

SIMONE WEIL AND THE THEO-POETICS OF COMPASSION

ANDREA HOLLINGSWORTH

I. Introduction

A notable consensus is emerging among contemporary readers of twentieth-century philosopher, activist, and mystic Simone Weil with regard to the way in which Weil's writings are most adequately approached. Specifically, there seems to be a growing acknowledgement that discerning the power and significance of Weil's thought requires a hermeneutic which attends to the intricate dance of form and content in her writings. David Tracy dubs Weil a "thinker whose very forms of thinking often act like searchlights amid our contemporary confusions,"¹ while Joan Dargan argues that Weil's distinctly "poetic" way of thinking and writing reveals "the inadequacy of inherited forms to the moment, the need for new modes of expression."² More recently, Weil's theological poetics have been brought into dialogue with prominent twentieth-century fictionists³ and artists.⁴ Such readings of Weil suggest that, when her works are encountered with an eye not only to *what* she says, but to *how* she says it, there emerge patterns of thought and speech which strike deep, resonant chords within the contemporary imagination (especially the

Andrea Hollingsworth

Berry College, Department of Religion and Philosophy, P.O. Box 550, Mount Berry, GA 30149
USA

Email: ahollingsworth@berry.edu

¹ David Tracy, "Simone Weil: The Impossible," in E. Jane Doering and Eric O. Springsted (eds), *The Christian Platonism of Simone Weil* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004), pp. 229–241; p. 232.

² Joan Dargan, *Simone Weil: Thinking Poetically* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1999), p. 39.

³ Ruthann Knechel Johansen, "Simone Weil's Ethic of the Other: Explicating Fictions Through Fiction, or Looking Through the Wrong End of the Telescope," *Cross Currents*, Vol. 60 no. 1 (March, 2010), pp. 70–88.

⁴ Angelo Caranfa, "The Luminous Darkness of Silence in the Poetics of Simone Weil and Georges Rouault," *Philosophy and Theology*, Vol. 23 no. 1 (2011), pp. 53–72.

theological imagination)—chords of lamentation, of protest, of ceaseless questioning, and of resolute searching for truth amid the rubble of modernity's shattered optimisms.

This article probes Simone Weil's theological thinking on the topic of compassion, and seeks to do so in the spirit of this attentiveness to both the manner and material of her thought. As a genuinely original thinker who was both witness to and sharer in some of the grossest afflictions of her time, Weil was able powerfully to portray in words the tragic and yet strangely hopeful phenomenon of human suffering-with. In many of her writings, Weil employs a fragmentary, provocative, highly poetic form of speech to lay bare the paradoxes involved in the experience of compassionate human communion. Attunement between a sufferer and sympathizer is, for Weil, both the most beautiful, genuine, and possible—and the most grotesque, impersonal, and impossible—of human moments. The more fully compassion is realized in intersubjective continuity between an afflicted one and a sympathetic one, the more decisively that continuity is interrupted by the power of affliction to annihilate both parties. Ultimately for Weil, this union-amid-breakage is theological in nature: relational spaces of authentic human compassion share radically in the concurrently intensifying distance and oneness of Creation, Incarnation, and Cross. For Weil's reader, the intensely provocative material of her thought, combined with the beguilingly bewildering method by which she conveys it, stand as invitations to a multifaceted involvement in the event of her poetic vocality.

After preliminary comments on Weil's biography and literary style, this article expositis Weil's writings with a view toward the possible impossibility of compassion in her thought, and the Christic paradox that underlies it. Concluding remarks center on hermeneutical implications of Weil's theopoetics of compassion.

II. Biographical Considerations

Anyone who would study seriously Simone Weil cannot escape the imperative to attend to her biography. "Of course," remarks Tracy, "her thought cannot be reduced to her life. But her life itself, so multiple and united only by her tenacious sensibility, provides some signal clues to her remarkable flashes of pure thought."⁵

On the topic of compassion especially, the confluence of Weil's life and writings is striking. In a letter to a colleague in 1942—about a year before her death—Weil confided: "The suffering all over the world obsesses and overwhelms me to the point of annihilating my faculties and the only way I can

⁵ Tracy, "Simone Weil: The Impossible," p. 229. Tracy also says of Weil: "[U]nlike the rest of us, even Kierkegaard, Simone Weil was not only an 'apostle of the Impossible.' In her strange and unnerving thought and her even stranger and most unnerving life, Weil herself was impossible." *Ibid.*, p. 241.

revive them and release myself from the obsession is by getting for myself a large share of danger and hardship."⁶ Indeed, Weil devoted much of her existence to seeking ways to share in the exigencies and miseries of the prewar and WWII era. In interwar Europe, the utopian trust in technologically-aided social advance had given way to a dystopian world of mad violence, and the terrors of the recent past—especially the Great War—made it no longer possible to call upon “progress” as a narrational category with which to interpret history and imagine the future of civilization. Much of the anxiety of the 1930’s and 1940’s was manifested in the factory culture, where large numbers of women and men languished under the crushing weight of long hours and dangerous, grueling work conditions. Between 1934 and 1936, Simone Weil juggled her teaching duties, political involvements, and writing projects with factory work so as to share in the suffering and dehumanization of plant laborers.⁷ Although exhaustion and ill health kept her from holding any factory job for very long, she spent enough time with machines, assembly lines, and fellow laborers to learn intimately of the miserable, degrading, personality-grinding reality to which the employees were subject on a daily basis. It was likely during her time in factories that Weil first began to develop her concept of affliction—a key motif to which we shall return.

Throughout the mid 1930’s and early 1940’s Simone Weil continued to attune with those she considered most crushed by the mad violence and oppression of her era. In 1936 she traveled to Spain to fight against the Loyalists in the Spanish Civil War, and later, while in New York City in 1942 with her parents (for safety during WWII), she regularly attended a black Baptist church in Harlem where she was the only white person.⁸ In Simone Pétrement’s words, Weil persistently devoted her energy “to serving those who belonged to ‘the humiliated layers of the social hierarchy’ . . . She never gave up the fight against the forces of oppression and, for this reason, she involved herself in dangerous and unusual undertakings.”⁹ Weil’s “dangerous and unusual” decision during 1942 and 1943 to refuse to eat more than the French (who were at that time under alimentary restrictions due to German occupation) contributed to her early death from tuberculosis complicated by malnutrition in August, 1943.

Weil seemed to welcome self-destruction, and to strain toward death. Louis Bercher, Weil’s friend and physician, “believed [she] felt a desire for

⁶ Simone Weil, “Letter to Maurice Schumann, 1942”, *Simone Weil: Seventy Letters*, in Richard Rees (trans), (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 156.

⁷ Weil’s factory work was part and parcel of her significant involvement with radical left-wing political coalitions such as the French Popular Front.

⁸ Upon arrival in the United States Weil recognized quickly the oppression of African Americans. Louis Bercher, a doctor and friend of Simone Weil, made the curious comment that if Weil would have remained in the United States “she would surely have become a black.” Simone Pétrement, *Simone Weil: A Life*, in Raymond Rosenthal (trans), (New York, NY: Pantheon, 1976), p. 478.

⁹ Pétrement, *Simone Weil*, p. 214.

mortification, not just to mortify herself but in order to share in the misfortune in which she knew so many people were engulfed.¹⁰ What is the significance of Weil's self-directed violence for her interpreters? While Weil denied that persons should seek out affliction, it is "indisputable" that she herself did seek it out.¹¹ As Claire Wolfteich observes, Weil "worked her body until it was weak and unhealthy," "never ate properly," and "ended her life at age thirty-four by refusing food."¹² Some of Weil's recent interpreters have argued that she suffered from some form of mental illness connected with internalized oppression on account of being a Jewish female in pre-WWII Europe. To a certain degree such arguments seem reasonable, even probable. However, while some knowledge of Weil's life (including its extreme aspects) is crucial for an adequate understanding of her thought, such awareness must be balanced with Wolfteich's important conclusion that "[Weil's] powerful thought should not be read entirely through her own biography."¹³ It is admittedly complex—but not absurd or impossible, I think—to appreciate the hyperbolic nature of Weil's thought whilst rejecting as prescriptive the hyperbolic pattern of her lived existence.

III. Truth, Knowledge, and Language: Thinking Poetically

Simone Weil's theory of truth contributes to a remarkable union of form and content in her writings. Weil's use of language is tied directly to her intuition that truth—like the Good, affliction, and God—is totally unavailable to conceptual apprehension and linguistic representation. Mediated by "metaxu"¹⁴ and discernible only in flashes of pure thought, truth stands before the intellect as a naked beggar, "eternally condemned to stand speechless in our presence."¹⁵ But while "[t]he intellect can never penetrate mystery," it alone can "determine the suitability of the words that express it." Moreover, "[f]or this use, it must be sharper, more piercing, more precise, more rigorous, and more exacting than for any other."¹⁶ Discourse on truth must mirror truth's impossibility; writing is a kind of "translation" which "push[es] away those

¹⁰ Pétrement, *Simone Weil*, p. 421.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 516.

