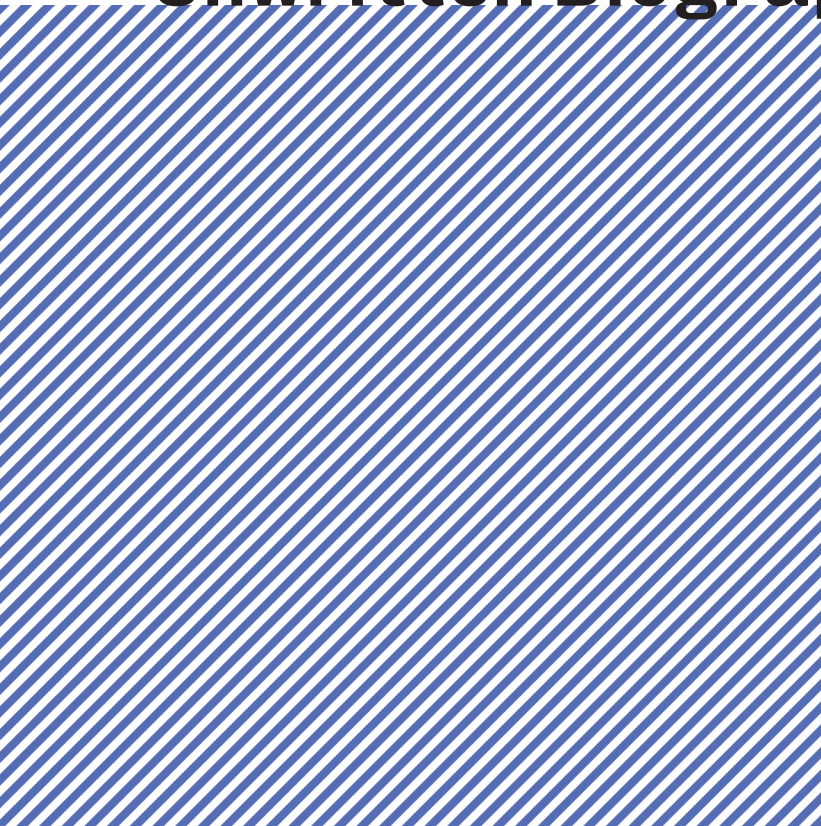


Simone Weil: Sketches for an Unwritten Biography



She was small and wiry, five feet two inches, thin as a rail but able to carry heavy loads and operate heavy machinery. Idleness was a deadly sin. Her older brother said Simone Weil had been in training to become a saint since the age of three, when she indignantly refused to wear a bead necklace. "I hate luxury!" She ate little. The bottom of the pot, she said, was good enough for her. Sweets were anathema. She loved reading ancient languages in the small hours. Her belief in self-sacrifice was as fixed as a law of nature.

Born in Paris in 1909, Simone's life was framed by the two world wars. When France fell to the Nazi armies in the spring of 1940 and her family fled to the unoccupied zone, she knew that her life was over. She must leave France without any thought of returning. Find a way to join de Gaulle and the Free French though all the routes to England were blocked. How to get to London, enlist and die on the battlefield? She wanted to cross behind enemy lines, to merge her patriotic duty as a soldier and her desire for self-sacrifice into one inescapable necessity that would not break God's commandment against suicide.

Simone and her parents flee Paris on June 13th 1940 before the German armies enter the city. They take the train to the end of the line; then join hundreds of others on the road, trudging south. From a window in Nevers they watch a Nazi column enter the city. They continue south to the unoccupied zone, stopping with friends in Vichy at the beginning of July, Toulouse at the end of August and reaching Marseille on September 15. Marseille, the ancient port city swarming with fugitives looking for passage anywhere out of reach of the Nazis and their French collaborators. The Weils rent an apartment on the shore overlooking the Mediterranean.

Early one morning four gendarmes from the local precinct knock on their door, looking for Simone. They rifle through her papers. She looks on, apparently lost in thought. An elderly policeman, seeing Dr. Weil's face, pats him on the shoulder—stay calm, he says; don't take it so hard. They haul his daughter away for questioning.

At the station the interrogator waves a note in Simone's face. It's addressed to a member of the resistance. She knows very well, he says, that her mother and father are sitting in the café right across the street, waiting for her release. Unless she answers all his questions—besides, he knows everything—she will be thrown into a prison cell. It would be a shame. A scholar who has won the highest honors. Sharing a cell with the lowest thieves and whores. She says she has always wanted to learn the minds of real outcasts from society. She can think of no better place to do it than in jail.

