

Revolutionary Desire: A Girardian View of *Paradise Lost*

Esmat Zeerak

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. . .while I to hell am thrust
Where neither joy nor love but *fierce desire*
(Among our other torments not the least)
Still unfulfilled with pain of longing pines.
(IV. 508 - 511, italics added)

Introduction: René Girard and Mimetic Theory

René Girard (1923-2015) was born in Avignon, trained at the École des Chartes, and came to the United States in 1947. After completing a doctorate at Indiana University, he taught at Johns Hopkins, Buffalo, and Stanford; in 2005 he was elected to the Académie Française. He began as a literary critic, but close reading led him into anthropology, philosophy, and religion. This path matters because his theory was not an abstract system imposed upon literature. It emerged from characters whose desires seemed to come from somewhere other than themselves (Haven).

His first major book, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, used Cervantes, Stendhal, Proust, and Dostoevsky to describe the hidden structure of desire. *Violence and the Sacred* extended the insight to societies. The question joining the two works is simple: why does imitation, which makes learning and culture possible, turn into envy, rivalry, and violence?

What, then, is mimetic desire? Girard means more than the copying of actions: we imitate desires. A subject learns from a model what is worth wanting and turns toward an object. Desire is therefore triangular: subject, model, and object. The object appears valuable because it is illuminated by the model's attention or possession. The subject may experience this desire as private and spontaneous, but the model has taught the subject both what to want and, more deeply, what kind of being to become.

Why does the model become an enemy? If the model remains distant, external mediation allows imitation without direct competition. When subject and model enter the same field, mediation becomes internal. The model reveals the object as desirable while blocking access to it: it becomes the model-obstacle. Frustration intensifies desire until the object may recede and the rival becomes the center of resentment and revenge.

Rivalry seldom remains confined to two people. Desire is contagious; others imitate the antagonists until the opponents resemble one another as mimetic doubles. As hostility spreads, social differences collapse into a sacrificial crisis. A divided group may then recover unity by directing its violence toward one vulnerable victim. The scapegoat seems to cause the disorder because peace follows the victim's expulsion, yet that peace hides the community's own mimetic violence.

Is imitation therefore evil? Girard's answer is no. Mimesis also makes education, love, and moral formation possible. Bad mimesis converts the neighbor into a rival. Good mimesis receives the good without coveting the being or place of the model and redirects desire away from victims.

These ideas provide the vocabulary for the argument that follows. In *Paradise Lost*, Satan is the subject, God the model interpreted as an obstacle, and Heav'n the first contested object. Satan passes his desire to the fallen host, imitates Heav'n in Hell, and transfers violence toward humanity. Milton's crisis of Degree can therefore be read as a Girardian crisis of distinctions. The introduction makes the mechanism visible before Milton's language gives it dramatic life.

Overture

Milton's *Paradise Lost* allows for a close examination of the operation of what Girard has termed "mimetic rivalry". In fact, this rather singular epic of the English language has the potential to serve as a useful model of representation for Girard's ideas as expressed in his revolutionary critical work on Shakespearean drama, *A Theater of Envy*¹, Milton's language can be examined for the sake of establishing mimetic rivalry as a fundamental operative principle at work between Satan and God². The language of Milton's epic is so complex, and yet beautiful, that it may at times seem difficult to give a complete account of the workings of the mimetic rivalry to the reader. Despite the technical difficulties posed by the concealing nature of Milton's language, all the discerning reader needs to do is pay attention to the letter of the text. Much attention must be paid to the specific words that Milton intentionally chooses to use. These critical aspects of Milton's language are revealing at multiple levels, which allows for the dynamic analysis of the narrative, as reflected in light of Girard's ideas.

To call this desire "mimetic," however, is not merely to say that Satan copies the outward gestures of God. The more important claim is that the model teaches the subject what is worth desiring. Satan does not look upon Heav'n as a neutral object and then independently decide that it is good. He sees it as the place ruled by God, filled with the dignity, brightness, and honor that belong to the Monarch. The value of the object is therefore inseparable from the being of the one who possesses it. Satan wants what God has because, at a deeper level, he wants to be what God is. The political object is Heav'n, but the desire reaches beyond the object toward the prestige of the model.

¹ This will be the primary text I will be using to apply Girard's ideas to Milton.

² The epic is gigantic in scale, and given the limitations of this paper, I shall limit the discussion to Books I - IV of the epic. It is important to keep in mind that the Books of the epic which include commentary on Adam and Eve's story (out of Genesis) also make use of the mimetic desire.

Here the triangle becomes more difficult than a simple contest over a throne. God first appears as the model who directs Satan's attention toward the good; yet, because God possesses what Satan desires, the same model also appears as an obstacle. Girard calls this the movement from model to model-obstacle.³ Would Heav'n retain the same force over Satan if it were not God's Heav'n? Milton's language suggests that it would not. The rivalry is already present within Satan's act of valuation, because the object shines with a light borrowed from the rival who seems to deny it to him.

