

“Simone Weil’s *Iliad* : Misunderstanding Homer ?”

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In this article, my eyes will be less on Homer’s *Iliad* than on Simone Weil’s interpretation or reception, or, as some critics would have it, misunderstanding of Homer. Simone Weil was one of several influential female writers who, since World War II have turned to Homer’s *Iliad* to make sense of their own personal, political, and historical circumstances. Although she would not have called herself a feminist, her identity as a woman who is writing about war is marked in several ways. Aside from her unusual proclivity towards Homer’s *Iliad*, an epic that has, until recently,

attracted few women translators and commentators,¹ her approach to the *Iliad* is gendered when she makes statements about war through the mouths and eyes of female characters. She shows a special awareness of how human relationships have an impact on war, highlighting scenes with the oppressed: the recently enslaved (Weil # 15), the about to be enslaved (Weil # 16–17), and the enslaved speaking to the soul of the recent dead (Weil # 20). She is also marked as female when she is accused by male critics of not understanding the virility of the *Iliad* and its joy in warfare.

My foci in this article will be twofold: interrogation of two specific examples of Weil's translations of/commentaries on the *Iliad* and whether these are "misunderstandings" of Homer, and the gendered and often misguided way in which critics have described the impact of Homer's world of warfare on the male and female scholars and writers who have translated and commented on it.²

For those not familiar with Simone Weil, I first provide some details about her life, writings, and socio-historical context since they explain much about her singular reaction to the *Iliad*. Her writing was never divorced from her life – everything she thought and wrote was based on her lived experience (and inversely, she led her life very much in accordance with her thinking). She was born in Paris in 1909 to an agnostic Jewish family. Both Simone Weil and her brother André (a brilliant mathematician at an early age who was later at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton) were precocious. Weil was a bright student, who studied and mastered Greek very early in her schooling. She finished first in the nationwide entrance exam in General Philosophy and Logic for the *École Normale Supérieure*, graduating in 1931 with a degree in Philosophy. Her political sympathies were well developed early on (although they changed frequently). While in school, after the

1 — Although fewer women have translated or written about the *Iliad* than the *Odyssey*, there are now several translations and commentaries by female authors (see notes 22 and 23 for more information). Caroline Alexander's translation of the *Iliad* appeared in 2015; Emily Wilson, who translated the *Odyssey* in 2018, has now completed a translation of the *Iliad* which was published in 2023. There have also been translations of the *Iliad* by female authors into languages besides English (Anne Le Fèvre Dacier [1711], Rosa Calzecchi Onesti [1950], Dora Marinari [2010]), commentaries by female authors (Book 6 of the *Iliad* by Barbara Graziosi and Johannes Haubold [Cambridge UP, 2010] and Book 22 by Irene J. F. de Jong [Cambridge UP, 2012]). There are a number of female scholars who are Homerists and have written on the *Iliad* (e.g., Mary Ebbott, Casey Dué Hackney, Sheila Murnaghan, Donna Wilson).

2 — For a full discussion of the gendered aspects of Simone Weil's writing, see Gold 2016. This article, "Simone Weil: Receiving the *Iliad*," which appeared in the volume *Women Classical Scholars: Unsealing the Fountain from the Renaissance to Jacqueline de Romilly* (ed. Rosie Wyles and Edith Hall) includes material about Weil that appears in this present article, but it does not include discussion of Weil's treatment of a key passage: the death of Lycaon in *Iliad* 21.

Russian Revolution, she was accused of being a Communist by a classmate. “Not at all,” she retorted, “I am a Bolshevik!”³

Although Weil was always physically weak and allowed her physical condition to deteriorate, she accomplished an enormous amount, both physically and intellectually, in her short thirty-four years. She taught philosophy and Greek, but left her teaching job to work at manual labor in factories and fields so as to put herself in the place of workers. Weil was always emotionally aligned with workers rather than her colleagues. She took another job teaching philosophy, but again left the teaching job, this time to serve briefly as a volunteer in the Spanish Civil War for the loyalist, Republican side. After witnessing the horrors of war in Spain, she became disillusioned with many “isms” (e.g., Communism, Marxism and Anarchism), finding that they failed to explain the conditions she saw in the warring world around her; she also abandoned her earlier pacifist leanings.

