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

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University of Wollongong

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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

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**Towards a Poetics of Hope: Simone Weil, Fanny Howe and  
Alice Walker**



## Introduction

*Abyss of hope, what an opening, what lightning, what thunder, what a  
passageway.*

*What an entrance.*

Charles Péguy<sup>1</sup>

*Real generosity towards the future lies in giving all to the present.*

Albert Camus<sup>2</sup>

*It seems to me that the best art is political and you ought to be able to make it  
unquestionably political and irrevocably beautiful at the same time.*

Toni Morrison<sup>3</sup>

As Péguy recognised in 1911, hope can provide a passageway or entrance to a different, deeper understanding of reality. Péguy, in the words of Robert Royal, conceived of hope as “a living force – perhaps the living cosmic force – that enables us to gaze at the fullness of reality, in fact brings us into closer contact with the real” (165). In this, his ideas intersect with those of French mystic, philosopher and political activist, Simone Weil. Rather than being associated with a brighter future, hope, for Weil, is found in an illumination of the present by the light of the divine. As indicated in the title of her most comprehensive work, *The Need for Roots*, Weil placed great importance on the role of heritage, tradition, language and culture in generating this form of hope. Weil’s

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<sup>1</sup> *Portal of the Mystery of Hope*, 69.

<sup>2</sup> *The Rebel*, 268.

<sup>3</sup> “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation”, 2290.

hope is intimately linked with the Greek term *metaxu*, which she uses to refer to those things that provide bridges between the human and the divine. A study of Weil's poetics reveals that the concept of *metaxu* is also central to her understanding of the role of literature. In conjunction, Weil's writings on hope and literature form the basis for developing a poetics of hope, which will be employed in this thesis to analyse the work of two contemporary American women writers, Fanny Howe and Alice Walker. Several literary movements and events of historical significance also inform this analysis: the Harlem Renaissance and the Negritude movement, both of which celebrated and drew inspiration from their roots, and the debates about the role of literature and hope that took place between Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus in the 1940s and 50s.

Various contemporary philosophers have recognised the value of a concept of hope that, like Weil's, is oriented towards the present rather than the future. Mary Zournazi's *Hope: New Philosophies for Change* includes dialogues on the nature of hope between Zournazi and a range of contemporary writers and philosophers from across the globe. Understanding hope as integral to the way we exist in the present is a theme that recurs throughout the book. For Zournazi hope is intimately connected with conversations and reflections that allow for generous, joyful engagement with others (12). Brian Massumi separates hope from both optimism and future orientation and places it within the present, suggesting that the current political, ecological, and economic climate leaves little room for optimism when thinking about the future. For him, if hope is to move beyond concepts of pessimism and optimism it needs to be separated from a wishful expectation of future success. Hope can then exist within the complexities of each moment, with the present being seen as a "threshold of potential", a space open for

experimentation (211-212). Isabelle Stengers identifies the process of thinking itself as a form of hope that resists probability in favour of possibility. Hope in this sense is not “hope for one or another thing or as a calculated attitude,” but an attempt to feel and articulate a “possibility for becoming” (245). These three perspectives present an understanding of hope that, while retaining some links to the future, is far more concerned with how we live, think, and communicate in the present. As Zournazi concludes,

hope may be that force which keeps us moving and changing – the renewal of life at each moment, or the ‘re-enchanting’ of life and politics – so that the future may be about how we come to live and hope in the present” (274).

The idea that hope can be oriented towards the present rather than the future is central to the following discussion, as is Weil’s belief that the continuing relevance of the past, as expressed through communities’ roots, is vital if this form of hope is to flourish.

### **Hope in the Harlem Renaissance and the Negritude movement**

Both the Harlem Renaissance, which took place in the 1920s and 30s in the United States, and the Negritude movement, which was founded in Paris in the 1930s among writers from various French colonies, emphasized the importance of African heritage and identity. Two of the key founders of Negritude, Léopold Sédar Senghor and Aimé Césaire, developed friendships and exchanged ideas with many Harlem writers in Paris (Wintz 229). Wole Soyinka suggests that the American and African colonial writers experienced a common sense of internal alienation, living as they did in a situation where they were identified as citizens of America or France, but were simultaneously forced to contend with the prejudice directed against them by the powers governing these countries (128). He sees this shared sense of alienation as central to the expression of their art, with many of these writers seeking to,



discover their roots, the meaning and significance of forgotten mores and values that could then be forged into a distinct identity to be held against others – nation and culture – that had been merely bestowed. From within that past the artists quarried a new language, new symbols and rhythms that in turn reinforced that sense of a separate identity (129).

Both movements were of great social and cultural significance. The Harlem Renaissance has been described as a “magic moment, when confidence and hope prevailed, when the dream that literature would free humankind seemed attainable” (Wintz 231); and Negritude has been cited as “one of the most important developments in black aesthetics anywhere in the world during the twentieth century” (Stovall 104).

The central characteristic that binds these two movements is the focus on reclaiming and celebrating African heritage and identity through literary expression.<sup>4</sup> The works of two prominent figures in the Harlem Renaissance, Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston, demonstrate this focus particularly well. Hughes’ poetry is permeated by a love for his people and culture, typified in his poem “The Negro speaks of Rivers”. This expresses the ancestral depth and beauty of Hughes’ cultural heritage, linking the poem’s speaker to centuries of African and American history:

I bathed in the Euphrates when the dawns were young.

I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.

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<sup>4</sup> A range of different (and often conflicting) ideas about the role of literature was held by writers within these two movements. According to Wole Soyinka, most of Harlem Renaissance writers (with the exception of Langston Hughes) looked to Africa to provide them with a sense of history and identity, but were less concerned with the *continuing* cultural heritage of Africa than were the Negritude writers (132). Within the Harlem Renaissance itself there were also debates about the role of literature. Despite these differences, Fabre and Feith suggest the common aim that tied the Harlem writers together can be located in their efforts to “control the image of black people in an assertion of pride in the face of political oppression and stereotyping” (26).

I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.

I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln

went down to New Orleans, and I've seen its muddy

bosom turn all golden in the sunset. (1291)

Hughes had a greater social purpose for drawing on his roots, which guided and informed the aesthetics of his work. The responsibility he felt towards his community as a poet is expressed in a passage taken from his essay "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain":

to my mind, it is the duty of the younger Negro artist... to change through the force of his art that old whispering 'I want to be white,' hidden in the aspirations of his people, to 'Why should I want to be white? I am Negro – and beautiful?' (1314)

For Hughes, the inspiration provided by his heritage was inseparable from the wider goal of upholding, celebrating and encouraging his community.

Zora Neale Hurston's work celebrates the expression of African culture as it developed within America. Her collections of folklore, *Mules and Men* and *Every Tongue Got to Confess: Negro Folk-Tales from the Gulf States*, record stories that embody the black culture of the American South, and she herself drew from this culture of storytelling in her own novels. Hurston's work provided later generations of African American women writers with a crucial link to their cultural and literary heritage. Alice Walker, who played a central role in the resurgence of interest in Hurston's work, discovered one of her collections of folklore whilst researching material for a short story, "The Revenge of Hannah Kemhuff". Walker comments on the importance of this collection of folklore, not only to the finished story, but also to herself during the process of writing it: "In that story I gathered up the historical and psychological threads of the life my ancestors lived, and in the writing of it I felt joy and strength and my own

continuity” (*In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens* 13). Langston Hughes was also important in Alice Walker’s development as a writer: the first short story of Walker’s to be published, “To Hell with Dying”, was published by Hughes. Walker describes him as “the greatest of old black singer poets [...] Aging and battered, full of pain, but writing poetry, and laughing too, and always making other people feel better” (*Living by the Word* 40). The influence of Hurston and Hughes, not only on Alice Walker but on many other writers, reveals the continuing impact of the hope generated by their work. As a result of their celebration of the heritage of their communities, later generations have also been able to embrace their own roots and thread them through their work.

Just as the writers of the Harlem Renaissance drew on their cultural heritage to uphold and celebrate the humanity and inherent value of their communities against a backdrop of social and institutional racism in the United States, so the Negritude writers drew on their African roots to provide them with a means to resist colonialism and to assert the validity of African culture in the face of French assumptions of cultural superiority. While they wrote mainly in French, many were also heavily influenced by traditional African poetry: Senghor translated Serer poems into French; Birago Diop transcribed stories told by griot Amadou Koumba; and Léon Damas chose to employ poetic forms close to those used in sung and danced African poetry (Kesteloot 86). Senghor in particular emphasized the importance of a living African heritage, and in his writings on Negritude articulated an African identity that affirmed the continuing relevance of his roots. Césaire extended this focus on roots beyond any specific identity and suggested that ultimately, by drawing on his heritage, his work was better able to express the universal: “For me there can never be any imprisonment within an identity. Identity means having roots, but it is also a transition, a transition to the universal” (“The

Liberating Power of Words” 5). René Méné echoed this understanding of the role of roots in literature: “Art is the expression of what is universal through the expression of the individual man rooted in his own existence, perhaps in his village life” (qtd. in Kesteloot 241). Many of these writers were not only highly respected literary figures, but were also politically involved: Césaire served in the French parliament for many years; and Senghor became the first president of Senegal when it gained independence. As demonstrated by these literary movements, a direct connection can be drawn between a poetics of hope and the literature that emerges as writers draw on their heritage and roots, particularly in an effort to resist oppression. There were, however, other arguments circulating in the first half of the twentieth century that suggested that hope was to be found in visions of future utopias.<sup>5</sup>

### **Future Versus Present Oriented Hope: the Argument between Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus**

It is instructive to examine this period from the point of view of two of France’s leading intellectuals and writers at the time, Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. Their political and literary visions became increasingly different during the late 1940s and early 1950s, eventually resulting in a complete breakdown of their personal and intellectual relationship.<sup>6</sup> The creative and philosophical works they produced during those years

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<sup>5</sup> Simone Weil made this assessment of the hope generated by Communism in 1942: “The force of soul of the Communists comes from the fact that they are going, not only towards what they believe to be the good, but towards what they believe will surely and soon be brought about” (*Simone Weil: An Anthology* 145).

<sup>6</sup> Aronson suggests that the split between Sartre and Camus was not as a result of “individual idiosyncrasy”, but because they

came to ‘incarnate’ the world-historical conflict between two of the century’s major ideological antagonists. Although Camus was never a partisan of capitalism and Sartre was never a Communist, these two antagonists wound up representing far larger forces than themselves. (5)

reveal two men struggling to find a creative, humane path that would lead people out of a preceding half century characterized by, as Camus described it in *The Rebel*, the uprooting, enslavement, and death of more than seventy million people (11). Ronald Aronson suggests that the philosophical split between Sartre and Camus, embodied in their plays *The Just Assassins* and *The Devil and the Good Lord*, reveals the “splintering of hope” the Left experienced during the Cold War. Hopes for human freedom and for socialism were torn apart as people were faced with what Aronson describes as an “impossible choice” between Sartre’s realism – which saw an alliance with Communism as the only way to move towards concrete social change – and Camus’s “principled leftist rejection of Communism”, which isolated him from the largest force working for change (5). David Sprintzen also recognises the significance of the debate between Sartre and Camus, suggesting that “many of the most significant passions and struggles of modernity reverberate throughout this confrontation” (72). Both Sartre and Camus addressed the question of literary commitment in terms of their wider hopes for social change. An analysis of their views on the interaction between politics and literature gives an insight into the various hopes that characterized the post-war period and the reasons for their decline.

Sartre was committed to working for the freedom of the oppressed: first for the French working-class, then increasingly, as the process of decolonisation began, for the French colonies. Sartre recognised the deep political commitment he himself sought in the work of the Negritude writers. In support of these authors he wrote several essays introducing their work to the French public, including his essay “Black Orpheus”, which was published as the Introduction to Senghor’s 1948 anthology of new African poetry in French, and the Preface to Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*. The

hope generated by the writers of the Negritude movement, however, was not born simply out of a desire to be politically committed. It originated as a deep-seated desire to assert both their own dignity and the validity of African cultures and heritage. Although Sartre supported Negritude, he did so from a philosophical standpoint that championed its revolutionary aspects rather than its celebration of the continuing significance of African cultures. As Jules-Rosette points out, Sartre saw Negritude more as an idea that supported his call for the freedom of all oppressed peoples rather than a recognition of the importance of African cultures in themselves. She suggests that for Sartre, “Africa functioned only to highlight the problems of oppression and subjugation affecting the world at large” (55). It was not the continuing significance of an African past that led Sartre to identify a sense of hope in Negritude, but the possibilities it presented for the future freedom of all peoples: an Hegelian antithesis that was a necessary but temporary step in the journey towards the eventual synthesis of universal human freedom.<sup>7</sup> The future-orientation of the hope Sartre identifies is revealed in this definition of Negritude: “Now it is a lost innocence which had existence only in a distant past, and now a hope which will realize itself only in the bosom of the City of the Future” (*Black Orpheus* 57-58). Sartre did not find the source of hope in the past, but in a revolutionary movement towards the future.

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<sup>7</sup> In his article “Presence Noire”, published in 1947 in *Présence Africaine*, Sartre stated that it was necessary that “the African presence be among us, not as a child in the family circle, but as the presence of remorse and hope” (qtd. in Jules-Rosette 37). Rejecting the paternalism of the French colonial system, he redefined Africa’s relationship to France: not as an interaction between equals, however, but in terms of an abstract idea. In *Black Orpheus* Sartre described Negritude as the means to achieve the ultimate end of a world free of racism:

Negritude appears as the weak stage of a dialectical progression: the theoretical and practical affirmation of white supremacy is the thesis; the position of Negritude as antithetical value is the moment of the negativity. But this negative moment is not sufficient in itself and the blacks who employ it well know it; they know that it serves to prepare the way for the synthesis or the realization of the human society without racism. Thus Negritude is dedicated to its own destruction, it is passage and not objective, means and not the ultimate goal (59-60).

One of the criticisms leveled at the Negritude movement by later generations of African and Caribbean writers was precisely the focus on the past rather than the future. Frantz Fanon in particular was critical of Senghor's insistence on creating a sense of identity based on his African roots. In *Black Skin, White Masks* he wrote:

In no way should I dedicate myself to the revival of an unjustly recognized  
Negro civilization. I will not make myself the man of any past. I do not want to exalt  
the past at the expense of my present and of my future. (*Black Skin, White Masks* 226)

Fanon argued instead for active political engagement and a militant rejection of colonialism. The hope here lay in former colonies becoming independent nations, throwing off the shackles of colonialism, economically, politically and culturally. Fanon's concluding chapter begins with an epigraph written by Marx, which states that "[t]he social revolution... cannot draw its poetry from the past, but only from the future" (*Black Skin, White Masks* 223).<sup>8</sup> Sartre also held the view that, rather than drawing on the past, the depth of what he termed the "novelist's universe", must be "discovered in a movement to transcend it" (*What Is Literature?* 43). "In short," he wrote, "literature is, in essence, the subjectivity of a society in permanent revolution" (*What Is Literature?* 118).

Sartre articulated his concept of a politically engaged, or committed, literature in a series of articles that appeared in *Les Temps Modernes* in 1947, later published in English as *What Is Literature?*. The key ideas expressed in these articles relate to the

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<sup>8</sup> Fanon's militant anti-colonialism influenced other groups across the world, including the Black Panthers and other Black Power groups. References to his ideas can be found in the work of both Fanny Howe and Alice Walker. Howe refers to him as one of the theorists who informed her own political education (*The Wedding Dress* xi); and Walker's central character in her first novel reveals beliefs that bear the mark of Fanon's ideas (*The Third Life of Grange Copeland* 218).

role of literature and the transcendence of human freedom. Sartre suggests that a work of prose is a site of freedom for both reader and writer. The author exercises freedom in the writing of the text, as he or she creates another world. The reader, in turn, exercises freedom in allowing him or herself to become involved in the created world of the novel or play, the ultimate aim being the creation of a classless society in which literature would become “the world aware of itself, suspended in a free act, and offering itself to the free judgement of all men, the reflective self-awareness of a classless society” (*What Is Literature?* 118). However, as that classless society had yet to be created, the first goal of literature was to operate within the historical bounds of the author’s own time, working towards two connected ends: an awakening of the reader to his or her own freedom, and the creation of a socialist democracy.

To write for one’s age is not to reflect it passively, it is to want to maintain it or change it, thus to go beyond it towards the future, and it is this effort to change it that places us most deeply within it... (*What Is Literature?* 236)

Again, for Sartre it is in the revolutionary movement towards the future that hope is expressed, in literary works as in politics.<sup>9</sup>

Hope that is firmly focused on the future, as can be seen in Sartre’s passionate call for politically engaged literature, can lead to a certain disregard for the means by which a desired end is achieved. It was this aspect of Sartre’s work to which Camus so strongly objected. Camus regarded Sartre’s concept of committed literature as an imposition of

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<sup>9</sup> Later in his life, Sartre would rethink his approach to hope. In a series of interviews with Benny Lévy in 1980, Sartre commented on the collapse of hope he saw spreading over Europe during and after the Cold War. In line with such philosophers as Emmanuel Levinas, Sartre in these interviews places greater emphasis on the Other, focusing on ethics as a form of politics, and articulating a form of hope based on fraternity (*Hope Now: the 1980 Interviews*).



the political onto the realm of the literary.<sup>10</sup> He felt that “the theory of engaged literature, by requiring the writer’s political involvement, destroyed his freedom” (qtd. in Aronson 212). As Aronson points out, Camus rejected Sartre’s willingness to set aside temporary human freedom in exchange for the advancement of his ultimate end; he felt it necessary to reserve a space outside any given historical context for moral judgement (59). From within this space, Camus offered the following indictment on the revolutionary events of his time: “The rebels, who have decided to gain their ends through violence and murder, have in vain replaced, in order to preserve the hope of existing, the ‘we are’ by a ‘we shall be’” (*The Rebel* 246). The hope of a utopian future had become the justification for murder committed in the present.<sup>11</sup>

Rejecting this model, Camus felt that revolutionary activity should be focused on the impact of political action in the present. An interchange between two characters in Camus’s play *The Just* expresses the absurdity he saw in revolutionary activity that was directed solely towards the future. Dora cries out in despair, “Peace! When will we find peace?” Kaliayev’s answer is laden with irony: “Tomorrow!” (43). In *The Rebel*, Camus offers an alternative to this form of revolutionary action:

revolution must try to act, not in order to come into existence at some future date, but in terms of the obscure existence which is already made manifest in the act of insurrection.

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<sup>10</sup> Camus was not the only critic of Sartre’s call for committed literature. Theodore Adorno also addressed the question of commitment, suggesting that, “[the] sort of works that try to free themselves from fetishism by siding with dubious political interventions find themselves regularly enmeshed in a false social consciousness because they tend to oversimplify, selling out to a myopic praxis to which they contribute nothing but their own blindness” (244). For Adorno, “[no] work of art can be true in social and political terms unless it is true in its own terms as well” (262).

<sup>11</sup> For Camus, this presented a problem that could only be reconciled by the willingness of a rebel to accept his or her own death in response to taking the life of another (*The Rebel* 246).

This rule is neither formal nor subject to history, it is what can best be described by examining it in its pure state – in artistic creation. (218)

This proposal effectively turns Sartre's theory of literary commitment on its head. Instead of a concrete political goal guiding the creation of literary works, Camus advocated the opposite: that the process of literary creation itself should inform political action.<sup>12</sup>

The differences between these two approaches are seen clearly in *The Just* and Sartre's *Lucifer and the Lord*. Although neither play appears particularly hopeful, Aronson suggests that each embodies the philosophical standpoint their authors held at the time in relation to the hope generated by revolutionary movements (5). Goetz, the central character in *Lucifer and the Lord*, reveals Sartre's belief that the most effective way to create change is by full involvement in the historical circumstances of his time.<sup>13</sup> Having passed through several different stages of belief and illusion, Goetz's existential journey finally culminates in his resolution to command an army. The first action Goetz takes after he is established as the head of the army is to murder one of the captains. He then proclaims: "The kingdom of man is beginning. A fine start" (*Lucifer and the Lord* 140-141). The hope lies in the fact that he has decided to become a man of action, to

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<sup>12</sup> Camus identified a parallel between artistic creation and the political uprising of the oppressed: "the artist's rebellion against reality, which is automatically suspect to the totalitarian revolution, contains the same affirmation as the spontaneous rebellion of the oppressed" (*The Rebel* 224). The widespread persecution of writers and other artists in various totalitarian states and military juntas during the twentieth century, including the deaths of such poets as Osip Mandelstam, Federico García Lorca and Victor Jara, confirms this view.

<sup>13</sup> In light of this, Sartre criticized Camus's "clean hands" approach towards violence, suggesting that: "[it] is incumbent upon the writer to judge the means not from the point of view of an abstract morality, but in the perspectives of a precise goal which is the realization of a socialist democracy" (*What Is Literature?* 214).

fight to bring about a better future; and that he has proved himself capable of doing this by carrying out an act of murder.

By contrast, Camus's belief that violence is only acceptable in a revolutionary context if rebels are prepared to be condemned and face their own deaths is revealed clearly in *The Just*. After hearing the account of Yanek's hanging, Dora, distraught and seeking to understand the meaning of his death, cries out to her companions:

Something has been born today which is our testimony, the testimony of us revolutionaries. Yanek is no longer a murderer! A horrible thud! That's all it took... one thud and he was plunged back into the joys of childhood! (70)

The desperate reality of death confirms in Dora the same belief that Camus's 'rebel' holds: "He kills and dies so that it shall be clear that murder is impossible" (*The Rebel* 246). In light of these two plays, Susan Neiman's assessment of the differences between the forms of hope offered by Sartre and Camus is apt:

If Sartre's metaphysical claims seem to give more room for action, his characters give no reason for optimism about its results. Sartre tells us that other people are the source of hell. Camus lets us hope they might prevent it. (297)

The conflict that arose between Sartre and Camus reveals the complexity of the relationship between politics, literature and hope. The future-oriented hope Sartre proposed, embodied in Goetz in the final scenes of *Lucifer and the Lord*, offered the possibility of working together towards creating a future utopia, but at what cost? The hope Camus identified in the moment of creative insurrection presents an alternative to a revolutionary literature and politics that focuses on the future at the expense of the present. It is the existence of beauty that gives Camus hope that living ethically and fully in the present is possible. In beauty is found the promise of a "living

transcendence”, focused neither on the future on this earth, nor on life after death, but on the present (*The Rebel* 224). It is through its expression of beauty, therefore, that art is able to inspire hope:

Art... leads us back to the origins of rebellion, to the extent that it tries to give its form to an elusive value which the future perpetually promises, but which the artist presents and wishes to snatch from the grasp of history. (*The Rebel* 224)<sup>14</sup>

This assessment of the role of beauty is similar to that elucidated by Simone Weil. Occupying a central position in the intersection between art and hope, beauty is described by Weil as having the ability to draw one’s attention and desire away from an imagined future good towards what actually exists (*Gravity and Grace* 58). It is on this point that the similarities between the role Weil ascribes to art in *The Need for Roots* and Camus’s aesthetics becomes clear. Camus had great respect for Weil: he was instrumental in the publication of several of her works after her death; and in the Preface he wrote for the first edition of *The Need for Roots* he referred to her as “the only great mind of our time” (qtd. in Dunaway, “Estrangement and the Need for Roots” 35). He quotes her directly in relation to the conditions of factory workers in passages in *The Rebel*,<sup>15</sup> and in his notebooks during the time he was researching material for the same book there are also many references to Weil (Dunaway, “Estrangement and the Need for Roots” 40). Whether his reading of her work influenced Camus directly, or

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<sup>14</sup> In *The Rebel* Camus suggests that the novel actually indicates a “metaphysical need”: the desire for unity (229). The focus on seeking after unity recurs throughout *The Rebel*, and is the major point on which Camus bases his assertion that artistic practice embodies the key elements of rebellion. The value of the novel is found in its ability to give form to experiences that, in reality, have no fixed shape, no limits. It presents a reality that is recognisable, but that has been altered in such a way as to give life a form and meaning it lacks in day-to-day existence (*The Rebel* 229).

<sup>15</sup> Pages 182-183.

whether his own intellectual and political ideas simply resonated with hers is debatable, but the fact remains that there are important points of intersection in their work.<sup>16</sup>

John Randolph LeBlanc, who has published a book length study on the ethical and aesthetic aspects of Weil's and Camus's political thought, finds many similarities between these two writers, particularly in terms of the way their work addresses the interaction between art, labour and politics. Indeed, he suggests that it is precisely "the relationship between work and art and the creative component that these two activities share" that characterizes both Weil's and Camus's political thought (96). In their attempts to address these central aspects of human society, Camus and Weil, disillusioned with the revolutionary movements of the time, both explored the possibility that art was able to inspire a form of hope that illuminated the beauty of the present, instead of offering the promise of a future utopia. These ideas had their basis in, as Dunaway has recognised, "the same profound compassion for a world exiled from the kingdom of rootedness" ("Estrangement and the Need for Roots" 42).

### **Simone Weil's Politics and Aesthetics**

Weil's concept of roots is central to her aesthetics. Her response to colonialism is a good introduction to both this and other key aspects of her ethical and political thought. Weil's writings intersect with the work of Negritude writers both thematically, in terms of the emphasis she placed on the importance of roots, and also in her critique of

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<sup>16</sup> Weil and Camus both studied under Jean Grenier and Emile Chartier (Alain), and were deeply influenced by their studies of the ancient Greeks: it is for these reasons, among others, that Dunaway suggests that, although *The Rebel* may have been influenced by Camus's reading of *The Need for Roots*, the similarities between these two writers "can best be attributed to commonality of interests and sources" ("Estrangement and the Need for Roots" 41-42).

colonialism.<sup>17</sup> In 1943, years before Sartre became involved with the Negritude movement, Weil wrote an essay entitled “East and West”, in which she drew an analogy between Nazism and colonialism:

Hitlerism consists in the application by Germany to the European continent, and the white race generally, of colonial methods of conquest and domination. [...] This analogy exposes the hollowness of all the arguments in favour of the colonial system. Because *every one* of these arguments, good, bad, and indifferent, is also used by Germany... (*Selected Essays* 199)

The argument presented here was also used by intellectuals involved in the Negritude movement and the Harlem Renaissance. Aimé Césaire drew the same link between colonialism and fascism in *Discourse on Colonialism*, suggesting that Europeans had already accepted Nazism

before it was inflicted on them, that they absolved it, shut their eyes to it, legitimized it, because, until then, it had been applied only to non-European peoples; that they have cultivated that Nazism, that they are responsible for it. (14)

Other black intellectuals, including W.E.B. DuBois, also commented on the similarities between French and British colonial rule and the atrocities committed by the Nazis (Kelley). Césaire’s *Discourse on Colonialism* was first published in 1950, two years after Sartre’s essay “Black Orpheus” and two years before the publication of Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks*. Weil’s essay was written well before these critiques of colonialism appeared. In it, she touched on themes addressed more broadly in *The Need for Roots*.

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<sup>17</sup> For further investigation into Weil’s writings on colonialism, see J.P. Little’s *Simone Weil on Colonialism: An Ethic of the Other*.

The reason Weil objected so strongly to colonialism was because she saw the destruction it caused to people's roots. Nazism mirrored colonialism in that it inflicted on European countries the same "evil of uprootedness" that had been wrought on colonized peoples: "the conquered countries would have become uprooted through the loss of their past. To lose one's past is to fall into colonial servitude" (*Selected Essays* 199). One of the failings of modern society, according to Weil, is the lack of concern for maintaining past traditions and respecting the importance of community heritage. Her thoughts on this matter are revealed in a passage in *The Need for Roots*: "For several centuries now, men of the white race have everywhere destroyed the past, stupidly, blindly, both at home and abroad" (51). The disregard for the preservation and continuing relevance of communities' roots that Weil identified in both colonialism and Nazism was, in her eyes, merely an extreme version of the general uprootedness affecting western culture as a whole.<sup>18</sup> The responsibility for these "monstrous conditions" in which people were living she located in the underlying ideologies governing modern science, history and art, which she believed needed to be transformed if there was to be any hope of seeing "the dawn of a better civilization" (*The Need for Roots* 235).

This state of uprootedness, according to Weil, was in large part due to an idolisation of force. In her essay "The *Iliad* or the Poem of Force" Weil defines force as "that  $x$  that turns anybody who is subjected to it into a thing," that, when exercised to the limit, literally turns a person into a thing: from a living, breathing being to a corpse (*Simone*

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<sup>18</sup> This uprootedness, Weil believed, was largely a result of the fact that "after being bemused for several centuries with pride in technical achievement, we have forgotten the existence of a divine order of the universe. We do not realize that labour, art and science are only different ways of entering into contact with it" (*Oppression and Liberty* 168).

*Weil: An Anthology* 183).<sup>19</sup> Force is blind and indeterminate, and beyond human control.<sup>20</sup> Although a person may believe he or she possesses force, in reality both victim and victor are equally at its mercy: while one is broken by it, the other is intoxicated (*Simone Weil: An Anthology* 191). Far from being something utilized by the strong to control the weak, force exercises power over both: “To the same degree, though in different fashions, those who use [force] and those who endure it are turned to stone” (*Simone Weil: An Anthology* 204). Weil offers a scathing critique of modern society’s assumption that force reigns supreme:

Today, science, history, politics, the organization of labour, religion even... offer nothing to men’s minds except brute force. Such is our civilization. It is a tree which bears the fruit it deserves (*The Need for Roots* 291).<sup>21</sup>

It is Weil’s intention not only to recognise the existence of force, but to also suggest that there is another, stronger power that force is ultimately obedient to. For Weil, it is this power – which she refers to variously as Eternal Wisdom, Justice, Love, Truth, God, beauty, absolute good, and the reality outside the world – that is the source of all good that exists in this world, and imposes limits on force (*The Need for Roots* 282). One of the effects of uprootedness is that this reality has been obscured, and force has taken its place at the centre of society.

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<sup>19</sup> For a more comprehensive study of these ideas, see Jim Grote’s article “Prestige: Simone Weil’s Theory of Social Force”.

<sup>20</sup> Weil drew a distinction between force and justice: “Force is not a mechanism for automatically creating justice. It is a blind mechanism which produces indiscriminately and impartially just or unjust results, but, by all the laws of probability, nearly always unjust ones” (*The Need for Roots* 240).

<sup>21</sup> Quoting a passage from Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*, which describes the supremacy of force over weakness, Weil asserted that Hitler’s ideas were not so far from the ideology underpinning western civilization as a whole (*The Need for Roots* 282). She pointed out the absurdity in Hitler’s argument that the “circular trajectories” of the planets reveal that force reigns supreme. “How should blind force be able to produce circles? It is not weakness which is the docile servant of force. It is force which is docile to eternal Wisdom” (*The Need for Roots* 282).



*The Need for Roots* can be read as an assertion of the existence of a power other than force, and of ways to establish societies with this reality at their foundation. It is in the fact that force does not rule supreme that Weil locates the grounds for hope. That the “brute force of matter” is obedient to a higher good is, for Weil, “the visible and palpable promise here below, the sure basis of hope. That is the truth which bites at our hearts every time we are penetrated by the beauty of the world” (*The Need for Roots* 282). It is in this quote that the link between Weil’s aesthetics, ethics and politics becomes clear. The terrible events of the twentieth century, characterized by violence and the uprooting of countless communities, were, according to this assessment, ultimately the result of a belief in the supremacy of force. Hope does not come from a belief that justice may be able to be imposed by the use of force, but that beyond the world there exists an absolute good to which force is obedient. It is beauty that has the potential to awaken this hope.

