

New Kind of Saint

WAITING FOR GOD. By Simone Weil. Translated by Emma Craufurd. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons. 227 pp. \$3.50.

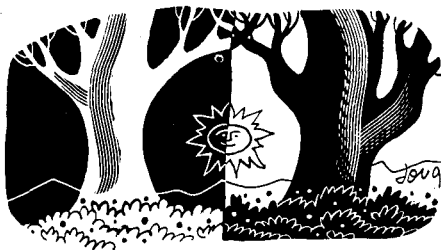
By THOMAS SUGRUE

SIMONE WEIL lived only thirty-four years, from 1909 to 1943. Much of her life she was ill, and always her health was fragile; from the age of fourteen she suffered migraine headaches; when she tried the hard physical labor she wanted most of all to do she invariably collapsed. She was clumsy and unattractive, and she purposely wore dowdy clothes. She wanted to identify herself with the exploited working class, but when she went to live among the poor she fell sick and her bourgeois parents had to come and take her home. She tried being a Communist, but her brilliant mind, trained in philosophy, saw through Marxism as the eye sees through a thin dress. In the midst of this confusion and among the obstinacy of her ambition to suffer, she was suddenly set upon by God; in Portugal one day, while she endured migraine and listened to a Gregorian chant, He hurled her to the ground of her soul and shouted in her ear. Thereafter His reality and the possibility of entering His presence were the purpose and the end of her life; without preparation or knowledge she fell into a career of contemplation which, as Leslie A. Fiedler says in his excellent introduction to this volume, is perhaps unparalleled since the time of St. Teresa of Avila. In her final years she was able to experience union with God merely by saying the Pater Noster.

She had never read the mystical saints; she knew nothing of religion; she had never prayed and could not bring herself to make the gestures and obeisances of any ritual. Her family were non-religious Jews, comfortable and respected. She rebelled from them into self-inflicted poverty, and from this she went into the self-inflicted disciplines of the mystic. She met a Catholic who was a lay theologian, and she made friends with a wise Dominican; but she did not join the Church. Her position, as she saw it, was to remain always with those who were exiled, who were outside the fold, who did not belong, who were without the privileges of organization and power. She could not put up with the Church's exclusiveness and social activities; she was too much alone within herself to abandon those all over the world who were also alone, whether socially or psychologically.

She believed a new kind of saint was needed, one belonging to the outsiders of society. Without intention, and with no realization of what was happening, she became that saint herself.

Her intelligence was high and her honesty was fanatical; between the two she squeezed each problem which came to her until its essence was pressed out in her mind. Into a prose built on paradox and contradiction she then let the essence drip, creating, in a mass of notes, in a few essays, and in certain letters, a picture of her interior self which reveals the dark night of the soul in all its lonely and splendid terror, and which described the hand of God feeling through spir-



itual darkness for the hand of the soul. So vivid are her descriptions of pain, of longing, of desolation, that they induce completely these feelings in the reader. So sharp are her analyses of ordinary human situations that these situations seem clearly visible for the first time. Her essay on affliction is unsurpassed by any who have attempted that subtle subject; she saw the frightening truth of what people do to those who are afflicted, and what God does to them. She came to religion and mysticism without briefing and without prejudice, and what she observed and experienced she set down without hedging or hypocrisy or self-deceit. It is impossible, because of this, to give the quality of her thought except by quoting it.

"When a soul has attained a love filling the whole universe indiscriminately," she wrote, "this love becomes the bird with golden wings that pierces an opening in the egg of the world. . . . Friendship is the one legitimate exception to the duty of only loving universally. . . . God is so essentially love that the unity, which in a sense is his actual definition, is the pure effect of love. . . . This universe where we are living, and of which we form a tiny particle, is the distance put by Love between God and God. We are a point in this distance."

Simone Weil was certain, and God must have thought her worthy. Otherwise He would not have given her such pain, such affliction, and such comprehension. The last words she wrote were, "The most important part of education—to teach the meaning of to know."

