

SIMONE WEIL, GOD'S SERVANT*

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THERE were giants in those days'. It was in reference to the past generation of Catholic writers that the remark was made, to the generation of Chesterton, Gill, Belloc and Baring, all those whose brilliance and wit led to talk of a Catholic revival in fashionable circles. How many of them were really giants might be questioned; but it is beyond question that a lesser breed followed in their wake, whose clever caperings and 'told-you-so' attitude did little credit to anyone, least of all to the 'giants' and the cause they served. Nor has the cause been better served by that superficial reading of the 'giants' which induced ill-founded reveries of an 'age of faith' and readily identified Christianity with dead cultures.

And the most poisonous effect of this fashionable nostalgia has been to leave a whole generation of young people thinking of themselves as inhabiting a world of winter which they can only hope will somehow turn again into a medieval summer. It will not. For despite the gloomy predictions and pessimistic determinism of the swelling band of prophet-historians, this wintry world is the one we have to live in, and, under God, it is we who must alter it. Furthermore, if only we were not so blind, if only we would take our eyes away from the past and look at the world in which we are living, we should see the summer, here already, shining in countless heroic lives. There are giants in these days. It is true, they are not given to poetry and *belles-lettres*, these giants of our day; they are a silent race, as becomes those who remember Auschwitz and Hiroshima. Where are they to be found? Many of them in monasteries, returning to God his choicest gifts, even the gift of speech; some live in Eastern Europe; others, perhaps, sell Catholic papers outside Lyons Corner House on dreary Saturday nights. Occasionally one of them breaks silence, and then we hear something really worth listening to. Such a person is Simone Weil.

*(*La Pesanteur et la Grâce*. Introduction by Gustave Thibon. Plon, 1948. *L'Enracinement*. Gallimard, 1949. *Attente de Dieu*. Introduction by Père Perrin, O.P. La Colombe, 1950.)

Born in 1909 of Jewish parents, Simone Weil was only five years old when she first identified herself with suffering; she refused to take sugar because it was needed by the soldiers at the front. The rest of her life follows the same pattern, with inessential variations. After acquitting herself brilliantly in her philosophical studies under Le Senne and Alain she began to teach philosophy in Puy. More exactly, she began to *live* her philosophy, defending the oppressed workers when they went on strike and restricting her expenditure to the dole which the unemployed received—the rest of her pay she gave away. In 1934 she so far identified herself with the oppressed classes as to become a hand in the Renault works; all this time, and for the rest of her days, she suffered from a splitting headache. When the Spanish Civil War broke out Simone went to Spain out of a desire to share in the fight against totalitarianism, but she was a rather clumsy person and one day she spilt boiling oil over herself, which put an end to her Spanish sojourn. By what series of events she then found herself spending Holy Week and Easter 1937 at Solesmes neither Gustave Thibon nor Père Perrin makes clear, though it was there that her spiritual destiny seems to have taken shape. The Gregorian chant bore witness to her of that beauty, the beauty of this world, which she accused Catholics of ignoring: '...one can say that the beauty of the world is almost absent from the Christian tradition. That is strange, and it is difficult to find the reason for it. It represents a terrible lack. How could Christianity ever claim to be catholic when it excludes the universe itself?' Even more, she met a young Englishman there whose radiance after communion deeply impressed her; through him, also, she came to know the English metaphysical poets, particularly Herbert. Four years later saw the Germans in occupation of Northern France, instituting measures against the Jews which drove the Weil family to Marseilles. Here Simone met the Dominican, Père Perrin, who introduced her to his farmer-friend, Gustave Thibon, after Simone had decided to spend some time working as a farm-hand in order to identify herself with the agricultural labourers in the same way that she had shared the lot of the factory-hands. Working on the land made her headache so acute that sometimes she nearly went out of her mind.

On the 17th May 1942 the Weil family left France to sail for America, where Simone hoped to be able to help the Free French organisations. Later she came to London for the same purpose

and tried to get permission to be parachuted into France, but her Jewish appearance made the plan impracticable. Therefore she cut down the rations on which she was living to the level of rations in occupied France; this, on top of her other privations, was responsible for the tuberculosis from which she died. It was in a London hospital on the 24th August 1943.

