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“All Personality Was Catching” – Mimetic Rivalry and Contagion with Violence in Wyndham Lewis’s *Tarr*

In the chapter on Wyndham Lewis’s *Tarr* in *Modernism and the Fate of Individuality*, Michael Levenson observes that one of the novel’s controlling images is the contagion of personality – a condition of experience which consists in passing over of character traits from one individual to another, so that the boundaries of identity are obliterated:

Character [in *Tarr*] is not a unique configuration of traits, nor a bounded essence; it is a *condition* that can pass beyond the usual boundaries of subjectivity, branding, tainting, contaminating others. Much of the struggle between individuals takes the form of a struggle to impose one character upon another. (Levenson 134)

This paper takes Levenson’s reflection as a starting point for an analysis of masculine aggressiveness, also construed in *Tarr* as infectious. Mimetic relationships between the novel’s male protagonists are exposed as mechanisms responsible for the emergence and spreading of violent impulses. The reading is supported by Rene Girard’s theory of violence, as put forth in *Violence and the Sacred*, which traces all conflict to mimetic desire and which explains self-propagation of aggression through human proclivity for reciprocal imitation.

Written at the time when Europe was bracing for a plague of violence of hitherto unknown proportions – the catastrophe of World War I

– Wyndham Lewis's *Tarr* foregrounds aggression as a hallmark of modern society. Although the novel's subject matter – the life of the artistic coterie in early twentieth-century Paris – may at first seem light-hearted, the reader quickly discovers that there is a darker edge to it as the book reflects anxieties peculiar to the era of its composition. It portrays negative energies at work in the pre-war bourgeois world, inherently flawed and threatened by masculinist self-destructiveness. For an international retinue of neurotic males crowding the book, conflict appears to be the basic mode of interaction: the pressures of modern life, combined with a growing disillusionment with conventional cultural models and values, trigger extreme reactions which find their expression in the novel's ultimate outbreak of violence – the duel scene.

Both critics and readers of *Tarr* are often surprised at the aptness with which the text addresses the disturbing realities of its milieu. Dennis Brown, discussing the historical context in which the novel came out, offers a representative comment:

[*Tarr*] tells the truth of its time. The underlying antagonisms in Europe which erupted catastrophically in 1914 are imagined here as the darkest of farces. The duel scene is paradigmatic, resonant with all the irony of a civilisation bent upon war. . . . Masculinity, here, is the issue – and the whole Patriarchal order that had made it and created, in turn, what seemed, at the time, the ultimate conflict. (Brown 68–9)

Tarr's relevance to the political situation at the time of the novel's completion proved striking even to Lewis himself. Looking back on his creative work from the pre-war period, he found it "somewhat depressing to consider how as an artist one is always holding the mirror up to politics without knowing it" (*BB* 4).¹ He also thought it appropriate, upon preparing his text for serialisation in *The Egoist*, to publish a disclaimer stating that it was not a product of war propaganda. The source of his concern was the nationality of the novel's most aggressive character that could give grounds for misinterpreting *Tarr* as an anti-German tract:

¹For the purposes of this paper, references to Wyndham Lewis's works will be abbreviated as follows: *BB* – *Blasting and Bombardiering*; *T* – *Tarr*; *RA* – *Rude Assignment: An Intellectual Autobiography*.

This book was begun eight years ago; so I have not produced this disagreeable German for the gratification of primitive partisanship aroused by the war. On the other hand, having had him up my sleeve for so long, I let him out at this moment in the undisguised belief that he is very apposite. I am incidentally glad to get rid of him. He has been on my conscience (my conscience as an artist, it is true) for a long time.

The myriads of Prussian germs, gases, and gangrenes, released into the air and for the past year obsessing everything, revived my quiescent creation. I was moved to vomit Kreisler forth. It is one big germ more. May the flames of Louvain help to illuminate (and illustrate) my hapless protagonist! His misdemeanours too, which might appear too harshly real at ordinary times, have, just now, too obvious confirmations to be questioned. (T 13)

