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

As my colleague Jane Doering has observed, Simone Weil serves as an interesting and important interlocutor for René Girard in the context of this gathering, not only because Girard himself has on many occasions attested to his own indebtedness to Weil, but also because of the many points of intersection one may find in their thought. These points of intersection—in particular a shared abhorrence of collective violence and an understanding of its spiraling and repetitive character—are not insignificant, and deserve more attention than can be given in such an abbreviated setting. Thus, my hope this afternoon in presenting some thoughts—principally on Weil but with some attention as well to Girard—is that I will, along with Jane, help us to begin thinking more seriously about the contributions made by both thinkers, and about possibilities for future conversations and projects devoted to exploring instructive commonalities and differences.

I. Introduction

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.”¹ 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, Weil tells us, and it is work

¹ Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace* (London, New York: Routledge, 2002), 130-131.

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, on the other hand, 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 become possible. Girard maintains that it is the Gospel narrative—the story of Christ the innocent victim put to death unjustly—that permits the full exposure for the first time of the pervasive power of violence, but also, and importantly, of its falsity and injustice. According to Girard, after Christ, “[f]or the first time, people are capable of escaping from the misunderstanding and ignorance that have surrounded mankind throughout its history.”² Thus, both Weil and Girard hold that it is possible through the work of reading—to be sure, certain texts in certain ways—to see through what Girard calls “the darkness of Satan” which he claims has so consistently and thoroughly obscured the manner in which mimetic violence grounds and sustain human society.

For Weil as well, it is possible, though very difficult, to read, not only a text (such as the *Iliad* or *Antigone*), but also another human being in a way that allows for victims to be seen, finally, as they really are, rather than as we their persecutors desire them to be. However, reading for her is a kind of fully-embodied work in which manual and not intellectual labor serves as the normative category; it offers especially rich possibilities for an understanding of transformative reading that attends to “right seeing” and to justice

² René Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* (New York, London: Continuum, 2003), 201.

for concrete individuals in all their particularity while resisting the potential violence of a universalism that sees one reading or one text as the only means of combating injustice, distortion, or victimization.

II. The difficulty of reading: collectivity and unanimity

According to Girard, “myths are based on a unanimous persecution [of an innocent victim]. Judaism and Christianity destroy this unanimity in order to defend the victims unjustly condemned and to condemn the executioners unjustly legitimated.”³ He has observed that in moments of mimetic crisis, the “crowd is so powerful that the most surprising results can be achieved without even assembling the entire community.”⁴ The very fact that unanimity is present in a situation of crisis or instability is usually, for Girard, an indication that the mimetic process is at work, and hence, that an injustice is being done. He writes, “Unanimity in accusation is in itself a cause for suspicion! It suggests that the accused is innocent.”⁵

For Weil, too, the crowd—to which she ordinarily gives Plato’s name “the great beast”—is suspect. While she argues that “[t]he Gospel makes no distinction between the love of our neighbor and justice,”⁶ and claims that compassion is “the only just love,”⁷ she is nevertheless quick to note that *in extremis*, when a polity is pushed into any sort of crisis or any difficulty which threatens the community, relying on a force rooted ultimately in the passions in order to form a just consensus or to distribute resources and meet the needs of its members becomes a dangerous risk. For Weil, Rousseau is correct

³ René Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, trans. James G. Williams (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009), 172.

⁴ René Girard, *The Scapegoat*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 115.

⁵ Girard, *Things Hidden*, 444.

⁶ Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*, trans. Emma Craufurd (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 139-140.

⁷ Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, trans. Rush Rees (Oxford: OUP, 1970), 95.

in thinking that the feeling of compassion is strengthened by the ability to identify with the one who is suffering; the problem with this notion of identification is that she thinks Burke is also correct in claiming, “To love the little platoon to which we belong in society is the first, the germ as it were, of public affections.”⁸ For Weil, one of the principal dangers of the collective is that it makes a consensus among several people or groups of people *feel* like a movement in the direction of justice, whether or not that is truly the case. This feeling “brings with it a sense of duty. Divergence, where this agreement is concerned, appears as a sin... The state of conformity is an imitation of grace.”⁹ A crowd can be convinced that their actions are just, even if the opposite is in fact true. This conviction often authorizes and legitimizes injustices of every sort.

