

# SIMONE WEIL AND GEORGE HERBERT ON LOVE THROUGH POETRY

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## ABSTRACT

In two letters written shortly before she sailed from Marseille in May 1942, Simone Weil reveals the profound impact George Herbert's 'Love' (now commonly titled 'Love (III)') had on her. When reciting the poem to herself during intense headaches, she had a religious experience which involved Christ descending and taking possession of her. This article offers a comparative case study of how focused attention on poetry can become a form of prayer leading to religious experience. It offers a close reading of 'Love' through the lens of Weil's philosophical and spiritual writings from the last year of her life. For Weil, the beauty of poetry is analogous to the beauty of the world and hence can indicate God's will or the ineffable order of the universe.

*Keywords:* Simone Weil; George Herbert; love; God; poetry; mysticism; prayer

IN MAY 1942, shortly before sailing from Marseille to New York, Simone Weil (1909–1943) wrote to the poet Joë Bousquet (1897–1950) and to her spiritual interlocutor Joseph-Marie Perrin (1905–2002) respectively.<sup>1</sup> In both letters, she reveals how the poetry of George Herbert (1593–1633) and especially 'Love' – which she called the most beautiful poem in the world – profoundly affected her.<sup>2</sup> As she tells Bousquet, the latter poem 'a joué un grand rôle dans ma vie, car j'étais occupée à me le réciter à moi-même, à ce moment où, pour la première fois, le Christ est venu me prendre' ['It has played a big role in my life, because I was repeating it to myself at the moment when Christ came to take possession of me for the first time'].<sup>3</sup> This article will analyse 'Love', the final poem of Herbert's posthumous collection, *The Temple* (1633), and a selection of Weil's writings from the last year of her life in order to explore correspondences between the poem and her thought.

What follows is a comparative case study of poetry as a form of prayer leading to religious experience. Poetry and philosophy may often be considered separate endeavours. For Weil, however, there are points when they are unified in truth and beauty to the point of being indistinguishable: there is a 'unité mystérieuse' ['mysterious unity'] linking 'la parfaite beauté, la parfaite vérité, la parfaite justice' ['perfect beauty, perfect truth, perfect justice'] and a 'point de grandeur où le génie créateur de beauté, le génie révélateur de vérité, l'héroïsme et la sainteté sont indiscernables' ['a focal point of greatness where the genius creating beauty, the genius revealing

truth, heroism and holiness are indistinguishable’].<sup>4</sup> I take Weil’s testimony seriously on its own terms in an open-minded way, leaving to one side questions of the validity or otherwise of her moral and metaphysical claims. The latter may appear gnomic, like those of Iris Murdoch, who was heavily indebted to Weil when she stated that the ‘essence [of art and morals] is the same. The essence of both of them is love. [...] Love is the extremely difficult realisation that something other than oneself is real. Love, and so art and morals, is the discovery of reality’.<sup>5</sup> Murdoch’s claims also serve as a summary for Weil’s experience of reading ‘Love’, and hence of this article.

For Weil, the beauty of poetry is analogous to the beauty of the world, and as such is a ladder to gaining insight or experience of God. Weil argues that, at its highest, poetry, like other art forms, imitates God: ‘le poète imite Dieu. L’inspiration poétique à son point de suprême perfection est une des choses humaines qui peuvent par analogie donner une notion du vouloir de Dieu’ (*E*, 346) [‘the poet imitates God. Poetic inspiration at its highest point of perfection is one of the human things which can by analogy furnish a conception of the will of God’ (*R*, 271)]. Given both the importance of ‘Love’ for Weil personally and the significance of poetry more generally in her writings, I shall undertake a close reading of ‘Love’ with a view to imagining her experience of reciting it to herself. The poem will suggest perspectives on Weil’s thought, and Weil’s thought will shed light on ‘Love’. Learning ‘Love’ by heart, indeed doubtless any learning worthy of the name, is like contemplating a facet of a crystal: one way a mirror, another way a window. In what follows, I seek to trace this two-way movement between intense personal reflection and viewing the universe anew through poetry.

The poem itself invites exactly this type of reflective renewal of perspective:

Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back,  
     Guiltie of dust and sinne.  
 But quick-ey’d Love, observing me grow slack  
     From my first entrance in,  
 5     Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning,  
     If I lack’d any thing.

A guest, I answer’d, worthy to be here:  
     Love said, You shall be he.  
 I the unkinde, ungratefull? Ah my deare,  
 10     I cannot look on thee.  
 Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,  
     Who made the eyes but I?

Truth Lord, but I have marr’d them: let my shame  
     Go where it doth deserve.  
 15     And know you not, sayes Love, who bore the blame?  
     My deare, then I will serve.  
 You must sit down, sayes Love, and taste my meat;  
     So I did sit and eat.<sup>6</sup>

Clearly, among other things, ‘Love’ is a reimagining of the ‘perfect reciprocity of holy communion’.<sup>7</sup> It portrays the mystical union between man and God in what seem to be the most everyday of terms. The similarity between Herbert and Weil is both personal – the poem portrays a union with God that Weil claims to have lived – and stylistic. Herbert and Weil share extraordinary clarity and plainness of expression. The directness of Weil’s expression about her reading quoted above belies or possibly exacerbates its mysterious nature. Indeed, elsewhere Weil discusses how ‘Notre Père ne réside que dans le secret. L’amour ne va pas sans pudeur. La foi véritable [...] est un secret entre Dieu et nous auquel nous-mêmes n’avons presque aucune part’ [‘Our Father only lives in secret. Love should always be accompanied by modesty. True faith [...] is a secret between God and us in which we ourselves have scarcely any part’].<sup>8</sup> The otherworldly intimacy of ‘Love’ and the way in which the narrator is overtaken by Love despite his hesitation, are poetic recreations of this kind of secrecy and ‘pudeur’. That we know about her experience of reading Herbert at all owes much to the fact that she felt compelled to write the letters mentioned above at this point in her life.<sup>9</sup> As she says in her letter to Perrin:

Jamais je n’aurais pu prendre sur moi de vous dire tout cela sans le fait que je pars. Et comme je pars avec plus ou moins la pensée d’une mort probable, il me semble que je n’ai pas le droit de taire ces choses. Car après tout, dans tout cela il ne s’agit pas de moi. Il ne s’agit que de Dieu. Je n’y suis vraiment pour rien.<sup>10</sup>

[I should never have been able to take it upon myself to tell you all this had it not been for the fact that I am going away. And as I am going more or less with the idea of probable death, I do not believe that I have the right to keep it to myself. For after all, the whole of this matter is not a question concerning me myself. It concerns God. I am really nothing in it all.]<sup>11</sup>

In an intensely personal way, Weil expresses a key theme of her late writing, namely that there is nothing personal about the workings of Providence, which is ‘en un sens [...] impersonnelle et analogue à un mécanisme’ (*E*, 334) [‘in one sense [...] impersonal and comparable to a mechanism’ (*R*, 257)]. As I hope to show, in so far as poetry is analogous to God’s will, then for Weil it will reflect the characteristics of a perfectly ordered and necessary mechanism. In the same letter, Weil claims that she never sought God, considered the problem of God to be insoluble and never envisaged the possibility ‘d’un contact réel, de personne à personne, ici-bas, entre un être humain et Dieu’ (‘AS’, 771) [‘of a real contact, person to person, here below, between a human being and God’ (‘SA’, 35)] until she considered that she had had an experience of it.<sup>12</sup> The first vehicle for Weil’s experience was, of course, her close attention to this poem that itself conveys a scene of union with God.

