

THE PERSONAL AND BEYOND

SIMONE WEIL AND THE NECESSITY/LIMITS OF BIOGRAPHY

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Drawing on both the life and work of the philosopher, political activist, and mystic Simone Weil, this essay is an attempt to work through what appears to be a contradiction. On the one hand, following William James especially, I want to underscore the idea that biographies and autobiographies – i.e., personal narratives – represent a privileged inroad into the study of religious experience and religious lives more generally. Along these lines, I will be arguing in the first section of the paper for the *necessity* of turning to narrative in fashioning a psychology of religion adequate to the reality of the religious. On the other hand, I also want to underscore the idea that biographies and autobiographies, while necessary in the fashioning of such a psychology, are, at one and the same time, inadequate to the task at hand. After exploring in some detail a trio of Weil's own mystical experiences in the second section of the paper, I will therefore move on in the third section to address the *limits* of biography in fashioning a psychology of religion adequate to the reality of the religious. Following Weil, among others, this is because what is – arguably – essential to authentic religious experience is precisely what is *impersonal*, i.e., what *transcends* the human personality.

A significant challenge for the exploration of religious lives, and creative lives more generally, thus concerns the dynamic process wherein the personal is “moved beyond itself,” transformed in such a way that the resultant product – in this case, a remarkable life as well as a remarkable body of imaginative thought about religion, politics, the human condition, and much more – exceeds its own origins. I will not be making a claim for divine intervention in this context. Nor would Simone Weil; even when she speaks of “genius,” she resists elevating it to some place on high, beyond the vicissitudes of messy life. And yet, as she well knew, there can be no denying the special capacity, on the part of some, to somehow lift themselves beyond those very life conditions without which there would be nothing at all. How is this possible? In the fourth and final section of this paper, I hope to provide some clues.

There is another way in which I will address the limits of autobiography as well. As we observe in the life and work of Simone Weil – but not only Simone Weil – the commitment to religious life can bring forth a mode of being-in-the-world that runs positively *counter* to biographical, or more specifically autobiographical, knowing. As we shall see, she does engage in some significant

autobiographical reflection in her own “Spiritual Autobiography,” a brief and somewhat schematic attempt to trace the trajectory of her spiritual awakening, but the very *last* thing she would want to do is “explain” this awakening – or any other truly creative endeavor – via her biography. By way of presenting but a taste of her view on this issue, consider her thoughts on writing, which are conveyed in a letter to her good friend and confidant Gustav Thibon:

In the operation of writing, the hand which holds the pen, and the body and soul which are attached to it, with all their social environment, are things of infinitesimal importance for those who love the truth. They are infinitely small in the order of nothingness. That at any rate is the measure of importance I attach in this operation not only to my own personality but to yours and to that of any other writer I respect. Only the personality of those whom I more or less despise matters to me in such a domain. (1952/1997, p. xiii)

As for Weil personally: “(M)y greatest desire is to lose not only all will but all personal being” (1951/1973, p. 59). The “virtuoso” or “genius” – religious, artistic, philosophical, whatever – is one who has succeeded in *effacing* his or her personality to such a degree that Reality can shine through. What’s more, he or she will be decidedly less oriented to the past (or the future) but will instead be rooted, to the greatest extent possible, in the present. “If we consider what we are at a definite moment – the present moment, cut off from the past and the future – we are innocent. We cannot at that instant be anything but what we are” (1952/1997, p. 32). We are emptied of those imaginings and fantasies and illusions that mire us in the personal, the subjective. In this context too, therefore, there is a kind of built-in resistance to the biographical, auto- and otherwise.

Weil may, of course, be wrong about all of this. Moreover, there is a good deal of evidence to suggest that, despite her very loud protests against the ego, her fervent wish to lose her personal being, and so on, she herself remained ego-invested in her own “decreative” project in a big way. As Thibon (1953b) has noted:

On the one hand there was a longing for absolute self-effacement, an unlimited opening to reality even under its harshest forms, and, on the other, a terrible self-will at the very heart of the self-stripping; the inflexible desire that this stripping should be her own work and should be accomplished in her own way, the consuming temptation to verify everything from within, to test everything and experience everything for herself. (p. 114)

But that is not all. “(S)he, who when her pleasure or her needs were involved would not have allowed anyone to make the slightest sacrifice on her behalf, did not seem to realize the complications and even sufferings she caused in the lives of others as soon as there was a question of her vocation to

self-effacement” (p. 117). Thibon goes on to speak of a “transcendental egoism” in this context:

This soul, who wanted to be flexible to every movement of the divine will, could not bear the course of events or the kindness of her friends to change by one inch the position of the stakes with which her own will had marked her path of immolation. Though utterly and entirely detached from her tastes and needs, she was not detached from her detachment. And the way she mounted guard around her emptiness still showed a terrible preoccupation with herself. In the great book of the universe spread often before her, her *ego* was, as it were, a word which she may perhaps have succeeded in *effacing*, but which was still *underlined*. (p. 119)

Thibon, it should be noted, is not particularly troubled by Weil’s egoism. “The saints are not given us for the sake of comfort, and I do not entirely reproach her for this uncomfortable side of her nature. Moreover there were some delightful moments when she let herself go and relaxed. Yet she lacked that supreme peace of mind, that sweetness and all-embracing indulgence which the signs of God’s maturity in man” (p. 120). So it is that he speaks of the “green immaturity” of Weil’s spiritual life, the fact that she “had not yet reached the reversed summit of supreme humility, that point where height and depth correspond, that divine abasement which counterbalances man’s baseness, that final simplicity in which the saint no longer judges anything but bathes all in the unity of love” (p. 126), the presumption being that, had she lived longer (she died at 34) and continued to develop spiritually, she might indeed have succeeded in achieving the full-scale self-immolation she so desired. “Simone Weil,” Thibon writes, “was complete truth and, at a certain level, complete love; she was not yet complete welcome (. . .) In a sense she remained all her life the inflexible child who sat down in the snow and refused to go on because her parents had given the heaviest baggage to her brother to carry” (p. 126).

