
The "Seriousness" of Simone Weil

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BOOK REVIEWED:

George Abbott White, ed., *Simone Weil: Interpretations of a Life*.
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Like many other Americans, I first became aware of Simone Weil, as anything more than a name, in Susan Sontag's essay, "Simone Weil." In that essay, Sontag does not praise—or even spend much space considering—Weil's "views" about various issues. Rather, she recommends Weil's ultimate "seriousness," and the exemplary qualities of the French woman's life. "I cannot believe," Sontag writes, "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. We read writers of such scathing originality [as Weil, and Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Dostoevsky, Kafka, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Genet] for their personal authority, for the example of their seriousness, for their manifest willingness to sacrifice themselves for their truths, and—only piecemeal—for their 'views.'"¹ Reading Weil's essay, "The Iliad, or The Poem of Force," and subsequently over several years reading further in Weil's amazingly large output, I became convinced of several things, and puzzled about one other: I became convinced that Sontag's "seriousness" is the main reason for the fascination of Weil's work—if not of her life. I became convinced that my own feelings about Weil's work were—and will always be, I suspect—a complex combination of attraction and repulsion, anger and admiration. And I became puzzled as to the particular attraction Weil has for some radicals whom I admire a great deal.

The interesting, and, I believe, significant essays in *Simone Weil: Interpretations of a Life*, collected and edited by George Abbott White, have raised these convictions and this puzzlement anew. White's volume is, in fact, excellent stimulus for my musings in part because its contributors include some of the leading

¹ Susan Sontag, "Simone Weil," in *Against Interpretation* (New York: Dell, 1966), pp. 50–51.

lights in that history of recent American radicalism of which I consider myself a small part. It seems to me that the characteristic mode of many, though not all, of the essays in *Simone Weil* is that of a kind of rescue operation, in a form somewhat like this: "Weil was not this, was wrong about that, was misinformed about the other, was irrational here—but she was a magnificent, important and profoundly moving figure in this or that other respect." It is as though some of the authors of these essays are responding to Sontag's comment that hardly anyone agrees with Weil's views about most matters, but that there is something about her work—her "seriousness"—that makes her terribly important. In some degree, I see my own review essay here as a similar rescue operation. I hope in performing my rescue to answer also the important question White poses for us in his introduction, when he asks us to consider "what possible use then, can be made of Simone Weil's life?" I have no intention of dealing with all aspects of the way we might "use" Weil's life, and neither does the volume of essays under consideration here. The issues I select are those I see of particular importance to me, and I believe for some of the essayists in White's volume.

Much is made in *Simone Weil*, and indeed in most discussions about her, of Weil's year of manual labor at factory work. Most agree that her experiences as a factory worker (and farmhand) marked her for the rest of her life. I do not want to denigrate the courage and integrity it took for Simone Weil, plagued with headaches, clumsy, and, as White writes "uncomfortable in her body," to leave the rather congenial sinecure of a teaching position to seek work as a factory hand, nor the authenticity of her desire to experience the lives of the workers in whose causes she was so passionately engaged in the early thirties. But since much that is written about Weil's conclusions concerning the nature of work is validated because her comments are based on her work experience, I think it important to point out how little of her life was actually spent in factory work. As one follows her in the chapter in Simone Petrement's biography entitled "The Year of Factory Work" one discovers that she actually worked a good deal less than a year. In fact, she never worked more than at most eight or nine weeks at a stretch, and probably less than that, without such interruptions as a vacation with her mother.²

2 See Simone Petrement, *Simone Weil: A Life*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Pantheon, 1976), pp. 224–43. Weil's first day of work at the Alsthom Company was December 4, 1934. She was laid off at Christmas, and returned to work January 2, 1935. Because of a bout of otitis, she was off ill after January 15, and took a vacation in Switzerland, returning to work February 25th. She worked till March 6, and shortly thereafter was laid off for two weeks, returning to work March 18. She was laid off April 5. She found work at the J.J. Carnaud et Forges de Basse-Indre factory, but was fired on May 7. On June 6 she went to work at Renault, but because of a hand she hurt on the 25th or so is given some leave between that date and July 7. She stopped working permanently before August 10, as best as Petrement can judge.

