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# The Weilian Concept of Attention and the “Autobiographies” of János Pilinszky

## Abstract

In this study, I will analyse the aspects of the everyday practice of attention and of the creative imagination that recognise necessary events, relations and, in general, necessity in the Weilian sense (“*nécessité*”)—and that thereby create reality—on the basis of Simone Weil’s fragmentary oeuvre, the reconstruction attempt published in 2021, and the volume collected under the title János Pilinszky’s *Önéletrajzaim* (My Autobiographies). The prose texts are characterised by the absence of temporal and psychological relations, the image of a speaker as “decreated” (cf. *décréation*), multiplied in the characters. The study demonstrates that, in addition to the Weilian concept of attention, he was familiar with the Weilian connections between “necessity” (“*nécessité*”), misfortune (“*malheur*”) and love, as evidenced by the markings on his copy of *Intuitions pré-chrétiennes* in the legacy, and that these connections are also to be found in the draft volume *Önéletrajzaim*. (For the analysis I used the version edited and published by József Bende in 2021.) Nevertheless, it may be concluded that János Pilinszky was not aware of or did not consider important the social aspects of the Weilian concept of attention, or the utopian social vision based on it, since I have not found any reference to them in his oeuvre.

**Keywords:** Simone Weil, attention, necessity, *nécessité*, misfortune, *malheur*, love, János Pilinszky, absence of temporal and psychological relations, decreeted speaker

10.56044/UA.2024.1.5.eng

## Introduction

Numerous excellent studies have been written on the philological connections between the two oeuvres, such as those by József Bende, Laura Turai and, most recently, Gábor Szmeskó (Szmeskó 2021). My approach will not be primarily philological, but I will try to identify a line of thought from Weil's fragments that an intuitive reader like János Pilinszky might have suspected even if we cannot currently find all the relevant books in his legacy (but based on the references made in his works, he most likely read them, for example *L'Enracinement*). The legacy does, however, include the 1951 edition of *Intuitions pré-chrétiennes* (Pre-Christian Intuitions), published by La Colombe (Éditions du Vieux-Colombier), which is considered to be a fundamental work by Weil on our subject. It contains two pages marked with two writing instruments and two dog-eared pages, which I will highlight in the analysis. The translation of some parts of the *Intuitions pré-chrétiennes*, quoted in my study, and *L'Enracinement* (The Need for Roots) were published in the volume *Ami személyes, és ami szent* (What is personal, and what is sacred, Weil 1983) in 1983, so it can be assumed that János Pilinszky knew the original French texts or parts of them, since he also appears in the volume as a translator (albeit for other texts). The title of *Intuitions pré-chrétiennes* was given by the editors (Father Perrin of the Dominican Order and Gustave Thibon). The first edition of this book was published in 1951, and that of *L'Enracinement* in 1949.<sup>1</sup> It is also important to know that Weil's oeuvre is fragmentary, mostly posthumous, and that certain themes recur repeatedly. We shall also see that Pilinszky's reception of Weil does not cover the whole of her oeuvre.

## Attention and necessity

*"Toute la force de l'esprit, c'est l'attention"* (Weil 1988, 391)—all the power of the mind is attention, said the young Simone Weil.<sup>2</sup> In her later works, this attention, this creative attention becomes an earthly image of one of the attributes of God:

"Intellectual attention, because of this power, becomes an image of the Wisdom of God. God creates through the act of thinking. Though we do not

<sup>1</sup> Benjamin Braude (Boston) questions precisely the uncensorship of editing in several of his works.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Joël Janiaud, *L'attention et l'action* (Paris, PUF/Philosophies, 2002).

create or produce anything by means of intellectual attention, in a certain sense we induce reality within our own sphere of influence." ("Simone Weil a szükségyszerűségről", Gutbrod and Sepsi 2011, 18.)

