

*Hunting the devils*¹.

E. Voegelin and Simone Weil,
Common points and divergences.

With Eric Voegelin (1901- 1985) and Simone Weil (1909-1943) we are confronted with two philosophers concerned with thinking the event, understanding their present, and considering the « disorder » of their time caused by marxism, fascism, and national socialism. Their respective works pretend to resist against any ideology. Wondering about the « dark times » (Bertolt Brecht), they *diagnose* : Europe suffers from a *disease*. A disease which is not without *precedent*, a disease which affects the *spirit*, the *soul* and which can be grasped by several *symptoms*. In order to *cure* this disease it is necessary to find *remedies*, of which two countries more particularly offer some hope.

Enough with Marx.

Voegelin became interested in ideologies through the recent communist revolution in Russia. He read *Capital* in the 1920's and confesses to having been a marxist for a few months before he came to understand the errors of Marx, thanks to his studies in economic theory and in the history of economics². Besides the study he devoted to this thinker, « *The Formation of the Marxian Revolutionary Idea* »³, Voegelin nonetheless came

¹ E. Voegelin, « Political science can assist in exorcising the demons in the modest measure of effectiveness that our society grants to *episteme* and its therapy », *CW* vol. 5 « Modernity without restraint » : *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism* [SPG], translated by William J. Fitzpatrick, University of Missouri Press, 1989, p. 276.

² E. Voegelin, *CW*, vol. 34, *Autobiographical Reflections: Revised Edition, with a Voegelian Glossary and Cumulative Index*, edited with introductions by Ellis Sandoz [AR], Columbia et Londres, 2006, p. 38.

³ E. Voegelin, « The Formation of Marxian Revolutionary Idea », in *History of Political Ideas* (New York, Macmillan Company), *CW*, vol. 34, *Autobiographical Reflections: Revised Edition, with a Voegelian Glossary and Cumulative Index*, edited with introductions by Ellis Sandoz [AR], Columbia et Londres, 2006, p. 38.

back many times in his work to this thinker whom he qualifies as a « speculative gnostic ». This characterization might appear surprising, but one of the characteristics of ancient *gnosis* is man's dissatisfaction concerning his dwelling in the world which he experiences as an imprisonment, as an alienation from which he has to free himself in order to find his way « back home to the other world of his origin »⁴. In *The New Science of Politics* (1952), E. Voegelin, in agreement with Hans Jonas to whom he refers, brings together under this category all immanentisms which deserted transcendence in order to impart to man and his action in the world the meaning of an eschatological fulfilment. By doing so, such immanentisms aspire to realize paradise on earth even if this entails hastening its coming through violence⁵. To destroy this imperfect and unjust world by elevating man to the rank of divinity, was Marx's ambition. In this spirit, E. Voegelin interpreted the three stages of his philosophy of history— primitive communism, class state and final communism— as the apocalypse of man⁶. So, the new man promoted by marxism, far from having rejected all religious illusions, is the one who « has taken God back into his being. [...] Therefore the new man is [...] the man who has made himself God »⁷. Moreover, according to Voegelin, with modern gnosis, a new phenomenon, unknown by Antiquity, appears, that is the conscious closure to *ratio*, the refusal to question oneself which becomes with Marx a real « oukase » : « When the man brings up the problem of the *arche*, Marx admonishes : “Ask yourself whether that progression exists as such for rational thought” »⁸. The reason

⁴ *Id.* , *CW*, vol. 5, *SPG*, p . 254.

⁵ Among these attempts in western history, E. Voegelin enumerates the substitution by Hobbes of the *summum malum* to the *summum bonum* as a force ordering existence, Hegel's raising of alienation into a system, the marxist rejection of the aristotelian ground, the freudian rejection of the opening to the ground of being as « illusory », the heideggerian's waiting for the « parousia of Being », and the « atheism » of Levi Straus, *Anamnesis: Zur Geschichte und Politik*, R. Piper &Co. Verlag, Munich, (1966), *CW*, vol. 12, *Published Essays, 1966-1985*, ed. with an Introduction by Ellis Sandoz, « Reason : The Classic Experience », pp. 277-278.

⁶ *Id.* , *CW*, vol. 34, *AR*, p. 94.

⁷ *Id.* , *CW*, vol. 5, *SPG* , p. 285.

⁸ K. Marx, *Œuvres II, Économie II*, édition Michel Rubel, Paris, Gallimard, 1968, p. 89, quoted by E. Voegelin in *CW*, vol. 5, p. 274.

referred to here, is not human reason, but the logic of the system. This questioning of philosophical questioning itself, this claim of *doxa* to erect itself as a science, appears to Voegelin as a real « intellectual swindle » with the intention of maintaining « an ideology that would permit him to support violent action against human beings with a show of moral indignation »⁹. In order to characterize this type of gnostic literature, counting on a new truth and a new world, Voegelin resorts to the Arab word « Koran » : « the works of Karl Marx have become the Koran of the faithful, supplemented by the patristic literature of Leninism-Stalinism »¹⁰.

S. Weil always had a leftist sensibility. A reader of the communist newspaper *L'Humanité*, she was also a trade-union activist, publishing articles in the *Revue prolétarienne* and in the *École émancipée*, but never belonging to any political party. Moreover, by the end of her life she even advocated the suppression of all parties which she had come to regard as virtually totalitarian organizations which prevented their members from thinking for themselves¹¹. In 1932 she had spent two months in Germany in a time of social crisis, high unemployment, and widespread despair among the youth. The situation seemed ripe for revolution, yet nothing of the kind took place or was even initiated, notwithstanding the maturity, discipline and culture with which she credits the German working class. She confessed to a trade-union comrade : « I have lost in Germany all the respect I still felt in spite of myself for the Party [...] it seems to me almost as guilty as social democracy »¹². From this time forward, her criticism of the Party became a critique of the USSR which she saw as « a State

⁹ E. Voegelin, *CW*, vol. 34, *AR*, p. 76.

