

Simone
Weil

Gravity and Grace

First complete English language edition

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London and New York

**Also available as a printed book
see title verso for ISBN details**

IMAGINATION WHICH FILLS THE VOID

The imagination is continually at work filling up all the fissures through which grace might pass.

Every void (not accepted) produces hatred, sourness, bitterness, spite. The evil we wish for that which we hate, and which we imagine, restores the balance.

The militiamen of the *Spanish Testament* who invented victories in order to endure death: an example of imagination filling up the void. Although we should gain nothing by the victory, we can bear to die for a cause which is going to triumph, not for one which will be defeated. For something absolutely denuded of power, it would be superhuman (the disciples of Christ). The thought of death calls for a counterweight, and this counterweight—apart from grace—cannot be anything but a lie.

The imagination, filler up of the void, is essentially a liar. It does

away with the third dimension, for only real objects have three dimensions. It does away with multiple relationships.

To try to define the things which, while they do indeed happen, yet remain in a sense imaginary. War. Crimes. Acts of revenge. Extreme affliction.

The crimes in Spain were actually perpetrated and yet they resembled mere acts of boastfulness.

Realities which have no more dimensions than a dream.

In the case of evil, as in that of dreams, there are not multiple readings.¹ Hence the simplicity of criminals.

Crimes flat like dreams on both sides: on the side of the executioner and on the side of the victim. What is more frightful than to die in a nightmare?

Compensations. Marius imagined future retribution. Napoleon thought of posterity. William II wanted a cup of tea. His imagination was not strongly enough attached to power to be able to span the years: it turned towards a cup of tea.

The adoration of the great by the people in the seventeenth century (La Bruyère). This was a result of imagination filling up the void, a result which has disappeared since money has been substituted for it. Two base results, but money the baser of the two.

In no matter what circumstances, if the imagination is stopped from pouring itself out we have a void (the poor in spirit).

In no matter what circumstances (but sometimes at the price of how great a degradation!) imagination can fill the void. This is why average human beings can become prisoners, slaves,

¹ For the meaning of this word (*lectures*) in the vocabulary of Simone Weil, see later chapter on Readings.

prostitutes and pass through no matter what suffering without being purified.

We must continually suspend the work of the imagination filling the void within ourselves.

If we accept no matter what void, what stroke of fate can prevent us from loving the universe?

We have the assurance that, come what may, *the universe is full.*

ATTENTION AND WILL

We do not have to understand new things, but by dint of patience, effort and method to come to understand with our whole self the truths which are evident.

Stages of belief. The most commonplace truth when it floods the whole soul, is like a revelation.

We have to try to cure our faults by attention and not by will.

The will only controls a few movements of a few muscles, and these movements are associated with the idea of the change of position of near-by objects. I can will to put my hand flat on the table. If inner purity, inspiration or truth of thought were necessarily associated with attitudes of this kind, they might be the object of will. As this is not the case, we can only beg for them. To beg for them is to believe that we have a Father in heaven. Or should we cease to desire them? What could be worse? Inner supplication is the only reasonable way, for it avoids stiffening muscles which have nothing to do with the matter. What could

be more stupid than to tighten up our muscles and set our jaws about virtue, or poetry, or the solution of a problem. Attention is something quite different.

Pride is a tightening up of this kind. There is a lack of grace (we can give the word its double meaning here) in the proud man. It is the result of a mistake.

Attention, taken to its highest degree, is the same thing as prayer. It presupposes faith and love.

Absolutely unmixed attention is prayer.

If we turn our mind towards the good, it is impossible that little by little the whole soul will not be attracted thereto in spite of itself.

Extreme attention is what constitutes the creative faculty in man and the only extreme attention is religious. The amount of creative genius in any period is strictly in proportion to the amount of extreme attention and thus of authentic religion at that period.

The wrong way of seeking. The attention fixed on a problem. Another phenomenon due to horror of the void. We do not want to have lost our labour. The heat of the chase. We must not want to find: as in the case of an excessive devotion, we become dependent on the object of our efforts. We need an outward reward which chance sometimes provides and which we are ready to accept at the price of a deformation of the truth.

It is only effort without desire (not attached to an object) which infallibly contains a reward.

To draw back before the object we are pursuing. Only an indirect method is effective. We do nothing if we have not first drawn back.

By pulling at the bunch, we make all the grapes fall to the ground.

There are some kinds of effort which defeat their own object (example: the soured disposition of certain pious females, false asceticism, certain sorts of self-devotion, etc.). Others are always useful, even if they do not meet with success.

How are we to distinguish between them?

Perhaps in this way: some efforts are always accompanied by the (false) negation of our inner wretchedness; with others the attention is continually concentrated on the distance there is between what we are and what we love.

