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The present book reflects on the life, work, and legacy of an exceptional and enigmatic woman: the philosopher and French Jewish mystic Simone Weil. It constitutes a testimony so unique that it is impossible to ignore.

In a Europe where authoritarian regimes were dominant and heading, in a sinister manner, toward WWII, this woman of fragile health but indomitable spirit denounced the contradictions of the capitalist system, the brutality of Nazism, and the paradox of bourgeois thought. At the same time, her spiritual journey was one of zeal and sorrow—that of a true mystic—but her radical intransigence and passion for freedom kept her from actually approaching the institutional church.

Curious and insatiable, she wanted to experience, in the flesh, the suffering of society's least fortunate and the truths of other religions. The reader will need to develop a discerning empathy for Simone Weil's sensibility, beyond her particular passion and zeal, in order to appreciate her in depth.

But undeniable are this truly singular woman's authenticity, her capacity to suffer, her identification with the other, her inner passion, her almost magical perception of the depths of the human spirit. And that is why her story merits being told as one of the great witnesses of our age.

# SIMONE WEIL

## Mystic of Passion and Compassion

**Maria Clara Bingemer**

*Translated by* KAREN M. KRAFT

*Foreword by* TOMEU ESTELRICH BARCELÓ

"Following her pointed observation that 'witnesses are fountains from which theology springs forth,' Bingemer offers a rich theological reflection on some of the central themes emerging from the life and thought of Simone Weil, one of the twentieth century's most intriguing mystics. The book brings Weil into the heart of the Christian theological tradition, while recognizing her desire to remain clear of any institutional determination. It is an important contribution to Weil studies, and to contemporary mystical theology."

—CATHERINE CORNILLE, Newton College Alumnae Chair, Boston College

"The always fascinating enigma of Weil and the wellspring for social justice represented by Brazil's most spiritually creative theologian of liberation come together in this superbly translated theological biography . . . [A] highly compelling meditation on the fragility and necessity of intellectual work in the face of the suffering of the marginalized."

—PETER CASARELLA, Associate Professor of Systematic Theology, University of Notre Dame

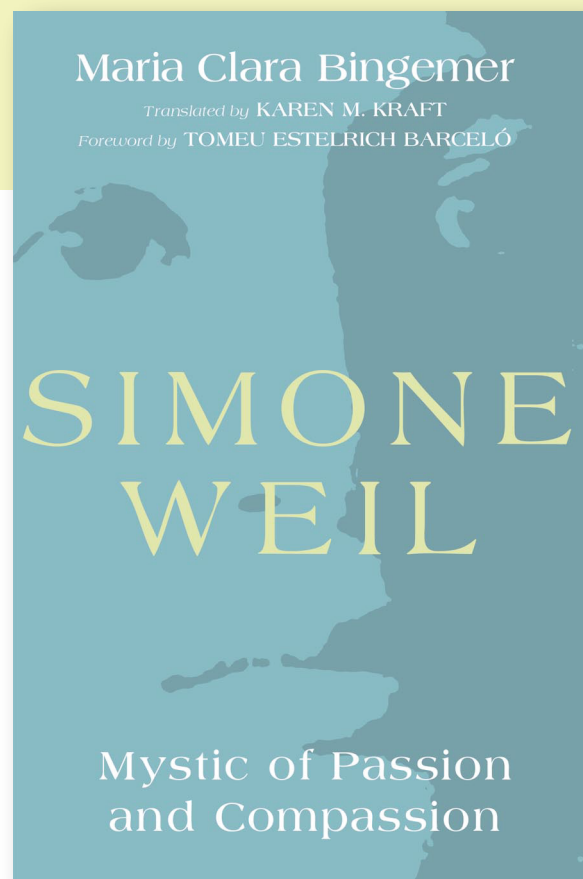
"The voice of Simone Weil—a key figure of the French philosophy of the twentieth century—is given to us to listen to by Bingemer. With skill and clarity she brings us into a thought without concessions, rooted in Christ (without entering into the Catholic Church), and committed to the insignificant people of our world. A good resource for contemporary researchers. 'A paradoxical testimony!'"

—THIERRY-MARIE COURAU, Dean of Theologicum, Institut Catholique de Paris

"Only a scholar who has passionately journeyed with Simone Weil over a lifetime could have produced this book. By any measure what Bingemer offers is exceptional. The beauty of Weil's intellect, heart, and life come alive in Bingemer's hands. This elegantly written book presents an intimate, compelling portrait of Weil that invites readers to consider how we too might give witness to the light intellectually and compassionately."

—NANCY PINEDA-MADRID, Associate Professor of Theology & U.S. Latino/a Ministry, Boston College School of Theology and Ministry

**Maria Clara Bingemer** is Full Professor of Systematic Theology at the Pontificia Universidade Católica de Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. She is the author of *A Face for God* (2014), among other books. She has written many books and articles on Simone Weil's thought, including the essay "Affliction and Option for the Poor: Simone Weil and Latin American Liberation Theology" (in R. Rozelle and L. Stone, eds., *The Relevance of the Radical: Simone Weil 100 Years Later*).



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*Simone Weil*

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Mystic of Passion and Compassion

MARIA CLARA BINGEMER

*Translated by Karen M. Kraft*

*Foreword by Tomeu Estelrich*



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SIMONE WEIL

Mystic of Passion and Compassion

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## Foreword

That which limits is God. . . . That which is unlimited has no existence except in receiving a limit from outside.

—Simone Weil, *Divine Love in Creation*

The most beautiful people we have known are those who have known defeat, known suffering, known struggle, known loss, and have found their way out of the depths. These persons have an appreciation, a sensitivity, and an understanding of life that fills them with compassion, gentleness, and a deep loving concern. Beautiful people do not just happen.

—Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *Death: The Final Stage of Growth*

It is always an interesting experience, pleasurable and uncanny at the same time, to read books authored by friends: they not only expand your knowledge about the new topics they are unraveling, but also they reveal aspects of their “academic personality” of which you were totally unaware. And this is precisely what happened to me while reading this book.

*Simone Weil: Mystic of Passion and Compassion* reveals Maria Clara Bingemer’s latest attempt to untangle one of her favorite, most pervasive, and consistent topics: *the analysis of the limits of this world from a religious perspective*. Even though I have never heard Maria Clara use those exact

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## Foreword

words to refer to that topic, I think they perfectly define her interests as a scholar. Beginning with her theological writings, Maria Clara has approached the study of the limits by tackling issues as important as prophecy, mysticism, sanctity, the Trinity, social commitment, liberation theology, and the role of the woman in the Catholic Church. More recently, taking a rather philosophical standpoint, she has examined contemporary thinkers who have devoted their lives to exploring the limits between ethics, religion, and social engagement, such as Emmanuel Mounier, Ignazio Silone, Emmanuel Levinas, Edith Stein, René Girard, Etty Hillesum, and Simone Weil.

Even though Maria Clara is fond of all these philosophers, it is Simone Weil who holds a special place in her writings. Weil appeals to her, not only because of her heroic, almost epic, life, but also for her convoluted religious experience; not only for being an exceptional witness in a tumultuous and treacherous time, but also for exercising a critical voice against the social inequalities of her moment; not only for conceptualizing the experience of living in a world devoid of God, but also for formulating a spirituality that aims to find Him in his very absence.

The conjunction of these aspects makes Simone Weil, in the eyes of Maria Clara, an exceptional thinker, full of thought-provoking insights, and one who entirely fulfills her arguably three main academic interests: prophecy, mysticism, and social commitment. As a prophetic voice, Weil is portrayed as a *wounded intellectual* who, immersed in sheer political activism, “saw well beyond her time; . . . threw herself into experiences and projects before others would do so, and . . . came to serve as a reference for others who would later travel the same path” (chapter 2). As a mystic writer, Weil is depicted as an *attentive, obedient, and unaffiliated Christian*, possessed by a relentless desire of kenotic abasement: “Her life’s meaning, and the only way not to squander her death, was to remain in complete solitude, in absolute darkness, in profound silence, in the hands of the One who alone is able to tend to her cries” (chapter 4). Finally, as a social thinker, Weil is described as a *wounded cantor*, eager to uncover the always unsettling and elusive truth: Weil is a thinker wounded by the truth that “no poetry concerning the people is authentic if fatigue does not figure in it, and the hunger and thirst which come from fatigue” (chapter 4).

