

Homer and Simone Weil: The *Iliad sub specie violentiae*

Simone Weil's varied writings are chapters in an autobiography of the mind, best understood in light of the zeal with which she lived life and expressed her thoughts. Although only thirty years old in 1939/40 when she wrote *The Iliad, or The Poem of Force*, she had already confronted a wide range of fundamental issues on a philosophical plane and carried over that struggle into her personal life. The ardor she brought to her intellectual pursuits and to the particular causes to which she devoted her time and energies makes Weil an attractive subject for biographers, as the spate of works on her life and career in the last thirty years attests.¹

Simone Weil had a brilliant academic career: she placed first in the nationwide entrance examination in General Philosophy and Logic for the prestigious École Normale Supérieure in Paris. Following graduation in 1931, she took a series of teaching posts in provincial lycées. At the same time her interest in the social, political, and economic realities of the world around her drew her for a time to Marxism. She became disenchanted with Marxism, however, both because she despised Stalinist totalitarianism and because Marxism came to seem inadequate to explain or improve conditions in France. Marxist or not, Weil continued to sympathize with the plight of the working poor. She participated in union activities on their behalf and even worked for a time in factories and at a vineyard. In 1936, a similar compassion for the oppressed led her to join Loyalist forces in the Spanish Civil War.

In 1938, a profound mystical experience² moved Weil toward a quest for spiritual truth and understanding of God's will. From childhood onward, a tough ascetic strain in her character fed a compulsion to share the privations of others, be they impoverished factory workers, soldiers caught in the vice of war, or the subjugated populations of occupied lands. Over the years, this rigorous sympathetic self-denial strained her fragile health. She finally died of tuberculosis complicated by self-starvation on 24 August 1943, while working for the Free French during exile in London.

- 1 A thorough record of the particulars of Weil's life is that of her friend Simone Pétrement (1976); equally meticulous, less hagiographic, and stronger on her social and intellectual milieu is Nevin (1991). Fiori's *intellectual biography* (1989), though heavily reliant on Pétrement, adds additional information from interviews with relatives, friends, and associates of Weil still alive in the 1970s. Coles, in his speculative psychoanalytic discussion (1987), shows less familiarity with her philosophical thought. McLellan's study (1989) is especially insightful on the political dimensions of Weil's outlook. Dunaway (1984), Little (1988), Hourdin (1989) and Gray (2001) are valuable, briefer examinations of her life and thought.
- 2 Weil (1951) 76–77: "In this sudden possession of me by Christ, neither my senses nor my imagination had any part; I only felt in the midst of my suffering the presence of love, like that which one can read in the smile on a beloved face. ... I had never foreseen the possibility of ... a real contact, person to person, here below, between a human being and God." See Pétrement (1976) 340–42.

Through all these experiences, Weil recorded her passions and intellectual quests in notebooks, journals, and a succession of published essays on fundamental social, political, philosophical, and theological matters: war and its causes, the claims and failings of various '-isms' (nationalism, militarism, capitalism, communism, fascism, totalitarianism), and the nature and ultimate source of spiritual enlightenment.

Most important as regards *The Iliad, or The Poem of Force*, Weil was also fascinated by the role of power determining human destiny. This was, naturally, especially prominent in her mind in the context of the Second World War.³ Indeed, some have seen the essay as first and foremost "a document of its time: an extraordinary response to the war with Hitler and the fall of France, written by a Frenchwoman primarily for her compatriots in both occupied and unoccupied France"⁴

Structure and Major Themes of *The Iliad, or The Poem of Force*

Simone Weil's essay on Homer is normally treated as literary criticism, but actually merges several lines of inquiry – theological, philosophical, and political, with the literary. It attests to a continuing love for the Greek classics⁵ and an unshakeable confidence in their enduring truths. More general reflections outline the wider implications of power in the social and political life of all times and places. As its overarching theme, the essay highlights the sinister psychological changes wrought by force upon both its victims and its transient possessors.

