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Simone Weil

Waiting for God

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'You cannot get far in these essays without sensing yourself in the presence of a writer of immense intellectual power and fierce independence of mind.'

— *Janet Soskice, from the Introduction to the Routledge Classics edition*

Simone Weil (1909–1943) is one of the most brilliant and unorthodox religious and philosophical thinkers of the twentieth century. She was also a political activist who worked in the Renault car factory in France in the 1930s and fought briefly as an anarchist in the Spanish Civil War. Hailed by Albert Camus as 'the only great spirit of our times,' her work spans an astonishing variety of subjects, from ancient Greek philosophy and Christianity to oppression, political freedom and French national identity.

Waiting for God is one of her most remarkable books, full of piercing spiritual and moral insight. The first part comprises letters she wrote in 1942 to Jean-Marie Perrin, a Dominican priest, and demonstrate the intense inner conflict Weil experienced as she wrestled with the demands of Christian belief and commitment. She then explores the 'just balance' of the world, arguing that we should regard God as providing two forms of guidance: our ability as human beings to think for ourselves; and our need for both physical and emotional 'matter.' She also argues for the concept of a 'sacred longing'; that humanity's search for beauty, both in the world and within each other, is driven by our underlying desire for a tangible god.

Eloquent and inspiring, *Waiting for God* asks profound questions about the nature of faith, doubt and morality that continue to resonate today.

This Routledge Classics edition includes a new Introduction by Janet Soskice and retains the Foreword to the 1979 edition by Malcolm Muggeridge.

Simone Weil (1909–1943) was one of the great theologians, philosophers and activists of the twentieth century. Her writings on the nature of religious faith, spirituality and philosophy have inspired many subsequent thinkers. Several of her other books, including *The Need for Roots* and *Oppression and Liberty*, are also available in Routledge Classics.



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Simone
Weil

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With a new Introduction by Janet Soskice
and the Foreword to the 1979 edition by Malcolm
Muggeridge.



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INTRODUCTION TO THE ROUTLEDGE CLASSICS EDITION

I was honoured to be invited to write a new foreword to this edition of *Waiting for God* but, having reread Malcolm Muggeridge's foreword of 1979, realized it would be something of a literary and historical crime to replace his text with mine, or perhaps with any other. Muggeridge wrote as someone of just about her literary generation and was able to interview not only her brother, by then a distinguished professor of mathematics at Princeton, but one of her co-workers at the Renault works in 1935 and even the doctor who attended her in the Kent sanatorium where, in 1943 at the age of thirty-four, she died—at least partially from her own refusal to eat. Muggeridge's essay should stand as a lasting testimony to this twentieth-century

saint, not least because it demonstrates so clearly how odd and ‘unsaintly’ Simone Weil was, even in the eyes of those who loved her most. There are, by now, many excellent books which tell us more of her life and of the lasting impact of her writings on ethics, political philosophy and beauty—in all of which she was innovative—and Muggeridge’s Foreword and the note included in this volume will give sufficient biographical detail for those readers coming to Simone Weil for the first time. I add here, by way of an introduction, some remarks on why her work, and this collection of her late writings especially, are rightly held to be classics of philosophy and of spirituality.

You cannot get far in these essays without sensing yourself in the presence of a writer of immense intellectual power and fierce independence of mind. There is no posturing. She is not writing for the academy but for the world, for the world she hopes we can rebuild together. She wrote not as a professional scholar but while working, usually with little success, in schools, on farms and in factories. She wrote philosophy as though it mattered, as though the world needs it, as though the body politic needed it and as though suffering souls needed it, as though her own thoughts needed to be out there and to be heard. Everything she wrote has an intensity of purpose which seemed to be part of her nature, as though she knew from the outset that her life would be a short one.

