

Wilfrid Laurier University

Scholars Commons @ Laurier

English and Film Studies Faculty Publications

English and Film Studies

2010

Hunger, History, and the Shape of Awkward Questions: Reading Sarah Klassen's *Simone Weil* as Mennonite Text

Tanis MacDonald

Wilfrid Laurier University, tmacdonald@wlu.ca

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholars.wlu.ca/engl_faculty



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#), and the [Film and Media Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

MacDonald, Tanis, "Hunger, History, and the Shape of Awkward Questions: Reading Sarah Klassen's *Simone Weil* as Mennonite Text" (2010). *English and Film Studies Faculty Publications*. 8.

https://scholars.wlu.ca/engl_faculty/8

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English and Film Studies at Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in English and Film Studies Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact scholarscommons@wlu.ca.

Hunger, History, and the “Shape of Awkward Questions”: Reading Sarah Klassen’s *Simone Weil* as Mennonite Text

Tanis MacDonald, *Wilfrid Laurier University*

My obstinate refusal to eat anything
but dry bread

will drive the saintliest sister raving
mad. I’ll never completely stop
speaking, my slow, insistent words
falling like stones

Sarah Klassen, *Simone Weil: Songs of Hunger and Love*

Contradiction alone is the proof that we are not everything.
Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*

I must have been thinking about “words / falling like stones” to the point of driving “the saintliest sister raving / mad” when I told a former graduate student of mine, a brilliant young scholar and devout

Christian, that I was studying a series of poems written by a Canadian Mennonite poet about French philosopher and activist Simone Weil. Her eyes widened. "Can you do that?" she blurted, and explained that the layers of traditions, expectations and politics suggested by such a text seemed daunting to her: how to justify reading Weil's controversial appropriation by feminists, how to read Weil's rejection of Judaism and ambivalent relationship with the Catholic church through a Mennonite lens, how to read poetry about philosophy, how to parse the differences between decreation and martyrdom, how to consider such a text's position in feminist literature, in Mennonite literature, in Canadian literature? Her question echoed some of my own concerns about investigating the ways in which Sarah Klassen's 1999 reimagined poetic biography, *Simone Weil: Songs of Hunger and Love*, uses Mennonite spiritual traditions to examine Weil as a historical personage and as a complicated feminist spiritual legacy, something that has the potential to drive the most "scholarly sister raving /mad," to paraphrase Klassen.

To speak of *Simone Weil: Songs of Hunger and Love* as a "Mennonite text," I mean to suggest that it is a text that deserves attention from the Mennonite writing community as an example of Mennonite engagement in an international debate, and from the Canadian literary community as material that benefits from its author's "Mennonite sensibility," to use Maurice Mireau's far-reaching and very useful term. In Mireau's 2004 essay "Why Rudy Wiebe is Not the Last Mennonite Writer," he argues for various cultural, spiritual or communal definitions of literary "Mennonite sub-brands" that may be read "in the literary world and the Mennonite one at the same time," but Mireau also warns against relying upon "intercultural translatability" that may promote a translation "out of our humble ethnic skins and into the literary values of the postmodern academic world...as fully assimilated, cooperative, well-educated post-colonial writers" (73). Citing that Mennonites have both "a brilliant tradition of colonizing themselves and others" (76) and "a Graham Greene-like talent for ending up in trouble spots," Mireau defines a "Mennonite sensibility" as "one that includes some intellectual or visceral knowledge of Mennonite experience (preferably both), whether that experience be cultural, historical, theological or literary (preferably all of these)" (77-78).

Defining the "Mennonite sensibility" may not seem necessary when discussing an acknowledged Mennonite classic like Rudy Wiebe's *Peace Shall Destroy Many* or Patrick Friesen's *The Shunning*, in which the subject matters are clearly Mennonite, but other texts like Di Brandt's ecocritical *Now You Care*, or Mireau's own *Fear Not*, draw on Mennonite sensibility to inform their political/poetic views of industrial pollution and reparative strategies in Brandt's case,¹ and wry

postmodern Biblical exegesis in Mireau's. Mireau's designation of this Mennonite sensibility is neither ethnically essentialist nor completely spiritually separatist, but its insistence informs the poetics and the politics of literary works, a link to "the contradiction of Mennonites' painful withdrawal from and simultaneous engagement with the relentless world," as Mireau puts it (78). So, too, in Sarah Klassen's *Simone Weil: Songs of Hunger and Love*, when the subject of the text is Jewish philosopher and activist Simone Weil and the method is a re-imagined poetic biography, Klassen uses her Mennonite sensibility to ask questions through Weil and of Weil, a historical figure whose "obstinate refusal" to compromise on the rigor of her beliefs and practices of austerity had a Mennonite sensibility of its own. When Klassen has Weil say that she will "never completely stop speaking," this attests not only to Weil's longevity as a philosophical and poetic subject, but also as a feminist and spiritual subject. In attending to Weil, Klassen fulfills an active assertion that she attributes to Weil: both author and poetic subject "carve / the shape of awkward questions / indelibly onto the white margins" (24). This essay is intended to extend those awkward questions from Klassen's work in describing Weil's ethics of decreation, to Klassen's contemplation of spiritual responsibility of "pilgrims of the absolute" (38), and finally, to my wish to situate Klassen's incisive literary enquiry in Mennonite literature, Canadian literature, and international subjectivity.

