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I came with a sword

Toril Moi



THE SUBVERSIVE SIMONE WEIL: A LIFE IN FIVE IDEAS

by Robert Zaretsky.

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WE DON'T ADMIRE Simone Weil because we agree with her, Susan Sontag argued in 1963: 'I cannot believe that more than a handful of the tens of thousands of readers she has won since the posthumous publication of her books and essays really share her ideas.' What we admire, Sontag thought, is her extreme seriousness, her absolute effort to become 'excruciatingly identical with her ideas', to make herself a person who is 'rightly regarded as one of the most uncompromising and troubling witnesses to the modern travail of the spirit'. Sontag underestimates the power of Weil's ideas, I think, but she is right to say that in the minds of readers, Weil's thought and life are intrinsically connected. Her life is the ground that gives her thinking its full meaning.

Simone's father, Bernard Weil, was a successful doctor. Her mother, Selma, had wanted to study medicine, but her father wouldn't allow it. Thoroughly assimilated French Jews, Simone's parents practised no religion, and didn't tell their children that they were Jewish until they were teenagers. Simone, born in 1909, was overshadowed by her older brother, André, a mathematical genius who at the age of twelve was reading Plato in Greek.

As a toddler Weil developed an extreme fear of germs and couldn't stand to be touched. She was also preternaturally clumsy. At school, she couldn't write fast enough to keep up with the others. She suffered from phobias, a sense of disgust provoked by certain foods, and by the idea of contamination. She had migraines. She was extremely myopic. Scholars have debated whether or not she was anorexic. She certainly had a neurotic relationship to food, was extremely thin and always wore clothes that hid her body. She wanted her family to treat her like a boy, sometimes even signing letters to them 'your son, Simon'. She

found the idea of being an object of desire repulsive, and dressed in an outlandish way. The poet Jean Tortel remembered her as ‘a kind of bird without a body, withdrawn, in a huge black cloak which she never took off and which flapped around her calves’. Weil never defined herself as a woman, any more than as a Jew.

She graduated from the École Normale Supérieure in 1931, during the brief prewar period when the institution admitted women. (Simone de Beauvoir, a few years ahead of her, didn’t have the opportunity to apply.) Weil had an immense appetite for learning, was a natural teacher and a driven writer. She once said that she felt her mind was crowded by ideas clamouring to be expressed. Yet throughout her life, she insisted on taking on physical tasks for which she lacked the slightest aptitude. In another person this might be seen as selfish. She often became a burden on others. But for most readers, her writing – her intense examination of *malheur* (‘misery’ or ‘affliction’), the exploitation of workers, of power, violence, war, duties and the need for roots – transfigures all this. Weil writes about her experiences with luminous clarity. Her austere and difficult life lends authority to her thinking in a way other intellectuals can only dream of.

Yet that life depended to an astonishing degree on the support of other people, in particular on the quiet labour of her parents. In 1931, she took up her first posting as a *lycée* teacher in the small town of Le Puy in the Auvergne. Refusing to live on more than the entry-level salary of an elementary school teacher, Weil sent most of her wages to a fund for striking workers. She would happily have lived in a hovel, but Selma, who virtually commuted from Paris to Le Puy during Weil’s year there, found her a spacious flat with a bathroom, and persuaded one of Weil’s colleagues, Simone Anthériou, to share it. Weil had no practical sense, so her indefatigable mother saw to it that the two Simones got a housekeeper. Weil wanted to live like a worker, yet her phobias meant that she could only eat the most expensive cuts of meat. If she couldn’t get them, she would simply go without. Selma quietly made a deal with Anthériou: she would buy decent meat and Selma would secretly refund her. Simone herself never had any idea how much her food cost.