The creation of reality arises from the recognition of necessity, of the relations that constitute necessity, through maintaining attention and its daily practice (ibid., 20). In the reciprocal movement of the love relationship between the Creator and the created world, made possible by Christ as a bridge (*metaxu*), the "de-created" ("*décréé*") self, which offers its autonomy on the model of Christ's mediation, is no longer an obstacle.<sup>3</sup>

The second person of the Holy Trinity in the chapter on the 'Descente de Dieu' ('Descent of God'), in Simone Weil's *Intuitions pré-chrétiennes*, is associated with necessity, which she sees as both the director and the Spirit of the World.

"But just as the order of the world in God is a divine Person, which we may call the ordering Word or the Soul of the World, so in us is *necessity a relation, that is, thinking in action*. »Demonstrations—says Spinoza—are the eyes of the mind« [Spinoza, V. 23.]. *We do not have the power to change the sum of the squares of the sides of a right triangle, but we do not even have a sum if the mind does not work and does not understand the proof. In the realm of integers, one can stand forever beside one and never become two unless the mind performs the operation of addition. Only the attentive intelligence can make the connections, and as soon as the attention wanes, the connections break down.*" ("Simone Weil a szükségyszerűségről", *op. cit.*, 17; my emphasis.)

God, who descends into the world with his love (Christ), inscribes his attributes, numbers, physical laws into physical reality, which the attention without an object, central to Simone Weil's thought, learns to decipher in the daily practice of the decreeted self. These coded attributes become signs only for total attention.

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<sup>3</sup> For more on this topic, see Sepsi 2007.

## *Intuitions pré-chrétiennes* (János Pilinszky's copy)

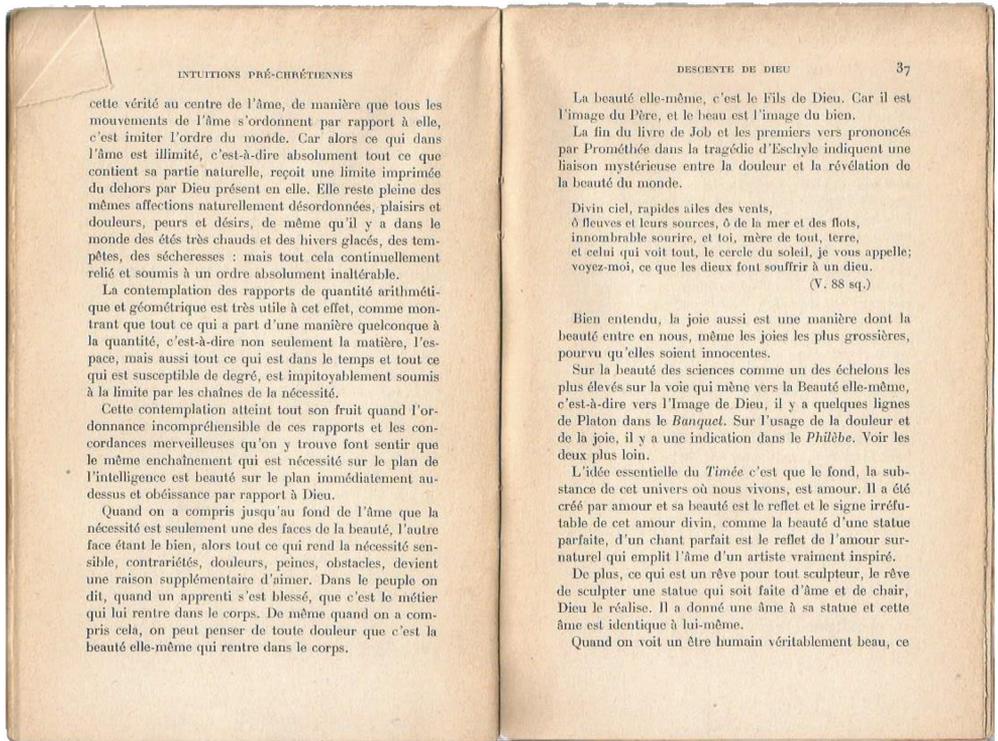
For the artist, necessity can be grasped in the absence of a final goal to be experienced in the universe. In art, the dominance of necessity is matched by the resistance of matter and the arbitrariness of rules.<sup>4</sup> For Simone Weil, the purpose of art—and especially of the theatre—is to make the necessity perceptible. It is the task of poetry to make terrible things lovable simply because they exist<sup>5</sup>—this Weilian idea is easy to recognise in János Pilinszky's post-Auschwitz aesthetics.