By emphasizing these liminal features, Maria Clara invites us, the readers, to place Simone Weil in the philosophical tradition of *the limit*.<sup>1</sup>

1. We must recall here that the Spanish version of this book is titled *Simone Weil*:

## Foreword

This tradition—whose main representatives are Plato, Kant, Hegel, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein<sup>2</sup>—focuses on the analysis of two main questions, “what is being?” and “what is the truth?” In exploring these two questions, this tradition manages to map *the limits of the world* by separating two sets of elements: those that can be sensed, understood, and stated, from those that can merely be intuited, contemplated, or imagined. Thus, Plato, to start with the eldest in the tradition, sets the limits of the world by establishing the existence of a *hyperuranios* realm, inhabited with eternal forms (*eidos*), that give shape to the entirety of our perceptions. For Kant, the *phenomenal* world is *metaphysically* limited by an unreachable and unknowable *noumenon* (the thing-in-itself), and *transcendentally* divided into three autonomous realms: the epistemological (*What can I know?*), the ethical (*What ought I to do?*), and the religious (*What may I hope?*). For Hegel, the limits of the world are generated by an absolute mind or spirit (*Geist*), which evolves and transforms our world into a quasi-totalitarian system. For Heidegger, death is the ultimate limit (*peras*) of human existence, encircling the subject (*Dasein*) into its domain and exacerbating its radical freedom. For Wittgenstein, language establishes the limits of the world by separating what *exists* (and “can be said”) from what does not exist (and about which one must keep silent).

At *par* with this tradition, Weil believes that *this world*—or, as she calls it, *the reality of here below* (*réalité d’ici-bas*)—is limited. Like Plato, she believes that there is a transcendent *reality outside it* (the *réalité hors du monde*), for which the ultimate purpose is to *guide, in-form, and trans-form this world*. For her, “That reality is the unique source of all the good that can exist in the world: that is to say, all beauty, all truth, all justice, all legitimacy, all order, and all human behavior that is mindful of obligations.”<sup>3</sup> Humans, caught in between both worlds, have the liminal function to connect both realities, since they, and only they, are capable to long for an absolute good, “a longing which is always there and is never appeased by any other object in this world.”<sup>4</sup> However, not everyone is up to that challenge. Only “those whose attention and love are turned towards that reality are the sole intermediary through which good can descend from there and come

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una mística a los límites, which can be translated as *Simone Weil: A Mystic at the Limits*.

2. See Trias, *Los Límites del Mundo*.

3. Miles, *Simone Weil: An Anthology*, 202.

4. Ibid.



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among men.”<sup>5</sup> In establishing this division, Weil manages to determine a second limit, ethico-spiritual this time, between two kinds of individuals: those who are willing to open their minds to the transcendent reality, and to transform the unjust situations of this world by allowing the good to descend and be part of it; and those who, overlooking that outer reality, thoughtlessly accept the limitation of this world, and assume its consequential inequalities.

Although Weil’s interpretation of this *second limit* sets her apart from the modern and contemporary philosophers of the limit,<sup>6</sup> it is precisely the theological possibilities that it opens that captures Maria Clara’s attention and prompts her to use it in her research. In fact, I would argue, the reason why Maria Clara selects Simone Weil’s philosophy is not primarily for the theoretical and metaphysical implications that I just have mentioned, but eminently for its ethical and religious repercussions. Her ultimate interest is to describe liminal situations where the ethical is radicalized to such a degree that it unveils and reveals, almost abruptly, the hidden presence of the sacred. Thus, the *cross*, to start with the most representative of those situations, captures those liminal moments in which degradation, affliction, and despair give rise to life, joy, and liberation. The *incarnation* portrays the capacity of the supernatural to penetrate, immerse, and dwell in the least desirable and most degraded zones of this world. The *Eucharist* signifies the human longing for transformation, change, and renewal. *Martyrdom* represents the radical offering of someone’s life for the sake of the ultimate reality. *Kenosis* expresses the willful desire to descend to, and be transformed by, the most inhuman and merciless experiences of this world. And *sanctity* suggests the liminal experience of waiting in “pure abstention” and in “inactive action” behind a mythical *door* (*la porte*) that, according to the famous Weillienne poem (Prologue in OC VI/3, 369–70), invites and deprives the traveler from the transcendent reality.

But this intellectual journey through the *religious* and *ethical* limits of the world does not stop here. It leads us to a third and final limit: Simone Weil herself. In the last chapter of the book, Weil is portrayed as a paradoxical, liminal, and conflicted figure, in constant struggle with her identity and beliefs. She is described, using four powerful images, as a self-exiled Jew in permanent struggle with her understanding of Judaism; as an

5. Ibid.

6. Kant, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein, unlike Weil, believe that the other reality is unreachable, unknowable, and has no part in this life.

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### *Foreword*

intellectual, more interested in praxis than theory; as an unaffiliated mystic whose metaphysical interests go beyond the teachings of the traditional religious systems; and as a pioneer of interfaith dialogue who uses its inner contradictions to reach supernatural truth. By introducing this new limit into the narrative plot, Maria Clara not only changes the dynamic of the book, but also its intention. Now, intermingled with her academic interests, emerges a more subjective one: one that compels the readers to take a personal stand on Simone Weil's philosophy and face the uncomfortable, but probably unavoidable, question about whether we agree or disagree with her premises; whether we adhere to or refuse her viewpoints; and whether we accept or reject her provocative proposals altogether. But that is neither easy nor desirable. Simone Weil's philosophy, as the rest of philosophies available at present, must not be accepted or refused based solely on the degree of emotional bonding that the reader is capable of establishing with the author. On the contrary, what it is more appropriate, and where the last chapter of this book is leading us, is to take a more solid perspective. It invites us to take a step further, come back to the first chapters of the book, and contemplate afresh the big picture of Simone Weil's life. *Exitus and reditus*. Only by closing the circle it is possible to fully appreciate the transcendental aspects of Weil's philosophy, the problematic of some of its ethical approaches, and the (in)convenience of its pointed proposals. Only by taking distance it is viable to create an existential gap between us and Simone Weil's life, that allows us to decide whether we accept or refuse *some, none, or all* of her philosophical positions.

Tomeu Estelrich  
Boston College  
Vice President, American Weil Society  
Boston, January 6, 2015

## *Simone Weil Bibliography and Abbreviations Used*

(From the list provided by the Association Internationale pour l'Etude de la  
Pensée de Simone Weil in Paris, France)

<i>AD</i>	<i>Attente de Dieu</i>
<i>AD</i> <sub>1</sub>	La Colombe, Ed. du Vieux Colombier, 1950, 238 pp.
<i>AD</i> <sub>2</sub>	La Colombe, 2nd ed., 1950, 189 pp.
<i>AD</i> <sub>3</sub>	Coll. "Le Livre de poche chrétien," 1963, 256 pp.
<i>AD</i> <sub>4</sub>	Librairie Arthème Fayard, 1966, 256 pp.
<i>AD</i> <sub>5</sub>	Ed. du Seuil, coll. "Livre de vie," 1977, 256 pp.
<i>C</i>	<i>Cahiers</i> , Librairie Plon, col. L'Epi (I: 1951; II: 1953; III: 1956)
<i>C</i> <sub>2</sub>	2nd edition (I: 1970; II: 1972; III: 1974) <i>CO La Condition ouvrière</i> , Gallimard
<i>CE</i>	<i>Euvres</i> , Gallimard, col. "Cuarto," 1999
<i>CO</i> <sub>1</sub>	Col. "Espoir," 1951
<i>CO</i> <sub>2</sub>	Col. "Idées," 1964, 1979
<i>CO</i> <sub>3</sub>	Col. & Polio Essais, 2002
<i>CS</i>	<i>La Connaissance Surnaturelle</i> , Gallimard, col. Espoir, 1950
<i>CSW</i>	<i>Cahiers Simone Weil</i>
<i>E</i>	<i>L'Enracinement</i> , Gallimard
<i>E</i> <sub>1</sub>	Col. "Espoir," 1949
<i>E</i> <sub>2</sub>	Col. "Idées," 1962, 1977; col. "Folio-Essais," 1990
<i>EHP</i>	<i>Ecrits historiques et politiques</i> , Gallimard, col. "Espoir," 1960

