Chapter 3

God and the World

> Already before the Passion, already by the Creation, God empties himself of his divinity, abases himself, takes the form of a slave. (FLN 70)

Most of the unorthodox or anti-orthodox elements in Weil's religious thought stem from her unusual conception of the creation of the world as a *withdrawal* of God. Her lack of formal theological education left her unusually free to conceive the creation of the world in a strikingly heterodox manner as an act of abdication rather than an act of power on the part of God. This unorthodox conception of creation functions as the decisive center of her religious thinking as a whole, for it is primarily through God's voluntary abdication in creation that God is revealed as a "self-emptying" passion: a passion that is fulfilled or "finished" (John 19:30) not only through the death on the cross, but in the entire movement of abdication that comprises creation, incarnation, and crucifixion as moments of a single providential decision. On the one hand, Weil embraced the central Roman Catholic teaching that God is a trinity (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit); that God is love, and before all things God knows and loves himself; and that the immanent "friendship" that characterizes God *in se* is an infinite nearness or identity. On the other hand, Weil was by no means an orthodox trinitarian. As we shall see, Weil's God divides himself by "an infinite distance" yet remains one across the

void of this distance, united by nothing but an unconditional, unintelligible love, which is an expression of God's "madness" (*la folie propre à Dieu*) (N 262, FLN 127, IC 182–3).

Creation as Withdrawal

Before creation—a "before" we can speak of only paradoxically—God is the sole reality: the godhead is in absolute unity with itself. The world cannot in any sense be created "outside" such a self-united God, for there is no godless point wherein to create, no "outside" or place of division, and for that matter no *nihil* out of which to create. In order to create, Weil reasons, it is necessary for God to undo this perfect unity and bring into existence something that is other than God. Only the imposition of what Weil terms "an infinite distance"—reminiscent of Kierkegaard's "infinite qualitative distinction"—can achieve this. The act of creation establishes the world at an infinite distance from the Creator, which is to say, as an infinite otherness. "God has created, that is, not that He has produced something outside Himself, but that He has withdrawn Himself, permitting a part of being to be other than God" (IC 193).

God, absolute and unlimited in himself, must renounce unbounded freedom if a world determined and ordered by finite limits is to exist. Out of his omnipotence, God abdicates power with the result that his freedom is limited. God lets his hands be tied, so to speak, and he himself does the tying. "God is more hidden in creation than in incarnation. [. . .] Everything is possible for him, but everything happens as if everything were not possible for him" (N 290). Creation, which is God's withdrawal and abdication for the sake of the world, is an act of renunciation of divinity: "In creating God renounces being all. He abandons a bit of being to what is other than Himself. Creation is renunciation by love" (IC 183).

This abdication introduces a contradiction within divinity. As Weil puts it, "It is contradictory that God, who is infinite, who is all, to whom nothing is lacking, should do something that is outside himself, that is not himself, while at the same time proceeding from himself" (N 385–6). The divine abdication must be understood as a

movement of God "against" God, an assault on God by God in that it means the destruction of the divine unity: the rending of God from God (SNL 176). Yet from another point of view the movement must be understood as "for" God in that it enacts God's providential will, which is a self-rending will. In willing the creation as an object of love, God freely consents to renunciation of power and the evil that is its consequence: "This universe [. . .] is the distance put by Love between God and God. We are a point in this distance. Space, time, and the mechanism that governs matter are the distance. Everything that we call evil is only this mechanism" (WG 127).

Something is thus created that is not only *not* God, it is God's *undoing*; it comes to exist as contrary to God, which means that God suffers a real diminution: "God and all his creatures are less than God alone. God accepted this diminution. He emptied a part of his being from himself" (WG 145; N 217, 212). Weil's term for this something that is contrary to God—which issues from and enacts God's will to create—is *necessity*. Weil views the act of creation as "God chaining himself down by necessity" (N 191). Necessity is the limitation and suspension of the pure freedom of God, although that limitation is the actual consequence of the enactment of God's freedom. Necessity can come to exist only by a decision of God to withdraw himself and to institute a principle in opposition to the pure and limitless good that he is.

Several scholars have commented on the striking parallels between Weil's conception of creation and that of the Jewish kabbalistic thinker Isaac Luria (d. 1572).[1] As there is no clear evidence that Weil was aware of Luria's highly original theory of creation, we can only speculate that she may have absorbed the idea through indirect channels of exposure (perhaps via Böhme or Schelling). Although in the last years of her life Weil began to read several major Christian mystics, her antipathy to Judaism seems to have kept her away from Jewish mystical traditions.[2] In any case, whether she was aware of Luria's theory of creation or not, the conceptual problem that it purposed to solve is essentially identical to the problem Weil confronted in her theological thinking, leading her along a parallel course of reasoning.

For both Weil and Luria, who share a commitment to the idea of *creatio ex nihilo*, the problem is the *nihil* out of which God created: where did this "nothing" come from if the plenitude of God is infinite and omnipresent? In the course of commenting on Luria, Gershom Scholem summarizes the series of questions that the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* provokes: "How can there be a world if God is everywhere? If God is 'all in all,' how can there be things that are not God? How can God create the world out of nothing if there is no nothing?"[3]

By way of solution, Luria conceptualizes creation as an act of *tsimtsum*, a Hebrew word denoting "contraction," "withdrawal," "retreat"; that is, God created the world by first withdrawing or stepping back into himself to form a primordial space empty of God. This precreative movement of *tsimtsum*, the self-contraction or withdrawal of the unlimited godhead *Ein Sof*, means that God's first act was a negation or limitation of infinite divine substance: "God was compelled to make room for the world by, as it were, abandoning a region within Himself, a kind of mystical primordial space from which He withdrew in order to return to it in the act of creation and revelation" (Scholem, *Major Trends*, 261). Moreover, every new manifestation by God is preceded by a corresponding movement of self-concentration and retraction in which God "pulls himself back" before sending forth the rays of his light in the creative movement of Genesis; "but for this perpetual tension, this ever repeated effort with which God holds Himself back, nothing in the world would exist." For Luria, the withdrawal of God is not a mythical idea but a conceptualization of an actual, pre-original *event* that must necessarily have occurred. Luria's conception of *tsimtsum* is intended to provide an explanation for the actual existence of something other than God, according to Scholem, thus it constitutes—remarkably enough—"the only serious attempt ever made to give substance to the idea of Creation out of Nothing" (261–2).

In strong contrast with Luria, Thomas Aquinas's reflections on the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* argue that in the act of creation (as opposed to change) there is first of all "no thing," and then the whole substance of a thing is produced; he makes clear that the "nothing" of

ex nihilo is not itself a thing, not a material cause, but is simply "not something," and the thing that is created is "not made from anything."[4] Created being is not first "nonexistent" and then existent; rather, it comes into existence *de novo* and that is all. But it is hard to see how Thomas's understanding of creation is not in some sense—a sense left unargued and unaccounted for—a *creatio ex Deo*, given that "before" the act of creation God is the sole subsistent being.

In subsequent tradition, Christian theology of creation has been heavily patterned on Thomas's thinking, sustaining his idea that the world as created being subsists in the power of the being of God, *ipsum esse*, and that God continues to govern creation with absolute power. Weil's concept of creation, quite purposefully and intentionally, reverses this understanding with an alternate deeply dialectical view: "Because he is the creator," she insists, "God is not all-powerful. Creation is abdication. But he is all-powerful in this sense, that his abdication is voluntary. He knows its effects, and wills them" (FLN 120). God, in giving rise to existence as a realm other than himself, at an infinite distance from himself, has forfeited omnipotence. "God's attributes do not overflow one another. They all have the same limit, the abdication that is God's creative act" (FLN 125). Thus God has abdicated the power of being God alone, a perfect unbroken unity, unfallen and absolutely free of evil. This means that the act of creation, for Weil, is a radical act of self-transfiguration of God by God: creation is already the crucifixion or passion of God.

