

Altruistic panic, or, is the revolutionary spirit a sickness?

HANNAH PROCTOR



There are a lot of dead people lying in the earth; there'll probably never be a heart that will remember all the dead at once and weep for them. What use would that be?¹

Andrey Platonov, *Happy Moscow*

"A single moment of true sadness connects you instantly to all the suffering in the world," declares Chris Kraus in *Aliens and Anorexia*.² She describes bursting into tears and feeling momentarily outside of her own body at a zoo in Mexico City. Kraus's heroine is Simone Weil whose actions she characterises as being driven by a "panic of altruism" and whose philosophy of sadness Kraus's film *Gravity and Grace* (1996) attempted to convey.³ Weil wanted to dissolve the boundaries between herself and others, to feel their pain with her own body. Empathy for Weil was not a detached intellectual exercise, but a visceral and embodied practice connecting the individual to the whole universe. She insisted on the possibility of entering fully into the experience of another person and of 'decreating' oneself in the process.

A few paragraphs of this piece were adapted from "Rub it better til it bleeds" published in *How to Sleep Faster 7*, ed. by Aurelia Guo (London: Arcadia Missa, 2016).

¹ Andrey Platonov, *Happy Moscow*, trans. by Robert and Elizabeth Chandler and others (New York, NY: New York Review Books, 2012) p. 52.

² Chris Kraus, *Aliens and Anorexia* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2000, 2013) p. 119. The line is repeated on p. 155.

³ Kraus, *Aliens and Anorexia*, p. 48. She discusses Weil's philosophy of sadness on p. 119.

Kraus describes an encounter between Weil and Simone de Beauvoir at the university in Paris where they both studied. De Beauvoir had heard a rumour that Weil, an unkempt communist who rolled her own cigarettes, had wept when she read the news of a famine in China, later writing that she envied Weil “for having a heart that beat around the world.”⁴ So long as suffering existed Weil had no interest in individual consolation or amelioration; this would be tantamount to an acceptance of its on-going existence and so to an acceptance of the on-going existence of the conditions that caused it:

Human misery would be intolerable if it were not diluted in time. We have to prevent it from being diluted in order that it should be intolerable. ‘And when they had had their fill of tears’ (Iliad).— This is another way of making the worst suffering bearable. We must not weep so that we may not be comforted.⁵

It’s hard to resist repeating Weil’s oft-recounted life story again. I found myself amalgamating other people’s tellings of it to produce yet another version. Born in Paris in 1909 into a bourgeois Jewish family, Weil studied at the École Normale Supérieure and subsequently became a teacher. Active in the workers’ movement since her teens, during the Great Depression she chose to take no more of her salary than an unemployed person would receive on the dole; the rest she redistributed. Examples of this kind of enactment of empathy recur in Weil’s biography. In 1934-5 she took up a job on the assembly lines of Renault wanting to experience industrial labour first-hand:

As I worked in the factory, indistinguishable to all eyes, including my own, from the anonymous mass, the affliction of others entered into my flesh and soul. Nothing separated me from it, for I had really forgotten my past and I looked forward to no future, finding it difficult to imagine the possibility of surviving all the fatigue.⁶

In 1936 she went to Spain to fight for the Republicans in the Spanish Civil War but was forced to return to her family after scalding her feet. In this period, she also became increasingly drawn to Christianity and had a series of religious revelations. During the Nazi occupation, Weil moved to the South of France to work as a farm hand. Despite suffering from excruciating headaches, Weil insisted on working alongside the more experienced farm

⁴ Kraus, *Aliens and Anorexia*, p. 147.

⁵ Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, trans. by Emma Crawford and Mario von der Ruhr, (London: Routledge, 2002) p. 14.