*Simone Weil Bibliography and Abbreviations Used*

<i>EL</i>	<i>Ecrits de Londres et dernières lettres</i> , Gallimard, col. "Espoir," 1957
<i>IPC</i>	<i>Intuitifs préchrétiens</i> , La Colombe, Ed. du Vieux Colombier, 1951; Librairie Arthème Fayard, 1951, 1985
<i>LP</i>	<i>Leçons de philosophie de Simone Weil (Roanne 1933–1934)</i>
<i>LP1</i>	Librairie Plon, 1959
<i>LP2</i>	Union Générale d'Éditions, col. "10/18," 1966
<i>LI3</i>	Plon, 1989
<i>LR</i>	<i>Lettre à un religieux</i>
<i>LR1</i>	Gallimard, col. "Espoir," 1951
<i>LR2</i>	Ed. du Seuil, col. "Livre de vie," 1974
<i>OC</i>	<i>Oeuvres complètes</i> , Gallimard
<i>OC I</i>	<i>Premiers écrits philosophiques</i> , 1988
<i>OC II 1</i>	<i>Ecrits historiques et politiques. L'Engagement syndical (1927–juillet 1934)</i> , 1988
<i>OC II 2</i>	<i>Ecrits historiques et politiques. L'Expérience ouvrière et l'adieu à la révolution (juillet 1934–juin 1937)</i> , 1991
<i>OC II 3</i>	<i>Ecrits historiques et politiques. Vers la Guerre (1937–1940)</i> , 1989
<i>OC VI 1</i>	<i>Cahiers (1933–September 1941)</i> , 1994
<i>OC VI 2</i>	<i>Cahiers (September 1941–February 1942)</i> , 1997
<i>OC VI 3</i>	<i>Cahiers (February 1942–June 1942)</i> , 2002
<i>OL</i>	<i>Oppression et liberté</i> , Gallimard, col. "Espoir," 1955
<i>P</i>	<i>Poèmes suivis de Venise sauvée</i> , Gallimard, col. "Espoir," 1968
<i>PG</i>	<i>La Pesanteur et la grâce</i>
<i>PG1</i>	Librairie Plon, col. "L'Epi," 1947
<i>PO2</i>	Plon, col. "Agora," 1991
<i>PSO</i>	<i>Pensées sans ordre concernant l'amour de Dieu</i> , Gallimard, col. "Espoir," 1962
<i>R</i>	<i>Reflexions sur les causes de la liberté et de l'oppression sociale</i> , Gallimard, col. "Idées," 1980; col. & Folio-Essais, 1998
<i>S</i>	<i>Sur la Science</i> , Gallimard, col. "Espoir," 1966
<i>SG</i>	<i>La Source grecque</i>
<i>SG1</i>	Gallimard, col. "Espoir," 1953, 162 pp.
<i>SG2</i>	Gallimard, col. "Espoir," 1963, 172 pp.
<i>SP I, II</i>	Simone Pétrement, <i>La Vie de Simone Weil</i> , 2 vols., Librairie Arthème Fayard, 1973, 1978
<i>SP2</i>	1 vol., Fayard, 1997

## English Translations of Simone Weil

The original French texts are indicated in parentheses.

*First and Last Notebooks*. Translated by Richard Rees. London: Oxford University Press, 1970.

(Excerpts from *Cahiers [C]* and *La Connaissance surnaturelle [CS]*—From C, “Pre-War Notebook, 1933–(?) 1939” and from CS, “New York Notebook, 1942” and “London Notebook, 1943”)

*Gravity and Grace*. Translated by Arthur Wills. Lincoln, UK: University of Lincoln, 1997.  
(PG: *La Pesanteur et la grâce*)

*Intimations of Christianity among the Ancient Greeks*. Translated by Elisabeth Chase Geissbuhler. New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957.  
(Chapters from *Les Intuitions préchrétiennes [IPC]* and *La Source grecque [SG]*)

*Lectures on Philosophy*. Translated by Hugh Price. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978.  
(LP: *Leçons de philosophie*)

*Letter to a Priest*. Translated by Arthur Wills. New York: Putnam, 1954.  
(LR: *Lettre à un religieux*)

*The Need for Roots: Prelude to a Declaration of Duties towards Mankind*. Translated by Arthur Wills. New York: Routledge, 2002. Online: <http://archive.org/details/WeilSimoneTheNeedForRootsPreludeToADeclarationOfDutiesTowardsMankind>.  
(E: *L'Enracinement*)

*The Notebooks of Simone Weil*. Translated by Arthur Wills. New York: Routledge, 2004.  
(*Cahiers [C]*, Vols. 1–3)

*English Translations of Simone Weil*

*On Science, Necessity, and the Love of God.* Translated by Richard Rees. London: Oxford University Press, 1968.

(Includes excerpts from *S* [*Sur la Science*])

*Oppression and Liberty.* Translated by Arthur Wills and John Petrie. New York: Routledge, 2001.

(*OL: Oppression et liberté*)

*Waiting for God.* Translated by Emma Craufurd. New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2009.

(*AD: Attente de Dieu*)

*Anthologies and Selections of Simone Weil in English*

*Formative Writings: 1929–1941.* Edited and translated by Dorothy Tuck McFarland and Wilhelmina Van Ness. London: Routledge, 2010.

*Gateway to God.* Edited by David Raper. New York: Crossroad, 1974.

*Seventy Letters: Some Hitherto Untranslated Texts from Published and Unpublished Sources.* Edited and translated by Richard Rees. London: Oxford University Press, 1965.

*Simone Weil: An Anthology.* Edited by Siân Miles. New York: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1986.

*The Simone Weil Reader.* Edited by George A. Panichas. New York: David McKay, 1977.

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## Introduction

Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses.

—Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*

This suggestive assertion by the great Paul VI is the springboard for this book. The true “helmsman” of Vatican II, Pope Paul VI was also an emblematic figure in the always difficult and complex dialogue of the Church with society and culture.

Considered “the godless age,” the twentieth century has concluded leaving behind, in several respects, an emptiness and senselessness that led many to live with anguish or indifference. History’s great stories and utopias no longer enlighten spirits and thoughts, and we often lack paradigms to guide our existential journey. Nevertheless, during that age, there lived men and women who were true witnesses to coherence and holiness, capable of putting forward admirable ideas and aspirations. And in these individuals, there are profound signs of hope for the future.

The present work is dedicated to an exceptional and enigmatic woman: the philosopher and French Jewish mystic, Simone Weil. Her writing and, above all, her life constitute a testimony so unique that they are impossible to ignore.

In a Europe where authoritarian regimes were dominant and heading, in a sinister manner, toward WWII . . . where factories were synonymous with exploitation and dehumanization . . . where the intellectual

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## Introduction

environment was marked by an atheistic existentialism, this woman of fragile health but indomitable spirit denounced the contradictions of the capitalist system, the brutality of Nazism, and the paradox of bourgeois thought that hid behind the figures most characteristic of French philosophy at that time (Simone de Beauvoir, for example, with whom she had contact). At the same time, her spiritual journey was one of zeal and sorrow—that of a true mystic—but her radical intransigence and passion for freedom kept her from actually approaching the institutional Church. In that sense, she not only anticipated the Vatican II years, but was also congruent with contemporary awareness and with other traditions.

Curious and insatiable, she wanted to experience, in the flesh, the suffering of society's least fortunate and the truths of other religions. Implacable toward her own Jewish tradition, she lived filled with love for Jesus Christ and yet far from the sacramental life for which she yearned. The reader will need to develop a discerning empathy for Simone Weil's sensibility, beyond her particular passion and zeal, in order to appreciate her in depth. Her words move from the political to the spiritual, from the testimonial to the philosophical, from the intuitive to the sensual.

. . . To understand some of her initiatives or propositions, such as nurses on the front lines or her criticisms of violence in the Old Testament, it is important to try to place oneself in her time as well as understand her culture and her radical, passionate sensibility. But undeniable are this truly singular woman's authenticity, her capacity to suffer, her identification with "the other," her inner passion, her almost magical perception of the depths of the human spirit. And that is why her story merits being told as one of the great witnesses of our age.

José María Poirier  
Editor of *Criterio*



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## *From the Translator*

This book is a translation of *Simone Weil: una mística a los límites*, published in Spanish in 2011 in Buenos Aires by Ciudad Nueva, and I am deeply grateful to the author, Maria Clara Bingemer, for offering me the opportunity to embark upon this endeavor and also for the depth of knowledge I have gained about the brilliant, unconventional, and spiritual figure she explores here. In the following paragraphs, I simply want to provide the reader with a brief overview of the “how” and “why” of the pages which lie ahead.

My translation begins with the table of contents and ends with the conclusion; I have also provided a bibliographic list of all the sources that I consulted in the process, with existing English translations of Weil’s works grouped separately, to distinguish them more easily for the reader. The translations of the index of names as well as of the appendices, four texts which already exist in English, have been provided by the author. We agreed to include the introduction by José María Poirer, Argentine journalist and editor of the Buenos Aires Catholic magazine *Criterio*, although in my translation I have omitted, for obvious reasons, his references to this book as the first in a new series by Ciudad Nueva.

To explore in detail the mystical nature of Weil’s inner and outer life, the author draws on many different sources in numerous languages; many of them are Weil’s own works, which she consulted directly in their original French. Most frequently cited are the biography of Weil by Simone Pétrement, *La Vie de Simone Weil* (a two-volume work which exists in English as a partial translation by Raymond Rosenthal, *Simone Weil: A Life*) along with Weil’s *Lettre à un religieux* (*Letter to a Priest*), *L’Enracinement* (*The Need for Roots*), and *Attente de Dieu* (*Waiting for God*). In every case possible, where

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*From the Translator*

there are direct quotations from sources for which an English translation exists, I have located the quotation in that existing translation and included that reference in the author's footnote, following her citation of the original. Where this was not possible (or if the author preferred my translation), the translation is my own.

