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"La Personne et le sacré"

Weil's notebooks, scheduled to comprise four full volumes of the edition of her complete works, are in many ways the nervous center of her *œuvre*, a record of a mind's astonishing range and unassuageable restlessness. Unmediated by conventions of narrative or persona or even some kind of classification, as in a thesaurus, this collection of thoughts exposed in their rawness and massiveness may well daunt the reader accustomed to acknowledgment and signpost; the spectacle of headlong, solitary trailblazing such as this can be unnerving. The doctor who operated on the four-year-old Simone for appendicitis and heard her speaking while under anesthesia thought that a child capable of saying all she was saying could not possibly live long (*VSW* 18); similarly, a reader first coming upon the notebooks might be given to wonder with what human specimen they originated.

Acknowledgment and signpost, in the form of literary precedent, may indeed be found for these works in the trace of the vital influence of the *Pensées* of Pascal. It is he whom Weil invokes in her

letter of protest of 1940 to the Vichy Minister of Public Education, where she speaks of "[h]aving practically learned to read from the French writers of the seventeenth century, in Racine, in Pascal" (*VSW* 528). During her years at the Lycée Fénélon (1919–24), she already knew parts of the *Pensées* by heart (*VSW* 40); later, at the Ecole Normale (1928–31), she studied with Léon Brunschvicg, well known for his classic edition of that work. To judge by the many allusions in her notes and essays, Pascal's thoughts were constant companions of her own. Both came to their mature writings on religion having undertaken the discipline of thought in other domains; for Weil, preparation came, more positively, in the form of "meditation on the social mechanism" ("And so I wasn't wrong to have rubbed shoulders with politics for so many years" [*OC* 6:2:434, both citations]); for Pascal, it was the study of mathematics and physics ("When I began the study of man, I saw that these abstract sciences are not appropriate to man, and that advancing in them I strayed more from my condition than did others not knowing them" [1104]). Pascal's definition of eloquence (1094) presupposes versatility in the art of persuasion, something reflected in the variety of genres in his work, a characteristic of Weil's as well. It is to Pascal and the heritage he represents that she clings even as life in France becomes impossible for her; would her work have been imaginable without his example? Pascal and Weil wrest much of their philosophy out of the terror and imminency of those sheer "cliffs of fall" familiar also to Hopkins; in the succinct phrase of André A. Devaux, they are "mystics incapable of forgetting that they are also philosophers" ("Simone Weil et Blaise Pascal" 97).

What is a mystic who is also a philosopher to do with language, having been introduced to a realm where it is dispensable entirely? For Pascal, pragmatic in temperament, apology seems to have been the answer. A Platonist, Weil focuses on the mediating function of language as it points to truths beyond space and time.

Although a full-scale comparison of Weil's notebooks and the *Pensées* is beyond the scope of this study, it is possible to examine a celebrated essay of Weil's very much grounded in observations recorded in the notebooks, "La Personne et le sacré" (*EL* 11–44, translated as "Human Personality"), for signs of its stylistic and philosophical kinship to Pascal's meditations on language and justice in the *Pensées*. The divergences between these figures will come

more dramatically to the fore in the juxtaposition following of two smaller works, a prayer composed by Pascal at about the time he was working on the *Pensées*, and an exercise in the genre culled from Weil's New York notebooks.

"La Personne et le sacré," a distillation of her psychology of the individual, according to Thomas Nevin (347), begins by criticizing ordinary vocabulary used to describe persons as individuals and ends by upholding the intrinsic virtue of words referring to absolutes such as truth, beauty, and justice. Weil's assumptions about lexical authority and hierarchy of reference (an upper region of absolute truth, a middle region of social reality, etc.) are so far removed from contemporary focus on the unreliability of reference that one is immediately disoriented, as if spun back to premodernity. Just as suddenly, the reader is plunged into contemporary history with an explanation of the French defeat in terms of a metaphysical struggle between two errors: the powerful German idolatry of the nation-state, and the weaker cult of the individual in France (*EL* 18). Similarly anchoring her absolutist discourse to the ground is one of the essay's most startling and poignant illustrations, based on her observation of courtroom proceedings in Rouen, a city she visited several times in 1940 while her brother was being detained there on a military charge of desertion (*VSW* 510):

> As a tramp, accused in court of having taken a carrot in a field, remains standing before the judge who, all the while comfortably seated, elegantly strings together questions, commentaries, and pleasantries, while the other cannot even manage to stammer out a few words: so truth stands before an intellect occupied with elegantly arranging its opinions. (*EL* 32)

This sense of the helplessness of truth as it is dependent on the workings of privilege and prejudice has its counterpart in Pascal:

> Wouldn't you say that this magistrate, whose venerable old age commands the respect of all the people, is governed by reason pure and sublime, and that he judges things after their nature without tarrying over vain circumstances that only trouble the imagination of the weak? See him enter church for a sermon, bringing his wholly devout zeal, the ardor of charity in him

