Fetishism and Form:
Erotic and Economic Disorder in Literature

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> "In a sort of way, it is with man as with commodities. Since he comes into the world neither with a looking glass in his hand, nor as a Fichtian philosopher, to whom 'I am I' is sufficient, man first sees and recognizes himself in other men. Peter only establishes his own identity as a man by first comparing himself with Paul as being of like kind. And thereby Paul, just as he stands in his Pauline personality, becomes to Peter the type of the genus homo."
> Karl Marx, *Capital*

> "The laws of the capitalist free market, like those of eroticism, arise from underground pride."
>
> René Girard, *Dostoievski*

The work of Rene Girard would seem to be quite remote from the concerns of Marx, and yet on two independent occasions his theory of mediated desire has inspired Marxists to rethink important problems in the fields of literary criticism and economics. Lucien Goldmann initiated the first of these encounters between Girard's thought and Marxism twenty years ago in an article comparing Girard's theory of the novel with that of the early Lukács.[1]

Goldmann pointed out the similarity between Girard's theory of mediated desire and the theory of the 'degradation' of values in Lukács' pre-Marxist *Theory of the Novel*.[2] Goldmann attempted to explain the underlying unity of these two approaches to the novel in terms of the Marxist category of commodity fetishism. He argued that there is a 'rigorous homology' between the position of "authentic values' in the novel and the position of use values on the market: both become 'implicit' as they are subordinated to exchange value. The individual who attempts to pursue authentic values in a world where they have become inaccessible is possessed by a demon and lives by illusions that bring about his destruction. Yet his struggle indicates by implication what has been lost in the reification of society. Such an individual is a 'problematic hero' because of the contradictions between his aspirations, their expression and society. According to Goldmann, it is the interposition of a debased social relation between the individuals and the objects of their desires that generates the universe of inauthenticity described by Girard and Lukács.

Goldmann's comparison is intriguing, but not entirely persuasive. The fetishistic substitution of exchange value for use value can be related to the Lukácsian idea of 'degradation' and to Girard's concept of mediation', but it is identical with neither. In Lukács' theory the 'problematic hero' of the novel is engaged in a degraded search for authentic values in a degraded world. The market is one, but not the only structure

corresponding to Lukács' image of the novelistic world as a dead 'second nature' against which the hero struggles for meaning and value. The mediation of use values by exchange values is of a different kind from Girardian mediation, which describes the relations of rivalry of two individuals who unconsciously designate each other's objects of desire in a competition based on mutual imitation and jealousy. Furthermore, there is something distinctly naive about Goldmann's identification of use value with authenticity in the context of a discussion of Girard, for whom the very category of use value is subject to a radical critique.[3]

These problems may explain why Goldmann's theory had little impact on the study of the novel and none at all on the second encounter between Marxism and Girard to which I now want to turn. Quite recently, Girard's writings have come to the attention of a number of French economists - some of them Marxists - with surprising results. No doubt this encounter could not take place until Girard himself had developed the theory of sacrifice that supplies the bridge between his theory of desire and his reinterpretation of the human sciences.[4] Then it became apparent that Girard's work had suggestive implications for economics, specifically for the theory of conspicuous consumption and the Marxist theory of monetary exchange.

It is as a theoretician of *desire* that Girard can interest economists who have become skeptical of utilitarian attempts to found economics in need. Girard's theory of mimesis provides the basis for a critique of substantialist illusions in economics because it offers an alternative to the conventional notion that desire is a direct relation to something desirable in objects. He proposes instead a theory of 'triangular' desire which reduces all object relations to prior social relations of competition and imitation. This position supports a rejection of three of the bases of traditional economic philosophy: the belief that scarcity is a natural phenomenon, the belief that consumer behaviour can be derived from competition for a falsely hypostatized substance called 'prestige', and the belief that prices 'represent' another hypostatized substance such as utility or labour.[5]

In *La Violence de la monnaie,* Aglietta and Orléan follow Girard in suggesting that the basic relation of exchange can be interpreted as a conflict of 'doubles', each mediating the desire of the Other. Like Goldmann, they see a connection between Girard's theory of mimetic desire and the Marxian theory of commodity fetishism.[6] In their theory, the market takes the place of the sacred in modern life as the chief institutional mechanism stabilizing the otherwise explosive conflicts of desiring subjects. But the identification and critique of theological residues in apparently secular institutions was precisely the basis of the theory of alienation Marx learned from Feuerbach and refined in his later work. His application of the term 'fetishism' to the economic problem of the commodity was no accident. Thus Goldmann's attempt to link Girard and Marx is not so arbitrary as it may at first seem.

Girard's literary theory has inspired a reflection on economics, and on precisely that aspect of economics which, for Goldmann, explained the structural similarity of the theories of the novel of Girard and Lukács. But if economic exchange is in principle identical with mimesis, which in turn elucidates the structure of novelistic desire, are we not justified in pursuing Goldmann's insight into the relation of fetishism and literary form? Perhaps the economic reflections inspired by Girard's theory can contribute to concretizing that insight and render it fruitful for the study of literary texts.