The withdrawal of God, his abdication to necessity, results in the rending of God—a rending that is for Weil the theological origin of evil. God the Father and God the Son are torn infinitely asunder: "Between the terms united by the relation of divine love there is more than nearness; there is infinite nearness or identity. But through the Creation, the Incarnation, and the Passion, there is also infinite distance. The interposed density of all space and time sets infinite distance between God and God (SNL 176, N 428–9). As a consequence of the Father's withdrawal in creation, and the Son's corresponding acts of descent into flesh and abandonment in crucifixion, an "infinite distance" is interposed between the Father

and the Son. Even the incarnation is simply a figure of the creation, recapitulating how God denied himself (*Dieu s'est nié*) and "abdicated by giving us existence" (WG 145, FLN 297). The incarnation does not bring God closer to us but increases the distance: God has placed the cross between himself and us: "The Cross is harder to bridge than the distance between heaven and earth. It is this distance" (N 298). The rending of God by infinite distance actually inaugurates the distinction between good and evil, for "evil is nothing else but the distance between God and the creature" (N 588). This distance is a negation of good, hence the dialectical opposite of good—evil—by definition; for God, who is the good, has withdrawn himself to make it possible.

Just as *tsimtsum* in Luria's thought distinguishes and concentrates the intradivine sternness within *Ein Sof* until it becomes recognizable as *din*, divine judgment or justice—an act of negation and limitation in which the root of all evil is already latent (Scholem, *Major Trends*, 261–3)—so Weil's God elects to withdraw himself to give place to *necessity*, which is the root of all evil owing to the infinite distance that separates the necessary from the good, the creature from God. "Necessity is the screen placed between God and us so that we can *be*" (N 402). The world is governed by necessity because God, in order to create, had to give the world over to a concatenation of determinations and limits whose boundaries judge one another in a Heraclitean sense: "Like the oscillations of the waves, the whole succession of events here below, made up, as they are, of variations in balance mutually compensated—births and destructions, waxings and wanings—render one keenly alive to the invisible presence of a plexus of limits without substance and yet harder than any diamond" (NR 288). Every limit that particularizes the order of the world establishes a *yes* and a *no*, a *good* and an *evil*, opposites that subsist in necessary mutual correlation. A real world governed by such limits cannot but entail the existence of evil: "God alone is pure good. Creation being both God and other than God is essentially good and evil" (N 414).

But Weil's statements concerning the evil of the created world must be balanced within the more comprehensive understanding that

"the possibility of evil is a good" (N 112). As will become clearer in the chapters that follow, the world is neither good nor evil intrinsically, but is both at once dialectically. The infinite distance of the world from God is evil, but inasmuch as it actualizes the will of God to create, giving himself to a godless other, it is good. The evil within creation is a dialectical vehicle of good. From this perspective, the world is ambiguously good or evil according to the aspect of its relationship to redemptive grace: "evil" is the point of view of grace withheld, "good" is the point of view of grace abounding. Although in a relative sense evil is always evil, in an ultimate sense, evil as such is entirely good.

The Absent God

The conceptual beauty of Luria's *tsimtsum* theory is that it establishes an absolute distinction (an "infinite distance" in Weil's language) of creatures from God, thus prohibiting any immediate pantheistic grounding of finite beings in the being or substance of God. Every being acquires a reality of its own, Scholem observes, which "guards it against the danger of dissolution into the non-individual being of the divine 'all in all.'" The creature is real as that which is created out of nothing, not out of God, and is therefore substantially other to God—truly distinct and independent from God, or "outside" of God, occupying the space left by the divine self-retraction. By the same token, *tsimtsum* is the deepest symbol of divine exile that could be thought of, since God is in effect exiled into himself (*Major Trends*, 261–2).

In a profoundly parallel respect, the negative ground of creation in Weil's thought establishes a pure distinction between God and creature. This takes the form of an inverse dialectical relation between God and world. Weil's many contradictory statements about God cannot make sense until this negative dialectic is recognized and taken into account. In willing the existence of an actual "other," God must necessarily withdraw, taking an infinite distance from that other: "God has only been able to create by hiding himself. Otherwise there would only be he" (N 230). The withdrawal of God engenders

the space of creation that is a "nothing"—the actual presence of the absence of God—for the presence of void is necessary in order that the world have need of God, and that presupposes evil (N 148). "It is impossible for God to be present in creation except in the form of absence" (N 419); only God's presence in the Eucharist is an exception (N 593). God has withdrawn, the good is absent, and precisely that absence or void is present to the creature as the purest negative revelation of God: "Pure goodness is not anywhere to be found in [this world . . .]. The existence of evil here below, far from disproving the reality of God, is the very thing that reveals him in his truth" (WG 145).

As the creature can only exist by the grace of God's absence, God respects the requirement of the negative relation and does not tamper with his creature in its otherness. God abandons creatureliness to necessity, a necessity embodied in the absence of God, the absence of good: "The distance between the necessary and the good is the selfsame distance separating the creature from the creator. God, with respect to creation, in so far as perfectly present and in so far as perfectly absent" (N 379). Where the world exists in space and time, God is necessarily absent. This absence of God is the condition of the world's existence, and remains ever present to the world as its negative foundation. That the world is created *ex nihilo* means that, by virtue of its origin, the world is *a-theistic*, without God, bereft of God. The world is negative from the point of view of God, and God is negative from the point of view of the world.

> Everything is upside down in our world of sin. What is negative appears as positive, and what is authentically and fully positive appears to us as negative. This constitutes a criterion. What appears to us as positive never is, cannot possibly be, positive. Only what appears to us as negative is authentically positive. (N 433)

Weil alternates language of positive and/or negative, of presence and/or absence to a paradoxical effect in speaking of this fundamental dialectical relation between God and world.

For example, the presence of the absence of God in the material substance of the world can be expressed in terms of either *presence* or *absence* dialectically, or both at once paradoxically. "God, in so far as he exists, is the universe composed of phenomena. God, in so far as he is other than the universe, is other than existence" (N 328); the universe both manifests and hides God (N 149). As in the case of any true paradox, neither opposite negates the other; each remains paradoxically true in relation to its opposite, and the comprehensive truth is expressed in their dialectical coincidence and correlation. Thus Weil's conception of creation as a withdrawal of God provides the theoretical grounds for what can be called her "religious atheism," or even her atheistic mysticism. In the dialectical terms of Weil's thinking, experience of the world negatively reveals the reality of the absent God. Precisely insofar as the things of the world mark the absence of good and the reign of necessity, they signify and make palpable the negative ground of creation: the withdrawal and abdication of God. The very existence of the world is the abiding proof and sacramental presence of God's abdication.

This makes possible for Weil an experience of intense negative mysticism and negative sacramentalism. For, although contact with human creatures is given to us through the sense of presence, "contact with God is given to us through the sense of absence"; compared with this divine absence, presence becomes "more absent than absence" (N 239–40). As classically defined by Augustine, a sacrament is the visible sign of an invisible grace. But while sacramental tradition understands the relation between visible form and invisible grace as a positive continuity between degrees of good, Weil's thinking renders the visible–invisible relationship inverse or dialectical. The visible form of the world renders sensible the *absence* of God as the form of his hidden presence; absence per se reveals the visible and palpable form of his grace. It is in this vein that Weil can write in a tone of mystical rapture of God's "everlasting absence," and can insist that consciousness of the absence of God is our most powerful experience of grace in the world:

> The occasional contacts resulting from inspiration between [God's] creatures and Him are less miraculous than is his everlasting absence, and constitute a less marvelous proof of his love. God's absence is the most marvelous testimony of perfect love, and that is why pure necessity, the necessity that is manifestly so different from good, is so beautiful [. . .]. Everything that makes this absence manifest is beautiful. (N 403)

Divine absence is the very substance of God's love for the creature. That God consents to this infinite distance from himself, to letting necessity reign so that the creature may *be*, is a gift of radical otherness, of "godlessness"—even of evil—to the creature. If "evil is nothing else but the distance between God and the creature" (N 588), then evil is the primary condition of creation: no world can exist without a fall into evil. For God, to love something truly other, something infinitely distant from himself, is to let it exist abandoned to necessity, and this act of abandonment is the actual embodiment of his love for the creature. It is only by willing absence of good, thus a voluntary "fall" into evil, that God can reveal his goodness to a created world: "The apparent absence of God in this world is the actual reality of God [. . .]. This world, in so far as it is completely empty of God, is God himself. Necessity, in so far as it is absolutely other than Good, is Good itself" (N 424).

