

The book cover features a photograph of a room. On the left, a wooden bookshelf is filled with books. The top section has glass doors, and the bottom section has solid wood doors. To the right of the bookshelf is a blue wall. Below the blue wall is a brick fireplace with a dark wood mantel. The floor is covered in a red carpet.

# Simone Weil as we knew her

J.M PERRIN AND G. THIBON

## SIMONE WEIL AS WE KNEW HER

Simone Weil (1909–1943) was a defining figure of the 20th century; a philosopher, Christian, resistance fighter, labour activist and teacher, described by Albert Camus as ‘the only great spirit of our time.’ In 1941 Weil was introduced to Father Joseph-Marie Perrin, a Dominican priest whose friendship became a key influence on her life. When Weil asked Perrin for work as a field hand he sent her to Gustave Thibon, a farmer and Christian philosopher. Weil stayed with the Thibon family, working in the fields and writing the notebooks which became *Gravity and Grace* and other posthumous works.

Perrin and Thibon met Weil at a time when her spiritual life and creative genius were at their height. During the short but deep period of their acquaintance with her, they came to know her as she actually was. First published in English in 1953 and now introduced by **J.P.Little**, this unique portrait depicts Weil through the eyes of her friends, not as a strange and unaccountable genius but as an ardent and human person in search of truth and knowledge.

**Joseph-Marie Perrin** (1905–2002) was a Dominican priest and French Resistance worker. His books include *Mary, Mother of Christ and Christians*. **Gustave Thibon** (1903–2001), a native of the Ardèche, received the ‘Grand Prix de l’Académie Française’ for literature in 1964, and for philosophy in 2000.

**J.P.Little**, of St Patrick’s University College, Dublin, is author of *Simone Weil on Colonialism* (2003) and *Simone Weil: Waiting on Truth* (1988).

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# SIMONE WEIL AS WE KNEW HER

*ŷ M Perrin and G Thibon*

Translated from the French by Emma  
Craufurd

**Introduction by J P Little**

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# NOTES ON THE AUTHORS

## **Joseph-Marie Perrin**

Born in 1905 into a devoutly Catholic family in Troyes, Michel Perrin was to take the name Joseph-Marie as a novice in the Dominican order. At the age of eleven, he was diagnosed with a disease of the retina that was to lead progressively to total blindness. He felt an early calling to the priesthood, which he maintained in spite of official discouragement on account of his handicap and, having successfully completed secondary education, entered the Dominican convent in St Maximin, taking his vows as a monk at the age of twenty-four. Overcoming all the problems occasioned by his visual handicap, he was ordained as a priest, and in 1930 was posted to the Dominican convent in Marseilles. There, his ministry was largely on a one-to-one basis, a speciality of the Marseilles convent. He also worked with students and young people, notably the “Jécistes” (“jeunesse étudiante chrétienne”), and in 1936 founded what was to become the focus of much of his life’s work, “Caritas Christi”, a lay order of women dedicated to serving God in everyday life, under the patronage of St Catherine of Sienna.

During World War II and the Occupation, Perrin played an important role in the Resistance, organising the distribution of the clandestine newspaper *Les Cahiers du Témoignage chrétien*, and coming to the aid on a personal level of many Jews and others suffering Nazi persecution. In August 1943 he was betrayed by a double agent and imprisoned for two weeks, during which he was interrogated by the Gestapo.

After the war he travelled extensively in Europe, North America, Brazil, North Africa, supervising the development of Caritas Christi, accompanied by his secretary and collaborator, Solange Beaumier, who acted also as his “eyes” and generally organized his

material existence, allowing him to lead a life of commitment that would not otherwise have been possible.

With her death in 1980, Perrin's activities were indeed severely curtailed, but he continued to write and to contribute to the Dominican community in Marseilles until his death in 2002 at the age of ninety-six.

### **Gustave Thibon**

Born in 1903 in the Ardèche in southern France, Thibon retained throughout his long life an intense attachment to his rural origins. His father, a peasant-farmer and a man of considerable culture, passed on to his son his love of poetry, in French, Provençal and Latin, so that although Gustave Thibon was essentially self-taught, having left school at an early age, his childhood combined high culture with a respect for the values of the soil. As a youth, he travelled within Europe, learning English and especially Italian, and discovered North Africa during military service. The discovery of Nietzsche, whose writings became a life-long passion, added German to his familiarity with European languages and cultures.