For Weil, her experience reading ‘Love’ was an encounter with a real presence. As she puts it in her letter to Perrin, she learned the poem by heart and trained herself to recite it during intense headaches ‘en y appliquant toute mon attention et en adhérent toute mon âme à la tendresse qu’il enferme’ (‘AS’, 771) [‘concentrating all my attention upon it and clinging with all my soul to the tenderness it enshrines’ (‘SA’, 35)]. Attention is essential not only to her reading of ‘Love’ but to her broader

notions of prayer or the discipline of spiritual practice as a means of contacting God. As she puts it at the opening of her essay, 'Réflexion sur le bon usage des études scolaires en vue de l'Amour de Dieu' ['Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God'], also written in 1942, and among the papers she left with Perrin:

la prière est faite d'attention. C'est l'orientation vers Dieu de toute l'attention dont l'âme est capable. [...] Seule la partie la plus haute de l'attention entre en contact avec Dieu, quand la prière est assez intense et pure pour qu'un tel contact s'établisse; mais toute l'attention est tournée vers Dieu.<sup>13</sup>

[prayer consists in attention. It is the orientation of all the attention of which the soul is capable towards God. [...] It is the highest part of the attention only which makes contact with God, when prayer is intense and pure enough for such contact to be established; but the whole attention is turned towards God.]<sup>14</sup>

This reads like the theory underlying her practice of focused attention on 'Love', except she tells us that initially her recitations were a form of therapy for her migraines and that she was not deliberately turning her attention to God. Yet as she defines this key term later in this same essay: 'L'attention consiste à suspendre sa pensée, à la laisser disponible, vide et pénétrable à l'objet [...] surtout la pensée doit être vide, en attente, ne rien chercher, mais être prête à recevoir dans sa vérité nue l'objet qui va y pénétrer' ('Réflexion', 260) ['Attention consists of suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty and ready to be penetrated by the object [...]. Above all our thought should be empty, waiting, not seeking anything, but ready to receive in its naked truth the object which is to penetrate it' ('Reflections', 72)].<sup>15</sup> Attention is a vital aspect of Weil's life and philosophy; crucially, her reading of 'Love' embodied the practice of her theory. Weil's thinking on attention implies an emptying of the subject to be open to the object, which is also, as I shall argue, woven into Herbert's poem.<sup>16</sup>

'Love' is an instance of imaginative 'orientation vers Dieu' figured as Love, so, unless we are reading the poem against the grain, Love would in any case be the object of her attention. This also suggests why this poem inadvertently became a form of prayer for Weil who, like the protagonist of Herbert's poem, finds herself on the other side and welcomed without even having realized she was crossing a threshold or seeking anything:

Je croyais le réciter seulement comme un beau poème, mais à mon insu cette récitation avait la vertu d'une prière. C'est au cours d'une de ces récitation que [...] le Christ lui-même est descendu et m'a prise. ('AS', 771)

[I used to think I was merely reciting it as a beautiful poem, but without my knowing it the recitation had the virtue of a prayer. It was during one of these recitations that [...] Christ himself came down and took possession of me. ('SA', 35)]

Weil is not dealing in metaphors; she is making unambiguous metaphysical claims. 'Love' gave rise to direct personal contact with God amounting to what William

James famously called a religious experience, often enabled by the mystical power of poetry:

Most of us can remember the strangely moving power of passages in certain poems read when we were young, irrational doorways as they were through which the mystery of fact, the wildness and the pang of life, stole into our hearts and thrilled them [...] lyric poetry and music are alive and significant only in proportion as they fetch these vague vistas of a life continuous with our own, beckoning and inviting, yet ever eluding our pursuit. We are alive or dead to the eternal inner message of the arts according as we have kept or lost this mystical sensibility.<sup>17</sup>

James's view of poetry as an 'irrational doorway' is particularly suggestive for 'Love', which opens on just such a threshold. Similarly, Weil's own poem 'La Porte' ['The Door'], written in 1941, begins with a request to open the door, 'Ouvrez-nous donc la porte et nous verrons les vergers' ['Open the door to us, and we will see the orchards']; yet the door remains closed for most of the poem, while the poet waits in despair.<sup>18</sup> James's terms, like Weil's, obviously run counter to much current thinking on literature. For instance, Terence Cave claims that 'literary ways of thinking are continuous with everyday ways of thinking'.<sup>19</sup> Yet Weil's testimony suggests that poetry can lead to religious experiences or 'forms of consciousness' radically 'discontinuous with ordinary consciousness', all of which 'forbid a premature closing of our accounts with reality', as James puts it.<sup>20</sup>

Cave's cognitive approach is still suggestive for Herbert's poem and for Weil's reading of it; for instance, literature is 'capable of profoundly changing the cognitive environment of the reader: a conserved cultural insight comes alive again'.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, learning a poem by heart, and especially one in a foreign language, demands considerable cognitive resources even for a formidable linguist like Weil, and the linguistic otherness of Herbert's verse may have contributed to her experience of being overtaken by an otherworldly force while reciting it.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, she writes movingly of her experience of reading the *Bhagavad Gita* in the original, first in August 1941, in a letter expressing her gratitude to her friend and erstwhile classmate, René Daumal (1908–1944), who taught her Sanskrit and copied out the work for her by hand.<sup>23</sup> She returned to the *Bhagavad Gita* in the final weeks of her life: while in hospital in London she mentions in a letter to her parents (from whom she simultaneously hides her illness and whereabouts): 'Comme cela fait du bien, le contact avec la langue de Krishna!' [This contact with the language of Krishna feels so good!].<sup>24</sup> Such contact with other languages involves making something born without alive within. In *L'Enracinement* she remarks that it is possible to encounter a thought one may have barely formulated in the words of someone else to whom one listens attentively so that 'elle en reçoit une force centuplée et peut parfois produire une transformation intérieure' (*E*, 264) ['its force is increased an hundredfold and can sometimes bring about an inner transformation' (*R*, 183)]. Her reading of 'Love' dramatizes the moment when her attention to thoughts and words initially outside of herself leads to divine revelation in a union in love, to re-enact on a mystical level what appears to be happening on a cognitive one.

Weil was moreover introduced to Herbert and other metaphysical poets by an English Catholic, John Vernon, at the Benedictine abbey at Solesmes, where she stayed and attended all the services from Palm Sunday until the Tuesday after Easter (10–19 April 1938).<sup>25</sup> She playfully named Vernon ‘angel boy’, not only because she saw him surrounded by an angelic luminosity as he returned from communion, which first gave her the idea of a ‘*vertu surnaturelle des sacraments*’ [‘supernatural efficacy of the sacraments’], but also because he was an angel or messenger for her.<sup>26</sup> Given that ‘Love’ alludes to Holy Communion, there is a set of what we might call providential circumstances that contribute to the poem’s importance for Weil.

The rhythms and sounds of poetry are inevitably embodied; hence, when memorizing verse, Ted Hughes recommends ‘listening as widely, deeply and keenly as possible, testing every whisper on the air in the echo-chamber of your whole body’.<sup>27</sup> In other words, before it could become an initially unsuspecting path to transcendence, Weil’s reading would have been physiologically and cognitively grounded, already a significant act of focused attention in its own right. As she notes elsewhere:

Le monde est un texte à plusieurs significations, et l’on passe d’une signification à une autre par un travail. Un travail où le corps a toujours part, comme lorsqu’on apprend l’alphabet d’une langue étrangère: cet alphabet doit rentrer dans la main à force de tracer les lettres.<sup>28</sup>

[The world is a text with several meanings, and we pass from one meaning to another by a process of work. It must be work in which the body constantly bears a part, as, for example, when we learn the alphabet of a foreign language: this alphabet has to enter into our hand by dint of forming the letters.]<sup>29</sup>

As far as ‘Love’ is concerned, Weil recited and wrote out the poem on more than one occasion, including for Simone Pétrement and for Bousquet.<sup>30</sup> This would be at once a linguistic and a social manifestation of the quality of attention that is of such importance for her. It is also a re-enactment of an important aspect of the poem, where Love is both embodied and as loving as their name would suggest: ‘Love took my hand, and smiling did reply [...]’. When Weil wrote and recited the poem for her friends, it was an act of kindness and of love and, as such, a performance of it in more ways than one, as she literally and metaphorically traced lines of love. The ‘travail’ that Weil refers to would moreover have been part of Herbert’s endeavour as a poet, especially one who is also evidently attentive to the appearance of his poetry.<sup>31</sup> The embodied quality of verse thereby points beyond the body and indeed intelligence, to put it in terms similar to Weil’s. More broadly, the body is inevitably part of any practice, or, as Weil puts it in another text she sent to Perrin before she set sail from Marseille in May 1942, ‘L’Amour de Dieu et le malheur’ [‘The Love of God and Affliction’], ‘Le corps a part dans tout apprentissage’ [‘The body plays a part in all learning’].<sup>32</sup>

