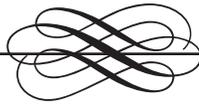


SIMONE WEIL

Attention to

THE REAL



ROBERT CHENAVIER

Translated by

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Introduction

To Marie Noël



At the time of her death in 1943 at the age of thirty-four, Simone Weil had already shown in the conduct of her life a responsibility at once intellectual, moral, and political, which brought to her writings an interior need for coherence, even if her work did not take on the form of a system.

From a philosophical point of view, it is difficult to classify her doctrine. On the one hand she affirms that, in her eyes, “nothing surpasses Plato” (*Pensees sans ordre*, 66; SL, 131). On the other hand the place reserved for Plato and Greece in the interpretation of her thought must not overshadow what she wrote in 1934 in *Réflexions sur les causes de la liberté et l’oppression sociale*: “The notion of work considered as a human value is without a doubt the single spiritual conquest that human thought has made since the Greek miracle; this was perhaps the only lacuna in the ideal of human thought that Greece elaborated” (*Oeuvres complètes* II.2.92;

OL, 106). She would return to this subject in 1943, insisting that “our epoch has for its mission the establishment of a civilization founded on the spirituality of work,” the thoughts related to the “premonition of this vocation” being the only ones “that we did not borrow from the Greeks” (*L'Enracinement*, 125; NR, 96).

These two citations should be enough to explain another constant presence in the thought of Simone Weil, that of Marx, a presence justified in a critical way by a serious lack: “A philosophy [of work] has still to be elaborated,” and in this direction Marx “did not begin even the outline of a rough sketch” (*Oppression et liberté*, 223; OL, 169). “Plato expressed only the half of it” (*Oeuvres complètes* VI.1.424) and Marx left only a “few indications” (*Oppression et liberté*, 223; OL, 169) for elaborating an authentic materialism. Platonism cannot be complete without according its proper place to a philosophy of work, and no materialism can be coherent without admitting the reality of the supernatural. Weil took great pains to reduce the opposition between a Plato whose theory of knowledge would have integrated the domain of work and a Marx who would have developed the most precious elements of his materialism by preserving the reality of the supernatural. Having arrived at this crossroad of thought, she carefully avoided neglecting either of the two paths.

This is how Weil defined the “interior necessity” which guided her: “For me personally life had no other meaning, and fundamentally has never had any other meaning, than waiting for truth” (*Ecrits de Londres*, 213; SL, 178). As a disciple of Plato, which she never ceased to be, she told her pupils that truth “is the light of the sun . . . ; it comes from the Good, which illuminates its value” (*Oeuvres complètes* I, 398). One could imagine this philosopher addressing her beginning students as the only ones in a position to leave the cave and choose a life of pure conceptual speculation. It was not this way at all. How did Weil succeed in reconciling an intellectual and spiritual vocation, the object of which was to lift the veil from truth, with an existence exposed to the realities of

this world during the very period when spiritual preoccupations dominated her thought?

A formula from her notebooks answers this question: truth “is always experimental” (*Oeuvres complètes* VI.4.177). There is neither empiricism nor pragmatism in such a statement; experience is defined as the “exploration” of different levels of reality. To these levels of being correspond degrees of knowledge, of “reading,” says Simone Weil. One might also say of “attention,” a key notion defined from the time of her first writings as a way of being active, a grasp of things found by thought (*Oeuvres complètes* I, 275). Truth is the work of “pure thought” (398), but this purity requires an operation of purification, before establishing contact with . . . With what exactly? It is not certain that this truth can be *spoken*, that it arises from the discursive intelligence. To affirm that truth is the object of love or of passion is not a fitting expression, for it is “always the truth of some thing”: “What one loves is something that exists, that one thinks, and for this reason could be the occasion of truth or of error” (*L’Enracinement*, 319; NR, 253). Nor does she hesitate to write that “truth is the radiance of reality.” It is a principle of order, comparable to light, which is not visible but which makes visible: it is the “nameless point (*alogos*) according to which one can establish order” (*Oeuvres complètes* VI.2.210), organize objects on several levels, without itself being an object. Philosophy, according to Simone Weil, is that practical task of *reading* on different levels, thanks to an orientation of one’s gaze toward the truth, established as the principle that puts in place the different contacts that we have with the real.

