ATTENTION AS PRAYER: SIMONE WEIL

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The story of Simone Weil's life has been told often enough and need not be sketched once more on this occasion. For the present purpose, however, it might be noted that, though brilliantly successful as a student of the Ecole Normale Supérieure, Simone Weil would never feel comfortable with her chosen profession as a philosophy teacher, and even less with the illusory prerogatives of the *vita contemplativa*, generally associated with the status of intellectuals. Priesthood, whether it be academic, political or religious, was not a path she would follow. She was, in Susan Sontag's apt words, too "excruciatingly identical with her ideas" to do so,[1] and would forever remain a mystic without a church, a political activist without a party, a wandering Jew with a Christian faith, in disagreement with the very fact of her physical being: "when I am in any place, I disturb the silence of heaven and earth by my breathing and the beating of my heart".[2] "Renunciation" is a key word in Simone Weil's lexicon: "we have to be nothing in order to be in our right place in the whole",[3] she writes, "Perfection is impersonal" and again, "our personality is the part of us which belongs to error and sin".[4] This is why moral improvement, here understood as an increase of our sense of reality, cannot be achieved through acts of will, but on the contrary, through the negative effort of a greater attentiveness to things.

From a psychological perspective it would be easy enough to trace the pathological origin of such a fierce renunciation, but it would also be mostly pointless. If Simone Weil saw in "uprootedness" an origin to all social and spiritual *malheur*,[5] it is certainly because she experienced that condition within herself; but more importantly, her being nowhere at home coincided with an inability to distance herself from her own thoughts which bears witness, in her own body, to a

fundamental aspect of the human condition. Her deliberate exposure to an unconditional truth, without the mediation of intelligence, informs her meditation on the subject of 'attention'; and her advice to those who wish to learn (on whose side she places herself) is one of intellectual detachment: "Attention consists of suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty and ready to be penetrated by the object". It is necessary to wait, humbly and as long as it takes, for the object to become, not visible, but a self-evident realisation of presence, the imageless expression of a revealed reality. Clearly "attention" here is synonymous with contemplation and not merely a psychological faculty or the realisation of an intention of seeing something. Rather it is, for Simone Weil, the expression of a spiritual obedience:

> If we suspend the filling-up activity of the imagination and fix our attention on the relationship of things, a necessity becomes apparent which we cannot help obeying. Until then we have no notion of necessity and we have no sense of obedience.[6]

To bear spiritual fruit, the mind ought to remain in a state of suspension essential to contemplation. It has to wait silently, neither shaken nor displaced by any shock from without for the revelation of what is necessary. In French, *attente* (wait) and *attention* (attention) share the same etymology: both words refer to a tension towards an object that is yet to become manifest. But patience and the deliberate receptivity of mind involved in the process of making oneself available to a felt presence should not be confused with the clean slate dear to the empiricist, let alone the suggestion that the mind should resemble a wax tablet upon which the considered object would of itself imprint its mark. Attention to a thing can be informed by a specific knowledge, but only on the condition that it remains uncluttered by it. Too often, haste in seizing the first thought that presents itself with relation to an object—generally the knowledge we already have of it—blocks the thinking process: "the cause is always that we have wanted to be too active, [for] there are some kinds of effort which defeat their own object".[7] Such remarks could remind one of Fénelon's own brand of *quiétisme*: "do not deafen God with your prayers", the bishop of Cambray would preach, "be quiet and God will speak to you". But it also seems reminiscent of Kant's 'disinterested interest' or 'finality without end' that characterises the Judgement of Taste. Be that as it may, it is as a religious philosopher that Simone Weil thought of "the attitude of looking and waiting [as] the attitude which corresponds to the Beautiful".[8]

From yet another perspective, the distinction drawn by Simone Weil between the different modalities of attention conjures up "the floating listening" (*l'écoute flottante*) recommended by Lacan to the practitioners of psychoanalysis, in order to connect with an unsaid within the said. But it is from a mystical perspective quite foreign to Freud, Lacan, or Kant, that Simone Weil taught that, in order to hear what can only be half-said and is generally beyond the grasp of the conscious mind, one needs to be neither indifferent nor over-attentive.

