

**ON WORK AND WAR:
THE WORDS AND DEEDS OF
DOROTHY DAY AND SIMONE WEIL**

by
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ABSTRACT

Dorothy Day (1897–1980), American organizer of the Catholic Worker movement, is a heroic figure among peace and social justice activists. Simone Weil (1909 –1943), French mystic and philosopher, is celebrated in intellectual circles. Both women trained their attention on a liberating vision of work and were unsparing in their critique of war. Both adopted Catholicism as the home that best reflected their spiritual aspirations. The interplay of radicalism and religion was the compelling feature of their lives.

As political activists and spiritual innovators, Day and Weil framed the challenges of their generation in unorthodox ways. Their encounters with suffering and injustice led them to stretch the fabric of political thought to include human experience on an intimate level. This paper is a case study of how two extraordinary twentieth-century women, politically rebellious yet religiously obedient, responded to their times.

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INTRODUCTION

Dorothy Day and Simone Weil.

Work and war.

These few words, with their peculiar prosody, are the subject of this paper: An exploration of the ideas and actions of two extraordinary twentieth-century women in the realms of work and war. Dorothy Day (1897–1980), American journalist and organizer of the Catholic Worker movement, is a heroic figure among peace and social justice activists. Simone Weil (1909 –1943), French mystic, philosopher, genius and/or fool, is celebrated in intellectual circles. Both women trained their attention on a liberating vision of work and were unsparing in their critique of war. Both adopted Catholicism as the spiritual home that best reflected their personal and communal aspirations. The interplay of radicalism and religion is the compelling feature of their lives.

This paper is a case study of how two women, thus committed, responded to their times. I examine them as activists, by looking into the circumstances and environments within which they manoeuvred. I examine them as innovators, by delving into the political and spiritual insights that animated their practices. My project is to understand Day and Weil as assemblages: to record the convergence of personality and events in their lives, alongside the broad strokes of history and economics. I consider their affinities and pointed differences. Day, for example, converted to Catholicism and lived into her eighties as a high-profile pacifist; Weil declined to be baptized and died a broken, young writer. Yet both women articulated a similar understanding of the knot that bound work and war. In life story and legacy, they could be said to personify the Pythagorean unity of opposites, an idea that was central to Weil's intellectual method.

Day and Weil are worthy of scrutiny not simply because their lives bear the scars of the last century but because each chose an untested path. They were privileged by their background and class – educated and secure – and could have lived in conditions less precarious, less exposed, than they did. Instead Day and Weil entered the fray, drawn to politics by curiosity and outrage, and to religion by intuition. They stepped outside their

generation to frame the challenges of the mid-twentieth century in unorthodox and demanding ways. Their encounters with suffering and injustice led them to stretch the fabric of political thought to include human experience on an intimate level.

In their view, uprooted industrial societies had created conditions that demanded little more than servility and offered little more than pain to most people. Coercion and affliction in the workplace were replicated on a national scale in the drive for war. Surveying this destruction from their separate locations, both Day and Weil conceived of work, especially daily, manual tasks, as possessing a sacramental potential: a difficult but powerful opportunity to make visible the spiritual core of human life. Work could be a profound service to others, in Day's view, and a profound encounter with stillness, in Weil's. In either case, work offered an engagement with persons and things that could shatter narrow senses of entitlement and unlock channels to God's grace.

Neither Day nor Weil sought refuge in an established ideology. They rejected tenets of the left that did not match their essentially humanistic instincts. Their inner journeys, though very different, were intense efforts to uncover the light of God's love as they saw it. They were politically rebellious yet spiritually obedient. This unlikely combination was a galvanizing element in their characters: their capacity to challenge worldly power was nurtured by their willingness to shake free of an old self. Political radicalism went hand in hand with disciplined spirituality.

With the world still at war, and with work, for many, still a place of indignity and pain, their words and actions are worth contemplating today. The following chapters present Dorothy Day and Simone Weil as thinkers and doers: women who studied the phenomena of work and war in their own times, and confronted the disorder with imagination and resolve.

Chapter 1

Dorothy Day: Early Years, and the Spirituality of Work

Dorothy Day (1897–1980) was born in Brooklyn, New York, to parents of Irish-Scottish stock.¹ The family was Episcopalian but non-observant. Her father, a man of traditional patriarchal values, was a successful journalist, as three of his four children would be. Her mother was good natured and resourceful. The Day household was of modest means and curious about worldly matters: good books were read and attention was paid to political affairs. They moved frequently, and Day would write vividly about the San Francisco earthquake of 1906 and the awakening of her social conscience, years later, in Chicago.

By the end of high school the lines of Day's character had emerged. She loved intensely, life in general, a neighbourhood boy and her baby brother in particular.² She was attracted to radical politics, consuming the works of Upton Sinclair, Jack London, Kropotkin, and Dostoevski. She seemed drawn to a religious outlook. Day described her young self as possessing "a thrilling recognition of the possibilities of spiritual adventure" (*Long* 24). Despite the non-religious tone of her household, prayer came naturally to her. Wheeling her brother's baby carriage through the streets of Chicago, her head filled with the words of Eugene Debs, the Russians, and St. Augustine, the fifteen-year-old Day felt a calling:

Children look at things very directly and simply. I did not see anyone taking off his coat and giving it to the poor. I didn't see anyone having a banquet and calling in the lame, the halt and the blind. And those who were doing it, like the Salvation Army, did not appeal to me. I wanted . . . a synthesis. I wanted life and I wanted the abundant life. I wanted it for others, too.
(*Long* 39)

Another fifteen years would pass before her desire for synthesis would find a religious expression.

Day attended the University of Illinois for a few semesters, lived away from home in poverty, and hobnobbed with fellow radicals. In 1916 she moved with her family to New York City and began working as a journalist at the *Call*, a socialist daily. There she helped to shape the whirlwind of leftist politics that characterized New York in the teen years. The *Call* had a diverse readership, from members of the American Federation of Labor to the Industrial Workers of the World (the Wobblies). Day read Godwin, Proudhon, and Tolstoy but had little stomach for Marx's analytical style. Her own politics wavered between socialism, anarchism, and syndicalism, with the accent falling on the direct-action Wobblies (*Long* 62). She eventually became editor of *The Masses*, a newspaper that published John Reed, author of *Ten Days That Shook the World*. In 1917 the Post Office suppressed the paper due to its anti-war stance.

That year Day attended a protest for political prisoners – anti-war suffragists – in Washington, D.C., and was herself jailed for the first time. Jail was harrowing. She and the other radicals went on a hunger strike. Her account of their wretchedness would be echoed in Simone Weil's account of factory work:

I lost all consciousness of any cause . . . the futility of life came over me so that I could not weep but only lie there in blank misery. I lost all feeling of my own identity. . . . I was willing not only to say two and two were five, but to think it (*Long* 78-79).

The misery of jail and of the jailed – of women afflicted by prostitution, addiction, and mental illness – was unrelieved, even by the Bible that Day requested during her incarceration. Released after a few weeks, she returned to New York City.

Day's life over the next decade could be described as genuinely dashing. She freelanced for radical newspapers, organized political actions, and was periodically jailed. She drank with New York's literati, including John Dos Passos, Hart Crane, and Eugene O'Neill, with whom she was close. She trained as a nurse, had a passionate love affair that ended in heartbreak and abortion (a subject about which she never wrote), married a wealthy man on the rebound, and divorced within the year. She lived in Europe, Mexico,

New Orleans, and Chicago; published a semi-autobiographical novel; sold the novel's screen rights and, with the money, purchased a cottage on Staten Island, where she cohabited with her anarchist lover. Throughout these tumultuous years Day heeded her religious calling by attending early morning Mass, alone.

Becoming Catholic

Day's conversion to Catholicism in 1927 was both instinctive and painful. The birth of her only child, born outside marriage, spurred her to seek baptism. Joy was overflowing, she wrote, and with it came a strong desire to worship: "I did not turn to God in unhappiness, in grief, in despair – to get consolation, to get something from Him" (*Long* 133). Even so, the process was wrenching, with months of study, doubt, political bewilderment, and high personal costs. Day had never been an atheist but neither had she regarded the Roman Catholic Church uncritically. In telling her conversion story, she described the many political obstacles to religion and to the Church, quoting Bakunin: " 'Christianity . . . exhibits . . . the very nature and essence of every religious system, which is the impoverishment, enslavement, and annihilation of humanity . . . ' " (qtd in *Long* 149). She had no mentor who blended radicalism with Catholicism. In fact, she was close to no other Catholics. Her lover was intolerant of religion, and their relationship soon ended. Her leftist friends and colleagues were puzzled and displeased.

Day herself felt politically uneasy during the early phases of her conversion. Yet her embrace of Catholicism never resulted in a dilution of her politics, and she would maintain an active bond with radical movements and radical friends throughout her life. Rather than a suppression, faith proved a boon to Day's worldly pursuits. Her political and religious natures were alike in being anti-authoritarian. Of the Roman Catholic Church's many facets, Day seemed the least struck by its institutional and hierarchical ones. She had never been a theoretical Marxist or syndicalist, and, true to form, she would be a theologically unsophisticated Catholic for many years (*Long* 141). Her "disobedience" – as a vocal, visible, female, anarchist, lay Catholic – was unproblematic to herself.

Peter Maurin and the birth of the Catholic Worker movement

After her 1927 conversion Day continued life as a political activist and single mother.

Except for attending Mass, she remained cut off from other Catholics. This isolation ended abruptly in 1932 with the appearance of Peter Maurin, whose ideas would give birth to the Catholic Worker movement.

Maurin was born in 1877 to a peasant family in Languedoc in southern France. He was schooled as a Christian Brother monk but soon outgrew its conservative outlook. In 1903 he joined *Le Sillon* – the Furrow – a populist Roman Catholic movement that embraced a Tolstoyian pacifism (Roberts 29).³ Maurin became disillusioned with the movement's lack of intellectual rigor and in 1909 moved to Canada to homestead. He entered the United States a few years later and spent the next two decades working, preaching, and organizing in labour camps, farms, and schools. In 1932, at age fifty-five, he went to New York City to find Dorothy Day. He was familiar with her journalism and had a proposal.

Less than a year later, this proposal would materialize in the first edition of the *Catholic Worker*, a radical tabloid that sold for a penny and, at its peak, achieved a circulation of 190,000. Day was co-publisher, editor, and chief writer. Maurin was co-publisher, visionary, and contributor of "Easy Essays," a series of compact prose poems about theology, community, and faith.⁴ Maurin's ideas and personality electrified Day. His proposal had been for a full-fledged program of Catholic social action. Although the two would differ on many points and practicalities, Maurin can fairly be described as the man who gave Day the vision and intellectual framework within which to channel her spiritual and political energies.

Maurin's program contained three elements:⁵ 1) intellectual study, in particular "roundtable discussions for the clarification of thought" to link people of varying class and educational backgrounds; 2) houses of hospitality, to provide shelter, food, and companionship to people in need; and 3) farming communes, or agronomic universities, to provide land, healthy work, and self-sufficiency for people displaced by industrial society. His ideas had much in common with other utopian, agrarian projects. There was a strong

endorsement of voluntary poverty and decentralized social/economic structures, and an equally strong rejection of modern technologies and conventional political forums. The Catholic Workers, wrote Day, were “looking for ownership by the workers of the means of production, the abolition of the assembly line, decentralized factories, the restoration of crafts and ownership of property” (Long 221). (Interestingly, Maurin, Day, and Simone Weil each saw merit in private property for personal and family needs.⁶) Houses of hospitality and farming communes would not only support individuals but demonstrate the capacity of persons to care for one another, thus undercutting the need for corporations and state intervention. Social change would spread by direct experience: in the satisfaction of good work and mutual support, and in the freedom from insecurity and oppressive materialism.⁷

Spiritual concerns lay at the core of Maurin’s pursuit of a decentralized, rural, and communitarian society. He spoke of creating social arrangements in which it was “easier for men to be good” (Day, *Sixties* 92). Unlike Day, Maurin had no interest in the rough-and-tumble of politics. He never cared for the *Catholic Worker’s* coverage of union struggles, believing the wage system to be irredeemable. He did not demand better government, believing the welfare state to detract from communal and personal responsibility.⁸ He disapproved of class struggle and revolution, believing all conflict to be divisive. He never explicitly endorsed pacifism though he often wrote about the waste of war and its contrariness to mercy (Egan 1988, 75). Maurin did not so much condemn existing society as encourage other possibilities – always small scale, always human scale. He was a positive man. Day wrote of him:

He did not begin by tearing down or by painting so intense a picture of misery and injustice that you burned to change the world. Instead, he aroused in you a sense of your own capacities for work, for accomplishment. He made you feel that you and all men had great and generous hearts with which to love God. If you once recognized this fact in yourself you would expect and find it in others. (Long 171)

Maurin found in Day a woman who not only responded to his program but had the practical skills to mobilize it. By the end of the 1930s the Catholic Worker movement had 40 houses of hospitality (including a handful in Canada), three farms, numerous urban cells, and a substantial readership.⁹ Their presence and message were unprecedented in the North American Catholic world: a lay movement, headed by an anarchist woman – a convert, no less – whose innovative politics proved attractive to thousands of politically concerned Catholics and clergy.¹⁰

Most other movements of Catholic social action in the U.S. were dominated by bishops and “preoccupied with questions of public morality, parochial schools, [and] birth control” (O’Brien 211). In contrast, the *Catholic Worker* from its inaugural edition in May 1933 was filled with articles about racism, pacifism, sweat shops, political corruption, union struggles, anti-semitism, fascism, and Catholic social theory. Day commented on the compatibility of her political and spiritual motivations in her discussion of the case of Sacco and Vanzetti.¹¹ The collective agony of the two men and their supporters, she said, mirrored the Roman Catholic Church’s own collective body. Day saw the church as a manifestation of spiritual solidarity – “the doctrine of the Mystical Body of Christ whereby we are the members of one another” (*Long* 147) – just as she saw political movements as a manifestation of people’s yearning for social justice. Throughout her life Day would construe unlikely associations that articulated this view of Catholicism’s corporate fibre: Marx and St. Paul, the Wobblies and the church. In 1962 she noted a parallel between the Wobbly slogan, “an injury to one is an injury to all,” and St. Augustine’s statement, “we are all members or potential members of the body of Christ . . .” (*Sixties* 94). Like Simone Weil, Day considered Catholicism to be primarily a spiritual home for the masses and the poor, a gathering place of visible communion and community. This interpersonal unity, both mundane and sacred, came with obligations to care and strive together. Day’s attraction to Catholicism drew from the same roots as her attraction to politics: the intuition that love and justice were inextricable callings.

Mining the Catholic sources

Day was a sociable and strong-minded woman, qualities she would require in her role as a pioneering lay activist. But she was not altogether alone. In the 1930s other progressive Catholics were attempting a synthesis of activism and spirituality. The U.S. movement to reform Roman Catholic liturgy, led by the Benedictine Virgil Michel, was developing approaches to worship in which Catholics “no longer would be able to conceive of salvation in isolation . . .” (O’Brien 190).¹² The movement aimed to expand liturgical forms beyond individual rituals with authorized gatekeepers (clergy) into practices that encompassed daily life and community. In contrast to the undemocratic rule of the church on the one hand, and the American fascination with individualism on the other, these reformers sought a Christian social order imbued with a “corporate and co-operative spirit” (O’Brien 190). The liturgical movement emphasized participation and was implicitly political: the laity would have more power to exercise their responsibilities as Christians in society.

Day also found affinity with a philosophical stance known as personalism. Personalism was a mode of social analysis articulated by French Catholic philosophers Emmanuel Mounier and Jacques Maritain.¹³ They and others were bent on carving a political space beyond the dominant ideological forms of the twentieth century, forms that could often be reduced to rigid dichotomies: “idealism and materialism, ethics and science . . . nationalism and internationalism, centralization and decentralization . . . faith and reason, work and contemplation, progress and decadence . . . tradition and modernity, Church and state, freedom and equality” (Amato 3). In this vein, Day considered individualism and collectivism to be the twin evils of modern politics, embodied in the extreme selfishness of capitalism and the impersonal repression of totalitarianism (whether fascist or Stalinist). Both paradigms were an affront to human dignity.

Breaking from these unhelpful dualities, Mounier posed “the person” as against the self-seeking individual, and “the community” as against the hyper-controlled or anonymous society (Amato 134). Personalism was to be a new synthesis, a third way that reconciled the primacy of both person and community. A personalist-styled society would

be one in which autonomous, rational, and spiritual human beings would find their deepest realization in engagement with others. Personalism resonated with the Catholic Worker belief that social change could not take place without a change in the hearts of human beings. The building block of the Catholic Worker movement – of any durable revolution, in their view – would be the individual soul:

The personalist philosophy offered by Day and Maurin did not expect change through and in social and political institutions, but rather looked for the creative changes in individuals as they elevated the Christian precept of active love to a place of practiced primacy in their lives. This stepping outside the tentacles of social progress was real precisely because it occurred in people's hearts (Coy 159).

Human hearts and souls, however, reside in human bodies, and it was to the realm of mundane experience that Dorothy Day directed much of her attention.

The Spirituality of Work

The *Catholic Worker* was a mix of hard-hitting news, earnest accounts of Catholic Worker life, and analyses of scholarly and canonical works. In particular, Day frequently quoted from two related encyclicals: Pope Leo XIII's *Rerum novarum* (1891) and Pope Pius XI's *Quadragesimo anno* (1931). These encyclicals were valuable to Catholic Workers because they represented church thinking on social justice and labour at an unimpeachable level. That neither encyclical had any consistent resonance with Day's politics was of no concern to her. As David J. O'Brien wrote regarding Pius's *Quadragesimo anno*:

The encyclical, in fact, offered no firm basis for constructing a unified program of Catholic social action. All could justify their approach on the basis of the encyclicals: those who looked to the State as the primary instrument of reform, those who were attracted to the dynamism of the labor movement as the best hope for establishing a just social order, those who rejected both as permeated by a false liberalism and a selfish

individualism, and those who concentrated on individual spiritual perfection and the practice of the works of charity (183).

Like others, Day found what she needed in the encyclicals. Pope Leo's *Rerum novarum* had been a response to the desperate conditions created by land displacements and the industrial revolution. Far from a Marxist document, the text nevertheless spoke eloquently against oppressive workplaces, social disruption, and imbalances of wealth.¹⁴ Leo called for adequate wages, dignified working conditions, and more equitable arrangements between workers and owners. It was a re-balancing that rejected both the carelessness of laissez-faire capitalism and the heavy-handedness of socialist statism (Abell 73, Roberts 113). Trade unions and workers' freedom of association were implicitly endorsed by the pope, whose 1891 encyclical was seen as a boon to progressive Catholics (O'Brien 15).

Pope Pius's *Quadragesimo anno* – forty years later – updated Leo's treatise. Once again, the Vatican's message, though less than radical, addressed the miseries of working people, the validity of trade unions, and, in general, a vision of social justice (Abell 237). Papal pronouncements on these matters were vital to Day because, like Maurin, she believed work to be central to human fulfilment.

Work and the machine

When we began our work there were thirteen million unemployed. The greatest problem of the day was the problem of work and the machine.
(*Long 222*)

To Day and Maurin, work was a problem *because* of the machine. The machine exemplified the trauma of urban industrial life, a trauma that took many forms: separation of mental and manual labour; atomized division of tasks; insubstantiality of wages; workers' loss of control; consumerism; centralization of economic and social structures; and the soul-destroying dependency and impersonality that characterized these other losses.

Maurin's analysis of industrial capitalism looked squarely at "the cultural inertia produced by the loss of meaning in work" (O'Brien 208). The machine was an instrument of disassociation: it deprived people of the satisfaction of "making." At the same time, machine culture uprooted the social connections that flourished when communities supplied their own needs. Unemployment was another assault on the spirit. Maurin believed that humans thrived on responsibility: on being directly accountable for their own and their neighbours' lives. Unemployment did not just create poverty, it broke these threads of usefulness and interdependency. The sweatshops and soup lines of the Depression were humiliating to individuals but, even worse, they were deadening to communities.

