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SIMONE WEIL ON GREECE'S DESIRE FOR THE ULTIMATE BRIDGE TO GOD: THE PASSION

Helen E. Cullen

Simone Weil believed that Greece's vocation was to build bridges between God and man. This paper argues that, in light of Weil's "tradition of mystical thought," the Christian vocation is an extension of the Greek. The search for the perfect bridge in Homer, Sophocles and Plato comes to fruition in the Passion of Christ. The Greek thinkers, especially Plato with his Perfectly Just Man, already had implicit knowledge of the Passion's truth.

Weil held an exceptionally broad view of the spiritual part of human beings. She argues in an essay called "The Romanesque Renaissance"¹ that we can trace our "spiritual treasures" back to the various revelations had by every country of pre-Roman antiquity.² Greece was one of the countries that had a revelation:

...it was the revelation of human misery, of God's transcendence, of the infinite distance between God and man.³

In this essay, I will develop Weil's complex view that the Passion of Christ is the fulfilment of the Greek vocation: to bridge the distance between God and man. As Weil says:

Haunted by this distance, Greece worked solely to bridge it. This is what made her whole civilization....In the minds of the best of the Greeks there dwelt the idea of mediation between God and man, of mediation in the descending movement by which God seeks man. This is the idea expressed in the notion of harmony, of proportion, which is at the centre of all their thought, all their art, all their science, and of their whole conception of life. When Rome began brandishing her sword, Greece had only just started fulfilling her vocation as builder of bridges.⁴

Weil saw the whole Greek culture from Homer, Sophocles, Pythagoras to Socrates and Plato as different manifestations of the desire for the perfect bridge which finally came to fruition in the person of Christ.



The idea of mediation achieved full realization, the perfect bridge was seen, divine Wisdom became visible, as Plato had hoped, to mortal eyes. In this way, the Greek vocation was perfected by becoming the Christian vocation.⁵

A. Greek Epic Poetry and Tragedy: Human Misery and Mystical Love

Homer was, according to Weil, the first of the Greeks to express an understanding of, the infinite distance between God and man, of human affliction — human misery — through his study of necessity in its manifestation as force in the *Iliad*. He described how all who were subjected to the “empire of might” take on the same coldness as that which dominates them: a coldness equalled only by the bitterness in their hearts. Bitterness, Weil claims, is the human cry in the face of a violence which is pitiless and kills. Homer described how this cry turns into self-destruction and destruction of the other. Weil comments on Homer’s description of force’s domination of the human soul:

...the soul that is dominated by war cries out for deliverance; but deliverance itself appears in tragic guise, in the form of extreme destruction.... The soul, which is forced by the existence of an enemy, to destroy that part of itself implanted by nature, believes it can only cure itself by the destruction of the enemy, and at the same time the death of beloved companions stimulates the desire to emulate them, to follow their dark example.⁶

Ah, to die at once, since without my help
My friends had to die. How far from home He
perished, and I was not there to defend him.
Now I depart to find the murderer of one so beloved:
Hector. I shall receive death at whatever moment
Zeus and all the other gods shall accomplish it.⁷

According to Weil, Homer shows us that the despair which thrusts towards death is the same despair that impels one to kill:

I know that my fate is to perish here.
Far from my loved mother and father;
but still I will not stop till the Trojans
have their glut of war.⁸

The soul dominated by force no longer belongs to the human race. Homer shows that, in war, both vanquished and victor are driven by the same madness towards annihilation. And, both are determined to make an object out of the other. The misery of such a condition afflicts both alike so that the strong and the weak are shown to be equals as they are in truth. The ravages of death afflict us all; Homer shows the human condition in its nakedness. Weil argues that Homer’s intention is to evoke sorrow for those

human beings who are reduced to matter before death:

The cold brutality of the facts of war is in no way disguised just because neither victors nor vanquished are either admired, despised or hated....the similes which make them appear...as beasts or things...cannot make us feel either admiration or disdain, but only sorrow that men could be thus transformed.⁹

Homer's genius was, Weil claims, to show that human beings dominated by the empire of force should be loved and not despised. She finds a parallel between the Christian notion "love thy enemy" — weak or strong — and the notion, expressed in the *Iliad*, that in the other we see an essential human weakness that we share. The misery of the human condition is to be so distant from God. Our common human lot is to be subjected to force in its many manifestations. Thus, we have to hate force but pity those who had not the love to resist:

...this poem is a miraculous object. The bitterness of it is spent upon the only true cause of bitterness: the subordination of the human soul to might.... That subordination is the same for all mortals....No one in the *Iliad* is spared, just as no one on earth escapes it. None of those who succumb to it is for this reason despised....Here the humiliation of a soul that is subject to constraint is neither disguised....neither is it an object of disdain. More than one human being, wounded by the degradation of affliction, is here held up to be admired.¹⁰

After demonstrating the horror of human degradation in all its artistic beauty, Homer shows, by contrast, how miraculous are pure justice and love. Expressions of pure love show the distance which separates those degraded by force from those who are, with grace, able to love:

...this double ability of turning men to stone is essential to might, and a soul placed in contact with it only escapes by a sort of miracle.... The resulting whole would be a dismal monotony were there not, sprinkled here and there, luminous moments, brief and divine moments in the souls of men. In such moments the soul which awakes...awakes pure and intact....In that soul there is no room for ambiguous, troubled or conflicting emotions, courage and love fill it all.¹¹

Weil quotes Homer's descriptions of "pure love" by which men and women were able to escape the dominion of force. Some examples are: how the "tradition of hospitality" takes on one occasion precedence over the "blindness of combat"; expressions of familial love; expressions of fraternal love; pure expressions of love and tenderness between a husband and wife; "the most beautiful friendship, that between companions in combat"; and finally,

...the triumph, the purest love of all, the supreme grace of all wars, is that friendship which mounts up to brim the hearts of mortal ene-

mies. This quells the hunger to avenge the death of a son, of a friend.¹²

What makes Homer's *Iliad* one of the finest examples of Greek genius, according to Weil, is that he understands the sorrow of human misfortune. All human beings — whether friend or foe — are seen to be equally precious and their degradation in the face of destiny to be a great sorrow. Homer's insight is to show that "chance" has delivered millions of human souls to the door of destiny "without preparation." He conveys how vast and powerful the dominion of force is and how pitifully weak human beings are in comparison. And yet, it is this very human weakness that must be loved just because it is our common human lot. The strongest person or the weakest is shown to be nothing in the face of the force which kills. The only thing distinguishing one person from another in such circumstances is that one may by grace consent to God's love whereas another may not. To recognize this fragility in the face of force and, to love it because it is an expression of God's love is at the same time to renounce the use of force oneself. Those who do not recognize that it is only grace which enables them to escape the dominion of force deceive themselves in thinking they are different from the afflicted.

...the understanding of human suffering is dependent upon justice, and love is its condition. Whoever does not know just how far necessity and a fickle fortune hold the human soul under their dominion cannot treat as his equals, nor love as himself those who chance has separated from him by an abyss. The diversity of limitations to which men are subject creates the illusion that there are different species among them which cannot communicate with one another. Only he who knows the empire of might and knows how to respect it is capable of love and justice.¹³

One way one shows respect for love and justice is by listening to reason even in face of "the empire of might." But, as Homer shows, all thought that it might be more reasonable to live and not seek revenge, to let it go, falls "into the void." For example, Achilles once spoke the words of reason:

Nothing is worth life to me, not all the rumoured wealth of Illium,
that so prosperous city...
For one may capture oxen and fat sleep
But a human life, once lost, is not to be recaptured.¹⁴

Achilles, being a leader, could have adhered to the law of limitation by restricting his people and the Greeks to a "moderate use of might." This would demand that Achilles appear weak; that he renounce using all his strength. But Achilles does not have the insight to practise this virtue.

Such detachment from appearances requires a renunciation of desire and force; a virtue Weil describes as equivalent to "a constant dignity in weakness." This is, in fact, the virtue the Greek Stoics perfected. Given Weil's analysis, one could speculate that the Stoics had learned of this

virtue from Homer and other Greek writers, such as Sophocles or Aeschylus, who did not admire force, but showed it proper respect. They understood that it took all of the human ingenuity and virtue possible not to be ruled by necessity. Weil admired the Greeks for their study of the mechanism of force and the difficulties involved in keeping a detached view of its pull so that one could be open to a reasonable and just way.

Homer's genius in revealing the relation between force and human misery, and the human virtues, "justice and the love that is its condition," was only the beginning of a whole culture of writers and artists who drew on the same revelation. Weil finds in Sophocles' tragedies similar expressions of the contrary feelings of the bitterness of affliction and love which thrives even in a void. Weil sees in Sophocles' tragedy, *Electra* the working of this love which she calls the love of the mystic.