Most of the pieces in this volume were written in 1942 to, or for, Fr Jean-Marie Perrin, a Dominican priest whom Simone Weil had met only a year before. They were written from Marseille and Casablanca as Simone Weil and her family fled Nazi-occupied France. The letters and *Spiritual Autobiography*, written at a time of such turmoil, have no trace of self-indulgence and—perhaps remarkably to us—make almost no mention of the political circumstances at the time of writing. Although she no doubt hoped for an audience wider than Fr

Perrin, who indeed made sure they reached this wider audience, we read them as private letters, almost eavesdropping on the intimate thoughts of a brave and remarkable woman. Like Augustine's *Confessions*, these letters, by being so entirely personal, manage to be universal.

The letters begin with 'Hesitations Concerning Baptism'. We have to imagine Fr Perrin's half of the correspondence, but it is clear that he wants Simone Weil to seek baptism and to receive the sacraments of the Catholic church. It is equally clear that she has no intention of doing so. This is not so much through any sense of her unworthiness (though she frequently writes of this and even of her self-loathing), but rather the reverse, because of her strong sense of 'being called' by God. She simply did not see, as she said, why everyone who loved God, Christ, the Catholic rites, hymns and the Catholic faith should be a baptized member of the Catholic church. Indeed, as she points out sharply to Fr Perrin, 'I have not the slightest love for the Church in the strict sense of the word...' (9). The Church, she adds in passing, has been guilty of atrocious abuses of power. Yet it is not even these shortcomings which make it evident to her she should remain as she is so much as her own confident sense of being, despite her own imperfections, where she is meant by God to be. (41)

Simone Weil came from a non-observant Jewish family. 'I was brought up by my parents and my brother in a complete agnosticism' (52), and while she speaks of being educated within a culturally Christian atmosphere (24), she describes her early life as religiously inert. The 'very name of God had no part in my thought', she writes of these early years, disabusing Fr Perrin of the suggestion that she had at any moment in her life 'sought for God'. ('Spiritual Autobiography', 24)

An active socialist, after a period of teaching in schools she took leave to become a factory worker, apparently in a quest for some vision of a spirituality of work. She was unsuited

for the rigours of the factory floor both by health and disposition and experienced during this period the crushing weight, on both herself and fellow workers, of what she would call 'malheur' (trans. affliction). Working with one's hands in manufacturing might theoretically become a place of blessing but working under pressure and in continual fear of losing one's livelihood results only in desolation—a robbing of self-will that leads not to solidarity but to abject submission. She came to understand, she said, what it meant to be a slave in the Roman sense. Her diagnosis of 'affliction', something different from oppression and more overwhelming than depression, is one of her great contributions to the cartography of the soul. The martyrs who went singing into the arena to meet wild animals were not afflicted. The enslaved, the crushed factory workers and Christ himself are, she says, afflicted. Christ did not die a martyr, she writes, but 'like a common criminal, confused with thieves, only a little more ridiculous. For affliction is ridiculous.' (78) No one notices the afflicted except those who are capable of 'attention', another great theme of this collection of writings.

Weil had, in her prosperous and supportive family, an escape route not open to her fellow workers and lasted only ten months on the factory floor. In 1938, after a crisis of health and spirit, she spent ten days at the Benedictine house of Solesmes, which she describes in her 'Spiritual Autobiography' in this volume. There a young English Catholic woman introduced her to George Herbert's poem, 'Love bade me welcome'. It was while reciting this poem (it was, she said, a prayer, although she didn't at the time recognise it as such) that, she says, 'Christ himself came down and took possession of me.' In a letter to the poet, Joë Bousquet, she describes this event and speaks of herself as both unprepared yet overwhelmed by feeling 'a presence more personal, more certain and more real than that of a human

being.... and it resembled the love that irradiates the tenderest smile of somebody one loves. Since that moment, the name of God and the name of Christ have been more and more irresistibly mingled with my thoughts.¹

It seems clear then that she felt she did not need to seek or choose God because God had inexplicably chosen her. No less than St. Paul, Simone Weil had a sense that she had been called by Christ, though not from any particular spiritual loveliness. (This is why it is tempting to give her the label of 'saint'). To Fr Perrin, and in solidarity with others outside the Church, she would write 'I regard it as legitimate on my part to be a member of the Church by right but not in fact, not only for a time, but for my whole life if need be.' (35)