¹⁰ *Id.*, *CW*, vol. 5, *The New Science of Politics. An Introduction*, [NSP], p. 202.

¹¹ S. Weil, « Note sur la suppression des partis politiques », in *Écrits de Londres, et dernières lettres*, [EL], Paris, Gallimard, coll. « Espoir », 1957.

¹² *Id.*, lettre à Urbain Thévenon, in *Œuvres Complètes, II Écrits historiques et politiques*, [EHP], vol. 1, « L'engagement syndical » (1927-juillet 1934), Paris, Gallimard, 1988, p. 28. My translation.

as oppressive as any other, and neither capitalist nor worker »¹³. In 1934, just before going to work in a factory in order to experience in her own flesh the workers's condition, she completed what she herself called her « masterpiece », her « Testimony », *Oppression and Liberty*. It amounted to a vigorous critique of Marx whom she had read very early and about whom she had even lectured several times. To put it briefly, she reproaches him for having diagnosed a governmental crisis of property instead of a social crisis. For her, what is at stake is rather the factory's structure, based on the separation between manual and intellectual work. She also reproaches him for not having seen that the mainspring of oppression accentuates the need for exploiting and oppressing the mass of workers « lest it be found weaker than the other nations »¹⁴ [MSOffice2]. *The Need for Roots* , her last manuscript which her death prevented her from finishing, written in 1943 in London while she worked as editor in the services of Free France, is in continuity with *Oppression and Liberty*. It is conceived as a real « treaty of civilization », whose purpose is to eradicate once and for all « the totalitarian idol » : « Fascism, communism and anarchy being all scarcely different, almost equivalent, [as] expressions of the self-same evil »¹⁵. It is an for the defeated France, and for Europe, the aim being to provide responsible politicians with « a few indications » in order that they don't « act sporadically and at random »¹⁶. In the same

¹³ *Id.*, « Perspectives. Allons-nous vers la révolution prolétarienne ? », in *La Révolution prolétarienne*, n°158, 25 août 1933, O.C. , II, *ibid.* , p. 265. My translation.

¹⁴ *Id.*, *Oppression and Liberty* , Routledge and Keagan Paul LTD, London, 1958, trans. Arthur Wills and John Petrie, p. 40. [O.C. , II, *EHP*, vol. 2, *L'expérience ouvrière et l'adieu à la révolution* (juillet 1934-juin 1937), textes rassemblés, introduits et annotés par Géraldi Leroy et Anne Roche, Paris, Gallimard, 1991, p. 32. Repris dans S. Weil, *Œuvres*, sous la dir. de F. de Lussy, Paris, Gallimard, 1999, pp. 273-348.]

¹⁵ *Id.* , *The Need for Roots*, Routledge Kegan Paul, 1952. Arthur Wills trans., preface by T.S. Eliot, p. 174-175. Albert Camus, who edited in this text in his 1949 collection of her writings, « *Espoir* », chose this title, maintaining however as a subtitle the title chosen by S. Weil, *Prelude to a declaration of obligations towards the human being*.

¹⁶ *Id.*, *ibid.*, p. 9.

way, the uncompleted work of Eric Voegelin, *Order and History* was conceived both as a diagnosis and a remedy for a time of troubles, as a resource in order to establish « an island of order in the disorder of the age »¹⁷.

A recurring disease.

Underlining the fact that history knows periods of order which are followed by « periods of disintegration », E. Voegelin observes that the situation with which Europe is presently confronted presents analogies to Antiquity : « our own situation as philosophers in the twentieth century A.D. resembles closely the Platonic-Aristotelian situation in the fourth century B.C., and we are today engaged in the same type of resistance against the disorder of the age »¹⁸. E. Voegelin enumerates the philosophers who preceded him in making this diagnosis : Heraclitus –when he distinguished between those who lead an awakened life and the sleepwalkers who take their dream for reality– and Aeschylus who described the promethean revolution against the divine ground as gnosis–, « had already observed and articulated at least a century before the classic philosophers the phenomena of existential disorder »¹⁹. Voegelin also invokes Cicero, who offered, in his *Tusculanae Quaestiones*, the different stoic formulations of these spiritual diseases (*morbi animorum*) or of this alienation (*allotriosis*), which consists in rejecting reason in the name of false opinions. E. Voegelin borrows from the writer Heimito Doderer the concept which will become fundamental for him for the understanding of these absurdities and ideological deformations,

¹⁷ E. Voegelin, *In Search of Order* , *CW*, vol. 18, ed. with an Introduction by Ellis Sandoz, Columbia, London, University of Missouri Press 2000, Introduction, p. 18.

¹⁸ *Id.* , *CW*, vol. 12, *Published Essays, 1966-1985* , « Reason. The Classic Experience », p. 267.

¹⁹ *Id.* , *ibid.* , p. 274.

that is to say the concept of *Apperzeptionsverweigerung*²⁰, which consists in refusing to perceive reality. The man who refuses to live the existential tension towards the Ground or who rebels against it by refusing to participate in reality lives then, and here Voegelin recalls a concept from Robert Musil, in a « second reality ». The autonomous *ego* takes the place of the Ground and begets « substitute images » such as the desire for wealth, power, or sex, as well as *superbia vitae*²¹. The only new thing in our time is, as we have seen, that those who offer such false opinions –that is A. Comte and K. Marx– knowing that they could not withstand a critical analysis, sought to ban the question itself (*denke nicht, frage nicht*). E. Voegelin baptizes this phenomenon, which is not at all « insignificant », as *ideological dogmatism*²², citing as evidence of this mentality a declaration by Auschwitz commandant Rudolf Höss, reflecting his docile obedience to orders, which leads Voegelin finally to suggest a fundamental identity between socialism, -positivism, and -nazism inasmuch as they are incapable of basic human inquiry²³ [MSOffice3].