In the copy of *Intuitions pré-chrétiennes* that Pilinszky left for Peter Kovács, the first "dog-ear" is on page 36, at the passage where Simone Weil writes that necessity has two faces, beauty and goodness, i.e., that every misfortune is limited by earthly necessity, which makes the limitless perceptible in the delimited (*picture 1*).

The other passage, this time marked on the vertical side of pages 44–45 (*picture 2*), tells how Zeus punished man by cutting them in two. It was also common practice in ancient times, Weil continues, to cut a coin in half and give one half to a best friend. These pieces were passed down from generation to generation, and the descendants could recognise each other by them. This is the origin of word symbol. It is in this sense that Plato says—we read in the marked passage—that we are not human beings, but we are all symbols of man, and we are searching for our other half. This quest is love; Weil concludes her reflections. Love is the cure for evil, and it is in all of us from the beginning, we just have to learn to control it.

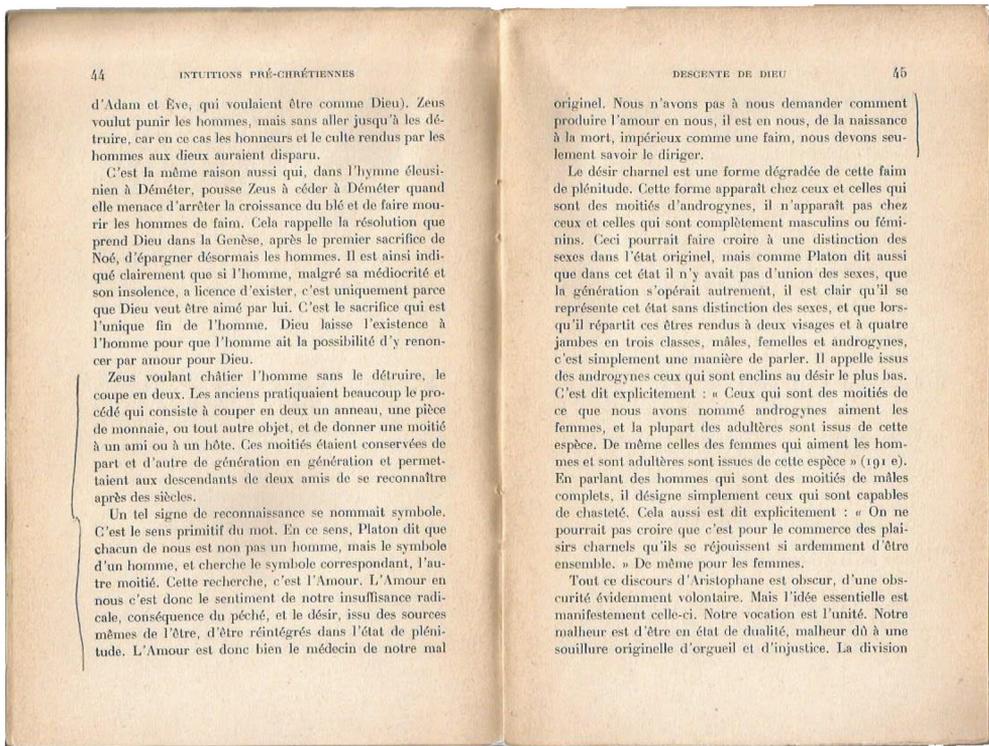
4 Cf. Little 1993. See also: "By comparing the world to a work of art, it is not just the act of creation, but also Providence that is equated with artistic inspiration. That is, in the world as in the work of art, there is finality without any representable end (fin)." (Weil 1985, 23: "*En comparant le monde à une œuvre d'art, ce n'est pas seulement l'acte de la création mais la Providence qui se trouve assimilée à l'inspiration artistique. C'est-à-dire que dans le monde comme dans l'œuvre d'art, il y a finalité sans aucune fin représentable.*") "Because Providence governs the world as inspiration governs the material of a work of art, Providence is also a source of inspiration for us." (Ibid., 40: "*C'est parce que la Providence gouverne le monde comme l'inspiration gouverne la matière d'une œuvre d'art qu'elle est aussi pour nous source d'inspiration.*")