The police strategy is to wear her down, keeping her in a corner of the interrogation room. She sits on her bench, motionless, ready to stay there all night. The gray-haired cop looks in every now and then. She gives no sign of noticing him. A presence carved out of stone. An unnerving stillness streaming off her. Hour after hour passes. The cop breathes hard. She's a little bitch, he screams, doing this to her parents! Simone looks up, surprised, looking into his eyes, hardly blinking. It's life in a mad house. He throws up his hands. Crazy—no reasoning with her—throws up his hands in disgust and escorts her to the courtroom. The judge frowns. Why do you bring me such cases? And they let her go.

III

The Vichy regime passes anti-Jewish laws—Jews no longer allowed to teach at the lycée. There's widespread hunger among the poor. She seeks work as a farm hand, living on the land, turning her labor into potatoes, carrots and onions. Gustave Thibon, a gentleman farmer, takes her on as a favor to a friend. Thibon dislikes Jews and supports the fascist regime at Vichy, though he admits it's unfair branding all Jews as traitors.

He meets Weil at the gate, overlooking the Rhone valley, distant vineyards, hills under clouds. Stillness envelops her, a stillness in her eyes. Even after she notices his presence the aura envelops her as she rises to the surface. Weil has never worked on a farm before. Everything is new to her. After the first night she refuses to stay in the house. Refuses the soft bed and warm room—they're too luxurious.

She finds an abandoned cottage in the fields. Four walls, a leaky roof—formerly used as a storage shed for farm animals. Thibon and his wife are dumbfounded. Crumbling stucco walls, earth mixed with pebbles on the floor. Weil sweeps away the spider webs and rat turds, spreads her bedroll on planks on the ground and lights a fire on the hearth. The river a short walk away provides cold clear water. Ice melt.

She struggles to keep up with the other farm hands. Most days she eats a Spartan dinner at the common table in the house. She eats no meat. Sometimes she stays at the cottage and picks berries for her dinner at the cottage—her fairytale house, she calls it. This is as good as life gets, sitting on a rise after a backbreaking day pulling weeds in the vineyard. Sitting on a rise looking across the river at a hill in the distance, dappled, flame-colored October trees. A cup of water, a slice of bread. She's spoiled she writes her parents, living so close to nature, which provides all her needs.

Weil reads Thibon's philosophical writings. They have much in common. She adapts Christian theology to fit her own faith that the laws of physics govern the material world. There are no miracles. But ghostly arms can touch you. She has opened herself to another reality and God is there. Thibon, a devout Catholic, debates with her. Weil is a Jew whose heritage links her to the Hebrew prophets, though she argues the true God is universal, which is what the Greek catholicus means. Interpreting the traditional teachings of the Church, Thibon is compelled to see his own faith in a new light. Weil is tireless when the spirit inspires her and their debates go on till he's exhausted.

But she can be charming. Her wry sense of humor, ironic but never mean or unkind, makes her an excellent companion. Their conversations stretch out over weeks. They wear each other down; then they wear each other in, till they bond over their differences.

The quiet countryside, the rhythmic motions of the earth... In a dream Simone lies under the vines as daylight fades, too tired to stand, still picking grapes, a roar like falling water behind her, lives endlessly falling, limbs, bodies flowing headlong over a precipice.

She passes out illegal papers and forged documents and collects cash for refugees, going on her errands to every corner of Marseille. She offers lessons to anyone who asks—examines the fine points of ancient Greek grammar and adjusts her routine to coach a child on arithmetic, focusing on the times table as seriously as on translating Dawn with her rose-red fingers and the wine-dark sea.

She makes a powerful impression on her contacts in the resistance. She and Malou Blum, who is in charge of the district, form their own mini-conspiracy. Ten years younger than Simone, Malou admires the single-minded clarity of her companion. In her later life she remembers her as a staunch activist tested as a leader of striking workers, always rational and determined to assign any serious risks to herself. They learn to hide their intentions and keep their work for the resistance secret, lying even to their closest friends and family. If they are caught they plan to put on a show to make sure the authorities arrest Simone. Malou is good at playing the role of the ingénue and enjoys acting. Simone cautions that deception is rarely justified, though it may be the lesser of the evils. It should never be taken lightly. She has a horror of all lies.

Looking back, Malou says their conversations are one of the high points of her life, luminous moments that changed her permanently. As an activist, Simone is always practical—nothing saintly about her, not in the least stand-offish, fearless, full of humor, sometimes extravagantly so. For Malou her charisma becomes magnified and clarified by the passage of time. Simone transmits the shock waves sweeping across Europe and transforms herself into a sounding board for suffering and oppression all over the world; she zeros in on the crushing of native cultures by the French in Vietnam and Algeria. At the same time, she anchors herself locally in Marseille, hiding refugees and feeding the hungry on her own street. Malou lights up at the memory—it's Simone's fire, and close up the softness in her face, the veiled depths of her eyes.

