11-17-1967

Simone Weil's Search For Unity Through The Union Of Contradictories.

Barbara J. Brim

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/fl_etds
Part of the Comparative Literature Commons, French and Francophone Language and Literature Commons, and the German Language and Literature Commons
MANUSCRIPT THESSES

Unpublished theses submitted for the Master's and Doctor's degrees and deposited in the University of New Mexico Library are open for inspection, but are to be used only with due regard to the rights of the authors. Bibliographical references may be noted, but passages may be copied only with the permission of the authors, and proper credit must be given in subsequent written or published work. Extensive copying or publication of the thesis in whole or in part requires also the consent of the Dean of the Graduate School of the University of New Mexico.

This thesis by Barbara J. Brim has been used by the following persons, whose signatures attest their acceptance of the above restrictions.

A Library which borrows this thesis for use by its patrons is expected to secure the signature of each user.

NAME AND ADDRESS DATE
This thesis, directed and approved by the candidate's committee, has been accepted by the Graduate Committee of the University of New Mexico in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER
OF
ARTS

Date November 17, 1967

SIMONE WEIL'S SEARCH FOR UNITY THROUGH THE UNION OF CONTRADICTORIES

By

BARBARA J. BRIM

Thesis committee

[Signatures]

Chairman
SIMONE WEIL'S SEARCH FOR UNITY

THROUGH THE UNION OF CONTRADICTORIES

BY

BARBARA J. BRIM

THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts in French
in the Graduate School of
The University of New Mexico
Albuquerque, New Mexico
September, 1967
Contents

I. Introduction..................................................p. 1

II. Chapter I- Spiritual Growth.................................p. 8
   A. The Plant.............................................p. 8
   B. De-creation..........................................p. 16
   C. The Void.............................................p. 21

III. Chapter II- The Symbolical Mirror of Supernatural Truths...p. 30
   A. Reading the Universe...............................p. 30
   B. Mediation............................................p. 41
   C. The Union of Contraries and Contradictories.......p. 54

IV. Chapter III- Terrestrial Energy.............................p. 69
   A. Work- The Spiritual Core..........................p. 69
   B. The Collectivity....................................p. 76
   C. Roots...............................................p. 82

V. Conclusion................................................p. 93

VI. Bibliography...............................................p. 100
Introduction

There is a good deal of modern literature, particularly that of the post-World War II period, which might be best described as "distorted," where an author deliberately focuses on some negative aspect of life, usually the sordid, and exaggerates it to an unbelievable nightmare. The author makes his point all too well. In fact, some of these works are masterpieces of human understanding. However, when one book after another presents the same negative theme, treated in the same way for a kind of shock effect, we begin to feel as though literature has as its sole aim a kind of psychological dissection. We feel a strange sensation of unbalance as though the surgeon had forgotten to put back one of our vital organs, or had removed one of our limbs.

On reading for the first time a book like Simone Weil's *Le ressentiment et la grâce*, we have the feeling of meeting an old friend whom we believed had died. This is not to imply that the negative is missing from her works, but rather that the negative has meaning by virtue of its participation in a more total perspective of life. Simone Weil realized as fully as Beckett, Camus and other writers and philosophers the absurdity of man's existence— the impossibility of achieving what he wants or wanting what he achieves. She looks at the absurd squarely, examines it thoroughly, and sees no reason for its giving rise to disequilibrium, but to the contrary finds in the confronting of the impossible a path to truth and a source of spiritual significance.

It is somewhat difficult to understand how she could find inspiration in the absurd, until one studies what might be called her "method," or rather her
approach to life. This consists in a re-interpretation, elaboration and application of the geometrical concepts of the union of contraries and the mean proportional, which will be the focal points of this study of her literary work and philosophical thought.

I have necessarily chosen a type of circular pattern for this study. After all, her own procedure seems to have been a circular probing. This very non-linear development of her ideas gives them a rareness of perception and sensitivity. The circular pattern resembles the growth cycle of a plant, an image frequently employed by Simone Weil to depict more clearly man's spiritual growth.

Though certain critics have claimed for Simone Weil's style the quality of utter barrenness, symbolism and imagery are nevertheless found in great abundance in her writings, particularly analogies with scientific and mathematical laws of the universe. It was her conviction that significant symbolism, necessary food for growth, was a major lack of modern man's life, although it is everywhere around him. For her the universe was, and is, a beautiful, clear mirror of spiritual truth. It was, and is, all the more beautiful because of its impartiality, its reflection of the eternal, its order, and its quality of detaching man from himself.

Although her emphasis on the value of the symbol may become a bit excessive, there is something very refreshing about once again finding nature, science, and the universal in literature, and joined to a very penetrating examination of man. She does not make the mistake, however, of seeing man only in the abstract, for she, like Albert Schweitzer, illustrates through her life and writings that man can fix his attention on the abstract and
universal, and simultaneously spend most of his efforts on alleviating the very concrete miseries of man. Yet, one must admit that the spiritual dominates even her participation in the labor movement.

Her use of scientific analogy not only is a mark of her own temperament, her attempt at clarity and precision, but also a strong indication of her desire to see science and mathematics again united to literature, religion, and philosophy. This we feel also to be of utmost importance because of the dangerous tendency to compartmentalize, not only in work and education, but in every aspect of life. The oriental concept of unity impressed Simone Weil as greatly as it has us, and therefore the union of contradictories appears to be the most beautiful and meaningful aspect of all her works.

Simone Weil had a remarkably keen intelligence as well as a very great sensitivity. In spite of attempts to depict her as superhuman, she was to the contrary very human. She had, however, unlike many men, a constant thirst for truth, which she sought everywhere. Her readings were very extensive and included such diverse interests as: the Upanishads (read in Sanskrit); American Indian, Celtic, Norse, and Mediterranean mythologies; early Greek science; Chinese thought; old Provencal literature; the theater; poetry; language; and psychology.

Through her early involvement in the proletarian movement, she read the most recent socialist and communist theories and contributed articles herself to revolutionary publications. Although she later became disillusioned with these political groups, she did not regret her contact with them and continued working for the interests of the working-man.

She did not ignore modern science; she studied and discussed Einstein's
theory of relativity, Planck’s constant, and de Broglie’s wave mechanics.
Her brother André, who was himself a mathematician, perhaps spurred, through
their talks and correspondence, her interest in mathematics and particularly
her interest in Pythagorean geometry.

Unlike many intellectuals, who store such knowledge in separate chambers
of their minds, Simone Weil attempted the impossible: the integration of all
this diverse information into a universal pattern of truth. A large portion
of her Cahiers contains recondite charts, figures, and analyses which form
her research on unity. Some of these bear a very close resemblance to astro-
logy and numerology, which causes us to wonder whether, perhaps, she had not
been swept away by her belief, or if there might possibly be more serious sub-
stance to such seeming fantasies than first meets the eye.

It must be mentioned here that, with the exception of several articles
and poems which appeared in proletarian newspapers or in Cahiers du Sud
under the pseudonym of Emile Novis, all of Simone Weil’s works were published
posthumously. Her notebooks, some ten in number, written prior to her depart-
ure for America in 1942, she entrusted to her friend, a lay theologian, Gus-
tave Thibon. She also left many essays and other correspondence with another
friend, Père Perrin, a Catholic priest whom she had long discussions with.
These two men, along with the help of others of her friends, and with the aid
of Gabriel Marcel, edited and entitled many of those volumes with which we are
most familiar, particularly Le Pesanteur et la grâce and Attente de Dieu.
Thus far, some sixteen or seventeen separate volumes in all have been published
from her notebook jottings. Only two of her works did she write as definite
literary efforts: L’Enracinement and Venise sauvée, her one attempt at writing
for the theater.

Although the emphasis of this study is not upon the life of Simone Weil, which it must be admitted, has fascinated many people and could indeed occupy the attention of the most brilliant of psychologists, it might nonetheless be helpful to provide the reader with a very brief biographical sketch.

Born in Paris in 1909, Simone Weil was reared in a family of Jewish origin, but one that was agnostic in belief. This fact has amazed many people, in view of her later attacks on Judaism and her fervent espousal of Christian ideals. Even as a child she manifested both an unshefish interest in sharing suffering (she refused to eat sugar as long as the soldiers at war could not) and her own prodigious intelligence. She felt always though that her intellect was much inferior to that of her brother and this may have been what prompted her to believe that all men could, regardless of intellect, find spiritual truth.

At the lycée Henri IV, she studied under Alain, whom many see as a prime influence in her life, although it is always difficult to know to what extent one person has really influenced another. After obtaining her "aggregation" at l'École Normale Supérieure in 1928, she taught philosophy at girls' schools in Le ruy, Roanne, Bourges, and Saint Quentin intermittently between 1931 and 1938. During this time she took part in workers' movements, taking also a leave of absence from teaching to work herself for the Renault and Alsthom factories. Her health was extremely poor: she was subject to attacks of pleurisy and migraine headaches and was forced several times to interrupt her activities to recuperate. It was also during this period that, very idealistically, she went to enlist in the Spanish Civil War on the side of the Repub-
licans. An accident, she spilled hot oil on her foot, forced her to return to Paris.

When the Second World War erupted, she and her family went to Marseille. There she met Père Perrin, who became one of her closest friends. She had asked him to help her find some kind of manual work, which resulted in her being introduced to Gustave Thibon. She stayed with his family and worked in the fields—working to the limits of her endurance and refusing all but the minimal shelter and food. It was at that time that she spoke of mystical experiences.

Anti-semitism grew, and Simone Weil and her family were forced to leave France for America. Disappointed that she could do nothing in the war effort, she nonetheless pursued her private studies and bombarded the French Resistance Party in London with pleas that she be given something to do—usually begging for some dangerous re-infiltration assignment, which was impossible in view of her recognized ethnic features. Finally, she was called to London, where she was asked to investigate the means of a regeneration of France after the war. Her report was L'Enracinement.

While in London, Simone Weil refused any but the strictest of rations, although her health was rapidly failing. She sent to her worried parents in New York only glowing accounts of the beauty of London, the delicious foods there, and notes designed to lift up their morale. Working feverishly during the day on her report, she returned at night to fill her personal notebooks with more of her ideas and experiences. Her health became so bad that she was admitted to Middlesex Hospital, then moved to Ashford Sanatorium. There she died in 1943 from what was noted in the official medical records to be
voluntary malnutrition.

It is ironic that Simone Weil's death should be so remarkable, for she wished not to call attention to herself, but rather always to turn outward from the confines of personality. The last thing she wrote in her notebooks was: "Part la plus importante de l'instruction—enseigner ce que c'est que connaître (au sens scientifique)." And so the ensuing study is an attempt to focus not so much on her life, on her mystic experiences, as on the value of her approach to life, both in a spiritual and a very concrete social sense.
Chapter I - Spiritual Growth

A. The Plant

There are many ways to examine and present the ideas of Simone Weil. One of the most helpful, perhaps, is the use of image and analogy, a method frequently employed by the author herself. What makes the imagery of Simone Weil so striking is her interest in and use of the analogy of man's life to scientific and mathematic principles. This use of analogy gives a good deal of clarity, precision, and beauty to her thought.

In this first chapter, Simone Weil's concern with growth is revealed. She is particularly attracted by the tree as a literary image: "...God puts a little seed in us and he goes away again...It is not as easy as it seems, for the growth of the seed within us is painful. Moreover, from the very fact that we accept this growth, we cannot avoid destroying whatever gets in its way, pulling up the weeds, cutting the good grass, and unfortunately the good grass is part of our very flesh, so that this gardening amounts to a very violent operation... When the seed of divine love placed in us has grown and become a tree, how can we, we who bear it, take it back to its origin."

This then is not growth in a physical sense, but in a spiritual sense, it is not growth toward a goal. The latter statement is particularly important in the thought of Simone Weil, and it is for this reason that the symbol of the plant has been used as characterizing her thought. However it must not be said that this one analogy neatly describes anything so multi-faceted, but rather it is employed to see better the development of her ideas. Plants
grow upward to receive light without any other visible motive than nourishment. Nonetheless, plants are rooted so that they better receive light and terrestrial energy— not so that they will become buried in and grow deep into the earth.

The spirit of man is seen by Simone Weil to resemble the plant, which must have light in a world of shadows. Here, as elsewhere in her thought, her admiration for Plato is evident, for she believes also that man is in a cave and can only see the shadows: "Nous naîssons et vivons dans le mensonge. Il ne nous est donné que des mensonges. Même nous-mêmes; nous croyons voir nous-mêmes, et nous ne voyons que l'ombre de nous-mêmes. Connais-toi toi-même: précepte impraticable dans la caverne. Nous ne voyons que de l'ombre de fabriqué. Ce monde où nous sommes et dont nous ne voyons que des ombres (des apparences), est une chose artificielle, un jeu, un simulacre."

Simone Weil dwells at length on shadows, for not to seek light is to perpetuate lies and illusions. Neither her spirit nor her intellect (which must function as a unity) will tolerate untruth, and she is ruthless about pulling up such weeds— even those which are consolations to man: "I have an extremely severe standard for intellectual honesty, so severe that I never met anyone who did not seem to fall short of it in more than one respect; and I am always afraid of failing in it myself." Thus when man uses the Church as only a source of consolation, she sees this as a comfortable illusion and would urge him, not to take shelter there, but to come out into the full light— a very uncomfortable position for man or a plant.

Though Simone Weil insists upon the plant standing nude to receive light, she would not have man strive to reach light as a goal, for light is
not an object. It is necessary to add that grace, God, being, love, and supernatural truth are not objects insofar as they can not be grasped by hand or mind to be examined, labeled, and bartered. Nonetheless, as objects of our desire, a desire which can never be fully satisfied as long as we are men, they can be regarded in a detached way as ultimate goals. This makes the aiming toward them all important.

It is ironic that, after warning us and herself of the danger of dwelling upon these "qualities" as objects, she should fill a major portion of her notebooks with definitions of the undefinable, the unnamable, the non-representable. Thus, everywhere in her texts we find descriptions and characterizations of God, of love, of truth, of light, and of grace, and we feel that she could not avoid treating what she desired so strongly as goals, even as objects with definite characteristics. It is as if the scientific mind could not be prevented from objectivizing to study better. Therefore, for physicists to study more effectively the unseen atom, they define its effects and represent it in a known form. That Simone Weil wished more fully to understand the spiritual, also that she attempted to discuss it in known terms is understandable. One danger, a danger of allowing oneself to live in illusion, as Simone Weil herself refused, is to define in such absolute terms, which she does repeatedly, what she felt and declared to be non-representable, non-object. It is to ignore that a river may have many branches (definitions, beliefs) leading from the same source (truth, God). Her definitions are written with a certainty that could come only from having a "mainline to God." In this, Simone Weil's absoluteness about the unknown, that suggestion of eliteness is similar to Kierkegaard's. But if one can
indeed have a "mainline to God," then one can hardly speak of the non-representable or the unknowable as Simone Weil does.

A great deal of her certainty may have come from her mystical experience. However, it still seems dangerous to define too precisely. Perhaps this, like her great prejudice toward the Hebrews and the Romans, is a weed which she didn't succeed in pulling up; or maybe it is a very good example of man as a union of contraries, since this latter case forms a core concept in her writings. It seems undeniable, though, that Simone Weil did wish to look upon her efforts and her thought as a directing of attention toward truth. Thus, it is the concentration on means, the direction, the aiming process, without expectation of rewards, that forms the basis of much of this study. This aspect is universally applicable to man, both in a purely spiritual realm and in the lowest of occupations.