The question of how to – or whether to – read Klassen's *Simone Weil* as a Mennonite text is triangulated by the ongoing dynamics between poetry, paradox and history, its awkwardness outlined by its own multifarious impossibilities. Some of this awkward questioning may be accorded to the lack of attention granted to Klassen's text and to its author. Ann Hostetler's insightful 2001 review in *Mennonite Quarterly Review* remains the only scholarly consideration of this book, and Hostetler's emphasis is firmly upon how Mennonite sensibility informs Klassen's poems in Weil's voice. Citing Klassen's reinterpretation of "the ambiguities of the martyr's search for absolute faith, which is the legacy of martyrdom in the Mennonite story," Hostetler notes that "Klassen links the Anabaptist themes of her earlier writing with the larger human story of suffering and faith, challenging readers to expand their own visions and probe their own spiritual lives" (136). Klassen, a long-time contributor to the Manitoba Mennonite writing community, is the author of six books of poetry and two of fiction, and winner of both the Gold Medal in the 2001 National Magazine Awards and the Gerald Lampert Award for best First Book of Poetry in 1989. She is the first poet featured in Hildi Froese Tiessen's 1992 collection *Acts of Concealment: Mennonite/s Writing in Canada*, but despite the length and consistency of Klassen's two-decade literary career,

scholarly attention to Klassen's work has been scant, with Froese Tiessen's "Tribute to Sarah Klassen" in a 2008 *Conrad Grebel Review* and Miriam Maust's 1993 interview with Klassen in *The New Quarterly* offering two rare critical explorations of Klassen's work. Douglas Reimer's inclusion of Klassen's poetry in his "Recent Mennonite Writing" chapter in *Surplus At the Border* (2002) leans decidedly on the side of damning with faint praise; Reimer's declaration that Klassen acts as a "territorial speaker for Canadian Mennonite values" (175) is rather simple given Klassen's long-held commitment to exploring matters of feminism, history, and the aestheticization of violence. While it is true that Klassen's literary work does not confront Mennonite culture as directly as a text like Miriam Toews's *A Complicated Kindness* does, Reimer's claim that Klassen does not "unsettle fixed beliefs and dispositions" and "seems to see nothing amiss, nothing unsettling, about the current relations of Mennonites to the material world around them" (Reimer 98) dismisses Klassen's long engagement with the politics and violence of the exacting material world in books like *Simone Weil* and 1993's *Borderwatch*, the latter of which charts, among other things, a series of violent incidents between Lithuanian citizens and the Soviet army. Such a conservative view is perhaps attributable to Reimer's examination of a single Klassen text, 1991's *Violence and Mercy*, though this too is a bit mystifying given the book's inclusion of lines like this, from "While waiting for war": "Before you pray for peace read the scriptures. The part where God states categorically not one of the enemy shall live" (71). Contradiction is unsettling; Weil's contention that contradiction, in scripture and in philosophy, is "proof that we are not everything," is played out powerfully in *Simone Weil: Songs of Hunger and Love*. In her interview with Miriam Maust in 1993, several years prior to the publication of *Simone Weil*, Klassen clearly delineates her interest in Weil as a subject who is both spiritually problematic and politically fascinating:

Simone Weil tried to live what she believed, and there was the least possible gap between what she said and what she did. That kind of integrity isn't found too often....it was a completely uncompromising search. She never ever (of course, she died a young woman) really bought into a system. She was very interested in communism, in Marxist theories, but found them wanting, and then she became interested in Christianity....It's easy for some people to think of her as a saint but she could be a difficult woman. (Maust 43-44)

Klassen appears more than aware that this "saintly difficulty" is part of Weil's appeal as a subject, and particularly as a subject

in a text with a Mennonite sensibility. Here Klassen is clearly not the "bringer-back-into-focus of the traditional values of Mennonite spirituality" (Reimer 175), and much more the inquisitive carrier of Mennonite sensibility to other parts of the world, other related subjects. For to write about French philosopher and social activist Simone Weil is, necessarily, to examine the ways that hunger speaks of the politics of consumption in the contemporary world. To discuss Mennonite(s) writing in Canada is, perhaps equally necessarily, to examine the tensions between a language of spirituality and the politics of a reading community, in Stanley Fish's terms. To consider, as Klassen's *Simone Weil* does, the ways in which consumption and community intersect at a critical crossroads is to engage with yet another kind of politics: that of the spiritual force of inquiry and the feminist force of re-vision, in Adrienne Rich's formulation as "the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction."² Finally, the force of contradiction itself, what Simone Weil cites as "the proof that we are not everything" (87) cannot be ignored as a contributing force to these "awkward questions." Klassen's *Simone Weil* offers a ruthlessly intimate view of Weil, whose ascetic life, demanding personal philosophy of decreation, and death in 1943 from tuberculosis complicated by the effects of voluntary self-starvation have made her legacy a powder-keg of spiritual and intellectual contradictions. Historically, Simone Weil is a figure who inspires remarkable polarization among readers: are her writings philosophical or mystical? Was she spiritually profound or politically naïve? Was she a new kind of Christian or an apostate Jew? This continental, problematic, saintly, clumsy woman, who annoyed and attracted people in equal measure, whose spirituality alarmed some and inspired others, is not for the faint of heart.

