‘As an Emerald is Green.’
Waiting, Poetry and Affliction:
Simone Weil’s Concept of Attention

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Thesis submitted for the Award of

Doctor of Philosophy

School of Theology, Philosophy and Music

Dublin City University

Supervisor

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January 2023

Declaration

I hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for assessment on the programme of study leading to the award of Doctor of Philosophy is entirely my own work, and that I have exercised reasonable care to ensure that the work is original, and does not to the best of my knowledge breach any law of copyright, and has not been taken from the work of others save and to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work.

Signed: …..  I.D.No: 14109921 Date: January 11, 2023

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Acknowledgements

Firstly, I would like to thank my husband, Frank, for his loving, generous and kind support throughout this process. This was very much a family endeavour, and I would like to acknowledge the support of all my family, especially my children Barry and Nancy, and my son-in-law, James.

I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr. Ian Leask, for his support and constant encouragement throughout this process; Dr. Ethna Regan (for that initial push!) and Dr. Patricia Flynn, not to mention all in the School of Theology, Philosophy and Music, under the guidance of Dr. Brad Anderson. I would also like to acknowledge the kindness and encouragement of Dr. Dermot Lane, whom I first encountered on the MA course in Mater Dei. I would like to say a special thank you to all librarians, especially Éilis and Aoife, from my local Co. Laois Library, whose cheery support and practical assistance meant so much to me during pandemic times.

I deeply appreciate the great friendships I have enjoyed over the years, and especially those who supported me in recent times, so to friends old and new – Thank you: Paula O'Flaherty, Karen O'Farrell, Margaret Holden, Dr. David Dunning, the Tuesday Writing Group, NMI Book Club, Kildare.

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Finally, I would like to dedicate this thesis to the memory of:

- my parents, Eileen and Cathal; my aunt Marian, Sr. Rosario Campbell OSU, who first gave me a love for music and for France; and Br. Alberic Turner OCSO, who led me into a deeper understanding of John of the Cross.

And to someone who has recently joined our family:

> **Aila O'Riordan** who was born during the writing of this thesis, had such a hard fight on her hands at the beginning, and who now lights up all our lives.

Le gach dea-ghuí agus beannachtaí ó do Mhamó

Abstract

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‘As an Emerald is Green.’

Waiting, Poetry and Affliction: Simone Weil’s Concept of Attention

This research thesis explores the concept of attention as outlined and practised in the life of Simone Weil (1909-1943), a French woman variously described as a philosopher, mystic and activist yet someone who eludes categorisation or systematisation. It outlines the background to her life in a France between two world wars, and seeks to situate her within the context of the Christianity she claimed as her cultural backdrop. It explores the concept of attention as both a spiritual exercise and a practice in the life of Weil, something that then evolved into a core principle of her thinking. The central question here is the age-old one, harking back to ancient philosophy, concerning the living of a good life, particularly within the context of a lifelong acquaintanceship with Weil’s work. As this study examines Weil’s ideas on reading, it also interrogates how she is read, particularly by poets today, with a view to assessing her influence. Weil was a writer who loved poetry and wrote some herself. Poetry and the recitation of prayers played an important role in her mystical experiences. The role of affliction in her mysticism and in her life is important and it will be seen how her stance in the face of affliction is something that marks her thinking. The concept of attention today incorporates issues around the commodification of the attention span, as well as its deficits. This study examines some of these issues and draws forth from the life and work of Simone Weil a more expanded, practical, and reflective understanding of the idea of attention.

Introduction

"Attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity,"[1]

For Simone Weil, attention is all encompassing. It involves the whole person, at the political, social and historical levels, as well as the cultural, personal and spiritual levels. There is an energy contained within attention, though it also sits and waits, whilst being entirely focussed on the other. Though it waits, this attention of Weil's pulsates with a quiet energy. Energy is expended in the reading of a situation and in the listening required on the part of the person paying attention. For Simone Weil, the thinking involved here has a focus: that focus is always on that which is real. Attention involves listening and ultimately, brings us to love. Weil speaks of love of neighbour and describes the attention given by someone to another human being, who is lying in a ditch, bleeding and naked. Others have passed by and do not even notice. Then someone possessed of "human personality" stops and "turns his attention toward it"; this action of turning sets in motion the compassionate actions that will eventually assist the person.[2] For Weil, though attention is creative, at the moment of engagement, in effect, it is a renunciation. The person accepts diminishment by "concentrating on an expenditure of energy, which will not extend his own power but will only give existence to a being other than himself, who will exist independently of him."[3]

So for Weil attention is pro-active, it is an energy and it is creative; it requires generosity and a focus on the other, particularly the suffering other and at its heart, it is about love. How Simone Weil sees her world, or reads her world, will be explored here as an aspect of this creative attention.as will the landscape of affliction to which she pays particular attention, as this involves love of one's neighbour. For Simone Weil, sitting with a question was important, but so was the process of discerning the answer. This discernment involved the application of the theory to practice at all times. Questions around the life of workers in a factory would entail working in factories herself for a year in order to comprehend the situation fully. A visit to Germany in 1932 was required to learn more about the Communist Party, a visit which resulted in a complete loss of respect for that party on her part. The questioning meant nothing if it did not result in the betterment of a situation, or the possibility

[1] Simone Pétrement *Simone Weil* trans. Raymond Rosenthal (London & Oxford: Mowbrays, 1976) p.462.
[2] Simone Weil *Waiting for God* trans. Emma Craufurd (New York London Toronto Sydney New Delhi Auckland: HarperPerennial 2009), p.91. Hereafter referred to as Weil *WG* 91.
[3] Ibid. p. 91.

of it, for the greater good. In all of this, it is clear that Weil was a thinker and a writer who was profoundly engaged with her world. That engagement may not always have made sense to those with whom she worked and lived, but it was there in its searing simplicity. As Weil could not look away and stared into the heart of suffering, others could not bear her intensity.

Weil's descriptions of attention assumed a more profound meaning for her after her own mystical experiences. How these experiences resonate with others, particularly in the realm of poetry, will be examined here too. The issue of attention is to the fore today due to the growth of technology, particularly that of information technology. This is part of our reality, affecting not just our personal lives, but that of our neighbour, both nationally and globally. As Simone Weil sees attention as possessing an energy and indeed creativity, the impact on our attention today, particularly from the information technology sector, and the commodification of every second of our attention, is something that cannot be ignored in the light of Weil's political and social writings. Simone Weil had a short, though intense life, an outline of which follows.

Simone Weil – A Short Life

Simone Weil was a French woman, whose family were of Jewish origin, though her parents were agnostic and she believed herself to be part of a wider Christian tradition in France. Her life was bookended by two world wars and she has been variously described as a mystic, a philosopher, a theologian, and an activist. Her daily practice was her writing. She died in England, in a sanatorium she had just been moved to from London in order to treat her tuberculosis; her grave is situated in a quiet corner of a cemetery in Ashford, Kent, a flat stone marking the spot, giving her name and dates:

Simone Weil

3 Février 1909 24 Août 1943

Other details were added in later years on an additional slab, to do with her joining the French Provisional Government in London and, as well as stating that she is one of the "foremost modern philosophers." As with her life, further details were added much later to her grave, as she and her work became more known.

Simone Adolphine Weil was born in 1909, in Parish, to Selma (née Saloméa Reinherz) Weil and Dr. Bernard Weil, who had a thriving medical practice. Weil's mother was of Russian

Jewish origin. Her family had to leave Russia during the pogroms of 1880. Selma's mother lived with her daughter and her family until she died. Dr. Bernard Weil also came from a Jewish merchant family, who had lived previously in Strasbourg. Dr. Weil was secularist, and did not discuss his Jewish roots. Sylvie Weil, Simone's niece, contends that whilst the family were indeed cosmopolitan, cultured and liberal people, it did not prevent them, in their wider family, from attending synagogue occasionally and wishing to have family ceremonies marked within the Jewish tradition. Sylvie Weil is "stupefied" by some scholarly articles pertaining to ascribe Simone's rejection of everything Jewish to traumatic experiences with her paternal grandmother. Sylvie Weil would ascribe these conjectures to the interviews given by her maternal grandmother, which were taken at face value. There was indeed real enmity between Selma and her mother-in-law.[4] How much of this enmity could be ascribed to personality clashes and how much to a desire to leave aside their ancestry on Selma's part is not one that can be adjudicated upon here. It is sufficient to say that Sylvie Weil's comments shed further light on the issue of her aunt Simone's perceived anti-Semitism.

Simone Weil had one brother, André, who was a mathematical genius. As children, they conversed in Greek, read widely and excluded many from their company as their allusions and games were way beyond their years. Simone attended Lycée Henry-IV in 1925, becoming a pupil of Alain (Émile-Auguste Chartier), whose philosophy and training were to have a great impact on her. During her time at the École Normale Supérieure, Weil participated in workers' education and in fighting for the rights of workers through her syndicalist activities. She was among the first women to be allowed entry into the École Normale Supérieure. Having completed her studies she worked as a philosophy teacher from 1931 until 1935, in various postings in Le Puy, Auxerre and Roanne; she also visited Germany during this time, in 1932, the better to understand the rise of Nazism, and the conditions which fostered it. In 1934, Weil decided to do factory work, again, for greater understanding, this time of the lot of female workers in such working environments; she had some idea that there would be great camaraderie among the workforce, a real sense of community. Instead she found that the grinding, relentless work deprived the workers of time to think and the boredom eroded their very ability to think. It was during this factory work that she felt "the affliction of others entered into my flesh and my soul."[5] Her factory work had a severe impact on her health and her parents stepped in to take care of her. A visit to

[4] Sylvie Weil *At Home with André and Simone Weil* trans. Benjamin Ivry (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern Press, 2010) pp. 42-44; also pp. 77-91.
[5] Weil *WG* p. 25.

Portugal provided her with the first of her mystical experiences, in a small fishing village, where she came to believe that Christianity was the religion of slaves, and moreover, that this included her.

In 1936, she joined the anarchist faction in the Spanish Civil War in 1936, becoming a member of the Durruti Column. Being such a bad shot that her comrades would not allow her come with them on expeditions, the short-sighted and clumsy Weil eventually tripped over a pot of boiling oil one day, burning her leg severely in the process. Her parents once again came to the rescue and she left Spain, accompanied by them, to recuperate. It is at this time that she visited Assisi, where she had the second of her significant mystical experiences, being brought to her knees for the first time in her life. The following year, at Easter, she visited the Benedictine Abbey of Solesmes, where she had another experience of a mystical nature, this time declaring that "Christ himself came down and took possession of me."[6] In arguing about the "insolubility of the problem of God"[7] Weil had never imagined the possibility of an encounter between a human being and God. Now she had experienced it for herself. "I only felt in the midst of my suffering the presence of a love."[8]

Simone Weil continued writing, sometimes all day. She wrote about the approach of war among other things. In June of 1940, she and her family left Paris for Marseilles. Here she encountered Fr. Perrin OP and worked with Gustave Thibon, a Catholic farmer on his, and neighbouring, farms. In 1942 Simone accompanied her parents to the United States but returned to Europe, this time to London, in November. Her intention was always to partake in the resistance. She was employed by the Free French and wrote constantly at this time. In April of 1943, Weil was admitted to the Middlesex Hospital in April, having been found in a state of collapse in her London room. She was diagnosed with tuberculosis and transferred to the sanatorium in Ashford, where she died shortly after on August 24. She had refused to eat any more than the rations the soldiers at the front were receiving, thus ruling out one of her treatments, a good diet of healthy food. The coroner ruled her death as suicide, as she was deemed to have contributed to her death by her actions.

As with so much to do with Weil, recognition of her life and work came posthumously. Weil left behind voluminous notebooks, as well as her articles and some manuscripts. Her own definition of being a philosopher is the one which this study holds as pivotal, as it contains

[6] Weil *WG* p.27.
[7] Ibid. p.27.
[8] Ibid. p. 27.

within it the idea of attention, and this attention is not only an exercise, but it is an intense, lifelong one. Weil wrote in her notebooks whilst living in London that the "proper method of philosophy consists in clearly conceiving the insoluble problems in all their insolubility and then in simply contemplating them, fixedly and tirelessly, year after year, without any hope, patiently waiting."[9] As this was written in the last year of her life, it seems reasonable to take it as a more considered opinion, or at least a deeply felt one. To spend years working through something is not an attractive proposition for most of us. We want results. Weil however, insists on contemplating them inexhaustibly, waiting, even waiting without hope. The contemplation here suggests a sitting-with, a prayerful pondering, though a pondering that could also be painful, given that the problems being contemplated are insoluble. She suggests that given this definition, there are few philosophers, if any at all. She continues to elaborate on the process she envisages by suggesting that the human faculties of intelligence, will, and human love need to come up against a limit, that is, a limit or a threshold that cannot be crossed "without turning away and without knowing what he wants, in fixed, unwavering attention."[10] It is this "fixed, unwavering attention" that is being explored here. This phrase of Weil's suggests a disciplined, even austere stance. This stance becomes important in Weil's writing when it encounters affliction as one of the "insoluble problems."

Weil is someone many people encounter when they are college students or as part of a youthful exploration of ideas and ideals. This is particularly so in America, where Weil has been popular on college curricula for many decades. I first encountered Simone Weil as an older teenager, courtesy of Thomas Merton and later in the poetry of Cork poet Seán Dunne.[11] It is in the writings of contemporary Americans, particularly female writers such as Maggie Nelson, Siri Hustvedt, Susan Sontag and Christy Wampole, among others, that one sees the more widespread influence of Weil. She is someone they have read in college or are familiar with from more general reading. Simone Weil's personal story attracts, and her thinking then draws people in further. Whilst for many thinkers of renown, their personal story remains in the background, for Weil, there are many issues that still attract both the analysis of psychoanalysis and of history.

[9] Simone Weil *First and Last Notebooks* trans. Richard Rees (Eugene, Oregon: WIPF & STOCK, 2015) p. 335 Hereafter referred to as Weil *FLN*, and the page numbers.
[10] Ibid. p. 335. Simone Weil's exclusive use of he/him to stand for all of humanity e.g. "mankind" etc., is noted here. I will be quoting her exactly as she wrote, with the understanding that this would not be acceptable today.
[11] Seán Dunne *Time and the Island* (Oldcastle, Co. Meath: Gallery Books, 1996). Dunne's poem on Weil in this collection is 'Simone Weil, 1909-1940' (*sic*), p. 44.

Encountering the life and work of Simone Weil through her influential presence in another's life is not an unusual occurrence, what can be surprising is the mixture of awed reverence coupled with frustration with which some speak of her. She is quoted often in the fields of philosophy and theology, as well as in fiction and non-fiction today. Whether she fascinates or appals – and this may happen in equal measure within the same response – she has the ability to hold one's attention and to instigate debate. Writers and thinkers such as Thomas Merton, Pope Paul the Sixth, Séamus Heaney, George Steiner, Czeslaw Milosz and Albert Camus have been influenced by her. Poets such as Fanny Howe, Jorie Graham, Stephanie Strickland, Anne Carson, Edmund Hirsch have wrestled with her ideas; even the world of punk rock has been touched by Weil – punk rocker and poet, Patti Smith, has written of her encounters with the French woman. Her appeal is broadly based.

Simone Weil's life has its fascinating aspects, and there is a temptation towards hagiography or psychoanalysis bound up in that fascination. It is also tempting, as it was for me, to feel that she is a solid companion standing shoulder to shoulder on the outside of so many institutions, especially the Catholic Church. Unfortunately, Weil's resistance to any form of a *collectivité* might leave one standing alone eventually. Her thinking shifted as her search for truth continued apace. This entailed living a life that was not bound by the ordinary compromises, or groundings, that many a life contains. Weil lived an austere life by choice, which could be perceived as immature in many ways, given that her parents could step in to provide whatever grounding or support was necessary from time to time. She died at a young age, a death brought about by her own lack of self-care. For someone who lived out their philosophy of life as intentionally as Weil, her legacy is complicated further by the fact that her writing was not organised for publication by herself, with Gustave Thibon compiling and editing *Gravity and Grace*, and Fr. Perrin compiling what became *Waiting for God*.

Most of Weil's work has been published posthumously and initially in edited form. This editing has affected how she has been read and understood in the years since her death. Initial decisions made in compiling her work tended to emphasise the Catholic aspects of her writing. A more complex picture has been emerging over the years since more of her writings have been made available. Since Weil spans so many subjects and domains in her writing, from philosophy to politics to mythology, to name but a few, reading her is a complex and involved endeavour, as well as which, she wrote little for publication during her life, aside from articles in smaller political and trade union journals. How she reads her world and the

text, and how she and her writings are read and interpreted, is at the heart of this study, as is the response to her life and work, particularly among poets. Mention has already been made of the energy of Weil's attention and it is in the response of poets that we may see reflected the more visceral aspect of her life and work. How she read informed her practice and her exercise of attention, which included her spirituality, as well as her writing itself. I am particularly interested in this study in her more popular appeal and will be using her work in translation in the main.[12] The concept of attention is at the centre of her thinking and some of the issues relating to attention today will be explored in this study as well, particularly as they pertain to information technology, something which has grown exponentially over the past few decades.

Chapter One of this study outlines the backdrop to the life of Simone Weil, including an outline of the background in France against which Weil was brought up and worked. As someone for whom reading the text and reading the world was an exercise in unifying them both with integrity, it is important to outline some of the issues surrounding her writings, and their presentation to the world for reading. It will also highlight some of those who influenced her and their place within that context, as well as focussing on some of the thinking that formed the life and work of Weil. Though Weil appears to be unique in many ways and outside her own time in some ways, she has her context and her personal history, a history she considered to be within the Christian context. This chapter also examines a recent contribution to the issue of Weil's Gnosticism, as well as the development of her writing as a spiritual exercise. Weil's relationship with her Jewish ancestry will also be explored in this chapter. What is perceived as her antipathy towards Judaism is a complex issue and forms part of the tapestry of her life.

Chapter Two will explore her concept of reading, of both the text and the world. This entails the **practice** of attention, and its development in Weil's life and work. The linking of force, necessity and nature will also be examined, with Weil's specific essay on reading examined as an essential element. As with other topics in Weil's thinking, the concept of reading remains 'unfinished'.

In **Chapter Three**, interrogating the initial question of Weil's core concept of attention, particularly with regard to its development, meaning and place in her life and her work, a

[12] On another note, Simone Weil almost always used the male pronoun when speaking in general terms: for example, *mankind*, *he/his*, *man.* In order not to disrupt the flow of her work, I have adhered to her words exactly when quoting her work directly.

characteristic, or principle, emerged that I believe to be germane to all Weil's thinking, and that is the *maintenance of attention*, or attentiveness, in the face of affliction. The grounding point around which her life revolved was the concept of attention. In this chapter, this stance of attentiveness will be explored with particular reference to her later years. After her mystical experiences in particular, Weil began to read John of the Cross, among others. His description of the dark night of the soul seemed to resonate strongly with her. These various experiences serve as the grounding of Weil's theology of suffering and the Cross. Weil's theology of the Cross is infused with this solid and unflinching stance of attentiveness that is unique to her.

Chapter Four explores how others have read Weil, particularly the reception of her work among poets and writers. Weil believed in the power of poetry, in its essential search for truth. For Simone Weil, writing was an exercise, even a spiritual one. Writing poetry was part of that exercise, and it was something she did from an early age, like many an aspiring writer. The arts in general were important to her. In an early notebook, she wrote: "Education ought to include nothing except art – giving a much larger place to dance, song, drawing … Poetry later still. As for the art of writing, it ought to be developed *only* in relation to the other disciplines."[13] Following the exploration of her own reading, and her position on affliction in earlier chapters, a question began to emerge around her more general appeal and the reception of her work, particularly in the artistic world. Weil wanted to be a poet and wrote some herself. She is oft-quoted, though it is almost always to do with attention and prayer. As her work gains more traction, especially in these conflict-ridden times, the aspect of her work to do with conflict and with its attendant issues of mass displacement, or *uprootedness*,[14] she has become particularly significant. For this study, a more extensive exploration seemed to be called for in order to assess her importance on a popular level, particularly in the world of poetry. In attempting to assess the influence of her work on poets and writers today, this chapter examines the work of some poets, mainly American, who cite Weil as an influence.

One cannot read Simone Weil on attention without raising the issue of attention today, both in personal terms, with regard to information technology, and to the wider cultural, social and

[13] Weil *FLN* p. 46.

[14] Uprootedness is the term of Weil's used to signify the process whereby people are uprooted after military conquest, with greater or lesser degrees of impact, depending on how the conquerors integrate themselves anew and put down their own roots eventually. This is the subject of her book *The Need for Roots* (London and New York: Ark Paperbacks, 1987), hereafter referred to as Weil *NR.*

political implications of that particular technology. **Chapter Four** explores some of the issues surrounding technology, particularly within the context of the writer and the creative process. **Chapter Five** draws together the conclusions to be drawn from the study. It is hoped that this thesis will contribute to the on-going assessment and reassessment of a major intellectual and spiritual figure, and show the continuing significance of her singular achievement.

1 CHAPTER ONE: Simone Weil's Christian backdrop – a variegated and shadowed spirituality

1.1 Introduction

> "I might say that I was born, I grew up, and I always remained within the Christian inspiration. While the very name of God had no part in my thoughts, with regard to the problems of this world and this life I shared the Christian conception in an explicit and rigorous manner, with the most specific notions it involves."[1]

Thus did Simone Weil declare in her "Spiritual Autobiography", a viewpoint she maintained throughout her life. In an effort to contextualise these words, this chapter will outline some of what Weil terms her "Christian inspiration", all the while remembering that her thinking was ever idiosyncratic and incorporated many other traditions as well. That she knew of Sertillanges, for example, and was familiar with the idea of spiritual exercises is true. Weil was committed to her writing as not just a daily practice, but also a spiritual exercise as the years went by. As will be seen below, her Christianity assumed more gnostic elements and it evolved into its own particular model, albeit within the wider French Spiritualist tradition. This needs to be remembered in any assessment of Weil's place within the Christian tradition. Simone Weil's relationship with the tradition into which she was born, albeit an agnostic one in the case of her parents, has been problematic. It is possible that she simply did not make any connection at all with the Judaism of her ancestors, and of her wider family. It may have been the case that she simply did not perceive there to be any connection in her own life with Judaism. However, given the times in which she lived, it is difficult to see how her attitude towards Judaism was not a matter of a denial or suppression of her ancestry as opposed to the lack of connection that she claimed. A brief examination of this aspect of Weil's background will be included at the end of this chapter. It is hoped to sketch out the background to Weil's life and thinking in this chapter, both as she declared it herself, and with the addition of some cultural and historical background.

[1] Weil *WG* p. 22.

1.2 France - Early Twentieth Century culture and spirituality: A brief background

The Catholic spirituality that flourished in Simone Weil's time was more devotional than the spirituality of today, though there was an additional element to French Catholic spirituality. A particular scenario evolved during the interwar years that galvanized a new humanism within the Catholic Church. After World War I, and the return of peace, "the Catholic laity plunged into an associational activism of unprecedented proportion,"[2] according to Philip Nord. Though this has been labelled 'ghetto Catholicism', Nord believes that it was truly innovative, and though there has been criticism of the authoritarian leanings of the Catholic Church in France in those interwar years, there was also the experience of the Resistance experience, which highlighted Christian democratic principles.

This period was also the time of what Nord calls, "independent Catholic theologians"[3] such as Gabriel Marcel, Teilhard de Chardin and Jacques Maritain, who were able to operate outside the hierarchical structures, not always to the approval of those within them. There were also writers and theologians within the priesthood, who were read more widely within intellectual circles than might be the case in other countries, for example Sertillagnes. Thomas Merton knew of Père A. G. Sertillanges, and had mentioned his book *La Vie Intellectuelle* in his journals.[4]

Simone Weil also mentions Sertillanges, and knew of his work. In an essay entitled "L'Avenir de la Science"[5] "Scientism – A Review",[6] in which she reviewed a book he co-authored. In this review of a book which is against scientism, and which she highlights at once as being of Catholic inspiration, Weil comments upon the 1937 Exhibition as a

[2] Philip Nord 'Catholic Culture in Interwar France', *French Politics, Culture and Society* 21.3 (Fall 2003) pp. 1-20, (p.1).
[3] Nord p. 4.
[4] Thomas Merton *Entering the Silence Becoming a Monk and Writer The Journals of Thomas Merton Vol. 2 1941-1952* ed. Jonathan Mondaldo (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1996, p. 280. This journal entry was made in 1949, on Feb. 13. Merton was commenting on Sertillanges' book *La Vie Intellectuelle: Son Esprit, Ses Conditions Ses Methodes* (Paris: La Revue des Jeunes, 1944). Merton notes about *La Vie Intellectuelle* that "it would be a nice feat to prove that it is not diametrically opposed to St. John of the Cross. I bet no one can do it. Maybe Jacques Maritain can see how the two can be reconciled." He went on to note that the two of them could now discuss it since Sertillanges had died the previous year – 1948 – on the Feast of St. Anne.
[5] "L'Avenir de la Science" A review of *L'Avenir de la Science* by Louis de Broglie, André Thérive, Raymond Charmet, Pierre Devaus, Daniel-Rops and the Rev. Père Sertillanges (Paris: Plon, collection 'Présences', 1941). Weil's article was published in the *Cahiers du Sud*, No. 245, April 1942, under the pseudonym 'Emile Novis'.
[6] "Scientism – A Review" in *On Science, Necessity and the love of God* ed. and trans. Richard Rees (London, New York Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1968) pps. 201; pp. 65-70, hereafter referred to Weil *SNL*

manifestation of contemporary scientism, and declared that it was fitting that the Church should relegate the "Palace of Discovery to its proper place in relation to the Church."[7] She thought that Sertillanges' essay was "full of good sense", especially as he points out that "no man of talent has ever been altogether a scientist, because the limitations of science are obvious."[8] Whilst she takes issue with him on his point about the reign of the Spirit only beginning when man has made the material world entirely subject to him, she is in agreement with much of what he says. Sertillanges and his co-authors were regarded by Weil with some respect and worthy of review.

1.3 Sertillanges – Christianising Humanity

It is worth pausing to discuss the life and work of Sertillanges, as he reflects a France that was Catholic, and perhaps a more engaged Catholicism than would have been the case in, for example, Ireland. Antonin Gilbert Sertillanges (1863-1948) was a part of the Dominican religious order, as was Fr. Joseph-Marie Perrin, Weil's confidant and friend towards the end of her life. Sertillanges was respected both as a philosopher and a spiritual writer. He is being highlighted here because he was a popular writer as well, translating his thinking into popular guides for those interested in the spiritual life. As this study is focussing particularly on how Weil as a popular figure culturally, as well as spiritually, Sertillanges serves to highlight the greater public engagement many French theologians and writers had with a broader public audience. Sertillanges' area of study was centred on Thomas Aquinas, particularly in the area of the moral life, and he wrote on Bergson, Claude Bernard and Pascal. His more popular writings include a book on the intellectual life, first published in 1920, which included references which were broad and liberal, and his recommendations therein on how to live a good intellectual life are replete with common sense, balance and clear guidelines.[9] Indeed, setting aside some language that to modern ears might sound archaic, and some attitudes to women that mark him particularly and peculiarly of his time, parts of this popular work could stand up easily against many of the more modern guides on how to be creative and productive, with or without the spiritual input. His suggestions are practical and are to do with preparation for work, which includes reading, the management of memory and notes. He also deals with the issue of creative work, and the balance between the essence of the person

[7] Weil "Scientism – A Review" p. 65.
[8] Ibid. p. 66.
[9] A.D. Sertillanges O.P. trans. Mary Ryan *The Intellectual Life its Spirit, Conditions, Methods* (Cork: The Mercier Press Limited, 1946).

and the person as worker. These are themes echoed by Weil throughout her writing, particularly those relating to the role of work, and physical work in particular.

At the beginning of his book, Sertillanges discusses what he terms as "Christianised humanity", which he says is "made up of various personalities no one of which can refuse to function without impoverishing the group and without depriving the eternal Christ of a part of His Kingdom."[10] Simone Weil always considered herself a Christian, or at least coming from a culture and a society based on Christian principles, and the idea of a humanity that has been Christianised over the centuries would concur with her views. Sertillanges encourages those pursuing the intellectual life to give from the heart "if truth is to give itself to us. Truth serves only its slaves."[11] The idea of being slaves in one's religious life is threaded throughout the work of Weil, and I am not suggesting here that Sertillanges and his work would have been a major influence on Weil; rather is it the case that he was part of a cultural and spiritual backdrop to her life, which Weil always painted as Christian, and even Catholic. As will be seen later in this study, the role of the Cross is fundamental to Weil's theology. This piece from Sertillanges finds clear echoes in Weil's thinking, in terms of the life of the Christian being grounded in reality, particularly the reality of the Cross:

> A Christian worker should live constantly in the universal, in history. Since he lives with Jesus Christ he cannot separate times, nor men, from Him. Real life is a life in common, an immense family life with charity for its law; if study is to be an act of life, not an art pursued for art's sake and an appropriation of mere abstractions, it must submit to be governed by this law of oneness of heart. "We pray before the crucifix" says Gratry, - we must also work before the crucifix, - "but the true cross is not isolated from the earth."[12]

In his article, Philip Nord cites the presence of a Catholic culture within the arts, with people like George Bernanos, Paul Claudel and Francois Mauriac being amongst the premier exponents of this artistic movement. These are people whose works Simone Weil would have known well and she corresponded with Bernanos as an admirer of his work. It is to him that she makes the comment about not being a Catholic, though "nothing that is Catholic, nothing that is Christian, has ever seemed alien to me.[13] She made a similar comment in what has become known as her "Spiritual Autobiography"

[10] Sertillanges p. 14.
[11] Ibid. p. 14.
[12] Ibid. p. 19.
[13] Simone Weil *Seventy Letters* trans. Richard Rees (Eugene, Oregon: WIPF & STOCK, 2018) p.105. Hereafter referred to as Weil *SL*.

> I knew quite well that my conception of life was Christian. That is why it never occurred to me that I could enter the Christian community. I had the idea that I was born inside. But to add dogma to this conception of life, without being forced to do so by indisputable evidence, would have seemed to me like a lack of honesty.[14]

With this cultural and artistic backdrop, it is easier to comprehend how Weil could describe herself as always being a Christian, or at least steeped in Christian culture. Though the Catholic Church in the inter-war period was changing in ways that might have attracted her, the deeper philosophical and theological issues were always at the heart of her disagreement with it, such as *anathema sit*, and as such, it is difficult to imagine how she could ever have been persuaded to enter the church. Weil's philosophical perspective was a major influence on her remaining at the edge of the Catholic Church: in discussing the supernatural effects of the sacraments, causality and the will of God, she stated "A philosophical clean-up of the Catholic religion has never been undertaken. In order to do so, it would be necessary to be at once inside *and* outside."[15] Nord sums up with regard to France thus:

> France was rotten with individualism; the Church itself had grown old, stodgy in its tastes and forms of piety. Catholic activists were determined to cause a fresh wind to blow, an apostolic wind that would re-energize the faithful and spur them to a conquest of the world. This was the Catholic answer to the problems of the interwar decades, and believers did not hesitate to label it a superior form of humanism. Indeed, it is remarkable how often the words "humanism" and "human" crop up in the Catholic discourse of the period.[16]

This "superior form of humanism" made Catholicism in France into a Catholicism of the ghetto and though it " styled itself as apolitical and inward-looking", there was no mistaking that it was innovative, though it has been criticised as well for being authoritarian, and its involvement with the Vichy government is complex, to say the least.[17]

Nord also believes that all of this did indeed permeate and influence the wider national community, citing the foundation of the *Parti Démocrate Populaire* in 1924, by Catholics of a Christian-Democratic persuasion.[18] Weil's Christian or Catholic, France had many liberal and political aspects to it.

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[14] Weil *WG* p.24.
[15] Simone Weil *The Notebooks of Simone Weil* trans. Arthur Wills (New York: Routledge, 2004) p. 314. Hereafter referred to as Weil *NB.*
[16] Nord, p. 9.
[17] Nord, .p.1.
[18] Nord. p. 10.

Situating Simone Weil is a complex task, and as the backdrop to her life has been explored above, it is apposite to examine a recent study by Simone Kotva on how Weil may be situated within the French Spiritualist tradition.

1.4 Simone Weil, the Occult and the French Spiritualist Tradition

Amid the discussion today on the turn to cultural analysis by theologians, and indeed those from other disciplines, the possibility of the blurring of lines between culture and theology, and indeed between culture, philosophy and theology, is all too evident. The more a scholar of any of these disciplines emphasises what divides them, the more they might appear to be demonstrating their own particular discipline's superiority over the others. Simone Weil was very much a part of her time, and of her culture – and in another way, she stood apart. This is partly due to her personality, and partly due to her training. She was moulded intellectually and spiritually in a Roman Catholic France, with an intellectual tradition that brought forth thinkers such as Marcel, Sertillanges, and Perrin. There are other traditions within France that merit consideration, and one of these is the Spiritualist Tradition, of which recent scholarship deems Weil a member. The issue of Weil's Gnosticism and situating her within the occult tradition is also considered.

Varied interpretations based on various disciplines, can lead to obfuscation of a discussion or an exploration, and leave more questions. Simone Kotva cites Weil's indebtedness to and lineage from thinkers such as Maine de Biran, Henri Bergson, Félix Ravisson and Alain (Émile Chartier, Weil's teacher. Kotva explores the French spiritualist philosophy in order to divine a new theory of spiritual exercise something she hopes could check the balance between the effort on the part of philosophy, and of grace on the part of theology. In her most recent book,[19] Kotva examines the role of spiritual practice within the context of this particular French tradition. In this interdisciplinary exploration, she wants to bring a new understanding of how philosophy today can benefit from a new understanding of the spiritual life. The idea of spiritual exercise usually brings the Ignatian tradition to mind, and the ancient philosophies. Kotva's understanding opens up new critical potential within the realm of contemplative practice. Chapter Two in this study will explore Weil's idea of reading, particularly as the foundation of her spiritual practice.

[19] Simone Kotva *Effort and Grace On The Spiritual Exercise of Philosophy* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020).

Kotva's study seeks to situate Weil in such a way that both philosophers and theologians alike can understand afresh how the spiritual life can be part of a philosophical conversation today. Before discussing Weil in the context of the French Spiritualist movement, Kotva's work on Weil's standing as a philosopher of the occult, bears some consideration. In this earlier article, Kotva has drawn together some interesting perspectives on Simone Weil as an occult philosopher, as well as a philosopher of the occult.

1.4.1 Simone Weil and the Occult

In her article "The Occult Mind of Simone Weil",[20] Simone Kotva argues that Weil's interest in occult subjects such as Gnosticism was not "an eccentric sideline to an otherwise 'Christian' mysticism but emerged necessarily out of her philosophical method."[21] Kotva believes that Simone Weil's thought needs to be interpreted as a search for lost knowledge and quotes one of Weil's letters to Déodat Roché, where Weil expresses a longing for a time such as "those great epochs which favoured the kind of spiritual life of which all that is most precious in science and art is no more than a somewhat imperfect reflection."[22] This idea of situating Weil as a searcher for lost knowledge is a particularly apposite one for today, where being a searcher in today's climes, gives permission to go beyond one's own tradition, and then returning, or not, as the case may be, with new treasures to enhance what was already given in one's own treasure chest. This ability to step beyond what is one's tradition, or culture, is something that marks Weil out, at least in her intentionality. In listening to Weil describe her interest in and passion for the Cathars, it is possible to map this journey for Simone Weil, though it is not an undisputed one.

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[20] Simone Kotva "The Occult Mind of Simone Weil" *Philosophical Investigations* 43.1 (2 January-April 2020), pp. 122-144. Kotva points out in a note in this article (N. 2, p. 123) that she uses the term "'occultism' more or less synonomously with concepts like 'esotericism', 'Hermeticism', 'Gnosticism' ('Catharism') and 'the Mysteries'". She is adhering to the thought of Christopher Lehrich, in "exploring the mode of address that develops when writers present true knowledge as that which is concealed (*occultas*) and set apart for an inner circle of initiates." (N. 2, p. 123).

[21] Kotva "Occult Mind" p. 122

[22] Kotva "Occult Mind" p. 122; Letter from Simone Weil *Seventy Letters,* ed. and trans. Richard Rees (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 131 (to Déodat Roché, 23 January 1941). It is noteworthy that much of the commentary on Weil's attitude towards the Cathars, is based on the relationship between Roché and Weil. Weil also wrote articles on the Cathars for the *Cahiers du Sud* in 1943. These were *L'Agonie d'une civilisation vue à travers un poéme épique and En quoi consiste l'inspiration occitanienne?* They are published in English under the titles (respectively) *A Medieval Epic Poem* and *The Romanesque Renaissance* in Simone Weil *Selected Essays 1934-1943* trans. Richard Rees (Eugene, Oregon: WIPF & STOCK, 2015 pp. 35-43 and 44-54. The particular issue of *Cahiers du sud* for which Weil wrote these articles, focussed on the Cathars as a twelfth-century civilisation, with a linguistic rather than a territorial unity, and which covered areas of the west and south of France and some of Spain, which became known as Languedoc.

This particular letter outlines Weil's attitude to and interest in the Cathars. She declares her great attraction to them, though not knowing very much about them. One of her main reasons for liking them is their view on the Old Testament, and she shares with Roché the opinion that "the worship of power caused the Hebrews to lose the idea of good and evil,"[23] Weil felt that Christianity's ranking of these texts as sacred, kept her away from it as a religion, because the stories in these texts were "so full of pitiless cruelty".[24]

It is worth noting here that Weil uses this letter to comment with some sharp clarity on her views not just on Catharism, but on the Old Testament, the Roman Empire and the Papacy. She claims that "Catharism was the last living expression in Europe of pre-Roman antiquity."[25] She held that before the Roman conquests the Mediterranean and Near East countries were part of a civilisation, not a homogeneous one, but rather a continuous one, and that "one and the same thought inhabited all its best minds and was expressed in various forms in the mysteries and the initiatory sects of Egypt, Thrace, Greece, and Persia, and that the works of Plato are the most perfect written expression which we possess of that thought."[26] As Kotva also notes, Weil did indeed declare in this letter that because of the scarcity of texts, it is impossible to prove this point. However, it is still the case that this belief in the mysterious, and in the mysteries, in the religion of the Cathars underpinned Weil's thought. Further perusal of this letter reveals Weil going on to aver letter that the religious and philosophical traditions of the countries Plato knew were "merged in one single stream of thought. It is from this thought that Christianity issued: but only the Gnostics, Manichaeans, and Cathars seem to have kept really faithful to it."[27] For Weil, they were the only ones who escaped the "coarseness of mind and baseness of heart" which characterised the territories they came to dominate, and which still in Weil's time "compose the atmosphere of Europe."[28] To say that these statements are sweeping is not perhaps the greatest of understatements, but it comes close. The idea of the searing damage carried out by the Roman conquests never left its central position in Weil's thinking, and this fact, coupled with her understanding in particular of Catharism, is something that needs to be confronted when studying Weil. Her thoughts on attention, spiritual exercise and the role of philosophy and religion need to be read with this context in mind.

[23] Weil *SL p. 129*
[24] Weil *SL* p. 129
[25] Weil *SL* p. 130
[26] Weil *SL* p. 130.
[27] Weil *SL* p. 130.
[28] Weil *SL* p. 130.

For Simone Weil also declares in this letter that she believes Catharism to be a religion and not just a philosophy. By this she means that around the area of Toulouse in the 12th century, "the highest thought dwelt within a whole human environment and not only in the minds of a certain number of individuals."[29] For Weil, this signifies the difference between religion and philosophy, as long as the environment cited does not become dogmatic. Though she calls these statements "rambling reflections" and they are in the form of a letter, yet the insight they give to Weil's background thinking is of great interest. Her consideration of what type of environment she considers as human, is one that is open to the world around it, that interacts with the society in which it is embedded, and is in contact with the whole of it "and not simply a closed circle of disciples around a master."[30] When such an environment is not to be found, a superior mind, she feels, will produce a philosophy for itself.

Never has it been more important for a revival of this kind of thought, she believes, than in her time, when people feel that "what was called enlightenment in the 18th century, including the sciences, provides an insufficient spiritual diet."[31] Notice that it is "spiritual diet" that Weil believes is required, because she feels that harking back to these great epochs will bring with it the kind of spiritual life, the like of which all that is "most precious in science and art is no more than a somewhat imperfect reflection."[32] She concludes this letter by wishing that her friend is able find a publisher and a collection of original texts which could be presented to the public at large. Weil is still ever the scholar and is desirous of some academic approval, it would appear.[33]

1.4.2 The key to a hidden mystery or the search for knowledge?

Kotva's interpretation of Weil as a searcher for lost knowledge is an endearing one for our age, allowing Weil a broad platform on which her ideas may be explored, and also allowing entry to concepts that otherwise may not receive a similar airing. In the article, Kotva takes particular issue with Lissa McCullough in her book *The Religious Philosophy of Simone*

[29] Weil *SL* p. 130.
[30] Weil *SL* p. 131.
[31] Weil *SL* p. 131.
[32] Weil *SL* p. 131.
[33] A point worth noting here is that Weil is indeed desirous of academic approval, though so strongly held are her opinions that it would appear she might take some persuasion to be moved from her particular viewpoint, should contradictory points be made. Also, these opinions of hers, which she states strongly here, and in other places, such as her *Notebooks*, are used and cited by students and scholars as if they were clear facts. It is always worth noting where Weil makes these pronouncements. Opinions expressed in a letter are naturally more personal, and of a more discursive nature than those in a piece intended for publication.

Weil: An Introduction [34] where McCullough shows that commentators who have attempted to attach to Weil's philosophy any Gnostic doctrines of the Cathars, for example, are doing so with little to support their theory. McCullough states that Weil had based her thinking on the Cathars on the work of the idiosyncratic Deodat Roché, who had made it his mission in life to clear the name of the Cathars, and to make clear to the world how the Catholic Church had repressed the heresy. Kotva agrees with McCullough that the attraction for Weil would have been the vision of Catharism as a "pure Platonic-Christian religion", not sullied by what Weil considered the two main sources of corruption in Christianity, Yahweh, the violent God of Israel, and "the unfettered power-lust of imperial Rome."[35] Ultimately, McCullough believes that "Weil's disassociation from Cathar theology on historical-textual grounds"[36] is secured, particularly as McCullough finds that there is no evidence that Weil saw matter as evil in the way that the Cathars are alleged to have done. For McCullough, any further claims for a strong influence on Weil by the Cathars would need to be grounded in historical-textual sources.

1.5 Simone Weil and Gnosticism

Kotva finds McCullough's demystifying of Weil's Gnosticism interesting, as she feels it tends to "defeat itself with regard to its uses."[37] Kotva cites Weil's attitude to sources texts, whereby Weil eschewed secondary texts, believing as her tutor Alain had taught her, that with effort and attention, the truth of the text, often hidden, would reveal itself. This notion of knowledge that would reveal itself in time to those who wait for that revelation may also be seen as part of the grounding of her idea of attention, whereby one approaches the object of one's study, or prayer, and gives oneself over to waiting. [38] Kotva feels that if one were no longer to give Weil's work the attribution of 'Gnostic' because of her unhistorical approach, then other attributions would have to be dropped also i.e. Platonic, Christian, mystic, religious, Stoic, "even philosophic – for Weil studied the sources of all these traditions … with the same disregard for scholarship and 'history' she accorded to the Cathars."[39] Whilst Kotva is careful to avoid any equivocation between all these attributions, yet she finds it

[34] Lissa McCullough, *The Religious Philosophy of Simone Weil: An Introduction* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2014)
[35]Lissa McCullough, *The Religious Philosphy of Simone Weil,* 215 (quoted on p. 124 Kotva "The Occult Mind of Simone Weil").
[36] Kotva 'Occult Mind' p. 125.
[37] Kotva 'Occult Mind' p. 126.
[38] Weil "Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God" in Simone Weil *WG* pps. 57-65. Hereafter referred to as Weil 'School Studies'.
[39] Kotva 'Occult Mind'p. 126.

strange that Gnosticism comes in for particular debunking by, for example, McCullough, when Weil's interpretation of Christian philosophy is "just as absurd as Catharism, at least from an historical-critical point of view."[40] This is a valid point, and one that may be seen in Weil's judgement of the Romans, for example, as well as her judgements on the Bible, which often have very little basis in historical fact.

Kotva believes that Weil's approach to knowledge is quite close to that of Gnosticism, and that McCullough has not recognised the Gnostic aspects of Weil's *methodology*, particularly "an inadvertent identification of Christianity with what is, in fact, Gnosticism – using the term in its broadest sense, as an example of the Mysteries and of the private religiosity which the Mysteries represents."[41] It is this revealing of the mysterious, the secret, the sacred hidden, that aligns Weil's thought more with Gnostic sensibilities, Kotva believes. This sensibility of the mysterious nature of true knowledge seems to be at the heart of Kotva's argument, and as it is contemplated, it also highlights how Weil's approach cannot be labelled Platonic-Christian, no more than her philosophy may be separated completely from Gnosticism. For Kotva, it is Weil's belief that truth of a spiritual nature must necessarily be "sequestered in personal and private circles in order to survive the onslaught of a morally depraved world that Weil's attraction to the Cathars and mystery religions should be read."[42]

Kotva cites Cyril O'Regan's discussion of Gnosticism in his book *Gnostic Return to Modernity*, in support of her case.[43] O'Regan regards Gnosticism as a "'transgressive hermeneutic program', a programme designed to refigure a person's perception of the Biblical narrative in such a way that a believer sees differently and now is able to recognise as meaningful what, previously, they had barely noticed or been cognisant of."[44] In continuing to disagree with McCullough's case, Kotva comes to the conclusion that it is Weil's search for truth, and her desire to situate it in a place that is pure, accessible only to a chosen few, and safe from the world, that distinguishes her philosophical writings as 'Gnostic'. Kotva feels that Weil believed herself to be in a direct line with this tradition, particularly in its approach to knowledge; that is, Gnostic, occult and esoteric in its search for truth.

[40] Kotva 'Occult Mind' p. 126.
[41] Kotva 'Occult Mind'. p. 127.
[42] Kotva 'Occult Mind'. p. 128.
[43] Cyril O'Regan, *Gnostic Return in Modernity* (Albany: State University of New York, 2001), p. 17.
[44] Simone Kotva 'Occult Mind' p. 129.

Thomas Merton would agree with Weil being situated as a thinker who accurately reflected the deepest issues of her times and he placed her in the company of Bernanos and Camus, as one of those "brilliant and independent French thinkers who were able to articulate the deepest concerns of Europe in the first half of this century," and although she is more difficult to situate than the others mentioned, also perhaps more of a genius, the names she has been given are both good and bad, and often contradictory: "Gnostic and Catholic, Jew and Albigensian, medievalist and modernist, Platonist and anarchist, rebel and saint, rationalist and mystic."[45] Whatever was going on in her life, she wrote in a letter to Jean Wahl, the state of the world always preoccupied her

> I cannot detach myself sufficiently from what is going on to make the effort of drafting, composing, etc; and yet a part of my mind is continuously occupied with matters absolutely remote from current events … My solution is to fill notebook after notebook with thoughts hastily set down, in no order or sequence.[46]

The solution Weil describes is that of the writer, the writer who needs to write in order to explain the world to herself, through the central tool at her disposal. It is through the word, reading it, writing it and transmitting it to others that she survives. It is my contention that Weil's way of paying attention, in her reading, her writing, her work as a teacher and in the factories, her trade union involvement, her endeavours during the war, all of them flowed from her concept of attention, the practice of which was in and through her writing. It is in examining the influence she had on other writers, particularly poets, that there is a sense of the unity of her work, and that though her life may be broken into sometimes contentious pieces, there is a wholeness to be found in her thinking on attention.

One of the scholars and poets whom she has influenced spoke of the issue of Weil's Gnosticism. Czeslaw Milosz declared in his 1980 Nobel acceptance speech,[47] that he was "profoundly indebted" to her writings, and furthermore, that Weil's unique place in the modern world is due to "her perfect continuity of thought."[48] This continuity was not

[45] Merton, Thomas "The Answer of Minerva: Pacifism and Resistance in Simone Weil" published originally in Thomas Merton *Faith and Violence* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press 1968) and also in Thomas Merton, Patrick Hart ed. *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions 1981) 134-139.
[46] Weil *SL* p. 159.
[47] He was not the only poet to quote Simone Weil in his Nobel acceptance speech. Seamus Heaney also quoted her in his speech "The Redress if Poetry", citing her work, especially in *Gravity and Grace* as being focussed on "counter-weighing, of balancing out forces" (p. …), and the redressing effect of which Heaney speaks, is because of the "glimpsed potential" or "revelation of potential" that poetry contains.
[48] Czeslaw Milosz "The Importance of Simone Weil" in *Emperor of the Earth: Modes of Eccentric Vision* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977) pps. 85-98, p. 89.

something of which Weil often stands accused, and Milosz attributes this to her because, unlike others who convert to Christianity, Weil's turn towards it after her experiences in 1938, was rather a continuation of her previous ideas. Milosz claims Weil as an Albigensian, or a Cathar "at least by temperament"[49], though her judgements were usually so harsh and without compromise. In the present age, he feels, if there is a theological bias at all, it is towards Manichaeism, with much of modern literature railing against the world which "no longer seems the work of a wise clockmaker."[50] Weil draws the admiration of intellectuals in our time, he feels, because in her life and writings, which are "classical, dry, concise," she enables a "salutary shame".[51]

There is much to suggest then that Weil's idea of attention has a basis in mystery, waiting for the key to open the door of knowledge and that this is more the way of the Artist and the Poet. Kotva illustrates her explanation of the occult mind by citing George Eliot's *Middlemarch*.[52] Mr. Casaubon, though not sharing Simone Weil's beliefs and religious leanings, nevertheless does share with her a vision of the truth, a truth that is hidden away from the world, with exclusive access and the requirement of a 'key' which unlocks all the secrets, to those who can open the treasure with it. Weil and Casaubon both seek out this hidden knowledge, "aided by a hermeneutic programme that assembles truth by selective reading and syncretic refiguring of pre-existing narratives."[53] Kotva highlights what many commentators today would make of Weil's opinions on the history of ideas, many of which are embarrassing. These would include, for example, her ability to believe in an original revelation vouchsafed to humanity, her syncretism in reconstructing that revelation from a wide range of sources, and her inability to have verifiable sources for the "'one identical thought' with which she validates her project."[54] The twentieth century revival of this approach, manifest in the works of Mircea Eliade, C. G. Jung, and, for Kotva's purposes, the writings of Frances Yates, demonstrated the appetite for the idea of seeking out supposedly hidden mysteries, preferably with a key, which then unlocks the mystery behind the door. Kotva sees that the work of Yates, and her "methodological doubling of the structure of mystery religion … plays an important role in understanding the thought-world of Simone

[49] Milosz p. 91.
[50] Milosz p. 96.
[51] Milosz p. 96.
[52] George Eliot *Middlemarch* (England: Penguin Books, 1980).
[53] Kotva ' Occult Mind' p. 131. Kotva also sees the new revivals of the Mysteries, in Eliot's 1870s England, by writers such as Éliphas Lévi and Papus, as influencing the revival of occultism in the twentieth century. (p. 131).
[54] Simone Kotva 'Occult Mind' p. 131.

Weil."[55] There is an issue here with describing the thought-world of anyone, and probably more so in the case of Simone Weil, whose thought-world was both vaster and more varied than most, and who soaked up into that thought-world many influences from other religious traditions, world mythologies and contemporary culture. Kotva declares Weil to be a "rogue philosopher siding openly with initiatory mystery cults."[56] McCullough outlines how Weil's interest in Catharism could not have had much background to it, as although she had a great interest in it, her knowledge of it seems to have been sparse. This is borne out also in David McLellan's work on Weil, who claimed that Weil's knowledge of Catharism was sparse.[57] Indeed, Weil, writing in her *Notebooks* in July 1940 claims, in a discussion on the Church, the crucifixion and the Great Beast, that one cannot be a supporter of something that does not exist. She includes in this list the re-establishment of the Carolingian dynasty on the throne, "or an adherent of the Catharist religion, or of the Order of Templars."[58] She would appear to be disavowing her previous allegiance, and is now stating that she believed that there was no good to be had in something that no longer exists, and it should really only be thrust aside.[59] McLellan tries to situate Weil's life and work in a more rounded way, within her context. As a political theorist, he does indeed focus on her politics, but also endeavours to see her work and thought in all its complexity.[60] It is this approach to Weil that bears more fruit than attempting to situate her within a philosophical box, or a spiritual box, or even a theological box. It is in paying attention to every aspect of life – political, spiritual, philosophical, theological, historical – and reflecting on it within the pages of her journals, and sometime-essays, that Weil's contribution may be discerned most clearly. Kotva's work also highlights the issue of idea of spiritual exercise, which is worth noting at this point.

