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The Red Virgin

A Poem of Simone Weil

Stephanie Strickland

The University of Wisconsin Press

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As for the Red Virgin,
we shall leave it to her to make bombs
for the coming grand social upheaval.

—C. Bouglé, Acting Director
Ecole normale supérieure

We shall send the Red Virgin
as far away as possible
so that we shall never hear of her again.

—C. Bouglé, Director of Career Placement
Ecole normale supérieure

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Note

Simone Weil's actual or paraphrased remarks are given in italics. Document excerpts are credited in the titles of poems where they are used. Thibon's remarks are to be found scattered in his portion of the account *Simone Weil as We Knew Her*, by J. M. Perrin and G. Thibon (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1953, translated from the French by Emma Craufurd). Mme. Weil's letters and Simone de Beauvoir's remarks are quoted in Simone Pétrement's biography, *Simone Weil, A Life* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976, translated from the French by Raymond Rosenthal). A transcript of André Weil's interview with the BBC appears in *Gateway To God: Simone Weil*, edited by David Raper (Glasgow: William Collins Sons & Co., 1974). Letters to her family, to her pupil, to Albertine Thévenon and to Jean Giraudoux appear in *Simone Weil, Seventy Letters*, translated and arranged by Richard Rees (London: Oxford University Press, 1965). The Gertrude Stein passages are from *The Making of Americans* (New York: Something Else Press, originally published 1925, reissued 1966). Paul West's essay appears in his book, *The Wine of Absurdity: Essays on Literature and Consolation* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University, 1966). I have drawn heavily on Jacques Cabaud, *Simone Weil: A Fellowship in Love* (London: Harvill Press, 1964).

Chronology

- 1909–28 Simone Weil is born in Paris, 3 February 1909, to an affluent Jewish family. Her brother, André, a mathematical prodigy, is three when she is born. Educated with—and by—her brother, at 16 she enrolls in the *Lycée Henri IV* in an all-male class. In the entrance exams for the *Ecole normale supérieure*, she places first. Simone de Beauvoir is second. Behind them, thirty men.
- 1928–31 At the *Ecole normale*, she publishes an essay on the nature of work and writes her thesis, *Science and Perception in Descartes*.
- 1931–32 While teaching in Le Puy, she is an active trade unionist. An episode in which she leads the unemployed to the mayor's office and the city council chamber results in her transfer.
- 1932–34 After investigating German trade unions and the German Communist Party, she publishes an analysis predicting a Nazi-Soviet non-aggression pact. While teaching at Roanne and Auxerre, she demonstrates against police brutality, armaments manufacture, and miners' unemployment.
- 1934–35 She begins work as a factory hand. Laid off after four months, she obtains, and loses, two subsequent positions.
- 1935–36 Teaching in Bourges, she experiences newly severe chronic headaches. In Spain, she offers her services as a soldier to the Anarchist Union's militia, but is injured in an accident.

- 1937 Visits Switzerland and Italy.
- 1938 In Holy Week, she goes to the Abbey of Solesmes to hear plain-chant. Introduced to George Herbert's poems by another visitor, she begins to make a practice of reciting Herbert's "Love III."
- 1939-40 Writes on the origins of Hitlerism. Also drafts and submits to the government a "Memorandum on the Formation of a Front-line Nursing Squad." The Weils flee to unoccupied France.
- 1941 In Marseilles, she meets Father Perrin, a Dominican monk working to help refugees. At her request, he sends her to Gustave Thibon to work as a field-hand.
- 1942 Routed through Morocco and New York, she arrives in London, where she works for De Gaulle's Ministry of the Interior.
- 1943 In April, she is admitted to Middlesex Hospital. She refuses food and refuses treatment for tuberculosis. Transferred to a sanatorium in Ashford, Kent, she dies August 24.

The Red Virgin

*In the English, the Provençal and Irish poems,
joy so pure it hurts; in Greek poems, pain so pure
it soothes: the mind becoming relaxed
descends a little, from its greatest
concentration, and spreads out in words;
love does the same, in acts.*

This is how she talks, too focal, too close
to the tension in her thought. I would descend
lower still, bring her near me, gossip
about her, paraphrase. If I distort,
I don't abandon.

Come to her
yourself: we each build our own scaffold.

Airdrill

Crisis in '32 becomes Depression and Simone
has joined rival Unions in order to unite them
in one Force for revolution, but goes alone

to the industrial region where she speaks
with workingmen about their condition and the need
for solidarity—traveling for hours, each way each week

on her day off from her job at the girls' school
in Le Puy. Visiting a mine, she is allowed to try
the compressed-air drill, a jack-hammer. Never

forgetting it, never recovered, riveted, *one body*
with the machine as if added on, like a supplementary
gear; her mind overridden, overwhelmed by vibration,

holding its head driven at the wall of coal: incessant
rapid acceleration appropriate to it—alien to her,
violently bending to service her body clinging to it.