Weil earnestly wanted to share in the suffering of others. She spent her spare time as a teacher doing trade union work. In 1934-35, she took a leave of absence, and spent the autumn working on her syndicalist analysis of Marxism, later published as *Oppression and Liberty*. In December, she went to work on the assembly line at Alsthom, building electrical machinery. The work was dangerous and she was bullied by the foremen. Her lack of strength and dexterity made her accident-prone and she often failed to fulfil her quotas. She fell ill after a month and had to take six weeks’ sick leave. To help her recover, her parents took her to a sanatorium in Switzerland. As soon as she felt better, she went back to the factory, where she survived another month before she left (or was fired). Next she found work at Carnaud, making gas masks and oilcans; she was laid off after a few weeks. Then Renault hired her. At the end of August, she was fired. The experience of dangerous, physically exhausting and soul-destroying factory work forms the background to *La Condition ouvrière*, a collection of texts – journal entries, letters, brief essays – dealing with

the way capitalism crushes the bodies and souls of workers. When Hannah Arendt read it in the 1950s, she thought it was the best thing ever written on the subject.

In August 1936, Weil crossed the Spanish border and made her way to Barcelona. There she managed to join a group of international volunteers in the small town of Pina de Ebro. Noticing her short-sightedness, her comrades at first refused to give her a weapon. But she demanded so vociferously to be allowed to carry a rifle like everyone else that they relented (though they prudently stayed out of range). One morning, less than two weeks after her arrival, she failed to see a vat of boiling oil on the ground and stepped into it, suffering terrible burns. After a few days, transportation was found to get her back to Barcelona. If her parents had not been waiting there, to provide treatment, food and rest, she might well have died. Towards the end of September, they finally persuaded her to return to France with them.

This became a recurring pattern. Weil acted on conviction, always with great courage and absolute determination. But in the background, her parents were ready to drop everything to make sure that she survived her attempts at living out her ideals. Gustave Thibon, a farmer and the editor of one of her most popular books, *Gravity and Grace*, thought that their 'constant care . . . put off the inevitable outcome'. The Weils themselves were perfectly aware of their role. 'If you ever have a daughter,' Selma said to Tortel, 'pray to God she won't be a saint.' When people expressed sympathy for her parents, Simone would reply: 'Another member of the Society for the Protection of my Parents!'

After Spain, Weil continued to work with trade unions, but she also became interested in Catholicism. She had mystical experiences in which she felt the loving presence of Christ, yet she refused to be baptised. She loved God, but she didn't love the Church, with its persecution of anyone who refused to submit to its dogmas. Although it caused her great pain to remain outside organised religion, Weil refused to become part of a community defined by the excommunication of dissenters and the exclusion of the non-baptised.

In June 1940, the Weil family only just outpaced the German invasion, getting the last train out of Paris. They stayed in Marseille until May 1942, when they left for New York via Casablanca. In Marseille, Simone decided to work as a farmhand. She also asked Thibon, who had reluctantly agreed that she could work on his farm, to let her sleep outside, which he absolutely refused to do. In the end they compromised on an abandoned, half-ruined, rat-infested house owned by his wife's parents.

As soon as she arrived in the United States, Weil campaigned to be allowed to join the Free French in London. She finally succeeded, and after a strenuous Atlantic crossing, and internment in Liverpool, she arrived in London in December 1942. When she died of tuberculosis and self-starvation in a sanatorium in Ashford, Kent, on 24 August 1943, she had been separated from her parents for nine months. In London she wrote day and night, far exceeding the pedestrian reports the Free French asked her to produce. Her output in

this period was prodigious. *The Need for Roots: Prelude to a Declaration of Duties towards Mankind*, her epochal study of what is required for us to feel at home in our society, was written during this time. When she was diagnosed with TB in April 1943, she hid her illness from her parents, filling her letters with pious lies. She didn't mention that she had become too sick to work, and didn't tell them she was in hospital. When she died, a telegram was sent to André in Philadelphia. He went to New York to break the news to his unsuspecting parents.

The last word Weil wrote in her diary before her death was 'nurses'. While she might have been thinking of the nurses who attended her in her final days, it is tempting to see this as a reference to a project she had promoted since the war began – that the Allies should send volunteer nurses to the front lines. Since only the simplest care could be given in battle, they wouldn't need to be highly trained. They would comfort the dying more often than saving the living. But the deeper purpose was moral: the white-uniformed nurses would serve as emblems of moral courage and symbols of Allied values, their femininity contrasting with the masculinity defined by the Totenkopf and the black uniforms of the SS. Naturally, Weil wanted to be among the first nurses deployed. She even took a First Aid course in preparation. When General de Gaulle heard about her plan, he exclaimed: 'Mais elle est folle!' Weil was deeply hurt by the dismissal of her idea.