¹² Claire Wolfteich, "Attention or Destruction: Simone Weil and the Paradox of the Eucharist," *Journal of Religion*, Vol. 81 no. 3 (2001), pp. 359–376; p. 375.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ "Metaxu"—a Platonic concept Weil develops—denotes a disconnect, separation, or absence that is also, paradoxically, an intimate connection: "Two prisoners whose cells adjoin communicate with each other by knocking on the wall. The wall is the thing which separates them but it is also their means of communication. . . . Every separation is a link." Simone Weil, *La pesanteur et la grâce* (Paris: Plon, 1947), *Gravity and Grace*, Emma Craufurd (trans), (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1952; London and New York: Routledge Classics, 2002), p. 145.

¹⁵ Simone Weil, "Human Personality," *The Simone Weil Reader*, in George A. Panichas (ed), (New York, NY: David McKay Company, Inc., 1977), pp. 313–339; p. 330.

¹⁶ Simone Weil, *Oeuvres complètes*, VI:2, A.-A. Devaux, F. de Lussy (eds), (Paris: Gallimard, 1988–90), p. 460, trans. by and quoted in Dargan *Thinking Poetically*, p. 138.

words that obscure the model, the silent thing that must be expressed."¹⁷ This task is, for Weil, pure negation; it involves immense suffering, terror, and hopelessness—and yet, it is the beginning of wisdom.¹⁸

Weil's arduous search for truth/the Impossible and the expression thereof results in a highly poetic form of writing. "Refreshingly, mystifyingly, her words are rarely predictable; Weil's cast of mind is of the sort that ponders, lingers, amplifies, races ahead, cuts through forests of impressions with aphoristic sweep; one comes across unexpected elaborations of insight and equally abrupt silences. Such writing is never far from poetry."¹⁹ Weil employs a profusion of genres and styles in her effort to touch on and communicate truth in words. Her essays, aphorisms, prayers, and parable-like examples²⁰ are marked by a tone that is, first, highly contradictory. Weil's method of investigation is to arrive at a position, and then immediately thereafter to jump to the exact opposite point of view. As Fielder notes, this to-and-fro is not an effort to arrive at a "golden mean" or "synthesis," but rather, an "equilibrium of truths."²¹ Secondly, the timbre of Weil's authorial voice is strikingly impersonal; the subject of her statements is often anonymous ("when *one* encounters affliction . . .") and her absolutist pronouncements seem given from a universal perspective ("the Good *is* . . ."). This search for total authorial anonymity amounts to what Dargan calls a "linguistic decreation of the self."²² Third, as her *Cahiers* (notebooks) demonstrate, Weil regularly employs a structurally fragmented method of thinking and writing. Single words or phrases are often placed next to each other, separated by diverse punctuations: for example, a period, a mathematical sign, a dash, a colon, or an open parenthesis which never closes.²³ Here Weil

¹⁷ Weil, *Oeuvres Complètes*, VI:1, 302, trans. by and quoted in Dargan *Thinking Poetically*, p. 103.

¹⁸ Simone Weil's theory of truth and language is poignantly illustrated by the following example/parable, drawn from her essay "Human Personality": "A man whose mind feels that it is captive [to falsehood] would prefer to blind himself to the fact. But if he hates falsehood, he will not do so; and in that case he will have to suffer a lot. He will beat his head against the wall until he faints. He will come to again and look with terror at the wall, until one day he begins afresh to beat his head against it; and once again he will faint. And so on endlessly and without hope. One day he will wake up on the other side of the wall. Perhaps he is still in a prison, although a larger one. No matter. He has found the key; he knows the secret which breaks down every wall. He has passed beyond what men call intelligence, into the beginning of wisdom." Weil, "Human Personality," p. 331.

¹⁹ Dargan, *Thinking Poetically*, p. 16.

²⁰ For an insightful analysis of Weil's rhetorical use of the "example," see Christine Ann Evans, "The Power of Parabolic Reversal: The Example in Simone Weil's Notebooks", *Cahiers Simone Weil*, Vol. 19 no. 3 (1996), pp. 313–324.

²¹ Leslie Fielder, Introduction to Simone Weil, *Attente de Dieu*, Emma Craufurd (trans), (Paris: Lacombe, 1950), in *Waiting For God*, (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 1951), p. xxvii.

²² Dargan, *Thinking Poetically*, p. 7.

²³ The following, drawn from Weil's New York Notebook (1942), is paradigmatic: "Réalité = contact d'une nécessité – (contradiction: la nécessité n'est pas tangible. Harmonie, mystère." ["Reality = contact with necessity – (contradiction: necessity cannot be touched. Harmony, Mystery."] Here the subject under consideration (reality) is defined as "contact" with necessity. But necessity—which, by definition, is the undoing of reality insofar as it can be understood—is

is indebted most of all to Pascal, whose *Pensées*, like Weil's *Cahiers*, tend to read like haphazard sprinklings of dense insight.²⁴

Such formal qualities combine to create a writing style that is unrelenting in its provocation:

Weil's use of language is not only, as one would expect, highly sophisticated; it is audacious, stunning, willing to risk offense in the service of expressing, or testing, her convictions. What Hannah Arendt writes of Walter Benjamin applies equally to Weil: "[W]e are dealing here with something which may not be unique but is certainly extremely rare: the gift of *thinking poetically* . . ."²⁵

Weil is a metronome whose arm sways ever steadily between the essential and the discardable, daring her readers to participate, to react, and to re-evaluate. As we narrow our lens to focus on the subject of compassion, we shall see that this provocative inconclusiveness—which mirrors the contingency and emergency of her historical era—is constitutive not only of the manner, but also the material, of Weil's discourse.

IV. The Possibility of Compassion

Simone Weil views attuned encounter with the afflicted as perhaps the most important aspect of lived Christianity. Her biography certainly bears this out: her life could be interpreted as one unremitting search for the realization of compassionate existence. In her writings she speaks often of the Christian obligation of charity toward the neighbor, implying that love for the afflicted other is not only feasible and valuable; it is, in fact, *hyper*-possible. When authentic, compassion is nothing less than the instantiation of the Real.

intangible. Together, these two truths cannot be reconciled; and yet, they cannot be thought apart from each other. This paradox is structured directly into the phraseology of the fragmented statement. Reality literally "equals" (=) contradiction, signaled by a statement that begins with a parenthesis but ends with "*Harmonie, mystère*" (note the lack of a closing parenthesis). Weil's statement thus remains infinitely unresolved, both formally and materially, which has the effect of giving her reader a taste of the radical aporia she sees as constitutive of both "reality" and "mystery." Simone Weil, *Oeuvres Complètes*, VI:3, p. 403. Translation mine.

²⁴ The structural similarity of Weil's *Cahiers* to Pascal's *Pensées* is obvious, and many have noted it. But the ideological affinities can also be quite striking. Observe, for example, the following from the *Pensées*: "Jesus Christ wants his witness to be nothing. The quality of witnesses means that they must always and everywhere be wretched. He is alone." The blunt and hyperbolic style is very Weilian; what's more, Pascal's notion of "wretchedness" and its significance for theology seems a clear predecessor of Weil's unique Christology and her notions of "decreation" and "affliction" (all to be treated below). (Blaise Pascal, *Pensées and Other Writings*, in Honor Levi (trans), (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 11.)

²⁵ Dargan, *Thinking Poetically*, p. 2.

4.1 Affliction and The Experience of God

In Weil's philosophy, genuine encounter with affliction ("le malheur") is so closely tied to the experience of God that the two cannot be spoken of separately. Because for Weil affliction is "at the center of Christianity," and that which we are "commanded to love first of all,"²⁶ it is imperative to understand at the outset what she means by "affliction."

More than suffering, affliction is the total seizure and "uprooting" of a life that once enjoyed some semblance of physical health, psychological stability, and communal belonging.²⁷ Affliction is a catastrophic combination of persistent and permanent physical pain, psychological anguish, spiritual distress, and social humiliation that kills the personality (in whole or in part) and plunges it into anonymity, turning what was once a person into "*une chose*"—a thing. "Affliction is a device for pulverizing the soul; the man who falls into it is like a workman who gets caught up in a machine. He is no longer a man but a torn and bloody rag on the teeth of a cog-wheel."²⁸ The afflicted are slaves to their misery. To describe affliction Weil frequently employs imagery of writhing, twisting, and contorting, implying that the only freedom the afflicted possess is the liberty to determine which warped, grotesque movement they will make in response to their anguish.²⁹

Affliction is the epitome of the absence of God. Through it, "the world of necessity 'enters' our bodies and souls: we realize that we humans belong to an impersonal world governed by mechanical laws and inexorable necessity."³⁰ But because for Weil, "God can only be present in creation under the

²⁶ Simone Weil, *Gateway to God*, in David Raper (ed), (London: Collins: Fontana Books, 1974), p. 96. *Gateway to God* is a compilation of Weil's writings drawn from *First and Last Notebooks* (first published in the French in 1950 as *La Connaissance surnaturelle*). *Gateway* should be read as a successor to *Waiting For God* (first published in French in 1950 as *Attente de Dieu*).

²⁷ Weil uses a mixture of fragmented and non-fragmented language to describe affliction: "Quasi-hell on earth. Complete uprooting in affliction. Human injustice as a general rule produces not martyrs but quasi-damned souls. Beings who have fallen into this quasi-hell are like someone stripped and wounded by robbers. They have lost the clothing of character. The greatest suffering which allows any of a man's roots to remain is at an infinite distance from this quasi-hell" (*Gravity and Grace*, p. 28).