Employing again the analogy of the plant, man clears away all weeds that prevent light from falling on him, but he can not rise up by himself to seize it in his hand and greedily drink it. Light is a reflection or image of truth, as the sun is often believed to be the image of divinity. If it were absolute truth, man could not receive it, for if he did he would be other than man. Wherever man believes light to be he should turn in that direction.

There is then a very humbling character in this view of man, for he can merely wait with his attention on the source of light, while he is in obedience to the necessity of living this world. These aspects of Simone Weil's thought (i.e. humility, waiting, attention, and obedience) are so important to her that she writes of them again and again throughout her notebooks, giving the impression that she had continually to remind herself to be humble, to
beware of the pride of her powerful intellect. They also reveal the influence of her readings of the Upanishads, the Bhagavad-gitā, and Buddhist writings. The influence of these works and her reverence for Christian ideals are very important, but her thought, nonetheless, bears the distinctive Weilien flavor: bittersweet.

If man believes, as he continues to do even in spite of the findings of Copernicus, that he is the all-important center of the universe, he will believe himself capable of achieving any desire by rushing forward to it with his hands wide open and seizing it. For achieving material goods this may be so, but in a spiritual sense it is folly. Even with the acquisition of goods this can be shown to be illusory, for how frequently have we struggled to acquire, even to possess another person, to find out afterward that this wasn't what we wanted. Man who rushes toward God to gobble him up is likewise as mistaken as the man who thinks that by climbing the arduous path to the top of a mountain he is any nearer to flying (in a spiritual sense) than when he was on the ground.

This example is meant to illustrate that man or the plant cannot ascend by himself. Man is obedient to the workings of the universe, whether or not he likes it. His only choice is to accept it, fix his attention on this condition, and wait, or to see himself as king of the mountain and continue to lie to himself: "La nécessité est l'obéissance de la matière à Dieu. Ainsi le couple de contraires constitué par la nécessité dans la matière et la liberté en nous a son unité dans l'obéissance, car être libres, pour nous, ce n'est pas autre chose que désirer obéir à Dieu. Toute autre liberté est un mensonge."
In waiting, in obeying, man imitates the universe, for necessity is nothing more than perfect obedience to universal or divine law. He also imitates the impartiality of the universe and of God. Therefore, there is an equality, a harmony in what seems, at a lower, more particular level, to be chaos. And it is up to man not to add to the chaos by forcing his own personality on the world, but rather to fix his attention on that harmony and imitate it. He is to be disinterested and impartial in his relationship to the world, as the mechanism of the world is impartial—the sun shines on all indifferently. (Here can be seen the reappearance of the microcosm-macrocosm analogy of man to the universe.)

There have been many objections to the idea that the world is other than chaotic. Is there any inherent order for man to imitate, or does he put order there abstractly because of his need to organize all things into a patterned unity? "We say, 'How astonishing it is that natural structures conform so precisely to geometrical laws!'—forgetting that by ignoring their irregularities we have forced them to do so." To such objections, Simone Weil would answer much as did J-J. Rousseau to Voltaire's "Poème sur le désastre de Lisbonne," that it is necessary to look at the whole picture, even though man seems able only to focus on the particulars. Further, she would argue that harmony and order are the union of contrary forces, contradictory truths. Instead of backing away from such arguments, she meets them deliberately to test their truth. (The idea of the union of contraries is to be elaborated later in this paper.)

Man is to direct his attention on the universal, on the harmonious. Attention is the means by which he pulls himself from a subjective approach to
life into an objective contemplation. This explanation of attention given by Simone Weil again shows very clearly the non-goal-directed quality of much of her thought: "C'est en désirant la vérité à vide et sans tenter d'en deviner d'avance le contenu qu'on reçoit la lumière. C'est là tout le mécanisme de l'attention." This idea is very similar to the silent contemplation, the "kuen," of Chinese philosophy.

This is not to suggest that action was unimportant to Simone Weil. For her, true contemplation was active and true action had to be contemplative. To contemplate a problem is not a vague staring at it, but a fixing of the attention upon it, like a bright light of examination, whereby illusions may disappear. What is active is the intelligence and feeling, being directed toward truth. Whatever truths man can achieve, can best be achieved by the process of fixing his attention and his desire upon the act of achieving. One day, says Simone Weil, after being attentive for so long a time to the universal, to truth, he will find himself contemplating the supernatural.

Most of Simone Weil's ideas on the creative act are bound up with attention and imitation. This is not to say that she believes art to be an exact photo duplication of nature. Imitation is found in man in the act of re-creation, since true creation has been accomplished by a higher power. Thus, she sees whatever grandeur man possesses in his attempt to re-create that which has been given to him: his life. "Par le travail, il produit sa propre existence naturelle. Par la science, il recrée l'univers au moyen de symboles. Par l'art, il recrée l'alliance entre son corps et son âme."

As she has rigorous standards for honesty, so does she have harsh pronouncements upon artists and writers. Very little credit does she give the
artist or writer himself, for here, as elsewhere, the personality is to play as minor a part as possible. A writer, for example, is in a particularly difficult situation as regards his art, for, on the one hand, he must work with his imagination, and, on the other, he must suppress it to truth. Those who deliberately disguise truth for their amusement and prestige she would call anything but artists. She condemns Gide for hiding behind "art for art's sake." An artist, she believed, is very responsible for what he writes and does.

A true artist to Simone Weil is rather like a medium between the divine and the human. The truly great works of art, literature, and music must above all possess that quality of anonymity which makes them universal. It is in this way that attention is so important in man's re-creation of his life and in the artist's "creation." Attention is what allows the "moi" to flow out of the artist so that divine inspiration may enter to speak through his art. Thus the artist of writer becomes one with the creation.

This is a very beautiful conception of artistic expression by attention or contemplation, however, it seems ironic that personality, the personality of Simone Weil, should cause her to pick and choose only a few "greats," while ignoring or labeling as inferior those artists who did not appear to conform to certain of her patterns. How could she praise Villon and not mention Baudelaire? In most of the works she cites, however, as first-rate there does seem to be a timeless, anonymous, universal quality. (King Lear, Phèdre, the Iliad, Goethe's Faust)

It is important to look at Simone Weil's style of writing to see a reflection of her insistence on attention and nudity of expression. How can
one read even one word of Simone Weil's thought without fixed attention? Otherwise, they can be little but cold lines of words. Each word is a universe of thought and feeling posed in a balanced line. The union of contradictions was the harmony sought by her, and here it is in evidence in the expression of her ideas. This is the poetry of crystal: "...to reach silence through words, to reach namelessness." Only those who find no poetry in science, in mathematics, and in the working of the universe would fail to feel the poetry of her thought and hear its harmony. There are those who seek poetry beyond the music of form alone, those who find truth and beauty in unlikely places; there are those poets who live their poetry, those who give us the chance to re-create the poetry in their ideas; there are poets who can never be the stereotype of a poet, for all poets are not cut by the same pattern. Amongst those poets is Simone Weil.

B. De-creation

Humility is a direction in the work of Simone Weil; she strives to maintain that direction and she is all too aware of her own failure always to do so. Thus, de-creation is one of the central themes in her writing. There is not anything really novel in the notion of de-creation; it can be found in Hindu, Buddhist, and Christian teaching, specifically in the Gita and in the writings of Saint Jean de la Croix.

It is necessary that one be careful not to confuse de-creation of the self with self-destruction or with masochism. She tells us that destruction is the very opposite of de-creation, which is a participation in the creation
of the world. As she frequently makes analogies with scientific principles, here also she likens creation and de-creation to centrifugal force (drawing away from the center) and centripetal force (drawing toward the center). For there to be a harmony, an equilibrium, there must be a pulling away and a going toward.

This superficially vague and contradictory concept becomes more comprehensible and consistent when one examines more deeply what constitutes for Simone Weil creation and de-creation. God, or the non-representable, being unity, de-created himself (the use of the word "himself" should not be regarded as a personification, but rather as an attempt to avoid "itself" as implying an object) in order to create man. That is creation may be seen as an extension, an emptying of, or a giving up of a part of being for the realization of a fuller being.

In this act of creation, man was given being, and with it he has developed his personality into a false deification of himself. It is this illusion on the part of man which prevents God from realizing unity with his creation. The ego of man makes God alien to the human and the human alien to the unity of which he is a part. Further, to live for the satisfaction of the ego is to refuse truth and to settle for illusion. As the only thing that man possesses, the "I" is the only thing he can de-create or undo in himself to re-establish the balance, to create again and participate in unity.

Even if one cannot accept or believe in such a characterization of God or of creation, the idea of making the "I" universal is a very valuable concept for any man who wishes to lead a less selfish existence. It is an idea found in practice among few men, usually writers, artists, thinkers, and scientists.
Since Simone Weil felt so strongly about the union of scientific, religious, and philosophic efforts, it is especially interesting to note this passage from the writings of Albert Einstein: "The true value of a human being is determined by the measure and the sense in which he has attained liberation from the self."

De-creation not only shows us Simone Weil's metaphysical questioning and religious belief, but also very well illustrates her desire to marry religion and science, thus giving more rigor to the former and making the latter more meaningful. She explains the method of de-creation by means of analogy to the lever: to raise one must first lower. Such laws as she sees operating in the universe she finds also to operate in the realm of grace. Here, for example, is how she states in numbers (as did the Pythagoreans) the notion of de-creating to restore unity: "Un nombre mauvais, non carré, 17 par exemple, peut croire qu'il serait plus grand s'il était 18. Mais il ne sait pas le secret, le principe créateur de toute grandeur n'est autre que 1. En devenant 18, il s'éloigne. Il dégrade le 1 dans le plan du nombre. Sa grandeur réside uniquement dans son identification à 1 par sa propre racine, $\sqrt{17}$, la médiation...La direction vers 18, c'est le mal. La direction vers 1, c'est la vérité, l'obéissance, le bien."

There are those who would criticize this as a mathematizing of God. It should be regarded rather as a supernatural symbol for those who will read it, or as evidence of the probing, questioning mind of a woman with strong religious feeling. Most of all, perhaps, it is a challenge for us to contemplate such analogies as a means to humility and detachment.

Looking at this numerical representation, one finds much to ponder over.
The number 17 represents man, not perfect, but thinking that greater perfection can be attained by acquiring more, say wealth, prestige, or pride, in short, by becoming 18. But 18 is merely addition, not perfection. 1 represents unity, wholeness, perfection, the source of all other numbers, according to the Pythagoreans. By going to 18, 17 only goes farther away from 1, thus giving the impression that he believes 1 to be lowly, or insignificant. \( \sqrt{17} \) is the humbling of 17 by turning upon itself to find its ultimate root. It also represents the directing by 17 of itself toward 1 through mediation, that is to say, by changing itself it makes itself the vehicle of communication, the means between God-1 and 17-man.

Here as elsewhere there is a danger in too literally interpreting such a sign as divine mediation. However, if one is concerned with ultimate truth, and if one feels that one of the keys is the reading of symbols, as Simone Weil did, the method for achieving wholeness can be seen in the equation:

\[
\frac{1}{x} = \frac{x}{17}, \quad \text{where } x \text{ represents the means or mediation; therefore, } x = \sqrt{17}.
\]

But as most men find something divine in certain numbers (one, the Trinity, the Decalogue), it is not surprising that the Pythagoreans, Plato, or Simone Weil should have interpreted numbers, and particularly mediation, as symbols of supernatural truth. Primarily though, it is a very good way of fixing one's attention on the universal, hoping for more light.

To espouse such a principle as de-creation in the abstract is one matter, but to practice it with the greatest attention is another, a much more difficult matter. One could say that Simone Weil lived de-creation; she refused to go toward 18, even though her intellectual gifts indicated it as a natural direction for her. All privileges she wished to refuse, with the exception of
her intelligence, which she, perhaps in too great modesty, felt to be second-rate. The barest minimums of life's necessities would she accept; all beyond that she donated to the unemployed or to anyone who would accept it. She knew much about giving, but little about receiving. Upon occasion she would offend (by refusing to accept their hospitality) those peasants she was trying so hard intellectually to understand.

All of her faults, errors, and sins she wished to have ever present to her eyes, not only as proof of the "néant" of the ego, but as a means whereby she could learn and better understand. Turning one's full attention on one's own faults requires an almost superhuman effort, but it is, perhaps, the most neglected and necessary part of education. Many men write of it, but the suffering it causes results in an extremely few men who practice it. It is this suffering, the nakedness of spirit—not the pleasure of masochism, which Simone Weil finds necessary to undergo in order to kill untruth. Suffering is not to be sought out and wallowed in, but is rather a painful by-product of the effort to avoid what Sartre might call "mauvaise foi." One consents to suffer, according to Simone Weil, and suffering, along with evil and death, teaches us that we are nothing. Suffering being almost a natural part of Simone Weil, she was subject to the worst of migraine headaches, it seems as though she found a use for it: "Que mon corps soit un instrument de supplice et de mort pour tout ce qui est médiocre dans mon âme."

As she is extreme in most things, so is she extreme in the de-creation process. To consent to any and all suffering without wishing to relieve it and even to consent to the absence of all good were important to de-creation for they removed even the normal goal of good. Absence of any goal is almost,
if not totally, impossible for man, and Simone Weil in even wishing for good or truth shows us that she could not live without these goals.

Often she speaks of making of herself a transparency between God and creation. This is a strange, peculiarly Eastern-flavored thought and rather difficult to understand. It is, however, as a part of her circular probing, another way of stating the undoing of the "I" for the sake of unity. Her statement reminds one somewhat of a Chinese landscape. The sage, usually present, meditates in his bare hut or along the road, but in the total view of the painting he is as nothing, a small being who blends into the totality of the landscape. Looking at de-creation in this way, one is impressed, not by the negative, often associated with such words as de-creation, void, "néant," detached, and disinterested, but with the positive aspect of blending and harmony. Seeing in the word "de-creation" an abstract complexity, one sees that she means rather simplicity and reality.

C. The Void

Persisting in the weeding process, in de-creation, man will find himself in the void. Here is another term very abstruse for a concept which is perhaps much simpler to conceive, but difficult to practice.

If man continues to denude himself, relentlessly destroying all illusions, he will find himself in the glare of the void. The void is a suspension of man between who he was as "I" and who he will become in unity. It is a time gone
through when man, having pulled out his ego by the roots, experiences fully and painfully the hole it has left. He cannot expect to have it quickly filled with the reward of grace, but must support it, keeping it open like a gaping wound, for here alone can grace (one could call this divine love or oneness) enter when it will. It's similar to the painful waiting of a man in the desert, who cannot leave, and who knows that it must rain sooner or later.

Although it is almost impossible to think of the void, as Simone Weil conceives it, without somehow associating it ultimately with God's love or grace, there are authors, who while denying grace, have confronted the void. Perhaps the best example, found elsewhere in French literature, of man enduring the void is in Roquentin's feeling of la Nausée. Whereas Roquentin turns back into the worldly to write his book, thinking of being able to accept what he has been, Simone Weil just waits, with faith that keeping the void clear is the only thing she can do.

As elsewhere, Simone Weil is here again concerned with means, the means of keeping the void open. She describes quite specifically those clever devices man has available for filling it to avoid pain and those things which indicate that he supports it.

