

Doubt

Virginia Woolf committed suicide in 1941 when the German bombing campaign against England was at its peak and when she was reading Freud whom she had staved off until then.

Edith Stein, recently and controversially beatified by the Pope, who had successfully worked to transform an existential vocabulary into a theological one, was taken to Auschwitz in August, 1942.

Two years later Simone Weil died in a hospital in England — of illness and depression — determined to know what it is to know. She, as much as Woolf, sought salvation in a choice of words.

But multitudes succumb to the sorrow induced by an inexact vocabulary.

While a whole change in discourse is a sign of conversion, the alteration of a single word only signals a kind of doubt about the value of the surrounding words.

Poets tend to hover over words in this troubled state of mind. What holds them poised in this position is the occasional eruption of happiness.

While we would all like to know if the individual person is a phenomenon either culturally or spiritually conceived and why everyone doesn't kill everyone else, including themselves, since they can — poets act out the problem with their words.

Why not say "heart-sick" instead of "despairing"?

Why not say "despairing" instead of "depressed"?

Is there, perhaps, a quality in each person — hidden like a laugh inside a sob — that loves even more than it loves to live? If there is, can it be expressed in the form of the lyric line?

Dostoevsky defended his later religious belief, saying of his work, "Even in Europe there have never been atheistic expressions of such power. My hosannah has gone through a great furnace of doubt."

According to certain friends, Simone Weil would have given everything she wrote to be a poet. It was an ideal but she was wary of charm and the inauthentic. She saw herself as stuck in fact with a rational prose line for her surgery on modern thought. She might be the archetypal doubter but the language of the lyric was perhaps too uncertain.

As far as we know she wrote a play and some poems and one little prose poem called "Prelude."

Yet Weil could be called a poet, if Wittgenstein could, despite her own estimation of her writing, because of the longing for a transformative insight dominating her word choices.

In "Prelude" the narrator is an uprooted seeker who still hopes that a conversion will come to her from the outside. The desired teacher arrives bearing the best of everything, including delicious wine and bread, affection, tolerance, solidarity (people come and go) and authority. This is a man who even has faith and loves truth.

She is happy. Then suddenly, without any cause, he tells her it's over. She is out on the streets without direction, without memory. Indeed she is unable to remember even what he told her without his presence there to repeat it, this amnesia being the ultimate dereliction.

If memory fails, then the mind is air in a skull.
This loss of memory forces her to abandon hope for either rescue or certainty.

And now is the moment where doubt — as an active function — emerges and magnifies the world. It eliminates memory. And it turns eyesight so far outwards, the vision expands. A person feels

as if she is the figure inside a mirror, looking outwards for her moves. She is a forgery.

When all the structures granted by common agreement fall away and that “reliable chain of cause and effect” that Hannah Arendt talks about — breaks — then a person’s inner logic also collapses. She moves and sees at the same time, which is terrifying.

Yet strangely it is in this moment that doubt shows itself to be the physical double to belief; it is the quality that nourishes willpower, and the one that is the invisible engine behind every step taken.

Doubt is what allows a single gesture to have a heart.

In this prose poem Weil’s narrator recovers her balance after a series of reactive revulsions to the surrounding culture by confessing to the most palpable human wish: that whoever he was, he loved her.

Hope seems to resist extermination as much as a roach does.

Hannah Arendt talks about the “abyss of nothingness that opens up before any deed that cannot be accounted for.” Consciousness of this abyss is the source of belief for most converts. Weil’s conviction that evil proves the existence of God is cut out of this consciousness.

Her Terrible Prayer — that she be reduced to a paralyzed nobody — desires an obedience to that moment where coming and going intersect before annihilation.

And her desire: “To be only an intermediary between the blank page and the poem” is a desire for a whole-heartedness that eliminates personality.

Virginia Woolf, a maestro of lyric resistance, was frightened by Freud’s claustrophobic determinism since she had no ground of defense against it. The hideous vocabulary of mental science

crushed her dazzling star-thoughts into powder and brought her latent despair into the open air.

Born into a family devoted to skepticism and experiment, she had made a superhuman effort at creating a prose-world where doubt was a mesmerizing and glorious force.

Anyone who tries, as she did, out of a systematic training in secularism, to forge a rhetoric of belief is fighting against the odds. Disappointments are everywhere waiting to catch you, and an ironic realism is so convincing.

Simone Weil's family was skeptical too, secular and attentive to the development of the mind. Her older brother fed her early sense of inferiority with his condescending intellectual put-downs. Later, her notebooks chart a superhuman effort at conversion to a belief in affliction as a sign of God's presence.

Her prose itself is tense with effort. After all, to convert by choice (that is, without a blast of revelation or a personal disaster) requires that you shift the names for things, and force a new language out of your mind onto the page.

You have to make yourself believe. Is this possible? Can you turn "void" into "God" by switching the words over and over again?

Any act of self-salvation is a problem because of death which always has the last laugh, and if there has been a dramatic and continual despair hanging over childhood, then it may even be impossible.

After all, can you call "doubt" "bewilderment" and suddenly be relieved?

Not if your mind has been fatally poisoned . . . But even then, it seems, the dream of having no doubt continues, finding its way into love and work where choices matter exactly as much as they don't matter — when history's things are working in your favor.