- 3 *L'Iliade ou le poème de la force* first appeared (under the anagrammatic pseudonym Emile Novis) December 1940 / January 1941 in *Cahiers du Sud*, a journal published at Marseilles, where Weil had moved after the occupation of Paris. It was reprinted in *La Source grecque* (Weil [1953] 11–42) and has more recently been reissued in *Œuvres complètes* (Weil [1989] 227–253); for detailed discussion of its gestation and publication, see in the latter the Appendix on the *Genèse de l'article sur l'Iliade* (304–9).
- 4 Summers (1981) 87; cf. Ferber (1981) 66: "She is not the only French writer of her generation to turn to the *Iliad* for insight into reality. ... Someone who knows French and French literature ... ought to look into the possibility that the *Iliad* had an important part in the social and moral reevaluation that took place during the Occupation and the postwar years"; Nevin (1991) x: "[*L'Iliade ou le poème de la force*] is not about Homer's Troy but about what war in the twentieth century should teach us. Its true context is not to be found at Ilium but at Compiègne in June 1940."
- 5 Weil studied Greek in her school days and taught Greek literature and language during her adult life. She carried in her memory large passages of Greek tragedy (Fiori [1989] 72), and was keenly aware of the nuances of Greek poetic diction, as may be seen throughout her notebooks and in her comments on translations of Homer by Bérard and Mazon in Weil (1965) 79, 92. She took great pains in translating into French the Homeric passages quoted in her essay on the *Iliad*: Pétremont (1976) 362, "The final result shows that this effort at precision was worth all the trouble. I believe that never before has a translation so completely captured the human tenderness and pity that pervades the *Iliad*."

“The true hero, the true subject, the centre of the *Iliad* is force.”⁶ The first sentence of *The Iliad, or The Poem of Force* proclaims Weil’s principal thesis with a typical directness. The essay fortifies this thesis by terse commentaries on particular Homeric passages. The piece is very lean in that sense. But the first paragraph also puts forth a second, less explicit contention as a subtext or corollary of the main argument: according to Weil, some readers have thought Homer’s poem a historical document of a more primitive and more brutal stage of civilization, but for those “who perceive force, today as yesterday, at the very center of human history, the *Iliad* is the purest and the loveliest of mirrors”⁷ – reflecting the social and political realities of our own times as well. To define: force is that which turns people literally into things, that is, corpses: “somebody was here, and the next minute there is nobody here at all.”⁸ Homer’s masterpiece graphically depicts carnage, hundreds of individual deaths picked out in unflinching and gruesome detail. While valiant Hector’s mutilated body lies on the battlefield, his wife Andromache orders a hot bath for the husband who will never return: “Far from hot baths he was indeed, poor man,” Weil observes, adding “nearly all human life, then and now, takes place far from hot baths.”⁹

There is, however, a more subtly operative force “that does not kill, that is, that does not kill just yet.”¹⁰ Under this heading, Weil discusses the peculiar mode of existence of the defeated man who supplicates his conqueror. Paralyzed by the imminence of force and the death it will bring, he imitates in advance the nothingness that is his fate. Witnesses view the suppliant as they would a dead man, at first with a shudder, then with indifference. He has effectively ceased to exist even before the fatal sword stroke.

Besides suppliants, there are other, even more unfortunate inhabitants of the empire of force – the enslaved, who suffer a protracted death-in-life. Weil poignantly characterizes the plight of women and children taken in war: Chryseis, Briseis, and, as foreseen by Hector, Andromache and Astyanax. Each, forcibly deprived of expression and feeling, is consigned to “a life that death congeals before abolishing.”¹¹

Weil’s most sweeping claim about the world view of the *Iliad* is that Homer’s ‘Poem of Force’ demonstrates the pathetic debasement of all humans. The common soldier, like Thersites, is in theory a free agent, but must endure the indignity of subordination and of abuse should he balk at orders. At the high end of the social scale, magnificent and invincible Achilles suffers humiliation at the hands of his superior, Agamemnon who in his turn must shortly humble himself.

6 “Le vrai héros, le vrai sujet, le centre de l’*Illiade*, c’est la force” – Weil (1989) 227. Translations of passages from Weil’s essay are those of Mary McCarthy: see Weil (1956a).

7 “Ceux qui savent discerner la force, aujourd’hui comme autrefois, au centre de toute histoire humaine, y trouvent le plus beau, le plus pur des miroirs” – *ibid.*

8 “Il y avait quelqu’un, et, un instant plus tard, il n’y a personne” – *ibid.*

9 “Certes, il était loin des bains chauds, le malheureux. ... Presque toute la vie humaine s’est toujours passée loin des bains chauds” – *ibid.*, 228.

10 “Celle qui ne tue pas; c’est-à-dire celle qui ne tue pas encore” – *ibid.*

11 “Une vie que la mort a glacée longtemps avant de l’avoir supprimée” – *ibid.*, 231.