1.6 Spiritual Exercise, Augustinian trends and attention in Descartes

In *Effort and Grace*,[61] Kotva brings fresh insight to the contemporary understanding of spiritual exercise, particularly as it pertains to its ancient history; and she also questions the connection and the reciprocal relationship heretofore, between passivity and grace on the one

[55] Simone Kotva 'Occult Mind' p. 132.
[56] Simone Kotva 'Occult Mind' p. 132.
[57] David McLellan *Simone Weil Utopian Pessimist* (London: 1991) p. 195. New York: Poseidon, 1990.
[58] Weil *NB* p. 350.
[59] Weil *NB*. p. 350.
[60] Having said this, there are some places where McLellan might be challenged, as, for example, in his statement that her Platonic discourse "emphasises transcendence at the expense of empirical reality." It could be said that this very transcendence in Plato, and in Weil, is empirical reality in their terms.
[61] Simone Kotva *Effort and Grace On the Spiritual Exercise of Philosophy* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020) pps. 273.

hand, and action and effort on the other. Between effort and grace, effort cannot be separated from the notion of repose, she believes. Kotva uses the work of Felix Ravaisson, Maine de Biran, and of Henri Bergson and Émile Chartier (Alain), with their revival of a type of Stoicism, to illustrate her point. For Bergson and Alain, she claims, effort became the central factor, and even a necessity, for the spiritual life. For Kotva, the tension between this type of Stoicism, and the idea that any kind of happiness may be achieved without effort, comes to the fore in the work of Alain's student, Simone Weil. Kotva examines Weil's life and her development of the concept of attention in one of her chapters.

Alain (Émile Chartier) taught Weil a love of philosophy, a lived philosophy, alongside a concept of effort, which was central to his teaching. As can be noted in the work of Bergson, the emphasis on effort in early twentieth century philosophy was not unique to Alain. Whilst Simone Weil took on some aspects of Alain's thought, notably that of the practice of philosophy, there are differences that are striking, Kotva believes. Simone Kotva cites Weil's thesis "Science and Perception in Descartes" (1929-30), where Weil draws together "Alain's striking sense of philosophy as effort with a Biranian meditation on the limits of effort and experience of passivity"[62]and produces an account that questions effort and is closer to the spiritual exercise tradition that influenced Biran. Kotva believes that few French thinkers since Weil "have succeeded in making relevant an Augustinian method of introspection or captured with more clarity its significance for a critique of philosophical method."[63] Kotva examines Weil's work on Descartes in some depth and cites Weil's assessment of Descartes' conclusions about the world as one where there is a division between reason, and matter or ordinary perceptions, as something that does not follow necessarily from Descartes' method, "which in itself is nothing but attention carefully and rigorously directed at every aspect of experience, including the senses."[64] In her dissertation, Weil takes on Descartes' method, and examines everything thereafter through this lens. She believed that it must be used meticulously on everything to be examined, with no aberrations.

Kotva suggestss that there are two approaches to spiritual exercise in Descartes' *Meditations*, i.e. the autonomous meditator whose emphasis is on effort, and the dependent meditator who focuses on grace. Kotva claims that Weil does not want to make the same error that Descartes

[62] Kotva *Effort and Grace* p. 134.
[63] Kotva *Effort and Grace* p. 134 Kotva also holds that Jean-Luc Marion has been the most significant theological critic of Descartes' since Simone Weil. cf. Note 5. P. 205.
[64] Kotva *Effort and Grace* p. 134.

made, and discard what may be learned from the approach of the dependent meditator. In her own thesis, Simone Weil employs Descartes' method then for the rest of her project, whilst questioning his procedures.[65] For Kotva, what Weil discovers is "the inadequacy of Descartes' equivalence between the meditator's self and pure activity, or mind."[66] Kotva notes that passivity plays a more significant role in the latter half of Weil's dissertation, and that Weil "asserts not only the indivisibility of action and passivity, but the need to reunite them in philosophical method."[67] Weil queries whether she can "attain perfect wisdom, wisdom in action, that would reunite the two parts of myself?"[68] This struggle between the "two parts of herself" finds an echo throughout her work. Kotva sees Weil's ability "to equivocate between action and passivity" as Weil sketches out what she believes to be the ideal life, as a demonstration of Weil's efforts to bring together these two sides of human life, that is, the life of the labourer, and the life of the philosopher. Meditation in the Cartesian sense, should, according to Kotva, "consist in the same reuniting of passivity to effort – rather than in a valorization of effort and a suspicion of everything associated with the opposite of effort."[69] In her dissertation, Weil is using philosophical practice as an exercise, but one which "maintains a double recognition of effort and repose."[70] Weil is always striving for the middle ground, something Kotva feels shows itself quite clearly here, at the beginning of her career, and which continues throughout the rest of it. Attention and contemplation remain the constant and central means for Weil of working at keeping this balance in the middle.

> In a way the remainder of Weil's writing is the result of viewing the middle repeatedly from fresh vantages with the aim of articulating better the duality of activity and passivity which it reveals and which structures the practice of attention which it performs.[71]

Kotva believes that Weil is one of only a few philosophers who have been as explicit about the importance of paradox, contradiction and duality to philosophical method. As Simone Weil later on in her life, then proceeds to bring prayer more into her own personal equation in this delicate balancing, the nuances around the concept of attention shift.

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[65] Weil "Science and Perception in Descartes" *Formative Writings 1929-1941 Simone Weil* trans. & ed. by Dorothy Tuck MacFarland and Wilhelmina Van Ness (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987) pp. 31-88. Hereafter referred to as Weil *FW.*
[66] Kotva *Effort and Grace* p. 134.
[67] Kotva *Effort and Grace* p. 135.
[68] Weil *FW* p. 78.
[69] Kotva *Effort and Grace* p. 136.
[70] Kotva *Effort and Grace* p. 136.
[71] Kotva *Effort and Grace* p. 136.

Attention is the principal tool of philosopher and mystic alike, as Weil writes in her dissertation. Though one needs to be fully alert to pay attention, yet it is only when she who is paying attention least expects it, often when most tired, that what one has been striving for, becomes apparent. Weil therefore concludes that attention relates to terms of "the unconscious and habit."[72] In drawing her conclusions about Weil's dissertation, Kotva cites the influence of "aspects of Augustinian anthropology with a psychological approach inherited from post-Biranian philosophy"[73], and claims that the theme of *homo duplex in humanitate, simplex in vitalitate*[74] explains Weil's discovery of herself as a dual being, though also, a single person, as in Descartes' thought. Whilst Kotva discusses this at some length and it does indeed provide a rationale for the division of and the struggle between the active and the passive being, it cannot be stated as a certainty that this influenced Weil to the extent claimed by Kotva. The probability is strong, though it needs to be tempered with some caution.[75]

Kotva claims that what Weil understood about meditation comes as much from humanism as it does the contemporaneous Augustinian trend in French philosophy. The influence of Alain's Stoicism upon Weil is quite clear, and Weil's practice of it as a philosophical exercise meant that it became "indistinguishable from reverence and joy."[76] Weil has arrived at this conclusion through the lens of Greek and Hellenistic philosophy, particularly Stoicism. For Kotva, Weil regards Stoicism as one example of a true philosophy, because Stoicism regarded the world as divine, "philosophy was continuous, loving contemplation directed towards everything that was – spiritual exercise (though Weil does not use the term)."[77] Though the Stoics did not believe in God as the world, their conception of the world was that it was comprised of that which enabled the communication between human beings and gods.

[72] Kotva *Effort and Grace* p. 139.
[73] Kotva *Effort and Grace* p. 137.
[74] "the person who, while twofold in humanity, is simple in vitality": this phrase is associated with Maine de Biran (1766-1824) and his initial development of the idea of a close relationship between the worlds of medicine, metaphysics, philosophy and psychology. The phrase originated with Hermann Boerhaave 1668-1738), a philosopher, Christian humanist and botanist, who pioneered the teaching of medical students by the patient's bedside, and who strongly advocated for clarity and organisation in all medicine. Biran used the phrase to support his theories of psychophysiology, which were based on the dual nature of humankind.
[75] In a Footnote, Kotva states the religious overtones in Weil's thesis are to be traced to Alain's mentor and teacher Jules Lagneau, whose work Alain had edited, and had introduced to Weil. Kotva claims that the account of meditation Weil cites, which results in the "self-perception of a 'dual being' is taken straight out of Biran's Augustinian anthropology, and would have been familiar to Weil from the *Essai sur les fondements de la psychologie et sur ses rapports avec l'étude de la nature* (Essay on the foundations of psychology and on its relationships to the study of nature) (1811-12), a classic student text." Kotva *Effort and Grace* N. 19, p. 206.
[76] Kotva *Effort and Grace* p. 140.
[77] Kotva *Effort and Grace* p. 140.

Kotva believes that what Weil saw in Stoicism was the relationship between the visible and the invisible, between matter and spirit. By the time Weil is writing her dissertation, Kotva believes that Weil has now bestowed upon attention a sense of religious feeling, in other words, that real attention experienced to its fullest, almost becomes unconscious, and this is now Weil's concept of the spiritual life.

To arrive at this place, Kotva has made some comments about Weil's mysticism, some of which are not entirely clear. She highlights Weil's naming of Francis of Assisi as a Stoic, noting how Weil sees Stoicism, Christianity and mysticism as being the same, with nothing to separate them. The essence of Stoicism for Weil was "the discovery of dependency (finitude, passivity) in the midst of power."[78] From her earliest lectures to her students, when she advocated that her students employ the paradox of passive activity as they applied themselves to their philosophy, to later in her life when she ascribed one of her mystical experiences to an encounter with Christ, the object of Weil's desire changed. Particularly after the mystical encounter where Weil says Christ took possession of her during her recitation of George Herbert's poem, "Love", she claims that she had "never foreseen the possibility of that, of a real contact, person to person, here below, between a human being and God."[79] Though Weil claims she had never read any mystical works before this, and that God had prevented her from reading them so that it would be evident to her that she had not invented this, yet "I still half refused, not my love but my intelligence."[80] So Weil does not refuse God her love, and this is where her mysticism takes on its more definitive Christian aspect. Weil may still appear to be a Stoic in many ways, but there is a crucial change in nuance to her mysticism after this encounter. Part of that crucial change is that the object of her prayer is now God, though not entirely passively. Weil remains Weil: she believed that no one could ever wrestle enough with God if it is done with regard for the truth. "Christ likes us to prefer to him because, before being Christ he is truth. If one turns aside from him to go toward the truth, one will not go far before falling into his arms."[81] The language here is resonant with relationship, rather than a struggle between love and the intelligence. It is the relationship with Christ which makes all the difference in her thinking from this point. It does not mean that Weil gives up the wrestling with God in her search for truth. It is the context within which it occurs that has changed. Though Kotva claims that the key to Weil's interpretation

[78] Kotva *Effort and Grace* p. 143.
[79] Weil *WG* p. 27.
[80] Weil *WG* p. 27.
[81] Weil *WG* p. 27.

of philosophical method is that "in attention mystical passivity is the same as Stoic effort", and that this results in a "dialectic of effort and grace",[82] it is my contention here that the context for it all changes after Weil's mystical encounters. This struggling with God in a search for truth is something that marks some of the poets who would later turn to Weil for inspiration, particularly Fanny Howe, as shall be seen in a later chapter here. The search for truth marks out the poet and the mystic, and the God who may be wrestled with is the ever-present companion in this endeavour.

1.7 Simone Weil and Judaism

Simone Weil may have felt that her background was indeed broadly Christian; however, Christianity, in which she claimed to have her foundation, is founded upon the people of Israel's story. Weil's parents were of Jewish origin, though they were agnostic. Weil did know about her Jewish ancestry through her grandparents, as previously noted, though her strong denials of her ancestry may be seen as ranging from anti-Semitic to strange. According to her first biographer, Simone Pétrement, Simone Weil actually used the phrase " personally I am an anti-Semite" in a joking way in a discussion with Dr. Bercher, who wrote in *La Révolution proléterienne* and who was a friend of Weil's.[83] Pétrement states that after a discussion, it was clarified that Weil was speaking of Jews who believed that they were separate from everyone else and were Jews before everything else. "In short, what she disapproved of in Judaism was what could possibly lead to sectarianism or fanaticism."[84] Setting these comments against her letter to the Minister of Public Education in October, 1940, where she distanced herself from any definition of being a Jew, the picture becomes less clear. Weil wanted to get another teaching post and believed that the new Regulation was the reason she had not been given one. Pétrement insists that Weil was "mocking the Statutory Regulation on Jews and the confused ideas on which all anti-Semitic racism rests."[85] However friends such as Fr. Perrin and Gustave Thibon, not to mention later commentators such as Emmanuel Lévinas, took issue with both Weil's attitude to Judaism, and her apparent misunderstanding of it.[86] For Lévinas, it was Weil's attitude to evil and her acceptance of suffering in silence that disturbed him, as did the reading of the religions of the

[82] Kotva *Effort and Grace* p. 143.
[83] Simone Pétrement *Simone Weil* trans. Raymond Rosenthal (London & Oxford: Mowbrays, 1976) p.554 n. 6.
[84] Ibid. p. 554 n. 6.
[85] Ibid. p. 392.
[86] Emmanuel Lévinas "Simone Weil against the Bible" in *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism* trans. Séan Hand (Baltimore:Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990) pp. 133-141.

world by her, whereby she claimed that all nations, with the exception of Israel, had a prefiguration of the Passion, thus proving the "eternal universality of Christ."[87] Lévinas read Weil's work in a more forgiving way than others but could not overcome both her idiosyncratic reading of the Jewish people and their place in the world, which she eventually turns into a reading of evil as being specifically Jewish, and what he terms her Gnostic anti-Judaism. He believes that Weil's anti-Judaism is gnostic in nature because it concerns "more the Hebrews than post-exile Judaism, which happily has experienced the beneficial influence of the Chaldeans, the Egyptians and maybe even the druids, as well as those authentically monotheist pagans. Nothing in common with Hitler. How comforting!"[88] One can sense Lévinas' frustration here, to put it mildly. Other commentators, George Steiner among them also voiced their frustrations with Weil in this regard.[89]

The issue of Weil's anti-Semitism is a vexed one and whilst it is highlighted here for the purposes of a more complete picture of her, it is a topic that is part of the discourse on Weil since her death, and the discussion continues. At this stage it would seem that the psychological and familial reasons for Weil's stance are part of the narrative, and as she is not available for analysis or questioning, it is almost impossible to discern the balance of the issues involved for her both personally and philosophically in this discussion.

In conclusion, though Simone Weil may have placed herself within the Christian tradition, which does indeed hold up, given the France of her times, yet the question of her own ancestry and her seeming hatred for that tradition, leaves us with a more nuanced picture. Just as Mr. Casaubon searched for the key to all mythologies in *Middlemarch*, so Weil appears to be searching for an underlying key, or strand of thought, that brings all religions together, and may be seen to be at the root of them all. Her Gnosticism feeds this energy, though the energy may not extend fully to the arena of the rational.

Simone Weil paid attention to every detail in her life, both on the micro level and the macro level. This resulted in acts of empathy with soldiers at the front, and is displayed with particular focus in her learning and writing, and her work. Her writing was in many ways a spiritual exercise for her, or at least was to become so. The need for spiritual exercises sat

[87] Ibid. p. 135
[88] Ibid. p. 134

[89] George Steiner "Sainte Simone – Simone Weil" *George Steiner Essays 1978-1996* (London Boston, Faber and Faber 1996), pps.171-179

easily with her, and was, as we have seen, part of the Christian, and Catholic, backdrop to her life. None of us are without our blind spots though: neither is Simone Weil. When we pay attention to everything, we may miss something small close to us. It is difficult to balance keeping our eye on the far distant horizon, whilst also watching for the stray pebble that might trip us up. Simone Weil paid attention to the physical act of her writing in order to get it right, as well as visiting Germany in the 1930s to see what was happening there. Tirelessly taking issues large and small into account has to take its toll.

Though Simone Weil waited for grace, her endeavours to deal with her world in all its aspects were constant and intense. The world as it presented itself to her had to be "read", just as a text had to be read. In the next chapter, an exploration of Weil's world of reading will focus upon her concept of reading.

2 CHAPTER TWO: Simone Weil and the Matter of Reading

2.1 Introduction

This chapter will focus on Simone Weil's concept of reading, which will become clear is a concept broadened out to include her reading of the world. It will be seen that Weil's reading of both the text and the world involves the practice of attention, an attention that has to be developed and practised in order to bear any fruit. This practice of attention Weil undertook from an early age, and it included how she read everything, both text and world. An examination of the process of reading, as understood by Simone Weil, is undertaken here; through this, the broadness of her approach is revealed, and some of the issues of central concern to her throughout her life will be highlighted. To begin, an overview of her thinking culled from the relevant chapter in *Gravity and Grace* will serve as an introduction to her thinking on reading. Weil's reading of the world led to her linking necessity with force, and this aspect will be examined through the lens of recent scholarship by Elizabeth Doering. The use of force is a central concept in Weil's thinking and her reading of force as being the "true hero, the real subject, the core of the Iliad", has made her essay on *The Iliad* one of her most effective; she is unambiguous about the role of force and its effects, "the human soul never ceases to be modified by its encounter with might, swept on, blinded by that which it believes itself able to handle, bowed beneath the power of that which it suffers."[1] Such is Weil's reading of force, that it has changed the way *The Iliad* is read, and it is one of most highly regarded of Weil's essays.

As with other topics in Weil's thinking, the concept of reading itself remains 'unfinished', and fragmentary. Such is our knowledge of the world. Weil's reading of a text within the context of faith must include a true reading of the world around her. This meant the incorporation of all aspects of life, to include the political, social and historical aspects of it. In many ways, this broad "church" is what endeared Weil later to liberation theologians, amongst others. Her particular reading of what religion needs to include within its remit would have made a contemporaneous reading of her work appear out of reach or even

[1] Elizabeth Chase Geissbuhler *Intimations of Christianity Among the Ancient Greeks* (London New York: Routledge, Ark Paperbacks Routledge Kegan Paul Ltd., 1987).

whimsical, yet the discernment both before and after the Second Vatican Council of the Catholic Church made some of her reading of the church make sense, particularly in the area of social justice.

For those who write, what is read is vitally important. There is no writing without reading, without that paying of attention to that which is before us, either in the text, or in the world. Simone Weil wrote daily, and she read voraciously from an early age. She enjoyed reading in Greek, and learned Sanskrit in order to read the *Bhagavad Gita*. She worked on problems in physics and mathematics, and was well versed in world literature. Her pathway to understanding was through this daily exercise. In what follows here, Weil's ideas on the self who performs the act of reading, the sensations within the reading process and the journey in attention that is contained within the process, will be explored.

Part of that reading process for Weil later includes the concept of God. Weil's work may be read to a large extent without reference to the concept of God. Kazuaki Yoda details how far he can go with Weil when he is discussing her essay on reading and debates whether Weil can operate on two levels, without going to a third with her.

The presentation of Weil's work for reading by a wider public has to be considered, and this will be done at the end of the chapter. As reading was important to her, and something upon which she reflected, perhaps we owe it to her to mention how her own work came to be read, particularly in the immediate aftermath of her death. Though she trusted Gustave Thibon to do whatever he thought best with her notebooks, it is only since the publication and translation of the complete notebooks in more recent decades that has allowed a more rounded picture of Weil to emerge.

"The spirit of justice and the spirit of truth, is nothing else but a certain kind of attention, which is pure love."[2] Quite often, reading Simone Weil can be disconcerting, disorienting or dismaying, stating in one sentence something which initially reads easily, yet its wordin, though seemingly simple, calls the reader back to another glance, another reading. Her epigrammatic and aphoristic style, as well as her analogical thinking, can lead one along many a varied and sometimes overgrown path, deceptive in its simplicity, until one realises that one is surrounded by concepts and notions that have been hiding in plain sight all along

[2] Simone Weil, "Human Personality" in George A. Panichas *Simone Weil Reader* (Wakefield, Rhode Island & London: Moyer Bell Limited, 1994) p. 333. Hereafter referred to as Weil 'HP'. Panichas *Reader* hereafter referred to as Weil *SWR.*

the route. How did she "read", and what did she mean by it? From her writings, it is obvious that she had read widely, not just in philosophy, but in literature, folklore and religions. As has been noted previously, people like Thomas Merton felt that her work needed to be read and taken as a whole, and that she is not a systematic thinker, a conclusion that would come to have general scholarly acceptance. It is my contention in this study that her work, incomplete and fragmentary as it is, needs to be read as a whole, or at least thematically. Reading Weil can lead one down many paths and disciplines, especially if one begins with asking the question about how one is to live one's life in the best possible way. This question about living life well and for the greater good is the central one in this study. Most of us feel that we live ordinary lives, and we would like to live them well. Turning to another's experience in poetry, or in philosophy, or in art is something we do for guidance along the way. Though Weil did not want the spotlight on herself, yet what she wrote about drew people to her life because she reflected on character, on ideals and on value. In reading her work closely in this chapter, it is hoped that by employing what was her own preference for dealing directly with the text, some of that guidance might be forthcoming. In ancient times, monks would offer their work in the hope that it may be of some use to the reader. Perhaps Weil's writing may be seen in that vein, thus providing support for considering Weil non-systematically.

2.2 Reading Simone Weil as a whole, not systematically

In his Introduction to *Simone Weil: Late Philosophical Writings,* Eric O. Springsted, whilst accepting that Weil is not a systematic thinker, wants to assert that this does not make her an "incoherent thinker", nor merely someone who is nothing but "an anthology of mystical insights."[3] Springsted believes that Weil was not about building a philosophical position, because this was not what philosophy was about for her. Rather, for Weil, contemplation of the world entails attention; it further integrates a waiting for the world to reveal itself and "thinking that one has the world down as a system fails at understanding either the world or reason itself."[4] The understanding of the world here demonstrates a more holistic approach to the world, an approach which can include a broad theology; my thesis assumes this whole and unifying approach. Simone Weil was a thinker, not just within the realm of philosophy. It

[3] Simone Weil, *Simone Weil Late Philosophical Writings* trans. by Eric O. Springsted and Lawrence E. Schmidt, ed. by Eric O. Springsted (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press 2015), p. 5. Hereafter referred to as Weil *LPW.*
[4] Weil *LPW.* p.5.

could be said that she believed the role of a philosopher was to contemplate all of life. If this is the case, then life is in a state of constant flux, and focussing on one element of it fails to comprehend the interweaving of all the elements together. Perhaps it is about finding the patterns that connect, rather than examining the particles individually. For Weil, this involves a profound waiting that may not be comfortable for everyone. As shall be seen later, some poets have spent a lifetime living with Weil and her work. It is this waiting and this letting go that she demands that make her both challenging and exasperating.

In the final year of her life, Weil wrote in her London *Notebooks*:

> The proper method of philosophy consists in clearly conceiving the insoluble problems in all their insolubility and then in simply contemplating them, fixedly and tirelessly, year after year, without any hope, patiently waiting.
>
> By this standard, there are few philosophers. And one can hardly even say a few.
>
> There is no entry into the transcendent until the human faculties – intelligence, will, human love – have come up against a limit, and the human being waits at this threshold, which he can make no move to cross, without turning away and without knowing what he wants, in fixed, unwavering attention.[5]

Here, Weil demonstrates her conviction that philosophy is a way of life, or even a vocation. It is not a vocation to be taken lightly either, for who can stand in the face of an insoluble problem, or great affliction, with that "unwavering attention"? Later on in this study, how Weil conceived this process of attention in affliction will be examined in more detail. It is worth noting at this point that this sense of vocation is one of the characteristics of Weil's that endears her to the popular imagination. In much of the literature, particularly in cultural and literary journals, it is the life of Weil that initially attracts. Though aspects of that life may then cause further questioning, and even upset when it concerns her relationship with Judaism, it is the example of a life lived as intentionally and as scrupulously aligned with declared principles, that attract the student, the scholar and the artist. During her life, Simone Weil resisted categorisation, and she still resists systematisation, both within philosophy, and within theology: Weil's proclamation that "The gospel contains a conception of life, not a theology,"[6] calls into question any attempts to systematise the Gospel, to force it into doctrine or dogma, which could entail a closing down of the revelation inherent within it. For Weil, the Gospel was something to be integrated into life, and life was something to be contemplated. That contemplation included judgement and discernment, too: being silent

[5] Weil *FLN* p. 335.
[6] Weil *FLN* p. 147.

before the mystery was not sufficient for Weil.[7] That alignment of the essence of the mystery and revelation with the reality of life itself is a constant guide for Weil: "The value of a religious or, more generally, a spiritual way of life is appreciated by the amount of illumination thrown upon the things of this world."[8]

It is because Weil is almost always described as being non-systematic in either philosophical or theological terms that her thinking may be viewed through the lens of many disciplines, both those already mentioned, though it may also include literary criticism, political and social theory, and spirituality in general. Tracy sees no coherence in Weil's philosophical thought, believing that coherence to be coming through her mysticism. If forced to make a claim a claim for unity in her thought, he would claim it as "political-mystical philosophy."[9]There are many resonances in her thinking with that of Pierre Hadot. Weil's search for what she conceived to be the truth enabled her to turn away from much of her Marxist thinking, and to alter her position on her pacifism too. Trying to systematise works from a philosopher or a theologian is not recommended by Hadot, who considered systematic studies to be like "herbariums full of dead leaves."[10] Hadot preferred to study a philosopher's work by analysing the work itself, "rather than looking to put together a system by extracting theoretical propositions from his or her works, separated from their context."[11] He believes that the meaning of any assertions made must be "interpreted as a function of the literary genre chosen by the author, and of the context in which this assertion is inscribed."[12] For Simone Weil, theories were redundant unless they could be exemplified in living reality, hence her decision to take on factory work, and to join the ranks of the Free French. Teaching the principles of philosophy, be it Marxism or Stoicism, was only one aspect of philosophy for Weil. Hadot believed that logic, physics and ethics are "both practical and theoretical", which means that, for example, with regard to Stoicism, philosophy became an "effective, concrete, lived exercise; the practice of logic, of ethics, and of physics."[13] It is the contention here that Simone Weil's reading of the world, and of the text, facilitated her living a unified life, an interior life and above all, a committed life, as she understood it. A theory read had to

[7] "It is bad both to offend against sacred things, even in a joking way (while thinking one is joking), and to pay them homage at a certain level. Nor must they be altogether passed over in silence." *Notebooks* p. 141.
[8] Weil *FLN*, p. 147.
[9] David Tracy "Simone Weil: The Impossible" in Jane E. Doering, Eric O. Springsted (eds), *The Christian Platonism of Simone Weil* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004), p. 229.
[10] Pierre Hadot *The Present Alone is our Happiness Conversations with Jeannie Carlier and Arnold I. Davidson* trans. Marc Djaballah (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2009) p. 91.
[11] Hadot. p. 91.
[12] Hadot. p. 92.
[13] Hadot. p. 94.

become a practice, a lived reality. Sharon Stone-Mediatore is clear on where she would situate Weil "perhaps more than any other modern European philosopher (Weil) sought to line academia to transformative social practice. And significantly, attention is a central theme in her work."[14]

For Weil, the spirit of justice and truth, as quoted at the top of this piece, is pure attention, which in turn, is love. This simple sentence encompasses the concepts of love, attention, truth and justice. For Simone Weil, reading a text, and reading the world were processes containing similar elements, quite familiar to modern readers. However, she felt that any interpretation of what we read requires a guarding against any sense of control this may give us. We encounter a world that delivers up to us experiences and sensations that can influence us and our lives, thereby robbing us of any illusion of control. This is life and its elements in constant movement. How we understand that movement has several dimensions to it, one of them being reading. An examination of Weil and the notion of reading will follow, beginning with Weil's thoughts on who she believed her audience to be, something that did pre-occupy her. Reading begins with writing, an effort to communicate with another. How one is read then, is something that occupied Weil throughout her life. For a writer to focus on the art of writing itself is an obvious assumption. For a writer to focus more on reading, on how the text is to be read, is a much nuanced approach.[15]

2.3 Weil – Writing for an audience; Writing for the World

Simone Weil intended her writings for a general audience, as she believed passionately in access to information and knowledge for all.[16] As we read Weil, there is a sense of

[14] Sharon Stone-Mediatore "Attending to Others: Simone Weil and Epistemic Pluralism" in *Philosophopical Topics* 41.2, (Fall 2011) pp. 79-95, (p. 82).

[15] The Irish writer, Claire Keegan, has voiced this in a recent interview, stating that she is "really interested in how reading works, not so much interested in being a writer, but in how reading works." https://www.cbc.ca/radio/writersandcompany/claire-keegan-s-small-things-like-these-is-a-story-of-moral-crisis-heroism-and-the-human-heart-1.6426299 <accessed May 24, 2022> This entails a shift in emphasis from writing a text that is then "sent out" into the world, to working on a text with the reader reading it in mind. The writer will always check what is being sent out, of course, but to write with reading in mind is quite a different concept.

[16] Weil wrote many articles, particularly in her early working life, for Trade Union and Marxist publications. There is also the issue of whether she intended her *Notebooks* to be as widely read as they were after her death. Her published work consisted of articles in small journals, aside from her book *The Need for Roots.* So the bulk of what is available of Weil's writing, consists of her own notes, and some essays.

incompleteness, given her age, and the circumstances surrounding the wartime conditions in which she died. Yet, there is a maturity and an urgency that is a mark of such times.[17]

Weil desired to link the worlds inhabited by philosophers and academics with that of a world in need of profound social change. She lived out this desire in choosing to work in factories and by doing agricultural work: this deliberately chosen aspect of her working life also reflects her desire to deepen her compassion for her fellow human beings by living and working alongside them. She wanted to write about workers' lives from the inside. Her thinking was to incorporate lived experience. As noted earlier Springsted believes that Weil is best understood as a whole, because though she has valuable insights on many topics, yet "the thinker transcends them."[18]

Simone Weil wrote as she read – widely and voraciously, with an ability to hone in on a topic and analyse it with little reference at times to other thinkers, not reliant on what others had said, though using their knowledge when necessary. Perhaps Simone Weil might best be described as a philosopher-writer, given that she worked through so many concepts in her journaling, and it is in and through these notebooks she kept, that much of the development of her thought may be traced. She regarded her notebooks and journals as being of some importance, and left them in safekeeping when she left Marseilles for America. Weil also wrote poetry, and was in the process of writing a play *Venise Sauvée*[19] when she died. It is one of the contentions here that contingent upon seeing Weil's life and work as a whole, is the idea that she occupies many of the thin, liminal spaces around so many of the topics and subject areas on which she wrote. She was a philosopher who remained a Platonist. She was also a philosopher with a theological stance, though she came by the latter through her own deeply personal experience, an experience she could not deny. So she could indeed be regarded as a saint of outsiders for the Catholic Church, or a rogue philosopher within that realm, or indeed a fledgling artist-as-writer. As she stated in a letter to Jean Wahl

> I cannot detach myself sufficiently from what is going on to make the effort of drafting, composing, etc.; and yet a part of my mind is continuously occupied with

[17] It is worth noting here that though Weil writes of the coming war, and moves away from her pacifist stance as war raged, there is not the same *level* of urgency or engagement in her work as there might be in that of Edith Stein, Walter Benjamin or Etty Hillesum.
[18] Weil *LPW Writings* p. 1.
[19] Simone Weil, *Poèmes suivis de Venise Sauvée* (Paris: Gallimard, 1968); Simone Weil *Venice Saved* trans. Silvia Panizza and Philip Wilson (London: Bloomsbury, 2019). Weil began to write the play in 1940, it was not completed. It concerns a plot by Spanish mercenaries to sack Venice in 1618. The plot fails when a conspirator, Jaffier, betrays them to the Venetian authorities, because he feels compassion for the beauty of the city. The themes central themes are force, affliction, love, kenosis, the void and the cross.

> matters absolutely remote from current events (though current problems are indirectly related to them). My solution is to fill notebook after notebook with thoughts hastily set down, in no order or sequence.[20]

It is the intention here that by expanding on the idea of attention, and by using is as a core theme, Weil's work and life may be seen more clearly and more holistically. Weil's thoughts on reading encapsulate some of her main preoccupations such as attention, force and necessity. Some of Weil's more popular works, recalled over the years, have guided my working life and led me to other guides. Weil's ideas on reading itself were not available, and then as now, I am keeping the emphasis on what is more popularly available in English

2.4 Reading - The Process

When Simone Weil reads, the page she is reading is read not for the marks and scratches on it, but for whatever inherent meanings may be contained within that process. As Weil understands it, the process of reading is also that of reading the world, and this is something she claims we do on a constant basis – the stars, the sky, all of nature, for example, speak to us and ask to be read. Reading the world includes our readings of the other, and of others. In one of her later essays, Weil explored the concept of reading, "Essay on the Notion of Reading"[21], and this, alongside other pieces of writing, reveal her lifelong engagement of this topic.

2.4.1 Reading and the notion of words

Why do any of us read? We read to connect, we read "to know we're not alone".[22] We read to understand our world and to decipher the messages we feel may be contained in the writing. We read to know the other and to see what the world is like from their point of view. In many ways, we live by the notion that what we read can transform us and can influence us with regard to our beliefs, our emotions, and cause us to modify our behaviour perhaps, in terms of a change of perspective, or in what we buy, what we eat, how we dress, how we feel and for whom we vote. In our own time, the written word comes at us so quickly and in such volume that we have the additional problem of dealing with great volumes of written

[20] Weil *SL* p. 159.
[21] Weil, 'Essay on the Notion of Reading', trans. Rebecca Fine Rose and Timothy Tessin in *Philosophical Investigations,* 13.4 (October 1990), pp.297-303. Published originally as 'Essay Sur la notion de lecture' *Etudes Philosophiques* (Marseilles), NS 1 (January-March 1946): 13-19. Hereafter referred to as Weil *ER.*
[22] Nicholson, William *Shadowlands* (London: Samuel French 1991).

information, of sifting through it for quality and value, whilst it is often digestible in sound bite form only. Simone Weil is writing of a time when the written word was predominantly in print form. This may appear a simplistic statement, but it serves to emphasise how small the readership of her work may have been. Never did Weil appear to countenance publishing her thoughts in major publications. She published in small, literary and socialist magazines.[23] Throughout her teaching life, as well as in all her social and political activism, she desired that all people should have access to the facts and the ideas. In a fully egalitarian society this would not only be desirable, but necessary.

The commandeering of mass media today by an elite and extremely wealthy few, with ownership of the major news platforms residing in the hands of a small number of corporations, would have provided much fodder for the thinking of Simone Weil, who wrote quite cogently in *The Need for Roots* on the subject of freedom of expression. She believed that there was a need for "unlimited freedom of expression for every sort of opinion, without the least restriction or reserve", because it was "an absolute need on the part of the intelligence", otherwise "when the intelligence is ill-at-ease the whole soul is sick".[24] This freedom of expression presupposes a literate and reading public who can discern what is happening and "read" situations put before them in a clear and coherent fashion. How clouded can the process of reading become if the news is engineered in such a way as to be considered, or even just declared, to be "fake"? Or, what happens when the information being presented to us is coming our way at a speed and in a way unprecedented during Weil's lifetime? Can the same principles be taken into account then? The speed of the information in conjunction with the often questionable nature of the quality of the information as well as its reception, have become increasingly more far-reaching and subject to commodification. A further exploration of this, and other issues relating to attention, will be discussed later in this study, particularly in relation to the impact of technology, on our lives today, particularly that of information technology.

Weil was acutely aware of the power of language, linking it to the political and social spheres. In her essay, 'The Power of Words', she discusses conflicts that appear to have an

[23] Weil published in magazines such as *Nouveaux Cahiers* (published from 1937-1940) founded by Jacques Barnaud and August Deteouf; and *Cahiers du Sud,* a French literary magazine published monthly from 1925-1966. It was founded by Jean Ballard, the poet and the contributors to this liberal magazine included Walter Benjamin and Marguerite Yourcenar.

[24] Weil *NR*. p.22.

"unreal character".[25] Weil cites the example of the Trojan War, the conflict that perhaps suffered the most from a lack of reality, as she believed. No-one really cared about Helen at all, except Paris. Helen became just an idea, her person being so "out of scale with this gigantic struggle that in the eyes of all she was no more than the symbol of what was really at stake".[26] At least in the Trojan War, there was a woman, indeed a woman of perfect beauty, according to Weil, who was at the centre of the conflict.[27] "For our contemporaries the role of Helen is played by words with capital letters."[28] By this, Weil means that whilst words themselves may not be murderous within their own content and meaning, sometimes they may become associated with violence. If this happens, it is usually by chance, and any effects may be controlled. However, "when empty words are given capital letters, then, on the slightest pretext, men will begin shedding blood for them and piling up ruin in their name, without effectively grasping anything to which they refer, since what they refer to can never have any reality, for the simple reason that they mean nothing."[29] Success can only be attained, therefore, by the crushing of the other group, who have the antagonistic phrase on their banner. If one took the time to understand and to define a word, it would lose its capital letter, and is useless then as a slogan. The word may then return to being what it was – a sign, "helping us to grasp some concrete reality, or concrete objective, or method of activity."[30] To take on the task of clarification of thought, and the precise definition of words, is, in Simone Weil's thinking, a way of saving human lives.

The world's recent experience of many social media platforms such as Twitter, spring very quickly to mind here, where it could be said that the process of capitalising words, has been replaced by another, that of short posts, be they the written word, or a video, where empty words and phrases, designed to antagonise and incite, are posted each day.[31] Current political upheavals and shifts to the far right (for example, in American politics since 2016, with the

[25] Simone Weil, "The Power of Words" in *Simone Weil Selected Essays, 1934-1943* chosen and trans. by Richard Rees 2015) pp. 154-171; p. 155, hereafter referred to as Weil *PW*.
[26] Weil *PW*. p. 155.
[27] Weil *PW* p. 156.
[28] Weil *PW* p. 156.
[29] Weil *PW* p. 156.
[30] Weil *PR*. p. 156.
[31] The following information is taken from a blog by Katie Sehl, on the Hootsuite site, a social media management platform. "As of the first quarter of 2020, Twitter has 166 million monetizable daily active users (mDAUs). Twitter defines mDAUs as "people, organizations, and other organizations… that are able to show ads." This represents a 24% growth from the previous year, the highest year-over-year increase on record. Twitter credits this growth to product improvements and online chatter about the COVID-19 pandemic." https://blog.hootsuite.com/twitter-demographics/ <accessed May 3, 2022>

election of Donald J. Trump, the advent of "fake news" and leadership founded on a script of tweets), take on a sharper meaning when read through the prism of Weil's words. She believed that though humanity may feel it has some control over nature, this is more than cancelled out by the "dangers of destruction and massacre in conflicts between groups of men."[32] She believed that all wars and conflicts of her time had "even less reality than the war between Greeks and Trojans."[33] These feelings of unreality which Weil highlights, coupled with her uncovering of the false oppositions of, for example, communism and fascism, as well as her cautionary words on critiquing capitalism in this essay, serve to distract from the real issues of order and freedom, she felt. But perhaps the biggest distraction was in evidence with regard to the issue of class struggle, which Weil believed was perhaps the only "legitimate and serious" conflict of her time.[34] Employing her example of Rome once again, Weil believed that the advantage it had over the France of her time, was that in "social matters she knew nothing of abstract entities, or words in capitals, or words ending in –ism; nor any of those things which, with us, are liable to stultify the most serious efforts or to degrade the social struggle into a war as ruinous, as bloody, and as irrational in every way as a war between nations. On inspection, almost all the words and phrases of our political vocabulary turn out to be hollow." If we have to choose words carefully then as we write them, how are the words of others to be read then? For Weil, this was a slightly less complex procedure than it is in today's world, when words written hastily in one moment may be read globally instantaneously, with little or no filter from the writer to the recipient.

2.4.2 Attention as Reading

"We read, but also we are read by, others".[35]

Reading is intimately bound up with Weil's idea of attention, and runs as a thread throughout her work. However, her essay on reading was written later in her life.[36] She comments on the idea of reading also in her *Notebooks,* some of which were gathered and edited for use

[32] Simone Weil *Selected Essays, 1934-1943* trans. Richard Rees (Eugene, Oregon: WIPF & STOCK, 2015), p. 154, hereafter referred to as Weil *SE.*
[33] Weil *SE* p.155.
[34] Weil *SE*. p. 162.
[35] Simone Weil *Gravity and Grace* translated by Emma Craufurd (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972) 121 Hereafter referred to as Weil *GG*.

in *Gravity and Grace;* she also mentions reading in *The Need for Roots* and *Waiting for God,* which in and of itself, gives a clear indication of it being a central concept for her. As her whole life was one of constant questioning in many arenas, be it in philosophy or theology or politics, and a stripping away of all that was considered to be *not* the truth, the need for attention would appear to sit at the heart of this whole process. How we pay attention to what we read is important, as is what we choose to read in the first place, not to mention the prejudices and biases we may bring to what we read.

2.4.3 Reading in *Gravity and Grace*

This reflection on the chapter on Reading in *Gravity and Grace* highlights further explorations of reading scattered throughout the *Notebooks* of Simone Weil. This enables an overview of Weil's thinking on a particular aspect of reading as an idea, and to notice how the central themes in her work all come through under this particular heading.[37]

Simone Weil uses the idea of reading to describe both the physical act of reading itself, making sense out of the marks on the page, and for the reading we do of our world and of the other, and in turn, the reading they do of us In this brief anthology of some of her central ideas on the subject, the incorporation of some central concepts are outlined: the other, gravity, judgement, slavery, justice, necessity, the passions and particularly, attention.

In his 'Editor's Note' for this Chapter in *Gravity and Grace*, Gustave Thibon claims that Weil uses the word readings (or reading) as "an emotional interpretation, the concrete judgement of value. For instance, I see a man climbing over a wall: instinctively, and perhaps wrongly, I 'read' in him a robber".[38] For the purposes of this collection, then, he has chosen to emphasise the emotional and value interpretation aspect of the idea of Reading, which does not encapsulate all there is to Weil's concept.

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[36] Weil *ER.*

[37] As this book is collected from both her *Notebooks* and manuscripts which were given to Gustave Thibon on her leaving France for the last time, it provides a useful overview, though it is important that Thibon was a friend of Weil's, and also viewed her work through the lens of his own Catholicism. His politics would have been quite right-wing, becoming more so in the latter years of his life.

[38] Weil, *GG* "Editor's Note" p. 121.

2.4.4 The Other

For Weil, "every being cries out silently to be read differently".[39] As Weil feels we are always reading others, or being read ourselves, it is worth noting the context here, as it has the austerity and the asceticism of Weil's worldview, which she outlines when she is describing others thus: "to see each human being (an image of oneself) as a prison in which a prisoner dwells, surrounded by the whole universe".[40] Situating human beings in a prison, each waving or signalling to each other from one outpost of humanity to another, with whatever intent or communication we may have in mind, is a fairly typical image in Weil's world, and is reminiscent of her use of the image of two prisoners knocking on the wall between their cells to communicate with each other. It is also a strong Platonic reference as well. We are each locked into our own worlds. For Weil, this is very much an inner/interior world, and is the main one from which we operate. What is this interior world precisely? Weil's whole *life* was based on her interior world. When not working, she was writing and reflecting, constantly and persistently. When she was working, each moment outside of her work was spent on writing and reflection. Coming from this place within, we might well ask, who is this self that is doing all this reading of others? What are we doing then when we are reading each other? What is it for? What do we need for this? These questions will propel the discussion further along around the self, as Weil conceived it. Not very far away for Weil at any point, is the issue of power

> One reads, but also one is ready by others. Interpositions of such readings. To force somebody to read himself as you read him (slavery). To force others to read you as you read yourself (conquest).[41]

From her essay on *The Iliad*, to her work in *The Need for Roots*[42], Weil used the image of slavery and conquest throughout her work, and extended this then to the personal level as well. She claimed that this reading of "conquest" was more often than not "a dialogue between deaf people."[43]

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[39] Weil *GG* p. 121.
[40] Weil *GG* p. 121.
[41] Weil *NB* p. 43.
[42] Simone Weil "*The Iliad*, Poem of Might" trans. by Mary McCarthy in Siân Miles *Simone Weil An Anthology*, (London: Virago,1986) pps. 182-215; Simone Weil *The Need for Roots Prelude to a Declaration of Duties towards Mankind* trans. by Arthur A. Wills (London and New York: Ark Paperbacks, 1987).
[43] Weil *NB* p. 43.

2.4.5 Gravity

For Weil, reading obeys the law of gravity and is a process which we employ mentally when we wish to avoid the emptiness which is at the heart of our being. Thus we use the imagination to avoid that emptiness, or the void. Weil saw this as a mechanical process too, so that with reading, for example, we will be drawn to that which distracts us, and may even bring us to a land of fantasy. Unless we pay attention our reading will obey the laws of gravity.[44]

> Readings. Reading – except where there is a certain quality of attention – obeys the law of gravity. We read the opinions suggested by gravity (the preponderant part played by the passions and by social conformity in the judgements we form of men and events). With a higher quality of attention our reading discovers gravity itself, and various systems of possible balance.[45]

Always seeking balance, Weil's theory of gravity and grace is brought to bear on the concept of reading too. She holds that gravity equates to "all the natural movements of the soul controlled by laws analogous to those of physical gravity. Grace is the only exception."[46] Creation consists of the descending movement of gravity, alongside the ascending movement of grace – the law of the descending movement is grace. As human beings, we tend towards what is evil, unjust or base and this tendency may be called original sin. Lissa McCullough states that for Weil "moral evil is a species of natural evil".[47] As McCullough continues, "creation and original sin are two aspects of a single act of abdication by God … nevertheless it is crucial to realize that both gravity and grace are forms of obedience to God, for everything that takes place is willed by God."[48] As we read, therefore, we are aware that we are part of a process that has the potential to be a grace-filled experience, as well as carrying the possibility of being pulled down by gravity. It needs our complete attention then to remain alert at all times, so that our focus may be on what is necessary. For Simone Weil, this intensity was a characteristic that was life long, bringing with it its shadow side, as well as its light. In her efforts to live a life of complete attention, this meant cutting out any social niceties with people, as she devoted herself with zeal to those she felt understood the search for truth, and exploring the role of the body, both in the light of Western Christian thought and of Western philosophy, in conjunction with studies of Eastern thought.

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[44] Weil *NB* p. 160.
[45] Weil *NB* p. 122.
[46] Weil *GG* p. 1.
[47] Lissa McCullough *The Religious Philosophy of Simone Weil* (London, New York: I.B. Tauris, 2014) 147
[48] McCullough. 147.

2.4.6 Judging

In our reading, we are not to judge, just as Christ does not judge. He is our judge, in fact, and "suffering innocence is the measure".[49] When we do not judge, it is not indifference on our part, or indeed, abstention. Rather is it "transcendent judgement, the imitation of that divine judgement which is not possible for us".[50] Gustav Thibon chooses to conclude the chapter with this paragraph on judging and Christ, which highlights once again his focus throughout, that is the selection of pieces that highlight Weil's more Catholic tendencies. As may be seen later, there is much more, obviously, on the idea of reading for Simone Weil, than is mentioned here, though it is interesting to note how Thibon does manage to encapsulate some core ideas in a short space. Weil's ideas on justice, the other, how we read and how we are read, the role of charity and our neighbour, and the law of gravity – all of these are touched upon in this chapter. Perhaps more so than in other chapters, the readings Thibon chooses even appear to be quite scattered and do not do full justice to her thinking. Before examining Weil's essay on reading then, the question of Weil and faith, and how this penetrated the thinking of Weil will be addressed.

2.5 Simone Weil's Reading of a Text and The Issue of Faith

Weil often read texts directly, from her own viewpoint and perspective, without the benefit of other scholars' work and interpretation. As Doering notes "this type of direct reading of a text, dependent on one's intelligence and culture to perceive its meaning, was typical of her style."[51] So whenever she writes then, it follows that she thinks for herself, with her own cultural and philosophical references not always cited, but rather implied. Truth is what mattered most to her, so much so that it overshadowed other things, as she explained in a letter to Maurice Schumann "Leaving aside anything I may be allowed to do for the good of other people, life for me means nothing, and never has meant anything, really, except as a threshold to the revelation of truth."[52]. The pursuit of truth for the living of her own life was

[49] Weil *GG* p. 123.
[50] Ibid. 123; Gustav Thibon chooses to conclude the chapter in *Gravity and Grace* on Reading with this paragraph on judging and Christ, which highlights once again his focus throughout. As may be seen later, there is much more, obviously, on the idea of reading for Simone Weil, than is mentioned in this chapter, with the excerpts cited being from Weil's *Notebooks*, in the main, not her essay on reading.
[51] Doering, E. Jane *Simone Weil and the Specter of Self-Perpetuating Force* (Notre Dame, Indiana: Notre Dame Press, 2010) p. 76.
[52] Weil *SL* p. 178.

what motivated her, so that she could live a life of integrity, and later in her life, this was also founded on faith in God.

2.5.1 Faith in God

With political, trade union and social justice issues, Weil's work may be explored without reference to her faith in God, as much of it was written in the form of articles in the 1930s. The contention here is that the concept of attention was a core element of her thinking from the very beginning, that it was even an exercise and a habit, and that it continued to pervade her thought, embracing both the philosophical and theological elements of her thinking. Ultimately, Weil would proclaim that "Attention, taken to its highest degree, is the same thing as prayer. It presupposes faith and love. Absolutely unmixed attention is prayer."[53] In contrasting the work of Yoda with, for example, Allen, it is hoped to demonstrate how some scholars can go a certain distance with her on the idea of attention, but then can go no further when it comes to the point where Weil grounds her thinking in faith in God. This is important within the context of reading, as some of her thinking on reading is also the focus of her essay "Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God". All of this would seemingly entail a division in Weil's thought. Yet, because her thinking encompassed so many disciplines, some more comprehensively than others, a description of her as a writer-philosopher may be closer to a valid description of her life and work. She commented on the world around her, and absorbed within herself the sufferings and afflictions she comprehended in her particular reading of the world. Whatever was going on in her life, she wrote in a letter to Jean Wahl, a friend, the state of the world always preoccupied her and she could never separate her faith from what was going on around her.

> I cannot detach myself sufficiently from what is going on to make the effort of drafting, composing, etc; and yet a part of my mind is continuously occupied with matters absolutely remote from current events … My solution is to fill notebook after notebook with thoughts hastily set down, in no order or sequence.[54]

How these filled *Notebook*s are compiled, edited and read then, is a more vexed question than it would be for many other thinkers, due in part to her early death. Decisions were made with regard to the editing and compilation of her essays, and the *Notebooks* that are still being unravelled today. The danger issuing from this posthumous editing and selection is and was

[53] Weil *GG*.
[54] Weil *SL* p. 159.

that her life itself could then take over as the central narrative, rather than what she had to say. "Preoccupation with a remarkable writer can issue in nothing better than mildly critical exposition and where a strange kind of 'sanctity' is associated with that writer, even mild criticism can be inhibited".[55] Ann Loades' words are a healthy reminder to keep a grounded approach. This is particularly true when encountering someone like Simone Weil, who by some accounts can appear to teeter between sanctity and lunacy, depending on where one lands on the spectrum of critical (and perhaps less than critical) thought on her work. Examining one of her essays, that "On Reading" in what follows, this will be borne in mind.

2.6 Reading as a journey of Attention

"With a higher quality of attention our reading discovers gravity itself, and various systems of possible balance."[56]

We read to be part of community, and we need to retreat from community in order to know the self, both the true self and the false self.[57] That posits the question about the requirement for some solitude for the purpose of study. How do we own that solitude? What does it mean to be a reader? Weil, both as a Platonist, and in following in the footsteps of her predecessors in French culture, particularly thinkers such as Montaigne and Descartes, might have agreed that we indeed read, or study, to know ourselves as part of a community. She would also have given credence to the idea that one feeds off the other. We need solitude to know the self, and yet our understanding of the self must also flow from our experience of being part of a community. That Weil believed in and had a desire for community herself is evidenced by her working in various factories, doing quite difficult manual work. That she may have found community irksome, and that others may have experienced her in this way, is also true.[58] This is just one of the many contradictions within Weil's life and work. Another would include her shift from pacifism to involvement in the war. These contradictions can signal a willingness to change and to alter opinions, if faced with what she believed to be an incontrovertible truth.