For all that Thibon was acutely attuned to Weil’s inner workings (and non-workings), he, like Weil herself, remains steadfast in his refusal to engage in the explanation game. “Is what we know of the character and interior life of Simone Weil enough to explain her thought, and to account for this unique work of hers which stands out sheer and solitary, like an isolated peak in the immense range of the highest achievements of human genius?” (p. 134). By all indications, Thibon’s answer to this question is a resounding “No.” And yet, even he will find in Weil’s character and interior life vitally important clues not only to her thought but to the very fabric of her experience.

In the pages to follow, I will pay particular attention to two significant challenges associated with biographical inquiry into religious lives. The first, which we have encountered already, concerns the familiar problem of biographical *reduction*, i.e., the attempt to use dimensions of character, inner life, childhood events (etc.) in order to explain whatever resultant phenomena

(mystical experiences, feats of artistic greatness, atrocities, whatever) one may be interested in explaining. This, of course, is a problem that is part and parcel of any biographical enterprise but is particularly acute in the study of those sorts of transformative experiences found in religious lives. The second challenge, which follows from the first, concerns the problem of *transcendence*. And it has to do with the fact that, from the perspective of the person whose story it is, the experiences being recounted are often regarded as supernatural visitations from without, not only irreducible to all that has come before but irreducible to, and transcendent of, *any* “account” whatsoever. Now, we, as psychologists, operating essentially in an agnostic mode (at least concerning the transcendental status of these sorts of data), need not (and perhaps cannot) “buy” these transcendently transformative stories uncritically. Doing so, in fact, would immediately launch us into the theological realm – which, for most psychologists, is quite out of bounds. At the same time, I would argue, we cannot discredit such stories uncritically either, by effectively ruling out the possibility that they are actually about what they claim to be about (see Freeman, 2004a). The challenge, therefore, as I see it, is to fashion a language in our own renditions of the lives being studied that somehow *preserves* the transcendent moment of the experiences being recounted – following Weil, such experiences may indeed go beyond the human personality – but without relegating them to a “wholly Other” sphere. The language of which I am speaking is *poetic* language, and, as I hope to show, it provides a valuable vehicle for responding to each of the two challenges just identified.

Narrative understanding and the necessity of biography

In the very first chapter of *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902/1982), James gives us an important warning of sorts regarding the centrality of narrative understanding. After offering his well-known distinction between an existential judgment and a spiritual judgment, he notes that, in dealing with the phenomena of religious experience “as if they were mere curious facts of individual history,” some readers may consider it “a degradation of so sublime a subject,” perhaps even imagining that he is “deliberately seeking to discredit the religious side of life” (p. 6). James’ very reliance on narrative data, in other words, is likely to be seen by some as inherently reductive: by tracing the emergence of the spiritual, or the ostensibly spiritual, to the existential conditions of a life, it would seem on the face of it that the existential is gaining the upper hand. Somehow, therefore, he needs to show that this reliance on narrative understanding, far from degrading and discrediting the subject at hand, will in fact do something quite different, something not only salutary but perhaps necessary.

We begin to see James’ approach in action in Lecture II, his “Circumscription of the Topic,” where, among other things, he emphasizes the centrality of “*the*

feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude" (p. 31) in understanding religion. But it is in the third lecture, on "The Reality of the Unseen," that his narrative aims are truly coming into view. "(T)he whole array of our instances," he tells us early in the lecture, "leads to a conclusion something like this: It is as if there were in the human consciousness *a sense of reality, a feeling of objective presence, a perception* of what we may call 'something there,' more deep and more general than any of the particular and special 'senses' by which the current psychology supposes existent realities to be originally revealed" (p. 58). Later on, after having examined some of these instances, he notes that, "Such cases, taken along with others which would be too tedious for quotation, seem sufficiently to prove the existence in our mental machinery of a sense of present reality more diffused and general than that which our special senses yield" (p. 63). The language here is one of "instances," "cases" – in a word, *stories*. And it is precisely these stories that will serve as the foundation for his ultimate defense of the seemingly transcendent nature of religious experience. Indeed, in a distinct sense, James implies, there is but one way to "testify" to the ostensibly transcendent dimension of the phenomena at hand, and that is to tell the story of their coming to be. Hence the great wealth of biographical detail found in the *Varieties*. And hence the idea that drawing upon biographical data is the most appropriate means of exploring the realities at hand.

It is surely necessary in the case Simone Weil. One might in fact ask of her strange and, on some level, downright mysterious case: How on earth did she come to be the person she did? Among other things, she was, as noted earlier, a philosopher, a political activist, and a mystic who, at age six, swore off sugar in order to send her share to French soldiers fighting at the front (Perrin, 1953); at age 10, had become involved in labor union demonstrations; and, by age 14, had developed what some have considered an "almost pathological receptiveness to the suffering of others" as well as "a strong tendency to cultivate her own" (Du Plessix Gray, 2001, p. 15). There had also been extraordinarily painful migraines and, as time wore on, a seemingly obsessive preoccupation with eating issues – to the extent that some (e.g., Du Plessix Gray, 2001) are thoroughly convinced of her anorectic status. And then there were her multiple attempts to immerse herself in the experiential world of the afflicted, particularly through hard factory labor, her ostensible goal in these endeavors being nothing less than reaching rock bottom, such that misery would somehow pass over into the clearest and most profound testimony to God's presence. There is little doubt but that she died in such a state of misery as well, at least one of the known causes being self-starvation – which, not unlike her swearing off sugar as a six-year old, was apparently another act of solidarity with the afflicted. In the end, Robert Coles (2001) has written,

Simone Weil seemed to have no interest in survival, at least the human survival most of us want. A discussion continues among many who knew her or admire her as to whether she did or did not take her own life, whether she was anorectic, a masochist, irrational, or psychotic at the end of her life. Her doctors were confused, frustrated, and enraged by her behavior. Here was a young woman as bright as any human being could want to be, educated and refined, not poor or without friends, who yet had no interest in cooperating with her doctors and nurses. Ultimately they tried tube feeding in a futile effort to save her. She died alone, on August 24, a thirty-four-year-old woman mourned by only a handful of London friends. (p. 18)