In one of her earlier essays Weil claimed that the most creative of the world’s civilizations set aside an empty space for the supernatural at the centre, around which every other aspect of life was constructed (*Oppression and Liberty* 168). This belief clarifies Weil’s project in *The Need for Roots*. In order for a society to be organised in such a way as to allow for the needs of each individual to be met, she believed that an emphasis on the divine conceived as space – as absence rather than concrete presence – was essential. Every element of her work revolves around this central point. The foremost role of society, in this case, is to provide each person with links to the divine; hence the importance she placed on all aspects of a person’s roots: culture, country, labour, language. It is not surprising, then, that for Weil the value of literature, along

with every other human endeavour, lies in its ability to provide openings onto the divine. These bridges, created by people's roots, Weil refers to as *metaxu*. A Greek term taken from Plato, *metaxu* literally means "intermediary" or "between".<sup>22</sup> Weil uses it to refer to those things that provide links between the human and the divine. *Metaxu* are not an end in themselves: they are integral steps in the path towards the transcendent good they point towards. Weil's interpretation of ancient Greek culture led her to make the following remarks, which reveal the connection between force and *metaxu*: "Civilization of the Greeks. No adoration of force. The temporal was only a bridge" (*Gravity and Grace* 134). *Metaxu* play a central role in Weil's project for creating societies that at their core are based on love and justice.<sup>23</sup>

It is precisely this concept of *metaxu*, and the central role accorded to it in Weil's politics and aesthetics, that forms the theoretical underpinning for this thesis. It allows for the development of a comprehensive vision of how literature may be able to inspire hope, and how this may also have a political and social impact well beyond the realm of the individual. This vision intersects with the writers of the Harlem Renaissance and the Negritude movement, particularly in terms of its focus on the importance of roots. It addresses the dilemma that Camus recognised in movements fighting for revolutionary change, when the means become less important than the hoped for end. In the hope

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<sup>22</sup> Eric O. Springsted, in his thesis examining the Platonic influence on Weil's concept of mediation, notes that "[the] term μετὰξὺ is a Greek adverb or preposition meaning 'intermediary' or 'between', although Weil uses it as a noun, variously singular or plural. [...] It, therefore, appears to be a shorthand term of her technical sense of 'intermediary'" (Springsted 293).

<sup>23</sup> In her essay "Romanesque Renaissance" Weil suggests that "[to] understand force is to recognize that it is almost supreme in this world, and yet to reject it with loathing and contempt. This contempt is the other face of the compassion which goes out to everything that is exposed to the ravages of force. It is in the conception of love that this rejection of force reaches its fulfilment" (*Selected Essays* 49).

generated by *metaxu*, the means (the *metaxu* themselves) are of central importance. Beauty plays a key role; not only does it attract one's attention away from the future towards what actually exists, it also reveals the existence of a power above and beyond force. Literature, in revealing the beauty of the world, can serve as *metaxu*, directing the reader's attention beyond the work itself to the divine. This process is akin to Camus's moment of creative insurrection: a rejection of the supremacy of force and an opening up of new possibilities for joyful, creative engagement in the present.

Weil's philosophy, as it relates to the interplay between hope, roots and literature, offers a unique starting point from which to develop a poetics of hope. The concept of *metaxu* lies at the heart of this discussion. J.M. Baker, in his recent article "Nostalgia of the everyday: earthly things as poetic criteria in Weil and Jacottet", recognises the significance of Weil's concept of *metaxu* in terms of its application to certain strands of modern poetry. He explores Weil's influence on the poetry of Philippe Jaccottet, naming Hölderlin and Rilke as the precursors to the meditative tradition with which his work is aligned. He identifies similarities between Weil's concept of *metaxu* and Rilke's "once being" as articulated in his Ninth Duino Elegy. He also draws a parallel between Weil's ideas concerning the purpose of created things as *metaxu*, and Heidegger's understanding of the role of things as intermediaries between material existence and the non-manifest dimension of being. Polish poet Adam Zagajewski also explores this concept in his collection of essays *A Defense of Ardor*. After exploring the idea of *metaxu* in relation to the tension between ardor and irony in modern poetry, Zagajewski arrives at the conclusion that poetry's role can be seen "in its movement 'between' – both as one of the most important vehicles bearing us upward and as a way

of understanding that ardor precedes irony” (16). Both Baker and Zagajewski recognise the potential for Weil’s *metaxu* to occupy an important place in contemporary poetics.

Although a substantial amount of criticism has been published recently on Weil’s work, the relevance of her thought to aesthetics and literary theory has received less attention than have other elements of her work.<sup>24</sup> Important contributions in this area include *The Beauty that Saves: Essays on Aesthetics and Language in Simone Weil*, edited by John M. Dunaway and Eric O. Springsted, in which a variety of critics including J.P. Little, Joan Dargan, and Katherine T. Brueck comment on Weil’s aesthetics; Dargan’s *Simone Weil: Thinking Poetically*; and Brueck’s *Redemption of Tragedy: The Literary Vision of Simone Weil*. Also of importance is Springsted’s study of Weil’s use of the term *metaxu*, discussed in his published thesis *Christus Mediator: Platonic Mediation in the Thought of Simone Weil*, which illuminates the concept of *metaxu* and allows for further exploration of it in terms of its application to literature. These publications reveal a growing interest in the application of Weil’s thought to contemporary literary studies. The significance of *metaxu* in the context of the study of hope, however, has not been addressed. It is this aspect of *metaxu* that places it at the centre of the development of a poetics of hope.

Perhaps the two best-known twentieth century studies that address the nature of hope are Ernst Bloch’s *The Principle of Hope* (1959) and Jürgen Moltmann’s *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and Implications of a Christian Eschatology* (1967). Bloch takes a Marxist approach, while Moltmann, writing partially in response to Bloch, explores

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<sup>24</sup> Baker notes the lack of research in this particular area; however, although his article acknowledges Joan Dargan’s *Simone Weil: Thinking Poetically*, it overlooks other work, notably Dunaway and Springsted’s *The Beauty that Saves*.

Christian eschatological hope. Rather than using these more familiar philosophical explorations, Weil's work has been chosen because it offers a unique perspective on the nature of hope, and a comprehensive vision of the interplay between literature, roots, hope and justice. In his introduction to *The Beauty that Saves*, Springsted comments on the continuing relevance of Weil's aesthetics:

We are convinced that Simone Weil's aesthetic vision is deeply worthy of attention, for in a world that is so 'post-', so knowing of what it no longer is, but hard pressed to say what it now is, that vision is boldly integrative – while still pluralist, critical, and even tragic – while still morally hopeful and liberating – while yet deeply rooted in the ongoing traditions of value. (9)

It is for these reasons that Weil's writings provide such an important perspective on the interaction between literature and hope. It is pertinent, then, to apply her ideas to the work of two contemporary writers whose novels have been identified by various critics and readers as having inspired hope, and for whom the question of rootedness is central to their fiction.

### **Uprootedness and Hope in the Fiction of Fanny Howe and Alice Walker**

American authors Fanny Howe and Alice Walker occupy unique positions in this dialogue between literature, roots and hope. Each has demonstrable connections with the writers discussed above. Fanny Howe has been profoundly influenced by Simone Weil, evidence of which can be seen in the many references to Weil scattered throughout her poetry, essays and novels. Howe also mentions Fanon as one of the philosophers who influenced her early political education (*The Wedding Dress* xi). Unlike Howe, Alice Walker has not been directly influenced by Weil. However, she does have strong links with other authors discussed above: the Harlem Renaissance writers are her literary predecessors, and Walker also gained inspiration from Camus

(“Interview: Alice Walker” 15). Of the same generation of American women writers, Howe and Walker became friends in the 1970s (White, *Alice Walker* 278). At the time, they were both living precariously on the edge of the colour divide in the United States. Both experienced the eventual breakdown of interracial marriages – in large part due to the external pressures of racism and inequality – raised children as single mothers, and struggled against poverty. They are well placed to give expression to the experience of being uprooted, and to the desire for a transformed society able to meet the physical and spiritual needs of its members.

Weil identifies America in *The Need for Roots* as an uprooted nation (50). In her essay “East and West” she suggests that, in the same way that a Nazi victory in Europe would lead to Hitler’s influence spreading across the globe, “... so the Americanization of Europe would lead to the Americanization of the whole world” (*Selected Essays* 206). The central danger she sees in this process is the fact that, in both scenarios, humankind would lose its connections with the past (*Selected Essays* 207). That, for Weil, would mean depriving the entire population of the world of the most important of the soul’s needs (*The Need for Roots* 51). Our very ability to act hopefully in the present would be weakened, unable to be replaced by visions of a brighter future:

The future brings us nothing, gives us nothing; it is we who in order to build it have to give it everything, our very life. But to be able to give, one has to possess; and we possess no other life, no other living sap, than the treasures stored up from the past and digested, assimilated and created afresh by us. (*The Need for Roots* 51)<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Péguy also looked to the past as a source of inspiration for the present (Adereth 78). This can be seen clearly in his poem *Portal of the Mystery of Hope*. Although Weil disagreed quite strongly with Péguy on several matters, particularly his glorification of the military, this poem, especially in its emphasis on the importance of roots, intersects with many of the ideas in Weil’s *The Need for Roots*. *Portal of the Mystery of Hope* expresses the continuing relevance of France’s religious, cultural and natural heritage. It

In light of this critique of American society, and the prophetic quality of Weil's words (have not American corporations, ideologies, products and arms now reached even the most remote areas of the globe?), Howe's and Walker's fiction provides an insight into the uprootedness that characterizes American society, and by extension, increasing areas of the globe. Their work can be seen as a search for ways to live ethically in the face of racial, patriarchal and economic oppression. As an integral part of their struggle against uprootedness, both writers turn to their own heritage and traditions.

The intersections between Weil's philosophy and the fiction of Howe and Walker allow for an analysis of Howe's and Walker's work in relation to the poetics of hope outlined above. The two primary texts discussed here, Howe's *Saving History* and Walker's *The Color Purple*, both explore one of the central elements of Weil's aesthetic and political thought: the link between force and uprootedness, and the role of beauty in revealing an alternative to the supremacy of force. The main characters in *Saving History* and *The Color Purple*, Felicity and Celie, both experience the horrors of being uprooted as a result of coming into contact with force. Both are seen as 'things' rather than human beings, abused and exploited in their position as poor women of colour in a society that does not value them. Although each character responds to this condition of uprootedness in different ways, their approaches do reveal several core similarities. The most important of these is the experience of a power beyond force, analogous to Weil's belief in the existence of an absolute good beyond the world. In both novels, love appears as a power able to counter the effects of force. Things that act as *metaxu* draw

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is for children that hope is kept alive, in order to pass on the richness of French heritage to present and future generations. Hope itself is personified as a young girl who, despite her diminutive size, plays a central role in human existence. "This little girl, nothing at all. / She alone, carrying the others... will cross worlds past" (6).

the characters' attention towards the beauty of the world, and as a result, love is awakened within them. As the characters become rooted in love rather than remaining involuntarily uprooted by the effects of force, hope begins to emerge. Central to this transformation is the refiguring of Felicity's and Celie's understanding of the divine. At first, they are subject to a form of divinity that is inseparable from the very forces of oppression that uproot them. Their initial visions of God, especially in Celie's case, must be discarded before they are able to grow roots into a divinity characterised by love.

Weil, Howe and Walker all articulate an understanding of the divine that upholds the value of active human love, attentiveness to one other and to the beauty of the world, and the significance of the world's beauty as an indication of divine love. Although there are differences in their conceptions of God,<sup>26</sup> all three understand the divine to be a source of power that enables human beings to be rooted in love. All reject a notion of religion that ignores the beauty of the world, and of a God who is on the side of the rich and powerful. Whether in Weil's understanding of a God who is absent, but in that very absence ultimately present on earth in the beauty of the world; or Howe's refiguring of the divine from one associated with white privilege, manipulation and power to an empty space, a mystery around which everything else revolves and has its being; or Walker's conception of God as the beauty of the world itself, as a source of love, healing, humour and joy – their work explores the possibility of setting down roots within a conception of the divine that is divorced from the ruling power structures of their times.

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<sup>26</sup> For Weil the beauty of the world is an opening onto, or a bridge leading to God, whereas for Walker the world's beauty is itself an embodiment of God. An explanation of these differences will be expanded upon in Chapter Three.



The centrality of *metaxu* in Weil's political and aesthetic thought demonstrates the importance of these bridges between the human and the divine in countering the effects of uprootedness. Howe and Walker also encapsulate a response to uprootedness in their work that rejects the supremacy of force, and affirms the existence of a divine love able to transform individuals, and by extension, the wider community. Things that act as *metaxu* within *Saving History* and *The Color Purple* provide the impetus for the characters to direct their attention towards this love, and ultimately to embody it in acts of love towards the other characters. In *The Color Purple*, this results in the positive transformation of Celie's life and community; in *Saving History*, it enables Felicity to make a decision that values the sanctity of every human life, even at great personal cost.

Not only do these novels demonstrate the role of *metaxu* in the generation of hope, they also have the potential to become *metaxu* themselves. Attention is a crucial element in the efficacy of *metaxu*: the object must be able to attract one's attention and direct it beyond the object itself towards the divine. Both Howe and Walker employ literary techniques that require a certain form of attention from the reader. The shifting narrative voice, spiraling narrative structure, meditative passages and use of contradiction in Howe's *Saving History* oblige the reader to disregard preconceived notions of literary conventions and simply attend to the text. It is impossible to read Walker's *The Color Purple* without hearing the voice of Celie, a marginalised black woman, thus recognising the value of that voice, and by extension, of Celie herself. The hope identified in these novels can be attributed to the presence of *metaxu* in the lives of the characters, and in the potential the novels themselves have to form *metaxu* for the reader.

## Thesis Outline

The first chapter of this thesis explores Simone Weil's concept of *metaxu* in the context of developing a poetics of hope. The form of hope Weil advocates is associated with an illumination of the present rather than utopian visions of the future. Beauty plays a central role in inspiring this hope. The concept of *metaxu* is central to Weil's aesthetic and political thought, offering an alternative to the escalation of uprootedness and a belief in the primacy of force; and identifying a quality within certain artworks that enables them to form bridges between the human and the divine. It is in its role as *metaxu* that literature is able to inspire hope. Weil wrote several articles directly addressing the role and responsibility of writers, and often referred to literary works she respected and drew inspiration from: these offer an insight into her understanding of the role of literature and its ability to inspire hope. One of the characteristics of Weil's poetics is the claim that the best literature is that which is essentially "impersonal": rather than celebrating the personality of the author, it reveals something of the power of divine love. It is literature such as this, she believes, that can play a role in the generation of more just societies. A self-emptying humility is needed in order for a writer to experience the inspiration necessary to produce such works.

This humility, or self-renunciation, finds expression in Fanny Howe's novel *Saving History*, which, in the second chapter of this thesis, is analysed using the poetics of hope formulated above. Howe's response to uprootedness, as expressed in *Saving History*, reveals a form of hope intimately connected with attentiveness to the beauty of the world and to the other, self-renunciation, and concrete acts of love. Lonely, displaced and often bewildered by the events that shape their lives, the characters in *Saving*

*History* struggle to live ethically in a society characterized by injustice. In these circumstances, hope emerges in the centre of a paradox. When uprooted by institutions, people or other forces beyond their control, Howe's characters begin to despair. If they voluntarily uproot themselves, however, by being open and attentive to the beauty of the world, they experience an inner freedom and become agents of hope. *Metaxu* play a key role in this process, attracting and drawing the characters' attention beyond themselves towards divine love. This experience enables them to see past their own needs and address the needs of others through concrete acts of love.

Weil's influence on Howe has been mentioned in some critical responses to her work, however it has not as yet been explored in any great depth. Ann Vickery examines the relevance of aspects of Weil's philosophy to Howe's poetry in a chapter in her book *Leaving Lines of Gender: A Feminist Genealogy of Language Writing*. Vickery draws on what she sees as Weil's main concern, "the relation between the invisible and earthly existence," to analyse the poetry of Fanny Howe and Rae Armantrout (218). This study provides a starting point for a more comprehensive analysis of Howe's work in relation to Weil's poetics. Tiffany Eberle Kriner's recent unpublished thesis *A Future and a Hope: Eschatology of the Other in Twentieth-Century American Literature by Women*, devotes a chapter to developing the concept of hope in *Saving History*, with particular emphasis on Howe's poetics of bewilderment. Kriner provides a comprehensive analysis of Howe's novel in relation to a form of hope embedded in an ethic of the other, however the influence of Simone Weil is only briefly mentioned. This chapter expands on the studies of Vickery and Kriner by offering an analysis of Howe's work in terms of Weil's poetics, focusing largely on the interplay between hope, *metaxu* and Howe's concept of bewilderment.

The third chapter introduces Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple* into this dialogue between literature and hope. *The Color Purple* also demonstrates the role played by *metaxu* in the generation of hope. *Metaxu*, in the form of the beauty of the world and human love, are integral to Celie's awakening. Before Celie can recognise these *metaxu* as openings onto the divine, however, her initial conception of God is challenged and eventually discarded. This refiguring of the divine, as in *Saving History*, is an important part of the process that results in a flowering of hope, not only in Celie's own life, but also in her wider community. Walker's novel provides a counterpoint to Howe's *Saving History* in several ways, raising the question of the role played by self-reclamation in the generation of hope. While self-renunciation plays an important role in both Weil's and Howe's work, Walker concentrates far more on self-reclamation and self-expression. On the surface, these two approaches would appear to be irreconcilable. Drawing on Walker's writings on the 'decolonisation of the spirit', however, the possibility emerges for these two quite different approaches to the self to co-exist, and for each to inform the other. This reveals another dimension in the search for a poetics of hope. Walker's response to uprootedness in her fiction forms part of a lineage of African American writers that reaches back to spirituals and slave narratives. In these narratives, as in Walker's work, the reclamation of self is central to both freedom and hope. African American women writers in particular, according to critic Barbara Christian, have been attempting to express a "totality of self" in their work since the nineteenth century (234). In line with her literary heritage, Walker's approach to the self necessarily involves a reclamation and celebration of black women.

Since its publication in 1983 *The Color Purple* has generated a wide range of responses, both positive and negative, from readers and critics alike. Although many have commented on hopeful aspects of the novel, there has been no major study assessing this theme. Certainly the intersections between *The Color Purple* and Weil's concept of *metaxu* have not yet been explored. This chapter identifies those points of connection, and employs the ideas developed in the previous two chapters to analyse *The Color Purple*. A number of conclusions emerge as a result of this analysis that both affirm the value of Weil's philosophy in developing a poetics of hope, and introduce new elements into the discussion that give added depth to the ideas formulated in the first and second chapters. Weil's *metaxu* is able to illuminate the hope expressed in these novels by Walker and Howe, despite obvious differences in their approaches to language, the emphasis they each place on reclamation and renunciation of self, and their conceptions of the divine. The truly hopeful moments in each novel occur not as the characters long for a blissful future, but in acts of love that emerge as they focus their attention on different forms of *metaxu*.

The final section of each chapter is devoted to developing a method of writing that results in the creation of works with the potential to form *metaxu* for the reader. Weil's poetics forms the basis for this discussion, while in later chapters the method of writing used by Howe and Walker is also explored. The importance of directing one's attention beyond oneself in the creative process emerges as a central theme. Developing the capacity for attention and humility in the act of creation is key to Weil's process of writing, Fanny Howe describes her own creative process as beginning with a form of attention akin to that described by Weil, and Alice Walker attributes much of the

humour and delight in *The Color Purple* to the discipline of meditation she maintained during the writing of it.

Weil's work provides an excellent starting point from which to develop a poetics of hope. Her preference for a present-oriented form of hope intersects with the work of contemporary philosophers, and provides an alternative approach to the future-oriented hope proposed by Sartre. No less politically committed, Weil, like Camus, embraced a politics that placed primary importance on living and creating ethically in the present. The importance of roots, so central to Weil's aesthetics, was also recognised among the writers of the Harlem Renaissance and Negritude movement, both of which inspired hope and laid a strong literary heritage that subsequent generations of writers have drawn upon. The value of Weil's concept of *metaxu* as a tool with which to identify the hopeful aspects of literary works is revealed in the analysis of Howe's *Saving History* and Walker's *The Color Purple*. In a world suffering the effects of uprootedness on an ever-increasing scale, Simone Weil, Fanny Howe and Alice Walker offer an alternative to a future-oriented hope. Their writings reveal a hope generated by acts of love in the present, inspired by attentiveness to the beauty of the world and to one another.

## Chapter 1

### Simone Weil's Poetics: Literature, Hope and *Metaxu*

*But the work of art which is the effect of the artist's inspiration is a source of inspiration to those who contemplate it. Through the work of art, the love which is in the artist begets a like love in other souls. So does absolute Love throughout the universe.*

Simone Weil<sup>27</sup>

In Simone Weil's *The Need for Roots*, the role of literature appears to be inseparable from her wider project of seeking to articulate the problems of her time, and to offer alternatives for the development of a more just society. Inherent in her search for justice is a sense of hope that seeks to see in and beyond the injustices of the world a deeper reality characterized by love, truth and beauty. The hope Weil offers is not focused on the future but is grounded in the present, inspired by things of beauty that have the potential to direct one's attention towards the divine. She uses the Greek term *metaxu* to describe these things, which act as intermediaries between the temporal and the eternal, the human and the divine. The culture, heritage, language and natural environment that form a community's roots are considered *metaxu*, if they point beyond themselves towards a transcendent good. Literature's ability to inspire hope resides in its role as *metaxu*. Although Weil's literary canon is extremely narrow, her ideas do provide a good foundation from which to begin to formulate a poetics of hope.

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<sup>27</sup> *Intimations of Christianity Among the Ancient Greeks*, 105.

### **Hope and *The Need for Roots***

A distinct articulation of a certain form of hope emerges in *The Need for Roots*. This most comprehensive of Weil's works was written while she was working for the Free French in London in 1942-3. She had been given the task of compiling a report on the political documents written by groups of intellectuals inside France who had gathered to share ideas on the restructuring of the country in anticipation of the defeat and overthrow of the Vichy government. Weil commented on and engaged with these writings in addition to contributing her own ideas (Cabaud 298-300). One of the works she completed during this time, "Prelude to a Declaration of Duties Towards Mankind", centres on the need for social relations in France to be organised in a more just manner, with a particular focus on the spirituality of work and the development and preservation of people's roots. This document was later published in France as *L'Enracinement* and in English as *The Need for Roots*; like much of Weil's work it addresses universal themes and has implications beyond post-war France. Not only does it address the practical organisation of society so as to provide each citizen with his or her physical and spiritual needs, it is also concerned with the problem of finding a method to breathe inspiration into a people. Although Weil rarely addresses the nature and role of hope directly in *The Need for Roots*, her understanding of how hope is made manifest appears throughout the document, and is inseparable from its overarching themes. The very fact that she sought to articulate a way to inspire and sustain a more just society in this work imbues it with a sense of hope.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Jim Grote recognises the hope inherent in Weil's social and political analyses, suggesting that although her reasoning may not appear to be particularly optimistic on the surface, it "does not lead to political despair, but rather to genuine hope" (217-232).



Weil's understanding of the role of hope in the development of more just societies is revealed in one of the few direct references to hope scattered throughout *The Need for Roots*. Found in the opening pages of *The Need for Roots*, this passage provides a concise introduction to the connections Weil drew between beauty, art, hope and justice. I will quote the passage in its entirety, for it clearly reveals the connection Weil draws between the role of art and the generation of hope:

The contemplation of veritable works of art, and much more still that of the beauty of the world, and again much more that of the unrealized good to which we aspire, can sustain us in our efforts to think continually about that human order which should be the subject uppermost in our minds.

The great instigators of violence have encouraged themselves with the thought of how blind, mechanical force is sovereign throughout the whole universe.

By looking at the world with keener senses than theirs, we shall find a more powerful encouragement in the thought of how these innumerable blind forces are limited, made to balance one against the other, brought to form a united whole by something which we do not understand, but which we call beauty.

If we keep ever present in our minds the idea of a veritable human order, if we think of it as of something to which a total sacrifice is due should the need arise, we shall be in a similar position to that of a man travelling, without a guide, through the night, but continually thinking of the direction he wishes to follow. Such a traveller's way is lit by a great hope. (*The Need for Roots* 12)

In this passage, as in Weil's other writings on aesthetics, the value of art is found in its ability to reveal the beauty of the world, to provide a means by which a divine order may be seen behind the "blind forces" that govern our existence. The beauty that finds expression in these works of art reveals a reality that is not subject to force. That it is possible to comprehend, through beauty, an order that limits and balances the world's competing forces, provides the possibility that human society is also able to be shaped

by such an order. It is this possibility that provides the hope that human social interactions can also be ordered in such a way as to reveal the beauty of the world, characterized by justice and love.

In Weil's writings, beauty appears as the embodiment of a transcendent wisdom that is not subject to force, but imposes limits on the exercise of it. The promise beauty embodies is that the forces which appear to control our existence are actually subject to a greater wisdom and love. For Weil, this provides, "the sure basis of hope. [This] is the truth which bites at our hearts every time we are penetrated by the beauty of the world" (*The Need for Roots* 282). Beauty inspires hope, providing a reminder of "the only thing which is immune to force and can preserve us from it: namely, that other force which is the radiance of the spirit" (*Simone Weil: An Anthology* 81). Elsewhere in Weil's writings, beauty is described as "the harmony of chance and the good" which is able to attract one's attention and provide something that can be contemplated (*Gravity and Grace* 135). In a passage from one of her essays written in the same period as *The Need for Roots*, Weil refers to beauty as "the supreme mystery of this world. It is a gleam which attracts the attention and yet does nothing to sustain it... It feeds only the part of the soul that gazes" (*Simone Weil: An Anthology* 92). As Joan Dargan notes, beauty is central to Weil's metaphysics (87).

One of the characteristics of Weil's conception of beauty is its ability to attract one's attention towards what actually exists. Beauty "takes our desire captive and empties it of its object, giving it an object which is present and thus forbidding it to fly off towards

the future” (*Gravity and Grace* 58).<sup>29</sup> In this way, hope that is generated by beauty is oriented not towards the future, but towards a clearer, deeper comprehension of the present. Weil did not advocate a form of hope that drew on the promise of a future utopia. In contrast, she believed that a continuous flow of inspiration from the past to the present, providing the impetus to move forward into the future, was necessary for human life to flourish (*The Need for Roots* 51). Weil’s hope is anchored in the past. The preservation of and active interaction with one’s roots provides the hope necessary to shape the future. Beauty is able to attract and hold one’s attention, generating a hope that is not caught up in an imaginary future, but is grounded in the present.

In an earlier essay “Prospects: Are we Headed for the Proletarian Revolution?” Weil states that, “[if] we want to traverse this sombre age in manly fashion, we shall refrain, like the Ajax of Sophocles, from letting empty hopes set us afire” (*Oppression and Liberty* 1). She was wary of the blind optimism associated with hope. In a later essay she again refers to the illusory nature of certain forms of hope.<sup>30</sup> People who struggle to maintain a subsistence level income by way of their own manual labour, she suggests, are in a position where they are working merely to exist. In situations such as these, when existence itself becomes the only end to work towards, its real purpose, that of providing the “framework upon which all good, both real and imagined, may be built” is lost (*Simone Weil: an Anthology* 265). In the face of such soul-destroying emptiness, people seek various compensations to make their lives more bearable. Some cling to the hope of being able to change their social position in order to secure a better life for either themselves or their children; others turn to illusions that offer an escape by way

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<sup>29</sup> In another essay, Weil describes beauty as “a source of energy on the level of the spiritual life” (*On Science, Necessity and the Love of God* 124).

<sup>30</sup> “Prerequisite to Dignity of Labour”, written in 1941.

of “mindless pleasure or violence” (*Simone Weil: an Anthology* 265-6). Later in this essay Weil reveals her method of seeking a different kind of hope in such unbearable situations: “Only one thing makes monotony bearable, and that is beauty, the light of the eternal” (*Simone Weil: an Anthology* 268). Beauty, in Weil’s writings, has the unique quality of being able to draw the soul’s desire towards “not what could be or will be, but towards what exists” (*Simone Weil: an Anthology* 268). Unlike Sartre’s revolutionary future-oriented hope, Weil’s hope is found in an illumination of the present.<sup>31</sup>

This conception of hope is underpinned by two of the major influences that find expression in Weil’s later writings: her admiration of the ancient Greeks, and her own experiences of suffering and mystical revelation. She wrote two essays while working for the Free French in London in 1942-3 which provide a valuable summary of the origins and application of her ideas: “Human Personality” and “Draft for a Statement of

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<sup>31</sup> Here we come up against a contradiction. When stripped of any association with future rewards, the form of hope set out above can almost be seen to be analogous to despair: “[if] we apply to the present the point of that desire within us which corresponds to finality, it pierces right through to the eternal. That is the use of despair which turns the attention away from the future” (*Gravity and Grace* 18). As many scholars have commented, any exploration of Simone Weil’s work can reveal contradictions and seemingly irreconcilable concepts. Contradictions appear in Weil’s life as much as in her writings: Jacques Cabaud points out that Weil was impatient, yet she advocated waiting (252); although she was Jewish, and advocated returning to one’s roots, T.S. Eliot in his Preface to the English translation of *The Need for Roots* comments on Weil’s almost vehement rejection of the Hebrew tradition (x-xi). However, as Miklos Vetö suggests, the contradictions in Weil’s writings are central to an understanding of her work. According to Vetö, Weil’s work forms a cohesive whole, governed by laws particular to Weil’s own spiritual experience and vision of the world (3-4). One of these laws relates to the value of contradiction in the revelation of deeper truths. Weil believed that to hold two irreconcilable, distinct thoughts in the mind, refusing to discount either one of them on account of the other, could lead to a new insight or understanding on a higher plane. She placed such importance on this aspect of contradiction that she saw it as a “criterion of the real”: according to her understanding, only what is imaginary does not contain a contradiction (*Gravity and Grace* 89).

Human Obligations”. In the second of these essays she begins with the Platonic view that absolute good exists beyond the world we currently inhabit:

There is a reality outside the world, that is to say, outside space and time, outside man’s mental universe, outside any sphere whatsoever that is accessible to human faculties...

That reality is the unique source of all the good that can exist in this world. (*Simone Weil: an Anthology* 221-222)

Taking this as her starting point, she goes on to state that: “Corresponding to this reality, at the centre of the human heart, is the longing for an absolute good, a longing which is always there and is never appeased by any object in this world” (*Simone Weil: an Anthology* 222). Each person, without exception, is connected to that other reality by a combination of “the longing in the depth of the heart for absolute good, and the power... of directing attention and love to a reality beyond the world and of receiving good from it” (*Simone Weil: an Anthology* 222-223). On account of this connection, every person is held to be sacred and deserving of respect (*Simone Weil: an Anthology* 223).

Furthering her definition of what makes a person ‘sacred’, Weil claims that:

At the bottom of the heart of every human being, from earliest infancy to the tomb, there is something that goes on indomitably expecting, in the teeth of all experience of crimes committed, suffered and witnessed, that good and not evil will be done to him.

It is this above all that is sacred in every human being. (*Simone Weil: an Anthology* 71)

This statement, taken in conjunction with the belief, quoted above, that the core of each person consists of a longing for “absolute good”, reveals an essentially hopeful view of the human spirit. If the basic definition of hope is given as “expectation and desire combined” (“Hope,” def. 1), Weil’s descriptions of the expectation and longing found within the human heart suggest that the sacred nature of each person is an expression of

hope itself. Returning to the idea that the sacred core of each human being corresponds to absolute good, it can be said that this longing within the depths of the heart is the direct result of a person's connection with the divine. If this is the case, seeking to inspire hope then becomes a question of finding ways to nurture the link between the human spirit and Weil's "reality outside the world".