> reinforcing the solidity of reason. Now he is ready to listen with exemplary respect. Let the preacher come forward, let nature have given him a hoarse voice and an odd-looking mien, let his barber have given him a poor shave, suppose he had accidentally gotten his clothes dirty on top of all that, whatever great truths he may announce, I'll bet on our senator's loss of gravitas. (1116–17)

An undercurrent of outrage electrifies the cool, limpid surface of Weil's prose, actually a reworking of a previously stated image: "There is nothing more dreadful, for example, than seeing an unfortunate stammering in court before a magistrate making fine pleasantries in elegant language" (*EL* 14). That Weil's mind circles around the spectacle of social injustice—or, more precisely, burns a circle around it with her scandalized prose—tells us that this is not something to be argued away in reasoned discourse; it is an obstacle, pure and simple, to the truth. Weil's tramp, who must inevitably bring Chaplin and Beckett to mind, is a real tramp, caught in his predicament, accused of wrongdoing in the manifestation of his hunger; is that not the crime, she implies, an offense above all against propriety, for he is hauled up against a mechanism disproportionally weighted against him and his deed. Elegance, ease, fluency, an abundance of verbal entertainments: the judge has in his possession all the marks of privilege that dispose the mind to regard justice itself as another plaything. The inarticulateness of the vagabond, alone, standing, reduced to the desire for a carrot in a field—always the minimum—calls out for the sympathetic ear in the way a historical document demands imaginative reading; but the intellect, professionally engaged, wants only matter for diversion. To be disrupted by need, above all a need upon which one's own wealth is arbitrarily predicated, will not do. The scene is static, the very drama is in the impasse; the tramp remains standing, the judge does not hear. The sketch suffices. Injustice does not care what features we wear.

Pascal's scathing portrait of hypocrisy condemns the social man whose self-satisfaction leaves no room for any other dimension. It is not so much truth's abjection as the official's deficiency that he exposes in evoking a darkly comic scene reminiscent of the Molière of *Le Tartuffe*. Indeed, the scene dissolves into social comedy—the

unseemly mirth presumably unleashed at the end—and the false sagacity of the man has been revealed as shallow conformity to the popular image of virtue. One is reminded of Weil's kindred observation that most of the time "people confuse attention with a kind of muscular effort" (*AD* 90). The magistrate has merely gone through the motions of gravity, as will be proved by his unguarded lapse into levity.

Addressing the reader directly, Pascal's narrator draws us in, has us applaud this worthy figure along with the crowd, follow him as he enters the church and imagine his solemn concentration. We are told of his age and lofty spirit in inflated language rich in cliché ("venerable old age," "reason pure and sublime," "a wholly devout zeal," etc.); his inner qualities are translated into physical posture and expression. These attributes evoke not a specific individual, but a type we may be expected to recognize; we assent to the character's existence, we join in the suspense as he awaits the approach of a suitably dignified preacher. But Pascal confounds our expectations, along with the magistrate's; the preacher offends by his appearance; he has violated the social code crudely and so warrants ridicule, which the magistrate, personifying all that is conventional, all too predictably will supply. We who are alert to the magistrate's inflation might be susceptible to the same response. Our complicity with the narrator, whose worldliness shows through his jaded willingness to bet, also reflects ambiguously on us.

Neither Pascal nor Weil lets the reader off the hook. To the extent that we are social beings—and Pascal meets us on that ground—we are supercilious, knowing, and sorry. We are characters in the drama of social life, however unremarkable our presence. In Weil's fleeting scenario, we may merely be as spectators in the courtroom, but the injustice we may witness there is only replicated in the sordid recesses of our minds. Both writers are confrontational; Pascal, not so much prophet as peer, accompanies us in the exploration of our common folly; Weil leaves us alone with our thoughts, perhaps already condemned by those elegantly arranged opinions.

Equally appalled by officialdom's self-serving deafness to the truth, Pascal and Weil are moved to create striking and related illustrations that also reveal differing rhetorical purposes and hopes of efficacy. A closer look at passages on another common theme, the

unarguable existence of evil, will show how deeply ingrained are these differences in voice and temperament, even as the prose of these thinkers gives an overwhelming sense of a shared fundamental outlook and cultivation of a classical style. One of a number of texts in the *Pensées* represents the point of view of the skeptic:

> *Pyrrhonism.* Each thing here is partly true, partly false. Of essential truth this is not so; it is wholly pure and wholly true. This mixture dishonors and annihilates it. Nothing is purely true, and therefore nothing is true understood in terms of pure truth. One might say that it is true that murder is evil; indeed so, because we have knowledge of evil and falsehood. But what will be said to be good? Chastity? I say not, because the world would come to an end. Marriage? No, abstinence is superior. To refrain from all killing? No, because horrible disorders would ensue, and the wicked would kill all the good. To kill? No, because that destroys nature. We have the truth and the good only in part and mixed with evil and falsehood. (1148–49)