5 "*Art. Poésie. Rendre aimables les choses horribles en tant qu'horribles, simplement parce qu'elles sont, c'est l'apprentissage de l'Amour de Dieu. Iliade.*" (Weil 1974, 69.)



Pictures 1–3. Pages from the 1951 edition of Simone Weil's *Intuitions pré-chrétiennes* (Paris, La Colombe/Éditions du Vieux-Colombier) in the legacy of János Pilinszky (Péter Kovács)

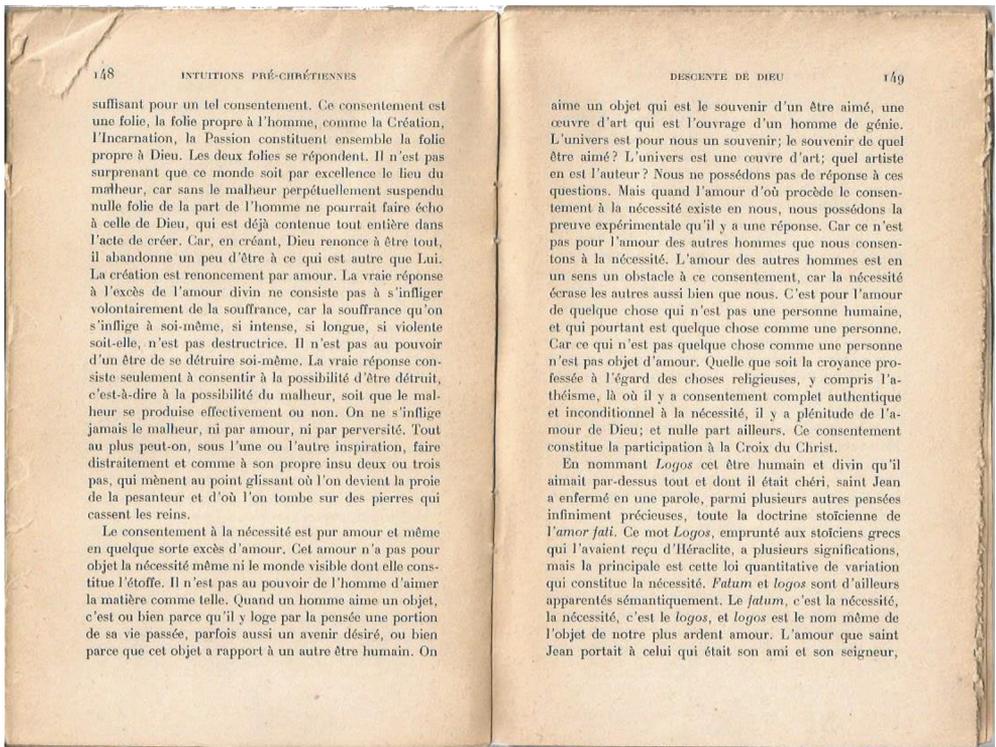
The third passage, also marked with a dog-ear on page 148 (*picture 3*), is about God self-limitation through creation, and the Passion that began with creation. Creation is renunciation out of love. Acquiescence in necessity (the possibility of misfortune) is love, even overflowing love. (However, man should not willingly seek this opportunity, for he has no power to destroy himself.) But man does not love the matter in this necessity, but the beloved being from whom necessity originates. The universe is a work of art whose author we do not know. But the love of the author is in us as an imprint, and the love of that person makes us share in that person's cross. This is as far as the reflections go. This line of thought appears in a letter of 27 March 1981 from János Pilinszky to Mátyás Domokos: "We must know that love," says Simone Weil, "is not a state of mind, but an orientation. Otherwise, it is lost in the first moment of misfortune" (Pilinszky 2021, 138).