The relevance of this situation to later ages and to ourselves is clear to Weil: the persistence of warfare and other forms of violence throughout history has meant that, though force may victimize some later rather than sooner, some less patently than others, all without exception are drawn into its net. Force, like death, is the great leveler.¹² Weil insists that those who ‘possess’ force do so only apparently and always temporarily. Warriors in the *Iliad* may enjoy short-lived triumphs, but they will eventually taste defeat. Achilles’ death follows Hector’s as surely as Hector’s does that of Patroclus. The lesson is that “Ares is just, and kills those who kill.”¹³ But this lesson is lost on those who shortsightedly and naively believe they may control force while evading its fatal effects. “Those who have force on loan from fate count on it too much and are destroyed.”¹⁴ Weil notes the pervasive Greek theme of Nemesis – violation of measure brings automatic retribution.

The informing political proposition of *The Iliad, or The Poem of Force* is that the essential immoderation of force infects everyone it touches. Only a super-human virtue could resist its allure. So it is that soldiers march to war with mindless enthusiasm. Victory in battle is itself an excess; and “excess is not arrived at through prudence or politic considerations. Man reacts to it as to an irresistible temptation.”¹⁵ The countervailing voice of sweet reason is rarely raised in the *Iliad* and falls always on deaf ears. The initial intoxication with force may endure for a time, but eventually and ineluctably the brutal realities of defeat and death deform the souls of warriors. Men in war are caught in a horrific self-perpetuating cycle, so preoccupied with doing themselves violence as to perceive no escape. “Regularly, every morning, the soul castrates itself of aspiration.”¹⁶ Because the inertia of force seems unopposable, the warrior sees only death in his future.

Weil discovers confirmation for this view of force in the *Iliad*’s many similes: again and again, Homer compares Greeks and Trojans to animals, to elements (sand, fire, flood, wind), to plants, in short “to anything in nature that is set in motion by the violence of external forces.”¹⁷ Force transforms human beings into objects, either corpses or breathing but soulless instruments. The same petrificative quality is everywhere at work. Weil admits that “brief, celestial moments

12 Cf. McLane-Iles (1987) 91–92: “Beyond its punitive value, the displacement of power and force is the leveler of individuals. It is a form of geometrical symmetry which reduces us all to a common denominator.”

13 “Arès est équitable, et il tue ceux qui tuent” – Weil (1989) 235, alluding to *Iliad* 18.309; Weil associates the sentiment with *Matt.* 26:52: “All who take the sword die by the sword.” Cf. also Weil (1956b) 40: “To kill is always to kill oneself.”

14 “Ceux à qui la force est prêtée par le sort périssent pour y trop compter” – Weil (1989) 236.

15 “Ce n’est pas d’ordinaire une pensée politique qui conseille l’excès. C’est la tentation de l’excès qui est presque irrésistible” – *ibid.*, 240.

16 “Chaque matin l’âme se mutile de toute aspiration” – *ibid.*, 242.

17 “De tout ce qui est mù par la violence des forces extérieures” – *ibid.*, 245.

in which man possesses his soul”¹⁸ relieve the scenes of undiluted horror in the epic. At these times, we see a respect for the bonds of hospitality, the devotion of familial love, and even the possibility of friendship between mortal enemies. But such fleeting moments of grace only heighten our regret at the eclipse of human kindness in the world that force engenders.

Simone Weil amplifies the tone of bitterness that suffuses the *Iliad* – a bitterness arising from the poet’s tender sympathy for the fate of those trapped in the harsh realities of war and the greatest of human calamities, the fall of a city. This sympathy bathes Greeks and Trojans alike in a light of love and justice.¹⁹ No human eludes suffering, no suffering is contemptible. According to Weil, the Greeks alone developed such a view of the world and fashioned from it “the only true epic the West possesses.”²⁰ Many, like Northrop Frye, have concurred:

It is hardly possible to overestimate the importance for Western literature of the *Iliad*’s demonstration that the fall of an enemy, no less than of a friend or leader, is tragic and not comic. With the *Iliad*, once for all, an objective and disinterested element enters into the poet’s vision of human life. Without this element, poetry is merely instrumental to various social aims, to propaganda, to amusement, to devotion, to instruction: with it, it acquires the authority that since the *Iliad* it has never lost, an authority based, like the authority of science, on the vision of nature as an impersonal order.²¹

