
Geometries of Force in Homer's Iliad: Two Readings

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At the outbreak of World War II, two French Jewish intellectuals—Simone Weil and Rachel Bephaloff—wrote responses to Europe's unfolding catastrophe in the form of literary essays on Homer's *Iliad*. Their explorations of violence, power, fate, freedom, and the machine of war, as seen through the lens of ancient Greece's founding epic, have themselves achieved the status of classic political and philosophical texts. In the essay that follows I will explore Weil's and Bephaloff's contrasting readings of the *Iliad*, recently published together for the first time by New York Review Books. How does each writer re-imagine the poem to make sense of the human condition and the harsh realities of warfare? In the shadow of totalitarianism and genocide, what moral and political resources do they find in Homer? Does either of the two writers offer a more compelling interpretation of Homer's epic? What might Weil and Bephaloff—and Homer—have to teach us about the geometries of force today?

I. Far from Hot Baths: Weil's Pacifist Reading of the Iliad

Simone Weil's "*L'Iliade, ou le poème de la force*" first appeared in December of 1940 and January of 1941 in the Marseilles journal *Cahiers du Sud*. Weil, described by Albert Camus as "the only great spirit of our time," was a philosopher who graduated with distinction from the *École Normale Supérieure* in 1931, a committed so-

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cialist who worked in a Renault assembly line and volunteered to fight alongside anarcho-syndicalists in Aragon during the Spanish Civil War, and a convert to Christianity who embraced Catholicism after receiving a mystical vision in 1938.¹ Her meditation on the *Iliad* as a revelation of the universal and dehumanizing effects of force—on victors and vanquished alike—is an essentially antiheroic, spiritual, and even pacifist reading that emphasizes Homer’s moral neutrality and the insensibility of all wars.

For Weil, the Iliad reveals dehumanizing effects of force on victors and vanquished alike.

According to Weil, “The true hero, the true subject, the center of the *Iliad* is force.”² The cumulative effect of the poem is not to valorize its warriors, Greek or Trojan, she suggests, but to demonstrate how the human spirit is modified, blinded, deformed, and enslaved under the weight of force, even as individuals imagine force is something they can control, possess, or contain. Weil defines force as “that x that turns anybody who is subjected to it into a thing,” and declares that force lies not only at the heart of the poem but “at the very center of human history.” The great value of the *Iliad* is its bitter yet unsentimental depiction, in myriad ways, of living beings undergoing violent transformations into sheer matter, corpses dragged behind chariots in the dust, as a result of their contact with force.

Even more dramatically, the *Iliad* shows how a free individual caught up in the machinery of war can be transformed “into a stone . . . into a thing while still alive.” In the strange interval of time between when a fighter realizes he is doomed and the sword strikes, his soul is already crushed, petrified, reduced to a state in which he is incapable of thinking or hoping. Even those suppliants whose lives are somehow spared by their enemies, such as King Priam at the feet of Achilles, must spend the rest of their days recalling the force of death that once hung over their heads. The result is a permanent scarring or deformation of their psyches that produces “a compromise between a man and corpse.” To say that a seemingly alive person is a thing is a logical contradiction. “Yet what is impossible in logic becomes true in life, and the contradiction lodged within the soul tears it to shreds.”

But force not only destroys and does violence to the weak in

¹ Camus as cited by George A. Panichas, “Introduction” to *The Simone Weil Reader* (London: Moyer Bell, 1977), xvii.

² Simone Weil, “The *Iliad*, or The Poem of Force,” in Simone Weil and Rachel Bespaloff, *War and the Iliad* (New York: New York Review Books, 2005), 3-37.

Weil's reading of the *Iliad*. "Force is as pitiless to the man who possesses it, or thinks he does, as it is to its victims; the second it crushes, the first it intoxicates." If human beings are driven, as Nietzsche insists, by a sheer will to power, in Weil's politics all merely human wills to power must ultimately be seen as expressions of hopeless delusion, since the appetite for power is produced by nothing other than the will of power at work in history. It is power itself, in other words, that possesses and manipulates men, not the other way around. Even the most clear-sighted warriors are unable to exercise restraint after experiencing victory in battle. Those who have been temporary channels of force imagine "that destiny has given complete license to them." Patroclus presses his advantage to his own destruction at the hands of Hector. Hector then rejects Polydamas' prudent counsel, refusing to allow the Greeks to escape, insisting instead that the Trojans pursue "glory at the ships."