Two fillers of the void can be dealt with first which have already been discussed at length. One of these is the false grandeur of man—his ego. Ego, according to Simone Weil, is always ready, almost naturally, to fill the void with pride, and worse, with force. In her examination of the Iliad, she dwells at length on man's use of force. Force is doubly destructive, for it not only turns the man who is subject to it into a thing, or worse, it also
can destroy ultimately the man who employs it. This is because man is too
tempted by excess, becomes too drunk with his own power, to see that his
force is limited and balanced by other equivalent forces. Using all the
force at one's disposal to create a void in another is a device of man for
filling his own void. Very frequently we attempt to alleviate pain of any
kind by hurting someone else. Simone Weil, at times during her most severe
headaches, says that she wished to hit someone else in that exact spot of
the head.

Another filler of voids is expectation of rewards. Man should not
deliberately create a void in the hopes of being praised for his strength or
goodness. Nor must he do it, she says, so that God will rush to fill it
with grace. This point is unbelievable, for no man, it seems, could speak
of grace entering only through the void without desiring and expecting that
it would come to fill the emptiness. Simone Weil says that man is not per-
mitted to know that the void is extreme fullness. In saying this, she seems
to be recalling her mystical experience of the void. Perhaps it is from this
experience rather than from her intellect's desire for precision, that she
seems to draw such descriptive statements. If she had not reached the void
and known it, how could she know that there is a reward there. And even if
grace did not enter the void, doesn't life without illusion constitute a
reward for certain men?

There are men who are less concerned with explaining the supernatural
and who, nonetheless, seem to live in the void. Some of them are atheists
who, in living strict standards of honesty, would see the notion of God as
a comforting illusion. This atheistic void is maybe more rigorous in a
sense than Simone Weil's. She says of this kind of atheism that it is purifying, but does believe that what makes it so purifying is that it is "loving God in secret." If one prefers truth to the notion of the divine or God, he will love the divine without knowing it, for truth is God. She would like to be an atheist in this sense.

Here, then, is man who desires to know the truth and who relies on his intelligence and on his feeling. If he truly uses his intelligence, man cannot fail to be other than humble, for he is detached and he knows that if he were to die, truth would go on being. Thus, by truly exercising his intelligence, he is humbled. One part of the mind, however, refuses to be humbled. This is man's imagination, which is strengthened by association with the intelligence, but is degraded by man's ego. Imagination is the greatest of all fillers of the void, and may also be considered as a counterfeit of intelligence. It is the large-scale manufacturer of an escape world for man to hide from himself. Man creates thousands of playthings and diversions with imagination, but instead of seeing them as such and using them to balance his life, he becomes obsessed with them and equates living with the acquisition and creation of more.

In keeping with the very spiritual purpose Simone Weil gives to de-creation and the void, imagination is bad for man because he deliberately uses it to avoid standing nude in the light of the very painful truth that he is nothing. But since imagination is a counterfeit of intelligence, it often resembles it very closely. When can one tell if his reason and feeling are being dictated by imagination or by intelligence and spiritual sense? What makes us associate truth with pain alone? Bernard Shaw says in Don Juan in
Hill, "An Englishman thinks he is moral when he is only uncomfortable."
Isn't the imagination much better in creating excesses, either complete
suffocation in pleasure or complete deprivation of pleasure?

Using Simone Weil's own suspicion and examination of the imagination, one
might say that it is, in part, imagination which associates truth with suffer-
ing alone or that tells man that he is either nothing or everything. Man
seems to be nothing, insofar as he is rarely who he thinks he is, and he is
everything, insofar as he is a part of the totality of the universe around
him. It is in such a light that one must examine the statement that man is
nothing. Thus, we find also that there is joy as well as pain in what we
feel to be true. And since imagination generally does not like even a little
pain, it does try to turn man's attention away from suffering, which is
sometimes necessary.

Another filler of the void, a fabricator of illusions is time, that is
to say the future and the past. The future is a speculator, an impetus to
daydreams and fantasies. It also brings the illusion of progress. To enter
the eternal, Simone Weil made of the present the atemporal. Therefore, she
looked on the present as the void. At first, the present is an instant bet-
-ween having been and becoming, as the void is at first lightning instants of
escape from this world to the supernatural. Viewing the present as the eter-
nal allows the void to grow by exponential progression— the longer one is
exposed at one time to the light, the greater endurance to exposure he builds
up into the eternal.

The past allows us to dwell too much on who and what we have been. Fur-
ther, since it is removed directly from us into our memory, we usually allow
ourselves only to remember the pleasant, or to twist past events to our liking. Excuses for present behavior can be pulled from past experiences. These are all good stuffings for the void.

To support the void demands a love of truth and an intolerance of any lie, especially to oneself. Consolations often constitute a kind of lie and thus have little place in the life or thought of Simone Weil. As to most rules and statements there are exceptions, so is there an exception in her world in the consolation afforded by the beautiful: beauty of religious ceremony, of scientific truths, of nature and the universe, and of the compassion of one man for another. Most of her consolation, as does most of her thought, centers on symbolism: religion, mythology, and science. Even though these may be seen as consolations, they are, contrary to many sentimental consolations, of an elevating nature and she looks upon them as roots for the plant; they are the terrestrial energy necessary to upward growth.

To support the void is to feel the impossibility and absurdity of life, and yet to live without wishing for death. It means that man must fix his attention on the truth, on the divine, while that part of him which is subject to the necessity of the world must attend to the earth. This might be best represented by an immobile point of man's spirit fixed in aim on the divine, while that other part of his spirit moves in the sphere of human affairs, exercising compassion, justice, working his body and his mind. This gives a more balanced view of living with and in the void. All of those things that it seems impossible for a human to do, Simone Weil finds it necessary to do in order to maintain the void: man does not lie to himself; he doesn't use all the force at his disposal; he is often in disaccord with public opinion;
he loves the unlovable; he lives in the present; he concentrates his attention on means and not on ends; he undergoes suffering as purification, not as masochistic pleasure; he is humble and obedient to necessity.

What then is the void? It is meditation. It is $x$ in the equation:

$$\frac{1}{x} = \frac{X}{Y}.$$ 

This is Simone Weil's religious conception. For those not seek-$x$, it can represent humility and whatever truth can be known about man and the universe: the universalizing of the "I."

At the beginning of this chapter, Simone Weil was likened to a plant, who, living in the shadows, longed only for light. If, however, a plant exposes itself too quickly to the glare of the sun, it will may die. It appears that, knowing the importance of balance and equilibrium as a universal law, she was nonetheless unable to imitate that law as she did others (i.e. the lever). She was given to excess in her life, particularly in what other men call the negative aspects. A very tender plant physically, she rushed eagerly to expose herself, not only to the severest sun rays, but also, she seemed to ignore that in pulling weeds so rigorously, she often yanked up her own roots.

Her refusal of luxury, because the less fortunate could not share it, was carried by her to the extreme of refusing food during the time of her resistance work in London, and maintaining this refusal, she died of malnutrition. Many people have labeled this "suicide," and, in a way, it was, for anyone knows that one of the surest paths to death, although very slow and painful, is self-denial of food. Also, one might say that the tendency to martyrdom becomes very strong in a person like Simone Weil, who admired the suffering of certain saints, and who "committed the sin of envy each time
she thought of the crucifixion of Christ." However, the last words she wrote indicate a very active fight for humanity, not an ascetic preoccupation with death and the beyond: "Part la plus importante de l'instruction enseigner ce que c'est que connaître (au sens scientifique). Nurses." The first remark refers to her interest in making education more meaningful, less purely scholastic, and the last word refers to the front line nurses corps she was working to have created for the war. In her great zeal for justice and equality, one might say that Simone Weil wished to ignore that she was on one end of the scale.
Footnotes for Chapter One

1. Simone Weil, Waiting for God (Hereafter referred to as WG) (New York: Capricorn Books, 1959) pp. 133-134. (This reference in English translation by Emma Craufurd was the only one available at the University of New Mexico. The original French edition, L'Attente de Dieu, was published by La Colombe in Paris in 1950.)


3. WG, op. cit., p. 66.


12. Ibid., 189.

13. SG, op. cit., p. 22.


15. WG, op. cit., p. 83.

16. CS, op. cit., p. 337.
Chapter II- The Symbolical Mirror
of Supernatural Truths

A. Reading the Universe

It is difficult to understand the ideas of Simone Weil if one persists
in regarding her as a saint and a mystic, whose experiences were too sacred
to be closely examined and criticized. She herself would have been the first
to object to such a misinterpretation. Her thought is as delicately balanced
as life itself and, as is life, it stubbornly resists rigorous questioning.
We miss much if we do not wrestle with each idea, using her own method to
examine it: "Method of investigation. As soon as one has arrived at any
position, try to find in what sense the contrary is true." Very frequent-
ly she forces us to apply this method by writing a phrase which equates two
contradictory notions, without indicating the rapport between them.

Some spiritual writers back away from precision in their writing;
Simone Weil went forward to embrace it as she would a ray of divine light:
"The ever greater and greater methodical control, which men have exercised
over matter since the sixteenth century, has led them to believe, by way of
contrast, that the things of the soul are either arbitrary or else bound up
with some form of magic, with the immediate efficacy of intentions and words.
Such is not the case. Everything in creation is dependent on method, includ-
ing the points of intersection between this world and the next... The method
merely differs according to the different spheres. The higher one goes, the
more rigorous and precise it becomes. It would be strange indeed if the order
of material things were to reflect more of divine wisdom than that of spiritual things. The contrary is true."

Though there is much to object to in this statement, three important points emerge: that spiritual experience is not arbitrary or magic, that the order of material and spiritual things reflects divine wisdom, and that one should fix one's attention on the method, on the means. She wished, as do all scientists, that her ideas be as precise as possible. She was a scientist herself, but in the Greek sense, particularly according to the Pythagorean concept of science, in which the laws of an ordered universe are seen as a reflection of supernatural truth. By discovering and by contemplating the order of the universe manifested in very precise mathematical relations, man becomes more detached from the self and from the illusions of his environment. To most modern scientists these ideas are nothing but astrology, even nonsense; yet some of them claim to experience a cosmic religious feeling revealed in the order of nature and the world of thought, as did Einstein.

Greek science, which Simone Weil admired so much, was in a sense a religion whose holy book was the universe. Each new discovery in astronomy, physics, and mathematics constituted a symbol of a higher truth. The Greeks were particularly concerned with finding an expression of limit, a symbol of divine justice. That which was limited they found in the laws of necessity, that is to say in the mechanism of the world. They saw in their own observations a balanced, limited, harmonious whole: "To Pythagoras himself the harmonic mean appeared as one of the most divine relationships in nature. He saw evidence of it in music, in the cube and octahedron, the motions of the
planets, and in the rhythm of the sea. He believed man's soul contains a harmonium, a word which meant both the tuning of a musical instrument and the orderly adjustment of parts in a complex fabric."

The circle was one of the most important symbols to the Greeks; being completely self-contained and non-changing, it was for them the image of God. Thus the discovery of the circular motions of the bodies in the heavens were confirmation of the perfect obedience of the universe to divine order. This respect for the circle has been passed down through the ages and is still an important symbol in religion, being particularly in evidence in the architecture of the great cathedrals of the world.

Although, it has been shown by modern science that the circle is much less prevalent in fact than at first believed, that the planets and other astronomical bodies do not move in exact circular patterns, we should, perhaps, not completely discount the efforts of Greek science. It is the process of contemplation and association, the search for rapport between the natural and the supernatural that is important to Simone Weil. Therefore, even if modern science has disproved earlier theories, one can see in certain physical laws today clear, beautiful symbols, which are just as rich in spiritual meaning as were the circle and the mean proportional to the Greeks.

Simone Weil still maintains that beauty exists in the necessity, in the order of the universe, for it illustrates the justice, the impartiality of God, and hence is a model for human relationships. There is beauty in the fact that the sun shines indifferently on the heads of the evil and the good; there is beauty in the fact that the sea makes no exceptions, it does not
change its movement for us: "If it altered the movement of its waves to spare a boat, it would be a creature gifted with discernment and choice and not this fluid, perfectly obedient to every external pressure. It is this perfect obedience that constitutes the sea's beauty." And beauty acts upon us in two opposite ways. One contemplates beauty without either being able to eat or to possess it. For example, we stand immobile, in awe, before a sunset. The poignancy of this experience detaches us from ourselves and from the world, and for the briefest of moments we are carried away beyond the limits of our knowledge. We do not consume the sunset, it consumes us.

In a strictly human sphere, we also find this beauty which gives us glimpses of another world. It can be experienced in the purest feeling of compassion. However, very often beauty produces an opposite reaction than complete detachment. Beauty can be and is a source of man's energy and as such attaches him to other men and to the world. Simone Weil compares it to an inspirational lever in society. The re-creation of beauty is one of man's chief occupations, even if he seems to attempt this in a multitude of strange ways.

One of the best examples of beauty as a source of energy is found in the artist's struggle to show us what we are and what we would like to be. Often he shows us what is beautiful, by making us experience that which is not beautiful. The architect often tries to make a gift to society of the beauty he sees in geometrical relationships, but he sometimes only succeeds in giving us unattractive stacked rectangles.

Beauty as a source of our energy is in a sense absurd. It always forces
us to strive toward the impossible. Thus we are always attempting to attain human perfection by the process of addition. Addition is the energy spent by present day technology to achieve Utopia. That is to say, if we find beauty or pleasure in something or some experience, we are tempted to look for perfection of joy, love, happiness by merely seizing or creating more of the same. This represents a degradation of energy; however, it might also represent a kind of necessity on a human level.

Simone Weil believed that science should be a contemplation of the beautiful. That which she deplores in science today is the complete lack of concern for the symbol and for the beauty of unity. Instead of a science which concentrates on unity and the relation between things and men, we have many compartmentalized sciences, a fact which leads to a very disjointed view of man and the world. Often, the men of one science, physics for example, have little to do with another science, biology, and both frequently look down their noses at the social sciences.

Simone Weil draws from her knowledge in all sciences, seeking to find rapport, in her attempt to arrive at a unified whole. In the first chapter of this study we discussed her interest in biology and biological symbols. Like a plant, man is dependent, for his spiritual growth, on the light, the terrestrial energy absorbed by his roots, and the "spiritual chlorophyll," which is grace.

It is not the literal interpretation of this symbol, the comparison of man to a plant, which Simone Weil wishes to emphasize. Her terminology, though colorful, is just terminology unless we try to understand what thought lies behind it. She may be asking us to contemplate what we usually ignore.
every day. Very few people, with the exception of farmers and biologists, are really aware of the miracle of growth. As this miracle can be expressed in certain mathematical equations (i.e. the work of Mendel and other geneticists), so can it be seen symbolically to apply to human growth, physical and spiritual.

How important it is, according to Simone Weil, that man learn to be attentive without expecting rewards! Why is it that the wonder of a little boy is seldom united with a grown man's experience and intellect? There is much to be learned still by observing a tree.

The study of energy is of capital importance to all branches of science, particularly to the physical sciences. Simone Weil applies it to the science of the soul:

"Modern psychology is trying to turn the study of the soul into a science. With a little extra precision this could be brought about. It should be founded on the notion of psychic matter, linked with Lavoisier's axiom, which is valid for all forms of matter, 'nothing is lost, nothing is created'; changes are either modifications of form, beneath which there is something that persists, or else they are displacements; but never simply appearances and disappearances. The notion of limit should be introduced, and the principle established that, as concerns the terrestrial part of the soul, everything is finite, limited, subject to becoming exhausted. Finally, the notion of energy should be introduced by postulating that psychical phenomena, like physical phenomena, are modifications in the distribution and quality of energy, and are determined by the laws of energetics."

