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**THE EXPERIENCE OF AFFLICTION AND THE POSSIBILITY OF LOVE
IN THE LIFE AND THOUGHT OF SIMONE WEIL**

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ABSTRACT

Simone Weil is best known to the world as a mystic and a philosopher. She died in 1943 at the age of 34, ostensibly because she refused the hypernutrition prescribed for the treatment of her tuberculosis. Shortly after her death, thanks to the posthumous publication of her work, she was recognised as one of the twentieth centuries most original thinkers in areas as diverse as philosophy, political history, religion, and ethics. Few writers have delved into the foundational relationship she discerned between a destructive form of suffering she called “affliction” and the experience of divine love. The present dissertation exposes how this fundamental relationship lies at the centre of Weil’s life and thought.

First, we correlate biographical details of Weil’s life with key insights into the reality of affliction. Second, the nature of human suffering is treated as a theological concept. Through Weil we consider the limits of creatureliness to the point at which one no longer feels a part of the human community. Third, we examine Weil’s insight into the radical possibility of love in response to the annihilating experience of affliction, that is, the experience of God’s love for us as well as the possibility of loving the afflicted neighbour. Finally, we consider several critiques of Weil’s sense of her own identity as a woman and as a Jew, and the impact of this identity crisis on her unique understanding of the relationship between suffering and the love of God.

RÉSUMÉ

Simone Weil est surtout connue comme philosophe et mystique. Elle est morte en 1943 à l'âge de 34 ans, manifestement après avoir refusé de se nourrir pour soigner sa tuberculose. Peu après sa mort, grâce à la publication posthume de son oeuvre, elle a été consacrée comme l'un des penseurs les plus originaux du XX^e siècle dans des disciplines aussi diverses que la philosophie, l'histoire politique, la religion et l'éthique. Peu d'écrivains ont étudié comme elle le rapport fondamental qu'elle a discerné entre une forme destructrice de souffrance qu'elle appelait «malheur» et l'expérience de l'amour divin. La présente thèse décrit la façon dont ce rapport fondamental se situe au coeur de la vie et de la réflexion de Simone Weil.

En premier lieu, l'auteur établit une corrélation entre la biographie de la vie de Simone Weil et ses grandes intuitions sur la réalité du malheur. Deuxièmement, la nature de la souffrance humaine est traitée comme un concept théologique. Par Simone Weil, il analyse les limites de la nature de créature au point où l'on n'a plus le sentiment de faire partie de la communauté humaine. Troisièmement, il analyse le point de vue de Simone Weil sur la possibilité radicale de l'amour en réponse à l'expérience destructrice du malheur, c'est-à-dire l'expérience de l'amour de Dieu pour nous et la possibilité d'aimer son prochain plongé dans le malheur. Enfin, il étudie plusieurs critiques du sentiment que Simone Weil avait de sa propre identité de femme et de juive et l'impact que cette crise identitaire a eu sur la compréhension intime qu'elle avait du rapport entre la souffrance et l'amour de Dieu.

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I am especially indebted to my supervisor Douglas John Hall, for staying with me and providing me with the guidance he has accumulated through his experience as a prolific writer and concerned teacher. I am also grateful to Rhoda Hall who read the very first manuscript of this dissertation and provided not only suggestions but encouragement.

The time and energy required for this work would simply not be available to me without the sacrifices and long-suffering of my wife Betty, as well as the prayers and the understanding of my daughters Anne and Grace. I make special mention of my brother Harris, who though younger than I, underwent this process ahead of me and has been a constant source of advice and encouragement. I am deeply grateful to my mother Anna and my father Dimitris, for believing in me more than words can tell. I wish to thank Louise Johnston and Beth Clelland for lovingly proofreading my work. Finally, I cannot forget the people of Margaret Rodger Memorial Presbyterian Church who were with me from the very beginning of this process.

I am humbled by the opportunity given to me to engage my subject, Simone Weil, who herself knew that to receive her work calls for fatiguing effort.

INTRODUCTION

In the first legend of the Grail, it is said that the Grail (the miraculous vessel that satisfies all hunger by virtue of the consecrated Host) belongs to the first comer who asks the guardian of the vessel, a king three-quarters paralyzed by the most painful wound, "What are you going through?"¹

A social critic, a labourer, a philosopher, a mystic: who was Simone Weil? It remains hard, for those who try, to define this outspoken woman who died as an exile in England at age 34. She was born in France in 1909 and died, a refugee and an exile, in England in 1943. Her background was not atypical. She was born into a family of assimilated Jews who tried hard to integrate and to be accepted in middle-class French society. Learning and culture were admired and pursued in the Weil household. Simone's parents, Bernard and Selma, came from well-to-do families of Alsatian and Slavic origin respectively. They wished for and gave their children the best education available. Simone's elder brother André was a mathematical prodigy and mathematics became an outlet for his genius. Simone pursued philosophy in a way that she made her own. Her method was to use discursive reason as a sharp instrument, clearing a path to insoluble contradictions before which she waited in attentive silence for the ultimate truth to reveal itself.

After graduating from the prestigious Ecole Normale Supérieure, she taught philosophy in various lycées. Concurrently she became a trade union activist, which in turn led her to work as an unskilled labourer in various factories in and around Paris during the depression. This latter experience, although lasting less than a year, changed her profoundly. Indeed, it led her to an appreciation and appropriation of the Christian faith and Roman Catholicism in particular. Even more significantly, she

came to a personal, though totally unexpected, encounter with the risen Christ.

None of this, however, is what remains truly unique and valuable in the life and thought of Simone Weil. Rather, what remains of utmost importance is her exposition of the universality of human suffering. Every creature is vulnerable and it is possible for anyone to be plunged into suffering. Weil has enabled us to enter the intimate reality of suffering, and to traverse the path that leads to a fork in the road. One side leads to brokenness and despair; the other leads to a genuine knowledge of love.

Weil's short life was spent in Europe, between the two world wars. Her life and thought converge on the nodal point of human suffering and the love that alone can address it. We human beings live in a world where suffering on a massive scale threatens to eclipse any reason for living. If, however, something like the love Weil witnesses to is possible precisely at the point where every reason for living vanishes, then suffering need not finally degrade our *raison d'être* as human beings.

First, in this dissertation I will emphasize the importance of considering Weil's life and thought together. Their relationship continues to be underappreciated in Weil studies. Several good biographies have been written to date, most notably the one by her friend Simone Pétrement.² Weil's thought on the subject of suffering has also been systematically presented and analysed, first by Miklos Vetö, and then by Eric O. Springsted.³ What is also needed, however, for a thorough appreciation of her understanding of suffering and the possibility of love which alone can address this suffering, is a more explicit presentation of the interrelationship between her life

and her thought. I will therefore examine concurrently biographical details and the thought which arose during critical points in her life. Unlike many intellectuals, Weil could not think without being in touch with the object of her thought. She needed to work in a factory in order to think about the plight of unskilled workers; she needed to pick grapes on her knees in order to think about the constraint under which human life is lived; she needed to be involved in war in order to think about the yearning for freedom; she repeatedly begged for a dangerous military mission in order to think about humility and justice by giving one's life for others. According to her own admission, she was constitutionally unable to think creatively without touching the object of her thought. Her own contribution to the understanding of the human condition comes out of an integrated concern about suffering, expressed through incisive analysis flowing out of an exacting praxis. Therefore, when her thought is considered without a careful consideration of her life, the wellspring of her thought is neglected. In turn this can lead either to an overestimation or an underestimation—even a misjudgement—of what she has to say.

Second, in this dissertation I want to bring out Weil's understanding of suffering as a theological concept. It is true that a lot of theological work has been done, during the twentieth century, on the significance and reality of suffering, especially as it impinges on our understanding of God.⁴ The theological question that is increasingly being asked is—in whom do Christians believe in a world saturated with tears? Far less has been done, however, to understand what we mean by suffering, to define it, to know its parameters, and most critically, to distinguish

between the kind of suffering that may lead to a profound renewal of life and the kind of suffering that is simply destructive—the suffering from which there is no way out.⁵ It is specifically the latter kind of suffering that Simone Weil articulates in an unmatched way. This is because her articulation is not abstract but strained through her living experience. If this kind of suffering is not dealt with in our talk of God, then a fundamental piece of reality remains unaddressed in our theological language at the very point that we seek to respond to the *angst* felt by many in our time.

Third, my aim is to show that Weil, by exposing the kind of suffering that threatens to annihilate life, points to the radical nature of love. This is important for any Christian theological discussion of the divine love. Weil's profound engagement of destructive suffering points to the radical nature of the authentic response to this suffering. Her unflinching exposition of human misery is illumined by the authentic response of love. Love cannot be said to be actual if it is not love of the unlovable. She thus offers to us a definitive standard by which to measure any discussion of divine love as the response to our human condition.

Thus the goals of this dissertation are to show that the essential contribution of Simone Weil for our time is the path she discovers between suffering and love and to demonstrate how she does this through the integration of her life and thought.

Order of the Dissertation

Part one of the dissertation is devoted to tracing Weil's perception and penetrating exposition of a destructive type of suffering which she named "affliction," an exposition that can be conceived as a series of four concentric circles, each moving successively closer to answering the question: "Who are the afflicted?" First, we will see that her initial sensitivity to human suffering, wherever and whenever it was found, led her in early adulthood to an ever deeper solidarity with oppressed workers. Secondly, this solidarity impelled her to a keen analysis of working conditions from the perspective of those who are subject to the necessities of physical labour. Thirdly, her analysis of the prevalent theories of liberation from oppression, such as revolutionary action, left her profoundly sceptical of those theories of liberation which reject the transcendent dimension. Fourthly, we see in Weil a deepening awareness of the enervation brought about by affliction. We will examine how this awareness of affliction was first crystallized for her through the experience of factory labour and then how she saw it manifested through the impact of force in time of war. Her understanding of affliction, in turn, opened her to the sphere of the transcendent good secretly present in the love which enables the recognition of, and compassion toward, the sufferer.

In the second part of the dissertation, we will move first to a detailed examination of the condition of affliction, highlighting its destructive effect upon human beings. Second, we will consider how the afflicted are alienated from themselves as well as from those who do not share their condition. Third, this insight

will prepare us to appreciate how difficult it is indeed to pay “attention,” in the Weilian sense of this term, to anyone who is plunged into affliction. Fourth, Weil’s religious perspective will become evident as we observe her explicit acknowledgement of the divine grace which alone enables one to pay attention to human beings who are otherwise unseen and unheard.

In part three, we will consider the transformation of the soul, which gives birth to and sustains compassion, what Weil comes to call “decreation,” the actual giving up of self in the tradition of Jesus’ call to his disciples to take up their cross and follow him. It is at this point too that we will consider the critiques that have been levelled at Weil herself, and what some writers have determined to be a problem of identity, both her identity as a woman and her identity as a Jew. Some critics have maintained that she was at war with herself, or even that she hated herself, and so the loss or destruction of self was, for her, all too tempting. But we will see that though Weil did struggle mightily with her own soul, she was able not only to transcend, but to transform her struggle into a profound understanding of the human condition. Even more important for our purpose is that her own struggle to understand the love of God for herself, and even her own failure to identify with the afflicted Jews, do not negate the value of her understanding of the quality of character that is called for in loving the afflicted. According to her, the very possibility of love, if one understands (stands under) the condition of affliction, is a self-emptying. There is no other way to love.

I. THE MOVEMENT TOWARD THE AFFLICTED

Simone Weil lived all of her short life in France save for the last fifteen months, four of which she spent in the United States, and nine of which she spent in England, with a remaining few weeks given to a dangerous ocean crossing and a forced interment in a refugee camp in Casablanca.⁶ It is clear from her biography that she was, throughout her life, particularly attuned to what was happening in the world around her. A key focus of her concern was the condition she came to call “affliction.” This idea has been examined extensively and related to her thought as a whole.⁷ It is important to emphasize, however, that Weil did not concern herself with the idea of affliction as it impacts people in general, but with the *condition* of affliction which arises in very specific circumstances. Writing in the midst of the Second World War to Joë Bousquet (a poet and writer who was injured during the battle of Verdun in 1918, when a bullet lodged in his spine), she says: “Fortunate are those in whom the affliction which enters their flesh is the same one that afflicts the world itself in their time. They have the opportunity and the function of knowing the truth of the world’s affliction and contemplating its reality.”⁸ In her own context, she considered affliction as a defining reality in the life of working people, and as a reality which arose within the conditions of war. Moreover, she was clear in identifying affliction on the basis of three necessary conditions. It results from the assault on one’s person in the physical, the psychological, as well as the social level, the latter being particularly important for her.⁹ As with all of her ideas, Weil never left it as an abstraction. She sought out specific situations which would expose her to the afflicted themselves.

1. A Deliberate Solidarity With the Oppressed

Weil's Early Political Involvement

Simone Weil's political activity was marked by the search for a public space in which the voice of the weak could be heard and considered. The social and political background against which she matured included: the Russian Revolution and the rise of the Russian state, the virulence of European fascism, the struggle for influence in France between liberalism, traditionalism, and Marxism, the harsh conditions of the Great Depression, and the outbreak of the Second World War.¹⁰ While her orientation to political thought and activity changed significantly over the years (from 1935 when she worked in several factories, through 1936 when she enlisted with the anarcho-syndicalist militia in the Spanish civil war, to 1938 when she says Christ took possession of her), she remained politically engaged throughout her brief life. Sometimes the impression given is that up to 1935, during her "political phase," Weil was a rigorous theorist and thinker, and that after her "conversion," she was consumed by mysticism.¹¹ This impression is not only misleading but also wrong, because it fails to appreciate the political mysticism she came to formulate. Her life and thought are held together from beginning to end by a commitment to what is real. She was duly suspicious of wish-fulfilling fantasies engendered by the mind, as well as ideologies and dogmas secreted by the collectivity, be it state or church. To the end of her life she remained acutely attuned to particular manifestations of human misery. Even after her disenchantment with the ability of

political parties and union organizations to help working people recover their dignity, she could not avoid personal involvement in what she observed. Circumstances in her environment continually called her back to the political arena.¹² Her thinking after 1938 more clearly identifies and embraces the transcendent dimension, in terms of Plato's concept of the good. This emphasis, however, served to highlight the distance between what is and what ought to be, impelling her to consider anew how justice may be possible in the world. In describing this thinking to his students, Canadian philosopher George Grant defined it simply as a shift from "a philosophy of will," in line with Descartes, Kant, and her teacher Alain, to "a philosophy of mysticism" or "grace."¹³ From emphasizing the exercise of methodical thinking, i.e. the application of the most appropriate means to the accomplishment of a given end, Weil shifts to thought which is characterized by what she terms "attention." The accent of attention is humility. It is not "muscular effort" but thought which is ready and waiting to be penetrated by that which transcends it. Throughout the latter part of her life, Weil's social concern was informed by this kind of thought.

At least as early as her years at the Ecole Normale Supérieure (ENS 1928-31), not to mention incidents in her childhood, Weil displayed a moral and political exigency which earned her such nicknames as "the Categorical Imperative in skirts" and the "Red Virgin."¹⁴ These labels, the former given by her classmates and the latter by the director of studies, are of course revealing not only of her character and penchant for political activity, but also of implications concerning her gender. Significantly, Weil was one of the first women admitted to the ENS. This was

possible not only because of Weil's intellectual calibre (she passed the entrance examination at the head of her class, followed by Simone de Beauvoir, followed by thirty men), but also because she "was a beneficiary of the opening up of the French meritocracy to women, campaigned for by feminists of the day."¹⁵ But as a photograph of the class of 1926 at Henri IV indicates, Weil was the sole woman, dressed not unlike her male classmates, and, for various complex reasons which will be considered later, regarded it "a great misfortune to have been born a female."¹⁶ This is important to note because Weil was always acutely sensitive to the reality of human anguish, which sense deepened for her as she exposed herself more and more to it. Clearly, however, the suffering that she identified with, in the social and political world around her, was not that of women qua women or of Jews qua Jews, both identities being potentially her own.¹⁷ Rather, she leaned over a social chasm to identify very consciously with the proletariat, as well as farm labourers, those who constituted the supply of workers for manual labour of all kinds. This identification is not accidental. One identity she was conscious of arose from her own socioeconomic class. Her parents were themselves descended from upwardly mobile families of Russian and European Jews, so Simone was born into the upper middle-class and educated along with the privileged of that class in the best educational system France had to offer. Weil came into her formative years in a period when authoritarian and nationalist movements were gaining influence in Europe and an economic crisis had reached its peak. Employers were uncertain, unemployment was chronic, and those who did manage to find work were often abused. At the same

time, this was a period of revision in management techniques and the engineering of the work process itself. In this social and political milieu, her sympathies consciously lay with those at the bottom of the social hierarchy.

Following her *aggregation* in philosophy in 1931, she taught at the lycées in Le Puy (1931-32), Auxerre (1932-33), and Roanne (1933-34). After spending close to a year working in the factories in and around Paris, she continued to teach in Bourges and Saint-Quentin. Weil took her teaching at the lycées very seriously, preparing her material carefully, tutoring her students after hours, supplying them with books out of her own funds if necessary, and certainly raising her pupils' awareness of the political realities around them. Yet she did not confine herself to teaching, and she specifically sought teaching assignments in industrial areas so as to be close to workers and their organizations. Almost immediately upon taking up her first teaching post in the industrial town of Le Puy, Professor Weil fraternized with the unemployed in the town, led them repeatedly on marches to city hall, and advocated for a certain minimum payment for their work of cutting stones. At the climax of "l'affaire Weil," an editorial in a local newspaper expressed indignation, labelling her a "red virgin of the tribe of Levi, evangelist of the gospel of Moscow. . . ." ¹⁸

She went on to forge strong personal connections with miners, factory workers, and school teachers engaged in union activity. She was extensively involved as a militant and organizer in revolutionary syndicalism, and wrote for left wing and

anarchic newspapers and journals, such as La Révolution Proletarienne, on problems of social and political organization. Weil's concern was to be with and to listen to workers, as the class of people who were at the bottom of the social ladder. They were visibly the class of people who bore immediately and directly the political and economic convulsions within French and European society.¹⁹

In their important discussion of Weil's appreciation and critique of Marxism, Lawrence Blum and Victor Seidler point out clearly that her early work experiences as a student as well as her contact with groups of workers

gave her a perspective unusual among socialist intellectuals of the time. For most of them adherence to socialism and radicalism stemmed substantially from a hatred of bourgeois society or an attraction to the explanation of history that Marxism seemed to promise; it involved at best a distanced and disembodied solidarity with the proletariat. For Weil the cause of the oppressed was the center of her commitment. . . .²⁰

Moreover, Weil never presumed to be a leader, intellectual or otherwise, in the workers' movement. She was well aware of the difference between her own status as a bourgeois intellectual who was in solidarity with the workers' movement, and the situation of workers themselves who were engaged in a direct struggle with the oppression that crushed them. In her 1933 essay entitled "Prospects: are we Heading for the Proletarian Revolution?", she states that: "Militants cannot take the place of the working class. The emancipation of the workers will be carried out by the workers themselves, or it will not take place at all."²¹ She was certain that, if a revolution was to be successful in overcoming oppression (oppression which resulted from the use of workers as means for the production of things rather than as valuable

decision-makers in and of themselves), it must arise from among, and remain under the control of, working people. Unlike many of her left-wing contemporaries, however, she considered neither the revolutionary consciousness of workers nor the revolution itself to be sure things.

In 1932, the economic situation in Germany was even more desperate than it was in France. Weil decided to go there to see at first hand how the German trade unions, the Communist Party, and the Social Democrats were preparing to address the situation of the German workers, especially in view of Hitler's growing strength. She was bitterly disappointed, for she saw no signs of a serious political struggle.²² The German trade unions, with a membership of about four million, had not suffered under the capitalist system. She wrote to her friends Albertine and Urbain Thevenon: "The German unions are *above all* associations for mutual welfare. They could be dragged along by the masses like dead weights. . . ." ²³ She criticised the German Communist Party, which primarily represented the unemployed and numbered up to six million, for its explicit revolutionary rhetoric and its implicit passivity. She was dismayed at the extent to which it was a compliant organ of the Russian State, subject to the latter's political interests which were not necessarily in the interests of workers themselves. She also criticised the Social Democrats, whom she found to be too well connected to the Weimar Republic and its commitment to reformism, and too removed from the cause of the oppressed in Germany. Furthermore, both the Communists and the Social Democrats expended their energy condemning each other; thus a potentially strong united front, some seven-tenths of the population, was

divided amongst a leadership that was insensitive to its membership's plight. This membership was being handed over unprepared to those who would destroy it—big capital and the even more insidious "Hitlerite movement," both of which had their own reasons for using each other.²⁴ She concluded fatefully: "I've returned from Germany with the feeling that our revolutionary syndicalism has no international significance. . . ." ²⁵

It is not an overstatement to say that, in contrast to her severe criticism of their leadership, Weil's heart went out to the unemployed and the working people of Germany, especially the young, with whom she stayed and whom she made concerted efforts to meet.

In a letter to her parents she described the situation:

Those who have been unemployed for two, three, four, and five years no longer have the energy that a revolution demands. The young people who have never worked, weary of their parents' reproaches, kill themselves, become vagabonds, or are demoralized completely. You can see frightfully thin children, people who sing lamentably in the courtyards, etc.²⁶

Upon her return from Germany, Weil was preoccupied more than ever with the viability of the working class struggle in Europe. Instead of a revolution, she sensed the greater possibility that any significant attempts by organized workers to upset the present precarious balance of forces would be defeated. At this point Weil clarified where she would stand under these circumstances:

For my part, I have decided for some time now that, the 'above the fray' position being in fact practically impossible, I would always choose, even in the eventuality of certain defeat, to share the defeat of the workers rather than the victory of their oppressors; but as for shutting

one's eyes because of the fear of weakening one's belief in victory, I do not want to do this at any price.²⁷

Her pain, in the face of the oppression which she saw was grinding down so many in the working class of Europe, impelled her to seek the root of this oppression and to define its essential features. She was dismayed that those who presumed to lead the oppressed masses in the major centres of Europe seemed more interested in gaining power and influence—in the very society that was continuing to use people as fodder for production—than in critically questioning their own assumptions. People continued to be unemployed for long periods of time, only to line up for hours begging to work in factories under arbitrary and heavy authority in dangerous, dark, improperly ventilated conditions, producing things they could scarcely afford themselves.

Weil's Critique of the Working Condition

“The present period is one of those when everything that seems normally to constitute a reason for living dwindles away, when one must, on pain of sinking into confusion or apathy, call everything into question again.”²⁸ This sentence opens Weil's seminal work (written in the summer and fall of 1934) entitled Reflections Concerning the Causes of Liberty and Social Oppression.²⁹ She began by calling into question the foundation of Marxist thought which was at the heart of the dominant modes of discourse in the French Left to which she belonged. Nevertheless, she evinced certain admiration for Marx's insight that society itself is a legitimate object

of study and that in society, just as in nature, "nothing takes place otherwise than through material transformations."³⁰

Weil analysed the relations of society and work as follows. The material conditions in which human beings exist do indeed determine what they can do. The social organization by which matter is worked upon to supply material needs is the method of production. An oppressive social organization, such as the one Weil experienced, cries out, she thought, for an examination of the method of production: to determine what can be expected from it in terms of output, what forms of social organization are compatible with it, and how it may itself be transformed. Yet she perceived that even Marx held back from just such a critical study. Rather than carrying through with a materialistic conception of history, she detected that Marx resorted to certain idealistic aspirations. He actually placed a certain *faith* in productive forces themselves. He invested productive forces with mythical power, believing that they would inevitably develop to the point wherein adequate production to eliminate scarcity could be carried out with minimal effort. This would presumably obviate the division between those who own and manage the factories and those who work in them.³¹ In short, the emancipation of productive forces would itself usher in the good society. Yet for Weil it was certainly clear, at least from the Russian experiment, that the need continually to expand productive forces in order to remain competitive in the struggle for power was not restricted to capitalists. A capitalist-dominated framework of social values was now replaced by one determined by professional revolutionaries, ushering in a new form of domination. In the name

of progress, workers continued to serve interests other than their own by trying to fill ever increasing quotas set in response to ever expanding technical means. The living labour of human bodies and souls remained subject to the dead labour of machines, which set their pace and movements, the point being: “as long as there is, on the surface of the globe, a struggle for power, and as long as the decisive factor in victory is industrial production, the workers will be exploited.”³²

Weil sensed that the Marxist preoccupation with the ownership of productive forces was an incomplete answer to the reality of oppression. A change in ownership would not automatically result in the emancipation of the worker, for the locus of the worker’s subordination was in the very organization of the factory: in the relations between workers and the kinds of machines in front of which they worked, as well as the relationship between workers and those who managed them. In other words, even if the workers themselves one day took over the machinery of production, they could not simply turn it to the benefit of all: a mass of people would continue under the same technology to be used as means for further production. Thus the entire workplace—people working under arbitrary orders on jobs which were broken down into minute parts, with no possibility of conceiving the whole or of contemplating the finished product—fostered the worker’s alienation from the very place in which the better part of a day was spent.

Weil sensed, in Marx’s mixture of materialism and idealism, a religion of progress. She declares: “The term religion may seem surprising in connection with Marx; but to believe that our will coincides with a mysterious will which is at work

in the universe and helps us to conquer is to think religiously, to believe in Providence.”³³ According to Weil, there was no indication in history that there was ever any progress in the sense that work would no longer be necessary, and so the examination of the way work was carried out was very important. Moreover, there was no indication that in advanced industrial countries social oppression itself would be eliminated simply through technical advancement. Marx himself had cogently demonstrated how far a worker had become an instrument to be manipulated as part of the machinery of production. On what basis then was the hope founded that further technical advance, in and of itself, would eliminate this subordination of the worker to the machine? Weil declares that Marx reversed the Hegelian dialectic so that matter rather than mind becomes the motive power of history, and then “attributed to matter what is the very essence of mind—an unceasing aspiration towards the best.”³⁴ She perceived that Marx was pained at the injustice of the worker’s condition and unmasked the power relations in society that fostered oppression. Yet he hoped and believed that the historical process itself would usher in a justice that existed neither in the past nor in the present.

Weil examined the related idea of “revolution”³⁵ but found it wanting not in the expression of defiance against the injustices of society, but in the assumption that the essential agony of the working condition could be eliminated. This agony was something to know, understand, and assent to, rather than try to eliminate.³⁶ She judged that the idea of a revolution had been made especially vacuous by those who professed to follow Marx, but who had neither his insight nor even perhaps his moral

sensitivity. She dared in fact to declare to her revolutionary syndicalist comrades, to dissident communists, and to the Marxist parties, that there was no clear objective or power behind the word "revolution." It is a word, said Weil, "for which you kill, for which you die, for which you send the labouring masses to their death, but which does not possess any content."³⁷ Primarily it contained an untested assumption: that a social order which has never existed before, one which is radically different from any that has come before it, one in which oppression of any kind is practically eliminated, can be established and is in fact the natural outgrowth of history. That is, in the capitalist period a point was close to being reached in which the forces of production would attain a maximum of growth, such that the goods necessary for a society's well being could be acquired with a minimum of effort. The division of labour between those who command and those who execute would then no longer be necessary. In sum, there would be a rapid, radical, and clean break with the past.

Turning to the two significant revolutions of the modern period, she demonstrated that a quite different mechanism is at work. Concerning the French revolution: "We are told that what the bourgeoisie did with regard to the nobility in 1789, the proletariat will do with regard to the bourgeoisie in a year unspecified."³⁸ She pointed out a significant difference, however, between the socio-political conditions on the eve of the French Revolution and the contemporary situation. Already by 1789, the nobility had lost most of its real power and was in fact dependent on the bourgeoisie. "The bourgeoisie occupied the highest positions in the State, reigned in the King's name, filled the magistracy, managed the industrial and

commercial undertakings, won renown in the sciences and in literature, and left the nobles with little more than one monopoly, that of the higher appointments in the army.”³⁹ So too the Russian Revolution, which brought in a putatively new social order, simply reinforced powers such as the bureaucracy, the police, and the army, which had already gained strength under the Czarist regime. Thus the idea of a revolution as a sudden reversal in which the weak, while remaining weak, take the place of the strong, is false. It is not a historical phenomenon because it is impossible. Moreover, Weil notes that the daily course of life, in terms of organizing, producing, exchanging, consuming, and so on, will continue. A sudden movement born of mass discontent (such as a general strike) that breaks this cycle is certainly possible, but it is temporary. Soon a balance of forces will be reestablished that is not in fact much different from any which immediately precede it. Indeed we see, says Weil, that change comes slowly, in degrees; force moves and establishes itself in new relationships. “When violent conflicts break out—and they do not always do so—they only play the role of a pair of scales; they hand over power to those who possess it already.”⁴⁰ According to Weil, Marx’s own materialistic examination of social forces produced no clear reason to suppose, as Marx did, that a proletarian revolution was an exception to these rules.

The examination of certain foundational ideas in Marxist thought was important for Weil, because this examination challenged catch phrases that would address various forms of discontent without offering concrete help, and because it challenged false hopes that would inevitably lead to the bitter disillusionment of

people who were already embittered by their present condition. Weil was in agreement with Marx's insight that oppression arises in the division between those who command and those who execute so that the latter are reduced to mere instruments of the former. This division becomes accentuated, according to her, as human beings gain a certain mastery over nature through technical power. This mastery of nature through technique demands increasingly complex forms of social organization. Thus the direct relations between human beings and nature are replaced by the intervening relations between human beings themselves. Yet, in contrast to Marx, Weil made the critical point that "the race for power enslaves everybody, strong and weak alike."⁴¹ Oppression does not reside in the capitalist system, or the totalitarian state, or in any particular group of oppressors. Its genesis is the very race or struggle for power which in turn is based on the conditions of existence inherent in the natural environment, in the competition with other organisms, and finally, in the complexities of social organization. According to Weil, it is not private interest, which is by its nature limited, that impels those who have power to oppress those beneath them. The impetus arises from a deeper necessity. This necessity is the search for power, a search that maddens because it is end-less, without a limit. Because power is never final and secure, it impels the powerful to continue to oppress and it forces the oppressed to continue to resist: "power-seeking, owing to its essential incapacity to seize hold of its object, rules out all consideration of an end, and finally comes, through an inevitable reversal, to take the place of all ends."⁴²

The Limitation of a Marxist Theory of Liberation

In her examination of oppression, Weil was interested in outlining not only the foundational causes of social oppression, but also its particular manifestation in the contemporary work-place. She saw that the fundamental cause of oppression lay in the fact that the workers' capacity to think was denied. Working people were oppressed not only as a class disenfranchised from the means of production, but also as individuals whose humanity was reduced to a physical capacity for labour. Work had become so standardized that machines were designed to execute a set of actions, while workers serviced the requirements of the machines.⁴³

To appreciate why this was a degradation of the worker, rather than progress in the name of efficiency, we may note that Weil's definition of liberty is centred in the relationship between thought and action. "True liberty is not defined by a relationship between desire and its satisfaction but by a relationship between thought and action; the absolutely free man would be he whose every action proceeded from a preliminary judgement concerning the end which he set himself and the sequence of means suitable for attaining this end."⁴⁴

Moreover, for Weil at least, liberty did not entail the elimination of certain natural constraints; these would always be present as long as human beings formed a fraction of the universe. As well, social constraints would be present, especially in complex societies, in the form of structures and rules needed for human beings to decide upon and to follow. "A state of things in which man had as much enjoyment and as little fatigue as he liked can, except in fiction, find no place in the world in

which we live.”⁴⁵ Necessity consists in an inevitable amount of suffering and hardship; yet at this point in her thinking, Weil still believed that a capacity for action centred in the individual human being was enough to constitute liberty.⁴⁶

During the period in which Weil was writing her “Testament,” as she called it, many faced the real hardship of trying to make a living. She felt it was important to distinguish between the extent to which oppression was an essential aspect of the contemporary method of production, and the possibilities of its mitigation. She asked whether it was “possible to conceive of an organization of production which, though powerless to remove the necessities imposed by nature and the social constraint arising therefrom, would enable these at any rate to be exercised without grinding down souls and bodies under oppression.”⁴⁷ For Weil, who tolerated no discrepancy between her thought and her action, the answer to this question affected her personal well-being. “At a time like ours, to have grasped this problem clearly is perhaps a condition for being able to live at peace with oneself.”⁴⁸

In Reflections, Weil tried to present the tension between oppression and liberty in terms of concepts which could shed light on the contemporary conditions of modern society. Shortly this line of thought would find existential expression and depth through her own experience of working in a factory. She would recognize in herself and in her fellow workers the effects of being forced to labour, because of material need, by exerting one’s body while restraining one’s mind. In the factory, the understanding of oppression as a condition from which one can be free would give way to the experience of affliction in which even the conception of freedom is

nonexistent. Here she would find labourers who had internalized the chasm which separated them from those who owned and managed the places in which they expended their energy.

In investigating oppression on the factory floor by working there, Weil would come to see the limitation of an exclusive materialist analysis of oppression. What she sensed was that “souls” as well as bodies were degraded in the present system of production. What she would come to appreciate and expose more fully later on, is that a certain level of suffering would remain unaddressed by a materialist transformation of social relations in general, and even the organization of the factory in particular. Her critique of the nineteenth century conception of “progress” as productive progress, as well as her critique of the idea of “revolution” defined as the violent imposition of a new social arrangement, still fell short of her later insight into how people are themselves qualitatively degraded by the power of force, whether they wield it or are crushed by it.

We may sense in Weil’s political involvement, as well as in her critical reflections on the Marxist conception of oppression, her intense search for a possible organization of work that was not destructive of those who engaged in it. She was disturbed that few, even in the revolutionary movement, had rigorously studied the actual method of production to see if and how it could be possible for workers to be more than living cogs of the machines with which they laboured. In January of 1935, shortly after she herself began work in a factory, she wrote to her friend Albertine Thevenon: “When I think that the great Bolshevik leaders proposed to create a *free*

working class and that doubtless none of them—certainly not Trotsky, and I don't think Lenin either—had ever set foot inside a factory, so that they hadn't the faintest idea of the real conditions which make servitude or freedom for the workers—well, politics appears to me a sinister farce.”⁴⁹

With the completion of Reflections, Weil was breaking with the political organizations, even the unions, she judged to be blinded by their own concern for political influence, and she was dismayed by their inability to focus on the conditions in which people had to earn their bread. Now she increasingly wanted to engage in difficult factory labour to which so many were subject in her time, and which she considered to be the chief locus of oppression. When she was already so engaged, she wrote to her friend Urbain Thevenon: “I think more and more that the liberation (relative) of the workers must be brought about before all else in the workshop. . . .”⁵⁰

She also wrote to one of her former pupils expressing her dismay at the political movements of the time. She sensed that the European states were on the path to war and that ideas such as “revolution” or the “cause of the proletariat” would simply be used as fodder for the preparation and execution of war. She continued to be intimately concerned about political events at the time; she was active in helping Communist refugees fleeing Germany after Hitler's rise to power, and, as we will see later on, she personally became involved in the Spanish Civil War. But her hopes for a worker's revolution were dashed. In the same letter to her pupil, she announced her decision to cease from any further political activity, with the exception of supporting

anti-colonialism and campaigning against passive defence exercises, and she indicated her intention to “make contact with . . . ‘real life.’”⁵¹ To Albertine Thevenon she would later write, “What a factory ought to be is . . . a place where one makes a hard and painful, but nevertheless joyful, contact with real life.”⁵² Thus far, Weil struggled against oppression as an intellectual in solidarity with the working class. She wanted very much, however, to be a part of, and to know from the inside, what working people were going through.

2. Factory Labour: The Encounter With Affliction ⁵³

Weil's Experience of Factory Labour

Weil applied for and received leave “for personal studies” from the ministry of education for the school year 1934-1935, during which time she worked in three factories: the Alsthom Company, which produced electrical equipment for subway and street cars; J.J. Carnaud et Forges de Basse-Indre; and the Renault plant. The last two were subassemblies for the major assembly line. She was prepared to assume the life of a factory worker, but she was not prepared for what she finally discovered of this life.

In an article on the specific experience of women factory workers in France in the 1930s, Sian Reynolds points out that the working life of women was different in certain significant respects from that of men. Women “were prepared to accept the

extremely low-paid, unskilled, insecure jobs offered to them in industry. . . . were paid at piecework rates . . . and could be hired and fired with no repercussions from unions or workforce. . . .”⁵⁴ Another important difference was that women were not involved with any of the skilled trades in the factory, including the adjustment or fitting of the machines in front of which they toiled. Thus, when Weil was hired, she “became a member of what was perhaps the most despised class in the French factory system—the class of unskilled women workers.”⁵⁵ She was of course clearly conscious of this fact. “As a female worker I was in a doubly inferior position, liable to have my dignity hurt not only by superiors but also, as a woman, by the workmen.”⁵⁶ Weil described the difficulty women faced even in obtaining work:

For a man, if he is very skilled, very intelligent, and very tough, there is just a chance, in the present conditions of French industry, of attaining to a factory job which offers interesting and humanly satisfying work; and even so, these opportunities are becoming fewer every day, thanks to the progress of rationalization. But as for the women, they are restricted to purely mechanical labour, in which nothing is required from them except speed.⁵⁷

Coming from the position of a qualified professor of philosophy to look for a job as an unskilled labourer in a factory, Weil felt keenly the humiliation—especially of women workers. “In industry at the present time, unless you have high professional credentials, looking for a job is an experience to swallow up most of your pride—trailing from factory to factory, dreading the expense of metro tickets, waiting indefinitely to be hired, being turned away and coming back again day after day.”⁵⁸ When she was at last hired, Weil forgot her former life, lived in the neighbourhood of the factory, and managed on whatever she earned. This

meant that when she was unemployed, she went hungry.

Even for those who did manage to find work, the conditions were grim. In an article written in 1936 entitled "Factory Work," Weil recalls that the factories were not constructed to offer a sense of belonging for the workers; the machines belonged to the factory in a way that the workers did not.⁵⁹ Inside, there were no breaks for tea, coffee, or any personal needs, lunchtime was unpaid, washrooms and changing rooms were unheated, and the danger of a work-related accident was ever-present. Added to this was an inefficiency in production techniques which was borne by the workers, especially the women, in the form of docked wages. Any time spent away from the machine, even if it was to get boxes to put finished pieces in, or to find a machine-setter, etc., was considered time without pay.⁶⁰

Weil's factory experience did not last long (from December 1934 to August 1935), but it marked her profoundly. She was only gradually able to articulate what happened to her there. Nevertheless she did not regret her decision, for, as she remarks, "it enabled me to test myself and to touch with my finger the things which I had previously been able only to imagine."⁶¹ No longer did she have to imagine, for example, what it meant to work on a stamping press. "I worked until 4 o'clock at the rate of 400 pieces an hour . . . and I felt I was working hard. At 4 o'clock the foreman came and said that if I didn't do 800 he would get rid of me: 'If you do 800 tomorrow, *perhaps I'll consent* to keep you.' " Weil did not conceal her bitterness: "They make a favour, you see, of allowing us to kill ourselves, and we have to say thank you."⁶² She pointed out to Boris Souvarine what she found most difficult: the

work was repetitive and required no thinking, preventing at the same time, any constructive thought whatsoever.⁶³ To think meant to slow down the pace, with the consequence of not making the rate, which led to reduced payment and eventual dismissal. Thus a limited set of speedy mechanical actions with little or no thought was what was required to earn one's keep. The end of the shift ushered in the feeling of fatigue, which often amounted "to a dazed stupor."⁶⁴ One was literally paid not to think, but to perform, under the constant pressure of a rate at the limits of one's endurance under orders that came with no warning, no consultation, no recognition of work well done, and with the clear knowledge that one was replaceable. "Disgust," writes Weil in her journal, "at being forced to strain and exhaust myself, with the certainty of being bawled out either for being slow or for botching, for the sake of these 56 centimes. . . ."⁶⁵

Clearly the assault on her ability to think is what she found most difficult in her transition to the existence of an unskilled worker. For her, to follow orders without a moment's thought as to their validity, logic, or correctness, and to extinguish the lucidity and sense of responsibility she exercised in any work she carried out, resulted in a sapping of her vitality. In order to assuage the assault on her moral sense, she found it the greatest temptation to give up thinking altogether and to work unconsciously. For, she tells her friend, to work with the feeling of outrage at the injustice of the factory system, is to "work badly and so condemn oneself to starvation."⁶⁶ She considered it a horror that one would be forced by the need for sustenance to work for years under these conditions.

Weil had come into the factory to study its organization but found that, week in and week out, she was too exhausted to string two thoughts together. She realized the power external conditions had to affect her identity: "All that would be needed is for circumstances someday to force me to work at a job without weekly rest . . . and I would become a beast of burden, docile and resigned. . . ." ⁶⁷ She was glad that at least her sense of outrage at the injustices inflicted on others still remained, but she wondered how long it would continue. ⁶⁸ In fact she considered that keeping the shreds of one's dignity depended on nothing more than one's physical strength; energy was of paramount importance. A way other than physical strength by which workers bore the monotonous expenditure of their energy, was to give in to moral laxity or despair, manifested in "drunkenness, or vagabondage, or crime, or debauchery, or . . . brutishness. . . ." ⁶⁹ Weil repeatedly tells of her feeling of humiliation in maintaining a "vacuous state of mind" on the job, and again of the exhaustion at the end of the day, or the week, which rendered any constructive thinking especially painful. ⁷⁰

Factory work was also particularly taxing for Weil physically because she suffered from excruciating migraines; these plagued her throughout her adult life. When she suffered an attack, any sound or movement intensified her pain. For example, one entry in her Factory Journal reads as follows: "VERY violent headache that day, otherwise I would have gone faster. I went to bed feeling all right the night before, but woke up at 2 a.m. In the morning, wanted to stay home. At the factory, every movement hurts. Louise, at her machine, sees that I'm not well." ⁷¹ She also

lacked physical strength and dexterity, yet she was not alone in her feelings of dejection. Women, she says, were especially forced “by the organization of the factory to compete with one another.”⁷² Moreover, no allowance was made for a woman’s body. “As you know,” she wrote to Souvarine, “the foot action required by a press is very bad for women; one of them told me that she had salpingitis, but had been unable to get work anywhere except the presses.”⁷³ “Ever since then,” she recorded in her journal, this woman’s “reproductive organs [were] completely and irrevocably destroyed.”⁷⁴ Added to this was a humiliation calculated to intimidate: “Today the foreman took the place of one of the women at this belt and kept her machine working full speed for 10 minutes (which is easy if you can rest afterwards) to prove to her that she should work even faster.”⁷⁵ Another woman, a mother of two, was forced to bring the older one, a nine-year-old boy, to the factory, since her husband was sent home from the hospital as a hopeless case.⁷⁶

One experience in particular must have made a special impression on her, for she mentions it repeatedly. Women, especially those who lived farther away from the plant, came early so as not to risk being late and thus waited outside the plant, even in the driving rain. A small door remained open while they were being soaked, but this door was not for them, it did not belong to them—it was the bosses’ door. The big doors of the plant would not open until ten minutes before the hour. The women waited in front of the open door. “That door,” she states, was “more alien to them than that of any strange house, which they would enter quite naturally if seeking cover.”⁷⁷ And the women themselves survived in this degradation: “A woman who

works at the conveyor-belt told me on the way home in the train that after a few years . . . one no longer suffers, although one remains in a sort of stupor.” Weil sensed in this remark a terminal level of humiliation.

Injury was a frequent, grim reality in the plants Weil worked in. She describes one incident in which a woman’s hair was caught in a machine and a clump of it torn off her scalp. It left a raw patch. The accident occurred just before noon. The woman was at work on the same machine after noon, scared and in pain.⁷⁸ Weil too was injured. In Alsthom she worked at a furnace into which, standing very close, she was required to insert metal bobbins, being vigilant not to drop any of them. After a few minutes she would remove the red-hot pieces quickly so that the last ones would not begin to melt. She would then have to repeat the process all over again. At the time, she was given no protective covering so that her arms, she tells Albertine, “still show the burns.”⁷⁹ Then, at Renault, while exhausted and trying to make the rate, she cut the end of her thumb. She went to the infirmary and returned to work in a great deal of pain.⁸⁰ On another occasion, working at a metal shearing machine, she noticed an abscess caused by a metal shaving which had punctured her skin.⁸¹

At the end of the day in the middle of winter, as Weil describes it, a worker enters an unheated change-room just after toiling in front of an oven. Ten minutes must be spent in there, placing raw cut hands into freezing water, scrubbing them with saw dust trying to remove some of the oil and black dust. A few simple changes would have made this a more comfortable place in which to conclude one’s working day. But to complain or even to ask for such change risked a cold rebuff. It was less

painful to accept this insult too, in silence.⁸²

“I shall know joy again in the future” she wrote to Albertine, “but there is a certain lightness of heart which . . . will never again be possible. But that’s enough about it: to try to express the inexpressible is to degrade it.”⁸³ An important discovery Weil made in living the life of a factory worker was that the workers, especially the men, resisted articulating their condition even to themselves. Even after working hours, reflecting upon one’s situation in any depth was painful, since no one was ready or willing to receive this pain, and even the person involved shrank away from it.⁸⁴ Thus it remained swallowed, incorporated, day after day and year after year, until one’s character was formed, or rather deformed by it.

Weil was shocked that this experience did not provoke her to rebel, but rather to submit without protest to any order that came her way. As she had indicated earlier in Reflections, a condition for living at peace with herself was to consider the possibility of organizing production with a minimum of oppression.⁸⁵ Upon entering the factory herself, she had expected to find and to know the object of oppression and to deal with it. Instead, she found that the factory system produced no distinct object upon which to direct her anger.⁸⁶ In fact the urgency to fulfill an order consumed the worker. To be irritated by anything, or at anyone, including the foreman, was to run the risk of fouling the work. Then one was on the street.⁸⁷ The entire system of factory labour was geared to humiliate the labourer. Even when one was paid, the feeling was that one was being given a handout. Unskilled workers, such as herself, filed before wickets under the watchful eyes of managers, not knowing exactly how

much they had earned. The calculation of wages was a complicated and arbitrary affair.⁸⁸

It may be noted parenthetically here that even at an early stage of her political thinking, Weil did not attribute moral failure to a particular social class. Rather she agreed with Marx that the failure is systemic. A capitalist system based on competition will devour the individual capitalist too, if “he” does not strive in every way to compete successfully against rival enterprises.⁸⁹ The key was the drive for competition in industrial production, and no matter how a collectivity was structured, those at the top as well as those at the bottom were subject to the struggle for power. In an incomplete article, probably dating from the spring of 1937, she comments that the social order, which includes oppressors and oppressed, is itself evil. One cannot lay moral blame on the oppressed for trying to undermine a social order under which they are being crushed, but neither can one blame the defenders of this same social order who are convinced it is conducive to the general welfare.⁹⁰

In the factory itself, she of course came to know owners and managers personally, and to regard them not as “the enemy,” but as human beings who struggled to be so in their particular social class. She was particularly able to sense the different kinds of difficulties confronted by workers and managers. At the same time, she became painfully sensitized to the plight of the workers, who were the ones being crushed by the corporate struggle for power. She chose very consciously to be at the bottom, in the exact place where the system bore down on a class of human beings.

To appreciate more fully the devastation Weil experienced in the factory, we need to keep in mind that she considered work, and physical labour in particular, not only a means to an end, a way of providing sustenance, but also a way for human beings to rediscover their *raison d'être*. As early as her Reflections, she regarded the divine curse upon Adam, to earn his bread by the sweat of his face, to be not only a punishment but also a blessing.⁹¹ Through work, Adam was to find his place in creation once again. She considered work, and physical labour in particular, to be a source of moral value. From an initial conception of work as a means of making contact with and “grasping” the world around us (which she presented in her dissertation on Descartes), she came to see it as a divinely ordained way of finding one’s legitimate place in the universe. Physical labour, be it picking potatoes, sailing a fishing vessel on stormy seas, or even building an automobile, is a way of being rooted in creation. The last example presupposes that the process is one which is a small-scale, cooperative venture, rather than a vast procedure broken down into minute parts in which even the group does not feel ownership. Far more important for her than the requirements of mass production and sale was the integration, through labour, of a human being’s body, mind, and spirit.

It was therefore painful for her to see labourers, herself among them, ordered to perform mind-numbing actions without a *telos*. The factory, as Weil found it, was a place which alienated workers from the world rather than rooting them in it. Unlike the farmer who cultivates his field, grows his crop, is responsible for its quality, assesses his needs, and can say, “This is my land” or “I love this land,” or “This land

has been in my family for generations,” the factory labourer goes to an alien place simply to survive another day.

It is indeed remarkable how fully Weil immersed herself in this life and how deeply it bit into her. She describes the feeling of getting on the bus.

How is it that I, a slave, can get on this bus and ride on it for my 12 sous just like anyone else? What an extraordinary favor! If someone brutally ordered me to get off, telling me that such comfortable forms of transportation are not for me . . . I think that would seem completely natural to me. Slavery has made me entirely lose the feeling of having any rights.⁹²

“Slavery” was a word she increasingly used to describe her factory experience. Writing to Albertine, she summarized the nature of this slavery: “the necessity for speed, and passive obedience to orders.”⁹³ Yet after her time in the factory, trying to articulate this condition to a general audience, she offered more particular details of what this new form of slavery entailed. The slave is clocked in and out of work⁹⁴. The slave is manipulated like a thing. What is demanded is blind obedience. In trying to relay this feeling, she describes a moment when she presented herself before the machine.

Voilà le contremaître. Qu'est-ce-qu'il va me dire ? <<Arrêtez.>> J'arrête. Qu'est-ce qu'on me veut ? Me renvoyer ? J'attends un ordre. Au lieu d'un ordre, il vient une sèche réprimande, toujours sur le même ton bref. <<Des qu'on vous dit d'arrêter, il faut être debout pour aller sur une autre machine. On ne dort pas, ici>> Que faire ? Me taire. Obéir immédiatement.⁹⁵

The slave has no say. Her anger, her suggestions, her despair, are all silent. For the slave there is no variation in the work save for new orders. The same circumscribed

movements are to be repeated over and over again—until a new order comes; this single variation in the orders only ushers in a new humiliation. Even God, says Weil, paused to contemplate the creation. But the slave is forced to repeat the same movements, with nothing to mark the end of one and the beginning of another. “Thus,” observes Weil, “thought draws back from the future. This perpetual recoil upon the present produces a kind of brutish stupor.”⁹⁶ A slave owns neither the space, nor the tools, nor the product upon which she or he works. A slave cannot say “This is my corner of the factory,” or “This is my machine,” or “These are my tools”; they are all alien to her and she is an alien among them.⁹⁷ The slave, therefore, has nothing to offer freely; nothing is asked of her and everything is demanded. A slave might be glad to accomplish even a dangerous task if the foreman expresses confidence in her ability, or counts her worthy of responsibility. But this kind of appeal is never made. One thing is demanded of the slave—a quantity of production; and one thing is given—a quantity of cash.⁹⁸ A slave is subject to a string of minutely disturbing incidents which added together insidiously aggravate her sense that she does not count. They include not being able to find enough boxes in which to place the finished pieces of her work, the breakdown of a machine, the loss of a toolbox, the competition with other workers, the constant anxiety of not working fast enough, and the dread of asking a foreman or boss for anything that she needs.⁹⁹ A slave is expected to be completely absorbed in executing a few simple movements very quickly and at the same time to be ready at any moment to deal with the unexpected: a broken lever, a belt that has jumped its track, a slower or faster worker before or

after the line of assembly. A slave has no identity. The parts she or he manipulates have a clearer identity than she or he does; they are named, the material of which they are composed is identified, and the degree of their elaboration is marked.¹⁰⁰ Weil laments: "How one would like, alone with his time card, to check in his soul upon entering the plant, and then check it out intact at quitting time! But the reverse takes place. One takes it into the plant where it undergoes its ordeal; evenings, drained by exhaustion, it can do nothing with its hours of leisure."¹⁰¹

Several months later she addressed a conference of workers in which she analysed the elements of this new form of slavery which had assumed the guise of "rationalisation" and "Taylorization."¹⁰² The word "rationalisation," says Weil, gives the impression that one is speaking of methods of industrial operation which are based on the scientific organization of labour. The practice of science, she notes, initially consisted in a study of the laws of nature in order to harness and use them. Subsequently, during the industrial revolution, scientific study was geared to the invention and perfection of machines which harnessed the forces of nature. At the end of the nineteenth century, however, science was applied not only to the harnessing of natural forces but also to the harnessing of human beings to work. It is only now, says Weil, that the implications of this kind of science are being felt. Seen from the point of view of production, rationalization may be judged to be part and parcel of industrial progress. But when considered from the point of view of the producer (i.e., the worker), one discerns not progress but enslavement.

The first element in this enslavement, of which the workers themselves are

not clearly aware, is that the hopes for something better in society, the value of a human life, the suffering that is generated in a single day of work, have all been reduced to a monetary value. For the owners of capital, nothing has value that cannot be reduced to dollars and cents, but it is evident that this same standard has captivated the workers as well, when any reproach they make of the economic system is expressed in monetary terms. Weil was pained by the supposition that a worker's dignity could be defined in financial terms. In her words:

C'est une déformation d'esprit d'autant plus compréhensible que les chiffres sont quelque chose de clair, qu'on saisit du premier coup, tandis que les choses qu'on ne peut pas traduire en chiffres demandent un plus grand effort d'attention. . . . C'est pourquoi la question des salaires fait souvent oublier d'autres revendications vitales.¹⁰³

Moreover, an insufficient wage is indicative of a deeper kind of suffering. It is the suffering engendered in a relationship of servitude. Outside the factory, this servitude is manifest by the level of existence arbitrarily set for the working class, but in the factory, it is manifest by the constraints under which this class is forced to work. "Les souffrances subies dans l'usine du fait de l'arbitraire patronal pèsent autant sur la vie d'un ouvrier que les privations subies hors de l'usine du fait de l'insuffisance de ses salaires."¹⁰⁴

What are these conditions which foster servitude? Weil answers this question through an examination of the work of the American engineer Frederick Winslow Taylor (1856-1915). She maintains that Taylor's obsessions were to eliminate any loss of time in the work process, to deprive workers of the possibility of determining their own approach to and rhythm of work, and to give into the hands of management

the choice of movements that required execution in the course of production. Weil goes on to say that Taylorization is not rationalization in the strict sense of the term. Submitting the methods of production to a reasoned examination was only a secondary concern of Taylor. His primary concern was to find a way to extract from workers their maximum capacity for work. For more than twenty-six years he worked in a laboratory, not for research purposes, but in order to perfect a means of constraint.

According to Weil, Taylor's method consisted of three stages. First, finding the optimal operations that could be used for every conceivable kind of unskilled labour. Second, determining the optimal time required to execute these operations by breaking down each job into elementary movements which could be applied indifferently to various jobs in different combinations. Thirdly, once the measure of time necessary for each elementary movement was determined, the time requirement could be applied to a wide variety of diverse operations. Hence timekeeping came into its own.

Set rates of payment for each piece of work were determined by measuring time by the unit of maximum output that the best worker could produce in one hour of work. For those who produced this maximum, each piece would be paid at a predetermined rate, so that a production rate lower than this maximum would result in lower pay. Those who produced significantly lower than the maximum set rate would not make enough to live on. In other words, she states, Taylor's method consisted of a procedure for eliminating those who were not first-class workers

capable of attaining maximum production. Taylor was not really interested in a method of rationalizing labour, but in managing workers. If at the same time he found a way to simplify work, this was a side effect.

The main effect of Taylorization was to “dis-qualify” workers. Taylor, as well as Henry Ford after him, boasted of the fact that significantly fewer trained workers were needed under their systems of work. Resultantly, in the Ford plants the percentage of workers who needed a training period of more than one day before commencing their work, was reduced to 1%. “Ce système a.... réduit les ouvriers a l’état de molécules,” says Weil. In other words, the effect of isolating workers from one another and treating them as single units who competed against each other for bonuses nullified their sense of solidarity. Ford, comments Weil, stated ingeniously: “Qu’il est excellent d’avoir des ouvriers qui s’entendent bien, mais qu’il ne faut pas qu’ils s’entendent trop bien, parce que cela diminue l’esprit de concurrence et d’émulation indispensable a la production.”¹⁰⁵ Effectively, wage becomes the clear and unique motivation for work, and if this proves to be insufficient motivation, one is soon fired. At every moment of work, wage is determined by the speed of one’s productivity, and at every moment, the labourer needs to make calculations in order to know how much she or he is earning.

