

Derivative Desire

In his book of 1961 Deceit, Desire and the Novel, René Girard claims that the truly great novelists reveal the imitative nature of desire in their works. They demonstrate that desire for an object is not a freely chosen expression of our individuality, but mediated by the desire of another person for the same object or by social prestige. Jane Austen's novels are customarily categorized as cultivated romances whose characters' distress is caused by the distortion of natural desire by outside forces, such as difference in rank or parental disapproval. The reading of Girard readjusts that categorization by bringing out the additional layer of masterful social observation present in Austen's novels, namely that the characters' distress is caused by triangular, not natural desire. Austen's last novel Persuasion most prominently exposes the main characters' culturally-mediated desire, or what Girard calls the illusion of the autonomy of one's own desires as what they really are, mimetic desire based on "envy, jealousy, and impotent hatred" (Girard 40). Deceit, Desire and the Novel demonstrates that Austen is the kind of revolutionary writer Girard speaks of whose work reveals the truth of desire by exposing that persuasion through mediated imitation is always a factor in courtship that can have a negative outcome, such as violent rivalry or Louisa's inconsistency of character, or a positive one, such as Anne and Wentworth's mutual admiration.

In Deceit, Desire and the Novel, René Girard opposes the notion of linear, autonomous desire (also called natural or spontaneous desire) to triangular, mimetic desire. Autonomous desire occurs when a subject originates hopes to gain happiness by obtaining the object of their affection independently of outside circumstances. In triangular desire, the subject's desire is mediated by either another person or an outside

influence that teaches them what or whom to desire. What Girard says in respect to Stendhal and Shakespeare is true for Austen, particularly in her treatment of Wentworth in Persuasion: “He re-establishes covertly the true hierarchy of desire while pretending to believe in the weak reasoning advanced by his character in support of the contrary hierarchy” (Girard 15). Austen, as Stendhal, is never blatant in the treatment of her characters’ mimetic desire. The actions of her characters reveal the rather un-romantic notion of desire being a cultural function, but they do it furtively and without shattering the belief in romantic celebration per se. Persuasion treats what Girard calls the “Romantic Lie,” the vain belief in one’s desire being autonomous, with both compassion and skeptical irony: the novel never ridicules its characters’ belief in the lie, but it exposes their self-deceit through irony. Similar to a novel’s character, Girard claims, its reader is usually convinced of his own spontaneity and applies to the work the meanings he already applies to the world. Persuasion affirms the risk of what Girard calls an act of misinterpretation, when the “romantic reader” identifies with the desiring character and fails to acknowledge the character’s mediated imitation in favor of individualism.

If Persuasion is read through the lens of Girard’s theory of mimetic desire, the very title refers to more than Anne Elliot’s inducement to end her engagement to Captain Wentworth. The novel’s title exposes that everyone within society is persuaded to act a certain way due to discontent, a fact most true during courtship. Girard calls that discontent “ressentiment,” the desire to own what another covets and the ensuing resentment and even hatred of the subject when she or he fails to obtain the desired object. Girard depicts mimetic desire with the metaphor of a triangle: “a simple straight line which joins subject and object...The mediator is there, above that line, radiating

toward both the subject and the object” (Girard 2). At the baseline of the triangle is the desiring subject (also the imitator) and the desired object. At the top of the triangle is the model or mediator, the one who first indicates an object as desirable. Even the seemingly steadfast characters such as Captain Wentworth and Louisa Musgrove fall victim to mimetic desire based on discontent. Louisa Musgrove presents herself as an independent and resolute young woman to Captain Wentworth: "I have no idea of being so easily persuaded," Louisa boasts. "When I have made up my mind, I have made it" (58).

Wentworth is impressed with Louisa’s apparent decisiveness:

"woe betide him, and her too, when it comes to things of consequence, when they are placed in circumstances, requiring fortitude and strength of mind, if she have not resolution enough to resist idle interference in such a trifle as this. ... It is the worst evil of too yielding and indecisive a character, that no influence over it can be depended on" (58-9).

Consequently, Louisa almost dies when she fails to yield to Captain Wentworth’s cautious persuasion in Lyme and obstinately insists on jumping off a high curb. Louisa’s decision to jump and reject all voices of reason, however, occurs in accordance with what Captain Wentworth had admired about her, namely her resolute independence: “yours is the character of decision and firmness” (58-9). In an act of persuasion, she has fashioned herself into a disciple of Wentworth’s with his ideal woman as model.