It goes without saying that the above brief sketch of her life does not report everything that has been published about her. Neither Thibon nor Père Perrin gives a great deal of personal detail; and that itself is significant. What Simone Weil wished to hand on to us was not an account of her struggles, but her ideas, so that they could nourish us. So far did she take this suppression of self that her farewell letter to Thibon contains the chilling message: 'I also like to think that after the first pangs of separation, no matter how it affects me, you yourself will never have any regrets about it, and that if by chance you sometimes think of me it may be as of a book which you read in your childhood. I would never wish to occupy any other place in the heart of anyone whom I love, so as to be sure of never causing them pain.'

If little has been said of the richness in her life, not much more can be written in a short article about her ideas, because she had ideas on every subject under the sun—Christianity, the Hebrews, the Romans, manual labour, the decadence of France, our involvement in the guilt of Adolf Hitler. Furthermore she hits the mark, or at least some mark, with each of her ideas, and so her words are difficult to comment upon; they are the kind which you know immediately are going to be your companions for a lifetime, which you grow into rather than excavate. Since, moreover, our English publishers have enough intelligence to recognise a thinker when they meet one, her books will be translated; therefore what follows is simply intended as an incitement to learn the many truths she has to teach.

Simone Weil's life and thought (to speak of either is to speak of both) represent a scandal. In the first place a scandal to Catholics, because she embodied truths of faith which we are content to leave suspended in the heaven of our imaginations, and yet she never received the waters of baptism. Writing to Père Perrin, she says: 'Like yourself, I think that our duty for the next two or three years—a duty so compelling that it would be treason to neglect it—is to convince the world of the possibility of a truly

incarnate Christianity'. One has heard so much talk of incarnational truth in recent years that this remark may not seem very striking; neither is it, until one reflects how few people have applied it so strictly as Simone Weil. She realised that Christianity is true from the moment when the Truth is incarnate, em-bodied, and that this embodiment has to take place in each Christian if the world is to see the possibility of a truly *incarnate* Christianity. A favourite quotation of hers was the phrase often used by workers when one of the young apprentices begins to weary or accidentally hurts himself: 'It's his job going into his body'. How aptly this traditional working-class wisdom applies to Christian life! Suffering, pain, hunger, headaches, absence of loved ones, are all modes by which the Christian's job enters into him, ways in which the Truth is em-bodied, incarnate. And what illumination the saying throws upon a much-quoted and little-heeded dictum of scholasticism, that 'the knower in some way becomes the thing known', that there is some kind of identification between the knower and the known! Simone Weil identifies herself with the Renault workers, the farm-labourers, Plato, and the French people under occupation, and in that way she comes to *know* them. It is a worthwhile elaboration of the scholastic dictum to point out that unless the knower in some way identifies himself with the known, there is no knowing; identification is not so much a description as a *condition* of knowing. The elaboration contains immensely practical lessons which are daily ignored. It means, for instance, that if tracts are to be written on the blessings of poverty there are certain people who should not write them, namely the rich, because, in the scholastic sense, they do not *know* what they are talking about.

Once the scandal of Simone Weil's life has given us a splitting headache we are in a position, perhaps, to appreciate the various spheres in which she em-bodied truth: the sphere of manual work, the sphere of intellectual life, the sphere of prayer, a division without separation. But before referring to these spheres let us make it quite clear what we mean by saying that she *em-bodied* truth and brought Christianity into relation with the twentieth-century world. It does not mean, for instance, that she read papers to summer-schools entitled 'The Church and the Worker', or 'The role of the Catholic Intellectual', or even 'The life of prayer'. That kind of 'reconciliation' between the various departments

into which our culture has been split, is ultimately no reconciliation at all because the truth is not embodied in a *person*. Examples of such 'reconciliations' from the so-called intellectual life of the past half-century come readily to mind, the readiness with which any cranky biologist has been adopted just because he says something derogatory about Darwin, the schoolboy squeals of timorous clergy when one of the detested scientists produced for them the second law of thermodynamics, the belief that social encyclicals dropped straight from heaven and were too precious to use as anything but a museum-piece; all these cases could be multiplied. And the reason why such 'reconciliations' have failed is that they had nothing to do with Christianity—they were mental adjustments of separate hypotheses, neither of which was embodied in the person who imagined he was bringing Christianity into relation with the twentieth-century world. There was, therefore, no Incarnation; since there was no Incarnation there was no one to carry the Cross, that *scientiae crux*, the Cross of Science, the Cross which is the reconciliation no less of erring man and Truth than of sinful man and perfect God. 'Contradiction endured into the very depths of one's being means being torn asunder; it is the Cross', as Simone Weil wrote, and as Simone Weil lived.