This system, she argues, had produced the monotony of labour. Ford himself, according to Weil, admitted that he could not put up with an entire day at a single job in his factory, but felt that his workers were made differently from him, since they refused more varied work.¹⁰⁶ If monotonous work in time became bearable, Weil

argued, this only exemplified what was absolutely the worst effect of the system; for it was certain that, at the outset, such work was always experienced as a form of suffering. If one became accustomed to it, it was at the price of a moral degradation.

Finally, nothing was left to the worker, including the basic determination of how to carry out a piece of work. The bosses had come to own the factory and all the machines in it. They had the knowledge of the market-place and the financial needs of their enterprise, and they also had a monopoly over the procedures of assembly. But they now also wished to monopolize the work itself and the time it took to complete it. “Que reste-t-il aux ouvriers?” asked Weil. “Il leur reste l’énergie qui permet de faire un mouvement, l’équivalent de la force électrique; et on l’utilise exactement comme on utilise l’électricité.”¹⁰⁷

Weil concludes bitterly: “Par les moyens les plus grossiers, en employant comme stimulant à la fois la contrainte et l’appât du gain, en somme par une méthode de dressage qui ne fait appel à rien de ce qui est proprement humain, on dresse l’ouvrier comme on dresse un chien, en combinant le fouet et les morceaux de sucre.”¹⁰⁸ If some workers avoid being reduced to this state, it is because a few ways remain of getting around the foreman and the system. But if the system was uniformly applied, as it was intended, it would be equivalent to training an animal. While the ancient Egyptian foremen used whips to force their workers to produce, Taylor was able to replace the whip with more ingenious methods conceived in the laboratory.¹⁰⁹

In naming the condition of unskilled labourers in the factory “slavery,” Weil

indicates that the condition is not chosen, but is one in which “people are defenceless at the mercy of a force completely disproportionate to their own, against which they can do nothing, and by which they are continually in danger of being crushed. . . .”¹¹⁰

It is a condition in which one’s sense of pride or dignity cannot be maintained through the exercise of sheer will. An unskilled labourer has to eat and feed her family, so she must work. Yet she works in conditions which inescapably degrade her physically, intellectually, and morally. She feels no real hope that this degradation will have an end, and that better times will come. Slowly and inexorably, her sense that “I am someone” is destroyed. She no longer feels that she has a right to anything. In the last stage of degradation, there is no strength left in her to resist internalizing the degradation—there is a total absence of revolt even within herself.

The first lesson Weil was surprised to learn in the factory was “that oppression, beyond a certain degree of intensity, does not engender revolt, but, on the contrary, an almost irresistible tendency to the most complete submission.”¹¹¹ This was a very hard lesson. Weil’s own example taught her that the trajectory of liberty she sought for in her Reflections, is not a straight one in which brutal oppression automatically engenders in an individual or group the overpowering desire to throw off the oppressor, or to find and to eliminate its underlying causes. Rather, oppression bears down, eviscerates, crushes, and leaves in its wake one who is less than the ideal of the autonomous acting agent of liberal individualism.¹¹² Writing to her friend Albertine, she states “that all external reasons (which I had previously thought internal) upon which my sense of personal dignity, my self-respect, was based were

radically destroyed within two or three weeks by the daily experience of brutal constraint.”¹¹³ The main ingredient in this constraint, distinguishing it from physical suffering as such, was humiliation.¹¹⁴

The second lesson Weil learned was “that humanity is divided into two categories—the people who count for something and the people who count for nothing. When one is in the second category, one comes to find it quite natural to count for nothing—which is by no means to say that it isn’t painful.”¹¹⁵

She came to know that a sense of self is based to a great extent on external circumstances, such as the affirmation and consideration one receives as a result of one’s social standing. The erosion or elimination of this social regard directly challenges one’s sense of personal worth. She questioned whether and how a human being could continue to maintain her dignity in the absence of elements such as family connections, native talents, basic financial means, or even physical health. Certainly one cannot simply decide to keep one’s sense of self while being brutalized. Weil pointed out to Victor Bernard, the technical manager of a stove factory, that the way in which one is treated bears directly on how one regards oneself. She asked him to consider the fate of a worker who is fired.

In most cases . . . he will have to leave the parish to look for work elsewhere. So he will move on to other parishes where he has no right to any relief. If he is unlucky—which is all too probable in the present conditions—and has to wander from place to place without finding a vacancy, he will gradually decline, abandoned by God and man, and with absolutely no resources, not only towards a slow death but before that to a state of utter disintegration—unless finally some firm has the charity to give him a job; *and against all this*

*no amount of pride and courage and intelligence will avail him.*¹¹⁶

As Blum and Seidler point out, Weil “learned to question Kant’s confidence that dignity and self-respect are ‘inner values’ that can be sustained in the face of relations of power and subordination; she learned on the contrary how *vulnerable* are our dignity and self-respect.”¹¹⁷

Weil was determined to remain in the situation which directly challenged her own sense of worth,

until the day when I was able to pull myself together in spite of it. And I kept my word. Slowly and painfully, in and through slavery, I reconquered the sense of my human dignity—a sense which relied, this time, upon nothing outside myself and was accompanied always by the knowledge that I possessed no right to anything, and that any moment free of humiliation and suffering should be accepted as a favour. . . .¹¹⁸

Upon what inner qualities this sense of human dignity is based, Weil does not say at this point. She was certainly struggling to understand how one may live as a human being under oppression. Not only did she find Kant’s rationalism to be inadequate in addressing a very real human experience, but she also found the Stoic teaching that “we may bear every event, without being depressed or broken by it” untrue to the facts.¹¹⁹ Again she wrote to Bernard:

It is true that a man of strong soul, if he is poor and dependent, has always the resource of courage and indifference to suffering and privation. It was the resource of Stoic slaves. But that resource is not available to the slaves of modern industry. The work they live by calls for such a mechanical sequence of gestures at such a rapid speed that there can be no incentive for it except fear and the lure of the pay packet. The Stoic who made himself proof against these incentives would make it impossible for himself to work at the required speed. The

simplest way, therefore, to suffer as little as possible is to reduce one's soul to the level of these two incentives; but that is to degrade oneself. So if one wishes to retain human dignity in one's own eyes it means a daily struggle with oneself, a perpetual self-mutilation and sense of humiliation, and prolonged and exhausting moral suffering; for all the time one must be abasing oneself to satisfy the demands of industrial production and then reacting, so as not to lose one's self-respect, and so on indefinitely. That is the horror of the modern form of social oppression. . . ."¹²⁰

The modern factory was not only a place of suffering and privation which a Stoic may consent to bear with equanimity and fortitude. It was also a place which demanded speed from the labourer, engendering fear of dismissal on the one hand and an intense wish for higher pay on the other. These were basic motivators which insidiously assaulted the labourer's sense of self-worth, since she was not working because she took pride in the work of her hands, but simply in order to make money and not get fired. To keep her dignity at the end of the day, she had to remind herself that she was a human being who was worthy of regard, but on what was this regard to be based when all she was valued for was the speed with which she executed certain mindless mechanical movements? If one was forced to live in this degradation long enough—a time period which could vary with different individuals, depending on personal characteristics and circumstances—one would be permanently branded with the mark of slavery. The characteristic marks of servility—acting only for payment, moral laxity, brutishness, or downright despair—would signify that deep wound of the labourer: she would never again feel, and she would believe others would never feel, that she was equal to other human beings who walked the earth.

A certain sense of self-respect integral to human well-being would be replaced by revulsion at oneself. One would continue to be alive, but the energy for life would be missing.

From this vantage point, Weil came increasingly to realize how inadequate was the cry of revolution, or even the reformist emphasis on reasoned negotiation for better wages and working conditions. Both of these paths led nowhere for workers who had become defeated in their own eyes. They were not the people who were ready to take up arms nor the people who were sure of their ability for analysis and negotiation. Both of these paths were marked out by people who were not themselves forced to earn their bread in a factory. She saw that what workers cried for, without being heard, was a recognition of something sacred that was being destroyed. This something she came to call "consent." Consent, in Weil's understanding, is not simply freedom from constraint in order to have the power to make choices. Rather, it is the capacity to receive what may in fact be painful, the capacity of saying "yes" even to a horrifying situation. The recognition of this capacity is demonstrated in communication, when the will of the weak is taken into account. For the recognition of this capacity, many workers would perform even the most dangerous tasks, but they needed to be known as those who are more than physical objects in the service of production. Those in power who allow for obedience rather than demand submission, preserve in the other the dignity of actualizing the best a human being is capable of in no matter what station of life.

The Condition of Afflicted Labourers

In the factory, Weil came to know the lineaments of the condition she came to call *malheur*.¹²¹ It is one in which a human being is subjected to a humiliation which is unendurable and yet inescapable. According to her, this was the state of unskilled workers (particularly women, though she does not consistently highlight this fact) in the factories of the 1930s. Theirs was the condition in which a yearning for liberty and a desire to overthrow oppression was brutally suppressed by the very conditions in which they were forced to earn their daily bread. Near the end of her article "Factory Work," Weil sensed that she had come to a point of describing a condition that was almost impossible to understand from the outside. "Nothing is more difficult to know than the nature of unhappiness; a residue of mystery will always cling to it. For, following the Greek proverb, it is dumb."¹²² It would seem from what Weil is saying here that to ask the *malheureux* (the afflicted) themselves "What are you going through?" is not enough, because they could not give an answer that articulates what they are experiencing. They could not give an adequate answer because: "To seize its exact shadings and causes presupposes an aptitude for inward analysis which is not characteristic of the [afflicted]."¹²³ It is not characteristic of them because the humiliation to which they have been subject for so long has resulted in the creation of forbidden zones which repel thought and analysis. The afflicted may voice complaints, even grievances, but none of these ever touch the content of the forbidden zones which remain shrouded in silence and illusion.

How then is Weil able to speak of this condition? She uses the analogy of

those stranded on an island. "Those who do escape from the island will not look back."¹²⁴ Even if an outsider manages for a time to penetrate one of these islands of affliction and come out, his or her account of it will be suspect. Can one, then, who has only passed through, feel exactly the same thing as those who reside permanently in affliction? Her answer is 'yes,' *if* this outsider does not simply go in as an observer but as one who forgets completely that she is an outsider. Weil herself felt she could only express what she knew by recalling impressions. In one sentence which extends the length of a paragraph, she does just that.

The faces drawn with anxiety over the day about to begin, the dejected looks in the morning subway-trains; the profound weariness, spiritual rather than physical, reflected in the general bearing, the expression, the set of the mouth, at quitting time . . . the hatred and loathing of the factory, of the place of work, often evinced in words and acts, a loathing that casts its shadow over any possible comradeship and impels working men and women, once they have cleared the factory exit, to hasten separately to their respective homes, with scarcely a greeting exchanged. . . ."¹²⁵

As a final consequence of this reality, she saw that the conditions of factory labour broke any sense of comradeship between workers. Not only was there a lack of the political consciousness, that unusually galvanized to offer resistance in the face of the oppressive conditions of labour, but also workers were isolated among themselves with almost no sense of camaraderie. Each one laboured to minimize the suffering that moment by moment weighed upon him or her, often at the expense of someone else. In a poignant scene, she describes the situation in which a woman worker complains to the foreman for being given a particularly low-paying job and

is immediately berated with foul language until she is close to tears. Weil says, “3 or 4 women witnessed the scene in silence, only half keeping back their smiles. . . .”¹²⁶ Later, the women openly declare that if this worker had not been given the job, one of them would have been given it. Conversely, the worker who was rebuked would have been quite happy if any one of the other women had been given the job. Thus in the factory, Weil acquired the sad conviction “that the capacity of the French working class not only for revolution but for any action at all is almost nil.”¹²⁷ She also knew that even if a spontaneous uprising of the oppressed enabled them to stand for a moment against their oppression, they would “fall on their knees the moment after.”¹²⁸ She felt that, under these conditions, workers should at least be given a clear idea of what they can change and what they cannot, in order then to be given the opportunity to accept what was impossible to change. For, as she would repeat often after her factory experience, “acceptance and submission are two very different things.”¹²⁹

In the foregoing description of slavery, Weil offers examples of its physical, psychological, and social consequences. A clearer articulation of modern slavery’s multifarious effects, as well as its transposition into affliction, is present in her later essay entitled, “The Love of God and Affliction.”¹³⁰ Yet even in her Factory Journal, all these elements are present. Physically one feels exhaustion, one is injured, and over time, one’s body gives out, to the extent that a forty-year-old unskilled worker is no longer useful. Then there is the social degradation engendered by material poverty outside the factory and the demand for a blind obedience to orders inside the

factory. Finally, one incorporates this social degradation so that revulsion and hatred, which can hardly be focussed on a system of oppression, are turned inward and deform a person's "soul."¹³¹ In other words, one's character is rendered servile.

Simone Weil's orientation to the world was exemplified not only in a desire to understand the causes of social oppression, but also, once she grasped this problem, to consider the possibilities for liberation. As we have seen, she came to deepen her understanding of oppression through the analysis of its impact on workers inside and outside the factory. Through her own experience, she felt how oppressive factors could not simply be identified and eliminated, and how oppression is felt as an insidious force that inexorably saps even the yearning for liberty.

It was her special burden not to accept the compromises and even what she considered the self-deceit entertained by many of her left-wing comrades. The picture of the present conditions, as well as the future prospects of the working class, which emerged as clearly as she could conceive them, was not pleasant. Even as a young woman of twenty-four, before her entrance into the factory, Weil could make pronouncements such as: "Not even Marx is more precious to us than the truth"; or again: "There is no difficulty, once one has decided to act, in maintaining intact, on the level of action, those very hopes which a critical examination has shown to be wellnigh unfounded. . . ."¹³² These were pronouncements which most of her comrades could not abide by; they were, however, indicative of the end she had reached of a certain trajectory of political thought expressed particularly in the revolutionary syndicalism she was closest to. Working in a factory, however, she was

brutalised by the physical pace, the emotional abuse, and the enervation of her mind. Her personal insight into how suffering at the level of the factory floor can turn workers into slaves decidedly voiced a preliminary answer to the question, “What are you going through?” She certainly could not avert her eyes because the sight was too ugly to bear, nor could she resign herself to these conditions and take her leave.¹³³ Yet she was physically and morally exhausted.

Her First Significant Encounter With Catholicism

Immediately after leaving her last job at Renault in August of 1935, and before resuming her teaching, Weil went on vacation with her parents to Portugal. Considering the hotel at which her parents stayed an excessive luxury, Simone found a pension in a nearby village.¹³⁴ Here she recalls in her “Spiritual Autobiography” (written to her Dominican friend Father Perrin), she made the first of three significant contacts with Catholicism.

I was, as it were, in pieces, soul and body. That contact with affliction had killed my youth. Until then I had not had any experience of affliction, unless we count my own, which, as it was my own, seemed to me, to have little importance, and which moreover was only a partial affliction, being biological and not social. I knew well that there was a great deal of affliction in the world, I was obsessed with the idea, but I had not prolonged first-hand experience of it. As I worked in the factory, indistinguishable to all eyes, including my own, from the anonymous mass, the affliction of others entered into my flesh and my soul. Nothing separated me from it, for I had really forgotten my past and I looked forward to no future, finding it difficult to imagine the possibility of surviving all the fatigue. What I went through there marked me in so lasting a manner that still today when any human being . . . speaks to

me without brutality, I cannot help having the impression that there must be a mistake. . . .

There I received forever the mark of a slave, like the branding of the red-hot iron the Romans put on the foreheads of their most despised slaves. Since then I have always regarded myself as a slave.¹³⁵

It is important to note the significance for Weil of the social dimension of affliction and the fact that she is not simply speaking of affliction in the world in general, but affliction as she lived it in herself and especially as she saw it “first-hand” in those with whom she laboured. There is some disagreement as to whether Weil could herself be counted among the afflicted, or whether she considered herself as participating in this condition. This is not a critical issue, since her writing on the subject can stand on its own merits. Nevertheless it would clarify our conception of her life to determine which is the case. Eric O. Springsted is in the minority when he comments that “Weil never describes herself as one who was afflicted.”¹³⁶ This, he emphasizes, is because even as a factory labourer, Weil “knew” that she could choose otherwise, as well as return to a nurturing family and to intellectual pursuits. Factory labour did not consume “the whole” of her life. On his part, Miklos Vetö declares that “Weil herself experienced affliction during her factory year,” and offers as reference Weil’s autobiographical statements to Father Perrin quoted above.¹³⁷ It should also be noted that when she says, “Until then I had not had any experience of affliction,” it may be deduced that the dividing line was indeed the factory experience before which her suffering was physical but did not include social degradation, and after which she was subjected to affliction in its fullest sense. Vetö also offers as reference her autobiographical statements to Joë Bousquet, to whom she confides: “The

personal experience and sympathy for the wretched mass of people around me, in which I formed, even in my own eyes, an undistinguishable item, implanted deep in my heart the affliction of social degradation that I have felt a slave ever since, in the Roman sense of the word.”¹³⁸ Weil chose to become a factory worker, and of course she also chose to terminate this work, but when we are dealing with Weil, neither choice is a matter of expediency nor a subject of experiment. She felt she was driven by an inner necessity practically equivalent to the external necessity that impelled an unskilled factory labourer to undergo the rigours of that kind of work.¹³⁹ Her determination to enter into the condition of working life, in the factory or even later in agricultural labour, was total. During her factory year, she literally put aside the real possibility that she was a qualified professor of philosophy, and lived to the minutest detail the life she had chosen, until it “entered” into her. In the factory, the combination of necessary speed and blind obedience to orders, as well as her weak physical condition, broke her, as she tells Perrin.

Returning to the quotation above, it is evident that Weil was at an impasse as to the “why?” of this slavery which held no conceivable good. She was “in pieces, soul and body,” forgetting her past and looking forward to no future. In this “wretched condition,” as she goes on to relate to Father Perrin, she entered that Portugese village one evening and witnessed a procession of the fishermen’s wives around the fishing boats. Carrying candles they sang “what must certainly be very ancient hymns of a heart-rending sadness.” “There,” Weil says, “the conviction was suddenly borne in upon me that Christianity is pre-eminently the religion of slaves,

that slaves cannot help belonging to it, and I among others.”¹⁴⁰ Recalling her Reflections, in which she still avowed the constant possibility that one could clearly conceive of whatever situation one found oneself in as a problem that can be studied and solved through purposive action, we may note the change that has come upon her. A slave cannot help herself. At best she can voice profound sadness, and this perhaps only in the company of fellow slaves. The level at which one exists in this condition is beyond the reach of instrumental thought. At the same time, in that village she found something else which was very precious—she found meaning in affliction. It was the first intimation that the good for which she was searching in the midst of affliction was not to be found at the end of a process of thought or action. Rather, it came to her as a refreshing gift. It was mediated quite basically, not in the official cult of the Christian religion, but through a liturgy conducted by peasant women around a few boats in their own village. This scene affected her profoundly because something fundamental to the human condition was expressed there, beautifully and without denial. The village and its folk were poor, their bread was earned dangerously, their life was manifestly subject to necessity, and all this was expressed in a liturgy that challenged despair. Moreover, we may extrapolate from her description of the scene that the worship these women offered was not directed to an omnipotent deity whose providential power required placation. Rather, the divine was sensed in the midst of a harsh necessity, like the “smile on a beloved face.”¹⁴¹ In other words, Weil sensed that a relationship existed between the ultimate good and the actions of these particular people in this place and time.

3. The Reign of Force: Affliction in the Context of War

Initial Reflections on Power and Prestige: The Spanish Civil War

At the end of the summer of 1934, Weil's primary exposure to the condition she came to call affliction was on the factory floor. The factory was in fact the place where she thought she might find a breakthrough in terms of contemporary political thought vis-à-vis the working condition. What she in fact did find, as we noted, was a limit to her own physical and intellectual powers, which then opened her to her first religious experience. For the school year 1935-36, Weil took up another post as professor of philosophy at the girls' lycee in the provincial town of Bourges. She maintained a keen interest in the conditions of factory labour to which she considered returning, though circumstances would shortly lead her elsewhere. She sensed more and more that within her lay "the germs of great things," and yet her physical resources continued to ebb. She decided, therefore, to keep pushing herself as long as possible until the point when "the disproportion between the tasks that have to be accomplished and my ability to work will have become too great. . . ." ¹⁴² She sometimes wondered whether she had not already reached this point. "Every time that I go through a period of headaches," she wrote to a friend, "I ask myself whether the moment to die has not come." ¹⁴³ She likened her own condition to that of a vital young life that is condemned to death. Nevertheless, political events were unfolding around her, calling for her attention, resulting now in a profound consideration of the effects of war on human life.

When she considered the subject of war, Weil was never a quietist, in the sense of being inactive or withdrawn. Before 1939, however, she held to a strict nonviolent pacifism.¹⁴⁴ In an article written near the end of 1933 entitled “Reflections on War,” she struggled to clarify her thought on this subject. She had already considered the situation in Germany and was clearly opposed to any kind of war, even a revolutionary one, because by its very nature, she reasoned, every form of war subordinates those who fight to those who do not. War, in fact, exacerbates productive competition, “where arms are put at the service of competition and production at the service of war.”¹⁴⁵ Those who work in the factories under managers and owners are the same ones who are called to fight and spill their blood under generals and leaders of the state. Thus the condition of the oppressed is not alleviated, but rendered even more burdensome. Weil was disgusted with talk of “honour,” defined in terms of a state’s interest, which was to be defended abroad by those very citizens of the state who were given no honour at home. Writing in 1936, Weil declared that “there have always been wars; but it is a characteristic of our era that the wars are fought by slaves. And what is more, these wars in which slaves are asked to die for a dignity that has never been granted them—these wars constitute the main wheel in the mechanism of oppression.”¹⁴⁶

Nevertheless, the Spanish Civil War—erupting in July of 1936, when General Francisco Franco invaded Spain in order to bring down the newly elected Republican government—presented a quandary for Weil, for it seemed initially to be “a war of famished peasants against landed proprietors and their clerical supporters. . . .”¹⁴⁷

Writing to Georges Bernanos in 1938, Weil gave her reasons for engaging in that conflict.

I do not love war; but what has always seemed to me most horrible in war is the position of those in the rear. When I realized that, try as I would, I could not prevent myself from participating morally in that war—in other words, from hoping all day and every day for the victory of one side and the defeat of the other—I decided that, for me, Paris was the rear and I took the train to Barcelona, with the intention of enlisting.¹⁴⁸

Here, human beings who had for so long served as means to the power of others were fighting to shake off their yoke, and she was prepared to join even violent action when this meant resistance to oppression. On entering Spain, she enlisted as a member of an international group belonging to the central anarchist trade union movement. Her stay was cut short by an accident, yet her two months in Spain and the reflections following it led her to reexamine and clarify some of her earlier conclusions.

She entered Spain with characteristic passion, especially for the Spanish peasants whom she had come to see and admire on an earlier trip. During the civil war, she yearned for their release from the humiliations they had suffered under a feudal system, but she was bitterly disappointed. She found that the war against the generals was in fact not transforming the conditions of the peasants' daily life, even on the side controlled by the anarchists. She saw that, far from sensitizing the combatants to the realities of social oppression, this war obliterated such awareness; in its wake, "every common measure between principles and realities is lost, every sort of criterion by which one could judge acts and institutions disappears, and the

transformation of society is given over to chance.”¹⁴⁹ In a fragment entitled “Reflections That No One Is Going to Like,” she declared that there were indeed anarchists in Catalonia who were fighting in good faith, and at the same time there was compulsion and brutality in direct contradiction to the emancipation that was being so dearly paid for by workers and peasants.¹⁵⁰ The civil war was becoming a means for collectivities to secure power, and was thus severed from the essential reason for which it was originally fought. People on the Republican side who did not want to fight were forced to do just that. Those who were found to be unsupportive or uncooperative were shot. Even under economic ministries held by the regional government of Catalonia, the conditions of labour were harsher than they had been before the state of civil war. The police functions had been taken over by militants, who dispensed a harsh and often arbitrary law, including “executions without the slightest semblance of a trial, and consequently without any possibility of syndical or other control.”¹⁵¹ The abuses against which the anarchists were fighting did not disappear even in the areas which they firmly controlled. Weil sensed that, even if the Republican side were to be victorious, the results could well mirror the contemporary state of the Soviet Union. Fighting on the side of those who ostensibly defended the interests of workers and peasants, she saw that even for the militiamen, life itself had become valueless, and a chasm divided them from the peasants; the latter were “always rather humble, submissive and timid,” whereas the former were “confident, off-hand and condescending.”¹⁵²

The poignancy of her letter to Bernanos is exemplified in the discernment

which the two of them, who supported opposite sides in the Spanish conflict, shared. Weil wrote to Bernanos on the occasion of her reading Les Grands cimetières sous la lune. She immediately sensed a kindred spirit in his repulsion with the intoxicated atmosphere produced by the shedding of blood. Weil recalled several incidents on the Republican side which repelled her. As one example, she related that two anarchists once told her of the capture of two priests. "They killed one of them on the spot with a revolver, in front of the other, and then told the survivor that he could go. When he was twenty yards away they shot him down."¹⁵³ The one who related the story to her was surprised that she did not laugh. With all the ideals that were ostensibly being fought for in this conflict, she never heard "anyone express, even in private intimacy, any repulsion or disgust or even disapproval of useless bloodshed."¹⁵⁴ She related to Bernanos her impression that it was not primarily fear that impelled people to laugh or take perverse pleasure at the sight of shed blood. Rather, murder became something "natural" when "a certain class of people has been placed by the temporal and spiritual authorities outside the ranks of those whose life has value . . ."¹⁵⁵ In Spain too, then, the war had been taken away from the peasants and was, at base, a naked struggle for power. No class of people, or cause, or value, or life, was regarded as the end for which this power was necessary—the fascists on the one side and the anarchists on the other sought only to consolidate their power, which meant crushing the other side. No reasoned thought rose above this brute struggle.

On the heels of her Spanish experience, while the war there was still raging, Weil wrote an essay on pacifism entitled "Let us Not Begin the Trojan War Again,"

with the added subtitle “The Power of Words.” Her crisp analysis—arising from concern over the atmosphere of war that pervaded Europe at this time—fell short of the events that were about to unfold with Hitler’s invasion of France. By 1939, she would castigate herself for not dissociating clearly from a pacifism that was unprepared for Hitler and that took little account of the possibility that a human environment which bathes and nourishes certain ways of life, spiritual values, and habits of thought, can be permanently destroyed. Nevertheless, it is important to retrace briefly the course of her thought here, because it is a prelude to her more mature reflections following the outbreak of the Second World War.

She began by making the point that, like the Trojan War, contemporary conflicts have at their base no rationally defined objective. The Greeks and Trojans fought for ten years over Helen. What could possibly account for all the sacrifices of the Trojans in depriving their own city of safety, of material necessities, of the flower of her youth, so that they refused to hand Helen over to the Greeks? What could possibly account for the intensity of the Greeks’ desire for Helen so that armadas of Greek ships took from its shores its own strength to fling before the walls of Troy, and leave destitute and defenceless at home old parents, wives, and children? Yet once the war had taken its course, no-one could possibly retire. Each side would stay and fight to the same end—the extermination of the enemy. The very reason for the war—a reason called “Helen”—was out of all proportion to the grim struggle; and with the very first casualty, any council for peace would be answered “with the same knock-out argument as Minerva in Homer and Poincare in 1917: ‘The dead do not

wish it.”¹⁵⁶

Weil declared that, “For our contemporaries the role of Helen is played by words with capital letters. If we grasp one of these words, all swollen with blood and tears, and squeeze it, we find it is empty.”¹⁵⁷ When words such as “nation, security, capitalism, communism, fascism, order, authority, property, democracy” are treated as absolutes, they become murderous.¹⁵⁸ She wished to emphasize not the right of one side over the other, but the fact that all participated in a fatal intellectual climate in which the energy of life was poured into conflict, including war, rather than into the solution of a problem that was defined as clearly as possible. It would seem that an attempt at a more precise definition of social struggles, with the use of certain relative clauses such as “*to the extent that, in so far as, on condition that, in relation to,*” would render no less a service than “saving human lives.”¹⁵⁹ In other words, problems can be defined and measured, and their solutions conceived, whereas conflicts engaged in on the basis of unexamined slogans, hiding the darkest premonitions, are without limit and permit no negotiation but end only in defeat.

Why then was it so hard to think clearly, and yet so easy to kill and destroy? Weil came to the conclusion that all these abstractions with capital letters are not dangerous in themselves. They are dangerous to the extent that they are represented by a concrete human group seeking power. For example, though an elementary analysis would show that the opposition between the fascist and communist social conceptions was “imaginary,” collective power—in the form of standing armies, police forces, and bureaucracies that stood ready to defend these conceptions—was

not. For human good was actually subordinated to the service of this apparatus. To the extent that an abstraction is not backed by a group seeking power over another, it is harmless. "All the absurdities we have enumerated cease to appear absurd when translated into the language of power."¹⁶⁰ A naked grabbing of power is never enough, however, for power needs the clothing of legitimacy. This legitimacy, says Weil, takes the form of prestige. No collectivity lasts long which simply declares it wants power—*point finale*. It must show that it possesses power by right and that it does indeed possess it. The Trojans fight to prove they have power in the defence of Helen's abduction. The Greeks fight to prove that power is theirs through the recovery of Helen. But throughout the struggle the common denominator is that what is fought for is the possession of more power than the other, and in this struggle there are no limits. It is a void into which human life is poured, yet it is never filled. In Weil's words: "Between one prestige and another there can be no equilibrium."¹⁶¹ Yet she was searching for just such equilibrium, particularly in challenging her contemporaries to discriminate "between the imaginary and the real." This discrimination does not eliminate the ubiquitous struggle for power inherent to human life on this earth, but it can indeed diminish the possibility of a senseless war.

Weil's Encounter With the Christ

Soon after the publication of this essay on "The Power of Words" in April of 1937, Weil was on her way to Italy to see for herself how fascism was playing itself

out among the people. She was dismayed to consider that an embrace of fascism within Italy and Germany indicated the defeat of the workers' movement. But her trip to Italy is noteworthy not so much because of her observation that fascism was rather superficially adhered to by the people, but because the time she spent there was to be one of the most joyous periods of her life. Her exposure to Italian art and the Italian countryside stimulated her continuing attraction to Christianity. On Whitsunday, she was in St. Peter's listening to the choir of young boys from the Sistine singing Palestrina: "The music, the voices, the words of the liturgy, the architecture, the crowd, many of them kneeling, which included many men and women of the people, the latter with kerchiefs on their heads—there you have the comprehensive art Wagner was seeking."¹⁶² She saw much that touched her deeply, especially in Assisi. Some years later, she wrote to Father Perrin that it was here, "in the little twelfth-century Romanesque chapel of Santa Maria degli Angeli . . . where Saint Francis often used to pray, [that] something stronger than I compelled me for the first time in my life to go down on my knees."¹⁶³ In fact, this was the second of her encounters with Catholicism which proved to be meaningful for her.

On her return from this first of two trips to Italy, she continued to be open to the experience of Christian faith even as events in Europe seemed to lead ineluctably toward war. In October of 1937, Weil took up another teaching post in Saint-Quentin an industrial town north of Paris. By the beginning of the next year, her headaches had become so debilitating that she was forced once more to ask for sick-leave. She was never to return to teaching. To the injured war veteran and writer Joë Bousquet

she would write in 1942 that, "For twelve years I have suffered from pain around the central point of the nervous system, the meeting place of soul and body; this pain persists during sleep and has never stopped for a second."¹⁶⁴ In one of these states during Holy Week in 1938, Weil decided to go to Solesmes, an abbey known for the exquisite interpretation of Gregorian plain chant. She wrote to Perrin:

I was suffering from splitting headaches; each sound hurt me like a blow; by an extreme effort of concentration I was able to rise above this wretched flesh, to leave it to suffer by itself . . . and to find a pure and perfect joy in the unimaginable beauty of the chanting and the words. This experience enabled me by analogy to get a better understanding of the possibility of loving divine love in the midst of affliction. . . . in the course of these services the thought of the Passion of Christ entered into my being once and for all.¹⁶⁵

She does not elaborate exactly what this meant for her. Her first contact with Christianity was, as mentioned previously, through the liturgy performed by a few women around fishing boats in a Portugese village. At Solesmes, the thought of God was communicated to her in a magnificent abbey through Gregorian chant. Here too, her own experience of pain found resonance as she reflected on the Passion of Christ. It was an indication for her that in the particular condition of affliction, it was possible "to go on wanting to love," and by implication, that affliction need not be a dead end in which human life is frozen.¹⁶⁶

But her decisive encounter with the Christ came a little later, near the end of 1938, while she was reciting George Herbert's poem, "Love." "I used to think," she tells Father Perrin, "I was merely reciting it as a beautiful poem, but without my knowing it the recitation had the virtue of a prayer. It was during one of these

recitations that . . . Christ himself came down and took possession of me.”¹⁶⁷

Recalling the same experience, she writes to Bousquet:

At a moment of intense physical pain, while I was making the effort to love, although believing I had no right to give any name to the love, I felt, while completely unprepared for it (I had never read the mystics), a presence more personal, more certain, and more real than that of a human being; it was inaccessible both to sense and to imagination, and it resembled the love that irradiates the tenderest smile of somebody one loves. Since that moment, the name of God and the name of Christ have been more and more irresistibly mingled with my thoughts.¹⁶⁸

Weil offered this intimacy to the two people mentioned above before leaving France in the Spring of 1942, feeling that she might never see them again. Her biographer, Simone Pétrement, states that Weil broke “the silence she had maintained on her mystical experience” because she was specifically asked about this by Bousquet.¹⁶⁹

It is impossible to comment on Weil’s experience from the inside. We may note simply that she calls this encounter a presence, though more than the presence that is offered by another human being. Moreover it was a presence that was neither accessed by sense perception nor created by the mind. Yet she knew it to be a response to her, a response that came in the midst of intense physical suffering—which had often made her want to strike out at somebody—while she was making the effort to love. To love what? Not God, whose name she had refrained from pronouncing in this context, but the universe, in the sense of the Stoic *amor fati*.¹⁷⁰ In other words, to accept the whole of necessity as the medium of the universe, including the particle which she experienced as her own often overwhelming pain.

In this encounter, however, Weil learned something more. To Father Perrin she confided that she saw it as an answer to the heretofore insoluble problem of God. In accepting the universe, cherishing its beauty, and refraining from giving any name to this object of her love, lest she name and love what is less than the whole or what is unworthy of one's final love, she encountered what she had never foreseen as possible: "a real contact, person to person, here below, between a human being and God."¹⁷¹

It has been tempting for Christians to jump on this autobiographical fragment and claim Simone Weil as their own. But even within this fragment one can sense that her encounter was no easy matter. She writes to Perrin, "*le Christ lui même est descendu et m'a prise.*"¹⁷² That is, Christ took possession, captured, or seized her while, unbeknownst to her, she was praying. With regard to God's encounter with human beings, she was fond of quoting the myth of Persephone, who was seized by Hades whilst picking some beautiful flowers. Evidently she was quite comfortable with words such as "captured" and "possession," which to contemporary readers may suggest a disturbing passivity. Yet Weil's character, as her biographers and those who have known her emphasize, was marked neither by passivity nor weakness. She gave no quarter in any intellectual argument and, when once she herself was convinced about a course of action, neither family member nor friend could sway her determination to carry it out. In relation to those in positions of authority and power, she was fearless. In this encounter, then, she insisted that it was Christ and only Christ who captured her. She was not possessed by any human being, even as she was

horrified that she might possess another through love or friendship. Weil gave herself to neither the party, nor the nation, nor the church. Moreover, though she would not admit that she was in the best tradition of the Hebrew Scriptures, she still refused to surrender, not her love, but her intelligence to this encounter with the divine. She would continue to wrestle with God even as Jacob did at Peniel (Gen. 32:24-29).¹⁷³ In her own words: "One can never wrestle enough with God if one does so out of a pure regard for the truth. Christ likes us to prefer truth to him because, before being Christ, he is truth. If one turns aside from him to go toward the truth, one will not go far before falling into his arms."¹⁷⁴

There are several more points which are important to make before taking up once more Weil's concurrent analysis of the effects of war. First, commentators have often called her mystical encounter a "conversion." Czeslaw Milosz correctly points out, however, that this is not accurate in the sense that Weil did not become converted to Christianity and repudiate a past way of life and thought. She wrote to Bernanos in 1938: "I am not a Catholic," though, "nothing that is Catholic, nothing that is Christian, has ever seemed alien to me."¹⁷⁵ Nevertheless, from this point at least, "the very name of God," which heretofore had no part in her thinking on the problems of this world, would henceforth profoundly inform her thought and action.¹⁷⁶ In Milosz's words: "Unlike those who have to reject their past when they become Christians, she developed her ideas from before 1938 even further, introducing more order into them, thanks to the new light."¹⁷⁷

Second, this decisive encounter was completely "unexpected" for Weil.¹⁷⁸

Though she is clear that she was searching for the truth she did not give the name “God” to it. She says of herself that there was never any moment in her life when she “sought for God.” In fact the expression itself rang a false note for her. It seemed to presuppose too much that was suggestive.

I saw the problem of God as a problem the data of which could not be obtained here below, and I decided that the only way of being sure not to reach a wrong solution, which seemed to me the greatest possible evil, was to leave it alone. So I left it alone. I neither affirmed nor denied anything. It seemed to me useless to solve the problem, for I thought that, being in this world, our business was to adopt the best attitude with regard to the problems of this world, and that such an attitude did not depend upon the solution of the problem of God.¹⁷⁹

She did not seek such an encounter—she did not even expect it, neither was she preoccupied with it, even in her moments of greatest physical weakness. In fact, for Weil, any such inducement of a divine presence would amount to a rejection of it precisely on the grounds that she herself played an active part in it. Her encounter was for her an intimate moment full of the purest joy because she knew it to be one in which, in the person of the Christ, God came and *found* her without the least attenuation of her suffering.

Third, it is important to note that in this encounter she knew joy. Elsewhere she declares that “pure joy is nothing but the feeling of beauty.”¹⁸⁰ Or again, “Such is the grace of God that sometimes he makes us feel a beauty in our affliction itself.”¹⁸¹ Throughout her writings Weil speaks of joy, not as often but as profoundly as she speaks of affliction.¹⁸² Joy and affliction are two sides of the same coin. Both are appreciated in relation to each other. Affliction is so terrible only because it is a

deprivation of the joy one has known. Those raised without experiencing moments of pure joy are hardened or numbed, and affliction does not have the same effect on them as it does on those who have once been joyful. “The Christ” she says, “knew the perfection of human joy before being precipitated to the depth of human distress.”¹⁸³ In fact, affliction which is impervious to any form of joy leaves one vulnerable to the horror of madness. In a letter to Jean Posternak, a young medical student she had met in Switzerland while receiving a treatment for her own headaches, she confides that, “For some years I have held the theory that joy is an indispensable ingredient in human life, for the health of the mind; so that a complete absence of joy would be equivalent to madness.”¹⁸⁴ In this encounter she found that joy can be known in the midst of affliction, through the exchange of love between a human being and God. We can thus understand why she goes on to emphasize in her later writings the need to love, even when there is nothing left to love. In situations of abject misery, even the *desire* to love keeps us human. It keeps us open to the whole, even when we are being crushed.

There are two elements, then, which are essential to this joy as Weil describes it. The first is the relationship between joy and love, in that the latter “is the central core and intangible essence” of the former.¹⁸⁵ The second is that joy, according to Weil, is real—rather than an artificial construct of emotion and thought—it “is not a consolation. It leaves pain completely intact.”¹⁸⁶ She likened it to “Christ’s resurrection through crucifixion.”¹⁸⁷ In other words, the resurrection in no way attenuates or voids the crucifixion. The former is a pure surprise of joy only because

the latter is a pure draft of affliction. This understanding of joy as Weil experienced it has an important connection with her orientation to the world. Her first experience of Christ's coming and taking possession of her, and even the more intense experiences that followed, did not take her away from a concern with "the problems of this world." They did not serve to assuage her disappointment with her political activity nor attenuate her social involvement. As we have seen thus far in the present chapter, and as I will show below, the situation of Europe in the midst of war preoccupied her almost completely. But now her perspective had changed; the reality of God and how this reality could be expressed in and for this world would henceforth increasingly permeate her thought.

Now her understanding of affliction would be informed by her appreciation of Christ's passion. The Christ too was afflicted, and yet he did not cease to love. In a letter also written in 1938 and probably addressed to an aspiring English poet she had met at Solesmes, Weil began to articulate the connection between the affliction that she herself encountered and Christ's own affliction. She began her letter by defining the mark of great poetry as that which "struggles toward the expressing of pain and misery," which "sounds through every word."¹⁸⁸ It is in fact, she says, the poetry that speaks best to "our age, which is an age of real, not metaphysical misery. Misery is always metaphysical; but it can be merely so, or it can be brought home to the soul through the pain and humiliation suffered by the body. That I call misery."¹⁸⁹ Then in one sentence she defines how she understood this to be so for Christ. "It was not till Christ had known the physical agony of crucifixion, the shame of the blows

and mockery, that he uttered his immortal cry, a question which shall remain unanswered through all times on this earth, 'My God, why hast thou forsaken me?'"¹⁹⁰ She felt this cry rang true for her contemporaries, certainly for the masses working in the factories, and now for entire populations threatened by invading armies. Many of her contemporaries knew what it meant to feel helpless, not because their characters were particularly weak, but because they lacked any substantial material strength with which to face or withstand that force which was arrayed against them. Yet to taste this bitter truth without recourse to false hopes of any kind was, for her, to find joy. There was an alternative to madness and despair, without recourse to lies, which serve only as false consolations supplied by the imagination. Weil began to see this possibility in the gospel accounts of the passion, as well as in particular examples of earthly existence. "For instance, the vilest prostitute in the streets, is better than a self-righteous woman born in a rich family."¹⁹¹ Why is this so? Because she suffers? Certainly not, for as Weil will make clear later on: "Affliction in itself contains no gift from above."¹⁹² But suffering can be the means to the revelation of the truth for human beings living in the earth. The truth is that we are subject to suffering in the world and this suffering is as much a mystery as the creation itself. She realized through her own life and through her concern for her neighbour that it is not in the avoidance, denial, or efforts to escape suffering that we know ourselves, but in its recognition—even in its embracing—when it does come. Our life in the world can become a love for the world to which we belong as integral parts. Combining the stoic *amor fati* with the biblical account of creation, she could

say: "God is not satisfied with finding his creation good; he wants it also to find itself good."¹⁹³ Nevertheless Weil throbbed with those who, plunged in misery, ached for a truth not mingled with it and who dared "not think it can be found in this world."¹⁹⁴ For the sake of those who paid this price for truth then, clever turns of phrase were not enough; only genius—the essence of which is "*caritas*"—can express what is not to be expressed "lightly or too often."¹⁹⁵

The Nature and Effect of Force

The Contrast Between Force and Justice

Even as Weil was undergoing these mystical experiences, Europe was rocked by political events arising from Hitler's advance beyond Germany's borders. In March of 1938, German troops entered Vienna, effecting the *Anschluss* with Austria, and in September, the Munich accords with Great Britain fatally weakened Czechoslovakian autonomy. In March of 1939, Hitler entered Prague. In September, German troops penetrated into Poland; and England, along with France, declared war on Germany. With her contemporaries, Weil felt each of these events keenly. Once more she trained her considerable analytical gifts upon the contemporary situation, wishing primarily to serve, not the governments who were mobilizing against Hitler, but the masses of people who were terror-stricken in the light of these events. In a sentence indicative both of her sensitivity to her context as well as her concern for the world, she writes: "The intelligence is usually paralysed by moments of tragedy; and yet at such moments, more than any others, it is incumbent on us, both for our safety

and our honour, to make a lucid general survey of our situation.”¹⁹⁶

Weil had not fully appreciated Hitler’s ambitions; and the Munich accords, in which, through a compromise with force, a nation was compelled to give away its ability to preserve a certain way of life, made a strong impression upon her. She came increasingly to appreciate that one’s own country was worth preserving against subjugation because it served as the very medium which was conducive to the development of a certain population of people. In “Cold War Policy in 1939,” she proposed to offer some reflections which could help in evaluating the contemporary situation for France, since “reflection today unavoidably takes place within some national context.”¹⁹⁷

In considering the quality of Weil’s pacifism, Thomas Merton is critical of commentators who say that Weil came to abandon or even decry her former pacifism. She never espoused a naive quietism. Rather, her stress before Munich was on nonviolence, while “after the fall of France it was on resistance, including resistance by force where nonviolence was ineffective.”¹⁹⁸ As we have seen with her involvement in the Spanish war, even before the fall of 1938 she did not categorically refuse to support or to be involved herself in actions of war. Rather, she was in favour of the “the formula of the ‘lesser evil’ . . . provided it be applied with the coldest lucidity.”¹⁹⁹ Up to the day when Hitler’s forces entered Prague, she considered the lesser evil in Europe to be giving to Hitler what he desired, even if it included the domination of Czechoslovakia, and even if it meant that country too would be subject to the racism that had already reached virulent proportions in the territories under

German domination.²⁰⁰ She even considered what all of Europe might look like under German hegemony and the possibility of maintaining certain basic freedoms that were conducive to communal life under this eventuality. Such a constriction of life was indeed evil, but perhaps not a greater evil than the oppression and general misery that would be unleashed on the populations of Europe on every side of an “unlimited” war. Nevertheless, within the aforementioned events of 1938-39, Weil came to recognize a nefarious element in the worship of force which called for resistance—even to the point of war!²⁰¹

Weil’s thoughts on power and the horror of its destructive effects are offered to us in several letters and essays she wrote in 1939. “Three Letters on History,” a collection of fragments to an undetermined recipient, offers a good summary of her thoughts at this time. The key reason for her support of resistance may be summarized in a question she herself poses: “Why does everyone go on repeating that commonplace about the impossibility of spiritual values being destroyed by brute force? It destroys them very quickly and very easily.”²⁰² She came to recognize that concentrated power, especially in a centralized state which knows itself to be significantly more powerful than its neighbours, can “kill by constraint that delicate and fragile thing which is the medium that favours the development of the soul.”²⁰³ Rome, significantly during the period of active conquest in its republican phase was, according to her, the prime historical example of this possibility. In her essays, “The Great Beast: Reflections on the Origins of Hitlerism” and “Cold War Policy in 1939,” she offers a litany of the calculated cruelty, terror, and perfidy, that she was

convinced were the hallmarks of a Roman foreign policy dedicated to the glorification of power embodied in the state. This foreign policy which, she maintained, had remarkable affinities with Hitler's Germany, was to reduce the diverse and fecund cultures of Egypt, Carthage, Gaul, Germany, and Greece, to the monotonous uniformity of the Roman Imperium.

Weil's almost uniform condemnation of everything Roman is of interest not so much in terms of its historical value, but as an insightful description of the effects of force. According to her, the Romans were successful not only because they were "serious, disciplined, and organized," but even more because they were convinced that they alone among the peoples of the world were born to rule.²⁰⁴ Rather than becoming masters in the art of *exercising* power, it may be asserted (anticipating what Weil had to say about force in her essay on the *Iliad*) that the Romans were themselves well fitted as *instruments* of power. One element that so fitted them was their mastery of "the art of perfidy."²⁰⁵ The prime example she offers in this regard is the destruction of Carthage, a civilization she believes was "at least as brilliant as the Latin," and yet "was destroyed for ever, without leaving a trace."²⁰⁶ After Carthage was reduced to the status of a colony, it was forced to assist Rome in the execution of several wars, yet Rome refused to defend Carthage (a defence promised by treaty) against enemies which invaded and pillaged it for almost half a century. Finally, when in desperation the Carthaginians armed themselves to repel an especially fearsome raid by the Numidians, they were severely defeated. Rome chose this moment of defeat to punish Carthage. After exacting the price of three hundred

children from the noble class as hostages, the delivery to Roman consuls of all its arms, warships, and navigational equipment, in exchange for which they were given the promise of safety and freedom for their city, all the senators, elders, and priests of Carthage presented themselves before the Roman army. They were then informed that they must abandon their city and move to a new site five miles inland, and that Carthage was to be razed to the ground. Reading Appian, Weil describes the ensuing spectacle as “tragic on a Shakespearian level.”²⁰⁷ The Carthaginian representatives “flung themselves on the ground and beat it with their hands and heads. Some of them even tore their clothes and lacerated their flesh as though to punish their own folly in having been deceived. When at last their frenzy subsided, there was a deep, heavy silence, as though they were prostrate corpses.”²⁰⁸ The signature of affliction in this situation, for Weil, is the submission to force. This is very different from consenting to necessity—a bearing of misfortune in which one’s self is not crushed. Here one is forced to abase one’s self, and remain thus, until what makes one human—the ability to say “yes” or “no”—is drained away. In an analogy that would be meaningful for her contemporaries, she contrasted Appian’s account with the then current accounts of Dr. Emil Hacha’s appearance before Hitler. As president of Czechoslovakia, Hacha is reported to have fainted after being compelled to sign away his people’s independence.²⁰⁹

Another element that Weil considered fitted the Romans for the service of power was their calculated infliction of terror. This time she quotes Polybius’ chronicle of the taking of Carthage by the elder Scipio. Soldiers were sent against

the town's inhabitants with orders to kill everything in sight, sparing nothing. The aftermath of such orders was "not only human beings who had been put to the sword, but even dogs cloven down the middle, and the limbs of other animals hewn off. On this occasion the amount of slaughter was exceedingly great because of the number of inhabitants."²¹⁰ She notes the effects of this cruelty and terror to be such that "the human soul recoils from looking extreme disaster in the face. It arouses gratitude in all those who might have been destroyed, but have not been. . . . as for those who have been annihilated . . . their feelings do not count, because they are silent."²¹¹ Weil again quotes Polybius, who recounts that, having set the survivors of this massacre apart, Scipio "exhorted them to be grateful to the Romans and to remember the favour which they were now receiving, and allowed them all to depart to their own houses. With tears of joy at this unexpected preservation, they bowed in reverence. . . ."²¹² This calculated cruelty served to heighten Roman prestige. Weil noted the similarities for the contemporary situation. Prestige was of utmost importance, for it allowed a finite power to clothe itself with the mantle of invincibility.²¹³ Any thought that either arms, or treaties, or past services, or submission could in any way influence the dominating power must be banished. For this advantage, she emphasized that Rome "never agreed to discuss peace except after a crushing victory."²¹⁴ Her judgement was categorical. "From the point of view of the development of humanity, the Roman Empire is, in my opinion, the deadliest phenomenon to be found in history. It killed and even almost destroyed all trace of several civilizations, and it put an end to that whole prodigious commerce of ideas

in the Mediterranean basin which made the grandeur of what we call antiquity.”²¹⁵

Considering her own context in 1939, Weil saw some of the very same possibilities being played out. “The analogy between the systems of Hitler and of ancient Rome is so striking that one might believe that Hitler alone, after two thousand years, has understood correctly how to copy the Romans.”²¹⁶ She had no use for characterisations of Hitler as a madman. “The appetite for power, even for universal power, is only insane when there is no possibility of indulging it; a man who sees the possibility opening before him and does not try to grasp it, even at the risk of destroying himself and his country, is either a saint or a mediocrity.”²¹⁷ Hitler could not be placed in the former category, but neither did he belong in the latter.

He governs a country which is strained to full pitch; his will is fiery, unflagging, pitiless, and closed to considerations of humanity; his imagination plays with grandiose historical visions of the future . . . and he is a natural gambler. He is therefore clearly not the man to refrain from exploiting to the full any possibilities that are open to him; he will be influenced neither by reasonable proposals nor by threats.²¹⁸

Nor did Weil abide by the attempt to isolate in the German people themselves, a will to aggressive domination. In fact she saw an earlier propensity to terrorize Europe in the history of France, particularly in the line of Richelieu, Louis XIV, and Napoleon. All the states of Europe eventually drank from the same poisoned cup in honour of the “Great Beast,” i.e. collective power as the bearer of repression within and oppression without. Weil considered that the cult of the Roman Empire, which had successfully seeped into the states of modern Europe, was the poison, which if not drawn by a pure motive, would kill any effective opposition to the renewed threat of

force. Her perhaps extreme and impractical proposal for a corps of front-line nurses, who would act in diametrical opposition to the notorious SS, was imbued by this essential conviction.²¹⁹ It was, for her, an endeavour to fire the imagination with a concrete manifestation of justice—which she equated with the biblical love of one’s neighbour—as the essential ingredient in any opposition to the worship of force.

Weil was now fully determined to be on the side of those who resisted Hitler’s onslaught. Nevertheless she considered that the people of Europe needed to make a radical about-face in order to successfully effect this vital opposition. Force itself was worshipped—in decisions made and actions taken—on pain of physical and spiritual death, not only of individuals but of an entire civilization that was fighting for its existence. As things stood, her own nation was not significantly different from Germany, except that it was weaker, for it also bowed before force. France as a colonial power could not boast of remaining the nourishing source of “*liberté, fraternité, égalité*,” when it also inflicted outrage against the peoples under its domination in Indo-China and North Africa. How then could it hope to resist Hitler with anything but his own methods?

Weil believed the idea of the “good,” in Plato’s sense, was in itself timeless, and that in fact any moral idea present to the human mind was not of human fabrication. Thus she did not think that there was any so-called progress in morality, such that certain actions in the past should be judged “barbaric” by contemporary standards. An act of cruelty executed in the first, fifth, or fifteenth century, was not in any way different from one executed in the twentieth.²²⁰ She believed that every

age of human history “conceived the good, when they conceived it at all, with the same purity and perfection as ourselves, in spite of the fact that they practised evil, and praised it when it was victorious, exactly as we do.”²²¹ As one of her favourite examples, she offers an early conception of goodness from ancient Egypt which was enshrined in a few lines from The Book of the Dead: “I have not caused harm to be done to the servant by his master. . . . I have made no one weep. . . . I have not struck fear into any man. . . . I have not spoken haughtily. . . . I have not made myself deaf to the words of right and truth.”²²² Yet while the conception of the good was present to every age, the practice of virtue was actualized in a particular time and place. Therefore it was now time for France and for any nation which opposed Hitler to choose to act in accord with virtue.

What, then, was the basis of virtuous action? Again, Weil found an especially clear and profound articulation of the distinction between the exercise of force and the possibility of a very different response, in an ancient text from Thucydides’ Peloponnesian War. During the war with Sparta, when the Athenian navy confronted the little island of Melos with the ultimatum of joining their empire or facing extermination, the Melians invoked the consideration of justice, begging to be allowed to remain neutral. The Athenians responded by saying that they would not try to prove that their ultimatum was just. Rather they recommended to the Melians “to get what it is possible for you to get . . . since you know as well as we do that, when these matters are discussed by practical people, the standard of justice depends on the equality of power to compel and that in fact the strong do what they have the

power to do and the weak accept what they have to accept.”²²³ The Melians, feeling deprived of justice, appealed to the will of the gods, since they knew their cause to be just. The Athenians considered this response irrelevant, for they were convinced that if the roles were reversed, the Melians would act no differently. “Our opinion of the gods and our knowledge of men lead us to conclude that *it is a general and necessary law of nature to rule wherever one can*. This is not a law that we made ourselves, nor were we the first to act upon it when it was made. We found it already in existence, and we shall leave it to exist for ever among those who come after us.”²²⁴ The Athenian response to the Melian appeal was, according to Weil, a lucid expression of natural justice. The language the Athenians use in this account indicates their conviction that they are bound by a certain necessity—“this is not a law we made ourselves”—and they were sure it cuts both ways. Since the Melians refused to submit, the Athenians put all the males of military age to death and sold the women and children as slaves. Weil returned to this passage often, and it is another example of her conviction that the good is in itself timeless, and yet we are called to recognize it and serve it in the vicissitudes of history.