[55] Ann Loades "Review of *Simone Weil Thinking Poetically*" in *Literature and Theology*, 16:1, (2002) pp. 97-98 (p.97).
[56] Weil *GG* p. 122.
[57] This idea of dividing the self thus is taken from the work of Thomas Merton. It is also to be found in the work of Iris Murdoch.
[58] Simone Pétrement details some instances of Weil's unease with groups and awkwardness in dealing with people, as does Gustave Thibon in his recollections of Weil in J.M. Perrin and G. Thibon *Simone Weil as we knew her* trans. Emma Craufurd (London: Routledge, 2003) p. 114.

Her decision to work in factories was influenced, of course, by her Marxist thinking at the time and she would have espoused high ideals around the community that she termed the proletariat, in keeping with her (then) Marxist views. Her sense of community is also evidenced by her wanting to join the Resistance during the War. Weil was deeply committed to the trade union movement all her life and her decision to do factory work was in keeping with that commitment. Her actual experience of it was rather different to what she expected, and she came to understand that thoughts of revolution were not easy to foster when those working in factories had to do so to the point of exhaustion.[59] Her efforts to become a greater part of the Resistance met with failure, perhaps because it was so much on her terms i.e. her plan for Frontline Nurses, which led General de Gaulle to conclude that she was out of her mind. So these forays into the world could be seen as manifestations of her own questions and searching. Whilst these attempts at community did not meet with any great success, there remains the issue of her position regarding joining the Catholic Church. Her well documented and much discussed decision to remain outside the Catholic Church, was what could be termed a solid decision made by her and adhered to with hardly a waiver. In all these endeavours, and no matter where she was, Weil tried to involve herself in awareness-raising through her articles in small journals, or in teaching others, as in her efforts to teach a peasant girl to read.[60]

For Weil, reading does not simply entail a way of extracting meaning from a text it is also about receiving meanings, and indeed sensations, from the world outside of ourselves. How we interpret them and what their meaning may be is explored in her essay on reading. In this she explores the idea of reading, giving simple examples to illustrate her point.

[59] On January 15, 1935 Weil writes in her *Journal d'Usine* "Exhaustion finally makes me forget the very reasons why I am in a factory, it makes almost invincible the temptation this life brings with itself: no further thinking."

[60] These are documented in the early chapters of Simone Pétrement's biography *Simone Weil* (London and Oxford: Mowbrays 1976). pps. 576.

2.7 "Essay on the Notion of Reading"[61] – The idea of sensation

When exploring the idea of sensation, Weil presents a simple, yet powerful example, early in her article, to illustrate the strength of the sensation that strikes when the meaning in a letter has been comprehended. Two women are reading a similar letter, containing the news that a son is dead; however, the women have different experiences as one can read the letter herself, whilst the other is illiterate. A strong sensation, similar to that of being punched in the stomach, is experienced by the woman who can read. The other cannot experience this as the marks and scratches on the page do not contain any meaning for her. For the woman who can read the marking on the page, the colour of the ink or the paper and even the sensations themselves, according to Weil, do not appear to her at all, she is not aware of them. All that is "seen" is the pain. This seeing includes the sensation of the pain. "Everything happens as if the pain resided in the letter and sprang up from it into the reader's face … What is presented to the sight is the pain itself."[62] It is the meanings we read in and from appearances that take hold of us. Thus we can say that the external world is not real as it consists of the meanings we have read; but on the other hand, we can say it is real because it "grabs hold of us as though from outside – so it is real."[63] Weil reflects on another image, borrowed from Descartes, to illustrate further: the blind man in using his stick to feel his way along can be convinced, as someone holding a pen would, that his sense of touch is conveyed into the stick, or to the pen.

> Even so this resistance to the pen is only something we read. The sky, the sea, the sun, stars, human beings, everything around us is similarly only something we read. What we call a corrected sensory illusion is a modified reading.[64]

Weil continues by naming reading as that which we would ordinarily speak of as "an effect of the imagination"

> The word implies that what is in question are the effects produced by appearances, but by appearances which are not themselves apparent, or hardly ever so; what does appear is something else, something which is to the appearances what a sentence is to

[61] "Essai sur la notion de lecture" was written in the Spring of 1941, and appears to be mostly finished, with Weil's mother having typed it, and Weil's notes appearing on that typescript. The essay first appeared in *Les Etudes Philosophiques*, in 1946, in a journal founded by Gaston Berger. The thinking propounded in this essay is original to Weil, and is not in response to another thinker's ideas. The version used here is from Simone Weil "Essay on the Notion of Reading" *Philosophical Investigations* 13.4, (Oct. 1991) pps. 297-303, referred to here as Weil *ER*.
[62] Weil *ER* p. 297.
[63] Weil *ER*. p. 298.
[64] Weil *ER* 298-299.

> the letters, but it gives the impression of being an appearance; unexpected, brutal, coming from outside, and owing to the evidence nearly incontrovertible.[65]

So when we mistake a tree on a dark road for a man, we can be filled with fear. In Weil's eyes, the human presence penetrates the eyes and enters the soul; it is not the case that there is both an appearance and an interpretation. For the person on the road, it is one and the same. The fear experienced here is not analogous to a conditioned reflex it is, rather, analogous to reading. One reads into the situation, and that meaning grips the soul, flooding in and

> taking hold of my soul and transforming it from one moment to the next, so much so that, to use a familiar English expression, I cannot call my soul my own. I believe what I read, my judgements are what I read, I act according to what I read, how could I do otherwise?[66]

Not being able to call one's soul one's own gives the impression of overwhelming emotion, which danger could incite quite rightly. Does this apply to all other situations that we read? When discussing the necessity associated with the noise of an explosion or a machine gun going off, or indeed a happier situation with regard to a noise associated with winning honour, Weil says that we either run away from, or run directly towards the presenting noise. In both cases, the necessity is forced upon us, as we read the situation and decipher the necessity in the noise.

Do we have the power to change our world, as in the changing of appearances? For Weil, any power we may have is circumscribed by our physical strength. Perhaps there is a power to change the meanings that may be read into appearances, readings which impose themselves on us

> Work in the ordinary sense of the term is one example of it, because every tool is a blind man's stick, an instrument for reading, and every apprenticeship is learning to read in a certain way. The apprenticeship completed, meanings appear to me at the nib of my pen or a phrase appears in the printed characters.[67]

Elsewhere, Weil speaks of a way of giving attention to a problem in geometry, or to the words of a Greek or Latin text, for example "without trying to arrive at the meaning, a way of waiting … for the right word to come of itself at the end of our pen", all we can do is "merely reject all inadequate words."[68]

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[65] Weil *ER*. p. 299.
[66] Weil, *ER* p. 200.
[67] Weil *ER* p. 301.
[68] Weil *WG* p. 63.

Here we have the idea of apprenticeship, which Weil invokes for attention – nothing comes in the moment, there is a waiting, and as this will be explored later in this study, for now let it be noted that this waiting could be in emptiness and includes a persistent and consistent effort at reducing the "I" as we prepare to approach God "Above all our thought should be empty, waiting, not seeking anything, but ready to receive in its naked truth the object that is to penetrate it."[69] Our most precious gifts come not as the result of our searching, but because we have waited for them. This effort and this discipline are what Iris Murdoch would echo in her work, especially when she speaks of the overlapping of the intellectual and the moral aspects of teaching and learning, when she considers it important to "attend and get things right."[70] This aids our creative power and initiates "new qualities of consciousness, minutiae of perception, ability to observe, they alter our desires, our instinctive movement of desire and aversion."[71]

2.8 Mystery and God

In her essay on reading, Weil alerts her reader immediately to the context of her thinking, by situating the reading process within a mystery. It is a notion as yet unnamed, she claims, "a mystery the contemplation of which can doubtless help not to explain, but to understand other mysteries in men's lives."[72] For Weil, the idea of mystery sits more easily here than it would have done in earlier work, as this is subsequent to her mystical experiences. However, it is important here though not to draw too straight a dividing line between Simone Weil's experience before and after her mystical experiences. There were always elements of the mystical throughout her work, and she allowed for the mystical where Plato was concerned, for example.[73] Miklos Vetö contends that Weil was a true Platonist in her placing of mystery, and that it is the harmony "between reason and mystery that make the developments in the *Cahiers* so fascinating."[74] He holds that reason must be fully engaged in comprehending our world and the possibilities there exhausted before mystery is invoked. Even then, "recourse to

[69] Weil *WG* 62.
[70] Murdoch, Iris *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (London: Penguin Books 1993) p. 179.
[71] Weil *ER*. p.179.
[72] Weil *ER* p.297.
[73]Weil would claim that "Plato is all that we have of Greek spirituality, and of him only the vulgarized works. … What then is Plato? A mystic, heir to a tradition of mysticism wherein all of Greece was bathed." *Intimations of Christianity among the Greeks* (London and New York: Ark Paperbacks 1987) p. 74.
[74] Miklos Vetö *The Religious Metaphysics of Simone Weil* trans. Joan Dargan (New York: State University of New York Press, 1994) p. 3.

faith will not be able to 'solve' the problem but simply change the level of investigation."[75] Weil's answer to this will be seen below in the discussion around her three levels.

Eric O. Springsted holds that the context of Simone Weil's discussion on mystery includes contradiction, and that she wanted to do more than provide a conceptual analysis, instead

> she clearly wants to press these ideas into the service of spirituality in such a way that they can be understood as effective tools for our coming to understand the world and to apprehend the mystery which is at its source.[76]

Springsted examines Weil's notion of reading as a bridge, providing a way to describe the role of the imagination in both religion and literature. Taken in the broadest sense of how any human being "reads" a situation, he asserts that Weil sees the phenomenon of reading as "entirely natural to every thinking being", though it is not casual or arbitrary; instead what we read is suggested to us "not only by our perceptions, but also by our conditioning."[77] Thus, a person is wholly engaged in the process of reading, a process that she feels also includes a call to action. Springsted highlights too, the fact that throughout her *Notebooks* Weil is concerned about avoiding false readings. "Ultimately she sees that we need to read God's hand behind all existence and also sees that this reading must include in a hierarchy all other good readings, even if they are limited."[78] As Weil puts it, rather pithily, in *Gravity and Grace* "Superposed readings: To read necessity behind sensation, to read order behind necessity, to read God behind order."[79] By this juncture of her life, as already stated, God is behind the order of the world, God provides the fulcrum for her thinking and it is God to whom all is directed – be that study, prayer or writing.

2.9 Three Levels - or Two Levels?

For some readers of her work, the point at which Weil begins to speak of two or three levels is where they part company with her. In an article examining Weil's philosophy of education through reading, KazuakiYoda, in arriving at the story of the ship in trouble in the essay on reading, has difficulty with what he terms the third level of reading i.e. the reading of God

[75] Vető. p. 3.
[76] Eric O. Springsted. "Contradiction, Mystery and the Use of Words in Simone Weil" *Religion and Literature,* (Vol. 17:2, Simone Weil, Summer, 1985) p. 8.
[77] Springsted op.cit. p. 8.
[78] Springsted. p. 8.
[79] Weil *GG* p. 123.

behind the order.[80] When Weil writes: "Where the passenger reads chaos, unlimited danger, fear, the captain reads necessities, limited dangers, the means of escape from the storm, a duty to act courageously and honourably."[81] These are at the first and second level. However, in coming to the third level, which Yoda states the captain may or may not be able to read, he decides to "leave aside the problem and the third level of reading. I argue that it is still very meaningful to discuss the second level of reading, which is tied to justice and love of others."[82] If the captain were capable of reading at the third level, he would see this limitation as God's love, as God allowing the existence of human suffering as something out of his love and he would indeed read God in the storm. Yoda feels that in a discussion of secular education today, "it is perhaps unreasonable to suggest the third level of reading i.e. reading God and accepting anything in the world as his love."[83] So Yoda puts it aside, claiming that the religious nature of Weil's philosophy needs another study. However, in acknowledging the three levels of reading, he makes a case for their correspondence with the three levels mentioned in the chapter on Intelligence and Grace in *Gravity and Grace*, where Weil is speaking of discerning and opinions "We have not to choose between opinions. We have to welcome them all but arrange them vertically, placing them on suitable levels. Thus: chance, destiny, Providence."[84] It is not clear, though he does emphasise the need to move on from a self-centred perspective, fighting our natural tendencies in order to pay more attention, which is to practice love for others. The third level concerns God. Yoda cannot therefore reconcile Weil's idea that "attention, taken to its highest degree, is the same thing as prayer," with his view, because he cannot follow Weil that far. Especially perhaps, as she continues by adding that "It presupposes faith and love."[85]

2.10 Reading and Nature

Diogenes Allen, who spent much of his life reflecting upon the works of Simone Weil, focuses on the reading essay too, this time within the context of nature and accepting Weil's

[80] Kazuaki Yoda 'An Approach to Simone Weil's Philosophy of Education Through the Notion of Reading' *Studies in philosophy and Education,* 36.6 (Nov. 2017), pp. 663-682.
[81] Weil, *ER* p. 302.
[82] Yoda p. 672.
[83] Yoda p. 672.
[84] Weil GG 118.
[85] Weil, *GG* p.105.

faith. "The Concept of reading and the 'Book of Nature'"[86] explores the interconnectedness of reading and nature, as well as other ideas such as necessity, order, suffering, work and decreation. He does so in order to examine how she organises her thoughts, given that order was so important to her, but mainly to link with the natural world. He notes that for Weil at this stage in her life, all of nature is God's book and everything in nature is a sacrament to her. Unlike Yoda, Allen continues with the exploration of God in the work of Weil, claiming, in fact, that there is a strong echo of the writings of the Eastern Christian churches on nature in the work of Weil, quoting from another work to illustrate this "For us, this obedience of things in relation to God is what the transparency of a window pane is in relation to light. As soon as we feel this obedience with our whole being, we see God."[87] This involves the disappearance of the "I", of course, the process of decreation for Weil. Allen claims that in this particular essay, Weil has ignored the effects of the ego on reading.[88] It is possible to read the essay, though, and read the effects of the ego as implicit. Allen does discuss an element of this as he ponders the impingement of the natural world on our lives, and how we are made aware of our earthliness, through accidents, illness and wear and tear. Our response when something happens to us is always egocentric, he highlights "adverse contact with matter helps free us from the false readings caused by our egocentricity. It brings us closer to reality."[89] Whilst Weil may appear to be ignoring the effects of the ego here, there is plenty of evidence to support her position on the need to expunge the "I" in her other writings. This stripping of the "I" will be explored in more detail in a later chapter.

2.11 Reading and Necessity

Allen also has something to say on Weil's understanding of the necessity of nature, which he feels is very different to our present-day understanding of scientific laws. For example, matter is not completely transparent to thought for Weil. Whatever about Descartes' arguing about matter consisting of extension, and that "its motions are describable by the necessary relations of geometry",[90] Weil uses the ancient Greek distinction, that between the unlimited as brute force, the stuff of nature, and limits which are rations and proportions, which are

[86] Diogenes Allen "The Concept of Reading and the 'Book of Nature'" in Richard H. Bell, ed. *Simone Weil's Philosophy of Culture Readings toward a divine humanity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1993) pp. 93-115.
[87] Simone Weil *Science, Necessity and the Love of God* trans. Richard Rees (London: Oxford University Press, 1968) p. 179.
[88] Allen p. 103.
[89] Allen p. 104.
[90] Allen p. 104.

geometric in nature. Weil's thinking on this is summarised by Allen as matter being "encountered as formed in a harmonious and orderly cosmos because it is governed by relations which are themselves immaterial and the product of intelligence."[91] Or as Weil herself states "brute force is not sovereign in this world. It is by nature blind and indeterminate. What is sovereign in this world is determinateness, limit."[92] Doering has developed the idea of force in a similar way in her work, as previously noted.

Allen claims that Weil's background is in a culture and a civilisation that presided over the disappearance of the divine presence with the advent of classical physics in the early modern period, and that Hegel's philosophy put an end to Protestant Christianity's use of nature as a source of knowledge and a foundation for spirituality. He claims Weil was attempting "to restore, or make plausible for us today, a supernatural reading of nature."[93] In contrast to Yoda, Allen uses Weil's remarks on the necessity behind sensations, the reading of order behind necessity and the reading of God behind order, to expand further the idea of the apprenticeship to the higher perspectives which Weil advocates. The question of whether one can read Weil to a certain extent, and when one has travelled a certain distance with her, then disembark when she takes God on board, is a central one. For Simone Weil, God became more personal subsequent to her mystical experiences in 1938. After this, though the idea of God was central to her thought, she did not embrace the Christian belief system in its entirety. She did believe in particular in the Incarnation of Christ and in the Crucifixion. Springsted makes a valid point in declaring that this conversion to her own, rather unorthodox version of Christianity "does not make serious and unremitting philosophical reflection beside the point for Weil."[94] For anyone who would wish to categorise Weil as a theologian, she offers up many difficulties, not least of which is her selectivity with regard to her beliefs. For anyone who would wish to categorise her as a philosopher, there may be fewer issues, but her experience of God and the centrality of God in her thought in the later part of her life are indeed issues. As philosopher, she is not the type of philosopher who produces a system of philosophy, rather is she practising philosophy, examining each situation as it comes before her, by whatever means is available to her.

[91] Allen pp. 104-105.
[92] Weil, *ER* p. 285.
[93] Allen p. 94.
[94] Weil *LPW* p. 2.

Allen places Weil within the tradition of Kantian critical philosophy, claiming that her emphasis on the constructed nature of readings supplied by the collective and the way it "exhibits the forces of egotism and 'gravity' that produces these constructed representations" are Kantian, but that she does not share his view that "appearances are phenomena that block access to a noumenal reality."[95] Allen claims that Weil displays a fresh perspective to other thinkers critical of social institutions (such as Kant, Hegel, Marx and Nietzsche), as for her, there is no demarcation of reason into speculative and practical. Allen also claims that Weil provides an advance on Kant because "it is from an analysis of some concrete situations that she gains access to what is not constructed by us."[96] It is the emotional effects produced by representations that enable us to realise that we are gripped by reality and this can occur even when our reading of the situation may be insufficient. Allen here highlights Weil's critical approach, which enables us to emerge with more adequate representations, which in turn give us better readings. He cites Weil's objection to algebra to support his argument here. She claims that the signs in algebra do not provide a sound connection with reality, whereas geometry can provide readings which give direct contact with nature in a world that is comprised of ratios and limits, ideas which are "so rich in aesthetic and religious significance."[97]

Whilst Weil is indebted to Kant, there is another view that would claim she was a metaphysician of the classical variety. Miklos Vetö, in pointing this out, also believes that Simone Weil never thought of constructing a philosophical system, and he states that there is no point in trying "to reconcile her many paradoxes, because they are not meant to be reconciled, being not at all the expression of a systematic and coherent thought; that they are only vaguely tied together through a few of their author's basic ideas and feelings."[98] Vetö's reflections provide another anchor for this study, in his description of Weil's work and thought. Utilising this perspective of Weil and using a thematic approach, will provide a clearer picture of her legacy.

2.12 Reading and reality

[95] Weil *LPW* p. 107.
[96] Ibid. p. 108 Weil was questioning Kant on other issues, as can be seen in her *Notebooks*, for example: "The conception of fact *a priori*. It was barely glimpsed by Kant; the limits of his system prevented him for applying himself to it. In what way is the *a priori* fact of greater value than the observed fact? And where lies the harmony in *a priori* facts? – a harmony which we do not supply ourselves, but which is given us." p. 370.
[97] Allen p. 108.
[98] Vetö p.2.

In Weil's essay on reading, it is quite clear that it is reality that grips us from the outside, we do not grasp it. Previously, Weil had held that one's freedom meant having an understanding of how things worked so that a goal could be achieved. The means to achieve that goal were within one's remit, even if one did not have a say in it. As Allen points out, though, this was before Weil's factory work experience, where she learned quickly that this limited freedom was not possible at all under the working conditions therein. Allen makes a further claim that Weil's experience with affliction led her to abandon her Kantian position "that one could keep one's moral personality intact even in impossible oppressive external conditions."[99] Alongside many other scholars of Weil's work, Allen believed that it was Weil's religious conversion that brought about the change, introducing her to a power, or a force, that is beyond us and which elevates us. From that point on in her life, freedom for Weil meant allowing the self to be subsumed into and to be carried along with this new order of creation, the essence of which is love for her "God created through love and for love. God did not create anything except love itself, and the means of love."[100] The self now is caught up in a flow of love, with the emphasis on receiving rather than giving, waiting rather than grasping at something. This is where Weil's concept of attention gains in momentum, and as we have seen, others can no longer accompany her. Allen supports his claim for her apprenticeship of attention, which includes suffering and manual work, with writings from her *Notebooks*; for our purposes here, the emphasis for now will be on reading. We become so detached that only the love of God is noticed, we do not pay attention to any lower or less complete perspectives. This brings us to whether God is reading then – or not? The decreation of the self now includes non-reading. Weil herself states:

> To think of a reader of a true text that I do not read, that I have never read, is to think of a reader of this true text, that is to say God: but at once there appears a contradiction, for I cannot apply this notion of reading to the being that I conceive when I speak of God.[101]

If reading is part of the overall project of attention, then it is the contention here that in her pursuit of a clear vision, reading as clearly as possible is a vital component of the process. Weil attempts to minimise the "I", to clear away all that is of the ego, in order that God may take possession of us. To get to the stage of reading clearly, is the idea of God then a necessary element of the process? For some, the idea of God can be left to one side, and the

[99] Allen p. 110.
[100] Weil, *WG* p. 72.
[101] Weil, *ER* p. 302.

concepts of justice and love of neighbour may be built on two of the levels of which Weil speaks. Is this not doing hermeneutical violence to Simone Weil?

As can be seen from the work of Yoda, it is possible to expand upon an idea on attention, for example, by not going the full distance with Weil on her theory i.e. not including faith in God. Whilst this is not doing full justice to her theory, there is a sense of cohesiveness to it. The question of how relevant Weil's work is within a religious context, and outside of it, will be explored further in this thesis.[102] As can be deduced thus far, there is one field of study that is still expanding, explicating and explaining her work. Another area is that of situating her thought within the culture of today. The reception of Weil's work has been particularly strong in the US, and this is another vein to explore.

2.13 Linking Force and Reading

E. Jane Doering is an American scholar who in her book on Weil *Simone Weil and the Specter of Self-Perpetuating Force* [103] combines Weil's essay on reading, with her essay on the *Iliad*[104] to provide a link that proves how Weil comes to her conclusions on the way to counter force effectively. "One must read one's fellow human being objectively and measure the choice of reactions against an eternal criterion of the good."[105]

The essay on reading then, is situated within the context of Weil's reflections on force, from an early recognition of "the self-perpetuating autonomy of violence to her final resolution of the continual struggle to constrain brute force from destroying humankind's vital bridges to the supernatural."[106] Doering discusses 'Essay on the Notion of Reading' within the context of the values we employ for reading the universe, and she expands firstly, on the values required for reading the universe by examining Hitler's reading of force. [107] The concept of reading the world goes hand in glove for Weil with her notion of reading a text. Doering explores and details the values Weil places on this reading of the world in her book.

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[102] Recent work done on comparing Weil with Judith Butler and Michel Foucault, for example, will be explored – A. Rebecca Rozelle-Stone & Lucian Stone eds. *The Relevance of the Radical Simone Weil 100 years later* (London New York: Continuum Books 2010).
[103] E. Jane Doering *Simone Weil and the Specter of Self-Perpetuating Force* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010) p. 10.
[104] Simone Weil *The Iliad* trans. Mary McCarthy *Simone Weil Reader* (Wakefield, Rhode Island and London: Moyer Bell Limited, 1994), pp. 153-183.
[105] Weil, *ER* p. 11.
[106] Weil *ER* p. 12.
[107] Weil "The Great Beast Some Reflections on the Origins of Hitlerism 1939-1940"" in Weil *SE* pp. 89-144.

Doering juxtaposes Hitler's reading of blind force against Weil's view of a different and new type of world where work would be the spiritual centre, not Hitler's materialist concept of human relations. Doering cites Weil's last work *The Need for Roots*, as the place where Weil enunciated this proposition. She outlines how Weil's belief in the good, was something situated outside the material universe, with "the impartial force that ruled over the material universe 'necessity', but that 'necessity' was not the reign of naked force, such as despots impose."[108] Rather was this necessity the working for salvation of all those who wished to partake of it. Hitler 'read' the universe materially, and that the good, in particular, was in something material, i.e. Aryan blood. For Doering "Weil knew he could be checkmated by the immaterial force of love, seemingly weak but paradoxically stronger than physical force."[109] Weil saw Hitler's reading of the economic situation in Germany, coupled with a massive propaganda machine, as his genius in a particular way. This led to war eventually, of course. Weil believed, quite simply, that those who felt rooted would not uproot others, whereas those who did feel uprooted would uproot others: this is the basic thesis for her book *The Need for Roots.* Weil did not want to spend time assigning guilt, though, states Doering, rather did she want to understand the underlying principles at work so that humanity could learn from it and "prevent future hindrances to exploitative power."[110] Weil felt that the West's conception of grandeur was false and that those who had responsibility for the next generation had to remain alert to the influence they could bring to bear on them. She cited Marcus Aurelius as an example of a leader who refused to imitate unjust examples of leadership, such as Caesar or Alexander, for example.

As Weil reflects on Hitler, Doering notes how she sees his use of propaganda as masterful and that he made a new contribution to mob psychology "by masterminding showy displays to manipulate public opinion."[111] That this is becoming more the norm in our political and cultural fields, gives cause for concern. It has become particularly evident since the American Presidential election of 2016, with the election of their forty fifth President. Doering quotes from *L'Enracinement* where Weil acknowledges Hitler's brilliance in this manipulation "his ingenious observation that brute force cannot triumph alone, but it can easily succeed by making use of a few ideas, as base as could be imagined".[112] "As base as could be imagined"

[108] Doering op.cit. 98.
[109] Doering p. 98.
[110] Doering p. 99.
[111] Doering p. 100.
[112] Doering p. 100 and Weil, Simone *L'Enracinement* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949) p. 174.

has many resonances in our time and shows Weil to be an insightful and prescient 'reader' of political situations, and of the need for those in power to be aware of their responsibilities. All countries put propaganda before their people to be 'read'. No propaganda, no matter how clever, will lead people to the good, though, because it does not inspire, rather it "closes and seals all openings through which inspiration might pass; it swells the entire soul with fanaticism".[113] Weil believed that education was the key to a more open and just society, one that could read this propaganda, and not be taken in by it. In the end, "her goal was to convince onlookers that selfless attention had far more worth for human kind than ruthless force".[114]

Doering examines Weil's plan for Frontline Nurses, which Weil worked on around the same time as she was writing about Hitler.[115] This plan "articulated the essence of Weil's political and mystical goal: to inspire her people to act according to eternal values that had their source outside this world."[116] The plan met with almost universal scepticism and rejection, with General de Gaulle deriding Weil and being quite dismissive of her. Joe Bousquet, a poet and friend of Weil's, to whom she confided much of her spiritual and creative reflections, and whom she felt understood her, was the only one she felt gave it any hope of success.[117] That she invested so much in a detailed and visionary plan that hinged on such a radical idea says much in itself of her belief in the power of words.

Weil felt that too many people admired power to the extent that they would read "humanity's role in the universe as perversely as Hitler did and mould their behaviour toward the futile goal of dominating others."[118] Doering places Weil firmly and clearly at odds with Hitler's view of the universe and of justice. Whereas his view was deviant, according to Weil, and meant "applying cold, ruthless force that imposed an opportunistic and false concept of justice on enslaved populations", Weil held that "man as a thinking creature held a privileged status: the privilege of being particularly loved".[119]

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[113] Doering. p.100 and Weil op,cit.. pp. 238-240.
[114] Doering. p. 101.
[115] Weil *SL* pp. 145-153.
[116] Doering. p. 105.
Doering's mention of "her" people here is not something that would resonate with Weil. I am not sure she saw herself as having a particular following as such. Being responsible for people in that way would not fit in with her both as a personality, and as a philosopher.
[117] Weil, *SL* p. 142.
[118] Doering p. 106.
[119] Doering p. 108.

It is Weil's view of the universe, a universe of love, to put it simply, that adds a supernatural element to her work. For Simone Weil this love is of God, and is from God. How humankind reads its place within the universe and the place of others is central to her thought, and Doering explicates this idea at length. She explains Weil's methods, demonstrating how Weil perceived the universe "as a paradigm for human behaviour, displaying obedience, respect for limits, and equilibrium after ruptures and compensations."[120] She describes Weil noting the physical properties of energy, inertia, gravity and using inquiries then in the form of questions, diagrams and citations that revealed her "desire to find analogies for human motivations that renewed and raised or exhausted and lowered the stamina and courage of people who were confronted with arduous dilemmas."[121] How we read the universe, for Weil, will increase or decrease our energies, as we fulfil our obligations to ourselves and to others. The laws of nature that command our surroundings are similar to those we encounter when we are trying to reach up (and for Weil, the good is always an upward reach), and be just. For Weil, "a spiritual force existed that enabled individuals to defy moral gravity and strive toward justice."[122] Weil's concept of gravity is discussed by Doering in some depth, highlighting how Weil uses it as "a metaphor for human beings' tendency to exert undue force in interpersonal relationships and to behave in immoral ways."[123]

Weil described the world as "God's language to us; the universe is the Word of God, the Logos."[124] Within the physical universe then, gravity is the force above all others. Weil had begun in her early work, by noting that what we expect from others is determined by the gravity in them.[125] However, as human beings, we have the privilege of supernatural grace, as Doering explains "Grace exerted an uplifting counterforce against base tendencies."[126] Weil always kept her examples as rooted as she could, and in this case, she uses the example of her own headaches to draw out the analogy. From the onset of adolescence, Simone Weil had been plagued by severe headaches, migraines.[127] As the pain of these reached a pitch almost beyond bearing, Weil reached a point where she was almost incapable of caring what would happen, thus leaving her with no energy. However, as the pain reached a throbbing, all-pervasive paroxysm, she would experience a lower energy that caused her to wish to inflict

[120] Doering. p.. 111.
[121] Doering. p. 111.
[122] Doering p. 111.
[123] Doering. p. 112.
[124] Simone Weil K 9, ms 33, in *Oeuvres Completes*, vol. 6, pt. 3, 179.
[125] Doering is using the *Notebooks* here again, K 4, ms m, *Oeuvres Complètes* vol. 6, pt. 2, 140.
[126] Doering p. 112.
[127] In the early chapters of Simone Petrement's biography, she outlines the development of these headaches.

harm on others, she claimed. For her, Doering states, this explained why marginalized people in society struck out first at those who were weaker than, or perhaps equal to themselves. Doering notes that by later notebooks, Weil continued this discussion, using the example of the captain who has been rebuked and broods over it until he relieves his frustration by punishing the lieutenant. "There was also a form of inertia in human behaviour by which the humiliated, induced to accept their belittlement, preferred the existing state of affairs to gathering energies for revolt."[128] Throughout her life, Weil had tried to encourage revolution, from her early Marxist days, in her teaching career, her involvement with trade unions, and in her factory work. This inertia was something she abhorred, though as well as it being part of her overall political and social philosophy, it stemmed also from something deep within her, a fear that she was not worthy. In concluding a letter to Joe Bousquet in 1942, towards the end of her life, she stated:

> The refuge of laziness and inertia, a temptation to which I succumb very often, almost every day, or I might say every hour, is a particularly despicable form of consolation. It compels me to despise myself.[129]

In continuing to explore Weil's concept of gravity, Doering outlines the alternatives Weil suggested whenever gravity presented a seemingly insurmountable obstacle in one's way. This could be a moral or a physical obstacle. These were brute force, fantasy or reflection and assessment. The third is the only option as far as Weil is concerned. In suggesting that if obstacles were to be deemed immovable, then all mental processes would be frozen, Weil advocated keeping the solution open, thus feeding more mental reflection.[130]

> This last option enabled the perplexed to maintain more positive energy in reserve. She understood that the situation could well remain the same but that the reading of the mix of elements in a situation could vary, invigorating powerful sources of energy for the individuals involved or, in contrast, diminishing their vitality to nothing. A good deal depended on whether the desire was of a higher quality (i.e. in view of the supreme "good") or of a lower quality (i.e. oriented toward one's personal attainments). Desire was a twofold motivation for human actions; it could drag people into endless infernal disputes, or it could be a springboard toward their salvation. The values one honoured at the time of decision had essential importance for the outcome.[131]

[128] Doering 113.
[129] Weil *S L* p. 142.
[130] Doering p. 115.
[131] Doering p. 115.

The 'reading' of the mix of elements is a vital component of this process, and though Weil once again mentions values, overall the concept of gravity is not always easy to pin down. In acknowledging this, Doering cites Pirruccello's study "'Gravity in the Thought of Simone Weil", where Pirruccello came to the conclusion that there were two incompatible ways of life for Weil, one being a life lived in "self-aggrandizing, illusion-fostering patterns without concern for a view of things untainted by personal interests. The other is a life lived in the spirit of impartiality and aversion to illusion. The latter seeks to attain a view of things that is not simply a reflection of what one happens to desire."[132] As Doering states about Weil's philosophy, "the thinking, well-disciplined mind, directed by a desire for truth, constituted humankind's unique safeguard against depravity brought on by violence and exploitation."[133]

It is in working through Pirruccello's study of Weil and gravity, that Doering highlights the issue of using the concept of moral gravity as a scientific analogy. Weil does indeed conflate the movements of the universe, "one of several circumstances in which she attributed moral characteristics to material forces and transformations."[134] Pirruccello argues that there is confusion when Weil combines scientific description and moral value.[135] Along with other readers of Weil's work, Doering agrees with Pirrucello that

> The value in Weil's model of gravity does not come from its being a theoretical scientific model. Despite that, it can still contribute to linguistic and imaginative resources as a way of referencing the moral significance of our desires and actions.[136]

It is the moral element of Weil's notion of gravity that many readers are drawn to, and her work in this area does indeed provide new ways of examining human desire and motivation, and assists in the search for a meaningful life. Pirruccello does insist that, had Simone Weil lived, she would have pursued her scientific model and "a more careful framework for her comparisons would have become necessary".[137] The idea of reading others, and being read by others, occupied her thoughts quite intensely, and Weil felt that if she could plumb the mystery of the energy involved in the pursuit of something good, a pursuit that stretched the human being to the ultimate, she could also comprehend the energy around emotions, both negative and positive. At times during an examination of Simone Weil's work, a 'raw' quote

[132] Ann Pirruccello "'Gravity' in the Thought of Simone Weil", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 57 1 (March 1997) pps. 73-94, p. 92.
[133] Doering op.cit. p. 116.
[134] Doering p. 119.
[135] Pirruccello pp. 91-92.
[136] Doering p. 120.
[137] Doering p. 120.

from her *Notebooks* adds immediacy to the particular subject that can be helpful, as in this piece on Reading

> Not to read. Possible only for brief moments.
>
> Not to read.
>
> > To read, and read at the same time one's own reading, the notion of reading, the mechanical or quasi-mechanical necessity for that particular reading, at this moment, in this place, in this state.
>
> multiple perspectives, composition on multiple planes.[138]

The idea she introduces here of reading one's own reading, is set in the context of the intensity of the reading process, a process that does not allow not reading at all, or for only brief moments. This process of reading is presented as an almost relentless one, something that is inescapable. Weil lived her whole life not just knowing this, but living it. By this is meant that she spent whole days writing non-stop, if there was no other work for her to do. She was rarely idle and maintained an intensity of focus, through affliction and pain, that was intense, to say the very least. When she speaks of being attentive, it encapsulates the notion of reading, which includes the experience of being read, and then of reading what one has read. Never is there a quiet mind, or so it would appear. The quotation above is from her early *Notebooks*, when, after her religious conversion, there was another dimension to her life, though it is inconceivable that it meant a lessening of intensity. It may have altered meaning for her but the intensity with which she held her beliefs was always the common denominator for her throughout her life. Theory and practice went hand in hand then, so that whatever she believed in was put into practice immediately.

Further on in her *Notebooks* from the quote above, Weil ruminates on the influence of the body on feelings: the body is "quicker than the lower intelligence, and so has already responded to the new situation while the intelligence is working … But the higher intelligence is quicker than the body e.g. moments of very great lucidity in extreme danger. What must we think of this?"[139] She believes that it is possible to create a habit of preventing the body from responding prematurely: "One can also not believe it, but that is an inferior procedure, because of the phenomenon of reading." It is shortly after this that she comes to the idea of reading and of being read by others, and also cites justice in the process. Justice for Weil means the readiness to allow another to be other than what we might read initially,

[138] Weil *NB* p. 42.
[139] Weil *NB* p. 42.

or what we might think of them. This thread is mentioned in order to highlight the way Weil writes in her *Notebooks* – between one of these thoughts on reading and the next, a few other topics were mentioned, and all within two pages.

Simone Weil was not so much interested in the precise nature and original location of our readings on the world rather did she care about what is done with them, how they are changed, and how in particular they are changed by others to suit their own needs, most especially in the pursuit of power. For Weil, our readings of the world are a result of our cultural, historical and personal histories. She is concerned with how words are changed and shaped in the name of war and conflict. As Eric Springsted notes about the art of war, it is "the art of changing people's readings."[140]

Doering's linking of Weil's idea of force with reading is also underscored by Weil in another essay, "Human Personality" - "by the power of words we always mean their power of illusion and error."[141] In their article on Weil and the *Iliad,* Hammer and Kicey quote these words in their discussion on bridging the metaphysical and spiritual world of Weil. They claim that one of the central paradoxes that organises her writings is the power of words. As well as citing her "spiritual individualism" which "does not mesh with liberal individualism", and her sense of "the paradoxes and contradictions of human existence",[142] Hammer and Kicey believe that her turning away from political concerns toward spirituality, which is thought to have led to "extremes of solitude, self-renunciation, and self-annihilation", could be seen best in her essay on the "*Iliad*".[143] They conclude their article by saying that "If Weil's argument hinges on accepting her understanding of God, then her philosophic approach will not be necessarily persuasive to our political age."[144] Though what she wrote after her mystical experiences did provide a dividing line for some, there is the broader view which can see this as a clear development.[145]

[140] Springsted p. 9.
[141] Weil *HP* p. 33.
[142] Dean Hammer Michael Kicey "Simone Weil's Iliad: The Power of Words", *The Review of Politics,* Vol. 72, No. 1 (Winter 2010), 79-96, pp. 79-80.
[143] Hammer Kicey. p. 80.
[144] Hammer Kicey. p. 95.
[145] In a discussion with her brother, André, Weil was explaining her reasons for not wishing to join the Catholic Church. His comment was "I see only one difficulty in that; it's that you would have the same reasons for adhering to Hinduism, or Buddhism, or Taoism." Quoted on p. 261 of Thomas R. Nevin's *Simone Weil Portrait of a Self-Exiled Jew* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of Carolina Press, 1991) pp. 488, p. 261 from Simone Pétrement *Simone Weil 2,* p.440.

Springsted highlights how Weil developed her ideas on reading throughout her life; she became more concerned about how human beings deal with the world as a whole, and was concerned that whatever the readings, they would be moral ones. This is where the three levels come in, whereby one begins with a totally egocentric reading at the first level, to the second level, where everything is of equal importance, "to rigorous order, and that the order's goodness does not depend on us."[146] The final level comes when we can read God behind the order.

For Weil, we are always reading as we are human beings, not God. However, we have a choice in what we see: so we can choose to see the goodness of God in all things.

> To read God in every manifestation, without exception, but according to the true manifestation relationship proper to each appearance. To know in what way each appearance is not God.
>
> Faith, a gift of reading.[147]

Taking her life as a whole then, Weil's approach to reading became more in tune with a theological perspective than a philosophical one. There are signs throughout her writings that enable a clear development to be seen. Vetö declares that the reason those who cannot comprehend the change in Weil from first to last notebooks, is because they will not accept that this "young anarchist, agnostic, and practically Marxist professor is the same person who was later "captured by Christ" and that "intellectual speculation in Weil really always obeys ethical passion and spiritual experience."[148]

As Weil's mystical encounters drew her into reading the mystics, particularly John of the Cross, and her own experience of youthful adherence to a commitment to those who are afflicted began to develop further, her thinking becomes more refined as she explores a different terrain of mysticism and affliction.

Before exploring Weil's mysticism, I would like to highlight the issue of the editing of Weil's work. There is an on-going debate about the compilation and editing of her work since the first posthumous publication of the gathering of pieces from her *Notebooks* that became *Gravity and Grace*.

[146] Springsted p. 10.
[147] Weil *NB* p. 220.
[148] Vetö p. 8.

2.14 The Presentation of the work of Simone Weil for Reading

There is a growing awareness of the need to assess the contribution which Gustave Thibon (1903-2001) has made to the propagation of the work of Simone Weil. Many people, whether academics or not, would have read Simone Weil's words for the first time in the pages of *Gravity and Grace.* This is still often referred to as Weil's book, rather than a selection from her writings, including the notebooks. Benjamin Braude and Ronald K. L. Collins have been writing and speaking about the issues surrounding the publication and editing of Weil's early work recently.[149] Thomas Nevin also examined the issue of the battlefield around Weil's *oeuvre* in his biography, and delivers up in his lengthy Bibliographical Essay alone, at the end of the biography, a reason to lift up the book.[150] Others might not agree with this particular reason though. In a review in 1992, Elizabeth Young-Bruehl, whilst believing that the book is a "nearly 500-page topographical map of the Battle for Simone Weil",[151] commends him for his extensive notes and his urging not to categorise Weil; Nevin feels that too many people approaching Weil do so with a cause in mind, and that what she has lacked is someone who will take her and her writings on with rigorous intellectual integrity, and place her in a truthful and clear light of her own. In her review, the war in the battlefield for Weil's work continues apace. Whilst Young-Bruehl has serious issues with both Nevin and with George Steiner's review of Nevin[152] - in particular around the issues of philosophy not being political, or practical, which she feels excludes feminists - her main disagreement with him is around the question of Weil's supposed repudiation of Judaism.[153] Whilst Nevin eschews the psychoanalytical approach, Young-Bruehl calls for some light to be shed from this field, as it might help to show "the origin and development of an obsessional

[149] Benjamin Braude gave a talk in Boston several years ago. It is entitled "Simone's Svengalis: a Petainist, a Missionary and the Making of Simone Weil", and was given at The Boisi Center for Religion and American Public Life at Boston College on Feb. 11, 2015, by Braude, who is an Associate Professor of History there. https://www.bc.edu/content/bc-web/centers/boisi-center/events/archive/spring-2015/simones-svengalis.html. He also gave an interview to the "Boisi Center Interviews" In February 2015. Ronald K.L. Collins has written on Gustave Thibon and the issues around the initial publication of Weil's work in 'The Famous Book She Never Wrote' in *Washington Independent Review of Books* April 16, 2020 http://www.washingtonindependentreviewofbooks.com/index.php/features/the-famous-book-she-never-wrote Ronald K.L. Collins edits a trii-monthly e-journal called *Attention The Life and Legacy of Simone Weil* https://attentionsw.org/about-attention.

[150] Thomas R. Nevin *Simone Weil Portrait of a Self-Exiled Jew* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Caroline Press, 1991) pps.488.

[151] Elisabeth Young-Bruehl "Rescue Mission" in *The Women's Review of Books Vol.IX,* No. 9/June 1992, p. 12.

[152] George Steiner "Bad Friday" *The New Yorker* 2 March 1992, p. 91 This article contains a review of Thomas Nevin's book, Steiner comments on Weil's lack of knowledge of Yiddish, and concludes his article by calling Weil a "complete *schlemiel*".

[153] Further reference to this issue will be made at the end of this chapter.

character."[154] One of the places where this "war" began initially is with the publication of *La Pesanteur et la Grâce.*

2.14.1 The Story of a Book

One of the initial, and most obvious, observations is that the book *Gravity and Grace*,[155] though attributed to Weil as author, is not entirely her own work. The words may be hers, but the order, themes and selection from thousands of pages of journals are solely the work of Gustave Thibon. Those beginning to study her in greater depth will move on to the complete notebooks and the essays, but her initial reputation, and her popular reputation, rests upon Thibon's book, and on that of Père Joseph-Marie Perrin's compilation of some of Weil's essays and letters under the title *Attente de Dieu*.[156] In the case of Perrin's book, at least the pieces quoted, be they essays or letters, were presented in a complete format, though once again, the choice of the editor is brought to bear. The pieces in this book were assembled by Perrin, though his introductory essay was left out of later editions.[157]

Gustave Thibon (1903-2001) was a farmer, a philosopher and a lay Catholic whose background bears further scrutiny. Though they came from different backgrounds, Thibon and Weil struck up a strong friendship, a friendship which culminated in Weil handing Thibon her notebooks just before she set sail for Morocco on the steamship *Maréchal-Lyautey*, a journey that would continue to America. She wrote to Thibon on handing her work over to him, a letter which he quotes in his Introduction to *Gravity and Grace*. This letter stated that Weil had given him her notebooks because their thinking was so similar, and because he had told her he found her work to be something for which he had long awaited. "I hope that after having been transmuted within you they will one day come out in one of your works."[158]

Braude contends that as Vichy France stripped Simone Weil of her rights, Thibon and Perrin nurtured the Catholic commitment that was growing within her. It is Braude's opinion that

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[154] Young-Bruehl op.cit. p. 13.
[155] Simone Weil *La Pesanteur et la Grâce* ed. Gustave Thibon (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1947), pp. 210. The English version was published in 1952 as *Gravity and Grace* trans. Emma Craufurd (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1952) pp. 183.
[156] Simone Weil *Attente de Dieu* (Paris: La Colombe, 1950) pp. 240. The English version was published in 1951 as *Waiting for God* trans. Emma Craufurd (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1951) pp. 170.
[157] For more details about the publishing history of the Perrin and Thibon books: https://attentionsw.org/70-years-later-still-waiting-for-god-a-few-thoughts-on-a-new-edition-of-a-weil-classic/ and also https://attentionsw.org/a-spiritual-friendship-simone-weil-and-pere-perrin/.
[158] Simone Weil *GG* p. xiii.

Weil's mysticism sets up a barrier between her and those scholars, particularly historians, who would approach the study of her texts more from a more historical viewpoint. For Braude, the mystical aura can appear to be unassailable, though not entirely so, and assailing is required, and therefore "if the beliefs are based on false or problematic evidence, then it's our duty to do that."[159] Whilst Weil appears to have been happy that her work could change form under the pen of Gustave Thibon, she gives some additional instructions and guidelines to him. Thibon may read passages from the notebooks to whomsoever he wishes, but must not leave them in the hands of anyone else. "If you hear nothing from me for three or four years, you can consider that you have complete ownership of them."[160] Though he is coy about his reception of these directives,[161] yet he went on to compile a collection of her thoughts and turn her incipient aphoristic style into a more full-blown version of itself into the compilation of her thoughts that became *Gravity and Grace*. Thibon claimed that Simone Weil's writings "belong to the category of very great work which can only be weakened and spoilt by a commentary."[162] However, it did not seem to occur to him that his editing was a commentary in itself. In fact, it could even be seen as mis-appropriation of that "great work." Editing this particular set of notebooks would always be a gargantuan task. As with any work that involves the choice of what to include, and what to exclude totally, the biases and perspective of the editor or the compiler, must be taken into account. It is these biases that Benjamin Braude in particular seeks to excavate.

In a talk he gave at Boston College, Benjamin Braude stated "hagiography has trumped history" in studies of Weil, and that of "the estimated four thousand books and articles published about her, only one book and only one article have been produced by card-carrying historians."[163] This is a point worth mentioning for all Weil scholars.[164] Braude's attention was drawn to Simone Weil by an article of hers called "The Three Sons of Noah and the

[159] Benjamin Braude Boisi Center Interview op.cit. p. 3.
[160] Simone Weil GG p. xiii.
[161] Thibon claimed he would have had to be a saint or a despicable individual to accept Weil's offer. As he was neither, the question did not arise. "In the first case my self would not have counted at all, and in the second it would have been the only thing that did count." From his Introduction to *GG* p. xiv.
[162] Simone Weil *GG* p. xvii.
[163] Benjamin Braude Boisi Center Interview op.cit. p.3.
[164] Braude's interest in Simone Weil began with his finding what he thought was an obscure article of Weil's on the Sons of Noah, an article he had difficulty tracking down because of its publication history: initially it was published only in French editions, and in the UK edition; its removal from American editions was discovered by Braude on reading the correspondence of the French publisher La Colombe, with the American publisher Putnam and Sons. "The French Publisher told the Putnam editor that this essay had been severely criticized in Jewish circles and maybe they shouldn't bring it out in New York." Benjamin Braude with Erik Owens in The Boisi Center Interviews No. 102, February 11, 2015.

History of Mediterranean Civilization", an article of significance because it was Weil's only major engagement with a biblical story. According to Braude, other masters of myth, such as Freud, Levi-Strauss or Carl Jung had avoided this particular story. Not so Simone Weil.

Benjamin Braude's attention was drawn to this essay on the three sons of Noah, as part of his research into the biblical story itself. In his reading of Weil's interpretation of it, he highlights the racist interpretation of the biblical story, and Weil's acceptance of it.[165] Braude had difficulty finding this article initially though, discovering that it was only published in the French editions, not in the English ones, and later discovered that it was indeed published in the United Kingdom, though not in the United States of America. He examines the racist interpretation quite often placed in the story, with its identification of each son with certain continental marks, for example, Ham with Africa, especially Egypt, Shem with the Jews and Japheth with the Romans, Europeans and Germans, which would be quite usual. In a separate Boisi interview with Erik Owens, Braude contends that Weil accepts the racist framework and begins "mystically inverting it in a Gnostic fashion so that the act of Ham seeing the nakedness of his father becomes not a sin but a blessing, in contrast to the biblical interpretation."[166] What the Bible interpreted as a sin, that is, Ham witnessing the nakedness of his father, Weil now turns into a blessing. The other sons who did not see their father thus, are now the evil ones. So Shem and Japheth become engaged in a conflict – which Weil, therefore, sees as being between German and Jew, a plague on both their houses. To make such a statement in 1942 is "a problematic and repugnant statement", states Braude, not to mention her calling the Jews repugnant.[167] According to Weil, as well as killing Christ, they also tried to kill Dionysus.[168] Her interpretation of *The Iliad* and the Trojan War draws particular comment from Braude. The comments on this war Braude deems vitriolic, and Weil's claims about the Canaanites sending auxiliary forces to Troy to defend it against Greece, is "absurd" and a "real embarrassment for someone who is such a serious intellectual to indulge in this vacuous and repugnant kind of thinking."[169] This particular essay is now published in the English re-issue of Routledge & Kegan Paul's edition of *Waiting for God* dated May 2021.

[165] Noah and his sons Genesis 9:18 – 10:32.
[166] Braude *The Boisi Center Interviews* No. 102, Feb. 11, 2015, p. 2.
[167] Ibid. p. 2.
[168] Simone Weil's conflation of various historical and iconic figures is well known, for example, her identification of Christ with Krishna.
[169] Braude Boisi Interviews p. 2.

The history of the publication of *La Pesanteur et la Grâce* in particular, is currently under scrutiny, and is being researched in more detail by Braude. In an interview with Ronald K.L. Collins about her book on her family *At home with André and Simone Weil,*[170] given at the Lewes Public Library, Sylvie Weil, Simone Weil's niece, refused to make any detailed comment about this issue of the initial publication of her aunt's work, as it is quite contentious.[171] She commented that it was a "long and complicated story".[172] It has been known that Gustave Thibon did not have the permission of the family to publish *La Pesanteur et la Grâce*, though the complete details of the story have yet to be uncovered. It is hoped that Professor Braude's on-going research will reveal more of this particular story.

