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**James P. Holoka (ed.), *Simone Weil's The Iliad or The Poem of Force: A Critical Edition*. New York: Peter Lang, 2003. Pp. x, 129. ISBN 0-8204-6361-2. \$19.95 (pb).**

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**Reviewed by Sheila Murnaghan, University of Pennsylvania (smurnagh@sas.upenn.edu)**

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This new edition of Simone Weil's famous essay on the *Iliad* gives it a very different status than it has in the version in which I, and probably many other readers of BMCR, first encountered it. My old copy is a pamphlet published in 1956 by Pendle Hill, a Quaker study center near Philadelphia. There Weil's essay, which began its life in English in the November 1945 issue of *Politics*, is offered as an aid to spiritual meditation in a tradition of pacifism. In a brief introduction, it is contextualized as a response to a defining catastrophe of the then contemporary world. "*The Iliad, or The Poem of Force* was written in the summer and fall of 1940, after the fall of France. It may thus be read as an indirect commentary on that tragic event, which signaled the triumph of the most extreme modern expression of force." Holoka's new edition also accords the essay great respect, but in a different form. Now it is not an authoritative tract that speaks for itself but a classic work of literature requiring the same treatment as a Greek or Latin text. We are given a French text drawn from a recent scholarly edition, to which we can compare the new, studiously faithful translation that is also provided (the earlier, somewhat freer translation having been guaranteed simply by the credentials of its author, Mary McCarthy); in addition, the text is elucidated through an introduction and a commentary.

The Pendle Hill pamphlet conveys a degree of certainty about what this essay is good for that is less evident in a scholarly edition produced after a greater lapse of time. If we are not reading it as spiritual seekers whose consciousness is dominated by World War II, what can we expect to find there? Is it a document of primarily historical interest whose worth lies in what it tells us about the thought of Simone Weil and about the uses of antiquity in mid-twentieth century France? Or is it informative as an account of the *Iliad* itself?

There is among classicists a tendency to present Weil as an exceptionally good interpreter of Homer. This is well represented on the back of Holoka's edition in a comment by Jasper Griffin: "No discussion of [the *Iliad*] is more precious than the passionate, profound, and penetrating essay of Simone Weil ..." Griffin's statement here echoes earlier comments by himself and, among others, Colin Mcleod ("I know of no better brief account of the *Iliad* than this.") and Oliver Taplin ("it ... conveys a fundamental understanding of the *Iliad*."). Weil was a stellar student in a rigorous, elite educational system and was well trained in the Greek language and in classical literature, but the deference of these scholars is based less on those qualifications than on her life experience: her role as a witness to the events of World War II and her remarkable determination to enter into and grapple with the sufferings of those around her. In her brief life, Weil not only endured the fall of France but actively renounced the privileges of her comfortable life, seeking out demanding factory labor, joining the Republican forces in Spain, and fatally refusing, while an exile in England, to eat more than the rations of her

compatriots in France. In addition, she devoted herself to reading, thinking, and writing about moral and theological issues. In their response to her essay, these eminent Homerists betray diffidence, even anxiety, about the adequacy of a scholar's relationship to works of classical literature, especially those like the *Iliad* that deal with historical crises and matters of war and violence. Weil's authority derives for these admirers from the fact that she saw close up events that could be considered to resemble those described in the poem. In a similar way, the inherently distinguished criticism of Bernard Knox, another of Weil's admirers, is often accorded an extra measure of respect because of his record as a soldier.

Holoka's own assessment blends several possible approaches. He concludes his Introduction with the claim that the essay's value lies in the access it provides to Weil's "distinctive outlook on the human condition," and he shares the assumption behind the Pendle Hill pamphlet that access to Weil's outlook can be uplifting. "It transcends the goals of conventional historicist or positivistic literary analysis by affording both a novel interpretation of an ancient masterpiece and an intrinsically valuable moral experience" (11). But he also grounds his claim that the essay should be taken seriously as an interpretation of Homer by noting that Weil follows the time-honored academic practice of supporting her statements with close citation of the text.