This was true, for example, for some citations from the translation of *Attente de Dieu* by Emma Craufurd (*Waiting for God*). It is a somewhat incomplete rendering of the French: not all of the original passages are included and, on occasion, some lines are missing a phrase or two. In those cases, I have translated the missing words and included them in brackets in the quotation, to distinguish them from Craufurd's text. And I have noted that in the footnote. To distinguish my notes from the author's, I have prefaced them with the words "Translator's Note" and enclosed them in brackets.

A further note about *Attente de Dieu*: This work exists in English in two different versions. The original translation is the 1951 version by Emma Craufurd that I have just referenced; the much more recent version is *Awaiting God* (which also includes a new translation of *Letter to a Priest*) translated by Brad Jersak, published in 2012 by Fresh Wind Press. I have used Craufurd's translation, primarily because of its "seniority" and the fact that it is the version with which the author is most familiar.

Scripture texts, unless otherwise noted, are taken from the *New American Bible, revised edition* [© 2010, 1991, 1986, 1970 Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Washington, D.C. and are used by permission of the copyright owner. All rights reserved. No part of the New American Bible may be reproduced in any form without permission in writing from the copyright owner].

As one final note, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to those who have offered their assistance to me in so many ways during my work on this project: Joseph Wojowski, for his initial, generous guidance; Emanuele Colombo, Michael Budde, and other colleagues at DePaul University, for their shrewd advice and suggestions; Lourdes Benitez, for the "work retreat" haven; Shannon Ambrose at St. Xavier University, for her insight into the world of academic publishing; the author, Maria Clara Bingemer, for her invaluable feedback and edits at each step of the process; and lastly, my friends and family (particularly, my parents Rosemary and David) for their abundant, unflagging support.

Karen M. Kraft

# 1

## *Timeline and Profile*<sup>1</sup>

The so-called godless age of the twentieth century did not preclude the rise of authentic witnesses, and Simone Weil is proof of that. Her whole life was an agonizing and, at the same time, subversive effort to save the dialectic between culture and holiness, steering it toward a dialogue and discovering, in the “holy madness,” a path of vital impulse for the world.

### *An Uncommon Child*

Simone Weil was born in Paris on February 3, 1909, in the bosom of a wealthy Jewish family. Her father was a doctor, and her mother dedicated herself to working in the home and caring for the children; they always

1. This short biography of Simone Weil cites largely from the two-volume work of Simone Pétrement, Weil’s friend and biographer par excellence: *La vie de Simone Weil* (cited from here on with the abbreviation *SP I* or *SP II*). [Translator’s Note: There is no complete English translation of Pétrement’s two volumes; therefore, Raymond Rosenthal’s partial translation, *Simone Weil: A Life*, has been cited wherever appropriate.] However, other biographies, with fewer details, have been written on Simone Weil, and some have portrayed her life from a determinate perspective: Cabaud, *L’expérience vécue de Simone Weil*; Perrin, *Mon dialogue avec Simone Weil*; Rosa, *Simone Weil: Politica e mistica*; Khan et al., *Simone Weil, philosophe, historienne et mystique*; Perrin and Thibon, *Simone Weil telle que nous l’avons connue*; Davy, *Simone Weil*; Hourdin, *Simone Weil*; Fiori, *Simone Weil une femme absolue*; Plessix Gray, *Simone Weil*.

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ensured that cultural refinements as well as healthy emotional expression and a hospitable openness permeated the family environment. According to Simone Pétrement, Madame Weil “had noble ambitions for her children, and the doctor certainly thought the same. . . . They neglected nothing in the children’s education in order that they might have access to the highest knowledge and, from there, the most demanding opportunities for action.”<sup>2</sup>

From a very young age, Simone’s older brother, Andrés, showed himself to be exceptionally gifted intellectually. Simone had a great admiration for him, and a loving friendship united them.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, she felt inferior because she did not consider herself as brilliant or clever as her brother. However, there was no jealousy or envy in her, but rather a sadness that she was unable to reach the truth, which was for Simone only accessible through knowledge and theoretical contemplation. At the age of thirteen, she experienced a profound crisis that she described as a “bottomless despair.” According to Pétrement, Simone would have seriously contemplated death, believing herself to be insufficiently gifted in intellect.<sup>4</sup>

She herself would later explain to Father Joseph Marie Perrin, her friend and spiritual confidant: “I did not mind having no visible successes, but what did grieve me was the idea of being excluded from that transcendent kingdom to which only the truly great have access and wherein truth abides. I preferred to die rather than live without that truth.”<sup>5</sup>

However, although only thirteen, Simone was then to receive the first transcendental revelation of her life, finding in the depths of her despair an abiding conviction that enabled her to overcome this crisis. Suddenly, she had the certainty that the heart’s spiritual desires will be granted to all those who strive, with all their effort, to attain them.<sup>6</sup> Many years later, she recounted this breakthrough to Fr. Perrin: “After months of inward darkness, I suddenly had the everlasting conviction that any human being, even though practically devoid of natural faculties, can penetrate to the kingdom

2. *SP I*, 20. (In this book, all of Weil’s original works in French will be cited according to the abbreviations provided by the Association pour l’Etude de la Pensée de Simone Weil, in Paris. A list of these with the complete citation can be found at the beginning of this book. [Translator’s Note: Following this is a list of those works by Weil which have English translations that have been used here. Additional sources used for this translation have been added to the supplemental bibliography.]

3. *Ibid.*, 27.

4. *Ibid.*, 54.

5. *AD*, 72, in *Waiting for God*, 23.

6. Cf. *SP I*, 54.

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of truth reserved for genius, if only he longs for truth and perpetually concentrates all his attention upon its attainment.”<sup>7</sup>

On the other hand, Simone stands out for certain gifts and abilities that, along with her intelligence, made her an uncommon—and exceptional—young girl. Solidarity, compassion for human suffering, and self-detachment, even self-neglect, were realities that she lived even as a small child. During World War I, at the age of five, she was a pen pal to a soldier, and even then, she completely gave up sugar, chocolate, and other sweets so that she could send them to the frontlines. She also worked tirelessly to save a little money and send gifts to the soldier: “she would collect scraps of wood in bundles that her parents would buy from her and set aside the money to fill the packages with more.”<sup>8</sup> The soldier corresponded with his little pen pal, and they struck up a great friendship. Once while on military leave, and to Simone’s great joy, he stayed with the Weil family.

In 1916, the family took in a young cousin who had just lost her mother. When Simone first learned this news, she urged her brother André: “We must do whatever she wants, because she is an orphan.” And as Madame Weil attests, “She mothers her little cousin and treats her with affection; she always defers to her, because she feels such sorrow for her!”<sup>9</sup>

In 1929, at the age of seventy-nine, Simone’s grandmother died of cancer. Skeptical towards her granddaughter, she would nevertheless find herself surprised by Simone throughout her illness. Simone did whatever she could to distract her grandmother and cheer her up; at one point, she even fell ill herself. She would read from Victor Hugo’s *Les misérables* and talk with her at great length, and this seemed to offer relief and comfort to her *grand-mère*. Simone’s mother asserts that it was her daughter who helped the grandmother to accept the idea of death.<sup>10</sup>

Young Simone’s future destiny was first foretold by a simple, elderly housekeeper working for the family who, one day, said, “Simone is a saint.” Previously a servant in the home of Father Langlois, the librarian at the Catholic University of Paris, the housekeeper had been recommended to Dr. Weil by the priest, with whom he had worked during the war. This remark about Simone, on the lips of an unassuming and poorly educated

7. AD, 72.

8. SP I, 34, in *Waiting for God*, 23.

9. Ibid.

10. SP I, 135–36.

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person, evoked the following reflection from Simone Pétrement: “It was, without a doubt, the first time this word was uttered.”<sup>11</sup>

Simone Weil’s long journey through the world of misfortune, poverty, and unhappiness, which took on increasingly radical dimensions in her teenage and adult years, was strongly marked and influenced by her first encounters with human misery and suffering (the soldier, the orphaned cousin, the housekeeper). Her intellectual career, which began when she finished middle school and entered the lycée to study philosophy, was already sealed by a fervent compassion. This quality was to shape her entire life and lead her along the paths of politics, intellectual engagement, and mysticism.

### *An Intellect Wounded by Compassion*

Opposite the brilliant intellectual career of her brother Andrés, who rose through the academic ranks with a surprising precocity, Simone’s development was slower. Very soon, however, she would show signs of an above-average intellectual ability. When she took her final middle school exam, the *baccalauréat*, at age fifteen, she was accepted by the Lycée Henri IV, one of the most prestigious high schools in Paris. She chose to study philosophy and, in the course of her intellectual formation, one person with undeniable influence and impact stands out: Alain, a beloved and admired teacher who later also became her friend.