²⁸ Weil, "Human Personality," p. 331. Here Weil comes extremely close to us in her description, for she surely speaks out of her personal experience of factory work and her knowledge of factory workers' misery. And yet, her discourse pronounces from on high; it is as if she speaks from a universal perspective of the way things simply *are*. Weil attunes with and alienates her readers at once, reflecting in her style of writing the aporetic theme which so permeates it.

²⁹ Weil writes: "Those who have received one of those blows that leave a being wriggling on the ground like a half crushed worm, those individuals don't have words to express what is happening to them" (*Waiting For God*, p. 69; cf. *Gateway to God*, p. 96). Elsewhere, describing those whom *la force* crushes, Weil remarks: "He is living, he has a soul; he is nonetheless a thing. Strange being—a thing with a soul; strange situation for the soul! Who can say how it must each moment conform itself, twist and contort itself?" (Simone Weil, *L'Iliade ou de poème de la force*, James P. Holoka (trans), *Simone Weil's The Iliad or the Poem of Force*, critical ed. (New York, NY: Peter Lang, 2006), p. 46).

³⁰ Alyda Faber, "Dancer in the Dark: Affliction and the Aesthetic of Attention," *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses*, Vol. 35 no. 1 (2006), pp. 85–106; p. 87.

form of absence,³¹ the torment of affliction can be said to be the site of the purest experience of the divine.³² In other words, affliction is tied to the experience of God insofar as the experience of necessity is revelatory of a God who is present only through absence. "This world," writes Weil, "in so far as it is completely empty of God, is God himself. Necessity, in so far as it is absolutely other than the good, is the good itself."³³ Here—in a way which leaves readers wondering whether she speaks as a theologian or a philosopher (for the twin phrases seem to indicate she is equally neither and both)—Simone Weil declares that the transcendent is disclosed in the void of necessity, and the principal effect of that void, namely, affliction.³⁴

Compassion, however, is an exception to the utter absence of God in the world. In a passage from her *Cahiers* Weil notes: "God is absent from the world, except in the existence in this world of those in whom His love is alive. Therefore they ought to be present in the world through compassion. Their compassion is the visible presence of God here below."³⁵ The experience of necessity and the absent-present God finds its quintessence in relational spaces of shared affliction. In such spaces, one person voluntarily attends to and wholly identifies with an afflicted other—for example, feeding this other if she or he is hungry, just as one would feed oneself.³⁶ In this manner, "compassion itself is the effect and sign of being united to God by love."³⁷ Clearly for Weil, affliction and the interpersonal sharing thereof are integral to the experience of God; even more, they are virtually the only modes in which the divine presence-as-absence is made manifest in creation.

4.2 Attention to Affliction

According to Simone Weil, what the afflicted most need is "people capable of giving them their attention."³⁸ Compassion is possible only through the prac-

³¹ Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, p. 109.

³² "It is in affliction itself that the splendor of God's mercy shines, from its very depths, in the heart of its inconsolable bitterness. If still persevering in our love, we fall to the point where the soul cannot keep back the cry "My God, why has thou forsaken me?" if we remain at this point without ceasing to love, we end by touching something that is not affliction, not joy, something that is the central essence, necessary and pure, something not of the senses, common to joy and sorrow: the very love of God." Weil, *Waiting For God*, p. 44.

³³ Weil calls this paradox the "mystery of mysteries" which makes "safe" all who touch it; (Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, p. 109.)

³⁴ Thus Weil will declare, "Relentless necessity, wretchedness, distress, the crushing burden of poverty and of labour which wears us out, cruelty, torture, violent death, constraint, disease—all these constitute divine love. It is God who in love withdraws from us so that we can love him. For if we were exposed to the direct radiance of his love, without the protection of space, of time and of matter, we should be evaporated like water in the sun. . . . Necessity is the screen set between God and us so that we can be"; (Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, pp. 32–33).

³⁵ Simone Weil, *La Connaissance surnaturelle*, Richard Rees (trans), (Paris: Gallimard, 1950), in *The First and Last Notebooks* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 103.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 327.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Weil, *Waiting For God*, p. 64.

tice of “l’attention”—the discipline of a mind in perpetual self-renunciation in its intent contemplation of the other. “Attention consists of suspending our thought, leaving it detached. . . . Above all our thought should be empty, waiting, not seeking anything, but ready to receive in its naked truth the object that is to penetrate it.”³⁹ Attention involves a self-diminishment in which one’s desire becomes wholly fixated on the existence of the other *as other*. To pay attention is to invite the truth of the other to penetrate the self, with full knowledge that this truth is (and will remain) “certainly something different, perhaps something completely different, from what we read in [the other].”⁴⁰ Attention is thus radical, perpetual, self-questioning; in the words of Mary G. Dietz, it is “a humility in the face of the incompleteness of one’s own knowledge, a compassion which extends patience toward others, a recognition of the autonomy of others, a real effort to take in a reality beyond the self.”⁴¹ “Decreation”—a crucial Weilian term to which we shall return—perhaps best describes the noetic and existential self-renunciation at the heart of true attention.

As we have said, for Weil, the intersubjective space of shared suffering is one of the manners in which “God is really though secretly present” in creation; thus, the act of attending to the afflicted is a “form of the implicit love of God.”⁴² Coming out of ourselves through the act of contemplative attention to suffering frees us to encounter the divine presence at the “centre” of the self⁴³ and in the being of the neighbor—the afflicted one “of whom nothing is known, lying naked, bleeding, and unconscious in the road.”⁴⁴ Whenever and wherever afflicted persons are encountered, listened to, and loved “for themselves alone,”⁴⁵ God in the voluntarily self-emptied sympathizer meets God in the sufferer who has been forcibly emptied of self by necessity. This relation is, for Weil, the impossible fullness of the divine life, which gives back to victims of affliction their humanity and their voice.⁴⁶ To experience it is to experience the presence of God

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

⁴⁰ Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, pp. 134–135.

⁴¹ Mary G. Dietz, *Between the Human and the Divine: The Political Thought of Simone Weil* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1988), p. 133.

⁴² Weil’s essay “Forms of the Implicit Love of God,” may be found in *Waiting For God*, pp. 83–142.

⁴³ As the following demonstrates, Weil closely linked selfhood and divinity: “As the Hindus perceived, the great difficulty in seeking for God is that we have him within us, at the centre of ourselves. How can I approach myself? Every step I take leads me away from myself. That is why we cannot search for God. The only way is to come out of oneself and contemplate oneself from outside. Then, from outside, one sees at the centre of oneself God as he is. But coming out of oneself means a total renunciation of being anybody and complete assent to being merely a thing”; (Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, p. 261.) We shall return to this topic of “God within the self” below in a discussion on decreation and deification.

⁴⁴ Weil, *Waiting For God*, p. 50.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 92–93.

implicitly,⁴⁷ for “compassion itself is the effect and sign of being united to God by love.”⁴⁸

Yet, to better understand Weil’s intricate intertwining of attention, affliction, and revelation, we must examine her thinking on the ways in which authentic compassion succeeds in uniting sufferer and empathizer.

4.3 Union with the Afflicted

In a letter to Father Perrin—a priest with whom she corresponded regularly during her last years—Simone Weil told of her intense desire to unite herself with others:

I have the essential need, and I think I can say the vocation, to move among men of every class and complexion, mixing with them and sharing their life . . . *merging into the crowd and disappearing among them*, so that they show themselves as they are, putting off all disguises with me. . . . For if I do not love them as they are, it will not be they whom I love, and my love will be unreal.⁴⁹

In her life as well as her theology and philosophy, Weil was convinced that in order for compassion⁵⁰ to be “real,” a kind of interpersonal merger must occur.⁵¹

For Weil, such a fusion is preceded by (and a response to) genuine attention to *this* or *that* specific sufferer. It consists of a dual movement. First, there is an openness or receptivity to the afflicted other in which his or her pain enters one’s mind and flesh.⁵² Second, there is a “projection” in which a compassionate person—desiring to “establish” the humanity of an afflicted

⁴⁷ “Implicitly” because, for Weil, the revelation of (and union with) God in the context of compassion is an experience which is also a counter-experience. In fact, she insists that one should not think of God at all while attending to an afflicted individual, for it is all one can do to direct one’s gaze toward “this small inert thing of flesh, lying stripped of clothing by the roadside.” In moments such as this, “the presence of God in us has as its condition a secret so deep that it is even a secret from us. There are times when thinking of God separates us from him”; (Weil, *Waiting For God*, p. 93). In noting this “secret,” we of course anticipate the impossibility of compassion and the experience of God therein—to be treated below.

⁴⁸ Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, p. 327.

⁴⁹ Weil, *Waiting For God*, pp. 6–7. Emphasis added.

⁵⁰ Weil often speaks of compassion and love interchangeably.

⁵¹ It seems that Weil herself experienced such a merger while she was an unemployed factory worker who was, like many other laborers, searching for a job. Pétrement recounts: “Having become an unemployed worker or regarding herself as such, Simone began looking for work. . . . In the course of her peregrinations she met two workers (metal fitters who were also looking for work), with whom she had a conversation—‘extraordinarily free, easygoing, at some level above the miseries of existence which are the predominant preoccupation of the slaves, above all the women.’ She notes: ‘Total feeling of comradeship. For the first time in my life, in short. No barrier, either in the class difference (since it is suppressed), or sexual difference. Miraculous.’” Pétrement, *Simone Weil*, p. 237.