One principle of energy and movement appears repeatedly throughout her works, the lever, which for her illustrates a basic truth about man's upward striving, his desire to fly in the spiritual sense: "Descendu, condition de la montée...Lever. Abaisser quand on veut éléver...Le mouvement ascendant en nous est vain (et pire que vain) s'il ne procède pas d'un mouvement.
descendant." This is the symbol of man's voluntary humbling of himself, the de-creation process.

Another major consideration of Simone Weil, in regard to energy, is that of the manipulation and effects of force. She treats force in detail in her discussion in *La Source précéue* of the *Iliad*, which she calls the "poème de la force."

That force can destroy, can kill, can turn anyone into walking death, is not news to man. He uses force every day, either physical force or psychological force. What he does tend to forget, however, is that "Personne né la [force] possède véritablement... il ne s'y trouve pas un seul homme qui ne soit à quelque moment contraint de plier sous la force... Le fort n'est jamais absolument fort, ni le faible absolument faible, mais l'un et l'autre l'ignorent." Force, then, is a part of the mechanism, of the necessity of the world, but man has the choice not to employ all his force or power. Most men in positions of power over others find it much too difficult not to use it; indeed, they find it all too easy to be tempted by excess. Thus, even these men live in perpetual danger by ignoring one of the basic concepts of physics, for every force there is an opposite and equal force. (Newton's Law of Action and Reaction)

In her discussion of force, Simone Weil speaks of Nemesis, a basic concept in Greek thought. Although today the name refers to vengeance or retribution, it once represented, she says, the idea of limit, of equilibrium—the punishment of excess. This concept, somewhat alien to modern thought, may be found in Buddhism under the name of "karma," which suggests the feeling of destiny or fate.
Force is both of men and beyond men. Since all men are destined to suffer force in one way or another, Simone Weil sees it as a part of the mechanism of the world, and therefore as a symbol of the impartiality of divine law. Forces are, in her view, in equilibrium. But man, by excessive misuse of them, upsets this balance. Equilibrium, justice, and order are fully reflected in nature's mirror; we have only to look.

As light supplies energy for upward growth, so is that force which pulls man down called gravity. Man who acts according to his natural inclinations does so because of gravity. All things which are base are likewise a manifestation of the effects of gravity. Here we see clearly the dualistic conception of opposing forces exerted on man. Simone Weil associates the "moi" and anything which takes reality away from beings and things with gravity. We are all subject to gravity, but it is up to us to limit its influence: "Traiter la partie inférieure de l'âme comme un enfant qu'on laisse crier jusqu'à ce qu'il en ait assez et se taise. Rien dans l'univers ne l'entend. Au lieu que Dieu entend le silence même qui Lui est adressé par la partie éternelle de l'âme."

The distinction between baseness and loftiness is not as simple to make as it might seem. These concepts are of a very contradictory nature: "Parmi les hommes... ce qui donne l'impression d'être vrai est presque nécessairement faux et ce qui est vrai donne presque nécessairement l'impression d'être faux... Ce qui est directement contraire à un mal n'est jamais de l'ordre du bien supérieur. A peine au-dessus du mal, souvent! Exemples: vol et respect bourgeois de la propriété; adultère et 'honnête femme'; caisse d'épargne et gaspillage; mensonge et 'sincérité'."
Simone Weil herself had difficulty applying this principle in her desire to limit or destroy that which was base in her. Seeing the desires of the "moi" as the unlimited, the illusory, and hence evil, she attempted the direct opposite, by denying the needs of the body (i.e. hunger). However, one may see in this contradiction, her own personal path to the supernatural.

Space she saw as a symbol of indifference and justice. Time, that great unsolved mystery of science, was of special spiritual significance to Simone Weil. Considering it as "man's cross," she wrote: "La contemplation du temps est la clef de la vie humaine. C'est le mystère irréductible sur quoi nulle science n'a prise. L'humilité est inévitable quand on sait qu'on n'est pas sûr de soi pour l'avenir. On n'atteint la stabilité qu'en abandonnant le moi qui est sujet au temps et modifiable." Time and beauty are two aspects of life which are, according to Weil, incapable of being grasped by reason alone.

Simone Weil's association of the past and the future with illusion, fillers of the void, was discussed in the first chapter of this study. M-M. Davy, in her book, The Mysticism of Simone Weil, speaks also of grasping the stemporal as a means of escaping the blinds which the past and future impose upon us. As can be felt in the experience of beauty before a sunset, that beauty is a kind of image of eternity.

One idea of Simone Weil in relation to time, that of refusing to see any progress in humanity, is somewhat hard to accept. It would seem that she is totally ignoring the overwhelming evidence we have on the evolutionary development of man. On a strictly moral plane, man's progress is definitely
debatable. Her emphasis on the present again reveals the non-goal-directed quality of her thought. Again and again she focuses on "l'attente."

"L'attente atteste l'humilité devant le mystère... Elle est le contraire de cet effort musculaire stérile, que la plupart confondent avec l'attention... L'attente n'attend rien...Dans l'attente, le moi s'épuise; il oublie qu'il attend, ce qu'il attend...Il perd le sentiment du temps."

It is interesting to note briefly some other spiritual symbols taken from science used by Simone Weil in her study of the natural and the supernatural. Some of these she doesn't explain very fully, while some require an advanced technical knowledge to comprehend the symbol.

Man's soul is like the balance which can so easily be swayed. Our energies cause the needle to swing to different numbers. "Dieu ne dit pas quel chiffre doit indiquer l'aiguille, mais du fait qu'il est là l'aiguille marque juste."

Because of her interest in order, it is not surprising that she should compare entropy, a measure in thermodynamics which characterizes disorder in a system, to the process of passing from good to evil. Love, associated with the good, unites and brings order; whereas hate, the partner of evil, brings disunity and disorder. Thus, she attributes the effects of "pesanteur" to entropy.

As was already mentioned in the first chapter, Simone Weil regarded creation and de-creation to be mirrored in the natural law of the opposite energies of centrifugal and centripetal force. If we regard the supernatural center of the universe to be unity or God, then we can better understand her analogy of creation to centrifugal force. God pulled away from unity, God
dispersed himself, gave of himself through the force called, on a natural plane, centrifugal (pulling away from the center). She sees in this a lessening of the grandeur of God—creation pulls away from the center. To re-establish balance, she believed it was up to man to imitate this act of God; man applies centrifugal force to himself, he pulls away from his "moi." This creates a kind of energy toward unity, toward God through centripetal force. Therefore, Simone Weil finds the balance of centrifugal and centripetal forces to mirror the supernatural forces of creation and de-creation.

Her whole conception of obedience and imitation of the laws of nature, which themselves are obedient to a higher order, is not the slavish submission of man and nature to a more powerful force by fear. "The thought which really enraptured the ancients was this: what makes the blind forces of matter obedient is not another stronger force; it is love. They believed that matter was obedient to eternal Wisdom by virtue of the love which causes it to consent to this obedience." Loving that which can destroy is a contradiction. Realizing that it is, in a sense, an impossibility and yet persisting in that direction of love, one enters another dimension—the supernatural.

In the collection of her writings entitled *Sur la Science*, Simone Weil discusses in detail her desire to see science again united with religion and ethics. While in Marseille, in 1941, she undertook a study of contemporary science, *La Science et nous*, in which she attempted to show that modern science is not longer science, that we have lost science without even perceiving the loss. This work was never finished, nor were her plans for writing a physics text based on analogies ever realized, although she did discuss the
physics text with her former professor, Alain, in her "Lettre à Alain" found in the volume *Sur la Science*.

She writes in *La Peasanteur et la grice*: "Une science qui ne nous rapproche pas de Dieu ne vaut rien. Mais si elle nous en fait mal approcher, c'est-à-dire d'un Dieu imaginaire, c'est pire..." What better example of an imaginary God, than the worship of modern technology.

B. Mediation

We have demonstrated that Simone Weil believed that supernatural truths are clearly revealed symbolically to man in natural, universal laws. That there is in these laws the greatest mathematical precision led her to the belief that this precision reflected a much greater precision in the spiritual truths.

There is nothing remarkable in the fact that Simone Weil desired precision in her religious beliefs. From a family of agnostics, she was not brought up with a conventional faith in religion and God. Furthermore, gifted with a superior intellect, she subjected everything to rigorous questioning. Nor is such a desire for mathematical precision unique with her; it is to be found in the works of many religious men, including some who had had mystical experiences similar to her's, for example, Saint Jean de la Croix and Pascal. As she read the works of these men, the *Bhagavad-gītā* and other Hindu and Buddhist writings, and as she reread the Greeks, particularly Pythagoras, Plato, and Heraclitus, she became convinced that religion was not arbitrary, but that the unity underlying the diversity of
world religions suggested one ultimate religious truth.

The very strong geometrical thread which runs throughout her works, gives unity to what might otherwise be seen as rather unrelated, even contradictory ideas. Those geometrical concepts which Simone Weil turns her attention to most frequently and at great length are Pythagorean discoveries, which for them were full of religious significance: the mean proportional and the union of contraries.

Simone Weil felt that there was a necessity for reviving Pythagorean and Platonic thought in the twentieth century, and, indeed, she has done much in her own way to facilitate that revival. The Pythagoreans have been very influential in the history of ideas in the western world since the sixth century B.C. Believing that the universe could be described in terms of the relationships between whole numbers, they not only arranged numbers in patterns or figures (thus being the first to unite geometry with mathematics), but they also equated certain numbers with actual elements in the universe. How did it happen that the Pythagoreans should attach so much importance to numbers? The discovery by Pythagoras of musical consonances by measuring the lengths corresponding to them on the monochord, probably led him to induce the general principle that all things were composed of numbers, although Aristotle suggested that the Pythagoreans actually only explained a few things by numbers.

Because of the interpretation ascribed to their figurative arrangement, certain numbers, however, are believed to have been of special importance to the Pythagoreans. "One" represented then, even as it does symbolically today, unity, wholeness; it was considered the source of all other numbers composed

42
of ones. It was, perhaps, the first union of contraries in that it was odd-even. "Three" represented marriage—the addition of one to a couple, and "four," as the first perfect square number, represented justice. (Notice that even today we speak of the "square deal.") "Ten," in the tetractys, was most important for it was "the symbol of Higher Unity wherein the One is unfolded, the generator of all other numbers and patterns constituting the harmonious array of nature, which was called the 'kosmos.'"

Many people would disdainfully call this numerology and object that numbers may be arranged arbitrarily in any kind of pattern, regular or irregular. However, there is something to reflect on in studying the tetractys which makes a perfect triangle of four, containing an equal number of prime and composite numbers, which shows the sum at a glance, and which can be extended indefinitely.

There is little concrete evidence (the early Pythagoreans left no writings) that they interpreted these symbols literally as absolute truths. Indeed, because of the scientific rigor in their method and the fact that they made a number of very valuable contributions to geometry and science (including the fact that they were among the first to view the world as a sphere and the universe as containing rotating spheres), it seems much more plausible that their interest in numbers as symbols was for them a method of contemplating the natural and supernatural, questioning and investigating the relationships between the physical and the abstract. It is in this light that Simone Weil appears to find value in their discoveries—not so much in the end result of calculations, but in the rigor of the method combined with
religious feeling and contemplation.

The Pythagorean School lasted over almost two centuries, and their influence has been very great (even finding its way into the theories of Copernicus and Kepler and in the famous Gargantua et Pantagruel of Rabelais.) For this reason, and also because they did not publish their findings until much later, it is very difficult to know who exactly is responsible for certain ideas. Therefore, when Simone Weil attributes a characteristic to the Pythagoreans, it must be realized that this title included at least two centuries of cumulative mathematicians, scientists, and philosophers.

Because of their emphasis on harmonies and relationships, the Pythagoreans were much concerned with finding bonds or bridges between seemingly unrelated concepts, forms and measurements. These they found with the mean proportional: "The mean proportional was in their eyes the image of divine mediation between God and his creatures. The Pythagoreans were concerned with finding out mean proportionals between numbers which don't form part of the same geometrical progression- the right-angle triangle supplied them with the solution- the right-angle triangle is the source of all mean proportionals- but since it can be drawn inside a semicircle, the complete circle can be substituted for this purpose. Thus the circle, the geometrical image of God, is the source of the geometrical image of divine mediation."

This search for the mean proportional, becoming much more extended in context with her, forms one of the key ideas in the writing of Simone Weil, and is what M-M. Davy, in a chapter heading in Introduction au message de
Simone Weil, calls "la recherche de ponts." Simone Weil herself uses this word "ponts" to describe why Greek art, science, philosophy, and poetry were so elevating: they were bridges to God.

The search for "ponts" is the complementary aspect to the de-creation process. In his attempt to reach the divine, man is in no way to destroy earth or what is on earth as inferior. Destruction and suicide are cheap imitations of de-creation and death. When man finds a spiritual bridge to God, this does not mean that he sets up an exclusive one-way gangplank to heaven. Finding bridges or seeking the mean proportional is an attempt to unite what appears as chaotic and diverse. In a very interesting letter to her brother André, Simone Weil says precisely why man needs proportion:

"Without it there can be no equilibrium between thought and the diverse, complex, and changing material of the world. On the other hand, proportion has no value in itself, but only insofar as it is applied, both in the arts and in the natural sciences...It is impossible to admire a work of art without thinking oneself, in a way, its creator and without, in a sense, becoming so; and in the same way to admire the universe as if it were a work of art is to become, in a manner, its creator."

The mathematical symbol for mean proportionals is the equation \( \frac{a}{b} = \frac{b}{c} \).

Within this very cold-appearing framework, Simone Weil demonstrates forcefully her love of beauty and supernatural truth. This symbol reveals paradoxically the warmest feelings of a woman who refused to be deceived by the apparent chaos of the world, which leads many men to abandon their search for God, for unity, or for meaning even on a strictly human plane.
Most people who seek a bond between earth and the divine, find it in
the established church. Simone Weil seemed unable to accept anything es-
tablished; it was as though she had to prove and experience everything her-
self. She did not back away from religion, but rather she fixed her atten-
tion on it to discover its value. In the many religions of the world, she
found the mean proportional manifested in several forms and symbols.

The most perfect model of the divine mean proportional Simone Weil
found in the Christ. Christ is perhaps the best example of the mean because
he was an embodiment of all those qualities which are themselves means to
supernatural truth: poignant beauty, love, necessary suffering, and con-
tradiction. Also he can be universalized, that is to say there are many
ways of viewing Christ. He may be believed to be divine, as in orthodox
Christianity, and as the Son, he becomes the perfect manifestation of God's
love for man. As a human, he taught and exemplified those values, humility,
love, charity, which inspire and unite men. Seen only as a symbol of man's
spiritual aim, all men may find in the Christ a direction away from the self
to the universal and eternal.

The mean proportional cannot belong exclusively to one group or one man.
If there is divine truth or supernatural unity, then it must be within the
grasp of all men, however high or low their social or intellectual status.
It was this very aspect of Christianity, "essentially the religion of slaves"
as well as that of any other man, that attracted Simone Weil to its teachings.
What is important to note is that she was vehement in her attack of the
"anathema sit" and those aspects of the religion which were primarily
associated with the Church as an institution, particularly for an elite.

Simone Weil read and studied a variety of other religious writings, seeking always links between them. And she found a great deal of similarity in those aspects of religion which were important, that is to say in aims rather than in ritual or doctrinal formalities. With Père Porrin, she undertook a work, while in Marseille, to collect in a volume all those pre-Christian and non-Christian writings on beauty and the love of God. These were to comprise that volume of her work called Intuitions pré-chrétiennes. This project, like so many of her others, was not completed.