The mention of Weil's name alone is enough to foment instant disagreement among critics, some of whom hail her, as did existential philosopher Albert Camus, as "the only great soul of our time," and others like George Steiner, who criticize recent interest in Weil's work as faddishly hagiographic. Steiner is particularly excoriating about what he calls a feminist "exaltation" of Weil's death as a result of "'mystical anorexia' as it has been attributed to certain female saints" (171). Steiner is, as so many thinkers and writers are, fascinated by Weil's mexatological links to the Divine through her refusal of an entire modernist ethic of consumption. The terms of Klassen's title attest to the importance of hunger and love as the relentlessly recurring moral issues not only for Weil, but for contemporary readers of Weil: faith, philosophy, and poetry. Hunger, for Weil, is active rather than passive; it is the conscious and deliberate refusal of worldly consolation as well as an attempt to feed others. Love, for Weil, may be found in nothing

less than the offer of oneself to the devouring demands of the Divine, a project Weil calls “decreation” in *Gravity and Grace*: “Decreation: to make something created pass into the uncreated. Destruction: to make something created pass into nothingness. A blameworthy substitute for decreation” (28). Likening decreation to communion, Weil contends that after consuming Godly matter in the world, “by fatigue, affliction and death, man is made into matter and consumed by God. How can we refuse this reciprocity?” (Weil 29-30).

Decreation itself, linking a tradition of devotional fasting to Weil’s philosophy of love as cannibalistic, is undoubtedly rendered extreme both in Weil’s writing and her practices, but it is not unfamiliar as a traditional practice of Christian devotion. Klassen does not shrink from describing the contradictions of Weil’s insatiable spiritual hunger against her food austerities, and insists throughout *Songs of Hunger and Love* that Weil’s difficulty is not opposed to her saintliness, but rather that saintliness demands difficulty. “I was born hungry,” writes Klassen in Weil’s voice. “Nothing in the whole world would ever be enough” (“Hunger I” 12); later in the same poem, Klassen’s Weil offers her “unseemly thirst and unearthly appetite” as the origin of her spiritual “voraciousness.” By refusing food as consolation she grows “reproachfully thin” (“Places of abandonment” 56); the reproach is to the world that refuses the reciprocity she advocates.

The baffling aspects of Weil’s life and death could – and continues to – fill many books, as internationally-known writers and critics ask hard questions about the ethics of Weil’s sacrificial philosophy, her rejection of Judaism, and her late-twentieth century incarnation as a feminist incursion into the all-male bastion of philosophy when her decreation philosophy appears to advocate self-destruction from starvation. With such international debate about Weil as a figure who has been both lauded and vilified by history and politics alike, no less a literary and scholarly luminary than McGill classics professor and Griffin Prize-winning poet Anne Carson weighs in on the paradoxes and necessities of reading Weil in a contemporary context, and doing so through poetry:

It is hard to commend the moral extremism of the kind that took Simone Weil to death at the age of thirty-four; saintliness is the eruption of the absolute into ordinary history. We need history to remain ordinary. We need to be able to call saints neurotic, anorectic, pathological, sexually repressed or fake. These judgements sanctify our own survival. (Carson 180)

That Weil, as an “eruption of the absolute,” saintly or otherwise, has captured the poetic imagination is unmistakable; several poetic

iterations of Weil have emerged in Britain and the United States as well as in Canada.³ Carson's comments come from her essay "Decreation: How Women like Sappho, Marguerite Porete and Simone Weil Tell God," from her 2005 text *Decreation: Poetry Essays, Opera*. Carson firmly establishes Weil as subject by naming both her book and her essay after Weil's concept of decreation, in addition to "Decreation: An Opera in Three Parts," a combination libretto and poetic dialogue partially "sung" in the persona of Weil. Any speculation about how much the academically-popular Carson relied on Klassen's earlier text for the metaphor of "singing" Weil must also consider the fact that Klassen's Weil was itself preceded by Maggie Helwig's "Hunger and the Watchman: For Simone Weil," a 22-page poetic sequence in Helwig's 1989 collection *Talking Prophet Blues*. Not incidentally, Helwig also uses the trope of singing to bring Weil's philosophy into the realm of the poetic, closing with an elegiac exhortation to Weil after death: "Beautiful child, will you sing?" (Helwig 21).⁴ These three poetic explorations of Weil by three very different – and differently received – Canadian female poets create a kind of triangulation that points us back to the importance of reading Klassen's *Simone Weil* as a Mennonite text. Helwig's designation of Weil as a "social activist" in the back cover of her book and Carson's emphasis on Weil as a "philosopher and mystic" (Carson 223) reflect, in some ways, the poetic interests of the authors. Carson's book in particular is considered the "legitimizing" text that brings Weil into Canadian literature, an opinion bolstered by Carson's status as a classics scholar, as a canonical poet and as a practitioner of a demandingly esoteric poetics. But Klassen's focus on Weil's spirituality provides much-needed ballast to the weighty ideas about Weil; Klassen's *Simone Weil* takes its tone from Weil's writing, and reaches toward corporeal existence and spiritual desire as the two central questions that haunt Weil's philosophy as a corollary to our consumptive and violent world.

