

Simone Weil's Practice of Attention as a Ritual of Prayer: Robert Bresson and Georges Bernanos

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In Simone Weil's religious and metaphysical philosophy, the concept of attention is a human practice of concentrated awareness that can be directed toward a single thought, an object, another being, the self, or one's soul. Attention is a learned practice, not an innate human characteristic. The practice of attention is integral to Weil's philosophy because it assists one to identify attachment and through introspection, transcend affliction. The curé in Robert Bresson's *Le Journal d'un curé de campagne* (*The Diary of a Country Priest*, 1951) loses his capacity for prayer when his faith becomes an attachment, and yet, his soul desires union with God, and thus grace. Grace, from the perspective of the curé, will provide reparation for his affliction: the acceptance of himself and the burden of his faith, the circumstances of his childhood, terminal illness, and the anticipation of death. This article engages in analysis of *Journal*, through the lens of Weil's philosophical concept, attention, while it also examines the parallel between Weil and the curé in their demeanor, compromised health, and emphasis toward the ritual (or habit) of prayer. Georges Bernanos, author of the novel that Bresson adapted, shares a similar view of grace, which supports the comparison of Weil's and Bresson's attention toward the soul.

Simone Weil's Concept of Attention as a Means for Encountering God and Divine Grace

When attention and prayer are aligned the soul is directed exclusively toward God. Weil believed that the greater the quality of attention the higher the attainment of truth: "Christ likes us to prefer truth to him because, before being Christ, he is truth. If one turns aside from him to go towards the truth, one will not go far before falling into his arms" (Weil, 1950: 36). Truth leads to illumination: our efforts of attention are rewarded when a light which is in exact proportion to them will flood the soul. The light I refer to is that which exists beyond Plato's cave. Illumination, that is the light, is accessible only to those who detach from unnecessary attachment. Weil writes: "Everything that is worthless shuns the light" (1952: 51). This is in part true, but not in a literal sense. Those of us who shun the light remain within the darkness of the cave, bound by attachment, while others who detach receive illumination. Attention that is self-focused and introspective enables awareness to be perceived that first acknowledges the attachment, then initiates the process of detachment. The attention in question should be of a considered form. Weil discerned that one should focus attention as one would during the ritual of prayer.

Weil regards the attention that is associated with education as instrumental in learning its potential. She uses the example of school exercises that enable the formation of attention to be attained by the students. This will in time cultivate an aptitude for a higher level of attention, an

intuitive attention, which Weil compares with the ritual of prayer: “school exercises use an inferior, discursive form of attention, the one that reasons; but, drawn on by a suitable method, it can prepare for the appearance in the soul of another type of attention, that which is the highest, intuitive attention” (2015: 140). Attention of an intuitive nature is attention that is uninhibited. It remains pure in intention however, it is expansive and exhibits a level of intensity and purpose, while still being considered in approach. Intuitive attention leads to creation, invention, discovery; it pertains to relations with others and with the self. It was Weil’s conviction that when intuitive attention is turned directly toward God, it constitutes true prayer (140). In order to gain the aptitude for true prayer, one must first develop the capacity for a higher level of attention, an attention that is concentrated and pure. Only this level of attention can bring forth illumination.

The discipline that school exercises provide, however mundane they may appear, in time will garner the capacity to receive illumination through the application of attention that is of a higher quality. The process of learning cultivates an awareness that is otherwise not attained:

If we concentrate our attention on trying to solve a problem of geometry, and if at the end of an hour we are no nearer to doing so than at the beginning, we have nevertheless been making progress each minute of that hour in another more mysterious dimension. Without our knowing or feeling it, this apparently barren effort has brought more light into the soul. The result will one day be discovered in prayer. (1950: 67)

When more light is brought into the soul, one becomes closer to truth. Truth is illuminated by the light, which is God. Truth represents all that is good and pertains to good (Hand, 1986: 63-4). For this to be achieved one must first establish desire as it relates to attention. Weil writes: “If there is a real desire, if the thing desired is light, the desire for light produces it. There is a real desire when there is an effort of attention. It is really light that is desired if all other incentives are absent” (1950: 68). The concentration involved in attention should not, according to Weil, become “confused with a kind of muscular effort” (70). The desire for light and one’s aptitude for prayer should refrain from exertion that equates to force: “Saint Augustine remarks that attention should never be forced. He maintains that prayer should be shortened to suit the capacity of the soul” (Hand, 1986: 92). And he believed that “to prolong prayer is to have the soul throbbing with continued pious emotion toward him to whom we pray” (20). Rather than forcing oneself to initiate attention or, being forceful during the practice of attention, in this context education, it would benefit oneself to recognize what provides fulfilment and thus pleasure and joy. Desire will then be led by such fulfilment (Weil, 1950: 71). The desire that draws God down to enter the void is the same desire whose incentive is really the light. To reiterate: one’s desire for light produces illumination (71).

