

Reading the Iliad in the Light of Eternity

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I

PUBLISHED ORIGINALLY during the Second World War, Simone Weil's "The *Iliad*, or the Poem of Force" and Rachel Bepaloff's "On the *Iliad*" are two of the last century's finest discussions of Western literature's preeminent epic. The former, said Elizabeth Hardwick, "is one of the most moving and original literary essays ever written." The other, wrote Robert Fitzgerald, "is about the best thing I have ever read on the art of Homer."¹ Penned in the authors' native French, the essays were rendered into English by Mary McCarthy. McCarthy's translation of Weil's appeared in November 1945, when Dwight McDonald published it in *Politics*. Its appearance in McDonald's journal came as no surprise to Bepaloff, who was then negotiating with American editors about a plan to print the two translations together in one volume, a plan unrealized until 2005, when they were finally bound together by the *New York Review of Books* under the title *War and the Iliad*.

"On the *Iliad*" originated in 1938, when its author, a French-Jewish philosopher like Weil, began making notes on Homer's poem while rereading it with her daughter.² As France bore up under the Nazi

occupation that ensued two years later, Bepaloff labored to shape her observations into a formal composition, "my method of facing the war," as she put it.³ With the help of childhood friend and distinguished editor Jacques Schiffrin, the essay was ultimately published in the United States by Brentano Books upon Bepaloff's desperate immigration to New York in 1942. The Brentano edition, *De l'Iliade*, was the basis of McCarthy's translation, which, in 1947, became the ninth volume of the distinguished Bollingen series.⁴

When, during the winter of 1940, Weil's "Poem of Force" first appeared as "*L'Iliade, ou le poème de la force*" in the *Cahiers du Sud*, it temporarily unnerved Bepaloff, who was then still completing her remarks on Homer's masterpiece. At a glance Weil's essay seemed uncomfortably similar to her own. "There are entire pages of my notes that might seem to be plagiarized," she told Jean Grenier.⁵ "What seems clear in retrospect," says Christopher Benfey in his introduction to *War and the Iliad*, "is that Bepaloff had written much of her essay while unaware of Simone Weil's work, but that she made revisions after learning of [what she came to call] the 'amusing coincidence.'"⁶

It is highly probable, Benfey informs us, that the strange coincidence of the almost simultaneous writing of the two

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essays is attributable to the influence of Jean Giradoux's popular drama *La guerre de Troie n'aura pas lieu*. From the time of its publication in 1935 to Germany's invasion of Poland, the play was as much in the mind of the French intellectual as the threat of war was in the air of Europe, for its author foredoomed, in comical but no uncertain terms, the inevitable conflict between the Gallic and the German peoples. By the time they came to write on the *Iliad*, Bespaloff and Weil had internalized Giradoux's discomfiting themes and dramatized forebodings. The title of one of her early opinion pieces, "Let Us Not Begin Again the Trojan War," suggests the influence of Giradoux's play on Weil's political imagination. "At the center of the Trojan War, there was at least a woman," she observed here with reference to the warmongering rhetoric *entre deux guerres*. "For our contemporaries, words adorned with capital letters play the role of Helen."⁷

Giradoux encouraged the French to think of themselves as assailable Trojans, of Hitler and his forces as menacing Greeks at the gates of Troy. The urgency of the play's message was humorously conveyed by its title, which takes the form of an "official" pronouncement: "The Trojan War will not take place." In the opening scene, Cassandra begs to disagree. "Doesn't it ever tire you to...prophesy only disasters?" scolds Andromache. "I prophesy nothing," says Cassandra. "All I ever do is to take account of two great stupidities: the stupidity of men, and the wild stupidity of the elements." To make Andromache see that war is inevitable, Cassandra asks the queen to "[i]magine a sleeping tiger." That tiger, she says, has been prodded out of his sleep by "certain cocksure statements," of which Troy has been "full" for "some considerable time."⁸ After Germany's invasion of Poland, the ominous parallel between the European crisis and Homer's epic, which commences with breached pacts and failures to ap-

pease the wrath of Achilles, appeared frighteningly apt to Bespaloff and Weil.