For her, it was precisely the virtue of refraining from exercising power wherever one can that was as vital as it was rare. For the Athenians to act justly in this situation, i.e., to have the power to compel Melos by force of arms to submit to its rule and yet to refrain from doing so, allowing this island the freedom to choose its alliances, required what Weil would call “supernatural virtue.”²²⁵ The very framing of the Melian dialogue by the Athenian general Thucydides indicates that

Athens was not convinced it had acted quite naturally, but knew its action to be cruel and, by implication, in opposition to justice.²²⁶ Weil would call this insight born of reflection, supernatural, for it is informed by a way of looking which begins with the knowledge of wretchedness and its consequences. Naturally, when power relations are balanced, a mutual transaction is carefully calculated to hurt neither party; there is no "unfinished business." Concomitantly, if one side is strong and the other weak, the will of the first prevails upon the second. "There is only one will. . . ." ²²⁷ "Supernatural justice," according to Weil, begins with the knowledge of misery and wretchedness. The weak one who is in a miserable state is treated by the strong as an equal. "Exactly in every respect, including the slightest details of accent and attitude, for a detail may be enough to place the weaker party in the condition of matter, which on this occasion naturally belongs to him, just as the slightest shock causes water that has remained liquid below freezing point to solidify." ²²⁸ Moreover, Weil recognizes a supernatural gratitude in this relationship. The weak one who is treated as an equal knows that this treatment is due solely to "generosity," in the full sense of the word. ²²⁹

France too had a choice vis-à-vis Germany following the First World War, and even following the treaty of Versailles. France had the power to choose to be generous. In the years 1938-39, this opportunity had passed. Nevertheless, she felt France was still able to act according to the virtue of justice in its relationship to its own colonies. If France were just in this regard, it could legitimately expect to be "seen by her own citizens and by all men as an ever-flowing source of liberty." ²³⁰ It

was paramount for France's efforts in this war that all the people who cherished liberty would "be able to be glad that France exists."²³¹

Though Weil had qualified her pacifism in the face of Hitler's advance, she was acutely conscious of the cost that was to be paid by those who would fight and die as well as those who were to be conquered. She sensed a spiritual poverty in the thought of the modern period, particularly because the idea of justice was not clearly distinguished from that of force. Now she was increasingly delving into the expressions of pre-modern thought, especially ancient Greek thought, to find a relevant alternative to the modern *Zeitgeist*.

The Iliad: Force Exposed

Her essay "The Iliad or the Poem of Force" is an expression of all that Weil had come to know about power as it impacts those who exercise it as well as those who submit to it. It is also an expression of the moment, a consideration of timeless truths as they must be understood in the context of the war. While Hitler and the war in Europe are never mentioned, the entire essay is bathed in the anguish she felt for all the civilians, the combatants, and the very ground upon which they fought and perished. In "The Great Beast: Reflections on the Origins of Hitlerism," she was concerned to point to the horror of worshipping force because of the resultant destruction of a particular civilization as the bearer of values. Her anger was clearly focussed on the modern states, including Germany, which, consciously or not, held up Republican or Imperial Rome as their model, i.e., ruling wherever possible

pretending that this is just. In her essay on the Iliad, Weil was seeking for an alternative that articulated what justice might look like even in the midst of war.

There is a new tension here between espousing the side of the weak—to which category she herself now belonged as a French citizen—and trying to gain perspective on the entire war through a consideration of the suffering even of those who were ostensibly wielding power. On the one hand, Weil admired what she considered to be Homer's impartiality in describing with equal sensitivity the misfortune of the Greeks as well as the Trojans and yet, in the situation in which she lived, she could not give up her identification with those who were at any moment on the receiving end of force.²³² Written in the fall of 1939, the essay appeared in two parts in the Cahiers du Sud (in December of 1940 and January of 1941) under the pseudonym of "Emil Novis." It was offered to the French people who knew themselves to be weak and vulnerable to the coming attack, but it was also the fruit of her own exposure to the effects of force in the factory as well as in the Spanish Civil War. Many at the time, including intellectuals and people in positions of leadership, may have found it difficult to draw energy from her insights. Her assessment of force and its effects is indeed grim. She argued that those who wield it are intoxicated into thinking they are invincible, while those who are subject to it can be killed. Yet for her, this insight was itself liberating.²³³

This essay is a reflection on herself as much as it is an attempt to appreciate Homer's genius. War having been declared in Europe and in the process of being fought, now takes on a life of its own. The service rendered to those who are directly

affected is to offer to them a way of facing its full fury without having to choose between the distortions of propaganda or the illusions of a collective self-righteousness. "Pride, humiliation, hate, disdain, indifference, the wish to forget or to ignore"—all are invitations to find rest in some form of deception.²³⁴ Unquestionably for her, what Homer's epic offers is an alternative that is a rare but true expression of misfortune, to which all human beings are vulnerable. In receiving this expression, one may be rewarded, as the Greeks were, "by knowing in all things how to attain the highest degree of lucidity, of purity and of simplicity."²³⁵ We may or may not follow Weil in her enthusiastic assessment of the ancient Greeks, and we may even question whether she herself was thus fully rewarded, but she was convinced that something equivalent to Homer's genius was needed if the present war were to be faced with responses other than hatred or contempt.

The true hero, the real subject, the core of the *Iliad*, is force. That which is wielded by men rules over them, and before it man's flesh cringes. The human soul never ceases to be modified by its encounter with force, swept on, blinded by that which it believes itself able to handle, bowed beneath the power of that which it suffers. Those who dreamt that force, thanks to progress, belonged henceforth to the past, have been able to see its living witness in this poem: those who know how to recognize it throughout the ages . . . find here its most beautiful, most pure of mirrors.²³⁶

With these opening lines Weil places herself in opposition to prevailing conceptions of human life which are based on the assumption that force is a reality in human relations to be possessed and wielded, or conversely mitigated and replaced, by an increasingly sophisticated use of human reason. According to her,

Homer understood the ubiquity of force and at the same time how not to respect it or fall under its sway. In the course of history, so much of social and political life was conducted and warped under its sceptre! She knew that, because of the dynamics of power, under the conditions of modern labour a chasm yawned between workers and the owners and managers of factories. Neither workers nor owners and managers could approach one another, because the former were so deeply marked by humiliation that they could not dare to speak of it, and the latter could not even begin to identify with the workers' condition. Weil was conscious of the deformations of the revolutionary struggle in the Soviet Union, in which an elite of bureaucrats had mushroomed to replace, with greater efficiency, Czarist oppression of peasants and workers. She had witnessed at first hand the horror of anarchists who had themselves become drunk with the power they wielded over the lives of their adversaries in the territories under their control. As Blum and Seidler point out, a basic tenet of the liberal tradition, which Marx did not challenge radically enough, still holds to the conviction that differences between individuals, social strata, or interest groups, can be negotiated as each side agrees to common criteria which bind them.²³⁷ Though Marx appreciated the role of power relations between social classes, he did not factor in the psychic modifications effected by power, either for those who wielded it or for those who are subject to it. In her reading of the Iliad, Weil was acutely interested in exposing what takes place in this interstice between the strong and the weak in which force is supreme.

In war, a very basic effect of force is to reduce anyone it touches to a corpse.

Yet, reminiscent of her experience of factory labour, she recognized a more horrifying effect of force on those who perpetually live under its sway. In very different contexts, a fighting soldier and an unskilled factory labourer know that their lives are not their own and may never be. Their body, their mind, their identity, is not formed by love, joy, and freedom, but deformed by constraint—the relentless force that “must surely kill, or . . . will perhaps kill, or else . . . is only suspended above him [and her] whom it may at any moment destroy.”²³⁸ In this existence they are far from the beings who identify themselves as *homo sapiens*, upon which identification so much of liberal theory is based. As Weil learned among her fellow workers, a life deformed under constraint may not be easily redeemed by compensations such as being treated equally outside the workplace, or even by a change of fortune. A subjection to force for a certain period of time can destroy forever what, according to her, makes a human being a human being—the ability to consent or to refuse, to say “yes” or “no.” Her reading of Homer’s *Iliad* helped her to sharpen some of the insights she had “purchased dearly” on the factory floor. She found in its pages an articulation of the truth about human suffering that only great art can dare to express. In her commentary on Homer’s epic, she finds a way to speak about the effects of constraint.

From the power to transform him into a thing by killing him there proceeds another power . . . that which makes a thing of him while he still lives. He is living, he has a soul, yet he is a thing. A strange being is that thing which has a soul, and strange the state of that soul. Who knows how often during each instant it must torture and destroy itself in order to conform? The soul was not made to dwell in a thing; and when forced to it, there is no part of that soul

but suffers violence.²³⁹

Clearly, to say that a human being is reduced to a “thing” even while living is, under Weil’s pen, a powerful abbreviation for the deformation of a human life, a life not treated as an end but as a means which it is permissible to destroy in the course of war. The ostensible end of the Trojan War is the recapture of “Helen” (and by implication, the end of every war is incommensurate with the price of human lives), but this end is soon transformed into the extermination of the enemy. We know of course that Weil speaks here of human beings, and the thought that a living consciousness can potentially, with a momentary stroke of the blade, be transformed into inanimate matter is horrifying. It is horrifying for many reasons, not least of which is the awareness that there is a value to life, the taking of which cannot be satisfactorily explained in terms of physical cause and effect.

Philosopher Peter Winch anticipates that there may be philosophical objections to Weil’s characterization of a living human being as a “thing.” There is even a problem with the characterization and treatment of a human cadaver as a “thing.” For example, is a human cadaver equivalent to an inanimate object? In one sense, the physical, it is, but in another vital sense, it is not. Funeral rites of various kinds are not conducted for a cadaver but for a person, now dead, who was part of a network of relationships not easily severed even after death. A woman who mourns over the body of her dead husband certainly does not treat it as she would any inanimate object. The *Iliad* itself is replete with examples in which even a human corpse is not treated as a mere thing: from the funeral rites for Patroclus; to the

lengths to which Priam goes to recover the body of his son, Hector; to the litany of indignities that the victor promises to carry out upon the body of the enemy about to be dispatched. Though Winch considers Weil's characterization here "unfortunate," he recognizes the importance of what Weil is trying to say.²⁴⁰ There is an "incommensurability between what we can say of the death of the human body and what we understand by the death of the person."²⁴¹ Weil's point is that something essential to a recognizably human life may be destroyed even while the person is physically alive, and this phenomenon is grotesque.

A related potential difficulty that may arise in reading Weil is her distinction between body and soul.²⁴² Though this distinction may have greatly pervaded our language and our thought, it is not very popular any more. Psychologists may demarcate their work by stating that their interest is not in an immaterial "soul" but in the actual phenomena of consciousness. Philosophers certainly deny the existence of an immaterial soul in their considerations of the mind-body problem. In Christian theology, this very distinction is now seen as foreign and not foundational to the biblical tradition, which does not disparage the body in favour of the soul. Weil of course uses this distinction without embarrassment or hesitation to great effect, as in the foregoing quotation. It is not my purpose here to enter into or to detail this ongoing debate, but to attempt to point out the significance of what she is saying.²⁴³ This significance has something to do with human life in the world. What is very clear is that what happens physically in the world was of utmost importance for her, because not all of the physical effects of oppressive working conditions, or other

manifestations of force, could be described in physical terms. For example, she was very interested in physical labour and the physical conditions of labour not only because of their power to effect material transformations, but also because of their power to affect that which could not be comprehended in any straightforward material description. In other words, what happened to the worker physically affected something more foundational even than the worker's personality. The worker on the assembly line who was forced to give up any determination of her own thought was violated, according to Weil, in a way distinct from a physical injury. In fact the injury to a worker's body was more easily detected than the "rent in the soul."²⁴⁴ Moreover, it was not a worker's feelings that were hurt in the factory, for these are recoverable, but something essentially necessary to her continuing to live a recognizably human life.²⁴⁵ She makes this point explicitly in one of her last writings:

I see a passer-by in the street, He has long arms, blue eyes, and a mind whose thoughts I do not know. . . .

It is neither his person, nor the human personality in him, which is sacred to me. It is he. The whole of him. The arms, the eyes, the thoughts, everything. Not without infinite scruple would I touch anything of this.

If it were the human personality in him that was sacred to me, I could easily put out his eyes.²⁴⁶

Weil is interested in the whole and will not accept a compartmentalization, even one which serves to distinguish the personality from the rest of the human being. It would be wrong therefore to conclude that, having accepted a body/soul distinction, she was concerned simply with the soul apart from the body. The effect

of force on the body touches the soul and vice-versa, as is evidenced by looking into the eyes of workers filing out of a plant at the end of their shift.²⁴⁷ There is no question here of an eternal soul to be saved from a body doomed to corruption. Rather, she points to the fundamental interactive connection between the two here and now. The body is important because the way in which it is treated affects the whole person. When she states that “the soul was not made to dwell in a thing,” it becomes evident that the entire human being is spoken of.²⁴⁸

As force was unleashed through war, Weil tried once again to articulate the resulting affliction. Through Homer’s poem, she speaks of virgin daughters taken captive, of those who watch as their child is sold into slavery, of those who watch as their city is sacked and their own are massacred. These are

miserable beings, who without dying have become things for the rest of their lives. In their days is no give and take, no open field, no free road over which anything can pass to or from them. These are not men living harder lives than others, not placed lower socially than others, these are another species, a compromise between a man and a corpse. That a human being should be a thing is, from the point of view of logic, a contradiction: but when the impossible has become a reality, that contradiction is as a rent in the soul. That thing aspires every moment to become a man, a woman, and never at any moment succeeds. This is a death drawn out the length of a life, a life that death has frozen before extinguishing it.²⁴⁹

I believe the intended effect of these words is twofold: first, it is to enable her contemporaries, or anyone who reads them, to pause and begin to see, and secondly, to know what may be too horrible even to contemplate: that this can indeed happen to human lives.

Now on the other side of the relation between victor and vanquished, Weil considered those who think they wield force, Achilles as well as the heroes ranked beneath him in might. They are maddened by force before being crushed by it. They think they possess it and so exult in their triumph, only to be terrified and humbled in their turn by the twists of "fickle fortune."²⁵⁰ She read Homer's epic in the crucible of the war raging in Europe at the time, conscious of its historical dynamics. In 1939, Germany seemed invincible and acted accordingly in foreign policy, yet France had defeated Germany only a short time ago and had collaborated in exacting an imposing price for its victory. Weil declared that the strong rarely "think of their own strength as a limited quantity. . . . Other men do not impose upon their acts that moment for pausing from which alone our consideration for our fellows proceeds: they conclude from this that destiny has given all license to them and none to their inferiors."²⁵¹ According to her, Homer's epic is a testimony to the Greek consciousness of the limits of power, though it is also a bracing demonstration of the eclipsing of this consciousness in the euphoria of momentary victory. Going beyond the limits of power, the formerly strong were themselves delivered "exposed, naked before misfortune without the armour of force which protected their souls, without anything any more to separate them from tears."²⁵²

Weil focussed on the transmutation that takes place in the Greek warriors as, at its opening, the war is still abstract, even a game, in which danger is far off and heroism in battle is attractive. If victory comes early, one may even believe in a providential preservation from defeat and death. "War is easy then, and ignobly

loved.”²⁵³ But defeat, the killing of comrades, and the realization that every moment holds the possibility of one’s own death, shatter the dream. Yes, all are destined to die, but for the fighting soldier, each moment of life must be strained through the thought of death. “Then the consciousness is under tension such as it can only endure for short intervals. But each new dawn ushers in the same necessity. Such days added to each other make up years. . . . In this way war wipes out every conception of a goal, even all thoughts concerning the goals of war.”²⁵⁴ The survivors are plunged into even deeper despair. The experience of terror, pain, exhaustion, the sight of massacres, and the deaths of one’s friends sear all thought. And the war continues with soldiers who are transformed into either machine-like killers with no respect for any life, including their own, or beings who are no longer fitted for killing and for anything useful in life. Without a quality of soul so rare that none of Homer’s warriors displays it, one that requires hardened soldiers to be generous to their victims, what is left is a

. . . scourge of nature; possessed by war, he as much as the slave, although in quite a different way, is become a thing, and words have no more power over him than over inert matter. In contact with force, both the soldier and the slave suffer the inevitable effect, which is to become either deaf or mute.

Such is the nature of might. Its power to transform man into a thing is double and it cuts both ways: it petrifies differently but equally the souls of those who suffer it, and those who wield it.²⁵⁵

In Weil’s reading, Homer bids us survey the ruins of so much that is precious and see that “force is the only hero in this picture,” for no human being benefits since no

human being is spared from loss.²⁵⁶ Through Homer's eyes, she saw in the vanquished as well as the victors a loss of something vital to human life. The effects of force on each are not the same, for the vanquished are constrained into servile submission—they are “mute”—while the victors cannot hear the cries of those below them—they are “deaf.” In the quotation above we see that she wants to underline the fact that, though the powerful in a sociopolitical relation wield force against the weak, force of the same kind can soon be exercised against them. Yet this is the “intoxicating” effect of power: that those who are its beneficiaries think they possess it. The mentality that prevails is one of “all or nothing,” and, as Weil expounds the Iliad, first it is all and then it is nothing. What the Greeks want is all. “All the riches of Troy as booty, all the palaces, the temples and the houses as ashes, all the women and all the children as slaves, all the men as corpses. They forget one detail; this is that all is not in their power. . . .”²⁵⁷ The powerful are indeed powerful, but they are not all-powerful. Sooner or later, especially as they aspire to be supremely powerful, they overreach themselves, and consequently they are deprived of the force they think is theirs.

It was clear to Weil that power itself could not be the goal of a struggle for a better way of life, for by its very nature, power blinded all whom it touched. In her dramatic language, force appears as an almost demonic reality. It begins by attacking those against whom it is wielded, and then breaks out against those who think they wield it.²⁵⁸ Its characteristic effect is to deprive the human being whom it touches of something vital to his or her humanity.

In this assessment, she clearly moved away from a theory of power based on the division between oppressor and oppressed, in which one group controls and wields power while the other fights to gain it.²⁵⁹ Power is not a possession. Rome did not possess it, neither does any modern state, like France or Germany, nor does any group within society. Certainly one side exercises power and another is oppressed or enslaved by it, but power does not inhere in any group. It is independent, a quantum of energy which can variously deform both its transmitters and its recipients. Since power cannot be possessed, neither can it be “transferred” in any straightforward way. Certainly justice does not involve the transfer of power from one side to another. Rather, justice demands that those in power deliberately place themselves in subjection to those who are weak. The weak do not thereby gain power; rather, through this “supernatural” act, they are empowered to relate as equals to those on whose side power resides. What is effected thereby is a mutual subjection; the strong are willingly bound to the weak, and the weak may consent to be bound to the strong. It is this very reality which moved Weil profoundly in her contemplation of Christ’s passion. In entering the world, the Christ empties himself of his divinity and becomes a slave, executed as a criminal. In the contemplation of this *kenosis*, she found a way to express the relation between justice and power, in a way in which the political distinction between oppressor and oppressed could not.

The lesson Weil derived from the Iliad is that all human creatures are subject to force in some form; therefore what we have to learn is that we are bound in a common humanity. For the strong one to think that he is related to the weak as a god

is to a man, and to act accordingly, is to invite destruction upon himself. The implements of power in the form of money, technical knowledge, arms, etc., can change hands. Fundamentally, all human creatures are of this earth, finite and subject to the constraint of matter; they have no part in the mythical realm of the gods, which realm may today be replaced by “words with capital letters.” That one side of the human relation may have power over the other, so that the vanquished are despised while the victors are held in awe, in no way obviates the fact that they are still of the same species—none is invulnerable. Action in the form of a moderation of power on the part of the strong and consent to authority on the part of the weak arise from this insight, and is the foundation of justice which is itself conditioned by love.²⁶⁰

Nor are the protagonists in the Iliad completely deprived of this insight. This indicates that while the realm of force is vast upon the earth, it is not supreme. Human relationships can so transform the soul as to deter the logic of force. These relationships are rare, even fleeting, but their presentation in the Iliad suggests, for Weil, that they are recognized and are held to be precious, no less because they are fragile and easily destroyed. Thus, a single exchange of hospitality in the past is enough to keep warriors on opposite sides from transfixing each other with their spears; the love of a son for his parents, of brothers for each other, of a husband for his wife and a wife for her husband, of a friend for a fallen friend, and above all, the love that arises to join mortal enemies—all testify to the penetrating bitterness with which the loss of what is valuable is regretted.

Concluding these examples, Weil underlines what she finds most

praiseworthy in Homer's epic—its “extraordinary equity.”²⁶¹ This equity forms the next step after the recognition of a force that claims both the vanquished and the victors.

It is this which makes the Iliad a unique poem, this bitterness, issuing from its tenderness, and which extends, as the light of the sun, equally over all men. . . . Justice and love, for which there can hardly be a place in this picture of extremes and unjust violence, yet shed their light over the whole without ever being discerned otherwise than by accent. Nothing precious is despised, whether or not destined to perish.²⁶²

Compassion extending to everyone that is vulnerable to force—i.e., to all people—is the very opposite of the worship of force. What Weil wants to highlight here may be designated as an engaged objectivity. According to her reading, the entire empire of force is surveyed without adulation. Though Homer is writing from the side of the Greeks, he does not exalt the Greek victory over the Trojans, but indeed pours his descriptive skill no less solicitously upon the Trojan losses. Through Homer's poetic skill, a recognition is elicited, even on the side of the victors, that something terrible is taking place. It is not simply human beings and a city that are being destroyed as so much physical matter, for they are the bearers of a culture, a way of being in the world, which is wiped away with them. We may conclude from her reading of Homer that to view the Trojan war, and every war, without the intoxication of victory and the bitterness arising from a servile submission, demands a vision formed by the knowledge of justice. Writing in France at the start of the Second World War, she found this objectivity, saturated with a passion for all who were touched by war, to be nothing less than a divine gift. This equity is akin to the “effort of heart-breaking

generosity” required of those for whom the respect for life has been mutilated.²⁶³ Both are formed by what she came to recognize as the justice inherent in loving one’s neighbour.²⁶⁴ “Equity,” “justice,” “love,” are all words which express that quality of vision which enables one to see what is otherwise invisible and thus to attend to it. Having surveyed the empire of force with Homer, Weil was convinced that this vision was a divine gift, a sign of grace. The alternative to bowing before force was compassion extended by the strong to the weak or even by the victors to the vanquished, compassion braced by the insight that all human beings were subject to necessity and that none were given the power to rise above it. This virtue, however, was “supernatural,” for the strong indeed believed themselves to be blessed with power, while those crushed by it, in time, believed this to be their natural destiny.

At the conclusion of her essay on the *Iliad*, Weil begins to speak about the suffering of God in the passion of Christ, and she speaks of this in relation to the afflicted and in contrast to the tradition of the martyrs’ suffering and death. In the Christian tradition, as she read it, martyrdom that was endured “joyfully” was a sign of grace. This, she was convinced, is a corruption of the truth about affliction.

Those who remember that even the incarnate God Himself could not look on the rigours of destiny without anguish, should understand that men can only appear to elevate themselves above human misery by disguising the rigours of destiny in their own eyes, by the help of illusion, of intoxication, or of fanaticism. Unless protected by an armour of lies, man cannot endure force without suffering a blow in the depth of his soul. Grace can prevent this blow from corrupting the soul, but cannot prevent its wound.²⁶⁵

Here we reach something that is of great moment for Weil. Affliction is

differentiated from the general category of suffering in that it leaves a lasting mark. No human being who is plunged, even for a moment, into affliction walks away unscathed. There are types of suffering that can be ennobling, suffering which, when endured, can serve to make one stronger than one was before undergoing it, suffering in which one's identity is not only left intact but even strengthened—not so affliction. Affliction is destructive and always leaves its mark. Weil repeatedly makes reference to the passage in the book of Revelation which speaks of “the Lamb that was slaughtered from the foundation of the world” (Rev. 13:8).²⁶⁶ This image is symbolic for her of the divine passion from the very moment of creation, but it is also indicative of the permanence of affliction.²⁶⁷ The suffering of the incarnated Christ is affliction, and it is a mark that he bears, according to Weil, from the beginning of creation.

The truth about the human condition is presented when the wound of affliction is not disguised or clothed in any way but shown to us in its nakedness. It would seem that, for her, this very exposition evinces a respect and love for the afflicted which is extraordinary. The same could not be said for a tradition that smuggles in an espousal of power in the form of the glory of martyrdom. There is no halo of glory in affliction. Its lucid expression in the gospels was lost at an early stage, even before the Christian religion was declared to be the official cultus of the Empire.

As was noted earlier, in her experience of Christ's taking possession of her, Weil had already begun to make the association between human affliction and the

passion of Christ in the midst of her debilitating headaches. She found in the gospels the same expression of truth as in the Iliad and its successors in Attic tragedy. Not only is force not admired, for the command is to seek God's kingdom and righteousness to the exclusion of all other goods, but "The accounts of the Passion show that a divine spirit united to the flesh is altered by affliction, trembles before suffering and death, feels himself, at the moment of deepest agony, separated from men and from God."²⁶⁸

The condition of affliction continued to be a bafflement to Weil until the end of her life. That is, she was perplexed that God, as love, could have given affliction the power to destroy souls and leave seemingly empty shells behind.²⁶⁹ She was conscious, like Dostoevski's Ivan, that too many human beings were irrevocably destroyed without the hope of a final redress that could in some way, at some point, mitigate or wipe away this destruction. Unlike Dostoevsky's character, however, who presents the question of theodicy in the accents of existential angst, but who does not himself share in the condition of the unfortunates whom he lists, Weil could not separate herself from their fate. Simply in the midst of what she saw of this condition, she was moved by the witness of the gospels that God was not spared this very condition on the cross, and, as she will soon say, no one therefore who is afflicted need be separated from the divine love. In contrast, she found that a liberal conviction which maintained that the sufferer could be treated as an equal through particular acts of kindness, or that the Marxist hope that the oppressed could take over power and use it to good effect, fell far short of the truth about the human condition. Moreover,

as Weil indicated to more than one priest, when the Church has held power, it has found it hard to follow after the Christ who suffered and was rejected (Mk. 8:31).

Conclusion

We have now traced in some detail how Weil herself came to understand a particular form of suffering she called *malheur* (affliction). The turning point for her was her work in the Paris factories of the early 1930s. Having already been disillusioned by the Marxist rhetoric of her time, which had made the “revolution” a catch phrase for what ailed the working class, she wished to enter herself upon the life that ostensibly, was to be revolutionised. As a factory labourer, she felt keenly the chasm which separated the rhetoric of revolution, as well as the kind of life lived by those who manufactured this rhetoric, from the life of those who were forced daily to earn their bread under conditions which humiliated them. The humiliation to which workers were subject, moreover, was internalised, in the sense that workers could not easily separate the conditions of their humiliation from their own identity. A labourer could not easily step back from the conditions under which he or she worked to consider that the way a capitalist society was structured meant that managers and owners of factories competing against each other forced labourers to work long hours, under seemingly arbitrary orders, at inhuman speeds, in fragmented movements. This process denied labourers a sense of camaraderie, ownership for their work and workplace, as well as a sense that they mattered to the productive output of the factory as a whole. Finally this kind of life deprived working people of a sense of belonging in

the universe. They were not even allowed to feel ownership for the most intimate elements of their identity, such as their own body, their thought process, and the means by which they earned their bread. Labourers were not given to choose how these essential elements of their identity were to be offered to the world.

What is significant to note is that Simone Weil was herself penetrated by this affliction. Though she wrote to her superiors in the Ministry of Education that she was taking a leave of absence in order “to prepare a philosophy thesis concerning the relationship of modern technique. . . to the essential aspects of our civilization,” it is clear from what I have described that she was not engaged in some kind of anthropological field study.²⁷⁰ She was not an objective observer; in her words, this life “broke” her. She herself felt and knew the humiliation as only an “insider” can. The dark and secret corners of the psyche that a worker dared reveal to no one were ones that could be known only by entering them through one’s own experience. Her first significant encounter with the Christian religion, in other words, one which had deep meaning for her, came in a miserable little fishing village. All the physical, psychological, and spiritual elements she notes—its wretchedness, the songs of lament, the women who sang them, the severity of the procession surrounding crafts which were used to go out to sea, the women’s reserved determination, the knowledge of their “slavery”—came together in her broken state to adequately express her anguish. It is remarkable that this inherently simple scene expressed for her what the political rhetoric, even of the anarcho-syndicalism she was familiar with, could not. She began here to think of grace, or the good that comes into the world and

which is thus not a product of the human sociopolitical network; a grace which meets and can bear the truth about human misery.

From this point on, Weil conceived a distinction between the immanent and the transcendent realms. The two were equally real but never mixed in her mind, and she tirelessly reaffirmed their radical distinction. At the same time, she avowed the truth that from time to time these two spheres intersected. Affliction under a crushing force was also the point at which grace could be known. It was with this conviction that she was henceforth to think through practical political problems, from the form justice could take in a court of law to conceiving the conditions necessary for enshrining justice in the constitution of the state.

When France was invaded in 1939 by Hitler's troops, Weil was well on her way to considering the reality of human misery in the light of divine grace. For her, the passion of Christ became the clearest expression of divine love, which comes into the world in the form of weakness and in contradistinction to force. Christ is neither hailed by the powers that be, nor venerated as a martyr; rather, he is rejected, despised, and crucified, treated in no way differently than a common criminal. The cross of the Christ becomes, in effect, a litmus test for her. This is what it means to be afflicted: one is rejected by human beings and is alone in the universe, cut off even from God. At the same time, the crucifixion of Christ is a true and worthy response to affliction. The afflicted Christ on the cross does not cease to love, even when there is nothing left to love. He loves in the void, and it is here, only at this point, that love from the other side of creation comes to meet him.

II. ATTENTION TO AFFLICTION: THE WAY TO THE LOVE OF NEIGHBOUR

4. A Biographical Sketch of Simone Weil's Last Years

The early 1940s were pivotal years for Weil; she would not survive the war. It was also a time of prodigious literary output flowing out of a life that had, as it were, incubated certain insights and ideas that would now find expression in written form. But her voluminous output also seems to indicate that she wanted or needed to express what was welling up inside her, that "deposit of pure gold" which, as she wrote to her parents from London, "is indivisible, and whatever is added to it becomes part of it."²⁷¹ It was as if, having determined that her time was short, she could not die without having tried to impart some of what had settled inside her.²⁷²

It was a time of displacement for the entire Weil family. Simone's brother André had his own problems with his government. He had been sent to Finland on a scientific mission in April of 1939, and when France entered the war in September, he decided not to return. Through a misunderstanding, he was subsequently arrested in Finland as a spy, and returned to France where he was convicted and sentenced to five years suspended sentence to be served on the front.²⁷³ By late May of 1940, the defence of France had all but collapsed, and André was taken along with other French soldiers to England. By June, France was clearly defeated and Paris itself was declared an open city. Simone and her parents became refugees, fleeing the capital, to Simone's great chagrin, on the last train heading south. They made it as far as Nevers; yet as the Germans sped south, the Weils were forced to continue on to

Vichy and reached it in the beginning of July, just as the Petain regime was establishing its headquarters there. From there they moved on to Toulouse, and then on to Marseille in early September, where they were to spend the next two years. At this time, Marseille was a haven for refugees of all kinds, and Simone made many significant contacts there. She reacquainted herself with René and Vera Daumal, who introduced her to Sanskrit, enabling her, to her great delight, to access the wisdom of the Bhagavad-Gita in its original tongue. She befriended Pierre Honnorat and his sister Hélène, who introduced her to the Catholic community in Marseille and significantly to the Dominican priest Joseph-Marie Perrin. Perrin was himself active in refugee work as well as in Christian-Jewish dialogue. In his friendship, she was challenged to consider her relationship to the church. Also, because of her expressed interest in working as a farm labourer, Father Perrin in turn introduced her to Gustave Thibon, himself a farmer as well as a self-taught philosopher, with whom Weil spent some time in Saint-Marcel d'Ardeche northwest of Marseille and with whom she left her now famous Notebooks before leaving for the United States. After her death, the latter two individuals were instrumental in publishing excerpts of her religious writing, through which she was first introduced to a larger readership. Finally, it was through her involvement with the Cahiers du Sud, which after the fall of Paris had become the most significant publication in the free zone, that she met Joë Bousquet, as well as several other authors.

At this time as well, Weil wanted more than anything else to participate actively in the war. This desire was consistent with her conviction that her place was

at the point in which the greatest number of human beings were subject to suffering and affliction. This is why she could dare to counsel Bousquet that he was fortunate to bear on his body the very same affliction that plagued so many at this time. She too wanted “the opportunity and the function of knowing the truth of the world’s affliction and comprehending its reality.”²⁷⁴ She formulated several plans in this direction, including the aforementioned front-line nurses’ corps. The implementation of this plan in particular consumed her from the time of its conception before the German invasion of France to the time of her death in England.²⁷⁵

In Marseille, Weil again attached herself to those on the margins of society, especially with Vietnamese workers who had been brought into France by the thousands to work in munitions factories. Following the armistice, they had flowed into Marseille and were housed in the future Baumettes prison, which was then under construction and was without heating or electricity. They were used and abused: given menial tasks, worked without pay for the profit of contractors, and often harshly treated. Pétrement quotes Dr. Bercher, a friend of the Weil family, who tells of one incident during the particularly cold winter of 1941 when these “men from the tropics” were scattered over the streets of Marseille and given brooms with which to clear the snow that had fallen. Simone was heartbroken to see these men “standing there in the middle of the snow, in their torn, ragged clothes, with not the faintest idea what they were supposed to do!”²⁷⁶ Bercher also tells of a common punishment in the camp which “was not physically cruel, but, it appears, many of them were terribly hurt by it. It consisted of shaving their heads, but only half their heads.”²⁷⁷ Weil

repeatedly intervened with the Vichy authorities on their behalf, and not without some success. She also concerned herself with refugees, mostly antifascists from neighbouring countries who had hurriedly been interred in camps. Hearing of one particular case, a young Spanish anarchist who received no letter or parcel, she entered into correspondence with him which she continued even after leaving France, sending him books as well as some money while trying hard to gain his release. Her biographer, Pétrement, as well as Marie-Louise David, who was herself involved early with the resistance, testify that Weil also helped Jewish refugees while she was in Marseille.²⁷⁸ She did not, however, identify herself as a Jewish refugee, though this is in fact what she was. Her further exposition of affliction was not without the influence of her own involvement with the lives of displaced and imprisoned people at this time.

Also in Marseille, while awaiting further developments in her own and her family's status, she felt it was time to effect another decision she had made some time ago. As with factory labour, she had considered immersing herself in work on the land. Again, for her this was much more than a learning exercise. It was an attempt at identification, a way of purification, and, it seems, a test of her own limits. To Thibon she wrote: "I want my time and the current of my thoughts, insofar as they depend on my body, to be subjected to the same necessities as those that weigh upon no matter what farmhand. . . ." ²⁷⁹ To her friend Gilbert Kahn she confided that she was prepared "to witness the extinction of my intelligence owing to fatigue. Nonetheless, I regard physical work as a purification—but a purification in the order

of suffering and humiliation. One can also find in it, in its very depths, instants of profound, nourishing joy that cannot be equalled elsewhere.”²⁸⁰ She certainly did not wish to base her identity on her intelligence or its products, both of which could easily be taken from her. “If there is something irreducible, it is that which has an infinite value. I am going to see whether this is so.”²⁸¹ To the Daumals, Weil admitted her natural fear of engaging in physical labour once again. She did not wish it, she told them. “It will certainly be hard morally and physically, and a part of myself is frightened by it.”²⁸² For Weil, this of course signalled a frontal attack. On the same subject, she wrote to Pétrement: “If I were so weak as to retreat before the harshness of the life that awaits me, I know that I could then never do anything else.”²⁸³ Moreover, at a time when she was conscious of so much suffering around her, she was impelled to identify herself in some aspect of it. On one point, at least, she agreed with the authorities in Vichy, who, having barred Jews from teaching in schools, directed them to engage themselves in production or work on the land.²⁸⁴ She wrote to Pétrement:

I haven't in me the energy to undergo pain and to suffer except when an inner necessity drives me that I feel I cannot avoid without betraying myself. When to this inner necessity an outer necessity is added, what power does it not acquire? Don't you feel how much this resolution helps me bear the misfortunes of the moment? The fatigues of my body and my soul are transformed into nourishment for a people who are hungry.²⁸⁵

The work of a grape harvester was indeed fatiguing for Weil. She even confessed to Thibon that at least once she wondered whether “hell did not consist in picking grapes eternally.”²⁸⁶ Yet her tone in describing this form of work is distinctly different

from that with which she reflected upon her factory experience. The humiliation of factory labour was absent, and in the direct contact with the soil she could give a kind of offering to those who were hungry. Again to Gilbert Kahn she related:

I work eight hours a day. . . . My employer and his family, with whom I live and eat, are excellent people and very considerate. They tell me that "I am keeping my end up" in the work, which gives me great pleasure. . . . Right at the bottom of my exhaustion I encounter joys that nothing else could give me and that prevent me from regretting the inevitable dwindling of my intellectual capacity. . . .²⁸⁷

To Xavier Vallat, then Commissioner of Jewish Affairs, she wrote her true sentiments in a letter dripping with irony.

I would like to express the sincere gratitude I feel toward the government for having removed me from the social category of intellectuals and given me the land and, with it, all of nature. For only those possess nature and the land who have been penetrated by it through the daily suffering of their limbs broken by fatigue. The days, the months, seasons, the celestial vault . . . belong to those who must cross the space of time that each day separates the rising from the setting of the sun by going painfully from fatigue to fatigue.²⁸⁸

When her friend Hélène Honnorat asked her, "but after all, Simone, why do you do this, with what you bear within you and what you have to say?" she replied, "There are things that I would not be able to say if I had not done these things."²⁸⁹

5. The Faculty of Attention

To appreciate fully what Weil was “able to say” about affliction in the latter part of her life, it is necessary to consider what she meant by a way of being which she named “attention.” The significance of attention for Weil cannot be overestimated because it is in fact one side of the key to understanding affliction. Affliction can finally be appreciated only through attention. In her “Spiritual Autobiography,” she tells Father Perrin of a crisis of despair she fell into early in her life, at the age of fourteen. She believed that her intellectual faculties were inferior to those of her brother, and that she was, therefore, almost convinced that unlike him, she was shut out of the “kingdom of truth,” the place where truth abides. She longed for admission into this kingdom above all else, and after “months of inward darkness,” she “suddenly had the everlasting conviction that any human being, even though practically devoid of natural faculties, can penetrate to the kingdom of truth reserved for genius, if only he longs for truth and perpetually concentrates all his attention upon its attainment.”²⁹⁰ This was, in mythical language, an embryonic awareness of what attention is. When, after coming out of the factories she was “in pieces, soul and body,” she was still waiting for the good, which she desired more than anything else, though she no longer hoped to find it in the world. All she could do was to reject any ersatz forms of the good—various conceptions of progress, the revolution, privileging a particular collectivity—that presented themselves before her.²⁹¹ She wrote in her “Marseille Notebooks”:

We desire the good . . . and it is not in this world. We cannot look for it outside this world. But if it comes itself to take possession of us, it is only if we have vainly sought for it in this world that we shall allow ourselves to be caught. If by means of a lie we have made ourselves believe that we have found it in this world, we shall not abandon ourselves to that which comes seeking us from beyond the world.²⁹²

Truth then, is what comes to us, but only when we have failed to find it after expending all of our effort. Our desperate struggle to get it brings us to the point of exhaustion, when absolutely nothing more can be done, like a runner who faints at the end of the race and needs another to come to her aid.

Though her short essay, "Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God," is not intended as a biographical statement and was in fact composed by Weil for Father Perrin and the students he became responsible for in the mission at Montpellier, it is an exposition of a practice she clearly engaged in, one which informed her thought and the direction of her life.²⁹³ She begins the essay by describing how school studies have as their true end the development of the faculty of attention that is ultimately directed to God: "prayer consists of attention," she writes in the first sentence.²⁹⁴ The point of school exercises, she says, is not the solution to a geometrical problem or the correct translation of a text, though the effort expended upon these is important enough. Rather, school exercises are valuable as a manifestation of the desire for some particle of truth (the correct solution or translation), which in itself "is a pure image of the unique, eternal, and living Truth, the very Truth that once in a human voice declared: 'I am the Truth.'"²⁹⁵ Thus, even if after long effort in trying to solve a geometric problem or in trying to translate a

Latin text, one feels one is no closer to a solution or a correct translation and one judges the effort to have been wasted, one has nevertheless made great progress in developing the faculty of attention. This progress will be revealed perhaps in an unrelated discipline, such as the appreciation of a few lines of poetry, later on. Even more important, however, this apparently barren effort develops the faculty of attention “which, directed toward God, is the very substance of prayer.”²⁹⁶ The seemingly barren effort, especially if it brings home to the student that his or her intelligence is limited, or even the realization that his or her failure is due to stupidity, can be the means of acquiring “the virtue of humility, and that is a far more precious treasure than all academic progress.”²⁹⁷ What she is speaking of here is, of course, very different from self-deprecation or low self-esteem. Rather, it is the reception of wisdom. Humility is foundational, because one no longer expects to gain truth through one’s own efforts, by the activity of investigating or searching. One has reached the limits of such effort. In other words, one has learnt how to attend to God. One has come closer to learning how to wait upon God for that spiritual nourishment that only the divine can provide.

The root of the French word *attention* signifies more clearly than its English cognate the quality of waiting, expectation, or longing.²⁹⁸ According to Weil, the truth comes only to those who wait and plead for it, but who do not move. In her words: “We do not obtain the most precious gifts by going in search of them, but by waiting for them. Man cannot discover them by his own powers, and if he sets out to seek for them he will find in their place counterfeits of which he will be unable to discern the

falsity.²⁹⁹

In attempting to consider Weil's life and thought as a whole, we detect that *attente* is not a passive or empty waiting. As an orientation of the soul it is a disciplined, expectant waiting for what is good, and for what, by definition, one cannot procure for oneself. Weil's social activity was the opposite of a passive waiting, and she did not encourage others to social passivity. In fact, her own short life is marked by the kind of activity that might consume two lifetimes. In her words: "To remain motionless does not mean to abstain from action. It is spiritual, not material immobility. But one must not act, or, indeed, abstain from acting, by one's own will."³⁰⁰ One will indeed act, but under a divine and not a natural necessity. To know the difference, one must know how to wait, since one's will only directs activity that will feed oneself. This self-directed activity cannot attend to God in prayer, i.e. waiting for the good which transcends the world. As we have seen in her exposure to the factory, she was keenly aware of how workers were constantly forced to wait: for work, for tools, for boxes, for orders, for payment. Yet what horrified her on the social plane she elevated to a virtue on the spiritual plane. Indeed, she considered it fitting for human beings to live in such a way that their life is a waiting for God to come, even as a slave waits for and upon his master.

The slave . . . waits near the door so as to open immediately the master knocks. . . . He must be ready to die of hunger and exhaustion rather than change his attitude. It must be possible for his companions to call him, talk to him, hit him, without his even turning his head. Even if he is told that the master is dead, and even if he believes it, he will not move. If he is told that the master is angry with him and will beat him when he returns, and if he believes it, he

will not move.³⁰¹

While she could affirm slavery as a form of complete devotion in the relationship between the human creature and God, it was clearly not an option between human beings themselves: "Slavery is contrary both to nature and reason." Yet "the right relationship with God is love, in action it is slavery. This distinction must be kept. We must act as becomes a slave while contemplating with love. . . ." ³⁰² Similarly she instructs the students at Montpelier that a little exercise of translating a Latin text is an attentive waiting, "for the right word to come of itself at the end of our pen, while merely rejecting all inadequate words." ³⁰³

In this vein, Weil then defines attention by relating what it is and what it is not. On the one hand, attention is not an effort in the sense of contracting certain muscles and trying hard to concentrate. Quite the opposite: "Attention consists of suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty, and ready to be penetrated by the object. . . ." ³⁰⁴ On the other hand, attention is "the greatest of all efforts . . . but it is a negative effort." ³⁰⁵ It does not involve the expenditure of muscular or mental energy to the point of exhaustion. Rather it involves far more, since our entire being flees from the demand of attention even as it flees from affliction. Here she intimates that the evil within us, in the form of the autonomous ego which keeps us far from God, also keeps us from contemplating affliction in our neighbour.

Something in our soul has a far more violent repugnance for true attention than the flesh has for bodily fatigue. This something is much more closely connected with evil than is the flesh. That is why every time that we really concentrate our attention, we destroy the evil in ourselves. If we concentrate with this intention, a quarter of an hour of attention is better than

a great many good works.³⁰⁶

It would certainly be wrong to conclude from the discussion thus far that attention was for Weil a mystical relationship between God and the soul without reference to the neighbour. “Souls which are absorbed in God without feeling compassion for human misery are still climbing and have not reached the stage of descending again (even though they apply themselves to good works).”³⁰⁷ She herself came to experience God, or more precisely, God came and found her, at the point in which she immersed herself fully in the condition of the afflicted, be they exhausted and dispirited factory workers, or victims of war who were deprived of all the physical and psychological means to repel the force which crushed them. When she witnessed to her possession by Christ, it was after she found herself totally unable to rebel at the indignity of factory labour, when she understood slavery under the necessities of life, when she was brutalised by her own physical pain and weakness. Her concern was for those who suffered, and at the point of her own exhaustion, she experienced the divine presence. In the latter part of her life she explicitly appreciated the integral connection between the two great commandments (cf. Mt. 22:36-40), “Whosoever genuinely loves God, even if he thinks he has forgotten God’s creatures, loves men without knowing it. Whosoever loves his neighbour as himself, even if he denies the existence of God, loves God.”³⁰⁸

This is the thrust of Weil’s reference to the Grail legend. To look upon the wounded neighbour with attention is tantamount to an eradication of evil in one’s self. In this context to ask, “what are *you* going through?” cannot be a self centred

act.³⁰⁹ The love of God as well as the love for the neighbour, she says, have attention as their substance. "Those who are unhappy have no need for anything in this world but people capable of giving them their attention. The capacity to give one's attention to a sufferer is a very rare and difficult thing; it is almost a miracle; it *is* a miracle. Nearly all those who think they have the capacity do not possess it. Warmth of heart, impulsiveness, pity are not enough."³¹⁰ She returned to this point often as if to underline the distinction between attention and philanthropy. The latter, for her, was a human effort, the former a divine operation. Why this is so is indicated even more dramatically in one of the last essays she wrote.

Thought revolts from contemplating affliction, to the same degree that living flesh recoils from death. A stag advancing voluntarily step by step to offer itself to the teeth of a pack of hounds is about as probable as an act of attention directed towards a real affliction, which is close at hand, on the part of a mind which is free to avoid it.

But that which is indispensable to the good and is impossible naturally is always possible supernaturally.³¹¹

The preparation for this kind of attention directed to God and the neighbour is a self-emptying. This is where the virtue of humility acquired through failure comes in. One's own power to secure the truth has been used (or used up) and found wanting.³¹² One is therefore not so full of one's self that there is no room for God or the "other." In the state of attention, one is not so dominated by one's own ego that he or she does not know that other people and things truly exist. In fact, the full expression of attention means that what one is attending to takes over one's self so that one is not even conscious that one is paying attention. In other words, one is so

absorbed in the contemplation of a piece of music, a text, a scene, or the afflicted neighbour, that at least for that moment, one is not fully conscious that one is so absorbed.

6. The Gravity of Affliction: A Dialogue With the Christian Tradition

Before elaborating on how attention can be directed to the afflicted, we need to consider Weil's mature reflections on affliction. These reflections are found in the remarkable essay she sent to Father Perrin in April of 1942 entitled: "The Love of God and Affliction."³¹³ Here she moves on from the particular contexts in which she first became aware of affliction, to consider it more generally as a possibility of the human condition. She begins her essay by isolating affliction from the category of simple suffering, and she does this by identifying its tripartite assault on human life. First, she states that on the one hand, affliction is inseparable from physical suffering. If there is no physical suffering, there is no affliction. Physical pain constitutes that irreducible core which cannot be jettisoned by a discipline of the mind. She maintains that even when one receives the news that a loved one has died, there may be a difficulty in breathing, a constriction of the heart, in other words a physical response. On the other hand, physical pain alone does not constitute affliction. If the pain is a temporary discomfort, once it is past it is promptly forgotten and the person who suffered it can move on with living their life. It is a different matter with pain that is chronic and insinuates itself into one's entire life; this can indeed be an affliction.

Second, even as affliction is not reducible to momentary physical pain, it is also not a “psychological state,” but “a pulverization of the soul by the mechanical brutality of circumstances.”³¹⁴ Weil makes this contrast to emphasize how affliction is not a disturbance of the personality, but the exposition of the misery inherent to the human condition. Certainly in a protracted state of affliction there no longer exist the lineaments of a personality that may be reintegrated, yet affliction even more profoundly is that “rent in the soul” which forces it to express the cry, “‘Why am I being hurt?’”³¹⁵ Feelings of contempt, disgust, guilt, and hatred, which do not arise from the perpetration of evil, but from the way in which one is treated, are turned against oneself—and over a definite period of time destroy a person from the inside. It is this turning against oneself that Weil came to know could be prevented by the love of God that comes to the soul which has not been closed to it. This divine love may often be imparted through the neighbour, and this is why she is so interested to emphasize the significance of attention. Thirdly, she identifies the social factor. What is determinative here is the element of humiliation. Again what is intended is not a matter of public insult. What she is pointing to is the social degradation and the exclusion from consideration within the human community—the isolation of one person or many, a child or an adult, as not worthy of basic human regard. One is treated and made to feel less than a human being. This third element is corrosive of the essential link, the capacity for relationship that is a defining characteristic of the social animal. “Men have the same carnal nature as animals. If a hen is hurt, the others rush up and peck it. The phenomenon is as automatic as gravitation. Our

senses attach to affliction all the contempt, all the revulsion, all the hatred which our reason attaches to crime.”³¹⁶ In each of these factors and in all of them together, the point to underline is that a limit has been crossed and the physical, psychological, and social integrity of the person is broken. The life so struck is “uprooted” from its milieu, or we may say the afflicted feel like “fish out of water,” such that sources of identity, strength, and comfort, are either not accessible or they are not available. The afflicted can no longer resist their own degradation.

Weil also maintains a distinction between affliction and various sources of suffering that may be given a doctrinal foundation. One such source is the suffering that is considered to be due to sin. Put simply: those who sin will suffer its consequences. Though in the biblical tradition as a whole, the equation is not simply, sin = punishment: there is an interplay between choice, action, and consequence in sin as symbolized in the story of the Fall. Sin is consequent upon a certain way of existing and acting in the world. A corrective is necessary, however, because in some forms, especially of the popularized tradition, sin and moral action have too often been directly connected with what is deserved, a connection that is all too easily and speedily made which is yet challenged by biblical texts, preeminently in the book of Job as well as in other passages (Ps. 73:1-14), and in Jesus’s ministry (Lk. 13:4; Jn. 9:2-3). Using Weil’s own examples, we may restate the more complex view of sin which differs from a pre-liberal orthodoxy that too easily equates sin with suffering, as well as a liberalism which would break the connection altogether and thus remove the “sting” of sin.³¹⁷ In a text such as Reflections, Weil recognized that as finite

creatures, human beings struggle to exist in a world of material necessity. In this struggle they are tempted in the face of their own finitude to grasp at infinity, to make their own life rather than, to phrase it in biblical terms, receiving it at every moment from their Creator's hand. Sin is the exercise of the will-to-be at the expense of the other; it is giving in to the anxiety of self-preservation by devouring space, as it were, into which the ego can expand. Especially within the collectivity, sin is the exercise of power to its extreme limit. Its seed-bed is the anxious struggle for power which goes beyond the call of nature to survive, and becomes a naked struggle in and for itself with no other end in sight. The action of the Athenian navy over the inhabitants of Melos is a classic example of what goes on in human life on the earth, and the label "sin" can be unequivocally applied to it.

Yet even here there is an element of tragedy which is not usually acknowledged. Basically the Athenians tell the Melians: "We cannot help ourselves, for it is not in our hands to choose to obey what is in effect a necessary law. You too in our place would behave in exactly the same way; you would command wherever you had the power to do so." Weil does not dispute that this is what in effect happens in human relations, and the admittance of this brutal fact, she declares, "is the light that comes immediately below that of charity."³¹⁸ There is a sense in which the sin is greater than the sinner—the evil surpasses its instrument. Those responsible for the affliction of others are, as it were, tiles blown off a roof. "Their only fault is the initial choice by which they became those tiles."³¹⁹ Though they seek to justify their injustice by elevating it to a necessary law, its consequences are disastrous not only

and initially for the Melians but for the Athenians as well. First, in slaughtering and enslaving a population of people who begged to be left alone, the Athenians undermined an essential quality of being human—their own receptivity to the good. They may have been convinced that their reasoning was based on the solid foundation of natural necessity, but they were in fact obeying necessity just as tiles blown off the roof obey the wind currents which carry them. Their action arose from the perspective of themselves as the centre of value. To spare the Melians would require grace, to see them from “God’s side.”³²⁰ It would be to forego the use of the force momentarily under their disposal. Second, while they exercise power now, it is not theirs to possess. It will change hands, and they too will be on the receiving end of the sword, without any legitimate appeal for justice. This change of fortune, however, cannot be simply classified as punishment because of what takes place even within those who are punished. When punishment begins to destroy its recipient and deform his humanity, the effect goes beyond the category of suffering due to sin. Here the coveted distinction between oppressors and oppressed fails. No body, no thing, is being made better or redeemed in this destruction. It is a “black hole.”

There is a further distinction between sin and affliction which Weil makes more explicitly. She declares that those who are “struck down by affliction are at the foot of the Cross, almost at the greatest possible distance from God. It must not be thought that sin is a greater distance. Sin is not a distance, it is a turning of our eyes in the wrong direction.”³²¹ Affliction strikes without cause. According to her, more than anyone else, the afflicted wish to know the links between cause and effect, to

classify their affliction, to conceptualize it and imbue it with meaning. Perversely, however, all such attempts by themselves or by others prove to be illusory.

Why? Why are things as they are? The afflicted man naively seeks an answer, from men, from things, from God, even if he disbelieves in him, from anything or everything. Why is it necessary precisely that he should have nothing to eat, or be worn out with fatigue and brutal treatment, or be about to be executed, or be ill, or be in prison? If one explained to him the causes which have produced his present situation, and this is in any case seldom possible because of the complex interaction of circumstances, it will not seem to him to be an answer. For his question 'Why?' does not mean 'By what cause?' but 'For what purpose?' And it is impossible, of course, to indicate any purpose to him; unless we invent some imaginary ones, but that sort of invention is not a good thing.³²²

The suffering that is affliction is incommensurate with any explanation which may be given in terms of the consequences due to sin. Affliction is an articulation of reality that is not encompassed by the categories of sin, repentance, and redemption. Theologian Wendy Farley offers several examples of the type of disteleological suffering which "rips the mask of beauty and wonder off the face of creation" to reveal "a hideous, gaping sore. . . ."³²³ The abused little girl, the victim of torture, the housewife who suffers in silence and then commits suicide, the veteran soldier who is emotionally broken because he was impotent to act in the face of the horrors he has witnessed: these are not sinners in need of redemption, their anguish cannot be atoned, and their humanity cannot be given back to them whole—it is lost forever leaving a "gaping sore." In the face of this reality to respond with indignation, even "righteous indignation" is woefully inadequate. Indignation itself is a feeble response to the hideousness of affliction. What does indignation matter in the face of the

actuality of the dissolution of the soul under force? This overwhelming incomprehensibility, which in effect takes over the person, is what throws the afflicted at the foot of the cross. "Christ was afflicted."³²⁴ Weil is not basing this claim on the gospel witness that Jesus as the Christ chose and knew, as the bearer of the world's sin, the reason for his crucifixion (e.g. Matt. 26:53-54, 56; Jn. 19:28, 30). Rather, she bases this claim on the cry of dereliction (Mk. 15:34).