At the precise moment when force bestows success it thus gives birth to an irresistible blindness or hubris in its carriers that invariably spells their destruction. In Homer's universe there is "not a single man who does not at one time or another have to bow his neck to force." Those "who have force on loan from fate count on it too much and are destroyed." Common soldiers, such as Thersites, may be abused and humiliated by their superiors, but Achilles and Agamemnon also will weep tears of humiliation in their turn. Every fighter in the *Iliad* other than Achilles experiences a defeat in battle, and Achilles is nearly destroyed by the river god Scamander. There is a strict moral economy at work in the poem, Weil writes, so that retribution falls with "a geometrical rigor" on strong and weak alike. "The *Iliad* formulated the principle [that those who take up the sword will die by the sword] long before the Gospels, and in almost the same terms: *Ares is just, and kills those who kill.*" "We are only geometricians of matter; the Greeks were, first of all, geometricians in their apprenticeship to virtue."

Strict geometry of force in Iliad radically subverts "just war" theories.

Homer's strict geometry of force does not lead, however, to a heightened sense of war's ultimate logic or rationality. Just the reverse: it is the most irrational elements of human behavior that come to the fore in war, radically subverting "just war" theories grounded in notions of prudence, proportionality, and restraint. What are required to win battles are not men of planning and strategy—"battles are fought and decided by men deprived of these faculties, men who have undergone a transformation, who have

dropped either to the level of inert matter, which is pure passivity, or to the level of blind force, which is pure momentum." A moderate use of force, even if effective, would require a superhuman capacity of restraint, but those who begin down the path of war prove incapable of resisting the temptation to overreach. Hence, "words of reason drop into the void." Force is at first claimed as a means to necessary ends, but the internal logic of war "effaces all conceptions of purpose or goal, including even its own 'war aims.'" What we witness in the *Iliad* is an inversion of means and ends, with violence ultimately becoming its own end. The death of one's comrades "arouses a spirit of somber emulation, a rivalry in death." You must fight on, the gods command, or you will offend the dead. The first cause of the war, Helen, is forgotten. It is slaughter that necessitates more slaughter.

Closely related themes may be found in Weil's trenchant essay on Marxism, "Analysis of Oppression," written before her essay on the *Iliad* but only published posthumously in 1955. "[P]ower-seeking, owing to its essential incapacity to seize hold of its object, rules out all consideration of an end, and finally comes, through an inevitable reversal, to take the place of all ends," she declares. "Human history is simply the history of the servitude which makes men—oppressed and oppressors alike—the plaything of the instruments of domination they themselves have manufactured, and thus reduces living humanity to being the chattel of inanimate chattels."³

The will to dominate makes humanity "the chattel of inanimate chattels."

If power/force in the *Iliad* is essentially dehumanizing and the battlefield profoundly antiheroic as Weil suggests, where in the poem might we locate authentically human modes of existence? What makes life meaningful, if not the quest for power or glory? For Weil, the *Iliad* alludes, by way of negation and contrast, to the possibility—though rarely the actuality—of another kind of world: "the far-away, precarious, touching world of peace, of the family, the world in which each man counts more than anything else to those about him."⁴ There are "luminous moments," "moments of grace" in the poem in which we catch glimpses of human beings fully possessed of their own souls and their own freedom rather than simply intoxicated by the blandishments of power or manipulated by capricious gods. These moments involve such emotions as

³ Weil, "Analysis of Oppression," in *The Simone Weil Reader*, 138.

⁴ Weil, "The *Iliad*, or The Poem of Force," 3-37.

love, loyalty, and pity, and are often rooted in familial or domestic relations. Thetis weeping for her doomed son Achilles; Achilles mourning the death of his friend Patroclus; Andromache preparing a hot bath for Hector, not knowing that he is already dead—all of these scenes expose the enervating horrors of war in stark relief and remind Homer's listeners/readers that force makes humans less than they ought to be. Yet "Nearly all the *Iliad* takes place far from hot baths. Nearly all of human life, then and now, takes place far from hot baths." War in the *Iliad* is symptomatic of the fact that human beings, in the language of another tradition, are radically fallen.

While it would be a mistake to read the *Iliad* in didactic or narrowly moralistic terms, the cumulative effect of the epic, in Weil's reading, is therefore deeply ethical if not theological in its implications. Homer makes us feel "with sharp regret what it is that violence has killed and will kill again." The poem is absolutely impartial to Greeks and Trojans alike, so that Homer's "incurable bitterness" at the fate that conspires to drag humans into a state of perpetual conflict reveals a great *tenderness* toward humanity as a whole. "Nothing precious is scorned, whether or not death is its destiny; everyone's happiness is laid bare without dissimulation or disdain; no man is set above or below the condition common to all men; whatever is destroyed is regretted."