Lewis's statement is relevant to the theme of this essay not so much because of the national sensibilities it tries to disengage from, but because of the nature of Lewis's metaphor. Otto Kreisler, whose German-ness seemed uncannily germane to the historical context of *Tarr's* publication, is likened to a germ, infesting Lewis's artistic conscience. Once "vomitted forth" onto the pages of the book, he retains his infectious capacity and proceeds to invade new territories. In the world where "all personality [is] catching" and people are "sicknesses for each other" (T 72), he earns a comparison to "the bubonic plague" (T 227). His effect on the Parisian community of bourgeois-bohemians is disastrous: unable to integrate into it, Kreisler treats it to a negative version of social experience and sweeps through the lives of the main protagonists like an epidemic. Nearly everybody who comes into contact with him is drawn into a maelstrom of trouble: he steamrolls the Pole Louis Soltyk into a farcical duel, rapes and impregnates his compatriot Bertha Lunken, complicates the relationship between the Englishman Tarr and the Russian Anastasya who both have to bear the consequences of Kreisler's unfortunate fatherhood. The book's minor figures, such as Fräulein Lipmann who invites him to a ball where he makes a fool of himself, Ernst Volker who faces Kreisler's resentment as he refuses to lend him money, Mrs Bevelage who becomes his dance partner and gets brought down to the floor in dress-torn humiliation, and even the staff of the police station at which Kreisler hangs himself, are all negatively affected by his disruptive presence and implicated in his fate. He emerges from the text as a psychopathic destroyer, fuelled by his own self-destruction. As Lewis once

suggested in a jocular plot synopsis of *Tarr*, the whole book is about "the elaborate and violent form of suicide selected by Herr Kreisler, involving a number of other people" (RA 151).

Being a typical Lewis's enemy figure, Kreisler constantly sets himself in opposition to others and pulls them into relationships of mimetic rivalry. An analysis of these, based on the concept of triangles of desire proposed by Rene Girard, affords an interesting insight into the problem of contagion with violence in *Tarr*. According to Girard, all human conflicts are rooted in acquisitive mimesis – the fact that our desires are never autonomous but learnt from others by way of imitation. Rivalry results from a convergence of aspirations between people who are drawn towards the same object; if for some reason the object cannot be equally available to the competing parties, they become locked in a triangular relationship where mimesis and difference are experienced together in tension. Frustrated rivals turn into "monstrous doubles," forever trying to surpass, but ending up mirroring, each other (Girard 161). Escalation of this reciprocity creates the risk of violence which itself is reciprocal and contagious. The passion aroused by an act of hostility can only be quelled by a similar act and if a person who has been attacked cannot rise above the desire for vengeance, he will replicate the behaviour of the aggressor. Additionally, an exchange of violent gestures usually attracts interest of those who find themselves near to mimetic rivals and who become involved in the conflict by supporting one of its sides (Girard 14–5, 28).

Violence in Lewis's novel is generated in accordance with the pattern suggested by Girard. On the social stage of bourgeois-bohemian Paris, Kreisler serves as a catalyst for evil instincts dormant in the community: the spite which emanates from him is mirrored by those who surround him, and multiplied through reciprocal escalation. Under his influence, other males in the novel begin to display aggressive tendencies, either because they want to confront the quarrelsome Prussian as rivals or because they take sides in his conflict with somebody else. When the pressure of pent-up emotions grows unbearable, the possibility of a cathartic bloodletting begins to seem an attractive option, even to the characters initially opposed to the idea of solving conflicts by force. The chaos of the duel scene, during which Lewis's angry males jump at each other's throats with violent abandon, is a logical consequence of their interaction with Kreisler, as well as the ultimate proof of their corruption.

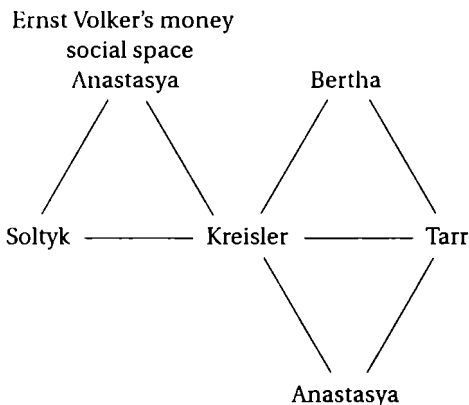


Figure 1. Triangles of mimetic desire between the male protagonists of Tarr.

Mimetic Triangles

In an analysis of contagion with violence in *Tarr*, Girard's mimetic paradigm serves as a useful structuring tool. The geometry of relations between the novel's main male protagonists can be represented by the diagram shown in Figure 1. These are the basic mimetic triangles created by Kreisler in the course of his furious passage through the plot. Competing with Soltyk and then Tarr for women and other objects of desire, he instigates two rivalrous conflicts that, as the novel progresses, begin to interfere with each other. The complications arising from this fact lead to an unexpected termination of one conflict and intensification of the other, which then becomes disclosed to a wider audience and spreads onto the novel's minor figures.