In some ways, Herbert and Weil are rhetorically and imaginatively down-to-earth. Theirs is mysticism without obvious mystique. But their very simplicity is paradoxically mystifying; as Weil notes, ‘Le secret du salut est tellement simple qu’il échappe à l’intelligence par sa simplicité. Il a l’air d’un calembour’ [The secret of

salvation is so simple it eludes the understanding by its simplicity. It appears to be a pun].<sup>33</sup> Herbert's poem plays with several apparent contradictions: its setting is at once domestic and otherworldly, given minimal indications of time and space.<sup>34</sup> Weil herself comments in one of her notebooks from her time in Marseille that 'Love' is a very rare example of a perfect poem, which means it has 'un commencement et une fin, et une durée qui soit l'image de l'éternité' [a beginning and an end, and a duration which is an image of eternity].<sup>35</sup> The poem itself imaginatively suggests an experience beyond ordinary time and space, akin to Weil's experience of reading it. Its opening seems to be on a threshold the poet has already crossed (l. 4). The poem thereby invites the reader to cross the spiritual threshold it simultaneously describes and dissolves. The wish to serve is instantly served by and with Love (ll. 16–18).

Clive James's comments on the poem, included in the anthology he composed during his terminal illness, share Love's simplicity and wit: Love or God is 'the patient instructor' who imparts his messages in a brief encounter during which 'Almost nothing has happened, except that everything has. God's grace has been registered as a generosity. [...] The meal is just two people facing each other, except that one of them is a divinity. Herbert, the narrator, is mortal, except that he is more than mortal, after being so lavishly instructed. He has feasted on the instruction.'<sup>36</sup> The final point reconnects to Simone Weil, as does Helen Vendler's view of the poem as being 'Like some decorous minuet [...]: a pace forward, a hanging back, a slackening, a drawing nearer, a lack, a fullness, a dropping of the eyes, a glance, a touch, a reluctance, a proffer, a refusal, a demurrer, an insistence – and then the final seating at the feast'.<sup>37</sup> Weil may have connected such aspects of the poem to her spiritual highs and lows, as she seems to have gone in and out of contact with Christ. The text known as the 'Prologue à la connaissance surnaturelle' ['Prologue to Supernatural Knowledge'] of April 1942, produced just before she wrote the letters in which she tells of the importance of 'Love', reads like a re-imagining of Herbert's poem, but with an emphasis on unworthiness. Relating an encounter with Christ, named only as 'il', the text may be an extended metaphor, allegory or vision. Like 'Love' it involves a dialogue, which Weil scarcely relays ('Nous causions de toutes sortes de choses, à bâtons rompus, comme de vieux amis' [We talked about all kinds of things, this and that, like old friends]).<sup>38</sup> Moreover, in a recreation of communion obviously shared with Herbert's poem, the Christ figure serves her bread and wine in an attic overlooking an unnamed town:

Parfois il se taisait, tirait d'un placard un pain, et nous le partagions. Ce pain avait vraiment le goût du pain. Je n'ai jamais plus retrouvé ce goût. Il me versait et se versait du vin qui avait le goût du soleil et de la terre où était bâtie cette cité.<sup>39</sup>

[Sometimes he would fall silent, take bread from a cupboard, and we would share it. This bread really tasted of bread. I have never found this taste again. He would pour wine for me and for himself; it had the taste of the sun and the land where this city was built.]

Communion involves connection, to place and more broadly to nature. Like 'Love', this vision of communion also involves a reciprocity which is reproduced at the level

of expression, as seen in the doubling of transitive and reflexive verb forms of *verser*. Weil goes further than Herbert in emphasizing the everyday, tangible, even the banal quality of the encounter, which belies its uncanniness. The bread itself, for example, tastes of bread, in a similar kind of circularity to that noted above when she was discussing how the secret of salvation seems like a pun.<sup>40</sup>

In addition to communion, this scene recalls the bread of the Lord's Prayer, which is also evoked in the conclusion of 'Love'. Weil learned the 'Pater' in ancient Greek and would recite it each morning 'avec une attention absolue' [with absolute attention] and would often repeat it to herself as she worked in the vineyard, which is itself suggestive of both the wine of communion and the eponymous parable.<sup>41</sup> The themes, spiritual attention and practice involved are very similar to her reciting of 'Love' and her contact with the original Sanskrit of the *Bhagavad Gita*. The effects of reciting the Lord's Prayer in Greek were however even more powerful:

La vertu de cette pratique est extraordinaire et me surprend chaque fois, car quoique je l'éprouve chaque jour elle dépasse chaque fois mon attente. Parfois les premiers mots déjà arrachent ma pensée à mon corps et la transportent en un lieu hors de l'espace d'où il n'y a ni perspective ni point de vue. L'espace s'ouvre. L'infinité de l'espace ordinaire de la perception est remplacée par une infinité à la deuxième ou quelquefois troisième puissance. [...] Parfois aussi, pendant cette récitation ou à d'autres moments, le Christ est présent en personne, mais d'une présence infiniment plus réelle, plus poignante, plus claire et plus pleine d'amour que cette première fois où il m'a prise. ('AS', 773)

[The effect of this practice is extraordinary and surprises me every time, for, although I experience it each day, it exceeds my expectation at each repetition. At times the very first words tear my thoughts from my body and transport it to a place outside space where there is neither perspective nor point of view. The infinity of the ordinary expanses of perception is replaced by an infinity to the second or sometimes the third degree. [...] Sometimes, also, during this recitation or at other moments, Christ is present with me in person, but his presence is infinitely more real, more moving, more clear [and more full of love] than on that first occasion when he took possession of me. ('SA', 38)]

The mystical realm to which she ventures, which is beyond time and space, is in a similarly undetermined dimension to the setting of 'Love'. Weil's poem, 'La Porte', written in October 1941 at the end of the wine harvest, concludes in similar terms:

La porte en s'ouvrant laissa passer tant de silence [...]
 Seul l'espace immense où sont le vide et la lumière
 Fut soudain présent de part en part, combla le cœur[.]<sup>42</sup>

[The door, opening, let so much silence escape [...]
 Only the immense space where emptiness and light are
 Was suddenly everywhere present, overflowed the heart.]<sup>43</sup>

Weil's extraordinary accounts of her religious experience convey it in impossible mathematical and physical terms, as if to suggest a kind of calculation or even mechanism that can be felt but not understood. The presence of Christ is paradoxically

even more tangible on these later occasions, when her experience seems ever more remote. But Christ's presence is also full of love, which returns us to Herbert's poem.

In her essay on 'À propos du "Pater"' ['Concerning the "Our Father"'], again from the papers she left for Perrin, Weil comments on the lines in the prayer 'notre pain, celui qui est surnaturel, donne-le-nous aujourd'hui' ["Give us this day our daily bread", (the bread which is supernatural)], that 'Le Christ est notre pain' ['Christ is our bread'].<sup>44</sup> The bread that the Christ figure gave her in the loft in the 'Prologue' would then have been himself, like the meat of the conclusion of 'Love'. She maintains that Christ 'est toujours là, à la porte de notre âme, qui veut entrer, mais il ne viole pas le consentement. Si nous consentons à ce qu'il entre, il entre; dès que nous ne voulons plus aussitôt il s'en va' ['is always there at the door of our souls, wanting to enter in, though he does not force our consent. If we agree to his entry, he enters; directly we cease to want him, he is gone'], which superficially reads like a reversal of the opening lines of Herbert's poem.<sup>45</sup> On a deeper level, to consent to Christ's presence is communion itself: 'Notre consentement à sa présence est la même chose que sa présence' ['Our consent to his presence is the same as his presence'], which, she says, can only happen in the present moment, like intense attention to a prayer or poem. Furthermore, this 'consentement' is to say 'yes' to a mystical marriage or 'l'union du Christ avec la partie éternelle de notre âme' ['the union of Christ with the eternal part of our soul'].<sup>46</sup> Herbert's verse also indicates this eternal part of the soul, as I will discuss further below.