⁶ Weil cited in Elizabeth Hardwick, “Reflections on Simone Weil”, *Signs*, 1:1 (1975), 83-91, p. 86.

labourers gathering grapes and took the simplest sleeping quarters. She accompanied her parents to New York in 1942 but negotiated to return to Europe where she felt she could be of more use to the Resistance. Kraus emphasises the physicality underpinning Weil's philosophy: "plagued by headaches, vomiting, picking grapes".⁷ Diagnosed with tuberculosis in 1943, Weil is said to have refused the additional food necessary for her to recover and had already hastened her illness by restricting her diet so as not to exceed the quantity of food rationing coupons allocated in France. She died in England at the age of 34.



Weil was obsessed with affliction and with the afflictions of others, but it's hard to write about her without obsessing over her own life trajectory. Despite emphasising 'decreation', accounts of Weil's work (including this one) remain fixated on her biography; her intent to destroy the 'I' is constantly undermined as her own life is recreated in prose over and over.

We possess nothing in the world—a mere chance can strip us of everything—except the power to say 'I'. That is what we have to give to God—in other words, to destroy. There is absolutely no other free act which it is given us to accomplish—only the destruction of the 'I'.⁸

Anne Carson sees this as a contradiction in Weil's writing or, rather, in the fact of her having been a writer: "any claim to be intent on annihilating this self while still continuing to write and give voice to writing must involve the writer in some important acts of subterfuge or contradiction."⁹ Attempts to escape, unmake or obliterate the self still take the self as their starting point.

⁷ Kraus, *Aliens and Anorexia*, p. 119.

⁸ Weil, p. 26.

⁹ Carson, p. 196.

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Chris Kraus is often taken to epitomise or exemplify a particular kind of 'confessional' writing with a white cis het bourgeois female subject. Grace for Weil entails the destruction of the 'I', but in Kraus's *Gravity and Grace* Grace becomes a protagonist. On the inside cover of my Semiotext(e) edition of *Aliens and Anorexia* a still from the film shows the character standing in front of a blackboard on which the word 'Subject' is scrawled.

In *I Love Dick* (1998) one of Kraus's faxed epistles describes her reacting to her film's rejection by festivals and funders by booking a trip to Guatemala, inspired by an interview she'd heard with Jennifer Harbury who was on hunger strike as part of a protest to uncover the whereabouts of her husband, the indigenous Mayan Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity commandante Efraín Bámaca Velásquez, who was ultimately revealed to have been tortured and murdered by the CIA.

Hearing her that November in the car made me reflect, however briefly, that perhaps the genocide of the Guatemalan Indians (150,000 people, in a country of six million, disappeared and tortured in ten years) was an injustice of a higher order than my art career.¹⁰

In a bus in Chetumal Kraus stops crying about the fate of her film.

The differences between Kraus's attempts to counteract self-absorption and Weil's attempts at decreation are stark, as are those between Kraus's actions and reflections and those of Harbury. Weil's heart beat around the world, while Kraus's continues to pulse with her own concerns. Kraus's trip to Guatemala is an attempt to put her own suffering in proportion rather than to enter into, minimise or counteract the suffering of others. Her tone remains wry and detached, wittily and cynically self-aware about the limits of her own empathy – you could almost imagine it being delivered as a voiceover on *Sex and the City* as Carrie lies on her bed typing pseudo-contemplatively on her laptop. Kraus gazes out of a window to contemplate "Sex and commerce, transience and mystery," while Harbury is "starting to die" on the 29th day of her hunger strike.¹¹ I thought of de Beauvoir's description of her encounter with Weil:

¹⁰ Kraus, *I Love Dick*, p. 142. I remember this passage being one of those selected for discussion by Rose-Anne Gush and Linda Stupart for an Under the Moon event at MayDay Rooms in April 2016.

¹¹ Kraus, *I Love Dick*, p. 142, p. 143.

I don't know how the conversation got started. She said in piercing tones that only one thing mattered these days: the revolution that would feed all the starving people on the earth. I retorted, no less adamantly, that the problem was not to make men happy, but to help them find a meaning in their existence. She glared at me and said, 'It's clear you've never gone hungry.' Our relations ended right there.¹²

Kraus writes about hunger in relation to anorexia rather than the kind of starvation Weil invokes here. Even when she attempts to contemplate the suffering of other people on earth on a larger scale – “however briefly” – she acknowledges this is still in order to work through her own shit. Her fascination with Simone Weil and Ulrike Meinhof (and with Harbury) is fascinating in itself, as the way they lived out their political commitments seems so removed from Kraus's sardonically self-involved descriptions of her own life. Wouldn't she just find them embarrassingly earnest?