Weil, sure of the "natural alliance between truth and affliction" (*EL* 32), never abandons her lofty perspective:

> Truly evil enters into someone upon whom evil is inflicted—not merely pain or suffering, but the very horror of evil. Just as men have the power to do good to one another, so they also have the power to do evil. One can transmit evil to a human being by flattering him, by providing him with well-being and pleasures; but most often men do evil to others by hurting them. (*EL* 39)

Pascal's speaker is the picture of confidence. He uses the pronoun "we" to assert what he takes to be incontrovertible fact; he signals his presence by the pronoun "I," unhesitating in the outline of his argument; the hypothetical interlocutor, identified as "one," joins in the process, providing welcome stimulation. The various implied parties weave a cloak of highminded and animated discussion that becomes an end in itself, neatly hemmed and lifted above the ground. There is no disagreeable contact either with one's colleagues or with unflattering earth. The barter of commonplaces

transparent in such thinking simply reflects the social preference for accommodation, confirmed by the circularity of the argument; no real progress occurs. Pascal knows his enemy.

Like the Pyrrhonist, Weil herself, in the passage from *L'Enracinement* cited earlier, has occasion to resort to obvious fact ("History is based on documents") and invoke a hypothetical presence ("a historian") whose position differs from her own. But she will not delay her argument to engage in imaginary dialogue with him; his method having been proved deficient, it is, one gathers, for the historian to perceive the error of his ways, not for her to bring him along (Weil's didacticism and Pascal's are not identical). Similarly, in "La Personne et le sacré," Weil does not invent dialogue or posit consensus. Yet, like the skeptic, she stands before the problem of evil and crafts a statement based on knowledge of human behavior. One might readily imagine the first four sentences attributed to the Pyrrhonist coming from her pen.

In her depiction of social forces, Weil attempts no synthesis, simulates no suspension of belief. She uses indefinite, impersonal pronouns and references to expose the solitude of the individual. Like Pascal's speaker, she alludes to the disposition to cause harm but speaks only of "men," declining to divide them into "the wicked" and "the good" (a distinction that contradicts the skeptic's own conclusions). She bores through the social shell, for Pascal fertile material for the invention of types, to the undiluted horror that is her subject. "[S]omeone," "a human being," the unidentified victim hurt by "one," an unidentified transgressor—the maimed creature has no ready, automatic persona. The Pyrrhonist steps forward into the arena of shared, rational discourse, confident he will not be devoured there, a knowledge of human nature his weapon. Weil's faceless sufferer has already been dealt the fatal blow, other human beings its instrument. The drama is now wholly interior and forbids speech.

The skeptic, incurably detached, approaches the objects of his curiosity as essentially static, using the verb *"être"* (to be) in the conditional and present tenses. The multiple choices at his verbal command—chastity, marriage, killing, not killing—require no commitment on his part. In Weil's darker vision of human possibilities, such distance is illusory. Action occurs inevitably, if in the form of indirection and transfer. Evil itself penetrates; men have given powers; but in

acting upon another person (never with that person, there is always a recipient), they redirect an impersonal element (evil, harm, potentially the good) and redistribute it quantitatively, as if obeying a hidden mathematical principle. Even grammatically, the victim becomes the indirect object of evil, subordination illustrated by the language ("someone *upon whom* evil is inflicted," "transmit evil *to a human being*"). The present tense illustrates the operation of a fixed process, an immutable law observed as from on high. For Weil, this world is "here below," always in opposition to the reality beyond. Pascal is content to have his Pyrrhonist speculate "here."

It is Pascal who will venture into the compromising mind of his skeptic, a figure not far removed in spirit from the glib, unfeeling magistrate of Weil's remembered courtroom. Perhaps his gift for social satire was something she would have rejected for herself on moral grounds, inasmuch as it requires the willingness to entertain the possibilities of illusion and evil through fictional constructs. Her writing has a monotonous quality she freely sought. Her interest is in the spiritual laws akin to mechanical ones; she would analyze the working of forces, rather than represent the thought or behavior illustrating those forces. Her style is thus impersonal; one might say, willed to be impersonal, as Weil does not enter her text as narrator, although most certainly she inhabits it. Excluding the personal element, she arrives directly at what is for her the common denominator, that part of the soul susceptible to the horror of evil. This minimalism born of devastation is of its era. Weil's mute, uprooted victim is an unseen brother or sister of Beckett's tramps, and her excruciating attention to the mind's smallest movements recalls the project of Nathalie Sarraute. In his essay "The Power of the Powerless" (1978), Václav Havel reaches a conclusion in language that can fairly be called Weilian: "There are times when we must sink to the bottom of our misery to understand truth, just as we must descend to the bottom of a well to see the stars in broad daylight" (89). But it is Pascal, after all, who freely avers, "The heart has its reasons reason knows nothing of" (1221); our logic and fictions desert us before that human abyss hidden within. Weil is of the company of those writers and philosophers who have the courage to look over the edge of that lifeline so finely spun out by their pen.