S. Weil offers her own diagnosis: « Europe was not subjugated by invading hordes coming from another continent, or from Mars, who have only to be driven out. She is wasted by an internal malady»²⁴, a malady which Weil identifies as

²⁰ Heimito von Doderer (1896 - 1966), *Die Dämonen*, Munich, C.H. Beck, 1995. In « *Reason : the Classic Experience* », *CW* vol. 12, p. 278, Eric Voegelin already alluded to this novel, as well as to *Die Merowinger oder die totale Familie*, (Munich, C.H. Beck, 1995), pp. 162 et 168, where Doderer uses the term « absurd » (or insanity) in order to try to grasp the phenomenon of national-socialism under the shape of the « grotesque » : « as a result of the loss of reality, actions transform themselves into a phenomenon which cannot any more be understood in terms of categories as much loaded with reality than the category of “fate” ».

²¹ E. Voegelin, *CW*, vol. 6, *Anamnesis. On the Theory of History and Politics*, p. 369.

²² *Id.*, *ibid.*, p. 412.

²³ *Id.*, *CW*, vol. 5, *SPG*, p. 264 [*SPG*, p. 40]: « Thus we see delineated three major types for whom human inquiry has become a practical impossibility ; socialist man (in the Marxian sense), positivist man (in the Comtean sense), and national-socialist man ».

²⁴ S. Weil, « A War of Religions », in *Selected Essays, 1934-1943*, Chosen and Translated by Richard Rees, London, Oxford Univeristy Press, New York, Toronto, 1962, p. 218.

« *uprootedness*. » Uprootedness may sometimes come about as the result of military conquest, as the result of the imperialistic will of one nation upon another. This was effectively the case of Germany in 1939. Thinking about the « origins of hitlerism », S. Weil considers the cases of : the Hebrews, the Romans, the Germans -- from which she concludes : « whoever is uprooted himself uproots others »²⁵_[MSOffice5]. The Hebrews : « this handful of uprooted » who « either exterminated or reduced to servitude all the peoples of Palestine »²⁶ ; the Romans, « a handful of fugitives who banded themselves artificially to form a city » and were animated by the conviction of being a superior race born to rule ; and the Germans who, when Hitler took hold of them, « were really [...] a nation of proletarians, that is to say, uprooted individuals »²⁷. Sensitive ever to the colonial question, in a text also written in 1939 she writes: « Our situation in Europe is not that of civilized men fighting a barbarian, but the much more difficult and dangerous one of independant countries threatened with colonization »²⁸. In the same way, E. Voegelin laments the interpretation of national-socialism in terms of barbarism²⁹. However, in contrast to E. Voegelin who, as early as 1933, wrote two books devoted to the idea of race³⁰,

²⁵ *Id.*, *The Need for Roots*, p. 45.

²⁶ *Ibid.* Even if she concedes that uprootedness has reached « its most acute stage when there are deportations on a massive scale as in Europe under the German occupation », *The Need for Roots*, p. 42 [*E.* p. 62].

²⁷ *Ibid.* Weil was also struck by the similarities between the Romans and the Germans in another respect, inasmuch as both peoples displayed the same seriousness, the same discipline, the same emphasis upon organisation.

²⁸ *Id.*, « Reflections on Barbarism » (fragments), in *Selected Essays*, p. 144 [« Réflexions sur la barbarie », *O.C. II, EHP*, vol. 3, « Vers la guerre » Textes établis, présentés et annotés par Simone Fraisse, Paris, Gallimard, 1989, (1937-1940), p. 225.]

²⁹ E. Voegelin, *Die politischen Religionen*, Tübingen, J.C.B. Mohr, (1938) ; *CW*, vol. 5, *The Political Religions*, p. 24.

³⁰ *Id.*, *Rasse und Staat*, Tübingen, J.C.B. Mohr, (1933) ; *CW*, vol. 2, *Race and State*, transl. By Ruth Hein, ed. with an introd. by Klaus Vondung, Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 1997; *Die Rassenidee in der Geistesgeschichte, von Ray bis Carus*, Berlin Junker und Duenhaupt, (1933) ; *CW*, vol. 3, *The History of the Race Idea : from Ray to Carus*, transl. By Ruth Hein, ed. with an introd. by Klaus Vondung, Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 1995.

one doesn't find an analysis of race in S. Weil's work. Rather, she assimilates racism and nationalism, concentration camps and gladiators' games, and she does not notice, in sharp contrast to Hannah Arendt, the specificity, the completely novel character of the hitlerian government³¹, the word totalitarianism being for her but a synonym for domination. Weil also interpreted this disease of uprootedness as a condition of alienation— which encompassed the situation of manual workers who felt themselves to be « strangers » or « exiles » in their own factories and on their own lands, and, *a fortiori*, strangers to the world of thought and culture—, and the situation of the French more generally who, after the Armistice « opened their hands and allowed their country to fall to the ground »³². In both cases, what has been lost and must be regained is the idea of a « homeland », a world in which man feels himself to be « at home ».

The need for order.

The disease is in fact, for Weil, a spiritual one : « We suffer from a lack of balance, due to a purely material development of technical science. This lack of balance can only be remedied by a spiritual development in the same sphere, that is, in the sphere of work »³³. This imbalance is moreover the result of our failure to understand the « Needs of the Soul », which is the title of the opening chapter of *The Need for Roots*. For Weil, we may discover what these needs are by analogy with the needs of our bodies ; and they too must be satisfied in order that the soul should not die. These needs are « sacred » inasmuch as they are those of a human being^[MSOffice6]. To each of these needs corresponds an *obligation* which testifies indirectly to the bond

³¹ S. Weil, « Hitler and Roman Foreign Policy », in *Selected Essays*, p. 131.

³² *Id.* , *The Need for Roots*, p. 96.