"Original Sin"

The withdrawal of God not only opens a space for the possibility of evil, but actually constitutes that space as qualified by evil, for by definition evil is a condition of separation from God, who is the good. In creating the world, "God renounces—in a sense—being everything. This is the origin of evil" (N 193). Evil is born when God, in the act of creation, renounces being the only reality in order that a world exist ruled by necessity and the conditional limits of existence. Thus evil is the unavoidable concomitant of God's decision to create; it inheres necessarily in the constitution of

existence per se. Existence projects evil as its inescapable shadow and nemesis, for the consuming shadow of nonexistence inheres in every relative good of existence. From this perspective all of creation is shot through with evil, an evil that takes the form of violence or suffering or both.

Can it be said, then, that God *wills* evil when he creates? The answer given by Weil's theology is dialectical: yes and no. We must always be mindful that God's willing of evil is not an act of power but a consent to withdraw and become powerless in relation to necessity: "Everything that occurs, without any distinction, is permitted, that is to say consented to, by God. But this consent is an abdication. So it is not the exercise of a kingly power [. . .]. God's will is to abdicate in favour of necessity" (FLN 296). For love of an other, the created order of the world, God wills the *nihil*, the nonbeing, the evil that necessarily attends a created existence. Inasmuch as God positively wills the existence of the world and everything that happens in it, he concomitantly wills evil, for "nothing happens here below unless He wills it" (FLN 136). And yet this willing of evil is "innocent" in a higher sense, for the alpha and omega of the world's evil aspect is a creative and a redemptive good. We are called to love evil not from the natural standpoint of a creature but from a supernatural perspective: "We must love evil as such" (N 431) because the goodness of God abdicates to it and in that sense fully wills it. Because we are called above all else to love the divine will, we must love the will of God not apart from evil or dissociated from evil but *through* evil as such. Recognition of the true God allows the horror of evil to subsist, and even renders it more intense; while one has a horror of this evil, at the same time one loves it as emanating from the will of God (N 505, 431). "We have to love God through evil as such: to love God through the evil we hate, while hating this evil: to love God as the author of the evil that we are actually hating" (N 340 = GG 75). As God is the author of evil, to love God's will is to love that authorship, and that means to love evil in an ultimate sense as providential. For, although the good is never a product of evil, evil is in a sense produced by good: "God allows evil to exist. Love consents to be an object of hatred" (FLN 300).

All evil in nature, including human nature, is associated with the creative will of God. Sin, in Weil's unorthodox theology, is that portion of natural evil that has its source in the willing of a created will. Such evil is "voluntary" in that it is actively willed by the creaturely will pursuing its own objects, quite apart from knowledge of or regard for the will of God for it. This will is the locus of the creature's otherness and separation from God. In creating the creaturely will, God has created this otherness, this contrariness to himself of voluntary evil, or sin (FLN 211). "Creation and original sin are only two aspects, which are different for us, of a single act of abdication by God" (FLN 140). The possibility of sin is attached not to freedom, but to existence—a separate existence (N 192). To will as a human creature is to will as a separate and distinct existent, alienated from the will of God—a separateness of will that as such cannot be distinguished from sin.

Original sin is a sin committed *before* any sin; it is outside time, transcendental (N 192). Weil is therefore consistent in her deep heterodoxy when she situates the fall of Adam outside the beginning of time, before existence has come into being. The original sin of Adam did not erupt in breaking a taboo or commandment; this traditional account, Weil maintains, is only a "translation of the real sin into human language"; rather, to her thinking, "time proceeded out of the sin and did not precede it" (FLN 127).

> Adam before the Fall is inconceivable; one can only conceive a causal, non-temporal anteriority between his creation, his sin and his punishment. The whole of humanity has sinned in a non-temporal sense by possessing its own will. It has been created with a will of its own and the vocation to renounce it [. . .]. The order from God was an ordeal proving that Adam had a will of his own. He was in a state of sin in view of the fact that he had a will of his own. It is clear that there never was a period of time in which he was in a state of innocence. (N 268)

A sin that is conceived as coeval with the creation of the will is necessarily a sin for which God himself is responsible. "If we are born

in sin, it is evident that birth constitutes a sin" (FLN 303). Just as God, in willing abdication, wills the evil inherent in creation, he likewise wills the "original sin" of the human will; but again, God wills it "innocently" inasmuch as sin is a dialectical means toward an ultimate revelation of good, a good that cannot actually be manifested qua good otherwise than indirectly, through the contradictory actualites of evil and sin.

According to Weil's nontemporal understanding of original sin, there is no pristine age of innocence before the fall. Creation as such is identified with fall, that is, creation brings into existence an "ungodly" will, which qua ungodly is nonetheless willed by God: "God undoes the harmony of which He is constituted in creating man—a creature that prefers itself to God" (N 560). When God creates the human will, God not only permits or consents to, but actually *enacts* the fall, and in that sense God's own innocence "falls" with that fall. While humanity falls upon being created with a will, God "falls" preveniently as the original provenance of that fallen will.

Challenging traditional Christian assumptions on this point, Weil questions, "Why should one be reluctant to think that God willed Adam's sin?" (N 235), for it is in view of redemption that the advent of sin is willed by God.[5] Only consciousness of the evil of evil, the sin of sin, can reveal to humanity the absolute desirability of good. The serpent in the garden promises Eve, "You will be like God, knowing good and evil" (Gen. 3:5), and Weil reads the serpent's promise positively, as did Hegel, averring that only in view of redemption does this likeness to God become strictly true, and the fall into sin is a condition of becoming "like God," of becoming perfect as the heavenly Father is perfect (Matt. 5:48).

> God has created man with the capacity of becoming like unto Himself, but in a state of sin consented to by man. The Fall expresses this essential character of consent attached to sin. Sin lies within man, not outside him; it comes from man; but man has been created such. Man has been created such, and yet God is innocent. This innocence is not harder to conceive after this fashion than is, for those who represent to themselves the story

> as unfolding itself in time, God's innocence at the moment when Adam disobeys. For everything that takes place is the will of God. (N 309)

So God consents preveniently to humanity's constitutive predisposition to sin, and does so in order that grace abound, for "where sin increased, there grace abounded all the more" (Rom. 5:20). But this is not to make light of the radical negativity of sin—which is a voluntary evil. It is *real* sin that makes possible *real* grace. Real sin is accompanied by guilt and resentment against oneself, against one's existence, and ultimately against one's creator. This is the ground of what Nietzsche came to understand as *ressentiment* and what Dostoevsky portrayed in the self-rending agonies of Ivan Karamazov. Viewed theologically, the deep problem of sin is that to pardon oneself or one's neighbor is not a sufficient remedy for voluntary evil: a human pardon does not get to the ontological root of the resentment because ultimately sin is not a merely human guilt. To forgive humanly cannot touch the primordial origin and provenance of the wound of sin. The guilt is ours *in God*, and equally it is God's *in us*. This is why, according to Weil, "one can only excuse men for evil by accusing God of it" (FLN 94). "We lay the blame for our failures and shortcomings upon things and creatures other than us. In the end, we are accusing God. If we forgive God for our sins, he forgives us for them. All our debts are to God, and God is also our only debtor" (FLN 210). Having created us, he owes us everything (FLN 177).[6]

Only a forgiveness directed toward God, the ultimate source of human existence and fallibility, can redress and heal the primordial wound of the fallen will. There is no ultimate release from our resentment over sin unless we can forgive God for our existence: "The most difficult remission of debts consists in forgiving God for our sins. The sense of guilt is accompanied by a sort of rancour and hatred against the Good, against God, and it is the effect of this mechanism that makes crime harmful to the soul" (FLN 140). Without recourse to ultimate forgiveness, resentment eats the soul, a rancor bitterly feeding on itself, a self-consuming negativity that is given powerful

expression in the words of Satan in Milton's *Paradise Lost*: "myself am Hell."