The concepts discussed thus far reveal a vision for how hope can be inspired, both in the individual and the wider community. Weil found hope in her belief that force does not rule supreme, that it is governed and limited by a transcendent justice and love. As such, she believed it possible to structure human relations in such a way as to mirror the divine ordering of the universe, as it is revealed in the beauty of the world. On the level of the individual, Weil's hope is based on the same principle: the reality of divine love and the individual's connection with that love. Another passage from *The Need for Roots* reveals the continuity between these two ideas:

So long as Man submits to having his soul taken up with his own thoughts, his personal thoughts, he remains entirely subjected, even in his most secret thoughts, to the compulsion exercised by needs and to the mechanical play of forces... But everything changes as soon as, by virtue of a positive act of concentration, he empties his soul so as to allow the conceptions of eternal Wisdom to enter into it. He then carries within himself the very conceptions to which force is subjected. (287-8)

Hope is inspired in the individual when one's inherent connection with the divine is strengthened by contemplating the beautiful, and in so doing, emptying oneself in order to allow the love that governs the universe to fill one's soul. In this way hope, on an individual level and at the level of envisioning more just societies, involves a recognition that blind force is not ultimately in control, and an act of focusing the attention on something beautiful in order to allow the love that does control the universe

to enter into the soul. As stated above, beauty plays a major role in this process: it provides the evidence of a transcendent love and it attracts one's attention towards it, providing a means for contemplation, for emptying the mind of personal thoughts and desires so as to allow space for "eternal Wisdom" to enter.

### **Weil's Mysticism: Connections between Suffering, Roots and Hope**

The form of hope underpinning Weil's project in *The Need for Roots* obviously operates on a different plane to those desires attached to certain possessions, relationships or ideas associated with future rewards, personal gain or visions of utopia. It is anchored instead deep within her own understanding and experience of the reality of suffering. The image she returns to in order to describe the relationship between hope and suffering is the cross of Christ. Indeed, as Katherine T. Brueck notes in her commentary on Weil's work, "[the] cross alone may unlock the secret of suffering, the only knowledge that offers a hedge against despair" (115). To appreciate the centrality of the cross in Weil's philosophy, it is necessary to refer to her explanation of the creation of the universe: "On God's part, creation is not an act of self-expansion but of restraint and renunciation. [...] God permitted the existence of things distinct from himself and worth infinitely less than himself" (*Waiting on God* 87). In Weil's understanding, God created the universe by withdrawing himself and allowing things other than God to exist. It is in the distance between God and God that the universe exists. As God created through love, the universe is bounded by love, and only exists by virtue of that love. The crucifixion then becomes "the infinite distance between God and God, this supreme tearing apart, this agony beyond all others, this marvel of love..." (*Waiting on God* 68). This rending, which is at once a tearing apart and a uniting of love,

echoes perpetually across the universe in the midst of the silence, like two notes, separate yet melting into one, like pure and heart-rending harmony. This is the Word of God. The whole creation is nothing but its vibration. (*Waiting on God* 68)

As God created the world by drawing back, he can never be fully present to us on earth. The earth only exists because of his loving absence.

The paradox of experiencing God's love through his absence runs as a current throughout Weil's work. She writes of this with a clarity derived from her mystical experiences. For her, it is in affliction that God's mercy shines (*Waiting on God* 38). She believed that if a person continued to love even in the depths of misery, social degradation and physical pain to the point where he or she could not help but call out as Christ did: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" that person would touch "something which is not affliction, which is not joy; something which is the central essence, necessary and pure; something not of the senses, common to joy and sorrow; something which is the very love of God" (*Waiting on God* 38). She highlighted the importance of choosing to continually orient oneself towards the good, even in the face of oppression, suffering and affliction.

Weil describes her own mystical experiences in her spiritual autobiography, written as a letter to Father Perrin in 1942. After spending a gruelling year working in a factory, suffering physical, mental and spiritual exhaustion, she accompanied her parents to a small fishing village in Portugal. At that time, after having worked in the factory for a year, she felt as though she had been marked forever as a slave (*Waiting on God* 19-20). While walking the streets of the village one evening she came across a procession of women, wives of the fishermen, walking down towards the ships, carrying candles and singing "ancient hymns of a heart-rending sadness" (*Waiting on God* 20). The



conviction came to her that “Christianity is pre-eminently the religion of slaves, that slaves cannot help belonging to it, and I among others” (*Waiting on God* 20). The second experience she describes took place as she attended church services in Solesmes, while suffering from severe headaches. During these services, she was able, “by an extreme effort of concentration... to rise above this wretched flesh, to leave it to suffer by itself, heaped up in a corner, and to find a pure and perfect joy in the unimaginable beauty of the chanting and the words” (*Waiting on God* 20). The role Weil attributed to suffering – that of bringing a person to a point where it is possible to touch the very essence of the love of God – was very much a part of her own physical reality.

In the above incidents, Weil experienced a spiritual revelation that took place in the midst of suffering. In both cases, the catalysts for these moments of transcendence were ancient songs and chants of the Christian tradition. In the following experience, also described in her spiritual autobiography, the catalyst was the recitation of George Herbert’s poem “Love”. The poem became an object of contemplation for Weil whilst she was in the midst of pain: “Often, at the culminating point of a violent headache, I make myself say it over, concentrating all my attention upon it and clinging with all my soul to the tenderness it enshrines” (*Waiting on God* 21). During one of these recitations, she “felt in the midst of my suffering the presence of a love, like that which one can read in the smile on a beloved face” (*Waiting on God* 22). These accounts reveal the close connection between the hope expressed in *The Need for Roots* and Weil’s experience of drawing on her own roots. She found in the songs, chants and poem a beauty that drew her attention, providing objects for contemplation. As a result, even as she suffered, she experienced a love that transcended her pain. These

experiences played a central role in shaping much of her subsequent writing, including *The Need for Roots*.<sup>32</sup>

For Weil, a person “has roots by virtue of his real, active and natural participation in the life of a community which preserves in living shape certain particular treasures of the past and certain particular expectations for the future” (*The Need for Roots* 41). Roots are not an end in themselves however; their central purpose is to provide pathways to the divine: “The human soul needs above all to be rooted in several natural environments and to make contact with the universe through them” (*Simone Weil: An Anthology* 229). The paradox at the heart of Weil’s writings on this subject lies in the relationship between rootedness and uprootedness. Weil not only advocated the growth and preservation of roots, she also asserted that it was necessary to uproot oneself (*Gravity and Grace* 34). While these positions appear to be mutually exclusive, together they reveal Weil’s approach:

To uproot oneself socially and vegetatively.

To exile oneself from every earthly country.

To do all that to others, from the outside, is a substitute (*ersatz*) for decreation. It results in unreality.

But by uprooting oneself one seeks greater reality. (*Gravity and Grace* 34)

This passage includes several key points. The purpose of roots is to provide ways of making connection with the divine: their value lies in the pathways they form between temporal existence and divine love. Uprootedness, in the negative sense, results from a destruction of a person’s cultural and social environment by an external party, removing these essential means of making contact with the divine. However, there is a different

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<sup>32</sup> Louis Dupré suggests that Platonic thought became central to Weil’s intellectual development after these experiences, particularly in terms of her focus on the importance of mediation (11-12).

kind of uprootedness, contrary to the first, which results as a person voluntarily moves beyond a reliance on their roots to what they point towards. If roots are seen as an end in themselves, their purpose is misunderstood:

The bridges of the Greeks. We have inherited them but we do not know how to use them... We have erected skyscrapers on them to which we ceaselessly add storeys. We no longer know that they are bridges, things made so that we may pass along them, and that by passing along them we go towards God. (*Gravity and Grace* 132-33)

Dunaway draws a parallel between Weil's concept of roots and several of Camus's novels and short stories. He suggests that the "goal of Camus's protagonist is always to be at one with the cosmos, in harmony with his universe" ("Estrangement and the Need for Roots" 36). LeBlanc also recognises the link between Weil's understanding of roots and Camus's writings. In his reading,

the confrontation in Camus is basic: between communal meaning, rooted in the traditions and history of a society, and governing structures or the physical and institutional forms that meaning has assumed. (61-62)

Camus's "governing structures" (the judicial system that condemns Meursault to death in *L'Étranger*, for example), bear resemblance to Weil's skyscrapers – they each arise from a fundamental misunderstanding of the role of roots. Rootedness, in both Weil and Camus, must be understood as separate to institutions that have developed within societies, perhaps originally to assist in providing meaning to a given community, but that have since become ends in themselves that perpetuate, rather than alleviate, suffering and injustice.

## *Metaxu*

Weil's conception of roots is heavily influenced by the Greek word *metaxu*, which she uses to refer to the existence of intermediaries that form bridges between earth and heaven.<sup>33</sup> E.O. Springsted identifies mediation as the aspect of Weil's thought that, in his eyes, marks the overall coherence of her work (12). His published thesis *Christus Mediator: Platonic Mediation on the Thought of Simone Weil*, explores the idea of mediation as it is developed in Weil's writings, and gives a comprehensive analysis of her use of the term *metaxu*. He describes *metaxu* thus:

Α μεταξύ in regard to its objective sense is an intermediate support and sustainer between nothingness and the fullness of being. It is also a reflector of light which, when proper attention is brought to bear on it, helps lift the soul. In regard to the subject's role, a μεταξύ is defined by the soul's attention intermediate between ignorance and truth and between a total lack of love and explicit love. (207-208)

There are two elements of *metaxu* that Springsted points out in this definition: the qualities contained in the object itself, and the subject's approach to the object. Both are essential in the creation of a *metaxu*. The relationship between subject and object is made clear in the example of Weil's recitation of Herbert's poem. The poem itself was able to attract and sustain her attention, drawing her thoughts away from herself and directing them towards the divine. The poem only became a *metaxu*, however, as Weil consented to use it as such, focusing her attention on the words even as she suffered physical pain.

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<sup>33</sup> Springsted claims that the idea of mediation is crucial to understanding *The Need for Roots*, not only in terms of illuminating the text itself, but also in revealing its consistency with the rest of Weil's work (242-243).

Referring to Plato's *Republic*, Weil describes the role *metaxu* play in assisting the soul's vision to adjust to the light after having left the darkness of the cave:

The role of the intermediary is, first, to be at a point half-way between ignorance and the plenitude of wisdom, between temporal becoming and the plenitude of being... And then it also has *to attract the soul towards being, to evoke the faculty of thought.* (*On Science, Necessity and the Love of God* 112-113)

*Metaxu* in this instance refer to those things that help one who has stepped out of the cave to become accustomed to the daylight. Plato's simile reveals the need for intermediaries in the revelation of truth. Unable to gaze at the sun itself, one becomes accustomed to the light by looking at things that are revealed by the light of the sun: shadows, reflections in the water and then the objects themselves, the night sky, moon and stars, and only then directly at the sun (516a). Socrates names four mathematical disciplines – arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and harmony – that aid the mind's "conversion... from a kind of twilight to the true day..." (521c). The value of these disciplines does not lie in themselves, but in their role as intermediaries. Jacques Cabaud addresses this aspect of *metaxu*, clarifying Weil's position that the value of roots resides in their role as bridges between the human and the divine: "From the moment that something created is not an end but a means, it becomes a bridge to God" (227). This quality of *metaxu* characterises Weil's approach not only to mathematics and science, but also to the arts, politics, labour and religion. These aspects of human existence are, for Weil, of value in so far as they offer a means of moving beyond themselves towards divine love. It is precisely this role that renders these things indispensable to human life:

No human being should be deprived of his *metaxu*, that is to say of those relative and mixed blessings (home, country, traditions, culture, etc.) which warm and nourish the

soul and without which, short of sainthood, a *human* life is not possible. (*Gravity and Grace* 133)

The value of collective life, art and science, according to Weil, is that they provide an environment in which the ‘impersonal’ element of the soul can thrive: “Relations between the collectivity and the person should be arranged with the sole purpose of removing whatever is detrimental to the growth and mysterious germination of the impersonal element in the soul” (*Simone Weil: an Anthology* 79). This “impersonal element in the soul” is the point within the heart that corresponds to divine love. Central to Weil’s thought is the idea that this love is able to be made manifest on earth through people who consent to focus their attention on the reality outside the world (*Simone Weil: an Anthology* 222). Those who have practiced this form of attention leave a legacy that, in turn, enables others to deepen their connection with the divine. The nature of the role played by a collectivity in ensuring that the wisdom of its members is passed on is explained in the first section of *The Need for Roots*:

a collectivity has its roots in the past. It constitutes the sole agency for preserving the spiritual treasures accumulated by the dead, the sole transmitting agency by means of which the dead can speak to the living. (8)

### **Self-renunciation and Attention**

Springsted’s recognition of the two-fold nature of *metaxu*, requiring not only the object’s ability to attract a person’s attention but also that person’s consent to focus their attention on the object, reveals the importance of two aspects of Weil’s philosophy that underpin her approach to both hope and literature: self-renunciation and attention. There is a basic illusion, Weil contends, that besets human existence: the tendency to see oneself as the centre of the world. “The illusion of perspective places [man] at the

centre of space; an illusion of the same kind falsifies his idea of time; and yet another kindred illusion arranges a whole hierarchy of values around him” (*Waiting on God* 98). To give up this position at the centre of the world, “to renounce it, not only intellectually but in the imaginative part of our soul, that means to awaken to what is real and eternal, to see the true light and hear the true silence” (*Waiting on God* 98). A transformation then occurs “at the very roots of our sensibility, in our immediate reception of sense impressions and psychological impressions” which results in us seeing the same colours and hearing the same sounds, but in a different way (*Waiting on God* 98-9). This has far reaching consequences, enabling us to “discern that all points in the world are equally centers and that the true centre is outside the world” (*Waiting on God* 99). Illusion gives way to a reality illuminated by the divine.

Self-renunciation plays an important part in the interaction between a person and the object that serves as a *metaxu*. The key element in this interaction is the person’s decision to focus his or her attention on the object rather than remain absorbed in his or her own thoughts. Attention, in Weil’s use of the term, refers to a form of concentration that “consists of suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty and ready to be penetrated by the object...” (*Waiting on God* 56).<sup>34</sup> To redirect one’s attention towards something other than oneself involves an inherent renunciation of self. It is this very renunciation, however, which contains an echo of God’s renunciation in the creation of the world, referred to above (*Waiting on God* 87-89). Consenting to the diminution of self that comes as a result of truly attending to what exists beyond oneself has an impact on the way one interacts with the world:

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<sup>34</sup> For further discussion on aspects of Weil’s concept of attention, see Ann Pirruccello, “Interpreting Simone Weil: Presence and Absence in Attention”, and Sharon Cameron, “The Practice of Attention: Simone Weil’s Performance of Impersonality.”

Two tendencies with opposite extremes: to destroy the self for the sake of the universe, or to destroy the universe for the sake of the self. He who has not been able to become nothing runs the risk of reaching a moment when everything other than himself ceases to exist. (*Gravity and Grace* 128)

In this way, *metaxu* play a crucial role in the lives of individuals and, by extension, in shaping the societies they are a part of.<sup>35</sup> Weil believed that eventually those who direct their attention and love towards absolute good receive a part of that good, which then shines through them, shedding light on everything surrounding them (*Simone Weil: an Anthology* 222). As they take root in the divine, the energy they draw from there enables them “to bring to bear without any outside help, against any collectivity, a small but real force” (*Simone Weil: an Anthology* 77).

Now we begin to see the intimate connection between Weil’s conception of hope and her understanding of the role of attention in the manifestation of good on this earth:

If pure good were never capable of producing on this earth true greatness in art, science, theoretical speculation, public enterprise... there would be no hope at all for the affairs of this world; no possible illumination of this world by the other one. (*The Need for Roots* 234-5)

Here, hope and the illumination of this world are seen to be analogous with one another. Central to the interplay between hope and the light cast by absolute good is the role of *metaxu*. These intermediaries become objects of contemplation, requiring a renunciation of self that ultimately leads to the transformation of the individual, and by extension, the wider society. Each human being, according to Weil, “has at his roots here below a certain terrestrial poetry, a reflection of the heavenly glory, the link, of

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<sup>35</sup> David McLellan suggests that for Weil, “contemplation was not a means of stopping a nauseating world and getting off, but of seeing the world in a different and truer perspective and, above all, of developing a sharp eye and ear for the traces of God in all human activity and experience” (272).



which he is more or less vaguely conscious, with his universal country” (*Waiting on God* 115). The essential element of hope within each human being is strengthened and given life by this connection with the divine, which is made possible by the existence of *metaxu*.

### **Literature as *Metaxu*: Weil’s Poetics**

Literature, according to Weil, in many cases merely offers yet another fictional reality, another play of shadows on Plato’s cave wall. However, some forms of literature move beyond a fictional representation towards an illumination of reality. These works, Weil contends, give us something,

in the guise of fiction, something equivalent to the actual density of the real, that density which life offers us every day but which we are unable to grasp because we are amusing ourselves with lies. (*On Science, Necessity and the Love of God* 162)

The criteria she uses to judge whether literature is able to present reality in all its nakedness and thus reveal the world by the light of the divine, is whether it is a work of ‘genius’. John M. Dunaway suggests that Weil’s use of the word genius in this context primarily refers to work that is intimately linked with the writer’s own struggle with necessity, and deals with the suffering inherent in the human condition (“Simone Weil on Morality and Literature” 101).<sup>36</sup> Weil herself separated her use of the word genius from the more commonly understood meaning of the term. Exceptional talent does not lead to or define genius: on the contrary, real genius, as she conceives it, is nothing but “the supernatural virtue of humility in the domain of thought” (*Simone Weil: an Anthology* 87). Talent and the manifestation of the author’s personality are not the

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<sup>36</sup> J.P. Little offers another definition of Weil’s use of the term ‘genius’. Genius, she suggests, “is a matter of paying attention to ideal good, and art of genius is only the incarnation of that ideal good in beauty” (*Waiting on Truth* 93).

measure of genius. Rather, works of art should reveal the world by providing “pure and true reflections” of its beauty, or openings on to it (*Waiting on God* 106).

Weil presents a very limited canon of works that she feels are able to fulfil this role: she mentions, among very few others, the *Iliad*, the tragedies of Aeschylus and Sophocles, Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, and Racine’s *Phèdre*. Her reasons for choosing these works are found in her essay “Morality and Literature”, one of two essays she wrote that directly address the role of writers and literature. In this essay Weil presents a damning criticism of writers, and indeed of literature itself. Literature, for the most part, she contends, is fundamentally immoral, and nothing short of genius can redeem it. Only those forms of literature that have been inspired by genius can have anything to offer: every other literary text merely encourages the reader to continue to live in a world of fiction. The only justification for the existence of literature that falls short of genius is that it allows for the possibility that a writer of genius may eventually appear. It is only those works of genius that reveal “the forces of gravity which govern our souls” that are truly inspirational (*On Science, Necessity and the Love of God* 160-5). Taking the *Iliad* as an example, Weil illustrates her claim that present in the works of genius are the forces of gravity each person is subject to. In the *Iliad*, she suggests, “the slope of victory and the slope of defeat are manifest and simultaneously perceptible, as they never are for a soldier occupied in fighting” (*On Science, Necessity and the Love of God* 162). The value of Homer’s poem, in this analysis, is that it is able to reveal the forces that govern the reader’s own existence from a vantage point that allows a clearer vision than could be gained from within the reader’s own limited perspective (*On Science, Necessity and the Love of God* 162).

In the second of these two essays, “The Responsibility of Writers”, Weil laments the fact that in her eyes, the literature of the majority of her contemporaries does not address the question of “good and evil”, but is largely psychological in nature (*On Science, Necessity and the Love of God* 168). She denounces Surrealism as the “literary equivalent for the sacking of towns”, arguing that in their adoption of “non-oriented thought” (intellectual activity which is not oriented towards the good), the Surrealists “have chosen the total absence of value as their supreme value” (*On Science, Necessity and the Love of God* 167).<sup>37</sup> Regardless of the aspirations of the Surrealists themselves (and the fairness – or otherwise – of Weil’s judgment upon them) her criticism of their approach to writing reveals an important aspect of her understanding of the role of literature. Her argument unfolds thus: literature, as an expression of the human condition, must take into account the things that affect human life, the most important of which, for Weil, is the question of good and evil (*On Science, Necessity and the Love of God* 168-9). If the role of literature is to address this question, providing the reader with a vantage point from which to view the forces that govern human existence, this statement of Weil’s comes as no surprise: “When literature becomes deliberately indifferent to the opposition of good and evil it betrays its function and forfeits all claim to excellence” (*On Science, Necessity and the Love of God* 169).

In Weil’s terminology, poetry retains a special significance that applies to actions and objects as much as to the written word. It is the effect poetry has on people’s lives that determines its value:

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<sup>37</sup> The Surrealists’ call for the “complete liberation of the mind” (Richardson and Fijałkowski 24), revealed, in Weil’s eyes, a lack of restraint equivalent to that shown by looting armies. She was perhaps justified in her criticism, considering Breton’s famous line: “The simplest surrealist act consists in going down to the street, revolver in hand, and shooting into the crowd for as long as one can” (Breton 125).

the people need poetry as they need bread. Not the poetry closed inside words: by itself that is no use to them. They need poetry to be the very substance of daily life. Such poetry can come from one source only and that is God. (*Simone Weil: An Anthology* 268)

Poetry in this instance (and throughout Weil's writings) becomes more than the written word, more than anything able to be expressed through language: it becomes the very connection that links people with the divine. Poetry becomes *metaxu*, recognised not in the qualities or characteristics of a particular form of writing, but in its function as a bridge between the human and the divine. Cities themselves "surround the lives of their inhabitants with poetry", which is why Weil suggests that,

[to] destroy cities, either materially or morally, or to exclude human beings from a city, thrusting them down to the state of social outcasts... is to sever every bond of poetry and love between human beings and the universe. It is to plunge them forcibly into the horror of ugliness. There can scarcely be a greater crime. (*Waiting on God* 115-116)

The full extent of Weil's critique of the Surrealists is revealed in this quote. Their work, in her eyes, was directed towards the destruction of roots: indeed, the destruction of "poetry" itself.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> While Weil rejected Surrealism on this basis, writers of the Negritude movement, although no less vocal about the importance of roots, embraced aspects of Surrealism in their work. The Surrealists themselves were outspoken critics of colonialism, for reasons not unlike Weil's, even if their proposed solutions were markedly different (see Richardson and Fijałkowski's *Surrealism Against the Current*, 180-197). For many Negritude writers, Surrealism provided a tool that enabled them to explore and express their African roots, so much so that Suzanne Césaire described it as "the tightrope of our hope" (126). Robin D.G. Kelley describes the journal *Tropiques*, of which Aimé Césaire was a founding member, as "one of the most important and radical surrealist publications in the world", drawing not only on Surrealism and Marxism, but also "pre-colonial African modes of thought and practice" (5). However, as Kesteloot notes, Senghor, Césaire and Damas were attracted to Surrealism not because of the techniques used by the Surrealists, but rather by its revolutionary spirit and the similarities it bore to African art and poetry (86). This goes some way towards explaining the fact that within the Negritude movement, the influence of Surrealism, which Weil rejected on the basis of its uprooting tendencies,

If the Surrealists earned Weil's particular condemnation, the prayer of St. Francis of Assisi gained her praise. Weil's identification of St. Francis as a poet provides perhaps the clearest insight into her understanding of poetry:

Not only is his actual poem perfect poetry, but all his life was perfect poetry in action.

[...] Vagabondage and poverty were poetry with him; he stripped himself naked in order to have immediate contact with the beauty of the world. (*Waiting on God* 99)

In this passage, it becomes clear that for Weil, poetry is in fact characterized by its ability to provide the means for intimate contact with the beauty of the universe. Poetry, regardless of whether it is expressed through action or in language, strips away the external trappings of existence to reveal a clearer vision of the world itself. It is important to note that Weil's understanding of the role of poetry is inseparable from her understanding of ethics. St. Francis's prayer becomes "perfect poetry" in Weil's eyes as it peels away any illusion of grandeur attached to the self, asking instead for the grace to serve. This renunciation of self, as has been discussed above, is both an imitation of divine love in the creation of the universe, and a necessary component in the efficacy of *metaxu*. Poetry, as *metaxu*, reveals the beauty of the world, and in so doing awakens an understanding of a divine ordering of creation, prompting a desire to imitate this love by serving others: "By loving our neighbour we imitate the divine love which created us and all our fellows" (*Waiting on God* 98). It is the poet's encounter with the beauty of the world that gives his or her poetry its value: "Every true artist has had real, direct and

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could coexist in the work of the same poets who placed such value on celebrating and expressing their roots. As these characteristics of the Negritude movement reveal, however, Weil's poetics becomes complicated when applied in the context of colonialism and slavery, an anomaly that will be discussed in greater depth in Chapter Three.

immediate contact with the beauty of the world, contact which is of the nature of a sacrament” (*Waiting on God* 106).

Weil’s poetics coincides with her ethics most obviously in her insistence on the importance of attention. She draws a parallel between creativity and loving action, suggesting that both are the result of attentiveness towards something other than oneself.

The poet produces the beautiful by fixing his attention on something real. It is the same with the act of love. To know that this man who is hungry and thirsty really exists as I do – that is enough, the rest follows of itself. (*Gravity and Grace* 108)

In both instances, the subject’s attention is directed outwards, away from the self. In the case of the poet, “something real” forms the object of his or her gaze, something external to the self. Likewise, the person performing a compassionate act fixes his or her attention on something other than the self: in this case, another human being. It is the consent to focus one’s attention on something other than oneself that is the precondition for both the creation of poetry and acts of love. This integration of Weil’s poetics and ethics reveals the cohesiveness of her thought as explored to this point. Poetry, as Weil conceives it, has value in its role as *metaxu*. It draws one’s attention towards the beauty of the world, and thus towards the divine. The same attention required to contemplate works of art is needed if one is to perform an act of compassion towards one’s fellow human beings, and is also required by the poet in the act of creation. The common thread that unites each of these actions is the ability of poetry to direct one’s attention towards the beauty of the world and thus to draw one into a closer encounter with the divine. This process is clarified in Weil’s definition of art:

Art is an attempt to transport into a limited quantity of matter, modelled by man, an image of the infinite beauty of the entire universe. If the attempt succeeds, this portion

of matter should not hide the universe, but on the contrary it should reveal its reality to all around. (*Waiting on God* 106)

The central concerns of Weil's poetics are given expression in her play, *Venise Sauvée*. In her analysis of *Venise Sauvée*, Gabriella Fiori identifies clear links between the themes that emerge in this tragedy and in Weil's philosophical and political writings (187). The pivotal point in the play occurs as the hero Jaffier decides to betray his compatriots rather than to take part in their plot to destroy the city of Venice. As Fiori notes, this decision emanates from a moment of attentiveness on the part of Jaffier, whose gaze is caught by the beauty of Venice as he stands at the top of a bell tower looking down at the city (185). Here, Jaffier displays Weil's "intense, pure, disinterested, gratuitous, generous attention" (*Simone Weil: an Anthology* 91-2). As has been discussed above, the contemplation of beauty is one of the things that can cultivate this form of attention. Beauty, Weil writes, "feeds only that part of the soul that gazes" (*Simone Weil: an Anthology* 92). The particular form of desire that beauty arouses is focused on *looking* rather than possessing. We desire what is beautiful, but what we desire is that the beautiful thing should continue to exist as it is. Desire thus directed is "gradually transformed into love; and one begins to acquire the faculty of pure and disinterested attention" (*Simone Weil: an Anthology* 92). This is the quality of attention Weil bestows on her hero, who is so captured by the beauty of the city he is about to destroy that he chooses to save the city rather than himself. Jaffier's actions illustrate Weil's own poetic employment of the concept of *metaxu*. The beauty of Venice captures Jaffier's attention, drawing his gaze towards the city and its inhabitants. This moment of attention results in a concrete act of love towards Venice and the Venetians that ultimately saves the city from destruction. However, there is a price to pay: Jaffier's act of mercy results in his own suffering and in the deaths of his comrades

(Fiori 186). All the qualities of *metaxu* are present in Weil's tragedy: it is the beauty of Venice, and Jaffier's consent to focus his attention on it, that results in his decision to act in a way that will ensure the survival of the city, even at great personal cost.

Weil's proclamations about the value of poetry, and of literature in general, lead to an extremely narrow set of guidelines that can accommodate only a small number of literary works. Despite this, her writings on this subject do allow for a broader application of her ideas. Joan Dargan's comment on the value of Weil's poetics to practicing writers is instructive on this point:

What Weil offers poets as they practice their art, as distinct from her dogmatic strictures on the nature of greatness... is the assurance of the reality of the world of mind and spirit in which poetry participates, a reality whose laws can be studied and formulated.  
(95-96)

Dargan recognises, as have many other writers – T.S. Eliot, Flannery O'Connor, Czeslaw Milosz, Seamus Heaney, Iris Murdoch and Fanny Howe, to name just a few – that Weil's writings offer valuable insights that deserve to be explored in a literary context. There are limits to the application of Weil's ideas to the study of literature, however, one of which is pointed out by Dargan in a comparison between Weil's writings on poetry and those of her contemporary, Russian poet Marina Tsvetaeva: "Weil's is not a poetics in its own right, only one in relation to a metaphysical view of the universe in which the moral law is always and everywhere absolute" (112). It is not literature in itself that concerns Weil: it is the role and function of literature in the lives of individuals, and by extension, its impact on society.

### **Creating *Metaxu*: Attention, Inspiration and Hope**



In order to write in such a way that one's work has the potential to form a *metaxu* for the reader, Weil believes it is necessary to be "shot through with an impersonal inspiration" (*The Need for Roots* 281). Literature, in her view, does not allow for the illumination of the world by being an expression of the author's personality, but as a result of the writer surrendering his or her personality so that what is impersonal may inspire the work. A perfect work of art, Weil contends, "has something which is essentially anonymous about it. It imitates the anonymity of divine art" (*Gravity and Grace* 136). Returning again to Weil's understanding of the creation of the world, the link between divine art and human creativity becomes clear. As the creative act of God involved a withdrawal of his self in order that the world might exist, so the supreme creative act of any human being is the voluntary renunciation of self, in order that the impersonal nature of God might shine through him or her. Renouncing the self in obedience to the love of God in this sense does not involve submission to a set of restrictions or rules, but is rather a step towards experiencing a fullness of life: "The divine and absolute model of that renunciation which is obedience in us – such is the creative and ruling principle of the universe – such is the fullness of being" (*Waiting on God* 114). It is this renunciation of self that is the precondition for Weil's "impersonal inspiration" to illuminate the writer's work.

The analogy drawn between divine art and human creativity occurs throughout Weil's work. In an analysis of a passage from Plato's *Timaeus*, Weil outlines what she terms an experimental theory of artistic practice.<sup>39</sup> A distinction is drawn in this passage between two forms of art: one imitates existing objects, feelings and sensations; the other is inspired by the essence of created things, rather than the things themselves (*On*

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<sup>39</sup> The passage she refers to is found in *Timaeus*, 27a-28b.