Instead of narrowly understanding Persuasion as a cultivated romance about two people’s second chance at love, or as a purely didactic lesson about finding the right measure of persuasion, the characters of Louisa, Wentworth and Anne demonstrate that the novel is more so a social critique about how everyone is persuadable in a highly

mimetic society. Courtship, Persuasion relates, can be a minefield, in which contagious mimetic desire can cause capricious appearances of love, such as Louisa's, but also lasting love, such as Anne's. Louisa only appears to be steadfast, but she is persuaded by Captain Wentworth to behave in a certain manner, as much as Anne was persuaded eight years ago by Lady Russell to end her engagement. The difference is that Louisa acts out of self-interest to gain Wentworth as a husband, whereas Anne's persuasion was a sacrifice to her family and only indirectly selfish. Louisa and Anne are both influenced by what Girard calls "exterior desire," the external "suggestion over impression" Wentworth and Lady Russell respectively employ to influence Louisa and Anne (Girard 33). Anne had modelled herself into the ideal model of filial duty she was signalled by Lady Russell to be: "If I was wrong in yielding to persuasion once, remember that it was to persuasion exerted on the side of safety, not of risk. When I yielded, I thought it was to duty" (163). In her courtship of Wentworth, Louisa models herself into the kind of decisive, unyielding woman he claims he desires: "My first wish for all, whom I am interested in, is that they should be firm" (59). Both Anne and Louisa are persuaded to put on an act to their own detriment.

Wentworth signals to Louisa to be the kind of woman who would not have been swayed to give him up as Anne did, who "had shown a feebleness of character in doing so, which his own decided, confident temper could not endure. She had given him up to oblige others. It had been the effect of over-persuasion. It had been weakness and timidity (41). Louisa's "obstinacy of self-will" and "darings of heedlessness" (161) seem to demonstrate the unfavourable and extreme opposite end of the spectrum to Anne's "over-persuasion" (41), but if understood through the lens of Girard, Louisa's resolute

independence is exposed as persuasion as well. In the original Greek meaning of the word “mimesis,” she imitates the part of the firm and resolute woman to win Wentworth and to best her sister Henrietta in courtship. Both Anne and Louisa imitate an external model that doesn’t represent their true characters. Neither does Louisa’s impulsive leap demonstrate the negative aspect of an unpersuadable character, nor does Anne’s self-defeating deference to Lady Russell demonstrate general persuasibility. Instead, both Louisa and Anne expose that their selves, as J.M. Oughourlian calls it, are “unstable, constantly changing, evanescent structure[s]” susceptible to persuasion by another (Oughourlian 11-2). Oughourlian explains Girard’s theory with the help of a planetary model: “In physics, it is the force of attraction, gravity that holds bodies together in space...In psychology...mimesis keeps human beings together and apart, assuring at one and the same time the cohesion of the social fabric and the relative autonomy of the members that make it up” (Oughourlian 12). Girard’s theory is therefore a key-organizing notion meant to transform the way desire has been understood so far and its “social ballet” of reciprocal mediation is perfectly demonstrated through the mutual imitation of Louisa and Wentworth, and shortly thereafter Louisa and Benwick (Girard 124).

Girard explains that the relationship between the subject and the object is not direct. There is always a triangular relationship of subject, mediator, and object. Through the object, one is drawn to the mediator, and it is in fact the mediator that is sought and imitated, be it an external one such as an ideal or social prestige, or an internal one such as another person. Louisa’s changeable nature is revealed when she easily transfers her mimetic desire from Captain Wentworth to Benwick. Her character undergoes a transformation from an impulsive, independent-minded young woman to a docile,

bookish girl: “Selves are completely isolated from each other and are incapable of recalling the former Selves or anticipating future Selves” (Girard 91). Louisa now imitates the object of Benwick’s desire and becomes “a very amiable, sweet-tempered girl,” whereas earlier she had advertised herself as the Wentworthian ideal of an independent woman (121). In the reciprocal dance of mimetic desire, both Wentworth and Benwick absorb some of Louisa’s characteristics as well, such as her enthusiasm. Wentworth expresses his surprise at Louisa and Benwick’s quick engagement and his veiled disdain for their caprice: “I confess that I do consider his attaching himself to her, with some surprise...It seems...to have been a perfectly spontaneous, untaught feeling on his side” (121). Benwick’s sudden impulsiveness is transferred from Louisa in an act of mutual imitation.

