THE MADNESS OF LOVE

The Madness of Love:
Simone Weil's Kenotic Theology of Decreation

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the notion of "decreation" in the thought of the French philosopher and mystic, Simone Weil. Although the term is ambiguous and contested, I argue that the kenotic hymn of Philippians 2 is crucial to understanding the concept and the related vocabulary of renunciation, sacrifice, obedience, slavery, and selflessness in her thought. Weil presents an incisive critique of modernity and the Christian culture within it that calls into question sovereignty and power as divine attributes to be emulated, and that turns instead to the alternative model of relation found in the radical and "mad" love of Christ's self-emptying servanthood. I begin by examining Weil's mystical reading of three of Plato's dialogues (*Symposium, Republic, Phaedrus*), focusing on her interpretations of several images, speeches, and myths that clarify her understanding of the dynamics of love and force. I then turn to Marguerite Porete's 14th century dialogue, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, to suggest that Porete's account of the soul's annihilation in Love illuminates Weil's concept of decreation. Finally, I consider how Weil imagined decreation might be embodied in her own time through what she calls the "spirituality of work," which she presents as an alternative to the empire of force in her final text, *The Need for Roots.* Weil believed that given the right conditions, labour could become an ascetic practice through which the "I" is relinquished in a mutual servanthood that simultaneously "roots" one in the world. Through my analysis, I argue that the mystical, kenotic shape of Weil's theology offers an account of how radical self-effacement might inform a politics of resistance to contemporary expressions of power, force, and empire.

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ABBREVIATIONS

AD	*Attente de Dieu*
CS	*Connaissance Surnaturelle*
E	*L'enracinement: prelude à une declaration des devoirs envers l'être humain*
FLN	*First and Last Notebooks*
FW	*Formative Writings*
GG	*Gravity and Grace*
IC	*Intimations of Christianity among the Ancient Greeks*
LP W	*Late Philosophical Writings*
LP	*Letter to a Priest*
NR	*The Need for Roots: Prelude to a Declaration of Duties toward Mankind*
N	*Notebooks of Simone Weil*
OC	*Œuvres complètes* (tome, volume, page)
OL	*Oppression and Liberty*
SE	*Selected Essays: 1934-1943*
SL	*Seventy Letters*
SNL	*On Science, Necessity, and the Love of God*
WG	*Waiting for God*
WI	*War and the Iliad*

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I. INTRODUCTION

In a small cemetery in Ashford, Kent, a flat and unadorned gravestone is marked with the name of Simone Weil, with the simple dates of birth and death underneath. Born in Paris on February 3, 1909, she died in England on August 24, 1943, at the young age of 34. The death certificate indicates that her cause of death was "cardiac failure due to myocardial degeneration of the heart muscles due to starvation and pulmonary tuberculosis," followed by the judgment, "The deceased did kill and slay herself by refusing to eat whilst the balance of her mind was disturbed."[1] Three British newspapers headlined the news shortly after: "French Professor Starves Herself to Death" in Ashford's *Tuesday Express*, and "Death from Starvation: French Professor's Curious Sacrifice" in the *Kent Messenger* and the *South Eastern Gazette*. Speculations about her death and interpretations of its meaning thus began almost immediately and have not ceased since. Those who were with her in her final days, however, furnish a more complex story: that before arriving at the sanitorium, she had several digestive attacks that made it more difficult for her to eat, and, already exhausted, she grew weaker and weaker; that she did in fact try to eat and on some days succeeded in consuming some peaches, bread, and sherry; that she craved her mother's potato *purée*; and that in solidarity with her compatriots, she had been refusing to eat more than the rations distributed in occupied France.

[1] Simone Pétrement, *Simone Weil: A Life*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Pantheon, 1976): 537.

In some ways, the death of Simone Weil raises some of the thorniest aspects of her life. Born into a secular Jewish French family, she was buried as a foreigner in the Catholic section of a graveyard in England. Her death from disease, exhaustion and undernourishment ended a life afflicted by the chronic pain of severe headaches and a fascination with imagery of food, eating and hunger. Her sanity was and continues to be called into question. Moreover, the identification of her death as a sacrifice has led to a curiosity about what it was meant to accomplish, or what such a sacrifice *could* mean or accomplish. Finally, her death demonstrates how her self-abnegation was deeply integrated with a concern for those around her who were suffering. It is thus entangled with issues of religious conversion, sacrifice, and activism, all within the context of the most devastating period of modern European history, one which was itself full of sacrifice—of men at war and food rations—and death.

It has become a common practice in Weil scholarship to begin explorations of her thought from the perspective of her death. Though Weil was not the first philosopher to have lived a life of quotidian asceticism or died young, rarely have others' writings been seen through the lens of their death to such a degree. But Weil's death and her relationship to her own embodiment have been the objects of consternation, at times overshadowing her thought and influencing the way she has been read. Her philosophy of self-effacement and "decreation" has been especially scrutinized from this perspective. On the one hand, her death is assumed to be a willful act of self-destruction and the logical outcome of her desire for radical selflessness. On the other hand, it has been regarded as a sign of mental disturbance, or as the performance of an internalized ethic of women's self-sacrifice. In

some readings, the circumstances of her death are acknowledged but quickly cast aside, claiming it distracts from serious examination of her thought.

But these approaches neglect to linger with the difficult questions her death raises and that preoccupied Weil's whole life, questions about sacrifice and selflessness, about the cost of taking the ethical claim of one's neighbour seriously, and the demands philosophy or theology might make on one's life. Responses to her death also reveal much about our own values and interpretive practices, and especially the tendency to either pathologize or reduce the complexities of a life and death to its simplest terms, foreclosing or dismissing what is most difficult or troubling. By dismissing her life and death, do we not also fail to take seriously her thought and the risks it entailed? Does it reinforce the false bifurcation between thought and action that Weil's whole life cries out against? And does it simply allow us to avoid entering the agonies she struggled with? Her death disturbs because it gives rise to a fear of what her philosophy might ask of us.

Reception of Weil's thought has varied widely, from admiration to dismissal. Some readers seek to downplay her eccentricities, while others have attributed them to either brilliance or illness. Albert Camus claimed that she was "the only great spirit of our time." In his introduction to *The Need for Roots*, T.S. Eliot named her a saint. She appears as the inspiration behind the eccentric, masochistic character of Lazare in George Bataille's *Le Bleu du ciel*. And Charles de Gaulle identified her as simply "mad" ("*folle*"). I suggest that Charles de Gaulle's designation of madness was more perceptive than he realized, though not for the reasons that he would have put forward. Rather than dismissing Weil on this account, or reducing the term to its psychological sense, I wish to inquire into the nature of

this "madness" and suggest that hers was the madness of a radical love. I argue that Weil's radical politics were interwoven with a daring spirituality in the final years of her life, centred especially around her notion of "decreation" and the kenotic hymn of Philippians. Weil presented an incisive criticism of modernity and the contemporary Christian culture within it, focusing her critique on the worship of force that she witnessed both in the socio-political realm and within Christianity. In response, she articulated a vision of radical self-renunciation that became one of the most controversial but important aspects of her thought.

1. The Problem of Force

If we understand the radicality of Weil's philosophy as a form of "madness," I also suggest that she was responding to the many other types of madness around her—those of dehumanizing labour conditions for the working class (which Weil likened to a modern form of slavery), of social oppression, colonial violence, and the fall of Europe to Hitler's totalitarianism. She saw the problems of her time with a piercing clarity, contesting the worship of might and envisioning an alternative, but never resigning to the consolation of facile answers, idealized futures or utopic dreams. Her madness is that she chose religious passion over indifference, and in this she joins a lineage of others who have been deemed insane or heretical or hysterical because they refused to behave or think in the ways prescribed to them by conventional authorities. Such figures call into question the "sanity"

of their own circumstances and of the status quo, refusing and resisting the world they have been given.

The biographical details of Weil's life have been well traced, and most accounts have pointed especially to the wide range of activities and causes in which she was involved.[2] But one of the consistent and central threads that defines her life is a concern for the oppressed and a desire to understand the dynamics and mechanisms of power and oppression. She approached this from her own complicated position as a Jewish woman born into a cultured bourgeois family and educated in the male-dominated milieu of philosophy at the prestigious *École Normale Supérieure.* There are many commonly cited ways that she became involved in movements to oppose social oppression from early on: her participation in syndicalist networks (for which she was named the "Red Virgin"), the year of factory work she undertook to better understand the plight of the working class, and her brief enlistment with the anarcho-syndicalists who were fighting against Franco's fascism in Spain, though a clumsy accident with hot oil sent her home before she saw any combat. Her active involvement extended to the end of her life, and her involvement with *France libre*, the government-in-exile operating from London that was supporting the resistance in Nazi-occupied France.

But there were also smaller, more personal acts of refusal and solidarity and regular involvement in existing networks that are less often recounted, and which demonstrate the

[2] The foremost biography is Simone Pétrement's *Simone Weil: A Life*. Others include Jacques Cabaud, *Simone Weil: A Fellowship in Love* (London: Harvill, 1964); Thomas R. Nevin, *Simone Weil: Portrait of a Self-exiled Jew* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991); David McLellan, *Simone Weil, Utopian Pessimist* (Houndsmills: Macmillan, 1989); and Robert Coles, *Simone Weil: A Modern Pilgrimage* (Woodstock, VT: Skylight Paths, 2001).

ways in which she resisted the idolatry of power in daily life. While working as a high school teacher in Roanne, for example, she was already actively involved in the trade union movement—to the chagrin of her supervisors, who hoped that sending her to a small town would prevent her from stirring up trouble. In addition to her regular teaching duties, she would spend her weekends travelling three hours to the neighbouring town of Saint-Étienne to teach factory workers and miners. She wrote extensively in the service of the well-established labour movement of the area and for pacifist circles organized after the First World War. By 1936, she was criticizing French colonialism and the way it forcefully uprooted people from land and destroyed cultures.[3] And while she was living in Marseille, having fled south with her family after the Nazi occupation of Paris, she participated in the activities of the already established networks of resistance, distributing pamphlets in the streets and becoming involved with the *Cahier du sud*, an outlier of the Vichy regime that continued to publish Jewish writers and others who were hostile to the Vichy government.[4]

Weil approached the problem of oppression through diverse avenues, but also through a range of intellectual perspectives and literary sources. Early on, she was drawn to Marxism, which she eventually grew disillusioned with but never completely abandoned. Her later analysis of force and oppression became imbedded in her unconventional reading of Christian texts. But she also brought other sources to bear on her analysis, including classics of philosophy, literature, and theatre, as well as sources from other religious

[3] See especially the writings collected in J.P. Little's *Simone Weil on Colonialism; An Ethic of the Other* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003).

[4] Founded in 1925 by the French poet Jean Ballard, the *Cahier du sud* published eight pieces by Weil, and most notably, "The Iliad or the Poem of Force," in December 1940 and January 1941. Other notable contributors to the journal included Joë Bousquet, Paul Valéry, Gaston Berger, and Walter Benjamin.

traditions. She read everything from Plato and Greek tragedy to the Bhagavad-Gita with an eye to what they could illuminate about the operation of power. Perhaps most importantly, she drew from the *Iliad* for some of her most profound analysis, articulating the problem in terms of what she called "force." Force, according to Weil, is "that *x* that turns anybody who is subjected to it into a thing. Exercised to the limit, it turns man into a thing in the most literal sense: it makes a corpse out of him" (WI, 3). In its grossest form, it is the force that kills, but it is also that which holds the mere possibility of killing, rendering a person "into a stone" (WI, 4-5), a "thing" that has lost its inner life, or a slave (WI, 10).

As several scholars have noted, force is a term that Weil employs in several ways and whose meaning changes slightly over the course of her life, ranging from the material or physical processes of physics to social and psychic conditions.[5] The most important insight from her reading of the *Iliad*, however, is that force entails a race for power that enslaves everyone, both strong and weak alike. It is not only the vanquished or oppressed who are enslaved to force, that is, but conquerors as well. For Weil, the *Iliad*'s virtue lies in its depiction—approached with "undiluted bitterness"—of both sides as subject to force; victors and vanquished are brought before the reader indiscriminately, the one briefly appearing as the hero only to be reversed the next day (WI, 16, 30). Any appearance of

[5] Jane Doering's *Simone Weil and the Spectre of Self-Perpetuating Force* remains the most comprehensive examination of force in Weil's thought. Doering charts Weil's use of the term and the ways its meaning shifted slightly throughout her life. Doering, *Simone Weil and the Spectre of Self-Perpetuating Force* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame Univeristy Press, 2010). See also D.K. Levy's "What is *la force* in Simone Weil's *Iliad*?", in which Levy explains some of the nuances of the French term: "In French, 'la force' has a connotation of strength and could readily be translated as 'might,' while in contemporary English, 'might' and 'force' are unfamiliar synonyms. Translating 'la force' as 'force' is not mistaken, but it may put one too much in mind of military or scientific senses of the word". Levy, "What is *la force* in Simone Weil's *Iliad*?", *Philosophical Investigations* 43:1-2 (2020): 21-22.

victory and mastery is only an illusion, since "force is as pitiless to the man who possesses it, or thinks he does, as it is to his victims; the second it crushes, the first it intoxicates. The truth is nobody really possesses it" (WI, 11). Rather, one becomes possessed *by* it. In Weil's reading, the epic demonstrates how the human race is not divided up into slaves, suppliants, and the conquered on the one hand and chiefs and conquerors on the other. There is not a single person who does not at some point have to bow his neck to the sovereignty of force (WI, 11).

This is not to suggest that those who wield force and those who are oppressed by it suffer in the same way. She experienced through factory work that this could not be true. But she also came to see force as not simply the product of a social, economic, or political system. What Weil is pointing to is a pervasive desire for might that subsumes and deforms everyone. She insists that there is a universal desire to possess force; even those who do not yet have it aspire to acquire it and use it over others. The problem she articulates is not how to eliminate force, then, which she understood to be impossible. Rather, what Weil calls for is a closer examination of the ways that each of us participate in using it over others, and most importantly, to re-examine it as the object of public and private worship.

The other important source frequently quoted by Weil in her reflections on force is a passage from Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*, the historical account of the twenty-seven-year war that led to the downfall of Athens. The passage is spoken by the Athenians to the Melians in Book 5, Ch. 17: "We believe as concerning the gods according to tradition, as we know as concerning men from unquestionable evidence, that each one always, through a necessity of nature, commands wherever he has the power to do so" (OL,

156). For Weil, this describes a fundamental human tendency to use all the power at one's command, which has much wider implications in that it affects the ways we relate to one another and inspires grand schemes to dominate others through war and empire. Given this reality, she asks, how might one resist the tendency to use might? How can the individual refuse might as the object of worship, and what would an alternative look like?

In direct opposition to Thucydides' words about might, Weil turned to the Incarnation in Christianity: "The reverse of this doctrine, with respect to the divinity, is the dogma of the Incarnation. 'Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God, but made himself of no reputation and took upon him the form of a servant…and became obedient unto death" (OL, 156). The kenotic hymn which she refers to here became central to her religious reflections and to the broader critique of might in her religious and political philosophy. The passage (Philippians 2: 5-8) presents the humble descent of Christ as a model for human relationships:

> In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:
>
> Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross.

This depiction of God—a God who relinquishes divinity and power, becoming a humble servant—calls into question sovereignty as a divine attribute to be emulated and depicts a dramatic reversal that Weil called attention to as an alternative model of relation.

2. Decreation and Kenosis

According to Weil's cruciform theology, the movement of renunciation in the kenotic hymn is not simply embodied in the Incarnation but is also the self-emptying movement of creation. She developed a novel account of the act of creation informed by the kenotic hymn: "Already before the Passion," she writes, "already by Creation, God empties himself of his divinity, abases himself, takes the form of a slave" (FLN, 70). God created the world through a movement of withdrawal so that other beings could exist, but it is a movement that can only be properly understood as a sign of the plenitude, not diminution, of God's excessive, even "mad" (N, 262) love for the world. Weil insists that God's withdrawal is not an indication of the world's evil quality or a denigration of the material, but a sign of God's love for it, a desire for it to exist. Moreover, this withdrawal introduces the possibility of relation between God and creatures. God withdraws so that we can love God, for "if we were exposed to the direct radiance of his love, without the protection of space, of time, and of matter, we should be evaporated like water in the sun" (GG, 78). This movement of descent is simultaneously present in the Incarnation and the Passion, but also in the Eucharist (FLN, 81), and is a movement that continues to unfold in the world as a drama in which human creatures are invited to participate.

Weil does not deny God's power, but she points to its relinquishment as what is most remarkable. The problem she identifies is that human beings have tended to aspire to accessing and possessing God's might. She sought to reveal the ways in which the tendency to use force arises from within the most intimate parts of the individual soul, tracing this

issue in the Genesis account of the fall but also finding it in other creation stories as well (notably Aristophanes mythic account in Plato's *Symposium*, as I elaborate in chapter 2). Weil operated with an assumption that human nature is necessarily acquisitive and egotistical, and that fallen creatures live and act according to self-serving and misdirected desires.[6] She locates the source of the problem in the "I", the egotistical self, and its tendency to want to expand, to imagine itself as divine and powerful. "The soul, like a gas, tends to occupy the whole of the space left open to it," she writes (N, 198). For Weil, there is something inherently violent about this self, in that it relates to others in ways that seek to dominate, possess, and totalize, rather than allowing them to exist on their own terms. It is very much easier, she suggests, to "place oneself in imagination in the position of God the Creator than it is in that of Christ crucified" (N, 411). That is, the imagination tends to project an image of the self as sovereign power. But Weil offers a reminder of Christianity's rootedness in a story of God who became a suffering servant. Rather than emulating sovereignty and might, she argues that what is needed is giving up our imaginary divinity, rendering back the self to God in an act of self-renunciation. She coins the term "decreation" to describe the human process of self-emptying, of eliminating the "I" which expands and obstructs through renunciation and effacement.[7]

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[6] Weil's understanding of human nature is strongly connected to her cosmology, wherein God creates the world by withdrawing from it, giving space for others to exist. Human creatures are thus constituted by an emptiness and hunger for what is absent. Rather than accepting this void, they seek to fill it with all kinds of substitutes.

[7] Miklós Vetö has noted that the term was first used by Péguy but in a diametrically opposite sense. See "Note conjointe sur M. Descartes et la Philosophie Cartésienne" in *Oeuvres en prose* (Paris: Pléiade, 1961), quoted in Veto, *The Religious Metaphysics of Simone Weil*, trans. Joan Dargan (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 11.

Decreation is one of Weil's most well-known concepts and it has been treated by a number of scholars.[8] It is also one of the most contested and controversial aspects of her thought. Unlike the widespread admiration for her concept of "attention," decreation is fraught. The term only ever appears in her notebooks where she mentions it briefly, never explicitly defining it. As readers, we are left to interpret the concept by means of brief intimations. For example, in one passage she writes: "God has created a finite being, which says 'I,' which is unable to love God. Through the action of grace the 'I' little by little disappears, and God loves himself by way of the creature, which empties itself, becomes nothing. When it has disappeared…he goes on creating more creatures and helping them to de-create themselves" (N, 331). Later in her notebooks, she refers to decreation in paradoxical terms, describing it as the "*annihilation in God* which confers the *fulness of being* upon the creature so annihilated" (N, 471, italics added). Crucially, such annihilation is a matter of consent and offering (N, 337), and is the opposite of destruction (N, 342). Moreover, she suggests that ultimately it is not something that we accomplish in ourselves at all; rather, it happens in spite of the self. As the first passage suggests, it is "through the action of grace." She spells this out again in one of the final passages in which she uses the term: "And then finally, with our consent, [God] will de-create us" (N, 545).

[8] The first to comment extensively on the term was Miklós Vetö, who situates it at the heart of Weil's religious metaphysics. J.P. Little also outlines the concept more extensively in "Simone Weil's concept of decreation," in *Simone Weil's Philosophy of Culture: Readings toward a Divine Humanity*, ed. Richard H. Bell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993). See also A. Rebecca Rozelle-Stone and Lucian Stone, *Simone Weil and Theology* (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2013), 80-85; and Ch. 5, "Grace and Decreation," in Lissa McCullough, *The Religious Philosophy of Simone Weil: An Introduction* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014).

The context in which Weil uses the term usually includes references to the Cross or Creation, and is thus embedded within her religious worldview/cosmology.[9] Along with other related statements about self-dispossession, renunciation, and annihilation, I argue it is therefore difficult to detach from its spiritual significance without also losing an important aspect of its meaning: that the radical selflessness it demands is an imitation of, and response to, Christ's self-emptying, but also his lifelong contestation of structures of power and domination recorded in the Gospels, reiterated in Paul's writings. While some commentators—such as Miklos Veto, Lissa McCullough, and A. Rebecca Rozelle-Stone and Lucian Stone—situate decreation within Weil's religious metaphysics, no extensive study of its relationship to the kenotic hymn exists in anglophone scholarship. The exception in French scholarship is Christine Hof's *Philosophie et kénose chez Simone Weil*, in which she identifies kenosis as a central and unifying theme in Weil's oeuvre. Hof systematically examines the passages in which Weil explicitly quotes the hymn, beginning when Weil first appears to have read the writings of Paul more comprehensively sometime in 1941, noting that Weil's first use of the term "decreation" appears only a few pages after her first citation of the hymn.[10] She then compares Weil's use of the term to interpretations by other theologians.[11] This dissertation builds on Hof's study by examining the ethical implications of the kenotic hymn with particular attention to Weil's concept of decreation.

[9] It is noteworthy that Weil does not exclusively refer to the Christian God in the passages on de-creation; she also draws comparisons to the Hindu gods Krishna, Arjuna, and Shiva, drawing parallels across cultures, a method of reading and interpretation that I address in chapter 2.

[10] OC, VI.2, 302-303. See Christine Hof, *Philosophie et kénose chez Simone Weil, De l'amour du monde à l'*Imitation Christi (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2016), 49.

[11] In chapters 3 and 4, Hof compares Weil's references to the kenotic hymn to the theologies of Hans urs von Balthasar, Martin Luther, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

My approach departs from the two most recent book-length studies of decreation, which have similarly focused on ethics but which have attempted to disentangle decreation from its religious frame of reference. Yoon Sook Cha's *Decreation and the Ethical Bind* gives an excellent account of decreation in Weil's later thought by bringing the term into conversation with the continental tradition, including Emmanuel Levinas, Maurice Blanchot and Judith Butler.[12] Cha acknowledges the way Weil's notion of decreation is situated within a religious metaphysics, turning to Weil's understanding of Creation and Passion briefly in chapter 5, but she admits that a full examination of its religious meaning is beyond the scope of her study. More recently, Kathryn Lawson's *Ecological Ethics and the Philosophy of Simone Weil: Decreation for the Anthropocene* appropriates the term decreation for an environmental ethic, but similarly omits its Christian inflection, focusing more exclusively on Weil's reading of Plato.[13] Neither mention the crucial kenotic hymn as a reference point.

This bracketing and omission of the religious significance is perhaps not surprising, given that the religious aspects of Weil's thought have sometimes been regarded as the most challenging, especially her assertions about renunciation and self-effacement. Christianity, and especially the kenotic hymn, has been criticized as valorizing suffering and sacrifice, and Weil's more radical ideas have been attributed to her turn to Christianity. Scholars have therefore sometimes looked upon the writings from her final years with discomfort and reservations, focusing instead on her earlier texts or bracketing the religious from the

[12] Yoon Sook Cha, *Decreation and the Ethical Bind* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017).
[13] Kathryn Lawson, *Ecological Ethics and the Philosophy of Simone Weil: Decreation for the Anthropocene* (New York: Routledge, 2024).

political. Others have construed her spirituality as much less radical than it in fact was, domesticating her wilder reflections and turning them into more commonplace statements about faith and spirituality or secular "unselfing."[14] The less palatable elements are excised to produce a more reasonable and conventional Weil.

However, this disregards a significant aspect of Weil's thought and leads to some confusion about what decreation entails. One of the biggest issues that I have already alluded to is that decreation has been interpreted in light of Weil's very early death, which has been interpreted as a manifestation of a willful desire to eliminate the "I" to the point of self-destruction. But Weil was clear that decreation was not equivalent to destruction, suicide, or martyrdom and, as though anticipating this conflation, she insists that they must not be confused: "Destruction is the opposite extreme of de-creation. One must try to conceive this clearly" (N, 342). Later, in her New York notebooks, she specifies more clearly in a passage on sacrifice: "God's sacrifice is creation; man's sacrifice is destruction. But man has the right to destroy only what belongs to him; that is to say, not even his body, but solely and exclusively his will" (FLN, 212). Decreation is not something that is ultimately willed, but is instead a consented annihilation of the personal, possessive (and force-ful) will. Yet decreation is also not un-related to her philosophy of self-renunciation. A more nuanced account of the complexities surrounding her death in relation to decreation and self-lessness is required.

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[14] For example, Iris Murdoch, one of Weil's early admirers and interpreters, discusses "unselfing" and "attention" in this way. Reading Weil rekindled Murdoch's interest in Plato and shaped her reading of the dialogues, and in *Existentialists and Mystics*, she refers to Plato's *Phaedrus* and the way art and nature effects a process of "unselfing" in the face of the beautiful. Her appeal to Weil's idea of "attention" also wrests it away from Weil's religious inflection. Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Penguin, 1999).

A second source of criticism comes from feminist scholars who have rightly pointed to some of the darker implications of decreation, and the ways that sacrifice and renunciation have historically been demanded disproportionally of some (especially women and racialized minorities) over others.[15] Moreover, calls to relinquish agency and selfhood have been questioned given that a robust sense of self has been denied or only recently established. These are crucial concerns that I respond to briefly here in two ways. The first is related to my emphasis upon the unconventional religious significance of Weil's language. That Weil associates decreation and the kenotic hymn points to a model of one who relinquishes the power and divinity that they already possess, not one who is already in a condition of dispossession. One cannot be emptied of something that one does not have. And although her references to decreation are brief, she nevertheless resists any supposition that decreation could be imposed on anyone else by referring to its "ersatz" forms in a number of places: she insists that it is not the imposition of sorrow on anyone else (N, 266), nor is it the uprooting or destruction of others (N, 298). Weil makes it clear that decreation and self-renunciation is never a forced dispossession – her constant reiteration of the need for consent (which I elaborate in chapter 4) precludes such an interpretation.

Secondly, I suggest that we must understand Weil's concept of decreation within the context of her lifelong commitment to interrogating the dynamics of force and oppression,

[15] For example, Ann Loades draws attention to the elements in Weil's thought which she argues did Weil "irreparable harm," focusing especially on her emphasis on sacrifice. See Ann Loades, "Eucharistic Sacrifice: Simone Weil's Use of a Liturgical Metaphor," *Religion & Literature* 17, no. 2 (Summer 1985): 43-54). Jean Bethke Elshtain reads Weil as a world-denying gnostic, arguing that Weil denied the body and especially the procreative female body. See "The Vexation of Simone Weil," in *Power Trips and Other Journeys: Essays in Feminism as Civic Discourse* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 23.

whether in factory work or France's colonial projects. Although Weil never claimed to be a feminist, she was nevertheless concerned with how people and institutions—including the institution of the Church—used power to dominate over others, sometimes in covert ways.[16] By situating decreation within Weil's lifelong opposition to oppression, I suggest it must be understood as part and parcel of her contestation of the valorization of force and might and her challenge to examine the ways we each serve and worship it, even when we do not possess it.

This is not, however, to suggest that there is not *also* an unsettling and scandalous element in Weil's understanding of decreation, which she was aware of through her attunement to the scandalous claims that appear throughout the Gospels. Weil called attention to some of Christianity's most challenging elements, revealing the troubling and paradoxical. Perhaps most importantly, her theology is centred on the humility and

[16] Simone Petrement points to the ways that Weil distanced herself from associations with feminists, how there were household jokes about her being a boy, and that she signed her letters in lycée by "your respectful son." Petrement writes: "As for the plans she had already formed, her whole conception of what she wanted to do with her life, it was—as she herself later said—a great misfortune to have been born a female. So she had decided to reduce this obstacle as much as possible by disregarding it, that is to say, 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. It was perhaps this that made many people consider her in some way inhuman. A woman is expected, to the extent that she is natural, to let us see her feminine nature. But Simone wanted to express this side of herself as little as possible." Pétrement, *Simone Weil: A Life*, 27. However, Cynthia Wallace nicely complicates this, writing, "As a woman who rejected feminine norms in early twentieth-century France, studying philosophy and participating in labour activism and war efforts, Weil models resistance to bourgeois patriarchal rule." In other words, she asks: "did Weil wish not to be a woman, or did she wish as a woman to be permitted a wider range of action in early twentieth-century France?". See Wallace, *The Literary Afterlives of Simone Weil: Feminism, Justice, and the Challenge of Religion* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2024), 20-21.

Although Weil has been criticized by some feminist scholars, she has also been claimed by others. For example, Sophie Bourgault turns to Weil as a resource for care ethics, especially because of her concept of "attention." See Sophie Bourgault, "Beyond the Saint and the Red Virgin: Simone Weil as Feminist Theorist of Care," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 35, no. 2 (2014): 1-27. Sarah Pinnock, on the other hand, proposes that Weil's understanding of subjectivity as porous and receptive has affinities with other feminists such as Luce Irigaray. Sarah Pinnock, "Mystical Selfhood and Women's Agency: Simone Weil and French Feminist Philosophy," in *The Relevance of the Radical: Simone Weil 100 Years Later*, eds. Rebecca Rozelle-Stone and Lucian Stone (New York: Bloomsbury, 2009), 205-220.

suffering of the cross.[17] Refusing religiosity as a form of consolation, she was drawn precisely to the difficult and uncomfortable, and centred her religious reflections on self-renunciation, sacrifice, obedience and consented servanthood. To take her religious ideas seriously thus also requires grappling with some of the more challenging aspects of Christianity.

I argue that the Christian kenotic sources of Weil's language are crucial to understanding her concept of decreation—and the related vocabulary of self-emptying obedience, slavery, and Incarnation—for two main reasons. First, it clarifies decreation as a movement that occurs within the context of a mutual love in which the self is offered back to the divine. This sacrifice and renunciation is a consented offering that imagines an alternative form of relationality than one rooted in forcefulness or domination. Secondly, kenosis helps to clarify and appreciate the potential social and political subversiveness of decreation by pointing to the ways that Weil understood Christ's Incarnation as a challenge to the idolatry of power and assumptions about weakness and strength, vulnerability and force. I suggest that when accounts disregard the religious, kenotic aspect of decreation in order to rescue it from what is most unsettling about it, they also lose recourse to its potential subversiveness.

This dissertation tarries with the difficult questions that arise from the religious nature of Weil's concept of decreation and the related language of renunciation and self-effacement; namely, how can we reconcile Weil's consistent opposition to oppression and

[17] In a letter to a priest she met in New York, Father Couturier, she writes, "The Cross by itself suffices me." (*LP*, 34)

what she considered to be modern-day forms of slavery with her call for radical self-effacement, obedience, and sacrifice? How are we to understand what appears to be two radically opposed postures: submission and refusal? Does Weil's emphasis on sacrifice and selflessness merely re-inscribe the domination of some over others? How could a posture of self-emptying servitude toward one's neighbour be consistent with, and even inform, a politics of resistance to structures of power?

I shall argue that Weil's engagement with these questions and paradoxes are best explored through the mystical tradition which she greatly admired. Weil's interest in the mystics developed from a series of encounters that were experienced as moments of revelation and divine possession. While she barely mentions the three events except in a personal letter to Father Perrin, they were nevertheless transformative and re-oriented her perspective. Weil confesses that prior to her own experiences she had "vaguely heard tell of things of this kind" but had never believed them and was even put off by such accounts. Moreover, she admits that she had never read texts by any of the mystics, that God had saved her from this "so that it should be evident to me that I had not invented this absolutely unexpected contact" (WG, 27/AD, 55). Afterwards, Francis of Assisi, John of the Cross, and Meister Eckhart appear often in her writings, but there are also brief references to Nicolas of Cusa, Bonaventure, Hugh of Saint-Victor, Jan van Ruysbroek, and Marguerite Porete (chapter 3). For Weil, these were figures who pursued ascetic practices of detachment, postures of poverty or nakedness, and forms of renunciation that she saw as

necessary to the abandonment of the self and its disordered attachments. Indeed, scholars have sometimes painted Weil as a modern-day ascetic belonging to this tradition.[18]

But the mystical tradition also presents bold and creative visions of annihilation and union with the divine, of self-effacement within the context of an excessive love that resonates especially with Weil's idea of decreation. She writes that "every effort of the mystics has always sought to reach the place when there is no longer anything in their soul that says "I" (LPW, 108/OC V.I, 217). Weil seems to have been drawn to their attention to the dynamics of these mysterious movements. Anne Carson nicely identifies this connection between self-annihilation and love in her lucid poetic essay on decreation, where she highlights decreation's riskiness by reading Weil alongside Sappho and Marguerite Porete. Commenting on a poetic fragment of Sappho's, she asks, "What is it that love dares the self to do?" Carson writes that for the ecstatic—the mad persons, geniuses, poets and lovers—"Love dares the self to leave itself behind, to enter into poverty."[19] Her essay points to the "spiritual daring" of Simone Weil's insistence on the need to withdraw and disappear. This loss of self requires a violent uprooting, and the entanglement of love and affliction—the pain of absence and uncertainty, the sense of insufficiency, of lack, of the self's dissolution—was something that many of the mystics articulated in evocative ways, revealing the agony of love, which is also part of its madness.

[18] For example, in *The Ascetic Self*, Gavin Flood argues that Weil stands at the end of a long tradition of Christian renunciation and asceticism, particularly articulated through her "asceticism of work." *The Ascetic Self: Subjectivity, Memory and Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). Simone Kotva similarly situates Weil within a line of French spiritualist thinkers who incorporated forms of spiritual exercises into their philosophical method. *Effort and Grace: On the Spiritual Exercise of Philosophy* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020).

[19] Anne Carson, *Decreation: Poetry, Essays, Opera* (New York: Random House, 2005): 161-162.

Weil understood that such a daring, impossible love entails discomfort, risk, and suffering, and recognized that a theology of decreation calls one to an existence on the edge of what is comfortable and even reasonable.

When understood in these terms, decreation becomes not a "state" which one maintains, but a temporary loss that is easily prevented or thwarted, often a failure, and ultimately beyond what anyone can accomplish on their own. It entails being undone and possessed by something outside and beyond the self. This was what Weil pointed to as the specifically "mystical" element – a "negative operation" in which one is acted on by grace (LPW, 84/OC IV.2, 119). One never exactly "arrives," since it is defined by struggle not perfection, and by continual undoing rather than permanent completion. Yet for Weil this was nevertheless critical in developing an alternative ethical posture in the face of the other, and it was this that she believed was crucial for her own time. Although decreation may be fleeting, it is transformative, disrupting the illusion of the sovereign self and engendering a self that is open and receptive to others. Emptied of one's own egotistic will and desires, one's mode of relation to others is transformed from mastery and domination to mutual servanthood.

It is perhaps no surprise that Weil turned to Christian mysticism, given the interest in it at the turn of the century.[20] But what *is* perhaps surprising is that it shaped her political

[20] Simone Kotva situates Weil's thought within a tradition of French spiritualism (via Maine de Biran, Félix Ravaisson, Henri Bergson and Alain) that overlaps with the Christian mystical tradition. See *Effort and Grace: On the Spiritual Exercise of Philosophy*. Additionally, mysticism was increasingly a popular subject. In 1901-1902, William James gave his Gifford lectures on the topic of "The Varieties of Religious Experience," and in 1911, Evelyn Underhill published her more popular and widely read *Mysticism: A Study of the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness*. Both framed mysticism as highly individual, centering on "consciousness" and ecstatic experience.

ethics so deeply, and that she posited its significance for the social realm. Weil argued that the contemporary forms of public and political worship of might could be traced to the glorification of force and domination engendered by the Roman Empire and rooted in a particular understanding of divinity. She argued that it was through a transposition of the Church's totalitarianism that the totalitarian regimes of her time had been inspired (WG, 37/AD, 69). Rather than abandoning the Christian tradition entirely, however, she sought an alternative from within it, and found in mystical texts a theology and ethics of relinquishment and self-emptying love rather than an ideal of sovereignty and mastery. Moreover, she saw the mystics as figures who prioritized a radical love in their writings and lives, sometimes risking charges of heresy and death for their claims which were not always in line with orthodox church doctrine. She traces a tradition from Plato to the medieval mystics, hoping to recover it for her own time. I seek to trace the connection between the religious and socio-political ethics by arguing that the mystical, kenotic shape of Weil's theology offers both a critique of power, might, and sovereignty, and a vision of an alternative form of relationality, one not grounded in domination of the other, but in consent to kenotic self-giving.[21]

Weil was aware of how radical this might be. In one of the final essays of her life, "Are we Struggling for Justice?," she acknowledges that the words of Philippians are

[21] Importantly, none of the main studies on Weil as political theorist mention her notion of decreation, leaving the social and political implications of the term unexplored. This is true of Benjamin P Davis's excellent *Political Philosophy of Simone Weil: Fieldnotes from the Margins* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2023), as well as Laurence A. Blum's *A Truer Liberty: Simone Weil and Marxism* (New York: Routledge, 1989). Perhaps most surprisingly, Desmond Avery does not mention the term at all in his examination of power in the thought of Weil, thereby neglecting an integral component of Weil's late understanding of power and force. *Beyond Power: Simone Weil and the Notion of Authority* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2008).

"absurd" and "mad." Once this madness has seized a human being, she admits that it completely transforms the modalities of action and thought, reshaping one's response to the world ("Are We Struggling for Justice?," 3/OC V.1, 242), and compelling one to abandon everything and, like Christ, to empty oneself.

> It truly is madness. It hurls one into risks one cannot run if one has given one's heart to anything at all that belongs to this world, be it a great cause, a Church or a country. The outcome to which the madness of love led Christ is, after all, no recommendation for it. ("Are We Struggling for Justice?," 9-10/OC V.1, 248-249)

Weil confesses this is not an easy or appealing path, and that it brings with it great risk. Yet she believed that it could be a more powerful motive for action than splendour, glory, or honour, and she therefore abandoned herself to the perilous journey with bold conviction.

3. Outline and Approach

I begin in chapter 2 with a series of myths and images that situate the problem of force within the context of love and desire. I suggest it is necessary to understand Weil's concepts of decreation, selflessness and renunciation within a much larger drama of love. Weil believed the roots of the mystical tradition could be found in the works of Plato, so I examine her meditations on three of the dialogues: the *Symposium*, *Republic*, and *Phaedrus*. She reflected and commented on these while living in Marseille after having been uprooted from Paris with her family, within the context of Nazi occupation in France, and therefore was intimately familiar with the effects of force. In her rough and scattered notes, she

develops a Christian-mystical interpretation of the dialogues that emphasizes the human will to power alongside the transformative potential of love, reading Plato's texts as anticipating the movement of self-emptying that occurs in the kenotic hymn.

In the *Symposium*, Weil reads Aristophanes' speech as a mythical account of the origins of human longing for what lies beyond, but also of a depiction of the desire to exceed the limitations of our existence and become like gods. But it is in Agathon's speech that Weil finds "the most beautiful lines in Plato," wherein he asserts that force is both sovereign everywhere and that it is absolutely detestable. The only one who escapes its grip is Love itself, an intimation for Weil of God's refusal to wield force and instead consent to descend and submit, relinquishing power. Weil situates the problem of force in two, related, places: the self and the "social beast." She takes these up in her reading of Plato's *Republic*, where she draws together the image of the cave and of the great beast to examine the way the collective projects a false idol that stirs and intensifies the desire for power. Only through the intervention of something beyond the self is the prisoner released and able, through the effort of the will, to uproot and detach herself, making the painful journey away from what is false toward what is true, beautiful and good. This will require an ascetic disciplining of the desires, freeing the soul from its disordered attachments. Yet for Weil this still only constitutes the inferior stages of transformation. It is in the erotic madness of the *Phaedrus* that Weil finds a depiction of the soul's abandonment to love through the recollection of beauty that nourishes the growth of wings which will allow the soul to soar. Through these various (and sometimes contradictory) mythical and poetic accounts, Weil

explores the relationship between the will and desire, elucidating the need for the effort of detachment and relinquishment before being possessed by divine love.

In chapter 3, I examine Weil's concept of decreation by comparing her writings to the thirteenth-century beguine, Marguerite Porete, and her dialogue *The Mirror of Simple Souls*. Porete depicts a drama centred on the Soul, who must relinquish the virtues, the will and desires before descending into an abyss of humility without attachments or consolations. At the "height" of this journey, Reason is extinguished, allowing the soul to become annihilated in the abundance of divine love. Porete's account of self-annihilation helps to illuminate Weil's concept of decreation by situating it within a mystical love story, in which annihilation entails the destruction of the ego which believes itself to possess being outside of God. The annihilated self returns to the "nothingness" or "non-being" that she had before asserting her own being. In Porete's dialogue, this dissolution is fleeting and likened to the brief opening of an aperture, and the stages to get there are unstable, frustrating any attempt to view the path as programmatic or permanent. Porete's radical vision of self-annihilation—which lead to condemnations of heresy and death at the stake—illuminates Weil's controversial "terrible prayer" and her more extreme articulations of renunciation and self-effacement.

In chapter 4, I turn to the ways that Weil envisioned kenosis as an embodied ethics and radical politics. I examine her final text, *The Need for Roots*, where she presents one of her sharpest critiques of her own time. She points to the spiritual roots of contemporary problems, diagnosing the emergence of totalitarianism and the rise of Hitler as a symptom of a much deeper problem: a widespread adoration of the "greatness" of force. I elucidate

her radical alternative to this greatness through what she called the "spirituality of work." Through labour, one's egotistical will can re-learn a lost obedience and conformity to God's will. I examine her condemnation of modern forms of slavish labour in relation to her paradoxical assertion that the slave is also a model of emulation, a scandalous claim that is central to the kenotic hymn. I end by suggesting that Weil's plan of front-line nurses is an embodiment of the kenotic self-emptying she envisioned, a form of labour that refuses to reinscribe the worship of force and is instead embodied as attentive care and servanthood.

In my analysis, I focus especially on the published essays, private notebooks, and letters that were written in the last four years of Weil's life while she was living in Marseille, New York, and London. These are the texts that most express her religious thought, interwoven with reflections on philosophical texts, literature, as well as on social and political issues. The first two volumes of her religious writings, which remain her most well-known, were initially collected and published by Gustave Thibon and Père Perrin in *Gravity and Grace* and *Waiting for God*, and although Thibon and Perrin were two of Weil's close acquaintances whom she respected and trusted enough to leave her notebooks, their curation has necessarily shaped the way her thought has been received.[22] Reading her unedited notebooks and letters alongside these published collections gives a fuller account

[22] The first collection of her religious works to appear, *Gravity and Grace*, is a collection of aphorisms plucked from Weil's notebooks and listed under what Gustave Thibon understood to be the main themes in her thought. *Waiting for God*, on the other hand, contains several religious essays and personal letters chosen by Père Perrin. Weil left her writings with Thibon and Perrin with the intention that they would be read. When Thibon confessed to her that he was quite moved by her writings, she responded in a letter: "now they belong to you, and I hope that after having been transmuted within you they will one day come out in one of your works," and further, that "I should be very happy for them to find a lodging beneath your pen, whilst changing their form so as to reflect your likeness" (*GG*, xiii-xiv). Thibon did not strictly follow Weil's instructions, instead transcribing passages in Weil's own words under his headings. Yet *Gravity and Grace* does maintain some of the difficulties in Weil's thought by including both the appealing and sometimes more provocative elements of her thought.

that is also at times even more astonishing than what they present. This is particularly true of her New York and London notebooks (not included in Thibon and Perrin's collections), which express her private thought experiments that range from audacious to impenetrable to dazzling.

As I have already suggested, Weil's religious writings raise some of the vexed issues of her thought; her language of obedience, slavery, and self-effacement are all key themes that I address throughout this dissertation. However, there are also other related issues and tensions that arise from her reflections on Christianity. Weil's ambivalent statements about the body, read alongside her own ascetic habits, can be situated within ongoing struggles to negotiate the valorization of embodiment in the Incarnation and the conflations of body and flesh with the sinful nature of human creatures. What appear to be disparaging statements about the body and the material world have caused her to be identified with the dualistic philosophies of Manichaeism and Gnosticism (which I address in chapter 2). She refers to both in her writings, usually briefly and often with admiration. But other statements about matter, the Incarnation, and the world's beauty seem to directly contradict the characterization of Weil as a dualist, suggesting that the relationship between the material and eternal, body and spirit, were ideas Weil was puzzling through. Her notebooks, which are full of contradictions, are a testament to these struggles and the ways she was working through them, often testing ideas by taking them to their limits.