In a provocative essay of literature, Weil finds a vision akin to that of the *Iliad* in the plays of Aeschylus and Sophocles, and in the Gospels, which she considers “a last marvelous expression of the Greek genius,”²² but not in the *Odyssey*, the Old Testament, the *Aeneid*, or the *chansons de geste*. *The Iliad, or The Poem of Force* ends with a somber meditation on the failure of European literature (save for brief glimmerings in Villon, Shakespeare, Cervantes, Molière, and Racine) to regain the Greek freedom from self-deception and to renew the epic genius. The lessons of Homer’s epic – not to idolize force, not to despise the enemy, not to disdain the unfortunate, not to presume exemption from fate – remain for the peoples of Europe to learn.

18 “Moments brefs et divins où les hommes ont une âme” – *ibid.*, 246. Cf. Courtine-Denamy (2000) 117: “It is the *Iliad*’s rare moments of grace which give us a sense of what force and violence destroy forever.”

19 Cf. Fraisse (1978) 196: “What she admires in Homer is that the poet is perfectly equitable toward both the conquerors and the vanquished; that is, he does not admire force.” Cf. Clarke (1981) 293: “it is probably this equity, more than any other quality, that has ensured Homer’s survival and success.”

20 “La seule épopée véritable que possède l’Occident” – Weil (1989) 250.

21 Frye (1957) 319.

22 “L’Évangile est la dernière et merveilleuse expression du génie grec” – Weil (1989) 251.

Simone Weil as Literary Critic

Only in the ten or fifteen years after World War II did Simone Weil's thought become widely accessible through publication of her books, journals, notebooks, and essays. The essay on the *Iliad* was one of the first of her works to appear in English.²³ Most students of Weil's thought see her study of Homer as an excursion into literary criticism by a thinker whose major contributions and interests lay elsewhere. But far from being merely a fascinating venture into a tangential area of inquiry, her analysis of the *Iliad* shifted and sharpened the focus of her political and moral philosophy.²⁴

This meditation about war also offers insights for Weil into the workings of capitalist production. It helped her to develop a moral understanding of the damage done to the oppressed and afflicted that would otherwise be legitimated or at the very least rendered invisible.²⁵

The Iliad, or The Poem of Force has attracted its largest readership among students of literature and specifically of Homer, most of whom know little of Weil's other writings. For anyone who loves the Greek epic, the essay holds a special appeal. In the first place, its severe perspicuity and depth of feeling make it a convincing critique. Secondly, Weil's interpretation of the poem often comes as a revelation, since many readers have found (or have been taught to find) a delight in heroic warfare in the *Iliad*. It is often assumed that the poet's original audience must have relished the many scenes of combat between mighty warriors and that the epic should be read in this spirit. Weil shatters that conventional interpretation of the poem. Even if one does not accept completely the vision she attributes to Homer, the brilliance of her argument compels us to evaluate more carefully the meaning of his poem.

The handful of professional classical scholars who have noticed Weil's essay have generally admired it, though, like all her work, it is certainly free of the trappings of specialized scholarship. Colin Macleod, wrote: "I know of no better brief account of the *Iliad* than this."²⁶

What are the theoretical bases of Simone Weil's iconoclastic and often doctrinaire approach to the epic? First and foremost, her critical orientation is

23 Mary McCarthy's translation appeared in the November 1945 issue of *Politics* and was frequently reprinted in pamphlet form – Weil (1956a).

24 See K. Simonsuuri (1985) for a succinct discussion of how "Weil's writings on Greek literature and thought have ... a fundamental importance for the understanding of her work" (167).

25 Blum and Seidler (1989) 252; see in general their chapter on 'Power' for penetrating and detailed analysis of the place of Weil's essay on Homer in the structure of her *Weltanschauung*: "It was as if it was only with the careful reading of the *Iliad* ... and the Greek tragedies that Weil could touch an incomparably humane accent that they shared with the Gospels, if not with Christianity more generally" (216).

26 Colin W. Macleod (1982) 1, n. 1; so too, Griffin (1980) 193, n. 41, remarks that Weil's essay "seems to me a profound and true account of the poem, and of other things besides." Cf. O. Taplin (1980) 17.

unabashedly ethical: “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.”²⁷ Authors must be appraised on the basis of the moral grounds from which they write.²⁸ This goes against the grain of much twentieth-century literary criticism: formalists, new critics, and structuralists stress the aesthetic or structural analysis of the work and emulate the dispassion of scientific analysis by claiming to eschew explicit moral judgments of a work’s effect or an author’s motives; Marxists, proponents of deconstruction, and gender discourse critics stress the relations among author, text, and reader / critic within shifting matrices of political and socioeconomic power.