The constant refrain of "La Personne et le sacré" is the question, "Why am I being hurt?," first mentioned as that "childlike cry Christ

himself could not hold back" (*EL* 13) and an unmistakable sign of injustice. The emergence of explicitly Christian references—there are others to the *Pater* (*EL* 38), the crucifixion (*EL* 41), and Christ's instructions to his disciples (*EL* 43)—shows the strength of Weil's claim to the heritage of Pascal; as if recourse to these references were unremarkable in the midst of impersonal, absolutist language derived from Plato, the implied equation of Christianity with the universal goes without comment. In a sense, the assumptions reflected here are those represented by the whole enterprise of her *Intuitions préchrétiennes*, where she casts Hellenic inspiration as the main, self-evident precursor of Christianity, with no recognition of Judaism as a source. The postwar reader is necessarily troubled by the exclusive religious reference in an exposition collapsing the historical dimension into an insignificant atmospheric layer seen from the lofty view of the supernatural. Must all suffering be inscribed in a Christian context? Can one pry away the essence from the temporal sheath? Weil clearly believes so. Positioning her *cri du cœur* "at the intersection of Christianity and everything that is not [Christianity]" (*AD* 54), Weil brings into apposition vocabulary and references from multiple sources, confirming Oxenhandler's perception of her "as someone who, in the struggle to become whole, drove herself mercilessly to reconcile various fragmented narratives" (8).

This kind of tension necessarily absent from the *Pensées*, Pascal asks a similarly phrased question with far greater rhetorical freedom:

> "Why are you killing me?" "Well, then, don't you live on the other side of the water? My friend, if you lived on this side instead, I would be a murderer, and killing you this way would be unjust; but since you live on the other side, I am a brave man and this is just." (1151)

This is a dialogue reminiscent of La Fontaine; in "Le Loup et l'agneau" ("The Wolf and the Lamb"), for example, having just been accused by the wolf of slandering him a year ago, the innocent lamb protests:

> "How could I have done it if I hadn't been born?
> I'm still nursing even now," the lamb answered.
> "If it's not you, then it's your brother."

"I have none." "Then it's some one of you,
For I am never given a moment's peace
By you, your dogs, your shepherds.
I've been told all about it; I'll have my vengeance." (44–45)

The personification of viewpoints made possible by dialogue is a useful tool for the social critic. The hapless traveler and the murderer, the lamb and the wolf each confront and address their antagonist. Social behavior is unmasked and distilled, as is, in these illustrations, the transparent rationalization accompanying the act of murder; the language of passion mimics logic and stakes desire's unreasoning claim. In Pascal, question is met by question; geographic accident is given status equivalent to justification for murder. The victim is silenced, his cry drowned out by the predator's volubility, the facile piling up of words betraying the argument's lack of substance. One need not travel as far as Plato; justice resides on the other side of the water, as on the other side of the sky. Pascal also says: "When it is a matter of judging whether one should go to war and kill so many men, condemn so many Spaniards to death, it is a lone man who decides, one with an interest; it ought to be a disinterested third party" (1151). An impartial third party is best able to decide the fate of the Spaniards or of the man from the other side of the water. When the subject is injustice, a narrator not himself a party to the scene he describes is best able to reveal it for what it is.

Weil provides a very different setting for her figure's query:

> Justice consists in ensuring that no harm be done to others. Harm is done to a human being when he cries within, "Why am I being hurt?" He will often be deceived once he tries to understand what evil it is he is experiencing, who is inflicting it upon him, why it is being inflicted upon him. But the cry is infallible. (*EL* 38)

If justice proceeds by negation, preventing action, injustice is also known by negation, by the absence of relationship. The attempt to understand—to rationalize, to intellectualize—is likely to be thwarted. The inner voice speaks, but the sufferer does not confront the evildoer directly. Disruption prevails. The question in

French, *"Pourquoi me fait-on du mal?,"* specifies a self (*"me"*), an anonymous agent (*"on"*), and a certain quantity of harm or evil (*"du mal"*). Weil distinguishes between this outcry and the apparently related question of why this harm is being inflicted; attempting to answer the latter question ensnares the mind in the realm of actions and their consequences, the social world dissected so effectively by Pascal and La Fontaine and from which justice has departed. Searching actively for explanation, one only deceives oneself. Only the original question has the ring of truth, of being an immediate response to brute reality. The question posed by Pascal's victim elicits more words and exposes their hollowness; Weil's leaves its speaker in solitude, susceptible to error after the ordeal, but for now exposed, all defenses torn away. She even uses in this instance the conventional masculine persona, itself a form of alienation and exclusion. Forced to contemplate the impersonal connection of the self to the reality of evil—precisely the content of Weil's question—the sufferer finds within "infallible" evidence of an inner life. There is no need for an interlocutor.