chapter one

Concerning the “Real Life”
in the “Land of the Real”



*To an exceptional degree, the life of Simone Weil, her personality, her commitment, and her reflection form one single whole. She was born in Paris on February 3, 1909, three years after her brother André, a noted mathematician, who died in 1998. Her father, a doctor, was descended from a Jewish family long established in Alsace. Her maternal grandmother was very attached to Judaism, but Simone’s father was an atheist. Simone’s mother was born in Rostov-on-the-Don. Her family left Russia in 1882, at the time of the first pogroms. This was a family of “liberal Jews” little known for their religious practice, who showed a pronounced taste for the fine arts. If her brother’s exceptional gifts were a source of emulation for the brilliant student that Simone was, they seemed also to have had distressing consequences for her psychological evolution. *Attente de Dieu* contains a letter to Father Perrin about this painful experience: feeling that she would prefer to die rather than live without the truth.*

At the age of sixteen, she entered the preparatory class for the *grandes écoles* at the celebrated secondary school Lycée Henri IV. Alain, her professor of philosophy, nicknamed her “la Martienne.” She wore thick glasses and a questioning look and dressed in clothes of a masculine cut. Her classmates called her intransigent, rude, and even unbearable. Her declared pacifist convictions, the classes she taught to railroad workers in a “social education group,” and her militancy led the director of the *Ecole normale supérieure* to name her “the red virgin.” When she received the coveted rank of *agrégation* in philosophy in 1931, she had already told her friend Simone Pétrement of her plan to seek work in a factory.

While she was teaching in the secondary school at Le Puy for the school year 1931–32, she lived very modestly, keeping from her salary only the equivalent of what an elementary school teacher earned. The rest she distributed to the funds for the unemployed and to the treasury of the mineworkers’ union in Saint-Etienne. She ate very little and did not heat her apartment because, as she said, those without jobs do not have the money to buy coal. She already suffered from violent and long-lasting migraines. As a full-time teacher at the Le Puy lycée, this young professor also prepared classes for the miners at their trade union meetings in Saint-Etienne, was active in union militancy, and collaborated on several small periodicals—following up on the contacts she had established with the revolutionary unionist milieus of *La Révolution prolétarienne* and of the *Cri du peuple*.

Weil’s presence in Le Puy was quite an event. She, a teacher having the rank of *agrégée*, was seen after school shaking the hands of the jobless who were employed temporarily by the mayor’s office to break stones in a public square. This same teacher accompanied a delegation to present their demands, then went with them to the café, and, carrying a red flag, marched at the head of their demonstrations—all this did not go unnoticed.

The local press reacted with public indignation. *Le Mémorial* of Saint-Etienne reported: “Mademoiselle Weill (*sic*), a red virgin

from the tribe of Levi, messenger of the *moscowtaire* gospel, has indoctrinated the miserable whom she has led astray" (cited in Pétrement, *La Vie*, 179; SWL, 114). Weil gave vent to her anger in a text she published in the bulletin of the Teachers' Union of Haute-Loire. In it she accused the university administration of still laboring under the caste system—"for them there are still untouchables, . . . with whom at any price the parents of the students must never see a professor shaking hands" which led her to demand a "precise ruling to indicate exactly under what conditions and with which members of such and such levels of society each category of the teaching staff has the right to associate" (*La Vie*, 158; SWL, 97). After Le Puy, her professorial career was interrupted by leaves of absence due essentially to very painful headaches. She taught in Auxerre (1932–33), in Roanne (1933–34), then in Bourges (1935–36), and at Saint-Quentin (1937–mid-January 1938).