*Science, Necessity and the Love of God* 132-133). Weil interprets the passage in these words:

[if] an artist tries to imitate either some sense object or some psychological phenomenon, such as a feeling, etc., his work is mediocre. In creating a work of art of the highest class the artist's attention is oriented towards silence and the void; from this silence and void there descends an inspiration which develops into words or forms. (*On Science, Necessity and the Love of God* 133)

Once again, attention emerges as the key: not only to reading or viewing works of art, but also to artistic creation itself. Just as the purpose of *metaxu* is to draw one's attention away from oneself towards the divine, so in the creation of a *metaxu* the artist's attention is drawn beyond himself or herself towards Plato's ideal. For Weil, nothing less than the desire to express the divine order of creation is enough to write poetry that is able to serve as a *metaxu*:

In order to write verse that contains some beauty, one must have had the ambition to equal by the arrangement of words that pure and divine beauty which, according to Plato, lies on the other side of the skies. (*The Need for Roots* 215)

Artistic creation then, in Weilian terms, is characterized by the artist's consent to direct his or her attention towards the divine, and to wait for inspiration. In *The Need for Roots*, Weil defines inspiration as "a tension on the part of the soul's faculties which renders possible the indispensable degree of concentration required for composition on a multiple plane" (214). It is this concentration, this attentiveness, which allows the artist to take into account the many different aspects of the form he or she has chosen to use. In the case of poetry, Weil suggests, the poet's mind must be able to hold, simultaneously, every element of language that affects the creation of the poem. These aspects of language include such things as the rules governing rhythm and rhyme; the

grammatical and logical order of the words; the musical quality of the words; the atmosphere surrounding each word according to the possibilities it contains; repetition and innovation; and an “intuition for beauty which gives all this a unity” (*The Need for Roots* 214). The effect of inspiration is to give the writer the concentration he or she needs in order to be aware of all aspects of language during the writing process.

Seen in this light, inspiration is not a matter of luck or talent, but is rather the result of a renunciation of self and a development of the capacity for attention. This brings us to another aspect of hope central to Weil’s understanding of artistic creation. Following on from the passage quoted above, she states that this form of intense concentration is available to all those who truly desire it, even if they find it impossible at first:

Whoever finds himself incapable of such concentration will one day acquire the capacity for it, if he perseveres humbly and patiently, and if he is impelled by a violent and unshakable desire. (*The Need for Roots* 214)

Here hope is included in the creative process itself. Two elements are mentioned that enable a writer to develop the inspired concentration Weil sees as necessary for the creation of a beautiful work of art: humble, patient perseverance, and an unshakable desire. Desire directs the writer’s attention, and perseverance enables him or her to continue with the expectation of eventual success. The expectation and desire found here indicate that this process in itself is essentially an expression of hope on the part of the writer. Not only is hope expressed in the final literary work, it is also an integral part of the act of creation itself.

Inspiration, for Weil, is not only necessary for the creation of works of art, but is also indispensable in other areas of cultural life. Science and politics, for Weil, are just as much in need of creative inspiration as the arts. To understand Weil’s position on this,

it is necessary to expand on our earlier discussion about the role of attention. In her essay “Human Personality”, Weil states that, “[the] spirit of justice and truth is nothing else but a certain kind of attention, which is pure love” (*Simone Weil: an Anthology* 92). Everything that proceeds from this attentive love is illuminated by beauty (*Simone Weil: an Anthology* 93). Here five key concepts in Weil’s thought are brought together to form a united whole. Justice, truth, beauty, attention and love are all aspects of the one thing. Loving attention is the spirit of justice and truth, and everything inspired by it is lit by beauty. Justice, truth and beauty thus form three aspects of the same loving, attentive spirit. The object of art, for Weil, is beauty; the object of science is truth; and the object of politics is justice. Hence, each of these three human endeavours should actually aim towards the same objective: the revelation of pure love on this earth. The same degree of concentration needed to inspire a work of art is also indispensable in the field of science, if scientists are to seek out the truth, and for politics, if politicians are to work towards the creation of a society that is truly just (*The Need for Roots* 213).

Literature-as-*metaxu*, then, truly has a social purpose. Far from being mere entertainment, or appreciated solely in terms of its formal aesthetic qualities, literature that takes the shape of *metaxu* helps to cultivate an attentive attitude among its readers. This form of attention has the same qualities that are required in other professions if just societies are to be created. The connections Weil drew between beauty, art, hope and justice, discussed at the beginning of this chapter, are now revealed in full. Beginning with the assertion that the world is ultimately ordered by a transcendent good that exists beyond the universe and that the proof of this good is found in the beauty of the world, Weil’s poetics and ethics form an ever-widening spiral. Attention leads to self-renunciation, which leads to an impersonal inspiration – the same inspiration that

creates the beauty of the world – which in turn leads to the creation of artworks that are able to capture one’s attention and direct it beyond the self towards the divine, allowing space for a divine inspiration – not only in art, but also in the sciences and politics – that leads to a flowering of beauty, truth and justice. Inherent in all stages of this journey is an acknowledgement of the role of hope: not only is hope found in the heart of each human being in a longing for the good, it is strengthened by a person’s roots; it is present in the creative act itself; and it illuminates the path towards the creation of more just societies.

## Chapter 2

### Hope, Uprootedness and *Metaxu* in Fanny Howe's *Saving History*

*I am aware that there is a vision of a just world behind language, sentences, syllables.*

Fanny Howe<sup>40</sup>

Fanny Howe, contemporary American poet, novelist and essayist, is known for her experimentation with language and form, and her commitment to addressing issues of race, poverty, ethics and religion in her work. Often focused on the most marginalised members of society, Howe's poetry and prose frequently raises questions concerning the nature of hope and uprootedness. The characters in her novels struggle to find ways to live ethically in a world where they are continually confronted, not only with the unjust structures of a society that privileges certain individuals and groups over others, but also with their own sense of fear, loneliness and displacement. Uprooting in Howe's work is presented as a paradox, and is clearly influenced by Weil's writings. When uprooted from without, by social, historical and economic forces beyond their control, or through the actions of others, Howe's characters undergo immeasurable suffering. If they uproot themselves from within, however, they enter into a certain freedom, becoming, from their position on the very edges of society, bearers of hope. The concept of hope found in Weil's writings, which focuses on the illumination of the present by the light of the divine rather than an optimistic attitude towards the future, is also found in Howe's work. The role of *metaxu*, so central to Weil's aesthetics, is evident in much of Howe's writing, but is present perhaps most obviously in her novel *Saving History*.

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<sup>40</sup> *The Wedding Dress* 133.

Howe's poetics of bewilderment, which underpins her experimentation with poetic and narrative form, intersects with Weil's philosophy, providing an example of how Weil's writings can be applied in a literary context without necessarily subscribing to her narrow canon of works of 'genius'. Perhaps the most interesting point of intersection is found in Howe's adaptation of Weil's metaphysics and ethics to the structure of language itself and to the writing process. Howe's poetics of bewilderment is built around the same core belief that characterizes Weil's metaphysics: the divine conceived of as space, as absence rather than presence. Howe then applies this to poetic form: "The serial poem attempts to demonstrate this attention to what is cyclical, returning, but empty at its axis. To me, the serial poem is a spiral poem" (*The Wedding Dress* 17). Howe uses the image of a spiral to explain the role of bewilderment in her work: "to the spiral-walker there is no plain path, no up and down, no inside or outside. But there are strange returns and recognitions and never a conclusion" (*The Wedding Dress* 9). Howe's poetics of bewilderment also forms the basis for experimentation in her novels, which are often characterized by spiraling narrative structures, long meditative passages and shifting points of view. She suggests that

bewilderment is like a dream: one continually returning pause on a gyre and in both my stories and my poems it could be the shape of the spiral that imprints itself in my interior before anything emerges on paper. (*The Wedding Dress* 9)

The narrative techniques Howe employs require a certain attentiveness on the part of the reader, and this, I argue, enables Howe's novel *Saving History* to form a potential *metaxu*. Viewing Howe's poetics through the lens of Weil's writings offers a deeper, more comprehensive vision of a poetics of hope. While retaining Weil's insistence on the inseparability of ethics and aesthetics, more attention is given to language itself and to the application of Weil's ideas to literary forms.

## Hope and Uprootedness in Howe's Novels and Poetry

Fanny Howe describes her novels as one body of work, spanning thirty years and concluding with her last novel *Indivisible* ("Au Hasard"). In an interview with Patricia Vigderman, Howe makes no distinction between her last four novels, *The Deep North*, *Saving History*, *Nod* and *Indivisible*, and her poetry. It is to these novels and one recent prose poem, "Doubt", that I will turn for a brief consideration of Howe's treatment of time, hope and uprootedness, before undertaking a more comprehensive analysis of *Saving History*.

Howe is particularly preoccupied with time. She describes her novels as "chops and grabs at moments in time", less like conventional novels than attempts at moving towards another genre ("Au Hasard"). The struggle to represent a multilayered, rhythmic experience of time, rather than a linear one – a vision of the world in which attention to what is approaching you from ahead is advocated rather than striding forward into an intended future – pervades her writings. In her essay, "Bewilderment", she suggests that "[time] is not a progression but something more warped and refractive" (*The Wedding Dress* 14). The connection between time and hope in Howe's work is often contradictory; however, one major thread runs through her work that reverses the idea of hope being found in an optimistic attitude towards the future. Rather than moving forward through time, intending to fulfil certain goals, hope in Howe's work is found in paying attention to what is approaching. Perhaps the best example of this is found in a comment made by Cloda, the central character in *Nod*.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> This juxtaposition between two different views of time is also referred to in *The Deep North*, although not explicitly in the context of its relation to hope: "Am I moving now toward the future or am I the eye that sees distant blossoms in a huddle of sparrows?" (35).



Cloda is typical of Howe's characters: poor, marginalized and on the brink of madness, her vision of the world oscillates between a foggy comprehension of reality and spiritual clarity. She walks in circles around buildings in the city for days on end, and when her doctor asks why she does so, her reply is that "she wanted to cast a spell on the ground, so that nothing could move forward in time. 'Only a ray of hope can thrive in this space'" (*Nod* 191).

The references to hope in Howe's work are too numerous to list, however common themes do recur, such as the notion of hope as inseparable from an active commitment to justice (*The Wedding Dress* 119); as an indispensable part of life (*The Deep North* 48); and as intimately connected with questions of faith (*The Wedding Dress* 48; *Indivisible* 249-250). Perhaps the most interesting treatment of hope in terms of Howe's connection with Simone Weil is found in her prose poem "Doubt", which explores the concept of hope in relation to Weil's "Prologue". "Prologue" is a short prose poem found in Weil's notebooks that some commentators describe as the record of a mystical experience similar to those described in her spiritual autobiography. Howe describes the narrator in "Prologue" as an "uprooted seeker who still hopes that a transformation will come to her from the outside" (*Gone* 24). In Howe's reading of the poem, the narrator moves through several stages of belief. First, the longing for transformation that precedes the arrival of the teacher; then the total loss of memory and consequently of hope when he abandons her; and lastly the arrival of doubt that turns her gaze outward, leading to her agonizing desire to believe that, despite everything, he loved her. This third stage leads Howe to the statement that "[hope] seems to resist extermination as much as a roach does" (*Gone* 26). Reminiscent of Weil's belief in a

point within the human heart that corresponds to absolute good (*Simone Weil: an Anthology* 222), Howe asks in this poem,

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? (*Gone* 24)

This question is at the heart of Howe's work. Her poetry, essays and novels embody her search for a form of language, poetic structure and content able to express what she describes as "something solid at the center of a human life" ("Interview with Fanny Howe" 1).<sup>42</sup>

This search, which can be seen in part as an attempt to seek out and draw sustenance from her roots, has led Howe to a wide variety of religious and literary figures whose influence extends throughout her work. Her novel *Indivisible* includes references to religious thinkers as varied as Aquinas, Weil, Sankara, Ramakrishna, Ibn Arabi, Henry Adams, Keats, St. Teresa, St. John of the Cross, Thomas Merton, St. Ignatius and Confucius. *Nod*, which is set in Ireland, is interwoven with stories of fairies, druids and saints. Of Irish heritage herself, Howe attributes her knowledge of fairies to Lady Wilde's *Legends of Ancient Ireland* (*The Wedding Dress* 24). If acknowledging and drawing on her roots is a major element of Howe's work, so is the recognition of uprootedness. One of the characters in *The Deep North* addresses this question directly:

Ghosting these shores my ancestors left behind their desperation and little else. It was this I inherited. Desperate desires – for recognition, for a home.

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<sup>42</sup> Reading Howe's work alongside Weil's illuminates aspects of both, as seen in a comparison between the above quotes and this statement of Weil's: "Love is the essential desire... [...] As for us, we have infinity in us only in this central desire" (*Intimations of Christianity among the Ancient Greeks* 121).

They left however no net with which to catch a person falling away from the will to power. And without it, all that's left is the hard wooden world of the poor. (98)

Towards the end of *Saving History*, Felicity views the uprootedness affecting American society from her position at its very outer edges. Sleeping in a canyon at night, she glimpses the world of the “havers and doers” during the day, as she cleans condominiums in a new housing development. The homes are sterile and anonymous, their occupants separated from one another in identical “egalitarian cages” that have been modeled on the “littlest, and the ugliest, and the most moveable – the motel” and have morphed into “the biggest, and the most vulgar, and the most entrenched – the condominium – somebody’s no-home!” (*Saving History* 212). Felicity views her society from a position that reveals its weaknesses, as Howe’s politics of bewilderment suggests, “from the bottom up” (*The Wedding Dress* 23).

Tiffany Eberle Kriner, in the final chapter of her recent unpublished thesis *A Future and a Hope: Eschatology of the Other in Twentieth-Century American Literature by Women*, identifies elements of bewilderment that are expressed in *Saving History*.<sup>43</sup> She examines the way in which Howe’s poetics and politics of bewilderment are linked to an eschatology of the other. I take a different trajectory in this chapter, analysing

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<sup>43</sup> There is a surprising scarcity of critical work that addresses Howe’s writings. Apart from book reviews and interviews, there are some scholarly articles, the most notable being collected in a special edition of the journal *Spectacular Diseases*, entitled “A Folio for Fanny Howe”, which includes essays on Howe’s writings contributed by Rae Armentrout, Paul Green, Romana Huk, Peter Middleton and Clair Wills. Other critics have also commented on various aspects of Howe’s work: for example, Ann Vickery briefly touches on Weil’s influence on Howe in *Leaving Lines of Gender*; Johnny Payne considers Howe’s early collection of short stories *Forty Whacks* and her correspondence with Edward Dahlberg in *Conquest of the New World*; Lyn Keller includes an analysis of Howe’s early poetry in her article “Just one of / the Girls: – / Normal in the Extreme” along with poets Kathleen Fraser and Rosmarie Waldrop; Laura Hinton makes the case for Howe’s *The Lives of a Spirit* to be considered as a postmodern romance in a chapter included in *We Who Love to be Astonished*; and Scott Bentley addresses the concept of mystery in Howe’s [*SIC*] and *Forged* in his essay “On the Day the Blood Let Fall”.

Howe's work in the context of Simone Weil's ideas, focusing particularly on the connection between *metaxu* and hope. While Kriner's study provides a sound base from which to argue that Howe's novel does in fact express a certain form of hope, an analysis of *Saving History* in relation to Weil's ideas illuminates these aspects of the novel in an entirely new light. The hope Kriner identifies in *Saving History* is described in her thesis as a "hope against hope", that, while being future oriented and revealing a "for-the-other ethics/politics", is complicated by its focus on the "victimization, destruction, and bewilderment of the self" (199). Although Kriner's assessment of the hope found in *Saving History* is both accurate and enlightening, the one comment she makes about the influence of Weil's writings on Howe's work is brief. She notes that the epigraph of *Saving History*, "The universe is a machine for effecting the salvation of those who consent to it", is taken from Weil's work, and suggests that this quote highlights Howe's interest in the concept of *Heilsgeschichte*. *Heilsgeschichte*, in Kriner's words, "posits the intersection of the God transcendent/eternal and the God immanent/temporal, suggesting that transcendent salvation is a process worked out in time and through human history" (225). Kriner's comment on Weil's influence ends there, however, allowing for a far more comprehensive study of the connection between Weil's ideas and *Saving History*.

Due to the obvious impact of Weil's thinking on her work, which Howe acknowledges in several interviews and essays, and which also finds expression both directly and indirectly in her poetry and novels, this is an important avenue of inquiry. Howe's references to Weil occur throughout her work, most significantly in her essay "Work and Love" (*The Wedding Dress* 123-142), which relates the process of making a short film about Weil, and her prose poem "Doubt" (*Gone* 24-26). Reference is made to Weil

in many of the essays collected in *The Wedding Dress*: she is mentioned along with liberation theologian Gustavo Gutierrez as a significant figure in Howe's journey towards Catholicism in the Introduction (xii), and references to her thought also occur in "Immanence" (52-53), "The Contemporary Logos" (75, 79), and the last essay of the collection, "After 'Prologue'" (143-148). Howe speaks of Weil in interviews with Patricia Vigderman and Justin Taylor. Weil is mentioned directly in at least two of Howe's novels, *Saving History* and *Indivisible*, and traces of her influence can be found throughout Howe's poetry. This chapter will address the connection between Weil and Howe, focusing particularly on the significance of *metaxu* in relation to the hope expressed in *Saving History*.

Howe's novel *Saving History* intersects with Weil's ideas in several ways. One major element of *Saving History* is its refiguration of the divine from an association with white privilege and power into a very physical, earthly experience of human love and the contemplation of the beauty of the world. The novel demonstrates the role of *metaxu* in the lives of the characters, revealing how, in a society rife with uprootedness, a focus on human love and the beauty of the world as expressions of divine love enables the growth of a form of hope divorced from narratives of power and success. Hope in *Saving History* is not found in overarching abstract theories or in the fulfilment of personal desires, but in moments of self-renunciation when the characters allow themselves to truly focus their attention on another human being or on the beauty of the world. These moments of attention, when acted upon, result in concrete, loving action that transforms the lives of those it touches. The novel's form and Howe's remarks about her method of writing provide another link between *Saving History* and Weil's

aesthetics, and, I would argue, contribute to the novel itself carrying within it the potential to serve as a *metaxu* for the reader.

### **Divine Injustice: Temple as god in *Saving History***

The characters in *Saving History*, which is set mainly on the Californian border between Mexico and the United States, are enmeshed in a society whose political, historical and social realities are inescapable. The extent to which these realities impact on the characters' lives is demonstrated both through the plot – which is directed, shaped, and limited by social forces beyond their control – and in the way that political realities encroach on the characters' emotional and spiritual lives. The plot, which traces the journey of the central character, Felicity, as she tries to save her daughter's life by procuring a liver transplant for her, is only able to move in certain directions, being limited and blocked by unavoidable social realities. Because Felicity is poor and unemployed, she is unable to afford the exorbitant prices required to secure a transplant for her daughter. The political reality that denies medical attention to the poor and marginalized forms an impassable barrier, forcing Felicity's search into other directions. Howe's comment on what she terms the "torturous clamp of plot," demonstrates the central role these unavoidable "historical, sociological, existential" forces play in her novels (*The Wedding Dress* 98). To finish writing a book, she suggests, "means that your plot has defeated you. You have been decimated by its logic, which is finally insufferable" (*The Wedding Dress* 98). Historical, social and political realities are ever present in *Saving History*, shaping the plot in its relentless march towards a logical conclusion.

The internal lives of Felicity and Tom are also infiltrated and shaped by political realities. Even the sections of the novel that are marked out in italics, expressions of the characters' emotional and spiritual lives, do not escape the impact of these realities.<sup>44</sup> In one of these sections, Tom is unable to verbalize his thoughts, and retreats into layers of memory. Images of his family are interrupted by a thought that thrusts itself at him, stark and unavoidable:

*And now all I can pore over, inside the morning papers, is a statistic: one out of every twenty-one black males is murdered in this country... [...] I want to be happy but I can't with this information – the experience of it – in my bloodstream... (Saving History 55-56)*

The historical and political situation Tom finds himself within is inescapable, and impacts on every area of his life. Likewise, Felicity's anguish at the death of her daughter is inseparable from external political events: *"Depression is a sunset emotion which comes with the regularity of the color orange. While US airplanes headed for Hanoi, we were eating lamb chops beside a highway in Mount Desert"* (Saving History 216).

Each of the three major characters in *Saving History* responds to the social forces that govern their society in different ways, but none are able to ultimately control the situation they find themselves in. As the novel progresses, it becomes clear that the character who attempts to exert the most control over both his own life and the lives of others, Temple, actually causes far more damage than good in his manipulation of others' lives. Temple occupies a particularly interesting position in the fabric of social

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<sup>44</sup> Howe explains the importance her own growing political awareness played in early adulthood in her Introduction to *The Wedding Dress*, suggesting that involvement in politics enabled her to see her own sense of despair as symptomatic of the wider political chaos of the time, rather than personal depression (XI).

relations within *Saving History*. A wealthy, white male who “looks good – blond, blue-eyed, well-dressed” (*Saving History* 30), Temple embodies the power structures that govern the society each character must negotiate in order to survive. This places him in quite a different position to the other major characters: Felicity, a single, unemployed mother of mixed ethnicity; and Tom, a struggling young lawyer with a passion for civil rights, who also has a mixed racial background. Although Temple is ultimately bound by the same societal structures as Felicity and Tom, he occupies a privileged position within the social hierarchy as one who is rewarded and upheld by these structures rather than being oppressed by or pitted against them. Particularly in his relationship with Felicity, Temple can be seen as an embodiment of the unjust social order that underlies and encroaches on both Felicity’s and Tom’s lives.

Throughout the novel Temple emerges as a god-like figure, capricious and manipulative. In Felicity’s life he serves the function of “boss, seducer, never-lover, and owner of the world in which she was condemned to live” (*Saving History* 27). He appears at crucial points in Felicity’s life, and is described as having “rescued her by ruining her life” (*Saving History* 26). Obviously, Temple’s name is closely associated with religious practice. He also fulfils an expressly god-like role in Felicity’s life: “In earlier centuries whales and wolves and plague played the role that Temple played in her life; so did the gods. She had learned how to appease and how to avoid and how to exploit him” (*Saving History* 71). Felicity’s relationship with Temple is ambiguous: he is unpredictable and vicious, yet she still looks to him for help. He appears as a powerful, distant ruler, who must be appeased, whose seeming efforts to ‘save’ her result only in destruction. This sense of god-like control, coupled with his close



association with unjust social and political forces, imbues Temple with a certain form of divinity: he is the god of American society, rich, white and male.

Another aspect of Temple's character that contributes to his embodiment of the social, political and historical forces that govern American society is his connection with slavery. When Felicity accepts Temple's offer to help her find a liver transplant for her daughter, Temple insists that she is now his slave: "You've got a master now, said Temple with a tight smile and his head nodding as if he was riding the subway downtown. You always wanted a master. Many women do" (*Saving History* 84). This assertion exposes Temple's association with two more aspects of the historical forces present in American society: slavery and the oppression of women. Later in the novel, Felicity considers the connections between slavery and her own heritage. Her ruminations tie the narrative into the wider geopolitical, historical sphere, linking these aspects of American history to her relationship with Temple: "Texas died for the freedom to keep slaves. Have slaves or die. Temple too might die for such freedom" (*Saving History* 98).

All three aspects of Temple's character – his embodiment of all pervasive unjust social structures; his god-like position of control; and his complicity in slavery and the oppression of women – point to him being associated with a certain image of the divine. This image is closely connected to Celie's initial conception of God as a white, male banker in *The Color Purple*. Just as Celie's image of the divine is shaped by the social forces that impinge on her life and the lives of those she loves, so Temple-as-god emerges in *Saving History* as an embodiment of white privilege and power. Associating his character so closely with both notions of divinity and unjust social structures sets up

an image of the divine that is inseparable from all Temple represents. However, in the same way that Celie's understanding of God is transformed in the *Color Purple*, Temple's divinity is challenged and undercut in *Saving History*, allowing a different understanding of the divine to emerge. In both novels a certain image of the divine is exposed and broken down, allowing other possibilities to emerge. Before these possibilities are explored, however, there is more to be said about Temple's role in *Saving History*, particularly in terms of Simone Weil's concept of roots.

### **Uprootedness in *Saving History***

In the first section of *The Need for Roots*, entitled "The Needs of the Soul", Weil addresses those aspects of human life she believes to be as important to the health and well-being of each human being as the obvious physical needs of food, shelter and clothing. In this section Weil sets up the premise that guides the remainder of the book. Very clearly, she lays out her understanding of the texture and fabric of human relations. Underpinning her argument is the idea explored in the first chapter of this thesis, that each human being has, at the centre of the heart, a longing for absolute good. It is this desire for good, she argues, that awakens a consciousness in people of the obligation they bear towards one another: an obligation that requires respect to be accorded to every human being (*The Need for Roots* 6,11). This obligation, according to Weil, must be fulfilled "in a real, not a fictitious way", by ensuring that his or her physical and spiritual needs are met (*The Need for Roots* 6). Weil believed that societies should be organised in such a way that any conflict between differing obligations should be minimised. The first of the soul's needs she mentions is order, which she defines as "a texture of social relationships such that no one is compelled to violate imperative obligations in order to carry out other ones" (*The Need for Roots* 10).

When this balance is broken, and people find themselves in a position where they have no alternative but to fulfil one obligation at the expense of another, Weil felt them to be exposed to a profound spiritual violence (*The Need for Roots* 10). Hence, her assertion that the “imperfections” of a society could be measured by the number of times people found themselves in a situation where they were faced with two irreconcilable obligations (*The Need for Roots* 5).

Towards the end of *Saving History*, Felicity is forced to choose between allowing her daughter Matty to die, and participating in the illegal organ trade across the Mexican border. If she is to save Matty, she has no choice but to carry out an action that would make her complicit in the maiming and deaths of others. The horror Felicity experiences as she is faced with this decision demonstrates the anguish Weil describes. Fanny Howe has written that her poetics of bewilderment evolved partly through testing it out on her characters, whom she describes as rushing “backwards and forwards within an irreconcilable set of imperatives” (*The Wedding Dress* 5). This certainly describes Felicity’s situation. When she arrives at the clinic from which Temple has directed her to collect the organs, she is still torn between these two terrible choices. “Her breathing was quick and dry. She felt faint. She walked around to the back of the barracks-like structure, and tore at her face and scalp. She made the twisting motions of a mime performing AGONY” (*Saving History* 179). Felicity’s obligation to respect the life of every human being, and her obligation to do all she can to save her daughter’s life, are in conflict with one another in this moment of stark, unavoidable reality. The societal structures that have encroached on Felicity’s life, allowing such a situation to evolve, have been built up and nurtured by those same issues Weil associates with what she terms the “disease of uprootedness”: military conquest, slavery, the primacy of money,

unemployment (*The Need for Roots* 44-45). It is these aspects of her society that, for Felicity, are inescapable; as a result of her ethnicity, gender and lack of wealth, she is slowly driven into a situation where she is faced with an impossible choice between two conflicting obligations.

Temple's inseparability from the power structures that govern American society make his character an ideal study for how uprootedness affects Felicity. Contained in one character are all the elements that have combined to put Felicity in a situation where she must choose between two horrific outcomes. Temple places her in that position both directly and indirectly. Directly, by offering to provide a liver transplant for Matty on the condition that Felicity collect the organs for him; and indirectly in his embodiment of the social and political structures that lead to Felicity being in such a desperate position that she feels she has no other option but to accept his offer. These unjust structures, which include profound inequalities in race, class and gender relations, are present in all their complexity in Felicity's relationship with Temple. An examination of Temple's view of the world, then, is essential in developing an understanding of the forces that have combined to uproot Felicity.

Temple's vision of society is presented as a series of abstract theories that are developed and expanded upon in several independent scenes during the course of the narrative. Firstly, he presents American society as a series of concentric circles, the smallest containing "people so rich they're free of all thoughts of money and power", the largest being a "waste dump" full of "rejects, criminals, ones who didn't quite qualify for power or for anonymity" (*Saving History* 82). Instead of viewing these circles as a hierarchy arranged in such a way that it is possible to progress from tier to tier, he sees

them as enclosed traps, each housing unhappy people who harbour a fruitless desire to be in the smallest circle. “No one is content in the one they’re in. That’s the race. The sting. The bite. The kill. I want to be in the one above the Kennedys and they do too” (*Saving History* 83). This continually frustrated desire for upward social mobility, which is embedded in Temple’s theory, exposes the sense of despair inherent in his view of the world. Hope, in this system, has been warped to the point where it is directed towards an impossible accumulation of wealth, power and prestige.<sup>45</sup> Felicity recognizes the poverty of such a theory, telling Temple that his system appears to her to be composed of “circles of evil” (*Saving History* 82).

Temple’s theories become progressively more extreme as Felicity’s knowledge about his involvement in the trade of human organs deepens. He tells her that

the human being is no greater than a machine with interchangeable parts. Livers, kidneys, hearts, tongues, penises, feet – he drew a picture of robotic reality, a take apart toy, where the mind or the emotions were gaseous emissions from the machinery. (*Saving History* 111)

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<sup>45</sup> Temple’s theories present a view of American society that intersects with Australian anthropologist Ghassan Hage’s assessment of some of the issues faced by contemporary capitalist societies. Hage suggests that capitalist societies have traditionally produced and distributed a certain form of hope among their citizens. This hope is equated with dreams of more highly paid jobs, better lifestyles and more commodities, and centres around the idea that upward social mobility is possible (13-14). Recently, however, and particularly with the growth of global capitalism, Hage claims, the state’s role as producer and distributor of hope has been undermined. The number of people who are deprived of this societal hope has increased to the point where even people with middle class incomes experience a sense of being trapped and deprived of those possibilities which life may have to offer (18-20). This form of hope, for Weil, would present a problem in that its promises of the possibility of increased material wealth and social prestige ultimately leave citizens unfulfilled, even if they are realised: “We have only to imagine all our desires satisfied; after a time we should become discontented. We should want something else and we should be miserable through not knowing what to want” (*On Science, Necessity and the Love of God* 148).

In a recent interview Fanny Howe spoke of the danger in subscribing to abstract theories that, when applied in reality, can lead to a desecration of human life: “The main danger, as I see it, is the invention of alternate worlds made of theories and systems that work in the mind, but not on the ground” (“Interview with Fanny Howe” 2). Temple’s theories, when considered in the abstract, may seem logical and straightforward; however, when applied to real situations, they result in the justification of mutilation and murder.

Although Temple’s justification of the mutilation of human bodies may seem a long way from Goetz’s violent murder marking the beginning of the “kingdom of men” in Sartre’s *Lucifer and the Lord*, the same tendency to embrace theories that “work in the mind, but not on the ground” is present in both. Temple does not appear to be at all concerned with the moral dilemmas Goetz struggles with. Ultimately, however, despite Goetz’s sincere desire to work towards a better future, his actions, informed by a belief in the necessity of violence in order to both prove himself and to further the goals of the army, have the same result as Temple’s actions: the devaluation and destruction of human life. The theories that inform Temple’s and Goetz’s actions do not take into account the element of human life that Weil terms the “sacred”. Human beings are sacred, for Weil, in their entirety: it is impossible in her understanding of the sacred to separate the physical from the emotional, intellectual and spiritual.

It is neither [the] person, nor the human personality in him, which is sacred to me. It is he. The whole of him. The arms, the eyes, the thoughts, everything. Not without infinite scruple would I touch anything of this. (*Simone Weil: An Anthology* 70-71)

It is precisely this sacred nature of each human being that Weil addresses in *The Need for Roots*.

Temple's theories disregard the sacred within each human being, and as such, do not respect or value people's roots. Just as Goetz's belief that violence is a necessary part of revolutionary activity results in the murder of one of his officers, so Temple's theory of the body as a machine allows him to participate in a trade that permits the mutilation of some people's bodies in order to keep others healthy. The full implications of Temple's vision of the world, and the social structures he embodies, are present in his last attempt to persuade Felicity to collect the organs:

I am not evil, Felicity. Believe me. You have to think realistically and not in those primitive terms. We live in a waste economy. We produce waste. [...] Business runs the world. Not government. Street kids? There are drillions of them, all like living abortions unwanted by anyone. I'm in the business of recycling the organs. The lucky ones win. In this case, for once, you're one of the lucky ones. (*Saving History* 177)

When considered in light of Weil's understanding of the sacred, it becomes obvious that Temple's theories lead to the uprooting, rather than the nurturing, of human beings.

