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Henry Leroy Finch. *Simone Weil and the Intellect of Grace*. New York: Continuum, 1999. Pp. xii + 177. \$29.95 (Paper).

[1] In the six months before his death from cancer, Henry Leroy Finch wrote down, then when he was too weak, dictated, his twenty years worth of as-yet-unrecorded reflections on the thought of Simone Weil. Finch, who had held the post of professor of philosophy at Sarah Lawrence College and Hunter College, City University of New York was one of the original founders of the Simone Weil Society. This volume of his collected essays is the fruit of a philosopher's lifetime of rumination on a genius who offers to the contemporary world a transforming vision of religion, politics, history and culture.

[2] If the reader knows nothing about the brilliant yet eccentric French mystic-philosopher who died in 1939, *Simone Weil and the Intellect of Grace* is not the place to begin. It presumes at least a basic familiarity with her life and thought. Nor is it intended to be a systematic treatment of her ideas. Rather, each essay takes off from some particular aspect of her thought that captured Finch's imagination or resonated with issues he considered crucial for the present day. The titles of the essays reflect those particular concerns. "Affliction, Love and Geometry," "T. H. Lawrence and the Purification of Evil," "Marx, Oppression and Liberty," "Heidegger, Science and Technology," and "Recovering the Sacred in Humanity" are samples of the themes addressed.

[3] Finch does that addressing with clarity, eloquence, and passion. Through his explication of Weil's most challenging ideas, the daring originality of her thought emerges. For example, in the essay entitled "Gnosis," we learn that, like Wittgenstein, Weil believed that it was essential to teach the meaning of the word *know*. However, the manner in which modern science has understood knowledge is erroneous. For her, knowledge in the scientific sense is "removed from the Good, it is obsessed with power and utility and subverted to the illusions of progress and technological expansion" (23). For her, true knowledge accords with the Pythagorean and Platonic *gnosis*, which is a participation in divine knowledge beyond partial, egoistic perspectives. Mathematical knowledge, with its starting and ending points in paradox, is one of the few ways that we can penetrate beyond the egoism of the psychological, social and historical. Impersonal love and beauty and suffering, when it does

not close us in and degrade us, can also penetrate beyond the egoistic illusions in which most of human experience is shrouded.

[4] Simone Weil's relationship to formal religious tradition has been of interest to many. Born of family that was Jewish by ancestry but which retained no relationship to its heritage, she later came into a deep, if unique, relationship with the Roman Catholic tradition. Her powerful "conversion" experiences are known to us chiefly through a spiritual autobiography she sent as a letter to Father Joseph-Marie Perrin. Through three contacts with Catholicism she was led into the company of Christ quite beyond the sphere of cultural Christianity. This culminated in a daily practice: the recitation of the Lord's Prayer in Greek with absolute attention. Weil never joined the church, however, situating herself as a Christian outside the church. Her view was that Christianity had not yet been incarnated in the world. Its intrinsic spirit of universalism has never been realized.

[5] Moreover, she decried the church's mistaken attempts to control the thoughts of men and women and to use power in a totalitarian manner. The abusive use of power to control was, in her thinking, the temptation of any collective that will always support the collective delusions of the day.

[6] Perhaps one of Weil's most challenging ideas (and for her ideas were never mere abstractions but realities into which she lived intensely) was the idea of the connection between love and abandonment. For her, the world was permeated by the beauty and love of God. Contrary to common ways in which that love is perceived, Weil felt it in the experience of the absence of God. It was in this absence or abandonment that she paradoxically discovered the chief manifestation of divine love. This and other often breathtaking insights that explode our ordinary assumptions about life, leap out time and again from the pages of *Simone Weil and the Intellect of Grace*. It is stimulating reading.

[7] If the book lags in any way, it is because of the unevenness of the essays. In some, the reader gets Weil unadulterated. In others, Finch wanders into consideration of a given theme well beyond her thought. In the last essay, her ideas are not explicitly present. They are the off-stage springboard for Finch's ruminations on time and timelessness in the world's religions. This unevenness is no doubt attributable to the fact that they were composed in the last brief months of Finch's life. There must have been little time for smoothing things out. But that fact does not truly detract from the interest of the book.

[8] For Finch, Weil explored in exciting and original ways issues for which he felt kinship: the pursuit of truth, the hunger for justice, a concern for non-violence, a mistrust of technology and the reduction of all values to those of commerce, the religious dimension of politics and mathematics, the integrity of all religions, the freedom of the intellect, concern for all things and persons marginalized or excluded. He has left an account of his excitement with her thought and a challenge to us to take it to heart.

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