Most often, attention is confused with a kind of muscular effort. If one says to one's pupils: "Now you must pay attention", one sees them contracting their brows, holding their breath, stiffening their muscles. If, after two minutes, they are asked what they have been paying attention to, they cannot reply. They have been concentrating on nothing. They have not been paying attention. They have been contracting their muscles.[9]

Still, "attention" is an effort, the greatest of all perhaps, but a negative one, which of itself does not involve tiredness. The main obstacle is not the accumulation of fatigue, and the difficulty is not to fix our attention with the intensity that curiosity or desire would command: "we do not obtain the most precious gifts by going in search of them, but by waiting for them". Grace is the appropriate name for the process described here, and one is not surprised to see Simone Weil replicating the Augustinian distrust in *curiositas*, as the original sin perverting the very principle of human attention. *Curiositas* or more exactly *concupiscentia oculorum*, was interpreted by the bishop of Hippo as a desire to have as many experiences as possible. It suggests an intellectual Don Juanism and implies an incapacity ever to be satisfied, a restlessness of the mind that is wholly incompatible with prayer or faith. Furthermore, there is a vanity inherent in *curiositas*, a hollowness at the core of the intellectual search that seeks to establish knowledge as a sufficient end for itself. Under the mantle of *curiositas*, there lies a vain desire to feel and see what lies beyond whilst neglecting the only knowledge that genuinely matters: "I desire to know God and the Soul. Nothing more? Nothing at all" (St Augustine). Finally, *concupiscentia oculorum* is a *temptatio* because it always desires to renew the experience of gaining new knowledge and, in supporting this desire, *curiositas* is to be understood with reference to one of the most generic scenes in the history of Christian ethics. When Adam and Eve violate the divine command by eating a fruit from the tree of knowledge, they

yield to the Great Tempter who has instilled in them a desire to know and in his commentary of the episode (*de Civitate Dei*, XIV), St Augustine defines malice or evil as the product of an avid curiosity. Here again, Simone Weil concurs:

> Something in our soul has a far more violent repugnance for true attention than the flesh has for bodily fatigue. This something is more closely connected with evil than is the flesh. That is why every time that we really concentrate our attention, we destroy the evil in ourselves.[10]

Again, there is a similarity of thought between the author of this passage and the Father of the Church who viewed *concupiscentia carnis* as being less damaging for the soul than intellectual libido. If carnal desire can be satisfied through the experience of *voluptas*, *curiositas* remains insatiable and is even more avid in its own desiring than the animal senses beyond which it aims and which it professes to despise. Intellectual curiosity does not permit a genuine connection with the object it seeks to grasp, because in it, thought, knowledge and adhesion are not united in a single act of mind. Once again, God alone is truly worthy of our attention: He alone, and nothing else. However, this does not mean that everything else is illusion. It means that Simone Weil envisages reality and value through God alone. This is why "all the various kinds of attention are merely degraded forms of religious attention. It is only when we think of God that we can think with the maximum of attention".[11]

Leaving aside the theological origins of a philosophy of attention whose final object is the love of God, Simone Weil's thoughts on the subject of education act as a startling reminder of the debasement of a system forsaking its social/spiritual role by letting itself be redefined by economic 'rationalism' and other heteronomous forces. Her moral teaching and the testimony of her brief existence may have become profoundly strange to us,[12] yet it constitutes a point of reference that makes it piercingly plain that it is not with semantic games or linguistic plays of the deconstructive kind that it will ever be possible to defeat the insignificance into which contemporary culture has fallen:[13]

> Extreme attention is what constitutes the creative faculty in man and the only extreme attention is religious. 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.[14]

We may or may not agree with the diagnosis that creativity is but the manifestation of a religious attention, or that the inattentive attention quite literally produced by the industrial production of appearances and the format of the mass-media concords with the spiritual nullity of our cultural environment, but it would be more difficult altogether to dismiss the view that the production of forgetting by the Culture Industry amounts to a derealisation of our material circumstances which attention alone might oppose.

