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Mimetic Theory Meets the Oxford Inklings: Girard, Lewis, Tolkien, Williams, and Barfield

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The Oxford Inklings, in case anyone is not familiar with them, were a group of Christian writers who met together during the 1930s and 40s for fellowship and, especially, to listen and respond to each other's works in progress. C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien are its most famous members, but it included a wider circle of more than a dozen at various points. Two among them, Charles Williams and Owen Barfield, wrote works that have garnered an equally devoted following, if not nearly as large. These four together are the subject of a new group biography, just published last month, called *The Fellowship*, by Philip and Carol Zaleski. As the Zaleskis put it, "The Inklings' work...taken as a whole, has a significance that far outweighs any measure of popularity, amounting to a revitalization of Christian intellectual and imaginative life" (510).

The Inklings are the major influence on my own intellectual and imaginative life. Reading Tolkien and Lewis as a teenager set me on the path to becoming a medievalist, reading Williams and especially Barfield later helped crystallize the questions I pursued in graduate school. And all of them, I think, helped make me hungry for the work of René Girard once I got to graduate school. Yet the two influences, the Inklings and mimetic theory, do not fit easily together. Ultimately I am finding them to be complementary, mutually correcting in some ways and reinforcing in others, but in the spirit of the conference I want to begin with what I

think might be the Inklings' strongest shared objection to mimetic theory. I will then consider some of the similarities between Girard and the Inklings as literary thinkers on the way toward sketching what I think are some fruitful avenues of dialogue between them: how to think about mythology, how to read the meaning of history, and what literature can do for us.

I would like to imagine the conversation the Inklings might have had when the mimetic theory fully came to light, say, with the publication of *Things Hidden from the Foundation of the World*. Picture a group of middle-aged, tweedy men drinking ale and smoking pipes in C. S. Lewis's rooms at Magdalen College. Owen Barfield says: "Anyone seen the new book by that Frenchman Girard? Quite the title, isn't it? I rather wish I'd used it myself. Is he serious?" Lewis replies, "I have, and I do believe he is. He seems to go beyond even Tollers and me in seeing Christianity as the key to all mythologies. But it's a bit like I've said about you, Owen, being the classic second friend, the one who shares all your interests but approaches them at a different angle, who has read all the right books but got the wrong thing out of every one" (*Surprised by Joy*, 199). "Well," says Barfield, "I like him already. What's the trouble?" "Oh, I'm sure you could have an interesting conversation with him about the evolution of consciousness, but he seems to see it all on a purely natural level. He gestures to a God beyond violence, but the only event inexplicable by natural causes seems to be the scriptural revelation itself. Even the Atonement he reads anthropologically, as he calls it, as nothing more than a revelation about the truth of human nature, as if that were all the deliverance offered!" "This will never do," mutters Tolkien.

Well, perhaps that is some sort of shadow of the conversation going on even now in the bright lands where they dwell. The Inklings are famous for imagining the incursions of what Lewis called "deep heaven" into ordinary, modern life. Of

Charles Williams in particular it has been said, by T. S. Eliot, that “For him there was no frontier between the material and the spiritual world.” They were committed to using what they called mythopoeia to imagine both psychological and theological realities. To one nurtured on them, mimetic theory looks reductive, too closed to supernatural aspects of what it seeks to understand. Now, I also think that Girard has very good reasons for operating as strictly as possible according to the methods of what he calls the human sciences. One of them is the dangers involved in re-mythifying Christian theology. The questions, then, can run in both directions: What room, or even need, is there in mimetic theory for a lively imagination of divine presence and action? And if there is still a need for what Tolkien called fairy stories, what guidance might mimetic theory offer for it?