Simone is anchored in place. And free—free enough to weigh the twin Juggernauts, Hitler and Stalin, and dismiss them, anchored in the certainty that words (she writes constantly) have little importance—only actions count and are the measure of what she believes, a moral imperative that permits no exceptions. Danger has the advantage that it anchors her more firmly in those certainties.

Many loyalists fled across the Pyrenees when the Spanish civil war ended, and were held in internment camps. Simone hears about Antonio, a fighter who knows no one in France, and never gets mail. The guards single him out as a scapegoat. Antonio suffers silently and never complains. The story takes on a luster like one of Simone's favorite parables. Here is a person who can give the millions in unmarked graves on battlefields and in concentration camps a voice and a human face. She sends him a letter and a care package, apologizing for entering his life without a proper introduction. She hopes he will accept her fellow feelings and agree there can be natural affinities between strangers. She already knows him though they have never met. They begin exchanging letters. She sends small sums of cash when she has any to spare. Simone builds a picture of a man of the people, strong and dignified, qualities she often found among the peasants when she fought against Franco's fascists. There exists such poetry, she says, in the ancient villages, a spirituality that occurs after many generations have earned there living by hard labor on rocky soil. Intellectuals can never be so rooted in the ground inhabited by their ancestors.

Her letters resolve into an image of a distant sharer taking his place in her personal mythology. Moved by her certainty, Antonio is drawn into her orbit, plays the role she assigns to him. The more the letters pass between them, the more they confirm her vision of a surviving golden age: closeness to the soil and harmony with the seasons. His devotion to the land, his ability to read the clouds as they pass over fields and across the sky tunes her musical portrait. The anarchist Antonio has renounced the traditional faith but preserves the moral clarity of the village elders. Interpreting Antonio to himself (none of his letters survive), she says natural religion is his birthright. When he is transferred to a barracks in Algeria she has no doubt he finds joy there, in spite of all the hardships. His suffering is relieved by the purity of the cloudless sky and the illumination of star-filled nights in the desert.

Simone Weil approaches Father Joseph Perrin for help finding work as a farm hand. The blind priest is known for sheltering Jews and other refugees. He later writes that he was struck at once by Simone's seriousness and reticence. In the cloudy light of his inner eye he sees the expression on her face, the depth of her humility and quiet selflessness. She has always been drawn, she says, to Christ and the Catholic religion and asks about the dogmas of the Church: What does it mean to be baptized as a Catholic? Father Perrin is unable to see that though they use the same names, Simone's "God" and "Christ" are entirely different from his own or that of any Catholic. She herself doesn't examine the contradictions inherent in the language she uses.

She says an inner light leads to God through the things of this world, the poetry of daily life and the daily round of duties. One must embrace ordinary things, the sacredness of all material and immaterial things that are smaller than the universe. Pay attention—the place where we are is Ithaca. But a night will fall darker than any human being can bear. The light fails; nothing prepares us for the evil hours of affliction; everywhere voices cry: Why hast thou forsaken me? Those who feel abandoned in this way can't help rebelling against existence, against the creation itself, a force blind, brutal and cold. Simone says the cross of affliction is a marvel of divine technique. We must wait not thinking of God, emptying the mind—thinking of God separates us from him.

She is drawn to the Catholic Church, she tells Perrin, but her "God" wishes her to stay outside any institutional faith. He has chosen her to serve the cause of intellectual freedom and to speak for all outcasts and outsiders. It's impossible for her to be baptized. Her "Christianity" is outside time; it exists in all of "God's" creation at all times. The anarchist Antonio, who calls himself an atheist, is more saintly and closer to "God," than she will ever be.

In her self-consciousness Simone Weil is cosmopolitan and incapable of the reflexive patriotism of the ordinary Frenchman. Her instinct when it comes to the national interests is not to rush to the defense of "my country." In this sense she confirms the perennial charge that Jews have divided loyalties. The nation was traumatized in the years before World War I by the Dreyfus Affair that divided it into two irreconcilable camps and shaped Simone in ways she herself never acknowledged. Hatred of Captain Dreyfus, the first Jew admitted to the elite army officer corps, occurred at every level of society; at his trial Dreyfus publically accused his highest-ranking fellow officers of bearing false witness against him. Though he was ultimately cleared and reinstated, half the country still believed he was guilty. In any case, he had not done his duty to sacrifice himself and defend the "honor" of the Army at any cost, a subtle and even more insidious treason.