By the age of twenty-three he was back in Saint-Marcel d'Ardèche, to devote himself to farming, and to reading, writing and reflection on literature and philosophy, creating works which were to be recognized by the 'Grand Prix de l'Académie Française' for literature in 1964, and that for philosophy in the year 2000.

World War I was a warning to him of the dangers of ideological patriotism and of all shades of fanaticism. It also sowed the seeds of his pronounced suspicion of democracy when contaminated with demagogy. Under the influence of the Catholic philosopher, Jacques Maritain, he converted to Catholicism, but remained an independent voice in regard to the Church and Church teachings. His attitudes reflected more closely therefore those of Simone Weil, whom he acknowledged as among those having had the greatest influence on his mature philosophy, than those of Maritain, a strictly orthodox thinker.

Gifted with a prodigious memory, Thibon's ability to quote from the various European languages he had mastered was legendary, and his culture grew more ample with the passing years. In his own writings, his preferred mode was the aphorism, open-ended and unsystematic, reflecting, however, a harmonious whole. Abhorring obfuscation, his style had a lucidity that belied the complexity of thought that lay behind it. He published his last work, a volume of

memoirs, in 1993, at the age of ninety, and died in his native village in 2001.

J.P.Little

# INTRODUCTION

*by J.P. Little*

With the death of Gustave Thibon on 19 January 2001 and that of Father Joseph-Marie Perrin on 13 April 2002, the final chapter in the story of their long relationship with Simone Weil has been concluded. Simone Weil's early death in 1943 brought the dialogue with her two friends to an abrupt end as far as she was concerned, but both Thibon and Fr Perrin continued to derive spiritual nourishment from their memories of the brief period of their dialogue with her in 1941 and 1942, and from those writings that she entrusted to them both on her departure from France on 14 May 1942 and others that began to appear after the second world war. It is appropriate, therefore, that this account of the relationship, first published in French a mere nine years after Simone Weil's death and in this English translation the following year (13),<sup>1</sup> should be offered again to the public.

Simone Weil's relationship with Perrin and Thibon spans a short but critical period in her development. The circumstances of their encounter are evoked briefly by both men in this volume, and in more detail elsewhere (see Bibliography): when Paris was occupied by the Nazis in 1941, Simone Weil, accompanied by her parents, fled south, arriving eventually in Marseilles, where she came across Hélène Honnorat, a young teacher and committed Christian, who introduced her to Father Perrin. Perrin, learning of her desire to work on the land, which was provoked in part by her exclusion from the teaching profession through the anti-Jewish laws then in force, spoke on her behalf to Gustave Thibon, a self-taught philosopher who farmed in the Ardèche. As well as spending a critical few weeks with the Thibon family, Simone Weil also saw Perrin on a regular basis while she remained in Marseilles.

1941–42 was clearly a traumatic year in French history. The fall of France in June 1941 seemed to have brought about the collapse

of everything the country stood for, creating enormous disorientation, social distress, fear and hardship. Simone Weil's writings from this time until her death in London in August 1943 bear witness to her agonized response to the unprecedented crisis. The experience of the war turned her acute social conscience from its main pre-war preoccupation, the organization of labour, towards an analysis of why France had been defeated in this way, and an elaboration of the conditions necessary for its regeneration. Simone Weil's own personal destiny is therefore inextricably linked at this point with that of her native land. At the same time, however, she was undergoing a profound spiritual development, the details of which she did not reveal to anyone at this time. But her close association with a Catholic priest and a committed Catholic layman certainly played a major part in this development and, in the case of Perrin in particular, in the clarification of her position regarding the Catholic Church.

The relationship that was to develop was different in nature in the case of the two men. When Simone Weil approached Father Perrin, it was to a professional of the Catholic Church that she appealed. His role was to listen to and counsel individuals needing spiritual guidance, and in a sense he had no choice but to listen. He himself makes a distinction at the beginning of his Foreword (p. 13) between himself as a person and his mission. Simone Weil therefore looked to him as an authoritative voice speaking for the Church, and their dialogue reflected her assumptions. Thibon, on the other hand, could let their dialogue develop freely. The fact that it developed at all was due first to his overcoming, for reasons which he never quite understood, his initial reservations when asked to take into his household a young Jewish intellectual with a reputation for left-wing militancy and second to his acute insight into the inner nature of the singular personage who presented herself to him. In an interview in 1975, he noted that he has often been accused of promoting Simone Weil's writings out of friendship for her. In fact, he says, it was for directly opposite reasons: at the beginning, he felt no spontaneous friendship for her whatsoever, rather what he calls 'an alarming lack of sympathy'. He admits to having been 'conquered in spite of [him]self by the purity of that soul, the quality of that mind'.<sup>2</sup>