It's surprising that she doesn't seem to find these women somehow ridiculous or overly pious in their conviction that they could throw themselves into political struggle in spite of their own subject positions. Of Harbury she writes: "Her heroic savvy Marxism evoked a world of women that I love—communists with tea roses and steeltrap minds."¹³ Kraus evokes that world but doesn't inhabit it and writing about her identification with these women, she sometimes translates their experiences into her own register. I almost admire Kraus's honesty in her descriptions of her trip to Guatemala, though it is one thing to reflect on this kind of subjective ickiness and another to accept the structural conditions it is tied up in with a shrug. It is one thing to describe one's own participation in the fucked-up world and to acknowledge

¹² Simone de Beauvoir, *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* (London: Harper Collins, 2016)

¹³ Kraus, *I Love Dick*, p. 142.

the limited possibilities for transforming both the world and the self, but it is another to revel in being a landlord (or indeed to become one in the first place).

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Weil's friend Gustave Fripon, to whom she entrusted her notebooks, remarks in the introduction to the posthumously published collection of notes that was given the title *Gravity and Grace* that "affliction is the lot of all those lovers of the absolute who are astray in this world of relative things."¹⁴ Weil seems to acknowledge the contradiction when she identifies

two tendencies with opposite extremes: to destroy the self for the sake of the universe, or to destroy the universe for the sake of the self. He who has not been able to become nothing runs the risk of reaching a moment when everything other than himself ceases to exist.¹⁵

For Carson, Weil's self-sacrifice is difficult to accept because it seems like a sacred act performed in the realm of the mundane: "it is hard to commend moral extremism of the kind that took Simone Weil to death at the age of thirty-four; saintliness is an eruption of the absolute into ordinary history and we resent that."¹⁶ This makes me think of something I read in the final notebooks of Gillian Rose, written as she was dying of cancer, in which she also mentions Weil. She recounts a discussion with a priest who tells her "he was troubled by the 'scandal of particularity'; that he wanted to see beyond persons to the vastness and perturbation of eternity."¹⁷

The conflict between the ordinary and the absolute, the particular and the eternal, also confronted me when I found myself idly googling where Weil was buried. The cemetery is in Ashford in Kent and on Google Maps it is surrounded by a profane halo of chain stores and franchises: McDonald's Ashford, Dobbies garden centre, a Premier Inn and a Holiday Inn, Cineworld Cinema, Eureka Leisure Park, Sainsbury's supermarket. When I read Rose's *Love's Work* I was similarly hung up on the mundane provincial environments and municipal buildings in which events unfold. Swimming pools in the West Midlands. As if I imagine that women who write about God inhabit a less quotidian reality than the rest of us. In Kraus's work, by contrast, the

¹⁴ Gustave Thibon, "Introduction" to *Gravity and Grace*, pp. vii-xl, p. xxvii.

¹⁵ Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, p. 142.

¹⁶ Anne Carson, "Decreation: How Women Like Sappho, Marguerite Porete, and Simone Weil Tell God", *Common Knowledge* 8.1 (2002), 188-203, p. 203.

¹⁷ Gillian Rose, "The final notebooks of Gillian Rose", *Women: A Cultural Review*, 9,1 (1998), 6-18.

intrusion of a world beyond the immediate seems more incongruous; her aliens already seem to inhabit the boring, brand-strewn, tarmacked earth.

