

THE POLITICAL THOUGHT OF SIMONE WEIL AND BRITISH MODERNISM

By

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ABSTRACT

This project will consider the political thought of Simone Weil and compare it the ideas of the influential British modernist authors, Virginia Woolf and Ford Madox Ford. The project will rely heavily on the Woolf and Ford's works *Three Guineas* and *Parade's End*, respectively. This project also takes into careful consideration the historical and social context of the era that includes the interwar period of the early twentieth century.

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DEDICATION

This one is for Piper.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Abstract.....	ii
Dedication.....	iii
Acknowledgements.....	iv
Table of Contents.....	v
Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1: The Political Thought of Simone Weil and Virginia Woolf’s <i>Three Guineas</i>	10
Chapter 2: Simone Weil’s “Iliad” and Ford Madox Ford’s <i>Parade’s End</i> : A Study of Literature and Politics in Regards to “Force” and War.....	43
Conclusion.....	66
Notes.....	69
Works Cited/ Works Consulted.....	79

INTRODUCTION

Simone Weil (1909 - 1943) was a profound French thinker, philosopher, and to some, a mystic. To academics, she is often overlooked or dismissed; however, there is an increasingly growing amount of scholarship on various aspects of her thought. Much of her thought, and the concern of Weil scholars, frequently revolve around her ideas about the soul, Catholicism, and Christianity in general; however, what is still being explored is her political thought. She was highly politically-minded and frequently participated as an activist during her lifetime. In her life she had supported the Reds during the Spanish Revolution, worked for a local Marxist movement, was a pacifist, worked for the Free French Forces (*Forces Françaises Libres*), and wrote tirelessly and passionately about these various causes. Although she only lived to be thirty-four years old, she amassed a surprisingly large and varied amount of essays, philosophies, letters, and notes. Through reading her work, one discovers that she often defies a concept of categorization and was an extremely unique thinker especially for the modern era.

My goal in this thesis is to connect her political ideas and philosophy with British literary Modernism. Although there is little scholarship comparing her works to literature and to modernist authors, several connections and opportunities emerge from which to explore overlapping perspectives between Weil and modernist authors. In order to do this comparison, I will compare Simone Weil's political thought with the concerns and literature of the British modernists Virginia Woolf and Ford Madox Ford.

Most of these writers' concerns stem from similar cultural and political concerns, particularly those of the inter-war period in the early twentieth century: ideology, women's rights, equality, economics, individual and identity politics, and nationalistic propaganda. The most basic and the most immediate threat to this era would be the onset of war. Europe recently

experienced World War One and was witnessing the horrors of the Spanish Civil War, in addition to facing the rise of fascism, Hitler, totalitarianism, and World War Two. The concern over these political and cultural ideologies found its way into several different realms including literature, philosophy, and journalism.

This thesis will look at Simone Weil's response to these concerns by studying her political thought. I will specifically focus on her ideas about the rise of ideology and war as found in her texts of *The Need for Roots* and "The Iliad or the Poem of Force," and compare it to the thought of Modernist British authors' responses, specifically, Virginia Woolf in *Three Guineas* and Ford Madox Ford in *Parade's End*, with special consideration given to the historical and social context of the era.

Overview of Simone Weil's Political Philosophy

Simone Weil was born in Paris, France, in 1909 to an agnostic French-Jewish family. She grew up with a private education and eventually made it to the École Normale Supérieure. In her earlier days of study she was a pacifist and a Marxist. She worked manual industrial jobs as well as some jobs within the classroom. She wrote furiously on a number of topics including theology, politics, society, fiction, and poetry. Weil was passionate about problems of power, warfare, suffering, affliction, and philosophy. She died in 1943 at the age of thirty-four.

Weil was known for her activism—notably, she tried and then failed to serve in the Spanish Civil War after falling shortly after an incident with cooking oil. She also not only spoke on the importance of work and manual labor, but she tried to operate large machinery in a factory setting despite her small stature, physical handicaps, and crippling headaches. Even her death can be linked to her activism: she would ration her food portions to the amount allotted to political prisoners that was not enough for a person to survive. Although her thought spanned a number of

arenas, she primarily focused on her spiritual and social thought. Although she was hardly recognized at the time she was writing, recent scholarship on Weil is on the rise. Most of her own writing and scholarship never had an audience until after her death in 1943. Within academic circles, she is mostly known for her essay, “The Iliad or the Poem of Force,” and her book-length essay *The Need For Roots*, first published in English and edited by T. S. Eliot. She is also known for her collections *Gravity and Grace*, *Oppression and Liberty*, and *Waiting on God*, all of which are now distributed through major publishing houses. Although her thought normally comes back to the spiritual dimension, this thesis will not concern itself with spiritual aspects of her philosophy. Rather, it will focus primarily on her political and social thought as it pertains to the role of the author, war, and the role the individual has in politics.¹

In order to create a theoretical basis and philosophical/political context for this project, I will first give a broad overview of Weil’s thought. For Weil, and for all of modernity, the focus, falls on the individual.² However, Weil’s focus on the individual human was very different than what she would argue modernity considers to be the focus on the human. Modernity was primarily focused on moving in a direction of self-interest and how the individual can best pursue those interests. Most of these self-interests took the form of ideologies and various “–isms” which led to a negative and destructive society. For Weil, the focus is on how the individual can help other individuals. In fact, for Weil, this was an obligation:

The object of any obligation, in the realm of human affairs, is always the human being as such. There exists an obligation towards every human being for the sole reason that he or she is a human being, without any other condition requiring to be fulfilled, and even without any recognition of such obligations on the part of the individual concerned. (Weil *TNFR* 5)

Therefore, it was the goal for humans to protect one another and to allow them to be humans, rather than, what she saw modernity making them, machines or tools for the advancement of their self-interest. Or, as Weil said, “Duty towards the human being as such—that alone is eternal” (Weil *TNFR* 5). For Weil, the collective was not a concern. Rather it was the obligation of the individual to see to, pay attention to, and respect another individual. Weil critiqued modernity by studying the negative effects of collective interests—like the “national interest” or “economic interest” which has caused the respect for the individual to become lost.

To further understand Weil’s concept and goal of the individual it is best to see the individual as being composed of two parts. One part that is earthly, present, here, right now, bound by necessity and obligations, or what Weil calls Gravity. The second, is holy, part of the transcendent, and a means to communicate with that; it is the soul, bound by its own necessity, and at the same time bound by nothing—for it is infinite in its own potential; Weil calls this Grace.

The goal for the individual is to strive for Grace, which can only be discovered through *attendre* or “To Wait.” There is no direct translation of this in the English language. But it means to “attend” to “pay attention to.” For Weil, when one focuses, attends, waits, they can witness that part of themselves which is often covered up—the part which has a connection to “God,” or the infinite. They are nourished with “supernatural bread.”

Man only escapes from the laws of this world in lightening flashes. Instants when everything stands still, instants of contemplation, of pure intuition, of mental void, of acceptance of the moral void. It is through such instants that he is capable of the supernatural.

Whoever endures a moment of the void either receives the supernatural bread or falls. It is a terrible risk, but one that must be run—even during the instant when hope fails. But we must not throw ourselves into it. (Weil *G&G* 11)

This goes through the process of “attendre,” when one is filled with a “void.” One “attends” to the supernatural in order to fill this void. Often it is known through suffering—which is why she often meditates on “The Cross,” and uses Christ as an example of this. She was highly concerned with suffering, affliction, and the voids that appear as a result, but she notes that humans also have “lightening flashes” of the supernatural to fill these voids.

Although Simone Weil’s thought focuses on the individual, it is always in the direction of the spiritual or the “Good.” Often, she turns to Christianity and Catholicism, although it should be noted that she never converted to a religion. Much of her thought deals with religion and spirituality, so much so that some scholars even classify her as a mystic, focusing their scholarship solely on this subject or write her off entirely because of the speculative nature of her “mysticism.” Her theological thought is ultimately beyond the scope of this project; however, because it is *so* central to her thought, it must be briefly addressed. Her vision of God often considers several Christian elements and this plays an important role in understanding her philosophy. Everything—thoughts, actions, intentions— must be directed towards God, which is a representation of the absolute Good.³ In this paper, when I am discussing the absolute Good, I may refer to God, or the Supernatural, the Good, or the Truth, all meaning the same *idea*, according to Weil.

In addition, Weil believes it is the individual’s job to pursue *dikē*. “*Dikē*” is a Greek word Weil uses meaning “righteousness, to mean justice as the search for the good” (Hrezo 99). For Weil, Justice is more of the ideal Justice, similar to the idea of Justice that comes from Plato in

The Republic, rather than the notion of a particular nation's judicial system. This quest for humans to pursue Justice, for Weil, is in conflict with what the quests of the individual have become in modern times. Modernity forces the individuals to act in the pursuit of self-interest, for materialism, and power. One, for Weil, must move in the direction of the Good or towards God, which one finds through individuals, rather than a blanket collective or society. Instead one must participate in the metaxu.

The Earth, for Weil, world where we live, is like Plato's vision of the metaxu, a means through which we can participate in "the cosmos." It is our means for reaching the Supernatural and discovering the Truth. The Good is what is present on Earth, but it is covered-up and disguised by things that are not the Truth. Anything that occurs in the metaxu that is not considered Truth, nor considered our True Reality, is evil. Everything not naturally created is a false part of our reality and blinds us to the Truth. When we are blinded, all one notices is the physical Earth and our self-interests. In other words, individuals become stuck in Gravity unable to reach Grace when they are blinded from the true reality, or unable to give Attention.

The Truth in an absolute form, for Weil, is ultimately unattainable. She rejects the notion of an *ideal*, or *ideology*; there is simply the Good. The Good is more of a direction, or a guide, which the individual should follow. This direction is only uncovered when one is confronted with Reality, or the Truth, by paying Attention.

Weil theorizes that modernity has covered up the Truth and prevented humans from the means of uncovering the soul of the individual or the Reality of the metaxu. It has created ideologies (closed systems of thought), which asserts that there is a right and a wrong way of the cosmos. Humans, by their nature and necessity for Weil, cannot achieve this—the concrete knowledge of "right" and wrong"—it is much too infinite, and it is something that belongs to the

Supernatural. The problem of Modernity and ideologies is evidenced in specific religions, political parties, nationalist propaganda, economies, and governments, which she rejected. For Weil, modernity has embraced these ideologies and agendas that have created a world that is false and oppressive.

Simone Weil preferred the individual follow a concept of philosophy (open systems of thought) where there is simply a direction, not an answer. It is the duty of the individual to follow philosophy as discovered through one's own Attention. However, modern systems like Capitalism, Socialism, War, and Ideology have prevented the individual from doing this. In doing so, they have destroyed the individual, subjecting them to force and oppression.

Weil's politics are difficult to separate from her spiritual thought because the focus of her thought revolves around the individual which at all times is a means to reach the Supernatural. One must live in such a way that they are not oppressed and are able to freely participate in the metaxu. It should be noted that the metaxu is not necessarily a happy, warm, fuzzy way of living. Or, as Weil said, "The Truth is on the side of death" (Weil *G&G* 11). Often Reality hurts. It is painful, causes affliction, is harsh; but, ultimately, it is from God, and therefore Good. In order to do this, one must first recognize the structures of modern oppression, overcome them, and figure out the best way to enable the individual to discover reality, and move in the direction of the Good.

In order to go about explaining, Weil confronts the most immediate problems of Modernity: namely war, the rise of Hitlerism, government ideologies, and all ideologies. As said before, these ideologies have led to the oppression, violence, suffering, destruction, and all of the horrors witnessed during the twentieth century because they are closed systems which do not have room for individual thought, only the collective.

Other contemporary thinkers in addition to Weil attempted to confront and address these problems as well. The problems that thinkers dealt with include the obvious failure of the Enlightenment to bring in peace and to stop destruction. This failure was identified in their immediate surroundings, and their confrontation with these problems was captured in culture, society, political agendas, and literature.

Overview of Project

This project will look at Simone Weil's political thought as outlined above and compare it to two other writers confronting similar problems of modernity. First is the modernist, Virginia Woolf. This chapter will deal with society and its oppressive ideologies by looking at the greater concepts of their thought and politics; by focusing on Weil's *The Need For Roots*, and Woolf's *Three Guineas*. There will be a focus looking at the systems of patriarchy and the masculine tradition as a root to these problems. Not only will this chapter study the problems facing society, and their causes, it also considers their respective political and social solutions to war, ideology, and oppressive traditions.

The second chapter will focus on the biggest political threat of the twentieth century: war. This will be studied in a literary context by looking at Ford Madox Ford's tetralogy, *Parade's End*, which gives a vivid and powerful portrayal of World War I. This will be studied alongside Weil's essay "The Iliad or the Poem of Force," which is a text looking at Homer's epic in order to uncover the true nature and reality of war and its effects on all of its subjects. In doing so, this chapter will also consider Ford and Weil's thoughts on literature as a method for conveying this reality—and will further consider the importance of such a depiction.

By studying Simone Weil with these two profound authors of British modernism, it will bring further depth to not only an understanding of Weil's political thought but the political and

social thought of Virginia Woolf and Ford Madox Ford as well. By considering these authors' thoughts, the reader will have a greater understanding of the societal and political pressures facing the inter-war period, especially in relation to oppression and ideology of the era, as found in patriarchy and war.

**CHAPTER ONE: ISOLATING AND FASHIONING SOCIETY IN THE CONTEXT OF
MODERNITY: A COMPARISON OF THE POLITICAL THOUGHT OF SIMONE
WEIL AND VIRGINIA WOOLF'S *THREE GUINEAS***

At first glance, the pairing of Simone Weil and Virginia Woolf seems unlikely. Virginia Woolf (1882 – 1941) was one of the foremost, and highly regarded literary figures of British Modernism although her status as such rose in the 1970s rather than during her lifetime. During her life she was mildly successful through her writing, and she was the author of some of the most influential literature from that time including her novels *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To The Lighthouse*, and *Orlando*. She also participated in intellectual and artistic circles, most notably the Bloomsbury group. In addition to her participation in these circles, she authored, in addition to her novels and short stories, over 500 articles, reviews, and essays.