Weil analyses Electra's affliction and how it causes her undue pain and degradation. She had lost her father, brother, and all that she had known was taken over by strangers. She was most embittered by the loss of her brother, Orestes, who she thought was dead. Electra's love for her brother was the one thing that made it possible for her to live on. Weil describes Electra's love as the love of the "dark night of the soul." Nothing could replace this love as she held in horror all other goods. This is the kind of love, love in the void, that waits for God. Weil interprets Orestes reappearance as God's answer to Electra's tears of sorrowful love:

...Orestes, who had taken her for a slave, recognizes her by her tears. He informs her that the urn is empty. He reveals himself to her.

There is a double recognition. God recognizes the soul by its tears, then makes Himself known to it.

Just when the soul is spent and has ceased to wait for God, when the external affliction of the interior aridity forces it to believe that God is not a reality, if then nevertheless the soul still loves, and holds in horror those worldly riches which would take his place, then it is God who comes to the soul, reveals Himself, speaks to it, touches it. This is what St. John of the Cross names the dark night of the soul.¹⁵

This juxtaposition of affliction and love was what made this tragedy a description of the human condition in its most extreme form. The Greeks, claims Weil, had the ability to see that affliction is the one human condition that has God's love hidden in its depth. For that reason alone, affliction deserves respect.

In Weil's view of Christianity she finds the same human virtues that she finds in Greece. We can, she claims, better understand Christ's affliction and Christ's message if we see it from the point of view of a unique truth which contains the same message throughout time. The message concerns the one transcendent God. Out of love, God gave us the freedom to choose to open ourselves to God's love/grace or not. Our misery consists in our separation from God. To overcome this miserable human condition, we have to renounce all that separates us from God. The Greek writers such as Homer, Sophocles, and Aeschylus show us how vast the domain of force, which is the name given to all that separates us from God,

really is. To renounce force in all of its manifestations and to love the afflicted who are crushed by force is the way, according to Weil's interpretation of these Greek writers, to build a bridge to God. Weil claims that the Greeks help us understand the true message of the Passion:

Is it not an extremely powerful thing to be able to say this to all unbelievers: without the haunting of the Passion, this Greek civilization, from which you draw all of your thoughts without exception, would never have existed?¹⁶

B. Plato's Bridge to God: The Perfectly Just Man Foretells the Christ

In looking for an image of perfect justice, Plato applied the knowledge which an awareness of the role of affliction gives us to an Image of the Perfectly Just Man in the *Republic*. Weil analyses Plato's thought on the Perfectly Just Man from two points of view: first, the Perfectly Just Man in society, and secondly as Mediator between God as Spirit (One, Unity) and human beings (two, duality).

Weil examines how the Perfectly Just Man mediates between appearance and reality through Plato's study of the soul's journey towards assimilation with God. It is at the third stage of the soul's progress toward God that she locates "prestige" — the screen which must be pierced if the soul is to continue on or not. At this third stage, the soul either does or does not encounter "the beauty in laws and institutions." It is also at this stage one encounters either the "morality of the Great Beast" or "supernatural morality." To help us to understand what an immense task it is to escape the influence of the "morality of the Great Beast," Simone Weil uses Plato's metaphor of the cave.

Weil argues that it is a mistake to think that the metaphor of the cave relates to knowledge and that sight signifies the intellect. Rather, she claims, the sun is the good and sight (which she calls the "eternal part of the soul") is the faculty which can relate to the good. The things in the cave are unreal because they cannot be objects of love. These "unreal objects" are the things which please the Great Beast, a society which is ruled by a morality that has no relation to love. Weil quotes Plato's familiar description of the sophistic moral teaching that takes its cue from what the people want — without giving any attention to the good:

Call whatever pleases this animal good, and whatever displeases him evil, and they have no other criterion. They call righteous and beautiful those things which are necessary, being incapable of seeing, or of showing others, to what degree the essence of the necessary differs from that of the good. (*Republic* VI, 493c)

Thus, Weil points out, all the things which bring social prestige are believed to be beautiful and good even though they belong to the realm of pure illusion. These are: "... the desire of the lover.... The pleasures of eating and drinking.... Riches, power, advancement, decorations, honours of every kind, reputation, recognition...."¹⁷ The most notable is power

because as Weil says, ninety per cent of it is prestige. This is remarkable because power “determines all in this world.” Even though power is largely an illusion, it succeeds in deluding those who have it on their side. As Weil shows in her commentary on the *Iliad*, those who have the power believe that it is more than prestige and this leads them to go to war. But, at this point they go too far since war spares neither the weak nor the strong — power and prestige are shown to be illusions when the victims are at the point of death. Nevertheless, Weil reminds us of a conclusion she had reached in *Oppression and Liberty*: “The supreme social value, or rather the unique value, is prestige.”¹⁸