The religious inflection of Weil's condemnation of force also leads to two other related difficulties: her disdain for the Old Testament and her troubled relationship to Judaism. Weil was raised in a liberal secular Jewish family, but increasingly criticized the

texts and religion of Judaism.[23] As most scholars have noted, her reading of the Bible is highly selective, affecting her understanding of both Judaism and Christianity.[24] Aside from the admiration she expresses for a few books of the Old Testament—Job, the Psalms, Proverbs, Song of Songs, Daniel, Isaiah, Ezekial, the beginning of Genesis—Weil's comments are often scathing. She reads the Hebrew Bible as a depiction of the glorification of force (and of the God of force), and therefore either dismisses or criticizes it severely. This is of course tied to her polemic against Judaism, which she characterizes as a collective religion that idolizes a particular nation and people and that aspires to temporal power. Her criticism, that is, centers on what she perceived to be its worship of force. Had she read the Hebrew Bible with the method and posture in which she approached (for example) the *Iliad*, however, she might have appreciated a very different understanding, reading it not as an affirmation of forcefulness but as a depiction of a peoples' struggles with force, sinfulness and idolatry.[25] In this case, her practice of reading does not live up to her own

[23] One of the earliest commentators on Weil's relationship to Judaism, Paul Ginewski, characterized her relationship as Jewish self-loathing in *Simone Weil ou la haine de soi* (Paris: Berg International, 1978). Similarly, Perrin suggests that her attitude to Israel is a "self-accusatory complex," and a "tendency to depreciate all that touched her nearly." J.M. Perrin and G. Thibon, *Simone Weil as we knew her*, trans. Emma Craufurd (London: Routledge, 2003), 55. Other scholars give more nuanced accounts. See especially Nevin, *Simone Weil: Portrait of a Self-exiled Jew,* and chapter 2 ("Christology and Religious Pluralism") of Rebecca Rozelle Stone and Lucian Stone's *Simone Weil and Theology*.

[24] Emmanuel Levinas articulated this first and perhaps most forcefully in "Simone Weil contre le Bible," in *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, trans. Sean Hand (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990). Levinas notes, "she treats [the Scriptures] as historical books whenever they support her thesis, and false whenever they disturb it" (135). Perrin notes that there were many lacunae in her knowledge of Catholicism and Christian texts and sources in general, but nothing is more striking than her ignorance of the Old Testament. Thus, even while there was a profundity to her inquiry into Christianity, there was at the same time notable gaps.

[25] Levinas writes: "Israel is not a model people, but a free people. It is of course, like any people, filled with lust and tempted by carnal delights. The Bible tells us of this lust in order to denounce it, but also knows that it is not enough to deny it. It seeks to elevate matters by introducing the notion of justice." "Simone Weil Against the Bible," 135. Nevin similarly notes how Weil's reading in this case is a sign of poor literary appreciation, not realizing that the failure and sinfulness of the Jewish people is depicted in the Hebrew Bible, not glorified. Nevin, *Simone Weil: Portrait of a Self-Exiled Jew*, 249.

stated method of approaching texts and ideas with detachment and humility, seeking the truth with an openness to what the texts may reveal rather than through preconceived ideas.[26]

This is especially striking given Weil's openness to other religious traditions and her interest in discovering resonances between them. Her prejudices meant that she was blind to her own inherited tradition but also to the ways Christianity is rooted in Judaism. Moreover, it meant that she missed the possible affinities between Jewish thought and some of the most important aspects of her own thought. For example, scholars have noted the resemblance between her concept of "decreation" and the idea of Tsimtsum in Kabbalah as articulated by Isaac Luria.[27] The Albigensian civilization that Weil so admired as a multi-cultural civilization founded on love was an example of open and free exchange between Christian, Jewish, and Muslim thought. Additionally, scholars have noted the similarities between Weil's philosophy and Jewish traditions of thought that affirm the dignity of labour and frame it as a form of obedience to God, as well as longstanding Jewish concerns for social justice and an emphasis on care and compassion for one's neighbour.[28] For someone who was inspired by such a range of texts and traditions, it is especially lamentable that she so willfully ignored her own.

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[26] Rozelle-Stone and Stone have noted that Weil's readings of Jewish literature are reductive, lacking nuance, sophistication, and humility, failing to live up to her own ideals of reading and thinking. *Simone Weil and Theology*, 62.

[27] Nevin, *Simone Weil: Portrait of a Self-Exiled Jew*, 249-250. See also Lissa McCullough, *The Religious Philosophy of Simone Weil*, 65-67.

[28] Nevin, *Simone Weil: Portrait of a Self-exiled Jew*, 250. See also Yoon Sook Cha, *Decreation and the Ethical Bind*, 154-155.

Almost no one escapes Weil's scrutiny when it comes to the subject of force, but it is Rome and Israel who are the targets of her harshest criticism. The only exception seems to be Greece, which she unequivocally admires without admitting that, like Rome, it too was dependent upon a class of slaves, her primary example of the use of force over others.[29] Although she traces the roots of modern totalitarianism to the Roman Empire, she ignores the broader resurgence of interest in antiquity and the deployment of both Roman and Greek civilizations in fascist rhetoric. Weil's concerns about the worship of force are primarily what lead her to reject Judaism, but they are also part of what kept her from baptism and formal conversion to Christianity. Yet her judgments about the Hebrew Bible and Judaism are particularly unsettling given the time in which she was writing. Contemporary readers can only take up Weil's stated aspirations about measured, critical reading and approach her writings with the critical eye that she aspired to. Given her incontrovertible condemnation of totalitarianism, Hitler, and Nazism in her private and published writings, and her active involvement in anti-Vichy organizations and the Resistance in France followed by her work for the Free French in London, her actions are a better model than her method of reading in this case.

In my reading of Weil, I regard her writings as interconnected with her life and suggest that her thought is better understood through attention to her lived experiences and vocational experiments. There have been some concerns about interpreting Weil's writings through the lens of her life, with warnings that too much focus on her biography risks taking

[29] The only source of her criticism of Greece seems to be that labour was always understood as service. See *NR*, 293/*OC* V.2, 360.

away from serious study of her thought or that scholarship has sometimes taken the form of hagiographical accounts of a saint's life.[30] Weil, too, was concerned that her person would receive more attention than her thought (SL, 196-197), and given her repudiation of the "personal" (and personalism) and her attempts to extricate her own person from her writings, these are valid concerns. And yet, she also did not subscribe to the separation of thought and action, insisting that "philosophy… is *exclusively* an affair of action and practice" (FLN, 362). As Benjamin Davis has nicely put it, Weil's method is one of "essaying"; she tested her ideas in the world as on the page.[31] Indeed, this is one of the virtues of her thought—that she sought to speak across disciplines and resisted the kind of rigid specialization and abstraction that she found so problematic of modernity. It often took her outside of her own familiar environment, away from what she believed to be her intellectual vocation (WG, 40/AD, 72) to begin again as an amateur, whether in the industrial factory or the grape fields. Her life is a testament to her desire for a better integration of thought and action and to understand not just intellectually but in her body.

One of the challenges reading Weil's notebooks is that they are full of contradiction and paradox, which is a product of her experimentation in a range of disciplines and a reflection of the way she thinks.[32] She often pushes contradictory ideas to their limits to

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[30] Yoon Sook Cha warns against the temptation to conflate Weil's thought with her life, writing that "the transposition between Weil's *bios* and thought is not as transparent as some of the secondary literature would suggest, or is at least a terribly fraught one," and she thereby "resists any ready correspondence between the life and the work" (xiv). She warns especially against pathologizing: "it is common to find studies that psychologize Weil's thinking by redacting details from her life, effectively reducing Weil's thinking to her biography" (xiii).

[31] Davis, *Simone Weil's Political Philosophy*, 15.

[32] On the use of contradiction as method in Weil's thought, see especially Eric Springsted, "Contradiction, Mystery and the Use of Words in Simone Weil," in *The Beauty that Saves: Essays on Aesthetics and Language in Simone Weil*, ed. Dunway and Springsted (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1996): 13-30. Springsted suggests that Weil's method of investigation was to see whether for every

test their verity and uses formulations that appear absurd or that shock and provoke. One is often made uncomfortable reading her notebooks, struck by the crystalline quality of a claim in one moment only to be appalled by the lack of clarity in the next.[33] But there is also a poetic character to her writing, with space for silence and incongruity, as well as a preference for images and metaphors. While Weil did write some poetry over the course of her life, [34] it is often in the prose of her notebooks that this poetic quality shines through most clearly, opening the reader up to the mystery.

Weil's whole life was an embodiment of the tensions and paradoxes that we witness in her writings. She exhibits a fierce independence and critique of the collective along with her involvement in social movements and proposals for collective action; in many ways she lived a solitary life yet had many friendships and showed great care for others; she worried about the imagination and the way it could distort one's vision of reality but also drew heavily from literature and art; she was brilliant but held astonishing prejudices; she articulated an agonized relationship to her own body yet articulated a philosophy that was profoundly embodied; she condemned slavery but also points to the slave as a model to

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thought, the contrary could be true (15). Contradiction is what signals there is more than our limited understanding of the world and is what beckons us to seek a higher unity that transcends our own thoughts (19-20). See also André A. Devaux, "On the right use of contradiction according to Simone Weil," in *Simone Weil's Philosophy of Culture: Readings toward a Divine Humanity*, ed. Richard Bell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993): 150-158.

[33] Thibon nicely articulates the challenges faced by the reader: "How is it possible to know in what manner this or that hasty note or judgement without context corresponded with her thought? How, in this uneven mass of material, is it possible to distinguish that which is based on deep, unshakeable conviction from that which is no more than verbal extravagance, provisional theory, too hasty generalization, polemical effect, irony, or even just a reminder jotted down with a view to some future train of thought which she never developed." Thibon and Perrin, *Simon Weil as we knew her*, 7.

[34] Weil's poetry has recently been collected and translated into English, along with a new translation of her play, *Venice Saved*. See Silvia Caprioglio Panizza and Philip Wilson, trans. and eds., *Mirror of Obedience The Poems and Selected Prose of Simone Weil* (London: Bloomsbury, 2023). Joan Dargan was the first to characterize Weil as a poetic thinker in *Simone Weil: Thinking Poetically* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999).

emulate and expressed her own desire to serve. Given the many sides of Weil's life, expositions of her thought will always leave something out or emphasize a particular view of her. I offer a reading of the "mad" Weil because I see this aspect as integral to the way she continues to speak to our time. This is the Weil who refused to sit on the sidelines in the face of injustice and who was not afraid to put her body on the line. It is also the Weil for whom philosophy and religion were not just things to be thought, but lived – something she exemplified with an intensity that has sometimes shocked and appalled.

What is risky and controversial in Weil is also what makes her compelling. She ends her essay, "Are We Struggling for Justice," with these words: "But if the order of the universe is a wise order, there must sometimes be moments when, from the point of view of earthly reason, only the madness of love is reasonable. Such moments can only be those when, as today, mankind has become mad from want of love" ("Are We Struggling for Justice?," 10/OC V.1, 249). Weil approached the world with a mad love, reflecting on, responding to, and resisting the social, political and religious idolatry of might. She presents a reminder of the radical roots of Christianity,[35] and its call to an extravagant humility, servanthood, and relinquishment of the self that is simultaneously a repudiation of the glorification of might in all its forms.

[35] In the introduction to *The Relevance of the Radical*, we are reminded of the etymology of "radical," which derives from "roots," a key concept for Weil. A. Rebecca Rozelle-Stone and Lucian Stone, *The Relevance of the Radical: Simone Weil 100 years Later*, xxiii.

II. MEDITATIONS ON LOVE AND FORCE

1. Introduction

There is perhaps no figure whom Weil describes with such admiration in her writings as Plato. However, the Plato who appears in the pages of her notebooks and essays is not the creator of doctrines or the philosopher of abstract philosophy. Rather, it is Plato the mystic, the narrator of myth, and the transmitter of a contemplative tradition. In Weil's introductory comments to some of her most extensive comments on Plato, she writes: "So what is Plato? A mystic who has inherited a mystical tradition in which all of Greece was bathed" (LPW, 46/OC IV.2, 75). Weil regards the Christian mystical tradition as rooted in Plato's corpus, and she draws from his texts to elaborate on some of the most important themes in her thought, including those that are related to decreation: detachment, self-renunciation, and divine possession. Rather than giving a complete overview of Weil's interpretations of Plato, which others have already done,[36] I will elucidate these ideas by concentrating on how Weil reads several key myths and images from three dialogues—the *Symposium*, *Republic*, and *Phaedrus*—which are particularly important for her understanding of love and force. Unlike the cosmological perspective of the *Timaeus*, which Weil interprets as an account of the divine's renunciation in creation, these erotic

[36] See especially Eric Springsted, *Christus Mediator: Platonic Mediation in the Thought of Simone Weil* (Chico, California: Scholars Press, 1983) and the essays collected in *The Christian Platonism of Simone Weil*, Doering E. Jane and Eric O. Springsted, eds. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004).

dialogues demonstrate how Weil understood self-relinquishment in more personal, social, and political terms.

Weil diagnoses the problem of force most extensively in her beautiful and important essay on the *Iliad*, yet it is in her reflections on Plato that she considers its relationship to love, and opposes the worship of might to the relinquishment of power to love by grace. She describes how she understands Plato's dialogues to be centered on the workings of divine love:

> Granted that the grace necessarily emanates from God, of what does that grace consist, by what process is it accomplished, in what manner may a man receive it? Texts: *The Republic*, *Phaedrus*, *The Symposium*. Plato uses images. The fundamental idea of these images is that love is the disposition of the soul to which grace is given, which alone is able to receive grace, love and none other than love. Love of God is the root and foundation of Platonic philosophy. (IC, 88/OC IV.2, 88)

This chapter is an attempt to chart Weil's understanding of the character and dynamics of this movement. I read Weil's writings on Plato not as an attempt to construct an overarching narrative, but as meditations on some of the most important themes to recur in her thoughts, and especially, as focused reflections on love, desire, and force. I suggest that Weil was reading these myths as narratives which offer resources to understand and re-consider the mechanisms and dynamics of force in social life and envision an alternative in mystical divine love.

2. Weil on Plato

Weil's references to Plato are scattered throughout her writings, and many of the myths and images that she turns to most often—the cave, the sun, the great beast from the *Republic*, the winged soul from the *Phaedrus*—appear in the form of a single word within her reflections on seemingly unrelated subjects ("beast," "cave"). As Michel Narcy points out, "although these images appear only once in the entire Platonic corpus and thus require detailed exegesis, Weil usually uses them without commentary, as if their meaning were as obvious as any other commonplace allusion."[37] That is, they were so familiar and became so integrated into her own thought that she often felt no need to explain them, instead using them as shorthand for an idea that is not always immediately obvious to the reader. She rarely elucidates a myth or image for more than a few paragraphs and refers to myths from other dialogues to compare and clarify the one she is focused on. Her references are thus often meandering and aphoristic rather than systematic.

The exception to these scattered references is the collection of notes published together in English as *Intimations of Christianity Among the Ancient Greeks*.[38] The text is comprised of an assembly of textual passages and commentary prepared for a conference on Plato for the *Société d'études philosophique*, organized by Father Perrin, as well as excerpts from some of Weil's more extensive comments on Plato's dialogues from her Marseille notebooks, written between 1941 and 1942. Unlike the confident script in many of Weil's writings, her meditations on Plato here, especially in "God in Plato," are full of

[37] Michel Narcy, "The Limits and Significance of Simone Weil's Platonism," trans. Chris Callahan, in *The Christian Platonism of Simone Weil*, 24.

[38] Simone Weil, *Intimations of Christianity Among the Ancient Greeks*, trans. Elisabeth Geissbuhler (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1987).

inter-linear additions, notes in the margins, arrows, and underlined phrases.[39] Rough and layered, they offer a picture of how Weil was thinking with and about Plato, demonstrating how she revised, deepened, and clarified her thoughts and understanding.[40] In other words, we are given a glimpse into Weil's own methods of reading and contemplation, of the ways she was reflecting on short passages, bringing them into conversation with other texts and her own lived experiences.

The content of the notes consists of brief excerpts and longer quotations from the dialogues, followed by Weil's own translations and reflections that occasionally wander far from what the initial fragment suggests. Weil's method of reading Plato is to focus on very short passages in order to draw out the meaning: "We must try to penetrate to the heart of these works by basing our thought upon indications that are often brief and by assembling scattered texts," she writes (IC, 77). Phrases from the dialogues appear aphoristically in the pages of the collection, often without context, and the structure of their organization indicates that she was not working through the dialogues methodically. Instead, we are given a series of passages that are thematically related or that Weil highlights as particularly evocative, moving, or illuminating.

Although Weil's method is not systematic, she was engaged in a project of an enormous scope. While she was in the Alpes with her parents, she explained to her friend

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[39] This quality has been maintained in the *Oeuvres Complètes* (*OC* IV.2) and the version of "God in Plato" translated in *Late Philosophical Writings*, translated by Eric O. Springsted and Lawrence E. Schmidt (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015).

[40] Weil describes the unfinished and exploratory character of her notes on the Pythagorean doctrine which she had sent to Perrin: "*Je vous envoie…le commentaire des texts phythagoriciens, que je n'avais pas eu le temps de finir, à joindre au travail que je vous avez laissé en partant. Ce sera facile, car c'est numéroté. C'est horriblement mal rédigé et mal composé […] mais je ne peux que l'envoyer tel que*." *OC* IV.2, 149.

(and later biographer) Simone Pétrement that she was working on a project on a collection of texts which she believed would show a concordance or affinity of a number of religious and philosophical traditions.[41] The title for the collection, *Intuitions pré-chrétiennes* (*Intimations of Christianity among the Ancient Greeks*), was chosen later by Father Perrin and Gustave Thibon as an expression of what they believed the central idea to be. However, according to some scholars, such as Michel Narcy, the title can be misleading. Narcy contends that it is perhaps more a reflection of the editors' desire to orient the reader toward a particular reading than of what is suggested in the notes themselves, arguing that while Weil clearly gives a theological and mystical interpretation of the texts, she does not ascribe a religious or Christian inspiration to the Greeks.[42] Instead, she refers more to "mystical resonance" (WG, 39) or that a fragment "exposes an idea" of the Incarnation more than any other Greek text (OC IV.2, 219).[43] He suggests instead that Weil was engaged in the work of translation; she sought to reveal the presence of a spirituality in certain passages of Plato by translating them into Christian terms. For example, she read certain passages in Agathon's speech about love with reference to Christ as the physician. Her project was not

[41] *OC* IV.2, 147, quoted from Simone Pétrement, *La Vie de Simone Weil*, II, 36. Weil also refers to "concordances" in *Intuitions pré-chrétiennes* to describe the connections between different texts. She writes that the concordances she lays out carry no threat to the Christian faith, but offer a confirmation of it (*IC*, 119).

[42] Michel Narcy, "Intuitions pré-chrétiennes: un malentendu," *Archives de Philosophie* 72, no. 4 (Octobre-Décembre 2009): 565. Weil's titles throughout the notes are far more descriptive, and with the exception of "God in Plato," they refer simply to the dialogue of which she was offering an exegesis. Narcy draws from Weil's letter to Solange Beaumier to make his argument. In the letter, Weil writes that her vocation imposed on her the obligation to stay outside the Church: "*En achevant le travail sur les pythagoriciens, j'ai senti d'une manière, autant qu'un être humain a le droit d'employer ces deux mots, definitive et certaine que ma vocation m'impose de rester hors de l'Église, et même sans aucune espèce d'engagement même implicite envers elle ni envers le dogme chrétien; en tout cas aussi longtemps que je ne serai pas tout à fait incapable de travail intellectual.*" Narcy, 568.

[43] Narcy, "Intuitions pré-chrétiennes: un malentendu," 570-571.

one of making impossible connections across time, but of accumulating testimonies or proofs that what Christians call the revealed truth was not reserved to one region of the world at a certain historical period, and he argues that her criterion of truth was its universality.[44] Still, she tends to measure and gauge other traditions against what she held to be the central tenets of Christianity, while at the same time understanding Christianity by way of Plato.

This method of interpretation was not exclusive to the way she read Plato. She often overlaps images from different narratives, collapsing mythical figures across cultures and time periods—from Indian philosophy to Nordic folklore, tales from China, Greek tragedy, biblical passages, and folktales—with an apparent disregard for the particulars of time and place.[45] In her interpretation of Plato she is constantly making cross-references between the dialogues, but also introduces other texts to clarify an idea. Thus, John of the Cross illuminates Plato, Plato sheds light on Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*, and she reads the Gospels alongside *Antigone*. Weil writes that every country from antiquity had its own vocation, a revelation that was oriented toward an aspect of supernatural truth, and in her notes on Plato, she is primarily interested in drawing attention to their resonances.

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[44] Narcy, "Intuitions pré-chrétiennes, un malentendu," 579-580. "*Entre toutes les civilisations donc elle accumule les témoignages, S. Weil ne cherche pas à établir d'impossibles liens historiques; elle cherche à accumuler les preuves que ce que les chrétiens appellant la verité révélée n'a été reservé ni à une region du monde ni à une période de l'histoire*."

[45] Weil was keen to explore these resonances in a published piece, writing in parentheses in her notebooks, "Must write a book about folklore" (*N*, 279). Her approach clearly irked some of her editors. For example, in *Simone Weil telle que nous l'avons connue*, Perrin and Thibon write "*Pour Simone Weil, comme il resort de ses remarques méthodologiques ainsi que de sa pratique, les principes de la critique historique ne sont pas contraignants*." They deplored what they called her lack of "historical objectivity." Perrin and Thibon, *Simone Weil as we knew her*, 461.

Some scholars have considered this to be a sign that Weil was engaged in a kind of syncretism and they have assumed that she was attempting to piece together parts of different traditions in order to construct a unified and coherent "whole."[46] Simone Kotva, for example, has situated this approach within a broader trend among intellectuals of the time, in which it was assumed that one original revelation could be sought by pulling disparate sources together in order to find a unifying "key" that would restore the truth behind many myths.[47] Kotva argues that Weil's methodology is to engage in a kind of editorial labour, a selective synthesizing that emphasizes certain portions of a sacred text while excising what does not "fit."[48] In this method, nothing is as it seems and true stories are either hidden or require decoding, in a process of piecing together lost wisdom.

Yet Weil was not interested in system-building or in a superficial amalgamation of traditions. In her notebooks, for example, she writes that "each religion is alone true, that is to say, that at the moment we are thinking of it we must bring as much attention to bear on it as if there were nothing else; in the same way, each landscape, each picture, each poem, etc. is alone beautiful. A 'synthesis' of religions implies a lower quality of attention" (N, 228). Her own attention to Christianity—and Plato, whose texts she believed could be understood as part of the same tradition—was an attempt to explore and understand more

[46] Scholars disagree on whether syncretism is a fitting characterization. While Perrin and Thibon make this case (*Simone Weil as we knew her*, 56-57), others such as David McLellan have insisted that this is an inaccurate assessment of Weil's method, and that Weil's aim "was not to construct some sort of universal religion out of diverse parts." McLellan, *Utopian Pessimist*, 218.

[47] Simone Kotva, "The Occult Mind of Simone Weil," *Philosophical Investigations* 43, no. 1-2 (2020): 131-132. Kotva refers to scholars such as Mircea Eliade, C.G. Jung, and Frances Yates, who exhibit this approach to the history of ideas.

[48] Simone Kotva, "The Occult Mind of Simone Weil," 130.

deeply the tradition to which she believed she belonged.[49] Turning to myth and folktales from other traditions was a means of illuminating something within that tradition that she felt might otherwise be overlooked or unseen. However, she did not believe that tradition alone held the exclusive possession of the truth. Indeed, her reading of Plato in light of Christianity was precisely an effort to demonstrate that wisdom is not bound to a particular tradition, institution, or time period.[50]

The other aspect of Kotva's analysis of Weil's methods is her argument that Weil's syncretic approach mirrors the principles of occultism, and more specifically, of Gnosticism because of the way it assumes a hiddenness, and even elitism, of truth.[51] Kotva defines this "Gnostic" aspect as the understanding that "philosophy is the search for a truth hidden from the eyes of ordinary persons and accessible only to those able to endure the ordeals required

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[49] In a letter to Perrin, Weil engages in an erasure of her own Jewish heritage, writing, "I always adopted the Christian attitude as the only possible one. I might say that I was born, I grew up, and I always remained within the Christian inspiration" (*WG*, 22). This of course raises the question of why she did not feel she belonged to Judaism, even though her family was Jewish, a question that Sylvie Weil (Simone Weil's niece) wrestles with in her book, where she engages with some of the antagonisms surrounding Weil's identification with Christianity and rejection of Judaism. See Sylvie Weil, *At Home with André and Simone Weil*, trans. Benjamin Ivry (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2010).

[50] In a letter to the French Dominican priest, Father Couturier, whom she met in New York, Weil requests counsel about whether one could be granted baptism given certain personal opinions, which she enumerates in a series of thirty-five statements. The eleventh statement explicitly concerns her beliefs about discovering truths in other religious traditions: "The Catholic religion contains explicitly truths which other religions contain implicitly. But, conversely, other religions contain explicitly truths which are only implicit in Christianity. The most well-informed Christian can still learn a great deal concerning divine matters from other religious traditions; although inward spiritual light can also cause him to apprehend everything through the medium of his own tradition" (*LP*, 19).

[51] There are a range of views on Weil's relationship to Gnosticism. Jean Bethke Elshtain makes an argument in favour of Gnostic readings of Weil in "The Vexation of Simone Weil," focusing especially on Weil's relationship to the body and embodiment. Lawrence Schmidt and Lissa McCullough both argue against this reading. See Lawrence Schmidt, "George Grant on Simone Weil as Saint and Thinker," in *George Grant and the Subversion of Modernity: Art, Philosophy, Politics, Religion, and Education*, ed. Arthur Davis (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996); and Lissa McCullough, *The Religious Philosophy of Simone Weil*. Simone Kotva suggests that while the content of Weil's thought cannot be considered Gnostic, her method is congruent with Gnostic methods. Kotva, "The Occult Mind of Simone Weil." Kotva ultimately agrees with Jacques Cabaud, in *A Fellowship in Love*, noting that Weil's Gnosticism is a "tendency" rather than a declared project (141).

to gain access to its mysteries."[52] She writes of Weil's philosophy: "Weil's continuous situating of truth in a spiritually pure realm safe from the world's violence and accessible only to the few, is, I would argue, what distinguishes her philosophy as 'Gnostic.'"[53] According to Kotva, it is Weil's *approach* to knowledge, more than her subscription to Gnostic claims about the world, which shows us the 'Gnostic' Weil.

Weil did indeed seek to unearth myths from the past that were not well known, and believed they required careful deciphering and interpretation. However, she never articulated an ambition of restricting what she discovered to a select few, nor did she believe the truth was only available to an inner circle of followers. On the contrary, Weil believed the truth was accessible to everyone, and she spent much of her life seeking ways of making it more widely available, attempting to disseminate the wisdom of texts and traditions that might otherwise be inaccessible.[54] For example, one of her early projects was to translate Greek tragedy for factory workers, which she did beginning with *Antigone* and later *Electra* in *Entre nous*, a small magazine written for workers at one of the factories where she worked.[55] Her many published compositions are remarkably clear and unencumbered by the language of specialists. Even in the essay that Kotva refers to on Catharism, which was

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[52] Simone Kotva, "The Occult Mind of Simone Weil," 123.

[53] Simone Kotva, "The Occult Mind of Simone Weil," 130.

[54] In her "Spiritual Autobiography," Weil relates how in her early adolescence, comparing her own faculties with those of her exceptionally gifted brother, she fell into a fit of "bottomless despair" at the prospect that she might be "excluded from the transcendent kingdom to which only the truly great have access and wherein truth abides" (*WG*, 23). After months of "inward darkness," she came to the 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" (*WG*, 23).

[55] Pétrement refers to this as Weil's attempt to make the masterpieces of Greek poetry "accessible to the widest possible audience." Weil wrote that "If I have done what I intended to do, it should be able to interest and move everyone—from the manager to the last of the workers." Pétrement, *Simone Weil: A Life*, 263.

written during the same period as her writings on Plato, Weil writes that what she was truly interested in was recovering something that would once again "permeate" civilization in the same way that she believed it had in the South of France in the thirteenth century. I will return to this in chapter 3, but here I highlight how Weil's method was not intended to decipher a secret knowledge for a select few, but was specifically articulated as a project of popularizing ideas that had been either stifled or lost to time.[56]

It is the figural language of myth in Plato's dialogues that most draws Weil's attention. Even early on, Weil recognized in myths the potential to open a person to divine truths, effecting a turning of the soul. In 1925, a sixteen-year-old Weil submitted an essay exposition of one of Grimm's fairy tales (The Tale of Six Swans) to her teacher, Alain, which Simone Pétrement records as the first work by Weil that Alain thought to be truly excellent.[57] It begins with a reference to Plato—"Among Plato's finest thoughts are those which came to him by meditating on the myths"[58]—which announces both Weil's early proclivity toward Plato and her fascination with myth. Weil pursued a similar task of contemplating myths that continued until her final years.[59] Part of her fascination with them

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[56] In Weil's letter to Déodat Roché in which she admires his essay on Catharism, she writes explicitly that "No thought attains to its fullest existence unless it is incarnated in a human environment, and by environment I mean something open to the world around, something which is steeped in the surrounding society and is in contact with the whole of it, and not simply a closed circle of disciples around a master" (*SL*, 131). Weil is not attracted to them because of a preference for an exclusive form/content of knowledge, but because a rejection of force had been so completely infused all of society, and that this formed a possible alternative vision for the kind of civilization she was trying to envision.

[57] Simone Pétrement, *Simone Weil: A Life*, 36.

[58] *OC* I, 57, quoted in English in Narcy, "The Limits and Significance of Simone Weil's Platonism," in *The Christian Platonism of Simone Weil* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004), 25.

[59] Weil's New York notebooks are particularly full of references to myths and folklore. In an especially rich section, for example, she lists a broad range of them to explore from Britain, Norway and Denmark to Albania and Japan, outlining some in more detail (*FLN*, 161-173). Weil's interest in folklore could be compared to the more contemporary example of Jack Zipes. *Buried Treasures: The Power of Political Fairy Tales* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2023). Zipes similarly describes his goal of "scavenging" and "collecting" buried tales that illuminate human struggles and social conflicts (7). His

was their openness to interpretation and thus, their richness as objects of contemplation since their meaning is never fully expressed by a single interpretation. Weil writes, "Plato never tells all in these myths. It is not arbitrary to extend them. It would be much more arbitrary not to extend them" (IC, 112/OC IV.2, 188). The myths and images that Weil discusses are suggestive more than they are comprehensive, evoking a variety of possible interpretations that must be tried and tested. They can never be fully explained discursively, nor is their meaning ever completely exhausted. They necessarily remain partial—even sometimes contradictory—accounts, leaving out as much as they reveal, yet disclosing something of the truth from different angles (IC, 113/OC IV.2, 189).[60] She compares the myths in Plato to the parables of the Gospels which need continual interpretation (LPW, 48/OC IV.2, 77). Written in plain language, they are intended to unsettle, jarring the wise from what they thought they knew and ushering the reader into a new understanding. She considers herself to be engaged in the work of "transposing" Plato's myths as part of an "eternal" philosophical tradition in order to put them into a language relevant to her own time (LPW, 33-34). This attention to the myths and images in the dialogues speaks to her awareness of how the poetic and metaphorical influences the ways we think about the world and, moreover, that to change one's way of thinking will also require new myths and images or reassessments of the old and familiar.

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focus has been especially to retrieve fairy tales that have been used to question abusive power, injustice, and exploitation (18), an enterprise that resonates strongly with Weil's own interests in interpreting myths with an eye to their potential for re-imagining social relations.

[60] "*Il ne faut pas regarder ces mythes et tous ceuz qui leur ressemblent comme des récits, mais comme des symboles, de sorte que des mythes différents peuvent correspondre à la même verité vue sous telle ou telle face*" (*OC* IV.2, 189). In her notebooks she writes similarly, "The various interpretations of mythology…can in certain cases all be true at the same time" (*N*, 49).

3. Divine Love and Force: The Banquet

Weil reads Plato's *Symposium* as a narrative describing multiple and sometimes contradictory accounts of Love. These contradictions are not problematic for Weil, but are instead crucial to uncovering and revealing the truth.[61] Her reading centers on three speeches—Aristophanes, Agathon, and Socrates—with Agathon's speech at the "height" of the dialogue, concentrating not so much on *eros* at all, but on his characterization of force in relation to love. Three things are especially important in Weil's reading of the *Symposium*: that human beings are born with a longing for god-like power and a sense of incompleteness or thirst that is never entirely overcome in this life; that divine love never proceeds by force; and that love is a daimon, a mediator between the heavenly realm and the earthly one. Weil's reading of these dialogues situates love and force within a divine drama of cosmic scope, in which humans participate in what Weil calls God's loving self-relation, a key idea that I elucidate with reference to Socrates' speech. In Weil's reading, the *Symposium* discloses the human tendency to use force not as a lack of love, but as a love that is misguided and that seeks domination. But she also discovers in Plato's dialogue, especially Agathon's speech, an account of divinity's loving renunciation of power that she

[61] Miklos Veto suggests that Weil held an understanding of both reason and mystery having just claim to authority in their respective domains, and that this is a central characteristic of Weil's interpretation of Plato. Veto, *The Religious Metaphysics Simone Weil*, 3. For Weil, there are legitimate and illegitimate "uses" of mystery and contradiction. It is legitimate when logical and rigorous use of the intelligence leads to an impasse, at which point, the notion of mystery works like a lever, carrying thought "beyond the domain of the intelligence and above it." But to arrive beyond, she insists that one must travel through the domain of the intelligence with "unimpeachable rigour" (*FLN*, 131).

compares to the Christian kenotic movement of self-emptying that human creatures are to emulate. She suggests that Plato's account raises the importance of mutual consent in this, drawing out God's first consent to submit and relinquish power followed by the need for human creatures to similarly consent to relinquishing themselves in decreation.

i. Aristophanes

Weil does not even mention the first two speeches of Phaedrus and Pausanias, and merely quotes a few passages of Eryximachus' speech with a single line of interpretation. It is Aristophanes, the comedian, whose speech Weil first elaborates on, characterizing it as "one of the most beautiful" (IC, 106/OC IV.2, 180). Aristophanes narrates a vivid mythical account of human nature and the origins of desire, a story about primordial circular people with two faces and four legs who live a life of felicity on the earth. And yet, terrible in strength and power, and with great ambition, they are one day overtaken by a desire to climb up to heaven to attack the gods (190c/IC, 108/OC IV.2, 183). In order to punish the creatures without utterly destroying them, and thereby lose their worship and sacrifices, Zeus cleaves them in two, diminishing their strength and leaving them with a continual sense of insufficiency and longing for their other halves. Aristophanes explains: "This, then, is the source of our desire to love each other. Love is born into every human being; it calls back the halves of our original nature together; it tries to make one out of two and heal the wound of human nature" (191d).

Weil reads Aristophanes' tale as a portrayal of the same hubris and desire for self-aggrandizement depicted in the Genesis accounts of the fall and the Tower of Babel. While Aristophanes' narrative moves toward the moment in which the creatures are severed in two in order to give an account of human desire and the consequences of their division, Weil first pauses to draw attention to their nature before they attempt the ascent to heaven. Although still whole, they were nevertheless ambitious (190c). For Weil, the myth depicts an initial lust for power that causes human fallenness in the first place, and that is revealed in their desire to be like gods. The consequence of this fallenness is that human creatures are afflicted with an ailment: the continual longing for completion that is within every one of us, a hunger from which we find no rest (IC, 109/OC IV.2, 184).

Weil admits that Aristophanes' speech is obscure, but she nevertheless interprets it as having an essential idea: "Our vocation is unity. Our affliction is to be in a state of duality, an affliction due to an original contamination of pride and of injustice" (IC, 110/OC IV.2, 185). This duality is experienced as a sense of lack and insufficiency that cuts to the core of our being:

> Love in us is therefore the feeling of our radical insufficiency in consequence of sin, and the desire, coming from the very sources of our being, to be reintegrated into the state of completion…We need not ask ourselves how to have love, it is in us from birth to death, imperious as hunger. We need only to know in what direction to direct it. (IC, 109/OC IV.2, 184)

The problem is articulated not in terms of needing to learn how to love, which is already fundamental to being human; love calls back the halves of our original nature in order to

make one out of two and heal the wound of human nature (191d). Rather, it is a matter of learning to direct one's love toward its proper end.

Weil admits that human creatures seek all kinds of objects that are poor substitutes. Sex and romantic love, what she calls platonic love, friendship – while they all give the impression of re-union, they are mere shadows that only temporarily satisfy the desire for wholeness. They are a degraded form of a remedy, she writes, a mere image of that primitive unity to which all aspire from the depths of their soul (IC, 112/OC IV.2, 188). This is part of the tragic character of human life for Weil: that we are born with love in our souls that is continually misdirected. Weil takes up Augustine's language of original sin to explain this elsewhere,[62] but here she simply focuses on Aristophanes' intimation of an initial desire, present but unexplained in the myth. A sense of alienation pervades human life that no person can assuage. Indeed, Aristophanes' myth casts doubt on the ability of any earthly love to satisfy desire, since even before the souls were severed, they were filled with longing for something beyond themselves. Quoting Aristophanes, Weil writes: "It's obvious that the soul of every lover longs for something else; his soul cannot say what it is, but like an oracle it has a sense of what it wants, and like an oracle it hides behind a riddle" (192c-d, quoted in IC, 110/OC IV.2, 185-186). Even if the souls were welded together

[62] Weil often uses the term "original sin" in her notebooks, referring to it as the inherited sin caused by Adam's pride and disobedience, prompting Weil to take up an emphasis on postures of humility and obedience. It is unclear how much Weil had read of Augustine's works, since she usually only mentions him in passing in her notebooks. When he is cited directly, it is often as the representative of what she took to be orthodox Church doctrine and official Christendom. Nevertheless, she was clearly influenced by him, if only through the mystical tradition in which she was interested. Simone Kotva, for example, suggests this influence through the prominent place Weil gives to passivity and her concept of attention as prayer. See chapter 1, "The spiritual exercise of philosophy: Two ideals," where she traces this influence on Weil's thought. *Effort and Grace: On the Spiritual Exercise of Philosophy*, 1-25.

again, they would not experience the satiation they seek, since the myth suggests a much earlier desire that caused the division in the first place.

The human condition is thus to be in a state of duality and continual hunger.[63] She describes this malady:

> That duality which is our affliction is the division by which he who loves is other than that which is loved, he who knows is other than that which is known, the material of the action other than the one who acts, it is the separation of the subject and the object. Unity is that state wherein the subject and the object are one single and the same thing, the state of him who knows himself and who loves himself. (IC, 110/OC IV.2, 185)

According to Weil, unity is possible for God alone, and therefore it is only through God that human creatures can once again experience it: "It is only in becoming again the friend of God that man can hope to receive, in the other world, after death, the unity, the integrity, which he needs" (IC, 112/OC IV.2, 188). Weil takes up Aristophanes' brief suggestion that Love is a physician (189d, 193d), reading the narrative as testimony that love is what treats the wound of original sin, restoring humans to wholeness (IC, 108/OC IV.2, 183). In her reading, there is an affinity here between Love as a physician and Christ in the Gospels who heals the wound and restores the soul to wholeness. What is required is not simply that God become the object of love, however, but that one becomes subsumed in God's love:

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[63] In "Seize Hold of the Hunger: Simone Weil's Ethical Eros," Rebecca Rozelle-Stone points out how this aspect of Weil's understanding of desire as unquenchable hunger holds structural similarities to contemporary neoliberal orientations about never-ending growth. She distinguishes between the "achievement subject" who is always oriented toward the future, and Weil's articulation in which one must become detached from the future as yet another false object. For Weil, as we will see, the proper disposition is one of waiting. Rozelle-Stone, "Seize Hold of the Hunger: Simone Weil's Ethical Eros," in *Reframing Twentieth-Century French Philosophy: The Roots of Desire*, ed. Eoldie Boublil (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2023): 68-70.

"we cannot become thus except by assimilation in God, which the love of God accomplishes" (IC, 110/OC IV.2, 185). And further, "Granted that such integrity belongs only to God, man may have part in it only by the union of love with God" (IC, 112/OC IV.2, 188). Weil returns to this in her reading of Plato's *Phaedrus*, but her interpretation of Aristophanes' speech emphasizes the propensity toward pride, hubris, and force, the inherent longing within human creatures and the perpetual attempt to fulfill that desire by insufficient means, and the possibility of having a taste of completion once again by participating in God's love.

ii. Agathon

Aristophanes' myth is beautiful, but according to Weil, the *Symposium* reaches its glorious height in the tragic poet Agathon's speech, which she suggests contains "perhaps the most beautiful [lines] in Plato" (IC, 116/OC IV.2, 192). Indeed, Agathon's celebration of Eros is put in beautiful terms that are praised in the dialogue by those in attendance. Of all the Gods, he suggests, "Love is the most joyful, the most beautiful and the most perfect" (195a). Love "gives peace to men and stillness to the sea, lays winds to rest, and careworn men to sleep" (197c-d). It draws people together and drains all divisiveness away. Love "moves us to mildness and removes us from wildness," and is giver of kindness and father to elegance, luxury, delicacy, and grace (197d).

Weil is clearly affected by these moving characterizations, but even more than Agathon's words about love, it is what he says about love's relationship to force that she

finds insightful and that forms the crucial center of her meditations. Her primary focus is on a few short lines in which Agathon turns to the god's moral character, associating love with justice:

> 196b. The most important is that Love neither causes nor submits to injustice, be it among the gods or among men. For, when suffering happens to him he does not suffer by force, for force cannot reach Love. And when he acts, he does not proceed by force, for each one consents to obey Love in everything. That agreement which is made by mutual consent is righteous, according to the laws of the 'City royal'. (IC, 116/OC IV.2, 192)[64]

Of Agathon's words, Weil writes: "These lines are perhaps the most beautiful in Plato. Here is the very centre of all Greek thought, its perfectly pure and luminous core" (IC, 116/OC IV.2, 192). What Weil finds so illuminating about the passage is Agathon's recognition of both the power of might and the acknowledgement of the need to resist its seduction. She writes: "The recognition of might as an absolutely sovereign thing in all of nature…and at the same time as an absolutely detestable thing; this is the innate grandeur of Greece" (IC, 116/OC IV.2, 192). Weil believed this "double knowledge concerning might" was sufficiently widespread in Greece to "impregnate the whole civilization" during its best epochs, becoming the inspiration for the poem of the *Iliad*, Greek tragedy, the historians, and a large part of the philosophy (IC, 117/OC IV.2, 193). She believed it re-emerged briefly

[64] Weil's French translation of the Greek of this important passage is the following: "*La principale, c'est que l'Amour ne fait ni ne subit aucune injustice, ni parmi les dieux, ni parmi les hommes. Car il ne souffre pas par force, quoi qu'il ait à souffrir, car la force n'atteint pas l'Amour. Et quand it agit, il n'agit pas par force car chacun volontiers obéit en tout à l'Amour. Un accord consenti de part et d'autre est juste, dissent les lois de la cité royale*."

in the Languedoc civilization of the South of France, and sought a way to recover it for her own time.[65] To have the understanding that force is both sovereign and detestable is the "purest source of love for God" because it "glues" the soul to prayer (IC, 116/OC IV.2, 193) with the recognition of one's limitations and that one is dependent on something outside of the self.

The passage inspires several pages of sprawling meditations on love and justice, force, and consent, in which Weil reflects on the prevalent worship of might and violence and the need to imitate divine love and its removal from all contact with force. She comments especially on the problem of the widespread, though often hidden, worship of might in the socio-political realm: "Today one sees many people who honour might above all, whether they give it that name or other names possessed of a more agreeable sound. One also sees many, however, in rapidly decreasing number, who despise might. This is because they are ignorant of its powerful effects. They lie to themselves, if need be, in order not to learn about it" (IC, 116/OC IV.2, 193). Might tends to be either worshipped outright or not treated with sufficient seriousness to understand its ubiquity. Weil seeks to expose the more subtle ways that it operates and shows how both those who wield it and those who suffer from it are victims to its power.

[65] Weil refers to this same passage of Agathon's speech in her essay on Occitan culture, "*En quoi consiste l'inspiration occitanienne*," which draws a direct link between what she believed to be similar understandings of force and divine love in the two civilizations (*OC* IV.2, 420). She draws the same parallel in her notebooks, where she writes more specifically: "Languedoc, Greece—two civilizations in which there was no adoration of force; because there the temporal was used as a bridge. Nor did they seek spiritual states characterized by intensity, but loved purity of feeling. Only that which is non-subject to force is pure. Love was, for them, pure desire, devoid of all spirit of conquest. Such is the kind which man feels for God" (*N*, 457).

Weil's most focused elaboration on the concept of force is in her essay, "The *Iliad*, or the Poem of Might," which was written in the summer of 1940 after France's collapse in the face of Hitler's forces. It was originally considered for publication in the *Nouvelle Revue Francaise*, but the editor, Jean Paulhan, requested cuts that she was unwilling to make. She was unable to publish it elsewhere at the time due to anti-Semitic censorship laws, but eventually had it published as her first contribution to the *Cahier du Sud*, which continued to publish Jewish writers.[66] In the essay, she articulates a key insight: that it is not only the vanquished who are victims of force, but also the conquerors who are subject to it. She begins the essay with a pithy statement of her thesis:

> The true hero, the subject, the center of the *Iliad* is force. Force employed by man, force that enslaves man, force before which man's flesh shrinks away. In this work, at all times, the human spirit is shown as modified by its relations with force, as swept away, blinded, by the very force it imagined it could handle, as deformed by the weight of the force it submits to. (WI, 3)

Force, she continues, is "that *x* that turns anybody who is subjected to it into a thing. Exercised to the limit, it turns man into a thing in the most literal sense: it makes a corpse out of him" (WI, 3).[67]

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[66] Lisa Robertson, *Anemones: A Simone Weil Project* (Amsterdam: If I Can't Dance, 2021), 48. The essay was the first of Weil's pieces to be translated into English, notably by the American writer and political activist Mary McCarthy, whose translation first appeared in the New York journal *Politics* in 1945.