However, these two writers and figures, I argue, have several aspects in common, especially in their political thought, which warrants our continued attention. Both of these women were highly involved in their communities; they were both concerned about society, politics, and the destruction and the projection modern times had in store for humanity. They were deeply passionate about their work, and both wrote furiously and meticulously about these problems.

This chapter will further compare the political thought of Virginia Woolf and Simone Weil, and their visions for society. This will be studied through the use of Woolf and Weil scholarship, academic criticism, and by using their texts *Three Guineas* and *The Need For Roots*, respectively. Other texts by the two others will also be taken into some consideration in attempting to convey the political thought of these two writers and activists as it pertained to the

historical and social context of the inter-war era of the twentieth century. I first give a detailed literature review of works that compare the two authors. Next, in order to employ a methodology, I consider the contexts and individual conceptions that led to the author's respective primary works considered in this chapter. I then explore the responses to what they viewed and highlighted as their main concern and overarching problems for modernity, and last display what the authors offer for the future so that humans may peacefully co-exist. In the greater context of this thesis, this chapter will layout the groundwork for thinking about politics during this era and for these two authors, particularly the societal and political pressures that led to war. The second chapter will then consider war and politics in the abstract medium of literature, and will consider in-depth the effects politics, and war in particular have on the individual modern subject. Both chapters will seek to better understand the cultural and social problems and the historical context of the twentieth century.

Historically, they lived in a similar cultural context of modernity, specifically the inter-war era. This was a time of destruction, war, oppression, poverty, inequality, propaganda, extreme nationalism and nationalist sentiment, and social uncertainty. Their essays and politics responded to the various problems of society, and world-issues, especially living in the shadow of World War I, the Spanish Civil War and its aftermath, the rise and threat of Hitler's power in Germany, totalitarianism, the progression of Fascism across many national boundaries in Europe, and a continent and world on the brink of World War II. The politics and society in Britain, the continent, and across the world brought about most destructive era in history. There was no choice for these two thinkers, as well as several other artists, philosophers, political thinkers, authors, and leaders, but to come up with a solution to the state of things.

These writers did not passively witness these atrocities; they actively responded to them. For the majority of the timeline in question, both Woolf and Weil were committed to peace and pacifist movements. Weil eventually separated from pacifism on the grounds that she was morally driven to participate in The Spanish Civil War, although it is important to note that she did so without personal contribution to physical combat. Both were from middle-upper-class backgrounds but tended to focus on the needs of those in the lower-economic strata, especially workers. Simone Weil participated in many Marxist demonstrations, protests, and meetings, and dedicated herself wholly to these movements with an almost saintly dedication. Virginia Woolf, on the other hand, was an activist by utilizing the methods she knew best: literature, essay writing, and publication. She used her spotlight and influence as a way to advocate for ideals of pacifism, equality, and art. However, to draw a comparison, they were both concerned with the status of the individual, and a concern for equality of all humans. Politically, I assert that they both fell on the Left in their concerns for equality, human rights, non-violence, attacks on the Right, especially the extreme-Right of fascism, and the at one time or another, attraction to Socialism.⁴ They both theorized about the human condition, the building blocks and influences of society, and its structures. They saw the destruction the societal, cultural, and political institutions had caused, and brought forth new ideas, and insights to the overarching problems of Modernity.

Both of these writers sought to make a difference through writing and publishing their political and social thought. Notably, Virginia Woolf wrote two book-length essays *A Room of One's Own* which focused on her feminist thought, and its often-overlooked-sequel *Three Guineas* (1938), which captured her social and political thought. Simone Weil, in addition to her activism, wrote often on her philosophical and social concerns. Unlike Woolf, Weil's thought is

not as easy to classify into categories like “political thought,” “spiritual thought,” “metaphysical thought,” or even “geometric thought.”⁵ Often Weil’s works blend together and should be considered as a whole. However, for her political thought, she wrote two texts that focus our thinking here, which Weil referred to as her “magnum opus.”⁶ The first was “Reflections Concerning the Causes of Liberty and Oppression” (published 1955 in French as *Oppression et liberté*, and 1958 in English). The other text, more profound and influential, was *The Need For Roots*, first English publication in 1952, and in French, *L’Enracinement* in 1949.

There are some obvious limits to this chapter that must be addressed. Namely there were several differences between the two authors including location, nuances of French and British culture, chronology, and, ultimately, differences in their thought. I suggest that despite these differences, there is compelling evidence that the two should be studied together because of their similarities. The similarities between the two authors include overlap and complementary political thoughts, responses to oppression, and biographical and occupational resemblances.⁷ This study will make room for future scholars to further compare these two together, and to hopefully illuminate new ways of thinking about their thought, and about the historical, social, and political contexts of this time, in addition to new ways of studying Modernism, political theory, and political philosophy. Notably, I think they offer the most insight about (in)equality, the nature of oppression, and its modern roots when they are compared side by side. I will show that their answers and scope of the problems they cover and the evidence they rely on, although similar at times, branch out into different and interesting directions.

Literature Review: Previous comparisons of Weil and Woolf

The idea of comparing these two writers is not entirely new; but a short literature provides a history of previous scholarship comparing these two authors. In the chapter entitled

“The Niece of a Nun: Virginia Woolf, Caroline Stephen, and the Cloistered Imagination” in the collection *Virginia Woolf: A Feminist Slant*, Jane Marcus mentions Simone Weil in the context of explaining the vastness of Woolf’s thought: “We may see this conjunction of revolutionary materialism, a tremblingly violent pacifism, and a simultaneously erotic and sublimely chaste mysticism in the intellectual response to modern fascism of two other important figures, Simone Weil and Walter Benjamin” (Marcus *NON* 12-13). Later she suggests adding a spiritual depth to Woolf’s silence when she discusses “intellectual chastity.” Jane Marcus points to Weil in the context of discussing pacifism and mysticism of “European Leftists” (Marcus *NON* 29). Marcus’ chapter was one of the only texts I found which mention the two together in any meaningful way. However, Marcus and I do not stand alone in feeling a relationship is warranted.

There is also evidence that the two are sometimes taught side by side in college classrooms and lectures. In the book *Between Women*, Sara Ruddick’s chapter entitled “New Combinations: Learning From Virginia Woolf” discusses her first discovery of Virginia Woolf and her personal interaction while reading Woolf’s literature with special consideration to her identity of being a woman. This grows into a mixture of her professional academic life, one in which she became a Woolf scholar, and Ruddick’s experience of identifying with Woolf’s writing and experience. Earlier in her scholarly career she also became interested in Simone Weil.

When writing about Woolf and her brothers, I used Weil’s account of affliction to express the pain Woolf suffered from her half-brothers’ abuse. Later I called on Weil’s portrait of the warrior, on her stunning analysis of a hero’s intoxication with violence to supplement Woolf’s perceptions of male arrogance. (Ruddick 151-152)

Ultimately, Ruddick found that she was not as drawn to Weil, and cited the reasons of her autobiographical traits, her “self torture,” and participation in war. Ruddick goes on to describe how she would teach Simone Weil, but notes her inability to do so seriously because she lacked a “relationship” with her. “I said I would use Weil to ‘deepen’ Woolf. Less consciously, I was using Woolf to ‘rescue’ Weil both from herself and from my contemptuous pity” (Ruddick 153). She would go on to try to teach Weil as Woolf characters—and even replaces her with the character of Mrs. Ramsay in *To The Lighthouse* (Ruddick 154). Although Ruddick’s article was not strictly academic, it is important because it highlights their relationship, and notes the potential and subsequent challenges of comparing the two. More so, it notes that there is a strong comparison to be made by studying two women, which I hope to continue.

My research also uncovered the work of Professor Bruce Thompson, a lecturer at University of California Santa Cruz, in the Department of History and in the Department of Literature at UCSC.⁸ In this course he prepared a comparative lecture on Woolf and Weil for a course on European Intellectual History. Thompson begins the lecture by noting their differences, politics, class, and moral values. He continues by detailing basic facts about the two authors, their work, and the context. In this lecture he covers general biographic information of The Bloomsbury Group, *A Room of One’s Own*, and briefly, *Three Guineas*. He then goes on to give a biographical account of Simone Weil. In this section, I believe he captures her spiritual thought particularly well.

Her religious thinking runs something like this: the world we inhabit is a world of necessity or ‘gravity’ from which God is voluntarily absent. He only approaches in rare moments of grace when our souls annihilate egotism and turn toward God in pure attentiveness. There is a contradiction between our longing for the good

and the cold determinism of the universe. One must refuse to worship the ‘Great Beast,’ the power of the state or the tyrant, by siding with the oppressed and by diminishing as much as possible the oppressive power of those who give orders.

(Thompson)

He ends his lecture with a brief overview of her essay “The Iliad, or the Poem of Force.” It is unclear based on Thompson’s lecture notes if he ever goes into a staunch comparison other than in the beginning where both writers reacted to the horrors WWII, and both ended their own lives. By discussing Weil’s views on God, the ‘Great Beast,’ and War, he allows comparing the two authors in a way that suggests their similar contributions to thinking about this era, despite their differences.

Ultimately, it is worth noting that there is *something* about the two writers, which suggest a side-by-side comparison—like in the experience of Ruddick. Thomson’s course covered intellectual history; Ruddick’s course was on literature. Beyond a few words about the occasional lecture or presentation, I have found no other compelling work that looks in-depth at the two writers beyond a brief mention or a footnote about one or the other. It is my goal to explore this comparison in depth which, to my knowledge, is lacking in present-day scholarship.

Context and Conception of the Woolf and Weil’s Work

Before a meaningful comparison of their political and social thought can be explored a brief background to the overall thought, and the central concepts of Simone Weil should be understood as well as the context in which she wrote *The Need For Roots*. Also, I will present a brief overview of the genesis of Woolf’s *Three Guineas*. A greater depth will be met in a discussion of their conceptions of how society turned into a violent place, and possible solutions.

To recall from the introduction of this project, it is important to have a basis for Weil's understanding of modernity, the individual, and the role that individual has in pursuing the Truth, the individual's role in Reality, and the metaxu. This will form an important basis for a further discussion of Weil's thought, especially in relation to Virginia Woolf's social and political thought.

This chapter will focus on Weil's most esteemed and interesting political thought, *The Need For Roots*. It was written as an assignment from her work with the Free French Forces, which she undertook in England due to threats of the rising Vichy government. In a biography introducing her text *Gateway To God*, scholar Vernon Sproxton describes this assignment:

She was given the task of drawing up a kind of spiritual testament which could be used as the basis for a constitution for the Fourth Republic. [...] By any standards it is an astonishing document. All the resources of Simone Weil's prodigious knowledge and acute intelligence were focused on the problems which post-war politicians would have to face and for the most part have ducked. Above all she realized that replacing the idea of truth and justice with that of productivity and utility was an invitation to disaster. (Sproxton *GTG* 26)

Indeed, this text was written in the name of politics, and with a distinct political purpose in mind. Because Weil was committed to her causes, this assignment seemed to suit her well, and this would give her a chance to bring her philosophy and politics to a wider audience. She was always concerned with what directly concerned her fellow individuals, and promoted a notion of truth and justice, and against those regimes and ideologies she found oppressive.

In this text, and several of her other texts, she spoke against the collective and in taking sides politically or socially. Weil scholar E. W. F. Tomlin elaborates, "Taking sides' was the

wrong attitude for one who distrusted all ‘collectivities.’ There were victims on all sides. There were victims because there were sides” (Tomlin 13). Instead of promoting a “side,” nationally or politically, Weil advocates for a “rootedness” in something more direct, and vis-à-vis in terms of a governmental or political structure rather than that on the grand scale of a nation or a nameless collective. I do not believe she would disagree entirely with the motives of Socialism, and their concern for equality; however, socialism took the form of a nameless “collective,” which was reminiscent of Plato’s “Great Beast” and should be avoided. Again, the focus of her thought was for the individual and enabling him or her to pursue *dikē* in the metaxu, which should be a primary value for a community.

Virginia Woolf’s political thought can be accessed through her work of *Three Guineas*, among other texts, which was the result of ten years of research. She drew her source material from biographies, autobiographies, letters and daily newspaper clippings in a search for the truth about the political situations, and the truth that governs society. This text was also seen as a sequel to her often studied (and vastly more popular) text of *A Room of One’s Own* which concerned itself more directly with feminism and the woman artist. She moved on to write *Three Guineas* which is considerably larger in scope. The introduction to both of these texts by Morag Shiach notes *Three Guineas* as having a particular motivation noted in the political atmosphere of the time and has similar motivations as Simone Weil’s concern to identify oppressive structures:

The political events of the decade made her political focus both more urgent and more radical. The coming to power of Hitler in 1933, the Spanish Civil War of 1936-9, the polarization of British society in an atmosphere of economic recession and massive unemployment, forced Woolf to consider the political implications of

both the patriarchal structure she had identified throughout both public and private institutions. Thus, in *Three Guineas*, her object is the identification of the social forces that have led to the growth of Fascism. Seeing these as inextricably linked to the institutions of patriarchal power, Woolf then goes on to advocate a form of radical political action in which women would form themselves into a society of “Outsiders” in order to challenge the rise of Fascism and the drift towards war. (Shiach xiii)

Woolf’s approach is similar to Weil’s in that there is a need to recognize and isolate oppressive structures and institutions that led to the growth of Fascism. Although their philosophy and activism begins in similar places, they branch out in different directions. Woolf advocates for a Society of Outsiders to challenge the patriarchal structure, whereas Weil promotes a philosophy that calls for the individual to turn inward. This turn inward will be expanded on later in this paper. However, both writers were compelled to take action against the political structures of the era. Modernity provided Virginia Woolf with the motivation and subject to respond to in order to create a book-length-essay. In addition to her response to politics, the text included her own personal convictions in the rise against patriarchy which the text repeated and strengthened the advocacy for equality.