Given this sort of profile, it is hardly surprising that chroniclers of Weil's life and work should turn to her early life, her childhood in particular, and "maybe find reasons to be concerned" (Coles, 2001, p. 7). The same may be said of her efforts at hard labor; and even though it remains unclear whether these efforts bespeak "silly romanticism or self-righteousness masked as idealism or a decent person's hard struggle to find out how to live and work and in a morally useful way, and by doing so, to learn something precious" (p. 10), there is little doubt but that they call out for biographical understanding. There was also a serious (if complicated) strain of anti-Semitism on Weil's part – and this despite the fact (or because of the fact) of her Jewishness. How, in light of all this information, could one *not* turn to biography in Weil's case?

Consider also Weil's physical presence as well as her own relation to her own bodily/sexual being. "The beauty of her porcelain skin, of her delicate features," Du Plessix Gray (2001) writes, "continued to be all but hidden by her huge glasses, her grubby clothes, her awkward gait. And those who saw through to her beauty wondered why she had chosen to make herself so ugly" (p. 25). Some of her philosophy students, Du Plessix Gray notes, had initially been "amused by her awkwardness, her clumsy way of holding the chalk, the total anarchy of her clothes." In due time, "they came to admire her deeply and tried to protect her from her own clumsiness, helping her to change her sweaters, for instance, which she often put on inside out" (p. 53). There was something about her "halo of voluntary poverty" and "the ascetic disarray of her life" that "touched them deeply" (p. 53) and that seemed, through it all, utterly authentic and real. But there was no getting around the sheer strangeness of her presence. As Thibon (1953) puts the matter, "she was not ugly, as has been said, but prematurely bent and old-looking through asceticism and illness." It was only her "magnificent eyes" that "triumphed in this shipwreck of beauty" (p. 116).

Weil was also not only "averse to physical contact (. . .), shunning even the most casual of hugs or comradely linking of elbows," but demonstrated a positive "dread of sexuality" (Du Plessix Gray, 2001, p. 25). As for her manner, Du Plessix Gray continues, "she retained the argumentative, eccentric style she had evolved in her mid-teens, and which had become even more intransigent"

(p. 25) over the course of time. There were times, in fact, when she was nothing short of “ruthless” in the way “she could cut off friends who in some small way displeased her” (p. 42). Du Plessix Gray also calls attention to Weil’s “impulse to extreme domination, which is now recognized as another frequent symptom of anorexia” (p. 29), as well as her hyperactivity. “Such hyperactivity, fueled by the constant rationale of urgent causes, is a symptom that very frequently attends eating disorders” (p. 60). It was these urgent causes that would lead to Weil’s “growing interest in the redemptive value of suffering” (p. 98) and, eventually, the birth of her spiritual consciousness. “The day-to-day struggles of trade unionism,” Fiedler adds, “unemployment, the Civil War in Spain, the role of the Soviet Union, anarchism, and pacifism” – filtered, as above, through Weil’s own distinctive character and manner – “these are the determinants of her ideas, the unforeseen roads that led to her sanctity. Though she passed finally beyond politics,” therefore, “her thought bears to the end the mark of her early interests, as the teaching of St. Paul is influenced by his rabbinical schooling, or that of St. Augustine by his training in rhetoric” (p. 4).

Along the lines being drawn here, therefore, there is no questioning the value of exploring Weil’s life and work in biographical terms. As we shall see shortly, however, there is also no questioning the limits of such an approach in coming to terms with the religious sphere of her life, which, by degrees, came to be the primary locus of her very being-in-the-world.

Mystical experience

“In a profound sense,” Fiedler (1951) maintains, “[Weil’s] life is her chief work, and without some notion of her biography it is impossible to know her total meaning” (p. 12).

On one level, indeed, Simone Weil’s life and work lend themselves readily – too readily perhaps – to biographical analysis. Du Plessix Gray’s (2001) portrait of Weil, in particular, provides a great deal of compelling biographical detail, and there are many places in her account that seem essentially to proclaim that, yes, finally, these biographical data are the surest means we have to get hold of Weil’s life and work. And yet, there is a refusal in virtually all of them to go the biographical route exclusively:

The severe secularist might trace Simone’s religious emergence to the myriad disenchantments she’d experienced in the social and political sphere: Passionate young woman lives through a series of traumatic disillusionments; turns away from Marxism, Revolutionary Syndicalism, trade unionism, the Spanish Republican cause; is successively shaken by her experience as a factory worker, by her disappointment at the fate of France’s Popular Front, by the growing evidence of her country’s moral malaise; and throughout remains ambivalent – just as her father had been all along – about her Jewish origins. (Du Plessix Gray, p. 129)

But there are aspects of Weil's own profile, Du Plessix Gray maintains – particularly the nature of her mystical experiences – that resist this purely secularist account, or that at least underscore its limits.

Let us turn briefly to Weil's own account of these experiences in her "Spiritual Autobiography" (1951/1973), written to her friend Fr. Perrin in 1942. Weil begins by saying that, "(N)ever at any moment in my life have I 'sought for God' (. . .) As soon as I reached adolescence, I saw the problem of God as a problem the data of which could not be obtained here below, and I decided that the only way of being sure not to reach a wrong solution, which seemed to me the greatest possible evil, was to leave it alone. So I left it alone. I neither affirmed nor denied anything" (p. 62). Strictly speaking, therefore, her earlier life was largely devoid of explicit religious commitment or belief.

