

France offered a rare gift to the contemporary world in the person of Simone Weil. The appearance of such a writer in the twentieth century was against all the rules of probability, yet improbable things do happen.

The life of Simone Weil was short. Born in 1909 in Paris, she died in England in 1943 at the age of thirty-four. None of her books appeared during her own lifetime. Since the end of the war her scattered articles and her manuscripts – diaries, essays – have been published and translated into many languages. Her work has found admirers all over the world, yet because of its austerity it attracts only a limited number of readers in every country. I hope my presentation will be useful to those who have never heard of her.

Perhaps we live in an age that is atheological only in appearance. Millions were killed during the First World War, millions killed or tortured to death in Russia during and after the revolution; and countless victims of Nazism and the Second World War. All

this had to have a strong impact upon European thinking. And it seems to me that European thinking has been circling around one problem so old that many people are ashamed to name it. It happens sometimes that old enigmas of mankind are kept dormant or veiled for several generations, then recover their vitality and are formulated in a new language. And the problem is: who can justify the suffering of the innocent? Albert Camus, in *The Plague*, took up the subject already treated in the Book of Job. Should we return our ticket like Ivan Karamazov because the tear of a child is enough to tip the scale? Should we rebel? Against whom? Can God exist if he is responsible, if he allows what our values condemn as a monstrosity? Camus said no. We are alone in the universe; our human fate is to hurl an eternal defiance at blind inhuman forces, without the comfort of having an ally somewhere, without any metaphysical foundation.

But perhaps if not God, there is a goddess who walks through battlefields and concentration camps, penetrates prisons, gathers every drop of blood, every curse? She knows that those who complain simply do not understand. Everything is counted, everything is an unavoidable part of the pangs of birth and will be recompensed. Man will become a God for man. On

the road toward that accomplishment he has to pass through Calvary. The goddess's name is pronounced with trembling in our age: she is History.

Leszek Kolakowski, a Marxist professor of philosophy in Warsaw,¹ states bluntly that all the structures of modern philosophy, including Marxist philosophy, have been elaborated in the Middle Ages by theologians and that an attentive observer can distinguish old quarrels under new formulations. He points out that History, for instance, is being discussed by Marxists in the terms of theodicy – justification of God.²

Irony would be out of place here. The question of Providence, or of lack of Providence, can also be presented in another way. Is there any immanent force located in *le devenir*, in what is in the state of becoming, a force that pulls mankind up toward perfection? Is there any *cooperation* between man and a universe that is subject to constant change? So worded, the question is related to the quite recent discovery of the historical dimension, unknown to the rather immobile societies of the past. Curiously enough, Christian theologians are helpless when confronted with those issues.

¹ At the time of this writing. [1960]

² His essay "The Priest and the Jester," English translation in *Towards a Marxist Humanism*.

They are ashamed of the providentialist philosophy propagated by Bossuet and other preachers, according to whom God, a super-king, helped good rulers and punished the bad. If it were true, and certainly it is not, the enigma of every individual's commitment would still remain unsolved. At least one French theologian, Father Fessard, affirms that this is the basic intellectual weakness of modern Christians. As soon as they touch historical problems, they succumb to habits of philosophy alien to them; they become, consciously or unconsciously, Hegelians or Marxists. Their weakness reflects a gap in Thomist doctrine. In Saint Thomas Aquinas, affirms Father Fessard, there are no traces of pronouncements on the historical dimension. He was interested only in the *order of reason* and in the *order of nature*. 'If the historical,' says Father Fessard, 'plays a capital role in Hegel, in Marx, and in many philosophers of existence, in the opinion of good judges it is, or rather it seems to be, completely absent from the Thomist doctrine.' So a Christian dialectician has to invent his very conceptual tools.

Here I end my introduction. It leads towards some vital points in Simone Weil's thought.

Simone Weil was born into a family of intellectuals of Jewish origin. Her father's family was from Alsace, her

mother's family had migrated to France from Russia. She grew up among people who respected learning above all, and all her life she preserved a lively interest in modern physics and mathematics. She mastered foreign languages early: besides Latin and Greek as taught in French schools (and her excellent knowledge of Greek proved decisive for her future evolution), German and English. She was not brought up in any religious denomination, and throughout her youth was not concerned with religious problems.