Louisa and Benwick demonstrate how quickly the spark of mimetic desire can cause more than one fire. Benwick had professed eternal love for his deceased fiancée Fanny Harville, but he quickly falls for Louisa and reveals what Girard calls “internal mediation.” He imitates Wentworth, who originally desired (or seemed to desire) Louisa. Wentworth’s critique of Benwick’s inconstancy exposes a dose of vain resentment. Even though Wentworth didn’t love Louisa, his vanity is hurt when she gets over him so quickly: “it is not that one wants the object but that one does not want to see it in someone else’s hands” (Girard 102). Persuasion reveals how Wentworth, in a rather immature indiscretion, accuses Benwick of inconsistency and Louisa of mediocrity, as opposed to blame himself for his own shallow entanglement with a young woman he (subconsciously or not) only used to make Anne jealous: “Fanny Harville was a very superior creature; and his attachment to her was indeed attachment. A man does not

recover from such a devotion of the heart to such a woman!—He ought not—He does not” (121). It escapes Wentworth that both Louisa and Benwick are driven by mimetic desire, which is, as Girard emphasizes, contagious: “In the world of internal mediation every desire can produce other rival desires” (Girard 107). Louisa imitates her sister in desiring Wentworth, and feeds into the Captain’s ideals to gain his sole affection; Benwick imitates Wentworth in desiring Louisa. Persuasion also reveals through Louisa and Benwick that desire constantly creates new identities. Louisa first creates a self for Wentworth that didn’t exist earlier, and later she does the same for Benwick. Wentworth implies that he would not behave as irresolutely as Benwick or Louisa, whose character traits depend on whom they are in the process of courting.

However, Captain Wentworth proves to be equally persuadable. Firstly, he subconsciously creates a competition for his affection between Louisa and Henrietta to make Anne jealous. Secondly, he feeds into Louisa’s impulsive side when he encourages her to imitate the desired qualities of his ideal woman. Louisa realizes that Wentworth is in awe of independent women when he tells her “I honour you” after she compliments Lady Croft’s fearlessness and strong union with her husband, even when Sir Croft’s carriage-driving skills prove precarious: “If I loved a man, as she loves the Admiral, I would be always by him, nothing should ever separate us, and I would rather be overturned by him, than driven safely by anyone else” (56-7). Wentworth spurs on Louisa’s recklessness and mimetic desire by “catching the same tone” of her enthusiasm, when he should have picked up on the strong sexual implication in her statement about “being overturned” and not “driven safely by anyone else” (57). Louisa therefore jumps off the high step because she is convinced that Wentworth will honour her Lady Croftian-

courage for it. She imitates the dynamic between the Crofts by casting herself in the role of Mrs. Croft and hurling herself into danger so to impress Wentworth. Louisa is not aware that Wentworth's reaction to her is founded on his resentment for Anne. His encouragement of Louisa's romantic statement about Lady Croft taking risks for her husband is meant to be heard and felt by Anne, whom Wentworth believes failed him on just that account. Both Louisa and Wentworth prove persuadable by imitating each other's models.

Girard explains that, when the subject and object (imitator and imitated) interact on a mutual level, mimesis occurs reciprocally between both: "We now have a subject-mediator and a mediator-subject, a model-disciple and a disciple model. Each imitates the other" (Girard 99). Wentworth is convinced that he is a resolute and steadfast man whose desire is original and never fickle. Interestingly enough, however, his feelings for Anne are not rekindled until Louisa confides in him that her brother Charles originally wanted to marry Anne, but was refused. It is at this moment that Wentworth begins to fall for Anne again. He transforms his "studied" and "cold politeness, his ceremonious grace" (49) into "a warm and amiable heart" (61). His question: "Do you mean she refused him" is rather redundant after Louisa's preceding statement: "I suppose you know he [Charles] wanted to marry Anne" (59). It shows his insecurity about having been refused by Anne eight years ago, but also his budding interest: mimetic desire "gains support from the obstacles we set in its way, from the indignation it arouses, from the ridicule" (Girard 97). Wentworth appears incredulous at first that someone as reputable as Charles Musgrove would be interested in the much-aged Anne, but his incredulity appears to also pertain to the fact that she would turn down someone so successful. Quickly thereafter,

Wentworth is persuaded into his old desire for Anne, but not until her social prestige have been re-established, which occurs when Wentworth finds that not only was Anne Charles's first choice, but she also refused him.