Thankfulness is the only appropriate response to the skill with which she states how the Truth may be made to live in the modern world, by Incarnation and Crucifixion. For a long time one had heard odd snatches of the truth; Scheler in fear and trembling at his 'narrow ledge', Edith Stein walking courageously 'on the edge of the abyss'; but always these snatches were drowned in the cries of the hey-nonny boys shouting that it was warm inside the city, that roystering was to be had and the best of both worlds. More chilling even than the desert wind in the night, these cries told many that they were strangers where they had hoped to have a home; now they may take heart from the story of Simone Weil who stood waiting outside the city, waiting for God like a faithful servant. For it is true that the struggle always takes place in the desert; the deep meaning of the command to go out and compel them to come in is that we must go out to the desert and wrestle with our erring brethren to bring them inside, wrestling with Jew and Gentile, with atheists and nihilists. The victory is ours when the sweat on our bodies makes them lose their grip, and our antagonists become captives of the Truth; if there are some,

like Simone Weil, weary from the struggle, who in the dark night cannot find their way inside, then they will be easy to find when the night is spent and day dawns.

Returning to the three spheres where Simone Weil's embodiment of the Truth is likely to prove most inspiring, we find her making the following observations on how to reach the workers, a task 'not of vulgarisation but of translation—something very different':

'We must not take truths, which are already impoverished, from their setting in the culture of the intellectuals so as to debase them, mutilate them and destroy their savour, but simply express these truths in all their fulness by means of a language which touches the heart for the sake of those whose hearts have been moulded by working-class conditions.

'The art of transposing truths is one of the most essential and least understood. What makes it difficult is that in order to practise it one must have placed oneself at the very centre of some truth and have taken possession of it in all its nakedness. . . . Furthermore, transposition constitutes a criterion for a truth: whatever cannot be transposed is no truth. . . .'

In the light of what has previously been said of how Simone Weil transposed truths for the workers, the quotation requires no comment; it only needs to be applied if it is to bear fruit. All young philosophers and theologians, for instance, should nourish the ambition of transposing their philosophies for a working-class audience, because they would find in the process a criterion for the truth of their thought—if they cannot transpose it, it needs revising.

In the second sphere which we referred to, that of intellectual life, she insists almost to the point of fierceness upon the virtue of integrity, and the responsibility of intellectuals. As proof of the repercussions which the written word may have upon human events, and of the care which words demand of us, she cites the effect produced by a book about Sulla upon the soul of a miserable, uprooted young fellow in Vienna, Adolf Hitler. But it is not only the forgotten author of this pernicious book, with its underlying evil assumptions, who is involved in Hitler's guilt; all are involved who helped to twist Hitler's mind by giving countenance to the *pseudo-scientific viewpoint which he implemented; and, oddly enough, they also are involved, the bien-pensants, who endowed*

this viewpoint with the force of their own fears in the face of science.

These are but a few of her penetrating remarks upon the case of Hitler, from her analysis of which she concludes that intellectual negligence results in just as much chaos as the negligence of a railway signalman, and therefore should be punished in the same way.

It should be clear that Simone Weil's passionate insistence upon intellectual integrity derives from her deeply religious reverence for the truth, and it is not surprising, therefore, to discover that her essay in *Attente de Dieu*, about the way in which scholastic pursuits can raise one to the heights of prayer, is a little masterpiece. It was intended for the young students in the care of Père Perrin, but will, we hope, be translated for the benefit of students in every country. As the focus for both the life of prayer and the exercise of learning she fixes upon the act of 'attention', wherein the most intense activity and complete passivity become one. Prayer for her, as for many of our mystics, is nothing more than a simple act of loving attention; it means just looking at God, looking at him whilst peeling potatoes or translating Homer; essentially uncomplicated, this attitude towards prayer (itself an attitude of prayer) may easily focus the various branches of learning. Unity of prayer and learning in attention forms the theme of some nine pages whose precision, if it defies summarising, may permit at least one illustration: 'Even when it seems as though all attempts at attention have proved fruitless during many years, one day the soul will be flooded by light in exact proportion to the intensity of those efforts. Each effort adds a little gold to a treasure which nothing in the world can take away. All the long and painful years which the Curé d'Ars spent in useless efforts to learn Latin bore abundant fruit in the marvellous discernment which enabled him to see his penitents' very souls behind their words or even behind their silence.' And all the long years when Simone Weil was attending to Christ through the unemployed, Homer, and her ceaseless headaches, bore their fruit and bear it afresh in these pages.

