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Toward a Critique of Girard's Model of Reading

Francesco Garritano

1. INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary debate on hermeneutics, one of the liveliest arguments regards the will to understand, the interpreter's sensitivity to come to the text intending to listen to what it says. "Willingness to understand" not only is an assumption of hermeneutics as a technical discipline, but also, according to Gadamer,¹ regulates all of social life, so that understanding is the initial moment of any collective practice. In this willingness—which entails laying aside assumptions and their verification—are found the beginnings of common sense, of history. Contact between the present and the past, the reception and enrichment of tradition, occurs with the acceptance of and opening up toward the other, all of which takes the form of a prolongation and propagation of the diastasis. Gadamer has always held fast to these ideas and defended them forcefully whenever questioned, as in his encounter with Derrida in Paris in April 1981.

[Translated from the Italian by Michael Rocke]

Derrida hypothesized that the Gadamerian “willingness to understand” as the preliminary moment of interpretation and of the relationship with truth, corresponds to the will to consensus, and therefore to a dialectic and metaphysical will.² In short, Derrida maintains that willingness coincides with intentionality, with the result that the other is absorbed by the conscience, in accordance with the typical procedures of dialectics. The third is thus reduced to the duality on which metaphysics is constructed, so that the other is the other of oneself. This is where Derrida places understanding, whose decisive moment in his opinion is not contact but interruption. This phenomenon is easily seen in psychoanalytic hermeneutics, where understanding presupposes a change of code, or rather, the translation of the text and its insertion into a different contextual scene.³ The doubts Derrida raises about the hermeneutic tradition from Heidegger to Gadamer are serious, and culminate in this question:

Whether one speaks of consensus or of misunderstanding (Schleiermacher), we wonder if the condition of *Verstehen*, rather than a continuum of the relationship, as was said last evening, may not in fact be the interruption of the relationship, a certain relationship of interruption, the suspension of any mediation whatsoever?⁴

With these words Derrida formulated a solid attack on hermeneutics as an attempt to deconstruct metaphysics, to think about the essence of being, an attack to which Gadamer later responded.⁵ While it is true that in arguing that the will to understand is intentionality, Derrida reiterates his belief that hermeneutics, both Heideggerian and Gadamerian, follows the metaphysical tradition, it is also true that, in the end, what he claims—that understanding is understanding of the self and not of the other—is confirmed in reality. Here we would like to dwell precisely on a case of the suspension of understanding.

2. HISTORY AND TRUTH

In 1964 René Girard published an essay on Camus, “Pour un nouveau procès de *L'Étranger*,”⁶ in which he exemplarily commits the gesture of interrupting the mediation which Derrida highlighted. What happens in this essay? Girard performs a reading of Camus’s text in which he places the idea of the absurd within the framework of underground logic, of the triangular desire he speaks about in *Mensonge romantique et désir romanesque* and in

*Dostoevski du double à l'unité.*⁷ According to Girard, Camus used *The Stranger* to mask his desire for success, for approval from the public opinion he condemned as incapable of being just.⁸ As is well known, Girard regards triangular desire as a consequence of nihilism, of the death of God, in the sense that the loss of unity unleashes a struggle to occupy the empty place, a contest that grows among men and leads to idolatry. This is explicit in the two texts mentioned above, works in which Girard emphasizes the need to overcome metaphysical desire (that which tries to substitute for God), something which occurs in the novel, a place of reconciliation.⁹ Girard's discourse highlights the loss of values (what he designates as nihilism) and the need to put this event behind us, that is, the urgency of rebuilding harmony to put an end to underground logic.

Girard applies this model to Camus without too much concern since he clearly sees the connection between the death of God and metaphysical desire, and therefore believes he can speak of "nihilist individualism."¹⁰ In reality, however, the consequentialness between the eclipse of the center and desire is not, as Girard would like, marked by God's death but by his presence: to deny God means in any case to acknowledge him, so to assert his presence does not correspond to the gesture of rejecting nihilism. In short, Girard does not thoroughly explore the problem of nihilism, but merely accepts the perspective handed down from metaphysics—that is, the opposition being-nothingness—without dwelling on the possibility of their connection. With these assumptions Girard fails to grasp the two central themes of Camus's query (responsibility and justice), and instead simply finds a replacement for them: the death of the divinity implies the triumph of the human, with the result that grace (Girard's harmonizing element) yields to the will to dominate, to man's pretext of being just. In other words the absurd—as separation, liberty, and responsibility—is grace. Girard forgets what, according to Sartre, is Camus's problem *par excellence*: ethics.¹¹

