Self and the other: mimetic desire and violence in Stephen Crane's "Maggie: a girl of the Streets" and D. H. Lawrence's "The Prussian Officer"

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Abstract

This essay examines Stephen Crane's novella *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* and D. H. Lawrence's short story "The Prussian Officer", in light of Rene Girard's notion of mimetic desire. Girard argues that at the heart of interpersonal relationships is the desire for that which makes the Other *being*. In possession of this *being*, the Other becomes at first the model the subject reveres, and later, the rival the subject detests. For Girard, this is what stands at the heart of violence and disharmony in human societies. Violence or ritual sacrifice become the mechanisms capable of halting mimetic desire and bring back social order. In the two narratives analyzed, mimetic desire stands at the center of the protagonists' existential crises and violent deaths.

Key words: Mimetic desire, naturalism, violence, selfhood, agency.

Although Stephen Crane and D. H. Lawrence belong to different literary traditions, their narratives stand out for sharing one element in common: the exploration of the psychological and social dimensions of human relationships. Writing under the influence of the European Naturalist movement, especially as outlined by Emile Zola, in France, Crane's texts portray a world where human beings are shaped by forces operating outside themselves. That is, instead of an autonomous individual in full control of his or her destiny, what Crane's narratives foreground are subjects living at the mercy of their environment. His texts bring to the fore a world destitute of agency and governed, instead, by inexorable

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laws which leave the individuals no choice but to fight for survival. As David Fitelson suggests, "the world of [Crane's texts] resembles nothing so much as the world of the jungle, and the pattern described by the lives of its characters is that of primordial struggle for existence" (1964, p. 184).

Writing under the banner of what has been commonly called literary modernism, D. H. Lawrence does not overtly portray the individual as being determined by the outer world. However, much like Crane, he still suggests the notion of a self lacking autonomy, and constituted, instead, as an extension of the environment in which it lives. Weldon Thorton reiterates that "Lawrence goes beyond the idea of an 'individual mind' to view personality as involving much more than ego can conceive, as resting upon a continuum with the body and with the circumambient situation" (50). For Lawrence, the ego does not exist as an independent entity standing outside the flux of time and history, but engages constantly with the world and the people around it. What one perceives in Lawrence's texts, therefore, is a growing sense of disenchantment with the individualism prevailing in modern literature, and a perception of the individual as continuous with the outer world. Like Crane, the self, in Lawrence's formulation, does not stand aloof in nature. Employing Rene Girard's theory of mimetic desire, this essay will examine the psychological and social dynamics of the self as it relates to the Other in two narratives: Stephen Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the* Streets and D. H. Lawrence's "The Prussian Officer."

Central to René Girard's theory of social order is the notion that mimetic desire stands at the core of interpersonal relationships. Desire, in Girard's formulation, is not a spontaneous feeling coming out of nowhere, but springs, rather, from the need the subject feels to posses that which makes the other *being*. Subjects, according to Girard, as they find themselves lacking, look to external sources in search of fulfillment. He puts it this way: "The reason is that he desires being, something he himself lacks and which some other person seems to

possess. The subject thus looks to that other person to inform him of what he should desire in order to acquire that being" (1972, p. 146). The subject, according to this view, can only find fulfillment in the Other's object of desire. Hence, desire is part of a triangular system where subjects and objects are not directly linked, but are, rather, always mediated by this Other which ends becoming the subject's model and rival. The Other is the model in the sense that it dictates the way the subject should behave in order to possess that being he or she desires; it is the rival because it possesses that which the desiring subject wants: *being*.

Girard further points out that while this mimetic desire is easily recognized in children, the adult subject tends to hide the desire to appropriate for fear of being seen as unoriginal. However, no matter how concealed this desire is, the subject cannot help but feel inadequate before his rival. As Girard puts it, the object becomes "only a means of reaching the mediator. The desire is aimed at the mediator's *being*" (1965, p. 53). That is, models, through their own desires, convey to their disciples what they should desire in order to be like them. In this game the object loses its power and its possessor takes the center stage.