Kreisler vs. Soltyk

Kreisler's first major rival, and one who will eventually die from his hand in the unfortunate duel, is the Russian Pole Louis Soltyk. His emergence as Kreisler's "monstrous double" begins with his unintended victory in

the competition for the favours of Ernst Volker, Kreisler's erstwhile patron. On arrival in Paris, Kreisler counts on Volker's financial help which would allow him to settle among the bourgeois-bohemians. Finding his place usurped by a more skilful borrower, he develops a sense of resentment and mentally accuses Soltyk of robbing him of his status. Since his rival seems to him "as empty and unsatisfactory as himself" (*T* 90), only less awkward in his ways, Kreisler imagines that they are both competing for the same social space. As Girard's theory explains, desire always reads the Other as a double of the self (Girard 161), and this is exactly what Kreisler does, constantly defining his position in the new environment in relation to Soltyk. Soon, their rivalry strikes everyone as natural, suggested not only by the similarity of their parasitical tendencies, but also by the likeness of physical appearance:

Soltyk physically bore, distantly and with polish, a resemblance to Kreisler. . . . Kreisler and he disliked each other for obscure physiological reasons: they had perhaps scrapped in the dressing room of Creation for some particularly fleshly covering, and each secured only fragments of a coveted garment. (T 90)

In the conflict for which they seem to have been programmed long before they actually meet, Soltyk happens to be the side privileged by fate. He recognises the "mysterious and vexing kinship" (*T* 90) which binds him to Kreisler but wears the air of a man who knows that luck has been on his side. He represents, as Fredric Jameson rightly points out, "some more prosperous and well-favoured branch of the family, some far more successful second version, which can but reinforce the envy and resentment of the botched first draft" (Jameson 92). Quite inconsiderately, rather than try to alleviate Kreisler's negative feelings towards him, Soltyk flaunts his superior position by speaking of his rival disparagingly or by belittling him in front of Volker and other people. The relationship between the two men gets even more complicated when a rich and beautiful woman enters the stage: Anastasya, towards whom Kreisler develops an unrequited passion, appears in Parisian salons in Soltyk's company. Overwhelmed by feelings of persecution and jealousy, Kreisler begins to long for "unbounded inflammation" (*T* 121) – a discharge of violent energy simmering inside him.

Kreisler vs. Tarr

Before Kreisler manages to provoke a confrontation with Solytk, he gets entangled, through a series of awkward chances, into a yet another relationship of mimetic rivalry, as it turns out, doubly triangular. This time his rival is the novel's title hero – Sorbert Tarr. It is quite surprising that Tarr should catch the germ of violence at all, for he seems to be the novel's least corruptible figure. Many critics see him and Kreisler as antithetical types, representing the true artist and the false one, mind and body, restraint and indulgence, rationality and emotion, or ego and id. In these binary schemes Tarr occupies the positive pole: he is associated with values which facilitate control of aggressive impulses, and which Western culture considers supportive of civilization and order. However, as Michael Levenson points out, Lewis's text does not support the familiar modernist paradigm where the contemplative individual (usually the artist figure) functions as an observer of life's passions and a sovereign arbiter capable of sifting the meaning of events (Levenson 139). Rather than cast a critical eye on other characters' depravity (as Marlow does in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, for example), Tarr follows Kreisler into moral and instinctual license, gets drawn into a conflict, and only thanks to an unexpected substitution avoids a violent confrontation.

Tarr's contamination with violence begins when he and Kreisler are brought together as successive lovers of the same woman, Bertha Lunken. The whole situation is rather ridiculous, since Tarr spends the first half of the novel trying to evade his uninspiring fiancé and then, as a result of an ironic twist of the plot, he gets attracted to her again. Kreisler, on the other hand, has no true feelings for Bertha; she is for him a mere substitute for Anastasya whose love he cannot get. The prospect of a rival sparks off a mimetic response in both men: once they learn of each other's existence, they develop a mutual dislike. Tarr cannot help being jealous about Bertha, while Kreisler, irritated by the "air of proprietorship" (T 217) which Tarr displays towards his ex- fiancé, immediately grows more possessive about her. In this way both men get trapped in a cycle of mimetic desire, where the attractiveness of the pursued object depends largely on whether someone else competes for it. Bertha's person, for whom neither Tarr nor Kreisler would care much if nobody

stood in their way, suddenly becomes important to them, although not as an end in itself, but as a means of proving their superiority over the rival. What counts in this game is not being with Bertha but preventing the other suitor from being with her – she is just a pretext for a masculine power struggle which, once begun, quickly escalates to dangerous proportions.