⁵² Weil avers that during her time as a factory laborer, “the affliction of others entered into my flesh and my soul. Nothing separated me from it . . .”; Weil, *Waiting For God*, p. 25.

individual—"transports" his or her very being into the other. These centripetal and centrifugal movements are beyond "natural pity"; authentic compassion is not merely feeding and clothing the other, which only frees the helper from thinking about the sufferer as soon as the act of altruism is accomplished, and solidifies the "distance" between them.⁵³ Rather, the person who attunes truly to someone in affliction is "left naked, without clothes or protection, exposed to every blow."⁵⁴ But such vulnerability to the other's hellish reality holds potential to "bring to birth" in the sufferer "an existence apart from . . . affliction."⁵⁵ This self-renouncing, total identification is thus profoundly creative. In spaces of true intersubjective "suffering-with," Weil suggests that the generativity of the divine bursts forth into the nothingness of human wretchedness, providing existence, personality, and hope—if only for a moment.

Theologically, Weil interprets the creative oneness of being between an afflicted and an unafflicted individual as a result of the fullness of Christ's presence, which constitutes the encounter through and through.⁵⁶ Compassion is "a sacrament," states Weil; "a supernatural process by which a man in whom Christ dwells really puts Christ into the soul of the afflicted."⁵⁷ Weil does not hesitate to use cannibalistic imagery—the literal consumption of one person by another—to speak of the radically sacramental union of sufferer and empathizer.⁵⁸ Is this merely rhetorical—intended to shock and offend readers, and/or, to draw the widest possible distinction between commonplace pity and genuine compassion? At one level, yes; such provocative imagery is, as we have said, ingredient to Weil's poetic discourse. But at another level it is evidence of an absolutely serious, utterly urgent, totally non-metaphorical conviction that, by physically expending/exhausting the self on the other's behalf, one can give nutritive life to the afflicted. Alec Irwin explains:

Weil's theories about the transfer of energy through work, paradigmatically the agricultural work associated with the production of food, allowed Weil to draw the conclusion that through certain types of physical labor, the substance of the worker's body quite literally passed into the products of her work (grain or other foodstuffs), and from there into

⁵³ Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, p. 327.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

⁵⁵ Weil, *Gateway to God*, p. 94.

⁵⁶ The naked, starving person is Christ to the compassionate one; conversely, the one "who gives from true compassion gives Christ himself"; Weil, *Gateway to God*, p. 95.

⁵⁷ Weil, *Gateway to God*, p. 95.

⁵⁸ "If I grow thin from labour in the fields, my flesh really becomes wheat. If that wheat is used for the host it becomes Christ's flesh. Anyone who labours with this intention should become a saint"; Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, p. 96. "Ask that we may transform ourselves into Christ and Christ into us. Ask that God may transform our flesh into Christ's flesh, so that we may be food for all the afflicted"; Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, p. 265.

the bodies of the hungry. So that in a real sense, the afflicted beings to whom the food was distributed would consume the toiling, suffering flesh of those whose labor had produced the food. Weil discerned in these chemical, physical processes the same principle of sacramental transformation of bread and wine into God's body and blood. Under these circumstances, work itself could take on a sacramental, transforming character, when it was performed with the intention of fulfilling the vital needs of one's fellow human beings.⁵⁹

According to Simone Weil, the compassionate "projection of being" from an unafflicted to an afflicted individual is possible in a literal sense. Moreover, insofar as fully attuned, compassionate encounter is the presence of God in the world, it is, of all things, most real and most possible. Weil is clear, however, that the experience of this sacramental hyper-possibility is shrouded in hiddenness; here, revelation comes as non-experience. This is the case for several reasons. First, when attention and compassion are genuine, the afflicted are attended to not *for the sake of God*, nor *out of love for God*, but rather *as God*.⁶⁰ Interpersonal encounter gives way to interdivine encounter, and the finite subjectivity that might have been available for an "experience of" the Absolute is wholly annihilated in the deifying event itself. Furthermore, this "miracle"⁶¹ takes place unbeknownst to the individuals involved. Indeed, if the experience of God is real, the thought of God does not even tug at the corners of one's consciousness:

⁵⁹ Alec Irwin, "Devoured by God: Cannibalism, Mysticism, and Ethics in Simone Weil," *Cross Currents*, Vol. 51 no. 2 (2001), pp. 257–272; pp. 266–267.

⁶⁰ Weil, *Waiting For God*, p. 93.

⁶¹ Simone Weil employs what David Tracy calls "limit language" to name genuine attunement to affliction: it is "supernatural" and "a miracle." At first blush it is tempting to suspect that Weil means to posit a dualistic metaphysic by using such terms. But one must also recall that, for Weil, "earthly things are the criteria of heavenly things" (Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, p. 147). Thus, in the words of Blum and Seidler, "[Weil] never saw the spiritual as an independent and autonomous realm but as something whose reality has to be expressed in the relations between people . . . in this way her spirituality was essentially material"; (Lawrence Blum and Victor Seidler, *A Truer Liberty: Simone Weil and Marxism* [London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1989], p. 181.) Likewise, Springsted concludes that "[r]ather than being a metaphysical dualist as some commentators have claimed, Weil instead holds to a 'monistic mystery' . . ." (Eric O. Springsted, "Contradiction, Mystery, and the Use of Words in Simone Weil," *The Beauty that Saves: Essays on Aesthetics and Language in Simone Weil*, edited by John M. Dunaway and Eric O. Springsted, (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1996), pp. 13–30; p. 23). For more on Weil's materialist supernaturalism, see also chapter 5 of Diogenes Allen and Eric O. Springsted's *Spirit, Nature, and Community: Issues in the Thought of Simone Weil* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1994), and chapter 15 of Peter Winch's *Simone Weil: "The Just Balance"* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1989). It is important to note that Weil herself defines "supernatural" as that which is "at the same time impossible and necessary" (Weil, *Gravity and Grace* p. 96). This suggests that for her, that which is "supernatural" (compassion included) is profoundly and constitutively contradictory—very close to what we are here calling "aporetic." This should become clearer as we explore the radical impossibility of compassion in Weil's thinking.

When the presence of God is visible in love, then it is the presence of something other than God. The heavenly Father dwells only in secret. The meaning of all those princely marriages in the folk takes is contained in the Spanish copla: "Possible loves—are for fools—Wise men feel—impossible loves."⁶²

Let us consider in-depth this "impossible" love, which, according to Weil, is the feeling (indeed, the very being) of the truly wise.

V. *The Impossibility of Compassion*

Simone Weil is no systematician. When a thought (or series of thoughts) approaches some semblance of comprehensibility and cohesion, it is her custom to insert a stunning contradiction—often in the form of a stubby aphorism or a sweeping superlative—which effectively shatters what might have turned out to be a neat, reasonable set of ideas that helped make sense of the world. Furthermore, this Weilian practice is itself followed with just enough irregularity to prevent it from becoming a predictable rule.

Inasmuch as radical suffering breaks open rationality and reveals its impotence, such methodology reflects Weil's keenly-sensed historical milieu which, like ours, was filled with the unfathomable, tormented cries of millions. But Weil's non-systematic manner of thinking and writing is also part and parcel of her unwavering commitment to the pursuit of truth. For her, irresolvable contradiction is the "door" at which the mind in pursuit of truth must "knock, and keep on indefatigably knocking, in a spirit of insistent, humble expectancy."⁶³ Weil's texts are, in many ways, a record of this "knocking" at the door of the aporia, and part of what makes them so frustratingly intriguing is that their author appears not to care in the least about the mental and existential whiplash she threatens to inflict upon her reader. One either knocks interminably at the door of truth with Simone Weil, or puts her book down. There is no third option.

It comes as no surprise, then, that Weil insists on the impossibility of compassion with the same intellectual rigor (and to the exact degree of conviction) that she insisted on its possibility. Here we are considering the two positions separately and consecutively. While this tack enhances the readability and flow of the present article, it is important to note that Weil's various discourses on affliction, compassion, and God constantly intertwine affirmations and negations of the possibility of attention to (and union with) the afflicted. Weil's dogged adherence to incommensurability at both formal and conceptual levels makes clear that, for her, compassion is aporetic: attun-

⁶² "We must not help our neighbor *for* Christ but *in* Christ." Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, p. 45. Cf. Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, p. 275.

⁶³ Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, p. 270.

ement with the afflicted other, if it is really attunement, implies alienation to precisely the same extent. Weil will stretch language and logic to their outer limits to convey the tragedy and hope of this (ultimately revelatory) bind.