Milton's language, as a poet (not a Tragedian), allows the reader to closely examine the triangular structure of the mimetic desire. Milton intended Satan to have a protean⁴ quality as a subject, which allows Satan to be easily transformed by the pandered object. This same mimetic structure inevitably leads to disastrous violence. In fact, as we shall see, conflict is a necessary outcome of this kind of mimetic rivalry. Ultimately, the Miltonian portrayal of mimetic desire can teach us the primacy of its existence in civilisations.

Mimetic Structure

First, the structure of mimetic desire is present in the epic. The structure is simple, yet at the same time, dynamic, so it is important to keep in mind the timeline of the epic. In the beginning of the epic, when reading about Satan's behavior, Milton presents him as a depressed character. He is defeated and lost much of his hope for his main object, that is, the political good. This political good is

³ For Girard's distinction between external and internal mediation, and for the model who becomes an obstacle, see *The Girard Reader*, pp. 37 - 41.

⁴ "Proteus turns himself into a second Valentine; his mimetic desire makes him protean." (p. 70, Chapter 7 - *Something Of Great Constancy: Theseus and Hippolyta in A Midsummer Night's Dream, A Theater of Envy*)

to be the monarch of Heav'n⁵. God remains the monarch of Heav'n. As the epic starts in *medias res*, Satan is defeated from an attempt at this political object, has been denied access, and is now nursing a resentful attitude towards God.

The mimetic scheme seems to be clear enough to declare the triangular structure as such: Satan is the subject (mediated), God is the possessor of Heav'n (model), and Heav'n is the much contested object. God, the Monarch, seems to impart the illusionary value on Heav'n, simply by spreading the 'good tidings' of it. This is simply a function of how mimesis works. This scheme seems to work well, especially considering Girard's application of the same scheme to *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*⁶. As Girard had mentioned, we should not take the idea of mimetic desire as simply a reductionist approach to critiquing literary works⁷. This principle also seems to apply to the critique of Milton's epic. And Milton himself applies the principle on a cosmic scale, to tell us, perhaps in a prophetic tone, concerning the nature of political workings.

This distinction allows us to say more precisely what kind of mediation is at work. God would seem, at first, to be an external mediator: He is infinitely removed from Satan in rank, authority, and being. External mediation should allow imitation without direct competition, because the model and the disciple do not occupy the same sphere. Satan's rebellion consists in refusing this distance. He interprets hierarchy as an insult, obedience as humiliation, and the Monarch not as a transcendent

⁵ Heav'n is a technical term, with a political connotation. It is clearly different from Heaven, and Milton is very precise in his usage of the two words.

⁶ "This is mimetic or mediated desire. . ." (p. 9, Chapter 1 - *Love Delights In Praises: Valentine and Proteus in The Two Gentlemen of Verona, A Theater of Envy*)

⁷ Further, Girard references Plato and Aristotle: "According to Aristotle, human beings love the theater because they love imitation." This statement signifies the primacy of mimetic structure in the arts. (p. 59, Chapter 6 - *More Than Fancy Images: The Craftsmen in A Midsummer Night's Dream, A Theater of Envy*)

model but as a political competitor. He brings God into the same field of rivalry with himself. The collapse of this distance is already a crisis of Degree before it becomes an open war.

Satan's declarations of independence make the mechanism especially visible. He insists that "The mind is its own place" and that it is "Better to reign in Hell, than serve in Heav'n" (I. 254, 263). These statements seem to affirm an autonomous self, capable of producing value out of itself. Yet every term of Satan's freedom remains measured against God. Hell becomes desirable because it offers a place where Satan can imitate sovereignty; reigning is valuable because God reigns. Satan exchanges the object of Heav'n for the object of an infernal empire, but he does not escape the model that gave both objects their meaning. His revolt is not an escape from imitation. It is imitation refusing to name itself.

This is why the word *resentful* matters. Satan does not openly confess admiration for the model. He represents the model only as a tyrannical obstruction, and he represents his own desire as prior, natural, and just. But the violence of his denial reveals the bond he wants to conceal. The more he repudiates God, the more God determines the form of his political imagination.