II. In Praise of Hector: Besseloff on the Virtues of Resistance

Rachel Besseloff, though less well known than Weil, was also a brilliant philosopher steeped in existentialist and classical literature. The daughter of Zionist theoretician Daniel Pasmanik, she published one of the earliest articles in French on Heidegger's *Being and Time*, as well as acclaimed essays in the 1930s on thinkers such as Kierkegaard, Gabriel Marcel, and André Malraux. Besseloff began to compose her own study of the *Iliad* in 1939, arriving at many conclusions startlingly similar to Weil's without knowledge of the other's work. After being sent a manuscript of Weil's essay by publisher Jean Grenier, and after the fall of Paris in 1940, however, Besseloff revised her work in answer to Weil's reading, as well as in response to the crisis of totalitarianism. "De L'Iliade" was published three years after Weil's essay in New York, where both women had fled as refugees in 1942 and where both would die tragic deaths involving their own wills. Weil, who had long

struggled with anorexia, died in 1943 from complications of tuberculosis while refusing to eat adequate amounts of food in solidarity with her starving compatriots in occupied France. In 1949, Besseloff sealed her kitchen with towels and turned on the gas oven. She left behind a note saying she was “too fatigued to carry on.”⁵

Besseloff’s essay on the *Iliad* is divided into a series of character sketches and philosophical reflections under the titles: “Hector,” “Thetis and Achilles,” “Helen,” “The Comedy of the Gods,” “Troy and Moscow,” and “Poets and Prophets.” Like Weil, Besseloff stresses the strict geometry of fate at work in the poem, which reduces or elevates Greeks and Trojans alike to a level of common, suffering humanity. Between Hector’s degradation of the body of Patroclus and Achilles’ degradation of the body of Hector “a rigorous parallelism is kept . . . war devours differences and disparities, shows no respect for the unique.”⁶ Besseloff also agrees with Weil that we should view force in the Homeric universe largely as something external to the warriors who wield it. Force possesses and intoxicates, and the culmination of exercising force over others is, paradoxically, the moment when the “strong” man’s weakness is exposed and his undoing is sealed. “Force revels only in an abuse that is also self-abuse, in an excess that expends its store,” Besseloff writes. “Homer shows us the limits of force in the very apotheosis of the force-hero.”

The *Iliad* thus presents a curious dialectic of power/weakness that is at once tragic and deeply ironic. Achilles’ cruelty, we find, springs from his actual “powerlessness to achieve omnipotence.” His megalomaniacal and self-destructive attraction to violence betrays “the eternal resentment felt by the will to power” confronted by the impossibility of its own “indefinite expansion.” For Homer, contra Nietzsche, it is not the weak man who most clearly evinces the quality of resentment, but the strong man who can “bend everything to his will” and who finds that this is still not enough, that there is no correlation between might and happiness, and that the result of power is a pointless but insatiable appetite for more power.

Yet Besseloff’s view of force in the *Iliad* is more complex than

⁵ Christopher Benfy, “Introduction” to Simone Weil and Rachel Besseloff, *War and the Iliad*, i, xvi-xxiii.

⁶ Besseloff, “On the *Iliad*,” in Simone Weil and Rachel Besseloff, *War and the Iliad*, 43-100.

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Weil's, for while she recognizes its self-destructive, circular, and illusory nature, she also detects its creative beauty, at least within the universe Homer gives us. "[H]e sees warlike emulation as the fountainhead of creative effort, as the spring of individual energy and of the manly virtues in the community." Homer possesses both "a virile love of war and a virile horror of it." Power is "the supreme illusion of life," but it is also its "supreme reality." It is "divine insofar as it represents a superabundance of life that flashes out in the contempt for death . . . it is detestable insofar as it contains a fatality that transforms it into inertia, a blind drive that is always pushing it on to the very end of its course . . . the obliteration of the very values it engendered." War, pillage, rage—the ways of Achilles—can deliver only "the glitter of empty triumphs and mad enterprises," Bespaloff asserts. Without Achilles and his tribe, humans would have peace. But without Achilles they would also fall into a deep sleep, "frozen with boredom, till the planet itself grew cold."