Another event that had a profound effect on Weil occurred in 1938, when she attended Easter services at the Benedictine abbey at Solesmes. There, she says, the passion of Christ entered her, and she began a quest for spiritual truth that had a profound effect on her writings.⁴

As World War II began, the Weil family remained in France. They fled the worsening Nazi persecutions in 1940, going first to Marseille, then Casablanca, and then the United States (New York). Simone managed to travel from New York to London, but she died at age thirty-four at a sanatorium in Kent, England, either of tuberculosis or of malnutrition from self-starvation.

Weil’s prolific output runs to some sixteen volumes, astounding for one who died so young. Her early writings, from 1931-36, focused on contemporary issues and problems. After her several mystical experiences, she turned to religious writings. Her “*Iliad*, or the Poem of Force” was begun as early as 1936 but mainly written in 1939–1940, before and after the fall of France and the beginning of the Nazi occupation in May-June 1940, and it was clearly influenced by that catastrophic event.⁵ This work was originally published in December 1940-January 1941, addressed to her countrymen, under the pseudonym Émile Novis (an anagram of Simone Veil), in the *Cahiers du Sud* (vols. 230 and 231), a literary monthly published in Marseille for which she wrote frequently. It

3 — Source in Weil unknown. Online biography: www.kirjasto.sci.fi/weil.htm; Petri Liukkonen (author) & Ari Pesonen, 2008.

4 — See Weil 1951 (*Waiting for God*): 76-77; Pétremont 1976: 340-42.

5 — Weil was so attached to the *Iliad* that she packed it in a suitcase to take when the Vichy police detained her and took her to a police station. Gray (2001: 166) says that she packed her copy of the *Iliad* “without which she never left the house.”

first appeared in English translation in 1945 in the journal *Politics*, translated by Mary McCarthy, and has subsequently been re-issued some thirteen times by Pendle Hill, a Quaker center which was interested in its pacifist argument.

It is difficult to know whether we should call parts of Weil's work on the *Iliad* a translation.⁶ We need to ask what a translation is or ought to be. How far can a translator get from the text before the new product ceases to have enough relationship to the original to be regarded as a "translation"? Is she allowed to import her own terms of reference? Can she not import her own terms of reference? Can she import "into the text something that is not there at all"?⁷ Weil certainly imports elements into Homer that Homer never could have imagined: Christianity for one. She clearly domesticates the *Iliad*, an act that always runs the risk of making readers misunderstand the original text. Sometimes she is accused of getting it wrong (and we can disagree about what a "wrong" translation or interpretation is).⁸

Let's look at two passages that have earned her criticism.⁹ Many scholars have faulted her for her interpretation of Priam's supplication to Achilles in *Iliad* Book 24. 468ff.¹⁰ Following are two passages focused on Achilles and Priam: first the Greek text of Homer's *Iliad*, followed by Weil's translation of it, then one of the standard English translations (Stanley Lombardo, 1997), and finally Holoka's translation of Weil's translation.

ὤς δ' ὅτ' ἄν ἄνδρ' ἄτη πικρινὴ λάβῃ, ὅς τ' ἐνὶ πάτρῃ
 φῶτα κατακτείνας ἄλλων ἐξίκετο δῆμον,
 ἀνδρὸς ἐς ἀφνειοῦ, θάμβος δ' ἔχει εἰσορόωντας,

6 — Dryden discusses various kinds of "translations," dividing them into imitations, paraphrases, or literal translations (see Tatum 2013 : 6). Simone Weil's *Iliad* is clearly not a literal translation in many places; the commentaries accompanying her translation passages move the whole into the realm of paraphrase or interpretation.

7 — Carne-Ross 2010b : 162.

8 — Many contemporary "translations" or versions of the *Iliad*, for example, insert somewhat jarring terms and objects that are thought by some readers to detract from the original context. See William Logan's review of Alice Oswald's *Memorial : A Version of Homer's Iliad* (London : Faber and Faber, 2011) in the *New York Times* 12/23/12. He complains mildly about Oswald's "accretion of a few modern artifacts like parachutes and motorbikes" and goes after the late Christopher Logue's "take-no-prisoners adaptation" which "equipped the warriors with helicopters and Uzis."

9 — Weil has been said, for example, to have delivered a one-sided interpretation of events, an interpretation that might come from her substitution of her own values for those of the *Iliad*. See Schein 2015 : 152-53.

10 — See Holoka 2003 : 74.