Woolf sought out new ways literature can provoke thinking. This was not the only time politics, modernity, or the troubles facing society found its way into her literature through experimental writing as well as the essay form. One can point to the shell-shocked character of Septimus in *Mrs. Dalloway*, the frequency of the airplanes, or the dictator-figure with a megaphone in *Between the Acts*.⁹ Nor is this her only stance against the rise of Hitler whom she names in *Three Guineas* as well as in her essay “Thoughts on Peace During an Air Raid.”

However, *Three Guineas* was initially designed to be an experimental text. “By early 1932, Woolf was trying both to extend her thinking on gender and education, and to develop an entirely new literary form. She started writing *The Pargiters*, which was to be a novel-essay[...]” (Shiach xix-xx). This original text was split up into her novel *The Years* (1931), and *Three Guineas*. In her original conception, this novel “[...] was to be a formal experiment in which sections of ‘fact’ that discussed the professions of writing by women would alternate with ‘extracts’ from a supposedly published novel written by a woman” (Hussey 210). One can speculate that she chose to restructure her novel in the essay form so that she could more clearly and explicitly address the problems of war, patriarchy, economy, and oppression the way she does in *Three Guineas*.

Not only does Woolf explicitly address the problems of modernity, she also advocates for peaceful solutions to the problems especially those concerning inequality. Jane Marcus, in her introduction to *Three Guineas*, talks about the strength this text has in advocating for peace.

Three Guineas is a manifesto, a polemic in the great age of polemics. It is a peace propaganda written as Europe gears up for war, as Woolf’s comrades in politics and intellectual debate who had been pacifists in the First World War called for artists to take arms in the struggle in Spain against Franco and fascism. (Marcus INT 1)

Although strongly written and with conviction, I do not know that I would agree with Marcus in calling the text a “manifesto,” nor would I call it “propaganda.” Ultimately Woolf speaks out against propaganda,¹⁰ and “manifesto” implies an unjust portrayal of problems and associated calls for solutions. Regardless, this is a text heavily committed to peace.

Virginia Woolf uses a number of tactics and pieces of evidence to convince the reader to become an advocate for peace. The text takes the form of three letters. For purposes of brevity I will include the eloquent summation provided by Morag Shiach:

The first letter is from a middle-aged, prosperous barrister, who asks her opinion about the most effective way to combat the draft towards war. He also asks her to sign a petition, to join his society which is working to preserve peace by protecting culture and intellectual liberty, and to give a donation to this same society. The second letter she receives is from the treasurer of a women's college, asking for a contribution to its Rebuilding Fund; the third asks her to donate money to a society which aims to promote the entry of women into the professions. (Shiach xx)

In the text she ends up giving each cause or request one Guinea. This image of a Guinea comes with the shadow of imperialism and oppression she will go on to criticize in the text significantly,

A 'guinea' was originally a gold coin worth about twenty shillings [...] It was minted for the Company of Royal Adventurers to do trade with Africa, taking its name from the Guinea Coast and made with gold mined there. For over a century after the coin itself had passed out of circulation, the word guinea was used to refer to one pound sterling and one shilling. (Hussey 285)

By using the trope of the three guineas, Virginia Woolf alludes to the use of slavery, corruption of capitalism, and the explicit types of oppression that have been used by England and the imperialist project more than 100 years. This technique further demonstrates her argument for challenging the patriarchal and imperialist tradition which is encapsulated in society.

Beyond the use of addressing letters, and the clever under-handed and thought provoking title, Woolf gives very thorough explanations and provides evidence for all of her letters that resulted in this text. She uses newspaper clippings and photos to work towards her peaceful agenda and in order to further illustrate the causes of oppression in modern times. Notably she excludes rather gruesome pictures suggested to her by her husband Leonard, and others. These omissions included images from the Spanish Civil War:

The Spanish photographs of mutilated ‘dead children’ and of ‘ruined houses’ are ruthlessly referred to over and over again in the book. They are like a red flag or (perhaps) a Republican banner running through her agonizing argument that you can’t stop force with force. She notes disapprovingly that the Madrid bombing photographs incite one to anger. She will not print them, lest they incite more volunteers to go off to war. (Marcus *INT lxi*)

Woolf’s refusal to print these photographs helped her in her cause, and helped *Three Guineas* reach an audience without being dismissed as “pacifist propaganda” the pictures would have caused. While avoiding the propaganda title, Woolf was able to maintain her pacifist agenda and never stray from it. Ultimately, the images and cause of the Spanish Civil War caused Simone Weil to break from her own pacifism to join the cause against Fascism.¹¹ However, for Woolf, to avoid war, all war, was the supreme cause—and she looked towards structures of society and oppression under the shadow of patriarchy as the primary cause for the state of modernity.

Woolf’s political thought of pacifism focused here on the structures which caused it—namely patriarchy. Often, and as previously quoted, she is lumped into the socialist-school of thought. I argue Woolf’s main concern revolves around how people (as a society, not individually) were socially constructed, and these same systems enabled war, destruction, and

subsequent oppression to happen. She proves this carefully and methodically by piecing together her evidence in order to give rise to a new way of thinking and living, resistant to the dominant destructive order.

Narrowing Down the Problems of Modern Society

There are several instances of overlap and digression between Simone Weil and Virginia Woolf in the conceptualization of their respective projects and political thought. They were both responding to the same political context of war, especially the Spanish Civil War. Weil and Woolf were also concerned with the rise of Hitler, and the growing popularity and force of fascism across the continent. They were also responding to the pressures of capitalism and the ideological thinking that pervaded culture and society. They were both politically driven to become active responders to these threats, and they both attempted to narrow down and isolate the specific threats to peace and understand the tradition and the structures of threats. Once they understand the threats of war and ideology, they go on to recognize a better way to fashion society than what traditions of history have provided them.

In the attempts to ground the theory and provide a context, Woolf grounded her concepts and theories in contemporary society. Weil, on the other hand took a historical approach by looking into the canons of Western civilization as well as some Eastern thought, such as texts pertaining to Buddhism, and the Upanishads. She looked notably at the historical features of Hellenic thought and included a vision aimed towards religion, specifically Catholicism. Religion was not of concern to Woolf, nor was religion of primary concern for most of the literature regarded as modern.

Woolf and Weil focused on what was knowable: historical events, especially those facing the Russian Revolution. Weil's *Oppression and Liberty* addresses this entire phenomenon. They

were also aware of structures of oppression, and societal constructs and structures in general. Weil's perception was more inward, and reflexive, focusing on *attendre* and the individual. Woolf's was more outward and focused on events and what to do with them throughout history. They both, however, do more than simply "respond" to the problems facing the era. They go beyond being mere reactionaries and seek to develop new ways of thinking, coming up with answers, and making special use of the political realm. Woolf was definitely calling for more of a revolt, and for Weil, "revolting was actually the opiate of the masses" (Miles 16)—because that would not ultimately lead towards happiness. That being said, I do not know that happiness, defined as pleasurable living, was the end-goal for either of these women, rather it was holding up a higher sense of morality which included an anti-war, anti-capitalist motive agenda and an intellectual freedom for all.

Their thought parallels when recognizing an oppressor. Ideologies have created dictators, and these dictators decide the "rights" and "wrongs" which create enemies, and takes the freewill and liberty away from the people by limiting room for individual thought. In turn, this destroys their intellectual abilities, and for Weil, disables them from connecting with the Good. While Weil merely deals with large ideological and collective thinking as oppressing everyone, Woolf acknowledges this, and expands on the idea by recognizing the dictator outright:

[...] Dictator as we'll call him when he is Italian or German, who believes that he has the right, whether given by God, Nature, sex or race is immaterial, to dictate to other human beings how they shall live; what they shall do. (Woolf *TG* 65)

Woolf not only displays oppression on an international level by comparing the English and the Germans—a heavy comparison at the time, but she notes an analogy of, perhaps, a domesticated form of fascism, which takes away the will of the people. This, for England, took away the will

and freedoms of women, and in turn, much of the population. Overcoming patriarchy was as important as the call to overcome Fascism.

For Woolf in particular, the main problem, as expressed in *Three Guineas* is the overarching system and deeply embedded traditional belief in patriarchy. To revolt or rise up against this system will take the efforts of education, art, and women entering the professions. For Woolf it is important to recognize that the same causes that led to this oppression of women, led to war. This notion of patriarchy had become totalitarian, and with that, forwarded an ideology—something that Weil disagrees with entirely. Woolf’s argument draws out of the position which she identifies as “an educated man’s daughter.”¹² This definition draws attention to the difficulties defining class in relation to “women who do not participate in relations of production” (Sirach xxi). She goes on to say how women have not been at a means to determine, or contribute to the reasons for going to war because they were unable to participate in the economies that produced it. This may sound like an easy excuse for Weil, who would agree that it is everyone’s responsibility to not go to war and to participate in the political realm.

Woolf notes that women *now* have influence in realms they have not before, because they are able to participate in the economy by entering the professions. The tradition builds up and glorifies the capitalist ideology and the imperialist national agenda based on competition and money, as previously described, has been at fault.

Thus, Woolf argues, if women are being asked to function effectively as a political force, they must approach the business of power and influence in a new way. They do have one ‘new weapon’, [*sic*] which is their recently acquired legal right to enter the professions, and thus to achieve a modest degree of economic independence. This is a vital first step, since Woolf asserts that economic

dependence has always locked women into a reproduction of patriarchal values.

(Sirach xxi)

By being able to enter the professions, women are able to participate and become a vital part of the economy, in turn, becoming a vital part of the capitalist structure that informs both war and politics. By being able to influence the economy by working, they can then influence the politics in a more peaceful direction.

For Weil, the workers were extremely important in a society because they were able to experience and better recognize oppressive structures. Woolf's oppressor is specifically the structure of patriarchy. Weil's oppressor is broader and identifies modernity, capitalism, or any assertion of ideology as being a means to oppress another. For Woolf, this "-ism" included those structures identified by Weil, and Woolf saw them as being reinforced and institutionalized patriarchy. They would both agree that 'work' is an important, and an essential part of human existence and experience and should be protected. For Weil, workers have become oppressed by the nature of capitalism, evil, and the Great Beast. People have succumbed to these forces, and have lost themselves, and their spirit. This extreme loss resulted in the economic gain of very few people who believe they have power and dominion over another—through man-made structures and institutions of economy. Woolf does not take the notion as far, but she agrees that the nature of work has been oppressive, competitive, and has led to violence and war. She likens this to a masculine tradition—the way to overcome the system is for women to then participate in it. Once women are no longer oppressed, or are able to overcome the burden of being economically and financially tied to traditional structures, then a value-shift can give way and culture and society will adopt peaceful values.

However, the answer needed to solve the problem is larger, much larger than being able to use the “new weapon” of women being able to enter the professions and subsequent economic independence: “Beyond this modest independence, however, women also need to develop a critical distance from dominant political and cultural values—something Woolf achieves by a critique of the rituals and distinctions that structure daily life in educational, legal, and religious institutions” (Sirach xxi). Sirach notes Woolf’s distaste for not only the economic structure and policy that governed England during this era, but for several aspects of culture, extending to the legal, religious, and education systems. Often these institutions shifted in support of economic benefit and gain on a national scale. Over half the nation was excluded.

Woolf gives an example of the educational system advocating and reinforcing the patriarchal ideology which has proven to be harmful to society:

But these facts, as facts so often do, prove double-faced; for though they establish the value of education, they also prove that education is by no means a positive value; it is not good in all circumstances, and good for all people; it is not good for some people and some purposes. It is good if it produces a belief in the Church of England; bad if it produces a belief in the Church of Rome; it is good for one sex and for some professions, but bad for another sex and for another profession. (Woolf *TG* 34)

Education had been established to serve the elite, and to primarily educate men. This only contributes to one specific agenda. The good of everyone is expected to come from this top-down structure that failed. Virginia Woolf points out these failings, and later advocates for education for women (but with restrictions to avoid teaching and backing the pro-war, ideology that has been in place). For Woolf, this institution which encourages patriarchy also encourages

war and the benefit of a few rather than advocating on behalf of all of a nation's people. Woolf saw that this has been prevalent throughout British society. Weil would agree that this same sort of institutionalized pro-war education has occurred throughout Europe as well.

Weil also points out the danger in endorsing a state religion especially in regards to education. This endorsement was especially dangerous considering the close historical context caused by the atmosphere and ideology of the Vichy Government. "To let the clergy have a share in public education is not a solution either. Even if it were possible, it would not be desirable, and it is not possible in France without a civil war" (Weil *TNFR* 91). This would forward a blatant ideology of the state which would cause a political crisis in France. In England the religious tradition is stronger. But for France, in light of recent political events, there was still a religious preference which was masked (or not) during this time. Weil points out that all man-made structures create a mask, like ideologies prevent and the individuals access to Reality. The regime and practice of religious preference prevented even more people from having access to politics, society, education, and basic rights.

Woolf lists several examples in *Three Guineas* and makes it clear that the oppressor is the rooted tradition of patriarchy. This tradition of patriarchy advocates for domination of women and, ultimately, of all people. For Woolf, patriarchy also advocates for what she calls the violent qualities that men naturally have. This value when widely embraced ultimately leads to war, totalitarianism and fascism, and the ills of the twentieth century.

One historic example of patriarchy in the law, was a legal policy that stated that in the event the woman dies in a married couple—if the deceased wife has an unmarried sister, legally that sister would have to marry the widowed-husband. This particular legal-code was so much in the forefront of society that it found its way to other aspects of culture like the literature of the

time, in particular the novel *Howard's End* by E. M. Forster. Not only did policies like this exist in recent-memory, but also the right for women's suffrage, and the right to enter the professions was enforced by the legal structures of government. These historic examples strengthen the arguments made by Woolf.