From as early as 1931, she considered Germany the country where real consideration was given to the problem of a social regime, which in France was the subject of no more than theories and discourses. By leaving for Germany, she made manifest a constant preoccupation in her life: to think and to write in contact with reality. During her stay there she produced four articles, one of which would be developed into a series of ten studies published in the review *L'Ecole émancipée* and later taken up once again in *Ecrits historiques et politiques*. The main lines of her analysis of the German situation brought her to the attention of the leftist milieu. She considered that the constitutive elements of a revolutionary period seemed united in Germany, but that these aspirations would lead nowhere. In her eyes the Nazi party was the "party of reckless and irresponsible revolutionaries" (*Oeuvres complètes* II.1.124), but she did not underestimate its capacity to maintain its position in German politics. She was very skeptical about the capacities of the leftist opposition, judging that the socialist party was bureaucratic and reined in the demands of the workers. The German communist party enjoyed enormous revolutionary

prestige, but it was composed essentially of the unemployed, which rendered any infiltration into industry impossible. Reduced to its own particular strengths, Weil judged that this party’s power was “nil” and analyzed lucidly the danger of common actions undertaken by the Nazis and the Communists, for example, the transport strike in Berlin. On her return from Germany she confided to a unionist friend that she had lost all respect that she still had for the communist party and judged that for the present “any compromise with [it], any reticence in criticism is criminal” (cited *La Vie*, 212; SWL, 137).

Her German experience joined to that of the situation of the unions and the revolutionary parties in France led Weil to decide in 1934 to “retire completely from any kind of politics.” This did not exclude her “eventual participation in a great spontaneous movement of the masses,” but she did not want “any responsibility whatsoever,” for she said she was sure that any bloodshed would be “in vain, and that they were already defeated” (*La Vie*, 291; SWL, 198).

Her article “Perspectives,” published in 1933 in *La Révolution prolétarienne*, clearly explains her change. This article contains some characteristic formulas concerning the USSR, whose regime is like the one “that Lenin thought he was establishing to the extent that he entirely excluded capitalist property; for everything else, he takes the completely opposite position” (*Oeuvres complètes* II.1.262). Against Trotsky she affirms that “the Stalinist regime [must be] considered, not as a worker State gone wrong, but as a different social mechanism, defined by the cogwheels that make it up, and functioning in conformity with the nature of cogwheels.” She was equally sensitive to the new forms adopted by capitalism and perceived this as the entry into the era of “management techniques,” which the American sociologist James Burnham would name the “managerial revolution” a few years later. Finally she insisted that the crisis of capitalism announced no new regime whatsoever that would in any way resemble socialism as she defined it: “the return

to man, that is to say to the individual, the domination that is his proper function to exercise over nature, over tools, over society itself" (*Oeuvres complètes* II.1.277). She tried to respond to the utter confusion of her era by what she called her "Great Work," *Réflexions sur les causes de la liberté et de l'oppression sociale* (1934), which she set herself to complete before she went to work in a factory.

The dead ends of her reflections on the social question and the dangers of methodical action pushed Simone Weil to become a worker from December 4, 1934 to August 1935.¹ A few months before carrying out her project, she wrote to one of her former students at the lycée of Le Puy saying that she was taking a sabbatical of one year in order to enter into the labor force "and also enter into some contact with that famous 'real life'" (cited in *La Vie*, 319; SWL, 213). This is clear evidence of her desire for truth conceived as contact with reality. If, as she insisted in 1937, "the most important [problem] for the worker movement"—that of the most desirable system for factories—had not been posed by the theorists of socialism, it was because they were "poorly situated to treat this subject, since they themselves had not been numbered among the cogwheels of a factory" (*La Condition ouvrière*, 304).

In the factory Weil came to know a form of extreme hardship, which is why she was able to summarize perfectly the spirit—but also the limits—of the events of June 1936. "As soon as the yoke was loosened, we raised our heads. Period, that's it" (*La Condition ouvrière*, 274). In these events, something other than specific demands came into play; it was about the fact that, after "having always given in, submitted to everything, taken all the hard knocks without saying anything, for months and for years, they finally dared . . . to feel that they were men, for a few days" (275). Consequently, it was the very conditions of work that had to change, and the urgency of this task led her to think about the primary conditions for a "new regime" in the factories.