### **Refiguring the Divine: Attention, *Metaxu* and Bewilderment**

Although Temple and the social forces he embodies exert pressure on the other characters in the novel, there is another force at work in *Saving History*, which emerges, ultimately, as more powerful than Temple. Powerful may be the wrong word to use in this context, for the force that is able to resist Temple's control also appears as weakness, relying as it does on moments of human kindness, attention and love; however, it is these very qualities that enable it to transcend the weight of an unjust social order. Simone Weil recognized the existence and nature of such a force in her essay "Human Personality":

By the nature of things, the person is subdued to the collectivity, and rights are dependent upon force. The lies and misconceptions which obscure this truth are

extremely dangerous because they prevent us from appealing to the only thing which is immune to force and can preserve us from it: namely, that other force which is the radiance of the spirit. (*Simone Weil: An Anthology* 81)

It is this “radiance of the spirit” that finds expression, however fleetingly, when the characters in *Saving History* respond with attention and love towards each other and the beauty of the world.

Attention, for both Weil and Howe, is central to developing a way of being in the world that results in ethical responses to suffering and oppression. As shown in the first chapter of this thesis, the reason Weil attributes such an important role to the *metaxu* is precisely because of their ability to attract and hold one’s attention, directing it beyond the self. It is this capacity for attention that, according to Weil, enables not only the creation of beautiful works of art, but also the extension of love towards others (*Simone Weil: An Anthology* 234). Attention is also an important component in Fanny Howe’s concept of bewilderment. The experience of being totally lost, utterly bewildered, for Howe opens a new way of responding to and acting in the world. She suggests that our comprehension of time, and of the movement between present and future, is profoundly altered by the experience of bewilderment. This experience, for Howe, results in the need for *attention* rather than *intention* in our negotiation of the world. Because of its importance to this discussion, it is worth quoting the passage describing this process at some length.

At certain points, wandering around lost produces the (perhaps false) impression that events approach you from ahead, that time is moving backwards onto you, and that the whole scenario is operating in reverse from the way it is ordinarily perceived.



[...] Each movement forwards is actually a catching of what is coming at you, as if someone you are facing across a field has thrown a ball and stands watching you catch it.

Watching and catching combine as a forward action that has come from ahead.

All intention is then reversed into attention. (*The Wedding Dress* 17)

In *Saving History*, both Felicity and Tom develop this attitude of attention, which is prompted by the experience of bewilderment, and is also closely associated with Weil's understanding of the value of attention.

Possibly the most obvious connection between the passage quoted above and the attention experienced by the characters in *Saving History* is found in Tom's return journey to visit his half-brother's father Pedro in prison. The journey to the prison and the journey back are completely different experiences for Tom. On the way there his thoughts turn to intention, to moving forwards into the future with the setting and accomplishment of goals. Throwing an object forward in childhood, he muses, is similar to "aspiration and accomplishment" as an adult (*Saving History* 147). His meeting with Pedro, however, throws him into turmoil, raising questions about his family's complicity in Pedro's incarceration, and by extension, Tom's own moral standing. As a physical counterpart to this mental and emotional confusion, Tom loses himself among the backroads on his return journey. Again his thoughts turn to the idea of throwing something forward into the future, and the connection this has with human aspirations. He remembers a scene from a movie showing men moving through an unknown area, throwing an object wrapped in white cloth ahead of them to test whether they were able to pass that way. Tom relates this to the way people live their lives by throwing "thoughts, plans, calendars... ahead into the void" (*Saving History* 155). While he accepted this interpretation of life easily enough before his conversation with

Pedro, now he grapples with a sense of dislocation and disorientation, both literal and psychological. He feels that time has been somehow thrown off balance, and concurrently, his energy has been exhausted. The time he spent with Pedro becomes something tangible, solid: “He felt he literally had time on his hands. A slick smear of it dotted with grime” (*Saving History* 157). The disorientation of place, ethics, morality and family history, brings Tom to the point where the action of moving into the future with a certain intention holds no meaning. He no longer envisions time spread out in front of him as a void to move into, but sees its stain smeared across his hand.

This collapse of forward orientation, and the resulting confusion, precede Tom’s glance towards the mountains. It is here that the attention Howe speaks of in her poetics of bewilderment takes on its redemptive aspect. Shorn of intention, confused and dislocated, Tom looks to the mountains, and his resulting thought process embodies many of the ideas Howe articulates in her essay on bewilderment:

Why, he wondered, even in the thick of despair, does a person yearn, with a whole heart, for something good, something complete? [...] Why did he, stuck in the indulgence of time, and sad, still find himself driven forward automatically (platonically) towards the beautiful? Am I responsible for creating tomorrow’s objects and events out of my motions, or is it already waiting for me – a table set, a pair of hands producing food? (*Saving History* 158)<sup>46</sup>

Howe suggests in her essay “Bewilderment” that although being bewildered means existing in a state of confusion and disorientation, it is also recognized and given high

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<sup>46</sup> The last sentence of the passage quoted here is reminiscent of George Herbert’s poem “Love” that Weil so admired. The significance of food prepared and a table set resonates on both the physical and spiritual levels.

status in some mystical traditions (*The Wedding Dress* 15).<sup>47</sup> Drawing on her understanding of Sufism, she marks out this aspect of bewilderment as “progressing at one level and becoming more lost at another” (*The Wedding Dress* 16). Tom, having lost his bearings physically, psychologically and morally, is thrown open to questions that propel him into a contemplation of the relationship between beauty and despair. His moment of attention, which emerges through his experience of bewilderment, draws his thoughts beyond the known towards the transcendent.

The beauty of the world, embodied in the mountains, serves as a *metaxu* for Tom in this moment of attention and contemplation. The criteria Springsted outlines that combine to make something a *metaxu* – the ability to sustain the attention and to awaken a “desire for the Good” (199) – are evident in the above passage. Tom’s attention is caught and held by the beauty he sees in the mountains, and as a result, he finds himself yearning for “something good, something complete”, moving irresistibly “towards the beautiful” (*Saving History* 158). Referring again to Weil’s understanding that the sacred nature of each human being is found in “the longing in the depth of the heart for absolute good” (*Simone Weil: An Anthology* 222), and drawing on the inference made earlier in this thesis that this longing forms the basis of hope, we find that the *metaxu* in this passage does in fact awaken a sense of hope in Tom.

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<sup>47</sup> In an interview with Leonard Schwartz, Howe expands on the influences that have led her to see positive aspects in the experience of bewilderment. She refers to her reading of Arabic poetry, in which she found “gorgeous references to a bewilderment that was looked upon as a great virtue because you were in a permanent state of awe and horror” (“Fanny Howe in Conversation”). Kriner also mentions this quality of bewilderment: “Howe lights on the idea of bewilderment itself as a spiritual, if not literal, progression; in its mingling of the immanent and transcendent, bewilderment can be both aimless and have positive spiritual results” (213).

The hope that emerges in the midst of Tom's confusion and despair finds expression both in his longing for what is good and beautiful and in the desire that this builds in him to love and care for others. His thoughts turn from himself to Felicity and her daughters, and he is filled with a desire to help them, to bring a sense of joy and delight back with him.

And he wanted to see Felicity now. To tell Matty that the human spirit is the size of a bird, and that's why the holy spirit is always represented as a bird... To tell Lee that she must learn to enjoy herself before it's too late. (*Saving History* 158)

At this point in the narrative, however, Tom is confronted with circumstances that disrupt his initial enthusiasm. His response to these circumstances demonstrates the need for hope to be expressed actively, in a concrete, physical way, in order to guard against a retreat from the reality of suffering.

However noble Tom's desire to extend his love to Felicity and her daughters may have been in the abstract, his good intentions are frustrated when he arrives back at the house to find that Felicity and the girls have already left. Without the physical presence of the small family, Tom's resolve slackens, and he is able to justify abandoning them entirely. He leaves the house, explaining to his half-brother Dan why he left later that evening: "it's... like I'm caught in a tide pool – too many walls, connections, the same whirling faces again and again" (*Saving History* 197). Again this is an expression of Tom's bewilderment; however, unlike his earlier response of attentiveness to the beauty of the world, this time he backs away from the lack of certainty and control. The experience of bewilderment is too much for him to bear, and he removes himself from the situation and catches the plane back to Boston. He wishes he could have taken on Matty's illness himself, swapped places with her, but his wish remains just that: an abstract desire unable to transform the reality of the situation (*Saving History* 198). The

hope that accompanied his moment of attention after visiting Pedro dissipated when he decided to leave the house Felicity had obviously departed from not long before. Without the chance to put his desire to love Felicity and her daughters into action, his experience of the positive effects of bewilderment receded, leaving him with only the horror of Felicity's stories and the memory of a situation he could not bear to voluntarily descend back into. Howe mentions the need for an active form of hope in her poem "Catholic": "All hope depends on possibility. But you can't have hope outside of an immediate, active concern for justice; and this complicates the processes" (*The Wedding Dress* 119). Tom's withdrawal into himself, his resistance to traveling further into the wilderness of suffering, tangled moralities and confused relationships that he has encountered during his time with Felicity, result in a hope that is not strong enough to sustain concrete actions of justice and love.

Felicity, however has a similar experience of bewilderment and attention, which does lead to concrete action on her behalf. Upon arrival at the site Temple directed her to in order to collect the human organs, Felicity peers into one of the windows at the back of the building. She is confronted with the corpses of two young girls, her attention caught by the beauty of their faces, their long eyelashes.

Each tiny hair might have been doubled by its own shadow, she figured, and that was what made them seem so long and so silky. Or maybe it was just the word "lash" for such a little thing that made them into such a strong thing? But she was stunned by the image of those drooping eyes. No longer in service to the female bodies that were only half-developed. [...] Incomplete works. Lashed down. Christ's back lashed in the stations, lashed to royal stripes, the cross lashed to his back, and the donkey following... (*Saving History* 180)

It is this moment of attention, this capturing of her thought – indeed, of her whole being – by the beauty and the suffering of these two girls that prompts Felicity to change her mind about carrying the organs back across the border.

Just as the mountains formed a *metaxu* for Tom earlier in the novel, so does the physical presence of these girls form a *metaxu* for Felicity. However, unlike Tom's delayed response, which resulted in a dissipation of the hope generated as he focused his attention on the mountains, Felicity's decision not to participate in the unjust trade of human eyes, livers, hearts, lungs across the border is acted upon immediately: "She stumbled downwards and landed on one knee in the dust, then plunged forwards, gasping, back to the car" (*Saving History* 180). Felicity's decision not to act in this situation – not to perform a task that will ultimately help to save her own daughter's life – is closely related to Weil's notion of "non-acting action". The practice of attention results in this type of action:

The attention turned with love towards God (or in a lesser degree, towards anything which is truly beautiful) makes certain things impossible for us. Such is the non-acting action of prayer in the soul. There are ways of behaviour which would veil such attention should they be indulged in and which, reciprocally, this attention puts out of the question. (*Simone Weil: An Anthology* 234)

Felicity, faced with two irreconcilable obligations – to take care of her daughter, and to respect the lives of people who are being exploited and murdered as a direct result of the trade in human organs – chooses not to participate in this trade at the expense of her daughter's life. She makes this decision as a result of a moment of attention, which proves powerful enough to direct her actions.

To identify the action arising from this decision as a moment where hope is brought into being may seem difficult to comprehend. Out of the very limited options left to her by the uprooting mechanisms at work in her society, Felicity has, in effect, chosen the path that will lead to her daughter's death. For Howe, however, Felicity's action opens a new realm of possibility and freedom, despite its consequences (Matty dies towards the end of the novel, and Felicity is incarcerated in a mental institution after setting Temple's family mansion alight). The hope in this choice is found in Felicity's decision to break away from her adherence to the unjust demands Temple has placed on her, and to act according to a good that transcends the structures of society he embodies. A passage from Howe's essay on Edith Stein illuminates the paradox inherent in her decision:

If a person makes the decision to be the thing that history and chance are already making them to be, this decision switches the mechanisms away from the fated into a zone of freedom. This is one definition of a religious act, as it is also of a selfless political act. (*The Wedding Dress* 49)

In consenting to be the person that the social and historical forces governing her society have made her (a mother who cannot afford to pay for a liver transplant for her child), Felicity is able to transcend those forces, acting under a higher order of justice and love. The hope generated by this decision bears resemblance to Camus's "spontaneous rebellion". Rather than clinging to the desire for her daughter's survival, and pursuing this end despite the actions she must take to accomplish it, Felicity instead rebels against Temple's control in an act of insurrection that results in the emergence of a very different form of hope.

It is here that the paradoxical nature of Weil's concept of uprootedness becomes clear. While roots are necessary for sustaining human life, their purpose is to point beyond the

finite, temporal good they represent. Ultimately, for Weil, being firmly rooted in the world and utilizing the *metaxu* that provide bridges between the temporal and the spiritual, finds its culminating point in an *uprooting* of the self, a tearing away from those temporal supports into the void.<sup>48</sup> This uprooting of the self is also linked to self-renunciation and decreation. The emphasis Weil places on a human being's freedom to choose to renounce or uproot the self is counterposed by two other, equally important and related ideas referred to in the first chapter of this thesis: the need to first have roots, and the need to ensure that other people also have access to their own roots.

Felicity's decision not to participate in the organ trade is made in the ever-closing gap between two competing forces: the structures of society that, along with Temple's influence on her life, have combined to uproot her; and her own desire to act justly, to fulfil her obligations as a human being and a mother. Squeezed inescapably between these two forces, Felicity finds herself incapable, finally, of carrying out an action that is contrary to her desire for justice and love. In making this decision, she cannot escape the other force bearing down on her, and as a result she is pulverized as the two finally meet. Voluntarily renouncing her own self whilst still at the mercy of social forces that uproot her "from the outside", as Weil puts it, Felicity simultaneously transcends those forces while still bearing their full weight. Springsted remarks that "If one were to be deprived of his *μεταξύ*, harm would be done to his soul... because while desiring good he received only evil" (198). Remembering that Weil finds *metaxu* in "home, country, traditions, culture, etc." (*Gravity and Grace* 133), in other words, in our roots, we see that Felicity's uprootedness has led to a situation where, while "desiring good" she is in fact faced with the horror of her daughter's death. The hope found in Felicity's moment

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<sup>48</sup> See Springsted, *Christus Mediator* 200.



of attention, and in her resulting act of justice and love, is, in this situation, inseparable from her own grief and pain. “*But when G-d is a metaphor for d—th, then I cry out: Rescue me from Yahweh my enemy, and from unjust people and their decisions*” (*Saving History* 181). When Felicity makes her choice, she is faced simultaneously with both “G-d” (the infinite good she took part in when she made the choice not to violate the life of another human being), and the knowledge that in making this decision, she is consenting to the death of her own daughter.

The real hope found in this decision becomes evident in the conversation between Felicity and her daughters as they stop at a café on the other side of the border, after their frenzied escape. Both Matty and Lee are given life through their own words in this scene, as opposed to being seen largely through Felicity’s eyes, as they are for the majority of the novel. Felicity is shown here from the point of view of her children, which deepens and validates the bond between them and allows her daughters a vitality and life beyond her own. The interaction between the three characters takes place in a space that is open enough for each of them to exist individually, and for both the love and the tensions between them to be given expression. The conversation ends as Matty promises to get better, and Felicity responds: “Better? You are the best. And the illness is just part of the perfect you, that’s all. You’re perfect. What is this ‘better?’” Felicity’s comment, even if only momentarily, transforms Matty’s own image of herself: “I feel better already,” she says (*Saving History* 194). The three characters are bound together in this moment of transformation that extends beyond the emotional to their physical connection, and beyond that again to their connection with the wider world: “Matty climbed up on Lee’s back and Felicity walked behind, holding her up with her hand. She was not conscious of her hair turning silver under the sun” (*Saving*

*History* 194). It is this interaction, this dialogue of love, which is able to transform a situation saturated with fear, illness, anxiety and guilt.

It is no accident that this conversation with Matty and Lee takes place after Felicity's decision not to participate in the organ trade. Unlike Tom, who fled from his experience of bewilderment before he acted on his newly awakened desire to extend his love to Felicity and her daughters, Felicity acts on her decision immediately. As a result of her act of self-renunciation, new possibilities emerge. Felicity's desire to love, once acted upon, transforms her reality. She does not have the power to change her external circumstances, which remain as present and as heavy as they did previously, but there is a shift in perspective that allows Felicity to perceive the world and her daughters in a new light. This shift in perspective results in the conversation with Matty and Lee in the café, which generates a sense of hope that is not dependent on Matty recovering, and illuminates the present in the light of their love for each other. Again, we return to Weil's assertion that a renunciation of the self results in a transformation in the way the world is perceived, which involves an awakening "to what is real and eternal, to... the true light and... the true silence" (*Waiting on God* 98). This awakening is not only experienced in Felicity's relationship with her daughters, but also characterizes her journey after Matty's death.

As Felicity wanders along the coast on foot, alone after the death of her daughter, her journey is suffused with a divine reality utterly different from the one she associates with Temple. Genderless, separate from human notions of power, manipulation and control, not capricious or requiring appeasement, the divine is revealed during this journey as a transcendent mystery that finds expression in the physical world.

I lived right up next to G-d in those days; it was as big and bristling as the Southern California hills, the rump of Tijuana, the desert and the ice blue sea all together. [...] It was great to watch the mystery unveil itself as fact. I had never wanted more than that.

(*Saving History* 211-212)

The physical landscapes she passes through arrest Felicity with their beauty and awaken her to a divine reality that, in contrast to Temple's theories of the mechanics of human existence, reveals itself simultaneously as both mystery and fact. The beauty of the world and the revelation of the divine are not the only elements of this journey that provide a counter to Temple's theories: the very physical acts of kindness shown to her by strangers are also important.

Unhappiness you know, it surrounds your hours, it moves ahead and behind you, but kindness – the kindness of people, or the kindness of events – is always a surprise.

In those days kindness took the form of food, blankets and a little floor space to sleep on – there was nothing abstract in it. (*Saving History* 212)

Human love, and the act of focusing one's attention on another, emerges in *Saving History* as an alternative to adhering to Temple's decrees of greed, fear, manipulation, and the perpetuation of racial and gender inequalities. Inherent in this process is a degree of self-renunciation.

Attention, which in *Saving History* precedes loving action, is in Weil's understanding inseparable from a person's consent to a certain diminishment of the self. "Attention alone – the attention which is so full that the 'I' disappears – is required of me" (*Gravity and Grace* 107). This renunciation of the self, which occurs as a person truly focuses their attention on another, in Weil's eyes is actually creative of the other. In renouncing the self, the other is given space to exist. She suggests that the pivotal moment in the parable of the Good Samaritan occurs as the Samaritan focuses his attention on the man

lying by the side of the road. The actions he takes afterwards are, for Weil, merely the “automatic effect” of this attention (*Waiting on God* 89).

The attention is creative. But at the moment when it is engaged it is a renunciation. This is true, at least, if it is pure. The man accepts to be diminished by concentrating on an expenditure of energy, which will not extend his own power but will only give existence to a being other than himself, who will exist independently of him. (*Waiting on God* 89)

The difference between an intended action that results in an expansion or imposition of the self, and an action that proceeds from self-renunciatory attention, is demonstrated clearly in a comparison between Temple and Felicity. Temple is described as both obsessive and indifferent, refusing to “comfort [Felicity] with one moment of human attention... [...] Like a radar machine, he kept track of her moves, remaining himself isolate and invisible” (*Saving History* 73-74). Later in the novel, Felicity describes Temple as “estranged from everything around him... present but indifferent” (*Saving History* 106). Temple is so intent on imposing his will on others that he remains untouched by what is happening around him: in contrast to Felicity and Tom, both of whom experience moments of bewilderment, attention, and loss of self, Temple’s self remains intact to the point of impenetrability.<sup>49</sup> He *intends* rather than *attends*. This lack of attention towards others results in an absence of compassion and love. Temple’s insistence on an expansion rather than a renunciation of his self, and concurrently, his refusal to give his attention to others, result in actions that contribute to, rather than relieve, the suffering of the other characters. Felicity’s and Tom’s experience of

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<sup>49</sup> Temple’s actions cause profound harm to Felicity, as shown above. Weil suggests that “[to] harm a person is to receive something from him. What? What have we gained (and what will have to be repaid) when we have done harm? We have gained in importance. We have expanded. We have filled an emptiness in ourselves by creating one in somebody else” (*Simone Weil: An Anthology* 217).

bewilderment, however, provides a counter to Temple's control. Bewildered, their attention is drawn towards objects that form *metaxu*, and in these moments of self-renunciatory attention they are prompted towards acts of love.

### ***Saving History as Metaxu: Howe's Poetics of Bewilderment***

Returning to Springsted's elucidation of the criteria of *metaxu*, which includes the ability to attract and sustain the attention in addition to awakening a desire for absolute good, I propose that Howe's novel certainly fulfils the first requirement. Howe's use of meditative passages, her employment of an unstable, shifting voice that moves irregularly between first and third person, and her manipulation of narrative structure, all require the reader to be attentive to the text. This reconfiguration of narrative conventions forces the reader to pay attention not only to plot, theme and character, but also to the opacity and plasticity of language, and to the reader's own struggle to create meaning from the text. It is this aspect of her writing that is able to attract the reader's attention in the same way that the bewilderment Felicity and Tom experience draws them towards things of beauty. Howe's poetics of bewilderment allows her work to truly engage the reader's attention.<sup>50</sup>

The act of reading *Saving History* requires not only the ability to draw connections between disparate sections of text that are often arranged in a non-linear order, but also a willingness to remain open to receiving meaning from a narrative that is often slippery and inconclusive. Howe's fiction continually surprises, turns back on itself, offers different readings of the same event. This flickering between the expected (development of character, plot, theme) and the unexpected (irregular shifts in narrative

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<sup>50</sup> Obviously, as established previously, this is a two-way process that involves the reader's consent to focus his or her attention on the work.

voice, non-linear structure, long meditative passages) requires the reader to set aside preconceived notions of narrative form and allow the text to speak for itself.<sup>51</sup> Howe's manipulation of narrative form encourages a kind of attentive reading, a suspension of expectation and a willingness to participate in the potential meaning of the text as it unveils itself.

The insertion of long meditative passages in *Saving History* foregrounds the experience of bewilderment for the reader. These passages, marked out in italics, often contain shifts between third and first person, densely packed physical descriptions of the surrounding landscape, and sometimes include visitations from ghosts or religious figures. These sections make no distinction between the physical, emotional, spiritual, intellectual or political aspects of human life, but move rapidly and freely between them:

*The embryo went to sleep early one night and in the liquidy darkness I stepped down the center of the road, by day bustling with cars and tourists. [...]*

*She was often sick, either hunched up or bent over, retching into a toilet bowl. Nature is extravagant. Her body was a difficulty in much the same spirit that a person's gender or income can be under certain conditions. Inside her eyes she saw placenta, membranes, amniotic fluids, cervical cul-de-sacs, a vulva and an interior like the gums of an infant. However, her mental dimensions tipped towards the metaphysical. G-d had been forced out of just such a world. She trudged up and down the island and daily*

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<sup>51</sup> Of course many other writers also make use of techniques that challenge narrative conventions. However, Howe's poetics of bewilderment, which underpins her experimentation with form, consciously focuses on the value of attention; and as such, it has a particular relevance for this discussion that other texts may not. The judges who awarded Howe the 2001 Lenore Marshall Poetry prize recognised this aspect of her work, suggesting that one of the strengths of her poems is that they "invite us, or remind us, to attend" (Lauterbach 33).

*visited beaches which were duneless but sided by slick streaks of beachgrass. The shadows of seagulls spilled along water's edges. (Saving History 91)*

In the context of bewilderment, such passages widen and deepen the flow of the narrative, giving the impression of a series of moments layered over one another, where events are not planned and carried out by the characters, but rather happen *to* them. Seeing through Felicity's eyes, the reader is left floundering, unsure of what will happen next, wading through a series of images that do not offer forward movement or resolution, but merely direct the gaze to surrounding objects and thoughts.

Howe's essay "Bewilderment" contains a clue to deciphering these passages. For Howe, "error, errancy, and bewilderment are the main forces that signal a story" in her poetry and fiction (*The Wedding Dress* 6). A signal, she suggests, may not mean that the subject wishes to be found and described, but rather to remain hidden. The contradiction in sending out a signal while at the same time not wanting to be located, she writes,

can drive the "I" in the lyrical poem into a series of techniques that are the reverse of the usual narrative movements around courage, discipline, conquest, and fame.

Instead, weakness, fluidity, concealment, and solitude assume their place in a kind of dream world, where the sleeping witness finally feels safe enough to lie down in mystery. (*The Wedding Dress* 6-7)<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Howe's serial poem "The Vineyard" is a particularly good example of a poem that interrogates the nature of the self, embodying the paradox of signalling a story while simultaneously wishing to remain hidden. The fourth poem in the series illustrates Howe's comments above:

To be close to its source

A self needs to be stealthy

Or too vague to contact

Meaning on earth

Taking into account Howe's statement that she does not make any distinction between her last four novels and her poetry ("The Poetics of Stillness"), this statement equally applies to the various "I"s in *Saving History*. In contrast to a narrative based on "courage, discipline, conquest and fame", the novel is more akin to a dream; the text, particularly in the meditative passages described above, foregrounds what is weak, fluid and concealed. Within this is an acceptance of mystery, of the unknown, of contradiction and uncertainty. As has previously been discussed, bewilderment, for Howe, can involve a changed perception of time, such that the intention to move forward into the future is transformed into attention to what is approaching (*The Wedding Dress* 17). The meditative passages in *Saving History*, based as they are on fluidity and mystery rather than courage or conquest, have the potential to reverse a reader's expectations of a narrative that will progress towards intended goals and outcomes, calling forth instead an attitude of attention, a widening of the reader's gaze.

Howe's reference to dream-like structures is also relevant to her use of shifting narrative voice and the spiraling structures that characterize her poetry and later fiction. In "Bewilderment", Howe describes a dream that provides a useful starting point from which to examine the use of voice in her fiction. In the dream, Howe is visited by two old women, one of whom represents the public aspects of a person's life, the other the private. The first, who rushes about, active and taking on the role of a mother, Howe calls "Way Out There"; the second, who is immobile and thoughtful, she calls "Way Inside". As the dream progresses, she becomes aware that these two women are

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Is AWAKE as a pond  
of a drillion fishes  
Hands reach out and feed it  
Where it hides in the dark  
Real life would kill it (14)



actually one: “[they] were splitting and re-forming into one and the other, as birds can sometimes seem to do, whole flocks of the same shape bursting up into the sky” (*The Wedding Dress* 8-9). As she observes in her analysis of the dream, it “illuminated a method for describing sequential persons, first and third” (*The Wedding Dress* 9). “Way Out There” becomes a way of envisioning the role of third person, “Way Inside” the role of first.

In *Saving History* Felicity and Tom appear as subjects who both see and are observed, as selves who contain simultaneously a “Way Out There” and a “Way Inside”. This is signalled in the first chapter of the novel, which consists of a confused succession of paragraphs cobbled together, with no clear map given to decipher either changes in tense or the switches between first and third person. Although Felicity has already emerged as the central character at this point in the text, her name has not yet been given, a fact which is drawn attention to: “We don’t care about her name yet because she has the advantage of the I” (*Saving History* 12). In this sentence, Felicity is revealed to be both subject “I”, and object “her”, and the identity of the narrator is also brought into question. The narrator’s identity remains fluid and uncertain throughout the novel: at times it seems to be Felicity, at other times Tom; but mostly it appears as a third Other that at times even morphs into the plural, as in the sentence quoted above. These changes in point of view function as a way of attracting the reader’s attention not only to the narrative itself, but also to the structures of language that underlie the telling of this story, and, further, to a consideration of the nature of the self.

Howe explains the reasoning behind these shifts in point of view in her fiction in an interview with Justin Taylor, linking this aspect of her work with wider concerns she attempts to address in both her poetry and prose.

‘I’ is sometimes ‘She’ and sometimes ‘He,’ in the sense that I can appear to be she or he, and I can see myself as an I or a she or a he, I can remember myself as she, or he, and the world only sees me as she when I am I. (“Interview with Fanny Howe” 1)

This seems obvious, a mere semantic mirroring of the different ways in which the self is perceived; however, as Howe continues her discussion, it becomes clear that her use of point of view forms an integral part of her overall quest to find what she terms “something solid at the center of a human life” (“Interview with Fanny Howe” 1). This centre, she says, is unable to be perceived by the senses, and is expressed in her fiction through an attempt to recapture the “malleability... and fleeting nature of the self” (“Interview with Fanny Howe” 1). Howe’s understanding of the self as an entity that is not fixed and isolated but is rather fluid and changing, has implications for both her writing and her politics.<sup>53</sup>

If my mind is not a continuum of consciousness that enfolds the earth and planets, etcetera, and if it begins and ends inside my skull, then how can I have children? Why continue this parade? (“Interview with Fanny Howe” 1).<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Daniel Kane notes that the notion of a fluid self is common across much of the writings of the contemporary American avant-garde (17). For Howe, interrogation of the “I” goes further than questions of authorial identity, and becomes an integral part of her formal techniques, ethics, and metaphysics. Stephen Fredman identifies the importance of the *via negativa* in Howe’s poetry, not surprisingly aligning her work with post-modern and liberation theologies that find the *via negativa* (or, in Weil’s terms, the decreation of the self), in ethics (208).

<sup>54</sup> Howe also refers directly to the experience of pregnancy in another interview: “...I think the experience of being both a womb and a tomb as you’re walking around is pretty intense and heart changing... When you give birth, you divide into parts. You become dispersed” (“Fanny Howe in Conversation”).

For Howe, the experience of pregnancy suggests an inherent connection not only between self and other, but also between the self and the universe.

The description of Felicity's pregnancy in *Saving History* demonstrates this connection, both in terms of its shifts between third and first person and in the juxtaposition of Felicity's experience of childbearing with the abundant fertility of the world around her. Ann Vickery suggests that childbirth is expressed in Howe's poem "Servitude" (*The Vineyard*) as something that "violates the space between self and Other, creating a radical moment of connection" (231). In Felicity's pregnancy in *Saving History*, not only is the line blurred between self and other, it is also blurred between the self and the world: "*The collar-like erection on the beach was made by a moonsnail to protect her eggs. So she was an organism which existed alongside the other particulars in the universe*" (*Saving History* 94). The self, at this extreme point of human experience, is revealed as porous and in constant relationship with other human beings, the world it inhabits, and its own creator:

*She inhabited her inhabitant and kept on moving. The larvae of soft-shell clams do no less. In an environment that changes wildly, creation creates a lot of itself. In a fierce storm barnacles, worms, and mussels reproduce in droves. If she wondered who really owned her hand, writing with a pen, and where she could be located, she now knew one thing at least and for the time being: she was present at her own life. (Saving History 93)*

The borders between Felicity's self and the rest of the world are no longer clearly defined: her own body contains more than one consciousness, and in its growth it also mirrors the wild reproduction of the natural world surrounding her. This situation produces a profound questioning of who and where her self is.

Questions concerning the nature of the self are also posed by Howe in “Bewilderment”. Referring to a Sufi creation story, which sees God’s sense of loneliness as the catalyst for creation, she suggests that it is God’s desire to be known that inhabits the human heart: “Now the One who wanted to be known dwells in the hearts of humans who carry the pulse of the One’s own wanting to be known by the ones who want in return to be known by it” (*The Wedding Dress* 12). This, for Howe, comes close to providing a way to understand the nature of human existence:

This is at the root of the incarnational experience of being – that one is inhabited by the witness who is oneself and by that witness’s creator simultaneously.