[67] For a particularly lucid analysis of this essay, see Chapter 2 of Yoon Sook Cha, *Decreation and the Ethical Bind*. Jane Doering's *Simone Weil and the Specter of Self-Perpetuating Force* provides the most comprehensive overview of Weil's use of the term force. See also Alexander Irwin, *Saints of the Impossible: Bataille, Weil, and the Politics of the Sacred* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

Weil returns to some of these ideas in her notes on Agathon's speech, developing an analysis of the social dimensions of force and reiterating the way that both the one who wields might and the one wounded by it are subject to its degrading empire, and that contact with it "petrifies and transforms a man into a thing" (IC, 117/OC IV.2, 193).[68] What she adds in her reflections on Plato is an elaboration on the relationship between force, love and desire. In her reading of Agathon's speech, she places divine love in direct opposition to force. Love neither does violence nor suffers it, it does not conquer by force nor does it allow itself to be conquered by force. While force may reign everywhere, love stands apart in that it is the one thing that is never able to be defiled by it (N, 456-457). Weil divides the human soul into two parts: the natural and the supernatural part. Although human creatures tend to act by force, by what she calls a "necessity of nature," she admits that within every one of us there is a part that is untouched by it: "There is something in us which lies completely outside the range of relationships of force, which does not touch force and is not touched by force" (N, 456-457).[69] She identifies this part of each of us as supernatural justice or supernatural love (IC, 117/OC IV.2, 193). What she is interested in is investigating how human creatures, who are constantly subjected to force and live in a world governed by necessity and might, can nevertheless live without serving it as master.

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[68] "*Aujourd'hui, devant un acte de violence, les uns accordant leur sympathie à celui qui exerce la violence, les autres à celui qui la subit. Il y a de la lâcheté dans les deux attitudes. Les meilleurs parmi les Grecs, à commencer par la où les poètes de l'Iliade, savaient que tout ce qui exerce ou subit la force est pareillement et dans la même mesure soumis à son empire degradant. Qu'on manie la force ou qu'on soit blessé par elle, de toute manière son contact pétrifie et transforme un homme en chose*" (*OC* IV.2, 193).

[69] Weil's language of "necessity of nature" comes directly from Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*, quoted in the introduction.

The difficulty for human creatures is that we live "hemmed in" by necessity and are continually caught up in relations that are defined by might. She writes that "being creatures of flesh and caught in necessity, we can be constrained by a strict obligation to transmit the violence of the mechanism of which we are a wheel; for example as leaders over subordinates, as soldiers over enemies. It is often very difficult, painful, and agonizing to determine just how far strict obligation goes" (IC, 120/OC IV.2, 196). Weil's anthropology is thus defined by her understanding of the human tendency to use force, replicating the structure of the world of which we are part through our relationships to others. Like gravity, this heaviness affects everyone, drawing the soul downward: "All in nature, including psychological nature, is under the dominance of a force as brutal, as pitilessly directed downward as gravity" (IC, 116/OC IV.2, 193).[70] Resistance to this force is all the more difficult, given we are usually unaware of it. Like Aristophanes account of love, which for Weil highlights an initial desire to rise by our own means, human creatures seek to imitate God's power rather than God's powerlessness. She writes that "We have become separated from God by desiring to share in his divinity through power and not through love, through being and not through non-being" (N, 539). Re-union will require a relinquishment of that desire for power and being.

Agathon's characterization of Eros leads Weil to draw a number of correspondences between Greek thought and Christian faith (IC, 119/OC IV.2, 195). In particular, it prompts her to consider the ways that power and sovereignty have been worshiped in Christianity.

[70] The opening lines of *Gravity and Grace* begin with a similar affirmation: "All the *natural* movements of the soul are controlled by laws analogous to those of physical gravity. Grace is the only exception" (*GG*, 45, italics added).

Weil admits that all speech about God ultimately fails, and her own tendency is to turn to paradox, which frustrates the limits of language. For example, in her notebooks she writes that "God is at the same time absolute power and absolute powerlessness" (N, 541). And yet, Weil suggests that too much emphasis has been placed on God's power, and that it is necessary to recall that God also renounces power and divinity in order to be in relation with human creatures. She turns to Agathon's speech about Love to reveal something about Christianity. What is so surprising about Agathon's statement, according to Weil, is that this God submits and refuses to use all the power at God's command:

> A more surprising thing for a God, for him who is the king of all the Gods, for the supreme God, is that he not only acts, he submits: πασχειν means at once to be modified, to submit, to suffer. From which comes παθεμα, the Greek word employed to designate the Passion. Love is modified, submits, suffers, but not by constraint. Therefore by consent. (IC, 118/OC IV.2, 194)

What is remarkable according to Weil is that this description of Love emphasizes that it does not wield force but submits. Her understanding of Christianity prioritizes the suffering servant who submits to pain and even to the cross, relinquishing power and might.

For Weil, it is God alone who escapes from this contact with might. In a rich passage, Weil outlines what it means for God to refuse contact with might, to withdraw and renounce power, and for human creatures to imitate this Love by means of obedience:

> If divine Love is the perfect model of justice, and that because he is withdrawn from all contact with might, neither can man be righteous except by preserving himself equally from contact with might, and he cannot preserve himself except by love. By

> love he must imitate Love, who never suffers anything without having consented to suffer it. It is also possible for man to be like this. It suffices for him to consent fully, at every instant, with love for the order God has created in the world, to all wounds without the least exception which the course of events may bring him. This unconditional 'Yes' which is pronounced in the most secret point of the soul, which is but silence, is entirely withdrawn from all danger of contact with force. This method is simple. There is no other. This is *amor fati*, it is the virtue of obedience, the Christian virtue excellent above all others. (IC, 120/OC IV.2, 196)

Here Weil identifies obedience as the central and purest virtue because of the way that it involves setting aside one's own will and desires with an openness to be directed by what is outside the self, taking up an attitude of submission to God's will. While humans tend toward self-aggrandizement, according to Weil a posture of obedience is the primary way to limit self-interest and forcefulness. "It is simple to take as rule with regard to others, and even with regard to oneself, in the wielding of stress, never to go even so much as a millimetre beyond strict obligation," she writes, clarifying that she is referring here not just to more obvious forms of force, but also to the ways it might appear under the guise of pressure, eloquence and persuasion which can constrain a person more subtly (IC, 120/OC IV.2, 196-197). Instead, a less willful way of acting is needed to imitate the way that divine Love acts in the world.

Does this simply indicate submission to another kind of tyranny, shifting one's obedience from force to Love? What kind of worship is involved in this? Weil's meditations on these passages in Agathon's speech identify a crucial difference between the two, which

is that Love itself consents to submit. The language of consent is there in the important passage of Agathon's speech and it becomes central to Weil's vocabulary in the final years of her life. Indeed, she goes so far as to suggest that love is precisely this consent (N, 450). She connects it explicitly to the way Christ submits voluntarily, consenting to suffering and the cross, and she insists that God only works in the soul of one who consents: "This Love, which is God himself, acts, since he is God, but he acts only so far as he obtains consent. It is thus that he acts upon the souls of men" (IC, 118/OC IV.2, 194). Weil continues, insisting that this consent must be absolutely unconditional, that its efficacy is thrown into question if there is even the slightest—even unconscious—reservation. But if the "Yes" is unconditional, it is a sail that carries the part of the soul which pronounces it to the heavens.

Weil praises the beauty of obedience. She takes up Agathon's descriptions of Love's softness, fluidity, and elegance and shows how obedience exhibits these characteristics. While the procedure of developing a gentle obedience is often a rigorous, difficult, and painful process of training, which Weil outlines in her reading of the *Republic*, here in the *Symposium* she notes the ways in which habituated consent to be moved by something outside of ourselves makes one's actions appear effortless. Her attention to the aspect of consent is key for this, since consent implies an agreement, to "feel together," which suggests that it is less about submission to domination and entails a shared movement.

iii. Socrates

Finally, Weil briefly elucidates Socrates' speech in which he repeats the teachings given by the priestess Diotima, whom Weil identifies as a priestess of the Eleusinian religion (IC, 124/OC IV.2, 202). Given the Christian mystical tradition's fascination with Diotima's account of love,[71] it is perhaps surprising that Weil barely comments on the speech. While she eventually takes up Diotima's description of the ladder of love, it is the myth of the birth of Love that Weil quotes in full, suggesting that each word of the "delicious myth" requires meditation (IC, 127/OC IV.2, 205). Diotima gives a genealogical account of Love's birth from the parentage of Resource and Want, conceived on the night of a feast in celebration of the birth of the beautiful Aphrodite. Love is thus born by nature a lover of beauty, yet Love's "fortune" is to be perpetually in want. Although the multitude believes him to be delicate and beautiful, they forget his other side, that he is a vagrant: "He is hardened and dried up, barefoot, without a roof, always stretched upon the ground, sleeping in front doorsteps, along the roadsides, in the open air" (203d). This is a very different depiction from Agathon's description of Love's beauty and elegance. While Agathon describes Love as the "king of the gods," here Love is portrayed as a "miserable vagabond" who is poor and destitute, homeless, sleeping in the open air and always lying on the bare ground (IC, 129/OC IV.2, 207). Yet for Weil this depicts another, unconventional kind of beauty, one that is present in Christ, but also in figures who emulate Christ such as Francis of Assisi (IC, 129/OC IV.2, 207).

[71] In *The Foundations of Mysticism* (Vol. 1 of *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism*), Bernard McGinn points to three myths that became central to the mystical tradition (the ladder of ascent in the *Symposium*, the winged chariot in the *Phaedrus*, and the image of the cave in the *Republic*).

The key revelation for Weil, however, is in Diotima's characterization of Love as a daimon, an intermediary between human beings and God through whom human creatures can communicate with the gods and divine messages can be received by humans so that there is dialogue between them (202e, quoted on IC, 125/OC IV.2, 202). In the myth, Diotima describes how Love, having his mother's nature, is always the companion of privation; yet like his father, he is enterprising, courageous, always busy, intense, a formidable hunter, and desirous of wisdom. He is the intermediary between the knowing and the ignorant, for his father is wise and resourceful and his mother wants wisdom and resource (IC, 126-127/OC IV.2, 203-205). According to Weil, "Plato affirms here, as categorically as possible, that apart from divine mediation there can be no relationship between God and man" (IC, 126/OC IV.2, 203).[72]

The other aspect of Socrates' speech that she briefly elucidates is what she understands as the stages of salvation by beauty. According to Weil, Diotima begins with a theory about carnal love as "the desire to beget in beauty with a view to immortality" (IC, 143/OC IV.2, 222). The desire for eternity in us goes first by mistake toward the material image of eternity, to the beauty that is most immediately apprehensible. And yet, Diotima describes the stages of the soul's progress from the consideration of physical beauty to the beauty of souls, to laws and institutions, the sciences, and finally the consummation of love, the contemplation of beauty itself (IC, 144/OC IV.2, 222). She quotes a long passage from Diotima's speech that elucidates the erotic pull of beauty: "These passages show how

[72] See Eric Springsted, *Christus Mediator*, on Weil's understanding of mediation in Plato's dialogues, 52-63.

mistaken are people who consider Plato's ideas as solidified abstractions. Here it is a question of a spiritual marriage with the beautiful, by the grace of which the soul truly begets virtues. Further, the beautiful does not reside in anything. It is not an attribute. It is a subject. It is God" (IC, 145/OC IV.2, 224). Slowly the soul is drawn up, so that eventually through their "supernatural sight" they can see what is true: "After a long spiritual preparation one has access to it by a sort of revelation, of rending: 'suddenly he shall perceive a species of miraculous beauty.' This is the description of mystical experience" (Symposium, 210e) (IC, 147/OC IV.2, 223).

Ultimately, Weil writes that everyone longs for this. From the beginning until the last instant of life, what one desires is nothing else than the Good, which for Weil is nothing else than God (IC, 131/OC IV.2, 209).[73] This is not a refutation of Aristophanes' myth about souls searching for their other halves; rather, Weil writes that it affirms the myth and specifies that the complement is not in fact our own likeness: "We are indeed incomplete beings who have been cleft by violence, fragments perpetually starving for their complementary part. But contrary to what Aristophanes' myth would seem at first sight to indicate, these complements cannot be in our likeness. Our completion is the good; that is, God. We are fragments torn from God" (IC, 130/OC IV.2, 208). And, moreover, "we need not search how to put the love of God in us. It is the very foundation of our being. If we love anything else, we do so by error as the result of mistaken identity" (IC, 130). We may mistakenly put our love elsewhere, yet "what we perpetually love, from the first to the last instant of life, is nothing else than the true God" (IC, 130-131). This is the point towards

[73] Weil makes one of the few direct references to Augustine on this point (*LPW*, 60/OC IV.2, 91).

which she directs our attention, but one which she suggests is taken up in the *Republic* in a way that is "still more beautiful and more powerful" (IC, 131).

4. Conversions: The Cave and the Great Beast

Weil's reading of the *Symposium* centres on the different accounts of the soul's loves and its tendency toward using force. Her reading of the *Republic* continues her reflections on love and force in the soul, but also extends her analysis to the social and political realm, invoking the ways that a love of social prestige is projected by the collective and fuels a desire for power over others. Weil's thoughts on Plato's *Republic* center almost exclusively on the images of the cave and the great beast from Books VI and VII. It is in this context that she elucidates the importance of detachment, which she identifies as the central, "mystical," theme of these two books. She calls it a "wrenching away" or "uprooting" from one's attachment to the false idols of the self and the collective, describing the process as a painful, even violent one that entails a death of the self. It is launched by an interruption from something beyond the self, a flash of beauty, and followed by the arduous work of the will to move from a place of darkness to light.

The cave's imagery of darkness and light, enchainment, vision, conversion, and ascent are central to her reading. She interprets the image as a depiction of the conversion of one's love from attachment to the things that pass—and specifically, the power and illusion of prestige—toward a love that attends to what is true, beautiful and good (IC, 132/OC IV.2, 210). She insists that one is mistaken in believing that the metaphor relates

simply to knowledge and sight signifies the intelligence (IC, 134/OC IV.2, 211). According to Weil, the image charts the soul's journey toward God as both the object and source of all longing.[74] Yet she is also concerned with exploring the condition of imprisonment and what the shadows might represent. By reading the image of the great beast from Book VI into the image of the cave from Book VII, she highlights the seduction of social prestige, positioning the collective element of society as one of the primary obstructions to loving what is true. Ultimately, however, Weil does not suggest that one must turn away from the world. While the prisoner reaches the height of their journey in the contemplation and vision of God, Weil insists on the necessity to descend again into the social and political realm as an embodiment of love in the world.[75]

Plato's cave is perhaps the most famous of the many images in his dialogues. Found in *Republic* Book 7 (514a-518b), the image is framed as an account of the soul's education. We are asked to imagine a scene of prisoners bound by chains with their eyesight fixed on the wall in front of them. Outlines of shadows on the wall are manipulated from behind, so that the operators cannot be seen and the prisoners are kept in a state of ignorance about their surroundings, each other, and the truth about what they see. The crucial moment occurs when the prisoner is suddenly released, compelled to stand up and dragged upward toward the sunlight. Blinded and disoriented, at first they would only be able to see the shadows of the things above ground. But gradually, they would become accustomed and

[74] On the city as soul in the *Republic*, Weil writes, "It is necessary to remember that this city is a fiction, a pure symbol that represents the soul" (*LPW*, 68/*OC* IV.2, 100).

[75] While most of my references to Plato's notes on Plato are drawn from *Intimations of Christianity*, I use to the version of "God in Plato" in *Simone Weil: Late Philosophical Writings,* ed. and trans Eric O. Springsted and Lawrence E. Schmidt (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015), because it offers a more precise translation.

able to look at reflections in water, followed by the light of the stars and the moon, and finally, to look at the sun itself. The evocative imagery has received countless interpretations and has been an important image within the mystical tradition, where it has been interpreted as a depiction of the soul's conversion and ascent to the beatific vision of God.[76]

In the image, vision is the primary metaphor to illustrate a state of dark imprisonment and illusion before the sudden turn and painful journey toward the source of light. For Weil, it is not solely a depiction of an intellectual process, but instead represents the total transformation of both one's knowledge and love from the worship and idolization of what is false to a love that is properly directed toward the divine. The unreality of the things in the cave is not connected to things as such, she writes, but is instead "a question of things as the object for love" (IC, 134/OC IV.2, 211). By likening the education of the soul to eyesight, Socrates' image suggests that the process is not about putting something into the soul that is not already present, since one is born with eyesight, but in the art of conversion, redirecting one to look towards the light that comes from on high (518d).[77] In Weil's

[76] For a broad overview of Plato's influence on the Christian mystical tradition, see Bernard McGinn, Chapter 2 ("The Greek Contemplative Ideal") of the first volume of his *Foundations of Mysticism: Origins to the Fifth Century* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1992). Denys Turner has argued that the allegory of the cave and Moses' encounter with Yahweh on Mount Sinai inform much of the distinctive language of the Western Christian mystical tradition, where the philosopher's ascent to knowledge is read as an allegory of the ascent to God. Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 11-15.

[77] Weil writes: "It is evident that Plato regards true wisdom as something supernatural. One cannot express more clearly than he does the opposition between the two possible conceptions of wisdom. Those who regard wisdom as a possible addition to human nature think that when someone becomes wise that a human effort has put into him something that was not there before, and that somebody, himself or somebody else, has put this thing in him. Plato thinks that whoever has arrived at true wisdom has nothing more in himself than before, because wisdom is not in him, but is perpetually coming to him from somewhere else, namely, God" (*LPW*, 61-62/*OC* IV.2, 93).

interpretation, it is an image that depicts a shift in the direction of one's attention,[78] a transformation of the way one orders and directs one's love that requires detachment from the false loves that obscure and distract, but that ultimately depends on a gift from beyond the self.

Much of Weil's meditations on the image focus not on the ascent, however, but on uncovering what causes the condition of imprisonment in the first place. For Weil, the cave is a "terrible image of human misery" (LPW, 53/OC IV.2, 83), which she refuses to interpret as a condition from which we have emerged: "*We are that way* (not we were)" (LPW, 63/OC IV.2, 94). "We are born and live *in a lie*," she writes, "Lies only are given to us. Even ourselves; we believe we see ourselves, and we see only the shadow of ourselves" (LPW, 65/OC IV.2, 96). What is illusory is not the existence of the shadows, she writes in her notebooks, but the illusion of their finality and their value.[79] So all-consuming is the view that we fail to see anything outside of the system of values it presents to us. Unconscious of their unreality, and at the greatest possible distance from God (LPW, 65/OC IV.2, 96), we mistake the shadows as ends in themselves.

Weil identifies several possible objects in which we mistakenly place our love—in particular, the self (the ego), the body and its desires—but she interprets the cave as a depiction of an even greater obstacle than these: the collective element of society (LPW, 53/OC IV.2, 83). For Weil these are related, insofar as the collective stokes the desire for

[78] "The way of ascent, in the *Republic*, is that of degrees of attention. The eye of the soul is the attention" (*N*, 527).

[79] In her notebooks she writes similarly: "The image of the cave is concerned with finality. All we have are shadowy imitations of good. Moreover, it is with respect to good that we are passive, chained down (by attachment). We accept the false values that are visible to us, and when we think we are acting, we are in reality motionless, for we remain within the same system of values" (*N*, 550).

prestige in the first place and influences and shapes one's loves. But in addition to the way it forms one's idea of reality, the collective also generates an aura of divinity around it and becomes an object of worship in its own right. She explains in a passage in her notebooks:

> There is only one single thing on earth which it is, in fact, possible to regard as an end, because it possesses a sort of transcendence with respect to the human individual, and that is the 'collective'. That is why we are chained to earth by it. It forms the object of every kind of idolatry. (N, 547)

This transcendent aspect of the collective holds power over the individual, giving it the "colour" of being an absolute good rather than a relative good (N, 592). The individual is at once part of it yet distant from it.[80] Weil admits that this articulation of the problem with the collective is not always something explicitly expressed in Plato's dialogues, yet she argues that the idea nevertheless permeates them all (IC, 84/OC IV.2, 84). Reflecting on its power and influence on the individual became an important and recurring theme in Weil's writings, surfacing especially in her critique of the Church as a social institution and her essays on the rise of Hitlerism at the very end of her life.

To better understand what Weil means by the "collective," however, we must turn to another image from the *Republic*. Weil suggests that the myth of the cave is only comprehensible when considered in conjunction with that of the "great, strong beast" from Socrates' discussion of sophistry in Book VI (N, 551, IC, 134/OC IV.II, 211). In the passage, Socrates uses the image to illustrate the ways in which young minds are educated

[80] Similarly, Weil writes in her notebooks with reference to the "Great Beast" of the collectivity: "The Great beast is the only object of idolatry, the only ersatz form of God, the only imitation of an object which is infinitely distant from me and is yet me" (*N*, 618).

in the beliefs and opinions of the sophists, mistaking the preferences and aversions of the multitude as wisdom. Compare such an education, he suggests, to learning the angers and desires of a beast one is rearing, noticing what makes it irritable or subdued, what soothes and excites it. After learning its tastes, one would call whatever pleases the animal good and whatever annoys it bad, regardless of what is noble or base, good or evil, just or unjust (*Republic* VI, 493a-c). Would this, he asks, be any different from becoming an expert in the anger and pleasures "of the multifarious many who assemble" (*Republic* VI, 493d)? When a large crowd gathers in an assembly, tribunal, theater, army or any other place where a multitude gathers, the crowd will cry and clap their hands, blame or praise excessively, and their noise is redoubled and amplified, creating an echo chamber that only intensifies the opinions of the beast (*Republic* VI, 492b-c) (LPW, 54/OC IV.2, 84).

The image is another evocative one that Weil turns to in order to highlight the character of the collective. She notes how Plato's image of the beast "depicts the collectivity as something animal, which hinders the soul's salvation" (NR, 128). It is driven by its own appetites, has a tendency to compel submission and conformity and curb independent thought, and inspires a certain fervour around it. Weil's integration of the great beast with the image of the cave reveals how she believed that the collective aspect of society is an obstacle—and perhaps even the primary obstacle—to loving the Good. In a collective, there is a confusion between relative and absolute goods and our desire is shaped by what the "many" projects. The puppet shadows in the cave are real but artificial and fabricated

imitations of things,[81] which Weil interprets as social institutions. Their shadows—conventions like money and royalty—have a certain reality, but of a secondary and artificial order (IC, 136/OC IV.2, 213-214). And yet, "we look upon [them] divorced from their purpose as being good things… And we ourselves only set a value on ourselves from the social standpoint" (N, 551).[82] Low-ranking goods informed by the fickle tastes of the multitude become the objects of desire and worship.

Rather than the Good, Weil argues that the "supreme social value" in the cave is prestige (IC, 136/OC IV.2, 214). Unlike other social conventions which are real but fabricated—Weil names gold or money, the institution of royalty—social prestige for Weil is an empty lie and an illusion. Yet it nevertheless wields power which "determines all in this world" (IC, 135/OC IV.2, 213). The dazzle of influence in the social realm is attached to the ability to have influence through money or education or fame, and is associated with war and conquest, and even forms of patriotism rooted in pride in a country's superiority over others.[83] For Weil, prestige belongs to the "kingdom of might" because of the way it exerts influence in order to procure advantages for oneself.[84] She associates the collective

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[81] Weil writes: "*des choses réelles, mais artificielles, fabriquées comme images de choses réelles et naturelle.*" (*OC* IV.2, 213-214).

[82] She elaborates further in a later passage of her notebooks: "Social forms of good are conventionally accepted forms of good. Social convention, the convenience of social conventions in general, or more precisely, the ordering of the City, the Law, constitutes the fire, the actual light, albeit an earthly one, which casts the shadows. Particular conventions, such as royalty, are fabricated objects. We look for the shadows of conventions. We are chained down in the midst of society. Society is the Cave. The way out is solitude" (*N*, 592-593).

[83] "War is the supreme form of prestige. The handling of arms may have as its object putting an end to prestige (Marathon), or establishing a durable prestige (Roman Empire)—In the former case there is an internal contradiction, in the latter case, not—Once the sword has been unsheathed, the domination of prestige is set up; non-resistance is not a means of avoiding it..." (*N*, 25)

[84] Weil makes a similar connection between might and prestige in one of her late essays, "The Power of Words," where she writes: "Prestige has no bounds and its satisfaction always involves the infringement of someone else's prestige or dignity. And prestige is inseparable from power. This seems to be an impasse from which humanity can only escape by some miracle" (*SE*, 169-170).

more generally with force in a passage from her notebooks: “The Great Beast. It is a real animal. It is susceptible to force and crushes weakness. It does not look upon humility as a virtue” (N, 370). This highlights another dimension of might that Agathon’s speech does not reveal. The “great beast” exposes the way force is adored in the social sphere through far more subtle ways of exerting pressure that can be used as psychological aids and that put constraints on the social realm (IC, 120/OC IV.2, 197).

Moreover, prestige is not simply manifested in the political realm. Weil writes that “we all choose for treasure those values that have their substance in social prestige” (IC, 135/OC IV.2, 213). She expands in more depth:

> This is true even for the desires which seem only to have reference to individuals…the pleasures of eating and drinking are much more social than they seem at first. Riches, power, advancement, decorations, honours of every kind, reputation, recognition, are values of an exclusively social order. Under the names of beauty and of truth almost all artists and scholars seek social prestige. (IC, 135/OC IV.2, 213)

Weil exposes the ways in which even apparently noble pursuits can be driven by a hidden desire for prestige, showing the prevalent influence of might in everyday life. Even the virtues of charity and love of neighbour can be subtle ways of demonstrating power over another person, either as a display of superior wealth or virtuous behaviour: “The etiquette of charity, of love for one’s neighbour, is generally a cover for the same article [of social prestige]” (IC, 135/OC IV.2, 213). Weil’s observations suggest that no one is immune, and that even apparent care for others can simply cloak one’s desire to show one’s own superiority.

This is true of relationships of desire as well. Though Weil does not mention the tyrannical love of Book IX of the *Republic* here,[85] in her notebooks she characterizes certain forms of desire that are obsessed with one's social image as similarly possessive and domineering:

> In the impulse which draws us toward a human being, the social character of that human being is in no sense absent. For example, the feelings of love aroused in us by princes, princesses, famous people, *grandes coquettes*, etc.—by all such as possess prestige. On the other hand, in the love we feel toward some one of an inferior footing to ourselves, the spirit of domination and possession is not absent, and this love tends toward the 'devouring' of a good many individuals: e.g. Don Juan. (N, 547)

One's desire for another person can be just as driven by prestige, either in that one desires the beloved for the prestige they possess or because of the way it contributes to a person's own prominence and reputation. The violent appropriation that is involved in the desire to "devour" another person is intimately related to Weil's critique of the way the ego always tends toward self-expansion, loving another human being "as food for ourselves" (N, 284). Here we can start to see the way that social prestige is for Weil always wrapped up with ideas about the self, since the desire for prestige is often accompanied by an attempt to project an inflated idea of the self that we want others to see.

As Socrates suggests in the *Republic*, the tastes of the great beast may be in line with what is true, or they may not. Conforming to them does not necessarily mean one is not in

[85] See Weil's Marseille notebooks where she opposes this tyrannical love of the *Republic* to the mad love in the *Phaedrus* (*FLN*, 52).

line with them, yet the inspiration remains different. For Weil, there are two moralities: a social morality which is governed by public opinion, and a "supernatural" morality, and "only those who are illumined by grace have access to the second" (IC, 85/OC IV.2, 85). She uses the example of someone stealing: if a person wants to steal but resists, there is a difference between resisting from obedience to the great beast or obedience to God. She writes that "the trouble is that one can easily tell oneself that one is obeying God and in reality be obeying the great beast. Because words can always be made to serve no matter what" (IC, 87/OC IV.2, 87). Just because one thinks or acts according to the truth does not prove that one is not a slave to the great beast, since all the virtues have a copy of themselves in the morality of the great beast (LPW, 56/OC IV.2, 87). The only exception, according to Weil, is the virtue of humility, which is opposed to prestige of any kind and which is modelled by figures such as St. Francis, and even more prominently, by Christ who rejected the prestige of worldly power when he was tempted in the desert by the devil who offered him all the kingdoms of earth.[86] Christ's whole life had little prestige, Weil writes, and he was stripped of any he had in his death on the cross as a common criminal, abandoned even by his disciples (IC, 137/OC IV.2, 214). The risk is that this is forgotten, and he is worshiped as a figure of prestige rather than servanthood.[87]

[86] Weil quotes Luke 4:5-6: "I will give you all the power and glory that goes with these. For it has been left to me, to me and to whomever it pleases me to make a part of it" (*LPW*, 56/*OC* IV.2, 86).

[87] Indeed, Weil suggests that Christians today are in an even more difficult position than his disciples because of this: "Because of his prestige, which acts as a screen, it is possible to be faithful even to death without being sure that it is to him one is faithful. Doubtless it is not impossible even to be a martyr without ever leaving the cave…." Unlike the martyr, Christ died abandoned and un-consoled, yet martyrdom today, Weil argues, has a degree of prestige (*IC*, 137-138/*OC* IV.2, 214).

The difference between obedience to the great beast and obedience to God can be subtle. Indeed, both the images of the cave and of the beast point to how difficult it is to know who or what one serves. One does not realize to what degree one is a slave to social influences, because "by its very nature this slavery is almost always unconscious, and at those moments when it appears to the consciousness there is always the resource of lying to oneself in order to veil it" (IC, 87/OC IV.2, 87).[88] It is the image of the cave that especially depicts this state of unconscious enslavement from which one must be freed. This presents one of the crucial aspects of the image: we do not possess the ability to unchain ourselves and require something from beyond to untether us from our false idols. What does the process entail? Plato's image is obscure and does not give any details about what releases the prisoner from their chains, but Weil interprets it as the shock of beauty. The prisoner receives a sudden jolt of "inspiration," a confrontation with beauty that may be from an instructor or by means of written word in a book, and they suddenly become aware that "this world is not everything, that there is something better and it is necessary to seek it out" (LPW, 66/OC IV.2, 97).

For Weil the role of beauty in this process is illustrated in the *Phaedrus*, but the *Republic* offers insight into the rest of the journey. Once the prisoner is released from their chains, there is a difficult and painful ascent out of the cave. According to Weil, the image of inertia, stiffness, and intolerable pain displays the process with "marvelous precision" (LPW, 66/OC IV.2, 97). To wrench away (*arrachement*) from what one has always loved

[88] It's for this reason that Weil suggests that atheism can be a kind of purification, because it asks one to question who or what one calls sovereign. See especially Rozelle-Stone and Stone, *Simone Weil and Theology,* 27-30.

as true and good involves undergoing an irreducible quantity of violence and pain that cannot be avoided without circumventing a total transformation. Indeed, Weil warns against the way the imagination can produce all kinds of new fantasies that convince the self that it is leaving the cave without undergoing any difficulty, leading to a mere superficial conversion (LPW, 66/OC IV.2, 97).[89] The sudden release from chains entails a violent uprooting, detachment, and even a kind of death that effects one's entire person:

> The soul, in order to turn and look towards God, therefore has to be entirely turned away from things that are born and that perish, that change, and from temporal things (exact equivalence). The entire soul, and that includes, therefore, the part of it that senses, the carnal part of the soul that is rooted in sensible things and that draws its life from them. It has to be uprooted. This is death. Conversion is this *death*. (LPW, 62/OC IV.2, 93)

The "uprooting" that occurs involves a detachment from the false images of the cave—the "goods" of social rank, wealth, fame, and relationships of domination—and a "rootedness"

[89] Such a false procedure, writes Weil, would lead to a very agreeable and satisfying life that costs nothing and that is filled with the satisfaction of self-love (*LPW*, 66/*OC* IV.2, 97). She writes: "If the one who has made the chains fall away has told of the marvels of the outside world, of plants, trees, the sky, the sun, we only have to stay still, close our eyes, and imagine that we are leaving, that we are climbing out of the cave and that we are looking at all those things. In order to make the imagination even more vivid, we can also imagine that we are experiencing some of the sufferings attached to this journey" (*LPW*, 66/*OC* IV.2, 97). In her notebooks she writes similarly: "Supposing that, basing themselves on the accounts of those who have come out of the Cave and have gone back there again, those in the Cave have made up stories, fairy tales about the outside world—perhaps quite in accordance with the truth; if one of the games played there consists of closing one's eyes and saying 'I can see the sun,' and if this gives rise to collective illusions, in the long run this game will prevail on some to go outside the Cave. But it will keep a good many others inside the Cave—And then what will happen if those who play this game, taking pity on the others, want to make them see the sun? And even want to make some see it who have really gone outside, but express what they have seen in different words from those of the accounts that have served as a basis for this game!" (*N*, 357).

in another reality.[90] The turn from the shadowy existence in the cave demands a "rupture of all the attachments that constitute our reasons for living" (LPW, 52/OC IV.2, 82). It entails a death and detachment.

According to Weil's interpretation, this detachment is the object of Books VI and VII of the *Republic* (N, 490).[91] But it is also a key component of the Christian mystical tradition that she is attempting to draw out. In the context of the *Republic*'s depiction of conversion, she writes: "total detachment is a condition of the love of God, and whenever the soul has made the move of detaching itself totally from this world in order to turn itself wholly towards God, it is enlightened by the truth that descends upon it from God. This is the same notion that is at the center of Christian mysticism" (LPW, 62/OC IV.2, 93). Weil draws attention to the parallels between Plato's imagery and what she considers to be a central aspect of the mystical tradition: detachment, nakedness, and death. And she does so in order to point to its necessity in giving up one's worship of prestige and force.

Perhaps the most important reference point for Weil's identification of detachment with the mystics is John of the Cross, an ongoing interlocutor in her thoughts during the final years of her life, especially in her reflections on the *Republic*. Weil received the works of John of the Cross in Spanish from Gustave Thibon while staying at his farm during the period that she was also writing her notes on Plato's myths.[92] Scholars have noted his

[90] This is a theme Weil picks up again in a different context in her final text, *The Need for Roots*, which I examine in chapter 4.

[91] In Lissa McCullough's reading of Weil's religious philosophy, she has suggested that Weil's emphasis on a movement of detachment is "the most Platonistic aspect of Weil's thought." *The Religious Philosophy of Simone Weil: An Introduction*, 67.

[92] Pétrement, *Simone Weil: A Life*, 428. In a letter quoted by Pétrement, Weil writes of John of the Cross: "It is a blend of poetry and prose, both extremely beautiful. The thought, expressed in different words, if often very close to Plato's" (446).

importance for Weil's concept of passive attention, but he was also crucial for her understanding of nakedness and detachment.[93] Weil makes the connection between detachment and prestige explicitly in relation to John of the Cross: "The total renunciation of all prestige is what St. John of the Cross calls spiritual nakedness" (IC, 137/OC IV.2, 214). The "double image" of nakedness and death is a mystical one "par excellence" for Weil, which she describes: "The truth is manifest only in nakedness, and nakedness is death, which is to say, the rending of all the attachments that constitute for each human being their reason for living, neighbors, the opinion of others, material possessions and morals, everything" (LPW, 52/OC IV.2, 82). To become naked and dead in this life demands a "rupture" of all attachments. She draws from John of the Cross to explain that detachment must be total: "Note that it is the *whole* soul. Cf. St. John of the Cross. The least attachment prevents the transformation of the soul. *As coming short by a single degree of heat can keep wood from being lit* (cf. the Stoics); *as a thread ever so slight can keep a bird from flying, unless it is cut*…That is what Plato means by this little phrase: *all* the soul" (LPW, 62/OC IV.2, 93-94). The allusion refers to a nice passage in *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, in which John of the Cross writes that even the thinnest thread will impede a bird's flight.[94]

[93] Simone Kotva has especially drawn attention to the connection between John of the Cross's "passive loving attention" and Weil's understanding of attention. She argues that "the essays, letters and notebook entries composed in the years between [receiving the complete works] and her death in 1943 may be read as an exercise in digesting and conveying the central idea of John's thought: 'passive loving attention'. Kotva, *Effort and Grace*, 151. On John of the Cross's influence on Weil, see also J.P. Little, *Waiting on Truth* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1998), 130.

[94] Weil refers to the image from John of the Cross' *Ascent of Mt. Carmel*, Book 1, Ch.11: "It makes little difference whether a bird is tied by a thin thread or by a cord. Even if it is tied by thread, the bird will be held bound just as surely as if it were tied by cord; that is, it will be impeded from flying as long as it does not break the thread. Admittedly the thread is easier to break, but no matter how easily this may be done, the bird will not fly away without first doing so. This is the lot of those who are attached to something: No matter how much virtue they have they will not reach the freedom of the divine union." John of the Cross, *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross* (Washington: ICS Publications, 1991), 143.

Conversion must be total, painful, and solitary. “If one cannot pay the whole price,” she writes, “one will not get to the goal, even if one has cut out very little” (LPW, 66/OC IV.2, 97).

In the face of the social aspect of force, Weil contends that the way to resist its influence is by relinquishment and detachment, refusing its seduction and power. According to Weil, the human tendency is almost always to desire the use of force over others, and the social circumstances in which we live only further embed this tendency. It is possible, however, to move away from an unconscious, blind submission and worship of force toward a conscious detachment. Weil draws from the mystical ascetic tradition, pointing to the need to cultivate such a disposition of detachment by habituated attention, a process that usually entails subjection to a painful and even violent uprooting. According to Weil, it is the painful effort of the will that moves the prisoner forward step by step, and allows them to emerge from the cave: “This is the part of the will in salvation. An effort in the void; an effort of the afflicted and blind will, for it is without light” (LPW, 67/OC IV.2, 98). Its role is one of detachment, clearing away, letting go of attachment to things like prestige.

Yet the will is insufficient on its own, and for Weil the violence one suffers during this time constitutes an inferior part of the journey: “So long as one finds it necessary to do oneself violence, one is still in the ‘dark night of the sensibility,’ in the Cave” (N, 321).[95]

[95] John of the Cross describes two different purifications, two different “dark nights” through which one advances: one in the sensory part of the soul, belonging to beginners in which God introduces them to the state of contemplation, and one which is more dark and obscure, and concerns the spiritual part of the soul. This second journey takes place in those who are already proficient, and has both active and passive parts of the night.

The will plays its part by urging the soul onwards, but once out of the cave, there are no more efforts for it to make. Here it is desire that is key. Weil writes that one must love "in the void" ("*à vide*") (LPW, 69/OC IV.2, 101). On a passage from the *Republic* she writes,

> In all our acts of willing, whatever they may be, over and beyond the particular object, we must want gratuitously, want the void. For this good which we can neither visualize nor define represents for us a void. But this void means more to us than all plenitudes put together…All this has nothing whatever to do with an intellectual process in the sense in which the word 'intellectual' is understood to-day. The intelligence is not called upon to discover anything, but merely to clear the ground. It is useful for carrying out servile tasks. (N, 491)

Several pages later, and in a particularly lucid passage of her notebooks, she continues this idea:

> In all that, the problem of knowledge is not raised, apart from the knowledge of good. Knowing is of no interest at all, apart from the knowledge of good. It is a question of ordering the various forms of good in relation to our desire, and to do that we have got to have fixed our attention to its fullest capacity on to our desire in its purity, in its emptiness. Exactly as though from among several more or less well-polished pieces of metal I wanted to choose the most highly polished—so the attention has got to be directed towards the perfect plane. However, we are not able to fix our attention to our desire, any more than we are able to see our sight. We can only see such objects as are lit up by the light of the sun. Thus, all we can do is to detach our desire from all forms

of good and wait. Experience shows that this waiting is recompensed in the fullest possible measure." (N, 550)

Here Weil articulates the need for detachment at the same time as the need to focus one's attention and desire on the void, using her crucial language of attentive waiting. In the context of the cave, we come to the second part of the journey that requires a far more passive posture: "it is only necessary to keep oneself in a state of waiting and of looking at the light, as hard as that may be," so that slowly over time, one will have a greater capacity of receiving the light (LPW, 67/OC IV.2, 98-99).

Weil did not consider the ascent out of the cave to be the end of the journey, however: "The final moment, when the delivered one looks at the sun itself, the good itself, that is to say God himself as he is, corresponds to what St. John of the Cross calls spiritual marriage. But in Plato this is not the end. There is still one more step. (This is also indicated by St. John of the Cross)" (LPW, 67/OC IV.2, 99). That is, for Weil there is no contemplation—no "spiritual marriage"—unhooked from the ethical. It is necessary for the detached soul to nevertheless be in contact with the world, but it must be a contact of a different kind, a contact that is not an attachment (LPW, 69/OC IV.2, 101). Weil writes that "He who is above social life returns to it when he wishes, not so he who is below" (N, 593/OC VI.3, 309). One's relationship to the world is altered in the conversion, so that the grip of social prestige is loosened and one can see the shadows for what they are. When one returns to the world, it is with a different disposition and a transformed love.

This is not, of course, a single event that occurs once and for all, but an ongoing process that must continually be renewed. It is the process of incarnation that is so central

to Weil's socio-political thought: "After having torn the soul from the body, having traversed death to go to God, the saint needs in some way to incarnate himself in his own body so that he might shed upon this world, upon this earthly life the reflection of the supernatural light. So that he might make of this earthly life and this world a reality, for until then it is only dreams. It is incumbent upon him thus to achieve creation" (LPW, 69/OC IV.2, 101).[96] According to Weil, this is what it means to imitate the incarnation of divine love in the world in Christ: "The perfect imitator of God first of all disincarnates himself, then incarnates himself" (LPW, 69/OC IV.2, 101).

5. The Way Home: The Winged Soul

One final myth from the *Phaedrus* helps to illuminate Weil's concept of decreation by revealing the madness entailed in the self dis-possession of love. Weil characterizes the *Republic* as a dialogue that gives an account of the roles of both the intelligence and desire, but she writes that "The *Phaedrus* indicates a way of salvation that is not intellectual in the slightest degree, that has nothing to do with study, with science, with philosophy, it is salvation by feeling alone, and at the beginning an entirely human feeling; the love that consists in falling in love" (LPW, 74/OC IV.2, 107). While this dialogue receives less elaboration than the others in Weil's notes, the winged horses and charioteer is a crucial depiction of the role of beauty and the gift of love's madness that for Weil entails a loss of

[96] The French term Weil uses for "shed" light on the world is "*répandre*": to spread, spill, scatter, extend, or radiate.

self. Moreover, she suggests that the myth presents a psychological and physiological examination of the workings of grace on the soul: "All this is not simply an image, it is really a theoretical essay in psycho-physiology on the phenomena that accompany grace. There is no reason not to attempt such a theory. Grace comes from on high, but it falls upon a being who has both a psychological and physiological nature, and there is no reason not to give an account of what is produced in these natures by contact with grace" (LPW, 81/OC IV.2, 115). Weil focuses especially on the myth's insights into the dynamics of self-discipline and surrender that lead to the transformation of the soul affected by this downward flow of grace.

In the dialogue, Socrates pronounces that "The best things we have come from madness, when it is given as a gift of the god" (244a). The image he uses to depict this madness is found in his second speech of the dialogue, a bare-headed palinode to atone for—and purify himself from—the first shameless account of *eros* he has given in response to the recitation of Lysias' speech on love. He gives a figural account of what the soul is like, admitting that an account of what it actually is would be too great a task and one that is only fit for the gods (246a). The image he conjures is of two winged horses and a charioteer who is driving them. While the gods' component parts are all from "good stock," human souls are composed of a beautiful and good horse as well as one of the "opposite sort of bloodline," making chariot-driving a "painfully difficult business" (246b). The result is a mixed soul which is internally at odds with itself, weighed down and pulled in different directions. While the divine procession of gods circles the heavens above, the nature of the human soul causes it to fall below, and while some will occasionally catch a glimpse of that

higher place, the rest strain to keep up and are continually carried below the surface to be washed up by the noise, sweat, and chaos.

In the heavens, the gods proceed behind Zeus in a divine procession. They reach great heights with ease because their chariots are well balanced, and they are therefore able to gaze beyond toward what is only visible to the intelligence. There, they feast on beauty, wisdom and goodness. Weil writes, "*When they go to eat, to feast*, they ascend and go to the highest vault of heaven" (LPW, 75/OC IV.2, 108). Those souls who follow the gods most closely will be able to raise their chariots enough to see something of beyond, but other souls who are unable to rise will instead be nourished by their own opinions or the false opinions of others, and are then dragged down further to be trampled in their attempt to outdo one another (248b). As they fall back down to earth, they settle into various human incarnations, depending on what they have seen. Those who have witnessed the most, and keep the memory alive and close, will appear to be possessed by an incomprehensible divine madness.