As has been mentioned, sin for Weil is centred in the autonomous self which has plenty of energy left to grasp at what it feels is necessary for its sustenance. She maintains the relations between suffering and sin, in the sense that suffering may tempt one to sin and sin may accentuate suffering. In affliction, however, the whole person is overwhelmed. At this point, when a cry of pain is heard, says Weil, it is "impersonal." It does not arise from the self, but involuntarily, from the fact that the whole person is being crushed. This cry, often inaudible to the powers that be, is not a personal protest but rather an innocent cry: "Why am I being hurt?"³²⁵ To use her metaphor, one is like a half-crushed worm left writhing on the ground. Movement is basically instinctive like the shiver of a slave under the lash. The body may be moving but without the benefit of personal volition or control. It is the case that, if the afflicted are revived by some genuine kindness shown toward them, they may be capable of frightful violence, but even for this to occur, they must be raised for a moment from their affliction.³²⁶

In Weil's conception of human existence, we live under necessity. This is the order of matter, space, and time, of which we are made, in which we exist, and which

may weigh upon any human being. The afflicted upon whom necessity weighs as force are at the farthest remove from God as perfection, or the good. This pressing down of necessity in a myriad of forms, from sickness to torture, upon any human being, is not a matter of choice. Affliction is not a form of divine punishment, and it is precisely its arbitrariness and anonymity, which defies classification. "The good, the bad, and the ugly" may be indifferently thrown into affliction.

Another example of suffering in the Christian tradition to which Weil points as distinct from affliction, is the suffering of martyrdom. Here suffering is not consequent upon wrongdoing but upon well-doing. There is evidence from the accounts of martyrs themselves, or accounts by those not directly involved, that at least in the first centuries of the church's existence, martyrdom was faced not only for the sake of Christ but also in an attempted imitation of him. Moreover, there is in some of the earliest accounts of martyrdom, or its anticipation, a certain eagerness, even "lust," to encounter the dread showdown with the forces of darkness. In his epistle to the Romans, Ignatius is able to say: "May I have joy of the beasts that have been prepared for me; and I pray that I may find them prompt; nay I will entice them that they may devour me promptly. . . . Yea though of themselves they should not be willing . . . I myself will force them to it."³²⁷ Near the end of this epistle he can declare, "I write to you in the midst of life, yet lusting after death."³²⁸ In her prison journal, Perpetua, a young woman, writes of the anguish of her father who, tearing hairs from his beard, throwing them on the ground, then throwing himself on the ground, said "such words as would move all creation."³²⁹ He entreats her on several

occasions: "Give up your pride!"³³⁰ Even the Roman governor who will pass sentence upon her tries to dissuade her: "Have pity on your father's grey head; have pity on your infant son. Offer the sacrifice for the welfare of the emperors."³³¹ Though Perpetua has only recently given birth and is suckling a baby, she refuses. Then the governor passes sentence. Perpetua writes: "We were condemned to the beasts, and we returned to prison in high spirits."³³² A witness to the ordeal describes the day of execution for Perpetua and the martyrs with her: "They marched from the prison to the amphitheatre joyfully as though they were going to heaven, with calm faces, trembling, if at all, with joy rather than fear."³³³

On her part, Weil maintains that Christ's passion should not be taken as an example of martyrdom. She would thus reject a phrase such as "the martyrdom of Christ."³³⁴ In the face of affliction, Christ begged the Father to be spared; he asked his friends to stay with him; he cried out in the moment he felt completely forsaken by God and humankind. There was no consolation to the agony, either in inner conviction, or in friends, or in the Father. In Weil's words, "There is a prestige belonging to the martyr of which he [Christ] was entirely deprived. Also he did not go to his martyrdom in joy, but in a swoon of all the powers of the soul, after having vainly implored his Father to spare him and having vainly asked men to console him."³³⁵ First he was ridiculed as a pretender, and then his life was taken with criminals, like a criminal. Unlike the martyrs who sang the hymns of the church as they entered the arena and were surrounded by a community of prayer, Christ on the cross felt himself to be accursed.³³⁶ The martyrs had a reason and a hope with which

they resisted their persecutors. In this respect they were different from the afflicted—unless the impact of their suffering was such that they forgot the reason for their persecution. For no higher purpose may be offered as a reason for the internal destruction of a human being, and the potential victim may be anyone at all. The key is that the crushing blow is incommensurate with any reason which may be given for it. It is in this sense that the condemned criminal about to be executed, and thus denied any future life, is closer to Christ on the cross than the martyr who has been celebrated in history and legend as courageously encountering death.

We need to point out, however, that Weil's distinction between affliction and martyrdom is based on accounts of the first Christian martyrs. Her definition of a martyr's suffering is restricted to what is in effect a deliberate act of witness in the name of Christ as Saviour/Lord, and in defiance of any ascription of glory to the powers that be, as well as in communion with a clearly defined community of faith identified with the name of Jesus as the Christ of God. In his discussion of martyrdom, Jürgen Moltmann recognizes another species of martyrs who are our contemporaries. Again the names Moltmann offers (Paul Schneider, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Arnulfo Romero) each chose to resist the powers that be and knew why they suffered and died.³³⁷ Both their life and their death stand as a testimony against power that is exercised to the limit of its potential. All were strengthened rather than weakened in their assurance through the course of their torment. Yet, while Moltmann does not state this, even to them assurance and peace did not come easily. There were indeed nights in Gethsemane. "I hear my own soul tremble and heave"

wrote Bonhoeffer in his poem "Night Voices in Tegel."³³⁸ And again in "Who Am I?" he says, "restless and longing and sick, like a bird in a cage, struggling for breath, as though hands were compressing my throat."³³⁹ When we read such writing, we enter the intimate space between God and God's people. Moltmann also recognizes a salient feature of martyrdom in this century to be its anonymity. "Today martyrs are tortured to death and then 'disappear'. No one knows the place where they were murdered, no one finds their bodies, and no one knows their names. The public forum is deliberately denied today's martyrs."³⁴⁰ It may be added moreover that, where martyrs are known and recognized as such, it is by others and not of themselves. What remains valid in Weil's distinction here is that, in affliction, the individual life is so deformed that it cannot access any sources of strength to defy evil. Consumed by inertia and resignation, horror-struck objects of disgust, the afflicted take no comfort from the past and look forward to no future that will save them. Unlike the afflicted, martyrs may stand in a tradition of witness, defiance, and resistance: through their own suffering they point to their crucified Lord. And yet between the prayer, "not my will but thy will be done" and the horror of martyrdom, lies "the valley of the shadow" in which martyrs too stand alone.

For the afflicted, according to Weil, there are three possible responses to the cross corresponding to the three crosses on the mound outside Jerusalem. Like the impenitent thief, the afflicted can "seek consolation in contempt and hatred for [their] fellows in misfortune."³⁴¹ They thus transform their suffering (whether it is sickness, or the violence of others) into sin. Being destroyed in this way without their consent

is a “quasi-infernal suffering.”³⁴² Another response is for the afflicted, and for any of us who may be plunged into it, to take our part with the penitent thief in consenting to our own affliction knowing that we have been accomplices in injustice even by our indifference. In our affliction we feel the shock of our own sin.³⁴³ Our suffering may then become expiatory.³⁴⁴ Finally there are those who are crucified with Christ on his cross. They are the innocent who are plunged into affliction. They are vulnerable to evil and hurt by its attack, but not degraded by it. In touching them, evil is not multiplied by being returned in kind through bitterness, hatred, and violence; evil is experienced as suffering. They are those who have been “decreated.” “Affliction can no longer destroy the ‘I’ in [them]; for the ‘I’ no longer exists in [them], having entirely disappeared and made room for God.”³⁴⁵ This does not mean they are vacuous, but that through their consent, the divine life is mediated through them to their neighbour. They do not take Christ’s place on the cross but take their place with him. Their suffering is redemptive. Weil understands the redemptive act quite specifically as a transmutation of evil into suffering. The indissoluble mixture of evil and suffering when it breaks upon the innocent is sundered. Only the suffering remains because evil is not passed on, it is not perpetuated but borne, and the price is life which is given for the sake of others.³⁴⁶ The context of redemptive suffering is social life in the world. The figures Weil recognizes are the just man of Plato, the suffering servant of Deutero-Isaiah, the Lamb of God.³⁴⁷

To suffer evil is the only way of destroying it.

No action destroys evil, but only the apparently useless and perfectly patient

suffering of it. . . .

Purity attracts evil, which rushes to it like moths to a flame, to be destroyed.³⁴⁸

Yet a question remains which Weil does not address. What of the little ones who are afflicted and have not had the chance to consent to the destruction of the “I” from within?³⁴⁹ Farley cites a frightful example of a mother witnessing the torture of her child. “At one point, I realized that my daughter was in front of me. I even managed to touch her: I felt her hands. ‘Mummy, say something, anything to make this stop,’ she was saying. I tried to embrace her but they prevented me. They separated us violently. They took her to an adjacent room and there, there I listened in horror as they began to torture her with electricity!”³⁵⁰ It is for the cries and tears of these little ones that Dostoyevski’s Ivan Karamazov rebels against the possibility of any “eternal harmony.” “How” says Weil, “could we believe it possible to find a compensation for this evil, since because of it God suffered crucifixion?”³⁵¹ On our part, can we not say that these little ones are on the cross with Christ? Upon them evil breaks out in its radical fury and neither cross on either side is theirs. There is a risk in the application of symbols at the very limits of what we can conceive and name. Yet we are called through the theological discipline to know and understand this aspect of creation also. We cannot create the truth, but we struggle to know it. According to Weil, innocence and decreation are coterminous. The innocent are those who no longer possess a grasping ego. Innocence is not *naïveté*. “To be innocent is to bear the weight of the entire universe. It is to throw away the counterweight.”³⁵² In other words, the innocent are completely exposed to evil and do not shield

themselves from it. Children who are plunged into affliction have not had the chance to gain the innocence Weil speaks of. Yet their suffering is not expiatory. May it not be said then that these are indeed crucified with Christ? The presumption is not that their affliction is atoned for: how can it be? Nor are they called to atone for the world's suffering. Simply, on the cross they are present before God and with God.

Weil proceeds to probe further the almost unbridgeable chasm which she maintains exists between those struck by affliction and those who are not. There is no state in nature to compare affliction with except perhaps "a half-crushed worm," and this almost ridiculous analogy serves to emphasize how difficult it is to place it within any prevalent conceptual grid.³⁵³ As for the afflicted themselves who may be the only ones able to communicate the experience to those unaffected by it, they are like the half-crushed worm in human form, not only unable to speak because they are overwhelmed by the experience, but perhaps also not even fully aware of what is happening to them. This numbing or lack of awareness is related to their conception of time. The afflicted are not dead, but neither can they honestly conceive any future for themselves, even like the warrior who is still alive but can be killed at any moment, or like the condemned prisoner who is forced to look for hours upon the guillotine under which his life will be taken from him.³⁵⁴ In affliction there is no progress from point A to point B; one is forced to feel and to know pain, degradation, and humiliation, without any consolation or compensation—ever. To the extent that they are not dead, there remains within them an inchoate urge to exist which is simultaneously pushed back into nothingness. In her "Marseille Notebooks," Weil

describes how this urge in the afflicted can take form in an ugly mutation of life.

In affliction, the vital instinct survives the attachments which have been torn away, and fastens itself blindly to everything that can provide it with support, like a plant fastens its tendrils. Gratitude (except . . . in a degraded form) and justice are inconceivable in this state Affliction, under this aspect, is hideous, as life in its nakedness always is; like an amputated limb, or the swarming of insects. Life without form. Survival is then the one and only attachment. That is where extreme affliction begins. . . . Attachment appears then in its nakedness, without any other object than itself. Hell.³⁵⁵

Extrapolating from what she has said, an example of this "hell" is an addict who lives, breathes, and moves, for the next "fix." The next fix only maintains an existence which is geared exclusively to the procurement of more of the same. This is an intolerable situation, yet it can persist for the length of a life. Thinking of Roman slaves, she declares: "The slave is a man to whom no good of any kind is offered as the end and object of all his fatigue, except mere existence."³⁵⁶ So also is the victim of torture, who is molested to the point of death and is slowly allowed to recover only to be tortured again with no end in sight. Such a phenomenon is more than disgusting; it is horrifying, because it is the vision of the destruction of creation. The limit is being reached and passed beyond which it is hard to make out what makes a human being.

Those who are plunged into affliction can become its accomplices. Weil likens this process to the interaction between a parasite and its host. People may become established in their own affliction to the extent that they lose the capacity not only to consider the possibilities of deliverance, but even to refuse to accept

deliverance when it is offered to them. It is as if affliction has claimed them, and looking at them, one may erroneously conclude that they are "quite contented."³⁵⁷ She tries to penetrate to the very bottom of this condition. She considers the real possibility that a person may be relieved of the afflicting circumstance or agent, and yet the experience may have effected permanent damage. Those permanently branded by it may no longer want liberation and are impelled to embrace their affliction. Their suffering has taken over so much of who they are that they do not want to be relieved of it, and will lash out at anyone who tries to help them. This possibility raises disturbing questions for any program of liberation. The issue is not the liberation of those who have kept a shred of their personal dignity, wish to be liberated, and ideally conceive and execute their own liberation. Rather the question becomes, what is to be the response to those we come face to face with who are afflicted, those who despise what they are and embittered with the world, who have no centre out of which to conceive their own liberation and have no capacity to accept the possibilities for it?

If the affliction has been ended as the result of some kindness, it may take the form of hatred for the benefactor; this is the cause of certain apparently inexplicable acts of savage ingratitude. It is sometimes easy to deliver an unhappy man from his present distress, but it is difficult to set him free from his past affliction. Only God can do it. And even the grace of God himself cannot cure irremediably wounded nature in this world. The glorified body of Christ bore the marks of nail and spear.³⁵⁸

We need to elaborate on two points arising from this quotation, for it is indicative of Weil's intuitive insight into the condition she is describing. The first is

the aspect of ingratitude or savagery which may be displayed by the afflicted. Her insight is indeed remarkable because—in the case of crime, as well as some other forms of affliction which she mentions, such as prostitution—it can only be the result of a striking empathy on her part.³⁵⁹ Of criminals and prostitutes she observes, they are the recipients of contempt—the very opposite of attention. Almost no one, unless they exercise attention, can know what is happening to these human beings, what they are going through. The automatic reaction in fact is like the henpecking of the injured victim, because in this condition, defilement is exposed without any social covering. Moreover the social contempt is concentrated through the penal system that handles criminals to defile them even beyond their crime, while they themselves have no power to deflect it. She did recognize that the afflicted may be more or less guilty or innocent, victimizers or victims, and she considered that affliction is felt differently in each case. The horror that is felt “is in exact proportion to the innocence. Those who are completely rotten receive no injury and do not suffer.”³⁶⁰ On the one hand she states that “Evil dwells in the heart of the criminal without being felt there. It is felt in the heart of the man who is afflicted and innocent. Everything happens as though the state of the soul appropriate for criminals had been separated from crime and attached to affliction. . . .”³⁶¹ Victimizers can shield themselves from their own affliction by sinking into moral insensitivity or by flinging their own affliction onto the weaker beings around them, like the impenitent thief whose hatred serves as a relief from his affliction.³⁶² On the other hand, she is conscious that even the victims, once plunged into affliction, are severely tempted to corruption: “It is

always possible for an afflicted man to suffer less by consenting to become wicked.”³⁶³ In fact, “This is the commonest effect of real affliction; it was so in the case of Roman slavery. People who are surprised when they observe such a state of mind in the afflicted would almost all fall into it themselves if affliction struck them.”³⁶⁴ We may conclude from what she is saying that the effect of affliction is accentuated to the extent that one refuses to pass it on and remains innocent. This is in fact the truth revealed preeminently in the passion of Christ, who is innocent and yet takes in the extreme of evil in the form of affliction passed on to him, and in him it is transformed into pure suffering; i.e. it is not passed on as evil. It is in effect absorbed and goes no further.³⁶⁵

The second point which requires some elaboration arises from her rather cryptic remark that “even the grace of God . . . cannot cure irremediably wounded nature in this world.” In her view the incarnation does not result in the elimination of affliction, but is a manifestation of the divine presence even in the most degrading of human conditions. When the divine is sensed in the midst of affliction, the dynamics are changed. We are, says Weil, “like shipwrecked persons clinging to logs upon the sea,” at the mercy of the waves, except that to each of us God throws down a rope. The one who takes it and holds on is still in the sea buffeted by the waves except that his buffeting is combined with the tension of the rope, “to form a different mechanical whole.”³⁶⁶ This is fine for those who can take hold of the rope, but what of those who are mortally wounded, those in effect who can no longer have a relationship to the good? As we mentioned earlier, Weil believed that while divine

love cannot prevent the hatred and revulsion which by definition the afflicted turn upon themselves, it can prevent this internalization from corroding the very centre of the soul. She defines this centre as “the longing for an absolute good, a longing which is always there and is never appeased by any object in the world.”³⁶⁷ She also speaks of “something” in every human being present “from earliest infancy until the tomb,” which “goes on indomitably expecting, in the teeth of all experience of crimes committed, suffered, and witnessed, that good and not evil will be done to him.”³⁶⁸ She maintains that “It is this above all that is sacred in every human being.”³⁶⁹ Although she does not use the term, this description can be called, in biblical language, the *imago dei*, especially when this *imago* is appreciated, as theologian Douglas John Hall points out, not as a substance one possesses, but as “a quality of the relationship between creature and Creator.”³⁷⁰ This relational openness, then, which Weil highlights as “the longing for an absolute good,” and the foundational expectation that good would be done to us and not evil, in other words our very link with the divine, can be broken.

Weil does not elaborate upon this, and it is not clear what condition of humanity she has in mind. She does intimate, however, that affliction may so harden the soul that even after one was freed from its effect, like the hardened criminal released from prison, one was not free indeed. When she speaks of the “grace of God” in this context, the intention is that the soul may or may not consent to the divine presence in it. As we will see, she exposes the condition of affliction in order to consider whether and how there can be a link between it and the good.

Nevertheless it would seem that in this statement she has in mind persons who are beyond the pale, those who carry physically upon their body and psychically within their soul permanent wounds, even those who are forever destroyed. This conclusion would seem to be corroborated by a passage in her "New York Notebook," wherein she describes the trajectory by which, in affliction, the soul is submerged in darkness: beauty cannot be appreciated, love cannot be attached to anything, and if in this condition one ceases to love, one may lose permanently all contact with the good. "If as I believe is possible, there is a limit which one can pass, in this world, and beyond which there is no further hope of salvation, I would like to believe that those who have passed it are insensible, even to physical pain, or almost."³⁷¹ An immediate reaction from the perspective of Christian faith might be to answer negatively to Weil at this point. Yet the gospels themselves are not without a certain severe judgement. "If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones . . . it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea" (Mt. 18:6; cf. Mk. 9:42, Lk. 17:2). Again in another context: "The Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that one by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that one not to have been born" (Mt. 26:24; cf. Mk. 14:21).

Considering this matter, Miklos Vetö comments that "the real question is whether the depth of our soul is really exempt from destruction or eternal punishment"³⁷² He concludes that Weil's answer is equivocal. Further in her thinking, detailed in her "New York Notebook," she writes that repentance is possible

even when crime has “impregnated the soul to the point where it is totally poisoned,” but this “repentance implies a total rending away from oneself, and there cannot be such repentance without sanctity.”³⁷³ She adds, moreover, that “this only happens to criminals who are in affliction. The prosperous ones do not have their crime deeply enough embedded in their souls.”³⁷⁴ In commenting on the final petition of the Lord’s Prayer, she declares that humility consists in being prepared and knowing that nothing in us may be exempt from violation and destruction, but at the same time we must “repudiate the possibility that the supernatural part of the soul should disappear.”³⁷⁵ That is the part of us that is not our own will, our “I,” but the capacity to consent, to say “yes” to God.

One contemporary of Weil who resonated with her description of the afflicted and who ostensibly saw no possibility beyond their hopelessness, is the playwright Samuel Beckett.³⁷⁶ In Waiting for Godot he explores the trajectory of affliction with bleak scenery and stark dialogue. The two main characters Estragon and Vladimir enter the stage as attenuated beings calling each other by the diminutives Gogo and Didi. Vestiges of their wounded pride remain. Estragon is still self-absorbed, he complains of being beaten, of his aching feet, is surprised at having lost his rights, is preoccupied with being fed, etc.. In a more noble vein Vladimir is preoccupied with questioning his life and getting his salvation. He has not yet dropped the struggle to live. When in the very first line of the play Estragon pronounces what becomes the refrain—“Nothing to be done.”—Vladimir responds: I’m beginning to come round to that opinion. All my life I’ve tried to put it from me, saying, Vladimir, be

reasonable, you haven't yet tried everything. And I resumed the struggle."³⁷⁷ He is a step away from despair but has not yet given in to it, the implication being that it is only a matter of time. A bit of dialogue between these two characters recalls Weil's frightful analogy of the afflicted as half-crushed worms.

VLADIMIR: Nothing you can do about it.

ESTRAGON: No use struggling.

VLADIMIR: One is what one is.

ESTRAGON: No use wriggling.

VLADIMIR: The essential doesn't change.

ESTRAGON: Nothing to be done.³⁷⁸

The main characters, who are themselves on the edge of the abyss, are visited by two others one of whom, Pozzo, is seemingly better off than Estragon and Vladimir and the other, Lucky, who only has one step left to fall to the very bottom. Pozzo enters with apparent exhilaration at his own identity and magnanimously declares to Vladimir and Estragon: "You are human beings. . . . As far as one can see. Of the same species as myself. Of the same species as Pozzo! Made in God's image!"³⁷⁹ He does not, however, consider them his equals. Yet there are small signs that all is not well with Pozzo either. Existence bears upon him too: he is rather lonely, his health is failing, the initial exhilaration in his own humanity is questioned, he slowly loses his possessions, and his life is nearing its end. Through the first act his failure inexorably continues. In the second act, Pozzo is not the same person. He is a mass of need: blind, in great physical pain, disoriented, and now worse off than Estragon and Vladimir who treat him cruelly. The character Lucky, however, is the one most

clearly fallen into affliction.³⁸⁰ Pozzo refers to him as “pig;” he is a slave, a mass of vital instincts stripped of all trace of personality. Pozzo knows “you can’t drive such creatures away. The best thing would be to kill them.”³⁸¹ Initially Lucky is treated as a curiosity by Estragon and Vladimir who lamely attempt to pity him. When they try to help him, Lucky lashes out at them and their superficial regard for him is soon reduced to dread and hatred. In the second act Lucky even loses his ability for a sort of mechanical speech, and can no longer respond to oral commands. His attention is gained by pulling hard on the rope around his neck as well as a taste of the boot, “in the face and the privates as far as possible.”³⁸² Beckett’s characters recall Weil’s own description: “In those who have suffered too many blows, in slaves for example, that place in the heart from which the infliction of evil evokes a cry of surprise may seem to be dead. But it is never quite dead; it is simply unable to cry out anymore. It has sunk into a state of dumb and ceaseless lamentation.”³⁸³

7. Attention to Affliction: The Love of Neighbour

We have engaged with Weil in an analysis of affliction in order to appreciate the depth that love needs to reach if it is to be a love of the afflicted. It is clear from her exposition of affliction that she is not busied with a form of disengaged investigation; such an investigation can be defined in terms of the isolation of an object of study, a research method applied to it, and results obtained, with a view to ever refined understanding, control, and eventually, technical application. She was herself

absorbed in observing carefully a particular situation, which she then describes in terms of its physical, psychological, and social ramifications. In fact her form of attention is not active and it is not objective because self-directed activity would preclude knowledge of affliction, and disengagement from this condition is in fact what serves to deny it, cover it up, and distort it. She was opened to a condition which, in her time, she saw to be overtaking many, but one which was nevertheless hidden and misunderstood. The political parties and regimes in power, the unions, the educational system, the intellectual elite, the organization of factories, the courts, the military apparatus—in effect all the dominant social actualisations of a certain world-view—were inimical to a true regard for affliction.

The dominant modes of scientific practice also led away from contemplation of the truth and toward the accumulation of knowledge divorced from love. The scientific enterprise had become a materialist examination of the constituents of matter and the goal was mastery through technical manipulation. She also considered it as only too obvious, once the situation was examined closely, that scientists themselves, like other savants, were motivated in their work by considerations other than the search for truth. In itself, truth was insufficient as a stimulant. “Professional advancement, professorships, rewards of all kinds, honours and money, receptions abroad, the esteem and admiration of colleagues, reputation, fame, titles—all that counts for a great deal.”³⁸⁴ In contrast, the truth was available to genius, but the signature of genius is “the supernatural virtue of humility in the domain of thought.”³⁸⁵ Weil considered that the discipline of science was therefore cut off from

its *telos* which was the discovery that the universe was a creation of love, and therefore not something to overcome but to contemplate and to love in return. A science which (according to her since the nineteenth century) busied itself with the accumulation of recipes or formulae in the service of the drive to an ever-increasing ability to dominate matter, was one which had lost its *telos*, or any foundation and principle greater than itself. She was thus critical of a “conception of science whose object is placed beyond good and evil, especially beyond good; viewed without any relation either to good or evil, but especially without any relation to good. . . . Facts, force, matter, isolated, considered singly, without reference to anything else—there is nothing here that a human mind can love.”³⁸⁶

In an essay which examines Weil’s influence on George Grant, and Weil’s significant appreciation of the relationship between knowledge and truth, W.R. Sheppard points out that when Weil prefers to speak of “the spirit of truth in love rather than the love of truth” (since truth is not an object but always refers to something), she points to “the impossibility of loving anything which is thrown over against ourselves as an ‘object’.”³⁸⁷ This objectification or squeezing out of facts is wholly inadequate and inappropriate for the appreciation of the universe of which we are a part. Rather, she was convinced that the condition of knowledge is love. “Man cannot exert his intelligence to the full *without charity*, because the only source of light is God. Therefore the faculty of supernatural love is higher than the intelligence, and is its condition. *The love of God is the unique source of all certainties.*”³⁸⁸ What this implies for the thinking creature is that the kind of human being one is, is

integrally related to what one is allowed to know. She points out that in the Gorgias only naked judges judging naked souls judge justly; nakedness exposes truth which is otherwise hidden by outer appearances (in the form of prestige, wealth, social rank, political connections, success).³⁸⁹ We are allowed to know, then, only to the extent that our inner eye (the eye of the soul) or our entire being is turned toward the good. This turning, according to Weil and following Plato, involves a renunciation, even the death of the "I." The coveted elements which attach one to the world are torn away. This renunciation turned toward God and the neighbour is love, which is not a subjective emotion but the actual disposition of the entire being toward the (O)ther. It is then that one can be said to be, not simply knowledgeable but wise. This wisdom moreover is a gift not procurable through a human effort.

Those who regard wisdom as something which human nature is able to acquire believe that when somebody has become wise it means that a human effort has put into him something which was not there before.

Plato, on the other hand, thinks that the man who has attained to true wisdom has nothing more in him than before, because the wisdom is not in him but is coming into him all the time from elsewhere, that is to say, from God. All the man has done is to turn towards the source of wisdom, to become converted.³⁹⁰

As we indicated earlier, in Weil's conception of attention, to regard the afflicted cannot be a human effort. It is against nature to look upon human existence without the covering of power, prestige, health, wealth, etc., in other words, in its nakedness. One has to be prepared for the death of everything the "I" holds dear to look upon that. The self is, so to speak, burst open to the reality of the other.

While Weil's regard for other human beings was informed by Kant's maxim to treat others not as means but as ends in themselves, she is not in line with Kant when he declares that judging others entails an impartial, "rational" viewpoint. Mary Dietz points out that distance, according to Kant, is that which provides an impartial perspective free from the entanglements of prejudice. Weil too considers that "self-regarding motives" are an obstacle to attention, but "she rejects the idea that attention involves a distancing or the achievement of some Archimedean point from which the impartial 'I' can then engage."³⁹¹ For Weil the issue of distance between those who are in a position to help the afflicted and the afflicted themselves is critical. For those who cannot attend and therefore cannot help the afflicted, the distance is too great to cross. It is so great they may either not notice the afflicted or, if they do, they are either physically repulsed or, like the victor over the vanquished, they cannot believe they are of the same species. It is quite otherwise for those who, like the Good Samaritan, sense no distance whatsoever between themselves and the afflicted. If they think of the distance at all, they know that anything whatsoever can precipitate them to the very same spot, and this intimate knowledge transports them to the same level as the bleeding mass of flesh beside the road. In her essay "Forms of the Implicit Love of God," Weil makes a telling point which recurs again in her comments on the love of the neighbour. Weil maintains that the distance that is bridged through attention does not involve God directly. Compassion for the afflicted initiates an automatic response, like eating when one is hungry. Just as one eats one gives. One does not eat for God's sake; one eats because one is hungry. "Christ," says Weil,

“will thank the people who give in the way they eat.”³⁹² When the attention of the “just” is drawn to the one in need, all of their energy is concentrated upon this need. It is not the time to think about God. “Just as there are times when we must think of God and forget all creatures without exception, there are times when, as we look at creatures, we do not have to think explicitly of God.”³⁹³ Following on the twenty-fifth chapter of Matthew, she recognises an attentiveness that is so automatic it is unconscious: Their charity having been recognised, the blessed ask: “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry . . . thirsty . . . a stranger . . . naked . . . sick . . . in prison?” (Mt. 25:37-39).³⁹⁴ While she is convinced that to love the afflicted, or to accept love when one is oneself afflicted, is so wholly a divine operation that it is indeed God in the compassionate one who loves the afflicted and God in the afflicted who accepts this love, nevertheless the afflicted and the compassionate “love each other . . . not for the love of God; they love each other for the love of the one for the other.” She continues: “This is an impossibility. That is why it comes about only through the agency of God.”³⁹⁵ In other words, attention is only the consciousness that my neighbour is in need, my response is automatic and the help I give is not for God’s sake but for my neighbour’s sake who is before me right now. Nevertheless, this immediate response can only have its source in God. It is simply that the source is so secret that the compassionate one is wholly unaware of it. A time will come when God alone will thank her for this act of justice.

It should also be noted that not only does keeping distance from the afflicted fail to offer a truer understanding of them, but also it is the case that there is a visceral

distancing from anyone in affliction (in Weil's expression, it is tantamount to a stag voluntarily advancing into the teeth of a pack of hounds.) There is, for example, a difference between, on the one hand, professional care given to the physically and mentally ill, or the needy in general, and on the other hand, attention as Weil described and practised it. For the professional caregiver, the possibility exists for escape, physically in the form of distance and emotionally, in the form of filtering out, at least for a time, the painful stimuli exuded from those broken people who are never going to recover or resume their social role. In fact this ability is considered adaptive, even essential, to enable one to continue to help. Nor can this caution be dismissed in comparison with a certain supererogation. It is a caution informed by the experience that the afflicted, who are destroyed without their consent, can take in all the help that is directed to them without its effecting the slightest change in them. Like the plant which attaches its tendrils to the nearest object, they too attach themselves to the sources of nourishment which they can suck dry without any scruple.³⁹⁶

In touching the afflicted with their eyes or their hands, what those who practise attention are in fact doing is "very different from feeding, clothing, or taking care of them." By, in a real sense through compassion, entering those they help, "they give them for a moment—what affliction has deprived them of—an existence of their own."³⁹⁷ The difference between what Weil intends here and a sentimental regard for the afflicted, or philanthropy, or a disengaged form of giving, is indicated by the pain and even the death of the self that this entails for the giver. "It is a renunciation," says

Weil.³⁹⁸ The giver “accepts to be diminished by concentrating on an expenditure of energy, which will not extend his own power but will only give existence to a being other than himself, who will exist independently of him.”³⁹⁹ There seems to be no middle ground which would be composed of a certain giving while at the same time retaining one’s composure in physical, psychological, and social terms.

To project one’s being into an afflicted person is to assume for a moment his affliction, it is to choose voluntarily something whose very essence consists in being imposed by constraint upon the unwilling. And that is an impossibility. Only Christ has done it. Christ and those men whose whole soul he possesses can do it. What these men give to the afflicted whom they succour, when they project their own being into them, is not really their own being, because they no longer possess one; it is Christ himself.⁴⁰⁰

What Weil speaks of here is therefore radically different from a certain “professional” help that may be given and which is indeed of benefit. Moreover, professional care in terms of clinicians, social workers, parole officers, medical personnel, is socially sanctioned and even provision for this kind of care, which is directed to the needy, cannot be maintained without a social and political struggle. Yet, as the quotation above indicates, there is a difference in kind rather than degree that separates this form of care from attention. Of course it can and certainly does happen that genuine attention is given in a professional relationship. If we follow Weil, however, when this takes place, one transcends one’s professional role and passes beyond the bounds of a certain contract. In speaking of attention, she is not inventing a new form of relationship; she stands within a tradition. Drawing on the tradition of Jesus’s call to his disciples, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, writing in 1937, declares: “When Christ calls a

man, he bids him come and die."⁴⁰¹ This death is nothing other than the denial of self which is not forced, nor simply one's choice, nor an end in itself. Both the call and the preparation to follow are the work of the One who calls. The end of this denial cannot be a perverse pleasure in an attenuation of the self. Rather, it is the means to a true regard for that which is other than one's self, as well as the means for one's own life to pass into another. Weil is blunt: "One gives oneself in ransom for the other. It is a redemptive act."⁴⁰² This tradition is of course also articulated outside the gospels. In his Letter to the Galatians, Paul declares: "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (2:19b-20). We may recall that Weil was fond of quoting the lines from the Egyptian text The Book of the Dead, which signify the equivalent regard for God and one's neighbour.⁴⁰³ Unfortunately, though she recognizes the double love commandment, she does not recognise that it enters the New Testament through the Hebrew Scriptures (Deut. 6:4; Lev. 19:18). Yet she maintained that wherever this form of attention appears and is enjoined, it is a divine revelation.

From the way Weil writes about attention we can come to see that it is not just a quality of being symbolised by immobility in waiting. This motionlessness is effectively a particular receptivity to a condition which is otherwise easily missed. She quotes a popular Spanish song which says: "If anyone wants to make himself invisible, there is no surer way than to become poor." She comments: "love sees what is invisible."⁴⁰⁴ Attention that is directed to the neighbour is manifest in a type of

relationship. In its most beautiful actualization, it is a reciprocity of giving and receiving. Recalling her quotation of the exchange between the Athenian navy and the Melians, in which the natural law is stated as commanding wherever one has the power, we may note that the practice of attention is the reverse of this law. One does not command, wherever one has the power to do so, by allowing the weaker members of the relationship to be treated as if they were in fact equal to the strong. This regard for the weak means that their will is not crushed. On their part, the weak offer the gratitude that is due to one who has acted justly toward them. In both the justice practised by the strong and the gratitude offered by the weak, we are faced with a phenomenon that goes against a necessity of nature.

On the one hand, for the strong, necessity dictates that the weaker party will not be consulted.

There is only one will, that of the strong. The weak obeys. Everything happens just as it does when a man is handling matter. There are not two wills to be made to coincide. The man wills and the matter submits. The weak are like things. There is no difference between throwing a stone to get rid of a troublesome dog and saying to a slave: "Chase that dog away."⁴⁰⁵

This is why Weil calls justice a "supernatural virtue." It is not a calculation of what is deserved but a manifestation of love. "Christ does not call his benefactors loving or charitable. He calls them just. The Gospel makes no distinction between the love of our neighbour and justice."⁴⁰⁶ Moreover to treat the afflicted, who is the weaker party, as an equal is an incredibly delicate matter. The afflicted do not consider themselves equal to anyone, to raise them by treating them as equals requires the quality of being that in the process of raising them will not let them fall, through a

word or a gesture that can easily plunge them back into the condition of slavery.

On the other hand, for the weak, necessity dictates that they are mistrustful or insensitive to any attempts to raise them. This insensitivity or mistrust may be manifest either in a brutish stupor or a violent lashing out at the one who would give anything to them. The afflicted may therefore be deprived not only by others, but even by themselves. The supernatural virtue in this case is to receive the gift and offer gratitude. "What dignity it gives to the afflicted man who is succoured, to know that he can give Christ's thanks to his benefactor."⁴⁰⁷ Moreover, gratitude on the part of the afflicted is nothing less than a consent to affliction.⁴⁰⁸ Consent is very different from "both submission and revolt."⁴⁰⁹ To submit is to become servile, an instrument or appendage of another's will, it is to be broken by affliction. To revolt is to attempt to relieve one's own affliction by projecting it upon the world around and in particular trying to afflict other human beings in turn. In contrast, consent is the recognition of one's place in the universe and in particular it is the recognition of extreme evil even as it impinges on one's self, at the same time it is a refusal of bitterness or hatred of the world. "The soul has to go on loving in the emptiness, or at least to go on wanting to love, though it may be with only an infinitesimal part of itself."⁴¹⁰ Consent is worship. It is saying "yes" to God.

On the part of the giver the respect for the afflicted is so penetrating it penetrates the fortress of affliction with the light of divine love, on the part of the recipient this respect is felt and understood; it becomes transformative "nourishment." Weil summarizes this exchange: "If the gift is rightly given and

rightly received, the passing of a morsel of bread from one man to another is something like a real communion.”⁴¹¹

Punishment and the Afflicted

Weil was conscious that the afflicted are not only victims; they may also be the victimizers or criminals. Crime, in her conception, is a turning away from the good. Its commission cuts one off from relationships of mutual obligation. How then is attention to be directed to the afflicted criminal? Through punishment, she answers. Punishment is a need of the soul because it seeks to restore the guilty one within the human community.⁴¹² Those who have been “estranged from the good” by harming others “can only be reintegrated with the good by having harm inflicted on them.”⁴¹³ But the inner aim of this harm is to bring the criminal to the point of expressing that innocent cry: “Why am I being hurt?” When one who has himself committed a crime is harmed to the point of feeling it, he seeks assuagement. Weil speaks as if a direct correlation can be found between the severity of the wound inflicted through punishment, and the purity of the good which is sought as a cure. Punishment can become the opening through which the criminal can consider the reality of the good, from which his crime has estranged him, especially if he accepts the punishment as something that he deserves. Her discussion of punishment presupposes what has been said above about the fundamental human expectation that good would be done to us rather than evil, as well as the longing in every human heart for an absolute good which remains unappeased by the objects in this world.

“Punishment is solely a method of procuring pure good for men who do not desire it. The art of punishing is the art of awakening in a criminal, by pain or even death, the desire for pure good.”⁴¹⁴ Even capital punishment, which she clearly allows for, permits the criminal to be reintegrated, not of course physically but in his own heart and mind as well as in the consciousness of the community. He has atoned with his life for the harm he has inflicted. The conception of punishment which arises here is of punishment as a gift to the criminal as it is appropriate for him or her. Punishment is not meant to break or crush the criminal’s soul, but to tap the buried yearning for the good.⁴¹⁵

Conversely, punishment that is only retributive or vengeful is itself a crime. It is an attempt to take something away from the criminal, his rights or even his life; it may even seek to crush him. Punishment based on the idea of retribution does not serve to restore the criminal to his society but often serves to fling him even farther away. Thus, according to Weil, if a criminal is so hardened that the yearning for the good can no longer be awakened in him, punishment is of no value! Society should simply prevent such a one from doing any more harm. “The infliction of a punishment is a declaration of faith that in the depths of the guilty there is a grain of pure good. To punish without that faith is to do evil for evil’s sake.”⁴¹⁶ When a system of justice is geared, not to know or listen to the criminal, but to treat him or her through the arms of its courts and penal institutions as an object of retributive punishment, a broken human being remains degraded and hardened. Even if in the process of administering justice that human being stammers “a cry to pierce the soul,

neither the magistrate nor the public will hear it.”⁴¹⁷ This cry may well be in the words of the last petition of the Lord’s Prayer—“deliver me from evil.” Or it may even be in the words of Psalm 22—“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Ps. 22:1; cf. Mt. 27:46; Mk. 15:34). Yet this cry will not be heard she says. Why is this so? It is so not because the criminal is singularly unable to use the correct words in terms of grammar and syntax, or even the appropriate legal jargon. Not even legal council may be able to hear and represent the afflicted criminal. In his treatment of Weil’s unique conception of justice, Peter Winch offers this reason:

There are special obstacles *in the soul of the reader* in the way of recognizing protests at real injustice. “Attention” is necessary; and the particular difficulty of my attending to someone in such a situation is that it requires me to understand that we are both equal members of a natural order which can at any time bring about such a violation of whoever it may be, including myself. That is, I cannot understand the other’s affliction from the point of view of my own privileged position; I have rather to understand *myself* from the standpoint of *the other’s* affliction. . . .⁴¹⁸

Winch ably points out the unique and radical nature of the commitment Weil calls for, and by implication the immense difficulty of realizing and enshrining this commitment for the thousands who are processed through the criminal justice system. Assuming such a standpoint would require a renunciation of one’s own being. Punishment arising from attention is the end result of a suspension of thought, thought which is waiting to be penetrated by the reality of the one who stands under judgement. It would require that a judge sitting upon the bench pay attention to the physical and spiritual needs of the one who has come under the power of the court,

and render judgement from “the standpoint of the other’s affliction.”

Yet nothing less is called for in Weil’s “high” conception of punishment. Punishment has a sacred function for her because it strikes at the point at which one’s yearning for the good, though dormant, can be awakened. In the very way an afflicted criminal is punished, he or she can sense ugliness or beauty, evil or good, and the consequences of each are of course great. Through calculated retribution the criminal is harmed and thus hardened in his or her affliction; his own humanity and his place within the community can be destroyed. Through attentive punishment he or she may be “brought to justice,” in his or her own eyes and before the community. Through attentive punishment an outcast is formally reinstated within a matrix of concern.

Her view of the sacred nature of justice is also evident in some of the examples she offers. From the Hindu tradition, she recounts the story of King Rama, who was obliged to execute a Sudra who had broken the law by taking on the ascetic practice of religion. Rama himself sought out the Sudra and dispatched him with a single stroke of his blade. Immediately the soul of the dead man abased itself before Rama in thanksgiving for the glory conferred upon it even by the touch of the blessed sword.⁴¹⁹ She also states that with regard to Christ: “The administration of punishment was not in accordance with the earthly life that was to end on the Cross.”⁴²⁰ Yet it is Christ alone who was worthy to “cast the first stone.”

What remains dangerous in what she is seeking in punishment, is a certain purity of execution which does not admit compromise. It is human beings who administer justice in the world, and these human beings are fallible. Compromise is

necessary in the administration of justice because of the “impurity” of social life which cannot contain or embody the mechanism that would raise and form that elite of judges, Plato’s “guardians,” or the “nocturnal council,” or class of saints. Judges remain finite human beings who are yet entrusted by the social mechanism to enforce the common law.⁴²¹ A gap remains between her transcendent conception of criminal justice and the necessities of its imminent enforcement.

What remains relevant in Weil’s insight on punishment is that she seeks its inner aim. In discussing the essence of her law, Ronald Collins and Finn Nielsen point out three elements which are recurring themes in her thought as a whole.⁴²² At a fundamental level, she maintains that if punishment is to fulfill its *telos*, it is required that it arise out of attention; that it seek the consent of the criminal so that it is not seen to be arbitrary or vengeful; and that it be an expression of mutual obligation; of the community to allow for the reintegration of the one who has alienated himself, and of the criminal to assume once again his own obligations to his fellows.

Conclusion

Weil’s discussion of attention to affliction in particular offers an important contrast to how the afflicted are usually treated within the social sphere. First, in pointing to affliction, which we do not want to see, she insists that of all the elements in our human environment to which we devote our attention, this may be the most important. Why? Because truth begins here. Truth does not begin with the acquisition

of information, nor does it come automatically at the end of a course of empirical investigation, for these are so often in the service of social prestige. Truth begins at the point at which reality is already bare, so bare in fact that it is hard to look upon, so hard to look upon that we instinctively try to cover it up through intellectual rationalisations, appeals to political expediency, and the practice of jurisprudence. To insist then, that the afflicted are worthy of our attention, is in itself significant.

Second, in pointing to attention, Weil clarifies how difficult it is to endure such a state of openness to reality. She maintains that every moment of attention is a burning away of evil. This cannot be without cost to the one paying attention. One in a sense consents to be deprived of social standing and connection, to give up “money, rank, honours, influence,” one’s peace of mind, and finally one’s place in the world.⁴²³ Such a call to radical self-abnegation begs the question “Why?” Why give up one’s pursuit of what comes instinctively in exchange for a moment of clear sight? Weil herself might answer that the question itself is evidence that the questioner does not know love. Love has no utility, or at least utility is not its motive. Yet it makes all the difference in the world. She writes to her friend Maurice Schumann: “A Christian knows that a single thought of love, lifted up to God in truthfulness, even though mute and without echo, is more useful even for this world than the most splendid action.”⁴²⁴ Specifically, attention to the afflicted is worthy because one is given a moment of reality, and this moment has intrinsic value.

But we can say more. Who we are in the world is revealed as well as dependent upon what we are paying attention to. In the words of the Gospel, “where

your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Mt. 6:21). If our attention is directed to "the things of this world," i.e. to that which is proffered for our attention by social convention, then, Weil would say, we are part of the gravity that pulls everything down. Sitting contentedly before the shadows, we are conditioned to view the universe from within the cave. The "single thought of love" cannot be "lifted up to God" without pain, and though it is without utility it "is more useful even for this world than the most splendid action." This is because, as we have noted, a moment of pure attention gives value to what is considered valueless; it invites the divine presence to the space that is void without it; it brings into creation its full measure; and in this way, attention can save lives.

In her writing on affliction, Weil is presenting us neither with her personal observations nor even with a way of being vis-à-vis the afflicted. At the same time hers is not a field study. It may be said, simply, that it is a way of seeing, a way of seeing that comes after the ego is displaced as the centre of concern. One has died to all one's talent and ability; a radical and permanent transformation has been effected in the way one reads the world. It cannot be read or seen in the same way any more. What is given now is a revelation, and it comes not as an escape from the world but through the tangible roughness of matter. She can say for example, "I possess the gift (which I purchased dearly) of reading the eyes of a shift of workers beginning or ending their day's work. . . ." ⁴²⁵ In this regard George Grant makes an astute observation about the relationship for Weil between affliction and attention:

Her involvement in the twentieth century through becoming a member of the industrial proletariat and through experience of war, shows that there was in her something beyond intellectual brilliance, namely that attention of the will or . . . love . . . which has always been considered necessary to the highest knowledge. This already present attention was what led her into the afflictions of the century, even before she knew what she was doing, and in turn the afflictions are the condition of her amazing attention.⁴²⁶

Grant recognized a reciprocal relationship between attention as a manifestation of love, and affliction. What Weil has to say is profound, as well as complex and difficult to understand as a whole, because in a fundamental way she is speaking to that which can best be contemplated from within the experience itself. This contemplation is very difficult, indeed impossible, but for the divine grace which reaches the afflicted person as he or she is opened to it through the very destruction of the ego. It is difficult or impossible because, as has been indicated, this destruction of the "I" may not necessarily give birth to the love of God. While there is little doubt that an intellectual grasp of what she is saying is possible, and the competent analyses of her writing are evidence of this, fundamentally what she has to say arises from the convictions she held about the relationship between intelligence and love, and how integrally these convictions were filtered through her own life.

III. DECREATION: A WAY OF BEING

It is now possible for us to address the logical conclusion to which Weil's life and thought brought her with regard to the possibility of a loving relationship with the afflicted. Having considered the radical nature of affliction and what is required to attend to those who are plunged into such a condition, it remains for us to examine the very end to which, Simone Weil maintained, it was necessary to go in order to participate in the love which was able to attend even the most miserable wretch. This is the quality of being she called "decreation." The privative "de," of course, can only have meaning when we are able to appreciate what she herself understood by the term "creation." Though it is quite evident from her writing that she first thought deeply about decreation before contemplating in some depth the divine creative act, the two go together, and for the purposes of facilitating greater clarity, we will reverse the order of her concern by dealing first with her understanding of the divine creative act to which she considered decreation to be the profoundest of human responses.

The appreciation of what she meant by her concept of decreation is decidedly difficult, and the barrier to this appreciation is not only an intellectual one, but a spiritual one as well. It should be evident from the foregoing analysis of attention, that what is required is more than an intellectual effort to love the afflicted neighbour. Her concept of decreation brings this reality to its final stage. The love of God and the love of neighbour are interrelated. One's love of God is manifest through the love one shows to the neighbour. In the language of the Johannine writings, "Those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they

have not seen" (I Jn. 4:20). In Weil's words, "Praise to God and compassion for creatures. It is the same movement of the heart."⁴²⁷ Both loves are ultimate in the sense that both demand everything that a human being can give, and neither can truly be manifest unless this spiritual commitment is made. In terms of the emphasis of this essay on Weil's insight into affliction, we can say that it is impossible to know or love the afflicted unless we are committed to them, not in some way but in every way. It is not enough to study this condition; in fact, as we have emphasized, this condition cannot be studied through any straightforward investigative method. Neither can it be addressed through political legislation which is not already a spiritual commitment. For otherwise it will be an attempt to deal with a problem to be eliminated, a problem which has impinged on the more or less smooth function of the social mechanism.

We therefore understand the afflicted only as we commit ourselves to them, or in Weil's language, only as we attend to them, suspending our own thought by opening ourselves completely to their reality before us. Since this attention demands everything, nothing that is our own can be held back in its exercise, and precisely here lies the difficulty in understanding decreation. It is itself appreciated to the extent that we are ready to contemplate the kind of love that is called for in Weil's life and thought. It is the extremity of her thought that is indeed problematic for many of her readers, nor are the biographical details of her life unproblematic. She was a woman, decidedly unattached to any man, who yet claimed attachment to Christ, and who died a premature death in the relative safety of the English countryside,

ostensibly by her own hand when she refused the vital nutrition which was medically prescribed for her. Her life is evidence of what can result from the kind of sustained attention she valued, attention that becomes the substance of a life. This is not to suggest that this kind of life will be uniformly judged to be a desirable one or even a good one. Both her life and her thought were amply suffused with her own particular will, and she did, albeit inadvertently, create hardship for those who cared for her, her family and friends. In this sense we can say that she herself fell short of the decreation she valued. As we will see further in the critiques below, Weil chafed under the necessity which dictated that she was not to take an active part in the war, as she had done in the Spanish Civil War. At the same time she refused, or was incapable of, identification with the Jews of Europe who were indeed undergoing great affliction at the very moment when she was seeking to take her part in danger and hardship. She preferred to die as a French patriot rather than as an exiled Jew. Yet the ultimacy which she clearly detected as essential in the love of the afflicted neighbour cannot be easily argued against, and this kind of commitment demands everything, though human creatures cannot make this commitment even when they appreciate the need for it.

8. Creation: The Renunciation of Power

We are now prepared to say something about Weil's uncommon, though not unique, conception of the divine creative act. What she has to say is based upon her perception of human affliction. Her reading of the scriptural record, including the Genesis account, as well as the Platonic dialogues, arises out of this hermeneutic. When she writes to Schumann in London that she is ceaselessly torn by the contradiction between the perfection of God and human affliction, she is making plain that she considers the creation and the creative act from below.⁴²⁸ From this vantage-point, her rather idiosyncratic view is not so puzzling. She is certainly not interested in theological speculation in and of itself, but rather in meditating on the content of a mystery which she keenly perceives.

Divine perfection and renunciation are the two poles from which she proceeds to speak of the creative act. Neither can be understood in isolation. On the one hand, she acknowledges that God is plenitude and perfection.⁴²⁹ Yet this plenitude is only recognised, from the creature's perspective, as it is renounced. Were it not the case that the divine is plenitude and perfection, there could be no renunciation. God was "all in all," but creation itself means that now something exists which is not God. Creation is not an extra outside the divine. Rather, creation is possible because of the divine withdrawal which permits what is other than God to exist.⁴³⁰

As has been noted by several authors, Weil's understanding of the creative act has remarkable affinities with Isaac Luria's (1534-72) interpretation of *tsimtsum*.⁴³¹ Gershom Scholem's authoritative account of Luria's teachings indicates that the term

initially referred to the concentration of the *Shekhinah* in a single point, in the holy of holies.⁴³² Luria, however, inverted this Talmudic term to mean that, rather than being concentrated at a point, or after being concentrated at a point, God moves away or retreats.⁴³³ There is therefore now a space which God does not inhabit. This is the only way in which a universe is made possible. The question Luria poses is very similar to Weil's. How can there be something other than God if God is indeed all in all? The answer is *tsimtsum*, the withdrawal of God which enables space to open up to which God returns in the act of creation; before the divine emanation there is a divine contraction. Furthermore, in Scholem's presentation of the Lurianic doctrine, this double movement seems to be an ongoing one. "Every stage involves a double strain, i.e. the light which streams back into God and that which flows out from Him, and but for this perpetual tension, this ever repeated effort with which God holds Himself back, nothing in the world would exist."⁴³⁴

There is, however, a significant difference between Luria and Weil in the reasons they give for the divine withdrawal.⁴³⁵ As Scholem explains, at its heart the Lurianic doctrine—which includes "*tsimtsum*, or self-limitation of God, the *shevirah*, or the breaking of the vessels, and the *tikkun*, or harmonious correction and mending of the flaw which came into the world through the *shevirah*"—is a profound symbolic expression of exile. The immediate historical context is the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492, "an event which more than any other in Jewish history down to the catastrophe of our time gave urgency to the question: why the exile of the Jews and what is their vocation in the world?"⁴³⁶ In *tsimtsum*, the creative space is not full

of God, and the best that can be said is that there is in it only a divine residue. Nothing is any longer in its proper place and everything is in exile. In fact the reality of exile affects God too, “or at least in the manifestation of His essence, exile takes on the enormous dimensions which it had obviously assumed for the Jews of those generations.”⁴³⁷

For Weil, on the other hand, the withdrawal of God which allows creation to be, is a manifestation of the divine humility which holds back the otherwise all-encompassing divine power. Another word for this restraint is “love.” As we have seen in chapter three, Weil was preoccupied with power: its nature, its necessary use, and its abuse. The Athenians exercised their power to its furthest possible limit, and could not see any other possibility in the universe, *viz.* gods and humans exercise all the power at their disposal. Not true, says Weil, and she proceeds to give examples, from history, and from revelation. The idea that God holds back so that the divine power does not fill all is directly relevant to the function of force in the world. The divine creative act is the cosmic symbol which stands against the natural law as put forth by the Athenian navy. It is indeed possible, though supernaturally possible, that force is not always exercised to its full potential, and as we will see, this is the very bedrock upon which the neighbour can be known to exist and thus to be authentically loved. Moreover, Weil saw that the exercise of force to its extreme limit, between the two great wars, called for the clear articulation of an alternative if human beings were to exist and to flourish in the world.

The Weilian and Lurianic ideas do find a convergence, however, in positing

a return of the divine so that God can again be all in all. According to Luria, this return is located in the *Tikun*; its essence is the action of human beings who know and fulfil the law. Things are restored from exile “by the secret magic of human acts.”⁴³⁸ Creation is fulfilled as the light scattered throughout the world is gathered, through each act of obedience to the divine law, back into the *Shekinah*. For Weil, the return of the divine is located in the decreation of the human being. As we will see, she maintains that every autonomous life is given the freedom to offer itself back to God, so that God courses through all of creation.

Weil herself does not posit the divine withdrawal as a static metaphysical factum, since God as creator is now related to the multiplicity of creaturely life. The question she then poses is, why should God, who is perfection, create at all? “It seems so obvious that God is greater than God and the creation together.”⁴³⁹ She offers no answer to the question she struggles with, but she ponders it over and over again. In her difficult yet important essay, “The Pythagorean Doctrine,” the reader can detect the actual process of her agonizing over this question.⁴⁴⁰ Finally, she states simply that creation is “madness,” but it is the madness of love.⁴⁴¹ This is the inherent meaning of the aforementioned polarity. In other words, in our very creation is manifest God’s not exercising power.