Her interest in other religions made possible another interpretation of the mean proportional. Hoping always for unity, \( \frac{a}{b} = \frac{b}{c} \), she found \( a \) to be such a diversity of beliefs and practices, all of which seemed to lead in opposing directions. Intuitions pré-chrétiennes represented for her the \( b \), the mean proportional. Look for beauty, look for unselfish love, and you well may find that mean.

With her desire for truth and unity, Simone Weil learned Sanskrit and read the Upanishads and the Bhagavad-gītā. Of her and this interest, Davy wrote: "Les analogies entre la sagesse grecque et celle des Upanishads la rendent particulièrement ouverte à l'Inde. Elle fut séduite par le caractère universel de l'hindouisme suivant lequel la vérité qui est une et éternelle ne saurait être enfermée dans une philosophie ou une écriture unique."

In the Gītā, as well as in Saint Jean de la Croix, Simone Weil found a mean proportional in the beauty of "la connaissance négative de Dieu et... l'état d'union totale de l'âme avec Dieu." This either inspired or
corroborated her own concept of man's voluntary de-creation. Thus, in this sense, de-creation is not only the complement of the mean proportional, but also a mean proportional in itself. If conceived of as the purest of humility and the longing for truth, it, too, exhibits a universality of aim.

Simone Weil would have man model himself upon the symbolic mean proportional seen by her in Christ; that is, as man imitates the universal, he should also imitate the perfect mean proportional. It is given to each man to be a mean between God, or unity, and himself. To achieve this, however, to become $\beta$ in the equation (which is an assimilation of man to God) involves the universalizing of the "moi" through love.

That Simone Weil wished to be the mean proportional between God and man is no new idea. Many Christians not only believe this to be their duty, but also they believe they have become the actual link. However, Simone Weil wished to become a transparency between the creator and creation, that the two might better be united. Becoming a transparency, which involves de-creation, is much too harsh a requirement to expect of man, particularly when man does not renounce the world (as Simone Weil did not) to go into isolated contemplation or to lead an ascetic life. It is infinitely more difficult to contemplate, to feel union with the supernatural while working in a factory each day, as Simone Weil attempted to do.

Becoming $\beta$ in the equation, involves not only an effort on the part of man, but also the descending motion of God, for the $\beta$ term, according to Simone Weil is neither purely man nor purely God:

\[
\frac{\text{Dieu}}{\text{Dieu-homme}} = \frac{\text{homme}}{\text{homme}}
\]

The work of an artist or scientist may be considered as a proportion
between man and the divine, or if he is not concerned with what is beyond
the realm of man and the universe the mean proportional can be read as the
unity of one man with the world, the union of the one and the many, the
microcosm related to the macrocosm, or in a variety of very practical ways,
such as arbitration between two countries.

Those proportionals which are basic to any effort toward unity or or-
der and away from chaos and multiplicity are beauty, love, suffering, and
contradiction.

Men are drawn together by beauty, to experience together that which
is beyond anyone's possession. Those experiences of beauty, such as (for
Simone Weil) Gregorien chant, the music of Bach, the order of the universe,
an act of pure compassion, detach man from all that is petty, including him-
self: "L'amour de la beauté est aussi surnaturel: il est négation de soi
à un double titre...la beauté n'est qu'objet de regard, il faut regarder le
fruit sans le manger, et ne chercher dans la beauté rien d'autre qu'elle-
même, pas même une promesse. C'est pourquoi l'amour du beau est renoncement:
on ne peut répondre à l'absolue beauté...que par l'abandon en soi de
toute fin, de toute intention, de toute volonté, de tout but, c'est-à-dire
l'abandon de toute autre 'profondeur' que la profondeur sans fond du néant."
(The supernatural void.)

The highest order of beauty is the universal. That is why only those
works of art and science which are universal, which elevate man beyond the
personal, the particular, the limited, are genuinely beautiful. There is a
certain anonymity in the beauty of the order of the universe, and those
great works of literature, art, science, and music likewise tend toward an anonymous discovery or creation.

Universal order is the highest beauty for it is the presence of God. (Simone Weil, although she was not a pantheist in the normal meaning of the term, writes in her Cahiers that beauty is actually the body of God, since beauty is usually related to a physical entity of some kind.) Speaking of this presence, she writes: "Le beau est le moyen dont Dieu se sert pour manifester sa présence réelle dans la sphère où il lui est impossible d'être présent directement. Donc le beau est un moyen, un intermédiaire, une sorte d'être médian et médiateur..." Elsewhere in her writings, she speaks of the beautiful as a divine trap, which captures souls, with their consent, and delivers them with love to the supernatural.

Those passages in which Simone Weil writes of love are among the most beautiful and moving in all her thoughts. They may be interpreted both on a supernatural plane, God's love for his creation, and on a human plane, love of man for woman, love of one human for another.

Love also is an abdication of the "moi," of desire, of reward. The kind of love which is attached to seeking satisfaction in another as an object, or the expectation of a reward from God for "loving Him" are degradations of love. Supernatural love is loving without object, it is to direct one's attention toward. Thus, there is always suffering in this love, for it is an "amour à vide." Simone Weil advises those who refuse to suffer voluntarily to love something or someone other than God. "Aimer purement, c'est consentir à la distance, c'est adorer la distance entre soi et ce qu'on
Love, as a proportion between man and other men, including man and woman, becomes very meaningful when not attached to motives. Loving without motives is a direction for man to aim for, not a reality, for Simone Weil saw that most relations called love are attempts to possess, and further, to devour. This kind of love is firmly attached to the "moi," and is a consolation, but it is very deceptive, and instead of leading to unity it leads to discord. Love between humans must also maintain a certain amount of distance; love does not destroy inner solitude, and if it is real, there should be no opposition between it and this necessary solitude: "For those who love, separation, although painful, is a good, because it is love." Seen thusly, love is a harmony between presence and absence, attachment and detachment, joy and suffering.

As for love of one's neighbor, Simone Weil equates this concept with that of justice in her writings. However, she lived this kind of unselfish love (giving of herself to balance injustice) to an extreme degree in order to share the misery of the factory workers, the field workers, and the soldiers. One sees in her political works and her participation in working-men's strikes, the overwhelming desire to bring dignity and equality to the lives of the oppressed, the desire to re-establish balance when the scale was tipped too much at one end.

In sharing their suffering, Simone Weil believed that she was imitating Christ and attempting to achieve a unity between her life and that of the
workers. Suffering, not that which is sought out or created by use of force, but that which is subject to necessity, must be shared, must be consented to. Not only does suffering render one's own non-importance and non-being more concrete, it establishes contact with reality and, hence, is a mean proportional between divine truth and man.

As the joy of beauty is a mean proportional between the soul and the divine, suffering is the proportional between the divine order (necessity) and the body. All things which are worthwhile, says an old proverb, are achieved through some amount of pain and suffering. Simone Weil seemed to be compelled to test all of her ideas on her body—through suffering: "We could no more become friends of God through joy alone than one becomes a ship's captain by studying books on navigation. The body plays a part in all apprenticeships. On the plane of physical sensibility, suffering alone gives us contact with that necessity which constitutes the order of the world, for pleasure does not involve an impression of necessity." She does not speak of creating suffering, either for herself or for others, but uses rather the words to "accept," to "consent" to suffering out of love.

The often contradictory or paradoxical character of the thought of Simone Weil is a reflection of her belief in the contradictory as a mean proportional between appearance and ultimate truth. She knew that all acts which man wishes to make, all his desires, all those things imposed upon his behavior by necessity, are indeed impossible for they all involve contradictory conditions. Notice, for example, how frequently truth appears to be falsehood and vice-versa. A man may work all his life to gain an immense
fortune only to find the emptiness when he has exhausted the best of his energy. Contradiction, as man's proof that he is not everything, indeed that he is nothing, is for Simone Weil a "chemin vers Dieu," "une porte à la vérité."

There was contradiction and absurdity in the crucifixion of Christ. Likewise, there was contradiction in our own creation: "Contradiction est notre chemin vers Dieu parce que nous sommes de créatures et la création elle-même est contradiction. Il est contradictoire que Dieu, qui est infini, qui est tout, à qui rien ne manque, ferait quelque chose qui est hors de lui, qui n'est pas lui, tout en procédant de lui." The situation of man vis-à-vis the world is for Simone Weil absurd. He must look for finality in a world where there is no finality. The whole notion of necessity is absurd. It is rather like the condition of Sisyphe in Camus' *Mythe de Sisyphe*. In *La Connaissance surnaturelle*, Simone Weil sees the making of a logic from the absurd, from the contradictory, as an urgent task.

When we discover a contradiction, we should fix our attention on it relentlessly. If it stems from illusion, it will disappear, but if it remains, we still should not flinch but continue to contemplate it. Then a loosening will take place, a detachment, and we will find ourselves contemplating a higher reality. She contended that this fixed contemplation of the contradictory, the insoluble, was the only true course for the philosopher.
C. The Union of Contraries and Contradictories

Man usually attempts to resolve contradictions by treating them as if they were on the same plane. Meeting a very basic contradiction such as "God exists—God does not exist," one usually examines particular incidents in life and accepts either one or the other, but not both. If he makes of this position a systematized philosophy, he very frequently finds himself embarrassed to admit that certain experiences he has, certain actions he takes, don't fit at all into his system, contradict his professed belief.

Simone Weil maintained, as did the Pythagoreans, that life is the union, the equilibrium of opposites. This belief is very similar, although much expanded and modified, to the theory of opposite tensions of Heraclitus. Observing the strings of a lyre, he arrived at the conclusion that all things are maintained in an oscillation, a balance between two extremes. The Pythagoreans actually set up a table of basic contraries, including such opposites as limited—unlimited, even—odd, one—many, and light—darkness.

Simone Weil does not state that matter, ideas, experiences necessarily are present in pairs, but rather that contradiction is associated with levels of comprehension, and that there is harmony of these contradictions. It is up to us to find the rapport. Her treatment of the contradictory is quite conceivably the most exciting and fascinating aspect of Simone Weil's thought. It is applicable to all phases of life, to education, to politics, to history, to the personal, and to religion. The union of contraries does not offer a quick solution to all the problems of the world, but it is of utmost value in
the method of confrontation of those questions and positions which seem irreconcilable. She is telling us that the world is not an either-or, but a harmony of many ors and eithers, and that most men make mistakes in their method of approach. There is chaos, because man is forced by society, his training, even by necessity, to see only the particular.

In her ponderings on the contradictory, Simone Weil makes a distinction between the contraries and the contradictories, the former treating of harmony of the natural, the latter involving the descent of the supernatural. The natural and the supernatural do not appear as an absolute dichotomy, but reflect each other, often becoming curiously indistinguishable one from the other. Very frequently one receives the impression that, for Simone Weil, the supernatural was secretly disguised, that it was like a person who likes to appear when and where he is least expected. Indeed, with the basic contradiction of reality and appearance, looking for truth or beauty in expected places is often the very place not to find it. Thus, in her writings, the union of contraries resembles very closely the union of contradictories and vice-versa. Both the natural and supernatural rapportds can only be found by much thought and/or silent contemplation. (She does insist, however, that we can not grasp the supernatural, that it grasps us.) If the only way we can resolve a contradiction, after much thought and attention, is to lie to ourselves that one or the other ideas in it is false, then this contradiction (such as "God is present—God is absent") is the door to a higher reality.

The union of contraries is a particularly valuable method for the man
who does indeed think about himself, his world, and his neighbors. In the first place, it shuts out no possibility if applied as it should be. Simone Weil wrote that one accepts all opinions, arranging them in a hierarchy of interpretation and comprehension. One of the primary sources of dispute between men is that they nearly always have, in each of their arguments, solid reasons for maintaining their stand, and that it is not a matter of right versus wrong, but rather a difference of perspective, a difference in the level of interpreting language, and a difference in the particulars of each's background and education which puts limits on the discussion.

Here one of the basic ideas in the work of Simone Weil, the lever, can be seen to apply to the union of contraries. Two men are hotly arguing some issue. One man has just found a flaw in the position of the other, which the latter can not explain if he maintains his stand. To admit this flaw and all that it involves, it would be necessary for the second man somehow to concede, retreat, or humble himself. But usually, to lower signifies only one thing, to destroy, to appear foolish. The lever, however, is a union of contraries; to lower is to raise. Thus, to humble oneself in an argument when it appears that one is maintaining certain falsehoods, is to rise in the realm of truth. It is to weed out obvious illusions, and furthermore it has been observed that very frequently the other man will concede more voluntarily the flaws in his own position. Such a union of contraries, it seems, can only lead to more real understanding. Although it may seem a Utopic ideal, the union does exist and it is practiced, but in the most limited way usually.
One man does not compromise his position out of fear or respect for the other person, but attempts to find the harmony of the two positions which does exist, out of a desire for truth.

As might be expected, Simone Weil writes a good deal about the character of good and evil without treating them necessarily as polarities: "Le mal est l'ombre du bien... le faux est l'ombre du vrai." That is to say that there is a kind of very general equilibrium of good and bad, that where there is one there are nearly always traces of the other. Speaking of herself and of others, Simone Weil wrote that if one believes that he is doing good, he is almost bound not to be doing good. This does not imply that he must therefore do evil, for the more frequent case is that he is acting through a mixture of their various nuances. One is more likely to do something good by fixing his attention on the impossibility of doing pure good, for this leads one more often in the direction of reality. In La Pesanteur et la grâce she writes: "Bien et mal. Réalité. Est bien ce qui donne plus de réalité aux êtres et aux choses, mal ce qui leur en enlève." However, reality even is often indistinguishable, for she writes in the same book: "Est-ce que le mal, tel qu'on le conçoit lorsqu'on ne le fait pas, existe? Le mal qu'on fait ne semble-t-il pas quelque chose de simple, de naturel qui s'impose? Le mal n'est-il pas analogue à l'illusion? L'illusion, quand on en est victime, n'est pas sentie comme une illusion, mais comme une réalité. De même, peut-être le mal. Le mal, quand on y est, n'est pas senti comme mal, mais comme nécessité ou même comme devoir."
Contradiction, that is to say the union of contraries and contradictories, is for us then a touchstone for reality, the good. Attentive always to the impossibility of attaining perfection, and acting as though this were possible, we can, according to Simone Weil, be elevated. However, to forget the impossibility is to slip into a chasm of illusion, for we settle for imperfect appearances of good, of reality.

Many writers have focused their glaring attention on the illusory, in contemplation of the impossibility of existing there alone. Pursuing this contradiction, Genet or Villon perhaps arrived, by the method suited to them, at a higher reality. It does appear that most people focus on the illusory with the notion of "making the best of it," thus fearing that by squarely facing their contradictory existence they will be forced to admit pain. These people must live a lopsided life, for harmony is found on the side of the contradictory.

The ultimate contradiction of this reality is that man must love through evil, hating it, but knowing its presence is necessary in an impartial, indifferent universe. Camus seemed to know this also, and La Paste is a very good example of man who loves and works through the sting of contradiction, finding there the only harmony, the only equilibrium which is not illusory. The fact that Camus does not speak of needing God does not detract from the similarity of his struggle to that of Simone Weil.

Two very striking examples used by Simone Weil that illustrate the union of contradictories are presence-absence and distance-accessibility. They also show the need not to deal with all ideas, particularly the contradictory
ones, on the same level.

