
Two Genders of the Soul Regarding the Love of God

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Francine du Plessix Gray, in her biography of Simone Weil, describes her appearance as follows: "An even more forbidding aspect of her physique was the clumsy clothing with which she covered her angular body. They were the clothes of a ragtag soldier or a poor monk. Her garments were always of the same monastic, masculine cut—a cape, boyish flat-heeled shoes, a long, full skirt, and a long body-obscuring jacket in dark colors."¹ She suggests that "Simone's cross-dressing" was related to her deep unease about issues of gender.² "If costume tends to express our inner attitudes," writes du Plessix Gray, "Simone's getups called out that she considered it a great misfortune to have been born a woman."³

It is, however, a stretch to call her clothes "cross-dressing." A long, full skirt and a jacket are not masculine, but rather sexless clothes. In the Paris of the 1920s and '30s, the golden age of literary lesbianism, several women really dressed like men, emphasizing their different sexual orientation. It was the time of Natalie Clifford Barney, Djuna Barnes, Gertrude Stein; and Radcliff Hall occasionally came to Paris. But Weil was not one of them.

It is true that Simone Weil's manner of dressing appears to have been in no way flirtatious or emphasizing of her femininity (fig. 1). The first adjective used by du Plessix Gray—"monastic"—seems to me to be more to the point than "masculine." Flat-heeled shoes and clothes that do not constrain movement are practical; they seem to make the wearer of this type of clothing not masculine, but rather genderless.

Is simple and quasi-monastic clothing related to unease about issues of gender? The way we dress might express our attitude to our place in the world. It seems to me, however, that the manner of dressing is usually chosen with conscious decision rather than unconsciously. By turning to Weil's writings, we can try to uncover what the clothes of a monk or a rag-tag soldier may have meant to her. As Henry Leroy Finch points out, "One of the remarkable things about Simone Weil is the degree of self-understanding that we find in her writings. As everyone knows, self-understanding is not always associated with great minds. But it was so with Simone Weil."⁴

In the following pages, I hope to show that the guise of a soldier or monk had for Weil a spiritual significance; and that the idea of femininity was as important for her as the idea of masculinity—as long as both aspects appear in their opposition to force. At the end, I will talk about how the idea of a soul—which, having metaphysically acquired both genders, transcends them—may be related to the ideals of the medieval sect of the Cathars.

1.

in *Some Reflections on the Love of God*, a small essay probably written in Marseilles between October 1940 and May 1942, Simone Weil states: "There is no relation between man and God except love. But our love for God should be like a woman's love for a man, which does not express itself by making advances but consists only in waiting. God is the Bridegroom . . . The bride-to-be should only wait."⁵

The Christian metaphor of God as a bridegroom, and soul—or church—as a bride finds its source in the biblical Song of Songs.⁶ This image appears in Western poetry already in the early Middle Ages. In the famous Latin poem of the eleventh century, *Quis est hic qui nunc pulsat ad ostium*, the soul is imagined as a girl on whose door Christ is knocking at night, waking her up (which might be a dream).⁷ She hastens to open the door to her beloved, but he is gone al-

ready—the dark street is silent. In despair, she runs after him and is caught by the guards who give her a new dress and take her to the palace—obviously for the consummation of the divine marriage. The poem starts with God seeking the soul of a human (not the other way around). The soul, responding, does not find God at first. It searches for him desperately, on the deserted street in the middle of the night. Only later is the girl-soul taken to him—to his palace.

That brings to mind the poems of the great Spanish mystic of the sixteenth century, St. John of the Cross. Let us note that Simone Weil was absorbed in reading St. John of the Cross during her sojourn in Marseilles. In his *Spiritual Canticle*, the Bride (that is, the soul) is anxiously searching for her Beloved (Christ) whom she had lost—both of them rejoicing at being reunited at the end. Even more evocative is his poem *The Dark Night*. Here, the soul leaves her home at night. She searches for God through the way of spiritual negation: everything is dark, no one sees her, nor does she look at anyone. She has no other light or guide but love. In a place where no one else appeared, the “guiding night” transforms the soul into her Lover, and they become one.