Weil would agree that women should definitely resist "the rituals and distinctions that structure daily life in educational, legal, and religious institutions" (Sirach xxi). For Weil, the oppression experienced was not exclusive to women but to everyone. I believe that Woolf also would agree that everyone should resist the oppressive structures in-place, but she saw the catalyst for this movement in women, namely in what she termed the Society of Outsiders. She hypothesized that eventually women and the Society of Outsiders' influence would reverse and correct the patriarchal system, leading to a more peaceful era. Weil begins by advocating for everyone on the level of the individual, and she says for everyone to resist the structures and institutions. For both women, the masses have bought into these structures and have subsequently lost their ability to find "Grace."

For Weil, society-at-large has lost the bearings to move in the direction of the Good. Moving in the direction of "The Good" does not happen en masse. Nor can it be achieved through the religious structures of the day especially Christianity. For Weil, Christianity as an institution (or any religion as an institution) cannot provide a mass with the good. The Good, and our notions of it, happens on an individual and very personal level. For Weil, there are two forms of Good. From her notebooks Weil says:

Totalitarianism is an ersatz form of Christianity.

Christianity became a totalitarian, conquering and destroying agent because it failed to develop the notion of the absence and nonaction of God here below. [...]

There are two forms of good, of the same denomination, but radically different from each other: one is the opposite of evil, and one which is the absolute—the absolute which cannot be anything but the good. The absolute has no opposite. [...] What we want is the absolute good. What is within our reach is the good which is correlated to evil. (Weil *GTG* 48)

Weil notes that Christianity became a totalitarian institution due to flaws in the way it governed itself and vice versa. A totalitarian regime modeled itself on the same notions and errors that Christianity fell into. This is because both Christianity and those institutions deemed “totalitarian” (which would be nearly all institutions or ideologies), believed it possessed “The Good.” Not only that, but Christianity believes it possesses the absolute Good which is inaccessible to humans by our earthly nature. Weil illustrates inaccessibility when she recalls God being absent, and in this instance, and for all of Weil’s texts, God represents “the absolute Good.” She would agree that institutions should embrace practical values grounded in what is actually knowable to humans—the second form of good, that which is opposite of evil. The notions of this occur on an individual level and are illuminated by Weil’s concept of *attendre*.

For Weil, and I believe for Woolf as well, people are naturally good when they are in a place of liberty and able to exercise their intellectual faculties. When people are enabled with liberty and are free of structures, they will place themselves in “right” direction with which to live morally. In *The Need For Roots*, Weil calls for resistance to Hitler (by name), fascism, and the failure of the masses to recognize and embrace the good. Instead nations have fallen victim to

submission to forms of totalitarianism, Hitler, fascism, and others forms like it. “Once one recognizes something as being a good, one should want to seize it. Not to want to do so is cowardly” (Weil *TNFR* 223). Weil trusts in the individuals’ capacity to recognize and find the good—also, once it is illuminated and discovered on the individual level, one will naturally “want to seize” the good. This individual good would cause forces like Hitler, fascism, and violent regimes to not come to power, or even exist. The important thing for Weil is that the individual has to be in a removed position, away from “false” or “evil” structures,” in order to discover the direction of the good. The “good,” as opposite from evil, is accessible to everyone, as it is what is natural and knowable from the Earth rather than a manmade creation like the “-isms” both Woolf and Weil refer to. The natural and true Reality, for Weil, is in the evidence that God has left behind in the world of Necessity for humans to attend to and admire: “And if admiration is a form of love, how can one bring oneself to love anything other than the good” (Weil *TNFR* 225). Essentially, if humans are enabled with the means of finding the true means of Reality, and can admire, recognize, and attend to them, then they will only move in the direction of the good.

For Virginia Woolf, the structure that is first foremost at fault for promoting self-interest, responsible for the oppression of the twentieth century, and moving away from the direction of the good is patriarchy. Patriarchy, as in ideology and in practice, assumes that it has the correct and absolute answers to the good and has influenced other structures and institutions that this is the “right” way of doing things. It has built around it a government, legal, religious, and educational systems to embrace this ideology. For Woolf, these ideologies must be resisted because they do harm and cause inequality, oppression, and violence.

If we take the concept of Woolf's resistance to these structures, and link them with Weil's concept that all ideology poses a threat to peace and the Earth, then we can gain a more complete picture and understanding of both of their thought. For Weil, no one can possess the truth, or the good—only move in the direction of it. Therefore, no one can accept a closed system or belief structure that endorses such an idea. These structures would be considered an “ideology.” What Weil calls for is an open system; a philosophy. In her chapter on Simone Weil, Margaret Hrezo eloquently explains this difference:

Somewhere along the line of history, she believed, philosophy and ideology became synonyms. Simone Weil saw them as very different endeavors. Philosophy is open; ideology is closed. Philosophy in the classical sense is the practice of dying. It is a way of life, not a system.[...]Modern ideologies are systematic ways of knowing truth that seek to immanentize transcendence, to make us gods and bring heaven to earth. Philosophy understands human life as a story that is part of bigger stories and is ultimately part of the story of reality. [...] Politically, as Plato tells us in *The Republic*, philosophy cannot create the city in speech as an historical entity; it can only help guide us toward justice and help us evaluate concrete cities based on that quest for justice. Ideology concentrates on material goods. Philosophy makes the well-being of the individuals the paramount good. (Hrezo 92)

In a preference for philosophy, we would reject all structures that suggested it *knew* the truth. Rather, she would suggest moving in a direction that allows humans to participate in a search for truth and all the things that come with it. Truth in a philosophical sense brings with it a sense of justice, the good, and the spiritual and physical well being of one's neighbors, humans,

humanity, and all things created or natural. When coming from this route, one can evaluate one's reality, circumstances, society, and culture, realize the structures, and move in a direction towards this Good. The realization and attention to the individual and humanity that Weil is calling for, is what the twentieth century is missing, which has caused destruction and ideological structures.

Woolf, and at times Weil, calls for an outright resistance to those structures that promote ideology. They both at times move towards philosophy, and at other times stray away from it, and in-turn can be interpreted as attempting to create an alternate ideology. It is arguable in that they advocate for a system to be in place that enables all humans to search for and embrace the good, peacefully, and with complete liberty. For Woolf, she concentrates on specific, pragmatic, and more grounded historic problems, which makes her difficult to place in the grand schemes of philosophical thought.

The placement and categorization in the grand scheme of philosophical thought is not the primary concern of this project, inasmuch as it is figuring out the contributions to political thought these two writers offer. If politics includes the structures that govern our communities, society, culture, and all institutions that allow us to exist together—these two writers have something manageable to offer. Politics in the twentieth century for these two, have become a means for oppressive ideologies to come to power that resulted in severe consequences. It is the responsibility of people, and the aim of these authors, to turn politics into something that is not oppressive. This is first accomplished by trying to figure out and potentially isolate what harmful “political” structures are at play. These authors, and consequentially the reader, question the problem or problems that do not allow society to exist peacefully. Next, would be to formulate a solution, so that society and all humans can live together peacefully.

However, the problem for this paper, and for these authors, is to attempt to formulate a political solution in the context of the inter-war period. Contemporary society was ultimately harmful for these writers, and perhaps harmful for anyone outside the few individual men-turned-tyrants at the pinnacle of the oppressive totalitarian societal structures. These structures are what determined human relationships with one another and are therefore political. The very structure of people living together can be reduced to the term “society.” Logical progression suggests society is the problem. Though this is not incorrect, it is not a manageable problem. Moving outward, one must consider how are people socially “constructed” or influenced by society. Beyond that, they must try to figure out what influences society.

For Weil, one must determine if that society is based on what is natural and based in her conception of Reality, for that was supposed to be the grounding for her political thought. For Woolf, the problem is more immediate, and can be judged easily by noting the structures that cause the political system to be oppressive to its citizens. In Woolf’s *Three Guineas*, the problem is patriarchy’s influence on society. The argument progresses from that and notes patriarchy’s influence as being reinforced by politics, and sequentially, politics’ continuing influence on society, and back and forth. For Woolf, this continued until it went back and forth enough that it ended up at the present situation. She notes that there might be some degree of nature involved in violence, and in the attraction to war, but it was the social and political conventions that harbored it to the extent that it became evident in structures like Hitlerism, totalitarianism, fascism, the Spanish Civil War, oppression, the threat of a new war, and violence.

Weil begins with the immediate solution to turn inward and to remove or seclude oneself from society, similar to Plato’s metaphor, in order to get out of its shadows and to truly experience reality. However, Weil’s philosophical solution does not end there. That is merely her

immediate solution to the problem not what she forwards as the suggestion for the future so that humans can live together peacefully. However, at this point in her thought, she advocates against society and therefore against politics. This can be seen as a dangerous move, and at first one may begin to classify her thought as branch of anarchy:

Despite the popular stereotype of anarchists as terrorist, there is a branch of anarchist thought which idealistic, egalitarian, and concerned with human dignity, and which values both individualism and cooperation. There is considerable similarity between Simone Weil's social/political thought in the mid-1930s and that of the more idealistic and less violent strains of anarchism. (McFarland 77n)¹³

Although this may resemble certain branches of anarchy and anarchic thought, I consider that move premature. I do not agree anarchy is the direction where she is ultimately going, but it is the first step. Also, it is important to recall that Simone Weil's thought does not fit easily into categorization. There are certain anarchist strands that occur in her thought, especially when she advocates at times for the removal of oneself from the influence of political institutions, and society.

This self-distancing and removal from society does not call for one to simply "give up" on society. Weil would argue that the real makers and participators in society fall on the individual. She points to false fabrications of societal conventions like "royalty," suggesting a top-down approach to societal conventions and norms which would then be considered good. God, or the good, does not occur in a society, mass, or societal institution or structure. It occurs in the individual. Weil advocates for the individual on his or her own in solitude to determine the direction of the good with attention paid to what is natural and based in Reality rather than the fabrications society cover. Weil's thought and influence comes from the bottom up, so to say.

But rather than saying, the “from the bottom, up,” her ideal construction of society would not have a hierarchy—rather it would exist across a plane of existence between humans. But life is composed on multiple planes for Weil—humans must be able to access the impersonal transcendent, pursue justice and *dikē* in their community, pay attention to one another, participate in work, and fulfill the demands of necessity not only the needs of the self, but meet the needs of the soul which requires an equality.

Woolf would advocate for a type of egalitarian agenda where everyone is economically and socially at the same level—or tries to work within the framework of an existing system. Her conception would first be for women in particular to enter the existing system so they may help to correct the system. They do so by being resistant to the overarching ideological systems, and actively, and purposefully avoiding systems considered being oppressive. I believe that Woolf would agree with Weil, in that one must act with *attendre*; however, Woolf differs from Weil in that people do not necessarily turn inward, but she calls for people to remove themselves from society in order to create a new Society of Outsiders to deal with the current problems modernity has left for politics to solve.

Fashioning Society

In review, both Virginia Woolf and Simone Weil saw the problems and causes of war stemming from the traditional social construction of their era and respective cultures. Woolf very clearly recognizes an attraction to war and gender inequality as having a direct cause on the violence and horrors of the twentieth century. By idolizing and enforcing patriarchy that was deeply embedded in the most influential social structures of religion, media, education, and economy, war and destruction have taken place. Almost as visible is the patriarchy as a type of fascism against women. There is a deep inequality exposed by Woolf in *Three Guineas*, and she

offers some solutions to the problem by using and recognizing the very institutions themselves as examples.

Notably, Woolf focuses on those pieces of evidence most readily available to the public as having influence including the newspapers, photos, and speeches by public figures. This patriarchy has made itself visible via propaganda, not only in promoting the national-self-interests to go to war, and succeed in the economics in a global sense through imperialist projects, but she also recognizes a cycle that propagandizes itself and further supports the oppressive traditions. Woolf in particular attacked the newspapers in her work *Three Guineas* and in other essays and short stories. In her on-going discussion of education and problems of restricted “intellectual liberty,” she notes “The teaching of history, then, reinforced by the teaching of the daily paper, drives us to a more restricted position” (Woolf *TG* 106). She goes on to argue the need to read three different daily papers in order to assemble the actual facts as the newspapers have become so overrun with opinion (Woolf *TG* 114-115). She concludes this argument with, “In short, if newspapers were written by people whose sole object in writing was to tell the truth about politics and the truth about war we should not believe in war, and we should believe in art” (Woolf *TG* 116). Ultimately, Woolf looked towards education and reason to discern information. She recognized the problem of the newspapers and sought to correct it by pointing out the propaganda tactics used during the era.

The evidence Woolf draws upon awakens the reader to question what is being told/sold to the public via the newspapers and propaganda especially during the inter-war era. Weil noted similar problems with the newspapers and in particular advertising in the newspapers and literary magazines. They both address the trustworthiness of something sold as “Truth” next to an advertisement which forwards and blends with a different cause altogether. However, Weil

directly addresses this in regards to literary magazines that the Bloomsbury Group contributed. One could argue that the Bloomsbury Group fell prey to advertising, or one could argue that Woolf should have attempted to see beyond it, The advertisement is an unwanted intrusion, as it appears to go against their philosophy where capitalism has become a violent and corrupted system which forwards a war and also contains remnants of patriarchy.

For Weil, the truth can occur in fiction, and she lists several instances in which this occurs. Weil, however, had a problem with many of the modernist ideologies and aesthetic visions of modernist authors on ethical grounds. She claims that they do not promote an inherent moral order which is conveyed by an understanding of the Truth. Woolf, and other modernists, as long as they would not fall under the “nihilism” umbrella, would also agree that there was a healthy and moral agenda. By moral, I do not mean ideological, but rather, a humane agenda. There was a focus on the individual for both, and the personal was political.