Still using the metaphor of the cave, she claims that prestige is the shadow of the puppets which are reflected on the walls of the cave. The puppets, she thinks, are not intended to be real. They are artificial things; they represent social institutions. Social institutions provide a collectivity with conventional good as well as its shadow, prestige. Weil uses an example to make this clear: the miser sees in gold the shadow of gold, prestige, and desires gold for this reason. Social convention makes of gold a means of exchange; in this sense, gold is a “purely conventional good.” The conventional good has a certain reality because relative good takes whatever reality it has from the Good. But the shadow of this good, prestige, has no reality. It is an illusion. That is why Weil claims that “There is a great difference between illusion and convention.”¹⁹ Furthermore, in order to recognize this difference and the good of social conventions, one has to turn away from prestige, the shadows of the cave. Only then can one recognize that “In all human institutions the images of truths of a supernatural order are to be found.”²⁰

Weil thinks that even a bad social order must be obeyed and be the object of charity because it still provides images of the truth of a supernatural order:

Obedience to the Great Beast which conforms to the good — that is social virtue.

A Pharisee is someone who is virtuous out of obedience to the Great Beast.

Charity can and should love in every country all that is a condition of the spiritual development of individuals, that is to say, on the one hand, social order, even if it is bad, as being less bad than disorder....²¹

Yet, there is a difference between those who obey the Great Beast as a Pharisee and those who obey in spiritual nakedness as Christ did. The first, remain consumed by the desire for prestige, whereas, the latter renounce all prestige. It is the total renunciation of prestige which, according to Weil, makes Christ a Perfectly Just Man: “It is the absence of prestige, and not the physical suffering, which is the very essence of the Passion.”²²

Plato, says Weil, knew this and that is why he made the laws and social institutions the intermediary between a legitimate leader, “a man stripped bare,” and the Great Beast in the *Statesman*. The laws and social institutions can mediate because, if they are legitimate, they provide an image of

the supernatural order, that is, they constitute an equilibrium: "Equilibrium is the submission of one order to another, the order which transcends the first being present in it under the form of something infinitely small."²³ Plato, she thinks, defined the laws and institutions as constituting this kind of equilibrium, which is a harmony in the Pythagorean sense:

Laws and institutions constitute another equilibrium which is placed as if at the intersection of virtue and natural necessity. But it is impossible to make out exactly what Plato has in mind: whether it is the city as a metaphor, as an enlarged image of the soul, as it is studied in the *Republic*, or a study of the harmony belonging to social relations, such as one finds in the *Statesman*. Anyway the Pythagorean idea of harmony as the union of contraries, and the combination of that which limits and of that which is limitless, most successively dominate these three studies.²⁴

Now to return to our stages of the soul's progress towards assimilation with God. If at the stage of making laws, one can see the images of the truths of a supernatural order in the laws and social institutions, then, according to Weil, one must be one of the elect few: "For all of us, save a few of the elect, are consumed by desire for prestige."²⁵

For the elect few, the laws and social institutions can be something of beauty, something to love even if undue pain is inflicted on one by them — as in the case of the Perfectly Just Man. This is indeed one of the stages of the soul's progress and no doubt the most difficult stage. This is the stage when the elect have to endure affliction. We need the elect because it is only through them that a society can have access to the supernatural morality. But we tend to completely ignore the elect or, as the Perfectly Just Man, treat them like a common criminal. The only way the elect few can appear here below is completely devoid of all prestige.²⁶ We, however, are completely taken up with prestige. In fact, it is a mark of the human condition that reality can only appear in this world completely veiled. Thus, to encounter this reality, we must get beyond all appearances; the only way is to renounce all social prestige.

