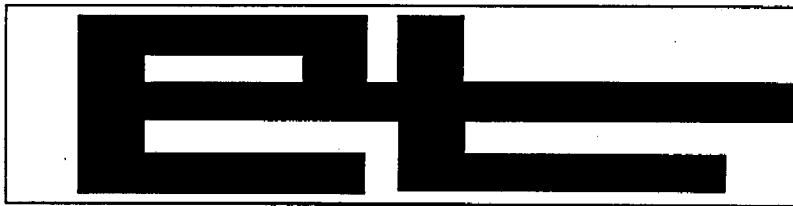


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And Dying as Supreme Attention*

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## *Attention in Simone Weil, and Dying as Supreme Attention*

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Many of those who have come to know Simone Weil face to face or through her writings have, in one way or in another, characterized her as *une femme absolue*.<sup>1</sup> Yet, they remain inspired by Weil and, even a cursory inquiry into her brief existence evokes in them two of her aspirations: to seek fully to live life authentically and to seek intensely to recoup life's meaning. Weil was born in Paris on February 3, 1909. She died in England on August 24, 1943. She was thirty-four years old. During her brief life, Simone Weil was a philosopher and a prolific writer, a factory worker and a farmer, a demonstrator against unjust wages and, in solidarity with the victims of war, a hunger-striker perhaps unto death. In 1933, just before Hitler's rise to power, Weil spent time in Germany to evaluate the political situation and in Spain in 1936, during the Civil War, she risked her life as a trade-union reporter. Earlier, in 1928, she had contacts with *La révolution prolétarienne*, a Marxist organization, and "in 1931-32 she supported the *chômeurs du Puy*; ten years later, through the intermediary of Fr. Perrin [her spiritual director], she was in contact with the Young Christian Workers in Marseilles."<sup>2</sup> In 1942, she lived in exile in New York where she often visited a Baptist Church in Harlem.

A question then arises: What made Simone Weil be so fully what she was and do so intensely what she did? In retrospect, she herself might call it

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<sup>1</sup> For example Gabriella Fiori, *Simone Weil: Une femme absolue* (Paris: Félin, 1987).

<sup>2</sup> Personal letter from Michel Narcy, editor of the *Cahiers Simone Weil*, dated 12/4/91.

"attention,"<sup>3</sup> for the latter appears to be the point of entry into her thought.<sup>4</sup> This article (1) highlights the meaning of attention in Weil and (2) suggests that *the* supreme act of attention (in the Weilian sense) might look very much like Weil's own way of dying.

### Attention in Weil

In quoting Nicolas de Malebranche, Victor-Henry Debidour has perhaps best encapsulated the Weilian meaning of the highest degree of attention: "[A] *prayer* which the [human] spirit addresses to *truth*."<sup>5</sup> For Weil, attention relates to both prayer and truth. On the one hand, prayer itself "is made out of attention," explains Weil. It is "the orientation toward God with all the attention of which the soul is capable."<sup>6</sup> Or again "[a]ttention, at its highest degree, is the same thing as prayer." To further her point, Weil adds: "[Attention] supposes faith and love"<sup>7</sup> – a kind of theological virtue.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, truth is addressed by attention only where truth means "love." In *L'ennracinement*, Weil explains that truth is "the burst [*l'éclat*] of reality," a burst that erupts only where someone or something is loved. As a result, we should not speak of "the love of truth," but of "the spirit of truth in love." Truth exists only where a concrete reality is loved, where the "spirit of truth [is experienced] in love." Consequently,

<sup>3</sup> LUCE BLECH-LIDOLF (in *La pensée philosophique et sociale de Simone Weil* [Berne: Herbert Lang / Frankfurt/M: Peter Lang, 1976], pp. 181-82) refers to the different meanings of "attention" in Weil. It seems to me, however, that the meaning of "attention" as explained in this article underlies all other meanings. Regarding "attention" in Weil, see also ERIC O. SPRINGSTED, *Christus Mediator: Platonic Mediation in the Thought of Simone Weil* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1983), "Attention and the Seeds of Grace," pp. 115-25; JACQUES CABAUD, *Simone Weil* (NY: Channel Press, 1964), pp. 286-90; VICTOR-HENRY DEBIDOUR, *Simone Weil ou la transparence* (Paris: Plon, 1963), esp. pp. 129-49; BERTRAND SAINT-SERNIN, *L'action politique selon Simone Weil* (Paris: Cerf, 1988), "L'attention," pp. 95-99. Weil was highly influenced by her mentor, the philosopher Émile Chartier (a.k. as Alain), who described "attention" as follows: "L'art de faire attention, qui est le grand art, suppose l'art de ne pas faire attention, qui est l'art royal. Savoir dormir, savoir se reposer, savoir ignorer, savoir oublier, voilà ce qui est trop rare dans les chefs. L'homme est étrangement assiégé; couleurs, odeurs, bruits, contacts ne cessent pas de se précipiter par les portes de l'homme; s'il tient audience ouverte, il est perdu." He added: "J'ai connu de ces regards appuyés qui qu'étaient le savoir, ils ne voient pas parce qu'ils regardent trop" (Quoted in DEBIDOUR, *Simone Weil ou la transparence*, p. 39, n. 5. in a reference to ALAIN's *Minerve ou de la Sagesse*).

