

# “Translations of Beauty: Simone Weil and Literature”

FINAL PROGRAM  
XLI Colloquy of the American Weil Society

University of Notre Dame  
March 17–19, 2022

And Friday Web Sessions on March 25, April 1, and April 8, 2022

(\*\* All Times are indicated in Eastern Daylight Time \*\*)

## Thursday, March 17

4:30–6:00 **Spiritual Friendships** – McKenna Hall 205/206/207

Moderator: Kathleen Cummings (University of Notre Dame)

Brenna Moore (Fordham University), “Invisible Friendship and the Language of Mystical Texts: Marie Magdeleine Davy and Simone Weil”

E. Jane Doering (University of Notre Dame), “‘Friendship as a Sign of God’s Presence’: Simone Weil and P. Perrin”

Julie Daigle (Concordia University, Canada), “Simone Weil and Henry David Thoreau: The Art of Seeing in the Practice of Journal Writing” (via Zoom)

6:00 **Reception** – McKenna Hall Gallery

7:30 **Keynote Lecture** – McKenna Hall Auditorium

Words of Welcome by Dean Sarah Mustillo, College of Arts and Letters

Words of Welcome by Sophie Bourgault (University of Ottawa), President, AWS

Words of Introduction by E. Jane Doering (University of Notre Dame)

Robert Chenavier (Association pour l’étude de la pensée de Simone

Weil), “The Responsibility of Writers: The True Relationship of Good and Evil”

## Friday, March 18

8:30–10:00 **Weilian (Auto)fiction** – McKenna Hall 205/206/207

Moderator: Sophie Bourgault (University of Ottawa)

Michael Jewell (Colorado School of Public Health), “Failed Decreation: Simone Weil’s View of *Exinanivit semetipsum* in Walker Percy’s *Lancelot*”

Peter Morgan (Harvard Law School), “Simone Weil in Autofiction”

Alexandra Sweny (Concordia University, Montreal, Quebec), “Contending with Weilean Decreation as Autofictional Praxis in Chris Kraus’ *I Love Dick*”

10:00–10:30 Break – McKenna Hall 205/206/207

10:30–12:00 **Weil’s Critique of Human Rights** - McKenna Hall 205/206/207

Moderator: Alexander Jech (University of Notre Dame)

Jesse Perillo (DePaul University), “Justice as a Liturgical Form of Life and Weil’s Critique of Human Rights”

Päivi Billie Gynther (Freelance Researcher, Finland), “Rights Critique Revisited: Comparing the Thoughts of Simone Weil and Christos Yannaras”

Jacquelyn Maxwell (Queen’s University), “Attention to Particulars and Simone Weil” (via Zoom)

12:00–1:30 **Lunch** – McKenna Hall B01

1:30–3:00 **Trauma and Lament** – McKenna Hall 205/206/207

Moderator: Gregory P. Haake, C.S.C. (University of Notre Dame)  
 Cristina Basili (Complutense University of Madrid), “The Lamentation of Electra: Simone Weil’s Appropriation of Sophocles” (via Zoom)  
 Dino Alfieri (UK-based artist), “Reading Weilian Affliction in Kevin Brockmeier’s *The Illumination*” (via Zoom)  
 Ed Chan Stroud (Oxford University), “Affliction and the (Mis)Translation of Beauty: The Hermeneutical Consequences of Trauma” (via Zoom)

3:00–3:30 **Break** – McKenna Hall 205/206/207

3:30–5:00 **Affliction and Protest** – McKenna Hall 205/206/207

Moderator: Christine Evans (Lesley University)  
 Pascale Devette (University of Montreal), “The Political Role of Literature to Experience ‘Impersonal’ Love”  
 Lucy Grinnan (University of Notre Dame), “Saints of Symbolic Speech: Antigone, Joan of Arc, and Simone Weil’s Frontline Nurse Project”  
 Cynthia Wallace (St. Thomas More College, University of Saskatchewan), “‘Theorist/of the victories of force’: Adrienne Rich reads S. Weil” (via Zoom)

5:30–7:00 **Dinner** – Morris Inn Private Dining Rooms

7:15 **Pre-lecture song-fest** by *Voices of Faith* – McKenna Hall Gallery & Auditorium

7:30 **Keynote Lecture** – McKenna Hall Auditorium

Moderator: Dianne Pinderhughes (University of Notre Dame)  
 Introduction by Gerald McKenny (University of Notre Dame)  
 Vincent Lloyd (Villanova University), “Are We All Slaves? Weil, Homer, and Black Thought”

## Saturday, March 19

8:30–10:00 **Ecology and the Impersonal** – McKenna Hall 205/206/207

Moderator: Ronald Collins, editor of *Attention* (on-line journal on Simone Weil)  
 Kate Lawson (Queen’s University), “Ethics and Beauty in the Anthropocene” (via Zoom)  
 Sarah Griffin (Memorial University of Newfoundland, Canada), “Weil’s religious Philosophy and Dark Ecology”  
 Michaela Dianetti (National University of Ireland, Galway), “*L’Impersonnel* in ‘*La Storia*’: The Influence of Simone Weil on Elsa Morante” (via Zoom)

10:00–10:30 **Break** – McKenna Hall 205/206/207

10:30–12:00 **Silence and Contradiction** – McKenna Hall 205/206/207

Moderator: Ruthann Johansen (University of Notre Dame)  
 Noemi Sanchez (Sophia University, Italy), “Divine and Demonic: Two Types of Silence in Simone Weil’s Philosophy” (via Zoom)  
 Mac Loftin (Harvard University), “Translating Silence: Delores Williams and Simone Weil on ‘The Underside of the Underside’”  
 Alejandra Novoa (Universidad de Los Andes, Chile), “The Use of Contradiction in Simone Weil’s Literary Work”

12:00–1:30 **Lunch** – McKenna Hall B01

1:30–2:30 **Fragility and Eternity** – McKenna Hall 205/206/207

Moderator: Susannah Monta (University of Notre Dame)  
 Matthew Kilbane (University of Notre Dame), “The Nail, The Needle’s Eye, and  
*The Need for Roots: George Oppen and Simone Weil*”  
 Ann W. Astell (University of Notre Dame), “Simone Weil’s Artful Transpositions  
 of *King Lear*”

2:30–2:45 **Break** – McKenna Hall 205/206/207

2:45–4:15 **Roundtable on Peter Winch** – McKenna Hall 205/206/207

This roundtable will discuss Peter Winch’s 1989 philosophical work, *Simone Weil: The Just Balance*, asking such questions as: How did Winch read Wittgenstein? How did his reading of Wittgenstein inform his interpretation of Weil? What attracted him to Weil in the first place, and why did her work continue to occupy his thought?

Eric Springsted, Chair

Mario von der Ruhr, Emeritus, Swansea University, UK

David Cockburn, Emeritus, University of Wales Trinity St David, UK

John Edelman, Emeritus, Nazareth College, Rochester, NY

4:30–5:45 **AWS Business Meeting** – McKenna Hall 205/206/207

6:15 **Banquet & choral reading** by ND students, Morris Inn Private Dining Rooms

**Friday Web Series:**

**Friday, March 25, 11:30–1:00, Lecture by Alexander Nemerov** (Stanford University)

“On Simone Weil and Giotto.” Alexander Nemerov, winner of many awards for excellence, is the Carl and Marilyn Thoma Provostial Professor in the Arts and Humanities, as well as Chair of the Department of Art and Art History at Stanford University. His writing often analyzes fiction and poetry alongside works of visual art. For Professor Nemerov, art makes real-world experiences more legitimate and powerful: “Learning to see is the longest apprenticeship of all the arts.”

**Friday, April 1, 11:30–1:00, “The Pleasures and Pitfalls of Translating Simone Weil”**

Translating is a formidable task. Three translators of Simone Weil’s works: Ros Schwartz, translator of Weil’s *L’Enracinement* (forthcoming from Penguin UK) and Philip Wilson and Sylvia Panizza, translators of Weil’s *Vénise Sauvée* and poems (Bloomsbury Press) will discuss some of the challenges. Tess Lewis, an internationally recognized translator, will moderate the discussion.

**Friday, April 8, 11:30–1:00, “Rethinking Theology” – A roundtable**

Emily King, University of Chicago

Gwen Dupré, University of Oxford

Joanna Winterø, University of Copenhagen

Mac Loftin, Harvard University

Tom Sojer, University of Erfurt, Chair

In this virtual roundtable, each of the five members of the “Rethinking Theology” seminar will give a brief summary of how their investigation into the present state and future possibilities of theology can draw on Simone Weil. “Rethinking Theology” is committed to transcending the political thinker/religious thinker divide in Weil scholarship – not only to do justice to Weil, but also to head towards a theology that is accountable to the political implications it always bears.

## Paper summaries/outlines & biographical notes

**Thursday, March 17**

**4:30–6:00 Panel 1 - Spiritual Friendships**

Moderator: Kathleen Cummings (University of Notre Dame)

**Brenna Moore (Fordham University), “Invisible Friendship and the Language of Mystical Texts: Marie Magdeleine Davy and Simone Weil”**

Brenna Moore is a Professor in the Department of Theology at Fordham University. Her teaching and research focus on Catholic intellectual history in the modern period, with special attention to the themes of mysticism, friendship, and the religious responses to the political crises of the mid-twentieth century. Brenna is author of two books, *Sacred Dread: Raissa Maritain and the French Catholic Revival 1914-1945* and most recently, *Kindred Spirits: Friendship and Resistance at the Edges Of Modern Catholicism*.

### Summary

This paper draws on what historian of Christianity Peter Brown has called “invisible friendship” to describe the inner bond ancient Christians felt with holy figures, especially the saints. It is an apt description of the bond that the French scholar of medieval mysticism and Nazi resistor Marie Magdeleine Davy felt with Simone Weil. Both Davy and Weil found ordinary friendships difficult. Both Davy and Weil were in many ways solitary figures who, at the same time, also lived lives marked by profound connections. Both had unusual ways of talking about friendship and though the two women were acquaintances and travelled in the same intellectual circuits in Paris, after Weil’s death, Davy felt an intense inner bond with Simone Weil that took place largely in the realm of memory. Davy wrote one of the very first books on Weil, published in 1951, with many more works of scholarship to follow. Above all, Davy admired Simone Weil’s vast understanding of global mystical texts – including Meister Eckhardt, John of the Cross and the Bhagavad Gita. Davy claimed to have learned from Weil and the literary texts of mystical experience kept alive the language of mystery, interiority, and nonviolence. This language of mysticism was particularly critical, according to Davy, because religious language so often co-opted for projects of authoritarianism and absolutism. Through archival research, I also discovered an international experimental community Davy established in rural France in the 1960s, named after her late friend, Maison Simone Weil. Using the Davy-Weil “invisible friendship” as a case study, this paper explores one of the earliest spiritual and scholarly impacts Simone Weil had on the world, particularly in her extraordinary knowledge of global mystical literature, as well as in those cultural and spiritual realms not easily captured by the written word. Uncovering the invisible friendship behind Weil and Davy also helps us see the rich interpersonal, theological, and political contexts of their friendship and shared retrievals of comparative mystical texts.

In her own writings, Davy often described Weil as similar to a flame, a prophet whose vision is always burning through her own writings, a light flickering on the dark landscape of the 20th-century. Davy thought Weil herself embodied something of the mystical literature she had introduced to Davy. Uncovering these intellectual, spiritual, interior collaborations with mystical texts helps to expand our understanding of friendship and reconsider its importance to the history of spirituality, and to the legacy of Simone Weil in particular.

### Bibliography:

- Marie-Magdeleine Davy, “A Propos de Simone Weil.” 1950, *L’âge nouveau* (1950)
- Marie-Magdeleine Davy, *The Mysticism of Simone Weil* (1951)
- Marie-Magdeleine Davy, “L’idée de Dieu et ses conséquences,” *L’âge nouveau* 90 (January 1955).
- Marcel Moré, “La Pensée religieuse de Simone Weil,” *Dieu vivant* 17 (1950): 47–54
- Marie-Magdeleine Davy, *Introduction au message de Simone Weil* (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1954),

Simone Weil, "What Is Sacred in Every Human Being?," in *Late Philosophical Writings*, ed. Eric Springsted (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015), 190.