Looking backward, Weil can nevertheless see some important precursors, if not determinants, of her spiritual vocation. At the age of 14, for instance,

I fell into one of those fits of bottomless despair that come with adolescence, and I seriously thought of dying because of the mediocrity of my natural faculties. The exceptional gifts of my brother, who had a childhood and youth comparable to those of Pascal, brought my own inferiority home to me. I did not mind having no visible successes, but what did grieve me was the idea of being excluded from that transcendent kingdom to which only the truly great have access and wherein truth abides. I preferred to die rather than live without that truth. After months of inward darkness, I suddenly had the everlasting conviction that any human being, even though practically devoid of natural faculties, can penetrate to the kingdom of truth reserved for genius, if only he longs for truth and perpetually concentrates all his attention on its attainment. He thus becomes a genius too, even though for lack of talent his genius cannot be visible from the outside. (p. 64)

As early as her adolescence, therefore, Weil had gained intimations of the "transcendent kingdom" to which she would ultimately devote herself as well as the possibility of her own "genius." She also recalls an experience at age 16 when the idea of purity "took possession" of her. "This idea came to me when I was contemplating a mountain landscape and little by little it was imposed upon me in an irresistible manner" (p. 65). These formative experiences notwithstanding, Weil is quick to emphasize and re-emphasize that none of these are to be equated with her entry into the Church. By her own account, there was little reason to add "dogma" to her own conception of life. And the institutional dimension of the Church, in her view, could only detract from authentic religious experience. This is why she would never be baptized: true religion, she essentially believed, could only be had outside the gates of religious institutions, with their inevitably collectivistic codes and strictures.

In view of the account provided thus far, the story Weil is telling in her autobiography brings forth a variety of experiences that are at once "preparatory"

to her mystical experiences – at least as judged in retrospect – but not “causative” in any obvious way. Not surprisingly, particularly in light of her own emphasis on the idea of “obedience” and her suggestion that “the most beautiful life possible [is] the one where everything is determined, either by the pressure of circumstances or by impulses (. . .) and where there is never any room for choice” (p. 63), there is also little talk of intention. This narrative strategy may, of course, be purposeful on Weil’s part: in line with her own philosophy, there would be little room in such an account for purely personal decisions.

Continuing with her account, Weil acknowledges that she “had three contacts with Catholicism that really counted.” After a year of brutal factory labor, in which, coupled with her own “prolonged and first-hand experience” of affliction, the affliction of others had “entered into my flesh and my soul,” she had accompanied her parents to Portugal, where she had visited a little village. “I was, as it were, in pieces, soul and body,” the “contact with affliction [having] killed my youth” (p. 66). Weil continues as follows:

In this state of mind, then, and in a wretched condition physically, I entered the little Portuguese village, which, alas, was very wretched too, on the very day of the festival of its patron saint. I was alone. It was the evening and there was a full moon over the sea. The wives of the fishermen were, in procession, making a tour of all the ships, carrying candles and singing what must certainly be very ancient hymns of a heart-rending sadness. Nothing can give any idea of it. I have never heard anything so poignant unless it were the song of the boatmen on the Volga. There the conviction was suddenly borne in upon me that Christianity is pre-eminently the religion of slaves, that slaves cannot help belonging to it, and I among others. (p. 67)

It is difficult to know which (language of) “enslavement” came first, the factory experience or the encounter with the fishermen’s wives – or whether, perhaps more likely, it came after the fact of both, during the course of autobiographical reflection and writing. Weil’s narrative at any rate establishes a connection between the two: the factory experience was the condition without which there would have been no being “borne in” upon her the idea of Christianity as “the religion of slaves.” In this context, again, there is no questioning the relevance of Weil’s biography, even by Weil herself. In her (retrospective) view, the earlier experience had, at the least, “set the stage” for the latter. At the same time, this first recounted mystical experience, and the “conviction” it brought in its wake, would, of necessity, work *against* the intentional, the biographical, the *personal*. The very idea of enslavement, not unrelated to the aforementioned idea of obedience, says as much: she was a captive, of affliction, of beauty, of God, and, she would soon see, of Christ.

In the second of her three significant contacts with Catholicism, in 1937, she would venture to Assisi, and “There, alone in the little twelfth-century Romanesque chapel of Santa Maria degli Angeli, an incomparable marvel of

purity where Saint Francis often used to pray, something stronger than I was compelled me for the first time in my life to go down on my knees” (pp. 67–68). Unlike the first experience, for which she does establish a precursor of sorts, this second experience seems devoid of one. She does acknowledge at one point in the autobiography that she “fell in love with Saint Francis of Assisi as soon as I came to know about him,” and she also acknowledges that she “always believed and hoped that one day Fate would force upon me the condition of a vagabond and a beggar which he embraced freely. Actually,” she adds, in true Weilian form, “I felt the same way about prison” (p. 65). The more affliction, the better! But, in her own rendition of things, there was simply no denying that “something stronger than I was,” strong enough indeed to force her to her knees, had descended upon her.

The final (recounted) experience would happen a year later:

In 1938 I spent ten days at Solesmes, from Palm Sunday to Easter Tuesday, following all the liturgical services. I was suffering from splitting headaches; each sound hurt me like a blow; by an extreme effort of concentration I was able to rise above this wretched flesh, to leave it to suffer by itself, heaped up in a corner, and to find a pure and perfect joy in the unimaginable beauty of the chanting and the words. This experience enabled me by analogy to get a better understanding of the possibility of loving divine love in the midst of affliction. It goes without saying that in the course of these services the thought of the Passion of Christ entered my being once and for all. (p. 68)

But there is more. In the course of this experience, she had encountered a “young English Catholic” from whom she would gain her

first idea of the supernatural power of the sacraments because of the truly angelic radiance with which he seemed to be clothed after going to communion. Chance – for I always prefer saying chance rather than Providence – made of him a messenger to me. For he told me of those English poets of the seventeenth century who are named metaphysical. In reading them later on, I discovered the poem (. . .) called “Love.” I learned it by heart. Often, at the culminating point of a violent headache, I make myself say it over, concentrating all my attention upon it and clinging with all my soul to the tenderness it enshrines. I used to think I was merely reciting it as a beautiful poem, but without my knowing it the recitation had the virtue of a prayer. It was during one of these recitations that (. . .) Christ himself came down and took possession of me. (pp. 68–69)