What Woolf frequently refers to as political are the structures of the government and the state. For Weil, the political included everyone because we are all actors in a community. Woolf would also agree with this interaction and with the effects an individual can have on a community, family, and other people. It was a difference in terminology. Weil’s politics include all of this when she uses the term, in addition to structures of the state and government including war. Woolf’s politics focused narrowly on the war when she uses the term “political.” In terms of the scope of this project, that which is considered and referred to as “political” and “politics” would refer to any kind of influence and individual or body/system has on another individual or body/system, which is grounded in an Earthly presence.¹⁴ Woolf attempted to convey her reality and mindset of the era through careful writing spanning across several genres and methods. For Woolf, art and writing captured her reality. For Weil, reality was something completely different

and not easily accessible on this world. They, both had similar objectives which were to defeat the destructive ideological structures that led to war, fascism, oppression, and inequality. They both find their roots of this problem in capitalism. They both address this problem and extend well beyond it; however, they lead into different directions from this position.

By using newspapers to support her claim, Woolf calls for honest reporting and journalism and in turn, history. She encourages women to revolt against the institutions which have been oppressing them directly by forming a “Society of Outsiders,” which for her would eventually carry influence to the rest of society’s institutions by creating a powerful one herself. Politically, her motives are peace and equality, and with the agenda to move away from war, violence and fascism.

Woolf also advocates for the growing importance of the artist and the role of arts in politics. She says that women should study art as it will help them study and understand life. People should *believe* in art because it lacks a direct propaganda to it and is less likely to, in Weil’s terms, support an ideology. Rather, it would expose Necessity.

Art turns away from the patriarchy. It is less concerned with gender and promoting a violent ideology; instead people will react to the human condition

Both masculinity and femininity, as traditionally defined, are at fault. As Virginia Woolf put it: ‘No, I don’t see what’s to be done about war. It’s manliness; and manliness breeds womanliness—both so hateful.’ What Woolf alludes to, of course, is ‘manliness’ that is defined by the warrior and patriarch and ‘womanliness’ that admires and supports ‘strong’ men—even when that strength is used to dominate women. (qtd. in Noddings 491)

She says that art is a way to prevent war—in the same way that attention for Weil would help to expose reality in a way to create peace. However, art must become separate from the state. She addresses these issues in an article, “Why Art Today Follows Politics.” She notes the writer is sensitive to social construction and the author has no choice but to convey this phenomenon.

However, the fine-artist must remain separate from the political sphere:

Again there is the voice which warns the artist that unless he can show good cause why art benefits the State he will be made to help it actively—by making airplanes, by firing guns.

And finally, there is the voice which many artists in other countries have already heard and had to obey—the voice which proclaims that the artist is the servant of the politician.

You shall only practice your art, it says, at our bidding. Paint us pictures, carve us statues that glorify our gospels. Celebrate Fascism; celebrate Communism. Preach what we bid you preach. On no other terms shall you exist.

(Woolf *SE* 215)

They are made to be “useful,” and the artist becomes a part of their economy or their cause. The artist is made to become a servant to the state, or the politician that forwards an ideology, and in turn, the artist is made to produce propaganda. If that is the case, their purpose or function is to create propaganda. This is important for a few reasons because it calls to mind the purpose of the artist: to convey the exercise of his “critical faculty” and “understanding.”

Weil would not only contend that the artist needs to exist separate from the state but from all citizens and workers as they should not be forwarding an agenda on that scale, or any agenda

that supports that type of strict ideology. Weil's politics would become personal and not so concerned with economy.

Weil's political thought says to move beyond a "rootedness" in the nation, rather she suggests a rootedness in that which is immediate to the individual. Therefore, politics occurs on a very small scale, determined to meet the needs of necessity for one another and not imposing his or her own will (knowingly or forcibly) upon another:

The quality of absoluteness which is bound up with idolatry remained with it, once the idolatry had ceased, and assumed this new aspect. The State appeared like an inexhaustible horn of plenty, pouring out its treasures in direct proportion to the pressure put upon it. So people always have had a grudge against it for not providing more. (Weil *TNFR* 154)

The expectation that the entire state provide for its citizens with attention and equality that humans deserve would occur unequally, because humans became the collective. The "idolatry" also drove the states to pursue capitalist, imperialist, and economic ends—which ultimately happens to be war. When people buy into this ideology, they become a part of the collective, and the Great Beast. People must become rooted on a smaller scale of culture in which they can directly participate in the politics and society—equally.

This chapter overviews Virginia Woolf and Simone Weil's understanding of what society had become, how it became this way, and speculates solutions. They both advocated against the ideologies, and more towards philosophy, and a greater concern for the individual. More importantly they advocated against harmful political ideologies and oppressive traditions that existed in the culture like patriarchy, fascism, totalitarianism, and war. The next chapter will

further explore the status of war society and its ideologies—with a concern surrounding the effects on the individual's soul in order to give a more complete vision of modernity.

**CHAPTER TWO: SIMONE WEIL’S “ILIAD” AND FORD MADOX FORD’S
PARADE’S END: A STUDY OF LITERATURE AND POLITICS IN REGARDS TO
“FORCE” AND WAR**

Of all of the threats of violence, economic hardships, inequality, oppression, and ideology surrounding the interwar period, the biggest threat and concern war. Britain and the European continent just experienced World War I, and the threat of World War II was looming, along with the rise of Hitler in Germany and the rise of fascism across several European states. The tension and anxiety in culture mirrored itself in the literature and fiction of this time. In continuing a discussion on the political thought of Simone Weil and British modernism, this chapter considers her philosophy with the contribution of literature from the twentieth century in the context of the inter-war era. For Simone Weil, the threat of war, and all of the oppression and violence throughout history, can be understood through her concept of “force” as portrayed in her essay, “L’Iliade ou la poème de la force,” or “The Iliad or the Poem of Force,” published in 1941. I will compare this essay to one of the most influential works of British modernism, a detailed portrayal of World War I, Ford Madox Ford’s tetralogy, *Parade’s End; Some Do Not...* (1924), *No More Parades* (1925), *A Man Could Stand Up—* (1926), and *The Last Post* (1928). By comparing Ford’s fiction with Weil’s influential essay, I consider the role of literature in conveying Weil’s concept of reality, as well as the role of Force upon the individual, especially the soldier, and on society. By comparing the two authors, I will further uncover both writers’ conceptions of war, force, politics, and modernity.

First, to accept that both of these texts are political in nature, one must accept the premise that war, all war, is political by its very nature.¹⁵ Simone Weil, as proven in chapter one, is very political, and her motives in writing this text can be assumed to be as well. Before he

wrote *Parade's End*, Ford's politics, were less obvious in his writing, and he was not typically known or regarded as a "political author." As scholar Max Saunders notes,

Ford is not usually thought of as a philosophical novelist. He does not proceed, certainly, with the rigorous analytical clarity of a Thomas Mann. Nor does he write 'novels of ideas' in which characters exist as mouthpieces for debating positions. But he often wrote and thought, which he tended to couple with the arts...Or when in an essay from 1927, he wrote 'For militarism is the antithesis of Thought and the Arts, and it is by Thought and the Arts alone that the world can be saved.' ...*Parade's End* might be understood as such a thought-experiment. In it, Ford attempts to take stock of the impact the war had on the nature of thinking and consciousness (Saunders xxxii-xxxiii).

In light of this, *Parade's End* captures a reality of war, and the individual's experience and consciousness with it through a more artistic method. Due to the seriousness of the text, overwhelming detail, and the artful presentation this text contains, is worth our attention.¹⁶ These four novels encapsulate for the reader an understanding of war which parallels Weil's thought on the destructive nature of war. Reading the two together gives answers for the break down of the protagonist, Christopher Tietjens at the end of war, the personal and political trauma he and other soldiers experienced, affliction, suffering, and its impacts. The comparison of these two authors creates a new understanding of the war-story tradition, especially within the context of modernity. I will proceed by first giving a context of their works, next by explaining why the method of fiction is so important in conveying their message, then by entering a discussion of "force," and last, comparing that concept to Ford's depictions of force and war in *Parade's End*. Ultimately, I argue that Weil's theory about the nature of "Force," is evidenced in Ford's work,

which uncovers further understanding about the destructive nature of war and the twentieth century.

Context of their work

This chapter will consider the prolific British modernist writer, Ford Madox Ford (né Ford Hermann Hueffer: 1873 – 1939), and French Philosopher/ Thinker/ Mystic, Simone Weil (1909 – 1943). Both Ford and Weil were motivated to convey the experience of war to the people. Both considered the occupation of the writer to be of extreme importance, viewed the writer as a messenger of the greater Good, and found the writer to be of great influence on society and culture. Weil furthers this idea of the greater Good by adding a moralistic value and responsibility of the writer to convey the Truth. Ford Madox Ford and Simone Weil also concerned themselves with depicting the true destruction of war.

Ford Madox Ford has a compelling biography, and a prolific body of work, which is often overlooked and understudied by modernist scholars. During Ford's sixty-three years, he amassed a body of work of eighty-nine books, including thirty-six novels. He founded two influential literary journals, *The English Review* and *The Transatlantic Review*, which gave rise to several leading modernist authors. Notably, he worked as the first editor to James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*, and published several other authors including H.G. Wells, Joseph Conrad, and Ezra Pound. He served as a soldier in World War I, where he almost died in the Battle of the Somme, but he never wrote about his experience in a formal non-fiction format (aside from a few personal letters). He skips over his war experience in his autobiography. There has been resurgence in his recognition as a forerunning modernist figure, and there has been a recent increase in his popularity to both scholars and wider audiences alike. He is primarily known for his master works, *The Good Soldier*, *The Fifth Queen* trilogy, and the *Parade's End* tetralogy.¹⁷

Ford wanted to truthfully depict World War I, and had experimented with a number of genres in an attempt to capture depictions of battle and war, including poems, novels, articles, essays, and letters; he found prose worked best to articulate his experience. What captured the most attention was his famed tetralogy, *Parade's End*, often regarded as one of the great works of modernist literature. In this text Ford depicted a complex and thorough experience of World War I in England. In particular the reader experiences some of the horrors of war through novels two and three, *No More Parades*, and *A Man Could Stand Up*—, respectively. These texts depict the military front and life in the trenches, but Ford went beyond battle scenes to focus on the individual. In this case, it is the protagonist Christopher Tietjens whom takes his professions very seriously: first in the role of a government mathematician and later in role of the soldier. By the end of the four novels, the reader experiences the decline of the hero, Christopher Tietjens, who is not regarded as the typical triumphant warrior from the history of the western world. Rather, Tietjens becomes subject to the loss of the individual identity and traits that made him dynamic and admirable in the first three novels. Instead of becoming the war-hero, by the end of the war Tietjens is almost entirely absent, and without personal agency in the fourth novel. Tietjens is of a higher class, clinging to his physical estate of Groby which represents an ideal estate in regards to his mentality and values. By the end of the novel, things deteriorate— the estate is sold, and the great symbol of the Groby tree is chopped down, representing an even greater loss for Tietjens.¹⁸

Similarly to Ford, Simone Weil was extremely concerned about the destructive nature of war and its effects on humanity. One of her most influential essays, originally published in 1941 "*L'Iliade ou le poème de la force*," (or: "The Iliad or the Poem of Force"), gives a perspective on the historical, cultural, and psychological crisis of War and destruction going on during that time.

She looks directly at Homer's epic, *The Iliad*, and relates it to her overall view of politics. She notes from the beginning of her essay "The true hero, the true subject, the centre of the *Iliad* is force" (Weil *SWA* 163). This essay, and in addition to essays concerning her thoughts on writing, politics, and the individual, at times contradicts Ford's depiction of war; however, they arrive at a similar end, which is ultimately an anti-war sentiment: war destroys the individual. Moreover, for both authors, it is important to convey this destructive reality of war and force to prevent it from happening in the future.

Importance of Fiction

Fiction had a unique role for the reader and for society especially as it pertains to conveying the war which both authors were deeply concerned about. Similar to journalistic principles discussed in chapter one, it becomes valued when it is able to convey the Truth about instances and accurately informs the reader about the experience of the soldier. However, fiction and the author have a creative license and perhaps a responsibility to go well-beyond journalism to convey the emotions and the existence of a battle or war. Fiction and literature often are trusted to convey war and politics, and philosophical thought to a wide audience.

Ford was particularly concerned about the choice of which genre is best suited to convey the experience of war most responsibly, authentically, and truthfully. In an early collection of essays, *Thus to Revisit: Some Reminiscences*, published in 1921, three years before the publication of *Parade's End*, he reflects upon his own writing, and compares it to others in the literary tradition. Most of these "reminiscences" concern Ford's immediate contemporaries like Ezra Pound, Henry James, and Joseph Conrad in relation to the literary genre. In the second half of this collection, entitled "Battle of the Poets," Ford offers how the war gave rise to his prose and verse.

Prose is for me an instrument—like a tool for precision. But the moment I come to want to write about verse I feel—possibly doubts, possibly misgivings; certainly some of the diffidence of the novice...I had thought about verse desultorily before 1912; it was not until 1915 or 1916, during the enforced waitings of a life sometimes of a rather frenzied action, that I devoted really the whole of my aesthetic mind to the practical side of verse-writing. (Ford *TTR* 129)

Ford sets up his frame of mind to the genre of verse writing came about in the middle of World War I. He continues to add importance to this specific moment in the development of his aesthetic, which focused on seriousness and precision. One can further speculate that the trauma an author undergoes through the experience of war often culminated into the genre of poetry. Ford found that he could not write his war experience in verse like others, instead we find that Ford's novel, written in prose, is the best avenue for conveying the depth of thought and the conveyance of experience and truth necessary for the reading public. Here he can be seen to set up boundaries for the reader, and can properly (re)create experiences and scenarios, and convey the message of the soldier's experience at war.