Archival materials :

Maison Simone Weil box 155 J 66, Marie Magdeleine Davy Archives, Départementales des Deux- Sèvres, Niort, France

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### **E. Jane Doering (University of Notre Dame), "Friendship as a Sign of God's Presence': Simone Weil and P. Perrin"**

E. Jane Doering is Director Emerita of The Teachers as Scholars Program at the University of Notre Dame where she taught French language and literature. She holds degrees from Northwestern University, University of Notre Dame, Goucher College, Douglas College of Rutgers University, and the Sorbonne in Paris. Her doctoral thesis was on the political and social thought of Simone Weil. Her book *When Fiction & Philosophy Meet; A Conversation with Flannery O'Connor & Simone Weil* in 2019 follows Simone Weil and *The Spector of Self-perpetuating Force* in 2010. She is a long-term member of the Administrative Council of the International French Simone Weil Society and is on the board of the new website ATTENTION.

#### **Summary**

"Friendship is a supernatural harmony, a union of opposites." SW (OC IV 1, p.328)

Friendship, writes Simone Weil, after having formed a relationship with Father Joseph-Marie Perrin, is a form of God's implicit love for us. This phenomenon is particularly evident when it occurs between two individuals with very different backgrounds and opposing views on how to achieve the teleological purpose of human lives. She believed that the presence of God must be sensed through all exterior things without exception.<sup>1</sup> Certainly, God's presence can be discerned in the meetings between our intensely rational philosopher Simone Weil, raised in an agnostic household, and the devout Father Joseph-Marie Perrin ,O.P.\* steeped in reverent obedience to the Catholic Church, guardian of the faith, and to the Dominican Order. Their meeting occurred due to the unforeseen happenstances of wartime upheaval, a mystical experience, and a reuniting with friends.

Simone Weil's past alienating experiences had led her to distrust of friendship. She had been cruelly mocked by fellow male students for her penetrating mind, her absoluteness, and a complete indifference toward social mores for women in her day. She confided to Perrin that as soon as an acquaintance betrayed her trust, she cut them off completely with never a backward glance. On the contrary, Father Perrin was a transparent confident person, whose dependence on others, because of his semi-blindness, had increased his trust and his openness toward others. He generously reciprocated acts of kindness and fearlessly defied the Nazis' inhumanity by hiding fleeing Jews and refugees of all backgrounds, providing them with requisite false documents. How the unique spiritual friendship between these seemingly opposite personalities bourgeoned and deepened over a scant 12 months, continuing virtually after Simone's departure, and producing extraordinary fruits is the object of our exploration.

The fortuitous meeting occurred because of Simone's chance encounter with Hélène Honnoret, a deeply observant Catholic; their brothers, Pierre and André had been students together in Paris. Despite the reality that many in the episcopacy were preaching obedience to the established powers, P. Perrin was active in the hazardous network distributing the anti-Nazi newspaper "Cahiers clandestins du Témoignage Chrétien." The *Cahiers* were playing a major subversive role by informing the public of the antithesis between Christian values and anti-Semitism and of ways to impede the Nazi roundup of Jews political fugitives. Knowing Simone's emerging inquiry into the Catholic Church, Hélène introduced her to the Dominican priest, and Simone Weil soon joined in this covert endeavor fraught with peril.

The spiritual friendship between the intellectual and the religious, only four years older than she, embodied essential concepts in Weil's evolving religious philosophy: attention, equality, "reading" the other as God would,

<sup>1</sup> *WG 14, Il faut sentir la réalité et la présence de Dieu à travers toutes les choses extérieures sans exception, aussi clairement que la main sent la consistance du papier à travers le porte-plume et la plume.*

contemplation of opposing views, sensitivity to the other's differences, and an embrace of the teleological purpose of human life. The unfolding of Weil's attitude toward friendship after their encounter becomes evident through two distinct vehicles: her letters to Perrin and her essay on friendship. In her letters, she speaks warmly and openly of her gratitude for the congenial welcome offered her by P. Perrin, yet repeatedly avows her unworthiness. In her essay, consistent with her vocation as a philosopher, perfect friendship is examined rationally through basic universal principles. With her new mystical outlook impinging on their dialogues, she concludes that friendship is a reflection of divine love and is a miracle that operates through supernatural grace, available to everyone, but perfected only with discipline and purity of purpose.

Perrin's feelings for her come through in the tender empathy expressed in his Introduction to *Waiting for God*. For him, her critique of the Church, her unique extrapolations of history and her asocial behavior, though at times shocking, were never a cause for either disdain or rejection. Indeed, his purpose in *Simone Weil, telle que nous l'avons connue*, \* 1967, and *Mon Dialogue avec Simone Weil*,\* 1984, is to counter arbitrary criticisms that might encourage a dismissal of her profound spiritual insights.

The body of the paper will continue with:

- reciprocal insights into Perrin's impressions of and comments on Simone Weil;
- description of the goals and dangers of distributing the anti-Nazi "Témoignage Chrétien";
- Conclusion with reference to her essay: Friendship

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- Weil, Simone, "Quatre Lettres de Simone Weil À Gilbert Kahn," *CSW XVIII* 4, 19??, p.335 – 342.

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### **Julie Daigle (Concordia University, Canada), "Simone Weil and Henry David Thoreau: The Art of Seeing in the Practice of Journal Writing"**

Julie Daigle received a Ph.D. in political science, with a specialization in political thought, from the University of Ottawa (Canada). She is currently a postdoctoral fellow at Concordia University's Department of Political Science. She is the co-editor (with Sophie Bourgault) of *Simone Weil, Beyond Ideology?* (2020).

### **Summary**

In the last few decades, there has been a growing interest in the political thought of Simone Weil and Henry David Thoreau, two philosophers who often worked in the margins, seeking to translate their ideas into real life experiences. Both philosophers also practiced, extensively and throughout most of their adult lives, journal writing. Weil's *Notebooks* and Thoreau's *Journal* offer voluminous, sometimes intimidating, accounts of their most intimate thoughts. In these, they jotted down various notes and summaries of books they were reading, as well as observations on ideas, events, people, and especially their own selves. Reaching flow states, Thoreau and Weil sometimes filled hundreds of pages in only a couple of months. At certain points in their lives, these journals were the very heart of their oeuvres.

In this paper, we argue that we can find in Weil and Thoreau's journals the basis of an "art of seeing" that leads to political resistance. This art of seeing, profoundly rooted in philosophy, involves the right use of thought. Where Thoreau speaks of "awareness," Weil talks of "supernatural attention". Both involve a demanding labor of the self that is inspired by Socratic and Stoic precepts, and thus renews with the ancient ideal of a practical

philosophy. Thoreau and Weil also found inspiration in the ancient philosophies of China and India. The art of seeing that is sketched in their journals isn't a type of eremitism that distances them from social life. On the contrary, it leads them to a reflection on the meaning and complexities of action, and fuels their participation in the world. In fact, journal writing seems to foster and sustain their political engagements, and increases their openness to the world, to nature and to others. Thoreau acts in protest against slavery and the Mexican War, in addition to playing an active role in the Underground Railroad and formulating an ethical defense of indigenous peoples, animals and the natural world, whereas Weil criticizes colonialism, and takes part in the labor movement, the Spanish Civil War and the French Resistance.

In the solitude, silence, and receptiveness of their own thoughts, Weil and Thoreau sketched an art of seeing that became a springboard for political action and resistance to the servitudes of their time. Perhaps most importantly, however, in the space of radical freedom that journal writing offered them, Thoreau and Weil were able to fine-tune the poetic language that would give prophetic tone to their voices. Despite the dire circumstances they both faced at the end of their lives, Thoreau and Weil's journals prove that their art of seeing, as a truly philosophical practice, was fruitful since they were able to experience deep joy and learned to embrace death as the most human and thought-provoking of all of life's experiences.

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## **Friday, March 18**

### **8:30–10:00 Panel 2 - Weilian (Auto)fiction**

Moderator: Sophie Bourgault (University of Ottawa)

#### **Michael Jewell (Colorado School of Public Health), "Failed Decreation: Simone Weil's View of *Exinanivit semetipsum* in Walker Percy's *Lancelot*"**

Michael Jewell (JD, University of Denver; MPH, Tulane University School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine; PGCert, Philosophy, Cambridge University; BA (History/Biology), Louisiana College) is a partner at Jewell

Jimmerson Natural Resources Law in Kittredge, Colorado. Michael holds an appointment as Assistant Clinical Professor at the Colorado School of Public Health - Anschutz Medical Campus, where he teaches courses in public health law and mental health systems and policy. He recently completed a post-graduate certificate at Cambridge University, which focused on the philosophy of population mental health. His other interests in philosophy include Roman jurisprudence, late Stoicism, Simone Weil's theological writings, and 20<sup>th</sup> century existentialism. Apart from taking advantage of the Colorado mountains with his wife (a research scientist) and two kids, Michael enjoys all things Alfa Romeo and monochrome photography.

### **Summary & Presentation Outline**

While the influence of Simone Weil's philosophy on Flannery O'Connor is well documented, less is known about the same influence on O'Connor's friend and Southern literary contemporary, Walker Percy. Percy himself makes little if any references to Weil and her religious philosophy. Yet, the themes projected in his stories and manifest in his characters starkly follow similar existential themes as O'Connor. As Professor Doering notes, "...Flannery O'Connor offers the mysteries of redemption lived out in the mid-twentieth century following the devastations of the Civil War and two world wars." This mystery of redemption lies in a context of "...an inburnt knowledge of human limitations" that was uniquely expressed in the Southern Gothic tradition that fit Weil's thought so well despite the differences of historical experience and time. Percy's anti-hero in *Lancelot* portrays failed redemption in the most devastating terms, showing a figure who "...filled an emptiness in [himself] by creating one in somebody else." (GG, 6)

This essay presents an analysis of Walker Percy's *Lancelot* as a failed decreation (GG, 32) in the person of Lancelot. To achieve this, I will analyze Weil's view of emptiness and false divinity (GG, 34) as realized in the character of Lancelot. Attention will then be given to the comparison of Lancelot and Percival in the emptying required to give attention and love to understand the position of the other (Hooten Wilson, 87; Reflections on the Right Use), and how Lancelot chose rejections of grace to fill "empty spaces" (GG, 10). The resultant argument will show that even if not directly influenced by Weil, Percy's Catholic faith, penetrating existentialism, and thematic literary relationship with Flannery O'Connor and Iris Murdoch reflect Weil's religious philosophy sufficiently to warrant further exploration.

- I. Introduction (2 min)
  - a. Thanks and Personal
    - i. Background
    - ii. Profession
    - iii. Interest in Weil
  - b. Limitations and grace
- II. Lancelot
  - a. Plot – focus on daughter, etc...
  - b. Synopsis
  - c. Characters
  - d. Dante
  - e. Counter characters – Percival, Siobhan, Janos Jacoby, Elgin, etc...
- III. Weil
  - a. Decreation
  - b. How was Lancelot an example of failed decreation?
  - c. Test/elements
    - i. Recent writings/definitions
    - ii. Concept as lens for the novel
  - d. Where did Lancelot fail?
    - i. Compare to other characters
    - ii. Focus on how he misdirected his pain and disappointment
    - iii. Lax life as lawyer and half ass attempt to live redemptively



- iv. Margot as redemptive? Aspirational?
- IV. Move to author – Walker Percy
  - i. Is there anything here from Weil weighing on Percy?
  - ii. Familiarity with Weil does not seem likely, at least directly, yet
    - 1. Flannery O'Connor
    - 2. Iris Murdoch
    - 3. Catholic Faith
    - 4. Cannot project something not there, yet
      - a. More opportunity for research
      - b. Doering/Hooten Wilson/Others
  - iii. Other/Symbolism/Gravity and Grave Implications in Lancelot or of the Character Himself
- V. Conclusion

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### **Peter Morgan (Harvard Law School), "Simone Weil in Autofiction"**

Peter Morgan is currently a law student at Harvard University. He holds a Masters' degree in English Literature from Stanford University. On a couple of occasions, he has given papers at the annual colloquy of the American Weil Society.