For Simone Weil, the essential purpose of education consists in a reawakening or a re-orientation of the soul which ultimately transforms knowledge into a providential dispensation. As Father Jean-Marie Perrins puts it, perhaps the Jansenism of her belief and her vacillation between "a pessimism which reduces man to nothingness and an optimism which raises him prematurely to divinity"[15] is so remote from the narcissism typical of the post-modern condition as to have become incomprehensibly excessive. Yet her approach to the problem of learning allows for a better grasp of the systemic character of the teacher's predicament, or the difficulty of capturing the attention of those to whom we address ourselves for a sufficient length of time. To teach the inattentive has become our impossible task, and this to the point where, Weil contends, "... the development of the faculty of attention forms the real object and almost the sole interest of studies. Most school tasks have a certain intrinsic interest as well, but such an interest is secondary." Oriented towards God (the meaning of meaning), attention as prayer begins with a hope to transcend the indifference of a purely speculative curiosity. But such a hope is the first casualty of a system that reduces all utterances into the undifferentiated flow of 'communication'. In the vast network of complicities and tacit acceptance of the world as it is described by the mass media, it seems possible only to maintain an inattentive attention, even if one episodically feels the indignity of a chronic *ataraxia*.

Television, of course, illustrates a situation one no longer dares to deplore, where the simple fact of appearing coincides with the disintegration of significance: the event or the idea ceases to exist as soon as it has appeared and has been replaced by another, whose sole *raison d'être* is to ensure the regularity of visual distraction. Television requires a contraction of the intelligence usually defined in terms of attention span. A few years ago, ten minutes or so was the maximum capacity of this sporadic kind of attention, then it was five, then one,

and now, I am told, it oscillates between ten and thirty seconds. In that sense it is true to say that the mass media 'educate' their audience, that is to say, systematically erode their capacity for attention. "We live in a world of unreality and dream", Simone Weil thought, and it is the task of the artist, the scholar and the philosopher to:

> pierce through the film of unreality that veils it, and make of it, for nearly all men, at nearly every moment of their lives, a dream or stage set. They ought to do it, but more often than not they cannot manage it.[16]

The reasons for such an impotence are manifold indeed, but it may be worth remembering Hannah Arendt's realisation that "the subject of the totalitarian realm is neither the fanatic nazi, nor the devout communist, but the person for whom the distinction between fact and fiction (i.e. the reality of experience), and the distinction between the true and the false (i.e. the norms of thinking) no longer exist".[17] It is the person who, for one reason or the other, has become unable to feel within himself, the reality of the world, or, to put it in Kantian terms, has lost his capacity for judgement. Such a person is therefore ready to accept just about any view of the world, any received idea concerning reality, especially if it provides an outlet for previously unmanaged anxieties. In fact, the originality of Arendt's analysis (and her affinity with Simone Weil's), lies precisely in the fact she would not regard the totalitarian ideology as an intellectual corpus (a *Weltanschauung*), but as a mentality or a fundamental manner of 'thinking', defined by a near complete indifference to the ideas it professes. Such an opportunism is inseparable from its radical contempt for the reality of the world and the concrete existence of those who live in it. If we dig a little deeper into Arendt's analyses of this particular indifference, we may find the link between the totalitarian mentality and 'the specific mentality of the moderns', a particular aspect of German Romanticism or the belief that the freedom to experiment is necessary for the search for a lost origin (whether of language or of being). The purpose of this activity, however, does not long remain a search for lost meaning, and soon the real business of the artist or the intellectual consists in surprising his audience with daring paradoxes and risky views that ultimately celebrate arbitrariness itself. The more arbitrary a work seems, the more original it is viewed.

Again, what matters to Arendt here is that the dogmatic constraint

of the totalitarian mentality and the idiosyncratic genius of the modern artist/intellectual, represent in fact a similar emancipation from contingent constraints and formal limits, founded, at least initially, in the respect for truth and beauty. Both the modern artist and the fascist militant demonstrate a similar irresponsibility in the use of ideas that are no longer considered as heuristic tools, but as alibis to be exploited by the intellect in a pure assertion of its boundless power. Hannah Arendt goes even one step further, as she argues that the romantic vision consists in evoking worldly events after having cancelled their reality, to discuss them from the very perspective of this negation. More important than the real is the thrill of discovery, the expression of a precious little difference which is inevitably insignificant.

