Saint of What?

Simone Weil

by Theodore Dalrymple

Opening my copy of the French newspaper *Le Figaro* recently, there was a long article titled "With Gustave Thibon in the Ardèche: the Saint and the Peasant." I was in the Ardèche at the time and therefore decided to read the article—for such slight or inadequate reasons are our decisions, or at least my decisions, about what to read often taken.

Gustave Thibon was a self-taught Catholic philosopher of peasant origin of whom I had never previously heard, a monarchist much appreciated by the Vichy regime. The saint of the article's title was Simone Weil, a young woman of Alsatian Jewish origin, and of brilliant academic accomplishment, who later became a Catholic philosopher. Weil took refuge with Thibon at his farmhouse in the Ardèche for a few weeks in August 1941, a time when such an association might have been risky for both of them. Despite their differences—she had been

associated before the war with the far left—they got on well.

And despite her great posthumous fame, I know almost nothing of Weil, except that she died, possibly of self-induced starvation, in England in 1943, that she was a great believer in mortification of the flesh, and that not a few people considered her to be a saint.

I have to admit that saints do not much attract me, not that I have so far met any. I think I would find them intimidating were I to meet them, like people who are brilliant at absolutely everything. I have met some saintly people, but even they, I am glad to say, had their faults. As for mortification of the flesh, I am not in favor of it, especially when it is an implicit criticism of those who do not indulge in it. I am no sybarite, but surely in this, as in everything, there is a happy medium?

Anyway, no sooner had Weil arrived at Thibon's house than she complained that the room he had prepared for her was too comfortable, and that she would have to sleep under the stars. So, an uncomfortable ruined hut on the banks of the Rhone was found for her. Thibon later had this to say of her conduct:

> *She who, would not have accepted the slightest sacrifice from anyone for the sake of her pleasure or need, seemed not to realise the complications, indeed the suffering, that she introduced into the life of others when it came to the fulfilment of her self-annihilation.*

From this, it seems to follow that Weil was very far from having been a saint, indeed she was a tiresome person of the most appalling and egotistical spiritual pride. Not to demand luxury of others is one thing; but to have rejected so thoughtlessly the kindness and comfort that others offered (which in Thibon's case could surely only have been reasonable rather than pharaonic) was outright rude and disagreeable. It is not as if, by rejecting it, Weil was benefiting anyone

else; her act was entirely self-regarding. I am repelled by such histrionics and inconsideration masquerading as self-sacrifice.

Of course, she must have had a much better side, and Thibon also said of her:

> *Her extraordinary and perfectly mastered erudition that was almost indistinguishable from the expression of her inner life gave to her conversation an unforgettable attraction.*

There is also a very amusing story about her and Thibon:

> *One day, she confided to him with tender irony about herself, "I have failed at everything: university, as a worker, a soldier, a peasant. There is only one thing left to me—the streets." To this Thibon replied, "I don't want to discourage you, but it seems to me that it is there that you would have the least success."*

The article goes on admiringly to quote a passage from one of Weil's books:

> *We must respect a field of wheat, not for itself, but because it is nourishment for mankind. In an analogous way, we must respect a collectivity, whatever it is—homeland, family, or any other—not for itself, but as nourishment for a number of human souls.*

This strikes me, as it stands, as not only wrong but profoundly stupid, perhaps all the more so because it was written in 1943. Of course, it is only a quotation, and in the book itself the thought might have been qualified; not having read the book, I cannot say. But to quote this thought without commentary seems to imply an author mesmerized by the fame and alleged saintliness of his subject.

The Ku Klux Klan, the Khmer Rouge, were each a human collectivity, but it seems to me that no respect whatever is due to either. Evil as well as good can draw people together, but their togetherness, their camaraderie, is no counterbalance, not by so much as a feather's weight, to their evil.

This is surely obvious on the most minimal reflection. Assuming that the quotation is not torn bleeding out of context, that it accurately represents part of Weil's thought, it raises the question as to the point of her erudition, however well assimilated. Why learn anything if that's what you end up saying? I am aware that she is only a single case; but I am sure that I could try the quotation on my plumber—in fact, the next time I have the misfortune to need his services, I will do so—and that he would be able to see at once what is wrong with it.

In parallel with *Le Figaro*, I was reading a short book about Nietzsche. The author quotes the following statement from Nietzsche's *Human, All Too Human*:

> *There are neither eternal facts nor indeed eternal verities.*

The author, no doubt mesmerized by Nietzsche's reputation as a great thinker, does not remark on the obvious contradiction, such that if this statement is true it is false, and therefore it is false: For the nonexistence of eternal verities is itself taken as an eternal verity.

This is the same error that the cruder logical positivists made when they claimed that, to be meaningful, a statement either had to refer to an empirical state of affairs or be a tautology; an obvious counterexample to the claim being the claim itself.

We should neither try to prick the bubble, reputation, simply because it *is* reputation, nor bow down before it. In short, we

are perpetually called upon to use our judgment, as best we can.

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