It is the memory of wisdom, goodness, and beauty that stirs the soul to turn toward the heavens and incites a thirst for what lies beyond. The recollection of another reality causes both agony as well as desire, a desire that exists in all human beings without exception,[97] Weil writes, and that is necessary for salvation: "We are children of Heaven, that is to say, of God. The earthly life is a forgetting. Here below we have forgotten transcendent truth and the supernatural. Then, that the condition of salvation is thirst. It is

[97] "Every human being, without any exception, and this includes the most degraded of slaves, has a soul that comes from the world above the heavens, which is to say, from God, and that is called to return there" (*LPW*, 78).

necessary to thirst for the forgotten truth even to the point of feeling that this thirst is killing us" (LPW, 47/OC IV.2, 77).[98] We have here, then, another different account of separation from the divine that nevertheless causes the stirrings of desire. What sets this account of longing apart from those in other dialogues for Weil is the central role of beauty and the depiction of divine *mania* that overtakes the soul, taking possession and transforming it.

As Weil's interpretation of the cave already suggested, beauty plays a crucial role in the soul's journey, and in the *Phaedrus* she writes that it is involved in a "double action," since it both sparks the memory of another reality and also provides the material source of energy—the nourishment—for spiritual progress (LPW, 81/OC IV.2, 115). In the first place, beauty stands apart from justice and the Good in that it is apprehensible in this world through the "keenest" sensual organ, that of the eye. She describes its ability to captivate the senses in a passage from the *Phaedrus* in her notebooks:

> For there is no light of justice or temperance or any of the higher ideas which are precious to souls in the earthly copies of them: they are seen through a glass dimly; and there are few who, going to the images, behold in them the realities, and these only with difficulty… But of beauty, I repeat again that we saw her shining in company with celestial forms; and coming to earth we find her here too, shining in clearness through the clearest aperture of sense… But this is the privilege of beauty, that being the loveliest she is also the most palpable to sight. (N, 455-456, quoted from 250d-e)

[98] Weil insists that this longing is present in every individual: "the aspiration for good exists in all men—for every man desires, and all desire is desire for good—and this aspiration for good, which is at the very being of every man, is the one good which is always unconditionally present in every man" (*FLN*, 284).

The beauty in this world ravishes the senses, sparking the memory of Beauty itself and inciting the desire to be united with it. Unlike wisdom and justice, which can only be seen "through a glass dimly," beauty holds a privileged position because it can be beheld here on earth "in all its so palpable loveliness" (N, 455). If we were given a clear image of wisdom, on the other hand, Weil reiterates Socrates' warning in bold in her notebooks that "it would produce terrible loves" (LPW, 80/OC IV.2, 113). With beauty, a different posture and relationship is possible.

The memory of beauty is sparked by its presence here below, prompting a second aspect of beauty's role: it nourishes the growth of wings that will allow the soul to soar. In the face of beauty, the lover's soul aches and itches like a child's gums that are just starting to grow teeth. It is overcome with both pain and joy, depending on the nearness of the beloved, that causes anguish and raving madness. But proximity to the beautiful beloved also acts as a balm, soothing the throbbing pain and encouraging the growth of wings. The image illustrates the different ways in which the horses approach the beloved. The good and noble one holds back through a sense of shame. But the bad one, who is described as crooked, black and shaggy (253e), is overcome by desire and rushes forward uncontrollably. After several cycles of approach and withdrawal, the bad horse eventually relinquishes and dies of fright so that the lover's soul is finally able to pursue the beloved reverentially and in awe.

What is depicted is a complex dance of restraint and divine madness, self-control and enthusiasm. Weil first emphasizes the need to discipline the unruly horse carefully, describing it as a training of conditional reflexes: "By associating such or such a thing with

pleasure or suffering, one develops new reflexes that end up being produced automatically. We can thus get the animal within us to behave in such a way so as not to trouble our attention when it is turned towards the source of grace" (LPW, 84/OC IV.2, 118). She compares the process to the way one trains a circus dog—either with sugar and rewards, or with the whip, which she suggests is often both quicker and easier. She insists on the docility rendered through training in Socrates' image: "It is well to note that training is a finite operation. The horse may well have a very difficult temperament, and can remain for a very long time without having made any progress, but we are absolutely sure that by punishing him time and again he will finally reach a perfect docility" (LPW, 84/OC IV.2, 118).

Comments such as these have incited charges of masochistic tendencies in Weil, of an excessive emphasis on effort, discipline, and self-mastery that is often associated with denying bodily wants and needs. This emphasis on self-discipline is certainly evident in Weil's writings, and her reading of the *Phaedrus* does indeed highlight the need to discipline the desires as a necessary way of deterring the tendency to forcefully appropriate others. But this is only a partial account of Weil's thought. In fact, it is also in her reading of this same dialogue that we can perceive how she reveals the prioritization of another, more passive, disposition. As I will suggest in chapter 3, ascetic discipline on its own can become an end in itself, something of which Weil was all too aware. Her reading of the *Phaedrus* presents the mortification of desires as a crucial but incomplete aspect of one's journey to the beloved.

The two aspects are portrayed in the image itself. Weil writes that the driver in this procedure has two specific things to do: pull on the curb of the unruly horse to train him by conditional reflex, and as for himself, to simply behold (N, 325). The posture of beholding is crucial for Weil. Unlike the gods, who can feast on beauty, human souls dwell in an erotic tension in which they must maintain a distance from beauty while simultaneously being consumed by desire. Socrates' language of nourishment is critical for the way Weil thinks about desire, in that she draws a sharp distinction between eating and looking on beauty. She offers variations of this language throughout her notebooks and essays, diagnosing a problem of love and desire that she saw as inherent to human nature: we love in a way that seeks to consume and possess the objects of desire, devouring things for our own sustenance, taking them in as nourishment rather than loving them in ways that allow them to exist on their own terms. Our loves are often self-serving, destructive, and totalizing, and thus manifestations of force. She describes beauty as a source of energy, but one that requires an entirely different posture of contemplation and detachment (LPW, 81/OC IV.2, 115). In an underlined passage of her notes, she writes: "Something that is seen as beautiful is something one ought not to touch, something that one does not want to touch for fear of harming it. In order to transmute usable spiritual energy from the energy from other objects of desire, an act of detachment is needed, an act of refusal—refusing the medal, giving money. However, the attraction of beauty implies in itself a refusal; it is an attraction that keeps its distance" (LPW, 81/OC IV.2, 115).

And yet, Weil also recognizes the necessity of the unruly horse, admitting that it plays an integral role: "Note here that the bad horse is as much a help as a hindrance. He is the

one who irresistibly drags the chariot towards the beautiful. When he is tamed, the itching in the wings is a sufficient motive for the charioteer. But at the beginning, the bad horse is indispensable. His faults are useful, for each of his faults is the occasion of some progress in the operation of training" (LPW, 84/OC IV.2, 118). Weil maintains the crucial distinction between the good horse and the bad horse in her reading, yet she insists that the unruly horse's faults nevertheless play a crucial role, and emphasizes the need for training. Her interpretation puts the dynamics of discipline and desire from the image into sharp relief.[99] Socrates had begun his second speech by seeking to guide Phaedrus away from the calculating and reasonable love, saying that there are certain forms of divinely given madness that are not bad, but that are even a gift, with erotic madness the greatest gift of them all. Weil insists on the need to follow this mad lead of desire.

Other than the training, which is a voluntary operation, she writes that this is only accomplished "insofar as the soul is touched by the memory of things above and as the wings have begun to sprout. *And this is a negative operation*" (LPW, 84/OC IV.2, 119). This is the part that is not up to us, which for Weil is the explicitly 'mystical' aspect. We do not act; instead, we are acted upon. Beauty effects a transformation in the lover, who is seized by its image and undone by it. Weil is clear in her writing that one cannot ascend to God: "I cannot climb to heaven through the air. It is only by directing my thoughts toward

[99] Simone Kotva has highlighted the tension between effort and grace in the philosophical tradition. See *Effort and Grace: On the Spiritual Exercise of Philosophy*. She situates Weil within the tradition of French spiritualists, emphasizing this tension in her thought, but suggesting that in Weil we might recover an aspect of passivity and repose for the philosophical method (132). Weil's interpretation of Stoic effort, she argues, is actually the other side of the coin of mystical passivity (143). Kotva writes that neither effort nor absolute passivity is the key to Weil's religious philosophy. Rather, it is spontaneity, "the ability to act without deliberation and as it were straight from the heart: it is love, or desire" (156).

something better than myself that I am drawn upwards by this something. No imaginary perfection can draw me upwards even by the fraction of an inch" (N, 434). Asceticism and habits of self-discipline are only sufficient insofar as they help to cultivate the kind of disposition of openness to grace needed in order to be possessed by the divine. Otherwise, the function of the will is to direct the attention toward the right objects of desire—by means of beauty's mediation—and wait. This is the foundation of religious practices, she writes in a passage that highlights the role of desire: "The notion of grace as opposed to virtue depending on the will and that of inspiration as opposed to intellectual or artistic work, these two notions, if they are well understood, show the efficacy of desire and waiting" (WG, 128-129). One waits, yearning, with a posture of repose in order to be moved by what is outside the self.

This account presents a different view of love and desire than what is depicted in the *Republic*: "Here is now the usefulness of the *madness of love* (Plato's expression) for salvation. It is a question of a love that is first generated as carnal love" (LPW, 79/OC IV.2, 112). There is for Weil "no real love where the part of the soul that is most closely attached to the body does not play a role," and where the good comes to it in the form of beautiful (LPW, 82/OC IV.2, 116). The soul is touched, that is, by the sensible beauty of the world. She adds that above all it is a question of the grace that comes from the effects of every type of sensible beauty (LPW, 79/OC IV.2, 112), suggesting that "this is something we receive without having any part in it, excepting the necessity that we keep ourselves exposed to grace; this is to say, that we maintain our attention oriented towards the good with love. The rest, smooth or rough, works in us without us" (LPW, 85/OC IV.2, 119). For

Weil, it is that which "works in us without us" that "proves this is a truly mystical operation" (LPW, 85/OC IV.2, 119). This is the madness Socrates describes as the "best and noblest of all forms that possession by god can take…" (249e), and implies a loss of self, or an *ek-stasis*. In contrast to the calculating love described in Lysias' speech that is devoid of discomfort and avoids love's "sickness," this is a love in which the subject is acted upon in a manner that makes her appear strange and disturbed, standing outside of human concerns (249c-d). It entails a movement that calls into question his or her own autonomy and self-possession, and points to a different role and understanding of the self that Weil believed was central to the mystical tradition.

Socrates' depiction of the soul dramatizes an ascent toward the heavens through the growth of wings nourished by the vision of beauty. While Weil's emphasis on vision and attention grounds her in a contemplative tradition that draws on this imagery, she once again stresses the importance of descent. She likens the downward motion in the *Phaedrus* first with the force of gravity on the soul, but she also describes a second descending movement that she associates with the loving, kenotic descent of Christ into the world: "It is the nature of the wings to convey aloft that which is heavy. Here we have a being attracted from heaven down to earth not by gravity but by love, by wings raised to the second power" (N, 323). Even though Weil emphasizes vision and contemplation, an ethical component is already revealed through her associations with Christ's loving descent: "The true love of our neighbour would be an assimilation to this love, a love that descends" (N, 323). For Weil it is not enough to contemplate beauty; the goal of assimilation and union occurs by

conforming oneself to the image of beauty, and therefore to descend, Christ-like, into the world.

Weil's reading of the *Phaedrus* prioritizes the madness of love, the way it makes the lover appear reckless and act in ways that are outside the expected norm. This depiction of the soul reveals for Weil an elaborate choreography of activity and passivity, waiting and desire. The ascetic training of the soul is required, but it is only an inferior, preliminary stage that opens the soul up to what is beyond itself. This erotic self-dispossession figured in the myth and the descent of love into the world is precisely the necessary movement of love involved in decreation. Ultimately, the transformation effected by grace is something that can be desired but not willed, and is best understood as a process of self dis-possession, as something that happens to the self in spite of the self.

6. Conclusion

Weil grounds the mystical tradition in Plato's writings – in his depictions of desire and detachment and the mad surrender of the soul to the movement of divine love. In the *Symposium*'s various accounts of love she highlights human beings' primordial desire for god-like power. She points to the need for one's love to be shaped and directed toward its true end, which is Love itself, the God who has relinquished force and might. She also reads in Plato a warning about the ways in which the egotistical "I" is easily moved by the collective aspect of society, which mis-shapes the desires and leads to the worship of might and prestige. What is needed is a conversion, in which the gaze is turned away from

shadows and projections to the source of light. Detachment, nakedness and death are the images that Weil draws from Plato's corpus, especially the *Republic*: "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" (IC, 82/OC IV.2, 82). The "double image" of death and nudity, she writes is the "purest mysticism" (IC, 81/OC IV.2, 82). Weil thus emphasizes the need for the training of the will and desires, even while she simultaneously insists that this is not simply a matter of discipline. Elsewhere, she likens the activity and passivity entailed to the process of breathing (WG, 111), where both effort and release are needed. The *Phaedrus* points to this second aspect, and the need to be taken up and possessed by a divine *mania*, a transformation effected by beauty that happens to the self, in spite of the self, and that even necessitates the complete relinquishment of that self. Decreation is best understood from within this context of a much larger drama of divine love, in which the soul is emptied of its desire for sovereignty and is transformed by the movement of grace to incarnate love in the world.

III. LOVE AND ANNIHILATION

1. Introduction

While she was living in Marseille, Weil was introduced to the circle of poets and philosophers who gathered in the attic offices of the monthly literary journal, *Cahier du Sud*, an outlier from the Vichy regime that continued to publish essays and poetry resistant to it. It was here that Weil first published her essay on the *Iliad* in 1940 under the pseudonym Émile Novis, followed by two essays she contributed to a 1943 special issue on the Languedoc civilization in the South of France entitled "*Le Génie d'Oc et l'homme méditerranéen*."[100] Lisa Robertson, in her new annotated translation of one of these essays, has contended that the journal's circle of contributors were interested in Occitan culture as a possible historical model of resistance to the fascist violence that Europe was facing.[101] Occitan culture, which blossomed in twelfth- and thirteen-century troubadour poetry, had resisted the violent Albigensian crusade against their culture centuries earlier, and the editors of the journal were thus interested in it as a model of resistance to Nazism and Vichy collaboration.[102] Additionally, according to Robertson, they saw it as a counterpoint to a Parisian vision of a centralised national French culture, which marginalized distinct

[100] The name was chosen to avoid the censorship of Jewish names. Weil's two contributions were "*L'Agonie d'une civilisation vue à travers une poème épique*" (translated as "A Medieval Epic Poem") and "*En quoi consiste l'inspiration occitanienne*" ("The Romanesque Renaissance").

[101] Lisa Robertson, *Anemones: A Simone Weil Project*, 16. Among contributors was the editor of the journal, Jean Ballard, as well as Déodat Roché, who was perhaps the leading scholar of Catharism, and Joë Bousquet, a French poet who had been paralyzed in combat during World War I and rendered bed-ridden. See Anne Brenon's introduction to Weil's essays in *OC* IV.2, esp. 383-385.

[102] Robertson, *Anemones*, 21-22.

regional languages and history,[103] a totalizing attempt to make diverse regions conform to a unified French identity.

Weil's specific contributions to the volume frames Occitan civilization as one that modelled a public life not pervaded by the worship of force. She saw in 11th-12th century Languedoc a creative and lively civilization of freedom and cultural intermingling until the people were subdued and defeated during the Albigensian crusade of the 13th century. What she wants to recover from that time and place is a specific "inspiration" of the age and its "spiritual vocation," an attitude toward force that she believed was inherited from Greece and briefly re-emerged in the territory of Languedoc: "The essence of the Languedocian inspiration is identical with that of Greek inspiration. It consists in the understanding of force" (SE, 48/OC IV.2, 419). She continues, "To understand force is to recognize that it is almost absolutely supreme in this world, and yet to reject it with loathing and contempt. This contempt is the other face of the compassion which goes out to everything that is exposed to the ravages of force. It is in the conception of love that this rejection of force reaches its fulfillment" (SE, 48-49/OC IV.2, 419).

Weil believed that the "Greek love" of Plato's *Symposium* and the poetry of Sappho could be found once again in the chivalrous love of troubadour song, which honors and aspires to a daring, impossible love (SE, 49/OC IV.2, 419). She describes this love in the *Cahier du Sud* article:

> In chivalrous love, the object was a human being; but it is not covetousness. It is simply a patient attention towards the loved person and an appeal for that person's consent.

[103] Robertson, *Anemones*, 16, 21-22.

> The word *Merci* by which the troubadours designated this consent is very close to the notion of grace. Such a love, in its plenitude, is the love of God through the person loved. In this land, as in Greece, human love was one of the bridges between man and God. (SE, 50/OC IV.2, 420)

Weil finds in the courtly tradition an ennobling love that maintains an erotic tension whereby the lover waits attentively for the lover's consent. Moreover, like the mystical texts which arose from the tradition and borrowed from its language, she understands such love to be a way to God and a means of participating in God's self-relation.

Weil's interest in Languedoc as a civilization founded upon lived forms of consensual love over servile force is connected to her admiration of the Cathar religion, a tradition she was likely exposed to through the writers at the *Cahier du Sud* but which she admittedly knew very little about.[104] Her brief mention of the Cathars in the essay focuses on it as the spiritual underpinning of the society's rejection of force: "their horror of force was carried to the point of practising non-violence and to the doctrine which sees everything associated with the domain of force as originating in evil" (SE, 52-53/OC IV.2, 423). According to

[104] In a letter to Déodat Roché, Weil responds with admiration to Roché's contribution to the special edition of the *Cahiers du Sud*, "The Cathars and Spiritual Love," but admits that while she has been attracted to the Cathars, she knows little about them (*SL*, 129). In Malcolm Barber's study of the Cathars, he emphasizes how rudimentary Weil's understanding was, and that it was largely based on what she read of Déodat Roché's. See Barber, *The Cathars: Dualist Heretics in Languedoc in the High Middle Ages* (Harlow: Longman, 2000), 204-207. There is indeed much in Roché's essay that resonates with Weil's thought, such as the need to refuse the selfish will to power and egotistical forms of love, a certain kind of ascetic mastering of the passions, and the Cathar rejection of the Old Testament's depiction of the God of force. However, there are also aspects which are profoundly at odds with Weil's religious philosophy, and most importantly, Roché's assertion that the Cathars rejected the cross in favour of the glorious Christ who vanquished death (see p.138 of his article in *Cahiers du Sud*). I agree with Barber that the humanity of Christ and the crucifixion are far too central to Weil's thought for her to have agreed whole-heartedly with Catharism. For Weil's relationship to Catharism, see also Lissa McCullough, ch.6 of *The Religious Philosophy of Simone Weil.*

Weil, what this civilization named as evil—"namely, everything carnal and everything social"—goes no farther than what is also present in the Gospels and its depiction of the demonic temptation of force. She refers to Christ's temptation in the desert and the promise of earthly political power (Matt. 4:8-10)[105] as an example of Christ's rejection of the idolatry of force (SE, 53/OC IV.2, 423). Languedoc is depicted in the essay as a civilization lost to the forceful domination of the crusades yet presenting an alternative to that force: a civilization founded upon a radical, daring, and heretical love that permeated all of society.[106]

The troubadour poetry and courtly love tradition that emerged from this context directly influenced the medieval mystical texts of women such as Marguerite Porete, a thirteenth-century Beguine who was burned at the stake as a heretic in 1310 for her daring book, the *Mirror of Simple Souls*. Drawing from the courtly love tradition, the *Mirror* is an account of an inner dialogue of the Soul as she is guided by "*Fine Amour*" to relinquish her desires and her will in order to be annihilated in the Divine Light of God who is Love itself.[107] Porete uses and upends the language of nobility to depict a love story in which

[105] Matthew 4:8-10: "Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour. 'All this I will give you,' he said, if you will bow down and worship me.' Jesus said to him, 'Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'"

[106] Later, in *The Need for Roots*, Weil alludes to the Languedoc civilization at various points with admiration and as a counterpoint to the Roman Empire (*NR*, 102, 144, 291, 292).

[107] Suzanne Kocher argues that the book's "true name" is this shorter title which appears on some of the pre-modern manuscripts, rather than the longer *The Mirror of Simple Annihilated Souls and Those who Only Remain in Will and Desire of Love*. Kocher argues that this correction helps to reduce some of the controversy about the book being considered esoteric, since the longer title gives the impression that it is exclusively for those who are already "simple souls." See Kocher, *Allegories of Love in Marguerite Porete's "*Mirror of Simple Souls" (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2009), 12. For further discussion on the ambiguities of the title, see Amy Hollywood, *The Soul as Virgin Wife: Mechthild of Magdeburg, Marguerite Porete, and Meister Eckhart* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 87.

Love and Faith are the "ladies of the house," and Reason must be extinguished before the Soul can be united with her Beloved.

Weil mentions the *Mirror* in two separate places of her late notebooks: one in a reference on the need to exhaust the human faculties of will and intelligence, and the other on the need to become "detached from the fruits of action."[108] While it's unclear how well Weil knew the text, her comments point to several of the main aspects of Marguerite's drama that I will draw out comparatively with Weil's own articulation of the need to relinquish the "I", a theme she explores most fully in her later notebooks. I will draw especially from these later writings, and in particular, her "example of a prayer'' from her New York notebook, which attends to the central themes of Porete's dialogue: desire and the will, detachment, non-being, and the limitations of reason.

I read Marguerite Porete's text as exemplifying what Weil most admired in the mystical love traditions that arose from the Languedoc civilization, but even more importantly, as a text that helps to illuminate the kind of self-annihilation Weil was attempting to describe through her concept of decreation. I begin by situating the *Mirror* within the context of the courtly love tradition, before elucidating Porete's account of the drama of love and annihilation. I then compare Porete's understanding of annihilation to Weil's notion of decreation, which she articulates as a drama between God and the whole of creation in which the self—the "I"—must withdraw in order for God's love to be incarnated in the world. For Porete, as for Weil, this movement cannot ultimately be willed, since this would entail the kind of self-mastery and domination that both women imply

[108] *FLN*, 205, 361.

must be given up. Porete's text may appear to describe this in a programmatic way, but it also undoes any assumptions about the soul's ability to effect its own annihilation by upending the very itinerary it charts. Weil and Porete both at times display ambivalent attitudes toward the body and embodiment, and present critiques of the institutional Church. As Anne Carson has suggested, both women express "daring" stories of love, in which "love dares the self to leave the self behind, to enter into poverty."[109] In this chapter, I turn to these stories of love as told by Porete and Weil in order to highlight their shared vision of a journey of relinquishing the desires and the will, descending to an abyss of humility without attachments or consolations so that the soul might be open and receptive to the movement of grace.

2. Courtly Love and the *Mirror of Simple Souls*

Historians have pointed to the twelfth century as the beginning of a new period in the history of the Middle Ages, in which an astonishing number of new elements and emphases were introduced.[110] Bernard McGinn has outlined how mystics of this period were deeply indebted to the tradition of monastic mysticism initiated by the church fathers and developed by the monks of the medieval West. And yet, a novel interpretation of the *vita apostolica* emerged that shifted away from the monastic life and stressed new forms of

[109] Anne Carson, *Decreation: Poetry, Essays, Opera*, 161-162.
[110] Bernard McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism: Men and Women in the New Mysticism, 1200-1350* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1998), 1.

proselytizing and preaching.[111] These changes were partly due to context—a politically less fragmented Europe, a period of economic expansion, the increase in urbanization due to the growth of trade and commerce, and growing literacy especially among the laity—and resulted in a marked shift from inward-looking communities to outward looking encounters with the world.[112] Whereas early medieval mysticism had been dominated by the motif of withdrawal from the world to join a spiritual elite, the "high" Middle Ages emphasized the "democratization" of the *vita apostolica*, wherein it was believed that it was possible for all Christians to enjoy immediate consciousness of God's presence.[113]

Women especially were among those who responded enthusiastically to this religious awakening, producing a large variety of texts, many of which were written in vernacular languages. But it was not just the language that changed; different genres and modes of representation of mystical consciousness also emerged. Texts shifted from the older technical genres of Latin scholastics and the monastic genres of biblical commentary, letter-treatises, and written sermons to new genres that were harder to describe, such as hagiography, visions, spiritual 'diaries,' dialogues with courtly personifications and other forms of poetry and vernacular sermons. With them also came a new and wider audience.[114] While no uniform mysticism can be found common to all texts written by women, McGinn does suggest that they faced problems and issues that most male mystics did not, such as having to defend the authority they claimed, which lead to some surprising innovations in

[111] For the origins of the new Beguine style of the *via apostolica*, see Bernard McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism*, "Ch. 1: Men and Women and the Origins of the New Mysticism," esp. pp. 32-40.
[112] McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism*, 2-6.
[113] McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism*, 12-14.
[114] McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism*, 19-22.

terms of language and theological categories.[115] Marguerite Porete is an exceptional instance of this new use of language, and her book is also a refusal to fit neatly into the categories of female piety prescribed during her time.

One of the new women's religious movements came to be known as the Beguines, initially a negative, derisive term used to describe a wide range of ways of life. Many beguines led a stable life in communal beguine houses, supporting themselves with incomes they earned from manual labour, while others wandered without discipline, living off of alms instead of working, and actively pursuing their version of the apostolic ideal through life in the world.[116] Ellen Babinsky writes that "Beguines formed a sort of middle way between ecclesiastical orders and lay status, living the religious life in chastity and in communities organized by house rules to which members vowed obedience," yet it was partly this in-between status that led to their undoing.[117] Growing suspicion led to a major attack on beguines, with two decrees from the ecumenical Council of Vienne held from 1311 to 1312, one of which termed their theological attempts as "madness."[118] But as some have argued, the greater problem may have also stemmed from the fact that the beguines existed in a liminal space between formal monasticism and laypeople. Beguines did not fit into the institutionalized categories of religious life (clergy/monastic/layperson), nor did they all practice the same form of religiosity, giving them an ambiguous status that was not easy to classify or define. Additionally, Hollywood notes that male hagiographers tended to emphasize the contemplative life as most appropriate for women, so that women's active

[115] McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism*, 153-154.
[116] Babinsky, Introduction to *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, 7-10. Hollywood, *The Soul as Virgin Wife*, 39.
[117] Babinsky, Introduction to *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, 8.
[118] Babinsky, Introduction to *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, 11.

life in the world might not have been well received. The emphasis was on *spiritual* poverty rather than mendicancy, and enclosure was preferred.[119]

The historical context surrounding the suppression of the Beguine movement is complex, but most scholars believe that Marguerite Porete's own trial was very much wrapped up with the socio-political context, and on June 1, 1310, she was burned at the stake—along with her book—as a heretic.[120] According to McGinn, her trial, condemnation, and execution must be seen as a critical moment in the history of Christian mysticism, for she is the first documented case of an execution for mystical heresy in Western Christianity, and provided critical ammunition for an ongoing struggle between the mystical and institutional elements of Christianity.[121] However, in spite of the fact that Porete's book was burned, it continued to be widely disseminated detached from her name, and survived in six versions in four different languages.[122] It was not until 1946 that

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[119] Hollywood, *The Soul as Virgin Wife*, 40-42.

[120] There are a range of hypotheses regarding the reasons for Porete's trial, from ecclesial and doctrinal to political and social issues concerning gender. Early scholarship assumed her condemnation was due to her association with the Free Spirit movement. See Robert E. Lerner, *The Heresy of the Free Spirit in the Later Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972). Bernard McGinn has outlined several of the possible religious motivations, including a bias against new religious orders and increasing competition among existing orders, suspicions about the proliferation of heresies, and the deeply ingrained fear of women who stepped outside the controlled roles prescribed for them by church and society. McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism*, 245-246. In addition to these, Babinsky also suggests the inquisitor was anxious to demonstrate that the inquisition maintained control over correct doctrine and ecclesiastical discipline so that his authority would not be questioned by secular power. Babinsky also notes that the circumstances of Marguerite's trial were wrapped up in the suppression of the Templars and bolstering royal power. Ellen L. Babinsky, Introduction to *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, 24-25. Robert D. Cottrell argues that Porete's text may have seemed heretical not primarily because of its particular propositions, but because it deviates from the "model" or paradigmatic text with the common themes and images expected within the Christian mystical tradition. "Marguerite Porete's Heretical Discourse; or, Deviating from the Model," *Modern Language Studies* 21, no.1 (Winter 1991), 17. Finally, Denys Turner argues that in addition to the political motivations having to do with her association with the Beguines, her text presents some daring speculations on the topic of boundaries (societal, ecclesial). "Why was Marguerite Porete Burned?" in *God, Mystery, and Mystification* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2019), 104-105.

[121] McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism*, 244-245.

[122] McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism*, 246.

Romana Guarnieri identified the Latin manuscripts in the Vatican as the lost book of Marguerite Porete.[123]

Porete's text does not fit well within the traditions of female piety. At her trial, she was named a "*pseudo-mulier*" by her inquisitors, a "phony woman" who claimed to write truths about God with no reference to special encounters or visions that would give her words authority, as many other women of her time could claim.[124] Moreover, the *Mirror* does not contain many of the tropes common to women's writing from the period. For example, Caroline Walker Bynum has highlighted the many ways that eating and food imagery were central to women's spirituality in the medieval period, yet Porete's text is a notable outlier; the *Mirror* contains very little mention of food, and instead expresses reservations about fasting, Eucharistic devotion, and women's embodiment.[125] Nor does Porete employ other categories often used by women such as a focus on the role of Christ, bodily suffering through excessive asceticism, or visions.[126] Indeed, not only does her text not refer to visions as a source of authority, it is even hostile to them,[127] and dismissive of other "works" associated with asceticism. As helpful as some of these categories may be, however, it is impossible to distinguish one single form of mysticism characteristic of all

[123] McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism*, 244.
[124] McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism*, 245.
[125] Bynum writes that "With the predictable and fascinating exception of the 'heretic' Marguerite Porete, all thirteenth-century women who wrote at length on spiritual matters emphasize the eucharist." See Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religions* (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 124.
[126] Imke de Gier, "Text as Authority: Marguerite Porete's *Mirouer des simples ames*," in *Mulieres Religiosae: Shaping Female Spiritual Authority in the Medieval and Early Modern Periods*, ed. Veerle Fraeters and Imke de Gier (Turnhous, Belgium: Brepols, 2014), 132-133.
[127] McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism*, 247.

women.[128] Still, the absence of these themes and tropes is particularly interesting given how prominent many of them—such as the role of Christ, suffering, and Eucharist—are in the writings of Weil, a point I return to at the end of this chapter in order to show how their absence in Porete in fact reveals a similarity between the two that might not be apparent at first glance.

Porete's book is an imaginative dialogue that draws from a number of traditions.[129] Most importantly, she situates it within a tradition of courtly love poetry, even if it resists certain aspects of that tradition.[130] The term "courtly love" remains contested because of the range of languages, geographical areas and traditions that it encompasses, but according to Irving Singer, there was nonetheless a cluster of ideas that became characteristic of

[128] McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism*, 15. Hollywood also argues this, particularly finding difficulties with Caroline Walker Bynum's argument about a distinctly 'women's' form of religiosity, arguing that Bynum's study is selective in its texts and figures, and that it is also necessary to consider the distinctions between texts written *about* women (particularly hagiographical texts) and those written *by* women. She argues instead that women themselves were more concerned with issues closely paralleling those important to the male mendicant orders (such as the apostolic life, the roles of poverty, work, and action, and the relationship between active imitation of Christ and the search for unity with the divine). See Hollywood, *The Soul as Virgin Wife*, 26. Mystical texts written by women are often gendered and labeled as "affective," "visionary," "speculative" forms of spirituality, but Hollywood argues that the differences are within *both* female and male authored books. See Hollywood, *Soul as Virgin Wife*, 16. Michael Sells has also taken this view, suggesting that Porete's text itself "unsays" essentialisms by employing the language of apophasis throughout. See Michael Sells, "The Pseudo-Woman and the Meister: 'Unsaying' and Essentialism," in *Meister Eckhart and the Beguine Mystics: Hadewijch of Brabant, Mechthild of Magdeburg, and Marguerite Porete*, ed. Bernard McGinn (New York: Continuum, 1994), 114-146.

[129] McGinn notes three main predecessors in Porete's use of dialogue: Song of Songs, the philosophical dialogue in the West (and particularly Boethius), and the interiorized personification dialogue found in Old French courtly romances. McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism*, 248. Kocher also identifies several other possible musical and mystical influences. See Kocher, *Allegories of Love,* 60-77.

[130] Scholars are divided on whether Marguerite was knowledgeable about the secular courtly love tradition or whether she knew of it through other religious and beguines text, but there is widespread consensus that she situates her own text in relation to them. See especially Amy Hollywood, *The Soul as Virgin Wife*, 88-89. Suzanne Kocher follows Peter Dronke in *Medieval Lyric* suggesting that conceptions of secular and religious love probably did not develop separately in any case, instead evolving together and influencing one another. Kocher, *Allegories of Love*, 82.

understandings of love at the end of the eleventh and beginning of twelfth centuries.[131] Singer writes that the first great moment of courtly love culminates in the literature of the troubadours in Provence—that time and region so admired by Weil—which emphasized the worship of a particular woman who is loved with an unrequited desire that purifies the lover's feelings so that he can transmute them into verse.[132] Porete signals her use of courtly love by opening her text with an exemplum that employs many common terms and themes from the tradition, such as *courtoisie* and *largesse*, as well as images of gifts from the beloved, noble friends of the king, and an emphasis on distant love (*amour de lonh*).[133] Barbara Newman has established how the use of this mystical courtly love was a distinctive creation of the thirteenth century that was used by beguines and others, and included a more complicated and less stereotypical role than was designated for them by men, allowing them a "wider emotional range."[134]

For all its evocations of courtly love, however, the *Mirror* also subverts the tradition throughout the dialogue. I will point to some of these places as they arise in the following

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[131] The term "courtly love" was introduced by scholars only in 1883 to characterize an attitude toward love that first manifested in French literature in the twelfth century. Irving Singer, *The Nature of Love: Courtly and Romantic*, vol. 2 (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), 19-20. Singer suggests several characteristics: love itself becomes an ideal worth striving for, particularly for the way that it ennobles both the lover and beloved. As an ethical and aesthetic attainment, sexual love was not reduced to mere libidinal impulse, and instead, love was understood as an intense, passionate relationship that establishes a holy oneness between man and woman. Finally, it was not necessarily related to the institution of marriage (22).

[132] Singer, *The Nature of Love: Courtly and Romantic*, 34.

[133] Ellen Louise Babinsky, "The Use of Courtly Language in *Le Mirouer des simples ames anienties* by Marguerite Porete," *Essays in Medieval Studies* 4 (1987), 93. Babinsky argues that the language, themes and concepts begin in the opening exemplum, which is "purely courtly in its content" and culminates in the Soul's experience of union with God (92-93). Kocher also flags several other motifs and images used in troubadour lyric: Marguerite's casting the relationship with God in terms of serfdom, servitude, vassalage, love's arrow and love's wound. Kocher, *Allegories of Love*, 62-64.

[134] Barbara Newman, "*La mystique courtoise*: Thirteenth-Century Beguines and the Art of Love," in *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist: Studies in Medieval Religion and Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 138.

section, but I want to highlight here Porete's use of the idea of nobility because it bears directly on the way one interprets the text's language, form, and purpose. Several scholars argue that there is an inherent elitism and disdain for the ignorant that is part of the language of courtly love.[135] Joanne Maguire Robinson in particular argues this view, her central contention being that "Marguerite Porete bases her theological speculations on an explicitly nongendered classification of souls into noble and non-noble, a hierarchy based on a God-given inborn spiritual status."[136] She argues that Porete "adopts as her central image an *immutable, inborn* nobility of certain chosen souls," thus promoting "a theology of exclusion and elitism."[137] Robinson's interpretation assumes that Porete was writing for "an inner circle of disciples, and her *Mirror* is directed solely to them. Her message is unknown—and will remain unknown—to all but a privileged few noble and annihilated souls."[138] She assumes that the *Mirror* is presenting its reader with secret or esoteric knowledge, a consequence of reading it exclusively as a manual or treatise that presents a specific technique for the spiritually proficient. Yet there is no indication that Porete writes for only a privileged few, particularly since her book emphasizes that what is needed is not a particular knowledge, but the training and shaping of love that is present in every soul.

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[135] See McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism*, 246. Newman also suggests a contempt for the uncomprehending masses, writing, "Hers was a vernacular mysticism, but vulgar it was not," "La mystique courtoise," 142-143. Similarly, Peter Dronke suggests that "gradually it becomes clear that what Marguerite envisions is an élite of divine love, an invisible Church that surpasses the visible and is the veritable one." Dronke, *Women Writers of the Middle Ages: A Critical Study of Texts from Perpetua (d. 203) to Marguerite Porete (d. 1310)* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 223.

[136] Joanne Maguire Robinson, *Nobility and Annihilation in Marguerite Porete's "Mirror of Simple Souls"* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), xii.

[137] Robinson, *Nobility and Annihilation*, 2, xi, italics added.

[138] Robinson, *Nobility and Annihilation*, xvi.

The text operates on several levels—as a work of theology, a phenomenology of the soul's transformation, and as a guidebook for that transformation. Its dialogical form distances Porete as author from the characters of the drama, so that we cannot read it simply as an autobiographical account of her own journey.[139] Instead, the three primary female personifications—the Soul, Reason, and Love—dramatize the complexity of what is taking place in the soul. The Soul, both a character and the venue in which the dialogue is taking place, is the one who is undergoing transformation, sometimes speaking with authority about becoming annihilated and sometimes questioning and learning from Love. She also assumes different personas throughout the dialogue (*L'Ame Anientie*, *L'Ame Franche*, etc.).[140] It is Reason who plays the critical role of moving the dialogue forward through her questions and her desire to understand. Her persistence is so strong that even when she dies, she returns, for the dialogue cannot continue without her. Love is perhaps the most complex character, fulfilling multiple functions in the dialogue as the opposite of Reason, the beloved of the Soul, the human faculty of loving, an interior experience, a means to God, and also the name of God.[141] At different points, both patient and exasperated, she leads the

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[139] Robinson assumes that Porete considered herself one of the simple, noble souls whose role it was to guide other "noble" ones toward annihilation. *Nobility and Annihilation*, xii. Peter Dronke has also interpreted the text as autobiographical, suggesting that one of the most marked features of women's texts from the thirteenth century is their increased subjectivity and the way they spoke and wrote in their own name. *Women Writers of the Middle Ages*, 203. Jane Chance likewise claims that Marguerite's text combines "visionary allegory with autobiography." Chance, "Marguerite Porete's Annihilation of the Character Reason in her Fantasy of an Inverted Church," In *The Literary Subversions of Medieval Women* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 64-65. Amy Hollywood, however, has argued against reading the text as autobiographical. While it has often been assumed that texts written by women from this period were autobiographical, she insists that "Porete eschews the narrative voice through her use of a continuous allegorical dialogue." Hollywood, *The Soul as Virgin Wife*, 92. Barbara Newman has also noted that personifications offered medieval women a "safe space" to talk about God. Newman, *God and Goddesses: Vision, Poetry and Belief in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 39-40.

[140] De Gier, "Text as Authority," 9. She also observes how much more the soul exclaims in the discussion, reflecting that she is learning, grappling with new insights, experiencing transformation, 16.

[141] Kocher, *Allegories of Love*, 100.

Soul and Reason as teacher and guide. None of these characters (or the host of minor characters that appear) are static; they change and develop according to the dynamics of the conversation, depending on who is speaking, in what context, to whom, and for what purpose. Reducing the text to a theological treatise alone leads to interpreting it as an account that is primarily concerned with presenting its readers with specific knowledge about the stages of the soul, and for this reason, I follow the approach of those who attend to its poetic and literary character, suggesting that this is integral to its theological meaning.[142]

The character's changing aspects have to do with the text's function to guide the reader toward transformation. Imke de Gier's attentive reading of the *Mirror* examines Porete's use of allegorical personifications from the perspective of the "mystagogic" ("mystical" and "pedagogic") aim of her book, considering how the form contributes to the aim of "guiding the audience and facilitating the journey towards spiritual transformation."[143] Rather than being written for a noble "elite," the dialogue addresses a variety of listeners and readers, including the "little ones" (Ch. 60, 137) the "children" (Ch. 124, 203) and the sad ones (Ch. 123, p.202), as well as those who have a high degree of

[142] See especially Suzanne Kocher, *Allegories of Love*; Imke de Gier, "Text as Authority"; A.C. Spearing, "Courtliness and Transcendence in *The Mirror of Simple Souls*" in *Envisaging heaven in the Middle Ages*, ed. Carolyn Muessig and Ad Putter (London: Routledge, 2007); and Nicholas Watson, "Melting into God the English Way: Deification in the Middle English Version of Marguerite Porete's *Mirouer des simples âmes anienties*," In *Prophets Abroad: The Reception of Continental Holy Women in Late-Medieval England*, ed. R. Voaden (Cambridge: B.S. Brewer, 1996). These interpretations oppose Robinson's suggestion that "Porete chooses a personification narrative to present her theological speculations. True to this genre, her allegorical characters maintain their identities and particular temperaments throughout the text," *Nobility and Annihilation*, 35.

[143] De Gier, "Allegory and Mystagogy in Marguerite Porete's *Le mirouer des simples ames*," *Ons Geestelijk Erf* 86, no. 1 (2015), 4. De Gier argues that each of the three main personifications has a different dominant voice (questioning, authoritative, dramatizing), although she suggests the Soul displays all three of these voices (11, 17).

understanding (Ch. 60, 137).[144] In response to Robinson's argument about the hierarchy of souls based on a status that is "essential" or "inalienable," Kocher argues that the soul's ability to transform is key. She insists that the soul is not *born* noble, but may rather *become* noble, arguing that "the whole didactic project of the *Mirror* rests on the hope that the Soul is capable of change, of transformation in and by love."[145] The form also provides Porete with an effective means of engaging the audience in conversation by presenting abstract aspects with a human dimension—a name and a voice—and stimulating an "imaginative response," instigating an interior transformation in the audience.[146]

This is not to suggest that the text is always easy to follow. Indeed, the opening *canzone* warns that it can be easily misunderstood, and that Humility, "who is the keeper of the treasure of Knowledge and mother of the other Virtues" must overtake the reader, for theologians and clerks will not have the intellect for it "no matter how brilliant [their] abilities," unless they proceed humbly.[147] This is not due to an esoteric quality, but rather because of a tendency toward a certain kind of reason and intellect, a way of reading the text from within the "safety" of Reason: "O my Lover," the Soul sings, "what will beguines

[144] Kocher writes that "The text moves from addressing the advanced souls to the less advanced and back again; it speaks to men and to women, to the faculty of Reason and to other parts of the person. It moves from theme to theme, presenting material of varying levels of difficulty. This suggests an effort to open many doors into the text, an attempt at accessibility to many types of readers." *Allegories of Love*, 50.

[145] Kocher, *Allegories of Love, 113.*

[146] De Gier, "Allegory and Mystagogy," 6-7.

[147] One of Marguerite's defenders, Godfrey of Fontaines, a theologian to whom she had sent the book, defended her and her book but did warn that it might be easily misunderstood. Porete describes his response, writing that he said "nothing unfavorable about the book…But he did indeed counsel that not many should see it, because, he said, they could set aside the life to which they were called in aspiring to the one at which they will never arrive. And so in this they could be deceived, because, as he said, the book is made from a spirit so strong and ardent that few or none are found to be like it." *Mirror of Simple Souls*, 222. For a summary of the three clerk's assessment of Marguerite's text, see Suzanne Kocher, *Allegories of Love*, esp. 33-35.

say and religious types when they hear the excellence of your divine song? Beguines say I err, priests, clerics, and preachers, Augustinians, Carmelites, and the Friars Minor because I wrote about the being of the one purified by Love. I do not make Reason safe for them, who makes them say this to me" (Ch.122, 200). The nobility that Love refers to in the text is not based on birth or lineage, merit, or wealth, however, but on its opposite, a disposition of humility, emptiness, and a recognition of the Soul's "nothingness" (*nient*). In the *Mirror*, it becomes clear that this is the quality of all created souls, and its recognition does not depend on acquiring knowledge, but on consenting to the Soul being overtaken by Love.

3. Annihilation in the *Mirror*

Marguerite's dialogue depicts a love story between the Soul and God, culminating in the self-annihilation of the will in the all-consuming flame of God who is understood and experienced as Love itself. The *Mirror*'s drama is driven by the relentless questioning of Reason, who cannot fathom the paradoxical way to union that Love describes, nor how it could require the relinquishment of all works including the virtues, prayers, and sacraments. Love tries to usher Reason toward a way of being and understanding in which she is no longer in servitude to these "works", describing a love story between the Soul and God. This is not a story about the lover needing to become more 'worthy' in the conventional sense of becoming more virtuous, although as we shall see, a certain amount of virtue is assumed. Instead what is needed is a letting go, clearing away what obstructs, distracts,

distorts, a relinquishment of servitude to the domination of the virtues and the complete annihilation of the lover's will—a burning, melting, and submersion into the beloved.