The most mysterious text by Simone Weil—written during her stay in Marseilles or shortly afterwards—is called *Prologue* and follows the tradition of St. John of the Cross and the author of *Quis est hic*. However, the sequence of events takes a surprising turn. It starts with the union of “him” and “her”—a union of friendship, not of ecstatic love— then the separation and the search follow. “He” enters her room (it is reasonable to assume that in this text “he” is Christ or a Christ-like figure). He tells “her” that she knows nothing and takes her to a church, makes her kneel and promises to teach her things “she didn’t suspect.” Then they both climb up to a garret, which has only a table and two chairs. They talk for months like old friends, sharing bread and wine; but then he orders her to go away. When she protests, he throws her out. Heartbroken, she wanders along the streets: she has forgotten where his house was.

Unlike souls in the Latin and Spanish poems, “she” does not even attempt to find his house again, realizing that he came for her by mistake, and her place is not there. She knows that he does not love her—and yet, in her heart of hearts, there is a part of her that thinks, “with a trembling fear,” that he does love her.⁸

“Love” here has nothing erotic about it—it was not a passionate melting of Lover and Beloved into each other. “He” and “she” treat each other like good friends. When he comes for her, he promises to teach her, which means her thirst is primarily intellectual. He does not actually teach her anything, but they talk together in the mysterious austere garret, eating only bread and wine (of incredible taste), with other men coming and going. A garret (*mansarde*) is both the highest room in a house and the poorest. The image we have is that of absolute purity. The church they see is new and ugly, the garret is empty, the branches of the trees seen through the window are bare, without buds, the air is cold and full of sunshine, i.e., of utmost transparency, the nourishment the most essential and sacred—bread and wine. From this pure world “she” is now being exiled.

And she realizes that her place is anywhere (but not in that garret): in a prison cell, in a bourgeois drawingroom, in a waiting room of a station. Instead of the soul realizing its alienation from this world and finding home in the abode of the divine, “she” acknowledges her alienation from “him” and his home of absolute purity, and her unity, instead, with this world of prisoners, vagabonds, and the middle-class. She has not been chosen (she was only picked up by mistake), she is not loved (how could he love her?). But it is exactly this *not being loved* and *not being chosen*, this being *spurned by him* that makes her hope, despite herself, that he loves her. It is not a mystical union of a soul with God that is celebrated here, but the utmost rejection. “I never read the story of the barren fig tree without trembling,” writes Weil to Father Perin from Casablanca in 1942, just after leaving Marseilles. “I think that it is a portrait of me. In it also, nature was power-

less, and yet it was not excused. Christ cursed it.”⁹

And—incomprehensibly—this rejection is love.

To love without the slightest hope of reciprocity—to be nothing, while the one you love is everything, and spurns you—to will it—to die of love.

It seems that, in Marseilles, Simone Weil exposed herself to two very strong influences that contradicted each other: Catholic thought through her friendship with Father Perrin, and the Cathar revival through the circle of Deodat Roché and Joe Bousquet. With the latter, Weil collaborated on the issue of the journal *Cahiers du Sud* that appeared in February 1943 under the title *Le Génie d’Oc et l’homme méditerranéen*. It was dedicated to the medieval culture of Languedoc that has since disappeared, having been destroyed by the invading Crusaders. Simone Weil contributed two articles to this issue and was very interested in two others, both written by Deodat Roché. For my purposes here, we must look at the Cathar fairy tale cited by Roché in his article “Les Cathares et l’amour spirituel.”

In this article on spiritual love as understood by the Cathars, Roché talks about a fairy tale that was appropriated by the Cathars from Apuleius. A man cultivating a vine lifted a stone, and saw a big snake who made him promise to give it one of his daughters in marriage. It is only the youngest one who decides to sacrifice herself. At night, the snake sheds its skin and becomes a beautiful prince. But one of the wicked sisters burns the skin, and the prince chases the sisters—and his wife—away from the subterranean palace. His wife can only find the prince again after having wandered for seven years, filling a bottle with her tears yearly and each year using up a pair of iron shoes.

This story must have appealed to Simone Weil because it exemplified her own attitude: love is taking upon oneself the utmost rejection and the utmost suffering. Even in Weil’s earliest writings, her interest in a deeper interpretation of fairy tales is evident. One of the first essays she wrote as a student in Paris was “The Fairy Tale of the Six Swans in

Grimm.”¹⁰ The sister in Grimm’s fairy tale must spin and sew six shirts of white anemones, without ever uttering a word, in order to save her brothers—her silence puts her in great danger and brings her to the verge of being executed. A very young Simone Weil says, “Sacrifice is the acceptance of pain.”¹¹ She remains true to this saying in her later writings. The “she” of the *Prologue* is exiled from the world of purity, and must wander through the world of vagabonds and prisoners, hoping (trembling with fear) that maybe “he” does love her. Similarly, the girl in the Cathar fairy tale cited by Roché must, every year, replenish a bottle with the tears of her suffering and use up a pair of iron shoes in the search for her beloved.

