

Such are the laws that praxeology presents to the human race. They are a binary set of consequences: the working of the market principle and the hegemonic principle. The former breeds harmony, freedom, prosperity and order; the latter produces conflict, coercion, poverty and chaos. Such are the consequences between which mankind must choose.

This brilliant work is certain to spark a spirited debate and is destined to be one of the classics of the rapidly growing literature of the free society.

Reviewed by H. GEORGE RESCH

“*Saint of the Churchless*”

First and Last Notebooks, by Simone Weil; translated by Sir Richard Rees, New York: Oxford University Press, 1970. xiv + 368 pp. \$9.75.

SIMONE WEIL did not express her religious philosophy in essays alone. She was always writing down her thoughts—her meditations—in single words, in phrases, in sentences, in extended paragraphs. One can find these fragments in her *Notebooks (Cahiers)*, containing the notes she made in France in 1940-1942, translated by Arthur Wills and published in two volumes in 1954, and more recently in her *First and Last Notebooks (La Connaissance surnaturelle)*, translated by Sir Richard Rees. The latter volume consists of notes for the years 1933-1939 and for 1942-1943, when she was in the United States and in England. As one would expect, these notes are unsystematic and often repetitious, at times obscure and at other times imprecise. They are fragments that should be considered as

a whole, however, if their full import is to be assessed. “Taken all together,” Rees writes in his Introduction, “the notebooks provide an unselfconscious and unintentional self-portrait of one of the most remarkable minds and characters of this century.” One should add that, as fragments, the notes are as noble as they are pious. They show a religious mind reflecting, struggling with words to crystallize thought and then, more importantly, to render the meaning and the variety of unified religious experience.

First and Last Notebooks points not only to Simone Weil’s remarkable mind and thought but also to her sustained concern with human problems approached in the light of ultimate religious perception. For her the “earthly life” is ever in “great need of the supersubstantial bread.” “Through our fleshly veils,” she writes in one of her letters, found in her book *Waiting for God*, “we receive from above presages of eternity which are enough to efface all doubts on the subject.” There is always present, in other words, an interaction between secular and eschatological tensions: between an awareness of matter as “our infallible judge” and the final certitude that “Waiting patiently in expectation is the foundation of the spiritual life.” And here, as in all her writings, there are certain “tracks” that cross in and out of her work and thought. The one that is the most manifest is her preoccupation with “waiting” (as opposed, it might be pointed out, to Samuel Beckett’s “languishing”). For Simone Weil waiting implies an intense spiritual condition, indeed a final religious state on the edge of redemption.

As such, the experience of waiting—“waiting humbly”—is one by which man is made similar to God. In effect, for Simone Weil waiting is “the Mystical Way.” It marks the ultimate perception, the transcendental consciousness, or “the movement of consciousness from lower to higher levels of reality,” the awakening of the Self to the consciousness of Divine Reality, of the “deified life,” as Evelyn Underhill observes

in her great book *Mysticism*. Thus, waiting is identified with humility and expresses in action a certain passivity of thought. "There is no attitude of greater humility than to wait in silence and patience It is the patience which transmutes time into eternity." Beyond humility, and beyond "the tension accepted in perpetuity," waiting also signifies obedience to time. "Total obedience to time obliges God to bestow eternity." All men, according to Simone Weil's concept, are abandoned in time, which epitomizes the act of abdication by God, who "emptied himself of his divinity and filled us with a false divinity." By his creative will God maintains man in existence that he may renounce it. "God waits like a beggar who stands motionless and silent before someone who will perhaps give him a piece of bread. Time is that waiting. Time is God's waiting as a beggar for our love." The contemplation of time is the key to human life, "the irreducible mystery, upon which no science can get a hold. Humility is inevitable when one knows that one is not sure of oneself for the future. There is no stability unless one abandons the 'I' which is subject to time and modifiable."