Work was about self-sufficiency, personal integration, and a tangible involvement with life. Writing in the *Catholic Worker* in 1951, Day commented on the wage system and private property as structural impediments to doing good and necessary work:

On every side we see work that needs to be done: even to the sweeping of the streets and the cleaning up of lots, the repairing of old buildings to provide for the homeless. But if a man took a broom and started to sweep a street, he would soon find himself put on the psychopathic ward . . .¹⁵

In the 1930s Day and Maurin were hardly alone in thinking the wage economy subjugated workers to capitalist interests at the expense of human needs. Like many others, they saw that the goal of most modern-day jobs was money and that the nature of most work was fractured: both mindless and heartless. But rather than focusing on union demands or ownership of the means of production, Day and Maurin called for a liberated relationship to work itself.¹⁶ They regarded work – tangible, hands-on work – as essentially good and desirable. Work had the power to bring people into contact with the "sacramentality of life, the holiness, the symbolism of things."¹⁷ In the *Catholic Worker*, June 1939, Day wrote:

we are not only urging the necessity of organizing for all workers . . . but also stressing over and over again the dignity of labor, the dignity of the person – a creature composed of body and soul made in the image and likeness of God It is on these grounds that we fight the speed-up system in the factory . . . working towards a share in the ownership and responsibility.(1)

Despite the rural orientation of the Catholic Worker program, theirs was not a romantic notion of craft and communal life. They felt a strong affinity with the Distributionist movement in the United Kingdom and its prominent Catholic champions, Hilaire Belloc and G.K. Chesterton, yet the two movements parted company in an important respect. The Distributionists' quarrel with mechanization and urban living caused them to embrace "a frank return to a peasant, handicraft society" (O'Brien 16); the Catholic Workers avoided this reactionary tone and did not frame their program as "a return" of any sort. Day never wrote of serene pastoral settings with looms and wood-turning lathes.¹⁸ If the Catholic Workers had an anti-modern strain, it was not due to nostalgia for a lost golden age but to their judgement that the main features of their times – fragmentation, disassociation, and materialism – were palpably harmful to community and spirit. Day's rejection of industrial life derived from her hard political edge, not from a soft embrace of an arts-and-craft utopia. In this regard, the Catholic Workers were much closer to William Morris, the nineteenth-century English activist whose commitment to socialism is often overshadowed by his handsome textile and furniture designs (designs that were, in fact, part of Morris's socialist project). Historian Jackson Lears described Morris as showing remarkable insight and originality in being a Marxist who predicted the "stifling overorganization [bureaucracy]" at the heart of capitalist and socialist systems and who was intellectually devoted to "the worker's right to joyful and useful labor" (62). Morris, Day, and Simone Weil (as we will see) had this much in common.

The intention of the Catholic Workers was to withdraw from the conventional world of work to avoid ethical compromise: to be nonparticipants in exploitation, inequality, and, increasingly, war production. More than this, though, the aim of the

Catholic Workers was to choose work that was *service*: to produce for and with others in intimate association. Their movement was in harmony with the political principle of subsidiarity, which asserts that a higher (remote) entity should never take over what a closer (personal) entity can do. A classic example of subsidiarity is that the state should not assume authority over needs that the family can best deliver (O'Brien 19). But the Catholic Workers' choice of intimate work was even more potent as a spiritual exercise. Day quoted Maurin as believing that " 'people do not need to work for wages. They can offer their services as a gift' " (*Loaves* 27). To labour for and with others – to make a gift of one's life work – was to act on Christian values of charity and love with an immediacy that could be transformative.

Day understood that this appeal to generosity and self-sacrifice was an idealistic reading of the Christian gospel, and she was neither naive about its practicality nor surprised by its challenges. She wrote with dry humour about conflicts at the Catholic Worker farms, especially between the unemployed (often outcasts from the city) and the scholars (student volunteers). Discrepancies between principles and realities could be found everywhere, in others and within herself. At the farm near Easton, Pennsylvania, people were often vain, stubborn, selfish, uncooperative, and flighty. "Food was short at times, but discussion was long," wrote Day. The scholars judged the unemployed to be "the unworthy destitute," while the workers found the students "glibly articulate" (*Loaves* 44-5).

The Catholic Worker path was singularly lacking in ease, solitude, and bliss. It was a renunciation of one version of worldliness (impersonal industrial society) for another version of worldliness (personal rural community). But in the latter, at least, one's actions and their consequences could be directly recognizable.

Chapter 2

Simone Weil: Her Origins, and the Puzzle of Work

In contrast to Dorothy Day, who is known mainly within Catholic and social justice circles, the mystic and philosopher Simone Weil (1909–1943) stands among the extraordinary figures of twentieth-century Europe. The scholarship on Weil is substantial, and her reputation as a brilliant and extreme soul – whose life was as productive as it was pain filled, whose death had the aura of a suicide – continues to grow.

Weil-the-thinker must be approached with humility. She was the beneficiary of a classical French education and grew into an unorthodox intellectual. Her personal tastes ranged from politics to mathematics, literature, physics, philosophy, classical studies, theology, pedagogy, sociology, folklore, and Asian cultures. She was fluent in Greek, Latin, English, German, and French, and taught herself enough Sanskrit to translate the *Bhagavad Gita*. Her choice of genres included scholarly essays, newspaper articles, notebooks, journals, personal letters, *pensées*, and a book-length manuscript. The wealth of Weil's published work, most of which appeared after her death, is testament to the fascination with which she is regarded.¹⁹

Weil was born in 1909 into a middle-class French Jewish family in Paris.²⁰ Her mother had emigrated from Russia as an infant; her father was a medical doctor from Alsace. The family was harmonious and energetic. Weil had an especially loving relationship with her mother, and she shared a close if competitive bond with her older brother, André, who would become the leading number theory mathematician of their generation. Among her grandparents, only Simone's paternal grandmother was a devout Jew. Her parents were thoroughly assimilated into French secular society, religiously nonobservant, and, in the case of her father, atheistic. The Weil home offered no exposure to Jewish culture and religion, a void that Simone would eventually express in antipathy towards Judaism and callousness towards Jewish vulnerability.²¹

She was a sickly child and was beset by terrible headaches from her teen years on. Weil was also physically awkward and, though determined, not strong. In her thirty-four years, she would demonstrate a fearlessness – both physical and mental – for which her natural resources were ill designed. Biographical accounts convey an image of an unfashionable, rather genderless human being, and Weil’s life story presents no evidence of romantic or sexual interests. Nevertheless, she was regarded by many as a sympathetic and generous woman, and her ethical conduct in personal and political relationships was unquestioned. Not everyone cared for her unusual character, but those who did held Weil in great esteem and loved her deeply.

Both Weil children were intellectually precocious, but André’s talents were in plain view while Simone’s were not. At age sixteen he was accepted into the prestigious Ecole Normale Supérieure in Paris, an event that hit his fourteen-year-old sister hard. In her 1942 “Spiritual Autobiography,” Weil recounted how this youthful fit of “bottomless despair” went beyond rivalry with her brother; it brought her face to face with the prospect of being shut out of the “kingdom of truth.” The anguish led to a discovery:

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 . . . can penetrate to the kingdom of truth reserved for genius, if only he longs for truth and perpetually concentrates all his attention upon its attainment The conviction that had come to me was that when one hungers for bread one does not receive stones. (*Waiting* 64)

This youthful hunger for truth has the flavour of adolescent melodrama, yet Weil’s discovery of *attention* became a hallmark of her intellectual method. Later in life she would suggest a parallel between attention and prayer. In her teens she simply acknowledged that the truths she pursued via attention encompassed “beauty, virtue, and every kind of goodness.” Weil appears to have been a bred-in-the-bone Platonist; indeed, she displayed a conscious affinity for Plato throughout her life.

In 1925 Weil came in contact with a formidable teacher at the Henri IV Lycée, an association that continued at the Ecole Normale, where she would be among the first females admitted. Alain (1868–1951), the public name of philosopher Emile Auguste Chartier, was an outstanding influence on French intellectuals of the twentieth century. He taught Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, and Simone de Beauvoir (a classmate of Weil); he belonged to a lineage of philosophers that included Jules Lagneau (1851–94) and Maine de Biran (1766–1824). Biran has the stature of a “French Kant” and his “doctrine of effort virtually transformed the Cartesian ‘I’ into a power, and the famous *cogito* into *I think, therefore I can.*” (*Formative*, Intro. 7,8). This muscular, in-the-world orientation was a central ingredient of Alain’s teachings, along with a brand of Christianity that was at once anti-clerical, anti-institutional, and profoundly faith-based. Weil’s chief biographer and classmate, Simone Pétrement, offered an account of Alain’s teachings that showed his influence on Weil regarding the pursuit of goodness. Alain appears to have also helped in shaping Weil’s method of thinking. For example, he described attention as a technique of being profoundly alert and open to discoveries, however uncomfortable:

– attention is not . . . the fact of being filled and as though hypnotized by a single object, a single thought; on the contrary, true attention is vibrant with doubt and freedom (qtd. in Pétrement 33)

Under Alain’s tutelage Weil studied European philosophy and literature in depth. Politically, he was a committed pacifist and an independent radical who often critiqued the left for its tendency to abuse individual rights (Pétrement 48). Alain helped to establish a school for working men, a project Weil participated in and would later emulate. His influence is also evident in Weil’s nonconformist stance towards political parties and actions. Throughout her school years she closely followed the communists and other far-left groups in France and Germany, but never joined a party. Alain appreciated Weil’s brilliant mind. She was not, however, universally liked by her classmates (she tended to be strident and dismissive of others). Simone de Beauvoir admired her emotional intensity –

“I envied her for having a heart that could beat right across the world” – but felt the sting of Weil’s judgment on the one occasion they talked (qtd. in Pétrement 51).

Weil earned a teaching degree (*agregée de philosophie*) at age twenty-two and was posted to a girl’s school in Le Puy for her first assignment. There she established a pattern that would stamp her brief tenure as an instructor: adored by students and dreaded by authorities. Weil affiliated herself with syndicalist groups in Saint-Etienne, the nearby industrial centre. She attended union meetings, taught a workers’ study group, subsisted as though on unemployment benefits, and agitated with the unemployed. School officials were scandalized by her fraternizing with working men in cafes and by her arrest during a demonstration in 1931. Weil was transferred to another region, where she again faced censure due to her political actions. In a letter home about the incidents at Le Puy, Weil described her initial refusal to accept the school transfer – she did not wish to abandon her students. The exasperated principal, she wrote, “found my scruples ‘honorable but exaggerated’ ” (qtd. in Pétrement 107). Weil’s choices were often exaggerated by ordinary standards. She appeared to lack self-interest and had no patience for political expediency and sloppy thinking.

In the early to mid 1930s, Weil was a frequent contributor to leftist journals such as the syndicalist *La Révolution prolétarienne* and *Libres Propos*. She occasionally inflamed readers for her positions on the U.S.S.R. (for example, she criticized Stalin for dealing with Hitler) and for her realistic appraisal of the German situation (she visited Berlin in 1932 and was not persuaded that the German left could withstand Nazism). Weil had no illusions about the freedom of the Soviet proletariat, and she wrote a searing analysis of the structural failings of state communism.²² These failings prompted her interest in developing a true understanding of how production – the matrix of worker, technology, and task – could be organized to make labour a liberating rather than degrading practice. In 1934 Weil took a job on the shop floor of the Alsthom Electrical Works in Paris.²³ She would spend the next two-and-a-half years in factories, operating machine presses and milling devices. By her own reckoning, factory life would break her body and spirit, and tip her towards an explicitly religious outlook.

The Puzzle of Work

In an essay examining how Simone Weil, Dorothy Day, and George Orwell each decided to take up manual labour, George A. White remarked that the trio were “dissatisfied with their intellectual ‘accomplishments’ ”(139). All three were unconventional leftists who had responded to the insufficiency of existing political theories and strategies by rebelling against their class – by becoming workers.²⁴ Yet Weil and Day’s immersion in physical labour had little in common with other middle-class responses to capitalism’s defects, whether the back-to-craft movements of Europe and the United States or the later trend by the New Left to emulate (and organize) unskilled workers. In their own ways, each woman was driven to grapple with work by what White called “a common crisis” (141).

The crisis was the failure of the left to address work on the level of actual experience. For both Weil and Day, the traditional Marxist solution to the problem of exploitation – proletarian ownership of the means of production – did not touch the more basic question of what, exactly, happened to people in their hours of work. Weil was determined to become intimate with the puzzle of work, to give the experience her full attention. In her circle of activists, she was alone in deciding to become a factory worker.

The results of her scrutiny may be gathered into two broad categories: first, a critique of working conditions in the broadest sense (work as an assault on intellect, body, soul, and society); and second, a spiritual appraisal of manual work as the core activity whereby individuals may connect with nature and with God (work as a medium of contemplation, obedience, and, conceivably, social justice). The two dimensions were connected, if not always comfortably, and drew from the same wellsprings: Weil’s political ideas, her experience of factory work, and her spiritual instincts and reflections.

In the 1933 essay, “Prospects: Are we heading for the proletarian revolution?” Weil offered an unsparing critique of the Russian Revolution. Her primary charge? In its frightening similarity to fascism, the Soviet regime had forgotten that socialism’s aim was the economic liberation of workers, not the exaltation of the state’s bureaucratic and military apparatus (*O&L* 8). The new despotism – the twentieth-century version of serfdom and slavery – was “oppression exercised in the name of management” (9).

Bureaucracy and bureaucrats had become the newest impenetrable gods, the deities of an economy based on deskilled, repetitive, and submissive work:

The rationalized factory, where a man finds himself shorn, in the interest of a passive mechanism, of everything which makes for initiative, intelligence, knowledge, method, is as it were an image of our present-day society. For the bureaucratic machine, though composed of flesh and of well-fed flesh at that, is none the less as irresponsible and as soulless as are machines made of iron and steel. (*O&L* 13)

Her quarrel was not with Marx. She judged Marx to have been astute about the destructive character of modern work processes. He had described how workers' dreadful insecurity within the wage-earning system was accompanied by something even more dreadful: being swallowed alive by the factory itself. Weil also agreed with Marx that bureaucracy – the institutionalized division of labour – constituted a “separation of the spiritual forces of labour from manual labour” (qtd. in *O&L* 14). The damage to bodies by strain and injury was one thing. The damage to self-worth and intelligence was quite another: a kind of forced exile from the world of meaning

Weil believed that states, organizations, and institutions – collectivities in all guises – had an unforgivable tendency to sacrifice the individual to the group.²⁵ In the workplace this was most evident in the breaking down of personal responsibility and individual knowledge. Machines, she observed, could “crystallize” (Marx's word) the power of the many; the word conjures up the image of a tremendous pressure crushing many fragile elements into a single hard unit. Whether the master of this power was a wealthy capitalist or a socialist bureaucrat was irrelevant; the brutality was the same. “Let us not forget that we want to make the individual, and not the collectivity, the supreme value,” Weil wrote. “. . . We want to give . . . the workmen the full understanding of technical processes instead of a mere mechanical training; . . . We want to make abundantly clear the true relationship between man and nature . . .” (*O&L* 19).

Weil often pondered this large question of “man and nature” in her political and spiritual writings. Essentially, the question related to both the materialistic demands of life (productive work) and the idealistic dimension of lived experience in which human intelligence, “far from passively reflecting the world, exercises itself on the world with the double aim of knowing it and transforming it” (*O&L* 32). For Weil the aim of a good society was to cultivate complete, not divided selves, and it was intolerable that most humans related to the material world in a fractured style. The world of modern work was based on disintegration:

The work they live by calls for such a mechanical sequence of gestures at such a rapid speed that there can be no incentive for it except fear and the lure of the pay packet The simplest way, therefore, to suffer as little as possible is to reduce one’s soul to the level of these two incentives; but that is to degrade oneself (*Letters* 38).

These words from a 1936 letter to the manager of a stove factory near Bourges encapsulate some of the horrors Weil witnessed at work. Her circumstances were exacerbated by the fact of being unskilled, female, and physically awkward. Weil held a lowly rank within the industrial hierarchy, only a notch above immigrants and children. Her notebooks and letters from this period are full of pragmatic observations and schemes, emotional commentary, and philosophical speculations about industry. She noted the polarized dynamics on the shop floor – kindness/rudeness, cooperation/ sabotage, gaiety/gloom – and noted too the exhaustion, injury, and fear. But Weil’s attention was primarily focused on how manual work affected the human spirit and intellect.

Her own experience was shattering. In a 1935 letter to a friend, Weil described her job transferring copper bobbins in and out of a red-hot furnace.²⁶ Her face was constantly scorched; the effort and speed were unremitting. She also felt kindness from some co-workers and the satisfaction of “eating bread that one has earned” (*Letters* 21). Yet the small pleasures of this job were not her usual factory experience. Weil typically felt overwhelmed by isolation, danger, speed, and devastating tension: “[A]ll the external

reasons (which I had previously thought internal) upon which my sense of personal dignity, my self-respect, was based were radically destroyed within two or three weeks” (*Letters* 21). To add insult, her response to this disintegration was not resistance but a kind of existential coma,

the resigned docility of a beast of burden. It seemed to me that I was born to wait for, and receive, and carry out orders — that I had never done and never would do anything else. I am not proud of that confession. It is the kind of suffering no worker talks about; it is too painful even to think of (*Letters* 22).

What caused this collapse? For Weil, mass production was an evil characterized by haste, repetition, inflexibility, and mindless specialization (*FLN* 39). Factories were organized for piecework, and their fierce pace was proof that capitalism made little distinction between materials and humans. “There is a certain relation to time which suits inert matter,” Weil would later write in *The Need for Roots*, “and another sort of relation which suits thinking beings. It is a mistake to confuse the two” (57). Yet the physical stresses of mass production were only partially to blame for her collapse. The real source of misery, she observed, lay in the skewed relations of power. Factory workers were constantly reminded of their dependent and subordinate status, and would succumb to the message of ‘not counting for anything.’ Poverty and exhaustion were bad enough; the slavery of “passive obedience” was worse (*Letters* 41).

Necessity, obedience, and the mysticism of work

A society in which the two poles are obedience and attention — labor and study (*FLN* 358).

Weil’s denunciation of industrial work as slavery — and of capitalist societies as enslaved — was beautifully drawn yet hardly original. What made her position distinctive was her thinking about obedience, a theme she explored in both political and mystical writings. In

her 1942 New York notebook, she considered how obedience was corrupted by power (*FLN* 80). It is a startling idea. Leftist intellectual traditions do not tout obedience as a desirable value: the overtones of servility and inequality are too strong. But obedience, based on voluntary consent, was important to Weil as a key to unlocking the spiritual significance of *necessity* – “the gravitational force, the weight of the world” (*NSW* 78).

Necessity referred to the phenomenal world with its laws, indifference, and inescapability. For Weil, all phenomena were bound by these rules, a fact that was both God’s doing and, as we shall see, God’s gift (*G&G* 94). She viewed work as one of the primary routes by which necessity could be negotiated by humans. People worked in order to live (the practical, substantive level of work). But more importantly they encountered in work, in an especially blunt manner, the pith of human existence: the fact of having bodies and bodies that die. “Manual labour. Time entering the body,” Weil wrote in the early 1940s, when her thoughts were increasingly oriented towards metaphysical concerns (*G&G* 160).²⁷ The spiritual dimension of work was this intersection of time and flesh: the grand indifference of the former, the abject vulnerability of the latter.

Humans turn themselves into matter when they work, she wrote, and in becoming like matter they had a choice: to oppose this loss of self (the usual reaction) or to embrace it. Like many mystics, Weil considered the shedding of conventional selfhood to be an essential step to approaching the divine. Physical labour was one of two opportunities that God, in her view, provided to humans to enable them to step back into the “current of Obedience” – the real terms of life (*NFR* 286).²⁸ The other opportunity was death. (Evidently, work was the more flexible of the two offers.)

Weil was careful to distinguish her ideas about the metaphysics of work from any notions about labour’s “penal quality;” these she considered to be a misinterpretation of Genesis regarding the exile from Eden (*NFR* 281). Work was neither a punishment nor a test. Rather, work was a means both to conserve life and to dissolve the self. This paradoxical daily death, if freely consented to, was thus “the most perfect act of obedience” (after death itself) available to humans (*NFR* 281). The perfecting of obedience was valuable not as an act of servitude but as an act of insight: an acceptance that human effort

had no claim to solidity. By giving up the “fruits of action” – renunciation and stillness were, for Weil, the truest of actions – and consenting to the loss of self, a person would be opened to receive God’s grace and love (*G&G* 160). She was advocating that we work ourselves to death, albeit metaphorically.

She was very clear that obedience must be based on a mature consent, not on “fear of punishment or hope of reward” (*NFR* 13). The problem with factories was that workers were coerced. Their ability to pay attention was thwarted by noise, fear, and boredom. Without consent and without attention, obedience was little more than degradation. One casualty of this degraded state was that the individual lost his or her capacity to “despise injustice” (*Letters* 56). To Weil, it was as though a person’s ethical compass was disabled by false obedience. A workplace that prevented workers from exercising their energy and intelligence offered them two spurious choices: unconsciousness or conscious despair. Both were morally disastrous for individuals and for society.

These ideas convey some of the paradoxical flavour of Weil’s spiritual writings.²⁹ She wrote about absence and distance, passivity and waiting, piercing and affliction, helplessness and abandonment, yet a reader can sense Weil’s own vital energies. Her vocabulary was full of synonyms for negation and loss, yet her parables often had a sweetness.³⁰ Her determination to reconcile suffering with divine love – the project of many mystics, in many traditions – led to an interpretation of God’s apparent absence from the world and human affairs as being *the* proof of his love (see n.75). In a similar fashion, she conferred a core spiritual power on work and obedience, which made the involuntary abasement of workers all the more problematic.