³³ *Id.*, *Ibid.* In the second part of *The Need for Roots* , S. Weil analyzes uprootedness in three steps : Uprootedness in the Towns, Uprootedness in the Countryside, Uprootedness and Nationhood.

which unites man « with a reality »³⁴. Weil identifies fifteen needs, which she conceives as pairs of opposites, (freedom/obedience, equality/ hierarchy...). The most important and the most ignored is the need for roots, but the need which she considers first is the need for « order ». However, in contrast to Voegelin, she does not depict the need for order as the opposite of the disorder which she also denounces. It is, moreover, the only need of the soul which has no opposite. More precisely, the need for order for Simone Weil is opposed to disorder only inasmuch as it is conceived as opposed to any incompatibility between the individual's various obligations, an incompatibility which is surely the case for the human being who lives within a totalitarian order [MSOffice7]. Indeed, as Weil avers, to violate one obligation in the course of fulfilling anotherone hurts the soul in « her love for good ». Order is thus initially defined as « a texture of social relationships such that no one is compelled to violate imperative obligations in order to carry out other ones ». While acknowledging that we cannot be certain that the idea of such an inherent order is not a fiction, Weil points to the everyday example of the order of the universe, which remains stable despite variations, and suggests that if we «keep ever-present in our minds the idea of a veritable human order, [and] if we think of it as of something to which a total sacrifice is due should the need arise, we shall be in a similar position to that of a man travelling, without a guide, through the night, but continually thinking of the direction he wishes to follow»³⁵. The contemplation of works of art, of the world's beauty, of the unknown good, are suggestive of the principle of order which may guide us. Here, the second meaning the symbolic meaning -- of the primacy of the need for order, which «« stands above all needs properly so-called », reveals itself :

Following Plato, the soul is for S. Weil a microcosm encompassed within the macrocosm of the universe³⁶. Commenting on Plato's quotation according to which the *polis* presents the same features, writ large, as the individual, for his part, E. Voegelin underscores that the polis must not be regarded « only a *microcosmos*, but also [as] a *macroanthropos* ». This expresses what he identified as the

³⁴ *Id.* , *Draft for a Statement of Human Obligations* , in *Selected Essays* , p. 220.

³⁵ *Id.*, *The Need for Roots*, p. 11.

³⁶ See O. Springstead, « The Need for Order and the Need for Roots : To Being through History », in *Cahiers Simone Weil*, XVII, 2, juin 1994.

« anthropological principle », that the order of each society reflects the type of men of which it is composed³⁷. In a similar spirit, Weil observed in 1928-29, in an analysis of the multiple meanings of the word « order » that « when I find order where man has not passed [...] I see in this order a sign foreign to this world, printed by a being close to my own spirit, and I therefore have a new reason to believe in God »³⁸. This definition is in agreement with Voegelin's formulation according to which the founding event of the *epistèmè politikè* is the idea according to which « the levels of being discernible within the world are surmounted by a transcendent source of being and its order »³⁹. It is also in agreement with his definition of order : « By order is meant the structure of reality as experienced as well as the attunement of man to an order that is not of his making –i.e. , the cosmic order »⁴⁰.

The symptoms of the disease.

S. Weil and E. Voegelin agree in attributing responsibility for Hitler's emergence to the intellectual collapse of modern society⁴¹. The symptoms of this collapse are to be found in the distortions of language and in the perversion of the educational system.

Those who destroyed the German language on the literary and journalistic planes – and whom Karl Kraus already denounced in *Die Fackel*⁴² – as well as the ideological flood, by which Voegelin means the language symbols that pretend to be concepts but are in fact

³⁷ E. Voegelin, *CW*, vol. 5, *NSP*, p. 136, [*NSP*, p. 106.]

³⁸ S. Weil, « Des différents sens du mot ordre » (topo pour Alain) circa 1928-1929, in *O.C. I, Premiers écrits philosophiques*, Paris, Gallimard, 1988, p. 237. My translation.

³⁹ E. Voegelin, *CW*, vol. 5, *SPG*, p. 259.

⁴⁰ *Id.* *CW* vol. 34, *AR.*, p. 75.

⁴¹ « ...it is not the forlorn youth, the wretched vagabond, with the hungry soul, whom it is right to accuse, but those who fed him upon lies. And those who fed him upon lies were our elders, whom we resemble », writes S. Weil in *The Need for Roots*, p. 230, [*E.*, p. 302-303.] As for E. Voegelin he writes in his *Autobiographical Reflections*, *CW* 34, p. 46 [*RA* = p. 44] : «This phenomenon of Hitler is not exhausted by his person. His success must be understood in the context of an intellectually or morally ruined society ».

⁴² E. Voegelin, *CW*, vol. 34, *AR.*, p. 46.

« unanalyzed *topoi* or topics », such as « total » or « authoritarian », were « the true criminals who were guilty of the national socialist . atrocities » : they managed to destroy the social environment in such a way that a vulgarian person as Hitler could rise to power. On this point the challenge is hardly a novel one, with Voegelin reminding us that Sir Francis Bacon had also confronted « the idols of the cave, the idols of the marketplace, the idols of pseudo-theoretical speculation », when he wrote his *Novum Organum*. Therefore the task of *resisting* the idols' domination becomes an imperative for Voegelin, who endeavors to rediscover « the experiences of reality as well as the language that will adequately express them »⁴³. According to Voegelin it is Humboldt's conception of the German university which is responsible for this absence of spirit— which is a consequence of man's closure to the divine Ground of his existence⁴⁴. Education (*Erziehung*), the art of *periagogê* in the platonic sense, which aims to bring man back to the Ground, has been replaced by a formation (*Bildung*) through « objective science », which is synonymous with the closure of the spirit. Man's existence then is no more a subject's (*Untertan*) existence, revealing itself in the public sphere, but the « narcissistic » existence of an individual withdrawn into oneself, the existence of an *idiotes*.

