LITERATURE AT THE SERVICE OF TRUTH: SIMONE WEIL AND *L'ENRACINEMENT*

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to elaborate the many literary allusions that Simone Weil used in her ultimate work: L' Enracinement*, translated as* The Need for Roots*, to achieve her goal of encouraging her fellow countrymen to create a new postwar society. Understanding how she used the riches of the French and Western Literary Cannon, less easily grasped by those not educated in the French Education system, enriches the understanding of Weil's purpose and skill in writing on many levels, simultaneously for different target audiences. Underlying her stress on the need for truth and honesty about a county's past and present, with discernable respect for every person, is her foundational belief in the spiritual destiny of every human being. Examining her literary allusions in detail to show her clever subversion of traditionally accepted interpretations brings a new dimension to Simone Weil studies, while underlining the relevance of this essay to contemporary dilemmas.*

Keywords: Simone Weil, laws, truth, justice, grandeur, patriotism

"In French literature, there is a discernible current of purity."
(Weil 1955*,* 235)

Introduction

While in London during the final year of her life, Simone Weil worked intensely on the essay she referred to in a letter to her parents as "another *magnum opus*," (Weil 1965*,* 186) but which is known today by its post-humous title, *L'Enracinement*, translated into English as *The Need for Roots*. Desperate over General de Gaulle's dismissal of her "*Plan for an Organization of Front-line Nurses*" (Weil 1965, 145-183) and tormented by the imperative to share with others the spiritual insights she held within her, she wrote constantly, pushing herself to exhaustion in what became the last year of her life. In this study, we trace the multitude of literary references in her ultimate work designed to prioritize liberty obtained through laws obeyed by all, to depict the horrors of oppression, and to subvert illusions about a nation's grandeur.

Having no books on hand in her small London workspace, she uses her remarkable memory to evoke supporting arguments from dozens of literary works by "first-rate minds" that call for honoring the rule of law and for accepting a truthful assessment of a country's past. A willing obedience to legitimate authority, due to strong ties of national fidelity, and a viable vibrant community can be inspired only by confronting a nation's past actions with truth and compassion and by mutually agreeing on rule-based communal living.

Underpinning her theorizing is a spiritual foundation; to love one's homeland one must also learn to love the beauty of the whole world as God's creation. To illuminate her argument for her countrymen, Weil highlights French "genius" with its strain of purity inherent in first-rate literary works based on truth—essential for inspiring love of country, God and neighbor. "The genius of France only resides in that which is pure." (Weil 1955, 236)

The abrupt fall of France under the Nazi boot in 1940 had uprooted her fellow French citizens by usurping their homeland, its fruits and its culture. By 1942, nevertheless, glimmers of a potential Allied victory were shimmering through the chaos. Our philosopher felt compelled to delineate her concept of a nation loved by its people, admired by others for goodness, honesty, and integrity, and cherished as a nurturing place to send down roots. She sees the goal as a continual and purposeful action of sending down roots into a well-prepared fertile soil. Such is the meaning of the word "enracinement." Since the work was unfinished at her death, the title was chosen by others. The accepted English title is "The Need for Roots": more descriptive of an essential aspect of the human condition.

The nation she envisioned would embody the concept of having a *vocation universelle*—often claimed by the French but seldom realized— and would inspire a patriotism sourced in a consented obedience to legitimate authority, while refusing all oppressive actions imposed on its own people or on others. Her immediate sight was set on a future political reconstruction of France, which would give close attention to the needs of the human soul and to eternal obligations. Overall, her "*magnum opus,*" consisting of a penetrating interrogation of France's democracy past and future—articulated from political, philosophic, and religious perspectives—still has relevance for the dilemmas of contemporary democratic societies.

1. Rootedness

Central to her religious philosophy is the concept of rootedness as an irreplaceable good; a sense of being rooted in a place is a sine qua non for true love of country and eventually love of God. Rootedness, for Weil, means being steeped in the lan-

guage, culture and beliefs of one's community, feeling at home in a place, and having tender compassion for its frailty and moral failings. A sense of rootedness inspires the willingness to sacrifice one's life, if need be, for the threatened homeland. Love for one's country becomes palpable where the inhabitants have a sense of living by laws that they have helped formulate, and it is sustained by compassionate reverence for those laws. "This compassion alone can give us back that feeling we have lacked for so long, and so rarely experienced throughout the course of history, and which Théophile [de Viau] expressed in the beautiful line, "*La sainte majesté des lois.*" (Weil 1955, 179-80)[1] Ignorance of or refusal to acknowledge ineluctable limitations imposed on everyone leads to mindless destruction of human lives and in Weil's religious philosophy the loss of one's soul.

Writers in France's literary canon give evidence that rules imposed by a forceful central authority compelling obedience create barren social conditions, smother individual thinking, and install a reign of fear. Comments of Louis de Rouvoy, duc de Saint Simon (1675- 1755) and descriptions from the letters of Elizabeth-Charlotte of Bavaria (1652 -1722), a German princess married to King Louis XIV's brother, provide evidence of this inevitable ennui. Conversely, laws decided collectively and applicable to all with no exclusions establish sovereign boundaries that mirror the network of the inviolable principles governing the universe, which she calls necessity. Each individual learns the reality of these limitations through manual and intellectual work, which she posits as the spiritual core of societies focused on the divine destiny of every soul. "Our age has its own particular mission, or vocation—the creation of a civilization founded upon the spiritual nature of work." (Weil 1955, 96) She underscores the importance of work forming the core of a functioning society in the thought of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, George Sand, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, and others.