While they both acknowledged the "tiger at the gates," Weil and Bespaloff apparently disagreed on what to do about it. Completed and published before Germany's defeat of France, the former's essay condemned war outright and implicitly advocated a pacifist stance toward Hitler. It is significant that McCarthy's translation was later printed by a Quaker press. Bespaloff's essay, on the other hand, revised after the occupation, made an implicit case for resistance, and served, whether its author intended it to or not, as a response to Weil's pacifism. To condemn war, "or to absolve it, would be to condemn life itself," Bespaloff wrote. "And life in the *Iliad* (as in the Bible or in *War and Peace*) is essentially the thing that does not permit itself to be assessed, or measured, or condemned, or justified, at least not by the living."⁹

Weil and Bespaloff were finally concerned with something more than their own historical moment, however. In the *Iliad* they sought a significance to history's entirety, a significance understood only in metaphysical or theological terms and informed by an anthropology grounded in a Judaeo-Christian Hellenism. Their appreciation of Homer's poem, to find critical accompaniment in American letters, is of the kind intimated in Lionel Trilling's observation: "When we read how Hector in his farewell to Andromache picks up his infant son and the baby is frightened by the horsehair crest of his father's helmet and Hector takes it off and laughs and puts it on the ground, or how Priam goes to the tent of Achilles to beg back from the slayer the body of his son, and the old man and the young man, both bereaved and both under the shadow of death, talk about death and fate, nothing can explain the power of such moments over us, or nothing short of a recapitulation of the moral history of the race."¹⁰

II

Weil's is considerably shorter than Bernaloff's essay, which divides into seven parts, each devoted to a separate topic. Its argument, articulated in the first sentence, consists in this: "The true hero, the true subject, the center of the *Iliad* is force."¹¹ What it endeavors to show above all else is that in Homer's poem, and ever in human warfare, souls are utterly transformed by their contact with force, shrunken, mastered, deceived by the force men mistakenly imagine themselves able to handle, misshaped by the force to which men submit involuntarily or otherwise as victims or wielders of it.

Throughout the essay force is understood as that which "turns anybody who is subjected to it into a *thing*."¹² To be turned into a thing in the most literal sense, Weil notes, is to be made a corpse. Here stood a man who lies now on the ground, carrion for kites of the sky. There, rattling an empty chariot through the swelling rout, a horse seeks its once splendid driver, whose mangled hulk lies prostrate in a pool of coagulate black, dearer now to ravenous dogs than to his wife. Behind another chariot drags the erstwhile hero, the ensanguined black hair of that once-charming head now hoar with dust. Such is the deadly spectacle of force in Homer's pageantry of woes, and the "bitterness of such a spectacle is offered us absolutely undiluted," writes Weil. "No comforting fiction intervenes; no consoling prospect of immortality; and on the hero's head no washed-out halo of patriotism descends."¹³ Neither Weil nor Homer's combatants, who fight and perish for ulterior reasons known only to themselves or to the gods, find death in the *Iliad* sweet or altogether proper.

What Weil deems to be entirely more poignant by contrast than the mere rubbing out of life in the poem is what she calls "the sudden evocation, as quickly rubbed out, of another 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."¹⁴ She finds an example of such an evocation in the description of Andromache ordering her serving maids to prepare a hot bath for Hector, soon to return from battle to his palace: "Foolish woman! Already he lay, far from the hot baths, / Slain by grey-eyed Athena, who guided Achilles' arm."¹⁵ The tragic sense of these lines derives from one of Weil's many insights into the human situation: As does nearly all the *Iliad*, nearly all of human life transpires unfortunately far from the precious joys of home.

Weil contemns most of all the force that "does not kill just yet," that "merely hangs, poised and ready, over the head of the creature it *can* kill, at any moment, which is to say at every moment."¹⁶ Such is the force that turns breathing, thinking men into stones. Countless are Homer's depictions of this form of force, wherein we see the once proud man, standing disarmed and naked before the pointing spears of his adversaries, become a corpse before any fell hand has touched him. Weil's commentary on the dehumanizing effects of looming force alludes to these depictions. It also evokes the imagery of notable war poems of her time. What concerned Weil is perfectly represented, for example, in three lines from "The Shield of Achilles," W. H. Auden's comment on the spiritual deprivations of World War II: "What their foes liked to do was done, their shame / Was all the worst could wish; they lost their pride / And died as men before their bodies died."¹⁷

In her analysis of Homer's epic and its relevance to the permanent conditions of history, Weil is quick to point out that even those who inflict violence, or stand ready and able to inflict it, suffer the vitiations of force, for it "is as pitiless to the man who possesses it, or thinks he does, as it is to its victims."¹⁸ Those in the

Iliad who think they possess force are intoxicated by a false sense of invincibility, a sense as fleeting as fortune is fickle. For one of the poem's many incontrovertible truths is that nobody really possesses force. Homer's world is not divided between conquered persons and suppliants, on the one hand, and conquerors and victors on the other. In it, as in ours, "there is not a single man," Weil reminds us, "who does not at one time or another have to bow his neck to force."¹⁹

Weil invites us to think of Achilles or Agamemnon or Hector or Ajax. More powerful than the common lot of men, none of these combatants wields force absolutely. The *Iliad* opens with the former weeping in humiliation over Agamemnon's haughty seizing of Briseis, the woman whom Achilles desired to wed. Even Agamemnon, though, must weep, as necessity requires him to plead humiliatingly with the brooding Myrmidon, whose force he needs to win his war on Troy. Hector, on the other side of the battle line, must suffer the misery of truckling to something latent in himself. To be sure, he strikes mortal fear into the Greek ranks, who stand astonished by his taunting challenges, which they are ashamed to refuse but afraid to accept. When Ajax steps forward, however, Hector feels the irrepressible, embarrassing shudder of terror. Nor is Ajax spared the paralysis of fear, which Zeus causes to overcome the warrior two days later. Though the cause of his own fear is not a man but a river, even dreaded Achilles shakes in his turn as he scurries frightfully up the banks of angry Scamander.