More broadly, in this short essay and elsewhere, Weil insists that the first need of the soul is literal as well as spiritual bread. She equates this bread with truth in *L'Enracinement*:

Le Christ a dit: 'Je suis la vérité.' Il a dit aussi qu'il était du pain, de la boisson; mais il a dit: 'Je suis le pain vrai, la boisson vraie', c'est-à-dire le pain qui est seulement de la vérité, la boisson qui est seulement de la vérité. Il faut le désirer d'abord comme vérité, ensuite seulement comme nourriture. (*E*, 314)

[Christ said 'I am the truth.' He also said that He was bread and wine; but He added: 'I am the true bread, the true wine', that is to say, the bread which is nothing but truth, the wine which is nothing but truth. They must first of all be desired as truth, only afterwards as food. (*R*, 237–38)]

The bread she receives from the Christ figure in the 'Prologue' was true bread, on these terms. Desire has a key role to play in seeking and finding the truth: it is the key. As Weil puts it in 'Réflexion sur le bon usage des études scolaires':

L'intelligence ne peut être menée que par le désir [...] le désir, orienté vers Dieu, est la seule force capable de faire monter l'âme. Ou plutôt c'est Dieu seul qui vient saisir l'âme et la lève, mais le désir seul oblige Dieu à descendre. ('Réflexion', 259)

[The intelligence can only be led by desire [...] desire directed towards God is the only power capable of raising the soul. Or rather, it is God alone who comes down and possesses the soul, but desire alone draws God down. ('Reflections', 71)]

For Weil, the value of attention on any school exercise is by analogy that of the slave waiting and listening by the door with a lamp full of oil to welcome their master back. The slave opens the door at the first knock, at which point ‘Le maître installe l’esclave à table et lui sert lui-même à manger’ (‘Réflexion’, 261) [‘The master will then make his slave sit down and himself serve him with meat’ (‘Reflections’, 74)]. The story is so reminiscent of ‘Love’, that the author of this translation, Emma Craufurd, has echoed Herbert, whether wittingly or not.<sup>47</sup>

Weil makes similar remarks in ‘À propos du “Pater”’. While all the desires of the world are ‘le pain d’ici-bas’ [‘earthly bread’], there is another form of food we must ask for, which is a ‘une énergie transcendante, dont la source est au ciel, qui coule en nous dès que nous le désirons’ [‘a transcendent energy whose source is in heaven, and this flows into us as soon as we wish for it’].<sup>48</sup> The bread of the Lord’s prayer, the meat of ‘Love’ and the bread that really tasted of bread of the ‘Prologue’ would all be instances of this spiritual sustenance. In ‘Formes de l’amour implicite de Dieu’ [‘Forms of the Implicit Love of God’] (1942), Weil comments that ‘La grande douleur de la vie humaine, c’est que regarder et manger soient deux opérations différentes. De l’autre côté du ciel seulement, dans le pays habité par Dieu, c’est une seule et même opération’ (‘Formes’, 304) [‘The great pain in human life is that looking and eating are two different operations. Only beyond the sky, in the country inhabited by God, are they one and the same operation’ (‘Forms’, 121)]. Weil devoted a great deal of the writing from the last year of her life to teaching how to aspire to the point where everything we see or encounter is our daily bread, by virtue of attaining the kind of communion she describes. As she puts it in *L’Enracinement*, ‘La beauté est quelque chose qui se mange; c’est une nourriture’ (E, 186) [‘Beauty is something to be eaten; it is a food’ (R, 89)]. In ‘Formes de l’amour implicite de Dieu’ she claims the beauty of the world

est le sourire de tendresse du Christ pour nous à travers la matière. Il est réellement présent dans la beauté universelle. L’amour de cette beauté procède de Dieu descendu dans notre âme et va vers Dieu présent dans l’univers. C’est aussi quelque chose comme un sacrement. (‘Formes’, 303)

[is Christ’s tender smile for us coming through matter. He is really present in universal beauty. The love of this beauty proceeds from God descending into our souls and go towards God present in the universe. It is also something like a sacrament. (‘Forms’, 120)]

The sacrament is again a communion and the ‘sourire de tendresse’ recalls ‘Love’ (l. 11). In a Platonic manner of speaking, love is the ladder from and to God or the universe, a union at the point she called eternal part of our soul.

Weil also discusses the sacraments and reciting the Lord’s Prayer with full attention in ‘Pensées sans ordre concernant l’amour de Dieu’ [‘Thoughts without Order Concerning God’s Love’] (1942), and adds a point that returns us again to ‘Love’: ‘Il n’y a de pur ici-bas que les objets et les textes sacrés, la beauté de la nature [...] et, à un degré moindre [...] les œuvres d’art issues d’une inspiration divine’ [Nothing is pure here below other than sacred texts and objects, the beauty of nature [...] and, to a lesser degree [...] works of art that derive from divine inspiration].<sup>49</sup> For Weil,

Herbert's poem is like a sacrament, its beauty an instance of the love it expresses, which is a human expression of 'l'amour de Dieu', analogous to the beauty of the world.

Yet almost all the above discussion has made the union seem straightforward, even easy. But it is anything but, for it requires nothing less than unflinching attention as well as the renunciation of desires of the personal self for 'le pain d'ici-bas'. The tensions are especially apparent in the 'Prologue à la connaissance surnaturelle': the Christ figure does not 'bid her welcome' but enters her room, saying 'Miserable qui ne comprends rien, et qui ne sais rien' [You're useless, you understand nothing, you know nothing]. Disturbingly, given Weil's death the following year in England, at least in part from the effects of malnutrition as she refused more food than what she considered those in occupied France would have, the 'Prologue' also concludes in great pathos:

Je sais bien qu'il ne m'aime pas. Comment pourrait-il m'aimer? Et pourtant au fond de moi quelque chose, un point de moi-même, ne peut pas s'empêcher de penser en tremblant de peur que peut-être, malgré tout, il m'aime.<sup>50</sup>

[I know all too well that he does not love me. How could he love me? And yet deep inside me something, a point within myself, cannot help but think as I tremble with fear that perhaps, despite everything, he loves me.]

The feelings of unworthiness and of 'dust and sin' in Herbert are all woven into this 'Prologue', as is love, but with little by way of the same graceful dance the poet portrays. Critics who have drawn attention to the violence and tension implicit in 'Love' – Michael C. Schoenfeldt calls it an 'elaborate fencing match' – seem to have recognized on a social level something that may happen on a spiritual dimension as a soul seeks union with God.<sup>51</sup> Vendler claims that in 'Love' 'The distance between God and the soul [...] shrinks, during the actual progress of the poem, to nothing', but Stanley Fish demurs on precisely this point: 'In a way, this is true, but the process is less comfortably benevolent than [Vendler] implies because what shrinks or is shrunk is the speaker's self. He has been killed with kindness'.<sup>52</sup> Fish is reading against the grain, but his view nevertheless serves to restore equilibrium: there is nothing automatic or straightforward about the kind of union Vendler alludes to. Moreover, Fish is doubtless correct to state that the union Vendler mentions would involve the death of the speaker, if we understand that as the personal self or ego. The other side of the balance is, however, that for union to be possible, on Weil's terms, there must be some impersonal dimension of the self that can connect to God, or, rather, there must be some element of God in the impersonal self that allows for the union to take place. To put it schematically, this would be the part of the soul that is part of and unifies with God, whether in the form of the beauty of the world, of the sacraments or indeed a beautiful poem like 'Love', 'la partie éternelle de notre âme' cited above.

In so far as 'Love' is an allegory or even a riddle, Love stands for God, since, to quote a source that Herbert and Weil would have shared: 'God is love; and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him' (1 John 4. 16).<sup>53</sup> For Weil, this lies behind the incarnation of Christ, as she noted in one of her 'cahiers':

La raison suprême pour laquelle le fils de Dieu a été fait homme, ce n'est pas pour sauver les hommes, c'est pour témoigner pour la vérité. [...] Quelle vérité? Il n'y a qu'une vérité qui vaille la peine d'être l'objet d'un témoignage. C'est que Dieu est Amour.<sup>54</sup>

[The ultimate reason why the son of God was made man is not to save mankind, it is to testify to truth. [...] What truth? There is but one truth that is a worthy object of a testimony. It is that God is Love.]