<sup>4</sup> DEBIDOUR, *Simone Weil ou la transparence*, p. 129.

<sup>5</sup> In DEBIDOUR, *Simone Weil ou la transparence*, p. 38 (italics are mine).

<sup>6</sup> SIMONE WEIL, *Attente de Dieu* (Paris: Fayard, 1966), p. 85.

<sup>7</sup> WEIL, *La pesanteur et la grâce* (Paris: Plon, 1948), p. 119.

<sup>8</sup> DEBIDOUR, *Simone Weil ou la transparence*, p. 38.

we discover truth only in what we love. Weil illustrates: the loving spouse who discovers that his or her fully trusted partner has been unfaithful "enters into brutal contact with truth." Conversely, the discovery that someone unknown to us has been unfaithful "changes in no way [our] relation to truth." So is it with knowledge (*connaissance*). Truth reveals itself only through knowledge which is loved. "Love, which is real and pure," Weil asserts, "is of itself spirit of truth. It is the Holy Spirit." As such, truth is a love which, at all cost and in all instances, refuses to have anything to do with lie or error.<sup>9</sup> As love of reality, on which attention is focused, truth is our most sacred need.<sup>10</sup>

Attention – as a prayer focused on the spirit of truth disclosed in love – consists "in a gaze [*un regard*], not in an attachment," states Weil. Attention allows one to "understand without attempting to interpret, [...] to look until the light springs forth."<sup>11</sup> And if, through the gaze of attention, light is desired, then it irrupts:

If true desire exists, if the object of desire is truly light, then the desire for light will produce light. There is truly desire only where a striving for attention is found. If truly light is desired, if all other motives are absent [...] then each striving adds on a bit of gold to a treasure which nothing in the world can steal.<sup>12</sup>

Thus, attention is an experience of irrupting "transcendence" [*du transcendant*] that can only be known through a contact initiated by transcendence itself since the latter cannot be fabricated by our faculties.<sup>13</sup> However, for transcendence to befall one through attention, the latter must be "a disinterested exercise [...] without consideration of success [...]." Thus, attention discloses "an attitude [...] of active passivity: infinitely awakened and yet expecting."<sup>14</sup> Attention is "expecting," however, in the sense that "the most precious gifts must not be searched for but awaited."<sup>15</sup> And to await means "to suspend one's mind, to make it available, empty,

<sup>9</sup> WEIL, *L'enracinement* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949), pp. 318-20. Michel NARCY corrects this reference: "[This quote comes from] l'édition de poche parue dans la collection 'Idées' et maintenant dans la collection 'Folio.'"

<sup>10</sup> WEIL, *L'enracinement*, p. 53.

<sup>11</sup> WEIL, *La pesanteur et la grâce*, p. 122.

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in DEBIDOUR, *Simone Weil ou la transparence*, p. 38, from WEIL, *Attente de Dieu*, between pp. 114-23, which I could not find in my 1966 edition of *Attente*.

<sup>13</sup> WEIL, *La pesanteur et la grâce*, p. 123.

<sup>14</sup> DEBIDOUR, *Simone Weil ou la transparence*, p. 40. In Debidour, this quote about attention refers specifically to the exercise and Christian understanding of study, which, in Weil, culminated in prayer. For example, see WEIL, *Attente de Dieu*, p. 85.