In fact, Simone Weil does forthrightly what most critics have always done tacitly (despite their disavowals) – pass moral judgment on literary works. Her candid stress on moral value is appealing and refreshing.

After the current fad of French structuralism ... it would be a relief to find serious and thoughtful critics asking old-fashioned questions again, like “Is this true?” and “Does this help us do right in the world?” rather than “How intricately and cleverly is this put together?” I admire her attempt to bring ‘nonliterary’ values to bear on the *Iliad*, even if they overwhelm it at times.²⁹

In fact, however, ethical criticism has never really been eradicated from literary analysis:

even those critics who work hard to purge themselves of all but the most abstract formal interests turn out to have an ethical program in mind – a belief that a given way of reading, or a given kind of genuine literature, is what will do us most good.³⁰

Such criticism is commonplace, appropriate, and, in any case, inevitable.

Simone Weil trusted her own assessment of the ‘realities’ of twentieth-century life, in particular, the oppression and privation ensuing from the idolatry of power. Our failure to appreciate the degrading dominance of power-corrupted social and governmental institutions imposed – in Weil’s opinion – a pressing agenda on the literary artist. A literature that was ‘true’ would expose the misguided allegiance of humankind to the ethos of force. This is why Weil felt that the *Iliad* was superior to the Hebrew scriptures,³¹ in which a patriarchal deity condoned and abetted massacres.

27 Weil (1968) 168–69.

28 Simonsuuri (1985) 166: “She represents a willingness to carry the crucial points of her discussion far from the level of language and erudition to areas that are more directly concerned with action and morality.”

29 Ferber (1981) 81.

30 Booth (1988) 5.

31 Cf. Weil (1977) 427: “The author of the *Iliad* depicts life as only a man who loves God can see it. The author of *Joshua* as only a man who does not love God can see it.”

What filled her with indignation was the fact that the order for the extermination is presented in the Bible [1 *Samuel* 15:3] as God's order and that neither the person who wrote this story nor the majority of those who read it, including Christians, had found it repugnant to admit that God could give such an order.³²

The author of the *Iliad* neither lionizes victors nor denigrates losers; Homer well knows that force is the only winner, and all humans alike are its hostages. Even the gods, who appear to enjoy the questionable luxury of dispensing the short-lived 'success' of individuals and armies, are constrained by Fate. "One may not debase God to the point of making Him a partisan in war. The same applies to the Old Testament. There God is a partisan. In the *Iliad*, the gods are partisans, but Zeus takes up his golden scales."³³

Similarly, Weil had a very low regard for the literature of ancient Rome,³⁴ produced by an imperialistic people, and overtly committed to a mythology of empire.³⁵ The main theme of her 'Reflections on the Origins of Hitlerism' (1939–1940) is the close resemblance between the ancient Roman and modern fascist states: "The analogy between the systems of Hitler and of ancient Rome is so striking that one might believe that Hitler alone, after two thousand years, has understood correctly how to copy the Romans."³⁶ To the extent that Christianity evolved from Hebrew and Roman traditions, it, too, was infected with the idolatry