The friendship Simone Weil developed with both Thibon and Perrin is recorded for their part in the pages that follow, and in many of their other writings. The fact that we have a record of it

from Simone Weil's point of view is due entirely to the hazards of war that provoked her exile and the consequent physical impossibility of continuing the dialogue face to face. She gives her account of it, although, it must be noted, not for the public eye, in the very beautiful and revealing letters to Father Perrin published as a part of *Waiting on God* (*Attente de Dieu*; 21, pp. 13–69) and in letters to Thibon which appeared more recently, along with his replies, in the *Cahiers Simone Weil* (22).

Simone Weil had a very high idea of friendship. She considers it to be one of the 'forms of the implicit love of God', described in the essay written in Marseilles and published under that title (21, pp. 154–61). The miracle of friendship is characterized by a sense of true equality between the two parties, and recognition of the autonomy of the other. It is devoid of any sense of need, dependence, or desire to please. The friendship that Simone Weil developed with both Perrin and Thibon clearly fulfilled these requirements and was indeed a manifestation of the love of God himself. 'Nothing among things human is as powerful' she asserts, 'as a way of keeping the gaze focused ever more intensely on God, than friendship for God's friends.'<sup>3</sup>

Assuming then this solid human bond, let us turn now to examine in more detail the development of the relationship first between Simone Weil and Father Perrin. Its direct expression is contained in the letters of *Waiting on God*. But other texts dating from this period were composed with Father Perrin in mind, or as collaborative projects. The essay 'On the right use of school studies' (21, pp. 71–80) was written for his students at the convent in Montpellier, where he was briefly posted, and the texts which were subsequently collected and published as *La Source grecque* and *Intuitions préchrétiennes* were designed for a much larger project in which they were to have collaborated, on Christian inspiration in pre-Christian societies. Simone Weil passed all these essays over to Father Perrin as she left Marseilles for the United States on 14 May 1942. She deeply appreciated Father Perrin's apparently boundless charity and his social concerns, and she showed a keen interest in several of his ventures. Perrin was also responsible for introducing her to the editor of the Catholic journal *Économie et humanisme*, and it was through him that she was able to engage in Resistance work with Marie-Louise David. There was clearly a very positive collaboration, therefore, in terms of their respective social consciences.

Their spiritual dialogue remained, however, at the centre of their relationship. There were misunderstandings at the beginning: when she approached him, Father Perrin asked her if she prayed, to which she replied in the negative. In fact, as she tells him later in her 'Spiritual Autobiography' (21, pp. 31–51), she had already had three highly significant 'contacts with Christianity', the latter two of which had involved a 'contact with Christ' that she recognized subsequently as prayer.<sup>4</sup> In the same letter, she evokes the deep sense of the presence of Christ that came frequently to her during her recitation of the Lord's Prayer in Greek, a practice she had adopted during her stay with Thibon, after, therefore, her first meeting with Perrin, and which she had confided to neither of her friends (21, p. 40). Simone Weil remained extremely discreet on the development of her spiritual life: the only other person in whom she confided on the subject was the invalid poet Joë Bousquet. Father Perrin had, however, the perspicacity to recognize Simone Weil's spiritual authenticity, although he knew nothing at this point of her mystical experiences, and in spite of the fact that he found her knowledge of Catholicism 'very inadequate' (10, p. 65)

There were other initial misapprehensions. Alluding to his love for Israel', he provoked a strong response from Simone Weil, who did not hide from him her aversion to the Old Testament (10, p. 65). But their most critical point of divergence, and the one that certainly tried the priest's patience most sorely, was the issue of the Catholic Church. Simone Weil's mystical experiences had brought her to the threshold of the Church: in many ways, she was deeply attracted by the idea of belonging to it through baptism, and she longed for participation in the sacrament of the Eucharist. But certain fundamental points held her back, centring mainly around the notion of the Church as an institution. In Simone Weil's interpretation, the Catholic Church was the direct descendant of the Roman Empire, the Great Beast of the Apocalypse, inheriting its lust for temporal power and totalitarian tendencies. She writes to Father Perrin of an 'insurmountable obstacle' to the true incarnation of Christianity, that is, the use of the words *anathema sit*, the formula by which heretics were excluded from the Church's sacraments. She was convinced that the mysteries of Christian dogma were objects of loving contemplation rather than affirmation or denial. She rejected also the Jewish inheritance of Christianity, and the concept of a chosen people, seeing in the Gospels the spirit of ancient Greece that she put on a higher level of spirituality

altogether. Rejecting what she saw to be the exclusiveness of the Church, overwhelmingly conscious of all the generations before Christ and all the peoples who had not heard the message of the Gospel, she saw it as her mission to remain waiting (*en hypomene*), on the threshold (21, p. 40), or as the church bell summoning the faithful from the outside, as she told Thibon (22, p. 10).