Just as the days of June 1936 pushed her once again to take part in social action, Simone Weil felt within herself, even though she

was a pacifist, the “interior necessity” of leaving for Spain, as she would write to Georges Bernanos in 1938: “When I came to realize that, in spite of my efforts, I could not prevent myself from participating morally in that war, that is to say every day and every hour, to wish for the victory of one group and the defeat of the other, . . . I took the train for Barcelona with the intention of volunteering” (*Oeuvres*, 406; SL, 106). On August 8, 1936 she crossed the frontier and found herself enrolled in a small international company which was involved in carrying out dangerous missions and which was seeking to join the headquarters of the Durruti column.² On August 19, as if to confirm her legendary clumsiness and her poor eyesight, she stepped into a basin of boiling oil. This put an end to her enlistment. When she returned to France very pessimistic about the eventual outcome of the Spanish Revolution, she threw herself into the struggle in favor of generalized non-intervention. Although her fellow-combatants in Aragon and later in Catalonia severely condemned the politics of Blum, she approved them, explaining: “This is because I refuse, on my personal responsibility, to deliberately sacrifice the peace, even if there is question of saving a revolutionary people threatened with extermination” (*Oeuvres complètes* II.3.43; FW, 261). Personal engagement is one thing, political decision is entirely another. The choice of non-intervention is heartrending, but she wanted to make it a model for future action: “We will be able to pardon ourselves for having accepted neutrality with regard to the Spanish slaughter only if we do everything in our power to transform this attitude into a precedent that in the future will regulate all French foreign politics” (II.3.282). She also discovered in Spain what leads men to commit monstrosities without becoming monsters, as is shown in her letter to Bernanos: “When temporal and spiritual authorities have put a category of human beings outside those whose lives have a value, there is nothing more natural to man than to kill. . . . Here there is . . . an intoxication that is impossible to resist without a strength of mind that I must certainly believe is exceptional, for I have never

encountered this anywhere else" (*Oeuvres*, 408; SL, 108). This experience would nourish her reflection on the roots of barbarism.³

In the autumn of 1934 Weil wrote to her friend Albertine Thévenon that she "would retire into her ivory tower" and would leave it only for the struggle against colonial oppression and against anything that would contribute to the preparation for war. Her conscious awakening to the colonial question can be dated to 1930–31 when she read reports on Indochina and the events of the colonial Exposition. Weil's sensitivity to this question came from a feeling of culpability. The feeling that she had participated in a collective transgression aroused in her the need for a personal reparation that could extend even to sacrifice. Apropos the will to humiliate the country conquered by the Treaty of Versailles, she wrote to Bernanos that the humiliations inflicted by her own country were for her "more painful than those that it could suffer" (*Oeuvres*, 409; SL, 109). Her sensitivity to the problem of colonial oppression was such that it transformed even her writing style itself. She became more polemical, ironic, and indignant, whereas in her analysis of social oppression, her writing was more descriptive and conceptual. Take for example her recourse to antiphrasis and to false evidence at the beginning of 1937 in an article on French claims regarding Morocco: "The territory of the nation is threatened . . . Alsace-Lorraine? Yes, precisely. Or rather no, it was not Alsace-Lorraine exactly, but something just like it. It was Morocco . . . that province so essentially French. . . . Germany seemed to be expressing some vague desire to lay its hands on the Moroccan population. . . . Morocco has always been a part of France. Or if not always, at least from a time almost immemorial. . . . To any impartial mind, it is evident that a territory belonging to France since 1911 is rightfully French for all eternity" (*Oeuvres complètes* II.3.123).

In contrast with the common reactions of public opinion, Weil did not attribute the agitation in the colonies and the development of nationalist movements to external causes. In her eyes the

responsible persons were those who treat the indigenous peoples with disdain, those who “carry out the progressive expropriation of indigenous farmers, those colonists, industrialists who treat their workers as beasts of burden, and those functionaries who accept, demand that, for the same work, they be paid a third more than their Arab co-workers” (*Oeuvres complètes* II.3.133–34). She admitted that she was ashamed not only of the French democrats and socialists, but also of the working class, and she deplored the fact that the official Left refused to recognize the symmetry between the aspirations of the workers in 1936 and those of the colonized populations. She never varied on the colonial question, and her positions influenced even her interpretation of what could be considered a “just war” against Nazism when at the same time democracies themselves were oppressing other peoples.⁴

Pacifism was a long-standing conviction of Simone Weil, dating back to her years at the *Ecole normale*. War was not only an element of foreign politics, but “an episode of internal politics, and the most atrocious of all” (*Oeuvres complètes* II.1.293), since it crystallized the relationships of oppression by obliging the individual to sacrifice his very life, and not just wear out his working strength. “Those wars in which slaves are invited to die in the name of a dignity never accorded them, these wars constitute the essential cogwheel in the mechanism of oppression” (*Oeuvres complètes* II.2.332).