Because both the model and the disciple's desire converge to the same object, Girard points out that this "imitate me" attitude becomes a breeding ground for conflict, rivalry, and violence. Two subjects desire the same thing and in this conflict both find themselves engaged in competition. At this point, the model, while feeling flattered for being the model, is also on guard, since what he possesses might be appropriated by somebody else. He feels compelled to protect that which gives him or her being and makes him or her special. As Girard explains, "Man cannot respond to that universal human injunction, 'Imitate-me' without almost immediately encountering an inexplicable counterorder: 'Don't imitate me'" (1972, p. 147). The subject finds himself thus in a double-bind, that is, he wants to be imitated, but if the disciple imitates him completely, he will lose his privileged position. For Girard, this imitate-

me, do-not-imitate-me compulsion constitutes the basis of human relations, and violence springs from the complex dynamics of mimetic desire. To keep mimetic desire under control and avoid social chaos, Girard explains, human societies have devised some form of "scapegoating" where a victim is found to halt the process and keep runaway mimesis from starting all over. In Girard's words, "by channeling its energies into ritual forms and activities sanctioned by ritual, the cultural order prevents multiple desires from converging on the same object" (1972, p. 149).

This notion of desire as desire for being, and the ensuing consequences thereof, is poignantly illustrated in Stephen Crane's novella *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*. Here, what ultimately leads Maggie to give up on life is the realization that she lacks more than money and worldly possessions. Foremost, it is the realization that she cannot obtain that otherness she so much desires. In Girardian terms, she gets caught up in a network of mimetic desire, which escalates to the point where she can only see herself through and for the Other. The more she looks elsewhere for self-realization, the more she feels she does not belong to the world where she grew up.

The story of Maggie develops in a place where poverty, abuse, and violence combine to create a hostile environment both in and outside her home. The streets are depicted as the place of constant fights between poor groups of children. The atmosphere of poverty stands out as Crane describes the neighborhood as "a dark region" replete with women "with uncombed hair and disordered dresses," dirty children sitting "stupidly in the way of vehicles" (1984, p. 64). Maggie's home is no different. Her mother Mary is constantly beating the children, cussing at her husband, and breaking the furniture in the house. Every brawl ends with heavy doses of alcohol followed by bursts and tears of lamentation over their miserable situation.

Despite all that, Maggie seems to grow up unaffected by the aggressive world that surrounds her. As Crane puts it, "The girl, Maggie, blossomed in a mud puddle. She grew to be a most rare and wonderful

production of a tenement district, a pretty girl" (1984, p. 24). The neighbors and young men in the streets noticed her beauty and refined manners. However, her life began to change as she met Pete, her brother's friend. All of a sudden, the qualities she had appeared insignificant and worthless when compared to Pete's possessions. Materially speaking, Pete did not have much, but still exerted a strong influence on her. He did not seem to belong to that place. The idealization of Pete came to a point when it started to affect her daily work routine and personal life: "Over the eternal collars and cuffs in the factory Maggie spent the most of three days in making imaginary sketches of Pete and his daily environment….She thought he must live in a blare of pleasure" (1984, p. 29). Her feelings of inferiority increased as they started to go out. She began to wonder if the could ever reach the high level of refinement and culture she saw in the women and men parading in the streets, salons, and theaters of the city. After being rejected by Pete, she embarks on a path of self-destruction, firstly posing as a prostitute, and later committing suicide.