It is established by Weil that one must achieve total detachment from all imposed or self-imposed attachment for a higher level of attention to be attained. The presence of evil and thus any residual attachment will only weaken one’s ability to practice higher (intuitive) attention. Conversely, if resistance is apparent where attention is concerned, Weil is reassuring in her assertion that “every time we really concentrate our attention, we destroy the evil in ourselves” (72). Therefore, when one participates in a higher quality of attention, the residual attachments will improve by way of increased awareness and patience. Patience is essential to reach fullness of attention. To wait in patience by not seeking truth, is to one’s advantage. It is more advantageous to practice attention in preparation to receive, as opposed to seeking with

intention. This relates to the “muscular effort” referred to by Weil, which she considered detrimental. Weil writes: “above all our thought should be empty, waiting, not seeking anything, but ready to receive in its naked truth the object which is to penetrate it” (72). To empty one’s thought and wait but not seek is to pay attention in emptiness. Attention in emptiness but with desire directed toward God will draw him down to us. The object Weil speaks of is God; it is God that penetrates our thought with truth. The diverse knowledge one shall acquire through attention and subsequently detachment will assist in the orientation of the soul toward grace, and thus, transformation.

According to Weil, it is rare that one has the capacity to direct attention toward another who experiences suffering or affliction. It is rarer still to show attention that is sincere, derived from the soul and with pure intention. In fact, Weil considers attention within this context to be a miracle: “it is almost a miracle; it *is* a miracle. Nearly all those who think they have this capacity do not possess it. Warmth of heart, impulsiveness, pity are not enough” (75). For one to attain the means to direct attention toward those in need, one must first empty one’s own soul “to receive into oneself the being it is looking at, just as he is, in all his truth” (75). For Weil, one’s capacity for the love of God should be equal to that of one’s neighbor, in other words, humanity at large. The recognition that the sufferer exists is imperative here, as immediately it confirms that one is initiating pure attention toward another in need; it is exhibiting awareness and acknowledgement that is external to oneself and one’s own needs.

Affliction was the impetus for three separate and direct contacts with Catholicism that Weil experienced. These were significant and marked a distinct development in her philosophy as related to religion, spirituality, and mysticism. After an episode of voluntary factory work, during which Weil suffered physically at the hands of industrial machines and the relentless demands of the labor, she absorbed through her empathic and altruistic tendencies, the profound affliction of those she worked alongside. At the conclusion of this period, in 1936, when Weil’s health was once again compromised, she was taken by her parents to Portugal to convalesce, where in a Portuguese village during a patronal festival she engaged in the first of three contacts with the divine. The second contact was in 1937 at Assisi, in a twelfth-century Romanesque chapel of Santa Maria degli Angeli. A resonance remained of the purity in the place where Saint Francis used to pray. In this moment, Weil was overwhelmed and compelled “for the first time in my life to go down on my knees” (34). In 1938, the third contact occurred at Solesmes, when Weil, by way of concentrated attention, was able to transcend the suffering she incurred from a severe headache to have direct contact with the divine.¹

In Solesmes, during Holy Week, Weil met a young English Catholic who imparted his wisdom regarding the metaphysical English poets of the seventeenth century; of those poets, it was George Herbert, and in particular, his poem “Love”, that had an enduring impact on Weil.² Weil learned Herbert’s poem by heart and when she suffered from a headache, she

¹ Further to Weil’s direct experience of God, the divine: “Letters of Farewell,” Letter IV: Spiritual Autobiography in Simone Weil, *Waiting for God (Attente de Dieu)*, 1950), translation by Emma Craufurd (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1951), pp. 28-49.