Nearness to Christ did not mean for Simone Weil discarding a residual philosophical Stoicism. The Stoic *amor fati*, love of one's fate, becomes Christianized in these late writings in terms of what it means to be a creature. As she writes, 'Every existing thing is equally upheld in its existence by God's creative love.' (55). In her letter to Joë Bousquet (Marseille, 12 May 1942) she writes that 'The whole of space is filled....with a dense silence which is not an absence of sound but is a positive object of sensation; it is the secret word of Love who holds us in his arms from the beginning.' It is this deep grasp of the existential meaning of *creatio ex nihilo* that makes Simone Weil akin to Julian of Norwich, Gertrude of Helfta and her own beloved John of the Cross. We are, in ourselves, nothing, but held up by the love of God, each one, each creature is of infinite beauty and value. It is also her springboard to escape from the philosophical dualism which had haunted French philosophy since Descartes.

Simone Weil is no dualist—her lasting and harsh experience of pain and sympathy with the affliction of others made her all too aware that we are not minds that happen to inhabit

bodies, but that we are embodied. We are not separate from the materiality of the world. It would be easy to read Weil's clear inclination to vicarious suffering, which grew in the last years of her short life and was an element of the self-starvation which hastened her death, as a dismissal of the flesh, but the opposite is the case. Fasting, as the desert saints knew, does not make you less aware you are a body but more aware of your physicality. It is one of the least convenient elements of her thought that she believed suffering was the means through which she could be closest to God and to her neighbours. It made her capable of what she calls 'attention', a patient waiting on God. We must learn to attend, to wait, to be in a certain sense actively passive before God and the world. Outrageously, she tells Bousquet that he should be grateful for the wound which had left him crippled since the First World War, as this lasting pain and affliction is the seed for *en hypomene*—waiting in patience. Being grasped by Christ in the depth of affliction is not, for her, a miraculous healing for 'like Christ's resurrection through crucifixion, that love which is the central core and intangible essence of joy, is not a consolation. It leaves pain completely intact.' Yet it is a moment when she becomes aware of what she can call the 'gift of affliction', and with it the possibility of learning truly to attend to others.

Fortunately for her readers, affliction and sorrow were not, in her view, the only school for attention, as is spelt out in her influential essay, 'Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God.' Sent to Fr Perrin in 1942 for use with his students, it is one of the most elevated guides to school studies ever written, and one of the best introductions to her influential notion of 'attention'. The key to a Christian understanding of studies, she begins, is that 'prayer consists of attention'—a training in how to attend is,

properly, the sole purpose of studies. (61) This has nothing to do with will power, discipline and furrowed brows for the intelligence must be led desire. Thought is led by what delights us. 'The intelligence' says Weil, 'only grows and bears fruit in joy.' (66) Like Augustine, or for that matter Aquinas and Dante and any number of others in this lineage of eudaemonistic or virtue ethics, this means our desires must be directed to God, or as she might say, to 'the Good' and that, once this is in place, other loves and desires will be ordered and whole. This power of love and attending will spill out into the love of thy neighbour which is the fruit of rightly ordered love. This is not achieved by being busily active but by attention, and this 'consists of suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty and ready to be penetrated by the object'. (67) This is a certain kind of waiting, for in the original French 'attention' and 'waiting' are near terms. Attention is an 'active' passivity, and a self-emptying which is not a negating of self but a returning of the self to its place in the order of things. Iris Murdoch, drawing on Weil, speaks of the self-emptying that comes from watching the flight of a kestrel—a momentary awareness that we are not the centre of the universe. It is in this advocacy of attending, waiting and a practice of contemplation which can, as Iris Murdoch shows, be entirely secular, that Weil is most at odds with the vigorous activism of most modern philosophy where 'Enlightenment Man' deludes himself that he is God, separate from and in control of the universe. We have to give up, she says, our 'imaginary position as the centre' of the universe. (108) For Weil, on the contrary, we must disdain such posturing. True creation, she says, means self-loss. (99) We are, and must know we are, dependent on the world and totally integrated with it, subject to its necessities. The passenger on a boat in the storm feels only the blows and rocking, but the captain knows how to read his nautical world—wind,

