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Towards a poetics of hope: Simone Weil, Fanny Howe and Alice Walker

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Howe, Christine, Towards a poetics of hope: Simone Weil, Fanny Howe and Alice Walker, PhD thesis, Faculty of Creative Arts, University of Wollongong, 2008. <http://ro.uow.edu.au/theses/548>

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**TOWARDS A POETICS OF HOPE: SIMONE WEIL, FANNY HOWE AND
ALICE WALKER**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the award of the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

from

UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG

by

CHRISTINE HOWE, BCA (Hons I)

FACULTY OF CREATIVE ARTS

2008

CERTIFICATION

I, Christine Howe, declare that this thesis, submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy, in the Faculty of Creative Arts, University of Wollongong, is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. The document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

Christine Howe

15 August 2008

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ABSTRACT

This thesis seeks to develop a poetics of hope based on the writings of Simone Weil, French mystic, philosopher and political activist. In *L'Enracinement* (*The Need for Roots*) Weil emphasizes the power of a living cultural heritage able to provide individuals with links to what she terms the 'reality beyond the world', or 'absolute good'. These connections inspire a form of hope that can become a catalyst for actions characterized by love and, ultimately, play a role in the creation of more just societies. Central to this is Weil's use of the Greek term *metaxu*, which describes things that act as mediators, or bridges, between the human and the divine. Certain forms of literature, according to Weil, have the potential to become *metaxu*. Two key themes emerge in this discussion – the significance of roots, both for the individual and his or her community – and Weil's preference for present-oriented, rather than future-oriented hope. These themes provide the theoretical basis from which a poetics of hope begins to emerge.

This poetics is then used to analyse the works of two contemporary American women writers, Fanny Howe and Alice Walker. Weil's *metaxu* is able to illuminate the hope expressed in the two primary novels discussed, Howe's *Saving History* and Walker's *The Color Purple*. Although there are significant differences in Howe's and Walker's approaches to language, in the emphasis they each place on reclamation and renunciation of self, and in their conceptions of the divine, the hope expressed in both novels is revealed in acts of love that emerge as the characters focus their attention on different forms of *metaxu*. Integral to this discussion is the emphasis Weil, Howe and Walker place on cultivating an attitude of attentiveness towards others, towards the

beauty of the world, and in the act of writing itself. Not only is this form of attention critical for the characters in *Saving History* and *The Color Purple*, the formal qualities of the texts themselves also require an attitude of attentiveness from the reader. As a result, these novels, in addition to revealing the role of *metaxu* in the lives of the characters, also have the potential to become *metaxu* in their own right.

The poetics of hope developed in this thesis suggests that literature, as *metaxu*, has the potential to inspire a form of hope able to transform uprooted individuals and societies, and to build communities characterized by beauty, love and justice.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank all those who have been involved in the writing of this thesis. In particular, I thank my supervisor Dr. John Hawke, who supported me wholeheartedly as my topic took shape, meticulously edited every draft, and encouraged me to trust my instincts. I would also like to thank the University of Wollongong for awarding me a University Postgraduate Scholarship, without which I would not have been able to complete this degree. I thank the Faculty of Creative Arts staff for their support, particularly Shady Cosgrove, Olena Cullen, Tony Macris and Alan Wearne. Thank you to all those I discussed my research with, especially Mehmet Adil, Tim Cahill, Geoff Callaghan, Elle Demuro, Colin Dray, Lauren Fee, Peter Hobson, Gareth Jenkins, Friederike Krishnabhakdi-Vasilakis, Stewart and Angela Mills, Wendy Suiter and Mary Zournazi. Special thanks go to Alice Walker's biographer, Evelyn C. White, who kindly sent me the unpublished transcript of an interview she conducted with Fanny Howe; the staff of the Bibliothèque nationale de France, who were extremely helpful in my quest to view Simone Weil's original manuscripts; and Dr. Rob Fisher and Stephen Neff, conveners of the interdisciplinary conference *Hope: Probing the Boundaries*, held in Prague in 2005, at which I presented a paper on Simone Weil. Finally, thank you to Peter and Janet Howe for their constant support and encouragement; Maria Pineda, whose wisdom helped me to maintain my sanity; and Duncan Wilson, for his very practical love and support.

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