All this finds its justification in that Girard does not contemplate entity in proximity to being—in other words, he does not evaluate the truth of the latter: oblivion. While Camus proceeds from the eternal's decreasing luminosity, from the disappearance of harmonizing unity, and confronts the question of man's responsibility, of destiny as derepresentation of the quotidian, Girard remains with the idea that being is entity. This perspective cannot but lead him to consider the Camusian revolt and the query about

ethics as a false problem: justice is the human pretext of substituting man for God as the origin of grace, and justice returns to grace after having passed through the state of underground logic. This point of view guides his interpretation of Camus, so that one arrives at understanding not in the mediation between text and reader, but in the affirmation of the present. Thus the exasperation of Girard's vision is verified by virtue of the fact that his action is accompanied by presence, by a being that surrenders itself completely and consequently has no need to re-present itself in order to be affirmed. Girard refuses to verify his preconceived idea, with the inevitable consequence that his interpretation of *The Stranger* acquires everything specific to ideological discourse. In short, Girard regards the truth as already given, an emanation of the divinity present even when underground logic prevails.

The effect of this concept is the end of history, the occurrence of truth in every human action. It appears that Girard actually declares the separation of truth and history: to ensure that its historical manifestations do not constitute revelatory moments, truth is taken to be (to use Pareyson's expression) but the repetition of the identical truth, that is, the repetition of the same. Girard disregards the multiple character of truth, the oblivion from which it is led onto the historical scene. In this way, history loses its character as "access-way to truth,"¹² as a dialogue between past and present and the revisitation of both, while events in their diversity are illuminated by a fullness, by an unalterable truth. The arbitrariness of Girard's interpretation is thus justified and justifiable according to the perspective of classical metaphysics: being is, and the bias that the interpreter rigorously defends is the primacy of this truth. It is opportune to dwell on this disregard for the historical character of truth. Truth cannot be an object that grows or diminishes but, on the contrary, remains immobile even when, on the level of events, there seem to be variations.

To return to Camus and Girard, the former regards truth as the representation of the present, while the latter rejects this point of view. The interpreter (Girard) resolves the tension according to the dynamics of triangular desire, a nihilism that keeps the truth very much alive. We are thus in the realm of the dialectical tradition, of pre-fixed synthesis, and so no ontic contradiction impugns being as presence. Continuing on the level of consequentiality, Girard's lack of understanding arises with regard to the ethical problem in Camus. If truth is fulfilled and puts an end to becoming, morality cannot change, in the sense that it is not

subject to reformulation. To accept the reappearance of truth would be to call being into question, to regard it as immersed in destiny. It is just this peremptory refusal that renders vain the interrogation on justice, since one can speak of justice only in doubt, in the distance between entity and being.

In Girard's case, freedom—posited in terms of understanding the true and the good (as Camus understands it)—has no reason to exist: freedom is the other side of grace. Man, therefore, does not have to interpret the true, since truth is, regardless of its presentation. This perspective arrives at a paradox: an individual's action is justified and he is free of responsibility since his action conforms to a previous and unchangeable design. This can be seen in the pages of *Dostoevski du double à l'unité*, at the point where Girard comments on the legend of the Grand Inquisitor.¹³ The Inquisitor does not want Christ to reappear, and thus wants man to persist in the truth, in a completed history free of revelations. If man is not turned away from the presence and from grace, the Inquisitor, inasmuch as he is the guarantee of and witness to the coming of the truth, will find himself faced with the event he tried to cancel: the return of truth. Girard realizes that the death of God might correspond not to his disappearance but to his appearance, or better, to his reappearance; he considers this possibility, but immediately consigns it once again to the silence of certainty. In fact, Girard traces for the Inquisitor the typical course of whoever harbors doubts about the divinity: the descent into hell, the fall into the underground, a place of no doubts, but of certainties:

If the world flees Christ instead of following him, He will make this flight serve his plan of redemption. He will do in division and contradiction what he wanted to do in union and in joy. In seeking to become divine without Christ, man puts himself on the cross. It is the freedom of Christ, deflected but alive, that generates the underground.¹⁴

As can be seen, negation is the confirmation of the presence in its immutability.