Writing in London in 1942 and 1943, Weil must have drawn strength from Pascal's example and fully appreciated the timeliness of his reflections. If she avoids the extended exercise in personification, this may be by way of a correction, refusing to let her thoughts dwell unnecessarily in that middle region where rights, individuality, and the institutions of democracy come into play (*EL* 30). Yet even in a summary description, her impulse is dramatic; there is presupposed a watchful, overseeing presence—an enlightened Creon?—whose role is to prevent miscarriages of justice. When vigilance fails, the unheard cry of wounded innocence—the sign of Antigone?—resounds inwardly. (Weil herself supplies the allusion elsewhere in the essay [*EL* 25–26].) Why is it that Weil's illustrations tend to presume the classical unities of time, character, and situation without also fleshing them out for the reader? Pascal revisits the story of Cain and Abel, writes in the active voice and invents lively discussion. Weil reduces the human element to immobility, adopts the passive voice and uses impersonal forms of reference; later in the essay, she even eliminates human reference altogether ("When the injury has penetrated deeply. . . . " [*EL* 39]). Injustice as a mechanism reveals how negligible our rights and persons truly are. Unlike Pascal, Weil does not even stop to unveil its arbitrary

workings; taking its existence for granted, she grammatically reproduces its actions. Personality is erased; the reality of pain supervenes.

Even in their treatment of the theme of spiritual hunger, Pascal's freer use of different registers and Weil's linguistic austerity make themselves apparent. In Pascal, we read:

> One never grows weary of eating and sleeping every day, because hunger is reborn, as is sleep; but for that, one would grow weary. In the same way, without the hunger for spiritual things, one grows weary of them. Hunger for justice: eighth beatitude. (1155)

Once again, Pascal uses "one" to allude to representative behavior; he appeals to a general understanding of human psychology. He leads from common experience (eating and sleeping) to common sense (the return of hunger and fatigue preventing boredom) and on to the moral dimension, by way of analogy. Our passion for justice is the logical outcome of our hunger for it; since this hunger is a spiritual good, deprivation is necessary. The cyclical nature of our appetites, physical and spiritual, wards off disinterest and ensures our attentiveness to the maintenance of good health. We are so constituted that even the things of the spirit ("spiritual things") could not of themselves attract our attention without the fluctuating register of their presence or absence. By this image a kind of quantitative measure is implied, as if the demands of justice regularly moved up and down a sliding scale, one located within the self. Registered as a lack, justice makes us take up its cause again. That this mechanism does indeed exist, and is validated, is confirmed by textual authority.

This passage, at first glance, might seem to have come as easily from Weil's notebooks as from Pascal's; the aphoristic language, the reference to essential needs, the abstraction from experience ("hunger," "justice"), the passage from physical reality to the spiritual—all of these characteristics of thought and expression are common to them both. At the same time, Pascal's call for a certain reasonableness in treating questions of the absolute would be anathema to Weil. The expression "spiritual things" would no doubt strike her as vague and even offensive; for her, absolutes would not enter so readily, linguistically or otherwise, into commerce with our notion

of things or objects. Without very explicit qualifications, the expression would be an oxymoron or a base compromise. Weil's preoccupation with the theme of hunger shows her inclination to conceive of questions in the same terms, but Pascal's illustration would probably strike her as repellent. How, she would ask, could one possibly compare justice to an appetite that is routinely satisfied? Her withering remarks on Pascal's wager (*E* 314–15) leave no doubt of her scorn for what she perceives as his willingness to traffic between material and spiritual realities, without attending first to the unyielding demands of intellectual integrity. If the hunger for justice, even if sanctioned in the gospels, essentially staves off a kind of boredom, how can it be worthy of praise, anymore than a yawn before bedtime or an empty stomach before breakfast? Is justice to be reduced to the dimensions of our routine cravings?