As in human love, presence-absence and distance-accessibility must be in harmony, so are they of greatest importance in supernatural love. There is evil in the world, for if there were not evil, man would believe himself in paradise, he would be too attached to this world. Likewise: "Dieu ne peut être présent dans la création que sous la forme d'absence. Il faut placer Dieu à une distance infinie pour le concevoir innocent du mal; réciproquement, le mal indique qu'il faut placer Dieu à une distance infinie. Ce monde en tant que tout à fait vide de Dieu est Dieu lui-même."

On a strictly logical plane, something or someone cannot be both present and absent simultaneously. But then, God or the unnamable is not a person or a thing, but an experience of unity, love, truth. Simone Weil, and some of the greatest thinkers of the world, as well as the most common of man, speak with certainty of experiences of some unseen presence. The fact remains, however, that to assert that God is present is for many as surely a lie as to assert that God is totally absent would be a lie for Simone Weil. This contradiction can not be resolved by natural means, and is what Simone Weil regards as a door to the supernatural. Only the supernatural can provide the rapport.

One of the greatest values of the writings of Simone Weil is not only that they are spiritually inspiring to that part of man who wants there to be order and love, but also that they are rich in meaning for the perspective they offer to man on man. Simone Weil continually focuses her attention on the highest and the lowest, hoping to find the rapport, the union

59
of contraries. She tells us, and continually reminds herself, that her search is not to find God, but to find man and the world. One of the absurdities of life is that man can not love himself, although he may well worship his "moi." It is not natural to love the afflicted, to submit to suffering, to truly love oneself because one is. It is a contradiction which Simone Weil rushes toward. And she found a supernatural unity with that which is naturally lowly in man.

Humility is a key to the grandeur of man, which is a closeness to reality. Those men who refuse to cushion their lives with luxury, live not only as very striking examples of united contraries, but also live, because it constitutes for them necessity, as examples of extremes which balance other extremes. It is all the more striking because humility is not a state or a constant practical principle, but always an aiming. Each new situation offers a new trial, a new set of contradictions and impossibilities. Always Simone Weil sought out the most impossible, fighting in the Spanish Civil War, working through her headaches as a "fraiseuse" for the Renault factory, pleas to be parachuted back into war-time France, when anti-Semitism was at its height.

Man must contemplate, but he must know that "Rester immobile ne veut pas dire s'abstenir d'action. Il s'agit d'immobilité spirituelle, non matérielle." Furthermore, man, who needs goals, must not let these goals be the reason for his action. He acts out of necessity, but he must tell himself, it seems, that he acts for some goal. It was impossible for Simone Weil, as it is for most men, to act without a reason—her reason which
dominates everywhere her writings and her life is the uncompromising need for truth and love of only the highest order. But she acted also, it appears, from a necessity imposed upon her by the circumstances of her life and intellect, as well as by the force of that which she hated, her own personality—the totality of her "moi" and her de-created self.

Pursuing truth so relentlessly, so bent on finding it through one method, regardless of how thorough that method may be, one is apt to find what one wishes to find rather than what is actually there. In such a case, Simone Weil's reproach of Pascal "for having lacked integrity in his search for God, for he embarked on an intellectual research having decided in advance where it would lead him," 33 might almost be applied to her own search, at times. Applying the union of contraries to most matters in her own search, she failed often to see it work in the very different methods of others. Those intimate with her life, Père Perrin and Gustave Thibon, speak of her refusal to concede any point that deviated from her own. (On the other hand, in certain of her letters to others, particularly to a factory owner and to her parents, she displayed a slightly obsequious attempt not to offend or hurt, actually concealing truth from her parents.)

Nature exhibits most beautifully the union of contraries, not only in such physical realities as temperature and energy, but in a kind of game with humanity. It happens nearly always that when man thinks he "has it by the tail," that he has characterized its mechanism, it plays the dirty trick of behaving in the opposite fashion. Thus men once believed firmly that the universe was finite, and they stumbled into $\sqrt{2}$. Man who believes that the
world is nothing but the chaotic can not explain the set cycles of the planets, the mathematical ratios of genetics, and other orderly phenomena. Thus, for the man who accepts the theory that the universe is a union of contraries his own particular life may appear as a predominance of one extreme alone (either positive or negative), a fact which will obscure any more general observation. This Simone Weil describes as man's ability to see only the particular, but if he sees the particular exclusively, how can he then formulate theories on the universal with such certainty as she does. This can only be done in "la durée d'un éclair. Instants d'arrêt, de contemplation, d'intuition pure, de vide mental, d'acceptation du vide moral. C'est par ces instants qu'il est capable de surnaturel." 34

As Simone Weil was a union of contradictories, so does her method and style reflect this. In the introduction to Waiting for God, Leslie Fiedler says of her method, "Corresponding to Simone Weil's basic conviction that no widely held belief is utterly devoid of truth is a dialectical method in which she balances against each other contrary propositions, not in order to arrive at a synthesis of a 'golden mean,' but rather to achieve an equilibrium of truths...When she is most faithful to this method, her thought is most satisfactory; only where some overwhelming prejudice prevents her from honoring contradictions is she narrow and unilluminating— as for instance, toward Israel, Rome, Aristotle, or Corneille." 35

Her style is a harmonious blend of simplicity and complexity, of nudity in number of words and bareness of adjectives balanced by a richness and depth of thought, of the positive and the negative. Above all, one finds
that rapid reading is not advisable, unless one wishes to remain at the level of the polished paradox. Reading her thought is to participate in the creation of her work. She makes it all but impossible for the reader not to apply her own method, to test her own ideas. There is a circular probing in her style. We read a phrase on the necessity of supporting the void and begin to wonder what precisely she means. A bit further we dig deeper into the concept, as she relates her experiences of it and its contrary. Each time she mentions the void, usually in a phrase of balanced opposites, we get a clearer idea and feeling of what the void and de-creation are. This circular character might bore one who is used to reading books which develop in linear fashion, if he were not struck by the freshness of her approach and by what appears to be an astonishing frankness. Perhaps, one reason why people may find that her works don't flow in a regular literary fashion, is that they were random jottings in stacks of notebooks, which she entrusted to Thibon and which were only later published as titled volumes. Secondly, they are "pensées" or aphorisms which do not need to develop in linear fashion.

To dwell at length on the style of Simone Weil is to miss the essential, and the essential for her was thought presented in the barest of forms. In a letter to Gustave Thibon, she wrote of the only style which was possible for her, the only style she admired in the great writers: "L'effort d'expression ne porte pas seulement sur la forme, mais sur la pensée et sur l'être intérieur tout entier. Tant que la nudité d'expression n'est pas atteinte, la pensée non plus n'a pas touché ni même approché la vraie grandeur...La vraie manière d'écrire est d'écrire comme on traduit. Quand on traduit un texte
écrit en une langue étrangère, on ne cherche pas à y ajouter; on met au contraire un scrupule religieux à ne rien ajouter. C'est ainsi qu'il faut essayer de traduire un texte non écrit." As usual, when she made such a strong statement of belief, she tried to live and practice it.

Throughout her writings, Simone Weil reveals a preoccupation with the natural order of man and the universe as a symbolic reflection of supernatural truth. In the first chapter, the spiritual growth of man was likened to the natural growth of the plant. The greater precision to be obtained in applying mathematical and geometrical equations to the laws of the universe, led her to believe, as did the Pythagoreans, that similar laws voiced in similar equations operated in the realm of the supernatural. It was, however, not so much the end result of mathematical calculations that was important to Simone Weil, but rather a concentration on the means or the method of contemplating these laws and equations as a way of detaching the self and of approaching the universal, and through the universal, touching in brief instants the eternal.

Part of her was always anchored firmly, in spite of her mystical experiences and her longing for the divine, to the most earthly aspects of life. For this reason, her writings have meaning for those who are not, and can not be, Christian or even religiously oriented. The contemplation of analogies between man and the world mechanism, the attempt to seek rapport between the seemingly irreconcilable, the confrontation of contradictions, the practice of humility out of recognition of one's very limited existence, the universalizing of the "moi," the search for unity rather than chaos, and most of all the
refusal to lie to oneself— all of these ideas which Simone Weil felt compelled to "live," are still vital to man. That many of these concepts, in a somewhat more crude fashion may be found in the writings of Heraclitus, Eudoxus, Pythagoras, or in the highly sophisticated writings of Plato, the Upanishads, Lao Tseu, and a variety of other religious and scientific thinkers, does not detract from them because of non-originality, but rather adds a certain universal strength to them. The ideas of Simone Weil could hardly be called archaic, and their applicability is as pertinent and fresh in the twentieth century as the Pythagorean concepts were in the sixth and fifth.
Footnotes for Chapter Two

1. WG, op. cit., p. 31.


4. WG, op. cit., p. 129.

5. NR, op. cit., p. 294.


8. GS, op. cit., p. 150.

9. PG, op. cit., pp. 65, 81, 82.

10. GS, op. cit., p. 137.


12. GS, op. cit., p. 103.


14. PG, op. cit., p. 64.

15. Most people are familiar with the Pythagorean theorem (the sum of the squares of the sides of a right triangle is equal to the square of its hypotenuse), but fewer people are aware that the Pythagoreans were primarily a religious brotherhood, very much like the later monastic orders, who lived an ascetic existence of contemplation. They were the originators of a kind of mysticism based on the belief that numbers are sacredly sovereign. Geometry was of special significance, and over the door to their school were the words: "No one may enter here who is not a geometer," thereby making of geometry a religious doctrine.

The Pythagoreans taught that the soul was not of this earth, where all is perishable. For them, the soul was imprisoned in the body. They also
believed in transmigration of souls and hence in the brotherhood of all creatures. Relations between numbers, more specifically geometrical relations, were signs somehow leading to the eternal. Mathematics offered not only an explanation for the natural phenomena of the universe, but also a spiritual purification for the soul: "The function of geometry," says Plutarch, speaking like a good Pythagorean, "is to draw us away from the sensible and the perishable to the intelligible and the eternal..."


22. CII, p. 367.


25. PG, pp. 75, 72.

26. WG, pp. 127.

27. Ibid., p. 132.

28. CII, p. 368.

29. Ibid., p. 411.

30. PG, pp. 83, 89.

31. Ibid., p. 126.

32. Pensées, p. 37.
33. The Mysticism of Simone Weil, op. cit., p. 44.

34. GII, p. 22.

35. WG, p. 31.

36. PG, p. v.
Chapter III- Terrestrial Energy

A. Work- The Spiritual Core

Simone Weil's life and her writings are based on the firm belief that there exist order, beauty, and divine love in the universe. She experienced this order although working and living in the chaotic and ugly. Coming from a fairly well-to-do family, she somehow regarded her own personal comfort as an injustice in view of all the misery extant in the world. Therefore, she always sought out this misery in order to share it. She was convinced that amongst the lowly was the only place she could live- it was her vocation.

Simone Weil regarded physical labor both as slavery and as a spiritual lever. Physical labor has for a long time represented to society the most degrading means of existence. It is for this reason that it was chosen as punishment for certain crimes. One of the worst tortures of all is physical labor which has no meaning- such as moving a boulder from point A to point B, and back and forth endlessly, as was the case in the Myths of Sisyphus.

From her first association with labor through the workers' syndicates, she was concerned with the abuses of forced, meaningless labor. However, she could not be satisfied by making outside protests of these abuses- she had to experience, to know from the inside the suffering of labor. She not only had to share the miseries of the working classes, both as a factory hand and an agricultural worker, but also wanted to give back to these workers the spiritual value of work, missing for so long: "Les travailleurs ont besoin
de poésie plus que de pain. Besoin que leur vie soit une poésie. Besoin d'une lumièr e d'éternité...Seule la religion peut être la source de cette poésie...L'esclavage, c'est le travail sans lumière d'éternité, sans poésie, sans religion. Que la lumière éternelle donne, non pas une raison de vivre et de travailler, mais une plénitude qui dispense de chercher cette raison. À défaut de cela, les seuls stimulants sont la contrainte et le gain. La contrainte, ce qui implique l'oppression du peuple. Le gain, ce qui implique la corruption du peuple."

Simone Weil is not concerned with destroying the obedient quality of labor, for obedience, willingly consented to, is the best way to feel oneself a part of that divine unity. This idea of obedience to divine order is only oppressive if one thinks of God as an overlord, to whom one obeys or is forced to obey. However, if one thinks of God as unity or love, obedience is seen as a blending into that unity—a consent to be a real part, rather than an illusory whole "moi." Nor can one lay the responsibility for one's actions upon obedience to God. Acting in obedience means, for Simone Weil, refusing illusions. If God is for a man a comforting illusion, he must refuse Him also, by acting as though He did not exist. Those injustices toward man and animal are caused by ego's ambitions, either individual or collective desires, that is to say, forced obedience to a false divinity.

The portrait of the worker which Simone Weil presents, particularly in La Condition ouvrière, is a very one-sided one. This picture shows the miserable condition of the factory worker in France in the 1930's, voluntarily
endured by a very sensitive, physically weak intellectual girl, and none-theless it manages to present a very real need of the workingman, even today: the need to feel himself a contributing individual, rather than a machine racing against the clock to receive only enough wages to exist.

It was the inhumanity of racing to produce more and more, one's entire worth measured by the number of pieces turned out in an hour, that disturbed Simone Weil the most. There was no time to think; the worker's sole intent was to make the number of pieces increase to receive more money. This hardly seems to be a phenomena peculiar to the 1930's in France. The machines may be better, the wages higher, but has the emphasis on more and faster changed? Bureaucracy, particularly in the business world because of the importance of the dollar or the franc, is an ever present token of man's injustice to man. The man in the factory often had only to look at the foreman to feel that he was an object, a cog which could easily be replaced by a more efficient one. Simone Weil, after having worked for about a year under these conditions, speaks of her own surprise when someone spoke to her as a human being. She felt that it must be somehow a mistake.

She did not advocate the abolishment of factories, of foremen, of work, or even of suffering. Rather she wished to have work seen in its true perspective, as the spiritual core of life, by shifting the emphasis from the non-human to the human, from the quantity to the character of the contribution of each man, from the money sign to the work itself—its real and symbolic value. That is to say that she wished to see equilibrium re-established where there was only disproportion and dis-equilibrium.
Why did Simone Weil consider work as the spiritual core of man's life? Work, she believed, which man consented to willingly, was the most perfect kind of obedience to necessity. Man must work regardless of his own joys and sorrows, in spite of his moods, in spite of the weather, and in spite of reward or pay he must work to live. It not only is a physical reality of coming to grips with the environment, but a psychological reality that men who do nothing are for most purposes dead; especially do they feel this when faced with retirement after working all their lives.

And yet to work is to consent to suffer. It is this aspect of necessary suffering which Simone Weil feels to be a spiritual purification. It is, in a sense, too negative that she writes almost exclusively of that which is sad or painful in life, without writing of that which is happily elevating. It must be remembered, however, that Simone Weil's experience was unique in that it was the extreme which was to bring about a more total balance. Also, one must remember, when she speaks of the suffering of physical labor, that this was in part due to the daily pain which her body was subject to—the migraines and the pleurisy leave one little room to feel physical joy in working. Thus to suffer is to feel the reality of man's place in the universe; it is to feel his own weakness.

