

H-France Review Vol. 23 (October 2023), No. 180

Robert Zaretsky, *The Subversive Simone Weil: A Life in Five Ideas*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2021. 181 pp. Notes and index. \$20.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN: 9-78-0226549330; \$15.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9-78-0226826608; \$14.00 U.S. (eb). ISBN 9-78-0226549477.

Review by Christine Zyka, The Newman Institute.

Without mentioning any specific biographers, it has become “a ritual” to sum up Simone Weil’s subversive and provocative life with a number of contradictions. The historian Robert Zaretsky takes a slightly different path in his biography of Weil (pp. 2-3). Zaretsky chooses to summarize Weil’s life without relying on a chronological history; instead, he identifies five of Weil’s most important concepts or ideas (cf. the subtitle, *A Life in Five Ideas*). Characterizing Weil’s life based on striking themes rather than chronological history is not a new approach. Examples of this approach include: Laure Adler’s rather free account of Weil, *L’insoumise. Simone Weil*; Sylvie Courtine-Denamy’s philosophically themed account, *Simone Weil. La quête de racines célestes*; and Gabriella Fiori’s biographical essay, *Simone Weil. Une femme absolue*.^[1] What is new is the methodical depiction of Weil’s life using only five Weilian concepts in a biography that integrates parts of Weil’s own philosophy. It is Weil’s fascinating unity between life and thought that leads Zaretsky to adopt this method, but what actually guides his selection of these five concepts?

The introduction provides the answer to this question. Zaretsky writes (p. 12) the following: “My goal is to explore a small number of core themes in her thought that still resonate today. Or, I believe, should resonate.” The selection is thus Zaretsky’s own, and he identifies the concepts that still resonate today as affliction, attention, rootedness, resistance and goodness. All of these concepts were important to, and used by, Weil herself, Zaretsky points out. The only exception is resistance, as this concept rarely appears in Weil’s own texts. Since resistance is crucial to Weil’s life merits, Zaretsky chooses to devote an entire chapter to this concept as well. Otherwise, Zaretsky rightly draws on Weil’s standard biographical author, her childhood friend Simone Pétrement, and Pétrement’s work in French, *La vie de Simone Weil*.^[2] Zaretsky also demonstrates a solid and broad reading of the English translations of Weil’s various texts.

Affliction (*malheur* in Weil) is an existential wake-up call that can be compared to humankind’s consistently unanswered cry: why? In the first chapter dedicated to affliction, the reader learns about Weil’s bitter experiences on the factory floor and how the Second World War gradually affected her view of power and force. Slavery is about being conditioned by either falling victim to thoughtlessness in mechanical and alienated work or being subjected to direct violence or oppression. Zaretsky gives an account in the context of the texts that were decisive for Weil in this respect: *the Book of Job*, Shakespeare’s *King Lear* and Homer’s *Iliad*. Nevertheless, affliction

remains a contradictory concept for Weil, as Zaretsky points out. For Weil, this condition of extreme physical, psychological, and social decay seems to render humankind completely dumbfounded. At the same time, she devotes much ink to capturing the content of affliction, especially when God himself seems to allow its existence. Christianity, which according to Weil is the religion of slaves, does not try to remedy affliction; rather, Christianity seeks meaning in the good use of it.

Chapter two deals with the concept of attention, which Zaretsky explains as being particularly important for the reception of Weil's thinking. However, there is a common thread between the two first chapters. If it is almost impossible for people to witness the suffering of fellow humans, it is because they find it difficult to face or pay attention to their neighbor. The jacket photography of Zaretsky's book also highlights Weil's gaze and face in a striking way; Weil's honest and truthful gaze was difficult to meet, according to those who have recounted what it was like to be in her presence. Zaretsky is particularly philosophical in chapter two. He goes from describing Weil's texts on reading the world hermeneutically, via Marcus Aurelius's methodical way of transforming the self in the *Meditations*, to comparing Weil's act of attention to a spiritual exercise. He also addresses the contemporary eagerness to improve one's focus and concentrate on one's inner self, or mindfulness. Zaretsky claims, however, that Weil's attention differs from mindfulness in that it does not lead to introspection or to the consideration of the content of consciousness. On the contrary, Weil's paying attention is doing justice, Zaretsky claims. Attention also entails unconsciousness, self-abnegation and waiting to create a space for action outside of the soul's narrow egoistic limitations. In his book about attention, *Simone Weil. L'attention au réel*, Robert Chenavier excellently describes Weil's articulation between an inner spiritual demand and an outside struggle for solidarity, justice and charity. [3]

Resisting lies and injustice is a real Ariadne's thread in Weil's short life story. In chapter three, the reader follows Weil's participation in the Spanish Civil War, in trade union work, and, later, in resistance activities during the Second World War. Zaretsky also addresses Weil's view of non-radical pacifism and her emphasis on thinking as an act of real freedom and resistance to slavery and oppression. Furthermore, Zaretsky provides a comparison between Weil and Hannah Arendt; he also examines how Jean Cavaillès prevented Weil from participating actively at the front, Jean Anouilh's reinterpretation of *Antigone*, and Camus's debt to Weil regarding the concepts of rebellion and revolution.