5.1 The Unknowability of the Other

Simone Weil's thinking regarding the impossibility of an attuned relation between a sufferer and empathizer is rooted, first, in her general views on personhood. She rejects a personalist philosophy which would posit an underlying relational sameness among all human beings—a universal affective essence at the core of each person which knits them together in warm, considerate, communal bonds. Rather, in Mary Dietz' summary of Weil's position, "It is impossible . . . for us to 'define' in any abstract or universalist manner what a person is. Any attempt to do so will succeed only in reducing distinctive, concrete, unique beings to a social category."⁶⁴ For Weil, each individual is a universe—an irreducible wholeness, who, when in pain, cries out, "Why am I being hurt?" It is this cry, singular in every instance, which is "sacred" in persons.⁶⁵

This interpersonal impermeability—this insistence on the uniqueness of each being's sense of perspective, experience of suffering, and longing for the good—is tied closely to Simone Weil's notion of justice. For Weil, justice precludes the failure to acknowledge that the self, every self, is singular in subjectivity.⁶⁶ Indeed, to do justice is to learn to "read" persons as whole beings whose reality is always and ever surprising, indefinable:

Justice. To be ever ready to admit that another person is quite different from what we read when he is there (or when we think about him). Or rather, to read in him that he is certainly something different, perhaps something completely different, from what we read in him. Every being cries out silently to be read differently.⁶⁷

Here, in characteristically fragmented style, Weil defines justice as perpetual openness to that which is wholly unexpected in the other. How are we

⁶⁴ Dietz, *Between the Human and the Divine*, p. 132. In her essay "Human Personality," Weil writes: "There is something sacred in every man, but it is not his person. Nor yet is it the human personality. It is this man; no more and no less"; Weil, "Human Personality," p. 314.

⁶⁵ "At the bottom of the heart of every human being, from earliest infancy until the tomb, there is something that goes on indomitably expecting, in the teeth of all experience of crimes committed, suffered, and witnessed, that good and not evil will be done to him. It is this above all that is sacred in every human being"; Weil, "Human Personality," p. 315.

⁶⁶ Slavery is this non-acknowledgement: "A man ten steps away from me is something separated from me by a distance (ten steps), but also another perspective from which all things appear. The relation between me and another man can never be analogous to the blind man and his stick, nor to the inverse relationship; it is in this way that slavery is contrary to nature and to reason"; Weil, *Oeuvres Completes* 6:1, p. 295, trans. by and quoted in Dargan, *Thinking Poetically*, p. 78.

⁶⁷ Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, pp. 134–135.

to link this insistence on the absolute otherness of the other with Weil's equally strong views on the possibility of and need for attunement—for example, her claim that attention consists in an attempt to absorb fully a reality beyond the self,⁶⁸ and that “[t]o listen to someone is to put oneself in his place while he is speaking.”⁶⁹ We can only conclude that, for Weil, the oneness of pure attention and listening is successful precisely in its failure. Interpersonal amalgamation—fully realized attunement with the other—must remain both utterly necessary and utterly impossible.⁷⁰ We must learn to “look” and not “eat;”⁷¹ that is, “[w]e have to remain quite still and unite ourselves with that which we desire yet do not approach.”⁷² Justice—which, for Weil, is the same as love or compassion⁷³—beholds the other with a humble patience that consents to distance even while straining toward union with unflagging hope.⁷⁴

5.2 Affliction, Repulsion, and Muteness

To the unbridgeable chasm that separates persons in general, the crushing reality of affliction adds yet another layer of alienation. Two factors especially—affliction's repulsiveness and muteness—make genuine attention to and compassion for the afflicted about as likely as a deer offering itself to a pack of hounds or a happy child committing suicide.⁷⁵

It is instinctive, avers Weil, for us either to flee from⁷⁶ or viciously attack⁷⁷ affliction. This universal reaction of disgust is due to the fact that affliction “confronts us, viscerally, with irrecoverable, irredeemable loss that remains larger than any effort to ameliorate it.”⁷⁸ To face affliction is to face the cold, brute mechanics of necessity (and necessity's weapon, “*la force*”) that make beings so vulnerable to misery, privation, and death. While the sight of mere suffering will sometimes inspire a person to have pity and help to alleviate the pain, Weil maintains that no sage, no hero, no saint, not even a pervert

⁶⁸ Weil, *Waiting For God*, p. 62.

⁶⁹ Weil, “Human Personality,” p. 333.

⁷⁰ Which is to say, “supernatural.”

⁷¹ The motif(s) of looking and eating are favorites of Weil's.

⁷² Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, p. 149.

⁷³ This is Richard H. Bell's argument in his book *Simone Weil: The Way of Justice as Compassion* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1998).

⁷⁴ “To love purely is to consent to distance, it is to adore the distance between ourselves and that which we love”; Simone Weil, *The Simone Weil Reader*, in George A. Panichas (ed), (New York, NY: David McKay Company, Inc., 1977), p. 360.

⁷⁵ Weil offers these analogies in “Human Personality” (pp. 327 and 333, respectively). The shocking, repugnant nature of both scenes deepens the reader's understanding of the absurd horror of affliction. This is yet another example of her poetic imagination and rhetorical skill at work.

⁷⁶ “Thought revolts from contemplating affliction, to the same degree that living flesh recoils from death”; Weil, “Human Personality,” p. 327.

⁷⁷ Weil likens the phenomenon of violence toward afflicted persons to hens rushing in to peck an injured member of the flock; Weil, *Gateway to God*, p. 122.

⁷⁸ Faber, “Dancer in the Dark”, p. 89.

would find attractive or want to come near a person being transformed “from the human condition into that of a half-crushed worm writhing on the ground.”⁷⁹ Weil stresses that among afflicted persons, this revulsion is often directed inward so that afflicted persons are scorned and abused even by themselves.⁸⁰

Simone Weil herself witnessed the alienating effects of affliction’s repulsiveness during her stint as a factory worker. Pétrement notes that a main reason Weil wished to undertake factory life was that she hoped to observe and experience real fraternity between workers.⁸¹ But, to her dismay, she soon discovered that the affliction caused by the cold harshness of factory life so dominated the being of each laborer that it rendered them indifferent or hostile toward one another,⁸² and filled them with a sense of shameful self-loathing.⁸³ Such intense, visceral repugnance toward the affliction of others (or that of the self) caused her to later conclude, “It is only God who can pay attention to an afflicted man.”⁸⁴

According to Weil, another key factor underlying compassion’s impossibility is the fact that affliction cannot speak itself; it is mute. At the same time that radical suffering cries out for understanding (for the need to attest to such misery is deep in us),⁸⁵ it resists every attempt at representation:

As for those who have been struck by one of those blows that leave a being struggling on the ground like a half-crushed worm, they have no words to express what is happening to them. Among the people they meet, those who have never had contact with affliction in its true sense can have no idea of what it is, even though they may have suffered a great deal. Affliction is something specific and impossible to describe in any other terms, as sounds are to anyone who is deaf and dumb. . . . Thus compassion for the afflicted is an impossibility.⁸⁶

⁷⁹ Weil, *Gateway to God*, p. 96.

⁸⁰ Weil writes: “In the case of someone in affliction, all the scorn, revulsion, and hatred are turned inward. They penetrate to the center of the soul and from there color the whole universe with their poisoned light”; (Weil, *Waiting For God*, p. 71.) On this point, Springsted remarks: “The afflicted are forced to believe that their treatment is just. Since their hatred of affliction finds its immediate object in themselves, the afflicted turn this hatred inwards and think themselves despicable, evil, and unclean. They can even go so far as to hate anybody who would genuinely help them, since they assume that only a contemptible being would touch them”; (Eric O. Springsted, *Simone Weil and the Suffering of Love* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley, 1986), p. 29.)

⁸¹ Pétrement, *Simone Weil*, p. 247.

⁸² Simone Weil, “Factory Work,” *The Simone Weil Reader*, in George A. Panichas (ed), (New York, NY: David McKay Company, Inc., 1977), pp. 53–72; p. 65.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

⁸⁴ Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, p. 327.

⁸⁵ Weil stresses that it is “indispensable” that the afflicted be listened to and understood; Weil, “Human Personality,” p. 327.

⁸⁶ Weil, *Waiting For God*, p. 69.

A chief reason for this voicelessness, observes Weil, is the devastating effect affliction has on one's sense of existing at all. In affliction, the personality is defaced; the tongue cut out;⁸⁷ the self made invisible in its "state of dumb and ceaseless lamentation."⁸⁸ Weil states that the one afflicted by the impersonal brutality of force comes to "imitate nonentity."⁸⁹ That is, he or she becomes utterly transparent, unreal, incomprehensible even to the self. For the unafflicted, the urge to pass over (fail to notice) such embodied silence and intangibility is almost irresistible.

Here again, it was likely Weil's experience working in factories that taught her of affliction's muteness. She found that the laborers refused even to acknowledge to themselves their adversity, shame, exhaustion, and humiliation, and would very rarely attempt to find words to communicate to others the depths of their anguish. When afflicted workingpersons do venture to speak of their lot, remarks Weil, they "repeat more often than not the catchwords coined by people who are not working[persons]."⁹⁰ In the factory Weil learned that, in speaking to an afflicted woman or man about their plight, a would-be empathizer is flooded with an eerie sense of unreality. For here is a person who seems to be alive, who seems to testify to cruel experience, but who speaks out of utter psychological hollowness using trite, general slogans. The suffering of such a one appears contrived, simple, shallow, caricatured. "Thus, every unhappy condition among men creates the silent zone . . . in which each is isolated as though on an island."⁹¹ The deeper the lamentation, the deeper the silence.