The aim of this paper is to call attention to the critical implications of the economic application of Girard's work. To that end 1 propose to re-examine several texts, one of which Girard himself discussed before the development of his theory of sacrifice and its application to economics. The texts I have chosen include two stories by Borges and Dostoevsky's short novel, *The Gambler*. I will show that the curious intermingling of economic and erotic relations in these works can be understood from the standpoint of a mimetic theory of fetishism, such as that proposed by Aglietta and Orlean. From this standpoint it is also possible to extend considerably Girard's original analysis of the Dostoevsky text, and the new analysis in turn suggests a new interpretation of Goldmann's comparison of Girard and Lukács.

Borges wrote two stories, called 'The Zahir' end 'The Aleph', which show the influence of H. G. Wells' 'The Crystal Egg.'[7] Curiously, when juxtaposed these titles represent a visible figure of the infinite. In fact, Borges informs us that *'Zahir* in Arabic means 'notorious', 'visible'; in this sense it is one of the ninety-nine names of God. . . and 'Aleph' is, of course, the mathematical sign for 'infinity'.[8]

These two stories of Borges resemble drafts of a single story, and somehow, retrospectively, they suggest that Wells too was working towards the production of the same ultimate text. In each of Borges' versions there is a first-person narrator in love with a dead woman who was always indifferent to him, and fascinated by a fetishistic object which has the attributes of infinity. In 'The Zahir', this object is finally revealed to us as . . . money. The story can be considered as a fantastic reflection on the paradoxes of the marketplace and the mysterious power of symbols. Borges' story offers a remarkable illustration of Aglietta and Orléan's thesis concerning the sacred character of money. A careful reading of his tale can liberate us from the assumption that *we know what money* is when we encounter it in fiction.

Wells' story does not at first suggest such metaphysical complexities. It concerns a 'crystal egg' within which it is possible to see a view of Mars, and through which, presumably, Martian observers see earth. Mr Cave, the antiquarian owner of the crystal egg, becomes obsessed with it (it becomes 'the most real thing in his existence'[9]), and eventually dies with a smile on his face holding the egg in his hands. After his death the egg is mysteriously lost.

In constructing his own stories out of the material supplied by Wells, Borges dropped the Martian element and concentrated instead on the implicit sacred significance of a ubiquitous object that serves as a mysterious medium, and which becomes an obsessive focus of attention for its owner.

The 'Aleph', in the story of that name, is 'the place where all places in the universe can be found together, without confusion, seen from every angle."[10] The narrator learns of its existence from Carlos Daneri, the cousin of his friend Beatriz Viterbo, whom he loved hopelessly in her lifetime and to whose memory he has dedicated himself. Daneri, it transpires, is writing an immense and silly poem in which he attempts to express the experience of the Aleph. At the end of the story it turns out that this cousin is the narrator's successful competitor in both literature and love, and his triumph is somehow connected to his secret knowledge of the Aleph.

The narrator concludes the tale of his discomfiture with some speculations on the word 'Aleph' which, in its cabalistic application, signifies 'pure and unlimited divinity', while in its mathematical usage it signifies the transfinite numbers 'in which the whole

is no larger than one of the parts'.[11] The Aleph, like the crystal egg, contains a mysterious spatial representation that defies ordinary logic. Its possessor is possessed by it and elevated above his fellows. The Aleph is a figure of God inexplicably revealing Himself to the narrator's triumphant double.

'The Zahir' covers much the same ground as 'The Aleph' in a still more revealing way. The narrator of 'The Zahir', 'Borges', received this commonplace Argentine coin in change in a bistro he entered after leaving the funeral of a woman he confesses to having loved long ago, 'moved by that most sincere of Argentinian passions, snobbery'.[12] Teodelina Villar was an elegant and disdainful fashion plate whose ever-changing image once adorned innumerable advertisements for creams and cars. The narrator describes her devotion to fashion as a kind of religion: 'She was in search of the Absolute, like Flaubert; only hers was an Absolute of a moment's duration."[13] In his last glimpse of her corpse, the narrator sees her face again as it was when he loved her, frozen once and for all in the cold mask of perfect indifference and snobbery.

Who can doubt that the old love story, were it told, would be the record of Borges' unrequited passion? But instead of the expected romance we are offered a bizarre variant on the crystal egg theme, a narrative of obsession with a common coin, a 'Zahir'.

The narrator's obsession is apparently unmotivated. The coin seems perfectly ordinary and yet, even after he has spent it, his thoughts return to it again and again until finally it blots out the rest of his existence. Eventually, he finds a book which explains his plight. The book recounts the history of the various 'Zahirs' of times past, objects which completely absorb the consciousness of those who look on them. The Zahir is typically expelled from society, but not before it has found victims. Once a blind man of the Surakarta Mosque was the Zahir, but he was stoned by the faithful; once it was a copper astrolabe thrown into the sea by order of the King of Persia, 'lest men forget the universe'.[14] Although everything can become a Zahir, God in his mercy creates only one at a time.