Thus Weil’s primary category for speaking of the divine is not “Being” but “Love.”⁴⁴² According to her, no attribute of the divine is more relevant to an appreciation of why God created or why “in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself” (2 Cor. 5:19). In suggestive language Weil declares: creation is an

“abdication,” a “renunciation by love;” “God is not all-powerful;” and having renounced kingship in the world, God “can enter it only as a beggar.”⁴⁴³ God can be considered all-powerful only in this—God wills to be diminished.⁴⁴⁴ “Not only the Passion but the Creation itself is a renunciation and sacrifice on the part of God. The Passion is simply its consummation. God already voids himself of his divinity by the Creation.”⁴⁴⁵

Moreover, though creation makes evident that God is not all-powerful in the world, creation also means, for her, that there is a separation between the Father and the Son. “God is torn asunder.” “The Christian doctrine,” she declares, referring to the second chapter of Philippians, “contains the notion of a second abdication.”⁴⁴⁶ God the Father remains as eternal perfection outside the space-time network, but God the Son is incarnated, or using the image of Plato’s *Timaeus*, the Son is stretched out upon the world (as the World Soul), giving it form as well as substance. Moreover, in the crucifixion, the separation of God from God goes as far as creation itself. It marks the infinite distance between the perfection of the Father and the affliction of the Son. Between the terms of this distance is found every creature, even the most deformed and furthest removed from the divine perfection. In fact Weil declares that “by assimilation with the Christ, who is one with God, the human being, lying in the depths of misery, attains a sort of equality with God, an equality which is love.”⁴⁴⁷ The suffering human being is lifted as it were to God. While the Son does not cease to love the Father, even when he feels himself completely abandoned, the Father’s love responds as silence, “heard” as the perfect harmony of wills.⁴⁴⁸ She declares,

moreover, that this connective love is the Holy Spirit, the bond echoing from both sides. "The supreme mediation is that of the Holy Spirit uniting through infinite distance the divine Father to the equally divine Son, but emptied of His divinity and nailed to a point in space and in time. . . . The being and the life of each one of us are together a tiny segment of this line whose extremities are two Persons and a single God, this line where Love circulates is also that same God."⁴⁴⁹

The crucifixion, then, completes the creation. In Weil's words, "God is not perfect except as Trinity, and the love which constitutes the Trinity finds its perfection only in the Cross."⁴⁵⁰ In creating, God is related to finite creatures, even to the point of affliction and death. The creation is not abandoned once it is brought into being. The divine presence, however, is not that of power but the renunciation of power. Creation itself functions under the power of necessity, and human creatures are themselves autonomous, capable of rejecting the divine love. Furthermore, human beings are not called to imitate the love of the Trinity, but they are included in that very love to the extent that they consent to be penetrated by it. In more traditional theological terms, we can say that those who desire to love are given the gift of the Spirit which proceeds from the Father *and the Son*. If we follow Weil, this love is not a feeling. At the point of affliction, feelings of love cannot be sustained; rather, love takes the form of an orientation of the whole being to the truth that the good is real even when it is no longer sensible.⁴⁵¹ As she words it: "Faith consists in believing that reality is love and nothing else."⁴⁵² The love from the cross in solidarity with the groaning creation awaits the Father's love.

This in distilled form is the integration Weil attempts to effect between creation and passion. The creator God is not different from the God of the passion; in both moments, God is a suffering God. From the moment God is involved in creation, God suffers, and it is only through creation that God now wills to love God's self. It is in this way that she understands the nature of the divine as kenotic, or in more anthropomorphic terms, as selfless love.

In emphasizing love rather than being as the key attribute of the divine, it is evident that the blade against which Weil sharpens her own thought is the idealization of divine omnipotence, manifest particularly as providential power.

The conception of Providence which corresponds to God after the Roman style is that of a personal intervention in the world on the part of God in order to adjust certain means in view of certain particular ends. . . . Let us imagine some great Roman magnate owning vast estates and numbers of slaves, and then multiply this to bring it up to the dimensions of the universe itself. Such is the conception of God which, in fact rules over a portion of Christianity. . . .⁴⁵³

In this way she cuts the connection which has traditionally been perceived between the divine providence and time. "God is not in time."⁴⁵⁴ As an essential element of creation, time is outside of God's power. We ourselves are "abandoned in time."⁴⁵⁵ Therefore God cannot affect or undo or prevent what has taken place in time. This reality is exemplified by affliction which is not assuaged or mitigated. The constant groaning "Why?", "Why am I being hurt?" receives no answer but silence. Time itself, which is the medium of our life and so saturated with suffering, is "a segment of the line that stretches, through the Creation, the Incarnation, and the Passion,

between the Father and the Son.”⁴⁵⁶ George Grant goes to the heart of Weil’s thought at this point, when he states that “the modern era substituted orientation to the future for orientation to eternity.”⁴⁵⁷ According to Weil, every moment of existence, even the most wretched, is given its due as reality when our eyes are focussed above rather than ahead.

Finally, it has been argued that Weil conceives the creative act as the permanent abdication of God.⁴⁵⁸ This is not accurate, however, for she conceives of God as absent in the form of providential power effective in time. God does not intervene in the world either for the benefit of the righteous or for the punishment of the wicked. God does not bless some and curse others; the equal distribution of sun and rain is evidence that all are equally subject to necessity and equally distant from the good. The very creation itself is possible because God is not present as omnipotence. This obvious absence, however, reveals God’s secret presence. A phenomenological example she offers is of “A man whose whole family had died under torture, and who had himself been tortured for a long time in a concentration camp ; or a sixteenth century Indian, the sole survivor after the total extermination of his people. Such men if they had previously believed in the mercy of God would either believe in it no longer, or else they would conceive of it quite differently from before.”⁴⁵⁹ In other words the conception of the divine presence or mercy is not tied, or should not be tied, to the whims of fickle fortune. Whenever and wherever the encounter with necessity (as the mechanical brutality of nature, or force as injustice in the world, both forms of which can claim what we are attached to in the world in

terms of possessions as well as relations) is not allowed to inject the very centre of the soul with bitterness, hatred, and despair, the divine is present. It is not less present in the world as we lose ourselves in the contemplation of a mountain landscape or as our life is brutalized by disease. To know this, to really know it, is to know that the creation, as well as the creator, exist. Moreover, as Weil elaborates in her essay "The Implicit Forms of the Love of God," the divine presence in the world may also be known indirectly at first in the attentive liturgy of the church, particularly in the Eucharist, as well as in the love of the just who treat the afflicted as equals.⁴⁶⁰ These forms of the presence or knowledge of God are implicit or secret because they are manifestations not of divine power but of divine love.⁴⁶¹

9. Relinquishing the Autonomous Self

The creature's response to God's creation is centred for Weil in the gift of autonomy, in the possibility for every creature to say "I am" vis-à-vis both Creator and fellow creatures. She is, however, ambivalent about this. On the one hand she considers this possibility a sacred gift, because it is finally the only thing human beings can give freely. When this freedom is taken away by force, it is the most frightful harming of creation. On the other hand, the autonomous "I" is what stands between God and the creation. God cannot finally be all in all when human creatures claim their autonomy and therefore the space not only to live but also to expand at the expense of other creatures. Grasping at one's autonomy in any final way is a sin

because in so doing, finite creatures claim infinity. This element of her thought, which was deepened through her experience and solidarity with the afflicted, still raises serious questions with her critics which, given the intertwining of her life and thought, are levelled not only at her writing but also, as we will see, at her own perception of herself.

Weil of course knew that each person is given an objective identity by her or his place in the social milieu. One has a name, a position, a title, a social place, and we are not given to forget it, since others remind us of it repeatedly.⁴⁶² We also view the world within a certain subjectivity. At the very least, physically, this is a given, as it is historically, culturally, and politically. Her point, however, is that the very fragility of our place in the world tempts us to make ourselves the metaphysical centre, not only from which the world is seen but also from which it is distorted and manipulated. We call good what we believe to be good, and we call evil what we believe to be evil. People, events, and things are scaled according to our desire, and we attach ourselves or distance ourselves accordingly. We may even be able to view what is distant from us, other people, things, places, from different angles. The object of our reflection may offer some of its varied perspectives to us and we may rejoice in our "objectivity." But so soon as any of these objects have a direct and intimate impact upon ourselves, our disinterest vanishes. On a personal note, my uncle on my mother's side is Armenian, born to the generation that was still affected by the massacre of Armenians in Turkey during the second decade of the twentieth century. Though he is himself an avid traveller, when he was recently told of the physical

beauty of the Turkish coast, he avowed that no description could ever tempt him to look at it, even from afar. For him it is not beautiful, but a place of cruelty and death.

Weil maintains that through our imagination we manipulate the world to maintain the fragile composite that we feel is our self.⁴⁶³ The world does not exist in itself but for me; I do not serve it, it serves me. When the illusion of ourselves as the centre of the world is disturbed through suffering, our imagination rushes in to fill the gaps; we imagine revenge on the powerful who have hurt us; we imagine our health as we lie in sickness; we imagine love on the part of those who bear us none, etc.. When this illusion is shattered by affliction, however, our imagination is overwhelmed by the truth and we are terrified. We are forced to give up our self and do things we thought we could never do. In the Iliad, Priam bows and kisses the hand of Achilles, the very hand that slew his son. "At this very moment, human beings are being led in spite of themselves, with every second that elapses, toward that which they cannot bear and yet will have to bear."⁴⁶⁴

Weil also calls war imaginary, and says the imagination is exercised not only by the defeated, but also by the victors.⁴⁶⁵ The maiming, enslaving, and killing of others are imaginary in the sense that the powerful are convinced this power is theirs, that they are inherently powerful, born for this moment. They are not. Rather, they are instruments of necessity. There is an initial choice, says Weil. "But when a man turns away from God he simply gives himself up to the law of gravity. He then believes that he is deciding and choosing, but he is only a thing, a falling stone."⁴⁶⁶ Analogous to the laws of physical gravity, one acts on whatever the ego determines.

Boundaries, relationships of one person to another, or of persons to places, the essence of things, the web that is the whole—all are razed before an egotistic determination. A murderer will fire a bullet into the skull of the one he hates, suddenly erasing memories, hopes, feelings, relationships, and every possibility in this other. Conversely and particularly: “To desire that a human being should live is to desire that oneself should be limited.”⁴⁶⁷ This desire comes from the intimate knowledge that all one is—feelings, thoughts, relationships to people and things, and most especially one’s relationship to oneself—is subject to circumstances beyond one’s control. This is the denial of self by which one is no longer subject to gravity but becomes a mediator of grace. Grace for Weil is symbolic of what is free from the downward drag of force, and it is divine. “Humility consists in knowing that in what we call ‘I’ there is no source of energy by which we can rise.”⁴⁶⁸

Weil discusses another danger when one strives to protect the fragile self. The temptation is to hide it in something bigger. In personal relations, one can hide in another human being and transfer one’s centre into another. One passes one’s plans, hopes and fears, through the other. The subordination thus effected may be mild or extreme. One may hide in one’s lover, one may live vicariously in the success of one’s child, one may exist to please the whims of a wealthy patron. What she was particularly alarmed by as a personal propensity as well as a reality in her context was having the self swallowed by the collective. “My natural disposition is to be very easily influenced, too much influenced, and above all by anything collective. I know that if at this moment I had before me a group of twenty young Germans singing Nazi

songs in chorus, a part of my soul would instantly become Nazi.”⁴⁶⁹ Even more pernicious than the power to say “I” is the power to say “We.” In its collective form, power does not recognize distinctions. There is no struggle, as there is in friendship, to bring harmony between contraries, for contraries are not recognized, only homogeneity.⁴⁷⁰ Moreover, the collective wields great force. Weil found it exercised in fascist, totalitarian, and capitalist form. In the latter, for example, the bourgeois class was tempted to elevate its own interest to the status of an ultimate good to be defended at great cost, as that which was most conducive to the peace and good order of society. She found it in the imposition of certain trends, within the more select enclaves of science and art, to which individual practitioners had to conform if they craved any success.⁴⁷¹ She found it in the church. Some of its ablest members were not free from its power to impose a will alien to what she read in the gospels. “There were some saints who approved of the Crusades or the Inquisition. I cannot help thinking they were in the wrong. . . . If I think that on this point I see more clearly than they did, I who am so far below them, I must admit that in this matter they were blinded by something very powerful. This something was the Church seen as a social structure.”⁴⁷² Her interpretation of “the chosen people” as a claim to exclusive privilege rather than service, in part kept her an implacable opponent of Israel. She consistently resisted any association which she perceived as excluding or setting off one part of the world from any other. “Our love should stretch as widely across all space, and should be equally distributed in every portion of it, as is the very light of the sun. . . . Every existing thing is equally upheld in its existence by God’s creative

love. The friends of God should love him to the point of merging their love into his with regard to all things here below.”⁴⁷³ In the individual “I” as well as the collective “We,” a refuge is sought for the self. Weil often wrote of the giants in folklore who hide their life in an egg which is in a fish which swims in a deep lake which is guarded by a dragon. Yet inevitably the egg is discovered and broken and the giant is killed.⁴⁷⁴

Her critique of the autonomous “I” as well as the collective “We” is certainly related to her social and political context, as well as to her own intellectual training.⁴⁷⁵ In attempting to trace the route to the present situation, particularly in European society *entre-deux-guerres*, she considered that the attempt to emancipate the self is a desire based on a fundamental anxiety about one’s life in the world. In complex societies, this desire to empower the self in the world has taken technical form, with a power struggle no longer directly engaged with nature but between human beings. In this struggle there always exists a class of people who are the substratum. They alone have a direct contact with nature, and this without benefit of “theoretical culture” and the “opportunity for self-expression.”⁴⁷⁶ The drive for an ever greater efficiency in the technical mastery of nature exacts from the workers their physical labour and deprives them of their potential for thought.

Weil saw the technical transformation in the factories and the moral degradation of those who worked in them during the early thirties, as well as the easy adaptation of this same technology to the killing of people during the early forties, as a lethal result of this desire to expand and control. Unfortunately, even potential

communities created for the purpose of nurture and protection within this environment, such as the small independent trade union, could not remain independent of this expansive trend. These too were sooner or later either co-opted by larger forces or eliminated.⁴⁷⁷

In the factory, as we have seen, Weil went on to learn more. Her own intellectual training and culture were rendered dumb before the degradation that seeped into her soul in an environment she perceived to be one of brutal constraint. The orders, the speed, the need to survive and therefore the necessity of labouring under these conditions, left no energy for revolt or for thought directed to lifting the physical pain and moral degradation. A human being was sapped of physical energy, psychic resources were desiccated, and one's soul was stamped with the mark of slavery. One lost value in one's own eyes, not only in the eyes of others. Here she learned what it was like at the end of the road. What does a human being know when all external supports for the ego are done away with and one is naked before necessity? "The truth is not revealed except in nakedness and that nakedness is death, which means the rupture of all those attachments which for each human being constitute the reason for living; those whom he loves, public esteem and possessions, material and moral, all that."⁴⁷⁸

Seeking for the source of justice within the complexity of human relations through her work as a teacher, a trade unionist, a factory labourer, an intellectual, as well as what for her were surprising encounters with the divine presence, she came to acknowledge only one legitimate source in which we may place, or to which we

may give up, our self. "God alone has the right to say 'I am'; 'I am' is His name, and is the name of no other being."⁴⁷⁹ Though she maintains that God can come and dwell in a human soul, even that the desire to be transported into God is legitimate, she does not let down her guard.⁴⁸⁰ For there are many variations on an ersatz form of the good which are in and of the world. One can transport oneself into God as into another person.⁴⁸¹ This can be a false love because the power to say "I" is not relinquished, rather it can be an attempt to get from God what we can for our self. The way to love God, she says, is to consent to the beauty of the world. This means that one accepts the even distribution of light and rain on the just and the unjust, earthquake or sickness, the swallowing up of a town or the death of a loved one. The world is not what promotes us; we are a part of it as is an insect or a bacterium. We do not love it or hate it according to the calculation of our benefit. This is certainly evident for Weil in the crucifixion of the Son who, even as the power of force enfolds and crushes him, curses neither creation nor Creator. He consents to drink the cup that is his to drink, and in this way continues to love the Father even through his abandonment. The other way of losing oneself in God is through loving of the neighbour plunged in misery. In this case one does not protect the self by transferring it into another, for the one loved is in misery and has nothing to give us except the true knowledge that she or he is a fellow human being. This love of the neighbour entails a more complete renunciation of one's own station in the world; for all our possessions, material and social, reinforce our power to say "I."⁴⁸² The proof that one loves God, according to her, "is not the way a man talks about God, but the way he

talks about things of the world.”⁴⁸³ Therefore: “The faith of a judge is not seen in his behaviour at church, but in his behaviour on the bench.”⁴⁸⁴

There is, however, a type of relationship in which Weil recognizes the validity of a love that is preferential and in which another’s autonomy as well as one’s own can be legitimately safeguarded. By its very nature, friendship is different from the love of neighbour, in that it is discriminatory.⁴⁸⁵ “She is my friend,” we say. Implicit in this statement is a preference for this particular over another. Whilst in the love of neighbour, the one who goes “down from Jerusalem” is by definition an enemy, charity does not discriminate against him. In friendship, however, preference for a particular person means either of two things: “We are seeking some particular good in him, or we need him.”⁴⁸⁶ Characteristically, she is acutely aware of the lengths to which this preference might lead, like one who consumes a drug to heighten his pleasure and soon becomes totally dependent on the very thing that is killing him. Citing Molière’s characters in L’Ecole des Femmes, she recalls how Arnolphe’s desire for Agnes, whom he planned to groom into a wife, turned into a terrible need which she exploited: “With the passage of time his attachment to her had become a vital bond which forced this terrible line from his lips: ‘*Mais je sens la-dedans qu’il faudra que je crève—*’.”⁴⁸⁷ Here we are face to face with necessity. One who is strongly attracted to another cannot unequivocally wish that the other’s autonomy be preserved. Either we desire something from them or we need them; their loss would diminish some of our vital energy. “When the degree of necessity is extreme, deprivation leads to death. This is the case when all the vital energy of one

being is bound up with another by some attachment. In the lesser degrees, deprivation leads to a more or less considerable lessening of energy."⁴⁸⁸ We cannot at this point pretend that we wish the other's full autonomy vis-à-vis ourselves. We do not. Why then does friendship work and why is it considered valuable? Weil's answer is that friendship is a good because it is in fact a union of opposites. While it is true that we desire or need this particular person for ourselves, we at the same time wish them to be free. "There is harmony because there is a supernatural union between two opposites . . . necessity and liberty. . . . There is equality because each wishes to preserve the faculty of free consent both in himself and in the other."⁴⁸⁹ Certainly there is need: we are looking for something in the other. Simultaneously, we wish for them freedom from ourselves, to be who they are, not subordinate to us; nor should we be subordinate to them.

The latter point is important to keep in mind when considering Weil's emphasis on consent, as well as her acceptance and use of patriarchal imagery. At no point does she advocate submission to inequality or injustice in human relations. "When anyone wishes to put himself under a human being or consents to be subordinated to him, there is no trace of friendship. . . . There is no friendship where there is inequality."⁴⁹⁰ Finally, the respect for human autonomy in friendship, says Weil, is very like the attention that is directed to the afflicted. In the first case, the harmony of contraries is between necessity and liberty; in the second, it is between subordination and equality.

What Weil is after in her severe critique of the self is the possibility of justice

in the relationship between human beings, as well as in the understanding of human beings of the place they occupy in the world. For her, real justice is not possible on the foundation of an autonomy which does not go beyond the level of bargaining for personal rights. This kind of talk arises from those who are only too conscious of their privilege and wish to protect it. Those who are plunged into radical suffering, which may be the majority in certain times and places, cannot find in this atmosphere the words to express what they are going through. It is not their personal rights that are at stake, for they have been deprived of their personality and turned into things. It is not their autonomy that is threatened but a meaningful human life, which Weil defines as one that has the space and time to appreciate its rootedness in God, or the good, even under a harsh necessity.

10. The Way to Decreation

A healthy human being has a distinctive personality formed over time in interaction between a certain genetic predisposition and a particular environment. Such a human being also legitimately occupies space and will normally not be pushed out of it without protest. This is the case, in a literal sense, observed in any line-up, from queuing for food to queuing in front of a banking machine. It is also the case in the metaphorical sense of needing and demanding to be noticed and regarded as we seek our way in the world. Each human being also has an ego in the etymological sense of the word. Moreover, in the West at least, we affirm individual autonomy, which

is partly defined over against heteronomy. In other words, we affirm an individual's "right" to choose over against the imposition of another's choice upon ourselves. What Weil tells us, however, is that affliction is an experimental demonstration that the definition of what a human being is, cannot finally be based on the criterion of personality. A human being participates in something more than the concatenation of terms such as personality, ego, the "I," or autonomous self, can comprise. For, as we have seen, what is defined by these terms can be destroyed, yet the human being does not cease to be. When the ego is destroyed from without, i.e. by force of circumstances or by the force exerted by other people, the life that remains is like that of a severed limb: it is not whole. At the same time Weil maintains throughout her writing that the ego distorts reality; it insinuates itself between what is and who we are. Affliction in its various forms, such as poverty, fatigue, slavery, torture, waiting to die, functions to break down the ego. This breakdown is destructive when the ego is not prepared to face the truth that it is in fact ephemeral, unable finally to maintain itself before a relentless necessity. It most wishes to live precisely when there is no reason left to live. One then wishes to please like a dog or receive ministrations like a cat.⁴⁹¹ But there is another possibility: the "yes" which arises either before affliction strikes or in the very midst of it.

In Weil's "New York Notebook," there is a passage in which she considers how to respond to physical pain, and for the reader it displays some very difficult teachings. The language she uses is unabashedly Platonic and it is inherently mythical, though this is complicated by the fact that she strives to describe in

scientific detail the process she calls “decreation.”

When suffering no matter what degree of pain, when almost the entire soul is inwardly crying “make it stop, I can bear no more”, a part of the soul even though it be an infinitesimally small part, should say: “I consent that this should continue throughout the whole of time, if the divine wisdom so ordains.” The soul is then split in two. For the physically sentient part of the soul is—at least sometimes—unable to consent to pain. This splitting in two of the soul is a second pain, a spiritual one, and even sharper than the physical pain that causes it. A similar use can be made of hunger, fatigue, fear, and of everything that imperatively constrains the sentient part of the soul to cry: I can bear no more! Make it stop! There should be something in us that answers: I consent that it should continue up to the moment of death, or that it should not even finish then, but continue for ever. Then it is that the soul is as if divided by a two-edged sword.⁴⁹²

The foundational impetus of this transformation of the soul is physical pain. Pain is the irreducible core of the entire experience. It is as if she is describing a brutal form of exercise which inherently involves the physical, but as it is appropriated and transformed by the spirit. As physical pain is accepted, one’s orientation to time is transformed.⁴⁹³ Here Weil is involved in her own experience. Her desire, overweening as it may seem, yet focussed and bold, is to accept the attenuation and even the effacement of that in her which can say “I.” We will consider shortly the implications of this in her personal life. Before doing so, however, let us consider the cogency of the choice she perceived as open to those who are in affliction. She bases her description on the concept of energy. She distinguishes between “supplementary” and “vegetative” energy. The former term designates that which supplies our desire and will, that which is conscious of time, with which we can imagine the future and

make calculations and plans and carry on the tasks of daily life. The latter term designates, not the kinetic energy which motivates us, but that which sustains our basic bodily functions without which we could no longer live. In a protracted condition of affliction, the supplementary energy is completely used up. Again there is a subjective factor. Some people are able to sustain the most frightful conditions of torture, deprivation, and misery, because the store of their supplementary energy is great, while others are thrown onto their basic life functions very quickly.⁴⁹⁴ The point is not to determine how much one can take and how long one can last, but what the possibilities are when the line is breached, when time has "run out." Our conscious nature then automatically cries out that the drain on our supplementary energy should cease immediately—"Enough!" If, for whatever reason, the source is not eliminated, our basic biological operations are exposed. At this very point, she says, there is within us another voice which does not cry halt but rather: "Forever, if it is thy will." She is confident that this expression is addressed to the "true God" because it arises only when the energy of the will, or the "I," is completely used up. Otherwise one still retains the initiative to come to God on one's own terms; in this case one may well be worshipping a god made in one's own image. "The thing that one feels to be oneself is in the part that cries: 'Enough!'," and yet one supports the other voice. This is really to relinquish oneself."⁴⁹⁵ Even a quarter of an hour in which one is drawing on vegetative energy is enough to reach the other side, the side in which necessity is seen not as a crushing force but docile and obedient matter. It is to pass "beyond time, into eternity."⁴⁹⁶

In her letter to Bousquet, Weil discusses this same subject using two traditional mystical images. In the first image she likens this world to an egg which contains a chick, symbolising the divine image or likeness, the capacity for relationship with the divine present in every person. When the chick is grown, it breaks its shell; it is still this world into which it emerges, but it is no longer within its shell. "Space is opened and torn apart."⁴⁹⁷ In accepting this imagery, she also avows a basic dualism of soul/body, spirit/matter, the world above/ the world below in which, apparently, the latter term is disparaged. "The spirit, leaving the miserable body in some corner, is transported to a point outside space, which is not a point of view, which has no perspective, but from which this world is seen as it is, unconfused by perspective."⁴⁹⁸ The point of the dualism, however, is not the disparagement of body, matter, and this world. Before buttressing this point, we need to confront the second image Weil uses.

She likens the soul's choice between good and evil to the nuptial act. She felt Bousquet was at least close to the point of decision. For twenty years he was paralysed by a bullet lodged in his spine and it seems he derived no pleasure from his existence. Almost the whole of him was crying, "Enough!" Evidently he had made some reference to Weil of no longer being able to discern between good and evil, and she counsels him in response that indeed, he still can. In fact, he was at least close to the point of deciding between the two, and the choice once made would commit him irrevocably. The ordeal was not without great moment and consequence. Again she speaks of a limiting moment in which the soul is called to decide, and she uses a

vivid image. “There is a kind of virginity in the soul as regards good, which is lost for ever once the soul has given this consent—just as a woman’s virginity is lost after she has yielded to a man.”⁴⁹⁹ Before taking its decision, the soul is virgin in the sense of its knowledge; it knows neither the one nor the other. But if at the fixed moment of decision that is unknown prior to this point, “it has not consented to be possessed by the good, it will immediately afterwards be possessed in spite of itself by the bad.”⁵⁰⁰ It is the nature of evil that it insinuates itself into the soul which can admit it unconsciously.

To be possessed by the bad, it is not necessary to have consented to it; but the good never possesses the soul until she has said yes. And such is the fear of consummating the union that no soul has the power to say yes to the good unless she is urgently constrained by the almost immediate approach of the time-limit which will decide her eternal fate. . . . The most a human being can do is to guard intact his faculty for saying yes to the good, until the time when the limiting moment has almost been reached.⁵⁰¹

In making her point, Weil freely uses a kind of spousal imagery which we consider objectionable today. It is important to remember, however, that the relation she speaks of is between Creator and creature rather than between creatures themselves. In this relationship, there is a giving which leads to the legitimate fulfilment of our humanity. What can happen and what can be done when affliction has reached a certain point? In terms of the first image, she tells Bousquet that once he has emerged from his shell, he will have touched the reality of war in his entire being, physically, intellectually, and spiritually. Its reality will be seen not for himself but in itself. Bousquet is privileged to apprehend a reality which others who are

presently faced with it miss, either because they are killed without a chance to reflect on what is happening to them, or, returning from the front physically unscathed, wish to forget and place the atrocity of it behind them. But he has not had this luxury, since war is permanently lodged in his body, waiting in patient fidelity until he is ripe to know it.⁵⁰² Bousquet is forced either to wait, literally immobile and fixed, for the good, or to repudiate it altogether. He is privileged too, she tells him, because his particular affliction is the same one that impacts so many of his fellows at this particular time, and he is called to know it—"that is the redemptive function itself."⁵⁰³ In the language of the gospels, Bousquet is given the privilege of bearing his cross, which is the bullet lodged in his spine. This is there for him, but it is also a reality for others who perhaps cannot bear it. By forgiving its presence in his body, by consenting to all the circumstances which congealed to drive it into him, he will allow the love of God to reach the depths of his own and the world's affliction.

Here Weil does not rest in a dualistic disparagement of the body because, for her, the body has an integral function. Elsewhere she declares: "The body plays a part in all apprenticeships."⁵⁰⁴ Without its sensation, one may easily imagine a false reality, an ersatz form of the good. As we have seen, physical pain fixes in the body the reality of the world; it destroys the illusion of personal strength and control.⁵⁰⁵ Now when the world is loved, it is loved through the pain and not through a spiritual exercise which numbs it. The "eminent dignity" of the body is that it acts as a balance between that part in us which is our will, and that part which yields to the will of God.⁵⁰⁶ The Son consents to the Father's will by undergoing crucifixion. "Not what

I want, but what you want" is carried out, not in imagination, but in the body (Mk. 14:36). In this letter to Bousquet, mystical expression and counsel offered in the context of friendship, are not divorced from the reality of the world: "I think that when you have consented to the good you will break the shell, after an interval perhaps . . . and the moment you are outside it there will be a pardon for the bullet which once pierced the centre of your body, and thus also for the whole universe which drove it there."⁵⁰⁷ The bird which pierces its shell is love of the beauty of the world. It is in the world but not of it. "Such a love does not love beings and things in God, but from the abode of God."⁵⁰⁸

It is evident in Weil's correspondence with Bousquet that, while maintaining an integral honesty with a man in the course of affliction, she attempts to offer a draught of the truth which she herself has tasted. It is, as in the case of the king in the Grail legend, paralysed by a most grievous wound, both a question and the response to it. She attempts to bring a dimension of meaning into this man's experience of affliction, which addresses his experience and transcends it. The veteran is not simply a paralytic whose entire vision is coloured by his wound. Rather, he is given the precious privilege of contemplating the very same affliction which presently overwhelms so many of his fellow-citizens. Moreover, his affliction ushers him to a point of decision in which he can receive the good and henceforth speak of war in a very different way, or he can sink into evil, that is, remain confined to the centre that says "me" and behaves accordingly toward the world.⁵⁰⁹ These thoughts which Weil shares with him offer the possibility of a different response to affliction than horror,

in the face of its destructive power.

Notably, this movement from affliction to decreation serves to realize the work of compassion. Again in her “New York Notebook,” Weil indicates how this may be. “In order to feel compassion for someone in affliction, the soul has to be divided in two. One part absolutely removed from all contamination and all danger of contamination. The other part contaminated to the point of identification. This tension is passion, com—passion.”⁵¹⁰ What I think she is trying to emphasize here is, that unless one has survived affliction in such a way that the part that is able to consent to it has remained intact, there is no possibility of expressing compassion. Evil is complete. Those crushed by affliction have nothing to give. And of course those who know nothing of affliction either ignore the afflicted or are horrified by the very sight of them. The “I” is finite and exhaustible. It cannot consider affliction without being itself reduced to it. Only that part of us that waits upon divine grace can say “yes” to our own affliction. It is tantamount to an invitation to the good which fills us and through us reaches out to the other. This process, however, as Weil understood it, demands everything.

Love is a divine thing. If it enters a human heart it breaks it.

The human heart was created in order to be broken in this way. It is the saddest waste if it is broken by anything else. But it prefers to be broken by anything rather than by the divine love. Because the divine love breaks only those hearts which consent to be broken; and this consent is difficult to give.⁵¹¹

When the good is received, it enables us to feel compassion for ourselves, for that part in us which is in affliction, and it also radiates through us to our neighbours.

Compassion extended by the decreed is by its very nature not a possession, not something one has that is extra or superfluous to be handed out as an alms. The compassionate one is herself a beggar who gives in the same spirit as she receives, and in giving, she gives "the last penny"; there is nothing left over.

Especially in her New York and London "Notebooks," Weil yearned for a cessation of her own self, certainly of her power to say "I." Yet this was not an end she set for herself. For her this was in accordance with the petition of the Lord's prayer, "thy will be done." There is no question but that she recognized at least the possibility of a radical transformation taking place. She uses expressions such as "new creation" and "incarnation" to describe it. She speaks of the moment in which the supplementary energy having been exhausted, there is no escape route for the imagination. A quarter of an hour is equivalent to eternity. At this moment, says Weil, an unrestricted vision of the good is present to the soul. If the soul rejects the good, bitterness and hatred colour it permanently, but if the soul loves the good, it consents to its own death. Its emergence is as a new creation; it is born "of water and the spirit."⁵¹² The new creation is no longer for the sake of oneself, for the self in a real sense has ceased instinctively to insinuate itself in the thought and action of this new being. One exists "but solely for the love of creatures."⁵¹³ All relationships are transformed. "This new creation is like an incarnation. The second creation is not creation but generation. Christ comes into the soul and substitutes himself for it."⁵¹⁴ For those who have passed through affliction, whose very existence has taken on the hue of horror, self-denial may be all too easy. Weil knew this of herself. She could

not believe others could feel friendship and love for one who regarded herself with “a mixture of contempt and hatred and repulsion,” but she effectively states that a choice stands in her way and the way of all the afflicted: destruction or transformation.⁵¹⁵

11. Decreation: Destruction or Transformation

As bold as Weil was in her description of decreation, she opposed it to destruction, which is effectively the unconsented dissolution of another human being through force. While decreation takes place from the inside as one effectively consents to one's own death, destruction is an external operation—it is not accepted. To uproot other people who are completely dependent on the renewal of the supplementary energy they receive from their physical integrity, their social milieu in terms of family, friends, work, a particular city or country, or language, “To do all that to other people, from the outside, is an ersatz form of de-creation; it is producing unreality.”⁵¹⁶ As we noted, Weil was painfully attentive to her contemporaries who, “under the stroke of affliction,” were deprived of their roots before having had the chance to transplant their entire source of nurture from the penultimate to the ultimate. We are naked in the world but for the coverings of physical integrity, character, intelligence, earning capacity, social relations, cultural forms, etc.. Even when these are threatened and lost, however, we do not necessarily lose the capacity to say “I,” to consider our self as a self distinct from what is happening around us and to us—except in extreme

affliction. Under its stroke, we lose even this capacity. A passage in her “New York Notebook” highlights the distinction she perceives between destruction and decreation at the moment of affliction.

The poor wretch who kneels and begs for life is saying, unknown to himself: Leave me more time in which to become perfect. Do not put an end to me while I have had so small a part in the good. . . .

Only God knows what happens if the man’s prayer is not heard and he is killed.”⁵¹⁷

An example she offers of this very possibility is that of Lycaon at the moment when he pleads for his life at the hands of Achilles, who is not disposed to spare it. “One has every reason then to fall on one’s knees and make grovelling supplication, when the violent death which is about to overtake one is bound to kill the ‘I’ from without before even life itself has been destroyed.”⁵¹⁸ This is because, when the “I” itself is destroyed in this manner, “there is nothing, absolutely nothing that one can do.”⁵¹⁹ Presumably even a pure love extended to such is completely ineffective to raise up what has been thus killed. Therefore she underlines the destructive capacity of extreme affliction which destroys the “I” from the outside, for then one is no longer able to make an offering of it.⁵²⁰ What is taken by force is the only genuine offering a human being can make. Again we sense the finality Weil intends to communicate. What do we have in the world into which we come and go but our identity, the power given to us in creation to say “I?” Yet God comes repeatedly like a beggar and begs it of us; but God never takes it, so when circumstances within the world do indeed take it, it is unbearable. This is why Weil speaks of forgiving God. This is the source of her question: “Why did God create?”⁵²¹ What of all those at any time and every

time who have been deprived by force of their only legitimate offering? Her single assurance is that, throughout time, Christ is present in his passion to those who, even at the last moment, wish to make their offering, for as she phrases it, “affliction without the Cross is hell, and God has not placed hell upon the earth.”⁵²² For this reason too we have an obligation to serve the basic needs of others, even if those others are our enemies. It is not for us to call them to renunciation but to serve them, so they have the opportunity preserved for them of making their own offering when the time comes.⁵²³

Destruction, then, is in opposition to decreation. The latter process is essentially defined by an element of joy. This is not a perverse pleasure derived through pain, but the conviction that no joy is possible outside the truth. Joy, for Weil, is not derived from suffering; quite the contrary, affliction itself is devoid of joy and is instinctively avoided at all costs. Joy is found only in the conviction that one is not living a lie but is “in the truth,” in the sense of coming to the knowledge of what is, other than one’s self. While destruction plunges the victim into unreality—since she clings to her existence even and especially while her existence is being destroyed—in the process of decreation she accepts, comes to know and to rest in the knowledge that she is but one fragment of the universe, and in a sense touches the truth, or better, the truth touches her.

It is perhaps easy in an initial reading of Weil’s exposition of affliction to miss the fact that she herself knew joy, and that it is this knowledge which gives her an acute appreciation of its absence in affliction. At one point she even considers

“pure joy” as a condition for “redemptive suffering.”⁵²⁴ How can we give something up of which we do not know the value? In that case, we do not give it up but merely throw it away. The very statement, “this world isn’t worth anything,” or “life isn’t worth anything” because evil is present in it “is absurd,” says Weil. If life is worthless “of what exactly does evil deprive us?”⁵²⁵ We feel and know suffering to the extent that we have known joy. “Of what does suffering deprive him who is without joy?”⁵²⁶ The relation here is not that between sadness and pleasure, which are both defined for Weil on the basis of a self-centred personality that does or does not get what it desires. Suffering is meaningful as it is related to the deprivation of the delight one may be given with the very process of life.⁵²⁷ There is, as it were, a naivete in joy such as a newborn might express with every simple movement. For human beings, joy is contained in rest after hard labour, a good meal when one is hungry, certainty in one’s bodily movements, and certainly in the contemplation of natural beauty: the reflection of the moon over the sea, beautiful human being in the midst of beautiful surroundings, such as the Umbrian peasants she observed working their land. For her, Homer’s *Iliad*, in an inimitable way, captured the deprivation of this joy that is our due. It is in the deprivation of this joy that one feels pain and anguish. There is a profound conviction that this anguish is not meant to be. When and if this conviction is not present, she finds one who has been somewhere, sometime, destroyed—there is no feeling left.

Weil was especially solicitous of happiness in her neighbours, as she wrote to Victor Bernard, the manager of the stove factory in Rosières, shortly after her

factory year: "You are a relatively happy man, and happiness in my eyes is something precious and worthy of respect. I do not want to spread around me to no purpose the indelible bitterness with which my experience has left me."⁵²⁸ When her friend Thibon remarked that a happy person was one who had not yet reached a higher state of purity, she responded: "I believe that true happiness is something no less rare and no less precious than pure and fruitful suffering. Some souls have the vocation of happiness; I do not envy them, but I admire them, and, when I think I have met one of them, I desire passionately that circumstances may favour him."⁵²⁹

Though Weil may have been tempted at times to force the attenuation of her own self (perhaps especially during her time in London when she saw no hope of getting back into France), her understanding of decreation would be misunderstood if it were finally explained in terms of a drive toward self-destruction. Rather, decreation is for her a way of seeing that other people and things exist, not vis-à-vis ourselves, whether they are occasions of our joy or suffering, but as "they exist in their own right." Though this involves the painful letting go of the filter through which "I" see the world, what is given is far more precious according to Weil. God comes to dwell in us with our consent and to feed us with the divine bread. One starts living instead of dreaming.⁵³⁰ This was her own conviction, as she reiterates it over and over in a paraphrase of the gospels, *viz.* "when one hungers for bread one does not receive stones."⁵³¹ In other words, if it is truth we desire and beg for, we will not be given illusion. Weil tells Perrin that "for ten years" (presumably through the thirties which were so formative for her), she persevered in a state of attention upon

the truth though “practically unsupported by any hope of results.”⁵³² The result, however, seems to be that everything in the world is then treated differently. In her unfinished play, *Venise sauvée*, the protagonist Jaffier, who has come upon the city of Venice in order to despoil it, looks upon it for a moment and suddenly, grasped by its beauty, knows the reality that Venice exists: its people, its canals, its alleys, and buildings, and the whole of it together independently of him—and in seeing it, he can no longer think of destroying it.⁵³³ Her protagonist, through attention, is given that momentary pause before the exercise of power, which is enough to arrest destructive action. His actions are no longer “natural” but “supernatural.” He denounces the planned attack and sacrifices his life in favour of the city. In this example, we can see that what is encountered in a decreated human being is not a hollow self, but a capacity for compassion, which Weil does not cease to call “supernatural” or divine.

The consented loss in decreation is the way that attention can be directed to the afflicted themselves.⁵³⁴ Only the decreated can dare to ask: “What are you going through?” and to listen for the answer. This is because the attentive question is tantamount to accepting the other’s suffering as one’s own. As noted above, Weil uses the image of a ransom that is paid. One’s entire being is given as ransom. One’s identity, security, peace, and life are given in exchange for the other’s pain, terror, despair, and alienation. This, as has been stated, is because attention is compassion; it is taking on the affliction of another, an acceptance of being nothing, even as this bruised “piece of flesh” is counted in her and the world’s eyes as nothing. It is creative in that one who is momentarily deprived of humanity is given human regard.

This is no longer giving oneself but imparting the love of God through human contact. This communion alone raises the afflicted in their own eyes to consent to their affliction. It needs to be remembered that this is not a counsel to passivity. It is not a matter of failing to do everything possible to remove the affliction. Rather, it is the recognition that evil is present, that under its destructive force human beings are being broken, and if left alone will be destroyed, shrouded in silence. What the decreed being offers them is a voice. "Only God, present in us, can really think the human quality into the victims of affliction, can really look at them with a look differing from that we give to things, can listen to their voice as we listen to spoken words. Then they become aware that they have a voice, otherwise they would not have occasion to notice it."⁵³⁵ Decreation is the passage from the existence of a slave to the life of an adopted child, the passage from behaviour subject to the laws of matter to behaviour that is subject to the good. One is no longer subject to the reality of force, which is sovereign in the world, but one becomes obedient to justice, which penetrates the world.

12. Decreation as a Problem of Identity

After the ravages of affliction, the response of decreation seems to express an almost smooth, flowing elegance, the highpoint of a life dedicated to God, a willing offering to the One who begs it of us.⁵³⁶ But here some of Weil's readers, especially her feminist and Jewish readers, have paused to ask some serious questions about Simone

Weil herself. And Weil offers much to question both in her writing and in her way of life, especially in the period after 1938. Her thoughts on decreation cannot be more fully appreciated without confronting some of the psychological critique of Weil as a person. Typically, it is not her understanding of affliction nor the attention that is to be directed to the afflicted that have elicited controversy, but rather what she has said about decreation and especially as she lived its implications in her own life. Contained in these critiques is the recognition, best articulated by her friend Thibon, that Weil's effacement of her own ego was not without a certain deliberateness. Thibon declares: "In the great book of the universe spread often before her, her *ego* was, as it were, a word which she may perhaps have succeeded in *effacing*, but which was still *underlined*."⁵³⁷

I will concentrate on the biographical critiques of Weil which maintain that she had special problems with her self-identity in general, and her female identity in particular.⁵³⁸ I will also introduce what is seen to be Weil's rejection of her Jewish identity in relation to the above, and will continue with an examination of this important aspect of her life in the next section. The challenge these critiques offer is to decreation as a viable and worthy response to affliction, particularly as it comes out of Weil's own life.

In a review of Otto Ruhle's biography of Marx, Weil herself states that when considering the work of the great, it is best to concentrate on it, and not on the details of their lives, for it is in their work that they have poured the best of themselves.⁵³⁹ Apart from the presence of personality, which Weil felt detracts from any work of

genius, at least one point she is making here is that who Marx was (and we can say by implication who Simone Weil was) cannot be finally or even primarily determined through biographical analysis, helpful and useful as this analysis may be in its sphere. Yet most students of Weil agree that with regard to her, thought is to a great extent illumined by life, for she tried to live her life in consistency with her convictions.⁵⁴⁰ Nor, so Thomas Nevin maintains, can we go along with Weil when she asks that we not pay heed to her person, but simply to what she bears within her.⁵⁴¹ As her letters to Perrin, Schumann and Bousquet amply indicate, her convictions were not simply intellectual constructs, but moral imperatives, such that she would not permit in herself a divorce between thought and action. We may recall that, when her friend Helen Honnorat wondered out loud why Weil would subject herself to the work of a grape-harvester in view of what she bore within her, Weil herself answered in effect that what she had to say was tied to what she had done.⁵⁴² At the same time, the evaluation of her biography on the basis of various psychological criteria, though useful in pointing to some of her problems, indicates the danger of such evaluation especially when it is necessarily based on written biographies at least one remove from the person. For one thing, as George Grant has tried to point out with regard to Robert Coles's psycho-biography, the evaluation is only as good as the tools and the person using them.⁵⁴³ But a more serious shortcoming, to which Grant also points, is that of reductionism. What Weil has to say through her lived life about affliction, attention, or decreation, or even who Simone Weil was, cannot be unequivocally tied to an examination of her crisis of identity. Those who have very different experiences

than Weil study her work because they find in it something which transcends her own limitations. Nevertheless, these limitations cannot be ignored if we are more fully to appreciate who Simone Weil was, and what she has had to say.⁵⁴⁴

Her Identity as a Woman

One of the more serious critiques from a feminist perspective is levelled by Ann Loades. Focussing on the reasons for her early death, especially her lack of adequate food intake, Loades argues that Weil adopted elements of the “imitation of Christ” tradition which have historically been lethal for women.⁵⁴⁵ This is not a focus on the Christ of resurrection glory, but on a self-sacrificial imitation of the crucified Christ. Loades traces the attraction to this tradition for certain women back to the Gregorian reform of the mid-eleventh century, which stimulated the clericalization of the church and the relative exclusion of authoritative functions by women, most especially the handling of the elements in the Mass.⁵⁴⁶ Up to our own century, Loades states, “religious women” in particular have created a pattern whereby, through physical asceticism, an attempt is made to do away both with their sexuality and their hunger. This author lists three perceived benefits from this pattern: the women command attention; they summon a certain energy in themselves; and they find communion with God.⁵⁴⁷ In this way they take control of what is otherwise a system of rewards managed by priests and confessors. “She can become a kind of saviour figure in her own right if she identifies herself with the suffering and dying Christ, for death becomes, so to speak, the only way forward, and death chosen freely

and early is still an expression of autonomy, as well as being the only anodyne for a certain kind of pain.”⁵⁴⁸ As Loades describes this pattern, it is an indirect way of assuming the power and recognition which has been denied to these women.

Loades implies that Weil too was tempted to adopt an *imitatio Christi* pattern in the face of a lack of control over certain elements impacting on her life. She does not elaborate on these elements, but mentions the then-current political slide into totalitarianism, and the prevalence of anti-Semitism. Apart from these, Loades mentions Weil’s problem with her feminine identity, abetted by her mother’s preference for “values associated with little boys rather than little girls.”⁵⁴⁹ Finally, Loades declares that Weil found ready to hand a type of Christian asceticism to fuel her faulty self-perception. She is critical of Weil’s male readers, who approve the adoption of such an *imitatio Christi* pattern wherein the self is extinguished because it is in the way of union with the divine.⁵⁵⁰ Loades charges them with a lack of sensitivity to the fact that what is here present is a search for “meaning and autonomy” which has become misguided. There is a distinction, Loades maintains, between Weil’s “*writings*,” in which she is attuned to the dangers of a morbid spirituality, and her life, marked as it is by a desire for “self-annihilation,” betraying unfulfilled needs for “nurture and connection.”⁵⁵¹ I do not think it simplifies Loades’ argument to say that, in her view, Weil found in a certain strand of the Christian tradition a justification for her self-hatred.⁵⁵²

While Loades recognises Weil’s perspicacity, courage, and maturity as a political philosopher, she nevertheless maintains that instead of serving as a source

of strength, Weil's religious faith was destructive and degrading of her own humanity. Her religious avowal was missing that genuine love for self which is an essential part of the joy of living. Loades states: "It is one thing to employ the metaphors of the 'imitation of Christ' as the context of love and then be sustained by it in a situation of extremity, but quite another to make the bare possibility of being in that situation a focus of attention outside the context of love."⁵⁵³ If we follow Loades' assessment, we may surmise that Weil was a proud woman who searched for recognition and affirmation in a negative way, by assuming a passion which did not arise from her own experience and context. Had she been in a situation of terrible privation, her asceticism would have manifested itself as a love dominating the whole personality, but deprived of such an object of love, she became conscious only of desperate fatigue, and eventually of a total lack of patience with herself.⁵⁵⁴

The question which Loades' assessment raises yet again is whether the last months of Weil's life in New York and London, and her untimely death, are a manifestation of spiritual morbidity (which compromises the attention one can give to the neighbour), or whether her death was in fact no less a manifestation of love and attention than was her life. Students of Weil's life and thought are divided on this issue. Her death remains open to a variety of interpretations. Her strong desire to become involved in the war on the French side, may be interpreted as willfulness. It is true that it was repeatedly indicated to her that getting into France would not only be impractical (i.e., of little value to the French war effort), and not only would it endanger her life, but it would also endanger the lives of others.⁵⁵⁵ Yet it seems she

would be satisfied with nothing less, and her will to live was broken as soon as she realized that apart from the office work for the Free French Forces in London, no further opportunity would be given her to engage in the war. It must be pointed out, however, that in a letter to Schumann, she is very clear about the limits to her thought. She states that she is not able to produce ideas for the Free French, which is what she was being asked to do, without being “in contact with the object” of her thought.⁵⁵⁶ When she is deprived of this contact she will eventually reach a moral limit, because she will be outside the place she knows it is her duty to be in. Second, she will reach an intellectual limit when she cannot grapple with the concrete circumstances of the situation in France. Thirdly, she will simply break down physically because her fatigue is growing.⁵⁵⁷ Weil was not suicidal. She was very clear within herself, as well as with those who were close to her, that apart from the compassion she might exercise with regard to others, life meant nothing for her except as a way to be in touch with the truth.⁵⁵⁸ This is a rare clarity to have reached in one’s life and it does not indicate spiritual morbidity.

Another critic, Judith Gregory, addresses Weil as if she were still alive, in the form of a personal letter. Admitting that she is not extensively familiar with Weil’s work, she writes not as a specialist, but as a woman. Middle-class and well educated, Gregory avows an estrangement as well as an attraction to Weil. Gregory feels Weil is a stranger to her because Weil never asked the question: “What effect does my being female have on my life?”⁵⁵⁹ At the same time, Gregory feels a kinship with Weil because of her own long and hard struggle to affirm herself. Gregory “tells”

Weil of the Olympic gold-medallist, the late Florence Griffith-Joyner, who as a black woman was “one of the oppressed” and who at the same time was everything “the oppressed would like to be: powerful, beautiful, free and fast.”⁵⁶⁰ In contrast, Gregory tells Weil that what stands out in her writing is “not affirmation of life for all of us, but negation of your own life.”⁵⁶¹ While Weil “*understood*” affliction, she “did choose self-annihilation.”⁵⁶² In the same vein as Loades, Gregory finds in Weil’s “extreme asceticism” and tendency to self-annihilation, a congenial spiritual practice. In rejecting this path, Gregory declares: “We women of this time, will not follow you to self-annihilation.”⁵⁶³ And she questions whether Weil’s was a path set by God, or a social standard set for “especially brilliant women.”⁵⁶⁴ Gregory feels Weil pushes her through the strength and cogency of her writing to a denial, rather than an affirmation of her being, and as a wounded woman Gregory senses the pull in Weil’s writing toward the former, while Gregory has fought most of her life for the latter. The author no longer wants to identify with the slaves, the victims, “to listen and speak from a sense of affliction and helplessness, asking the Son of God for mercy.”⁵⁶⁵ She wants to identify with the free. So she responds with a “*No!*” to Weil.⁵⁶⁶ “Jesus told us, ‘Take up your cross and follow me,’ not ‘Make your cross and follow me.’ And he spoke to us as living beings who exist, not as if we had better become nothing.”⁵⁶⁷ Gregory maintains that Weil never accepted herself in order to be able to deny herself.⁵⁶⁸

In the opening chapter of her work on Weil’s political thought, yet another critic, Mary Dietz, attempts a psychological analysis of the origins of Weil’s

problems with personal and collective identity. Using the work of Erik Erikson as a basis for her analysis and Pétrement's biography as material, Dietz traces the reason for Weil's problems with her personal identity as far back as Weil's weaning. "Whatever else it did, the disastrous nursing helped set the stage for the child to make some connection between her personal sense of unworthiness and her mother's power over her."⁵⁶⁹ Aside from the problematic relationship with her mother, Dietz points out that Simone's relationship with her brilliant brother was a subordinate one. "As a very young child, Simone totally surrendered her identity to her brother. . . . André was her world."⁵⁷⁰ Dietz finds here a source of trouble: "The total identification with and subordination of one sibling to another is a psychological time bomb."⁵⁷¹ Dietz points to Simone's unfavourable comparison of herself to her brother in which she fell short on two counts, being a female and lacking genius. The dominating mother encouraged Simone's masculine attitude, which finally resulted in her "ascetic turning away from sexuality altogether."⁵⁷²

Again basing herself on Erickson's work, Dietz proposes that even a particularly difficult childhood need not lead to psychologically deleterious effects.⁵⁷³ A community in which one finds purpose and meaning can offer welcome to a fragile self, but where was Simone to find one? Her parents came from and fostered the tradition of assimilated Jews. The Weil children were never encouraged in deepening their Jewish identity. At the same time, the French society around them did distinguish the Jews, and this distinction did not bode well for them, as the Dreyfus affair and its aftermath as well as the rhetoric of such organizations as the *Action*

Francaise clearly indicated. It may be, says Dietz, that circumstances such as these attracted Weil to Christianity, but the Christianity she was exposed to was that of the general culture, and not that within the church. It was filtered through teachers, especially Alain, and her educational experience in the French lycee. Far from ushering her into a community of believers, Weil's Christianity provided the basis for her self-directed lonely calling.⁵⁷⁴ What was in fact the formative influence for Weil was an intellectual culture in which she was nurtured through her parents and her brother, and one in which she was conversant from the outset. "If there was any prevailing religion in the Weil family or in the French secondary schools, it was faith in reason and in intellect."⁵⁷⁵ While Christianity may have served as a substitute for Judaism, the sense of being French served as a substitute for belonging to family.⁵⁷⁶ This substitute also proved inadequate. Her patriotism was severely tested during the First World War. The Weil family observed the horrors at close range, since Dr. Bernard Weil served as a doctor in the French army and the family followed him in his various postings. As well, in the aftermath of the war, symbolised by Versailles, Weil herself declares that the will to humiliate a defeated enemy cured her once and for all of a naive patriotism. Finally, during her childhood and adolescence, even a "group certainty" was denied Simone, because she had no peer group to which she belonged as an integral part.⁵⁷⁷ "In short," Dietz concludes, "what Erikson calls 'the identity of both identities,'—both the core of the individual and the core of her communal culture—were deeply compromised in Simone Weil."⁵⁷⁸

Another notable element of Dietz's critique arises from conclusions she

makes based on Weil's admission of despair at the age of fourteen when she perceived that she was, in comparison to her brother, excluded "from that transcendent kingdom to which only the truly great have access and wherein truth abides."⁵⁷⁹ We have already noted that she was lifted from this despair by the insight that "any human being, even though practically devoid of natural faculties, can penetrate to the kingdom of truth reserved for genius, if only he longs for truth and perpetually concentrates all his attention upon its attainment."⁵⁸⁰ Dietz maintains that the solution Weil discovered was anything but worldly. Since she did not feel she possessed natural faculties for genius, she saw its achievement through attention, an achievement which eschewed measurement by external standards. Moreover Dietz maintains that Weil's use of the term "transcendent kingdom" indicates a movement "out of the world of 'mortal' geniuses."⁵⁸¹ This was Weil's way out of her failure to find a satisfying personal and communal identity. The discovery of a "transcendent kingdom" gave her "a way to move beyond André's intellect, legitimize the destruction of her 'worthless' self, and remove the pressing burden of worldly belonging all at once."⁵⁸²

Rachel Feldhay Brenner finds serious weakness in Weil both as a woman and as a Jew. Her work entitled Writing as Resistance: Four Women Confronting the Holocaust: Edith Stein, Simone Weil, Anne Frank, Etty Hillesum is an attempt to show how autobiographical writing for each of these four Jewish women was both an act of defiance and affirmation, defiance of the power that threatened to destroy life and affirmation of humanity under the threat of dehumanization. Brenner

struggles to find in and through the writing of these women an alternative to the “order of reciprocity” in the liberal humanist tradition of the Enlightenment. The alternative she sees enunciated here is a responsibility to oneself as well as “for” the other as a form of defiance before the fact of radical evil.⁵⁸³ Brenner, who herself lost members of her family in the Holocaust, is adamant that its horror cannot be transcended through a “humanistic hopefulness.”⁵⁸⁴ Nevertheless, while Brenner acknowledges the absolute solidarity of these women with God, “even and particularly in his weakness,” one cannot find in Brenner’s own writing a grounding for this responsibility for the other in anything other than a new humanity. There is vacillation in Brenner’s writing between admiration for these women’s faith in a God who is variously seen to be absent, or present only as One who shares in the suffering of the victims, and her own search for a new humanism. Endeavouring to distill the value of the literature she examines, Brenner concludes: “In their acts of writing, the four women defied tyrannical limitations, cut across the boundaries of the decree, denied isolation, and established a relationship that speaks the language of humanism in resistance to terror.”⁵⁸⁵ Drawing on Emil Fackenheim’s concept of the “Mad Midrash,” and Paul Tillich’s “the courage to be,” a courage “rooted in the God who appears when God has disappeared in the anxiety of doubt,” Brenner maintains that “the existence of God lies no longer in his commanding presence but in the human courage to think and act as if God and his divine order existed—that is, to maintain the values without the support of the Divine.”⁵⁸⁶

In drawing parallels between the lives and the writings of these four

contemporaries, Brenner seems unable to fit Weil into an acceptable category of resistance. In Brenner's interpretation, Weil fails in repeated comparisons especially to Edith Stein. Stein acknowledged her Jewishness, was attuned to women's "intrinsic feminine value," and balanced her responsibility "as a citizen and a humanist," while Weil remained a compromised figure who denied her own Jewishness, her femaleness, and her own self.⁵⁸⁷ Brenner writes that Weil's projected self-image "vacillates between that of a brilliant political, social, religious activist, and that of a self-tormented, self-destructive 'wretch.'"⁵⁸⁸ Moreover, the author is convinced that "the subtext of Weil's rebellious social activities and controversial missions reveals an intensifying disposition toward dramatic self-sacrificial destruction."⁵⁸⁹ Brenner recognizes that Weil's sharp tuning into affliction comes from the unflinching recognition that in the afflicted, we can see a real possibility for ourselves; we are human and vulnerable to the same predicament. "Our inability to contemplate such an affinity because of our fear of affliction causes us to dissociate from the afflicted or, worse, to exploit or dominate the victim."⁵⁹⁰ At the same time, Brenner is critical of what she sees as a suicidal self-offering in Weil, in contrast to the other women. "While Hillesum found meaning in concrete ways of alleviating the physical and mental hardship of her fellow inmates, Weil sought meaning in a spectacular act of self-offering."⁵⁹¹ Brenner makes this assessment especially in light of the last two years of Weil's life, when she had departed from France and sought for some concrete way to take her part in the war and of the mysterious circumstances surrounding her death.