5.3 A Dual Erasure of Subjectivity

We have seen that, for Simone Weil, the possibility for attuned empathy with the afflicted rests in a charitable person's uniting their very being with the afflicted other. We have also noted the extreme language and imagery with which Weil asserts the radicality of the interpersonal merger involved in genuine compassion; she does not hesitate to speak, for example, of devouring and being-devoured in Eucharistic oneness. According to Weil, if this reciprocal projection and ingestion of being is not constitutive of the encounter, it cannot truly be said to be "compassion."

But affliction, we have said, destroys the personality and erases subjectivity. At times Weil asserts that this annihilation is absolute; affliction causes a loss of

⁸⁷ The afflicted are "like someone whose tongue has been cut out and who occasionally forgets the fact. When they move their lips no ear perceives any sound. And they themselves soon sink into impotence in the use of language, because of the certainty of not being heard." Weil, "Human Personality," p. 333.

⁸⁸ Weil, "Human Personality," p. 316.

⁸⁹ Weil, *The Iliad*, p. 48.

⁹⁰ Weil, "Factory Work," p. 54.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

self that is both total and permanent.⁹² At other times, she employs language and imagery of hybridism, halving, or severing to speak of affliction's effects on personhood.⁹³ Thus, in her depictions of affliction and its consequences, Weil vacillates between positing the complete and partial annihilation of the self. Sometimes her reader is sure there is hope for the afflicted, whereas at other times, it seems clear that affliction and hopelessness are synonymous.⁹⁴ What is never in question, however, is that affliction leaves its victims desiccated of life, soul, being, subjectivity—whether in whole or in part.⁹⁵

What happens, then, when sufferer and sympathizer unite? Weil does not mince words: "To listen to someone is to put oneself in his place while he is speaking. To put oneself in the place of someone whose soul is corroded by affliction, or in near danger of it, is to annihilate oneself."⁹⁶ The obvious problem here is that such a union only results in two individuals whose personalities have been devastated by the nothingness and absurdity that is affliction. Genuine compassion, for Weil, means shared extermination—an obvious implication being that "the afflicted are not listened to."⁹⁷ Affliction so erases subjectivity that compassion can neither be given nor received; there no longer exist personalities that can connect, empathize, or unite—only beings who have been made into things.⁹⁸ Thus, compassion becomes a relation of infinite void to infinite void—"an impossibility," concludes Weil. "Only Christ has done it."⁹⁹

⁹² "Affliction is anonymous before all things; it deprives its victims of their personality and makes them into things. It is indifferent; and it is the coldness of this indifference—a metallic coldness—that freezes all those it touches right to the depths of their souls. They will never find warmth again. They will never believe any more that they are anyone." Weil, *Waiting For God*, p. 73.

⁹³ In her essay on *The Iliad*, for example, Weil describes the person whom force crushes as "an alternative species, a hybrid of man and corpse" who "aspires at all times to be a man or woman, and never attains the goal"; (Weil, *The Iliad*, p. 48.) Likewise, in *Waiting For God*, she speaks of the surprising power affliction has to possess and rule over "the innocent" who, "at the very best," are able to keep "only half [their] soul"; (Weil, *Waiting For God*, p. 69.) Elsewhere, as we have noted, Weil compares the afflicted person to a "half-crushed worm, writhing on the ground"; (Weil, *Gateway to God*, p. 96; cf. Weil, *Waiting For God*, p. 69.)

⁹⁴ This ambiguity mirrors the possible-impossibility of empathic attunement and the experience of God therein. It is another way in which Weil's fragmentary, inconsistent forms of thought and speech perform meaning by resisting conclusiveness.

⁹⁵ Indeed, Weil's contradictions force her reader to wonder whether there is a difference at all between the partial and total annihilation of the personality.

⁹⁶ Weil, "Human Personality," p. 333.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ Commenting on this aspect of Weil's thought, Pattison writes: "[A]ffliction implies an annihilation of the personality that makes any talk of compassion impossible. . . . Even if we have experienced affliction in our own lives, it is not something we can ever 'know,' for it occupies a place at which no knowing subject can survive, a place where what was once a human being has become blind hunger, blind fear, blind pain." George Pattison, "Desire, Decreation and Unknowing in the God-relationship: Mystical Theology and its Transformation in Kierkegaard, Simone Weil and Dostoevsky," in *Subjectivity and Transcendence*, Arne Grøn (ed), (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), pp. 193–211; pp. 206–207.)

⁹⁹ Weil, *Gateway to God*, p. 94.

Total intersubjective sharing-in-affliction is that which Simone Weil presents as the sole creaturely possibility for experiencing the presence of God—the zenith of the Real. But it is, at the same time, the epitome of unreality, absence, and negation.

Let us presently investigate ways in which her theological reflections on Creation and Cross intertwine with those of decreation and deification so as to hold together (but not necessarily reconcile or synthesize) this provocative contradiction.

VI. *The Christic Paradox*

What sort of theology lies behind Simone Weil's paradoxical affirmations and negations of compassion for the afflicted? As we set out to explore this question, it is important to note that the concept of *distance*¹⁰⁰—that between God and the world in the Creation and between God and Christ in the Passion—plays a key role. Weil's theological development of the notion of distance comes to its fullest, most mystical expression in her fragmentary discourses on "decreation" (*dépouillement*) in which relational spaces of compassionate encounter are named hidden manifestations of the divine. Far from presenting a tidy metaphysic, Weil's theological interpretations of the experience of alterity are deeply construct-shattering.

6.1 Cross and Creation

If there is a core intuition at the nexus of the vast web that is Weil's theological thought, it is that generativity, goodness, and redemption are bound in a necessary, dependent relation to divine withdrawal, renunciation, and abandonment. To better understand this relation, we must first glimpse the way in which Weil's doctrine of Creation is bound up within her theology of Christ's Passion. Weil's various discourses on the crucifixion function as windows into the interconnected aporiae in her thought—especially the

¹⁰⁰ As Bartomeu Estelrich has shown, Weil's all-important notion of "distance" is tied significantly to her interpretation of Book VI of Plato's *Republic*, recorded in her early essay *Oppression et liberté* (1934). In this essay (which is principally a critique of Marxism), Weil uses Plato's classic text as a means for thinking through social oppression and the relation of necessity to the Good. She concludes, "The essential contradiction in human life is that man, with a straining after the good constituting his very being, is at the same time subject in his entire being, both in mind and in flesh, to a blind force, to a necessity completely indifferent to the good. So it is; and that is why no human thinking can escape from contradiction." Distance, for Weil, is the "salvific contradiction" (Estelrich) that constitutes human life. Weil's deeply dialectical thought was thus shaped early on by both Plato and Marx. Later, however (following her religious turn), Weil's thinking on the relation of necessity to the Good via the notion of distance acquired an Incarnational quality even as it maintained its love of philosophical contradiction. Simone Weil, *Oppression et liberté*, Arthur Will and John Petrie (trans), (Paris: Gallimard, 1955), *Oppression and Liberty* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1973), p. 173. Cf. Bartomeu Estelrich, "Simone Weil's Concept of Grace", *Modern Theology*, Vol. 25 no. 2 (April 2009), pp. 239–251.

co-constitution of closeness and alienation, presence and absence, possibility and impossibility.

Weil's comments on the crucifixion are profoundly fragmented: they come in fits and starts; exclamations and questions; solitary nouns and phrases without verbs or predicates; aphorisms now cautious, now confident. The following is paradigmatic of the bare, penetrating approach she takes in her *Cahiers*, where many of her Christological insights are to be found:

The most beautiful harmony: maximum of separation and of unity. That a divine Person should be a thing, a piece of inert matter (a man who is a slave and in agony). Christ's agony.¹⁰¹

By examining and contextualizing this short journal entry, we may come to see that on formal and material levels, it sums up the meaning of the Cross in Simone Weil's thought.

First, "the most beautiful harmony" is equated with the unthinkable paradox of absolute oneness and severance. Held together by a colon rather than a copulative verb, the phrase is more equation (beauty = incomprehensibility) than statement. The middle fragment, also non-declarative, acquires meaning when linked with the first and placed within the broader context of Weil's thought. In the Incarnate Christ's slavery and agony, there is, on the one hand, a marriage of divinity to affliction which wholly merges God and the world ("maximum of unity"), and, on the other hand, a total estrangement between God and affliction (represented by Christ's cry of forsakenness on the Cross) which wholly separates God from the world as well as God from God ("maximum of separation"). For Weil, that which is maximally discordant to human reason is that which is maximally harmonious. The final, two-word fragment captures Weil's understanding of the crucifixion in all its offensiveness and comprehensiveness. Of "Christ's agony," nothing is predicated; is utterly singular. But, at the same time, everything (in the most literal sense) is included in these two words, for, in Weil's thought, reality is upheld in the paradox of God's radical oneness with, and abandonment of, brute necessity (represented by the bloodied corpse of Jesus). "We are God's crucifixion,"¹⁰² she declares elsewhere—meaning that Christ's affliction, which is God's simultaneous withdrawal and advance, constitutes the love of the Creator that upholds the world's existence. Without God's absence (Christ's cry of abandonment), the intensity of the divine goodness would extinguish us; without God's presence (the divine fullness in Christ), we would cease to be at all, for nothing

¹⁰¹ Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, p. 86.