A further disappointment followed when the Free French refused to send her on a mission into occupied territory. None of her superiors in London would entertain the thought. Her bad eyesight and clumsiness were well known. Some also thought her 'physical type' made her unsuitable. In other words: she looked too Jewish. The likelihood of her being caught – possibly jeopardising the lives of others – was too high. Although her good friend Maurice Schumann (later foreign secretary under de Gaulle) patiently explained why nobody in their right mind would send her on a secret mission, Weil reproached him. Why would such an intelligent woman fight so tenaciously for such quixotic projects? Maybe the answer is simply that they would oblige her to risk her life.

It's hard to know what to make of Weil's life and death. Christians see her as Christ-like in her suffering. Others may find her desire to help selfish and her insistence on doing work she couldn't handle almost risible. Even Thibon admits that watching Weil try to do the dishes had him in fits of laughter. She knew perfectly well she was unsuited to practical work. But saints must often bear the ridicule of others. In her last years, she came to see the 'extraordinary difficulty' she had 'in doing an ordinary action' as a favour from God, because it kept her from attempting more self-aggrandising heroics. However strangely she did the dishes, Thibon was in awe of her presence, her luminous gaze, her 'insistence on inner purity and authenticity'.

I am struck by her loneliness. She wanted to merge with the masses, to be anonymous and unobtrusive – a worker, a farmhand, a trade unionist, a soldier – one among many, working and fighting alongside others. Yet she found true solidarity hard to come by.

Everywhere she went, she stood out. She was often the only woman; she was always different. Tortel notes that her purity inspired fear. Even her writings are not really about acknowledging the pain of others. They are, rather, about the complete eradication of the self in the service of the afflicted, who, precisely because of their affliction, have already had their own subjectivity obliterated. Weil's only loving interlocutor is God.

WHAT ABOUT Weil's ideas? There is no disputing their importance. Her thinking about affliction, attention, factory work, oppression and liberation, rights and obligations, and the need for belonging has been influential across political theory, moral philosophy and theology. She has inspired thinkers as different as Maurice Blanchot, Iris Murdoch and Giorgio Agamben. Wittgensteinians such as Peter Winch and Cora Diamond have felt kinship with her ideas about language and morality. The feminist philosopher Andrea Nye has suggested that Weil's emphasis on obligations rather than rights might offer a way out of the impasse over abortion in the US. Thousands of ordinary readers interested in mysticism or Catholicism have found her books illuminating.

Others have found her thinking repellent. Sontag expresses relief that we can admire Weil without having to agree with her 'anguished and unconsummated love affair with the Catholic Church, or accept her gnostic theology of divine absence, or espouse her ideals of body denial, or concur in her violently unfair hatred of Roman civilisation and the Jews'. George Steiner goes even further. He considers Weil 'one of the ugliest cases of blindness and intolerance in the vexed history of Jewish self-hatred'. They have a point. She had an almost visceral loathing for 'Hebrew' and Roman culture, matched in intensity only by her deep veneration for ancient Greek culture and Catholicism. More than half of *The Need for Roots* is taken up with her passionate insistence that French culture and politics went awry as a result of the Romans. In Weil's account, the Druids, who resisted the Romans, emerge as the unlikely heroes of French history.

In *The Subversive Simone Weil: A Life in Five Ideas*, Robert Zaretsky sets out to show that Weil's ideas can still 'resonate' with secular readers today. He wants us to learn from Weil, but he also thinks that, undiluted, she is likely to send us running. His solution is to tone her down. The value of affliction 'lies in the use we make of it. Whether it can teach us anything as grand as wisdom depends on how we define wisdom. If virtues like comprehension and compassion, toleration and moderation are to constitute at least part of wisdom, we could do worse.' But Weil was never a champion of 'moderation'. Zaretsky's Weil becomes Simone of the Suburbs, a standard-bearer for traditional liberal morality.