Picture 2

It is clear from other parts of the text that, for Weil, to accept the passage of time is to accept necessity, and it is in this context—through this context—that one is able to distinguish dream from reality and thus to detach oneself from the objects of one's attachment: duration is thus a constitutive part of the act of attention. The state of decreation ("*décréation*") is thus characterised by a passive activity that Simone Weil calls "non-acting after", a term whose origins I have found in the *Bhagavad Gita*, the Taoist tradition and Weil's master Alain (and Jules Lagneau): this world "deserves no respect, but only attention" (Alain 1958, 77).<sup>6</sup> This attention is focused: "one must only dare and know to

<sup>6</sup> The original text: "*et cela ne vaut nullement respect, mais seulement attention*". On the impact of Jules Lagneau and Alain, see my earlier paper: "Theatrum philosophicum: az én meghaladása", in Gutbrod and Sepsi 2011, 57–76.



Picture 3

think of nothing". "Assured idleness, busy idleness. I wouldn't say that thought would always derive from it, but if it does, its nest is made" (Alain 1969, 93).<sup>7</sup> Non-acting action is akin to the notion of the desire without an object and empty attention, a compromise between moral and metaphysical immobility corresponding to the decreation<sup>8</sup> and movement essential for physical action (see Vetö 1971, 122; Sepsi 2015, 35–36). What is only a fragmentary idea in Alain's work becomes a system for the organising mind in Simone Weil's fragmentary oeuvre (Sepsi 2016, 36; Sepsi 2015, 39). My study "Theatrum philosophicum: transdend-

7 Ibid., 93 and 95: "seulement il faut oser, et savoir ne penser à rien [...]"; "Oisiveté assurée, oisiveté occupée. Je ne dis pas que la pensée viendra toujours, mais, si elle vient, son nid est fait".

8 See Weil 2002, 343, 346. See also: "Etre un instrument de contact entre le prochain et Dieu, comme le porte-plume entre moi et le papier." (Weil 1997, 485.) The same thought: Weil 1950, 81. "Taoïstes, le bon forgeron forge sans y penser et ne se fatigue pas. Pensée (attention) immobile, pôle de mouvements cycliques." (Weil 1997, 107; my emphasis.)

ing the self" is the first in the academic literature to discuss the occurrence of will and imagination in the oeuvre of Simone Weil's teacher, Alain (Gutbrod and Sepsi 2011, 57–76). These two concepts are also emphasized by János Pilinszky in his August 1964 *Új Ember* article, "A figyelem megszenteléséről" (On the Sanctification of Attention), which is an exposition of the chapter entitled "Réflexions sur le bon usage des études scolaires en vue de l'amour" in *Attente de Dieu*.<sup>9</sup>

## The "autobiographies" of János Pilinszky and the Weilian notions associated with attention (decreation, necessity, misfortune, love)

Simone Weil's drama *Venice sauvée* (Venice saved) places the responsibility for the civitas on a metaphysical level: in the second act, Jaffier encounters reality when pays attention after having transcended his personal horizon. This is when the necessary events take place.

"Necessity is the obedience of matter to God" (Gutbrod and Sepsi 2011, 16). On the other hand, *Venice sauvée* is a staging of the process of decreation, a process that begins with attention directed towards suffering and leads to the immobile state of Jaffier's character, who is pure, i.e., perfect in the sense of a Greek hero, who does not change, who keeps the bad within himself so as "not to propagate it to the outside through imagination and actions that fill the void" (Weil 1968, 44). This notion of attention directed towards misfortune, which helps decreation, already appears in this 1964 essay by Pilinszky ("A figyelem megszenteléséről", see Pilinszky 1964) and permeates the texts published in the reconstruction volume entitled *Önéletrajzaim* (My Autobiographies). Among the notes published in the appendix of the 2021 edition, we read: "I am at once I, you and he. [...] The short course of an action, which might qualify as a sentence, is sufficient to begin as I, and to continue and finish as he. But this he is not identical with anyone else, and it is a thousand times more applicable to myself than the I, which is always capable of absorption. It is an unhappy moment when the I (the self) turns towards itself with the attention it ought to pay to the world and to others. I think this is the beginning of the fall" (Pilinszky 2021, 77). An example of Pilinszky's attention to the Weilian misfortune is Baby, who