Man, according to Simone Weil, is also a prisoner of time. Indeed, he is abandoned in it. To labor is to feel fully the meaning of time as it enters the body through fatigue and monotony. We are usually aware of this prison only when we perceive the circular pattern of life and particularly the circular pattern shown in physical labor: "Le travail fait éprouver d'une
manière harassante le phénomène de la finalité renvoyée comme une balle; travailler pour manger, manger pour travailler... Si l'on regarde l'un des deux comme une fin, ou l'un et l'autre pris séparément, on est perdu. Le cycle contient la vérité."

The circle, geometrical image of divine unity and order, often appears to man as monotony. This monotony may appear to him unbearable and bleak, or he may find it meaningful; for there are two kinds of monotony: that which imitates the clock pendulum and that which imitates the eternity of the movement of the constellations. Thus it is up to man to choose to measure his life by the ticking of the clock, or to be happy to read in the "belle monotonie" of the heavens a meaningful pattern, a more peaceful image of eternity. Of monotony she writes: "...Il est à la fois inévitable et convenable qu'il y ait dans le travail de la monotonie et de l'ennui, et d'ailleurs il n'est rien de grand sur cette terre, dans aucun domaine, sans une part de monotonie et d'ennui. Il y a plus de monotonie dans une messe en chant grégorien ou dans un concerto de Bach que dans une opérette...Mais il n'est pas moins vrai que notre pensée est faite pour dominer le temps, et cette vocation doit être préservée intacte en tout être humain. La succession absolument uniforme en même temps que variée et continuellement surprenante des jours, des mois, des saisons et des années convient exactement à notre peine et à notre grandeur."

This is the rhythm of the time of man's life and this is obedience to and imitation of the eternal order. What Simone Weil found in the factory was not identification with this spiritual order, but rather an obedience to the
ticking of the clock, the meaningless order of the machine.

Many modern humanists and humanitarians have bemoaned the appearance of the machine for its negative effect on man's relation to man. Simone Weil was very concerned with the growing importance of the machine, not with the evils of the machine itself (although she was often horrified at the atrocious accidents at Renault and at Alsthom), but with the misuses of the machine. The machine becomes the shortest distance between certain ambitious men and money. In such a relationship there is little need for man as a man. In most cases, factory workers knew little about the tool they were using and were forced into the very embarrassing position of always calling an irate superior when something went wrong. Simone Weil, in her "Journal d'Usine," in La Condition ouvrière, shows her attempts to understand the machine, seeking to find in its operation an analogy with geometrical functions.

She was most concerned with the misuse of the machine to supplant the individual for only the individual can experience the spiritual character of work. Work loses its spiritual significance when masses of men and machines are easily exploited for gain. Gain is all important to businessmen and most workers, but gain, particularly money beyond what is needed to live, is a false finality in a world without finality: "Tout est intermédiaire dans cette existence, tout est moyen, la finalité ne s'y accroche nulle part." We deceive ourselves with the myth of gaining more faster, which is the present value placed on the machine. Simone Weil here insists that man work for the joy of working.
The factory worker particularly is a plant in desperate need of light, for he lives constantly in the shadows of the bureaucracy, the machine, the tick of the clock, and the fear of being replaced by a more efficient cog. Today the agricultural worker, too, is often a degraded contributor, unless he is wealthy enough to control other men and land. The farmer lives close to the earth, but often is so busy that he fails to see a real religious significance in the work he performs. Also, in a world of neon lights and money, agriculture offers little enticement by way of comparison. Simone Weil wishes him to turn his attention to a higher light, symbolized by the sun.

She felt a kinship especially with the factory and field workers because of this lack of glamour, because of the harshness of the labor, and perhaps because it was what suited her own natural talents the least. She was bent on re-establishing balance from the imbalance created by the degradation of labor. In reading the sacred literature of the world and ancient mythology, she was convinced that labor was important in religious symbolism and that agriculture was and is the basis for much of this symbolism: "There are numerous signs indicating that... long ago physical labor was pre-eminently a religious activity and consequently something sacred. The Mysteries— a religion that embraced the whole of pre-Roman antiquity— were founded upon symbolical expressions concerning the salvation of the soul, drawn from agriculture. The same symbolism is found again in the New Testament parables." Thus at one time the unity of the natural and supernatural was experienced by the mean proportional of work and its symbolic value. It is interesting to note here again that Simone Weil looked always for similarities among the
world's religions, to better show the underlying unity of man's spiritual life.

B. The Collectivity

What has been responsible for the dis-equilibrium? Simone Weil answered with vehemence, as did Rousseau, collective humanity, "le gros animal" of Plato. She believed very strongly in the necessity for an individual relation to God. Individuals create a collectivity as a means of convenience and custom. Only when the individual remains an individual can the collectivity be anything other than a nightmarish Frankenstein. However, the collectivity quickly becomes "le gros animal" for men begin to idolize it as an end or it becomes a means for the ambitious to better exploit. Man is more easily exploited if he feels it is for the good of society, thus he makes of the collective life an object, a false God. He is therefore vulnerable to any lie or vice in the name of the state or the nation, or even the community. The society can be, if universalized, the source of high-level, well-intentioned energies, or, if too particular and exclusive, can be the source of the forces labeled by Simone Weil "la pesanteur": "Le capitalisme a réalisé l'affranchissement de la collectivité humaine par rapport à la nature. Mais cette collectivité humaine a pris par rapport à l'individu la succession de la fonction oppressive exercée auparavant par la nature. Cela est vrai même matériellement. Le feu, l'eau, etc. Toutes les forces de la nature, la collectivité s'en est emparée. Question:
may be transferred to the individual the freedom gained by the society?

This last question was a haunting one for Simone Weil and a prime motivator in any social efforts she made. It is therefore necessary to consider more closely the character and the influence of the "gros animal." Modern man must examine more intelligently that which he continually salutes and takes off his hat to without really knowing why or knowing how this very national pride can become, as Simone Weil pointed out repeatedly, a very dangerous "idolatry," and one which leads to the oppression which she fought so bitterly.

In the *Need for Roots*, and elsewhere, Simone Weil writes of the importance of necessity, obedience, obligations to other men, and she believed in a well-ordered, harmonious social order. However, it can not be forgotten that basic to all of these are liberty, intelligence, humility, and love, none of which, according to her, are to be found among those who are adolescent in mind and egotistical. Often today liberty is feared to lead to chaos; intelligence must not question too much; humility is considered cowardice; and love is a label for a variety of practices or is an idolatry of an object.

Responsible liberty and intelligence must go hand in hand with humility and love, and these all can be exercised only by the individual. On the other hand, the most frequent tool of the collectivity is force. The individual is as nothing confronted with force. Force is the mean between man and destruction, not man and unity. The nation becomes particularly dangerous
when it steals force from nature, for this force is always greater than man, both the object and the wielder of it, and when it is coupled with the notion of God not only being on one side, but actually being that side, that nation being God, men become, as objects, easily expendible.

Simone Weil was suspicious of patriotism and nationalism as she was suspicious of any social collectivity. She felt that traditions of the different countries were sacred as were their religions, and that no one nation had the right to impose its own order and religion on another (colonial expansion), for the different traditions and religious ceremonies were all different paths to be cherished for their uniqueness and which all lead ultimately to identification with the divine or supernatural. She saw in certain missionary activities and colonization a kind of sacrilege, uprooted people who must roam about uprooting others. The home, the country, the traditions of a group of people she considered to be "metaxu," a Greek word meaning "intermediary." These are things which are neither good nor bad in themselves, but which are necessary for man to root himself in, so that if he wishes to, he may voluntarily give them up in the de-creation process:

"Les vrais biens terrestres sont des metaxu. On ne peut respecter ceux d'autrui que dans la mesure où l'on regarde ceux qu'on possède seulement comme des metaxu, ce qui implique qu'on est déjà en route vers le point où l'on peut s'en passer. Pour respecter par exemple les patries étrangères, il faut faire de sa propre patrie, non pas une idole, mais un échelon vers Dieu."

Simone Weil cherished traditions for their symbolic value of mediation. But traditions often are like words that are constantly uttered century after

7
century without anyone paying attention to them. Simone Weil was not concerned with just pulling skeletons out of the closet, but with restoring the meaning that was once attached to traditions, to religious ceremonies, even to words. (Such words as are written by the Simone Weils of the world are quickly appreciated verbally, but seldom taken seriously.) As she herself believed, silence is sometimes the real poetry of life. But silence is uncomfortable, and man must eternally fill space with sounds, with words that he seldom "knows," in the true meaning of "to know" (which is to understand by feeling and intelligence). Language, like meaningless traditions, then becomes a prison to man.

The lack of attention and the wrong use of intelligence (the real exercise of intelligence shows us our limits) lead to the dis-equilibrium of modern life. For this reason, Simone Weil was concerned with the wrong direction of education which appears more and more to be a competitive race for grades, for scholastic laurels, whereas the real goal of education, she believed, was to establish the importance of attention. Attention is not muscular constraint, frownings and worries about the solution of a problem, but rather it "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."

Thus she saw that education consisted not of the rapid reaching of the
"correct solution," but of the learning of an approach applicable to all problems. Even, she wrote, if we do a geometry problem wrongly, that may nonetheless constitute learning on a higher level. It is above all necessary to fix our attention on our mistakes, however painful this may be, to discover why and how we made them. Those students who appear to make no mistakes may not in truth be learning anything of value.

Here we can see that Simone Weil advocated the education of individuals, not that of puppets in the collectivity. These puppets end up by being what she calls "poor caricatures of apprentices."

That quality of Simone Weil's struggles and writings which is so remarkable and so admirable is the attempt to establish unity and harmony between the most opposite and contradictory of elements. Those contradictions with which most writers and philosophers have had the most difficulty in harmonizing have been the individual and the society. Most resolve the problem by simply concentrating on the one and ignoring the other, or by proposing some compromise order which is unsatisfactory to either. The harmony that Simone Weil proposed leans toward the individual, since the collective can quickly become the "gros animal" if the individual is slighted: "The position of the intelligence is the key to this harmony, because the intelligence is a specifically and rigorously individual thing. This harmony exists wherever the intelligence, remaining in its place, can be exercised without hindrance and can reach the complete fulfillment of its function...The special function of the intelligence requires total liberty, implying the right to deny everything, and allowing of no domination. Wherever it usurps control there is an excess
of individualism. Wherever it is hampered or uneasy there is an oppressive collectivism, or several of them."  

The collectivity, according to Simone Weil, is "the guardian of dogma;" by this she refers to the conservatives of meaningful traditions which are inspirational to man. It must be admitted that this union of contraries is the hardest to accept, for the collectivity is, in a sense, the guardian of illusion, of the past, and in the first chapter it was shown that Simone Weil believed that man must weed out illusions, cling to nothing. Traditions are illusions; they allow man to assume his importance in the present by his ties to the past. The ties to one's own country are also illusory, insofar as man defines himself through his identification to it.

We may interpret this contradiction as necessary in one of two ways: either Simone Weil believed that de-creation was only for the elect, or that one must first have roots in order to be able voluntarily to pull them up. Since she opposes the first of these suppositions so bitterly, we prefer to believe that she would propose the latter. However, she often implies that "saints" are needed to guide and balance modern society. Saintliness must only mean degree rather than a state of being, for de-creation is not a state achieved, but a continual directing of one's attention away from the illusory. So long as man realizes that tradition is a symbol rather than reality, then the direction toward equilibrium between the negative and positive is maintained. Therefore symbolism serves as food and terrestrial energy for the plant, and it may also be seen as in the equation \( \frac{a}{b} = \frac{b}{c} \), \( a \) being the supernatural, \( c \) being the natural. Growing natural roots does not involve

81
burying the entire plant in the ground.

C. Roots

Just as the plant grows both up and down, Simone Weil's being was constantly being pulled in opposite directions. She desired only light but she knew that: "Il ne faut pas oublier qu'une plante vit de lumière et d'eau, non de lumière seule. Ce serait donc une erreur de compter sur la grâce seule. Il faut aussi de l'énergie terrestre." Man must have roots.

Although most of Simone Weil's suggestions on growing roots are contained in the book intended for "les Français déracinés" after World War II, L'Enracinement, her most beautiful and inspiring work on restoring value through roots is found in La Condition ouvrière under the title "Condition première d'un travail non servile." Here we see her desire and efforts to restore to the worker the poetry and meaning long missing from his life.

The most difficult problem to overcome in giving back the poetry to the worker, is getting him not only to read it, but first even to raise his head. The worker has lived so long with his head and eyes lowered, that he feels this to be the only possible direction for himself. So primary to any attempt to revive the poetry is education. This education should emphasize the attentive process and should be taught along with the apprenticeship of the trade. The worker must again feel the real equality and justice of the social order, although each contribution be different: "Si les étudiants, les jeunes paysans, les jeunes ouvriers se représentaient d'une manière tout
Once the worker can truly lift his head, he can "attend" with more feeling not only to his own work, but to the entire universe around him. He is more receptive in his search for "mean proportionals," and these may be found in the very matter with which he deals daily. There is no need, according to Simone Weil, to create an arbitrary set of symbols, a brand new poetry, for the worker, for it's there in the confrontation of man and matter, in the actual re-creation of his own life through his work. Throughout her writings, she insists upon re-creation rather than creation, attention to what is rather than attempts at novelty by the imagination. Every symbol is there, in the universe, in front of your nose: "Il faut seulement ne-toyer le miroir et lire les symboles qui sont écrits dans la matière de toute éternité."

And this is what Simone Weil does with great diligence—she searches for the symbols, the poetry, the divine mean proportionals everywhere. She examines with care the mythologies of all lands in detail, noting all references to agricultural and natural symbols, all parallels to working and labor, noting that dissimilarities are due to differences in local terrain and custom rather than differences in truth.

She attempted to make the farmer feel that religion was not reserved for
Sunday in the repetition of certain phrases, but rather that each action he performed in work is a symbol found in that Bible he may look at only in church. The circular pattern of the seasons, the planting of seed, the water and sunshine, the nourishment in the ripe plant, all of these are found in the religious ceremony and in the Evangelies. Simone Weil felt therefore that the farmer should participate in these ceremonies in his natural role.

Working in the field with full attention the farmer would live his religion daily. He would feel the unity of the microcosm and macrocosm. However, the poetry must assuredly is not lost if the farmer is an atheist or unconcerned with what is called "religion." For him, the individual freedom, the opportunity to explore his inner being and his relation to nature, his search for truth may find terrestrial food in a similar way. In the rooting process Simone Weil emphasizes the attention to that which is usually considered unimportant, that which is all too frequently taken for granted, or worse still, is used in a half-hearted way for material gain.

For the worker in the factory, Simone Weil returns to the analogies in geometry, for as she worked she could not fail to notice the geometrical functioning of man and machine, and hence the whole symbolical chain found another link. Pointing to the derivation of mechanical laws from geometry, she then shows once more the symbolic nature of geometry. The circular movement and the alternative movement, she finds, mirror the limited and the unlimited character of man's life in relation to the eternal. Even the rhythm of work in the factory (when the emphasis is not merely on speed) reflects the
necessary unity of the individual and the collective, the rapid and slowly careful, man and matter. The lever, particularly, is a geometrical equation which mirrors what Simone Weil says is a supernatural truth— a symbol of the necessity for humility. The equilibrium of ascending and descending motions is likewise spiritually meaningful. The list of analogies and symbols is endless and is for Simone Weil overwhelming evidence of order in the midst of seeming chaos.