Counterweight

Activist—
yet she subscribes to the world
as a perfect work in no need
of assistance;

impatient,
but enjoining herself to wait
nearly motionless, focusing
all hope

on an event
which will not occur,
and as hope disappears,
worn down, to wait;

woman
crippling her own dark
and antic loveliness
conscientiously;

Résistante
who resigns
from the Free French shortly before death,
though without

illusion
about them when she left
for London—it wasn't
that some

Gustave Thibon, *How Simone Weil*
Appeared to Me/4

We are *all*
bargaining with heaven—
Simone Weil's whip

calls us back to order.
The only non-heresy is silence.
Silence,

itself, a kind
of treason. She said, *Truth*
is on the side of death,

and it may be so,
but still, it is
too hard for me, that saying.

Gustave Thibon, *How Simone Weil*
Appeared to Me/5

I can still hear Simone's voice in the deserted
streets of Marseilles as she accompanied
me to my hotel in the small hours. She was

commenting on the Gospel. Words issued
from her mouth as a tree yields its fruit.
Her words did not so much translate the truth

as pour it into me, whole and unadulterated.
I felt as if I were being transported
beyond space and time, so that I virtually fed

upon light. The systematic side of her work,
so weak and flat, intelligence in flashes
that can't be strung together. Not pearls.

How Imperatives Enter the Body

From a bed in Middlesex Hospital, concealing
her address, Simone is writing
to her mother . . . *my intelligence is praised*

*as fools' foolishness is mocked, to evade
the question, Is what I speak the truth?*
She asks to see a priest, who is "annoyed"

by her thought: it will not "grasp . . . itself
satisfactorily, and . . . [will] not accept fixed
starting points. . . ." It seems to him,

"too 'feminine' . . . too 'Judaic' . . ." Her refusal
of treatment offends Dr. Bennett, who rules
her bed be given up, and she taken

to Kent, where they do not want her.
"We deal with industrial patients here
and feel she will not settle down with us."

How You Are Withheld from Me

Diffidence? Both of us. You raised
on some banner: the cerebral, intransigent
fragments of your life—

your papers not published, not
together; untranslated, out-of-print.
That the work

is copybook, letter
and draft, hurried entry of some scrap
—and magisterial *essais*.

Coming to me
sour, brought by the distaste
you cause some man or woman; no one

saw what you were doing, not even
you, although you knew
the price you paid. You say,

*don't cavil at the mystics
for using words of love: they
are theirs, by right. All*

others only borrow. Joy
is your secret, your power to keep
a secret, to keep it implanted,

growing: only closed
lips retain the name of God—how
you are withheld, from me.

Jews

*Them, she said,
that people held together
by a terrible violence,*

*by massacres
they carried out—
those, inflicted on them.*

A people
non-assimilable, not
assimilating: so

she indicts *them*,
pushing *her* food away,
blocking *her* baptism.

Justice

As justice is to disregard your strength in an unequal
relationship and to treat the other
in every detail, even intonation, posture, exactly

as an equal:
so God

all-powerful, does not exert power; God waits like a beggar
for us, made equal, Might drawn
back

that the world
be—

As justice: so God, secretly
present, an opening in us that can move, consent, bond us
forever,

but not
appearing—appearing absent; except
for how a thing can be beautiful, constrained

to its nature, how that
snares us.

My *Not* Burns

What burns in hell?
Divines, doctors, say self-will.
But I say *not*.

If I am not
fire, fire consumes me.
My *not* burns me.

Names / Ugliness

... to make her seem less of a right-minded monster, I fastened avidly on the details of her womanhood. ... The photographs mutely record the decline from her second year, when she was chubby-cheeked with curly black hair the color of her almond-shaped eyes—a pensive, cute doll—to thirty-four, when she starved herself to death in order to share the sufferings of the French. Her face in 1936 is handsome, firm, full-mouthed and rather appealing ... [b]ut five years later she has ... become the headmistress type, owl-eyed through excessive perusal, her expression an odd blend of hennish timidity and impatient pity. And there is a general look of—well: dryness. A sad little gallery of snaps indeed. —Paul West

They don't know love when they see it.
They think ugliness unfits her for it,
or nicotined fingers, grating voice,
that low monotonous tone, never known
to concede. Love doesn't fail,

either. Love loves what there is:
a bare cupboard—and hunger; though
it be treason, herself, by herself,
France, at her nadir—France still persecuting
what still falls beneath her: Vichy,

shaving the heads of Vietnamese;
an intact elite, the professionals
of language, humiliating
vagrants, women, workers. Love riven
by the cry, *Why am I being hurt?*

but as rain must rain, love must identify
with what is there, with pain, then,

On the Wireless

To Jean Giraudoux, Minister of Propaganda in 1939

... I would wish you always to speak the truth, even on the wireless.