ὡς Ἀχιλεὺς θάμβησεν ἰδὼν Πρίαμον θεοειδέα ;
θάμβησαν δὲ καὶ ἄλλοι, ἐς ἀλλήλους δὲ ἴδοντο. (*Il.* 24.480-484)

Weil’s translation :

Comme quand le dur malheur saisit quelqu’un, lorsque
dans son pays

Il a tué, et qu’il arrive à la demeure d’autrui,

De quelque riche ; un frisson saisit ceux qui le voient ;

Ainsi Achille frissonna en voyant le divin Priam.

Les autres aussi frissonnèrent, se regardant les uns les
autres.

(Weil # 11, *Holoka* 2003 : 21)

Here is Lombardo’s translation of this passage:

Passion sometimes blinds a man so completely

That he kills one of his own countrymen.

In exile, he comes into a wealthy house,

And everyone stares at him with wonder.

So Achilles stared in wonder at Priam

Was he a god? (Lombardo; *Il.* 24. 511-16 [=480-84], Lombardo’s
italics¹¹)

Holoka’s translation of Weil (Weil, #11, *Holoka* 2003 :47):

As when hard misery seizes someone when in his own land
he has murdered, and when he arrives at the home of another,
some rich man; a shiver (*frisson*) seizes those who look at him;
so Achilles shivered seeing the godlike Priam.

The others too shivered looking at one another.¹²

Here is the second passage from the *Iliad* focused on Achilles and Priam:

11 — Lombardo puts all similes in the *Iliad* into italics to set them off; he explains his reasons for doing this on pp. x-xi of his 1997 translation. He bases his decision at least partly on his performances of the *Iliad*.

12 — All citations from Simone Weil’s “The *Iliad* or the Poem of Force” are taken from the 2003 *Holoka* edition; I use his numbering.

Ὡς φάτο, τῷ δ' ἄρα πατρός ὑφ' ἴμερον ὤρσε γόοιο ;
 ἀψάμενος δ' ἄρα χειρὸς ἀπώσατο ἦκα γέροντα.
 τῷ δὲ μνησαμένῳ, ὁ μὲν Ἴκτορος ἀνδροφόνιοιο
 κλαί' ἀδινὰ προπάροιθε ποδῶν Ἀχιλλῆος ἔλυσθεῖς,
 αὐτὰρ Ἀχιλλεὺς κλαίεν ἐὼν πατέρ', ἄλλοτε δ' αὖτε
 Πάτροκλον ; τῶν δὲ στοναχὴ κατὰ δώματ' ὀρώρει. (Il. 24. 507-512)

Weil's translation :

Il dit. L'autre, songeant à son père, désira le pleurer ;
 Le prenant par le bras, il poussa un peu le vieillard.
 Tous deux se souvenaient, l'un d'Hector tueur d'hommes,
 Et il fondait en larmes aux pieds d'Achille, contre la terre ;
 Mais Achille, lui, pleurait son père, et par moments aussi
 Patrocle ; leurs sanglots emplissaient la demeure.
 (Weil, #12, Holoka 2003 : 22)

Holoka's translation of Weil

He spoke. The other, thinking of his father, desired to weep;
 Taking him by the arm, he pushed the old man away **a little** (*un peu*),
 Both were remembering, one Hector slayer of men,
 and he huddled in tears at Achilles' feet, against the earth;
 but Achilles wept for his father and then too for
 Patroclus; their sobbing filled the hut. (Weil, # 12, Holoka 2003 :48).

Lombardo's translation of this passage:

He spoke, and sorrow for his own father
 Welled up in Achilles. He took Priam's hand
 And **gently** (ἦκα) pushed the old man away.
 The two of them remembered. Priam,
 Huddled in grief at Achilles' feet, cried
 And moaned softly for his man-slaying Hector.
 And Achilles cried for his father and

For Patroclus. The sound filled the room. (Lombardo; *Il.* 24. 544–551[=507–512])

Weil has been faulted for presenting an Achilles whose treatment of Priam is dehumanizing. The three main points of contention for critics are her translation of the Greek *θάμβος* (*Il.* 24.482) with *frisson* (Weil, # 11); her translation of *ἤλα* (*Il.* 24.508, *un peu* (“a little”) in Weil, #12, “gently” in most translations); and her comment that Achilles treats Priam as if he were an inanimate object, a thing, an object of force, someone who is “not there” (Weil, #13).