Writing in a political vein, Weil was surprisingly pragmatic in her attempts to re-imagine the industrial workplace. For example, she did not have naive expectations about running factories as collectives. In a 1936 letter she argued for a management structure that involved respectful subordination, rather than one-sided domination. The problem was not hierarchy per se but the stifling of workers’ intelligence and virtue. Being ordered to do something could be an acknowledgement of skill and responsibility – even courage and conscience (*Letters* 45). Unlike Dorothy Day, Weil was not fundamentally suspicious of

machines and manufacturing. “To escape back to primitive life is a lazy solution,” she wrote in her pre-war notebook (*FLN* 45). She called for a revolution in technical research to produce machines that emphasized versatility and safety, operated by highly skilled workers. Her vision for France – for re-rooting the deracinated working class – included the abolition of large factories in favour of small workshops that were dispersed throughout the countryside and connected via cooperative networks (*NFR* 57). Decentralization was imperative, as was workers’ education (she shared these values with Day and Maurin). The point was to infuse the workplace with a sense of the wider world. The deeper point was to fashion a civilization founded on the “spirituality of work”:

Everybody is busy repeating . . . that what we suffer from is a lack of balance, due to a purely material development of technical science. This lack of balance can only be remedied by a spiritual development in the same sphere, that is, in the sphere of work A civilization based upon the spirituality of work would . . . be the opposite of that state in which we find ourselves now, characterized by an almost total rootlessness. (*NFR* 94)

Weil’s depiction of labour as deadening reflected the shock of her own factory experiences but also spoke to the wretched conditions of industrial life in the 1930s. In trying to solve the puzzle of work, she engaged in two unrelated (and somewhat disconnected) internal conversations. The first was down-to-earth and political, dealing with technology, workers’ education, democratic work structures, and decentralized production. The second was idealistic and mystical, dealing with work as an activity whose spiritual potential was so rich it could (and hence should) be the organizing principal of a healthy society. In this second discourse, physical labour was like meditation, prayer, and other self-conscious acts of devotion or surrender: designed to take one outside the unreality of the self into what Weil called “the plenitude of knowledge of the real” (*Letters* 137). As we will see, she believed there was another human experience, involuntary and grim, that also offered such a keen encounter with real knowledge: war.

Chapter 3

Dorothy Day: The Active Pacifist

And what am I capable of doing? Can I stand out against state and Church?
Is it pride, presumption, to think I have the spiritual capacity to use
spiritual weapons in the face of the most gigantic tyranny the world has
ever seen?

– Dorothy Day (*Loneliness* 272)

To be a Catholic pacifist in the United States in the first half of the twentieth century was to wander very far off the beaten path. To be a strict pacifist, a lay woman, and a high-profile activist was even lonelier. Whatever one might say about Dorothy Day's approach to pacifism – an approach that has been variously described as absolute, intuitive, penitential, and prophetic – it was not something she inherited as a convert to Catholicism.

But Day did have access to anti-war traditions that combined the religious and the political. By the early decades of the twentieth century, pacifism and the myriad beliefs associated with it were well rooted in American soil. The Protestant peace churches had clearly defined religious stances against participating in war on any level. Mennonites, Quakers (Friends), and Brethren congregants had sought exemption from military service and received conscientious objector status during the Civil War and in wars thereafter. These men characterized themselves as nonresistants, adhering to religious dictates against killing and exercising force. Their position stemmed from biblical commandments to love one's brother and one's enemy and to refrain from ever taking up the sword or revenge. If the obligation to follow these commandments ran afoul of the state's demands, these Christians were to conduct themselves in a spirit of nonrebellion: "submit to but not participate in the violence of this world" (Chatfield 1971, 6). Their duty was to withdraw rather than to confront; such was the pacifism of Protestants who believed in separate spheres for God and the state.

Other Protestants promoted a lively range of anti-war positions, from supporting peaceful solutions to political strife to a wholesale rejection of war (Chatfield 1971, 4).

Prior to the First World War, most people bearing the pacifist label were advocates of international cooperation. During the war the label was upended to disparage those who wanted no part in the fighting, whether as communists, socialists, or evaders of conscription. (The term was eventually rehabilitated but, even today, “pacifist” carries more than a whiff of derogation.) Not just the label, but the American anti-war movement itself underwent important changes during the 1914–19 conflict.³¹ Established peace societies were displaced by a coalition of progressive forces including “action-oriented peace advocates, feminists, social workers, publicists, and social-gospel clergymen [and] . . . antiwar Socialists” (Chatfield 1971, 15). It was within this loose coalition that a young Dorothy Day cut her political teeth as a journalist and organizer.

Pacifists were often active in a gamut of social justice issues, from labour rights to racial equality and anti-imperialism. For example, in 1928 Day was involved with the Anti-Imperialist League, which agitated against American military interference in Nicaragua (Forest 70). A.J. Muste, co-founder of the influential Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR), exemplified this combination of radical socialism, Christianity, and nonviolent pacifism. In a 1928 article Muste made clear the association between social justice and pacifism: “In a world built on violence one must be a revolutionary before one can be a pacifist: in such a world a non-revolutionary pacifist is a contradiction in terms, a monstrosity” (Muste 6). Day was a lifetime member of the FOR.

The Roman Catholic Church had no equivalent tradition. Pacifism was neither well understood nor well explored among Catholics; when the term was used, it often “carried a pejorative connotation of passivity, and in particular passivity in the face of injustice and oppression” (Egan 1988, 73). The Catholic establishment in the United States took a cautiously conservative position on patriotic matters; Francine de Plessix Gray described the American Church as possessing “an immigrant nervousness” not apparent in other nations (91). American Catholics were a minority that felt vulnerable to the charge of divided loyalties. Moreover, Catholics were accustomed to accepting the secular power of the state as legitimate and ordained by God. In contrast to Protestant traditions of dissent

against secular power, “Catholics were much more likely to espouse a blind patriotism” (Roberts 116).

This narrowness was reinforced by the choices offered to American Catholics by their priests and teachers. Within the institutional centres of Catholic faith – churches, schools, and seminaries – “the concept of peace, a basic . . . element of the gospel, was generally not taught as such,” wrote Eileen Egan, a Catholic Worker. The church’s attitude towards military service, she added, could be summarized by a simple assertion: “‘When your country calls you, you must go’ ” (1966, 124). Conservatism was the norm even in progressive church organizations. On matters of war and peace many Catholics looked to the Catholic Association for International Peace (CAIP), founded in 1927 and affiliated with the National Catholic Welfare Conference, an organization of American bishops that furthered Catholic social policies. The bishops’ program was solidly liberal. Like most liberals, their positions on economic reform and war revealed a “conflict between the ideal of social justice and the fears of radicalism and the State” (O’Brien 43).

Pacifism and isolationism were condemned equally by the CAIP, which criticized the U.S. government’s policy of neutrality during the Spanish Civil War and argued for intervention in support of Franco (Chatfield 1971, 135). Indeed, the CAIP’s anti-pacifist bias was rock solid, a reminder that “peace” in an organization’s title should not be mistaken for “anti-war.” In the early 1960s laypeople of the CAIP staked out a pro-nuclear position at the Second Vatican Council, advocating that Rome recognize the value of nuclear weapons as deterrents (Egan 1988, 96).³² Robert Ludlow, a *Catholic Worker* editor during the 1950s, described the CAIP as being “ ‘in peacetime for peace; in wartime for war’ ”(qtd. in Egan 1966, 124).

Day was aware of the conformist and ultra-patriotic tendencies of most American Catholics. She was also aware that the church was comfortable, even assimilationist, in regard to the American veneration of materialism and self-interest. For Day, these individualistic values were antithetical to the Christian vision of love and interpersonal responsibility, a vision that was integral to her pacifism. As well as fighting against war, Day would be fighting a battle within her chosen spiritual home.

Unjust War

If pacifism was a less than hardy tradition within the Roman Catholic Church, just war theory was extremely well grounded. The original Christian expression of the theory appeared in the fifth century with Augustine of Hippo's *Contra Faustum* XXII. In the thirteenth century Thomas Aquinas would further articulate the issues in his *Summa Theologiae*, posing the question, "Is it always a sin to wage war?" (qtd. in Dombrowski 6). The timing of Augustine's exposition was significant. The Roman Empire had adopted the mantle of Christianity in 313, and his writings on war and justice would help to arrange the "marriage of convenience between the pure pacifism of the Gospels and the demands of the [war-loving] secular state" (du Plessix Gray 93). Both Augustine and Aquinas adjudicated the issue by exploring questions of self-defence, lawful authority, restraint, proportionality, and proper intention and conduct.³³ On paper, just war theory appears high-minded and meticulous. In reality, the theologians provided the church and Christian rulers with a flexible rationale for militarism and armed conflict, carefully legitimized within a network of means and ends. Just war theory posed no serious impediment to warfare by Christianized nations. Rather than inhibiting violence, the doctrine was used to justify armies and soldiering in general, and the defence of fiefdoms and worldly interests in particular. Although the theory never attained the status of creed within the church, some Catholic Workers viewed it as having permitted "Christians to be rented out for combat in every war declared by every ruler or nation" (Egan 1988, 72).

Day's rejection of just war thinking was instinctive, political, and spiritual. Her instinctive response was based on her sense of war's "intrinsic immorality" (Chatfield 1966, 6). Arguably there is nothing extraordinary about intuiting that war is wrong. Between gut feelings and common sense, many people readily discern the cruelty of war, the suffering of families, the catastrophe of destruction. But Day was exceptional in that she did not smother her intuition with fear, compromise, or patriotism. In September 1938 she addressed *Catholic Worker* readers who were angered by the paper's pacifist stance towards the Spanish Civil War. Day began by expressing her difficulties in writing the piece at all – "I am writing it with prayer because it is so hard to write of things of the

spirit – it is so hard to explain.”³⁴ She then put forward a simple idea, one that would be echoed by Simone Weil: “As long as men trust to the use of force – only a superior, a more savage and brutal force will overcome the enemy. . . . As long as we are trusting to force – we are praying for a victory by force.”³⁵ It is an unadorned perception. Force begets force, force venerates force, force vindicates force. To Day, force was never a solution or even a tool: it was a dead end and a vicious circle. Just as the child Day had felt an instinctive joy for the world and humanity, the adult Day would never shake her sense that remedying violence with violence was wrong-headed.

She was not alone in her political objections to just war theory, at least not in the non-Catholic world. Pacifists, socialists, and Protestant social gospel adherents had formulated modern critiques of the theory, aided in no small part by the ferocity of the First World War. Ideas of restraint, last resort, and blameless self-defence were theoretically feeble after the European slaughter. To many in the 1930s, war itself had become unjustifiable. Its most indefensible features were the trammelling of democratic rights, indiscriminate killing of civilians, coercion of faith communities, state propaganda, and conscription. National self-interest was the ill-disguised trigger for most conflicts. Many pacifists believed that, in a modern war, the notion of a “civilized” weapon was outmoded. Noncombatants were either caught in the cross-fire or deliberately targeted. No one side was likely to be all right and the other all wrong (Chatfield 1971, 133-34).

The Second World War and its aftermath brought an even more trenchant critique of just war thinking. The obliteration bombing of German cities and the nuclear destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki could not be shoe-horned into any just war criterion. Terrorism was now embedded in war’s structure: the intentional shattering of enemy morale by wiping out whole cities, the poison of nuclear weapons. Thomas Merton weighed in on the subject in a 1962 essay unpublished in his lifetime:³⁶ “Traditional Christian teaching, which deplored war itself even under the best of conditions, never hesitated to condemn terrorism in war as a very grave crime. Now terrorism is no longer taken so seriously. It has become ‘necessary,’ the ‘only effective defense,’ and of course defense is a ‘duty’ ” (29). With limited nuclear war promoted as a realistic possibility,

Merton wrote, “the old notion of the ‘just war’ . . . has now become completely irrelevant” (35).

Merton came relatively late to this position. Day had sensed the bankruptcy of just war theory long before Dresden, Hiroshima, and the muscle-flexing of the Cold War years. From the early 1930s she had observed that modern war *was* total war, involving massive civilian casualties and a fundamental distortion of daily life. War preparations skewed economic priorities; fear-mongering and nationalism tarnished the cultural milieu. Whether in the planning stages or at hand, Day argued, war could not help but to preempt social justice. For Day, pacifism was not just a response to conflict; it was a program for living.

The Qualities of Her Mercy

In 1965 Day was asked by a fellow Catholic to write a brief, logical statement about her pacifism. By then she had written about peace and organized against war with an intensity that few twentieth-century Americans would equal. But no such manifesto, the interviewer noted, could be found among her voluminous writings. Day responded:

I can write no other than this: Unless we use the weapons of the spirit, denying ourselves and taking up our cross and following Jesus, dying with Him and rising with Him, men will go on fighting, and often from the highest motives, believing that they are fighting defensive wars for justice for others and in self-defence against present or future aggression.

To try to stop war by placing before men’s eyes the terrible suffering involved will never succeed, because men are willing (in their thoughts and imaginations at least) to face any kind of suffering when motivated by noble aims like the vague and tremendous concept of freedom, God’s greatest gift to man . . . (*Sixties* 236).

On the surface these words are conventional Christian doctrine and convey little of the depth of Day’s analysis of war and peace. But she was a sophisticated pacifist and political thinker. She recognized the lure of social pressures – the “freedom” in this passage seems more American than metaphysical – and appreciated the duty-bound motivation of many

soldiers. She examined the roots of war (for example, nationalism, economic prerogatives, and the enculturation of violence) in order to skilfully disturb those roots in campaigns against conscription, war preparations, and civil defense. There was a simplicity in her unconditional commitment to peaceful conduct and a complexity in her blending of religious and political convictions. Day's rejection of war as a Christian – essentially, a refusal to use force to get things done – was linked to her rejection of coercion in all its secular guises. The exploitation of industrial production, the inequities of class and race, the compulsive materialism and individualism at the core of American society, the soulless apparatus of the Soviet Union – war was both a logical outcome and an extreme expression of these heartless systems, which were themselves a denial of human spiritual capacity.

Her religious and political outlooks seemed to have a natural concordance. Even Day's earliest glimpses of transcendence were injected with political energy. As she wrote of her young self in *The Long Loneliness*, "Whenever I felt the beauty of the world in song or story, in the material universe around me, or glimpsed in human love, I wanted to cry out with joy I always felt the common unity of our humanity; the longing of the human heart is for this communion" (29). War was not just the antithesis of community, it was an enemy of beauty and love.

Above all, war was a rejection of God's love, the extra-personal love that is expressed most authentically, and paradoxically, in human relations.³⁷ Here again is the merging of spiritual and political intuitions, with the spiritual in ascendancy. Day has been called a "Sermon on the Mount Pacifist" (Egan 1988, 109), a label that derives from her own writings. "The Sermon on the Mount answered all the questions as to how to love God and one's brother," she wrote in her autobiography (*Long* 141). This first teaching by Jesus dealt with individual and communal values, and is best understood as a whole rather than in fragments.³⁸ From this perspective, the sermon's startling instructions – to love one's enemy, to turn the other cheek – can be seen not as an exhortation to other-worldly perfection but as a skill to be developed through steady effort. Taking the Sermon on the Mount literally, as Day did, implied a profound commitment not just to renounce force but

to act responsibly in relationships, day by day. Responsible acts were needed as much in peacetime as they were in times of conflict. To live as a pacifist, rather than to simply hold or advocate the position, meant to abstain from the war-oriented machinery of society: a literal withdrawal of services and expectations. In Day's view, matters of war and peace were tied to the chain of social production, to choices in one's personal life, and to all expenditures of energy and purpose. Pacifism was not an isolated speciality but a lifelong vocation.

This, more than the rejection of violence, was the revolutionary aspect of Day's pacifism. The ability to love one's enemy did not arise from abstract tenderness, it grew from a life's work. It was not an easy injunction for pacifists, including many who subscribed to the *Catholic Worker*. After listing the many wars in which the *Catholic Worker* had taken a strong pacifist position, Day would write ruefully in her autobiography, "[A] very great many [of our members] . . . did not realize for years that *The Catholic Worker* position implicated them; if they believed the things we wrote, they would be bound, sooner or later, to make decisions personally and to act upon them" (Long 264).

To be an absolute pacifist – unwilling to sanction any occasion for war, and willing to loudly proclaim this belief – is to provoke disapproval and contempt at best, moral condemnation and persecution at worst.³⁹ Even moderate pacifists are often backed into uncomfortable corners. To survive, pacifists need a bedrock belief – not mere instinct or ideology – to support what is often an excruciatingly unpopular stance. Day's biographer, Paul Elie, described one common accusation against pacifism: "unrealistic, indeed escapist – an attempt to opt out of the messy process whereby power is gained and exercised" (102). The charges against pacifists are legion: they are cowardly, traitorous, naive (a pawn of the enemy), stupid, idealistic (the worst sort), ineffective, selfish, and irresponsible. During the twentieth-century wars in which Catholic and American lives were threatened and lost, the Catholic Workers were subjected to just such harsh criticisms. Day's unwavering pacifism, according to Elie, put her at odds with most Catholics and most workers. Among her admirers, "the loneliness and scorn she suffered

on its account are often described as a spiritual discipline which she courageously shouldered” (140).

“Prophetic” is the term some commentators have used to describe both Day’s spirituality and her role within the contemporary church. She was not a prophet who foretold the future but rather one who bluntly interrogated the values of her day. This prophet’s job is to promote an inspired vision that rattles the status quo, chips away at complacency, and challenges stereotypes: “[W]hat the prophet has to say will be directed to the deepest assumptions of the culture in question,” wrote Daniel DiDomizio, an American Catholic and professor of religious studies (217). Day was the prophetic laywoman who questioned the ease with which Catholics and Christians in general ignored the peace-loving message of their God. She was not much more than faithful, albeit literally, to the teachings of Christ, yet this was enough to disturb the majority of Catholics. “By refusing to cooperate in war-making,” wrote DiDomizio, “the Catholic Worker holds before Catholics the contradiction between their weekly celebration of human oneness in the eucharist and their willingness to cooperate in the destruction of countless brothers and sisters around the world” (237).

Day’s prophetic aspect is evident in Francine du Plessix Gray’s account of a gathering during the Vietnam War. In May 1968 nine Catholic activists, including the brothers Berrigan, had entered the Selective Service office in Catonsville, a suburb of Baltimore. Their action was a spectacular success. They burned draft records with napalm (concocted at home from a U.S. Special Forces Handbook recipe) and were, as intended, arrested. Their “crime” was publicized widely, ensuring the fame of the Catonsville Nine protest.⁴⁰ A few weeks later Father Daniel Berrigan, out on bail, celebrated a non-traditional Mass at the Catholic Worker’s headquarters in New York City. A question-and-answer session followed between the congregants and Berrigan.

Dorothy Day put an end to the meeting. Speaking slowly and loudly, she towered majestically in the tiny room, as if addressing a multitude.

‘I would like everyone of you to meditate on the acts of witness given by Fathers Daniel and Philip Berrigan and the rest of the Catonsville

Nine [T]here is only one way to end this insane war. Pack the jails with our men!

‘Pack the jails!’ she repeated imperiously. (58)

Activism in a pacifist is bracing, and Day was an exceedingly active pacifist. By all personal accounts she was compelling, brave, and stern. The labour movement, for one, was unsettled by the *Catholic Worker*’s critique of war industries. As they should be, said Day, whose support for unions and the working class was beyond reproach. Organized labour *was* implicated in the manufacturing of weapons and uniforms, along with any group or individual involved in the war economy. She had the moral authority of the consistent (demanding no more of others than she did of herself) and the honest (acknowledging the shortcomings of her position). In an editorial in the January 1941 *Catholic Worker*, entitled “Pacifism Is Dangerous. So Is Christianity,” Day took on the bitterness directed towards pacifists as the United States entered the Second World War. If we fail to be thorough in our pursuit of peace, she wrote, then we *are* to blame when conditions led to war: “It’s been said many time that it was the fault of the Pacifists that England was so unprepared. *Pacifist, appeaser*, these are words of scorn. Let us be honest and say that to a great extent that scorn is deserved. If we are not going to use our spiritual weapons, let us by all means arm and prepare” (2, italics in original).

Day did not choose the prophetic role even if it suited her temperament. The sources of her religious inspiration and discipline were many; often but not always Catholic. She was known to write sympathetically of Marx, Lenin, and Mao; she was a life-long reader of Dostoevski.⁴¹ Her pacifism, inextricably linked to social justice, was nurtured by her reading of Francis of Assisi (1187– 1226). In Francis, Day found a man who embodied voluntary poverty, manual labour, and peacefulness, qualities she understood to be inseparable. As the Catholic scholar Brigid O’Shea Merriman wrote, “In [Day’s] mind, the one who was voluntarily poor worked to earn a living, freed from the insatiable hunger for power and possession over which wars were fought” (178). Day lived and worked, too, as though guided by a calling that demanded simplicity and

directness. But her vocation as a modern pacifist would demand a difficult simplicity, one that did not shrink from the world but would confront, head-on, anonymous powers and appetites.

Putting Theory into Action

To survey Day's lifetime of activism is to be reminded of how thoroughly the twentieth century was wrung out by war and its miseries. The Spanish Civil War was the first test of her pacifism. The conflict provoked anguish among Catholics and, indeed, among concerned Americans in general. To those of a left or liberal persuasion, and to most Protestants, the war clearly pitted a legitimate democratic government against the forces of fascism. The opposite view was held by the Catholic establishment, which saw the war as "an equally clear confrontation of Christianity and civilization with communism and barbarism" (O'Brien 86). The church hierarchy and almost all Catholic organs supported Franco, though this fact did not necessarily reflect the laity's opinion. Still, the anti-communist strain within the American Roman Catholic Church was vehement, and any Catholic not supporting Franco was open to the charge of being pro-communist (Roberts 120).