Simone entered the Lycée Henri IV in October of 1925. Her ultimate goal was to study, like her brother, at the prestigious École Normale Supérieure on Rue d’Ulm in Paris. But above all, her greatest desire was to listen to Alain’s lectures.<sup>12</sup> And so began her true philosophical journey. Pétrement, her classmate at the lycée and also a great admirer of the distinguished

11. Ibid., 38.

12. Alain (1868–1951), whose real name was Émile Chartier, had a considerable influence on an entire generation of young philosophers, both in his role as instructor at Lycée Henri IV and in his work as a journalist for newspapers and magazines. Born the son of a veterinarian in Montagne-au-Perche, Normandy, he entered the École Normale Supérieure as a student, became an *agregé* philosophy teacher, and would remain a teacher all of his life. During World War I, Alain enlisted as a soldier and became a gunner. His political choices were always on the side of the rebels. His life and his viewpoints, as well as his charisma as a teacher, explain why he had such great influence on the exceptional student that was Simone Weil.

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teacher, stated that “Alain’s instruction usually erased all previous philosophical training in his students.”<sup>13</sup>

Pétrement maintains that this juncture marked a break in Weil’s life and a new birth, that Simone’s philosophy originated in Alain’s classes.<sup>14</sup> Alain’s philosophy was not characterized by system building, but rather by an intellectual method: it focused on the rational exercise of judgement, submitting the real to the order of reflection. His fundamental concepts are the following: the soul as the spiritual principle that controls the body and the passions; consciousness, understood as the act of knowing turned in on itself, in the full transparency of the *cogito*, of knowledge; morality, conceived as the set of principles and rules of conduct that lead to the recognition of human dignity; and the will, understood as choice that is thoughtful, tenacious, resolute—distinct from impulsivity—an effort of desire that is attempted only once.<sup>15</sup>

Alain emphasized radical freedom of the will and the intimate relationship between will and intelligence: mental action is an indivisible whole, a moral *locus* in response to the experience of the physical body in the world.<sup>16</sup>

As a student exceptionally gifted in intellect, and possessing a passionate heart as well as a compassionate outlook on reality, Simone did not go unnoticed in Alain’s classroom. From the beginning, he appreciated and valued her abilities, even in the face of those who scorned her eccentric appearance. Her sober style of dress, her ongoing concern for the problems of humanity, and her vehement rejection of any superfluous person or thing elicited comments like those of Madeleine Davy, one of her biographers: “I met Simone Weil at the Lycée Henri IV; she was unbearable.”<sup>17</sup>

In the end, however, according to Pétrement, Simone was loved and respected by the majority of her classmates. The school’s academic activities did not keep her from becoming politically active. In fact, her interest in labor unions, political parties, and other revolutionary groups dates to her days at the lycée. Alongside the study of great philosophers, the ideals of

13. *SP I*, 63.

14. *Ibid.*, 64. Pétrement adds: “Just as an artist starts with a work of art and not with the natural world itself, every philosopher starts with a previous philosophy, and this is true even among the greatest.”

15. Information from the website “Philonet, la philosophie à portée de tous,” <http://mper.chetz.tiscali.fr/>.

16. Cf. *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy CD-Rom*, “Weil, Simone.”

17. Davy, *Simone Weil*, 13, cited in *SP I*, 69.

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social justice, democratic freedom, and revolution also formed part of her daily life.

When she completed her studies at the lycée, she began preparing for entrance into the École Normale Supérieure. During this time, she went to the Sorbonne, where the admission exams were given. Preparatory courses for the exam were offered there, but Simone did not attend them often; she preferred to prepare herself by attending Alain's classes and, being a voracious reader, by poring over books she selected. In her rare visits to the Sorbonne, she once came across Simone de Beauvoir.<sup>18</sup> The French writer tells us of their encounter in this striking anecdote:

While preparing to enter the Normale—the training college in Paris for professoriates—she was taking the same examinations as myself at the Sorbonne. She intrigued me because of her great reputation for intelligence and her bizarre get-up; she would stroll round the courtyard of the Sorbonne attended by a group of Alain's old pupils; she always carried in the one pocket of her dark grey overall a copy of *Libres Propos*<sup>19</sup> and in the other a copy of *L'Humanité*.<sup>20</sup> A great famine had broken out in China, and I was told that when she heard the news she had wept: these tears compelled my respect much more than her gifts as a philosopher. I envied her having a heart that could beat right across the world. I managed to get near her one day. I don't know how the conversation got started; she declared in no uncertain tones that only one thing mattered in the world: the revolution which would feed all the starving people of the earth. I retorted, no less preemptorily, that the problem was not to make men happy, but to find the reason for their existence. She looked me up and down: "It's easy to see you've never been hungry," she snapped. Our relationship did not go any further. I realized that she had classified me as "high-minded little bourgeois," and this annoyed me. . . . I believed that I had freed myself from the bonds of my class.<sup>21</sup>

18. The French writer Simone de Beauvoir was Europe's precursor of the feminist school of thought, and her writings on the emancipation of women are her most prominent contributions to that field. In the West, she is also well-known for her relationship with Jean-Paul Sartre.

19. A French philosophy journal to which Alain regularly contributed.

20. The French Communist newspaper founded by Jean Jaurès on April 18, 1904, with the objective of creating a socialist publication independent of other groups in the French workers' movement.

21. Beauvoir, *Mémoires d'une jeune fille rangée*, 236–37, in Beauvoir, *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, 239



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Nevertheless, in the same book, Simone de Beauvoir returns to mention her namesake, with both admiration and loathing. She relates that, in 1926, Weil brilliantly passed the exams in the History of Philosophy and General Philosophy & Logic, in which she received the first-place score.<sup>22</sup> This small episode is significant in Weil's intellectual journey: the practice of a rigorous and demanding intellect informed by a passion for the world and for the individual that burned in a heart which felt profoundly affected by anything that could devalue or abuse human life. The first essay that Weil wrote for Alain—a commentary on *The Six Swans* by the Brothers Grimm—foreshadows her intellectual trajectory in a most symbolic and telling way.<sup>23</sup> The story marks the beginning of the process of constructing the great themes of Weilian thought, which begins in late 1932. Her essay opens with a reference not to Grimm but to Plato: “Among the most beautiful of Plato's thoughts are those he found through meditation upon myths.” This phrase, the very first line of her paper, is astonishing for anyone who is familiar with the subsequent development of her writings. It could very well have been the last line she ever wrote. Plato's work accompanied her throughout her entire life, and she never ceased to delve ever deeper into his thought, defining him as the first of the mystics.<sup>24</sup>

The myth (the symbol) gave the young philosopher pause for thought. Reflecting on myths and their hermeneutics allowed her to speak of what she saw “behind the door,” in other words, to construct a discourse about the mystical reality.<sup>25</sup> This particular Brothers Grimm tale reappears in Simone's life many times, marking her writings.

The core principle of the anthropology of her later years is already present here: that which is good is received only “from the outside,” “from the other.” And this existential posture enables the tendency to do good,

22. Beauvoir, *Mémoires*, 243.

23. OC VI 1, 122: “Parmi les plus belles pensées de Platon sont celles qu'il a trouvées par la méditation des mythes.”

24. AD2, 46: “It was after this that I felt that Plato is a mystic . . .”

25. “La Porte” is the title of a poem by Simone Weil published in *PSO*, 11–12: “Ouvrez-nous la porte . . . nous verrons les vergers . . . / Nous boirons leur eau froide . . . / La longue route brûle . . . / Nous errons sans savoir . . . / Nous voulons voir des fleurs. Ici la soif est sur nous./ Attendant . . . souffrant . . . devant la porte/ S'il faut nous rompons cette porte avec nos coups./ Nous pressons . . . poussons . . . / . . . Languir . . . attendre . . . vainement/ . . . elle est close . . . / Nous fixons nos yeux . . . / Nous la voyons toujours; le poids du temps nous accable./ La porte en s'ouvrant laisse passer tant de silence./ Seul l'espace immense . . . le vide . . . la lumière . . . / . . . lave les yeux . . . aveugles sous la poussière.” See also *Prologue* in OC VI/3, 369–70.

which she will term “inactive action,” one of the most important categories of her thought.<sup>26</sup> “Here, pure abstention is operating. . . . The absence of action, therefore, has virtue. That idea is the most profound of Eastern thought. Action is never difficult: we are always in action and we constantly disperse ourselves through random, scattered acts. . . . Strength and virtue only exist in the refusal to act.”<sup>27</sup>

Here, in seed form, is the complete philosophical theology developed in Simone’s *Notebooks (Cahiers)*: the image of God’s renunciation (*kenosis*), decreasing so that the world could increase and then returning for his children and saving them. Thus, for Simone Weil, the interpretation of the Grimm swan myth is already soteriological:<sup>28</sup> man, transformed here into an animal (a swan), separates himself from God, who “follows after, in search of him.” It is God who searches for man, not the inverse, and God who, in the end, saves him. Salvation is given through the Mediator, who in this case is the silent young sister, daughter of the king, a transparently Christic figure. The analogy that Weil draws between the Grimm tale and Eastern thought is the beginning, here prefigured, of her hermeneutics of culture.<sup>29</sup>

“The only power in this world is purity; all that is whole, unadulterated,” she will later say, “is a piece of truth.”<sup>30</sup> In effect, on the scale of values, intention and attention can replace the effort of the will and of talent. The truth pursued by Simone Weil does not coincide with the truths of ideologies, religions and churches, but rather with a light that quenches the soul’s thirst and without which life is unbearable suffering. In her conception, the constitutive elements of this truth are beauty, purity, and integrity.