Ousted from the position of dominance, Tarr must take the initiative in the developing conflict, or disappear from Bertha and Kreisler's life. Reason advises him to do the latter, but the process of contagion is already underway and an urge to confront his successor prevails. He follows Kreisler to various bohemian haunts and begins to socialise with him, ostensibly to cure himself of his nostalgia for the lost relationship:

A sort of bath of Germans was Tarr's prescription for himself, a voluptuous immersion. To heighten the effect, he was being German himself; being Bertha as well. (T 221)

Tarr's self-proscribed therapy is, however, only a form of delusion. An exposure to German influence causes him to open himself to the drives and desires he has hitherto tried to suppress. If, as Fredric Jameson claims, the Germans of *Tarr* represent the forces of the id (Kreisler – aggression, Bertha – sexuality) (Jameson 89), then Tarr's increasing "Germanness" symbolically underscores his transition to a different mode of functioning. Under the guise of a nostalgic purgation, he sets out in pursuit of primitive satisfaction, gradually transforming from an ascetic intellectual into an angry, jealous male. Before he knows it, he falls victim to what Michael Levenson terms "transitivity" – the transference of personality features between characters (Levenson 135) – and comes to resemble not only Bertha, but even his own rival, Kreisler.

The change that Tarr undergoes remains in agreement with the theory of mimetic triangles, according to which rivals coveting the same thing or person inevitably turn into mirror-images of each other. A stage of reciprocal imitation then begins, with Tarr and Kreisler unconsciously trying to swap their identities. Tarr begins speaking German and becomes Teutonic in his ways; Kreisler addresses Tarr in broken English and talks about leaving Paris for London (something that Tarr had actually intended to do after a break-up with Bertha). Both find this mimetic be-

haviour very unnerving and yet pretend that the bone of their contention does not exist and that they are not interested in conflict at all. The dynamics governing their relationship (reciprocal mirroring, denial of the problem, attributing hostile intent to the rival) are visible even within the span of a short conversation such as this one:

"Have you seen Fräulein Lunken to-day?"

"No." As Tarr was coming to the point Kreisler condescended to speak: "I shall see her tomorrow morning."

A space for protest or comment seemed to be left after this sentence, in Kreisler's still very "speaking" expression.

Tarr smiled at the tone of this piece of information. Kreisler at once grinned, mockingly, in return.

"You can get out of your head any idea that I have turned up to interfere with your proceedings," Tarr then said. "Affairs lie entirely between Fräulein Lunken and yourself."

Kreisler met this assurance truculently.

"You could not interfere with my proceedings. I do what I want to do in this life!"

"How splendid. *Wunderbar!* I admire you!"

"Your admiration is not asked for!"

"It leaps up involuntarily! *Prosit!* But I did not mean, Herr Kreisler, that my desire to interfere, had such desire existed, would have been tolerated. Oh no! I meant that no such desire existing, we had no cause for quarrel. *Prosit!*"

Tarr again raised his glass expectantly and coaxingly, peering steadily at the German. He said, "*Prosit*" as he would have said, "Peeep-oh!"

"*Prost!*" Kreisler answered with alarming suddenness, and an alarming diabolical smile. "*Prosit!*" with finality. He put his glass down. "That is all right. I have no *desire*," he wiped and struck up his moustaches, "to *quarrel* with anybody. I wish to be left alone. That is all."

"To be left alone to enjoy your friendship with Bertha – that is your meaning? Am I not right? I see."

"That is my business. I wish to be left *alone*."

"Of course it's your business, my dear chap. Have another drink!" (T 222)

By returning tit for tat endlessly, mimetic rivals enter a path towards violence from which it is virtually impossible to divert (Girard 14). Tarr senses this danger before his critical faculties are entirely gone and undertakes an attempt at liberating himself from the "three-legged affair"

(*T* 229). As he intuits correctly, the introduction of a fourth party might "make things solid and less precarious again" (*T* 229), but unfortunately his choice falls on Anastasya – the object of Kreisler's unrequited passion. Instead of transforming the triangular structure into a rectangle, he produces another triangle of desire, or rather reinforces the existing one. The collision of interests is far more intense than before, especially as both Tarr and Kreisler value Anastasya much higher than Bertha. As a potential recipient of Anastasya's affection, Tarr cannot escape Kreisler's resentment and thus finds himself drawn into conflict again.