Being rooted is an essential need of the soul, Simone says. Her roots are in the culture and soil of France. She can choose to be baptized and accept Father Perrin's offer, an ardent offer—adopt the national religion. She has the freedom to choose; but they're talking about two incompatible forms of faith: the Christ who was crucified at Calvary offers salvation only to members of the Catholic Church; her universal "Christ" appeals to the faithful of all religions. She switches back and forth between the two different meanings, sometimes in the same sentence, as if hiding from her role as a dissenter, a party of one.

Simone can't escape the contradictions, her doubleness in the conversations with Father Perrin: who she is in spite of herself—a Jew and not a Jew, truly French and not French enough—a glove turned inside-out as the hand revolves.... She feels the divisions within, her grandparents who observed the Jewish religion, buried memories that keep surfacing: living with the friction, living with migraine headaches that never stop even in her sleep, trapped by more imperfections than she can bear. She confesses to a friend that she's broken, out of tune, a broken instrument that will never sing again.

In June 1942, on the verge of leaving France for good, Simone asks Perrin to keep her mystical writings and do as he wishes with them. "As for the loving kindness with which you have favored me, I wish it could be turned from me and redirected toward the message I carry within me, and which, I like to believe is far more valuable than I am." After the end of World War II Father Perrin publishes six letters from Simone explaining why she won't be baptized and several essays on the appeal of universal "Christianity" to the faithful in all ages. Perrin calls the collection *Waiting for God*. The letters, he says, reflect only one moment in their conversations, part of an interrupted process that might have led anywhere. *Waiting for God* records Simone's inner life, a snapshot without a gloss to hint at the labyrinthine depths it enfolds. Her faith allows no exceptions; obedience to God is an absolute, even if obeying God would result in her own damnation. The mystery is inseparable from her prophetic mission.

Ever since childhood, Simone writes, she has known she must stand "at the intersection between Christianity and everything that is not Christianity." She is destined to "live alone, a stranger, an exile in relation to any social milieu without exception." At such moments she becomes a romantic rebel, casts herself as the central figure in a sacred melodrama. When she writes, "if it were conceivable that in obeying God one should bring about one's own damnation and in disobeying him one could save oneself—even then, I would choose to obey," she spells out a faith that shields and allows her to continue in a world crazed by war.

But "someone who has known pure joy, even for a minute," Simone says, "and tasted the beauty of the world, for it's the same thing—only that person knows what it is to be flayed by affliction." The affliction of others opens the way. The sufferer is "only a little piece of flesh, naked, inert and bleeding beside a ditch; he is nameless; no one knows anything about him."

"One loves God through the things of this world," she adds, the most painful of all, "a veiled love, love by indirection." This is a kind of mystical poem in which life is a struggle to reach the highest rung of being in order to experience reality as it is, if only at the instant of death. She quotes an ancient Hindu fable: "when a soul has arrived at a love that fills the universe in all directions this love becomes the unfledged bird with golden wings whose beak pierces the egg of the world."

Simone never loses her awareness of the singularity of that vision. She confides it to Father Perrin, whose sympathy and discretion she depends on. She says nothing about it to her atheist family and closest friends. Starting from the line between natural and supernatural realms she draws, which must be taken on faith, *Waiting for God* belongs to the realm of great mystics who were also poets: St. John of the Cross and St. Francis. She is mad; as a rationalist, who

interprets divine commandments and applies rigorous logic to them appears to be mad. She is sane; she applies these inflexible standards only to herself, condemning her failure to live up to them. Forgives others their trespasses, while insisting that her own cannot be forgiven.

God has made a problem without a solution, commanding her to forgive the trespasses of others, which is impossible without forgiving herself. Her desire to impress Father Perrin uncovers layers of self-deception outside and within. Simone dismisses the Rabbinical wisdom of her forefathers. That ancestry carries a sting that alienates her in her native France. She could never be just an ordinary citizen. Her Jewishness is one of the blocked passages in the mazes of her mind: the mixed motives of her denials in the age of Hitler—vanity of vanities. Her own trespasses will never be forgiven. There are no miracles on this earth. She does penance by leaving Marseille and French soil forever.

Simone's ship sails for Casablanca on May 20th 1942. She embarks again on June 7th, arriving in New York on July 6th. She gets her parents settled on Riverside Drive; her brother is already there. Simone leaves New York for England on November 10th and arrives in Liverpool on November 25th. Stationed in London with the Free French, she pleads with them to send her as a spy behind enemy lines, fails to persuade them, and dreams she is invisible, like dead leaves or certain insects. She hides her illness from her parents lest they try to reach her.