Simone Weil also held writers and the role they play in culture in high-esteem, which is important because it can cause the reader to awaken to truth and beauty, and in some instances experience *Attendre*. Like Ford, Weil saw writers had the important duty to translate ideas, concepts, and language to the public. In her essay "The Power of Words," she notes, "Where there is a grave error of vocabulary it is almost certainly the sign of a grave error of thought" (Weil *SWR* 275). However, literature went beyond more than just articulating an experience or conveying a clear message, it had influence on society, culture, and politics. Weil scholar, George A. Paniachas notes: "Problems of language cannot be detached from political problems,

as she brings out in a sentence that rings with recurring truth in the socio-political arena: ‘On inspection, almost all the words and phrases of our political vocabulary turn out to be hollow’” (Paniachas 263). Because of the political problems, there is a strong emphasis on the need for fiction to convey thought and experience, especially given the context. Ford is particularly suitable for this role because he does not frequently find himself subject to her critiques of modern literature in which she frequently attacked writers like Beckett and the surrealists. For example, “In much of modern literature, she observes, values are reversed so that evil becomes attractive, good tedious” (Piniachas 263). Although the good is tedious in *Parade’s End*, for the majority of the tetralogy, Tietjens is representative of the ideal English Country Gentleman. However, evil is not preferred—rather Ford depicts the effects of war and evil to destroy what Weil would call the human soul, consistent with her political and spiritual thought and associated concern for the individual.

For Simone Weil, the author has a responsibility to convey the Truth and at the same time morality. Her concept essentially falls in line with her political and social thought previously discussed. Literature should be a means to convey the true nature and necessity of life. In conveying nature and necessity, literature can awaken the reader, or cause the reader to undergo *attendre* to the reality of things. When one does this, they will move naturally in the direction of the Good. In doing so, authors had been traditionally valued and had an important role to play in society and in education which she saw as declining particularly in the case of modern(ist) literature. She discussed this in a number of essays on the power of language, particularly “The Responsibility of Writers” and “Morality and Literature.” In these essays she is highly critical of contemporary literature and of the stylistic directions in which it was headed at the time:

In a general way, the literature of the twentieth century is essentially psychological; and psychology consists in describing states of the soul by displaying them all on the same plane without any discrimination of value, as though good and evil were external to them, as though the effort towards the good could be absent at any moment from the thought of any man. (Weil *SWR* 289)

Her critique is accurate. Much of modernism is set in the psyche of the individual, often utilizing techniques such as “stream of consciousness” which can make it difficult for the reader to discern the difference between “good” and “evil.” For Weil, good is anything that points in the direction of God, and evil is any distraction to the attention to God. However, she would also assert that if reality is depicted on an equal level and done truthfully, the good, and the natural order or hierarchy of good and evil will reveal itself. For modernist writers, to convey the psychological was to convey their truth. Also in her essay, “The Responsibility of Writers” she notes that there is a “growing weakness, and almost disappearance, of the idea of value” (Weil *SWR* 287). Writers were the traditional guardians of this value. In modernism there came a problem of aesthetic value, and in turn, moral value. “Dadaism and surrealism are extreme cases; they represented the intoxication of total license, the intoxication in which the mind wallows when it has made a clean sweep of value and surrendered it to the immediate” (Weil *SWR* 288). For Weil, we must be reminded that the author does not have the authority or responsibility to completely recreate reality; rather, it is the responsibility to show things the way they are in reality and bound by necessity.

Rather than recreating a reality which forwards the “evil” agenda, because that is more compelling to write about, it is equally important for Weil that a writer does not go in the other direction of forwarding a personal conception of “the good.” She states:

Writers do not have to be professors of morals, but they do have to express the human condition. And nothing concerns human life so essentially, for every man at every moment, as good and evil. When literature becomes deliberately indifferent to the opposition of good and evil it betrays its function and forfeits all claim to excellence (Weil *SWR* 298)

When a writer becomes a “professor of morals” they would then forward an ideology which led to war, oppression, inequality, and violence. No one knows the good or the truth, because humans are incapable of knowing it. Rather, they only know the direction. If one simply conveys the reality of what is natural, the good reveals itself with grace to overcome the gravity of necessity.

Although critical of the genre of literature and modernity, Weil does recognize some artistic merit and genius in regards to literature. However, few of these for her actually meet the quality of genius. Genius for her comes from God, and she ends there because moving beyond that is ultimately unknowable. For Weil, only certain writers and works convey the reality she values and does so with poetry, value, and grace. To summarize from her essay “Morality and Literature,” the authors that do have genius expose the reader to reality and the truth so fully that they provide “spiritual guidance,” as in the reader is aware of this Reality and Truth; and the reader is exposed to the nature of Good and the nature of Evil. The reader is aware of Reality so much so that it causes them to choose the Good. Not every writer can do this. It comes from “genius,” which comes from an unknowable source. There are geniuses which go to the good like the Homer’s *Iliad*, Phedre, Aeschylus and Sophocles, a few Molière comedies, and a few plays in Shakespeare, notably *King Lear*. There are bad “demonical geniuses” like Rimbaud. He

is still recognized as genius, just the wrong kind.¹⁹ Some genius is underdeveloped or not there which that is not entirely the writer's fault because that comes from simply being human.

What is most important to note about literature, for Weil, and perhaps all writers, is it can provoke the reader to *attend* to reality. It can awaken one to truth with an image so as to direct them towards the good. It is through this *attention* that one is able to see reality, participate in the metaxu, lead an examined life with one another in a non-oppressive community, and fulfill their human obligations to necessity and to each other. She discusses Homer's *Iliad* as a method to convey the reality of Force, of war, and in turn, necessity. It awakens the reader to the *true* nature of reality, necessity, and the transcendent.

Ford Madox Ford presents all of reality, and especially the reality of war on an equal playing field. By nature, war, for myself and for Weil and Ford, is bad (to say the least). He did not redefine reality, and he chose techniques of impressionism over Dadaism or surrealist techniques to convey his literature. Ford's technique could fall in line with Weil's values in literature because they both concern conveying reality with extreme precision.

The Author's First-Hand Experience of War

It can be assumed that both Ford and Weil pull the inspiration and influence from first-hand experience in war. As previously noted, Weil participated in, or attempted to participate in, the Spanish Civil War, and witnessed first hand the first few years of World War II especially pertaining to the occupation in France. Ford Madox Ford had first-hand experience when he participated in World War I.

Although, Ford did not speak about his experiences in his autobiography, he does briefly write about his experience which can be assumed to have informed his fiction on the subject. He

wrote a letter to his love interest, Lucy Masterman, on July 28th, 1916, and offers this simple description of war:

We get shelled two or three times a day, otherwise it is fairly dull—indeed, being shelled is fairly dull, after the first once or twice. Otherwise it is all very interesting—filling in patches of one’s knowledge & so on, but it isn’t more than interesting, because one gets no news. Absolutely none, except gossip. (Ford *Letters* 66)

In this letter, Ford talks about getting *used to* and adapting to being under fire. Although this is not graphic, and suggests a pacification to any worries of Ms. Masterman, it still offers more insight to the on-goings of World War I and the uncertainty involved: “one gets no news.” This letter gives further insight to the lack of communication and organization of commanders and decision makers during the war.

On August 6, 1916, less than two months later, an excerpt from a letter to his friend, and sometimes-co-author, Joseph Conrad, reveals a different, potentially more honest depiction of war, which would carry on into his writing:

Shells falling on a church: these make a huge ‘*corump*’ sound, followed by a noise like crockery falling off a tray—as the roof tiles fall off. If the roof is not tiled you can hear the stained glass, sifting mechanically until the next shell. (Heard in a church, on each occasion, about 90 yds away). Screams of women penetrate all these sounds—but I do not find that they agitate me as they have done at home. (Women in cellars round the square. Oneself running thro’ fast.) Emotions again: I saw two men and three mules (the first time I saw a casualty) killed by one shell. A piece the size of a pair of corsets went clear thro’ one man,

the other just fell—the mules hardly any visible mark. These things gave me no *emotion* at all—they seemed *obvious*; rather as it wd. be. A great many patients on stretchers—a thousand or so in a long stream is very depressing—but, I fancy, mostly because one thinks one will be going back into it. (Ford *Letters* 73-74)

The battle and war become more real, more unpleasant, and filled with fear. Even more so, Ford experienced the loss of emotion or the loss of his Centre. The sentiment is powerful, and this could be seen as a motivation or driving force for Ford to depict the truth for the reader in order to convey the ugly, hellish truth about war. From this comes an inner turmoil for Ford as well as a deep sobriety about writing which presents itself in his fiction.

Unlike Ford, Weil's motives for going to war were political. In her life she attempted to fight in the Spanish Civil War to be able to convey her experience, and also fight for the lower class subject to the hegemony of capitalism. Although she did not experience combat, her impression and thoughts on war were powerful, and she was highly motivated to express them in her writing. She was also sensitive to other depictions of War especially images coming from the Spanish Civil War and those from Homer and literature.

Simone Weil's theory of "Force"

It is through a fictional depiction of war that Weil is able to represent the Truth especially in regards to the time period of modernity. Not surprisingly, they are often graphic and unpleasant depictions of War. There are several qualities which war imagery has in common: there is the fight; there is a victor and there are those defeated; there is a motive, whether for a nation, or a nationalistic value; there is a sense of inner turmoil; the individual soldier in his environment, often clouded by the commonly-referred to term "fog of war;" and through all of

this there is often a jarring moment of clarity and realization accompanied by a horror surrounding the realization.

This jarring portrayal of war is especially important to Weil in her discussion of the *Iliad* in her essay “The Iliad or the Poem of Force.” The unrelenting, honest depiction of war portrayed in Homer’s epic cause the reader to pay *attention* to the violence involved in war:

The essay on the *Iliad*, one could argue, is a vehicle for an act of attention...all her considerable rhetorical powers are aimed at making us ‘attend.’ We are to attend to her essay, of course, and to the *Iliad* itself, but more important we are to attend to the truths the *Iliad* shares with the real world. (Feber 65)

By citing the most bloody and violent scenes in the *Iliad*, she is able to shock the reader first, but then cause them to realize the harsh Truth of battle and war. This truth she wants to convey is about the nature of “Force.” She starts out with the insight that “The true hero, the true subject, the centre of the *Iliad* is force” (Weil *SWA* 163). She goes on to define Force. “it is that *x* that turns anybody who is subjected to it into a *thing*. Exercised to the limit, it turns man into a thing in the most literal sense: it makes a corpse out of him” (Weil *SWA* 163).²⁰ She relates Force to the war between the Greeks and the Trojans. However this essay was written in response to WWII, as a clear reference to her present political condition.

Weil further notes that not only is there truth conveyed about the violence and nature of Force present in the *Iliad*, but she goes on to note how war’s effects are felt everywhere and how the effects are depicted. Not only does everyone bow their head to Force at least one way in the text, but she represents how Homer depicts a hardship for everyone. “Nearly all of the *Iliad* takes place far from the hot baths. Nearly all of human life, then and now, takes place far from hot baths” (Weil *SWA* 164). Here she notes that society still has not learned that war and force is

responsible to this day for creating unpleasantness in life. Although she does not encourage the individual to pursue self-interests the way we might traditionally understand self-interest, and the conception that happiness does not necessarily equate to pleasure, it should not come about in the form of violence or oppression or the other hardships witnessed throughout history. If the *Iliad* is “[...] at the very centre of human history, [and is...] the purest and loveliest of mirrors” (Weil *SWA* 163), then it should be indicative of the true causes of oppression—which is of force. Force is an indefinable “x” coming from necessity that cannot be possessed or governed by mere mortals.

Similar to the discussion of ideology in the first chapter, no one possesses force the same way that no one possesses the good or the truth. “Force is as pitiless to the man who possesses it, or thinks he does, as it is to its victims; the second it crushes, the first it intoxicates” (Weil *SWA* 171). To reiterate the claim that no one possesses force, she also offers “Such is the empire of force, as extensive as the empire of nature” (Weil *SWA* 170). It comes from that unknowable “absolute,” which casts a shadow over everybody and everything. For Weil, (and in turn modernity), much of human life is covered in force, oppression, and suffering. “In this poem there is not a single man who does not at one time or another have to bow his neck to force” (Weil *SWA* 171). Force is all around in reality, unattainable, and its nature is unknowable, but not unrecognizable.

At the same time, this notion that force is unattainable and unknowable is a clear historical critique to the rise of ideologies of this time. This essay was mostly written during the first year of World War II, and several political groups, for example, the fascists’ political parties, felt they possessed force: they were able to turn other people into “things.” This was not

only felt in that they had to ability to turn people into “things” in the literal sense of a corpse, but in addition to turning them into a “thing” when they are still alive:

The force that does *not* kill, i.e., that does not kill just yet. It will surely kill, it will possibly kill, or perhaps it merely hangs, poised and ready, over the head of the creature it *can* kill, at any moment, which is to say at every moment. (Weil *SWA* 165)

In this sense, “force” is anything that can cause fear, anxiety, or oppression. It is unknowable at its source. Weil scholar, Mary Dietz points out that it is only knowable by its consequences when she states, “Force, it seems, is best understood by looking to it [*sic*] consequences—its ability to turn a human being into a thing—rather than to its origin, or to its cause, or to something like its ‘internal nature’” (Dietz 87). Force, in this sense is more powerful, and it includes anything dehumanizing. This would parallel the human conception of “good.” Humans cannot understand the absolute good, only that Good which is the opposite of evil. Here, Humans cannot understand Force, but they know its effects. Its roots cannot be known.