Since the guilt of the human creature and the guilt of the Creator are the fruits of reciprocal "crimes," they require a reciprocal forgiveness, a mutual redemption: "God's great crime against us is to have created us, is the fact of our existence. And our existence is our great crime against God. When we forgive God for our existence, he forgives us for existing" (FLN 263). To forgive God for his abdication in creating us is at the same time to consent to exist as he created us, outside his kingdom (NR 277). To pardon God for our sins is to embrace God's will that we exist, for our sin is our existence apart from God. "God pardons us for existing so soon as we are willing to consent to exist only in so far as God wills our existence" (FLN 263). In forgiving God, then, we are simultaneously consenting to a "repetition" of creation qua fall; we consent to creation by saying *yes* to God's abdication of power. This enactment cuts to the root of sin:

> One can only excuse men for evil by accusing God of it. If one accuses God one forgives, because God is the Good. Amid the multitude of those who seem to owe us something, God is our only real debtor [. . .]. Sin is an offense offered to God from resentment at the debts he owes and does not pay us. By forgiving God we cut the root of sin in ourselves. At the bottom of every sin there is anger against God. If we forgive God for his crime against us, which is to have made us finite creatures, He will forgive our crime against him, which is that we are finite creatures. (FLN 94–5)

Human forgiveness in Weil's thought is an *imitatio Dei:* when we blame God for our afflictions, for all the evil we give and receive, we are imitating the action of God in Christ when God accuses himself of this very guilt through the mouth of his Son: "Just as God, through the mouth of Christ, accused himself of the Passion, so we should accuse God for every human affliction. And just as God replies with silence, so we should reply with silence" (FLN 94, 83). To reply with silence means to consent, not to refuse or rebel. It is to love

God's will even though caught in the teeth of evil because God's will is ultimately the good, the sole source of the beauty and wisdom that pervades all things. As all that we love is received from this will, so all that we hate must be returned to it, offered back to it in the form of sacrificial consent.

All crime is a transference of evil from the one who acts to the one who suffers the action. The one who suffers evil wants to be relieved of it in turn by putting it elsewhere (FLN 154). Such transference does not diminish evil but multiplies it. Thus every evil enacted in the world circulates and multiplies, passed from one to another, until it alights on a perfectly pure being who suffers it in completeness and thereby destroys it (FLN 153). To be absolutely just, one must be able to suffer injustice without it doing one any harm, and God alone, pure love, is able to do that (N 627). We must offer our hatred to God; we must leave it to God to avenge the offenses we receive, so that the hatred in us is burnt up by contact with pure good (FLN 331). For it is only through contact with God, the Just One, that evil falls into its own proper nothingness.

> Where, then, are we to put the evil? We have to transfer it from the impure part to the pure part of ourselves—if we have such a thing in us, even though it be only a speck—thus transmuting it into pure suffering. The crime that is latent in us we must inflict on ourselves. In this way, however, it would not take us long to sully our own speck of inward purity if we did not renew it by contact with an unchanging purity placed outside us, beyond all possible reach. Patience consists in not transforming suffering into crime, and that in itself is enough to transform crime into suffering. (N 624–5) / The false God changes suffering into violence. The true God changes violence into suffering. (N 507 = GG 72).

The alienation from goodness that we experience in the evil and fallenness of the world is an alienation that God has already suffered in himself, accused himself of, and forgiven himself for. We can only reenact the cry of God within himself, unto himself: "'Father,

why. . .?' God accuses himself of Christ's passion. 'He that delivered me unto thee hath the greater sin. . .'" (FLN 94; see John 19:11). In Weil's radical interpretation of this gospel passage, the one who "delivers" Christ is not Judas, or the Jews, or the Romans, or human sin, but God himself, and *God* therefore has the greater sin. God has delivered himself into evil; God is guilty of the blood of the innocent; and God is also the innocent who has consented to this crime against himself.

The satisfaction that we seek by throwing the offense of evil away from ourselves in sin consists, for God, in submitting to it (FLN 154). Human beings have the choice of being either willing or unwilling participants in this sacrifice, the crucifixion of God, which has been enacted already once and for all. Our vocation is to transcend evil by recognizing evil for what it is, consenting to it as emanating from the will of God (N 505), and suffering it as a participation in the cross. This is why, Weil asserts, "One should ask for circumstances such that all the evil that one does falls solely and directly upon oneself. That is the Cross" (N 418, 414). Thus we may give or refuse consent, but the will to fallenness is God's, and that will is done on earth as it is in heaven. Even in the light of divine grace, there is no escape from or consolation for the suffering caused by evil: "It is impossible to contemplate without terror the extent of the evil which man is capable of causing and undergoing. How are we to believe that it is possible to find a compensation, a possible consolation for this evil, when because of it God suffered crucifixion?" (N 564, 227).

The Self-Emptying God

To grasp Weil's understanding of creation in its full implications is to grasp that finally all suffering is God's suffering. God, for love, has consented to and undergone all possible suffering preveniently in an infinite degree. The God who loves with a purity beyond comprehension likewise suffers with a purity beyond intimation. To believe that God "so loved the world that he gave his only Son" (John 3:16, FLN 113) is to believe that God himself suffers

ultimately (FLN 82). This is why, Weil writes, "None goes to God the creator and almighty without passing through God EMPTIED OF HIS DIVINITY (*VIDÉ DE SA DIVINITÉ*). [. . .] We have to *empty God of his divinity* in order to love him" (N 283–4 = OC 6.2.393–4, emphasis in original).[7]

Here Weil's scriptural ground is the early Christian hymn embedded in Paul's letter to the Philippians, which she quotes in her notebooks in the original Greek (N 208). The hymn recapitulates the kenosis of Christ, "who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant [or slave], being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross" (Phil. 2:6–8). But her theological construal of the hymn is a free one: her conception of creation as abdication links Father and Son in mutual kenosis. Not only the Son but also the Father "did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped," for the Father, provenance of all creation, humbled himself and became obedient. Thus, in advance of the passion of Christ on the cross, "creation itself is already a Passion" (N 560): the passion of the Father. It is not only Jesus Christ but the Creator who empties himself and becomes a servant: "God possesses power of life and death, but he voids himself of both and is made a slave" (FLN 258, 70). This crucial theological point is summed up in Weil's affirmation that even God's power is also obedience (FLN 338), a statement that refers not to Christ's obedience, but to God the Father's obedience in abdication to necessity: "God has abandoned God. God has emptied himself. This means that both the Creation and the Incarnation are included within the Passion" (FLN 120 = OC 6.4.152).

Clearly such a claim radically inverts the traditional Christian conception of God as omnipotent ruler of heaven and earth, and Weil was well aware that her kenotic conception of the Creator runs against the grain of established doctrine. This was precisely her intention, and at this crucial point she was resolutely non-Catholic. She held that the Roman Catholic conception of God, centered on God's absolutely sovereign omnipotence, was a corruption foreign to

authentic Christianity, introduced into it by the influence of imperial Rome's adulation of power. When the Christian religion was officially adopted by the Roman Empire, "God was turned into a counterpart of the Emperor" (NR 271). Ever since, the Roman spirit of imperialism and domination has retained its hold over the Church; hence she believed that much of Catholic mysticism (for example, Marguerite Porete, Meister Eckhart, John of the Cross) was aimed at purifying faith of this corrupt personification—"the infinite equivalent of a Roman slaveholder"—in order to reveal the invariable universal justice of an impersonal God of providence worthy of love: "In the mystic traditions of the Catholic Church, one of the main objects of the purifications through which the soul has to pass is the total abolition of the Roman conception of God. So long as a trace of it remains, union through love is impossible" (NR 277–9).

What is to be gained theologically by viewing the Creator as "powerless" vis-à-vis necessity—a necessity that is equivalent to the order of the world, indeed, is the world itself? What value is there in thinking of God, the omnipotent primordial reality, as impotent in relation to creation? From Weil's viewpoint, the gain is *love*. For the key duality in Weil's thought is the universal dichotomy between power (force, gravity) and love: it distinguishes nature from grace; necessity from the good. If it were true that God ruled the world with sovereign power, then God could be thought of as a sort of supernatural tyrant—much in the way that Dostoevsky's character Ivan Karamazov judges God to be tyrannical—because God does not respond to the horrors of evil and the sufferings of the innocent on earth. Having read *The Brothers Karamazov* in French translation, Weil at several points expounds her theodicy as a critique of Ivan Karamazov's stance (N 283, 287, 288, 293, 432–3). Ivan harbors bitter resentment against God in the face of innocent suffering because he views God as a transcendent power: a sovereign will removed from the world and unaffected by its pain. His God is inexplicably unwilling to intervene where he is conceived to have infinite power to do so: "to rebel against God because of man's affliction, after the manner of [. . .] Ivan Karamazov, is to represent God to oneself as a sovereign" (N 283).