The narrator observes that the Zahir represents a radical simplification of existence: from a multitude and variety of sensations, he is passing to a single one: 'Whatever is not the Zahir comes to me fragmentarily, as if from a great distance . . ."[15] He seeks consolation in the thought that the secret of the entire universe may be revealed in a flower; every thing is a 'symbolic mirror' of the whole, even the Zahir.[16] His last hope, inspired by a certain *Libro de Cosas que se ignoran, is* that by sheer concentration of awareness he will pass beyond the Zahir itself to the ultimate substance that underlies it: 'perhaps behind the coin I shall find God'.[17]

The interpretative problem posed by these stories consists in finding the connection between the parallel erotic and metaphysical fascinations of the characters. In 'The Aleph' this problem is obscured by the doubling of the subject and the allocation of some important elements of the structure to a third person in the story. 'The Zahir' is on the contrary crystal clear: in it the infinity of consciousness returns to the alienated subject as an infinite destructive power first in the form of the beloved and then far more radically as a paradoxical monetary obsession which has nothing to do with economic gain and in which nevertheless money plays a peculiarly appropriate role.

'The Zahir' is a story about fascination, represented in various degrees and kinds but always as an emblem of overpowering objectivity very much along the lines of Sartre's remarkable description:

> "In fascination . . . the knower is absolutely nothing but a pure negation; he does not find or recover himself anywhere - he is *not*. The only qualification which he can support is that he *is not* precisely this particular fascinating object. In fascination there is nothing more than a gigantic object in a desert world. Yet the fascinated intuition is in no way a *fusion* with the object. In fact the condition necessary for the existence of fascination is that the object be raised in absolute relief on a background of emptiness; that is, I am precisely the immediate negation of the object and nothing but that."[18]

The narrator, Borges, is predisposed to fascination, and Teodelina was for him just such a fascinating object. His enslavement to her *is* barely hinted at in the reference to a love based on snobbery. In what does this love consist? Borges gives us little evidence, but what we have speaks plainly. Teodelina is a worshipper of the God Fashion; her eyes are always turned away from Borges towards Paris and Hollywood. Teodelina's whole activity consists in becoming a perfect object: that is to say, in the exercise of the fascinating power of the fashionable model of the moment. As a snob, Borges is sensitive to her appeal.

The relationship is not so one-sided as it may seem. The seductive power of Teodelina is no accident but derives from her struggle to constitute herself as a fascinating object. Sartre notes that fascination is 'the non-thetic consciousness of being *nothing* in the presence of being. Seduction aims at producing in the Other the consciousness of his state of nothingness as he confronts the seductive object . . . To accomplish this I constitute myself as a meaningful object."[19] Fashion is the code through which Teodelina so constitutes herself. Her ultimate triumph is to enter the code as a model in her own right, to become an advertising image. Thereupon she withdraws from the world to avoid making concessions and competing 'with giddy little nobodies'.[20]

Despite her successes, Teodelina's life is a profound failure. She too is the victim of a fascination that brings no satisfaction, that can never be fusion with the object but only a 'consciousness of [her] state of nothingness'. 'Her life was exemplary, yet she was ravaged unremittingly by an inner despair. She was forever experimenting with new metamorphoses, as though trying to get away from herself.'[21]

These worldly phenomena of fascination with fashion and the fashionable form a triangle of desire. Teodelina is both object and mediator for Borges the snob. She is object in so far as she is the model of his rivals, the readers of the fashionable reviews in which her picture appears. In this respect Teodelina is like any other 'star' of modern consumer society. She is offered to society as an idealized model, a lesson in desire. Her admirers participate in a consumer culture in which possession of Teodelina's attributes can be immediately decoded by others as the sign of desirability. The skilled consumer knows how to free herself in time from the fascination with Teodelina's image while carrying away the lesson:

> "In the world of commodities, the imitation of the Other's desire does not necessarily propel the Subject headlong towards the obstacle which serves as his model. Open conflict can be avoided by a simple lateral shift. To avoid experiencing the torments of desire, it is enough for the Subject to find the EQUIVALENT of the object possessed or desired by the Other."[22]

In her social function Teodelina is a currency, a common coin in the transactions of desire, not an active party to the rivalries and loves she inhabits anonymously. Teodelina is a medium of erotic exchange and as such has in principle no 'use value' in the sexual marketplace.

However, Borges knows Teodelina personally. Thus for him, her status as star belongs to her personally. Through her total absorption in this status she becomes a mediator to Borges, who is fascinated by her fascination with her own objectivity. It is not her beauty that interests him, but her relation to an ideal of perfection which he conceives as a kind of religion. This second-order fascination corresponds to a sense of self which is the secret inner world of symbols, a religious world, a fetishistic world, always pointing beyond towards a source in the absolute. It is this inwardness of symbols which fascinates Borges. The form of his love for Teodelina thus adumbrates the disorder represented by his fascination with the Zahir, through which he hopes to reach the absolute.