Weil's essay offers many insights into the Greek mind, and one of the wisest is this: Fate has a way of penalizing those who abuse force while they have it on loan. Such retributive justice operates with "a geometrical rigor" in the *Iliad*, Weil argues, because it is "the main subject of Greek thought."²⁰ She reminds her reader that, in their considerations of the uni-

verse and man's place in it, the idea of retribution (known as Nemesis in Aeschylus's tragedies) is the starting point for the Pythagoreans, and for Socrates and Plato. The concept is familiar, Weil maintains, wherever the influence of Hellenism has extended, including those countries steeped in Buddhism, where it survives, she speculates, in the concept of Karma. Weil notes regretfully the absence today of a word in any Western language to express the idea of moral retribution: "[C]onceptions of limit, measure, equilibrium, which ought to determine the conduct of life, are, in the West, restricted to a servile function in the vocabulary of technics."²¹ Of all her reflections on our time, none is truer than this: "We are only geometricians of matter; the Greeks were, first of all, geometricians in their apprenticeship to virtue."²²

Weil is finally concerned with the condition of the human soul. When its embodiment is turned into a "thing" by the threat of force, the soul, she remarks, finds itself in "an extraordinary house."²³ For souls are not created to live in things; those that do are done violence to the quick of their being. Such is the genius of Greek wisdom, of which the "Gospels," in Weil's Hellenic view of them, "are the last marvelous expression."²⁴ In them, Weil declares, "human suffering is laid bare" in the person of Christ, whose Passion shows that even a divine spirit, incarnate and subjected to material force, "is changed by misfortune, trembles before suffering and death, feels itself, in the depths of its agony, to be cut off from man and God."²⁵ In the final analysis, then, Weil's underlying theme is: In the perpetual struggle against the constraints of the human condition, no embodied spirit long eludes the violence of force, be it human, natural, or supernatural, "although each spirit will bear it differently, in proportion to its own virtue."²⁶

III

Three of the seven sections dividing “On the *Iliad*” deal with Hector and Achilles. With the former Bespaloff empathizes more than with any of Homer’s other tragic figures. For Hector is the resistance hero, whose happiness consists in family and fatherland. Domestic happiness is for him “more important than anything else, because it coincides with the true meaning of life” and is “worth defending even with life itself, to which it has given a measure, a form, a price.”²⁷ What causes him to falter in his final hour is not the rancorous valor of Peleus’s insatiably discontented son, but rather Hector’s capacity for happiness. This capacity, says Bespaloff, “which rewards the efforts of fecund civilizations, puts a curb on the defender’s mettle by making him more aware [than Achilles] of the enormity of the sacrifice extracted by the gods of war.”²⁸

To Bespaloff’s mind, Hector is nothing if not the quintessential champion of civilization, “the guardian of the perishable joys.”²⁹ None among the mortals contesting on the windy plains of Troy feels the pangs of loss as deeply as he. To his wife’s desperate plea of nonresistance, he is far from insensible. As he takes his final leave of Andromache and their doomed child, Hector, Bespaloff observes, embraces with a final look what truly matters, exposed as they are to the sully hands of his enemies. He knows that death, the dreadful premonition of which he cannot shake, means relinquishing all power to protect the ones he loves from humiliation, punishment, torture.

To deny fate, though, is to deny his place among the subjects of the epic poet who, in ages hence, will resurrect Ilion and immortalize its champions. So Hector steps up to Achilles, who pursues him “not around the walls of Troy but in the cosmic womb itself,” as Bespaloff recollects their struggle *sub specie aeternitatis*.³⁰ Humiliated though he is, Hector finally

conquers himself (the only thing left him in the end), defies destiny, and steels himself for a glorious failure. This is no insignificant feat, Weil would have us note, for in the minds of Homer’s warriors, “glory is not some vain illusion or empty boast; it is the same thing that Christians saw in the Redemption, a promise of immortality outside and beyond history, in the supreme detachment of poetry.”³¹