On Google Maps I dropped into Street View and found myself between a KFC and a Burger King. It seems hard to imagine contemplating grace here. Though for Weil the imagination is the “filler up of the void”.¹⁸ She also said: “There is a resemblance between the lower and the higher”.¹⁹ Does that mean a proximity? And are those realms inside or outside the self? What did Weil believe happened to the spirit in the afterlife? She distinguishes between decreation and destruction, between the ‘uncreated’ and ‘nothingness’, but I’m still staring at the entrance to a Burger King Drive-thru on my screen. I continue googling. In the 2019 general election the Conservative MP Damian Green won 62.1% of the vote in Ashford. Allegations of sexual harassment that emerged in 2017 did not prevent him from increasing his share of the vote. Ashford has recently been in the news as it will be the site of a huge lorry park post-Brexit to process goods coming into the UK across the English Channel.



Perhaps I’m inserting a contradiction where there isn’t one though. Elizabeth Hardwick writes that for Weil: “Pain and suffering are concrete, historical—the factory, the prison, the concentration camp. They are also evils falling down upon the sacred soul of all mankind.”²⁰

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¹⁸ Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, p. 16.

¹⁹ Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, p. 34.

²⁰ Hardwick, p. 85.

In notes responding to Georges Bataille's review of André Malraux's *La Condition humaine* (1933), set in an imagined Shanghai during the 1927 communist insurrection, Weil states that: "We have to know once and for all if the revolutionary spirit must be considered as a sort of sickness".²¹ As Alexander Irwin discusses in *Saints of the Impossible*, Bataille had praised the novel's depiction of revolutionary commitment as excessive, ecstatic and sensual, as a commitment that went beyond any "criterion of utility".²² But Weil was troubled by the novel's depiction of revolutionary activity as a means for people to escape themselves. In attempting to give their empty lives meaning, the political acts they pursue are themselves hollowed out (like Kraus boarding a plane to Guatemala). If personal motives underpin collective political action then for Weil the meaning of the action is debased and becomes "a disguised form of suicide".²³ Weil was wary of political action that seemed more interested in death than in life and saw this as betraying an interest in the self over others: "...an existence whose object is to escape from life constitutes in the final analysis a search for death. [...] One cannot be a revolutionary if one doesn't love life."²⁴

Weil defended rational approaches to revolution against Bataille's insistence on the irrational and excessive. Yet her own death is often narrated precisely in the terms she condemned, her revolutionary spirit posthumously pathologised. Carson did not accuse Weil of ignoring "ordinary history" in all its extraordinary cruelty but suggests it is nonetheless difficult to understand Weil's extreme actions as a rational response to it but perhaps the magnitude of suffering is so great that rational responses can only look irrational.

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"A single moment of true sadness connects you instantly to all the suffering in the world," Kraus repeats at a later moment in *Aliens and Anorexia*.²⁵ Her heroine has shifted from Weil to Ulrike Meinhof whose letters from prison she cites: '*Feeling your head exploding, feeling your brain on the point of bursting to bits.*'²⁶ But didn't Kraus concede as she gazed out of a bus window in Guatemala that her own sadness was not really identical to the suffering of others? In the year 2000 Kraus takes two militant women driven to extremes and ultimately to their own deaths by intense political commitment as two

²¹ Weil cited in Alexander Irwin, *Saints of the Impossible: Bataille, Weil, and the Politics of the Sacred* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), p. 83.

²² Bataille cited in Irwin, p. 82.

²³ Weil cited Irwin, p. 83.

²⁴ Weil cited in Irwin, p. 84.

²⁵ Kraus, *Aliens and Anorexia*, p. 155.

²⁶ Kraus, *Aliens and Anorexia*, p. 155.

examples of anorexic 'girls'. And what could better epitomise the 'end of history' than that?

Countdown on the millennium clock at 34th Street and 7th Avenue in Manhattan, a grid of twitching light-dots advancing into numbers, ringed by brightly-colored logos of its sponsors burned into the plastichrome–TCBY Yogurt, Roy Rogers, Staples and Kentucky Fried Chicken—a neo-medieval message from our sponsors, instructing us that time is fluid but Capital is here to stay—

*468 days, 11 hours, 43 minutes, 16 seconds to go*²⁷

There's a KFC here but there are no cemeteries. There is certainly no God. Capital is here to stay.

²⁷ Kraus, p. 23.