The point of her essay on force is not to simply point out again and again that it cannot be known, and that one should not try to turn someone else into a *thing*, rather this is an awakening that this force exists and that this realization is brought to us via the *Iliad*. First, this genius work of literature draws our attention to the nature of reality and allows us to choose the Good. But the answer is more complex than that. She ends her essay with the hope that the *Iliad*'s readers will walk away with closure. “Perhaps they will yet rediscover the epic genius, when they learn that there is no refuge from that, learn not to admire force, not to hate the enemy, nor to scorn the unfortunate. How soon this will happen is another question” (Weil *SWA* 195). It is our job in turn, to convey these lessons after we have had a glimpse into the true nature of things. However,

it is more than to be good people, for that is no easy task. “To respect life in somebody else when you have had to castrate yourself of all yearning for it demands a truly heartbreaking exertion of the powers of generosity” (Weil *SWA* 184). The greatest and most important thing you can give is *attendre* not only to nature and reality, but to give attention to your fellow community and individuals. For it is through this attention that one can become filled with grace to overcome the force of gravity.

“Force” in Ford’s *Parade’s End*

There are many instances where Simone Weil’s notion of force is present in Ford Madox Ford’s *Parade’s End*, and her philosophy of force can help make sense of some of the battles, hardships, and oppression that occur throughout the text. Weil’s essay did have an over-arching anti-war sentiment, but her thought also encompassed an anti-ideology sentiment. Ford set out to convey a similar stance when he wrote this text:

Ford makes it clear that he saw his novel as something more than a plea against future wars. First of all, his subject ‘was the world as it culminated in the war’—a ‘crumbling world.’ He even tells us that he was fascinated with the idea of using the world as his central character in ‘an immense novel in which all the characters should be great masses of people—or interests...’ (Cassell 205)

In addition, it does not appear that there was a clear “moral profession” Weil warned about, inasmuch as there was simply a conveyance of the realities Ford underwent himself as evidenced in his letters. Ford’s world in his text, like Homer’s, occurred far away from the hot baths, and it was in the trenches that he conveys the most central, violent, and memorable travesty in his four novels. He wrote these texts to take place far away from the “hot baths,” yet shows them in the beginning to draw a sharp contrast to the military front.

Much of *Parade's End* takes place on the military front and in the trenches. A profound scene depicts Tietjens as a witness to the death of the fellow soldier Mackenzie. Here he is completely subjected to the cause of war, and subject to the dominion by the power of the throne:

It had occurred to him that it was a military duty to bother himself about the mental equilibrium of this talk, wearisomely, to keep his mind employed! Captain Mackenzie was an officer of His Majesty the King: the property, body and soul, of His Majesty and His Majesty's War Office. It was Tietjens' duty to preserve this fellow as it was his duty to prevent deterioration in any other piece of the King's property (Ford *PE* 329)²¹

In this passage, Tietjens recognizes the cause of Mackenzie's death as being his fault because he was his responsibility, and this scene and sentiment can be read that Tietjens is either recognizing Mackenzie as an individual, or rather, he turns him into an object already. He is a pawn for the king in the game. "That's the Game! And if any of his, Tietjens', men were killed, he grinned and said the game was more than the players of the game..." (Ford *PE* 329). The idea of war as a game was warned about previously in Weil in that it first intoxicates, then it destroys. Here the purpose is masked by the task of the soldier in the war. It has suddenly become a game, and the reality of the situation becomes lessened from their perspective. It is two pages later that O Nine Morgan gets shot in the war, and Tietjens experiences the graphic nature of it:

He gave a high, rattling laugh. He bent, as if in a stiff bow, woodenly at his thighs. He pitched, still bent, on to the iron sheet that covered the brazier, rolled off that and lay on his back across the legs of the other runner, who had been crouched beside the brazier. In the bright light it was as if the whole pail of scarlet

paint had been dashed across the man's face on the left and his chest. It glistened in the firelight – just like fresh paint, moving! (Ford *PE* 331)

The narrator attempts to capture the situation, but cannot. The language is still stuck in metaphor, is fragmented in its use of verbs—and still, a failure to recognize what happened in the situation. We can recognize the impersonal nature of this scene, as well as the narrator and Tietjen's disassociation from reality. The blood is not blood, it is paint, and nowhere in the scene does it recognize the death of O Nine Morgan. Similar to Weil, Ford depicts a gruesome scene, and follows similar elements of Force happening. Ultimately, we get a description of treating the late-soldier as a thing:

The heat from the brazier was overpowering on his bent face. He hoped he would not get his hands all over blood, because blood is very sticky. It makes your fingers stick together impotently. But there might not be any blood in the darkness under the fellow's back where he was putting his hand. There was, however: it was very wet. (Ford *PE* 331)

The struggle to make sense of the situation and quickly deal with it forces his fellow soldiers to no longer recognize him as O Nine Morgan but to quickly consider their own needs no matter how small. In his narration, Ford does not hold back from the imagery and the raw violence of the situation. Finally Tietjens came to understand what had happened:

Tietjens let the trunk of the body sink slowly to the floor. He was more gentle than if the man had been alive. All hell in the way of noise burst about the world. Tietjens' thoughts seemed to have to show to him between earthquake shots. He was thinking it was absurd of that fellow Mackenzie to imagine that he could know any uncle of his. (Ford *PE* 332)

Tietjens is able to recognize that human qualities of gentleness again and recognize that he is no longer alive. He also depicts the absurd nature of the situation and the consequent struggle to make sense that continues throughout the chapter. However, the gruesomeness of the scene, and is flashbaked multiple times in the teratology that includes a vision of O Nine Morgan.

O Nine Morgan was made into a thing by being subjected to the force of war. For Tietjens, there is recognition of himself as being at-fault for this. Tietjens, as a general forwarded the ideology of the war machine, and sees himself as responsible. There is a moment of intoxication, then of complete sobriety when he is awakened to the reality of the situation:

O Nine Morgan presents Tietjens with another reflection or echo of his own plight and ultimately becomes a central symbol for the breakdown of Tietjens' feudal personality. There is, first of all, Tietjens' growing awareness of identity with the 'other Ranks.' That his 'inner mentality' will plague him with the thought that as an *officer* he was responsible for O Nine Morgan's death seems to Tietjens to be the 'absurd end of the earth' [...] He admits that 'in literalness' he had been responsible for a man's death. The memory of O Nine Morgan's wondrous eyes when he, 'God-Tietjens,' had passed judgment on him evokes thoughts of all the dead in the war that he had seen and could imagine, a blackness of mood that came at odd times. (Cassell 227)

Here we are awakened to the Tietjens-as-God motif. This was a mistake which the modern subject often makes and also the oppressive regimes of the twentieth century. When one believes and acts on their notion of "right" and "wrong," "good" and "evil," they forward an ideology. For Weil, it is the goal to simply move in the direction of the Good after having an awakening to

reality. Instead, Tietjens is awakened to Force, he bows his head to it, and becomes more of a thing by the force that does not kill.

Tietjens not only becomes subjected to the force that does not kill, but represents a larger notion of the degradation of values in English society. This could be part of an awakening to the wrong direction which has ultimately brought him to war and to witness and become responsible for the death of O Nine Morgan. Ford scholar Cassell writes about the degradation of English values Ford depicts throughout a number of novels spanning from 1907 – 1937. “[...]he saw these qualities as steadily degenerating during the war and after, when England returned to a prechivalric savagery of recrimination and revenge. Actually Ford never had much sympathy with the great public, in spite of their redeeming qualities” (Cassell 84). If Tietjens represents the traditional English gentleman, and he is responsible for the death of someone he is now recognizing as equal in being a fellow soldier in war, then there is a shift in the tradition. Indeed, this plays out in the novel where by the end Tietjens is haunted throughout by O Nine Morgan and through psychological trauma which results in him being barely present in his own life, in his traditional estate, and even in the last novel, *Last Post*—a text which comes to a logical end where Tietjens is no longer present; the protagonist is objectified in his own work. Tietjens ultimately loses agency of perspective, action, and subjectivity. He is not seen as a war hero, rather someone who barely exists.

Through the recurring depictions of war, degradation of Tietjens, and exposure to the flaws of traditional English values, Ford Madox Ford depicts force on a number of planes. It is psychological in that it affects Tietjens’ consciousness, it is political in the representation of Tietjens as both representing English values and as a pawn in the war machine, and also physical in that his fellow soldiers and those whom he is ultimately responsible for are turned into *things*.

In addition to them being turned into things, they were not recognized as human until it was too late. Had Teitjens given *attendre* to his situations, and to his fellow countrymen—his humanity would have been more fully protected. Through these images Weil's thought seems to reach a fuller depiction and representation regarding the nature of war. This shedding of humanity is what parallels with Simone Weil's thought on war, where she describes Force as taking away subjectivity, and making humans and who experience force into a thing.

War, affliction, uprootedness, force, and the desire for power are seen as the most destructive devices humanity faces. "To define force—it is that *x* that turns anybody subjected to it into a *thing*" (Weil *SWA* 163). This is what happens in the face of war—one is subjected to the entirety of all Force. She relates this metaphor to the epic war poem *The Iliad* by Homer to illustrate the issue. She notes that every character at one point finds themselves subject to force. For Weil one must not rely on the age-old solution of war and force to dictate the good—or assert one's will on another.

Force is not a machine for automatically creating justice. It is a blind mechanism, which produces indiscriminately and impartially just or unjust results, but by all the laws of probability, nearly always unjust ones... Where force is absolutely sovereign, justice is absolutely unreal. Yet justice cannot be that. We know it experimentally. It is real enough in the hearts of men. The structure of a human heart is just as much a reality as any other in this universe, neither more nor less of a reality than trajectory of a planet. (Hrezo 99-100)

The value of the individual comes into play, and that includes all parts of the individual for Weil: the spiritual, physical, and emotional. By using force, war is ultimately destroying the

individual—as is depicted through the character of Teitjens, as well as in the *Iliad*, and any depiction of War.

5. Conclusions

The response to war for both Simone Weil and Ford Madox Ford was an important one given the context of violence surrounding their culture. For Ford, it was through depicting an experience in World War I. For Weil, it was her insight in how violence, war, and *force* brought about destruction throughout humanity. There was an obvious sentiment embracing pacifism and a rejection of traditional ideology which came from this era.

For both, this was especially important to convey in literature. It took Homer's portrayal to illuminate or attend to this issue for Weil. For Ford, he set out to depict war faithfully through the novel and create an anti-war sentiment; however, both writers move beyond that and critique greater issues of modernity. Margaret Hrezo furthers that modernity carried with it other problems. "Modernity, Weil believes, also replaces the capacity for conscious thought with force. More and more human beings see themselves as victims rather than moral actors" (Hrezo 95). Ford depicted Tietjens, and everyone in *Parade's End*, as subject to the force of war and also as a victim. Although the portrayal of the soldier shows the hero as a force for the good, he falls from grace and into the gravity of modernity. Ultimately it falls on the individual to become responsible for modernity's shortcomings, and to consciously correct them.

What is ultimately depicted here is a shedding of mythology surrounding War. Previously, our intelligentsia of the Western world depicted warriors as glorious and, frankly, the victors wrote the history. For the modern world, there are not clear-victors. They are not regarded as strict enemies. Rather, they are to be seen as real, live people. This is good to

recognize the humanity of others, rather those who are once thought of as an Other, or as mere objects for political gain.

CONCLUSION

In some regards this thesis is a recovery project to the study of Simone Weil. Often she is overlooked for her extreme activism that occurs throughout her biography, or she is not taken seriously because of her mysticism and somewhat inconsistency of her thought. She only lived to be thirty-four years old, and her body of work is impressive. Had she lived longer to more fully develop her thought, she may be studied more often or held in higher esteem among literary scholars and social scientists. Although there is a body of scholarship written on her, to compare it to some of the other French thinkers during this time period such as Camus or Sartre, her work pales in comparison. There have been many theorists that discuss her religious, social and political thought, but what is particularly lacking is scholarship of her literary criticism which I hope this thesis will add to significantly.

As a literature scholar, it was compelling to compare her to the British modernists because they felt similar social and cultural pressures especially in regards to their politics of war, oppression, ideology, and tradition. There is a significant amount of criticism done on Virginia Woolf; however, of her works *Three Guineas* is often overlooked because it is one of her least-known texts. This thesis fills a research gap hinted at by other scholars, notably Jane Marcus who briefly noted the possibility for a comparison. Comparing these two writers gives a better and interesting conception of both their social, political, and social critiques especially those surrounding ideology such as patriarchy or force. Comparing them side-by-side gives a fuller understanding to what they viewed as similar societal and political pressures, but also gives an understanding to differences in their thought which is equally important. Often their work, especially these texts in particular, can be critiqued as confusing or jumbled. To break down select elements of their concepts, like attempting to isolate between “political” or “social

critique” helps to clarify their respective thought which spans across several subjects. Places where the texts intersect help illuminate pressures and situations that caused problems for modernity such as capitalism, educational tradition, patriarchy, art, and war, and illustrate not only their concerns, but the concerns of society at large during this era.

Ford Madox Ford and Simone Weil, admittedly, is still a peculiar pairing, but it brings about an opportunity to study Weil’s thought with literature, especially her thought on the nature of war and Force. War was of primary concern for both of these writers as were the literary depictions of it throughout the history of western civilization as well as the twentieth century. Ford’s *Parade’s End* represented a masterpiece of World War I literature, and through my exposure to other war literature, I feel like its portrayal of the soldier and war is both compelling and important. To compare the role of literature, and the depiction of war with Weil helps the reader discern the oppressive nature of war and the “moral duties,” as well as the political duties of the author. More so, it offers a critique of modernism on behalf of Weil and brings to light a question of aesthetics, whether or not ethics is involved in a truthful and accurate portrayal, and exactly what those ethics entail. Furthermore, I think that comparing Ford and Weil can give rise to a “Weil-ian” reading of a text and set a foundation for future readings in comparing her thought to literature. Last, it gives a fuller understanding and depth of the literature and the types of writers the early twentieth century produced in response to the politics and pressures of the interwar era.

Overall, this scholarly pursuit comes with its own intellectual opportunities. Dealing with the abstract mediums of philosophy, essays, and literature presents its own challenges, triumphs, and limitations. This will add to scholarship for all three of these writers, and hopefully provide a

deeper understanding of what they have to offer to the study of modernism, and Weil's political and social thought.