From 1932 to 1938 Weil’s pacifism became firmly attached to the most extreme positions. So in “L’Europe en guerre pour la Tchécoslovaquie?” an article published in *Feuilles libres de la Quinzaine* on May 25, 1938, she showed herself ready for any compromise to save the peace and to find justifications for the annexation of Sudetenland by Germany. She went so far as to concede that the Czechs “can outlaw the Communist party and exclude the Jews from less important functions without losing anything at all of their national life. In short, injustice for injustice, . . . let us choose the one which runs the least risk of leading to war” (*Oeuvres*

complètes II.3.82–83). In a letter to Gaston Bergery⁵ in April 1938, she made the point that should France permit Hitler to establish his hegemony in Eastern Europe, one could hope that Germany would not take the trouble to invade it. "Without a doubt the superiority of the German forces would lead France to adopt certain restrictions, especially against the communists, against the Jews: this, in my opinion and in that of most Frenchmen, is pretty much a matter of indifference" for "nothing essential would be touched" (*Ecrits historiques et politiques*, 286; SL, 99). It would be useless to look here for a trace of anti-Semitism for it was simply the same strict application of her extreme pacifism that had led Weil to support the politics of non-intervention in Spain⁶ by consenting to the crushing of a cause that she held so dear. Only the entry of Hitler's troops into Prague in March 1939 would gradually put an end to the pacifism she regretted having held so long and so obstinately. Notes written in London speak of her "criminal mistake before 1939 about the pacifist milieu and their action"⁷ (*Oeuvres complètes* VI.4.374).

Along with her philosophical, social, and political reflections, but on a deeper level, Simone Weil experienced a spiritual change of direction that she steadfastly refused to call a "conversion." After a year in the factories, her parents took the broken young woman suffering from violent headaches to Portugal. In a small village she took part in a procession of fishermen's wives, "who sang hymns of heartbreaking sadness," as she wrote to her Dominican friend Joseph-Marie Perrin, to whom she confessed: "There I had the sudden certitude that Christianity is the religion of slaves, that slaves could not do other than adhere to it, and I along with them" (*Attente de Dieu*, 43; WG, 26). Weil encountered Christianity in the context of a sensitivity to the hardship and slavery that she had lived through in the factories.⁸ In 1937, at Assisi, in the little Romanesque chapel of Santa Maria degli Angeli where St Francis had prayed, she recognized that something stronger than herself "obliged her, for the first time in her life, to drop to her knees."

This was her second contact, under the sign of beauty and purity. At Solesmes, during Holy Week in 1938, while she was suffering from intensely painful headaches, she assisted at the divine office sung in Gregorian chant. She said that in the course of these religious services “the thought of the passion of Christ entered into me once and for all” (*Attente de Dieu*, 43; WG, 26). At Solesmes she met a young Englishman who introduced her to the seventeenth-century metaphysical poet George Herbert and gave her the text of his poem *Love*. Toward the end of 1938, several months after her stay at Solesmes, “at the peak of a series of violent headaches” she “set herself to reciting the poem while applying [her] complete attention to it.” “I thought I was reciting it simply as some beautiful poem,” she wrote to Father Perrin, “but without my awareness that recitation had the force of a prayer. It was in the course of these recitations that . . . Christ himself came down and took possession of me” (*Attente de Dieu*, 44–45; WG, 27). The beauty of the chant, the possibility of loving in the midst of suffering, the felt presence of love during that suffering, these are all elements of this third contact.

These mystical experiences are all inscribed in what Weil called her “particular vocation,” which gave her “legitimate reasons” (*Ecrits de Londres*, 205; SL, 172) to take her place at the intersection of what is Christian and what is not. For the moment let us remember simply that she asked herself if, at a time when a “great portion of humanity is submerged in materialism, God does not wish that there be men and women who would give themselves to Him and to Christ and who would dwell outside the Church” (*Attente de Dieu*, 18–19; WG, 6). Likewise she dreaded “the Church as a social entity.” If its power was capable of blinding saints, who had given their approval to the Crusades and the Inquisition, “what evil would it not do to me,” she wrote, “who am particularly vulnerable to social influences?” (*Attente de Dieu*, 22, 25; WG, 12).