<sup>15</sup> WEIL, *Attente de Dieu*, p. 93.

and penetrable to the object [...] to look for nothing, but to be ready to receive in its naked truth the object which will penetrate it."<sup>16</sup>

The disinterestedness or indifference that characterizes attention is, nevertheless, an utterly powerful and positive attribute. In fact, indifference is a desire – one that discloses itself as a focus on the “other” – which is so intense in its restraint that, while standing before the neighbour (even the closest and dearest to you), one must not “desire him or her to be immortal nor dead.”<sup>17</sup> That is why, for Weil, even to desire friendship is a serious fault. For example, she writes: “Friendship must not heal the pain of solitude, but redouble its joys.”<sup>18</sup> For these reasons, friendship must be a free joy – the kind of joy which art gives,<sup>19</sup> because of the simple fact that art exists. Art cannot be changed, transformed or become what I want it to be.<sup>20</sup> Like friendship and art, the “other” must be approached with the “desire of indifference” (which, for Weil, lies at the core of attention) simply because he or she exists.

Attention as “desire of indifference” is desire with “all the tension of desire but without desire: a tension forever accepted.”<sup>21</sup> This means for Weil that “one must go down to [*descendre à*] the source of desires in order to extricate [*arracher*] the energy [of desires] from its object [the object of the energy].” For “it is there that desires are authentic [that is, as energy]. It is the object which is false.”<sup>22</sup> In other words, the drive of desire must be kept, but its object must be separated from it.

As “desire of indifference,” attention discloses two dimensions: (1) that of the self which turns away from the self and (2) that of the self which transcends toward the “other.” Attention, in Weil, is so powerful [*si pleine*] that, when it occurs, the “I” vanishes. The “I” must be deprived of the light of attention and the latter must be refocused on the inconceivable.<sup>23</sup> (1)

<sup>16</sup> WEIL, *Attente de Dieu*, pp. 92-93. See also *La pesanteur et la grâce*, “Effacement,” pp. 48-50.

<sup>17</sup> WEIL, *Cahiers I* (1951-53-56), p. 68 (in DEBIDOUR, *Simone Weil ou la transparence*, p. 15, n. 5). I could not find the reference in my 1970 edition of the *Cahiers I* (Paris: Plon). What I found on p. 68 (C.I.): “Ne pas s'approprier ce qu'on aime [...] ne rien changer [...] refuser la puissance.” [*En marge*] “Le poème enseigne à contempler les pensées au lieu de les changer.”

<sup>18</sup> WEIL, *Cahiers I*, p. 70.

<sup>19</sup> WEIL, *Cahiers I*, p. 69.

<sup>20</sup> WEIL, *Cahiers I*, p. 68.

<sup>21</sup> WEIL, *La connaissance surnaturelle*, p. 59. (“Attendre implique toute la tension du désir, mais sans désir, une tension acceptée à perpétuité.”)

<sup>22</sup> WEIL, *La pesanteur et la grâce*, p. 31.

<sup>23</sup> WEIL, *La pesanteur et la grâce*, p. 120.

Inasmuch as attention means "turning away from the self," it is humility, that is, "the consent to that which horrifies nature; namely, nothingness [*le néant*]: a consent "to not being."<sup>24</sup> (Conversely, "hell is to become aware [*c'est de s'apercevoir*] that we do not exist and not to consent to it.")<sup>25</sup> It remains that "to consent" is not an act of the will which, for Weil, has control over muscle movements only, but an act of attention as desire<sup>26</sup> which has control over that which it seeks by backing up [*reculer*] before it.<sup>27</sup> Yet, attention is an act deprived of desire,<sup>28</sup> in the sense that its act is qualified by "indifference," paradoxically, a "desire of indifference." (2) Inasmuch as attention means "transcending toward the other," it is simply "to wait and wait and wait" for the other [...] while not making the other wait, for "woe to us if we are fed up and leave."<sup>29</sup>

In *Attente de Dieu*, Weil illustrates the process of attention at least in two ways. She compares the *sine qua non* of attention, the "suspended mind" (as the latter relates to particular and already formed thoughts in the mind), to people on a mountain who, while looking out in front of them, notice simultaneously but in an unfocused way, the forests and the plains below.<sup>30</sup> Weil also describes the process of attention as one which is similar to that of writing. She explains that while writing, "[one has] to wait for the right word to come by itself and to place itself under the pen, while one drives back only those words which are inexact."<sup>31</sup>

Thus, in Weil, attention originates not from the emptiness of the soul, but from the plenitude of the desirable – as "beauty attracts desire and satisfies it, and yet leaves it sufficiently unsatisfied in order that it may not turn itself toward something else."<sup>32</sup> The two dimensions of attention

<sup>24</sup> WEIL, *La connaissance surnaturelle*, p. 48.

<sup>25</sup> WEIL, *La connaissance surnaturelle*, p. 176.

<sup>26</sup> WEIL, *La pesanteur et la grâce*, p. 120.

