

THE WORK OF SIMONE WEIL: AN EDUCATIONAL MISSION¹

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Abstract: The paper investigates the question if Simone Weil's thought is unitary or fragmentary, if one can speak of a "system" concerning her theoretical approach, and if her works are still current. The paper suggests a re-reading of Weil's reflections to find in them an educative aim.

Keywords: philosophy, education, phenomenology.

A pilgrim of thought

When one approaches the greatness of weilian philosophy, one is inevitably taken by very conflicting emotions: this *woman of genius* inspires strong passions.

Simone Weil, an ascetic, uncontrollable, overpowering woman, literally fed herself either on the words of peasants and workers or on reading her classic works, forgetting to eat.

She refused all obliging solutions in order to be always ready to confront herself with the innovation and variety of situations, without examining them through the reassuring methods of memberships.

A double misrepresentation of the figure of Simone Weil² emerges from the critics' interpretations: the first one, based on hagiographic criteria, makes

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In this paper, the citations are written in the original language with translations in footnotes by the writer.

² For a reconstruction of Simone Weil's thought, see the *Oeuvres complètes* (Gallimard, Paris 1988-2012). Her writings are re-ordered as follows:

I *Premiers écrits philosophiques*

II *Écrits historiques et politique*

a. *L'engagement synodical* (1927-1934)
b. *La condition ouvrière* (1934-1937)

her a separate, singular case, by distinguishing the years of her political commitment from the last years, which are characterised by a mystical and religious experience, and the second one, which attempts to equate her, in all ways, with the other intellectuals of her time.

From this interpretative hodgepodge, therefore, the image of Simone Weil emerges as that of a sensitive, lucid and committed intellectual who moves from civil rejection to contemplative acceptance of the fracture between manual and intellectual work, from complain of the factory regime to the dream of a domestic industry, and from condemnation of the Soviet-style State to the proposal for a Constitutional Act that prohibits parties.

Simone Weil appears a vulcan of ideas and feelings and she presented herself, through her fragmentary writings and disordered thoughts, as an eccentric and unstable woman: « il suo carattere appare in tutta la sua complessità: dall'andatura disadorna e non curata, le tasche piene di tabacco, grosse lenti, scarpe pesanti, terribilmente irritante e antipatica»³. She became known in Parisian cultural circles as the *vierge rouge*. Often, the image of her is that of a being in constant tension, grumpy, shadowy, perpetually crushed by the misfortune of others and presumably inclined to shun the joys of life. However, this is a distortion, a stereotype which does not stand up to the test of facts: a careful reading of her writings reveals an authentic attitude of

c. *Vers la guerre (1937-1940)*

III *Poèmes et Venise sauvée*

IV *Ecrits de Marseilles*

a. *Philosophie, science et religion*

b. *Les civilisations inspiratrices: La Grece, L'Inde et l'Occitanie*

V *Ecrits de New York et de Londres*

a. *Questions politiques et religieuse*

b. *L'enracinement*

VI *Cahiers (voll.1-4)*

VII *Correspondances*

a. *Correspondance familiale*

b. *Correspondance générale*

In addition, an indispensable source of documentation and information are the CSW «Cahiers Simone Weil», a quarterly journal published by the «Association pour l'étude de la pensée de Simon Weil», whose first issue (May 1974) presented itself as a “Bulletin de liaison” between the members of the association (instituted in 1973, following the decision taken during the 1972 congress, organised by J. Tavernier in Tremblay-sur-Mauldre). The name «Cahiers Simone Weil» appeared for the first time in the June 1978 issue.

³ Mario Catsellana, *Mistica e rivoluzione in Simone Weil*, Lacaita, Manduria 1979, p. 20. [«Her character appears in all its complexity: with an unadorned and unkempt gait, pockets full of tobacco, thick lenses, heavy shoes, terribly irritating and unpleasant»].

searching for the self and for the other, an original way of thinking about being in the world, conducted also with a spirit that does not disdain humour, loves jokes, sarcastic jokes too.