In 'The Love of God and Affliction' (included in the essay collection *Waiting for God*), Weil writes that 'compassion for the afflicted is an impossibility.' The afflicted 'have no words to express what is happening to them'. Affliction is different from suffering, for it mutilates a person's whole being. In affliction, Weil writes, 'a kind of horror submerges the whole soul. Extreme affliction, which means physical pain, distress of soul and social

degradation, all at the same time, is a nail whose point is applied at the very centre of the soul.' We see examples of this every day: the homeless person on the street corner; the refugee stuck in a desolate camp or immigration centre; the trafficked woman suffering daily assaults by anonymous men. What can possibly count as the 'wise use' of such destitute lives, of such affliction?

One of Weil's most passionate accounts of affliction can be found in her essay 'The Iliad, or the Poem of Force', written at the beginning of the Second World War. 'Force,' she writes in Mary McCarthy's excellent translation, is 'that X that turns anybody who is subjected to it into a thing. Exercised to the limit, it turns man into a thing in the most literal sense: it makes a corpse out of him.' Force is the power of 'halting, repressing, modifying each movement that our body sketches out'. Because force is the ability to kill, it can make a thing out of a human being while he is still alive. 'He is alive; he has a soul; and yet – he is a thing,' Weil writes. Her example is the overpowered soldier in the *Iliad*: 'A man stands disarmed and naked with a weapon pointing at him; this person becomes a corpse before anybody or anything touches him ... Still breathing, he is simply matter; still thinking, he can think no longer.' Weil taught us how to think about the horrors of the Holocaust.

Her reflections on war are also reflections on slavery. 'To be outside a situation as violent as this is to find it inconceivable; to be inside it is to be unable to conceive its end ... Always in human life, whether war or slavery is in question, intolerable sufferings continue, as it were, by the force of their own specific gravity.' Faced with absolute force, the slave is reduced to a thing. To say that a person is a thing, is a 'logical contradiction', Weil writes.

Yet what is impossible in logic becomes true in life, and the contradiction lodged in the soul tears it to shreds. This thing is constantly aspiring to be a man or a woman, and never achieving it – here, surely, is death but death strung out over a whole lifetime; here surely is life, but life that death congeals before abolishing.

Force, moreover, both generates and is generated by *prestige*, which Weil defines as 'that marvellous indifference that the strong feel towards the weak, an indifference so contagious that it infects the very people who are its objects'.

Force does not just destroy its victims. It is also 'pitiless to the man who possesses it, or thinks he does'. The soldiers at Troy inevitably 'exceed the measure of the force that is actually at their disposal', because they don't realise its limitations, or their own. It intoxicates the powerful but, as Weil sees it, force is not a quality of the person but an impersonal energy. At the end of the essay Weil declares that force is *matter*, that is to say nature, material necessity, a heaviness (gravity) that weighs us down. So what do we do when faced with force? Clearly, compassion, moderation, and other fine liberal virtues won't help. We must 'learn that there is no refuge from fate, learn not to admire force, not to hate the enemy, not to scorn the unfortunate'. To do this, we can't just rely on our own

capacities: we need grace. It's difficult to imagine that Weil could have produced such a powerful analysis without having suffered on the assembly line and in the Spanish Civil War. It is also difficult to imagine that she could have written anything like this had she decided to be less demanding, less extreme: in short, less herself.

Zaretsky rightly devotes a chapter to Weil's ideas on attention. For her, attention is not focused, tense concentration. It has nothing to do with willpower. Attention is *attente* – a waiting, a letting go, an unselfish opening. To struggle with a problem in geometry is valuable whether or not we manage to solve it, because it teaches us to be open to God and therefore to others. The 'love of God', she writes

has attention for its substance; the love of our neighbour . . . is made of this same substance. Those who are unhappy have no need for anything in this world but people capable of giving them their attention. The capacity to give one's attention to a sufferer is a very rare and difficult thing; it is almost a miracle; it is a miracle.