But the cardinal difference between the fairy tales and the mystical poems on the one hand, and Simone Weil’s *Prologue*, on the other hand, is that there is no promise of an accepting love on the part of “him.” The soul is united with her beloved at the end of St. John of the Cross’ poem. The wife finds her prince again after seven years of suffering. But the “she” of the *Prologue* knows that he does not love her; yet deep inside a particle of herself cannot help *thinking* that maybe, despite all, he loves her. And so she wanders.

2.

if you die of love, death is not death anymore; it is defeated by the vital act of loving. This has been known for thousands of years, but in European culture found its purest expression in the idea of chivalry—the readiness of a knight to sacrifice himself for his king or for his lady. Simone Weil explored the chivalrous world of Languedoc in two essays she published in the same journal—*Le Génie d’Oc et l’homme méditerranéen*—under the pen name Emile Novis, a male name.

In the first of them—*A Medieval Epic Poem*—Simone Weil talks about an epic fragment from the Middle Ages called the *Song of the Crusade against the Albigensians* (the Cathars). She talks about the Cathar civilization of medieval Languedoc.

doc that was destroyed by force during the Crusade. The legacy of this destroyed civilization lies in its chivalric virtue as expressed by the words *Prix et Parage* (or *Parage et Mercî*) and that perished because of the violence done to it. She describes this chivalric virtue as a concept of subordination “which makes the servant equal to the master through voluntary fealty and allows him to kneel and obey and suffer punishment without losing any self-respect.”¹² It was subordination without force, i.e., a knight’s voluntary subordination that expressed itself in his fidelity to his lord. Although this understanding of obedience has since disappeared, Simone Weil concludes the essay (somewhat enigmatically) by hoping that at least its equivalent can be called into being in the twentieth century.

In her second essay—*The Romanesque Renaissance*—Simone Weil defines the essence of the Languedocian civilization as the understanding of force. “To understand force is to recognize that it is almost absolutely supreme in this world, and yet to reject it with loathing and contempt.”¹³ And further: “It is in the conception of love that this rejection of force reaches its fulfillment.”¹⁴ We must agree that in the two most astonishing and connected expressions of the culture of Languedoc—the Cathar heresy and the troubadour poetry—two ideas come to fulfillment: the rejection of force and the impossible love. The Cathars, the first proponents of non-violence, abstained from any kind of war, as well as from capital punishment: killing a human being was the most horrible crime for them. They also refrained from killing animals and eating meat or dairy. Even death was a sister to them—as evidenced by the practice of *endura*, when a dying man, having achieved moral perfection, does not take any nourishment in order not to fight death and not fall back into a sinful existence.

What troubadours in reality aspired to, says Weil, was the impossible love. This is why (and not out of a penchant for adultery) the object of their adoration was usually married. The most important thing in the love of a troubadour was

that his love must be unattainable. Impossible love therefore equals chastity. "In chivalrous love, the object was a human being; but it is not covetousness. It is simply a patient attention towards the loved person and an appeal for that person's consent. The word *Merci* by which the troubadours designated this consent is very close to the notion of grace. Such a love, in its plenitude, is the love of God through the person loved."¹⁵ Her words here echo her thought as quoted above, when she compared our love for God to the love of a woman for a man—love which consists only in waiting.

Waiting and patient attention come up whenever Simone Weil talks about a woman's love for a man and a man's love for a woman. But we usually equate man's and woman's love with the desire to possess, a willful and forceful emotion. One should probably make a separation here between love that admits force (let us call it physical love) and love that is the opposite of force and rejects force (let us call it spiritual love). Both loves being sexual, the names we have given are, of course, only conditional.

Force—as Simone Weil constantly reiterated—reduces a person to a thing, an object (this is the main theme of her essay *The Iliad, or the Poem of Force*). What does the other love do—love that is rejection of force? By merely looking at a person, by merely saying "I love him," I have already (at least grammatically) turned him into an object. To avoid objectifying the other, I should wait until he looks at me, instead of looking at him myself. Instead of saying "I love him" or even "I love you," I should wait until the other says, "I love her." Thus love consists entirely in patient consent to the love of the other. Instead of turning the other into an object, one turns oneself into a thing for the other.