The drive of her vocation led her to make declarations that can appear to be manifestations of pride. Before leaving Marseille

for America, she wrote to Father Perrin that "something tells her to leave" and that she abandons herself to it hoping that this abandonment "will lead [her] in the end to a safe harbor." She added that "what I call safe harbor, you know, is the cross. If it cannot be given to me some day to share in the cross of Christ, at least let it be in that of the good thief. . . . To have been at Christ's side and in the same state as in the crucifixion seems to me a much more enviable privilege than to be at His right hand in His glory" (*Attente de Dieu*, 31–32; WG, 18). She understood the pride entailed in desiring the sufferings of Christ, all the while confiding that, each time she thinks of the crucifixion, she "commits the sin of envy" (*Attente de Dieu*, 62; WG, 38). This confession becomes a form of personal repentance, a condition necessary for "decreation," a major term in her spirituality, to which we shall return. "Misfortune without any consolation whatsoever" is one of the "keys by which one enters into the pure land, the land where one can breathe freely, the land of the real," she wrote to Joë Bousquet (*Oeuvres*, 798; SL, 141). She wrote this letter on May 12, 1942, at a time when the war had already deeply upset her life, her thought, and her spiritual progress.

On June 13, 1940, Paris was declared an "open city." Simone's parents left the capital, accompanied by their daughter who accepted this exodus with considerable reluctance for she believed that the French people's duty was to defend themselves, not to flee. By way of Nevers, Vichy, and Toulouse, the Weils arrived in Marseille a little before September 15, 1940. Simone Weil had obtained a sabbatical for health reasons at the beginning of 1938 that had been renewed but was to expire in July 1940. She asked for a post in Algiers, which seemed to her to be the best point of departure for England, not to mention the interest this post held as a point from which to observe the colonial situation. A reply from the ministry appointed her to Constantine, beginning with the opening of the academic year in October 1940, but she never received this letter. Thinking she was a victim of some process of

exclusion, she wrote to the Ministry of Public Instruction expressing her surprise at not having received the appointment. She asked if the decree called “Statut des Juifs” [Status of the Jews] applied to her. She insisted that she did not know the definition of the word ‘Jew’. If it is a religion, “I have never entered a synagogue,” she said. If it is a race, she declared that she had no reason to suppose that she had any relationship whatsoever “with the people who lived in Palestine two thousand years ago” (cited in *La Vie*, 527; SWL, 391). She emphasized the fact that the Christian, French, and Hellenic tradition was hers, and she concluded in the ironic tone that she often used: “If nevertheless the law obliges me to consider the term ‘Jew’ . . . as an epithet applicable to my person, I am disposed to submit to it as I am to any law whatever it may be. But in this case I want to be officially informed.”

In 1940, in the same state of mind as the majority of those who wished to continue the struggle, Weil was convinced that everything depended on England, the last rampart of the democracies threatened by Germany. Her strong belief that England was in danger of having to repel a German invasion led her at the beginning of 1941 to look for a network that would permit her to go to London. Her network was discovered by the police. This led to a house search of the Weils’ apartment in May 1941 and to a summons to appear at several interrogations by a commissioner of public safety in Marseille and another to appear before a military tribunal in September.

In Marseille she met the Dominican Joseph-Marie Perrin, with whom she had long conversations about Christianity, the Church, and baptism. Father Perrin put Weil in contact with Gustave Thibon, a farmer and writer, because she wanted to have the experience of working on a farm. She passed two months participating in different forms of agricultural work, including the grape harvest, and she took advantage of this experience in October 1941 to send a letter to Xavier Vallat, Commissioner of Jewish Questions, in which she took up once again the exchange she had with

Commissioner Ripert. In her judgment, the Statut des Juifs was "unjust and absurd," but she did express her "sincere gratitude" to the government for having "removed her from the category of intellectuals" and for offering her instead what the directors themselves did not own, the land and nature, and above all for having bestowed on her "the infinitely precious gift of poverty, which [they certainly] did not [possess] either" (cited in *La Vie*, 591–92; SWL, 444).