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The *Iliad*, in Bespaloff's reading, is therefore a more morally ambiguous text than in Weil's reading. Where Weil sees force always and only as transforming radiant spirit into dull matter, Bespaloff allows that force might also transform matter into spirit. Being and becoming, nature and existence, matter and spirit, war and peace, in her poetics, are all caught up in the One of life, just as they are on the shield of Achilles. Hence, "To condemn force, or absolve it, would be to condemn, or absolve life itself." "Who is good in the *Iliad*? Who is bad? Such distinctions do not exist; there are only men suffering, warriors fighting, some winning, some losing." The idea of "justice" is therefore most strongly connected in Homer to the idea of vitality. "Anything that is beneficent for life cannot be injurious to God." For Homer, though, the arc of the universe does not bend toward justice. Life for humans is not a comedy, as it is for the immortal gods, but a tragedy. There is no redemption in the *Iliad*, only an inexorable fall, Bespaloff asserts, continuous "as the life-process itself which heads forever downward into death and the absurd." We can locate no innocence in *being*, as in Stoic moral reasoning, neither any innocence in *becoming*, as in Nietzsche's philosophy. There is only the All before which "Silence is the only answer, silence and that disabused, dispassionate look which the dying Hector casts on Achilles."

And herein lies the contradiction.

In contrast to Weil's subversive and antiheroic reading of the *Iliad*, Besseloff identifies a clear hero in the epic: Hector, the archetypal "resistance hero," as over and against the "revenge hero" Achilles. It is not force but "the tragic confrontation of the revenge-hero and the resistance-hero . . . [that] forms the *Iliad*'s true center." Besseloff insists that it is hopeless to look in the *Iliad* for a condemnation of war, or for moral or political truths that can be expressed in terms other than the ineffable truth of the cosmos and of life itself. History, she writes, "is a show that neither knows divine justice nor asks for it." Yet Besseloff proves incapable of practicing the moral detachment she commends in Homer. She admires Hector, precisely as a man of virtue, more than any person or god in the poem. Hector is unique. Hector is not merely a cipher for raw force or inscrutable fate, but a free, courageous, and *gentle* man. Hector is the one who shows us how to be truly human in a universe of tragic absurdity.

Besseloff's essay, Christopher Benfy points out, is hardly concerned with the actual scenes of battle that fill so much of the poem, and that Weil almost exclusively focuses on.⁷ Instead, she presents a series of incisive and sympathetic character studies and philosophical musings, paying particular attention to women and to feminine perspectives on the war. It is Hector, though, who Besseloff most often returns to as the archetypal Everyman who might teach us what to admire and how to live. Hector "is the guardian of the perishable joys" whose "zeal for glory exalts but does not blind him." He alone shows compassion to Helen without the taint of lust. His actions are marked by an existential "passion for defying destiny," even though he knows that fate in the end will have its way. "One omen is best, to fight for one's country," says Hector. Homer, according to Besseloff, reveals a man's profoundest nature by showing us "his ways of loving and choosing his love." Hector's love is for his city and his family, and so is marked by a noble forgetfulness of self and the desire to preserve and protect. Achilles' love, by contrast, is an entirely narcissistic self-love; what he most adores in Patroclus is his own reflection. What he most relishes in life is the ecstasy of murder. Why should Hector's selfless love be preferred over Achilles' murderous egoism? Trapped within the cage of his own ego, Besseloff suggests, Achilles may

Hector's "zeal for glory exalts but does not blind him."

⁷ Benfy, "Introduction," xxi.

be an impressive force of nature. But he is also incapable of experiencing authentic joy in life, which requires the freedom of self-forgetfulness. It is in Hector alone that “the will to greatness never pits itself against the will to happiness.”

Of course, Hector is not without his flaws. His prudence fails him on the eve of his confrontation with Achilles when he rejects Polydamas’ counsel. He is not the strongest man in battle. He runs in terror from Achilles. But for Besseloff, Hector’s flaws are the necessary elements of his moral development and final heroism as Everyman. “Homer wanted him to be a whole man and spared him neither the quaking of terror nor the shame of cowardice.” His flight from Achilles is in fact the flight of all humans from death, so that when at last Hector turns to face Achilles, he teaches us how to face our own mortality: with self-mastery, with defiance, with resistance.

III. Conclusions

“When Simone Weil called the *Iliad* ‘The Poem of Force’ and saw in it a commentary on the tragic futility of war, she was only partially right,” George Steiner writes. “In the Homeric poem, war is valorous and ultimately ennobling. And even in the midst of carnage, life surges high.”⁸ Weil identifies moments of pity and compassion as the sole “luminous moments” or “moments of grace” in the poem. But this is too Christian a reading of Homer. “Homeric man’s highest good is not the enjoyment of a quiet conscience, but the enjoyment of . . . public esteem,” E. R. Dodds writes.⁹ There are only two ways to achieve public esteem in the world of Hector, Ajax, and Achilles: in political counsel and in battle.