#### **Summary:**

When autofiction took over literary fiction in the 2010s, Simone Weil did too. In autofiction, authors began to write autobiography at a slant, fictionalizing their own lives—and their own personalities—in a form blending the novel, essays, and criticism. Autofiction is, in this sense, a formal interrogation of the individual, aiming not for the impersonal a higher, deeper personal—a personal that transcends itself.

It may seem strange, then, that Simone Weil is one of its most recurring figures. Weil, after all, was no great fan of personality, especially not in literature. (She preferred the impersonal, the *King Lears*, *Phedres*, and, in her own play, *Venice Saved*, is any indication, classical). Yet against her apparent sensibility, there she is: Chris Kraus made her a character in *Aliens and Anorexia*. Sheila Heti claims that *Motherhood* was supposed to be a book on her. Sigrid Nunez titled her most recent book, *What are You Going Through*, after a quote from her. Susan Taubes, whose *Divorcing* recently reissued, wrote a dissertation on her. Whether evoked, shadowing, or fully

claimed, Weil is a constant autofictional specter, a fixed point of reference through which these works' aims, aesthetics, and ethics can be understood.

Instead of dismissing this as a perverse use of Weil's thought, this talk instead positions her as a crucial interlocuter with autofiction, one who prompts much of the self-interrogation that enriches the genre. By this account, Weil is not just a static corpus of statements on literature or personality but a living person who embodies the contradictions in autofiction. She was, in the end, a useful subject and foil, a woman who revolted against personality so intently that it constituted a new, striking personality. Far from a past objector, Weil stands, through this tradition, as a present complication and anchor.

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### **Alexandra Sweny (Concordia University, Montreal, Quebec), "Contending with Weilean Decreation as Autofictional Praxis in Chris Kraus' *I Love Dick*"**

Alexandra Sweny is a graduate student in literature at Concordia University (Montreal, Canada). Her current research is funded by a Social Science and Humanities Research Council award.

#### **Summary**

This paper locates Weilean decreation as a structuring logic in Chris Kraus' 1997 autofictional work *I Love Dick*. Straddling the line between autobiography and fiction, *I Love Dick* recounts the self-fashioned narrator Chris' sudden and all-consuming infatuation with her husband's colleague, the titular Dick. Despite dozens of unreturned love letters (which largely comprise the book's epistolary format), Dick remains for the most part absent and unresponsive, prompting a dejected Chris to turn to the philosophies of Simone Weil. I argue that Kraus recruits decreation as a literary technique in order to move beyond the confines of first-person narrative "I." By "decreating" her authorial self, Chris is able to reckon with the fictions she has created about herself and about Dick, and subsequently contend with absence as a generative and compelling posture. A Weilean analysis of Kraus' cult-classic thus serves a twofold purpose: it both restores a philosophical charge to Kraus' novel (which has, in the early years of its publication, faced misogynistic dismissals as "condemnable gossip" and "a book not so much written as secreted"), as well as draws attention to the literary merits and applications of Weilean decreation, which remain understudied. Given the autobiographical details of Kraus' life (which include a 1995 film adaptation of *Gravity and Grace* and a later book, *Aliens and Anorexia*, which recruits Weil as a fictional interlocuter), this intervention is at once fruitful and long overdue, allowing for a Weilean reading of *I Love Dick* that sees decreation as a formal and thematic element. As such, I propose Chris Kraus as one author whose writing, alongside that of Anne Carson and Flannery O'Connor, is deeply indebted to, and structured by, Weilean thought.

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### ***10:30–12:00 Panel 3 - Weil's Critique of Human Rights***

Moderator: Alexander Jech (University of Notre Dame)

### **Jesse Perillo (DePaul University), "Justice as a Liturgical Form of Life and Weil's Critique of Human Rights"**

Jesse Perillo is a lecturer at DePaul University and Central Michigan University where he teaches courses in applied ethics and death and dying. His research is informed by liberation theology and liberation psychology and it addresses the intersection of trauma, vision, ritual, and Christian ethics.

### Summary

Weil expresses concern over the limitations of human rights discourse and contrasts human rights language with justice, and this paper will argue that contrast in Weil's work should be understood through contemporary dialogue about liturgy's connection to politics and ethics. In doing so, the necessity of justice as a performative form of life becomes clearer. In contrast to the proceduralism and commensurability of values that might be present in rights discourse, justice's effect on the person is found through its performance as a form of life that cannot be so easily abstracted, quantified, or reduced. While the rejection of rights discourse might be seen as idiosyncratic, seeing Weil's work on justice through a liturgical lens highlights that the idiosyncrasy is not hers as much as Christianity's.

When one considers how liturgy shapes a person politically there exists a problematic tendency to believe that liturgy merely provides principles to live by, which might allow for the form of worship to be ignored once the principles are grasped. There exists an equal danger that liturgy might be seen just as an instrument for moral instruction, which would transform liturgy into a means to a larger social end in life. Similarly, Weil's presentation of justice seeks to resist justice being turned into a mere principle to be applied and something sought just to solve a problem. One does not distill justice into a series of rote exchanges. To do so would shift it closer to the rights discourse she rejects. Instead, one dwells in it and is changed. As the liturgy is understood to be for its own sake despite the fact that it inevitably transforms people, the spirit of justice rejects rights language in order to focus primarily on life lived with and through the other that also happens to radiate change.

Addressing Weil's work on justice through a liturgical lens is not an arbitrary reading as Weil's corpus contains elements that develop the role of religious ceremonies and their connection to love of neighbor and justice. Likewise, the role that the body plays in training one's reading of and attention to the world suggests that it would be through a bodily practice that one might appreciate how disembodied the language of rights discourse can prove to be. It is this disembodied nature that would make rights discourse immune to a deep appreciation of the suffering of body and identity, and, of course, this proves to be at the heart of Weil's rights critique. Finally, the logic and performance of ritual makes sense of the reality that exists in justice being something that both must be here and not fully grasped.

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### Päivi Billie Gynther (Freelance Researcher, Finland), "Rights Critique Revisited: Comparing the Thoughts of Simone Weil and Christos Yannaras"

Päivi Billie Gynther is a doctor of political science, an independent researcher and a non-fiction writer from Finland. Her academic background is in public law and human rights. She has published extensively on legal and quasi-legal regulation of education and culture, including "Beyond Systemic Discrimination" (Brill Academic Publisher 2007). Her current book project is about the legal obligations of individuals in Nordic welfare states.

### Outline/summary:

The objectives of this presentation are, from the perspective of a Nordic human rights researcher:

- to clarify what is at the heart of the rights critique from Weil;
- to estimate how her critique differs from the thought of Christos Yannaras, a distinguished Greek philosopher also well-known for his critique of individual rights;
- and
- to ask if there are lessons in their critique that we should try to learn from.

The presentation sets out in six points what Weil and Yannaras seem to both regard as major problems in the doctrine of individual rights. The critique they present will be considered first and foremost in the context of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (hereafter Declaration), which is widely agreed to be the foundation of modern international human rights law.

Primary sources are one essay each by Weil, *Human Personality* (1943, transl. 1963) and by Yannaras, *Human Rights and the Orthodox Church* (2003). Additional sources are mentioned in the bibliography below.

The six points to be discussed are as follows:

- 1) Rights-language feeds self-centeredness
- 2) Rights-language creates deceptive categories of concern
- 3) Rights-language offers a false image of freedom
- 4) Rights-language defeats communities
- 5) Rights-language is insufficient in terms of vocabulary
- 6) Rights-language attempts to create a hegemonic paradigm

Each of the six points will be explored as a triad consisting of an argument, a counter-argument derived from the Declaration or from human rights doctrine based on it, and a rebuttal that can be deduced from the texts of Weil and Yannaras, respectively.

On many of these points, Weil and Yannaras seem to think along similar lines. On most points, it is also easy to sketch a univocal counterargument from contemporary human rights scholars. The sixth point is the one that according to this parallel reading of the two thinkers most apparently requires further consideration.

In the context of today's reality, point six is crucial for the very reason that language is a way of thought. Both of the two thinkers discussed here base their criticism on a deep knowledge of western culture and history. In many non-western societies, criticism of rights-talk is even tougher. It may well be that the language of human rights as a global lingua franca remains a dream. Do we have alternatives? Is social thought at this point as much in need of efforts of creative invention as are arts and science?

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### **Jacquelyn Maxwell (Queen's University), "Attention to Particulars and Simone Weil"**

Jacquelyn Maxwell teaches philosophy at Queen's University, Kingston (Ontario, Canada).

#### **Summary**

Particularism is a moral theory that eschews the use of principles in moral judgement. According to particularists, instead of appealing to principles to make moral judgements, the moral agent should attend to the situation at hand to figure out what she has reason to do. The central figure of particularism is Jonathan Dancy. Dancy claims that his view of moral reasons and his theoretical arguments in favour of particularism will "make a considerable difference

to moral practice if accepted” (Moral Reasons ix). Thus, from the beginning, particularism was meant to be about everyday moral actions. However, this practical component of particularism has been neglected. Much of the work on particularism has instead focused on outlining and defending arguments in favour of particularism. However, particularists have had little to say about how one actually works on making better moral decisions, how particularists should wrestle with moral issues, or how to live a moral life.

Particularism has a striking genealogy. Simone Weil and Iris Murdoch were precursors to the contemporary particularist movement, and they inspired—sometimes indirectly—influential particularists like Dancy, John McDowell, and Margaret Little. I will argue that particularists should return to Weil’s work and that Weil has resources that can help provide guidance to those who find particularism compelling. Specifically, I describe several lessons that Weil’s remarks on Attachment, Attention, and Decreation have for particularists. I identify three main shortcomings of particularism’s account of the moral life: neglecting features of our psychology that obscure moral vision, conceiving of moral education as something that happens during youth rather than a lifelong endeavour, and having an overly narrow account of moral perception. I argue that appealing to Weil’s philosophy can address all three of these shortcomings.

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### **1:30–3:00 Panel 4 - Trauma and Lament**

Moderator: Gregory P. Haake, C.S.C. (University of Notre Dame)

#### **Cristina Basili (Complutense University of Madrid), “The Laments of Electra. Simone Weil on Sophocles”**

Cristina Basili is Lecturer in Contemporary Philosophy in the Department of Philosophy and Society at the Complutense University of Madrid. Previously, she was ‘Juan de la Cierva’ Postdoctoral Fellow at the same University, DAAD Postdoctoral Fellow at the Institute for Philosophy at Bonn University, and Adjunct Lecturer in the Department of Humanities at the Pompeu Fabra University in Barcelona. She received her PhD in Humanities from the University Carlos III of Madrid (2016) with a dissertation entitled *La caverna della modernità. Filosofia e politica nel Platone di Leo Strauss* (Outstanding Thesis Award for Humanities UC3M). Her research focuses on the reception of classical political thought and the problem of power in twentieth century philosophy. She is the author of several articles and book chapters on the work of Simone Weil, Hannah Arendt, and Leo Strauss. She is currently working on a monograph on Simone Weil’s political thought, forthcoming in 2022.

#### **Summary**

The aim of this paper is to analyze Simone Weil’s interpretation of Sophocles’ *Electra*. An attentive reader of the classics, Weil participates in the return to Greek literature and philosophy that characterizes the development of political thought in the twentieth century. There is a return to ancient sources to unearth a critical outlook on current theories and practices. Having familiarized herself with the study of ancient Greek culture and language since childhood, Weil returns in all her work to its masterpieces, in order to disclose several different meanings. She reads the texts closely and she repeatedly translates some passages, without burdening herself with the use of classical scholarship. Instead, according to the training of her teacher Alain, she engages in a direct, philosophical interpretation of the texts.