The point of studying is not to learn this or that, but to acquire this discipline of the soul. Weil argues that we can train our attention by doing geometry, Greek and Latin translation and by writing, if we are willing to wait for the right word to come. 'The intelligence,' Weil writes in a passage I particularly love, 'can only be led by desire. For there to be desire, there must be pleasure and joy in the work. The intelligence only grows and bears fruit in joy. The joy of learning is as indispensable in study as breathing is in running.' Weil's method is hardly a way to get straight As, for if there is no joy, there should be no work. As always, she practised what she preached. She failed the entrance exams to the *École Normale* the first time she tried, because she disliked her history teacher and so never turned up for his classes.

Zaretsky's account of attention ends with a discussion of the everyday experience of seeing a beggar at the motorway exit. The question, as he sees it, is whether I am willing not to look away, willing to stop and give money. I agree that this is a moral dilemma. I also share his sense of failing this simple moral test more often than not. But even if I were to give money every day, this is not what Weil means by paying attention to the afflicted. To do that, I would, at a bare minimum, have to stop, get out of my car and ask: 'What are you going through?' I would also need to listen to the answer. But given that the afflicted can't say what they are going through, I would also have to take in the whole situation, grasp what affliction is, and what force is, and how this person has come to be in such a horrific state. If I truly did all that, I would feel compelled to act on my understanding. And by the time I had come so far, I would have missed the class I was on my way to teach. If I continued in this vein, I might soon find myself out of a job. No wonder that Weil insists that an act of true attention towards the other is a miracle.

Zaretsky stresses the importance of *The Need for Roots*, but his account of the book is somewhat diluted by his penchant for drawing parallels to other philosophers. He places

Weil in the conservative tradition of Edmund Burke, Roger Scruton and other communitarian thinkers. He has a point: Weil's account of the need for roots is a savage critique of modernity, which has uprooted every social class, including farmers and peasants. She insists that uprootedness creates a loss of community by destroying the sense of a common past, and the concomitant responsibility to transmit that past to future generations.

There is no denying that *The Need for Roots* is quite strange. In her 1976 biography of Weil, Simone Pétrement notes that in the original manuscript hardly anything is crossed out. The sentences certainly bear no traces of hesitation or doubt. The tone is dogmatic, and the last third of the text offers a theological metaphysics of matter which would surely have baffled the officials of the Free French, had they ever received it. Weil attempts to show that there is no conflict between religion and science, since science explains the behaviour of matter, and matter is, for Weil, ultimately explainable as obedience to God: 'The universe is nothing but perfect obedience,' she concludes. She also harps on the Romans and their evil influence on the French state.

At the same time, *The Need for Roots* is radical and extremely inspiring. It is rightly famous for its first section, setting out the 'needs of the soul'. Here Weil rejects all 'rights talk'. We should not focus on rights, she argues, but on obligations. Obligations (*devoirs*) precede rights; rights are situational and relative, obligations are metaphysical, absolute and eternal. How do I know what my obligations are? An obligation arises from the very fact of encountering another human being. If I encounter a starving human being, I am not in doubt: I offer food. (Food and eating are the chief metaphors she uses to describe what it means to respond to a need. For me, these metaphors became a reminder that the woman who wrote this was slowly dying from starvation.)

Each obligation responds to a human need. Weil begins by emphasising the need for order, which she conceives of as the complex organic unity of all the other obligations. The rest she organises loosely as a series of oppositions (or in one case, a triad), each of which must be combined in just balance: liberty and obedience and responsibility; equality and hierarchy; honour and punishment; security and risk; private property and collective property; truth and freedom of opinion. Although Weil's text is more of a sketch than a fully worked-out account, it offers a rich starting point for anyone who feels that traditional rights talk (which is too often paired with 'identity talk') has ceased to deliver the kind of insight necessary in our own times.

Although she thinks a good society needs order and a sense of hierarchy, Weil believed that the French police had lost all credibility with the French people. (She doesn't explain why, but it must have to do with its role in suppressing strikes before the war, and its collaboration with the Vichy government.) For her, defunding the police would not be radical enough. She proposes dissolving the French police force, and building a new body from scratch.