9 See Weil, 1950. In Hungarian: "Iskolai tanulás és istenszeretet", transl. Barsi Balázs, *Vigilia*, Sept 1985, 748–752.

is of course an important character not only in “Ónix Beáta” (Beáta Ónix), which is part of the novel’s plot, but in the oeuvre as a whole (the diary-like book “Végre beszél” [Finally Speaks] would have been written by the two of them, had it been completed, see *ibid.*, 67). In the same text, it is Petra Ónix, who is self-identical with the narrator, who speaks of herself in the third person in a childlike way (“Have you noticed that children talk about themselves in the third person?”—reads a textual variant of “Grant kapitány” [Captain Grant, see *ibid.*, 84]) who is hit by Jánoska, the “unfortunate boy crying in the grass” (*ibid.*, 21).

In this project, the “vertical novel”, begun in July 1977, the author, after writing his plays, expressed the need for a novel without plot or psychologization. It is an “immobile novel” faithful to the Weilian ideal of the immobile theatre. Lorand Gaspar, the poet’s French translator, in his preface to the “*Hármasoltár*” (Triptych), recounts what Pilinszky told him about this project during his brief stay in Tunisia, “[i]t is the autobiography of a little girl of five or six, an old philosopher, a nun, and a young prostitute”, he said, “and they are all myself” (Pilinszky 1998, 13).<sup>10</sup> He wanted to call this project *Önéletrajzaim*, which eventually resulted in the prose texts that the French translator calls “*récit*” (narratives): “*Hármasoltár*”, “*Szabadesés*” (Free Fall), previously published under the title “Simon Áron” (Áron Simon), and “*Három etűd a bűnről*” (Three Etudes on Sin). The prose, conceived as a “novel in motion”, elsewhere called “a story of attention”, contains the image of the “decreated” (cf. *décréation*) speaker multiplied in the characters, and the iconic fixation in the titles. The creatures are distinguished by the sets of signs attached to their respective “characters”: Lenke Ónix, Petra Ónix, Beáta Ónix, Captain Grant, Caffeine, etc., but they are also invoked in the spirit of the mystical “we are all one”. Weil’s Labyrinth can be interpreted as a basic human story of deception, in which God devours those who enter the labyrinth, spits them out, and they return to the mouth of the labyrinth to gently usher in the newcomers; so this basic story is evoked by a sentence in “*Szabadesés*”, “[y]ou can’t even get lost in the labyrinth anymore” (Pilinszky 2021, 26). It also appears in “*Ónix Beáta*”, “[t]omorrow I will command Caesar to take me in his mouth, break me and spit me out at your feet” (*ibid.*, 23).

It was the author’s intention to produce “*Szabadesés*” (“Simon Áron”), probably written at the end of 1979, for theatre and film soon afterwards, starring Sheryl

10 “*Il s’agit disait-il, de l’autobiographie d’une fillette de cinq ou six ans, de celles d’un vieux philosophe, d’une nonne et d’une jeune prostituée, d’autres encore, et tout cela, disait-il c’est moi.*”

Sutton or Mari Törőcsik, while Gábor Bódy planned to adapt "Hármasoltár" for film—according to the editor's afterword, as well as the letter written to Maria Baitz in the appendix.<sup>11</sup> Neither of them was produced, but they do highlight a very important aspect of Pilinszky's creative work: he was a poet who worked across genres. The short-shot montage technique, familiar from film, which had characterized Pilinszky's poetic composition from the *Apokrif* (Apocrypha) onwards, is also evident here in the novelistic design and texts of *Önéletrajzaim*. His notes from this period indicate that he always worked in the same notebook, deciding later which part of what he had written would be included in which book (Pilinszky 2021, 72; Pilinszky 1955, 144).<sup>12</sup> What's more, his letter to Maria Baitz also suggests that the certain living film screen (the sensitivity of a young neurotic girl in "Simon Áron") on which the hallucinatory still and moving images are projected, "this living 'film' reacts sometimes with signs characteristic of *you* (Maria Baitz) and of course of me (the poet)" (Pilinszky 2021, 115; emphasis in original).