But in Weil's analysis, it is our own longing for power, for infinite being and control, that tempts us to imagine God as possessing this unlimited power to intervene arbitrarily in time, to manipulate particular events, to alter circumstances much as a monarch or dictator would do, though infinitely more effectively. We picture God this way, as reigning in almighty power, Weil points out, because "it is very much easier to place oneself in imagination in the position of God the Creator than it is in that of Christ crucified" (N 411). Such an image of God reigning in power contradicts the God who has emptied himself of divinity and abdicated to necessity in order to establish the existence of an absolute other. God does not exercise his all-powerfulness, for if he did, neither we nor anything else would exist (N 191). Limitation is the evidence that God loves us (N 613).

But the human creature, suffering the limits of existence, is inclined to refuse this powerlessness of God because of its own craving for power and being. It is prone to imagine God in the image of its own will; it longs for a divinity extrapolated from earthly images of power and sovereignty. "To represent God to oneself as all-powerful is to represent oneself to oneself in a state of false divinity. Man is only able to be one with God by uniting himself to God STRIPPED (*DÉPOUILLÉ*) OF HIS DIVINITY (EMPTIED of his divinity)" (N 284, emphasis in original). Yet it is God-in-his-powerlessness who will judge us, who will be the arbiter between God-in-his-power and us (N 542).

At this point, for Weil, trinitarianism is essential for understanding God as love. When God is conceived as One rather than Three, the "fall" into evil of the Father who abdicates to necessity is not redeemed by the sacrificial suffering of the Son; rather, God the Creator reigns in the image of a transcendent power without the descending and self-emptying movement of divine love incarnate in Christ. God conceived as One, purely one, is an *object* (N 264); whereas God who is Three is pure relation, pure *mediation* (IC 176, FLN 87), the self-abdicating movement of love outside itself while remaining itself. The Father does what is necessary to create; the Son, through voluntary suffering, redeems the necessary as the good. In

these reciprocal acts of Father and Son, the dialectic of necessity and the good is maximized to the extreme and reconciled in a transcendent harmony. Accordingly she can write, "the Trinity implies the incarnation—and *consequently* the Creation" (FLN 130).

Because our status as created beings is as nothing, we can only imitate God in his powerlessness, not in his power. We become separated from God by desiring to share in his divinity "through power and not through love, through being and not through non-being" (N 539). Hence our spiritual rebirth, our ability to love unconditionally in the void, depends on our acceptance of and consent to "*God all-powerless*" (*Dieu impuissant*) (N 284 = OC 6.2.395). It is not the God of power but the God who made himself a slave who educates us concerning the chasm between creator and creature, between necessity and good. Certain of Weil's affirmations sound startlingly like Luther expounding his *theologia crucis*, although Weil knew little of Luther: "So that we may feel the distance between us and God, God has to be a crucified slave. For we can only feel this distance looking downward" (N 411).

We should clarify that when Weil uses the expression "stripped" or "emptied" of divinity she does not mean that the Creator or Christ ceases to be *divine*, but that God abdicates the *power* and *prestige* of divinity, which are not the locus of his essential divinity. God's essential divinity consists in not power but love. God the Father voluntarily empties himself of omnipotence in the act of creation; on the cross, Christ the Son is stripped of power and social prestige. Both acts of abdication reveal true divinity under the form of love, and this kenotic enactment is the whole meaning of incarnation and crucifixion for Weil. God who is essentially love not power—who is love *sacrificing* power—cannot intervene because love bids that an infinite distance be allowed to exist *in extremis*.

> God here below cannot be anything else but absolutely powerless. For all limited power is a union of power and powerlessness, but in accordance with a unity belonging to this world; whereas in God the union of these opposites is found in

> its very highest degree. (N 542) / God has to [cross] the infinite thickness of time and space. Love is here, if anything, greater. It is as great as the distance that has to be crossed. (N 428)

Weil's view of creation means that God has abdicated power to act within the world, from the beginning of the world, for the love of the world. This love consists of desiring simply that a thing should be and not wanting to tamper with it: "God loves us in this way; otherwise we should immediately cease to exist" (N 541–2). "He stays far away from us, because if He approached He would cause us to disappear" (FLN 142).

Given that evil is defined by Weil as distance from God, to eliminate evil would be to eliminate creation and creature. This means that with respect to innerworldly power—or capacity to act within the world—the creature is actually more powerful than the creator (FLN 129, 312). Having an essentially negative (dialectical) relation to existence, God can bring about effects in the world only indirectly by inspiring human desire to action. Grace is God's means of "begging" for action from a human being and "waiting" for our consent and obedience, given that he cannot directly alter the machinations of necessity.

> One must approve God's creative abdication and be glad to be oneself a creature, a secondary cause, with the right to perform actions in this world. A victim of misfortune is lying in the road, half dead of hunger. God pities him but cannot send him bread. But I am here and luckily I am not God; I can give him a piece of bread. It is my one point of superiority over God. "I was hungry and you fed me." God can beg for bread for the afflicted, but he cannot give it to them. (FLN 312)

This impotence vis-à-vis necessity is the Father's cross to bear, a cross that he shares with the Son, suffering equally, though differently, every moment of the world's existence. That there is a God in heaven, that God is pure love, does not change anything on earth: it does not remove evil or eliminate the necessity to suffer; on the contrary, Weil

asserts, Christ was killed out of rage because he was powerless: "because he was only God" (N 221).

From Weil's perspective, Ivan Karamazov is not wrong to feel overwhelmed and broken by the world's evil, for Christ himself was humanly broken by it. Ivan is not simply failing to see the good in the world that would supposedly overbalance this evil, as optimistic theodicies attempt to argue. The world is truly as evil as Ivan finds it, and there is no greater good anywhere in the world to balance it. The world cannot contain such good, since the world exists by virtue of necessity, which imposes conditions and limits that engender evil. But Ivan is mistaken, Weil insists, in pitting the world's evil against the goodness of providence. For the good that alone is capable of balancing evil in the world is a good that lies "outside" the world. It is a *nonexistent* but nonetheless real, knowable, experienceable good, and it is a good that is actually known *through* the world's evil—even by the God who is crucified. The world's existence manifests the reality of good negatively—dialectically—through the palpability of its absence, and therein the world is a negative sign pointing to good, incarnating it in the form of absence, void, and longing in the void.

In the novel, Ivan claims that he accepts God's wisdom and the inscrutability of his purpose, but refuses to accept the world: "it is not God that I do not accept, but the world he has created." But this stance is disingenuous, an example of what Weil calls illegitimate contradiction. Can the two be separated this way, given that the providence that creates the world is the principal act of God's wisdom and purpose? Indeed, providence is nothing other than God's will, and the will of God and the order of world are so indistinguishable in providence that to reject one is to reject the other. Ivan himself recognizes that his unwillingness to accept the world because of innocent suffering is related to the problem of ultimate forgiveness. One who deigns to forgive the sins and evils of the world must have an absolute *right* to forgive them. When Ivan demands, "Is there in the whole world a being who could or would have the right to forgive?," his brother Alyosha answers precisely as does Weil's theology: "There is such a being, and he can forgive everyone and everything and *for everything*, because he gave his

innocent blood for all and for everything. You've forgotten him, but it is on him that the edifice is founded" (Dostoevsky, *Brothers Karamazov*, 125, 287, 288).