But part of the problem with reading Weil as a devotional figure, in Klassen's text or any other, is the recent conflation of deliberate food austerities with the psychopathological condition of anorexia nervosa, a condition that reached epidemic proportions in North American women in the 1990s, and even more problematically, with the history of starvation associated with genocide in the twentieth century. Anorexia nervosa, a condition in which a person will refuse food to the point of death, has been culturally glossed as a particularly gendered form of self-hate among women, with the result that any discussion of Weil's decreation is haunted by a posthumous diagnosis.⁵ However, considered historically, decreation as a philosophical practice of refusing food as consolation is more closely aligned with the ancient religious devotion of fasting to attain spiritual enlightenment and

refuse the animal needs of the corporeal self. Anorexia, as a diagnosis of self-denying psychopathology, is most often aligned with the medical condition of starvation, a term used to refer to the effects on the human body when it is denied sufficient nutrients over an extended period of time. These four terms – fasting, anorexia, starvation and decreation – are, in some ways, conflated by assumptions of psychopathology and gender.⁶ Equally problematic is the way that the twentieth-century history of starvation in post-war Europe – and in particular, images of concentration camp survivors – and more recently in African nations, have for many diasporic populations made hunger an issue that is inseparable from genocide. Such images also haunt Klassen's text, and in such contradictions lurk moments of resonant connection. One of Klassen's most audacious acts in *Songs of Hunger and Love* is Weil's address of the extermination of European Jewry as a reason to subscribe to a philosophy of decreation rather than reject it. In Weil's refusal of the Catholic sacrament of baptism, Klassen writes Weil's decreation as a corporeal reminder of genocide: "Grace and unwavering attention held me in my rightful place outside the gate where smoke of burning nettles seared my nostrils and the stench of charred flesh satisfied for a while all my hunger. Congregations of gaunt eyes, the fellowship of bruised and broken limbs surrounded me" ("Baptism" 50). Decreation here is both political and devotional. It neither effaces nor disrespects a history of persecution but, rather, honours its memory as both awful and impossible to ignore. Klassen's Mennonite sensibility – and her sense of the Anabaptist history that she explored in "Singing at the Fire," her series of poems about Jan Luyken's 17th-century engravings of Anabaptist martyrs in the 1685 version of *The Martyrs' Mirror* – is integral to her view of Weil as a political and spiritual separatist in fascist-dominated Europe.

Di Brandt has recently drawn attention to what she calls "Canadian Mennonite (alter)identifications," pointing out the possibilities of shared histories between Jews of Europe, women-centred cultures, and Mennonites, largely based upon these groups' rejection of the Catholic church, their resistance to Enlightenment beliefs, their understandings of God as a living entity, and equally, tragically, their shared cultural persecution and martyrdom (Brandt 105-132). Brandt also points out that "many... Mennonite surnames are also recognizably Jewish names" and "almost half of the names listed in the catalogue of Holocaust victims in the Jewish Museum in Berlin... are also Mennonite names" (122) and further notes that "Jews and Mennonites...shared landscapes of several centuries of forced migration, from Prussia/Poland to Russia/Ukraine to Canada, and [had] marked similarities between Yiddish and *Plautdietsch*" (124). Is Weil, a female Jew in occupied France who had a vision of Christ but refused

baptism in the Catholic Church because of its hierarchal theological system, such a "Mennonite (alter)identification"? Weil was a religious separatist without a community, or as Flannery O'Connor says of her, Weil had a "religious consciousness without a religion" (*Habit* 189). Klassen's work with Weil as a literary "Mennonite (alter)identification," a work that not only reimagines Weil's life in a poetic biography but also asks Mennonite reading communities to reimagine their own relationship to Weil's fierce philosophy, makes some demands of its own, chief among them being the demand to be read with attention to the impossible.