current, swell and rudder. (83) Yet out of this learning to attend comes love, and ‘Love for our neighbour, being made of creative attention, is analogous to genius.’ (99) To learn this gift of attention is the greatest object of study for school children because we can learn to see our neighbour in her affliction, not as a specimen of the unfortunate, but as one like us. ‘The love of our neighbour in all its fullness simply means being able to say to him: “What are you going through?” It is a recognition that the sufferer exists, not ... as a ... specimen from the social category labelled “unfortunate,” but as a man, exactly like we are, who was one day stamped with a special mark by affliction.’ (70) What is indispensable for school children, then, is the learning of a practice. They need to learn to look at school studies and at other people in a certain way. ‘This way of looking is first of all attentive. The soul empties itself of all its own contents in order to receive into itself the being it is looking at, just as he is, in all his truth.’ (70) This simple and universal guidance speaks again into today’s driven, self-seeking world with its casualties—the poor, the refugee, the outcast, the crushed in spirit.

Weil’s distinctive and not entirely orthodox version of Christianity (for she only described herself as ‘Christian’ in the future conditional—‘should I ever be able to call myself a Christian’...) is dark and shadowed by inexorability. There is a stress on affliction as ‘a marvel of divine technique’ which undoubtedly comes from her own experience of a life of substantial suffering (writing to Bousquet of her own experience of Christ as Solesmes, she tells him that for twelve years she had suffered persistent and continuous pain in her nervous system). But surely to her credit, her sense of knowing fully embraces the body—‘The body plays a part in all apprenticeships’, whether that is mastering a ship, or riding a bike, or raising a child. The body knows, especially through suffering,

the ‘necessity’ of the world, its ‘mechanically harsh matter’. The Stoicism of her earlier philosophy speaks through, yet in her Christianized vision this becomes what it means to be a creature. Across the infinite separation, ‘God crosses the universe and comes to us.’ (85)

JANET SOSKICE, 2020

NOTE

- 1 From *Simone Weil: Seventy Letters*, trans. Richard Reis (London: Oxford University Press, 1965). All other references to Weil’s May 1942 letter to Joë Bousquet are from this edition.



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FOREWORD

Interest in the life and writings of Simone Weil has gone on steadily increasing since her death in 1943 at the age of thirty-four. At the time of her death her only published work consisted of a few articles in obscure periodicals and, apart from some leftist trade unionists and Gaullists she worked with at their war-time headquarters in London, she was unknown outside the circle of her friends and family. From one of her letters to Fr Perrin, the Dominican priest who became her friend and counsellor in 1942 when she was waiting in Marseilles for a boat to take her and her parents to America, it is apparent that this obscurity troubled her; she writes to him that 'if no one consents to take any notice of the thoughts which, though I cannot explain why, have settled in so inadequate a being as myself, they will be buried with me.' There follows a strong hint that Fr Perrin himself should act as her literary executor; at the same time, characteristically, she felt bound to make it clear

to him that if he undertook this responsibility, he must not suppose that he would thereby be serving his Church, which, she explains at some length, she has no intention, or indeed possibility, of joining, except perhaps on her deathbed.

As things turned out, she and Fr Perrin were never to see one another again, but he scrupulously preserved all her writings that came into his possession, and in due course made them available for publication, thus performing a signal service to Simone's memory, as well as to all seekers after truth, to all—as she likes to call them—friends of God. The Perrin papers, all included in this volume, are themselves of inestimable value, constituting, as they do, far the most interesting and revealing of her writings about herself, and it is difficult to believe that in any circumstances they would have been lost to posterity. Her fear that they might disappear without trace recalls how Pascal's sister, Gilberte, in her charming memoir of her brother, bewailed the fact that, owing to his early death, his life work, his great apologia for the Christian faith, was never to be realized, since only a confused pile of scribbled notes relating to it were found among his papers. These notes were the *Pensées*, which for three centuries now have edified and delighted successive generations of readers precisely because they are so succinct, spontaneous and luminous. It is quite possible that, had Pascal lived to work them up into a long, considered thesis, the impact might have been much less.