It is no coincidence that in 1933-1934, at the same time as preparing and editing her only completed work, the *Réflexions sur les causes de la liberté et de l'oppression sociale*⁴,

Simone Weil equipped herself with an unusual instrument for thinking, the *Cahiers*, a literary genre in which sparse thoughts are compiled in aphorisms or in fragments. These thoughts are collected together with no internal order, and they correspond to Weil's idea that all matters are of the same importance. All reflections merit full attention. None of them is more important than any other when they are in the light of a contemplative view.

Simone Weil's shocking reflection on the feeling of self is given in her own writings where one can find a veritable phenomenological description of the obstruction of self, of the contrast between invisibility, which was so striking for people who met her, and the desire to be in a different balance with the world-

Le monde est un texte à plusieurs significations, et on passe d'une signification à une autre par un travail ; un travail où le corps a toujours part [...]. Faute de quoi tout changement dans la manière de penser est illusoire⁵.

The relationship of one's own body with space and time has the cross as reference figure, one of the most important symbols for Weilian thought, because it indicates the intersection of necessity and good of finite and infinite, of the two levels (the arms of the cross) which are completely heterogeneous and opposed, the first one of the perceived worlds and the second one of the transcendent world.

La Trinité et la Croix sont les deux pôles du christianisme, les deux vérités essentielles, l'une joie parfaite, l'autre parfait malheur. La connaissance de l'une et de l'autre et de leur mystérieuse unité est indispensable, mais ici-bas nous sommes placés par la condition

⁴ Gallimard, Paris 195.

⁵ *Oeuvres complètes*, t. VI, vol. 1 pp. 400-401. [«The world is a text with many meanings, and one moves from one meaning to another by work; work in which the body always has a part [...]. Otherwise, any change in the way of thinking is illusory»].

humaine infiniment loin de la Trinité, au pied même de la croix. La Croix est notre patrie⁶.

Di questa giovane filosofa si è impadronita assai per tempo la leggenda.... Ed essa è tuttora oggetto di stime esagerate, incapaci di accettare i limiti della sua esperienza e le contraddizioni pure presenti nel suo pensiero, oppure è il bersaglio di critiche infastidite da esiti che non corrispondono alla propria visione culturale e politica⁷.

The fact is that both radicality and plurality of her contributions are uncomfortable, so the attempts to manipulate one or other part of Weil's work are not only an appropriation, but also an misappropriation. Simone Weil can be comprehended if she is not identified, as the fact of being identified gives origin to misunderstandings in the interpretation. Her work, if read from the perspective of unitary complexity, overcomes all barriers and inner contrasts.

Interpretative conflicts

In order to inhabit the complexity of weilian thought and succeed in describing a clear and precise portrait of Simone, it is necessary to identify the objective difficulties encountered in the hermeneutic reading of her work.

The first difficulty is that, although weilian's meditation covers a period of less than twenty years, it cannot be said to be «concisa, né tanto meno sistematica»⁸. It is fragmentary because it consists of sparse notes and annotations that are not ordered for publication.

Weil's texts are very diverse, including writings on art, science, religion, mathematics and physics, society, political structures and employment: to

⁶ *Oeuvres complètes*, t. IV, vol. 1, p. 351. [«The Trinity and the Cross are the two branches of Christianity, the two essential truths, the first one is perfect joy, the other one is perfect misery. Knowledge of both and of their mysterious unity is essential, but here below one is placed by the human condition infinitely far from the Trinity, at the very base of the Cross. The Cross is our home»].

⁷ Domenico Canciani, *Simone Weil e il coraggio di pensare*, Edizioni Lavoro, Roma 1995, pp. 13-14. [«This young philosopher has long been the subject of legend.... And she is still the object of excessive esteem, unable to accept the limits of her experience and the contradictions that are also present in her thought, or she is the object of criticism disturbed by the results that do not conform to her personal cultural and political vision»].

⁸ Salvatore Obinu, *I dilemmi del corpo. Materia e corporeità negli scritti di Simone Weil*, prefazione di Gabriella Fiori, Ed. Lalli, Firenze 1989, p. 19 [«concise, let alone systematic»]

understand them, it is necessary to keep them in opposition and not simplify their reading through a dialectical process.