In her commentary on these passages, Weil says, “Le Spectacle d’un homme réduit à ce degré de malheur glace à peu près comme glace l’aspect d’un cadavre” (“the spectacle of a human being reduced to this degree of misery” [so the spectacle of a miserable suppliant like Priam] “chills one like the sight of a dead body” (*un cadavre*) (Weil, # 11). She later says, “Ce n’est pas par insensibilité qu’Achille a d’un geste poussé à terre le vieillard collé contre ses genoux” (“Not through insensitivity does Achilles push to the ground the old man clutching his knees,” Weil, # 13). Priam, in other words, is an example of a living being reduced to the status of a thing or object by force or by the threat of force (Weil’s main thesis in this essay). Holoka remarks that “Weil’s comment on 24.480–84 is a rare case of misunderstanding or misrepresentation. Priam is not in quite the same position as other suppliants in the *Iliad*, already dead before actual death; that is, he is not ‘un cadavre’” (Holoka 2003:74). In Holoka’s view, Priam causes Achilles to shudder as one would at the sight of a murderer, not a corpse. Holoka goes on to comment on Weil’s *Iliad* 24. 507–12: “The suppliant, at the mercy of superior force, does not long command attention, because he has already started to approximate a thing [Holoka paraphrasing Weil]. Achilles’ thoughts turn to his own father, Peleus, and to his dead friend, Patroclus, just as if Priam were not present at all. Weil’s analysis here and in the next paragraph depends on a misleading translation in line 508: *un peu* (‘a little’) does not convey the Greek *ἤλα*, which means ‘gently.’ Achilles pushes the old man gently, being distracted by anguish rather than uninhibited because he discounts Priam’s humanity.”¹³

Achilles’ behavior in the face of the king of Troy, the man whose son he killed, is complex and difficult to read. Does Achilles push Priam away because Achilles is anguished, discomfited, overwhelmed with emotion, or because Priam has become in his

13 — Holoka 2003 : 74-75. See also on this Ferber 1981/1976 : 70-72 (who calls Weil’s treatment “perverse”); Schein 2015 : Appendix, pp. 166-70.

eyes a thing, a corpse? Those commenting on this passage have largely overlooked Weil's important comment in section #10, preparatory to her translation of *Il.* 24. 477-79, where she says: "Quand, hors de tout combat, un étranger faible et sans armes supplie un guerrier, il n'est pas de ce fait condamné à mort ; mais un instant d'impatience de la part du guerrier suffirait à lui ôter la vie. C'est assez pour que sa chair perde la principale propriété de la chair vivante... Seul, un pareil suppliant ne tressaille pas, ne frémit pas ; il n'en a plus licence" ("When, outside of combat, a weak and unarmed stranger supplicates a warrior, he is not automatically condemned to death; but an instant of impatience on the warrior's part is sufficient to strip him of his life. It is enough for his flesh to lose the chief quality of living flesh ... only the suppliant does not tremble or shiver; he has not the license").

So, for Weil, this *instant d'impatience* on Achilles' part, when he pushes the suppliant aside (whether "gently" or "a little"), begins the process of turning Priam into the person who no longer has the license to tremble or shiver, one who is like the sight of a dead body. Only those watching (including Achilles) still have the capacity to react. The gesture of Achilles shows the vulnerability of the suppliant, Priam, to his present circumstances; it may be quite different than Achilles' pushing Priam gently away in *Il.* 24. 508, an act that would not lead to Priam's death. But in both cases Achilles is the one with the power to act, to shudder, to feel, and Priam is reduced to a powerless object of Achilles' whims.

In Weil's version (# 11), a *frisson* ("shiver") seizes those who look at Priam. The word in the Greek which she translates with *frisson* is *θάμβος* (which is repeated twice again in verbal form in *Il.* 24. 483 and 484). The Greek word *θάμβος* often describes a sense of wonder and a shiver of awe in the person receiving the experience. Weil uses this word (the noun *frisson* or its cognate verb *frissonner*) three times in three lines here:

Comme quand le dur malheur saisit quelqu'un, lorsque dans son pays

Il a tué, et qu'il arrive à la demeure d'autrui,

De quelque riche ; un frisson saisit ceux qui le voient ;

Ainsi Achille frissonna en voyant le divin Priam.