2. In London

The leadership in the Free French Forces, having allowed Weil to cross the ocean and to enter England while recognizing her enormous intellect, were at a loss over how to exploit her unique potential. That others paid more attention to her intelligence than to her message was a constant source of anguish for Simone. (Weil 1965, 196) Her intransigence and sharp critique of the men who had assumed authority complicated the resolution of the dilemma. They partially resolved the

[1] The actual words are “La sainte autorité des lois.” (Weil 2013, 189, note 1) In wartime London, she had no access to a library.

problem by assigning her to a small office with the loosely defined task of responding to the stream of correspondence full of hopes and suggestions coming from occupied France. Although she appeared to be complying with the demands of the services of the Free French Forces, her final essay, carefully crafted, despite the franticness with which she worked and the absence of source material, goes far beyond their presumed expectations. (Weil 2013, 48) She molded her political and social theories into a work of timeless value worthy of an extensive readership.

That scholars still mine this essay in the century after its composition to extract underlying criteria for establishing a viable community and for recognizing the psychological need to feel rooted provides proof of the wide-ranging applicability of our French philosopher's ideas. Before she left France on June 7, 1942, Weil wrote her mentor, the Dominican Père Perrin, that in such perilous times with death hovering over everyone, she does not have the right to keep silent about the precious message she bears. "As I am going more or less with the idea of probable death, I do not believe that I have the right to keep it to myself. For after all, the whole of this matter is not a question concerning me myself. It concerns God." (Weil 2021, 32-3) She subsequently spent her last residue of energy sharing her ideas in written form, despite suffering from extreme fatigue and advanced tuberculosis.

3. Enracinement – a social vision

This final work embodies her inordinate talent of simultaneously writing on several levels: in this case, for authorities in the Free French Forces, for posterity, and for an urgent appeal to her fellow citizens. She had a practical goal with an underlying motivation to spread out her overall vision of the beauty of human beings living together in the material world constantly guided by their spiritual destiny. This ultimate purpose becomes clear in her selection of literary references. Her brief allusions, often just an author's name or the title of some work, reveal underlying layers of meaning to any reader educated in the French nationalized system of education. She combined keen intellectual gifts with well-honed writing skills in her plea for a rethinking of France's cultural legacy in order to extract hidden pearls of honesty obscured by vainglorious claims. Her pressing appeal to compatriots interests us here. She knew that they would have the drive and ultimate responsibility to insist on an innovative reorganization of their country's institutions, with the ardent desire of meeting integral and profound human needs.

To expand the mindsets of her countrymen for reimagining what could be, she argued for a close yet skeptical reexamination of what they had been taught in the French education system, which she saw as too oriented toward fostering an uncritical patriotism. Her early political and social diatribes had focused on criticizing French educational policies in relation to truth. The weak resistance to the advancing German Army in 1940 had shown the futility of such superficial pride in a questionable glory. Our young philosopher, on the contrary, was exploring ways to instill a readiness in the citizenry to give a full measure of devotion toward preserving the place in which they had sent down roots. At base, a fidelity inspiring loving obedience can only be founded on an unswerving desire for truth and justice. Consequently, a humble recognition in word and deed of horrendous past deeds committed in the name of one's country must be acknowledged as the crimes they were; France was no exception.

Her words cajole, taunt, tease, and jolt her readers into questioning any complacent assurance that "*la France éternelle*," endowed from on high with a *vocation universelle,* was truly a beacon light for those who love "*liberté, fraternité, égalité*." Not so, she declares, and proof of the contrary is in their own history of oppression and destruction of others' cultures. "[…] The national unity had been brought about almost exclusively by the most brutal conquests**."** (Weil 1955, 145) Such historic reality needs acknowledgement and sincere repentance. At the same time, she counters, traces of France's genuine exceptionalism can be perceived in ingenious French minds of earlier epochs. To support her contention, she refers to examples from all literary genres: drama, satire, poetry, correspondence, memoirs, autobiography, even faint vestiges left from vanquished cultures that had once inhabited present-day French soil.

Her task was daunting; France's emergence from a ruthless occupation after a mortifying defeat understandably filled the tyrannized with an overwhelming desire for vengeance. In her spiritual view, however, the final purpose of human life involved a willing consent to God's love under all conditions, no matter the suffering involved. Consequently, evil perpetrated on others, even though seemingly justified, risks forfeiting one's soul. To temper their bitterness and to inspire humility and forgiveness, she reminds her readers that France had not only imposed similar devastating oppression on others by uprooting vulnerable cultures both within and beyond their borders but had taken inordinate pride in such behavior. Treating the subdued as conquered people is a source of poison that counters any attempts to cultivate love of homeland. "It must be admitted that the 40 kings who in a thousand years made France did so often with a brutality worthy of our own age." (Weil 1955, 106)

Refusing to acknowledge having run roughshod over people and cultures in arrogantly colonizing weaker communities, while assuming an egotistical vanity in uprooting them, runs counter to Christian virtues and creates an unsustainable foundation for fidelity. Intentional lies aggrandizing past tyrannical exploits feed into the idolatry of a nation clothed in a false grandeur, a vice inherited from the Romans. "[The Romans] never committed any acts of cruelty, never granted any favors, without boasting in each case of their generosity and clemency." (Weil 1955, 141)

4. French "genius"

Weil saw the necessity of subordinating French patriotism to justice, in such a way that the country's actions could be regarded compassionately. She did not abandon the belief in France as a north star for other nations but burnished its tarred reputation by stressing elements that infallibly reveal the good embedded in first-rate literature extending from pre-Christian times up through the twentieth century. Of her more than four dozen allusions from within the French canon, that distinguish good from evi**l**, explicitly or implicitly, we will look at a select few. Readers who can discern the implications behind her concise references that offer unique perspectives are rewarded by an enriched appreciation of her skill and by an enhanced understanding of her encompassing religious philosophy.