Among the dramatic poets, she is particularly attracted by Sophocles, for it is possible, for her, to recover in his work the peculiar conception of oppression and liberty that stands at the core of her thought. Weil reads attentively three different tragedies: the *Antigone*, the *Electra*, and the *Philoctetes*. In these pieces she looks for a non-reductionist conception of the human condition that deals with its ontological and, eventually, metaphysical dimension. Weil devotes several reflections in her writings to these tragedies, substantially changing the frame of her interpretation across the years. This fact confirms the meaningful relationship she establishes with the language and conceptuality of tragedy, which she uses to overwhelm the limitations of contemporary philosophical and political rationality. Weil finds in the symbols, metaphors, and contents of the tragedy better resources to approach the problem of *malheur*, in which she condenses her previous reflections on oppression in capitalistic societies.

Her reading of *Electra* must be framed in this philosophical context, where it stands as a particularly original interpretation of the tragedy. The richness of the ideas that Weil draws from this work deserves a specific analysis and a central place in her writings, despite the scarce and disperse materials at our disposals. Weil essays the notions of oppression, resistance, and liberation, while she develops her own tragic conception of history and the human condition, trapped in the irresoluble tension – on a secular scale – between the necessity of force and the aspiration to justice and love.

In the first part of the paper, I will analyze her first reading of *Electra*, developed in 1936, in an unpublished article intended to address the harsh condition of the working class in French factories during the thirties. There, Weil uses the story of Electra as a symbol of resistance against the despotic power of contemporary capitalistic system. She uses this tragic character to capture the complexity of the condition of oppression – its ontological dimension – beyond the reductionistic language of Marxism and current political theory. The real dimension of the suffering of workers can emerge only if it is understood as part of an *eternal* struggle that needs to be expressed in universal terms. The work of *translation* of the Greek tragedy into a popular language aims to offer the working class the words and images needed for better understanding its own condition. In doing so, she uses the tragedy to develop an analysis of the material and spiritual core of disgrace.

In the second part of the paper, I will address the interpretation of the tragedy she gives some years later, during the forties, when she frames it into the context of her mystical approach to ancient civilizations. Weil returns to the same verses of the tragedy, giving them a metaphysical and religious meaning. The tragedy now symbolizes the mystical encounter of the soul with God. Electra becomes the image of someone going through the “dark night” of the soul, being rewarded with final salvation, represented by the manifestation of her brother Orestes. This further perspective on the tragedy deepens our understanding of her speculations on the transcendence of the divine and human destiny. It seems here that the only *real* redemption from suffering can happen on a supernatural level, where the soul meets her destination. Nevertheless, considering this reading in the framework of a general critique of Western civilization and the correlative search for an “authentic” spiritual inspiration, it is possible to point out the continuity with her previous discussion of social and political regeneration.

This study of the different frameworks of Weil’s interpretation of the character of Electra aims to point out the philosophical significance of her encounter with Sophocles’ tragedy. Furthermore, it aims to provide a critical perspective based on the consistency and coherence of her intellectual work. Finally, it aims to prove the interest of Weil’s writings for contemporary political theorists, in light of her analysis of trauma, extreme suffering and of individual and collective liberation.

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## **Dino Alfier (UK-based artist), “Reading Weilian Affliction in Kevin Brockmeier’s *The Illumination*”**

Dino Alfier completed a doctorate on Simone Weil’s notion of attention at the University of the Arts, London. He has published a number of papers on Weil, including: ‘Where There Is Nothing, Read That I love You: Simone Weil’s “Attention” and The Art of Perception’ (Indigo), ‘La critique weilienne de la science contemporaine et le Book of Dust d’Agnes Denes’ (Cahiers Simone Weil), and ‘Necessarily Selfless Action: An Enactment of Simone Weil’s Notion of Attention as a Practice of Detachment through Observational Drawing’ (Peter Lang).

### **Summary**

In the world of Kevin Brockmeier’s novel *The Illumination*, where pain is manifested as light, Christian missionary Ryan Shifrin asks himself whether God is looking on human suffering ‘with loving compassion or a cultivated interest in suffering’, and he is horrified by the thought that God’s love for us might be ‘merely decorative’, that our suffering might be ‘pleasing to his eyes’.

The chapter dedicated to Ryan Shifrin is epigraphed with a long quote from Simone Weil’s essay ‘The Love of God and Affliction’, which ends with these words: ‘Pain is the color of certain events. When a man who can and a man who cannot read look at a sentence written in red ink, they both see the same red color, but this color is not so important for the one as for the other.’ The epigraph signals that, as Weil does in ‘The Love of God and Affliction’ and throughout *Waiting for God*, Ryan is grappling with the question of what, or whom, suffering is for, of how we should read suffering, and with the problem of how to reconcile the existence of affliction with the supposed loving nature of God.

What does Weil have to say about Ryan’s horror at the thought that suffering might be pleasing to the eyes of God?

In her essay ‘Forms of the Implicit Love of God’, Weil writes that ‘Creation is not an act of self-expansion on God’s part but of withdrawal, of renunciation [...] God denied Himself for us to give us the possibility of denying ourselves for Him.’ As omnipotent God chooses not to command wherever He has the power to – that is, chooses not to command to the extreme limit of possibility – so the one who loves the afflicted ‘accepts a diminution by concentrating on an expenditure of energy which will not extend their power, that will only make exist a being other than them, independent from them.’ Love of the afflicted, which is in essence attention towards the afflicted, is truly creative, since it creates a person out of the weak, the one who from the point of view of the strong is bereft of the quality of human beings, bereft of personhood, who is just a little scrap of naked, bleeding flesh unknown to all, anonymous, an inert and passive thing, mere matter to be handled, to be commanded right to the extreme limit of possibility.

Weil’s argument is as conceptually neat as it is problematic, since there is an asymmetry here: while God’s withdrawal *brings*, albeit indirectly, affliction in the world, the withdrawal which is one’s act of love towards the afflicted *diminishes* affliction; and the question then arises of whether it would have been better if God had refrained from denying himself in Creation, thus avoiding the emergence of affliction in the first place.

I suggest, however, that this is not a matter of primary concern for Weil, but rather that she is articulating an admonition: since God transcends human knowledge and power, how could you possibly understand God’s motives? How do you know that when you talk about God’s love you are not just making God into a better version of whatever you think the best humankind has to offer is? And how can you be so arrogant as to presume that you are not just using God as a ventriloquist’s dummy to proselytize your petty, self-serving ideas of what is good?

The reading of Weil I propose makes sense of some passages in *Waiting for God* that are, in my view, shocking; as for instance when Weil writes that ‘God has willed necessity as a blind mechanism [so that affliction is] first of all anonymous [and] deprives those whom it takes of their personality and makes them into things’, and that affliction is an ‘infinitely precious privilege’ and ‘a marvel of divine technique’. A metaphorical reading of these passages – perhaps gesturing towards the undeniable difficulty of loving the afflicted – does not, in my view, account satisfactorily for the sheer bleakness of some of Weil’s images. And when I try to interpret passages such as these as

pointing to a loving God, I find them utterly baffling; while they are more understandable as attempts to offset the tendency to bring the transcendental concept of God down to the mundane level.

At one point in *The Illumination* we learn that Ryan Shifrin thinks it is an insult to ‘the mystery at the center of the great big *why-is-there-anything* called the universe’ to pretend that it speaks to us ‘in a language we could understand’. But when Ryan gets caught in the dichotomy between God’s compassion and God’s cultivated interest in suffering, is he not himself forgetting that God’s ways are incommensurable to ours, that we cannot understand His language? And yet what else can we do in our intellectual reflections but to commensurate them? Weil, I believe, would not deny this, but she sends out a warning: Beware of being ensnared in self-righteousness, as Elihu is ensnared in the Book of Job. Elihu, who, on one hand, says that God ‘does great things that we cannot comprehend’, but, on the other hand, describes himself as ‘one who is perfect in knowledge’ and claims to have ‘something to say on God’s behalf’. The ‘true God’, Weil writes, ‘is found only in the heavens or in secret here below.’ You do have knowledge, I believe Weil would say, but not perfect knowledge. You do have something to say, but not on God’s behalf.

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## Ed Chan Stroud (Oxford University), “Affliction and the (Mis)Translation of Beauty: The Hermeneutical Consequences of Trauma”

Ed Chan Stroud is a Theology DPhil student at Oxford University. His research is interdisciplinary between psychology and theology, with a particular focus on Christian spiritual practices. Prior to his DPhil research Ed worked alongside social workers, where he first began to explore trauma-informed practices. Ed holds an MPhil in Christian Theology from Cambridge University and a B.A. in Philosophy and Theology from Durham University.

### Summary

#### *Introduction*

Judith Herman begins her seminal work on the nature of trauma writing that ‘the ordinary response to atrocities is to banish them from consciousness’ (Herman, 2015: 1). Herman diagnoses that human beings find it deeply difficult to speak about or listen to accounts of trauma. Simone Weil talks of something similar, describing how ‘only God, present in us, can really think the human quality unto the victims of affliction, can really look at them with a look differing from what we give to things, can listen to their voice as we listen to spoken words’ (Weil, FLG: 93).

Trauma is that which we shy away from, we avert our gaze, we may even try to deny its existence. In contrast we find beauty attractive, we give our attention to it, desire more of it, almost feel invited in by it (Thompson, 2021: 58). In light of these different reactions we might conclude that beauty has no point of contact with trauma, an investigation into the relationship between them would therefore be meaningless. My paper questions this conclusion. To do so I establish a dialogue between trauma studies and the thought of Simone Weil. I start by noting points of commonality between the way trauma studies develops a conception of trauma, and Weil’s understanding of *malheur*. Importantly both bodies of literature understand trauma/affliction as affective, social and embodied (LGA: 68; Van der Kolk, 2014: 247; Herman, 2015: 133).

#### *Affliction and beauty*

With the possibility of a meaningful dialogue established I go on to explore the relationship between beauty and trauma in Weil’s thought. In Weil’s writing, affliction, at least initially, obscures beauty leading to a (mis)translation of beauty. Describing this, Weil writes that in the pain of *malheur* ‘every good or beautiful thing is like an insult’ (GG: 50). Detailing the process by which this happens Weil writes that it is a process of ‘transference’ as we pass a feeling of ‘ugliness’ (*la laideur*) onto the world around us. Tragically this transference far from ridding us of a feeling of ugliness, compounds it (FLG: 123).

#### *Eucharistic seeing: discovering hidden beauty*

Seeking to explore the constructive applications of Weil’s thought my next section looks at how Weil understands the relationship between beauty and the recovery from trauma, situating my discussion within Weil’s theology of the Eucharist. I argue that, for Weil, in looking upon the Eucharist there is ‘a process of transference’ in which the individual’s experience of ‘ugliness’ is deeply challenged. In attending to the Eucharist the self comes to experience herself as somehow beautiful. My line of argument here is the most important part of the paper and therefore I’ve tried to keep as much of the important material as a two page summary allows.

The first objection to this, and indeed perhaps to relating the Eucharist and beauty at all in Weil’s thought is Weil’s own description of the Eucharist as ‘something utterly stripped of beauty’ (FLG: 121) (*entièrement dépourvu de beauté*). On first reading this might imply that the Eucharist is unable to reunite the afflicted with beauty. Contrary



to this I want to argue that it is just this description which makes the Eucharist such an appropriate place to turn to. Indeed, the fact that the Eucharist has been stripped of beauty plays a pivotal role in reuniting the soul with beauty.