When Love asks 'who bore the blame?' (l. 15), the orthodox Christian answer would of course be 'Jesus Christ'.<sup>55</sup> Obviously, for Weil the orthodox answer is misleading, for Christ does not save mankind but bears witness to the truth that God is love. 'Love' itself does not give an explicit answer to the question, as if to leave open other possibilities. At the point of mystical union that the poem conveys, there can be no blame, for the poet is unified with God who is love. On this reading, feelings of guilt or 'dust and sin' are man-made. There is no sin or blame attached to a soul in union with God. To put it another way, 'Love' is the *Inferno*, *Purgatory* and *Paradise* all in one, a *Divine Comedy* in miniature.

Weil develops this point in 'Pensées sans ordre concernant l'amour de Dieu':

Ce qui est parfaitement pur ne peut pas être autre chose que Dieu présent ici-bas. [...] Dans l'âme où s'est produit un tel contact avec la pureté, toute l'horreur du mal qu'elle porte en soi se change en amour pour la pureté divine.<sup>56</sup>

[Whatever is perfectly pure cannot be anything other than God present here below. [...] In the soul where such contact with purity has happened, all the horror of evil that it carries within itself changes into love for divine purity.]

The difficulty of accepting such contact is seen in how the narrator in 'Love' initially resists Love's advances. As Weil puts it, 'Le seul obstacle à cette transmutation de l'horreur en amour, c'est l'amour-propre qui rend pénible l'opération par laquelle on porte sa souillure au contact de la pureté' [Self-regard is the only obstacle to this transfiguration of horror into love: it makes the process of bringing one's stain into contact with purity painful].<sup>57</sup> To put it another, schematic way, 'dust and sin' attach to the personal self, and union involves releasing or completely purifying those attachments. She further describes how 'le péché se transforme en simple souffrance' [sin is transformed into simple suffering].<sup>58</sup> She discusses a similar set of issues in more detail in 'L'Amour de Dieu et le malheur', where, to make an obvious connection to 'Love', she declares that 'avant tout Dieu est amour. Avant tout Dieu s'aime soi-même [...] Dieu est si essentiellement amour que l'unité, qui en un sens est sa définition même, est un simple effet d'amour' ('L'Amour', 353) ['above all, God is love. Above all God loves himself [...] God is so essentially love that the unity, which in a sense is his actual definition, is the pure effect of love' ('Love of God', 84–85)]. Weil takes the line from 1 John, 'he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him', literally. But she does not shy away from the consequences. It follows that

Dieu a créé par amour, pour l'amour. Dieu n'a pas créé autre chose que l'amour même et les moyens de l'amour. Il a créé toutes les formes de l'amour. Il a créé des êtres capables d'amour à toutes les distances possibles. Lui-même est allé [...] à la distance [...] infinie.

Cette distance infinie entre Dieu et Dieu, déchirement suprême, douleur dont aucune autre n'approche, merveille de l'amour, c'est la crucifixion. ('L'Amour', 351)

[God created through love and for love. God did not create anything except love itself, and the means to love. He created love in all its forms, he [*sic*] created beings capable of love from all possible distances. He himself went to [...] the infinite distance. This infinite distance between God and God, this supreme tearing apart, this agony beyond all others, this marvel of love, is the crucifixion. ('Love of God', 82–83)]

The crucifixion thereby stands as a kind of infinite point of suffering, but this leaves open the possibility that God's love can lead to any amount of suffering. Weil also concedes that the 'simple effet' she refers to is far from simple for the individual:

Par-dessus l'infinité de l'espace et du temps, l'amour infiniment plus infini de Dieu vient nous saisir. Il vient à son heure. Nous avons le pouvoir de consentir à l'accueillir ou de refuser. [...] Si nous consentons, Dieu met en nous une petite graine et s'en va. À partir de ce moment, Dieu n'a plus rien à faire ni nous non plus, sinon attendre. Nous devons seulement ne pas regretter le consentement que nous avons accordé, le oui nuptial. Ce n'est pas aussi facile qu'il semble, car la croissance de la graine en nous est douloureuse. ('L'Amour', 357–58)

[Over the infinity of space and time, the infinitely more infinite love of God comes to possess us. He comes at his own time. We have the power to consent to receive him or to refuse. [...] If we consent, God puts a little seed in us and he goes away again. From that moment God has no more to do; neither have we, except to wait. We only have not to regret the consent we gave him, the nuptial yes. It is not as easy as it seems, for the growth of the seed within us is very painful. ('Love of God', 91)]

As mentioned at the outset, Weil views the workings of God or Providence as an impersonal mechanism, hence 'Il vient à son heure'. They are also indifferent in leaving the individual alone to deal with the pain of growth of the seed planted in the soul. This is perhaps the point reached during the 'Prologue' and at the beginning of 'Love'. In Weil's view, denial of the personal self and obedience or surrender to God are essential:

L'âme n'aime pas comme une créature d'un amour créé. Cet amour en elle est divin, incréé, car c'est l'amour de Dieu pour Dieu qui passe à travers elle. Dieu seul est capable d'aimer Dieu. Nous pouvons seulement consentir à perdre nos sentiments propres pour laisser passage en notre âme à cet amour. C'est cela se nier à soi-même. Nous ne sommes créés que pour ce consentement. ('L'Amour', 358)

[The soul does not love like a creature with created love. The love within it is divine, uncreated; for it is the love of God for God which is passing through it. God alone is capable of loving God. We can only consent to give up our own feelings so as to allow free passage in our soul for this love. That is the meaning of denying oneself. We are created for this consent, and for this alone. ('Love of God', 92)]

Crucially, 'Love' is a poetic portrayal of the kind of union through love that she discusses. On these terms, Fish is unwittingly close to Weil's point when he says that the guest in Herbert's poem 'has been killed with kindness', but for her the personal

death implied by self-denial makes way for love/God, something infinitely greater than the personal self. In this sense, the ‘dust and sin’ of ‘Love’ are grist to the mill of progress to union or, as Weil puts it in ‘L’Amour de Dieu et le malheur’, ‘La joie et la douleur sont des dons également précieux, qu’il faut savourer l’un et l’autre intégralement’ (‘L’Amour’, 357) [‘Joy and suffering are two equally precious gifts which must both of them be savoured to the full’ (‘Love of God’, 90)]. ‘Love’ itself conveys, in extraordinarily condensed form, such savouring of affliction and joy as essential elements of a mystical union with God.

Herbert also conveys this union of self with God through wit. Love’s question ‘Who made the eyes but I?’ is a play on words that recreates on the level of phonemes the union in the soul with God that Weil writes about.<sup>59</sup> The pun suggests the poet gets to see through the eyes of Love and thereby look on all with love and compassion. This in turn suggests an alternative view of the self to that envisaged by most critics of Herbert. Weil encountered another conceptualization of the impersonal self, ‘la partie éternelle de notre âme’, or God in the self and the self in God, in the *Upaniṣads* and the *Bhagavad Gīta*, where it is called the *ātman*. For instance, at the beginning of 1942, she gathers extracts together for Perrin and defines the term at the beginning as ‘le je transcendantal, dans la mesure où il est identique à Dieu, et Dieu pour autant qu’il est présent dans l’essence de chaque être’ [the transcendental self, to the extent that it is identical to God, and God to the extent it is present in the essence of every being].<sup>60</sup> This is not the place to develop this vast question in any detail, other than to observe that the *ātman* was already suggested by Love’s wordplay in Herbert’s poem.

In her letter to Bousquet, Weil makes similar points in story form when she uses the traditional image of a chick about to break out of its shell: ‘L’œuf, c’est ce monde visible. Le poussin, c’est l’Amour, l’Amour qui est Dieu même et qui habite au fond de tout homme comme germe invisible’ [‘The egg is this world we see. The bird in it is Love, the Love which is God himself and which lives in the depths of every man, though at first as an invisible seed’].<sup>61</sup> The story gives another way of imagining the mystical union she describes in the accounts of her religious experiences. Such a story in a letter is itself another act of love, a wish to share her insight. It also brings us back to literature and, not least, ‘Love’: the image of the chick breaking out of the egg is another way of telling the story of that poem as Weil seems to have read it.