The opening exemplum sets the tone and terms for this romance, alerting the reader to its themes and motifs and placing the *Mirror* within the courtly love tradition. Love tells the story of a maiden of great heart and nobility who hears tell of the "great gentle courtesy and nobility" of the king Alexander. She fixes her love on him from a distance, not able to see him or have him near. She is inconsolable because of his farness, yet she also realizes that this faraway love is close within her, so she comforts her melancholic heart by having an image painted to represent the semblance of the king as it appears to her within. By means of this image she dreams of the king. We are told at the beginning of the prologue that this is an exemplum of love in the world that is a parallel to divine love, but it is the Soul who interprets it. She describes another King of great power and gentle courtesy who is likewise far away, but for the sake of her memory, He has given her this book which "makes present in some fashion His love itself" (Ch. 1, 80/13).[148] But his Image is also already present within the soul, so that the King is in fact intimately near—an early allusion to the image of the Trinity in the Soul and God as FarNearness, or "*LoingPrès*."[149] Porete

[148] In-text citations refer first to the standard chapter, the English translation in *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, trans. Ellen Babinsky (Mahway, NJ: Paulist Press, 1993), followed by the Old French edition that has been edited by Romana Guernieri, in *Marguerite Porete, Le mirouer des simples ames* (Turnholti: Typographi Brepols Editores Pontificii, 1986).

[149] On the trinitarian structure of the Soul in the Mirror, see Ellen L. Babinsky, "Christological Transformation in *The Mirror of Souls*, by Marguerite Porete." Babinsky argues that the faculties of the soul (ability, intellect, understanding) mirror the procession of the Persons of the Trinity (37). She also notes the variety of other trinitarian references throughout the book, such as the traditional attributes of God (Power, Wisdom, Goodness), and the Augustinian concept of God as Lover, Loved, Love (30). Sells finds further triads in the work—self-seeing, self-knowing, self-loving; Dame Amour, FarNear, Freed Soul—displacing the traditional Trinity in her work. See Sells, "The Pseudo-Woman and the Meister: 'Unsaying' and Essentialism," 141.

spells out this image in more detail later in the text when she distinguishes between the soul's faculties (ability, intellect, and understanding), and describes the movement of alienation from the image to conformity with it.

The Soul's gloss of the story alters some of its details, revealing some of the key motifs as well as the kind of hermeneutics needed to read this book. In the story, the princess loves from afar and her love is unreciprocated; she has to make an image for herself of her beloved from what she imagines him to be. But in the Soul's interpretation, the image is given by the King—an active character in the story who desires to be known—and her love is reciprocated by this gift. As Amy Hollywood notes, the image is not just the love of the Soul for God, but also an expression of God's love for the Soul.[150] The pain due to the maiden's unreciprocated love is replaced by the comfort of a beloved who does not just reach out to her but who is already within. The opening romance and its interpretation set the terms of the love story, in which the relationship between Soul and God is depicted as a drama of love and desire, in which the beloved is paradoxically both near and far, absent and yet mysteriously present in the soul. The journey towards this presence is described in similarly contradictory terms as an ascent and a descent as well as a movement inward and a relinquishment by the Soul of all she thought she possessed.

The introductory prologue also gestures toward the hermeneutics required to read the text; the reader will have to read imaginatively and understand the words and images figuratively through the guidance of Love and with an eye to their deeper meanings, as the Soul has already shown by alluding to familiar courtly themes only to take them beyond

[150] Hollywood, *The Soul as Virgin Wife*, 89.

their obvious significance. The text gives some clues and directives about how to read (or not read) it, directing the reader to "Gloss these words, if you want to grasp them, or you will grasp them poorly, for they have some appearance of contradiction for the one who does not attend to the core of the gloss. But appearance is not truth, but truth is, and not some other thing" (Ch. 97, 171/270). Suzanne Kocher has argued that Porete "seems fascinated with interpretation and intent on instructing her audience about the correct ways to construe a word, an example, a parable, or an allegory."[151] She suggests that it is by means of these analogies and guided comparisons throughout her text that "her treatise shows its listeners how to move back and forth across the boundaries between literal and figurative meaning," guiding her audience toward mystical experience.[152] This begins already in the Soul's explanation and gloss of the exemplum, which shows how the Mirror adapts the well-known literary paradigm of courtly love that it has borrowed.[153]

Throughout the dialogue, Love will attempt to overturn all that Reason had assumed about the journey of love through her slow and patient explanations, her short rebukes or by presenting Reason with contradictory and provocative explanations in order to draw her in to the subtleties of her own "Intellect of Love." But Reason continually fails to understand Love's "double words" ("*double mots*") (Ch. 13, 94/54) and is reluctant to understand Love's figural explanations. While the opening exemplum appears deceptively simple, Love begins almost immediately with her controversial ideas, asserting that the

[151] Kocher, *Allegories of Love*, 147.
[152] Kocher, *Allegories of Love*, 147.
[153] Kocher, *Allegories of Love*, 86.

Soul must take leave of the virtues.[154] Erupting into her first song, the Soul confesses the misery and anxiety she experiences under their servitude and her future freedom:

Virtues, I take my leave of you forever,
I will possess a heart most free and gay;
Your service is too constant, you know well.
Once I placed my heart in you, retaining nothing;
You know that I was to you totally abandoned;
I was once a slave to you, but now am delivered from it.
I had placed my heart completely in you, you know well.
Thus I lived a while in great distress,
I suffered in many grave torments, many pains endured.
Miracle it is that I have somehow escaped alive.
This being so, I no longer care: I am parted from you,
For which I thank God on high; good for me this day.
I am parted from your dominations, which so vexed me.
I was never more free, except as departed from you.
I am parted from your dominations, in peace I rest. (Ch. 6, 84/25)

The Soul describes the enslavement to the virtues which have kept her apart from God, and speaks of the "freeness" of the annihilated soul.

[154] Kocher suggests that the opening Prologue is a relatively modest and cautious beginning to a text "whose later wording is not so cautious," for it "makes no attempt to introduce features of the Mirror that are controversial or difficult to understand," nor does it "give any hint of the varied relationships of gender and status that will appear later in the text." Kocher, *Allegories of Love*, 90.

It is in this context that Reason first enters the conversation, for this is indeed an unexpected place to start a love story, particularly given that it has just been situated within a tradition of courtly love that emphasizes how the lover must make themself more virtuous, more noble, more worthy of the beloved. Reason's request for clarification begins a pattern of halting and questioning that lasts almost the length of the dialogue, with interjections of "Ah, for God's sake, Love…what does this mean, what you have said?", "how can it be?" (Ch. 7, 85/26), or later, "Prove it" (Ch. 32, 113/107) and "Is she not out of her mind, the Soul who speaks thus?" (Ch. 8, 85/29). Kocher has noted that "the conflicting epistemologies of Love and Reason furnish much of the text's humour and also its most serious lessons."[155] Indeed, rather than offering a clarifying explanation to Reason's first questions, Love tells her that understanding is a gift given to the one who has no remaining intellect of her own, and she proceeds to offer a string of further paradoxes that are crucial to the rest of the dialogue: "this Soul, who has become nothing, thus possesses everything, and so possesses nothing; she wills everything and she wills nothing; she knows all and she knows nothing" (Ch. 7, 85/26).

Through her use of paradox and "double meanings", Love will try to jolt Reason out of her habituated ways of thinking. Amy Hollywood suggests that "the real work of dialogue and of language itself within the text is to break the hold of Reason upon the soul through negation, paradox, and contradiction. Through such mystical apophasis, the soul will be annihilated and her divine simplicity and radiance uncovered."[156] A cycle of

[155] Kocher, *Allegories of Love*, 5.

[156] Hollywood, "Suffering Transformed: Marguerite Porete, Meister Eckhart, and the Problem of Women's Spirituality," in *Meister Eckhart and the Beguine Mystics: Hadewijch of Brabant, Mechthild of Magdeburg, and Marguerite Porete*, ed. McGinn (New York: Continuum, 1994), 98-99.

cataphatic and apophatic language—of saying and unsaying—ensues as Love alternates between speaking in her own poetic language and convincing by means of Reason's logic (the "Intellect of Reason").[157] In doing so, she also primes us as readers to read more figuratively, against our own tendencies to mimic Reason and her errors of understanding, and guiding us instead toward an understanding that requires the submission of Reason to Love.

The problem that Love articulates about the virtues is put in terms of servitude, domination and the anxiety these cause. The Virtues demand "honour and possessions, heart and body and life," at whatever cost to Nature (ex: Ch. 8, 86/31). They can become fixations and ends in themselves, masters that govern the Soul in the place of God. Reason's perplexity over Love's contradiction—that the Soul both takes leave of the virtues and that the virtues remain with her more perfectly than with any other (Ch. 21, 103/79)—was precisely what led Porete's inquisitors to accuse her of antinomianism.[158] Ironically, by plucking statements out of context, the inquisitors exemplified the failure to read and understand with the subtlety that Love tries to teach. In taking Love's words as individual propositions without context, they, too, were convinced by the voice of Reason.[159]

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[157] Michael Sells, especially, has taken up the apophatic quality of Porete's text. Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994). See also Maria Lichtman's comparative treatment of Porete and Jacques Derrida in "Negative Theology in Marguerite Porete and Jacques Derrida," *Christianity and Literature* 47, no. 2 (Winter 1998): 213-227). Amy Hollywood contrasts apophatic to visionary modes of mysticism, suggesting that this is yet another way that Porete's text does not fit neatly into categories of style/gender/genre, her text being one of the few which is not grounded in visionary experience. Hollywood, *The Soul as Virgin Wife*, 25. For a broader exploration of the interplay between apophatic and cataphatic discourse, see Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God*.

[158] On accusations of antinomianism, see especially John A. Arsenault, "Authority, Autonomy, and Antinomianism: The Mystical Ethical Piety of Marguerite Porete in *The Mirror of Simone Souls*," *Studia mystica* 21 (2000): 65-92.

[159] Spearing articulates this especially well. Writing about the propositions which were found to be problematic, he writes: "These ideas do appear in the *Mirror* but they exist in it not as propositions forming

According to Love, however, a reversal takes place. Rather than labouring to serve the Virtues, the Soul is freed from their dominion and the Virtues serve her instead: "the Virtues do everything which such Souls wish, without dominating and without contradiction, for such Souls are their mistresses" (Ch. 8, 86/28). Love insists that "such Souls possess better the Virtues than any other creatures, but they do not possess any longer the practice of them" (Ch. 8, 85-86/28). "Such a Nature is so well ordered," she says, "through the transformation by unity of Love…that Nature demands nothing which is prohibited" (Ch. 9, 87/32).

Although Love begins with the problem of servitude to the virtues, she soon turns to the deeper issue of the will.[160] Babinsky argues that the underlying problem assumed in Porete's text is that while free will has been given by the goodness of God, it is precisely by the power of that free will that the soul has removed her will from divine will, separating herself from God. The will is thus both the locus of sin and separation and of spiritual perfection and its return.[161] Love says that free and annihilated souls are no longer concerned with purgatory or paradise or salvation in this life because "they no longer

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a logical structure, but as dynamic elements in a dialogic text, in which opposing views are put forward, often propelled by intense emptions; and there is a fundamental slipperiness or jerkiness about it that denies the possibility of the clear-cut identities and distinctions on which scholasticism relies. Rather than offering a sustained logical argument, the *Mirror* proceeds in a series of fluctuations, sometimes steady and sometimes violent, each correcting the last, as if it were a boat tacking across a sea in high winds. In this way, though largely prose, it resembles a greatly expanded troubadour lyric, seeming to express the movements of a fluid and self-conscious consciousness. The scholastic methodology of Porete's accusers, which led them to treat propositions extracted from the text as if they could be judged independently of the meaning and emotional expressiveness of the whole, was bound to misrepresent her intentions." Spearing, "Courtliness and Transcendence in *The Mirror of Simple Souls*," 131.

[160] Both Maria Lichtman and Amy Hollywood emphasize the radical nature of Porete's emphasis on the will. Lichtman notes that Porete follows Augustine in that the will is the central problem, but that she goes farther to say that a *turning* of the will is not sufficient, but rather that no form of willing can remain. "Negative Theology in Marguerite Porete and Jacques Derrida," 218-219. See also Hollywood, *Soul as Virgin Wife*, 11.

[161] Babinsky, Introduction to *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, 32-33.

possess any will, and if they would desire anything, they would separate themselves from Love" (Ch. 9, 86-87/32). So radical is the transformation that she will no longer even will to will the will of God:

> All that this Soul wills in consent is what God wills that she will, and this she wills in order to accomplish the will of God, no longer for the sake of her own will. And she cannot will this by herself, but it is the will of God which wills it in her. Which is why it appears that this Soul has no will without the will of God, who makes her will all that she ought to will. (Ch. 11, 92/48)

The text dramatizes the process of returning the will to God, something that can't be accomplished through any kind of "work," whether the outer works of the "actives" or the inner works of the "contemplatives." Porete insists that both can be enslavements to the will, and that in contemplation, too, one can assume independence and become closed off from the movement of grace.

Here lies another striking aspect of Porete's book. Love insists that the annihilated Soul no longer wills even those works ordinarily associated with the pious life, whether it be attendance at mass, sermons, fasting or prayer, and even the sacraments (Ch. 9, 86-87/32). Porete's text offers a radical alternative to, and a forceful repudiation of, extreme forms of asceticism as well as a critique of the church and its institutional power.[162] That is, she offers a vision of a path that eventually does away with all forms of mediation except Christ—whether they be religious works or what she calls Holy Church the Little, which

[162] Lerner outlines the ways that other contemporaneous religious movements (such as those associated with the Free Spirit heresy) emphasized arduous ascetic practices in order to purify the body/soul and achieve spiritual perfection. *Heresy of the Free Spirit*, 46-53.

she says remains a servant to Reason. While some of these forms of mediation (such as prayer or fasting) can be understood as the spiritual practices meant to divest the self of its will and reshape its desires to align more faithfully to God's, Porete points to the ways that even these practices can be manifestations of the soul's wilfulness when they are believed to be sufficient in themselves.

Love also seeks to set all Souls free from the fears and anxieties about sin and suffering, rewards and punishments.[163] When Reason asks her how it may be that such a soul no longer desires masses or sermons, fasts or prayers—the "food of holy souls"—Love responds that "This Soul has no anxiety ("*mesaise*") about sin which she might have ever committed, nor about suffering which God might have suffered for her, nor about the sins or anxiety in which her neighbours remain" (Ch. 16, 99/66-68). She no longer has any anxiety because she no longer belongs to herself, and instead, "her thought is at rest in a peaceful place, that is, in the Trinity, and thus she cannot move herself from it, nor have anxiety, as long as her Lover is content" (Ch. 16, 99/68). Both Love and the Soul emphasize how this soul is at rest; this is not the rest one finds in the final stage, but a stillness and freedom from worry about the actions needed for salvation that plagued many in Porete's time. Hollywood explains that Porete was responding to a situation of great anxiety and struggle, and to a moral rigorism that threatened what she held to be true religiosity.[164] Moreover, while radical asceticism was expected of all aspiring to sainthood, the burden of

[163] Ellen Louise Babinsky describes the text as offering comfort to readers who might be anxious about their salvation, but also giving a warning (to those who see themselves reflected in the sad souls) about the danger of assuming that practices alone are the only way to live a spiritual life. Babinsky, "Christological Transformation," *Theology Today* 60 (2003), 44.

[164] Hollywood, *The Soul as Virgin Wife*, 189.

sanctifying the body fell especially on women, so that Porete's alternative vision liberates them especially from the strictures of harsh bodily asceticism and pain.[165] Instead of an emphasis on perfection and self-mastery, Love's language emphasizes freeness, un-encumberment, and rest.

Early in the dialogue, Love refers to seven stages leading to the annihilation of the Soul and its union with Love, but it is not until Chapter 118 that we are given a full elaboration of these steps or states ("*estats*"). Whereas the rest of the dialogue moves forward in a spiralling pattern, returning to the same themes and questions from different angles, Love's explanation of the seven stages appears comparatively straightforward and methodical.[166] Yet its placement near the end of the book, at a point when Reason (and the reader) has been warned about assuming superficial itineraries, suggests we shouldn't be deceived by its formulaic appearance. Indeed, Love's delineation of the stages undoes itself even as she describes them.

In the first three stages, the Soul advances from the labour of keeping the commandments to the strain of mortification and the attempt to abandon the self and will in imitation of Christ (Ch. 118, 189/318-320). But at the fourth stage, the Soul risks getting stuck. Here, she relinquishes exterior labour and reaches the height of contemplation, at which point she experiences the "pure delight of love" that makes her believe there is no

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[165] Hollywood, *The Soul as Virgin Wife*, 38, 55-56.

[166] Spearing has commented on the "loose spiralling motion" of the text that allows us to repeatedly return "to glimpse the same themes from different angles." "Courtliness and transcendence in *The Mirror of Simple Souls*," 120. Kocher suggests that this circuitous form would make the text, with its abstract formulations, more accessible to the ear. She writes that it takes about seven hours to read the Middle French manuscript aloud, so it is unlikely that all listeners heard the entire book, yet when read aloud, "listeners will hear most of its central ideas in virtually any thirty-minute period," making it well suited to oral reading. *Allegories of Love*, 54.

higher life than this. She is so dazzled by the brightness of love that she sees nothing beyond her love: "love has so grandly satisfied her with delights that she does not believe that God has a greater gift to give to this Soul here below" (Ch. 118, 190/322). It is only in the fifth stage that the Soul begins to see "by the light from the overflow of Divine Light" which is poured out into her, and is shown that her will has received her freedom by God's goodness, that she is nothingness, and must render her will back to God so that it might be dissolved into the Divine Will (Ch. 118, 192/328-330). The earthly stages culminate in the sixth, a vision of oneness in which the Soul sees that there is nothing but God and through the transformation of love it is God who "sees Himself of Himself in her, for her, without her" (Ch. 118, 193/330). Regarding the seventh stage, Love is silent, except to say that there can be no understanding of it until the soul has left the body (Ch. 118, 194/332).

The Soul describes the crucial moment of transition in a passage that makes use of courtly language, describing the loyalty of the lover and the courtesy and generosity ("*largesse"*) of God who has gifted the soul with the presence of goodness, the Trinity (Ch. 86, 161/244).[167] She has been filled with divine goodness: "I am pregnant and full and abundantly full of the abundances of delights from the flowing goodness of His divine goodness" (Ch. 86, 162/244). In Love's description of the soul's transformation and assimilation with God she uses images that defy dualities, describing the soul's union with God as a river flowing into the sea and iron into flame (Ch. 82-83, 158/234-236). These images of flowing and melting suggest complete incorporation and annihilation in which there is no longer any mediation between Soul and God, a point that McGinn suggests was

[167] Babinsky highlights this language in "The Use of Courtly Language," 96-101.

the ground for some of the most controversial aspects of her teaching.[168] Such a soul "is so enflamed in the furnace of the fire of Love that she has become properly fire, which is why she feels no fire" (Ch. 25, p.107/91-92). She no longer feels love because she *is* love, she no longer feels joy because she *is* joy itself. Like other mystical theologies, McGinn notes, Porete uses binary dynamics throughout her dialogue (Love/Reason, Holy Church the Little and Great, salvation by virtues/faith) only to destabilize and undo them,[169] and nowhere is this more evident than at the "height" of Love's stages.

Love's use of spatial metaphors is another way that she upends the very course she charts. The Soul rises through the first four stages, at first ascending by following the commandments, acting virtuously, performing good works, and mortifying the flesh, but in a sudden shift in the fifth stage, Love describes a fall into "bottomless abyss" ("*fons de*

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[168] In addition to fears that she advanced antinomianism, there was likely also opposition to Porete's articulation of union. McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism*, 261-265. Babinsky argues that Marguerite maintains distinction between God and Soul in union. For example, she cites the following passage: "This Soul…has entered into the abundances and the flowings of divine love not, says Love, by the attainment of divine understanding; for it could not be that any intellect, however enlightened, could attain any of the flowings of divine Love. But the love of such a Soul is so conjoined to the flowings of the greater part of this absolute divine Love…that the Soul is adorned with the adornments of this absolute peace in which she lives, and endures, and is and was and will be without being" (Ch. 52, quoted in Babinsky, 44). However, she admits that for Marguerite this difference of nature does not make any difference because of the transforming power of divine love. Babinsky, Introduction to *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, 45. For an examination of the poetic use of the image of mixed liquids in medieval thought see Robert E. Lerner, "The Image of Mixed Liquids in Late Medieval Mystical Thought," *Church History* 40, no. 4 (Dec. 1971): 397-411. Lerner considers the use of this metaphor especially in relation to the Free Spirit Heresy, concluding that the image occurs in both members of the Free spirit and orthodox thinkers. But what is most interesting about the case of Porete's use of this image is that she does not preface it with any qualifications. Others qualify the image with words like "seems to" disappear into, but Porete does not, instead using it to describe a complete mixing. Lerner writes that one other idiosyncrasy in her use of the metaphor is that "her point in using the image of rivers draining into the sea is not to describe a *gain* in the fashion of Bernard of Clairvaux, but rather to describe a *loss*—the soul's draining loss of its willful identity in preparation for future gains." "The Image of Mixed Liquids," 400.

[169] McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism*, 253. Robinson's reading misses the crucial way that Love upends these dualities. She argues that Porete sees humanity and its institutions as fundamentally dualistic (lost and sad, Little and Great churches) (37). It is precisely such a dualistic reading of the *Mirror* that leads to her assumption that Porete is making an unequivocal distinction between the chosen souls of inborn nobility and all others who remain lost.

bas") that is so deep she cannot lift herself out on her own (Ch. 118, 192-193/328). The Soul realizes that neither outer nor inner works are sufficient and she falls into humility, recognizing she cannot approach God by her own means. What Porete calls the fall into humility mirrors the fall into sin, but also, I suggest, the kenotic descent of Christ that is central to both this text and Weil's understanding of self-annihilation.[170] Hollywood argues that "paradoxically, Porete subverts the traditional hierarchy of Christian and noble perfection, that very hierarchy her own talk of the soul's seven stages seems to accentuate, for those who learn *not* to strive after virtue are the "highest" and closest to God."[171]

In the bottomless abyss of nothingness, the Soul is described as free, simple and unencumbered. In returning her will to God she is given a sense of vision that had been lost because of the duplicity of her will and desires:

> Now this Soul is at rest in the bottomless depths, and the depths are the lowest. And this depth makes [the Soul] see very clearly the true Sun of the Highest Goodness, for she has nothing which would impede the vision. The Divine Goodness shows Himself to her through the goodness which draws her, transforms her and, through a joining of goodness, unites her into pure Divine Goodness, where goodness is the mistress. (Ch. 118, 192/328)

She will have a "simple eye" (Ch. 47, 126/142), a reference to Matthew 6:22: "The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are good, your whole body will be full of light." In the passage, which appears within the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus warns his listeners against

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[170] Sells argues that in this inversion of the fall, "Porete brings together and affirms woman, love, the fall, and nature, four elements whose combination received a sharply negative light in medieval Christianity." *Mystical Languages of Unsaying*, 128.

[171] Hollywood, *Soul as Virgin Wife*, 103.

ostentatious displays of charity and prayer, and against outward demonstrations of righteousness. Fittingly for Porete's text, it ends with an expression of comfort against worry and the anxieties of daily life: "See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendour was dressed like one of these" (Matthew 6:28-29)—a passage beloved by Weil as an expression of obedience to necessity that I will return to.

This new vision requires the more subtle "Intellect of Love" that is mentioned from the beginning (Ch. 1, 80/10; Ch. 7, 85/26). Reason's questions are what drive the drama, but she is constantly told that her intellect is too low: "You take the shell and leave the kernel…hence you cannot perceive so loftily as is necessary for the one who wishes to perceive the being of which we speak" (Ch. 12, 93/50). That is, her perception is too coarse (Ch. 12, 93/50) and she lacks the courtesy needed to understand Love's meaning, which is not to say that Love's intellect is secret or elitist, but that it will require a reimagined nobility not rooted in conventional family lineage, class or wealth.[172] Love and the Soul insist that Reason's "one-eyed" vision will not be sufficient: "Ah, Reason, says Love, you will always be one-eyed, you and all those who are fed by your doctrine. For, to be sure, one has faulty vision who sees things before his eyes and does not understand them at all. And so it is with

[172] Love describes an alternative nobility based on another genealogy. Directly before Reason faints and dies, Love describes the Soul as the lady of the Virtues, daughter of Deity, sister of Wisdom, bride of Love. (Ch.87, 162-163)

you" (Ch. 43, 122/132).[173] Another vision is needed that integrates love and knowledge more fully.[174]

If there is a single climax of this dialogue it is the death of Reason. In Chapters 35 and 36 Reason begins to submit to Love, promising obedience to her and freeing the Soul from her subjection ("Thus I give my all to you"), asking for guidance: "Now, Lady Love…I pray you, guide me so that I might serve her completely as her simple handmaid. For I understand that I cannot have greater joy nor greater honour than to be the servant of such a lady" (Ch. 39, 119/124). Yet she continues to question, failing to grasp Love's words. It is not until she hears the Soul's articulation of her total integration into Love in Chapter 87 that she finally dies, the victim of a wounded heart: "Ah God! says Reason. How dare one say this? I dare not listen to it. I am fainting truly, Lady Soul, in hearing you; my heart is failing. I have no more life" (Ch. 87, 162-163/247). The Soul's only words of grief are to lament that Reason's demise had not happened sooner (Ch. 87, 163/248).

Reason's death is not final, however. Love briefly assumes the role of Reason by asking the questions she would have asked, but eventually Reason returns, dramatizing the necessity of her role as a critical interlocutor in the discussion and in the journey toward

[173] A reference to reason and love as the two eyes of the soul needed for spiritual progress. See Babinsky's note 28, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, 224. In becoming "two-eyed" one's vision becomes more like God's, who on the final page is described as having two eyes that are constantly seeing creation (Ch.139, 221).

[174] Bernard McGinn suggests the difference between earlier and later mysticism lies in a changing understanding of the relationship between love and knowledge. Later mystics can be differentiated by their insistence that love *subsumes* all else in the highest stages of mystical union. He argues that Marguerite Porete provides an example of one of the most extreme forms of the new understandings of union that emerged in the thirteenth century. See Bernard McGinn, "Love, Knowledge and *Unio mystica* in the Western Christian Tradition," In *Mystical Union and Monotheistic Faith: An Ecumenical Dialogue*, ed. Moshe Idel and Bernard McGinn (New York: Macmillan, 1989), 74.

the Soul's union with her beloved.[175] Love, too, is aware of this role and insists that for much of the journey she will remain in the Soul's entourage as a guardian of her gate, "for otherwise havoc would be greeted by you" (Ch. 65, 142/186). Most scholars have agreed that Porete associates "Holy Church the Little" with Reason, and thus demonstrates the limitations of the forms of "knowing" associated with it.[176] Reason's role at the end of the dialogue indicates her transformation; just as the Soul is released from servitude to the Virtues who learn to serve her, Reason renounces her dominance and comes to serve Love.

It is fitting that Reason's death is temporary, giving way to a re-birth. Porete's text destabilizes expectations and gives no straightforward itinerary. Just as the apex of her seven stages involves a brief moment of union that is likened to the opening and closure of an aperture, there is no stability here; Love implies a recurring process of letting go and being taken up by God, a journey that is never complete or accomplished. Mommaer's literary approach to Porete's text articulates this nicely. He writes that the key for Marguerite is that the experience of union through annihilation is not to be understood as a "terminus" or a definite state, but is a transformation that is always in the midst of intensifying.[177] Moreover, Imke de Gier notes that the shifting character is reflective of the character of the spiritual path: that it is "not necessarily constant, steady, or uniform," but

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[175] Imke de Gier suggests that Reason plays an important pedagogical role as the one who makes it possible for the audience to hear aspects of the annihilated life in more detail. "Allegory and Mystagogy," 9.

[176] See especially Jane Chance, "Marguerite Porete's Annihilation of the Character Reason in her Fantasy of an Inverted Church." Chance argues that Reason in fact masks the clergy, and that Porete is repudiating "a concept of acculturated and gendered reason" (72).

[177] Paul Mommaers, "*La transformation d'amour selon Marguerite Porete*," *Ons Geestelijk Erf* 65 (1991), 101. Kocher concurs, writing that "Reason personifies a soulless desire for knowledge, almost intractably stubborn, unable to remain silent, unable even to remain dead. Her reappearance implies that people's effort to free themselves from *raison* is likely to be long and uneven, with repeated setbacks." Kocher, *Allegories of Love*, 7.

is dynamic and far from systematic.[178] The dialogue's form, too, speaks to the ongoing and dynamic nature of this drama, which gives no prescriptive technique or method, but instead tells a story of the Soul's annihilation in Love, culminating in song:

> Truth declares to my heart,
> That I am loved by One alone,
> And she says that it is without return
> That He has given me His love.
> This gift kills my thought
> By the delight of His love,
> Which delight
> lifts me and transforms me through union
> Into the eternal joy
> of the being of divine Love. (Ch.122, 201/346)

4. Selfhood, Annihilation, and Decreation

Marguerite Porete's daring depiction of self-annihilation finds a modern expression in Weil's later writings and notebooks. Weil understands the annihilation of the will both as a personal call and part of a greater cosmic story of God's kenotic descent in Creation, Incarnation, and Passion. One must "decreate" the self, she writes, becoming a transparent channel for God to act in the world. This entails detaching the self from the ego, desires,

[178] Imke de Gier, "Allegory and Mystagogy," 20.

and even notions of God. Here I outline Weil's understanding of decreation in relation to Porete's terminology of self-annihilation with attention to what constitutes selfhood and the loss that is so central to each. While there are notable differences in the ways Weil and Porete articulate the need to unite the will with God's—particularly with regard to asceticism—I argue that these are rooted in a shared concern with eliminating selfish and possessive desire and a focus on the will as the locus of separation and possible union with God. Both women articulate in their different ways a love story between God and the soul that culminates in the union and assimilation of wills, but only as the egotistical self disappears.

Weil's later notebooks range from short and assertive aphorisms to longer exploratory passages and expositions of themes repeated more confidently in her essays. But there are also many fragments that have the quality of a prayer. Prayer is for Weil the purest form of attention, a "silent orientation of longing" and a disposition of patient waiting (FLN, 101) that she exemplifies throughout the writings of her private notebooks. She writes that prayer "means knowing that we can do nothing and yet wearing ourselves out in what we recognize as useless efforts and waiting humbly for the day when, perhaps, they will be noticed by the Power whom we dare not implore" (FLN, 101). Weil's characterization of prayer—and the disposition it requires—exemplifies the posture of empty desire and consent required for the soul to be taken up into the movement of God's love in the world. I turn first to a passage from her New York notebook, written in the summer or early fall of

1942, that has sometimes been referred to as her "terrible prayer."[179] Written with the tone and intimacy of a lover addressing a distant God, it is an admission of her insufficiency and an expression of a deep longing for her will to be completely assimilated to God's.

In the "example of a prayer," Weil articulates her desire to wear down the egotistical self in hyperbolical terms that have provoked offence in her readers. The opening metaphors are indeed jarring. She asks: "Father, in the name of Christ grant me this. That I may be unable to will any bodily movement, or even any attempt at movement, like a total paralytic. That I may be incapable of receiving any sensation, like someone who is completely blind, deaf and deprived of all the senses…" (FLN, 243).[180] She writes in the frenzied words of a lover's madness. But the second half of the prayer echoes the more familiar words of the Lord's prayer and of Porete's mystical language of the devouring flame of love before turning outward, away from the self toward others:

> May this body move or be still, with perfect suppleness or rigidity, in continuous conformity to thy will. May my faculties of hearing, sight, taste, smell and touch register the perfectly accurate impress of thy creation. May this mind, in fullest lucidity,

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[179] So called by Marie-Magdaleine Davy in *The Mysticism of Simone Weil*, trans. Cynthia Rowland (London: Rockliff Publishing, 1951); Ann Loades in "Eucharistic Sacrifice," Yoon Sook Cha's *Decreation and the Ethical Bind*, and Richard D.E. Burton, "Fasting, Bleeding, Seeing: 'Extraordinary Phenomena' in France, c. 1970-c. 1950," In *Holy Tears, Holy Blood: Women, Catholicism, and the Culture of Suffering in France, 1840-1970* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), among others.

[180] These opening words recall Weil's great admiration of the French poet Joë Bousquet, who, as noted above, had been permanently paralysed as a result of a wound in WWI. Weil met Bousquet in person for the first time in March of 1942. They continued to correspond, and in one letter she writes, "Whether or not affliction imposes literal immobility, there is always enforced immobility in this sense that a part of the soul is always steeped, monotonously, incessantly and inextricably, in pain. Thanks to this immobility the infinitesimal seed of divine love placed in the soul can slowly grow and bear fruit in patience—εν υπομενη is the divinely beautiful Gospel expression. Translators say *in patientia*, but υπομενειν is quite another thing. It means to remain where one is, motionless, in expectation, unshaken and unmoved by any external shock" (*SL*, 137).

> connect all ideas in perfect conformity with thy truth. May this sensibility experience, to their greatest possible intensity and in all their purity, all the nuances of grief and joy. May this love be an absolutely devouring flame of love of God for God. May all this be stripped away from me, devoured by God, transformed into Christ's substance, and given for food to afflicted men whose body and soul lack every kind of nourishment. (FLN, 243-244)[181]

She ends her prayer with an astonishing supplication to be utterly possessed by God: "Father, since thou art the Good and I am mediocrity, rend this body and soul away from me to make them into things for your use, and let nothing remain of me, for ever, except this rending itself, or else nothingness" (FLN, 243-244). So extreme were these private words of longing that Weil admitted they could not even be willed:

> Words like this are not efficacious unless they are dictated by the Spirit. One does not voluntarily ask for such things. One comes to it in spite of oneself. In spite of oneself, yet one comes to it. One does not consent to it with abandon, but with a violence exerted upon the entire soul by the entire soul. But the consent is total and unresolved, and given by a single movement of the whole being. (FLN, 244)[182]

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[181] "*Que ce corps se mauve ou s'immobilise, avec une souplesse ou une rigidité parfaites, en conformité ininterrompue avec ta volonté. Que cette ouïe, cette vue, ce gout, cet odorat, ce toucher, reçoivent l'empreinte parfaitement exacte de ta creation. Que cette intelligence, dans la plenitude de la lucidité, enchaîne toutes les idées en conformité parfait avec ta verité. Que cette sensibilité éprouve dans leur plus grande intensité possible et dans toute leur pureté toutes les nuances de la douleur et de la joie. Que cet amour soit une flame absolument dévorante d'amour de Dieu pour Dieu. Que tout cela soit arraché à moi, dévoré par Dieu, transformé en substance du Christ, et donné à manger à des malheureux don't le corps et l'âme manguent de toutes les espèces de nourriture.*" *OC* VI.4, 179-280.

[182] "*De tells paroles n'ont une vertu efficace que si ells sont dictées par l'Esprit. Ce n'est pas volontairement qu'on peut demander pareilles choses. C'est malgré soi qu'on en arrive là. Malgré soi, mais on y consent. On n'y consent pas avec abandon. On y consent avec une violence opérée par l'âme entire sur l'âme entire. Mais le consentement est entire et sans reserve, donné d'un movement unique de tout l'être.*" *OC* VI.4, 280.

Weil insists that even this desire for nothing of herself to remain is no longer her own desire; her very words are given to her and written in spite of herself.

Viewed from the vantage point of Weil's early death, passages such as this have often been treated as evidence of Weil's masochism and dismissed as instances of ascetic excess.[183] As provocative as her prayer is, however, it provides insight into the way she thought about conforming the will, the senses, and intelligence to God's through the relinquishment of the self. For Weil, it is primarily the egotistical self and its desires, the "I", that prevents one from conforming to God's will and that obstructs the soul from uniting with its true beloved. Her prayer expresses both desire as well as the agony and struggle she believed is always part of one's yearning for self-effacement.

Weil situates this struggle within a much larger love story of God's self-abdication, describing a cosmic drama of creation and Incarnation. God renounces being everything, emptying himself of his divinity and withdrawing from creation so that something outside of God might exist. Creation, Incarnation, and Passion are a model of this dispossession that demonstrates God's distance from the world and simultaneous presence within the soul: "The Creation is an abandonment. In creating what is other than Himself, God necessarily abandoned it. He only keeps under his care the part of Creation which is Himself—the uncreated part of every creature." (FLN, 103). She situates human beings

[183] For example, Richard D.E. Burton compares her prayer to Herbert's poem, "Love," writing that the differences between the two could not be more marked, that Weil "cannot, *will not*, 'sit and eat'." He writes: "Hyperactive even as she strains to be passive, intensely self-willed even as she wills the annihilation of her will," she cannot receive the gratuitous gift of Christ's body and blood. *Holy Tears, Holy Blood*, 142.

within this drama by turning to the context of the fall of Adam and Christ as the second Adam who heals the wound of original sin:

> Our sin consists in wanting to be, and our punishment is that we believe we possess being. Expiation consists in desiring to cease to be; and salvation consists for us in perceiving that we are not.
>
> Adam made us believe that we had being; Christ showed us that we are non-beings.
>
> To teach us that we are non-beings, God made himself a non-being. (FLN, 218)[184]

Weil refers to the problem of "being" as one that originated with Adam; its "punishment" is that assuming that we possess it produces further distortions of reality about ourselves, others, and God. Weil calls for an imitation of God's own renunciation, offering the self—the "I" being the only thing one truly possesses (GG, 26)—back to God: "God has conferred upon [the human being] an imaginary likeness of his power, an imaginary divinity, so that he also, although a creature, may empty himself of his divinity" (WG, 99).

According to Weil, the self is an obstruction between God loving the world and its creatures. She writes this about the need for self-effacement:

> All the things that I see, hear, breathe, touch, eat; all the beings I meet—I deprive all these of contact with God and I deprive God of contact with them to the extent to which something in me says 'I'.
>
> There is something I can do both for all these and for God, which is to withdraw, respect the tête-à-tête. (N, 378-379)

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[184] "*Notre péché consiste à vouloir être, et notre châtiment est de croire être. L'expiation est vouloir ne plus être; et le salut pour nous consiste à voir que nous ne sommes pas. Adam nous a fait croire que nous étions; le Christ nous a montré que nous n'étions pas. Pour nous apprendre que nous sommes non-être, Dieu s'est fait non-être –" OC* VI.4, 252.

She articulates the problem of the self as a problem of its intrusion between God and creation, and rather than putting it in terms of the soul's longing for God as her beloved, she describes herself as the obstruction:

> I must withdraw so that God may make contact with the beings whom chance places in my path and whom he loves. It is tactless for me to be there. It is as though I were placed between two lovers or two friends. I am not the maiden who awaits her betrothed, but the unwelcome third who is with two betrothed lovers and ought to go away so that they can really be together.
>
> If only I knew how to disappear, there would be a perfect union of love between God and the earth I tread, the sea I hear… (GG, 88-89)

Weil describes the self as a screen (GG, 88) and a shadow (GG, 87), an obstruction that gets in the way of God's light.

She points to the problem of the "self" in passages throughout her notebooks: each person imagines him- or her-self to be "situated in the centre of the world," which produces all kinds of deceptions and impedes the soul's ability to discern what is true. The soul's tendency is toward self-expansion—"the soul, like a gas, tends to occupy the whole of the space open to it" (N, 198)—measuring everything according to its own wants and needs. Instead, "One must strip oneself of the imaginary sovereignty of the world, in order to reduce oneself to the point one occupies in space and time" (N, 213). This "stripping" or self-emptying is what she calls "decreation," a term which has received much commentary but in fact appears only a few times in her notebooks.

There have been no shortage of questions and criticisms regarding Weil's insistence on the need to relinquish the self, particularly from the perspective of feminist scholars.[185] These often centre around the issue of agency and point to the way that selflessness has often been demanded of some over others. But there are also questions about what a "decreative ethics" could look like. If the self disappears, what is left as an acting subject? Yoon Sook Cha identifies an "ethical bind" in Weil's thought, asking how self-dispossession can be a passage to the other when it must occur precisely at the point at which the "I" disappears. She calls attention to the ambiguity of the status of the decreated "I" who is faced with the claim of the other, and asks: "if the self is not the ground from which ethical action is derived and produced, what exactly underwrites moral action framed by the claim of the other not to be harmed?"[186] Cha explores this question with reference to other continental philosophers (Emmanuel Levinas, Maurice Blanchot, and Judith Butler), concluding that "decreative ethics" does not offer a "normative, constructive or prescriptive model for behaviour, nor a guiding set of principles, since one does not exactly 'do' anything."[187] That is, self-dispossession does not fit easily within familiar models of ethics, since it relies on a passivity in the face of the other. Cha does not seek to resolve the bind, but argues that for Weil, all one can do is withdraw, consenting to being nothing and not giving in to the domination of force.

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[185] See especially Ann Loades, "Eucharistic Sacrifice"; Jean Bethke Elshtain, "The Vexation of Simone Weil," in *Power Trips and Other Journeys: Essays in Feminism as Civic Discourse*; Alec Irwin, "Devoured by God: Cannibalism, Mysticism, and Ethics in Simone Weil," *Cross Currents* 51, no. 2 (2001): 257-272.

[186] Cha, *Decreation and the Ethical Bind*, 2.

[187] Cha, *Decreation and the Ethical Bind*, 4.

Cha ultimately concludes by suggesting that decreation might primarily be understood as textual, a disposition that occurs in reading and writing, rather than in the political realm.[188] This is partly a reflection of her approach to Weil which resists "any ready correspondence between [Weil's] life and work."[189] Yet as she admits, "the 'problem' of Weil's life keeps seeping in," and the final chapter considers Weil's final personal letters and her proposal for a project of frontline nurses. While I agree that Weil's notion of decreation does not offer a prescriptive model that can be easily applied through principles or as policy, this need not mean that it is not embodied. For Weil resists abstractions and uses incarnational language explicitly in her description of decreation. We can see this explicitly in her "example of a prayer," which I will return to at the end of this chapter. For Weil, the inner is never detached from the outer.

Still, the question remains as to what precisely is left when the self is "annihilated" or "decreated." Central to the first chapter of Cha's analysis is Weil's essay entitled "La Personne et le sacré," written in London in 1943, in which Weil offers a critique of personalism.[190] In the piece, she writes that while there is something sacred in every human being, it is not one's person or personality. Instead, it is on the level of the impersonal and anonymous: "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" (SE, 10/OC V.1, 212).

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[188] Cha, *Decreation and the Ethical Bind*, xii-xiii.

[189] Cha, *Decreation and the Ethical* Bind, xiv.

[190] Translated as "Human Personality" but also as "What is Sacred in every Human Being" in *Late Philosophical Writings*, ed. Eric O. Springsted and Lawrence E. Schmidt.

She continues, writing that "Our personality is the part of us which belongs to error and sin. The whole effort of the mystic has always been to become such that there is no part left in his soul to say 'I'" (SE, 14/OC V.1, 217). Weil's allusion to the mystics in this passage gives a helpful indication that they might give us a better sense of what Weil means when she writes that one must relinquish the "I". While she does not refer to Porete here, I nevertheless turn to Porete's dialogue as an exploration of the question of the self, its annihilation and "non-being."

Weil writes that "God created me as a non-being which has the appearance of existing, in order that through love I should renounce this apparent existence and be the plenitude of being. Then there is no 'I'. The 'I' belongs to non-being" (FLN, 96-97). This passage about non-being has been noted as a place of affinity between Weil and Porete's own articulation of the Soul's nothingness.[191] In the *Mirror*, Truth responds to the Soul's question of "who am I?" in the following way:

> You were nothing… as long as you had abandoned nothing of what I gave to you. Now you are another thing, for you are less than nothing by however many times, says Truth, you have willed something other than my will. (Ch.109, 181/297)

God created the soul from nothing ("*nient*"), but she abandoned this nothingness in willing independently, becoming "another thing" ("*une aultre*") distinct from God. In falling from love into the bottomless abyss she once again recognizes her own nothingness (Ch.118, 192/329), and in this "nakedness" (Ch.52, 130/155) she is released and freed (Ch.45, 125/140) so that she once again wills nothing and knows nothing and possesses nothing.

[191] McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism*, 265.

The words of Weil's prayer resonate here: "let nothing remain of me, eternally, except this tearing itself, or else nothingness." She uses an analogy in her New York notebooks to describe this consent to "nothingness":

> For glass, there is nothing better than absolute transparency. For a human being there is nothing more than to be nothingness. Every value in a human being is really a negative value. It is like an opaque stain on glass. If a piece of glass is covered with such blemishes it may easily believe it amounts to something and is much superior to some perfectly transparent glass through which the light passes as if there was nothing there. That is why 'Whosoever exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted.' (FLN, 354)[192]

The "nothingness" she refers to here is likened to transparency, a removal of those parts of the self that shadow and obstruct. We have to "undo the creature in us" (GG, 81). Weil writes that we possess nothing in the world except the power to say "I," and it is this that we have to give to God (GG, 71). This is not a destruction, however. Weil insists that decreation is different because through it, one "passes into the uncreated" (GG, 78), just as Porete describes the nothingness of the soul as return to what she was before she had being, living "without a why" (Ch.91, 167).

