

**Simone Weil.** *First and Last Notebooks: Supernatural Knowledge.* Trans. Richard Rees. Wipf & Stock Publishers 2015. 384 pp. \$45.00 USD (Paperback ISBN 9781498239196).

The *First and Last Notebooks* collect together three of Simone Weil's notebooks. The first, the 'Pre-War Notebook,' was written in France between 1933-9. The latter two, which comprise the 'Last Notebooks,' were written in New York and London in 1942 and 1943 respectively. The New York notebook is the bulk of this collection, comprising about three-quarters of its length. The last pages of the London notebook were written in hospital and end just before her death. Between the First and Last Notebooks is an item entitled 'Prologue.' This collection is a new edition of Richard Rees' out of print translation from the 1960s. The notebooks are a document of Weil's ideas in formation, and offer a close and fascinating view of the voice and thinking of an original and challenging philosopher. Rees rightly states in the Introduction: 'Taken all together, the notebooks provide an unselfconscious and unintentional self-portrait ... She is, so to speak, thinking aloud; and it is an inestimable privilege to be able to listen in' (viii).

The Last Notebooks show a greater emphasis on religious matters. It is for this reason that the Notebooks, as a whole, are given by the editor the subtitle 'Supernatural Knowledge.' For Weil, the supernatural includes selfless love, or justice, in contrast with the natural human proclivity toward self-centeredness. The supernatural also refers to God, or the good, which for Weil are synonymous and equated with selfless love and justice. However, while she investigates facets of the supernatural, the end-point would seem to be contemplation rather than knowledge. She begins the London Notebook with this passage on the method of philosophy: 'The proper method of philosophy consists in clearly conceiving the insoluble problems in all their insolubility and then in simply contemplating them, fixedly and tirelessly, year after year, without any hope, patiently waiting... There is no entry into the transcendent until the human faculties—intelligence, will, human love—have come up against a limit ... It is a state of extreme humiliation ... Genius is the supernatural virtue of humility in the domain of thought' (335).

Intelligence finds a limit at the insoluble, she says, and at this point one must simply contemplate and wait. Doing so, and not presuming to solve the insoluble, is where the humility and genius of philosophy lie. By this standard, she thinks there have been few philosophers. Socrates is one. In these notes, Weil does not aim to dispel or solve mystery, not completely anyway. It may often look like she is trying to give final answers, about such matters as the nature of God, but if we take her to be true to her words here, she is really employing her intelligence as far as she can. She notes that if one tries to get to mystery without pressing the intelligence then one will not 'arrive beyond the domain of the intelligence,' but rather remain 'on this side of it' (131). If the intelligence is not pressed with 'unimpeachable rigour' (131), then the mystery we arrive at may not be genuine, but rather something we could answer but have not.

Both in writing and life, Weil pursued truth, or what is real. The following passage from the Pre-War Notebook is an example that shows how this commitment conditioned her views of joy and sadness: 'Definition of joy (which is absent in Spinoza): joy is nothing other than the feeling of reality.... Sadness is nothing other than the weakening or disappearance of this feeling' (10). Thus, disconnection from reality, even in a pleasant reverie or dream, would not be joy while an experience of the harshness of reality, despite any pain and suffering, would contain joy. Manual work, particularly when arduous, physically engages with reality and thus, for Weil, is a source of joy. Manual work is a regular theme of the Pre-War Notebook.

The notebooks also explore the reality of metaphors. She states: 'We must rediscover the idea of the metaphor which is real. Otherwise the story of Christ, for example, loses either its reality or else its meaning' (207). The story of Christ is a metaphor, she says here, but this is not to deny its

reality or significance (or perhaps historicity). For Weil, what is ultimately real, and the source of value, is the good. She asserts: 'All goods in this world, all beauties, all truths, are diverse and partial aspects of one unique good' (98). Since the good is real, a metaphor that is an expression or telling of the good is veridical. Indeed, she says the 'entire universe is nothing but a great metaphor' when seen as an 'architecture' (98) for apprehending the good. Another example: 'Trees grow by the water and light which come down from heaven. In the same way, the grain of mustard seed grows to a tree in our soul' (207). The mustard seed is a real metaphor because, thinks Weil, there is a goodness within which manifests as a seed. It is the quintessence of everyone: 'this aspiration for good, which is the very being of every man, is the one good which is always unconditionally present in every man' (284). And it is available to experience: close attention to desire, to the emptiness or pangs felt in desire, reveals desire not simply for a particular object or end, but for goodness. She notes: 'The purpose of human life is to construct an architecture in the soul' (208). Seeing certain metaphors as real is part and parcel of constructing this 'architecture' and thereby apprehending and manifesting this goodness.

As with metaphors, Weil thinks that folk tales and myths can be expressions of the good. Rees notes: 'In the folk tales of every continent she discerned an incalculable treasure of supernatural wisdom, dating from fathomless antiquity' (x). For instance, in stories where a hero sacrifices all for a princess, without thoughts of self, Weil sees a desire or quest for the good. At different places in these notebooks, Weil collects information and her thoughts about such folktales. At the basis of these efforts is her view of truth. She asserts: 'It is impossible that the whole truth should not be present at every time and at every place.... It is absurd to suppose that for centuries nobody, or hardly anybody, desired the truth, and then that in the following centuries it was desired by whole peoples' (302). Looking to folktales and myths can uncover the universality of certain truths. In particular, she looks for commonalities between myths, folktales, other religions, and the New Testament. For instance, figures she thinks bear similarities to Christ include Prometheus, Osiris, Job, Antigone, Snow White, Krishna, and the Tao (321-2).

Between the dates of the first and last notebooks Weil had mystical experiences. Rees notes that 'She appears never to have referred to her mystical experience directly.... But the undated text entitled 'Prologue' is clearly related to it in some way' (ix). This Prologue is appropriately placed between the first and last notebooks. It begins: 'He came into my room and said: "You poor wretch, who understand nothing and know nothing – come with me and I will teach you things you have no idea of.' I followed him' (65). She follows, first to a church and then outside to a garret. He feeds her bread of which she says: 'That bread truly had the taste of bread. I have never found that taste again' (65). This bread is truth. It is known by its 'taste,' not other evidence, and is beyond what she has experienced before. She wants to stay in the experience, to stay with Him, and eat of this bread. But she is not allowed. Still, she notes that deep within she feels loved by him. The Prologue seems to be an expression of a mystical experience, and an example of a metaphor that is real. It is not clear whether it was to have been the prologue to a book drawn from the Last Notebooks. But it does at least portend their spiritual concerns.

On the second last page of the London notebook she draws a box around the following phrase: 'Idea of transferences of attention.' She does the same with the word 'transference' on the last page. She gives some examples of transference. Someone playing violin while looking at sheet music is transferring attention to the page to the playing of the instrument. It is not a willed transference; it involves paying attention, and acting. Another example is talking: attention is correctly directed to the other person, she says, and transference involves this attention manifesting in speaking. On the last page she continues her thoughts on transference: 'It is only real feelings that possess this power of transferring themselves into inert matter,' and 'Matter is our infallible judge' (364). Thus, just as a tree is judged by its fruit, the effect on matter is the measure of the truth of feeling. In the

Introduction, Rees notes that Weil was, ‘Entirely dedicated to the good,’ and that ‘In her self-dedication to the good, she went too far in depriving herself of earthly sustenance’ (xiii). For Weil, attention to the good—to truth and God—transferred to action, and to flesh. Shortly after these last entries, she died of complications associated with malnutrition.

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