Neutrality was a distasteful position in this war with its clear victims and clearer villains – depending on the side one favoured. After a brief pro-Franco phase the progressive Catholic journal *Commonweal* declared its neutrality in 1937.⁴² The magazine's circulation dropped sharply, the editor was fired, and the right-wing position was restored (Roberts 118). The church's vocal support for Franco contributed to anti-Catholic sentiments in the U.S., sentiments already fanned by the excesses of the radio priest, Father Charles E. Coughlin.⁴³ Into this bitter atmosphere stepped Day and the *Catholic Worker* with a simple message: "Peace Not Victory."

It was an unpopular message even within the Catholic Worker movement. Day was launching a *de facto* challenge to just war thinking, a theory to which most Catholics were strongly loyal. Further, neutrality was unattractive to both halves of her natural constituency. Catholic trade unionists and others on the left supported the Spanish

Republic and abhorred fascism; conservative Catholics demanded protection for the priests and nuns who were being persecuted by irreligious communists. Neutrality was the position of Britain and France, whose governments were motivated more by *real politick* – notably, anti-communist fears – than by principles; their neutrality was in fact tacit support for fascist Germany and Italy’s meddling in Spain. Several American dioceses refused distribution of the *Catholic Worker*; the movement’s pacifism was denounced from pulpits.

But Day was not completely alone. Her pacifist position in the Spanish Civil War was shared by such distinguished European Catholics as Georges Bernanos, Jacques Maritain, and Emmanuel Mounier. Nevertheless, in the September 1938 edition of the *Catholic Worker*, Day acknowledged the unpopularity of her position: “It is folly – it seems madness – to say as we do – ‘we are opposed to the use of force as a means of settling personal, national or international disputes’ ” (4).⁴⁴ This folly, she wrote, was similar to another one – the folly of the cross – and she reminded readers that the intention of Christian prayer was “that love would overcome hatred, that men *dying* for faith, rather than *killing* for their faith, would save the world” (4; emphasis in original).⁴⁵ Pacifism was a choice not an evasion, and the choice was for all Spanish people irrespective of political or religious bent. “We are praying for the Spanish people – all of them our brothers in Christ,” Day concluded her editorial (7).

She understood that to pray for people, all people, was to forego an ordinary sense of victory. This was exactly the point: ordinary victories required ordinary defeats, and defeats brought resentment and hatred in an unceasing round of action and reaction. Day’s pacifism envisioned a different ecology of power: power that was one part spirit, with elements of mystery and devotion, and another part material, with elements of service and support. Both soul and body would need hard exercising on the path of peace.

Unwavering: The Second World War

If the Spanish Civil War was turbulent for the *Catholic Worker* movement, the Second World War was one long storm. Day’s refusal to support the war on any level was baldly

out of step with American opinion. Although anti-war sentiments had run high in the United States during the mid to late 1930s, intense political and moral pressure in support of European democracies had carved an opening for military engagement before Pearl Harbor in 1941.⁴⁶ From an American Catholic perspective, the war against the Axis – a war of self-defense against aggressive, undemocratic, and racist regimes – was tailor-made as a just war. Minor tensions within the mainstream church about the fine points of the theory fell away. Even progressive Catholics widely endorsed Roosevelt’s measures to first prepare for and then lead the nation to war. The majority of Catholics, when they came around to fighting, came around with vigour: “The [Catholic] interventionists saw the need to destroy this manifestation of evil with armed force in alliance with Divine Providence. There was no room for compromise” (Sicius 73).

The steadfastness of Day’s pacifism is remarkable if only because her grasp of fascism’s threat had been so prescient. Day and the Catholic Workers had denounced anti-semitism in Hitler’s Germany as early as 1934. Nancy Roberts, a Catholic Worker historian, notes that “The *Catholic Worker* eclipsed most – perhaps all – American publications, both religious and secular, in the speed and concern with which it disclosed the Jewish persecution” (Roberts 122). The newspaper had also taken on home-grown Catholic anti-semitism, criticizing Father Coughlin’s demagoguery and the 1939 publication of the so-called “Protocols of the Elders of Zion” in his journal, *Social Justice* (Roberts 123).⁴⁷ The same year Day helped to co-found the Committee of Catholics to Fight Anti-Semitism. Her political radar was acute. During the 1930s the *Catholic Worker* protested the Nazi’s harassment of communists, trade unionists, progressive Catholics, and other targets.

As war approached Day did not suppress her disapproval of the belligerent climate. Her message was defiant. In the front-page article, “Love One Another,” in the June 1941 *Catholic Worker*, Day energetically countered Roosevelt’s call to prepare for patriotic war. “Mr. President,” she wrote, “. . . You say that we have ‘chosen human freedom – which is the Christian ideal.’ We choose to exercise that freedom, then, to inform you that we will **not** cooperate, we will **not** participate, we will **not** unite with you in this

‘emergency’ or undeclared war. . .” (1) (emphasis in original). When the United States finally declared war, Day did not waver. In the paper’s January 1942 edition, the first after Pearl Harbor, she affirmed the Sermon on the Mount precepts and the Catholic Workers’ refusal to participate in armed struggle, weapons production, government bonds, or other forms of public support for the war effort (4).

Day was no fool. Politically and religiously, she understood the outrageousness of her position. Politically and religiously, she held to the position. Europe’s second mass war of the century, Day believed, was the direct result of the first. The damages of 1919 had created socio-economic systems that thrived on division and exploitation. English, French, and American self-interest had exacerbated the tensions that led to war. Like Weil, Day saw no purity in the Axis’s ‘victims.’ She also saw clearly that the Vatican had spent the 1930s more anxious about the possibility of communism than the reality of fascism. Rome’s concordats with Italy and Germany and its support for fascist regimes in Austria and Portugal were evidence of this priority. As late as 1937, “as the democracies were awakening to the menace of Germany, Pius XI issued the strongest condemnation of communism to date, the encyclical *Divini Redemptoris* . . .” (O’Brien 82).

With the American Catholic church and its members now solidly behind the war, Day’s pacifism would be punished. Remarkably, the church establishment made no direct attempt to close her down. From the newspaper’s inception, Day had felt her way into what proved a durable survival strategy: keep a respectful – genuinely respectful – distance from the institutional church and, at the same time, draw freely from the church’s own well-springs. Her obedience to church authority was sincere, which perplexed some of her fellow travellers. But it was an ingenious obedience. Jim Forest, a Catholic Worker and biographer of Day, recounted a conversation:

‘If the cardinal asked me to stop publishing articles on pacifism tomorrow, I would do so immediately,’ she told me one day. ‘You mean,’ I responded with alarm, ‘if he says give up our stand on war, we give it up?’ ‘Not at all. But it means then we only use quotations from the Bible, the words of

Jesus, the sayings of the saints, the encyclicals of the popes, nothing of our own' (*Remembering* 107).

Day routinely showcased the underground tradition of Catholic pacifism. The *Catholic Worker* carried essays by contemporary theologians of various pacifist stripes, including Paul Hanly Furfey, Jacques Maritain, and Thomas Merton. Day also dug deep to publish works by church fathers such as St. John Chrysostom and St. Clement of Alexandria. She is credited with uncovering for American Catholics the non-violent message of spiritual masters from the early Christian centuries, the Renaissance, and beyond, an oft-times buried stream of pacifism that "ran, nevertheless, an unceasing course" (Egan 1988, 84).

In 1942 Day wrote to the church about her plans to publish a pacifist message, reminding them how they had tolerated "the pacifist point of view during the Spanish Civil War" (Roberts 128). The Catholic Workers were again spared official censorship during the war years but again suffered serious losses.⁴⁸ The *Catholic Worker's* circulation dropped from a peak of 190,000 (1938) to a low of 50,500 during the war (Roberts 119). The drop was largely due to the church's informal censorship (cancellations of bundled copies to Catholic schools and parishes); individual subscriptions actually rose in this period (132). Internal dissent was also costly. Catholic Workers were no more inclined than other American pacifists to refuse all support to the war effort, and many young CW men either enlisted, worked in war industries, or served as medics. Day was considered too hard line, even dictatorial, by some Workers. They worried that her public stand against conscription would place unbearable pressures on the movement, undoing its good works and destroying the newspaper.⁴⁹ The Chicago branch broke with her over the war and adopted a conventional position that emphasized "individual conscience worked out within the tradition of just-war theology" (Sicius 67). By 1944 twenty-three houses of hospitality had closed, and only nine houses and seven farms remained (Roberts 132).

Day's most visible campaign in this period was her opposition to universal conscription, specifically "her insistence on . . . having men refuse to register for the draft," an action she pioneered among Catholic pacifists (Klejment 1966, 25). The Catholic

Worker's anti-conscription position was laid out carefully, with Day relying on scholars, saints, and popes to make some of the argument. In the November 1939 *Catholic Worker*, Rev. G. Barry O'Toole, a professor at the Catholic University of America, contributed a lengthy philosophical piece regarding ends and means. A just war was nearly impossible, he wrote, because the "modern abuse of *universal conscription*" made wars "on so *gigantic* a scale" as to be unjustifiable (1, italics in original). Day was the only Catholic layperson to address senate hearings on the Burke-Wadsworth Compulsory Military Training bill in 1940.⁵⁰ She employed the words of Pius XI. The fallacy of "an armed peace," which the pope had deplored in an 1922 encyclical, was, Day quoted, "scarcely better than war itself, a condition which tends to exhaust national finances, to waste the flower of youth, to muddy and poison the very fountain heads of life, physical, intellectual, religious and moral."⁵¹ Her message to the hearings was at complete odds with the official stance presented by the National Catholic Welfare Conference, which took pains to nail down the patriotic virtue of Catholics. Day was aware of her role as a layperson who could speak for the men who would actually face combat, unlike the clergy and seminarians who were exempt under the conscription bill (Egan 1988, 78).

Resistance to war preparations, civilian war duties, and conscription: this was the three-pronged focus of Day's pacifism during and after the Second World War. The militarization of peacetime is not an easy threat to discern during the crisis of war, but the Catholic Workers foresaw it. They objected strenuously to the 1944 May Bill to establish permanent conscription. "The bill . . . would lead to the complete militarization of our educational system," said an unsigned article in the December 1944 *Catholic Worker*: "Universal military service offers no assurance of peace, but instead builds the basis for war" (1).⁵² While Eleanor Roosevelt campaigned unsuccessfully for women's inclusion in the bill, Day protested the drift towards an over-armed society. War seemed to seep into everything, infiltrating culture and co-opting families. Day refused any role in a war that required the seduction of whole populations so that "housewives are urged to save fat for explosives and school children are urged to buy bonds for bombers, and to bring scrap

for shrapnel to disfigure, maim and kill their brothers in Christ, but with love' ” (qtd in Elie 140).

But the seduction of a population was not as dreadful as a population's total destruction. Day noted that both the Axis and Allies had employed this method of modern warfare: “We did a clean job of wiping out whole cities, by obliteration bombing, flame throwers . . . ” she wrote in the May 1951 *Catholic Worker*. “The atom bomb, released by a flick of the hand, a pressure of a finger, makes a clean sweep of an entire city” (2). Under the nuclear cloud, the post-war focus of Day and the Catholic Workers would be resistance to the normalization of violence.

Uncivil, indefensible

In the 1950s pacifists had several tasks. The clearest challenges were resisting the ideology of nuclear deterrence, the use of tax dollars to produce and stockpile weapons, and the division of people along Cold War lines. Day summarized these tasks as a protest against “the terrible injustice our basic capitalist industrial system perpetuates by making profits out of preparation for war” (*Loaves* 161). A particular tactic she used was disobeying the Civil Defence Act, which required all citizens to take shelter during air-raid drills. During these Ban the Bomb demonstrations, Day and other dissenters would sit peacefully in a public park rather than in a shelter. They advertised their intentions, invited others, and fully expected to be arrested.⁵³ And so they were. Between 1955 and 1960, Day was arrested and imprisoned four times, after pleading guilty (judges would not oblige her with jail on all occasions).⁵⁴ In 1957, going on sixty years of age, she was incarcerated for a month.

The demonstrators used Gandhian tactics: modelling non-violent behaviour, shaming authorities, and practising forbearance. Their goal went beyond unmasking the lie that a nuclear war was survivable, much less winnable. Day and others, including A.J. Muste of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, also opposed the encroachment of the state, which compelled citizens to obey a law that violated individual conscience. Catholic Workers deplored the psychological warfare of the fifties, when Americans were

encouraged to believe in and “accept the inevitability of nuclear war” (Klejment 1986, xxv). Air-raid drills were only superficially a civic duty. More pointedly, they were a mass acquiescence to fear, naivety, and delusion, stirred up in a frantic anti-communist climate. Day also saw her acts of civil disobedience as a means to atone, publicly, for the atomic bombings of Japan, a horror that was trivialized by the idea that nuclear warfare was manageable (Roberts 153).

By 1960 civil defense protests that had attracted handfuls in the early years were drawing thousands. The ensuing decade was one of intense activity for Day. She sojourned in Cuba, fasted in Rome with women’s peace contingents during the Second Vatican Council, and organized against the Vietnam War. The pacifism of the Catholic Worker movement was a forerunner, if not a direct antecedent, of the 1960s’ protest movements that would, once again, make the link between militarism, consumerism, and spiritual poverty.

Disarming the Heart

As a pacifist Day made no claims to moral superiority. She did not condemn people who participated in wars, and she readily understood how men were conditioned to defend their country and identity.⁵⁵ Not even Catholic Workers were immune to the pressures. In a cover article in the September 1938 *Catholic Worker*, Day explained the newspaper’s neutrality in the Spanish Civil War and admitted, “Of all at *The Catholic Worker* how many would not instinctively defend himself with any forceful means in his power?” (1). She recognized the gulf between belief and reaction, and viewed this gulf as precisely what cried out for a new response. Human customs were often aggressive, whether for protection, vengeance, or self-interest. For Day, the way to disrupt these old habits was to embrace the supernatural. Pacifists needed to prepare “the way of love” by disarming their hearts.⁵⁶

Disarmament of the heart was Day’s counterweight to force – her prescription and method, the means by which pacifism would actually work. It was a simple phrase yet should not be misread as simplistic. The church officially disapproved of violence: “turn

the other cheek” and “love thy enemy” were fundamental Christian dogma, not esoterica. Yet the Catholic establishment had been four-square behind the major wars of the century and had little interest in promoting pacifism. It was precisely in the church’s failure to denounce war that “the claim of Christianity to be a religion of love, and its betrayal by so many Christians, could be seen especially starkly” (Elie 140). Day understood the political and economic dynamics that promoted war. She had analyzed the infrastructure and ideology of the two dominant systems – capitalism and totalitarianism – and saw how, within both, war was profitable to some and irresistible to many. Disarming the heart was not meant as a pretty metaphor. Nor was it a call to merely change attitudes or actions. Disarming the heart was to be a *practice*.

For Day and the Catholic Workers, the practice of pacifism could only grow from the practice of mercy; to be exact, from performing works of mercy – a Christian precept about relating to fellow humans with compassion, care, impartiality, and selflessness. Works of mercy, both spiritual and corporal, are held to be a mirroring of the life and teachings of Christ.⁵⁷ Day herself performed these works throughout her life, and she often described their centrality to the Catholic Worker movement. Within houses of hospitality, farming communities, and political campaigns, Catholic Workers were to practise the works of mercy as a means to alleviate suffering and to transform society at its roots. They shared this revolutionary map with the American sociologist-priest, Paul Hanly Furfey, a leading figure in progressive Catholic circles. Furfey, like Peter Maurin and Day, had an affinity for the personalist philosophy of Emmanuel Mounier, and he too based social change on the supernatural. In particular, he extolled

the works of mercy in imitation of the life of Christ: feeding the poor, clothing the naked, providing shelter for those without, visiting the sick and the imprisoned, instructing the ignorant – in general attempting to assist one’s neighbor both materially and spiritually but always from a supernatural motivation . . . to fulfill the love of neighbor that had to follow from love of God . . . (O’Brien 186)

In her autobiography Day listed the spiritual works of mercy in her inventive style: “enlightening the ignorant, rebuking the sinner, consoling the afflicted, as well as bearing wrongs patiently, and we have always classed picket lines and the distribution of literature among these works” (*Long* 220).⁵⁸ She explicitly called upon Catholic Workers to counter the works of war with the works of mercy. The traditional church might perform traditional acts of charity but Catholic Workers were bent on social revolution, and the unit of change would be the individual.

This personalist approach to social change did not just hinge on serving people as individuals (rather than as clients, cases, or proletariat). Importantly, it also hinged on how the person performing the merciful act would be altered. Day was attuned to how the works of mercy could challenge one’s sense of entitlement and, more deeply, one’s sense of self. The alteration would not be easy nor would it necessarily be pleasant. Living with dispossessed and difficult people, and embracing voluntary poverty to do so, was an ego-shattering discipline:

We suffer these things and they fade from memory. But daily, hourly, to give up our own possessions and especially to subordinate our own impulses and wishes to others – these are hard, hard things; and I don’t think they ever get any easier.

You can strip yourself, you can be stripped, but still you will reach out like an octopus to seek your own comfort, your untroubled time, your ease, your refreshment No, it is not simple, this business of poverty (*Loaves* 80).

Day considered “this business of poverty” to be invaluable. To take personal responsibility for the well-being of strangers, to work directly and daily with people, could lead to a scouring *and* a polishing of the soul. Day wrote often of the need to “put off the old man” and put on the new, not simply for the sake of personal liberation but to mend the world. To her, the link between poverty, work, and pacifism was unbreakable. Voluntary poverty was like an economizing of self, a downsizing of ego, that enabled one to meet Christ in the other.

Day often wrote as though she believed material comforts were a clutter that formed walls around each person, shutting down contact with others. In an extended essay entitled “Poverty and Pacifism,” published in the December 1944 *Catholic Worker*, she wrote: “Love of brother means voluntary poverty, stripping one’s self, . . . denying one’s self, etc.” (7). Without this practice, without encounters with suffering, and without undoing the fear, judgement, and disgust that suffering evokes in the human psyche, a person would remain ill suited for peace-making, no matter how firm their convictions. Love for one’s enemy – the ability to imagine their frailties, fears, and hopes – was unlikely to arise if one had not yet learned to love one’s rude neighbour, irritating co-worker, or troubled relative. In this regard, the pacifism of the Catholic Worker movement was akin to Gandhi’s concept of *satyagraha*, a Gujarati word usually translated as “firmness in truth,” denoting a kind of soul force. Gandhi recognized that, to be effective, an individual must enter “political action with a fully awakened and operative spiritual power in himself, the power of . . . nonviolent dedication to truth . . .” (Merton 206). Pacifism without a daily practice of self-denial, discipline, and compassion would be not only illusory but impossible.

Day understood that personal experience was the training ground for conflict between nations, and that personal experience both flowed from and fashioned society. In 1964 she wrote about the roots of war apropos of a dispute among some Catholic Workers: “We have written and spoken many times of all the aspects of war, the beginnings in our own hearts, the hostilities in the family between husband and wife, parents and children, children and parent. The entire conflict of authority and freedom” (*Sixties* 183). As anarchists and pacifists, she wrote, we deal with these matters ceaselessly.

Anarchist and pacifist. Authority and freedom. The significance of Day’s combining of these words in a passage about war cannot be overlooked, any more than her association of the quotidian with the spiritual. Self-governance was a core value for Day, though she did not use the expression.⁵⁹ Her pacifism drew upon Christian sources yet also reflected her political temperament, which was suspicious of remote power

structures and authorities. Day's horror of war and her staunch anti-war activism in the face of criticism and loss were due, in part, to her horror of enslavement, whether mental or physical. War, after all, was a prison of bodies and spirits, and war was a delusion.⁶⁰ This most concrete of collective acts – this heavy arrangement of bodies and materials – relied on a scaffold of beliefs that was contrived, arbitrary, and destructive of conscience. War reflected its parentage: mass society itself. Whether a society was capitalist, socialist, or totalitarian, the sheer scale of organization made human freedom and human community unsupportable. And unfree, disassociated humans were incapable of the love – the devotion and service – upon which pacifism depended.

Day was also literal about the idea of loving one's enemies. It was not a simplistic literalness but a deep grasp of the revolutionary seed in the message. To love an enemy was to cast into question both "love" and "enemy." What was love if it could flow to a person one feared or despised? What was an enemy if he or she were not only eligible for warm-heartedness but entitled to it? Ultimately, Day's understanding of the message was based on her capacity for practice: loving your enemy was not a rule or a talent; it was what you had to try to do, day after day. Her Catholicism was a theology of effort.