² George Herbert (1593-1633), “Love,” is the third of three poems published in *The Temple: Sacred Poems and Private Ejaculations* (Cambridge: Printed by Thomas Buck and Roger Daniel, 1633). In the audio commentary for *Journal*, Peter Cowie references Herbert when he observes that Bresson accentuates glass and often the character is waiting at glass doors creating the appearance of being visible and yet closed off. He is referring in this instance to the curé arriving at the manor: “George

would recite the words with concentration that was reminiscent of prayer, the higher level of attention she suggests one practice:

Often, at the culminating point of a violent headache, I make myself say it [Herbert's poem, "Love"] over, concentrating all my attention upon it and clinging with all my soul to the tenderness it enshrines. I used to think I was merely reciting it as a beautiful poem, but without my knowing it the recitation had the virtue of a prayer. It was during one of these recitations that, as I told you, Christ himself came down and took possession of me. (35)

The recitation of Herbert's poem "Love" had the virtue of a prayer because, when Weil concentrated her attention on the words, it released the need for her to reside in her affliction. The poem redirected her attention from focusing solely on the attachment, which was the headache she suffered. Thus, Weil was able to temporarily detach from affliction. She shifted her consciousness beyond the self and her own needs. When Weil emptied her thoughts of affliction, she gained the capacity to focus on the poem, which in this instance represents the divine. Reciting Herbert's poem initiates Weil's desire as movement toward God. It is her desire that draws God down: "He only comes to those who ask him to come; and he cannot refuse to come to those who implore him long, often and ardently" (71). Weil implored God through the concentration of her attention that was derived from her soul, a soul that contained the void caused by attachment. When desire is directed toward God it engages the soul. By engaging one's soul with God, one shall experience the presence of grace.

Attention as it was Conceived by Robert Bresson in his Approach to the Cinematograph

Through the attention Bresson imposed on the cinematograph he conveyed a realism that required participation from the audience: "what I attempt with my films is to touch what's real. Perhaps I'm obsessed with reality" (Bresson, 1966). Bresson considered what is real to be beneath the surface, a subliminal reality. It was Bresson's preference to reveal as opposed to show his intentions to the audience. Bresson in 1966: "Someone once said I'm one 'who imposes order.' I prefer that to 'director' like on a stage because I don't see a stage anywhere". When Bresson imposes order he focuses concentrated attention toward the process of the cinematograph (During, 2012: 171). His attention, I believe, was drawn toward the reciprocal exchange that occurs within this process. The reciprocity I refer to is the relationship between what Bresson himself can see and what is seen by the participants involved: "See at once, in what you are seeing, what will be seen" (Bresson, 1975: 69). Divination is critical to this exchange.

Bresson encouraged a reciprocity that was based on divination. Divination transpired as a mutual interchange between realism and the supernatural during his process of filmmaking. Bresson's cinema involves a dialogue between the temporal-material realm and supernatural reality. The dialogue consists of an unspoken but significant presence which is cultivated by Bresson, both in his creative process, and for those viewers who have the potential to divine

Herbert, the religious poet of the seventeenth century, wrote those famous lines 'a man may look on glass, on it may stay his eye'. Peter Cowie, audio commentary for Robert Bresson *Journal d'un curé de campagne* (*The Diary of a Country Priest*, 1951), (Criterion Collection, DVD, 2003), (00:17:32).

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what he only partially reveals. This ability of Bresson's to create while still retaining an element of restraint demonstrates the filmmaker's sophistication. Divination is present in the collaboration between Bresson and his models (or protagonists), and crucially, in the perception and participation of the audience and their experience of his cinema. If one is to participate as Bresson encourages, it requires a higher level of attention that is intuitive, as Weil has suggested.

Divination relies on one's intuition, where one intuits what is perhaps initially unseen. Intuition derives from what is instinctively felt as opposed to a more rational approach. For Bresson, the camera represents a neutral component in the transition from conception to the recording of the film. It is neutral in that it records what is being played out in front of the lens without the complication of intelligence: "Divination – how can one not associate that name with the two sublime machines I use for my work? Camera and tape recorder carry me far away from the intelligence which complicates everything" (1975: 88). What remained of enduring interest to Bresson is not what is shown by his models in character, but what they conceal: "Cinematographic films made of inner movements *which are seen*" (50). Bresson believes that by capturing what is concealed, he reveals "inner movements," which are by normal standards indiscernible to most. The interiority Bresson discloses relates to the soul, whether of his models, or regarding the viewer's perception: "Your camera catches not only physical movements that are inapprehensible by pencil, brush or pen, but also certain states of soul" (66).