If Weil's perspective can be construed as unfair to Pascal, it is in part because she does not admit of considerations of social well-being (different in kind from questions of social order and justice) in the pursuit of truth, and in part because her unstated point of departure differs radically from his. The passing suggestion that the lack of justice, like the lack of food or sleep, is somehow good for us, even in the context of describing a psychological mechanism, would be unacceptable to a thinker just as eager to identify and describe such mechanisms, but who would not categorize them in terms of human behavior. Pascal's approach is more anthropological and prescriptive; his observation of how and why people act as they do is worldly and acute; his argument in favor of the appetites, his advocacy of the wager, would have us capitalize on our limited strength and perception to better our condition. It is not that Pascal loses sight of the nothingness of human beings so eloquently decried in the first pages of the *Pensées*; it is rather that he sees human dependency on God a natural corollary of our situation. Our predicament has its meaning or solution in that dependency; once we have grasped it, and its implication of the soul's ultimate reality, we may orient ourselves and our actions in the right direction. Hopefulness is inscribed in such a viewpoint. For Weil, human misery confirms our dependency on God's absence, and that bitter reality does not logically imply any hope for progress or solution. Her mysticism, which is situated not in humanity per se, but strictly in the individual, and probably passing, soul, does not contradict that

fundamental observation. Our appetites do not betray us, they serve us, in Pascal's scheme. In Weil's, they are frankly irrelevant as manifestations of our human nature.

Returning to "La Personne et le sacré," one finds a passage reminiscent of Pascal:

> Beauty is the supreme mystery in this world. It is a brilliance that attracts attention but gives it no motive to stay. Beauty is always promising and never gives anything; it creates a hunger but has in it no food for the part of the soul that tries here below to be satisfied; it has food only for the part of the soul that contemplates. It creates desire, and it makes it clearly felt that there is nothing in it [beauty] to be desired, because one insists above all that nothing about it change. If one does not seek out measures by which to escape from the delicious torment inflicted by it, desire is little by little transformed into love, and a seed of the faculty of disinterested and pure attention is created. (*EL* 37)

Weil speaks of a hunger that draws itself to our attention; she uses the impersonal pronoun "one" in generalizing our response to it; her language, like Pascal's, is striking in its lapidary concision and marvelous use of symmetry. Where he surprises with his reference to "spiritual things," Weil catches us off guard with hers to a "delicious torment." The spiritual hunger for beauty is among those allowed for in Pascal's rumination, one that comes over us again and again.

But in Pascal's world, it is perfectly consistent for such a hunger to exist alongside our natural instincts; its dailiness, its ordinariness, has roots in human nature; it is part of a pattern that identifies us and redeems us. Such a hunger is an instance of right orientation in the midst of human grandeur and misery. It creates an expectation, his analogy implies, that can be satisfied; spiritual things sustain the soul, just as food and sleep sustain the body. Without entirely contradicting Pascal—again, their closeness is often remarkable—Weil proceeds differently. Where Pascal acknowledges the presence of spiritual and material things in the world, Weil lays the emphasis on our being *ici-bas,* here below, where things of the spirit are not so readily accessible. It goes without saying that Weil is more pe-

remptory in her rhetoric; she does not cower before superlatives ("the supreme mystery"). Pascal cites what is commonly acknowledged about the body before going on to assert the existence of a spiritual appetite. His language allows room for contrast (body-spirit) and hypothesis ("but for that, one would get tired of it"); it is an exploration of possibility. The mind tests and affirms the limits of its empire, as does, in the context of his own evil will, the murderer of the man from the other side of the river. One dares to assert within the limits of what is possible; through our language, our actions, we go forth into the world; we participate in the larger thought and action around us. Weil leaves an entirely different impression.

Indeed, in the passage chosen, and again and again in her notebooks, one has the sense of approaching the absolute zero of motion—the effect of undertaking a microscopic examination of the forces at work in the movement of the mind. She speaks from on high, presents an unchanging, static precept ("beauty *is*"). Energy is demanded but given no fuel; the well-balanced engine of the appetites proposed by Pascal is nowhere to be found. Beauty, as Weil conceives of it, would not participate in this process ("there is in it no food for the part of the soul that tries here below to be satisfied"). This hunger does not correspond to ordinary human changeableness; it provokes the desire that nothing be changed ("one insists above all that nothing about it change"), and it is itself not necessarily quickly replaced and forgotten. It may even be transformed, not merely exhausted and reinserted into the cycle of appetites and desires. Weil goes on to find illustrations of the beautiful in great works of literature, linking words to this process.

In Weil, desire is provoked from without ("a brilliance that attracts attention"); it is not unleashed by a sense of lack found within. Thus the source responsible for setting the working of desire in motion is, in Weil, situated outside the self, as if to establish the insignificance of the individual and his or her characteristics from the outset. No pattern of human behavior is of interest. Weil's use of paradox confirms that the phenomenon proceeds quite independently of our expectations ("no motive," "never gives anything"). Beauty does not serve our purposes. The separation of this world ("here below") from supernatural realities is mirrored in the division of the soul between its active, devouring lower part and the

part capable of contemplation. Weil steers the self along an increasingly featureless path; the operation is independent of ourselves as well, referred to in terms of "attention," "the part of the soul that contemplates," "one." If there is no resistance—the only action envisioned—beauty simply works on the soul in a manner akin to photosynthesis. A transformation occurs; the attributes of the particular plant are beside the point. Questions of personal or collective identity do not interest Weil in this context.