The question is, what is it to be familiar? (Why am I familiar to myself at all?

Or is it my self that is familiar to some inhabitant behind my existence?)” (*The Wedding Dress* 13)

This is crucial to understanding Felicity’s reference to the location of her ‘self’ in the passage quoted above, and by extension, Howe’s irregular use of first and third person in *Saving History*. The claim that Felicity “*inhabited her inhabitant*” is integral to Howe’s search for the nature of human existence. Not only is Felicity inhabited by her child, she is also inhabited by her own creator, which she in turn also inhabits. The paradox here, the continuing spiral of connections between mother, child, creator, writer, has the capacity to produce a sense of bewilderment in the reader. Nothing is fixed or stable: normally unquestioned boundaries between the self, the Other, and the world are ruptured and blurred.

Howe’s experimentation with language and syntax is inseparable from this wider project that turns to bewilderment rather than to any form of fixed absolute as a way of explaining and interacting with the world. Language in its present form, she writes, “fails to deal with confusion” (*The Wedding Dress* 14). There is no way to describe

simultaneous events, for example, unless the words are repeated or the letters layered on top of one another. Language is bound by syntax “that insists on tenses and words like ‘later’ and ‘before’” (*The Wedding Dress* 14). This inability of language to adequately express confusion or non-linear experiences of time, leads Howe to describe bewilderment as “more than an attitude – but an actual approach, a way – to settle with the unresolvable” (*The Wedding Dress* 14). In her essay “Fairies”, Howe quotes British-Guyanese writer Wilson Harris: “‘The frame that conventional realism uses endorses the absence of cosmic love. It consolidates the nation-state and the vested interests of the nation-state’” (*The Wedding Dress* 33). In employing techniques that include shifting point of view, meditative passages, and spiraling rather than linear narrative structure in *Saving History*, Fanny Howe undercuts traditional narrative conventions. This can be seen as a political, as well as a poetic act of resistance to fixed systems of language and governance, an attempt to address issues of narrative form that Howe identifies in her essay “Au Hasard”:

Sentences and plots for a time seemed dangerous to me, an extension of closed potential, of socialization. My impulsiveness seemed to fizzle through excess scheming as the life of a nation does. When I had a chance to break free, the laws of grammar restrained me. Unfulfilled gestures and cries were excluded from this ‘government of words.’

Having discussed Howe’s use of meditative passages and shifting point of view, we turn now to a third technique central to Howe’s poetics of bewilderment: the spiraling structures that characterize her poetry and fiction. Again, Howe returns to dreams in order to find a way to balance “the necessity associated with plot and the blindness associated with experience”, without letting either override or subsume the other (*The Wedding Dress* 7).

A dream often undermines the narratives of power and winning. [...]

A dream breaks into parts and contradicts its own will, even as it travels around and around.

For me, bewilderment is like a dream: one continually returning pause on a gyre and in both my stories and my poems it could be the shape of the spiral that imprints itself in my interior before anything emerges on paper. (*The Wedding Dress* 9)

This spiraling structure is clearly evident in *Saving History*. Felicity's and Tom's stories intersect with and bounce off one another throughout the novel, the past continually invades the present through memory and storytelling, and images reappear at different moments in the text, giving the impression that the narrative is ceaselessly circling back to the same place, even while the plot moves forward through time. Several of these images are introduced in the first chapter:

When people decided to mix inventions into the real things – cement in water, steel pipes in earth, tiles under fields – they were only a few steps away from putting nails into hands, people into ovens, needles into arms. (*Saving History* 12)

Many of these images recur at critical points during the story, the most noticeable being the reference to the Holocaust. In his final attempt to persuade Felicity to pick up the organs, Temple shows her a video of himself being interviewed on television, in which he calls Hitler a prophet and expresses support for racial segregation. In the speech he says: "As for all that holocaust business, no such thing ever happened" (*Saving History* 172). Several pages later, when Felicity arrives at the compound she has been directed to pick up the organs from, she sees a "little building with the kind of chimney she had only seen in crematoriums" (*Saving History* 178). The cumulative effect of these references – the early mention of putting "people into ovens", Temple's denial of the Holocaust, and Felicity's direct experience of being in a place that recalls the barbarism

of concentration camps – gives the impression that the narrative is whirling around, touching again and again on the same points.

There is also a metaphysical element to Howe's use of spiraling structures. This is perhaps demonstrated even more clearly in her poetry than her prose. Many of Howe's poems are arranged as a series of shorter poems that are either separated by large spaces in the text or stand alone on separate pages: for example, "Splinter" (*Gone* 1-20) consists of eighteen smaller poems each presented on its own page. Serial poems, for Howe, take the form of a spiral, demonstrating "attention to what is cyclical, returning, but empty at its axis" (*The Wedding Dress* 17). This constant circling around an ultimately empty space is crucial to understanding the way Howe's formal techniques intersect with her metaphysics. Just as, for Weil, absolute good exists outside the world we inhabit, so Howe's insistence on allowing an empty, untraversed space to remain at the centre of her work, points to the absence (and thus to the hidden presence) of God in the world: "Bewilderment circumnavigates, believing that at the center of errant or circular movement is the empty but ultimate referent" (*The Wedding Dress* 20). The existence of an ultimately empty centre evoked by Howe's use of spiralling structures is also drawn attention to in other ways: directly, as in this sentence in *Saving History*, "*The world is one, but there is no center*" (114); and in her spelling of the word "G-d".<sup>55</sup>

Each of these techniques – the use of meditative passages, shifting point of view, and spiralling narrative structure – contribute to the sense of bewilderment that pervades *Saving History*. The overall effect of these narrative strategies causes a reversal of any

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<sup>55</sup> In her interview with Justin Taylor, Howe explains that her use of the word G-d goes beyond the conventional use of the word as a Jewish expression of piety: "The difficulty of the word God is behind all my writing and revising ("Interview with Fanny Howe" 1).

expectations the reader may have that this story is progressing towards an intended goal or outcome. Instead, the reader is required to abandon preconceived ideas about narrative form and simply attend to the text. Just as Tom's experience of bewilderment preceded (and perhaps made possible) his glance towards the mountains, which then held his attention through their beauty, so the text's ability to bewilder the reader also enables it to awaken the reader's attention.

Having now established that *Saving History* does in fact meet Springsted's first requirement for an object to act as a *metaxu*, it remains to be seen whether the second criteria, "lifting the soul by awakening a desire for the Good" (Springsted 199), is also fulfilled. It is useful at this point to return to Weil's description of the role of *metaxu* in her essay "God in Plato". One of the things that is able to 'lift the soul', for Weil, is contradiction:

Whenever the intelligence is brought up against a contradiction, it is obliged to conceive a relation which transforms the contradiction into a correlation, and as a result the soul is drawn upwards. (*On Science, Necessity and the Love of God* 113)

*Saving History* is full of contradictions and paradoxes that are able to, borrowing from Weil's terminology, "evoke the faculty of thought" (*On Science, Necessity and the Love of God* 113). One of these paradoxes has already been discussed: the statement that Felicity, during her pregnancy, "*inhabited her inhabitant*" (*Saving History* 93). As previously mentioned, this contradiction raises questions about the nature of the self, particularly in terms of perceived boundaries between the self and the other, whether that "other" be another person, the surrounding environment, or God. There are many more examples, not least the paradox that encompasses the entire novel: Felicity's transcendence of the social and historical forces that, combined, have presented her with a choice between saving her daughter's life and violating the life of another. Felicity's



movement into a “zone of freedom” (*The Wedding Dress* 49) occurs not as she escapes or triumphs over these forces, but as she consents to be what they have made her to be. The importance and sheer number of contradictions in *Saving History* suggests that it does perhaps have the potential to ‘lift the soul’. This is supported by the fact that Fanny Howe also highlights the value of contradiction in her work and her life as a whole.

What I do every day comes from one impulse, whether it’s writing or washing – to convert, to be wholehearted, happy, brave, faithful, without a doubt. Contradiction has gotten me the closest to this experience. (qtd. in Kane 73)

### **Writing *Metaxu*: Howe’s Method**

If *Saving History* does indeed have the potential to form a *metaxu* for the reader, as this analysis suggests, a consideration of Fanny Howe’s method of writing becomes important. Having outlined a way of writing in the first chapter of this thesis based on Simone Weil’s views on hope and literature, it now becomes possible to test those ideas against Howe’s description of her own writing process. Howe discusses her method in an interview with Patricia Vigderman, revealing many points of intersection between her process and Weil’s poetics. One of Vigderman’s questions refers to a passage by an unnamed Jewish mystic quoted in Howe’s essay on Weil, “Work and Love”, which suggests a way of preparing oneself to receive and transcribe an insight. According to this mystic, after lighting a room, sitting with paper and pen, and committing to serve God with joy, the next step entails combining individual letters “until thy heart be warm”, and finally,

when thou feelest that thy heart is already warm and when thou seest that by combinations of letters thou canst grasp new things which by human tradition or by thyself thou wouldst not be able to know and when thou art thus prepared to receive the

influx of divine power which flows into thee, then turn all thy true thought to image the Name. (*The Wedding Dress* 128)

At Vigderman's request, Howe describes her way of preparing herself to write in these words: "I think it's very much about, as Simone Weil would say, attention." Sitting in front of a pad of paper with a pen, for Howe, helps to create a focal point to fix her attention on. When this space is created, she remains there "until there is a reflected image rising up between [the] mind and the page" ("The Poetics of Stillness"). The process discussed here is closely linked with the method of writing outlined earlier in this thesis, the emphasis falling particularly on the importance of attention and waiting.

Another aspect of Howe's method is her insistence on the physicality of the act of writing. Howe draws a connection between the words of the Jewish mystic quoted above and Weil's belief that all labour should be directed towards the good (*The Wedding Dress* 128). In keeping with her refusal to compartmentalise aspects of human life, or to engage with abstract theories that cannot be "tested in the body" ("Interview with Fanny Howe" 2), Howe's relationship with her own creative work is corporeal as much as intellectual. She persists in using pen and ink in first drafts because this connection between her hand, pen and paper enables her "to feel from my heart to my hand, almost a kind of pain is possible then, the impression is contact, erotic, you might say" ("The Poetics of Stillness"). Perhaps this insistence on the physical aspect of writing also contributes to Howe's inclusion of pages of handwritten drafts into her novels (see *Saving History* 146), and her assertion that she doesn't write, but rewrites ("Interview with Fanny Howe" 1). Not only is the physicality inherent in the act of writing important, it is also central to the way she would like her work to be received. The "sound values" of words and combinations of words, for Howe, are more central to the meaning generated by a poem than their content. The physical act of reading a

poem aloud, and the reciprocal act of listening to it highlight the relationship between sound and meaning: it is only when she is giving a reading, Howe remarks, that she really considers her audience; and when she does, it is with the hope that they will hear “the subliminal logic behind the music of the speeding words” (“The Poetics of Stillness”).<sup>56</sup>

Howe’s method of writing, including as it does a commitment to both attention and waiting as well as to the physical, is inseparable from her above-mentioned search for the centre of a human life:

I try to let the words write the words, not interfering, until a meaning begins to reveal itself to me. It emerges from the random mass of words facing me as a mind that happens to be mine for that moment. I think what I am always after is discovering the interrelationship between the parts that are given, because I don’t see, or want to see, any conflict between mind, body, context, intelligence, memory, stars, weather, and emotion. (“The Poetics of Stillness”)

The most obvious parallel to emerge between Howe’s writing process and her search for the solid centre of a human life is found in her reference to the inseparability of all aspects of human existence, including not only the physical, emotional, intellectual, but also the environment that surrounds the body. She attempts to capture this interrelationship first by a withdrawal of the self in an effort to let the words emerge without personal interference: in other words, a form of renunciation. The next step includes an openness and attentiveness to a potential meaning beginning to appear on

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<sup>56</sup> Listening also plays a role in the writing process itself, for Howe, as she explains in her interview with Leonard Schwartz: “I write in a sort of echo state where the sentence passes through me and around in a circle and hits something out there and then comes back in again. It’s like the spiral that I keep talking about. I suppose that it’s like an ear, and I’m inside of the ear and outside of it at the same time” (Fanny Howe in Conversation”).

the page. Lastly, the meaning drawn from the words, in keeping with Howe's belief in the connection between all things, is revealed as having originated not from a single mind, an "intelligence lost in space" ("Interview with Fanny Howe" 1), but from the relationship between everything within, surrounding and containing not only that mind, but every other mind as well. Howe's method is consistent with her insistence on the connection between all aspects of human life, her fascination with the nature of consciousness, and her desire to express these ideas in her poetry, prose and essays. It is also closely linked to the method articulated earlier in this thesis, especially in terms of the emphasis placed on self-renunciation and attention.

Howe's method differs, however, in its attitude to the words themselves: for her, words are opaque, and emerge first as random thoughts, memories and ideas which she then arranges more in terms of their sound values rather than their literal meaning ("The Poetics of Stillness"). Howe often preferences the signifier over the signified: a very different approach to that taken by Weil. Weil's recognition of the power of words, and the responsibility writers have to use language wisely, is expressed in various places throughout her work, most notably in her essay "The Power of Words".<sup>57</sup> In her introduction to this essay, Siân Miles quotes a later passage of Weil's that proves to be one of the most illuminating in terms of understanding her writing process: "[the] real way of writing is to write as we translate" (*Simone Weil: An Anthology* 239). This highlights the difference between Weil's and Howe's approach to the written word. Weil's effort to seek words that would convey, as accurately as possible, the thought she was attempting to express, presupposes a certain transparency in language. In

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<sup>57</sup> J.P. Little, in her essay "Simone Weil and the Limits of Language", notes that Weil rejects both the Surrealists' approach to language with its highlighting of the arbitrary, as well as the absurdist notion of a world whose incoherence defies expression (42).

contrast, Howe seeks to express a truth that lies beyond language through experimenting with the form and sound values of the words. For Howe, the transparency of language is problematic; she describes her extensive editing as a process that involves “scratching at words to see what is behind them” (“Interview with Fanny Howe” 1).

This difference in approach to language raises an interesting question in terms of method. For Weil, words allow a writer to express a thought with clarity and simplicity. The act of writing, for her, is ideally carried out with the same attention to detail and accuracy one would use when translating a written text (*Simone Weil: An Anthology* 239).<sup>58</sup> This accounts for the emphasis on attention and waiting in the method outlined earlier. Although inspiration, for Weil, appears in the form of an intense concentration that enables a writer to be aware of each element of language simultaneously, she makes little reference to the actual physical process of writing itself.<sup>59</sup> Howe’s act of combining words before she is aware of the meaning they convey, arranging them in terms of their sound quality, and heavily editing her work, introduces another approach. Written language, rather than being a vehicle through which thought is expressed accurately, becomes the means by which thought is revealed to the author. Both Weil and Howe seek to express truths about the nature of existence through their writing, both see self-renunciation and attention as central to this process, but within this, they

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<sup>58</sup> The original manuscript of *L’Enracinement* contains very few corrections or erasures: it is indeed as though Weil wrote as though she was translating, as clearly and concisely as possible (Manuscript held at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris. Accessed 24 January 2008).

<sup>59</sup> An exception to this is found in Weil’s statement that “Writing is like giving birth: we cannot help making the supreme effort” (*Gravity and Grace* 108). However, unlike Howe, who addresses the physicality of writing directly, in this quote the physical is expressed as an analogy rather than an integral part of the writing process.

each hold quite distinct views in relation to the nature and role of language itself in this process.<sup>60</sup>

Reading Fanny Howe's work in relation to Simone Weil's writings illuminates aspects of both writers' approach to the relationship between literature and hope. Howe's work explores and responds to the suffering caused by uprootedness, offering a form of hope that arises as a result of a renunciation rather than an expansion of the self. Attention and acts of love, as opposed to desire for personal gain, generate hope in *Saving History*. *Saving History* explores the value of bewilderment in bringing a person to a point where his or her attention is freed from a focus on the self and is directed towards things that provide *metaxu*: in this case, the beauty of the world and other human beings. This same attention is required of readers as they negotiate the formal qualities of the text itself. Howe's poetics of bewilderment results in the creation of a text that, through the commitment to experimentation in form and the insistence on contradiction, carries the potential to form a *metaxu* for the reader. If the text does, in fact, become a *metaxu*, and if the analysis of Weil's ideas in relation to hope undertaken in the first chapter of this thesis is correct, *Saving History* also has the potential to awaken hope in the reader. Howe's method of writing differs in some respects to the method based on Weil's aesthetics; however, the focus on attention and self-renunciation common to

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<sup>60</sup> Howe suggests a reason for why this may be the case in her prose poem "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. (*Gone* 24)

Joan Dargan, in her assessment of the few poems Weil did write, suggests that, in contrast to the fluidity of her prose, Weil's poetry contains a "certain paralysis of the imagination":

Distrust of the source of poetry, consistent with her loyalty to Plato, perhaps made it necessary for Weil to always work hard, intellectually, at her poetry, will it into existence, rather than listen for it, hard work of a different kind. (95)

both suggests that the process developed in the first chapter of this thesis is a valid way to approach writing a text with the view to inspiring hope in the reader.

### Chapter 3

#### **Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and Simone Weil's Aesthetics: Towards a Poetics of Hope.**

*...the world, I have found, is not simply rich because from day to day our lives are touched with new possibilities, but because the past is studded with sisters who, in their time, shone like gold. They give us hope, they have proved the splendor of our past, which should free us to lay just claim to the fullness of the future.*

Alice Walker<sup>61</sup>

In *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker responds to the same issue of uprootedness that Weil and Howe are concerned with in *The Need for Roots* and *Saving History*. The manner in which Walker addresses this issue intersects with their writings in several important aspects, and departs from them in others. As in *Saving History*, *The Color Purple* demonstrates the importance of *metaxu* in the lives of its characters, particularly in relation to the beauty of the world and acts of love. A refiguration of the divine also plays a central role in the novel. The aspects of the response to uprootedness which differ from *Saving History* include a focus on reclaiming rather than renouncing the self; and the depiction of what many critics have identified as a utopian ending which stretches possibility to the limit and, some argue, crosses over into the realm of fantasy. These differences allow for the further development of a poetics of hope, taking into account another response to the loss of roots that, in keeping with the literary tradition of which it forms a part, responds to quite definite problems of uprootedness afflicting

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<sup>61</sup> *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, 37.



African American communities. The interplay between self-reclamation and self-renunciation is central to this discussion.

While there is no evidence to suggest that Walker has been directly influenced by the writings of Simone Weil, there are possibilities of secondary influence. Walker names Flannery O'Connor and Albert Camus as writers she admires, drawing on O'Connor's embrace of mystery, prophecy, and "supernatural grace" (*In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* 8, 53), and Camus's insistence on the need for beauty in any humane revolutionary movement (*Revolutionary Petunias* 28). Both O'Connor and Camus admired Weil's work, and the aspects of their writing Walker refers to in the above examples certainly bear evidence of an affinity with Weil's ideas.<sup>62</sup> Although Walker does not directly reference Weil at any point in her work, this is precisely one of the reasons why Walker's work has been chosen. Thematically, *The Color Purple* coincides with many of Weil's writings in relation to uprootedness and hope. *The Color Purple* has been immensely popular, both within the United States and internationally, and although it has also generated a large amount of negative as well as positive criticism, it stands as a novel that has inspired hope in many of its readers.<sup>63</sup> As such, it provides an excellent counterpoint to Howe's *Saving History*, allowing an interrogation of Weil's aesthetics using a text whose author, in contrast to Howe, has not been directly influenced by Weil's work. An examination of Walker's *The Color Purple* in

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<sup>62</sup> For a discussion on the connections between O'Connor and Weil, see Lee Sturma's article, "Flannery O'Connor, Simone Weil, and the Virtue of Necessity".

<sup>63</sup> The most obvious evidence of this is found in the collection of responses to the novel included in Walker's book *The Same River Twice: Honoring the Difficult* (229-256); however critics in various fields have also commented on the hopeful aspects of the novel, among them womanist theologian Emilie M. Townes (70) and literary critic Peter Kerry Powers (64).

this context adds breadth and clarity to the emerging poetics of hope outlined in previous chapters.

There are a number of strong biographical links between Walker and Howe that contribute to the reasons for analysing their work side by side. Although Howe and Walker come from very different socio-economic and racial backgrounds – Howe is white, and belongs to a family of writers, intellectuals and activists; Walker is black, and grew up in a sharecropping family in Eatonton, Georgia – they both experienced the intensity of the racial divisions in the U.S. within interracial marriages in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Both marriages ultimately failed, and they each attribute this in part to the wider climate of racism in the U.S. and the external pressures this placed on interracial partnerships during that time. In her Introduction to *The Wedding Dress*, Fanny Howe describes the effects of wider racial conflict within her own and other interracial marriages at the time:

Race war was enacted inside tight little houseboats – violent language, violent action, intimidation, insult, accusations that made no sense, based as they were in an absolute lack of understanding of each other's cultures...(xv)

Likewise, Evelyn C. White's biography of Alice Walker reveals some of the hardships Walker faced as a result of the external pressures placed on her marriage (*Alice Walker* 226-7, 262-4). Walker and Howe met each other in the mid 1970s, becoming friends while working at Radcliffe (White 278). During this period, prior to her conversion to Catholicism, Howe studied the Jewish mystical tradition of kabbalah, numerology, and tarot-card reading, and became Walker's tarot card reader for several years. It was in this search for the metaphysical, in addition to their common struggles as women who experienced the racial hatred directed at people in mixed-race relationships, that the two women found a connection (White 278).

The aspect of their relationship most relevant for this study, however, is the approach each adopts towards the self. Taking *Saving History* and *The Color Purple* as case studies, one of the most obvious differences between Howe and Walker is revealed in Felicity's and Celie's journeys towards healing. Both break free of abusive relationships during the course of each novel. However, while Felicity's refusal to obey Temple involves a renunciation of self, Celie's refusal to remain with Mr.\_ involves a reclamation and assertion of self. The circumstances surrounding these very different responses are inseparable from the tangle of American racial and patriarchal oppression that contributes to, and is informed by, the uprootedness Weil identified within American society. Unravelling the causes for these different responses raises interesting questions in terms of hope, and the generation of hope through literature, casting into relief the questions pursued in this thesis.

While Howe's approach to uprootedness is to uproot the self further on a path of spiritual journeying, Walker's approach is to reclaim identity and humanity, to seek ways to re-root the self in a community of mutual support and love.<sup>64</sup> Again, this corresponds to Weil's ideas in some respects, but departs from it in others. Walker's novel is far more conventionally hopeful than Howe's: it incorporates what many critics describe as a utopian ending, but also offers moments of attention and love. The hope that is generated by these moments intersects with Weil's concept of *metaxu*. An

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<sup>64</sup> These approaches are certainly not mutually exclusive, however, as can be seen in Fanny Howe's response to *The Color Purple*. In an unpublished interview with Evelyn C. White, she described Walker's novel as "a book of reconciliation that everybody in the country was longing to hear about", a story that offered a form of healing even beyond issues of race (Transcript of interview with Evelyn White, 2 February, 1997).

analysis of *The Color Purple* reveals a fascinating interplay between hope, *metaxu*, and the role of both self-renunciation and self-reclamation in the decolonisation of the spirit.

*The Color Purple* intersects with the poetics of hope developed in the previous chapters in several ways. The concept of *metaxu* provides a theoretical basis from which to explore Celie's transformation in the novel from a life of oppression and fear to an abundance of love and a flowering of spirit. Just as a refiguration of Felicity's conception of the divine in *Saving History* was a catalyst to developing a form of hope generated by concrete acts of human love, so too is Celie's initial image of the divine challenged and reworked. Certain differences emerge between Weil's and Walker's understanding of the divine in this context. Walker also takes quite a different approach to the renunciation of self, which is so integral to Weil's poetics, in *The Color Purple*. Celie's journey towards healing and hope is far more a celebration of the reclamation, rather than the renunciation, of self. In this, Walker's work is obviously situated firmly within the tradition of black American women writers. Her approach to the self, although quite different to that of Weil and Howe, nevertheless serves to clarify and extend the arguments developed thus far.

### ***Metaxu in The Color Purple***

The three most significant elements of *The Color Purple* that intersect with Weil's concept of *metaxu* are Celie's relationship with Shug, Celie's and Albert's growing awareness of the beauty of the world, and Celie's physical, creative act of sewing pants. These aspects of the novel demonstrate the role played by *metaxu* in Celie's journey towards healing. They each correspond to one of the many different forms *metaxu* can take: human love, the beauty of the world, and labour which has a spiritual base. As in

*Saving History*, when the characters in *The Color Purple* focus their attention on these *metaxu*, they are often prompted towards concrete acts of love. This in turn begins to generate a more loving, supportive community whose members are grounded in hope rather than oppression and fear.

The love that develops between Celie and Shug is vital to the hope that begins to grow within Celie; and their relationship is also instrumental in awakening her to an understanding of divine love. In effect, it provides a bridge between Celie's temporal existence and a love that both transcends, and has the ability to transform, this oppressive reality. Celie first becomes aware of Shug when her step-father begins negotiating with Mr.\_ about their potential marriage. She obtains a photograph of Shug, and is smitten by her beauty: "I see her there in furs. Her face rouge. Her hair like something tail. She grinning with her foot up on somebody motocar" (*The Color Purple* 8). Celie's attention is captured by the photograph, which she gazes at "all night long", so intensely that her image follows Celie into her dreams: "An now when I dream, I dream of Shug Avery. She be dress to kill, whirling an laughing" (*The Color Purple* 8). Later, when Celie finally meets Shug, stubborn, proud, and physically ill, the love that was initially sparked by the photograph continues to grow despite Shug's "hateful" response to her: "I wash her body, it feel like I'm praying. My hands tremble and my breath short" (*The Color Purple* 45). In *Christus Mediator*, Springsted refers to Weil's belief that love between two people can function as *metaxu*. The beauty of the beloved attracts the lover, and his or her beauty acts as a "reminder of God to the soul" (206). Springsted asserts that this love, "which begins in physical desire[,] can then serve as a bridge to transcendence" (207). This is particularly evident in Celie's relationship with Shug. As the novel progresses, Celie's love for Shug is reciprocated,

and it becomes clear that their relationship is instrumental in transforming Celie's perception of both the temporal world and the divine.

It is Shug who introduces Celie to the idea that the beauty of the world is an expression of divine love. Rather than being an all-powerful, deaf, white man, as Celie has imagined God to be, Shug suggests that the divine has no fixed image, but is found in every created thing. Creation, as an expression of God's love, is constantly trying to attract our attention, she tells Celie. "Everything want to be loved. Us sing and dance, make faces and give flower bouquets, trying to be loved. You ever notice that trees do everything to git attention we do, except walk?" (*The Color Purple* 168). This leads to a profound change in Celie's conception of God, and results in a growing awareness of the beauty of creation.

I been so busy thinking bout [the old white man] I never truly notice nothing God make. Not a blade of corn (how it do that?) not the color purple (where it come from?). Not the little wildflowers. Nothing.

Now that my eyes opening, I feels like a fool. Next to any little scrub of a bush in my yard, Mr.\_'s evil sort of shrink. (*The Color Purple* 168)

Again, it is beauty that draws Celie's gaze, and although it is Shug who initiates this discovery, Celie is led beyond her love for Shug to the intricacies, shape and colour of the world itself. In turn, the aspects of the world she is drawn to lead her beyond their mere physical characteristics towards a deeper understanding of the divine. In this way, Shug provides a bridge to the beauty of the world, and as Celie encounters the physical world in a new way, the material world then provides a bridge to the divine. It is significant that, as Celie attends to the beauty of creation – corn, wildflowers, shrubs – the weight of Mr.\_'s oppression begins to lighten. *Metaxu*, in this form, plays a truly transformational role in Celie's life.

For Mr.\_, too, focusing his attention on the world, on the physical existence of things beyond himself, plays a pivotal role in his own transformation. When Celie leaves him, Mr.\_ is forced to reconsider his place in the world and his interactions with others. Eventually, when at the end of the novel he and Celie begin to build a friendship based on mutual respect, he describes the process he underwent that changed his perception of reality: “I first start to learn all them days ago I use to sit up there on my porch, staring out cross the railing,” he tells her (*The Color Purple* 238). Through this contemplation of creation he was drawn towards a way of understanding the world that was based in wonder and humility: “The more I wonder, he say, the more I love” (*The Color Purple* 239). This transformation in Mr.\_’s perception of reality also changes the way he interacts with others; Celie notes that “...when you talk to him now he really listen...” (*The Color Purple* 221).

Mr.\_’s awakening is similar to that of Zora Neale Hurston’s character Janie in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, a text whose literary influence on *The Color Purple* is widely recognised. The wonder Mr.\_ experiences mirrors that of Janie lying beneath the spring blossoms of a pear tree:

How? Why? It was like a flute song forgotten in another existence and remembered again. What? How? Why? This singing she heard that had nothing to do with her ears. The rose of the world was breathing out smell. It followed her through all her waking moments and caressed her in her sleep. (23-4)

Like Hurston’s Janie, both Celie and Mr.\_ are profoundly altered as they focus their attention on the world’s beauty, which serves as a bridge between their temporal reality and divine love. The fact that they are able to become friends at all, however, is due to Celie’s earlier decision not to react out of her rage and sense of betrayal by killing Mr.\_,

when she discovers that he has been keeping her sister Nettie's letters from her. She decides to create instead, laying the foundation for the third form of *metaxu* found in *The Color Purple*.

One of the central themes in Weil's *The Need for Roots* is the idea of physical labour needing to have a spiritual root. Weil uses an analogy of two women sewing, in very different circumstances, to illustrate the difference between work that is and is not motivated by a deeper spiritual focus. The first woman is making a layette for a baby she is expecting; and the thought of this baby permeates her work, giving her the motivation to sew the garment well. The second is a convict working in a prison workshop; and, in stark contrast to the first woman, her motivation is provided by the thought of possible punishment if she makes a mistake. Weil identifies a "gulf of difference" between these two women: although they are both engaged in the same kind of physical labour, one is working from a position of rootedness (the work expresses the love she has for her unborn child), while the other is not. Weil then draws a parallel between the labour undertaken by the first woman and labour which maintains the dignity of the worker: "What is required is that this world and the world beyond, in their double beauty, should be present and associated in the act of work, like the child about to be born in the making of the layette" (*The Need for Roots* 94-5). Celie's position in terms of work in *The Color Purple* moves from the one signified by the second woman, characterized by exploitation and uprootedness, to one akin to the first woman, where her dignity remains intact.

Initially, when Celie marries Mr.\_ she finds herself in a situation where she is expected to cook, clean, take care of his "rotten children", and work in his fields. Celie's



response to this endless labour is shown clearly when Nettie tells her that seeing her with Mr.\_ is like “seeing you buried”. Celie thinks, “It’s worse than that... If I was buried, I wouldn’t have to work” (*The Color Purple* 18). The work she undertakes throughout most of the novel is motivated by the need to fulfil her role as Mr.\_’s wife. When Celie discovers that Mr.\_ has betrayed her, however, her submission to his demands gives way to anger and a desire for revenge. This provides the catalyst for Celie to begin an entirely different kind of work. Instead of murdering Mr.\_, which was her first impulse, Celie follows Shug’s advice that “Nobody feel better for killing nothing” (*The Color Purple* 122). With Shug’s help, Celie’s desire to destroy Mr.\_ is transformed into the creative impulse that begins a process vital to her journey towards healing. In an act of insurrection Camus would have applauded, the two women begin to sew a pair of pants together, directing Celie’s energy towards creativity rather than violence: “A needle and not a razor in my hand,” she thinks (*The Color Purple* 125). After the first pair is finished, Celie continues to sew, choosing patterns and fabric especially for each individual she designs them for. Her experience of the labour involved in making pants is entirely different from the earlier work she did for her husband. In creating these pants, not only does Celie employ her knowledge of technical sewing skills; her spirit is also engaged. This is clearly shown in her loving description of the pants she is making for Nettie: “I am making some pants for you to beat the heat in Africa. Soft, white, thin. Drawstring waist... I plan to make them by hand. Every stitch I sew will be a kiss” (*The Color Purple* 182). Celie’s experience of sewing pants ties in with Weil’s description of work that “occupies its rightful place in a man’s thoughts... Instead of being a kind of prison, it becomes a point of contact between this world and the world beyond” (*The Need for Roots* 94).