The laws and social institutions are supposed to maintain an equilibrium of forces between authority and obedience: "A well ordered society would be one where the State only had a negative action, comparable to that of a rudder: a light pressure at the right moment to counteract the first suggestion of any loss of equilibrium."²⁷ But the laws and social institutions will not be perfectly just because "the model of justice for men is a just man."²⁸ Also, she points out that "Our world is the kingdom of necessity. The appearance of justice is of this world. Real justice is not of this world."²⁹

The Perfectly Just Man could only appear here completely devoid of his reality — as Christ was deprived of His reality and treated like a common criminal, a condemned criminal. This depiction of the Perfectly Just Man in the *Republic* (361b-e) was, for Weil, a clear indication that Plato is referring to the divine incarnation:

The passage concerning the perfectly just man demonstrates the idea of divine incarnation more clearly than any other Greek text. ...in order that a man 'in no way differ from justice itself,' should be the same in all respects as justice, 'divine Justice, from beyond the skies, must descend upon earth.'³⁰

Weil argues that Plato "...refused to demonstrate that such a thing could be possible." However, she thinks that his thoughts were of the divine incarnation because, for him, the perfect has greater reality than the imperfect; thus, the model of perfection for relatively just men must be an actually existing perfectly just man. Without an earthly appearance in space and time, the perfectly just man would remain an abstraction. Weil thought that Plato believed this appearance could happen and she quotes a passage from the *Timaeus*: "divine Justice, from beyond the skies, must descend upon the earth."³¹

Weil thinks that, in the *Republic*, Plato is making the claim that just men can only assimilate with God by passing by way of the Perfectly Just Man. She supports this claim by quoting a passage from the *Theatetus*:

One must be careful to notice how Plato clearly affirms that justice in itself is not a sufficient model. The model of justice for men is a just man.

It is he, doubtless, who is also the divine and blessed ideal spoken of in the *Theatetus*. When Plato speaks of assimilation with this model,...the word assimilation in Greek, and especially for such a Pythagorean as Plato, is a geometrical term which refers to the identity of relationships, to proportion....No proportion is possible between man and God except by mediation. The divine model, the perfectly just man, is the mediator between just men and God.³²

But, according to Weil, human beings are not innocent; the affliction of the original sin is that we are faced with an incompatibility between appearance and reality. After the original sin, human beings can no longer come face to face with reality. A veil now covers reality so that we get no more than glimpses of it. Under these conditions, perfect justice had to appear as perfect injustice in order to respect the necessity of appearance. The Perfectly Just Man had to appear as completely unjust while being in reality thoroughly just.

Thus, the Perfectly Just Man must appear naked, without honour and unrecognizable. Only in this way would His appearance contradict His reality:

Take the just man, let us show him forth by our words. Simple and generous, desiring, as Aeschylus says, not the appearance but the reality of the good. Let us take away all appearance... let him be shown naked of all things except justice, ...that while committing no injustice he may have the greatest reputation for injustice in order that this may be a touchstone for his justice....(*Republic* 361b)³³

In order for the human soul to progress towards assimilation with God he or she must follow Christ's method of turning away from appearance towards the reality hidden by the appearances. At each stage, the appearance is both the barrier and the way through. Weil's "method of attention" involves facing the contradiction between appearance and reality and waiting for the mediation of Supernatural Love. Weil holds that "Insoluble contradictions have a supernatural solution." For the Perfectly Just Man to appear here as a condemned criminal, naked and without the prestige that the appearance of justice would give him is a contradiction. Weil points out that it is absurd for the Perfectly Just Man to appear in a manner contradictory to that which He is to be a Model of. That is why, she thinks the Passion is the supernatural solution to this insoluble contradiction. Only the Love between the Father and the Son could solve this contradiction. People who possess grace can see this solution. All others are weighed down by the contradiction. Even many of Christ's followers, Weil points out, had doubts when, "as Plato would have him," he lost "all appearance of justice."

We see that Weil has developed her method of attention through her analysis of Plato's thought. Furthermore, she believes that Plato is carrying on a long tradition of mystical thought which culminates in the "foretelling of the Christ:"

In short, only the penitent thief has seen justice as Plato conceived it, naked and perfect, veiled beneath the appearance of the criminal.

Plato, in going so far as to suppose that the perfectly just is not recognized as just, even by the gods, had the premonition of the most piercing words of the Gospel: 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?'³⁴

Weil points out that the reason for the Perfectly Just Man's suffering in Plato differs from the Christian idea of redemption or the idea that Christ came to suffer for us. But, "there is a bond between the two ideas." The link, as we have seen, is that the appearance masks the reality. The appearance is false. So, although our desire, which Weil believes constitutes our very being, may be desire for the good, it is only inclined toward evil until conversion. Only true humility can pierce the screen of appearance and move towards reality. This is why Christ is the key because he consented to be reduced to nothing in order to assimilate with God: "The Father is the creation of being, the Son is the renunciation of being...Humility is the consent to this reduction."³⁵

C. Christ's Passion: the Cure for Our Duality

As I pointed out above, Simone Weil saw Plato's analysis of the Perfectly Just Man to be his way of expressing his desire for Christ. Furthermore, she thinks that Plato even saw that Christ's Mission on earth was to cure us of our "original sin." Weil finds this analysis in the "Dissertation of Aristophanes" in the *Symposium* where Aristophanes says that Love is the only thing that can cure men of their misery. Weil takes Love to be refer-

ring to the Love which mediates between man and God. Aristophanes claims that Love is the only physician for man because it is only through Love that the human being can overcome the affliction of duality. Christ also compares His Mission to the work of a physician.