Importantly, despite the Eucharist being stripped of beauty it remains somehow beautiful. Weil is clear that the Eucharist contains the real presence of Christ, and that Christ is beauty (IC: 101). However, the beauty of the Eucharist is not present in an obvious way. Rather following Ann Astell I read Weil as proposing that the Eucharist contains a hidden beauty (2006: 229). As Astell identifies, looking upon the Eucharist and seeing Christ requires a new hermeneutic, one which is capable of recognising beauty in its hiddenness. This Eucharistic hermeneutic, in which hidden beauty is recognised, can be applied beyond liturgical contexts. Indeed, there are some obvious applications for revising a self-concept. The person who experiences themselves as ugly has had their own beauty hidden from themselves. A hermeneutic which recognises beauty in hiddenness is important in enabling the revision of a self-concept.

Despite this, we should not think of the Eucharist as only providing a new hermeneutic. For Weil the experience of the love of God is an essential component of the Eucharist, and of the hermeneutic which springs from it. That an experience of the love of God should be so important for this revised hermeneutic becomes more apparent given the nature of beauty. Just as Weil describes ‘the beauty of the world’ as ‘the order of the world that is loved’ (FLG: 104) so I suggest that for a self-concept to be experienced as beautiful requires an experience of love.

This is what is provided in the Eucharist as the recipient experiences love in the midst of their own suffering. Part of Weil’s insight into the nature of traumatic recovery and the self-concept involved in this is that the self-concept includes the implicit gaze of the other. For Weil, this is what is established in the Eucharist. In gazing on the Host so Christ gazes lovingly back. The love of God experienced in the Eucharist lays the foundation for a loved self-concept, one which is affirmed in the experience of the world as beautiful and the recognition of Christ’s ‘tender smile’. In the beauty of the world we experience Christ’s loving gaze, telling us we are beautiful. We feel the gaze of the other recognising that, in all our pain and suffering, we shine forth beautifully.

#### *Eucharistic spaces: attending to neighbour love*

I finish my paper by returning to Herman and Weil’s thinking on the human desire to obscure trauma, perhaps (mis)translating or ignoring entirely the narratives of trauma survivors. With this in mind I ask what kind of consequence Weil’s Eucharistic hermeneutic might have for the construction of spaces in which trauma narratives can be heard. These spaces are vital for recovery, to quote Judith Herman again ‘recovery can take place only within the context of renewed relationships; it cannot occur in isolation. In her renewed connections with other people, the survivor re-creates the psychological faculties that were damaged by the traumatic experience’ (2015: 133).

A survivor’s recovery from trauma will require others to move into their pain, to sit in it, to refuse to obscure the survivor. I want to propose that one way this might be possible is in a renewed hermeneutic of beauty, one which allows for the recognition of the trauma survivor despite the experience of something of their pain. To do so I explore the relationship between Weil’s Eucharistic theology and neighbour love, showing the way in which Weil uses sacramental imagery to describe the love between two people (FLG: 84, 90) and exploring the way in which the two concepts are linked through Weil’s use of ‘attention’.

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### **3:30–5:00 Panel 5 - Affliction and Protest**

Moderator: Christine Evans (Lesley University)

#### **Pascale Devette (University of Montreal), "The Political Role of Literature to Experience 'Impersonal' Love"**

Pascale Devette is an assistant professor of political theory at the Université de Montréal. She co-edited a journal special issue on Simone Weil's thought ("Liberté et oppression, Simone Weil ou la résistance de la pensée", *Tumultes*, 2016), and published several articles in French on Simone Weil. Her PhD thesis was about the notion of tragic in the thought of Simone Weil, Hannah Arendt and Albert Camus (2019). Her current work chiefly deals with the concepts of vulnerability, attention, and narrative.

#### **Summary**

This contribution compares two interpretations of love in Antigone: that of Martha Nussbaum (*The Fragility of Goodness : Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* : 1986) and that of Simone Weil (*La Source Grecque* : 1953, "*La personne et le sacré*" : 1957, *Attente de Dieu* : 1950 ). I suggests that while Nussbaum gives a *middle reading* of Antigone, by seeking to fit Antigone into a *middle level* of values of love and individuality, Weil's interpretation does true justice to the radicality and love of Antigone by placing her at a *higher level* of good.

To put it briefly, Nussbaum considers Antigone to be cold, closed and excessive. Weil, however, sees in Antigone a very rare and demanding form of love. The two thinkers also differ in their appreciation of love. While Nussbaum defends an emotional, almost romantic view of love, Weil evokes a form of love that is not primarily rooted in emotion. This off-centered, detached love has an ecstatic effect: it takes individuals out of themselves. Like Antigone, who resists power, this love opens new ethical and political configurations, which we shall examine in turn.

Nussbaum points out that Antigone's rebellious and sacrificial attitude frightens Ismene. The philosopher shows how Ismene and Haemon are more emotional characters than Antigone is. Nussbaum reminds us several times that Ismene would be unable to understand "this *impersonal and single-minded passion*" (1986 : 64). The term *impersonal* used by Nussbaum is most relevant for us since it is a concept central to Weil's thought. For Weil, Antigone was able to perceive the different demands of a complex situation. By comparing her choices (burying her brother or following the order of the state), Antigone knows that they are not proportional. To omit the first obligation is to add annihilation to destruction by erasing the memory of what has perished. Neglecting the law simply delegitimizes the power in place. In other words, one option implies protecting the infinitely fragile, the memory of the one who is no longer with us, while the other merely confirms existing power dynamics. For Weil : « [Créon] juge tout du point de vue de l'État ; [Antigone] se place toujours à un autre point de vue, qui lui paraît supérieur » (1953 : 58). This other point of view that makes Antigone seem distant is, in fact, consubstantial with her love for others and echoes the impersonal love of which Weil speaks.

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## **Lucy Grinnan (University of Notre Dame), “Saints of Symbolic Speech: Antigone, Joan of Arc, and Simone Weil’s Frontline Nurse Project”**

Lucy Grinnan is a second-year Master’s student in Early Christian Studies at Notre Dame. They study gender, desire, and embodiment in ancient and medieval literature, particularly focusing on reception studies. They received their BA in Dance and Classics in 2020 from Middlebury College, writing a thesis on the reception of Sappho in Ovid, Lucretius, and second-wave lesbian feminist zines. In addition to their work on ancient literature, they work at the writing center on campus and teach after-school writing courses. Throughout and after college, Lucy worked on farms, and they are returning to farmwork after graduating in May.

### **Summary**

Simone Weil is often called the patron saint of outsiders or a saint for the modern age; in the introduction to *Waiting for God*, Leslie Fiedler calls her “the Outsider as Saint in an age of alienation, our kind of saint.” This term fails to define, though, how Weil herself saw sainthood. As she became more religious towards the end of her life, and therefore more aware of the state of slaves in the world, Weil grew skeptical of her previous pacifism and more open to a sainthood forged in a violent world. This led to her involvement in the Resistance after a brief time in New York.

Weil’s desire for a dangerous, sacrificial role in the war seems to conflict with her growing belief that one could only wait for God, rather than pursue God with one’s will. Because of this, during the last two years of her life, Weil dreamed up a way that women could help the moral character of France through a traditionally feminine role—one to which she felt called and for which she was uniquely well-suited. She proposed a corps of frontline nurses who would parachute onto the front line of battles to provide emergency first aid, inspiring soldiers and the country at large with their maternal energy and acts of sacrifice. These women, like modern saints, could revitalize the country’s religious spirit: their selflessness and love would inspire emulation.

Building off the work of Alec Irwin in his book *Saints of the Impossible: Bataille, Weil, and the Politics of the Sacred*, in this presentation I will discuss the Frontline Nurse Project as a symbolic spectacle: through their willingness to undergo affliction, the nurses would become symbols of French innocence and reciprocity, inspiring religiosity and political change. In particular, I focus on the figures of Antigone and Joan of Arc, two of Weil’s philosophical inspirations. Looking closely at these three characters—Antigone, Joan, and the archetypal nurse—clarifies how Weil imagined sainthood in the time of war, and what she desired from her own life and death.

Sophocles’ character Antigone showed pure love in her choice to bury her brother Polyneices above the king’s orders; Joan of Arc displayed healthy compassion for France, an alternative to idolatrous, self-centered patriotism. Like the nurses, they possess a unique gender expression: a maternal care for others combined with a masculine coolness; like the nurses would, both answered divine calls to convert their purity and womanhood into strength, choosing to undergo affliction and dying in acts of symbolic speech. More importantly, both Joan of Arc and Antigone experienced divine love as it was meant to be experienced—not as a way out of affliction, but as something within it: “That divine love which one touches in the depth of affliction... is not a consolation. It leaves pain completely intact.”

More specifically, Antigone and Joan of Arc offer models of the process by which the afflicted create beauty and become sources of spiritual inspiration. In “Human Personality”, Weil argues that beauty can communicate as truth and affliction cannot, allowing affliction and truth to be seen and comprehended: “The radiance of beauty illumines affliction with the light of the spirit of justice and love, which is the only light by which human thought can confront affliction and report the truth of it.” The nurses, like Antigone and Joan of Arc’s sacrifice, open

themselves up to affliction and truth so purely that they generate beauty and render the sacrifice legible and therefore spiritually impactful. This is the power of symbolic speech, especially in times of war.

Simone Weil's interpretations of Antigone and Joan of Arc thus offer a clearer perspective on her definition of sainthood and offer a clear lineage for her nurses. In her last letter to Father Perrin, Weil wrote: "Today it is not nearly enough merely to be a saint, but we must have the saintliness demanded by the present moment, a new saintliness, itself also without precedent... It is the exposure of a large portion of truth and beauty hitherto concealed under a thick layer of dust." Through embodied affliction, Antigone, Joan of Arc, and the frontline nurses served as models for this new sainthood, healing the world and inspiring imitation in the image of Christ himself.

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## **Cynthia Wallace (St. Thomas More College, University of Saskatchewan), "Theorist / of the victories of force': Adrienne Rich reads Simone Weil"**

Cynthia R. Wallace grew up under the maple trees of southeast Michigan but now lives on the northern prairies, where she serves as Associate Professor and Department Head of English at St. Thomas More College, University of Saskatchewan. She teaches and researches at the intersections of contemporary women's writing, religion, ethics, and race. Her first book, *Of Women Borne: A Literary Ethics of Suffering* (Columbia UP, 2016), reads contemporary women's writing in conversation with philosophies and theologies of redemptive suffering. Her work has appeared in the journals *African American Review*, *Religion and Literature*, *Literature and Theology*, *Contemporary Literature*, *Christianity and Literature*, and *Humanities*, and her current book project examines Simone Weil's importance for a number of twentieth-century women writers.

### **Summary:**

Adrienne Rich was among Simone Weil's most avid twentieth-century readers. In this presentation I trace Rich's underacknowledged engagement with Weil's writing, drawing on her poetry and prose as well as the archives to argue that attending to Rich's 45-year-long literary conversation with Weil illuminates both writers' legacies.

I begin with a brief overview of Rich's early engagements with Weil, noting that this history enriches the narrative of Weil's reception. Rich likely first encountered Weil in the early 1960s, possibly through Susan Sontag's famous piece on Weil in the inaugural 1963 issue of the *New York Review of Books*. Weil's influence is inescapable in Rich's work by the late 1960s, and she appears by name in the 1969 poem "Pieces" ("This morning: read Simone Weil / on the loss of grace."). Rich continued to cite Weil widely during the 1970s, and she endorsed both a 1973 paperback edition of *Waiting for God* and the 1977 English translation of Simone Pétrement's biography, helping introduce Weil to writers like Denise Levertov, Annie Dillard, and Mary Gordon. This influence continues through the last decade of Rich's life, and recognizing Weil as one of Rich's persistent sources also supports a recent focus on the importance of Rich's later work. Rich is often remembered for her mid-career radical feminism, but scholars

like Albert Gelpi, Miriam Marty Clark, and Ed Pavlić call us to reassess the ever-expanding sense of global responsibility in Rich's last three decades of writing. Weil is a clear—but not yet recognized—source for Rich's perpetually intensifying ethico-political poetic commitments.