At the root of Catholic Worker politics lay no grand theory of social change. They offered no building blocks à la Marx, no inevitable stages. For a Catholic Worker, there were only acts and actors guided by bedrock Christian values within a communal setting. There was study and work, service and prayer, all performed in an atmosphere of immediacy. This personal approach bore some resemblance to Gandhi's paradigm of nonviolence, in which aggressors were to be destabilized by peaceful resistance: a display of vulnerability and openness that "removes any basis for fear, anger, or foreboding" (Chatfield 1971, 205). There was also in Day's method a penitential quality: a sense that the hardship endured by the individual peacemaker would radiate a positive effect beyond his or her personal sphere (Zwicker np). Yet Day and the Catholic Workers never elaborated their pacifism into a system of social change. As she wrote in the *Catholic Worker* editorial of June 1939, "The only way we can show our love for our brother is by

doing something for them” (4). The works of mercy would be modelled beside the works of war. The hard work of love would go up against the hardness of societies built for war.

The Catholic Worker movement may not have been efficient but neither was it blinkered or utopian. The path was evidently a slog: unpopular, messy, and slow. It was, in Day’s words, “a paying of the cost of love” (*Loaves* 47).

Chapter 4:

Simone Weil: Metaphysician of War

Every time we closely and in a concrete manner examine ways of actually alleviating oppression and inequality, we always come up against war, the aftereffects of war, and the necessities imposed by the preparation for war. We will never untangle this knot; we must cut it – that is, if we can.

– Simone Weil (*Formative* 254)

While Dorothy Day's actions and ideas regarding war were rooted in her interpretation of Christian and socialist principles, Simone Weil drew from a wider intellectual pool. Her approach to war and violence can be divided into two major spheres: her political analyses of militarism and social conflict, and her metaphysical reflections on force and power. Within these explorations, she often remarked on the similarities between the terms of war and the terms of work – the battleground and the shop floor – similarities that were both literal and figurative.

During the 1930s Weil analyzed the historical dimensions of war in essays and letters that convey her ample scholarship and keen grasp of European affairs. For a European intellectual, there was nothing abstract about political instability and armed struggle: these were the dominant features of European history and dominant subjects for political theorists. Her earliest responses to war were typical of many in her milieu, and her prose was confident and frequently anguished. Weil condemned war as imperialistic and anti-worker; she was motivated more by a refusal to fight a capitalist war than by an explicit commitment to peaceful social change.

In her 1933 essay, "Reflections on War,"⁶¹ Weil surveyed the beliefs of progressives and Marxists since the eighteenth century, highlighting differences that the contemporary left had yet to resolve. Pacifism had never been part of the original revolutionary menu, she noted; the *soupe du jour* was a glorious war of liberation (*Formative* 237). Not until the 1870 Franco-Prussian conflict were workers and their theorists forced to hammer out their positions on war. Weil described how Marx advised against wars of

conquest but endorsed the need for defensive wars; Engels, on the other hand, advocated protection for the country with the most advanced working-class movement and the vanquishing of reactionary nations (238). Offensive or defensive, the criteria for military action was whatever best served the proletariat. Bolsheviks and Spartacists adopted yet another stance whereby “the proletariat must wish for the defeat of its own country and sabotage the war effort in it” (238). Weil pointed out the fatal flaw in this position: workers were encouraged to help defeat their own (albeit imperialistic) country, while those in the opposing country were obliged to prevent the war from ever starting.⁶² Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg presented other views on revolutionary and defensive wars – disagreements within the left were endless. “It is obvious,” Weil wrote, “that, as far as war is concerned, the Marxist tradition offers neither unity nor clarity” (*Formative* 239).

The horrors of the First World War had further disrupted the convoluted debate, not so much on a theoretical level but by producing “another moral atmosphere” (*Formative* 239). Soldiers, even revolutionary Russian soldiers, were no longer willing to fight. This refusal by ordinary people, Weil wrote, pushed proletariat parties towards a rhetoric that was explicitly pacifist. She acknowledged that Hitler’s rise had altered the landscape yet again, causing “all the old ideas, inextricably mixed together, [to] float to the surface” (*Formative* 240). She bemoaned the confusion of her day: leftists tugging in various unimaginative directions, many French favouring war against Germany, and many pacifists remaining pacifist for no reason other than habit and fatigue. At this point in the 1930s, Weil, like most of her radical circle, was as dismayed by the prospect of war as she was by the ascent of fascism. Hers was not the pacifism of a gentle soul but a clear-eyed rejection of nationalism and militarism on historical grounds.

The Body in Means and Ends

Weil’s closing argument in “Reflections on War” was one that resonated throughout her other political writings: the primacy of means over ends. She did not condemn any and all violence as an absolute pacifist would, but recognized that each historical circumstance lent itself to specific *mechanisms* of violence, which must be specifically appraised.

Arguments for or against war were inevitably flawed, she wrote, if they assessed a situation based on aims rather than on methods (*Formative* 241).

The question of ends and means is common to pacifists of many tendencies. For example, Alexander Berkman, the would-be assassin of the industrialist Frick, grafted an ends-and-means pacifism onto his vision of revolutionary anarchism in his later years, claiming “You can’t grow a rose from a cactus seed” (qtd. in Sibley 21).⁶³ Aldous Huxley, a pacifist influenced by Asian spirituality and ideas of non-attachment, argued in his 1937 book, *Ends and Means*, that a peaceful aim could not justify aggressive means “for the simple and obvious reason” that ends inevitably reflect the means used to achieve them (qtd. in Sibley 31). The inextricable link between ends and means, according to pacifists, rested on two separate ideas: 1) the two elements were morally inseparable, so that a violent act with a good intention was, nevertheless, fatally tainted by violence; and 2) actions (the means) must embody the values of the social goal (the end), so that a non-violent act was both a sign of positive change (within the actors) and a signal to their opponents that goodness was humanly possible.⁶⁴ Weil made a distinctive contribution to the issue: for her, actual experience – the intersection of time and space in bodies – was the site that revealed the indelible tie between ends and means.

In her estimation, soldiers were enslaved to war machines just as workers were to factories – “reduced to the state of passive matter manipulated by a military and bureaucratic apparatus” (*Formative* 247). Their bodies were subordinated to armaments and to the will of leaders, who did not themselves risk life and limb on the battlefield. A nation, she wrote, could only defeat its enemies by compelling its own people to fight to the death. Thus “the war of one state against another is immediately transformed into a war of the state . . . against its own army” (*Formative* 241). The ends of a war were thus irrelevant, she said, because every state is obliged to use this murderous method irrespective of its position – defensive or offensive, imperialist or nationalist – “since the enemy uses it” (*Formative* 242). Modern warfare was beyond redemption.

Nor could war be excused as a defensive foreign policy, an error to which socialists were especially prone. The means of war were so explicitly harmful to one’s own

soldiers that war was, in fact, always a domestic policy, and “the most atrocious one of all” (242). Interestingly, Weil added that her view was based neither on sentimentality nor on a “superstitious respect for human life.” Rather, war was oppressive because it violated an individual’s integrity. She was both literal and figurative about this violation.

Oppression, Weil seemed to say, does not lie in danger, hardship, or even death. It lies in the inability to choose how to invest one’s own energies and how to manoeuvre within the confines of a task. A soldier in modern warfare was useful only as a body, just like a worker in modern industry. Their obedience was tainted because it was servile and passive. As we have seen, Weil regarded honourable obedience – granted, not coerced – to be a political and spiritual value of immense significance. As she would later write in *The Need for Roots*:

Those who keep masses of men in subjection by exercising force and cruelty deprive them at once of two vital foods: liberty and obedience; for it is no longer within the powers of such masses to accord their inner consent . . . (14)

War was just one element in an overall system of domination that degraded individuals. Coercion was the central paradigm of modern societies, whether of the left, right, or centre. Consider the manner in which war and fascism were kin, said Weil: “Both . . . essentially involve a kind of aggravated fanaticism that leads to the total effacement of the individual before the state bureaucracy” (*Formative* 246). In their effects, war and fascism were indistinguishable; to wage war against fascism, then, was nothing short of absurd. In her view, any centralized structure of control, however superficially benign, was a manifestation of the “Great Beast,” a phrase Weil borrowed from Plato to express her disdain for collectivities. She believed that groups were incapable of genuine intelligence or ethical behaviour.⁶⁵ In the 1930s, Weil seemed to say, the beast did not march under a single banner or threaten from afar. It could be found at home, in many guises: “[N]o matter what name it bears – fascism, democracy, or dictatorship of the proletariat – the principal enemy remains the administrative, police, and military apparatus; not the

apparatus across the border from us . . . but the one that calls itself our defender and makes us its slaves” (*Formative* 248).

Like Day, Weil believed that military and civilian apparatuses were mirrors of one another. Both systems required the appropriation of bodies and souls; both were designed to produce glory and gain for a select group. Neither situation required a teasing out of the means from the ends: they were indistinguishable. War was society by another name.

Facing the Beast

Weil’s prescription for the 1930s was anti-war in the broadest sense. Her worry was that German militarism would provoke France into an arms race and, in short order, a war. For those who could not bear to be inactive, she wrote, the choices were grim. They could either impede “the military machine in which we ourselves constitute the wheels, or [help] that machine to blindly crush human lives” (*Formative* 247). It was a depressed rallying cry from a woman who would, in a year’s time, voluntarily enter a factory and experience first hand the industrial juggernaut.

Throughout the decade Weil grappled with issues relating to nationalism, the looming German threat, French insecurity, and the economic underpinnings of hostilities. She held to a kind of world-weary anti-war position until the brink of hostilities in 1938. In a letter to one of her students in 1934, she wrote with disgust that the socialists and communists had withdrawn their commitment to fight colonialism and militarism, while gearing up to fight Germany. “Such being the situation,” Weil wrote, “it is my firm decision to take no further part in *any* political or social activities, with two exceptions: anticolonialism and the campaign against passive defense exercises” (Pétrément 212). Weil’s resistance to defence exercises anticipated Dorothy Day’s refusal to participate in civil defence drills in the 1950s. War, as both women understood, was physically impossible without war preparations, which must therefore be resisted at all levels of civic and economic life. In a 1938 letter to a leftist member of the *Chambre des Députés*, Weil lamented the fact that efforts to preserve a European balance of power would necessitate vast expenditures on weapons. An arms race would not only distort the economy and

hasten the likelihood of war, it would create moral decay – “nervous tension, regimentation of minds, infringements of liberty, individual and collective anxiety” (*Letters* 97) – with no guarantee of safety. A balance of power, she recognized, was little more than a vicious circle, whereby improving the security of one nation – an arms build-up – meant threatening the security of their neighbour (*Letters* 98).

In 1938 Weil still maintained an anti-war stance, even though it could mean delivering Europe into the clutches of fascism. “A war in Europe would be certain disaster . . . for everyone and from every point of view,” she wrote in summarizing this position, “whereas a German hegemony in Europe, however bitter the prospect, might in the end not be a disaster for Europe” (*Letters* 100). It is a striking statement. One cannot help but feel that, in this period, Weil was allowing her anti-war convictions to trump her awareness of political and moral catastrophe. Her dilemma is a textbook example of the precarious position of pacifists, absolute or otherwise, in threatening times. Their choices are few and always uncomfortable. If defensive violence is rejected, then offensive violence must be faced in a spirit of submission or resistance. In any event, the experience will be harsh. Here Weil opted to ‘roll over’ in hopes that the means of German fascism would be less life-destroying than the means of total war. It was as though fascism could be abstracted yet corpses on a battlefield were undeniably real. Weil’s stance would change later when she firmly rejected the idea of a choice between fascism or slaughter: the two clearly went hand in hand.

Weil was in no way naive about Hitlerism, and her insights into the psychology of domination and war were considerable. Hitler, she wrote, had no choice but to muscle his way to supremacy in Europe: he had boxed himself into a domestic corner and needed foreign resources “to speak to Europe in the tone he must use in order to continue to speak as master to the Germans” (*Letters* 101). Years later, writing *The Need for Roots* in England, she discussed the psychological substrata of European wars. Hitler was merely being a good Roman, she wrote, a well-admired type; his actions reflected the hunger for greatness that runs throughout western history. “Was it his fault,” she asked provocatively, “if he was unable to perceive any form of greatness except the criminal

form?" (*NFR* 216). The solution to this kind of aggression, she wrote, would be a cultural revolution: "The only punishment capable of punishing Hitler, and deterring little boys thirsting for greatness . . . is such a total transformation of the meaning attached to greatness that he should thereby be excluded from it" (*NFR* 217). Discredit the mythology, she suggested, by advancing a gentler one. She also made a sharp observation about war's self-perpetuating nature: "Is not the real aim of war nowadays the acquisition of the means for making war?" (*Letters* 101).

As we've seen, Weil's principled refusal to support war against Germany could leave her (and other pacifists) on shaky ground. Another fault line in Weil's thinking was her startling anti-Jewishness, startling because she was otherwise hyper-sensitive to oppression and quite free of hateful attitudes. The defect was evident in a 1938 letter to Jean Posternak, a young medical student she had befriended. She deplored the layers of dishonesty that had permeated French political and social life as war approached, creating "an unbreathable moral atmosphere" (*Letters* 94). France faced two options, she wrote: war against Germany for the sake of Czechoslovakia or "an anti-democratic *coup d'état*" by Prime Minister Daladier and the army. Although the latter would undoubtedly lead to violent anti-semitism and brutal suppression of the left in France, she wrote, it was the better option because "it would be less murderous of French youth as a whole" (*Letters* 95). Again, Weil was favouring selective repression over wholesale destruction, but her anti-Jewishness is apparent in the coldness of this opinion. Her reasoning is also an example of moral bargaining by an anti-war intellectual in times of escalating conflict. With the rising Nazi threat, an anti-war position had no realistic hope for peace; it simply held out for a less bloody conclusion.

"Paris was the rear"

The Spanish Civil War (1936-39) was appalling not only for its human toll but for its wrenching of political positions. We have seen how American Catholics were torn by the war. In Europe, the Nationalist attack on the Spanish Republic grew into a kind of test match between Franco-style fascists (the military establishment aligned with the Roman

Catholic Church and aristocracy) and leftists (many shades of communist, anarchist, syndicalist, and liberal). Massacres of entire villages, in-fighting among the Loyalists, murders of priests and nuns, interventions by Italy, Germany, and the Soviet Union, deployment of modern weapons, and thousands of international volunteers – all these whipped the Spanish Civil War into a political maelstrom.

Just as Day and the Catholic Workers were stung by the conflict, Weil faced her own difficult choice. She supported French Prime Minister Léon Blum's neutral stance, yet neutrality offered no comfort. For anti-war leftists, the Spanish war was a nightmare. By its nature and etiology, any war was oppressive – but being a bystander in this war was unbearable to Weil. She had withdrawn from direct political action after her shattering factory experiences in 1934-35, yet she never shed her basic activist orientation: to seek the heart of effort, even danger. As her biographer Simone Pétrement wrote, “She was ready to sacrifice herself personally to help the Spanish people but not to sacrifice peace” (280), a position almost identical to Day's. In a 1938 letter to the French Catholic writer, George Bernanos,⁶⁶ Weil explained her reaction to the outbreak of war. She had been in Paris in August 1936:

I do not love war; but what has always seemed to me most horrible in war is the position of those in the rear I could not prevent myself from participating morally in that war – in other words, from hoping all day and every day for the victory of one side and the defeat of the other – [and] I decided that, for me, Paris was the rear and I took the train to Barcelona, with the intention of enlisting. (*Letters* 106)

Hope for one side, then, must be translated into action; anything less would be immoral. Critics such as Athanasios Moulakis see courage at the root of her choice: “Her courage, that aversion to the gap between will and action, overcame her loathing of violence” (170). But there was also in Weil a certain craving for physical contact – unmediated and bare – with the heaviest pressures that human experience could offer. It was as though she was congenitally attuned to human suffering, would do anything to diminish it, but would

not avoid an affliction that others were powerless to avoid. Yet she did not have an appetite for misery or abuse. “I believe in the value of suffering,” Weil wrote in her 1930s notebook, “so long as one makes every [legitimate] effort to escape it” (*FLN* 3). She did, however, have deep empathy and a conviction that human life was unsparing.

Weil’s time in Spain was disastrous. She linked up with an anarchist unit in the north but was shipped home within a few weeks, her leg badly burnt in a cooking accident. She had carried a rifle and gone on patrol but never confronted gunfire. What she did confront was ruthlessness. Weil described hearing about the execution of a fifteen-year-old boy captured from the Falangist side. Durruti, the leader of the Catalan anarchist unions of the C.N.T. column (la Confederación nacional del Trabajo), had given the teenager twenty-four hours to reconsider his allegiance. The boy refused, and Durruti shot him. “The death of this little hero has never ceased to weigh on my conscience,” she wrote (*Letters* 107). Spain was a fleeting but vivid exposure to both the barbaric and seductive aspects of war. Examining her own side, Weil could see the slow entanglements, the erosion of individual morality, the assertions of the herd. It seemed to her that no one resisted the call:

As soon as men know they can kill without fear of punishment or blame, they kill; or at least they encourage killers with approving smiles. If anyone happens to feel a slight distaste to begin with, he keeps quiet and he soon begins to suppress it for fear of seeming unmanly. People get carried away by a sort of intoxication which is irresistible without a fortitude of soul which I am bound to consider exceptional since I have met it nowhere. (*Letters* 108).

At the time of her evacuation, she intended to return to the front but later decided against it. Weil’s original interpretation of the war – “famished peasants against landed proprietors and their clerical supporters” (*Letters* 106) – had been toppled by geo-political realities. The Soviets, Germany, and Italy were involved, and the Spanish conflict had blossomed into every evil she feared war to possess.

Abandoning pacifism

Never an outright pacifist, Weil had accepted by 1939 that war against Germany was necessary.⁶⁷ She was not drawn to the fight by patriotism, a noteworthy fact in a nation where leftist intellectuals were known to jettison their passionate pacifism when the honour of France was at stake.⁶⁸ Weil was troubled by France's status as a colonial power, which made it a less-than-honourable state. She was also disturbed by France's failure to avert war by relieving German reparations, among other missed opportunities for generosity. Pétrement described Weil's position: "If she no longer had any hesitations about deciding that it was necessary to fight Hitler, she nonetheless felt, sadly, that France's case was not entirely just" (354). Weil regarded the Franco-German armistice of 1940 as "a collective act of cowardice and treason" (*Letters* 158), yet also felt compassion for those of her compatriots living in collaboratist Vichy France.

She and her parents made their way out of the occupied north, albeit with some reluctance on her part. Weil's parents were alarmed by anti-semitism; Simone had little sense of this danger largely because she did not identify as Jewish. They moved first to Marseilles, where Weil sought work in the countryside as a farm hand.⁶⁹ In the spring of 1942 they travelled to New York City via Casablanca. Weil was determined to join the Free French forces – leaving France had felt like "an act of desertion" (*Letters* 144) – and she goaded various compatriots to speed her way to London. She was anxious for a visceral connection with the war effort and wrote letters requesting an espionage assignment in Vichy France: "I would accept any degree of risk (including death if the objective was sufficiently important)" (*Letters* 154). She eventually sailed alone to England in November 1942. Nine months later, after writing *The Need for Roots*, a report commissioned by the Free French office, she died. The causes were exhaustion, self-imposed starvation, and tuberculosis. Weil was thirty-four years old.

Her prolific writings in this brief, unsettled time – letters, essays, notebooks, and *The Need for Roots* – were a fusion of her political and spiritual preoccupations. Weil's spiritual orientation, which arose in the mid-1930s and accelerated after her mystical experiences in 1938,⁷⁰ never came at the expense of political thoughtfulness. *The Need for*

Roots, written in the last year of her life (1943), was supposed to provide a blueprint for the economic and social revitalization of post-war France. It was a rich blend of sociological, philosophical, and theological insights, and one can only imagine how useless this inspired manifesto may have appeared to the hard-headed planners of the French Provisional Government in London.

Weil discussed pacifism in *The Need for Roots*. No nation, she wrote, not even the masses in Gandhi's campaigns, had ever attempted to hinder an enemy *army* with unbending, peaceful determination. Such forbearance she likened to "an imitation of Christ's passion realized on a national scale" (*NFR* 153). To do so, she acknowledged, would probably result in the nation's disappearance. Her own belief was that peaceful resistance was worthier than heroic warfare, but she was enough of a realist to acknowledge that nations were not inclined to self destruct for peace's sake. Only an individual could be expected to "follow the path leading to such perfection" (*NFR* 153). Exceptional persons, then, were capable of extreme obedience and endurance, but a group was not. Given Weil's distrust of the Great Beast, it is not surprising that she had no program for pacifism on a collective scale or for non-violence on a national scale. Her political advocacy for non-violence was pragmatic rather than strictly principled. In *Gravity and Grace*, which draws on notebooks from the early 1940s, Weil stated that a non-violent approach that lacked a material effect was "no good" (*G&G* 77). For non-violent resisters to succeed, they would need to "possess a radiance" of energy that was as powerful as the energy in their muscles – and as effective. The world needed more and more of this non-violent radiant energy, Weil said. She never specified the source of such energy, simply writing that "we should strive" (77).