The divination Bresson associates with the camera and what it records is the realism he intended to portray. When Bresson is asked: "To you, what is the supernatural?" He replies: "It's reality, a precise reality, that we get as close to as possible, almost penetrating things. That's the supernatural" (Bresson, 1965). Realism, then, for Bresson, is to penetrate through the exterior façade to reveal interior movement; that is, the supernatural. In Bresson's cinema, realism and the supernatural remain harmonious and exist simultaneously. Intuitive attention and divination refrain from the over complication suggested by Bresson, a complication which occurs in the mind (1975: 48). Bresson considers the crude real that is recorded by the camera to capture what was intended in its conception, without external interference that would impede divination. Divination draws the viewer toward a subliminal reality to reveal the interiority of the character. Reciprocity is apparent between what is composed by Bresson, recorded by the camera, and translated by the audience. It is a mutual exchange that if participated as Bresson intended, the attention of the audience will intuit as opposed to intellectualize the experience of the film.

Bresson extends intuitive attention toward the models that he casts in his cinema. Often there is an unspoken exchange where divination contributes to achieve an unveiling of movement, a movement that is internal:

Human Models: Movement from the exterior to the interior. (Actors: movement from the interior to the exterior.) The thing that matters is not what they show me but what they hide from me and, above all, *what they do not suspect is in them*. Between them and me: telepathic exchanges, divination. (6)

The telepathic exchange Bresson refers to is based on his ability to see into the models he engages; to divine himself what already exists and provide an environment conducive for the models to reveal themselves: "Model. You illumine him and he illumines you. The light you

receive from him is added to the light he receives from you” (52). Donald Richie relays a conversation with Anne Wiazemsky, who played Marie in *Au hasard Balhazar*: “Anne said, of course she didn’t create her performance, she just stood there. What Bresson wanted already existed in her which he was unveiling by taking her picture. The wonderful x-ray eye that he had, where he can look at you and know who you are” (2004).

Bresson’s attention required from his models a certain restraint of emotion and mechanical delivery of lines until “something ‘clicks’ in the character, and they give me what I’m after, but they give it without realizing it” (1965). The model unveils to Bresson a latent existence which is considered divine, that is, the soul: “On the screen, I’d like to have something more than bodies in motion. I’d like to be able to make perceptible the soul and the superior presence, which is omnipresent, this entity which is God.”³ It is a priority for Bresson to make visible what is not seen, at least at a superficial level. He manages to capture the soul and presence of God by utilizing his own ability to divine and thus see what others cannot.

For the attention of the audience to be drawn toward what is latent as opposed to external and expressive, Bresson prefers the actions of his models to recover, in a sense, the automatism of real life. He believes that our gestures and words are essentially automatic: “Our hands are autonomous. Our gestures, our limbs, are practically autonomous. They’re not under our command. That’s cinema. What cinema is not is thinking out a gesture, thinking out words” (1966). This is reaffirmed by Michel de Montaigne: “*Tout mouvement nous découvre*” (“*Every movement reveals us*”). But it only reveals us if it is automatic (not commanded, not willed)” (*apud* Bresson, 1975: 83). Movement that is automatic and not premeditated reveals one’s authentic self. One could say that one’s authentic self is derived from the soul. This pertains to the realism (the supernatural) that Bresson aspired to achieve in his cinema.

Divination describes the way in which Bresson not only sees when he creates, but it also identifies the mutual exchange that is reciprocal between each encounter he has during his creative process. I consider that through this attentive approach he implores this way of seeing from the audience by applying a strategic level of restraint. Thus, Bresson intentionally limits what is available to the viewer at a superficial level, and he requires one to look beyond surface reality to pursue a more resonant meaning that exceeds one’s initial interpretation. When the viewer participates by way of divination, intuitively, they are using a higher level of attention, which in turn expands their perception. As we have learned from Weil: intuitive attention offers expansion and awakens the soul to spiritual awareness and the presence of God. An audience that utilizes intuitive attention to witness the state of the soul has achieved what Bresson intended, by simultaneously engaging their own soul with the supernatural. This practice is the orientation of the soul toward grace.

³ François Weyergans in response to Bresson: “This presence you are very conscious of, do you try to translate it with a camera or is it something that appears in the camera by itself?” Bresson: “No, it’s primordial. It was there from the start.” Weyergans: “In you?” Bresson: “In me, of course.” Robert Bresson, “Bresson: Without a Trace” (*Cinéastes de notre temps*, 1965), *Un condamné à mort s’est échappé, ou Le vent souffle où il vent* (*A Man Escaped or The Wind Bloweth Where it Listeth*, 1956), (Criterion Collection, DVD, 2013), (00:50:34).