According to S. Weil as well, « the art of living » is intimately related to « a right use of language »⁴⁵. She might have agreed with Voegelin as to the potentially destructive power of language⁴⁶, and regarding the « social dominance of opinions » which she associates with the Prince of this World, the Devil⁴⁷, whom she identifies as the source of the difference between truth and opinion, which she equates in turn with the « difference

⁴³ *Id.*, *CW*, vol. 34, *AR.*, p. 118.

⁴⁴ *CW*, vol. 12, *Published Essays*, 1966-1985, ed. Ellis Sandoz, 1990, pp. 1-36.

⁴⁵ S. Weil, *Leçons de philosophie* [*LP*], présentées par Anne Reynaud-Guérithault, préface de Jean Guittou, Paris, Plon, 1959/1989, p. 69. My translation.

⁴⁶ *Id.*, « Réponse à une question d'Alain » (mars 1936), in *O.C.*, II, *EHP*, vol. 2, p. 329 : « The words dignity and honor are may be today the most murderous of the vocabulary ». My translation.

⁴⁷ *Id.*, *O.C.* VI, vol. 4, *Cahiers*, juillet 1942-juillet 1943, « La Connaissance surnaturelle », (*Cahiers de New York et de Londres*), Paris, Gallimard, 2006, K17, ms 72, p. 354. My translation.

between the real and the imaginary in the spiritual life »⁴⁸. But, whereas Voegelin dates the corruption of European language to the 1920s, S. Weil traces it back to the Enlightenment. To give one example of this confusion of language and ideas, which she denounces as « largely responsible for the present political and social confusion,⁴⁹ consider the word « Rights » in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The concept of « Rights », inherited from the Romans, was unknown to the Greeks who « were content with the name of justice [...] companion of the gods in the other world ».⁵⁰ Weil links this concept to the ideas of « sharing», « exchange », « measured quantity » and emphasizes its « commercial flavour »⁵¹. Weil's more salient point, however, is to argue that right is always derivative, secondary and situationally relative, inasmuch as it presupposes that the others acknowledge my right. By contrast, Weil holds that the concept of *duty*, or *obligation*, is primary and unconditioned since it originates in a sphere which is above this world and « comes before that of rights »⁵². Unfortunately, the revolutionaries who founded the modern age began not with the idea of absolute duty or obligation but with the concept of right which they absolutized, sowing social and political confusion as a result.. S. Weil is also very critical of educators, the scientists and historians who were « possibly guiltier of Hitler's crimes than Hitler himself ».⁵³ [MG8] Indeed she goes so far as to suggest that they bear a responsibility for what ensued which is proportional to the prestige which they enjoyed. In opposition to the reign of abstractions which has passed for wisdom since the Enlightenment, *The Need for Roots* offers propositions intended to overcome the conceptual slavery of workers and farmers, who have been « exiled » from both the objects of their labor as well as from the world of thought. Each of

⁴⁸ *Id.* , *O.C.* VI, vol. 2, Cahiers (septembre 1941février 1942). Textes établis par Alyette Degrâces, Marie-Annette Fourneyron, Florence de Lussy et Michel Narcy, Paris, Gallimard, 1997, K7, [ms. 79], p. 470. My translation.

⁴⁹ *Id.* , *The Need for Roots*, p. 4.

⁵⁰ *Id.* , « Human Personality », in *Selected Essays*, p. 20.

⁵¹ *Id.* , *Human Personality*, in *Selected Essays*, p. 18.

⁵² *Id.* , *The Need for Roots*, p. 3.

⁵³ *Id.* , *ibid*, p. 229.

her propositions reflects this suspicion of «void entities » ; seeks to restore the missing link between concept and sensible experience ; and affirms what she takes to be the proper relation between language's signs and reality. From this perspective, she addresses the gap between middle class culture and the sensibility of the working class, arguing that this gap is to be closed not through « vulgarization [...] The term is as atrocious as the thing itself »⁵⁴, she says, but through an effort of translation, of transposition, which does not preclude resorting to the classics, and to those of Greek literature in particular : *Antigone*, *Philoctetes*, « speak », and must be allowed to speak, directly to the unfortunate. Besides its penchant for abstraction, modern science is guilty for having simultaneously claimed, for at least three centuries, that strength [MG10] is the measure of all natural phenomena, while allowing that human relations may and even must be grounded upon justice based not upon the will of the stronger but on reason. S. Weil illustrates this idea by means of a quote from Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, which shows how Hitler understood very well indeed which advantage he could draw from such an absurdity [MG11]:

« Man must never fall into the error of believing himself to be the lord and master of the creation...He will then feel that in a world in which planets and suns follow circular trajectories, moons revolve round planets, and force reigns everywhere and supreme over weakness, which it either compels to serve it docilely or else crushes out of existence. Man cannot be subject to special laws of his own. »⁵⁵

But what S. Weil regrets most of all and what she denounces most forcefully, is the loss of the link which existed in the minds of the ancients between science and religiosity : Science « was not a subject of profane study. The Greeks regarded it as a religious subject »⁵⁶.

The Remedy : religion versus idolatry.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* , p. 63.

⁵⁵ *Id.*, *ibid.* , p. 229.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.* , p. 234.

S. Weil didn't know of E. Voegelin who, in search for a « conceptual tool with which to grasp the horror »⁵⁷, forged the phrase « political religions », which he subsequently clarified with the introduction of the distinction between *intramundane* and *supramundane religions*. Nonetheless the notion which Voegelin expressed with the phrase « political religion » was in the air at a moment when many were seeking to articulate the nature and meaning of the eclipse of the religious and of its illusory « compensation » which had come about through the ideologies of the XXth century. Though Weil would have been unfamiliar with Voegelin's speculation, she was familiar with the work of Louis Rougier, author of *The Political Mystics*, a book to which E. Voegelin refers explicitly⁵⁸. She might indeed have agreed with Voegelin's argument in his book, *The Political Religions*, in which he describes what he identifies as the « egophanic revolt » of the West, which is intended to signify the existential phenomenon of man turning away from theophany and withdrawing into himself to focus on his ego⁵⁹, a phenomenon which reached its climax, according to him, with the advent of the absolute knowledge and the deification of man in the philosophies of Hegel, Comte and Marx.