I raise this issue because several contributors to *Simone Weil* and others who have written about her use her discussion of work as the basis for theorizing about the nature of labor and for proposing political approaches by radicals to working people. It seems to me, however, that Weil did not really understand work. Her middle-class milieu, which regarded physical labor as unworthy, left her completely unprepared for work in a factory. Her sense of agony about the job was almost bizarre, based as much on her own inability to manage the machines as on the difficulties inherent in the job for others. Her sense of the depersonalization of work was in part the consequence of never having learned how to cope with work by staying at any one job long enough to learn its rhythms, to accommodate to its demands, to learn the little tricks and skills that make more tolerable any physical job. She was a middle-class intellectual out of her element, and she was honest enough to claim for her opinions about work no more than the authority of her own impressions. "It seems unreasonable to expect credence when one is but setting down impressions. Yet there is no other way of describing a human misery," she writes in her essay "Factory Work."³

But Staughton Lynd and George Abbott White claim much more for her essay. Lynd especially draws conclusions, based on his admiration of Weil's position about work, that I find dangerously romantic. Basing his opinion on Weil's views of work and on her trenchant analysis of Marxism, Lynd applauds Weil's denigration of "the specialization of tasks promoted by Taylorism," and supports her call for a decentralized economy. Lynd in fact claims that the failure of the New Left of the sixties, a movement in which he played such an honorable and significant role, to bring its force to bear on working people, was in large part caused by the failure of the New Left to address these issues. Turning to Weil's essay on work, Lynd fully agrees with Weil's description. Work must be free, workers must not be treated as employees, workers must feel at home. Lynd sums up Weil's position thus:

"Work should involve incentives worthier than money or survival. It should be educative, not stultifying; creative, not mechanical; self-directed, not manipulated"; and one might say that to bring about this change society should consider "experimenting in decentralization based on the vision of man as master of his machines and his society," because "the personal capacity to cope with life has been reduced everywhere by the introduction of technology that only minorities of men (barely) understand." It is food for thought that the words I have just used to summarize, accurately I think, Weil's reflections on factory work, are words from the now-forgotten *Port Huron Statement*.

Both Lynd and Weil are, in my opinion, profoundly romantic here. I see no evidence anywhere that work can be decentralized without seriously reducing

³ *The Simone Weil Reader*, ed. George A. Panichas (New York: David McKay, 1977), p. 64. This essay first appeared in English in *Politics* 3, no. 11, (December 1946).

productivity. Certainly, questions of freedom on the job, of ending shame and humiliation, must be addressed, but they have been and are being addressed by militant trade unions, from the "breaks" acquired by autoworkers to the grievance procedures that good unions defend more strenuously than anything else in their contracts. But opposition to the system of specialized—that is, mass—production, seems to me to call in question the need for productivity, and that of course is exactly what Weil does, and by extension what Lynd calls into question. For most of the world outside the most developed countries, this is an inconceivable luxury. Keeping fully in mind the need to oppose mindless consumerism, there is little doubt that for most peoples of the world the problem is not alienation in the factory—but lack of goods to keep body and soul together at anything like a decent standard of living. What most of humankind needs is decent medical care, adequate transportation, sufficient housing and, above all, enough food—and none of these are attainable without mass production. And mass production, at least at the moment, will be to some degree mindless and stultifying, no matter how one fiddles with a little decentralization here or diversification there. In part, I bring to this view my own impressions, though mine were gathered not during a few weeks of factory work, but during fifteen years of it as a coke oven heater in a steel mill in East Chicago, Indiana.

If there is to be a hope for making work less stultifying, in fact, it lies in *increased* mass production. Robotics and computerization have already shown the possibility of removing the most onerous tasks of mass production from human to nonhuman operators, and though under any system of private accumulation—and, I am forced to add, under any presently existing system of state ownership of the means of production—this process will be dominated entirely by profit, there is now a technical possibility that Weil could not have foreseen.