To be sure, such a demand does not necessarily win readers, attention to the text, or even understanding of the continuum of Mennonite literature on the Canadian prairies. In *Surplus at the Border*, Douglas Reimer writes of Klassen as "a poet ... who stands for retrenchment, for rediscovery, for reaffirmation of a whole set of values, which her minor/major literary tradition, Mennonite literature and language, supports fully in its understanding of its own territorial past and ideals," and as a "standard-bearer for a territory the Mennonite community thinks it believes in and honestly reveres" (176). Reimer's assessment of Klassen as cultural "standard-bearer" seems a bit back-handed and a good deal too dismissive to apply to Klassen's re-voicing of the excoriating consciousness of Simone Weil. Though, admittedly, Klassen's Weil could be read as an exploration of the poet's interest in "a faith none of us are strong enough to possess" (Reimer 176), Klassen's Weil cites decreation through hunger as an artistic and spiritual pursuit in which impossibility is made corporeally and practically possible:

I hungered for the absolute
truth of music, beauty of line and colour
the exact texture, pure shape
of love
in the midst of affliction.
("Interlude" 46)

That Weil proposes the impossible as the necessary is part of her appeal. That Klassen refuses to make Weil more reasonable or more understandable defies Reimer's view and suggests instead that Klassen offers Weil as a challenge to purely traditional values – a *Martyrs' Mirror* turned upon a different kind of Anabaptist, perhaps – as well as a cautionary tale about how spirituality is read through gender. The following passage from "Grief" is written in Weil's voice, and its intended subject is her contradictory but fierce spiritual ambition, but it is impossible not to read the incipient feminism in this *crie de coeur* against socially-sanctioned silence and invisibility:

The greatest grief is knowing what I hold
 inside my throbbing head,
 what I hunger to offer the world
 remains invisible to their blinded eyes.
 I want to cry out in rage, force them to probe
 each lucent phrase I've spoken, rip open
 every syllable, eat every word.
 (77)

The multiple poetic layers in the last line – the consumption of the word as belief, the consumption of the word as a form of punishment, the decreative impulse turned violent, the discovery that the cry to the angelic horde is no longer enough – is followed by three and a half lines that end the poem, the frustrated desire of the female philosopher to teach and of the unacknowledged saint to illuminate, even on her deathbed:

Why don't they
 seize me violently by my frail shoulders,
 grasp my transparent hand in theirs and ask:
 Are these things true?

While it is true that these *Songs of Hunger and Love* map a diasporic consciousness that has much in common with Canadian Mennonites, what is at work in these poems is much less a lyrical retrenchment of values than a fearless inquiry into what it means to “receive the wind’s burning laceration, lies, the voices gunfire couldn’t silence” (“Morning” 74). In “Exile,” echoing Rilke’s first question in *The Duino Elegies*, Klassen’s Weil asks “If I should cry out now / who would hear me?” and finds part of her answer in the service of being consumed:

I long to be

 consumed completely, my imperfect body
 transformed, portioned bit by bit
 to the afflicted. My nothingness

 my imperfect faith by grace
 freely
 made nourishment
 (“Exile” 65)

The reality of faith “made nourishment” is the key to this text, whether we read Klassen as a Mennonite traditionalist who understands the

need for a communalist philosophy, or as a feminist asserting the need to regard history's examples of female devotion. And truly, in a book about a historic personage who baffles as much as she fascinates, why would – and why should – a single intention, or a single understanding, satisfy?

While it can be hardly a surprise that Weil's lived contradictions and the stark beauty of her philosophies have made her a poetic subject, all of the poets who write for and about Weil lay claim to her as a citizen of the world. The hybrid nature of Canadian poetry, its passion for permutations and combinations of diasporic, indigenous, localized, globalized, stolen, haunted and reconfigured stories means that the transit of one story into a seemingly unrelated cultural context – for example, Weil into Mennonite writing – is neither insignificant nor incidental. In a style that recalls Gwendolyn MacEwen's literary ventriloquism in *The T.E. Lawrence Poems*, Klassen's "songs" are sung in Weil's voice, a voice that is both demanding in its devotion and capacious in its humility.⁷ MacEwen's Lawrence makes a good comparison with Klassen's as both collections work through and with international and historic tensions: to whom, and to what part of the planet, do these two "eruptions of the absolute" into twentieth-century history belong? Both Lawrence and Weil lived as rebels in wartime, both were asexual radicals, both died in mysterious and mythologized circumstances, both continue to be worshipped and vilified well into the twenty-first century. Weil and Lawrence meet twice in Klassen's book, first for a wry discussion of "how to become anonymous" (29) – a deeply ironic idea for both Weil and Lawrence, historical figures for whom fame has been largely based on dubious conceptions of themselves as stylized victims. Later Lawrence appears to Weil as a model of the exiled figure, as Weil sleeps on the ground in a refugee camp in Casablanca, dreaming herself into the politicized romanticism of "travelling like Lawrence on a camel / and pitching my tent nightly under cold stars" (63). But the most arresting moment between Weil and Lawrence arrives when Lawrence teaches her "the fearful pleasure / of killing and being killed" (29). In this heart-stopping phrase, Klassen shows an unerring instinct for enunciating exactly what fascinates and frustrates about Weil, and why a Mennonite sensibility provides a valuable perspective that is necessary to inquire into the mixture of martyrdom, devotion and violence that decreation proposes. Weil's blast-furnace intelligence was consistently turned towards what appears to be a project of self-annihilation, which may contain elements of martyrdom, but lacks the external force of persecution so clearly depicted in *The Martyrs' Mirror*. In "Writing Like a Mennonite," Julia Kasdorf warns against what she calls "an especially Mennonite temptation": that assumption that "we can make