Weil believes that Aristophanes' dissertation is a myth about original sin. Man was once a "complete being" and therefore much happier. But he committed the sin of "pride" by desiring to be like God: this was the original sin. Man wanted to have all the same powers as God. Zeus got very angry and wanted to chastise man for overstepping his bounds. Weil claims this is very similar to the story of Adam and Eve. However, in Aristophanes' myth the point that human misery has to do with men and women's duality and ultimately their separation from God is clearly stated. For originally, according to Aristophanes' story, the human being was at once male and female. He or she was complete and had no need for the other being both same and other at once. After the sin, Zeus chastised man by cutting him in half; thus, human beings became man and woman. But Weil claims that Zeus' choice to chastise man rather than completely destroying man was an act of Love and a desire to be loved by man.

The quest is for Love because it is only Love which can re-unite the two halves. Without Love, humans feel a lack and sense of insufficiency; consequently, we always desire Love and a reunion.

Love in us is therefore the feeling of our radical insufficiency in consequence of sin, and the desire coming from the sources of our being to be reintegrated into the state of completion.³⁶

This myth is the story of the human condition — of our misery as being in a state of duality while always desiring completion which was our state before sin and what we should be:

Our vocation is unity. Our affliction is to be in a state of duality, an affliction due to an original contamination of pride and injustice.³⁷

Weil argues that the use of the sexes is only meant to give us a "sensible image" of our dualistic condition; therefore carnal union should not be mistaken for a remedy to that condition. Human beings encounter duality in all aspects of life and their goal in each case is to try to overcome it. But we cannot since "duality which is our affliction" is the human condition. We are divided from that which we love, that which we know, and that which we act upon as subject is divided from object. Unity is when the subject and object are the same. Only God is united in this way. Human beings can only become united like this through an assimilation with God which is accomplished through love of God.

Any desire to escape from the state of duality is a sign of love in us. However, it is very important to properly direct that desire. This is why human beings need the model of the "perfectly just man" — the original sin was an indication that man had lost sight of Justice and of the way to achieve unity. Thus, Christ's Mission in healing the original sin is to show us the way out of the affliction of duality. Weil claims that in the myth

"Love is the physician" and in the Gospels, Christ is. Just as Love in the myth was the "right physician" to cure us of our duality and be the redemptive god, so Christ was "the right physician" to heal our duality, for He came to earth to be our Redeemer.

Christ, claims Weil, in His extreme afflicted state on the Cross was separated from His Father by the greatest possible distance; thus, He was, at this point, the example of absolute duality.

...God cuts in two the Soul of the World. This represents duality (in the Hindu sense). The Cross is this duality. In order to find the One, we have to exhaust duality, go to the very extreme of duality. This means crucifixion.³⁸

Christ, as Plato had foreseen, had to go the infinite distance to be the model — to show man the way to escape their duality and be united with God. To do this, Christ had to give up all, to renounce all that existence entailed. Christ suffered in complete nakedness, completely without prestige. The beauty of the Passion can be seen through the parallel that can be drawn between Christ's abnegation and God's renunciation in Creation. To be a human being and to consent to not having any earthly power or wealth, and ultimately consent not to exist; that is the supreme expression of the folly of Love. It is this complete and absolute renunciation of all that distinguishes Christ from the martyrs. Christ, unlike the martyrs, could not fall back on the prestige that the appearance of justice gives. He was deprived of all appearance. There was no joy, as there is for the martyrs, in Christ's suffering, only extreme affliction.