Les autres aussi frissonnèrent, se regardant les uns les autres. (Weil, # 11)

Her translation of this word is important for our understanding of the passage as a whole and for her understanding of the *Iliad*. Other critics show Achilles as seized by "wonder" or "amazement"

at the presence of Priam,¹⁴ but Weil describes Achilles’ *frisson* (both awe and wonder) at the presence of a man who comes as a suppliant to reclaim his son’s body, a man who at once reminds Achilles of his own father, Peleus, and evokes pity, and yet needs to be pushed away and distanced from Achilles. Weil implies that Achilles’ moment of impatience deprives Priam of a human presence and therefore causes him to be deprived of life (Weil, # 13). It is just this moment of hesitation, of impatience that Weil emphasizes here, when Priam becomes less human to Achilles.

As so often happens in Weil’s *Iliad*, she returns later to this same passage, as if she felt that she had something more to say on the subject. But her focus in the later passage is quite different: forms of love (*amour*) and friendship (*amitié*). For “le triomphe le plus pur de l’amour, la grâce suprême des guerres, c’est l’amitié qui monte au cœur des ennemis mortels” (“the purest triumph of love, the supreme grace of wars, is the friendship that stirs in the hearts of mortal enemies”), she cites Priam and Achilles in *Il.* 24. 628–33, who, after they have finished eating and drinking together, marvel at and contemplate each other (Weil, # 70). Weil’s commentary on this passage is as follows: “Ces moments de grâce sont rares dans l’*Iliade*, mais ils suffisent pour faire sentir avec un extrême regret ce que la violence fait et fera périr” (Weil, # 71) (“These moments of grace are infrequent in the *Iliad*, but they suffice to convey with deep regret just what violence has killed and will kill again”). Weil says, “aucun homme n’est placé au-dessus ou au-dessous de la condition commune à tous les hommes ; tout ce qui est détruit est regretté. Vainqueurs et vaincus sont également proches.” (Weil, # 72) (“No man is set above or below the common human condition; all that is destroyed is regretted. Victors and victims are equally close”). So, Achilles and Priam, victor and victim, here draw closer together than in the previous passages, each admiring the other, Achilles appearing as a god to Priam, and Priam admired for his handsome face and his words (Weil, # 70; *Il.* 24. 628–633). We can see a gentler or nobler side of Achilles here; he is still the victor but exhibits a humanity little seen in other encounters. This picture of Achilles and Priam gives a slightly different slant to the earlier scene with Achilles and Priam in Weil, # 11–12, humanizing and building on their earlier meeting. But such rare *moments de grâce* (Weil, # 71) serve to make us regret what violence destroys; bitterness emerges from tenderness (Weil, # 72).

A second passage that Weil has been accused of getting wrong is the death of the Trojan warrior and son of Priam, Lycaon, at the

14 — See Ferber 1981/1976 : 70-72.

hands of Achilles. As she does with the account of the meeting of Priam and Achilles in *Iliad* 24, Weil here treats the story of Lycaon (from *Iliad* 21) more than once, returning to it near the end of her essay.¹⁵ Lycaon was one of the few Trojans to be captured by Achilles and to survive the encounter. But eleven days after Achilles decides not to kill him but to sell him into slavery (from which he is ransomed), Lycaon once again meets Achilles face-to-face. Meanwhile Patroclus has been killed. Lycaon becomes a suppliant, begging Achilles to spare him, but Achilles is not moved and kills him, declaring that all men (including himself) must die.

Weil breaks up Homer's extended description of Lycaon's death (*Il.* 21.34-135) into five different short passages (with ellipses). She thus both rearranges Homer's narrative sequence and omits parts of it, forming her own version of this episode. She begins (Weil, # 8) with a short description of a nameless man, "un homme désarmé et nu" ("disarmed and exposed"), who "devient cadavre avant d'être touché" ("becomes a corpse before being touched"). It is not until the next segment (Weil, # 9) that we know the man is a son of Priam, but he still is not named. Lycaon is here an example of a living corpse – not yet dead but changed into a thing before death (Weil, # 7). In Weil's first two passages, Lycaon grasps Achilles' knees and becomes a suppliant. Achilles is harsh in his response: ἀμείλικτον δ' ὄπ' ἄκουσε ("Il entendit une parole inflexible," Weil, # 9 ["he heard an uncompromising response"]). Lycaon realizes that all hope is lost, stretches out his hands (in despair?), and Achilles slays him. Lycaon, Weil says, "respirant encore, il n'est plus que matière, encore pensant ne peut plus rien penser" (Weil # 9) ("though breathing still, he is only matter; still thinking, he cannot think any more").