peace in the world by absorbing its violence onto our own bodies” (172). Is such a “fearful pleasure” in martyrdom also a way of “killing”? The literary commitment to the poetic biography – a subgenre that is not quite historiographic metafiction, not quite dramatic monologue, not quite documentary poem, but working in striking distance of all three of these – complicates the adoption of voice, and nowhere in *Simone Weil* is Klassen’s Mennonite sensibility more engaged than in that single line that equates decreation not only with sacrifice, but with murder. If MacEwen’s appropriation of Lawrence’s voice emphasizes Lawrence’s own gender negotiations as one way to read his historical trace in the British empire and in the ways that Canadian literature interrogates that empire, then Klassen’s appropriation of Weil’s voice emphasizes the traces of spiritual hunger and devotional violence in Mennonite history and literature.

When Klassen writes that Weil is “still looking...a country to call me home” (73), and that she is “trapped in an alien country,” she is referring to Weil’s geographical exile in England, as well as her exile in a human body when she longs to be spirit. Undeniably, the hunger for home is a spiritual hunger. The immigration of Mennonites to the rich arable soil of southern Manitoba – land that is also perpetually subject to drought, flooding, pests, and hail – suggests a spiritual hunger that is satisfied by making Manitoba the home place, at the same time as such homely satisfaction is forever deferred by diasporic memory. Hunger and plenitude form a continuum in diasporic peoples, and cannot be reduced to mere metaphors for desire and scarcity, but this continuum outlines an ethic of consumption that sustains both traumatic memory and its partial erasure.⁸ Recall Patrick Friesen’s *the breath you take from the lord* in which he writes “The town believes so hard they worship themselves thin and hardly anyone reaches for the wine.” Weil scholar Alec Irwin reminds us that “the imperiousness of hunger became for Weil a moral and metaphysical issue, as well as a political problem...[for]...hunger brings the daily demonstration that our will is not free, that our bodies are inhabited – constituted – by forces over which we can exert only the most limited and fleeting control” (260). Certainly the most obvious way to link hunger and Mennonite history is to consider the centuries that Mennonites endured forced migrations, the burned homes and crops, the pogroms and persecutions, and think about Weil’s exile from France. Klassen’s Weil emphasizes the longevity and ceaselessness of hunger as a trope of endurance, something that is particularly apt considering Weil’s long reach as a historical subject, and something that suggests its own resonances with the Mennonite diaspora. “A person could die / or live forever with such hunger” says Klassen’s Weil (19), and the wry twist to these lines suggests both humble spirituality and grandiose ambition.

Weil's enduring appeal as a philosopher and a poetic subject was perhaps best expressed by Gustave Thibon, Weil's friend and the first editor of *Gravity and Grace*: "Her self was like a word she had perhaps managed to erase but that still remained underlined" (Thibon, qtd. Dargan 93). This "underlining" of Weil, as a self and as an ethical set, is part of Weil's political and intellectual legacy, and an integral part of reading Klassen's text. Weil was adamant that she starved so that others – children, the Chinese, French soldiers in WWI, Spanish peasantry, factory workers earning bitterly low wages – might eat, on both a literal and spiritual level. In this she was eccentric, but not inconsistent, and Klassen voices Weil's understanding of the tensions between endurance and sacrifice, recalling the spiritual and intellectual force of what Weil herself called her plan "to read necessity behind sensation, to read order behind necessity, to read God behind order" (Weil 123).

This injunction to read necessity behind sensation and God behind order suggests a final historical link between Weil's hunger and Mennonite history by linking Weil's decreation as love beyond "cannibal love" to a practical example of spiritual and practical "decreation" in mid-century Mennonite history. Klassen describes Weil's intention to "carve/ the shape of awkward questions / indelibly on white margins" (24), and perhaps no questions are so awkward as those that place Weil's "decreative" self-starvation against Mennonite men's participation in a prominent World War II-era Civilian Public Service project that became known as the Minnesota Starvation Experiment.⁹ Wanting healthy male subjects in wartime, Dr. Ancel Keys's recruitment brochure was aimed at conscientious objectors assigned to Civilian Public Service in the U.S.; many volunteers came from the historic peace churches – including Quakers, Mennonites and Brethren. The recruitment brochure featured a photograph of a line of children gazing at empty plates, and the caption could have been written by Simone Weil herself: "Will You Starve that They Be Better Fed?"