It is certainly true that, the more frequently Weil quotes the *Iliad*, the more convincing she is. For most of the essay, she uses passage after passage to ground her central claim that the *Iliad* is above all a clear-eyed witness to the effects of force on the human spirit. Elaborating on her opening assertion that "The true hero, the true subject matter, the center of the *Iliad* is force," she makes a series of related points: the poem's many detailed accounts of death on the battlefield, with their focus on individual body parts, document the way force reduces human beings to things; sympathetic depictions of displaced and enslaved victims of warfare show that this dehumanization can apply as well to the living; victors are as much subordinated to force as the conquered, since it seduces them into a blind confidence contradicted by the ever-seesawing fortunes of war; the *Iliad* records the pervasive effects of force with a deep sorrow (which she terms "amertume" or "bitterness") that is entirely without partisanship, "all that is destroyed is regretted." With these observations, Weil provides a powerful, irrefutable counter to any reading of the *Iliad* that sees it as simply a celebration of warfare or a partisan glorification of the victorious Greeks. In the last few pages, however, she floats free from the text to offer a sweeping set of generalizations about the Greek spirit, which assimilate Greek culture to her own Christianity. "The Greeks had a force of soul that allowed them, for the most part, to avoid self-delusion; they were compensated for this by understanding how to attain in all things the highest degree of insight, purity, and simplicity." This spirit was also found in the Gospels, but nowhere else: it eluded the Hebrews and the Romans and was quickly lost in the contaminating later history of Christianity. Clearly, the breathless reader can only learn from these pronouncements what the past meant to Weil, as she formed it into a personal spiritual map.

Through her passionate attunement to the way the *Iliad* records the evil and futility of war and her strong, heartfelt prose style, Weil does Homer a great service, commending his poem to modern readers who might not see beyond its martial subject matter. But her interpretation is reductive as well as sensitive, and she cannot do justice to the full complexity of Homer's challenging vision. Her most conspicuous blind spot concerns the poem's commitment to heroism, a concept she obliterates with her strange formulation that force is the poem's "true hero." In the *Iliad*, there is no other way of life than war, which generates the most meaningful, noble, and glorious actions along with destruction and self-destruction. Killing in battle may be recognized as brutal and dangerously heady, but it is also an artform and an exhilarating achievement. For the poem's characters, clear-sightedness about the costs of war does not preclude investment in its promise of immortal fame. Weil quotes Hector's pitying vision of Andromache's future enslavement, but not his fantasy that Andromache's captured form will stir in an observer a memory of Hector's own exploits or his prayer for his son to follow the same course. Homer understands the allure of war as Weil does not, and it is notable that she never

mentions what for most readers is the heart of the poem: its account of how Achilles, having articulated a thorough-going critique of the supposed reasons for fighting, is nonetheless drawn back into battle.

In her indifference to Homer's positive vision of heroic action, Weil also misses the *Iliad's* sense of itself as a medium for conferring glory and providing entertainment. For her, the poem is a "flawless mirror" of force, conveying to its readers the fate to which all are subject. But the Homeric world encompasses both a less austere concept of poetry as transmuting suffering into something satisfying and pleasurable and an unavoidable gap between the experiences of audiences and the events retold in poetry. Weil speculates that the Greeks who produced and treasured the *Iliad* were themselves defeated victims of war, like the Trojans and like herself, specifically those displaced by the so-called Dorian invasion. But the *Iliad* hints, and the *Odyssey* shows in detail, that the audiences of poetry may be quite detached from the stories in which they delight. The *Odyssey* may reveal the ironies produced by this detachment, as in its portrait of the different responses of Odysseus and the sheltered Phaeaceans to the tale of Troy, but both epics leave no doubt that hearing the struggles of others recounted in song is a joy to be savored. For Homer, the pervasiveness of human pain inspires respect for the consolations humans devise in the face of that pain and a sense that there is no point in suffering more than one has to, which is the message behind Achilles' exhortation to Priam to put grief aside. It is not surprising that this dimension of the *Iliad* was invisible to Weil, who believed that suffering is inherently ennobling and sought it for herself when she did not have to -- and is perhaps more readily apparent to those who lead the quieter, safer lives of scholars.

In their extravagant praise of Weil, Griffin et al. no doubt reflect a worry that the technical concerns of scholarship can obscure the urgent issues addressed by the *Iliad*. But their own writings show that scholars can take on those issues, and in a way that is more complete and better informed than Weil's. So do works by scholars such as James Redfield and Seth Schein who also express reservations about Weil's interpretation (see especially pp. 82-84 of Schein's *The Mortal Hero*). Holoka's new presentation of Weil's essay as a text to be studied rather than an oracular utterance gives the essay an ongoing currency that it certainly deserves and helps us to appreciate it for what it is: a shaft of light illuminating one aspect of a complicated poem and an inspiring example of how an ancient Greek text can serve a modern reader struggling with her own life and times.

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