*Metaxu*, in each of these three forms – human love, the beauty of the world and the spirituality of work – play a vital role in Celie’s recovery. Captured by Shug’s beauty, Celie is led towards a relationship based on love and support. Through this relationship she is also awakened to the beauty of creation, and thus is drawn toward a deeper understanding of divine love. Shug also provides the impetus for Celie to begin a different kind of work, in which both her spirit and her physical being are engaged. Celie’s life is altered dramatically as a result of these *metaxu*. She becomes progressively anchored in divine love, and her spirit flourishes. However, before she is able to set down these roots into the divine, her initial image of God is challenged, and ultimately destroyed; and in its place there develops a growing awareness of the divine as expressed through the beauty of the world.

### **Refiguring the Divine**

One of the ways Walker responds to the question of uprootedness in *The Color Purple* is through a refiguration of the divine. The shift in Celie’s conception of God from an image of an old, white man to everything contained in the natural world – the “stars... trees... sky... peoples” (*The Color Purple* 242) – is central to the themes of hope and healing threaded through the novel. This refiguration comes about as a result of Celie’s relationship with Shug, who awakens Celie to a different understanding of the divine: one which, rather than being associated with white, male power, is expressed in the beauty of the world and in loving human relationships. In this way, the journey Celie undertakes in *The Color Purple* intersects with Felicity’s path in *Saving History*. The destructive nature of the society these characters are a part of is, at first, all pervasive, to the point where it shapes their perceptions of the divine. However, just as Felicity’s image of the divine is separated from the unjust social structures that encroach on her

life throughout the course of the novel, so Celie's understanding of God is dismantled and reconfigured as an expression of love and delight rather than oppression. It is through this process that Celie begins to become ever more rooted within her immediate community. Although there are fundamental differences in Weil's and Walker's understanding of the divine, these differences are instructive in themselves, allowing for a more complex understanding of the role of roots among oppressed peoples.

Celie is born into a society in which, as a young black woman, she is, as Janie's grandmother in Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* puts it, "de mule uh de world" (29). Occupying the lowest position in the social hierarchy, she is subject, with heart wrenching consequences, to the abuse of first her step-father and then her husband. The society Celie is a part of, far from providing her with spiritual nourishment, corresponds to the collectivities Weil refers to as those that do not fulfil their role of sustaining their members, but rather, "instead of serving as food, do just the opposite: they devour souls" (*The Need for Roots* 9). As Walker has stated, Celie and her husband Mr.\_ have both been affected in a negative way by the society they are a part of: "[t]hey are, in fact, dreadfully ill, and they manifest their dis-ease according to their culturally derived sex roles and the bad experiences early impressed on their personalities" (*Living by the Word* 80). The "culturally derived sex roles" cause Mr.\_ to abuse Celie, physically, mentally and psychologically, and cause Celie to passively accept this constant battering of her body and spirit. This pattern of abuse also threatens to be passed onto the next generation, as Mr.\_'s son Harpo begins to beat his wife Sophia, with Celie initially condoning his behaviour.

The social structures that shape Celie's existence not only devalue her worth as a human being; they also present her with a disempowering image of the divine. Celie begins writing to God after she is raped by the man she believes to be her father. She pictures the God she addresses her letters to as "big and old and tall and graybearded and white" (*The Color Purple* 165). Peter Kerry Powers suggests that Walker's work reflects a tension in African American religious history between a form of Christianity that is used as a tool in the hands of white oppressors, and a transformed Christianity that has become a source of power for the oppressed. He identifies two opposing strands that run through her work in relation to this religious past: a call for revolution that makes a clean break with the past and the religion of the oppressors; and a call for a transformation of the past by "reimagining" it (45-50). The first half of this dialectic is embodied in *The Color Purple*, he suggests, in Celie's image of God as an old white man. Powers notes that Celie's God, throughout the early pages of the novel, is inseparable from the abuse she, and the other members of her community have suffered: "If whiteness and maleness signify threats to the bodies of black women, a God who is white and male signifies transcendent violence" (45).<sup>65</sup>

This has profound implications for the way Celie responds to the violence directed at her: while her perception of the divine dovetails with the suffering she experiences at the hands of her step-father and Mr.\_, she has no energy to resist it. When first Nettie, then Mr.\_'s sister Kate, tell her to fight, Celie's response is that she does not know how to. "All I know how to do is stay alive," she thinks (*The Color Purple* 17). In her experience, the only way to do that is to endure whatever she is subjected to without fighting back. When she receives no letters from her sister after Nettie resists Mr.\_'s

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<sup>65</sup> This is compounded by the fact that, as Walker points out, white men in white robes are suggestive of the Klu Klux Klan (*Anything We Love Can Be Saved* 16).

advances and leaves, Celie assumes she has died. This only confirms her view of the futility of rebellion: “I think bout Nettie, dead. She fight, she run away. What good it do? I don’t fight, I stay where I’m told. But I’m alive” (*The Color Purple* 39).<sup>66</sup> Trudier Harris criticises this lack of resistance, stating that she could not imagine any black woman she knew accepting such oppression:

What sane black woman, I asked, would sit around and take that crock of shit from all those folks? How long would it take her before she reached the stage of stabbing somebody to death, blowing somebody’s head off, or at least going upside somebody’s head? (155)

Believing in a God who embodies, as Powers argues, “transcendent violence”, provides the grounds for Celie’s passive acceptance of Mr.\_’s abuse. Celie’s experience prior to meeting Shug is one of powerlessness in the face of men who use her to fulfil certain functions in their lives. Her understanding of the divine merely compounds this experience of being desired, not for who she is, but for the services her body can provide. Celie is incredulous when Shug tells her that she feels loved by God: “You telling me God love you, and you ain’t never done nothing for him? I mean, not go to church, sing in the choir, feed the preacher and all like that?” (*The Color Purple* 165). In effect, the existence of a God of love and her own intrinsic worth are concealed from her. It is only when Celie’s image of the divine begins to change that she develops the capacity for resistance.

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<sup>66</sup> It is significant that one of the major catalysts that prompts Celie’s eventual anger and rebellion against Mr.\_ is the discovery of Nettie’s letters. As she reads, the truth about Nettie’s disappearance is finally revealed. Nettie did not die as a result of her resistance at all; her life expanded (*The Color Purple* 100, 107, 122). Cheryl A. Wall points out that Celie and Shug’s conversation about the nature of the divine is preceded by the discovery of Nettie’s letters. These letters, she suggests, provide a context for Shug’s view of the divine to emerge, and link it with African traditions (156). In this way, Celie’s image of an oppressive God is replaced by Walker’s vision of a spirituality that is not only a celebration of the divine expressed through the beauty of the world, but is also connected to her African roots.

Celie's image of God must be transformed before she is able to draw sustenance from her roots. In an essay titled "The Sound of Our Own Culture", Walker describes her understanding of roots. Many black Americans, she suggests, are living like "plants whose roots are sunk in poisonous soil," neither supported nor nurtured by a culture designed "to encourage the full development of the white and the male only, and not even the disadvantaged in those categories..." (*Anything We Love Can Be Saved* 53).<sup>67</sup> It is integral to the growth of Celie's roots that she disassociates herself from an oppressive image of God. It is only then that the beauty of the world is revealed to her. Weil states that, "The soul which is prevented by circumstances from feeling anything of the beauty of the world... is invaded to its very centre by a kind of horror" (*Waiting on God* 105). This is certainly Celie's experience, until her eyes are opened to the world's beauty through Shug's description of the divine. This revelation marks the beginning of Celie's struggle to "git man off [her] eyeball", and to replace her conception of the white-robed, white male God who threatens her from heaven, with "everything that is or ever was or ever will be" (*The Color Purple* 167-8).

Walker describes Celie's awakening as a decolonisation of the spirit (*Anything We Love Can Be Saved* 4). Celie's journey echoes Walker's own movement from Christianity to a spirituality deriving primarily from her relationship with nature. Her ancestors, including her immediate family, she wrote, belonged to the

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<sup>67</sup> Hurston also uses the image of uprootedness in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Nanny begins explaining the impact slavery has had on her with these words: "You know, honey, us colored folks is branches without roots" (31).

millions of people [who] were broken, physically and spiritually, literally destroyed, for nearly two millennia, as the orthodox Christian church “saved” them from their traditional worship of the Great Mystery they perceived in Nature. (“Alice Walker” *The Humanist* 31)

Walker, in reclaiming this spiritual connection with the land, defines herself as a pagan. In the concluding pages of *Living by the Word* she describes her understanding of prayer as “the active affirmation in the physical world of our inseparableness from the divine; and everything, *especially* the physical world, is divine” (192). Although the beauty of the world also plays an important role in Weil’s philosophy, for her it is only one of the ways in which the divine is revealed on earth. Weil’s insistence on a reality beyond the world, which is the source of all good on earth, sits in contrast to Walker’s belief that the physical world itself is sacred. The fundamental difference lies in the fact that for Weil, the natural world reveals the divine; while for Walker, the natural world *is* the divine. This distinction is inseparable from Walker’s efforts to decolonise her own spirit: in embracing a pagan understanding of the sacred, she is rejecting the patriarchal Christianity she was born into.<sup>68</sup> Despite this difference in Weil’s and Walker’s understanding of the divine, their metaphysics do intersect in terms of the importance they place on the beauty of the world in drawing people to the divine.

In a letter written in the early 1940s, Weil articulated the problems associated with western religious tradition that would later impact on Walker’s life. Weil felt that,

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<sup>68</sup> Walker introduces her book *Anything We Love Can Be Saved* with a description of the gulf between the Christianity she was brought up in, and her later embrace of paganism. She explores her awareness of “the limitations of the patriarchal Christianity into which I was born; as well as my realization, over time, that my most cherished instinctual, natural self, the pagan self, was in danger of dying from its oppression by an ideology that had been forced on my ancestors, under threat of punishment or death, and was, for the most part, alien to me” (xxi).

although a sense of the beauty of creation could be traced through certain strands of Christianity, the beauty of the world had been largely ignored in the Christian tradition. She expressed her surprise and dismay that this should be the case. This omission had terrible consequences, she wrote, not only for western cultures, but for all people who have been subject to western imperial expansion:

Today one might think that the white races had almost lost all feeling for the beauty of the world, and that they had taken upon them the task of making it disappear from all the continents where they have penetrated with their armies, their trade and their religion. (*Waiting on God* 100-101)

For Weil, as has already been discussed, one of the primary links between humanity and the divine is the world's beauty. "The only true beauty, the only beauty which is the presence of God, is the beauty of the universe. [...] Between God and [our] incomplete, unconscious, often criminal searchings for beauty, the only link is the beauty of the world" (*Waiting on God* 111). While these two writers have a different conception of the divine, the emphasis each places on the beauty of creation, and their rejection of religious practices that deny the world's beauty as an expression of divine love, enable a comparison and analysis of their works side by side.

Becoming aware of the beauty of the world is central in awakening a sense of hope in Celie, and in changing her perception of the world. As she discards the old image of God, and begins to replace it with a growing appreciation for the beauty of creation, Celie's approach to life also changes. She begins to resist Mr.\_, leaving him and travelling to Memphis with Shug. Her words to him as she explains why she has decided to leave reveal the importance of her changing perception of the divine: "You a lowdown dog is what's wrong, I say. It's time to leave you and enter into the Creation" (*The Color Purple* 170). Celie's resistance to Mr.\_ only occurs as her image of a



masculine, oppressive God begins to dissolve. She leaves behind the God who is “just like all the other mens I know. Trifling, forgetful and lowdown” (*The Color Purple* 164), and embraces the wonder of creation instead. As a result, she is free to relate to Mr. \_ out of a source of strength that takes her beyond his power. Finally, Celie has begun to set down strong roots in the divine through the beauty of the world, and as a result, has discovered the strength she needs to resist her husband’s oppression. This reimagining of the divine involves a decolonisation of Celie’s spirit. As such, it is also intertwined with a process of reclaiming her dignity and worth as a human being.

### **Self-reclamation and Self-renunciation in *The Color Purple***

*The Color Purple* involves a reappraisal of who Celie is as an African American woman, which includes redressing the oppression and silencing of the past, and a growing celebration of her identity and inherent dignity. This reclamation of self is integral to *The Color Purple*, and to many of Walker’s other texts, including her first novel *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*. Implicit in Simone Weil’s concept of *metaxu*, however, is a renunciation of self. At first glance, this would appear to preclude the things that lead to Celie’s recovery from being related to the concept of *metaxu*, as they do not directly involve a renunciation of self. However, when analysed in the context of the tradition of African American women’s literature, and when Weil’s own description of what the soul suffers under slavery is also taken into account, a more comprehensive understanding of the role *metaxu* can play in addressing the uprootedness of oppressed peoples becomes clear. *The Color Purple* presents a complex interplay between self-reclamation and self-renunciation that ultimately draws Celie closer to the divine, and results in the development of loving relationships.

Returning briefly to Weil's metaphysics, we see that in her understanding there are three main spiritual elements at work within each person: the impersonal, the personal, and the influence of the collective. The impersonal is that which corresponds to the divine, and in Weil's view, makes each person sacred. The personal can be loosely equated with the ego: the "I". The influence of the collective can play two contradictory roles: either nourishing the impersonal element, providing spiritual food, or drawing a person away from the impersonal by saturating him or her with the opinions and beliefs of the majority. Weil placed great importance on the power of the individual to renounce the personal in favour of the impersonal, and to draw on the strength and energy generated by this link with the divine in order to work for a flowering of justice, love, truth and beauty within the human community.<sup>69</sup> Central to this process is a renunciation of self. However, this becomes complicated when the effects of oppression are taken into account.

One reason for Weil's abhorrence of oppression and injustice was the fact that people who suffer in these circumstances might be so badly damaged by the experience that they no longer have a 'self' left to renounce. Those who experience extreme suffering or affliction before they have voluntarily surrendered the self in an act of love, face the possibility that their personality will be destroyed by circumstances beyond their control. If a person loses his or her 'self' in this manner, Weil writes, it is almost impossible for that person to be able to renounce the self voluntarily, as it no longer exists (*Waiting on God*, 115). Preserving people's independence is of primary importance, not so that they may develop their personalities in order to exert influence

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<sup>69</sup> The ideas set out in Weil's essays "Human Personality" (*Simone Weil: An Anthology* 69-98) and "Draft for a Statement of Human Obligations" (*Simone Weil: An Anthology* 221-230) form the basis of this analysis.

over others, but so they retain the possibility of renouncing their personality, enabling an impersonal love to animate them.<sup>70</sup> We have been given independence, she suggests, so that we have “the possibility of renouncing it out of love”, and that is enough for us to want to preserve that same independence for every human being. For Weil, it is for this reason that each person’s ability to exercise free choice is of utmost importance (*Waiting on God*, 115). Weil’s comments on the destruction inflicted on the self as a result of slavery are instructive in this situation: “To lose more than the slave does is impossible, for he loses his whole inner life. A fragment of it he may get back if he sees the possibility of changing his fate, but this is his only hope” (*Simone Weil: An Anthology* 190).

Any form of slavery, then, when one person is held in bondage to another, can result in a situation where the self is attacked from without, leaving the enslaved person with no self to renounce. Walker’s novels *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* and *The Color Purple* chart the journey of individuals from certain forms of slavery to freedom. Both Grange and Celie undertake a journey that leads them first through the recovery of a sense of self, and then towards a love of others that requires a certain renunciation of self. In this way, they embody a dialectic that suggests that in certain situations, a reclamation of self is required before a renunciation can take place. Grange Copeland’s description of oppression, which he explains to his granddaughter Ruth, mirrors Weil’s understanding of the destruction of the self as a result of external abuse. “The Lord knowed that you could dump shit on a fellow for just so long before he begin to stink

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<sup>70</sup> The use of the term ‘impersonal’ here could be misinterpreted to mean something cold, clinical, and distant. Little’s description of the term sheds light on a more correct interpretation. She suggests that the ‘impersonal’, being the sacred part of a human being, is the manifestation of the relationship between an individual and absolute good. The ‘impersonal’, then, as it expresses a relationship that only exists through loving attention, is actually “full of joy, warmth, beauty” (*Waiting on Truth* 96).

from within. It's the spoiling of the soul that make forgiveness impossible. It just ain't in us no more..." (*The Third Life of Grange Copeland* 293-4). Grange's son Brownfield embodies this description; scarred by relentless economic and racial oppression, he never recovers a sense of self worth, and as a result, begins to lose a sense of compassion and love, even for his own family.<sup>71</sup>

In contrast to his son, Grange himself does undergo a process of self-reclamation. He also comes to believe, though, through his relationship with Ruth, that this is only part of the process that leads to healing, both in himself, and in his relationships with others. Complicit in the death of a pregnant white woman, Grange believes he has discovered "the necessary act that black men must commit to regain, or to manufacture their manhood, their self-respect. They must kill their oppressors" (*The Third Life of Grange Copeland* 218). As a direct result of the murder, he feels "alive and liberated for the first time in his life" (*The Third Life of Grange Copeland* 218). Grange's experience embodies Frantz Fanon's assertion in *The Wretched of the Earth*, that "if the last shall be first, this will only come to pass after a murderous and decisive struggle between the two protagonists" (28). Years later, however, Grange finds that the motivation of hatred and the violence accompanying it, central to the liberation of his self, become ugly in the face of Ruth's innocence. He tells his granddaughter to think of him "as a big, rough-looking coward. Who learned to love hisself only after thirty-odd years. And then overdone it" (*The Third Life of Grange Copeland* 223).

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<sup>71</sup> The direct link between racial oppression and domestic violence is explored in Ann Petry's short story "Like a Winding Sheet" (1496-1504). Like Petry, and other black women writers, Walker shows how continuous external pressure affects relationships between men and women within African American communities.

This love for Ruth is ultimately what sets Grange apart from Brownfield. Walker comments in an essay in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* that the major difference between these two men is the fact that Grange

was fortunate enough to be touched by love of something beyond himself. Brownfield did not change, because he was not prepared to give his life for anything, or to anything. [...] He could find nothing of value within himself and he did not have the courage to imagine a life without the existence of white people to act as a foil. (*In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* 253)

This is a key quote in understanding the interplay between self-reclamation and self-renunciation, in both *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* and *The Color Purple*. First, Grange was touched by a love external to himself, and was prepared to give his life for that love. His liberation involved both a reclamation and a renunciation of self. Brownfield, however, remained tied to the oppression he experienced throughout his life, neither recovering, nor voluntarily renouncing his self. Grange is critical of the fact that his son does not undergo this process of liberation. He admonishes Brownfield for blaming his own actions on the oppression he has suffered, suggesting that this is actually bowing to a final blow delivered by racial oppression. "Then you begins to think up evil and begins to destroy everybody around you, and you blames it on the crackers. *Shit!* Nobody's as powerful as we make them out to be. We got our own souls, don't we?" (*The Third Life of Grange Copeland* 294). The importance of reclaiming or decolonising one's self is reiterated by Walker in her afterword to *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*: "I believe wholeheartedly in the necessity of keeping inviolate the one interior space that is given to all" (345).

In *The Color Purple*, Celie, like Grange, also undergoes first a reclamation, then a renunciation of self. An integral part of *metaxu* is that those things that act as bridges

between the human and the divine draw the attention away from self-absorption and direct it towards the divine. However, in Celie's case, as she focuses her attention on the beauty of the world, instead of her gaze being directed away from the self, it is drawn away from Mr.\_. It is not a focus on self that is redirected as she concentrates on the flowers, the crops, the trees; it is the place Mr.\_ holds within her that is displaced. As she begins to notice the beauty surrounding her, she realises that "[next] to any little scrub of a bush in my yard, Mr.\_'s evil sort of shrink. [...] ...it is like Shug say, You have to git man off your eyeball, before you can see anything a'tall" (*The Color Purple* 168). Celie reclaims her "interior space", a space that bears close resemblance to the one Audre Lorde speaks of in "Poetry Is Not a Luxury":

For each of us as women, there is a dark place within, where hidden and growing our true spirit rises... [...] These places of possibility within ourselves are dark because they are ancient and hidden; they have survived and grown strong through that darkness. (1924)

Part of Celie's acceptance of her self involves a growing connection with other black women: Sophia, Shug, Mary Agnes. The fact that she starts writing her letters to Nettie instead of to a white God is also a significant part of this process.

Celie's reclamation of self does not ultimately result in an obsession with self-preservation, however, but in a Celie able to freely renounce her self out of love. This becomes evident when Shug deserts her, and takes up with a young man instead. Celie is devastated at first, berating herself for having hope that her life might be governed by love rather than abjection and dismissal: "Even thought you had the trees with you. The whole earth. The stars. But look at you. When Shug left, happiness desert" (*The Color Purple* 220). Significantly, however, and in keeping with the role of *metaxu* as bridges rather than building sites, Celie learns to appreciate the beauty of the world that Shug

originally led her to, without needing Shug to be present: “If she come, I be happy. If she don’t, I be content. And then I figure this the lesson I was suppose to learn” (240). This finally enables Celie to renounce her self out of love for Shug: when Shug does eventually return, and questions her about her growing closeness to Albert, she sets aside her desire for revenge and decides to love instead.

What do you know, I think. Shug jealous. I have a good mind to make up a story just to make her feel bad. But I don’t.

Us talk bout you, I say. How much us love you. (*The Color Purple* 240-1)

According to Springsted, “One’s soul is uplifted by the practice of renunciation in the face of the object to which he is attached so that the object may have its full reality...” (205). Celie freely renounces her desire for revenge, and in that moment, allows Shug her own existence.

Although Celie does renounce her self out of love in the concluding pages of the novel, the narrative, for the most part, is devoted to the reclamation of self. In this aspect of her work, Walker sits firmly within the tradition of African American women’s literature. Barbara Christian states that for African American women writers, an “overtly self-centred point of view has been difficult to maintain because of the way they have been conceptualized by black as well as white society” (234). Alice Walker’s statement that black writers must not subscribe to any of the fantasies about their identity constructed by the dominant culture reflects her desire to challenge this form of marginalisation:

In any case, the duty of the writer is not to be tricked, seduced, or goaded into verifying by imitation or even rebuttal, other people’s fantasies. [...] To isolate the fantasy we must cleave to reality, to what *we* know, *we* feel, *we* think of life. (*In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens* 312)

Christian notes that African American women writers have been engaged in a struggle to “use the range of one’s voice, to attempt to express the totality of self” from the nineteenth century onwards (234). Walker is obviously grounded in this tradition, especially in relation to the influence Zora Neale Hurston has had on her work. Christian marks *Their Eyes were Watching God*, a text Henry Louis Gates Jr. identifies as a literary ancestor of *The Color Purple* (244), as the point where this tradition began to portray the self as central, using language in particular to explore the self as black and female (237). In response to entrenched racism and sexism, which marginalises the voices and experiences of black American women, the literary tradition Walker belongs to has sought to redress this silencing by creating characters like Janie and Celie, whose voices form the centre of their texts.

Hurston’s influence on Walker’s work is significant. Walker is in large part responsible for the resurgence of interest in Hurston’s work, and in claiming her as a literary foremother, she is drawing on and ensuring the preservation of her roots. In Hurston’s texts, Walker finds “a sense of black people as complete, complex, *undiminished* human beings”, and in Hurston’s upbringing, a firm rootedness in a black community that “affirmed her right to exist, and loved her as an extension of itself” (*In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens* 85-6). The inspiration she finds in Hurston’s work is obvious in Walker’s description of what she sees as important in her own writing: “I am preoccupied with the spiritual survival, the survival *whole* of my people. But beyond that, I am committed to exploring the oppressions, the insanities, the loyalties, and the triumphs of black women” (*In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens* 250). Just as *Their Eyes Were Watching God* celebrates life, love and the reclamation of self, so does *The*



*Color Purple*. The hope in these two novels can be located precisely in this reclamation of self, especially in relation to the love of others.

The hope expressed in *The Color Purple* is in large part due to the impact of *metaxu* on the lives of the characters. Celie's love for Shug, her growing awareness of the beauty of the world, and the shift from oppressive labour to work which is underpinned by creativity and love, each play a part in Celie's transformation. The refiguration of Celie's image of the divine from one associated with oppression to one whose love is expressed through the beauty of creation, is also an integral part of this process. Finally, the interplay between self-reclamation and self-renunciation sets *The Color Purple* apart from Weil's concept of *metaxu* in some senses, but also intersects with it in others. Although the focus on the reclamation of self sets this novel apart from the poetics of hope developed thus far, the hope generated by Celie's transformation does reveal a significant connection between *The Color Purple* and Weil's *metaxu*.

### **Embracing the Self: Celie's Language**

*The Color Purple* takes the form of a series of letters Celie writes to God and her sister Nettie, interspersed with Nettie's letters to Celie. The majority of the novel is written in Celie's voice, which Walker modeled on her step-grandmother's speech. Again there is an intersection between Weil's concept of roots and *The Color Purple*. The emphasis Walker places on her roots and the inspiration they provide, mirrors Weil's understanding of the role played by collectivities in preserving and transmitting the spiritual treasures of the past. Walker's celebration of her roots is inseparable from a reclamation of self, a protest against the marginalisation of black women in her society. This makes her work profoundly political, at least in terms of voice. It is not surprising,

then, that this aspect of the novel has received the most widespread critical acclaim, even among critics who have expressed strong reservations about the novel as a whole. Trudier Harris, an outspoken critic of *The Color Purple* in many other aspects, does find merit in Celie's voice. Harris states that as she read certain lines in *The Color Purple* she,

felt a sense of déjà vu for all the black women who made art out of conversation in the part of Alabama where I grew up; they created poetry out of cotton fields and rivaled the blues in the domestic images that came so readily to their tongues. (156)

The voice that emerges in Celie's letters gives concrete expression to the voice and language of Walker's step-grandmother, whose "unique pattern of speech" is the clay used to shape Celie's character (*Living by the Word* 63-64). This is important not only in the authenticity it lends to Celie's voice, and thus to the novel as a whole, but also in the far deeper significance Walker attributes to keeping her ancestors' voices alive: "If we kill off the *sound* of our ancestors, the major portion of us, all that is past, that is history, that is human being is lost, and we become historically and spiritually thin, a mere shadow of who we were, on the earth" (*Living by the Word* 62). By revealing Celie's reality in the language of a poor, marginalised black woman, and placing that reality in the centre of the novel, Walker insists on her inherent humanity and her ability to define herself, her vision of the world, and the injustices she suffers. This involves a reshaping of the societal constructs that grant the white, rich and male centre stage, while relegating women like Celie to the outer margins. Celie's voice gives the novel its life and energy, validating the artistry inherent in the language of the community of which she is a part. Thus, Walker asks, "How can you justify enslaving such a person as Celie? Segregating or sexually abusing such a person? Her language – all that we

have left of her – reveals her as irreducibly human. The answer is you cannot” (*Living By the Word* 64).

### **Possibilities Versus Historical Accuracy: Revisioning of an Oppressive Past towards a Utopian Future**

In *The Color Purple* Walker explores the imagined lives of people belonging to her parents’ and grandparents’ generation. Although it is seen as an historical novel, several critics identify a problematic relationship between the historically accurate and the imaginary within the narrative. Walker herself comments on her manipulation of historical facts to suit her own purpose in relation to the novel’s outcome. However, while she sees this revisioning of the past as an expression of hope and a celebration of the lives of her ancestors, critics are divided on their assessment of the utopian ending of the novel. Some suggest that this utopia is a depiction of hopeful possibilities that could inspire change: others see in it an impossible fantasy that could actually lead to despair. It is this tension between the historically accurate and the search for new possibilities, new ways of envisioning a world where people’s basic needs are met and each person is treated with dignity, love and respect, that needs to be explored to develop an understanding of the hope generated by *The Color Purple*.

Although Walker drew inspiration for Celie’s character from her step-grandmother Rachel, there are crucial differences between the life her grandmother led and Celie’s journey. Walker refers directly to her grandmother’s life in her poem “Burial”, included in *Revolutionary Petunias*. The similarities between Rachel and Celie are striking:

Not pretty, but serviceable. A hard  
worker, with rough, moist hands. Her own two  
babies dead before she came.

*Came to seven children.*

*To aprons and sweat. [...]*

*Came to fields to plow.*

*Cotton to chop.*

*Potatoes to dig. (14)*

The parallels between them, however, make the differences between Walker's actual grandmother and the imagined character of Celie even more acute. The most obvious difference is the fact that Rachel's children did actually die, whereas Celie's children, although she believed them to be dead for a time, grew up with her sister Nettie, and finally returned to Celie after years in Africa. The approach Walker took to the construction of this part of the novel reveals her desire to use her authorial power to rewrite the history of her grandmother: "Fortunately I was able to bring Celie's own children back to her (a unique power of novelists)..." (*In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* 359). This same desire that prompted her to reunite Celie with her children extends to every other aspect of *The Color Purple* as the novel draws to a close. Walker describes the discrepancy between the factual and the fictional in these words: "I liberated [Rachel] from her own history... I wanted her to be happy" ("Alice Walker" *Newsweek* 67). This longing for both her fictional character and her grandmother to be happy pervades the end of the novel, and results in a utopia that certain critics, most notably bell hooks and Trudier Harris, find problematic.

Both hooks and Harris remark on Walker's manipulation of historical fact in *The Color Purple*. hooks finds the blurring of historical fact and fantasy disturbing, accusing Walker of mocking the "notion of historical truth" in her construction of a fictitious autobiography (464). She suggests that, in its willingness to disregard historical accuracy in favour of making a point, *The Color Purple* parodies slave autobiographies.

“Historical accuracy is altered to serve didactic purposes – to teach the reader history not as it was but as it should have been” (465). Similarly, Harris identifies elements of both realism and fantasy in the novel. She suggests that the fable-like structure of *The Color Purple*, particularly in terms of its utopian ending, which grants Celie her own property, her family and her lover, affirms the myth of the Great American Dream. This is no way to inspire an authentic sense of hope, Harris argues, but merely “perpetuates a lie in holding out to blacks a non-existent or minimally existent hope for a piece of that great American pie” (160). hooks also reacts strongly to the ending of *The Color Purple*, particularly in terms of its utopian qualities:

The tragedy embedded in the various happy endings in *The Color Purple* can be located at that point where fantasy triumphs over imagination, where creative power is suppressed (470).<sup>72</sup>

Harris’s objections to the novel centre around the claim that the novel reinforces negative stereotypes held by white racists about black women and black communities, and perpetuates the idea that black men are violent, black women subservient, and both have a questionable morality (157). *The Color Purple*, judged by both positive and negative reactions to it, certainly does not adhere to recognised social moral codes. Both criticised and celebrated for its depiction of lesbianism, violence in black communities, and unorthodox family structures, it stands as one of the most contested novels written by African American women writers in the late twentieth century, and one of the most popular. Harris’s criticism that it perpetuates white racist stereotypes points to its very popularity as a cause for concern (155). The underlying message

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<sup>72</sup> Molly Hite also comments on the improbability of *The Color Purple*’s ending. Instead of interpreting this through the conventions of fantasy, however, she places the novel within the tradition of Shakespearean romance, suggesting that the ending depicts a metaphysical and social metamorphosis (110-111).

found in both Harris's and hooks's responses to *The Color Purple* is the belief that Walker, as an African American woman, has a responsibility towards her community to remain as historically and sociologically accurate as possible in her depiction of black families in the South. This accuracy, in their eyes, involves not only staying true to African American experience as Walker herself perceives it, but avoiding stereotypes as well.<sup>73</sup>

These criticisms echo some of the conflicting ideas about the role of art that arose among the writers of the Harlem Renaissance. As Fabre and Feith point out, writers such as W.E.B. Du Bois and Alain Locke raised questions about whether art should be a form of propaganda to uplift and prove the humanity of African Americans, in the hope of effecting social change, or whether it should be freed from cultural values and "restrictions to artistic freedom" imposed by both black and white (24-25).<sup>74</sup> The criticisms of *The Color Purple* outlined above recall both Du Bois's argument that all art is propaganda, and Sartre's call for a literature of commitment. For Harris and hooks, Walker's novel has the potential to shape its readers' opinions about African American communities, and as such, should not portray characters or events that could

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<sup>73</sup> Walker's own answer to critical responses such as these is set out in her book *The Same River Twice*. Responding to the criticisms of her portrayal of the violence of black men, Walker includes several letters written in support of the novel by both African American men and women, who state that she has exposed a reality they themselves have experienced.