The seriousness of this scientific and social endeavour, and the participation of Mennonite subjects, are undeniably significant both to nutrition studies – for the results were indeed used to aid the recovery of people in Europe as early as 1949 – and to Mennonite history in North America.¹⁰ In 2003, eighteen of the experiment's subjects were interviewed by Leah Kalm and Richard Semba of the Johns Hopkins School of Medicine. Their article is a fascinating account not only of a pioneering and historically significant experiment in nutrition, but also of a peace service connected strongly to spiritual practice and service. The men, even nearly sixty years after their participation in the experiment, are fiercely proud of their contribution to a restorative peace service. Citing the "religious element" in his dedication to the

experiment, participant Daniel Peacock said, “the experiment kind of became our religion in a way. And we were keeping the faith with that” (1350). Kalm and Semba’s article emphasizes that the volunteers “distinguished their hunger from that of those starving in unmonitored environments” and were “almost apologetic about the relative medical safety” of their controlled experiment (1351). Photos of the men at their lowest weight appeared in *Life* on July 30, 1945, and are disturbingly reminiscent of images of concentration camp survivors. However, the commitment to decreation – not suicide, but a political and spiritual devotion to be consumed in order that others may benefit – was at the core of this experiment. The presence of so many participants from the historic peace churches underscores a kind of pragmatic idealism tempered with the memory of historical atrocity that Di Brandt has noted in Mennonite culture: “If the Mennonites weren’t so *Plaut* minded, one writer offers, they’d fly off into never-never land with their utopian ideas. As it is, they’re too prosaic and sensible to get completely carried away. (If they hadn’t been tortured, burned, drowned, hounded out of their homes, I think)” (Brandt 100). The Minnesota Starvation Experiment, as a practical demonstration of the ethics of decreation, attracted Mennonite men both because they were “*Plaut* minded” and because they had utopian ideals. The historical links between Weil, the men of the Minnesota Starvation Experiment, and Klassen’s reading of Weil through a “Mennonite sensibility” bring us back to that triangulation that describes “the shape of awkward questions” written on the margins of history. If we are to read the Minnesota Starvation Experiment as a cultural text, could we be more true to its Mennonite sensibility than to acknowledge its Weilian song of (wilful) hunger and (social, political, spiritual) love?

Examining the absolute – in Weil’s life and legacy, in Klassen’s *Weil* as Mennonite text, and in Mennonite sensibility that is neither easy to define nor easy to control on the page – means engaging with paradox in a way that may not seem *Plaut* minded, but is, in the end, a practical way of understanding painful histories. Weil herself wrote “The world is a text with several meanings, and we pass from one meaning to another by a process of work. It must be work in which the body constantly bears a part” (Weil 118). Klassen’s insistent questions about Weil’s spirituality suggest a fierce correspondence with the resonances of history, and by interrogating Weil’s perspective through her voice, Klassen in turn becomes a Weilian demonstration of “the poet [who] produces the beautiful by fixing [her] attention on something real” (Weil 108). As readers of *Simone Weil: Songs of Hunger and Love*, we become part of the “work in which the body constantly bears a part”: interlocutors of strange, even ecstatic, speech that never stops.