According to S. Weil too, this war is a war of religions, a fight between good and evil : « Anyone who had understood that this war was going to be a religious drama could have foreseen many years ago which nations would play an active role and which would be passive victims. The nations which lived without religion could be nothing but passive victims. This was the case with almost the whole of Europe »⁶⁰. According to her too, the source of totalitarian regimes, of Nazism as well as of Bolshevism, is linked to the disappearance of « the spirit of truth » and to the substitution of human Reason for divine transcendence -- revolution in the case of Marxism, and profit in the case of liberalism serving as being « rational » substitutes for salvation. As Weil writes : « in Hegel's philosophy, God, under the "world's spirit", still appears as the motor of history and lawmaker of nature. It is only after having accomplished its revolution that the bourgeoisie acknowledged in this God a creation of man himself, and

⁵⁷ E. Voegelin, *CW*, vol. 5, , *SPG*, p. 252.

⁵⁸ *Id.*, *CW*, vol. 34, *AR* , p. 78.

⁵⁹ *Id.* , *ibid.* , p. 94.

⁶⁰ S. Weil, « A War of Religions », in *Selected Essays*, p. 216.

that history is man's proper work »⁶¹. Commenting on the association she maintains between marxism and religion, Weil observes : « The term religion may seem surprising in connection with Marx ; but to believe that our will coincides with a mysterious will which is at work in the universe and helps us to conquer is to think religiously, to believe in Providence »⁶², in other words the fact of being possessed by apocalyptic spirit—, their common point consists in their use as an « opium of the people », according to Marx's own formula^[MG12]. To substitute the « spirit of truth » for these ideologies, is S. Weil's ambition.

Since « the “nonsense” [Blödsinn] of the time offers no home for man »⁶³, to find *remedies* for the metastatic faith inasmuch as it remains « one of the great sources of disorder, if not the principal one », was for Voegelin the most urgent task, « a matter of life and death ».⁶⁴ Recoiling before what seemed to him to be a gnostic heresy which threatened to destroy the soul, Voegelin pondered the question of the possibility of any rational politics for the future⁶⁵. In the face of the evil of National Socialism, which he regarded as evil incarnate -- « not only as a deficient mode of being, a negative element, but also a real substance and force that is effective in the world »— Voegelin sought out a counter-force more powerful than the evil which must be fought. This counter-force was religion, with Voegelin calling for a renewal of religion « be it within the framework of the historical churches, [or] be it outside the framework »⁶⁶.

S. Weil, for her part, thought that our time needed a « new saintliness », saints working among the unfortunate and not behind a frock or in a covent, as she objected to Father Perrin who planned to create a feminine secular movement under the aegis of Catherine de

⁶¹ *Id.* , *O.C.* , II, *EHP* , vol. 2, « Ébauches et Fragments divers », p. 121. My translation.

⁶² *Id.* , « Critique of Marxism », in *Oppression and Liberty* , Routledge and Keagan Paul, London, 1958, trans. By Arthur Wills and John Petrie.

⁶³ E. Voegelin, *CW*, vol. 6, *Anamnesis*, « What is Political Reality ? » p. 388.

⁶⁴ *Id.* , *CW*, vol. 14, *Order and History*, vol. I, *Israel and Revelation*, ed. with an introd. by Maurice P. Hogan, Columbia, London, University of Missouri Press, 2001, Preface, p. 23-24.

⁶⁵ *Id.* , *CW* , vol. 5, *NSP* , p. 228.

⁶⁶ *Id.* , *CW* , vol. 5, *PR* , p. 24.

Sienna. Born to a very assimilated Jewish family, and brought up a complete agnostic, she later claimed surprisingly perhaps : « I was born, I grew up, and I always remained within the Christian inspiration »⁶⁷. Biographically, Weil's personal movement toward Christianity was precipitated by three mystical « person to person » encounters with Christ which occurred between 1935 and 1938, in the period after her experience as a worker in the French factories where she had borne the sufferings and misfortune of the workers in her own flesh. That she had not previously read the works of Christian mystics and that these experiences were not thus overdetermined by such influences made the effect of these mystical experiences that much more profound for her. Nonetheless, notwithstanding her strong desire to be baptized, she did not convert, on account of several obstacles, including: the Church's dogmatism ; the anathema which it pronounced against « heretics » (an identity which she claimed for herself) ; the fact that it is « catholic » – that is to say universal– only theoretically but not in fact ; and her belief that the New Testament had been corrupted by its filiation from the Old Testament, a contamination of which she wanted to see it « cleansed ». She also refrained from converting on account of Christianity's socio-political sins—from the Inquisition, to the Crusades—, to the « patriotism » of this social organization which she compared to Plato's « Great Beast ». All of these are the source of her resistance to conversion. Therefore she deliberately chose to stay on the threshold of the Church, simultaneously inside and outside, waiting. To justify her refusal to become a member of the mystical body of Christ, she also invoked the dignity of man which consists not so much in being part of a « body », even if it be the body of Christ, but in reaching the state of perfection where Christ lives in us. And to this rationale she adds the sharp-eyed observation that : « Undoubtedly there is real intoxication in being a member of the Mystical Body of Christ. But today a great many other mystical bodies, which have not Christ for their head, produce an intoxication in their members that to my way of thinking is of the same order »⁶⁸.