<sup>27</sup> In *La pesanteur et la grâce*, p. 119, WEIL explains: "Reculer devant l'objet qu'on poursuit. Seul ce qui est indirect est efficace. On ne fait rien si l'on n'a d'abord reculé. En tirant sur la grappe, on fait tomber les grains à terre."

<sup>28</sup> WEIL, *La pesanteur et la grâce*, p. 118.

<sup>29</sup> WEIL, *La connaissance surnaturelle*, p. 92. (*La connaissance surnaturelle*, p. 176) [In Greek, "en hypomone" ("Waiting" / in French "l'attente"), often translated in Latin by "patientia." But referring to the Greek word as meaning "sans bouger, immobile," Weil wrote: "C'est un mot tellement plus beau que 'patientia!'" (*Attente de Dieu*, p. 54)].

<sup>30</sup> WEIL, *Attente de Dieu*, p. 93.

<sup>31</sup> WEIL, *Attente de Dieu*, p. 94.

<sup>32</sup> WEIL, *Cahiers III* (Paris: Plon, 1956 & 1974), p. 193. Compare with Emmanuel LEVINAS, *Totalité et Infini: Essai sur l'intériorité* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1961), p. 33. ("Le désir est une aspiration que le Désirable anime; il naît à partir de son 'objet,' il est révélation. Alors que le besoin est un vide de l'âme, il part du sujet.")

referred to above (the turning away from the self, and the transcending of the self toward the other) are illustrated well by Weil in a quote referred to above: "while writing [attention is] to wait for the right word to come by itself and to place itself under the pen, as one drives back only those words which are inexact."<sup>33</sup> Saint-Sernin quite accurately described "attention" in Weil as "this perfect act of mind and heart, where a person finds him or herself dispossessed of self and rooted in a reality other than the self, the universe or God."<sup>34</sup>

Weil also speaks of attention as *un point d'éternité dans l'âme*, a point of eternity in the soul – a "point," "which by itself grows like a seed"<sup>35</sup> and discloses itself as "attention." It should be noted that for Weil, the point of eternity in the soul – attention – while not initially related to the love of God *in se*, is all the same related to the latter insofar as the commandment "to love God" is for all a "permanent obligation."<sup>36</sup> One of its forms is the love of neighbour, where God is really, but secretly present.<sup>37</sup> (The other forms of "anterior" love are religious ceremonies, the beauty of the world, and friendship.) When through our consent "God comes in person to take the hand of his future spouse, the 'anterior' form of love [that of the neighbour] does not disappear: it becomes infinitely stronger, and together they [the love of God and the love of neighbour] become but the same love."<sup>38</sup> The point of eternity in the soul, which discloses itself as attention – the disinterested desire toward the desirable – might perhaps be illustrated further by exploring Weil's death as the supreme act of attention.

<sup>33</sup> WEIL, *L'attente de Dieu*, p. 94.

<sup>34</sup> SAINT-SERNIN, *L'action politique selon Simone Weil*, p. 96.

<sup>35</sup> WEIL, *La pesanteur et la grâce*, p. 121. Contextually, here, "point d'éternité dans l'âme" refers to "attention." In a related way, in *La connaissance surnaturelle* (Paris: Gallimard, 1950), p. 92, WEIL writes: "God gave to his finite creatures this power to transport themselves into the infinite" ["Dieu a donné à ses créatures finies ce pouvoir de se transporter dans l'infini."] And in *Attente de Dieu*, WEIL writes: "Through the veil of the flesh, we receive from above 'pre-sentiments' of eternity, which are sufficient in that respect to remove all doubts" (p. 71). Again on p. 214, she speaks of an absolute placed by God in his creatures, to which we have the absolute freedom to accept or not. This absolute is "the orientation by which God imprints us toward him [l'orientation qu'il nous imprime vers lui]."

<sup>36</sup> WEIL, *Attente de Dieu*, p. 122.

<sup>37</sup> WEIL, *Attente de Dieu*, pp. 122-23.

<sup>38</sup> WEIL, *Attente de Dieu*, p. 123.