The path I will take toward working out these questions is to consider the common ground that Girard and the Inklings share, beyond their confidence in the Christian revelation. All are convinced that the great texts, the Bible above all, always have more to say. More distinctive of both Girard and the Inklings, compared to other literary scholars, is the claim that the texts themselves can teach us how to read them. Tolkien was single-handedly responsible for a revival in studies of *Beowulf* by teaching his fellow scholars how to read that poem on its own terms as a literary text rather than as a sort of exhibit in a museum of anthropology or folklore. Lewis did something similar for Spenser in the *Allegory of Love*. Girard, likewise, holds that he is only trying to be faithful to the self-interpretation offered in the works of Shakespeare or Dostoevsky, and especially in the Bible.

With all of them, there is the danger that their interpretive approaches can be seen as reductive. In Girard’s case, his paradigm is so elegant, broad, and interdisciplinary with respect to the human sciences that it can seem to be imposed on texts from outside. I will not try to explain his defense of his method or

justification of what he is happy to admit is successful precisely because it is reductive. For this audience, I think I can simply observe that reductive does not mean exclusive for Girard any more than it does for good scientists, even if popular reception of science tends to confuse the two. Girard has made clear his interest in seeing his readings brought into harmony with others as long as it is not on the relativist basis of all readings being seen as equally valid.

In the case of the Inklings, seeming reductivism would take the form of allegory. The fictions of the Inklings have been accused of being too allegorical in the sense of beginning with an abstract, oversimplified understanding and dressing it up in a literal narrative. They run the risk of a dualism between good and evil that is perhaps the most common way of re-mythifying the Gospel into the violent sacred. But I find the accusation of allegory much too easily made. Tolkien rejects it out of hand and prefers the notion of “applicability” precisely because it preserves the inexhaustibility of interpretation. Lewis and Barfield were great scholars of allegory, but both see it primarily as a historical stage in the development of literature.

Allegory is more important to the Inklings and to Girard, and less reductive, as a way of reading rather than a mode of composition. As Erich Auerbach and others have argued, allegorical reading of the Bible is different from allegorical reading of texts like Homer’s because it holds that the literal narrative being read is historically true. It is based on a theory of history that finds meaning through correspondences between narrative patterns across multiple levels, material and spiritual, and across multiple time-scales, from brief events to life-times and all of history. Explanations on one level or scale do not preclude explanation on another but can be related to them in all manner of ways, all with a basis in historical fact. Literary works participate in this process of reading history by telling similar

stories. The Bible is the inexhaustible hermeneutic key to this way of reading history.

Now, I would suggest that Girard and the Inklings share a commitment to biblical allegory in this sense as a way of reading history. Lewis's space trilogy and Narnia stories and Tolkien's stories of Middle Earth, far from trying to escape history by inventing other worlds, create other worlds and their histories in order to provide a standpoint from which to see better what Tolkien calls the true escape always being offered within real history. Girard, meanwhile, sees the Bible as interpreting and intervening in the basic dynamics of history.

What Girard and the Inklings see by reading history through the Bible can seem quite different though. The opposition is clearest in their views of myth. Both see a strong connection between Gospel and myth. For Girard, the Gospel exposes mythology as lies that conceal the historical, which is to say, natural acts of scapegoating that are at the origin of culture. For the Inklings, on the other hand, the Gospel is myth become fact; that is, myths tell stories of supernatural events that became history in Christ. In one view, the Gospel shows the truth about human nature; in the other, it reveals the truth of divine supernature. These could be two sides of the same coin, but are they? Do Girard and the Inklings read salvation history in the same way, just from opposite sides, as it were? Girard has methodologically confined his attention to one side. The Inklings, while they may be best known for their interest in the other, were also quite interested in the interplay between the two. In this respect, I think they can be helpful in imagining how mimetic theory can relate to more spiritually oriented approaches to Christian faith.