To forgive is to exercise a dreadful responsibility, an ultimate decision to override justice with love. Ivan is torn between his resentment toward God on the one hand, and his powerful reverence for the way of freedom and love offered by Christ on the other. He must either hate God, the world's providence, as a cruel tyrant, or else accept Christ as having a real, actual, effectual "right" to forgive and accept what God has done. Ivan's professed "acceptance" of God is really an accusation, an attribution of responsibility: there *is* a God, and it is God who permits innocent suffering in the world. God is absolutely guilty of this crime. Where Ivan struggles is in relation to Christ: will he grant Christ the right to forgive God?

Scandalized by God's renunciation of power for love, Ivan rebels against the kenotic will of God. Only a renunciation of his own, in imitation of God's renunciation, would enable Ivan to accept the world and become, in effect, a co-creator. As it is, Weil calls his rebellion an "abscess on the world" (a Stoic metaphor she borrows from Marcus Aurelius) since "not to accept some event taking place in the world is to desire that the world should not exist" (N 297). Ivan's urgent desire to escape this dilemma is nonetheless a sign of the good in him, for in general "the desire to escape from duality is the sign of love in us" (IC 110). Love for good is evident in Ivan's spiritual agony, including the resentment and betrayal embodied in his poem of the Grand Inquisitor.[8]

It is God's love that lets the world and creatures exist in a condition separated from good. "The dereliction in which God leaves us is his own way of caressing us. Time, which is our one misery, is the very touch of his hand. It is the abdication by which he lets us exist" (FLN 142). Though this love is incomprehensible to the creature, who is entrapped in time, it is love that prevents God from willing to eliminate evil, for "love is on the side of non-action, of powerlessness" (N 541). Because God *will* not prevent evil, in a real sense he *cannot* prevent it; he cannot because his power is limited by his will: "The limits of will and power are the same in God. He wills

only what He can, and if He is unable to do more it is because He does not will to be able to do more" (FLN 124). The love of God consents absolutely to the powerlessness of God. "God, out of love, limits his power [. . .]. God is at the same time absolute power and absolute powerlessness" (N 541–2). As it is love that renders God powerless vis-à-vis the creature, so it is by means of love alone, not power, that God crosses the infinite distance to the creature, transfiguring the abyss of evil by the light of love, without eliminating or altering the conditions of necessity.

This means that God's abdication to necessity—and in that sense his willing of evil—is the opposite of tyranny or indifference, being a decision of suffering love. "God's power tends toward annihilation, but his love produces salvation. This opposition between the power and the love of God represents supreme suffering in God" (N 542). The renunciation that empties God of his divinity is the Father's own sacrificial agony; it constitutes the crucifixion not only of the Son in the world but of the Father "outside" the world, and so it constitutes the sacrifice of his omnipotence, his very divinity, on the cross of created time and space.

Crucifixion as Redemption

For God, to create is concomitantly to will the advent of evil, since it is evil that "causes the distinction," and makes it impossible for God to be all (N 126). This is an evil for which God is ultimately responsible and in which we, as creatures, participate. Here a deep question must arise, which Weil herself poses, concerning the good of creation: "Why is creation a good, seeing that it is inseparably bound up with evil? In what sense is it a good that I should exist, and not God alone?" (N 191). Why the world, given that evil in the form of an inflexible necessity attends it? For the world as such is the reign of necessity, as Weil reiterates time and again: "There is an infinite distance between the nature of the necessary and that of the good. Our world is the kingdom of necessity" (IC 142).

God, in creating, has willed a "fall" from himself—undoing the perfect good of himself, inaugurating an alien reality, a conjunction

of good and evil that is dialectically evil in relation to God. What can explain this paradox, that God would give existence to the world in full knowledge of the concomitant descent into evil? For a resolution, Weil resorts to a theological response that can make sense only in the light of grace, since it transcends human understanding: "Insoluble contradictions have a supernatural solution. The solution of this one is the Passion. But it is truly a solution only for those souls who are entirely possessed by the light of grace. For the others, the contradiction endures" (IC 142). We can only grasp the "solution" to the paradox when we consent to the existence of the world, including its evil, as being necessary for God.

God is perfect good, but it is intrinsic to the perfection of this good that it reveals itself by passing into its pure opposite, evil. In this sense, God is essentially a God of absolute passion: God is the one who rends himself with infinite distance, and—paradoxically—withdraws, waits, watches, and in all these indirect ways loves with infinite compassion, powerless to use his power (the Father); yet at the same time God descends, becomes incarnate, suffers, dies, and is resurrected (the Son); God is this absolute unity-in-separation (Holy Spirit), which constitutes the supreme supernatural harmony that is the trinitarian godhead.

> In God, at the point where the two opposites, Power and Love, are separated, a supreme anguish exists [. . .]. In order that there may be a perfect, an ideal model for the reuniting of the opposites, it is necessary that the unity of the two supreme opposites should be disrupted. The Holy Spirit withdrew for a moment from Christ. It is in this way that the Passion constitutes at the same time Redemption. (N 539)

In his deepest essence, then, God has suffered subjection to existence and evil. God *is* essentially God's enactment of abdication, self-emptying, incarnation, and passion. "God not incarnate is not really God; he has been incarnate and sacrificed from the beginning; 'the Lamb slain from the beginning of the world'" (N 222). This God, sacrificed from the beginning, is the crucified God, and we know this,

in a sense, simply because the world *exists*. But we know it more perfectly and explicitly as revealed in the cross of Christ.

We must remember that for Weil theological language is never strictly true, and this includes language of the Trinity. Supernatural truths as set forth in verbal figures of expression are ever subject to the risk of falsification by a too direct and univocal understanding. This danger can be minimized by the use of paradox, which holds the truth above the reach of language and direct affirmation. Transcendent inspiration alone can "grasp" the reality toward which the language of religious paradox gestures. It is only in a highly figurative sense, then, that Weil means what she asserts of the relation between God's decision to create and God's passion: "God is trapped by evil when he contemplates what he has created. He is caught and subjected to the Passion" (FLN 329). We are not mistaken to think that, for God, creation absolutely implies the passion, but the necessary link between creation and passion in God is strictly nontemporal; only in temporal analysis are the two distinguishable, in the will of God they constitute a pure unity. Hence, the reverse causality holds equally true: in order to be subjected to the passion, God realized that he had to be trapped by evil, so he created the world. Passion and creation are one and the same movement, co-implicated in the divine will.

This means, furthermore, that the creation, incarnation, and crucifixion, which are aspects of one and the same passion of God, are not essentially enacted for the benefit of humanity. Rather, they are self-realizing, self-enacting movements of God in which humanity has the privilege of participating.

> Our misery gives us the infinitely precious privilege of sharing in this distance placed between the Son and his Father. This distance is only separation, however, for those who love. For those who love, separation, although painful, is a good, because it is love. Even the distress of the abandoned Christ is a good. There cannot be a greater good for us on earth than to share in it. God can never be perfectly present to us here below on

> account of our flesh. But he can be almost perfectly absent from us in extreme affliction. For us, on earth, this is the only possibility of perfection. That is why the Cross is our only hope. (SNL 177)

Weil insists that, because "God is prior to humanity in all respects" (IC 198), the incarnation should be presented not as destined for humanity, but on the contrary, as that to which the destiny of humanity is related. We must view ourselves in relation to the passion, not the passion in relation to ourselves. The passion expresses and enacts God's relation to God; it is not something God has done for *us*, except insofar as we "are" him through the decreation of our will.

> The Son separated from the Father by the totality of time and space, by the fact of having been made a creature; this time which is the substance of my life—and of everybody's—this time so heavy with suffering, is a segment of the line that stretches, through the Creation, the Incarnation, and the Passion, between the Father and the Son. (FLN 83, see WG 127)

Taking this stance frees Weil's theology from traditional anthropocentrism, setting in its place a *cosmocentrism*, which is concentrically united with a *theocentrism*. The world, though radically other than God, is actually an event in the life of the godhead. The passion of God is the real center of everything inclusively that happens in the world; it is the real meaning of the existence of the world as a whole:

> The effects of misfortune upon innocent souls are really unintelligible unless we remember that we have been created as brothers of the crucified Christ. The absolute domination throughout the whole universe of a mechanical, mathematical, absolutely deaf and blind necessity is unintelligible, unless one believes that the whole universe, in the totality of space and of time, has been created as the Cross of Christ. (IC 198)

In this vein, Weil affirms that every particle of matter partakes of the nature of the Eucharist (N 322), which is to say, the body of Christ; every particle of matter in the world is God crucified.