The Passion is the harmony of the union of contraries. Weil claims that such extreme suffering is the reality of the union of the contradictories of man-God. Man cannot be united with God without death because any union between God and man denotes a unity with God; therefore, no longer being man. God in creating the Universe withdrew from it and man and all other creatures were given existence by this abdication. This allowed man to have "free will." Thus, any union between man and God on earth would be a contradiction; it would mean a union of Being and not-being. This means that God is not only Mediation Himself but also a mediation of Mediation. In other words, God, through His constant Love, is a Mediation between Himself and His Creation. And through the Love of His only Son, Christ, God mediates His original and constant Love. The reason it is a mediation of Mediation is because the Son is given autonomous Love by becoming a human Person. This is what Weil calls a "spiritual quartering" which is passion. God first divides Himself from His Creation. These are the first two parts of the quartering. Then, God divides Himself again through His Son when His Son descends to earth and lives the Passion. God could only do this out of pure Love for His creature:

The union of contradictories means a spiritual quartering. It is itself a passion, and is impossible without extreme suffering.³⁹

The reason God appeared on earth under the appearance of extreme injustice was because the reality of the God-man union could only manifest itself as a union of contradictories: the reality of extreme justice combined with its exact opposite the appearance of extreme injustice. Weil claims that the Passion bears witness to the fact that true contradiction leads us to God:

The perfectly just man: the union of extreme justice with the appearance of extreme injustice. Christ did not simply suffer, he suffered a penal form of suffering,... Extreme justice combined with the appearance of extreme injustice is an example of that contradiction which leads to God.⁴⁰

Weil claims that although suffering itself has no significance, suffering does point to what does have significance; it points to reality itself as long as human beings don't lose sight of it because of the suffering. We must see suffering as the necessary effect of the contradiction which makes up creation itself, i.e. the separation of God, the reality, from His creation, the appearance. Christ gives us the perfect image, a Model through the crucifixion of the relation between extreme suffering and contradiction. If we can see the reality behind the suffering, it can have redemptive value for us:

We must use suffering qua contradiction that has been experienced. By using it in this way it acquires a mediatory, and consequently a redemptive, value. We must use it qua spiritual quartering.⁴¹

The greatness of Christianity, seen from the Platonic perspective, is that it saw suffering and affliction to be in keeping with God's order; thus, the Greeks understood that human beings must not seek in God a remedy for affliction or suffering rather they must use suffering to bring them closer to Christ. This is, however, very difficult because, as Christ has shown us, everyone, almost without exception, turns their back on the afflicted. Furthermore, because they are human, the afflicted themselves begin to hate and be disgusted by themselves. Weil claims that by the laws of sensibility human beings are repulsed and disgusted by the horror of being reduced to the state of a thing. This is the worst possible state imaginable for the human being. Thus, without even being conscious of it, we treat the afflicted with disdain:

Men have the same carnal nature as animals. If a hen is hurt, the others rush upon it, attacking it with their beaks. This phenomenon is as automatic as gravitation. Our senses attach all the scorn, all the revulsion, all the hatred which our reason attaches to crime, to affliction. Except for those whose whole soul is inhabited by Christ, everybody despises the afflicted to some extent, although practically no one is conscious of it.⁴²

Christ, on the Cross, is the "perfect image" for the afflicted because they, like Christ, are not criminals; and yet, they suffer a distance almost as great

as the "infinite distance" which separated Christ on the Cross and God. And, also like Christ, they are capable of loving God through this distance because God created them to love. It is important, however, that they know this. Weil confirms that God created out of love and for love. "He created beings capable of love from all possible distances." This is why Christ went the infinite distance in identifying with the thieves while on the cross. God went the greatest possible distance, the infinite distance because no other being could possibly do this. The crucifixion was an act of love; it was God going the infinite distance. If God was prepared to go this distance, Weil thought that the afflicted should consider themselves fortunate to be close to reality, "at the foot of the cross."

CONCLUSION

Weil believed that it was Greece's vocation to build bridges between God and man and showed how Homer's, Sophocles', and Plato's desire for the "perfect bridge" came to fruition in the Passion of Christ.

Homer in the *Iliad* and Sophocles in *Electra* show us how vast the domain of force is and suggest that the way to overcome this force and build a bridge between us and God is to love the afflicted. Weil thinks that, in doing so, these Greek writers have demonstrated that they had implicit knowledge of the true message of the Passion.

Weil sees the whole of Plato's writings from the point of view of his Greek vocation: to build a bridge to God. Plato's Perfectly Just Man (in the *Republic* and the *Theatetus*) has the utmost respect for social order, but, disdains the prestige which consumes those who obey the Great Beast. Both Plato's Perfectly Just Man and Christ totally renounce prestige. Both appear on earth as condemned criminals because the reality of justice has to appear masked in this world, the kingdom of necessity. Plato's depiction of the Perfectly Just Man thus foreshadows the divine incarnation. Plato shows us the contradiction between the reality of the Perfectly Just Man and his appearance as a common criminal. Christ solves Plato's contradiction by living the Passion.