Take a look at this powerful soliloquy by Satan:

Pow'rs and Dominions, deities of Heav'n,
 For since no deep within her gulf can hold
 Immortal vigor, though oppressed and fall'n,
 I give not Heav'n for lost. From this descent
 Celestial Virtues rising will appear
 More glorious and more dread than from no fall
 And trust themselves to fear no second fate.
 Me though just right and the fixed laws of Heav'n
 Did first create your leader, next free choice
 With what besides in counsel or in fight
 Hath been achieved of merit, yet this loss,

Thus far at least recovered, hath much more
 Established in a safe unenvied throne
 Yielded with full consent. *The happier state
 In Heav'n which follows dignity might draw
 Envy^s from each inferior. But who here
 Will envy whom the highest place exposes
 Foremost to stand against the Thund'rer's aim,
 Your bulwark, and condemns to greatest share
 Of endless pain? Where there is then no good
 For which to strive no strife can grow up there
 From faction.* For none sure will claim in Hell
 Precedence, none whose portion is so small
*Of present pain that with ambitious mind
 Will covet more!* With this advantage then
 To union and firm faith and firm accord,
 More than can be in Heav'n, we now return
 To claim our just inheritance of old,
 Surer to prosper than prosperity
 Could have assured us, and by what best way--
 Whether of open war or covert guile--
 We now debate. Who can advise may speak.
 (II. 10 - 42, italics added)

Here Satan is addressing his minions, as he is politically charged. His enterprise is solely focused on *Pow'rs and Dominions*. He is further cognizant of the fact that there is an established order, or hierarchy to the structure of the heavens. The one power that seems to matter to him is that of the ruler or deity of *Heav'n*. Even though he has been defeated, he is not willing to accept defeat. We see that this is an echo of earlier lines, as Satan affirms to his minions that *all is not lost*^s. Clearly, this rebellious mentality drives Satan to organize a debate on gaining the seat of *Heav'n*. Satan is so charged with passion (envy being one of them), that it is imperative for him to attempt yet another coup.

^s "Satan, now in prospect of Eden, and nigh the place where he must now attempt the bold enterprise which he undertook alone against God and Man, falls into many doubts with himself and many passions--fear, envy, and despair; . . ." (*The Argument*, Book Four)

^y All is not lost; the unconquerable Will, / And study of revenge, immortal hate, / And courage never to submit or yield: / And what is else not to be overcome? / That Glory never shall his wrath or might / Extort from me." (106 - 111, Book I)

The passage describes the sense of injustice Satan feels was done as a result of the denial he suffered by the current Monarch, God. The lines are very revealing: Satan desires Heav'n because it is the cause of *envy* on the part of *each inferior*. Milton states quite clearly, that the reason Satan is putting on the theatrics of a political coup is because Heav'n is the envy of all. Satan has been mediated upon by God, the Monarch. Would Satan care about Heav'n if it was not the object of desire by so many? It would be difficult to tell, since the passions, generated by Satan, envy and pride, seem to provoke these responses. Satan is painfully aware of the fact that he does not want to rule over the worst of all the worlds. Without the clear mechanism of mimetic rivalry at play, we cannot see why else Satan would act the way he does. Satan's influence has been demonstrated, at a cosmic level, as inferior.

Satan expresses the following (30 - 35): if there is no good at stake, then there is no rivalry. There is no reason to desire anything, if there is no object for desire. No one covets more pain, if it is not worth the trouble. This is further reasoning to substantiate why Satan would not desire the seat of Heav'n - if it was not the source of envy of all. By expressing all that has been said so far, Satan has made Heav'n the sole *ambition* of desire for his minions as well. Some actors detest Satan's motives, and do not want to partake in the enterprise. For the most part, however, all the minions are united in the pursuit of this desire.

Once Satan speaks before the infernal council, the original triangle reproduces itself. God is the model for Satan, but Satan now becomes the model for his minions. He gives their defeat a common interpretation, gives Heav'n a renewed value, and gives the defeated angels a shared object of resentment. Would the entire host organize itself around the recovery of honor if Satan did not render

that honor desirable through his speech? His rhetoric does more than describe a grievance. It circulates a desire. Beelzebub's imitation of Satan then confirms the desire before the assembly, so that what begins as Satan's private resentment takes the form of a collective political purpose.

This is the contagious dimension of mimesis. The movement is first vertical, from God to Satan and from Satan to Beelzebub; it then becomes horizontal, as the minions imitate one another's assent. The apparent unanimity of Hell is not evidence that the desire arose spontaneously in every fallen spirit. The unity is produced by a common model and a common rival. Satan's political theater succeeds because each participant sees the desire reflected in the others and therefore experiences it as more urgent and more real.

At the same time, the original object begins to recede. Girard argues that in an intensified rivalry, each antagonist becomes both model and obstacle for the other, until the contested object may become secondary to the struggle itself.¹⁰ Satan can no longer plausibly expect an easy possession of Heav'n, yet his desire does not weaken. It changes into revenge. By repeatedly naming God as the "Thund'rer," Satan reduces divine authority to superior force and imagines the two sides as rivals of the same kind. Hatred now conceals the admiration from which it began. Satan cannot cease to speak of God because God still supplies the form of Satan's rebellion.