Christ is the incarnate God who, by expiating the evil of the world, expiates the guilt of the disincarnate God for having created the world. "God has expiated creation [by crucifixion], and we who are associated in it expiate it also" (N 80). This is achieved through Christ's redemptive suffering, a divine suffering that gathers in and purifies evil of its evilness, while in another sense leaving it unchanged: "Evil itself may be pure. It can only be pure in the form of suffering" (N 234). Redemptive suffering, the essence of Christ, is what transfigures the very evilness of evil into good; this is achieved not through action, but through voluntary passion, for "no action destroys evil, but only the apparently useless and perfectly patient suffering of it" (FLN 218).

Redemptive suffering reveals evil in all its evilness as the real presence of the absence of the Father, from whom all pure good, of whatever order, derives (FLN 122). That is to say, whereas the Father, in this world, is embodied as an *absence*, the Son, in this world, is embodied as *real presence*, a presence corresponding inversely and dialectically to the Father's absence, suffering that absence perfectly in the form of abandonment. So it is through the Son's abandonment that God is present in extreme evil, for "God [the Father]'s absence is the divine form of presence that corresponds to evil—an absence that is felt" (N 343). The Father, who has withdrawn in order that the world exist, can suffer the world only indirectly across an infinite distance; he cannot redeem the world directly, since by entering or even touching it he can only destroy it. It is God the Son, the incarnation of the Father, who suffers the world directly and infinitely in order to redeem it, thereby enacting the will of the Father: "God who is in heaven cannot destroy evil; he can only send it back in the form of a curse. It is only God in this world, having become a victim, who can destroy evil by suffering it" (FLN 154), for indeed to suffer evil is the only way to destroy it (FLN 218). The pure one arrests the malediction of evil by becoming accursed, for to become a curse it is

necessary to be pure (FLN 69). The Son, through the movement of incarnation, consents to the Father's will, enters the world, and voluntarily suffers its evil perfectly, totally, and redemptively as the Father cannot.

As God alone is the ultimate source of evil, God alone can destroy evil ultimately and thus redemptively (FLN 358). The totality of evil that the Father has engendered in creating, the Son takes upon himself in his consent to suffer the world infinitely. The Son consents to be delivered into evil for the Father, emptying himself of his divinity to manifest the Father's goodness, to redeem his innocence. When the Son enacts the Father's will in crucifixion, this entails a mutual and concurrent suffering of evil by both in pure unity of will: the Father suffers evil passively, possessing a power that cannot be used for love, while the Son suffers it actively, as a pure suffering love bereft of power. "The abandonment, at the culminating point of the Crucifixion—what unfathomable love this shows on either side" (N 403).

Inasmuch as all evil traces back to God's abdication in creation, it is inflicted on the world by a decision made "outside" the world. Evil is the inescapable consequence of the original constitutive abandonment of the world by God: "The Creation is an abandonment. In creating what is other than Himself, God necessarily abandoned it" (FLN 103). The world suffers God's abandonment without a power of choice in the matter, and in this specific sense all of creation, including the most horrible intentional criminality, is finally "innocent" of evil. Viewed as a totality, the world simply suffers what God has done, without any power to choose otherwise: "The Creation as a totality is without a blemish. All the evil in it is only suffering" (FLN 207). Christ, however, is God's means of allowing the world to suffer the decision with a choice: he voluntarily takes all the world's evil upon himself as a malediction.

Crucifixion is divine atonement: by becoming a malediction, Christ redeems God from the evil effected in the creation–fall, transfiguring it into voluntary suffering, and in so doing redeems humanity from its complicity in the "fall" into voluntary evil. Weil embraces the idea that "God suffered in place of man," but this does

not mean that Christ's affliction in any way diminishes the affliction suffered by human beings; rather, it means that human suffering, which would otherwise be utterly useless, is transfigured into divinely redemptive suffering when it is consented to in imitation of Christ. "Through the affliction of Christ (in the preceding centuries as much as in the following) the affliction of any afflicted man acquires the meaning and the value of expiation, if only he desires it. The affliction then acquires an infinite value, which can only come from God" (FLN 152, 345).

So individual human beings, through voluntary suffering, are able to share in the destruction of evil, and in a sense every effort to relieve affliction and diminish the spread of evil is a voluntary suffering of it. But this is possible only through the prevenient action of Christ, not through a virtue of one's own, for "all expiation implies that it is God who is expiating" (FLN 152). The cross is something infinitely greater than martyrdom (N 415) because it is the self-damnation of the Son that achieves the redemption of the Father, who cannot enter the world except as necessity (absence and evil) or as grace (powerless suffering love).

In view of the crucifixion, the unavoidable suffering of a human being, which has no real remedy, acquires a supernatural use when it is consented to with the pure intention that God's will be done: "An innocent being who suffers sheds the light of salvation upon evil. He is the visible image of the innocent God" (N 234). For Weil, the redemptive power of God is centered on and revealed in the crucifixion rather than the resurrection: "The death on the Cross is something more divine than the Resurrection, it is the point where Christ's divinity is concentrated" (IC 142–3). The truly "blessed" (*heureux*) exemplified in the gospel beatitudes are those who have no need of the resurrection in order to believe (NR 269), those for whom Christ's perfection as manifested on the cross is the full glory of God. Like Luther and Kierkegaard before her, Weil excoriates the "theology of glory" that obscures and displaces the greater glory of the crucifixion: "After the Resurrection the infamous character of his ordeal was effaced by glory, and today across twenty centuries of adoration, the degradation that is the very essence of the Passion is

hardly felt by us [. . .]. Today the glorious Christ veils from us the Christ who was made a malediction" (IC 142–3).

From the perspective of a theology of glory, the resurrection of Christ "reopens" the door of life that crucifixion "closes," whereas quite the reverse is true for a theology of the cross. The cross itself is the open door. In a striking passage, Weil faults an undue emphasis on the resurrection in Christian teaching for *closing the door of separation* that was opened by the crucifixion: "The crucifixion of Christ has almost opened the door, has almost separated on one side the Father and the Son, on the other the Creator and creation. The door half-opened. The resurrection closed it again" (IC 195). Separation—that is, the movement of infinite distance, abandonment, crucifixion—is the movement that "opens" the door of truth, not the resurrection as it is commonly understood, which blocks the door shut with false glory.

For Weil, it is the voiding of prestige, not the physical suffering, that is the essence of Christ's passion, and this voiding of prestige is what is inverted by liturgical and dogmatic glorification of Christ. Christ, who had little prestige in life, was totally stripped of it after the Last Supper, when even his disciples abandoned and denied him, including Peter—that Peter, Weil comments, "who today is wrapped in a mantle of prestige deriving from the Church and twenty centuries of Christian history" (IC 137). Although it was extremely difficult to remain faithful to Christ during his life, Weil maintains, there is an even greater difficulty today because this prestige itself acts as a screen: it is possible to be faithful even unto death without being sure that it is truly Christ to whom one is faithful.

For God, who is pure good, to become flesh and dwell in the world is to become subject to every possible suffering, and indeed, "the extremest form of suffering" (N 414–5). As Christ is the existence in this world of the greatest possible good, a goodness that surpasses human understanding, so to accept the crucifixion is to consent to the greatest possible evil, for in crucifixion the greatest harm is inflicted on the greatest good, and "if one loves that, one loves the order of the world" (FLN 144). Conversely, also, to love the order of the world is to love the cross of Christ as the manifest will of God, for the "cross"

of which Weil speaks is not only the cross on which Jesus died; it is the more comprehensive cross of creation and incarnation, the cross that God bears, in himself, already before the creation of the world—the cross that incites him to renunciation of divinity. For the creation of the world is already a crucifixion of divinity (FLN 70), and all human suffering, whether willing or unwilling, participates in this crucifixion, but only affliction that is consented to *because* it is the cross of Christ participates in the redemptive power of that cross, which is the perfection of suffering love in God.