The larger problem with both Weil's and Lynd's position is that they treat the problem of factory work apart from the general problem of the alienation of all work, of all activity, under a system of private accumulation. Marx did not make this mistake, and Erich Fromm's explication and quotation of Marx in this regard makes the contrasting point well:

Alienation leads to the perversion of *all* values. By making economy and its values—"gain, work, thrift, and sobriety"—the supreme aim of life, man fails to develop the truly moral values, "the riches of a good conscience, of virtue, etc., but how can I be virtuous if I am not alive, and how can I have a good conscience if I am not aware of anything?" In a state of alienation each sphere of life, the economic and the moral, is independent from the other, "each is concentrated on a specific area of alienated society and is itself alienated from the other."⁴

⁴ Erich Fromm, *Marx's Concept of Man* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1961, 1966), p. 54.

Fromm's posture, based directly on Marx, is so much broader than Weil's that by comparison it shows the rather empty romanticism of her horror at factory work. By no means does Fromm show us a way out. What all of us on the left should have learned in the last decades is that socialism is not easily attained, that it is easily corrupted, and that there are many answers we still lack.

Writing from the vantage point of early 1983, some seven years after Lynd wrote his essay, it seems at least to me clear that Weil's complaints about work are rather limited, and are largely based on her own inability to cope with problems with which the workers of Gary, Indiana, the steeltown where I live, would gladly cope if they could only get their jobs back. The problems of the workplace are most likely to be solved by a combination of developing industrial technology and militant trade unionism, provided that technology is not left entirely to the service of private accumulation, and that trade unions have enough people at work to permit them to worry about making improvements at the workplace rather than merely keeping jobs. To decry the fullest mass production is to condemn most of the world, and, unfortunately, most of the non-white world, to an eternity of terrible living conditions. The solution to the problem of the workplace is impossible, in any long-range sense, without a solution to the problem of systemic alienation.

I have demythologized Weil's knowledge about work, and suggested that those who follow her too closely are trapped in the same romanticism about the possibly ennobling nature of work that her middle-class expectations, and her persons failings, brought to her factory work experience. I do not mean, I want hastily to add, to denigrate either Weil's or Staughton Lynd's sincerity, or the profundity of their concerns in raising these issues. I ask, however, for a more tough-minded look at possibilities, and at the fact of working people's experiences.

Very little is said in *Simone Weil* concerning Weil's Jewish background, and that is true as well in much else written about her. Michelle Murray notes, in her often moving biographical account, that the Weil family was "well assimilated and did not offer their children any religious upbringing," and Conor Cruise O'Brien suggests that "Judaism repelled [Simone Weil], basically because of the concept of the chosen people." I find it fascinating that this woman, raised in a Paris still aware of the Dreyfus case, and living all her adult life in a Europe in which Nazi anti-Semitism was a crucial factor, should find one of her pet hatreds in the history of ancient Israel (as well as in ancient Rome) and in the Old Testament. These aversions contrast strangely with her passionate, and sometimes ludicrous, defense of almost everything in classical Greece, and with her passion for the Cathars and probably other aspects of Gnosticism. It is a testament to Weil's integrity that none of these passions were pretense. They were as deeply felt, it appears, as her sympathies for the powerless and oppressed, her passion for a Catholic God and Christ, and, at the end of her life, for a resurgent France.

I feel, however, that her opinions about ancient Israel and her own Jewish background are most fully understood as part of a profound and little noted aspect of her personality—what I can only call her self-hatred and self-loathing. The personal indications of such self-hatred are extensive, and do not require more than the slightest documentation here. Petrement points frequently to Weil's apparent desire to make herself physically as unappealing as possible, even to the point of remembering the humiliation she suffered—when she was successful in getting a job at the Renault plant only after borrowing some makeup from Petrement so that “one saw how she could have looked if she had taken the slightest trouble to fix herself up.”⁵ There is the aversion to touching or kissing, and an accompanying apparently profoundly repressed sexuality, such that Leslie Fiedler describes her as “a woman to whom ‘sexual purity’ is as instinctive as breath; to whom, indeed, any kind of sentimental life is scarcely necessary.”⁶ There are obvious feelings of inferiority vis-à-vis her brilliant brother, the mathematician Andre Weil. This is coupled with repeated assertions that no one loves her, that one should shun friendship, and other such indications of profound feelings of worthlessness.