The narrator's terminal fascination is with a piece of money, a still more universal equivalent than his beloved's face, and certainly a far colder object than the most heartless coquette. The universality of money is clearly its attraction, making it an ideal 'Zahir'. It can stand for everything and yet it is nothing in itself, just a thin piece of metal with a few scratches to distinguish it from other thin pieces of metal of the same value. The Zahir is like the Aleph in being virtually infinite. Both are the pure potentiality of everything and just for that reason neither has a content, a 'use value', in itself. Both represent the universe - the one in space, the other economically. The chief difference between them is one of viewpoint: we learn of the Aleph only indirectly and as a prop in a banal competition of doubles, whereas Borges places us directly inside the consciousness of the Zahir's victim.

Thc relation between the Aleph's ubiquity and God is clear enough, but the monetary metaphor to the divinity is more subtle. The paradoxical status of Teodelina as a goddess of desire placed beyond all human contact exactly describes the position of money in the fetishistic system of economic exchange. Aglietta and Orléan explain the peculiar position of money as a function of the primitive mimetic crisis in which the desires of the entire community are focused on a single object:

> "Although this paroxysmic situation can lead to the destruction of the community, it also offers an escape: *the exclusion* of this object from the private sphere, its divinization or, in other words, its institutionalization . . . It is only because mimetic contagion makes possible this transcendence that society is able to free itself for a time from the destructive effects of violence. The 'monetary thing' provokes a respect and fear in the individuals which suggest the attitude of believers towards the divinity."[23]

In this description of the quasi-sacred character of money we recognize the Zahir, object of universal fascination and scapegoat expelled from the community 'lest men forget the universe'. However, the Zahir is not merely money, it is money gone mad, money that no longer plays its part as a medium of exchange but which has become the absolute object in itself, a sacrificed god returning for vengeance. Recognizable in this description is a particular form of monetary disorder, thesaurization, which converts the medium of

exchange into an object of desire: 'Although money as a medium of exchange is a sign of life, its pursuit for its own sake in the accumulation of treasure is deadly.'[24]

The narrator of Borges' story cannot, of course, be described as economically interested in money. He is engaged in a kind of metaphysical thesaurization rather than in the ordinary accumulation of wealth. Similarly, it is difficult to believe that his passion for Teodelina was ever consummated. In both cases, the narrator is fixated on the sacred function of mediation and cannot pass beyond to what is mediated by the sacred. He cannot free himself from the intermediary in order to transact the business of living. His is a case of arrested circulation.

The theme proposed by Wells has undergone a remarkable transubstantiation in Borges. Wells' crystal egg can be in two places simultaneously, a curious feat no doubt, but one that still suggests naturalistic explanations. The Aleph carries the principle of the egg beyond all natural possibility to its logical conclusion by being everywhere in the universe simultaneously. However, the power of the Aleph is still relatively weak: it can be forgotten, because 'Our spirit is porous in the face of forgetfulness.'[25] The Zahir, finally, overcomes even forgetfulness: time, after all, is money. The Zahir not only represents the universe, as does the Aleph, it obliterates it. Money, which in principle can stand for anything at all, here actually replaces everything: 'the whole is no larger than one of the parts.'

These stories by Borges are particularly clear- because fantastical -expressions of the interaction between erotic and economic fetishism in literature. But a similar structure can be found beneath the 'realistic' surface of many novelistic works. Money, which seems to be part of the social background of the story, is often an object of demonic passions inexplicable in narrowly realistic terms. Dostoevsky's novella *The Gambler is* a particularly clear example of the non-economic relation to money in the novel.

The Gambler concerns the household of a spendthrift and profoundly humiliated General, who unwittingly transfers a great Russian estate into the hands of a pair of schemers. At the beginning of the story the estate still belongs to 'Granny', an imperious old lady whose anxiously awaited demise forms the background to the intrigue. The General has lost his own money and that of his children, and he cowers before Granny, before the Count de Grieux, to whom all his own estates are mortgaged, and before Mlle Blanche, the *grue* with whom he is desperately in love. It is clear that as soon as the General inherits, all his wealth will be confiscated by these two parasites.

There are two individuals in the General's household who have a certain independence and strength of character. They are his stepdaughter, Polina, and the hero, Alexey, an impoverished nobleman who serves in the humiliating position of tutor - *outchitel* -to the General's children. Polina has been de Grieux's mistress, a fact which torments her because de Grieux offered her money in a parting gesture she cannot forgive. Alexey's abject passion for Polina masquerades at times as a tragicomic attempt at chivalry. Alexey is determined to win immense sums at roulette, convinced that this will make a man of him, gaining him the respect and, more importantly, the self-respect he requires to be worthy of Polina.