In Hector’s destroyer Bespaloff sees the uncivilized man whose capacity for happiness remains undeveloped because his “appetite for happiness” has not been fully satisfied and drives him “on toward his prey and fills his heart with ‘an infinite power for battle and truceless war.’”³² Even though in his forcefulness Achilles is enviably half-divine, his dual nature adds to his discontent, his divinity and humanity being violently inharmonious: “As a god, he envies the gods their omnipotence and immortality; as a man, he envies the beasts their ferocity, and says he would like to tear his victims’ bodies to pieces and eat them raw.”³³

Insofar as his life is brutish and short, Achilles, according to Bespaloff’s characterization, resembles Hobbes’s primitive man. Or perhaps he is more comparable to Rousseau’s noble savage. In any case, he defies every earthly or deific authority and scoffs at being supplicated in the name of anything high or low. He has, as Conrad describes Kurtz, “kicked himself loose of the earth,” has “kicked the very earth to pieces.”³⁴ When dying Hector begs him not to feed his remains to the dogs, Achilles is obdurate and, as Bespaloff points out by way of Achilles’s own insensitive words, quite aware of being something other than a civilized man: “There are no covenants between men and lions.... It is not permitted that we should love each other, you and I.”³⁵ Yielding at once to truth and death, Hector recognizes his mistake: “Yes, I see what you are.... A heart of iron is in you for sure.”³⁶

More chief than king to his Myrmidons, Achilles “spends himself without reckoning, in a rapture of aggressiveness.”³⁷ Through him, says Bespaloff, Homer reveals the limits and the futility of force, which, in its acts of cruelty, avows at once its desire and inability to achieve godhead. She explains: “When Achilles falls upon Lyacon, shouting ‘death to all,’ and makes fun of a child who is pleading with him, he lays bare the eternal resentment felt by the will to power when something gets in the way of its indefinite expansion.”³⁸ In Achilles Bespaloff sees weakness manifesting itself in the very consummation of force, because Achilles, the consummate force-hero, “can never get the best of the thing he kills: Lyacon’s youth will rise again and Priam’s wisdom and Ilion’s beauty.”³⁹

Bespaloff abstains from simplifying Achilles. At once an image of grandeur and a marvelous ingrate, he is, according to her discerning assessment, many things still: “The sport of war, the joys of pillage, the luxury of rage, ‘when it swells in a human breast, sweeter than honey on a human tongue,’ the glitter of empty triumphs, and mad enterprises—all these things are Achilles.”⁴⁰ Men need him, as they need death, for both place formative and necessary limits on life. “Without Achilles, men would have peace,” we read in Bespaloff’s meditation on Homer’s foremost enigma.⁴¹ Without him, “they would sleep on, frozen with boredom, till the planet itself grew cold.”⁴²

Foe to every impulse of pity though he is, this lord of limit remains the son of Thetis, whom filial love for a mortal has made to feel the pangs of human suffering and to regret her immortality. From this maternal goddess of “the fair tresses,” Achilles, writes Bespaloff, “inherits a grace even in the midst of violence, a generosity that is quick and unpremeditated.”⁴³ A leaden heart is in him, to be sure. But, owing to Thetis and her exalting influence, it is not entirely immovable and

finally proves to be a noble heart when Priam, the noblest of suppliants, moves it with his winning plea for mercy: “I am far more pitiable [than your own father], for I have endured what no other mortal on earth has, to put to my mouth the hand of a man who has killed my sons.”⁴⁴

Hector and Achilles embody the respective psychologies of their constituents. Regardless of what happens, the Achaians, like the latter, remain convinced of their invincibility. The Trojan princes contradistinctively share Hector’s premonition of defeat, even when the tide of battle turns in their favor. Bespaloff meditates at length on Hector and Achilles because for her the duel between them, not Achilles’s wrath nor his dispute with Agamemnon over Briseis, constitutes the epic’s center, its unifying principle.

IV

The balance of “On the *Iliad*” is chiefly concerned with the gods in relation to Homer’s major figures and with Homer in relation to Tolstoy. While the epic hero assumes responsibility for all that happens, the gods, according to Bespaloff’s assessment of their morality, assume responsibility for nothing, though all that happens has been wrought by them. But from his forceful struggle against the god’s irresponsibility the epic hero gains his dignity, as does Hector in the final moments of his death. Helen, too, gains what dignity she has from her struggle against the fatuous gods, inasmuch as she achieves a measure of nobility in her splendid disgrace.