After having completed her university studies at the *École Normale Supérieure* (where one of her colleagues was Simone de Beauvoir, then a Catholic), Simone Weil started her brief career as a teacher of Greek and of philosophy. A brilliant professor, she was often in trouble with the authorities because of her eccentricity. She was politely ironic towards her bourgeois surroundings and sided with people looked at by the French middle class with horror: the militants of the labour unions and the unemployed workers. Those were the years of the economic crisis. She refused herself the right to earn money if others were starving and kept only a small part of her salary, giving the rest away to union funds and workers' periodicals. Politically she was on the left, but she never had anything to do with

the French Communist Party. She was closest to a small group, La Révolution Prolétarienne, which followed the traditions of French syndicalism. Her numerous political articles on the chances of the workers' struggle in France, on economic policy, on the causes of Nazism in Germany, as well as her studies on the mechanism of society and on the history of Europe, have been recently collected in a few volumes. Only some of them had been published in her lifetime, in little known magazines.

The desire to share the fate of the oppressed led her to a momentous decision. In spite of bad health, she worked for a year (1934-35) as a simple worker in Paris metallurgical factories; she thus acquired a first-hand knowledge of manual labour. Her essays on that subject (a volume entitled *La Condition ouvrière*) are a terrible indictment of brutality, callousness, physical and spiritual misery. As she confesses, that year in the factories destroyed her youth and forever left the indelible stigma of a slave upon her ('like those stigmas branded on the foreheads of slaves by the ancient Romans').

When the Spanish civil war broke out, Simone Weil left for Barcelona (in 1936), where she enlisted as a soldier in the Colonna Durutti, an anarchist brigade.

I stress anarchist – she chose it because the ideal of the anarchists was utopian. But owing to an accident and resulting illness, her stay in Spain was very short.

In 1938 Simone Weil, to use her words, was 'captured by Christ.' Nobody has the right to present her biography as a pious story of conversion. We know the pattern: the more violent the turn, the more complete the negation, the better for educational purposes. In her case, one should not use the term 'conversion.' She says she had never believed before that such a thing, a personal contact with God, was possible. But she says also that through all her conscious life her attitude had been Christian. I quote: 'One can be obedient to God only if one receives orders. How did it happen that I received orders in my early youth when I professed atheism?' I quote again: 'Religion, in so far as it is a source of consolation, is a hindrance to true faith: in this sense atheism is a purification. I have to be atheistic with the part of myself which is not for God. Among those men in whom the supernatural part has not been awakened, the atheists are right and the believers wrong.'

The unique place of Simone Weil in the modern world is due to the perfect continuity of her thought. Unlike those who have to reject their past when they

become Christians, she developed her ideas from before 1938 even further, introducing more order into them, thanks to the new light. Those ideas concerned society, history, Marxism, science.

Simone Weil was convinced that the Roman Catholic Church is the only legitimate guardian of the truth revealed by God incarnate. She strongly believed in the presence, real and not symbolic, of Christ in the Eucharist. She considered belonging to the Church a great happiness. Yet she refused herself that happiness. In her decision not to be baptised and to remain faithful to Christ but outside of His Church, we should distinguish two motives. First, her feeling of personal vocation, of obedience to God who wanted her to stay 'at the gate' all her life together with all the neo-pagans. Second, her opposition to the punitive power of the Church directed against the heretics.

After the defeat of France she lived in Marseilles for a while, and in 1942 took a boat to Casablanca and from there to New York in the hope of joining the Committee of Free Frenchmen in London. Her intention was to serve the cause of France with arms in hand if possible. She arrived in London after a few months spent in New York. In 1943 she died in the sanitarium at Ashford, apparently from malnutrition,

as she limited her food to the level of rations allotted by the Germans to the French population.

Such was the life of Simone Weil. A life of deliberate *foolishness*. In one of her last letters to her family, commenting upon the role of fools in Shakespeare's plays, she says: 'In this world only human beings reduced to the lowest degree of humiliation, much lower than mendicancy, not only without any social position but considered by everybody as deprived of elementary human dignity, of reason – only such beings have the possibility of telling the truth. All others lie.' And on herself: 'Ravings about my intelligence have for their aim the avoidance of the question: Does she tell the truth or not? My position of "intelligent one" is like being labelled "foolish," as are fools. How much more I would prefer their label!'

Tactless in her writings and completely indifferent to fashions, she was able to go straight to the heart of the matter which preoccupies so many people today. I quote: 'A man whose whole family died under torture, and who had himself been tortured for a long time in a concentration camp. Or a sixteenth-century Indian, the sole survivor after the total extermination of his people. Such men if they had previously believed in the mercy of God would either believe it no more, or

else they would conceive of it quite differently than before.' Conceive of it how? The solution proposed by Simone Weil is not to the taste of those who worship the goddess of History; it may be heretical from the Thomist point of view as well.