Persuasion is subtle about the process of Wentworth's reanimation of love for Anne and portrays it romantically, but the fact is that he, just as the Elliots did, assures himself of her social worth first. Put in economic terms that capture the nature of desire well: when Charles Musgrove's name is mentioned as Anne's former suitor, her stock rises in the eyes of Wentworth and slowly climbs from there on. Now Wentworth goes out of his way to find Anne a ride home and respectfully places her in the Croft's carriage, which she (mistakenly) takes as a romantic gesture originated by Wentworth: "he had placed her there...his will and his hands had done it" (61). Wentworth might be certain that his desire for Anne is rejuvenated by himself, but his actions prove otherwise. His desire is at first mediated by Charles in Uppercross society, then by Benwick and Harville in Lyme, and eventually by William Elliot in Bath. While walking in Lyme, Anne is surrounded by the attention of Benwick and Harville: "Anne found Captain Benwick getting near her...Their conversation, the preceding evening, did not disincline him to seek her again...instead of Captain Benwick, she had Captain Harville by her side" (72). Both Benwick and Harville are drawn to Anne, and if it weren't for Louisa's accident, they are implied to have romantically pursued her further. Captain Wentworth is ironically forced to watch his best friends pay court to the woman he had written off as "[a]ltered beyond his knowledge (41).

When William Elliot appears in Lyme, Wentworth becomes almost obsessed with him being that he openly reveals an interest in Anne: "The mediator's divinity is central

to novelistic genius” (Girard 77). According to Girard’s theory, Persuasion proves Austen’s genius when William Elliot enters the action, because he persuades Wentworth that Anne is still desirable:

“Anne's face caught his eye, and he looked at her with a degree of earnest admiration, which she could not be insensible of...It was evident that the gentleman (completely a gentleman in manner) admired her exceedingly...Captain Wentworth looked round at her instantly in a way which showed his noticing it. He gave her a momentary glance, -- a glance of brightness which seemed to say, "That man is struck with you, -- and even I, at this moment, see something like Anne Elliot again" (70).

Latter moment perfectly reveals what Girard depicts as triangular desire: William Elliot glances at Anne with desire, thereby mediating it to Wentworth; the subject, Captain Wentworth, inspects the model, William Elliot, and follows the latter’s glance back to Anne, the object. Girard’s statement that “from the moment the mediator’s influence is felt, the sense of reality is lost and judgment paralyzed” is shown to be true during the moment of the encounter between William Elliot, Anne, and Wentworth in Lyme (Girard 4). Wentworth’s interest rushes to the mediator, William Elliot, and scrutinizes him in envy, but also with admiration: “‘Ah!’ cried Captain Wentworth, instantly, and with half a glance at Anne; ‘it is the very man we passed’” (70). Wentworth is more agitated than usual, and his repeated glances at Anne -after he glances at William Elliot- are telling of his mimetic desire.

Wentworth, on the one hand, wants a mediator who cannot hold up in competition, but on the other hand, he also needs a mediator as prestigious as William

Elliot who can sanctify Anne's worth: "To see the truth of desire is to see the double role, evil and sacred, of the mediator" (Girard 81). Girard calls the latter dilemma a "double bind": "The model as rival, the rival as model" (Girard – Things Hidden 335). Wentworth's sentiments toward his mediator William Elliot are a kind of "fascination coupled with hatred" (Girard 41). Wentworth goes out of his way to find out the name of his mediator and competition: "'Pray,' said Captain Wentworth, immediately, 'can you tell us the name of the gentleman who is just gone away'" (71). Girard explains the subject's obsession with the mediator: "the birth of passion coincides with the birth of hate" (Girard 40). The more preoccupied Wentworth becomes with William Elliot, "[t]he closer the mediator comes, the greater his role becomes and the smaller that of the object," because the subject (Wentworth) is too busy emulating the model (William Elliot) (Girard 45). The novel emphasizes Wentworth's mediated, electrified state that is unlike him in its overly emotional haste: he acts "instantly" (70) and "immediately," and begins sentences with ardent outcries such as "Ah" (71). If Charles Musgrove's former courtship of Anne put her back on Wentworth's map, and if Benwick and Harville caused a stir of jealous excitement, then William Elliot's interest in Anne creates an emotional tornado in Wentworth: "What was for him in the beginning only a whim is now transformed into a violent passion" (Girard 99).