One way to approach this question would be to look at how they read actual myths. Lewis has a paragraph (in his essay called “On Stories”) about Oedipus as an example of stories that turn on fulfilled prophecy and show, as he puts it, “how destiny and free will can be combined, even how free will is the *modus operandi* of destiny. The story does what no theorem can quite do,” Lewis continues. “It may not be ‘like real life’ in the superficial sense: but it sets before us an image of what reality may well be like at some more central region” (100-1). This is not incompatible with Girard’s reading of Oedipus as a scapegoat and perhaps suggests how Christians might read Sophocles not only as evidence of anthropological truth but also an anticipation of saintly example. A much more comprehensive example of combining two such readings is to be found, as I have argued elsewhere, in Lewis’s last novel, *Till We Have Faces*. He retells the story of Cupid and Psyche in such a way as to expose the violence behind the myth while at the same time reimagining it as a fairy tale about a God beyond violence.

I take this distinction between myth and fairy tale from a suggestion by the theologian John Milbank, who in turn takes his notion of fairy tale, I think, largely from Tolkien’s classic essay “On Fairy Stories.” Tolkien’s essay, in fact, already makes a distinction between what he sees as the corrupt uses of fantasy for delusion or domination and its true potential for recovering the givenness of things from possessiveness. The uses of myth to conceal violence and of fairy tale to point to infinite love can at times be seen within the same works of literature, as my student Rebecca Fox has found in the medieval Welsh stories that make up what are called the Mabinogi. Tolkien’s own stories are, of course, the best examples of what he means by fairy tales. As the other student here with me, Anna Goodling, has begun to explore, Tolkien’s stories work largely by bringing to light the dynamics of mimetic desire and rivalry, including the notions of heroism based

on them, and offering models of conversion to a different kind of desire that begins with renunciation. Think of Thorin Oakenshield's desire for the Arkenstone in *The Hobbit* and Bilbo's decision to steal it in order to give it away and open a possibility for reconciliation. Or of the one ring and Frodo's quest to destroy it, which succeeds in part because those in mimetic thrall to it cannot conceive of anything but using it to dominate.

The novels of Charles Williams provide a similar complement to mimetic theory, as Jacob Sherman has suggested. In this case, what Sherman calls Williams's "relational metaphysics" can incorporate Girard's anthropological understanding of sacrifice within a theological and spiritual understanding of its redemptive potential, not just in the single instance of Christ's passion, but in daily examples of what Williams calls co-inherence, substitution, and the way of exchange. A sense of positive mimesis is here developed far beyond mere renunciation of acquisitive desire.

These examples from the novels of Lewis, Tolkien, and Williams show them using the means of literature to imagine the interplay between the natural and the supernatural in a way that begins to take on board mimetic theory's understanding of human nature and includes it within a rich, poetic rendering of spiritual reality driven by hope for what Tolkien calls eucatastrophe, a deliverance beyond all expectation. In the time that remains, I would like to turn to the fourth Inklings, Owen Barfield, who is known more for philosophical and philological writings.

Barfield said that he had one big idea that he kept writing about in different ways, and he most often called it the evolution of consciousness. The mimetic theory could also be called a theory of the evolution of consciousness in Barfield's sense. In *Saving the Appearances: A Study in Idolatry*, Barfield articulates his theory

through the key term “participation,” which he deploys in ways that cross back and forth between the natural and the supernatural, or between what might be called a horizontal, social dimension and a vertical, theological one. Girardian mimesis can be seen as a particular and crucial kind of participation along the horizontal dimension, which then suggests the possibility of considering it along the vertical, as a spiritual and voluntary aspect of being.