The Secret System

VENTURE WITH IDEAS: Meetings with Gurdjieff and Ouspensky. By Kenneth Walker, New York: Pellegrini & Cudahy, 212 pp. \$3.25.

By ANNE FREMANTLE

IN 1923, on a Thursday, Dr. Kenneth Walker found himself searching for the number on the badly illuminated front door of a house in Warwick Gardens, Kensington. He had been invited by a friend to hear P. D. Ouspensky lecture. This lecture changed his life; for the next twenty-four years—until Ouspensky's death in 1947—he was a follower of his "system," a member of his school. From 1947 to 1949 he followed Ouspensky's own teacher, G. Gurdjieff. Both Ouspensky and Gurdjieff have had posthumously published books, detailing their ideas. Ouspensky's "In Search of the Miraculous" tells of his own experiences with Gurdjieff, and gives, moreover, the substance of the lectures delivered at Warwick Gardens and elsewhere. Gurdjieff's "All and Everything" was read aloud at Gurdjieff's Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man, housed in the Château de la Prieuré, Fontainebleau. About this Institute a certain amount has been written: it is well known that Katherine Mansfield died there, and her own letters give a glowing account of the place: "It's like Gulliver's Travelers. One has, all the time, the feeling of having been in a wreck and by the mercy of Providence got ashore . . . somewhere. Simply everything is different. Not only language, but food, ways, people, music, methods, hours—all. It's a real new life." And her husband wrote, "There was a blend of simplicity and seriousness in most of the people I met there . . . which impressed me very deeply."

But of Ouspensky's group far less was known, mainly because he made everyone coming to the lectures, as Dr. Walker puts it, "promise that nothing that was learned at his meetings should be spoken about in public or allowed to appear in print." (Actually, the promise included any mention even in private. If a husband were in "the work" and his wife not he might not tell her where he went, or what he heard, and vice versa.) Except for an occasional eavesdropper, such as Rom Landau, who in his "God Is My Adventure" gave an account of the Warwick Garden meetings, nothing

(Continued on page 56)

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INSIDE SOVIET LITERATURE

(Continued from page 11)

finds a number of people engaged in animated conversation. Lavrentiev's eye is immediately caught by a young man in a faded military shirt. His name is Pavel Dryomov; he is an undisciplined, "balky" fellow who quarrels with everyone. When Lavrentiev chides him, he retorts with unconcealed hostility: "You're going to give me a political education, Professor?!"

People like Boyaryshnikov and Dryomov existed in Soviet life before the war, too. But then writers rarely portrayed such "discordant citizens" and, if they did, exposed them as "diversionists" and "wreckers." In more recent writing the "discordant citizen" almost invariably figures in the story. As before, the writer takes an aloof attitude toward him, depicting him as a "narrow individualist" in whom "vestiges of the bourgeois past" are still strong. Yet at the same time these "negative heroes" are shown, not as cowards hiding behind the backs of loyal citizens, but as *aggressive* types. It is notable that, even though the author emphasizes his lack of sympathy for such "individualists," the other characters in the story are tolerant and even sympathetic toward them.

In general, the changeover to "peacetime tracks" proved a far more complicated process for the Soviet people than the official ideologists of the regime would have liked. During the war and occupation hundreds of thousands of families had been destroyed. The destruction of the family took place in the literal sense when the mother or wife died back home or the father or husband was killed at the front; but it also occurred when the husband or wife formed new attachments during the years of separation. One such case is remarkably described in Vera Panova's recent story "The Bright Shore" (*Star*, September 1949). Before the war Almazov had been a good carpenter and an excellent family man; on being released from a hospital in a strange city at the end of the war, he met and fell in love with a woman soldier. Almazov had never imagined before that "such a thing" could happen, that a woman could "become closer to you than anyone else on the face of the earth." But his happiness did not last long. The woman received a letter from her husband, whom she had thought to be dead; he had lost an arm in the war and wanted to know whether she would take him back, "armless" as he was, or whether he should go off some-

where else and try to make a life for himself. Almazov and the woman decide to part. But, after returning home, he tries to drown his longing for her in drink; nor does she forget him.