In these works written in the last year of her life, Weil often returns to the point that ‘l’art imite la beauté du monde’ [‘art imitates the beauty of the world’] and as such maps onto Providence or ‘La convenance des choses, des êtres, des événements’ [‘The suitability of things, beings and events’], to be accepted in its entirety so as not to sully ‘notre patrie universelle’ [‘our universal country’], which she calls ‘l’amour stoïcien de l’univers’ [‘love of the Stoics [for the universe]’] (‘Formes’, 311; ‘Forms’, 131). Acceptance or obedience to this is vital; as she puts it in *L’Enracinement*, ‘L’ordre du monde doit être aimé parce qu’il est pure obéissance à Dieu’ (*E*, 351) [‘The order of the world is to be loved because it is pure obedience to God’ (*R*, 275)]. Pretending to understand or second-guess this order is, Weil argues, like the school exercise in which a teacher tells their pupils why the poet put such-and-such a word in such-

and-such a place, but if the poet is inspired then their work is akin to God's will, and the exercise is absurd (*E*, 346). 'Love' and similar works are one of a number of 'Formes de l'amour implicite de Dieu':

Dans un poème si l'on demande pourquoi tel mot est à tel endroit, et s'il y a une réponse, ou bien le poème n'est pas de premier ordre, ou bien le lecteur n'a rien compris. [...] Pour un poème vraiment beau, la seule réponse, c'est que le mot est là parce qu'il convenait qu'il y fût. La preuve de cette convenance, c'est qu'il est là, et que le poème est beau. ('Formes', 311)

[If we ask why such and such a word in a poem is in such and such a place and if there is an answer, either the poem is not of the highest order, or else the reader has understood nothing of it. [...] In the case of a really beautiful poem the only answer is that the word is there because it is fitting that it should be. The proof of this suitability is that it is there and that the poem is beautiful. ('Forms', 130)]<sup>62</sup>

'Love' is the most beautiful poem in the world for Weil because it expresses the love that animates or infuses Providence; as she puts it towards the end of *L'Enracinement*, 'ce qui a fait obéir la force aveugle de la matière n'est pas une autre force, plus forte. C'est l'amour' (*E*, 350) ['what makes the blind forces of matter obedient is not another, stronger force; it is love' (*R*, 275)]. Not only does the inspired poet imitate God, but God is in a sense a poet, hence the 'convenance' and beauty of the universe in the microcosm of a poem and in the macrocosm of the universe.

Inevitably, however, this love is mysterious or ineffable:

C'est par un amour inconcevable que Dieu a créé des êtres tellement distants de lui. C'est par un amour inconcevable qu'il descend jusqu'à eux. C'est par un amour inconcevable qu'eux ensuite montent jusqu'à lui. Le même amour. Ils ne peuvent monter que par l'amour que Dieu a mis en eux quand il est allé les chercher.<sup>63</sup>

[It is through inconceivable love that God has created beings so distant from him. It is through inconceivable love that he comes right down to them. It is through inconceivable love that they in turn climb up to him. The same love. They can only climb up through the love that God has put in them when he came to seek them.]

Poetry is doubtless the ultimate human means to communicate such 'amour inconcevable'. As Weil puts it, 'Pour produire des vers où réside quelque beauté, il faut avoir désiré égarer par l'arrangement des mots la beauté pure et divine dont Platon dit qu'elle habite de l'autre côté du ciel' (*E*, 285) ['In order to write verse that contains some beauty, one must have had the ambition to equal by the arrangement of words that pure and divine beauty which, according to Plato, lies on the other side of the skies' (*R*, 208)].<sup>64</sup> Beautiful poetry is the attempt to convey the kind of ineffable Platonic realm of pure being conveyed, for example, in the *Phaedrus*.<sup>65</sup>

Weil's focused attention on 'Love' involved her intelligence as her soul's guide, for her reading of that poem to be a means of experiencing 'amour inconcevable'. As she records in her notebook written in New York in autumn 1942 before she sailed for England to join the Free French Forces in London:

L'intelligence ne peut contrôler le mystère lui-même, mais elle est parfaitement en possession du pouvoir de contrôle sur les chemins qui conduisent au mystère, qui y montent, et les chemins qui en redescendent. Elle reste ainsi absolument fidèle à elle-même en reconnaissant l'existence dans l'âme d'une faculté supérieure à elle-même et qui conduit la pensée au-dessus d'elle. Cette faculté est l'amour surnaturel.<sup>66</sup>

[The intelligence cannot control the mystery itself, but it is entirely in possession of the power of control over the paths which lead to the mystery, which climb up to it, and the paths which come back down from it. It thereby stays true to itself by acknowledging the existence in the soul of a faculty that is superior to it and which leads thought above it. This faculty is supernatural love.]

Focused attention on 'Love' or the Lord's Prayer doubtless constitute two of the 'chemins' Weil refers to here. The 'mystère' remains in place, in much the same way as the realm of being Plato refers to can never be fully articulated in language. Yet intelligence can be an instance of 'amour surnaturel' itself, akin to the *ātman* discussed above. As Weil writes in 'Réflexions sans ordre sur l'amour de Dieu', 'Dieu seul est la force ascendante, et il vient quand on le regarde. Le regarder, cela veut dire l'aimer. Il n'y a pas d'autre relation entre l'homme et Dieu que l'amour' [God alone is the upward force, and he comes when you look. Looking at him means loving him. There is no relation between man and God other than love].<sup>67</sup>

On this account, to rephrase Herbert, when you love, love welcomes you. Human love is itself a means of reaching beyond to God as love: 'C'est seulement à travers les choses et les êtres d'ici-bas que l'amour humain peut percer jusqu'à ce qui habite derrière' (*E*, 240) ['It is only through things and individual beings on this earth that human love can penetrate to that which lies beyond' (*R*, 151)]. As well as recalling the story of love as the chick breaking out of the egg, these different dimensions of love recall the great commandment: 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself' (Matthew 22. 37–39). Loving your neighbour as yourself, on Weil's terms, can lead to loving God, which would return us back again to loving your neighbour. As she says in the conclusion of 'Formes de l'amour implicite de Dieu', it is not as if your neighbours, friends and beauty of the world fall away after direct contact between the soul and God, 'Au contraire, c'est alors seulement que ces choses deviennent réelles' ('Formes', 336) ['On the contrary, it is only then that these things become real' ('Forms', 166)]. Far from being a flight into some purely Platonic realm, Weil's religious experiences through 'Love' and the Lord's Prayer were integral to the compassion of which she writes, and which she practised in life.

For Weil, 'Love' was an instance of the ancient Greek notion of *metaxu*, for whatever is 'in between'. She draws on the old image of prisoners in neighbouring cells – the wall divides them but also allows them to communicate; she concludes 'Toute séparation est un lien' ['Every separation is a link'].<sup>68</sup> This paradox is where the power of her reading of 'Love' resides, since for her the poem became a threshold to transcendence, a place where separation became union. If as critics we are closed to

such dimensions of poetry, we risk missing the redemptive and transformational potential of literature. Indeed, such possibilities are omnipresent in writing of all kinds. To pick just one example, the opening address of Almustafa in Khalil Gibran's *The Prophet* (1923) has numerous points of connection to the themes developed in Herbert and Weil:

When love beckons to you, follow him,  
 Though his ways are hard and steep.  
 And when his wings enfold you yield to him,  
 Though the sword hidden among his pinions may wound you.  
 [...] For even as love crowns you so shall he crucify you. Even as he is for your growth  
 so is he for your pruning.  
 Even as he ascends to your height and caresses your tenderest branches that quiver in  
 the sun,  
 So shall he descend to your roots and shake them in their clinging to the earth.  
 [...] And then he assigns you to his sacred fire, that you may become sacred bread for  
 God's sacred feast.  
 All these things shall love do unto you that you may know the secrets of your heart, and  
 in that knowledge become a fragment of Life's heart [...].<sup>69</sup>

Obviously, all the examples cited above concern literature as an invitation to transcendence, perhaps less love through poetry than poetry as love. We may not realize we have accepted the invitation, yet, like the narrator in 'Love' and indeed like Simone Weil herself, find ourselves welcomed despite ourselves.

