

## René Girard's Mimetic Desire as Seen in the Writings of Simone Weil

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In a 1987 interview, René Girard stated, "It was on rereading Simone Weil that I understood at what point she had been present at the very heart of the principal ideas that govern my work."<sup>1</sup> He credits, in particular, her innovative interpretation of Homer's *The Iliad* and her use of Plato's allegory of "the Great Beast" as inspiring insights into mimetic desire and the social mechanism of violence. Girard cites Simone Weil's writings throughout his works, from his early literary essay on Proust through his latest conversations with Benoît Chantre, "Battling to the End." To shed light on the manner that both philosophers consider the question of force leading to violence against others, we will examine Weil's interpretation of Homer's epic, the *Iliad*, which Girard considered core to his principal ideas.

The thoughts of these two French philosophers converge at critical points in their dogged pursuit of truth. Their material lives, however, could hardly have been more different. A few facts about Simone Weil's life highlight the divergence. Simone was born in 1909 into a secular Jewish family that was totally assimilated into French society. Her father's family had roots in Alsace and her mother's in Russia. As an adolescent with fragile health, Simone received extensive private tutoring. At the conclusion of her secondary education in France's elite *lycée* Henri IV, she gained admittance into the *Ecole Normale Supérieure*, one of the prestigious *Grandes Ecoles* that had just begun reluctantly to accept women. With stunningly high scores on the competitive entrance exam, she was granted entry by the authorities, who, nevertheless, did not accept her gladly.

After her *agrégation*, qualifying her to become a professor of philosophy, she intensified her militant activism toward restoring more humane workplace

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<sup>1</sup> CSW XI – 3, sept 1988: 201. [*A la relecture, j'ai compris à quel point elle avait été présente au cœur même des idées principales qui gouvernent mon travail.*]

conditions for industrial workers. She was a materialist who believed that rationalism held the key to social improvement. In her intense desire to experience oppressive working conditions first-hand, she took a job in three metallurgy factories operating the heavy machinery that produced parts for the new Parisian Métro system and did farm-work in southern France. In 1936, she joined an anarchist brigade fighting in the Spanish Civil War. Her life was an embodiment of her belief that action must accompany thought. She wrote out her thoughts daily, mostly for herself, to clarify her ideas, but only rarely sent her work out for publication.

Sometime in late 1938, after attending Holy Week services in the Benedictine Abbey of Solesmes, Weil had a mystical experience, which, she describes as Christ coming down to take possession of her. Henceforth, the Passion of Christ enlightens her political and social philosophy with a mystical dimension that rests on the divine teleology of every human being. She believed that beauty is a sign of God's implicit love for his creation, as are mutual love and friendship in the world here below, and she treasured the beauty of liturgical practices and the Gospels. Nevertheless, she refused to accept baptism for herself or to belong to a Church that does not acknowledge past abuses—one of them being the restriction of freedom of thought

Her life was unfortunately cut short in 1943, in the midst of a raging war, when she died at the age of 34 in England, leaving voluminous writings as her legacy. When the expert team of academic specialists completes the annotation of all her works, begun in the 1980s for the French publishing house of Gallimard, there will be seventeen volumes of rich material available for study and reflection.

Girard, in his 1987 interview, insists that an integral collection of all Simone Weil's work would not only be a "grand and beautiful task to accomplish,"<sup>2</sup> but

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid. 205-6. [*une grande et belle œuvre à accomplir*]

would restore a compelling orientation to a Christianity that appears to have lost its sense of direction. He adds, “She would have had much to say concerning our times,”<sup>3</sup> which he qualified at that time as “hedonistic.”<sup>4</sup> Twenty years later in his 2007 conversations about attitudes toward the present global violence, Girard excoriated modern nonchalance toward the escalation of destructive force, which is increasing exponentially due to new technology. He lamented people’s indifference to this reality, saying, [Because] “we neither can nor want to see violence as it is . . . [w]e are witnessing a new stage in the escalation to extremes.”<sup>5</sup> Simone Weil spent her life exploring the mechanism of spiraling violence and seeking ways to short-circuit its acceleration. She and Girard each found guidelines for countering the human penchant for oppressing our neighbor in the Passion of Christ.