It is always as a religious philosopher, not as a theologian, that Simone Weil thinks and writes. That is to say, her "vision philosophy," as it can well be called, must be appreciated in terms of personal intuition and meditation, rather than in terms of dogma. (In the earlier published *Notebooks* she quotes with approval the remark that "the science of religions has not yet begun," and she insists that "To be able to study the supernatural, one must first be capable of discerning it.") As a philosopher who is at once concerned with the problems of history and the religious meaning of life and who refuses to separate religion from history or history from religion, Simone Weil adheres to a spiritual criterion. Her adherence to this criterion is uncompromising and non-liberal. "The Gospel," she asserts, "contains a conception of human life, not a theology." Earth-

ly things are the criterion of spiritual things. "The value of a religious or, more generally, a spiritual way of life is appreciated by the amount of illumination thrown upon the things of this world." Yet she is never unaware of the inherent resistance of the secular attitude to such a truth: "This is what we generally don't want to recognize, because we are frightened of a criterion." Iris Murdoch perceives an essential quality in the whole of Simone Weil's thought when she writes: "To read her is to be reminded of a standard."

When she applies her criterion to history, to the world, Simone Weil finds that spiritual poverty is the pervading condition of life. As she puts it succinctly: "We no longer know how to receive grace." Hence her conclusions regarding both human history and historic reality are profoundly pessimistic. Sadness, a rending spiritual sadness, inevitably describes Simone Weil's own condition as she looks at the world. In *Waiting for God* she explains the threefold nature of this sadness when she admits that fate has permanently stamped it upon her nature; that her own "miserable and conscious sins" are inescapable; that "the miseries of this epoch and all those of all past epochs" make this sadness terrifying. At the same time it is precisely this sadness that makes her social-cultural observations acute and prophetic. Indeed, Simone Weil has a kind of bifurcated vision that in a historical sense is deeply prophetic, particularly as found in works like *The Need for Roots, Oppression and Liberty*, and *Selected Essays, 1934-1943*, and that in a religious sense is mystical, as found in works like *Gravity and Grace, Waiting for God*, and in her letters and notebooks. In the end her mystic vision is triumphant and leads to her stern rejection of the temporal world and an escape from what Plato, her favorite philosopher, calls the "Cave of Illusion." This bifurcated vision, in all its tensions, helps to explain the violent and aggressive aspect of her prophetic utterances and the pure and saintly aspect of her

synthesizing religious search: her final grasp of a transcendent religious faith, which is Christian in the inspirational sense and which she superbly defines as "the submission of those parts which have had no contact with God to the one which has."

In her *First and Last Notebooks* Simone Weil's views of the historical situation recur as they are found in her essays relating to cultural and social questions. These views are largely negative, and the note of hopelessness is never far away. What she particularly focuses on, in ways that bring to mind Dostoevsky, is man's arrogance and his self-corruption through the manipulation of power, which contains "the unlimited" and turns man into a thing. It is this love of power that distorts all sense of proportion and accounts for what is a base phenomenon, of which physical "gravity" is symbolic. "Humanism," she asserts, "was not wrong in thinking that truth, beauty, equality are of infinite worth, but in thinking that man can obtain them for himself without grace." Such an attitude (in Dostoevsky's novels the "Titans"—with Ivan Karamazov as the best example—illustrate this process) leads to human breakdown in various forms. Above all it leads to the most dangerous consequence of all: the plight created by "the lure of quantity" when collectivity dispossesses man and, in effect, corrupts everything: "Outside the sphere of external observances (bourgeois formality) the whole moral trend of the postwar years (and even before) has been an *apology* for *intemperance* (surrealism) and therefore, ultimately, for madness." Any critical survey of our civilization will "bring to light exactly how it is that man has become the slave of his own creations." Methodical thought and action have surrendered to the quantitative, with man losing control of science and technique and thus building (to borrow Dostoevsky's images) his "Crystal Palace" and becoming part of the "ant-hill." "When humanity fell away from a civilization illumined by faith, probably the first thing it lost was the spirituality of labour." Disequilibrium and

alienation are, therefore, in ascendancy, because

The conditions of modern life destroy the mind-body equilibrium in everything, in thought and in action—in all actions: in work, in fighting . . . and in love, which is now a luxurious sensation and a game In its every aspect, the civilization we live in overwhelms the human *body*. Mind and body have become strangers to one another. Contact has been lost.