This visitation was apparently a shock to Weil. “In my arguments about the insolubility of God,” she writes, “I had never foreseen the possibility of that, of a contact, person to person, here below, between a human being and God. I had vaguely heard tell of things of this kind, but I had never believed in them.” In fact, she continues, “accounts of apparitions rather put me off if anything, like the miracles in the gospel.” She apparently hadn’t had any familiarity with

mystical works either. “I had never read any mystical works because I had never felt any call to read them. (. . .) God in his mercy had prevented me from reading the mystics, so that it should be evident to me that I had not invented this absolutely unexpected contact.” Indeed, “(I)n this sudden possession of me by Christ, neither my senses nor my imagination had any part; I only felt in the midst of my suffering the presence of a love, like that which one can read in the smile on a beloved face” (p. 69). Weil’s skepticism had apparently met its match. Given that she was vehemently “anti-apparition,” as it were, and given as well that she (apparently) knew precious little about the mystics, she could only assume that neither her senses nor her imagination had played a role.

Did they? Must they have? There is, of course, no way to answer these sorts of questions definitively. But what are the possibilities here? One is straightforwardly theological, and is in strict keeping with Weil’s own view: Christ possessed her! One could also go the Jamesian route and essentially suspend the question. One could say, in other words, that these experiences were utterly binding and valid for Weil but that they certainly need not be considered so by anyone else: if *she* says that neither her senses nor her imagination had entered the scene, then so be it. With all due respect to James, most psychologists would likely move in a different direction. After all, it was *Christ* who (allegedly) possessed her, not the Buddha or Mohammed or any other putatively divine being or force. Now, maybe if she had never *heard* of Christ, we could more easily assume that there was no imaginative work going on. But clearly she had, and it stands to (psychological) reason that *some* of what she knew had found its way into these ostensibly unanticipated and, in the last case, “absolutely unexpected” encounters.

In some recent work (e.g., Freeman, 2002), I have spoken of the “narrative unconscious,” which, I have suggested, refers not to what has been dynamically repressed but to that which has been lived through but which remains largely unthought and hence untold – which is to say, to those aspects of one’s *history* that have not yet become part of one’s *story*. Bearing this idea in mind, it could be that Weil had internalized – from her reading, from the people she met, and from the cultural surround more generally – much more than she (consciously) knew and that, somehow or other, she brought this knowledge with her to Portugal, Assisi, Solesmes, and countless other places, infusing the quite real features of the world (such as those extraordinarily moving Portuguese songs) with her memory and imagination, covertly at work. But this sort of account, valid though it may be within its own sphere, isn’t entirely satisfactory either. For, in the end, it does a kind of violence to Weil’s own account, essentially relegating her visitations from without to the internal machinations of her mind and the particularities of her life history. This would seem to be true of virtually any explanatory account of this sort, however hermeneutically sensitive it

may be. Even while positing the necessity of biography, therefore, some measure of violence would appear inescapable. Is there a way to minimize it?

Probing the limits of biography

For Du Plessix Gray (2001), who in many respects offers a more purely psychological account of Weil's life and work than most others, Weil's testimony bears within it "all the earmarks of a true mystical experience: the severe physical and emotional suffering that preceded it robbed her of all self-will; the experience came unexpectedly – she had no premonition of it; the feelings of submission, joy, and particularly of a Pascalian *certitude* brought her by her epiphany (a presence 'more certain and more real') were unrelated to any emotions she'd known thus far" (p. 129). Fiedler (1951), while also comfortable enumerating "the determinants of her ideas," concurs. Given the prominence of her political commitments, he notes, there were many, in fact, who were shocked upon learning about Weil's posthumous meditations on spiritual and religious life. "Surely," he writes, "no 'friend of God' in all history, had moved more unwillingly toward the mystic encounter. There is in her earlier work no sense of a groping toward the divine, no promise of holiness, no pursuit of a purity beyond this world – only a conventionally left-wing concern with the problems of industrialization, rendered in a tone at once extraordinarily inflexible and wonderfully sensitive" (p. 4). What is so compelling about Weil's testimony is, again, "the feeling that her role as a mystic was so unintended, one for which she had not in any sense prepared." Indeed, "An undertone of incredulity persists beneath her astonishing honesty: quite suddenly God had taken her, radical, agnostic, contemptuous of religious life and practice as she had observed it!" (pp. 4–5).

One could, of course, see Weil's spiritual awakening as little more than reaction-formation and one could also return to Weil's ostensibly pathological characteristics and trace them back, one by one, to this or that dimension of her history. But most agree that there remains a marked gap in her case, between any and all wholly secular determinants and the profound depth of her spiritual vocation. Anna Freud (cited in Coles, 2001) has commented that, even though Weil undoubtedly had some significant eating issues, for instance, and even though these issues undoubtedly point in the direction of a form of narcissism, hers "is a narcissism that is not pathologically 'fixed' on her own appearance and weight and her appetite and her potential obesity" (p. 39). Indeed, Freud maintains, despite the severity of her various commitments, it isn't at all clear whether any sort of "clinical emphasis" is warranted in Weil's case. Coles picks up on this line of thinking in his own rendition of the matter:

Her hunger was for God, not a slim waistline. She was not the first mystic to be a picky eater. She wanted the quickest possible life consistent with her own

tenaciously held ideas (. . .) She wanted to live, so she could die in the most honorable manner (. . .) One feels sure that this brave and yet scatterbrained person, as shrewdly sane as could be and as wacky as could be, had a central dream: her moment of release, her giddy ascent, His welcome. Her intense moral imagination simply couldn't stop doing its work, couldn't stop distracting her from the routines the rest of us take for granted, including our meals. She refused the food offered her while awaiting the big feast she often mentioned, the one given the symbolic form of the Holy Communion. She yearned to have her appetite appeased, not for a day or for a week, Sunday to Sunday, but forever. (p. 41)

“Once Simone Weil met Christ,” Coles continues, “her life began anew, a slave, now, to a particular master.” For Coles, it is not stretching things to say that, in a distinct sense, Weil “fell in love with Jesus; that he became her beloved; that she kept him on her mind and in her heart.” The last five years of her life would be spent “thinking about Jesus, writing about him, praying to him, fitting him into her social and economic and political scheme of things. She was a nun of sorts, following her vocation alone. She was an ambitious, dedicated follower, anxious to meet him – maybe become one of his saints” (p. 119). How, then, shall we deal with her case, in particular her writing, which at once grows out of her distinctive biography and yet, somehow, beyond it? “One does best (. . .) to accept her writing for what it was, a gift of the gods who resided in her, inspired sparks that had not yet come together as a single flame” (p. 19).