What is different between Porete's and Weil's articulations about self-annihilation and decreation is that their writings are situated in—and responding to—two contexts with

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[192] "*Pour du verre il n'y a rien de plus que d'être absolument transparent. Il n'y a rien de plus pour un être human que d'être néant. Toute valeur dans un être humain est réellement une valeur negative. C'est comme une tache dans du verre. Le verre qui est plein de taches peut bien croire qu'il est quelque chose, et qu'il est très supérieur au verre parfaitement transparent, au travers duquel la lumière passe comme s'il n'y avait rien. C'est pourquoi: << Quiconque s'élève sera abaissé, quiconque s'abaisse sera élevé.>>*" *OC* VI.4, 383-384.

very different assumptions about the nature of the self. In *Effacing the Self: Mysticism and the Modern Subject*, for example, Marc De Kesel has argued that modernity is characterized first and foremost by "a non-effaced, strongly self-assured self." And yet, he suggests that there is also a desire to be rid of that self: "Being modern, we cannot do without a solid, self-assured ego, yet we are haunted by the dream of finally being liberated from our very self, leaving our problematic ego-condition behind and losing ourselves in mere selflessness."[193] It is this goal of self-effacement, he suggests, that is precisely the practice of the Christian mystic. De Kesel traces a fundamental shift from premodern assumptions of the divine as the "ground" or even the "abyss" of being, to modernity in which we can no longer assume that the self is "grounded" in divinity, and instead we relate to reality on the basis of ourselves.[194] Whereas in the Middle Ages, God functioned as "subject," with modernity, the ego or the I has become the exclusive subject, and God became "object," either of doubt or faith.[195]

De Kesel points to Weil as a modern mystic who seeks to "hold fast" to God as the subject of reality and get beyond ourselves as the subject.[196] However, he argues that for Weil, to embrace the abyss requires what it contradicts: the "power to say I." Ultimately, he argues that "Weil's intention to go beyond the modern subject (the subject/ground of our relation to reality) and to restore the premodern, real subject (the subject of reality itself,

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[193] De Kesel, *Effacing the Self: Mysticism and the Modern Subject* (Albany: SUNY, 2023), 4-5.

[194] De Kesel makes his argument by turning to a wide range of thinkers, beginning in Part I by focusing on seventeenth-century French *spiritualité* and especially the thought of Francois Fénelon. He traces the shift in understandings of the self by examining Meister Eckhart's medieval worldview of God as the "ground" of being, demonstrating that while Fénelon articulates a similar notion of the self, there is nevertheless already a move away from the assumptions instructing Eckhart's thought.

[195] De Kesel, *Effacing the Self*, 110.

[196] De Kesel, *Effacing the Self*, 121.

God) fails. In a way, she gets stuck in the act *as such* of destroying the (modern) subject, an act that never stops being executed and which inevitably requires a subject."[197] Yet Weil understands the self and its "power to say I" as constitutive of fallenness, and thus never something that can be effaced in this life. It is the reason why self-renunciation is both necessary and a continual struggle.

Moreover, "failure" here depends on what one considers to be "success." For both Weil and Porete, self-effacement is never a single event that occurs once and for all. Both imagine self-renunciation as part of an unfolding drama that is far greater than our individual selves. For Porete, the "height" of annihilation that is possible in this life is as fleeting as the momentary opening of an aperture ("*espandement*") or a brief spark ("*esclar*") (Ch. 58, 135/168). Similarly for Weil, decreation is not a single event, but an ongoing struggle that involves failure at every turn. "Decreation" is not a terminus, that is, just as God's self-emptying was not a single event for Weil: "God has not only made himself flesh once; every day he makes himself matter in order to give himself to man and be consumed by him" (N, 99). To believe otherwise about decreation is to risk turning it into a "state" (as we might similarly mis-interpret Porete's text) that one can master and achieve on one's own, which only reinforces the imagination's projection of a sovereign self.

For Weil, it is precisely an over-reliance on one's own abilities that is why the problem of the self cannot be resolved by the will alone: "The harder one wills, the more one is oneself. One can only desire and supplicate" (FLN, 262). Weil shares with Porete the sense that the problem of "being" is located primarily at the level of the will. It is the will

[197] De Kesel, *Effacing the Self*, 122.

that separates the soul from God and allows us to believe that we possess an "I" in the first place. Both the *Mirror* and Weil's notebooks attest to the ways in which the only free act is to render the self back to God, consenting to God's will. In the *Mirror*, the Soul says that she has been given free will by God's goodness, but that with this freedom, she has removed her will from that goodness and thus from the will of God. She cannot be what she "ought" to be until she returns her will to God, once again becoming "as naked as I was when I was who was not" (Ch.111, 183).

5. Desire and Detachment

Weil does suggest a place for the will in the quest to rid oneself of the self; however, it is a subordinate and preliminary role: "The effort that brings a soul to salvation is like the effort of looking or of listening; it is the kind of effort by which a fiancée accepts her lover. It is an act of attention and consent; whereas what language designates as will is something suggestive of muscular effort…The right use of the will is a condition of salvation, necessary no doubt but remote, inferior, very subordinate and purely negative" (WG, 193-194). Weil associates willfulness here with "muscular effort," an active "seizing" that she contrasts to the "active passivity" of desire, consent and attention. But how is one to relinquish the forceful will? In his comparative analysis of asceticism, *The Ascetic Self*, Gavin Flood describes asceticism as precisely this practice. Through spiritual exercises, one habituates a form of detachment and release from the individual will and desires in order to subject oneself to a larger tradition and what he calls a higher freedom: "The ascetic

submits her life to a form that transforms it, to a training that changes a person's orientation from the fulfilment of desire to a narrative greater than the self."[198] He suggests that in Christianity, the goal of asceticism has often been understood as the passivity of the self in which the self's will is replaced by the divine will.[199] The practice of asceticism requires the active rooting out of those desires which interfere with the soul's ability to see and act according to God's vision and will, so that the personal will and divine will become harmonized. Through *ascesis*, the soul's desires become reordered and habituated through practice so that one can act virtuously without the labour and strain caused by disordered desires.

Porete and Weil articulate what appear to be very different views of asceticism. On the one hand, Porete's book warns against harsh forms of mortification. On the other hand, Weil has been identified as a modern-day ascetic, whose personal life and published writings both point toward the need to discipline the soul, sometimes by means of extreme measures of renunciation and purification. Reflecting on contemporary urban life, Flood rightly argues that "there is little place for abstinence, self-contradiction, containment, and the purification of desire that have been part of the ascetic life of thousands of men and women throughout the centuries."[200] Indeed, the idea of "self-annihilation" is viewed with suspicion—often for good reason, as I have noted—which partly explains why Weil's writings have drawn such conflicted responses, from admiration to horror. Yet in spite of their apparent different views on asceticism, Porete and Weil share an emphasis on the need

[198] Flood, *The Ascetic Self*, 2.
[199] Flood, *The Ascetic Self*, 14.
[200] Flood, *The Ascetic Self*, 2.

for detachment – detachment from the virtues, from one's desires, from one's ideas about God and the practices of institutional Christianity, even detachment from detachment itself. Indeed, Weil's references to Porete in her notebooks are precisely along these lines, and on closer examination, their diverging perspectives on asceticism share this same concern.

In the *Mirror*, Love warns against confusing the exercises associated with asceticism as goals in themselves. Amy Hollywood notes that Porete clearly believes many of her contemporaries are stuck on this level, in a life of contemplation, asceticism, poverty, prayers, ecstasies and martyrdoms.[201] She suggests that Porete's criticism of these works is also related to the ways they were gendered and that she rejects the way that the "body marked by harsh asceticism and paramystical phenomena increasingly becomes the visible sign by which sanctity can be demonstrated and read."[202] The *Mirror* thus presents a warning to those who would become transfixed by the pleasure of their own mortification. Love explains to Reason:

> There are those who completely mortify the body in doing works of charity; and they possess such great pleasure in their works that they have no understanding that there might be any better being than the being of the works of the virtues and death by martyrdom…Such folk are happy, says Love, but they are lost in their works, on account of the sufficiency which they have in their being. (Ch. 55, 132/160)

These are the "lost souls," Love says, for they believe there is no better life than the one in which they dwell. In a later passage, Love describes this state within the seven stages. In

[201] Hollywood, "Suffering Transformed," 97.
[202] Hollywood, "Suffering Transformed," 92-93.

the fourth stage of the soul's journey, the Soul relinquishes all exterior labours and obedience to another, and in the height of contemplation becomes "marvelously filled with love" (Ch. 118, 190/322). Yet this love makes her inebriated and her sight is so dazzled by its brightness that she sees nothing beyond it. Deceived by the "sweetness of the pleasure of her love" which completely overtakes her, she can no longer see that there are still two more stages.[203]

Porete's *Mirror* describes the soul's journey as a process of uniting one's will with that of Love, but also of becoming freed from servitude to the virtues and desires and "works" of all kinds, including contemplation and asceticism. The soul who passes to the fifth stage will see her insufficiency by the overflowing of Divine light so that she will render back her will to God, dissolving it in God's own will (Ch. 118, 191/324). This soul lives in stillness, no longer disturbed by the vicissitudes of life. She accepts whatever comes her way, and neither "desires nor despises poverty, neither martyrdom nor tribulation, neither mass nor sermon, not fasts nor prayers," nor does she take account of shame or honor, nor ease or anxiety, love, hate, hell or paradise (Ch. 13, 94/54). She is free, unencumbered and detached. The "sad souls," on the other hand—the "merchants" and "servants"—are those who remain under the domination of the virtues but can see that there is a better being and are sad because they recognize what they lack (Ch. 57, 134/164-

[203] Maria Lichtman points to this as an instance in which Porete subverts the courtly tradition: "Porete exploits the language of 'pleasure' and 'drunken ecstasy of Love,' the language of excess of the courtly love lyric and even of Beguine love mysticism, only in order to subvert it. The soul passes beyond this state, thereby offering a subtle critique of its affective mysticism." "Negative Theology in Marguerite Porete and Jacques Derrida," 220. While Love's insistence that the Soul needs to move beyond this level does subvert courtly language, it need not signify that Porete's text is a critique of a more affective path, especially given Love's privileged position above Reason in the dialogue.

166).[204] They have not yet become detached from their desires and actions, and therefore are not yet free and unencumbered. Porete's call for the relinquishment of all attachments is so total that Love extends this even to the desire for salvation. The annihilated soul no longer worries about heaven or hell and is freed from her anxieties about salvation.

One of Weil's brief references to Porete's text in her New York notebooks is precisely to this need for detachment. She refers to the *Mirror*, alongside passages from two other texts,[205] with the following note underneath: "To be detached from the fruits of action. For that, the soul needs an architecture of depth. Because the part of the soul that acts must strive passionately towards the fruits of action. Another part of it must be detached" (FLN, 205-206). In Porete's dialogue, Love warns against servitude to the "works" associated with asceticism, but Weil, too, warns against the egotism that can arise from the very practices that are intended to wear down the ego. Instead of releasing the soul from its willfulness they can become sources of comfort and give a sense of self-sufficiency, becoming distractions rather than tools. Weil writes the following:

> We have to cast aside all other desires for the sake of our desire for eternal life, but we should desire eternal life itself with renunciation. *We must not even become attached to detachment. Attachment to salvation is even more dangerous than the others*. We have to think of eternal life as one thinks of water when dying of thirst, and yet at the

[204] For a treatment of Porete's metaphors of merchants and servants and their reversals, see Kocher, *Allegories of Love*, esp. Ch.3, "From Spiritual Servitude to Freedom: The Allegory of Social Rank," 107-125. Kocher argues that Porete employs social rank to describe spiritual status but that in the spiritual realm, the possibilities for change were much greater, expressing the changing state of the Soul. *Allegories of Love*, 107-109.

[205] The two other texts are a short reference to Ruysbroek's *The sparkling stone* and a passage written by the Italian Franciscan, Jacopone da Todi (*FLN*, 205).

> same time we have to desire that we and our loved ones should be eternally deprived of this water rather than receive it in abundance in spite of God's will, if such a thing were conceivable. (WG, 219-220, italics added)

Weil's understanding of detachment is, like Porete's, so radical that one must not desire any consolation, even that of salvation.

Weil writes about the need to become detached, associating it with the relinquishment of the desires related to the ego: "'The extinction of desire' (as in Buddhism); or detachment; or *amor fati*; or the desire for absolute good—it always amounts to the same thing: emptying desire of all content, finality of all content" (N, 550). Several pages in her New York notebook (FLN, 315-319) offer a particularly concentrated meditation on desire and detachment, though her thoughts are interspersed with questions and are clearly written in a mode of inquiry. She writes about the need to avert desire from the things of this world, comparing it to a tearing or wrenching away: "To turn away from them—that is all. Nothing else is necessary" (FLN, 315). And yet, she acknowledges how difficult this is: "Although I know that the things of this world are unworthy of desire, I find nevertheless that my desire is attached to them, and I lack the energy to wrench it away. Efforts of will are illusory… All I can do is to desire the good" (FLN, 317). Weil describes detachment as the process of turning away from the objects of this world as a source of energy in order to gaze on the good as the source of nourishment.

She uses her customary analogy of food and nourishment to describe the way human creatures receive energy through attachment to earthly things. She describes us as beings who draw our energy from outside ourselves:

> Besides actual food, in the literal sense of the word, all incentives are sources of energy for us. Money, ambition, consideration, decorations, celebrity, power, our loved ones, everything that puts into us the capacity for action is like bread. If any one of these attachments penetrates deeply enough into us to reach the vital roots of our carnal existence, its loss may break us and even cause our death. That is called dying of love. It is like dying of hunger. All these objects of attachment go together with food, in the ordinary sense of the word, to make up the daily bread of this world. (WG, 221)

But it is not this earthly bread we should ask for. Instead, "there is a transcendent energy whose source is in heaven, and this flows into us as soon as we wish for it. It is a real energy; it performs actions through the agency of our souls and our bodies. We should ask for this food" (WG, 221).[206] Yet according to Weil, the "energy" derived from the objects of desire (or from "eating" what we love) can make us believe that we are not hungry for the transcendent bread that nourishes. Like the *Mirror*, in which the annihilated soul's detachment from the "works" of asceticism and contemplation is not an outright rejection of them but a rejection of the belief that works or actions could ever be sufficient, for Weil, detachment entails a refusal to be satiated by this "food."

Detachment begins for Weil with our very notions of God, which are always limited but to which we often become problematically attached. In some of her reflections on the Lord's Prayer, she writes that "God has placed the skies between himself and us, in order to hide himself; he lets us have only one thing of his, which is his name. This name is really

[206] In these rich pages of reflections on detachment from her New York notebooks, Weil makes a distinction between the water that quenches in the account of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well from John 4: "Scriptures make use of two images: 'He that drinketh of this water shall thirst again' and 'He that drinketh of this water shall never thirst again.' This water is the good" (*FLN*, 317).

given to us. We can do what we want with it. We can attach it like a label to any created thing. But in doing so we profane it and it loses its virtue. It is only when it is spoken without imagining any representation of it that it has its virtue" (FLN, 296). Detachment in this sense can be likened to the apophatic practice of "unsaying" in which one seeks to be released from the names that limit or contort our understandings of God. Perhaps even more radically, Weil suggests that a certain form of atheism can function as a means of purifying the soul from these attachments. She posits that "Religion in so far as it is a source of consolation is a hindrance to true faith; and in this sense atheism is a purification" (N, 238).[207] Atheism in the sense Weil means here is a practice of extinguishing idolatrous naming, loving, and worship.

Like Love's emphasis on poverty in the *Mirror*, Weil writes that "To return to the Father, one must have nothing left at all. If one still has something left when one turns to the Father, then one is looking to someone else under his name" (FLN, 236). It is only after exhausting the will, the names for God, and even the intelligence that the Soul is ready to "pass over to the transcendent":

> One only reaches that point after a process of exhaustion which takes time… it is only after we have exhausted all the natural faculties in us (will, intelligence, natural tendency toward loving) in the effort to produce good, and have recognized that we are incapable of any good, that we fall prostrate before God. (FLN, 353)

[207] Christine Hof notes the important resonances here with Weil's reading of John of the Cross and the Dark Night that purifies by means of the utter sense of abandonment by God. *Philosophie et kénose chez Simone Weil*, 158.

Weil's mention of "exhausting" the human faculties also appears in one of her references to the *Mirror* in her notebooks. In the final pages of her London notebook—likely written either in the hospital or just before her admission—she writes briefly:

> *Mirror of Simple Souls*, v, 12—image of iron and fire.
>
> *exhaust* the human faculties (will, intelligence, etc.) so as to pass over to the transcendent. Cf. *Mirror of Simple Souls*, ix, 18. (FLN, 361)

Her allusion to exhausting the intelligence recalls the lengthy time it takes in Porete's drama for Reason to finally be extinguished. Weil similarly writes that the intelligence must be exercised until it comes upon its limit. Contradiction brings it to this brink of collapse.[208] The disposition is one of poverty and fatigue, echoing the words of the Soul who speaks about such exhaustion to her readers: "You have nothing to delay in giving up yourselves, for no one can rest in the highest restful repose if he is not fatigued first—of this I am certain. Let the Virtues have what is theirs in you by sharpening the will in the core of the affection of your spirit until they have acquitted you of what you owe Jesus Christ" (Ch. 94, p.169). Worn out, with a disposition of poverty and fatigue, one comes to a place of submission and prayer.

To "detach" the self from "detachment" is not something that can be carried out by one's self. Instead, it requires letting go. Weil explains with an analogy about plant life:

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[208] For example, in an oft-quoted passage from her New York notebook, Weil writes: "The notion of mystery is legitimate when the most logical and most rigorous use of the intelligence leads to an impasse, to a contradiction which is inescapable in this sense…then, like a lever, the notion of mystery carries thought beyond the impasse, to the other side of the unopened door, beyond the domain of the intelligence and above it. But to arrive beyond the domain of the intelligence one must have travelled all through it, to the end, and by a path raced with unimpeachable rigour. Otherwise one is not beyond it but on this side of it" (*FLN*, 131). The passage is a particularly helpful comparison to Porete's own depiction of the use and impasse of Reason in the *Mirror*.

> The weeds are pulled up by the muscular effort of the peasant, but only sun and water can make the corn grow. The will cannot produce any good in the soul…In our acts of obedience to God we are passive; whatever difficulties we have to surmount, however great our activity may appear to be, there is nothing analogous to muscular effort; there is only waiting, attention, silence, immobility, constant through suffering and joy. (WG, 193-194)

The active part of this is undertaken through ascetic effort—weeding out illusions and desires, refusing consolations, directing the gaze–but the rest is accomplished in the soul in spite of the self. Weil continues that one cannot take a single step toward heaven, for "it is not in our power to travel in a vertical direction" (WG, 194). Instead, all one can do is root out what obstructs and patiently await, consenting to the divine possession that is also depicted similarly in Socrates' image of the *mania* of the winged soul and Love's description it in the *Mirror* of the rapturous overflow of the Divine Light's movement, poured out from the bosom of God who is Being (Ch.118, 191/324).

Simone Kotva has nicely articulated this important role of desire, waiting, and attention in the thought of Weil, suggesting that "if there is a key to Weil's religious philosophy…it is not effort, nor is it absolute passivity as such (an impossibility in any case). Rather, it is spontaneity—the ability to act without deliberation and as it were straight from the heart: it is love, or desire."[209] Kotva argues that spiritual exercises have often been associated with effort, leaving out the crucial element of passivity (and thus relaxation,

[209] Kotva, *Effort and Grace*, 155.

effortlessness, desire), but Weil reintroduces action and passivity as two sides of a coin.[210] This is best expressed, Kotva suggests, in Weil's understanding of prayer as an effort that takes on the passive quality of waiting: "when we pray our attention is not trying, actively, to achieve a goal, since God is not really something that can be possessed by the mind. And yet we are paying attention; we are making an effort."[211] Kotva argues that "what Weil is questioning is not effort but the alliance of effort to force, or the idea that to act is always to be in control and to be exerting one's power in some way."[212] Rather than willfulness, Weil calls for attention as a disposition of waiting desire, an openness and consent to God:

> We liberate energy in ourselves…but it constantly reattaches itself. How are we to liberate it entirely? We have to desire that it should be done in us—to desire it truly; simply to desire it—not try to accomplish it; to think on it only…In such an undertaking all that I call 'I' has to be passive. Attention alone—that attention which is so full that the 'I' disappears—is required of me. I have to deprive all that I call 'I' of the light of my attention and turn it on to that which cannot be conceived. (N, 179)

There is a productive tension in Weil's thought between what Kotva has called effort and grace, and between willfulness and passivity. Detachment and asceticism are only ever a preparation, and it is through attention, which Weil likens to a form of passive activity and to prayer, that the soul signals her consent to the outpouring of grace.

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[210] Kotva, *Effort and Grace*, ix, 136.

[211] Kotva, *Effort and Grace*, 157. Kotva notes the similarity between Weil's description of attention as "waiting" and John of the Cross's account of "passive loving attention" and its Augustinian language of 'tranquility' and 'repose', a state in which "the soul does very little but accomplishes a great deal because it is now God who acts through it" (151).

[212] Kotva, *Effort and Grace*, 159.

There has been some discussion about whether Weil was sufficiently able to detach herself from detachment. Gustave Thibon and Father Perrin have pointed out the conflicting nature of Weil's desire for self-effacement, suggesting that at its most strong and rigid it was often simultaneously an affirmation of the ego and an assumption that she could do it by her own efforts.[213] Flood points to a similar ambiguity about what constitutes the self in the process of losing the self's will. Weil, he argues, is an excellent example of this ambiguity because she wishes to eradicate the will and replace it with divine will, yet "this is performed through great effort and suffering on her part."[214] Yet Weil was well aware of her own egoism and failures of detachment, admitting to it often in letters and her notebooks. Even when her notebooks are not formal prayers, they often have this character—they describe aspirations and struggles, admissions of failure and insufficiency, and supplications for what she cannot achieve on her own. Her notebooks, that is, articulate precisely the desire that Kotva notes is so central to the movement Weil seeks to describe – an empty desire, a desire for the void. In some of the final pages of her London notebook Weil recites the words of the Lord's Prayer adding her own interlinear invocations: "May thy creation disappear absolutely, beginning with myself and everything to which I am attached in any way whatsoever." She continues: "Having absolutely relinquished every

[213] Thibon notes this about the contradiction present in Weil's desire for effacement: "On the one hand there was a longing for absolute self-effacement, an unlimited opening to reality even under its harshest forms, and, on the other, a terrible self-will at the very heart of the self-stripping; the unflexible desire that this stripping should be her own work and should be accomplished in her own way, the consuming temptation to verify everything from within, to test everything and experience everything for herself" (*Simone Weil as we knew her*, 104). He continues later, remarking about her own detachment: "Simone Weil's ego was not dead: it was engaged in the process of committing suicide in a heroic tension which accentuated its forms and limitations" (*Simone Weil as we knew her*, 124).

[214] Flood, *The Ascetic Self*, 38.

kind of existence, I accept existence, of no matter what kind, solely through conformity to God's will," and finally, "I accept the eternal decree of the divine Wisdom and its entire unfolding in the order of time" (FLN, 360).

6. Conclusion

Weil's emphasis on detachment does not entail an abdication of social responsibility or a withdrawal from the world into a life of pious solitude. As Gavin Flood has noted, Weil's asceticism is directed outward, in service of others.[215] Her life and writings indicate she was deeply invested in the embodied expression of her thought, although this is not to suggest that her consideration of the body was not without tension and even a certain agony. To conclude this chapter, I will briefly demonstrate how Weil articulated her understanding of decreation as a process of incarnating God's love in the world, a topic I elaborate more specifically in chapter 4.

Several scholars have argued that Porete's text provides no tangible or "practical" ethic, and even that she avoids questions of embodiment. Amy Hollywood in particular has argued that this is in fact one of the more subversive aspects of Porete's text: the body is largely absent from the *Mirror*, demonstrating her rejection of the association of woman with bodiliness and showing how she refuses to abide by the expectations of women's texts.[216] Porete shifts the focus away from extraordinary bodily experiences—and with

[215] Flood, *The Ascetic Self*, 39.
[216] Hollywood, *The Soul as Virgin Wife*, 36.

them, the sacraments, the visible Church, the human Incarnation of Christ, and the "works" of prayer and contemplation—while also shifting the onus of sinfulness and fallenness away from the body toward the will.[217] Hollywood argues that because of this, Porete "is in danger of losing any point of contact between the simple soul and the world in which she lives," and that her teaching on the practicalities of communicating with the neighbour remain obscure and undeveloped.[218] However, Hollywood does admit elsewhere that while Porete largely de-emphasizes the body, she is ultimately "radically incarnational in that the divine works in and through the soul who has become detached," for such souls embody Christ.[219]

I will show how Porete's text implicitly develops this, turning to Weil as someone who also sought to articulate how relinquishing the "I" is related to a responsive, embodied attention to others. As we have already seen, Porete's inquisitors criticized her on the grounds that her text encouraged abandoning the virtues and other works. Yet at the beginning of the dialogue, right after the opening exemplum, Love begins with an ode to charity and this passage: "Therefore we shall begin, says Love, with the commandments of the Holy Church, so that each might be able to take his nourishment in this book with the aid of God, who commands that we love Him with all our heart, all our soul, and all our strength; and ourselves as we ought, and our neighbours as ourselves" (Ch. 3, 81/16). She insists that "these commands are of necessity for salvation for all: nobody can have grace with a lesser way" (Ch. 3, 81/16). She begins in this way only to shift the focus from the

[217] Hollywood, *The Soul as Virgin Wife*, 183-186.
[218] Hollywood, *The Soul as Virgin Wife*, 186.
[219] Hollywood, "Suffering Transformed," in *Meister Eckhart and the Beguine Mystics*, ed. McGinn, 108.

labour of charity to the "perfect charity" that consists in willing perfectly God's will (Ch. 37, 118/120). Love describes how charity transforms from the work of an individual to God's work: "When this Soul…is thus drawn by Him without herself, by God for her sake, this is divine work. A work of charity was never accomplished by a human body. The ones who accomplish such a work could not accomplish it [by themselves]" (Ch. 71, 146/198).

This entails a new freeness of charity (Ch. 45, 124/138), in which the Soul no longer needs to strain against herself or be weighed down by covertly selfish motivations. She is released from the anxiety of loving others as something she must perform to ensure her salvation, and instead, she can "rest" in the works of the commandments because she no longer labours to keep them: "But if this Soul, who is at rest so high, could help her neighbours, she would aid them with all her power in their need. But the thoughts of such Souls are so divine because they are not impeded with things passing or created, which might conceive anxiety within them, since God is good without containment" (Ch. 16, 99/66). John A. Arsenault argues that for Porete, what disappears is self-interest, but this "does not mean that there is an abandonment of one's moral responsibilities in responding to the needs of one's neighbour," but rather that the Soul becomes "unfettered from the chains of self-interest and self-desire."[220]

Weil has faced similar criticisms about her ambivalence toward the body and her "too lofty" ethics.[221] Yet she was no abstract theorist, and wrote throughout her life about

[220] Arsenault, "Authority, Autonomy, and Antinomianism," 84. Yet his suggestion of a "higher standard of moral excellence" is perhaps a misleading articulation of what Porete's text is trying to get at.

[221] For example, Jean Bethke Elshtain suggests that Weil's "too lofty" spiritual subject must be brought down to earth and embodied. "The Vexation of Simone Weil," 22. Gavin Flood has also noted Weil's ambivalent attitude toward the erotic body and the female reproductive body, *The Ascetic Self*, 54.

concrete socio-political issues, offering examples of a lived response to the Other.[222] While there are places in her notebooks in which she repudiates the body or advocates its mortification, her use of contradiction and paradox should warn against simplistic readings. In one moment, she condemns the body as a prison and a tomb (FLN, 230) and the next she calls the body a "lever for salvation" (FLN, 330), and what pulls the soul towards the good (FLN, 289). Moreover, prisons and tombs are not simply symbols of death and confinement for Weil, but are also referred to as sites of transformation, mediation, and places where truth is revealed. But it is the centrality of Christ and his embodied suffering—a theme that she wrestled with—that offers the biggest challenge to these characterizations, and nowhere is Weil's incarnational language more present than in her writings on decreation and God's kenotic self-emptying. Weil's turn to more explicitly religious language in the last few years of her life was no flight from the real world. As Rozelle-Stone and Stone argue, it was not an attempt to find consolation, a "transcendental refuge from the hardships of lived experience."[223] They argue instead that "Weil's seizure of Christianity paradoxically rooted her more firmly *in* the world."[224] Although the mystical Christianity to which Weil was drawn has sometimes been popularly construed as centred on ecstatic, transcendent experiences of union with the divine, Weil did not understand its end to be ecstatic annihilation, but incarnation. It was transformation so that one might participate more fully in the incarnation of divine love. Weil's attention to Christ's affliction drew her even more

[222] This extended to the end of her life when she proposed a project of front-line nurses. See especially Weil's letter to Maurice Schumann, written from New York in 1942, which includes an addendum with her plan (*SL*, 144-153).

[223] Rozelle-Stone and Stone, *Weil and Theology*, 12.

[224] Rozelle-Stone and Stone, *Weil and Theology*, 12.

intently to respond to those around her who were suffering. As we saw in Weil's interpretation of Plato's image of the cave, she understands the descent to be critical, and her articulation of the decreation of the self entails a movement of compassion toward others.

Returning to Weil's "example of a prayer," she asks that her faculties of hearing, sight, taste, smell and touch "register the perfectly accurate impress of thy creation," and that her mind "connect all ideas in perfect conformity with thy truth" (FLN, 244). She puts this in similar terms in another passage of her notebooks, describing how the self is a gift from God that must be rendered back:

> The soul which has attained to seeing the light must lend its vision to God and turn it on the world.
>
> The self, as it disappears, must become an empty space through which God and the creation contemplate one another.
>
> Then the part of the soul that has seen God must transform every relation with a created being or thing into a relation between that being or thing and God. (FLN, 269)

Weil describes the disappearance of the self in terms of becoming hollowed out, transparent, an empty channel and mediator for God's work. Her account of God's decreation stresses God's absence and hiddenness from the world, but it is through the decreation of the self that God becomes present and visible again in the world.

More specifically, Weil writes about this process in terms of the movement between the Trinity, a drama of "love loving love" that follows Porete's Augustinian language of

Lover, Loved, Love (Ch. 113, 184/306).[225] Weil speculates that "The dogma of the Trinity is necessary so that there may not be dialogue between us and God, but between God and himself within us. So that we may be absent" (FLN, 96). Conjectures such as these appear increasingly in Weil's notebooks, suggesting that she was contemplating theological concepts, and was particularly interested in the relationality of the Trinity and how the human creature fits within this understanding of the divine.[226] While such statements might appear unconventional and even audacious, they speak to her desire to integrate the doctrine of the Trinity within her understanding of God's self-emptying love and the human need to relinquish the "I." In another passage, she presents a lengthier reflection on this relationship, incorporating it into what she knew:

> The relation of the Persons of the Trinity to man. God considered as the one and unique 'I' does not enter into man. Nor is it given to man to embrace God considered as an object of love. But by means of the disappearance of the individual 'I' the love of God for God passes through the soul of a man like the light through a piece of glass. That is what is meant by the presence of the Holy Spirit in the soul. A better comparison is that God as an object of love is the light and the human soul is the eye, an organ of vision; it is the organ of the individual 'I'. But when the individual 'I' has become

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[225] Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 2nd ed., trans. Edmund Hill (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2012), 8.14. Few scholars comment on this trinitarian dimension of Weil's thought. For example, Lissa McCullough highlights that in loving the world one refracts God's love into the world, but she does not mention this in terms of the Trinity. McCullough, *The Religious Philosophy of Simone Weil*, 7.

[226] Weil was clearly not yet thinking systematically about the Trinity, but she was beginning to develop her thought and curiosity in this direction. Emmanuel Gabellieri has briefly examined Weil's religious views on the Trinity in light of her Platonism in "Reconstructing Platonism: The Trinitarian Metaxology of Simone Weil," in *The Christian Platonism of Simone Weil*, ed. E. Jane Doering and Eric O. Springsted (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004): 133-158. He highlights especially the central role of mediation in Weil's interpretation of Plato, very briefly alluding to a similarity between Weil's thought and the intra-Trinitarian kenosis of God in von Balthasar (148).

effaced, without the organ having lost its virtue, the soul then becomes an organ of God's vision. The Spirit is this vision. (N, 344)

Weil returns here to her metaphor of vision to articulate the way the "I" disappears, consenting to the movement of love passing through (FLN, 102) so that it can be incarnated in this particular time and place. The metaphor of sight is one that Porete uses as well to describe the "height" of the abyss: "The sixth stage is that the Soul does not see herself on account of such an abyss of humility which she has within her. Nor does she see God on account of the highest goodness which He has. But God sees Himself in her by His divine majesty, who clarifies this Soul with Himself, so that she sees only that there is nothing except God Himself Who is, from whom all things are" (Ch.118, 193/330).

Weil's prayer also puts this in terms of eating and feeding: "May this love be an absolutely devouring flame of love of God for God. May all this be stripped away from me, devoured by God, transformed into Christ's substance, and given for food to afflicted men whose body and soul lack every kind of nourishment" (FLN, 244). Weil puts self-annihilation explicitly in terms of service towards others, though her notebooks provide no straightforward or programmatic course of action. Instead, Hollingsworth suggests, Weil "employs a fragmentary, provocative, highly poetic form of speech to lay bare the paradoxes involved in the experience of compassionate human communion."[227] The connection between consent to self-annihilation and compassion only raises more questions. Writing about the need to consent to decreation as an abandonment, Weil

[227] Andrea Hollingsworth, "Simone Weil and the Theo-Poetics of Compassion," *Modern Theology* 29, no. 3 (July 2013), 204.

wonders in another prayer-like passage, "How can this consent be united with compassion? How is it an act of unique love, when it seems irreconcilable with love? Wisdom, teach me this" (FLN, 103). Weil continued to grapple with such questions. While neither she nor Porete set forth a programmatic account or prescriptions that could simply be implemented, Weil was invested in exploring how this could be put into practice, turning especially to the possibilities in labour, which I consider in the next chapter.

I noted at the beginning of this chapter that Porete's book eschews many of the common tropes used by women in the high Middle Ages, such as the body of Christ, his suffering, and eucharistic devotion. The absence of these themes in the *Mirror*—and Love's disclosure of an alternative religiosity that is not dependent on masses, fasting, or Holy Church the Little—is in fact far more in line with Weil's emphasis on these themes than might at first be obvious, for both Porete and Weil imagine a process of wearing down the will, detaching the self from its egotistical desires so that the will can be dissolved in God's. Weil describes a drama between God and creation in which the self—the "I"—is what obstructs the movement of God's love in the world. To relinquish the self is to render the will back to God, an operation that requires divesting the self from its misconstrued desires through a process of uprooting and detachment, an asceticism within the world that is ultimately only ever capable of disposing the soul to God's movement within it. For Weil, to "eat" is always a willful possession of the other by means of force, using them as energy to serve our own needs. Instead, she insists that we must desire the void, maintain the hunger. Her life of quotidian asceticism and her philosophy of detachment appear radical in a time in which restraint, deprivation and self-limitation appear to be the remains of

medieval excess, no longer carrying the same social or even religious importance. Yet Porete's *Mirror of Simple Souls* is a reminder of the ways that these, too, can become expressions of a willful ego and desired as ends in themselves, a dangerous edge on which Weil knew she lived.

It is no surprise that Weil admired the way that plants feed on solar energy: "The only power that can overcome gravity is solar energy. It is because this energy comes down to earth and is received by plants that they are able to grow vertically upwards" (SNL, 151). If only we could receive our energy by waiting patiently, attentively to receive such nourishment, becoming more plant-like. This "spiritual chlorophyll" is nothing other than grace, and it was for this that Weil prayed, not ostentatiously, but quietly in her notebooks, reaching out in longing for possession by the divine.

IV. THE SPIRITUALITY OF WORK

1. Introduction

Weil was invested in the issues of her time, not just in understanding or theorizing about them, but in experiencing them and finding practical solutions that could be implemented. No issue seems to have interested her more than labour, which preoccupied her from her early days at university to the final pages of her last text, *The Need for Roots*, composed in some of the last months of her life. While her early analysis was shaped by Marxism, she later became more keenly interested in the possible religious significance and possibilities of work, theorizing what she called a "spirituality of work." It is in this later understanding of labour that I argue Weil began to think about decreation most concretely, describing it as a means of annihilating the "I" and practicing a lost obedience through the daily motions of one's work. It is also where we find an elaboration of the more creative aspect of decreation, in which one incarnates divine love in the world by offering the self in service to others.

Weil spent much of her life involved in activist circles attempting to improve the quality of life for workers and seeking ways to make labour less oppressive and more dignified. Early on, while still a student at the *École Normale Supérieur*, she was an active participant in syndicalist activities. After passing her agrégation in 1931, and while teaching at a girl's school in Le Puy-en-Vélay, she became involved in the existing worker's movement of the area, participating in their demonstrations and writing numerous articles

for trade union journals. In addition to her teaching, on Saturdays and Sundays she would travel approximately three hours to the nearby town of Saint-Etienne to teach French and political economy to miners in a program organized to improve workers' skills and working conditions.[228] Curious about all kinds of work and eager to learn, she sought out opportunities to visit mines, go out on fishing vessels, and work in the vineyards as a labourer during the grape harvest. And while she was sometimes initially treated with suspicion as a woman with primarily intellectual training—who was also clumsy and confessed to be ill-suited for physical labour—her earnestness and desire to participate fully earned her respect from those she worked for and with.[229]

Weil's interest in labour led her beyond her initial involvement in education, writing, and activism. Longing for more direct contact with the conditions of the factory, she officially requested a leave of absence from her teaching post in June of 1934 to embark on a year-long experience as a factory labourer. She began in December, working at three different factories—with short intermissions due to illness or being laid off—until August of 1935.[230] The experience marked her deeply, and many of her most poignant essays on

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[228] Pétrement, *Simone Weil: A Life*, 87-89.

[229] Gustave Thibon expresses his reservations in his introduction to *Gravity and Grace*, writing that "I am a little suspicious of graduates in philosophy, and as for intellectuals who want to return to the land, I am well enough acquainted with them to know that with a few rare exceptions they belong to that order of cranks whose undertakings generally come to a bad end," and that his first impulse was therefore to refuse Perrin's request to host her (*GG*, 4). In perhaps her earliest experience of public scrutiny, in which she was targeted for what was deemed to be meddling and troubling lines of social class and decorum while working as a teacher, an article publicly condemned her involvement in the movement as a woman and teacher. Yet the worker's union defended her involvement by responding with its own public statement: "For what can Simone Weil be reproached? Nothing…S. Weil could have led the movement of unemployed, but we must in truth say that she has not even tried to influence it. She wanted to help the unemployed, to 'serve,'" concluding, "What has S. Weil done? What we all should do." Pétrement, *Simone Weil: A Life*, 103.

[230] The three factories, each located in Paris, were Alsthom (December to April), Établissements J.J. Carnaud et Forges de Basse-Indre (April-May), and Renault (June to August).

labour emerged at this time. Her most concentrated analysis, and what she called her first "*grand oeuvre*," is in "Reflections Concerning the Causes of Liberty and Social Oppression," written in 1934, in which she seeks to give an account of the mechanism of oppression and enslavement in the social sphere. In the "social machine," she writes, everything is in disequilibrium. Perhaps most crucially, there is a disjunction between those who command and those who execute, but there is also a disconnect between the individual worker's body and the intellect, and between what the worker does with his or her body and what is being produced. Weil argues that scientific knowledge is too vast to be understood by most people—or even by specialists—and the technological industrial world that modernity has brought into being is too complex and abstracted from what is being produced in particular industrial settings, resulting in the worker's inability to understand what they are working on (OL, 41). Mass production renders every movement mechanical, automatic, reducing the manual worker to an increasingly passive role (OL, 103), and Taylorism[231] requires speed and efficiency to such a degree that the workers execute their tasks automatically, virtually becoming machines themselves.

It was in this context of labour that Weil first began to theorize most concretely about the dynamics and mechanisms of oppression and force. Much of the scholarship on Weil's philosophy of labour has focused on this early thought and her engagement with—and critique of—Marx.[232] Weil believed that Marx had done more than other theorists to

[231] By Taylorism, Weil refers to scientific and industrial management designed to optimize efficiency and productivity by breaking work down into individual tasks. The intention is to increase productivity and reduce costs. It was named after Frederick Winslow Taylor, who described the principles in his 1911 book, *The Principles of Scientific Management*.

[232] Weil criticizes especially the "mythological character" of Marx's analysis: his conviction that there is a mysterious will leading human creatures toward inevitable historical progress through modern technique,

understand the causes and mechanisms of oppression. She admired his materialistic method, as well as his analysis concerning the way workers are subordinated to the material conditions of work in the factory, and his assessment of the degrading division of labour into manual and intellectual labour. However, she identifies the mechanism of this oppression as force and the race for power that enslaves everyone, both strong and weak alike (OL, 65). That is, enslavement is neither just a product of a particular economic or political system or something that is wielded by the one at the top, but is rather something that subsumes everyone.

Yet in spite of her critique of industrial factory work, she continued to treat labour with the highest regard, writing that "the most fully human civilization would be that which had manual labour as its pivot, that in which manual labour constituted the supreme value" (OL, 98). She believes that its highest value is not in relation to what it produces, which would only engender a "religion of production," as she believed reigned in America. Rather, its value is in relation to the one who performs the work, insofar as it must constitute what each person is most essentially in need of in their life, taking on a meaning and value in

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which Weil recognizes is simply a secularized belief in Providence. She disagreed with Marx's confidence that once freed from capitalist forms of economy—through revolution—the degrading specialization created by capitalism could be eliminated (*OL*, 76-77). For an analysis of Weil's relationship to Marxism, see especially Lawrence Blum and Victor J. Seidler, *A Truer Liberty: Simone Weil and Marxism*. For scholarship that situations labour within Weil's broader philosophy, see especially David McLellan, *Utopian Pessimist*; Clare Fischer, "Simone Weil and the Civilization of Work," in *Simone Weil's Philosophy of Culture*; Robert Chenavier, *Simone Weil. Une philosophie de travail* (Paris: Les éditions du cerf, 2001). For the relationship between labour and spirituality in her thought, see Gavin Flood, *The Ascetic Self*; Élodie Wahl, "La 'civilisation du travail' selon Simone Weil" *Sociologie dur Travail* 47, no. 4 (2005): 518-532; Inèse Radzins, "Simone Weil on Labor and Spirit," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 45, no. 2 (2017): 291-308, and Inèse Radzins, "Simone Weil's Political Theology," *Political Theology* 17, no. 3 (May 2016): 226-242.

their own eyes, and allowing direct contact with the world (OL, 98). She sought to imagine how work could become *the* form of human activity in the world:

> Rimbaud complained that 'we are not in the world' and that 'true life is absent'; in those moments of incomparable joy and fullness we know by flashes that true life is there at hand, we feel with all our being that the world exists and that we are in the world. Even physical fatigue cannot lessen the strength of this feeling, but rather, as long as it is not excessive, augments it. If this can be so in our day, what wonderful fullness of life could we not expect from a civilization in which labour would be sufficiently transformed to exercise fully all the faculties, to form the human act *par excellence*? (OL, 98)

In her vision of civilization, labour would be at the centre. While Weil admits that "thought is certainly man's supreme dignity," she argues that it is often exercised in a vacuum, as abstract speculations (OL, 98-99). Through one's labour, one can become fully "rooted" in the world, as she later puts it.

Weil continued to reflect on labour and the mechanisms of oppression and force for the rest of her life. Years after her factory experience, she once again set out to experience another form of labour directly. She had been seeking an opportunity to work on a farm for some time when, through Father Perrin, she was connected with the writer and philosopher Gustave Thibon, who took her on as a farmhand for the summer. She then spent the following fall working on another farm during the grape harvest. Unlike her factory experiences, this experience of work was overwhelmingly positive. Though she was similarly burdened with the physical exhaustion of difficult work and long hours, she was

nevertheless rejuvenated, and the tone of her writings from this time is significantly different, expressing a renewed hope about the possibilities labour offered. Both the experiences in the factory and the farm supplied her with material that would inform her specific recommendations for urban and rural labour reforms in her final text, *The Need for Roots*, which she imagined as central to the reconstitution of France post-war.

In this chapter, I turn to this final text where Weil frames labour in explicitly religious terms. I argue that labour came to be one of the places that Weil believed decreation could be embodied. In the strange final pages of *The Need for Roots*, Weil describes labour in ways that evoke the kenotic hymn without ever naming it explicitly, describing it as a practice of learning obedience, as a descent into matter, affliction, and death. These last pages on labour are a surprising departure from the rest of the text in the way Weil characterizes labour and in the more explicitly theological language she employs, but I argue that the kenotic hymn helps to clarify its relationship to the rest of the text, and in particular, to Weil's larger critique of greatness. Weil suggests that what she calls the "spirituality of work" is an antidote to the "false" forms of greatness—of might and sovereignty—that she believed were publicly idolized. The kenotic hymn helps to elucidate Weil's assertion that in labour we can find the "true" form of greatness, a way of cultivating and embodying an alternative to force in the world. I seek to show how the kenotic hymn is not simply a call to abandon the self that reinforces the power of some over others, but for Weil, it was connected to the contestation of force and a vision of an alternative mode of relation, one of mutual servanthood.

By characterizing labour as a form of self-emptying obedience, we are confronted with some of the more difficult aspects of the kenotic hymn as a model to emulate, especially its focus on slavery and suffering. Yet in some of Weil's late religious writings, she refers to the slave as a model to emulate, something that has caused trepidation from her interpreters. I suggest her employment of the term is best understood from the perspective of the kenotic hymn, which calls readers to emulate the descent of Christ to servitude in relationships with one another. This raises other, related, issues regarding freedom and obedience that are crucial in discerning the difference between the desirable model of slave as opposed to the forceful subjugation that Weil criticizes fiercely.