Her aversion to Jewishness, in my view a part of her self-aversion, takes on political overtones because it puts into question about her, as nothing else of which I know quite does, her sense of community and of humanity. Indeed, as humane a figure as George Steiner has reacted to her in this way: “I have always felt that Simone Weil rather misread Homer and that her ‘philosophy’ is not really deserving of that name. My feelings may well stem from the simple conviction that Judaism is not a club one resigns from in the time of Auschwitz.”⁷ One might consider Weil's willingness to consign Jews to the anti-Semitism she knew to be rife in France, prior to the outbreak of World War II, as in the service of the greater good of avoiding war.⁸ Her aversion to ancient Israel can be seen, as O'Brien sees it, as an aversion to the “chosen people” notion, its totality and lack of mitigation, like her aversion to ancient Rome, as historical blindness and crankiness.

I find it more difficult to explain her letter to Xavier Vallant, the Commissioner of Jewish Affairs in Vichy France, to whom she wrote on the occasion of the denial of a teaching assignment to her because she was Jewish. “Even though I do not

⁵ Petrement, *Simone Weil*, p. 240.

⁶ Leslie A. Fiedler, “Introduction” to Simone Weil, *Waiting for God* (New York: Harper & Row, Colophon, 1973), p. 27.

⁷ Professor Steiner replied to my inquiry, which asked him his views concerning Weil because George Abbott White comments briefly about Steiner's views in his Introduction. Professor Steiner's note to me, dated September 6, 1982, gives me permission to quote him, for which I am most grateful.

⁸ Simone Weil, *Seventy Letters*, trans. and arranged by Richard Rees (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 95, in letter #32 to Jean Posternak, 1938, and p. 99, in letter #33 to Gaston Bergery, 1938.

consider myself a Jew," she writes, "since I have never set foot in a synagogue, have been raised by my free-thinking parents with no religious observances of any kind, have no feeling of attraction for the Jewish religion and no attachment to Jewish tradition, and have been nourished since my early childhood only on the Hellenic, Christian, and French tradition, nevertheless I have obeyed."⁹ Although there is some irony in this letter, as it proclaims Weil's obedience in going to work as a grape harvester, it nevertheless is a major effort to separate herself from her Jewish background. I find this hard to swallow, in part because, in my own experience as a child in Austria after *Anschluss*, I saw so many Jews just like Weil, assimilated and mostly disconnected from Judaism, who re-learned their *sh'mas* on the way to the prisons and *Kazets* (as did my father), and who eventually chanted the *kaddish* on their way to their last moments, not as an affirmation of belief in God, but as an affirmation of oneness with one's people, of the worthiness of a tradition for which one was dying.

And yet, I take Weil's anti-Jewishness (clearly not anti-Semitism), as part of her self-hatred and self-loathing. I find it a major flaw in *Simone Weil: Interpretations of a Life*, that no serious effort is made to come to grips with this fact of the work's subject's life. I see this self-hatred as part of the explanation of much in Weil's thought that also has intellectual support—for example, what O'Brien calls her "dissociative bent," which is a consequence of the "intellectual limitations of pure intellectuals," and that gives rise to her "bias against the first-person plural." O'Brien adds, "in reality, an unusually imperious first-person singular had much more to do with the matter." That is what I find so troubling. The person who had such enormous sympathy for workers whom she could not join for more than a few weeks at a time, the person who could feel so powerfully for the colonial oppressed, could not seem to feel for the people of whom she was a part, by the fiat of Nazi anti-Semitism and its French variant, anything but disdain and aversion. At the same time, she showed enough arrogance and lonely self-righteousness to justify the "outsider" posture that she maintained all her life, and from which she suffered enormously.

One can treat most of the thought of Simone Weil without reference to these matters, but one cannot treat her life without recalling them. Moreover, there are aspects of her thought, including her disdain for much of the left and for almost any form of human association, which can be understood best by combining her powerful intellectual justifications for her position with these psychological ones I have suggested. Her death, after all, was called a suicide by the coroner, and though the matter is not entirely clear, surely her anorexia had a good deal to do with it. I am reminded by this aspect of Weil's life of the powerful lines of the American poet Robert Mezey, from his "No Country You Remember":

⁹ Petrement, *Simone Weil*, p. 443.

