

“Attentive Distance” in Love, in Light of Simone Weil’s Thought

Abstract

This article is a reflection on lived out love, as it might be experienced by lovers, in light of French philosopher Simone Weil’s writings on love. In entering a dialogue with Weil on the subject of love, the interconnectedness of love, beauty and reality stands out as central. While the richness of Weil’s understanding of love is not exhausted here, this article shows that what I call “attentive distance” is essential to lived out love understood as living, in a concrete, rather than idealist or illusionary way. Only then love is real, although, no less frail.

“The beautiful is that which we cannot wish to change.”¹

Simone Weil

As an original and unconventional thinker whose thought is anything but easy to grasp, and whose writings challenge us in so many ways, it may seem odd to speak of Simone Weil in a paper on “love,” especially lived out love. As a witness of the horrors of the twentieth century, many of her writings are about political and social struggles: the rise of Nazism in Germany, the Civil War in Spain, factory work, oppression and liberty, and more. She is a witness in the true sense of the word: she lived through these events by looking and experiencing them from up close. She traveled to Germany to see for herself what the “Hitlerite” movement was all about; although a pacifist, she went to Spain to stand for the Republican army against Franco; she worked in a Paris factory as a worker, to experience the impact of the industrial system of production on her body and mind. These experiences alone reveal an extraordinarily coherent life: Weil always sought to find order in a world that appeared to have none, and looked for it on the side of those crushed by the weight of oppression, abandoned to their suffering.

The political and social activism that marked much of her life was also interwoven with a deeply spiritual dimension. Plato’s philosophical writings, especially

¹ Simone Weil, “Love,” in *Simone Weil: An Anthology*, edited and with an Introduction by Sian Miles, (New York: Grove Press, 1986), 273.

their focus on attaining the good, became later accompanied by the life and teachings of Christ. In the last years of her short life, she wrote about her mystic experiences and her “spiritual autobiography” in an exchange of letters with Fr. Perrin.² Undoubtedly a complex figure that resists all sorts of simplistic classifications and one that does not lend herself to summary readings. Her writing does not resolve tensions; instead, it lays them bare. In their starkness they defy us and confront us with paradox. How then can we aspire to find some illumination from her writings on love?

To be clear, the scope of this essay is limited. It does not consider Weil’s thought in its entirety, it does not aim at providing a comprehensive examination of the concept of love in her writings, nor establish its value in the context of her whole work. Still, it provides the opportunity to reflect on love and, as such, it is, hopefully, not in vain. Weil sought to convey the hardest truths in the simplest language, to make it possible for everyone, regardless of their knowledge, to grasp them. And so, it is with her writings on love; they are terse, limpid and leave no room for equivocation. They are not written solely for scholars, but for all who care to read them. If there is a minimal condition for approaching these texts, it is that we are able to bear the truth they present sharply and distinctly. The value of this essay, if it has any, and each reader

² The collection of letters written by Simone Weil to Fr. Perrin, including the one named “Spiritual Autobiography,” are published in English in a volume entitled *Waiting for God*, originally published by G.P. Putnam’s Sons in 1951. A later edition of the same book, was published by Harper & Row Publishers, in 1973. Some of the essays contained in *Waiting for God* are also collected in other editions, published later, such as the one mainly referenced in this essay, published by Grove Press, in 1986, under the title, *Simone Weil, An Anthology*. It is good to keep in mind that most of Weil’s writings were published posthumously, and different editions contain different selections of her writings that may have appeared together in prior editions. With regard to her writings on love, in addition to *Waiting for God*, other notable texts are *Gravity and Grace* (1997), *Gateway to God* (1982), *The Notebooks of Simone Weil* (1956, 1976), and *First and Last Notebooks* (1970).

will determine that for himself or herself, lies in taking the risk of trying to find some correspondence between our concrete experience of love and Weil's words.