In Brenner's description, Weil's life as a whole is a contradiction. On the one hand, Weil is in solidarity with the oppressed, and on the other, she oppresses herself. "The discrepancy between Weil the brilliant social thinker and rebel, and Weil the sufferer aspiring to self-obliteration as a martyr, raises questions of both identity and identity denial."⁵⁹² Brenner tends to answer these questions by implying that Weil's proclivity for taking risks with herself, as well as her asceticism, may be explained as a striving to efface her Jewish identity. I will undertake to discuss Weil's problematic relationship to her own people below, but it is necessary to hear what Brenner has to say at this point because she intertwines, in her discussion of Weil's identity, the issues of Weil as a person, a woman, and a Jew.

Brenner sees in Weil a drive to reconnect with God through self-annihilation, which is a departure from both the Christian and Jewish understanding of creation.⁵⁹³ For Christian thinkers, the love of God is manifest "in the individual's self-identification as God's sacred creation." In Jewish thought, the emphasis is on the "partnership between the divine and the individual in the labour of love intended to re-create the original purity and perfection of the world."⁵⁹⁴ Brenner wonders why, in contrast, Weil saw divine love in the negation of human existence. She maintains that "Weil rejects the value of self-preservation when she writes that at the lowest rank of created beings 'is *the most wretched one that is capable of loving [God]*.'"⁵⁹⁵ The full quotation, which Brenner offers in part, from Weil's "Marseille Notebooks" is as follows:

God has created a whole range, an infinitely varied scale of beings. And the lowest limit of this scale in the category of thinking creatures is *the most wretched one that is capable of loving him*. The love of the most wretched one is the most precious love of all; for when such a creature has become transparent, something by way of which God can love himself, the creative act has been completed.

(How grateful, therefore, I should be that fate has placed me in the lower ranks, with those that are most wretched!)⁵⁹⁶

Brenner interprets Weil to be avowing a depersonalized merging into God through the loss of individual distinction.⁵⁹⁷ According to Brenner, Weil's ideal becomes transparent wretchedness. This however, is not what we read as we continue the passage just quoted:

"It is by way of his creatures," says Weil, that God loves the creation. "For this purpose he has need of them. He cannot love Creation in any other way."⁵⁹⁸ What Weil is speaking of here is that condition of attention which is possible for those who have allowed the substance of their life to reflect the divine love. This condition is not for the purpose of merging into God, but for the incarnation or enfleshment of love toward that which is not lovely.

Having misunderstood Weil, Brenner posits a series of questions: Why would Weil, a well-educated daughter of a loving, well-established family that doted on her and granted her every wish, feel herself to be a "transparent wretch?" Was it the sense of "being a stranger and an exile" in a society that could not tolerate Jews that motivated Weil to seek the love of God in social invisibility? Or was it her inability to tolerate the exclusion that Jewish identity signified, that prompted Weil to seek the

love of God in the state of “transparent wretchedness”? Or was it perhaps her repulsion of the body and bodily existence that caused her to aspire to the invisibility of the transparent, the privilege of the wretched?⁵⁹⁹ Concluding that Weil considered herself a transparent wretch, and pointing to Weil’s “Example of Prayer” in her “New York Notebook,” in which, in stark language, she asks to become nourishment for the afflicted, Brenner proceeds to answer her own questions.

As physical and mental paralysis, de-creation seems to indicate the end of the agonizing interaction with the world. From this point of view, the “transparency” as depersonalized reconnection with the Divine designates identity as the locus of unbearable mental and emotional suffering. As such, de-creation signifies the unbinding of all ties and relations that cause suffering and anguish. Beneath the desire for self-destruction in self-offering for the afflicted, we detect a supplication for non-being as a rescue from the impossible torment of life.⁶⁰⁰

In comparison to Stein once again, who stressed the rights of both Jews and women, Weil was silent with regard to both of these groups. Brenner is puzzled as to why Weil, who was so attuned to the suffering of others, including workers, peasants, even the blacks in Harlem during her stay in New York, did not address the particular oppression of women. After concluding that Weil denied both body and physical needs as a way of effacing her ethnic identity, Brenner adds that in this way she also attempted “to eradicate her femininity. . . .”⁶⁰¹ Brenner rehearses further reasons for the denial of female identity in the way Weil was brought up by her mother, “who insisted on raising Simone as a boy,” her “sibling rivalry with her brother,” and her mystical choice to remain sexually pure.⁶⁰² Brenner brings all these

elements together in a single explanation. "Her womanhood had to be denied in order to deny Jewish identity altogether. Acknowledged through marriage and childbearing, her femininity would reaffirm her Jewish origins in her Jewish name, which she considers a "defect," to her children. Seen in the light of Weil's self-denial, the negation of her Jewishness and femininity are ineluctably related."⁶⁰³

I have pointed to these four critics because they highlight some of the key problems which are encountered in a critical assessment of Weil's life and thought. Did she apply her conception of decreation in a way which was self-destructive? Did she court suffering as an indirect way of gaining power in a society which did not know what to do with a brilliant woman? Finally, can we give serious credence to her concept of decreation when we examine her life especially in her "exilic period"?

In the critiques I have cited, there is at least an implication that Weil's life indicates a psychological propensity to masochism. Taken out of their immediate context in her correspondence or her notebooks, and the larger context of her entire life, certain comments she makes about herself seem to be supportive of these observations. One can then read back to at least two crises in her life which she mentions, as well as her family relations, to find a person whose problems with identity find expression in the avowal of total self-annihilation. What I would argue is missing in these biographical critiques is a spiritual dimension, one that lies at the heart of Weil's life and thought, a dimension which enabled Weil not to transcend her fundamental conviction that she was unworthy of consideration but to espouse it as

a way of appreciating the divine love, especially for the afflicted. But before proceeding to comment on this dimension, we may consider the psychological aspect further.

In a series of two articles, psychiatrist Marie-Annette Fourneyron argues against the implication that Weil suffered from a form of masochism.⁶⁰⁴ Fourneyron defines masochism both as a psychological and moral perversion. As regards the first, she argues that the link between (physical) pain and (psychological) pleasure cannot be found in Weil's writing. Neither pleasure nor pain were ever ends in themselves for her, nor is there an indication that a suspension of pleasure by means of pain, submission, and humiliation, served to intensify a sense of pleasure. The author argues that Weil proscribed any sort of pleasure in suffering which would function as a consolation and would consider an active search for torture, or a provocation of torture, especially as a means of remaining in charge of the situation, a perversion.⁶⁰⁵ In Weil's words: "It is wrong to desire affliction; it is against nature, and it is a perversion; and moreover it is the essence of affliction that it is suffered unwillingly."⁶⁰⁶ As regards masochism as a moral perversion, Fourneyron finds that certain essential features of a "*masochisme moral*," that is a desexualised masochism, are also absent in Weil, *viz.* a general sense of dissatisfaction, a systematic pessimism, a passivity that drives one to search for love rather than to offer it, and a retreat before life or a fear of failure.⁶⁰⁷ She points out that Weil does not look to suffering for any benefits, whether direct or indirect. In Weil's words, "To turn suffering into an offering is a consolation, and it is thus a veil thrown over the reality

of suffering. But the same applies if we regard suffering as a punishment. *Suffering has no significance*. There lies the very essence of its reality. We must love it in its reality, which is absence of significance. Otherwise we do not love God.”⁶⁰⁸ Here we see, says Fourneyron, that for Weil, suffering is not an end in itself nor an alternative means for others to recognise one’s value, nor a way to value oneself.⁶⁰⁹ Simply suffering, when considered in the way Weil presents it, becomes a *metaxy*, an unmanufactured way that leads toward God and away from self-centeredness, or even self-reliance.⁶¹⁰ The question does remain, however, as to whether Weil coveted this way as a means to the exposure of reality.

Several authors deal with the possibility that Weil suffered a form of *anorexia nervosa*.⁶¹¹ As the biographical details of Weil’s life indicate, she ate little, was easily disgusted with food not of the highest quality, and during her time in London, even when her tubercular condition indicated the need for hypernutrition, insisted on keeping strictly to the rations imposed upon civilians in occupied France.⁶¹² In an interview after Simone’s death, her brother André relates that eating little had become a habit with his sister, and that this was part of her general neglect of her own needs.⁶¹³ Simply put, she had become used to eating so little that at a certain point, she could eat no more. Her eating had nothing to do with trying to lose weight, and little to do with self-image. There is also a question of a lifelong eating disorder going back to her mother’s appendicitis while nursing her.⁶¹⁴ Weil’s language is itself replete with oral metaphors as well as the symbolic superiority of looking versus eating, as a way of relating to the world. It is important to note, however, the

differences between this characteristic in Weil, and indications of clinical *anorexia nervosa*, the key one being, as Lucy Bregman maintains, that the anorexic's "attention becomes focussed exclusively on her own body. . . ." ⁶¹⁵ In contrast, Weil did not care for her appearance, or for what others thought about her appearance. She cared very much, however, about her intellect and her soul. Eating, for her, was not without moral implications. She could not allow herself to eat her fill while her compatriots waited in line to get food vouchers.

One author who addresses this subject in Weil's life, as well as its symbolic significance in her writing, is Judith Van Herik. In an essay entitled "Looking, Eating and Waiting in Simone Weil," Van Herik detects certain similarities between the symptoms of young anorexic women and Weil. ⁶¹⁶ Physical symptoms include "fatigue, anemia, and amenorrhea." ⁶¹⁷ Psychologically, these young women are afraid of laziness, and overcompensate with excessive physical activity as well as intense intellectual work. They are typically unsatisfied with themselves and are "overwhelmed by feelings of impotence, inferiority, ingratitude, and failure." ⁶¹⁸ Their struggle against both hunger and fatigue is a way for these women to regain their autonomy, usually over against a strong, energetic, and loving mother. ⁶¹⁹ Also Van Herik notes that these young women perceive the satisfaction of bodily needs, whether alimentary or sexual, as tantamount to bodily enslavement. ⁶²⁰

Van Herik argues, however, that Weil transformed an experience shared with anorexic women. "She did not think of good and evil, purity and contamination, and truth and falsehood simply in terms of the body, let alone simply her body. Even her

most private writings express a spirituality of great beauty, power and terror, and a struggle which is not self-concerned like the struggle of anorexics finally is.”⁶²¹ It is Van Herik’s contention that Weil worked with her weaknesses in a way that brought her into intimate contact with the world. Exhausting physical work in the factory or the field, an exposure to war and her reflection on the effects of force, her preoccupation with affliction and the possibility of knowing divine love in its midst—all were ways in which Weil moved from her own condition to say something about the relationship of human beings to the particulars of the world in which they lived.⁶²²

It is almost certain that Weil did not remain personally unmarked by her experience of affliction. As the critiques of Dietz and Brenner point out, it would seem that from her infancy she faced certain physical and emotional difficulties, not least of which, in terms of the present discussion, were her sense of inferiority before the genius of her brother and the feeling that it was a misfortune for her to have been born a female.⁶²³ Her way of facing these issues, however, was not to run away from them, but to wear herself out before what she considered to be a fundamental contradiction of human life, *viz.* being born and existing in necessity and yet yearning for the good. She may be likened to the widow in the Gospel parable who breaks down the unjust judge: “Because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming” (Lk. 18:5). It is this stance which Weil displays in her poem entitled “The Gate” (“La Porte”):

We want to see flowers. We are so thirsty here.

Waiting and suffering, we are now before the gate.

If we must, we will break it open with our blows.

We press and we push, but we cannot shift its weight.⁶²⁴

She was especially vigilant against false presentations of the good within necessity. This was the reason for her rejection of consolations, no matter how effective they might be in relieving the crushing weight of reality, *viz.* good as an eventual product of force, work without fatigue, a particular and scrutable providence, or a belief in future recompense. She welcomed necessity as manifest in poverty, constraint, physical labour, and exhaustion, because this necessity was real. Indeed she advocated a way of living that may repel many and that few would emulate.

Her statements about herself were vivid and unequivocal. She confided to Perrin that she was deeply moved by his friendship because he did not turn her away, even with her most insistent and troublesome questions, her arguments, and her refusal to be baptised a member of the church. She perceived Perrin's actions to be motivated by nothing less than charity, because what she felt for herself, as she also told Bousquet, was "a mixture of contempt and hatred and repulsion. . . ."⁶²⁵ She revealed to both of them that she felt mutilated "by overlong and uninterrupted suffering," beginning with excruciating and at times unabating physical pain, and by the concomitant fact that this pain froze her capacities for what she considered to be any gift she had for work. Weil maintained an acute sense that she was not fruitful with the gifts she had been given. "I never read the story of the barren fig tree without trembling. I think that it is a portrait of me. In it also, nature was powerless, and yet

it was not excused. Christ cursed it.”⁶²⁶

Apart from the experience at the age of fourteen that she describes, Weil also, as we mentioned, felt she had reached an impasse in her life during early adulthood. “I thought my soul menaced, through exhaustion and an aggravation of the pain, by such a hideous and total breakdown that I spent several weeks of anguished uncertainty whether death was not my imperative duty.”⁶²⁷ It was in this period, while working in the factories, that her own misery and the sight of the misery around her marked her with “the affliction of social degradation. . . .”⁶²⁸ Again she told Perrin: “I have the germ of all possible crimes, or nearly all, within me.”⁶²⁹ She offered another context for this thought elsewhere. Having quoted the incident in the ministry of Jesus of “a woman in the city, which was a sinner” who then proceeds to anoint Jesus’s feet and wipe them with her hair, Weil writes:

He who thinks his sins are few asks little from God and loves little.

But a cheap prostitute cannot help knowing that her sins are many, because society won’t allow her to forget it.”⁶³⁰

She was, however, too astute an observer of herself not to realize the danger in these convictions about herself. She resonated with a line in one of Bousquet’s books, in which he indicated that his friends are mistaken in thinking that he exists. “That shows a type of sensibility which is only intelligible to those who experience existence directly and continuously as an evil. For them it is certainly easy to do as Christ asks and deny themselves. Perhaps it is too easy.”⁶³¹ She also recognizes that “morbidly aggravating one’s pain” may act as a consolation or a perverted form of

wish-fulfilment.⁶³² Weil did not succumb to this morbidity, however. Knowing herself to be afflicted, she wished to respond with abandon in the form of obedience rendered without compulsion, but with a profound sense of freedom. She felt herself a slave but at the same time master of the house, not through a ruse but out of love for the master. It is tempting to read in this language a sort of misguided attachment, but if her expressions of consent are taken at face-value, this conclusion is not warranted. It seems that when Weil described her feelings about herself to Perrin he tried to hearten her. She responded tenderly but firmly.

You quoted some glorious words of Saint Paul. I hope though that in owning my wretchedness to you I did not give you the impression of misunderstanding God's mercy. I hope I have never fallen, and never shall fall, to such a depth of cowardice and ingratitude. I do not need any hope or any promise in order to believe that God is rich in mercy. I know this wealth of his with the certainty of experience; I have touched it.⁶³³

She found a way to avoid becoming bitter or falling into despair; for what were facts of her life, she chose to receive as a form of the divine mercy.

Weil did not remain a "prisoner" of her childhood (Alice Miller). Through her own situation, in her own time, she perceived the need of those who were humiliated to express their humanity. Though she felt constitutionally unworthy of fulfilling her own humanity, she also felt an inexorable call to do just that. She fulfilled her humanity through her conception and practice of attention to the afflicted. In her words, "Today it is not nearly enough merely to be a saint, but we must have the saintliness demanded by the present moment, a new saintliness, itself also without precedent."⁶³⁴ For her, saintliness had to do with a conception of the truth which is

witnessed to outside the power of the “Beast,” a way of attention without discrimination that was the substance of a life; but now, in a world of strident collective powers which excreted regard for the loud, the powerful, and the victorious, and scorned the deformed, the weak, and the failing, the neighbour to be loved was “a being . . . lying naked, bleeding, and unconscious on the road.”⁶³⁵ The battlefields of Europe in her time were full of these anonymous neighbours. For her, contemporary sainthood entailed the quality of *caritas*, whose source of energy was very different from that inherent in force. “The world needs saints who have genius, just as a plague-stricken town needs doctors. Where there is a need there is also an obligation.”⁶³⁶ This conviction needs to be kept in mind when one considers Weil’s plan for a front-line nurses’ corps. The idea itself was judged by the experts in the field, particularly those among the Free French who refused it authorization, as impracticable. Here perhaps Weil’s reading of what the present moment required and the practical application of this requirement were not well-integrated. More pertinently, as has been pointed out by Brenner as well as several of her other readers, Weil’s own drive to participate in this proposed action, and to call other women to it, needs to be questioned.⁶³⁷ Nevertheless, at heart it is Weil’s striving for a concrete expression of a clear alternative to the worship of force. Even today, fifty-seven years after her death, the ethnic tensions in the Balkans which have resulted in war, the steady presence and actions of Neo-Nazi groups not only on the European continent, and the ruthless treatment of minorities in several regions of the world, all impel us to consider at least the motivation of Weil’s vision with full seriousness. Through her

condition she was nevertheless able to formulate the need of the moment, and that is the reason she may continue to be read with profit. Writing in 1957, Leslie Fiedler declares: "I have never dealt with a personality so painfully and inexhaustibly contemporaneous as Simone Weil; though ten years dead, she remains living in a way that Alger Hiss, for all the resurrection of his name in the press and on the radio, is not. Beside her, the Rosenbergs, McCarthy seem ghosts, less real than what one has written about them."⁶³⁸

Ann Loades maintains that Weil was one of those women who adopted what became deleterious elements of the *imitatio Christi* tradition. In an oft-quoted sentence, Weil herself confides to Father Perrin: "Every time I think of the crucifixion of Christ I commit the sin of envy."⁶³⁹ Weil is not being modest. The background to this statement is her conviction of the redemptive value of innocent suffering, "redemptive suffering which transports the presence of God to the farthest extremity of the world through the co-operation of the creature."⁶⁴⁰ At the same time, she recognises that in the incarnation, God "took upon himself the form of a creature so that this act should be accomplished once, perfectly, and beyond any doubt. The Cross is the very essence of the Incarnation."⁶⁴¹ *Prima facie*, one could judge her admission to Father Perrin as morbid, but this judgement would not be taking into account Weil's insight that the curse of the present time (symbolized by the young SS guards who do not fear their own death but inflict it with gusto on the weak around them) demands not the same force, but that alone which can burn it up. This was the source of Weil's inordinate desire to participate in the cross of Christ.⁶⁴² In

her “Last Thoughts” to Father Perrin, she assures him of the certainty she has of loving God even and especially in her own affliction, but when she is in contact with the affliction of others, it “causes me such atrocious pain and so utterly rends my soul that as a result the love of God becomes almost impossible for a while.”⁶⁴³ In the same vein she writes to Schumann: “The suffering all over the world obsesses and overwhelms me to the point of annihilating my faculties and the only way I can revive them and release myself from the obsession is by getting for myself a large share of danger and hardship.”⁶⁴⁴ Weil may have been unbearable in such moments of candour, but such a fierce concern is not unique to her. Though she, unfortunately, did not give herself to the contemplation of the prophetic tradition, she resonates with the Hebrew prophet who “employs notes one octave too high for our ears. He experiences moments that defy our understanding. He is neither ‘a singing saint’ nor ‘a moralizing poet,’ but an assaulter of the mind. Often his words begin to burn where conscience ends.”⁶⁴⁵ Abraham Heschel emphasizes that while most often human beings make a compromise with their social milieu through a moderation of their standards of justice in order to adapt comfortably, the prophet in this situation is unable to comfort or to be comforted.⁶⁴⁶ In this regard Weil felt free: “We have an unlimited right to ask God for everything that is good. In such demands there is no need for humility or moderation.”⁶⁴⁷

Judith Gregory’s own struggle is the lens through she reads Weil. Gregory laments that Weil chose self-annihilation: “Rather than choosing any sexual identity, you chose to cultivate all the intellectual and spiritual possibilities of becoming

nothing, ultimately to the point of self-annihilation.”⁶⁴⁸ Gregory questions why Weil did not seek liberation from affliction and rather affirmed her identity as a slave. This questioning is legitimate, and it arises within what for Gregory is not just a personal struggle but one she feels she shares with all women in societies that lie and have supported “lies about what it means to be female.”⁶⁴⁹ Furthermore, this author poignantly describes her struggle to be a woman; a struggle obvious enough to attract ridicule. “In my youth, people had seen this in me . . . and on the street would laugh at me and once someone laughed and shouted, ‘Animal, mineral or vegetable?’”⁶⁵⁰ What Gregory affirms is her liberation from victimization and her protest against it. It is the case that much of the present discourse, and not only theological discourse, revolves around the poles of oppression and liberation, with the exodus theme being especially prominent in the theological language. On her part, Gregory is not alone in seeing her struggle and women’s struggle in this way. But Weil’s sources are quite different.

When Weil considers models of women, they are those who are innocent—not naive—and maintain their innocence in the midst of affliction. They are ready to die, but this is not the end they seek nor the result of giving up “the fight.” Antigone defies Creon, and in attempting to bury her treasonous brother, Polynices, she openly chooses death rather than compromise.⁶⁵¹ Weil’s early emphases on the Sophoclean tragedy are significant. The first is a distinction she makes between Antigone and her younger sister Ismene. The latter’s “disposition is better adapted for obedience than for revolt.”⁶⁵² Antigone sees this obedience to the

State as “submission” and “cowardice.”⁶⁵³ Antigone acts alone, and when she is caught in the act of burying her brother, “she knows she is lost. Yet she does not waver for an instant.”⁶⁵⁴ The order she does obey comes not from Creon but from another realm. “I was born not to share in hate, but only in love.”⁶⁵⁵ When Ismene, with a change of heart, wishes to join Antigone in death, the latter answers:

You have chosen to live, I to die.

Take courage and live. As for me, my soul is already dead.⁶⁵⁶

The witnesses to the whole drama conclude “Whoever loves is mad.”⁶⁵⁷ Antigone is to be sealed alive in a cave. She shudders. Weil comments: “She stands at the very threshold of death, and of a death so atrocious that the pride which supported her breaks. She weeps.”⁶⁵⁸

Weil originally wrote this commentary for the factory magazine Entre Nous, edited by its manager, Victor Bernard. She considered “these old poems” to be “much more moving for ordinary people, who know what it is to struggle and to suffer, than for those who have spent their lives between the four walls of a library.”⁶⁵⁹ And what is so special about them?

In each one of these [dramas] the principle character is a courageous and noble being who wrestles alone against an intolerably painful situation; he is bowed down by the weight of solitude, of humiliation, of poverty, of injustice; at times his courage is at the breaking point, but he holds on and never lets himself be corrupted by misfortune. For that reason, no matter how painful they are, these dramas never leave us with an impression of sadness. Instead, they leave an impression of serenity.⁶⁶⁰

This is quintessential Weil. Both her weaknesses and strengths are evident in the

quoted words. Antigone is alone and has not found community. The essential struggle for justice is a lonely one and it is against the Great Beast, a form of collective coercion which impels the individual to follow its laws and to shore up its power. To defy it consigns one to loneliness, humiliation, and death. At the same time there is not here an element of defeatism. According to Katherine Brueck: "In . . . the final scene in which she appears, the heroine is emptied of all security and self-regard. Yet she does not lose a love of the good. Here, specifically, that good constitutes an act she herself performed: the burial of her brother, Polynices. By the act itself, as by her refusal to repent it, Antigone bears witness to the supernatural good which undergirds moral law."⁶⁶¹ Creon naturally judges this to be treasonous and at least until her composition of The Need for Roots, Weil did not consider the exercise of supernatural justice as possible for the state.⁶⁶²

The other tragic character Weil mentions repeatedly is Electra. She does not submit to her father's murderers.

Chrysothemis: "You might live happily if you were reasonable."

Electra: "Counsel me no cowardice. . . ."

Chrysothemis: My advice is only that you submit to those who are stronger. . . ."⁶⁶³

Electra is reduced to slavery because she does not give in to power, but remains alone in mourning her father's murder and crying for redress. Even when the news comes that her only saviour, her brother Orestes, is dead she still does not give in; she would rather die as a slave than assume her place as a princess in a palace ruled by those who have murdered her father. Significant for Weil, finally, is that before Orestes reveals to Electra that he is in fact alive, she must let go the urn she thinks contains

his final remains. The urn is all she has of the life she has poured out. She was the one who cared for Orestes and sent him away in order to save him from certain death. Now he has come back in the ashes which she holds, and even this particle is demanded of her. Here are Weil's concluding words on the drama: "Belief in the apparently certain evidence that he whom she loves is absolutely non-existent never diminishes her love, but on the contrary increases it. This is the sort of fidelity raised to the point of madness which compels Orestes to reveal himself. He can no longer restrain himself from it; he is over-powered by compassion."⁶⁶⁴

A "servant" and a "beggar," both women were Weil's models—neither of them submissive, they suffer because they obey a law alien to nature.⁶⁶⁵ Clearly, in these models she does not see a historical process by which liberation comes after a hard-fought struggle. Electra is indeed avenged of her father's murderers, but for Weil this part of Sophocles's denouement is of less importance before the stance Electra is prepared for, and takes, in the face of hopelessness. Though Weil early became aware that "revolution" can become a doctrine with variable content behind which groups hide and attack other groups, at no point was she opposed to any thoughtful action that would lead from oppression to liberation. What she also realized, however, is the inadequacy of this kind of language to address those who were unable to think and act because they were broken. When she was in the factory, before her mystical encounters, she was determined to regain her dignity "in and through slavery," but this dignity no longer relied on anything outside herself, which included intellectual credentials, social class, or political solidarity. Quite consciously

her own dignity was to be “accompanied always by the knowledge that I possessed no right to anything, and that any moment free from humiliation and suffering should be accepted as a favour. . . .”⁶⁶⁶

It was only after she exhausted herself in looking for an embodiment of the good in the world that she turned from conceptions of the human existential predicament expressed in terms of the opposition between oppression and liberty. When one’s autonomy is broken under force, one cries fundamentally for justice. “The essential contradiction in the human condition is that man is subject to force, and craves for justice. He is subject to necessity, and craves for the good. It is not his body alone that is thus subject, but all his thoughts as well; and yet man’s very being consists in straining for the good.”⁶⁶⁷ At the same time, it was to the broken people, for whom it was all too easy to deny themselves, that a privilege was given. Because their place within the community was taken from them and they were pushed out of the world, because they were physically wasted, because the intimate sense of their own self was stripped away, they were naked before reality, with no illusory covering or protection.

Weil admired the portrayal of this phenomenon in Shakespeare’s “King Lear.” Almost immediately the tragedy begins with the dismantling of a king. Lear thinks he is wise, but true wisdom will come to him when he has nothing else. Shorn of his power he has no means by which to defend himself from spiralling humiliations. He is treated as a child, by the two daughters who offered him flattery in his days of power, and they shut him out of his former castle. When all that made

him king is sheared away, he is reduced to his basic humanity. Yet at this point he begins to exercise genuine compassion.

Poor naked wretches, wheresoe'er you are,
 That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,
 How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,
 Your looped and windowed raggedness, defend you
 From seasons such as these?⁶⁶⁸

The threat to his life, his powerlessness to defend himself, his place among the "wretches," teach Lear that all he is, is a human being, but a human being needs regard. Weil comments: "Helplessness—I do not mean weakness of character, but utter lack of material force. . . . It is better for the soul than triumph and power, because there is truth in it; it is not . . . poisoned with delusions and lies."⁶⁶⁹ Natural sight is transformed into supernatural vision through waiting at the end of striving. It is the same truth she elaborates upon later, in her "Marseille Notebooks." "The *irreducible* nature of suffering, which makes it impossible for us not to have a horror of it at the moment when we are undergoing it, is ultimately designed to arrest the will, just as an absurdity arrests the intelligence, or absence, non-existence, arrests love. So that man, having come to the end of his human faculties, may stretch out his arms, stop, look and wait."⁶⁷⁰ This is the point she identifies as the division of the soul. There is no harmony between the passions, the will, and the knowledge of God. It is rather the breaking of the will and the transformation of desire. In response to Gregory, we may say that the decremented being which Weil recognises is nothing in and of herself, but she is something in the eyes of God because she is a point of

consent by which the divine life enters the world. The *metaxy* between necessity and the good is realized through consent, what may be called in the words of the Pauline exhortation, “the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding” (Phil. 4:7). This is knowledge in the deepest sense that this is who we are, and where we are, and even why we are. “This consent is madness, man’s own particular madness, the madness that belongs to man, like Creation, like the incarnation, together with the Passion, constitute God’s own madness. These two madresses answer each other.”⁶⁷¹

The cross, for Weil, is an intersection. We are brought into contact with necessity. With our physicality we sense the pain that is possible for us and with the faculty of consent the divine love is made present to us. An example, in a pastoral setting, of what Weil speaks of here is offered by Bruce Chilton who describes the dying of his friend. Diagnosed with cancer, this young man was vigorous; he thus underwent much more suffering than his doctors thought he would have to bear. “But the overwhelming reality which eventually consumed everything was the fact of his pain in itself, his unmistakable loss of self. One afternoon, as he literally shuddered with his burden, he repeated, ‘He rules, he rules, HE rules . . .’⁶⁷² Chilton’s comment is that his friend “had found a doorway in his suffering, a way through his own vulnerability to an encounter with God.”⁶⁷³ The cross, in Weil’s understanding, is not a prelude to re-creation or resurrection perceived as a way of completeness that was unavailable in earthly existence. On the contrary, the transformation, if it takes places, happens here and now. As she told Bousquet “space is opened and torn apart. . . . this world is seen as it is, unconfused by perspective.”⁶⁷⁴ It is not that she

repudiated the resurrection per se, but she was conscious of its consolatory potential. One could put up with much in this world and thus hide their life in a future hope, rather than live the reality of the present.

There is no such proof of feebleness of faith as the way in which people, even including Christians, sidetrack the problem of affliction when they discuss it. All the talk about original sin, God's will, Providence and its mysterious plans (which nevertheless one thinks one can try to fathom), and future recompenses of every kind in this world and the next, all this only serves to conceal the reality of affliction, or else fails to meet the case.⁶⁷⁵

The cry of dereliction is uttered by those who have lost everything. The cross is an astounding symbol, for her, of those who are not going on to glory but awaiting execution: "there is nothing to love."⁶⁷⁶ What is important about what she is describing here, is that this is a truth human beings have experienced and one that has eclipsed human lives in this very century. To love in this darkness is to love in the void, an utter impossibility but for God who crosses space and time to take possession of the soul "and to reveal the beauty of the world to it. . . ."⁶⁷⁷ Love in this situation is, for her, not an experienced psychological state but "an orientation."⁶⁷⁸ In other words, one is not relying on feeling states but on the conviction that goodness exists, though one does not experience it. The true love of God with one's entire heart, soul, and strength is revealed here.⁶⁷⁹

Apart from the fact that Weil did not ask the question of what being a female means in her life, Gregory also feels estranged from her because she never mentions "Freud or psychoanalysis, nor do you seem ever to have contemplated the psychological self-discovery that has been so central an experience for me and so

many of my contemporaries.”⁶⁸⁰ Weil does of course mention Freud, but as Lucy Bregman explains, Weil’s struggle with what is true or real transcended Freudian categories of female neurosis. Bregman agrees that Weil repudiated what is considered “normal femininity” in Freudian terms. But “the feminine woman depicted by Freud is masochistic, passive, and has never developed a strong super-ego or a sense of universal justice.”⁶⁸¹ This Freudian diagnosis, says Bregman, is tied to a certain class of women treated in a particular time and place, and it says much more about prevalent cultural assumptions than about womanhood.⁶⁸² Moreover, Bregman agrees, in reading Pétrement’s biography, that Simone’s parents seem to have imbibed at least some of these cultural assumptions, and the author recognizes in Weil a reliance “on the feminine mystique of suffering . . . in spite of her attempt to avoid viewing herself or being viewed as a woman.”⁶⁸³ Bregman’s concern, however, is to show that in the recognition of affliction as “a kind of poisoning of the soul by pain, humiliation, injustice,” there is no suggestion of a transcendence of matter.⁶⁸⁴ Weil’s emphasis is quite the opposite.

It might appear that Weil is advocating pain, glorying in weakness, the cornerstone of Freudian masochism. But she is not. Affliction is the absence of such a possibility. In becoming object, the afflicted one enters the female masochist’s situation. Yet no longer is some secret erotic joy found in painful experience; the whole point of affliction is that it lays bare the real core of self-hatred on which such an attitude depends. . . .⁶⁸⁵

Weil’s response, according to Bregman, is not an imagined strength or the adoption of male attributes. “Weil’s metaphor of the resurrected but mutilated Christ undermines this hope.”⁶⁸⁶ Even the presence of God at the moment of radical

suffering is not the projection of a father figure, for Weil does not conceive of God as an all-powerful person. The divine presence she knew was not a way to the transmutation of pain and weakness into strength. Rather, the image of this presence is “the smile on a beloved face,” or “Christ’s tender smile for us coming through matter,” or finally, the little piece of Eucharistic bread.⁶⁸⁷ In this last image, Weil says: “It is not the human person of Christ such as we picture him; it is not the divine person of the Father, likewise subject to all the errors of our imagination; it is outwardly only a fragment of matter. . . . The love of God ought to be impersonal as long as there has not been any direct and personal contact; otherwise, it is an imaginary love.”⁶⁸⁸

To enjoy her femininity as well as to come to affirm her womanhood, was not given to Weil. Typically, as her friend Pétrement notes, “she had decided to reduce this obstacle as much as possible by disregarding it . . . by giving up any desire to think of herself as a woman or to be regarded as such by others, at least for a set period of time.”⁶⁸⁹ Yet Weil was a woman. A “*genius-woman*” as another biographer, Gabriella Fieri, calls her.⁶⁹⁰ In Fieri’s judgement it is her being a woman which generated her self-laceration as well as the adverse reactions of others toward her. Bearing and living with these wounds exhausted her.⁶⁹¹ Weil’s response to who she was, however, was her own response to the parameters given by her society. With an almost self-inflicted harshness, she paid little attention to the particular suffering of women in her time. In her factory journal, her observations of fellow women-workers are ambivalent. On the one hand, she notes their particular mistreatment in

the menial type of work to which they were restricted and the callousness with which their needs were met. On the other hand, she identifies with male workers, especially skilled tradesmen, as the group which had some potential for effecting change—this from a woman who understood and exposed affliction so profoundly. At the same time, can it be dismissed that her appreciation of the condition of slavery, of being unnoticed, of having to wait, of speaking without being heard, were not hers to know because she was this woman?

A woman looking at herself in a mirror and adorning herself does not feel the shame of reducing the self . . . to a small space. In the same way every time that we raise the *ego* (the social *ego*, the psychological *ego* etc.) as high as we raise it, we degrade ourselves to an infinite degree by confining ourselves to being no more than that. When the *ego* is abased . . . we know that we are not that.

A very beautiful woman who looks at her reflection in the mirror can very well believe that she is that. An ugly woman knows that she is not that.⁶⁹²

What Weil experienced as a “genius-woman,” she used as a lever to move, not horizontally, but vertically. Horizontal movement for Weil is not the image of movement toward the neighbour. Rather, it is action based on gravity; fed by supplementary energy, it does not rise beyond the realm of material rewards. Vertical movement is only possible through grace, at the end of human striving. In order to begin to rise, one needs to have reached the bottom of one’s potential. Weil enjoyed the image of the lever because the object is raised as the lever is lowered. This, I think, is the way Weil experienced her feminine identity, not in denial, but as a lever. She did not deny it in order to adopt the dominant male identity of the scientist, the

intellectual, the expert, the connoisseur, that might be hers through her formidable intellect. Rather, she waited in attention for truth to reveal itself. Moreover, Weil was aware of her body, she was painfully aware of it, as she was also aware that she was not just her body. A physically beautiful human being may well become attached to her or his physical beauty, and their hunger for the good not realized, whereas the one who is “wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked,” cannot help but know that they remain unfulfilled (Rev. 3:17).⁶⁹³

Finally what is most evident in this regard is that Weil did not submit to force, nor did she counsel submission—a response that could be all too tempting and even acceptable to the society in which she lived. Her religious vocabulary is replete with the terms of violated virginity, rape, being devoured, a passive vessel waiting to be filled, but as these images refer to the relationship between the soul and God, they take on their proper value in the love exchanged between Creator and creature. Weil never accepted such images as fitting for human relationships, but in yearning for the absolute good, they were for her consummate expressions of devotion to the One who has renounced being all in all.

Her Identity as a Jew

One issue remains which is critically important when considering the life and thought of a person who avowed and indeed displayed a concern for the afflicted. It is the following: why did a woman who was by race a Jew, refuse to identify with her people at a time when the Jews were undergoing the very affliction which, in the

West, may be considered the defining one of the twentieth century? Why did Simone Weil, who always sought, with such a herculean expenditure of energy, to be where she did not naturally belong, with labourers, with peasants, with Spanish anarchists, with colonial peoples, even with Blacks in Harlem, refuse to identify with the group to which she belonged—the Jews of Europe—during a defining moment in their history? This question will serve not as a prelude to an unequivocal answer, but as a focus for our consideration of this difficult aspect of Weil's life.⁶⁹⁴

Any response to this question is inherently complex. In his critique of several commentators on Weil, George Steiner notes the need for “the most scrupulous delicacy of inquiry, the utmost provisionality and *pudeur* on the part of the inquirer” who wishes to speak on the intractable ambiguity of the person who was Simone Weil.⁶⁹⁵ We can only claim the awareness of this caution in our present attempt and add that we speak as outsiders, yet from the Christian perspective as those who are committed to the “tradition of Jerusalem.”⁶⁹⁶

We begin by recalling Pétrement's details of the Weil family background. Her father's family originated from the Alsatian region; Simone's paternal grandfather is described as pious but not very strict, while her grandmother was observant enough to follow Simone's mother Selma (Salomea) into the kitchen to be sure the Jewish dietary laws were being followed. On the mother's side, the family originated from Galicia in southern Poland, later moving to Russia and Belgium. They were liberal Jews who were not given to religious practice of any kind. On both sides, the family was comfortably bourgeois, and the maternal side seems to have been wealthy.

Simone's parents followed in the line of assimilated Jews. They were well educated with no particular religious practice. Bernard Weil was a "convinced atheist" with his own fund of vaguely anti-Semitic jokes.⁶⁹⁷ It is quite clear that both André and Simone were brought up to respect and enjoy education, learning, and intellectual freedom, but with little exposure to the Jewish faith. Cosmopolitan awareness took the place of religious grounding. Although the Weils considered themselves to be French citizens, the pervasive anti-Semitism of post-Dreyfus France at the close of the nineteenth century, and the keenness with which the Vichy regime aided and abetted the rounding up of French Jews in the middle of the twentieth, gave the lie to this assurance. The experience of the Weil family is typical of the painful state of affairs among assimilated European Jews. They were forced to contend with the anti-Semitism of their society without a rootedness in anything other than that society itself. This is the context in which Simone's letters to the French authorities—to Jerome Carcopino, Minister of Public Education, in the Fall of 1940, and to Xavier Vallat, Commissioner of Jewish Affairs, in the Fall of 1941—need to be read.⁶⁹⁸

She takes preposterous pains to declare to the Education Minister that as far as race is concerned, the ancient Jews of Palestine were all but obliterated by the Romans, leaving no traceable descendants. She maintains that her descendants were Slavs on her mother's side, and French on her Father's side. Despite the misplaced irony and the clear rejection of her Jewishness which are evident in her correspondence, there is also a basic truth in what she tells the Education Minister. As far as the Jewish religion is concerned, she points out that she has "never entered

a synagogue . . . never witnessed a Jewish religious ceremony,” and that at least her maternal grandparents were “freethinkers.”⁶⁹⁹ She contends that she herself never practised any religion and her formation was based on the reading of seventeenth century French authors, such as Racine and Pascal, which reading, if anything, “impregnated” her, before she heard any talk of Jews, with “the Catholic tradition.”⁷⁰⁰ She emphatically states “The Christian, French, Hellenic tradition is mine; the Hebrew tradition is foreign to me. . . .” And adds that if the present law in France demands that she be labelled a Jew, she is disposed to submit without understanding the meaning of this designation.⁷⁰¹

This letter makes painfully obvious how much Weil had lost or given up in terms of her own identity, and it is sad to think what little impact this letter must have made on its intended recipient, if he even read it. Moreover, the letter makes evident how little her upbringing prepared her for the external imposition of a Jewish identity. Simultaneously she was deprived of the identity she claimed for herself as a French citizen, with all the responsibilities and rights pertaining thereto, and the profession she practised, the teaching of philosophy in the lycées of France. She says much the same to Xavier Vallat, Commissioner of Jewish Affairs, though with less surprise and more biting irony. She mocks the implication that a teacher, by virtue of being Jewish, could possibly harm schoolchildren. Ironically she tells Vallat that what she welcomes about her situation is not being identified with disenfranchised Jews, but being excluded from the category of intellectual and included in the ranks of peasants.⁷⁰² The fact that what Weil tells the authorities about herself can be taken

at face value is corroborated by a letter she wrote to Jacques Maritain in 1942, which again summarises her essential understanding of her roots. “Je suis d’origine israélite, mais mes parents, tout a fait agnostiques, m’ont laissée ignorer mon origine jusqu’à l’âge de onze ans et m’ont élevée en dehors de toute religion. Depuis ma plus tendre enfance (...) j’ai absorbé l’inspiration chrétienne par l’intermédiaire des livres, en commençant par le XVII^e siècle français que j’ai aimé dès que j’ai su lire.”⁷⁰³ The only difference here is that she clearly recognises her Jewish roots, while she denies them in her correspondence with Carcopino.

The tone of her autobiographical letters to Father Perrin is certainly different, but the content concerning her upbringing is not. She tells her friend that she was raised in complete agnosticism.⁷⁰⁴ Since childhood her spiritual nourishment came from a wide range of literature, art, and experience.⁷⁰⁵ She more clearly emphasises being imbued by what she calls “the Christian attitude,” “the Christian inspiration,” and “the Christian conception,” but the content of all this remains vague. What emerges more clearly in her correspondence with Perrin, her protestations notwithstanding, is a spiritual affinity with Judaism which she could not jettison.

Before any avowal of religious faith she was, by her own admission, already focussed on the problems of this world. She was engrossed in the plight of the disenfranchised, and spoke out against the virulence of force. We cannot attribute this focus to her own understanding of the Jewish tradition. However, the ethical expression of faith in terms of action that is focussed on the problems of this world is a particular emphasis of the Hebrew prophets, an emphasis renewed after the

Holocaust in the writings of scholars such as Abraham Heschel, Martin Buber, and Emmanuel Levinas, to name only three. Her inveterate concern for justice, which she insists is best expressed by the Greeks, is itself in a form first articulated by Torah (Ex. 22:22; Deut. 10:19) and applied in concrete form by the Hebrew prophets in pronouncements of judgement upon Hebrew kings and princes (Isa. 10:1-2). We have already mentioned her wrestling with God “out of pure regard for the truth.”⁷⁰⁶ Her faith was not credulous but exacting, and not only its human interpreters, like the Catholic priests whom she assaulted with her formidable thought, but God too were challenged to answer her insistent questions. This theological boldness, this talk about and to God, which comes from acknowledging the divine claim upon all of life, is the inheritance of Old Testament characters she refuses to recognise: Abraham who bargains for the life of ten people before the destruction of Sodom (Gen. 18:23-32); Jacob who does not release his interlocutor before extracting a blessing (Gen. 32:26); Job who dares to contend with the almighty (Job 40:2). Above all, her intimate understanding of affliction can hardly be divorced from the particular experience of the Jewish people. It is through their own historical experience of suffering that Jewish voices have earned the right to speak to us about remaining human in the midst of dehumanizing conditions. From post-exilic prophets like Deutero-Isaiah to post-Holocaust Jews like Buber, Heschel, Fackenheim, and Wiesel, we have imparted to us the profoundest teaching on how to “pursue love” in the midst of darkness (I Cor. 14:1). Finally, even with her profound understanding of Western culture, she did not allow herself to belong to any intellectual school, political party, or religious

community. Jews themselves, even the so-called assimilated ones, tried so hard to be a part of the intellectual, artistic, political, and economic society of Europe; but in fundamental respects, they remained outsiders. They were categorically excluded from belonging to the genteel Gentile society they were constantly prompted to merge with. Weil herself remained “an exile among exiles,” as biographer David Nevin points out, and the question remains “Why?”⁷⁰⁷

Her own answer, which has some cogency, is that her “intellectual vocation,” as she called it, required of her that she be open to all streams of thought, assessing them with the same standard—their distance from the transcendent good. The good she defined primarily through Platonic philosophy as beauty, truth, justice, and love. This standard goes a long way in explaining her intellectual pursuits, from maintaining the validity of science as a form of attention upon the divine creation, to appreciating the unique contributions of the world’s religions. But it does not explain her violent rejection of Jewish faith and thought. In this regard the reader repeatedly comes up against a blind spot. It is as if her keen sense for exposing a unique aspect of the good, presented by particular cultures and beliefs, is lost as she engages the Jewish heritage. Nevertheless, in the Europe of her time she refused to be a part of any group, and in particular, she resisted a Christian milieu which was ready to welcome her.

Speaking as an insider, Wladimir Rabi calls her: “notre Simone Weil.”⁷⁰⁸ This claim is bold and humble at the same time. He declares that Weil was the greatest spiritual writer France has produced in the first fifty years of the twentieth century,

and perhaps the only one. At the same time, he declares she is the product of French Judaism, “notre judaïsme français était coupable d’elle.”⁷⁰⁹ It is “we,” says Rabi, who are more guilty than she. “La défaillance du judaïsme français pendant cent-cinquante ans, sa faiblesse et sa vacuité spirituelle, étaient telles que l’on devait considérer Simone Weil comme le produit ultime d’une communauté aspirant à l’extinction.”⁷¹⁰ He insists, as only he and other French Jews can, that Simone Weil embodies the self-ennervation of French Judaism.

But the roundup of Jews destined for extermination camps was unprecedented in French history. It was not only that assimilation had failed; it was a declaration that the Jews would never be accepted within the community. To ignore this or to choose not to know it was tantamount to assent. More pointedly, we now ask, what did Weil know of Hitler’s plan for the Jews after 1939? There are several indications that she was still left with the idea that actions against the Jews remained at the level of unsystematic animosity and repression, and that she remained ignorant of an unprecedented, calculated plan, to systematically annihilate the Jewish race. In analysing the currents of European anti-Semitism from 1700 to 1933, Jacob Katz details the path from Christian ideology, through philosophical romanticism and nationalism, to incubation, crystallisation, racism and the Nazi climax. In other words, there was a process which laid the groundwork for the Nazi concentration camps. In the France of the 1880s and 1890s, anti-Semitism was directed against financiers and intellectuals who “were thoroughly part and parcel of French society.”⁷¹¹ Moreover, “by the end of the Dreyfus affair in 1906, political anti-

Semitism in France seemed to be absolutely discredited. . . .⁷¹² It was only later replaced “by the more sophisticated insinuation of *L’ Action français* of Charles Maurras. . . .”⁷¹³ The targets of this latter movement, however, were not only the Jews of France, but laicization and all the trends which were seen to compromise the integrity of the French nation. In this way, “hostility toward Jews was kept alive until the pre-Nazi period, when it once again assumed a political and later even physically destructive form.”⁷¹⁴ Yet the anti-Semitism of the Third Republic was not equivalent to the planned destruction of the Jewish people envisioned by the Nazi regime. As a pacifist in 1938, Weil was prepared to give up a lot for peace, including the repression of Communists and Jews in countries such as Czechoslovakia, which would be dominated by Germany.⁷¹⁵ This was consistent with her pacifist stand. She was just as adamant that the French socialist government of the time not intervene on the side she herself supported in the Spanish Civil War, even if it meant the defeat of what she considered to be a budding, legitimate, and vibrant revolution.⁷¹⁶ Discrimination and repression is not yet extermination. Her thinking seems to have been stuck at evaluating a judicial anti-Semitism which primarily sought to make the Jews second-class citizens. Clearly, as she herself bitterly recalled, the evil of war which could possibly be averted by appeasing Hitler, was far outweighed by the destruction of human life which was consequently unleashed. At least with regard to “the Jewish question,” Weil seriously misjudged Hitler’s intentions, and it is most probable that, until the very end of her life she did not appreciate the magnitude of what was in fact taking place. She cannot easily be excused in this regard, however,

because there were clear indications of what was going on for anyone who cared to know. As we may recall, the Weils left France in May of 1942 because they were required to register themselves as Jews, and on July 16 the infamous “Rafé du Veld’hiv” took place, in which French Police in Paris rounded up thousands of French Jews, eventually deporting them to the Drancy interment camp and then on to Auschwitz. Between 1941 and 1944 a total of about 76,000 Jews were deported from France, including 12,000 children. Only about 2,500 survived. Weil’s response to this reality, which is largely silence with regard to these facts, and invective with regard to the faith of the Old Testament, is morally troubling.

It is legitimate to assume that Weil was especially conscious of the danger of saying “I” because of her own temptation to pride. In conversation with Robert Coles, Anna Freud admits to speculating when she says that, though Weil knew very well that she was in danger, “she wanted to be in danger in her own way, on her own terms! She certainly was no coward! She didn’t want to be curbed because of what others thought she was; she wanted to be curbed because of that which she made clear to others she had become.”⁷¹⁷ This line of thought is supported by some correspondence between Weil and Huguette Baur, one of her former students. In 1940, Baur had offered Simone and her parents a place of refuge on a family plot in the Loire region. Simone declined the offer. The reasons she gives say quite a lot about her perception of her Jewishness. She admits that very soon, France will be plunged into an accentuated form of racism and that she herself will become a pariah. And then she comments: “Tout bien pesé, je le regrette; souffrir pour quelque chose

qu'on n'a pas choisi et a quoi on n'est pas attache semble stupide. Mais enfin le fait est que j'en serai."⁷¹⁸ One would think that becoming a pariah, something she has not chosen, would legitimately bring her into solidarity with the afflicted! This would seem to be precisely what she sought from Schumann, and what Schumann could not give her. The key phrase, however, is "*a quoi on n'est pas attache*." She would be suffering for what she was not at heart—a Jew. The designation was, as far as she was concerned, misplaced, "stupid." In the case of her Jewishness, the inner certainty by which Weil breathed and moved would be missing. As Robert Chenavier comments, she may have had "the inner certainty" that the link between human affliction and divine love would be known to her only when she herself was "physically in affliction, and in one of the extreme forms in which it exists at present," but the status of pariah which was imposed upon her by historical circumstances could not be the object of her vocation, and the resulting affliction seemed void of significance.⁷¹⁹ What is painfully obvious is that while she could be animated by the affliction of other human beings, she did not know what to do with her own affliction. She thus missed its gravity and privilege completely. How much this is so is made amply evident when compared to the testament of a character such as Yossel Rakover who boldly identifies himself. "I, Yossel, son of David Rakover of Tarnopol, a Hasid of the Rabbi of Ger and a descendant of the great, pious, and righteous families of Rakover and Meisel, inscribe these lines as the houses of the Warsaw ghetto go up in flames."⁷²⁰ He knows he is Jewish and it is his strength. He prays to God:

I do believe in You, believe in You more strongly than ever, because now I know that You are my Lord, because after all You are not. You cannot after all be the God of those whose deeds are the most horrible expression of ungodliness.

If you are not *my* Lord, then whose Lord are You? The Lord of the murderers?

If those that hate me and murder me are so benighted, so evil, what then am I if not the person who reflects something of Your light, of your goodness?⁷²¹

Weil wrote to Bousquet of the privileged few who “have the opportunity and function of knowing the truth of the world’s affliction and contemplating its reality.” And she judges harshly “those who have this function and do not fulfill it.”⁷²² Yet she could not see this in the case of her own Jewishness.