Love is the teacher of gods and men, for no one learns without desiring to learn. Truth is sought not because it is truth but because it is good.

Attention is bound up with desire. Not with the will but with desire—or more exactly, consent.

We liberate energy in ourselves, but it constantly reattaches itself. How are we to liberate it entirely? We have to desire that it should be done in us—to desire it truly—simply to desire it, not to try to accomplish it. For every attempt in that direction is vain and has to be dearly paid for. In such a work all that I call ‘I’ has to be passive. Attention alone—that attention which is so full that the ‘I’ disappears—is required of me. I have to deprive all that I call ‘I’ of the light of my attention and turn it on to that which cannot be conceived.

The capacity to drive a thought away once and for all is the gateway to eternity. The infinite in an instant.

As regards temptations, we must follow the example of the truly chaste woman who, when the seducer speaks to her, makes no answer and pretends not to hear him.

We should be indifferent to good and evil but, when we are indifferent, that is to say when we project the light of our attention equally on both, the good gains the day. This phenomenon comes about automatically. There lies the essential grace. And it is the definition, the criterion of good.

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

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.

As soon as we have a point of eternity in the soul, we have nothing more to do but to take care of it, for it will grow of itself like a seed. It is necessary to surround it with an armed guard, waiting in stillness, and to nourish it with the contemplation of numbers, of fixed and exact relationships.

We nourish the changeless which is in the soul by the contemplation of that which is unchanging in the body.

Writing is like giving birth: we cannot help making the supreme effort. But we also act in like fashion. I need have no fear of not making the supreme effort—provided only that I am honest with myself and that I pay attention.

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 much as I do—that is enough, the rest follows of itself.

The authentic and pure values—truth, beauty and goodness—in the activity of a human being are the result of one and the same act, a certain application of the full attention to the object.

Teaching should have no aim but to prepare, by training the attention, for the possibility of such an act.

All the other advantages of instruction are without interest.

Studies and faith. Prayer being only attention in its pure form and studies being a form of gymnastics of the attention, each school exercise should be a refraction of spiritual life. There must be method in it. A certain way of doing a Latin prose, a certain way of tackling a problem in geometry (and not just any way) make up a system of gymnastics of the attention calculated to give it a greater aptitude for prayer.

Method for understanding images, symbols, etc. Not to try to interpret them, but to look at them till the light suddenly dawns.

Generally speaking, a method for the exercise of the intelligence, which consists of looking.

Application of this rule for the discrimination between the real and the illusory. In our sense perceptions, if we are not sure of what we see we change our position while looking, and what is real becomes evident. In the inner life, time takes the place of space. With time we are altered, and, if as we change we keep our gaze directed towards the same thing, in the end illusions are scattered and the real becomes visible. This is on condition that the attention be a looking and not an attachment.

When a struggle goes on between the will attached to some obligation and a bad desire, there is a wearing away of the energy attached to good. We have to endure the biting of the desire passively, as we do a suffering which brings home to us our wretchedness, and we have to keep our attention turned

towards the good. Then the quality of our energy is raised to a higher degree.

We must steal away the energy from our desires by taking away from them their temporal orientation.

Our desires are infinite in their pretensions but limited by the energy from which they proceed. That is why with the help of grace we can become their master and finally destroy them by attrition. As soon as this has been clearly understood, we have virtually conquered them, if we keep our attention in contact with this truth.

Video meliora . . . In such states, it seems as though we were thinking of the good, and in a sense we are doing so, but we are not thinking of its possibility.

It is incontestable that the void which we grasp with the pincers of contradiction is from on high, for we grasp it the better the more we sharpen our natural faculties of intelligence, will and love. The void which is from below is that into which we fall when we allow our natural faculties to become atrophied.

Experience of the transcendent: this seems contradictory, and yet the transcendent can be known only through contact since our faculties are unable to invent it.

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

We can only know one thing about God—that he is what we are

not. Our wretchedness alone is an image of this. The more we contemplate it, the more we contemplate him.

Sin is nothing else but the failure to recognize human wretchedness. It is unconscious wretchedness and for that very reason guilty wretchedness. The story of Christ is the experimental proof that human wretchedness is irreducible, that it is as great in the absolutely sinless man as in the sinner. But in him who is without sin it is enlightened . . .

The recognition of human wretchedness is difficult for whoever is rich and powerful because he is almost invincibly led to believe that he is something. It is equally difficult for the man in miserable circumstances because he is almost invincibly led to believe that the rich and powerful man is something.

It is not the fault which constitutes mortal sin, but the degree of light in the soul when the fault, whatever it may be, is accomplished.

Purity is the power to contemplate defilement.

Extreme purity can contemplate both the pure and the impure; impurity can do neither: the pure frightens it, the impure absorbs it. It has to have a mixture.