Girard makes a similar claim, arguing that it is precisely the “all-against-one” character of mimetic violence that permits a fractured and unstable community to “[find] itself unified once more at the expense of a victim who is...incapable of self-defence; the immolation of such a victim would never...augment the crisis, since the victim has unified the community in its opposition.”¹⁰ It is this unity, bought at such a high price, that ensures the stability of the community, even if that stability lasts only until the next episode of mimetic desire commences yet again. Indeed, according to Girard, one of the most truly horrendous aspects of the victimage mechanism is its generativity; the unanimous, violent offense against an innocent victim who is falsely considered guilty by the community for its crisis actually functions as a means of generating culture, safeguarding an *ersatz* stability, and grounding religious practices. Essential to Girard’s

⁸ Edmund Burke, *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke: The French Revolution, 1790-1794*, ed. Paul Langford and L. G. Mitchell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), viii, 97.

⁹ Simone Weil, *The Simone Weil Reader*, ed. George Panichas (Wakefield, RI: Moyer Bell, 1977), 394.

¹⁰ Girard, *Things Hidden*, 24.

theory is the hidden character of the entire process: “People do not wish to know that the whole of human culture is based on the mythic process of conjuring away man’s violence by endlessly projecting it upon new victims. All cultures and all religions are built on this foundation, which they then conceal.”¹¹ Girard, who argues that a post-facto divinity frequently was conferred on the innocent victims of mimetic violence, no doubt would agree with Weil when she writes, “Something of the social labelled divine: an intoxicating mixture which carries with it every sort of license. Devil disguised.”¹² According to Girard, it is in fact impossible to read myths correctly as long as generative unanimity and the oft-repeated mimetic cycle are in place. The devil is indeed disguised, Girard claims, in the midst of the mimetic contagion.¹³

III. The difficulty of reading: love and justice

Like Girard, who writes that “[l]ove is the only true revelatory power because it escapes from...the spirit of revenge and recrimination,”¹⁴ Weil observes that love *may* be an exception to the power that the collective holds over individuals, thus allowing justice to become possible at certain moments. According to Weil, however, love can only be considered commensurate with justice when it has been purified of the kind of grasping subjectivity of the ego and the “should-not-be” of the emotions, however noble one may consider a particular emotion (such as love) to be. Until the illusion of the autonomous and sovereign ego is unmasked, the love one has for another person is necessarily compromised, since, according to Weil (who was drawn to the line in the *Iliad* about the

¹¹ Ibid., 164.

¹² Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 166.

¹³ “[H]uman subjects as individuals are not aware of the circular process in which they are trapped; the real manipulator of the process is *mimetic contagion itself*. There is no real subject within this mimetic contagion, and that is finally the meaning of the title ‘prince of this world,’ if it is recognized that Satan *is* the absence of being... Satan is mimetic contagion as its most secret power, the creation of false gods out of the midst of which Christianity emerged.” Girard *I See Satan*, 69-70.

¹⁴ Girard, *Things Hidden*, 277.

dead warriors left unburied who were so recently mourned), “[w]e love in the same way as we eat—and when we no longer find anything to feed on in a person, we leave him to those who can still find something there to devour: the voracious ‘love’ of the vultures succeeds the worn-out love of the wives...”¹⁵

The difficulty, explains Weil, is that love and justice can only be given their proper determinations by “readings,” by which she means the kind of concretized perceptions of the world around us in which we are always and already experiencing and responding to life’s situations. To read others and our surroundings justly is in fact nothing less than to attend to them. Yet the possibility always exists that our reading of others will be unjust or oppressive; indeed, this is sure to be the case if the falsely autonomous ego is not divested of its illusions of self-enclosure and power, or if the individual is too mired in the collective to perceive things clearly:

Justice. To be ever ready to admit that another person is something quite different from what we read when he is there (or when we think about him). Or rather, to read in him that he is certainly something different, perhaps something completely different, from what we read in him. Every being cries out silently to be read differently. We read, but also *we are read by*, others. Interferences in these readings. Forcing someone to read himself as we read him (slavery). Forcing others to read us as we read ourselves (conquest)... Charity and injustice can only be defined by readings, and thus no definition fits them... Who can flatter himself that he will read aright?... What love of justice is a guarantee against a bad reading?... Causes of wrong reading: public opinion, the passions.”¹⁶

Reading someone aright, for Weil, is directing one’s attention to that person’s situation, such that one is able to see the person as he is, and not as we think he is or want him to be in order to fulfill our desires or satisfy our appetites. In consenting to what Weil calls decreation—a consent which is essentially the refusal to dominate others—one becomes

¹⁵ J.M. Perrin and G. Thibon, *Simone Weil as we knew her*, trans. Emma Craufurd (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1953), 143.

¹⁶ Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 134-135.

capable of seeing through the screen of selfhood that formerly corrupted proper readings so as to read the existence of others properly—that is, justly and lovingly and with attention.

For Girard, too, the problem of justice is one of reading rightly—an impossible task when individuals are in the grip of mimetic desire or generative unanimity. Indeed, “[r]itualized violence is the greatest secret of cultural conformity”¹⁷ and the hidden substratum of myths, religious practices, and cultural edifices; its secrecy and impenetrability to recognition and analysis are defining features. Both the power of the crowd when it is caught up in the victimage mechanism and the post-facto strategies that employ narrative and ritual to conceal the true nature of that mechanism operate as barriers—hermeneutic barriers, in some sense—that hinder right readings of what has taken place. Girard observes that *genuine* concern for victims—the capacity to make justice present and to escape the cycle of mimetic violence—inevitably involves love: “The Gospels tell us that to escape violence it is necessary to love one’s brother completely—to abandon...violent mimesis.”¹⁸ For Girard, as for Weil, this escape from violence into a just love is far from simple, and is fraught with risks and obstacles, from the continual recurrence of acquisitive mimesis to the potent influence of the all-against-one.

IV. Possibilities for reading rightly: work and the problem of universalism

Girard, like Weil, holds that the will to dominate and possess objects—including others who have become objects for us—is for the most part not conscious. Rooted in acquisitive mimesis and therefore connected to the scapegoating mechanism, this will to

¹⁷ René Girard, in an interview in Richard Golsan, *René Girard and Myth: An Introduction* (London, New York: Routledge, 2002), 147.

¹⁸ Girard, *Things Hidden*, 215.

dominate resists seeing the truth about violence. In order for a true reading of violence to take place, Girard (like Weil) notes that our sense of self—“everything that we can call our ‘ego’, ‘our personality’, ‘our temperament’, and so on”¹⁹—must be undone. How is this possible, though, in a world whose most important structures are formed by and upheld through unjust violence? For Girard, only the Judeo-Christian Scriptures—and in particular, the Gospel narratives—fully make manifest the cycle of mimetic violence and expose the injustice at the heart of myths, religions, and other cultural institutions. He has frequently claimed in a number of places that “[t]he structure of the Christian revelation is unique,”²⁰ that “the Gospel accounts are the only texts in which the rupture of unanimity comes about...before our eyes,”²¹ and finally, that “[t]he Gospels reveal everything that human beings need to understand their moral responsibility with regard to the whole spectrum of violence in human history and to all the false religions.”²²

According to Girard, it is possible to read the Gospels in such a way that the truth about mimetic violence and its concealment in all other myths and religions is revealed; this is, after all, precisely what the Gospels were designed to do. He argues, moreover, that this project of reading rightly—something that can only enter the picture with the advent of the Judeo-Christian scriptures—will “[disclose] a universal human truth that is relative neither to...a system of beliefs nor to a historical period nor to language nor to cultural context. It is therefore absolute. And yet it is not a ‘religious’ truth in the strict sense of the term.”²³ However, he also claims that “[t]he authentic knowledge about violence and all its works to be found in the Gospels cannot be the result of human action

¹⁹ Girard, *Things Hidden*, 400.

²⁰ Girard, *I See Satan*, 123.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 124.