- 32 Pétrement (1976) 345–46. Weil's distaste for ancient Hebrew literature and for Judaism and her relative silence on the plight of Jews in her own time have prompted much comment and considerable controversy: Pétrement (1976) 554, n. 6, Giniewski (1978), Isaiah Berlin (1980) 280: symptoms of "*juedischer Selbsthass*", Knopp (1984), Cruise (1986), Coles (1987) 42–62, Blum and Seidler (1989) 254–55, and Nevin (1991) 235–59. For our purposes here, we need only be clear about the basis of Weil's ethical criticism of literature.
- 33 Weil (1956b) 55. Nonetheless, Homer's gods succeed, as promoters of force, in catalyzing the devolution of human into animal or inert matter.
- 34 See Fraisse (1978) 193–95 for a good, brief discussion of anti-Roman bias among modern French writers: "She is heir ... to certain stereotypes of Greek beauty and purity, Roman perfidy, etc."
- 35 The prevailing attitude toward Golden Age Latin literature in Weil's day is exemplified in the chapter on 'The Organization of Opinion' in Syme (1939): "Propaganda outweighed arms in the contests of the Triumviral period. Augustus' chief of cabinet, Maecenas, captured the most promising of the poets at an early stage and nursed them into the Principate. ... As was fitting, the poets favoured by the government proceeded to celebrate in verse the ideals of renescent Rome – the land, the soldier, religion and morality, the heroic past and the glorious present. ... The new Roman literature was designed to be civic rather than individual, more useful than ornamental" (460–61). Nowadays, specifically since the war in Vietnam, many classicists perceive notes of ambivalence and skepticism in Roman poetry formerly thought essentially propagandistic. See, e.g., Parry's programmatic discussion (1963) and O'Hara (1990).
- 36 Weil (1962) 101 [= (1989) 181]. Cf. Africa (1974) 187–88, n. 9: "The great German historian Theodor Mommsen saw [Julius] Caesar as a messianic hero who overthrew a cabal of corrupt reactionaries. ... More recently, antifascist historians have damned the Roman dictator for the sins of the ersatz Caesars of twentieth century." In Mussolini's Italy, the call to revive the glory of the ancient Roman Empire was a frequent refrain of fascist propaganda; see Mack Smith (1976).

of force. The early Christians were wrong to think grace could inoculate one against suffering: the martyrs did not have what Christ lacked. The soul may indeed survive, but not without the wound of ultimate insight into the nature of man as a subject in the realm of force. The Church, Weil noted, would even exert force to convert others, believing itself to be acting righteously; hence, another fatal blindness to the effects of force.³⁷

In fact, in Simone Weil's comparative estimation of national literatures, only the Greeks (and they not invariably) recognized the threat force poses in human affairs and sympathized with, rather than despised, those whom it debased. This was a necessary attitude, since, for Weil, we are all without exception similarly vulnerable. With unhesitant frankness, she devalues the literary / moral merit of writers whose works fall short of the Greek standard:

In Latin literature how seldom do we hear the humane accent which sounds so often in Homer, Aeschylus, Sophocles, and in Greek prose. ... When they were not glorifying power the Latin poets, Lucretius and Juvenal always excepted, were chiefly concerned to sing of pleasure and love ... but the astonishing baseness of the elegists' conception of love is closely related, in all probability, to the warship of force, and it contributes to the overall impression of brutality.³⁸

By contrast the *Iliad* furnishes a 'mirror of reality' – socially, politically, morally.

Has Weil, by stressing the ancient poet's insistent disclosure of the dehumanizing effects of force, made him our contemporary?³⁹ Has she read her own more or less Christian⁴⁰ values into the poem? And does not the epic, viewed with the disinterest of the historian, in fact evince a celebration of force, by depicting the confrontations, the victories and defeats of heroic combatants struggling for honor on the battlefield?

37 Weil (1965) 129–30 [= (1977) 83]: "I have never been able to understand how it is possible for a reasonable mind to regard the Jehovah of the Bible and the Father who is invoked in the Gospels as one and the same being. The influence of the Old Testament and of the Roman Empire, whose tradition was continued in the Papacy, are to my mind the two essential sources of the corruption of Christianity."

38 Weil (1962) 120.

39 Classical scholars have striven to abstain from intruding 'anachronistic' values into interpretations of the thought and literature of classical antiquity. Cf. Hugh Lloyd-Jones, in his Oxford Inaugural Lecture (1961) 28: "If we carefully control every statement we make about an ancient theory or belief by reference to the evidence, if we are constantly on the watch against importing Christian or other modern preconceptions into antiquity ... we have a slender chance of getting at the truth"; but see Simonsuuri (1985) 169: "Gadamer talks, in *Wahrheit und Methode* (1960), about the need to avoid false topicality, the kind of relevance that is in fact typical of vulgarizing interpretations of literary works. But a new reading is a new text that expands the sphere of the work of art like a helix."

40 N.b.: Weil (1977) 16: "all the *Iliad* is bathed in Christian light." The program implicit in Weil's explication of Homer's epic has, not surprisingly, drawn accusations of distortion and bias: Steiner (1969) 26 refers to Weil's essay as "a perverse reading of the *Iliad*"; Fiedler (1972) 11 speaks of "her splendid, though absurdly and deliberately partial, interpretation of the *Iliad*", and Clarke (1981) 293 of her "passionately one-sided reading of the *Iliad*".