These writings are presented in the form of short speeches or fragments. This choice is indicative of a research style that makes it possible to identify the crucial points of the proposed theme and the insights to be developed.

The non-systematic character of the writings is a testimony of weilian research, of that interweaving between theory and experience from which aporias, contradictions and sometimes theoretical voids are revealed. These voids lead us to consider Weil's philosophy as a moment of passage in the philosophical culture of the twentieth century with reference to the themes of the radical difference of the other and the absolute moral responsibility of the self, in a constant *entrelacs* between rationalism and profound spirituality. Weil feels the need to come to the truth, but also feels the awareness that this can only be achieved through a phenomenology of the human condition, which opens up two ways of analysis: the first one is aimed at the deprived and oppressed condition, such as that of the workers, and in any case, of all those who are subjected to power, and the other one is directed towards the phenomenology of the "expectation" of the truth, the transcendent revelation.

A second difficulty to consider when reading Simone's work is that the publication of most of his works is posthumous and reflects the multifaceted interpretations that critics have attributed to her⁹.

As one can read in the reconstruction of her biography, written by Gabriella Fiori¹⁰, the vast material of Weil's writings remained in the drawers of her office in London, in the hands of her friends or in her birthplace.

These writings have come down to us thanks to the patient work of arrangement carried out by Simone's father and mother¹¹, and were subsequently published by friends such as Gustave Thibon (who was responsible for the first text published in 1947, *La pesanteur et la Grâce*¹²)

⁹ The problem of a necessarily directional interpretation was partly solved by the edition of the Weilian *corpus* critically compiled in the *Cahiers*. Important intellectual figures such as Albert Camus in France and Franco Fortini in Italy have contributed to the dissemination of Weilian thought. Among the philosophical monographs, see Miklos Vetö, *La métaphysique religieuse de Simone Weil*, Vrin, Paris 1970.

¹⁰ Gabriella Fiori, *Simone Weil. Biografia di un pensiero*, Garzanti, Milano 1981.

¹¹ When Weil's parents returned to Paris in 1949, they immediately set about collecting their daughter's writings. They returned in possession of what had been kept by Pierre Honnorat in Marseilles and some papers left in Paris and saved by Simone Pétrement before the flat was sacked by the Nazis, and without difficulty obtained from Closion and other friends that the London manuscripts be sent to them.

¹² Simone Weil, *La pesanteur et la Grâce*, Plon, Collection L'épi, Paris 1947.

and Albert Camus (who edited almost all Weil's texts, among the others *L'Enracinement*¹³ in 1949, by Gallimard in the series "Espoir" founded by him) and Joseph Marie Perrin (who published, at Simone's will, the dialogue between them, made up of letters and essays, in the book *Attente de Dieu* in 1950, and two years later, part of the comments on Greek texts under the title *Intuition sprèch rètiennes*)¹⁴.

In 1951, the American and London *Cahiers*¹⁵ were published by Plon, followed in 1970 by a more accurate edition by Weil's brother, André, and her friend biographer Simone Pètrement.

A series of biographical essays, many of them hagiographical, accompanied the history of the disclosure of Weil's thought until the 1970s. The official philosophical culture remained almost completely indifferent. Except for the appreciation, also episodic, made by Emile Auguste Chartier¹⁶, the few judgments expressed by the philosophers of the time were either of limited theoretical depth, as in the case of Gabriel Marcel's interpretation, or only of partial recognition of the value of Weil's reflection, as in the critical reading made by Emmanuel Mounier.

This is because, as Augusto Del Noce¹⁷ pointed out, the underestimation should be ascribed to a dominant reading of her writings oriented to see in them fragments of a great work of mystical poetry.

However, since the 1980s, Weil's thought seems to be comprehended in its entirety: in fact, a considerable number of studies have been published: translations of her writings have been published in Brazil, Mexico, United

¹³ Id., *L'Enracinement. Prélude à une déclaration des devoirs envers l'être humain*, Gallimard, Collection Ideas, Paris 1949.