I end by briefly addressing how Rich speaks to a tension in Weil studies around erasures of Weil's religion in discussions of her politics. Rich cites from a wide range of Weil's writings, and while she embraces Weil's ethics and politics in a thoroughly desacralized frame, in poems like "Hunger," "A Vision," and "For a Friend in Travail," she struggles openly with Weil's yearning for a cruciform Christianity. Rather than treating her with embarrassment or condescension, these poems question the philosopher-mystic's decreative impulses *even while* they embrace her wisdom, following Weil's own example of a passionately critical embrace of Christianity—and thereby modeling a secular literary feminism that begins to do justice to Weil's provocations.

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## Saturday, March 19

### 8:30–10:00 Panel 6 - Ecology and the Impersonal

Moderator: Ronald Collins, editor of *Attention* (on-line journal on Simone Weil)

### Kate Lawson (Queen's University), "Ethics and Beauty in the Anthropocene"

Kathryn Lawson is a PhD Candidate at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario, Canada. Kate's dissertation entitled "Decreation for the Anthropocene" works with Simone Weil's ethics to understand our responsibilities during this current epoch of catastrophic climate change and mass extinction. Kate has forthcoming chapters on Weil in two books through Springer and Bloomsbury and she is currently co-editing a collection on Weil and Arendt under consideration with Bloomsbury after co-organizing a conference on these two thinkers. She acted as co-editor of a collection on Jean-Luc Marion and assists with editorial work at the online Weil journal and archive: *Attention*. For more, see: [www.kathrynlawsonphilosophy.com](http://www.kathrynlawsonphilosophy.com). Kate is delighted to be taking part in the American Weil Society Colloquy and humbled to have the opportunity to share in conversation with such wonderful scholars.

### Summary

This paper will consider the possibility of ethics in the Anthropocene by examining Simone Weil's suggestion that art, science, and work are the three actions that allow for human creation (*FLN*, 44). As a harbinger of mass extinction, natural destruction, and total human annihilation, the Anthropocene is, in a Weilian sense, the best time to be born precisely because loss so immense offers a space for radically new possibilities (*FLN*, 47). Weil's decreation necessarily includes, or is succeeded by a recreation, what Rozelle-Stone calls the "second movement of

grace” (*Weil and Theology*, 165-171). My paper will focus on this second aspect of the decreative process, which is a demand for our ethical action or what Cha refers to as the “ethical bind to the other,” in which the I is renounced, made vulnerable and precarious for the sake of the other, but is reinscribed at the site of the encounter with the other through ethical action (*Decreation and the Ethical Bind*, 36). Potential avenues for Weilian ethical action in the Anthropocene will be considered by examining specific examples in science, art, and activist work. The becoming of decreation, the learning to die as an individuated self in order that one may live in relation to other beings, both domesticated and radically other, is a dauntingly personal project. But this is the demand of Simone Weil. We cannot simply think. We must thoughtfully act. As the Anthropocene crashes onward through the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it becomes painfully clear that it is only gaining momentum, that the formidable powers of capitalism and progress fuel its trajectory. A Weilian decreation for the Anthropocene is not a mere intellectual proposition but a requirement if we wish to maintain ethics and love in this time of exponential loss.

This paper will begin by briefly unpacking the concept of the Anthropocene and why I believe that expanding Weil’s ethics to include the “natural world” is both within and beyond Weil’s own project. Weil’s ethics prove to offer a rich and meaning path for humans in the face of climate catastrophe. Second, I will briefly unpack Weil’s second movement of decreation, or the beginning of action. While this second movement is often considered to be distinct from the decreative act, I believe that it is necessary for decreation to be other than destruction. The division of the act of decreation and recreation is a contributing factor to misunderstanding Weil’s ethics as violent self destruction, when in fact, decreation and recreation are two sides of one coin, each necessary for the possibility of the other. Third, I will turn to specific examples of how the actions or creations of science, art, and work can realize an ecological ethics in the epoch of the Anthropocene.

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### **Sarah Griffin (Memorial University of Newfoundland, Canada), “Weil’s religious Philosophy and Dark Ecology”**

Sarah Emily Griffin is a graduate student in Philosophy at Memorial University of Newfoundland. Sarah received her Bachelor of Arts (Honours) in Classics and Contemporary Studies from the University of King’s College and Dalhousie in Halifax, Nova Scotia in 2019. Broadly speaking, Sarah is especially interested in Weil’s mystical theology and Christian Platonism.

#### **Summary**

One can draw deep parallels between the 13th-century German mystic theologian Meister Eckhart and Simone Weil. Of particular note, and what will be the focus of this examination, is that we see considerable overlap between Eckhart’s discussion of ‘detachment’ and Weil’s term ‘decreation.’ At times, these two terms can seem almost interchangeable, particularly when considering (as this paper will aim to do) their parallel methods of disestablishing attachment with the world and its trajectory of supernatural divine union. This paper will begin by examining the deep resonance between Weil’s and Eckhart’s mode of detachment, particularly in terms of the dissolution of the will.

Despite considerable overlap, our comparison will lead to a central distinction between Eckhart and Weil, and this distinction will become apparent when considering the idea, which both Eckhart and Weil draw on, of ‘ground.’ ‘Ground’ is the basis through which we can come to understand both detachment and decreation, and thus, to understand the important distinctions of the two terms, we must trace these differences to their root in the ‘ground.’ Eckhart’s ‘ground’ is the non-dual, infinite and indistinct union of God and soul. Eckhart suggests that, in the ground, the soul and God exist as the indistinct union as was the case ‘prior to creation.’ Eckhart’s ground is attainable through detachment; the soul creates a space in the ‘likeness’ of God such that God divinely inflows into the soul in a creative and indistinct union. For Weil, ‘ground’ is also the meeting place of God and the uncreated part of the soul, however, it is at this point that we will examine a considerable difference: Weil’s ground is not located in the beyond-God and pre-creative ground, as we would say of Eckhart, but rather, her ground is a ‘void’ and ‘nothingness’ realized through Christ’s crucifixion. For Weil, in the crucifixion, a void is created at the moment of most extreme separation of the transcendent God the Father from the immanence of God the Son. Lisa McCullough helps us mark this important distinction:

In Weil, the nothingness of God is not the precreative aboriginal ground of the Trinity as it is for Eckhart, but rather the postcreative ground in God of the crucifixion. The nothingness of God is that rending void in God that contains and manifests the supreme plenitude of divinity. Never,



therefore, does Weil's thinking back-pedal away from the crucifixion or aspire to return to the precreative unity of God (McCullough, p. 187)

Ground as 'void' and 'nothingness,' realized in the crucifixion, is crucial for Weil, as it is the place where the soul, in the nothingness of the void, is prepared for the supernatural imposition of divine Love. This is a distinctly alternative understanding of 'ground' from that of Eckhart's: Eckhart's ground is a pre-creative unity that exists prior to the emergence of the Trinity. For Weil, the cross is emphatically the only means by which the human soul and God can meet. As the soul becomes 'decreated' it moves across the cross from material humanity into supernatural divinity. Decreation occurs in and through the cross of Christ: the cross is the mystical union through which the uncreated part of the soul enters into God.

Weil's decreation, which occurs within the uncreated part of the soul, is dependent on the destruction of the created part of the soul through affliction. Affliction sheds the soul of its created part, leaving the uncreated soul 'at the foot of the cross,' in preparation for decreation. Weil's emphasis on affliction, and in particular, her understanding of affliction as the first and necessary step towards relating to God through the Cross, lends her Christology a distinctly tragic feel. For Weil, the God the individual ought to relate to is the God of the crucifixion (the moment in which we see God as perfect Love, she suggests) and *not*, as is the case with Eckhart, the pre-creative and primordial God we find in Eckhart's ground. As McCullough explains,

Only when God abdicates the power and freedom he possesses as the precreative "God beyond God" does he fully realize himself as the God who is absolute love: the Crucified God. It is the cross of the world that renders God fully and truly God (McCullough, p. 187)

Both Eckhart and Weil posit a kind of 'freedom' that occurs through detachment. For Weil, one finds 'freedom' by moving deeply into the crucifixion, particularly by moving into the moment where God is most separate, or detached, from the immanence of God in creation on the cross. In this moment, the soul is detached as God is detached from the world. For Eckhart, by contrast, freedom is attained through detachment as it leads the soul to exist within the indistinct and pre-creative union of soul and God.

The aim of my examination will be to firstly, outline the considerable parallels between Eckhart's detachment and Weil's decreation, and secondly, understand the underlying distinction of 'ground' that is at the root of the differences between these terms. In doing so, we will come to see that, for Weil, decreation is the means by which we relate to God as 'Love,' realized fully only through the crucifixion.

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#### Michaela Dianetti (National University of Ireland, Galway), "*L'Impersonnel in 'La Storia': The Influence of Simone Weil on Elsa Morante*"

Michela Dianetti graduated in Philosophy from the University of Rome Tor Vergata with a BA thesis on fairy tales in Simone Weil and Cristina Campo, and a MA thesis on the idea of 'limit' in Simone Weil and Rainer Maria Rilke. She is now a PhD candidate at the Department of Italian Studies at the National University of Ireland, Galway, fully funded by the IRC, Government of [Ireland Postgraduate Scholarship Programme](#). Her research compares Iris Murdoch's and Elsa Morante's realism, understood as 'obedience to reality', tracing its theoretical background to Simone Weil's philosophy and her consideration of affliction. Recently she published an article on Simone Weil and Rainer Maria Rilke in the Italian Journal of the Group of Women Philosophers *Diotima* [<https://www.diotimafilosofe.it/per-amore-del-mondo/istante-del-risveglio/>]. She has also recently been granted the 2022 Barbara Stevens Heusel Research Fund Fellowship for Early-Career Scholars, awarded by the Iris Murdoch Society

#### Summary

Following a recent interest in Morante scholarship revolving around Simone Weil's influence on Elsa Morante (Bardini, D'Angeli, Cazalé Bérard, Gaeta, Borghesi, Zanardo), and my investigation of Morante's notes in the margins

of Weil's books held in the National Library of Rome, I will start from Angela Borghesi's suggestion that Weil's idea of the Homeric *Iliad*, as Weil presents it in *L'Iliade ou le poème de la force* (1940/41), is the fundamental model which inspired Elsa Morante's novel *La Storia* (1974).

I will focus on the dichotomy between Weil's idea of the force, turning the human being into an impersonal being (a thing, as she formulates it in *L'Iliade ou le poème de la force*), and *l'impersonnel*, approached through self-effacement (as she explains it in her 1943 essay *La personne et le sacré*). My aim will be to show how these radically opposed effacements of the self (one resulting from *destruction* and the other from *décréation*) are central 1) in Morante's conceiving of *La Storia*, 2) in her idea of the role of the writer, and 3) within the framework of her novel, in the characters of Ida, Davide Segre, and Usepe.

Therefore, my talk will be divided in three parts. The first is dedicated to the concept of *l'impersonnel* in Weil and in the philosophical foundations of Morante's novel. The second part focuses on Morante's realism, which she sees as a form of narration in which the author's voice comes from his/her standpoint on the world, but at the same time lets reality emerge without the filter of the narrating self. In this sense, art is considered by Morante to be the opposite of destruction. This makes it possible for the narration to encompass all the events with compassion, in the sense of Homeric *pietas*. The last part analyses the different ways in which the three characters relate to reality: Ida who turns into an impersonal entity as the game of force ultimately turns her into a thing, Davide who uses force and illudes himself in his attempt to rationally understand the game of force, and thus ends up being all centred in the *personnel* and far from reality, and Usepe, who contrastingly is the only one who can communicate with *l'impersonnel* and see reality as it is.