And the sign of this “conversion” of the soul can be found in her essay on the Grimm tale: the salvation of the six brothers, transformed by a spell into swans, is not derived from personal effort or the ability to perform

26. *Action non-agissante* (inactive or non-agent action).

27. “Ici, l’abstention pure agit . . . Le néant d’action possède donc une vertu. Cette idée rejoint le plus profond de la pensée orientale. Agir n’est jamais difficile: nous agissons toujours trop et nous répandons sans cesse en actes désordonnés . . . La seule force et la seule vertu est de se retenir d’agir” (OC I, 58–59).

28. Cf. the commentary on the recognition of Electra and Orestes (Sophocles) and on the Chorus of Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon* in *Intuitions préchrétiennes (IPC)*, 15–21, and in SG, 47–55.

29. It was in Marseille, in 1941, that Simone Weil was introduced to Sanskrit and Eastern thought by René Daumal.

30. OC I, 58.

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great acts, but rather from the love of a sister who patiently waits and sews the shirts for them. Making six shirts from aster flowers: here is our only means of gaining strength . . . in this world, strength is purity.<sup>31</sup>

Already here in Simone's essay are the constitutive elements of her later thought: silence, motionless waiting, effective virtue (later recognized and named as humility), purity, beauty, love. God who comes in search of man: all of the doctrine on humanity, the world, and God that develops in her later years (1940–43) already exists here in this text, so fundamental to understanding her thought and her philosophical-theological experience.

This philosophical paper, written at the end of her course, applies the perspective of her teacher, Alain, linking the will and intelligence with work. For Simone, work is the antithesis of the immediacy of thought, because it requires of us a commitment to actions that we do not want to perform to attain the goal that we do, in fact, desire. Such actions are not intrinsically related with the mind's movement toward its goal. Pure freedom of thought and will must be activated in the concrete world indirectly and through mediation. Work, then, is the paradigm of all that she will later designate as a necessity, imposed on the mind. Even if the initial mental act is not interrupted on its path, it allows for neither an extended conceptualization of the world in time and space nor the possibility of speaking about objects or duration (which intervenes between desire and fulfillment). Work was the most important subject for Simone Weil during her young philosophical years. For her, peace was based on work, not religion.<sup>32</sup>

While at the École Normale, she felt the desire to be physically close to the working class in order to experience their living conditions. She wanted, according to her biographer, to undertake manual labor for herself.<sup>33</sup> This desire reveals the inner movement that was beginning to stir her spirit, a stirring that she will later obey and that will culminate in her year of factory work. Social issues greatly occupied the mind of the young idealist Simone. In an attempt to reconcile political ideas with philosophy, many of her papers written for Alain at the École Normale addressed political philosophy or sociology.<sup>34</sup>

31 This is her thesis in the essay, "Le Conte des six cygnes dans Grimm," in *OC I*, 58–59.

32. Article proposed for the Civil Service, for which Simone Weil wanted to work in Liechtenstein, cited in *SP I*, 126.

33. *Ibid.*, 138.

34. *Ibid.*, 142. In this area, as in many others, Simone Weil was a pioneer. Her attempt to reconcile, in terms of intellectual knowledge, the human and social sciences

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Regarding the notion of work, Simone made a special effort to connect seemingly disparate areas of knowledge, such as politics and mathematics, society and ancient philosophy. Simone Pétrement asserts that the theory she came to develop around these ideas was, perhaps, her first important accomplishment in the realm of intellectual thought. She wrote two important articles in 1929: “De la perception, ou l’aventure de Protée” and “Du temps.” Both were published in *Libres Propos*, the magazine in which Alain wrote.<sup>35</sup>

During the summer of 1929, Simone wanted to work in the fields with the farm hands. In these hot months, she went to the home of one of her aunts, in the Jura region of France, and worked ten hours a day harvesting potatoes. She also spoke with the locals and befriended the farming families.<sup>36</sup>

During the 1929–30 academic year, while her brother André went to Aligarh Muslim University in India, Simone finished her university studies. As the topic of her final term paper she chose “Science and Perception in Descartes.” Departing from pure and merely theoretical scientific rigor, she began the reflection by asking if science can contribute to equality and liberty among human being or if, on the contrary, it necessarily implies a new slavery. To answer that question, she goes to the source of modern science, which she believes to be found in Descartes.<sup>37</sup>

And in this paper, she addresses the question of God, declaring God the sole source of true power.<sup>38</sup> Pétrement makes a significant comment on this assertion by Simone: “For her, at that time, God exists. But surprisingly, this God is defined by omnipotence rather than kindness, goodness, or perfection. Perhaps, at that time, she loved liberty or action more than goodness. Or maybe she did not know that she was honoring goodness

will be at the forefront of thinking in the 1960s and thereafter, especially after 1968. Liberation theology, born in 1971 with Gustavo Gutiérrez’s book *Por una teología de la liberación*, inaugurated an entire movement that would have far-reaching and profound implications, not only in Latin America, but throughout the world, and it was prophesied by Simone Weil’s intellectual career. Cf. theses that began to appear comparing Simone Weil’s thought with that of liberation theologians. See Nava’s *The Mystical and Prophetic Thought of Simone Weil and Gustavo Gutiérrez*. Cf. also my article, “Affliction and the Option for the Poor” in *The Relevance of the Radical*, edited by Rozelle and Stone, 240–57.

35. *SP I*, 144.

36. *Ibid.*, 149.

37. Cf. her biographer’s comment in *SP I*, 151. This paper by Simone Weil is published in the collection *Sur la science*.

38. *S*, 70.

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above all else.”<sup>39</sup> To that end, Jacques Cabaud remarks: “She was a heart that, so to speak, still did not know itself.”<sup>40</sup>

It is striking that, for Simone, the existence of God emerges alongside that of the world. It is the idea of God that causes man to realize that he himself is not God, and this knowledge coincides with his learning about the world. And the belief in God, therefore, is postulated and expressed in one’s right thinking about the world . . . a world that is opposed to freedom. The world is an obstacle; it is oppression. The world that oppresses freedom can only be known through work. It is through labor that reason perceives the world.<sup>41</sup>

Simone Weil ends her essay defending and praising work as the redeemer of humanity in the world. Work, for Weil, teaches us to use the world as an exterior obstacle in order to resist the world as an enemy within. Through her praise of work, she will respond to the questions she posed at the beginning of her essay about the usefulness of science for the liberation of humanity. In fact, in this manner, she places workers in the forefront as protagonists in this process of redemption and liberation. She says, “Workers know everything, but outside of working, they do not know that they possess all the wisdom there is.”<sup>42</sup>

Also from this period in Weil’s life, there exist some manuscripts—probably preparatory drafts of her term paper—in which she reflects on God. In these documents, her conception of God is very similar to that of Descartes, to whose philosophy she fully adhered in those years. She asserts that this God is not the God of theologians, but rather “what there is of the infallible in myself.”<sup>43</sup> And according to these scattered manuscript fragments, gathered by her family and friends, belief in God was, for Weil, the very same as just action. Belief is the effect of, not the condition for, courage and virtue.<sup>44</sup>

As she was preparing for the final stages of her university exam, which in France authorized a person to teach, the desire to work in a factory work never left her. She also felt, in her mind and heart, the intuition of some of

39. *SP I*, 155.

40. Cabaud, *L’expérience vécue de Simone Weil*, 21.

41. *S*, 82–83, cited in *SP I*, 157.

42. *S*, 95, cited in *SP I*, 157; quoted in Nevin, *Simone Weil: Portrait of a Self-Exiled Jew*, 56.

43. *SP I*, 159.

44. *Ibid.*, 162–63.

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the tragedies of human history that would touch her closely. In 1931, the year of the Colonial Exhibition in Paris, as she was reading a newspaper article on the French occupation of Indochina and the Annamites' living conditions, Simone truly felt and understood, for the first time, the tragedy of colonization. These were her words: "I saw, on the front page, for this first time, the first few lines of Louis Roubaud's touching report on the Annamites' lives, their misery, their slavery, and the insolence of the whites. Sometimes, with my heart full from reading these articles, I would go to the Colonial Exposition . . ."<sup>45</sup>

The inner process of this young intellectual began to intertwine, unequivocally, with the reality of oppression and injustice in the world . . . the reality of violence of which thousands of human beings were victims. The truth, for which she so passionately searched, began to show its shadowy face. And the compassion that dwelled in her heart from her youngest years, she extended, boundless, to the whole of the universe.