This indifference to reality characteristic of intellectual culture forms the negative background of Simone Weil's passionate attentiveness to the alterity of things and her devoted attendance to their otherness. The self-referential obsession of a thinking which cares about nothing but its own *trouvailles* (findings), or the narcissistic obsession of the intellectual/artist in the interpretation of reality, typifies a certain kind of excitement that allows this endless process of re-creation. Some may find this continuous swapping of ideas and opinions 'interesting', but it is most certainly unconcerned with the reality of *malheur*.

In the moral relativism of both the modern artist, and the mass man produced by the soft totalitarianism of a media-bound society, can be fathomed a similarity between different attitudes of the mind, from which both attention and obedience are missing. It is the same refusal to accept that human thought has to obey a legality or an authority which transcends it and which forbids it to do whatever it fancies with the ideas it plays with. This is why it matters to be attentive, beyond the seduction of words, to the relationship between them, or the connection with the world which they intimate. This does not merely mean that to mistreat ideas is the sign that one is ready to mistreat other people, but rather that contempt for ideas or the indifference to what ideas actually mean is in itself already a contempt for others.

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 only as a unit in a collection, or a specimen in the social category labelled "unfortunate", but as a man

exactly like us, who was one day stamped with a special mark by affliction. For this reason it is enough, but it is indispensable, to know how to look at him in a certain way. The way of looking is first of all attentive. The soul empties itself of all its contents in order to receive into itself the being it is looking at, just as he or she is, in all its truth: "Only he who is capable of attention can do this".

Notes

1 Susan Sontag, "Simone Weil" (Review of Simone Weil, *Selected Essays*, trans. Richard Rees (Oxford: Oxford University Press), in *The New York Review of Books*, vol. 1, no. 1 (1 February, 1963).

2 Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, trans. Gustave Thibon (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), p. 89. First published in French in 1947.

3 *Gravity and Grace*, p. 82.

4 Simone Weil, "Human Personality", *The Simone Weil Reader*, ed. George Panichas (London: Moyer Bell, 1999), p. 318. First edition 1977.

5 See Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (New York, N.Y.: Penguin, 1993): "For the extreme state she uses the word *malheur*, meaning not just unhappiness or sorrow. One might translate it as 'affliction'. It is marked (the mark of slavery) by physical symptoms, 'difficulty of breathing, a vice closing about the heart'."

6 Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, p. 96.

7 Simone Weil, "Waiting for God: Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies", in *The Simone Weil Reader*, p. 49.

8 *Gravity and Grace*, p. 206.

9 "Waiting for God: Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies", *The Simone Weil Reader*, p. 49.

10 Simone Weil, "Waiting for God: Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies", *The Simone Weil Reader*, p. 49.

11 Simone Weil, "Waiting for God: Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies", *The Simone Weil Reader*, p. 51.

12 "One may as I do feel that there is something inhuman about her. Yet it could be that what we feel to be inhuman in her is that which made her capable of turning away from those aspects of our all-too-human attachments that put our neighbours, our environment, our world, our children, ourselves all in deadly danger". Conor Cruise O'Brien in the *The Simone Weil Reader*.

13 See Cornelius Castoriadis, *La Montée de l'insignifiance* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1996), pp. 82-102.

14 *Gravity and Grace*, p. 170.

15 Father Jean-Marie Perrin is quoted by George Panichas in his introduction to the *The Simone Weil Reader*.

16 Simone Weil, "Forms of the Implicit Love of God", *The Simone Weil Reader*, p. 478.

17 Hannah Arendt, "The Origins of Totalitarianism", *The Totalitarian System*, (London: André Deutsch,1973), p. 224. First edition in 1951.

18 Simone Weil, "Waiting for God: Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies", *The Simone Weil Reader*, p. 51.