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This article is an essay borne of amateur curiosity, as both Weil and Herbert lie outside my area of specialism. I apologize in advance to specialists for any glaring omissions in the notes, owing to my lack of expertise. I would also like to thank the two anonymous readers for their generous comments and suggestions.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Weil's letter to Bousquet of 12 May 1942 was first published in 1962; her long letter to Perrin of 14 May was printed posthumously as her 'Autobiographie spirituelle', in *Attente de Dieu* (1950).

<sup>2</sup> Weil's description of 'Love' as 'le plus beau poème du monde' comes from the testimony of her friend and biographer Simone Pétrement, *La Vie de Simone Weil* (Paris: Fayard, 1973), pp. 456–57. The poem is commonly referred to as 'Love (III)' in modern editions and scholarship, but not so by

Herbert or Weil; this essay will refer to it as 'Love'. Two articles by American theologians have previously compared Herbert and Weil: Diogenes Allen, 'George Herbert and Simone Weil', *Religion & Literature*, 17 (1985), 17–34; and Michael Vander Weele, 'Simone Weil and George Herbert on the Vocations of Writing and Reading', *Religion & Literature*, 32 (2000), 69–102. Both tend to offer general and rather schematic readings, as if the poet and philosopher were positing theological arguments from which we can draw straightforward conclusions.

<sup>3</sup> Letter to Joë Bousquet, 12 May 1942, in Simone Weil, *Œuvres*, ed. by Florence de Lussy (Paris: Gallimard, 1999), pp. 791–800 (p. 799); she also transcribed 'Love' at the end of her letter. English translation by Richard Rees (1965), in *The Simone Weil Reader*, ed. by George A. Panichas (New York: David McKay, 1977), p. 93. Where possible, I have consulted and cited published translations, sometimes altering them to bring them closer to Weil's literal meaning; unacknowledged translations are my own. Pêtrement estimates the experience happened in mid-November 1938; see *La Vie de Simone Weil*, pp. 468–70.

<sup>4</sup> Simone Weil, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by André A. Devaux, Florence de Lussy and Robert Chenavier (Paris: Gallimard, 1988–), v: *Écrits de New York et de Londres 11: (1943) L'Enracinement: Prélude à une déclaration des devoirs envers l'être humain*, ed. by Robert Chenavier and Patrice Rolland (2013), p. 299. Subsequent references to the *Œuvres complètes* are to 'OC'; subsequent references to *L'Enracinement* are to this edition, as 'E', incorporated in the main text. English translation from Simone Weil, *The Need for Roots: Prelude to a Declaration of Duties towards Mankind*, trans. by A. F. Wills (London: Routledge, 1952), p. 224. Subsequent references are to this translation, as 'R', incorporated in the main text. On the role of beauty in Weil's philosophy, which I am only touching on here as it relates to her reading of 'Love', see Patrick Sherry, 'Simone Weil on Beauty', in *Simone Weil's Philosophy of Culture: Readings Toward a Divine Humanity*, ed. by Richard H. Bell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 260–76.

<sup>5</sup> Iris Murdoch, 'The Sublime and the Good' (1959), in *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, ed. by Peter Conradi (London: Penguin, 1999), p. 215.

<sup>6</sup> George Herbert, 'Love', in *The Temple* (Cambridge: Thomas Buck and Roger Daniel, 1633), sig. H8<sup>r</sup>. Line numbering is added; subsequent references are to this edition, incorporated in the main text by line number. Since my focus is not so much on the poem itself, my engagement with scholarship on Herbert is limited. For other readings of the famous poem, see Hannah Brooks-Motl, 'George Herbert: "Love (III)"', *Poetry Foundation*, 24 August 2012, <<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69843/george-herbert-love-iii>> [accessed 12 December 2022]; John Drury, *Music at Midnight: The Life and Poetry of George Herbert* (London: Allen Lane, 2013), pp. 1–4; Clive James, *The Fire of Joy: Roughly 80 Poems to Get by Heart and Say Aloud* (London: Picador, 2020), pp. 26–29; Stanley Fish, *The Living Temple: George Herbert and Catechizing* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), pp. 131–36; Michael C. Schoenfeldt, *Prayer and Power: George Herbert and Renaissance Courtship* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1991), pp. 199–229; and Helen Vendler, *The Poetry of George Herbert* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), pp. 58–60, 274–76.

<sup>7</sup> John Drury, notes to 'Love (III)', in George Herbert, *The Complete Poetry*, ed. by John Drury and Victoria Moul (London: Penguin Classics, 2015), pp. 485–86 (p. 485).

<sup>8</sup> Simone Weil, 'Formes de l'amour implicite de Dieu', in *OC*, iv: *Écrits de Marseille 1: (1940–1942) Philosophie, science, religion, questions politiques et sociales*, ed. by Robert Chenavier and others (2008), pp. 285–336 (p. 326). Subsequent references are to this edition, as 'Formes', incorporated in the main text. English translation from Simone Weil, 'Forms of the Implicit Love of God', in *Waiting on God*, trans. by Emma Craufurd (London: Fontana, 1959), pp. 94–166 (p. 152). Subsequent references are to this translation, as 'Forms', incorporated in the main text. See 'pray to thy Father which is in secret', Matthew 6. 6.

<sup>9</sup> Weil also recited and copied out the poem for Pêtrement, but only mentioned her religious experience to her once: *La Vie de Simone Weil*, p. 457.

<sup>10</sup> Simone Weil, 'Autobiographie spirituelle', in *Œuvres*, ed. by de Lussy, pp. 765–89 (p. 773). Subsequent references are to this edition, as 'AS', incorporated in the main text.

<sup>11</sup> Simone Weil, 'Spiritual Autobiography', in *Waiting on God*, trans. by Craufurd, pp. 28–49 (pp. 38–39). Subsequent references are to this translation, as 'SA', incorporated into the main text.

<sup>12</sup> Weil claims never to have sought God towards the beginning of her letter: 'AS', p. 768.

<sup>13</sup> Simone Weil, 'Réflexion sur le bon usage des études scolaires en vue de l'Amour de Dieu', in *OC*, iv: *Écrits de Marseille 1*, pp. 255–62 (p. 255). The essay was first published in 1950. Subsequent references are to this edition, as 'Réflexion', incorporated in the main text.

<sup>14</sup> Simone Weil, 'Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God', in *Waiting on God*, trans. by Craufurd, pp. 66–76 (p. 66). Subsequent references are to this translation, as 'Reflections', incorporated in the main text.

<sup>15</sup> For a similar set of points, see Weil, *E*, p. 353.

<sup>16</sup> For an introduction to attention in Weil, see Christopher Mole, 'The Moral Significance of Attention', in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* <<https://www.rep.routledge.com/articles/the-matic/attention/v-2/sections/the-moral-significance-of-attention>> [accessed 14 December 2022].

<sup>17</sup> William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (London: Penguin, 1985), p. 383.

<sup>18</sup> Simone Weil, 'La Porte', in *Œuvres*, ed. by de Lussy, p. 805; English translation as 'The Threshold' (literally, 'The Door'), trans. by William Burford, in *The Simone Weil Reader*, ed. by Panichas, pp. 408–09.

<sup>19</sup> Terence Cave, *Thinking with Literature: Towards a Cognitive Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 3; in context, Cave acknowledges that literature 'can perform remarkable feats' and he promotes a 'view of language, and thus of literature, [...] as an open medium the very opposite of a prison house': pp. 3–5. Nevertheless, I want to keep open an alternative possibility to the overarching limit he proposes to 'literary ways of thinking'.

<sup>20</sup> James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 388; cited in Ram Dass, *Be Here Now* (San Cristobal, NM: Hanuman Foundation, 1978), p. 17.

<sup>21</sup> Cave, *Thinking with Literature*, p. 8.

<sup>22</sup> I am indebted to one of the anonymous reviewers of *FMLS* for this point. The physical and cognitive experience of memorizing and reciting verse in a foreign language could well merit further investigation.

<sup>23</sup> Pétrement, *La Vie de Simone Weil*, pp. 533, 566–67.