The Need for Roots also contains a critique of colonial and other kinds of conquest. A proper sense of rootedness will create a new kind of patriotism, she writes, one that is entirely incompatible with empire. To conquer a people is to destroy its traditions, which means destroying both its past and its future. And since history is written by the victors, these peoples will be eradicated from the historical record. In this context she mentions the fate of Native Americans, as well as Polynesian children who have to learn history from textbooks that talk about ‘our ancestors the Gauls’.

Above all, *The Need for Roots* contains a stunning account of the dignity and value of work. Weil considers unemployment to be the worst form of uprootedness, and gives a lot of space to the need to avoid authoritarian workplaces, to offer workers respect, autonomy, freedom, to give them an ambitious education, and make sure they can own a house with a small garden. Weil conjures up a world in which work, not least the work of farm labourers and factory workers, would be ‘lit up by poetry’.

When read alongside her account of force and affliction, Weil’s vision of a just world permeated by respect for the dignity of work helps us understand the wretchedness of refugees in the West today. They arrive traumatised by war and conquest, forcibly cut loose from their roots, and yet we treat them with suspicion and refuse them the right to work. In Weil’s language, we meet refugees with force, deny their crucial needs and push them into affliction. In the same way, her vision of the dignity and honour of work makes me see more clearly than ever that contemporary mutations, such as zero-hours contracts, are incompatible with the respect we owe another human being.

As I reached the end of *The Subversive Simone Weil* I came to think of the book as a bit of a conundrum. Why would anyone in search of a liveable secular morality turn to Simone Weil? Zaretsky is surely right to think that if we take Weil as seriously as she took herself, our nice lives will fall apart. Following her path would destroy our families, our careers, our wellbeing. But that was her point and she recognised it as a challenge: ‘I come not to bring peace, but a sword.’ Faced with communism, fascism, war, invasion and concentration camps, Weil’s extremism – her asceticism, her saintliness, her thought – was a response to extreme times. If she strikes me as more relevant than ever, it may be because we are beginning to realise that we too live in extreme times. What sacrifices and what heroism will the climate crisis demand of us?

I am no more capable of living up to Weil’s demands than Zaretsky is. But the solution is not to argue that ideals aren’t worth having. The question is what do we want and need from ideals? Teenagers may read about the lives of saints or the exploits of heroes because they themselves aspire to be saints, or because they hope that one day they too will carry off grand exploits. But most grown-ups harbour no such hopes. We read accounts of heroism, rather, to see what human beings are capable of, and to shore up our shaky faith in the possibility that this world can be changed.



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Letters

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Toril Moi describes my version of Simone Weil as a ‘Simone of the Suburbs’ (LRB, 1 July). The phrase is catchy and her dislike of the burbs – those bastions of ‘moderation’ – is clear. Less clear, though, is her claim that Weil was ‘never a champion of “moderation”’. That depends on what one means by moderation. In my book I suggest that Weil believed, as did her editor Albert Camus, that moderation was another word for resistance. Moi might disagree with this claim, but instead she scants it.

My book, in fact, receives scant attention in her review. She can ignore it, of course, but I cannot ignore her few misleading references to it. Space allows me to cite just two instances. First, Moi mentions my account of the moral confusion I feel whenever I stop my car next to a panhandler. She assumes – something this admirer of Weilian attention does quite a bit – that my dilemma is whether to stop and give him money. What I actually asked, however, is whether my children, in the back seat, would one day open the car window and, as Weil urged, ask the panhandler: ‘What are you going through?’ Acting on the other’s humanity, I wrote, is the ‘important question’, not whether to hand over a buck.

Second, Moi finds my book a ‘conundrum’. ‘I am no more capable,’ she writes, ‘of living up to Weil’s demands than Zaretsky is.’ Fair enough. ‘But the solution,’ she adds, ‘is not to argue that ideals aren’t worth having.’ Malgré Moi, I never argued this. Should she ever come to Houston, we can meet at the coffeeshop in my corner of the benighted burbs and compare our clearly different versions of the same book. Would this change Moi’s mind? All I can do is try – like her, I’m an idealist.

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