William Elliot constitutes the perfect mediator of desire because he is above Wentworth in rank and presumed to be wealthier. Wentworth's overly attentive reaction to William Elliot reveal that the Captain must be instinctively aware of the danger Elliot represents to his union with Anne, but Elliot's sanction of Anne also strangely excites Wentworth. It also exposes Wentworth's own "weakness" and "febleness of character,"

namely jealousy and pride (41). In a close-reading of what Wentworth himself depicts as the most hurtful action of Anne's ("she had given him up to oblige others"), it becomes clear that Wentworth's sticking-point was more so the "to oblige others" than it was that Anne had "given him up" (41). Wentworth exposes his own "timidity" when he, again and again, allows himself to fall victim to "over-persuasion" by having more faith in the advantages of his mediating rivals than in Anne's and his own constancy in love (41). It proves easier for Wentworth to be persuaded that someone else is worthier than him in his courtship of Anne, than it is for him to be persuaded to fall back in love with Anne and trust it. Wentworth validates that the "the ravages of mediation" can be self-defeating and paralyzing (Girard 99).

When Louisa is injured after her jump off the steps in Lyme, Girard's emphasis on potentially paralytic mimesis within a group is brought to light. Neither of the men who are navy officers with war experience takes the lead. Instead, they let themselves be guided by Anne, who is the only one to act rationally in the moment of crisis. In "a tone of despair" Captain Wentworth cries: "Is there no one to help me" (74). Anne remains level-headed and reacts to the gravity of the situation, whereas Wentworth and the others all react to someone else; everybody except for Anne imitates someone else's actions, be it Mary's hysteria or Wentworth's shell-shock. Anne has to direct the group in the most obvious actions under the circumstances, such as calling for a surgeon. When Wentworth dashes off in blind haste and Anne reminds him that it were better to send Benwick who knows where to find a surgeon, "[e]veryone capable of thinking felt the advantage of the idea" (74). In this instance, Persuasion could not be any clearer about the fact that Anne is not the timid, easily persuadable character that Wentworth has painted her as; in fact,

Anne only followed Lady Russell's advice once in respect to courtship, when she rejected Captain Wentworth's marriage proposal. The other two times Lady Russell attempts to sway Anne's choices of marriage, she is unsuccessful. Anne neither marries Charles Musgrove, who had been sanctioned by Lady Russell, nor does she get engaged to William Elliot, who is also endorsed by Lady Russell.

Anne is and always has been steadfast in her love for Wentworth; the one area she was not steadfast in and has since regretted for eight years was her own superior judgment of character. Anne therefore needs to be persuaded into gaining her confidence and beauty back, which she had denied herself in an act of self-punishment over losing Wentworth. Once the Captain shows signs of desire for Anne again, she "is persuaded" to look beautiful again: "She was looking remarkably well; her very regular, very pretty features, having the bloom and freshness of youth restored by the fine wind which had been blowing on her complexion, and by the animation of her eye which it had also produced" (70). The novel treats Anne's transformation with kind irony. It is due to Wentworth, not the wind that Anne begins to blossom again. Anne is persuaded to gain her beauty back once Wentworth reattaches himself to her, as Jane Bennett in Pride and Prejudice gains her glow back once Bingley reaffirms his desire for her, or Fanny Price becomes prettier the more loving attention she gets: "Fanny saw that she was approved; and the consciousness of looking well, made her look still better;" once Fanny is admired, she is persuaded to be stunning: "there were few persons present that were not disposed to praise her. She was attractive...and she was soon said to be admired by Mr. Crawford" (Mansfield Park 187, 189). Anne trusts in Wentworth's desire for her, whereas Wentworth is shown to be everything he had faulted Anne for: it is not Anne who "had

used him ill,” but Wentworth who “deserted and disappointed” her by not having faith in her love for him (40). It is not Anne who shows “feebleness of character,” but Wentworth when he fails to see Anne herself, not only the Anne mediated through Charles Musgrove, Benwick, Harville, or William Elliot (40).