¹⁴ There is a parallel publishing history: on the one hand, the Perrin-Thibon couple, on the other hand, the Weil family and Camus. This division did not help in setting up an editorial plan for Weil's work which, because of its fragmentary state, already showed considerable difficulties in terms of organisation and presentation.

¹⁵ Simone Weil, *Cahiers*, Plon, Paris 1951 (vol. 1); 1953 (vol. 2); 1956 (vol. 3).

¹⁶ In 1929, 1932 and 1935, the following articles by Simone Weil were published in Émile-Auguste Chartier's journal, "Libres Propos": *De la perception ou l'aventure de Protée*, "Libres Propos", Nîmes, new series, 3rd year, no. 5, 20 May 1929, pp. 237-241; *Du temps*, "Libres Propos", Nîmes, new series, 3rd year, no. 5, 20 May 1929, pp. 387-392; *L'Allemagne en attente*, "Libres Propos", Nîmes, new series, 3rd year, no. 5, 20 May 1929, pp. 237-241; *Du temps*, "Libres Propos", Nîmes, new series, 3rd year, no. 5, 20 May 1929, pp. 387-392; *L'Allemagne en attente*, "Libres Propos", Nîmes, new series 6th year, no. 10, 25 October 1932; *Réflexions sur la guerre*, "Libres Propos", Nîmes, new series 8th year, 31 August 1935. Also see Alain (Chartier Émile), *Simone Weil*, "La table ronde", no. 28, April 1950, pp. 47-51.

¹⁷ Augusto Del Noce, *Simone Weil interprete del mondo di oggi*, Published as Introduction to Simone Weil, *L'Amore di Dio*, Borla, Turin, 1968, pp. 28-40.

States, Canada, Russia and Japan. Cultural organisations were established with reference to the French philosopher: in France the *Association pour l'étude de la pensée de Simone Weil*, in the United States the *American Weil Society*, in Mexico the *Instituto Simone Weil*. In 1988, Gallimard began publishing the whole of Simone Weil's works in a chronological order, under the direction of André A. Devaux and Florence de Lussy.

The objective difficulty to position Weil on either philosophical axes, to identify her philosophical, political-social, mystical-religious, Jewish ancestry, to identify the ancestry exerted by Gnosticism, the cultural weight of classical Greek philosophy, Weil's interpretation of Marx, or the comparison of Weil with other thinkers of her time have resulted in a vast and diverse current of critical studies¹⁸ in which biographers and academics privilege the inclination of an image of the *solitary thinker*.

Conversely, some critics argue that considering dependencies, ascendancies, and connections irrelevant or non-determinative seems to be the condition for granting her writings universal value.

But if this reading procedure is partially justifiable for the texts of the last years, it does not stand the test of facts for the writings published during the 1930s, since the comparison with the routine, as documented by numerous letters and notes, is considered by Simone Weil the most adequate approach both to face the concrete problems of militancy and to try to solve the theoretical ones.

There emerges, therefore, an interpretative limitation of unilateral readings that privilege only some aspects or circumscribe certain periods of Simone Weil's thought: a limitation also because only the writings of the last years are selected, about the *Cahiers* and the letters, not considering the totality of Simone Weil's works.

Nessuno può esimerci dal privilegiare un'opera piuttosto che un'altra, soprattutto quando si vuole mettere in evidenza l'attualità dell'opera di un pensatore, ma un'autentica lettura critica non può non tener conto che una parte non trascurabile degli scritti della Weil sia quella degli anni del suo impegno politico e culturale riconducibili agli anni Trenta¹⁹.

¹⁸ In Italy, too, the critical literature has elaborated on these themes through the careful work of numerous researchers. In general, one can see that the Italian bibliography privileges the thematic or interpretative reading of some aspects of Simone Weil's thought and life.

¹⁹ Miranda Corbascio Contento, *Scienza, etica e religione nel pensiero di Simone Weil*, Levante, Bari 1992. [«No one can exempt us from favouring one work over another,

And it is precisely by reading the writings of the 1930s that one can notice the genesis of the pedagogical reflection of Weil's thought, which resulted in guidance of souls, orientation towards the place where one can "become what one is" and which draws the educational values of a thought in action from the Greek tradition and from the socio-political path.