Sacrificial Substitution

When Tarr and Kreisler discover that their desires have converged once more, the enmity between them enters its final stage at which a radical confrontation seems unavoidable. Unable to endure the tension of rivalry any longer, Tarr pays Kreisler a "bellicose visit" (*T* 247) at his home, but must beat a hasty retreat, threatened with a dog-whip. The incident is for him the last drop of poison, completing the process of his contamination: obsessed with the idea of revenge, he wishes his rival would provoke an outbreak of violence. It is during this climactic movement of the novel that a surprising substitution takes place. As Tarr gets braced for a definitive clash and expects Kreisler will challenge him to a fight, the German unexpectedly launches an attack on Soltyk, whom he has seen with Anastasya earlier during the day. The blow that Tarr is waiting for falls on "another man snatched up into his role" (*T* 251). All the carefully constructed tension deflates in an instant, only to begin building up in another configuration of relationships. As a result, Tarr is given a unique chance to recover from the plague: the mimetic process of violent escalation is unexpectedly brought to a halt. The fact that he has found himself outside the mainstream of events is obviously not easy to accept for the egocentric Englishman, yet after a while a sobering reflection arrives. Irritation gives way to a feeling of relief that someone else plays Tarr's part while he is free to back out unobtrusively:

As [Tarr] watched the man Kreisler had struck, he seemed to be watching himself. And yet he felt rather on the side of Kreisler. With a mortified

chuckle he prepared to pay for his drink and be off, leaving Kreisler for ever to his very complicated, mysterious and turbulent existence. (T 251)

In Girardian terms, Soltyk's function can be seen as that of a sacrificial victim that helps to re-route Tarr and Kreisler's violence against each other. It is onto him that both parties displace their need for revenge; the latent hostilities become symbolically assuaged through a seemingly unrelated act of aggression. Challenged to a fight over Anastasya, Soltyk pays for Tarr's sins and bears the full impact of Kreisler's wrath. Interestingly, although Tarr senses that an unfair substitution has occurred, his sentiment lies with the assailant rather than the recipient of the blows. (This is partly because Tarr's vanity is hurt when it turns out that he is not the destined participant in Kreisler's drama; Soltyk is in a way his rival when it comes to attracting Kreisler's attention.) A logical consequence of this is the truce which takes place between Tarr and Kreisler a little later when the former agrees to act as the latter's second in a duel with Soltyk (although only until a substitute can be found). Opposition momentarily converts into alliance, and Tarr, steadied into cold sense by the violent scene he has witnessed, uses this opportunity to withdraw entirely from the affair.

Spreading of the Plague

Kreisler's attack on Soltyk opens the way for a whole series of new infections, especially as it is meant to be a prelude to a more profound clash, for which a number of participants are required. Aware of the fact that Soltyk might not be willing to confront him, Kreisler sets out to stage a duel, relying on culturally constructed methods of implicating people in violence. To ensure the success of his mission, he finds himself a henchman with equally aggressive inclinations – the Russian Bitzenko. Working in tandem, and using different methods of persuasion (Kreisler – insults and blows, Bitzenko – lofty talk about honour), they manage to drag Soltyk into a conflict he does not want to enter, over a matter that he does not quite understand. He, in turn, passes the germ of hatred and aggression onto his companions, Staretsky and Khudin, who consent to serving him as his seconds. Since both the attack on Soltyk and the duel negotia-

tions take place in a café, all the people present at the scene – the garçons, the manager, the customers – are at risk of contagion with violence, even through passive observation of the spectacle unfolding before their eyes. In an anthropologically sensitive manner, Lewis notes the attractiveness of violence to the onlookers: the incident makes all conversations die down and "the entire Café appear[s] to be participating" (*T* 252).

Among the crowd of potential plague victims, Tarr is the only person who enters an opposite trajectory: his determination to leave and have nothing more to do with Kreisler holds the promise of recovery. It must be noted, however, that he is not saved by the power of reason and other qualities we associate him with, but because the ancient mechanism of irrational scapegoating has fulfilled its role. And even though he gradually gains a belated insight into the infectious nature of violence, he makes no attempt at preventing others from contagion. Full of sympathy for Soltyk, but with a grim conviction that the plague of violence must take its toll, he quietly disappears from the stage at the critical point of the plot.

The events which unfold after Tarr's departure are far from what we would imagine as a comforting resolution to the novel. After all – to quote Michael Levenson again – "one does not go to Wyndham Lewis to renew a commitment to humane values" (Levenson 144). Unflinching in its portrayal of human weakness, *Tarr* articulates a disturbing message about the ease with which aggression takes control of individuals and holds them in the grip of conflict. The novel's vision of antagonism underlying modern society is rigorously carried to its conclusion – the inevitable collective bloodletting. In the light of the fact that the book's completion was prompted by Lewis's decision to go to the front, such pessimism seems fully understandable.

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