Persuasion repeatedly implies that Wentworth projects his own insecurities onto Anne. The novel questions how “decided” and “confident” Wentworth’s “temper” really is, and if it is not Wentworth who obliges others out of “weakness and timidity,” not Anne (41). Wentworth’s actions belie his self-professed “decided and confident temper” (41): Anne neglects William Elliot at the concert to speak to Wentworth, but he cannot relate to her directly, only indirectly through mediators, even though Anne proves more resolute in her affection for him than ever: “she did not mean, whatever she might feel on Lady Russell’s account, to shrink from conversation with Captain Wentworth” (125). The reason Anne always feels “as if she had been one moment too late” for Wentworth is because he is always one step removed from her due to a preceding interaction with his mediators, be it through a glance at William Elliot or a conversation with Harville (125). In Walter Elliot’s case, Wentworth’s dependence on his mediator proves disastrous because Wentworth believes the marriage rumours Mr. Elliot has planted all over Bath more so than he believes Anne’s actions to the contrary. Persuasion points out the truth about Wentworth and his behaviour throughout the course of the novel during the concert in Bath: he “seemed irresolute, and only by very slow degrees came at least near enough to speak to her” (126). Anne wonders how “in all the peculiar disadvantages of their respective situations, would he ever learn her real sentiments” (127). After all, Anne herself could not be more loyal in her love for him: “Prettier musings of high-wrought

love and eternal constancy, could never have passed along the streets of Bath, than Anne was sporting” (127). At this point, the novel emphasizes the difference between Anne’s love for Wentworth, which is “high-wrought,” and Wentworth’s love for Anne, which has become too reliant upon mediators and cultural acceptance.

Wentworth proves through his actions that “all talk of woman’s fickleness” and “woman’s inconstancy,” is indeed “written by men” (156). Anne has none of the flaws Wentworth accuses her of, but he cannot see that through the mediating glass around him, which only reflects Anne back through others. Hence, Wentworth chooses to only see his own suffering, but not hers until he drops his pen (and metaphorically male authorship) during Harville and Anne’s debate about which sex suffers longer in love. Once more, Anne is presented to Wentworth through a mediator, but because Harville treats her with respect, Anne’s own unmediated opinions and feelings are revealed: “All the privilege I claim for my own sex...is that of loving longest, when existence or when hope is gone” (157). Even though it occurs indirectly again, Harville offers Anne the opportunity to relate to Wentworth that she still loves him. During this moment Wentworth’s persuadability becomes explicit. He has so far constructed “his-story” by recording only Anne’s flaws and withholding his own: “she had used him ill; deserted and disappointed him” (41). However, Wentworth is equally guilty of all the charges he has laid at Anne’s feet: persuadability, desertion, disappointment, timidity and indecisiveness. In addition to that, Wentworth is guilty of what Girard calls “sexual vanity,” in that he waits for others to revive Anne’s worth for him: “only the prestige of the mediator can certify the excellence of a sexual choice” (Girard 54). Anne, in this instance, is not as fiercely tested because Wentworth enters her world through two mediators, Louisa and Henrietta, that

make it impossible to anticipate how Anne's desire for Wentworth would have fared otherwise. Wentworth is certainly, however, guiltier of pride than Anne, because he wouldn't allow himself to write to her once he had established himself financially.