The fragility of her health, together with the economic crisis in France, prevented her from realizing her dream after completing her *agrégation* exam.<sup>46</sup> She wrote to Simone Pétrement: "I provisionally abandoned my great project, due to the crisis."<sup>47</sup> Appointed as a teacher at the lycée in Le Puy, she began a new stage of her life, in which teaching and political commitment would take center stage.

### *Thought and Political Commitment*

Before beginning her work at the school in Le Puy, Simone vacationed in Neville, on the seashore. There, she approached the fishermen and their families and insisted on working with them. Some rejected her, calling her a communist. But others, above all the Le Carpentier family, accepted Simone explaining that her ideology did not matter to them. At night, she went out on the boats with the fishermen, but with such a frail physical composition, they did not know what task to assign her. In the end, Simone looked after the nets and wound the fishing line. She faced storms like the rest of the fishermen, unafraid of the sea.

45. *EHP II*, 135. Cf. also the 1936 *Lettre aux Indochinois*, *EHP II*, 121–22.

46. In the French education system, the *agrégation* exam requires students to submit a written research dissertation and then defend it orally. The *agrégation* title authorizes one to teach in secondary schools.

47. *SP I*, 179.

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When the weather was bad and the fishermen could not go out, Simone would give them classes in different subjects. It is moving to read the story that one of these poor and simple men of the sea related to Anne Reynaud, who shares it in the foreword to the book *Leçons de philosophie*:<sup>48</sup>

She wanted to live like us for several days, fishing and trawling for eels for hours (it's hard work!), sharing our meals, and going back out again to the sea. She taught me arithmetic. Many of the summer visitors didn't like her; they said she was a communist. But I don't think so: our daughter arrived one day with her catechism and she told her, "I'm going to explain it to you out loud . . ."

Anne Reynaud adds: "This simple seaman began our conversation by telling me, 'She was unique . . .' And he added quickly, with great spontaneity: 'She was a saint!'"<sup>49</sup>

Since she would be teaching in Le Puy, Simone Weil moved into an apartment there with the help of her mother. In terms of amenities, food, and facilities, her detachment and restraint were radical and striking. Madame Weil managed to find another teaching colleague to share the apartment with Simone, but she returned to Paris knowing that her daughter often would forget to buy groceries, would not turn on the heat in the winter, and would open her doors to anyone who needed a place to stay. Her philosophy class was composed of only eight students; later, it grew to fifteen. In addition, Simone taught Greek and art history to the younger children. Although she did not have a burdensome teaching schedule, she worked quite hard preparing for each class in detail. It was during this time that she began to experience severe headaches that made her work painful and difficult.<sup>50</sup>

According to her biographer, Simone Pétrement, from the beginning, her students noticed in her teaching sound and strong ideas, well-constructed and exacting. They admired her deeply. At the same time, it seemed to them that she was vulnerable and ill-equipped for practical life,

48. Reynaud, *Leçons de philosophie de Simone Weil*, cited in *SP I*, 183.

49. Ibid. [Translator's Note: Anne Reynaud wrote both an introduction and foreword to the original French, *Leçons de philosophie*. Her introduction is included in the English, *Lectures on Philosophy*, translated by Hugh Price; however, this translation does not include her foreword, which is where she relates this encounter with the fisherman. Therefore, the translation here is my own.]

50. *SP I*, 186.

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and this evoked tenderness in them. They strived to protect and shelter her, even those in her Greek class who were the youngest of all her students.<sup>51</sup>

But teaching was not Simone's only occupation in the early 1930s. After having participated in the General Confederation of Labor (CGT) national conference in Paris, she immediately made contact with the trade union movement upon her arrival in Le Puy. After meeting Urbain and Albertine Thévenon, of Saint-Etienne, she began to take an active part in the Haute Loire and Loire region's trade union movement. She joined the national teachers' union and started to organize meetings for activists of all political orientations, fighting for trade union unity.<sup>52</sup>

From that point on, her life took on a truly feverish pace. Besides classes at the lycée, not only for her philosophy pupils, but also for other younger students, she also gave free classes to the local miners, dedicated herself to trade union efforts, made trips to Saint-Etienne, collaborated with Alain's newspaper *L'Effort*, and wrote articles for the union newsletter. All of this activity took time, robbing her of meals and hours of sleep.<sup>53</sup>

In December of 1931, Simone Weil accompanied a delegation of unemployed workers in Le Puy to the town hall, where they presented a list of demands. Simone's support cost her opposition and attacks, even in the local press, from people who did not understand that an intellectual, a philosophy teacher, would support the unemployed in appealing for that which was not theirs to request. The director of education at Simone's lycée asked for her transfer. She was supported, however, by her students, and there were articles in the local newspaper that were favorable to her intervention.<sup>54</sup>

During this time, she had to face police citations, warnings from educational authorities, and threats of a job transfer, but Simone continued her efforts. Her collaborations and interests during this period turned increasingly to the left, including the far radical left. Her sympathies with anarchism were clear, and her criticism of capitalism, explicit. In spite of her youth, it is curious that she never lacked the ability to think clearly and critically with respect to the contradictions and limits of political ideologies. An article she wrote for *L'Effort* demonstrates this. Published on July 2,

51. Ibid., 187.

52. Cf. Ibid., 188.

53. Ibid., 202–3.

54. For a detailed account of this period, see *SP I*, 205–75; in Pétrement, *A Life*, 75–128.



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1932, it denounces the admiration Stalin had expressed for American efficiency, particularly with regard to industry and technology. Simone asserts that nowhere but in the United States has the subordination of the worker to working conditions arrived at such an alarming state. She concludes that Stalin has abandoned the Marxist standpoint and “allowed himself to be seduced by the capitalist system in its most perfect form.”<sup>55</sup>

Simone felt the opposition against her from the school system and the Ministry of Education, an antagonism reinforced by the reports condemning her extracurricular activities and by the scarce number of her students who succeeded in passing the *baccalauréat* exam. In the end, she decided to request a transfer in order to expand her political efforts to more central and important places than the small city of Le Puy. But she first asked for one month’s leave, in the summer of 1932, to rest in Paris. That August, she departed for Germany.

Like many leftist European activists, Simone imagined that, in Germany, she would encounter the future revolution. She felt a particular affection for this country that can be traced back to her childhood, when she learned of the humiliating terms that the Treaty of Versailles imposed on this nation that was defeated in World War I.<sup>56</sup> However, Simone had another objective: to analyze the political foundations of the Nazi Party, rapidly growing at that time, and understand by what aberration the German proletariat—one of the most educated and organized in Europe—could let itself be seduced by Hitler.

She visited factories and labor unions, chatted with leaders of various political persuasions, and spoke to hundreds of Germans on the streets and in cafés. At the request of her friend and Trotskyist Raymond Molinier, she struck up a friendship with Leon Sedov, the son of Leon Trotsky. Molinier was a member of the intellectual circle coordinated by Boris Souvarine, whom Simone would come to know very well. According to Simone Pétrement, Molinier had pleaded with Weil to contact Leon because he was in danger in Berlin and needed help.<sup>57</sup> She traveled to France carrying information from the Trotskyists in his country.

Simone admired the intellectual vigor of the German people, most of all that of the working class. Her time in Germany opened up a new perspective in her thinking. The articles she wrote and her study of the

55. *SP I*, 275.

56. Cf. Plessix Gray, *Simone Weil*, 82.

57. Cf. *SP I*, 278.

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German situation enabled her to see that the proletariat revolutions heralded by the Marxists for the future were impossible.<sup>58</sup> She also observed that, due to the evolution of the industrialization process and the capitalist organization of labor, the proportion of unemployed workers was reaching a critical stage: the fear of unemployment was a restless ghost.<sup>59</sup>

Simone also became aware of the irreparable corruption within the Russian Communist Party, something she already suspected. And she noted that the German communists had contributed to Hitler's rise to power and to the defeat of the social democrats. Nazism was now gaining momentum in France as well. Returning there from Germany, she obtained a teaching position in Auxerre, a small city southeast of Paris. Through her contacts, she met Nazi deserters and offered assistance to all of them, converting her parents' house in Paris into a veritable hotel.<sup>60</sup>

Simone was not happy in Auxerre, and she longed for her labor union colleagues. Auxerre was a middle-class city and her students, the children of military officers. She lived in a small, unfurnished apartment and did not look after herself well. The relationships she had at school with her teacher colleagues and the principal were not the best. Her students, young middle-class girls, were intelligent and listened politely to their teacher, but Simone sensed that the lessons did not stimulate them.<sup>61</sup>

It is surprising to see the role that religion plays in Simone's writings; she speaks well of it, whatever specific religion it may be, because she finds it superior to superstition. She has words of admiration for the Catholic faith and also admires the ancient Greeks' religion which, in her words, "has only myths and not dogmas."<sup>62</sup> She considers Christianity to be a synthesis of the Greek religious spirit and that of the Bible. In her interpretation, the Beatitude of the poor in spirit has nothing to do with material poverty itself or extreme asceticism, which the gospel seems to require. Rather, it approximates Hegel for whom "the control of the physical body constitutes the condition for freedom of the soul," and she adds that pure ascetics are those who are most dependent on the body itself.<sup>63</sup>

58. Cf. Plessix Gray, *Simone Weil*, 84. See also *SP I*, 289; *ibid.*, 285.

59. Plessix Gray, *Simone Weil*, 84.

60. *Ibid.*, 85.