In concluding this chapter, the importance of attention for Simone Weil, a concept which began as a habit and developed into an exercise, even a spiritual exercise, may be understood as central to both her life and her work. Simone Weil's life and work have had an equal impact, as she strived to embody in her daily life the results of her reading of the world. She read both the text and the world and developing the exercise of attention was underpinned for Simone Weil by her concept of reading. Whatever she read, and however she read the world, was weighed and measured against her search for justice and truth. However Weil may be judged as being idiosyncratic there is no doubting her integrity as she pursued the truth. She was single-minded to a fault and did not bear fools gladly, being rather sharp with those she considered to be taking life and its particular issues less seriously than she would desire.[173]

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[170] Sylvie Weil *At Home with André and Simone Weil* trans. Benjamin Ivry (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2009) pps. 126.

[171] The Interview is part of a series by the Lewes Public Library, Delaware Libraries, and was held online https://delawarelibraries.libcal.com/event/7577974?f=h on May 3, 2021 at 5 pm ET, 10 pm local Irish time. In this interview, Sylvie Weil would only say that her aunt often trusted people who were not trustworthy at times, as she did not always "see people the way they were".

In her book, Sylvie Weil details the impact that her aunt's death had on the family. It drove a wedge between Simone Weil's parents and their son, with their granddaughter caught in the middle. She titles this particular chapter 'A Family Unglued' pp. 94-100.

[172]Sylvie Weil's comments, both in her book, and in the interview, reveal the pain and the grief of her family, in the aftermath of her aunt's death. That Simone had been maintaining a fiction about her life in London became clear to them after her death, and her mother became so overwrought that she spoke of suicide. The family would have appeared to be in no state to deal with publication issues, much less contentious ones.

[173] One of the most famous examples of this is her encounter with Simone de Beauvoir during their student days. De Beauvoir was interested in meeting Weil, and when she was eventually in her company one day, a discussion began about the Revolution that would feed the starving people of the world. For Weil, it was the only thing that mattered. De Beauvoir suggested that it was not about making people happy, but rather to work out the reason for their existence. Weil looked her "up and down" and retorted "It's easy to see that you've never gone hungry." Quoted in Simone Pétrement Simone Weil A Life trans. Raymond Rosenthal (London and

To quote again from the beginning of this chapter, "The spirit of justice and the spirit of truth, is nothing else but a certain kind of attention, which is pure love."[174] There was nothing sentimental about Weil's idea of love. It is in absolute and utter complete attentiveness to the spirit of truth and the spirit of justice. Nothing less will do for her.

Weil's description of the sensations of reading demonstrates her visceral approach to the concept. There is power in what we read, depending on the message being conveyed and its impact upon us. This may appear to be a simple idea. However, Weil highlights the power of words here. A statement containing sad, or upsetting, news can render the reader sad or upset, depending on its relevance to the person, and on whether they can read or not, as in the example she gives of mothers receiving news of their sons at the front during war. If thought is given to misleading the reader, as in the case of some social media and news outlets today, how much power is concentrated in those who create and craft the message and then disseminate it.

For Simone Weil, as we shall see in the next chapter, the grounding in reading and writing contributed to her concept of attention. This grounding enabled her to be ready, to be attentive, when darkness came, both personally and in the world around her. This, coupled with her zealous pursuance of truth, led her to adopt a stance of waiting, even in the midst of profound affliction.

Oxford: Mowbrays 1976) p. 51, from Simone de Beauvoir Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), p. 243.

[174] Weil, 'HP' in *SWR* p. 333. .

3 CHAPTER THREE: Attention in the midst of Affliction and Suffering – a Mystical Stance?

3.1 Introduction

"In Weil we have not only a modern example of an articulation of subjectivity but a modern example of asceticism in the service of others."[1]

Gillian Rose encapsulates the life and work of Simone Weil neatly here: this situating of Weil allows the presentation of the traditional idea of asceticism to a modern audience in a vital and essential way. A life of asceticism often includes a life of mysticism too. This chapter will explore the role affliction played in Weil's life and mysticism, from her early life and practices, to the later experiences of her working life. It will be seen that the awareness of and empathy with those who suffered, combined with the quality of attention that she paid to them, are at the core of the thinking and her spirituality. It will also be seen that this awareness provided the foundation for her mysticism, which contains resonances with John of the Cross, though not fulfil a direct comparison.

The word "mystic" is used in many contexts, so a discussion on its use, and with particular reference to Simone Weil, is required in order to contextualise her in any way. Weil's circle included Marie-Magdeleine Davy, someone who was a scholar of mystical thought in later life and who came to appreciate Weil's sense of social justice in later years as well, based as that was in the trade union and political work of their youth. The nature of Weil's personal mystical experiences impacted her life profoundly but not totally. Her idea of God and her relationship with God changed, though not the essence of her thinking, which remained open to other traditions. The theological nature of Weil's thinking has caused some debate, and whilst she may not be a theologian, her thinking does reveal a theological perspective, and this chapter includes an exploration of her thinking in relation to maintaining a stance of attention in the face of affliction, which for Weil entails encountering Christ in the Passion. As we shall see, it also entails encountering what she terms the void and her explanation of the void as that pulling away of God, that leaves the void for human beings between them and God.

[1] Gillian Rose 'The Asceticism of work: Simone Weil' in *The Ascetic Self Subjectivity, Memory and Tradition* ed. by Gavin Flood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp.37-63 (p. 39).

This chapter will examine her great essay on the topic of personalism and the essence of the person in one of her greatest essays, 'La Personne et la Sacré' in order to highlight the central issues contained therein and to assess their importance on Weil's writing and her legacy. For Simone Weil, the issue of personalism and the personality was paramount, and was woven into her thinking not just where her spirituality was concerned, but also into her politics. They were as one for her: any aspect of one's life, whether it is political or religious or cultural, is our life. The issue of impersonality is at the heart of her spirituality and of her writing.

That there is tiredness with the language and the institutions of Weil's time is a point explored in this chapter too. The Catholic Church Weil knew would change utterly in a matter of fifteen to twenty years; politically, the rise of fascism and nationalism had brought the world to its second war of the twentieth century. She was an outsider with regard to all institutions of interest to her. Perhaps this was part of her dark night. The work of Constance Fitzgerald has shed new light on this dark night, particularly from the Carmelite perspective and John of the Cross. There are echoes of Weil's work and thought here, as Fitzgerald believes that the theologies and lifestyles we have carefully constructed, based on our unique belief systems, are going to fall on us. This is in line with Weil's thinking on the demise of political parties and her dissatisfaction with the Catholic Church as an institution.

Weil's identification with the soldiers at the Front during World War One was one of the first signals of her empathy with those who are suffering. Why one sets out on such a path, or indeed continues on such a path, are considerations worth exploring, though with some caution.[2] In the case of Weil, what seemed to spring forth from within and came naturally, became a practice situated within her developing spirituality. This spirituality of Weil's, though rooted within the Christian and Greek traditions also included her study of some of the religious and spiritual traditions of the East. Whichever tradition one follows in pursuit of Weil's roots, she is not to be found fully planted in any of them. Nor can she be described as being syncretic. There are elements of a syncretic approach, if this approach is understood as the attempt to fuse together religious traditions. Rather than doing this, Weil appears to be

[2] Some biographers have incorporated a more psychological assessment of Weil into their studies, focussing on her eating issues and querying anorexia, or examining her family dynamic: Robert Coles in *Simone Weil A Modern Pilgrimage* (Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1987) and to a lesser extent, Francine du Plessix Gray in *Simone Weil* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2001). Though bringing some expertise to bear, it remains the case that without the full co-operation of the person in question, assessing the motivation of another cannot ever be completely realised.

mining each tradition for its particular reserve of resources and instead of bringing them forward towards some kind of union, she seeks to comprehend what is at the root of them all. This is exemplified in her understanding of Christianity's roots in the Greek tradition. To travel thus from one tradition to another may entail a solitariness of thought, and a solitariness of existence, which can create pain and isolation, yet these stances were to Weil as normal, and assisted in creating the well-worn image of Weil as the quintessential outsider. Weil's writing style, her assertive voice and strength of tone, have a direct appeal to those today whose lives are caught in fraught moments and slivers of history unprecedented for several generations. The condensing, editing and presentation of her work, a situation that began almost immediately after her death, and which has already been discussed earlier, has made her thoughts easily available in, dare it be said, bite-size morsels. In discussing her political thought, Helen M. Kinsella suggests that Weil's role as the pariah or the lonely figure could be explained by several factors, "the putative peculiarity of her personality combined with her stringent asceticism has overwhelmed attention to her thought, the explicit foregrounding in her later writings of her conversion from an agnostic Jew to Christian, the incomplete and idiosyncratic nature of her work, and the way in which her work was first circulated,"[3] all of these combine to cloud the clear presentation of her work. It can also be said that Weil's work itself is fragmentary in nature, with little of it prepared, or intended for publication.

This liminal space of Weil's making, could become a negative space, sought out and occupied by those who have taken refuge from, or been rejected by, whatever passes for normal in their family, church, or workplace. However, in these times of fake news, mass communication and the crumbling of religious, political and cultural institutions, coupled with the intense battles for the concentrated attention of every human being's eyes, those who find themselves in the outsider compound, may glance around to find it a crowded place, and not solely composed of refugees from societal or religious norms. It will include those from the political realm, as well as cultural and other realms.

In the current global political, health and economic context, this compound of outsiders is occupied by many who do not choose to call themselves outsiders, yet who have been forced into the space by virtue of a circumstance of birth, which placed them in the 'wrong' category – a category perhaps imposed arbitrarily by a political system gone awry. This compound of

[3] Helen M. Kinsella "Of Colonialism and Corpses: Simone Weil on Force" *Women's International Thought: A New History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2021) pps. 72-92, p. 74.

outsiders becomes also a liminal space in times of war and crisis, where memory and hope combine to make of it a space on the verge. This is not a comfortable place to be, and many may run for the cover of an old institution or two. This experience of the void experienced here will be considered later, as it serves to highlight and to provide an entry into the v*ia negativa.* Simone Weil knew and understood this space better than most, and had been exploring the concepts of sacrifice and of suffering from a young age. How she perceived suffering, affliction is hewn from these early experiences.

3.2 Simone Weil – Mystic

It is perhaps in delineating her anatomy of affliction, and the role of attention in remaining with the affliction, that Simone Weil has contributed in a significant way to the study of both these topics. Towards the end of her life, Weil's writing on affliction, on prayer and on attention came to encompass her personal mystical experiences. At this stage in her life, she had also been influenced by John of the Cross, who was one of the mystics she had by then commenced reading. Weil is often described as a mystic, this description sitting alongside others such as 'activist' or 'philosopher'. However one might expand upon the last two descriptions of Weil, the word 'mystic' contains within itself less clarity, and greater potential for obfuscation. Taking the word within a religious context, its dictionary definition is given as "the belief in the existence of a state of reality hidden from ordinary human understanding, such as occult or other mysterious forces."[4] However it is examined, accepting the concept of mysticism appears, at its most basic, to return to the simple assertion of faith, be that in a god, in a higher power or in a general acceptance of there being something 'other'. This 'other' is usually connected with an experience of some kind, an experience that is impossible to pin down to rational explanation alone. In today's world, the word "mystic" has become ubiquitous, so it is important to explore the word and the experience.

3.3 Mystical Experience

This leads in turn, to the greater issues around language and perception. Denys Turner questions the idea of mystical experience itself in his book *The Darkness of God.* He interrogates the whole notion of those experiences, because his reading of those regarded as

[4] Chambers Dictionary online (London: John Murray Learning/Hodder and Stoughton, 2020).

mystics such as Eckhart or the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, revealed that they did not speak of experiences, nor did later writers such as John of the Cross or Teresa of Avila, much less define those experiences as mystical. The use of words like 'inwardness' and 'ascent', which are within the portfolio of metaphors Western civilisation has inherited, and which Turner claims Christians need in order to begin to describe what mysticism, or spirituality, or prayer are like, lead him to question further.[5] This questioning leads him to an examination of the concept of 'inwardness', for example, in our time, as compared to its use in medieval writing. He states that the "medieval employment of them was tied in with a 'critique' of such religious experiences and practices."[6] In Western culture today, we have psychologized these metaphors, claims Turner, the Neoplatonic medieval writer "used the metaphors in an 'apophatic' spirit to play down the value of the 'experiential'."[7] The medieval mystical mind perceived the 'mystical' to be the secret, or hidden, wisdom of the divinity, something which is hidden from experience.[8] Turner employs the term *anti-mysticism* in his definition of what mysticism might mean for our times

> For though the mediaeval Christian Neoplatonist used that same language of interiority, ascent and 'oneness', he or she did so precisely in order to deny that they were terms descriptive of 'experiences'. And the central metaphor of this negativity, of this restraint of 'experience', was the apophatic metaphor of 'light' and 'darkness', of the 'cloud of unknowing'. [9]

Turner claims that our usage today of the metaphors under discussion, is done so after what he terms an evacuation of their dialectics, and then a filling up of them again with the "stuff of 'experience'. This modern development I call 'experientialism'."[10] Therefore, he cautions against the reading of mediaeval Neoplatonic mystics from within this 'experientialism', as to do so, would be to misread them greatly. His task is to retrieve the apophatic or negative, mysticism.

In his final defining of the mystical, he disagrees with Bernard McGinn, who argues that if what we are experiencing as real is present to us, "is not a 'present' God just one more thing? This is why many mystics from Dionysius on have insisted that it is consciousness of God as

[5] Denys Turner *The Darkness of God Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 3.
[6] Turner p. 4.
[7] Turner p. 4.
[8] Turner p. 4.
[9] Turner p. 4.
[10] Turner p. 5.

negation, which is a form of the absence of God that is the core of the mystic's journey."[11] Turner also uses McGinn's citation from Simone Weil's *Notebooks*, which is used by McGinn to back up his argument,

> Contact with human creatures is given us through the sense of presence. Contact with God is given us through the sense of absence. Compared with this absence, presence becomes more absent than absence.[12]

Turner disagrees with McGinn, believing that it is not possible to use the apophatic 'unknowing' of *The Cloud of Unknowing* as the *experience* of negativity, rather should it be known as the *negativity of experience*.[13] Whilst on the surface, Turner's quote from Weil may seem to back up McGinn's argument, there is something to be said for reading Simone Weil's comment that "presence becomes more absent than absence", in another way. It may read rather differently if her antithetical style is brought into the equation. She may herself have been guilty of some of what Turner terms 'experientialism'. It is also worth noting that it is not clear that Weil would always have understood God as being absent. In her story about the two prisoners in adjoining cells, for example, God is compared to the wall that separates them. They communicate by means of taps on the wall. The wall separates them, but it is also what enables their communication. "It is the same with us and God. Every separation represents a bond."[14] It is within the absence that the presence is known, perhaps Turner's idea of the absence (of God) being just the absence of another thing, could be read differently.

Jantzen finds McGinn's approach to be linear: mysticism is not about intense, subjective experiences, rather "mysticism has undergone a series of social constructions, which were never innocent of gendered struggles for power."[15] When these "gendered struggles" are ignored, then philosophers of religion "are in turn perpetuating a post-Jamesian understanding of mysticism which removes mysticism and women from involvement with political and social justice."[16] Weil was committed to social jusice all her life and her mysticism was not separate from this. If anything, her mystical experience enhanced her work. She is not regarded as a mystic first though – perhaps Jantzen's words have some truth

[11] Bernard McGinn *The Presence of God: A History of Western Mysticism 1*: *The Foundations of Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1991) pp. xviii-xix, quoted by Turner on p. 264.
[12] Weil *NB* pp. 239-40.
[13] Turner p. 5.
[14] Weil *NB* p. 497.
[15] Grace M. Jantzen 'Feminists, Philosophers, and Mystics' *Hypatia*, 9.4 (1994), p. 186.
[16] Jantzen p.186.

to them. Jantzen places mysticism within the Western view, flowing from Biblical times, developed in the patristic and medieval era, flowering in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, and with new developments in the Catholic and Protestant reformations. Weil had read widely in Eastern philosophies and religions and she did not sit well within a strictly Catholic background. Weil's experience supports Jantzen's argument, though Weil did not discuss this issue. Jantzen believes that the concept of mystical knowledge only being available to the mind or spirit, detached from the body, originated around the time of Plato, thus leaving things of the body to women, and the higher knowledge of mysticism to men. She suggests that there could be a "mystical core of religion – an inward, personal experience that people in all religions have in common, although it is then overlaid with culture-specific beliefs and practices."[17]

Jonardon Ganeri broaches the subject of inwardness, by recalling Augustine and his plea to turn inward "do not go out, return to yourself; truth dwells in the inner man (*in interior homine*)."[18] Augustine is credited by many with the concept of the inner self in the Western tradition. Ganeri clarifies that it is Plotinus who was responsible for this idea coming into Western thought, though in terms of world philosophy, it can be "traced back to the pre-Buddhist Upanişads. What Augustine does invent is an original depiction of the nature of inwardness."[19] Ganeri examines Simone Weil's definition of self-emptying, the stripping of the "I" and compares it with that of the Portuguese poet, Fernando Pessoa (1888-1935). Ganeri believes Weil is advocating an abandonment of the inward turn in order to "attend to the world itself, without allowing one's desires or preoccupations to influence what one attends to or how one attends."[20] Ultimately, he believes that she does not want to revoke the concept of inwardness, rather does she object to a "way of thinking about oneself that puts one at the center of an arena of agency."[21] For Pessoa, this turn to one's inner life is termed "analysis" which for him entails "attentive scrutiny of the landscape of sensations that constitute a heteronymic subjectivity."[22] In utilising his heteronymous identities, one of Pessoa's main discoveries was that there is "no constancy in the fact of who is there at the

[17] Jantzen p. 195.
[18] Augustine *De Vera Religione – Die Wahre Religion* ed. Josef Lőssl (Paderborn: Schőningh, 2007) 39 quoted in Jordanon Ganeri *Inwardness* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021) p 9.
[19] Ganeri p. 10.
[20] Ganeri p. 10.
[21] Ganeri p. 91.
[22] Ganeri p. 79.

center."[23] Each heteronym is another "I". As Pessoa spent a lifetime stretching the boundaries of inwardness and discovering that it sustains "a phenomenal center, a subject position which can be multiply occupied," Simone Weil was in agreement with Pessoa as far as acknowledging that our desires and wishes shape the world. Ganeri holds that what matters to Weil is complete attention to the world, "to eliminate the distortions of self-interest, and to make the internal geography of one's mind into a conformal map, without perspective or prejudice."[24] For Weil, there is an object, though that object is absent. For Weil, there is God, "This world, in so far as it is completely empty of God, is God himself."[25] Paying attention to the world then, is paying attention to God. In order to develop a clearer picture of Weil's mysticism throughout her life and to understand her spirituality better, the thoughts of a friend, who later wrote a book on Weil's mysticism, contain some useful insights.

3.3.1 Simone Weil – always a mystic? A contemporaneous account

Simone Weil's maintenance of a stance of attentiveness in the face of profound affliction is stark, unflinching and intense. She expects that this stance entails nothing less than standing squarely, facing into the abyss that is affliction, not rushing to fill the void we are experiencing with our imagination, nor holding on to the past. This stance was a lifetime in the making. A contemporary of Weil, Marie-Magdeleine Davy, who wrote a short book on Weil's mysticism in 1951, believed that her mysticism had, at its roots an identification with the poor, which is readily attested to by her childhood experiences of denial and self-sacrifice. "Deliberately, she identified herself with the anonymous masses, their unhappiness entered into her, soul and body, disintegrating her on every level."[26] Simone Weil felt that she was branded with serfdom, as the Romans had branded their slaves, and she demonstrated throughout her life, a quality that could be said to transcend empathy in some ways, given her desire to be at one with the poor, and her desire to work under the same conditions as the poor, for example, in her work in factories. However, as this tendency began at such a young age, it could be contended that a fine line exists between a sense of empathy of this nature, and perhaps some compulsive behaviour. Simone Weil always demonstrated the ability to

[23] Ganeri p. 80.
[24] Ganeri p. 101.
[25] Weil *NB* p. 424.
[26] Marie-Magdeleine Davy *The Mysticism of Simone Weil* trans. Cynthia Rowland (London: Rockcliff, 1951) p. 6.

focus intently on whatever her goal may have been, cutting out any distractions along the way.[27]

Davy's own life as a philosopher and academic, was centred around the study of mysticism, and of many books she wrote, some focussed on the mechanics of mysticism, and on those who were mystics, or who were drawn to the mystical life, such as Bernard of Clairvaux, Guillaume de Saint-Thierry, Henri le Saux, and Gabriel Marcel, among many others. Davy was acquainted with Weil during their time studying together at Henri IV. Davy and Weil often spent Sunday mornings together at Sacré Coeur, in Montmartre, as they sold *L'Humanité,*[28] a Communist paper later banned by the Nazis in the Second World War, on behalf of two old women who were news-vendors and who could not leave their home due to their infirmities.[29] According to Davy, they used to fight and she found Weil to have great depth, thought she did not understand her. We both liked politics but she had a social sense that I do not have, have never had, and shall never have."[30] Davy's viewpoint is from a Catholic perspective, and she tends to see Weil as someone on a clear trajectory towards God, with few, if any, deflections. Davy's emphasis tends to focus on the elements of self-annihilation by Weil, and on her struggle with the Catholic Church, much of which Davy elucidates with honesty and openness. Both of them shared a belief in the essential message of the Gospels, and Davy felt that it was not so much a case of the modern world having failed the gospels "but simply the defeat of the wrong uses to which they have been put".[31] The church had become too bourgeois, too linked to the establishment, to be of any effective use to those who needed it, she claimed. These views would be in line with Weil's, and Davy perceived her as living in such a profound state that few could reach it:

> When one lives in such a dimension, time no longer exists; in its place, there is a tapestry, upon which everything can be read, the past, current events and what will happen. She simply knew. It was the end of wandering. When I speak of wandering, I mean Adam and Eve, full of fear and condemned to wander without any direction.

[27] There is background in Simone Pétrement's book on Weil, detailing the fastidiousness of Weil's mother, Selma, when it came to her children and the avoidance of microbes. This included watching out for who and how other people touched her children. Simone Weil thus grew up with a sense of what this biographer quotes Weil as claiming to be her "disgustingness". Simone Pétrement *Simone Weil* p. 11.

[28] *L'Humanité,* and the Communist Party, were dissolved in 1939 in response to the German-Soviet Nonaggression Pact, and the journal was then published clandestinely during the War years.

[29] Gabriele Fiori *Simone Weil An Intellectual Biography* trans. Joseph R. Berrigan (Athens and London: The University of Georgis Press, 1989), p. 41.

[30] Fiori *Simone Weil* pps. 41 and 328 n. 7. This particular quote is taken from Fiori's conversations with Davy, which was published in the book by Marianne Monestier *Elles étaient cent et mille-femmes dans la resistance* (Paris: Fayard, 1972) pp. 202-203.

[31] Davy p. 73.

> She understood that Christianity was to be lived internally, that the external does not count. All values can then be attained, even those involving one's country and the world.[32]

As this opinion was published in 1972, long after Weil's death and Davy's earlier work on her, it provides an interesting summary of Davy's later thinking on Weil, particularly concerning the living of Christianity internally, which means an encompassing of values, including those involving one's country and the world. Davy's appreciation of Weil's sense of social justice appears to have deepened as the years went by.[33] Davy had noted well in her earlier work how Weil had learned early on that "nothing has the same quality as actual experience."[34] The sense of social justice within Weil from an early age led her to identify always with those who were poor or afflicted. This sharing of their experience was core to her life and thinking; this is what paying attention meant to her. There was no looking away for her.

Davy also highlights the process of taking on Weil as a subject, and quotes Pétrement as saying that "it is not very much help to have known her. On the contrary, it may even be deceptive."[35] With her awareness of psychoanalysis, and from her own study of that subject, Davy could state:

> For we see other people through what we ourselves are. It is not enough to know someone. One has to understand and coincide. Besides we do not talk about our spiritual experiences. They can only be read between the lines, in the inflection of a voice or perhaps even in an expression of the eyes. It is only by a lucky accident that we are able to know something of the inner life of Simone Weil, without any risk of distorting it.[36]

That "lucky accident" included Weil's correspondence with Fr. Perrin, asserts Davy, thus enabling what was later to find its way into the book *Attente de Dieu*, to be of a revelatory nature. Having thus accorded Weil's work the status of revelation, Davy then describes Weil's spiritual life as having reached the heights of mysticism, a mystical height, or level, common to all religions, be they of the Muslim tradition, or the Vedantic, or whatever. Not however, the Jewish tradition.

[32] Fiori *Simone Weil* pp. 307 and 368 n. 27.
[33] Marie-Magdeleine Davy was born in 1903, and died at the age of 95, in 1998.
[34] Davy p. 6.
[35] Davy p. 17.
[36] Davy p. 17.

Davy acknowledges Weil's Jewish background by stating that "though she was of Jewish origin, "Simone Weil was unacquainted with Jewish thought."[37] Whether Weil chose to remain "unacquainted" with her cultural background, or may even have had a more negative response to her Jewish background is certainly well documented and debated at this stage.[38] Davy accepts this state of affairs without much exploration, whilst also making some judicious and cautious comments on knowing Weil. It is when she comes to describing Weil's mysticism that she suddenly lifts into hyperbole. Those who wrote about Weil's mysticism from a Catholic perspective tend to do so through the lens of that particular religion, imputing an underlying Catholic standpoint that sometimes, indeed, appears to benefit from Weil's stance as an outsider. She can provide an outsider's point of view, which can refresh and invigorate a debate.[39] However, sanctification, for those within a religious system is a long and arduous process, never mind for those without.

Much has been laid at the door of Weil's reading of John of the Cross which further stokes the idea of a Christian mystical flame. For Weil though, reading the mystics did not preclude her from continuing her broad reading of other sources as well. Right up until the very end of her life, she was still quoting multifarious sources, both from folklore and from modern works of fiction, as well as from religious sources. She did not separate or place in categories when it came to her search for the truth, as she perceived it, the truth could be found in a popular book on mythology, or in an academic treatise.[40]

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[37] Davy p. 17.

[38] There are varying views given in almost all studies undertaken on Simone Weil, as has already been noted. That she was born into a secular Jewish background is the prevalent thinking, though, as noted already, her niece Sylvie Weil has highlighted the religious practices of Simone's grandmother, whom she knew and who did practice her faith. Information on this is contained in Sylvie Weil's *At Home with André and Simone Weil* trans. Benjamin Ivry (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2020).

[39] This may be seen in articles by Madeleine Grace, who wrote about Edith Stein and Simone Weil, and their similarities, as well as their differences in "Edith Stein and Simone Weil: A Study in Commitment" in *Teresianum* (1993/1, pps. 1990219); and Jane Khin Zaw, who sees Simone Weil as foreshadowing the Second Vatican Council in her articles, for example "The Spirit blows where it chooses: Simone Weil, the Church and Vatican II" in *The Way* 56.2, (Spring 2017), pps. 89-110.

[40] In the last few pages of her *Notebooks*, Simone Weil mentions a story she says is of Irish origin. It is a story she thought was called "A Flock of Birds" and tells of the sister of a youth who has just been executed, as she returns home. In a burst of energy, she devours a pot of strawberry jam. Never again can she bear even the mention of strawberry jam. This story is not actually from ancient folklore, but rather from a popular book called *A Flock of Birds*, written by Kathleen Coyle, an Irish-American writer. It was published in 1930 in New York by E.P. Dutton and Company. As Coyle was a popular writer, it is quite conceivable that Weil would have found this book, and read it, during her stay in London. Coyle knew other writers such as Rebecca West and James Joyce, and was also a social activist and suffragist. Simone Weil read widely, and indeed, according to Mme. Denise-Aimé Azam, told Gabriella Fiori that Weil was known to own a whole collection of English detective stories (the Green Penguins) cf. Gabriella Fiori *Simone Weil An Intellectual Biography (*Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press 1989) n.38 p. 339.

3.3.2 Charting Simone Weil's mysticism from a theological perspective

Writing on Weil's mysticism, Rozelle-Stone and Stone, highlight Weil's stance as an outsider too. For them, mysticism is the "first stage of the art of dying", and this includes "renouncing collective identities."[41] Simone Weil did not even take on a collective identity at any stage in her life, quite the opposite. She cautioned against all collectives, all institutions. She refused to be baptised into the Catholic Church, preferring to remain outside it. The same lack of affiliation goes for her relationship with the Communist party, one which ultimately she could not continue, due to the failings of the party in her eyes, which included not living up to the ideals of communism, citing the Soviet Union as her main example. Her strongly held beliefs about the dangers inherent within any institution, be it the Catholic Church, or the Communist Party, such as idolatry, authoritarianism and the susceptibility towards corruption, remained with her always.[42]

Rozelle-Stone and Stone examine the concept of mystics as being those who discover new levels of meaning within their own traditions, by quoting the work of Scholem on this issue. They claim that this idea of new levels of meaning "both affirms and problematizes aspects of Scholem's framing of mysticism as a historical phenomenon."[43] Simone Weil ignored, or laid aside, her historical and cultural background, when it came to her Jewishness. Whether to consider Weil within the ambit of her Jewish origins, or her professed leanings towards Christianity, is problematic. As previously noted, Weil's personal history cannot be ignored in her case. As these, and other authors, highlight, Weil's family had become subsumed into the secular society of the France of their time, and their Jewishness had been all but forgotten, though it was to be resurrected in the next generation of the family.[44]

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[41] A. Rebecca Rozelle-Stone and Lucian Stone *Simone Weil and Theology* (London New Delhi New York Sydney: Bloomsbury 2013), p. 30.

[42] It is important to note here the controversy around the end of Simone Weil's life, and the assertion of her friend, Simone Deitz, that Weil was, indeed, baptised in the sanatorium in Ashford, during her final days. There is a full discussion and analysis of this assertion in *Spirit, Nature, and Community Issues in the Thought of Simone Weil* by Diogenes Allen and Eric O. Springsted (Albany,New York: State University of New York Press, 1994), "The Baptism of Simone Weil" pps. 3-18.

[43] Rozelle-Stone and Stone, pp. 9-10.

[44] This was remedied in later generations, as is evidence by Simone Weil's niece, her brother André's daughter, Sylvie, in her book *At Home with André and Simone Weil* trans. by Benjamin Ivry (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2010). Sylvie recounts a life growing up in the shadow of her aunt (and her father), to whom she bears a strong resemblance. She also recounts her own connection with their Jewish roots. As her aunt had begged André to have Sylvie baptised, this was done, sometime after her birth, mainly in order to honour her aunt's memory (Sylvie Weil p. 39). However, Sylvie Weil has also acknowledged her Jewish ancestry cf. N. 27.

Rozelle –Stone and Stone cite Weil's own perception that her thoughts and deeds were always Christian, taking the example of the Christian idea of love of one's neighbour, which Weil read as justice. The authors make an excellent point with regard to Weil's perception of herself; the fact that there was within herself a "staggering consistency – one that spans from her early childhood until the last years of her life."[45] They note that Weil made this declaration feeling like a Christian all her life, subsequent to her three mystical experiences. Therefore, they contend that technically speaking, "there was no causal relationship between Christianity as such and her thoughts and actions antecedent to her mystical encounters."[46] Pursuing Scholem's thinking, the authors, in agreeing that mystics often look to sacred texts to find their experiences reflected therein, hold that Weil extends the reading of these sacred texts to include not only an explanation for her Christian mystical experiences, but also to explain many of her previous experiences, especially those which she feels, in retrospect, define her as a Christian. Far from Christianity providing her with a refuge from the tribulations and conflicts in the world, it grounded her more in the realities of life, they believe.

> Thus, Weil's religious awakening resulted in two radical conclusions. First, Christianity – or rather, Christ – is exemplary of the unflinching attention necessary for addressing the problems in this world. Second, attention not only led her to acknowledge the spiritual crisis afflicting the world at large (a commonplace observation for religious devotees) but also that which contaminated religious institutions such as the Church.[47]

The portrayal here of Weil's Christianity, is of a grounded, attentive faith, strong in social justice, focussed on the figure of Christ, and fully engaged in a troubled world. There is more than a passing resemblance here to the theology developed years after Weil's death in the Catholic Church i.e. a theology of Liberation. In this context, Weil could fulfil the criterion for living a mystical life – that is, one whose prayer life not alone lifts them beyond the everyday and the mundane experience of life, but one which grounds them in that very experience and gives them new eyes to see that which is the true reality. For Simone Weil, discernment of that true reality was paramount. She would even go as far as stating that "Christ likes us to prefer truth to him because, before being Christ, he is truth. If one turns aside from him to go toward the truth one will not go far before falling into his arms."[48]

[45] Rozelle-Stone and Stone, p. 11.
[46] Rozelle-Stone and Stone, p. 11.
[47] Rozelle-Stone and Stone, pp. 12-13.
[48] Weil *WG* p. 27.

Perhaps this could be witnessed most assiduously by her attitude to baptism. Discerning the truth in something that is "mysterious but real" is her task.[49] In writing to Fr. Perrin in what has become known as her "Spiritual Autobiography", Weil takes something from Durkheim's theory, which, though she claims his theory confused what is religious with what is social, yet it leaves behind an element of truth for her, and that is "that the social feeling is so much like the religious as to be mistaken for it."[50] So whilst Weil could agree that participation in the rituals and the sacraments is an admirable thing, it is not enough. The appearance of being religious is not enough. Weil takes a step further though, believing that "I think that only those who are above a certain level of spirituality can participate in the sacraments as such. For as long as those who are below this level have not reached it, whatever they may do, they cannot be strictly said to belong to the Church."[51] It is with comments like these that Simone Weil's harsh judgement of both herself and others comes through. She creates a hierarchy of perfection that could almost be said to be as stultifying as any regulation the Church could outline. She gives grace the opportunity to help her to become less imperfect. What, though, about being held in the love of God? This is where Weil's inability to release herself fully to a loving God, becomes more obvious. More importantly, she then elevates it to the level of scrupulosity, denies this very scrupulosity, and goes beyond it again. This time, her claims that it is not scrupulosity, but rather her own state of inadequacy, that makes her unfit to partake in the sacraments, is more striking in the midst of all her protestations of a lack of humility and begs the question with regard to her own judgement. If it is her lack of perfection that keeps her outside the Church, as well as "the fact that my vocation and God's will are opposed to it," where might she situate herself then?[52] Her presumption that God's will and her vocation are so aligned brings into sharp relief how deeply held her conviction was around the question of her vocation to the truth. The focus here is on her own vocation and the will of God, more than it is on faith in and dependence upon, a loving God.

Yet it is love for her neighbour, for her fellow human beings that keeps her outside the Church. In her letter concerning her issues with baptism, she details how she believes that God does not want men and women "who have given themselves to him and to Christ and who yet remain outside the Church."[53] She cannot contemplate taking the concrete step that

[49] Weil Waiting for God pp. 4-5.
[50] Weil *WG* p. 5.
[51] Weil *WG* p. 5.
[52] Weil *WG* p. 6.
[53] Weil *WG* p. 6.

would gain her entry into the Catholic Church, because that would separate her from those who did not believe. She defines a vocation as having sprung from a need:

> I have the essential need, and I think I can say vocation, to move among men of every class and complexion, mixing with them and sharing their life and outlook, so far that is to say as conscience allows, merging into the crowd and disappearing among them, so that they show themselves as they are, putting off all disguises with me.[54]

It is at *this* point that Weil discusses love. The love she outlines is that of neighbour, and describes having within her a longing to love her neighbour, as they are, for this, *this* is real love, according to her. She feels she is incapable of helping this neighbour yet, and would never countenance joining a religious order to do so, as this would be separating herself from the people by the wearing of a religious habit. Whilst there are those who are pure of soul, Weil feels that she could not place herself in this category, and it is because she believes herself to be the carrier of the seed of all crimes. This is a dangerous and painful position, she claims, however, it is one that can be put to some advantage too, with the help of the grace of God. Weil reaches the heart here of what she conceives a vocation to be:

> It is the sign of a vocation, the vocation to remain in a sense anonymous, ever ready to be mixed into the paste of common humanity. Now at the present time, the state of men's minds is such that there is a more clearly marked barrier, a wider gulf between a practising Catholic and an unbeliever than between a religious and a layman.[55]

The desire for anonymity, and for a hidden life, is often propounded as one of the hallmarks of one who is seeking holiness, someone who may even be described as a mystic. However, there is a tension inherent along this path, if the seeker is also writing about the experience. That tension arises between the involvement of the ego in the life of a writer/artist, and the desire to be nothing, to live the aforementioned hidden life; the question of how possible it is to be the voice for the voiceless, when one's own ego is ever present is a perennial one?

For Rozelle-Stone and Stone, Weil's mysticism was the "result of intellectual honesty and constant philosophical analysis and critique, that is, not a flimsy, shoddily constructed, self-interested spirituality intentionally wrapped in vague language."[56] The authors feel that this honesty of Weil's, coupled with her awareness that philosophical reflection has no language which can express it fully, has led to a situation where her "constant self-critique had the

[54] Weil *WG* p. 6.
[55] Weil *WG* p. 7.
[56] Rozelle-Stone and Stone p. 32.

effect of decentering her "self"."[57] They also make the point that because of this self-critique, Weil was vulnerable to being struck by "un(pre)determined experiences" be they of the ordinary suffering of humankind, or of the extraordinary, religious kind – in fact, these experiences were not particularly in her self-interest, they believe.[58] In describing Weil's mystical experiences, particularly the culminating one in the Abbey in Solesmes, where Weil experiences Christ himself coming down and taking possession of her, Rozelle-Stone and Stone state that this brings her *philosophical* thinking to its culmination. It is not the contradiction of her thinking in general, but rather the philosophical, they believe. This statement is rather striking, and their reasoning is given in the following way: for the authors, mysticism is "not the opposite of philosophy, but the consequences of philosophical investigation."[59] Simone Weil's mysticism is therefore a philosophical matter? Their argument is that though no-one would accuse philosophers of being loving, or of philosophy promoting intimate encounters, yet philosophy's literal meaning has to do with loving wisdom. They claim that, until recently, philosophy has been assumed to be "illiterate in love's expression."[60] On many levels, this is difficult to accept, if one reaches back to the origins of Greek philosophy, for example, particularly with Weil's great guide, Plato. In *The Symposium* the discussion about love, having begun with the subject of young boys, is extended by Eryximachus, to include many other objects, animals, plants and all existing things; "Love is a great and wonderful god whose influence extends everywhere, and embraces the worlds of gods and men alike."[61] In concluding his speech, he states:

> It is the love whose object is good and whose fulfilment is attended by sobriety and virtue, whether in heaven or earth, that possesses the greater power, and is the author of all our happiness, and makes it possible for us to live in harmony and concord with our fellow-creatures and with the gods, our masters.[62]

Truth is such a core value for Weil that Christ himself would ask a follower to prefer truth to him, as previously noted. In the section of her "Spiritual Autobiography" where she discusses this issue, she calls it "the problem of God", and claims that up until that point in her life, she had never considered the possibility of a real contact between a person and God.[63] She had

[57] Rozelle-Stone and Stone p. 32.
[58] Rozelle-Stone and Stone p. 32.
[59] Rozelle-Stone and Stone p. 34.
[60] Rozelle-Stone and Stone p. 34.
[61] Plato *The Symposium* 186a.
[62] Plato *The Symposium* 188c.
[63] Weil *WG* p. 27.

heard of such things but dismissed them.[64] In this mystical experience, the possession by Christ did not involve either her senses, or her imagination, she claims. As always, she strives for obedience in all things, even her reading.[65] Weil only reads what she is hungry for, something which she also encouraged in her students. Only in this way could spiritual progress be made. Of course, when she does read, it is to an extreme "I do not read. I *eat*. God in his mercy had prevented me from reading the mystics, so that it should be evident to me that I had not invented this absolutely unexpected contact." This then is the unexpected turn for Weil. This mystical turn became an impassioned one and is of a piece with both Weil's personality, and her stated method of working on her own spiritual path, seeking the truth in many places, condensing what she can from her various personal experiences, and continuing to forge that solitary path, ready to assimilate new experiences, and to sift through them for that "deposit of gold" that she felt was within her and needed to be shared.[66] This feeling about handing on something precious, and the urgency with which she state it, is all the more poignant given that it was written not long before her death.

3.4 Maintaining Attentiveness in Suffering and Affliction - Dark Nights and Voids

The American poet, Marie Howe (b. 1950), speaks of the difficulty of staying present in these times: "This might be the most difficult task for us in postmodern life: not to look away from what is actually happening. To put down the iPod and the e-mail and the phone. To look long enough so that we can look through it – like a window."[67] Maintaining attention through suffering and affliction, be it one's own, or that of another, is often an impossible task. Simone Weil charted this path, devising her own anatomy of affliction, with particular reference to the image of the dark night from John of the Cross. An examination of the dark night follows below, interrogating it from John of the Cross's perspective, and from a Carmelite perspective today, as well as reflecting on Weil's use of the image and where,

[64] She also claimed that "In *The Fioretti* the accounts of apparitions rather put me off if anything, like the miracles in the Gospel." *WG* p. 27.
[65] Weil *WG* p. 27.
[66] In a letter to her parents, dated July 18, 1943 (just about a month before she died), Simone Weil said that she felt she had "a sort of growing inner certainty that there is within me a deposit of pure gold which must be handed on. Only I become more and more convinced, by experience and by observing my contemporaries, that there is no one to receive it." This letter is from Simone Weil *Seventy Letters Personal and Intellecctual Windows on a Thinker* trans. by Richard Rees (Eugene, Oregon: WIPF & STOCK, 2015) p. 66.
[67] Marie Howe https://poets.org/poet/marie-howe This is from Marie Howe's biographical note on The Academy of American Poets site.

perhaps, the two diverge. At the core of the Christian idea of suffering is the Cross, and it is here that the path of affliction is anchored, both for Simone Weil, and for John of the Cross.

3.5 Attention and the Cross

"To look long enough so that we can look through it – like a window" – this is what attention demands of us in suffering. It is becoming more difficult to do in these days of the early twenty first century. At this juncture, it may be salutary to acknowledge how the topic of suffering, affliction and darkness may impact us, both as reader and as writer. Who among us waits in affliction with anything resembling patience or fortitude? Who among us willingly turns to read an account of suffering or affliction? In our culture in this twenty first century, if we so choose, we are confronted on an hourly basis, with suffering from all over the world via our technology. Choosing whether to stay with the image or the story is not something that we may feel is within our remit – is it a voluntary choice? Or is it something that is involuntary, something whereby our attention is not ours to give anymore, but is snatched away from us? Staying with the suffering long enough for it to become as clear as a window is on another level. We may look at suffering on a screen, and swipe away from it within seconds. Our attention is meted out in nano-seconds. So we see an image on our screen. Have we been touched by the suffering therein? Whatever the case, affliction unnerves us, indeed frightens us. Why, therefore, should we adopt an attentive posture? Even when we are thrust into an all-consuming experience of suffering and affliction in our lives, we are always working to sidestep it, somehow or other. The mere thought of the pain inherent in such a posture of attentiveness is sufficiently daunting to warrant any human being taking flight in the opposite direction, and that person to find understanding and compassion for so doing.

Adopting and then maintaining this attentiveness demanded much from Weil, and she maintained the discipline involved throughout her life. One of the exercises in maintaining this attentiveness was to write every day, for several hours, a practice initially encouraged by her tutor, Alain, and one which she maintained throughout her life. She felt she was being lax According to J.P. Little, for Weil the idea of attention is "one of her profoundest insights and not limited to the religious sphere."[68] Even though attention may not indeed be limited to the religious sphere, the issue of the crucifixion and the Cross emerged as a central theme in the

[68] J.P. Little *Simone Weil Waiting on Truth* (Oxford New York Hamburg: Berg, 1988) p. 130.

later years of Weil's short life. As well as a book outlining Weil's thought and life,[69] Little has made a study of the symbolism of the Cross in her work.[70] Broadly speaking Little sees Weil's idea on the formation of attention as a vital element of all studying, insofar as the revelation of truth depends upon it; she states that:

> It is also the only basis for true relationships between people, whether between friends or between an observer and an anonymous passer-by in some kind of need or distress, in that it reveals the true reality of the other. Attention is the opening to truth which comes from the outside, opposed to all acts of will, and to all muscular involve effort.[71]

It is worth noting, as it highlights the essence of Weil's thinking. Attention entails the suspension of thought "L'attention consiste à suspender sa pensée, á la laisser disponible et penetrable à l'objet … la pensée doit être vide, en attente, ne rien chercher, mais être prête à recevoir dans sa vérité nue l'objet qui va y pênétrer."[72] The opening to truth is what concerns Weil here, and this may entail a period of waiting that is long indeed, and painful, as it leaves thought suspended. Little highlights the fact that for Weil the mind becomes a recipient for truth, it does not create the truth. Here may be seen the absolute need for stillness, for silence and, above all, patient waiting. It is a waiting in emptiness, forming no attachment to outcomes, or to fulfilment, except at the behest of God, who has withdrawn. The God who has withdrawn having created the void, leaves humanity with its freedom, and the need, according to Weil, to shed the "I" in order to connect with God again.

Little has some of the most precise and clear explanations of what Weil means by attention, wherein she highlights the role of desire, and the similarities between Weil's idea of waiting on God, with John of the Cross's idea "loving attentiveness". This "loving attentiveness" is what resonates most with Weil's thought, as it coincides with her idea of the waiting on God that is commensurate with the leap one takes into the nothingness in order to connect with God. Constance Fitzgerald's mapping of John of the Cross's dark night provides a further insight into another concept too, that of the void and the dark night, and provides an outline and an understanding which allows other resonances in the work of Weil to come through.

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[69] Little, cited above.
[70] J.P. Little "The Symbolism of the Cross in the Writings of Simone Weil" *Religious Studies, Vol. 6, No. 2* (June 1970), pp. 175-183.
[71] Little *Waiting on Truth* p. 130.
[72] Simone Weil *Attente de Dieu* (Paris: La Colombe, 1950) pp. 76-77, translated in Little on p. 130 as "Attention consists in suspending thought, leaving it available, empty and ready to be entered by its object … thought must be empty, waiting, seeking nothing, but ready to receive in its naked truth the object that is about to penetrate it."

These will be explored below. To start at the very beginning, though, at creation there is an encounter with the void.

3.6 "Le Vide"

Weil's concept of the void is one where she may be said to develop her own particular theology, one not necessarily in line with central Christian thought. She believes that the void is created by God, as he withdraws from the world in creation. "A representation of the world in which there is some void is necessary, in order that the world may have need of God. That presupposes evil."[73] She also states that the world, as it manifests God, is full. Weil uses language that is more mystical and poetical, one which holds opposing forces together: "The universe both manifests and hides God."[74] So for those who want to find God, there will be times when the quest will yield clarity, but there will also be the moments of knowing nothingness, as the soul searches for that attachment to a God who remains hidden. The void is "the supreme plenitude", though man has not the right to know this, for Weil believed that this is proved by the fact that Christ himself, "was completely without knowledge of it."[75] To drink the cup of humanity to its final dregs, Christ had to know that moment of utter darkness, of knowing the nothingness, to the extent that he felt completely forsaken.[76]

Though Weil appears to equate the void with the dark night, it is unclear whether she treats them as precisely one and the same thing. Weil speaks of the "tearing asunder, something of a desperate nature, so that a void may first of all be produced – Void: dark night."[77] This gives the idea that God's creation of the void has an almost desperate component and leads to questioning whether Weil's reading of what constitutes a dark night is actually the same as that defined by John of the Cross? In her book on Weil's religious philosophy, Lissa McCullough explains Weil's thought by stating that "when the laceration point is reached and the void is produced, it registers on the soul as a total death, a pure negation, an annihilating hell."[78] This gives the impression that the void is almost an active energy, with some agency, that assails the person. The point where the soul is detached from the world, and unable to

[73] Weil *NB* p. 148.
[74] Weil *NB* p. 149.
[75] Weil *NB* p. 149.
[76] In Matthew 27:46, we read of Jesus on the cross, just before his death, crying out "'Eli, Ei, lema sabahchthani?', that is 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'" This is the essence of the human experience, to experience the abyss that is between humanity and God.
[77] Simone Weil *Notebooks* p. 135.
[78] Lissa McCullough *The Religious Philosophy of Simone Weil* (London New York: I.B. Tauris, 2014) p. 191.

form the attachment to God it desires is, according to Weil "void, terrible anguish, dark night."[79] Though Simone Weil seemed to know the work of John of the Cross, it is doubtful whether he would have agreed with her idea of the void as being that space brought into being by the violent sundering of God from the soul and the world. The lived experience might indeed be that of void and anguish, leading to the depths of a dark night, but the understanding of what is happening would be different. In an examination of the John of the Cross's thinking on this below, further insights will be forthcoming on this issue.

J.P. Little feels that see that Weil does indeed see her way through this darkness to an ultimate transformation

> The void which from a natural point of view was experienced as privation, as emptiness, is now seen to be fullness itself, supreme plenitude, the source and principle of all reality.[80]

This transformation, and indeed the dark night of the soul too, may only be understood in a mystical fashion. Little certainly feels that Weil is discussing mystical experience, something that she claims Weil does not do very often, and certainly not about her own experiences, unless specifically requested.[81] J.P. Little also finds that Weil's descriptions of the void are in the negative, "the experience of emptiness resulting from the deliberate or enforced suppression of goals or objects of desire."[82] She claims that this is partly because of Weil's natural diffidence, and partly because of reluctance on her part to evoke anything which might prove a consolation to the human predicament. In suffering, all a human being can do is cry out 'Why?' It is from this point of utter emptiness, hopelessness and despair that may be heard the echo later in the work of Johannes B. Metz, particularly in his book *Poverty of Spirit.*[83] The echoing continues in the development of a theology of liberation, and Weil's positioning within this particular field of theology is discussed in more recent times in the work of Maria Clara Bingemer, and that of Alexander Nova.[84] Taking the issues of the

[79] Weil *NB* p. 215.
[80] Little *Waiting on Truth* p. 131.
[81] Simone Weil wrote her *Spiritual Autobiography* for Fr. Perrin, as he had requested it. It is included in *Waiting on God.*
[82] Little *Waiting on Truth* p. 131.
[83] Johannes B. Metz, *Poverty of Spirit* trans. John Drury (Paramus, J.J. New York N.Y.: Paulist Press, 1968) pp.53.
[84] Maria Clara Bingemer trans. Karen M. Kraft *Simone Weil Mystic of Passion and Compassion* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books 2015) pp. 146; and Alexander Nava *The Mystical and Prophetic Thought of Simone Weil and Gustavo Gutiérrez Reflections on the Mystery and Hiddenness of God* (New York, NY: State of University of New York Press, 2001) pp. 203.

exercise of power, and the systemic suffering of peoples all over the world, we find that Weil links the void with the exercise of power.

3.6.1 Power and the Void

"Not to exercise all the power at one's disposal is to endure the void. This is contrary to all the laws of nature. Grace alone can do it."[85] For Weil, the exercise of power is pivotal to her thinking on the void. She believed that both experience and tradition teach us that people, "by a necessity of nature, every being invariably exercises all the power of which it is capable."[86] This quote is from Thucydides, and in true Weil fashion, she follows this quote from an ancient Greek historian, with a reference to the soul, which is like a gas that "tends to fill the entire space which is given it."[87] God can only enter when there is a space to fill. Our role, according to Weil, is to decreate, to annihilate the "I", so that there is room, there is that space, for the encounter with God.