What if I paid for what I got?
 Nothing can so exhaust the heart
 As boredom and self-loathing do,
 Which are the poison of my art.

Simone Weil's mystical conversion is an important fact of her life and is the source of attraction for many who are so fascinated by her. Yet very few of the writers in *Simone Weil: Interpretations of a Life* pay much attention to this conversion to the all-but-Catholic state that dominates her thought and her writing in the last six years of her life. She became a Catholic, albeit without actually joining the Church, for entirely laudatory reasons, of course, which have to do with her awareness of profound flaws in the Church, with her boundless sympathy for those kept outside the Church, and with a version of Jansenism peculiar to her. Increasingly, as a result of her conversion to mystical Catholicism, her political ideas became significantly unpolitical. Though she never abandoned her agonized sympathy for most of the oppressed, she came increasingly to disapprove of any association of human beings for purely "material" ends. When forced, by an assignment from the Free French government, probably intended to keep her out of harm's way, to define a political philosophy, she came up in *The Need for Roots* with what O'Brien describes as "a state governed by a spiritual and moral elite, a rule of the saints. In practice an effort by mortal and fallible men to 'apply' *The Need for Roots* would probably have resulted in something like Vichy France—the resemblance to which she acknowledged with characteristic courage and integrity—but minus collaboration with the Nazis, and with de Gaulle at the top instead Petain." O'Brien attributes this rather discomfiting outcome to Weil's nonpolitical and even antipolitical bent, and, I would add, the source of this bent is, among other things, her conviction that only God is good, and that there is little that can be done by human beings to create such goodness.

Why, then, are such profoundly democratic and political thinkers as Lynd, White, Robert Coles, and many others so attracted to Weil? I think they ignore those consequences of her religious posture that the often wonderfully iconoclastic O'Brien confronts, because they are searching for something that did indeed characterize the New Left, and still characterizes some of its adherents—a search for a spiritual basis for political action. Such a spiritual basis for political action is something I suppose all of us, who think of ourselves as radicals would desire. Some have found it, in my opinion to their peril, in party affiliations. Others have found it in adherence to religious political movements. But those of us who are in both of these senses outsiders and "independents" do not have such easy answers available. It would be nice if one could believe in a God, the cliché has it. It would be nice as well if one could be comfortable with political actions because one had found a spiritual, transcendent basis for them.

It seems to me unfortunate that others, besides O'Brien, in the pages of *Simone Weil: Interpretations of a Life*, fail to take as hard and thorough a look at the ultimately antidemocratic, anti-civil libertarian content of her last ideas, as he does. They do so in precisely the opposite way in which they deal with her attitude towards her own Jewishness. In the case of the mysticism, they ignore the writings to concentrate on the life; in the case of Jewishness they concentrate on the writings and ignore the life. But if one would wish to "use" Simone Weil, it seems to me that we will have to heed Sontag's warning that few of us can agree with Weil about many things. If we follow her mysticism to its ultimate conclusion and wait for God's grace to overcome us, political action of any kind becomes useless, and radical activism also loses utility.

In Joseph Summers's and especially in Michael Ferber's discussions of Weil's essay "The Iliad or The Poem of Force" there seem to me to be the beginnings of the "rescue operation" I promised at the start of this review. For it is in this work, about the Greece she loved so deeply, that Weil shows herself at her most "serious." Petrement is quite right when she comments that "in this essay Simone found the accent of all the writing she did in her last years."¹⁰ It is the "accent," the tone of this essay, that is crucial, for though much in the content of Weil's later writings is troublesome to me, the tone, the pain, the awareness of "affliction" is crucial in them all, as it is in the essay on *The Iliad*.