61. *SP I*, 292–93. See also Plessix Gray, *Simone Weil*, 87.

62. *SP I*, 294. Simone Pétrement says that Weil closely followed her teacher Alain who asserted that myths teach truths, freeing the spirit.

63. *SP I*, 294–95. Pétrement is inspired by Cabaud's work, cited previously, to consult

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Weil's close friend, Simone Pétrement, offers an interpretation of this apparently disconcerting assertion: "This may surprise us, since Simone does not seem to have rejected asceticism, even in her youth. It was not only in spirit that she strived to be poor. But she always avoided advocating a morality that was too strict and that demanded of others what she demanded of herself."<sup>64</sup> She adds: "On the other hand, she never practiced asceticism for asceticism's sake. Rather, given her desire to help others and practice justice, she wanted to share her fortune; she simply could not live any other way."<sup>65</sup>

With respect to God, the class notes discussed by Cabaud and Pétrement show that Simone Weil was on the verge of accepting the ontological argument for the existence of God. At that time, however, Simone's God was still the philosophers' God. In reality, she had more influence over her students than one would suppose—so much so that, to their parents, she seemed dangerous.<sup>66</sup>

During the year she spent in Auxerre, Simone dedicated herself to debates and discussions within the Unitary Federation of Teaching, a union consisting of older reformists, among whom she was disheartened to see her young colleagues.<sup>67</sup> Her reservations with communism, especially with the German Communist Party, were harshly criticized by the French members of the party. However, Simone did not allow this to disturb her; on the contrary, she continued to follow closely the events developing in Germany. It was constant anguish for her to be so far from the place where decisive events were occurring, events that would affect the destiny of the entire world. She sensed that violent times were approaching and she did not want to be far away: she wanted to suffer with the victims.<sup>68</sup>

However, Simone did not align herself with an anticommunism that was cheap and gratuitous, defeatist and revisionist. In a harsh letter to her friend Thévenon, she says that this is the time for unity, not division.<sup>69</sup> Events were accelerating, and Hitler was increasingly gaining power. The number of refugees coming to France was on the rise, and, unhappy in

these notes from Simone Weil's course preparation.

64. *SP I*, 295.

65. *Ibid.*, 295.

66. *Ibid.*

67. *Ibid.*, 303.

68. Cf. fragment of a letter to unknown recipient, cited in *SP I*, 307.

69. Cf. *SP I*, 309–11.

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Auxerre, Simone devoted a good deal of her time to helping them.<sup>70</sup> Her parents' house became a constant coming and going of people seeking refuge; she looked after all of them with maternal concern.

In the spring of 1933, Simone wrote an important text—*Perspectives*—in which she makes clear that Marxism no longer provides her answers as an ideology or a way of life. Here emerges her lucid critique of the Manichean tendency that had formed the communist realization of Marx's theory of class struggle. In response, she proposes a new leftist movement, a Fourth International.<sup>71</sup>

Regarding the Soviet Union, her criticism goes far beyond that which the French left had dared to formulate thus far. It reflects the influence of her friend Boris Souvarine, the noted Russian-born revolutionary syndicalist who cofounded the French Communist Party and was later expelled from leadership for insubordination.<sup>72</sup> At its root, Simone's virulent opposition to Soviet communism that begins in 1933 stems from her closeness and friendship with Souvarine, as well as her lucidity as a thinker.<sup>73</sup> In spite of his support, the French left observed her with increasing suspicion.

Simone's time teaching in Auxerre does not end on a positive note. The school inspectors' reports were not favorable to her, not even from a professional perspective. Her fragile health and constant migraines were supporting evidence of poor performance.<sup>74</sup> The report from the Ministry of Education's representative lauded her dedication but harshly criticized the way in which she presented political convictions and ideologies in the classroom. When the time came for the *baccalauréat*, only three of her twelve students passed the exam. That was sufficient for the principal to eliminate her course, and Simone was forced to apply for a new position elsewhere.

She traveled to Spain where she spent a happy time vacationing on the beach, disclosing an unexpected and hidden beauty beneath her glasses and the homely clothes she deliberately wore. Pétrement writes that a Spanish

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70. Ibid., 313–15. Cf. the touching stories with which Simone Pétrement illustrates Weil's radical practice of compassion and the price paid by her parents, who would have done anything to please their daughter.

71. *OP*, 39, cited in *SP I*, 320–21.

72. Plessix Gray, 87.

73. Ibid.

74. Cf. *SP I*, 341.

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anarchist friend, Patri, who accompanied her, said she “had never been so close to such *joie de vivre*.”<sup>75</sup>

She then moved to Roanne, with a work prospect she liked much more, and continued her efforts to help the German refugees. That Christmas, she convinced her parents to put Trotsky up as a guest, and he arrived at the Weil home with his wife and two bodyguards. Simone engaged this Russian leader in tremendous, vehement discussions, which provoked his wife to exclaim: “This girl dares to confront Trotsky!”<sup>76</sup>

In Roanne, Simone continued to take part in political activities. She had a particular compassion for prostitutes and wanted to know, to understand, their environment and their misery. She felt that experiencing this from the inside and understanding it would give her the means to overcome it. Friends testify to Simone’s eager desire to accompany others in their joys and sorrows.<sup>77</sup>

In March of 1934, convalescing from a throat abscess that weakened her and affected her overall health, Simone began to move away from the practice of partisan politics. In a letter to her friend Pétrement, she writes: “I decided to withdraw completely from all forms of politics except as regards theoretical research. This by no means rules out my possible participation in a spontaneous mass demonstration (of the rank and file, such as soldiers). But I want no responsibility, however small or even indirect it might be, because I am sure that any blood spilled will be in vain, for we are already defeated.”<sup>78</sup>

In this letter, we observe the sad clarity of someone who no longer believes that party politics and violence can solve the problems that are descending upon Europe and the rest of the world. Without abandoning her commitment to the defeated and the downtrodden, Simone participates in strikes and protests, and she continues to look after the German refugees who fill her parents’ house. Within herself, slowly gathering strength is the great project that will forever mark her: to know the world of poverty and oppression from the inside, laboring as a blue collar factory worker.

During her final months in Roanne, Simone worked on one of her most famous texts: “Reflections Concerning the Causes of Liberty and

75. *SP I*, 351.

76. Plessix Gray, *Simone Weil*, 93. See also *SP I*, 383–84.

77. Cf. *SP I*, 393.

78. *Ibid.*, 401.

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Social Oppression.”<sup>79</sup> She called it her “great work,” her “testament,” because it was a synthesis of her thought on the relationship between mankind and the society of her time.<sup>80</sup>

Her decision to work in a factory was conclusive; it was an experience for which she yearned so much that to wait any longer would be to risk losing the opportunity. Nonetheless, what she most desired was to reconcile the infrastructure required by an industrial society with the working and living conditions of a free proletariat. This question, still unanswered, was one she would explore in the burning heat of the factory and in her proximity to the workers’ suffering. Simone Pétrement, as always, lucidly interprets her dear friend: “She must have thought that there, where theoretical reflection found no solution, contact with the object could evoke the answer. Immersed in that misery herself, she would better be able to see what solutions were appropriate to address it. And, after all, it was necessary to understand that which she wanted to discuss.”<sup>81</sup> Simone’s “testament,” which presents the best of her thought on politics and oppression, was finished in December of 1934. She began her work in the factory on the fourth day of that same month.

### *Incarnation, Slavery, and Vocation*

Simone’s near-complete break with organized left-wing political groups did not remove her from reality. A few days before starting work at the factory, she writes to the Thévenons: “Everything that has happened since we parted . . . has made me more and more determined to retire once and for all to my ivory tower, and not come out except for two reasons: the struggle against colonial oppression and the struggle against the maneuvers connected with the idea of passive defense in case of war. As for the anti-Fascist struggle, it is impossible to prosecute it without joining those who are preparing a fine little war side by side with Russia; so I abstain.”<sup>82</sup>

Regarding her decision to work in the factory, Simone wrote an impressive paragraph revealing her desire to be close to the poor and share the harshest living conditions. It also demonstrated her detachment from vanity and prestige and, at the same time, a critical lucidity with respect

79. *OC II, EHP II*, 27–109, cited in *SP I*, 408; in *Oppression and Liberty*, 36–117.

80. See the clear, concise description in Plessix Gray, *Simone Weil*, 103.

81. *SP I*, 412–13.

82. *SP II*, 9, in Pétrement, *A Life*, 217–18.