Imitative Qualities

So far, there is plenty of evidence that a process of mimicry is at work between Satan and God. We see more evidence as such:

¹⁰ Girard describes reciprocal rivalry as a positive feedback in which each antagonist becomes the model and imitator of the other; see *The Girard Reader*, pp. 9 - 12.

Their dread commander. He above the rest
 In Shape and gesture proudly eminent
Stood like a tower. His form had yet not lost
 All her original *brightness* nor appeared
 (Book I, 589 – 592, italics added)

Despite being in Hell, Milton's Satan has a certain imitative quality about his display. Satan is clearly imitating God when he is proudly emanating brightness. The binary scheme upon which Milton's cosmos is operating is one that is based on *Genesis*. Keeping *Genesis* in mind, the reader must be aware of the suprahistorical genesis of this order: "When God began to create heaven and earth, and the earth then was welter and waste and darkness over the deep. . ." (Chapter 1, 1-2). Milton himself is operating on this axiom of creatio ex nihilo out of *Genesis*: his axiomatic system clearly demarcates the two different domains. Light is the representation of all that is good, and that darkness is the representation of chaos. Now the question of rivalry becomes clear - what does light have to do in a place for darkness, that is Hell? Of course, Milton is mixing the two different elements. In the aforementioned lines, Satan is portrayed as such because Satan's desire is unmet; it is the ultimate representation of his desire for the good.

Another prime example of this unmet desire is when Satan hears the rumors about a new generation of creation:

Space may produce new worlds whereof so rife
 There went a fame in Heav'n that He ere long
 Intended to create and therein plant
 A generation whom His choice regard
 Should favor equal to the sons of Heav'n.
 Thither, if but to pry, shall be perhaps
 Our first eruption, thither or elsewhere.
 For this infernal pit shall never hold
 Celestial spirits in bondage, nor th' abyss

Long under darkness cover!
(Book I, 650 – 659)

These lines reveal how envious and jealous Satan is of God's offering to his best creation, the Humans. Girard points out that this is simply a hyper-inflated value that is placed on the object. Intrinsically, the object does not seem to have much value. It strikes Satan as an insult that there is a rumor (or advertisement to use Girard's terminology) of a generation of beings who shall be created that might equal those of 'celestial spirits'. Satan's very core and being is offended at the thought of all this, which adds dramatic action to the political theatre. If these new beings are equal to the 'celestial spirits', then why isn't the 'mighty Cherubim' not recipient of this same honor? This creates an unjust situation, in light of the judicial system that is present in Heav'n. Satan's rebellion stems from the very fact that he is a witness to an unfair distribution of honor by the Monarch of Heav'n. What does Satan get in return for all his pleading and failed attempt at honor? Disastrous defeat and humiliation, all in the presence of his minions. A political system, no matter how evolved and established, cannot remain for long, if justice does not prevail¹¹. This is the essential message that Milton, through the character of Satan, seems to prophesize.

Imitation therefore operates at the level of institutions as well as appearances. Pandemonium is an imitation of the political order of Heav'n: it has a throne, ranks, offices, councils, speeches, and a claim to legitimate dominion. Even the names "Pow'rs and Dominions" are inherited from the order

¹¹ Girard warns of tenuous communal/ political situations plenty of times throughout his work. In *Violence and The Sacred* he says such about the role of **Judicial Systems** as a potential remedy: "In fact, it is the result not of any familiar interchange between the two, but of the recognition of the sovereignty and independence of the judiciary, whose decisions no group, not even the collectivity as a body, can challenge. (At least, that is the principle.) The judicial authority is beholden to no one. It is thus at the disposal of everyone, and it is universally respected. The judicial system never hesitates to confront violence head on, because it possesses a monopoly on the means of revenge. Thanks to this monopoly, the system generally succeeds in stifling the impulse to vengeance rather than spreading or aggravating it, as a similar intervention on the part of the aggrieved party would invariably do." (pp. 22 - 23, *Chapter 1 - Sacrifice, Violence and The Sacred*)

against which the fallen angels rebel. Satan does not create a political world *ex nihilo*. He copies the form of the world he opposes and fills that form with a contrary purpose. His supposed anti-order is thus dependent upon the order it negates.

The same point returns in Satan's claim that the mind can make "a Heav'n of Hell, a Hell of Heav'n" (I. 255). The line seems to place value entirely within the isolated mind, but its very symmetry shows how relational Satan's imagination remains. He can imagine Hell only by reversing Heav'n, and Heav'n only by darkening it into Hell. The opposites have become mimetic reflections. Satan's identity is formed through the ceaseless inversion of God's order.