If we consider what Girard says about the triangular structure of desire, we see that the central moment is the acknowledgment of desire as the expression of nothingness. All this generates idolatry to the extent that it requires the overcoming of this state, that is, reconciliation. We have here an absolutely dialectical articulation, marked by the resolution of conflict

according to a procedure regulated by negativity. In fact it is death that harmonizes, that puts an end to tensions; it is in death that Girard finds the presence of grace. We can discover what we have been talking about in the *explicit* of *Mensonge romantique et désir romanesque*, a comment on the verses of the Gospel of John used by Dostoevski as the epigraph to *The Brothers Karamozov*: "Verily, verily I say unto you, except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit." We believe that the pages in which Girard comments on these words are the core of his thought, where we see the primacy of unity, of being, quite far from oblivion. This vision springs from an analysis of the world of novels, a reflection that embraces authors like Cervantes, Stendhal, Flaubert, Dostoevski, Proust. Girard finds in a certain type of novel what becomes a sort of universal, whose value transcends the present and acquires unlimited significance.

To verify what we have said, let us dwell on the opening of "Pour un nouveau procès de *L'Étranger*."

Girard does not bother to prepare himself for Camus's text. He does not accept, as Gadamer would say,¹⁵ the demands of tradition as the origin of dialogue, but unhesitatingly sets the limits within which the text must move. What are these limits? The first and most apparent consists of making the character of Mersault express the emotions that rouse all men: "love, hate, ambition, greed, jealousy."¹⁶ When he identifies Mersault with emotion, Girard takes the first and definitive step toward setting him up within his model of the modern novel. Indeed, when Mersault expresses a desire (which for Girard corresponds to Camus's desire for success), *The Stranger* is inscribed in the schema of triangular desire and the absurd becomes the opposite of grace. As Girard says:

The character of Mersault frames the nihilistic individualism exposed in *The Myth of Sisyphus* which is generally designated by the word "absurd." Mersault is possessed by the absurd like some people, in another spiritual context, are possessed by grace.¹⁷

If it is kept in mind that we are at the *incipit* of the essay dedicated to *The Stranger*, it is easily seen that Girard's intentions are not to understand the text. Indeed he commits an act of misunderstanding, whose object is not so much *The Stranger* but rather *The Myth of Sisyphus*. What does Girard do? He merely places the absurd and mercy in a reflective relationship, or rather he estab-

lishes a connection between openness and divinity: in other words, he is true to the idea that the present is, that the truth is expressed in it. The fusion of horizons as the initial moment of understanding is lost, thus confirming the Derridian thesis discussed above, according to which this phenomenon, interpretation as the suspension of tradition, is typical of psychoanalytical interpretation.¹⁸ In "Pour un nouveau procès de *L'Étranger*," Girard merely demystifies the underground plan of Camus's discourse on the absurd, and at the same time reinforces his own bias, in the sense that he confirms his own convictions, his own discourse.

3. ETHICS OF ACTION

If one looks closely, Girard's horizon is structured, as Pareyson maintains when he defines ideological discourse, on a finite temporality, not subject to diastasis: the two polarities fixed by Girard (God-metaphysical desire) derive from the same thing, so there is no dialectical dynamic that culminates in synthesis. There is no movement, since one begins with being only to stay with being. It is not by chance that Girard self-confidently applies his method to an author like Dostoevski and to an author like Camus; indeed, this perfectly demonstrates that his bias tends toward atemporality. Paradoxically, by following Girard's pseudo-articulation, one can grasp what Heidegger maintains in his "Letter on 'Humanism.'" Responding to Jean Beaufret's question, "How can sense be restored to the word 'humanism'?", Heidegger notes that in Western thought, man values being regardless of its truth.¹⁹ Metaphysics, Heidegger believes, continues to maintain its dominion even when, as in Sartre's case, one claims the precedence of existence over essence²⁰: all this leads one to not consider the essence of existence, to not see that man exists, that he is near to existence.²¹

Now what Girard does not consider is precisely existence as man's taking part in the destiny of being (oblivion). This, in our opinion, is Girard's position when he speaks of the absurd and of revolt, that is, when he interprets Camus's text.

The openness of the present, its non-occurrence, is irreconcilable with the radicalization of his preconception, a radicalization that imposes reflection on essence and existence beginning with his non-consideration of the oblivion of being. True to the metaphysical tradition, therefore, Girard ignores the possibility that

the absurd is existence and, without a shadow of doubt, fixes the presence of truth in human action, assimilating Camus's thought to Sartre's existentialism. It is understandable that Girard effects this translation of Camus's thought, inasmuch as he persists in it. Identifying the absurd with metaphysical desire, he feels the need to defend history or, better, his idea of history, to which he ideologically attributes the value of truth. From this it results that the position of Camus, for whom history is expression and revelation, must necessarily be rethought, that is, reduced to expression, to a present that cannot be altered by appearances. In realizing all this, Girard makes Sartre's considerations in "Réponse à Albert Camus" his own. With the goal of defending the primacy of existence, which absorbs essence within itself, Sartre accuses Camus of rejecting history in the name of transcendence,²² that is, of separation. In the Sartre-Camus controversy, the latter, who initiated the *différend* with the well-known "Lettre au directeur des *Temps Modernes*," upholds an absolutely specular idea: Sartre's position, centered on the priority of existence, celebrates action, and therefore the present as the end of history. Camus thus accuses Sartre of making action the foundation of history, transforming history into ideology, with the result that he forgets that truth is a quest.²³