Finally, a response is called for with regard to the contention of several Jewish authors, namely Wladimir Rabi, Paul Giniewski, and Rachel Feldhay Brenner, that Weil’s project of decreation was in fact a project to decreate her Jewishness. We have already considered Brenner’s thesis that decreation for Weil was in fact a rejection of herself as a Jew. “May we assume,” asks Brenner, “that this impossible torment of life was the consciousness of having been branded a Jew?”⁷²³ Most forcefully of the three, Giniewski maintains that Weil’s course of autodestruction is a classic instance of Jewish self-hatred.⁷²⁴ He offers examples from Baruch Spinoza to Otto Weininger, and places Weil directly in this line.⁷²⁵ Beyond this however, Giniewski judges Weil to be morally culpable, because not only did she do nothing to relieve the affliction of the Jews, but she added to it through a harsh rhetoric against them which was little different from that of their enemies, at the very moment when the Holocaust was being carried out.⁷²⁶ On his part, Rabi considers Weil’s

concept of decreation to be the key to the visceral response she reserved for the Jews alone. Decreation, says Rabi, has nothing to do with masochism and other psychological explanations and everything to do with her conflictual relationship to the people of her origin.⁷²⁷ The Jewishness which was thrust upon her by the Vichy laws, caused her exceptional pain and intolerable suffering.⁷²⁸ The irony in her letters to the authorities is indeed misplaced. In fact it is intolerable: it highlights a terrible ignorance of the inexorable process which carried the Vichy regime, through its own stupidity, from “discrimination,” to “deportation,” to “extermination.”⁷²⁹ Rabi does not easily subscribe to the thesis of Jewish self-hatred in Weil’s case; it is, he says, that and something else at the same time. He recounts her statements about God’s abdication of power which calls for the creature’s abdication of being, and for him this connection is only too apposite in a time when two thirds of European Jews were destroyed. She was already, says Rabi, “hors du monde; parce qu’elle ressent une culpabilité profonde. Son crime est d’exister, d’avoir ainsi volé a Dieu une partie de lui-même.”⁷³⁰ And yet decreation is not self-destruction. Rabi acknowledges this. Here, however, he offers very little in terms of a distinction. Decreation is not “autodestruction, mais c’est l’acceptation, sans résistance de la volonté de Dieu. . . .”⁷³¹

The position of these authors is based on the postulate that Weil’s Jewishness meant everything to her and perhaps not in a fully conscious way. Yet this is at least to mitigate if not ignore the facts of her intimate family milieu as I have outlined them above. To pin so much on her Jewishness, to the point of saying that she wished

to decreate herself precisely because she was Jewish, is to say more than is warranted. I would agree that Weil was perhaps more Jewish than she thought, but she was also many other things. She was indeed a Platonist in a very serious way, and she said she belonged to Christ, and to a more limited degree, she espoused some of the teachings of the East and avowed an affinity with some of the teachings of the Manicheans and Cathars (although how much the latter affinity is influenced by their persecution under force is unclear.) These were not disjointed loyalties, since these faiths were intimately connected for her by their rejection of force and their recognition of human misery. There were then several profound influences which marked and shaped her. Her Jewishness was one of them, but in the negative sense that she tried to distance herself from it. Moreover, as Chenavier points out, Weil did not have Jewish roots which she tried to uproot. In fact, she struggled much more to uproot herself from an intellectual and bourgeois inheritance than she did from a Jewish one.⁷³² Nevertheless, her invective against her people indicates that she was bound by her Jewishness in a way that she was not bound by being a woman. The latter identity was sublimated into a spiritual depth of analysis of the nature of creaturely being. But her Jewishness was something she wished away, a blind spot not only in terms of the Jewish heritage but even in terms of her physical appearance, one which was judged too Jewish, by her superiors in London, to warrant undercover work in France!

It also needs to be said, in response to the authors cited above, that for them to assume Weil's Jewishness was her greatest "agony" (Giniewski); her "impossible torment of life" (Brenner); or "an intolerable suffering" (Rabi); that this is the reason

for her avowal of “decreation,” is for these authors to ignore, or at the very least to mitigate, her repeated emphasis on the sacredness of each and every human being, a sacredness founded on their desire for the good. This desire is at the same time personal and impersonal. It is personal in that it involves a certain human being in a particular time and place, a labourer, a capitalist, a religious person, or an atheist. It is impersonal in that the desire defines all human beings. It is what is sacred in the human creature as such. It is therefore not her Jewishness, or its rejection, which was the overriding preoccupation of her life and which led to her death; rather it was the search for that connection with the good, which was valid even for the most miserable wretch. Richard Bell is closest to the truth of Weil’s mind, I think, when he states that she “did not so much wish to be something other than a Jew as much as she wanted to be regarded simply as a human being—as <<her>> in an <<impersonal>> way—not as a Jewess or a Christian.”⁷³³ For Weil, attachment could not finally be to particulars, but must be to the whole, without excluding a single part. She did not identify herself as a Marxist, a Catholic Christian, nor as a “catastrophe Jew,” in other words a Jew who learns of her identity in solidarity with her own people who are being persecuted.⁷³⁴ Weil would have considered the acceptance of even this identity to be a consolation to the extent that it is an admission of “solidarity in the face of threat” and she would not accept it.⁷³⁵ What can and needs to be said is that Simone Weil did not fully realize her desired attachment to the whole. There are parts of the universe which she explicitly excluded from regard, or at least she did not regard everything equally. The truth of creaturely life is that we can only love the

universe from somewhere, and this is the very test of love. Loving the Jews at that time was very personal and impersonal at the same time. It was a personal act because only identification with them—seeing and knowing their condition from the inside, which was not given to everybody—was the clearest possible protest and resistance to evil at the very point where the battle was raging. It was an impersonal act in the Weilian sense in that to love the Jews was to love the creation really and not in the imagination. To love the Jews was to destroy evil. To love the Jews was a demonstration of humanity, of what we were created to be as creatures formed in the image of God. To love the Jews was to accept matter as our infallible judge. Indeed, how else could the impersonal God be loved *hic et nunc*? How else could the link be made between the absence of God and the affliction of human beings except in identification with the Jews? Thus a valid critique of Weil is, not that she destroyed herself because she could not stand being a Jew, but that she failed to recognise and apply the decreative love she had come to appreciate in relationship to afflicted workers, colonized peoples, and war-weary civilians, to the Jewish people who were truly afflicted at that moment in time.

CONCLUSION

It is difficult to write about Simone Weil. It is difficult when one realises that her work can be something more than an object of academic inquiry, as necessary and as important as this inquiry may be. It is Simone Weil who confronts us as a subject. She questions us about our own convictions as they are manifest in our preoccupations, our actions, and our sense of purpose. The brutal honesty with which she lived her life demands engagement beyond the safety of formal critiques. In her we are confronted with one who has authority, not the authority of force to be sure, but the authority of one who desires more than anything else to live in truth. Few are those who are possessed of this love and the fearlessness it engenders. It is possible to confront Weil, to put questions to her, about her identity, about her death, about her life, but we can demand answers of her only if we are possessed of the same desire.

In her life this passion for truth was exemplified in her sense of vocation. Her vocation was a spontaneous "yes" to what she saw with crisp clarity as the call to be in the truth. For her this meant not only an avowed intellectual honesty, not only conscientious obedience to a moral code, but more particularly adherence to an internal impulse toward certain actions which were called for in her own life. Her sense of vocation, therefore, was not engendered from a certain inclination or reasonable choice. Even if the demands of her vocation were reasonably impossible, she could not abandon it. Akin to the impossible folktale feats which are the only way to "live happily ever after," nothing which came in the way of her vocation

dampened the ardour of her desire to enter into the kingdom of truth. The truth she desired could never be known in abstraction. She meant to fulfil it and to know it herself as best as she could. Her desire was manifest in the fevered search for the love of God in the furnace of affliction. The truth which haunted her was the truth of our own existence. To be open to this truth meant that she could not exclude any part of the universe as outside the divine will. She strove to be open to the whole of matter, animate and inanimate, to the whole of reality in its beauty and brutality. This openness, she shows us, comes at incredible cost.

Thus, Simone Weil was not looking for affliction, but it found her as she deliberately exposed herself to the reality of the human condition. Stung and brutalised by this reality, she attended upon it, motionless, accepting no consolation that would in any way assuage its bitterness and mitigate its truth. What she is able to tell us from the inside, therefore, is that affliction has a way of disabusing us of our illusions about our life in the world. Affliction shocks us into reality, but it also brings us to a point of decision. We either choose to love, even when we find nothing to love, or sink into despair. When the mask that is normally provided by social standing, personal pride, and physical integrity, is sheared away, we have that singular opportunity to love the Creator for no reason at all. We then know that love is possible only through divine grace.

Through grace one is enabled to attend to affliction, whether the affliction is one's own or another's. First, this means that affliction is accepted. "How could this be?" we may well ask. Weil tells us that by its very nature, affliction cannot be

accepted. Affliction is a brutalisation that wears away the ego, but in its wake it leaves a naked desire for good to be done to us. Precisely here Weil finds that one has come very close to the origin of creation. Essentially, after everything we consider necessary for human life is gone, we still yearn to live. It is then, she says, that we can see. Even so, one has either consented to this point in time or one has already been destroyed. It is possible to hold on so tightly to the self that when it is gone, absolutely nothing is left, including the possibility of love. In a sense one is unable to “forgive” reality. Conversely, attention already means that there is a trust in love, a trust which is possible beyond our own striving. One can approach the evil of affliction, its horror and repulsion, because one has let go. Any possibility for action at this point is no longer ego-driven.

Second, she pressed further to say that it is possible not only to accept the evil of affliction, but to be perfected through it. In affliction, our own importance is not only diminished, but also eliminated. Even without the brutalisation of affliction, we know that we are not the centre of the universe, yet we think and act as if we are at least the centre of our universe. We use every measure and ruse at our disposal to preserve our autonomy. In affliction, however, every vestige of our autonomy is stripped away. Then we are most intimately invited to cede the ground we never possessed to the truth that is opened before us. Affliction is that clear boundary marker between life as it was known before, and life as it can be known. Affliction can be that furnace which burns away dross to reveal the particle of gold. But this gold does not belong to us; it is in Weil’s terms an impersonal desire for the good.

In the trajectory between affliction, attention, and decreation, we are made privy to a possibility beyond hope and hopelessness. Weil tries to speak in terms that are as precise in the spiritual realm as they are in the physical realm. She declares in no uncertain terms that in affliction there is not a way out but a way in. At the precise point when life is swallowed by the encroaching darkness, a light shines from within as well as from without. In the witness of the New Testament, nothing can separate us from the love of God (Rom. 8:39). Or in Weil's terms, it is possible to know the good we desire to be done to us. We know this good to be genuine because there is nothing any longer to grasp through force. Force is consumed at the point of consent. In letting go of life, we receive it. Again in New Testament terms, "Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it" (Mt. 16:25). Weil, then, is saying nothing new, nor does she claim to do so. What she does offer is an understanding of the truth in our time. A factory worker, a peasant farmer, a serving soldier, can know that life is gained, is indeed gained, through loss. The naked desire for good to be done to us, the innocent desire we carry from infancy, which never leaves us, can be fulfilled as we let go of our will and striving. This letting go is not demanded but begged for in the crucible of affliction.

The sources for Weil's convictions are the encounters in her own life with the Christ. According to her, certain texts, preeminent among them being the gospels, present with simple clarity a truth that she herself knows. Love is possible in the world, but it is secret. It has nothing to do with force, and yet force is consumed in its presence. There is an invaluable reminder here for the Christian understanding of

God. It is a reminder to us that we are creatures who are under necessity. Therefore, we do not possess power. Power does move in the world; it has an inebriating quality, it is worshipped, but it is not God. While power rules in the world, divine love can be manifest, but only as that "still small voice" which inspires an individual's consent to be possessed by it rather than by power.

Moreover, Weil gives us a measure of the depth to which a divinely inspired love needs to reach. We know love by loving, very particularly by loving the afflicted neighbour. Desire itself is the only thing we have and the only prerequisite for this love. Desire sustains the attention that is demanded in regarding the afflicted neighbour and in turn, attention opens the way for decreation, the letting go of all that would keep us from the love which can course through creatures such as we are. Affliction, far from being the severance point of the bond between Creator and creature, is the point at which this relationship is sealed. While the creature feels abandoned in affliction, tempted either to submit in despair or to rebel in hatred, it offers consent. Grace becomes present as the intimacy of love is shared. Consent is the best a human creature can offer.

The last thing Simone Weil would counsel is emulation of her life. What she did insist upon was that every human life can be lived authentically only when it succumbs to the desire for truth. The critiques of her own identity as a woman and as a Jew are valid, not on their own terms, but in terms of her own stringent criterion for honesty. "Life for me," she said near the end of her life, "means nothing, and never has meant anything . . . except as a threshold to the revelation of truth."⁷³⁶

NOTES

¹ Simone Weil, Waiting For God, trans. Emma Craufurd (New York: Harper and Row, 1973) 115.

² Simone Pétrement, Simone Weil: A Life, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Pantheon, 1976).

³ Miklos Vetö, The Religious Metaphysics of Simone Weil, trans. Joan Dargan (Albany: SUNY, 1994) 70-88. Eric O. Springsted, Christus Mediator: Platonic Mediation in the Thought of Simone Weil (Chico: Scholars Press, 1983) 71- 83.

⁴ This is not the place to offer a detailed list of this work. In broad outline some significant strands of thought which bear on this subject include contemporary expositors of the theology of the cross such as Douglas John Hall, Jürgen Moltmann, and Kazoh Kitamory; Latin American liberation theology; Black theology especially that of James Cone; the feminist critique of the Christian theological tradition; the rise of process theology, as well as the work of Jewish authors such as Emil Fackenheim, and Elie Wiesel.

⁵ A few notable exceptions include Wendy Farley, Tragic Vision and Divine Compassion: A Contemporary Theodicy (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990) and Douglas John Hall, God & Human Suffering: An Exercise in the Theology of the Cross (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986).

⁶ Jacques Cabaud offers some interesting material on this period of Weil's life relying primarily on recollections from Simone Deitz, whom Weil befriended in New York and who then accompanied Weil to London. Jaques Cabaud Simone Weil a New York et a Londres: les Quinze Derniers Mois (1942-1943) (Paris: Plon, 1967). This volume is a supplement to Cabaud's biography of Weil entitled: Simone Weil: A Fellowship in Love, trans. Amalia Elguera and David Lutyens (New York: Channel, 1964).

⁷ In addition to note 3 above see also Eric O. Springsted, Simone Weil & the Suffering of Love (Cambridge: Cowley, 1986) 17-35. Diogenes Allen and Eric O. Springsted, Spirit, Nature, and Community: Issues in the Thought of Simone Weil, (Albany: SUNY, 1994) 97-110.

⁸ Weil, Seventy Letters 137.

⁹ Weil declares: "The social factor is essential." Especially when it takes the form of degradation or humiliation. Simone Weil, On Science, Necessity, and the Love of God, ed. and trans., Richard Rees, (London: Oxford UP, 1968) 171.

¹⁰ Roy Pierce, offers an elaboration of this classification of French political ideas in Contemporary French Political Thought (New York: Oxford UP, 1970) 1-23.

¹¹ This is Pierce's implication when he states that "by the time she was thirty, [Weil] had come closer than any of her compatriots to producing an original political theory and was already giving expression to the mysticism which was eventually to envelop her." French Political Thought, 32, cf. 89. This impression may also be fostered by the hitherto piecemeal publication of Weil's work in French, as well as in English, and its inherently fragmentary nature.

¹² In the words of Blum and Seidler:

Increasingly dissatisfied with the French political organizations and movements in the early 1930s, from 1934 on Simone Weil periodically proclaimed her withdrawal from political action, only to be pulled back into it by compelling events of her time—by peace demonstrations in the mid-1930's, the sit-down strikes of 1936, the Spanish Civil War in 1938, and finally World War II and the Nazi occupation of France.

Lawrence A. Blum and Victor J. Seidler, A Truer Liberty: Simone Weil and Marxism (New York: Routledge, 1989) xvii.

¹³ George P. Grant, "Notebook for class on Simone Weil: 1975-76," n.p, n. pag. This text is taken from Grant's own notes for a class he taught on Simone Weil. Pétrement states that during Weil's first mystical experience (in November of 1938), "She was not yet a believer but perhaps there had already occurred a certain change in her philosophical ideas. Alain's philosophy was voluntaristic in nature. The philosophy of mysticism is the exact opposite of voluntarism." 341. In an important essay written in the spring of 1942, Weil states: It is because the will has not power to bring about salvation that the idea of secular morality is an absurdity. . . . Religion on the contrary corresponds to desire, and it is desire that saves. Waiting for God 195. Cf. Marie-Magdeleine Davy, The Mysticism of Simone Weil, trans. Cynthia Rowland (Boston: Beacon Press, 1951) 31. Marie-Annette Fourneyron, "Pour en finir avec le masochisme de Simone Weil," CSW 11.2 (juin 1988) : 157-58.

¹⁴ Cabaud, Fellowship 37,38.

¹⁵ Sian Reynolds, "Simone Weil and Women Workers in the 1930s: Condition Ouvrière and Condition Féminine," CSW 19.1 (mars 1996) : 99.

¹⁶ Pétrement 27. The photograph may be found in Pétrement and other biographies.

¹⁷ There is some indication, however, that Weil was particularly sensitive to a group of women who were beyond the fringe of ordinary social relations, i.e.

prostitutes. She wanted to know and understand their degradation. Gabriella Fiori, Simone Weil: An Intellectual Biography, trans. Joseph R. Berrigan (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1989) 129-130. Pétrement 194-95.

¹⁸ Cabaud, Fellowship 63.

¹⁹ Sian Reynolds argues that by failing to highlight the specific oppression of women in factory labour in the 1930s, Weil pays a price in terms of historical accuracy. When Weil wrote on the condition of workers following her factory experience, she wished to relate to the bourgeoisie what it meant to labour in a factory and she wished to sensitize the proletariat to their own plight. Reynolds considers that Weil's general definition of oppression on the basis of class, and not of sex, misses the full reality of that oppression. While Reynold's point is well taken, our present interest is, in part, to examine how Weil came to understand the condition she named "affliction." Weil of course knew what it meant to be a woman worker but she simply does not identify how this particular fact entered into her understanding of affliction. To identify with the working class, she was determined to experience a social situation which was normally closed to her, and to experience it not as a woman per se but as a worker. According to another commentator: "Weil is . . . a 'pre-post-feminist' tenaciously upholding her being-as-woman against the demands of culture, nature and religion put upon her." Mary Orr, quoted in Sian Reynolds, CSW 19.1 (March 1996) : 113. Cf. note 59 below.

²⁰ Blum and Seidler 10.

²¹ Simone Weil, Oppression and Liberty, trans. Arthur Wills and John Petrie (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972) 22. The critical edition is to be found in Simone Weil, Oeuvres Complètes, André A. Devaux and Florence de Lucy eds., 2.1 (Paris, Gallimard, 1988) 279. As Weil's complete works are still in the process of publication, references to the critical edition will follow the English citations wherever possible.

²² Pétrement 131,133. Upon her return from Germany, Weil wrote a series of articles originally published in L'Ecole émancipée. English translation in Simone Weil, Formative Writings 1929-1941, trans. Dorothy Tuck McFarland and Wilhelmina Van Ness (Amherst: Massachusetts UP, 1987) 89-148. Oeuvres Complètes 2.1:141-195.

²³ Pétrement 137.

²⁴ Formative Writings 144-45.

²⁵ Pétrement 136.

²⁶ Pétrement 132. Cf. Formative Writings 99; Oeuvres Complètes 2.1: 144.

²⁷ Pétrement 147-48.

²⁸ Weil, Oppression and Liberty 37; Oeuvres Complètes 2.2: 29.

²⁹ Originally intended as an article to be published in the Critique Social, it became for Weil a major project, which finally remained unpublished during her lifetime.

³⁰ Weil, Oppression and Liberty 45; Oeuvres Complètes 2.2: 36

³¹ Oppression and Liberty 42-43; Oeuvres Complètes 2.2: 34.

³² Oppression and Liberty 40; Oeuvres Complètes 2.2: 32.

³³ Oppression and Liberty 44; Oeuvres Complètes 2.2: 36.

³⁴ Oppression and Liberty 44; Oeuvres Complètes 2.2: 35.

³⁵ For a detailed discussion of Weil's critique of this idea, tracing it through Reflections as well later essays, see Blum and Seidler 59-72.

³⁶ For a clear expression of this see Weil's later essay entitled "Prerequisite to Dignity of Labour," Simone Weil—An Anthology ed. Sian Miles (London: Virago, 1986) 266-67. It is here too that Weil declared that Marx's phrase "opium of the people" "applies essentially to a revolution" which promises to eliminate the necessity inherent in the condition of work. 267.

³⁷ Weil, Oppression and Liberty 55; Oeuvres Complètes 2.2: 45.

³⁸ Weil, Oppression and Liberty 138; Oeuvres Complètes 2.2: 146.

³⁹ Weil, Oppression and Liberty 139; Oeuvres Complètes 2.2: 147.

⁴⁰ Weil, Oppression and Liberty 139; Oeuvres Complètes 2.2: 148.

⁴¹ Weil, Oppression and Liberty 68; Oeuvres Complètes 2.2: 57.

⁴² Weil, Oppression and Liberty 69; Oeuvres Complètes 2.2: 58.

⁴³ In a few words Weil crystalized what, for her, was most abhorrent about work geared to mass production—taking from workers the need for thought.

From the moment when the mind has worked out a method of action [sic] has no need to take part in the job of execution, this can be handed over to pieces of metal just as well as and better than to living members; and one is thus presented with the strange spectacle of machines in which the method has become so perfectly crystallized in metal that it seems as though it is they which do the thinking, and it is the men who serve them who are reduced to the condition of automata.

Weil, Oppression and Liberty 92; Oeuvres Complètes 2.2: 79.

⁴⁴ Weil, Oppression and Liberty 85; Oeuvres Complètes 2.2: 73.

⁴⁵ Weil, Oppression and Liberty 139; Oeuvres Complètes 2.2: 72.

⁴⁶ A critique of what she considers to be Weil's pervasively individualistic conception of liberty, is offered by Mary G. Dietz, Between the Human and the Divine: the Political Thought of Simone Weil, (Totowa, N.J. : Rowman and Littlefield, 1988) 71-81.

⁴⁷ Weil, Oppression and Liberty 56; Oeuvres Complètes 2.2: 46.

⁴⁸ Weil, Oppression and Liberty 56; Oeuvres Complètes 2.2: 46.

⁴⁹ Weil, Seventy Letters 15.

⁵⁰ Pétrement 227.

⁵¹ Weil, Seventy Letters 8, 10.

⁵² Weil, Seventy Letters 20.

⁵³ The key source of information on this period of Weil's life are the entries Weil made periodically in a diary she kept entitled Factory Journal found in Formative Writings. Two other types of writing which serve as sources for this period are her letters written to friends, several of them included in Seventy Letters, as well as articles she wrote shortly after she left the factories intended for a more general audience. The latter are found in translation in George A. Panichas, The Simone Weil Reader (New York: David McKay, 1977). The critical collection with variants, annotations and notes is available in Oeuvres Complètes 2:2.

⁵⁴ Reynolds 101-02.

⁵⁵ Weil, Formative Writings 151-52.

⁵⁶ Weil, Seventy Letters 44.

⁵⁷ Weil, Seventy Letters 11.

⁵⁸ Weil, Seventy Letters 33.

⁵⁹ Weil Reader 62; Oeuvres Complètes 2.2: 297. This article was revised in 1941 and published in Economie et Humanisme, 2, juin-juillet 1942. Examining the texts of La condition ouvrière, in Oeuvres Complètes 2.2, Reynolds argues that a significant difference exists between Weil's entries made in her Journal d'usine and her later articles on the factory experience. Her journal entries more clearly reflect her particular experience as a woman working in the factories, while in her

articles, written for publication shortly after she left the factories, Weil minimizes or excludes gender differences and tries to present the plight of factory workers in general. Reynolds argues that the latter generalization serves to “de-historicize the experience” and render it “an overwhelmingly masculine discourse.” (Reynolds 111, 112).

⁶⁰ Formative Writings 159, 167; Oeuvres Complètes 2.2: 176.

⁶¹ Weil, Seventy Letters 19-20.

⁶² Weil, Seventy Letters 17. Weil also notes this exchange in an article entitled “La vie et la grève des ouvrières métallistes” in Oeuvres Complètes 2.2: 350, and in her Factory Journal in Formative Writings 201. Oeuvres Complètes 2.2: 221.

⁶³ Boris Souvarine was a very close friend of Weil’s, and was instrumental in helping her to procure her first factory job by which she could secure a worker’s permit. Souvarine himself had been a factory worker as early as age thirteen, and had proceeded to become one of the founding members of the French Communist Party, from which he subsequently dissented. Anne Roche, introduction, Oeuvres Complètes 2.2:154. See also Pétrement 140-41.

⁶⁴ Weil, Seventy Letters 11.

⁶⁵ Weil, Formative Writings 160.

⁶⁶ Weil, Seventy Letters 15-16.

⁶⁷ Weil, Formative Writings 171; Oeuvres Complètes 2.2: 192-93.

⁶⁸ Weil, Formative Writings 171; Oeuvres Complètes 2.2: 193.

⁶⁹ Weil, Formative Writings 171; Oeuvres Complètes 2.2:193.

⁷⁰ Weil, Formative Writings 218, 185; Oeuvres Complètes 2.2: 243, 209.

⁷¹ Weil, Formative Writings 188; Oeuvres Complètes 2.2: 214.

⁷² Weil, Seventy Letters 16.

⁷³ Weil, Seventy Letters 18.

⁷⁴ Weil, Formative Writings 203; Oeuvres Complètes 2.2: 224.

⁷⁵ Weil, Seventy Letters 18.

⁷⁶ Weil, Formative Writings 188; Oeuvres Complètes 2.2: 352.

⁷⁷ Weil, Weil Reader 63. Cf. Weil, Formative Writings 202; Oeuvres Complètes 2.2: 351. Weil, Seventy Letters 33.

⁷⁸ Weil, Formative Writings 166-67; Oeuvres Complètes 2.2: 186.

⁷⁹ Weil, Seventy Letters 21.

⁸⁰ Weil, Formative Writings 207; Oeuvres Complètes 2.2: 228.

⁸¹ Weil, Formative Writings 209; Oeuvres Complètes 2.2: 232.

⁸² Weil, Oeuvres Complètes 2.2: 352.

⁸³ Weil, Seventy Letters 15.

⁸⁴ Weil does not mention this, but it is the case that sometimes this pain is released in the form of violence upon the weaker beings one comes in touch with, such as one's wife and children.

⁸⁵ Weil, Oppression and Liberty 56; Oeuvres Complètes 2.2: 46.

⁸⁶ Weil, Formative Writings 171; Oeuvres Complètes 2.2: 193.

⁸⁷ Weil, Seventy Letters 16.

⁸⁸ Weil, Weil Reader 63; Oeuvres Complètes 2.2: 352-353.

⁸⁹ Weil, Oppression and Liberty 40; Oeuvres Complètes 2.2: 32.

⁹⁰ Weil, Oppression and Liberty 146; Oeuvres Complètes 2.2: 133.

⁹¹ Weil, Oppression and Liberty 106, cf. 43; Oeuvres Complètes 2.2: 92, cf. 34.

⁹² Weil, Formative Writings 211; Oeuvres Complètes 2.2: 234.

⁹³ Weil, Seventy Letters 22.

⁹⁴ Weil, Weil Reader 55; Oeuvres Complètes 2.2: 291.

⁹⁵ Oeuvres Complètes 2.2: 351. "La vie et la grève des ouvrières métallos" which appeared in June of 1936, at the height of the sit-in strikes and originally published in La révolution prolétarienne. Throughout the dissertation I have kept untranslated material in the original French.

⁹⁶ Weil, Weil Reader 57; Oeuvres Complètes 2.2: 293.

⁹⁷ Weil, Weil Reader 62; Oeuvres Complètes 2.2: 298-99.

⁹⁸ Weil, Seventy Letters 42.

⁹⁹ Weil, Weil Reader 58; Oeuvres Complètes 2.2: 294.

¹⁰⁰ Weil, Weil Reader 63; Oeuvres Complètes 2.2: 298.

¹⁰¹ Weil, Weil reader 59; Oeuvres Complètes 2.2: 294.

¹⁰² What we have of this address is a typescript copy of notes taken by an auditor who attended this conference. Oeuvres Complètes 2.2: 458.

¹⁰³ Oeuvres Complètes 2.2: 460.

¹⁰⁴ Oeuvres Complètes 2.2: 461.

¹⁰⁵ Oeuvres Complètes 2.2: 472.

¹⁰⁶ Oeuvres Complètes 2.2: 472.

¹⁰⁷ Oeuvres Complètes 2.2: 473.

¹⁰⁸ Oeuvres Complètes 2.2: 473-74.

¹⁰⁹ Oeuvres Complètes 2.2: 467. Weil was writing during the Great Depression, a time when mass production and the assembly line had come into their own. More recently certain basic changes in this system have been aimed at benefiting workers and not just the quality and price of the product produced. Nevertheless, Weil's critique remains relevant to employers and factories in Canada, the U.S.A., and Europe, which manage to continue flouting basic standards for workers' safety. In these countries as well, many continue to work outside the system of safety standards as refugees, foreign workers, and "illegals." Weil's critique is of course relevant for a much greater population of workers in two thirds of the world, where human beings work in conditions that are as bad and worse than the conditions she experienced. Moreover, a reality of labour beyond her critique is that of child labour which has remained difficult to legislate away or deal with through sanctions alone, since crippling poverty compels families to send their children—and compels children themselves—to labour in whatever kind of work they can find.

¹¹⁰ Weil, Seventy Letters 34.

¹¹¹ Weil, Seventy Letters 35, cf. 21-22. Weil also notes this in her Factory Journal in Formative Writings 226.

¹¹² For a discussion of Weil's critique of liberal individualism see Blum and Seidler 150.

¹¹³ Weil, Seventy Letters 21.

¹¹⁴ Weil, Formative Writings 225; Oeuvres Complètes 2.2: 253.

¹¹⁵ Weil, Seventy letters 35. Cf. Weil's notes to herself in her Factory Journal: "One finally gets a clear idea of one's own importance. The class of those who *do not count*—in any situation—in anyone's eyes—and who will not count, ever, no matter what happens (notwithstanding the last line of the 1st verse of the *Internationale*)." Formative Writings 225; Oeuvres Complètes 2.2: 253.

¹¹⁶ Weil, Seventy Letters 41-42 (emphasis added). Referring to her own experience Weil tried to make the same point to Auguste Detoeuf, himself an owner and manager of factories, through whose offices Weil obtained her first factory job. Seventy Letters 55.

¹¹⁷ Blum and Seidler 178.

¹¹⁸ Weil, Seventy Letters 22.

¹¹⁹ Epictetus, Moral Discourses, trans. Carter-Higginson, ed. Thomas Gould (New York: Washington Square, 1964) 1.4: 19. Cf. Allen and Springsted Spirit, Nature 99-101.

¹²⁰ Weil, Seventy Letters 38-39.

¹²¹ It remains difficult to capture all the shades of meaning Weil expresses with this word. She intends by it a certain misfortune that is so profound it is almost inexpressible. At the same time it is like a dark shadow that engulfs its victim so that light in the form of joy, gratitude, and certainly a *joie de vivre* is absent. The best way of illustrating it is by pointing to those who are in this condition. Aside from the workers in front of a machine or those who filed out of a factory, Weil pointed to literary examples such as Job.

¹²² Weil, Weil Reader 64. The original reads as follows: "Rien n'est plus difficile a connaître que le malheur; il est toujours un mystère. Il est muet, comme disait un proverbe grec" Oeuvres Complètes 2.2: 299. It is unfortunate that the word Weil uses in this sentence—"malheur"—is in the present English translation rendered as "unhappiness." She is dealing here with a condition which reaches the limits of what human beings can bear. The word "misery," which is also used in this translation, captures more of what Weil is about to describe. In fact Weil herself designated *malheur* by the word "misery" in English. See Seventy Letters 102. The word "unhappiness," however, is too generalized a term to express what Weil is trying to say.

¹²³ Weil, Weil Reader 64. Again the English translation reads "unhappy." Oeuvres Complètes 2.2: 299

¹²⁴ Weil, Weil Reader 64; Oeuvres Complètes 2.2: 299.

¹²⁵ Weil, Weil Reader 65-66; Oeuvres Complètes 2.2: 300-01

¹²⁶ Weil, Formative Writings 182; Oeuvres Complètes 2.2: 205.

¹²⁷ Weil, Seventy Letters 37.

¹²⁸ Weil, Seventy Letters 41.

¹²⁹ Weil, Seventy Letters 41.

¹³⁰ Weil, On Science 170-198.

¹³¹ With the word "soul," which Weil uses repeatedly, we enter the thickets of her understanding of the human being. In contemporary language we may say that the term "soul" is equivalent to the "mind" or "self." Yet the experience of her own debilitating headaches, the knowledge of her own physical weakness, and the crushing weight upon all her faculties of physical labour, impressed upon her the fragility of this self. She understood that the self is not sufficient unto itself. Any piece of matter from a virus to a bullet can hurt or destroy it physically, psychological distress could shake it to its foundations, and of course the withdrawal of social regard could desiccate it. For Weil, therefore, there does not rest, as a possession, at the centre of human being an indestructible core composed of the personality or the ego. The possession of personality is of course a given in the way human beings are conceived in the modern West. Yet what Weil discovered this is at best a preliminary way of speaking, for the idea of "personality" as an individual possession does not capture the whole truth about what a human being is. In her late essay, "Human Personality," this is the point she is trying to make over against a personalism which presupposes that every human being possesses an inalienable metaphysical centre, symbolic of a unique human identity. According to her, human "dignity" cannot be based upon a personal core, for then what of the human being who is left when this core itself is destroyed? The personalists could not answer this question because their very definition of personality does not account for the reality of affliction. According to Weil what is left even after the destruction of the personality, even in the most corrupt of people, is not something one possesses but a yearning—a bare yearning for the good. "At the bottom of the heart of every human being, from earliest infancy until the tomb, there is something that goes on indomitably expecting, in the teeth of all experience of crimes committed, suffered, and witnessed, that good and not evil will be done to him. It is this above all that is sacred in every human being." (Weil, Selected Essays 10). This yearning is for her not personal but "impersonal" which means that it transcends the particular ego and is in fact the expression of the divine life in every human creature. We are closer the truth, according to Weil,

when we come face to face with affliction. (For a detailed discussion of “personalism” see Allen and Springsted Spirit, Nature 180-81).

¹³² Weil, Oppression and Liberty 6; Oeuvres Complètes 2.1: 265. Oppression and Liberty 22; Oeuvres Complètes 2.1: 280.

¹³³ Even at this point of lament at the actual social and psychic conditions of the working class Weil had certain positive recommendations to make. In summary, she recognized three areas of need. First, was the need for the education of the worker as a whole person. She considered of prime importance giving back to workers what Taylorization had taken away, the opportunity to think, plan, and execute their work. This required offering workers basic information on what they were producing and its purpose, as well as transmitting to them a part of the common cultural heritage which was geared specifically to help them integrate their work with their life. She even felt that in their situation, the workers were closer to an appreciation of the tragedies of Sophocles than the academics who regularly digested them. A second need she identified was for workers to appreciate the concepts of time and rhythm (so that the worker was not unconsciously mastered by time in the process of quantitative production) in such a way that workers, with appropriate pause, could find their place in a varying cycle of days and seasons. Thirdly, Weil sensed the need to offer workers as prime incentives for their work not the threat of dismissal and the lure of a pay packet, but a feeling of work well done and a sense that a meaningful contribution is made to a larger whole.

¹³⁴ Pétrement 248.

¹³⁵ Simone Weil, Waiting for God, trans. Emma Craufurd (New York: Harper & Row, 1973) 66-67.

¹³⁶ Springsted, Suffering of Love 27.

¹³⁷ Vetö 185. An entry in Weil’s “Marseille Notebooks” reads: “A long-drawn-out affliction kills the desire for deliverance, and makes even the thought of it practically unbearable [in my case, applies to headaches, end of 1938].” Weil, The Notebooks of Simone Weil, trans. Arthur Wills (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1976) 139. Oeuvres Complètes 6.2: 142. Cf. Simone Weil, Simone Weil: First and Last Notebooks, trans. Richard Rees (London: Oxford UP, 1970) 263. Cf. Weil’s own comment to Father Perrin in Waiting 100. Judith Van Herik states: “Particularly after her year of factory work in 1934-1935, her injury—an accidental burn—in the Spanish Civil War in 1936, and her ensuing migraines in 1938, she felt herself to be one of the afflicted, one who has undergone an irreparable social, biological, and psychological uprooting.” “Looking, Eating and Waiting in Simone Weil,” Mysticism, Nihilism, Feminism 63. Father Perrin himself emphasizes what Weil felt to be “the crushing burden, of her wretchedness” which he attributed to

the sheer physical pain of her chronic migraine headaches which marked her own conception of herself as unworthy of love. J.M. Perrin and Gustave Thibon, Simone Weil As We Knew Her, trans. Emma Craufurd (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1953) 76. Also J.P Little states that Weil's insightful analysis of affliction "arises from personal experience on the part of Simone Weil herself, and close and empathic observation of those around her. "Simone Weil's Concept of Decreation," Simone Weil's Philosophy of Culture: Readings Toward a Divine Humanity, ed. Richard H. Bell (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993) 40. What is undeniably true, is that affliction did not destroy Weil in the sense of corroding her appreciation or openness to the good.

¹³⁸ Weil, Seventy Letters 140.

¹³⁹ Pétrement 433.

¹⁴⁰ Weil, Waiting 67.

¹⁴¹ Weil, Waiting 69.

¹⁴² Pétrement 261.

¹⁴³ Pétrement 261.

¹⁴⁴ One she later bitterly censured herself for maintaining. Weil, First and Last Notebooks 345.

¹⁴⁵ Weil, Formative Writings 241; Oeuvres Complètes 2.1: 292.

¹⁴⁶ Weil, Formative Writings 254; Oeuvres Complètes 2.2: 332.

¹⁴⁷ Weil, Seventy Letters 106.

¹⁴⁸ Weil, Seventy Letters 106.

¹⁴⁹ Weil, Formative Writings 255; Oeuvres Complètes 2.2: 403.

¹⁵⁰ Weil, Formative Writings 256-57; Oeuvres Complètes 2.2: 389.

¹⁵¹ Weil, Formative Writings 257; Oeuvres Complètes 2.2: 389.

¹⁵² Weil, Seventy Letters 109.

¹⁵³ Weil, Seventy Letters 107.

¹⁵⁴ Weil, Seventy Letters 108.

¹⁵⁵ Weil, Seventy Letters 108.

¹⁵⁶ Weil, Selected Essays 162; Oeuvres Complètes 2.3: 57.

¹⁵⁷ Weil, Selected Essays 156; Oeuvres Complètes 2.3: 51.

¹⁵⁸ Weil, Selected Essays 157; Oeuvres Complètes 2.3: 52.

¹⁵⁹ Weil, Selected Essays 156; Oeuvres Complètes 2.3: 51.

¹⁶⁰ Weil, Selected Essays 168; Oeuvres Complètes 2.3: 64.

¹⁶¹ Weil, Selected Essays 169; Oeuvres Complètes 2.3: 65.

¹⁶² Weil, Selected Essays 80.

¹⁶³ Weil, Waiting 67-68.

¹⁶⁴ Weil, Seventy Letters 140.

¹⁶⁵ Weil, Waiting 68.

¹⁶⁶ Weil, Waiting 121.

¹⁶⁷ Weil, Waiting 68-69.

¹⁶⁸ Weil, Waiting 140.

¹⁶⁹ Pétrement 465. The examination of Weil's mystical encounter is a contrast to her concurrent analysis of the war. While she was considering the relationship between war and affliction she was also entering more deeply into a relationship with the divine, a relationship very few people were aware of at the time. Heinz Robert Schlette points out that Weil's distinction between the language of the "market place" and the "nuptial chamber" may well be applied to her own work, i.e. she certainly writes in the language of the public sphere, but she also writes in terms of the intimate insight nurtured in the contemplation of God's secret word in the privacy of the *tete-a-tete*. "The Language of the Marketplace and the Language of the Nuptial Chamber: The Theological Significance of a Distinction in the Philosophy of Language," The Beauty That Saves: Essays on Aesthetics and Language in Simone Weil, John M. Dunaway and Eric O. Springsted, eds. (Macon: Mercer UP, 1996) 37. Weil's expression of her encounter with Christ is certainly an example of the latter. It should also be pointed out, however, that she sought for a harmony between public and private discourse. One example is an essay such as "Human Personality," which is intended as a public document yet is imbued with her most profound personal reflections. In her "Spiritual Autobiography" she clearly states that: "The incarnation of Christianity implies a harmonious solution to the problem of the relations between the individual and the collective. Harmony

in the Pythagorean sense; the just balance of contraries. This solution is precisely what men are thirsting for today." Weil, Waiting 77.

¹⁷⁰ Weil, Seventy letters 140.

¹⁷¹ Weil, Waiting 69.

¹⁷² Weil, Attente de Dieu (Paris: Fayard, 1966) 45.

¹⁷³ All Scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible. Indeed in her Notebooks she goes further. "Isn't it the greatest possible calamity, when you are wrestling with God, not to be beaten?" Notebooks 574.

¹⁷⁴ Weil, Waiting 69.

¹⁷⁵ Weil, Seventy Letters 105.

¹⁷⁶ Weil, Seventy Letters 140.

¹⁷⁷ Czeslaw Milosz, "The Importance of Simone Weil," Emperor of the Earth: Modes of Eccentric Vision (Berkeley: U of California P, 1977) 89.

¹⁷⁸ Weil, Waiting 69.

¹⁷⁹ Weil, Waiting 62.

¹⁸⁰ Simone Weil, Intimations of Christianity Among the Ancient Greeks, ed. and trans. Elizabeth Chase Geissbuhler (London: Ark, 1987) 190.

¹⁸¹ Weil, First and Last Notebooks 139.

¹⁸² See for example, On Science 180-81, 187. Intimations 190.

¹⁸³ Weil, Intimations 190.

¹⁸⁴ Weil, Seventy Letters 95.

¹⁸⁵ Weil, Seventy Letters 142.

¹⁸⁶ Weil, Seventy Letters 142.

¹⁸⁷ Weil, Seventy Letters 142.

¹⁸⁸ Weil, Seventy Letters 103.

¹⁸⁹ Weil, Seventy Letters 102. She wrote this letter in English and it is clear that by the word "misery," she means *malheur*. So also Vetö 185, note 35.

¹⁹⁰ Weil, Seventy Letters 103.

¹⁹¹ Weil, Seventy Letters 103.

¹⁹² Weil, On Science 191.

¹⁹³ Weil, On Science 193.

¹⁹⁴ Weil, Seventy Letters 104.

¹⁹⁵ Weil, Seventy Letters 104.

¹⁹⁶ Weil, "Cold War Policy in 1939," Selected Essays 178. French Title: "Réflexions en vue d'un bilan," Oeuvres Complètes 2.3: 100. It was written immediately after Hitler's annexation of Czechoslovakia.

¹⁹⁷ Weil, Selected Essays 178; Oeuvres Complètes 2.3: 100.

¹⁹⁸ Tomas Merton, "Pacifism and Resistance in Simone Weil" Faith and Violence: Christian Teaching and Christian Practice (West Bend: U of Notre Dame P, 1968) 79.

¹⁹⁹ Weil, Oppression and Liberty 146; Oeuvres Complètes 2.2: 133.

²⁰⁰ Weil, Seventy Letters 158.

²⁰¹ Judging by her "London Notebook," written near the end of her life, it is evident that Weil continued to clarify for herself the reason for her resistance to the use of force.

"Love your enemies" . . . has nothing to do with pacifism and the problem of war.

"You enemies" can have two different meanings.

It may mean those who do harm to your person and to what you personally hold dear.

In so far as I have suffered in my personal life because of the Germans, in so far as things and people to whom I am personally attached have been destroyed or hurt by them, I have a special obligation to love them. . . .

If I am prepared to kill Germans in case of military necessity it is not because I have suffered from their acts. It is not because they hate God and Christ. It is because they are the enemies of every country in the world, including my own, and because, to my acute pain, to my extreme regret, it is impossible to prevent them from doing harm without killing a certain number of them. First and Last Notebooks 340.

²⁰² Weil, Selected Essays 79. Weil's conviction, that human action can destroy human values, is a fact that we in North America witness in the long and painful struggle of native peoples to regain what has been taken from them.

²⁰³ Weil, Selected Essays 80.

²⁰⁴ Weil, Selected Essays 102; Oeuvres Complètes 2.3: 181.

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- ²⁰⁵ Weil, Selected Essays 103; Oeuvres Complètes 2.3: 182.
- ²⁰⁶ Weil, Selected Essays 104; Oeuvres Complètes 2.3: 183.
- ²⁰⁷ Weil, Selected Essays 104; Oeuvres Complètes 2.3: 184.
- ²⁰⁸ Appian, Roman History 4.12. Quoted in Weil, Selected Essays 105; Oeuvres Complètes 2.3: 184.
- ²⁰⁹ Weil, Selected Essays 104; Oeuvres Complètes 2.3: 184.
- ²¹⁰ Polybius, Histories 10.15. Quoted in Weil, Selected Essays 107; Oeuvres Complètes 2.3: 186.
- ²¹¹ Weil, Selected Essays 107; Oeuvres Complètes 2.3: 186.
- ²¹² Polybius, Histories 10.17. Quoted in Weil, Selected Essays 107; Oeuvres Complètes 2.3: 187.
- ²¹³ Weil, Selected Essays 181.
- ²¹⁴ Weil, Selected Essays 112; Oeuvres Complètes 2.3: 191-92.
- ²¹⁵ Weil, Selected Essays 76.
- ²¹⁶ Weil, Selected Essays 101; Oeuvres Complètes 2.3: 181.
- ²¹⁷ Weil, Selected Essays 184; Oeuvres Complètes 2.3: 106.
- ²¹⁸ Weil, Selected Essays 184-85; Oeuvres Complètes 2.3: 107.
- ²¹⁹ A description of this proposal conceived sometime before May 1940, is available in Seventy Letters 145-153. See also Pétrement 374-75. While the proposal was dear to Weil's heart, it was not accepted in any official circles.
- ²²⁰ Weil, Roots 229.
- ²²¹ Weil, Selected Essays 131; Oeuvres Complètes 2.3: 210.
- ²²² Quoted in Simone Weil, Selected Essays 132; Oeuvres Complètes 2.3: 211.
- ²²³ Thucydides, The Peloponnesian War, trans. Rex Warner (Suffolk: Penguin, 1974) 5.89.
- ²²⁴ Thucydides 5.105 (my emphasis). Cf Weil, Waiting 140-42.

²²⁵ Weil, Waiting 143. The supernatural, as Weil used it, is certainly not opposed to the natural but transcends it. Thus, "God is beyond what we can imagine or conceive." Simone Weil, Gravity and Grace, trans. Emma Craufurd (New York: Ark, 1987) 88. For a detailed analysis of Weil's use of the term "supernatural virtue" see Peter Winch, Simone Weil: "The Just Balance" (New York: Cambridge UP, 1989) 191-211.

²²⁶ Weil, Selected Essays 115.

²²⁷ Weil, Waiting 142.

²²⁸ Weil, Waiting 143.

²²⁹ Weil, Waiting 143.

²³⁰ Weil, Selected Essays 194. Oeuvres Complètes 2.3: 116.

²³¹ Weil, Selected Essays 194. Oeuvres Complètes 2.3: 116.

²³² Blum and Seidler 240.

²³³ In reading this essay one may be persuaded that Weil strove to compose in accord with what she considered to be the standard of great poetry—the struggle to express pain and misery in every word. Cf. Weil, Seventy Letters 103. For another perspective on Weil's idiosyncratic reading of the *Iliad*, see Michael K. Ferber, "Simone Weil's *Iliad*" Simone Weil: Interpretations of a Life ed. George Abbot White (Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1981) 63-85.

²³⁴ Weil, Intimations 53; Oeuvres Complètes 2.3: 252.

²³⁵ Weil, Intimations 53; Oeuvres Complètes 2.3: 252.

²³⁶ Weil, Intimations 24. Though I am quoting from this translation I have chosen to use the word "force" rather than "might". Both words have been used in the various English translations of this essay. Oeuvres Complètes 2.3: 227.

²³⁷ Blum and Seidler 217.

²³⁸ Weil, Intimations 25; Oeuvres Complètes 2.3: 228.

²³⁹ Weil, Intimations 26; Oeuvres Complètes 2.3: 228-29.

²⁴⁰ Winch 145.

²⁴¹ Winch 151.

²⁴² Michael Ferber declares that a body/soul "dualism, severe, exacting, and with its implications deeply thought out, governs Simone Weil's religious and moral thought." ed. White 76.

²⁴³ For a fuller treatment of the feminist critique of a soul/body dualism, as well as a discussion of how Weil uses dualistic language to overcome traditional dualisms, see, Lucy Bregman, "The Barren Fig Tree: Simone Weil and the Problem of Feminine Identity," Mysticism, Nihilism, Feminism: New Critical Essays on the Theology of Simone Weil, ed. Thomas A. Idinopulos and Josephine Zadovsky Knopp (Johnson City, Tenn.: Institute of Social Sciences and Arts, 1984) 90-116.

²⁴⁴ Weil, Intimations 28 Oeuvres Complètes 2.3: 231.

²⁴⁵ Blum and Seidler 223.

²⁴⁶ Weil, "Human Personality," Selected Essays 9.

²⁴⁷ Weil, Seventy Letters 76.

²⁴⁸ Cf. note 131 above.

²⁴⁹ Weil, Intimations 28-29; Oeuvres Complètes 2.3: 231.

²⁵⁰ Weil, Intimations 53; Oeuvres Complètes 2.3: 251.

²⁵¹ Weil, Intimations 34-35; Oeuvres Complètes 2.3: 236.

²⁵² Weil, Intimations 35; Oeuvres Complètes 2.3: 236.

²⁵³ Weil, Intimations 41; Oeuvres Complètes 2.3: 241.

²⁵⁴ Weil, Intimations 41; Oeuvres Complètes 2.3: 242.

²⁵⁵ Weil, Intimations 44-45; Oeuvres Complètes 2.3: 244-45.

²⁵⁶ Weil, Intimations 46; Oeuvres Complètes 2.3: 246.

²⁵⁷ Weil, Intimations 36; Oeuvres Complètes 2.3: 237.

²⁵⁸ In her Notebooks, Weil declares that "force is a mechanism a pure concatenation of conditions." 499.

²⁵⁹ Cf. "The notion of oppression is, in short, a stupidity: one only has to read the *Iliad*. And the notion of an oppressive class is even more stupid. We can only speak of an oppressive structure of society." Weil, Gravity and Grace 141.

²⁶⁰ Weil's prime example of this possibility is the twelfth century civilization of the *langue d'oc*, in which obedience was based on legitimate authority accepted as such, allowing the servant to be equal to the master in regard. In other words, there was no element of humiliation in a relationship in which the servant consented to obey the master, and the master fulfilled certain obligations toward the servant. She saw in this relationship a bringing together of contraries, two different classes, not through force nor even through a blurring of social distinctions. A point was found in the ideas of fealty and fidelity in which both groups came together. The basis of this obedience was therefore, justice. See Selected Essays 51.

²⁶¹ Weil, Intimations 51; Oeuvres Complètes 2.3: 250.

²⁶² Weil, Intimations 48; Oeuvres Complètes 2.3: 248.

²⁶³ Weil, Intimations 44; Oeuvres Complètes 2.3: 244.

²⁶⁴ Weil, Waiting 65.

²⁶⁵ Weil, Intimations 54; Oeuvres Complètes 2.3: 253.

²⁶⁶ E.g. Oeuvres Complètes 4.2: 319. Weil evidently prefers the longer variant of this verse. There is also a problem with the reading of this verse depending on whether "from the foundation of the world" refers to the "book of life" or "the Lamb that was slain." For Weil it clearly refers to the latter.

²⁶⁷ "[E]ven the grace of God himself cannot cure irremediably wounded nature in this world. The glorified body of Christ bore the marks of nail and spear." Weil, On Science 174.

²⁶⁸ Weil, Intimations 52. Oeuvres Complètes 2.3: 251.

²⁶⁹ Weil, On Science 172.

²⁷⁰ Pétrement 205.

²⁷¹ Weil, Seventy Letters 196.

²⁷² Pétrement 460.

²⁷³ Pétrement 372.

²⁷⁴ Weil, Seventy Letters 137.

²⁷⁵ The last entry in her "London Notebook" reads: "The most important part of teaching = to teach what it is to *know* (in the scientific sense). Nurses." First and Last Notebooks 364.

²⁷⁶ Pétrement 387.

²⁷⁷ Pétrement 387.

²⁷⁸ Pétrement 444. Cf. Joseph-Marie Perrin, Mon Dialogue Avec Simone Weil (Paris: Nouvelle Cite, 1984) 105. "Marie-Louise David entretien avec Wladimir Rabi," CSW 4.2 (juin 1981) : 77-79.

²⁷⁹ Pétrement 421.

²⁸⁰ Pétrement 423.

²⁸¹ Pétrement 423.

²⁸² Pétrement 421-22.

²⁸³ Pétrement 433.

²⁸⁴ Pétrement 443.

²⁸⁵ Pétrement 433.

²⁸⁶ Pétrement 442.

²⁸⁷ Pétrement 441-42.

²⁸⁸ Pétrement 444.

²⁸⁹ Pétrement 440-41.

²⁹⁰ Weil, Waiting, 64. For a psychological explanation of Weil's "adolescent crisis," see Dietz . 22-23.

²⁹¹ In a period of time when powerful ideologies such as fascism, communism, and capitalism, were secreted by the collectivity, Weil was unable to appreciate the possibility that a society may in fact exist which is not oppressive. It was only after the invasion of France, and especially after her departure from her native land that she appreciated the "need for roots" within a community.

²⁹² Weil, Notebooks 434. Later in the same notebooks Weil notes to herself: "Nothing on this earth is really an object of the desire that is in me. . . . Since I exist and this desire for absolute good constitutes the foundation of my being there must be something in Reality which possesses at least the same value as this

desire. But I am separated from it; I am unable to reach it. All I can do is to know that it exists, and wait—even if it means for years.” Notebooks 562.

²⁹³ Weil, Waiting 87, 105-116.

²⁹⁴ Weil, Waiting 105.

²⁹⁵ Weil, Waiting 112.

²⁹⁶ Weil, Waiting 106. Cf. Notebooks 597.

²⁹⁷ Weil, Waiting 109.

²⁹⁸ See, Dietz 97. Also, Martin Andic, “One Moment of Pure Attention is Worth all the Good Works in the World,” CSW, 21.4 (décembre 1998) : 352. Andic’s essay is a sensitive exploration of the dialectic between contemplation and action inherent in attention.

²⁹⁹ Weil, Waiting 112.

³⁰⁰ Weil, On Science 154-55. Cf. First and Last Notebooks 101. Genuine movement is possible for human beings, but in a downward direction. If we wish to rise we must go down. Weil repeatedly refers to the model of the lever. Ascent is predicated on a descending movement. “It is on the same principle,” says Weil, “as ‘he who humbleth himself shall be exalted’.” Notebooks 169 cf. 221, 560.

³⁰¹ Weil, Waiting 196. Cf. Luke 12: 36-37.

³⁰² Weil, Gravity and Grace 44.

³⁰³ Weil, Waiting 113, cf. 196.

³⁰⁴ Weil, Waiting 111.

³⁰⁵ Weil, Waiting 111.

³⁰⁶ Weil, Waiting 111.

³⁰⁷ Weil, First and Last Notebooks 97.

³⁰⁸ Weil, Notebooks 280; Oeuvres Complètes 6.2: 390.

³⁰⁹ Weil, Waiting, 115 (emphasis added). Cf. Notebooks 281. Oeuvres Complètes 6.2: 390-91.

³¹⁰ Weil, Waiting 115.

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- ³¹¹ Weil, Selected Essays 23.
- ³¹² Weil, First and Last Notebooks 211.
- ³¹³ Simone Weil, "The Love of God and Affliction," On Science 170-198.
- ³¹⁴ Weil, On Science 193. Cf. Selected Essays 27.
- ³¹⁵ Weil, Selected Essays 11.
- ³¹⁶ Weil, On Science 173.
- ³¹⁷ For an extended discussion see Hall, God & Human Suffering 73-92.
- ³¹⁸ Weil, Waiting 141-42.
- ³¹⁹ Weil, On Science 177.
- ³²⁰ Weil, Intimations 187.
- ³²¹ Weil, On Science 175.
- ³²² Weil, On Science 196.
- ³²³ Farley 61.
- ³²⁴ Weil, On Science 176.
- ³²⁵ Weil, Selected Essays 11.
- ³²⁶ Weil, Notebooks 338. Oeuvres Complètes 6.2: 462.
- ³²⁷ J.B. Lightfoot and J.R. Harmer, eds., The Apostolic Fathers (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984) 151.
- ³²⁸ Apostolic Fathers 152.
- ³²⁹ Herbert Musurillo, ed. and trans., The Acts of the Christian Martyrs (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972) 117.
- ³³⁰ Musurillo 113.
- ³³¹ Musurillo 115.
- ³³² Musurillo 115.
- ³³³ Musurillo 125, 127.

³³⁴ Jürgen Moltmann, The Way of Jesus Christ: Christology in Messianic Dimensions, trans. Margaret Kohl (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1990) 197.

³³⁵ Weil, Intimations 138.