Nietzsche was wrong, Bespaloff declares, when he called Homer the poet of apotheosis: “What [his epic] exalts and sanctifies is not the triumph of victorious force but man’s energy in misfortune, the dead warrior’s beauty, the glory of the sanctified hero, the song of the poet in times to come—whatever defies fatality and rises superior to it, even in defeat.”⁴⁵

While acknowledging the mortal struggle against material force in the *Iliad*, she maintains that Homer's is an interest primarily in the "limited and finite aspect [of force] as perishable energy that culminates in courage."⁴⁶ Homer's eternity, she reminds her contemporaries, centers round the striving wills of individuals and exists in the exalted tale of extraordinary deeds: "Homer asks no quarter, save from poetry, which repossesses beauty from death and wrests from it the secret of justice that history cannot fathom."⁴⁷ Against the comedy of the gods and the contingencies of fate "is set," in Bespaloff's words, "the creative lucidity of the poet fashioning for future generations heroes more godlike than the gods, and more human than men."⁴⁸

While irresponsible and actually less godlike than the epic hero, the gods are not without their significances. Bespaloff notes, in particular, the shared significance of Hera, seemingly witless though able to manipulate the father of the gods; Aphrodite, whimsical yet not as defenseless as she appears; and Pallas Athena, brooding but quick to send haughty Ares reeling to the ground with a single blow: "These are the three goddesses involved in the judgment of Paris, and each in her own way reveals the other side of the eternal feminine whose tragic purity is embodied in Andromache, Helen, and Thetis."⁴⁹ And there is Zeus, of course: Mere watcher though he is, his "serene look, dominating from on high consequences still distant, prevents the Trojan War from being a mere bloody fracas" and "conveys to the flux of events its metaphysical meaning."⁵⁰

In the final analysis, however, Zeus's court is to the *Iliad* what worldly society is to *War and Peace*. Both, says Bespaloff, are targets of ridicule. Homer's deities and Tolstoy's worldlings, beings emptied by fortune from the fate of ordinary men, exhibit something of a decorative showiness that carries neither force

nor weight. The gods of the epic and the aristocrats of the novel are both exquisitely comic in their interaction with one another and careless of the mortals whom they use for their sport. They lack a certain seriousness, Bespaloff observes, which for Homer and Tolstoy distinguishes the truly human from the subhuman. "*Agents provocateurs*, smart propagandists, heated partisans, these non-belligerents do not mind the smell of carnage or the clash of tragic passions," she writes.⁵¹ In truth, they rely upon it: "Condemned to a permanent security, they would die of boredom without the intrigues of war."⁵²

Nor would old mortality be quite the same, from the point of view of Homer and Tolstoy, without war to make peace meaningful. Thus it is futile, Bespaloff insists, to look to them for a condemnation of war as such. Neither pacifist nor bellicist, both love and fear it, have no misconceptions about it, and "present it as it really is, in its continual oscillation between boisterous animal spirits that break out in spurts of aggressiveness and the detachment of sacrifice in which the return to the One is consummated."⁵³ For Homer and Tolstoy war, according to Bespaloff, is one of the ineluctable conditions of life; it is to be regretted, certainly, perchance remembered in verse, but not to be judged any more than destiny.

In their art, war becomes something of a relative good when viewed, as they view it, under the aspect of eternity. Bespaloff understands this way of seeing the inevitable: "Precisely because war takes everything away from us, the All, whose reality is suddenly forced on us by the tragic vulnerability of our particular existences, becomes inestimable."⁵⁴ Nor is man's love of country, rooted as it is in his passion for eternity, as fully palpable as when it is tested by war: "Faced with this ultimate threat man understands that his attachment to the country which willingly, or unwillingly, he has made the center of his

world, the dwelling place of his gods, and his reason for life or death, is no pious and comfortable feeling, but a grim demand imposed upon his whole being.”⁵⁵ The threat of slavery or of annihilation denudes—but it also exalts. As Bepaloff remarks: “Pierre [Bezhukhov], [Prince] Andrey, Hector, and Achilles are never more themselves than when they are on the verge of being nothing.”⁵⁶

Bepaloff draws a striking parallel between the Ionian poet and the demiurge of Yasnaya Polyana. Her essential claim is that their world is what ours is in perpetuity: We do not enter it, for we are always there. Homer and Tolstoy along with Shakespeare are, she declares, “the only ones...who are capable of those planetary pauses, those musical rests, over an event where history appears in its perpetual flight beyond human ends, in its creative incompleteness.”⁵⁷ In her final assessment of their comparability, however, Bepaloff argues that Homer far exceeds Tolstoy. The Greek, she explains, who insists that Achilles and Priam exchange mutual homage, never betrays a preference for his own people; his paradigm of human virtue is, after all, Hector, a Trojan. The Russian, on the other hand, cannot resist decrying and belittling the French, and for him “reciprocal esteem becomes impossible” because he sees Napoleon as “not only the invader of his country, but also God’s rival.”⁵⁸