Simone Weil believed that "one identical truth can be found—expressed very precisely, with only very slight differences of modality," in universal folklore, ancient mythologies, Pythagoras, Plato, Greek Stoics, *Gita*, in sacred Egyptian writings, and in many other sources, as is in the dogma of Christian faith and the greatest of Christian mystics. This revealed truth requires a transposition and a new form of expression suitable for each epoch. (Weil 1965, 159) Literature, as a conveyor of truth, had always been an essential part of her education with Alain, and subsequently became foundational in her own teaching and writing. For her, fine literature engaging in perennial questions of distinguishing good from evil allow readers to discern eternal truths while vicariously experiencing the consequences of others' decisions, good and bad.

Writers have a moral responsibility for their influence on readers, and educators have a responsibility toward the young: lies about one's country should not be tolerated nor should dishonesty about humankind's true destiny go unchallenged. Just as valuing Christ's preference for humility over vainglory leads to true love of God and of neighbor, having compassion for the derelictions of one's homeland opens the way to an abiding compassionate loyalty.

5. A sovereign people – Rousseau and Montaigne

Throughout *The Need for Roots*, Simone Weil's references to literary figures and works, all very recognizable to French readers, bolster her claim that post-war France could be a true sovereign nation that gives attention to the people's needs and that honors laws based on truth and justice. In her unique view of the real, a sovereignty based upon the general will of the people, requires a spiritual foundation, creating a link between this world and the other, where an absolute good abides. Her essential concept of the general will comes from Jean-Jacques Rousseau's social philosophy, expressed in his 1762 essay "The Social Contract," which states that by joining together into civil society through *a social contract* and abandoning claims of *natural right*, individuals can preserve both their personal integrity and liberty. She advises, "It would be a good thing just now to encourage the reading of the *Contrat Social.*" (Weil 1955, 28) In the Genevan author's concept, submission to the authority of the *general will* of the people as a whole guarantees individuals against being subordinated to the wills of others and also ensures that they obey themselves because they are, collectively, the authors of the law. This desirable situation, she insists, may have been *de jure* but not *de facto* prior to the fall of France.

In Weil's mind, Rousseau's "The Social Contract″ indicates the way to a more perfect society by describing indispensable conditions of a free society based on each person's consent. She laments, however, that while he recognized the possibility of breathing inspiration into a people he did not sufficiently pursue the idea. "Rousseau, with his powerful mind, clearly recognized its existence, but didn't go any further." (Weil 1955, 187) Her intent in *The Need for Roots,* while acknowledging that such a society may not be fully attainable, is to refresh her readers' minds about its possibility and to develop this concept further for contemporary needs.

Supporting arguments for a country ruled by laws, also come from Charles de Secondat, Baron de, Montesquieu (1689 – 1755), judge and political philosopher of the eighteenth century, who theorizes on the value of laws to avoid despotism. The distinction between monarchy and *despotism is clear for Weil: the former has the possibility of being good, but the latter is inevitably evil.* This opposition hinges on whether or not a fixed set of laws exists that can restrain the authority of the king: if so, the regime counts as a monarchy; if not, it counts as despotism. Referring to Montesquieu's theory, she alleges that "The first obstacle was that, on the death of Charles V, France, to use Montesquieu's words, ceased to be a monarchy, and fell

into the state of despotism from which she only emerged in the eighteenth century," (Weil 1955, 104) a term he had brought into the political vocabulary. (Sullivan 2018, 1) Montesquieu's 1748 treatise on political theory, *The Spirit of the Laws*, originally published anonymously due to censorship of his works, attempts to re-inspire compassion for an orderly and just France based on laws; he too claimed that patriotism cannot exist without compassion.

According to Montesquieu, Louis XIV's statement "*L'État c'est moi*." (Weil 1955, 117) invalidates his legitimacy. Montesquieu pleaded for a constitutional system of government with a separation of powers, the preservation of lawfulness and civil liberties, and the *end of slavery*. Combined; these elements constitute a sovereign nation, in which all the people are viable participants on an equal basis. Montesquieu's ideas provoked opposition from the French monarchy, not at all interested in equality, understandably so, for his counter arguments against a despotic monarchy helped spark the desire for freedom, which fed eventually into the French Revolution.

6. Force versus good

Through citations from her admired writers of "genius," she invokes the objective toward which to strive and the criteria for recognizing inevitable obstacles. Three of these formidable barriers are 1) humankind's lack of inherent goodness, 2) authority figures who demand absolute allegiance, and 3) leaders who refuse to honor their obligation to support the needs and dignity of the people.

In an illustration on the value of truthful leadership that recognizes its obligations, she references a 1678 fable of Jean de la Fontaine and cites from the *Mémoires* of Cardinal de Retz, also of the seventeenth century, but adamantly condemns a line from a sixteenth-century poem by Joachin du Bellay, often memorized by French schoolchildren. La Fontaine depicts the adverse effects of arrogant leadership through satire and Retz protests the lawless monarchy via his memoirs, but du Bellay, she claims, is dishonestly complicit with false claims of France's grandeur when he extolls an untruth through his poetry. The first two of these authors buttress her indictment of France as a cold impersonal State that demands absolute allegiance to itself and is no longer a sovereign nation ruled by the people but instead, is a place where the rule of law has long since fallen into disuse.