³³⁶ Felicitas, a slave and companion to Perpetua was also in prison awaiting execution. She was pregnant, however, and the law did not allow for the execution of pregnant women. The writer comments: "she might have to shed her holy, innocent blood afterwards [post-partum] along with others who were common criminals." Musurillo 123. Again this is seen as a blessing rather than a curse.

³³⁷ Moltmann, Way of Jesus Christ 199-203. It should also be pointed out, that while Weil defines Christ's affliction on the basis of the agony in the garden and the cry of dereliction, she does not engage the gospel passages which portray Jesus as being in command and choosing his death. Cf. Mt. 26:63-64, 27:14; Lk. 9:51, 22:52-53, 23:3-4, 9,46; Jn. 18:4ff, 19:30.

³³⁸ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Letters & Papers From Prison New Greatly Enlarged Edition, Eberhard Bethge ed., Reginald Fuller et al. trans., (New York: Macmillan, 1972) 349.

³³⁹ Bonhoeffer, Letters 348.

³⁴⁰ Moltmann, Way of Jesus Christ 198.

³⁴¹ Weil, On Science 183.

³⁴² Weil, Notebooks 342; Oeuvres Complètes 6.2: 467.

³⁴³ Weil, Gravity and Grace 65.

³⁴⁴ Weil, Notebooks 342; Oeuvres Complètes 6.2: 467.

³⁴⁵ Weil, Notebooks 342; Oeuvres Complètes 6.2: 467. The "I" for Weil designates the autonomous self or ego, that which sets us as the centre of the world in opposition to the true centre which is outside the world. Living through our "I" or ego is a distortion of perspective, for everything is perceived through me and I am therefore incapable of recognizing that others have as much right to esteem themselves as centres, as do I.. For this reason she was severely critical of state constitutions based on the notion of rights. Such a basis results in a cacophony of screaming for rights which she likens to siblings screaming for a bigger piece of cake. In this cacophony the comparatively silent or inchoate cry of the soul, "Why am I being hurt?" cannot be heard. (See further chapter 9 below).

³⁴⁶ Weil, Waiting 190-91.

³⁴⁷ Weil, Notebooks 506. "The false God changes suffering into violence: the true God changes violence into suffering." Notebooks 507.

³⁴⁸ Weil, First and Last Notebooks 218.

³⁴⁹ Weil offers the preliminary observation that this is a significant reason why children deserve a greater interest to be shown to them than do adults, because unless an exceptional form of affliction has done its work "their 'I', even if it is in a comatose state, even if it pretends to be dead, is never altogether killed. Its very capacity for feigning death, typical of the adaptability of childhood, is a means of preserving it." Weil, Notebooks 339; Oeuvres Complètes 6.2: 463.

³⁵⁰ Farley 21.

³⁵¹ Weil, Gravity and Grace 68.

³⁵² Weil, Notebooks 229; Oeuvres Complètes 6.2: 328.

³⁵³ Weil, On Science 172. Cf. "I am a worm, and not human" (Ps.22:6).

³⁵⁴ Weil, On Science 171.

³⁵⁵ Weil, Notebooks 223; Oeuvres Complètes 6.2: 321.

³⁵⁶ Weil, Notebooks 546.

³⁵⁷ Weil, On Science 174.

³⁵⁸ Weil, On Science 174.

³⁵⁹ In Marseille Weil often sat in on court proceedings, and her writing at this time is full of allusions to judges and convicts. Cf. Selected Essays 11, 25. Perrin in As We Knew Her 32-33.

³⁶⁰ Weil, Waiting 155.

³⁶¹ Weil, On Science 173.

³⁶² Weil, On Science 183.

³⁶³ Weil, On Science 198.

³⁶⁴ Weil, On Science 198.

³⁶⁵ Cf. Weil, Waiting 191.

³⁶⁶ Weil, Intimations 194.

³⁶⁷ Weil, Selected Essays 219.

³⁶⁸ Weil, Selected Essays 10.

³⁶⁹ Weil, Selected Essays 10.

³⁷⁰ Douglas John Hall, Professing the Faith: Christian Theology in a North American Context (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993) 218.

³⁷¹ Weil, First and Last Notebooks 139.

³⁷² Vetö 85.

³⁷³ Weil, First and Last Notebooks 263.

³⁷⁴ Weil, First and Last Notebooks 263.

³⁷⁵ Weil, Waiting 226.

³⁷⁶ The French title of Beckett's play is En Attendant Godot. Beckett also wrote the English version entitled Waiting for Godot. It was first published in 1952, shortly after the posthumous publication of Weil's Attente de Dieu (Waiting for God). There is no indication from Beckett that his play has any connection with the writings of Simone Weil on the subject of affliction. "It may be presumed," says Robert Cohen, that the two were acquainted. They both came to the ENS in 1928, Weil as a student and Beckett as Lecteur d'Anglais. See Robert Cohen, "Parallels and the Possibility of Influence Between Simone Weil's Waiting for God and Samuel Beckett's Waiting for Godot," Modern Drama 6.4 : 425-36.

³⁷⁷ Samuel Beckett, Waiting for Godot: a Tragicomedy in Two Acts (New York: Grove, 1954) 7. This may well be a play on Weil's conception of *hupomene*, *attente*, or waiting.

³⁷⁸ Beckett 14.

³⁷⁹ Beckett 15.

³⁸⁰ At one point in "The Love of God and Affliction," there is what appears to be an uncanny description of someone like Lucky. In speaking of those who like slaves are compelled by human will to suffer what they would not, Weil says: "*Lucky* are those to whom this precious opportunity comes often." On Science 186 (emphasis added).

³⁸¹ Beckett 21.

³⁸² Beckett 56.

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- ³⁸³ Weil, Selected Essays 11.
- ³⁸⁴ Weil, Roots 256-57.
- ³⁸⁵ Weil, First and Last Notebooks 335.
- ³⁸⁶ Weil, Roots 243.
- ³⁸⁷ W. R. Sheppard, "The Suffering of Love: George Grant and Simone Weil," Two Theological Languages by George Grant and Other Essays in Honour of His Work, ed. Wayne Whillier (Queenston: Edwin Mellen, 1990) 28.
- ³⁸⁸ Weil, On Science 104. Quoted in Sheppard 25.
- ³⁸⁹ Weil, On Science 94-96.
- ³⁹⁰ Weil, On Science 105.
- ³⁹¹ Dietz 129.
- ³⁹² Weil, On Science 190. Cf. (Mt. 25: 31-46).
- ³⁹³ Weil, Waiting 151.
- ³⁹⁴ Weil, On Science 192.
- ³⁹⁵ Weil, Waiting 151.
- ³⁹⁶ Weil, Notebooks 338-39. Oeuvres Complètes 6.2: 463.
- ³⁹⁷ Weil, On Science 190.
- ³⁹⁸ Weil, Waiting 147.
- ³⁹⁹ Weil, Waiting 147.
- ⁴⁰⁰ Weil, On Science 191.
- ⁴⁰¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, The Cost of Discipleship, trans. R.H. Fuller and Irmgard Booth (Suffolk: SCM, 1980) 79.
- ⁴⁰² Weil, Waiting 148.
- ⁴⁰³ Weil, Selected Essays 131-32.
- ⁴⁰⁴ Weil, Waiting 149.
- ⁴⁰⁵ Weil, Waiting 142.

⁴⁰⁶ Weil, Waiting 139. Elsewhere Weil maintains: "Because affliction and truth need the same kind of attention before they can be heard, the spirit of justice and the spirit of truth are one. The spirit of justice and truth is nothing else but a certain kind of attention, which is pure love." Selected Essays 28.

⁴⁰⁷ Weil, First and Last Notebooks 84.

⁴⁰⁸ Weil, Waiting 148.

⁴⁰⁹ Weil, Waiting 143

⁴¹⁰ Weil, Waiting 121.

⁴¹¹ Weil, Waiting 139.

⁴¹² Weil, Roots 20-21.

⁴¹³ Weil, Selected Essays 31.

⁴¹⁴ Weil, Selected Essays 31.

⁴¹⁵ "Ultimately, punishment, if truly legitimate, gives more than it takes." Ronald Collins and Finn Nielsen, "The Spirit of Simone Weil's Law," Philosophy ed. Bell, 251.

⁴¹⁶ Weil, First and Last Notebooks 345.

⁴¹⁷ Weil, Selected Essays 28. Weil's description of the afflicted criminal is very like Hugo's characterization of Jean Valjean in Les Misérables.

⁴¹⁸ Winch 182.

⁴¹⁹ Weil, Waiting 153.

⁴²⁰ Weil, Waiting 152.

⁴²¹ In book 1 of his Laws (632c) Plato speaks of "a body of guardians endowed some with wisdom, some with true beliefs" who committed to justice rather than self-seeking, maintain the good order of the *polis*. Cf. A "council entrusted with supervision of the laws." They meet "before daybreak, the time, above all others when a man is always freest from all other business, private or public" (951d, 961c). The Collected Dialogues of Plato: Including the Letters, Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, eds., (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1987).

⁴²² Bell, Philosophy 253.

⁴²³ Perrin and Thibon, As We Knew Her 1-2.

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- ⁴²⁴ Weil, Seventy Letters 178.
- ⁴²⁵ Weil, Seventy Letters 76.
- ⁴²⁶ George Grant, "Introduction to the Reading of Simone Weil" n.p. 10.
- ⁴²⁷ Weil, First and Last Notebooks 102.
- ⁴²⁸ Weil, Seventy Letters, 178.
- ⁴²⁹ Weil, Notebooks 386.
- ⁴³⁰ Weil, Intimations 193.
- ⁴³¹ Vetö, 166 n.8. Wladimir Rabi, "La conception weilienne de la Création. Rencontre avec la Kabbale juive," Gilbert Kahn, ed. Simone Weil: philosophe, historienne et mystique (Paris: Aubier Montaigne, 1978) 148 ff.. For a Christian appropriation of this idea see Jürgen Moltmann, The Trinity and the Kingdom, trans. Margaret Kohl (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1981) 108-111, and Jürgen Moltmann, God in Creation, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993) 87-89.
- ⁴³² Gershom G. Scholem, Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism (New York: Schocken, 1967) 260.
- ⁴³³ Scholem, Major Trends 260. Cf. Gershom Scholem, On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: Schocken, 1965) 111.
- ⁴³⁴ Scholem, Major Trends 261.
- ⁴³⁵ Cf. Rabbi in historienne et mystique, ed. Kahn, 151ff..
- ⁴³⁶ Scholem, On the Kabbalah 110.
- ⁴³⁷ Scholem, On the Kabbalah 113.
- ⁴³⁸ Scholem, On the Kabbalah 116.
- ⁴³⁹ Weil, On Science 194.
- ⁴⁴⁰ When she sent this text to Father Perrin's secretary she noted that it was unfinished. Weil Waiting 84.
- ⁴⁴¹ Weil, Intimations 182.
- ⁴⁴² Weil, First and Last Notebooks 194.

⁴⁴³ Weil, First and Last Notebooks 120, cf. 81. Intimations 183. Simone Weil, "Are We Struggling for Justice?" trans. Marina Barabas, Philosophical Investigations 10.1 : 3.

⁴⁴⁴ Weil, First and last Notebooks 120.

⁴⁴⁵ Weil, On Science 153. Cf. First and Last Notebooks 120.

⁴⁴⁶ Weil, "Are We Struggling for Justice?" 3.

⁴⁴⁷ Weil, Intimations 170.

⁴⁴⁸ Weil, On Science 175, 197.

⁴⁴⁹ Weil, Intimations 197, cf. 169.

⁴⁵⁰ Weil, Intimations 170.

⁴⁵¹ Weil, On Science 183.

⁴⁵² Weil, First and Last Notebooks 260.

⁴⁵³ Weil, Roots 267.

⁴⁵⁴ Weil, First and Last Notebooks 140.

⁴⁵⁵ Weil, First and Last Notebooks 140.

⁴⁵⁶ Weil, First and Last Notebooks 83.

⁴⁵⁷ Grant, "class on Simone Weil," n.p, n. pag.

⁴⁵⁸ This argument has been made in particular by Susan Anima Taubes, "The Absent God," The Journal of Religion 35 (1955) : 8-16. Taubes maintains that Weil has turned "the historical experience of the death of God into a theological principle." 6. Also, Gerda Blumenthal, maintains that in Weil's conception, creation is the permanent abdication of God. "Simone Weil's Way of the Cross," Thought 27 (1952-53) : 227.

⁴⁵⁹ Weil, Gravity and Grace 104.

⁴⁶⁰ Weil, Waiting 139ff, 181ff.. Cf. First and last Notebooks 103.

⁴⁶¹ "Love consents to all things and commands only those who are willing to obey. Love is abdication. God is abdication." (Weil, First and Last Notebooks 300).

⁴⁶² Simone Weil, "Letter to a Priest" Simone Weil, Gateway to God, David Raper, ed. (Glasgow: Collins, 1974) 100-01.

⁴⁶³ Weil valued creative imagination but she called it "genius." Otherwise, when it is based on that part of us that says "I," the imagination is a filler of voids.

⁴⁶⁴ 455. Weil, Notebooks 204. Oeuvres Complètes 6.2: 296.

⁴⁶⁵ Weil, Notebooks 140. Oeuvres Complètes 6.2: 142.

⁴⁶⁶ Weil, On Science 177.

⁴⁶⁷ Weil, Notebooks 48. Oeuvres Complètes 6.1: 325.

⁴⁶⁸ Notebooks 180. Oeuvres Complètes 6.2: 252. It is not often remembered that for Weil grace also descends but without the weight of force. Creation itself is finally a descending movement of grace. Gravity and Grace 3-4.

⁴⁶⁹ Weil, Waiting 53.

⁴⁷⁰ Weil, First and Last Notebooks 87.

⁴⁷¹ Weil, Waiting 148-49.

⁴⁷² Weil, Waiting 53.

⁴⁷³ Weil, Waiting 97.

⁴⁷⁴ Weil, First and Last Notebooks 233. Cf. Notebooks 493-94.

⁴⁷⁵ Weil, Waiting 54. For a discussion of Alain's influence on Weil's political thought see Athanasios Moulakis, Simone Weil and the Politics of Self-Denial, trans. Ruth Hein (Columbia: U of Missouri P, 1998) especially 146-168.

⁴⁷⁶ Weil, Oppression and Liberty 30; Oeuvres Complètes 2.1: 304.

⁴⁷⁷ It needs to be kept in mind that Weil did not remain with her initial critique of the collective as manifest in the nation state. She went on to ask how indeed the nation too, as a nation, can be open to the good which transcends it. Her writings in the London period carry the burden of this struggle.

⁴⁷⁸ Weil, Intimations 82.

⁴⁷⁹ Weil, Intimations 174.

⁴⁸⁰ Weil, Waiting 209, 128.

⁴⁸¹ Weil, Intimations 174.

⁴⁸² “The Roman who died to save his slaves from torture loved God,” and “Every master who believes that his slaves are his equals knows and loves God.” Weil, First and Last Notebooks 146. The call Weil recognizes, to state it in the words of the gospel, is to: “go sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. . . .” (Mk. 10:21). Cf. Weil, Intimations 175. First and Last Notebooks 87.

⁴⁸³ Weil, First and Last Notebooks 145.

⁴⁸⁴ Weil, First and last Notebooks 146.

⁴⁸⁵ For a discussion of Weil’s thoughts on friendship vis-a-vis other critical appraisals of it see Spirit, Nature 118ff..

⁴⁸⁶ Weil, Waiting 200.

⁴⁸⁷ Weil, Waiting 201.

⁴⁸⁸ Weil, Waiting 202-03.

⁴⁸⁹ Weil, Waiting 204.

⁴⁹⁰ Weil, Waiting 204.

⁴⁹¹ Weil, Notebooks 338-39; Oeuvres Complètes 6.2: 463.

⁴⁹² Weil, First and Last Notebooks 219.

⁴⁹³ “Pain keeps us nailed to time, but acceptance of pain carries us to the end of time, into eternity.” Weil, First and last Notebooks 199, cf. 208.

⁴⁹⁴ Weil, First and Last Notebooks 220-21.

⁴⁹⁵ Weil, First and Last Notebooks 220.

⁴⁹⁶ Weil, First and Last Notebooks 220.

⁴⁹⁷ Weil, Seventy Letters 136.

⁴⁹⁸ Weil, Seventy Letters 136.

⁴⁹⁹ Weil, Seventy Letters 138.

⁵⁰⁰ Weil, Seventy Letters 138.

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- ⁵⁰¹ Weil, Seventy Letters 138.
- ⁵⁰² Weil, Seventy Letters 137.
- ⁵⁰³ Weil, Seventy Letters 137. Cf. Andic "One Moment of Pure Attention," 364-65.
- ⁵⁰⁴ Weil, On Science 180.
- ⁵⁰⁵ Bruce Chilton, "Suffering: in the Light of the Gospel," Living Pulpit 4:2 : 24-25.
- ⁵⁰⁶ Weil, First and Last Notebooks 290.
- ⁵⁰⁷ Weil, Seventy Letters 139.
- ⁵⁰⁸ Weil, Waiting 97.
- ⁵⁰⁹ "If a man gives bread to a beggar in a certain way or speaks in a certain way about a defeated army, I know that his thought has been outside this world and sat with Christ alongside the Father who is in Heaven." Weil, First and Last Notebooks 147.
- ⁵¹⁰ Weil, First and Last Notebooks 97, cf. 209.
- ⁵¹¹ Weil, First and Last Notebooks 324.
- ⁵¹² Weil, First and Last Notebooks 224. Intimations 195.
- ⁵¹³ Weil, First and Last Notebooks 224.
- ⁵¹⁴ Weil, First and Last Notebooks 224.
- ⁵¹⁵ Weil, Seventy Letters 139.
- ⁵¹⁶ Weil, Notebooks 298; Oeuvres Complètes 6.2: 421.
- ⁵¹⁷ Weil, First and last Notebooks 125.
- ⁵¹⁸ Weil, Notebooks 337-338; Oeuvres Complètes 6.2: 462. Homer, Iliad, trans. Richmond Lattimore (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1973) 21: 70-95.
- ⁵¹⁹ Weil, Notebooks 338; Oeuvres Complètes 6.2 : 462.
- ⁵²⁰ Weil, Notebooks 337; Oeuvres Complètes 6.2: 462.
- ⁵²¹ Weil, On Science 194.

⁵²² Weil, On Science 194. Cf. "A Roman slave, torn away from his own life, placed in the power of a master, ill-used, and finally crucified, must have died with his heart full of hatred—and consequently been damned—unless Christ descended into him. So if one thinks that Christ came only twenty centuries ago how is one to forgive God for the affliction of the Roman slaves?" First and Last Notebooks 178.

⁵²³ Weil, First and Last Notebooks 213.

⁵²⁴ Weil, Notebooks 290; Oeuvres Complètes 6.2: 402.

⁵²⁵ Weil, Notebooks 290; Oeuvres Complètes 6.2: 402.

⁵²⁶ Weil, Notebooks 290; Oeuvres Complètes 6.2: 402.

⁵²⁷ Pétrement 369-370.

⁵²⁸ Weil, Seventy Letters 43.

⁵²⁹ Quoted by Thibon, As We knew Her 131.

⁵³⁰ Weil, Seventy Letters 12.

⁵³¹ Weil, Waiting 64.

⁵³² Weil, Waiting 64.

⁵³³ Weil, Poèmes: suivis de Venise sauvée (Paris: Gallimard, 1968) 95-96, 47. Notebooks 299. Oeuvres Complètes 6.2: 422.

⁵³⁴ Eric Springsted maintains that: "The stage of decreation is . . . to be distinguished from attention, not as something distinct from it, but as the state in which attention has become the sum and substance of our being. Suffering of Love 71-72.

⁵³⁵ Weil, Waiting 150.

⁵³⁶ Weil, "Are We Struggling for Justice?" 2.

⁵³⁷ Perrin and Thibon, As We Knew Her 119.

⁵³⁸ It is not my aim here to engage the continuing debate on the philosophical nature of Weil's metaphysical dualism, of which Vetö's book as well as Springsted's Christus Mediator are important contributions. A short but astute philosophical critique of Weil is offered by Jean Bethke Elshtain, who acknowledges the power with which Weil exposes human vulnerability to force and her uncompromising challenge to the collective idols of her time. Elshtain also maintains, however, that Weil's affirmation of human dignity is couched in a

fundamental rejection of human materialism and social identity. "The Vexation of Weil," Telos 58 (1983-84) : 195-203. A related issue is the nature of Weil's Gnostic/Manichean leanings. Lawrence Schmidt clearly points to several key differences between Weil's Platonic Christianity and ancient Gnosticism. "George Grant on Simone Weil as Saint and Thinker" George Grant and the Subversion of Modernity: Art, Philosophy, Politics, Religion, and Education, ed. Arthur Davis (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1996) 263-281. George Grant makes a careful statement in this regard "In Defence of Simone Weil," Best Canadian Essays 1989 ed., D. Fethering (Saskatoon: Fifth House Publishers, 1989) 167-68. Charles Moeller is one of the harshest critics of Weil's ostensible Christianity. Littérature du XXe siècle et christianisme: 1 Silence de Dieu 3e edition. (Paris: Casterman, 1954) 240-252. See also Madeline Hamblin, "Simone Weil's Self-Emptying God" Mysticism, Nihilism, eds. Idinopulos and Zadovsky Knopp, 49-53. Moulakis 140-43. For a critical examination of Weil's last months in London considering the ambiguities of her character as well as her ostensible espousal of Gnostic dualism and Cathar asceticism, see Michelle Murray "Simone Weil: Last Things" Interpretations ed. White, 47-61. Also by the same author in the same volume "The Jagged Edge: A Biographical Essay on Simone Weil," 26.

⁵³⁹ Weil, Oeuvres Complètes 2.1: 351-52.

⁵⁴⁰ George Grant allows that the particular lives of great thinkers are unimportant relative to the truth in which they participate. "But sanctity is not the same thing as philosophy, and in describing sanctity, details matter." "In Defence" 168.

⁵⁴¹ Thomas Nevin, Simone Weil: Portrait of a Self-Exiled Jew (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1991) x. Cf. Weil, Waiting 100.

⁵⁴² Pétrement 440-41.

⁵⁴³ Grant, "In Defence" 167, 170.

⁵⁴⁴ The critiques reviewed below are not exhaustive, but representative of the issues which have been found troubling in Weil's character. There are also of course sympathetic feminist readings of Weil. See Mona Ozouf, "Simone ou l'ascétisme," Les Mots des Femmes: Essai sur la Singularité Française (Paris: Fayard, 1995) 263-91.

⁵⁴⁵ In a later essay, Loades tries to understand Weil's participation in the Greek tragic tradition exemplified by Sophocles' Antigone. "Simone Weil and Antigone: innocence and affliction," Philosophy ed. Bell, 277-294.

⁵⁴⁶ Ann Loades, Searching for Lost Coins: Explorations in Christianity and Feminism (Allison Park, Penn.: Pickwick, 1988) 41.

⁵⁴⁷ Loades, Searching 44.

⁵⁴⁸ Loades, Searching 44.

⁵⁴⁹ Loades, Searching 50, 46.

⁵⁵⁰ Loades, Searching 46-47.

⁵⁵¹ Loades, Searching 47.

⁵⁵² Loades, Searching 53.

⁵⁵³ Loades, Searching 57.

⁵⁵⁴ Loades, Searching 53.

⁵⁵⁵ Of interest is the conversation reported by Maurice Schumann between Simone Weil and Jean Cavailles, who was himself sent undercover into France.

"Presentation de Simone Weil," philosophe, historienne ed. Kahn, 23-24.

⁵⁵⁶ Weil, Seventy Letters 177.

⁵⁵⁷ Weil, Seventy Letters 177-78.

⁵⁵⁸ Weil, Seventy Letters 178.

⁵⁵⁹ Judith Gregory, "A Letter to Simone Weil," Cross Currents 40 (Fall 1990) : 370.

⁵⁶⁰ Gregory 374. Florence Griffith-Joyner who was born in Watts, a suburb of Los Angeles, died in September of 1998.

⁵⁶¹ Gregory 374.

⁵⁶² Gregory 375.

⁵⁶³ Gregory 375.

⁵⁶⁴ Gregory 375.

⁵⁶⁵ Gregory 380.

⁵⁶⁶ Gregory 383.

⁵⁶⁷ Gregory 379.

⁵⁶⁸ Gregory 381.

⁵⁶⁹ Dietz 5.

⁵⁷⁰ Dietz 6.

⁵⁷¹ Dietz 6.

⁵⁷² Dietz 7.

⁵⁷³ Dietz 9.

⁵⁷⁴ Dietz 12.

⁵⁷⁵ Dietz 11.

⁵⁷⁶ Dietz 12.

⁵⁷⁷ Dietz 13.

⁵⁷⁸ Dietz 14.

⁵⁷⁹ Weil, Waiting 64. Dietz 21-22.

⁵⁸⁰ Weil, Waiting 64.

⁵⁸¹ Dietz 22.

⁵⁸² Dietz 23.

⁵⁸³ Rachel Feldhay Brenner, Writing as Resistance: Four Women Confronting the Holocaust: Edith Stein, Simone Weil, Anne Frank, Etty Hillesum (University Park, Penn., Pennsylvania State UP, 1997) 176.

⁵⁸⁴ Brenner, 178.

⁵⁸⁵ Brenner 179.

⁵⁸⁶ Brenner 181.

⁵⁸⁷ Brenner 161, 164, 87-88.

⁵⁸⁸ Brenner 85.

⁵⁸⁹ Brenner 85.

⁵⁹⁰ Brenner 37.

⁵⁹¹ Brenner 45.

⁵⁹² Brenner 87.

⁵⁹³ Brenner 89.

⁵⁹⁴ Brenner 91.

⁵⁹⁵ Brenner 91.

⁵⁹⁶ Weil, Notebooks 333; Oeuvres Complètes 6.2: 457. Cf. Brenner 92, note 53. The reference in Brenner to First and Last Notebooks, 333 is mistaken.

⁵⁹⁷ Brenner 91-92.

⁵⁹⁸ Weil, Notebooks 333; Oeuvres Complètes 6.2: 457.

⁵⁹⁹ Brenner, 92.

⁶⁰⁰ Brenner 94. Cf. Ozouf 273, 290. Little, "Simone Weil's Concept of Decreation" Philosophy ed. Bell, 47-48. Springsted, Suffering of Love 81.

⁶⁰¹ Brenner 161.

⁶⁰² Brenner 161.

⁶⁰³ Brenner 161-62. The author shows no indication of recognizing the cutting irony with which Weil addresses Xavier Vallat, Commissioner of Jewish Affairs under the Petain regime. Weil writes to Vallat that the grape harvester, for whom she has worked for the past four weeks, has given her the highest praise in telling her that she is worthy to marry a farmer. She then comments ironically to Vallat: "He does not know, it is true, that simply because of my name I have an original defect that it would be inhuman for me to transmit to children." (Quoted in Pétrement, 444). For a discussion of Weil's use of irony as well as another example of it directed to Pétain himself by lawyer Pierre Masse, see Robert Chenavier, "Simone Weil, 'La Haine Juive de Soi'?" CSW 14.4 (décembre 1991) : 307-08.

⁶⁰⁴ "Pour en finir avec le masochisme de Simone Weil," CSW 11:1 (mars 1988) : 57-64. CSW 11.2 (juin 1988) 155-164. For indications of a masochism in Weil see Brenner 45, 48, 87. Loades' essay also implies that Weil's language, especially her "example of prayer," is indicative of masochism. 48-49.

⁶⁰⁵ Fourneyron, CSW 11.1 (mars 1988) 59, 61, 64.

⁶⁰⁶ Weil, On Science 184.

⁶⁰⁷ Fourneyron, CSW 11:2 (juin 1988) 155.

⁶⁰⁸ Weil, Notebooks 483-84 (emphasis added).

⁶⁰⁹ Fourneyron, CSW 11.2 (juin 1988) 156.

⁶¹⁰ Weil, Notebooks 596.

⁶¹¹ Loades, on her reading Rudolph Bell's Holy Anorexia, classifies Weil as a "holy" anorexic. 43, 44, 51. But she also calls it an "illness" and maintains that Weil inflicted on herself the kind of death, by starvation, that she would have come to in a concentration camp. 53, 49. See also Michelle Murray, Interpretations ed. White, 50. Another author, Val Webb, goes so far as to state that Weil "was an anorexic whose struggle with the disease shaped her philosophical reflection." In "Simone Weil: Theologian and Mystic-Anorexic Woman," Daughters of Sarah, (Fall 1993) 37.

⁶¹² Pétrement, 81, 420, 490, 517, 536. Her death certificate read in part: "cardiac failure due to myocardial degeneration of the heart muscles due to starvation and pulmonary tuberculosis" 537.

⁶¹³ Gateway 159.

⁶¹⁴ Pétrement, 7.

⁶¹⁵ Lucy Bregman, "The Barren Fig Tree: Simone Weil and the Problem of Feminine Identity," Mysticism, Nihilism, eds., Idinopulos and Zadovsky Knopp, 102.

⁶¹⁶ Judith Van Herik, "Looking, Eating and Waiting in Simone Weil," Mysticism, Nihilism eds., Idinopulos and Zadovsky Knopp, 57-90.

⁶¹⁷ Van Herik 81.

⁶¹⁸ Van Herik 82.

⁶¹⁹ Van Herik 82. It is to be noted that the professional literature Van Herik cites is limited.

⁶²⁰ Van Herik 83.

⁶²¹ Van Herik 84.

⁶²² Van Herik 84. There are other feminist readers of Weil who appreciate her struggle with her identity, including her feminine and Jewish identity, and see in her a unique reappropriation of it through her intense interaction with the world she inhabited. Entitling her chapter on Weil, "Suffering the World," Andrea Nye declares: "Always her thought was wide-ranging and incarnate, physically rooted in activities and experiences: in labour, in political activism, in spiritual life, in her work for the Free French. Always her thought was meant to do something in the world." Philosophia: the Thought of Rosa Luxemburg, Simone Weil, and Hannah Arendt (New York: Routledge, 1994) 58. Mona Ozouf, considers that early in her life Weil embarked on a project of self-deprivation moving from the material, to the social, and even spiritual level, which challenged her bourgeoisie upbringing. (Ozouf 269). At the same time she sees in Weil a recognition of the inherent danger of a self-directed asceticism entered into through pride or fed by resentment. She maintains that Weil's self-renunciation is not a proof of endurance or self-conquest, but above all the search for an authentic knowledge of the human condition. As she words it: "Se démurer n'est donc pas seulement dolorisme ni goût pervers du néant, mais effort pour mieux voir la vérité des choses: non ce qu'elles sont pour nous, mais ce qu'elles sont en elles-mêmes." (Ozouf 271). Moreover, she sees in the contradictions of Weil's lived life—from sitting down in the midst of a standing crowd fervently singing *L'Internationale*, to the graduate in philosophy screwing in bolts, to an uprooted person who writes a book on rootedness—an exceptional liberty. (Ozouf 279). See also Sonia Kovitz, "Simone Weil's dark Night of the Soul," The Midwest Quarterly 33.3 (Spring 1992) : 261-275. Kovitz does not approach Weil from an explicitly feminist perspective, but deals with Weil's creative struggle with her own sense of unworthiness. Kovitz tries to relate this struggle to the mystical tradition of the "dark night" in which the old dies without the assurance that anything new will emerge, forcing one to wait. What dies is the old self "filled with useless feeling of inferiority" and what emerges is not simply greater self-knowledge but the presence or self-revelation of God. (Kovitz 274-75).

⁶²³ Pétrement 27. Cf. Ozouf 285.

⁶²⁴ Gateway 15.

⁶²⁵ Weil, Seventy Letters 139. Cf. Waiting 74.

⁶²⁶ Weil, Waiting 100.

⁶²⁷ Weil, Seventy Letters 140. Cf. Waiting 64.

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- ⁶²⁸ Weil, Seventy Letters 140.
- ⁶²⁹ Weil, Seventy Letters 48.
- ⁶³⁰ Weil, First and Last Notebooks 314. Cf. Lk. 7:37.
- ⁶³¹ Weil, Seventy Letters 141.
- ⁶³² Weil, Seventy Letters 142. Bregman 110.
- ⁶³³ Weil, Waiting 88.
- ⁶³⁴ Weil, Waiting 99.
- ⁶³⁵ Weil, Waiting 98. "They liked only victors and reconstructors; they despised the sick, the dying, lost causes." Paul Nizan, Conspiracy, quoted in Moulakis 47.
- ⁶³⁶ Weil, Waiting 99.
- ⁶³⁷ Brenner, 46-48. Cf. Bregman 100-01.
- ⁶³⁸ Leslie A. Fiedler, To the Gentiles (New York: Stein and Day, 1972) 31.
- ⁶³⁹ Weil, Waiting 83.
- ⁶⁴⁰ Weil, Notebooks 345; Oeuvres Complètes 6.2: 469.
- ⁶⁴¹ Weil, Notebooks 345; Oeuvres Complètes 6.2: 470.
- ⁶⁴² Cf. Weil, Intimations 195-96.
- ⁶⁴³ Weil, Waiting 91.
- ⁶⁴⁴ Weil, Seventy Letters 156.
- ⁶⁴⁵ Abraham J. Heschel, The Prophets, vol. 1 (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1969) 10.
- Men struck by the madness of love need to see the faculty of free consent spreading throughout this world, in all forms of human life, for all human beings.
- What can it matter to them? Think reasonable men. But it is not their fault, poor wretches. They are mad. Their stomach is upset. They hunger and thirst for justice.
- Weil, "Are We Struggling for Justice?" 4-5.
- ⁶⁴⁶ Heschel, 9.
- ⁶⁴⁷ Weil, On Science 184.

⁶⁴⁸ Gregory, 377.

⁶⁴⁹ Gregory 370.

⁶⁵⁰ Gregory 378.

⁶⁵¹ Sophocles Antigone, ed. and trans., Hugh Lloyd-Jones, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1994) 9, 11. Cf. Brenner 160-61. Loades, Searching 45. Katherine Brueck, The Redemption of Tragedy: The Literary Vision of Simone Weil (Albany: SUNY, 1995) Brueck distinguishes between classical and Hegelian interpretations of Antigone's confrontation with Creon, in which the former interpretation, in keeping with Sophocles' own view, distinguishes "right vs. wrong" rather than Hegel's "right vs. right." 79. Brueck tries to show how Weil remains faithful to the classical interpretation. 76-93.

⁶⁵² Weil, Intimations 20.

⁶⁵³ Weil, Intimations 20.

⁶⁵⁴ Weil, Intimations 21.

⁶⁵⁵ Weil, Intimations 21.

⁶⁵⁶ Weil, Intimations 21.

⁶⁵⁷ Weil, Intimations 22.

⁶⁵⁸ Weil, Intimations 22.

⁶⁵⁹ Weil, Intimations 19.

⁶⁶⁰ Weil, Intimations 19.

⁶⁶¹ Brueck 91.

⁶⁶² It would be of interest to contrast Weil's reading of Antigone's role, with the biblical characterization of Deutero-Isaiah's suffering servant, as the identity of a people rather than of a single individual.

⁶⁶³ Quoted by Weil, Intimations 12.

⁶⁶⁴ Weil, Intimations 17.

⁶⁶⁵ Weil, First and Last Notebooks 33.

⁶⁶⁶ Weil, Seventy Letters 22.

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- ⁶⁶⁷ Weil, Oppression and Liberty ("Fragments," London 1943) 159.
- ⁶⁶⁸ William Shakespeare, "The tragedy of King Lear," The Complete Works eds. Stanley Wells et. al. (Toronto: Clarendon, 1991) 3.4.
- ⁶⁶⁹ Weil, Seventy Letters 104. For a study of Weil's appropriation of Shakespeare's King Lear, see Martin Andic, "Simone Weil and Shakespeare's Fools," Beauty eds. Dunaway and Springsted, 197-215. See also Ginger Crabb, "Shakespeare's King Lear: Gaining a Soul," Living Pulpit 4.2 : 23.
- ⁶⁷⁰ Weil, Notebooks 415.
- ⁶⁷¹ Weil, Intimations 182.
- ⁶⁷² Bruce Chilton, "Suffering: in the Light of the Gospel," Living Pulpit 4.2 : 25.
- ⁶⁷³ Chilton, 25.
- ⁶⁷⁴ Weil, Seventy Letters 136.
- ⁶⁷⁵ Weil, On Science 194-95.
- ⁶⁷⁶ Weil, On Science 172.
- ⁶⁷⁷ Weil, On Science 172.
- ⁶⁷⁸ Weil, On Science 183.
- ⁶⁷⁹ Springsted, Suffering of Love 93.
- ⁶⁸⁰ Gregory 370.
- ⁶⁸¹ Bregman 96.
- ⁶⁸² Bregman 95.
- ⁶⁸³ Bregman 102.
- ⁶⁸⁴ Bregman, 103.
- ⁶⁸⁵ Bregman, 104.
- ⁶⁸⁶ Bregman 104.
- ⁶⁸⁷ Weil, Waiting 165, 199.
- ⁶⁸⁸ Weil, Waiting 199-200.

⁶⁸⁹ Pétrement 27.

⁶⁹⁰ Fiori 309.

⁶⁹¹ Fiori 301.

⁶⁹² Weil, Gravity and Grace 29. Weil offers a corollary of this image in the intellectual sphere. "The difference between more or less intelligent men is like the difference between criminals condemned to life imprisonment in smaller or larger cells. The intelligent man who is proud of his intelligence is like a condemned man who is proud of his large cell." Selected Essays 26.

⁶⁹³ Lucy Bregman reminds us that today we are not in danger of denying our bodies, "its concerns reign in the softcore pornography of much medical and beauty advice in women's magazines . . . and the bombardment by advertisers who insist that we are the image we see in the mirror." 113. See also Jeffrey C. Eaton, "Simone Weil and Feminist Spirituality," Journal of the American Academy of Religion, 54.4 (1986) : 695. Eaton tries to show how Weil's elaboration of the implicit love of God through the love of the beauty of the world, the neighbour, religious practices, and friendship, provides valuable material "for the construction of a spirituality that is both feminist and Christian." 703.

⁶⁹⁴ We will not be dealing here with Weil's specific critique of the Old Testament. There are several important papers which have engaged this issue. Notably David Minton (formerly David Raper), "La critique weilienne de la conception de dieu dans l' Ancien Testament," CSW (juin 1980) 3.2 : 111-124. Gilbert Khan, "Limites et raisons du refus de l'Ancien Testament par Simone Weil," CSW (juin 1980) 3.2 : 98-110. Jean Riaud, "Simone Weil et l'Ancien Testament," CSW (juin 1980) 3.2 : 75-97. A specifically Jewish response to Weil's ignorance of Torah is offered by Emmanuel Levinas, "Simone Weil Against the Bible," and "Loving the Torah More Than God," Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism, trans. Sean Hand (London: Athlone, 1990) 133-145. On his part Martin Buber effectively challenges Weil's stereotype of the God of Israel as "the deification of the nation" The Writings of Martin Buber, ed. Will Herberg (New York: Meridian, 1974) 309. Against this stereotype Buber emphasizes that "The religious character of the people consists emphatically in that something different is intended for it from what it is now, that it is destined for something different—that it should become true people, the 'people of God.'" 310. Indeed, according to Buber, to make the people themselves into an idol is a betrayal of the religion of Israel because the call directed to this people is a critical one.

⁶⁹⁵ George Steiner, "Sainte Simone: The Jewish Basis of Simone Weil's *Via Negativa* to the Philosophic Peaks" rev. of Simone Weil's Philosophy of Culture: Readings Towards a Divine Humanity, ed. Richard Bell Times Literary Supplement 4 June 1993 : 3.

⁶⁹⁶ The tradition of Jerusalem (as compared to that of Athens) has been highlighted for me by Professor Douglas John Hall, who reminds us that especially in the prophetic tradition of the Hebrew scriptures, though not only there, the divine is known and understood within the creature/Creator relationship. In other words, ethics—what we do in the world and with the world matters. The human goal, therefore, is not to attempt a transcendence of history in seeking for something better.

⁶⁹⁷ Pétrement 3.

⁶⁹⁸ Thomas Nevin indicates that at the time the Minister of Public Education was indeed Jerome Carcopino. Portrait of a Self-Exiled Jew 239.

⁶⁹⁹ Pétrement 391.

⁷⁰⁰ Pétrement 391-92.

⁷⁰¹ Pétrement 392.

⁷⁰² Pétrement 444.

⁷⁰³ Quoted in Robert Chenavier, "Simone Weil, << La haine Juive de soi >> ?" CSW 14:4 (December 1991) 294.

⁷⁰⁴ Weil, Waiting 94.

⁷⁰⁵ Weil, Waiting 94.

⁷⁰⁶ Weil, Waiting 69.

⁷⁰⁷ Nevin 239.

⁷⁰⁸ Wladimir Rabi, "La conception weilienne de la Creation. Rencontre avec la Kabbale juive," ed. Kahn, 154.

⁷⁰⁹ Rabi 154.

⁷¹⁰ Rabi 154.

⁷¹¹ Jacob Katz, From Prejudice to Destruction: Anti-Semitism, 1700-1933 (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1980) 299.

⁷¹² Katz 300.

⁷¹³ Katz 300.

⁷¹⁴ Katz 300.

⁷¹⁵ Weil, Oeuvres Complètes 2.3: 82-83. Cf. Seventy Letters 95, 99.

⁷¹⁶ Weil, Oeuvres Complètes 2.2: 406.

⁷¹⁷ Quoted in Coles 58.

⁷¹⁸ Quoted in Chenavier 309.

⁷¹⁹ Chenavier 311. Cf. Weil, Seventy Letters 178.

⁷²⁰ Quoted in Richard H. Bell, Simone Weil: The Way of Justice as Compassion (Boulder: Rowman and Littlefield, 1989) 177.

⁷²¹ Quoted in Bell 178.

⁷²² Weil, Seventy Letters 137-38.

⁷²³ Brenner 94.

⁷²⁴ Paul Giniewski, Simone Weil ou la haine de soi (Paris: Berg, 1978) 282, 290.

⁷²⁵ Giniewski, especially ch.15, 281-298.

⁷²⁶ Giniewski 297, 331 ff., 339.

⁷²⁷ Rabi 142.

⁷²⁸ Rabi 144.

⁷²⁹ Rabi 145.

⁷³⁰ Rabi 152.

⁷³¹ Rabi 153.

⁷³² Chenavier 326.

⁷³³ Richard H. Bell, "Simone Weil and Post-Holocaust Judaism," CSW (mars 1997) 20.1 : 53.

⁷³⁴ Brenner expounds on Jean Amery's definition of a "catastrophe Jew." 72.

⁷³⁵ The fuller quotation reads: "solidarity in the face of threat is all that links me with *my* Jewish contemporaries, the believers as well as the non-believers, the national-minded as well as those ready to assimilate." Jean Amery, At the Mind's Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor of Auschwitz and Its Realities, trans. Sidney

Rosenfeld and Stella P. Rosenfeld (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1980), quoted in Brenner 72.

⁷³⁶ Weil, Seventy Letters 178.

APPENDIX REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

1. Works by Simone Weil

Simone Weil did not publish a single book. Pieces of her writing published during her lifetime remained, on the whole, in relatively obscure newspapers and journals. These included trade union publications, revolutionary syndicalist journals, and literary magazines. Her written work is parcelled out in articles, essays, a book length study of what she considered essential for a free France following the war, letters, a few poems, an unfinished play, and several volumes of personal notebooks. The entire corpus includes some sixteen volumes, which is considerable in view of the fact that she died at the age of thirty-four, and spent a good deal of her life involved in political activity, teaching, and physical labour.

Publication of her work since her death has taken place under the editorship of others, initially those close to her such as Gustave Thibon who selected and edited extracts from some of the notebooks Weil left with him in April of 1942, published under the title La Pesanteur et la grace (1947), translated into English as Gravity and Grace (1952), and Father Perrin who published certain important letters Weil had sent to him along with a few remarkable essays in what is probably the best known volume of her writing entitled: Attente de Dieu (1950), translated into English as Waiting for God (1951). These texts presented a provocative aspect of her religious thought during the latter part of her life, but offered little of her analysis of ancient Greek texts, eastern religions, science, and politics.

Later on her full notebooks (Cahiers, 1951, 1953, 1956) which are the

immediate expression of her experience and thought, were edited in very much the same way that she wrote them. In English two volumes of her Notebooks (1956), translated by Arthur Wills, cover the period of her life in France from 1939 to 1942. La Connaissance surnaturelle (1950), translated into English as First and Last Notebooks (1970) by Richard Rees, is a key source of her thinking in the last period of her life spent in New York and London between 1942 and 1943. A collection of her correspondence offering valuable insight into her personality and thought, also edited and translated by Rees, is entitled: Seventy Letters (1965). Rees himself played a key role in the initial presentation of Weil's work in English.

Apart from the notebooks, Weil's writing may be classified into two main categories: her sociopolitical thought and her philosophical-religious thought. Authors such as Peter Winch, Simone Weil: "the Just Balance", have shown that there is certainly development from the one to the other, but more importantly there is continuity in the interests she shows about certain specific problems which she does not tire from engaging in different ways. Under the heading of sociopolitical writing may be placed Oppression et liberté (1953), Oppression and Liberty (1958), which includes two significant essays, one of which is an incisive appreciation and uncompromising critique of Marxism, and the other an attempt to understand the causes of social oppression which arise within societies that are future oriented (which conceive of themselves as progressing toward a fixed goal). The only book length study Weil produced, entitled L'Enracinement (1949), The Need for Roots (1952), was composed as a public document. It was written initially as a report for

the Free French Forces in London outlining certain key principles for the organization of French society following the war. Being the last major work she composed, shortly before her death, it is an important contrast to Oppression and Liberty. The key theme is uprootedness, or alienation, within the individual and society; a reality Weil understood after her factory experience. In this volume she emphasises, in contrast to the autonomous acting self, the need for roots within a community which is itself nourished by something more ultimate than itself. A very important prolegomenon to this work is the essay entitled "Human Personality," in which Weil maintains that what is sacred in every human being, what any just society must cherish and protect, is the indomitable longing for the good. This essay is contained in a set entitled Selected Essays (1962), also edited and translated by Richard Rees.

Under the heading of philosophical-religious writing (apart from the aforementioned editions by Thibon and Perrin) may be placed the collections entitled La Source Grecque (Gallimard, 1952), and Les Intuitions Pré-chrétiennes (Colombe, 1951), edited and translated in English by Elisabeth Chase Geissbuhler under the title: Intimations of Christianity Among the Ancient Greeks (1957). Here Weil ranges through Plato, Homer, the tragedians, Pythagorean fragments, as well as Greek mathematics. What holds these writings together is her appreciation of certain themes she considers common with the spirit of the gospels, key among them being the manifestation of the divine not as power but as love. Another Rees edition of her work entitled: On Science, Necessity, and the Love of God (1968), contains a key text on affliction and the love of God, as well as reflections on Greek and classical

science. A theme running through this selection is the appreciation of the natural order, or sensible phenomena, as an image of the good, and therefore an object of love. Finally, her "Lettre à un religieux" (1951), "Letter to a Priest" (1953), written to a catholic prelate in New York, deals directly with Weil's personal concerns about baptism, her reservations about membership in the Roman Catholic Church, and her critical preoccupation with the Old Testament.

The aforementioned headings do not cover all that Weil has written, nor all of the English collections. A good summary of the publication history of Weil's work to 1980, as well as English translations of it, with a list of what he considers some of the better work on Weil, is offered by George Abbott White, "Simone Weil's Bibliography: Some Reflections on Publishing and Criticism." Simone Weil: Interpretations of a Life. Ed. George Abbott White. Amherst: Massachusetts UP, 1981. 181-194. An annotated bibliography of Weil's work in English translation can be found in: Springsted, Eric O. "The Works of Simone Weil." Theology Today 38 (1981-82): 389-92. A complete bibliography of all of Weil's works and secondary works has been compiled by Little, Patricia J. Simone Weil: A Bibliography (London: Cutler and Grant, 1973. A bibliography supplement no. 1, 1979). A less thorough but more recent bibliography is, Nordquist, Joan. Simone Weil: A Bibliography. Santa Cruz: Reference and Research Services, 1995.

Several hitherto untranslated pieces by Weil have appeared after 1986, they are as follows:

1987-

Formative Writings: 1929-1941. Ed. and trans. Dorothy Tuck McFarland and Wilhelmina Van Ness. Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1987.

This is one of the latest translations of new material in English. It includes some valuable material that is necessary for a fuller assessment of Weil's entire work. Three key texts include: "Science and Perception in Descartes," Weil's dissertation for the ENS; "The situation in Germany," a set of articles evincing a sharp and perceptive assessment of Hitler's rise to power in 1932; and "Factory Journal" containing Weil's almost daily reflection and grappling with the experience of working on the factory floor.

1987

"Are We Struggling for Justice?" Trans. Marina Barabas. Philosophical Investigations 10.1 (January 1987) : 1-10.

"The Legitimacy of the Provisional Government." Trans. Peter Winch. Philosophical Investigations 10.2 (April 1987) : 87-98.

1990

"Essay on the Notion of Reading." Trans. Rebecca Fine Rose and Timothy Tessin, Philosophical Investigations, 13.4 (October 1990): 297-303.

Presently, Gallimard is in the process of publishing a critical edition of Weil's complete works under the general editorship of André Devaux, emeritus Professor of Philosophy at the Sorbonne, and Florence de Lucy, the custodian of the Weil manuscripts at the Bibliothèque Nationale. Six volumes (of a projected sixteen) have

been published to date, with the first one appearing in 1988. The value of this edition lies in its facilitation of the systematic study of this unsystematic writer, and in the mitigation of the problems which have been encountered because of the hitherto fragmented publication history of her work.

Finally a key source of information, and information exchange, is the Cahiers Simone Weil, a quarterly publication by *l'Association pour l'étude de la pensée de Simone Weil* founded in 1974.

2. Major Secondary Works on Simone Weil's Religious Thought

(in ascending order of publication date)

Vetö, Miklos. The Religious Metaphysics of Simone Weil. Trans. Joan Dargan. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994. Translation of La Métaphysique religieuse de Simone Weil. Paris: J. Vrin, 1971. Republished (Paris and Montreal: L'Harmattan, 1997).

This is the first volume to seriously examine Weil's religious thought as a consistent whole. It remains a standard guide to Weil's most important conceptions such as: decreation, attention and desire, energy, the void, affliction, beauty, time and the self, and non-acting action. Vetö considers Weil's thought within the framework of classical Western metaphysics.

Kahn, Gilbert. Ed. Simone Weil: Philosophe, historienne et mystique. Paris: Aubier Montaigne, 1978.

This is a collection of material from the French *Association pour l'étude de la pensée de Simone Weil*. As the title suggests it seeks to understand the great breadth of Weil's thought in particular detail. Of relevance are articles which deal with Weil's relationship to Christianity as well as Hinduism and Buddhism, and her problems with Judaism. It is an important reference also in that it brings together the best of Weil scholarship in France with an exchange of views between the participants, some of whom knew Weil personally.

Springsted, Eric O. Christus Mediator: Platonic Mediation in the Thought of Simone Weil. Chico: Scholars Press, 1983.

This is the second critical volume to appear on Weil's more specifically Christian thought. It is a detailed presentation of Weil's conception of mediation as a central element of her religious thought. The author traces in detail how Weil relates Plato's concept of the *metaxy* directly to Christ's cross; specifically how Weil finds in Christ's incarnation and passion the bridge between the necessary and the good, or the affliction of human beings and the perfection of God.

Idinopulos Thomas A. and Zadovsky Knopp, Josephine. Eds. Mysticism, Nihilism, Feminism: New Critical Essays on the Theology of Simone Weil. Johnson City, Tenn.: The Institute of Social Sciences and Arts, 1984.

This volume is not one which has received much attention in the secondary literature, probably because more studied critical engagements of Weil have been available. It

remains, however, one of the few which treats theological themes in her writing. Included is an essay by one of the editors (Thomas Idinopulos) entitled: "Necessity and Nihilism in Simone Weil's Vision of God." Idinopoulos sees in Weil a preoccupation with affliction, which even draws God in subjection to it, and a neglect of the New Testament affirmation of redemptive grace. In the same volume, Madeline Hamblin considers Weil's conception of God, Weil's "solution" to the problem of evil in positing a God who abandons creation to the working of necessity and human autonomy, as well as some similarities and clear differences between her thought and elements of Gnosticism. The value of this essay is, however, compromised by several serious misunderstandings of Weil's cosmology. Of greater interest in this same volume are two informative essays which deserve greater attention than they have thus far received. In "Looking, Eating, and Waiting in Simone Weil," Judith Van Herik points to a way of understanding the link between Weil's life and thought, through an examination of Weil's use of religious imagery. The other essay is by Lucy Bregman, entitled: "The Barren Fig Tree: Simone Weil and the Problem of Feminine Identity." Bregman offers a corrective on the one hand to an easy appropriation of Weil as a spiritual teacher, and on the other hand to a repudiation of her relevance to issues in contemporary feminist theology.

Springsted, Eric O. Simone Weil and the Suffering of Love. Cambridge: Cowley, 1986.

This is a volume intended for a wider, non-academic, audience. It points out Weil's relevance for personal spiritual reflection, and emphasizes the cost of coming into

contact with the truth. The author is able, on the most part, to consider the profundity of Weil's religious experience without diluting it.

Little, Patricia J. Simone Weil: Waiting on Truth. New York: St Martin's Press, 1988.

This is another biography of Weil. It is especially helpful in that the author demonstrates a command of Weil's texts, a discernment of what was central to her thought and the biographical context within which it arose. Two chapters especially relevant for Weil's theology are: "The Good and the Necessary" and "The *Via Negativa*."

Blum, Laurence, A. and Seidler, Victor, J. A Truer Liberty: Simone Weil and Marxism. New York: Routledge, 1989.

Although not dealing with her religious thought per se, these authors give some consideration to the relation between Weil's identification with the afflicted, and contemporary social movements in solidarity with the oppressed, such as feminist philosophical theory, liberation theology, the Polish Solidarity movement, and Catholic radicalism.

Bell, Richard, H. Ed. Simone Weil's Philosophy of Culture: Readings Toward a Divine Humanity. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993.

This collection is a collaborative effort which tries to add depth and critical understanding to specific areas of Weil's thought. Part one is of special interest in that it isolates some of the ideas covered by the *Vetö* volume and considers them in

greater depth. These include Weil's concept of decreation, the non-existence of God in the world, and Weil's use of contradiction.

Allen, Diogenes, and Springsted, Eric, O. Spirit, Nature and Community: Issues in the Thought of Simone Weil. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994.

This is a collection of essays which, in conversation with recent Weil scholarship, tries to clarify some of the confusion surrounding Weil's most basic but difficult concepts. It includes chapters on the nature of necessity, the notion of reading, Weil's understanding of affliction, and her conception of grace operating in the love of particulars. The authors also address interpretive issues as, for example, the reading of Weil's natural-supernatural distinction.

Brueck, Kathrine, T. The Redemption of Tragedy: the Literary Vision of Simone Weil. Albany: SUNY P, 1995.

The author proposes a supernaturalist alternative, or transcendent orientation, to contemporary post-structuralist theory. She tries to make a connection between tragedy, Christianity, and Platonic thought, arguing for Weil's appreciation of tragedy as an authentic witness to human suffering. On the whole, however, the author fails to grasp the inherent horror of affliction which inevitably plunges its victims into despair. For Brueck, the *deus ex machina* offering victory is always close behind those who suffer. Therefore, the reality of affliction, which truly threatens to annihilate the communion between the creature and the Creator, is not fully appreciated.

Richard H. Bell, Simone Weil: The Way of Justice as Compassion. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998.

This latest volume from Bell examines Weil's obligation-based (versus a liberal right's based) view of justice. Bell argues that in Weil's understanding, the key to compassion is its foundation in the "must" of love, rather in the "must" of power. The author tries to bring the spiritual framework of Weil's political thought into dialogue with contemporary moral and political thinking. The volume also includes a significant critique of Weil's lack of solidarity with the Jews during the Holocaust.

The most recent bibliographical information is available through the American Weil Society, a division of the French *Association pour l'étude de la pensée de Simone Weil*.

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