Did not France acquire Annam by conquest?

We have killed their culture; we forbid them access to the manuscripts of their language; we have imposed upon a small section of them our own culture, which has no roots among them and can do them no good.

I shall never forget hearing an agricultural expert of the Colonial Ministry frigidly explain that people are right to hit the coolies on the plantations because they are so weak from overwork and privation that any other form of punishment would be more cruel.

Past Centuries

To refuse to enter, when you are on the threshold—

*but Father—so many
things outside the Church, the whole
immense vista of past centuries
except the last twenty;
everything not white, everything in secular
life, the stunning heresies.*

To refuse to bind yourself—

*But Father, only in ecstasy, only in division
will the human mind not run away but stay
truthful, in what's painful.*

Still Darning a Sock

Simone brushed aside Albertine Thévenon,
wife of the trade union leader, who answered her door
still darning a sock.

Frowning, the young professor pushed past her
to the back room where Thévenon,
the leader— But in England,

no longer a professor, when she looks at her landlady
standing at the iron, outside it is dark,
blacked out, a notion

of the soul
washed through with woman's work. *Mrs. Francis,*
promise me you won't work so hard—

"Oh and you Miss, that cough. You know
you go with no rest.
Take some tea now, with us."

Mrs. Francis threw roses
into the grave tied with tricolor ribbon. It had been a long ride
on the train—and back to London, working late

at her job
and in the evening, lessons with two boys,
the char work of the house.

There Comes

If you do not fight it—if you look, just
look, steadily,
upon it,

there comes
a moment when you cannot do it,
if it is evil;

if good, a moment
when you cannot
not.

Unconverted: Bede's Sparrow

What if Bede's sparrow for that instant in flight
through the mead hall entering one open end
in the dead of winter found no aisle of calm,

no shelter from storm, but gauntlet fire, the clash
of spear-clang, feasting chieftains? Trapped inside
a pit of roof-beams flying high near the ridgepole,

what if it were glad for light at the end, for clarity
and open air, whether this be full of swirling mist,
ice-like rain, or a blind snow of pine-poles and dark,

floating forests, for it is flying, glad of great
openness, whether it soar the night stung to kindled
points, or is hung in a bell of day's blue, receding light,

or, is nailed to the moon, to a shaft of pure iron,
pulling the sea to vast swells, leaf-bone white.

Unregarded Source

To give up greatness—

*For our conception of greatness is the very one which has inspired
Hitler's life.*

To have a filial feeling

for your country, but no impulse to compel a worship you cannot
command, but that comes to you, *gratis*, because you are "a citizen"
of that land, that Rome, that Reich—

To shift

from a national wargod to a God of nooks and crannies, a God merely
good, God-of-slaves, -of-the sick. What does it mean—not
to react to, but to resist, Hitler?

To proclaim

a blind woman in a field of lavender, a mystery, initiatory sect
of Egypt, Thrace: *the truth*, Simone says, *has an unregarded
source . . . unheard story: the truth, taken captive—*

What is filial feeling?

In '42, in London, in conversation with Maurice Schumann,
her friend, her schoolmate, fellow Jew, fellow Catholic, Simone
says she is troubled, by parts of the Old Testament,

by Saul and the Amalekites. By the order given there, by
God, for genocide. They had not heard of the concentration
camps, yet, Schumann said.

How can we

condemn a holocaust, today, Simone asks—using that word, that word, later, to Schumann, seeming like a premonition—if we do not

condemn all holocausts in the past?

Vertigo / Walk on Water

The generous have overcome their anger,
the zealous have overcome their fear,

those who love have overcome their passion—
charity is horror, overcome. To triumph over

fearsome forces, interpose an obstacle: a rudder
or a bit. Don't wish for anything, neither to control

nor, to submit. You are one who sails a boat. Enormous
masses of wave and wind contend. To balance them,

you. And your tiller. The difference between
sailors is: some understand

the laws that compel them. You can tell
by watching, while they keep their footing, which.

he said of God.
t was also true of André.
[true of us all.

She said,

*when from the depth
of our being,
we need, we seek a sound*

*which does mean
something: when we cry out
for an answer,*

*and it is not granted, then,
we touch the silence
of God—*

*Some begin to talk,
to themselves, as do the mad;
some give*

their hearts to silence.