Not to use the power at our disposal is to endure the void. The work involved in annihilating the "I", the acceptance of suffering and affliction – these are what must be endured in the void. This is contrary to the laws of nature, which Weil knows. "Grace alone can fill it", she claims.[88] The acceptance of the void is a supernatural task, hence our need for grace. Weil sees this in terms of energy "Where is the energy to be found for an act which has nothing to counterbalance it? The energy has to come from somewhere. Yet first there must be a tearing out, something desperate has to take place, the void must be created. Void: the dark night."[89] Weil's language is worth noting here again: the words "desperate" and "tearing out" signify a violence that is not the tone connected with mystical language in general, particularly not so in the writings of John of the Cross, whose imagery and language is steeped in the Wisdom/Sophia tradition, and the language of The Song of Songs from the Old Testament. For Weil though, the *experience* of the dark night may be similar to that of John of the Cross as it speaks to the affective life of the person i.e. the feelings experienced may be that of emptiness, of being in a void, of living in darkness. However, with John of the Cross, there is always the sense of being held in that very darkness, grounded and believing in a loving God. For Simone Weil, there is an 'all-or-nothingness' to her descriptions of the life of prayer, of a

[85] Weil *GG* p. 10.
[86] Weil *GG*. p. 10.
[87] Weil *GG* p. 10.
[88] Weil *GG* p. 10.
[89] Weil *GG* p. 10.

relationship with God. "Whoever endures a moment of the void either receives the supernatural bread or falls. It is a terrible risk, but one that must be run – even during the instant when hope fails. But we must throw ourselves into it."[90] Once again, there is the stark language with no room for error, but plenty for terror – of the divine kind. Weil's admonition not to "throw ourselves into it" may be reflective of her personal experience, but it is her use of the word "throw" that may say more about her, as once again, she uses graphic images and strong verbs to describe a life of prayer, a life dedicated to God. Weil's sense of discipline brings her a long way on the road to God, but, apparently, without the smallest ounce of joy. The only ease there may be, is that to be found in "instants of contemplation, or pure intuition, of mental void, of acceptance of the moral void," but these she sees as man (*sic*) "escapes from the laws of this world in lightning flashes."[91] The only escapes are mere flashes yet again those flashes may be sufficient food for someone on the contemplative path. The history of mysticism is replete with those who existed on very little light or reward in their lives e.g. Thérèse of Lisieux, who was known to have lived most of her life in the dark night, the experience of which is detailed in her autobiography *The Story of a Soul*.[92] For Simone Weil, the experience of the void is a stripping away of power, the annihilation of the "I", in this emptiness that was a dark night for the spirit. It was from John of the Cross that she borrowed this phrase, though modifying it to "spirit", instead of dark night of the soul.

3.7 John of the Cross and Simone Weil

As often as Simone Weil quoted John of the Cross, it was mostly in connection with the dark night. This phrase "the dark night of the soul," has been used to describe everything from deep depression, to having a bad day, to struggling spiritually. For John of the Cross, the phrase is utilised in the context of the spiritual life, and the development of the life of prayer and contemplation. Simone Weil was not speaking in this context, though she held a great admiration for the life of contemplatives, visiting the Benedictine Abbey of Solesmes in 1938, where she had one of her mystical experiences during Easter. For Simone Weil, this life of prayer and contemplation was open to all people; there was equal opportunity for everyone, not just those in contemplative orders. She did acknowledge, however, that it took

[90] Weil *GG* p. 11.
[91] Weil *GG* p. 11.
[92] Saint Therese of Lisieux The Story of a Soul trans. by Michael Day Cong. Orat. ed. by Mother Agnes of Jesus (Wheathampstead Hertfordshir: Anthony Clarke Books, 1964) pp. 173.

discipline and dedication, and she herself did not engage in intimate relationships in order to keep herself free for her work.

Certainly, John of the Cross's spirituality contains many more dimensions. Turning to Constance Fitzgerald, a Carmelite scholar, who explicates the spirituality and thought of John of the Cross, one might wonder if Simone Weil could have found a place for herself within its confines in our own time:

> Today our spirituality is rooted in experience and in story: the experience and story of women (poor women, white women, exploited women, Asian women, Native American women, etc.); the experience of the poor and oppressed of the world; the experience of the aging; the experience of the fear of nuclear holocaust and the far-reaching evils of nuclear buildup for the sake of national security, power, and domination; the experience of the woundedness of the earth and the environment.[93]

In the light of our current world landscape, which now includes the experience of a global pandemic, many nations riven by racism, and the lack of moral leadership within the so-called "superpowers", we may now include these to the list above. These issues may be more comprehensive and diverse than in Weil's time, however, she did indeed live in a time of great upheaval and terrible tragedy. The issue of feminism, and its various ramifications, may not have struck the same chord with Weil, nevertheless, her writings on politics and social justice would resonate with much of Fitzgerald's description. Though she experienced two world wars (and even though she was a child in the First World War, yet it had its impact upon her), Weil did not experience the all-pervasive effects of the climate crisis. Her perspective was a far-seeing one though, and it is likely that very little of what is occurring today, both in politics and in the whole area of the environment and climate change, would have surprised her. A reading of her political essays alone would attest to this, especially her article "On the Abolition of All Political Parties".[94] Her prescription for the ending of political parties does not appear in any way far-fetched now. Perhaps Weil's theology, had it been developed more, particularly after Vatican II, might have done so in the direction of a theology of liberation, as previously noted.[95] The Catholic Church she had come to know, and the culture formulated around its development within various countries in Europe, including her own, was to change drastically in the late 1950s and early 1960s, with the

[93] Constance Fitzgerald "Impasse and the Dark Night" in *Living with Apocalypse, Spiritual Resources for Social Compassion* ed. by Tilden H. Edwards (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984) pp. 93-116, p. 96.
[94] Simone Weil, "On the Abolition of All Political Parties" trans. by Simon Leys (New York: New York Review Books, 2014) pp. xxii, 71.
[95] For further development on and discussion of the links between Simone Weil and Vatican II, the work of Jane Khin Zaw and Lawrence Schmidt provides a useful insight.

advent of Vatican II. Since this Council, the preferential option for the poor, initially advocated for by the Liberation Theology movement in South America, became a strong cry of the post-Vatican II era.

The influence of John of the Cross on Simone Weil's life and writing was a later one,[96] so it is strictly within the realms of speculation as to where and how her thinking would have developed. From what she does write, however, it may be useful now to examine both what her thinking was, and what the thinking of John of the Cross was on the idea of the dark night of the soul, in order to gauge its influence one on the other. Weil does mention John of the Cross in her only book, where she declares that "The entire works of St. John of the Cross are nothing else but a strictly scientific study of supernatural mechanisms," and she continues by stating that "Plato's philosophy also is nothing else than that."[97] She is speaking here in the context of what she terms the "practical experience of the saints", who could sometimes, "by force of desire, cause more good to descend upon a soul that the latter really desired of its own accord. This shows that good descends from heaven upon earth only to the extent to which certain conditions are in fact fulfilled on earth."[98] It is worth keeping this rather mechanistic view of Simone Weil's in mind, as a deeper examination of the "dark night of the spirit", adapted by Weil from John of the Cross's "dark night of the soul", reveals that John of the Cross's concept reveals a less scientific, more feminine and more mystical consciousness of the dark night than Weil's.

Simone Weil had the facility of making use of the words and thoughts of someone like John of the Cross in her consideration of issues to do with social justice, for example, and had no trouble borrowing, or transposing, words from a thinker in one discipline to apply to another. For her, it was all one thread, drawing everything together seamlessly. However, as Joan Dargan notes, for Weil

> It is clear that she believes in the urgency and universality – the truth – of these thoughts and so wishes to privilege them, to place them at the center of her thinking; but it is not so clear that the assertions themselves and the terms used to express them are in fact so obvious and unobjectionable.[99]

[96] Weil had been reading John of the Cross from December 1941, at least.
[97] Weil *NR* p. 252.
[98] Weil *NR* p. 252. It is also worth noting here that Weil's idea of good descending "from heaven" is probably retained more Platonic elements than Christian ones.
[99] Dargan p. 36.

It is worth noting again that Simone Weil, following upon the practice and the advice of her mentor, Alain (Émile-Auguste Chartier), made a habit of reading and of dealing with the primary texts alone. She did not really believe in dealing with secondary sources. Therefore, her reading of John of the Cross, using his texts directly, under her own terms, as Dargan notes would be the norm for her. Weil has a wide embrace when it comes to vocabulary, the tone of her work, and what Dargan terms "her enveloping perspective (in its uninhibited freedom reminiscent of the omniscience of narrators of nineteenth-century fiction)" and she feels that Weil is to be located at a particular crossroads "where the exhausted forms of a dying civilization must be discarded at last."[100] That sense of being at the end of something runs throughout much of Weil's work, there is a tiredness with the language of the church whose doorstep she hovered over for so long, a tiredness with the political institutions of her time which led the world through fascism and to war, and a tiredness with the social institutions, which needed to respect the equal rights of all.[101] So for Weil, encountering John of the Cross entails assessing his work within her own scientific and mechanistic framework, and yet also finding resonances with his mystical experiences, to a certain degree.

3.7.1 The essence of the darkness

Constance Fitzgerald highlights the fact that the essence of the experience of darkness, as John of the Cross describes it, contains within it the presence of Wisdom, of Sophia. This is central to his thought, she believes. "If Jesus Christ is Divine Wisdom, Sophia, then dark contemplation is the presence of Jesus Christ as Wisdom and Dark night is the time when the image of Jesus-Sophia takes on all the marks of crucifixion: suffering, isolation, failure, marginality, rejection, abandonment, hopelessness, meaninglessness, death."[102] This is what John of the Cross states about the dark night:

> This dark night is an inflow of God into the soul, which purges it of its habitual ignorances and imperfections, natural and spiritual, and which the contemplatives call infused contemplation or mystical theology. Through this contemplation, God teaches the soul secretly and instructs it in the perfection of love without its doing anything or understanding how this happens. Insofar as infused contemplation is loving wisdom

[100] Dargan p. 37.
[101] Dargan continues to compare and contrast the work of Weil and Pascal, noting their adventurous language, how their attention is caught by the combination of good and evil in the world, something that imprisons the mind, though they differ when it comes to conversion. "Pascal, who believes in divine miracles, still has confidence in his kind, in the activity of the intellect, in words: Weil, who would entertain no notion of compromise with reality, is fundamental, as David McLellan calls her, the utopian pessimist." Dargan, p. 38.
[102] Constance Fitzgerald "Desolation as Dark Night The Transformative Influence of Wisdom in John of the Cross" in *The Way* 82 (Spring1995) pp. 96-108.

> of God, it produces two principal effects in the soul: by both purging and illumining, this contemplation prepares the soul for union with God through love. Hence the same loving wisdom that purges and illumines the blessed spirits purges and illumines the soul here on earth.[103]

It is easy to see how using terms such as "imperfections", "purging and illumining" might reverberate with Weil. However, John of the Cross's couching of this experience in the "loving wisdom" of God, as preparation for a "union with God through love", is not something that can be heard in Weil's writing, at least in her prose. As can often be the case with mystics, and their writing, it is often in poetry that the essence of their thought comes through. So it is with Weil, who would have liked to be a poet, and who wrote of the longing she felt in some of her poems: "We want to see flowers. We are so thirsty here./Waiting and suffering we are now before the gate."

The idea of thirsting and longing for God, as outlined at the beginning of this poem, has its Old Testament resonances in the Psalms,[104] for example, and in much mystical literature, where the soul feels cast out, and is longing for God. Once again, Weil's language is robust, she wants to break the gate open "with blows", if necessary, pressing it and pushing it, forcing the gate - forcing the issue? There is an element of hopelessness then "what use is it to want?" It is at the point of hopelessness, and exhaustion, and a certainty that the gate will never open, that it does indeed open. There are no flowers or orchards to see, though, as the heart had desired, instead there is "Just the vast expanse of void and light/ Which filled our hearts as it burst into sight." In mystical literature, the seeker does not always find what they expected, though it is noteworthy that the void, coupled with the light, is what confronts Simone Weil as she enters through the gate. Her desire was for flowers and a slaking of thirst for God, what is given, is an expanse of the void. It is also noteworthy that Weil speaks here, not of her own experience as one outstanding, but rather contextualised within that of the "we", she is within her community, or perhaps humanity in general? Weil rarely spoke of her

[103] John of the Cross *Dark Night of the Soul* Book Two Chapter 5:1 in *The Collected Work of St. John of the Cross* trans. by Kieran Kavanaugh OCD, Otilio Rodriguez OCD (Washington DC: ICD Publications 1991) p. 401.

[104] Ps. 41 v.5 "My soul is thirsting for God,/ the God of my life" and Ps. 62 v.2-3 "O God, you are my God, for you I long:/ for you my soul is thirsting./ My body pines for you/ like a dry, weary land without water." *The Book of Psalms* Grail Translation (London: Harper Collins, 2009).

personal experience, though the most personal piece she wrote, her *Spiritual Autobiography*, has become one of her most famous pieces.[105]

John of the Cross deals with the map to be followed once one begins on the journey and gives many directions and indications to watch out for along the way. The longing and the desire are always there, and he outlines further what to expect. For him, there are stages to be marked along the way of purification of the spirit, which includes the whole person, it is not simply a time or an experience that is limited to times of prayer, or to do solely with one's beliefs. Those in the early stage of the life of contemplation, a "proficient", as he calls them, may at an early stage still feel towards God as little children might do. They have not yet reached perfection, a perfection of union of the soul with God. The advancing of this union will entail a stripping away of the old self. Here may be heard the reverberations with Weil's thinking in decreation, where the self must disappear in order to make way for God. For John of the Cross, this process involves God divesting the person of "the faculties, affections, and senses, both spiritual and sensory, interior and exterior", this he delineates further by saying that God leaves "the intellect in darkness, the will in aridity, the memory in emptiness, and the affections in supreme affliction, bitterness, and anguish by depriving the soul of the feeling and satisfaction it previously obtained from spiritual blessings."[106] Thus do the lives of those on this path find all those means of support, sustenance and strength, taken away from them. They are left bereft, feeling a nakedness due to this contemplative purgation that John of the Cross also names "poverty of spirit".[107]

In interrogating what John of the Cross may have meant by the intellect being emptied and left in darkness, Fitzgerald believes it could mean that it is our theologies, our philosophies, and our lifestyles which have been carefully constructed around our unique belief systems, that are going to fall on us. Again, this is an aspect that would resonate with Weil, in line with her thinking on political parties and the need for their demise, as well as her thinking on the Catholic Church, although it is less easy to envisage her giving up on her own Platonic stance, when it comes to the philosophical area. Within the field of faith, as Weil always reserved the right not to become part of any community, it is difficult to see her following John of the Cross's thought as he speaks of the stripping away that is required. Faith,

[105] Simone Weil "Spiritual Autobiography" in *WG* pp. 21-38. Simone Weil wrote this *Autobiography* for Fr. Perrin, at his request, in Marseilles, in May of 1942, before she departed for America. Though she did return to England later, and died there in 1943, she was not sure whether she would ever see him again.
[106] John of the Cross *Dark Night* Book Two Chapter 3:3 p. 399.
[107] Ibid. p. 400.

anything that previously spoke of God is gone. Even our memories mock us: John of the Cross details how even they can mock us, now making hopes for the future appear false and an illusion. There is an experience of loss, of abandonment, even betrayal. These are common experiences at this point in the life of prayer for John of the Cross. This experience, however, is couched in an initial experience, or belief, that God is love, that no matter how far away he may be to our affective selves, he is still a presence, though a non-presence. There is hope.

It is here in this place where hope is a possibility, that Simone Weil may be stuck, and where she leaves John of the Cross and his teaching aside. For him, "activated by Sophia's dark presence, the theological virtues are our only option, presenting a very uncomfortable alternative vision."[108] For Fitzgerald, the only way possible through the dark night, is by the "acceptance of this contemplative posture or vision whereby one actually passes over to the love perspective of Divine Wisdom."[109] This shift in consciousness to a "love perspective" appears to elude Simone Weil. Whilst she understands the crucifixion, the sufferings and the agony of Christ in the garden, it is as if the symbol of the cross stays forever burned into her thinking, and cannot be progressed into a movement towards the love and the hope of the resurrection. She speaks of love and she knows love. Hope is another matter: could it be said that for her, the theological virtues did not include hope? That the dark night remained dark, with only a hope from within that God is on the other side of the darkness, not a solidly grounded hope, based on faith?

> Perfection is impersonal. 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 not a part left in his soul to say "I". But the part of the soul which says "We" is infinitely more dangerous still. Impersonality is only reached by the practice of a form of attention which is rare in itself and impossible except in solitude; and not only physical but mental solitude.[110]

In this extract from one of her strongest essays, Simone Weil raises several issues that rest at the heart of her thinking, especially those of her final years: the idea of the impersonal as perfection, what constitutes personality, the way of the mystic, especially in the stripping of

[108] Fitzgerald "Desolation" p. 104.
[109] Fitzgerald "Desolation" p. 105.
[110] Weil *HP,* p. 318. "La Personne et le sacré" was published in *Écrits de Londres et dernières lettres (*Paris: Gallimard, 1957) though it was first published in *La Table Ronde* (December 1950), under the title of "La Personnalité humaine, le juste et l'injustice" Susan Sontag highlights in a review that this essay was first published in two parts in a British magazine called *The Twentieth Century* in May and June of 1959. It required an editorial in defence of its publication in June, because of criticism from its readers about it being "heavy going". Sontag states that this "speaks volumes about the philistine level of English intellectual life, if even as good a magazine as *The Twentieth Century* cannot muster an enthusiastic, grateful audience for such a piece" (Sontag op.cit. p. 2).

the "I", the concept of attention, and the idea of solitude, away from the *collectivité.* These and other tangential topics, will be explored now, as a prelude to examining Weil's influence and the reception of her work in the world of culture, particularly that of poetry and writing, with some reference to the visual and musical worlds. Weil strived so much to strip herself of the "I" in her work, yet, paradoxically, it is her own person and her life story that continues to fascinate people or, that which draws them initially to her, and thence on to her writings. Whilst she is ever the philosopher, her influence is strong in the world of writing, and in particular among poets.

There are few precise divisions within and between auto-fiction, memoir and biography today. Philosophical issues, artistic conundrums and literary musings all combine within the covers of a book or manuscript, alongside autobiographical and semi-fictionalised episodes of the writer's life. The purpose of this literature often appears to be the answering of some of the age-old questions of philosophy and indeed of theology. The questions centre on truth, meaning and purpose. In an age of specialisation, academic writing may struggle to answer the core questions, because they appear too general. When a person asks how they are to live, or what helps in my particular situation, the answer, or answers, need to be relevant, clear and relating to the whole. These questions have been particularly relevant in recent times, replete as they have been with pandemic panic and attendant anxieties; it was to poetry that people turned for the truth, as well as for solace and comfort in distress. There was a hunger for truth, and a desire for true beauty, particularly at the beginning of the experience, when fear and even terror became associated with possible future scenarios of death and suffering. This walking with darkness, with the blackness engendered by pictures of escalating affliction, is a terrain which has been well-trodden by people like Simone Weil, and other mystics, particularly those within the apophatic tradition. The writer as visionary guide is not a novel concept, particularly within the realms of spirituality. From all that Weil would have written and commented upon, she was not comfortable in the role of guide, and wrote cautioning others about this. Not alone does she caution against the temptation on the part of a writer to impart their spiritual wisdom as guidance, as previously noted, she considers how the writer can get out of the way of their writing in one of her greatest essays, "Human Personality".

3.8 "La Personne et le Sacré"

"Night philosophy becomes theology

We've not seen such darkness for centuries."[111]

These words of Fanny Howe's could stand as a description of Simone Weil's times, or the current times. In this darkness, creativity matters, not just for ourselves, but for our communities. How is it to be manifest though? What is most deeply personal is universal. "Perfection is impersonal" claims Weil. Achieving that level of impersonality is difficult, not everything that is personal necessarily makes great art. "What is essential in a work of art is that it should rise far above the personal life and speak from the spirit and heart of the poet as man to the spirit and heart of mankind. The personal aspect is a limitation – and even a sin – in the work of art."[112] In an interesting piece on personal narratives and their value in developing a psychology of religion, Mark Freeman addresses the issue of Weil and the impersonal, which he defines as that which "transcends the human personality."[113] In discussing the approaches of Thibon and Finch to Weil's biography, Freeman attempts to strike a balance between the authenticity and value of the biographical narrative, against the possibility of a reduction that does not allow the spirituality to come through. As creativity is itself an "act of transcendence, a "going-beyond" the determinants of the past in the service of creating something new, its existence poses similar questions and problems."[114] Freeman asks whether the "personal becomes transformed into the impersonal?"[115] Freeman believes the answer lies in Weil's concept of attention, both attention within and, more especially, without ourselves, to the "other-than-self", this involves the stripping of the "I" and it is in this "dialectic of decreation and attention that is constitutive of the "creative faculty" in art and religion alike."[116] The issue of personality and the impersonal was an important one for Weil.

In her essay "La personne et le Sacré"/"Human Personality",[117] Simone Weil sets out her thinking on the impersonal and her resistance to the emphasis placed on the modern concept

[111]Fanny Howe "Night Philosophy" in *Love and I* (Minneapolis, MN: Graywolf Press, 2019) p.36.
[112] Carl Jung *Modern Man in Search of a Soul* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001) p. 172.
[113] Mark Freeman, "The Personal and Beyond Simone Weil and the Necessity/Limits of Biography" in *Autobiography and the Psychological Study of Religious Lives (International Series in the Psychology of Religion) 15* pp. 187-207, p. 187.
[114] Freeman p. 202.
[115] Freeman p. 202.
[116] Freeman p. 203.
[117] This essay was written in 1943, the last year of Weil's life, and was published under the title "La Personnalité humaine, le juste et l'injustice" in *La Table Ronde* in December 1950; it was published in *Écrits de Londres* under the title "La Personne et le sacré". It has been published in English as "Human Personality" or "Whatever is Sacred in every human being". The translation used here is by Richard Rees and may be found in *Simone Weil Selected Essays 1934-1943* (Eugene, Oregon: WIPF & STOCK 201), pps. 9-34. From now on, this essay will be referred to as Weil HP.

of the self, exemplified by Emmanuel Mounier in France at first, but more explicitly and in an even more populist way, by Jacques Maritain. The issue of impersonality goes to the heart of Weil's life as a writer and as a mystic. 'La Personne et le Sacré' is Weil's response to Jacques Maritain in particular, and his thinking on Personalism, a subject on which Weil and Maritain were in strong disagreement.[118] It was thought initially that Weil was writing a response to the work of Emmanuel Mounier and his concept of Personalism, but it is far more likely to be dealing with Maritain. This issue is an important one and it speaks to both Weil as a writer, as well as an activist and a mystic. The issue of Personalism mattered to Simone Weil because, as Christopher Hamilton summarises it, "her engagement with Marx left her sceptical about whether the personality is anything more than a product of historically contingent social forces",[119] therefore she could not contemplate grounding rights in the concept of personality. However, the more pertinent criticism for Weil and the one which goes to the core of her thinking has to do with the nature of human suffering. Personalism fails to understand its true nature, as it does not believe that a human being can be destroyed completely. In discussing Eric Springsted's reading of this essay of Weil's, Hamilton takes issue with him on this second point. Though Springsted holds that Weil's objections to Personalism were that it failed to make sense of human suffering, Hamilton puts it slightly differently.

> For if Personalism says that there is always a metaphysical core to the individual that cannot be destroyed even as the person lives, then the real problem is that no one, in real dealings with human beings, can actually believe this. The philosophy does not capture a proper understanding of what we all know to the case: that a human being can be spiritually destroyed, that his soul can be killed, even as he lives.[120]

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[118] Eric O. Springsted's article on the subject of Weil and Maritain's connection, "Beyond the Personal: Weil's Critique of Maritain" *The Harvard Theological Review*, 98.2 (Apr., 2005) pp. 209-218, provides detailed insight on this subject. Springsted provides strong support for the idea that this essay was indeed a response to Maritain cf. n.5, p. 210. The personal note which needs to be recalled in this encounter between Weil and Maritain, is that Simone Weil wanted Maritain's support for the plan she was devising to parachute into the occupied part of France.[118] Maritain was an influential person, and would assist later in the drafting of the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights. When Weil arrived in New York in July 1942, she devised the plan as her contribution to the war effort. Though this may not sound like the greatest of war campaign efforts, yet the plan meant much to Weil, emphasising as it did the compassion and self-sacrifice that she believed the Allies were fighting for in the war. She wrote to Jacques Maritain shortly after her arrival in New York, seeking his support for this idea, and received what Simone Pétrement deemed to have been a friendly reply.[118] That this may not have been well received by Weil is not unusual and Eric Springsted appears to think she could have read it as condescension, the polite dismissal of a great man.[118] Whatever the reasons, some of which may have been to do with her own heightened sensitivities, Weil did indeed have issues with Maritain on the essential meaning of a person, and the movement of Personalism.

[119] Christopher Hamilton "Simone Weil's "Human Personality": Between the Personal and the Impersonal *The Harvard Theological Review* 8.2 (April 2005) pp. 187-207, (p.188).

[120] Hamilton. p. 188.

What would stay the hand of one person taking out another's eyes, Weil queries? If it were the human personality alone that was sacred, she reasons, it would be possible for the first person to take out the eyes of the other, because though the eyes might then be gone, the human personality would still remain intact.

Eric O. Springsted lays out Weil's previous responses to Maritain in *The Need for Roots*, which focuses on Maritain's book *The Rights of Man and Natural Law.*[121] In these, it is clear that they disagreed on the issues of the soul's need for truth, and the notion of right "being deeper than that of moral obligation."[122] Though Weil is critical of Maritain, they had some areas of agreement, such as the serious issues of totalitarianism and of individualism, and the "need to establish the human being as ontologically related to God."[123] For Springsted, Weil's attacks on personality and the person are attacks on "concepts of the empirical, social ego, and that is clearly not what Maritain thinks he is trying to get his readers to consider."[124] Springsted holds that Weil believed Maritain's failure lay in his definition of the term *personne.* This would appear to be the core of the issue. Though Maritain did make efforts to define the self as completely as possible, Springsted details the fine-tuning that he finds lies between his and Weil's different understandings. Weil felt that no matter how one defines *personne*, as in Maritain's explanation of a person being sacred, it does not include the idea of someone finding their complete fulfilment in an absolute God. What may be coming across, whether Maritain was aware of it or not, is that it is the personality that is sacred, that "confused mass of desires that constitutes our social egos and aspirations."[125] Thus does humanity create the sacred in its own image. Maritain's tendency to connect the concept of rights with the concept of the *personne* is not sufficient for Weil, and it was going too far for her when Maritain made the assertion that rights claim priority over obligations. Springsted outlines it succinctly:

> Not only has the law of property and commerce been applied rather unequivocally to the divine, the whole sense of the proposition runs counter to the more genuine Christian understanding of God. God acts out of his goodness and love to creatures, going out from himself to meet their needs.[126]

[121] Jacques Maritain *The Rights of Man and Natural Law* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1944 trans. of *Les Droits de l'homme et le loi natural* (New York: Éditions de la Maison française, 1942).
[122] Eric O. Springsted 'Beyond the Personal'. p. 210.
[123] Sprinsted op.cit.. p. 213.
[124] Ibid. p. 213.
[125] Ibid. p. 214.
[126] Ibid. p. 215.

The love of God does not entail the lining up of rights before obligations, for Weil that is clear. The love portrayed in the Gospels is about just that: love, and goodness. Weil's idea of love encompassed the need for the soul to be rooted, and the soul's need is for "multiple roots", which include those for the "moral, spiritual and intellectual life".[127] If God is not in every detail of one's life, then that is not truly a Christian society for her.[128] The love of God, or more correctly in Christian terms, that God *is* love, is the essential message of Christianity. However, love does not receive the same primacy or attention in Weil's thinking, this is reserved for the power of beauty. There will be a return to this point later. For now, let us have some clarity about what the self might mean for Weil.

To begin, it is important to highlight the difference between the word person in English and *personne* in French. They do not have the same meanings. *Personne* contains an understanding of being human, and does not really have an exact English equivalent. Person in English has come to mean an individual human being, with reference also to *persona,* a character represented on the stage, or the masks we take on. As she develops the concept in her essay, the word can be better understood in Weil's terms, particularly as she describes the role of personality in it. For Weil did believe that the self has residing within it that which she believes to be sacred and this sacred element entails that which is at the "bottom of the heart of every human being …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."[129] The idea of the sacred, and what constitutes a person, are central issues within the concept of impersonality. For Maritain, the development of personality was important, though he did develop the idea of the mystery dwelling within each human being, believing that "that mystery is the human personality."[130] He believed that "Man is an individual who holds himself in hand by his intelligence and his will. He exists not merely physically; there is in him a richer and nobler existence; he has spiritual superexistence through knowledge and through love."[131] This "spiritual superexistence" was definitely not sufficient for Weil, though it was to be gained by knowledge, as well as by love. For Simone

[127]Weil *NR* p. 41.
[128] The detailed outline of the shape and form of such a life is laid out in *The Need for Roots*; where Weil's basic thesis is based on the needs of the soul, and the uprootedness, *déracinement,* of that soul in today's world. These needs of the soul are discussed under various headings, and include order, equality, liberty, responsibility, security, honour and ultimately, truth.
[129] Weil 'HP' p. 10.
[130] Jacques Maritain *The Rights of Man and Natural Law* (London: Geoffrey Bles The Centenary Press, 1944) p.5.
[131] Maritain p. 6.

Weil, the goodness that we aspire to and that we know is real, it is also within: when speaking of the person, she encapsulates it thus:

> It is neither his person, nor the human personality in him, which is sacred to me. It is he. The whole of him. The arms, the eyes, the thoughts, everything.[132]

Claiming that it is impossible to define what is meant by respect for human personality, Weil states:

> It is not just that it cannot be defined in words. That can be said of many perfectly clear ideas. But this one cannot be conceived either; it cannot be defined nor isolated by the silent operation of the mind.[133]

What is more, to devise a public morality based on a notion such as this is "to open the door to every kind of tyranny."[134] She went on to discuss the issue of rights, about which she writes most compellingly, particularly in *The Need for Roots.* Combining the issues of rights and human personality does not bring the discussion any further, as Weil believed they were two inadequate ideas. The issue of Personalism was a serious one for Weil, as it combined personality with rights, as she perceived it.

3.9 Personalism: suffering and evil

At the core of Weil's objection to Personalism was that it could not explain the suffering of human beings, and that it maintained there was a "metaphysical core to the individual,"[135] according to Christopher Hamilton. In responding to and refining Springsted's argument that Weil's issue with Personalism was its inability to make sense of suffering, Hamilton states that Personalism, "does not capture a proper understanding of what we all know to be the case: that a human being can be spiritually destroyed, that his soul can be killed, even as he lives."[136] For Hamilton, following the logic of this means that neither can Personalism make sense of why anyone would find something morally repugnant in harming another human being. For Weil, Personalism does not answer these moral questions around the person and evil acts. The only thing that would give a human being pause before they considered putting out the eyes of another human being, from Weil's point of view, would be the thought that

[132] Weil *SWR* p. 314.
[133] Weil SWR p. 314.
[134] Weil SWR p. 314.
[135] Christopher Hamilton "Simone Weil's 'Human Personality': Between the Personal and the Impersonal" *The Harvard Theological Review*, 8.2 (Apr., 2005), pp. 187-207, (p.188).
[136] Hamilton p. 188.

the soul of that person would know that evil was being done unto her. Hamilton makes the point here that if Weil is not referencing a universal trait, psychologically speaking, which he believes she is not, it is not clear to what exactly she is referring. Even if everyone has some idea of the concept of good, Hamilton suggests, it is not clear if this would be the kind of absolute good that Simone Weil is considering. For Hamilton, the claim that a human being continues to expect that good rather than evil will be done to them, this is not a claim based on human psychology, but rather is saying that "human psychology does not really matter" and that it is rather a case of Weil "inviting us into a distinctive ethical perspective on human life and human beings."[137] It is the impersonal in a person that makes them sacred, not any empirical characteristics which could make the harming of a human being's personality wrong. For many who read Weil, according to Hamilton, the conclusion is often reached that each person has a centre within their being or their soul, buried deeply within their personality, something that hungers and thirsts for the truly good. He cites Richard Rees as one such reader, who also identifies the human being as expecting that "good and not evil be done to him with her idea of thirsting for pure good."[138] Ultimately, Hamilton claims that when Weil is speaking of the impersonal as being sacred within the human being, she means that "there is a kind of love – a kind of attention – in the light of which it is possible to see human beings as sacred."[139]

This "kind of love" and "kind of attention" is what allows the language of poetry and philosophy to meet, and it is the ground upon which some of those that have been most influenced by Weil would walk upon too. Christopher Hamilton mentions Weil's discussion of Antigone, whom she claims is possessed of a pure love in her dealings with the brothers Polyneices and Eteocles. Because of this pure love, demonstrated by Antigone's treatment of the brother with radical equality, the issues of the humans concerned do not matter. Hamilton explains:

> There is in the light of this love – a sort of love Weil found best exemplified in the life of Christ – a kind of radical equality of all human beings in which issues of what kind of person one is, of what one has done, and of what one has achieved are of no consequence whatsoever.[140]

[137] Hamilton p. 192.
[138] Hamilton. p. 191.
[139] Hamilton. p. 192.
[140] Hamilton p. 192.

For Hamilton, this leads to a conception of value which does away with the normal evaluations we make of people's actions and deeds, and "are replaced by an all-embracing love of individuals regardless of such considerations."[141] So Hamilton provides solid grounds for building on Weil's ideas of a kind of attention and a kind of love, that provide the framework for her concept of what is sacred in the human being. The kind of love of which Weil speaks, as Hamilton sees it, is not reasonable, or wise. This is so central to the thought of Weil, this kind of love, that it demands some further elucidation here. As she writes of the deepest expressions of love in the face of affliction, Weil outlines the love she means when she describes the effects on the person of God's apparent absence during their affliction

> A kind of horror submerges the whole soul. During this absence there is nothing to love, the soul ceases to love, God's absence becomes final. The soul has to go on loving in the emptiness, or at least to go on wanting to love, though it may only be with an infinitesimal part of itself.[142]

It is the contention here that "loving in the emptiness, or at least to continue in wanting to love" is what marks Weil's work out, and is that which strikes a chord with those who suffer affliction. That affliction takes on a slightly different shape, and form perhaps, than in Weil's time, in that there has been an increase in an awareness around the issue of mental health, with greater levels of anxiety and depression being recorded, as well as increasing issues with the ability of the human being to remain focussed, or to pay attention, for long periods of time. This issue will be explored further in a later chapter.

3.9.1 Not 'I' nor 'Thou'

This striving for impersonality is essential for Weil. It is part of the diminishment of the self, that lessening of the "I" so that God becomes the greater presence. As things are impersonal and we are personal, and though God is neither, perhaps, Weil suggests, we might "have a personal relationship with an impersonal God?"[143] This would involve calling him neither "thou" nor "I", but rather allowing the relationship to be "closer than any human form of union."[144] A union of such intimate closeness resembles the intensity of union described by John of the Cross, of whom more is written in this study. At this juncture, it is important to be reminded of the intensity of feeling in this union for John of the Cross, a union that was

[141] Hamilton p. 192.
[142] Simone Weil "The Love of God and Affliction" *WG* .
[143] Simone Weil *NB* p. 173.
[144] Simone Weil *NB* p. 173.

deeply personal, but also stripped of the personal. His poems in particular, acclaimed as they are not just as an expression of his mystical experiences, but as "artistic creation of the highest craftsmanship",[145] describe in ecstatic and intimate detail the relationship between God and the beloved, particularly the longing for the beloved who so often remains hidden:

> "Where have you hidden
>
> Beloved, and left me moaning?
>
> You fled like the stag
>
> after wounding me;
>
> I went out calling you, but you were gone."[146]

For Simone Weil, beauty was a mystery, and also "a gleam which attracts attention"[147], yet does nothing to sustain it. Beauty promises but does not deliver, Weil believed, it makes one hungry, but does not satisfy that hunger. It also wounds. What this world can offer is not the focus for her, she is focussing on that part of "the soul that gazes" and continues to expound on desire:

> While exciting desire, it makes clear that there is nothing in it to be desired, because the one thing we want is that it should not change. If one does not seek means to evade the exquisite anguish it inflicts, then desire is gradually transformed into love; and one begins to acquire the faculty of pure and disinterested attention.[148]

John of the Cross knows that when on the path of perfection, where union with God is attained, it is because one has also been steadfast on the path of negation. When writing his poem "The Dark Night", John of the Cross introduces his poems by declaring that they are "Songs of the soul that rejoices in having reached the high state of perfection, which is union with God, by the path of spiritual negation."[149] Attaining this union through spiritual negation aligns with Weil's writing on affliction and attention in this particular essay. She states that "affliction and truth need the same kind of attention before they can be heard, the spirit of justice and the spirit of truth are one. The spirit of justice and truth is nothing else but a certain kind of attention, which is pure love."[150] The lover in John of the Cross who gazes in longing, waiting for the beloved to be revealed, is in many ways similar to the "soul that

[145] *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross* trans. Kieran Kavanaugh OCD, Otilio Rodriguez OCD (Washington DC: ICS Publications Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1991), pps. 814, p.41.
[146] Kavanaugh. p. 44.
[147] Weil 'HP' p. 29.
[148] Weil 'HP' p. 29.
[149] Kavanaugh. p. 50.
[150] Weil 'HP' p. 28.

gazes" in Weil. Whilst John of the Cross' gaze is on the beloved, Weil's concept of love is bound up with her discussion on the spirit of justice and truth, and whilst coming to the conclusion that the "certain kind of attention" required here is "pure love", it is noteworthy that this love, may only be attained after being powered by the "supernatural working of grace"[151]. Then it can "get the sort of attention which can attend to truth and to affliction", and for Weil it is this attention which can hold both, and which can listen to them both, and "the name of this intense, pure, disinterested, gratuitous, generous attention is love."[152] This is a pure love for Weil, and everything that this pure love touches is radiant with beauty for her. Whilst exciting desire, Weil also made makes clear that beauty does not have anything desirous within it. It is when a person does not shirk affliction, and indeed comes to appreciate the supreme beauty of its representation, that a certain beauty "illumines affliction with the light of the spirit of justice and love, which is the only light by which human thought can confront affliction and report the truth of it."[153] The Book of Job and the *Iliad*, but in particular the account of the Passion in the Gospels, contains representations of affliction that illustrate the beauty of which Weil speaks. Here beauty shines forth from affliction because it is suffused with the spirit of love and justice. It is worthwhile noting that Weil uses the word *sisters* as well as *brothers* here. She gives the feminine pronoun to Beauty, and speaks of truth, beauty and justice as being "sisters and comrades".[154] It is rare that she does this: in biblical tradition, wisdom is always depicted as feminine, though not beauty.

For Weil, what is sacred is beautiful, and that beauty exists within the realm of the impersonal and the anonymous. "Gregorian chant, Romanesque architecture, the *Iliad*, the invention of geometry were not, for the people for whom they were brought into being and made available to us, occasions for the manifestation of personality."[155] The beauty of the world proves that there is a God who is personal and impersonal for Weil, a God who is neither one nor the other. "A work of art has an author, and yet, when it is perfect, there is something essentially anonymous about it. It imitates the anonymity of divine art."[156] If a person is working on eliminating the "I", it will fade away in proportion as they mirror God's impersonality. For Weil, it is difficult not to question then how it could be sufficient "to

[151] Weil HP' p. 28.
[152] Weil 'HP' p. 28.
[153] Weil 'HP' p. 29.
[154] Weil 'HP' p. 29.
[155] Weil 'HP' p. 318.
[156] Weil *NB* p. 241.

conceive a personal God?"[157] In what is possibly some of her most revealing letters, Simone Weil reveals to Maurice Schumann[158] both some of her misgivings and doubts, as well as stating what she believed to be true for her life. In what Weil terms is a more leisurely communication, she begins by musing on the power and the meaning of words, whose only use, she believed, was to communicate truth, which in turn, and always, comes from God. She speaks of truth, of love and what she believes to be her own role, or vocation, in life. That role would entail suffering and affliction, both her own, and that of others.

Before leaving the issues around Personalism, it is important to remember what Weil considered to be a real threat to the ability of anyone to think freely, and to express themselves as completely as they desired, the idea of the *collevtivité.* Before continuing to explore the world of poetry, it is important to highlight this feature of her thinking. Weil considers what she terms the *collevtivité,* the collectivity, to be dangerous, though it warrants respect too. Just as a cornfield is due our respect, not in itself, but because it is food for mankind, so we owe respect to a collectivity, because it is "food for a certain number of human souls."[159] Though the respect due a collectivity is high, according to Weil, yet there needs to be caution too. The respect is due because each collectivity is irreplaceable and unique. It is also moving toward the future because of its continuous nature, and is rooted in the past. The collectivity "constitutes the sole agency for preserving the spiritual treasures accumulated by the dead".[160] For Weil, transmitting this wisdom from age to age is vital, though if a collectivity is in danger, and a total sacrifice is called for, caution must be exercised, as collectivities are not superior to any human being. Collectivities may not always act for the greater good, of course, and may even "devour souls".[161] There are dead collectivities too, which whilst not devouring souls, do not nurture or nourish them either. These then need to be destroyed, if efforts at improvement do not succeed. This is the basis then for Weil's setting out both the needs of the soul, and the remedies she claims need to be acted upon. It is precisely this lack of planning, reflection or investigation into such needs that causes governments, in Weil's opinion, to "act sporadically and at random."[162] It is such

[157] Weil *NB* p. 241.
[158] Schumann was the spokesperson of *France Libre* in London, and particularly in a letter penned to him in 1943 (written sometime after her arrival in London in December 1942 and her admission to the Middlesex Hospital in April 1943) she is quite personal and open with him about what she considered to be her vocation, amongst other matters.
[159] Weil *NR* p. 7.
[160] Weil *NR* p. 8.
[161] Weil *NR* p. 8.
[162] Weil *NR* p. 9.

statements as these of Weil's that can demonstrate her incisive thinking and make her writing more prescient as time goes by, particularly in these times of great threat to democracies all around the globe.

In conclusion, whether a mystical experience makes one a mystic or not, may be a moot point. That Weil's experience went beyond the rational in her experience, and took her by surprise, may be seen as underscoring her status as a mystic. That her mysticism did not make an enormous difference to her thinking in some areas, even in the vexed issue of her joining the Catholic Church, is something which speaks to Weil's search for truth.[163] She continued her exploration of other religions and her commitment to social justice; she did not change her mind suddenly on her attitude towards Judaism, for example.[164] The difference for Weil was that now the issue of God was personal, it was no longer a problem to be solved for her, a problem she had put away because "the data of which could not be obtained here below".[165] Her spiritual experience is something she treated very privately in many ways, only revealing herself in this letter, which has become her spiritual autobiography. As has been evident in this chapter, Simone Weil's concept of love for our neighbour remained at the heart of her thinking and the grounding of her faith in this awareness of our neighbour's issues, and indeed the social construction around these issues, is what made her thinking attract those working from the perspective of theologies of the poor, and of liberation.[166]

However, it is in the maintenance of her stance of attentiveness in the face of affliction that Simone Weil offers up to us a stark reminder of what living within the void is like. She is so rigorously honest in her adherence to her views about the Church and any kind of collective, that she has no safe harbour. The lyricism and the love shining through John of the Cross's work are not there to the same extent in Weil's writing. Weil's rigorous approach to truth

[163] With regard to intellectual honesty, Weil tells Fr. Perrin that he has helped her to be even more rigorous, making her aware that there could be in her "obstacles to the faith, impure obstacles, such as prejudices, habits". Weil *WG* p. 30. Whilst acknowledging this, she did not change her mind on some central issues of her thinking cf Note below.

[164] In fact, in discussing her refusal to be baptised, Weil stated that "I felt that I could not honestly give up my opinions concerning the non-Christian religions and concerning Israel – and as a matter of fact time and meditation have only served to strengthen them – and I thought that this constituted an absolute obstacle." *WG* p. 28.

[165] Weil *WG* p. 22.

[166] The work of Maria Clara Bingemer and of Alexander Nava springs to mind here, with Bingemer's work emphasising Weil's attention to the suffering of the poor and her mysticism grounded in this attention, in *Simone Weil Mystic of Passion and Compassion* trans. Karen M. Kraft (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2015); Alexander Nava compares Weil's thought to that of Gustavo Gutiérrez in his book *The Poetical and Mystical thought of Simone Weil and Gustavo Gutiérrez Reflections on the Mystery and Hiddenness of God* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2001).

brings a stark element to her relationship with God, with Christ. Though she is influenced and impressed by John of the Cross, she does not exude that knowing that comes across in his writing. This knowing is to do with the awareness of an endless love upholding him, though he may not necessarily experience it. Weil writes about the love of God in a clear way, outlining the implicit and the explicit ways of this love. Her God is an impersonal God, "in the sense that he is the divine model of a person who passes beyond the self by renunciation. To conceive of him as an all-powerful person, or under the name of Christ as a human person, is to exclude oneself from the true love of God."[167] Weil's concept of a person's renunciation of their personality makes it so frightening that it reduces them to "the condition of inert matter by plunging them into affliction."[168] Weil's fascination with the Book of Job is based on her admiration of his honesty in his suffering. In his contemplation of necessity, Job would have experienced what Weil describes as the pressing of "its metallic cold and hardness directly to (our) very flesh",[169] which would then bring us closer to revealing the beauty of the world. Weil's use of the words "metallic cold and hardness" are revealing here. It is not that any mystic ever speaks of God and of love in solely warm tones. Far from it, indeed. There is in Weil's work though an overarching thread, a cerebral, sometimes nearly clinical thread, that delicately weaves itself into her writing on the love of God. The relationship Weil depicts towards her God speaks of love, of beauty and of truth. Yet, there is not the warmth of a relationship radiating from her writing, warmth which is easily accessible in the work of Francis of Assisi or of John of the Cross. Though her mysticism draws upon the work of Christian mystics, it also draws upon the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Upanishads.* Simone Weil remains outside, without affiliation to any tradition but gazing fondly in upon many. This increases the appeal of Weil to those who would not wish to claim an allegiance to one particular religion, or tradition, and draw also from many sources. It is in the field of poetry that this can be seen and understood in a particular way. Simone Weil the reader and the writer has a special appeal to the world of poets and poetry.

In the next chapter we will explore how Weil's writing, as well as her life, have been read by and have influenced some poets and writers today.

[167] Weil *WG* p. 115.
[168] Weil *WG* p. 115
[169] Weil *WG* p. 114

4 CHAPTER FOUR: Echoes in Contemporary Poetry

4.1 Introduction

> "We participate in the creation of the world by decreating ourselves."[1]

> "Nous ne possédons rien au monde – car le hazard peut tout nous ôter – sinon le pouvoir de dire je. C'est cela qu'il faut donner à Dieu, c'est-à-dire détruire"[2]

> "The restless demands of the intellect, the search for suitable imagery – these are the things which place Simone Weil among the poets."[3]

The precarity of our lives is ever to the fore for Simone Weil. This chapter will seek out the contemporary echoes of her thinking in contemporary poetry, particularly among women poets. The intention is to highlight Weil's relevance to today's cultural life. Simone Weil's interest in poetry and in poets was a lifelong one. She sought relevance and transparency between her search for truth and the life she lived. It was partly through George Herbert's poetry that she was led to pray. In researching the world of poetry for echoes of her thinking, it transpired that many of the poets citing Weil as an inspiration and a support are North American. This again is due to a greater knowledge and awareness of Weil among American colleges, for example. It is Weil's passion for following the truth, whether it is religiously based or not, that draws these poets to her. It is her adherence to this journey that continues to impress. The English poet, Elizabeth Jennings, as quoted above, believes Weil's "restless demands of the intellect" and "the search for suitable imagery", are what place Weil among the poets. Weil did indeed write poetry, and, at the time of her death, was working on her play *Venise Sauvée*[4], a work which continues the exploration of Weil's concepts of force and affliction, as well as the triumph of beauty and friendship. Set in Venice in 1618, it concerns a Spanish conspiracy to overthrow the governing bodies of Venice and to subjugate the

[1] Weil *NB* p. 309.
[2] Simone Weil *La pesanteur et la grâce* (Paris: Plon, 1948) p. 35. "We possess nothing in the world – a mere chance can strip us of everything – except the power to say 'I'". *NB* pps. 336-337.
[3] Elizabeth Jennings *Every Changing Shape: Mystical Experience and the Making of Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1996) p. 134 quoted in Adrian Grafe 'Simone Weil among the poets' in *Ecstasy and Understanding: Religious Awareness in English Poetry from the Late Victorian to the Modern Period* (London: Bloomsbury, 2008) pps. 161-171.
[4] Simone Weil *Poèmes suivis de Venise Sauvée Lettre de Paul Valéry* (Paris: Gallimard, 1968) pps. 138.

people there; it has many resonances with the backdrop of Hitler's invasion of Europe, against which it was written. Weil is always reading her situation, both on a micro and a macro level and in this case converts her concerns into something creative. She wrote poetry too, and some of her poems will be examined here, providing as they do further insight into her thinking and motivation.

To be with a loving God, or the ultimate good, may be the goal for Weil, but her delineation of the topography of this inner territory has more than its share of stark moments. As she strived to live according to her beliefs, to transform her thought into action in her own life,[5] that thinking process had to be fluid. Believing as she did, as previously noted, that "philosophy is *exclusively* an affair of action and practice"[6] meant that her life and her thought were ever in flow, neither settling down long enough to be described categorically or systematically. Gabriel Marcel advocated that Weil be allowed to speak for herself, for precisely the reason just mentioned, that she was not systematic in any way. So if Weil is not a systematic philosopher, nor is she solely an activist, what is to be made of her writing, and the measure of her influence on our thinking today? The times which we inhabit are ones of attention fragmented, imagination left threadbare by sometime-daily global and local events and a thirst for spirituality, or at least greater depth, in our lives.

In this chapter, it to those who "read" Weil with the eye of the fellow writer and artist that I turn. Through exploring their writings and reflections, some assessment of the impact of Simone Weil's writings on our artistic and cultural communities will be made, with this particular emphasis on the world of poetry. Her influence is one which confounds, inspires and discombobulates. Flannery O'Connor notes that she needed to stick a picture of Weil into her copy of the *Notebooks*, because "That face gives a kind of reality to the notes"; she also commented that reading the *Notebooks* is "one way to understand the age."[7] The work of understanding, of comprehending our world and possibly reflecting back some of that reflection to their fellow human beings, is the job of the poet, in particular. For the poet, truth

[5] There is a subtle difference here that needs to be accentuated at this juncture. The description of Simone Weil as someone who endeavoured to practise what she preached, or wrote about, falls short of the complete reality of her particular situation. The implication that someone endeavours to practise what they preach, suggests that they have passed their theories through a rigorous testing process, perhaps, or at the very least, assessed the viability of the propositions. Weil lived more intensely than this, and her cycle of action and reflection was both faster and more varied than for most. She did not develop a philosophical system or espouse one view steadfastly: it was a daily cyclical process for her, with a willingness to change if necessary. Her *Notebooks* show someone developing, honing and refining ideas, as she lived her life.

[6] Simone Weil *FLN*, p. 362.

[7] Flannery O'Connor *The Habit of Being* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1979) p. 189.

is the goal, and it is presented in its essential form. The need to understand is the motivation of the writer, the philosopher and the artist. Simone Weil, and her work, seems to appeal to people across a wide range of opinions and sensibilities. Her work can indeed help to "understand the age", and not just that of the twentieth century, but also that of this century. Some of her writings carry a foreshadowing of our own age, with its struggles around democracy and freedom, as will be seen. It is particularly within the concept of attention that all these issues are situated, and that this study is focussed. Weil's own thoughts on literature and words are particularly apposite now, as has been previously noted. Reflecting on both her own poetry and the reception of her work and its influence will help to situate Weil, insofar as that is ever possible, and will also elucidate the areas where some learning may be highlighted and taken forward. To begin, it is important to listen to Weil on the strength or the power of the words that we employ, and how carefully we need to tread.