Hence the terrible prayer: "Father, in the name of Christ grant me this. That I may be unable to will any bodily movement, or even any attempt at movement, like a total paralytic . . . Rend this body and soul away from me to make them into things for your use, and let nothing remain of me, for ever, except this rending oneself, or else nothingness."¹⁶

3.

by absolute obedience to the will of the other—by turning oneself into a thing—one transcends gender. One is not a “he” or a “she” any more—one is an “it,” something neuter. A neuter human being can be described as a eunuch. In the *Romanesque Renaissance*, Simone Weil says that the Cathars practiced their doctrine of non-violence by rejecting everything carnal and everything social. She cites two passages from the Gospel that illustrated this rejection for the Cathars. Rejecting the social: the devil offers Christ supreme power, and Christ rejects it. Rejecting the carnal: “those who become eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven.”¹⁷

She refers here to the passage from Matthew 19:12: “For there are eunuchs who were born thus from their mother’s womb, and there are eunuchs who were made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven’s sake. He who is able to accept it, let him accept it.” As evidenced by Deodat Roché,¹⁸ this passage was cited in the sacred book of the Cathars, *The Secret Supper*, as an answer to a question about marriage. After resurrection, the souls will be like angels, genderless. Having shed matter, they will find new, spiritual bodies. The separation of the sexes will be transcended and the real brotherhood will finally be achieved. The “pure” ones (the *catharoi*) prepared themselves for this state by creating a sort of provisionary heaven upon earth by abstaining from marriage, intercourse, and procreation.

If love rejects force, love becomes patient attention and waiting. One turns oneself into an object, a thing, for the other: one becomes an “it,” a eunuch. Gender is a separation of human beings into opposites, males and females. Love that is force (possession) destroys the division, but changes its objects by imposing its will on them. For example, by flirting with a man, I forcibly change his perception of me in order to possess.

Love that rejects force can achieve a transcendence, not a destruction, of this separation. I do not change the other—I change myself. The distance between us is preserved. Gender must be transcended and can be transcended only by means of this love.

“Two prisoners whose cells adjoin communicate with each other by knocking on the wall. The wall is the thing which separates them but it is also their means of communication. It is the same with us and God. Every separation is a link.”¹⁹

notes

1. Francine Du Plessix Gray, *Simone Weil* (New York 2001), 19.
2. Du Plessix Gray (note 1), 20.
3. Du Plessix Gray (note 1), 19.
4. Henry Leroy Finch, *Simone Weil and the Intellect of Grace* (New York 1999). And further: “A consequence is that those who think that they understand her better than she understood herself—for example, by referring, as some critics do to psychoanalysis or ethnic inheritance—are far off the track.”
5. Simone Weil, *Gateway to God* (New York 1974), 75.
6. “Readings fall into three major categories, which may be called the ecclesiological, the mystical, and the Marian, according to whether the bride (*sponsa*) is seen as the Church, the individual soul, or the Virgin Mary. The *sponsus* in all cases is Christ,” (James I. Wimsatt, “The Canticle of Canticles: Two Latin Poems, and ‘In a Valley of Pis Restles Minde,’” *Modern Philology* 75:4 [May 1978], 327–28).
7. For the text of the poem see Wimsatt (note 6), 328–29.
8. The text of Prologue can be found, for example, in du Plessix Gray (note 1), 229–31.
9. Simone Weil, *Waiting for God* (New York 1951), 100. And on 101: “By a strange twist, the thought of God’s anger only arouses love in me. It is the thought of the possible favor of God and of his mercy that makes me tremble with a sort of fear. On the other hand the sense of being like a barren fig tree for Christ tears my heart.”
10. Simone Petrement, *Simone Weil: A Life* (New York 1976), 36.
11. Petrement (note 10), 38.
12. Simone Weil, *Selected Essays 1934–1943*, ed. R. Rees (London 1962), 39.
13. Weil (note 12), 48.
14. Weil (note 12), 49.
15. Weil (note 12), 50.
16. Simone Weil, *First and Last Notebooks* (Oxford 1970), 243–44.

17. Weil (note 12), 53.

18. Deodat Roché, *Le catharisme* (Toulouse 1947), 38–39.

19. Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace* (Lincoln, nb 1997), 200.





Fig. 1. Simone Weil in Marseilles.