Indeed, Weil was strikingly impractical when her focus turned to wartime tactics. The poet Czeslaw Milosz described her as having lived a "life of deliberate *foolishness*" (90), albeit a highly conscious foolishness. Weil was incorrigible and dogged, like a creature who had shaken off all masks and peered, with fixed attention, at unbearable subjects. In a 1942 letter from New York City, she pitched an idea to the Free French for a troop of front-line nurses. A select cadre of highly skilled, cool-headed female nurses

could be dispatched to battlefields to deliver first aid to injured soldiers (*Letters* 145-53). The scheme had two aims: direct medical and humanitarian benefits, and indirect moral and inspirational utility. With respect to the latter, Weil envisioned that the fearless, kindly nurses, acting in a “spirit of total sacrifice,” would manifest a courage qualitatively different from the wartime courage that “springs from the will to power and destruction” (150). Both French and German soldiers would witness the nurses’ courage, as would the general public through propaganda. This exposure would have tremendous moral ramifications: the nurses, with their life-affirming demeanor, would be “a gift of creation . . . a sign of moral vitality” (149).

Propaganda, imagination, symbolism – Weil was well aware of how the powerful played these cards. She judged Hitler to be a master at capturing the public’s imagination. The S.S. troops were, she wrote, “a perfect expression of the Hitlerian inspiration” (150). Their brutal heroics were both tactic and theatre. Weil’s unarmed nurses would be the moral and dramatic counterpoint: a brave “maternal solicitude” defying the enemy’s inhumanity, “which he compels us also to practise” (150). The meeting of shock troop and nurse would throw open a choice. The nurses, presumably, would possess the muscular radiance that elevates non-violence to an effective level. Weil would fight fire with love.

The proposal went nowhere. An apocryphal story has Charles de Gaulle muttering, “Mais . . . elle est folle!” while reading the plan (Hellman 80). The idea was not so much unintelligent as too intelligent. Weil had made a serious study of force and violence, and seemed unable to think in half measures during the crisis of war. The nurse cadre was essentially an antidote to violence, a nonaggressive expression of compassion and care. Weil believed that the battle field needed a light-filled presence. The nurses would be more than healers, they would be beacons: “It may be that our victory depends upon the presence among us of . . . inspiration, but authentic and pure” (*Letters* 150). At one level, one cannot help but feel that Weil has drifted into Joan-of-Arc territory (though she makes no suggestion that the radiant nurses are intrinsically French). On another level, one senses her effort to confront raw power with raw goodness. As one commentator said of her

plan, “what mattered was to be in a position to confront the prestige of power with the prestige of the opposite virtues” (Moulakis 173).

For Weil, the prestige of force was not rooted merely in theatricality and devastating material effects. As we have seen, Weil saw power as thriving on its ability to corrupt obedience. She detected another feature, too: its ability to disrupt thought. Force staked its claim over the body *and* the mind. The assault on bodies was easy to observe. The conquest of minds was more subtle and, arguably, more deadly. Humiliation held a key to understanding this dynamic.

Humiliation: Colonization of the mind

Humiliation looms large in many conflicts, either as apologia or smokescreen, and Weil applied herself to understanding the matter’s bearing on war. She had a peculiar sensitivity to the feeling. She never denied her personal experience of humiliation on the factory floor, and she was unforgiving towards powerful people – politicians, bureaucrats, capitalists – who inflicted humiliation on others. Yet she would not tolerate humiliation as a rationalization for war.

In her 1938 letter to Bernanos, Weil described an early insight into the correlation between patriotism and national humiliation. Weil was ten years old at the signing of the Versailles treaty. She had been a staunch girl patriot – “thrilled as children are in war-time” – but the vindictive spirit of Versailles, which Weil described as “the will to humiliate the defeated enemy,” persuaded her on an intuitive level to abandon knee-jerk patriotism: “I suffer more from the humiliations inflicted by my country than from the ones inflicted on her” (*Letters* 109). This is vintage Weil: enthusiasm for political events, abhorrence of cruelty, and passion for the underdog. Her sensitivity to suffering, even the sufferings of a maligned enemy, prevailed over other considerations.

Weil addressed the issue of humiliation again in her 1936 essay, “Reply to One of Alain’s Questions.” Her former professor, the philosopher Alain, had asked in a scholarly journal, “Are the men who speak of honor and dignity as being more precious than life disposed to be the first to risk their lives? And if not, what should we think of them?”

(*Formative 251*). In her reply, Weil dissected the meaning of humiliation, self-respect, and dignity. In the context of international relations, she wrote, it was a mistake to equate self-respect with dignity; they were quite different matters. A loss of self-respect was an internal matter that could arouse feelings of self-contempt, whereas a loss of dignity was an external (social) matter that could arouse feelings of humiliation. Do not confuse the two, she said:

Epictetus treated like a plaything by his master and Jesus slapped and crowned with thorns were in no way diminished in their own eyes. To prefer to die rather than lose one's self-respect is the basis of any moral philosophy; to prefer to die rather than be humiliated is something altogether different; it is merely the feudal code of honor. One may admire the feudal code of honor; one may also, and with good reason, refuse to make it a rule of life. (*Formative 253*)

Humiliation, in short, was a worldly concern that had no genuine bearing on self worth. An act (or atmosphere) of humiliation was actually more damaging to the inflicter than the inflicted.

On a mundane level, Weil noted that humiliation was a painfully common experience for workers under capitalism. Similarly, soldiers endured humiliation at the hands of officers even before putting their bodies on the line. Humiliation was a social norm, she wrote, which suggested the absurdity of fretting about wartime humiliation. Weil then invited the reader to imagine the chaos that would follow if humiliated people stood up for themselves: "If the principle that obligates one to resist being humiliated even at the cost of one's life were applied *inside* the country, it would be subversive of all social order" (*Formative 254*, emphasis added). But she also understood that humiliation, real or imagined, was at the heart of the engine that drove war, just as war was entangled in the heart of all oppressions.

The 1938 Munich Pact gave rise to another meditation on national humiliation, from a different angle.⁷¹ Rather than dismissing humiliation as a mistaken response or an everyday occurrence, Weil looked at how German boldness had produced humiliation

among the French. Yes, she said, the French had felt deeply humiliated by the events of September 1938; the evidence could be found in the “stupor . . . into which we have all been plunged . . .” (*Formative* 275). Yet this reaction was not due to the loss of national prestige. Rather, the French had felt the sting of humiliation’s main weapon, namely “the abasement of thought before the power of a fact” (*Formative* 275). The fact that so stunned the French was not the inevitability of war, but the realization that they were not masters of something as intimate as their own thoughts. “One realizes that men have the power, if they so desire, to tear our thoughts away,” Weil wrote, and fill our minds with “some obsession that is not of our own choosing” (*Formative* 275).

It was a powerful insight. Weil had rejected the obvious causes of French humiliation (loss of face, threat of violence, uncertain future). The real cause was moral dispossession, experienced on a personal scale. The French could no longer think for or about themselves, on their own terms. This colonizing of the psyche – the ability of physical might to penetrate to the depth of intelligence – was the internal expression of war’s havoc.

The Terrible Gift of War

Weil’s political and psychological insights into war were valuable, but it was in the realm of spirituality that she shone among her generation of anti-war intellectuals. As noted earlier, it was not uncommon to be a pacifist after the First World War. Weil would move the debate beyond ethics and politics into the far reaches of human pathos. For her, war was not just a site of oppression but a confrontation with necessity, force, and affliction. Her writings on these subjects, largely unpublished during her lifetime, are a formidable contribution to peace studies.⁷² According to Thomas Merton, “This intuition of the nature and meaning of suffering provides, in Simone Weil, the core of a metaphysic, not to say a theology, of nonviolence. A metaphysic of nonviolence is something that the peace movement needs” (Merton 229).⁷³ The richest expression of Weil’s metaphysics of violence can be found in her essay on *The Iliad*.

Measuring the dominion of force

Weil's *The Iliad, or the Poem of Force*, originally appeared under a pseudonym in the 1940-41 winter edition of *Cahiers du Sud*. Translated into English by the novelist Mary McCarthy, the paper was published in the American journal, *Politics*, in 1945 and then widely distributed as a pamphlet. Weil's interpretation of *The Iliad* was idiosyncratic, unbalanced, and brilliant. Michael K. Ferber described the work as "a clear, cold, dry wind that stings us awake and drives the mist from our eyes" (65). In this essay on Homer, as in much of Weil's writing, one feels the presence of a fearless intelligence, prepared to travel into extreme and extremely uncomfortable territory to honestly report human experience and its contradictions.

Her reading of *The Iliad* may have been atypical but her scholarship was sound. Weil was a skilful student of Greek and spent painstaking hours translating the epic (Pétrement 362). She wrote the essay after the outbreak of German hostilities and, although Weil made no direct mention of Europe's situation, her fascination with suffering and aggression seems related to the immediate perils. To Weil, *The Iliad* was not a heroic account of rivalry, passion, and human folly but rather an authentic portrait of force and pity. Her choice of Homer as the lens through which to elucidate a metaphysics of violence speaks to her admiration of classical Greek culture. In this epic, Weil believed the Greeks displayed a fully mature comprehension of suffering.

The essay started with a declaration: "The true hero, the true subject, the center of the Iliad is force" (*Iliad* 3). Men, she suggested, were first blinded by the force they attempted to wield and then deformed by the force they must bow down to. To Weil, force was any form of domination that degraded and potentially annihilated the self. In *The Iliad*, force was "that [which] turns anybody who is subjected to it into a thing." At its furthest limit, this thinghood was literal: a corpse. But almost worse than death, Weil seems to say, was force's ability to turn a living man into stone – emotionally, intellectually, and morally.

Weil often used the imagery of folding and pleating in the essay. Her war was a kind of compressed reality, a constant bending and enfolding of necessity that made human

life less spacious, certainly less intentional, than one usually cares to believe. War's fury "effaces all conceptions of purpose or goal" (*Iliad* 22); ordinary thinking was overwhelmed and then obliterated. Insanity followed, though Weil did not use this word. The pressure of war shrank any medium in which truce, peace, or even survival could be contemplated. A trap was set: the warrior began almost to seek death. This disregard for his own life – "a man who has rooted out of himself the notion that the light of day is sweet" – translated into a disregard for other lives. A super-human degree of generosity would then be required to extend to someone else what you have denied yourself: respect for life (*Iliad* 24-25). It was at this point that the soldier, even the victorious soldier, became a thing. The failure of generosity and empathy made him no better than a beaten-down slave, reduced to matter (albeit animate), beyond even the sway of language. The ungenerous soldier – unhuman, one could say – was now "possessed by war" in every aspect of his being (*Iliad* 25). This personal annihilation involved a transformation. Wars were fought by men, said Weil, "who have dropped either to the level of inert matter, which is pure passivity, or to the level of blind force, which is pure momentum" (*Iliad* 26). The transformation was a kind of mutation that robbed men of their intelligence and consciousness.

Weil then went beyond describing the mechanisms by which force degrades humans. She believed that *The Iliad* also challenged the illusion that some persons possess power and others do not. In the epic, she wrote, no character was spared: "Force is as pitiless to the man who possesses it, or thinks he does, as it is to its victims; the second it crushes, the first it intoxicates" (*Iliad* 11). She painted a battleground in which the powerful human, like his victim, became incapable of awareness, as though shedding his moral vocabulary: "[He] seems to walk through a non-resistant element; . . . nothing has the power to interpose . . . the tiny interval that is reflection" (*Iliad* 13). The forceful man could no longer pause or absorb what he has entered; to do so would be to recognize the temporary nature of his power. Brutality produced a loss of self-control: the temptations of ego – of pride – became indiscernible. Yet no one in *The Iliad*, said Weil, would lay claim to lasting power. Hector, trembling before the walls of Troy, was "stripped of the

prestige of force" (*Iliad* 18). Prestige, honour, renown: these were the foremost concerns of Achilles, Agamemnon, and Hector, all of whom would be utterly dispossessed.

This dispossession, however, presented a vital opening. For Weil, *The Iliad's* brilliance rested not only in its unflinching portrait of human frailty and self-deception, but in its grasp of suffering as a catalyst for justice. Human misery in *The Iliad* did not arise simply from the thingness to which mortals were reduced. The epic also depicted how force, with its mutating power, gave rise to regret (*Iliad* 29). Warriors had some sense that they were transformed – deformed – and the poem recorded this sense in what Weil called a sustained "note of incurable bitterness" (*Iliad* 29). She considered the bitterness of *The Iliad*, with its regretful, tender quality, to be unparalleled in literature. The feeling betrayed the profound knowledge that within "the limits fixed by fate, the gods determine . . . victory and death" (*Iliad* 32). All human events, all deaths, and all losses were subject to these limits and contained in this knowledge.

Weil admired the ancient Greeks for their willingness to scrutinize human arrogance and vulnerability. It led them, she believed, to spiritual and intellectual discoveries of great clarity. They understood that force produced a backlash ("retribution . . . was the main subject of Greek thought") and hence they created a philosophical model of the good based on "limits, measure, equilibrium" (*Iliad* 15). Further, the Greeks understood that human misery did not play favourites. And therein lay the transcendent quality of *The Iliad* for Weil. The understanding that all souls were subject to chance and necessity could lead to a merciful regard for fellow-creatures, a compassionate 'we're all in this together' that is the precursor to justice. The Christian gospels, Weil believed, were the last great expression of this insight.⁷⁴ She lamented that the Western world had lost touch with the spiritual genius of the Greeks, a genius that, if tapped, would enable modern Europeans to "learn not to admire force, not to hate the enemy, nor to scorn the unfortunate" (*Iliad* 37).

Weil's approach to *The Iliad* was a hybrid of literary analysis and political theorizing, but the main angle of her thought was metaphysical. The war of Weil's *Iliad* was not unlike the other extremes of human experience that she explored, in factories and spiritual contemplation. Politically committed, mystically inclined, and emotionally eccentric, she

found much of life to be extreme. In the last years of her life, in the midst of ruin, Weil seems to have listened for *The Iliad's* sustained note and heard not only bitterness, but a strange kind of hopefulness. In her reading, war was not so much a clash of wills, ambitions, or fates, but an *extremity* that offered a rarified state of being. For all its potency, force was illusory; it contained its own antithesis. Force tore away the veils of possessions, status, and permanence, reducing even the most forceful human to nothingness. The occasion of war pierced the body and mind with these disillusionments, unsparingly. But within the misery bred by loss could emerge a recognition that freedom from illusion was possible. Vulnerability was inescapable in human life, and therein lay a great possibility.

Weil was attracted to Pythagorean ideas of harmony – “the just balance of contraries” (*Waiting* 77) – and her reading of *The Iliad* suggests this attraction. Her ideas are often counter-intuitive, yet only as counter-intuitive as the Christian religion with its murdered god. Weil understood the energy of contradiction – the release in breaking down a one-dimensional certainty – and she used the energy as a tool. For her, just as manual labour presented the possibility of freedom, so too did a naked encounter with force.

Loving in extreme emptiness

This pairing of duress and transcendence runs throughout Weil's overtly spiritual writings, where she seldom wrote explicitly about war. War, however, does resonate in her meditations on affliction. Affliction – *malheur* in French – was more than terrible suffering to Weil. It was an encounter with God's absence from the world and a state of lovelessness in which one must nevertheless keep love alive, or else face spiritual death.⁷⁵

In her 1942 essay, “The love of God and affliction,” Weil stressed that affliction was related to physical pain and social conditions, and especially to relations with others: “There is not really affliction unless there is social degradation or the fear of it . . .” (*Waiting* 119). The origins of affliction were not internal; it was not one's own thoughts or personality that gave rise to an afflicted state. Rather, affliction seemed to arise from

human contact and temporal reality, as a basic consequence of being alive. Weil did not mention war in the essay, yet her understanding of affliction – human interactions that arouse degradation or fear – reminds one of a battlefield (and a factory). She was writing from Marseilles, with war in full flood. It may not be a literal battle that concerned her here but a more generalized confrontation with mortality and meaning.

Weil was never perplexed that humans hurt one another and that nature inflicted pain via “the blind play of mechanical necessity” (*Waiting* 119). But God’s part in affliction was difficult to grasp. Her solution to this common theological dilemma was unique and demanding. In a 1942 letter to Joë Bousquet, a friend paralyzed in the First World War, she encapsulated her views regarding affliction, divine love, and war. Weil shared these ideas with Bousquet because his war injury had, in her view, rendered him eligible for special knowledge. You are privileged, she wrote, “because you have war permanently lodged in your body” (*Letters* 137). Anyone who was personally afflicted by what generally afflicts the world – in the Roman era, slaves; in the modern era, wounded soldiers – was fortunate in Weil’s view. They were endowed with the capacity to contemplate a vital reality and thus play a role in war’s “redemptive function” (137). Weil cast them in the role of witness, unprotected by any shield. Their bodies and minds were the set on which reality, full-blown, was played out. For Weil, direct encounters with reality – with necessity – were always to be preferred.

War was valuable, she suggested, because war’s enormity contained its opposite: the possibility of loving in extreme emptiness, obedient to the terms of God’s absence and awaiting the grace of God’s love. In her letter Weil used the metaphor of a bird within an egg. The egg was the visible world, which, when broken, released the creature to a place outside spatial reality. This site was free of any specific vantage point and thus spared any particular (and limited) perspective. The unlimited space was infused with a sound-beyond-sound – “the secret word, the word of Love” (137). When Bousquet emerged from the shell, when he was ready to reap his full share of war, she told him, “You . . . will know the reality of war, which is the most precious reality to know because war is

unreality itself. To know the unreality of war is the Pythagorean harmony, the unity of opposites” (137).

With this Pythagorean model in hand, Weil described the process of actually bearing affliction. Using quasi-Christian imagery, she outlined to Bousquet a state of mind that resembles a meditative state. Affliction must enter the body, “driven very far in like a nail” (137). One must not resist this piercing but remain unmoved until such time as it can be genuinely seen, just as the bird released from the broken egg was able to see expansively, unbound by personal perspective. In this immobilized state, not so much passive as “in expectation, unshaken,” it became possible for “the infinitesimal seed of divine love placed in the soul [to] slowly grow and bear fruit . . .” (137). Affliction was the cause of love, Weil seems to say, just as war’s misery could bring forth love’s antecedent, pity. She not only attempted to reconcile necessity and human cruelty with God’s love, she made them the soil from which authentic charity could grow.

It is tempting to view Weil’s beliefs about power, obedience, and necessity as a kind of spiritual inertia: a throwing away of personal power, a submissive reliance on God’s grace. This would be a mistake. Even after her mystical experiences, Weil never entirely withdrew from human affairs. (Her urgent effort to join the Free French is one proof of this.) She remained faithful to the tradition of intellectual activism that she had inherited from her mentor, Alain. It was her refusal to avoid the real world – whether factory, field, or battleground – that made her accessible to the crushing nature of life itself. For Weil, God’s presence in the world was both utterly real and utterly conditional. This paradox was evident in the immense distance God had placed between Himself and each human; and this paradox – the profound insecurity of life – was *the* guarantee of human freedom, itself the surest sign of God’s love. “Necessity and liberty were the two opposites God combined when he created the world and men,” she wrote in “Forms of the Implicit Love of God” (*Waiting* 204). Necessity was the distance between God and humans made manifest in time and space; acceptance of necessity was the means by which the distance would be dissolved; liberty was what enabled an individual to sit still and

exercise his or her acceptance. Rather than evade this contradiction, Weil choose to be thoroughly present to it – to give it her full attention.



With her far-ranging intellectual and spiritual journeying, Weil is a disquieting figure on the anti-war landscape. She painted a wretched portrait of militarism, nationalism, and state power, yet was not herself an absolute pacifist. Her commitment to real people in real circumstances motivated her to fight to save others, but she would not fight for ideas or interests. From her study of history, she extracted literal horrors and underlying essences. The soldier's body was never far from her thoughts, nor were the criminal ideologies that war mimicked. Yet she also conceived of war and its injuries as a blessed opportunity; not to be sought, but if found, to be attended with patience and focus.

Weil's approach to war shows the multiple layers of her talents and experiences. She was a scholar whose historical writings left no doubt about war's fraudulence and misery. She was an activist whose willingness to fight – and to die – was rooted in a desire to bring comfort and peace to others. She was a philosopher who saw war as a theatre of power and imagined new characters to neutralize the lustre of power. She was a political theorist who explored the psychological underpinnings of patriotism, humiliation, and moral lethargy. Finally, Weil was a mystic who apprehended war as a terrible gift, suggesting that “only he who has measured the dominion of force, and knows how not to respect it, is capable of love and justice” (*Iliad* 34).

Weil was born into a generation of Europeans whose childhood was spent in war, whose youth knew the sour aftertaste of war, whose early adulthood was a long slide into total war. That violence, dispossession, and power would figure so strongly in her thinking is no surprise. That over the clamour of war Weil would hear the secret sound of love is a marvel.

Chapter 5

With Hands and Minds Unbound

I had great difficulties writing this final chapter, the chapter in which I was to distill my thoughts about Dorothy Day and Simone Weil, on work and war. I found myself wondering if Day and Weil even belonged together.