V

One can fully appreciate the essays revisited here only by experiencing them for himself. For they are neither reducible to any terms short of those which translate the originals into English nor satisfactorily expressible in any summary or paraphrase. What impels their description here is the hope that they will find readers in our day. If their present appreciator had his way, both would be required reading for all university English majors, for the authors exemplify the art of enduring

literary criticism penned “in the light of eternity,” to borrow a phrase from Dietrich Bonhoeffer.⁵⁹ Each defies the New Historicist imperative to view works of the moral imagination as mere products of their time, an imperative which literary theorists and literature professors alike have abided dogmatically ever since Marxist ideologue Fredrick Jameson gave the command: “Always historicize!”⁶⁰

Weil and Bepaloff were certainly aware that one derives a fuller understanding of its moral significance from historical interpretation of a literary work. But, unlike today’s typical critic of the New Historicist persuasion, their aim was to rise above the mere historicity of literature to see the eternal significance of its conceits and symbols. For them the greatest of poems, the *Iliad*, was nothing if not an explanation of the universal relevance of their ravaged century. The epic’s encarnalizations of truth were for both writers insights into the very depths of being. Homer was for Weil and Bepaloff a celebrant of the imagination who turned the world into words through which posterity could enter from time to time into the realm of permanence, “charioted on the viewless wings of poesy.”⁶¹

There is no denying that Weil and Bepaloff are guilty of “killing time,” to appropriate the phraseology of one New Historicist.⁶² Note, for instance, the tenor of this passage from the former’s opening paragraph: “For those dreamers who considered that force, thanks to progress, would soon be a thing of the past, the *Iliad* could appear as an historical document; for others, whose powers of recognition are more acute and who perceive force, today as yesterday, at the very center of human history, the *Iliad* is the purest and loveliest of mirrors.”⁶³ Yes, Weil’s criticism is chronologically homicidal, insofar as it rejects the fundamental tenets of the New Historicism and sees history in the light of that which moves but moves not.

Like Weil, Besseloff turned to the “purest and loveliest of mirrors” because in it she saw embodied immutable truths about man’s predicament. Of special interest for her was Helen, Homer’s embodiment of human error. In literature, if not in life itself, Helen is a tragic type we see time and again; she is akin to Anna Karenina, for instance, with whom Besseloff compares her at length.⁶⁴ Politically, and according to Besseloff’s final comment on the mythical cause of the Trojan War, Helen is always with us “since nations that brave each other for markets, for raw materials, rich lands, and their treasures, are fighting first and forever, for Helen.”⁶⁵ Is Besseloff altogether wrong? Does not every war, just or unjust, have its Helen, its *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*? Is not Helen, in one rhetorical form or another, what Conrad means by the “idea” that redeems “the conquest of the earth,” the “unselfish belief in the idea,” the beautiful lie men continually “set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to”?⁶⁶

In her discussion of Helen, Besseloff reminds us that in Homer’s mind punishment and expiation do not fix responsibility for error: “They dissolve it in the vast sea of human suffering and the diffuse guilt of the life-process itself.”⁶⁷ To be sure, the Greek notion of universal defectiveness bears some relation to the Christian idea of Original Sin. For back of Attic tragedy, epic or dramatic, is always the idea of a fall. But, as Besseloff is quick to point out, a fall in the Homeric sense is not preceded by a state of innocence and does not anticipate redemption in any Christian sense. It is true that Homer sees the universe as inherently flawed. But in a flawed universe in which salvific grace and redemptive remorse are meaningless phrases, individual error, she explains, “is not quite the same thing as a sin.”⁶⁸

To speak of correspondences between the Greek, Jewish, and Christian visions

of order is to come finally to the nexus of Weil’s and Besseloff’s thought. To clarify this connection of minds, it may be said that, for both Weil and Besseloff, Jehovah’s justice supersedes Homer’s force, as Christ’s love supplants Jehovah’s justice. To these correspondences Besseloff was keenly sensitive, and, according to Hermann Broch, to reveal them “seems to have been [her] purpose in linking the Homeric epic with biblical prophecy.”⁶⁹ Such was Weil’s purpose, too.

In fact, appeals to these correspondences are present not only in “Poem of Force,” but also in many of the letters and commentaries Weil wrote prior to and in the wake of the essay’s publication and translation. Several of these remarks chime perfectly with what one critic has called the “numinous and redemptive” pedagogical function of Besseloff’s essay, which “superbly mediates the relations between literature and religion.”⁷⁰ For instance: “It is impossible to love at the same time both the victors and the vanquished, as the *Iliad* does, except from the place, outside the world, where God’s Wisdom dwells.”⁷¹ These words, quoted from Weil’s “Contemplation of the Divine,” are predicated on a belief in the reconcilability of the Greek and Christian worlds, a belief which Weil shared with her compatriot.