On her return from the grape harvest in November 1941, Father Perrin introduced her to Malou David,¹⁰ who distributed the *Cahiers du Témoignage Chrétien* and she had serious responsibility for the distribution of one of the most important clandestine publications in the unoccupied zone. From December 1941 to May 1942 Weil distributed almost 300 copies of each issue and, in league with the resistance activities of the Marseille Dominicans, had false identity papers made up for refugees. This period from September 15, 1940 to May 1942, filled with resistance activities, farm work, and with meetings and work with Father Perrin, was equally rich in writing. Weil frequented the *Cahiers du Sud* for which she wrote several articles. Doing research on the continuity between ancient civilizations, Greek culture, and the Christian message, she composed during this period most of the texts later regrouped in *Intuitions pré-chrétiennes*, *La Source grecque*, and *Attente de Dieu*. She kept writing in her notebooks, which she gave to Thibon when she left Marseille, and in two articles she returned once again to her work experience in factories.¹¹

The Weils sailed for the United States on May 14, 1942. After a long stopover in Casablanca, they arrived in New York, where Simone hoped to obtain passage to join Free France in London. She wrote to several important persons asking for help; among them was Maurice Schumann who had been her fellow-student in Alain's class. André Philip, Commissioner of the Interior in the national committee of Free France, agreed to employ her in services that corresponded to the Ministry of the Interior. On November 9,

1942, she left New York and arrived in Liverpool on the 26th. She had no more than nine months to live.

She did not appreciate the work of an intellectual functionary that she was asked to perform. She did not abandon her desire to be on the front lines, wanting to be parachuted into France to carry out a dangerous mission. She spent much time writing however, for within a few months she produced ten texts later collected in her *Ecrits de Londres*. She also composed *L'Enracinement*, “Y a-t-il une doctrine marxiste?” “A propos de la question coloniale dans ses rapports avec le destin du peuple française,” and “Théorie des sacrements,” in addition to a notebook and a number of reports that have not yet been published. Among the projects close to her heart was the “formation of frontline nurses,” an idea conceived even before the German offensive of 1940 and later attached to a letter addressed to Maurice Schumann.¹² She did not view this project as a simple humanitarian intervention carried out by women ready to sacrifice their lives, but rather as a form of political and strategic action. Hitler understood the importance in war of acting on the imagination through the heroic action of elite troupes made up of men prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice. This led Simone Weil to ask how to create opposition to Hitler by means of *equivalent* procedures that would not be based on a “heroism of brutality.” The frontline nurses would make this different orientation of heroism obvious. Present in the areas of the greatest peril, they would bear witness to the “persistence of some good offices of humanity . . . at the highest point of savagery.” Small in number, these nurses would be able to care for only a limited number of soldiers, but Weil insisted that “the moral effectiveness of a symbol is independent of its quantity” (*Oeuvres complètes* IV.1.408; SL, 150–51).

Realizing very quickly the difficulty of returning to France, Weil insisted to Schumann that she be given tasks “involving a high degree of effectiveness, of pain, and of danger.” “The suffering spread over the surface of this world obsesses me and crushes me to the point of annulling my faculties, and I cannot restore

them or free myself from this obsession unless I myself share a large portion of that danger and suffering" (*Ecrits de Londres*, 199; SL, 156). Only by according her permission to share in this could they keep her, she said, from "being sterilely consumed by grief." Adding that this was a "question of vocation," she insisted that her life never had any other meaning than "a waiting for truth," and this is how she defined what she expected at this moment of her life: "I am experiencing a wrenching that never ceases to worsen, both in my intelligence and in the center of my heart, by the incapacity in which I find myself to think in truth, at one and the same time, about the misery of men, the perfection of God, and the link between the two. I have the inner certainty that this truth, if it is ever granted to me, will be only at the moment when, physically, I myself will be . . . in one of the extreme forms of this present suffering" (*Ecrits de Londres*, 213; SL, 178). Jean Cavallès—whom she met in London—saw in Weil a "case of exceptional nobility, but today we no longer have such an example" he is supposed to have said (cited in *La Vie*, 668; SWL, 515). She was never sent to France.