A selection from her thought may give some hint of its quality. First of all, a thought for pacifists: 'Whoever takes up the sword shall perish by the sword. And whoever does not take up the sword (or else puts it down) shall perish on the Cross.'

And for our specialists in 'culture': 'Culture is an instrument manipulated by professors for the manufacture of professors who will, in their turn, manufacture professors.'

For those more Roman than Catholic: 'The word pagan, when applied to Rome, is rightly charged with all the horror that was given to it by the first Christians. They were a godless and idolatrous people; not idolising bronze and stone statues, but idolising themselves. This idolatry of self they have bequeathed to us under the name of patriotism.'

For the American Catholic review describing Christopher Columbus as an agent of the Providence which had planned that, centuries later, there should be a country capable of defeating Hitler: 'One might have thought that instead of sending Christopher Columbus to America so long in advance it would have been simpler to send someone to assassinate Hitler round about 1923.... Every providential interpretation of history is of necessity situated at this level, as with Bossuet's conception of history which is both insulting and stupid....'

For those given to pragmatism in arguments for Christianity: 'Many [of these arguments] are of the Pink Pills publicity type, e.g. Bergson and his followers. In Bergson faith seems to be a superior kind of Pink Pill which communicates an enormous charge of vitality.'

For many of us: 'The imagination is continually at work trying to block up the chinks through which grace might flow in.'

For all of us, sinners hating sin: 'The attention turned lovingly towards God (or, in less degree, towards anything truly beautiful) makes certain actions impossible. That is the effect of passive prayer in the soul.'

There are three books full of such nourishment. *Gustate et videte!* Yet there is something unbalanced about her thinking, which is expressed in the sentence: 'Surely those who are called "blessed" [in the words of St Thomas] are those who have no need of the Resurrection for their belief, those for whom perfection and the Cross are sufficient proofs.' That, I believe, is true, and a truth which Simone Weil tried to live; she lived the Incarnation and the Crucifixion. Not less true is the fact of the Resurrection; *crucifixus etiam pro nobis* (may we never forget it), but that is not the whole truth—*resurrexit tertia die*, and if our Lord, out of compassion for our poor, miserable, human weakness and unbelief,

rose from the tomb, then let us allow our risen Lord to wipe away the tears from our eyes and heal our broken hearts, and let us cry *Resurrexit sicut dixit, Alleluia!* Such complete acceptance of *everything* he has done for us is surely one with the obedience by which the Son allows the Father on Good Friday to tear from him the cry, '*Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani*'; for it is only through sharing in that obedience that we could ever decide the place of joy, agony and glory in our Christian lives. Of ourselves we could never decide, but he has decided for us, since he is the Church; and the Church in the Liturgy tells us where to fix our gaze—on Good Friday at Christ crucified, on Easter Day at the risen Lord. It was said of St John of the Cross, whom Simone Weil so much admired, that you could tell from his countenance which feast the Church was keeping. So may it be with us all.

However, not one word of this is intended in criticism. Rather is it meant to call attention to the first rays of Easter Day which one can detect filtering into Simone Weil's life, rays which in their fulness would have relieved her harshness and one-sided judgments. Easter light first suggests itself in her meeting with the young Englishman at Solesmes, and becomes clearly distinguishable after she had come to know Père Perrin, an almost blind Dominican. Having devoted herself for so long to others out of a somewhat Kantian sense of duty she now begins to love, as a person loving persons. If one studies her letters to Père Perrin closely one realises that she is slowly becoming a complete human person; the metallic tones of the female intellectual, unconscious echoes of a heart empty with longing, are unmistakably softened into the fuller notes of the woman deep in understanding of others.

But despite the promise in this admirable friendship, Easter Day did not dawn fully upon Simone Weil in this life; her journey through the world was a Lenten journey. May all Christian folk pray that she shall hear those words that are refreshment to the parched traveller, 'Come ye blessed of my Father. . . .', and may she now rejoice that Lent is over; may she enter into the eternal Easter.