That Weil took this reconcilability seriously is further exemplified in her last and lengthy letter to Father Perrin. Here she discloses in Homer one of her main themes (a theme which Besseloff’s essay advances in its concluding paragraphs): In the afflicted soul shines brightest “the splendour of God’s mercy.”⁷² Knowledge of God’s presence, Weil reminds Perrin, affords no “consolation,” removes “nothing from the fearful bitterness of affliction,” leaves unhealed “the mutilation of the soul.”⁷³ Yet, as she goes on to relate in terms evoking at once the Incarnation and the Passion, “we know quite certainly that God’s love for us is the very sub-

stance of this bitterness and this mutilation.”⁷⁴ Nothing surpasses the *Iliad*, Weil tells Perrin, in its capacity to bear witness to this certainty. Indeed, its witness to this certainty is, she maintains, “the implicit signification of the poem and the one source of its beauty,” notwithstanding the fact that this signification “has been scarcely understood.”⁷⁵

Antithetical to the discourse of New Historicism, Weil’s words illustrate what Besseloff says in her essay’s final summarizing sentence: “[T]here is and will continue to be a certain way of telling the truth, proclaiming the just, of seeking God and honoring man, that was first taught us and is taught us afresh every day by the Bible and by Homer.”⁷⁶ In other words: the way to truth is through the

wisdom of the Logos as we find it inscribed in great poems and incarnate in the figures of the ethical poet. “If the religion of the Bible and the religion of *Fatum* both resort to poetry in order to communicate with the people,” writes Besseloff, “this is because poetry gives them back the truth of the ethical experience on which they are based.”⁷⁷ Only on the language of poetry, on “aphorism and paradox,” is Nietzsche able to proclaim “his Dionysiac faith in the Eternal recurrence,” Blake to describe “his vision,” Kierkegaard “to puzzle out Abraham’s experience,” Pascal “to acknowledge the God of Abraham and Jacob.”⁷⁸ In their parts and in their wholes the essays remembered here affirm this epistemological verity.

1. The comments of Elizabeth Hardwick and Robert Fitzgerald are quoted on the flap of *War and the Iliad* (New York, 2005). 2. There is no need to rehearse Weil’s biography here, for reliable chronologies are available in many sources including *The Simone Weil Reader*, ed. George A. Panichas (New York, 1977), xxxv-xlii. A brief sketch of Besseloff’s life is in order, however, there being an unfortunate paucity of commentary on the subject, particularly in English, outside of a few commemorative conference papers and panels presented or organized by faculty of Mount Holyoke College, where Besseloff taught French literature for six years beginning in 1943. She was born in Kiev in 1895, the daughter of Debora Perlmutter, a trained philosopher with a doctorate degree, and Daniel Pasmanik, a cultivated Jewish physician and leading light among Russian Zionists. In Switzerland, where her family moved in 1900 in search of greater religious tolerance, Besseloff attended the Conservatory of Geneva, where, in 1914, she received her diploma in piano performance. Later, she taught music at the Opera in Paris, married Ukrainian businessman Shraga Nissim Besseloff, with whom she produced her only child, Naomi. In 1942, twelve years after her father’s death, Besseloff, her daughter, mother, and husband immigrated to the United States, where she made French-language broadcasts for the Voice of America. At Mount Holyoke she relied on renewable contracts, lived estranged from her husband, and on April 6, 1949, sealed her kitchen doors with towels, turned on the gas, and died unaware that

she had inadvertently killed her invalid mother in the adjacent room. 3. Quoted in Christopher Benfey’s introduction to *War and the Iliad*, xvii. About the only thing of note or length printed in English about Besseloff, Benfey’s essay appeared first in *The New York Review of Books* (25 Sept. 2003) when Besseloff’s *Lettres à Jean Wahl* was published by a Parisian press in 2003. It is notable that Benfey’s discussion, the primary source of the biography above, relies almost entirely on French sources. Significant among them is *Revue Conférence*, no. 6 (1998), which includes a sketch of Besseloff’s life by Jean-Pierre Halévy, along with Besseloff’s “Lettre à M. Daniel Halévy sur Heidegger,” an essay first published in *La Revue philosophique* in 1933, and remarkable for being among the first analyses in French of Heidegger’s *Being and Time*. 4. The Bollingen edition included a lengthy introduction by Austrian man of letters Herman Broch, who framed Besseloff’s discussion in a history of mythopoeia from Homer and Virgil to Kafka and Joyce. Included as an afterword in *War and the Iliad*, Broch’s introduction is an extraordinary commentary in its own right and really does not depend on Besseloff’s remarks for context. In fact, Broch adverts directly to Besseloff in only two or three instances. In his penultimate paragraph, however, he makes an important observation about the nature and significance of the element of “force” in Homer that subtly connects her essay to Weil’s. 5. Quoted in Benfey’s introduction, xix. 6. *Ibid.* 7. *Op. cit.*, x. 8. Jean Giraudoux, *Tiger at the Gates*, trans. Christopher Fry (New York, 1955), 1-2. Fry’s translation of the