### **Girard’s mimetism as seen in Weil’s “The Iliad, a Poem of Force”**

Just as Girard uncovered a mechanism of “psychological laws” that govern social interaction, Simone Weil perceived that, in the set order of the world, which she called “harsh necessity,” human social behavior had laws that needed to be discerned and understood. In Weil’s observations, human beings are predisposed to use force due to the strong pull of what she calls “moral gravity” inherent in their psyche. This tendency activates a person’s desire to seek immediate satisfaction by striking out in retaliation at the one who is offensive, hurtful, or patronizing. The imagination obscures the real results of such self-destructive behavior, despite the painful lessons integral to past experiences. Thus, once violence, physical or psychological, is unleashed, the impetus of mimetism creates a spiraling effect in which each opponent, be it an individual or group, responds in kind, making the ensuing reciprocal calamitous chaos almost impossible to stop.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 209. [*Elle aurait eu beaucoup de choses à dire sur notre époque.*]

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 212.

<sup>5</sup> *Battling to the End*, 213, 212.

Girard perceives an illustration of this oscillation between victor and vanquished in Simone Weil's essay "The *Iliad* or the Poem of Force," which he claims had a decisive influence on him. This "prodigious text," as he calls it, reveals the mechanism of "doubles," which is the transformation of the opponents into "matching images of violence" that inevitably occurs in the follow through of mimetic desire.<sup>6</sup> Weil pinpoints the process of how the victor of today becomes the vanquished of tomorrow; in each case the defeated desire peace, but the victorious refuse to concede. The implacable and tragic character of this struggle between antagonists who become "twins" in their interchangeability stems from a permanent and unresolved shifting of power that subsides only when both sides are effectively eviscerated.

Weil wrote this essay just as World War II was looming on the horizon. By framing her ideas within this ancient Greek epic, in which Homer portrays the mechanism of self-perpetuating force, she creates an aura of timelessness. In emphasizing that in the *Iliad* no one is sheltered from fate, she reminds her readers that in war everyone loses. Neither civilization nor the illusion of progress protects anyone from the defilement that results from the necessity to submit to the empire of force.

She describes the Trojan War as a game of seesaw; the conqueror of the moment feels invincible, forgetting his prior narrow defeat and the fragility of his present victory. The victors continue in the determination to totally humiliate the losing army, even while remaining aware that everything they hold dear can disappear in the fray. Weil points out that at the end of the first day narrated in the poem the Greeks have every likelihood of regaining Helen, along with her riches, and returning home. But that rational response gains no support; at this heady point of enjoying power and prestige, they want nothing less than all of Troy as booty. Though the cost is enormous, warriors on both sides boisterously decide to keep on

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<sup>6</sup> *Violence and the Sacred*, 79.

fighting for honor, prizes, and vengeance. Consequently, the war lurches on with death after harrowing death, as violence mangles all it touches. When the fighting ends, everyone has lost piteously.

For Weil, the main protagonist in Homer's narrative is force: autonomous, unrelenting, and coldly indifferent to the havoc it wreaks on the human psyche. Its mercurial volatility keeps up a relentless movement, shifting back and forth between antagonists rendering them incapable of making morally good decisions. Force on the move inescapably punishes with a mathematical rigor the perpetrator as well as the sufferer. Once launched, force eventually plays itself out, leaving only a trail of utter despair. Weil writes, "Homer's listeners know that the death of Hector can bring only brief joy to Achilles, the death of Achilles brief joy to the Trojans, and the annihilation of Troy brief joy to the Achaeans."<sup>7</sup>

In Weil's analysis, the seductive charms of the empire of force control the bodies and minds of the warriors, whether they are winners or losers. She highlights Homer's depiction of the warriors as blind, uncontrollable scourges of disaster: blasting fire, flood, whirlwinds, and man-eating lions, everything that violent external forces could propel. Their massacres make up a uniform tableau of horror.

This total loss of rational control struck Weil as the profound truth in the *Iliad*, in which "Nothing disguises the cold brutality of the facts of war because neither the conquerors nor the conquered are admired, scorned or hated."<sup>8</sup> Everyone suffers, no one possesses force, and no man escapes its brutal necessity. She writes, "Men are not divided into the conquered, with enslaved and supplicants on one side and conquerors and commanders on the other. There is not a single man who must not at some time bend under the constraint of force . . . Valor contributes less to determine victory than blind destiny."<sup>9</sup> Hector terrified the Achaeans, but

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<sup>7</sup> Weil, "*Iliade*," OSW, 540.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 549.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 535,536

later Ajax makes the Trojans tremble as he enters the melee. Then Ajax, spirits dashed, is forced to retreat like a trapped beast. Even Achilles trembles and groans, though caught by an element of nature, the churning, surging rapids of the River Scamander, until the god Hephaestus saves him from drowning.