Perrin clearly found this deeply troubling. In the various essays that he devoted to his dialogue with Simone Weil, of which the text in this volume is only one example, he returns again and again to the way in which he had tried to explain to her the 'errors' in her interpretation of Catholic teaching, and one senses his increasing frustration that she did not appear to comprehend. He clearly cannot understand how someone with such deep spiritual insight could remain so closed to the true nature of the Church. He also reproached her for some of her interpretations of Biblical passages, and what was to him the cavalier fashion in which she juxtaposed Christian truth and pagan myth. While maintaining their friendship with great loyalty and recognizing her genuine spiritual gifts, his writings on her are frequently very critical of her views on the nature of the Church and Christian doctrine, and often appear to be largely a justification of Church teaching. Was this due to a sense of failure on his part? When a rumour began to circulate after her death that she had in fact been baptised *in extremis* by a friend in London, Simone Deitz, Perrin took the trouble to go to the United States to question her about it, and is one of the few people to attach importance to it, if it ever took place. Such a baptism would, after all, from his point of view, have been the crowning achievement of their relationship.

His placing of Simone Weil's baptism and consequent entry into the Church at the centre of their relationship is related closely to what Simone Weil herself discerned as a 'serious imperfection' in her friend, namely a certain partiality. She caught him one day, for example, referring to certain ideas as being 'false' when he meant 'unorthodox', indicating 'a confusion of terms incompatible with true intellectual probity', inter-pretng the cause of this to be his attachment to the Church as an 'earthly fatherland' as well as a celestial one (21, p. 64). It is to Perrin's credit that his regard for his outspoken friend did not diminish as a result of this criticism; it seems he took it as a manifestation of their mutual regard for truth, and he in fact included it in one of his subsequent essays. But it illustrates both a point of fundamental discord and its

probable cause. It was without doubt this discord which caused his Preface to *Waiting on God* to be suppressed after the first edition. When he realized that Simone Weil's parents were concerned at any suggestion that he was trying to bring their daughter into the fold, he also abandoned a project to prolong their dialogue after her death by creating a research journal dedicated to those who, like Simone Weil, sought spiritual truth.

The relationship between Simone Weil and Gustave Thibon was different in nature, but just as challenging and transforming. We have already evoked the unpromising nature of their initial contact; but Thibon readily concedes that after two or three days his initial impression had been completely reversed. Disagreeing radically on the temporal plane—Thibon having opted to support the Vichy regime, whereas Simone Weil was already totally committed to resistance—they soon discovered total communion on the level of spiritual reality. 'I have never met in a human being' asserts Thibon, 'such a familiarity with the mysteries of religion; never has the word *supernatural* seemed to me more full of meaning than in contact with her.'<sup>5</sup> According to him, it was a recognition of something other than himself, however, of qualities that he at that time did not possess. In a much later text, he admits: 'I was made to know Simone Weil and I had the good fortune to know her but, at the time when I met her, my level of spiritual evolution did not coincide with hers, so that our real dialogue began only after her death'.<sup>6</sup>

That dialogue is revealed as a passionate and wide-ranging exchange between two minds avid for nourishment, on the plight of France at that time and more generally on political ideas and the foundations of society, on literature, culture, the arts, religious ideas and the Catholic Church. Their views frequently conflicted—some of their differences in literary taste, and the reasons for them, are presented in Thibon's essay in this volume—but he maintains that when Simone Weil's opinions and excesses provoked a brutal contradiction or an exasperated silence on his part, she never manifested the slightest degree of hurt pride, and he quickly grew to feel only 'unconditional respect' for the singular being who had crossed his path so unexpectedly. In their political thinking, despite their differences over contemporary issues, they nonetheless shared a common perception that politics was the art of the lesser evil, and Thibon therefore found Simone Weil curiously tolerant in this area. As with Perrin, Simone Weil's dialogue with Thibon examined also her relationship to the Catholic Church. As he demonstrates in the