In *The Gambler,* more than in most novels, money is an obsessive object of interest literally from the first page to the last. Its ubiquity receives apparently realistic explanations: the hero is poor, his employer is bankrupt, and so on. However, behind

this facade of ordinary financial exigency, the reader soon detects another more basic relationship to money: money is required not so much to buy things as to settle power struggles between lovers. Erotic and economic relations are inextricably intertwined.

Girard's analysis of the story is based on 'l'identité secrète de l'érotisme et du jeu'.[26] He shows how the struggles for domination between lovers are mirrored precisely in the imaginary struggle of the gambler with the roulette wheel. In the psychological underground of the doubles, victory is assured to the individual capable of hiding his desires behind a veil of proud self-sufficiency. The idolator can become the idol if only he can hide his passion. Applied to gambling, this mentality yields a 'system' which 'consists in extending to the domain of physical nature the influence which self-mastery is able to exercise in the underground world'.[27] Alexey lives by these rules and is destroyed by them.

Girard's analysis illuminates the love affair between Alexey and Polina and helps us understand its bizarre reversals and its relationship to gambling. However, something important is missing: an account of the role in the story of the strictly economic relationship to money. For *The Gambler* cannot be understood by focusing exclusively on the demonic triangle formed by these two principal characters and the roulette wheel. The story takes place in Germany, identified contemptuously by Alexey as the epitome of the capitalist spirit, and it contains characters like de Grieux and Mllle Blanche who are engaged in quite ordinary money-grubbing. The heroic quality of Alexey and Polina stems from their refusal of the commercial ethic which surrounds them. It is in distinguishing themselves from what Lukács called 'the world' that they achieve the status of 'problematic' characters possessed by an 'ideal'.[28]

A careful examination of the story reveals the importance of this theme. The confusion of the erotic and economic realms can be traced in the structure of all the relationships: each couple is made up of one party for whom it is an economic exchange, while the other perceives it as a passionate relation of doubles. The resulting confusion of economic and erotic orders leads inexorably to catastrophe. It is necessary to sketch the variety of ways in which the relationships are structured by the conflict of economic and erotic motives.

Mlle Blanche is a professional coquette in search of a price for her favours. She is a hard bargainer, like a peasant seeking a good price for his cow, and does not hesitate to point out the (exaggerated) value of what she has to offer. Her coquetry consists in a narcissistic self-absorption which signifies her 'object' as desirable to the General. From her standpoint, the General is a buyer on the marketplace. However, he is no ordinary buyer; he is passionately and miserably in love, and he suffers terribly because his beloved is a commodity which he must buy or see sold to another. To make matters worse, his fate is contingent on a chance event, Granny's inheritance, and this drives him literally crazy with frustration and helplessness. And, since the General is truly in love, he is in no position to bargain for Mlle. Blanche's favours. She is literally everything' for him and sets her own price, essentially his entire fortune.

The relationship has a pathetic quality because while the General is enslaved by the laws of desire, Mlle. Blanche relates to him as a prudent *petit bourgeoise,* trading on her person while she is young and attractive to constitute a capital to protect herself in old age when she will no longer have anything to sell. Characteristically, she does not gamble herself but loans money to gamblers. The affair has a sad end: by the time the

General can afford her he has been reduced to a shadow of himself and soon dies, leaving behind a prosperous widow.

Polina's case is more complex. The General wanted to buy only what he needed, while Polina wants something much more difficult: to prove that she herself is beyond all price.

Polina has been de Grieux's mistress, but their relations were infected by a mutual suspicion of mercenary afterthoughts. De Grieux fears that Polina intends to trade her love for the mortgaged estate of her stepfather, the General, in which her own property has long since been confounded. Polina is appalled at de Grieux's suspicion, which seems to signify her as a mere commercial object. She is a romantic young woman who can imagine nothing more degrading than this misinterpretation of her passion. She therefore withdraws in her pride, becomes cold and indifferent to de Grieux, and attempts to escape the role in which he has cast her.

This escape is finally blocked by a diabolical gesture: de Grieux offers her a way of recovering her own money from the wreckage of the General's estate. The sum involved is 50,000 francs, precisely the amount of money Mlle Blanche will later demand of Alexey for a month's delights in Paris. Polina now knows her price and a first exchange has been completed, that of her favours for de Grieux's money.

The humiliation she experiences drives her into Alexey's arms. He is poor and can apparently offer her nothing for her love. By giving herself to him she once again signifies herself as beyond price, as a creature of passion rather than calculation - as a person, in short, rather than a commodity. But this is not enough for Polina. She wants to fling de Grieux's money in his face to prove that she is not for sale and that their earlier relations were in no sense a commercial transaction.

Once Polina yields to Alexey, the sadomasochistic relationship of doubles in which they are locked is reversed. Alexey immediately interprets his victory over her as the beginning of a run of gambling luck and rushes from her side to the roulette tables, where he wins more than enough money to cancel her obligation to de Grieux. But when he offers her the money she needs, she interprets his chivalrous gesture as a second purchase. She gives herself to him in hatred, and throws the sum in his face as previously she had proposed to throw it in the face of de Grieux. Polina cannot use Alexey to escape the trap that has been laid for her: in her eyes he has simply become another purchaser. Her autonomy as a person has been irreversibly alienated on the market.