play was used in the Robert L. Joseph production on October 3, 1955, at the Plymouth Theatre in New York City. **9.** *War and the Iliad*, 50. **10.** Lionel Trilling, introduction to *Anna Karenina*, trans. Constance Garnett, Gustavus Spett, and Bernard Guilbert Guernsey (Norwalk, Conn., 1975), x. **11.** *War and the Iliad*, 3. **12.** *Ibid.* **13.** *Ibid.*, 4. **14.** *Ibid.* **15.** *Ibid.* **16.** *Ibid.*, 4-5. **17.** W. H. Auden, *Collected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson (New York, 1976), 454. **18.** *War and the Iliad*, 11. **19.** *Ibid.* **20.** *Ibid.*, 15. **21.** *Ibid.*, 16. **22.** *Ibid.* **23.** *Ibid.*, 5. **24.** *Ibid.*, 34. **25.** *Ibid.* **26.** *Ibid.*, 33. **27.** *Ibid.*, 44. **28.** *Ibid.* **29.** *Ibid.*, 43. **30.** *Ibid.*, 45. **31.** *Ibid.*, 48. **32.** *Ibid.*, 44. **33.** *Ibid.*, 54. **34.** Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (New York, 1993), 94. **35.** Quoted in *War and the Iliad*, 45-46. **36.** *Op. cit.*, 46. **37.** *Ibid.*, 54. **38.** *Ibid.* **39.** *Ibid.* **40.** *Ibid.*, 54-55. **41.** *Ibid.*, 55. **42.** *Ibid.* **43.** *Ibid.*, 53. **44.** *Op. cit.*, 79. **45.** *Ibid.*, 69. **46.** *Ibid.*, 68. **47.** *Ibid.*, 49. **48.** *Ibid.*, 50. **49.** *Ibid.*, 67. **50.** *Ibid.*, 69. **51.** *Ibid.*, 65. **52.** *Ibid.* **53.** *Ibid.*, 71. **54.** *Ibid.*, 72. **55.** *Ibid.*, 73. **56.** *Ibid.*, 74. **57.** *Ibid.*, 73. **58.** *Ibid.*, 77. **59.** Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Christ the Center*, trans. John Bowden (New York, 1966), 75. **60.** Fredrick Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (Ithaca, 1981), 9. Jameson is not unlike C. S. Lewis's Screwtape, that remarkable old devil who takes great pride in having rendered the learned man, the only one still interested in old books, incapable of deriving any wisdom from them. Screwtape and his fellow demons have accomplished this feat, as the former boasts, by inculcating the historical point of view. When presented with the utterance of an ancient author, today's learned man, who sees everything from the historical point of view, never asks whether what the author says is true. To the satisfaction of Screwtape, he asks instead "who influenced the ancient writer, and how far the statement is consistent with what he said in other

books, and what phase in the writer's development, or in the general history of thought, it illustrates, and how it affected later writers, and how often it was misunderstood (specifically by the learned man's own colleagues), and what the general course of criticism on it has been for the last ten years, and what is the 'present state of the question.'" See *The Screwtape Letters* (New York, 1962), 128-29. **61.** *The Poems of John Keats*, ed. Aileen Ward (Norwalk, Conn., 1980), 264. **62.** See Brook Thomas, "Preserving and Keeping Order by Killing Time in *Heart of Darkness*," *Heart of Darkness*, ed. Ross C. Murfin (Boston, 1996), 239-57. Misreading *Heart of Darkness* as a fact rather than an allegory of the soul, Thomas charges Conrad with unwittingly perpetuating the horror of imperialism by locating truths about man in an "atemporal realm," rather than acknowledging their historical contingency. **63.** *War and the Iliad*, 3. **64.** Both Helen and Anna Karenina flee from husband and home thinking they can "abolish the past and capture the future in some unchanging essence of love." But when reality catches them up, both feel "nothing but a dull disgust for the shriveled ecstasy that has outlived their hope." When in exile they awaken from "their deteriorated dream, they can blame only themselves for having been the dupes of Aphrodite," who rules them despotically. "Everything they have squandered comes back to them; everything they touch turns to dust or stone." See *War and the Iliad*, 57-58. **65.** *Ibid.*, 63. **66.** Conrad, 8. **67.** *War and the Iliad*, 58. **68.** *Ibid.* **69.** *Ibid.*, 121. **70.** See George A. Panichas, *The Critic as Conservator: Essays in Literature, Society, and Culture* (Washington, D.C., 1992), 193. **71.** *The Simone Weil Reader*, 431. **72.** *Ibid.*, 107. **73.** *Ibid.* **74.** *Ibid.* **75.** *Ibid.* **76.** *War and the Iliad*, 100. **77.** *Ibid.*, 91. **78.** *Ibid.*