1. In order to focus on the concept of *l'impersonnel* in Morante, I first define what *l'impersonnel* means for Weil as she explicitly explains in *La personne et le sacré*. I do this moving from the investigation of 'the extreme opposite of *décréation*', which is the 'destruction' of human beings 'turned into things' by force, as explained in Weil's *L'Iliade*. If in the *Iliad* both the oppressors and the oppressed in the context of the war are represented as impersonal entities, in the sense of objects at the mercy of the force (whether the force is used or suffered), in *La personne et le sacré* the 'de-created' human being who abdicates his/her power and all that pertains his/her personal identity approaches the *impersonnel* in the sense of reality devoid of any projections stemming from the self, a place where God can descend. Morante in her novel *La Storia* aims to represent the spirit that Weil recognizes in the Homeric poem, which is, as Morante writes in the subtitle, 'lo scandalo che dura da più di diecimila anni' [the scandal that lasts for a few thousand years]. This is the everlasting game of force; the illusion of power-seeking that produces the logic of winners and losers, and which eclipses the only truth that stands behind all the suffering: there is no winner or loser, but all human beings are subject to the same necessity of existence, and because of this all are equal.
2. This perspective of equality among humans can only occur for Weil from an 'impersonal' perspective, and it is this impersonal stage that Morante wants to adopt in her writing. Her 'realism' requires that the voice of the narrator should not be present, but at the same time it requires a narration impregnated by Homeric *pietas*. The *Iliad* ultimately teaches that it is only in virtue of the fact that we live *le malheur* that justice and love can occur. Within the poem, the moments in which love emerges are narrated as impersonal instants in which time is disrupted and the human condition is unveiled. As moments in which the dream of the force evaporates, they are poetically narrated, differently from the narration of the events of the war. The narration of the destruction of the city of Troy, for instance, epitomizes the human condition of being always at the mercy of chance, and this becomes the tragic framework in which luminous instants of love and justice can occur. This capacity of pointing out the 'dream' by letting the beauty concealed in affliction emerge is, for Morante, the proper aim for the contemporary author. In the voice of the narrator of *La Storia* there is a coexistence of two – at first sight different – characteristics: the voice is in the third-person, semi-omniscient, I could add that this voice is 'impersonal', but sometimes it seems to be Morante's voice, although an 'impersonal' and universally compassionate Morante. When *La Storia* first came out, Morante was criticised most commonly for the 'espressività affettiva' of the narrating voice, and the sense of 'lamentation'. As Homer in the *Iliad*, the voice that narrates *La Storia* never judges oppressors, it is always neutrally compassionate, and always hinting at the dream of the force. Morante states that pointing out the human condition, as the *Iliad* does, is not a lamentation, but a 'testimonianza' carried through a 'compassione per identificazione'. The novelist represents a particular time and space in history, through a particular system of human relationships between characters, animals, places, and time, which are built up on the author's own experiences and perspective on the world, and which through this particular but impersonal narration represent the truth of human relationship with reality. From Morante's perspective, in a time of 'destruction', the novelist must advocate for its opposite, that is 'the integrity of the real'.
3. *L'impersonnel* is also represented in the framework of *La Storia* itself. It is opened through violent events that disrupt the flow of time, or through the selfless gaze of the child Usepe. Both the events of destruction, and those



of *décréation*, hint to the unreality of force. In the novel, we can find three different emblematic modalities of suffering force. Firstly, there is Ida, the protagonist of the novel who represents the reduction of a human being into a thing made by human history and its violence, who bends to necessity in complete obedience. Secondly, there is Davide Segre, the man that wants to explain violence through reason, and inevitably fails in this impossible process of understanding. He is in fact unable to attend to something other than himself, and thus gets defeated by force that, instead of being understood by him, is spread from him into the world as 'contamination'. Finally, there is Usepe, the 'ragazzino' who is the innocent, and so not yet contaminated by unreality in virtue of his being still in the dimension of infancy, and this allows him to communicate with *l'impersonnel*. Ultimately, 'i ragazzini', and perhaps the poet, are the only ones who receive the suggestion from the *l'impersonnel* of the dream of unreality, which is the message that echoes throughout the entire novel.

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### 10:30–12:00 Panel 7 - Silence and Contradiction

Moderator: Ruthann Johansen (University of Notre Dame)

#### **Noemi Sanchez (Sophia University, Italy), “Divine and Demonic: Two Types of Silence in Simone Weil’s Philosophy”**

Noemi Sanches (March 06, 1990, Bela Vista, Brazil). After a five-year degree in Communication Sciences with emphasis in Institutional Communication at the Catholic University “Nuestra Señora de la Asunción” in Paraguay (2014), she received a Master’s degree *cum laude* in “Foundations and Perspectives for a Culture of Unity with specialization in Trinitarian Ontology” at Sophia University Institute (Florence, Italy) in 2016. In April 2020 she obtained also with honors the title of Doctor of Philosophy at the University of Perugia (Italy) with the thesis *Del silencio a la palabra. La ontología del lenguaje en Simone Weil* (being published by Ciudad Nueva España). She is currently a lecturer at Sophia University Institute, where she is also carrying out post-doctoral research in theoretical philosophy focusing on Luigi Pareyson’s ontological hermeneutics in dialogue with Simone Weil’s notion of *lecture*.

#### **Summary**

*« L’Amour ordonnateur, c’est l’Amour divin,  
l’Amour de la démesure, c’est l’amour démoniaque »<sup>2</sup>.*

Simone Weil’s language is essentially silent, both in form (one need only think of the writing style of the *Cahiers*<sup>3</sup>) and content. In the latter sense, the category of silence is crucial for the entire Weilian meditation – from her first philosophical writings to those composed in London<sup>4</sup>. It is a key and necessary element for accessing Reality, whether through action as *non-action* (and as contemplation), or through art (music, painting, sculpture, architecture, etc.), but also through the word, in particular the *poetic word*, which is precisely – and paradoxically – *impregnated by silence*.

Silence is therefore substantially linked to truth and transcendence. In fact, as can be seen in particularly in the writings of Marseilles and in those that followed, there is a silence *more positive than any sound*, which is identified with the source and content of the original Word.

On the other hand – as often happens in Weil’s reflection in which paradox and contradiction play an essential role<sup>5</sup> –, just as there is a silence that is *conditio sine qua non* for the unveiling and communication of Absolute Truth (which is itself silence), there is also a diametrically opposed silence, which does not come from the transcendent domain, but is purely immanent and hinders the elevation of man.

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<sup>2</sup> S. WEIL, *Écrits de Marseille*, vol. 2: *Grèce – Inde – Occitanie (1941-1942)*, t. IV: *Œuvres Complètes*, Gallimard, Paris 2009, p. 182.

<sup>3</sup> As evidenced in particular by N. PRZYBYLSKA, *Ascèse de la parole. Écriture personnelle de Simone Weil*, Éditions Universitaires Européennes, Saarbrücken 2010.

<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the category of silence is abundantly present throughout the 18-year arc of Weilian reflection: from *Le conte des six cygnes* (1925) to the *Carnet de Londres* (1943), her last notebook (*K18*).

<sup>5</sup> Reasoning from *pairs of opposites* and *contraries* is a very common method of S. Weil philosophizing. According to the French philosopher herself, it is a rich and fruitful procedure for the thought that wishes to rise beyond itself, thus allowing itself to be “touched” by the transcendent truth.

It is the *demonic silence*, characterized by its one-dimensionality (unlike the depth and multidimensionality present in original silence), absence of relationship, and obedience to the pure force of gravity (and not necessity). Demonic and diabolical are two adjectives that appear not that frequently in Weil's writings and indicate the concrete and powerful action of Evil in the world, which only the "weakness" of pure and supernatural love can overcome.

To develop this thesis, our presentation will essentially be divided into three parts:

- 1) In a first moment we will try to describe briefly the "different degrees of silence" found in Simone Weil's reflection, highlighting particularly their essential qualities and the syntony with the Weilian style of writing. At the end of this section, we will dwell on the last degree of Silence described by Weil in *L'amour de Dieu et le malheur* and *Lettre à Jöe Bousquet*, in order to outline its divine and ontological foundation.
- 2) From this, we will seek to describe what Weil means when she uses the terms "demonic" and "diabolic" in her writings, in order to better understand the meaning of the application of this adjective to the term silence, which gives it a significance substantially different from, and contrary to, the notion developed in the first point.
- 3) Having clarified the essential difference between both types of silence, we will discuss their ethical consequences and the impact they have on social life, on the basis of examples given by the philosopher herself and which are extremely actual and relevant to interpret our times.

In this way, the ultimate goal of this contribution is to offer a double reflection on silence: a) on the one hand, by highlighting its essential value in the life of the person for a proper balance in the various relationships that he/she establishes both at the individual-social and transcendent level. At the same time, it is important to be aware that not all silences are equal and that if there is a silence that elevates and promotes the growth of the person in his/her interrelation with the world, there is also another type of silence that is destructive and degenerative, and that must be avoided and combated in order to achieve a more just and harmonious society for each person.

For this analysis we will rely in particular (but not only) on the philosophical meditation of the last three years of Weil's life (1940-1943). That is: the writings of Marseilles, New York and London, and, of course, the *Cahiers*.

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### Mac Loftin (Harvard University), “Translating Silence: Delores Williams and Simone Weil on ‘The Underside of the Underside’”

Mac Loftin is a PhD candidate in Theology at Harvard University, where he studies the relationship between Christian theology and political thought, principally in relation to far-right white nationalisms in the twentieth century and today. His research explores theology as a site of contestation in times of crisis, drawing on psychoanalytic and poststructuralist theories of subjectivity and relation as well as theologies of incarnation, sacrament, repentance, and vulnerability. His dissertation is on the theological antifascisms of Simone Weil, Georges Bataille, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

#### Summary

Throughout her notebooks, Weil troublingly collapses fascism, Ancient Rome, and Ancient Israel into a single nationalist political theology. According to Weil, all three share in common an understanding of God as a divine sovereign with a favored relationship to a particular nation, helping that nation kill and dominate other communities (in the Nazi's *Lebensraum*, Rome's imperial expansion, and the Israelite conquest of Canaan). Many readers take Weil's uncharitable reading of the Hebrew Bible as an internalization of Third Republic and Vichy anti-Semitism.

However, there may be a way of taking Weil's *critique* seriously without endorsing her *rejection* of the Hebrew Bible. To do so, we can look to the similar critique of the Hebrew Bible in Delores Williams' *Sisters in the Wilderness*. There, Williams traces a “non-liberative thread” running through the Bible, in which God is depicted as condoning slavery. This thread, according to Williams, is best seen in the narratives of Sarah and Hagar and the extermination of the indigenous Canaanites, as well as New Testament framings of the crucifixion as substitutionary atonement. Williams' womanist method involves taking non-Hebrew enslaved women such as Hagar as her point of departure, reading the Bible with an eye to “those who are the victims of those with whom the biblical writers have identified.” Such a method allows her to see God as the one who “makes a way out of no way,” claiming that nationalist episodes like the Book of Joshua are the biblical authors misidentifying genocidal ambitions as God's will.

Weil, too, regarded Hagar's story as one of the “beautiful and pure parts” of the Hebrew Bible, and like Williams, she read the book of Joshua as nationalist propaganda falsely claiming its own agenda as the will of God. Rather than writing off Weil's criticisms of Israel as unimportant to her work as a whole or writing off Weil herself as hopelessly ensnared in self-loathing anti-Judaism, my paper puts forward a new reading of Weil as giving an internal critique of the Hebrew Bible similar to Williams'.

However, I also use Williams' womanist methodology to argue that Weil's wholesale rejection of Israelite religion entails a reductionist misapplication of her own criteria of “true” and “false” religion. For Weil, every religion witnesses to the truth in its own unique and exclusive way, with that truth being that necessity and the good are utterly distinct, having their union only outside the world in the supernatural, and that we cannot ascend to the supernatural but must wait for it to descend to us. This principle leads Weil to accept as true those religions that

worship a vulnerable and suffering god consenting to necessity (Christ, Osiris, Dionysus, Zeus the suppliant) while rejecting as false any god who rules the world from above (Jupiter, YHWH).