Barfield divides his overall story of the evolution of consciousness into three phases: original participation, objectivity, and final participation. The middle stage, objectivity, is what our culture takes to be the only possibility, a mode of consciousness that has been the dominant norm throughout the modern period, seen especially in the rise of modern science, but with its roots in the ancient Greeks and Hebrews. “Original participation,” then, refers to a pre-scientific, pre-reflective, what used to be called “primitive” mode of consciousness. These two phases, and the transition between them, are closely connected to the transition between oral and literate cultures as analyzed by Walter Ong, long-time member of the faculty here at St. Louis University. One of the contrasts Ong pointed out between orality and literacy, in fact, is between “participatory” and “objectively distanced” modes of knowledge. “Participation” here means a sense of connection between the knower and the known, such that the knower perceives behind the appearances of things the same kind of subjectivity one perceives in oneself. Literate moderns may tend to imagine this as something like a kind of animism, with a set of beliefs to support it, but part of Barfield’s (and Ong’s) point is to see this mode of consciousness apart from the capacity for objectivity and self-consciousness that seems natural to us. Objectivity can then be seen not as a given but as a slow cultural achievement. Barfield takes this use of the term “participation” from the anthropologist Lucien Levy-Bruhl, and also invokes

Durkheim's notion of "collective representations" to talk about how much of what we perceive is not objective but the result of unconscious processing mediated by cultural forms. This phase of original participation and orality is the one in which Girard would see the origin of cultural forms through the mechanisms of mimetic desire. Whereas Barfield uses the idea of participation epistemologically, to talk about knowledge, it seems to me one might say that Girard extends it to volition, to talk about desire and action. We are always participating in the desires of others. Objective consciousness provides a buffer against this participation, one that those in a state of original participation lack. Conversely, the transition to objectivity through literacy and the rise of science is intricately connected to, and perhaps largely dependent on, the exposure of the scapegoat mechanism and the consequent opening up of the possibility of stepping away from the violent mob. Barfield, Ong, and Girard could combine for a richer account of the evolution of consciousness, which might have as one of its benefits making the mimetic account of origins a bit more persuasive, at least on the level of imagination.

Barfield's notion of a "final participation" after and including objectivity is more mystical and less well developed. He links it, however, to the sense of "participation" that goes back to the Platonic idea of *methexis* as received among Latin theologians: the participation of all created things in the divine, mediated through transcendental realities such as being and goodness. What Barfield has in mind is the epistemological sense of participation, so that final participation involves some kind of consciousness that true knowledge is illuminated by the divine Logos. How this could include objectivity and self-awareness is part of the puzzle. What I want to suggest, however, is that here again, in this vertical dimension, participation also has a volitional element that we could call mimesis.

Simply put, it is the imitation of divine Love, the choice of Jesus as one's model, which is at once participation in Another's will and perfect freedom.

Those of you familiar with the theological movement known as Radical Orthodoxy will recognize this vertical sense of participation as one of its key ideas, taken largely from Augustine and Aquinas and transmitted not only by Barfield, but also by the members of another mid-twentieth-century intellectual circle, the Nouvelle Theologie. For Henri de Lubac, in particular, the crucial experience of participation is the sacrament of Holy Communion, which joins what I have distinguished as the horizontal and vertical as well as the epistemological and volitional aspects of participation. Girard has pointed to the centrality of the Eucharist in Christian life. The Inklings play with a sacramental view of reality that resonates with Barfieldian final participation and opens a response to mimetic theory beyond renunciation of acquisitive mimesis. Tolkien especially adumbrates several versions of peaceful, sacramental presence that resist the acquisitive domination of the Ring: the contemplative artistry of the elves; Tom Bombadil's exuberant, generous delight in things as they are; the hobbits' devotion to simple pleasures. Hobbits have nothing very magical or supernatural about them, but perhaps it is this very simplicity, this distance from the precincts of the sacred, that, when seen through the eyes of Gandalf, Bombadil, or Galadriel, makes them most holy.

David Bentley Hart, in *The Beauty of the Infinite*, suggests the need to supplement Girard's negative understanding of sacrifice with a positive one that connects it to the idea of divine, infinite gift, a need which many Girardians have worked to supply. I have suggested some ways in which the work of the Inklings might help point the way from participation in mimetic violence to mimetic participation in the peace that passes all understanding. The final one I would like to mention is

friendship, both as abundantly represented and discussed in their works and, even more, as they lived it with each other, and as we can try to live it in this fellowship.

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