4.2 LANGUAGE - The Power of Words

In one of her most prescient essays, as we have already seen, Weil discusses the power of words, citing the example of the Greek war involving Helen of Troy. For Weil, Helen herself was completely out of scale with the gigantic effort that the war around her entailed, she was only a symbol though not of anything anyone could define. For Weil, the real issue in the war was never defined because it never existed. In essence, Weil is saying that no-one knew what they were fighting for: all those at war – Hector, Achilles, Minerva and Ulysses – were "in pursuit of a literal non-entity whose only value was in the price paid for it."[8] In Weil's discussion of the place of truth in the conflicts of today, she claims that words are unreal and have "even less reality than the war between Greeks and Trojans."[9] At least the Trojans had a woman of beauty at the centre of the war, in our time, "the role of Helen is played by words with capital letters"

> But when empty words are given capital letters, then, on the slightest pretext, men will begin shedding blood for them and piling up ruin in the their name, without effectively grasping anything to which they refer, since what they refer to can never have any reality, for the simple reason that they mean nothing.[10]

If one were to compare Weil's categorising of words with capital letters, with the hash tagging of words in today's social media, the limitation of the number of words allowed on

[8] Weil 'PW' p.269.
[9] Weil *PW* p. 270.
[10] Weil *PW* p. 270 This topic was also mentioned in Chapter Two, on Reading.

certain social media platforms, and the headline-only nature of much of our news content, her prescience becomes quite startling. She contends also in this essay that "the glossy surface of our civilization hides a real intellectual decadence"[11] She claims that because of this our minds have no room for superstition, the superstition that the Greeks contained in their mythologies. In revenge, "superstition, under cover of an abstract vocabulary, has revenged itself by invading the entire realm of thought."[12] The consequence of this are societies and cultures that are incapable of applying rational thought, such as the principles surrounding measure, degree, proportion relation, contingency and the" interrelation of means and ends."[13] For Weil, this means a political landscape peopled by monsters and myths, containing nothing but absolutes and abstract entities. This can be demonstrated simply by the vocabulary in common political and social use "nation, security, capitalism, communism, fascism, order, authority, property, democracy. We never use them in phrases such as *to the extent that* … or: There is capitalism *in so far as* … The use of expressions like 'to the extent that' is beyond our intellectual capacity."[14] For Weil, discussing the destruction and the preservation of capitalism become "meaningless slogans" except that "these slogans are supported by real organizations."[15] Whatever absurdities may be contained within these examples, cease to be absurd when they are translated into what Weil terms the "language of power".[16] Complete annihilation of the enemy is what is called for in a war, Weil believes. Even though those who may have a more nuanced view may look on in amazement and confusion, once two blocs exist and are at war with one another, in whatever way, the leaders of each, according to Weil, must be prepared for the total annihilation of the other in order to maintain their authority. Power is always a vulnerable state for Weil, and therefore, bound to defend itself, with those on either side believing implicitly that the only way to defend is to attack. As human beings, we so often fail to discern the true extent of the problem because of the "swarm of vacuous entities or abstractions" placed in front of us; these stupefy our minds, and make people willing to die, but "infinitely worse, they make them forget the value of life".[17] In concluding this essay, Weil acknowledges that getting the balance right between competing social forces is not easy, and those who are less privileged will always seek to right them, though she warns against stabilising them artificially. She concludes finally

[11] Weil *PW* p. 271.
[12] Weil *PW* p. 271.
[13] Weil *PW* p. 271.
[14] Weil *PW* p. 270.
[15] Weil *PW* p. 282.
[16] Weil *PW* p 282.
[17] Weil 'PW' p. 284.

> What is required is discrimination between the imaginary and the real, so as to diminish the risks of war, without interfering with the struggle between forces which, according to Heraclitus, is the condition of life itself."[18]

Weil's warning about the "intellectual decadence" of the age, with its capitalising of words and its' banner headlines containing "absolutes" and "abstract entities" have more than an echo in our own age, with the extreme polarisation of societies and a cancel culture that brooks no real debate. Not alone is Weil's writing prescient, but especially with essays such as 'The Power of Words', as well as her thinking on the concept of attention, that influence can only be surmised to extend well into the future, perhaps because at heart, she is a writer who writes poetically, who has the heart of a poet.

4.3 Simone Weil – The heart of a Poet

As a teacher, a factory worker and an activist for the resistance, Simone Weil occupied roles that she felt were her calling, her vocation, that she was being led into the experiences she believed were necessary. She railed against those who kept her from doing what she believed to be her calling, for example, when she pushed to be allowed return to France to fight in the resistance, and when her plan for dropping nurses into the frontline was scotched. Believing so strongly in philosophy as action and practice, Weil wrote that philosophy was difficult to write about, "Difficult in the same way as a treatise on tennis or running, but much more so."[19] So what may be written about? What can language do, or what can something like poetry do, except fail? "Language, as we have it, fails to deal with confusion"[20], according to Fanny Howe, someone whose work will be examined in greater depth later. Language is connected to time for Howe, as she states that we cannot know if "Paradise is behind or ahead of us."[21] The dreams of finding a new language, or a new alphabet in order to cope with such issues as expressing actions "occurring simultaneously without repeating all the words twice or piling the letters on top of each other."[22] As Romana Huk describes it, Howe's answer to this is bewilderment, whereby she attempts to "retrain herself to embrace the future's emptiness through such perception of all that is and that remains 'unresolvable' in any one, single way": it transpires that Howe's journey is of a phenomenological nature too, and that

[18] Weil 'PW' p. 285.
[19] Weil *FLN* p. 362.
[20] Fanny Howe, 'Bewilderment', in *The Wedding Dress Meditation on Word and Life* (Berkeley Los Angeles London: University of California Press 2003) pp. 5-23, p. 14.
[21] Howe, The Wedding Dress p. 14.
[22] Ibid. p. 14.

this in turn leads her back to "one of the greatest fathers of the Church: Aquinas' thirteenth-century example."[23] Howe saw his thinking rolling like a reel, "in other words, without obeying strictures of time."[24] Reading Howe on her experience of bewilderment contains echoes of Weil as she approaches the void, that liminal place that became a place-in-itself for her. Howe describes bewilderment as "an enchantment that follows a complete collapse of reference and reconcilability".[25] Particularly in the following description, can one almost hear and feel the void "(bewilderment) breaks open the lock of dualism (*it's this or that*) and peers out into space (*not this, not that*)."[26] The sense of that complete loss of footing, the sense of getting lost, but also perhaps staying lost, has its antecedents in many mystical traditions. One of the places where Weil and Howe come together is in their willingness to take on the issue of language, to write poetically, to try to capture what was happening in each moment, especially in those moments of lostness. Howe's relationship with Weil will be examined in more detail later. Locating the truth from the centre of that "lostness" is the work of the poet, and the philosopher too.

Simone Weil wrote poetry, something for which she is not as well known, and a play, on which she was working towards the end of her life, as well as constructing her essays and writing habitually in her notebooks. These were the forms of writing that she chose to work on, to create some shape and meaning that could be offered to the world. Poetry mattered greatly to Weil, and it meant even more after her reading of the work of George Herbert, to whose work she was introduced by an English man at the Benedictine Abbey in Solesmes, prior to one of her mystical experiences. Those who knew her would claim that Weil would have given all she had to be a poet. Her view of what being a poet entailed is found in one of her letters to Fr. Perrin on what she considered to be her intellectual vocation. She was explaining to him what being catholic meant, that is, not being bound to anything created, except to creation in its totality. This "universality", as Weil termed it, was possible for saints of former times to own implicitly

[23] Romana Huk "'A Single Liturgy': Fanny Howe's *The Wedding Dress* in *Christianity and Literature* 58.4, (2009), pps. 657-693.
[24] Huk, p. 683 Huk's article examines the work of Howe in *The Wedding Dress*, with a primary focus on how the ideas of Edith Stein and Simone Weil contribute to Howe's developing thought, particularly in the light of her conversion to Catholicism, which is at the heart of this book. She examines the issue of language, and the writing of a ""theological" poetics written against itself, in a sense, or rather, written in phenomenological mode, bracketing perception against preconceptions about the matter at hand." P. 658
[25] Howe, *The Wedding Dress* p. 15.
[26] Ibid. p. 15.

> They were able implicitly to give the rightful place in their soul, on the one hand to the love due only to God and to all his creation, on the other to their obligations to all that is smaller than the universe. I think that Saint Francis and Saint John of the Cross were like this. That was why they were both poets."[27]

Simone Weil did not write many poems herself, and they are not usually studied in any great depth. As this study is examining a contemplative and more thematic approach to Weil, an examination of one of her poems, and her own poetical prose style will follow. It is hope to demonstrate how the central themes of Weil's writings, and her life, gather themselves together in an essential way in her poetry.

4.3.1 Weil the Poet

In October 1941, Weil wrote a poem called *La Porte*,[28] at the end of the wine harvest. The poem begins with a person at a gate, calling for it to be opened so that the orchards may be seen. The image of the long, hot road, unwelcoming to strangers, is compounded in its imagery by the subject wandering without knowledge. There is a desire for flowers, as the subject waits at the gate, suffering.

> Nous voulons voir des fleurs. Ici la soif est sur nous.
>
> Attendant et souffrant, nous voici devant la porte.
>
> S'il le faut nous romprons cette porte avec nos coups.
>
> Nous pressons et poussons, mais la barrier est trop forte.[29]

In this second verse, Weil introduces the idea of suffering because of waiting, a suffering in being an outsider, waiting outside to see the flowers. However, the person is being held back by strong forces from going on to where they need to be

> If we must we will break this gate with our blows
>
> We press and we push, but the barrier is too strong.[30]

The four verses of the poem end with the opening of the gate eventually, but with no orchards or flowers appearing,

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[27] Weil, *WG*, p. 50.
[28] Weil, "La Porte" *Oeuvres* (Paris: Quarto Gallimard, 1999) p. 805.
[29] "We want to see flowers. There is thirst upon us here.
Waiting and suffering, we are now before the gate.
If we must we will break this gate with our blows
We press and we push, but the barrier is too strong."
[30] The translation of this poem is the author's own.

Seul l'espace immense où sont le vide et la lumière

Fut soudain present de part en part, combla le Coeur,

Et lava les yeux Presque aveugles sous la poussière.

All that is before them is only a "vast space of void and of light"

Which as it appeared touched our hearts

And soothed our eyes, almost blind with tears.[31]

The images employed by Weil here, of a long, hot and inhospitable road, of a heavy barrier getting in the way, and of the effort required to break through that barrier are forceful ones. Furthermore, there is little hope given, even upon the opening of the gate. As one reads this poem, there is no doubting the author's directness, and the severity of the situation. The themes are familiar ones, of being on the outside, suffering in a place of affliction because of that, and a sense of beauty. The beauty is symbolised by the flowers, though they are on the other side of the wall. There is a longing and a desire to be on the other side. The difference between the outside, and what lies on the other side is stark, almost severe. The intensity of the desire escalates to an aggressive attempt to break down the barrier and reach the place with the flowers. The strength of these images, coupled with the intensity of feeling, highlight the core themes and feelings in the work of Weil, something other poets have taken up. Though she is not a great poet, she thinks and writes poetically, claims Joan Dargan.[32] For Dargan, it is in her writing of prose that Weil most often displays the voice of the poet. One of the poets whom Weil has influenced profoundly, Fanny Howe, also displays her poetic voice, not just in her poetry, but in her essays, some of which are discussed later.

4.4 Reflective living – Being a poet, thinking poetically

Living and writing poetically is grounded in reflective living. In his latest book, the Simone Weil scholar, Eric O. Springsted suggests that consideration be given to the description of Weil's life as being a thoughtful one. By this he means an examination of her life as "a thinker, as a philosopher, and what that might tell us about philosophy and about thinking, and ultimately about how to think about the lives we are living and how to live lives that are

[31] Translation is author's own.
[32] Joan Dargan *Simone Weil Thinking Poetically* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1999).

thoughtful."[33] It is often the totality of Weil's life and work that attracts people, particularly artists and musicians. Stephanie Strickland's book of poetry, *The Red Virgin*, is at heart an attempt to situate Weil, using many of Weil's own words to do so. Stephanie Strickland believes that "Simone Weil belongs to a world culture, still to be formed, where the voices of multiple classes, castes, races, genders, ethnicities, nationalities, and religions, can be respected."[34] It is the contention here that this strikes at the very core of Weil's popularity and fascination for today's writers and thinkers. Strickland is not saying that Weil is signalling a world of peace but rather one where people of every colour, race, gender and ethnicity may be regarded as one, in unity. Strickland concludes this thought with the comment that achieving this world culture is impossible but "as Weil would remind us, not on that account to be forsaken."[35]

Patti Smith, the punk rocker, poet and singer-songwriter is an example of someone who has developed great affinity with Weil, whilst remaining somewhat awestruck, another common characteristic of Weil readers. Smith describes Weil's path as one of "revolution, revelation, public service and sacrifice".[36] As Smith travels to England, where she visits Weil's grave[37], she feels that Weil fills her with adrenaline that is "dangerously familiar."[38] Smith incorporates some of the attributes of Weil to the central character, Eugenia, in the story which is at the centre of the Smith's *Devotion*, and the writing of which becomes the focal point of the book. A central question for Smith, as it is for many artists and writers, is what compels anyone to do this creative work? Smith answers this thus

> Why do we write? A chorus erupts
>
> Because we cannot simply live.[39]

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[33] Eric O. Springsted *Simone Weil for the Twenty-First Century* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2021) p. 5.
[34] Stephanie Strickland 'About Simone Weil – As Seen by Others' http://simone.weil.free.fr/lesautres.htm <accessed May 24, 2021>
[35] Ibid.
[36] Patti Smith *Devotion The 2016 Windham-Campbell Lecture* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2018) p. 9. Patti Smith's introduction to the life and work of Weil is through a biography *Weil* by Francine du Plessix Gray (New York: Viking Penguin 2001).
[37] Simone Weil is buried in the Roman Catholic section of Bybrook Cemetery in Ashford, Kent. Having been found unconscious in her rooms on April 15, 1943, and brought to the Middlesex Hospital, Simone Weil was transferred to the Grosvenor Sanatorium in Ashford, having requested that she be sent to a sanatorium as she felt she was suffocating in her room at the hospital. On August 17, she was brought to the Grosvenor Sanatorium by ambulance. She died at 10.30 pm on August 24.
[38] Smith p. 17.
[39] Smith p. 93.

A similar answer has been given by many artists, and Smith does not elaborate any further, thought the resonances with Weil are clear. Simone Weil always wanted to do better, to be better, whether it was working on her terrible handwriting until she developed a good handwriting style when younger, or whether it meant devising difficult schemes to offer moral assistance during the war, such as her plan for nurses. She was always attempting to make things better, and her reflections centred around this constantly.

The life of a poet is one of constantly paying attention to the world, and to one's self, especially in the smallest of details, those little moments which flash forth from our lives, and either bounce off the world and are reflected back, or disappear. Paying attention to the movement of these moments, and to their growth, is the work of the philosopher, and perhaps more particularly, the poet. Both are asking about the world, and searching for what is real, both within us, and outside us, situated as we are in what we know as our world. Many commentaries have noted that during the recent Covid-19 pandemic, particularly at the beginning of it during strict lockdowns, it is poetry that was requested, both online and in book form, as people sought to understand their situation on a planet suddenly shocked into chaos. The questions were focussed on the process of daily living and the meaning of this new existence. How do we live our lives now? This question could be stated as the basic one, at the root of all poetry and philosophies, and could be an accurate summation of the approach of Pierre Hadot and his philosophy as a way of life, which has been discussed in a previous chapter. Life presented itself to Simone Weil as a whole, a complete package: there was nothing that could not be interrogated and an attempt made at understanding it, whether it be reflecting on the concept of the Good and of God, to the machines she worked on in the factories. Her search was for truth, and it did not matter which shape, form or attitude it arrived in.

Whilst artists like Patti Smith may see Weil as a tragic figure, a mystical figure that inspires awe because of the way she lived her life, there is a more valiant side to Weil. It is this that Springsted highlights. He cites her strong will and her concern for others as two of the mainstays of her character throughout her life. The strength of her will could bend towards stubbornness, but Springsted stresses that it could also bend towards a disciplined, concentrated and loyal life. Her concern for others and her desire to share their lives demonstrated a "rare openness and generosity"; however these attributes could enrich other

people's lives, they could at times lead to a "self-destructive asceticism."[40] The distinction which Springsted makes between Weil's thinking before and after her mystical experiences is a clear one and perhaps one that is not highlighted sufficiently. In the first period, she was more socially and politically concerned, though these concerns did not disappear in the second. It must be remembered that by the time war began, Simone Weil was at the beginning of major moves, transatlantic moves, in her life: firstly, to Marseilles, thence to America, and finally, back to London and to Kent. Her religious experiences did indeed usher in a new period of reflection, one which, I suggest, though as grounded as ever in her daily writing practice, brought additional and sharper focus into her writing. The object of her writing was becoming more refined. It is important to highlight this shift in her inner life, as it is Weil's writings of this later period that are the most influential in terms of her popularity, as well as signifying this turn in her life. She was now reading John of the Cross and her focus was more on the experience of God, and of Christ. Because her Christ was the Christ of the least, of those with no voice, Weil was once again charting stark territory.

As already stated, everything for Weil was to be at the service of truth, no matter what stage of her life she was living through. Weil's education, particularly with Alain, contained elements of the will and willing, and a mystical philosophy that contained a "certain sort of passivity or receptivity in the inner life."[41] Springsted outlines succinctly the shift in Weil's thought from the concern with discipline and training, alongside a concern for method, which would curb the imagination and distort our perception, to a concern less focussed on discipline in her later writings. This later concern would be keener to emphasise how one might allow oneself *be* shaped or moulded. Working on oneself becomes a matter of attention then, as one focuses not on how one's discipline or training is working, but rather on god. There are times indeed when this clear and steady attentiveness will cost us, as things we are attached to within ourselves, and those outside of ourselves, will be shed from our lives. This could include people we know and love. There is a detachment, s discipline and a definite shedding of the "I", as the focus changes to one completely outside of ourselves, though involving the whole self in that process. Thomas Merton would later claim that the self, the deepest part of our being, resides within us and that the more we delve into the depths of ourselves, the greater the chance of our finding God

[40] Springsted *Simone Weil for the Twenty-First Century* p. 6.
[41] Springsted op.cit. p. 8. Springsted is relying here on Simone Pétrement's biography of Simone Weil.

> Therefore there is only one problem on which all my existence, my peace and my happiness depend: to discover myself in discovering God. If I find Him I will find myself and if I find my true self I will find Him.[42]

Weil was an influence on Merton and he was fascinated by her thinking; it is clear that the turn to the self, and to the inward journey, had occurred when he was writing his book on contemplation was published first, in 1961. e and personal reflections into his writing in a way that Weil never did. Weil's concerns were more centred on the evils of the collectivity, and social justice, as well as on her own spiritual path. Merton too shared these concerns, but incorporated his own life

4.4.1 The art of Writing

For Simone Weil, writing was central to her process of attention. It is something she did as a daily exercise, and something she regarded sufficiently to place her notebooks in the care of a friend, Gustav Thibon, when she left France with her parents, to sail to America. Writing was her work, and even when she was engaged in physical labour, writing formed part of each day's schedule. When not working in the factories, she spent all day writing. This was the work. "Art, (of whatever kind) is related to two things: *work* and *love* … The poem teaches us to contemplate thoughts instead of changing them. … The artist's inspiration is always *Platonic*."[43] Weil may be referring here to the tendency to flee from our thoughts in affliction, allowing the imagination to take over. Poetry is not for her a work of the imagination, rather is it about staying with the thought, of maintaining that posture of attention, no matter how difficult or traumatic the thought. We must stay with what is before us, and not shirk it. Poetry can assist in this endeavour, helping us to contemplate the thoughts, rather than using the imagination to change them. The two noblest efforts of humanity are to construct, which is work, and to desist from destruction, which is love overcome.[44] Elsewhere in this pre-war notebook, Weil suggests that "education ought to include nothing except art."[45] Her programme for education would begin with song, dance, and drawing. "Poetry later still. As for the art of writing, it ought to be developed only in relation to the other disciplines."[46] Weil believed at this stage in her life, that art would be reborn after the "great anarchy", any greatness that may arise as a corollary of this great art,

[42] Thomas Merton *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 2007) p. 36.
[43] Weil *FLN* (Eugene, Oregon: WIPF & STOCK, 2015) p. 42.
[44] Weil, *FLN* p. 42.
[45] Weil, *FLN*. p. 46.
[46] Weil *FLN*. p. 46.

can "only be solitary, obscure, and without echo … (but without an echo there is no art)."[47] Weil's sense of contradiction within her writing is particularly evident here, and it should be noted that some of these comments come from the margins of her notebooks. It is important to note her overall vision though, before proceeding to outline her thoughts on literature, as Weil's comments about some issues, such as this one, for example, could be stark. It is good to remember to set these remarks against those she would make later in essays such as "Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God" and "Literature and Morals".

4.5 Simone Weil – Writing on Literature

Simone Weil wrote about literature within the context of morality, though she knew that both writers and readers alike might take issue with her conclusions. In her usual forthright fashion, she comes straight to the point in her essay "Morality and Literature"[48], defining an aesthetic that declares imaginative literature as sharing in immorality. Whilst describing the good as beautiful and wonderful, and evil as dreary and monotonous in our lived reality, she then declares "With fictional good and evil, it is the other way round. Fictional good is boring and flat, while fictional evil is varied and intriguing, attractive, profound, and full of charm."[49] There is no doubting the perennial popularity of crime and detective fiction in our time, and even Weil herself read this genre.[50] The reason fictional evil can be so alluring, according to Weil, is that there are "necessities and impossibilities in reality which do not obtain in fiction." [51] "Unreality takes away all value from the good."[52] Though she abhors the writing in capital letters she expounds upon in "The Power of Words", Weil can bring clarity to new levels of razor sharpness in the polarities she describes in her writing, such as those cited above with regard to good and evil, fiction and reality. She can also declare, rather sweepingly, that "immorality is inseparable from literature, which chiefly consists of the

[47] Weil *FLN* p. 47.
[48] Simone Weil "Morality and Literature" in *The Simone Weil Reader* ed. George A. Panichas (Wakefield, Rhode Island & London: Moyer Bell Limited, 1977) pps. 290-295 hereafter known as Weil ML
[49] Weil ML p. 290.
[50] Gabriela Fiori in her biography *Simone Weil An Intellectual Biography* notes Weil's interest "The mechanism of human vicissitudes greatly interested Simone Weil; I think that it is to this interest that we should attribute her passion for detective fiction. Mme. Denise-Aimé Azam … told me that Simone owned a whole collection of English detective stories (Green Penguins)." These would have included Margery Allingham, Agatha Christie, George Simenon and Ngaio Marsh, to name a few.
[51] SW ML p. 290.
[52] SW ML p. 291.

fictional" and that "writers with pretensions to high morality are no less immoral than the others, they are merely worse writers."[53]

In explaining her views thus, she expounds on the idea of fiction as something that is not merely a part of our lives, rather is it almost the complete substance. She claims that we fictionalise our future, and our past too, as we refashion it to our taste. When it comes to dealing with and processing our interactions with others she claims that we "do not study other people; we invent what they are thinking, saying, and doing."[54] This refashioning serves to soften the realities of whatever we may have experienced and provide us with a past that, as with all fiction, may appeal to us, whilst the good is odious. We may receive a rude awakening at times, due to the harsh reality of certain events in our lives, but we soon "relapse into the waking dream peopled by our fictions."[55]

There is no quarter given in the language Weil uses to describe the immorality of fiction. As she continues to explain that there is something that will release humanity from its stupor and enable it to face the truth, she is just as stark and all-encompassing as she defines the works of those who possess the genius to uplift, in whose work there is present the force of gravity, which though not made of words, is present in their souls. The writer of genius is able to bring their reader to an experience of "the slope of victory and the slope of defeat."[56] Included in this pantheon of genius is Shakespeare, various works of Aeschylus, Sophocles, Racine, Molière and Villon. Weil reserves a special place for Rimbaud, as the "maturity of genius is conformity to the true relations of good and evil, the work which represents maturity of demoniacal genius is silence. Rimbaud is its example and symbol."[57]

Weil reserves a special mention for those writers who usurp the function of spiritual guidance. Only a writer of the highest genius is capable of taking on such a task. She is scathing about any other writer who might dare to take on such a mantle. Unless they have a philosophic bent in addition to a literary one, their opinions do not matter. [58] She dates this abuse back to the romanticism and she believed it had introduced into literature a "Messianic

[53] SW ML p. 291.
[54] SW ML p. 292.
[55] SW ML p. 292.
[56] SW ML p. 293.
[57] SW ML p. 293.
[58] On a more whimsical note, it does not take much imagination to assess the content, or the extent, of Weil's response to the culture of celebrity today should she have lived to a ripe old age.

afflatus wholly detrimental to its artistic purity."[59] In previous ages, the dissemination of bad literature had an antidote within the culture and life of the people. For Weil, these were religious ceremonies, stories, dance and prayer. However, she feels that times have now changed and that between a poem by Valéry and an advertisement for a beauty cream promising happy days married to the perfect man, there was no continuity. The work and the standing, the authority previously held by priests, was now filled by literature's spiritual usurpation. "To have permitted that state of affairs is a crime for which all who can hold a pen should bear the responsibility as a remorse."[60]

Devastating as Simone Weil was on the issue of colonialism, and the upholding of the right of every person, and every person's soul, to be rooted, she sometimes displayed a patronising attitude to those village girls and natives who had been led along by advertisements for face cream. Perhaps she could have endowed them with more of a sense of their own agency? In all her writing, there is a sensibility towards the life of others, though not perhaps always a sensitivity towards them. Her writing displays an awareness of the suffering of others. Whatever she was going through herself, her essential exercise and coping skill was her writing. Whilst her writing was critical of society, politics and religions, she saw all these not just as a social critic, but rather with the eyes of the poet, at least in some aspects.

4.6 Simone Weil: A writer of poetical prose?

> What counts in a human life is not the events governing the course of years, or even months, or even days. It's the way in which each minute is linked to the next and what it costs each person in his or her body, heart, and soul – and above all in the exercise of the faculty of attention – to bring this linking about minute by minute.
>
> If I were to write a novel, I'd be doing something entirely new.[61]

For Joan Dargan, Weil's writing in her notebooks is her way of following those links. Her journey is one of self-knowledge, though had she indeed taken up the challenge to come up with something new, Dargan is uncertain as to whether it would have worked, as any time that Weil chose to embark upon a literary endeavour, she chose convention over new departure each time. Her notebooks were filled with bold ideas and sharp illustrations; it might have been assumed this would transfer into her creative writing. As Dargan highlights

[59] SW ML p. 294.
[60] SW ML p. 294.
[61] Simone Weil *Oeuvres Complètes* ed. André Devaux and Florence de Lussy (Paris: Gallimard,since 1988) 2:2:267, quoted in Joan Dargan *Simone Weil Thinking Poetically* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1999), p. 86 trans. Joan Dargan.

though, there is always a pedagogical element in Weil's work, and her notes for her play *Venise sauvée*, indicate "the extent to which carefully articulated intentions, more than internal dramatic considerations, govern the writing of the play."[62] Her poetry also has the pedagogical element coursing through it, written as it is in more traditional forms. It expounds upon her particular philosophical themes "without the breath-taking animation and subtlety characteristic of her finest prose."[63] Dargan reminds the reader too of how the psychological element exists in Weil only to be decreated, and the imagination has to be banished, source as it is of illusion.[64]

Dargan's description of the poetic discourse and the philosophical discourse, serves to support, in part, the appeal that Weil has for writers and poets. There is a striving on Weil's part to express herself thus, and though her own poetry does not have the same impact as her prose, yet it is the "thinking poetically" that draws in a wider audience. If Weil is primarily a philosopher, then philosophers are those who, according to Wallace Stevens, deal with this "present world plus thought", whilst it is the poet who deals with the world as it is, "plus imagination."[65] Dargan argues for the beauty of Weil's prose, insofar as it is not merely the restraint a philosopher might bring into play, rather is it the result of helplessness before certain evidence, a "poverty of means imaginatively overcome by the oblique perspective detecting unanticipated logic."[66] Weil's use of examples of people's lives, often in their starkest moments, presents the reader with the complex reality of their situation, be it the affliction in their lives, or the difficult choices before them.

Though Simone Weil would have loved to have been a poet,[67] her life and work was based on the notion of beauty as "a mediating role in her metaphysics."[68] For her, artistic creation is the doorway through which access is gained to the moral aspect of life, it is not just about human consciousness. For Dargan, Weil's aesthetic is one of "invisible weights and balances, these forces implicit in the imprint of a mind upon matter."[69] However, this does not entail a complete commitment by Weil to a complete dedication to the artistic endeavour. For Weil,

[62] Dargan *Simone Weil Thinking Poetically* p. 86.
[63] Dargan p. 86.
[64] Dargan pps. 86-87.
[65] Quoted in JD p. 87 Wallace Stevens *Collected Poetry and Prose* (New York: Library of America, 1997), p.864.
[66] Dargan p. 87.
[67] Dargan quotes from Simone Pétrement's biography, where the poet Jean Tortel, who knew Weil in Marseilles, claimed the "I truly think she would have sacrificed her whole work for the few poems she wrote." Simone Pétrement *Simone Weil p. 531;* Dargan p. 87.
[68] Dargan p. 87.
[69] Dargan pps. 87-88.

this endeavour must always be at the service of the infinite. She would admit of no other possibilities. She sets out her meaning very clearly thus: "Utmost attentiveness is what constitutes the creative faculty in man, and utmost attentiveness I none other than religious."[70] In comparing Weil's work with that of other poets such as Elizabeth Bishop, Dargan believes that Bishop can pursue artistic awareness without "necessarily finding religious meaning in what it examines."[71] One of Weil's own poems was written when she was in Marseilles, and it exemplifies this principle of the connection which can be made by the artistic endeavour. It can in acknowledging the state of our world, re-create the "link between the harshness of truth and the perception of beauty."[72]

Necessity

The cycle of days in the deserted sky turning
In silence watched by mortal eyes
Gaping mouth here below, where each hour is burning
So many cruel and beseeching cries;

All the stars slow in the steps of their dance,
The only fixed dance, mute brilliance on high,
In spite of us formless, nameless, without cadence,
Too perfect, no fault to belie;

Toward them, suspended, our anger is vain.
Quench our thirst, if you must break our hearts.
Clamoring and desiring, their circle draws us in their train'
Our brilliant masters were forever victors.

Tear flesh apart, chains of pure clarity.
Nailed without a cry to the fixed point of the North,

[70] *Cahiers* 3:59 quoted in Dargan p. 90.
[71] Dargan p. 90.
[72] Dargan p. 90.

Naked soul exposed to all injury,

May we obey you unto death.[73]

Joan Dargan notes that in the composition of this poem, Weil falls one syllable short in each line of the twelve necessary to fulfil the requirements of the alexandrine of French poetry and of classical drama "an odd, disjointed meter that persistently calls attention to its imperfection. It is as if the author deliberately maims her creation in order to ensure its truthfulness."[74] For Dargan, this absent syllable "cries out the reality of subjection and disfigurement."[75] In a poem about the realm of necessity, Dargan notes that when determinism rules unchecked, "it would be false to project a sense of fullness or the possibility of transcendence, even on the level of form."[76] And thus a picture presents itself once again of Weil, even as poet, needing to be the moral arbiter, or at least to keep the human condition to the fore, stamping out any hopefulness, or any chance of even symbolic relief.

Once again, it is to the prose of Simone Weil that the artist, or the poet, must turn, away from the "withering effects of a harsh mental ascesis",[77] to find some comfort, and even perhaps inspiration. Dargan quotes from Séamus Heaney's *The Redress of Poetry*[78] to support her claim here, Heaney sees Weil's *Gravity and Grace* as being shot through with the idea of what he terms "counterweighting, of balancing out the forces, of redress – tilting the scales or reality towards some transcendent equilibrium."[79] For Heaney, this is the activity of poetry, sensing a reality that may only be glimpsed by the imagination, but carries weight because that imagining is carried out within "the gravitational pull of the actual and can therefore hold its own and balance out against the historical situation."[80] Heaney's comments are made within the context of a discussion on the countervailing gestures that he would deem are a necessity for a poet. There is much pressure on the poet, from the general public in whatever era, for simplification. He cites the examples of a British soldier at the front in World War One. His poetry is expected to support the war effort, just as the Irish poet who is alive after

[73] Dargan p. 91; this is Dargan's translation of the poem.
[74] Dargan p. 91.
[75] Dargan p. 91.
[76] Dargan p. 91.
[77] Dargan p. 95.
[78] Dargan p. 95 Séamus Heaney *The Redress of Poetry* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995). It is worth noting that Heaney's only reference for Weil's writings is Gravity and Grace. He calls it "her (Weil's) whole book." (p.3).
[79] Quoted on p. 95 of Dargan, Heaney p. 3.
[80] Dargan p, 95 Heaney pps. 3-4.

the 1916 executions is expected to rail against the British as a tyrannical power. It is here that Heaney brings in Simone Weil, in whose writings on gravity in particular he places such emphasis. Her assessment of the unbalancing of society leads Heaney to conclude that

> Clearly, this corresponds to deep structures of thought and feeling derived from centuries of Christian teaching and from Christ's paradoxical identification with the plight of the wretched.[81]

Insofar as poetry reflects the "mind's extreme recognitions, and of language's most unexpected apprehensions",[82] then it too demonstrates Weil's law of gravity. Ultimately, those poets who disobey the law of gravity, and for Heaney, this would include Osip Mandelstam and Czeslaw Milosz, the "redress of poetry comes to represent something like an exercise of the virtue of hope as it is understood by Václav Havel."[83] To hope is to defy gravity.

For Joan Dargan, Heaney's view is similar to Weil's, in that it prioritises harmony, art in harmony with justice and order. All this is very European in character. Dargan believes that Weil would agree with Heaney in his calling for personal integrity on the part of the poet, something which she espoused in *The Need for Roots.* It is however, in the place given to the imagination by Heaney that Simone Weil might disagree with him, however sincerely and honestly this concept was brought about. "For Weil, the inspired work of art only reflects …the working of the good at large."[84] Dargan believes that for Weil, poetry could not carry all the world's great injustices, however, a poem, or a painting, is "a thing small enough to place in our prison cells of mind or concrete, giving us strength to cultivate the faculty of attention."[85] Dargan deems Weil's devotion to truth as being all-consuming; she is prepared to "leap out of life and language in response to a mystical intuition far more radical than any poetic one."[86] And it was intellectual integrity above all that formed "the connective tissue of her conscious life, exacting a terrible cost …"[87]

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[81] Séamus Heaney *The Redress of Poetry* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995) p. 3.
[82] Heaney p. 3.
[83] Heane p. 4 Havel sees hope as "a dimension of the soul … an orientation of the spirit … it transcends the world that is immediately experienced, and is anchored somewhere beyond its horizon." From Václav Havel *Disturbing the Peace* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990) 9. 181.
[84] Dargan p. 96.
[85] Dargan p. 96.
[86] Dargan p. 97.
[87] Dargan p. 97.

4.7 Weil – Among the Poets

Weil's favourite poet of her later years was George Herbert. Elizabeth Jennings, an English poet of the twentieth century, claimed that "the restless demands of the intellect, the search for suitable imagery – these are the things which place Simone Weil among the poets."[88] Adrian Grafe employs this title for his chapter on Weil in a book on English poetry.[89] In this piece, Grafe cites a number of poets who have been influenced by Weil, either in their poetry, or in their prose. These include Seamus Heaney, T.S. Eliot, Geoffrey Hill, Rowan Williams and Michael Symmons Roberts.[90] Jennings is the only female he lists. Grafe claims that what he terms the "poetic commonality" which focuses on Simone Weil has its origins in some religious awareness, and the search for its "poetic expression." [91] Whilst he acknowledges the criticism of English poetry, since the 1950s in particular, as being parochial, inward looking and afraid of "tackling broader or deeper issues, metaphysical ones", he makes the rather astonishing claim that the response of the particular poets he is citing in his discussion to Simone Weil, proves English poetry's ability to "engage with foreignness *(sic)* at a high ethical and spiritual level and the catholicity of their approach to poetry, thought and language."[92] It is not quite clear what Grafe's definition of "foreignness" is, though for the purposes of this study, the most benign interpretation will be taken.

Grafe sees Weil as a symbol of something beyond herself, symbolising the anxiety of her age, whilst retaining her individuality, which includes basic contradictions. He sees her early death as partially the responsibility of the "feverish level of intensity" at which she wrote. The manner of her death also provides an attraction to her on the part of lyric poets, he believes.[93] It is in his assessment of Weil's influence that he identifies a characteristic which could be seen as fundamental to Weil and the attraction of her work. Just as a poem begins with an insight so does Weil, "Simone Weil begins with an insight" according to T. S. Eliot in his Preface to *The Need for Roots.*[94] However, Eliot qualifies this statement by following it

[88] Elizabeth Jennings *Every Changing Shape: Mystical Experience and the Making of Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1996) p. 134.
[89] Adrian Grafe 'Simone Weil among the Poets' in *Ecstasy and Understanding: Religious Awareness in English Poetry from the Late Victorian to the Modern Period* (London: Bloomsbury, 2008) pps. 161-171.
[90] Simone Kotva has written of another British poet, the Scot, Thomas A. Clark, in the context of using Weil's religious philosophy to interpret Clark's concept of waiting. Her article is "Attention: Thomas A. Clark and Simone Weil" *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry 01-01*-2019, Vol. 11, 1 pps. 1-16.
[91] Grafe, p. 162.
[92] Grafe p. 162.
[93] Grafe, p. 162.
[94] Weil *NR*, p. x.

with "but the logic of her emotions can lead her to make generalisations so large as to be meaningless."[95] Whether her views on the latinisation of Western Europe by Rome is a good or a bad thing is neither here nor there for Eliot at this point; whatever "flights of fancy" Weil may have had, do not invalidate her "fundamental concept of rootedness, and her warnings against the evils of an over-centralised society."[96] Nor do they invalidate the basic notion of insight that he mentions. Simone Weil was driven by this insight, an insight into a world that was in distress on so many levels and strata, all of which impacted on the population as a whole.

As anyone who comes into contact with the complete works of Simone Weil will know, she did not write or publish for academic journals. Though there are many academic articles and books written about her and her thinking, she was not an academic. Though she had an excellent academic education in philosophy, and had been a teacher herself, she chose to channel her energies into writing articles for small political and trades union journals.[97] It is the intention in this study to pursue whatever legacy Weil may have left behind, in the spirit of that same search for truth that Weil employed, or at least with something of the same focus that she herself had in mind. Weil's handing over to Thibon of all her notes, especially in such embryonic form, so completely to another, is difficult to comprehend, particularly when Weil describes her writing as part of her *doing* her philosophy. Simone Weil struggled as all writers must, with the notion of the ego. Especially for those writers who would aspire to write in a self-stripping manner, dealing with the presence of the ego, and managing that presence, is an on-going task. The question of the balance between what they wanted to say, and who was saying it, affects the notion of presence within their own writing. Who is speaking? Simone Weil used a pseudonym for her article writing at times.[98]

Some of Weil's popularity resides in the fact that she went to work in factories in order to experience at first hand the work life of those engaged in such physically taxing and repetitious tasks. Thus she has come to signify solidarity with the poor, and with those who feel disenfranchised. This has contributed in no small measure to her saintly status, albeit the saintliness of the outsider. Particularly in the last years of her life, there were themes that ran through Weil's work that enhanced that more saintly reputation.

[95] Weil *NR* p. x.
[96] Eliot op.cit. p. x.
[97] *Cahiers du Sud* among others, previously noted.
[98] She used the pseudonym Emile Novis to disguise her Jewish name for the articles in *Cahiers du Sud*.

4.7.1 Some Central themes*: Dépouillement?*[99]

The need to quell our selfishness and indeed to go beyond this to search for our true selves is not out of place with the thinking and writing of mystics of all traditions. Thomas Merton speaks of the "true self" and the "false self", the latter being illusionary, full of unreality and seeking out power and myths to cover up that which we could truly become.[100] What is at stake is the need to become nothing so that the Other/God may take possession of the soul. For Simone Weil though, there is a stark quality, a severity in the approach, and in her language, that does not brook any prevarication. An example of this would be one of her detailed descriptions of the process of affliction, where she speaks of it as being "hideous, as life in its nakedness always is; like an amputated limb, or the swarming of insects."[101] For those who have experienced profound affliction, descriptions such as this are commonplace, particularly in accounts of war and torture. The numbers enduring such affliction may be small relative to the world's population, but there are other types of suffering that border on affliction, though not satisfying all the criteria laid down by Weil. In particular, the current mental health crisis is a prime example. People may not be suffering physical torture, but there is a suffering within their loneliness and isolation that stands out in sharp relief against a world seemingly based on "communities", albeit online ones. The inner suffering spills over into the physical body and causes real pain, not to mention the inner pain being endured.

4.7.2 *Malheur,* Love and Affliction

The power to claim this "I" may only be taken away from us by extreme affliction "*l'extrême malheur".* Weil delineates this process carefully, believing that a human being who is in a state of perfection and who, through grace, destroys the "I" in themselves, then "falls into that degree of affliction which corresponds for him to the destruction of the "I" from outside – we have there the cross in its fullness."[102] As there is no "I" remaining, this leaves space for God. However, affliction produces an effect that is equivalent to the destruction just mentioned. "It

[99] This word for *stripping away*, is used here with the further nuance of ensuing poverty caused by such stripping.
[100] Thomas Merton *New Seeds of Contemplation* pp. 31-36.
[101] Simone Weil *NB* p. 223.
[102] Simone Weil *GG* p. 24.

produces the absence of God. 'My God, why hast Thou forsaken me?'"[103] This is redemptive suffering for Simone Weil: because God is present in the evil, it follows that "the absence of God is the mode of divine presence which corresponds to evil – absence which is felt. He who has not God within himself cannot feel his absence."[104] When the soul joins itself through love to this external destruction, this then is what she terms "expiatory suffering."[105] Love is the essential ingredient for the fullness of the experience of redemptive suffering, otherwise it is "quasi-infernal suffering."[106] When Weil speaks in this fashion, it may be construed as severe. As the quotations in this section have been from her *Notebooks,* it is important to assess her thinking within the context of one of her essays, where she brought her thinking on affliction and the love of God, into focus in a more formal way. The essay in question was "The Love of God and Affliction", some of which was written in 1942, with the rest of the essay being discovered posthumously.[107] It is here that a more systematic account may be found of Weil's ideas on love, coupled with as close as she may have come to a theology of love. It is one of the most Christian essays in her work.

She begins the essay by launching into the concept of affliction, and concludes it thus:

> The man who has known pure joy, if only for a moment, and who has therefore tasted the flavour of the world's beauty, for it is the same thing, is the only man for whom affliction is something devastating. At the same time, he is the only man who has not deserved this punishment. But, after all, for him it is no punishment; it is God himself holding his hand and pressing it rather hard. For, if he remains constant, what he will discover buried deep under the sound of his own lamentations is the pearl of the silence of God.[108]

That the essay begins and ends with affliction, concluding with the mention of lamentations, highlights that for Weil, this life is indeed a "valley of tears". That Simone Weil experienced the onset of World War Two may account partially for such a perspective. However, it is quite clear from all her writings, that she had a propensity for a rawness and a starkness in her outlook; some might even deem her to be not just ascetic, but masochistic.

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[103] Simone Weil *GG* p. 24.
[104] Simone Weil *GG* p. 24.
[105] Weil *GG* p. 24.
[106] Weil *GG* p. 24.
[107] The first part of this essay, "L'Amour de Dieu et le malheur*"* was published initially in *Waiting for God,* which was written before May in 1942 pp. 68-82. The second part of the essay was found amongst her papers and was subsequently published, along with the first part, in *Pensées sans ordre concernant l'amour de Dieu* (Gallimard, 1962). The complete essay, especially the second half, which is used here, is from *Simone Weil Reader* ed. by George A. Panichas. The complete essay is also published in Simone Weil, trans. Richard Rees *On Science, Necessity and the Love of God* (London New York Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1968).
[108] Simone Weil "The Love of God and Affliction" in SWR pp. 439-468, p. 468.

Our encounters with suffering, with the void, leave us scrambling around, attempting to fill it. What *we* attempt to fill the void with in our pain and our emptiness is imagination "The imagination is continually working to stop up all the fissures through which grace might pass."[109] Sustaining this stance of attentiveness is not easy, nor is it one that is commonly acceptable. Yet, according to Weil, the only real power we have in this life is to be able to say "I". Whatever self it is that we feel we may possess, could be taken away from us by a mere chance, as she states above, hence the precarity of our human situation, as it relates to the self before God. This destruction of the "I", aimed at the "*je*", of which we are so fond, begs the question of what the self is for Weil, and what is meant when she speaks of the interior and the exterior. This will be examined later as part of the discussion on mysticism.

The stripping away of the ego that Weil desires and indeed recommends, would, as Christopher Hamilton has indicated, leave "little room for many of the forms of attachment which make human life what it is – and make it worth living."[110] Normal human attachments of love, such as those between siblings, parents and children, lovers and friends are where we learn to love, though the attitude of many of the institutional churches towards certain forms of love has led to an elevation of the celibate state over that of the conjugal, for example, not to mention the puritanical attitudes which engulfed Christianity, particularly since the Victorian age.[111] Hamilton makes a good point when he highlights the fact that from a certain viewpoint of purity, some of what he terms the "standing conditions of human life" may appear to be compromised, rather than being seen as life in all its "messy unclarity".[112] Keeping lines clear was an on-going process with Simone Weil, and the messiness of life did not hold her in its unclarity, as she powered through each stage of the development of her life and her writing. Reading the selection of extracts from her *Notebooks* that form the chapter in *Gravity and Grace* on The Self/Le Moi, there is an overriding harshness in them that feeds the picture of Weil that is often perpetrated: that of a disconnected and, literally disembodied voice, striving for perfection and The Good. Leaving aside for now the issues with regard to

[109] Weil *NB* p. 150.
[110] Christopher Hamilton, review of *Simone Weil An Apprenticeship in Attention* by Mario Von der Ruhr *Philosophical Investigations,* 31:4, (2008), 374-379, (p. 375).
[111] For an Irish slant on this issue, Derek Scally's book *The Best Catholics in the World* deals effectively with the adoption of Victorian values into Ireland after the Famine, which, coupled with the reforms of Cardinal Paul Cullen, led to a Catholic Church which had little or no intellectual heft, and a deferential membership. This provided fertile ground for the abuses which ensued and which this generation is dealing with currently. For an examination of the effects today of these abuses, particularly those which have been unvcovered in relation to the Mother and Baby Homes in Ireland, the Report of the Mother and Baby Homes Commission of Investigation was published on March 1, 2021, and is available at https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/mbhcoi/ .
[112] Scally p. 375.

Weil and embodiment, it bears repeating that the process of decreation was indeed a harsh and a thoroughgoing one for her, but a necessary one in the process of allowing God to enter the soul. It is this aspect of Weil's thought that the Canadian poet Anne Carson, has chosen to highlight.

4.8 Finding an echo – Simone Weil and some contemporary North American female poets

Those poets who have been influenced by Weil over a lifetime's work include Anne Carson, Stephanie Strickland,[113] Jorie Graham, Kate Daniels and Fanny Howe. It is Howe perhaps who has lived with, and reflected upon the work of Simone Weil the longest, and in whose work may be seen both the early influence of Weil, as well as a more mature influence. For the purposes of this study, the emphasis will be on Anne Carson for one work, and Fanny Howe for her lifetime of studying Simone Weil. The intention is to explore their work for resonances with Weil, to see what themes occur in their work that issue from Weil's thought, and to examine where and how this might reflect back on her work. Anne Carson is the first and as she takes Weil's concept of decreation, it might be useful to begin with what this might mean, in more general terms.

4.9 Anne Carson

In the discussion of the reception of Weil's work amongst North American/Canadian poets, particularly female poets, there are some who have subsumed her thought into their own, particularly at an early stage of their lives, and who have produced work that takes its foundational impetus from Weil's work and life. Because of the early publication of articles of a political nature in America, Weil's name is more widespread than it would be in Ireland, for example.[114] Then there are those who have taken a central aspect of Weil's thought to

[113] Stephanie Strickland has written one of her books based on the life of Simone Weil *The Red Virgin A Poem of Simone Weil* (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1993).

[114] Anecdotally, it is clear that for college students in America, there may be a higher awareness of Weil's thought than there is in Europe, and definitely in Ireland. In discussing this with the poet Rita Sims Quillen, who lives and writes in Virginia, her experience would appear to echo that of others, in that it is in college that people begin to hear about Weil. The themes in her work echo those of Weil's to some extent: the need for physical work, questioning the writing process and dealing with darkness.

develop in their own work, often comparing her with others. Anne Carson's *Decreation,*[115] is one such example. Here the poet puts Weil's concept of decreation under the microscope.

In her book, Carson employs Weil's concept of decreation to examine Weil's thought alongside that of Marguerite Porete and Sappho. Carson challenges poetry itself as she writes her essays poetically, and keeps a tight control over her ideas and her language. She is a strong theoretician and yet can balance that aspect of her writing with her poetic impulse, in whatever form she is writing. In a phrase that would not sound amiss coming from Weil, Carson once declared, in answering a question about poetry's suitability for memorialising, that "I do not believe in art as therapy."[116] Her essay on decreation is the central essay in the book and it is revisited as an opera at the end of the book as well. In "Decreation: How women like Sappho, Marguerite Porete and Simone Weil tell God"[117] Carson grounds the section on Simone Weil on Weil's desire to get herself out of the way in order to arrive at God. Carson gives as concise and as clear an interpretation of the meaning of Weil's idea of decreation as it is possible to give: "The process of decreation is for her a dislodging of herself from a centre where she cannot stay because staying there blocks God."[118] Carson continues her theme of jealousy which runs throughout this piece, by situating Weil in an erotic triangle involving Weil, God and the whole of creation. For Carson, jealousy is "a dance in which everybody moves because one of them is always extra – three people trying to sit on two chairs."[119] "*Si seulement je savais disparaître, il y aurait union d'amour parfait entre Dieu et la terre où je marche, la mer que j'entends*" Weil's wishing to disappear so that there would be a "perfect union of love between God and the earth I tread, the sea I hear …"[120] is quintessential Weil. Carson concludes this section on Weil by comparing her thinking on joy with that of Marguerite Porete

> It seems consistent with Simone Weil's project of decreation that, although she too recognizes this kind of joyless joy, she finds in it not an occasion of swimming but one of exclusion and negation:

[115] Anne Carson *Decreation Poetry, Essays, Opera* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2006). Anne Carson CM was born in Canada in 1950 and is currently living in Iceland, reading the Icelandic sagas.
[116] Kate Kellaway "Anne Carson: 'I do not believe in art as therapy'" *The Guardian* October 30, 2016 https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/oct/30/anne-carson-do-not-believe-art-therapy-interview-float <accessed November 10, 2021>.
[117] Anne Carson "Decreation" and "Decreation: An Opera in Three Parts" in *Decreation Poetry, Essays, Opera* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2006) pp. 155-183 and 185-240.
[118] Carson p. 167.
[119] Carson. pp. 168-169.
[120] From *GG* p. 36, quoted in Carson on p. 168.

> "Perfect joy excludes even the very feeling of joy, for in the soul filled by the object no corner is left for saying "I"."[121]

Her ultimate conclusion on all three women in her piece begins with a question about Marguerite Porete being a 'fake woman', commenting that society is eager to pass judgement on "the authenticity of women's ways of being but these judgements can get crazy."[122] Marguerite Porete's manuscript[123] had to wait from her burning at the stake in 1310 until 1946, when it was reconnected to her finally as its author by an Italian scholar. Such is the way women have been treated for speaking of things which are not perceived to be their business. Marguerite Porete was a mystic, and though that description is also given to Simone Weil, it goes in tandem with others, such as social activist, philosopher, or writer. Carson is taking Weil's whole life into account too, and judges Weil's death as something which could be labelled morally extreme. She finds it difficult to be reconciled to Simone Weil's life, particularly its ending

> At the same time, it is hard to commend moral extremism of the kind that took Simone Weil to death at the age of thirty-four; saintliness is an eruption of the absolute into ordinary history and we resent that. We need history to remain ordinary. We need to be able to call saints neurotic, anorectic, pathological, sexually repressed or fake. These judgements sanctify our own survival.[124]

We need the ordinary, but we desire the extraordinary. Carson's point is well made here in that we need to have relatable saints. Perhaps it is their job to jolt us to some form of insanity. Simone Weil is referred to so often as the saint of outsiders, someone who rings the bell from outside society's boundaries and calls out some fresh truth. Why read Simone Weil then, and why turn to her for guidance on matters mystical or spiritual? Perhaps one of the reasons why Weil attracts readers initially is the narrative of her life story, which may both enthral and repel, sometimes in equal measure. Carson may be dealing with one aspect of Weil's thought, but she is taking her biography into consideration too. So, is it the case that staying with anyone's writing and paying deeper attention to their work can be of value no matter what the desired outcome? Weil would appear to advocate such an approach herself in her essay on "School Studies", she states that even if the proof in a problem of geometry, for example, is not arrived at, or even understood, "never in any case whatever is a genuine effort of the

[121] Carson p. 170 Quote from Simone Weil GG, p. 77, slightly adapted by Carson.
[122] Carson p. 180.
[123] Marguerite Porete *Le Mirouer des simpes âmes anienties et qui seulement demeurent en vouloir et désir d'amour* ed. R. Guarneri = *Archivio Italiano per la Storia della Pietà 4 (1965), 513-635.*
[124] Carson p. 180.

attention wasted."[125] If this principle is applied, it means that the focussing of one's attention on any problem with which we must grapple, is good. It does not matter whether it is something of a lofty academic nature, or the solving the problem of "who did it" in a detective novel. We have been making progress indeed "in another more mysterious dimension … this apparently barren effort has brought more into the soul."[126] Ultimately, Carson does have an important reason for reading Weil; it is about telling God, and relationship between the self who is the writer, the words they write and God.