Weil's understanding of love is layered, it is presented in short passages and by lucid language that invite the reader to meditate. In the interstices between one passage and another, we are given the opportunity to pause, to linger and dwell on the words; whether they open up our concrete experience of love, or whether our love is confirmed in and through these words, remains a question. If it is true that love is a mystery, something that cannot be reduced to intellectual conceptions, nor summed up by words, it is also true that it is in lived out love that we come to experience its power in our whole being. Only then, concretely, love is. To grasp love in its many manifestations by way of clear language is challenging, but the effort is invaluable and worth pursuing, or we risk finding ourselves tossed in all directions, at loss with ourselves, at loss with the one we love, at times even derelict. Love's troubles, just as its rewards, are not solely due to the passing of time, tough time does leave its marks. Love's troubles originate in living it. This is the paradox of love: it is in living out love, that love is, but it is in living it out, that we also lose it. Weil writes for all who have loved and continue to love, concretely, day after day, in the conditions that make lived out love what it is, burdened by gravity and enlightened by instants of grace. Weil writes for all who have found love, who have lost love, for all who remain open to love.

*Love needs reality. What is more terrible than the discovery that through a bodily appearance we have been loving an imaginary being. It is much more terrible than death, for death does not prevent the beloved from having lived.*³

³ Simone Weil, "Love," in *Simone Weil: An Anthology*, 272.

These are blunt words. They don't leave much room for interpretation. Love is about the real. Anything imagined or desired leads away from the real. To love is to stay as close as possible to what is. But what does it mean to stay close to the real?

Every desire for enjoyment belongs to the future and the world of illusion, whereas if we desire only that a being should exist, he exists: what more is there to desire?⁴

There is something about love that feels so gratuitous. "Gratuitous" here in the sense of its etymological meaning of being "freely bestowed," "without cause," and "not called for." It has nothing to do with us, in the sense that nothing of our words and deeds seems to be the direct cause of love. It simply has happened. The French call it for what it is: "*un coup de foudre*," or in Italian, "*un colpo di fulmine*," (and most languages probably have an expression similar to that), it is something unexpected and unforeseen. Yet it has everything to do with us: it is "I" who feels love, in this very way, at this very time, for this one particular individual. No one else. And this is the miraculous in love, that there should be another human being whose life "corresponds" to my own, in ways we could not imagine possible, someone with whom we feel "at home," someone who understands us without needing to say a word. It is indeed something that defies all logic and all causality. It is a gift coming from elsewhere. We are overtaken by the grace of love and delight in the presence of the one we love. That he or she exists is a miracle of reality and we rejoice in it. Indeed, there is nothing more we wish or desire, as Weil writes.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 273.

But our desiring nature is restless, and as it delights in love, it also goes right past by it, seeking more. It may manifest itself in the desire to change the one we love in ways that will make him or her just about perfect (in our mind at least); or in the desire to set out a goal for the both of us, if one is not exactly the same as that of the other, we can work on making the two merge into one. It may be found in the desire to support one another's professional career, or one another's dream, but if one becomes preponderant, what happens to the other? There may be a desire to have children and a family, but how does this shared desire translate into concrete shared responsibility? The openness of lovers toward one another is remarkable. It does not seem like there is anything they, together, cannot face. They are literally invincible. They seem to have an un-extinguishable well of good-will toward each other. It is beautiful because it is real. It speaks of the power of love, about which we say that "it moves mountains."

Weil, however, cautions us. How much room do we leave it up to our desiring nature to shape our relationship with the one we love? Desiring to be together, desiring to become one together, desiring to do things together, are all seemingly good aspirations and deserving of being pursued, but like all aspirations, if they are not rooted in the concrete lived reality of the love between the two, in lived out love, they can turn into empty desires that go after illusionary goals. Like all illusions, instead of bringing people together, they tear people apart.

It becomes of most importance then, not to give in to any illusions, or better, avoid as much as possible to give rise to any. This is particularly difficult in love, as we want to believe in the power of love, what it can do and where it can lead us. But it is

precisely this faith in love, so necessary to love, that can also bring it down. Along with our desiring nature, also our ability to imagine, so resourceful in creating possibilities, can be damaging to love. It may be something as innocent as desiring and imagining a common future goal together, towards which both turn. As the imagined future goal takes hold of them, it can easily supplant the space between them. The pull of a desired goal is hard to escape, but is thick with unanticipated traps. Aspiring to a professional career, for instance, is something that both may be interested in pursuing and for which they may be prepared to endure some sacrifices. Careers, however, come with ever new responsibilities, new demands, and what was acquiesced to easily, turns just as easily into a yoke. They imagined there was nothing they could not endure together. They did not anticipate that what they undertook, would change them too.

