

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Simone Weil (1909-1943)

One of the great geniuses to rise from the turmoil of the Second World War in Europe was a middle class French girl named Simone Weil. From the start Simone had preferred the masculine form of her name, Simon and made herself known to her male friends as Simon, to the vast amusement of her own mathematician brother, who grew up to be one of France's most eminent mathematicians. The family was destined to meet its dangerous world headlong. They had humor, high intelligence, and abundant self-confidence. Simone was clearly heading for academic excellence--she excelled in her studies at the Ecole Normale superieure-- the elite Parisian institution of higher education.--and there proved her prowess by nudging past her chief competitor for top academic award, none other than Simone de Beauvoir, who was perhaps to be her time's competitor for the leadership role in the expression of the feminist perspective, in France and elsewhere. It is of mind boggling interest, in retrospect, to check the academic stats of the ENS, and to learn that the two Simone's shared the academic laurels for their academic graduation year. It is so remarkable coincidence that we may speak here of the voice of history. From the French nation's highest academic testing ground we hear the unanimous expression of the power of the female voice to address the most burning questions of a great nation. The eminence Simone Weil promised unfolded itself intensely in the course of a brief startling career. It was a career marked by strong feelings and even stronger ambitions, the latter of which put her beyond the likelihoods of practical wartime politics--such as her pleas to General Charles de Gaulle, to commission her into a Free French parachute brigade, destined to jump across the Channel into occupied central France. (She was turned down on this request, as she had been on others which had, for instance, involved her inability to shoot straight, a source of humor to her and fellow militants. During the Spanish Civil War, for which she had volunteered in the mid-thirties, she was similarly laughed at for her nearsighted marksmanship. She expressed her insistence but kept her sense of humor, traits endearing in her throughout her lifetime)

At the same time that Simone Weil was throwing herself into the turmoil of her time, fighting, propagandizing at a furious pace, she was writing and editing voluminously, both during her stays in the United States and England, and during her earlier life in France. She was as it were replete with testimonies, opinions, political stances--militantly Free French, as a primal lover of freedom and independence--anthe, with the growing curve of war keener and more vicious, her from the outset total involvement and social intensity grew hard and firm. There was throughout this time a growing mass of genuinely philosophic work flooding from Weil's pen. This work--from the outset less eloquent or sexy than the world, say, of Simone de Beauvoir's Second Sex--strikes the reader with a blend of logic and close observation of the given world. If there is a leitmotif to this philosophy 'written in a hard time,' it will be that philosophy is NOT something to which one goes out to study. There results from this perspective a kind of minimalist view of the activities of this profession. God, for instance is what is not, so that what is the fallen, what is the evil. A cosmology is thus characterized in which nothing of value remains--except beauty. In the end Weil is simply describing the world she lives in. And in which she will die prematurely, in England.