NOTES

¹ Simone Weil biographical information was compiled from the introduction sections of her texts published under Routledge, including *Gravity and Grace*, *Oppression and Liberty*, and *The Need for Roots*. Further information was also provided from Siân Miles' introduction in *Simone Weil: An Anthology*, and also the secondary texts by Mary G. Dietz, and the chapter written by Margaret S. Hrezo.

² Developing a broad overview of her thought was no easy task, nor does it capture her thought entirely. I attempted to simply put down those concepts, which are central to understanding her political thought. For the creation of this overview, I've consulted several of her available primary works, and several secondary sources. My understanding of her thought, and especially her politics is particularly indebted to the great scholarship of Margaret S. Hrezo's chapter entitled "Composition on a Multiple Plane: Simone Weil's Answer to the Rule of Necessity" in *Feminist Approaches to Social Movements, Community, and Power, Volume One: Conscious Acts and the Politics of Social Change*, as well as the work of Mary G. Dietz, especially her text *Between the Human and the Divine: The Political Thought of Simone Weil*. I highly suggest consulting those sources for a more complete understanding of her political thought, and of course, reading the work of Simone Weil.

³ As Weil scholar, Hrezo elaborates on the idea of God:

However, her God is not a 'person' who exists in some place one could call "heaven." Her life took her beyond the symbol of God to the mystery at its ground. The spiritual irruptions she sees in Plato, Aeschylus, and the early Greek scientists also influence her view of God, as did her dislike of the violent,

patriarchal God she saw in the Old Testament[...] Weil believes that there is truth in all the world's major religions. Love of religious practices means love of *dikē* and, therefore, is not synonymous with acceptance of the Christian God. (Hrezo 100)

⁴ Simone Weil's thought defies clear classification. She does not belong to a particular "school of thought," and is truly one of the most original and unique philosophers I've come across. I should note that although generally accepted among Weil scholarship, she would fall on the Left-side politically, not all scholars would place her there. Notably, her first English publisher, the renown Modernist literary figure, Nobel Prize laureate, author and poet, T.S. Eliot, would argue that she defies even that classification. In the preface he wrote for her first English edition of *The Need For Roots*, in 1951, he notes:

And in her political thinking she appears as a stern critic of both Right and Left; at the same time more truly a lover of order and hierarchy than most of those who call themselves Conservative, and more truly a lover of the people than most of those who call themselves Socialist. (Eliot x)

More importantly he states, "As a political thinker, as in everything else, Simone Weil is not to be classified. The paradoxically of her sympathies is a contributing cause of the equilibrium" (Eliot xiii). So, to do justice to her thought, I would agree that it is, in theory impossible to place her in the conventions of Right or Left; but, in taking into consideration of her other political thought, similarities I draw with other thinkers whom readily identify on one side of the spectrum, and in taking special consideration her personal biography, history of activism, and for Left values she embraced, I would place her there—at least in the context of this project.

⁵ She wrote about math sometimes.

⁶ This reference is referred to frequently in Weil scholarship when attempting to provide an introduction to either of these texts. To cover my ground, I will quote from one: “The result of her labors was *L’Enracinement*, or *The Need for Roots*, [...], which Weil called her “other *magnum opus*,” the “Reflections Concerning the Causes of Liberty and Oppression” being the first” (Dietz *BTHD* 149).

⁷ Among their differences and limits to this project to consider would first be the problem of location—Virginia Woolf lived in England, and Simone Weil lived in France. They also lived during slightly different times. Although both of their lives were cut short by suicide, they experienced slightly nuances in culture and chronology. The majority of Weil’s writing, for instance, occurred in the last two years of her life, 1940-1943, the majority of which occurred after Woolf’s death in 1941. I do not mean to suggest then that these two authors experienced the *exact same* struggles, oppressors, or even experienced the same culture. England and France have their respective histories and identities to consider, in addition to the time period and influential events that occurred during the inter-war period.

Twentieth-century modernism responded to a time of massive change, and helped to develop a break from tradition—every year held something new, and this should always be at the forefront of the reader’s mind. I do not wish to suggest either that these times are the same, or that these countries are the same—but both authors responded to very similar circumstances that affected both English and continental thought, and their societies. Also, in exploring the political thought of these two writers, I do not intend to sacrifice one thought and replace it with another—they both were independent and important theorists for this time, and I would like to honor that, and at the same time I would like to display some of their similarities and differences

in order to suggest that they complement one another. In some instances they leave some concepts abstract, or leave open-ended answers. These instances, I believe are intentional on behalf of the authors in order to leave room for the reader to make up his or her own mind on the issue. Nonetheless, I think these two authors often have responses for one another, or at least have perspectives to offer on the varying problems facing society and answers for them. I believe that, at times, these two authors are confusing, and perhaps inconsistent, and a comparison between the two may suggest a light to make sense of these areas. I also do not wish to address or consider their personal lives, biographical traits they both share, consisting of their personal relationships, views on aesthetics, literature, or artistic responses to war. There will be some attention drawn to Weil's aesthetic thought about literature, art, and response to war covered in the following chapter of this thesis, but it will be in comparison with the modernist author, Ford Madox Ford.

I should also note another important limit of this comparison, and that is that there is no compelling evidence to suggest that Virginia Woolf had ever read or heard of Simone Weil, and vice versa. Despite these factors, I feel the two writer's political thoughts are worth exploring, considering, and comparing. Lastly, it is not my intention to present this as an all-encompassing view or understanding of either author's overall thought, nor political thought. An attempt to summarize, break-down, or even pull from the context of the source, is, to be completely honest, unfair. Both authors are incredibly dynamic and interesting not only in their written thoughts, but also in their lives. I would suggest to the audience a close reading of these two texts—as they are both geniuses in their own regard, and masters of their craft.

⁸ Professor Thomson was kind enough to correspond with me over e-mail during the course of my research. He sent me his lecture notes from when he previously taught the course. The quoted

material is from those notes. I would like to note that I have not experienced his lecture first-hand, and cannot attest to a staunch comparison of their thought, only that they were taught within the same context of a single lecture. Also, this lecture was delivered for a history-course, not literature, which may be suggested by my introduction of Thomson.

⁹ This chapter is not concerned deeply with “literary works” of fiction per se...but it should be noted that several scholars note the character of Ms. La Trobe to be a fascist dictator figure, (which I do not agree with—but that is another paper entirely), and also *Between the Acts* has several scenes mentioning a megaphone, which not only for Woolf (apparently), but was also a great concern for other thinkers during this time, namely Walter Benjamin and others in The Frankfurt School.

¹⁰ Marcus notes this fact in the same introduction:

She complained in letters about signing manifestos and going to meetings of ‘idiotic societies’...But she also worked. She worked for peace and justice. She advocated a much more difficult position than war—fighting fascism at home in the patriarchal family, not in war, certainly not even in the Spanish Civil War, which all her friends agreed was a righteous war, not even in the war we call World War II, with hits horrendous persecution of the Jews. She was willing to die with Leonard if the Germans invaded, but she was not willing to fight.

(Marcus *INT* lxxv-lxxvi)

It should be noted that Virginia Woolf was extremely strong willed in her commitment to pacifism, which is a major point of separation between Woolf and Weil. Which was morally the right thing to do, is not a part of my argument in this paper. However, it is my job to note that

there was a clear difference and break from their thought, which carries with it a significant amount of theoretical and moral weight.

The suggestion of propaganda and manifestos on the behalf of Marcus may suggest a violent uprising or resistance, and propaganda was one of Virginia Woolf's biggest opponents in *Three Guineas* and in several of her other essays.

¹¹ Leonard Woolf, her husband, wrote a similar socialist-leaning novel entitled *Quack, Quack* (1935, 1936). "Leonard's book attacks the savage irrationality of fascism and celebrates those who have fought against totalitarianism, and includes an appendix on anti-Semitism" (Hussey 220). However, this text was criticized and generally overlooked at its time for being reminiscent of propaganda tactics, and it includes pictures like those (in retrospect, wisely) omitted from *Three Guineas*.

¹² It is unclear as to whether or not Virginia Woolf herself is the narrator of the story, but I am going to refer to the text as her responding to the letters.

¹³ This quote is considered from the Simone Weil scholar, Dorothy McFarland, in a discussion of Weil's enthusiasm, involvement, and support of the anarchist "Reds" in the Spanish Civil War, against the Republican dictator/tyrant, Franco:

Her enthusiasm for the Spanish Civil war stemmed from the fact that anarchism and anarcho-syndicalism were stronger and more widespread among the workers and peasants in Spain than in any other European country, and there seemed to be grounds for a real hope that a people's revolution which would replace the state with a system of 'self-contained and self-governing communes' was truly in the making. (McFarland 77)

Weil felt so strongly about this issue, and in support of this cause that she broke from her long-held and fervent belief in pacifism. She felt compelled to participate as a moral duty, which for her, I don't know that there is an higher-duty. In regards to the anarchy statements, the peaceful branches like "Direct Democracy" and "Individualism" have similar values that she would uphold her in own thought. Her concern always fell upon the individual first, and she gave special consideration throughout her life to the workers, and the working class, and often advocated on their behalf. If this was what the workers supported in Spain, then she would be in support of it; however, only to a point where it would not be wrapped up as an "ideology." She was often in support of these movements, and worked as a Marxist for much of her life.

¹⁴ I feel like I must say Earthly presence because so much of Weil's thought extends into the "Infinite" or "heaven," and "True" "Reality." This sentence might seem to suggest that Weil would have considered this reality to be political; however, it is not. For Weil, that which is political, is man-made, and therefore part of the disguise, mask, or barrier of what is considered Truth.

¹⁵ This has been the subject of many theorists and philosophers. Most famously would be the war-theorist, Carl von Clausewitz whose most famous text *On War* (1832), deals with theme of war-as-political at length.

¹⁶ Socially there was a "War Book Revival" in 1928-30 (Graves & Hodge 254). Given this evidence there were a number of texts I could have chosen for this study. However, in light of Weil's thought (as will be discussed) she had particular issue with modernist methods of surrealism and Dadaism, which I found not to be overtly present in *Parade's End*. In addition, this text is one of the most famous to come out of the modernist period, and to remain of interest for contemporary scholars. It should be noted that I also considered Evelyn Waugh's "Sword of

Honor” trilogy, but I found the satire and humor in the text too distracting to do an accurate analysis of this “serious” subject which Ford’s text and aesthetic more readily allows.

¹⁷ Ford Madox Ford’s biographical information was gathered from a number of sources including biographies provided in the introductory sections of the Carcanet publications of the *Parade’s End* tetralogy, the back pages and authors notes of his novels, and *The Saddest Story: A Biography of Ford Madox Ford* by Arthur Mizener.

¹⁸ I’m aware that this summary does not do Ford’s *Parade’s End*, a masterpiece, justice. In fact, any summary would not do it justice. I encourage you to read it.

¹⁹ I wish Weil had followed up on this, she took knowledge of Rimbaud for granted. Left to my own devices, I read a few poems of Rimbaud to seek and understanding here—and I’ll give an example of “Guerre” in English “War” from his collection *Illuminations (1872-1874?)*:

[...] of moments and the infinity of mathematics hunt me throughout this world where I experience civic popularity, respected by strange children and overpowering affections. –I dream of a War, of justice or power, of unsuspected logic.

It is as simple as a musical phrase” (Rimbaud 353).

Here, although poetic (this is translated from the French), values war in the “wrong” way, and further sees it as a battle of justice and power, valuing self-interest. This would go against Weil’s concept of reality, and of where human interest is *supposed* to lie, as it is caught up in the same values of modernity. Not to digress further, there is the possibility of cynicism here on Rimbaud’s part, as is present in much of his poetry—but when left of to the reader, this can become lost, which is what I speculate Weil was worried about.

²⁰ A discussion of the various translations of these quotes is in order. From a previous translation in the text *Imitations of Christianity Among the Ancient Greeks*, we find “The true hero, the real subject, the core of the *Iliad*, is might” (Weil *ICAAG* 24). And “Might is that which makes a thing of anybody who comes under its sway. When exercised to the full, it makes a thing of man in the most literal sense, for it makes him a corpse” (Weil *ICAAG* 24). To compare this to the original French, “Le vrai héros, le vrai sujet, le centre de l’*Iliade*, c’est la force” (Weil *Œuvres* 529). And, “La force, c’est ce qui fait de quiconque lui est soumis un chose. Quand elle s’exerce jusqu’au bout, elle fait de l’homme une chose au sens le plus littéral, car elle en fait un cadavre” (Weil *Œuvres* 529).

In my opinion this does not capture the poetry and strength of her writings as much as Miles’s translation of the essay. I do not believe that the French word for “force” *la force*, would translate into English as “might.” The most recent scholars use the translation of “force” now. However, I do not wish to dismiss this translation entirely, as some scholars still cling to this older translation. Also, I am unqualified to dismiss it without consideration. So to add a few passing thoughts on the translation: the word “might” possesses a different essence than “force”. “Might” first implies a human quality, or a trait found in natural things—“the mighty oak tree” for example. There is a durable nature and strength to the term. “Might” also captures a feeling of uncertainty, or of potential in action—“That might happen; I am unsure.” With it, comes fear. The term is also bound to the future. To contrast that with “Force,” force is impersonal, it is everywhere, and can be applied to any type of action—“The force of gravity,” “I am forced to do my homework,” etcetera... “Force” acts upon objects, and it is not bound to time. I would agree that “Force” would be more accurate translation of what Weil is attempting to describe. But, like many of the terms Weil carefully defines, a direct translation, with the nuance and power with

which she writes, is difficult to capture in English. Perhaps it is important to not forget about the former translation as it implies that humans, and the natural world believe they can possess it—which for Weil, is a mistake.

²¹ Pagination that occurs for *Parade's End* is taken from the Vintage edition.

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