Homer's recounting of the gods' capriciously deciding the warriors' fate underline for Weil that "the strong person is never absolutely strong, nor the weak absolutely weak, but neither of them knows it."<sup>10</sup> Thus the stronger is encouraged to act as if no obstacle creates the necessity for him to pause and think about the consequences before he acts. She concludes, "Where thought has no place neither do justice or prudence."<sup>11</sup> Weil reflects that if all persons have the potential to suffer under the effects of force, somehow circumstances close their minds to this reality.

In 1939-40, Weil fears for her contemporaries who will disregard the warning, as old as the ancient Greeks and renewed by Christ, that those who live by the sword die by the sword. She underscores her injunction by using the fateful events of Homer's narrative, which, as in the story of the Passion of Christ, reveal the full humiliation tasted by souls placed under constraints imposed by others. No one escapes this reality. She wanted all to remain aware of their choices when faced with brute domination: they could respond with acts of violence or they could counter with acts of generosity. The human beings who set violent force into motion long for life but deal in death. These same persons, however, could perform acts of courage, kindness, and love, inspired by supernatural grace. Homer's epic does not slight the warm relationships revealing true love of the other; they serve to heighten the tragedy of their absence in the empire of force.

### **Literature as a source for truth**

Both Girard and Weil hold that the means to mitigate rampaging violence have roots in the supernatural and that literary master works throughout the

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 537.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

centuries provide access to this truth. Girard believes with Weil that only the great writers succeed in a faithful portrayal of the social mechanisms guiding interpersonal relationships that can lead to good or to evil. For great artists, art is simply a means to penetrate to the truth; all other works are inferior.<sup>12</sup> Courageous persons who attempt to counter the impulse to use force against others can not have self-aggrandizement as a goal, for they, too often, become victims of mob violence, which Weil portrays as the Great Beast (*le gros animal*). But because these individuals, who are “mad with love,” in Weil’s eyes, discern the truth of the situation, they cannot do otherwise than try to stop the blatant crushing of souls.

In an essay on literature and criticism, Girard wrote, “Simone Weil [makes the] distinction between works of art that remain second rate, however brilliant they may be—because they do nothing but ‘enrich’ their author’s personality—and true masterpieces, which originate from an impoverishment, a mutilation of the inauthentic self.”<sup>13</sup> Weil believed that to perform the miracle of actively loving one’s suffering neighbor in dire circumstances requires openness to Christ’s model on the Cross, leaving no place for egotism. For Weil, Christ’s Passion models the essential elements of compassion: “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do”; obedience to God’s will: “Thy will be done”; and persistence even in the face of abandonment: “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” Exemplary compassion and obedience to the invisible supernatural do not invariably inspire a peaceful response, although, in truth, it is the model, *par excellence*, for carrying out mimetic desire in a positive way. Human beings, however, have a strong counter pull inherent in their nature, which Weil called moral gravity.

### **Christ as a counter force**

In concluding his 2007 conversation with Benoît Chantre about von Clausewitz’s analysis of war, Girard summarizes his great concern over Christians

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<sup>12</sup> Weil, *OC VI* – 1, 108.

<sup>13</sup> Girard, *Mimesis and Theory: essays on literature and Criticism*, 67.

not understanding that “mimesis is the true primary engine driving history.”<sup>14</sup> He insists, “Today’s terrorism, a superior form of violence, is a modern effort to counter the most powerful and refined tool of the Western world: technology.”<sup>15</sup> He believes that love continues to work in the world as never before, but it has “cooled down;” consequently, *caritas* now confronts a worldwide empire of violence.<sup>16</sup> His profession of faith is based on the belief that “Christ died everywhere and for everyone,”<sup>17</sup> and that “Christ alone allows us to face this reality without sinking into madness.”<sup>18</sup> He, like Weil, affirms the notion that to render the Revelation wholly good, and not threatening, humans have only to adopt the behavior recommended by Christ, by abstaining completely from retaliation and renouncing the escalation to extremes.<sup>19</sup> Christ made explicit this difficult mode of “mutilation of one’s inauthentic self” when he spoke to his disciples about suffering and rejection: “For those who want to save their life will lose it and those who lose their life for my sake will save it.”<sup>20</sup> Weil’s message is, “Do not believe you are sheltered from fate, do not admire force, do not hate your enemies, and do not scorn the less fortunate.”<sup>21</sup> We would do well to listen to both René Girard and Simone Weil.

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<sup>14</sup> Girard, *Battling to the End*, 213.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 214, 215.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 216.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 215.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, xiii.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, xiv.

<sup>20</sup> *The Oxford Bible*, Luke, 9: 24.

<sup>21</sup> Weil, *OSW*, 551.