To be sure, this is never a sharp turn, rather a subtle and gradual movement, hardly noticeable until the day when the divide has grown so wide, it can no longer be ignored. At this particular moment, it is as if the two are standing on the separate shores of some body of water, with no way to get to the other side, and it may be only then that they come to know that they are speaking a foreign language to one another, each caught up in whatever illusion they imagined to be going toward together.

How does this happen? Very easily, though subtly: by replacing the real with the desired and imagined thing. By not seeing what is before us and preferring what lies ahead, which can be fabricated in and through imagination and toward which our desiring nature pushes us. What confronts us here in the now becomes overlooked for the sake of what lies ahead. What lies here is catapulted forward and magnified to a

degree that it always looks better and greater than what is now. The love the two feel for one another now is transposed into the future and it is imagined it will be there just as strong, just as alive. Except, a lot happens that could not be imagined. Life has its way of making itself felt without us taking notice.

Whatever was imagined in the future may be attained; seldom does it correspond to the picture one had anticipated in one's mind. In the process, it is rarely the case that love is as it was. Only the lovers know this truly in their heart, whether it was there in the first place and whether it is still alive. If it feels as if something has been lost, in the effort to revive it, the impulse, though genuine, is often misplaced: one may throw oneself backwards, where one can be reassured by the memory of it, that it was for real, or one may throw oneself forward and imagine that it will be there again at some point in the future. Looking backwards, looking forward, but not right here. In both instances, the real in the sense of what is here, is not looked at, not seen, and that is where love is, if it is anywhere. As Weil writes, when it comes to love, there is nothing worse than realizing that the one we loved, never really existed. It was a mere fabrication of our imagination. We can't even mourn its death. Illusion has filled the space that was once love's place.

Love tends to go over further and further, but there is a limit. When the limit is passed love turns to hate. To avoid this change love has to become different.⁵

It is not possible to detect precisely how and when this change occurs. There comes a point when one can no longer deny it. As we know, even the best of wines can

⁵ *Ibid.*, 271.

turn into vinegar. All that goes bad, happens through something we are very familiar with: neglect. The Italian word for “neglect,” “*trascuratezza*,” conveys, unequivocally, a lack of care, it entails bypassing someone or something, it is a dis-regard, looking away, elsewhere, and it has an intentional flavor. It can be easily avoided, if only one could attend to love, which, in principle, we are all capable of. It is over time, and in the midst of all that occurs, that this ability is tested. Unless one is able to sustain what Weil calls “attention,” something as real as love, evaporates or, may even turn into hate. There is a limit, Weil tells us, past which we must not go, “to avoid this change, love has to become different.”

It can happen that a point is reached where the lovers believe to know one another so well, that there is nothing more to be discovered about him or her. One may even go as far as believing to possess the other, that she is part of him, or that she has made his life, her own. When this happens, love has gone too far, it has passed the limit, it may even turn into hate, since how is it possible that the one who is so much a part of me, does not do as I say? It is as if a part of myself were literally going against myself, and that would be enraging, hateful, truly inconceivable. If I want to move a limb of my body, then I do so and it moves; I would expect something similar with the one I love, she is part of me, we are one, how is it that she does not move when I desire so? But this is precisely the mis-step, what Weil calls “passing the limit.” Here, one mistakes love for possession, or for some form of total identification with the other, a sort of drowning into the other. There is no creation of a space between the lovers in this case,

but the opposite. Attention is not possible if the space in between the lovers has been extinguished.

To love purely is to consent to distance, it is to adore the distance between ourselves and that which we love.⁶

For how strange it may seem, love needs distance. To be clear, distance here does not mean indifference. The latter implies some kind of absence, to be turned away, being not there. This distance is also not the kind that comes about by way of all the things we do and are part of our life. This distance can also be source of trouble, no doubt, just like all of the things that distract us, by absorbing us, but it doesn't have to be. Distance, as used by Weil here, means preserving a space in between, so the two can be attentive to one another. This space comes into existence when the lovers are fully present to one another which does not merely happen by being together; nor does it subsist by inertia. It has to be sustained. One needs to consent to the distance in between. Interestingly, Weil does not say, one needs to will it. By willing it, it is as if "I" made it possible, but this space is not about me, and in willing it, I act as if "I" had the power to make it be, and in so doing I take up the space as well, which goes counter the possibility of this distance. In consenting to it, I acknowledge I am not its creator. It comes from somewhere else.