La Fontaine's "The Animals Sick of the Plague" illustrates how the strong circumvent justice in order to exploit the vulnerable. The powerful lion holds court to assign blame for a scourge that had fallen upon them all. The King of beasts, showing a pretense of humility, confesses first:

For me, my appetite has play'd the glutton
Too much and often upon mutton.
What harm had e'er my victims done?
I answer, truly, None.
Perhaps, sometimes, by hunger press'd,
I've eat the shepherd with the rest. (La Fontaine, 1882)

The animals hastily excused the lion and then confessed their own bloody deeds. In the end, however, the ultimate sacrifice was demanded of the innocent defenseless ass who had done no more than eat fresh grass from a field while the owners were at mass. Jean de La Fontaine (1621-1695) makes clear that social status decides innocence or guilt.

'What? eat another's grass? O shame!
The noose of rope and death sublime,'
For that offence, were all too tame!
And soon poor Grizzle felt the same.

Thus human courts acquit the strong,
And doom the weak, as therefore wrong. (ibid.)

Cardinal de Retz's (1613 - 1679) *Mémoires* are among the esteemed classics of seventeenth-century French literature and appreciated by Simone Weil, who cites him in her *Notebooks.* Retz had participated in the Fronde, the aristocratic rebellion against Louis XIII and had opposed both Richelieu and Louis XIV's rise to power. In his chronicling, de Retz denounced the tyrannous behavior of the monarchy, which nullified its legitimacy, and agreed with Montesquieu's contention that after Charles V laws no longer prevailed in France. Weil prods her readers to recall the ferocious fourteenth-century repressions of both Flemish and French towns under Charles VI with his callous indifference to laws. The crown imposed absolute tyranny over its cowed subjects, requiring total servility. "Charles VI, during his minority, aided and abetted by his uncles, by using corruption and the vilest cruelty, brutally compelled the people of France to accept a perfectly arbitrary tax, renewable at will, which literally reduced the poor to starvation, while the nobleman frittered away the proceeds." (Weil 1955, 104-05)

Undeterred by these historic realities, young French students often memorize the first line of "Les Regrets," Joachin du Bellay's 1558 poetic reverie, "*France, mère des arts, des armes et des lois*." Weil objects: ". . . the last word was *de trop.* As Montesquieu, so ably pointed out, and as Retz before him had explained with such marvelous lucidity, there were no laws at all in France from the death of Charles VI onward." (Weil 1955, 194-95) Nor does the revered romantic French poet Alphonse de Lamartine (1790-1869) escape her intense focus on truth. She

decried the final line in his poem "La Marseillaise de la Paix**"** that claims "*la vérité, c'est mon pays.*" (Weil 1955, 147) No, she states only Christ is equivalent to truth; no country is holy. Here again, she sees literature as a means for discerning truth; no opportunity should be squandered. She contrasts these false claims to the true assertion of Théophile de Viau—referred to earlier—whose poem on the 1620 Civil War, written with profound compassion for his country, concludes with his appeal to the holy authority of the laws.

Refusing to idolize force and portraying the behavior of humankind in relation to good and evil are essential parameters of "first-rate" literature for Weil. Consequently, writers like Cardinal de Retz are included among the "minds of the first order, which have been neither servants nor worshipers of force," (Weil 1962, 134) despite less savory aspects of their life choices.

Simone Weil felt quite comfortable lauding historical figures for one or two central ideas apropos of truth in their writing, while being able to overlook other less moral aspects of their problematic lifestyle. In P. Perrin's original Introduction to *Attente de Dieu*—later translated and published as *Waiting for God* but without his Introduction—he gently expresses surprise at Simone's esteem for de Retz and for d'Aubigné, given their reprehensible behavior. (Weil 1966, 9) Someone who perceives and proclaims the truth is worthy of her admiration, notwithstanding any untenable moral qualities. Her repeated ovations for François Villon (1431 – after 1461), a well-known poet of the late Middle Ages, exemplify this focus on what she sees as essential in a person's life while dismissing the rest as having no bearing on her purpose. "What if Villon did steal? In his case, the act of stealing was perhaps the result of necessity or perhaps a sin; it was not a thrill or a gratuitous act. The sense of good and evil permeates all his verse, as it permeates all work that is not irrelevant to man's destiny." (Weil 1981, 289) Villon's poetry was varied, playful, and deeply personal; he acknowledged being a scoundrel. In his lyric poem, "The Ballad of the Hanged Men," written most likely in prison, he addresses a universal brotherhood of sinners, pleading with them to keep in mind their mortality. Envisioning the hungry birds that will soon be pecking out his eyes as his body hangs on the gibbet, he concludes each stanza with the plea: "but pray God would us all absolve." (Villon)

Villon's humility and awareness that his destiny was in the hands of God placed him high on her list of "minds of the first order," whereas Cardinal Richelieu (1585 - 1642), as Minister to Louis XIII, was among the most disdained. He held the responsibility for sapping the identity from peoples living independently in their ancestral lands by forcing them to become subservient to the French monarchy, thus

losing their liberty and precious irretrievable culture. His *Mémoires* describe in detail the machinations that emboldened royal power by restraining the jurisdiction of the nobility and by insisting on absolute commitment to the strong, centralized state.