Gustave Thibon, the French religious thinker who befriended Simone Weil and, along with the Reverend Father J. M. Perrin, acted as her spiritual legatee, observes that "Simone Weil oscillates between a pessimism which reduces man to nothingness and an optimism which raises him prematurely to divinity." If, then, she sees the social order as essentially evil, she emphasizes that "The world must be regarded as containing something of a void in order that it may have need of God." Her thoughts are always God-oriented, and she insists that "only the unconditioned leads to God," since no resolution can transport one to eternity. The "unconditioned" is contact with God, is the absolute. All sins, Simone Weil affirms, are attempts to escape from time and to fill the void; at the bottom of each sin there is anger against God. "If we forgive God for his crime against us, which is to have made us finite creatures, He will forgive our crime against him, which is that we are finite creatures." God and humanity she images as "two lovers who have missed their rendezvous. Each is there before the time, but each at a different place, and they wait and wait and wait." Indeed, she concludes, the crucifixion of Christ "is the image of this fixity of God." The distance that separates God from the creature, she adds, is spanned by compassion, which "should have the same dimension as the act of creation. It cannot exclude a single creature."

No reader will fail to appreciate the aphorisms interspersed throughout Simone

Weil's Notebooks. Interest in her philosophic thought should, in fact, not blind one to the stylistic excellence of her writing, particularly its simplicity and lucidity. Examples of both her aphorisms and the language in which her thinking is expressed are in constant evidence: "Without humility, all the virtues are finite. Only humility makes them infinite." "In another use of the word, justice is the exercise of supernatural love." "Impossibility is what limits possibilities; limit is necessity abstracted from time." "Nothing is more difficult than prayer. In all other tasks of the religious life, however exacting, one can sometimes rest; but there is no rest in prayer, up to the end of one's life." "To give a piece of bread is more than preaching a sermon, as Christ's Cross is more than his parables." "Beauty is a providential dispensation by which truth and justice, while still unrecognized, call silently for our attention." "Once we have understood how it develops minute personal failings into public crimes, then nothing is a minute personal failing. One's little faults can only be crimes."

Invariably, then, as one follows the various tracks leading through Simone Weil's Notebooks, one is aware of being, as T. S. Eliot said, in "contact with a great soul." But, beyond this, she is the kind of mystic and saint ("the saint of the churchless," as she has been called) who serves as a guide leading the soul toward God. Admittedly hers are concerns so unyielding and relentless in their spiritual essences—she has been described as suffering from the "vertigo of the absolute"—that her conception of what is human is distorted by an excess of love for the superhuman. To insist on such a view, however, is to ignore the peculiar quality of her thought and of her mysticism which Rees speaks of as "an uncommonly refined common sense." One need only think of Simone Weil's belief in the need "To love men in the same way as the sun would love us if it saw us"; or her insistence, in the last sentence of these Notebooks, that "The most important part of teaching = to teach what

it is to *know* (in the scientific sense)"—to know, that is, "with one's whole soul"—to understand why, in spite of her asceticism, her repeated flights into the country of the spirit, her "immoderate affirmations" (to quote Eliot again), her impatience for the absolute, she is also always looking behind her, beckoning by her example to men tormented by the demon of doubt to follow her in the last and greatest quest.

Simone Weil's Notebooks, though they contain fragments, the rough drafts of her thought, are nonetheless paradigms of spiritual progress won through meditation. As stark and severe as her meditations are, they have much to say about the glory of the inner life; and to meditate on her meditations is to participate in an experience of the inner life that modern man has ignored to his growing peril. If Simone Weil's works remind us of a standard, they also remind us of an inner discipline of effort and attention and solitude without which life is incomplete. "Depths of silence," writes Thibon, "have to be traversed in order to grasp the authentic meaning of her words." But when we have grasped it, we are able to communicate with one whose meditations on the life of man and "the needs of the soul" place her among the first philosophers of our civilization.

Reviewed by GEORGE A. PANICHAS

What the Blacks Want

What Country Have I? Political Writings by Black Americans, edited by Herbert F. Storing, *New York: St. Martin's Press, 1970. vii + 235 pp.*

HERBERT STORING states in his opening paragraph that his aim in this work "has been to select those writings that explore