This is a familiar refrain in the lore about Weil. The philosopher Gabriel Marcel, for instance, had “warned” against any and all attempts to situate Weil’s thought within extant categories or, for that matter, to analyze her life and work. Whatever is said about her cannot help but distort her (cited in Miles, 1986). As Finch (2001) adds, “Psychology and sociology and even philosophy will not help us with Simone Weil. Her messages are messages of grace, received by those who wait and not by those who grasp” (p. 112). It is because “the very premises of psychology and sociology and philosophy are grasping willed knowledge,” Finch maintains, that they cannot rise to the challenge at hand. “We are used to people who impose interpretations on the world, not those who wait and let it come to them.” But again, it is precisely such “waiting” that “puts the world into a new context, a sacred human one,” and that underscores “the recognition that everything that matters most to us comes to us as a gift” (p. 112). According to Finch, one of the most important lessons learned from Weil herself concerns the distinction between the psychological and the spiritual (or what Jung [1933] calls the “visionary”). It is a “delusion of our age,” as Finch puts it,

that it is possible to ‘explain’ the spiritual psychologically (Freud, Jung, Reich, and the rest). We have myths that have the appearance, but not the reality, of science. They have to be taken on faith, ‘believed in,’ like pseudo-religions (. . .) Simone

Weil herself has been the victim of such psychological ‘explanations,’ which in effect ignore her philosophy and try instead to fit it into categories of masochism or anorexia or self-hatred, in the way that psychologists have attempted to explain Leonard da Vinci’s art as a mother-fixation or Dostoevsky’s as parricide. In the case of Simone Weil, such ‘theories’ may fulfill a useful purpose by forming a protective shell around her that guarantees that only those who are seriously interested will be able to see through it. This will prevent her from being turned into a cult. Those who cannot recognize her genius had best stay away. Thus, her intellectual and moral and spiritual integrity will remain protected until such reductive psychology has disappeared and we are able to meet her truly. (p. 115)

But what exactly does it mean to “meet her truly”? What exactly is Finch calling for here?

Weil’s friend Thibon (1953a) raises concerns similar to Finch (though in a bit less acerbic a fashion) in his discussion of the challenge of dealing biographically with the likes of Weil. “‘Who could conceive a biography of the sun?’” Baudelaire had written. “‘From the time when the flaming ball gave its first sign of life the story is one of monotony, light and greatness.’” “And indeed,” Thibon himself continues,

one can no more write the story of the sun than the story of God. What a condemnation of all that side of history which appeals to the depraved appetite of the crowd! (. . .) The deep reality is too eternal to be ‘actual,’ too intimate and too continuous to be sensational (. . .) The true greatness of Simone Weil was of such an order. Depths of silence have to be traversed in order to grasp the authentic meaning of her words. Moreover, it is no longer she who pronounces those words; it is the Spirit from above, into whose submissive instrument her body and soul are transformed; at those times of supreme inspiration the hand which writes and the mind which thinks have become nothing but a ‘link between mortal and immortal,’ an impersonal intermediary through which the ‘the Creator and the creature exchange their secrets.’ (p. 3)

Not unlike Marcel, Thibon continues, “it is better not to speak [of Weil]; her message absorbs her personality; her life, her character, her actions become as she herself expresses it ‘infinitesimal to the *n*th degree’ – particles of change in the bosom of an ocean of necessity. Biography can only deal with what is contingent, the absolute and universal provide no handle for narrative” (pp. 3–4).

After this rather romantic rendition of things, Thibon seems to catch himself. Her “greatness” notwithstanding,

Simone Weil, (. . .) like every created being, was not constantly and completely under the influence of supreme inspiration. Side by side with her deep originality (. . .) and her purity which was invisible to the outward eye, she was gifted with another kind of originality which was not only visible but striking, provocative, almost aggressive. And these two sides of her nature were not only juxtaposed, but were very closely interconnected (. . .) Like most of those who are marked by a transcendental vocation, she was at the same time above and below the level of normal

activities, and the picturesque singularity of her person was at once the consequence and the antithesis of the self-effacement and transparency of her personality. (pp. 4-5)

As Thibon goes on to note, there is a twofold tendency in accounts of Weil's life and work. First, there is the tendency for her message to be considered "as a kind of infallible revelation of universal import," set essentially apart from her imperfections and weaknesses, from the messy details of her life. The result of such an enterprise is generally "a deplorably flat picture of the being or the work unduly adored (. . .) for, in refusing to see the limitations of a human being, one is bound to miss his deep reality which is marked and as it were moulded in its very foundations by these same limitations. One substitutes a perfection, the frozen immutability of a mummy for the warmth and movement of a finite human body. Much could be written about the sterilizing process of idolatry" (p. 5).

The second tendency is "to stress everything which might be considered as exaggerated or illusory in the thought of Simone Weil in order to question, not only the deep value, but even the authenticity of her spiritual testimony" (p. 5). Thibon goes on to speak of "these totalitarian, and for that reason, mutilating, interpretations" (p. 6). We are therefore left with the following idea: "The finite and infinite, which paradoxically coexist in all men, in her case form contrasts so great and of such violence as to confound the judgment. Attracted by that in her which is infinite, one is tempted to forget her limitations, or else, shocked by her limitations, one is in danger of misunderstanding that which is infinite." The challenge, therefore, is "to avoid this double pitfall" (p. 6).