This distance comes into being when the lovers are fully present to one another. In an odd sort of way, it is in and through tending to one another, that the space in between exists and so the movement that makes this space possible is also one of

⁶ *Ibid.*, 273

withdrawal; it takes some receding for a space to open up. The act of tending to another needs distance. Yet this distance is possible in and through attention. As the French and the Italian related words “*attendre*” and “*attendere*” make explicit, to attend is also connected with waiting, and waiting is precisely about being there, for someone or something. It is recognizing that there is something worth waiting for, and that it will be, if only that space, this distance, is sustained and preserved. Think about the way a piece of music creates and transforms the atmosphere of a space. Something analogous happens with attention, it creates and re-creates a space anew.

A divine inspiration operates infallibly, irresistibly, if we do not turn away our attention, if we do not refuse it. There is not a choice to be made in its favor, it is enough not to refuse to recognize that it exists.⁷

If love is a miracle, unexpected, yet real, it will manifest itself insofar as the space is there. Creating and sustaining this distance, is what it takes, we do so by consenting to it, or more precisely, by recognizing that there is more to love than what we make it out to be. Attention is a relationship, we look, we tend, we wait, we keep ourselves open and ready. We do not become dulled by it. Habit may cause a pattern of behavior, repeated over and over again, to settle, and if this happens, love turns into something very predictable. We know what to expect, hardly anything new happens, a pattern that goes on as a mechanical thing, with well-rehearsed movements, lacks presence. Attention to one another has hardened into a mechanism without life. At times, reducing love to what we make of it, happens by refusing to see a gesture or to

⁷ Simone Weil, “Attention and Will,” in *Simone Weil: An Anthology*, 214.

hear a word, or even by not being able to listen to silence. This is about the worst thing that can happen to anyone, let alone to someone who is in love: he or she has spoken, she may have looked or gestured, yet it is as if nothing has happened, his word has not been heard, her gesture has not been seen. He and she, their words and gestures not being acknowledged, they do not exist. This lack of attention, a lack of recognition, is a lack of love. As stated earlier, there is no reality without love. Weil does not tire to repeat this fundamental point: reality, love, beauty, are all interconnected. She writes:

*Belief in the existence of other human beings as such is love.*⁸

*That is why beauty and reality are identical.*⁹

*Friendship cannot be separated from reality any more than the beautiful. It is a miracle, like the beautiful. And the miracle consists simply in the fact that it exists.*¹⁰

To keep love alive, distance and space in between must be held, so that the one we love, his words, her gestures, their whole being is acknowledged and thus is real. Attention is that which allows for this very frail equilibrium to persist. This balance is hard to attain, even harder to sustain. Perhaps, it exists only in moments. This is the challenge, or better the paradox: to be detached and able to sustain a distance while desiring to merge with the one we love, to become one. For as much as we feel this desire to become one with the one we love, Weil repeatedly tells us not to.

*Friendship is a miracle by which a person consents to view from a certain distance, and without coming any nearer, the very being, who is necessary to him as food.*¹¹

⁸ Simone Weil, "Love," in *Simone Weil: An Anthology*, 271.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 272.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 275.

¹¹ Simone Weil, "Friendship," in *Simone Weil: An Anthology*, 267.

Are we capable of preserving the attentive distance with the very being, that is necessary to us as food? Perhaps, we think this a very idealistic notion of love, one that is hardly possible as lived out love. True, it requires a great deal from us, that we are there, but that we don't take away the elements so indispensable to growth. No plant grows without air, water and sun: are we capable of creating the space where these elements flow without obstruction, where growth happens? This kind of solicitude is not possible without attentive care that persists in time and is capable of waiting. This is not to be confused with resignation, nor it is about giving in to questionable situations. If circumstances and conditions are such that growth is extirpated even before it takes root, then there is no possibility for anything to come to life. Some minimal conditions must be there for love to exist and these conditions are as concrete as soil, air, water and light. Idealistic notions of love, completely disconnected from lived out experience are often the source of disappointment. They are illusions constructed out of desires that are not rooted in reality, although alluring, they are deceptive and as fabrications without roots, they will, in time, reveal themselves for what they are, mere chimeras.