Maggie's plight in Crane's novella has been traditionally discussed as a typical example of determinist forces shaping the destiny of human beings. Robert Stallman, for instance, states that "the true villain of this comic melodrama is Maggie's environment, including the persons and institutions composing it" (1959, p. 251). Florence Leaver, along the same lines, argues that Maggie's plight results from her inability to cope with her environment, and consequently, "she turns to dreams and imaginings and dooms herself to disillusionment and death" (1962, p. 521). Maggie is perceived as epitomizing the notion of the human condition as the direct of result of outward forces; in her case the failure of the family and social institutions. Undoubtedly, the environment certainly plays an important role in Maggie's distress. But upon closer examination, what ultimately leads her to give up on life is the realization that she lacks more than money and worldly possessions. Foremost, it is the ontological quest for *being*, namely, the realization that she is unable to obtain that

otherness she so much desires. In Girardian terms, she gets caught up in web of mimetic desire, where *being* resembles a moving target by always hiding behind her rival Other. This quest escalates to the point where she can only see herself through and for the Other.

Mimetic desire begins to operate in Maggie's life after her first encounter with Pete, the man who would eventually become her boyfriend. Even though Pete comes from the slums as well, Maggie sees him as someone belonging to a different social circle. Since the moment he lay her eyes on him, Pete becomes the model through which she looks at the world and herself: "His mannerisms stamped him as a man who had a correct sense of his personal superiority. There was valor and contempt for circumstances in the glance of his eye" (1984, p. 25). For Maggie, Pete possesses something valuable that sets him apart from all the others. What matters are not his physical features, but rather the idealized qualities she perceives him to possess: "Maggie perceived that here was the beau ideal of a man" (1984, p. 26). Pete suddenly becomes the model through whom she will relate to the world. As the becomes more intimate with Pete, his aura of importance only increases: "He walked to fro in the small room, which seemed then to grow even smaller and unfit to hold his dignity, the attribute of a supreme warrior" (1984, p. 27). What starts to take place in Maggie's mind is Pete's transformation from a human being into a mediator, a blown-out-proportion sign, the lenses through which she looks at the world: "Swaggering Pete loomed like a golden sun to Maggie" (p. 35). Desire, from this point on, will function in a triangular manner. On the one side stands Maggie, and on the other the being she feel she lacks. In between stands Pete, her idol and at the same time her rival.

As mimetic desire increases, her world suddenly loses its importance. Little by little, Maggie is drawn into a pattern of elevating her idol to a pedestal and putting herself down. The factory where she works, for instance, becomes a dreary and boring place: "She reflected upon the collar and the cuff factory. It began to appear to her mind as

a dreary place of endless grinding." Likewise, her home, which was not appealing to begin with, turns into an unbearable place: "The almost vanished flowers in the carpet-pattern, she conceived to be newly hideous" (1982, p. 28). Thus, Maggie starts to head to a direction where nothing makes sense unless it is under Pete's zone of influence. He becomes the measuring stick, the standard she uses to evaluate not only herself, but the world around her: "As thoughts of Pete came to Maggie's mind, she began to have an intense dislike for all her dresses….She craved those adornment of person which she saw every day on the street, conceiving them to be allies of vast importance to women" (1982, p. 34).

As Maggie gets deeply caught up in mimetic desire, she begins to lose all sense of self-appreciation. Girard points out that "in the experience which originates the mediator the subject recognizes in himself extreme weakness" (1965, p. 282). This is exactly what happens to Maggie as her deification of Pete intensifies. The more she reveres his qualities, the more she loses the ability to stands for herself: "From her eyes, had been plucked all look of self-reliance. She leaned with a dependent air toward companion" (1982, p. 52). From now on, Maggie's final downfall becomes just a matter of time. As she loses all sense of self-identity, Maggie puts all the focus on what she perceives herself as lacking. In other words, even though on the surface she wants other people's clothes, jewelry, and money, what she actually desires is the *being* these materials possessions seem to endow their bearers with. When the world as the unreachable Other gains greater and greater importance, Maggie turns to Pete as the source, the mediator of that mode of existence she so avidly fights for.