BEAUTY

Beauty is the harmony of chance and the good.

Beauty is necessity which, while remaining in conformity with its own law and with that alone, is obedient to the good.

The subject of science is the beautiful (that is to say order, proportion, harmony) in so far as it is suprasensible and necessary.

The subject of art is sensible and contingent beauty discerned through the network of chance and evil.

The beautiful in nature is a union of the sensible impression and of the sense of necessity. Things must be like that (in the first place), and, precisely, they are like that.

Beauty captivates the flesh in order to obtain permission to pass right to the soul.

Among other unions of contraries found in beauty there is that of the instantaneous and the eternal.

The beautiful is that which we can contemplate. A statue, a picture which we can gaze at for hours.

The beautiful is something on which we can fix our attention. Gregorian music. When the same things are sung for hours each day and every day, whatever falls even slightly short of supreme excellence becomes unendurable and is eliminated.

The Greeks looked at their temples. We can endure the statues in the Luxembourg because we do not look at them.

A picture such as one could place in the cell of a criminal sentenced to solitary confinement for life without it being an atrocity, on the contrary.

Only drama without movement is truly beautiful. Shakespeare's tragedies are second-class with the exception of *Lear*. Those of Racine, third-class except for *Phèdre*. Those of Corneille of the nth class.

A work of art has an author and yet, when it is perfect, it has something which is essentially anonymous about it. It imitates the anonymity of divine art. In the same way the beauty of the world proves there to be a God who is personal and impersonal at the same time and is neither the one nor the other separately.

The beautiful is a carnal attraction which keeps us at a distance and implies a renunciation. This includes the renunciation of that which is most deep-seated, the imagination. We want to eat all the other objects of desire. The beautiful is that which we desire without wishing to eat it. We desire that it should be.

We have to remain quite still and unite ourselves with that which we desire yet do not approach.

We unite ourselves to God in this way: we cannot approach him.

Distance is the soul of the beautiful.

The attitude of looking and waiting is the attitude which corresponds with the beautiful. As long as one can go on conceiving, wishing, longing, the beautiful does not appear. That is why in all beauty we find contradiction, bitterness and absence which are irreducible.

Poetry: *impossible* pain and joy. A poignant touch, nostalgia. Such is Provençal and English poetry. A joy which by reason of its unmixed purity hurts, a pain which by reason of its unmixed purity brings peace.

Beauty: a fruit which we look at without trying to seize it.

The same with an affliction which we contemplate without drawing back.

A double movement of descent: to do again, out of love, what gravity does. Is not the double movement of descent the key to all art?¹

This movement of descent, the mirror of grace, is the essence of all music. All the rest only serves to enshrine it.

The rising of the notes is a purely sensorial rising. The descent is at the same time a sensorial descent and a spiritual rising. Here we have the paradise which every being longs for: where the slope of nature makes us rise towards the good.

In everything which gives us the pure authentic feeling of beauty there really is the presence of God. There is as it were an incarnation of God in the world and it is indicated by beauty.

The beautiful is the experimental proof that the incarnation is possible.

Hence all art of the highest order is religious in essence. (That

¹ *Descendit ad inferos* . . . So, in another order, great art redeems gravity by espousing it out of love. [Editor's note.]

is what people have forgotten today.) A Gregorian melody is as powerful a witness as the death of a martyr.

If the beautiful is the real presence of God in matter and if contact with the beautiful is a sacrament in the full sense of the word, how is it that there are so many perverted aesthetes? Nero. Is it like the hunger of those who frequent black masses for the consecrated hosts? Or is it, more probably, because these people do not devote themselves to what is genuinely beautiful, but to a bad imitation? For, just as there is an art which is divine, so there is one which is demoniacal. It was no doubt the latter that Nero loved. A great deal of our art is of the devil.

A person who is passionately fond of music may quite well be a perverted person—but I should find it hard to believe this of any one who thirsted for Gregorian chanting.

We must certainly have committed crimes which have made us accursed, since we have lost all the poetry of the universe.

Art has no immediate future because all art is collective and there is no more collective life (there are only dead collections of people), and also because of this breaking of the true pact between the body and the soul. Greek art coincided with the beginning of geometry and with athleticism, the art of the Middle Ages with the craftsmen's guilds, the art of the Renaissance with the beginning of mechanics, etc. . . . Since 1914 there has been a complete cut. Even comedy is almost impossible. There is only room for satire (when was it easier to understand Juvenal?). Art will never be reborn except from amidst a general anarchy—it will be epic no doubt, because affliction will have simplified a great many things. . . . Is it therefore quite useless for you to envy Leonardo or Bach. Greatness in our times must take a different course. Moreover it can only be solitary, obscure and without an echo . . . (but without an echo, no art).