Girard, therefore, interprets the absurd on the basis of a strange and profitable mixture between the positions of Sartre and Camus. He accepts Sartre's idea that Camus is opposed to history, sending it off to a preconceived and useful wait. Nothing keeps Girard from subscribing to this idea. Nonetheless, after having taken Sartre's side he puts himself in a position that clearly reveals his bias and interest: he contemplates the absurd as metaphysical desire, as aspiration to centrality, and thus points out the correspondence Heidegger observed between the metaphysical tradition and Sartrian humanism. Put another way, he who questions himself about being finds himself in the same position as he who denies it in the name of existence. This is not surprising since, as Heidegger teaches, it is impossible to get away from metaphysics, although it should be noted here that, in seeing grace in the absurd, Girard assimilates Camus's position to Sartre's and thus does not take account of their difference. Indeed, Girard does not really understand this correspondence, but advances it because of the transhistorical character of his model of reading. There is nothing surprising in the way Girard interprets *The Stranger*: it is natural that he interprets it in his own way. Obviously this penchant means that the interpretation loses

its revelatory character, that is, its dimension of listening to being in the language.

I believe Girard was unconcerned about this when he placed himself before Camus's text; after all, he proceeds from a truth without blemish, from being without destiny. Nonetheless, it is opportune to assess the consequences of this interpretive model from an ethical point of view, since Girard bases his own discourse on and in morality. In *Mensonge romantique et désir romanesque*, Girard reveals the origins of metaphysical desire and the underground world, whose logic constitutes the rejection of ethics, the refusal to stand face-to-face with the other. In fact the overcoming of this state is found in the reconciliation achieved in God. It is in the rediscovery of centrality, therefore, that otherness is acknowledged. In this regard Girard asserts, "A victory over self-love permits us to descend deeply into the ego and with the same movement gives us the recognition of the Other."²⁴ This idea of ethics also guides Girard's thinking in *Dostoevski du double à l'unité*; indeed, in this text it is even more clear, since Girard speaks of Dostoevski's sinking into the underground and his consequent rediscovery of the light, of grace.²⁵ There are no doubts, therefore, that Girard considers a certain type of novel as the place where the thought of an epoch is made manifest, a type marked by the crisis of values, by the loss of moral motivations, and by the need to rediscover them. The same coordinates emerge in "Pour un nouveau procès de *L'Étranger*," in which he seeks to inscribe Camus's thought in the dynamic described above—in the negation-affirmation of God—thereby eliminating the possibility that the absurd can be an interrogation on being, can be distance.

At this point, however, there is an event that cannot be ignored. When Mersault becomes "the man of Dostoevski's underground,"²⁶ we not only have a confirmation of the value of Girard's thought, but something else happens that is ethically important. Girard declares that access to justice and morality through a non-dialectical process is impossible. In fact, the absurd is nothing but man's taking responsibility after the presence-absence of God. Camus is explicit about this in *L'homme révolté*, where he notes that revolt (the absurd) has not found an application in history except in terms of deviation: revolt is inevitably linked to the State—that is, it is transformed into revolution, into centrality, and thus fails in responsibility. According to Camus the absurd, as separation from and derepresentation of

the present, demands that the subject can no longer take refuge in God, that man cannot be invested and helped by his presence. The openness of being defines responsibility, since it keeps the subject from proceeding intentionally, that is, from acting in the name of God according to a design legitimated even in injustice. Yet Girard seems to deny there is responsibility in separation, in the oblivion of being, in a subject as I-for-other, to use Lévinas's expression.