### Simone Weil's Own Way of Dying: Supreme Attention (*Attention suprême*)<sup>39</sup>

Simone Weil's death certificate indicates that the cause of death was "cardial failure due to myocardial degeneration of the heart muscles due to starvation and pulmonary tuberculosis"; to which is added the following sentence: 'The deceased did kill and slay herself by refusing to eat whilst the balance of her mind was disturbed.' (This is the formula ordinarily used in such cases, since suicide is prohibited by English law.)"<sup>40</sup>

In *Simone Weil ou la transparence*, Victor-Henry Debidour asks: "In [Weil's way of dying] what aspect reveals the unregulated and irresponsible movements of a dying person, and what aspect reveals the heroic will to die from starvation, which thereby would have attained its final course?" Debidour answers: "No one will ever penetrate this secret." He adds, however:

[I]t would seem that when [Weil] finally understood that death was awaiting her, not as the result of an action<sup>41</sup> – as she had long wished – but as the result of a "passion," she wanted to go there [to death] also by facing it [*elle a voulu aller là aussi au-devant d'elle*]. In either case, the intention was not to promote [*devancer*] death, but to "await" it [*attendre*] in the Weilian sense of the word, with an active power [*force*] of an absolutely pure acquiescence which is an irresistible call for the irruption of its object.<sup>42</sup>

Face to face with Weil's way of dying, one realizes most profoundly the full force of Emmanuel Levinas's words:

One must listen to [the signification of a thought or action] without leaning over its tracks to control its logic or to invent its psychology [...]. *Suprême naïveté ou attention suprême?* For my part, I believe that through such a way of listening one hears that

<sup>39</sup> In "La mort au sommet du vivre" (in FIORI, *Simone Weil: Une femme absolue*, pp. 131-43), much in this chapter might substantiate the remainder of this article. "Même quand j'étais enfant, et que je croyais être athée et matérialiste, j'avais toujours en moi la crainte de manquer, non ma vie, mais ma mort" (*Écrits de Londres et dernières lettres* [coll. *Espoir*, Paris: Gallimard, 1957], p. 213; in FIORI, *Simone Weil: Une femme absolue*, p. 141). See also "Her Hunger," pp. 23-41, in ROBERT COLES, *Simone Weil: A Modern Pilgrimage* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, Inc., 1987), and "La mort désirée," pp. 218-22, in GEORGES HOURDIN, *Simone Weil* (Paris: Éditions La Découverte, 1989).

<sup>40</sup> SIMONE PÉTREMENT, *Simone Weil: A Life* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976), p. 537, translated from the French by RAYMOND ROSENTHAL.

<sup>41</sup> I suppose the reference here is to the dangerous missions related either to Weil's nurse project or to her being parachuted as a spy behind enemy lines. See reference in PÉTREMENT below.

<sup>42</sup> DEBIDOUR, *Simone Weil ou la transparence*, p. 131.



which, in a thought [or action], is gathered [to disclose itself as] an impacting and awakening power.<sup>43</sup>

"*Suprême naïveté ou attention suprême?*" I suggest that an understanding of Simone Weil's death discloses "its impacting and awakening power" through the process of "supreme attention," as attention in Weil has been discussed above; namely, attention as a gaze [*un regard*], not an attachment; attention which allows one to understand without attempting to interpret, but to look until the light springs forth; attention as a disinterested exercise without consideration of success; attention as an attitude of active passivity, infinitely awakened and yet expecting; attention as awaiting the most precious gifts which must not be searched for; attention – like the one we must have while writing: "to wait for the right word to come by itself and to place itself under the pen, as one drives back only those words which are inexact"; finally, and most importantly, attention as a prayer addressed by the [human] spirit to truth, which is love.

Thus, it seems to me that Simone Weil's death – be it construed as suicide or as heroic desire – discloses the ultimate Weilian meaning of attention, with its active strength of an absolutely pure acquiescence, the irresistible call for the irruption of its object,<sup>44</sup> – the object here being God. Simone Weil's death may have been the utterance of the ultimate prayer, "pure and total."<sup>45</sup> Discarding food, and thus dying of starvation, may have been for Weil but "the driving away (while writing) of the inexact words," in "wait for the right word to come by itself and to place itself under the pen": attention in its ultimate modality, that of "waiting" – and in the process of dying – that "of waiting for God," of "looking intently" upon God. For Weil, to "look intently" upon God might have meant disinterestedness even toward food. It might also have meant disinterestedness in the sense that she had described it before; namely, that in the midst of our suffering as we shout "I cannot take it anymore," we catch ourselves saying: "I consent to the fact that this [painful] situation may end immediately or remain as such forever."<sup>46</sup> Could it be that, in her way of dying,

<sup>43</sup> Emmanuel LEVINAS – Xavier TILLETTE – Paul RICEUR, *Jean Wahl et Gabriel Marcel* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1976), Présentation de Jeanne HIRSCH, p. 15. The word "action" between brackets is my addition ("Il faut écouter ce sens [la signification d'une pensée] sans se pencher sur des traces pour en contrôler la logique ou pour en inventer la psychologie. Suprême naïveté ou attention suprême?" Levinas continues: "Je crois, pour ma part, que dans une telle écoute s'entend ce qui, dans une pensée, se ramasse en puissance de choc et d'éveil.")