Here Girard's idea of the mimetic double becomes useful, though Milton also complicates it. In a fully reciprocal rivalry, the antagonists grow alike as each copies the other's hostility. God, however, does not become Satan's imitator, and Milton does not erase the ontological difference between Creator and creature. The doubling occurs within Satan's political imagination. He tells himself that reason made the two equal and force alone made God supreme. In this way he converts a relation of radical difference into a contest between near equals. The mimetic crisis does not prove that Satan and God are truly the same; it shows that Satan must imagine them as the same in order to sustain his rivalry.

Conflict

There is an underlying awareness that mimetic rivalry will result in conflict. Satan is *uniting* his army of minions because he is aware of the fact that he alone cannot attempt the coup. One political community surrounding the palace of Pandemonium is raging against the other political community,

Heav'n. Satan warns the audience of *open war* or *covert guile*. As a political leader, Satan is calculating enough to understand where desire leads. He has canvassed out the potential turmoil, and the cosmic wars. In that sense, Milton does have a prophetic tone about the origins of mimetic desire and where it can lead. Given his humiliating defeat, Satan is at once outraged, though still hopeful for a chance to gain the honor that has long been denied to him and his minions. The high status that this new generation of beings is to enjoy seems so good that Satan himself does not desire any other alternative. He himself only wants that which is bestowed upon the 'choice' creation. Satan's personal political domain of Hell, although a place of utter darkness, cannot 'long under darkness cover!' a revolutionary message Satan utters not only to the multitude of his minions, but also to the opposing Monarch in Heav'n, who is a witness to all things of past, present and eternity. Satan is clearly willing to take up *arms* to confront his nemesis, resulting in disastrous conflict. Girard puts the point of conflict resulting from mimetic rivalry as such:

Conflict can now be described more fully. Mimetic rivalry does not merely precede violence as one cause among others. The rivalry becomes violent through a process of reciprocal obstruction. The more the desired good appears to be withheld, the more valuable it becomes; the more valuable it becomes, the more the rival appears guilty for possessing it. Each frustration intensifies attention to the obstacle. Satan's options of "open war or covert guile" are different strategies, but both remain governed by the same relation to God. Whether he attacks the model directly or strikes indirectly at the model's creation, the rival continues to determine his action.

This helps explain why Satan persists after military defeat. If Heav'n alone were the object, defeat might bring the desire to an end. But once the rival has become more important than the object,

the impossibility of possession only increases resentment. Revenge becomes a substitute object. Satan's announced principle, to act "as being the contrary to his high will / Whom we resist" (I. 161 - 162), is a confession of negative imitation. He will let the will of God decide his own will, and then reverse it. Opposition gives him a purpose, but it also binds him more completely to the model he claims to reject.

The crisis of Degree is therefore also a crisis of distinctions. Girard describes the sacrificial crisis as the moment when reciprocal violence begins to erase the differences that ordinarily give a community its order.¹² The fallen angels still retain titles and ranks, but their new polity copies the polity it attacks. Heaven and Hell remain morally distinct in Milton's cosmos, yet Satan's rivalry works to abolish the distance between them by making both appear as competing empires. Undifferentiation does not mean that the two sides possess equal justice. It means that the logic of rivalry represents every difference as an obstacle that must be overcome.

Satan's revolutionary rhetoric spreads this crisis from one actor to an entire community. He gives the minions a common object, a common enemy, and a common story of injury. In that sense, Pandemonium is not only a place. It is a machine of contagious desire. The council transforms private humiliation into public unanimity, and the unanimity in turn makes violence seem both necessary and just.

"In the absence of Degree rivalry proliferates. In the presence of Degree, rivalry is not absent, but it is less destructive. Why should it be so? Are we to understand that Degree keeps desire nonmimetic and spontaneous? The example of the army shows that this is not the case. In a disciplined and efficient outfit, each soldier looks up to the rank immediately above his own in the hope of a promotion. Each soldier takes his commanding officer as a model and a guide.

¹² Girard defines the sacrificial crisis as a crisis of distinctions in which reciprocal violence erases the cultural differences that ordinarily establish identity; see *Violence and the Sacred*, pp. 49 - 51.

This ambition is a modality of mimetic desire. Far from being suppressed, it is encouraged; there is no military excellence without it.” (p. 164, Chapter 18 - *Pale and Bloodless Emulation: The Crisis of Degree in Troilus and Cressida, A Theater of Envy*)

The above analysis by Girard can be applied to Milton’s Satan in the following way: Satan is a rebellious soldier, who for the sake of glory, driven by envy, takes up arms and shatters the Degree of Heav’n. Only in this case, the presence of Degree in *Paradise Lost* has caused envious feelings on a cosmic scale. The entire order of the universe is at stake here. There seems to be two different Degrees. One in each respective domain: Heav’n, and hell. Within each, the Degree and rank is respected. Beelzebub is a good lieutenant, and very imitative of Satan. Christ, in his own right, is very imitative of God, the Monarch. In the former, however, the problem is that the imitation is not for the sake of the good, but rather is born out of a murderous desire for the sake of personal glory. The problem arises when there is a desire to mix the two domains. Satan clearly has this desire, at least according to Milton. This is another reason as to why Milton mixes *brightness* in the domain of darkness. If the two political communities stay to themselves and don’t approach each other in a locative-sense, the situation is stable. Girard talks about the locative-nearness problem here:

“Degree¹³ is more than the source of all stable meaning, more than the mechanism of differentiation in the sense of modern theory; it is a paradoxical principle of unity among men. I call it paradoxical because it is disunity, separation, distance, hierarchy. Why should a principle of separation be a principle of union? When this separation is gone, when people come too near to each other, hark what discord follows.” (p. 164, Chapter 18 - *Pale and Bloodless Emulation: The Crisis of Degree in Troilus and Cressida, A Theater of Envy*)

¹³ Girard emphasizes on the word *Degree* in the following way: “‘Degree,’ from the Latin *gradus*, means a step in a staircase or on a ladder, a nonhorizontal spacing between two entities, and more general rank, distinction, discrimination, hierarchy, *difference*. It is also the “endless jar” between justice and injustice, the same empty space once again that prevents any confusion between right and wrong. Justice is no exercise in exquisite impartiality, no perfect balance, but a fixed modality of imbalance, like everything cultural.” (pp. 161 - 162, Chapter 18 - *Pale and Bloodless Emulation: The Crisis of Degree in Troilus and Cressida, A Theater of Envy*)

Girard's words here bear upon the analysis of the proximity of Satan's domain to God's domain. Degree is not only about respecting or revering light, but goes beyond any such considerations. One might think of Milton's language as being reverent of light only for the sake of being reverent. Milton's sympathetic portrayal of Satan's domain, however, seems to show that the desire of one domain is entering the domain of another. When this desire goes unchallenged for too long, then a violent situation will result. Despite being aware of this fact, Satan clearly ignores the boundaries, and attempts to gain close proximity to Heav'n. When the cosmic separation is gone, hark what catastrophic violence follows. This is simply another aspect of the mimetic desire, albeit, one that takes a catastrophic turn.

The nearness Girard describes is therefore not merely a nearness in space. Satan crosses the physical distance between Hell, Chaos, and Eden because he has first collapsed a spiritual and political distance within his imagination. He approaches every sign of God's favor as if it were a personal provocation. The rumor of humanity acts as an advertisement because the new creatures are said to receive God's "choice regard." Their value for Satan is mediated by that regard. He does not yet know them, but he already envies them.

The model-obstacle thus follows Satan into every new domain. God's possession of Heav'n, God's creation of humanity, and God's love for Eden all become versions of the same denial. Every new good seems to Satan to have been placed before him for the purpose of exclusion. The obstacle does not weaken the desire; it confirms the prestige of the model and makes the object appear still more desirable. Satan carries the scandal with him. Wherever he goes, he reconstructs the triangle.

Justice

In Milton's grand scheme of things, the reader is granted the benefit of viewing things from a God's omniscient viewpoint. The reader needs to be mindful of the fact that the forces at work are even more complex within the political narrative, that in other words, the political figures are not one dimensional, i.e. simply evil or good. Once these characters are seen to be operating from a deeply complex core and being, there is a better chance at keeping the political system stable. Milton's Satan could have possibly avoided all the envious feelings, and the cosmos would have avoided all the wars, if proper attention was given to his *unfair* state of affairs. Milton's Muse is tasked to solve the most injudicious situation since the dawn of mankind, the fall of Satan from grace. The unfair situation that Satan confronts is a political one that is present on a cosmic scale. If Milton wanted to justify the ways of God to man, then who is to justify the ways of God to Satan? Satan with all of his intelligence, is still the grieving party, with a desire for the same kind of knowledge that man desires. For justice to prevail, it has to account for the justifiable perplexity on both sides.

A Girardian account of justice must therefore take Satan's grievance seriously without simply accepting Satan's account of it. His language of injury gives the rebellion much of its rhetorical power. He calls Heav'n a "just inheritance of old," presents himself as the victim of arbitrary force, and turns resentment into a demand for recognition. Yet Girard's analysis of internal mediation shows how the subject commonly reverses the order of desire: he claims that his desire came first and that the mediator arrived later as an unjust intruder. Satan's rhetoric conceals the fact that the object received its value from the very Monarch he accuses of withholding it. This does not mean that every political grievance

is an illusion. It means that Satan's particular claim to justice cannot be separated from his desire to possess the being and rank of the model.