7. Counter-history: a source of spiritual knowledge

Simone Weil's sharp critiques and insistence on truth—stemming from a position of loyal opposition—creates a type of counter-history, one that brings to light silenced or glossed over aspects of a country's past. She rejects unquestioned glorifying platitudes put forth by influential members of society who prefer to leave certain evil deeds in the shadows. By the very nature of conflict, surviving documents come from the victors of any power struggle. « History, therefore, is nothing but a compilation of the depositions made by assassins with respect to their victims and themselves." (Weil 1955, 225) She seeks inspiration from authentic disappeared civilizations as motivations for shaping the future of France. We look first at two expunged peoples, former inhabitants of land now considered French: the first exterminated by the Romans and the second dispersed by the French monarchy in cahoots with the Church.

7.1. The Druids

Weil's insistence on giving a voice to civilizations from the past, led her to extoll the Druidic culture destroyed by the Romans, which left only fragments of their sacred poetry for future generations. "Thus this people possessed a whole ocean of sacred poetry whose inspiration we are only able to form some idea of through the works of Plato." (Weil 1955, 222) Their spiritual light from which all future seekers of divine knowledge could have benefited can only be surmised because their culture was eradicated. "In this almost desperate situation, all we can look to for encouragement here below is in those historical atolls of the living past left upon the surface of the Earth." *(*Weil 1955, 50)

The Druids**,** originally dwellers on French soil, may be the least well-known of the annihilated cultures; the earliest known fragmentary references remaining date to the fourth century BCE. They exemplify Weil's lament of vast spiritual riches lost to all due to conquerors' rampant destruction of disdained cultures. The once existent store of Druidic sacred poetry concerning the divine and the universe required twenty years of study for their religious leaders. To evoke their contributions, Weil reiterates the comments of a third-century Roman biographer of Greek

philosophers, Diogenes Laërtius, who said that "a tradition attributed several foreign origins to Greek wisdom, and among others the Druids of Gaul. Other texts indicate that the thought of the Druids was related to that of the Pythagoreans. (Weil 1955, 222) Druids were the intelligentsia caste of ancient Celtic society, incorporating all the professions: physicians, judges, international lawyers, historians, ambassadors, medical authorities, and political advisors. (Cunliffe 2010, 3) As repositories of wisdom about the natural world and the traditions of the people, combined with a reverence for the sacred, they became for the Celts mediators between humans and the gods.

Although literate, they purposefully did not write down their beliefs, much of it sourced in Greek wisdom, in particular, according to Laërtius**,** the Pythagorean belief in the immortality of the soul. For Weil, Pythagoras was a true philosopher, that is, a lover of divine wisdom. (see Weil 1957b, 151-201) Since he wrote little to nothing, all remnants of his wisdom have treasured value. Although Weil seldom gives her sources, she was partial to Laërtius, who had gleaned knowledge of Pythagoras from traces of the writings of Alexander Polyhistor, a Greek scholar of history, brought as a slave to Rome for employment as a tutor. Despite the Romans' penchant for employing Celtic tutors for their sons, Caesar considered the Celtic influence subversive and consequently annihilated them, leaving human wisdom much impoverished in Weil's opinion. ". . . the military defeat of the Gauls is an unsurmountable obstacle to our recognizing the high spiritual qualities of this civilization, which was destroyed." (Weil 1955, 223)

7.2. The Cathars

Among the greatest atrocities committed by the French, in her mind, was that against the territories south of the Loire in the 13th century. "These lands, where a high level of culture, tolerance, liberty, and spiritual life prevailed, were filled with an intense patriotic feeling for what they termed their ‘language'—a word that, for them, was synonymous with native land." (Weil 1955, 106) Pope Innocent III, aligned with the French crown, massacred the Cathar people in the thirteenth century and demolished their unique civilization, leaving only traces of their pure Christian spirituality in rare texts and splendid churches. The uprooting of those people living in the capital of the Conté de Toulouse, an area now called Languedoc, sapped the quality of their thinking and their spirituality, vastly diminishing the contributions to French culture by this brilliant and, in Weil's mind, authentically Christian civilization. Appropriate to the shared spiritual loss in this unfortunate

situation is Weil's oft repeated dictum that contact with force, from whichever position one grapples with it— the hilt or the point to the sword—deprives one of God at that moment.

She pays homage to the Albigensian people of Occitania in two extraordinary texts: "A Medieval Epic Poem" and "The Romanesque Renaissance" (Weil 1962, 35-43; 44-54) written in 1942 for the *Cahiers du Sud* in Marseille. These two essays on the Cathar culture, which she considered authentically Christian for its embrace of poverty and purity of lifestyle, exemplify her appreciation of the rare glimpses of past civilizations that offer models of humble virtue. The Cathar civilization espoused tolerance, liberty, and a spiritual life that rejected centralized authority.

The Cathars' fierce patriotism for the land and language persisted and grew under the oppressive terror imposed by the French monarchical tyrants and the Church, who accused them of heresy and then imposed upon them the relentless persecution of the Medieval Inquisition.

Théodore-Agrippa d'Aubigné (1552 - 1630), a soldier poet admired by Weil, implies that the ruthless crusade against the Albigeois gave impetus to the growth of Protestantism up to the point in the 1600s when Henry IV forced the Huguenots into exile for their supposed "heresy." Weil included d'Aubigné among the "minds of the first order" who neither served nor adored force. As an uncompromising advocate of the French Huguenot interests, he foretold the later Protestant revolt and emigration that would impoverish France, as huge numbers of literate, devout, diligent workers refused to live under oppressive rule and left France. Despotism squanders human creativity, knowledge, and spirituality, a notion seldom acknowledged by the dominators and bleakly suffered by the subjugated.