To answer such questions, one may examine the method of Weil's critical discussions. And in this regard, she is a largely persuasive commentator. She accumulates compelling evidence for her vision of the poem by appealing directly to the text.⁴¹ For example, Homer in fact – in his 'signature' similes – often equates human beings with forces of nature. That such equations – hundreds of them in the *Iliad* – have powerful cumulative effect is indisputable. Similarly, there is the bludgeoning impact (on the reader of the *whole* poem) of the numerous, graphic scenes of mayhem and death on the battlefield.⁴² A moral evaluation of the similes and battlefield descriptions invites the charge of subjectivity, but to the extent that we are entitled to formulate literary interpretations of the text at all, Weil employs – for the most part – sound analytical procedures. She can, naturally, be convicted of specific errors of interpretation or understanding,⁴³ but we cannot fault the methodology *per se* of her literary critical argumentation. She avoids vague impressionism by close reading.

A second approach is to place Weil's treatment of the poem's distinctive insight and artistry within her own political and philosophical outlook. In this sense, whether she is 'right' in interpreting the poem's virtues as she does is beside the point.⁴⁴ As T. S. Eliot wrote,

In trying to understand her, we must not be distracted – as is only too likely to happen on a first reading – by considering how far, and at what points, we agree or disagree. We must simply expose ourselves to the personality of a woman of genius, of a kind of genius akin to that of saints. ... Our first experience of Simone Weil should not be expressible in terms of approval or dissent. I cannot conceive of anybody's agreeing with all of

- 41 In this sense, she fulfills the essential requirement laid down by Wilamowitz (1969) 257: "We perform our task correctly only when we don't force our own mind into every ancient book that falls into our hand; but rather *read out of it what is already there*" [trans. W. M. Calder II; my emphasis].
- 42 Cf. Fraisse (1978) 195–96: "A reading of the *Iliad* presents us a quite horrible succession of combats; in general, the *Iliad* is known in wonderful extracts – the encounter of Andromache and Hector, the entreaty of Priam to Achilles – that occupy an elevated moral and spiritual level. But when one reads the *Iliad* from beginning to end, the succession of battles and massacres is quite fatiguing." So too, Ferber (1981) 80–81: "While it may be interesting to learn how many ways a man may be done in by different weapons, such an interest is of a minute and morbid sort and no answer to the cumulative weight of death upon death. Perhaps Homer's original audience took delight in all the names and details, but it is hard to believe that they too did not feel the tedious burden of it all"; and Clarke (1981) 293: "there will be some who complain, with good reason, that the balances occasionally fail, that the *Iliad*'s battle scenes, for instance, run on too long..."
- 43 See, e.g., Ferber (1981) 70–71, on a serious misreading of the Greek by Weil in her analysis of the interaction of Priam and Achilles in a crucial passage of *Il.* 24; also Edwards (1987) 158: "Simone Weil's well known account of the violence in the *Iliad* ... presents only one side of the picture; most of the brutal statements she quotes are made by the characters, not by the poet, and she says nothing of the words of pathos and sympathy that follow so many of the killings" – but this overlooks that the similes she quotes as evidence are in the poet's voice.
- 44 See Simonsuuri (1985) 169, on Weil's essay as "a useful legitimate misreading of a kind that is vital for the tradition of literature"; cf. Nevin (1991) 133: "Weil chooses not to read Homer on what might be called Homeric terms."

her views, or of not disagreeing violently with some of them. But agreement and rejection are secondary: what matters is to make contact with a great soul.⁴⁵

The value of Weil's essay lies in her distinctive outlook on the human condition, quite apart from the accuracy of its representation of Homer's actual worldview (to the extent that it can be reconstructed). The essay transcends the goals of conventional historicist or positivistic literary analysis and affords both a novel interpretation⁴⁶ of an ancient masterpiece and an intrinsically valuable moral experience. Participating in its vision of Homer's 'message', we benefit by Simone Weil's distinctive understanding of the relations of human beings and the effect of force on those relations. Her essay may not be 'the purest mirror' of Homer's poem, but it certainly enlarges and improves our vision of the *Iliad*.

45 T. S. Eliot, preface to Weil (1952) vi.

46 McLane-Iles (1987) 87–95 brings Weil's criticism of Homer's epic fashionably up-to-date by seeing it in post-structuralist terms: "Weil uses the centrality of force to deconstruct the myth of heroism. The deconstruction of this myth, the leveling of all human character, serves to react against the reversal of Kantian priorities and to deconstruct the myth of power and false attributes" (90).

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