Therefore, the writings of the 1930s become the lighthouse from which to illuminate Simone Weil's thought.

In this way, one arrives at a reconstruction from which emerges Weil's commitment between mystical terms and human values, as an original and fully valid speculative contribution on a critical-philosophical level that opens up to an anti-modern, but not reactionary, philosophy.

From this perspective, one can glimpse the brushstrokes of the portrait of an exiled woman at the bottom of solitude who reached God through the existential *malheur* magnified by the encounter with industrialism, whose thought is the expression of a life path that can be reached by three ways: *the desire for truth, the constant effort of attention* to draw on it, *the obedience to one's vocation*, within a nomadic and "concrete" curiosity (from the presses of the *Société de Construction sélétriques et mécaniques* in Alsthom to the decision to work in the fields, to the participation in the life of fishermen in order to study the human condition), within a continuous self-destruction, which is connected to the eternally youthful nature of her inner self, within the certainty of expressing ideas that are heretical to all orthodoxies.

In her, there is a great search for balance, not on this side of reality, in a detached "contemplation", but within the flow of real production, in the entirely modern and collective effort to affect the essence of things.

Another difficulty to be noted when reading Weil's work is that of getting caught up in the contradictions of the arguments proposed. Weil's complex and multifaceted thought cannot but meet contradictions. Her thought is structured on a logic of double thoughts, not a sterile *aut-aut*, but a constructive *et-et*, and therefore develops through turns and discontinuities. Simone Weil inhabited contradiction and it is contradiction that prompts her thought. It is the contradiction from which existence and thought take their meaning, and that, according to the philosopher, this is the vision of reality:

especially when we want to highlight the topicality of a thinker's work, but an authentic critical reading cannot fail to consider that a not insignificant part of Weil's writings is that of the years of her political and cultural commitment that can be traced back to the 1930s»].

reality is stretched between two irreconcilable and irreducible opposites, good and necessity²⁰.

Notre amour a deux objets. D'une part ce qui est digne d'être aimé, mais qui, au sens qu'a l'existence pour nous, n'existe pas. C'est Dieu. D'autre part ce qui existe, mais ne contient rien qu'il soit possible d'aimer. C'est la nécessité. Il faut aimer les deux²¹.

Weil seeks a mediation of contradictions, not the simplification of opposition, which would imply either the elimination of one of the two terms or their synthesis. Such contemplation of contradictions is Weil's method of a philosopher leading to authentic knowledge of the human condition.

The development of her intellectual research thus reflects her constant need to shed full light on the contradiction inherent in the social condition of man, and so to identify the political means to act within it, to guarantee the individuals, the greatest possible freedom and justice.

For Simone, the contradiction is in things, in the human condition in general and in the historical situation. Simone's personal drama lies in the

²⁰Weil notes that the organisation of social and economic life by the state is aimed at preparing for war, where the labouring classes play the role of 'docile accomplices' to their own servitude. According to Simone Weil, when necessity is translated into a social principle that acts cruelly in human relations, then man no longer has any value and activities such as work, and war become almost interchangeable. Weil takes his analysis from reading *Glück auf!* (1934) by Pierre Hamp and from watching Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936). The way in which Hamp describes life in the mines gives her the opportunity to make a judgement on necessity in an everyday context. But her reflections are not only about the miners, but also about their guards: both are subjected to *dressage* - a word that indicates the education of animals and that Weil uses to denote the training - a type of power that, as such, subjects both the giver and the follower of the order. In her *Notes de préparation de cours* in *Glück auf!* when discussing *dressage*, she writes: «Une demi-seconde d'hésitation dans l'obéissance laisserait passage à la peur, à l'épuisement, à la fatigue, à la révolte. Dans certains cas, ce dressage les protège contre eux-mêmes - D'autre part il les met à la discrétion d'autrui. Ils sont soumis à la contrainte du salaire; mais ce pli de l'obéissance les tient de plus près. Pourquoi un dressage si serré? », S. Weil, *Écrits historiques et politiques*, II, 2, Éditions Gallimard, Paris 1991, p. 531 [«Half a second's hesitation in obedience would give way to fear, exhaustion, fatigue, revolt. In some cases, this training protects them from themselves - on the other hand it puts them at the discretion of others. They are subject to the constraint of salary; but this obedience holds them more closely. Why such close supervision? »].