Alexey's own case is even stranger than Polina's. He has no debts, desires nothing that can be bought with money, and feels contempt for those who work and save. He has no conception of working for a living himself, and says: that 'I don't look upon myself as something subordinate to capital and necessary to it.'[29] Until she comes to him, Polina is the sole object of his desires. Afterwards, he can think only of gambling. Love and gambling are identical in principle for him, victory in one promising victory in the other. In both domains he is convinced that self-conquest is the key to success. He relates to the gambling table as he wishes he could relate to a cold and indifferent beloved. To expose one's hand is to lose. Only a coldness surpassing that of the spinning ball can conquer the roulette wheel, or the beautiful Polina.

Alexey's essential masochism is revealed in his treatment of Polina. At the beginning of the story, when she is cold and distant, he says to her: 'I lose all self-respect

in your presence, and I don't care.'[30] After she yields, his love for her wanes while gambling obsesses him completely. Puzzled, he comments: 'from the very moment when I reached the gambling tables the previous evening and began winning a pile of money, my love had retreated, so to speak, into the background'.[31] Polina's defeat in the struggle of the doubles removes her as an obstacle from Alexey's path and by the same token also removes her as an object of desire: "All that is required for Polina to lose her prestige in the eyes of the *outchitel is* that she reveal her vulnerability. The empress becomes the slave and vice versa. This is why the *outchitel,* who was waiting for the 'right moment', decides to gamble".[32]

The roulette wheel offers a less yielding obstacle than even the most sadistic of lovers. 'Mimetic desire begins by transforming models into obstacles; it ends up by transforming obstacles into models.'[33]

This analysis shows the extent to which economic and erotic relations are precisely *not* identical in the novel itself, but only in the minds of certain of the characters. In fact the novel displays four variants on an underlying structure of conflicts between economic and erotic agents. They are distinguished as buyer and seller on the one side, sadist and masochist on the other, as follows. The relationship of Mlle. Blanche and the General represents a seller attached to a masochist. The relationship of de Grieux and Polina represents a buyer attached to a sadist. The relationship of Alexey and Polina combines these two forms in an impossible hybrid: the masochistic Alexey is rejected as such by the sadist, Polina, who cannot accept the reversal in their relations of dominance implied by Alexey's sudden offer of money. Polina can be won neither by love nor by purchase. Alexey's relation to the roulette wheel, finally, represents the general form of the whole enterprise of extracting erotic power from economic relations and vice versa.

Why should the mixing of economic and erotic orders of desire produce such radical disorder? The answer lies in the obscure origins of the one system of exchange in the other, as is made clear in Aglietta and Orléan 's analysis of the Marxian theory of monetary exchange in terms of Girard's mimetic theory of desire. The authors note the puzzling complexity of Marx's explanation of barter, which is usually seen as a self-explanatory exchange for mutual benefit. They argue that Marx's theory becomes comprehensible if exchange is seen as arising from an original relation of doubles. On these terms, the bizarre events of Dostoevsky's story may be explained as boundary problems in the transition between the two forms of relationship.

Barter, according to Marx, is the elementary form of value. Marx treats this form as a dialectical contradiction, because in it each bartered good must serve as both a particular use value offered for trade and as a measure of the value of the good for which it is exchanged. The contradiction seems purely formal until the relation of the barterers is interpreted as a relation of doubles. Then it becomes apparent that the split between use value and exchange value, and the fact that they can be expressed only in a relation between two distinct commodities, reflects an underlying social tension. This tension, by the way, is quite real and haunts all primitive societies, obliging them to ritualize exchange in elaborate ways that are often insufficient to prevent outbreaks of violence.

Considered as a relation of doubles, barter is complicated by the fact that each commodity can enter the exchange process only in so far as it is perceived as a use value by an eventual buyer. This perception in turn depends on that buyer taking the owner

for a model/rival who designates an object as desirable and erects an obstacle to its possession in the form of a price. But the buyer can meet that price and overcome that obstacle only through himself serving as model/rival for the seller, designating for him another commodity in his (the buyer's) possession as a use value and erecting once again an obstacle in the form of a price. The roles of buyer and seller, which seem complementary in purely economic terms, in fact embrace incompatible positions of desire. To play both roles, the individuals must be at the same time both model and imitator for each other. But this is precisely the double bind of double mediation in Girard's theory of mimetic desire.