<sup>24</sup> Letter of 9 June 1943, in Weil, *OC*, vii: *Correspondance familiale*, ed. by Robert Chenavier and André A. Devaux (2012), p. 284; Pétrement, *La Vie de Simone Weil*, p. 678.

<sup>25</sup> Pétrement, *La Vie de Simone Weil*, p. 456; Weil also alludes to this stay in 'AS', p. 771.

<sup>26</sup> Pétrement, *La Vie de Simone Weil*, p. 456.

<sup>27</sup> Ted Hughes, 'Introduction: Memorising Poems', in *By Heart: 101 Poems to Remember*, ed. by Ted Hughes (London: Faber and Faber, 1997), pp. ix–xvi (p. xv).

<sup>28</sup> Weil, *OC*, vi: *Cahiers 1: (1933–septembre 1941)*, ed. by Alvette Degrâces and others (1994), p. 295; first published in Weil, *La Pesanteur et la grâce*, ed. by Gustave Thibon (Paris: Plon, 1947; repr. 1988), p. 210.

<sup>29</sup> Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, trans. by Emma Craufurd (London: Routledge, 1952; repr. 1987), p. 118.

<sup>30</sup> See the reproduction of a handwritten transcription by Weil in Pétrement, *La Vie de Simone Weil*, n.p., between pp. 356 and 357; see also Weil, Letter to Bousquet, in *Œuvres*, pp. 799–800.

<sup>31</sup> For a famous example, see 'Easter-wings', the lines of which are presented on the page in the shape of two birds: Herbert, *The Temple*, sigs. B<sub>5</sub><sup>v</sup>–B<sub>6</sub><sup>r</sup>; and Herbert, *The Complete Poetry*, p. 41 and see note, p. 384.

<sup>32</sup> Simone Weil, 'L'Amour de Dieu et le malheur', in *OC*, iv: *Écrits de Marseille 1*, pp. 346–74 (p. 357). Subsequent references are to this edition, as 'L'Amour', incorporated in the main text. English translation from Simone Weil, 'The Love of God and Affliction', in *Waiting for God*, trans. by Craufurd, pp. 76–94 (p. 90). Subsequent references are to this translation, as 'Love of God', incorporated in the main text.

<sup>33</sup> Weil, *OC*, vi: *Cahiers 1v: (juillet 1942–juillet 1943) La Connaissance surnaturelle (Cahiers de New York et de Londres)*, ed. by Marie-Annette Fourneyron, Florence de Lussy and Jean Riaud (2006), p. 203.

<sup>34</sup> For a powerful reading of the domesticity and etiquette implicit in the poem, drawing on multiple contemporary sources, see Schoenfeldt, *Prayer and Power*, pp. 199–299. See also Clive James’s comment that ‘probably the encounter is happening at God’s house; somewhere not very pretentious perhaps, and certainly not lavish enough to merit description’: *The Fire of Joy*, p. 27; Heaney’s view that the ‘immaculate ballet of courtesy and equilibrium in “Love (III)” represents a grounded strength as well as a perfect tact’: Seamus Heaney, *The Redress of Poetry: Oxford Lectures* (London: Faber and Faber, 1995), p. 14; Drury, *Music at Midnight*, p. 1, and commentary in Herbert, *The Complete Poetry*, p. 486; and Brooks-Motl, who suggests that ‘The guest, once you begin looking, is peculiarly disembodied’: ‘George Herbert: “Love (III)”’.

<sup>35</sup> Weil, *OC*, vi: *Cahiers I*, p. 224.

<sup>36</sup> James, *The Fire of Joy*, pp. 27–28.

<sup>37</sup> Vendler, *The Poetry of George Herbert*, pp. 275–76.

<sup>38</sup> Simone Weil, ‘Prologue à la connaissance surnaturelle’, in *Œuvres*, pp. 806–07.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 806.

<sup>40</sup> Weil, *OC*, vi: *Cahiers IV*, p. 203.

<sup>41</sup> Weil, ‘AS’, p. 773; see also Matthew 20. 1–16.

<sup>42</sup> Weil, ‘La Porte’, in *Œuvres*, p. 805; see also n. 1.

<sup>43</sup> Weil, ‘The Threshold’, p. 409.

<sup>44</sup> Simone Weil, ‘À propos du “Pater”’, in *OC*, iv: *Écrits de Marseille I*, pp. 337–45 (p. 340); see n. 21, pp. 559–60, for Weil’s use of the word ‘supernatural’. English translation from Simone Weil, ‘Concerning the “Our Father”’, in *Waiting on God*, trans. by Craufurd, pp. 166–77 (p. 171).

<sup>45</sup> Weil, ‘À propos du “Pater”’, p. 340; Weil, ‘Concerning the “Our Father”’, p. 171.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> Herbert and Weil are also doubtless echoing Luke 12. 35.

<sup>48</sup> Weil, ‘À propos du “Pater”’, p. 219; Weil, ‘Concerning the “Our Father”’, p. 172.

<sup>49</sup> Simone Weil, ‘Pensées sans ordre concernant l’amour de Dieu’, in *OC*, iv: *Écrits de Marseille I*, pp. 280–84 (p. 282).

<sup>50</sup> Weil, ‘Prologue’, pp. 806–07.

<sup>51</sup> Quotation from Schoenfeldt, *Prayer and Power*, p. 206.

<sup>52</sup> Vendler, *Poetry of George Herbert*, p. 274; Fish, *The Living Temple*, p. 135.

<sup>53</sup> See Drury, *Music at Midnight*, p. 2, and commentary in Herbert, *The Complete Poetry*, p. 486.

<sup>54</sup> Weil, *OC*, vi: *Cahiers IV*, p. 276.

<sup>55</sup> See, for instance, Diogenes Allen’s reading of the poem: ‘Love sacrifices itself to relieve us of both death and sin’: ‘George Herbert and Simone Weil’, p. 28.

<sup>56</sup> Weil, ‘Pensées’, p. 282.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> See, for example, Drury, notes to ‘Love (III)’, in Herbert, *The Complete Poetry*, p. 486, who observes Love’s humour, but does not see it as part of the union; my reading drawing on Weil is rather different to Schoenfeldt’s view that Love’s question ‘stresses [Love’s] prerogative of judgment derived from his status as creator of the speaker’s eyes as well as his “I,” his sense of an integral and independent self’: *Prayer and Power*, p. 204.

<sup>60</sup> Simone Weil, ‘Textes rassemblés à l’intention du Père Perrin’ (January 1942), in *OC*, iv: *Écrits de Marseille II: (1941–1942) Grèce – Inde – Occitanie*, ed. by Anissa Castel-Bouchouchi and Florence de Lussy (2009), p. 361.

<sup>61</sup> Weil, Letter to Bousquet, in *Œuvres*, p. 793; English translation by Rees in *The Simone Weil Reader*, ed. by Panichas, p. 87.

<sup>62</sup> As if to illustrate Weil's point, A. D. Nuttall experiments with substituting 'conscience' for 'love' in 'Love', in *Overheard by God: Fiction and Prayer in Herbert, Milton, Dante and St John* (London: Methuen, 1980), pp. 6–7.

<sup>63</sup> Simone Weil, 'Réflexions sans ordre sur l'amour de Dieu', in *OC*, iv: *Écrits de Marseille 1*, pp. 272–79 (p. 273).

<sup>64</sup> See also Iris Murdoch's comment: 'Simone Weil, that admirable Platonist, said that a poem is beautiful in so far as the poet's thought is fixed upon the ineffable': 'The Fire and the Sun' (1976), in *Existentialists and Mystics*, pp. 460–61.

<sup>65</sup> See Plato, *Phaedrus*, ed. and trans. by Robin Waterfield (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 2002), 247c; the passage presents multiple parallels to Weil, including to the idea of spiritual food and to the place where to look is to feed on the truth.

<sup>66</sup> Simone Weil, *OC*, vi: *Cahiers IV*, p. 174.

<sup>67</sup> Weil, 'Réflexions', p. 277.

<sup>68</sup> Weil, *La Pesanteur et la Grâce*, p. 228; Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, p. 132.

<sup>69</sup> Khalil Gibran, *The Prophet* (London: Penguin Classics, 2002), pp. 13–14.