In: *The Iris Murdoch Review* 14, 2023

*The Subversive Simone Weil: A Life in Five Ideas*. By Robert Zaretsky. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2021; 181pp, Hardback $20.00.

By Silvia Caprioglio Panizza

It cannot be easy to write about Simone Weil’s life. First, writing about the life of a woman intellectual as such can raise the doubt that one is sacrificing her output for an interest in her person, which is sadly often at the forefront when we talk about brilliant women. Richard Eyre’s 2001 film about Iris Murdoch, where not enough of her novels and little of her philosophy shine through, is an example of such worry. Luckily, Robert Zaretsky’s book on Weil is explicitly aimed at narrating, yes, her life, but ‘in’ her ideas, as the subtitle promises (although he starts the Introduction, regrettably, with the fact of Weil’s death and starvation, something that has already generated way too much fascination). The ideas are meant to guide the story of her life, not vice versa, and that’s why, as Zaretsky states, the chronology is not followed in strictly linear fashion, nor does the book have the ambition to be an exhaustive presentation of either Weil’s life or her ideas.

Having avoided the danger of focusing on the life and forgetting the work, another specific danger looms large, and is much more difficult to avoid: that of writing about a person whose aim was impersonality, of narrating ideas through a life of someone who wanted her ideas to come out as if from nowhere, and of describing the genealogy and context of thoughts that, according to the author of these thoughts, had to be universal to be worth anything. Indeed, the ambition to universality and impersonality is one of the (many) striking features of Weil’s thought, which manifests, on the one hand, in her capacity to read principles such as ‘force’ or ‘gravity’ as agitating through disparate events and times, from the *Iliad* to 17th century Venice to Europe during the Second World War; on the other, in her insistence that no intellectual or spiritual achievement has anything to do with the achiever’s person; rather – as she writes regarding school studies - any time a student gets the sums right, it’s because she has let the impersonal take over.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Does this mean that Weil would have been uncomfortable with a presentation of her ideas not just as *hers* (uncomfortable enough), but as embedded within her life? I think quite likely. This does not immediately translate to the normative claim that one should not do it. Kafka wanted his unpublished work to be burned when he died, and the jury’s out on whether his friend and literary executor Max Brod should have done so. Weil did not leave any note forbidding future writers to combine her life and thought, or explain one through the other. Nonetheless, the tension between Weil’s aspiration of impersonality and interweaving her life and ideas cannot but make a reader wonder.

So, a life in five ideas. What are these five ideas? Affliction - of course. Attention - yes indeed. Resistance? One might have expected ‘force’, but it’s really ‘the varieties of resistance’, so at least force finds some room there. Roots, again quite rightly. The Good, the Bad, and the Godly, well that’s three, and uncomfortably squeezed together into one chapter, where at least the Good and the Godly could do with a chapter each. In any case, overall, the selection is reasonable, but the uneven space given to ‘key’ ideas is itself a key to the book: much stronger when it comes to historical and political questions (indeed, matching the longer chapters) and less strong when it comes to the metaphysical and ethical Weil.

Matching what seem to be the author’s strengths, the book is at its most valuable when it offers a historical background for Weil’s life, going beyond Weil’s life and offering events, stories, and anecdotes that a Weil reader may not be acquainted with. The author is clearly at home in history, and it shows. The connections with contemporary culture and politics are also worth reflecting on, such as those found in the discussion of contemporary Western ‘patriotism’ as opposed to real roots, and the opposition of populist patriotism with Weil’s idea that love of one’s country is incommensurable and does not and cannot lead to thinking it superior to others (119).