Consider their dissimilarities. One was an American of Irish-Scottish extraction, the other a French Jew. One was an autodidact and popular journalist; the other was schooled in Europe's intellectual bosom and reflected this rarified training in her writings.⁷⁶ One was an absolute pacifist whose beliefs were never tested by warfare or occupation on her own soil; the other was an unclassifiable pacifist who, when war struck her homeland, longed to get as close to the action as possible. One was a convert to Catholicism who accepted church authority yet consistently thought – and agitated – outside official church positions; the other internally identified with Catholicism but, as a non-joiner, never formally embraced the faith.⁷⁷ One had a personal practice of worship that deepened with time yet was always at the service of social justice; the other was involuntarily gripped by mystical experiences that did little to ease her already uneasy relationship with political movements. One lived to old age and was active in grassroots campaigns until the end; the other died at age thirty-four in broken health brought on by self-neglect and the trauma of war.

Even on their most common ground – a life-long examination of the meanings and possibilities of work – they had important, albeit surface differences: Day was a tall, strong, indefatigable Catholic worker; Weil was sickly and rather hapless.

In short, Day and Weil had very different origins, challenges, and preferences. Nevertheless, I came to see these differences as the fascinating particulars of two distinctive characters, in two distinctive political and cultural environments, who clearly did belong together as radical twentieth-century Catholics.

My difficulty in writing this chapter – I eventually realized it was a singular not plural difficulty – did not let up. I spent a year wandering the outskirts of the page, a painful non-arrival. What was the obstacle? I could say “work.” My new job. My new vocation, teaching in a community college – nothing like the industrial workplaces condemned by Day and Weil. My students and subjects offer plenty of worthwhile stimulation. I feel useful and well exercised – my mind and emotions, anyway. The pay is decent. I have a good deal of control. My fellow employees are almost always helpful and pleasant. Day and Weil might even have approved of this nice, professional workplace (probably not Weil.)

Work, demanding though it is, was not the difficulty.

Nor was war. The war against Iraq has been present throughout this project, a troubling background drone. I speculated about how Day and Weil might have framed this war, its roots, illusions, and miseries. My journal on November 7, 2003, reads:

“. . . what rids one of dishonor is not vengeance but peril.” – Simone Weil, 1936 (*Formative* 252)

Did the Americans face peril when they invaded Iraq? Yes and no. Yes, insofar as some American soldiers died, as much due to the accidents of this war – traffic, miscalculations, panic – as the enemy. And no; it was foregone that the US military would not simply win the war but would pulverize the Iraqi army. Overwhelming American force was both the strategy and the fact. An aggressor has an easy choice: to fight when the prospects are rosy, to decline when the perils are high.

Then there are the less immediate perils. Part of the immorality of this war is the staggering disregard for the future. The history these men know is the history of last week and a few years ago; the vision they possess is of next week and a few years hence. They have endless regard for their own destiny and none for their childrens’. They seem to have never read the Greeks or Shakespeare. Their energy is no longer raw, it’s over-processed by the supernatural spell of their weapons, by their cool electronic powers. They no longer feel the quaking in their stomachs, and if they do, they convert the juices to glee, getting stoned like gods, falling

into the stupor of the invincible, the remote, the so-well-armed they are beyond personal calamity. Or so it seems.

Yesterday I heard Rumsfeld on the radio reading a statement about "recent losses." His voice was unmusical, careless of the actual words, one sentence ramming the next, unnatural pauses, as though he had no idea what he was reading, what the emotional tone should be, where the silences should fall, where the meaning wanted to travel. He was not delivering or performing, he was no more than mouthing the words. And like a man whose job is to do damage, he damaged the words. This was not robotic behaviour, though on the surface it may seem so. The robot has the affect of its program. No, this man does not suffer from a lack of programming, from distraction or incomprehension. He is simply too polished. He will not allow leakage from the other side, the small, malnourished side of him that hesitates to send other people to die, possibly even hesitates to send other people to kill – if this side exists in him, and I'm sure it does. But rather than listening for this side, this man Rumsfeld must consider it a weakness that will cloud his resolve, complicate his projections, undermine his intentions.

If you are commanding others to kill or be killed, you had best appear unshakable. You had best have a case that is unnuanced, diamond-hard and, preferably, beautiful. Your case must be a cause, and your cause must be unassailable, like honour and duty and liberty.

Who can quibble with duty and liberty?

The thinker, Weil would say. The thinker can. The one who thinks something through. Who pays attention.

When I re-read this journal entry, I felt that I had been channelling Day and Weil. I had been trying to identify the distortions of personality and soul that make war possible. (By soul, I mean the ethical impulse that resides in humans as a given and is shaped by our experiences, perceptions, and conduct in the world.) Both women were curious about such distortions, in individuals and in cultures. The Iraq war and its shadow, terrorism, have an element of naked hatred, a hatred as stark as the combatants' refusal to acknowledge their complicated histories. Each side despises the other and questions its basic worthiness. Ignorance and hatred, a lovely twosome. How bizarre to find this at the

beginning of the twenty-first century: a comic-book war with over-sized villains and heroes, neither recognizably human. Some progress.

Yet it wasn't the war that stalled me.

Going through the stacks of papers amassed for this project, I came across a scribbled note pad. I don't remember writing this (it is dated December 2004):

And then, after several days of reading Weil and her notions of obedience, I am sobbing on the sofa. Sobbing for poor Simone, age 34, dying of starvation and depletion in an English sanatorium, dying because she knows not what else to do, the world at war. And the worst of wars: collaboration and capitulation, her people compromised, the suffering inconceivably great – and she has only a mind and a pen. Her understanding of how it could be done, how it may be done, is wholly inadequate to the task. And the task is the world as she finds it: this reality, which has in fact entered her body and lodged there, as she said it would. And see how this body flees, this body fades, this body escapes the labyrinthine mind, which has laboured to create a picture that reconciles the abyss with the heights. Poor Simone, dead at 34, no family at her bedside.

And so it is that I cannot write. Cannot write about these two impossible women who decided to be right about what they saw – and were right, were more right than most people can bear to be, these two women who followed through on their beliefs – their instincts, their analyses, their aspirations – who followed through with action. Whose lives are bigger in retrospect than they were in life because in life they were impossible. They made a difference as ideas rather than as concrete realities, and the idea was to be true to your understanding, without compromise. So they have become mythic – myths of honesty, of steadfastness, of refusal, of difficult truths, of uneasy absoluteness – and my difficulty is that they were failures. They failed. Nothing really changed.

And yet they did not fail because here they are still. These two women, who were so concerned with the real, have themselves become iconic: symbols of an obstinate holiness, of carrying on amid the wreckage. I cry because they are impossible.

Here was my obstacle. I could not write because these two women were impossible: impossibly pure, impossibly failed.

Upon reflection I realized that the obstacle, seemingly formidable, was quite flimsy. Day and Weil were only pure insofar as they were resolute nonconformists. Their ideas and actions were marked by a consistency and intensity that most of us do not possess. We notice people such as Weil and Day precisely because they stand apart from the compromised herd. And we benefit from their example: it forces us to acknowledge the mushy edges of our own principles and actions (or inactions). I had no need to be intimidated by their single-mindedness or to judge it as stubbornness or wishful thinking. Day is a study in determined leadership, Weil a study in eccentric genius. Both were exceptional, not pure.

They were only failures, I realized, insofar as they followed the fashion of all ardent pacifists. It was Machiavelli who warned his Prince that unarmed prophets always fail. He was referring to the group that includes Gandhi, Christ, the Buddha, Martin Luther King, Jr., Dorothy Day, and Simone Weil – about as honourable and indispensable a band of failures as one could hope to join. I needed to relax. It would not be fruitful to assess Weil and Day's ideas against some high standard of validity and their accomplishments against some higher standard of effectiveness. Their stature – Day as a mentor to progressive Catholics and social justice activists, Weil as a creative theologian and mystic – suggests that they were significant and influential. They were only impossible to the part of me that laments war and exploitation, a childlike part that wishes the cruelty and waste would all just stop. Or at least show signs of winding down.

Yet the obstacle was also helpful: it reminded me why I was first attracted to Weil and Day. This purity (of intention) and vigour (of action) represented a fusion of spiritual and political commitments; it was this integration that drew me. As children, the two women were seized by an intuitive spiritual spark and a political itch. Religious and political curiosity went hand in hand. As they matured, both inquiries were directed towards understanding and responding to suffering in the world. They applied themselves to their personal spiritual paths, yet their goal was always a larger project: the political,

economic, and social layers of life where human bodies live and human misery erupts. Specifically, they engaged with work and war – among the most strenuous dimensions of human experience – with a focus that was transcendent and practical in equal measure.

Politics would not be shorn of spirit, spirit not shorn of politics. Weil and Day shared this desire, even if it played out within a sea of differences. They lived as though the two domains were unintelligible without each other. The mixture made for some unusual syntheses. They were politically rebellious yet spiritually obedient: to the Catholic church, in Day's case; to a metaphysical essence, in Weil's. The combination of these ingredients – rebelliousness and obedience – caused something akin to a chemical reaction within them, generating a power source. The outer life and inner life would proceed together. The zone of the flesh and the zone of the spirit – flesh as the labouring, vulnerable body, spirit as the instinct for goodness – were a unity, albeit a complex unity.

This was how I came to understand the appeal of Day and Weil: the compounding of spirituality and politics. After prolonged exposure to their ideas, I also noticed what reverberated from the mix. This twosome – spirituality and politics – are analogous to mind and body. Weil and Day's efforts can be seen as bridging these other two, an unintentional patching of the split that infects much of Western thought. Neither woman would have said as much. In fact, both were implicitly faithful to the mind-body dichotomy that feeds Christianity's suspicion of physical pleasures and appetites. Day was a sensualist by nature but put a halt to it. Weil was a renunciant by nature, a philosopher who took "literally Descartes's cleavage of mind and body – indeed, her notion of attention insists upon such a separation" (Meltzer 616). Nevertheless, neither woman 'lived in her head,' nor did they dismiss the flesh as a poor cousin to the spirit. Their words and deeds argued for the centrality of the material world, not as a barrier to the divine but as the perfect route. Day perceived the body as a vehicle for profound service. Weil saw it as the most intimate site of necessity (for Weil, the world was weighty on many levels). In either case, there was no getting around the body. It would be nonsense to even try. The body was the where, when, and how of life itself – acts and impacts – and hence an indivisible partner to the why and what of contemplation and spiritual longing.

Indeed, the appeal of Catholicism for both women was as a body, albeit a mystical body. This was no metaphor. The bodies of the devout poor were visible proof of human community and sacred obligation. Day and Weil did not deal in disembodied souls, but with human beings in their most earth-bound conditions: at work and at war.

They also did not deal in abstractions. Another theme, I saw, flowed from this reconciliation of spirit and politics, body and mind. It was a commitment to the individual: the person, the actual person. Just as political and spiritual struggle could be balanced, and with them bodies and minds, Day and Weil insisted on re-aligning the individual and society. It was a balancing act they performed (or tried to) with numerous twentieth-century thinkers and activists. Indeed, the basic political question that haunts Western political thought may well be unanswerable: How to organize a society so that individuals are not sacrificed to economic, bureaucratic, and other hegemonic forces. The problem of scale – the point at which a society starts to cannibalize its own citizens – seems intractable. In the 1930s, Weil and Day confronted industrial, urban societies that were big, dense, and, for all their self-destructiveness, durable. They called for decentralization to heal the alienation of crowded, industrial life, but decentralization was a grand idea that made sense only if something small happened first, within the lives of individuals. This small thing was Day and Weil's prime strategy: a revivifying of work itself.

Work, they believed, could be designed to place constructive demands on the individual: concentration, skill, purpose, and connection. Unhealthy work did the opposite: it was impersonal in the most exhausting sense of the word, extinguishing a person's intelligence and ethical capacity. Modern social systems – fascist, capitalist, and socialist – were riddled with these corrosive, impersonal qualities. Industrial work was synonymous with exploitation and disassociation, not much more than undignified servitude. Work of this sort had an inescapable link to war, which also depended on the conquest of resources and the disposability of individuals. Any society that organized its workplaces and workers for the purpose of serving elites could be counted on to need war, want war, extol war.

Day and Weil intuited the danger of breaking human beings into disconnected parts or abstracting them into generalized masses. Leftist concepts such as “the people” or

“the proletariat” had little meaning, though both women employed a strong class analysis. Day was too grounded in everyday life – in the housework of feeding, sheltering, and comforting – for such theoretical niceties; Weil abhorred the artificiality of groups (the Great Beast) and distrusted ideas that seemed to float outside the limits set by necessity.⁷⁸ The socio-political structures of the 1930s, though real enough, were based on abstraction: the cult of individualism in capitalist societies, the fetishized planning of the soviets, and fascism simply beyond the pale. These systems concealed their true nature behind confident ideologies of self-determination and mastery of the physical world. In fact, they were systems of concentrated power, and their materialism, though delivering a degree of coarse security to some, came at the expense of personal and social wholeness.

To Weil and Day, individuals were the marrow of society. This conviction was necessarily political and spiritual. Only a person, they thought, could experience empathy, pity, and mercy. (And only an individual possessed intelligence, Weil would have added.) These were not qualities of societies, nations, or even cultures, though they may be esteemed by such entities. Only a person could feel vulnerability (disillusionment, suffering, mortality) and sense goodness (compassion, fairness, love); only persons together could transform this knowledge into healthy communities. Their ideas have a clear religious underpinning: it was from the smallness and grandeur of one’s own God-given life, they suggested, that people were able to grasp the preciousness of others.

Not surprisingly, Day and Weil did not conceive of the individual as a self-interested or self-sufficient unit. Their individual was the opposite of this: almost a *nothing*, but a desirable nothing as distinct from the deplorable kind imposed by mindless work and war. Their individual was soft-shelled, a metamorphic figure (potentially) that could shed its conventional form and realize a more genuinely human nature, permeated by God’s love. The shedding was a spiritual transformation that could be wrought by the exertion of good work and, if need be, said Weil, by the penetrating misery of war. Only an individual could make such a difficult move, albeit supported by others. Again, this is the core of Day and Weil’s separate undertakings: the merging of ground and transcendence. They called for a radical non-detachment, which could lead to a voluntary erasure of self, the gateway to a

deeper self and a genuine community. Always, in their thinking, the hard ground of reality could be useful – powerful – to the spirit.



In physics, work is defined as the transfer of energy or the exertion of force. Curious, how these two definitions resemble work and war. Work changes things, makes things new. Work is powerful. In the best of circumstances, said Day and Weil, it would be the worker who wields the power. As political and spiritual activists, they studied the workings of power in its myriad forms, destructive and constructive. Their antipathy towards war was, in some ways, despair about the waste of power. Their aspiration for workers was to realize how powerful each person can be, with hands and mind unbound. The power of serving for Day, the power of stillness for Weil: varieties of effort, of longing, of work.

Endnotes

1. Biographical details about Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin are from Day's *The Long Loneliness*, Jim Forest's *Love Is the Measure*, and Patrick Coy's (ed.). *A Revolution of the Heart*.

2. "The love for my baby brother was as profound and never-to-be-forgotten as that first love," Day wrote (*Long* 31). Her descriptions of caring for her brother, John, give some sense of her intensity. I too had much younger siblings with whom I was smitten and can testify to the power of that affection.

3. *Le Sillon* was founded as a discussion group in 1894 by a French student, Marc Sangnier. It had a loose program dedicated to popular education among workers and democratic politics, based on intense Christian faith, divine love, and human compassion – a grassroots movement with "a confused mingling of religious sentiments and political aspiration" (Rauch 25). As such, *Le Sillon* was part of a French political tradition that attempted to reconcile spiritual practices with progressive (often communal) social values.

4. Maurin's "Easy Essays" were superficially easy and often quite funny. For example, this verse from "Beyond Marxism," published on page one of the *Catholic Worker*, September 1938, encapsulates a personalist vision of the works of mercy:

"Primitive Christianity

1. In the beginning of Christianity
the hungry were fed,
the naked were clothed,
the homeless were sheltered,
the ignorant were instructed
at a personal sacrifice.
2. And the Pagans
used to say
about the Christians,
'See how they love
each other.'
3. Fr. Arthur Ryan,
born in Tipperary,
used to call
this period of history
'Christian communism.'
4. But it is
a long, long way
to Tipperary."

5. Day described Maurin's three-part program in *On Pilgrimage*, p. 149, and in various places in *The Long Loneliness*.
6. Private property for ordinary folks and the poor, that is. In "Reflections on Work," an article about coal miners in Derry, Pennsylvania, Day addressed the question of why workers needed their own property: "One very good reason is that a man loves what is his, and has a sense of responsibility for it, almost a sacramental sense in regard to his house, his land and his work on them." *Catholic Worker* 13:10 (December 1946): 4.
7. Maurin often summarized his program as a "synthesis of cult, culture and cultivation." Cult referred to scripture, worship, and liturgy; culture referred to the study of broader philosophical texts, music, and art; and cultivation referred to the cooperative land movement (Day, *Loaves* 30).
8. Maurin was Jeffersonian in his distrust of state intervention. "Peter also quoted Jefferson – 'He governs best who governs least'" (Day, *Long* 222).
9. For example, CW houses of hospitality were located in San Francisco, Los Angeles, Seattle, Butte, St. Louis, Chicago, Detroit, Dayton, Cleveland, Boston, Memphis, Pittsburgh, Windsor (Ontario) and Wigan (GB); each operated independently. Farms were located in Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Massachusetts. Their number declined with the Second World War but "[u]nexpectedly, the Catholic Worker movement has grown since Day's death [in 1980], and there are now several thousand Catholic Workers in 150 Houses of Hospitality" (Elie 465). Vancouver has one such house on East Pender Street.
10. Day often described herself as an anarchist: "To us at the Catholic Worker, anarchism means 'Love God and do as you will' (*Little* 357). There was no shortage of working-class Catholics in the United States of Irish, Italian, and Polish descent. In the 1930s their numbers were well-represented both in unions and in the ranks of the poor.
11. The protracted case of Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti was a political event of enormous significance to radicals of the 1920s. The two men, shoemaker and fish peddler respectively, were arrested for a robbery in Massachusetts in which two guards were killed. Sacco and Vanzetti were anarchists; they were unarguably innocent and the case came to symbolize the class and power struggle of the day. Their cause was championed by the communists and the I.W.W., and their executions in 1927 caused a huge outpouring of public anger and grief.
12. Virgil Michel O.S.B. died a relatively young man, in 1938. He was sympathetic towards workers and labour rights, and lamented the American preoccupations with materialism and individual claims (O'Brien 190). Liturgy, in Michel's view, needed expression in social life. "Michel insisted on a revival of the Pauline imagery of the Mystical Body of Christ, a doctrine little stressed in the United States at the time. The attention given community . . . was a thread woven through most of Michel's later articles. His criticism of both atomistic individualism and of totalitarianism was shared by personalist and like-minded Christian of this period" (Merriman 79).

13. Several commentators on personalism are at pains to assert that Mounier, the chief architect of personalist thought, did not create a systematic philosophy: "Mounier's personalism was less a philosophy . . . than a frame of reference, a set of values, and a method with which a new and more human (*sic*) society might be constructed" (Rauch 3).

14. ". . . Working men have been surrendered, isolated and helpless, to the hardheartedness of employers and the greed of unchecked competition . . . a small number of very rich men have been able to lay upon the teeming masses of the laboring poor a yoke little better than that of slavery itself" (*Rerum novarum*, 206-7, quoted in O'Brien 14).

15. Day, Dorothy. "Work." *Catholic Worker* 16:5 (October 1949): 6.

16. Day never stopped campaigning for union and workers' rights. She was active with Caesar Chavez and the California farmworkers in the 1970s (her own seventies, too).

17. Day, Dorothy (unsigned). "Reflections on Work, *Catholic Worker* 13:9 (November 1946): 4.

18. Day wrote with pleasure about the countryside but, as often, she described the hard work, precariousness, and personal conflicts that accompanied life on the farm. The urban houses of hospitality were no less free of strife. The homes and farms of the Catholic Worker movement were anything but oases of tranquillity.

19. In her lifetime Weil was widely published as an essayist in French journals, both political and philosophical. After her death she was championed by Albert Camus and T.S. Eliot, among others. English translations began to appear in the 1950s, including *Waiting for God* (1951), *The Need for Roots* (1952), and *Gravity and Grace* (1952).

20. Biographical details about the Weils are from Simone Pétrement's *Simone Weil: A Life* (Pétrement, a philosopher in her own right, was a childhood friend of Weil; the English translation of the biography appeared in 1976); *Simone Weil: An Anthology* (edited and introduced by Sian Miles); and Leslie A. Fielder's introduction to *Waiting for God*.

21. This is my interpretation. The subject of this paper does not invite a focussed exploration of Weil's relationship to Jews, Jewishness, and Judaism (see also n. 66). Suffice to say that her anti-Jewishness expressed itself in many forms: dismissiveness and hostility towards the Hebrew Bible (with the exception of the Book of Job, the Song of Songs, and some Psalms); lack of curiosity about Jewish scholarship and mystical traditions (all the more extraordinary, given Weil's eclecticism); failure to identify with the dangers confronting European Jewry between the 1920s and 1940s; and worse, failure to direct any compassionate attention to the unfolding disaster. Her shortcomings in this domain would be reprehensible in another thinker; in Weil they are also bizarre. She was generally attentive to human suffering and attracted to teachings of many sorts. Ironically, these latter qualities make her recognizable as a politically committed Jewish intellectual.