<sup>44</sup> DEBIDOUR, *Simone Weil ou la transparence*, p. 131.

<sup>45</sup> DEBIDOUR, *Simone Weil ou la transparence*, p. 131.

<sup>46</sup> WEIL, *La connaissance surnaturelle*, p. 177.

Simone witnessed to ultimate attention? The moment when one “truly exits from oneself,”<sup>47</sup> because one is waiting so intensely for God?

Weil herself has described the ultimate exemplar of attention: the “fixity of God,” she calls it, as revealed in Jesus crucified, the ultimate expression of attention – of what it means “to wait for God.” In contemplating Jesus crucified, Weil contrasts divine attention with human attention. She wrote:

God and humanity are like two lovers who made a mistake as to their meeting-place. Each one is there before the [appointed] hour [that is, on time], but at a different place, and they wait and wait and wait. God, the lover, stands, motionless, nailed to the spot for the perpetuity of times. Humanity, the lover, is distracted and impatient [...]. The crucifixion of Christ is the image of [the] fixity of God [...]. God is attention without distraction [...]. We must imitate God's waiting [*attente*].<sup>48</sup>

To imitate God's waiting also means not to let God wait, for Weil adds: “Woe to us if we get fed up and leave!”<sup>49</sup> In the concluding lines of her spiritual autobiography, Weil confesses what she calls “her greatest sin” against God, the most “horrible one.” “Every time I think of the crucifixion of Christ,” she wrote, “I commit the sin of envy.”<sup>50</sup> It is almost as if in this instance she perceived herself “as not waiting for God,” as “leaving” and, as a result, “of letting God wait.”

It seems to me that Simone Weil's death by starvation tells us something about the radical meaning of attention in Weil. She already had expressed the radicality of attention when she wrote:

“If, by an absurd hypothesis, I were to die without ever having committed any serious faults and yet all the same at my death, I were to fall to the bottom of hell, I should nevertheless owe God an infinite debt of gratitude for his infinite mercy, on account of my earthly life, notwithstanding the fact that I am a poor unsatisfactory creature [*que je sois un objet si mal réussi*].”<sup>51</sup>

Yes, attention in Weil goes that far! So far that she could state: “The eternal component of the soul nourishes itself from hunger.”<sup>52</sup>

Without denying the usual reasons offered by Weilian scholars for Weil's unusual way of dying – for example, solidarity with the French

<sup>47</sup> WEIL, *La connaissance surnaturelle*, p. 178.

<sup>48</sup> WEIL, *La connaissance surnaturelle*, p. 92. In French, “attention” and “waiting” [*attente*] have the same root.

<sup>49</sup> WEIL, *La connaissance surnaturelle*, p. 92.

<sup>50</sup> WEIL, *Attente de Dieu*, p. 62.

<sup>51</sup> WEIL's last letter to Fr. Perrin, in *Attente de Dieu*, “Dernières Pensées,” pp. 70-71.

<sup>52</sup> WEIL, *La connaissance surnaturelle*, p. 252.

resistance fighters whom Weil yearned to join<sup>53</sup> – I suggest that Weil's death might reveal the radical meaning of attention: sacrifice and consecration. "[She] does not suicide her body and her soul," observed Debidour, "but she crucifies them [...] in imitation of Christ."<sup>54</sup>

Weil's death was as paradoxical as her life. For Simone Weil might have died in committing her greatest sin against God, her most horrible one, the sin of envy: that of envying Christ's crucifixion to the point of enfleshing in her death the fixity of God, the attention of God – an attention without distraction – the "sin" of Jesus crucified. If it is true that often one dies as one has lived, then Simone Weil may have died as she had lived: of *attention suprême*. Or rather, might Simone have died of *suprême naïveté*? Or might she have died of both? For within the realm of *attention suprême*, would *suprême naïveté* not be a better word for Weilian "attention"? The *suprême naïveté* of the children of the Gospels, "youngsters – twisted, humped, wrinkled, white-bearded – all kinds of youngsters [...], still growing, [...] still improving, [... still] on the road, [...] on their way; [unlike] grown-ups [for whom] there is nothing to expect anymore, [grown-ups who] will no longer grow, no longer improve [because] they have come to a full stop; grown-ups thinking they have arrived."<sup>55</sup> Grown-ups who have lost their capacity of attention.