following pages, he found her refusal to enter the Church when on the threshold - as she undoubtedly was, in his opinion—deeply problematic (p. 156). But he admits in the end to a lack of understanding of the forces which kept her on the threshold, at the same time as he denies any desire to try and ‘convert’ her after death. His approach to the subject, inevitably, is less strained than Perrin’s. In his Introduction to *La Pesanteur et la grace* - which, like Perrin’s Preface to *Waiting on God*, was omitted after the first edition—he evokes two dangers in dealing with Simone Weil’s relationship to Christianity: the first being to judge her thought in the light of strict orthodoxy, the second that of trying to make that thought coincide with orthodox doctrine. He declares his intention of avoiding both dangers.<sup>7</sup> In some respects, his view of the Catholic Church was similar to Simone Weil’s: the Church partook of the nature of social reality, belonging not to absolute good, but to the realm of the necessary (3, p. 28).

This judgement on the Church reflects Thibon’s beliefs on the nature of God, which often echo Simone Weil’s. God, in the realm of appearances, is ‘terribly absent’. He is above all ‘an orientation’. Idolatry consists in ‘looking for the eternal on the temporal plane and the infinite on the plane of the finite’.<sup>8</sup> While initially he was suspicious of Simone Weil’s desire to ‘return to the soil’, he soon learned that they shared a common perception of work on the land being a contact with reality.

He refers to ‘the realism of the land, that perpetual control of the idea by the facts’.<sup>9</sup> Simone Weil’s evocation, in a letter to him, of the reward belonging to work on the land and to none other, that is to say ‘the feeling that the land, the sun, the landscape truly exist and are something other than a decor’<sup>10</sup>, must have struck a chord in him. It is neither possible, nor would it be helpful, to say whether such concordance of thought, here and elsewhere, is due to direct influence from the thought of Simone Weil. But it would seem that there were in Thibon similar tendencies, a similar commitment to the absolute and clear apprehension of the limitations of the temporal, which attained their maturity through contact with Simone Weil’s thinking.<sup>11</sup>

Simone Weil herself was clearly aware of her friend’s potential at the time of their brief meeting, but extremely lucid in her view that this potential had not yet been realized. In a passage of brutal frankness, she comments on writings he had submitted for her comments, noting that although ‘they contain [...] some things of

the highest order', these were 'not many; not nearly as many as the praise of your friends suggests': there was still much 'dark night' to be endured, before Thibon would give his 'true measure' (see pp. 123–24).<sup>12</sup> It says much for Thibon's lack of susceptibility that he accepted—and quoted—such criticism.

The period Simone Weil spent at Saint-Marcel d'Ardèche was thus one of growth on both sides. In Simone Weil's case, as we have already noted, it was not always expressed. But the bond was sufficiently close for her to pass over all the notebooks in which she had daily been elaborating her ideas, instructing him to do with them as he wished. She seems to have been expecting him to use them in the development of his own thought, and seemingly felt no personal attachment to them. 'It is certainly very preferable for an idea to link its destiny with yours rather than mine', she writes. 'I am not someone with whom it's good to throw in one's lot.'<sup>13</sup>

Thibon did not, of course, accept her suggestion that he should simply use her notebooks as a quarry for his own writings. *Gravity and grace* (*La Pesanteur et la grace*) was the fruit of his editing of a selection of extracts from these notebooks, and because, apart from the various political and syndicalist articles which had appeared in specialist journals and newspapers during her life, it was the first glimpse the wider public had of this extraordinary writer, it conditioned the way in which Simone Weil was perceived. For Thibon, she was simply 'the greatest spiritual author of our times'<sup>14</sup>, and he felt he was presenting her thus; but, given his deep Catholic faith, it was perhaps inevitable that *Gravity and Grace* suggested a less complex relationship with Catholicism than was actually the case.

While appreciating the complexity of that relationship, the reader of the pages that follow will not be tempted to question the reality of the friendship between Simone Weil and both Gustave Thibon and Father Perrin, nor their deep admiration for her spiritual gifts and her profoundly human generosity.

### Notes:

- 1 Italicized numbers refer throughout to the numbered sequence of the Bibliography. Superscript numbers refer to footnotes.
- 2 3, p. 113: 'J'ai été en quelque sorte vaincu malgré moi par la pureté de cette âme, par la qualité de cet esprit.'