8. Human knowledge and creativity stifled.

The French had suffered under dismal authoritarian regimes in the past; this recognition of past situations to be avoided could inspire her compatriots to realize a truly sovereign nation under a new social contract. The value of remembering history accurately can inspire the desire to improve on the positive moments and to avoid repeating the terrible mistakes that had caused such suffering. The potential of recreating a new French society after the liberation of France, with true liberty for the individual, consumed her; the disheartening alternative would be to return to a vapid society with oppressive strictions, such as existed prior to and during the occupation. Her three literary witnesses who attest to forlorn conditions under Louis XIV's

rule are the memorialist Saint-Simon, a gifted epistolarian Elizabeth-Charlotte of Bavaria, and a satirical moralist La Bruyère.

Louis de Rouvoy, duc de Saint Simon (1675- 1755) was a courtier, soldier, diplomat and indefatigable writer, who had a skill for narrative and character drawing. "If one reads Saint-Simon, not as a literary and historical curiosity, but as a document, dealing with the lives of human beings who actually lived, one is overcome with horror and disgust at such a turgid atmosphere of mortal ennui, such widespread, spiritual, moral, and intellectual baseness." (Weil 1955, 117) By the same token, the letters of Elizabeth-Charlotte of Bavaria (1652-1722), full of clever anecdotes and widely read throughout Europe, gave a similar image of the boredom in the royal court. Although a sister-in-law and faithful admirer of Louis XIV, Elizabeth-Charlotte (aka Liselotte) characterized life at Versailles as intolerable, with nobles drifting from billiard room to music room, hardly uttering a word, accompanied by dreary, repetitive music.

Her contemporary, Jean de la Bruyère (1645–1696), a French moralist of rare wit, satirized the hypocrisy and corruption of the nobility surrounding Louis XIV. His literary portraits, mostly unflattering, of the personal and mental characteristics of an individual, recall reflections of Montaigne and the maxims of Blaise Pascal. He would cleverly define qualities such as pretense, flattery, or boorishness, and then name actual people, a practice that made him both hated and feared. His sudden death in Versailles just after being received as a member of the Académie Française, understandably gave rise to rumors of foul play.

9. National grandeur versus humility in truth

Weil claims that the false heroic tradition of admiring vainglorious men has worked against the unique gifts that France has to share with the world. Against the odds, some great figures in the past keep justice and truth as their steadfast criteria, she insists, evoking the Stoic philosopher and Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius**.** She much admired his incisive critique of Alexander and Caesar: "if they were not just, nothing forces me to imitate them**."** (Weil 1955, 228) By the same token she asserts: nothing requires that we admire Napoleon nor Richelieu nor their emulator Hitler.

Why spend precious time in school on the nefarious when there are literary and visionary artists who portray an aura of purity in their creative works and characters? she questions. A nation must ask whether some aspect of the terrible chaos they endure was due to their blind honoring of infamous men who have caused so much harm to others by a ruthless pursuit of personal and national grandeur. The

real criterion for judging the quality of historians and literary works to be used as guides for young citizens must hinge on a love of truth and justice.

Weil's heartfelt judgment on the French literary canon for condoning blatant untruths—as we saw with Du Bellay and with Lamartine—and for celebrating the seventeenth-century French dramatist Pierre Corneille with his pompous self-idolatrous heroes was audacious and counter to popular culture**.** She subverts the traditional view of this tragedian as a cultural icon of France, trotted out repeatedly in threatening times to inspire French patriotism (Barber 1951, 368). The values presented by Corneille are pagan and based on a false sense of national glory gained through limitless conquests over vulnerable peoples. Such dubious standards cannot encourage a durable love of country, which must be founded on compassion for its weaknesses and transgressions.

She faults Corneille's protagonist Horace, in his drama of the same name, for being directly in the mold of the Romans, pridefully seeking fame through conquering others and dominating their culture—an anathema to Weil. Rome, for her, is analogous to Plato's Great Beast, serving only itself. Horace offers blind devotion to the state, willing to kill family and friends and even himself rather than tarnish a glory that would outlive him. Baseness and pride are inseparable. *Gloire* is fundamentally unchristian in Weil's understanding of human destiny and poles apart from the Christian virtue of humility. "The essential fact about the Christian virtues, what lends them a special savor of their own, is humility–the freely accepted movement toward the bottom. It is through this that the Saints resemble Christ." (Weil 1955, 141)

Not condemning Horace's heinous deed of murdering his peace-loving sister, Corneille instead offers the questionable Roman precedent of Romulus and Remus in which the mythical Romulus slew with impunity his twin brother for having mocked his choice of hills as the future site for Rome. Just as equivocal, Horace is advised to put his trust in kings, and great and well-made minds, thus, paying obsequious homage to Louis XIII. Still worse in Weil's mind, this first major modern French playwright, widely admired as a master of French dramatic tragedy, servilely dedicates his play to the king's powerful minister Richelieu. "Corneille was right to dedicate his "Horace" to Richelieu, and to do so in terms which baseness provides a suitable accompaniment to the almost delirious pride, which permeates this tragedy." (Weil 1955, 143) Weil is adamant that art loses authenticity by groveling before power, for which she also dismisses two famed poets: the ancient Roman Virgil and the Italian Ariosto with the comment: "Poetry is not something for sale." (Weil 1955, 233) The former bargained for his life with the emperor Augustus

and the latter solicited his patron, the Duke of Este, with "Give me your patronage and riches, and I will make you illustrious." (Weil 1955, 233)