While the historical and political Weil is very important and, as Zaretsky notes, useful for us in our time to reflect with, some of the force of her political philosophy comes from her broader, metaphysical and moral, worldview. That is not absent in this book, but the treatment, while competent and at places quite enjoyable, may leave the reader of Weil wanting more. This takes us to another Weilian theme, that of contradiction. The book aims to present Weil to the general public, and make Weil accessible to anyone who does not know her. To some extent, I think it succeeds: the style is engaging, the connections are broad, and the ideas presented not false. But simplifying Weil comes at a great cost: that of smoothing over not only the depth and difficulty of some of her ideas, but also their contradictions, which according to Weil are necessary to any true philosophy.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The purpose of the book makes it harder, I acknowledge, to do otherwise. The book is relatively short and meant to be accessible. That may be the reason, for instance, why a brief discussion of themes as huge as the ‘I’ and the Good are interrupted to jump to the question of political parties (149); or why the introduction of force in the *Iliad* gives way, too soon, to other remarks about Nietzche and the *Odyssey* (106-7). Here we also see how the range of connections that Zaretsky effortlessly draws is vast and impressive: he links Weil with Albert Camus, Edmund Burke, Emile Zola, Martha Nussbaum, Robert Putnam, Mahatma Gandhi, among others. This breadth can be a strength but also a weakness, if one feels that Weil’s complex ideas require more than quick connections and expansions, and that some comparisons may be a little less substantial that one would like.

The wish to present Weil engagingly leads to formulations that are worryingly breezy, when they border on not doing justice to Weil’s through: ‘In Weil’s scheme, God is at best neurotic, at worst sociopathic; a divinity who has wrought a cosmos He wishes He never had and filled it with residents who should wish they never were’ (140-1). (If God’s love, for Weil, is creation, then we cannot say God never wished to create); or force being ‘an equal-opportunity oppressor’ (19). It’s evident that the author feels unease at Weil’s utter earnestness, and he knows he is not alone. Earnestness is not the only aspect of Weil that makes Zaretsky receive her with ambivalence. It’s well known that the extremity of Weil’s thought has many readers captivated and repulsed, and it seems that the author of this book is no exception. In the final page, and not only there, we find a clear admission of this ambivalence, between finding Weil ‘insufferable’ and ‘irrepleaceable’, although the final verdict is that ‘it is difficult to find a more desirable, if difficult [sic], guide for our lives’ (160).

Although Zaretsky finally embraces Weil, the sense of discomfort is hard to shake off, both in the content and in the tone of the book. Perhaps the quick presentation of ideas, and some of the more light-hearted formulations, are an attempt to make the weight of Weil’s ideas more bearable to a post-modern sensibility who needs irony to swallow some pills (with the risk that the irony may lead to swallowing only half the pill). There is a sense of escape. That, too, is not surprising when struggling with a thinker who has no time for compromise and whose thoughts may strike us as all the more outrageous as they are true. Some have called Weil’s moral rigour saintly. If that’s true, it’s not surprising that Weil makes us uncomfortable. As Anne Carson writes in her essay comparing Weil, Sappho, and Marguerite Porete “saintliness is an eruption of the absolute into ordinary history and we resent that. We need history to be able to call saints neurotic, anorectic, pathological, sexually repressed or fake. These judgments sanctify our own survival”.[[3]](#footnote-3) Who can blame us for wanting to live, even if that means make compromises, accepting that we do wrong, even evil, when goodness seems to demand of us not exactly too much, but a jump into a realm of existence that seems so different that could make us mad? Weil’s most important ideas are at once hard to explain, hard to contemplate, and hard to accept. If writing about Weil’s life is hard, writing about her ideas can be at the same time joyful, transfiguring, but also maddening, and that should be part of our consideration of anyone who attempts it.

## Funding

## This project has received funding from the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No 101026701.

1. See ‘Reflections on the Right use of School Studies’ in Waiting on God, tr. Emma Craufurd, Harper and Row 1973. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See e.g. Simone Weil, “Some Reflections around the Concept of Value: On Valéry’s Claim that Philosophy is Poetry,” trans. Eric Springstead, *Philosophical Investigations* 37(2) 2014: pp. 105–112: “With respect to contradictions, all philosophical thought contains them. Far from being an imperfection of philosophical thought, it is an essential characteristic of it without which there would only be the false appearance of philosophy.” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Carson, Anne. "Decreation: How Women Like Sappho, Marguerite Porete, and Simone Weil Tell God." *Common Knowledge*, vol. 8 no. 1, 2002: 188-203, p. 203. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)