²¹ *Oeuvres complètes*, t. VI, vol. 4, p. 227 [«Our love has two objects. On the one hand, that which is worthy of being loved, but which, in the sense that existence has for us, is non-existent. This is God. On the other hand, that which exists, but contains nothing that it is possible to love. This is necessity. We must love both»].

impossibility of distancing oneself from contradiction, of living it as something external to oneself, just enough to preserve that reserve of vital energy that allows everyone to live, despite public tragedies and private misfortunes. In other words, Simone found herself unable to lie to herself.

La geniale individualità del pensiero weiliano offre una griglia di riferimento realmente filosofica, sgombra da paure, illusioni e preconcetti dogmatici. Rappresenta la tappa più attuale ai fini di una riflessione evolutiva, ossia civilizzatrice, in quanto fondamento di un'etica in rapporto con la realtà che ci circonda²².

Therefore, in order not to remain trapped in the ambiguous interpretation of the texts, one must start from the idea that the weilian work is a limited field of possible constructions, therefore one has to identify its *boden*: a philosophy different from the traditional one, escaping from abstraction and moving towards the concrete, in other words finding Simone's educational philosophy.

Philosophy in action

Georges Bataille, in his 1935 short story *Le bleu du ciel*, sketched a unique portrait of this philosopher in his portrayal of Louise Lazare:

elle avait des vêtements noirs, mal coupés et tachés. Elle avait l'air de ne rien voir devant elle, se cognant souvent aux tables sur son passage [...] sans chapeau, ses cheveux courts, hirsutes et mal coiffés faisaient des ailes de corbeau de chaque côté de son visage. Elle avait un grand nez juif, fin et jaunâtre, qui ressortait de ces ailes sous des lunettes d'acier. Elle était mal à l'aise : elle parlait lentement avec la sérénité d'un esprit retiré de tout ; la maladie, la fatigue, la détente ou la mort ne comptaient pour rien à ses yeux [...]. Elle exerçait une fascination tant pour sa lucidité que pour sa pensée hallucinatoire [...]. Mais je me suis

²² Gabriella Fiori, *La trasversata nel deserto*, p. IX [«The brilliant individuality of Weilian thought offers a truly philosophical frame of reference, free from fears, illusions and dogmatic preconceptions. It represents the most up-to-date stage for the purposes of an evolutionary, or civilising, reflection, insofar as it is the foundation of an ethic in relation to the reality that surrounds us»].

demandé un instant si elle n'était pas l'être le plus humain que j'aie jamais vu²³.

This humanity characterised Simone's *educational mission*.

Throughout her life, in an eclectic and anti-systematic way, Simone Weil taught and wrote about philosophy, as one can see by consulting various notebooks, schematic annotations drafted in the preparation phases of the lessons, and writings in which precious testimonies of students, colleagues, but also of those who knew her during the years of teaching are reported²⁴.

The weilian pedagogical line, based on the training of attention, summarises the choices of her life: her employment as a factory worker and her conversion to Christianity. Two moments that emerge from her biography: in the first case, as a determined and lucid resolution to overcome any kind of intellectualism; in the second case, as the beginning of an intellectual and spiritual trip. Simone Weil hired herself on the factory to verify the state of physical and moral degradation of the workers, who were subjected to a production mechanism of which they had no control or knowledge. This experience was noted day by day in the *Journal J'usine* and subsequently reworked in various essays and letters, all of which were collected in the volume *La condition ouvrière*²⁵. More precisely, what prompted Weil to undertake and carry out this experience of brutal and daily constraint was firstly the need to measure, by translating into practice, the philosophical image of the *action travailleuse* constructed through her studies