"Personalized depersonalization"

Thibon, along with Finch, has presented us with a difficult task. For Thibon, it is necessary to somehow preserve the tension between the biographical and that which, on some level, transcends it: to recognize and embrace the "limitations," the "warmth" and movement of [the] finite human body," that mould the deepest realities of being and, at the same time, to convey both the "authenticity" and "value" of the spiritual testimony in question. Only then will we avoid a "deplorably flat picture" or a "totalitarian, mutilating" one. Can there be a biographical perspective on religious lives that avoids the sort of mutilating violence about which Thibon speaks? As for Finch's rendition of things, one can ask a related question: Can there be a different kind of *psychology* than the one he refers to, one that avoids the (al)lure of reduction and that is able to deal appropriately with the spiritual as such? Or is this simply a contradictory, and ultimately untenable, project?

These are questions that apply not only to the study of religion but the arts as well. Insofar as creativity is itself an act of transcendence, of a sort,

a “going-beyond” the determinants of the past in the service of creating something new, its existence poses similar questions and problems. So it is that Jung (1933), for instance, insists that “the creative aspect of life which finds its clearest expression in art baffles all attempts at rational formulation” and “will for ever elude the human understanding” (p. 153). None of what is being said, he clarifies, means that biographical data are irrelevant: “No objection can be raised if it is admitted that this approach” – which Jung associates with Freud – “amounts to nothing more than the elucidation of those personal determinants without which a work of art is unthinkable. But should the claim be made that such an analysis accounts for the work of art itself, then a categorical denial is called for.” Jung’s next sentences might have been spoken by Simone Weil herself: “The personal idiosyncrasies that creep into a work of art are not essential,” Jung argues; “in fact, the more we have to cope with these peculiarities, the less it is a work of art. What is essential in a work of art is that it should rise far above the personal life and speak from the spirit and heart of the poet as man to the spirit and heart of mankind. The personal aspect is a limitation – and even a sin – in the work of art” (p. 168).

By way of returning to a question posed earlier: Is there a way of conceptualizing the process whereby the personal becomes transformed into the *impersonal*? Whether the object in question is religion or art, what we seem to be considering here is a kind of psycho-spiritual “alchemy.” Recall in this context Weil’s own “everlasting conviction” that “any human being, even though practically devoid of natural faculties, can penetrate to the kingdom of truth reserved for genius, if only he longs for truth and perpetually concentrates all his attention on its attainment” (1951/1973, p. 64). Here, it would seem, we have a preliminary, if somewhat rudimentary, clue about this transmutative process. With this in mind, let us return to Weil herself once more, focusing especially on her thoughts regarding attention.

In *Gravity and Grace* (1952/1997), Weil speaks early on of the necessity, first, to adopt an “attitude of supplication”: “I must necessarily turn to something other than myself since it is a question of being delivered from self” (p. 3). “Grace,” she continues, “fills empty spaces but it can only enter where there is a void to receive it, and it is grace itself which makes this void” (p. 10). Somehow, therefore, the self needs to be emptied, made void. As we saw earlier, the experience of affliction is one significant way for this self-emptying to occur. “To strip ourselves of the imaginary royalty of the world” (p. 12), through suffering, degradation, even humiliation, serves to carve out the necessary space. Indeed, “Relentless necessity, wretchedness, distress, the crushing burden of poverty and of labour which wears us out, cruelty, torture, violent death, constraint, disease – all these constitute divine love” (p. 28) insofar as they pave the way to the operation of grace. This is Weil’s notion of

“decreation”: “It is God who in love withdraws from us so that we can love him. For if we were exposed to the direct radiance of his love, without the protection of space, of time and of matter, we should be evaporated like water in the sun” (p. 28).

Following this line of thinking, Weil maintains that we, as individual selves, need to “withdraw” in much the same way. “He emptied himself of his divinity. We should empty ourselves of the false divinity with which we were born. Once we have understood we are nothing, the object of all our efforts is to become nothing.” Weil goes on to suggest that there is a deep connection, even a “resemblance,” as she puts it, between the “lower” and the “higher.” “Hence slavery is an image of obedience to God, humiliation an image of humility, physical necessity an image of the irresistible pressure of grace.” The implication? “On this account it is necessary to seek out what is lowest. (. . .) May that which is low in us go downwards so that what is high can go upwards” (p. 30). The preliminary aim, therefore, is nothing short of disappearance: “May I disappear in order that those things that I see become perfect in their beauty from the very fact that they are no longer things I see.” To clarify: “I do not in the least wish that this created world should fade from my view, but that it should no longer be to me personally that it shows itself.” Strictly speaking, this may be impossible: “When I am in any place, I disturb the silence of heaven and earth by my breathing and the beating of my heart.” But the aim remains: “To see a landscape as it is when I am not there” (p. 37) – in short, and again, to “unself” oneself (see especially Murdoch, 1970; also Dargan, 1999) to the greatest possible extent in order to behold unvarnished reality.

What Weil has presented thus far, however, is only part of the equation. Alongside the dissolution of the self, there needs to be attention directed outward, to the *other*-than-self; for “attention, taken to its highest degree, is the same thing as prayer” (p. 105). In line with Weil’s idea regarding the attainability of genius by all, here too she is convinced that “if we turn our mind towards the good, it is impossible that little by little the whole soul will not be attracted thereto in spite of itself.” Ultimately, she argues, “Extreme attention is what constitutes the creative faculty in man and the only extreme attention is religious.” As such, “The amount of creative genius in any period is strictly in proportion to the amount of extreme attention and thus of authentic religion at that period” (p. 106). Weil makes an interesting move at this point by noting that not only is the dissolution of the self a prerequisite for the work of attention but attention, in turn, is itself instrumental in the dissolution of the self: “Attention alone – that attention which is so full that the ‘I’ disappears – is required of me” (p. 107). It is this dialectic of decreation and attention that is constitutive of the “creative faculty” in art and religion alike.