The other area where Weil was strikingly negligent was as a woman. She had

nothing to say about being female, nor did she comment on the misogynist blind spots in the philosophical and spiritual traditions she studied. Biographer Pétrement wrote that Weil considered it “a great misfortune to have been born a female. So she had decided to reduce this obstacle as much as possible by disregarding it . . . by giving up any desire to think of herself as a woman or to be regarded as such by others . . .” (27)

In short, Weil avoided examining two of her primary personal characteristics. The betrayal of her gender was passive; the betrayal of her Jewish heritage was active. Regarding the former, one can perhaps forgive Weil for strangling her disappointment at being female in a sexist world. Regarding the latter, forgiveness seems more difficult.

22. Her essays on this subject include “Prospects: Are we heading for the proletarian revolution?” published in *Revolution prolétarienne*, August 1933, and “Reflection concerning technocracy, National-socialism, the U.S.S.R. and certain other matters,” published in *Critique sociale*, November 1933. Both essays appear in the 1958 translation, *Oppression and Liberty*.

23. A mutual friend introduced Weil to Auguste Detoef, manager of the Alsthom electrical factory. An educated man, Detoef was “searching for new ways to organize industry and society, too” (Pétrement 224) and was thus amenable to hiring as unlikely a worker as Weil.

24. If only for a while, in the case of Weil and Orwell. Dorothy Day’s manual work did not involve factories or waged labour, but subsistence living on farms and in urban shelters.

25. Weil thought that groups had a fundamental (and fatal) flaw: a collectivity was incapable of thought – “the one thing that cannot be abstracted from the individual” (*FLN* 27). See also n. 65.

26. The letter was to Albertine Thevenon, who, with her trade unionist husband, was associated with the journal *Révolution prolétarienne*.

27. This quotation is from “The mysticism of work” in *Gravity and Grace*.

28. This idea – that physical labour is a means of addressing the sin of disobedience – appeared in the last chapter of *The Need for Roots*, Weil’s 1943 opus for the Free French in London. Weil rarely referred to sin or other Christian notions of being fallen and in need of redemption. For her, the distance between humans and God was a structural matter, a relationship that echoed Plato in the idea of a perfection that was fundamentally hidden. Weil invented the word “decreation” to describe the relationship: “God could only create by hiding himself. Otherwise there would be nothing but himself” (*G&G* 33). And by implication, there would be nothing human, imperfect and subject to necessity. The world was needed for both God and humans to be possible; it was a necessary barrier, a necessary separation. The task of humans was to overcome the barrier by transcending the

obstacle of the illusory self: “Necessity is the screen set between God and us so that we can be. It is for us to pierce through the screen so that we cease to be” (*G&G* 28).

29. Weil's thought was frequently paradoxical due to her intellectual habit of seeking the counterbalance of contradiction. A fragment from "Contradiction" is often cited as the *sine qua non* of her intellectual style: "'Method of investigation: as soon as we have thought something, try to see in what way the contrary is true" (G&G 93).

30. One such parable is found in *The Need for Roots*, when Weil discusses the need for dignity in work: "A happy young woman, expecting her first child, and busy sewing a layette, thinks about sewing it properly. But she never forgets for an instant the child she is carrying inside her. At precisely the same moment, somewhere in a prison workshop, a female convict is also sewing, thinking, too, about sewing properly, for she is afraid of being punished. One might imagine both women to be doing the same work at the same time, and having their attention absorbed by technical difficulties. And yet a whole gulf of difference lies between one occupation and the other. The whole social problem consists in making the workers pass from one to the other of these two occupational extremes.

"What is required is that this world and the world beyond, in their double beauty, should be present and associated in the act of work, like the child about to be born in the making of the layette" (91). In this passage, we see Weil's political aspiration for work – idealistic, but less laden with profundity than her religious view.

31. The period gave birth to some of the United States' most significant peace organizations: the Fellowship of Reconciliation (1915); the Quaker-based American Friends Service Committee (1917); and the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (1919), formerly known as the Women's Peace Party (Chatfield 1966, 4).

32. The position of the CAIP did not win over the Vatican. Pope John XXIII delivered *Pacem in Terris* on April 11, 1963, an encyclical that "validated civil disobedience . . . [and] shocked many cold warriors by urging coexistence between differing political systems . . . ; it called for the ending of the arms race and the banning of nuclear weapons" (Egan 1966, 129). Many commentators interpreted the encyclical as dispensing with the traditional standard of the just war; war itself was to be abandoned. *Pacem in Terris* did not, however, produce a revolution in mainstream Catholicism. Throughout the 1960s and beyond, most American bishops continued to strongly defend the need for (and potential usefulness of) nuclear weapons, and the CAIP continued to support the bishops.

33. In 1937 the *Catholic Worker* published "Conditions For a Just War," an unsigned text that summarized the key tenets of just war theory: "I. The war must be undertaken in defense of a strict right. II. The value or importance of this right must be in proportion to the magnitude of the damage to be inflicted during the war. III. War must be absolutely the last resort. IV. There must be reasonable hope of victory. V. The right intention must exist at the declaration of war, and must continue for the duration of the war. VI. The war must be rightly conducted." *Catholic Worker* 5:5 (September 1937): 2.

34. Day, Dorothy. "Explains CW Stand on Use of Force." *Catholic Worker* 6:4 (September 1938): 1.

35. *Ibid.* 4.

36. "Target equals city" was censored by Merton's superiors. The essay also provoked a directive from the abbot general of his order (the Order of Cistercians of Strict Observance, commonly known as the Trappists) that he refrain from further writings on pacifism and war.

37. This is my interpretation, as an atheist, of the Christian idea of God's love.

38. The Sermon on the Mount is found in Matthew 5.1–7.27 and echoed in Luke 6.17–49. Christ's teaching famously begins with the words, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." The passages especially relevant to pacifism include "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God" (Matthew 5.9); "Do not resist one who is evil. But if any one strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other one also" (Matthew 5.39); and "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5.44).

39. An absolute pacifist has a response to even the most baiting question: What if your child is being attacked? Day addressed this question in *The Long Loneliness*: "What would you do if an armed maniac were to attack you, your child, your mother? How many times have we heard this. Restrain him, of course, but not kill him. Confine him if necessary. But perfect love casts out fear and love overcomes hatred. All this sounds trite but experience is not trite" (270).

40. The Catonsville Nine released a statement that read, in part: "We confront the Catholic Church, other Christian bodies and the synagogues of American with their silence and cowardice in face of our country's crimes. We are convinced that the religious bureaucracy in this country is racist, is an accomplice in war, and is hostile to the poor . . ." (qtd. in du Plessix Gray 47). Although Dorothy Day was not the focus of any of du Plessix Gray's essays in *Divine Disobedience: Profiles in Catholic Radicalism*, her influence and inspiration are evident throughout. The essays were originally published in the *New Yorker* magazine in 1969-70.

41. With the Cold War at a good boil, Day wrote sympathetically about Marx in the May 1951 *Catholic Worker*: "[H]e lived in exile, in poverty and hunger in London and saw his child die and had no funds to bury him, and suffered the anguish of his wife." In the same article she acknowledged "we shock people by quoting Marx, Lenin, Mao-Tse-Tung, or Ramakrishna to restate the case for our common humanity" (2).

42. *Commonweal's* position was that to "argue that fascism was preferable to communism was to ignore the fact that it necessarily involved the use of violence and terror and did not eliminate the abuses which gave rise to communism" (O'Brien 8).

43. Father Charles Coughlin of Royal Oak, Michigan, had a weekly radio show that brought him astonishing popularity in the early 1930s. As the decade progressed, Coughlin's peculiar mix of populism, muckraking, monetary reforms (akin to Social Credit), and personal egoism, along with his increasingly anti-Jewish and anti-Roosevelt pronouncements, made him a marginal figure (Abell 242). Coughlin and his journal, *Social*

Justice, lambasted the Catholic Workers for their pacifist stand during the Spanish Civil War.

44. Day, Dorothy. "Explains CW Stand on Use of Force." *Catholic Worker* 6:4 (September 1938): 1, 4, 7.

45. Day's September 1938 article focused on basic Christian ideals but she did not pull her political punches: "We are not praying for victory for Franco in Spain, a victory won with the aid of Mussolini's son who gets a thrill out of bombing; with the aid of Mussolini who is opposing the Holy Father in his pronouncements on 'racism'; with the aid of Hitler who persecutes the church in Germany. Nor are we praying for victory for the loyalists whose Anarchist, Communist and anti-God leaders are trying to destroy religion" (7).

46. Throughout the 1930s, long before the outbreak of war in Europe (September 1939) and Pearl Harbor (December 1941), Americans organized themselves into anti-war movements with diverse political and ethical stripes: non-interventionists, isolationists, religious pacifists, internationalists, etc. When war came, few groups and individuals maintained a strict pacifist stance (except conscientious objectors from the traditional peace churches and some secular COs). Most anti-war activists directed their energies to post-war concerns such as just peace negotiations, anti-colonial campaigns, and democratic reconstruction.

47. The notoriously fraudulent text, which accused the Jews of world domination, was the culmination of Father Coughlin's weekly "radio tirades against Jews" (Roberts 124).

48. Jim Forest, in his biography of Day, *Love Is the Measure*, summarizes the mainstream Catholic criticisms thus: "The Catholic Worker's pacifist witness seemed traitorous to the ultra-patriotic, embarrassing to many bishops, and suspiciously Protestant to some of the guardians of orthodoxy" (104).

49. Day recognizes these fears in an unsigned article, "C.W. Fights Draft at Senate Hearing" in the *Catholic Worker*, July-August 1940: "From here it is easy to see the crisis which the Catholic Worker is faced with But how can we sacrifice our principles, remain silent in the fact of a gigantic error . . . ?" (1).

50. Burke-Wadsworth became the Selective Service Act of 1940, the U.S.'s first peacetime conscription bill.

51. Excerpts from Day's presentation to the senate committee (including this quote from Pius XI) were published in an unsigned box, "C.W. Fights Draft at Senate Hearing." *Catholic Worker* 12:10 (July-August 1940): 1.

52. "Fight Conscription." *Catholic Worker* 11:10 (December 1944): 1.

53. A poster of the July 20, 1956, action in New York City, signed by Dorothy Day and pacifist Ammon Hennacy, is reproduced in *American Catholic Pacifism*. "Ban the Bomb / By Personal Protest" is the poster's headline; the body reads, in part: "Our 'disobedience

to law' and readiness to take the penalty for it is in protest against deception of the people by leading them to think there is any shelter from a nuclear weapon attack. Atomic warfare is uncontrollable, wipes out the innocent as well as the guilty, and is contrary to all natural law.

"The bomb is defended as a weapon against Communism We of this country, which we dearly love, believe that use of such weapons of 'force and violence' against our brother is a denial of God and of the image of God in our brother. God is our Father and all men are brothers. We are willing to die for this belief. We are ready to do penance for the sins of our country which was the first to drop the bomb. Jail is in a little way a dying. But 'unless the grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone, but if it dies, it brings forth much fruit.'

"JOIN US IN PENANCE AND IN PROTEST AGAINST WAR!" (Klejment 1966, n.p.)

54. Compulsory air-raid drills ended in 1961.

55. In late 1965 in the *Catholic Worker*, Day addressed the question of whether a man would be in a state of mortal sin for going to war. For her, the man's motives and intentions were key, and she allowed that, "If a man truly thinks he is combating evil and striving for the common good, he must follow his conscience regardless of others." Then she gave some practical advice about how to cultivate a pacifist intention: "But he always has the duty of forming his conscience by studying, listening, being ready to hear his opponent's point of view, by establishing what Martin Buber called an I-Thou relationship" (*Sixties* 254). In other words, he must try to love his enemy.

56. Day, Dorothy. "Explains CW Stand on Use of Force." *Catholic Worker* 6:4 (September 1938): 1, 4, 7.

57. The works of mercy derive from the gospel of Matthew 25:31-46.

58. Day produced a more orthodox list of the works of mercy for the November 4, 1949 issue of *Commonweal*: "The Spiritual Works of Mercy are: to admonish the sinner, to instruct the ignorant, to counsel the doubtful, to comfort the sorrowful, to bear wrongs patiently, to forgive all injuries, and to pray for the living and the dead.

"The Corporal Works of Mercy are to feed the hungry, to give drink to the thirsty, to clothe the naked, to ransom the captive, to harbor the harborless, to visit the sick, and to bury the dead" (*Little* 98).

59. Day's understanding of the interplay between human freedom and religious commitment was apparent in this letter to a possible donor: "I explained that we were not a community of saints but a rather slipshod group of individuals who were trying to work out certain principles –the chief of which was an analysis of man's freedom and what it implied. We could not put people out on the street, I said, because they acted irrationally and hatefully. We were trying to overcome hatred with love, to understand the forces that made men what they are . . ." (*Loaves* 47).

60. Day's sense of the delusions of war – and her sharp-eyed journalism – were evident in an unsigned piece entitled “Lesson in Ethiopian War Plans,” *Catholic Worker* 5:5 (September 1937). She was responding to an article in the August 1937 issue of *Harper's* regarding Mussolini's plans to invade Ethiopia. Her words are especially resonant in 2004: “Let us have some of this frankness before we yield to the emotional instincts aroused by martial music, finance patriotism, and unthinking slogans. It would be well to question ourselves as to just what interests we are serving by encouraging and taking part in any modern war when what is told us before varies so widely with what we learn after. . . . In this naive admission of De Bono and Mussolini to Italy's raid upon Abyssinia we see how the military mind works to create ‘incidents’ and prepares to force war . . .” (1, 2)

61. The essay was originally published in *La Critique sociale*, no. 10, November 1933.

62. In exploring this conundrum, Weil discussed “The Main Enemy is Our Own Country,” the infamous 1915 pamphlet by Karl Liebknecht, a German imprisoned during the First World War for anti-war activities. The pamphlet had denounced German imperialism and called for the state's collapse (*Formative* 239).

63. Berkman was born in Russia in the 1870s, emigrated to the United States, and in 1892 made his assassination attempt on H.C. Frick, a Pennsylvania coal baron and anti-union hardliner. Berkman's quote is from *What Is Communist Anarchism?*, New York: Vanguard, 1929.

64. In exploring the issue of ends and means, Theodore Paullin wrote that absolute pacifists will always refrain from harming others even though their restraint may “not work” (3); they are guided by the principle that all human beings are worthy of love and that violence is evil, full stop. This principled approach relates to the first point: the moral inseparability of ends and means. Other pacifists, Paullin noted, may not accept this principle but rather believe in the fruitfulness of non-violence: non-violent practices are chosen because they *do work* to transform individuals and societies. This practical approach relates to the second point: the moral effectiveness of non-violent means.

65. Weil often referred to ‘the Great Beast’ in her political and spiritual writings. In the London notebooks (1943), she wrote: “Plato compared society to a huge beast which men are forced to serve and which they are weak enough to worship Working out a social mechanics means, instead of worshipping the beast, to study its anatomy, physiology, reflexes, and, above all, to . . . find a method for training it” (*O&L* 165). Plato used the phrase in Book VI of *The Republic* in a parable about the pressure to conform to norms and opinions, at the expense of an independent pursuit of meaning, goodness, and truth. Weil also called the beast “the power of the social element” (*G&G* 147).

66. Like Weil, George Bernanos was a French intellectual who defied easy categorization. Michel Winock described him as “a great Catholic voice” against both totalitarianism and capitalism, and during the Second World War Bernanos was an outstanding critic of collaboration with the Nazis (291). Yet Bernanos was also an admirer of monarchism, an enemy of conventional democratic institutions, and an unabashed anti-semite who, nevertheless, despised the *state*-sponsored racism of Hitler (294). Like Weil, he reflected

the convulsive French relationship to the so-called Jewish question, which found its most vehement expression in the Dreyfus Affair (1894–1906).

67. In a 1942 letter from New York, Weil described her decision: “Ever since the day when I decided, after a very painful inner struggle, that in spite of my pacifist inclinations it had become an overriding obligation in my eyes to work for Hitler’s destruction, with or without any chance of success, ever since that day my resolve has not altered; and that day was the one on which Hitler entered Prague – in May 1939, if I remember right” (*Letters* 158).

68. Michel Winock’s *Nationalism, Anti-Semitism, and Fascism in France* is a fascinating look at this phenomenon. It wasn’t just French intellectuals on the left who could display this tendency (swinging from militant anti-patriotic pacifism to militant pro-war nationalism when confronted with an enemy); leaders of the working class did as well. Their reasons were complex, according to Winock; a deep-seated French pride in its revolutionary history was often at the root. At the opposite end of the political spectrum, some right-wing French intellectuals were able to stomach Hitler due to their *loathing* of France’s revolutionary history with its republicans, socialists, and Jews. The tortuous character of French politics since 1789 is mirrored in the path of many French intellectuals, including Simone Weil.

69. During this time she met Gustave Thibon, a Catholic layperson who was profoundly affected by Weil’s intensity, generosity, and erudition. She left her notebooks with Thibon, and he arranged for their publication under the title *Gravity and Grace*. Of Weil, Thibon wrote, “never have I felt the word *supernatural* to be more charged with reality than when in contact with her” (*G&G* viii).

70. Weil wrote of this mystical experience in a 1942 letter to the ex-soldier Joë Bousquet. It occurred in Solesmes, during an excruciating headache and while she was reciting the poem “Love” by George Herbert: “. . . I felt . . . a presence more personal, more certain, and more real than that of a human being; it was inaccessible both to sense and to imagination, and it resembled the love that irradiated the tenderest smile of somebody one loves. Since that moment, the name of God and the name of Christ have been more and more irresistibly mingled in my thoughts” (*Letters* 140). Weil had never read the mystics and was “completely unprepared” for the experience.

71. The notorious agreement, signed by France, Great Britain, Germany, and Italy in September 1938, ceded the Sudetenland to Germany. It was struck after the Czechs had conceded self-determination for the Sudeten Germans and then balked at Hitler’s further demands.

72. The English translations of these works include *The Notebooks of Simone Weil* (1956); *Oppression and Liberty* (1958); *Waiting for God* (1959); *Gravity and Grace* (1963); *Seventy Letters* (1965); *First and Last Notebooks* (1970); and *Formative Writings 1929-1941* (1987).

73. Merton's article, "The answer of Minerva: Pacifism and resistance in Simone Weil," was originally published in *Peace News* (London) in April 1965.

74. In her "Spiritual Autobiography," a letter to Father Perrin written shortly before embarking for Casablanca (May 1942), Weil wrote that, after, her mystical experience, "I came to feel that Plato was a mystic, that all the *Iliad* is bathed in Christian light, and that Dionysus and Osiris are in a certain sense Christ himself; and my love was thereby redoubled" (*Waiting* 70).

75. Weil's formulation of God's presence-within-absence (essentially, the coincidence of both states: by one you will know the other) came from her contemplation of human impermanence and the crucifixion. Weil started with divine love, which for her was based on intuitive knowledge, mystical experiences, and a Platonism that equated God with the good (among other sources). Her spiritual ideas may be thought of as an attempt to reconcile the hard terms of time and space (necessity) with divine love: How to account for our apparent mortal abandonment and the heaviness of our suffering? In the essay, "The love of God and affliction," she addressed the question in this way: "God did not create anything except love itself, and the means to love He created beings capable of love from all possible distances. Because no other could do it, he himself went to the greatest possible distance, the infinite distance. The infinite distance between God and God, this supreme tearing apart . . . is the crucifixion This tearing apart, over which supreme love places the bond of supreme union, echoes perpetually across the universe in the midst of the silence, like two notes, separate yet melting into one, like pure and heart-rending harmony. This is the Word of God. The whole creation is nothing but its vibration" (*Waiting* 124).

76. In fairness to Weil, she too was committed to popular education. She was involved with a workers' college, taught at workers' study groups, and wrote frequently about the need for quality public education. In *The Need for Roots*, she wrote about organizing industry so that "A workman's university would be in the vicinity of each central assembly shop . . ." (*NFR* 70).

77. Weil's decision not to join the Roman Catholic Church was based on more than her anti-group reflex. She also strongly objected to the church's history and ideology of exclusion. In her "Spiritual Autobiography" (1942), she told the Dominican Father Perrin, "So many things are outside of [Christianity] . . . so many things that God loves, otherwise they would not be in existence. All the immense stretches of past centuries, except the last twenty, are among them; all the countries inhabited by colored races; all secular life in white peoples' countries, all the traditions banned as heretical . . ." (*Waiting* 75). She also cited "an absolutely insurmountable obstacle" in institutional Christianity: "It is the use of the two little words *anathema sit* [he is accursed] I remain beside all those things that cannot enter the Church . . . on account of these two little words. I remain beside them all the more because my own intelligence is numbered among them" (*Waiting* 77). In another letter to Father Perrin, Weil said very simply, "What frightens me is the Church as a social structure." Not only did she distrust the fallibility of the institution, she also distrusted her own tendency to, as she put it, "be very easily

influenced . . . by anything collective” (*Waiting* 52). Weil, it turns out, was a loner at least in part because she was susceptible to group think.

78. Weil valued geometry and physics as representations of reality, but viewed algebra as abstract and unanchored (Meltzer 617).

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