²³ Georges Bataille, *Le bleu du ciel*, Gallimard, Paris 1957, pp. 38-39 [«She had black clothes, badly cut and stained. She looked as if she could see nothing in front of her, often bumping into tables as she passed [...] without a hat, her short, shaggy, badly combed hair made raven wings on each side of her face. She had a large, thin, yellowish Jewish nose, which stuck out from these wings under steel glasses. She was uncomfortable: she spoke slowly with the serenity of a mind removed from everything; illness, fatigue, relaxation, or death counted for nothing in her eyes [...]. She exerted a fascination as much for her lucidity as for her hallucinatory thinking [...]. But I wondered for a moment if she was not the most human being I had ever seen»]. Accepting the contradictions of Weil's thought means not trying to trace a systematic nature in her philosophy. She herself had made the decision to escape from a world of abstractions and to find herself 'among real men, good or bad, but of genuine goodness and badness', not because Weil did not have the strength to systematise her theoretical elaborations, but in the broader sense of a thought that renounces its speculative possibilities by seeing in them an artificial and abstract way of problematising reality.

²⁴See Gaetano Gaeta, *I "Cahiers". Storia di un'opera postuma*, in Simone Weil, *Quaderni*, translated by G. Gaeta, Adelphi, Milan 1982, vol. I, pp. 11-37 (org. ed. Simone Weil, *Cahiers I*, Plon, Paris 1971).

²⁵ Les Éditions Gallimard, Paris 1951.

and youthful compositions; secondly, the philosopher intended to verify the structure of the social-political mechanism at work in the production process, as analysed in *Réflexions sur les causes de la liberté et de l'oppression sociale*. In this way, she carried out an informal didactic activity aimed at workers, miners, the unemployed, in short, all those who were in a condition of oppression, not only material but above all cultural. It is therefore in Weil's own life that work expresses a reunification, which becomes a place and moment of mediation between the philosophical need to study the structures of oppression experimentally and the existential need to reunite theory and practice, and to see them reunited in the act of work²⁶.

This indissoluble connection between thought and practice, which distinguishes weilian's thought in the varied overview of the 20th century, is evident in the epistolary *Piccola cara..... Lettere alle sue allieve*, in which she offers substantial indications of the educational relationship established by this exceptional teacher.

As well as training in factories, literacy training for workers, Weil also gained institutional experience as a teacher, giving lessons at girls' high schools in five French cities - Le Puy, Auxerre, Roanne, Bourges, Saint-Quentin - over four school years and a term, from October 1931 to January 1938. Simone Weil always paid the greatest attention to her pupils as persons: ready to listen and sensitive in handling consciences in formation. Her most frequent exhortation was "you have to do well what you do".

The relationship established with the students is strengthened, meeting after meeting: if, at first, the teacher appears clumsy and funny and sometimes sloppy, after making herself known she exudes a feeling of esteem and admiration. She is judged by her pupils as a teacher who gives her all despite her many social commitments, her spartan life and, above all, her terrible headaches. She always arrived at school on time, loaded with books to distribute, or with her homework, a little burnt by the cigarette, but perfectly correct. She prepared her lessons carefully, even if she was reduced to drawing up diagrams and summaries late at night, sometimes tired after returning from meetings with the workers. Another aspect that was much appreciated by the students was the fact that in every school where she taught, she gave free courses and this disinterest in money, so rare, only increased the esteem for her.

²⁶ Cfr. Gabriella Fiori, *Simone Weil; la biografia interiore di una delle intelligenze più alte e pure del nostro secolo*, Garzanti, Milano 1981.

By reading the various sources, it seems that Simon did not attract attention during her lessons for a brilliance in exposition, but for her acumen in presenting the contents: she spoke in a low and rather monotone voice, apparently without emotion, she generally did not look at her audience, she seemed absorbed in herself; she made no gestures except slowly extending an arm forward, yet she won the attention and admiration of her listeners by her use of crystal clear words, like grains of light suspended in a balance between herself and the listener.