This impersonal rendering of an invisible phenomenon predicated upon the immobility of the subject, on the renunciation of action, startles by its absoluteness; on what authority, on what observation does this analysis rest? The speaker has dissolved into the prose, though her presence is clearly signaled by the words "delicious torment," a characterization of a state implying full familiarity with it. The "if" clause, introducing not a hypothesis, but rather an observation, likewise arises from personal observation; it calls to mind Weil's allusion to a mediating figure—the role she envisioned for herself—in the factory ("If someone, coming from the outside, penetrates . . . "). The passage strikes with the full force of the author's inner certainty, and the absence of persona in conjunction with the description of such intimate subjective experience disorients the reader. One has the sense of intruding upon the sanctuary of the speaker's mind—but of course it is the speaker herself who has brought us inside.

In the notebooks and later essays where Weil alludes directly to her mystical experience, the combination of breathtaking certainty of tone and erasure of personality in her expression poses multiple challenges to the reader living in what Sarraute calls "the age of suspicion." Even with his classical restraint, Pascal does not remove his moral and spiritual imperatives from the context of space and time and human nature. His predicament is ours; he wishes to persuade us; his words engender self-recognition (we are like the hypocritical killer, we know the pattern of our appetites, etc.); although the cultural context is now far removed, we understand that his writing is offered in the spirit of language being a shared commodity. It is the natural medium of exchange, and just as he quarrels with Montaigne and Descartes in the course of his reflections, so he expects the reader to come to his or her own conclusions. He does not claim to have the last word; the conver-

sation will go on. These assumptions are not necessarily those we would automatically adopt in reading a contemporary text, but we acknowledge the implicit faith in language and in the meeting of minds that has traditionally led to the making and reading of books.

Weil would object to dissection of her style—its elegance, too, like that effect of beauty that draws attention to itself—on the grounds that it is the substance that should be debated: "Praise of my own [intelligence] has as its very *purpose* to avoid the question: 'Is she right or isn't she?'" (*EL* 256). But in many ways her style is exclusive, shutting the reader out. The disappearance of an "I" might well have the effect of concentrating the mind on the discussion at hand, allowing the invisible speaker shaping its boundaries to escape notice. Where, in such shifting terrain, is the reader to stand? Clearly, we are not elevated to the status of interlocutors; made to peer into a mind's private workings, we are to submit to teaching based on that mind's authority. Weil's knowledge is all of a piece, "a massive block" (*EL* 250), and we are to take it or leave it. This attitude of laissez-faire might seem to resemble Pascal's, but he reassuringly shows us that he is seeking truth along with us. Weil has found it and remains at the summit.

Weil's declamatory style—her speech ex cathedra—thus seems to have at least two sources: her inner conviction and the nature of the experience addressed. The impetus for her writing is not discourse; it is silence. Her words are not first and foremost launched by and into the stream of writings begun by philosophers before her and continuing through time (historically speaking, of course they are). One has instead the impression of her traveling a vast inner distance back to the level of language, resurfacing, and then meticulously describing her experiences. Rather than a continuing affirmation of speech, such writing stands in relation to silence; it emerges out of wordlessness. The sense of violation or intrusion we sometimes feel in reading Weil is created by the very fact of recourse to language—with all its inherent limitations, the problem of motivation (Why must such things be formulated at all? Is Weil's motive merely pedagogic?), the reference to experience not every reader could possibly be expected to verify. It is also due, perhaps, to a sense that we might not be her intended readers. As early as her essay *Reflections on the Causes of Liberty and Social Oppression* (1934), Weil foresaw her civilization's demise and articulated the

need to begin salvaging what was worthy of preservation. Perhaps Weil intended her texts for future archeologists of the Western spirit, seeing no reason to posit imminent dialogue in a collapsing Europe. Do we come upon these later works of hers too early—again, provoking the sense of exclusion—even if we do not mistake their apocalyptic tone?

Weil's writing is, in passages such as the one under consideration, akin to poetic works in their nature and musicality; sound emerges from silence, of an inner necessity, and returns to it. In an essay like "La Personne et le sacré," and certainly many times in *L'Enracinement*, Weil moves between different levels of experience and correspondingly different kinds of speech. At one moment she may prescribe judicial reform, at another comment acidly on class hypocrisy, and at another draw on mystical insight. The bases of her logic and argumentation are constantly shifting, in ways sometimes unannounced and sometimes obtrusive, delighting or disconcerting the reader. For this reason, one may prefer the freedom and lack of forced connection offered in the reading of Weil's notebooks; her procedure seems at odds with the implied rhetorical consistency and argumentative intent of the philosophical essay, and the formal question can be troublesome. For example, the conclusion of a delightful essay on school studies reinserts all of her previous remarks on the joy and profit inherent in study in an exclusively Christian context, appropriate for what was, in fact, a *pièce de circonstance* written for the use of Father Perrin, but potentially jarring for other audiences. The change of context must inevitably expel some readers; Pascal's prose, in the concerted rhetoric of *Les Lettres provinciales* and in the fragments of the *Pensées*, does not give rise to such conflict. It is part of Weil's originality that thoughts that would be at home in John of the Cross are brought to bear in her consideration of pressing social concerns; it is clear that she believes in the urgency and universality—the truth—of these thoughts and so wishes to privilege them, to place them at the center of her thinking; but it is not so clear that the assertions themselves and the terms used to express them are in fact so obvious and unobjectionable. A reader might well feel compelled to question the overwhelming number of unqualified pronouncements in Weil's prose, all the while admiring her courage and taking instruction from her stunning insights, of which there are many in "La Personne et le sacré."