The more serious Girardian turn occurs when Satan's hostility is displaced from God onto humanity. In Book II, Beelzebub proposes that the devils attack the newly created world, either destroying its inhabitants, possessing it, or seducing humanity into their party. God cannot be injured directly, so Satan seeks to injure what God loves. Humanity becomes a surrogate target: vulnerable, near at hand, and charged with the prestige of the original rival.¹⁴ The violence changes objects without changing its mimetic source.

This displacement also gives the infernal community a new unity. The devils cannot all possess the throne of Heav'n, but they can share hostility toward a single created race. A divisive desire is converted into a unifying antagonism. The case is not a complete founding sacrifice in Girard's anthropological sense, because the victimization of humanity does not restore a legitimate order; it consolidates the false order of Pandemonium. Still, the mechanism is recognizable. The enemy that cannot be reached is replaced by a victim who can be reached.

Nor should Satan himself be treated simply as the scapegoat of Milton's poem. Milton gives him a voice, allows the reader to feel the force of his humiliation, and refuses a one-dimensional portrait. But the poem also shows Satan creating victims out of his own frustrated rivalry. A Girardian reading can hold both truths together: Satan presents himself as the injured party, and he uses that self-presentation to authorize violence against another.

Girard formulates the problem in the following way:

¹⁴ On displaced violence and the surrogate victim, see *Violence and the Sacred*, pp. 2 - 6; on the scapegoat effect as mimetic reconciliation at the expense of a third party, see *The Girard Reader*, pp. 11 - 13.

“This same ambition, this same imitation, becomes *emulous and destructive if it tries to seize office, rank, or power independently of military rules and military tradition*. When indocility appears at the top, the lower ranks copy it as docilely as the former docility; Order consists of a chain of obedient imitation so pervasive that it facilitates the contagion of disorder when disorder appears. Each one borrows the same channels and operates in the same manner. When every step is exemplified by the first pace, it can be either the “good” or the “bad” imitation that propagates itself down the ladder of Degree. The difference stems not from two types of imitation but from Degree itself: *imitation is ‘good’ when it conforms to the rules of Degree and respects the separateness and distinctiveness of each rank.*” (p.165, Chapter 18 - *Pale and Bloodless Emulation: The Crisis of Degree in Troilus and Cressida, A Theater of Envy*)

Milton uses the word *ambition* in the same way that Girard utilizes the word. Satan’s ambition is connected to his imitative desires, and eventually as we have seen, it all turns destructive. We see that this catastrophic turn takes place in the following way:

. . .and no less desire
To found this nether Empire, which might rise
By pollicy, and long process of time,
In *emulation* opposite to Heav’n
(I. 295 - 298)

Satan’s political process is that of *pollicy*. This can be also termed as statecraft, a more modern term, but a clear indication of the mechanics of Degree in *Paradise Lost*. When two political neighbours, even if at the cosmic level, get too close to each other, the ensuing power dialectic immediately turns violent. Emulation is the essential ingredient in the process of how violence manifests itself in the epic. This is further a clear indication that everything is happening through a process of *emulation*. The entire domain of Hell, and its capital Pandemonium, is constructed in emulation of Heav’n. This seems to happen because the Monarch of Heav’n seems docile or timid, thus authorizing Satan to attempt the coup. Satan does not find a respectable model to emulate; he does not feel the need to fear the Monarch to a degree that can keep him away from the desired object,

Heaven. Satan turns rebellious and prideful of his bright figure, and attempts to mix the two elements of creation, darkness with light. Here is where we see the workings of pride in conjunction with envy of the desired object. God, who in the beginning set clear boundaries, does not find this indiscriminate action acceptable, since the ladder of Degree has been corrupted. Imitation, in this sense, only works if the order and rank of the Degree (Monarch) is respected.

A Model of Moral Education

What Milton has demonstrated through this epic is universally applicable. Once Milton's true prophetic message is revealed, through the Girardian analysis, that the binary forces at work behind the operation of the universe, Good and Evil, are so complex and powerful that they can at once create or destroy entire political communities. Girard, through an anthropological lens, is right to say that civilisations come to existence through the founding violence. Milton's epic supports this viewpoint as well, though mimetic rivalry, as we have seen in the epic, has been clearly established in numerous myths such as *Cain and Abel* (or *Romulus and Remus*). Not only is this an anthropological truth, it is also an affirmation of a universal truth about the nature of the human condition. All that said, we can only surmise how many wars have been fought out of a lack of antidote for such behavior. Girard provides an accessible process for demystifying the truths that Milton tries to establish. Girard properly investigates the cause of human conflict (because of bad-mimesis) as shown here:

“Degree, that is, the cultural order, is transcendental, but in a peculiarly finite and fragile way that makes it highly vulnerable not to the stars but to human conflict. It has no other reality than the respect it inspires. If this respect turns to disrespect at the top, contagion is sure to follow and Degree will quickly dissolve in the undifferentiation of mimetic rivalry. Degree is no real god, Degree is impotent; it does not even exist anywhere in or out of the world. Nevertheless, it functions as a divinity, rewarding those who honor it with the benefits of

order and punishing rebels with the impartial violence of disorder, with the spiraling retaliation of a rivalry that turns to deadly vengeance.” (p. 164, Chapter 18 - *Pale and Bloodless Emulation: The Crisis of Degree in Troilus and Cressida, A Theater of Envy*)

Milton’s epic is a true model of moral education, as it reflects the teaching of the decalogue, which clearly provides the prohibition: “Thou shalt not Covet”. This simple commandment gives credence to the necessity of avoiding bad-mimesis.