Simone's life story is brief and rather tragic—even at times tragi-comic. Essentially, she was a characteristic product of a time like ours, in which the term 'displaced person' has been devised as a bleak bureaucratic version of the Biblical phrase, 'a stranger in a strange land'—a description of what all mystics at all times have felt themselves to be. The essential facts are contained in Jacques Caboud's *Simone Weil, A Fellowship in Love*, and, in greater detail, in her friend Simone Petrement's full-length

biography, recently published in English. In doing the commentary for Vernon Sproxton's BBC television programme on Simone Weil, *Pilgrim of the Absolute*, I had occasion to visit the Weil family's apartment on the Rue Auguste Comte overlooking the Luxembourg Gardens, kept still very much as it was when Simone lived there. I also had the great pleasure of making the acquaintance of Simone's brother André, now a mathematician of international reputation at the Princeton Institute for Advanced Study. He gave me a vivid account of his and Simone's very happy childhood, in the process exploding a number of mythical anecdotes; for instance, one to the effect that during the First World War he and Simone had volunteered to forego their allowance of sweets to contribute towards sending food parcels to a soldier at the Front. Nothing of the sort happened, he insists. In my experience, pretty well all anecdotes are mythical or apocryphal. Another example in Simone's case is the often-repeated anecdote that she and Simone de Beauvoir passed first and second into the *École Normale Supérieure*. Actually, Simone de Beauvoir never attended the *École Normale*; Jacques Soustelle who was a fellow-student there with Simone Weil, told me this, and even showed me a list of students in his and Simone Weil's time, with no Simone de Beauvoir among them. The only encounter in the flesh between the two Simones was by chance, in a lift, at which neither uttered.

André Weil remembers his and Simone's companionship as children as being full of gaiety and laughter—a side of his sister that has largely, alas, got left out in her own recollections of herself, and in those of others, but which undoubtedly existed. To have, as she had, a heightened sense of eternity, is not to laugh less, but to laugh more; hence the gargoyles alongside the steeples in the great medieval cathedrals. Soustelle remembered her at the *École Normale* as being decidedly earnest, certainly, but still by no means destitute of humour. In her dress and bearing,

he said, she went out of her way to make herself physically unattractive, which was entirely in character. Snapshots of her when she was young suggest that she was really rather pretty. The family were Jewish, the father a doctor, a general practitioner, modest and quiet and competent, the mother effusive, opinionated and, I suspect, inclined to be domineering. André confirmed that his own rapid progress with his school studies gave Simone the feeling that she was no more than a plodder, though in fact she, too, in her own way was a brilliant student.

Re-reading Simone Weil's writings, and thinking about her, I have been more than ever struck by the close parallel between her and George Orwell, who was also, incidentally, obsessed with the notion that he was physically unattractive. They were both possessed with a passion to identify themselves with the downtrodden and oppressed, which they sought to achieve by sharing their way of life and experiencing their deprivations, often with bizarre results. Orwell, for instance, sought to cover up his Etonian traces by wearing a sort of proletarian fancy dress, rolling his own cigarettes and punctiliously frequenting public rather than saloon bars, and Simone conscientiously did stints as a factory and agricultural worker, but neither managed to achieve the identification they sought. In the course of filming *Pilgrim of the Absolute* I interviewed a fellow-worker of Simone's at the Renault Works, where she was employed between 6 June and 12 August 1935. Over an excellent luncheon which he hospitably provided at his apartment near the Works, he spoke of Simone with the utmost affection and admiration, but explained that of course she really had no notion of what a worker's life was like, and was unable herself to achieve even minimum efficiency owing to her absent-mindedness and congenital clumsiness.

Both Orwell and Simone made their way to Spain during the Civil War to fight on the Republican side. Orwell joined