Indeed, Weil's prose in her later writings—audacious and provocative in her choice of vocabulary, in her fluctuating registers, in her enveloping perspective (in its uninhibited freedom reminiscent of the omniscience of narrators of nineteenth-century fiction)—seems to be located at a crossroads where the exhausted forms of a dying civilization must be discarded at last. It is the Pyrrhonist appearing in Pascal's meditations on justice who anticipates this weariness: "Each thing here is partly true, partly false. Of essential truth this is not so; it is wholly pure and wholly true. This mixture dishonors and annihilates it. Nothing is purely true, and thus nothing is true, understood in terms of pure truth" (1148–49).

Could one come any closer to Weil than in these first lines of Pascal's exposition of the chosen point of view? The Pyrrhonist will not proceed to aspire to the absolute, but the spectacle of the mixed state of good and evil in this world ("here")—in which this world and the mind are imprisoned—arrests his attention just as it does Weil's. However, once he has ascertained this condition, the confrontation with reality degenerates. He can affirm nothing; the argument does not advance. The meandering, world-weary, inconclusive voice perfectly reflects the theme. Author and persona are distinct; Pascal creates a shadow voice—not his own, and yet his own creation. In this way, that is to say, dramatically, attention is drawn to the persona—or, more specifically, to the caliber of mind that would think this way. This is another example of the ability to adopt different guises and kinds of speech used by Pascal in the service of his quest for truth; the impassioned believer has the imagination to enter into the mind of the skeptic; the philosopher testing the limits of knowledge can wield the language of those who refuse to take up arms.

Pascal in his prose is, like Weil, an adventurer. He will, for the sake of argument, flesh out positions that he considers untenable, momentarily abandoning his own point of view. He will wield the tools of logic and reason to advance into new territory, embracing the unknown in the same way he does different personae. Unflinching in his contemplation of human injustice, he will find use for it; "this infinite chasm" (1185) within us, and which we are constantly tempted to evade through distraction, is nothing other than the trace of "an infinite and immutable object" (1185), something we should seek to possess. His concept of the wager, which

Weil finds utterly lacking in intellectual integrity, celebrates risk and action. Advocating initiative, built upon the language of appropriation, Pascal's call to conversion is the polar opposite of Weil's assertion that it is God who descends to us, if we implore him to. Pascal, who believes in divine miracles, still has confidence in his kind, in the activity of the intellect, in words; Weil, who would entertain no notion of compromise with reality, is fundamentally, as David McLellan calls her, the utopian pessimist.

She presents a completely different picture of the flawed state of the world, in which good and evil, beauty and imperfection coexist:

> Beauty is sensible, although quite vaguely and mixed with many false imitations, inside the cell in which all human thought is at first imprisoned. Truth and justice with their tongue cut out can hope for no other help than its help. It too has no language; it does not speak; it says nothing. But it does have a voice with which to call out. It calls and indicates justice and truth which are voiceless. As a dog barks to bring people to the side of his master lying lifeless in the snow. (*EL* 37–38)

The prison or cave of the mind is precisely where Pascal's Pyrrhonist resides; the impotence of "truth and justice with their tongue cut out" is illustrated by his dispirited negations. But Weil, speaking, like Pascal, of a limited understanding, does not represent the thinker him- or herself; instead, she personifies the ideals thought should aspire to. She endows them with a voice; but truth and justice have been mutilated. Beauty has sound, but not speech; language has been mutilated; there is a forceful series of negations, different in kind from the Pyrrhonist's. Beauty's impingement upon the consciousness, at first vaguely felt and then insistent and effective ("it calls and indicates"), culminates in an image dissociating voice and animation. The process reverses the order of events of that other account of an awakening, Rimbaud's prose poem "Dawn"; the narrator first encounters nature in its stillness ("Nothing was yet moving . . . The water was dead"), only to notice its quickening as he advances ("I walked, awakening the quick and warm breaths"), and soon meets "a flower who told me her name" (140). Nature is an enchanted image of the poet's powers. In Weil, the prison cell of