The words he wrote in connection with Béla Kondor's exhibition "The Grace of a Single Moment", published in *Új Ember* in 1965, describe his creative method very well (here, too, he focuses on the Weilian concept of attention): "he does not wish to reassemble the divided reality, but to fuse it into one, so that everything can once again be together and in one: image, reason, desire and action..." (Pilinszky 1999, 432). For without attention, he quotes Weil, there is no love, and here he refers to Weil's interpretation of the story of the Good Samaritan: one possesses his identity, the other has lost it through misfortune. And then the one possessing his personality "turns his attention" to the other: this attention is "creative", and the action that follows is "renunciation": "he renounces himself to bring the other to life" (ibid., 433). The development of Béla Kondor's attention, which became "more and more confused, more and more detached" as time went on, could be seen as a self-confession about Pilinszky's late art, if we did not pay attention to the rather early date of 1965.

11 Speaking of the fourth part, "I would write its theatrical version in Budapest" (ibid., 114); "I am working. I have already written a 20-page film script for TV" (ibid. 116).

12 He writes this about another unpublished volume, "Appendix".

## The social aspects of the Weilian attention

The creation of reality stems from the recognition of necessity, of the relations that represent necessity, through the maintenance and daily practice of attention. This idea is reflected in the social aspects of the finale of *L'Enracinement*, elevating love as a working force, which is none other than "the spirit of truth", which in no way wants to commit lies (Weil 2012, 268). Science, should also be based on this love, she continues, a love that inspires those who truly encounter it to voluntary "slavery" not to man but to God (ibid., 293). I agree with András Borbély's statement in one of his writings (Borbély 2018; emphasis in original): "According to Simone Weil, however, decreative attention is not a purely subjective meditative practice, nor is it only aimed at a better mystical or philosophical understanding of the world. Since the concept of the *person* and the *self* is rooted in the culture of the Enlightenment and modernity, and even in modern law, and is therefore both a cultural and political category, its decreation requires cultural and political practice, activism, and specific forms of language and mediation."

*Oppression et liberté* (1955), which is also part of János Pilinszky's legacy, and *Luttons-nous pour la justice?* (1943) shed light on Simone Weil's social interest, as did *Journal d'usine* (1935), based on her experience at the Renault factory, and later *La condition ouvrière* (1934–1942). In these, Weil's reflections, which turn from personal mysticism to social processes and culminate in *L'Enracinement*, the needs of humans are not only physical in nature but also moral and spiritual: order, freedom, obedience, responsibility, equality, hierarchy, honour, punishment, freedom of opinion, security, risk, private property, collective property, justice. Weil refers to order as the first among all the needs and as the closest to man's mission, but she also speaks as a spiritual person of the other needs, such as obedience, the experience of the various pure forms of hierarchy as a basic need, which is prevented by oppression, the abuse of power, which reduces motivation to the level of income and the threat of being fired, and this impedes rootedness. In an order that is attentive to our basic needs, rootedness (*réenracinement*) can be re-established, and the community is the basis for this when it makes the problem "the object of attention" (Weil 2012, 199).

Culture, according to Weil, is primarily a locus of universal truths, and these truths are reflections of perfection. The problem with bourgeois intellectual culture, according to Weil, is not that it is too "high" and can only be understood

by a narrow elite, but that it is too "low", since it contains few truths that are truly worthy of adoption by more than a narrow elite.