Supernatural Harmony

Suffering turns us ever again to ask the question *why?* Why affliction? Why necessity? Why the world? The answer Weil offers is that God created the world as that infinite distance across which the absoluteness of absolute love could be perfected in full actuality. Evil is the infinite distance separating God the Father from God the Son; love is the passion that at the same time crosses the distance, spanning the void. Both effects are made real by the real existence of the world, and God cannot be God in actual perfection without it.

> Those who ask why God permits affliction might as well ask why God created. And that, indeed, is a question one may well ask. Why did God create? It seems so obvious that God is greater than God and the creation together. At least, it seems obvious so long as one thinks of God as Being. But that is not how one ought to think of him. So soon as one thinks of God as Love one senses that marvel of love by which the Father and the Son are united both in the eternal unity of the one God and also across the separating distance of space and time and the Cross [. . .]. God is joy, and creation is affliction; but it is an affliction radiant with the light of joy. (SNL 193–4 = SWR 463)

Weil calls this a "Pythagorean harmony" in which the maximum distance and the maximum unity between the contraries is realized

(IC 169). The cross symbolizes at the same time the union between and separation of the opposites, and the unity that characterizes this union and this separation (N 578). It constitutes a supernatural harmony: the harmony of Father and Son across the extremest void of distance and the bitterest suffering. This moment is the incomprehensible perfection of love: the love that passes all understanding (IC 169). Supernatural harmony is audible as a cry of love dissolving into the absolute silence of God:

> God allowed God to send up a cry to him and did not answer. It is when from the innermost depths of our being we need a sound that does mean something—when we cry out for an answer and it is not granted us—it is then that we touch the silence of God. (N 627) / The cry of Christ and the silence of the Father together make the supreme harmony, that harmony of which all music is but an imitation, that to which our harmonies, those at once the most heartbreaking and the most sweet, bear an infinitely far away and dim resemblance. The whole universe, including our own existences as tiny fragments of it, is only the vibration of that harmony. (IC 199)

This divine unity-in-separation constitutes a more encompassing universal harmony than any in nature or any representable in the forms of human language or music. All music is finally a mimesis of the plenitude of God's silence (N 232).

Father and Son are united by a reciprocal love that makes each the true God for the other: "Through love, the Father causes the Son to be, because the Son is the Good. Through love, the Son desires not to be, because only the Father is the Good. For the Father, God is the Son. For the Son, God is the Father. Both are right, and this makes a single truth" (FLN 102). This single complex truth articulates the essence of God: God at once separated from himself and conjoined with himself; other to himself and one with himself. Self-love and love between absolutely separated persons are one and the same thing in God, since "God alone is both himself and another" (N 192). God is one and two simultaneously by virtue of being three essentially;

that is, two united by a mediating third—the Holy Spirit—who abides in the beginning with the Father and Son, making God always one and always three. The separation effected by creation between Father and Son is real and infinite, but in the Holy Spirit it remains a union (IC 68–9): not an absolute diremption but a supernatural coincidence of opposites. Weil has the model of the trinitarian God primarily in mind when she affirms that "unity is not a thing in itself, but an act that cannot be divided" (N 618).

What unites God to himself, then, has nothing to do with the power of being, its attachments and conditions; what unites him ultimately is only love. The love between God and God is a love that rests on nothing, depends on nothing: suspended in the void of separation and suffering, grounded in mutual self-emptying, it reverberates in silence. God is pure love, nothing but love, spanning the void of distance. "God is so essentially love that the unity, which in a sense is his actual definition, is the pure effect of love" (WG 127). God is essentially three because the love uniting God with God is itself the divinity of God.

> The love between God and God, which in itself *is* God, is this bond of double virtue: the bond that unites two beings so closely that they are no longer distinguishable and really form a single unity and the bond that stretches across distance and triumphs over infinite separation. The unity of God, wherein all plurality disappears, and the abandonment, wherein Christ believes he is left while never ceasing to love his Father perfectly, these are two forms expressing the divine virtue of the same Love, the Love that is God himself. (WG 127)

God is good because he is love, and loves himself because he is good; or as Weil puts it, "God desires to be, not because he is himself but because he is the good" (FLN 102). Indeed, the goodness of God, which causes God to love himself infinitely, *is* God: "The intrinsic being of God resides in the fact that he is good—he is not a being to whom good is attached as an attribute, but is absolutely pure good in itself" (N 383); Weil identifies this idea as at once Augustinian and

Platonic (SNL 104). But in Weil's kenotic logic, it is because God is absolute goodness that he must abdicate power and empty himself to manifest absolute love. Weil characterizes this sacrificial generosity as a "divine madness" (*folie de Dieu*): an excess of divine love (*excès de l'amour divin*) that effects a total and unreserved self-expense for love. God stakes *himself* when he creates, for "the creation is a very much greater act of madness still than the incarnation" (N 262, IC 183).

Why would God lay down his divinity, his power and plenitude of being, his unity with himself? Because, Weil answers, divine love, being truly unconditional, goes to the furthest possible length; it knows no bounds or conditions, which in itself makes it a madness: "Love is supernatural when it is unconditioned. An unconditional love is a madness" (FLN 127). Unconditional love is God's creative madness, a madness that creates, and by creating gives itself in infinite sacrifice. Unconditional love is the madness that subjects God to crucifixion, for God, who is not compelled to do anything by necessity, elects to be crucified as an expression of superabundant goodness.

This can be expressed in alternate terms: that God creates in order to give himself not only to everything good (himself), but to necessity and evil, to everything void of good, to everything other than himself and infinitely distant from himself. He creates the realm of necessity and the void of evil in order to give himself to it, and he gives himself to it precisely by creating it, by letting it *be* apart from good, making it possible for necessity and evil to be illumined by the good. "God, who is nothing else but Love, has not created anything else but love. Relentless necessity, misery, distress, the crushing burden of poverty and of exhausting labour, cruelty, torture, violent death, constraint, terror, disease—all this is but the divine love" (N 401). Faith consists in believing that reality is love and nothing else (FLN 260).

The crucifixion is a model of love that passes understanding (IC 169): a love that tests itself beyond natural measures of reasonableness, a love that goes to the furthest extreme. "The supreme reason for which the Son of God was made man was not to save men, it was to bear witness for the truth. To bear witness that the

love between the Father and the Son is stronger than the distance between the Creator and the creature" (FLN 240). If *Christ crucified* is a stumbling block and a folly, according to Paul (1 Cor. 1:23), contradicting every reasonable idea of God, then *God crucified* is surely a supreme madness. Yet, Weil writes, we are called to consent to and imitate this madness—not, along with Tertullian, because it is *absurd*, but because it is *good*. And we know it to be good not because it is intelligible, but because it is *beautiful*, and its beauty gives us joy.

The beauty of this good, the joy we take in it, is unintelligible (N 221). Faith alone can embrace it, consent to it, and feel joy in spite of suffering. This is a joy that redeems the sorrow of the world; it can only be encountered in immediate experience, and cannot be communicated outwardly except through the paradoxical conjunction of contradictory meanings. It is a complex supernatural joy—a joy available in the midst of the deepest anguish. It is a joy in the knowledge that, even in the greatest possible abyss of separation, love is stronger than separation. Love redeems every stringency of the void.

The most extreme separation of all is not the distance between the Creator and the world, but the infinite distance that alienates God from himself (N 560; IC 169, 197). Weil symbolizes this infinite rent in God by imaging God as divided, with the entire universe interposed between the Father and the Son. The universe, which occupies the distance between God and God, exists as an echo chamber for the theophanic—or theophønic—reverberation of an ultimate harmony: the silence of God (N 627). "This tearing apart, over which supreme love places the bond of supreme union, 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" (WG 124).

The supernatural harmony that reverberates through the universe is heard as a silence, but an *essential* silence that is not a mere absence of sound (FLN 83, WG 213, 72). It is the positive silence of divine "speech" that is deeper than being, deeper than nothingness: it underpins, transgresses, and transcends the distinction between

being and nothingness. Hearing this Word in silence, faith receives in time what God has decided from the beginning outside time. If the love that bridges is in proportion to the distance (N 616), then distance is the soul of love, and infinite distance is the soul of infinite love.