2. Weil's Critique of Greatness

In *The Need for Roots*, Weil offers a vision of what she believed was required for the complete renewal and regeneration of France. She wrote the text in 1943 while working for *France Libre*, a French political group that established a government-in-exile in London led by General Charles de Gaulle, and which was working with the resistance against the puppet Vichy government in France. Weil had left France reluctantly with her parents for America in June of 1942, knowing that they would not leave without her.[233] But in New York, she was restless and desperate to make her way back to the continent. She eventually

[233] On her departure, Weil sent a letter to Perrin in which she writes: "I do not in the least wish to leave. I shall leave with anguish…At bottom, the principal reason that is sending me away is that, given the rate at which things are now moving and the conjunction of circumstances, it seems to me that the decision to stay would be an act of personal will on my part. And my greatest desire is to lose not only all will but all personal being." (*WG*, 17/*AD*, 43-44).

secured passage to England, hoping to return to France from there, and found work in London with the Free French where she was given the job of editing and responding to reports. One of the specific tasks of *France Libre* was to reflect on what had led to the French collapse and what might happen once the Germans were defeated. And in particular, one of the sub-groups of which Weil was a part was discussing ideas about a new constitution.[234]

It was in this context that she composed *The Need for Roots*. Weil's vision diverged from others in the office, in that she envisioned the need for a complete spiritual renewal of the nation, and not simply a political, economic, or moral renewal. Sweeping in scope, yet still provisional and unfinished, the text is an examination of the condition of Weil's country and a diagnosis of its problems which she argues arise from a "disease" of "uprootedness" (NR, 98/E, 164).[235] The text is Weil's response to France's particular context, but aside from some of the more concrete suggestions for labour reforms, it is hardly a pragmatic treatise. Instead, Weil offers radical suggestions for an extraordinary time, not only regarding the reorganization of social relations, but also suggesting a revaluation of everything France held to be important, including its forms of education, labour, religion and science. Additionally, Weil suggests a revision of the notions of greatness which she saw upheld ideologically through the country's social institutions and in the way its identity had been constructed and transmitted through a collective mythos.

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[234] See the Introduction to Springsted and Collins, *A Declaration of Duties toward Humankind: A Critical Companion to Simone Weil's* The Need for Roots, (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 2024), 6.

[235] The English edition does not include the important "Profession of Faith" that was intended to appear at the beginning of *The Need for Roots*. In it, she ends with the caveat that she views the work as permanently open to revision ("*Cette étude est toujours susceptible de revision*") (*E*, 409).

One of the main obstacles that Weil argues is keeping her own time and place from becoming a civilization that is "worth something" is its false conception of greatness ("*grandeur*"), which she calls "the most serious defect of all" (NR, 216/E, 274).[236] Weil writes that it is absolutely necessary to distinguish between true and false greatness, which she describes by evoking examples rather than giving any explicit definition. She spends a great deal of *The Need for Roots* elaborating on the forms of "false greatness" which she saw proliferating in her time. The object of much of her criticism in the text is the Roman Empire. Weil criticizes Rome on a number of levels: its worship of force and domination, its patriotism, conceit, and its attachment to Empire and colonial conquest. She also saw it as an empire devoid of what she believed to be true spirituality, presenting a false and superficial version of Christianity as the official state religion (NR, 273/E, 328), and inculcating a spiritual life that was nothing more than an expression of the will to power (SE, 116).[237] These criticisms are drawn out further and more specifically in her essay, "The Great Beast," which was written a few years earlier (1939-1940) and in which Weil outlines some of the most egregious and violent episodes in Rome's history of domination, citing examples of calculated and systemic cruelty, in which everything was sacrificed to acquire and heighten the prestige of the Roman Empire (SE, 102).[238] Her critique of Rome

[236] The other three obstacles she cites include the degradation of the sentiment of justice, the idolization of money, and the lack of religious inspiration (*NR*, 216).

[237] Weil writes that "The Romans could not tolerate anything rich in spiritual content. Love of God is a dangerous fire whose contact could prove fatal to their wretched deification of slavery. So they ruthlessly destroyed spiritual life under all its forms" (*NR*, 273). Furthermore, they "knew the value of a deceptive exterior of spirituality," and thus, Weil argues, they maintained an outward sense of religiosity devoid of "spiritual content" (see *NR*, 272-273).

[238] "The Great Beast: Some Reflections on the Origins of Hitlerism," in *Selected Essays, 1934-1943: Historical, Political, and Moral Writings*, trans. Richard Rees (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1962).

especially demonstrates how she was thinking about the false sense of greatness she saw perpetuated in her contemporary Europe and its contribution to "uprootedness" and the uprooting of others. She saw the contemporary influence of Rome in the rise of Hitler, who she characterizes as embodying prestige, an adoration of force, and the exercise of a terrible power. The will to domination was for Weil particularly apparent in the forceful displacement and conquering of other territories and people, and Weil traces the similarities to Hitler's dreams of expansion and conquest.[239] She returns to these charges once again in *The Need for Roots*, writing that Rome embodied the spirit of force and domination through imperialism, and conquest had become an *ersatz* greatness (NR, 97/E, 163).

But Weil also insists that we are delusional if we think we do not continue to valorize such notions of greatness. She presents a ruthless condemnation of her own time. Along with colonial conquest, Weil identifies France's attachment to Empire (which she calls a Roman conception of greatness) as one of the sources of the problem of uprootedness, arguing that France must choose between an attachment to empire and the need to "have a soul of her own again" (NR, 167/E, 230). The Roman sense of self-satisfaction, reinforced by power and conquest, is "contagious," and she argues that her own country continued to be under its influence (SE, 116).[240] It is especially instilled through the glorification of force

[239] Weil compares this to France's own colonization project: "Even in our own time, it would certainly be difficult to deny that we have made and are still making use of methods similar to Rome's in conquering and ruling our colonial empire; and many Frenchmen would be more inclined to boast of this than to deny it" (*SE*, 134). Weil criticized French colonialism beginning in writings from about 1937.

[240] In "A War of Religions" Weil elaborates on some of the themes she discusses in *The Need for Roots*. On the admiration and idolatry of greatness she writes: "We ought not to hide from ourselves we people of the twentieth century, that Germany is a mirror for all of us. What looks to us so hideous is our own features, but magnified" (*SE*, 214/OC V.1, 253). Similarly, in "The Great Beast" she argues that "Hitler and his men do not love war; they love domination and dream of nothing but peace—a peace in which their will is supreme of course. Ancient Rome did likewise" (*SE*, 96).

in literature and history lessons. Writing about literature, for example, she argues that "it is the cult of grandeur, conceived after the Roman model that has been handed down by an almost unbroken line of famous writers" (SE, 134). With the notable exceptions of Rabelais, La Boétie, Montaigne, Descartes and Pascal (and a few others), Weil draws attention to the many songs learned by school children that praise Charlemagne and Napoleon, and to Corneille, Racine (with the exception of *Phèdre*) and Bossuet as depicting heroes infatuated with conquest. Weil suggests that there are very few "perfectly pure things" that have survived the sweep of history, naming only a few key historical and literary figures (NR, 232-233/E, 289).[241] The people and places that are the subject of the literature included in education embody greatness as force. But force is also venerated through the recording and telling of history, which is always from the perspective of the vanquishers (SE, 133). The defeated are often lost to time, Weil writes, and their wisdom—which she was often eager to recover—is buried in history.[242] Weil's recommendation is not that the teaching of history should be supressed, or even that wars should be placed in the background (which she argues would be deceptive), but that it should be taught in an

[241] Within the small circle of exemplars of greatness in *The Need for Roots*, Weil also includes Giotto, the *Iliad*, the tragedies of Aeschylus and Sophocles, the Canticle of St. Francis, Racine's *Phèdre* and Shakespeare's *King Lear* (*NR*, 232-233). She offers a slightly more extensive list in "The Great Beast" (*SE*, 134).

[242] Weil writes, "The heroic resistance of the vanquished is admired when time brings with it a certain revenge, not otherwise. No compassion is felt for things which have been utterly destroyed. Who is there who accords any to Jericho, Gaza, Tyre, Sidon; to Carthagee, Numantia, Sicily under the Greeks, or Peru before the time of Columbus? But, it will be objected, why lament the disappearance of things about which we know, as it were, nothing at all? We know nothing about them because they have disappeared. Those who destroy them didn't consider it necessary to become the guardians of the culture they represented" (*NR*, 215-216). Weil observes that history is founded on the written evidence, but that this only ever tells a partial story: "Now, according to the nature of things, documents originate among the powerful ones, the conquerors. History, therefore, is nothing but a compilation of the depositions made by assassins with respect to their victims and themselves" (*NR*, 222).

entirely different way, oriented by the good and examined to locate and recover what otherwise remains lost (NR, 229/E, 286).[243]

To Weil, the education that glorifies force as greatness cannot help but be reproduced. Nothing "forces" one to admire Hitler or Napoleon, she writes, "except the sovereign influence of force" that undergirds assumptions and that we implicitly worship (NR, 225/E, 285). In *The Need for Roots*, she makes a bold statement about her own time: "Our conception of greatness is the very one which has inspired Hitler's whole life. When we denounce it without the remotest recognition of its application to ourselves, the angels must either cry or laugh" (NR, 217/E, 275). So inherent and insidious are the assumptions about greatness that they are not always easy to recognize in one's own context until they appear in their most brutal and inhumane forms in others. Weil recognizes how seductive Hitler could be by pointing to the ways he embodies a forcefulness that is broadly accepted and appealing, merely mirroring what France itself glorified. Alexander Irwin puts it well: "Weil's commitment to the resistance effort and the defeat of Hitler was total; yet she was convinced that the fight against fascist domination risked simply reproducing that same type of domination under a different name, unless those involved in the struggle carefully examined their own motives and clarified their own relationship to force."[244] According to Weil, "In order to have the right to punish the guilty, we ought first of all to purify ourselves of their crimes, which we harbour under all sorts of disguises in our own hearts" (NR,

[243] "History is a tissue of base and cruel acts in the midst of which a few drops of purity sparkle at long intervals. If such is the case, it is first of all because there is very little purity amongst men; and secondly because the greater part of what little there is remains hidden. One must try and seek out if possible indirect testimony of its existence" (*NR*, 229).

[244] Alexander Irwin, *Saints of the Impossible*, 67.

238/E, 294). Her text seeks to reveal the deceptions of her own society through these comparisons.

Rome's influence is not only evident in the political realm for Weil; she also criticizes its contribution to the worship of might and a misguided image of sovereignty in Christianity, writing that when Christianity became associated with the Roman Empire, "God was turned into a counterpart of the Emperor" (NR, 268/E, 323). She insists that the Roman sense of power still holds sway: "the Roman spirit of imperialism and domination has never loosened its hold over the Church sufficiently for the latter to be able to abolish the Roman conception of God" (NR, 274/E, 329). This became its own form of idolatry, in that it prompted the "idolatry of self," an idolization of their own mastery and power. Weil was deeply suspicious of any form of Christianity which claimed to be centred on Christ while effectively worshipping power or prestige. She saw in this worship of glory the mere appearance of justice.[245] Concerned about the different kinds of triumphalism that could arise from focusing too much on the resurrection, Weil lingered on the crucifixion, refusing to glorify the force that she associated with Rome's notion of greatness. While she occasionally refers to Easter in her notebooks, when mentioning the kenotic hymn she almost always refers exclusively to the first half—Christ's renunciation, becoming a slave, and obedience to death. The exaltation of Christ is for Weil a dangerous model that can too easily be used as justification for the use of force over others.

[245] Elsewhere in her notebooks, Weil writes: "We no longer imagine the dying Christ as a common criminal. St. Paul himself wrote: 'If Jesus Christ be not risen, then is our faith vain.' And yet the death on the Cross is something more divine than the Resurrection, it is the point where Christ's divinity is concentrated. Today the glorious Christ veils from us the Christ who was made a malediction; and thus we are in danger of adoring in his name the appearance, and not the reality of justice" (*IC*, 143/*IPC*, 74).

In these pages, Weil writes that while the Roman conception of God has proliferated, it is in the Christian mystical tradition that an alternative has been preserved. She expresses the high stakes of the retrieval of this alternative conception of God: "in the mystic traditions of the Catholic Church, one of the main objects of the purifications through which the soul has to pass is the total abolition of the Roman conception of God. So long as a trace of it remains, union through love is impossible" (NR, 275/E, 330). She continues, writing that even the mystics who were able to destroy this conception of God in their own hearts were unable to destroy it in the Church since it was needed for its temporal dominion, just as the Roman Empire before had needed it (NR, 275/E, 330). According to Weil, the mystical strain of Christianity—which she argues maintained a distance from the coercive tendencies of the collective—retained a sense of God that was not tied to forms of domination related to either Church or Empire.[246]

It is unclear which mystics Weil is referring to here, although she alludes to John of the Cross in several places in the text.[247] However, of particular importance is another historical and mystical figure: Joan of Arc—the military leader, mystic visionary, and patron Saint of France—is cited as both an admirable model of spiritual greatness in *The*

[246] Weil writes, "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, and which has perhaps more or less infected the whole of Christianity, with the exception of the Mystics" (*NR*, 274). A few pages earlier, she writes: "apart from pure mysticism, Roman idolatry has defiled everything—yes, idolatry; for it is the mode of worship, not the name attributed to the object, which separates idolatry from religion. If a Christian worships God with a heart disposed like that of a pagan of Rome in the homage rendered to the Emperor, that Christian is an idolater also" (*NR*, 271).

[247] In the text, she refers to the "scientific precision" of John of the Cross's treatises on mystical contemplation, which she believes to be superior to "anything produced by the psychologists or professors of our own time" (*NR*, 185). She also writes "what is really marvellous, in the case of the mystics and the saints, is not that they have more life, a more intense life than that of other people, but that in them truth should have become life" (*NR*, 246).

Need for Roots (NR, 228/E, 285) and as a figure who has been bound up with prestige in popular myth and political accounts, and thus simultaneously a model of "false greatness" (N, 25). She thus serves as a model to distinguish the differences between "false" and "true" greatness that Weil is trying to articulate.

The figure of Joan of Arc—the military leader, mystic visionary, and patron Saint of France—has been interpreted and re-interpreted by writers, politicians, and historians, and used as a spokesperson for multiple, sometimes conflicting, concerns and causes. Weil thus participates in a long tradition of interpretation through her brief references. There are several affinities between the two. Both Joan of Arc and Weil had a series of mystical experiences that left lasting imprints on their lives. These experiences did not result in a retreat to prayer and contemplation away from the world but instead lead to active engagement in the issues of their times. And although they lived roughly 500 years apart, each spent the latter part of their lives actively responding to situations of occupation in their home-country. Both Weil and Joan of Arc died very young, and their deaths have become sites of consternation. Though Joan of Arc died on May 30, 1430, when she was found guilty of heresy and handed over to an executioner to be burnt at the stake, it was not until 1920 that she was declared one of the patron saints of France, and Pope Benedict XV declared the Maid of Orléans a saint.

For Weil, Joan of Arc's "saintliness"—which she suggests is the true mark of greatness (NR, 235/E, 291)—is exhibited in the pity and compassion she embodied for her country and which Weil held to be the necessary form of patriotism for a truly "rooted"

people (NR, 168/E, 231).[248] Indeed, some of the accounts of Joan of Arc emphasize this – that she wept, not just for the loss of French soldiers but for the English as well. Rather than a patriotism that is motivated by the sense of a country's greatness, what was necessary was the recognition of its fragility: "One can either love France for the glory which would seem to ensure for her a prolonged existence in time and space; or else one can love her as something which, being earthly, can be destroyed, and is all the more precious on that account" (NR, 170/E, 233). The love of one's country that Weil describes here is not chauvinistic nationalism, but is a poignant "tenderness" ("*sentiment de tendresse*") more comparable to the familial relations between a person and his or her children or their aged parents, a love that is "inflamed" regardless of weakness or strength and which is free of any sentiment of grandeur (NR, 170-171/E, 232-233). Weil compares this to the way Christ showed no patriotic attachment to a country, but whose compassion was expressed in the way that he wept over Jerusalem as he entered before his trial, foreseeing its imminent destruction (Luke 19, NR, 168/E, 231). Weil suggests that rather than a patriotism that is motivated by the sense of a country's greatness, what was necessary was the recognition of its fragility, limitation, and impermanence.

The way Joan of Arc has been represented, however, is quite different: "Joan of Arc's popularity during the past quarter of a century was not an altogether healthy business; it

[248] Weil suggests this pity and compassion is modelled by Christ. It is not an expression of pity or compassion in patriotic terms, but rather compassion for the suffering of the country's people. She writes, "In the Gospels, there is not the least indication that Christ experienced anything resembling love for Jerusalem and Judaea, save only the love which goes wrapped in compassion. He never showed any other kind of attachment to his country. But his compassion he expressed on more than one occasion. He wept over the city, foreseeing, as it was not difficult to do at that time, the destruction which should shortly fall upon it…" (*NR*, 168/*E*, 231).

was a convenient way of forgetting that there is a difference between France and God" (NR, 131-132/E, 196). Ann Pirruccello has written of this passage that Weil seems to be referring to specific accounts that were popular in her time, either to the possible appropriation of Joan of Arc by the French Right (and the government of Pétain) in the name of national unity or the extreme Left (and the Popular Front) in the name of the people. In both cases, there seems to be a common theme of identifying Joan of Arc with the glory of a nation that wields force.[249] Weil points to the confusion between the order of this world and a higher order, writing that Christians in particular have forgotten that the object of their true patriotism is situated outside this world rather than in it (NR, 131/E, 195). The false greatness that Joan of Arc represents is the conflation of divine will with political and nationalist force, of a God who intervenes preferentially toward the goal of national glory.[250] A short reference to Joan of Arc in Weil's notebooks helps to illuminate this further: "Difference between the spirit of the Bhagavad-Gita and that of the story of Joan of Arc, a fundamental difference: he makes war although inspired by God, she makes war because inspired by God" (N, 25). The association between God and force is what causes Weil to reject Joan as an unequivocal saint. "Her voices are bound up with prestige," Weil writes, alluding to the visions that foretold the future triumph of France over England, for "war is the supreme form of prestige" (N, 25). In popular accounts she has come to serve as a "cloak" to nationalist ideology (NR, 257) and the representative of France's divine chosenness.

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[249] Ann Pirruccello, "Force or Fragility? Simone Weil and Two Faces of Joan of Arc," In *Joan of Arc and Spirituality,* ed. Ann W. Astell and Bonnie Wheeler (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 269.

[250] Pirruccello, "Force or Fragility?," 270.

A recognition of the "true" greatness of Joan of Arc would require attention to the less celebrated details of her story: the obedience to divine will without attachment to her own desires or sense of self, and the pity and compassion for her fellow suffering compatriots. Piruccello also points to Joan's uncertainty and doubt in her abjuration during the trial as perhaps what attracted Weil to her; like Christ, she experienced the depth of abandonment, and unlike other martyrs of legend, she was not convinced of a reward, nor did she have unambiguous public support. Her saintliness is apparent in that she learned to act without attachment to her own idea of self and was moved by beauty and fragility rather than force.[251] Weil does not ascribe unambiguous saintliness to Joan of Arc. She does not reduce her to a trope or caricature to be used in the service of a political campaign. Instead, by identifying the various aspects of Joan of Arc's life—both the military leader and the woman who wept—she highlights some of the ambiguities of her story, even while she nevertheless names and condemns what she took to be misguided appropriations of her as a figure of might. Weil had strong words against martyrdom and the way it can become yet another form of the aspiration for glory, but Joan of Arc's sacrificial death was not undertaken with a purpose of personal glory or greatness, and she went to her death without hope or consolation.[252]

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[251] Pirruccello, "Force or Fragility?," 276-277.

[252] She writes that "the martyrs did not feel themselves separated from God, but it was another God, and perhaps it was better not to be a martyr. The God for whom the martyrs drew joy in torture or death closely resembles the one who was officially adopted by the Roman Empire and afterwards imposed by means of exterminations" (*N*, 26). This is why Weil insists that Christ's death was different, because it was not associated with power: "Much easier for the martyrs to be faithful, later on, because the Church was already there, a force, with temporal promises. We die for what is strong, not for what is weak…The fact of dying for what is strong robs death of its bitterness" (*N*, 148).

3. Obedience and Death in the Spirituality of Work

Weil insists that a re-evaluation of greatness is essential for her time, arguing that true greatness must permeate France: "The unhappy peoples of the European continent are in need of greatness even more than of bread, and there are only two sorts of greatness: true greatness, which is of a spiritual order, and the old, old lie of world conquest." (NR, 97/E, 163). Perhaps most surprisingly, she proposes that "the contemporary form of true greatness lies in a civilization founded upon the spirituality of work" (NR, 97/E, 163). Moreover, a civilization based on the "spirituality of work" would give human creatures "the very strongest possible roots in the wide universe" and be a remedy to the state of uprootedness that she felt characterized her time (NR, 97/E, 164). Weil refers not just to geo-political uprootedness, but also to moral and spiritual uprootedness, and therefore urges the need for social, political, economic, but also spiritual remedies. Indeed, the crucial preamble to the text (not included in English translations) is what Weil calls the "Profession of Faith," where she articulates the scope of what she was trying to accomplish in explicitly religious terms. "There is a reality outside this world," she begins, "a reality beyond space and time that every human heart longs for" (SE, 219). She proposes labour as a means of becoming "rooted" again in that reality. Instead of being a prison, the act of work could become "a point of contact between this world and the world beyond" (NR, 90-91).

Weil hypothesizes that long ago, physical labour had been a religious activity in which the bodily movements of one's craft or trade were a direct expression of religious faith, and she sought to recover its sacred aspect so that quotidian life could again be infused

with the transcendent. A contemporary spirituality of work was something she felt could be broadly agreed upon, even creating unanimity across religious traditions, creeds and political affiliations.[253] However, she warns that it must not be attached to a particular cause, movement or regime, as the motto adopted by Pétain's government—"Work, Family, Country" ("*Travail, Famille, Patrie*")—turned labour and family into yet another abstract nationalist slogan (NR, 97/E, 163). She envisioned labour as an antidote to the sufferings of her day because of the way it would orient and "root" society in a shared transcendent reality. While Weil had already acknowledged the potentially crucial role of manual labour in the earlier texts collected in *Oppression and Liberty*,[254] it is in her later writings that this role takes on a specifically religious inflection as she envisions how it might be embodied in the city and the country, the factory and the farm.

In her earlier analysis of the causes of oppression in labour she had argued, like Marx, that the division of labour into intellectual and manual work has been degrading and alienating, since it reduces workers to "things" who thoughtlessly carry out the actions required by those who command. Modern industry, with its mass production and specialization, has reduced the worker to an increasingly passive role, in which they become dominated slavishly by another's will (OL, 41). In *The Need for Roots*, her analysis takes on a religious dimension: "If we go to the heart of things, there is no true dignity

[253] "The word spirituality doesn't imply any particular affiliation. Even the Communists, in the present state of things, would probably not reject it. Besides, it would not be difficult to find in Marx quotations that can all be brought back to the reproach of a lack of spirituality levelled at capitalist society…The conservative parties wouldn't dare to reject such a conception; nor would radical, laical or masonic circles either. Christians would seize on it with joy. It could create unanimity." (*NR*, 97/*E*, 163)

[254] In "The Causes of Liberty and Social Oppression" she writes, "If the foregoing analyses are correct, the most fully human civilization would be that which had manual labour as its pivot, that in which manual labour constituted the supreme value," (*OL*, 98).

without a spiritual root and consequently one of a supernatural order" (NR, 94). In her suggestions for reform she sought to bring more dignity to work by infusing it with thought, but perhaps most importantly, she argued that "this world and the world beyond, in their double beauty, should be present and associated in the act of work" (NR, 95/E, 161). Through the contemplation of divine truths, specific to each sort of work and impressed on the mind through habit, every physical movement would become a means of connection to the divine. As Simone Kotva has argued,[255] Weil's spirituality of work envisioned labour as a way of cultivating and exercising the faculty of attention.

Weil illustrates this relationship with an illuminating example in *The Need for Roots.* A woman who is expecting her first child is busy sewing a layette. She thinks about sewing it correctly, yet in the process, she never forgets the child she is carrying inside her. Elsewhere, in a prison workshop, a female convict is also sewing a layette. However, while she is similarly thinking about sewing it properly, the motivation is not the love for her unborn child, but fear of punishment. Both are doing the same work, and their attention is even absorbed by the same technical difficulties, and yet, there is an enormous difference between the occupation of one and the other.[256] Weil writes: "The whole social problem consists in making the workers pass from one to the other of these two occupational extremes" (NR, 94-95/E, 161). Work is given dignity by "infusing it with thought" so that the working person is not rendered into "a thing divided up into compartments which sometimes works and sometimes thinks" (NR, 94/E, 160). Weil writes that this association

[255] Kotva, *Effort and Grace*, 150-151.

[256] Simone Kotva suggests the difference is between fear and joy, but we could also think of it in terms of force and love. See Kotva, *Effort and Grace*, 150.

between thoughts and movements can be achieved by "a process of assimilation sufficiently complete to enable them to penetrate into the very substance of the individual being," and by a habit impressed on the mind that connects certain thoughts with certain movements (NR, 95/E, 161).

Weil's writings on labour, here and elsewhere, focus especially on physical or manual labour. Already familiar with teaching and intellectual work, and intimately aware of its challenges after having been ill from exhaustion several times—a sign of the toll that it, too, can take on the body—she sought experiences of manual labour to better understand its particular struggles and the acute forms of oppression it involved in her time. She rails against the kind of condescension toward manual labour that she perceived in the bourgeois class into which she was born and educated, and emphasizes the particular possibilities it offers for uniting the body and mind in the exercise of attention.[257] She articulates her contention that intellectual work cultivates the attention in other essays, such as "Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with the View to the Love of God," but she is also insistent that attention can similarly be practiced in a wide range of vocations.

According to Weil, when the worker experiences the fullness of their attention in their labour, work becomes like a prayer. In labour it becomes clear how attention is never simply intellectual contemplation for Weil; her "mysticism of work" is not a lofty aspiration for transcendence, but a grounding rootedness in this world that involves the whole body

[257] Weil explicitly addresses the way those who worked physical jobs in her time were often treated with condescension that she likens to a kind of colonial superiority (*NR*, 82). Her suggestions in *The Need for Roots* are intentionally designed to alleviate the contempt directed toward them. Elsewhere, she suggests that her recommendations would be a way of avoiding "the feeling of intellectual inferiority" that is so frequent among workers, and at the same time, she suggests that intellectuals would be able to avoid the unjust disdain that had become "fashionable" in her time (*LPW*, 139).

through thoughtful attentiveness to the eternal in the everyday.[258] Labour becomes a practice of attention and a means of orienting one's self toward the divine: "He who is busy sowing seed can, if he wants, turn his attention to this truth without the aid of any word through his own gestures and the sight of the grain that is being buried in the ground" (LPW, 137). This is what both intellectual and manual work can aspire to:

> The point of unity of intellectual work and manual labor is contemplation, which is not work. In no society can the person who manages a machine exercise the same type of attention as the one who resolves a problem. But both can equally, if they desire it and if they have a method, promote the appearance and the development of another attention situated beyond all social obligation, and which constitutes a direct link with God, if each exercises the type of attention that constitutes his proper lot in society. (LPW, 140-141/OC IV.1, 427)

The problem Weil experienced in the factory was the way the fast pace and Taylorized work inhibited attention: "the worst outrage, the one that perhaps deserves to be likened to the crime against the Spirit, which cannot be forgiven, if it weren't committed by those unconscious of what they were doing, is the crime against the attention of the workers. It kills the faculty in the soul that is the very root of every supernatural vocation" (LPW, 142/OC IV.1, 429). Any reform in working conditions would have to ensure that the worker is best able to cultivate his or her faculty of attention.

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[258] Indeed, Christy Wampole argues that this is part of what sets Weil's metaphor of rootedness as distinct from Heidegger's: "While Weil's and Heidegger's searches for context overlap in many ways, Weil does not rely on *terroir* to make her case. Her approach to recontextualization is more pragmatic and—strangely—less mystical than his. In this instance, Heidegger proves to be much more of a mystic than Weil." Wampole, *Rootedness: The Ramifications of a Metaphor* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 144.

At the end of *The Need for Roots*, the character of Weil's remarks on work changes dramatically, and she suggests that labour is "the most perfect form of obedience," that it "does violence to human nature," and even that it is a "daily death." She turns to the Genesis account to frame labour within the context of the Fall, writing in a far more explicitly theological mode. The abrupt shift in tone makes it difficult to understand how her descriptions of labour here are connected to the rest of the text and to her previous comments on the spirituality of work as cultivating and exercising attention. Yet her language bears resemblances to passages in some of her religious essays and notebooks, especially in the way she identifies labour as a means of relinquishing the "I." Attention to the resonances with her broader kenotic theology and her concept of "decreation" helps to clarify the final, puzzling pages on labour as a more specifically Christian mystical theology of work, but also illuminates how Weil was positioning labour as an alternative to the greatness of power and might in the rest of the text.

Weil situates labour within a greater narrative of human fallenness and redemption. In *The Need for Roots*, she alludes to a lost quasi-mythic civilization which she posits must have valued labour and understood it to have a spiritual significance. Neither her beloved Homer nor Hesiod, nor even Plato, Weil writes, had a trace of this high regard for work (NR, 293/E, 348).[259] But she also insists that Christian interpretations of the Genesis account of the Fall, in which Adam's eating of the fruit results in the cursed ground and the need to toil and sweat in order to eat, have misunderstood its punitive character. To regard

[259] Chenavier suggests that this is what Weil meant when she wrote in her notebooks that "Plato only said half." Chenavier, *Une philosophie du travail*, 47. See *OC* VI.1, 424.

labour as a subsequent necessary evil is to mistake the very nature and purpose of punishment. She writes that "it is a mistake to read into this text the slightest hint of a disdain for labour. It is more likely that it was handed down by some very ancient civilization in which physical labour was honoured above every other activity" (NR, 292/E, 347). We can already see an earlier version of this in her essay on factory work, in which she writes that the high value of manual labour is not found in either ancient Greece or Genesis, both of which "made the world appear as a convict prison and labour as the sign of men's servitude and abasement" (OL, 101). However, in her later thought, she develops an account of the way in which labour allows one to become re-integrated into the order of the Good, through the way that it "de-creates" the self that causes the distance in the first place and offers a way of living in relations of reciprocity with others.[260]

Within the context of the Genesis account, Weil's understanding of labour has everything to do with the problem of the "I"/self and its tendency toward expansion and grandeur that I elucidated in the previous chapters: "Our sin consists in wanting to be, and our punishment is that we believe we possess being" (FLN, 218). In a series of short statements in her notebooks, she expands on how the distance between God and creature is caused by an assertion of the self that claims freedom and existence outside of God.

[260] Inese Radzins nicely points out how Weil frames the fall, slavery and sin in terms of labour. See Radzins, "Simone Weil's Political Theology," 227. She argues that for Weil these concepts do not describe an individual state, but rather, are about social categories. Rather than localizing evil in the fall, she suggests that Weil situates it in a social dynamic akin to Marx's means of production, and that it is *society* which produces something like a fallen condition (229-230). Radzins writes that for Weil, evil is related to the social or the collective. While Weil certainly insists on the problems of the collective, her discussion of the fall and labour in these passages of *The Need for Roots* specifically refers to the problem in terms of individual disobedience.

Conversely, in *The Need for Roots*, Weil writes that labour is the way to recover a lost obedience:

> Man placed himself outside the current of Obedience. God chose as his punishment labour and death. Consequently, labour and death, if Man undergoes them in a spirit of willingness, constitute a transference back into the current of supreme Good, which is obedience to God. (NR, 296/E, 351)

According to Weil, one performs the motions of daily labour in spite of one's self, whether one feels "sad or happy, worried or ready for amusement, tired or bursting with energy" (NR, 298/E, 353) – not, that is, because of one's whims or desires, but as a form of regular, habituated obedience, dependent on a prior consent that is then renewed every day.

Obedience is a central theme in Weil's thought and is related to the need to relinquish the will. For Weil, obedience is the only pure motive, the only one that does not seek a reward for action, and instead leaves all care of reward to God. It entails an openness and readiness to listen to what is outside of oneself, a practice of docility. Like the lilies of the field that neither toil nor spin (Matthew 6:28-33), Weil writes that one must not exercise the will or make arrangements to bring about one's object. Instead, to labour is to put one's self into the "circuit of matter," turning the body into an intermediary and an instrument (NR, 297/E, 351-352). She writes that:

> Whatever, in heaven, may be the mysterious significance of death, on earth it is the transformation of a being composed of palpitating flesh and of mind, of a being who loves and hates, hopes and fears, wants and doesn't want, into a little pile of inert

> matter. Man's consent to such a transformation represents his supreme act of total obedience. (NR, 296/E, 351)

Weil compares human obedience in relation to God to the transparency of a window pane in its relation to light (WG, 77/AD, 121). According do Weil, however, one can never really escape from obedience to God: "A creature cannot but obey. The only choice given to men, as intelligent and free creatures, is to desire obedience or not to desire it" (WG, 76/AD, 120). When we have the sense of having disobeyed God, is simply means that we have ceased to desire obedience (WG, 77/AD, 120).

In the final pages of *The Need for Roots*, Weil goes so far as to insist that "physical labour willingly consented to is, after death willingly consented to, the most perfect form of obedience" (NR, 292/E, 347). Christ is the greatest model of this obedience in his death on the cross, which the kenotic hymn highlights. He offers humanity the possibility of right relation, and physical labour for Weil imitates Christ by being a daily practice of obedience. She identifies work as a practice that entails a certain kind of death, and on the final page she puts this specifically in terms of the self:

> Consent to suffer death, when death is there and seen in its nakedness, constitutes a final, sudden wrenching away from what each one calls "I". Consent to perform labour is of a less violent nature. But where it is absolute, it is renewed each morning throughout the entire length of a human existence, day after day, and each day it lasts until the evening, and it starts again on the following day, and this goes on often until death. (NR, 297-298/E, 352)

It is for this reason that Chenavier identifies labour as the decreative activity "par excellence" for Weil,[261] since through the obedience of labour one submits to the daily patterns of work, relinquishing the "I" and its egotistical desires.

Labour becomes the supreme exercise in which the self dies and through which one can be brought back into obedience and conformity to God's will. Gavin Flood puts it well in what he identifies as Weil's "asceticism of work." He highlights how for Weil, work consciously performed can be a form of detached acceptance, an *ascesis* or exercise in eradicating the private will and replacing it with divine will.[262] Flood's study begins with Weil as a modern example of someone who developed an asceticism of work, exemplifying a subjective self that nevertheless resonates with the political individualism of late modernity.[263] He argues that Weil's experience in the factory showed her that for the "industrial, social machine to function," the worker needs to eradicate a sense of self and become a slave with no rights, subordinating personal will to the institution. Yet when work is consciously undertaken—when approached with attention—it can be a form of asceticism.[264] In Weil's terminology, it can become an embodied practice of relinquishment and de-creation.

The distinction between destruction and decreation is an important one, given the way Weil's own life and death have always haunted evaluations of her thought, particularly

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[261] Chenavier, *Une philosophie du travail*, 451.

[262] Flood, *The Ascetic Self*, 38. See Flood's excellent account of some of the ambiguities in the way Weil thinks about subjectivity.

[263] Flood, *The Ascetic Self*, 37. Flood also suggests that Weil also appeals to contemporary Western sensibilities as a "dweller on the margins" who resists formal commitment yet is "deeply bound to a religious subjectivity," 39.

[264] Flood, *The Ascetic Self*, 41-42.

the religious "excesses" of her later writings. And it is especially pertinent to the bodily form of labour that Weil models on the kenotic descent of Christ to the cross, an obedience even to death. As Christine Hof has noted, an emphasis on kenosis has sometimes been interpreted historically as a valorization of pain, and *imitatio Christi* has been understood as a call to sacrifice and emulation of the suffering of the cross.[265] Christ's agonized cry of god forsakenness is indeed central to Weil, and her confrontation with the crucifixion later in her life—in conjunction with her own insufferable headaches—prompted her to reflect on the complexities of pain, suffering, and the body with careful attention, neither seeking to resolve this central paradox of Christianity nor to accept facile explanations of human suffering. Her "unsentimental" approach to suffering—a characterization made by Deborah Nelson—neither sacralizes pain nor remains indifferent to it.[266] Nelson suggests that suffering is part of Weil's tragic theological vision: "Decreation is a theology of nonsovereignty; for Weil, the sovereign individual can only ever be a fantasy, one that is maintained with all the forms of self-delusion, self-aggrandizement, and hubris that create oppression."[267] To believe that suffering can be eliminated is to indulge in the kind of progressivism that assumes mastery and control and refuses to acknowledge human limitations—tendencies that Weil criticized.

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[265] Hof writes that the Second Vatical Council called into question certain propositions of *imitatio Christi*, especially those that seemed to valorize suffering and an almost exclusive reference to the cross, as it had been popularized by figures such as Thomas a Kempis. See Hof, *Philosophie et kénose*, 129-131.

[266] Deborah Nelson, *Tough Enough:Arbus, Arendt, Didion, McCarthy, Sontag, Weil* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 7-8. On this approach of "unsentimentality" Nelson writes of the six women who are the subject of her book: "They were drawn to suffering as a problem to be explored and yet remained deeply suspicious of its attractions…they sought not relief from pain but heightened sensitivity to what they called 'reality.' Perversely or not, they imagined the consolations for pain in intimacy, empathy, and solidarity as *anesthetic*" (8).

[267] Nelson, *Tough Enough*, 29.

Suffering casts doubt on one's perception of control and independence. Weil was concerned about "the mechanisms of avoidance", and how men and women wish to avoid helplessness, fragility, mortality, "cloaking themselves in prestige and retreating from reality to the imagination." [268] She insists that such denial of suffering is a form of self-delusion that gives rise to utopianisms and insulates us from the real. But suffering can be neither sought nor avoided, only borne. In the context of labour, Weil refused the suggestion that work could be completely free of burden and permitted no delusions about the monotony and fatigue that are inherent to it. While she admits that at times there may be a superabundance of energy for the work at hand, at others, there is only exhaustion, strain, anxiety, and disgust (NR, 297/E, 352). Consent does not make it any easier or less painful, since for Weil, "labour does violence to human nature" (NR, 297/E, 352), functioning as a process of purification in which the self is confronted with its limitations and stripped of any sense of self-sufficiency or greatness. One is liberated from the illusions about one's self through the experience of fatigue and disgust, but one can never be entirely free from the struggle.[269]

Earlier, she had criticized what she saw in Marx's account as an idealizing desire to return to the Garden. According to Weil, Marx dreamed of regaining "the happiness of Adam and Eve before the fall" (OL, 42). In her later writings, she suggests that the best one might hope for is a daily and often painful obedience that nevertheless builds up "roots" in

[268] Nelson, *Tough Enough*, 39-40, 43.

[269] In a letter to Gilbert Kahn, before leaving for the farm, she wrote: "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 equaled elsewhere" (Pétrement, *Simone Weil: A Life*, 423)

both self and society.[270] Weil laments, "Manual work. How is it there has never yet been a workman or peasant mystic to write on the use to be made of the disgust for work?" (N, 301). In her notebooks she refers to what must have been a planned essay on precisely this topic: "Titles. 'Work as a spiritual exercise.' 'Work as a mystical experience.' 'Work as poetry.'" (N, 79/OC VI.2, 63). If undergone in a spirit of consent and obedience, labour—and even the discomfort and weariness associated with it—could be a lever to the divine. Although Weil never completed her project on the topic, she refers to the "spirituality of work" throughout *The Need for Roots*, writing that labour must be nothing less than the "spiritual core" of a well-ordered social life (NR, 298/E, 353).[271] This included the cultivation and exercise of the attention, but also the practice of obedience and even a kind of death that recalls the kenotic hymn that is so central to Weil's thought.

4. Labour and Servitude

Weil experienced the pain and fatigue of manual labour personally in her year-long experiment as a factory worker and in her brief but important time as a farm hand in the

[270] Elodie Wahl makes this point well, writing that Weil's paradoxical conclusion is that for work to provoke disgust, one cannot deny it, one can only render the disgust of work sublime. Wahl, "La 'civilisation du travail'," 531. Yet to render it "sublime" seems to elevate it, whereas Weil seems more interested in it as a form of descent, of de-creation.

[271] Weil's proposition that work be at the centre of social life is an idea that has been contested. Elodie Wahl writes that other thinkers, such as Hannah Arendt, Jacques Ellul, and Dominique Méda have offered a critique of the idea that civilization should be founded on work, on the grounds that work does not liberate but makes humans submit, it does not realize human creatures essence but mutilates it. Wahl, 519. Still, in *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt wrote with admiration about Weil's analysis: "It is perhaps no exaggeration to say that Simone Weil's *La condition ouvrière* (1951) is the only book in the huge literature on the labor question which deals with the problem without prejudice and sentimentality." *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018): 131.

South of France. She documented her experiences of the difficulty and exhaustion of labour in her "Factory Journal," which is perhaps the most personal of her notebooks.[272] In one of the few places she writes in the first person, she details the daily tasks she was performing at the factories she worked, the number of pieces she completed each day and her daily wages, as well as reflections on her interactions with fellow workers. It also gives voice to her disgust about factory conditions, her exhaustion and hunger, powerlessness, and the many forms of humiliation, confirming and deepening the critiques of industrial labour that she had articulated in her incisive essay, "Reflections Concerning the Causes of Liberty and Social Oppression," which Weil called her first "*grand oeuvre*" and that she had completed the fall before entering the factory.[273] As Simone Pétrement has noted, Weil's factory experiences mark both a culmination of her previous philosophy and a slight shift in her concerns,[274] although there is no definitive break since labour remained a central concern until the end of her life. Still, in her later writings on labour she began to reflect on the religious dimensions of slavery, obedience, and force that were not yet present in her early analysis of factory work.

The Factory Journal gives a vivid account of Weil's experience of the slavery of factory work and reflects her more direct contact with the dynamics of oppression and

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[272] *Formative Writings: 1929-1941*, ed. and trans. Dorothy Tuck McFarland and Wilhelmina van Ness (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1987).

[273] *Oppression and Liberty*, trans. Arthur Wills and John Petrie (London: Routledge, 2001). In a letter to Albertine Thévenon, Weil writes that her experiences of factory work only further confirmed what she had written earlier, alluding to the sense of slavery she articulates elsewhere: "*Cette experience qui correspond par bien des côtés à ce que j'attendais, en diffère quand même par un abîme: c'est la réalité, non plus l'imagination. Elle a changé pour moi non pas telle ou telle de mes idées (beaucoup ont été au contraire confirmées), mais infiniment plus, toute ma perspective sur les choses, le sentiment même que j'ai de la vie. Je connaîtrai encore la joie, mais il y a une certaine légèreté de coeur qui me restera, il me semble, toujours impossible*." *La condition ouvrière*, 15.

[274] Pétrement, *Simone Weil: A Life*, 214-215.

force. While there are occasional descriptions of the joy—even euphoria—she felt at the machines (FW, 177), overwhelmingly she reports the times she and her coworkers experienced hunger, occasional incidents and injuries, and the extreme fatigue that was in her case only exacerbated by her own illnesses and headaches.[275] In Robert Chenavier's comprehensive examination of Weil's philosophy of work, he suggests that Weil describes the slavery she saw in the factory as characterized by its monotony, cadence, and speed, in which the worker is only a "machine of flesh" ("*machine de chair*").[276] The sense of slavery, according to Weil, came primarily from the way the pace and fatigue occluded any individual thought, and made submissive to another's will. "The effect of exhaustion is to make me forget my real reasons for spending time in the factory, and to make it almost impossible for me to overcome the strongest temptation that this life entails: that of not thinking anymore, which is the one and only way of not suffering from it" (FW, 171). Only on Saturday afternoons and Sundays did a few "memories and shreds of ideas" return and she writes, "I remember that I am *also* a thinking being" (FW, 171). Otherwise, the only way to bear the work was to no longer think about it.

Weil emerged from her factory experience defeated and demoralized, with her sense of dignity crushed through humiliation and affliction. In her "Spiritual Autobiography," written to Father Perrin before she set sail for America with her parents in 1942, she writes that her factory experience left her "in pieces, soul and body," and that the "contact with affliction had killed my youth" (WG, 25/AD, 52). She describes its deep effect on her soul:

[275] For example, she writes of the crushing fatigue one afternoon and "the feeling of sliding back into the condition of beast of burden" (*FW*, 180).

[276] Robert Chenavier, *Une philosophie du travail*, 318. Quote from *OC* II.2, 392.

"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" (WG, 25/AD, 52). Writing before many of the labour reforms we now take for granted, Weil was pointing to the personal and collective sense of subjugation experienced in the manual labour of her time.