Voegelin was an optimist : if humanity has reached the lowest point in its spiritual life then « the depths of the turning around, the *periagogê* , are reached and the ascent from the cave toward the light

⁶⁷ S. Weil, « Spiritual Autobiography », in *Waiting for God* , Introduction by Leslie Fiedler, Harper and Row Publishers , New York, 1973, trans. Emma Craufurd, p. 62.

⁶⁸ *Id.*, *Waiting for God*, p. 81.

can begin »⁶⁹. And he calls attention, as a matter of fact, to previous movements of « return », be it under the form of « traditions » and « conservatisms »⁷⁰. For S. Weil, the essential question is that of finding the method by which to get rid of the evil of the totalitarian systems --brown, red, or whatever, to which « so many distraught minds » adhered believing they could find in them the « solid illusion of inward unity »⁷¹. Among the obstacles in the way of the advance to a better civilization to which she calls our attention, S. Weil singles out the absence of religious inspiration in our lives. For her, France's hope of victory does not depend on force⁷², on money or on american industry. France and Europe both are suffering from an inner disease and the remedy lies within. This *remedy* is a return to faith which seems to her « more realist than is realist policy »⁷³: « If a faith were to arise in this unhappy continent, victory would be rapid, certain and secure »⁷⁴. Of course, at the same time, she insisted on the distinction between religion proper, which she espoused, and pseudo-religion, or « insanity », which made an idol of a given social reality, in this instance idolizing the social reality of the nation, which Germany presented to us as a mirror in which we see « our own features, but magnified »⁷⁵.

America and England : the hope.

E. Voegelin and S. Weil—as H. Arendt herself— were confident in America and England : « In this situation, wrote Voegelin, there is a glimmer of hope, for the American and English democracies which most solidly in their institutions represent the truth of the soul are, at

⁶⁹ E. Voegelin, *CW*, vol. 6, *Anamnesis*, p. 369.

⁷⁰ *Id.* , *ibid.* , p. 387.

⁷¹ S. Weil, *The Need for Roots*, p. 235.

⁷² *Id.* , « A War of Religions », in *Selected Essays*,: « At one time all the walls in France were covered with posters : “We shall win because we are the strongers”. It was the silliest word spoken in this war...because force, not being divine, has its limits », [« Une guerre de religions », *Écrits de Londres*, p. 106.] My translation.

⁷³ *Id.* , *The Need for Roots*, p. 204.

⁷⁴ *Id.* , « A War of Religions », in *Selected Essays* , p. 218, [« Une guerre de religions », in *Écrits de Londres*, p. 107.]

⁷⁵ *Id.* , *ibid.* , p. 214.

the same time, existentially the strongest powers »⁷⁶. As a student, E. Voegelin had stayed for two years in America where he discovered the English and American philosophies of *common sense*. John Dewey, and then Thomas Reid, exerted an immediate and significant influence upon him and upon returning to Vienna in 1928, he published *Über die Form des amerikanischen Geistes* [*On the Form of the American Mind*]⁷⁷. Dismissed from the University of Vienna as a public opponent of National-Socialism⁷⁸, Voegelin went into exile in the United States, informing his correspondents that he wished « to become American as much as possible »⁷⁹, and as a matter of fact, he and his wife became American citizens in 1944. The Anglo-American philosophy of *common sense* appeared to him as a « genuine residue of *noesis* » able to resist ideologies, as « a branch or degree of *ratio* » such that a common sense inspired political theory would not consist of a body of principles elevated above the propositions of an empirical science of politics. In this spirit, Voegelin writes that : « the civilized *homo politicus* need not be a philosopher, but he must have *common sense* »⁸⁰. At the same time, E. Voegelin underlines the limits of *common sense* which might not confront these ideologies, since it is not « a substitute in our historical situation for a differentiated

⁷⁶ E. Voegelin, *CW*, vol. 5, *NSP*, p. 241, [*NSP*, p. 257.]

⁷⁷ *Id.*, *Über die Form des amerikanischen Geistes*, Tübingen, J.C.B. Mohr, (1928). [*On the Form of the American Mind*, *CW*, 1, transl. By Ruth Hein, ed. with an introd. by Jürgen Gebhart and Barry Cooper, Columbia, Londres : University of Missouri Press, 1995.]

⁷⁸ See particularly *Der autoritäre Staat*, Vienne, Springer, (1936), [*The authoritarian State : an Essay on the Problem of the Austrian State*, transl. by Ruth Hein, ed. with an introd. by Gilbert Weiss, historical commentary of the period by Erika Weinzierl, Columbia, Londres, University of Missouri Press, 1999] ; see also *Die politische Religionen* (1938) [*The Political Religions*], which was confiscated by the Gestapo while the name of his author was written on the black list.

⁷⁹ E. Voegelin, Lettre to Dr. Willibald Ploelchl, october 5th 1941 and Letter to Elisabeth Waal october 22nd 1942, in *Occasional Papers*, XIV, hrsg. von Peter J. Opitz und Dietmar Herz: « Stationen einer Rückkehr. Voegelins Weg nach München », München, 1999, p. 8. Yet, neither during his stay in Alabama nor in his position as *full professor*, from 1946, at the Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge, did he find a satisfying intellectual environment, and indeed he complained of being isolated and of not having talented American students.