What Anne Carson likes about the three women she has taken under consideration is that "they know what love is. That is, they know love is the touchstone of a true or a false spirituality, which is why they play with the figure of jealousy."[127] Carson quotes Weil as she concludes "Love is a sign of our badness" This has been taken from the Arthur Wills translation of *Gravity and Grace.*[128] "L'amour est un signe de notre misère" has been translated as "love is a sign of our badness". Whereas the Emma Craufurd translation has "Love is a sign of our wretchedness",[129] which gives a much more nuanced rendition of the meaning, and suggests a sense of contrition and awareness that the word "badness" does not. In the end, it is indeed all about love. Anne Carson focuses on Weil's idea of the stripping of self, and decreation in this particular book. For other poets, Weil has been a lifetime study, with her influence waxing and waning throughout various stages of life. [130]

[125] Weil, *WG* p. 58.
[126] Weil *GG* p. 58.
[127] Carson p.180.
[128]Simone Weil *Gravity and Grace* (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1997).
[129] Weil *GG*, p.55. Carson has made a note that the Wills translation has been "adapted".
[130] There are several issues when it comes to studying Simone Weil, one of them being that she is not a systematic thinker, as already mentioned, nor did she want to be such. Given this fact, it begs the question of what role she, or her thinking, can play. Reading her *Notebooks* is necessarily an experience of scattered thoughts and ideas, which are planted in one place, and re-appear in another without too much warning; therefore time needs to be taken to piece together what is essential. Such is the way with all journaling. The writing of notes, or a journal, provides a support for other writings and, perhaps, a welcome clarification at times. For scholars of Weil, the *Notebooks* provide much of the material to hand, with subsequent issues involving the level of meaning behind some phrases, or sentences, when taken out of context.A temptation with Weil, as with anyone whose life is cut short, is to speculate about where she would have taken her thought. Conversely, it is striking how prescient her words continue to be in these days of political polarisation, breakdown of communities and an uncharted – and sometimes un-chartable – world of technology. As Weil's life was so intertwined with her thinking, and was ended prematurely, it is easy to shroud her in the mysterious and to speculate about the rounding out of her work. Though it is not always easy to come to a broad conclusion about her, employing a thematic approach enables a concept, such as attention, allows the drawing of some shape, or order, on the work in order to provide a useful template for today, especially in our personal and communal interactions.

4.10 A study of Simone Weil and some American Poets

In his article on reading Simone Weil in contemporary poets, Kit Fan examines the work of Fanny Howe, Jorie Graham and Stephanie Strickland, though Howe is dealt with less extensively. He writes of how Weil inspires and causes consternation, almost in equal measure.

> It is as if Weil's words, written from within the extremity of her intellectual predicament in the mid-twentieth century, are being heard an deciphered beyond the walls of her cell by later writers seeking to mediate between some of the same contradictions, and also seeking to grapple with the possibilities of the life of the spirit in the modern world.[131]

So much of Weil's life was lived within extremities, not just the intellectual one mentioned by Fan here, but also in her family life, with the extreme care and extended parenting she elicited from her parents because of her own lack of self-care, and her willingness to take a stand on what she believed, no matter the cost to her professionally or personally. Fan also highlights that Weil's biography as well as her biographical writings were a particular influence on Strickland and Howe, "whose poetics are partially drawn from the dialectic of Weil's life and works."[132] He continues by suggesting that it is the "liminality of Weil's beliefs and her elusive, intermediary authorial status" that draws these poets to her. Therefore, instead of battling with the impossibility of dealing with a writer's biography, as in Weil's case, there has to be an acceptance that her biography is central to her thought, as she endeavoured in so many ways to embody the theories she was propounding. Fan highlights the tensions with regard to this notion though, by quoting T. S. Eliot in his Preface to Weil's *The Need for Roots,* where Eliot appears to place Weil within the discipline he enunciated in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent'. This entails self-sacrifice on the part of the artist and "a continual extinction of personality".[133] Fan feels that Eliot then contradicts himself when writing of Weil in his Introduction, because he confirms the "special biographical status of her writing."[134] He seems to be stating this when he is claiming that the only kind of introduction to such a book by Weil would have to be written by someone who

[131] Kit Fan "'Between the blank page and the poem': Reading Simone Weil in Contemporary American Poets" *The Cambridge Quarterly,* Vol. 36, No. 2, 2007 pp. 129-154 (p. 131).
[132] Fan, p. 133.
[133] T. S. Eliiot "Tradition and the Individual Talent" in *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999) p.17 quoted in Fan p. 133.
[134] Fan p. 133.

knew her, for any association with her work to have any permanent value.[135] Fan is correct in the point he is making about the difficulties in reading Weil's work, with its inherent tensions and contradictions, however, it is not the only conclusion that may be drawn from the selected quotations. To be working on the extinction of one's personality is not necessarily affected by, or is affecting, the narrative of one's biography, at least to the extent that Fan is suggesting here. The issue begs the question about how much of the writer in Weil was an artist, even a poet, and how much was the saint, albeit a saint for the outsider. It is conceivable that all of these possibilities can be held simultaneously.

Fan acknowledges the debate regarding the posthumous presentation of Weil's work to the world. Her desire for full anonymity displayed during her life, does not match the fascination that the narrative of her life story garnered after her death. That this was facilitated by people who wished to display a particular aspect of her life, to the exclusion of others, is always a fact worth remembering. As previously noted, the presentation of Weil's writings to the world initially was fashioned by Gustave Thibon, someone who was anxious to portray Weil in a more Catholic light. Weil is easy to stereotype and her unflinching desire for truth propelled her into different disciplines and different ways of life, from attempts at active war duty to teaching philosophy. And there was always her writing, which was a daily exercise and her means of working out her ideas. Fan claims that George Steiner's placing of Weil exclusively within the framework of Western philosophy, whilst dismissing her biography, culminates in mystifying her in different ways "turning her into an elective descendant of Kant and Kierkegaard".[136] Steiner is dismissive of Weil's attitude to affliction, and his overall opinion is that "of the great feminine spirits abroad, that of Weil does strike one as the most evidently philosophic."[137]

The poetry of Stephanie Strickland and Fanny Howe he deems gives a more "kaleidoscopic version" of Simone Weil and make her a figure of "poetic agency". [138] Strickland's poem *The Red Virgin* is concerned primarily with situating Weil, and examining how her life and work relates to our own time.[139] Strickland employs Weil's own words to do this, quoting or paraphrasing them throughout the piece, finding that by so doing it brings out "the latent

[135] Fan p. 133.
[136] Fan. P. 135.
[137] George Steiner 'Sainte Simone – Simone Weil' in No Passion Spent: Essays 1978-1996 (London Boston: Faber and Faber,1996) p. 179.
[138] Fan p. 137.
[139] Stephanie Strickland *The Red Virgin A Poem of Simone Weil* (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1993) pps 75.

poetic quality" of Weil's writing.[140] Strickland allows Weil's own voice to come through in her poetry, and in doing so situates her more precisely than many others have done, allowing her life and her writings to be presented as a more unified whole.

In his discussion of authorship and poetic agency, Fan highlights a particular aspect of Strickland's poem which aims at balancing the issue around Weil's relationship with the physical body, believing that Strickland "historicises her and insists on the intricate correlation between the body of her texts and the text of her bodily identity."[141] In another piece of writing, Fan quotes Strickland as stating that "Simone Weil belongs to a world culture, still to be formed, where the voices of multiple classes, castes, races, genders, ethnicities, nationalities, and religions, can be respected."[142] It is the contention here that this strikes at the very core of Weil's popularity and fascination for today's writers and thinkers. Strickland is not saying that Weil is signalling a world of peace, but rather one where people of every colour, race, gender and ethnicity may be regarded as one. Strickland concludes this thought with the comment that achieving this world culture is impossible, but "as Weil would remind us, not on that account to be forsaken.[143] Here is the struggle, here is the call, and here is the vocation for Simone Weil. Weil's sense of vocation is broadly based, yet sharply focussed on adherence to the will of God at all times As Patti Smith stated, answering her own question about why the writer writes "Because we cannot simply live",[144] so Strickland paraphrases Weil's words, performing by so doing one of the most "arduous and indispensable tasks of Weil's scholarship."[145]

Strickland concludes her poem with silence, firstly with God's silence, which then becomes our silence. As we hear nothing in response to our calling out, it is then that

> "we touch the silence
>
> of God"

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[140] Joan Dargan's *Simone Weil Thinking Poetically* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1999) explores this theme in a comprehensive and fruitful way. There are only a few poems in *The Red Virgin* that do not contain direct quotations from Weil; for example: 'Learning the Lyre' p. 40, 'Necessity' p. 49, 'Letters from Mme. Weil to Mlle. Chaintreuil, André's Tutor' p. 41, 'Never but One' p. 50, 'Numberbody' p. 51, 'Vertigo/Walk on Water' p. 65, 'Xeres: Take this Cup' p. 72.

[141] Kit Fan p. 138.

[142] Quoted in Fan p. 139 from 'About Simone Weil – As Seen by Others' http://simone.weil.free.fr/lesautres.htm <accessed May 24, 2021>.

[143] Stephanie Strickland 'About Simone Weil – As Seen by Others' http://simone.weil.free.fr/lesautres.htm <accessed May 24, 2021>.

[144] Patti Smith op. cit. p. 93.

[145] Fan p. 144.

It is only then that this silence, in turn, brings our own hearts to silence.[146]

Strickland comes to a point of silence, with some of her questioning ceasing. For another poet, Fanny Howe, the questioning is continuous.

4.11 Fanny Howe

Someone for whom the communal, and the good of society as a whole, is of particular interest is Fanny Howe. Of many American poets today who cite Simone Weil as an influence, Howe[147] is amongst those who have grappled with Weil's thought over a lifetime of sixty years of writing poetry and prose, and who has focussed in particular on what may be termed the apophatic aspects of Weil's work. "I have read SW for so long, and so intensely, I often don't remember what she believed, stated, or knew. In a sense my stupidity is a sign that I have incorporated her work into myself."[148] For many writers, Simone Weil is someone whose work cannot be "incorporated" deeply into their own, as she calls one out into a space of unknowing. Weil's path is not an easy one, particularly in its latter years, linked profoundly as it is with the search for Good, or for God, and in imitation of Christ: "An imaginary divinity has been given to man so that he may strip himself of it like Christ did of his real divinity."[149] Our job as human beings therefore, is to plunge ourselves into this process of decreation, so that we may participate more fully in creation itself, this is how we partake in creation according to Weil. This selflessness, or stripping of the self, can take shape and form in our lives in a practical way too, as shall be examined later in this study, in an exploration of the process of listening and of waiting, essential aspects to the process of paying attention. Fanny Howe has used her own life experience as a mother, partner and daughter in her writings, be it in prose or poetry. Her work stands out in its addressing of issues of religious faith, ethics, politics, culture and suffering. She couples her writing with activism, an activism based in her conversion to Catholicism during her first marriage; this fact, coupled with her prodigious writing, begins to draw obvious comparisons with the life of Simone Weil.

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[146] *The Red Virgin* p. 75.
[147] Fanny Howe was born in Buffalo, New York, in 1940. She lives in Boston and is still writing. She has taught at several universities, and has published over 50 books of poetry and prose.
[148] Fanny Howe 'Work and Love', in *The Wedding Dress* op.cit. p. 126.
[149] Weil *NB* p. 229.

"Language, as we have it, fails to deal with confusion."[150] Howe's comment about language indicates that, like Weil, she lives with uncertainty and confusion, and in doing so recognises the shortcomings of language, as has been discussed above. For Fanny Howe, this language problem has some prospect of an approach, or "a way to settle with the unresolvable."[151] Howe's lives in a state of bewilderment and this is a "way of entering the day as much as the work," and as she prays, she remembers that Muslims also pray like this; "'Lord, increase my bewilderment', and this prayer belongs both to me and to the strange."[152] In owning the fact that this prayer belongs to both her and the strange, Howe aligns herself with the world, and especially those who are small and who feel unheard, or who may be regarded as too much of an 'other' for the rest of society. As Simone Weil strives to strip away the "I", so does Fanny Howe strive. Weil attempts her particular process in a searing and single-minded way, winnowing the chaff from the grain of her essential truth, a truth which becomes progressively more associated with the idea of God. Fanny Howe wants to follow a similar path: both are concerned with language and with writing, and with dealing with the idea of God both in their lives and in their work. There is a sense with both of them that they write, line by line, to know: to know themselves and to know God. Weil describes it thus: "Writing – like translating – negative operation – setting aside those words which conceal the model, the silent thing which has to be expressed."[153] Weil continues immediately after this in her *Notebooks* with the supporting statement that "Acting, just the same," and "such is non-intervention".[154] This use of paradoxical language in an attempt to reveal what is silent and may not want to be revealed is typical of Weil's writing, as has already been noted. It is also to be found in the work of Howe.

As Weil's work is proving prescient in so many ways with regard to culture and society, particularly with regard to the power of words, as a whole, so has Howe's work always reflected the society in which she lives. Like Weil, she has been a lifelong political and social activist. Fanny Howe's background has echoes of Weil's, as Howe's father was a professor in Harvard Law School and her mother, Mary Manning, was an Irish playwright. Howe's upbringing was one of intellectual stimulation. She was married to Carl Senna in the 1970s, a

[150] Fanny Howe *The Wedding Dress Meditations on Word and Life* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, California: University of California Press 2003) p.14.
[151] Howe op.cit. p. 14.
[152] Howe "Bewilderment" in *The Wedding Dress Meditations on Word and Life* (Berkeley Los Angeles London: University of California Press, 2003 pps. 5-23, p.6.
[153] Weil *NB* p. 29.
[154] Weil *NB* p. 29.

fellow Civil Rights activist, poet and writer, who is of African-Mexican descent, and both of them were active in the civil rights movement.[155] Howe has three children, whom she brought up mainly on her own, and has held positions in several universities throughout America.

In many obvious ways, such as being a mother and wife, her life is different to that of Weil's, yet their themes of searching within the world of religions, and their commitment to the spirituality of work, as well as their activism, are features of similarity. Simone Weil held the experience of work on a par with that of art or science, especially by the time she wrote one of her most profound essays "Human Personality".[156] As previously discussed, one of the issues Weil addresses here is that of personalism and the question of its origins, which she maintained did not develop as a philosophy in popular circles, but rather among writers, "for whom it is part of their profession to have or hope to acquire a name and a reputation".[157] Weil advocates that all that is possible be done to arrange a situation between the collectivity and the person such that anything that is to the detriment of the "growth and mysterious germination of the impersonal element in the soul," be removed.[158] What people need for this is "silence and warmth", what they get is "icy pandemonium".[159]

> Physical labour may be painful, but it is not degrading as such. It is not art; it is not science; it is something else, possessing an exactly equal value with art and science, for it provides an equal opportunity to reach the impersonal stage of attention."[160]

Placing as she does then, art, science and physical labour on a par in the search for truth, beauty and all that is real, Weil is not only displaying her Platonic origins, but is incorporating her lessons from Marxism as well.

Fanny Howe writes from the perspective of her own Catholic faith, to which she was a convert, having been brought up in a sceptical household, though one with a strong commitment to social justice and to poetry.[161] Her faith is one which challenges her on many

[155] One of their children Danzey Senna, is a novelist and has written about her experience of growing up biracial in the 1970s and 1980s.
[156] Simone Weil "Human Personality" in *Selected Essays, 1934-1943 Historical, Political, and Moral Writings* trans. Richard Rees (Eugene, Oregon:WIPF & STOCK, 2015) pps. 9-34. This particular essay was written in 1943, the year of her death. It appeared in *La Table Ronde* (December 1950) with the title 'La Personnalité humaine, le juste et l'injuste' and in Écrits de Londres, entitled 'La Personne et le sacré'.
[157] Weil 'HP' p. 17.
[158] Weil'HP' p. 17.
[159] Weil'HP' p. 17.
[160] Weil 'HP' p. 17.
[161] Howe's father was involved in defending colleagues in Harvard during the McCarthy era and also "worked for social justice and was eviscerated" (*Winter Sun* p. 49); her mother, Mary Manning, founded The Poets' Theater https://www.poetstheatre.org/our-history in Cambridge and worked throughout her life.

levels, both on a personal level, as well as on a socio-cultural level. Howe has maintained connections with the monastic world and this experience too has fed into her poetry.[162] Some of her more recent poetry provides a crystallisation of the thoughts and fears of living today, as in "Night Philosophy"

> Night philosophy becomes theology:
>
> We've not seen such darkness for centuries.
>
> Every thought condensed into a death before dying.
>
> Then a shout: *who?*[163]

What Howe may mean by "night philosophy" becoming theology may be taken at its face value, especially in the light of the subsequent line on the darkness of today. Though Weil uses the word God, as does Howe, both of them struggle with naming God, Howe putting it most succinctly

> We don't have a name for God.
>
> But the Word still holds.[164]

For Howe, the Word is spoken through art, music, literature and the sound within each human being, waiting to be listened to, waiting to be heard. This waiting and listening are at the core of Weil's thinking, and it may be seen here just how much Weil's writing of her particular word has propelled Howe to find hers. Howe is content to live and to survive in a world where "

> The Word lives alone everywhere
>
> Lives as a pariah
>
> That attentive
>
> Listeners will know by ear.[165]

Howe highlights here how the Word may be unknown, unrecognisable and possibly living with the outcasts. The only way to hear the Word is to listen attentively, whether that be

[162] For example, in a more recent collection, Fanny Howe has included a poem "Monastic Life" from her book *Love and I* (Minneapolis, Min: Graywolf Press, 2019), pp. 21-28. This poem is based on her experiences in Glenstal Abbey, a Benedictine monastery in Co. Limerick. Ireland.
[163] Howe "Night Philosophy" in *Love and I* (Minneapolis, Min: Graywolf Press, 2019), p. 36.
[164] Howe "No Beginning" in Love and I (Minneapolis, Min: Graywolf Press, 2019), pp. 15-20, p. 18.
[165] Howe "No Beginning" in *Love and I* p. 16.

listening to the Word in the language of art, music or poetry, or the Word, or listening to discover the Christ. Living in this state of searching, waiting and listening entails a familiarity with darkness and a willingness to live in and through it. Fanny Howe's experience of her religious faith does not lead her into certainty on the contrary she inhabits the worlds of uncertainty and that of bewilderment as one born into them. She describes the writing of 'Bewilderment' coming as the result of extensive reading in other traditions. She was feeling defiant because of "the crushing sense of failure I carry with me. I decided to stand up for the weakness of it all."[166] Simone Weil felt that she too had failed in so many ways, but still felt compelled to write, and to keep pushing her ideas, right until the very end of her life. This driven nature of this vision is the mark of the poet, the writer too. Knowing there is something within one that is meant to be shared appears to be both the gift and the burden of those of artistic or spiritual bent. In one of her last letters to her parents, she discussed this, in response to a comment from her mother that Weil had something to give:

> But I too have a sort of growing inner certainty that there is within me a deposit of pure gold which must be handed on. Only I become more and more convinced, by experience and by observing my contemporaries, that there is no one to receive it.
>
> It is indivisible, and whatever is added to it becomes part of it. And as it grows it becomes more compact. I cannot distribute it piecemeal.[167]

The concept of her work as an organic whole, something which grew and changed as she grew and changed in herself, is one that sits easily with a modern reader, in an age when biography is at the core of much fiction, and where auto-fiction has developed into its own genre. Whilst biography is always an issue when it comes to Simone Weil, Leslie Fiedler maintains that "(Weil's) life is her chief work, and without some notion of her biography it is impossible to know her total meaning."[168] In Fanny Howe's work, the idea of continuous crafting of life and work in order for it to be of one piece, is evident too. There is an added dimension to Howe's work in that one of her books, a novel, *The Deep North*,[169] was written in an intuitive spurt of creativity, after the author had thrown the pages to the ground in frustration, kicked them around, and then decided to move the pages around according to

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[166] Fiona Alison Duncan "Interview with Fanny Howe" in *The White Review* October 2020, 29. https://www.thewhitereview.org/feature/interview-with-fanny-howe/ .

[167] Weil *SL* p. 66.

[168] Leslie A. Fiedler 'Introduction' Simone Weil WG p. xiv. There is an excellent discussion of the place of biography with regard to Simone Weil in Mark Freeman "The Personal and Beyond Simone Weil and the Necessity/Limits of Biography" *Autobiography and the Psychological Study of Religious Lives* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2008) pps. 187-207.

[169] Howe *The Deep North* (Los Angeles: Sun and Moon Press, 1990) pp. 152.

"juxtaposition, montage, close-up, and distant tracking",[170] thereby reverting to her interest in film techniques. Though Simone Weil may not have used this particular method, there is within this process of Howe's a willingness to let go, to experiment, to take a chance. The element of chance and risk, as well as a willingness to work within the darkness is a familiar theme for Weil also.

4.11.1 Writing Autobiographically

One of the issues that one encounters in exploring the work of Weil and Howe, is that of value of autobiography. Weil did not want to write about herself and only wrote her "Spiritual Autobiography" at the request of Fr. Perrin. She believed she had something special to offer, a "deposit of gold" something perhaps not quite refined and developed yet. Weil believed sufficiently in her writing to leave her notebooks with Thibon on her departure for America, yet struggled with inserting herself into her work. Today, as well as the genre of autofiction, and the growing ranks of books under the heading of 'memoir', there has been a corresponding growth in the writing of spiritual autobiography. Howe uses the fabric of her own life, and it is threaded throughout her work. In reviewing several books on women's autobiographical spiritual writing, Stephanie Paulsell draws out some interesting comparisons between medieval women's writing and that of today's women.[171] She cites the widespread popularity of Kathleen Norris' *Dakota A Spiritual Geography*, as the first memoir of its kind to reach an extremely wide readership.[172] Paulsell credits the fact that Norris "gave voice to the process of *bricolage* by which more and more Americans constructed their spiritual lives."[173] In a more particular way, she addressed how, in a mobile society, one's engagement with one's interior life could be enriched by a love for and a commitment to one place. This could in turn lead to a greater commitment to the greater world as well. Even more importantly, she explored theological issues that concerned her through the "lens of embodied experience without recourse to specialized theological language."[174] Simone Weil was more than capable of using specialised language, though she tried to write for everyone. Weil was not a memoirist, yet it is the combination of her writing *and* her life that is commented upon. For our times, the search for truth must bear a personal hallmark; the need

[170] Howe, *Winter Sun* p. 141.
[171] Stephanie Paulsell "The Body and the Book: Women's Autobiographical Spiritual Writing" *Religious Studies Review* 4, Vol. 33, 2007 pp. 291-297.
[172] Kathleen Norris *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography* (New York: Mariner, 2001 (1993) pp. 256.
[173] Paulsell p. 291.
[174] Paulsell p. 291.

for integrity and wholeness is profound. Theologians and philosophers, especially women, are following in this trend: for example, Phyllis Tickle has written about her spiritual jouney in *The Shaping of a Life: A Spiritual Landscape.*[175] For many women, such memoirs include their struggle with the institutions of church/religious background, and/or academia. They struggle to construct a language and to find a form in which they can express themselves best. According to Paulsell, contemporary women who write of their spiritual lives[176] are exploring the "intersection of embodiment and writing. … In their books, the engagement with the body illuminates writing as an embodied practice that is at once spiritual and political."[177] Medieval women also wrote at this intersection, and Paulsell outlines the interrogation of various embodied experiences of women today, which could align with some of the experiences of medieval women. What is different is that those who write spiritual autobiographies from within an academic background cannot express themselves with a purely academic vocabulary, they need new forms, new words that are adequate to the task of "thinking with the body and writing at the intersection of the body and the book."[178] It is in the writing of their lives that they find this, and it is this which resonates with a wider audience.

Paulsell's reading of Howe's work is that she draws out from her experience of the world and of her dreams, a poetics that allows her to examine the relationship between the body and the book; she also draws on her experience of being born white, into some privilege, but with financially straitened circumstances. Paulsell highlights Howe's state of bewilderment:

> The poetics and politics of bewilderment that mark Howe's work also mark her understanding of the interaction between humanity and the divine, an experience of 'constant oscillation and clearing and darkening' that she sees reflected in the Psalms and Sufi poetry. She is drawn to writers who fully inhabit this oscillation: Simone Weil, Edith Stein, women on the boundaries of Christianity.[179]

Inhabiting the terrain of darkness is not an unfamiliar experience for Simone Weil, especially in her later years. She learned from reading John of the Cross about the consolation and encouragement that may be experienced in the early stages of prayer. As linear time progresses though, there is the realisation that this darkness may not be something that will

[175] Phyllis Tickle *The Shaping of a Life: A Spiritual Landscape* (New York: Image, 2001) pp. 380.
[176] Paulsell p. 292.
[177] Paulsell p. 292.
[178] Paulsell p. 292.
[179] Paulsell p. 297.

lift or clear, rather is it the case that a person may feel condemned to live in this darkness for a long time. In the *Spiritual Canticle* he writes:

> If we could but now fully understand how a soul cannot reach the thicket and wisdom of the riches of God, which are of many kinds, without entering the thicket of many kinds of suffering, finding in this her delight and consolation; and how a soul with an authentic desire for divine wisdom wants suffering first in order to enter this wisdom by the thicket of the cross![180]

This is where hope may provide the sliver of light that provides the sustenance for the rest of the journey. Simone Weil's focus on affliction has been examined in the previous chapter, and from that we know that Weil did not choose to run from suffering. Rather did she choose to maintain a stance of attentiveness towards affliction. In Fanny Howe's writing, there are echoes of this concept of suffering with, and of abiding in affliction, though Howe develops her thinking and her spirituality to contain the idea of affliction within a broader sense of hope, albeit a jaded one at times. She even includes John of the Cross in one of her novels, which are, in the main autobiographical.[181] Howe's exploration of the spiritual life permeates her work and she is drawn to those who have been on a similar search, and have reached a place of knowing, in the unknowing. Like Weil, she feels her work is a calling, something which she has to fulfil, and to work hard at fulfilling. Though Howe subtitles her book *Winter Sun* as *Notes on a Vocation*, she also declares it to be a "vocation that has no name."[182]

4.11.2 Friendship

Like Weil, Howe is drawn to people who are exploring a similar terrain, and this led Howe to a friendship with and exploration of the work of Sara Grant, an English woman who, from childhood perceived God not as the human God portrayed by the nuns who were teaching her, but rather as "invisible, unknowable, unnameable".[183] This became the central focus of her life, one which she pursued to the end. Howe is fascinated by Grant, as she is by Weil. With regard to Grant, she asks why she had such certainty "as to live a cloistered life and devote herself to one purpose?"[184] Grant became a religious sister of the Sacred Heart order, a teaching order, with a strong sense of social engagement. Believing that she needed to be

[180] John of the Cross "The Spiritual Canticle" Stanza 36:13 in *The Collected Works of Saint John of the Cross* trans. by Kieran Kavanagh O.C.D. and Otilio Rodriguez O.C.D. (Washington D.C.: ICS Publications Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1991), p. 614.
[181] Howe *Indivisible* (Cambridge Ma: Semiotext(e), 2000) pp. 252.
[182] Howe *Winter Sun* p.7.
[183] Fanny Howe *The Winter Sun Notes on a Vocation* (Minnesota, Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2009) p. 101.
[184] Howe, *Winter Sun* p. 101.

wary of the language as a possible obstacle to reality, she read much and it was in her reading of Thomas Aquinas, particularly his commentaries on the Pseudo-Dionysius, that Grant found an apophatic theology that seemed to be more true to her than others, and which bridged the gap "between Plato and Descartes".[185] It was Grant's arrival in Bombay in 1956, to head the Department of Philosophy at Sophia College that signalled a paradigm shift in her thinking and her life. She immersed herself in Hinduism, and allowed herself to experience a resulting instability that quite literally, upset her thinking. This led to decades of her life "wrestling with nondualism as a practical reality in daily life."[186] Howe claims that Grant was attempting to "reconcile a system that is based in language (Logos) with one that has a cosmology (Cosmos) as its source and goal."[187] Grant serves as a modern reminder of someone who, like Weil, was prepared to practise what she preached, and to live with seamless integrity according to what she believed to be true.

4.11.3 Writing the World

Howe shares with Weil the act of writing as their prime activity for self-discovery, and for understanding the world**.** Weil wrote in her *Notebooks* every day, sometimes all day, if she was not working. Her identification with the marginalised and those in affliction commenced at an early age, and was manifest in her writing throughout her life. Fanny Howe identifies with the marginalised, though in her case it is expressed through the figure of the child. The child for Howe does not stand for a particular stage in the lifespan of a person, rather does it stand for those who are small and vulnerable, those who demonstrate an innocence and a sincerity not always known, or understood, by the world. Weil and Howe worked on these, their central preoccupations, from their earliest writings. Whilst Weil saw suffering in the brutality of war, of uprootedness, and of the pain of conflict in our world, for Howe, the ethos of the child contains the essence of vulnerability, with the only way to protect that essential quality being to remain in the state of childhood. She explores this in her most recent book *Night Philosophy*, which brings together her work from the past thirty years.[188]

Perhaps they could both agree with the statement made by another woman who was a writer, a philosopher and a commentator on social justice, Gillian Rose "However satisfying writing

[185] Howe *Winter Sun*. p. 101.
[186] Howe *Winter Sun*. p. 105.
[187] Howe *Winter Sun* p. 106.
[188] Howe *Night Philosophy* (Brussels and London: Divided Publishing, 2020) pps. 150.

– that mix of discipline and miracle, which leaves you in control, even when what appears on the page has emerged from regions beyond your control – it is a very poor substitute indeed for the joy and the agony of loving."[189] For both Howe and Weil, the "joy and the agony of loving" are their primary concerns too – though writing it comes a close second.

4.11.4 Apophatic Pilgrims

Brian Teare pairs Weil and Howe as apophatic pilgrims. For Teare, the apophatic pilgrim was born in the twentieth century, with its wars shaping "her conscience, vocabulary, and destiny."[190] He draws a composite picture of this pilgrim, deriving the details from the lives and work of Howe and Weil, each of them encouraging the reader to read forward and back, from Weil to Howe, and back again. Teare emphasises that the pilgrim "believes her physical labor, intellectual pursuits, creative and spiritual practices, and everyday domestic life also prepare her for possible apophasis".[191] It is fairly clear from all Weil's biographies that she was not inclined towards "everyday domestic life" and reduced it if anything, in order to get on with her work. For Teare, her *Notebooks* constitute what he terms a "theory of the apophatic" and that in their structure resemble "philosophical grammar" and "its unspoken 'meaning event' introduces apophatic paradox and syntax into her propositions."[192] Through her use of simile, metaphor and analogy, he claims that this allows Weil to replace the "central term of her argument with another, analogous term in her attempt to get ever closer, though language, to an inexpressible source of knowledge – a form of argument that paradoxically conceals through continual revelation."[193] Teare's emphasis on the process of substitution of words for Weil, leads him to claim it as a process of "linguistic transubstantiation: as wine into blood, so void into God."[194] Fanny Howe does not agree that this shaping and progression of analogies succeeds with Weil, because of its dependence on logic, a logic that forces a marriage, a paradoxical one, between "transcendence and immanence".[195]

[189] Gillian Rose *Love's Work* (London: Vintage, 1995) p. 59.
[190] Brian Teare, 'The Apophatic Pilgrim Simone Weil and Fanny Howe', in *Quo Anima innovation and spirituality in contemporary women's poetry* ed. by Jennifer Phelps and Elizabeth Robinson (Akron, Ohio: The University of Akron Press, 2019) pp. 6-22, p. 6.
[191] Teare, p.7.
[192] Teare, p. 7.
[193] Teare, p. 7.
[194] Teare, p. 9.
[195] Teare, p. 9.

> Howe's writings, however, most often address the relation between mystery and revelation by insisting on the gap between them, demonstrating that one of the central terms of apophatic experience is that it can't really be "translated" into language, and can at best only be approximated.[196]

This assessment captures the essence of the issue with regard both to the comparison between the work of Howe and Weil, and to a general description of what apophaticism entails. That apophaticism is beyond words and struggles with speaking the unspeakable, and with putting the essence of silence into words.

4.11.5 **Doing the Work – Howe and Weil: Language and Writing Styles**

Both Howe and Weil write often in epigrammatic style, which contains more than the occasional aphoristic twist. In Weil's case, this happens in part because of the excerpts taken from her *Notebooks* and compiled posthumously, into what became *Gravity and Grace*. The essence of journal writing means a fragmentary, style anyway, though even Weil's essays provide examples of this short, concise style as well. Simone Weil always aspired to write in a clear and unambiguous style, so that her readership could be as broadly based as possible. She did not want to exclude anyone, and wanted parity of access for all, no matter their academic, social or spiritual standing. Weil took time to explain her thinking in an inspirational way to her students, whether it was on the curriculum or not, as well as debating with people working on or around Gustave Thibon's farm, for example, "presenting her bewildered hearer with arguments which had no meaning for anyone but herself?"[197]

Poetry does not always have the widest readership in book form, though its reach can be wide and varied. There are pieces of poetry within our common currency that have an international reach. In times of distress and emergency, it is often poetry that comes to the rescue. Our words and our language carry power, weight and strength, those worked-upon and condensed words of poetry and myth even more so. Pondering on other disciplines, comparisons may be made. Fanny Howe examines theology, and states that it is a "science without instruments. Only words. Therefore words present its greatest dangers."[198] Howe states it succinctly "Theology can offer no evidence or proof to show for its conclusions,

[196] Teare, p. 9.
[197] J.M. Perrin and G. Thibon *Simone Weil as we knew her* (London and New York: Rougledge Taylor and Francis Group, 2003) p. 114.
[198] Howe *Wedding Dress* p. 67.

beyond the magnificence of language."[199] This calls to mind the words of Weil in her essay "The Power of Words". Words may be capitalised, used in short, stabbing phrases or spoken in peace – whichever it is, they have power. The short, stabbing phrases of hate and invective have their corresponding measure at the other end of the scale in poetry. Going from one to the other involves a paradigm shift within one's thinking – or clever use of all the words.

Though Simone Weil wrote so lovingly and compassionately of her fellow workers, their lives and their rights, of soldiers in the two world wars that impacted upon her, and of the Catholic Church, yet she could never stake herself within their communities, so fearful was she of the mind-set of the collective. Weil inhabited a liminal place that gives a whole new meaning to the word: her liminal place not alone stretched between transitions in her own life, but also held her in that counterbalancing of which Heaney speaks, ever poised between systems, societal norms and above all, words.

In conclusion, as do the worlds of philosophy and theology, the world of poetry struggles to situate Simone Weil. Strickland's poem of Weil's life delivers up a more rounded Weil, because it is rooted in both her life and work. Anne Carson's aligning of Weil with Sappho and Marguerite Porete is about the process of telling God, or as Cole has it "the intimacy between words, God and the writer."[200] For Anne Carson too, there is "too much self" in her writing and it is this is where she most identifies with Weil.[201] I would agree with Coles who believes that "Weil's writing does not turn the problem of her subject's absence into its own feature" and that the paradox that the self is "by default too present and too absent is at the centre of her theology."[202] The self is still the obstacle for Weil, at least where full attention is required. For other poets, it is Weil's life that inspires, as with Smith and Strickland, as well as Weil's writings. Simone Weil's writing on social justice and colonialism, the longing for the good and for love, are found echoed in a profound way in the work of Fanny Howe, with Howe paying particular attention to Weil's central themes of affliction and justice. Weil is ever the apophatic pilgrim, with the movement that being a pilgrim implies. She does not remain static but moves with the ever-changing winds of truth and justice.

[199] Howe *Wedding Dress* p. 67.
[200] Elizabeth Coles 'The Sacred Object: Anne Carson and Simone Weil' *Acta Poética*, 34.1 (2013) pp. 127-154 (p.135).
[201] "There is too much self in my writing" – this Carson declares in *Economy of the Unlost* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999), *VII* quoted in Coles p. 130.
[202] Coles pp. 151-152.

Simone Weil wished she could have been a poet. The poetry she wrote, as has been demonstrated above, displays both her stark spirituality and her profound innocence. The clear-sighted way she views both affliction and beauty, and indeed the love of God, leaves no room for comfort or for second guessing. For those who look to Weil for inspiration in their life and their poetry, it is this simplicity and this striving for truth that stands out. I sense the essence of Weil's life and thought when reading these poets. In an age of misinformation, disinformation and shortening attention spans, the essential can often remain hidden in plain sight, and is therefore all the more welcome when it is made visible and named. It is difficult to contemplate writing about attention today without reflecting on these issues, and that is the terrain the next chapter will explore.

5 CHAPTER FIVE: Attention in a Technological Age

5.1 Introduction

The "evacuation of interiority"[1] of which John O'Donohue speaks, is something that Simone Weil predicted. Weil "foresaw, more than most modern thinkers, the many forms of technological and social alienation that have produced everything from Trumpism and insurrectional politics to media addiction."[2] The issues surrounding Information Technology, particularly those allied to the use and the manipulation of social media are well rehearsed in today's world. The attempts at solutions for media addiction, particularly social media addiction, for example, are in themselves garnering large profits.[3] This chapter will focus on the concept of attention as a central issue of our world today, linked as it is with the use of Information Technology, both our use of it as individuals, and the use by those who control this particular technology of those individuals, or subscribers. Weil's thinking on the concept of attention will also be explored, through her essay on "School Studies", one of her most simple, yet profound, essays.

The word "technology" spans a vast terrain in our world today. Information Technology is both an industry that functions within a sector that has been quite unregulated, and a personal phenomenon that has serious implications for a human being's ability to focus, to solve problems and to reflect upon their experience. The prevalence of serious issues pertaining to its use has clouded the debate at times, and the personal aspect is either subsumed into the political, or becomes so overwhelming that it appears to overtake the social, or the political, and is also lost. The use, and abuse of technology, has serious implications for not just national and international economics, but also for the health and wellbeing of each person who uses even the most basic forms of technology. Even the way we employ the word "technology" has changed. For Simone Weil, writing her essay on "The Power of Words" the

[1] John O 'Donohue "The Inner Landscape of Beauty: Krista Tippett's Interview with John O'Donohue" *On Being* http://www.onbeing.org/program/john-odonohue-the-inner-landscape-of-beauty/transcript/7801#main_content, <accessed January 29, 2019> .
[2] Christy Wampole "Simone Weil for Americans" *Los Angeles Review of Books* April 26, 2021.
[3] According to *Business Wire* March 5, 2021, the market for mindfulness applications alone is set to reach 4,206 million US dollars by 2027, whilst the overall worth of the wellbeing industry is 55 billion US dollars in 2022. *Selazar*, a company that helps companies to automate their eCommerce operations, states on its website that since the pandemic in particular, more people are "experiencing mental health issues …it's no longer viewed as a somewhat fringe experience. Social distancing has facilitated the self-care psychosis even further." https://www.selazar.com/the-wellness-industry-pandemic-creates-surge-in-self-care-products/ .

word had more to do with human beings' command of nature, the "relative security we enjoy in this age, thanks to a technology which gives us a measure of control over nature, is more than cancelled out by the dangers of destruction and massacre in conflicts between groups of men."[4] It is worth noting here how tightly bound up are the issues of technology, destruction and war. Our use of the word technology, now includes artificial intelligence, as well as more advanced forms of surveillance, to name just some of technology's developments. That belief in some "relative security" that Simone Weil and others, believed they were enjoying in 1937, "thanks to a technology which gives us a measure of control over nature, is more than cancelled out by the dangers of destruction and massacre in conflicts between groups of men"[5] was indeed rudely and summarily ended in 1939.[6] The balance between that security and the "dangers of destruction and massacre in conflicts"[7] is a fine one indeed. It is one to which Simone Weil gave much of her attention. Weil attempted to be guided always by the vision of truth at that particular time, though she was not afraid to change it as she developed her thought. For her the world is made up of the Platonic dialectic of "contradictions and analogy", as "both are a means of emerging from the *point of view*."[8]

That her thinking developed from pacifism to an acknowledgement of and an engagement in the war effort is one such development. Her closeness to the Catholic Church became tighter and closer as she neared the end of her life, though she remained an outsider by choice and by conviction. Her mystical experiences appear to have centred her more within the world of poetics, though the theme of attention is that which facilitated that grounding, and threads its way through all her work and her life.

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[4] Weil 'PW' p.154.
[5] Weil 'PW' p. 154.
[6] Simone Weil viewed the situation in the Germany of the 1930s through the lens of her Marxism initially. She visited Germany in the Summer of 1932, believing as a Marxist at the time, in its reputation as the home of the revolution to come. Jacques Cabaud gives a good outline of her experiences in Germany, and of both her admiration for the Communist Party, and her confusion over the future of the Party, disillusioned as she was by the USSR at that particular time (cf. Jacques Cabaud *Simone Weil* pp. 69-73). By February of 1933, she believed that Hitler had succeeded only by blackmail. With the burning of the Reichstag and the arrest of 4,000 people, among them influential communists, Weil believed that "her reasons for condemning the Communist International had been confirmed. The Comintern had brought tragedy to the German working class by abandoning the leadership of the German industrial proletariat." Cabaud *Simone Weil* pp. 72-73.
A later essay of Weil's "The Great Beast Some Reflections on the Rise of Hitlerism 1939-1940", had as its central thesis the strong resemblance between the Germany of Hitler with Rome two thousand years previously. Both the men of ancient Rome and Hitler and his men, Weil claimed "do not love war; they love domination and dream of nothing but peace – a peace in which their will is supreme, of course." Simone Weil "The Great Beast" in *Selected Essays 1934-1939*, p. 96.
[7] Ibid. p. 154.
[8] Weil *NB* p. 46.

As previously noted, Simone Weil would have loved to become a poet and this study has examined how poets have read her, in particular women poets. Perhaps because poetry can excavate reality and drill down to the essence of the matter Weil could understand its value. The underlying conviction in all these endeavours though is that of attentiveness, attention to the word, and to the world. Weil read the world poetically, as Joan Dargan would have it, and she wrote poetically, though with a particular bluntness that might have been more nuanced at times. She also wrote with a profound awareness of the world around her. Whilst her own poetry is simple and stark, her attention is always focussed on an object, be that love, the good or God. The poet or artist writing today has to contend with the world of information technology, making decisions about the extent of their involvement in it and then managing that involvement. It has changed the landscape of the writer and even in a secluded monastery or a desert retreat these challenges and decisions have to be managed.

Therefore, consideration in this chapter will be given to Weil's thinking on the process of attention itself, from her early writings to her later, when her thought was becoming more refined on this as well as other subjects. Her essay on 'School Studies' provides some simple, yet profound reflections on the process of attention. Paying attention is an endeavour that does not grow any easier in a world that both values it whilst also stealing it from us; reading Weil, we come to appreciate attention as a rare thing, a gift, a gift that may be given freely. Or as we see today, it is a gift that may be taken away also, and taken away in a surreptitious and unknowing way. It is this issue that is at the centre of much of the debate around attention. There has been some focus on the price each individual has to "pay" for all this, both in personal and in economic terms. What is needed, in Weilian terms at least, is a transformation of the structures that allow this payment to be considered at all. Though the world of information technology as we know in our time was not Weil's world, yet the underlying principles of attention, among them waiting in patience, are possibly even more necessary today and will be explored further below. Some understanding of where information technology is situated at present will also be offered, with the caveat that this situation is always a fluid one, and subject to change more quickly than heretofore. For the examination of the world of technology, the perspective of a writer, Julia Bell, who has recently reflected on this from the point of view of creative writing, will begin the discussion, Bell has used the work of Weil to give her some guidance in her teaching of creative writing, particularly those of Weil's on attention.

5.2 Waiting in a technological age: The Writer's perspective

The process of waiting involves much sitting, in patience, as already mentioned, and it also involves restraint on the part of each person as they study. This waiting in patience is difficult when solutions may be attained within seconds by technological or virtual means, and where concentration is compromised so many times in an hour, even a minute, at times. The pressures inherent within the world of technology include issues surrounding the dissemination of information involving misinformation and disinformation, the commodification of our attention and the resulting issues with our efforts at maintaining our attention span

As this study has focussed on Weil's reading the world and the text, the development of her concept of attention from habit to exercise has been given a particular focus. The reading of Weil by some contemporary poets has also been explored, and a recent book length essay by Julia Bell, gives an interesting perspective on the idea of attention from a writer's perspective, particularly in light of the impact of information technology on the writing life.[9] In it, Bell does not reveal anything that we may not already know, such as how Google knows so much about us and our movements and that we are addicted to looking at our screens for rolling news and information. Rather through a series of snapshots does she expound on the idea of attention in Weilian terms. This essay was published during the pandemic and that gives the book an added piquancy, in that vast populations were cut off from each other, sitting with their screens and "consuming" more of that rolling information and news than ever before.

For Bell, the greater good of human beings is not the interest of this final iteration of capitalism, if indeed it ever held any such aspirations. As media monopolies, particularly those of social media, began by offering opportunities for socialisation, they have continued the socialisation process, except that they are using people as the *target* of that socialisation. The attention of each person, and their behavioural data, is now a market commodity. Algorithms serve up to each person what they have deduced from their behaviour will appeal to each one. This behaviour and appeal is broken down into seconds at this point. The *Wall Street Journal* highlighted the fact that the social media company Tik Tok was able to note through subtle cues such as how long a person lingered on the app, down to the number of

[9] Julia Bell *Radical Attention* (London: Peninsula Press, 2020) pps. 126.

seconds, what their preferences might be at any given time. These were then accumulated and a picture developed of the person's desires, likes and dislikes. Advertisements are then micro-targeted to reach a particular person, with their individual profile, a profile replete with data that has been sold to the advertising company. The algorithms operate in such a way that they continue to feed the person what they like, and continue to build a profile, which, over time, may be led subtly in a direction the subscriber may not have thought possible originally. That this is open to corruption and hacking is most clearly seen in the case of the American Presidential Election of 2016.

In her book, Bell takes an autoethnographic approach, and attempts to step outside the attention industry to make an assessment of the problem. Bell suggests a *radical* attention in order to instil in her reader a sense of value and agency around their attention, because the social economy, and hence the wider economy, has indeed put a price, or a value, on it. Especially since the pandemic, which began in 2020, the world has had to become more organised, at the very least, if not controlled, by technology. During this crisis situation, there may not have been sufficient oversight or due diligence in some areas, as those who might question most were also in need of the services. This could include everyone from those who needed to stay in touch with support services in the health sector, as well as for personal reasons. It would also include all those who required the technology in order to work from home during the pandemic. The technological services and equipment required for pupils and students for learning at home were not equal; as the pandemic continued, attention was drawn to the fact that students in disadvantaged areas did not have the same equipment, wifi connections and support that other students enjoyed. Once again, the deficit was felt most by those at the lower end of the income scale, not to mention those living in poverty. To engage systematically with this issue demands a high level of both self-awareness and self-consciousness, as well as a strong sense of the wider community, a community existing online as much as it does "in real life", as it has now become known. Bell decided to use the ideas of Simone Weil on attention because of her understanding that the development and growth of attention is the underlying objective of all studies. Bell sees Weil's attention having "energy and agency"[10], and understands her process of paying attention as being one of attempting to understand a problem, or a person, with the "completeness of the self", without distraction and "crucially without judgement."[11] She differentiates this process from

[10] Julia Bell *Radical Attention* (London: Peninsula Press, 2020) p. 29.
[11] Bell p. 30.

meditation, where thoughts are watched come and go, without being given consideration. Weil's concept of attention foregrounds stillness and openness, the attentive looking *is* the end in itself. Bell acknowledges that this process takes time and effort, and that Weil's development of it was in relation to her own teaching. Bell accepts the importance of attention as it equates to Weil's own "spiritual practice,"[12] without leaving aside the idea of God. "Taking time to hold in our minds the whole person is the first step towards a moral, inquisitive life and the prerequisite of love."[13] Bell elucidates this love by seeing Weil's concept coming to realisation in a new way of relating to each other; "not in competition, but in connection."[14] This solidarity that we feel as vulnerable human beings gives us strength, though a different kind of strength; the acknowledgement of our vulnerability is far removed from a culture that supports and encourages feelings of immunity to fear, death and sickness, according to Bell.[15] In considering the attention expended by the poet, Weil links it to the act of love.

> The poet produces beauty by fixing his attention on something real. The act of love is produced in the same way. To know that this man, who is cold and hungry, really exists as much as I do myself, and is really cold and hungry – that is enough, the rest follows of itself.[16]

Bell explores this link with real love in a reflection on the Incel[17] movement online, and comes to the conclusion that because people who identify as Incels see dating as a market, an idea which the wider culture supports, they have become indoctrinated and can no longer "understand a relationship between two people that isn't transactional".[18] To continue the argument, Bell states that

> [b]y this definition, love – and by extension via Weil, attention – is labour, and looks are capital. Once we've been sold the idea that our attention is labour, how can we learn to love any other way?[19]

Though Julia Bell invokes Weil here, it is perhaps extending Weil's concept beyond what may be intended. Or perhaps it does not go far enough? For another definition of love from

[12] Bell p.30.
[13] Bell p.32.
[14] Bell p. 33.
[15] Bell p. 34.
[16] Weil *NB* p. 449
[17] "Incel" is used to describe someone who regards themselves as being involuntarily celibate and harbours deep resentment against those who are sexually active. The initial online group of incels was mostly male and they blamed their situation on females. The resentment can often become violent.

[18] Bell p. 39.
[19] Ibid. p. 39.

Weil, her essay on "The Love of God and Affliction"[20] defines love as being created by God, through love and for love. "God did not create anything except love itself, and the means to love."[21] Weil's complete understanding of love is stark, in that she asserts that God went to the greatest possible distance from us, thus creating the void, the infinite distance between God and God: "this supreme tearing apart, this agony beyond all others, this marvel of love, is the crucifixion."[22]

> This tearing apart, over which supreme love places the bond of supreme union, echoes perpetually across the universe in the midst of the silence, like two notes, separate yet melting into one, like pure and heart-rending harmony. This is the Word of God. The whole creation is nothing but its vibration. When human music in its greatest purity pierces our soul, this is what we hear though it. When we have learned to hear the silence, this is what we grasp more distinctly through it.[23]

This takes the idea of love beyond attention, and yet it encompasses all attention. Because to hear and to participate in that silence is to remain in utter stillness of being, with all our attention which previously had been focussed on the object, now in full realisation of the absence of that object, who is God, and also the great love that has been created within that distance and that absence. Whilst Julia Bell attests to the stripping away of the self that is required by love, Weil pushes the concept even further when taking into consideration the process of affliction. Bell believes that Iris Murdoch "secularises" Weil, turning God into Good, but keeping the basic idea of attention the same, that is "a capacity for looking at the world in a way which overrides the ego, and which allows us to change the quality and effect of our consciousness."[24] For Bell, this attentive looking at the world, given the political climate "where lies and distortion and anti-social tendencies are pre-requisites to power", takes courage, a moral courage.[25]

Bell's book is a collage of thoughts, incidents and reflections that gradually build a picture of an exhausted and frenetic humanity, overloaded with information and feelings directly linked to its screen time. She reflects on some of the literature that suggests ways of controlling our attention, and asks the question: "are we to accept that we are simply manipulable brains at the mercy of our neuro-biology, or are we individuals with free will?"[26] She continues by

[20] Simone Weil "The Love of God and Affliction" *Waiting for God* pp. 67-82.
[21] Weil "Love of God and Affliction" p. 72.
[22] Weil 'Love of God and Affliction' p. 72.
[23] Weil 'Love of God and Affliction' p. 72.
[24] Bell, p. 116.
[25] Bell, p. 116.
[26] Bell p. 45.

asking "where is the space for the personality, for thought, for that unquantifiable part of ourselves that we might unfashionably call a soul?"[27] Though Bell may not explore the religious elements of Weil's thought, her reflections on the landscape of our technological lives today, and its politics, contain many resonances with Weil's thought. Whilst not being anti-technology, Bell is concerned too about what she terms "the enmeshment" of major companies with "an increasingly dark version of libertarian capitalism."[28] This has led to giant monopolistic corporations, with astonishing profits and little regulation, whose foundation provided creative and imaginative people with great scope, but who have left ordinary people out of the conversation. Bell works to fight this by encouraging her students with creative and productive exercises in attention, both alone and with each other, "being totally present with ourselves, and with each other, is an active form of hope".[29] Like Hannah Arendt, she asks that we make space to think about what we are doing, both for ourselves and for others. If we do not do this, "those with very different visions of society will prevail in the coming struggle."[30]

5.3 And In the 'Valley'

Some of those with a "different vision" may be represented by Jaron Lanier, especially in his earlier career. Lanier is an American computer scientist and self-styled computer philosopher, who is one of the creators of virtual reality and one of the central figures in the most recent incarnation of Silicon Valley. However, as the twenty-first century dawned, he turned away from his original work on Web.2, with its pioneering spirit and collective development of a brave new world of virtual reality, and became a critic of what has been termed the "hive mind" of the internet. His new ideology is called Web2.0 futurism, whereby internet intellectuals are indicted for allowing their companies to become surveillance and spy agencies, which could in turn lead to great social upheaval and even catastrophe, as Lanier cautions against a technology driven collectivist ideology that would eventually overcome the individual person. Lanier's critique is based both on the power of the technology companies and the willingness of many to allow them to grow, either from apathy or from greed. Lanier has written that

[27] Bell p. 45.
[28] Fran Lock "An Interview with Julia Bell" *Culture Matters* October 28, 2020 https://www.culturematters.org.uk/index.php/culture/theory/item/3534-an-interview-with-julia-bell .
[29] Bell, p. 119.
[30] Bell, p. 119.