At this point, the distinction between good and bad mimesis must be made more precise. Girard later clarified that mimetic desire is not evil in itself. Desire opens the self toward another person; it makes education, devotion, creativity, and love possible. The problem is not imitation as such, but imitation that becomes acquisitive and rivalrous. The antidote is therefore not the fantasy of having no models. It is the conversion of desire through a model who does not turn the disciple toward rivalry.¹⁵

Milton gives us two chains of imitation. In Hell, Beelzebub imitates Satan, the minions imitate their leaders, and the whole community becomes organized around envy and revenge. In Heav’n, Christ imitates the Father without attempting to seize the Father’s place. Satan interprets imitation as competition for rank; Christ reveals imitation as obedience to the good. The difference does not arise because one character imitates and the other does not. It arises because one form of imitation grasps at the model’s being, while the other participates in the good without turning the model into an obstacle.

The commandment “Thou shalt not Covet” can now be read as a prohibition directed at the triangle itself. It does not condemn every desire. It warns against desiring the neighbor’s object through the prestige of the neighbor, because that form of desire converts the neighbor into a rival. The

¹⁵ Girard later clarified that mimetic desire is not evil in itself; it can be converted through the imitation of a positive, non-rivalrous model. See *The Girard Reader*, pp. 62 - 64.

commandment interrupts the movement from model to obstacle before the obstacle becomes an enemy. Moral education, on this account, is not education into absolute autonomy. It is education in the choice and imitation of models.

Degree can help channel imitation by preserving differences, but hierarchy alone cannot guarantee peace. A rank that inspires only fear may restrain rivalry for a time without transforming desire. The deeper remedy is a form of mimesis in which the good can be shared without the being of the model becoming an object of seizure. This is what the distinction between Satan and Christ finally brings into view.

Coda

The existence of discord as a result of a crisis of degree across history teaches us that the problems of mankind can really be solved, if the fundamental underlying mechanisms are demystified. Girard's work is important both as a philosopher and thinker for his attempts to demystify things hidden since the foundation of the world¹⁶. The problem of Satan being pandered by the object is a real time problem. We all have the ability to be seduced by the day to day attractions, that should aptly only be thought of as distractions. The real stumbling block for humanity, as affirmed by Girard, is the fact, that people do not want to accept the prevalence of mimetic rivalry. Out of the Garden of Eden, we seem to have come far, but the fact that we are constantly seduced by a plethora of commercialist tactics reveals the uncomfortable state of humanity. The antidote to this self-destructive behavior is

¹⁶ Reference to another title of Girard's work, "Things Hidden Since the Foundation of The World" (1987, Stanford University Press). Also, Matthew 13:35.

the practice of good mimesis, that at once affirms the desire, but chooses not to become destructive, but instead, a friend to the desire.

One final Girardian point concerns the reader. Satan's speeches are persuasive because Milton allows the reader to experience the attraction of resentment from within. We hear the claim of injury before we fully see the structure that produces it. The poem therefore places the reader inside the danger of mimesis: one may begin to imitate Satan's fascination with the obstacle and to accept his account of God as a rival. Milton's greatness lies in allowing this sympathy without letting the mechanism remain concealed.

Would the analysis become another form of scapegoating if we placed all violence inside Satan and treated him as a monster wholly outside the human condition? Girard's thought warns against that easy solution. Satan remains responsible because he consents to rivalry, turns it into a political program, and transfers it to innocent victims. Yet the mechanism through which he acts is not uniquely satanic. It is the same structure of envy, imitation, resentment, and displaced violence that can appear within any political or personal community. Milton's Satan is morally singular, but he is also recognizable.

The phrase "a friend to the desire" can now be stated more exactly. Good mimesis does not require desirelessness. It requires the recognition of the model, the refusal to transform every obstacle into a persecutor, and the choice of goods whose possession does not depend upon the defeat of another. Read in this way, *Paradise Lost* does more than illustrate Girard's theory. It dramatizes the moment at which imitation becomes rivalry, rivalry becomes contagion, and contagion seeks a victim.

It also leaves open the possibility that desire, converted by a different model, can become the basis of love rather than war.

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