

René Girard, *Resurrection from the Underground: Feodor Dostoevsky* translated by James G. Williams (Michigan State University Press, 2012)

I confess from the outset to being a ‘Dostoevsky fanboy’. If *Doctor Who* fans are *Whovians* and *Star Trek* fans are *Trekkies* then I am a ... Dostoevskyite. If there was a convention I would be there, ‘cosplaying’ as Raskolnikov while my friend ‘cosplayed’ as the student corner I writhe in remorsefully. Or something.

So this work by René Girard, the famous French literary critic, historian, philosopher, and one of the ‘forty immortals’ of the French Academy, translated by James G. Williams, was something I found myself devouring with glee.

As we train to be academics who cut into the very core of literature and reveal its sometimes sickly and shrivelled beating heart, dare we admit that it is sometimes difficult to analyse and take apart books we truly love? Occasionally one winces even to see another do so, as one would flinch at the sight of a stranger receiving a beating. We all have our literary gods, we have those stories closest to our hearts, and perhaps we do not always want to open those texts up and watch their cogs and mechanisms fall onto the floor and roll under the sofa. The lowest grade I ever received at university was for a paper about *Crime and Punishment*, my favourite novel of all time, something I had been aching to write about. Praise and awe do not lead to insightful essays.

But Girard is insightful here, and his magnificent extended essay on the great genius of Russian literature leads one to appreciate and admire the master more, and not less. Girard scorns postmodernism and various other ‘posts’, and he has no interest in Freud, structuralism, Karl Marx, Nietzsche or many of the other theories and theorists that have been popular among intellectuals in his lifetime. This is almost refreshing. His grand theory is of ‘mimesis’; that we all mimic each other’s desires. We see someone else desiring something and so we want it. This turns the other person into our rival. It is like, as Girard says, toddlers fighting over the toys that only become interesting when another toddler chooses them. This way of thinking continues into adult life, but we are desperate to conceal it. Girard’s theories take into account religion as well, and he sees the Bible as the underlying, fundamental text of Western civilisation, the patterns of which are only felt more strongly as we seek to suppress them and superciliously place ourselves above and apart from such cultural mythologies.

To Girard, in place of one God, every individual has become their own god. However, we cannot always convince ourselves we are gods, though we feel that we deserve to be deified. We seek the approval of others for proof of our individual divinity. And if others do not approve of us, we may transfer the idea of godhood onto them. But, because we secretly want to be the one and only god, we worship the Other in hatred.

In the modern world, with its celebrities and its countless fields of science no single person could master, we have come to rely on experts, each with their own divine answers, and that makes these transferrals of worship easier. The idea of God therefore does not reside completely in the Self nor in the Other; it is a constant tug-of-war between the Self and the Other over who receives the desired worship. The world becomes individualistic and selfish, a constant battle between supreme pride and utter humiliation, which Girard sees as two

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Transnational Literature Vol. 5 no. 1, November 2012.
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extremes of the same emotional need. We desire what others desire, and we want to be desired, but when others desire us, we scorn them proudly. When we are humiliated we will gladly worship, in hate, at the foot of the Other, the expert who must guide us to the right path, for we must mimic them to share in their glory and to become God ourselves.

The epic but petty battles of the minor official of Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground* personify this: in a billiard hall, the author of the notes is, without a word, picked up and moved by an officer who wants to get by him. In the face of this affront, the author hates the officer, and imagines various ways of shaming and outclassing him, but at the same time he desires desperately to become him, and have others admire the author as they admire the officer. He wants to learn from the expert so he too can have his power. The Dostoevsky references in Ricky Gervais and Stephan Merchant's *The Office*, site of petty battles, minor tyrants, extreme pride and wincing humiliation, were not accidental!

In *Notes from the Underground* the character of the officer, a minor obstacle and humiliation in the author's life, takes on, due to pride, immense importance. Until the author can be the officer, can become one with him, the author hates the officer and sees him as a godlike opponent.