*Friendship is not to be sought, not to be dreamed, not to be desired, it is to be exercised (it is a virtue).*¹²

For as counter intuitive as it may seem, love is very “down to earth.” It keeps us rooted into what is, if we could only sustain it, in and through attention. Weil reminds us that if we think we lost love, perhaps it is because we want to hold on to something that may have been, but that has, in time, changed and transformed. A memory,

¹² Simone Weil, “Love,” in *Simone Weil: An Anthology*, 274.

perhaps, but just as we are not static beings, neither is love a static reality. If we think we lost love, or even that it has died, let's look with courage at how we have been able to sustain and cultivate our attention toward the one we love. If there is any hope to revive it, it lies in this incredibly powerful ability to attend to the one we love, in being able to see, to hear, to listen to and delight in him, in her.

*It is necessary to be dead to see things in their nakedness.*¹³

“To be dead” evokes an attitude where my desires, my goals and my aims, do not govern my life, as if I have succeeded in detaching myself from myself. They stand in the way of seeing with clarity. They direct our seeing toward what we seek to achieve. Hence, for the most part, we don't really see things in their nakedness. We see things insofar as they are useful or helpful to us with regard to what we seek to achieve. If we could see things “in their nakedness,” then we would be able to connect with the real and “delight in it.” This is not to be thought of as having become so detached, that nothing moves me. Weil is pointing to a way of being that makes room for love to be, that it creates a space where it exists; a ray of light pierces through a dark space and transforms it. Weil expresses this same idea, somewhat differently, in another essay:

*Solitude. Where does its value lie? For in solitude we are in the presence of mere matter (even the sky, the stars, the moon, trees in blossom), things of less value (perhaps) than a human spirit. If we could be attentive to the same degree in the presence of a human being...*¹⁴

We return again and again to the paradox (mystery?) of love, that Weil never tires to present to us: in love we are both dead and alive, it is a relationship of distance

¹³ *Ibid.*, 273.

¹⁴ Simone Weil, “Attention and Will,” in *Simone Weil: An Anthology*, 216.

rooted in an attentive attitude, that doesn't falter, it is the constant practice of an equilibrium, that is difficult to attain, even more difficult to maintain, hanging in between ourselves, and who in being in love with another, has nothing to hold on to, except love. It is in fact astounding that love is at all, in the face of how much gets in the way of it. We are fooling ourselves when we fall into the delusion that love is something to be pursued as we pursue something outside of us. Love demands an attentive attitude with ourselves and others; only this kind of caring attention enables us to grasp what is real and forego the imagined.

Men owe us what we imagine they will give us. We must forgive them this debt. To accept the fact that they are other than the creatures of our imagination is to imitate the renunciation of God. I also am other than what I imagine myself to be. To know this is forgiveness.¹⁵

Practicing renunciation is practicing refraining from making the one we love into something of our own making. This applies to oneself too, trying to make oneself into someone that we think may be more pleasing and attractive to the one we love. Being able not to do this, is to forgive, Weil writes. We expect others to give us what we want them to give us, but this is our doing, not theirs; therefore, to release them from this presumed debt is to release ourselves from our empty imaginings and be as close as possible to what is. It is therefore not surprising to read:

Love is not consolation. It is light.¹⁶

¹⁵ Simone Weil, "Void and Compensation," in *Simone Weil: An Anthology*, 200.

¹⁶ Simone Weil, "Detachment," in *Simone Weil: An Anthology*, 258.

Consolation is about having been disappointed and trying to come to terms with it. If love is about the real, as Weil tells us, it is indeed more like light, it illuminates what is and what is not.

Love comes to us from outside of ourselves. It comes to us through the “thickness” of the world as Weil beautifully writes. Love is indeed “supernatural.” But it is in the world that love is, and the challenge lies in finding the tenuous balance that makes it be and keeps it alive.

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