A Higher Level of Attention as a Ritual of Prayer in *Le Journal d'un curé de campagne* (*The Diary of a Country Priest*, 1951)

There is a mutual concern associated with one's faith in God between the curé of Ambricourt (Claude Laydu) in *Le Journal d'un curé de campagne* and Weil in her own spiritual development. Both endeavor to question the devotion they have for God by gauging their capacity for prayer. One's capacity for prayer is dependent on one's aptitude for attention. The curé's and Weil's aptitude for attention is compromised in part because of their failing health. They both suffer from affliction that is inescapable: the curé's deterioration is depicted on screen until inevitably he is diagnosed with stomach cancer, and Weil exhibited physical weakness from infancy that in adulthood manifested in fatigue and recurring severe headaches.⁴ The curé and Weil also share a somewhat deliberate tendency to remain ignorant of their physical decline, which contributes to their unavoidable fate of premature death.

The curé as the protagonist of *Journal* is internally conflicted by his health, but also by the burden of his devotion to God and his standing as priest in the rural village of Ambricourt, France. Bresson wrote the screenplay based on the novel written by Georges Bernanos of the same title, completed in 1936.⁵ The story is set during the early 1930s when the curé, who is the newly appointed priest of the local church, navigates a less than encouraging reception from a community that is lacking in faith but not in contempt. The curé is treated with disdain and suspicion due to his fragile appearance and ingenuous demeanor. A parallel is drawn by Bernanos and reiterated by Bresson, through the analogy of Christ's passion in relation to the curé's affliction: "Whatever I were to do, were I to pour out my last drop of blood (and indeed sometimes I fancy the village has nailed me up here on a cross and is at least watching me die) I could never possess it" (Bernanos, 1936: 40). It is implied by Bernanos that both the curé's parents were alcoholics, which is reflected in his solitary diet consisting of wine and bread (96). Frequent diary entries that are written by the curé reveal to the audience his interior mind and the state of his soul.⁶ Bresson uses pleonasm for emphasis, such as, an overlapping of the curé recording in his diary a scene he will then narrate, and following this, the viewer shall see the same scene projected on screen.

The curé of Torcy (André Guibert) is the young curé's superior and mentor who offers support and firm but wise guidance. In the manor reside the count (Jean Riveyre) and countess (Marie-Monique Arkell) and their daughter, Chantal (Nicole Ladmiral), who is the curé's antagonist. The curé's relationship with the countess, however, is reciprocal in nature. It is their

⁴ Simone Pétrement considered Weil's compromised health at infancy to be related to her mother's (Madame Bernard Weil) attack of appendicitis, for which she had to undergo rigorous treatment while still nursing Weil as a newly born. Simone Pétrement, *Simone Weil: A Life*, translation by Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976), pp. 7-8.

⁵ It is of interest to note that Weil corresponded with Georges Bernanos in 1938. Her letter expresses admiration for *Le Journal d'un curé de campagne* (*The Diary of a Country Priest*, 1936) and *Les Grands Cimetières sous la lune* (*The Great Cemeteries under the Moon*, 1938). Weil then continues at length concerning the Spanish Civil War and her intention to enlist. *Simone Weil: Seventy Letters, Personal and Intellectual Windows on a Thinker*, translation by Richard Rees (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2015), pp. 105-109. Also, regarding Weil and Bernanos: Pétrement, 277-278, 332-333.

⁶ Peter Cowie explains suffering in the context of Bernanos; he notes that Bresson was drawn to Bernanos for the same reason he was drawn to Dostoevsky: "both writers Bresson has commented, are searching for the human soul" (2003: 00:19:55).

spiritual encounter that redeems the countess's soul from the loss of her child, while providing solace for the curé in the form of restoration of self. The curé leaves for Lille to be seen by a doctor, only to receive the diagnosis of stomach cancer. Though he passes away soon after, he will accept grace, the divine, when his soul is reunited with God.

The fullness of the curé's attention during the ritual of prayer is indicative of his desire that is directed toward God: "I never endeavored to pray so much. At first quietly, calmly, then with an almost desperate will that made my heart tremble" (Bresson, 1951: 00:25:44) (Fig.1).