Weil's scorn extends to those who seek social honors through ascension in rank and power, be it military, political or literary. She lamented that the only eleventh-century epic poem learned in a French lycée is the *Chanson de Roland***,** which extolls Charlemagne's drive for universal domination. This perversion of values paves the way for a future Napoleon or a Hitler, two purveyors of destruction who practiced the opposite of the two most important commandments named by Christ. They honored no limits until their evitable excess brought them to an untimely end, and, so, are unworthy of emulation. For Weil, purity of spirit comes from knowing that everything on earth follows strict laws bound by fixed limitations and from guiding one's behavior accordingly.

By referring to Stendhal's well-known nineteenth-century novel *Le Rouge et le Noir* (1830), she sustains her accusation that many of the young men blindly following Napoleon embraced his false grandeur as a means for advancement. (Weil 1955, 175) The ambitious young protagonist Julien Sorel recognizes that after Napoleon's fall he has no chance of promotion in the military (symbolized by the color Red). He turns his opportunism to the Church (symbolized by the color Black), gaining notoriety through manipulative charm and seduction until he brings on his own downfall through failure to recognize the invisible network of limits to human behavior. Weil insists that no durable love of country or willing obedience to legitimate authority can be founded on the apparent limitless appeal of prideful glory. On the contrary, young French citizens must learn, as must members of all established countries, to cherish their homeland for its limitations, fragile beauty, and only too real imperfections, all of which deserve humble compassion.

10. Examples of Purity in literature

As we have seen with Homer, Ariosto, and other referenced literary figures, Weil does not limit her allusions to French authors, but extends her vision to the entire Western canon, knowing that every educated French person would recognize even a brief mention. She finds in the "Canticle," of St. Francis of Assisi, "that jewel of perfect beauty," (Weil 1955, 235) an expression of love for all creation that exemplifies loving what is fragile in our world "here below." He cherished the whole universe through his tender regard for every particular part. Like the Cathars, St. Francis sought truth and beauty in poverty.

An embrace of poverty inclines one to want to relieve others' suffering and to bring them joy. Francis's spirituality implies contemplating humbly every aspect

of creation as a gift from God; the sun, stars moon, flowers, plants, human beings, including Sister Death, for they each praise the eternally good Lord. Weil reflects: "The human condition, that is the dependance of a sovereign thought, capable of conceiving and of loving this world and the other, enslaved to a bit of flesh that itself is submitted to all exterior actions, that is beautiful." (Weil 1957, 181, translation mine) Francis, in his poverty of mind and body, loved the beautiful for its fragility and the mystery therein. Weil saw that in art everything that evokes human misery in its truth is infinitely touching and beautiful.

The mystical writings of Saint John of the Cross, the sixteenth-century Spanish reformer of the Carmelite way of life, whom Weil calls a witness to the absolute, offer ample evidence that the spiritual good of the soul leads to divine wisdom through a method as strictly defined as the laws governing the cosmos. "Saint John of the Cross wrote treatises on the method of attaining [the supreme and perfect state of mystical contemplation], which, by their scientific perception, are far away superior to anything produced by the psychologists or professors of our own time." (Weil 1955, 188). St. John too strove for a radical interior poverty, abandoning everything to embrace Christ on the Cross. St. John's spiritual contemplation relates intimately to the good of the soul. The lived interior poverty of Saints John and Francis bears a close resemblance to Weil's concept of d*écréation*, which signifies ridding oneself of all ego-centered attachments that inhibit true commitment to the invisible Christ, through love of one's neighbor, who is only too visible. She does not gloss over the challenge that décréation poses, given the obstacle of an inherent lack of goodness in the human being.

The spirituality of St. John and St. Francis, revealed in their writings, gives evidence of God's abundant unending love for creation. This humble knowledge of God's goodness is the same as we saw communicated by François Villon in the Middles Ages, whose acceptance of divine wisdom, gleaned through affliction, was so admired by Simone Weil. In fact, from pre-Christian times, knowledge of the relationship between spirituality and the good of the soul has always been accessible. "Actually, from remote antiquity, long before Christianity, right up to the latter half of the Renaissance, it was always universally recognized that there is a method to be followed in spiritual matters and in everything connected with the soul's welfare." (Weil 1955, 188)

These three men exemplify the purity that Weil found in literary works composed by artists of genius who never debased themselves as adulators of force. Their protagonists do not strive to vanquish and dominate others, nor do they prize glory over justice or the public good, but rather attend to what is just and true. For Weil, further proof that such morality is eternal is found in an ancient Egyptian funerary

text written on papyrus and used from the beginning of the New Kingdom (around 1550 BCE) called the *Book of the Dead,* to which she often refers**.** Here, she cites: "I never turned a deaf ear to just and true words. (Weil 1955, 140)

Showing humility as one faces death is an alternative and exemplary form of human grandeur. The scorned and humiliated hero, common in the Greek theatre of Aeschylus and Sophocles, offers the same model as that of Christ in the Gospels**.** "[…] The tragedies of Aeschylus and those of Sophocles bear the clearest indication that the poets who produced them were in a state of holiness." (Weil 1955, 235) Weil highlights two modern examples: Racine's tragic heroine Phèdre the Cretan princess, a descendent of the sun, who, suffering from a guilty passion, can no longer bear to see the light of day and Shakespeare's King Lear who, losing his beloved daughter Cordelia, learned too late the error of arrogantly demanding proof of love in words rather than in its purity. Neither protagonist acknowledged the limits built into the laws of the cosmos or of necessity, as Weil calls this reality.