Attention – "a prayer addressed by the [human] spirit to truth,"<sup>56</sup> is revealed in a most intensive way in the often-quoted saying of Simone Weil:

One can never wrestle enough with God [*résister à Dieu*] if one does so out of pure regard for the truth. Christ likes [*aime*] us to prefer truth to him, because before being Christ he is truth. If we turn aside from him to go toward truth, we will not go far [*on ne fera pas un long chemin*] before falling into his arms.<sup>57</sup>

One can only feel the horror that Weil felt when she read the words of Dostoyevsky, which she called "the most hideous [*affreux*] blasphemy":<sup>58</sup> "If Christ is not truth, I prefer to be outside truth with Christ."<sup>59</sup>

<sup>53</sup> PÉTREMENT, *Simone Weil: A Life*, pp. 526-39, where Weil's death is discussed.

<sup>54</sup> DEBIDOUR, *Simone Weil ou la transparence*, p. 22.

<sup>55</sup> Michel QUOIST, *Prayers* (New York: Sheed and Ward, Inc., 1963), pp. 3-5, translated from the French *Prières* (Paris: Les Éditions Ouvrières, 1954) by Agnes M. FORSYTH and Anne Marie de COMMALLE.

<sup>56</sup> See above note regarding "prayer" and "truth" as love in Weil.

<sup>57</sup> WEIL, *Attente de Dieu*, pp. 45-46.

<sup>58</sup> WEIL, *L'enracinement*, p. 313.

<sup>59</sup> Quoted in WEIL, *L'enracinement*, p. 313.

In 1938, during Holy Week, Weil was on retreat at the French Benedictine Monastery of Solesmes. Some time later, she experienced Christ. Then, "*le Christ est descendu et m'a prise*," she wrote.<sup>60</sup> The context for that mystical experience, according to Weil, was George Herbert's poem entitled "Love"<sup>61</sup> – "the most beautiful poem in the world," Weil once said. In some way, Weil's mystical experience, according to Pétrement, might relate to the Solesmes retreat.<sup>62</sup> In any event, the poem says much about Simone Weil – however gratuitous an assumption one may deem its connection with the Solesmes experience to be:

Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back,  
 Guiltie of dust and sinne.  
 But quick-ey'd Love, observing me grow slack  
 From my first entrance in,  
 Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning,  
 If I lack'd anything.  
 A guest, I answer'd, worthy to be here:  
 Love said, You shall be he.  
 I the unkinde, ungratefull? Ah my deare,  
 I cannot look on thee.  
 Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,  
 Who made the eyes but I?  
 Truth Lord, but I have marr'd them: let my shame  
 Go where it doth deserve.  
 And know you not, sayes Love, who bore the blame?  
 My deare, then I will serve.  
 You must sit down, sayes Love, and taste my meat:  
 So I did sit and eat.

But for Weil what did "to eat" mean? In the course of a study of Weil's examination of the relationship between light, eyes, the sun, and food, Judith Van Herik explains that for Weil looking [attention] became eating. Van Herik writes:

<sup>60</sup> Marie-Madeleine DAVY, *Simone Weil* (Paris: Témoins du XX<sup>ème</sup> siècle, 1956), p. 27. In WEIL, *Attente de Dieu*, 1963, p. 38.

<sup>61</sup> WEIL, *Attente de Dieu*, 1963, p. 38 ("C'est au cours d'une de ces récitations que [...] le Christ lui-même est descendu et m'a prise.")

<sup>62</sup> PÉTREMENT, *Simone Weil: A Life*, p. 330 and between pp. 434-35, the seventh page of illustrations. In a personal letter (12/4/91), Michel NARCY wrote: "Comme elle [Simone] dit, [e]lle a découvert ce poème ['Love'] 'plus tard' que son séjour à Solesmes pendant qu'elle écoutait du chant grégorien" (WEIL, *Attente de Dieu*, 1963, p. 37).