Girard observes that as individuals turns to the Other, they do it so as "to enjoy [their] divine inheritance" (1965, p. 58). Maggie's giving of herself physically to Pete can be seen as the ultimate attempt to be one with the Pete's *being*. She seems to feel that this is the only way to achieve that status of being Pete enjoys. That is why his rejection shakes

her up so much. As the wonders in the streets later, she realizes she has been left with nothing: "She wondered aimlessly for several blocks. She stopped once and asked a question of herself: 'Who'?" (1982, p. 69). João Sedycias has observed that what is present here is Maggie's inability "to differentiate between self and Other" (1993, p. 159). The question "who?" suggests more than that, though. It suggests that her ontological quest for being has reached a dead alley. Maggie feels emptier than ever. She has realized that she is nothing more than a question mark in the vast extension of the universe. The final realization that she cannot achieve the being she so eagerly needs is responsible for Maggie's existential crisis and, finally, her suicide. The destructive chain of uncontrollable mimetic desire is violently interrupted with suicide.

Similar to Crane, in "The Prussian Officer" Lawrence investigates the psychological dimensions of mimetic desire as desire for otherness in the relationship between a captain and his orderly. Throughout the narrative, Lawrence explores the dynamics of desire and rivalry and goes further than Crane in exposing the violent aspect of this behavior. The story starts with a group of soldiers marching through a valley on a hot day. The captain in charge is a man of about forty, who is described as impersonal and very aggressive when irritated. His orderly is described as a young man of about twenty, strong, who obeyed his superior as a faithful soldier. Lawrence portrays the captain and his orderly as having a strictly professional relationship: "To his orderly he was at first cold and just and indifferent: he did not fuss over trifles. So that his servant knew practically nothing about him, except just what orders he would give, and how he wanted them obeyed" (1972, p. 99). What brings harmony to this relationship is the establishment of clear boundaries and the mutual knowledge that neither of them should step over the line.

However, mimetic desire begins to operate and threaten the harmony brought by these distinct boundaries when the captain realizes that his orderly possesses something he apparently lacks. Up to this moment, the captain had managed to keep the neutrality expected from

a leader. But the moment he realizes he is not complete, he cannot avoid noticing that his orderly own what he apparently lacks:

> Gradually the officer had become aware of his servant's young, vigorous, unconscious presence about him. He could not get away from the sense of the youth's person, while he was in attendance. It was like a warm flame upon the older man's tense, rigid body, that had become almost unloving, fixed. There was something in the young fellow's movement that made the officer aware of him. (1972, p. 99)

Mimetic desire comes to the fore as the captain desires that which makes his orderly distinct from him: youth. However, if at first, what called the captain's attention was the soldier's "strong young shoulders under the blue cloth, the bend of the neck", later this fixation shifts to the soldier's very *being*: "But the influence of the young soldier's *being* had penetrated through the officer's stiffened discipline, and perturbed the man in him" (1972, p. 99-100. Italics mine). As this passage suggests, much like Crane's Maggie, what Lawrence's captain finds attractive in the young soldiers is not simply his physical features, his agility, dexterity, and discipline. Rather, the captain desires to possess that which makes the soldier be what he is. In other words, what disturbs the captain so much is that fact that when he looks at himself, he finds himself incomplete and to make matters worse, his attendant makes this incompleteness stand out.

As the story unfolds, this mimetic desire intensifies to the point where the captain cannot control his obsession. The once disciplined captain finds himself entangled in a mimetic web he cannot free himself out of. All his efforts to maintain the control of his emotions prove to be vain: "In spite of himself, the captain could not regain his neutrality of feelings toward his orderly" (1972, p. 100). In Girardian terms, the soldier becomes, from this point on, the captain's model, and at the same time, rival, for he possesses that which the captain feels he lacks. This paradox is best expressed in the captain's mix of love and hate towards the soldier: "The captain grew madly irritable. He could not rest when the soldier

was away, and when he was present, he glared at him with tormented eyes" (1972, p. 101). On the one hand, the captain needs his orderly around because he brings him closer to that being he very much aspires for. On the other hand, the soldier represents an obstacle to his coveted object.