A few words should be said about Simone Weil's road to Christianity. She was imbued with Greek philosophy. Her beloved master was Plato, read and reread in the original. One can notice a paradox of similarity between our times and the times of decadent Rome, when for many people Plato – that 'Greek Moses' as he was sometimes called – served as a guide to the promised land of Christendom. Such was the love of Simone Weil for Greece that she looked at all Greek philosophy as eminently Christian – with one exception: Aristotle, in her words 'a bad tree which bore bad fruit.' She rejected practically all Judaic tradition. She was never acquainted with Judaism and did not want to be, as she was unable to pardon the ancient Hebrews their cruelties, for instance the ruthless extermination of all the inhabitants of Canaan. A strange leftist, she categorically opposed any notion of progress in morality, that widely spread view according to which crimes committed three thousand years ago can be justified to a certain extent because men at that time were 'less

developed.' And she was making early Christianity responsible for introducing, through the idea of 'divine pedagogy,' a 'poison,' namely, the notion of historical progress in morality. She says: 'The great mistake of the Marxists and of the whole of the nineteenth century was to think that by walking straight ahead one would rise into the air.' In her opinion, crimes of the remote past had to be judged as severely as those committed today. That is why she had a true horror of ancient Rome, a totalitarian state not much better than the Hitlerian. She felt early Christians were right when they gave Rome the name of the Apocalyptic Beast. Rome completely destroyed the old civilisations of Europe, probably superior to the civilisation of the Romans who were nothing but barbarians, so skilful in slandering their victims that they falsified for centuries our image of pre-Roman Europe. Rome also contaminated Christianity in its early formative stage. The principle *anathema sit* is of Roman origin.³ The only true Christian civilisation was emerging in the eleventh and twelfth centuries in the countries of the Languedoc, between the Mediterranean and the Loire. After it was destroyed by the Frenchmen who invaded that

³ Excommunication formula, used in condemning an individual convicted of heresy.

territory from the north and massacred the heretics – the Albigensians – there has not been any Christian civilisation anywhere.

Violent in her judgments and uncompromising, Simone Weil was, at least by temperament, an Albigensian, a Cathar; this is the key to her thought. She drew extreme conclusions from the Platonic current in Christianity. Here we touch perhaps upon hidden ties between her and Albert Camus. The first work by Camus was his university dissertation on Saint Augustine. Camus, in my opinion, was also a Cathar, a pure one, and if he rejected God it was out of love for God because he was not able to justify him. The last novel written by Camus, *The Fall*, is nothing else but a treatise on Grace – absent Grace – though it is also a satire: the talkative hero, Jean-Baptiste Clamence, who reverses the words of Jesus and instead of 'Judge not and ye shall not be judged' gives the advice 'Judge, and ye shall not be judged,' could be, I have reasons to suspect, Jean-Paul Sartre.

The Albigensians were rooted in the old Manichaean tradition and, through it, akin to some sects of the Eastern Church of Bulgaria and of Russia. In their eyes God the monarch worshipped by the believers could not be justified as he was a false God, a cruel

Jehovah, an inferior demiurge, identical with the Prince of Darkness. Following the Manichaean tradition, Simone Weil used to say that when we pronounce the words of the Lord's Prayer: 'Thy kingdom come' we pray for the end of the world as only then the power of the Prince of Darkness will be abolished. Yet she immediately added that 'Thy will be done on earth' means our agreement to the existence of the world. All her philosophy is placed between these two poles.

There is a contradiction between our longing for the good, and the cold universe absolutely indifferent to any values, subject to the iron necessity of causes and effects. That contradiction has been solved by the rationalists and progressives of various kinds who placed the good in this world, in matter, and usually in the future. The philosophy of Hegel and of his followers crowned those attempts by inventing the idea of the good in movement, walking toward fuller and fuller accomplishment in history. Simone Weil, a staunch determinist (in this respect she was not unlike Spinoza), combated such solutions as illegitimate. Her efforts were directed toward making the contradiction as acute as possible. Whoever tries to escape an inevitable contradiction by patching it up is, she affirms, a coward. That is why she has been accused of having

been too rigid and having lacked a dialectical touch. Yet one can ask whether she was not more dialectical than many who practise the dialectical art by changing it into an art of compromises and who buy the unity of the opposites too cheaply.