Steiner is right, of course, when he writes in his note that Weil "rather misread" Homer. Michael Ferber's essay verifies Steiner's view in a number of respects, and Joseph Summers's "Notes on Simone Weil's *Iliad*" begins with the comment that many readers have noted that Weil's work "distorts many of the values of the Greek epic." Summers points out that he thinks of Weil's essay as a document particularly rooted in the agony of the fall of France, and concludes that "Weil's '*L'Iliade, ou le Poeme de la Force*,' even in its distortions, struck me as moving and ennobling—not merely in its anguished response to the defeated and enslaved, but particularly in its perception of the dehumanization, the reciprocal enslavement of the victors and the defeated in total war." Ferber also points repeatedly to limitations of Weil's essay as a piece of scholarship: she mistranslates some crucial terms, she invokes a rather simple-minded mimetic theory of literature, more clearly limited in the aftermath of poststructuralist critical endeavors than when Weil was writing; she uses elements of a romantic and an expressive theory of literature, and in her claim that "God has inspired every first-rate work of art there is a version of expressivism as old as the opening lines of the *Iliad* itself."

Thus there is wide agreement, in *Simone Weil: Interpretations of a Life*, that Weil's "*Iliad*"—no doubt her best-known work, at least in the United States—is of

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 363.

little use as a piece of scholarship or literary explication. And yet, Ferber insists, and in important ways I agree, that this essay of Weil's is a masterwork. Ferber provides one of the reasons why this is so when he writes: "It is not that the *Iliad* offered any rationale for France's ignominious collapse in 1940. Paris was not Troy, holding out heroically for ten years against an equally heroic host of besiegers. But perhaps the sense of even-handed disillusionment in the midst of endless days of violence that bring permanent joy to no one, this clear-eyed and bitter feeling [Weil] rightly claims we find in the *Iliad* offered a kind of solace. If we can bear the world of Homer, even find in it moments of beauty and grace, then we can bear our world of violence and defeat." Ferber goes further, indicating precisely what is so significant not only about Weil's "*Iliad*," but also about her work and life. He writes that he must pit his own "optimism against Simone Weil's pessimism, my revolutionary duty to hope against the reasons and experiences behind her despair." Then he concludes his essay as follows:

Yet we need her vision. It will help keep us from the illusions that easily beset social reformers and revolutionaries. Her critique of Marx and Lenin is a bracing wind that blows cobwebs from the mind. Her vision of war's effect on man in the *Iliad* essay, and the automatism of violence, if not of all force, is an essential contribution to our moral literature. Once the shooting starts outside the windows the world may well become the one she paints, where people who possess force walk through the human substance around them as through a nonresistant medium.

That is the "accent" that makes Weil important. It is the accent of her profound sympathy for the "afflicted": the accents of the tragic.

It is in this that Weil's importance, indeed her grandeur, lies. Even when her thought is just short of silly, as is her unmitigated condemnation of ancient Rome and Old Testament Israel, even when it is abhorrent, as I find her letter to Vallant and the self-loathing of her feelings about Judaism, even when it is regressive, as is her mysticism and the politics that flow from it, Weil remains essential. Essential is her "gravity," her awareness of the ultimate horror and injustice, the inordinate pain and terror in the world, coupled with the demand, on herself and on others, that we act to alleviate injustice and pain, even while we know that we cannot end "gravity."

The value of George Abbott White's volume lies in its ability to make us sharply aware precisely of Weil's "gravity." Though I have taken issue with several of the authors in the volume, because, it seems to me, they fail to subject "the saint" to the criticism her own unimpeachable integrity calls for, each of their essays contributes to this awareness of Weil's gravity, and it is this gravity, above all, that makes Simone Weil central to our century. She asks not only that we

recognize disaster, but that we act to end it at almost any cost to ourselves—and it is this demand that we must take most seriously, and that is most “serious” in Sontag’s sense—and that the essays in White’s book help to recall, so we may “use” Simone Weil.

In what I believe to be the best single essay in White’s book, Conor Cruise O’Brien concludes with the following paragraph:

Simone Weil’s contribution to politics is not in system or in method, or even in analysis, but in her lucid sensitivity to the dangerous forces at work in all collective activities, and her refusal to localize these forces exclusively in some other nation, or among the adherents of some other faith or ideology. One may, as I do, feel that there is something inhuman about her. Yet it could be that what we feel to be inhuman in her is that which made her capable of turning away from those aspects of our all-too-human attachments that put our neighbors, our environment, our world, our children, ourselves all in deadly peril.