As a measure of value money resolves the contradiction, or at least permits it to be played out in a relatively pacific form. If the value of each good can be expressed in terms of a third object, money, publicly instituted as a measure, then the goods involved in the exchange need not each serve as the measure of the other. The interactions of the doubles is now indirect, socially mediated; hence they need not establish privately the intrinsic value of the commodities they exchange:

The existence of a nominal currency enables each private subject to define himself in relation to society as a whole, represented as a monetary space, by naming a price in terms of a definite number of monetary units. In practical terms, this means that his desire for Being achieves expression in an asking price for the totality of his possessions, through which he seeks recognition from others.[34]

The difference between barter and sale reflects the difference between passion and monetary exchange. Erotic doubles are engaged in a relationship which is formally homologous with the relationship of barter described above. Each offers the other a unique value that can be measured only by the other's choice. The contradiction in the relationship is also the same: a happy resolution would require that each serve simultaneously as model and disciple, as master and slave. But the attempt to resolve this contradiction through the mediation of money will not work in the erotic sphere as it does in the economy. Chaos results from the interposition of a public medium of exchange between the doubles and what they offer each other in love.

Where a price is set, distance is created and, in the economic domain, a way is opened to relaxing the conflict of the doubles. But such a gesture is incomprehensible or offensive to a lover completely engaged in the struggle of doubles. Where the one offers passion for passion, self for self, the other brings in the entire society as potential bidders in a public auction of the soul. The passionate party to the relationship cannot but interpret this as a sadistic gesture, and so the passage from erotic to economic exchange is blocked.

The General responds to such a gesture masochistically: he is unable to haggle over price, and so the 'sale' of Mlle Blanche turns into something quite different because of the inability of the buyer to impose the market discipline that correlates logically with the setting of price by a seller. Polina is a sadistic character, and her response to the offer of money is hatred and rage. She interprets the attempt to monetize her relationship with de Grieux as an expression of his unconquerable pride, a victorious stratagem in a struggle for domination. What appears from one viewpoint as a transaction appears from the other as an offence.

Alexey's relationship to gambling has a similar contradictory character. Like the narrator of 'The Zahir'. Alexey is involved with money not as a medium of exchange, but

as a sacred object. He does not perceive money as an intermediary between himself and goods, but rather as an idol and a sign. He seeks not to be rich but to be blessed by fortune, and especially to be seen as such:

> "No, it was not money that I wanted. All that I wanted was that the next day... they might be all talking about me, repeating my story, wondering at me, admiring me, praising me, and doing homage to my new success".[35]

Economically considered, gambling is a business, a simulacrum of capitalist investment. But gambling is precisely not a business for gamblers: it is an erotic relationship to money, the ultimate reification of the challenge of the doubles.

The Gambler is no doubt a novella rather than a novel because the logic of gambling does not lend itself to extensive treatment. The typical novelistic hero is engaged in action on a larger scale, an economic or personal struggle entwined with erotic passions revealing a broad social canvas. Yet Dostoevsky's short novel is emblematic of these wider perspectives and encapsulates the struggle of individual and society in a particularly transparent form.

To understand fully this emblematic character of the text it is necessary to return to the considerations from which we began: the relation of novelistic form to capitalist society. Lucien Goldmann, it will be recalled, suggested that they are structurally homologous. It is this homology which, for Goldmann, explains Lukács' theory of the novel as a degraded search for authentic values in a degraded world.

In an interesting article on *The Theory of the Novel,* Ferenc Feher argues that Goldmann's thesis of a homology between novelistic form and market structure is most persuasive in pointing to the 'fortuitous' character of modern individuality both in literature and society. Capitalism destroys the organic communities that preceded it and the social differences on which they were based. Social status is no longer a destiny prior to individual experience but rather emerges from the encounters of free individuals, who circulate in society according to the laws of chance. In the novel, as in life, the individual has the task of converting these accidental circumstances into a destiny through the labour of building an identity. Feher writes that individuality is 'ambivalent' under capitalism, where it can mean "two entirely different things: . . . that individuals realize themselves or fail to do so through the accidents of competition and struggle; but also. . . that an individual's place in a given order or class . . . is no longer a personal quality of his, but the result of his own activities."[36]

Chance is thus at the core of the modern experience of individuality. What is typically missing in Marxist accounts such as Feher's is the connection between these changes in the social background of the novel, which make possible the literary representation of individual biography and the passionate erotic struggles which accompany the characters' social struggles like a fatal complication of existence. This connection can be made in terms of the parallel structure of fortuitous individuality and the Girardian mimetic crisis. The Girardian concept of modernity is also a passage towards social dedifferentiation, the destruction of social differences and the consequent descent of the mediator, which opens the field not only to ambition but also to the conflict of the doubles.

The Gambler thematizes these problems of fortuitous individuality directly and immediately. The absence of predetermined identity in which fortuitous individuality consists is simply the other side of chance as the reigning deity of social life. The hero

rejects the arduous labour of self-creation; or rather he sees in the action of chance itself the imaginary sign of self-creation. He relates to chance as though it were not the opportunity but the means of self-affirmation. To maintain this confusion, he must treat chance as an adversary rather than an environment in which he moves. But for the hero all adversaries are erotic partners, and vice versa. The hero relates to an economic activity, gambling, as though it were an erotic relation of doubles.