But the social obligations, which she classifies, are surpassed by the kind of attention that transcends all obligations and which means a relationship with God. Contemplation is the point of union of physical and spiritual work, and this educated attention played a major role in Simone Weil's civilisation project for building a post-war Europe.<sup>13</sup> Being essential for survival, physical work is the spiritual centre of a society functioning in orderly conditions. In this sense, the arts, science and even philosophy are inferior in terms of their spiritual significance (Weil 2012, 318). It is this kind of work that Pilinszky, when writing *Önéletrajzaim*, allows himself as a kind of selfishness: "The only form of selfishness I can keep is its *sacrificial* form: work. Constant writing will be my atmosphere", we read in a note (Pilinszky 2021, 57; Pilinszky 1995, 47; emphasis in original).

In the context of industrial workers, Simone Weil disapproves of the alienation caused by the separation of thought and action. Simone Weil's idea is to restore the control that man has over matter and machines, so that man will finally know what he is doing. This requires the development of a "faculty of attention" ("*faculté d'attention*") specific to each trade, so that each worker can observe the material being transformed, while a previously unknown truth is revealed to him. In this way, work becomes to the intellect what prayer is to spiritual things. Work, labour, extends the incarnation of God in the world: it dies to itself (weariness, sacrifice, subjection to matter) and rises again (as a "new creation").

"Physical work, although onerous, is not in itself degrading. It is not an art; it is not a science; it is something else, but its value is perfectly equal to that of art and science. For it may likewise contribute to impersonal attention." (Weil 1994, 25.)

The greatness of man, says Simone Weil, is that he can always recreate his life. In my reading, this is what the experiment of *Önéletrajzaim* does. He can recreate what is his. Through scientific and artistic work, he creates his natural life. However, without the others, any of them is empty and futile in itself, he

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13 Simone Weil arrived in Britain in November 1942. Shortly afterwards, the government-in-exile in London, led by Charles de Gaulle, asked her to write a report on how to reorganise France after the war. This resulted in a social utopia titled *L'Enracinement*.

states in his plan for a university for workers at the turn of 1933–1934. All three activities are based on passive action, attention, and the resulting action (act), restraining the irregular imagination. Fernand Pelloutier, founder of the Bourses du Travail, one of Simone Weil's main sources, wrote in an article in 1898 that what the French worker lacks most is the knowledge of his own misfortune ("*science de son malheur*"). The militant, revolutionary outlook of her first writings subsides in her later writings, and her posthumously published *La condition ouvrière*, inspired by her experience of working in the Renault factory, is not only an example of compassion, but also the understanding, unfolding, and incorporation of the "misfortune" that Pelloutier considered necessary into the Weilian mysticism that was evolving at the time.

## Conclusion

Misfortune is not a state of mind, says Simone Weil, but "the crushing of the soul by the mechanical brutality of circumstances" (Weil 1998, 35). Only supernatural love can agree with this, according to the author's repeatedly recurring reflections. The created world is imbued with the possibility of misfortune, only the uncreated is free from it. The three texts in *Önéletrajzaim* present various scenes of misfortune, from alcohol to the alienation of the male-female, as captured in a poem. At the same time, the original plan is comparable in grandeur to the quasi-madness and desire of the Mallarméan book plan. Its formal and editorial audacity, its encounter with the many shards of misfortune, must have been guided by the Weilian thought that says, "We must will to move towards reality; then, believing we find a corpse, we meet an angel who says, 'He is risen'" (ibid., 37).

The concept of attention in *Önéletrajzaim* is based on the attention of the creating person, but does not embrace the whole Weilian social perspective. This can, of course, be explained by the constraints of the time (communism) in which the poet lived inherently within limits. It is also certain that János Pilinszky was not familiar with the entire Weilian oeuvre, and that he was less touched by the actionist Simone Weil, who was socially engaged in education, development and teaching, than by the mystical thinker. There is, however, linguistic evidence of a deep knowledge of Weil's oeuvre in terms of decreated personal attention and necessity, and it is these two optics that become the defining creative principles in *Önéletrajzaim*.

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