The fourth idea is about people's need for roots in different milieus and how rootless people tend to spread their rot to their fellow human beings through mass murders, war, and colonialism. Weil dedicates her second major work, *L'Enracinement*, to this problem. What kind of roots is Weil really talking about? Zaretsky addresses this issue in depth. Unlike many of her contemporaries, Weil does not fall victim to nationalism. Her own view is of a relational nature. Roots are required on several levels and in different milieus simultaneously. On a horizontal level, it is about a need for belonging to a civil society or even what Robert Putnam later called a need for social capital. Zaretsky's parallel between Weil's patriotism and Johann Gottfried Herder's cultural conservative nationalism is also worth highlighting in this chapter. Finally, the chapter addresses Weil's view of the seemingly binary oppositions of the individual and the collective as well as duty and obligation.

The last chapter, which addresses metaphysics and morality, is about Weil's spiritual journey: the meeting with Gustave Thibon and Father Perrin, the pros and cons of Christianity, and the

kind of mysticism Weil might stand for. Always striving for a transcendent good to which humankind has a true relationship on the vertical plane leads to both goodness and God. In this chapter, Zaretsky chooses to compare Weil's Platonism with Iris Murdoch's moral interpretation of it. Finally, in his epilogue, Zaretsky asks himself whether it is possible to share Weil's radical and uncompromising thoughts. Reading Weil is a demanding task that leaves the reader feeling uncomfortable, to say the least, but also in deep awe of such an exemplary person. "Reading her is always a revelation and a reproach," claims Zaretsky (p. 158).

With this summary of the book's contents in mind, let us briefly return to Zaretsky's selection of core themes. Most people probably know Weil for the work *La Pesanteur et la grâce*, compiled by Gustave Thibon, but these particular concepts are never discussed by Zaretsky, which for me is somewhat strange (this also applies to themes such as love, beauty and joy). When gravity and grace—which are orientations or attitudes towards reality—are omitted, even concepts such as attention and rootedness do not get their full meaning. For example, Zaretsky discusses how comparing Weil's attention with a classic *vita contemplativa* can be misleading (p. 48) and easily be interpreted as pure passivity but does not explain why passivity is still important. Zaretsky emphasizes the horizontal aspect of the tree metaphor as fundamental to the concept of rootedness but he also hastily mentions the vertical aspect of the tree without analyzing Weil's meaning of having roots in the heavens (p. 107). Finally, he notes that both Murdoch and Weil based their teleological view of good on Plato's parable of the cave in the *Republic* (p. 148), but omits how often Weil pointed out that Plato's philosophy lacks a descending good, a God that is present here and now. What really makes man actively devote himself to his fellow man is that—like plants and trees—he receives his nourishment from the energy of sunlight, from a naturally existing grace with which he already has a relationship, and that he is capable, if he is truly attentive in certain passivity, of receiving a supernatural grace in the encounter with God himself. From this perspective, the passive path (Weil's negative effort) towards good is already an active (but indirect) path. The passive path and the active path embrace one another.

A quick comparison of Emmanuel Gabellieri's *Simone Weil*^[4] and Zaretsky's core themes would have been an interesting starting point for the discussion of the selection of the five core themes. *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Simone Weil* (edited by Lissa McCullough), scheduled for publication in 2024, will assist English-speaking Weil researchers with forty key terms identified by the most prominent modern Weil scholars and will further complement this picture. Of course, that does not prevent the five concepts chosen by Zaretsky from being both relevant and meaningful.

Personally, I also find it difficult to follow Zaretsky's ethical comparison between Weil, Aristotle, and Martha Nussbaum's central capabilities in chapter four, although the comparison itself is justified. That is, I find it difficult to reconcile Weil's needs with eudaimonism and self-realization (or perfectionism). To me, Weil's needs appear as spiritual food (or energy) in analogy with the material food of the body, without which man is unable to pay attention to the supernatural and transcendent good that alone constitutes the good goal of life, unlike Aristotle's naturally different good goals. Weil's non-exhaustive list of needs is an example of the obligations that each society, association, group, or community has towards everyone. A breeding ground for the soul, then, but which for the individual can alternately lead to both pain and joy, as each need is also accompanied by an equally important opposite (order and freedom are both needed, in the same way that food must be accompanied by moments of lack of food, as Weil also points out in the beginning of *L'Enracinement*). From that perspective, rootedness and uprootedness (exile or homelessness) are both needs of the human soul.

Zaretsky's book has many merits. It describes Weil's life and work in an accessible and fascinating way. The numerous examples and connections to contemporary times make the reading current and personal. For the French-speaking audience, the comparisons with Anglophone thinkers should be particularly interesting. Zaretsky is also a good connoisseur of French authors and of the French historical context of many of Weil's life events, which makes the portrayal broad and rewarding, especially for a diverse audience.

NOTES

[1] Laure Adler, *L'insoumise. Simone Weil* (Arles: Actes Sud, 2008); Sylvie Courtine-Denamy, *Simone Weil. La quête des racines célestes* (Paris: Cerf, 2009); Gabriella Fiori, *Simone Weil. Une femme absolue* (Paris: Ed. du Félin, 1993).

[2] Simone Pétrement, *La vie de Simone Weil* (Paris: Fayard, 1973). Zaretsky also refers to a large number of other biographers in his book.

[3] Robert Chenavier, *Simone Weil. L'attention au réel* (Paris: Ed. Michalon, 2009).

[4] Emmanuel Gabellieri, *Simone Weil* (Paris: Ellipses, 2019).

Christine Zyka
The Newman Institute
christine.zyka@newman.se

Copyright © 2023 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of *H-France Review* nor republication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on *H-France Review* are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172