¹⁰² Simone Weil, *Intimations prechretiennes*, Elizabeth Chase Geissbuhler (trans) and (ed), (Paris: La Colombe, 1951), in *Intimations of Christianity Among the Ancient Greeks* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1957), p. 564.

can exist outside God.¹⁰³ Therefore, “Christ’s agony”—the zenith of God’s creative presence/absence in which all things subsist—stands completely alone—a jarring bookend when juxtaposed against beauty, the subject that opened the concise meditation. Weil thus implicitly communicates that nothing can be said of “Christ’s agony”: raw contradiction all the way down, it stands alone—mute, untouchable, unthinkable.¹⁰⁴

This brief scribble in Weil’s journal—so perfectly representative of her fragmented form of thinking and writing—leaves her reader feeling and participating in the aporia of which she speaks. As a notebook entry, it is intimate and informal; Weil comes close to us as she jots down her musings. We might even picture her scratching it down hastily just before receiving a visitor or taking a walk. But, at the same time, Weil leaves no room for her reader. Not only is the entry cryptic and difficult to ascertain,¹⁰⁵ there is no argument to follow, no logic to analyze, no room for dialogue (let alone disagreement). One senses simultaneous attunement to and alienation from the author, so that aporetic form (Weil’s personal/impersonal style) and aporetic content (radical estrangement both generates reality and knits it intimately to the divine life) mutually inhere and mutually speak.

What has Weil’s theology of the Cross and Creation to do with the experience of God in the (im)possibility of compassion? The crucial link is that, according to Weil, “every moment of pure compassion in a soul is a new descent of Christ upon the earth to be crucified.”¹⁰⁶ Indeed, compassion is something “only Christ” can do,¹⁰⁷ for only the (im)possibility that is God crucified can match the (im)possibility that is an afflicted person—a living death. This means that, for Weil, theological categories like Christ, Cross, Incarnation, and Creation are ongoing realities whose instantiations are most true and poignant in spaces of shared intersubjective suffering. The creative primordial rending and oneness of the crucifixion is powerfully (though secretly) disclosed in the aporiae of compassion for the afflicted; or, put differently, the concurrent attunement to and alienation from the other in relational spaces of shared suffering makes manifest the unintelligible

¹⁰³ This Christic paradox is also, for Weil, the key to the relation of necessity to the Good: “It is God who in love withdraws from us so that we can love him. For if we were exposed to the direct radiance of his love, without the protection of space, of time and of matter, we should be evaporated like water in the sun; there would not be enough ‘I’ in us to make it possible to surrender to ‘I’ for love’s sake. Necessity is the screen set between God and us so that we can be”; Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, p. 33.

¹⁰⁴ Elsewhere Weil states openly what she implies here—namely, that affliction and truth (which are, for Weil, the Cross) cannot be said at all: “By a providential arrangement, both truth and affliction are mute”; Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, p. 336.

¹⁰⁵ Surely without the reader’s familiarity with Weil’s views of Christ, creation, affliction, necessity, and the Good (furnished by other primary and secondary sources), the entry would be completely unintelligible.

¹⁰⁶ Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, p. 97.

¹⁰⁷ Weil, *Gateway to God*, p. 94.

(im)possibility of the Incarnation.¹⁰⁸ Pure compassion is, for Weil, pure revelation.

As we have seen, Weil's fragmented theological speech and thought heightens the impossibility of categories like Christ and Creation. Now, for Weil, the proper response to impossibility is *action*; indeed, she will go so far as to say that those who act while attending truly to impossibility cannot fail to do good.¹⁰⁹ This, considered in light of her intuition of Christ's hidden presence in compassion, suggests that for Weil, the divine is not meant to be *understood*, but rather, *lived forth*—embodied and testified to in and through the aporiae of genuine suffering-with. But as we shall see below, to live forth the divine presence/absence is to be devoured by it.

6.2 Decreation and Christification

Thus far we have seen that in Simone Weil's thought, compassion for the afflicted is the pinnacle of both possibility and impossibility. Along with Weil's theologies of Creation and Cross, her notion of decreation (*dépouillement*) underlies compassion's aporiae. Since "only Christ" can give compassion, when someone "projects" their being into an afflicted person, "it is not really their own being, because they no longer possess one; it is Christ himself."¹¹⁰ Therefore, those who would seek to attend to and succor the afflicted must undergo a decreation in which they are transformed into simultaneous nothingness and divinity. As with the topic of the crucifixion, the form of Weil's written discourse on the theme of decreation gestures toward the incomprehensibility that is the heart of its subject.

Much has been written on Weil's notion of decreation,¹¹¹ and scholars have recognized that it holds many meanings: "the stripping away of the 'I,'"¹¹² "the surrender of the last vestiges of selfhood,"¹¹³ disciplined attention "to the world as it exists outside the orbit of the ego,"¹¹⁴ the resolution to be possessed by God (and to disappear in the process),¹¹⁵ the consent to be torn

¹⁰⁸ "There is no way of imagining a contact between God and man which is not as unintelligible as the incarnation. The incarnation explodes this unintelligibility. It is the most concrete way of representing this impossible descent"; Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, p. 95.

¹⁰⁹ "All true good carries with it conditions which are contradictory and as a consequence is impossible. He who keeps his attention really fixed on this impossibility and acts will do what is good"; Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, p. 98.

¹¹⁰ Weil, *Gateway to God*, p. 95.

¹¹¹ Miklos Vetö conducts one of the most well-known and comprehensive treatments in his *The Religious Metaphysics of Simone Weil*, which posits decreation as the organizing principle on which Weil's "metaphysic" is built. Miklos Vetö, *The Religious Metaphysics of Simone Weil*, Joan Dargan (trans), (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press), p. 1994.

¹¹² Dietz, *Between the Human and the Divine*, pp. 111, 117.

¹¹³ Fielder, Introduction to *Waiting For God*, p. xxxiii.

¹¹⁴ Alexander Nava, *The Mystical and Prophetic Thought of Simone Weil and Gustavo Gutierrez: Reflections on the Hiddenness and Mystery of God* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2001), p. 205.

¹¹⁵ Estelrich, "Simone Weil's Concept of Grace", p. 247.

asunder by the generative distance between necessity and the Good,¹¹⁶ creative participation in divine withdrawal,¹¹⁷ and the embrace of the reality of the cross.¹¹⁸ Weilian decreation is, in fact, all these things (and more). But for our purposes, it will be helpful to concentrate on one particularly poetic way in which Weil names the experience of decreation—namely, as reciprocal consuming and being consumed.

In her essay “Forms of the Implicit Love of God,” Weil describes the process of spiritual transformation as a courageous walk through a lonely, foreign, hopeless labyrinth at the center of which God—a dangerous, devouring beast—lies in wait to consume, digest, and expel those who arrive there.¹¹⁹ Here medium and message are equally shocking and mutually informative: the thought of becoming divine excrement effectively unsettles one’s hermeneutic (and spiritual) sensibilities just as decreation *means* the effective unseating of one’s all-controlling ego. Similarly, in her *Cahiers* Weil writes: “Ask that we may transform ourselves into Christ and Christ into us. Ask that God may transform our flesh into Christ’s flesh, so that we may be food for all the afflicted.”¹²⁰ These abrupt twin imperatives—buried in a series of fragments on work, energy, and Eucharist¹²¹—name the experience(s) of decreation, Christification, and oneness with the afflicted in a way that is highly ambiguous and provocative. We are presented with an urgent enjoinder, a call to prayer. Weil does not explain *dépouillement*; she pleads with us to garner the courage to long for it, beg for it, embody it. In both of these examples, Weil’s discourse is not meant to teach, nor to command, but to incite a lived desire for the (Im)possible in which we consent to become matter to be consumed by God just as God becomes matter to be consumed by us and all the afflicted.

At this point, a slight excursus is necessary. From a critical feminist perspective especially, Weil’s insistence that self-mortification is the apex of human freedom and redemptive transformation raises concerns. For victims of social oppression, the religious imperative to sacrifice the self can have grave implications—especially when based in a theology of the Cross which glorifies Christ’s suffering.¹²² But does Weil prescribe self-diminishment to all? Certainly not; in fact, she strongly denounces those historical, political, and psychological dynamics that steal from individuals their sense of self.

¹¹⁶ Gustave Thibon, Introduction to Simone Weil, *La pesanteur et la grâce*, Emma Craufurd (trans), (Paris: Plon, 1947), in *Gravity and Grace*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1952; London and New York: Routledge Classics, 2002), p. xxvii.

¹¹⁷ Pétrement, *Simone Weil*, p. 497.

¹¹⁸ Springsted, *Simone Weil and the Suffering of Love*, p. 82.

¹¹⁹ Weil, *Waiting For God*, p. 103.

¹²⁰ Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, p. 265.

¹²¹ Cf. above discussion on Weil’s theory of the sacramental transfer of energy through food.

¹²² For an insightful and multi-perspectival exploration of this topic, see the set of essays in *Cross Examinations: Readings on the Meaning of the Cross Today*, edited by Marit Trelstad (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2006).