The series of confusions hangs together. Success at gambling, like success at love, signifies the absolute value of self, singled out by its idol from all the others. At the same time success at gambling, like economic success, signifies the moral worth of a character which has known how to conquer itself and fortune.

The hero's struggle with chance is a kind of magical reflection, a way of establishing the quality of the inner void left by the absence of social differences. Like the lover engaged in a struggle for domination with his beloved, Alexey finds that his identity as master or slave becomes visible to him via the detour of roulette. By instilling personality into the reified obstacles to personal fulfillment, the hero hopes to meet those obstacles head-on and defeat them. But this personalization of reification leads to the loss of personality of the self, its gradual voiding of all inner substance. The hero is finally destroyed as a man by the very means through which he had hoped to prove his conquering nature. For Marx this is 'the contradiction', characteristic of capitalism, 'between the personification of objects and the representation of persons by things'.[37]

Although Goldmann suggested that Girard's theory could explain the degradation of the problematic hero's search for authentic values, he never worked out the connection. The analyses presented above offer several approaches to concretizing Goldmann's suggestion. The 'problematic' hero is the individual who confounds the erotic and economic domains, interpreting the socially mediated relations of the market as a personal struggle of doubles. The hero is the centre of the narration because, in a conformist business culture, only the representation of the explosive idolatry of the doubles can offer a living subject matter for literary representation. The dead world of the market forms the environment in which the hero struggles to prove himself. But he goes at it in a profoundly confused way, not in terms of the laws of the world - laws of conventional behaviour and economic gain - but rather in terms of the logic of erotic desire. The clash generates the novelistic universe, which embraces not only the realistic representation of society but also the hero's degraded aspiration for the absolute.

Notes

1. Lucien Goldmann, 'Introduction aux problemes d'une sociologic du roman', in *Pour une sociologie du Roman* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964).

2. See René Girard, *Mensonge romantique et verite romanesque* (Paris: Grasset, 1961!; and Georg Lukács, *7'heorv of the Novel* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 1971).

3. Lucien Goldmann, op. cit., p. 36.

4. See René Girard, *La Violence et le sacre* (Paris: Grasset, 1972), English translation, *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore: Jolms Hopkins University Press, 1977; London: The Athlone Press, 19881. For an excellent introduction to Girard's thought, see Christine Orsini,'Introduction a la Lecture de Rene Girard', in Michel Deguy and Jean-Pierre Dupuy (eds), René *Girard et le probleme du mal* (Grasset, 1982).

5. Paul Dumouchel and Jean-Pierre Dupuy, *L'Enfer des choses,* (Paris: Seuil, 1979).

6. Michel Aglietta and Andre Orlean, *La Violence de la monnaie,* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1982).

7. Jorge Luis Borges, *El Aleph* (Madrid: Allianza Editorial, 1981), p. 182.

8. Borges, 'The Zahir', trans. A. Kerrigan, in *Labyrinths* (New York: New Directions, 1964), p. 161.

9. H. G. Wells, 'The Crystal Egg', in Leslie Fiedler (ed.), *In Dreams Awake* (New York: Dell, 1975), p. 41.

10. Borges, 'El Aleph', in *El Aleph op.* cit., p. 158.

11. Ibid., p. 173.

12. Borges, 'The Zahir', in *Labyrinths,* op. cit., p. 158.

13. Ibid., p. 157.

14. Ibid., p. 162.

15. Ibid., p. 163.

16. Ibid., p. 163.

17. Ibid., p. 164.

18. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness,* trans. H. Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), p. 177.

19. Ibid., p. 372.

20. Borges,'The Zahir', op. cit., p. 157.

21. Ibid., p. 157.

22. Dumouchel and Dupuy, op. cit., p. 113.

23. Aglietta and Orlean, op. cit., pp. 59-60.

24. Ibid., pp. 47-8.

25. Borges, 'El Aleph', op. cit., p. 174.

26. René Girard, *Dostoievski: du double a l'unite'* (Paris: Plon, 1963), p. 77.

27. Ibid., p. 78.

28. The role of money in this text clearly reveals the error of Lukács' own remarks at the end of *The Theory of the Novel* to the effect that Dostoevsky did not write novels, but was engaged in the creation of a new epic form. The later Lukács attempts to explain this error in his 1962 *Preface* to this work. (See Lukács, op. cit., pp. 152, 20.)

29. Fyodor Dostoevsky, 'The Gambler', *Great Short Works of Dostoevsky,* trans. Constance Garnett (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), p. 404.

30. Ibid., p. 410.

31. Ibid., p. 497.

32. René Girard, *Dostoievski: du double a l'unité', op.* cit., p. 76.

33. Dumouchel and Dupuy, op. cit., p. 95.

34. Aglietta and Orlean, op cit., p. 44.

35. Dostoevsky, op. cit., p. 511.

36. Ferenc Feher, 'Is the Novel Problematic?', trans. Anne-Marie Dibon, *Telos 15 (Spring* 19791.

37. Karl Marx, *Capital* (New York: Modem Library, 1906 reprint), vol. I, p. 128.