Weil, it seems to me, also overstates the “geometrical rigor” of Homer’s universe. It is true that there is often a strict economy of fate at work in the poem, and the deaths of Patroclus, Hector, and Achilles are closely bound together in ways that suggest a common humanity and equality *among nobles*. Achilles unwittingly sends Patroclus to his death at Hector’s hands wearing his armor, which Hector then strips from Patroclus’ body and claims as his own. When Achilles slays Hector he therefore slays not only

⁸ George Steiner, *Tolstoy or Dostoevsky: An Essay in the Old Criticism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), 77-78.

⁹ E. R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1951), 17.

his enemy but also the image of his best friend and the image of himself. Past, present, and future; friend, enemy, and the self are all caught up as one. Yet the abuse heaped by Odysseus on the non-noble Thersites—who denounces the war in exactly the same terms as Achilles—never returns to Odysseus’ head. In the world of the *Iliad*, there are few common standards by which to judge the actions of the strong and the weak. We thus often observe an asymmetry rather than a parallelism of force and suffering; fate never conspires to elevate commoners to the rank of kings. Besseloff’s non-pacific reading in this sense seems to me to be a more faithful exposition than Weil’s of the actual text.

It would be a mistake, however, to judge either Weil or Besseloff’s essays according to normal standards of literary interpretation. Their readings of Homer were not offered as detached and objective exercises in literary criticism but as creative and even subversive re-readings of the *Iliad* under the weight of history. Weil’s essay was “suffused with the sorrow she felt over the outbreak of World War II.”¹⁰ Besseloff described her reflections on the poem as “my method of facing the war.”¹¹ What the two writers were engaged in were imaginative revaluations of Homer in response to the unfolding crisis of totalitarianism. They sought to uncover new ways of thinking about violence and power in the present in the light of Homer’s ancient and mythical past. If Besseloff is more true to Homer’s text in some ways than Weil, her praise of Hector is nevertheless equally conditioned by her fear of Nazism and her desire to encourage the forces of resistance. Both writers in this sense illustrate Steiner’s statement that “Time . . . alters our view of a work or body of art.”¹² Is it possible, after Auschwitz, to accept the destruction of a city and the genocide of its people as a mere stage for ennobling combat and glorious tales? For those who think not, Weil and Besseloff’s essays offer two possible ways of preserving and continuing to value the *Iliad* in a post-Holocaust world.

Allowing that Weil and Besseloff are writing as much about history as about Homer, which of the two writers offers a more compelling reading of the *Iliad*? Although Weil pays little attention to Homer’s political elitism or to the valorous aspects of combat

Creative re-readings of Homer examples of time’s altering “our view of a work or body of art.”

¹⁰ Francine du Plessix Gray, *Simone Weil* (New York: Penguin, 2001), p.156.

¹¹ Besseloff as cited in Benfy, “Introduction”, p.xvii.

¹² George Steiner, *Language and Silence: Essays on Language, Literature and the Inhuman* (New York: Atheneum, 1982), 8.

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in the *Iliad*, which are undeniably present (Weil may in fact have consciously suppressed key elements in the poem—such as Achilles' gentleness toward Priam—in order to intensify her theme of the dehumanizing effects of force¹³), her essay nevertheless remains to my mind the more trenchant and provocative essay on many levels. Early in the poem, the Greeks and Trojans make a pact allowing both sides to collect and burn their dead without hindrance or threat of attack. The agreement, while not affecting the actual prosecution of the war, seeks to place the struggle within a framework of social and religious convention. It aims to humanize and dignify the bloodshed through shared values of reason and restraint. As the war intensifies, though, the combatants kill with increasing savagery until at last they are seen gleefully mutilating dead corpses. "Tell haughty Ilioneus' father and mother, from me, that they can weep for him in their halls," cries Peneleos to the Trojans while holding up the fallen soldier's eyeball on the point of his spear.¹⁴ When Patroclus is slain at the end of Book Sixteen the unstoppable drift toward total war, in which no rules or conventions apply, is finally realized. The two sides engage in a battle of unprecedented fury and destruction for the entirely irrational purpose of seizing Patroclus' dead body—the Trojans to further mutilate it and then feed it to wild dogs, the Greeks to prevent this humiliation at whatever cost. The idea that war might somehow be mediated by reasonable agreements, heroic values of resistance, and religious scruples, such as those governing the burial of the dead, has been reduced to a shambles by the internal dynamics of war and the logic of violence itself.

¹³ Benfy, "Introduction," xv.

¹⁴ Homer, *The Iliad*, trans. Richard Lattimore (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), XIV.500-505.