In another interesting move, Weil seems to offer a correction of sorts to the earlier notion of self-emptying. On the one hand, “Attention consists in

suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty, and ready to be penetrated by the object.” But it also means

holding in our minds, within reach of this thought, but on a lower level and not in contact with it, the diverse knowledge we have acquired which we are forced to make use of. Our thought should be in relation to all particular and already formulated thoughts, as a man on a mountain who, as he looks forward, sees also below him, without actually looking at them, a great many forests and plains. Above all our thoughts should be empty, waiting, not seeking anything, but ready to receive in its naked truth the object that is to penetrate it. (1951/1973, pp. 111–112)

Rather than seeing virtuosic achievement, whether in art or religion, either as a visitation from without or as a product of some special faculty or personal characteristic, therefore, Weil, not unlike Jung, sees *depersonalization* as the requisite condition. When personality dominates in the process of creation, wonderful achievements remain possible. “But above this level, far above, separated by an abyss, is the level where the things are achieved,” and these are “essentially anonymous” (1986, p. 55). It is for this reason that “every time that a man rises to a degree of excellence, (. . .) we are aware of something impersonal and anonymous about him. His voice is enveloped in silence. This is evident in all the great works of art or thoughts, in the great deeds of saints and in their words” (1952/1997, p. 179). Weil has also told us, however, that the kind of attention that is requisite for the emergence of these impersonal and anonymous dimensions must itself *pass through* one’s biography, including all the “diverse knowledge” that has been acquired. Her formulation is a provocative one. In a distinct sense, Weil is calling for a kind of “personalized depersonalization,” a process that draws upon the energy and movement of one’s own unique history even as one seeks to purge oneself of it.

Telling the story of religious lives

One might think of the study of religious lives in much the same way. On the one hand, all of the diverse knowledge one has accumulated about the life in question must be brought to bear on the objects of one’s attention. For this reason, turning to the biographical is, once more, a matter of necessity. But it must be done, Weil implies, in a different way than it often is – such that the relevant biographical data are held in mind, within reach but not in direct contact. The biographical is thus the necessary “backdrop,” one might say, the condition without which there could be no authentic encounter with the phenomenon of interest. One turns to the biographical, therefore, not to *explain* this or that phenomenon, this or that artistic or religious “product”; explaining in this sense can quickly become an explaining-away, reductive in just the way that both James and Finch had discussed. One turns to the biographical instead in order

to show the deep belonging of history to the present. The relationship at hand is dialectical through and through and embodies within it the dual meaning of “history” – as the constellation of the quite real events, emerging in time, that culminate in and permeate the present and as the story that that is told, from the present, about the movement of the past. The task, therefore, in the study of religious lives especially, is to adopt a biographical approach that is “non-violent,” that displays its own limits – that itself embodies a kind of humility.

Just as the artist or person of faith must renounce his or her self, his or her personality, in order to behold reality, those who study religious lives must do something similar, particularly with respect to their own theoretical interests. The aim, as above, cannot be to explain, to grasp, willfully, alone; that would inevitably lead to a kind of violence. Rather, the aim, it would seem, is to open oneself attentively to the otherness of that life in such a way that both the personal and the impersonal, the “finite” and the “infinite,” live on the page as one. The challenge, I have suggested, is a *poetic* one (see Freeman, 1999, 2004b). Recall Weil’s idea that “every time that a man rises to a degree of excellence, (. . .) we are aware of something impersonal and anonymous about him” and that, as such, “his voice is enveloped in silence” (1952/1997, p. 179). A narrative perspective on such lives and works, I suggest, must somehow employ language that preserves this silence and that finds, in the fabric of the flesh and blood person, those impersonal and anonymous dimensions that signal and express their transcendent excellence.

In an essay called “The Power of Words” (1986), Weil states that, “thanks to a providential arrangement, there are certain words which possess, in themselves, when properly used, a virtue which illumines and lifts up towards the good.” Such words, she maintains, in true Platonic form, “refer to an absolute perfection which we cannot conceive. Since the proper use of these words involves not trying to make them fit any conception, it is in the words themselves, as words, that the power to enlighten and draw upward resides. What they express is beyond our conception” (p. 76). Whether the words about which Weil speaks refer to an “absolute perfection” remains an open question and need not be pursued here. But the idea of using words, using poetic language, as a vehicle for expressing what is, ultimately, “beyond our conception” – or at least *potentially* beyond our conception – is an important one. The reason is that poetic language itself entails what I earlier referred to as an act of transcendence, a going-beyond: in this context, a going-beyond the routine use of referential language for the sake of disclosing – or, as Heidegger (1971; see also 1977) might put it, “unconcealing” – those features of reality that would ordinarily go unnoticed and unthought. Poetic language points beyond itself, and at its best, points precisely in the direction of naming the unnamable, giving voice and presence to that which is at once beyond our conception and that calls for it.

Nearly everything that has been said here rests on the presupposition that there are modes of human experience, aesthetic and religious being foremost among them, that are unable fully to be accounted for by a factor, set of factors, or constellation of factors of the sort that psychologists and other social scientists often seek to identify. They are indeed beyond our conception, and so must be preserved against any and all methodological strategies that might try wholly to grasp them, to *contain* them. To the extent that this is so, some might argue, these modes of experience escape the purview of psychology. Insofar as psychology is irrevocably committed to the discourse of causality, explanation, theoretical “entrapment,” as Heidegger (1977) puts it, this is true. But there is no necessary reason, I would argue, for this to be considered unassailably so. Indeed, as I have suggested elsewhere, a portion of psychology would do well to embrace what I have termed the “untheorizable” and, in turn, to generate what might be termed “theory beyond theory” – that is, a kind of thinking, and a kind of writing, that tries to do justice, *poetic* justice, to precisely those sorts of phenomena that at least seem to be beyond theoretical conception as ordinarily understood (see Freeman, 2000). By doing so, this portion of psychology will have significantly expanded the reach of the discipline.

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