Weil insists that one needs a robust sense of self (what she often names “that within us which says ‘I’”) before one can be asked to relinquish it to God. The afflicted victims of the world who have been robbed of personality cannot freely offer themselves up to God. Precisely this inability *is* the profound tragedy of affliction, and is what puts afflicted individuals in danger of radical, irremediable, spiritual death. According to Weil, what victims need is a bolstering of their being rather than a stripping of it, and this is what the presence of Christ in a compassionate person provides.

If Weil’s notion of decreation with its imagery of ingestion and excretion is disturbing in its call to radical self-annihilation, it is equally so in its call to radical deification. Weil makes clear that decreation is the realization and fulfillment of the self in God and God in the self, for it is the “vocation of each one of us” to be “the Mystical Body of Christ.”¹²³ For Weil, we are created to consent to God’s total possession or consumption of us, and to be made divine in the process. In the context of compassion, this means that the self-annihilation implied in genuine attunement to affliction is also an enfleshed realization of the divine within the self.

The interplay of form and content in Weil’s thought as regards decreation and deification (or Christification)¹²⁴ is striking in its implicit communication of meaning. A sampling of the aphorisms in *Gravity and Grace* illuminates this well.

- We participate in the creation of the world by decreasing ourselves.¹²⁵
- In so far as I become nothing, God loves himself through me.¹²⁶
- My “I” is hidden for me (and for others); it is on the side of God, it is in God, it is God. To be proud is to forget that one is God.¹²⁷
- Humility is the refusal to exist outside God. It is the queen of virtues.¹²⁸
- I have to know that as a thinking, finite being I am God crucified.¹²⁹

Several things are worth noting in regards to these sayings. First, on the level of Weil’s theology, they demonstrate that she conceives the self’s decreation as an inter-divine event. The “I” which willingly relinquishes being out

¹²³ Weil, *Waiting For God*, p. 36.

¹²⁴ Weil’s frequent elisions of God and Christ in her writings mean that, for her, deification and Christification are synonymous.

¹²⁵ “*Nous participons à la création du monde en nous décréant nous-mêmes*”; Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, p. 33 (Weil, *La pesanteur et la grâce*, p. 44.)

¹²⁶ “*A mesure que je deviens rien, Dieu s’aime à travers moi*”; Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, p. 34 (Weil, *La pesanteur et la grâce*, p. 44.)

¹²⁷ “*Je est caché pour moi (et pour autrui); il es du côté de Dieu, il est en Dieu, il est Dieu. Etre orgueilleux, c’est oublier qu’on est Dieu*”; Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, p. 38 (Weil, *La pesanteur et la grâce*, p. 49.)

¹²⁸ “*L’humilité, c’est le refus d’exister en dehors de Dieu. Reine des vertus*”; Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, p. 40 (Weil, *La pesanteur et la grâce*, p. 51.)

¹²⁹ “*Savoir que comme être pensant et fini, je suis Dieu crucifié*”; Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, p. 89 (Weil, *La pesanteur et la grâce*, p. 105.)

of love is nothing other than the Creator God who self-renounced power in creating the world, and the crucified God who underwent self-annihilation on the Cross. Pétrement explains:

By withdrawing, God has allowed us to exist; he has done so for the sake of love and so that we ourselves, for the sake of love, can renounce the being he has given us. . . . The love of God within us is not ourselves, it is the son of God, reincarnated once again. That which within us can accept good is not further from the self than God. In the end, the self exists in neither instance. In the first, the self is only a deceptive appearance and, in the second, it is not the self that exists but God.¹³⁰

The simultaneity of decreation and deification is, for Weil, a kind of return of divinity to divinity. Otherwise put, it is an infinitely receding and proceeding reflection between God at the center of the self and God beyond the world in which the absence and presence of both the self and the divine increase in direct proportion. Like many mystics before her, Weil names the experience of union with the holy as an event in which God loves God, and becomes all in all.

The second notable aspect of the above aphorisms is their sheer shock factor. Weil does not shy away from stating things that threaten deep offense in their apparent absurdity—things like, “To be proud is to forget that one is God.” Here both the meaning and the manner of its rendering turn standard assumptions about divinity and selfhood on their head. Weil’s discourse means to provoke. In provoking, it performs the *aporia* of which it speaks, in all its incomprehensibility and incommunicability.

Finally, it is important to observe once more the striking blend of the personal and the impersonal in Weil’s speech. Her sayings sometimes read like a private first-person confession, while at other times they read like an injunction addressed to all people everywhere from a *punctum archimedis*. As such, Weil’s aphorisms bring her close to us and remove her from us at once. This ambiguity between the singular/human/personal (on the one hand), and the universal/abstract/impersonal (on the other hand)¹³¹ both informs and reflects the aporetic dance between presence and absence that permeates Weil’s thought—especially in regards to God, affliction, and compassion.

How shall we draw together the Weilian theological fragments we have collected and placed under the overarching umbrella of “the Christic Paradox”? First, let us recall that, for Weil, compassion is *hyper*-possible inasmuch as it is the incarnate presence of the divine; yet, at the same time, compassion is radically *impossible* inasmuch as it is the annihilation of

¹³⁰ Pétrement, *Simone Weil*, p. 497.

¹³¹ As Joan Dargan argues, the tension between the personal and impersonal in Weil’s writing is a large part of what makes it so poetic. “The speaker has dissolved into the prose, though her presence is clearly signaled . . .” (Dargan, *Thinking Poetically*, p. 34).

selves—utter absence relating to utter absence. It should now be apparent that this aporetic (im)possibility of compassion comes together in Weil's notion of decreation, in which God so "consumes" an individual that he or she incarnates the absent/present God in the encounter with the afflicted person. The event of compassion becomes an instantiation of the concurrent merger and rending, oneness and estrangement of Creation, Incarnation, and Cross. This is not an "experience of God," but rather an "experience *as* God."

At this point, we are ready more ably to intuit Weil's meaning when she writes:

I must withdraw so that God may make contact with the beings whom chance places in my path and whom he loves. It is tactless for me to be there. It is as though I were placed between two lovers or two friends. I am not the maiden who awaits her betrothed, but the unwelcome third who is with two betrothed lovers and ought to go away so that they can really be together.¹³²

To show compassion is to consent to decreation and deification so the other might have an experience of God's creative presence-in-absence. It is to become pure medium, pure "metaxu."¹³³ Further, inasmuch as the afflicted other has been forcibly rendered a "thing" by necessity and force, this other is no less than the crucified God; thus, the interpersonal event of compassion becomes an inter-divine encounter.

However, all this takes place in deep hiddenness, for "the presence of God in us has as its condition a secret so deep that it is even a secret from us,"¹³⁴ and "[w]hen the presence of God is visible in love, then it is the presence of something other than God."¹³⁵ The peak of revelatory experience is remarkably counter experiential; Weil insists that when we attend to the afflicted, we ought not even think of God, for it will be enough for us to look at, feed, and clothe the half-dead creature before us.¹³⁶ So, as it turns out, the possible-impossible "miracle" of compassion—though it be the heartbeat of the Real—cannot be experienced, nor thought, nor said. Weil's discourse de-creates itself.

Shall we toss up our hands? Or is there a lesson, perhaps an invitation, in Weil's tenacious incommensurability?

VII. Conclusion

Simone Weil once likened the impossibility of human life to a fly stuck inside a glass bottle, "attracted to the light and unable to go towards it." In

¹³² Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, p. 41.

¹³³ Cf. note xi.

¹³⁴ Weil, *Waiting For God*, p. 93.

¹³⁵ Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, p. 275.

¹³⁶ Weil, *Waiting For God*, p. 93.

characteristically tragic fashion, she decrees that it is better to remain caught in the bottle for all time than to turn away from the light for even a moment. This proclamation is followed by a prayer and a passionate enjoinder: "Will you have pity, O Light, and break the glass, at the end of this perpetual duration? Even if not—one must stay pressed against the glass."¹³⁷

Weil presents the possible-impossibility of human compassion in much the same way: it is passion for an absent (yet deeply longed for) presence—an unending straining-against-the-glass. Weil's imagination was deeply shaped by Greek tragedy, and this surely is evident in her theology of compassion. The tragedy of the tragic is, in large part, the deeply absurd character of existence that it reveals. Weil's writings on compassion are tragic in that they bring to the surface the sense of absurdity or meaninglessness that ever threatens human life—especially human life as destroyed by affliction. Moreover, Weil's insistence that compassion is as annihilating as it is Christifying implies that compassion is perhaps as meaningless as affliction. However, *that* her writings name the theological significance of compassion by staring into the face of absurdity is rhetorically and theologically significant. This naming *itself* is Weil's way of enacting, in writing, what it means to "press toward the light" in spite of the impenetrable glass barrier.

Weil's testimony asks to be interpreted in a way that takes her affirmations and her negations equally into account. If we, her readers, would attempt to interpret her in this manner, we must attend to her work with a similar sort of courage Weil implies is necessary to attend to the afflicted other. We must piece together her contradictory statements, face them calmly in all their fascinating strangeness, bear the offense they pose to our need for a clear-cut theory or command, and wait longingly ("*attente*") in the space between the fragments for some kind of meaning, some sort of revelation. As well, we must abide Weil's personal/impersonal style, startling imagery, shocking confessions, and utter refusal to conclude. If we would read Weil faithfully, we *can't not* get *involved*. We must press, with her, toward the light on the other side of the glass.

¹³⁷ Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, p. 292.