<sup>74</sup> In his "Criteria of Negro Art", Du Bois stated that

all Art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists. I stand in utter shamelessness and say that whatever art I have for writing has been used always for propaganda for gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy. (782-3)

Locke suggested that the hope of the Harlem Renaissance lay elsewhere:

the present generation will have added the motives of self-expression and spiritual development to the old and still unfinished task of making material headway and progress. No one who understandingly faces the situation with its substantial accomplishment or views the new scene with its still more abundant promise can be entirely without hope. (993)

reinforce negative stereotypes. For them, the political emancipation of African American communities takes precedence over the self-expression and spiritual development that Locke applauded, and which find expression in *The Color Purple*. Like Camus, Walker refuses to comply with accepted political viewpoints. Jago Morrison suggests that although “political aspiration” is a common thread running throughout both Walker’s literary works and political activism, one of the characteristics of her fiction is its “political unorthodoxy and ambivalence” (204). In Morrison’s reading, rather than intending to highlight “the virtues of political struggle”, *The Color Purple* instead points towards “a recognition of the emancipatory possibilities of black women’s spirituality and creativity” (216-17).

Other critics celebrate the utopian aspect of Walker’s work, arguing that the creation of new possibilities within the novel inspires hope. In contrast to Harris’s and hooks’s criticisms of the utopian ending of the novel, Powers suggests that the novel’s conclusion offers a space that allows the possibility for new ways of structuring society to be imagined (63). What begins to emerge here are two different ways of reading the novel in terms of its ability to generate hope. The first judges the novel based on its truth content, the second on its generation and portrayal of possibility. Harris and hooks both insist on the importance of historical accuracy, and express their unease with what they see as inaccuracies and improbabilities in both the novel’s content as well as its form (how could Celie, black, poor, working domestically in addition to labouring in the fields, even find the time to write? asks hooks) (466). Anne Bower, however, argues that Celie’s letter writing, however improbable, is not impossible. She refuses to rule out the possibility that Celie could have found time to write, and suggests instead that the act of documenting her life through the written word enables her to “mark loss

and restoration of creativity, self, and community” (66). Celie’s letter writing, Bower believes, is an act that falls within a tradition of verbal and written forms of resistance that reaches back to the antebellum days (64). The line of influence Henry Louis Gates Jr. traces between Rebecca Cox Jackson’s *Gifts of Power* and *The Color Purple* supports this view (240).

It is instructive, in terms of navigating a path through these critical responses, to consider how Walker herself describes her use of ancestors’ voices in her fiction. Capturing the true sound of their voices is important; however, seeking to create an accurate portrayal of the actual lives of her ancestors is not the primary focus. Walker is more concerned with creating characters who challenge oppression, assert their inherent dignity and actively participate in and shape the world around them.

I create characters who sometimes speak in the language of immediate ancestors, characters who are not passive but active in the discovery of what is vital and real in this world. Characters who explore what it would feel like not to be imprisoned by the hatred of women, the love of violence, and the destructiveness of greed taught to human beings as the “religion” by which they must guide their lives. (*Anything We Love Can Be Saved* 4)

For Walker, possibilities for freedom and healing are the central elements in her construction of characters that echo the lives of her ancestors. It is the exploration and generation of these possibilities that lies closest to her artistic sensibility. In her role as an artist, she seeks to “bring people hope and joy” and to remind them of their inherent strength (“*The Color Purple* Premiere: Q&A” C.7). This revisioning of the past is an act of decolonisation of the spirit, a generation of new possibilities for different ways of interacting with the world and other people.



Walker's choice to emphasize the generation of new possibilities rather than provide an accurate portrayal of historical events intersects with Weil's poetics and her concept of rootedness. Read as a novel that increasingly slips into fantasy, as Harris and hooks believe it does, it seems to disregard necessity, offering instead an escape from reality. This interpretation, when analysed in light of Weil's article "Morality and Literature", suggests that *The Color Purple* is far from being a text Weil would have held up as a work able to inspire hope. Rather than revealing the "actual density of the real", it perpetuates the fantasy we construct around ourselves each day, the perception of reality Weil describes as a "waking dream peopled by our fictions" (*On Science, Necessity and the Love of God* 162). However, when read as a narrative that puts forward a vision of a more just, humane world in which the characters are firmly rooted in their community and the divine, *The Color Purple* mirrors Weil's idea of healthy collectivities that provide food for their members. Societies, according to Weil, should be organized in such a way as to allow for the "mysterious germination of the impersonal element in the soul." For this to occur, she suggests that each person needs to be given "enough room, enough freedom to plan the use of one's time, the opportunity to reach ever higher levels of attention, some solitude, some silence," and warmth (*Simone Weil: An Anthology*, 79). At the novel's conclusion, Celie has been provided with each of these requirements: she owns her own house, she spends her time creating beautiful garments for people she loves, she has the solitude and silence given her through living alone, and yet she is also surrounded by love and support.

Hope in *The Color Purple* can be identified in two primary places: either at the end, in its vision of a community rooted in love and the restoration of everything Celie originally lost; or at the points when Celie makes contact with divine love through

*metaxu*. It could be argued that the one leads to the other: without her love for Shug, the revelation of the beauty of the world and the development of meaningful work, Celie would not have begun the journey that resulted in the manifestation of a community of love and support. However, there remains the fact that circumstances contrive to give Celie everything she desires, even beyond the need for setting down roots: she inherits her father's property, which she was previously unaware of; her sister and children return to her from Africa, even after she has been told they are dead; her lover, Shug, returns; and she is able to give Sophia a job working in her store, that she also inherited. The complexities of this situation need to be unravelled to some degree in order to articulate where Walker's poetics in this situation departs from both Weil and Howe.<sup>75</sup> The key to this is found in hooks's criticism that *The Color Purple* is steeped in an ethics of "narcissistic new-age spiritualism wherein economic prosperity indicates that one is chosen-blessed" (463).<sup>76</sup> As Celie reclaims a sense of self and asserts her independence, fate also seems to intervene, granting everything she has once been deprived of. This lies in stark contrast to the end of *Saving History*, which,

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<sup>75</sup> Fiction necessarily deals with the possible, but whereas Howe seeks to present a balance between the necessity of plot and the blindness of experience, Walker embraces the possibilities of creating a vision of the world in which each person is allowed to blossom. In this sense, Walker's approach is quite different from that of her contemporary, Toni Morrison, who stated in her essay "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation" that although she believed fiction should suggest what the conflicts and problems of society are, "it need not solve those problems because it is not a case study, it is not a recipe" (2287). Walker, in many of her novels, does give certain solutions to the issues she identifies. These solutions can, of course, be read in different ways: as either a vision of a more just, humane world; or as a retreat into an impossibly utopian dream.

<sup>76</sup> The most hopeful scene in *Saving History* takes place when Felicity is in the café with her daughters, and although Matty is obviously dying, Felicity has chosen not to participate in the trade of human organs. This decision not to participate in unjust social structures is less obvious in *The Color Purple*, as hooks points out. Celie does not question her newfound wealth, but makes use of it and attempts to transform it into something that supports rather than oppresses her community: she has wealth, thus she has power.

although concluding with a family reunion and a celebration of the joys of existence, still retains a sense of continuing suffering, mental disturbance, and bewilderment. Most significantly, Felicity's daughter Matty, unlike Celie's daughter Olivia, is not present at this reunion. Felicity's journey towards an inner freedom involves profound loss, not only of self, but also of her daughter. Celie's journey, however, takes an opposite trajectory, carrying her towards a point where all her deepest desires have been realised. If the primary source of hope in *The Color Purple* can be traced to this point, the novel would not appear to intersect with the poetics of hope developed through the analysis of Weil's and Howe's work. However, if it is identified earlier, in the transformation that results from Celie's encounters with *metaxu*, it certainly bears resemblance to the hope found in the writings of both Weil and Howe.

Womanist theologian Emilie M. Townes identifies the point at which hope emerges in the novel as the refiguration of the divine. She states that

Walker's portrayal of a passive Celie and an all too human male God readies the way for a new understanding of God for Black children, men, and women that is a pathway to a deepening spirituality and a liberating hope. (70)

Townes suggests that this vision can provide inspiration for members of her community to move towards a stronger connection with the divine, and a hope that is inseparable from liberation. This interpretation of the novel's ability to inspire hope clarifies the question of whether *The Color Purple* has the potential to form a *metaxu* for the reader. Townes recognises in the novel the qualities of a pathway, or a bridge, that links the reader with the divine. However, she also suggests that this connection leads to a specifically liberating form of hope. *The Color Purple*, in its focus on self-reclamation in conjunction with a refiguration of the divine, generates a form of hope that is inseparable from, as Walker puts it, a decolonisation, or liberation, of the spirit.

### Walker as Medium

Referring to Walker's descriptions of her own writing process is instructive in further articulating the points of intersection and departure between her work and that of Weil and Howe. First, and perhaps most importantly in terms of *The Color Purple*, Walker refers to herself not only as the author of the book, but also as a medium. This is particularly interesting in terms of Walker's approach to the reclamation and renunciation of self: in identifying herself as a medium, she seems to suggest that the two seemingly opposed states of reclamation and renunciation actually exist simultaneously for her in the act of writing.

Walker frames *The Color Purple* by a dedication and an expression of gratitude. The dedication she gives in these words:

*To the Spirit:*

Without whose assistance

Neither this book

Nor I

Would have been

Written.

In an essay on Rebecca Cox Jackson's book *Gifts of Power*, Walker describes how Jackson, who eventually became an itinerant minister, learned how to read. Jackson relates how, rather than learning to read through human tutelage, she was taught to read directly by God, or in Walker's interpretation, by "the spirit within her" (*In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* 73). Gates suggests that the spirit Walker refers to in the above dedication is the same spirit that taught Jackson how to read (243). Walker begins *The Color Purple*, then, with a dedication to the spirit as she perceives it. This same spirit is

also described in the Preface to the tenth anniversary edition of the novel as the “Ultimate Ancestor” and the “Great Mystery”. This provides a good starting point for examining Walker’s view of herself as a medium, and what she is channelling through her writing. In attributing the creation of both the novel and her own self to this spirit, Walker accords a central place to the divine in her conception of herself as an author/medium. In writing the novel, she sees herself as participating in the creative work of the same spirit whose mystery shapes her own existence, and is also expressed in the lives of her ancestors.

Walker furthers her description of the spirit in *Living By the Word*, indicating a belief in the power of both direct and indirect ancestors to animate their descendents:

The spirit of our helpers incarnates in us, making us more ourselves by extending us far beyond. And to that spirit there is no “beginning” as we know it (although we might finally “know” a historical figure who at one time expressed it) and no end. (98)

This quote provides a link between the dedication at the beginning of the novel and the note of thanks that appears at the end of *The Color Purple*. In this note Walker directly refers to her characters, who are, as has already been mentioned, based on her own ancestors. “I thank everybody in this book for coming. A.W., author and medium” (245). Between the dedication at the beginning and the thanks at the end, the actual novel sits as a complex expression of Walker’s understanding of herself as a creation of the Spirit, her ancestors as expressions of that same Spirit, and the embodiment of those ancestors within her, and subsequently within the text itself, in the shape of her characters. At no point does Walker assume that she has created the narrative herself: instead, she consciously places the novel in a continuum between the Spirit, her ancestors, and herself. As such, it becomes simultaneously an expression of the divine,

a celebration of the life of her ancestors, and through them, a celebration of both her heritage and her self.

Thus the complexities of Walker's conception of herself as medium become clear, especially as they relate to the reclamation of self. Being the conduit through which her ancestors can write themselves into being, for Walker, also involves an animation of self: "Let us understand that to keep alive in us the speech and the voices of the ancestors is not only to 'lively up' the old spirits through the great gift of memory, but to 'lively up' our own selves, as well" (*Living By the Word* 66). Walker, during the writing of *The Color Purple*, thought of the characters as "trying to contact me, to speak *through me*" (*In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* 356). This process did not involve a conscious renunciation of self, but a sense of friendship and mutual trust between her and her characters, whom she describes almost as though they were actually embodied and present with her as she wrote. "Celie and Shug and Albert were getting to know each other, coming to trust my determination to serve their entry (sometimes I felt *re-entry*) into the world..." (*In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* 358). Her characters would "come for a visit", and when they sat and talked with her, were "obliging, engaging and jolly" (*In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* 358-359). Walker's vision is not one of renunciation in order to allow an impersonal love to animate her, as is Weil's, but a belief that she is a part of a continual expression of the divine, which also incorporates the natural world and her ancestors. To be animated by the Spirit, for Walker, requires an acceptance and celebration of both one's ancestors and one's self.

Walker's approach to her role as an author/medium is part of her wider celebration of her African heritage. Her belief in the power of the spirit is central to her understanding

of these roots: “If there is one thing African-Americans and Native Americans have retained of their African and ancient American heritage, it is probably the belief that everything is inhabited by spirit” (*In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens* 252). Carolyn Martin Shaw examines the rise of spiritualism in African American feminist writings in her article “The Poetics of Identity”. She suggests that many African American feminists emphasize three main qualities of the spirit:

spirit as an incorporeal animating force, spirit as a vigorous sense of membership or connection with others, and spirit as an everlasting, transcendent quality of individual human beings. (350)

Walker’s view of the spirit coincides with all three elements, and as such, partakes in the same spiritualism that Shaw identifies in her article. This spiritual practice, according to Shaw, involves a minimization of ego in favour of healing and community (351). It is here that the interplay between self reclamation and self-renunciation in Walker’s approach to authorship becomes clear. Yes, there is a celebration of self, however there is also a strong sense that the self is not an isolated entity, but is connected, through the spirit, to other human beings, including ancestors: indeed, in Walker’s conception, to every created thing. The reclamation of self, for Walker, involves an inherent renunciation: the recognition that the self is not a separate being with only its own interests at heart, but is intimately connected to every other living thing. In her Afterword to *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, Walker reveals her vision of the responsibility each person has to respect the life of things other than themselves: “The white man’s oppression of me will never excuse my oppression of you, whether you are man, woman, child, animal or tree” (345). It is the claiming of the self from beneath oppression that Walker believes leads to respect and love for other living things.

Perhaps the best way to gain an understanding of the way Walker perceives the role of the artist as medium is to turn to her short story “Fame”, in which she describes the impact of a young girl’s song during an awards ceremony.

She opened her mouth and began to sing with assurance an old, emphatically familiar song.

A slave song. Authorless.

Picked drumsticks fell onto plates like hail. Profound silence at last prevailed. (*You Can’t Keep a Good Woman Down* 63)

This provides a clear image of Weil’s understanding of the role of roots. In singing a song by anonymous ancestors, the child is drawing on the treasures of the past, and bringing the words and music of her ancestors alive in the present. This has a profound effect on the people present, who recognise the power in the voice of the young girl singing a song that forms a part of their common heritage. The girl’s voice is important in that it provides the means by which the ancestor’s song can be heard, but she herself is not the focus, nor does she create the power of the song. She is the means by which a treasure of the past is kept alive for members of her community. It is in this scene that the clearest intersection between Weil’s concept of roots and Walker’s belief in her role as medium can be seen. In being the conduit for her ancestors’ voices, Walker sees herself as offering a gift to her community that is an expression of the same spirit that animates not only herself, but also her ancestors and the wider community she addresses her work to.

For Walker, then, the two opposing extremes that Weil identifies in her approach to the self – that of either killing the self for the sake of the universe, or killing the universe for the sake of the self – are not so starkly separated. Indeed, if Walker’s ideas were to be arranged in similarly opposing extremes, what might emerge is the idea of celebrating



and affirming the self for the sake of the universe, or celebrating and affirming the universe for the sake of the self, both of which, in Walker's eyes, appear to amount to the same thing. Hope, then, for Walker, is not expressed in her work as a result of a renunciation of self, but in a celebration and affirmation of the self's place within the universe, and the flow of the spirit through all created things. This belief carries through into Walker's practice of meditation, which also plays an important role in her writing process.

### **Weil's Attention, Walker's Meditation**

In the same way that attention is so central to the process of writing for both Weil and Howe, meditation is significant for Walker. There are parallels between Weil's attention and Walker's description of the experience of meditation. Just as Weil's attention involves a concentration so intense that it results in the disappearance of the 'I' (*Gravity and Grace* 107), so Walker outlines meditation as a process that takes her back to one of her favourite pastimes as a child: that of "gazing out into the landscape, merging with it and disappearing" ("Writers on Writing" E1). Walker also associates the practice of meditation with the generation of hope, suggesting that "peering quietly and regularly into the expanded opening [of our broken hearts] is to nurture a beginning to the re-creation of hope" ("Writers on Writing" E1). The disappearance of the 'I' for Weil, and Walker's disappearance of the self, first experienced in the contemplation of the beauty of the world and later during meditation, suggests that for all their differences, their ideas do converge in this emphasis on the centrality of attention in developing a poetics of hope.

In commenting on the importance of meditation in the creation of her novels, Walker ascribes much of the humour and delight found in *The Color Purple* to the daily practice of meditation she undertook while writing it (“Writers on Writing” E1). *The Color Purple*, in addition to revealing the world’s beauty through Celie’s eyes, is also the product of Walker’s own spiritual awakening, which she describes as an encounter with the Spirit as she sat contemplating the beauty of the natural world. In the Preface to the tenth anniversary edition of the novel, the genesis of *The Color Purple* and Walker’s own revelation of the divine appear to be inseparable. The book, she writes, is a “theological work examining the journey from the religious back to the spiritual” that literally chased her down as she sat in a field with her back turned. It caught her as she realized she was watching and listening to “the Great Mystery’s word... moving in beauty across the grassy hills” (i). This reverence for the world’s beauty, and its connection with Walker’s creative impulse, is reminiscent of Weil’s statement that the mark of a “true” artist lies in the experience of “real, direct and immediate contact with the beauty of the world, contact which is of the nature of a sacrament” (*Waiting on God* 106).

For Walker, meditation and the act of focusing her attention on the beauty of the world is a way of clearing her “inner vision” (“Writers on Writing” E1), a process similar to that which she identifies as a decolonisation of the spirit, referred to above. This decolonisation of the spirit, she suggests, allows her to “flow again, with and into the Universe” (*Anything We Love Can Be Saved* 26). Walker’s meditation involves a simultaneous reclamation and renunciation of self: a decolonisation and a disappearance, both of which are central to her writing process. In this way, Walker’s method of writing mirrors the approach to the self that shapes *The Color Purple*.

Celie's journey leads to a greater awareness of the beauty of the world and the joys of supportive human relationships, and of her place within a world that reveals itself as an expression of divine love. In the course of that journey, she both reclaims her self, asserting herself against the oppression that has denied her dignity and freedom; and then reaches a point where she is able to renounce her self voluntarily out of love. Likewise, Walker's method of writing incorporates both a reclamation and renunciation of self: a celebration of her heritage and ancestors, and an understanding of herself as a medium for their voices, the means by which *The Color Purple*, as a "gift to the people" (*Living By the Word* 56), is brought into being.

### **Towards a Poetics of Hope: Considerations raised by *The Color Purple***

*The Color Purple* intersects with the poetics of hope developed earlier in this thesis in several ways. The role of *metaxu* is central to lives of its characters, particularly in relation to the transformation that occurs in Celie's life as she encounters different forms of *metaxu*: her love for Shug, a growing awareness of the beauty of the world, and the joy she finds in the creative labour of sewing pants. A key part of this process that enables Celie to use these aspects of her life as bridges to the divine is a refiguration of her understanding of God. Replacing her image of a God associated with oppression, with an understanding of the divine as expressed in the beauty of the world, is central to Celie's journey towards healing and hope. This journey, which results in casting off oppression and an awareness of her place within the world, involves a reclamation of self. Although Celie also renounces her self out of love at the end of the novel, the reclamation of self remains the central focus. This is also seen in the form of the novel, especially in the use of Celie's language as the focal point of the text. The question of where hope appears in the novel reveals the fact that, although

there is substantial debate among critics as to the merits of Walker's reworking of the past into a utopian vision, at least one critic identifies in *The Color Purple* the qualities of a pathway between the reader and the divine. This suggests that the novel does hold the potential to become a *metaxu* for the reader, and that it is this quality in the work that enables it to inspire a sense of hope. Walker's use of meditation in the writing process, as well as her understanding of herself as a medium, suggest that her work does in fact intersect closely with Weil's belief in the importance of attention in the creation of works of art.

Although Walker's method of writing differs from Weil's and Howe's in some ways, as is evident above, it is similar in enough ways that an analysis of her work in this context is valuable in building upon and clarifying the ideas expressed earlier in this thesis. *The Color Purple*, according to accounts by several critics and readers, does have the potential to inspire hope. In applying the ideas that have shaped the poetics of hope developed thus far to *The Color Purple*, it becomes clear that they do, in fact, contribute to the novel's ability to inspire hope. Firstly, *metaxu* plays a central role in transforming the lives of the characters, as it does in *Saving History*. Secondly, the focus on the beauty of the world, both in terms of Celie's awakening and refiguration of the divine, as well as in Walker's description of the genesis of the novel itself, points to the importance of the beauty of creation providing a link between humanity and the divine. Thirdly, Emilie Townes identifies *The Color Purple* as a pathway between the reader and the divine that leads to a "liberating hope". Taking these three elements of the novel into consideration, it becomes clear that the hope inspired by *The Color Purple* is shaped by a poetics similar to that which resonates in Weil's and Howe's work.

The differences, however, are also instructive, particularly the difference in focus between the reclamation and the renunciation of self. The conclusion that can be drawn from the approach to the self in *The Color Purple* is that it is actually possible for self-renunciation and self-reclamation to occur simultaneously, as evidenced by Walker's efforts to decolonise the spirit. In claiming her dignity and humanity in addition to renouncing her self out of love, Celie demonstrates that it is possible to reclaim the self while at the same time recognizing that the same spirit that gives one life also flows through every other created thing. Likewise, in the "liberating hope" generated by *The Color Purple*, there is a recognition that growing roots involves a reclamation of the self from beneath the oppression resulting from colonialism and slavery. This decolonisation of the spirit bears resemblance to Weil's assertion that "The human being can only escape from the collective by raising himself above the personal and entering into the impersonal" (*Simone Weil: An Anthology* 77).

## Conclusion

*...the works of authentic genius from past ages remain, and are available to us. Their contemplation is the ever-flowing source of an inspiration which may legitimately guide us. For this inspiration, if we know how to receive it, tends – as Plato said – to make us grow wings to overcome gravity.*

Simone Weil<sup>77</sup>

In her memoir *Hope Against Hope*, Nadezhda Mandelstam describes the value of poetry in Russian society:

Poetry does indeed have a very special place in this country. It arouses people and shapes their minds... it is the golden treasury in which our values are preserved; it brings people back to life, awakens their conscience and stirs them to thought. (333)

In this description Mandelstam suggests that one of the key roles of poetry is the preservation and transmission of the values and heritage of a given society. This characteristic cannot be separated from the other attribute Mandelstam recognises: the ability of poetry to breathe life into the reader's conscience and intellect, to bring the reader to "attention", in Weil's terminology. It is in the combination of these two aspects that literature's potential to inspire hope resides.

As has been shown, the significance Simone Weil placed on the preservation and continuing relevance of a community's roots resonates not only with Mandelstam's assessment of the role of poetry, but also with the work of prominent Harlem Renaissance figures such as Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes, and Negritude writers Léopold Sédar Senghor and Aimé Césaire. Although expressed in many

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<sup>77</sup> *On Science, Necessity and the Love of God*, 165.

different forms, challenged and debated, the idea that roots play a vital role in generating hope runs as a common thread throughout this thesis. The works of many holocaust survivors also make reference to the relationship between roots and literature, supporting the arguments pursued above. Observations made by Primo Levi, Elie Wiesel and Ivan Klíma attest to literature's ability to inspire hope, and to the centrality of roots in preserving one's dignity and humanity.

Levi records an incident in *The Drowned and the Saved* that demonstrates the power of literature as a source of hope. In this account of his imprisonment in Auschwitz, Levi describes the history of the Third Reich as “a war against memory, an Orwellian falsification of memory, falsification of reality, negation of reality” (31). In this landscape, devoid of cultural reference points, where even language itself became an expression of alienation, Levi one day recalled several lines of Dante. Describing the importance of remembering these fragments of poetry, he writes: “They made it possible for me to reestablish a link with the past, saving it from oblivion and reinforcing my identity” (139). The value of Dante's lines lay in their capacity to awaken his cultural memory, to remind him of his own humanity and dignity. Wiesel also remarks on the importance of memory: “One who forgets forgets everything, including the roads leading homeward. Forgetting marks the end of human experience...” (25). Klíma suggests that it is precisely the ability to preserve and awaken memory that gives literature its unique character:

A truly literary work comes into being as its creator's cry of protest against the forgetting that looms over him, over his predecessors and his contemporaries alike, and over his time, and the language he speaks. (38)

The importance of keeping one's roots alive also echoes throughout the poem quoted at the beginning of this thesis, Péguy's *Portal of the Mystery of Hope*.

What unfortunately depends on us, fortunately,  
One after the other, is to nourish the living word,  
To nourish for a time the eternal word.  
After so many others, before so many others.  
[...]  
From hand to hand, from heart to heart, we must pass the divine  
Hope. (60-61)

Implicit in Péguy's poem is the belief that hope is found in what he terms the "eternal word", passed down from generation to generation. For Weil, as we have seen, this connection between the human and the divine is found in *metaxu*. In its role as *metaxu*, literature that forms a part of a community's roots does indeed have the potential to inspire hope, as both Mandelstam's description of the role of poetry and Levi's account in *The Drowned and the Saved* suggest. That this form of hope is oriented more towards the present than the future is revealed in Levi's account: Dante's words did not awaken hope for the future, rather, they served as a reminder of Levi's own heritage, his roots, his very humanity.

This brings us to the second major theme explored in this thesis: the value of present-oriented, rather than future-oriented hope. While the importance of present-oriented hope has already been discussed, not only from the perspective of Weil and Camus, but also in relation to the work of contemporary philosophers such as Mary Zournazi, it is also pertinent to briefly mention its significance for contemporary political and social activism. Rebecca Solnit discusses present-oriented hope from an activist's perspective in *Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities*, published in 2006. She



identifies a shift in contemporary revolutionary movements away from a focus on ideology towards an “antidoctrinal” approach: a rejection of “static utopia in favor of the improvisational journey” (104). She suggests that in revolutionary movements such as these, in which the means are just as significant as the desired ends, “hope is no longer fixed on the future; it becomes an electrifying force in the present” (108). These ideals, she suggests, are typified by the Zapatistas, the indigenous revolutionary movement in the Chiapas mountains of Mexico (35). The Zapatistas are described by Julio Moguel, editor for the *Jornada del Campo and Economia Informa*, as “a source of inspiration and of living hope” (41). Subcomandante Marcos’s stories and speeches have been distributed throughout the world, and have been instrumental in inspiring new ways of resisting oppression. In Marcos’s story “Making the Bread Called Tomorrow”, hope is found in the present: in the sharing of pain, the joy of creating puppet shadows during a long sleepless night, the baking of bread in the morning (389).

The approach of the Zapatistas recalls Camus’s preference for forms of creative insurrection, as opposed to Sartrean commitment. Camus’s criticism of the belief that the ends justify the means led him to point out some of the potential dangers arising from a future-oriented form of hope. More recently, contemporary author Calixthe Beyala, born in Cameroon and currently living in Paris, has recognised the social implications for people living in situations where hope resides solely in the future. The language of the bidonville, she suggested in an interview with Bennetta Jules-Rosette, is a language conducted in the future rather than the present tense. This results in a kind of madness: “when you try to understand the present with this language, you go mad. Life in the bidonville denies the present because one lives on hope” (204). This assessment shows the result of an adoption of future-oriented hope pushed to its

extreme. When the present is so desperate it is denied in favour of an as-yet non-existent future, one exists in a no-mans-land, between an impossible present and an imagined future. Language itself becomes distorted in such an environment, unable to express anything but future possibilities.

It is here that the value of the second function Mandelstam attributes to poetry – awakening the reader’s attention – comes into play. Rather than appealing to the desire for a better future, poetry in this sense is able to reveal the present in a new light. This cultivation of attentiveness is at the heart of Weil’s *metaxu*. Literature that forms a part of a community’s roots, that has the potential to draw the reader’s attention away from the self towards “the reality beyond the world”, does not offer promises of a brighter future, but instead has the ability to, in Weil’s words, “awaken [one] to what is real and eternal, to see the true light and hear the true silence” (*Waiting on God* 98). This is not a retreat from reality, but rather a deepening understanding of it, which, as revealed in the characters in Howe’s *Saving History* and Walker’s *The Color Purple*, inspires actions motivated by justice and love. These actions – Felicity’s refusal to take part in the organ trade, for example – are in themselves expressions of hope, and have the potential to transform the lives of others.

As the analysis of these two novels has revealed, Weil’s ideas can be successfully applied to identify and explore hope in literary works. The concept of *metaxu* has proven to be of particular significance, both in terms of locating the points at which hope emerges in the lives of the characters, and in providing a theoretical framework which can be used to discuss each text’s potential to inspire hope in the reader. Howe’s poetics of bewilderment and Walker’s use of the language of her ancestors both require

a certain attentiveness from the reader, suggesting that *Saving History* and *The Color Purple* have the potential to form *metaxu*. The interaction between self-renunciation and self-reclamation, evident in the comparison of Howe's and Walker's novels, broadens the poetics of hope developed on Weil's writings alone. While Weil's focus on self-renunciation remains important, Walker's insistence on the need for a 'decolonisation of the spirit', a self reclaimed from the shackles of racial, patriarchal and economic oppression, suggests that there is a need for both.

The poetics of hope explored in this thesis applies Simone Weil's concept of *metaxu* in a literary context. What has emerged from this discussion is a vision of a present-oriented hope, generated as individuals draw on their roots, which provides the impetus for actions characterised by love and justice. Weil's *metaxu* allows for the development of a poetics that recognises the potential for literature to inspire hope, and provides a means by which hope can be identified within literary works. For writers desiring to inspire hope through their own work, it points to the value of Weil's 'attention' in the act of writing itself. Such a poetics has the potential be applied far more widely than it has been here: either to identify and analyse hope in literary works other than those discussed above, or by contemporary writers who may wish to use it to inform their own practice. Regardless of any future application, however, this study suggests that literature, as *metaxu*, has the potential to inspire a form of hope that does not deny suffering and oppression, but helps bring into being a reality characterized by beauty, justice and love.

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