⁸⁰ *Id.*, *CW*, vol. 6, *Anamnesis*, p. 411-412.

noesis »⁸¹. Except for a parenthesis of ten years spent in Munich – from 1958 to 1968⁸² – E. Voegelin's career took place in the United States, from 1938 till he died in 1985, which included twenty years of teaching courses in the American government sub-field. Reflecting on the different revolutions – American, French, Russian, or National-Socialist – , Voegelin emphasizes the fact that contrary to the French Revolution, which revolted against the « Christian order » in the name of Reason and the Supreme Being, the American Revolution did not show such animosity. He then concludes that the American Revolution was the only one which managed « to successfully create an open society with a minimum of violence required for its imposition »⁸³. The formula « open society » refers of course to Bergson with whom Voegelin had become familiar when he stayed in France, reading *Matter and Memory*, as well as *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*. But he was especially influenced by *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, which he read in 1932, a book in which he saw one of the two attempts of mysticism « to return to the rationality of thought beyond dogmatism ». The other attempt was that of Jean Bodin, the thinker of the XVIth century, who interested him as well, in 1934, when he was gathering materials for a study on this thinker which became part of his *History of Political Ideas*. In this connection, Voegelin singles out the importance of Bodin's idea of the sacred hierarchical order which he developed when Europe was convulsed by the wars of religion. According to Voegelin, Bodin's conception of the sacred hierarchical order of State and Society according to which the king submits only to God alone, while his vassals submit to God as well as to the king, and while the subjects submit to the king, to the magistrates and to God –, has remained « the structure of Europe's inner state order up until the propagation of the new secularized theories of legal gradations ».⁸⁴ Voegelin also notes that Bodin went so far as to espouse the hope that

⁸¹ *Ibid.* , p. 412.

⁸² On January 27th 1958 a chair in political science was created in Munich upon which E. Voegelin was elected. He delivered there his inaugural speech « Science, Politics and Gnosis ». He quickly built an Institute of Political Science attracting personalities such as Henry Kissinger, Michael Oakeshott, Hannah Arendt, Raymond Polin, but contrary to his hopes he had but few contacts with his colleagues. During this decade he published among others his lectures of the summer semester 1964, *Hitler and the Germans*.

⁸³ *Id.* , *CW*, vol. 34, *AR.* , p. 140.

⁸⁴ *Id.* , *CW*, vol. 5, *PR.*, p. 44.

the King of France should be « if not a mystic, at least advised by a mystic like himself in order to stand above the dogmatomachy »⁸⁵. Without regarding Bergson as being of equal importance as Bodin, for Voegelin these two thinkers remain - « the representative figures for the understanding of order in times of spiritual disorder »⁸⁶.

S. Weil lived only a few months in New York where she unwillingly followed her parents into exile from May to November 1942. In her « *Demande pour être admise en Angleterre* », which she probably wrote between January and May 1941, she argued : « I always had sympathy for /England/ the english intellectual culture and since I was ten years old, I always took a real pleasure in studying english prose and poetry-writers. This attraction arose and reinforced itself later on in my life and culminated when England took a clear position against the Germans' designs of universal domination »⁸⁷. Feeling that she « deserted » her countrymen and wishing to share their fate, and wanting to be useful, she managed, thanks to her friend Maurice Schumann, who was then the spokesman for Free France, to be sent back to London for the last months of her short life which ended in August 1943. Short as was her experience of the Anglo-Saxon world, she nevertheless wrote: « although England is wasted by the sickness of the age she has such continuity of history and such a living tradition that some of her roots are still nourished by a past which has bathed in the light of mysticism »⁸⁸.

In *The Need for Roots* S. Weil expresses contempt for Bergson. The concept of « *élan vital* », which characterizes for him the heroes and the mystics, was for her nothing but a form of pragmatism : « In Bergson, religious faith appears after the manner of a “Pink” pill [...] which imparts an astonishing amount of vitality »⁸⁹. For S. Weil, love

⁸⁵ *Id.* , *CW*, vol. 34, *AR.* , p. 138.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.* , p. 139.

⁸⁷ S. Weil, *Demande pour être admise en Angleterre* in Robert Mencherini, « Simone Weil dans les archives judiciaires d'Aix en Provence », *CSW* XVII, n°4, déc. 1994, pp. 327-362. [Document N°2 : pièce 120], in *OC.* , IV, 1, *Écrits de Marseille*, [EM], textes établis présentés et annotés par Robert Chenavier avec la collaboration de Monique Broc-Lapeyre, Marie-Annette Fournayron, Pierre Kaplan, Florence de Lussy et Jean Riaud, Paris, Gallimard, 2008, p. 447. My translation.

⁸⁸ *Id.* , « A War of Religions », in *Selected Essays*, p. 216-217, [« Une guerre de religions », in *Écrits de Londres*, pp. 105-106.]

⁸⁹ *Id.* , *The Need for Roots*, p. 239.

for truth is rather *consent* to death : : « what is really marvellous, in the case of the mystics and the saints, is not that they have more life, a more intense life than that of other people, but that in them truth should have become life. In this world of ours, life, the *élan vital* so dear to Bergson, is but a lie ; only death is true »⁹⁰. However, for her, the remedy for this inner disease from which France and Europe suffer, necessitates « mysticism [MG13]», that is the union of the soul with the absolute good : « The transformation is the opposite of what took place when men followed the devil », ⁹¹ she writes. Such an union transforms forever the soul's nature, and while S. Weil acknowledges that we cannot hope that a whole people might accomplish this, it is nonetheless possible that a religion oriented towards mysticism might « impregnate » the life of a whole people : « all that is needed is to place it [this infinitely small thing which is God] at the center of life, whether of a people or of an individual soul. Everything that is not directly in contact with it should be, as it were, impregnated by it through the mediation of beauty »⁹².

We may temporarily conclude with this quotation of E. Voegelin which is true for both of our authors :

« The life of people in political community cannot be defined as a profane realm, in which we are concerned only with legal questions and the organization of power. A community is also a realm of religious order, and the knowledge of a political condition will be incomplete with respect to a decisive point, firstly, if it does not take into account the religious forces inherent in a society and the symbols through which these are expressed or, secondly, if it does include the religious forces but does not recognize them as such and translates them into areligious categories. »⁹³

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⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 238.

⁹¹ *Id.* , « A War of Religions », in *Selected Essays*, p. 214.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 215.

⁹³ E. Voegelin, *CW*, vol. 5 : *RP*, p. 70.