Simone Weil dies of self-starvation at the Ashford Sanitarium, Kent, on August 24th 1943.

Review

By Christopher Hamilton

How could any biography of Simone Weil be anything but unwritten? For Weil, words are unimportant compared with deeds. What you do shows who you are, not what you say. "Be not too hasty to trust or admire the teachers of morality," says Imlac in Johnson's *Rasselas*: "they discourse like angels, but they live like men." Weil did discourse like an angel. How could she not doubt herself? Yet she lived through words as much as deeds: one of the many points of self-laceration that marked her life.

These points are everywhere: in her asceticism, in her hatred for her own Jewishness which she denied was hers, in her contempt for the bourgeois comfort which made her what she was, in her hostility to intellectuals of whom she was so striking an example.

It is her longing for purity that undoes her even as it makes her. Here we have a mind wrecked by Christianity's vision of the possibility of a life that could escape the fact that, as William James has it, our civilisation is "founded on the shambles." There is no such escape, but escape is what Weil craved more than anything. She hated the world in its compromised, ramshackle mess, but kept telling herself that she loved it. Herbert Marder is right: she saw herself as "a romantic rebel...the central figure in a sacred melodrama."

Melodramas can be lurid, and there is something lurid about Weil's life. Many rewrite it in the form of a hagiography: Marder knows better. Weil lives everywhere and everything in some kind of extreme. Nietzsche said of Christianity that it had a hatred for measured emotions. Perhaps. But the comment certainly applies to Weil. This makes of her life something that many admire and find fascinating, but would have no intention of seeking to emulate. Yet this reservation is usually hidden. Marder exposes it. He does not let us forget that this is a monstrous life, even as it holds its own appeal. That is the way with melodramas. Weil's *mise-en-scène* of her life was so knowing that it consumed itself in gestures whose spirit is given by her comment that every time she thought of the crucifixion of Christ she committed the sin of envy.

Her life was lived out, as Marder says, in a personal mythology, a mythology in which others might easily figure as mere means for her to achieve her goal of Christ-like affliction that she chose to see as a form of joy. Did she ever see anyone as he or she really was? Obsessed with interpreting – she called it "reading" – without prejudice, one wonders whether this remained anything more than an idea in her head. Her hatred for her own body certainly stopped it from being an idea that pervaded her whole being. One feels, reading Weil, that everything is wrong and yet somewhere, somehow, there is something right: that she knew more deeply than most of us do the truth in Kathleen Raine's words that we live "encumbered with irrelevancies

which we mistake for living experience, and which in the end come more and more to usurp it." Weil supposed that somewhere, beyond the rim of those irrelevancies, there might be truth. But perhaps she shows us that, whatever it is that we suppose the truth to be, is just one more irrelevancy.

Biographies

Herbert Marder is a poet, painter, and emeritus professor of English at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, where he taught literature and rhetoric. He is the author of *Feminism and Art: A Study of Virginia Woolf* (University of Chicago Press, 1968) and *The Measure of Life: Virginia Woolf's Last Years* (Cornell University Press, 2000). In 1970, Marder and his wife, singer Norma Marder, co-founded the New Verbal Workshop, an experimental ensemble conceived as a platform for exploring "speechmusic." For more than a decade, the New Verbal Workshop brought together an evolving personnel of trained performers and amateurs, who developed a repertoire of original compositions through collective improvisation. The ensemble also performed experimental music by distinguished contemporary composers Kenneth Gaburo and Ben Johnston.

Christopher Hamilton is Senior Lecturer in the Philosophy of Religion at King's College London, where he has taught since 2003. He completed a BA in philosophy at King's College London and an M.Phil. in philosophy at Birkbeck College, London. He began his Ph.D. at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, and completed it at Birkbeck College and the University of Bonn, Germany, where he studied German literature as well as philosophy. Before beginning his appointment at King's College London, Hamilton taught at Birkbeck College, the Open University, Sheffield University, and the Catholic University of Lublin, Poland. In 2007, he was Scholar in Residence at the University of Salzburg, Austria; in 2013, he was a visiting professor at the University of Trent, Italy. Hamilton's research interests include the relation between philosophy and literature, and between moral, religious and aesthetic value; the nature of good and evil; Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Simone Weil; the philosophy of middle age; and tragedy. He is the author of the books *Living Philosophy: Reflections on Life, Meaning and Morality* (Edinburgh University Press, 2001), *Middle Age* (Acumen, 2009), *How to Deal with Adversity* (Picador, 2014), and *A Philosophy of Tragedy* (Reaktion, 2016), as well as of numerous important essays and interviews in scholarly publications and popular media.