This issue arises even more dramatically in postwar life in the country. Not a single even remotely significant work on *kolkhoz* life fails to portray the conflict between the returning soldier and his wife. In the country, however, the causes of this conflict are often social, rather than romantic. During the war many women had advanced in their work, becoming *kolkhoz* presidents and work-brigade leaders. The husbands returning from the war had to work under their direction, which injured the men's self-esteem. This situation is revealed in such a novel as Galina Nikolaeva's "Harvest" (1950).

It is characteristic of postwar Soviet literature that love interest is never a central feature of major novels or dramas. For a clue to the emotional life of Soviet citizens, one has to go to the obscure little stories which are often not found worthy of critical attention. A typical example is Dmitri Osin's story "In Mid-Summer," *New World* (September 1950). Sofia Strogova, a *kolkhoz* brigade leader, has lost her husband in the war, and she is now putting all her remaining energy into her work and care of her two children. As a reward for her devotion, the *kolkhoz* administration decides to present her with a new hut. One of the carpenters at work on the job, Lipovka, becomes interested in Sofia. Lipovka is a former *frontovik* whose wife and son died during the war; since then, he has lost all taste for a settled life and become an itinerant artisan. Sofia attracts his attention, and she, in turn, feels drawn toward him. However, her children are jealous of Lipovka, and at the end of a sleepless night she makes her decision: It is too late for her to go chasing "after new happiness." (It is interesting to note that these stories, aside from their artistic qualities, are characterized by the absence of the propaganda and anti-Americanism of which there is so much in popular plays and major works of fiction.)

The close-knit Soviet family so exalted by official propagandists is really a thing of the distant future, but the need for such a family is unquestion-

ably felt in broad sections of the population. It may be as a concession to these feelings that writers avoid basing their plots on romantic conflict, and, when they occasionally do, always try to return the "lost sheep" to the bosom of the family. Sergei Mikhailov's play "The Lost Home," published in the April 1951 issue of *October*, is typical in this respect. Novels and plays in which the wife is unfaithful to the husband or vice-versa always come in for censure by the critics. I will cite one example. In 1949 the popular Siberian woman author Antonina Koptyaeva published a novel, "Ivan Ivanovich," in which Olga, the wife of Dr. Arzhanov, becomes infatuated with an engineer and leaves her husband. Koptyaeva shows that it is not only the wife who is to blame for what happened, but also the doctor, who had taken little interest in his wife's inner life. Yet the critics remained dissatisfied with the novel, and with the very fact that the author had made her characters' personal experiences central to the story. In a short article published in the *Literary Gazette* (December 31, 1950) to mark the eve of the New Year, in which she

shared her plans for the future with her readers, Koptyaeva promised to "revise" her novel for a new edition.

In connection with the current propagandization of the virtuous family by official ideologists, postwar Soviet literature is characterized by a sort of sentimental hypocrisy in the portrayal of the "happy families" of Party members, industrial directors, etc.



SOVIET critics are fond of quoting the late Andrei Zhdanov's dictum that the people of the USSR have changed a great deal: "Today, we are not the people we were yesterday, and tomorrow, we will not be the people we are today." At first glance, postwar Soviet literature does not bear out this assertion. Indeed, the contrary would seem to be true. The "positive heroes" and the "villains" strike one by the lack of change in their character traits. And yet, to some extent, Zhdanov was right, even though the changes occurring in the people are not moving in the direction that he had in mind.

A new quality in postwar literature is the intelligentsia's attraction toward comfort, toward material blessings. This was true neither of the pre-Revolutionary intelligentsia nor of Soviet youth in the period of *Sturm und Drang*. Today, it is distinctly evident. In Yuri Trifonov's story "The Students" (*New World*, November-De-