Works Cited

- Brandt, Di. "Je jeliada, je vecheida: Canadian Mennonite (Alter)Identifications." *So this is the world & here I am in it*. Edmonton: NeWest P, 2007. 105-132.
- _____. *Now You Care*. Toronto: Coach House P, 2003.
- Carson, Anne. "Decreation: How Women Like Sappho, Marguerite Porete and Simone Weil Tell God." *Decreation: Poetry, Essays, Opera*. New York: Knopf, 2005. 155-184.
- Clarke, Austin. *Pigtails 'n Breadfruit: A Culinary Memoir*. New York: The New Press, 2000.
- Dargan, Joan. *Simone Weil: Thinking Poetically*. Albany, NY: State University of New York P, 1999.
- Friesen, Patrick. *The breath you take from the lord*. Madeira Park, B.C.: Harbour, 2002.
- Grafe, Adrien. "Simone Weil Among the Poets." *Ecstasy and Understanding: Religious Awareness in English Poetry from the Late Victorian to the Modern Period*. Ed. Adrien Grafe. London: Continuum, 2008. 161-171.
- Helwig, Maggie. *Talking Prophet Blues*. Kingston: Quarry P, 1989.
- Hostetler, Ann. Review of *Dangerous Elements* and *Simone Weil: Songs of Hunger and Love* by Sarah Klassen. *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 75 (2001): 135-136.
- Irwin, Alec. "Devoured By God: Cannibalism, Mysticism, and Ethics in Simone Weil." *Cross Currents* (Summer 2001): 257-272.
- Kalm, Leah M. and Richard D. Semba. "They Starved So That Others Be Better Fed: Remembering Ancel Keys and the Minnesota Experiment." *Journal of Nutrition* (2005): 1347-1352.
- Kasdorf, Julia. "Writing Like a Mennonite." *The Body and the Book: Writing From a Mennonite Life*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2001. 167-207.
- Klassen, Sarah. *Borderwatch*. Windsor: Netherlandic P, 1993.
- _____. *Dangerous Elements*. Kingston: Quarry P, 1999.
- _____. *Simone Weil: Songs of Hunger and Love*. Don Mills, ON: Wolsak and Wynn, 1999.
- _____. *Violence and Mercy*. Windsor: Netherlandic P, 1991.
- MacDonald, Tanis. "Reparative Strategies: An Interview with Di Brandt." *Arc* 57 (2006): 36-48.
- MacEwen, Gwendolyn. *The T.E. Lawrence Poems*. Oakville, ON: Mosaic P, 1982.
- Maut, Miriam. "An Interview with Sarah Klassen." *The New Quarterly* 13.3 (1993): 34-45.
- Mireau, Maurice. "Why Rudy Wiebe is Not the Last Mennonite Writer." *Conrad Grebel Review* 22.2 (2004): 69-82.
- O'Connor, Flannery. *The Habit of Being*. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1979.
- Reimer, Douglas. *Surplus at the Border: Mennonite Writing in Canada*. Winnipeg: Turnstone P, 2002.
- Rich, Adrienne. "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision." *On Lies, Secrets and Silence: Selected Prose, 1966-1978*. New York: Norton, 1979. 34-55.
- Steiner, George. "Saint Simone – Simone Weil." *No Passion Spent: Essays, 1978-1995*. New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1996. 171-179.
- Tiessen, Hildi Froese. *Acts of Concealment: Mennonite/s Writing in Canada*. Waterloo, ON: U of Waterloo P, 1992.
- _____. "A Tribute to Sarah Klassen." *Conrad Grebel Review* 26.1: 93-96.
- Tucker, Todd. *The Great Starvation Experiment: Ancel Keys and the Men Who Starved for Science*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2008.
- Weil, Simone. *Gravity and Grace*. Trans. Emma Craufurd. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1952.

Notes

- ¹ Please see my 2006 "Reparative Strategies: An Interview with Di Brandt" for more on this topic.
- ² In her foundational feminist essay "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision"(1971), Rich defines re-vision as "the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction...Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves...We need to know the writing of the past, and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us" (35).
- ³ Adrien Grafe's excellent article, "Simone Weil among the poets," in *Ecstasy and Understanding*, notes that Weil's own love of English poetry, particularly "Shakespearean tragedy and...the Metaphysical poets" has been matched by posthumous attention paid to Weil by poets (161). In the United Kingdom, Elizabeth Jennings, T.S. Eliot and Seamus Heaney have all featured Weil in their essays on poetry, while Geoffery Hill, Rowan Williams and Michael Symmons Roberts have all written Weil into their poems, as have U.S. poets Stephanie Strickland, Fanny Howe, and Jorie Graham. Please see Grafe's article for more discussion of Weil as an international poetic subject.
- ⁴ Sarah Klassen was the first to tell me, during the Mennonite(s) Writing conference in Winnipeg in 2009, about Helwig's poetic series about Weil.
- ⁵ Klassen mentioned to me at the conference that when she first began to write about Weil in the early 1980s, the term anorexia had not yet acquired the discursive and diagnostic popularity that it would gain after Karen Carpenter's death in 1983.
- ⁶ I thank Rudy Wiebe for requesting definitions of these four terms at the conference.
- ⁷ In her 1993 interview with Miriam Maust, Klassen cites MacEwen's *T.E. Lawrence Poems* as a poetic text that inspired *Songs of Hunger and Love*. See Maust, page 43.
- ⁸ The many cookbooks that were for sale at the conference were testament to this difficult legacy. Far from being "unimportant" because they are not scholarly, the authors of these cookbooks are performing significant cultural work, as writers of various cultures do in preserving food as a cultural legacy. For a good example, please see Austin Clarke's *Pigtails 'n Breadfruit: A Culinary Memoir*, in which Clarke links the favourite foods of his Barbadian childhood to the island's history of colonialism and slavery.
- ⁹ Beginning in 1944, just a year after Weil's death in London, the Starvation Experiment's aim was to investigate the impact of a limited diet on the human body and mind. This limited diet was designed to imitate the amounts and restricted variety of foods available to thousands in war-torn Europe, a diet that was to sustain them in the labour of restoration: re-building roads and buildings, restoring fields and orchards, and other physical tasks. The study was designed by Keys to reproduce the conditions of semi-starvation, with the stated goal of "gaining insight into the physical and psychologic effects of semistarvation [sic] and the problem of refeeding civilians who had been starved during the war" (Kalm and Semba 1347).
- ¹⁰ While Todd Tucker's 2008 study, *The Great Starvation Experiment: Ancel Keys and the Men Who Starved for Science*, is a lengthy examination of experiment, this 288-page text includes very little discussion of the importance of Mennonite participants, even though Tucker used the Mennonite Historical Library at Goshen College for much of his research (Tucker 251-252).