This position seems to contradict the foundation of ethics. In short, there is a paradox, for in the name of the other Girard erases otherness; in the name of a thought protected from the timelessness of ideology, he brings everything back to sameness. Even more peculiarly, the supposed dialectical movement is not really such: he establishes an interpretive model and applies it inexorably to different texts, which he never listens to but simply translates and reduces. The tension that marks dialectical thought is missing, since Girard does not limit himself to establishing his own position, but also defines the antithetical position and, of course, their unification. That Girard radicalizes history as present and event can be seen in his defense of the quotidian. He seeks to defend public opinion and, more precisely, its values, from the doubts of a moral nature raised by Camus. According to Girard, Camus claims the arbitrariness of values, therefore value as desire for power; nonetheless, his discourse is unable to escape this logic and he seeks to disguise it with the problem of justice.²⁷ Continuing on this path, Girard runs up against the question of "authentic existence," and of course he can only reject the hypothesis that the quotidian is the occurrence of the possibility of impossibility and its re-presentation.²⁸ Finiteness cannot, therefore, call into discussion the advent of the present, whose temporal narrowness is led toward the timelessness of being, in the sense that the present partakes of the infinity of negation. All this develops in Girard's discourse under the guise of a defense of current values and the preconceptions of his public.

On the basis of what we have said, Girard's reading of *The Stranger* constitutes a sort of celebration of bias, with the result that tradition is received in terms of interruption. The fusion of horizons occurs, then, as a radicalization and ahistoricity of the present, which, as truth, rejects dialogue with tradition. This seems to support the idea of discontinuity in hermeneutical practice, a possibility which, as has been noted, Girard did not contemplate: in fact, the foundation of the present is in a being that

is, with the result that bias is truth. In this way an ethics of action is affirmed in which the other, paradoxically, is not acknowledged in history or daily life, but in synthesis—that is, outside history.

1. Cf. H. G. Gadamer, "Testo e interpretazione," trans. by F. Vercellone, in *aut aut*, 217-218 (January-April, 1987), 29.
2. Cf. J. Derrida, "Buona volontà di potenza. (Una risposta a Hans-Georg Gadamer)," trans. by M. Ferraris, *ibid.*, 59-60.
3. Cf. *ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*
5. We refer to H. G. Gadamer, "E tuttavia: potenza della volontà 'buona'," trans. by M. Ravera, *ibid.*, 61-63, and by the same author, "Decostruzione e interpretazione," trans. by A. Fabris, in *aut aut*, 208 (July-August, 1985), 1-11.
6. R. Girard, "Pour un nouveau procès de L'Étranger," in *PLMA*, 79 (December, 1964); republished in *Critiques dans un souterrain* (Paris: Grasset, 1983), 137-175.
7. R. Girard, *Mensonge romantique et désir romanesque* (Paris: Grasset, 1982); *Id.*, *Dostoevski du double à l'unité* (Brionne: Gérard Monfort éd., 1979).
8. Cf. R. Girard, "Pour un nouveau procès de L'Étranger," *op. cit.*, 162-66.
9. Cf. R. Girard, *Mensonge romantique et désir romanesque*, *op. cit.*, 325 ff.
10. R. Girard, "Pour un nouveau procès de L'Étranger," *op. cit.*, 137.
11. Cf. J.-P. Sartre, "Explication de L'Étranger," in *Situations I* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), 122.
12. L. Pareyson, "Verità e interpretazione," in *Filosofia dell'interpretazione*, ed. M. Ravera (Torino: Rosenberg & Sellier, 1988), 197.
13. Cf. R. Girard, *Dostoevski du double à l'unité*, *op. cit.*, 150-51.
14. *Ibid.*, 151.
15. Cf. H. G. Gadamer, *Verità e metodo*, trans. and ed. by G. Vattimo (Milan: Bompiani, 1983), 427-32.
16. R. Girard, "Pour un nouveau procès de L'Étranger," *op. cit.*, 137.
17. *Ibid.*
18. See also L. Pareyson, *op. cit.*, 207, on the understanding of ideology, which sounds very much like Derrida.
19. Cf. M. Heidegger, "Lettera sull' 'umanismo'," in *Segnavia*, ed. F. Volpi (Milan: Adelphi, 1987), 273-76.
20. Cf. *ibid.*, 281-83.
21. Cf. *ibid.*, 277-80 and 295 ff.
22. Cf. J.-P. Sartre, "Réponse à Albert Camus," in *Les Temps Modernes*, 82 (August, 1952), 348.
23. Cf. A. Camus, "Lettre au directeur des Temps Modernes," *ibid.*, 323-24 and 332.
24. Cf. R. Girard, *Mensonge romantique et désir romanesque*, *op. cit.*, 334.
25. Cf. R. Girard, *Dostoevski du double à l'unité*, *op. cit.*, 163.
26. R. Girard, "Pour un nouveau procès de L'Étranger," *op. cit.*, 157.
27. Cf. *ibid.*, 151-54.
28. Cf. *ibid.*, 162-68.