Her sadness became overwhelming, and she was weakened by the privations she inflicted on herself in order to share the fate of her French compatriots suffering under the constraints of rationing. On April 15, 1943, a friend went to her home and found her stretched out on the floor unable to move. Sent to a hospital in London, then to a sanatorium in Ashford, Simone Weil died on August 24, 1943, eleven days after she was admitted there. Her last letters to her family give no hint about the state of her health. She wrote of insignificant subjects even in her next-to-last letter of August 4, 1943: "Here as dessert we sometimes eat . . . mixtures called *fruit fool*. This is a kind of compote of fruits, strained and mixed with a large quantity . . . of gelatin, or something else" (*Ecrits de Londres*, 255; SL, 200). However, as if she had to express something else without being able to say it brutally, she artificially slipped in subjects that were in some way quite serious:

But these *fools* are not like those of Shakespeare. They lie, pretending they are fruit, whereas in Sh[akespeare] the fools are the only characters who tell the truth. . . .

Do you get a sense of the affinity, the essential analogy between these fools and me—in spite of the Ecole [normale supérieure], the aggregation, the praise of my “intelligence”? . . . A great intelligence is often paradoxical, and at times wanders off a bit into nonsense. . . .

The praise of my [intelligence] had as its *object* to avoid the question: “Is she speaking the truth or not?” My reputation for “intelligence” is the practical equivalent of the fool sign that these fools wear. How much I would prefer their sign!

Maurice Schumann came closest to the truth about Weil’s death when he confided: “Reproaching all of us, with a sudden hardness, for not having eliminated the insurmountable obstacle that kept her far from the clandestine struggle, . . . she revealed to us . . . that from now on there was for her only one single conceivable link in truth between the suffering of men and the perfection of God: to let oneself be consumed by grief.”¹³ A passage from her essay consecrated to the Our Father confirms this interpretation. Apropos the formula that she translates “Our bread, which is supernatural, give it to us today,” Weil comments: “If our energy is not renewed daily, we lose our strength and become unable to move. Outside what is properly called nourishment, in the literal sense of the word, all stimulants are sources of energy for us. . . . If one of these stimulants penetrates profoundly within us, to the very vital roots of our carnal existence, its deprivation can break us and even cause us to die. This is called dying of grief. It is like dying of hunger” (*Oeuvres complètes* IV.1.341; WG, 147).

At the end of her life, Simone Weil still had the strength to hope, as she wrote poignantly to Maurice Schumann: “I desire nothing for myself except to be in the number of those who are not forbidden to think of themselves as useless slaves, having done

only what they were commanded to do" (*Ecrits de Londres*, 211; SL, 176). Simone Pétrement gave the most beautiful commentary on this slavery, considered as obedience and not as submission to constraint, which reveals the meaning of the death of her friend, whom "grief rendered indifferent in great measure to whatever could happen to her":

Nevertheless it seems probable to me that we should not speak of indifference [with regard to her recovery], but rather of obedience. . . . She had become, it seems, truly incapable of nourishing herself normally. Nothing else remained for her except to carry out the "supreme act of total obedience," that is to say, her consent to die. Until that point, she perhaps did nothing other than remain obstinately faithful to what she regarded as an obligation, an order. She accepted the risk that this fidelity brought with it, but there is nothing to prove that she had in mind anything other than this very fidelity. (*La Vie*, 682; SWL, 528)

Simone Weil was a French philosopher, Christian spiritualist and an activist who was a part of the French Resistance during World War II. Know more about her life, childhood, and timeline here. Simone Weil was a French philosopher, Christian spiritualist and an activist who was a part of the French Resistance during World War II. Know more about her life, childhood, and timeline here. Quick Facts. Simone Weil was born in Paris on February 3, 1909, the second child of an assimilated Jewish family. She received a superb education in the French lycées and the Ecole Normale Supérieure. A brilliant and unusual student, she was admired by some of her teachers and held in awe by some of her peers, while others mocked her for her radical political opinions and the intensity of her convictions. Readers of Simone Weil's Notebooks (two volumes, published in 1959) and her Intimations of Christianity Among the Ancient Greeks (1958) will be familiar with her attempt to derive everything distinctively Christian from Greek spirituality as well as to deny entirely Christianity's Hebraic origins. This fundamental argument—along with her admiration for Provençal civilization, for the Manichean and Catharist heresies—colors all her historical essays. I cannot accept