

QUESTIONING GREECE
WITH HEIDEGGER AND SIMONE WEIL

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Simone Weil

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edited and translated by

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Foreword

Arriving in Paris from Brazil in 1962, with a perfect mastery of the French language and a good classical education, Maria da Penha Villela de Caralho (later Villela-Petit) plunged into the vibrant intellectual life of the great capital. Resident in the Latin Quarter and employed as a researcher at the Centre National de Recherche Scientifique, she has been for six decades an active participant in many diverse circles. These included the disciples of Paul Ricoeur (1913–2005); the Husserl scholars centered on the Husserl Archives at the École Normale Supérieure, rue d’Ulm; philosophers of aesthetics, chief of whom was Henri Maldiney (1912–2013); the theological and philosophical world of the Institut Catholique de Paris, where she lectured on aesthetics; the admirers of Simone Weil, publishers of the *Cahiers Simone Weil*. Her study of the Greek classics, Plato above all, was nourished by frequentation of the many scholars of Greek culture and philosophy working in Paris, notably Pierre Aubenque (1929–2020), while her devoted reading of Scripture was stimulated by Paul Beauchamp, SJ (1924–2001). I first made her acquaintance in 1978 at a time of Heideggerian enthusiasm, reflected in chapter 11 below. Through all this, Maria Villela-Petit has remained a vibrant presence in Brazilian intellectual life, as the Portuguese items among her hundreds of learned essays testify. Counting among her ancestors the Dutch pope, Adrian VI, and gifted with a rich and deep knowledge of the forces operative in European and Latin American history as well as sharp insight into current global concerns, she is

well-positioned to fix a lucid, critical gaze on modern intellectual life, beyond the stuffy air of various conventicles.

The thirteen essays in the present volume form a kind of *Geviert* between Greece and Israel, Martin Heidegger and Simone Weil. A sensitive reader of Heidegger, Maria Villela-Petit is also a judicious and discriminating one. From early on, she recognized that not all the constructions making up Heidegger's imposing *Seinsgeschichte* could be taken as gospel, and that in particular his readings of Plato, heavily influenced by Nietzsche during the 1930s, were inadequate in several respects. Heidegger's interpretation of Plato's Idea of the Good, developed in phenomenological musings on the Good as "fittingness," was simply untenable. Phenomenology becomes a limiting factor also in Heidegger's repetitive insistence on reading *eidos* (form) in Plato as meaning the look or appearance of things. An element of primitivism attaches to his general attempt to reduce the classical themes of philosophy, such as cognition, judgment, truth itself, justice, good and evil to phenomenologically manageable terms of encounter, openness, unconcealment, authenticity, errance. The claim that in Plato a radical mutation in the essence of truth took place, corresponding with the birth of metaphysics, and at the expense of the prior conception of truth as unconcealment, became a dogma that froze Heidegger's reception of Plato, cutting short the responsive dialogue of the 1924/25 *Sophist* lectures (GA 19). Heidegger's later, perhaps rueful wish to revisit Plato was never realized.

Pursuing her critical reading, Maria Villela-Petit discovered that Heidegger's entire attitude to Greek culture had many questionable aspects. Very much a product of the elective affinity with Greece cultivated by German poets and thinkers from the time of Winckelmann and the Weimar classicism of Goethe and Schiller, Heidegger carried this to an extreme in his cult of the sublime poet Hölderlin, whom he took not only as an oracle of the truth of Being, but as a prophet of the German future and of Germany's leading role in western civilization. Heidegger believed that his native landscapes and their greatest poet

were a lucky find that put him in a privileged relationship to Being from the start. This faith survived the debacle of Nazism, or was rather reinforced in reaction to it. Touchingly, and even a little comically, it faced another test when he actually visited Greece, fearing that everything Hölderlin and he himself had dreamed about Greece would turn out to have been a fatuous illusion. He managed to preserve his image of Greece intact, and on a second journey confirmed it by reading Hölderlin constantly. Maria Vilella-Petit punctures this purist philhellenism by showing that ancient Greece was a multicultural product of several other civilizations, which Heidegger had no interest in when he encountered them, for instance at the museums in Crete, just as he also held at a distance the world of the Hebrew Scriptures. Another point on which Maria Vilella-Petit faults Heidegger is his misreading of ancient Greek art and aesthetics through projecting back onto them categories of modern philosophers of art.

Against all this, Maria Vilella-Petit takes up traditional readings of Plato that stress the place of the ethical and of transcendent realities in his work. For this she finds a dynamic ally in Simone Weil, who stands over against Heidegger as a dauntless representative of forces overshadowed in his thought: the Latin (French) world, women, Judaism, Christianity, and above all another Greece, attuned to human suffering and resistance against injustice, wrestling with the problems of war and violence, steeped in science and mathematics under the aegis of Pythagoras, and set in a broader and more pluralistic cultural context than Heidegger was willing to recognize.

Heidegger's and Simone Weil's conflicting views of Greece provide the hermeneutical frame of the volume. While polemical notes are not lacking in Maria Vilella-Petit's writing, we may say that these essays ultimately stage "a loving strife about the matter itself," to use the Hölderlinian phrase appropriated by Heidegger. Beyond its exegeses of particular texts, such as the *Philoctetes* and the *Sophist*, its discussion of particular works of art, and its reactions to such figures as Lessing and Winckelmann, the book is porous to great issues concerning the nature

of humanity, of divinity, and of Being. The essays stay near to what the early Heidegger called “facticity,” the texture of human existence in all its contingency and stress. They begin with the strain of glory in battle, reading the *Iliad* through the prism of Simone Weil’s meditation on force; then meditate on the ordeal of one banished from the battlefield and cheated of renown, and sound the thought of Aeschylus and Sophocles, where resonances with Hebraic concerns—suffering, justice, divine pedagogy—become more and more perceptible; next we turn to the impact of sculpture and painting in Athenian life as scrutinized in Plato and Aristotle, where questions of truth and falsehood come thronging, leading to a critique of Heidegger’s stances on truth and on Plato’s alleged role in the history of truth; finally a reflection on Simone Weil as a biblical thinker leads to a study of Cain and Abel that opens onto our present wrestling with division and conflict.

The first ten chapters (except chapter 4) are an update of *Incur-sions en Grèce ancienne en compagnie des anciens et des modernes* (Paris: Paul Geuthner, 2015). The author wishes to thank especially Luc Brisson, Monique Dixsaut, Carlo Natali, Michel Narcy, Denis O’Brien, Fernando Rey Puente, Cristina Viano, and Claudio W. Veloso. Special thanks are due to James Heisig for his patient correction of the final text. My hope is that this book will make the distinctive, penetrating voice of Maria Villela-Petit, and her noble sentiments of compassion, thirst for justice, love of beauty, and fearless freedom of judgment, better known and appreciated in the English-speaking world.

Joseph S. O’Leary