I argue that the theme of *covenant* in the Hebrew Bible, according to which God consents to be in relation to the people of Israel be they faithful or no, places the Hebrew scriptures squarely in the tradition of divine vulnerability from which Weil excludes them. As Williams shows, the Bible consists of contesting narratives – God is depicted both as the nation’s conquering sovereign and as the one who “makes a way out of no way” for Hagar. This internal contestation, I argue, is a sign of vulnerability – God consenting to have God’s story told by fallible creatures who will inevitably fail in the telling.

By reading Weil and Williams together, my paper takes seriously Weil’s critique of the Hebrew scriptures while also showing how Weil failed to see that this critique is, by her own criteria, evidence of their beauty and truth.

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## **Alejandra Novoa (Universidad de Los Andes, Chile), “The Use of Contradiction in Simone Weil’s Literary Work”**

Dr. Alejandra Novoa is a lecturer in Philosophical Anthropology at Universidad de Los Andes in Santiago de Chile. She works in two different fields: philosophical anthropology and philosophical didactics. The professor has investigated and published in the concept of metaxy (μεταξύ) and sacrifice in the work of Simone Weil. She is working on a book about the concept of sacrifice in Simone Weil’s philosophy. In the area of philosophical didactics, she has a chapter on philosophical questioning formation and high-level thinking abilities in the book *¡No aprendas filosofía, aprende a filosofar!* (2020). She is working too on a research project about the influence of the Socratic Seminar on the quality of writing with Dr. Terry Roberts, Director of The National Paideia Center at Asheville, North Carolina. In addition, she has published the novel *Antiyal, La Hija del Sol* (1998), which was priced with the recognition of the Chilean Council of the Book and Lecture in 1999. She was a school principal for several years (2007-2012).

### **Summary**

In this presentation, I will analyze the use of contradiction in Simone Weil's literary work as a bridge to transcendence. With this objective, I will first talk about the Weilian understanding of philosophy as a tension between life and death. Then, I will expose participated reality in the metaphysics of Simone Weil and her use of the dialectical method, and explore how this is portrayed in her poems. Finally, I will show how the moral contradiction is taken to sacrifice the selfish self in the play *Venice Saved*.

Simone Weil acknowledges that the true source of her thought is Platonic philosophy. The author conceives the dialectical method to apprehend reality and as a spiritual path to achieve union with God, the source of all good, overcoming any contradiction. Weil conceives the ordered reality on various planes or levels in an analog way. These planes become tensioned by apparent contradictions resolved in the higher planes. While evil on the natural plane appears contrary to good on the natural plane, it is not on the supernatural plane. As we advance through these contradictions, we achieve greater assimilation to God; one ascends in the scale of those perfections or attributes that in God are unitarily fused in the fullness of the divine Being.

Although Plato expels the poets from the polis, he continues to use metaphors and allegories to express the truth. Weil, however, recognizes in art a μεταξύ as access to transcendence, and her ambition is to build this bridge through her poetic creation. In this sense, her poetry and drama, *Venice Saved*, included in the compilation *Poèmes, suivis de Venise Sauvée* (1968), are crossed by contradictions that are used both as a poetic resource -antithesis and oxymorons- and as a scale of access to the truth: as "Creative fire, destroyer, flame artist!" (1968: 22) that like Prometheus, brings us closer to the divine.

Like Plato, Weil distinguishes two orders of reality, governed by opposing laws: the order of the eternal, spiritual, governed by the law of freedom and supernatural love, and the order of the contingent, material, governed by the law of gravity. In the Weilian vision, we can notice a continuity between these two orders, a necessary step from one to another in which duality is overcome. The necessary order, governed by force, acquires its true meaning in the act of free love: consent to God's love. This is what his poem *Necessity* conveys: "L'âme nue exposée à toute blessure,/ Nous voulons vous obéir jusqu'à la mort." (PVS, p.33). According to Weilan's logic, it is not a question of eliminating the influence of the material world to liberate the spirit, but the elevation of the latter supposes the acceptance of the material order. For this reason, all things that participate in being are intermediaries for the human spirit to reach its union with God. They should not be eliminated but put in their place in an orderly way to ascend.

The above is of great importance in the reality of sacrifice understood as an offering and not as annihilation. It is not about the self-sacrifice of the enslaved person but the son's trust. This is what happens, too, in her work *Venice Saved* (2019). In this play, Weil shows how personal contradiction, in the highest expression of personal sacrifice, elevates the human being to his supernatural destiny and saves, in turn, society, constituting it as a bridge to access the transcendent. This transformation necessarily passes through a man's sacrifice: Jaffier, who comes voluntarily to his death as if towards his liberation.

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## **1:30–2:30 Panel 8 - Fragility and Eternity**

Moderator: Susannah Monta (University of Notre Dame)

### **Matthew Kilbane (University of Notre Dame), "The Nail, The Needle's Eye, and *The Need for Roots*: George Oppen and Simone Weil"**

Matt Kilbane is an assistant professor of English at the University of Notre Dame, where he teaches and writes about modern and contemporary poetry in the U.S., poetry and music, the history of sound technologies, and digital literary cultures. His current book project, "The Lyre Book: Modern Poetic Media," unfolds a disciplinary meeting place for literary and media studies around modern lyric poetry. Before arriving at Notre Dame, Matt served as the Joseph F. Martino Lecturer at Cornell, where he received his Ph.D. from the Department of Literatures in English and taught with the Cornell Prison Education Program.

### **Summary**

This paper unfolds the implications of a nearly missed encounter between Simone Weil and the American poet George Oppen. Bound together by striking intellectual affinities, these two figures never met, and the exact contemporaneity of these "two great minds [that] appeared during the worst of times," to borrow the words of poet Fanny Howe, is almost entirely obscured by the violence of the twentieth century. Though Weil was born in 1909, just a year after Oppen, her brief maturity as a writer coincided with Oppen's decades-long period of poetic silence (the latter had foresworn writing after 1934 in order to commit himself to political organizing). She would die thirty years prior to the publication of *Seascape: A Needle's Eye* (1972), the collection of poems in which Oppen explicitly announces his own resonant connection to Weil, a relationship that otherwise would have been lost to history. Having been moved "by an image of Oppen and... Weil passing on ships through the night, though their actual passage was many months apart"—Weil from Marseilles to New York with her parents in 1942, and Oppen from New York to Marseilles later that year with the 103<sup>rd</sup> Antitank Division—Howe wonders at how surely, over the "black Atlantic Ocean, with its litter of slaves and mines," "their minds and imaginations intersect there, out in that darkness." Once he was able to recognize it as such, it was out of that very darkness—the darkness of an acknowledged mis-appointment in historical time—that Oppen was able to sight a way forward for his

phenomenological poetics in the early 1970s, at a moment when the poetic vocation he had reassumed in the 1950s now began to founder on the social transformations of the period and the political gauntlet of the New Left.

It was Oppen's practice to latch on to concepts or passages, irrespective of their wider context, from poets, philosophers, and theologians, and these passages would compose, in Michael Heller's phrase, "an intense transformational nexus" for the poet's thinking. In a 1973 letter to his niece, Andy Meyer, Oppen quotes the "nail image" that Weil had seized upon in "The Love of God and Affliction" to dramatize the mystery of "extreme affliction": "physical pain, distress of the soul, and social degradation, all at the same time, is a nail whose point is applied at the very center of the soul, whose head is all necessity spreading throughout space and time." In his letter, Oppen adds: "Suppose she had never said anything else. Suppose nothing else had ever been said by anyone...? This would be a literature. Literature could begin here."

His own late-phase poetics, inaugurated by *Seascape*, certainly does "begin here," with a meditation on afflicted experience, and I'll open this talk by describing how Weil's nail image animates "Of Hours," the poet's reflection on his exile from poetic writing, the horror of his wartime experience, and his agonized relationship with Ezra Pound. But *Seascape* moves with Weil further afield, too, as Oppen struggles to reconcile his phenomenological theology with the foreclosing *lateness* he diagnoses in his own historical moment. This second half of the paper traces the reverberating force of another transformative Weil passage, which has—like the historical connection between Oppen and Weil—gone conspicuously missing: *Seascape* opens with the poem "From a Phrase of Simone Weil's and Some Words of Hegel," but the phrase hauntingly fails to appear in the verse. I'll argue that its provenance may very well be Weil's *The Need for Roots* (1949), though in the spirit of missed connections, this is a claim I can't quite prove. Nevertheless, I'll end the paper by substantiating Oppen's turn to *The Need for Roots*, and explaining that book's potentially talismanic significance for the poet as he grappled with the meaning of the 1960s counterculture and his own complicated relationship to the political praxis of a younger generation. Important to the paper's conclusion is Staughton Lynd's provocative claim that Weil might be credibly termed a member of "the first New Left."

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## Ann W. Astell (University of Notre Dame), “Simone Weil’s Artful Transpositions of *King Lear*”

Ann W. Astell is Professor of Theology at the University of Notre Dame and former Professor of English at Purdue University. She is the author of five books and the editor or co-editor of seven volumes. She has published on Simone Weil in *Shofar*, *Studies in Spirituality*, and the *Journal of Continental Philosophy*, as well as in her book, *Eating Beauty: The Eucharist and the Spiritual Arts of the Middle Ages*. In other writings, she has studied Weil’s influence on René Girard.

### Summary:

Discussing education in *The Need for Roots*, Simone Weil (1909–1943) praises Shakespeare’s *King Lear* in a single, exultant sentence, naming it “the direct fruit of the pure spirit of love.” Similarly brief references to Shakespeare’s tragedy appear in Weil’s notebooks, letters, and late essays. In a short article, S. Nagaragan has explored the critical value of her comments for Shakespeareans, but surprisingly little attention has been paid to what this play, the greatest of Shakespeare’s tragedies, contributed to Weil’s own late writing via her philosophical transpositions of it.

In this paper, I follow the lead of Joan Dargan, who has described Weil as “thinking poetically” alongside French literary models, in order to advance the thesis that Weil also thought poetically about *King Lear*, attending to the play as something inherently philosophical, an avenue to truth; she “read” it meditatively at several levels of understanding, naming it a play about affliction, gravity, ingratitude, and speaking truth. She continued to learn from it over the course of several years, even as she had learned from Homer’s *Iliad*, Sophocles’ *Antigone*, and the *Bhagavad-Gita*. In the end, she also “transposed” *King Lear*, translating its truth into terms understandable by men and women immersed in their own real-life dramas in an age of world wars.

Shakespeare’s tragedy, in short, is intertextual with Weil’s own late writings. Framing my argument with biographical references to Weil’s significant encounters with *King Lear* in April, 1938 and in January, 1943, I examine three of her wartime writings: “Notes on the Concept of Character,” “What is Sacred in Every Human Being?” and Weil’s “Plan for an Organization of Front-Line Nurses,” each of which somehow alludes to *King Lear*. The first, “Notes on the Concept of Character,” reflects her meditations on Lear himself as a man “broken, not bent” by his encounter with affliction; the second, “What is Sacred in Every Human Being?” reflects her ponderings on the blinded Gloucester and his two sons, Edmund and Edgar; the third, “Plan for an Organization of Front-Line Nurses,” shows her to have been “thinking poetically” about Cordelia and the Fool, both of whom are named nurses in Shakespeare’s play.

In her letter to her parents dated August 4, 1943, Weil identifies herself with the Fool and expresses frustration that her own words, especially the plan for an elite corps of nurses, have gone unheeded. This complaint of Weil’s gains in significance when heard against the background of Donald Wolfitt’s performance of *King Lear* in London in January, 1943—a performance that Weil attended and that, together with his many other productions of that play, strengthened the English people in their rooted resilience under enemy assault. The moving theatricality of Shakespeare’s (and Wolfitt’s) *Lear* contributed to Weil’s belief that the optics of front-line nurses caring for the wounded and dying would have had a similarly transformative effect, had her plan been implemented.

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