²² *Ibid.*, 125.

²³ *Ibid.*, 114.

alone. Our own inability to grasp knowledge that has been waiting there for two millennia confirms theological intuitions that are no less certain for being incapable of setting out explicitly their foundations in reason.”²⁴

While Weil, too, speaks of grace, her understanding of how a right reading mediates love and justice for victims of affliction places an equal emphasis on the work we must do as readers. Indeed, Weil’s notion of work—of which reading is a species—serves as a means for understanding our own violent desires and for uncovering the power-based mechanisms within the community that help to create victims. According to Weil, work is ultimately “the action by which [one] recreates [one’s] own life,”²⁵ and while Girard tends to focus more closely on the capacity of right reading as principally an intellectual exercise which possesses significant “explanatory power”²⁶—Weil makes manual labor the normative category and develops her reflections on reading as intellectual labor on the basis of manual labor. Manual labor is particularly important for Weil because it serves as a clearer and more straightforward way of uniting bodily and mental experiences in a manner that, at least potentially, creates the conditions needed for the individual, not only to see the injustice hidden beneath institutional structures and embedded in the egoist desire for domination, but also to change them.

Work of this kind permits the individual to cope with the onslaught of events and sensations because it functions as a kind of narrative structure through which the individual is able to experience, interpret, and understand the world. Weil writes

Reading. All we are ever given (in a sense) is sensations, and whatever we may do about it we can never, never think anything else (in a sense) but sensations.

²⁴ Girard, *Things Hidden*, 219.

²⁵ Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, trans. Richard Rees (Oxford, London: Oxford University Press, 1970), 18.

²⁶ Girard, *I See Satan*, 3.

But we can never actually think sensations; we read through them, as through a medium. What do we read? Not just anything at all, according to inclination. Nor, of course, something which does not depend in any way whatever on ourselves. The world is a text containing several meanings, and we pass from one meaning to another by an effort—an effort in which the body always participates.²⁷

For Weil, this is not merely a question of our epistemological or analytical constructions and the perspectival shift we enact by altering our standpoint; nor is it a movement that occurs without reference to our character as fully-fleshed and particular. Indeed, reading is work, for Weil, and it is work in which the whole person is involved. If we get it wrong—and Weil thinks this is frequently the case—then we perpetuate injustices and commit acts of violence against others. It is not so much the case for Weil that there is some definitive and correct meaning at which we are supposed to arrive when we “read” another individual or a text—whether it be the Gospels or *King Lear*; rather, it is a question of restraint, of allowing our reading to be open-ended, of an encounter between two very different “worlds” in which, despite the differences, some kind of authentic, loving, and just relationship is to be hoped for and worked toward.

I want to focus finally on this idea of a relational community as it connects to work and to reading, by bringing the concept of justice to the forefront once more. According to Weil, “A human being has roots by virtue of his real, active...participation in the life of a community.”²⁸ It strikes me that for Girard and Weil alike, the means by which the work of individual readings move outward into the community of readers matters immensely. In fact, Weil is careful to note that relational structures alone are not sufficient for creating just communities, and can even function to undermine the presence

²⁷ Weil, *Notebooks*, vol. 1, 266.

²⁸ Weil, *The Need for Roots*, 43.

of real work—real reading—which is so important for active participation in the life of a community. What she fears is that, in a world in which the notion of work as an embodied process uniting intellectual and manual labor has been lost, the notion of reading as work—as a productive encounter between two related yet ultimately unassimilable entities—will be lost, too. When this occurs, then relational structures have indeed overcome autonomy and traditional divisions, but in so doing have rendered everything endlessly convertible. Subject and object are dissolved into a network of power in which everyone becomes simply a means to manipulate, transfer, or accrue power. In a system in which all ends have been converted into means, what remains is only relational power itself.

Both Weil and Girard—with his notion of “interdividuality” which overlaps so much with Weil, but which I don’t have time to address here, alas—seek to avoid this kind of appropriative violence, while nevertheless acknowledging the crucial role played by authentic relationships of justice and love in the process of reading and in the creation of communities that are *not* grounded in violence.