Weil also finds in Plato's *Symposium* the view that "Love" is the "right physician" for our duality. Christ used the same words to describe His Mission on earth. He is this "Love" as He came to earth to cure us of our original sin and its consequences: our affliction of duality. As our Redeemer, Christ in His Passion traveled the greatest possible distance from the Father whilst still maintaining His Love of His neighbor and God. The afflicted are nearest to Christ in their suffering whether or not they maintain their love. If they do continue to love, they show they have taken the way of the Cross.

Weil's view of the "Greek vocation" becoming the "Christian vocation" extends the historical past of Christianity thus showing its "continuity in time." By penetrating the Greek "tradition of mystical thought," she deepens our understanding of the contradictory nature of Christ's appearance and increases our awe of the beauty of its culmination: the Passion.

NOTES

1. Weil, Simone, *Selected Essays 1934-1943*, translated by Richard Rees, London: Oxford University Press, 1965.
2. *Ibid.*, see pg. 45 for the details on this point.
3. *Ibid.*, 46.
4. *Ibid.*, 46.
5. *Ibid.*, 46.
6. Weil, Simone, "The Iliad or the Poem of Force," *Intimations of Christianity Among the Ancient Greeks* (1951; London: Ark Paperbacks, 1987), 42-43. Hereafter: "Poem of Force".
7. Simone Weil quoting the *Iliad*, *ibid.*, 43.
8. Simone Weil quoting the *Iliad*, *ibid.*, 43.
9. Weil, Simone, "Poem of Force," 50-51.
10. Weil, Simone, "Poem of Force," 51-52.
11. Weil, Simone, "Poem of Force," 46.
12. Weil, Simone, "Poem of Force," 47-48.
13. Weil, Simone, "Poem of Force," 53.
14. Weil, Simone, "Poem of Force," 39.
15. Weil, Simone, "God's Quest for Man," *Intimations of Christianity Among the Ancient Greeks*, op. cit., 8.
16. Weil, Simone, "Prometheus," *Intimations of Christianity Among the Ancient Greeks*, op. cit., 71.
17. Weil, Simone, *Intimations of Christianity Among the Ancient Greeks*, op. cit., 135. Hereafter: *Intimations*.
18. Weil, Simone, *Intimations*, 136.
19. *Ibid.*, 136.
20. *Ibid.*, 136.
21. Weil, Simone, *Gravity and Grace*, translated from the French by Emma Craufurd, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1963), 148-149. Hereafter: *Gravity*.
22. Weil, Simone, *Intimations*, 137.
23. Weil, Simone, *Gravity*, 150.
24. Weil, Simone, *Intimations*, 147-148.
25. Weil, Simone, *Intimations*, 137.
26. In her commentary on Plato, Weil speaks, like Plato, about the elect few. But I am not sure how she understands this idea. What she says in *Waiting on God* about the afflicted being closest to Christ suggests that she understands the term "elect" to denote the poor (or those who for other reasons are outcasts of society). This would cohere with her view that actual poverty is a privilege.
27. Weil, Simone, *Gravity*, 151.
28. Weil, Simone, *Intimations*, 141.
29. *Ibid.*, 142.
30. Weil, Simone, *Intimations*, 140.
31. As quoted by Simone Weil, *Intimations*, 140. Weil also quotes the passage in Greek.
32. Weil, Simone, *Intimations*, 141.
33. Weil, Simone, *Intimations*, 138. I have quoted only part of the passage. She also quotes from 361e, 367b, 367e and Book V 472b, as well as from the *Theatetus*, 176a, 176b, 176e.
34. *Ibid.*, 143.
35. Weil, Simone, "New York Notebook (1942)," *First and Last Notebooks*, tr. by Richard Rees (London: Oxford University Press, 1970) 102.

36. Weil, Simone, *Intimations*, 108.
37. *Ibid.*, 110.
38. Weil, Simone, *Notebooks II*, op. cit., 436.
39. Weil, Simone, *Notebooks II*, 385.
40. *Ibid.*, 385.
41. *Ibid.*, 387.
42. Weil, Simone, *Waiting on God*, translated by Emma Craufurd, (1950: Glasgow: Fount Paperbacks, 1983), 81.