Fig. 1. The curé of Ambricourt (Claude Laydu) in despair, as he doubts his capacity for prayer, yet he contains the desire to pray and contends that God could not ask for more (Bresson, 1951: 00:28:41).

The curé's desperate will represents the over-exertion of attention that Weil disparages; yet his need for atonement endures, which leaves him entirely depleted. This is evident when his ability to engage with God in prayer requires from him too much: "I know, of course, that the desire to pray is a prayer in itself, that God can ask no more than that of us. But this was no duty which I discharged. At that moment I needed prayer as much as I needed air to draw my breath or oxygen to fill my blood" (Bernanos, 1936: 103).⁷ The curé's desire to pray remains despite his perpetual fear that his connection to the divine is an illusion and his sins will prevail. He relentlessly questions the attention he directs toward God in the form of prayer: "For weeks I had not prayed, had not been able to pray. Unable? Who knows? That supreme grace has got to be earned like any other, and I no doubt had ceased to merit it" (141).

⁷ Desire that is directed toward God must derive from the heart in the form of love; desire is the voice of the heart, according to Augustine: "He who prays with desire sings in his heart, even though his tongue be silent. But if he prays without desire he is dumb before God, even though his voice sounds in the ears of men" (On Ps. 86, 1). Thomas A. Hand. O.S.A. *Augustine on Prayer* (New York: Catholic Book Publishing Corp., 1986), pp. 20-21.

The curé's spirit of prayer (or "habit" as described by Bernanos) (242) is marred by his self-doubt. This is reminiscent of Weil's view that she was unworthy of the sacraments. Both the curé and Weil carry with them an inhibition that stemmed from their sense of inadequacy, which imposed itself on their residing faith.⁸ Weil writes to Reverend Father Perrin in 1942: "During this time of spiritual progress I had never prayed. I was afraid of the power of suggestion that is in prayer" (1950: 37). Weil continues regarding her absence of prayer: "Until last September I had never once prayed in all my life, at least not in the literal sense of the word. I had never said any words to God, either out loud or mentally. I had never pronounced a liturgical prayer" (37). When an opportunity came for Weil to learn the "Our Father" (or Lord's Prayer) in Greek and recite it by heart, she did so incessantly and with pure attention.⁹ The effect of this practice on Weil is described as follows:

At times the very first words tear my thoughts from my body and transport it to a place outside space where there is neither perspective nor point of view [...] there is silence, a silence which is not an absence of sound, but which is the object of a positive sensation, more positive than that of sound. Noises, if there are any, only reach me after crossing this silence. Sometimes, also, during this recitation or at other moments, Christ is present with me in person, but his presence is infinitely more real, more moving, more clear than on that first occasion when he took possession of me. (37-39)

Christ's possession of Weil and of the curé is apparent in the purity of attention they direct toward God. It is clear by Weil's description that, as in her first visitation from Christ, transcendence occurs from the temporal plane to the supernatural, where Christ is there to greet her. The encounter between Weil and Christ has intensified, which I believe is due to Weil's refinement in her ability to practice attention that is aligned with her intuition. This is evident in her discernment of when not to pray: "I say it [the "Our Father"] again out of sheer pleasure, but I only do it if I really feel the impulse" (38).

Though the curé's soul is oriented toward God as Weil's is, his internal struggle appears greater, and his doubts persist as he writes in his diary: "I only wanted to show complete acceptance and surrender. The same solitude, the same silence, but this time, no hope in breaking through the obstacle. There's no obstacle. Nothing. God has left me. Of this, I am sure" (Bresson, 1951: 00:29:11). The silence Weil suggests as "the object of a positive sensation" is the presence of Christ, as opposed to that of the curé for whom solitude and silence become the obstacle he is unable to break through: "Behind me there was nothing, and before me was a wall. A black wall" (00:29:03). It is as if the capacity of the curé's soul for prayer has been exhausted and his faith in God has grown to become an attachment. Force that is associated with attention in the ritual of prayer is detrimental to the soul, as both Weil and Augustine have stated.

⁸ Further to the curé's lack of self-worth concerning his childhood: Georges Bernanos, *Le Journal d'un curé de campagne* (*The Diary of a Country Priest*, 1936), translation by Pamela Morris (Massachusetts, Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2002), 70, 142, 235, 275-276, 280.