The violence that ensues as the story develops results from this mimetic desire now transformed into intense rivalry between the captain and his orderly. The captain sees the solder as his rival because he is in possession of that precious thing he needs. This feeling of frustration surfaces in the form of violence: "His nerves, however, were suffering. At last he slung the end of a belt in his servant's face. When he saw the youth start back, the pain-tears in his eyes and the blood on his mouth he had felt at once a thrill of deep pleasure and of shame" (1972, p. 102). Girard explains that rivalry and violence are closely connected in the sense that, for the subject, the model "becomes a shrewd and diabolical enemy" who tries "to rob the subject of his most prized possessions" and "thwarts his most legitimate ambitions" (1965, p. 11). This is exactly what happens to the captain. The soldier turns into his enemy because it is only through him that self-fulfillment will be achieved. The soldier from now on has become the objectified Other, the Other as a rival and enemy; the other as a moving target, always out the protagonist's reach.

As for the soldier, rivalry manifests as he realizes that the captain wants more than destroy his physical body. The realization that his essence as human being is at stake leads him to seek protection, first, in the form of indifference towards his master's aggressive behavior: "The words never pierced to his intelligence, he makes himself, protectively, impervious to the feelings of his master" (1972, p. 101). Later, as the captain steps over into the space where his selfhood is threatened, the soldier decides to fight back: "But hard there in the center of his chest was himself, himself, not to be plucked to pieces" (1972, p. 110). This passage portrays clearly the soldier's attempt to keep his self from being taken away. The violent murder at the end of the narrative epitomizes

the intensity of the soldier's firmness and the level of mimetic rivalry that developed between both.

Crane's and Lawrence's texts greatly exemplify the complexity of human relationships along with the psychological and social dimensions of mimetic desire. The quest for being prevails in both narratives as Crane and Lawrence depict characters constituted not by what they are, but by what they are not. Maggie can only find self-fulfillment in the person of Pete. For Maggie, Pete is the mediator between her and that imaginary world of completeness she so much desires. Pete becomes, thus, the idealized Other whom she can never fully grasp. The same happens to Lawrence's captain. His hate towards his orderly comes from the realization that is incomplete, unfinished, lack in being. Furthermost, it is the realization that his orderly is in possession of that essence he apparently lacks. His aggressive behavior towards the soldier becomes an odd mixture of love and hate, admiration and envy. Maggie's demise comes when Pete rejects her and she realizes that the only link between her and the Other no longer existed. The captain's death takes place in the woods in a violent battle where only the soldier survives. In both texts, mimetic desire followed by violence reach dangerous proportions and threatens social order. But paradoxically, this social order can only be maintained or restored when the very erasure of being seems to be the only way out.

O EU E O OUTRO: DESEJO MIMÉTICO E VIOLÊNCIA NAS NARRATIVAS "MAGGIE: A GIRL OF THE STREETS", DE STEPHEN CRANE E "THE PRUSSIAN OFFICER", DE D. H. LAWRENCE

RESUMO

Este ensaio discute uma novela de Stephen Crane e um conto de D. H. Lawrence à luz da noção Girardiana de desejo mimético. Girard contende que no centro dos relacionamentos interpessoais e ordem social está o desejo por aquilo que faz o Outro *ser*. De posse desse *ser*, o Outro a princípio é o modelo do sujeito, mas logo em seguida, torna-se seu rival. Esta relação paradoxal de amor e ódio fica sendo então o principal causador de desarmonia social. Violência e sacrifício

ritualístico se tornam os únicos mecanismos capazes de interromper esta corrente contínua de desejo mimético e de restabelecer a ordem social. Nos dois textos analisados, o desejo mimético está no centro das crises existenciais dos protagonistas, bem como da violência e morte que os acompanham.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Desejo mimético, violência, arbítrio, subjetividade, naturalismo.

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