Recognizing the limits inherent in every aspect of the cosmos can best be realized, in Weil's conception, by confronting the universe through work that forces an acceptance of the fixed limits inextricably interwoven into all material and spiritual existence. The budding civilization south of the Loire, the Albigeois, was impregnated with both ancient and Christian spirituality centered on work, which, had it been allowed to exist, would have been free of the stain of oppression. (Weil 1955, 298) In addition, feeling pride in a substantial contribution to a well-functioning society and having control and possession of one's tools is essential to workers' dignity and their sense of the divine, in Weil's philosophy. Work in the industrial age creates the exact opposite; forced unemployment squanders a basic human need, causing psychological despair and disorientation.

Weil illuminates the depths of despair felt by the workers bereft of their tools and thus their means of subsistence by the dilemma of the mythical Philoctetes**,** a master archer, who received Hercules' bow and arrows because of his compassion shown to the suffering demi-god. When Odysseus, who had abandoned Philoctetes on the Isle of Lemnos, hears the oracle that only Hercules' bow with its poisoned arrows that never miss their mark can conquer Troy, he treacherously plans to steal them. "A workman, for instance, who bears the anguish of unemployment deep in the very narrow of his bones, would understand the feelings of Philoctetus, when his bow is taken away from him, and the despair with which he stares at his powerless hands." (Weil 1955, 70) At the last moment, the gods intervene; Philoctetes, desperate to rejoin the battle, returns to the fray, his divinely endowed weapons in his possession and accepts his destiny to defeat the Trojans.

Weil's use of ancient Greek themes by applying them in unexpected ways to contemporary human dilemmas is in full evidence here. Although she knows that the divine will not save the workers from their plight, she dedicates her talents toward making everyone aware that their dire economic situation is not inevitable. She hopes to inspire a reimagining of a new France that honors workers as a core value.

Her goal is a civilization beloved by its members and based on the spirituality of work, which assures self-esteem to the workers. The theories of the French libertarian socialist and journalist Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1803 - 1885) have a relationship to her aspirations. In his writings, he defended the right of the farmer to *possess* the land he works and the craftsman his workshop and tools, as an essential element for the preservation of liberty. In the dawning industrial age, he had the foresight to propose that workers could transform society by economic action rather than by violent revolution and that factories could be operated by associations of workers. Such antiauthoritarian ideas through which a society is transformed from the base up were embraced by Simone Weil.

Making work the spiritual center of a society also implied for her a simpler existence, which is why she includes reflections on the nineteenth-century pastoral novels of George Sand (1804 – 1876) and the eighteenth-century memoirs of Restif de la Bretonne (1732 – 1806). Both led far from conventional lives, but for Weil, their literary descriptions of lives lived in natural uncomplicated surroundings held the utmost importance. George Sand was a prolific French Romantic writer, who had a profound love and understanding of the countryside of Berry where she spent her childhood. Her literary gifts were in composing rustic novels, which drew their chief inspiration from her lifelong love of nature, an intimate knowledge of peasant life and celebrations, and from a natural sympathy for the poor. Weil laments that without the descriptions by George Sand, revered customs would be totally lost to the memory. "Loss of the past, whether it be collectively or individually, is the supreme human tragedy, and we have thrown hours away just like a child picking off the petals of a rose." (Weil 1955, 119)

A century earlier, another French novelist and thinker Restif de la Bretonne had described his own idealized childhood. "When you read all that Restif de la Bretonne has written about his childhood, you can only conclude that the lot of the most unfortunate peasants of that time was infinitely preferable to that of the most fortunate ones of today." (Weil 1955, 87) Weil's admiration of this writer is one more example of selectively extracting specific elements of an author's work that concur with the point she's intent on making. Her attraction to La Bretonne is also in the category of "remarkable" choices, for much of his writing could be classified

as scabrous. Weil always read literature with the purpose of admiring its beauty, whose source is goodness and truth, virtues to which she knew every person has access.

Her skill in seamlessly interweaving literary allusions in her compositions to make specific points about liberty, justice and their opposites—oppression and injustice—reaches an apex in this second "*magnum opus,*" truly qualifying it as "first-rate" literature. This exploration has taken up only a fraction of the references she selected to further her aspiration for a society that respects all human souls. Inventing her own persuasive style, while dealing with her deep disappointment at not being allowed back into France, she composed this long essay in isolation, as London was undergoing severe stress from German air assaults. Its layout, inception, and persuasive use of the multitude of pertinent allusions, all from her astounding memory, is an extraordinary and unique achievement.

While wanting to capture the attention of political leaders who would lead post-war liberated France with her political and social theories, she held her co-citizens needing spiritual sustenance at their moment of suffering uppermost in her mind. Her idea of an active *enracinement* offers the grass-roots populace new hope for the future of their homeland where they have sent down roots and a reminder that they must continue to nourish those roots with truth and compassion. Literature served her purpose: "Literature is only useful to us here as a sign; but it is a sure sign." (Weil 1955, 116) In her deep interior, she knew that her message also addressed a universal timeless audience; her success in this final aim assures the continuing relevance of her creation, skillfully composed, astutely argued, and crafted with beauty.

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