⁹ This occurred in Le Poët, France, after Weil had been teaching Greek to Gustave Thibon. Weil soon began working in the grape harvest, where she would continue to frequently recite the prayer: "If during the recitation my attention wanders or goes to sleep, in the minutest degree, I begin again until I have once succeeded in going through it with absolute attention" (1950: 38).

The curé enters a significant spiritual exchange with the soul of the bereft countess at the manor (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2. The curé, left, and the countess (Marie-Monique Arkell) during their exchange at the manor, which is reciprocal, in part, because of attachment, thus, they each contain a soul that suffers in affliction (Bresson, 1951: 00:52:16).

The countess is bereft because she is grieving the loss of her son and thus her faith in God has been reduced to suspicion and accusation. The curé speaks to the countess: “God will break you” (00:44:45). The countess: “Break me? (The countess turns to look at a photo of her deceased son) God took my son from me. What more can he do to me? I no longer fear him”. The curé: “God took him away for a time, but your hardness?” The countess interrupts: “Silence”. The curé: “No, I will not be silent. The coldness of your heart may keep you from him forever”. The countess: “That’s blasphemy! God doesn’t take revenge!”

The conversation evolves and with perseverance the curé persuades the countess to detach from her grief, detach from the blame and resentment that has accumulated and consumed her. Affliction has isolated the countess, and her heart no longer desires to communicate with God. The loss of her son has established a void in her soul, which she in turn fills with pain: the countess’s bereavement is an attachment which caused her to lose faith in the divine. The curé, in his attention (as compassion) toward the countess, observes her indifference to God as she struggles to justify, as Weil has done, the necessary existence of good and evil; he recognizes this because he shares the same residual doubt, the same question of God. Thus, the curé is bound to his own attachment: an attachment of faith and an overpowering need for grace and God’s acceptance. The soul of the curé and that of the countess acquire during their encounter reprieve from the desperate plight to be released from internal affliction.

In this devastating scene with the countess, the curé draws her in with supplication to release her soul from affliction. When the countess’s soul is oriented toward God, her son will be returned to her by order of the divine. He will be returned to her, but only when she yields

to God, unconditionally. However, her affliction extends beyond that of her son to the relationship with her husband and daughter, the count and Louise, respectively. The blatant infidelities of the count and contentious attitude shown by Chantal only reaffirm the isolation experienced by the countess. The curé can relate to being felt cast aside and solitary, when even attention to God in the form of prayer appears too difficult. At the height of their exchange the countess tears the medallion (or locket) from round her neck containing a photograph of her infant son and throws it into the fire. In haste, the curé retrieves it as the countess drops to her knees in submission: “forgive me,” she says (00:51:56). “God is no torturer. He wants us to be merciful with ourselves”, replies the curé.

The curé then blesses the countess and leaves the manor for Dombasle. Upon his arrival home he receives a small package and letter from the countess. She has sent to him the now empty medallion, still fastened to the broken chain. The curé narrates the letter which expresses gratitude for the peace he has given her soul (Bernanos, 1936: 173). The following morning, however, he learns that the countess has since passed. It was the curé’s intuitive attention that allowed the countess to receive the presence of grace. Grace will not be permitted to enter the curé’s soul until he learns to accept his own fate. The curé’s fate is his passing on to the realm of the divine, where he will no longer suffer affliction. Absolution will be granted to him when he has reconciled with himself¹⁰ (296), as his final words reveal: “Does it matter? Grace is everywhere” (298).

In conclusion, for one to cultivate an aptitude for attention of the highest degree, attention that is intuitive, a pure attention, it is necessary to acquire an awareness of the soul. When the state of the soul is in equilibrium one’s capacity for attention is increased. Thus, attention must first be directed toward the soul because the soul is the source from which attention will emanate. It has been established that a higher level of attention is not an inherent human quality, but a learned practice: learned either by forced circumstances, such as, affliction, or garnered over time through experience. This relates to attention in any context and in all areas of human life. To engage with attention as Weil suggests, will require patience. Attention that is practiced with concentrated awareness will cause one to become confronted with fate or drawn from the temporal to the supernatural, as Weil intended.

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¹⁰Further to the curé’s self-acceptance, or grace: “The strange mistrust I had of myself, of my own being, has flown, I believe for ever. That conflict is done. I cannot understand it any more. I am reconciled with myself, to the poor, poor shell of me” (296). Also, see Michael R. Tobin, *Georges Bernanos: The Theological Source of His Art* (Montreal, Quebec: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2007), p. 105.

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