Thus the poetry Simone Weil finds for workers is in their own movement, their own efforts, and in their attention to these movements. This is not, however, to imply that higher learning should be closed to workers, but rather that higher learning, as well as the other trades, needs also a revitalization, new meaning and direction, which would result in a greater unity of individual and collectivity. "Dans aucune société celui qui manie une machine ne peut exercer la même espèce d'attention que celui qui résout un problème. Mais l'un et l'autre peuvent également s'ils le désirent et s'ils ont une méthode, en exerçant chacun l'espèce d'attention qui constitue son lot propre dans la société, favoriser l'apparition et le développement d'une autre attention située au-dessus de toute obligation sociale, et qui constitue un lien direct avec Dieu."

Those needs of the soul which may receive food from an individual participation in the collectivity "are arranged in antithetical pairs and have to combine together to form a balance...What is called the golden mean actually consists in satisfying neither the one nor the other of the two contrary needs. It is a caricature of the genuinely balanced state in which contrary needs are
each satisfied in turn."

As man needs order, so does he need diversity and the liberty above all to exercise his intelligence. But he must not abuse his liberty through irresponsibility or indifference. From the latter kind of liberty there results a frantic running in all directions—this is liberty pushed to a ridiculous extreme.

The extreme of the need for obedience is servility, and this also constitutes imbalance. Man needs to obey both the rules of society and those who are leaders. This is a very dangerous need, for the balance is more easily tipped to tyranny, if not coupled with individual responsibility. One does not obey because he must obey, but because he consents to obey what he knows is just and what he feels is necessary. It is all too tempting to accept what the leader or the group says is just or necessary, rather than questioning fairly each issue with one's own intelligence and experience. When the leader says, "This is just because it is the law," then the first thing the individual must do is apply Simone Weil's method: "Try to find in what sense the contrary is true."

Although each man should be recognized equal as regards respect and consideration, Simone Weil wrote that he needed also authority, as represented to him symbolically through other men. This rather curious need, which may indeed be questioned, she called the need for hierarchism, the need for "a certain devotion toward superiors, considered not as individuals, not in relation to the powers they exercise, but as symbols. What they symbolize is that realm situated high above all men and whose expression in this world is
made up of the obligations owed by each man to his fellow man." At times she appears to advocate the enlightened despot concept of government espoused by Voltaire and other writers of the eighteenth century, or the medieval feudalism system. One must wonder then how much of her admiration is a kind of over-romanticization of the benevolent master-faithful slave notion. One may look with nostalgia at systems such as the feudal order, believing falsely that the peasants found a spiritual symbol in the feudal lord, and likewise, that the feudal lord felt a human responsibility for his serfs and knights. However, if such a relationship existed at all, we have reason to believe, that as with the slave holders in the South, it was a rarity. But here she is chiefly concerned with symbolic hierarchy—a functioning of each separate part in an ordered whole.

Each profession should have ways of honoring individual achievements, she believed. But there is a danger in bestowing honors for they frequently are, as Rousseau pointed out in Discours sur l'origine de l'inégalité, the source of frustration and jealousy among those who do not succeed. Exercised cautiously, the giving of honors may be a method of recognizing each individual's contribution equally.

Corresponding to the need for honor is the need for punishment. Simone Weil emphasizes the need to reawaken the true sense of justice in the very sluggish judiciary, penal, and law enforcement systems. Punishment must be a way of re-integrating a man who has placed himself outside "the chain of eternal obligations." Therefore "punishment must be an honor. It must not only wipe out the stigma of the crime, but must be regarded as a supplementary
form of education, compelling a higher devotion to the public good."

Freedom of opinion must be allowed, but the most sacred of all human needs is the need for truth. Freedom of opinion may frequently lead to complete irresponsibility. This is particularly regrettable, writes Simone Weil, when authors and newsmen, toward whom the public looks for guides, misuse their freedom by writing anything which may amuse or anything which will bring more money. She criticises writers like André Gide or the Surrealists, who frequently claimed the right of writing according to the conception of "l'art pour l'art."

We need security, for fear paralyzes the soul. But complete security in all matters stifles the soul by a kind of boredom. Certain risks, not gambling for the pleasure of it, constitute an initiative for us to act. Furthermore, often security constitutes illusion, for certainties are, like finalities, absent from our life.

It is necessary that man have both some private property, particularly the tools of his trade and his home, and property in common with others. The latter may be felt through public parks and monuments and through the partnership in the factory or large business for which one works. How frequently, though, private property and group property lead to feelings of exclusiveness rather than sharing, so that one wonders if property is not perhaps the worst of all deceptive myths.

All of these needs which Simone Weil sets forth in The Need for Roots are extremely idealistic and are almost the exact opposite suggestion to that given in the first chapter of this study, that is to say the weeding out of illusion,
consoling or not, in the process of de-creation. It must, however, be noted
that this book was written for the uprooted French and other peoples dis-
placed by the war. This is her most patriotic work and one can easily see
that it was her attempt, as always, to balance the scale.

Detachment is the key to the first chapter dealing with the soul's need
for light and its weeding process, and here we see an emphasis on attachment.
Looking for the proportional between these contradictories, we discern Simone
Weil's insistence upon freedom to consent to give up and the necessity of not
burying the individual in society. All aspects of her social thought must
center upon the satisfaction of these needs in close association with their
symbolic value.

Some symbolism is very meaningful in anyone's life, but too much can be
oppressive; it quickly loses its simple beauty and significance. Simone Weil,
beginning with an excellent idea of restoring meaning to the meaningless, con-
cludes with an obsession with symbols, all of which ultimately lead, through
her interpretation, to the same thing— the symbolic crucifixion of Christ.
In some of her books, particularly La Connaissance surnaturelle, we wade
through mountains of mythological data which simply overwhelm the reader.
This is, although on a much more elevated plane, very similar to the ex-
treme Freudian view of literature, and indeed of life itself, that all ob-
jects and actions are purely and simply sex symbols. Nothing is what it is,
but only a sign of a frustrated people. This not only is an oversimplifica-
tion, but also a very stifling, one-sided view.

To tell man, and perhaps particularly the worker, that his life is
composed of layers of symbols, is to oppress him maybe as much as by subjecting him to a malicious bureaucracy. Telling him, through lists of scholarly examples, that his life is a symbol is to do him a disservice. The chances are that he will be prejudiced strongly against any and all symbols. Man "feels," he "discovers" symbolic truths and it is the delight of being able individually to find these truths that give meaning. Imposed symbols, like imposed religion, are dead weights which inspire only resentment in many men.

We should be allowed the freedom and the education which enable us through attention to discover; this is, it seems, what Simone Weil actually wished for the worker. Discovering can not be brought about by simply telling, least of all by "pounding ideas into someone's head," but rather, one discovers by "attending" to what he confronts, a landscape, a physics problem, a poem, and by the use of his intelligence. What Simone Weil so often did, although she warned herself against it, was to provide her own end result, when, to the contrary, she wanted to emphasize the process. Imposing Christian symbolism on the worker or on anyone else, one assumes that there is only one path, one set of roots possible, one meaning for man's life. On the other hand, we must look at most of her compilations of mythological symbols as private notes of a scholar to herself— a scholar who was intent upon proving an underlying order in all apparent diversity.

Simone Weil so convinced herself that religion was the only meaningful aspect of living, that she could not prevent herself from seeing it as the only solution to all men's problems. Her work has a great universal value when she remains true to her method and interprets "religion" in its largest
sense, as unity or truth or a feeling of wholeness of being, or as the "cosmic religion" of Einstein and others. When she is not true to her method of questioning, she seems to have a tendency to choose man's religion for him. Thus she looks primarily at the positive aspects and beauty of Christianity, while accentuating what she considers to be the negative aspects of Judaism. For her, the God of the Hebrews represented only force, while the Christian God represented love. This is of course a simplification, even though the Old Testament does very frequently emphasize the wrath and force of God.

If one concentrates only on the religious arguments of Simone Weil, her work must be regarded primarily as a theological treatise in behalf of Christianity. But since we know through her self-reminders that she feared becoming too narrow, we find in the more universal aim of her work, particularly in her emphasis on attention and confrontation of contrary truths, the prime value of her thought and her writings. We can believe that had she lived longer, she might have revised much of what seems biased or not universal.
Footnotes for Chapter Three

1. FG, p. 206.
2. Ibid., p. 205.
4. Ibid., p. 262.
5. NR, pp. 295, 296.
6. FG, p. 177.
7. Ibid., p. 168.
8. WG, pp. 111, 112.
9. Ibid., p. 78.
11. CG, p. 271.
12. Ibid., p. 266.
13. Ibid., pp. 270, 271.
15. Quoted already in Chapter II—footnote number 1.
17. Ibid., p. 21.
18. Ibid., p. 25.
Conclusion

The dis-equilibrium which Simone Weil felt and wrote about in the years between 1930 and 1943 not only is still present in our lives today, but has, to many people's horror, become a frantic race for happiness. The emphasis is on speed and quantity and on cramming one's life to overflow with the full gamut of experience. There is little or no attempt to balance the exuberance with contemplation; even solitude is anathema. We live in a kind of cellophane wrapping, insulated like a hothouse orchid against nature and against the rest of the world. This cellophane wrapping is man's new prison, but it allows him to see out and hence he thinks he knows about reality.

If there is any kind of reality in man's insulated existence, there is a greater, truer reality outside. A few men and women find it necessary to live only in this unshielded area. Such a person was Simone Weil. She found that living without a shell was painful, but she found that the fullest joy was found right there with the pain. Those who live as she did know that humility is not just a word, not is it the idolatrous attitude of many men before what she would recognize as "the false gods"—money, the collectivity, physical or psychological force. Humility is a simple way of life, a constant exercise of intelligence, whose only goal is always to aim toward truth.

The vocabulary of Simone Weil is very abstract, and such terms as "humility," "truth," "beauty" have through overuse and distortion lost a good deal of significance. If we insist on reading her work, or any other work, merely as an intellectual pursuit, then "truth" is only a word. Sometimes it seems
that the world is already buzzing, whirling, and ringing with altogether too many such words—noble, idealistic terms which slide easily off the end of everyone's flapping tongue. The worst part about writing is the danger of man's refusal to really reflect on what has been written, to let it swim about inside him, instead of reducing it hastily to a group of words and beginning a semantic battle. Simone Weil, when her intellect dominates her expression, sometimes falls into the pit of words, but there is, particularly in her less polished thoughts, a quality which requires a state of "kuan" or "wordless contemplation." With their jagged edges, her thoughts work their way, as nature does, into our being. As Alan Watts said, "Just as one must sometimes be silent in order to hear what others have to say, so thought itself must be silent if it is to think about anything other than itself... Otherwise our minds begin to be haunted by words about words."

Simone Weil was very aware of the need for this kind of suspension of thought, and it is this "wordless contemplation" which underlies her concept of "attente de Dieu." Man detaches all traces of illusion, detaches or de-creates his "moi" through this very unambitious, non-goal directed contemplation, which she refers to as "attention."

Although this is a very Eastern concept of unity of being, Simone Weil, while recognizing its spiritual value, did not, and could not perhaps, relinquish what is considered to be a Western emphasis on action. What is very amazing and admirable is her ability generally to harmonize contemplation with a very active crusade against oppression and dis-equilibrium. She was constantly working for integration and unity in a world which tends more and more to
divide, to compartmentalize, and to specialize.

The sciences, religion, literature all seem intent upon rushing into fragmented specialization. Very frequently one becomes buried not only in the study of one of these, but one narrowly pursues one sub-branch while entirely ignoring other associative research. Ideas from any but the specialists are quickly scorned. Only occasionally do fresh ideas leak through the barriers erected by the specialists to separate their specialties. Thus we find a science which collides with religion, a technology which hurtles toward who-knows-what, a literature which is often sterile (that is to say, it disdains nature and science while concentrating on man as the center of the universe), and a multitude of bureaucratic monstrosities.

One of Simone Weil's most ardent wishes was to re-integrate science, religion, philosophy, and literature— that is to fuse rigor and observation with spiritual and artistic endeavors. This wish is reflected in her use of mathematic and scientific laws to represent what she felt to be true about man's soul and about the higher reality man can't know because of the weeds.

Reflection is a key concept of Simone Weil's finest thought, for it not only refers to the fixing of our attention upon even the simplest of things, but also describes her belief that supernatural truth is mirrored in the natural laws of the universe, and more precisely is shown in the mathematical expression of these laws. Geometry she felt to be a particularly good reflective study, because of the attention required by it and because it is a less goal-directed kind of thought. For those who must live only for goals, perhaps the only geometrical principle observed is: the shortest
distance between two points is a straight line. This kind of attention involves tense muscle contraction, but as one goal after another loses its importance, man is left only with the tenseness.

We have seen that Simone Weil continued to question what most men ignore or take for granted. Her confrontation of the paradoxical, of the contradictory is of particular importance, for contradiction is, she believed, "le chemin vers Dieu," the "criterium of the real." Looking about us, examining ourselves and others, we have little difficulty in understanding that the contradictory does exist, and in fact seems to be the mark of existence. Simone Weil believed, as did the Pythagoreans and her former teacher Alain, that contradictories formed a harmonious unity. It is up to us to search for the mean proportional which will uncover the relation of the two. Proceeding with mathematical precision, she herself saw overwhelming confirmation of this in the order of nature and the universe. We very often "discover" some new scientific "fact" today which seems at first to prove that chance and randomness are the essence of what we formerly thought was divine order. To such a notion, Simone Weil replies unwaveringly: "On se trompe souvent sur le hasard. Le hasard n'est pas le contraire de la nécessité; il n'est pas incompatible avec elle; au contraire, il n'apparaît jamais, sinon en même temps qu'elle."

Simone Weil not only confronted, examined, and attempted to understand the paradoxical, she was herself a union of contradictories: contemplative and active, revolutionary and conservative, intellectual and laborer, unorthodox and Christian, and Eastern and Western. Above all she was human. There
is among her apologists a mistaken tendency perhaps to overemphasize her
saintliness, her mysticism, her apparent martyrdom, and her eccentricities.
We feel that she was seen as an eccentric primarily because she was a woman,
and society has so defined woman's role that a woman like Simone Weil who
refused to fit into the mold seems entirely too strange to have her ideas
readily heard. A man who lives as she did, unattentive to dress, working
where he felt the need to, would hardly be labeled eccentric. We also feel
that the emphasis on the mystic worth of her suffering is a bit overdrawn
by several critics, for it must be remembered that the frailness of her body
did not deaden her interest in and love for humanity and her will to balance
injustice. She found a purpose worthy of suffering for. She knew work was
important as well as contemplation—she did not intend, we believe, to mortify
her body and renounce the world.

To regard Simone Weil merely as a saint is, in a sense, to deny her work
its rightful place among the most important literature—next to the works of
Sartre, Camus, Gide, Malraux and other literary giants of the twentieth century.
The works of a saint frequently get lost among the other thick theological
treatises meant only for study by specialists. Perhaps one reason we hear so
little about Simone Weil is precisely because of the saintly aura, the close-
ness of much of her ideas to Church dogma, and an often oppressive resemblance
to what modern man has an aversion to—moralizing.

Simone Weil died almost too early for most critics to accept her fully
into the literary world. She did not live long enough to polish her thought,
to develop her ideas into a "system." Furthermore, most of her books were only
assembled and edited after her death. However, we feel that the charm and the value of her "poèmes" are to be found in their freshness, their sincerity, their poetry of thought in process.
Footnotes for the Conclusion


Bibliography

Works by Simone Weil


* These works were read in English because at the time they were available only in translation.
Articles and Books concerning Simone Weil


Works of General Reference Consulted in this Study