Certainly her vision is not comforting. In the centre we find the idea of the wilful abdication of God, of the withdrawal of God from the universe. I quote: 'God committed all phenomena without exception to the mechanism of the world.' 'The distance between the necessary and the good is the selfsame distance as that between the creature and the Creator.' 'Necessity is God's veil.' 'We must let the rational in the Cartesian sense, that is to say mechanical rule or necessity in its humanly demonstrable form, reside wherever we are able to imagine it, so that we might bring to light that which lies outside its range.' 'The absence of God is the most marvellous testimony of perfect love, and that is why pure necessity, necessity which is manifestly different from the good, is so beautiful.'

She allows neither the historical Providence of the traditional Christian preachers, nor the historical Providence of the progressive preachers. Does it mean that we are completely in the power of *la pesanteur*, gravity, that the cry of our heart is never answered?

No. There is one exception from the universal determinism and that is Grace. 'Contradiction,' says Simone Weil, 'is a lever of transcendence.' 'Impossibility is the door of the supernatural. We can only knock at it. Someone else opens it.' God absent, God hidden, *Deus absconditus*, acts in the world through persuasion, through Grace, which pulls us out of *la pesanteur*, Gravity, if we do not reject his gift. Those who believe that the contradiction between necessity and the good can be solved on any level other than that of mystery delude themselves. 'We have to be in a desert. For he whom we must love is absent.' 'To love God through and across the destruction of Troy and Carthage, and without consolation. Love is not consolation, it is light.'

For Simone Weil, society is as subject to the rule of necessity as all the phenomena of the world. Yet if Nature is nothing but necessity and therefore innocent, below the level of good and evil, society is a domain where beings endowed with consciousness suffer under the heel of an ally and tenant of necessity, the Prince of Darkness. She says: 'The Devil is collective (this is the God of Durkheim).' Her stand in politics is summed up in a metaphor she used often, taken from Plato. Plato compares society to a Great Beast. Every citizen has a relationship with that Beast, with the

result that asked what is the good, everyone gives an answer in accordance with his function: for one the good consists in combing the hair of the Beast, for another in scratching its skin, for the third in cleaning its nails. In that way men lose the possibility of knowing the true good. In this Simone Weil saw the source of all absurdities and injustices. Man in the clutches of social determinism is no more than an unconscious worshipper of the Great Beast. She was against idealistic moral philosophy as it is a reflection of imperceptible pressures exerted upon individuals by a given social body. According to her, Protestantism also leads inevitably to conventional ethics reflecting national or class interests. As for Karl Marx, he was a seeker of pure truth; he wanted to liberate man from the visible and invisible pressures of group ethics by denouncing them and by showing how they operate. Because of that initial intention of Marx, Marxism is much more precious for the Christians than any idealistic philosophy. Yet Marx, in his desire for truth and justice, while trying to avoid one error fell into another which, argues Simone Weil, always happens if one rejects transcendence, the only foundation of the good accessible to man. Marx opposed class-dominated ethics with the new ethics of professional revolutionaries, also group ethics, and thus

paved the way for a new form of domination by the Great Beast. This short aphorism sums up her views: 'The whole of Marxism, in so far as it is true, is contained in that page of Plato on the Great Beast; and its refutation is there, too.'

But Simone Weil did not turn her back on history and was a partisan of personal commitment. She denied that there is any 'Marxist doctrine' and denounced dialectical materialism as a philosophical misunderstanding. In her view dialectical materialism simply does not exist, as the dialectical element and the materialist element, put together, burst the term asunder. By such a criticism she revealed the unpleasant secret known only to the inner circles of the Communist parties. On the contrary, class struggle, filling thousands of years of history, was for her the most palpable reality. Meditations on social determinism led her to certain conclusions as to the main problem of technical civilisation. That problem looks as follows. Primitive man was oppressed by the hostile forces of Nature. Gradually he won his freedom in constant struggle against it; he harnessed the powers of water, of fire, of electricity and put them to his use. Yet he could not accomplish that without introducing a division of labour and an organisation of production.

Very primitive societies are egalitarian, they live in the state of 'primitive communism.' Members of such communities are not oppressed by other members, fear is located outside as the community is menaced by wild animals, natural cataclysms, and sometimes other human groups. As soon as the efforts of man in his struggle with his surroundings become more productive, the community differentiates into those who order and those who obey. Oppression of man by man grows proportionally to the increase of his realm of action; it seems to be its necessary price. Facing Nature, the member of a technical civilisation holds the position of a god, but he is a slave of society. The ultimate sanction of any domination of man by man is the punishment of death – either by the sword, the gun, or from starvation. Collective humanity emancipated itself. 'But this collective humanity has itself taken on with respect to the individual the oppressive function formerly exercised by Nature.'