[For Weil], [p]lants are an image of salvation because they absorb solar energy and use it to rise. The remedy for the human desire to devour anything edible is to find a mediator analogous to chlorophyll, which confers "the faculty of feeding on light." [Weil] takes this further: "There is only one fault: incapacity to feed on light." "Grace represents our chlorophyll" [*The Notebooks of Simone Weil*, vol. 2, p. 416]. When one refuses to eat [and one] looks and waits [which are components of *attention*], grace comes from above like light to feed the soul. And while the soul that eats natural food falls, the soul that is fed by light rises.<sup>63</sup>

And so Simone Weil, unfed by natural food, died, but she never fell. Fed by light, she never failed to rise. This "emmerdeuse" – "to be avoided at all cost" because of her "interminable discussions" – who could infuriate those around her to their wit's end because of her acrimonious language (*âpreté de langage*), as Père Raymond-Leopold Bruckberger, O.P., remarked,<sup>64</sup> can still transmute one from a state of utter annoyance and aggravation to one of fascinating yet puzzling admiration. Bruckberger explains why such a conversion happened to him: "[Simone] lived totally of an invisible presence which nourished her and, at the same time, devoured her." Once one realized that, "[t]hen, [Simone] was no longer infuriating."<sup>65</sup>

In *Simone Weil: Une femme absolue*, Fiori quotes in a chapter entitled "La mort au sommet du vivre" several texts of Weil about death, which hint at Weil's response to this "invisible presence of which she lived totally, and which nourished her and, at the same time, devoured her." A case in point: "One must love life much," Weil wrote, "in order to love death even more."<sup>66</sup> She further stated: "Death is the most precious thing ever given us" and warned that to die imperfectly [*mal mourir*] is "the supreme desecration [*impiété*]."<sup>67</sup> And a most striking text: "Even when I was a child," Weil recalled, "and believed that I was atheistic and materialistic, I

<sup>63</sup> Judith Van HÉRIK, "Simone Weil's Religious Imagery: How Looking Becomes Eating," in Clarissa W. ATKINSON – Constance H. BUCHANAN – Margaret R. MILES (eds.), *Immaculate and Powerful: The Female in Sacred Image and Social Reality* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), p. 273.

<sup>64</sup> *Cahiers Simone Weil* (Vol. II - N° 4: Décembre 1979), "Trois témoignages sur Simone Weil," p. 180.

<sup>65</sup> *Cahiers Simone Weil* (Vol. II - N° 4: Décembre 1979), p. 181. ("Elle vivait totalement d'une présence invisible qui la nourrissait et la dévorait à la fois. Alors, elle n'était plus irritante.") [To convey the textual meaning, the two sentences are inverted.] Bruckberger's remark relates to the Eucharist and to the latter's impact on Weil. I believe, however, that the remark transcends the immediate context.

<sup>66</sup> WEIL, *Cahiers II* (coll. *L'Épi*; Paris: Plon, 1953), p. 192, which Fiori quotes from. There is a 1972 edition of *Cahiers II* (see Fiori, *Simone Weil: Une femme absolue*, p. 141).

<sup>67</sup> WEIL, *Cahiers I* (coll. *L'Épi*; Paris: Plon, 1951), p. 230. There is a 1970 edition of *Cahiers I* (see Fiori, *Simone Weil: Une femme absolue*, p. 141).

always carried within me the fear of botching (*manquer*) not my life, but my death."<sup>68</sup> Fiori concludes: "[For Weil] death is *the door*, at the end of this world, which is "a barrier, and at the same time [...] the passage." Fiori then quotes from Weil's *Pensées sans ordre concernant l'amour de Dieu* a poem entitled *La porte*, in which Simone may have foreseen what her death was to look like: an act of *attention suprême*.

Il faut languir, attendre et regarder vainement,  
 Nous regardons la porte; elle est close, inébranlable ...  
 Nous la voyons toujours; le poids du temps nous accable ...  
 Nous n'entrerons jamais. Nous sommes las de la voir ...  
 La porte soudain en s'ouvrant laissa passer tant de silence  
 Que les vergers ne sont parus ni nulle fleur;  
 Seul l'espace immense où sont le vide et la lumière  
 Fut soudain présent de part en part, combla le cœur,  
 Et lava les yeux presque aveugles sous la poussière.<sup>69</sup>

<sup>68</sup> WEIL, *Écrits de Londres et dernières lettres*, p. 213 (see Fiori, *Simone Weil: Une femme absolue*, p. 141).

<sup>69</sup> WEIL, *Pensées sans ordre concernant l'amour de Dieu* (Coll. *Espoir*, Gallimard, 1962), pp. 11-12, Poème, "La porte" (in Fiori, *Simone Weil: Une femme absolue*, p. 143):

Languish we must, and wait and look in vain.  
 We gaze at the door; it is closed, immovable.  
 Always, we see it, burdened by the weight of time.  
 Never will we enter. Of looking, we tire.  
 Suddenly, as it opened, the door allowed so much silence to pass by  
 That orchards and flowers failed to bloom;  
 Only the immense space where reside emptiness and light,  
 Through and through, suddenly appeared. It fulfilled the heart  
 And washed the eyes almost sightless under the dust.