> [i]f there's a clock ticking to get a monetized information economy started, this is it. Will there be middle-class wealth and clout to balance the potential of masters of siren Servers to become near-immortal plutocrats? This is the scenario H. G. Wells foresaw in *The Time Machine*.
>
> If the middle classes are weak, then chaos will unfold. People usually protest in a reasonably orderly fashion against austerity. If they come to see that their families must die before those of a weird insular upper class, there will be no restraint. As much as we like to romanticize revolutions, they are a form of terror in practice. It would be wise to institute a universal system to strengthen the middle classes before the destined moment arrives.[31]

Lanier's view on revolutions echoes Weil's on force, in that force turns all who are subjected to it into a thing.[32] However, his concerns are for the middle class,[33] not the peasant and the worker in Weil's thinking. Though he terms this new ideology that claims an omniscience for the collective wisdom of the internet, "digital Maoism", it is unclear as to where Lanier would situate the working class. His assumption of "middle-class wealth and clout" which could staunch the creation of "near-immortal plutocrats" might leave a Simone Weil reeling and it emphasises yet again the exclusionary nature of the valleys of the technological world. Lanier, though a critic of the system he helped to create, and a critic who speaks out regularly, still works with the very companies he criticises. This is reminiscent of the vicious circle that develops in the world of self-help. Among the many and growing self-help books in the Technology section, there are those written by Nir Eyal; the first being on how to manipulate people through technology, with his second being a self-help book for anyone wishing to regain control of their attention.[34] There is now quite an industry in self-help literature assisting people in cutting down the many hours they consume social media content daily, which has evolved from literature that focussed previously on abstaining altogether from social media. The emphasis appears to have shifted from total abstinence to containment. This would appear to be based on the supposition that social media, in particular, is so all-pervasive that it is a requirement for all aspects of life now, from the labour market, to the cultural, social and political aspects, not to mention our personal lives.

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[31] Jaron Lanier *Who Owns the Future?* (London New York: Penguin Books, 2013) p. 315.

[32] Simone Weil *The Iliad* trans. Mary McCarthy in *Simone Weil An Anthology* (London: Virago, 1986) pps. 182-215. This was originally published as *'L'Iliade ou le poème de la force', Cahiers du Sud,* XIX, 230. December 1940-January 1941). It was published in *Politics*, New York, November 1945, translated by Mary McCarthy trans. pps. 321-331.

[33] It is not entirely clear who Lanier has in mind here, given the differences between what this term might mean in the America, as opposed to Europe, for example. I take it that he means to include blue-collar workers.

[34] Nir Eyal *Hooked How to Build Habit-Forming Products* (London: Portfolio Penguin, Nov. 2014) pps. 256, and Nir Eyal *Indistractable How to Control your Attention and Choose your Life* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, Feb. 2020) pps. 336.

Though Julia Bell sets out some small grounds for hope, they are small. They are built on love. But for Simone Weil, attention is more than a phenomenon that helps us to avoid alienation: it is about a transformative love, contemplation of that love, desire and joy. It is generous and expansive, and ultimately founded on God.

5.4 Attention as generosity, love and joy – not "technological and social alienation"

"Attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity,"[35] Simone Weil wrote, in a letter to her friend Joë Bousquet, on April 13, 1942, thus giving the world one of her more famous quotations on the idea of attention. Bousquet was one of the few people she shared with on a more personal and spiritual level.[36] In the essay under consideration here,[37] there are both spiritual and pedagogical elements, with both maintaining a fluid and open relationship with each other. The piece is grounded in relationship, and that relationship is with God, its line of communication being that of prayer. It is possible to read it as a pedagogical text to some extent, though, and to extrapolate some guidance for issues surrounding the concept of attention today, as well as reading it as a whole, to include certain spiritual aspects, in which it is grounded. Weil wrote the essay for her friend Fr. Perrin to share with some of his students. She sent it to him whilst she was on her way to America in 1942, and though it is simple and brief, it does contain guidelines that could develop into more practical supports for learning. A closer reading of the text will yield these, and suggestions will be made for further pedagogical, as well as spiritual, guidance.

5.5 A growing concept - Attention from the early writings of Weil to "School Studies"

Weil had begun to outline her thoughts on the process of attention in her lectures with her students, and some of these lectures were noted carefully by one student during her time

[35] Simone Pétrement *Simone Weil* trans. Raymond Rosenthal (London & Oxford: Mowbrays, 1976) p.462

[36] In another letter, dated May 12, 1942, Simone Weil shared with Bousquet details of her mystical experience and her journey towards faith that she would not have shared with many others. Bousquet's experience of pain and affliction was a topic they shared and reflected upon together, particularly in this letter. Weil shared as deeply as she did because she felt understood by Bousquet. (cf. *Simone Weil Seventy Letters Personal and Intellectual Windows on a Thinker,* trans. Richard Rees (Eugene, Oregon: WIPF & STOCK, 2015).

[37] "Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God" was written in 1942 for Fr. Perrin, as Simone Weil was heading to America, and sent to him for use with his students.

spent teaching in Roanne in 1933-34. These are contained in *Lectures in Philosophy*,[38] and are based on the notes of Anne Reynaud-Guérithault. Threaded through these lectures are references to the concept of attention, which reveal the basis for some of her ideas which would be more fully developed later. These include the idea that being attentive to a problem in geometry, for example, might include the prospect of looking at it "dreamily, unconsciously. Men of genius, one thinks, are those who have unconsciousnessses (*sic*) of genius".[39] This would find its more developed echo in "School Studies", where Weil speaks of a student who may have no taste for geometry, but who would still learn much from the process of paying attention, as they began "wrestling with a problem or studying a theorem", whereby they could still develop a capacity for attention – in fact, it is "almost an advantage."[40] The "unconsciousness" of which she spoke in her earlier lectures, has been expanded into the following:

> Attention consists of suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty, and ready to be penetrated by the object; it means holding in our minds, within reach of this thought, but on a lower level and not in contact with it, the diverse knowledge we have acquired which we are forced to make use of. … Above all our thought should be empty, waiting, not seeking anything, but ready to receive in its naked truth the object that is to penetrate it. [41]

5.6 From Detachment to Joy

Whilst paying attention means desisting from thinking, aiming to have our thought detached, and even empty, we must do so against the backdrop, at a lower level of consciousness, of the knowledge we have already gained. Weil assumes that there is previous knowledge upon which the student rests, that work has already been done. This then results in arriving at a point where the student learns to carry their knowledge lightly, realising that they rest upon their own learning, learning and wisdom honed from the theories and wisdom of those who have gone before them. This process of detachment may only come with much hard work; and part of this process also includes joy. This is not a word often used by Weil, and it seems to erupt onto the page as she is discussing the difference between will power and attention. The kind of attention which she names as "muscular effort"[42] is not the kind that allows for

[38] Simone Weil *Lectures in Philosophy* trans. Hugh Price (Cambridge London New York New Rochelle Melbourne Sydney: 1979) hereafter referred to as Weil *LP*.
[39] Weil, *LP* p. 92.
[40] Weil *LP*. p. 92.
[41] Weil "School Studies" p. 62.
[42] Weil "School Studies" p. 60.

more in-depth learning; it is more to do with will power, and is quite distinct from the energy Weil espouses, although it may succeed in getting good grades in examinations. This could be due to natural gifts, and not just the effort expended; "moreover such studies are never of any use."[43] With this rather categorical and rigid denigration of the school curriculum, it is important to remember that Weil practised what she preached and did not follow the curriculum when it came to her own teaching, something which did not endear her to the education boards that employed her, though she was very popular with students, in the main. She preferred to teach her students how to think, and used her own ideas when it came to working out a teaching programme. J.W. Morgan gives a succinct assessment of her teaching style:

> She was an unorthodox teacher who refused to co-operate with the school over assessment marks and class rankings which she considered bureaucratic and oppressive, and prejudicial to what she considered authentic understanding and learning on the part of her students.[44]

This stance led to calls for her resignation, as these assessments were required by the education system in France, and as someone who had come through the system, Weil would have understood this. However, she devised a programme for her students which would definitely extend and challenge their thinking. Weil was practical in devising examples from ordinary life in the setting out of each particular issue within the subject she was teaching at the time.[45] Though she encouraged her students to think for themselves, she was developing her own thinking on attention in studies during this early part of her working life. In her "School Studies" she would write of the type of attention needed for study and the experience of her teaching years may be read within her text.

5.7 Reading "Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the love of God": Attention as Waiting and a Negative Effort

[43] Ibid. p. 61.
[44] W.J. Morgan "Simone Weil's Lectures on Philosophy: A Comment" RUDN Journal of Philosophy 23.4 (2019) pps. 420-429, (p. 422).
[45] In *Lectures in Philosophy* the areas covered are named as follows: (pps. v-vii):
1. The materialist point of view.
2. After the discovery of mind.
3. Politics and Social Theory.
4. Ethics and aesthetics.
5. Miscellaneous topics and essay plans.
Morgan's article gives a good breakdown and assessment of these notes from Weil's lectures.

Prior to discussing attention as a more contemplative exercise, it may be worthwhile to navigate through what Simone Weil means by this waiting, even as we hold the knowledge we have already gained.

Weil values highly the sincere search for truth "[q]uite apart from explicit religious belief, every time that a human being succeeds in making an effort of attention with the sole idea of increasing his grasp of truth, he acquires a greater aptitude for grasping it, even if his effort produces no visible fruit."[46] That the desire is real: this is the vital ingredient for any student. It may be years before any result comes forth, if at all. So for Weil, in this instance, the process is the essential element. Another condition which Weil declares important is that of examining slowly and attentively each task in which we have failed. Thus the student will notice what the faults and failings of the particular piece are, particularly if they attempt to get down to "the origin of each fault."[47] There is a humility involved here, that does not sit well with modern culture and mores. There is a letting go, a self-abnegation that could be mistaken for giving in to failure. Complete mastery of the subject is supposedly the goal in the student's work and all their study, and she may not be content with being seen to sit, and to be "in waiting" for the answer to be revealed. Postures of mastery trump postures of humility on most days. Spending time with one's mistakes in one's work is not a matter of failure – it can be quite the reverse, though it may also be counter-cultural. Mastery, and instant mastery, is the preferred requirement. The negative effort required presumes a different energy than that which we usually expend. It does not come easily. For Weil, working with students entails highlighting this process with them, assisting them in the process of reflecting upon their errors. This would need to be done in an atmosphere of trust and openness. Many education systems do not prepare the person to receive honest feedback, nor indeed to give it. The challenge here is to listen profoundly and honestly to each one, so that a student's studies can advance at every level.

The kind of will power that sets teeth grinding, that "muscular" effort of which Weil speaks, is required so that suffering may be endured, and is the type of effort that is required as a weapon by those engaged in manual work. It has nothing to do with study, as far as Weil is concerned. This is rather shocking, given the number of students who would force themselves to "study" intensely, in the belief that they are heading towards success. Weil's definition of success does not include good marks in exams, so for her, this "muscular" effort has no place

[46] Weil *WG* p. 59.
[47] Weil *WG*. p. 60.

in true study. For her the intelligence has to be led by desire, and for this to occur, there needs to be pleasure in the work, and indeed, joy: "The joy of learning is as indispensable in study as breathing is in running."[48]

Weil goes on to explain that all mistakes made in dealing with problems in geometry, or with composing an essay, can be attributed to the fact that "thought has seized upon some idea too hastily, and being thus prematurely blocked, is not open to the truth."[49] We have, she believes, wanted to be "too active."[50] The solution is starkly simple: it is not by searching out the most precious truths that we obtain them, it is "by waiting for them,"[51] maintaining as we do a negative effort. Searching on one's own can only lead to finding counterfeits, not to finding the truth, according to Weil. The solution to a problem in geometry is not anything precious in and of itself, but the same law extends to it because it is the image of something precious. Here Weil makes the leap from a "little fragment of particular truth" to being a "pure image of the unique, eternal, and living Truth, the very Truth that once in a human voice declared: "I am the Truth"."[52] For her, every exercise of study is comparable to a sacrament. Simone Weil spends some time detailing the process of waiting at this point, and it is vital to her understanding of attention and hence to our study here. Weil's waiting involves *not* searching: there must be a way of giving our attention to the data before us without focussing on finding a solution. Writing gives a good example of this, whereupon one sits in front of the blank page waiting for "the right word to come of itself at the end of our pen, while we merely reject all inadequate words."[53] This requires a relinquishing of the ego, a process Weil describes elsewhere as decreation. Weil's intention is that of remaining with the real: as Robert Chenavier put this, "attention gives back to the real what the existence of the self has stolen from it."[54] Chenavier states that for Weil "attention is decreative"[55], in that it is always searching for truth, for the real, and this entails a process of a stripping of the self. Though Weil's idea of the stripping of the self is an essential element of the process of attention, perhaps it is not all a passive process. In a memorial lecture, John

[48] Weil "School Studies p. 61.
[49] Ibid. p. 62.
[50] Ibid. p. 62.
[51] Ibid. p. 62.
[52] Ibid. p. 62.
[53] Weil 'School Studies'. p. 63.
[54] Robert Chenavier *Attention to the Real* trans. Bernard E. Doering (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012) p. 67.
[55] Ibid. p. 67.

Habgood, Archbishop of York[56] described her concept of attention as a "form of contemplation, an inwardness which enabled her to be receptive to the whole of her experience."[57] He also asserted that he believed there was a "strong sense of being actively grasped by what one was attending to, and passivity is the last word one would use of her life in general."[58] Though Weil does not outline exactly what this "grasping" might mean, nor is it clearly alluded to in her work, it is possible that there was some experience of God, or of love during this time of waiting contemplatively. Her descriptions of the God, creation and love already mentioned above, would confirm this. Habgood quotes the poet R. S. Thomas, whose God was also hidden, "appearing only to disappear, away ahead of us, yet glimpsed in the contemplation of life itself when honestly attended to" …

> so in everyday life
> it is the plain facts and natural happenings
> that conceal God and reveal him to us
> little by little under the mind's tooling.[59]

Comparing Thomas' attention to "plain facts and natural happenings" to Evelyn Underhill's more sacramental view of the holiness of everyday living, consecrated as it is already by God, and then to Weil's, Habgood comes to the conclusion that all three of them "engage in an intense kind of inwardness, through a process of waiting, attending, listening, and shaping reality in the mind."[60] This inwardness will be discussed later in more specific terms, particularly given Weil's interest in other world religions. For Habgood, this "quality of attention represents the essence of human freedom and spirituality."[61] Citing Weil on attention being something voluntary always, he claims that we can choose where to direct our attention, as Iris Murdoch would claim. However, there is no such thing as absolute freedom, but "little by little we shape ourselves by the way we habitually think … and it is in this area that such inner freedom as we possess is either squandered or enlarged."[62] Habgood comes to

[56] As Archbishop of York, John Habgood pushed through the compromise position enabling the ordination of women at the Church of England General Synod in 1992.
[57] Rt. Rev. and Rt. Hon. Lord Habgood "Waiting for God" *Eric Symes Abbott Memorial Lecture*, Westminster Abbey, May 15, 1997, pp. 1-10, p. 7.
[58] Habgood. p. 9.
[59] Ibid. p. 9 R. S. Thomas "Emerging".
[60] Habgood. p. 9.
[61] Habgood p. 9.
[62] Habgood. p. 9.

the conclusion that there is no easy answer to the question as to whether contemplation of God makes us more open to the needs of the world and of our neighbour. Religion, as Habgood names it, can be for better or for worse, in our lives. The choice is ours. As this section is examining the aspect of attention today, particularly in the light of current movements in awareness, we will also consider the concept of contemplation and mindfulness, particularly as they are pertinent to the discussion above on the impact of technology on the lives of human beings today. Part of the solution offered is to meditate, to practice mindfulness. For Simone Weil, prayer is the ultimate goal of attention, and for a Christian, the "key to a Christian conception of studies is the realization that prayer consists of attention."[63] Situating prayer at the higher level of attention as she does, Weil's concept appears to treat attention as a muscle, which, when exercised enough, can lead to prayer, with the quality of the attention being paramount. "The highest part of the attention only makes contact with God, when prayer is intense and pure enough for such a contact to be established, but the whole attention is turned towards God."[64] Where mindfulness seeks to have no object, and instead focuses on a complete, profound awareness of each passing moment with regard to thoughts, feelings and the immediate environment, holding all this in a non-judgemental posture, Weil claims God as the object of prayer, and the training involved in studying as part of the basic skill set for this. For her, there is discipline and work attached in attaining the level of attention necessary for contact with God, which could be construed as *being mindful*, though with an object in mind: prayer is "the orientation of all the attention of which the soul is capable toward God."[65] Attention is the key for Weil. Towards the end of her "School Studies" essay, she reiterates that the love of God has attention as its substance, and that the "love of our neighbour, which we know to be the same love, is made of the same substance."[66] With this statement, Weil ascribes to attention an activity, which in turn forms the substance of attention. The other aspect of this substance, as already noted, is prayer. Therefore the substance of prayer and of love of our neighbour is all part of the same substance: the love of God and the love of our neighbour are "made of the same substance."[67]

[63] Weil "School Studies" p. 57 .
[64] Weil "School Studies" p. 57.
[65] Weil "School Studies"p. 57.
[66] Weil "School Studies" p. 64.
[67] Weil "School Studies" p. 64.

5.8 Contemplation vs. Mindfulness

In an age where there is a crisis of attention manifesting itself in attention deficit disorders and media addiction, there is also a growth in the practice of mindfulness. There is quite an industry attached to mindfulness, with its practice being advocated in many disciplines from medicine/psychiatry, business/industry, as well as religion and spirituality. Separation of the different types of mindfulness is necessary, as some practices could be categorised as secular, or non-religious and non-spiritual, whilst others are focussed on spiritual awakening. The secular focuses on overall wellbeing and good health, and enhancing performance in specific areas, whilst the spiritual is most often linked to the Buddhist tradition (particularly in the case of Zen Buddhism), and focuses on the handing on of the tradition of awareness by a long-standing practitioner. However, what would appear to be an answer to today's ills for many may in fact be insidiously caught up within the very system it appears to be setting against.

In his book on the growth of mindfulness, Ronald Purser critiques the industry that has grown up around mindfulness.[68] His critique carries many resonances with the work of Simone Weil, in that he highlights the insidious nature of the full impact of the monetisation and manipulation of people's attention by large corporations such as Google, Facebook, Apple and Twitter, as we have already seen. Instead of focusing on the wider societal issues surrounding these companies and their operations, the mindfulness industry locates the problem within the mind of each consumer:

> It is not the nature of the capitalist system that is inherently problematic; rather, it is the failure of individuals to be mindful and resilient in a precarious and uncertain economy. Then they sell us solutions that make us contented, mindful capitalists.[69]

Purser asserts that mindfulness, and the broader happiness industry, has "depoliticised stress".[70] Humanity is being sold the idea that happiness is indeed an "inside job", guaranteeing freedom from within; though that freedom also remains *within*. Purser claims that with the retreat to the private sphere from the public sphere, mindfulness becomes a

[68] Ronald E. Purser *McMindfulness How Mindfulness became the new Capitalist Spirituality* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2019) pp. 304.
[69] Ronald Purser "The Mindfulness Conspiracy" *The Guardian* June 14, 2019, p. 3 https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2019/jun/14/the-mindfulness-conspiracy-capitalist-spirituality.
[70] Ibid. p. 3.

"religion of the self."[71] Purser outlines the birth of the phrase "McMindfulness", coined by Miles Neale, a Buddhist teacher and therapist, compared the contemporary mindfulness fad to be the "entrepreneurial equal of McDonald's."[72] Jon Kabat-Zinn, a meditator, had a vision whereby he saw himself adapting the Buddhist teachings and practices he knew so well to help hospital patients deal with their pain and stress. His "masterstroke was the branding of mindfulness as a secular spirituality."[73] This then developed into a standardised 8 week course, MBSR,[74] that could be delivered anywhere in the world, offering the same qualification and certification. The quality and content do not vary across the franchises, either for McDonald's – or for MBSR.

Proponents of mindfulness believe it to be apolitical, and so "the avoidance of moral inquiry and the reluctance to consider a vision of the social good are intertwined."[75] In a point that would resonate with Weil, Purser cites the work of Jeremy Carrette and Richard King, who in their book *Selling Spirituality: The Silent Takeover of Religion*[76] argue that Asian wisdom traditions have been subject to colonisation and commodification since the 18th century, "producing a highly individualistic spirituality, perfectly accommodated to dominant cultural values and requiring no substantive change in lifestyle."[77] So it is today, with mindfulness being sold more as a way of dealing with the toxic effects of capitalism, rather than dealing with the system itself. Purser questions the "western sense of entitlement to happiness irrespective of ethical conduct", for example.[78] The more the focus is internal, the greater the risk that other things are also internalised, such as corporate needs to "structures of dominance in our society."[79] A person may become calmer and even nicer after meditating – though they still return to work within a system that caused the lack of calm in the first place. Divorced as it can be from its original religious or wisdom tradition, mindfulness is merely a tool, a tool that supports the business and corporate systems that initially caused the stress. As Purser concludes: "This is how neoliberal mindfulness promotes an individualistic vision of

[71] Purser, p. 3.
[72] Purser, p. 4.
[73] Purser. p. 4.
[74] MBSR stands for Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction.
[75] Ibid. p. 5.
[76] Jeremy Carrette, Richard King *Selling Spirituality: The Silent Takeover of Religion* (Abindgon, Oxon. New York, NY: Routledge, 2004).
[77] Purser p. 5.
[78] Purser p. 6.
[79] Purser. p. 6.

human flourishing, enticing us to accept things as they are, mindfully enduring the ravages of capitalism."[80]

That image of enduring whatever havoc capitalism can wreak upon humanity in a mindful way is not just contradictory, but has a feeling of obscenity about it. It is the same feeling that may occur when the proponents of the prosperity gospel attempt to persuade of its truly Christian basis. Regarding all institutions from a distance, and an objective distance, is something Weil lived out to the end. There is a starkness in her attentiveness, a starkness that left her without community at times, and outside institutions whose values she cherished. Her opinions on the Catholic Church were debated fiercely with Fr. Perrin, and still she resisted entering the church. As long as she felt that those with whom she identified, the afflicted, could not have a voice, she felt she had to stay with them. Her God

5.9 Attention as Contemplation – Poetry of the Simple Statement

In examining Weil's concept of attention with a view to today's technological era, perhaps it is apt to recall what Jacques Cabaud, one of Weil's first biographers, has to say about her ideas on this subject. Cabaud was profoundly affected by reading Weil's work initially, and went on to write a biography, one which in and of itself, is quite contemplative in nature. In an interview for Australian public radio, Cabaud elucidates Weil's concept of waiting as a form of creative attention: he speaks of how the French word "attente" is translated into English as "waiting", but that it is more closely related to "attention" than the English word.

> And "attention" is synonymous with "contemplation". Thus does the soul that remains in its place, "waiting; not motionless, nor shaken or displaced by any shock from without", thus does this soul bear spiritual fruit from "the seed of divine love thrown into" it.[81]

Cabaud reiterates Weil's idea of attention being linked to desire, not to the will, and that "the very density of these formulations points out that we are entering the mystical area."[82] For Cabaud, Weil is essentially a mystic, though a paradoxical one, as she refused to pray, because of her fear of its power. He recalls that it was after her experience in 1941, of reciting the Our Father in Greek, an experience that became mystical, that she "gave up on her

[80] Purser. p. 14.
[81] "Jacques Cabaud on Simone Weil – interview (transcript) with Lyn Gallacher" transcript *ABC Radio National* May 7, 2000 10 a.m.
[82] Cabaud p.5.

resolution to abstain from prayer, and became a full-fledged mystic."[83] It is difficult to calibrate exactly what this means, as Cabaud would have been aware of Weil's thinking on Plato as a mystic. That Weil writes in poetical language has already been discussed; whether that can be equated with mystical language is another matter. Weil's descriptions of God, particularly the silence of God, and above all the absence of God, could lead to a definition of mysticism. However, as has already been noted in a previous chapter, the notion of mysticism has become even more convoluted and indeed tenuous since Cabaud was writing originally.[84]

In her *Notebooks*, towards the end of her life, Weil spoke of the need to protect what she had been given, whilst remaining in stillness.

> As soon as there is a point of eternity in the soul, there is nothing else to do but to preserve it; for it increases of its own accord like a seed. We must simply maintain a stationary armed guard around it and feed it with the contemplation of numbers, of fixed and unchanging relationships.
>
> We feed what is constant in the soul by the contemplation of what is constant in the body.
>
> It is the constant element amid a seething mass of water.[85]

Shortly after this entry above, Weil quotes from Thomas Aquinas and Augustine on love, and the intelligence, and quotes from Isaiah on "I am that I am". She states: "The Spirit is attention".[86] She is reflecting on the roles within the Trinity, and the movement between them. This may not be the first concern of the student today, struggling with a language, or their mathematics, but the commitment to developing this "power of attention" will bring

[83] Cabaud p. 2.
[84] For Cabaud, as for other scholars, one of the central beliefs of Weil's thinking towards the end of her life was stated in her "Draft for a Statement of Human Obligations" in Simone Weil *Simone Weil Selected Essays 1934-1943* trans. by Richard Rees (Eugene, Oregon: WIPF & STOCK, 2015), p. 196 "There is a reality outside the world, that is to say outside space and time, outside man's mental universe, outside any sphere whatsoever that is accessible to human faculties." Given this statement, and Weil's notion of the higher levels of attention required to attain the contemplation of God, it is not difficult to ascertain that she pitched the standard at a high level for any real prayer or mysticism. She herself did not think mystical experiences really possible, until she was surprised by her own mystical experiences. In a recent interview, Jacques Cabaud stated that today there are many more people who are having "visions, locutions, and mystical experiences"; however, in the same interview, he states that Weil had "stretched the field of private revelation to an extent that I cannot follow because … she had the light of natural reason, she had the help of her own genius. I don't see private revelations existing outside of religion …" Ronald K. L. Collins "Q & A Interview with Jacques Cabaud, one of Simone Weil's First Biographers *Attention* 5, March 2022 https://attentionsw.org/a-qa-interview-with-jacques-cabaud-simone-weils-first-biographer/ [accessed April 30, 2022].
[85] Weil *NB* p.626.
[86] Ibid. p. 628.

about a closeness to God, which is the aim for Weil: "studies are nearer to God because of the attention which is their soul."[87]

In another part of the radio interview, Cabaud is asked about love being absent and whether, for Weil, waiting is enhanced by the absence of love.[88] His answer to this question is that one is now "reaching into the highest areas of mystical speculation", and that for Weil "existence is participated being, being is the way in which alone God can be said to be, through his very essence."[89]The Trinitarian God can be said to be absent, and shows his love through that absence. For Cabaud, it is within the realm of the mystical, and of the absent God, that Weil's waiting is situated. When one is waiting, "not motionless, nor shaken or displaced by any shock from without"[90] the soul bears real fruit. Cabaud states that this is when the mind "remains in the state of suspension essential to contemplation."[91] A state of suspension is not an entirely comfortable place to inhabit, much less to endure waiting in. And yet this is what the essence of all contemplation must be – to wait suspended in that liminal place between what we know and who we are in our truest selves, and that which we contemplate. In Weil's case, the object of her contemplation is God.[92]

Returning to "School Studies"

Though Weil can often be accused of being esoteric in her interests and recommendations, she is quite practical and insightful with regard to the fact that though attention, or being attentive, involves a negative effort, it does not necessarily involve tiredness. When tiredness overcomes the student, full attention is not possible anymore, unless they have become quite proficient in matters of study. "It is better to stop working altogether, to seek some relaxation, and then a little later to return to the task; we have to press on and loosen up alternately, just as we breathe in and out."[93] Though this may appear to be clear and simple advice, yet there

[87] Weil "School Studies" p. 64.
[88] Cabaud interview.
[89] Cabaud interview, quoting Weil.
[90] Weil "School Studies".
[91] Cabaud interview.
[92] When Cabaud is questioned about Weil being so quotable, he compares her to Pascal, although Pascal's work has had so many translations that he feels there is no need for greater improvement. At the time of this interview, Cabaud feels that this is not the case with Weil's texts. "There is a kind of transparent depth, of unaffected emotion, of controlled urgency, of immediacy, a poetry of the simple statement, of restrained lyricism, for which it is hard to find in most foreign languages an adequate transcription. Furthermore, her sense of humour, her at times disguised but biting irony, and her use of metaphor, are difficult to convey in a language like English, with its partly Germanistic roots. If she were to be translated, I would say it should be in classical Greek, which her French at times reminds us of. She was in a way more a contemporary of Plato than of those figureheads of French Literature of her days."
[93] Weil'School Studies' p. 61.

is something within each of us that fights the concept of true attention, especially in a culture that is focussed on productivity and on perfection. For Weil, this something, this struggle within us, is connected to evil, and it follows, therefore, that the more we can concentrate truly, the more we may destroy the evil in ourselves. For Weil, a short time spent in good attention is "better than a great many good works."[94] The time spent studying, or contemplating, an object external to us, such as a piece of music, or writing, or art, or a geometrical problem means that the object of our study, should we allow ourselves to let go, will reveal itself to us in time. Not our time, but in time. In the meantime, we wait for the grace of that moment of truth.

In concluding her essay, Weil allies the love of God, which "has attention for its substance", with the love of our neighbour. They are the same love:

> Those who are unhappy have no need for anything in this world but people capable of giving them their attention. The capacity to give one's attention to a sufferer is a very rare and difficult thing; it is almost a miracle; it is a miracle. Nearly all those who think they have this capacity do not possess it. Warmth of heart, impulsiveness, pity are not enough.[95]

She recalls the legend of the Grail. The first person to enquire of the king, who is the guardian of the vessel and almost completely paralysed by a painful wound, this simple question "What are you going through?" is the one who gains the Grail. Weil believes that with this question comes recognition of the existence of the sufferer, not just as a "specimen from the social category labelled "unfortunate", but as a man, exactly like us."[96] There is a special way of looking at such a person, and that way is primarily attentive. This involves the emptying of the soul completely in order to "receive into itself the being it is looking at, just as he is, in all his truth."[97] This stance towards one's neighbour is at the heart of Christianity, and a contemporary reading of this question for our neighbour is found in the work of an American writer, Sigrid Nunez.

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[94] Weil 'School Studies' p. 62.
[95] Weil'School Studies' p. 64.
[96] Weil 'School Studies' p. 64.
[97] Ibid. p. 64 There are echoes of this posture of attentiveness in the work of those who developed a person-centred approach later in the twentieth century i.e. Carl Rogers, who speaks of the unconditional positive regard with which one must see the person being helped. It is desirous that the self be as clear as possible in order to truly "hear" the other person, this also includes congruence and accurate empathic understanding cf. Carl Rogers *Client-Centered Therapy: Its current Practice, Implications and Theory* (London: Constable, 2003).

5.10 "What are you going through?"

Nunez has written a novel based on this question and its meaning. The book deals with friendship, loss, death and suicide, and is situated in a post 2016 election America. It contemplates a terrain that appears to have fulfilled some of the worst imaginings of people like the narrator and her friends, and brings her to the contemplation of a previously unthinkable future. The asking of the question "what are you going through?" is one not to be undertaken lightly. The personal and the collective experience are woven together throughout, and the narrative both encapsulates and broadens out the spaces between them. Simone Weil's question permeates the narrative, as her thinking permeates much of Nunez's writing.[98] Nearing the end of the book the question of love and teaching arises, as one of the central characters recalls a happy time at school. "That somebody wanted to teach me things, that they cared about my penmanship, my stick-figure drawings, the rhymes in my poems. That was love. That was most surely love, she said. Teaching is love."[99] This love included a precise delineation between effort and achievement, unlike the woman's parents, who treated both equally. It is the teachers whose opinion can be trusted and who are clear with her, therefore they are the ones to be remembered with love years later. This idea of correction and honesty with a student concurs with Weil's idea of the correction of students' work, so that they may go over it and make it better. If a student is praised for everything equally, they no longer know the difference between the material they know well, and that which still needs more work. Nunez's book takes a moral view, and availing of the lens of Weil's question, searches through the remains of compassion, sympathy and love when people who have cared, and may still care, encounter each other again, this time when death is on the horizon. As with Weil, the search is for truth and for what is real, and for this we need attention.

5.11 Concluding the Essay on "School Studies"

All of this studying, paying attention, working out a problem, though it may not yield great results in the short term, nonetheless it brings our learning to fruition, and for Weil, the ultimate aim of all this work is that one day, we might be able to provide a great service, we

[98] Books by Sigrid Nunez which display some of Weil's philosophy are *The Last of her Kind* (2006) *Sempre Susan* (2011) and *The Friend* (2018).
[99] Sigrid Nunez *What are you Going Through?* (London: Virago, 2020) p. 155.

may be able to "give someone in affliction exactly the help required to save him, at the supreme moment of his need."[100]

Weil's final sentence contains a paean to academic work, and it should be noted here that the paean is to work, not to results or achievements:

> Academic work is one of those fields containing a pearl so precious that it is worth while to sell all our possessions, keeping nothing for ourselves, in order to be able to acquire it.[101]

Weil's idea of academic work includes the peasant girl struggling with her reading, the young person learning geometry, or the student learning their philosophy. The process is the same: it is the quality of the attentiveness that matters.

In concluding this chapter, it is clear that the quality of our attention is only one issue. The commodification of our attention is another. For Weil, that each writer and artist takes responsibility for their work and writes from a place of integrity is vital. As our society encourages us to reduce our time on social media, for example, an industry has grown around the process of being mindful. For Simone Weil, the object of our attention is not our minds. From our place within the void, our gaze needs to be fixed on God and "he comes when we look towards him. To look towards him means to love him."[102] That love insists that we turn to our neighbour to ask "what are you going through?" Ultimately, the love we have come to know out of this void is grounded in this unflinching gaze towards God, which then propels us to turn to our neighbour and ask the question. Then we listen. Then we wait, we wait for their reply. This is the waiting that could take some time.

Finally, Weil's reading of the world of technology was particularly prescient and no study of her today can avoid probing the issues surrounding information technology in particular. The economics and politics of the battle for our attention is one that Simone Weil would have understood, rooting it in the economic and social systems of our time, particularly those of capitalism. It is noteworthy that it is in the study of creative writing, as evidenced by Julia Bell, that Weil's thoughts on attention are called upon. Though the issues around attention have become very personal and have invaded every home and workplace, making them vital issues for us all, the blame is not to be laid at the feet of the person at the receiving end of hidden algorithms, who is going about their daily business, oblivious to the targeting of that

[100] "School Studies" p. 65.
[101] Ibid. p. 65.
[102] Weil *SNL* p. 157.

daily business. Yet that person is the one who is shouldering the blame, the guilt and indeed the worry about future generations, where the vista of technology overseeing, and controlling, even more aspects of our lives presents itself in even more frightening detail. Those in the "Valley", where much of this technology was born, would appear to be aware of the issues, yet the solutions being offered are also problematic. Becoming mindful may be presented as the answer and it might assist in achieving some level of calm, but it does not address the wider societal and global issues that have resulted in the lack of calm in the first place. It is Simone Weil's attempt to have the whole person paying attention that is one of her vital messages: that whole person is part of a wider societal and political framework that cannot be ignored, or seen as separate from the person. It sometimes appears that the world of information technology can obfuscate that whole picture, causing its subjects to forget their general milieu, or at the least, to downplay its importance. For Simone Weil, the person who is paying attention, complete attention, will include each and every aspect of their lives, no matter how uncomfortable or unwieldy.

6 CONCLUSION and RECOMMENDATIONS

Simone Weil's life was, states Leslie Fiedler, "in a profound sense … her chief work."[1] As such, some knowledge of her biography is necessary, as without it, "it is impossible to know her total meaning."[2] According to Fiedler her writings are an extension of her life, and though he does not believe they are great literature, they remain confessions and testimonies that contain directness, "an appealing purity of tone" with Weil's "subtle mind" attempting to "capture in words the most elusive of paradoxes, or of contemplating an absolute love striving to communicate itself in spite of the clumsiness of language."[3] This "absolute love striving to communicate itself" contains both the essence of youthful passion and the yearning of the mystic. The widespread acceptance that Weil's life mirrored her work, that her professed yearnings found an echo in her life is what makes her attractive. The idea that Weil needs to be seen, and to be read as a whole is borne out by these words from Fiedler, and have served as the backdrop for this present study. Having examined the context within which she wrote during the years before and during war in France, including some of her philosophical and spiritual background, the significance of reading the world and the text for her becomes clear, and she undertook this reading with the same intensity she undertook other aspects of her life. Reading, and indeed writing, became a spiritual exercise for her.

Her reading of the world altered after her mystical experiences, she now read a world that included Christ and the Gospels, and a personal relationship with God. Though Weil now included Christ and God within the framework of her thought, she could still read the Bhagavad-Gita and find therein "words with such a Christian sound, put into the mouth of an incarnation of god, that I came to feel strongly that we owe an allegiance to religious truth which is quite different from the admiration we accord to a beautiful poem."[4] Urging the need to be catholic, which for Weil meant not being bound to "any created thing, unless it be to creation in its totality," she believed that saints are able to give the love of God its rightful place in their soul and also to their "obligation to all that is smaller than the universe."[5] She believed that Francis of Assisi and John of the Cross exemplified this and "that is why they

[1] Simone Weil *WG* p. xiv" Introduction" by Leslie Fiedler.
[2] Weil *WG*. p. xiv.
[3] Weil *WG* p. xiv.
[4] Weil *WG* p. 28 Weil read the Bhagavad-Gita in the Spring of 1940.
[5] Weil *WG* p. 50.

are both poets."[6] The primacy Weil gave to poets and poetry was a consistent one throughout her life, and I believe is one of the reasons she resonates with so many poets and artist. She is often more the poet, or the poetical writer, than she is the theologian. The appeal of Weil for poets in particular, as well as some of her own poetry was explored in Chapter Four and revealed themes focussing on justice, love, the poor and the afflicted.

Weil's attentiveness to the afflicted is in many ways her core stance, and the way she maintains this stance, and her inspirations for it, were examined in Chapter Three. It is notable that Weil's life and work often takes on a lifelong fascination with those from a Catholic background, Fanny Howe being one of the prime examples. Weil's remaining outside the Church is a challenge to those within it, as it was to her friend, Fr. Perrin; though her reasons for staying outside it can also provide some support to those who struggle within. Her opinion on what today may be termed the toxicity of all big institutions provides more prescient moments for the reader today. Weil claimed that her "conception of life was Christian", and that is why she could never enter the Christian community,[7] as "to add dogma to this conception of life, without being forced to do so by indisputable evidence, would have seemed to me like a lack of honesty."[8] Bearing witness to the truth within oneself in such a way made for inspiring reading to someone such as this writer who was living through the Irish Catholic Church's post-Vatican II scenario of initial enthusiasm. That it was later to move to a sense of accommodation and thence to an institution struggling with scandals made made Weil's words all the more stark.

At the beginning of this study, I mentioned encountering Weil as a young person and being inspired by her idealism and her status as an outsider. As a mother and more recently a grandmother, I find it is her writing about the power of words, the use of language and the responsibility of writers that remains with me and strikes me as apposite for our current political and social life in a world divided by power and wealth. Living today in an age of information technology with its many concomitant issues, in the shadow of a war that threatens the world and climate change that threatens all life forms on our planet, Weil's voice does not carry within it much comfort, though there is reassurance.

However, even more compelling than these writings is the attention she confers on those who are afflicted. To maintain this stance of attentiveness is exhausting and posed differing

[6] Weil *WG* p. 50.
[7] Weil *WG* p. 24.
[8] Weil *WG* p. 24.

challenges to those Weil encountered in her own lifetime. The word "stance" has its origins in the Latin *stare*, to stand. Its meaning involves both the stance a person takes in standing up, rooting themselves in their position on the ground, as well as that of taking a position or a stand on an issue. If there is anything that marks out Simone Weil it is her ability to stand up and to take a position on particular issues, with little fear and with little or no consideration of the opinion of others. She could alter her stance if required: changing her pacifist views during the war is one example of this. She could never be accused of sitting on the fence. It is in the maintenance of this stance of attentiveness to the afflicted that is one of the characteristics that marks out her contribution to twentieth century thought and spirituality.[9] From her childhood commitment to the soldiers at the Front during World War I, to her deeper commitment later in life, the plight of the afflicted was always with her. "I was obsessed with the idea"[10], she claimed, especially after her experience of her year doing factory work. She went away to Portugal with her parents, and left them to go alone to a village. She was "in pieces, soul and body. That contact with affliction had killed my youth."[11] Following this experience, she had other mystical encounters in Assisi in 1937 and at Solesmes on 1938. In Assisi, she fell to her knees in prayer for the first time, and in Solesmes she was able to find a "pure and perfect joy in the unimaginable beauty of the chanting and the words."[12] It was at this point that Weil understood more profoundly than before what divine love could mean. It was also the time when the Passion of Christ entered into her being for good. If one continues to reflect upon the personal recounting of these experiences which Weil wrote down for Fr. Perrin, her "Spiritual Autobiography" also highlights her attitude to reading, in the exercise of which she always practiced obedience. "There is nothing more favourable to intellectual progress, for as far as possible I only read what I am hungry for at the moment when I have an appetite for it, and then I do not read, I *eat."*[13] This devouring of a new idea as the way to intellectual progress speaks to a confidence in her ability to follow any text and her judgement regarding same, and fits neatly with her urging to let go of wrestling with an idea when studying. To wait patiently for the answer to emerge is an intuitive endeavour, one for which some confidence in the projected

[9]Anna Rowlands "Reading Simone Weil in East London: Destitution, Decreation and the History of Force" in *Suffering and the Christian Life* (London: T and T Clark, 2020). It is no coincidence that in this recent study, Anna Rowlands employs Weil's reflections on force, suffering and love to "explore the experiences of contemporary destitute and formerly detained migrants and asylum seekers in the UK." (p.113).
[10] Simone Weil *WG* p. 25.
[11] Weil *WG* p. 25.
[12] Weil *WG* p. 26.
[13] Weil *WG* p. 27.

outcome is required. Perhaps Simone Weil is more of a Romantic than previously credited, though her thinking on affliction and force, coupled with her concept of decreation, leave little room for an empathy that would be all-inclusive. Her search for truth certainly comes before anything else. Following her reflections on her mystical experiences, she still confesses to half refusing "not my love but my intelligence. For it seemed to me certain, and I still think so today, that one can never wrestle enough with God if one does so out of pure regard for the truth. Christ likes us to prefer truth to him because, before being Christ, he is truth."[14] The idea of truth coming before Christ could be seen as supporting those outside an institution which has allowed itself to lose sight of its original vision and has begun to serve and preserve itself for its own sake. But what about those within the institution who wish to remain and fight for truth? Who discerns that is a debatable point.

This particular stance of Weil's makes more sense in times of suffering and affliction.

Reading Weil as a young woman, the initial encounter with her was more than sufficient to draw me further in. Reading her with almost forty years' life experience accrued since then, the words that matter now, as already mentioned are different to those that mattered then. However few those words are, whether encapsulated in a pithy quotation, or part of a longer essay, Weil's voice rings out as one that upsets and discombobulates

In dealing with the world of information technology and of social media, both unknown to Weil, her words on language and the power of words caution about the responsibility each of us bears with regard to our use of those words, our choice around what we choose to put into the public arena. This is a timeless issue, though our age has speeded up that process immeasurably, and has left us with an issue of attentiveness, with shortening attention spans and multiple millisecond demands for our attention span. In a culture and environment that is oversaturated by technology, awareness appears to be the most valuable tool at our disposal now. It is up to each person to develop that awareness. The suggestions regarding listening below are particularly pertinent.

Whilst this may be a personal choice ultimately, there is a role for society to play in the development of that awareness. I believe there are conclusions to be drawn from the work of Weil that can contribute to this endeavour. All of the recommendations have listening at their

[14] Weil *WG* p. 27.

core and this is a listening of letting go, of patient waiting, in line with Weil's attitude of waiting, with attention.

6.1 Learning from Weil

In Simone Weil's spirituality, there are several themes that bear deeper contemplation, beginning with her method of prayer. Weil prayed by reciting the Our Father daily and often, in Greek. She also recited the poetry of George Herbert, particularly "Love", as has already been noted. The memorisation and recitation of prayer like this is reminiscent of the Divine Office, and *Lectio Divina*. The singing of the Psalms each day, and the practise of listening to the word of God read aloud, is rooted in the Rabbinical tradition. Simone Weil was within her tradition of Judaism and that of her adopted religion, Christianity when she prayed thus. Nóirín Ní Riain cites Weil's memorisation and recitation of prayer as an example of what she terms theosony, a theology of listening. Ní Riain understands Weil to be waiting on God with a "listening patience",[15] using the ancient practice of learning sacred texts by heart as part of her way to God. Weil learned Herbert's poem "Love" off by heart in Solesmes, and would recite it, often at the apex of a violent headache, "concentrating all my attention upon it and clinging with all my soul to the tenderness it enshrines."[16]This practice is essential to the practice of Judaism and Ní Riain sees the "theosonic depths of Simone Weil's religious experience" as twofold: beauty continued to reside within the ear of Weil as she listened to the monastic chant around her, receiving as she did the "ambient, cosmic sound".[17] Secondly, the aural theosonic experience does not diminish as it brings with it a permanence.

> The constancy of Christ entering her being for once and for all, it is suggested, through the illustration of her story, is transcribed in her soul through a listening and a memorisation. To forget is a natural phenomenon; to remember everything is absurd. God's love and its presence in one's life is never forgotten.[18]

The sound of words was important to Weil; how much of that was part of her heritage is a moot point. Her mystical experiences involved her whole being, including the physical, as some of them occurred at the apex of one of her headaches. Though she claimed that her senses and her imagination were not involved, she did indeed feel "the presence of a love,

[15] Nóirín Ní Riain *Theosony Towards a Theology of Listening* (Blackrock, Co. Dublin: The Columba Press, 2011) p. 127.
[16] Weil *WG* p. 27.
[17] Ní Riain. p. 127.
[18] Ní Riain. p. 128.

like that which one can read in the smile on a beloved face."[19] Now she had something she had not believed possible – a "real contact, person to person, here below, between a human being and God."[20] This experience was wrapped up in the experience of sound, both from within Weil, and from outside her.

- A suggestion here is for a re-evaluation of memorisation in learning and in our reading, across all levels of education. This would not be rote learning, which often lacks basic comprehension and understanding though it aids and stimulates memory. It is that learning that one can witness with small children, whose instinct it is to be told a story time and again, until it becomes part of their own memory, part of their whole being.

- Another suggestion is to encourage the process used in *lectio divina* within education. Veling has proposed, and is using, this method in class work in a university setting.[21] He highlights the close relationship in the rabbinical tradition between reading and writing, and also cites the work of Paulo Freire and his process of "naming the world" as contributory factors in his endeavour. Veling's efforts are centred on assisting his students in finding their voice, their own words. To enable this, he encourages the students to write freely, without fear of correction or of being wrong. He has also initiated the practice of reading aloud in his classroom, where each student reads out loud from the text. This enables them to slow down the reading, aids attentiveness, encourages commentary and insight into the meaning of the reading, and promotes a "communal reading with a richer quality than the solitary reading of a self alone with a page (or a computer screen)."[22]

- The final suggestion has to do with the virtue of courage that virtue that is the mean between rashness and cowardice, according to Aristotle. As a grandmother "reading " the world today, the words of Natalia Ginzburg on the "little virtues"[23] have often come to mind, and for me, they echo the essence of Weil's thought. Weil's concerns around force, justice and the use of language have been well noted. She has been regarded as foolhardy at times, arrogant at others. Another lesson to be gleaned from her work and her life is perhaps an obvious one; it is courage. In Weil's case, that was sometimes construed as over-confidence in her own abilities. However, as I look at the upcoming generations and reflect upon the

[19] Weil *WG* p. 27.
[20] Weil *WG* p. 27.
[21] Terry A. Veling "Listening to the 'Voices of the Pages' and 'Combining the Letters': Spiritual Practices of Reading and Writing" in *Religious Education* 102.2 (Winter 2007), pps.206-222.
[22] Veling pp. 211-212.
[23] Natalia Ginzburg *The Little Virtues* trans. Dick Davis (London: Daunt Books, 2018)

heavy mantle, not of courage, but of caution that has had to be donned by parents and teachers alike, the words of Ginzburg ring out

> As far as the education of children is concerned I think they should be taught not the little virtues but the great ones. Not thrift but generosity and an indifference to money; not caution but courage and a contempt for danger; not shrewdness but frankness and a love of truth; not tact but love for one's neighbour and self-denial; not a desire for success but a desire to be and to know.[24]

Finally, the words "fragmentary" and "unfinished" are often used to describe Weil's work. Attempting to situate Weil is itself an exercise in fragmentation. She did not have publication in mind for her work. Reading Weil is a fragmentary experience, her intentions ultimately unknowable. Studying her writing leads one in so many different directions that "fragmentary" and "unfinished" is often the energy remaining with this reader when reading her *Notebooks* in particular. If one accepts that life itself is fragmentary, then fragments from Weil can shine through with some force. One such is from her New York *Notebooks* and captures two vital elements of her thought, impersonality and love:

> In a sense the creature is more powerful than God. It can hate God and God cannot hate it in return.
>
> This impotence makes him an impersonal Person. He loves, not as I love, but as an emerald is green. He is "I love."
>
> And I too, if I were in the state of perfection, would love as an emerald is green. I would be an impersonal person.[25]

The emerald symbolises balance and harmony, though Weil does not say this. It is an unusual gem to choose but one with which it is fitting to conclude. There is a balancing in Weil, a redressing as Heaney would have it; she is indeed "tilting the scales of reality towards some transcendent equilibrium."[26] Reading Weil may disconcert but just as the shock of some statement is sinking in, she will strike with fierce simplicity about another topic. I did not expect at this stage of my life that our world would be facing the enormous challenges and difficulties that currently beset us. Reading Weil may bring little comfort but she serves to keep us honest. She asks that we pay attention until we reach the point where we have no

[24] Ginzburg p. 151.
[25] Simone Weil, *FLN* p. 129.
[26] Heaney, p. 3.

longer have a choice, because then we will know our dharma;[27] and she also suggests we let go and wait patiently for the answer to come.

There are still some answers to come with regard to Weil: more historical research on her body of work and its publication is required. Pulling the threads of all her work together challenges the specialisation of today and encourages a more eclectic approach.

For Simone Weil, beauty exists at all levels of the universe and is "Christ's tender smile for us coming through matter."[28] As a grandmother, it is difficult to walk away from Weil's words without some deeper reflection, focussing mostly on the future of our world, our planet. The more prescient she becomes, the darker seem the times we live in. Weil's Christ does not get down from the cross; yet, as our daily news bulletins accrue more stories of war, famine and the destruction of the planet, Weil does not seem to be quite so dark.

[27] Weil, *NB* p. 205.
[28] Weil *NB*. p. 104.

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