Likewise, Stavrogin, the man admired and coveted by young revolutionaries in Dostoevsky's *Demons*, becomes a godlike figure to some. People admire Stavrogin as they would a cult leader, and gladly humiliate themselves before him. Dostoevsky had a famous flash of prescience in *Demons*, foreseeing the Stalinist regime to which the actions of such revolutionaries would lead: a man made God and a nation bowing down in humiliated worship.

Desire comes from others; desire leads to conflict; and all this happens atop a pattern of worship set in motion by the Bible. Western Civilisation's idea of Christ becomes its greatest poison. All these acts of pride, humiliation and mimetic desire occur beneath the surface, they are concealed, and so Girard aptly calls these ideas, in line with Dostoevsky, *underground* thoughts.

But religion comes through even more strongly than this in Girard's superb piece. He traces the developments of ideas in Dostoevsky's works and links them to the author's personal biography: his early successes with Romantic texts, his sudden fame and subsequent toppling from literary heights, his imprisonment, his self-imposed exile and the eventual restoration of his literary dignity. Circumstances cause Dostoevsky to overturn his earlier ideas and examine them in a new light, and so in some ways the works of Dostoevsky's middle period are all about seeing through the society-induced lies of his own earlier texts from a time when he mimicked the literary desires of others. Dostoevsky's life was not without an excess of pride and humiliation, and we see that his genius was born from past mistakes that many perhaps would not learn from, but that this great and truly self-searching intellect did indeed take to heart. Girard's book ends in Christian revelation, as Dostoevsky himself in *The Brothers Karamazov* reconciles a lifetime's worth of ideas with scripture, seeing beyond the popular literary and social theories of his day and revealing a universal human truth. It is this human truth which still marks Dostoevsky out as one of the most psychologically perceptive authors who ever lived.

Such a structure works well to give Girard's extended essay a driving force and a strong, cathartic ending. It fits well with the Biblical allusions throughout the works of Dostoevsky, a man who grappled with an inability to believe throughout his life. And one does not have to be a believer to appreciate the analysis here; one needs only accept that the Bible has shaped Western civilisation, and that modern life causes us to lie to ourselves in various ways every day.

Girard's writing is excellent, and so packed with transcendent insight that one hardly feels one is reading an essay; the text seems to rise above what most would expect from writing about literature. There is pulsing life and passion here as genius writes about a genius. Every sentence demands utmost attention as Dostoevsky's life and thinking are brought alive, and the world as we know it is shown through a new lens. As the blurb on the back tells us, 'Milan Kundera said that René Girard wrote "the best book I have ever read on the art of the novel."' This essay, regarded, the introduction tells us, as one of Girard's best, has never before been translated into English, despite having been written some fifty years ago. Any 'Dostoevskyite' will find this book an unabashed pleasure, a great treasure fallen suddenly from the sky. Also, anyone who loves 'the art of the novel' would do well to read and enjoy Girard's passionate essays, and if one wants a new way of looking at how we as human beings relate to each other every day, this book is a good starting point to Girard's career-spanning ideas.

All-in-all, Girard's text would be perfect were it not for a few unfortunate attacks on feminism and multiculturalism in the final two pages of the postface that feel almost like the complaints of a doddering old grandfather. Multiculturalism is another theory Girard rejects, but we do not have the space here to understand why. Perhaps there is an expanded intelligence and rationale to these opinions elsewhere in his works, but the way it stands here, such a short barrage without definition seems arbitrary.

Some of Dostoevsky's characters are all too familiar to me. Though my favourite works are *Crime and Punishment* and *The Idiot* I cannot help but uncomfortably relate to the squirming, selfish cowardice and the empty pretence to literary genius displayed by the author of *Notes from the Underground*. It is a similar self-recognition that had my mind racing with febrile excitement, and perhaps a dash of self-loathing, as Girard laid bare another facet of the human condition, his 'mimesis', while celebrating my favourite author, Dostoevsky, in *Resurrection from the Underground*.

Now it is time for me to go back and read all of Dostoevsky's great novels again, in chronological order, so I can partake again in his spiritual and intellectual revelation as it happens.

'One will not explicate Dostoevsky's work with his biography, but one will finally perhaps, thanks to the creative work, render the biography really intelligible.' (53)

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