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The World and the Text: Simone Weil and Rene Girard on the Transformative Power of Reading

Simone Weil writes, “The world is a text containing several meanings, and we pass from one meaning to another by an effort... in which the body always participates.” For Weil, the ability to move from one level of the “text” to another always occurs with reference to our status as embodied beings who must make a physical and affective change in order to alter our reading. Indeed, reading is work, for Weil, and it is work in which the whole person is involved. It comes as no surprise, then, that for Weil, the work of reading is tied closely to the presence of justice in the wider community, and to the potential for just relationships among individuals. Thus it is always possible, Weil thinks, to do the work incorrectly, and to get the reading wrong. A wrong reading often takes the form of violence; to read rightly is to transform violence into justice for those who suffer. For René Girard, too, reading has the capacity to unmask violence and to allow justice for its victims to be made present. Girard maintains that it is the Gospel narrative—the story of Christ the innocent victim put to death unjustly—that permits the exposure for the first time of the power of violence, but also, and importantly, of its falsity and injustice. According to Girard, “After Christ, for the first time, people are capable of escaping from the misunderstanding and ignorance that have surrounded mankind throughout its history.” Yet Weil’s notion of reading as a kind of fully-embodied work (in which manual and not intellectual labor serves as the normative category) offers rich possibilities for an understanding of transformative reading that resists the violence of triumphalism that is arguably implicit in Girard’s account of the Christian narrative.