Shortly after her factory year, however, she had the first of three religious experiences that she describes as having "really counted," and that gave a new meaning to the language of slavery and servitude. Alone at night under the moon in a Portuguese village, Weil witnessed a candle-lit procession for a festival in honour of the town's patron saint, in which the fishermen's wives were singing what she assumed to be ancient hymns "of heart-rending sadness." A revelation dawned on her: "There the conviction was suddenly born in upon me that Christianity is pre-eminently the religion of slaves, that slaves cannot help belonging to it, and I among others" (WG, 26/AD, 52). This is a disquieting claim, which troubles Weil's previous unequivocal denunciation of slavery and her assertion that labour had become a contemporary form of slavery. Weil's references to slavery and servitude after this point are more ambiguous than her initial outright condemnation, and at times, she even refers to the slave as a model to be emulated, describing it as a desired posture of self-emptying humility, obedience, and attention. This is understandably something that contemporary scholars have often struggled with.[277] Yet this language is also present in the

[277] For example, Philippe Dujardin claims that Weil uses the term to describe a moral or metaphysical state of the soul in relation to the divine, rather than a sociological or political state between individuals. See Dujardin, *Simone Weil. Idéologie et politique* (Grenoble: Presses Universitaires de Grenoble, 1975), 57. Robert Chenavier, on the other hand, insists that Weil never used the term to refer literally to the condition of the slave in antiquity, but instead used it to work out the *distance* between master and slave. Chenavier, *Une philosophie de travail*, 333.

kenotic hymn, and Weil was aware of its provocation, believing the scandalous call to servitude was at the heart of Christianity. Turning to Weil's use and understanding of this passage illuminates how Weil was thinking about liberty, servitude, power and greatness, and the way a "spirituality of work" offers an alternative to the logic of force.

The kenotic hymn's description of God descending "into the form of a slave" is an aspect that is not always elaborated on, but which is crucial to the way Weil thought about God. Hof writes that it is *because* Christ took the form of a slave that Weil says we truly know that he is the Son.[278] Weil primarily describes God in terms of renunciation, voluntary distance, and apparent absence (WG, 89/AD, 138), rather than as one who commands wherever there is power to do so.[279] Indeed, it is this relinquishment and renunciation that demonstrate God's divinity. She puts it in notable terms in her notebooks:

> Christ curing the sick, raising up from the dead; this is the humble, human, almost menial part of his mission. The supernatural part is the bloody sweat, the unsatisfied desire to find consolation among his friends, the supplication to be spared, the feeling of being forsaken by God. (My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?). There lies the real proof that Christianity is something divine. (N, 263)

The distance that appears between God and human creatures—and that is expressed in Christ's agonized cry on the cross—is just as important to Weil's theology as the

[278] Hof, *Philosophie et kénose*, 21.

[279] In this passage, Weil also addresses the theodicy question of the existence of evil: "Either God is not almighty or he is not absolutely good, or else he does not command everywhere where he has the power to do so. Thus the existence of evil here below, far from disproving the reality of God, is the very thing that reveals him in his truth" (*WG*, 89/*AD*, 137).

sacramental presence of God in all of matter. She locates Christ's divinity in his absolute abasement and writes that this is what one must likewise emulate and embody.

Weil emphasizes God's willing and loving withdrawal and refusal to exercise kingly power in order to serve (FLN, 296). To conform to the *imago dei* as revealed in the kenotic hymn is to consent to relinquish one's self and emulate the obedience and servitude of Christ. A passage in one of the essays in *Waiting for God* demonstrates this in relation to the will, where she makes a crucial distinction between the master/slave relationship among human beings and the relationship between humans and God:

> To be perfectly obedient is to be perfect as our Father in heaven is perfect.
>
> Among men, a slave does not become like his master by obeying him. On the contrary, the more he obeys the greater is the distance between them. It is otherwise between man and God. If a reasonable creature is absolutely obedient, he becomes a perfect image of the Almighty as far as this is possible for him. (WG, 115/AD, 174)

Servitude to God of this kind, which is consent to submit to God's will, is to become more like God because it is to become Christ-like. Obedience to God makes one more similar to the model because it is an imitation of the relinquishment of our false divinity in imitation of Christ's abdication of divinity. The slave's obedience to the master's will, on the other hand, only re-inscribes the difference between them.

In *The Need for Roots*, Weil describes the way that God has been understood as a figure modelled after a Roman slave-holder, who holds sovereign rights over another's life

that "can only allow for a servile devotion" (NR, 275/E, 330).[280] This case—in which the slave is devoted to the one who looks on him as his own property—is a base version of devotion (NR, 275/E, 330). She contrasts the Roman ideal of servility to the love which "drives a free man to bring himself body and soul into servitude to what constitutes perfect good" (NR, 275/E, 330), clarifying how different the Gospel version is from the "Roman" sense of both slavery and God:

> If we were God's property, how should we be able to give ourselves to him as slaves? He has emancipated us in view of the fact that he has created us. We are outside his kingdom. Our consent alone can, with time, bring about an inverse operation and convert us into something inert, something analogous to nothingness, where God is absolute master. (NR, 274/E, 329)

The difference hinges on the distinction between forceful submission and consent to being brought back into the nothingness—that "no-thing" which Marguerite Porete describes.

Understood within the broader context of her kenotic theology, Weil's language of slavery emphasizes that one becomes more like God by *not* engaging in the race for power, by refusing to use force over others, and by relinquishing the imagination's distorting grip which projects and imagines the self's divinity and sovereignty. Christine Hof nicely points out how the imitation of Christ's kenosis has a subversive function in both the social and political spheres by calling into question the foundations on which human organizations

[280] "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, and which has perhaps more or less infected the whole of Christianity, with the exception of the Mystics" (*NR*, 276-277).

and systems are based.[281] In Christ's kenosis, she writes, there is a de-centering of sovereignty that can liberate humankind from the thirst for power,[282] disrupting the meaning that human beings have given to the divine and to its power.[283] Weil's references to the kenotic language in her emphasis on slavery make all the difference because it emphasizes a movement of renunciation of power, a dis-possession of God's sovereignty, and an abandonment of divinity. The image assumes that one begins with power, and the emphasis is on consenting to lose what one has, voluntarily, willingly, lovingly in a relationship of service to one another. The imitation of God is, then, not an imitation of power but of giving *up* and relinquishing both power and the self. Attention to this aspect of kenosis sheds light on the way Weil is contesting force and power altogether as objects of admiration.

It was from the perspective of *imago Dei* and consent that Weil criticized the enslavement of others. In an essay written in Marseille, "Forms of the Implicit Love of God," she explains the problem of subjecting others in terms of taking away their ability to consent:

> We are made in the very image of God. It is by virtue of something in us which attaches to the fact of being a person but which is not the fact itself. It is the power of renouncing our own personality. It is obedience.

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[281] Hof, *Philosophie et kénose*, 60. She writes further: "*Dans le context de l'écriture paulinienne, la kénose du Christ est une Parole de rupture et de renouveau qui bouleverse fondamentalement la représentation que l'homme macédonien se fait du monde*." Hof, 73.

[282] Hof, *Philosophie et kénose*, 74.

[283] Hof, *Philosophie et kénose*, 75-76.

> It is because the renunciation of the personality makes man a reflection of God that it is so frightful to reduce men to the condition of inert matter by plunging them into affliction. When the quality of human personality is *taken* from them, the possibility of *renouncing* it is also taken away, except in the case of those who are sufficiently prepared. As God has created our independence so that we should have the possibility of renouncing it out of love, we should for the same reason wish to preserve the independence of our fellows. He who is perfectly obedient sets an infinite price upon the faculty of free choice in all men. (WG, 115-116/AD, 174, italics added)

What Weil continues to criticize in certain forms of servitude is the way it robs those who are subjected to it of the ability to freely give themselves, for it reduces them to a state in which their personality is taken from them. One is willing consent, the other is forceful dominion; one is mutual and relational, the other transactional.

She makes this case from a different angle in *The Need for Roots*, where she identifies obedience as one of the fundamental "needs of the soul." The first part of the text enumerates a total of fourteen needs within Weil's analysis of rights and obligations. Many of these needs are written in pairs; she explicates the need for both equality and hierarchism, security and risk, private property and collective property, as well as obedience and liberty.[284] In her outline of obedience, she insists that "it presupposes consent" rather than

[284] Weil suggests that Languedoc was an example of a civilization which exercised precisely this harmony between liberty and obedience. In "The Romanesque Renaissance," she writes: "Liberty was loved. Obedience was loved no less. The unity of these two contraries is the Pythagorean harmony in society," and that "The Pythagoreans said that harmony or proportion is the unity of contraries, *qua* contraries. There is no harmony if the contraries are brought together forcibly, nor if they are mixed; the point of unity has to be found" (*SE*, 51/OC IV.2, 421-422).

fear of punishment or hope of reward so that submission is never mistaken for servility (NR, 14/E, 88). Moreover, "Those who keep masses of men in subjection by exercising force and cruelty deprive them at once of two vital foods, liberty and obedience; for it is no longer within the power of such masses to accord their inner consent to the authority to which they are subjected" (NR, 14/E, 88).

What is crucial in Weil's formulation, then, and part of what differentiates the servitude she admires from the form of slavery she experienced in the factory, is the willing consent, which she makes even more clear in her New York notebook:

> In what sense did Christ make expiation for humanity? To expiate is to restore what one has unjustly taken. Humanity stole free will, the choice between good and evil. Christ gave it back, by learning obedience. To be born is to participate in Adam's theft. To die is to participate in Christ's restitution. But we are only saved by this participation if we consent to it. (FLN, 212)

This consent is the crucial piece in Weil's understanding of kenotic servitude, and it is also the posture that she interprets from Plato's images of love and the troubadour poetry of Languedoc. It entails a "patient attention towards the loved person," a disposition of waiting, and a consent to the other's existence beyond one's power and control, seeing them as they are. Indeed, Weil writes that attention is constituted by consent: "Attention is intimately related to desire—not to the will, but to desire (Or more precisely to consent; it constitutes consent. Which is why it is intimately related to Good.)" (N, 527). It differs from the willful relationship of force that puts both people in positions of servility, not to one another, but to force itself. Consent, by contrast, entails feeling or sensing *with* another.

Weil refers to several passages from the Gospels to illustrate instances of servitude. Indeed, the Gospels are full of comparisons drawn from slavery, but she proposes that in Christ's mouth, "this word [slavery] is an artifice of love," and that the "slaves" are those who have wanted with the heart to give themselves to God (NR, 274/E, 329). A particularly important example of this is her interpretation of the parable of the faithful servants from Luke 12:35-37:

> Be dressed ready for service and keep your lamps burning, like servants waiting for their master to return from a wedding banquet, so that when he comes and knocks they can immediately open the door for him. It will be good for those servants whose master finds them watching when he comes. Truly I tell you, he will dress himself to serve, will have them recline at the table and will come and wait on them.

In Weil's interpretation, the slave is one who takes on a posture of patient, waiting attention. Yet there is also reciprocity in this story. Christy Lang Hearlson has pointed to the ambiguity in Weil's French: "*Le maître alors installe l'esclave à table et lui sert lui-même à manger*" (AD, 104), which she translates: "The master will then make his slave sit down and *feed him himself*."[285] Hearlson suggests that Weil fully intends a double meaning here that parallels the same intentional ambiguity as George Herbert's poem "Love": "You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat/So I did sit and eat," a eucharistic allusion to the "host" which is both the bread and Love itself.[286] The master is both served and serves. It is a calling of mutual service to one another, also present in the servanthood of Christ.

[285] Christy Lang Hearlson, "A Eucharistic Pedagogy: Gospel Parables and Teachings in Simone Weil's 'On the Right Use of School Studies,'" *Horizons* 49 (2022), 13.
[286] Hearlson, "Eucharistic Pedagogy," 13-14.

Christ's humility is key here, and Weil opposes it specifically to the patriotism and glorification of the Romans: "The essential fact about Christian virtues, what lends them a special savour of their own, is humility—the freely accepted movement towards the bottom. It is through this that the saints resemble Christ" (NR, 140/E, 204-205).

This is embodied as a humble love toward one's neighbour: "To love means loving created beings and things as the divine Word loved them at the moment when it emptied itself in order to become a slave….Love this world as the divine Word loved it when for the sake of this world it parted from God" (FLN, 274). In *The Need for Roots*, Weil writes that this love must be lived in enactments of care within smaller units of relation—families, trade guilds, villages or cities—rather than impersonally simply through the State: "The nation, single and separate, has taken the place of all that—the nation, or in other words, the State… One may say that, in our age, money and the State have come to replace all other bonds of attachment" (NR, 99/E, 164). Hence Weil's criticism of money (she names its "idolization" one of the four obstacles of rootedness, NR, 216) and her interest in developing guilds as means of apprenticeship for a profession and as a "link between the dead, the living and those yet unborn, within the framework of a certain specified occupation" (NR, 99/E, 164). The mutual servanthood she is describing takes place in these smaller circles that resemble the life of a monastic community, in which allegiance and obedience to the leader is not through any illusion of their divinity, but "solely as a result of a convention which was considered to be divinely ordained" (NR, 270). Weil suggests this used to be the case, and that public life "was thus permeated by the religious virtue of obedience, like the life of a Benedictine monastery of the best period" (NR, 270).

She envisions labour as part of a new asceticism in the world, one that would wear down the "I" through obedience to the order of the world. But she also positions this in opposition to the notion that anyone who wants to give themselves to Christ must necessarily enter a religious order (OC IV.1, 271), suggesting a monasticism that is not cloistered but within the world.[287] She clarifies in an essay written in London:

> There is no need of a new Franciscan order. The monk's habit and the convent are a barrier. The new *élite* must be a part of the mass and in direct contact with it, and, further, they must do something which is harder than enduring poverty, they must renounce all compensations; in their contacts with the people around them they must sincerely practise the humility of a naturalized citizen in the country that has received him. (SE, 216/OC V.1, 256)[288]

Weil refers to the need for a "genuine *élite*" that is not tied to false versions of greatness, but comprised of those who would be poor in spirit and fact, and who would "inspire the virtue of spiritual poverty" among the masses (SE, 216/OC V.1, 256). Chenavier writes that to regard annihilation in contemplation as Weil's goal is to miss an essential part of her

[287] The role of manual labour in monasticism is of course not new. St. Benedict's Rule is characterized by the balanced life of "*ora et labora*," prayer and work (see esp. Ch. 48 of the Rule), which Weil makes no specific reference to, although she was attending the Holy Week services at the Benedictine abbey of Solesmes when she had one of her mystical experiences. *The Rule of St. Benedict*, ed. and trans. Caroline White (London: Penguin, 2008)

[288] Elsewhere, she imagines a religious order along similar lines as the beguines: "Let us suppose a religious order without a habit or bade of any kind, composed of men and women (pledged by implicit rather than explicit vows of poverty, chastity and obedience within the limits compatible with orders received directly through the conscience), who would be given the very best aesthetic, philosophical and theological training, and who would afterwards go down for a period of years, abstaining from all religious practices if circumstances should so require, as criminals into the prisons, as workmen into the factories, peasants into the fields, and so on" (*N*, 388).

spirituality: that one does not withdraw from the world.[289] For Weil, one's labour is a means of descent.

5. Conclusion

Weil admitted that one can never escape the reality that work is always in some sense a form of servitude. In "The First Condition for the Work of a Free Person," a short essay written in 1942 before leaving for America, she insists: "There is in the work of human hands and, in general, in the skillful performance of a task, which is work properly understood, an irreducible element of servitude that even a perfectly just society cannot remove" (LPW, 131). Human effort is expended daily to live, and one finds oneself in the same condition as the first day of a month, a year, or twenty years later, turning in an endless cycle: "One works only because one needs to eat. But one eats in order to continue working. And again one works in order to eat" (LPW, 132-133). While one can revolt against the social injustices of the conditions of labour, it is an illusion to believe one can revolt against the essential servile character of the worker's condition, for there is no finality in work (LPW 133), there is only immersion in the slow rotation of time.

However, one's labour can participate in—and cultivate—either "false" or "true" forms of greatness. An example from Weil's life illustrates the way the kenotic hymn inspired her own aspirations to participate in the war efforts of her time. Weil had arrived

[289] Chenavier, *Une philosophie du travail*, 611. Hof also distinguishes between a different kind of *imitatio Christi* which privileged a retreat from the world. See Hof, *Philosophie et kénose*, 130-131.

in London with hopes of returning to France to participate in the resistance more directly. To her dismay, for her job with the Free French she was largely relegated to clerical work. It was in this context that she wrote *The Need for Roots*, along with an enormous amount of other writings, which left her worn and spent. Yet at the same time that she was writing her second "magnum opus," she was also attempting to put forward a proposal for an organization of women nurses who would administer first-aid on the frontlines of battle. She outlines the plan in a letter written from New York to Maurice Schumann on 30 July, 1942, which includes an extract from the *Bulletin of the American College of Surgeons* suggesting that according to the Red Cross, the greatest proportion of deaths in battle were the result of the shock, exposure, and loss of blood that required immediate treatment on the battlefield. Weil proposed a corps of courageous, volunteer women nurses whose primary purpose would be to administer first aid on the front lines of battle to save the lives of injured soldiers. Weil also outlines a secondary purpose: she envisioned the nurses as a moral inspiration for the injured, the general public, and even the opposing side.

Weil refers to Hitler's successful ability to stoke the imagination through visual displays of heroism, and most notably, in the special forces of the S.S. who first parachuted to places such as Crete (SL, 149). Weil is adamant that one cannot copy such acts, since any response must spring from a completely different source: "these men are unmoved by suffering and death, either for themselves or for all the rest of humanity. Their heroism originates from an extreme brutality. The groups they compose correspond perfectly to the spirit of the regime and the designs of their leaders" (SL, 149). Instead, she envisioned a striking visual symbol as a counterpart to Hitler's parachutists that would be rooted in an

entirely different inspiration, one that is religious in the sense that it is "authentic and pure" rather than what she calls the "idolatrous inspiration" that is a "substitute for religious faith." "There are circumstances in which this inspiration is an even more important factor for victory than the purely military ones," she writes, referring to Joan of Arc's victory as an example of leadership rooted in such inspiration. While it would be impossible to claim the front-line nurses would be any more courageous than the enemy, Weil posits that "we can and ought to demonstrate that our courage is qualitatively different, is courage of a more difficult and rarer kind. Theirs is a debased and brutal courage; it springs from the will to power and destruction. Just as our aims are different from theirs, so our courage too springs from a wholly different inspiration" (SL, 150). The sight of a small group of women caring for the wounded on the frontline "would be a spectacle so new, so significant, and charged with such obvious meaning, that it would strike the imagination more than any of Hitler's conceptions have done" (SL, 151). While Weil warns about the imagination and its tendency to make us "kings and masters of the world in thought," she also perceives its potential role in envisioning creative alternative ethical and political practices. Rather than destruction, she proposes the front-line nurse as an example of a novel refusal of force that manifests selflessness in the service of cherishing life.

Weil's plan was intended to disrupt the logic of force and to be a concrete way in which it might be resisted. She sincerely believed in the potency of the image of nurses, of its ability to stir witnesses, jolting them out of their ordinary ways of seeing the world and opening them to unexpected possibilities. But she also believed it would be morally and practically effective on the frontlines. Indeed, she was so convinced of the effects of such

a demonstration of sacrificial love that she volunteered to be among the first sent to the frontlines, and the project was a lingering preoccupation until the end of her life. The final words in her London notebooks are: "The most important part of teaching = to teach what it is to *know* (in the scientific sense). Nurses" (FLN, 364). It is partly due to her obsession with this final project that Weil has sometimes been charged with exhibiting a death-wish, a longing to die in an act of total self-renunciation in the service of others. Like her death, which was quickly characterized as a sacrifice, the project once again raises the entangled issues of sacrifice, gender, and activism. For example, one can dispute the association Weil makes between the ideal candidates and the characteristics of the stereotypical self-sacrificing mother, even while recognizing that in proposing such a venture, Weil was querying the limitations she faced as a woman in the war, relegated to the sidelines. Within her context, in which sacrifices were being demanded of many—of soldiers at war and food restrictions at home—Weil sought a corresponding act of sacrifice that would refrain from merely replicating force and instead contest the basis on which those sacrifices were being made. Her project was an attempt to enact an image so compelling that it would pierce through assumptions and reveal the strength of love over power.

Weil's project of front-line nurses never gained traction. It was famously met with Charles de Gaulle's reaction: "But she is mad!"[290] However, it illustrates her vision of a response to the problems of her time through a vocation inspired by the kenotic hymn. The project admittedly required a radical act that she believed was necessary in response to extreme circumstances. Like the many other sacrificial actions of the time, Weil

[290] Pétrement, *Simone Weil: A Life*, 514.

acknowledged that her plan was not without risk, and that it would likely cost something of those willing to participate. The purpose, however, was not self-destruction, but rather the creative and life-giving work of healing, attending to someone else's suffering by willingly putting one's own body on the line. Viewed as an embodied example of decreation, the plan for front-line nurses was a way to incarnate self-emptying love in the world while also contesting force. In a notebook entry, Weil describes what it is to emulate this movement of self-emptying love: "One must strip oneself of the imaginary sovereignty of the world in order to reduce oneself to the point one occupies in space and time" (N, 213). In *The Need for Roots*, Weil proposes less dramatic ways in which this same ethic could be practiced through one's daily labour. The privilege of labour for Weil is that under the right conditions, it can be a practice of relinquishing the self and its false divinity in order to attend to the tasks, people and place of our specific point in time. This is the alternative sense of greatness that she elaborates in *The Need for Roots*, and that might also be described by the words of Matthew 20:26-28, which she mentions in several passages of her notebooks: "whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." For Weil, the greatness of labour is revealed paradoxically when it is a willing descent of mutual servanthood that allows the growing of common roots through shared work and its attendant suffering.

We might simply dismiss Weil's nurse project as "mad." Its radicality could appear absurd, outlandish, and dangerous. But Weil was living in extraordinary circumstances that demanded thought and action that might appear foolish. While living in London, she had

the opportunity to see a production of Shakespeare's *King Lear*. She briefly reflects on the character of the fool in her second-last letter to her family from August 4, 1943, a few weeks before her death in a sanitorium in Ashford, Kent on August 24:

> When I saw *Lear* here, I asked myself how it was possible that the unbearably tragic character of these fools had not been obvious long ago to everyone, including myself. The tragedy is not the sentimental one it is sometimes thought to be; it is this:
>
> There is a class of people in this world who have fallen into the lowest degree of humiliation, far below beggary, and who are deprived not only of all social consideration but also, in everybody's opinion, of the specific human dignity, reason itself – and these are the only people who, in fact, are able to tell the truth. (SL, 200)

Weil's "foolish" scheme, and her upending of greatness as force for greatness as humble service, was an attempt to tell an impossible truth. In her notebooks she writes—among reflections on tragedy, algebra and art—a lucid personal reflection: "You could not have wished to be born at a better time than this, when everything has been lost" (FLN, 47). She thus wrote with an urgency and a recognition of the distinctiveness of her time. In this context, she envisions the embodiment of a mad love, one belonging to the mystical tradition that she so admired, as active refusal and resistance to the empire of might.

V. CONCLUSION

Weil's contestation of force and oppression was lifelong, but the writings from the end of her life express her concerns with an increased urgency. She was under no illusions that human beings could entirely avoid using force; however, she did believe it could be refused as an object of worship and idolization. Earlier in her life, Weil was involved in pacifist circles that had organized after the First World War in France, and some of her earliest writings in response to the rise of Hitler denied that force should be used, believing that he could be appeased and that France should not involve itself.[291] However, she reluctantly came to admit that force was sometimes necessary, even while she maintained that it degrades both the person it is used against and the one who wields it. To wield force was for Weil full of agony, regret, disgust, and inner conflict that could not be assuaged. She refused to view it as a zero-sum game or to divide the world simply into conquerors and conquered, persecutors and victims, lamenting the destruction inflicted on both and recognizing the way force becomes master over all. It is for this reason that she continued to refine her critique of the desire for might, looking for resources from a range of literary and religious sources, including the Christian mystical tradition, and imagining unorthodox alternatives, such as her nurses project, in the face of egregious manifestations of force.

In *The Need for Roots*, she presents her most severe critique of the worship of force as she witnessed it in institutions, revealing the ways it had become imbedded in social,

[291] This view is articulated in some of the earlier essays collected in *Écrits historiques et politiques*, OC II.3.

cultural, and political life, both in obvious ways and more inconspicuously. She levels her criticisms especially toward her own country of France, arguing that the glorification of force was learned early through the education system and then became the inspiration for everything from literature and the telling of history to France's ongoing colonial projects. Perhaps most pointedly, she sought to expose how France implicitly engaged in the same inspiration as Germany's totalitarianism, insisting that France could not delude itself with any sense of moral superiority or self-righteousness until it had seriously reflected on its own complicity in—and idolization of—the exercise of force. But Weil does not only identify the worship of force in the secular or political realm; she also points to the way it is present within Christianity. In worshipping the risen, resurrected Christ, Weil suggests that Christians can pass too quickly over the crucifixion, forgetting that God abdicated divinity and lived and suffered on earth in the flesh. Weil did not deny God's power and sovereignty, but what she found so extraordinary was a God who refused to use all the power at God's command, not only in the Incarnation and the Cross but also in Creation, in a withdrawal that relinquishes space for others to exist. The problem, however, is that human creatures tend to imitate God's power, and the imagination easily conjures visions of ourselves possessing and wielding might. She emphasizes the self-emptying love of the kenotic hymn and seeks to envision how social relations could be rooted in this alternative posture of relation that prioritizes selflessness and mutual servanthood, and which becomes a way of participating in the incarnation of divine love in the world.

Weil articulated a critique of Christianity from an ambiguous position on the margins, as one who had concerns about the Church as an institution but who also longed for the

communion bread and wine.[292] She dismissed Judaism because she believed it valorized force, but some of her same concerns kept her on the edge of Christianity as well, and her exploration of both was interrupted by her very early death. We are left with the writings of someone who was committed to the possibilities of Christianity even while she held serious misgivings about her ability to be a member. She tries to articulate her reasons for remaining on what she calls the "threshold" of the Church in a series of personal letters to the Dominican priest, Père Perrin. Each letter, written from Marseille in 1942 just before leaving for America, reveals her agony over the question of baptism and expresses her reservations in slightly different ways. She discusses what she called her "intellectual vocation," and asks how her desire to confront any idea and move among any people would be met if not in line with the teachings of the church. But she also felt that it was God's will that she remain outside the Church, that if it was God's will to enter, she would do so immediately, "For I want nothing else but obedience, obedience itself, in its totality, that is to say even to the Cross" (WG, 15/AD, 41). She admits that if she were to one day feel a

[292] In a letter to Maurice Schumann, Weil describes her understanding of the Christian sacraments as "a contact with God through a sensible symbol," and refers to the words of Christ from John 3:14: "And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life." The saving power of looking is here understood as a means to receive the communion host. Weil writes, "I think it is a sacrament simply to look at the host and the chalice during the elevation with this thought in mind," admitting to Schumann that she does not consider herself outside the Church "as a source of sacramental life, but only outside it as a social reality" (*SL*, 172). Ann Astell has insightfully compared Weil's looking at the communion bread and wine without eating it to medieval practices of spiritual Communion, in which gazing on the consecrated Host as it was raised during Mass was often regarded as a substitute for its consumption (3). She suggests that Weil "feasted on the Host ardently with her eyes in adoration, practicing as a paradoxically non-Christian Christian what medieval believers called spiritual Communion and daily drawing 'transcendent energy from it'" (6). Astell, *Eating Beauty: The Eucharist and the Spiritual Arts of the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006).

sudden, irresistible impulse, she would run to ask for baptism, "for the action of grace in our hearts is secret and silent" (WG, 8/AD, 35).[293]

The more serious and recurring concern in each of these letters, however, is the issue of the Church as a social institution and its employment of two little words, *anathema sit*. For Weil, these words epitomize the Church's exercise of power and practices of exclusion, excommunicating people from the institution and thereby denying salvation. She refers especially to the power of the Church during the middle ages, making a sweeping and severe charge: "After the fall of the Roman Empire, which had been totalitarian, it was the Church that was the first to establish a rough sort of totalitarianism in Europe in the thirteenth century, after the war with the Albigenses…And the motive power of this totalitarianism was the use of those two little words: *anathema sit*" (WG, 37/AD, 69). Furthermore, she suggests that this is the lasting legacy of the Church in her own time, contending that its totalitarianism had been transposed to the political realm, through a "judicious transposition" and noting that "this is a point of history I have specially studied" (WG, 37/AD, 69). She thus makes an explicit connection between the worship of might, the Roman Empire, the institutional Church, and the form of totalitarianism that existed in her own time.

Weil describes her love for God, Christ, the Catholic faith, its liturgy, hymns, architecture, rites, and ceremonies, but admits that she has "not the slightest love for the

[293] Weil was preoccupied with the question of baptism, discussing with Perrin and writing several letters to him in France and then to another priest, Father Couturier, when she arrived in New York. It was clearly something that preoccupied her. In a letter to Couturier, she enumerates a number of thoughts which she felt maintained a barrier between her and the Church, asking whether they would be incompatible with the opinions of the Church. She continued to agonize over the question of baptism, and there is one apocryphal account that she was baptised on her deathbed by an acquaintance and laywoman, Mary Deitz.

Church in the strict sense of the word, apart from its relation to all these things that I love" (WG, 8/AD, 34). She acknowledges the indispensable function of the Church "as the collective keeper of dogma" (WG, 35/AD, 66-67). However, what frightens and worries her most is the Church as a social structure that engenders a form of "patriotism" which she witnessed in existing Catholic circles (WG, 12/AD, 37). She reflects on its power and influence, writing:

> There were some saints who approved of the Crusades or the Inquisition. I cannot help thinking that they were in the wrong. I cannot go against the light of conscience. 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. (WG, 12/AD, 37)

Her concern arises because she recognizes the appeal of being adopted into a social circle while also being exceptionally aware of the collective's ability to influence and coerce the opinions and actions of those within it.

Thus, in addition to the problem of the "I," at the end of her life, Weil expresses a heightened concern about the collective, framing it in terms of the "great beast" from the *Republic* and describing it in relation to the image of the cave. While in London, she warns that "the part of the soul that says "us" is still infinitely more dangerous" than the part that says "I" (LPW, 108/OC V.1, 217). As I have suggested in chapter 2, the two are related, insofar as the collective stokes the desire for prestige and the social sphere is the space where the self seeks to expand, often at the expense of others. Weil was deeply concerned about the ways that the collective could demand a selflessness in the service of a larger

cause that in reality only valorizes might. She worried about the ways people rallied behind abstract concepts and "words with capital letters" (such as capitalism, order, democracy), and the way the collective could become another false god, taking on a likeness to the transcendent and producing a public frenzy that demands selflessness and sacrifice in the service of an idea or social body. [294]

She reflects on this concern by turning to the idea of the mystical body of Christ. Weil admits that the image is a very attractive one, but she warns of the great many false mystical bodies who do not have Christ for their head, and which produce an equivalent intoxication. "Social enthusiasms have such power today," she writes, "they raise people so effectively to the supreme degree of heroism in suffering and death, that I think it is as well that a few sheep should remain outside the fold in order to bear witness that the love of Christ is essentially something different" (WG, 36/AD, 68). Much like Porete, Weil makes a similar distinction between "Holy Church the Little" and "Holy Church the Great." As I have already suggested, however, her concerns about the Church and her position on the margins did not mean that she abandoned Christianity, but rather, she spent her final years writing increasingly urgent calls to reflect on the institutional Church and its associations with might, considering what it might mean to take seriously the kenotic hymn and to imitate

[294] In "The Power of Words" (also titled "Let us not restart the Trojan war"), Weil decries the way certain words—such as nation, security, capitalism, communism, fascism, order, authority, property, or democracy—have been given "capital letters" so that under the slightest pretext, people will rally behind their banner and be willing to shed blood and cause ruin in their name. She suggests that "each of these words seem to represent an absolute reality, unaffected by conditions, or an absolute objective, independent of methods of action, or an absolute evil," and we can make them mean anything whatsoever. If we grasp one of these words, "all swollen with blood and tears," however, we will find that they are empty. We act and strive and sacrifice ourselves for abstractions. It is not that they are all meaningless, Weil insists, but she suggests that in defining them properly, with a recognition of their limits, contingencies, degrees (qualifying phrases such as "to the extent that…" or "in so far as"), they lose their capital letter and can once again help to grasp a concrete reality (*SE*, 156).

Christ's obedience and servanthood in the context of great social oppression and political turmoil.

In spite of her many criticisms of the collective, Weil did not give up on the need for collaborative action in response to social oppression. She participated in existing social movements throughout her life and *The Need for Roots* is full of recommendations for the kinds of collective action that she believed were necessary for the transformation of France. Rather than the mystical body of Christ, however, which she associated with the collective hysterias of her time, she sought a different image to shape and understand those forms of relationality, and instead turned to the Eucharistic feast of bread and wine as a central and kenotic model of transformation, exchange and reciprocity.

The eucharist as a model of relationship became especially clear for her during her brief but formative time as a farm labourer. Unlike her experience of factory work, which left her exhausted, humiliated, and demoralized, the experience was overwhelmingly positive and revelatory.[295] Indeed, directly after her time on the farm, Weil wrote some of her most famous religious essays, collected in *Waiting for God*. In one untranslated essay in particular, "*Le Christianisme et la vie des champs*," she reflects on the landscapes where wheat and wine are grown, suggesting that the manual worker, through the energy he or she puts into the work, transforms their flesh and blood into fabricated objects, the food that is produced and offered to others. In the process, the farmer becomes like the body and blood of Christ (OC IV.1, 266). This aspect of labour—the task of feeding others—was one

[295] When her friend Hélène Honnorat asked Weil why she had chosen to undertake her farm experience, given her intellectual gifts, Weil responded that "There are things that I would not be able to say if I had not done these things" (Pétrement, *Simone Weil: A Life*, 441).

of the reasons Weil was drawn to the French countryside in the first place. She confesses in a letter: "I must say that for me the thought of transforming the efforts of my body and soul into potatoes and things of that kind among a people who may go hungry is the only thing that can excite me at this moment—save for one other…".[296] Her other preoccupation was her front-line nurse project, which she was actively seeking to promote, and that offered an equivalent vision of self-emptying service. Weil saw labour as an imitation of the movement of God into the eucharistic bread because it is a process of creation, in that one creates or produces something, but it is also an imitation of the Incarnation and Passion since it entails exhaustion and pain and is an exercise in the same, voluntary submission to necessity that Christ undertook in loving obedience.

According to Weil, manual labour can either be a degrading servitude or it can be transformed into a sacrifice, and in the case of agricultural labour, if the link with the Eucharist is truly felt, Weil proposes that it is enough to transform it into a sacrifice (OC IV.1, 266-267)—a willing submission and offering of the self, rather than an act coerced by force. In an important passage of her notebooks, she describes the way the daily offering of one's self and one's labour can become a reciprocal sacrifice made sacred through consent: "God has not only made himself flesh once; every day he makes himself matter in order to give himself to man and be consumed by him. Conversely, through fatigue, affliction, death, man is made matter and consumed by God. How refuse this reciprocity?" (N, 99). She continues in the same passage: "If men could feel continually the fatigues of labour, and of life as a reciprocal form of communion…" (N, 99). This is the eucharistic

[296] See Pétrement, *Simone Weil: A Life*, 434-435.

reciprocity at the heart of Weil's vision of relationality, in which each one offers the self to the other in mutual service. She longed for the total transformation that this entails: "In the state of perfection, which is the vocation of each one of us, we no longer live in ourselves, but Christ lives in us; so that through our perfection Christ, in his integrity and in his indivisible unity, becomes in a sense each one of us, as he is completely in each host" (WG, 36/AD, 67).[297] This is what she intends when in her "Spiritual Autobiography," she writes to Father Perrin that what is needed is for Christianity to become "truly incarnate." For Weil, Christianity is incarnated not through demonstrations of power or force but through the relinquishment of the self in loving attention to one's neighbour.

I have argued that the radical selflessness that decreation entails is not simply intended to end with the annihilation of the "I." Inspired by the kenotic hymn, Weil calls for a different mode of relationality not grounded in self-serving interests or domination, but in emptying the self of its illusion of sovereignty in order to see the person before us, in their alterity, and with care for their particular afflictions. It entails a mutual servanthood in which we offer ourselves back to God through our service to others. That is, Weil's prioritization of the kenotic hymn in her concept of decreation is not simply a call to self-renunciation, but is also integrated with her lifelong contestation of force and her resistance

[297] Astell charts Weil's understanding of this transformation as incorporation into the unconventional beauty of Christ's self-emptying love. See Astell, *Eating Beauty.* She suggests that for Weil, the Host is beautiful because "it is a material that offers no resistance to God's will and formation" (230). By receiving Communion, we incorporate Christ's self-denial and descending movement into creation (232). Weil's reluctance to eat the communion bread is in line with her insistence that the proper relationship to beauty is not to consume or appropriate it, but to gaze on it. Yet the Eucharist provides the crucial exception whereby consumption does not entail destruction, but transformation into its beauty. Astell describes how Weil understands this as a form of reciprocity, "God's eating of us and our eating of Him in the Eucharist are not destructive of beauty, she insists, but rather a way to participate in Beauty itself, the same beauty that expresses itself in obedience to God's law of charity" (5).

to the people and systems that oppress because it seeks to imagine a different mode of relation.

To fully appreciate this connection requires examining Weil's religious writings alongside her political writings, and her life in conjunction with her thought. The separation of these risks interpreting Weil as promulgating two very different visions that might seem at odds with one another: on the one hand, the religious Weil, who was primarily writing about submission, selflessness and self-sacrifice, and the political activist Weil, who spent her life practicing techniques of refusal and contesting oppression through organized labour movements and resistance to the Vichy regime. That Weil brought these two together makes her a valuable and constructive resource for kenotic theology, which as I have already suggested, has sometimes been deemed too entangled in the problematic valorization of self-sacrifice and suffering. Weil's mystical theology imagines a way in which a posture of consented servanthood toward one's neighbour might be united with the contestation of contemporary power structures.

Weil's analysis of the way force is wielded and revered was a response to her time and what she saw as gross misuses of power – in the workplace, in the French colonies, and in the political realm where she witnessed the rise of Hitler's totalitarianism. Yet her critique of the worship of force remains relevant, insofar as force continues to be an object of worship, both explicitly and implicitly. This is perhaps most obvious in the political realm, where strongmen continue to be admired and emulated. But the contemporary reckoning with colonialism and its ongoing consequences, as well as the environmental crisis, also requires interrogation into the ways that the pursuit of might and empire have been integral

to subjugating others and to destructive ways of being in the world. Indeed, recent scholars have recognized in Weil a valuable resource for these issues. For example, in Benjamin Davis' *Simone Weil's Political Philosophy: Field Notes from the Margins*, he places Weil in conversation with feminist and decolonial philosophies, arguing that Weil is a valuable interlocutor for critiques of oppression today. Kathryn Lawson, on the other hand, has suggested Weil's philosophy can be appropriated for environmental ethics.

But the religious aspect of Weil's late writings also offers a valuable contribution to these topics, particularly as they are addressed in political theology, and especially in terms of her investigation into the dynamics of force at play within Christianity. Weil's interrogation of the ways that power has operated within Christianity—historically and institutionally—raises the question of how to reckon with its unsettling past and presses for the need to inquire into how force continues to be employed. She presents a warning about the way the Church has supported political expansionism and colonialism and been complicit with unjust regimes, but also intimates how forms of contemporary culture's obsession with might and power has been influenced and informed by a glorification of force within Christianity.

Moreover, Weil points to the contemporary relevance and constructive potential of kenotic and mystical theology as a resource in the face of these issues. Her appeal to mysticism and her emphasis on divine love is not a resignation to a bland or mawkish spirituality that simply soothes the soul through an exclusive focus on individual spirituality, though for Weil the refusal of force does begin with the individual. She does not read mysticism as necessitating a retreat or withdrawal from the world that only

reinforces the social and political status quo, but as a way of developing a greater attention to the world, to the particular afflictions of others, and to the ways that force is deployed to master or subjugate. The selflessness she advocates is not weak or uninvolved, nor is it a spinelessness in the face of others.[298] She articulates her view in a short fragment: "Violence is often necessary, but to my eyes, there is grandeur only in gentleness. (I do not mean by that word anything bland.)."[299] The "gentleness" she advocates requires a daring refusal of power that may require personal sacrifice but that responds to force in a way that disrupts its own logic. As she puts it, there is an overlooked strength and fortitude in the gentleness that opposes force. We can perhaps see this most clearly in her dream of the nurse's project, which confronts the brutality of might with the courageous attentiveness of one who seeks to heal, nourish, and care.

Weil turned to the mystical tradition because she found resources in it for cultivating obedience and detachment from false idols, but also an emphasis on the need to relinquish power and control, developing a posture of radical self-emptying love that she associates with the kenotic hymn. Her mystical theology prioritizes the relinquishment of the self, but

[298] Several feminist scholars have veered away from characterizing mysticism as simply an individual, subjective psychological state that is private and ineffable. Grace Jantzen, for example, has argued that this is a relatively recent understanding that bears little resemblance to historical understandings. She calls into question the assumption that spirituality and social justice are separate, and problematizes how mystical texts have often been domesticated for privatized spirituality, providing ways of coping with life's distresses but doing little to address the conditions themselves. While she acknowledges that the mystical tradition is hardly immune to issues of injustice (such as racism, classism, sexism, and homophobia), there have nevertheless been creative efforts at pushing the boundaries of thought and action toward justice that require attention. See Jantzen, "Feminists, Philosophers, and Mystics," *Hypatia* 9, no. 4 (Autumn 1994): 186-206, and *Power, Gender, and Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). Dorothee Soelle has similarly considered the mystical tradition as a resource for resistance to oppression and violence. Soelle, *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance*, trans. Barbara and Martin Rumschedit (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001).

[299] "*Fragments de lettres*" in *Ecrits historiques et politiques*, 109.

also insists on the need to preserve the other person's ability to consent to their own self-emptying. Returning to one of Weil's last essays, "Are we Struggling for Justice," she again underlines the radical nature of the kenotic hymn and kenosis as a mad love that moves people to think and act in ways that may appear strange. But one who is overtaken by such love cannot help but desire the same free consent for others:

> Men struck by the madness of love need to see the faculty of free consent spreading throughout the 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, the poor wretches. They are mad. Their stomach is upset. They hunger and thirst for justice. ("Are We Struggling for Justice?," 4/OC V.1, 243)

Those who are mad with love suffer from the thought that other human beings serve as intermediaries to someone else's will without ever having consented to it. Human consent is a sacred thing for her; it is what God searches for when God approaches human creatures ("Are We Struggling for Justice?," 2/OC V.1, 242), and it is what Weil believed must be desired and enabled for others. This consent is real only insofar as one is not constrained or under duress and there is a real ability to refuse. It can never be imposed on anyone else, since for Weil, the greatest tragedy is the perpetuation of conditions that do not allow the ability for others to give themselves up freely for others. She insists that submission and obedience, as well as refusal, must be grounded in one's ability to consent.[300]

[300] Weil writes that "rape is a terrible caricature of love from which consent is absent. After rape, oppression is the second horror of human existence. It is a terrible caricature of obedience. Consent is as essential to obedience as it is to love" ("Are we Struggling for Justice," 3).

She returns again to the madness entailed in such love in the same essay, describing the ways it inspires not only bold actions but also smaller gestures that pierce through the ordinary:

> The madness of love draws one to discern and cherish equally, in all human milieux without exception, in all parts of the globe, the fragile earthly possibilities of beauty, of happiness and of fulfilment; to want to preserve them all with an equally religious care; and where they are absent, to want to rekindle tenderly the smallest traces of those which have existed, the smallest seeds of those which can be born." ("Are we Struggling for Justice?," 9/OC V.1, 248-249)

Weil's philosophy of selflessness might seem radical, but she insists that it is cultivated and exercised in the smaller actions of daily life. Just as the highest form of attention is cultivated in school exercises, so the mundane activities of one's daily labour can be a place to learn and embody self-emptying love rather than force.

Weil held herself and others to high and exacting moral standards that at times must have seemed impractical or impossibly difficult, and she continues to make challenging demands of her readers. For example, she was aware that France's withdrawal from the French colonies would carry an economic price, and that resisting military power could entail great personal sacrifice. She recognized that the relinquishment of force might ask something of us, and that it often carries a cost. Yet what is striking about reading her essays and notebooks is that she also impresses upon her reader that she has full confidence that we can live up to the kinds of challenges she believed were necessary, and she offers herself as a companion in the difficult.

To take Weil's idea of decreation seriously is to accept a certain discomfort with its radical plea for selflessness, even to call it into question as an aspiration. It is to agonize with her over questions of sacrifice and servanthood, and to grapple with the radical nature of the kenotic hymn. Decreation remains a challenging call to refuse the worship of force, power, and empire, and to envision an alternative by seeking out images and myths that do not glorify domination as a model to emulate. It requires accepting the risk of being overtaken by the movement of divine love that may fundamentally re-orient one's vision, transform priorities, and alter the course of one's life. She confesses that kenosis entails a madness that upends ordinary ways of thinking and acting, but she maintains that "to the extent to which at any given time there is some madness of love amongst men, to that extent there is some possibility of change in the direction of justice: and no further." ("Are we Struggling for Justice?", 5/OC V.1, 244). For Weil, this means to refuse engaging in the dynamics of force, to ache with hunger for transformation, and to relinquish the self to a mad love for the world.

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