Today Simone Weil could have backed her social analyses with many new examples; it is often being said that under-developed countries can industrialise themselves only at the price of accepting totalitarian systems. China, for instance, would have provided her with much material for reflection.

The basic social and political issue of the twentieth century is: 'Can this emancipation, won by society, be transferred to the individual?' Simone Weil was pessimistic. The end of the struggle between those who obey and those who give orders is not in sight, she argued. The dominating groups do not relinquish their privileges unless forced to. Yet in spite of the upheavals of the masses, the very organisation of production soon engenders new masters and the struggle continues under new banners and new names. Heraclitus was right: struggle is the mother of gods and men.

This does not mean we can dismiss history, seeing it as eternal recurrence, and shrug at its spectacle. Willing or not, we are committed. We should throw our act into the balance by siding with the oppressed and by diminishing as much as possible the oppressive power of those who give orders. Without expecting too much: *hubris*, lack of measure, is punished by Fate, inherent in the laws of iron necessity.

The importance of Simone Weil should be, I feel, assessed in the perspective of our common shortcomings. We do not like to think to the bitter end. We escape consequences in advance. Through the rigour exemplified by her life and her writing (classical, dry, concise), she is able to provoke a salutary shame. Why

does she fascinate so many intellectuals today? Such is my hypothesis: If this is a theological age, it has a marked bias for Manichaeism. Modern literature testifies to a sort of rage directed against the world, which no longer seems the work of a wise clockmaker. The humour of that literature (and think of Beckett, Ionesco, Genet), if it is humour at all, is a sneer, a *ricanement*, thrown in the face of the universe. Professor Michael Polanyi has recently advanced the thesis that the most characteristic feature of the last decades has been not a moral laxity but a moral frenzy exploding in the literature of the absurd as well as in revolutionary movements. Political assassination has been practised in the name of man's victory over the brutal order of Nature. Yet the belief in the magic blessings of History is being undermined by the very outcome of that belief: industrialisation. It is more and more obvious (in the countries of Eastern Europe as well) that refrigerators and television sets, or even rockets sent to the moon, do not change man into God. Old conflicts between human groups have been abolished but are replaced by new ones, perhaps more acute.

I translated the selected works of Simone Weil into Polish in 1958 not because I pretended to be a 'Weilian.' I wrote frankly in the preface that I consider

myself a Caliban, too fleshy, too heavy, to take on the feathers of an Ariel. Simone Weil was an Ariel. My aim was utilitarian, in accordance, I am sure, with her wishes as to the disposition of her works. A few years ago I spent many afternoons in her family's apartment overlooking the Luxembourg Gardens – at her table covered with ink stains from her pen – talking to her mother, a wonderful woman in her eighties. Albert Camus took refuge in that apartment the day he received the Nobel Prize and was hunted by photographers and journalists. My aim, as I say, was utilitarian. I resented the division of Poland into two camps: the clerical and the anticlerical, nationalistic Catholic and Marxist – I exclude of course the *apparatchiki*, bureaucrats just catching every wind from Moscow. I suspect unorthodox Marxists (I use that word for lack of a better one) and non-nationalistic Catholics have very much in common, at least common interests. Simone Weil attacked the type of religion that is only a social or national conformism. She also attacked the shallowness of the so-called progressives. Perhaps my intention, when preparing a Polish selection of her works, was malicious. But if a theological fight is going on – as it is in Poland, especially in high schools and universities – then every weapon is good to make adversaries

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goggle-eyed and to show that the choice between Christianity as represented by a national religion and the official Marxist ideology is not the only choice left to us today.

In the present world, torn asunder by a much more serious religious crisis than appearances would permit us to guess, Catholic writers are often rejected by people who are aware of their own misery as seekers and who have a reflex of defence when they meet proud possessors of the truth. The works of Simone Weil are read by Catholics and Protestants, atheists and agnostics. She has instilled a new leaven into the life of believers and unbelievers by proving that one should not be deluded by existing divergences of opinion and that many a Christian is a pagan, many a pagan a Christian in his heart. Perhaps she lived exactly for that. Her intelligence, the precision of her style, were nothing but a very high degree of attention given to the sufferings of mankind. And, as she says, 'Absolutely unmixed attention is prayer.'

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IN THE LIGHT OF SIMONE WEIL

Milosz and the Friendship of Camus

Simon Leys