Wentworth also chooses to present his mediated persuasion that helped him revive his desire for Anne as his personal evolution into the forgiveness of maturity, whereas really, as Girard puts it, Wentworth had surrendered his "most fundamental individual prerogative, that of choosing [his] own desire" (Girard 55), because the "hero is always trying to convince us that his relationship with the object of desire is independent of the rival" (Girard 46), and the hero's "[r]omantic pride willingly denounces the presence of the mediator" (Girard 38), because he doesn't want to admit that he "has always copied Others in order to seem original in their eyes and in [his] own" (Girard 38). Through Wentworth, Persuasion clarifies that "novelistic genius begins with the collapse of the 'autonomous self:'" when Wentworth finally faces Anne without a mediator, he "destroy[s] a little of [his] pride" and opens the way to "the birth of humility and thus of truth (Girard 38). As Wentworth confesses himself: "I too have been thinking over the past, and a question has suggested itself, whether there may not have been one person more my enemy even than [Lady Russell]? My own self...I was proud, too proud to ask again" (164). Wentworth accepts responsibility and ceases to be petulant in his view that he was the only party that was hurt: "Everyone thinks that he alone is condemned to hell, and that is what makes it hell" (Girard 57). He even admits that it was his pride that cost Anne and himself years of "separation and suffering...a sort of pain, too, which is new to [Wentworth]" who is used to seeing things one-sidedly, from the male perspective (165). Wentworth sees that he behaved as the "self-centred person"

Girard depicts who needs to be persuaded to give up his pride and vanity to become a mature and forgiving person, certainly a lesson the novel portrays as valuable but difficult; it takes Wentworth eight years to be persuaded to forgive Anne, and it takes Anne eight years to forgive herself.

Only “victory over self-centeredness allows us to probe deeply into the Self and at the same time yields better knowledge of Others” (Girard 298). Wentworth doesn’t fully grasp the origins of his desire: “The romantic is always falling on his knees before the wrong altar; he thinks he is sacrificing the world on the altar of his Self whereas the real object of his worship is the Other” (Girard 87). More importantly, however, Wentworth does manage to grasp how proud, selfish, and solipsistic his understanding of his own suffering was, and he consequentially lets go of it and embraces Anne’s former suffering: “I must learn to brook being happier than I deserve” (165). Wentworth admits that he “could never doubt that [Anne] would be loved and sought by others,” and he admits that his desire and hope surged again because he “knew to a certainty that [Anne] had refused [Charles], of better pretensions” than Captain Wentworth” (162). He therefore admits that, once he saw Anne’s popularity and the fact that someone like Charles Musgrove of high social standing wanted her but couldn’t have her, he began to desire Anne again. He also confesses that he was jealous to see Anne’s “cousin close to [her], conversing and smiling, and feel all the horrible eligibilities and proprieties of the match” that were higher, better, and more generally endorsed than his courtship of Anne (162). Wentworth doesn’t connect the three dots of the triangle that led to his rejuvenated desire, however, just as much as he doesn’t grasp that Anne is aware of his comment about her alteration “beyond his knowledge (41) when he relates to her the contradictory statement he made

to his brother Edward: “He enquired after you very particularly; asked even if you were personally altered, little suspecting that to my eye you could never alter” (162). The irony here is that, clearly, Anne had altered to Wentworth, but when he professes his love for her he is not lying; he truly believes his own contradiction just as much as he believes that his desire for Anne is autonomous and spontaneous.

Therefore, Persuasion demonstrates Girard’s theory: “Romantic pride willingly denounces the presence of the mediator in Others in order to found its own autonomy on the ruins of rival pretensions” (Girard 38). The novel, particularly through the character of Wentworth, also brings to maturity Austen’s “novelistic genius when what is true about Others becomes true about the hero,” which makes Wentworth so likeable in spite of his flaws. Wentworth’s desire is portrayed not as “deriving from himself,” but “as the opinion of the Other” (Girard 38). He prefers to support the “weak reasoning” of the romantic lie, while Persuasion itself “uncover[s] a meaning that had previously been hidden by a transparent veil of fiction” and exposes the truth of Wentworth’s desire as mimetic. Persuasion’s indirect treatment of mimetic desire appeals to different levels of sophistication in its readership. Girard comments on the challenge a great author faces when treating the popular romantic lie of desire being spontaneous in A Theatre of Envy: “As for Shakespeare, he quickly realized that to wave mimetic desire like a red flag in front of the public is not the sure road to success” (Girard – A Theatre of Envy 4). Austen accomplishes what Shakespeare did according to Girard: she presents the complexities and unromantic truth about desire, but she does so in a way that allows for that truth to co-exist with the more popular interpretation of desire as romantically and individually

originated. She therefore, even more so than Wentworth, “speak[s] to [us] by such means as are within [her] reach,” and still successfully “pierce[s] [our] soul[s]” (158).