It is also important to emphasise that she taught her students not only concepts but also values, such as respect for others, and she did this through daily gestures, donating a large part of her salary to the unemployed and giving away books and exercise books. Simone Weil certainly prepared her students not only for a final school exam, but for life, and encouraged them to the wisdom of knowledge and the constant search for critical attitudes, in a sort of scholastic gymnastics leading them to philosophical logic. The phrase that condenses this formative objective is as follows: “do not let yourself be persuaded that you understand what you do not understand”.

In this training ground for life, the phenomenological dimension of the educational and ethical value of teaching becomes evident:

l'educazione consiste nel dare origine ai movimenti. L'indicazione di quel che è vantaggioso, di quel che è obbligatorio, di quel che è bene, compete all'insegnamento. L'educazione si occupa dei moventi per l'effettiva esecuzione. Poiché nessuna azione viene mai esagerata quando manchino moventi capaci di fornirle la quantità di energia necessaria²⁷.

The education imparted by Simone Weil is, therefore, a patchwork of practical activities implemented through the orality of the most valuable things. Indeed, Simone constantly orients the behaviour of her students with her saying in action: teaching, among the various and multiple human actions, is an action on oneself and consists in transforming meanings, in changing what one learns to change oneself.

²⁷ Simone Weil, *Piccola cara... Lettere alle allieve*, Marietti, Milano 1998, p. 16 (Editions Gallimard, Paris 1951).

[«Education consists in giving rise to movements. The indication of what is advantageous, what is obligatory, what is good, is the responsibility of teaching. Education deals with the motives for effective execution. For no action is ever exaggerated when it lacks motives capable of supplying it with the necessary amount of energy»].

In Simone's philosophy of education, politeness and culture are interrelated.

Her pedagogical reflection goes beyond the structuralist conception that reduces the subject to a mere epiphenomenon or relativises it as a sign of structures or systems, to move towards the embodied subject. That subject who is in the world, acts, is oriented, lives. Therefore, for educational action to be phenomenologically oriented, it is necessary, according to Simone, to "attend the school of history", to listen to the needs of all and of the weakest, to satisfy the legitimate demands of workers, without suppressing them or violating their dignity, and finally to direct every educational act towards the fruitful encounter with transcendence.

Here are some simple suggestions scattered throughout weilian's writings: be suspicious of all newspapers in general; to use the critical spirit in history; to connect complex knowledge with more common knowledge; to examine the thought of the great philosophers. Furthermore, by reading *Leçons de philosophie*²⁸, transcriptions of lessons by a pupil, one can deduce some practical elements of the weilian method: from providing the pupils, since the very first lessons, with the programme and the outline of the topics to be dealt with, to the choice of enriching the explanations with examples for a zetetic procedure.

Simone Weil's entire life thus confirms the unrepeatable singularity of a philosopher-educator, a sensitive, lucid, and committed intellectual, in short, a vulcan of ideas and feelings.

She often thought and acted against the tide, and with an astonishing ability to anticipate the turning points and spiritual needs of the twentieth century in which there are philosophers who cross time, others who carry its weight and still others who penetrate it by piercing it, so that past and future, present and perfect, in them contaminate, contract, and then stretch. These are the most uncomfortable among philosophers. But they are also the ones on which one is most encouraged to do exercises of seduction or of imprisonment. This is when the horizons of belonging are born, or the sacks where the ties of reassuring isms bind the openings through which the inventions of thought could overflow into original freedom. Simone Weil belongs entirely to this group of uncomfortable philosophers, and her philosophy in action is a magisterium not relegated to the interior of a magisterium and it is still today a resonant echo of the educational genius of the philosophical method:

²⁸ *Leçon del philosophie (Roanne 1933-1934)*, transcribed and presented by A. Reynaud-Guérithault, Plon, Paris 1989, p. 44.

la méthode propre de la philosophie consiste à concevoir pleinement les problèmes insolubles dans leur insolubilité, puis à les contempler sans plus, fixement, inlassablement, pendant des années, sans aucun espoir, dans l'attente²⁹.

²⁹ *Oeuvres complètes* vol. V, p. 362. [«The proper method of philosophy consists in fully conceiving insoluble problems in their insolubility, then contemplating them without more, fixedly, tirelessly, for years, without any hope, in the expectation»].