Later in her essay, Weil picks up lines she had earlier omitted (Weil, # 58, 59; *Il.* 21. 74–85, 106-12). Here she focuses on the victor (Achilles) whose desire for death and destruction (the Trojans' and his own) makes him belong to "une race différente de la race des vivants," Weil, # 57 ("a race quite unlike the race of the living"). Weil allows us to see the very human side of Lycaon as he reminds Achilles of when they first met and how Achilles then allowed him to escape while still alive. Achilles replies, saying, ἀλλά, φίλος, θάνε καὶ σύ ("Allons, ami, meurs aussi, toi !," *Il.* 21. 106, Weil,

15 — In the collection of Weil's notes and translations at the Bibliothèque Nationale there are eight versions of Weil's "translations" of the Lycaon episode rewritten as Weil searches for both "l'exactitude et la beauté du rythme." See Fraisse 1989 : 306; Schein 2015 : 169.

59) (“Come, friend, face your death too!”). Achilles points out that better men than Lycaon (namely Patroclus) have died and that even he himself, comely and tall, “of noble lineage, my mother a goddess,” must die soon (*Il.* 21.109).¹⁶ Weil’s sympathy in the commentary on either side of these passages (Weil, # 58, 60) lies with the victim, “le vaincu” (“the beaten man”), while the conquering soldier is “comme un fléau de la nature” (“like a scourge of nature”). In the *Iliad*, Achilles follows up the killing of Lycaon with mockery and a total lack of compassion:

τὸν δ’ Ἀχιλλεύς ποταμόνδε λαβὼν ποδὸς ἤκε φέρεσθαι,

καὶ οἱ ἐπευχόμενος ἔπεα πτερόεντ’ ἀγόρευεν :

“ἔνταυθοὶ νῦν κείσο μετ’ ἰχθύσιν.”

.

ἽΩς ἄρ’ ἔφη, ποταμὸς δὲ χολώσατο κηρόθι μάλλον,

ὄρμηγεν δ’ ἀνὰ θυμὸν ὅπως παύσειε πόνοιο

δίον Ἀχιλλίῃα, Τρώεσσι δὲ λοιγὸν ἀλάλκοι. (*Il.* 21. 120-122, 136-138)

Achilles slung him into the river by his foot

And crowed over him as the current bore him off:

‘Lie there with the fish’ . . .

As he spoke the river roiled in wrath

And pondered how to foil Achilles’ efforts

And save the Trojans from this pestilence. (*Il.* 21. 127-29, 143-45 = *Il.* 21.120-22, 136-38; Lombardo translation).

While these passages are not in Weil, it seems likely that she was influenced by them to see Achilles as a violent force who turns Lycaon first into a living corpse and then into an actual corpse.¹⁷ So Weil says, just after the passages she cites from *Iliad* 21, “L’un et l’autre, au contact de la force, en subissent l’effet infaillible, qui est de rendre ceux qu’elle touche ou muets ou sourds. Telle est la nature de la force. . . Elle pétrifie différemment, mais également, les âmes de ceux qui la subissent et de ceux qui la manient” (Weil, # 60–61) (“Each, in contact with force, is subjected to its inexorable action,

16 — For a discussion of Achilles’ address to Lycaon as “friend (φίλος),” see Schein 2015 : 168. According to Schein, Achilles, by addressing Lycaon in this way, acknowledges “their shared humanity and reciprocal obligations.”

17 — Jonathan Shay sees here that Achilles’ “so-called ‘consolation’ to Lykaôn is nothing but the chilling cruelty of the berserker; a warmer reading of this scene is ruled out by Achilles’ gratuitous mistreatment and mockery of Lykaôn’s corpse” (see Holoka 2003 : 94).

which is to render those it touches either mute or deaf. Such is the character of force ... in equal but different ways, it petrifies the souls of those who undergo it and those who wield it”).

The last mention of Lycaon is in a list of young victims who fell in the Trojan War (Weil, # 73; *Il.* 21.45-48). Lycaon spent eleven days with loved ones after his first encounter with Achilles, only to be sent by Achilles to Hades οὐκ ἐθέλοντα νέεσθαι (“quoiqu’il ne voulût pas partir,” *Il.* 21.48, Weil, # 73) (“though he did not want to go”). The point Weil is making here is that “aucun homme n’est placé au-dessus ou au-dessous de la condition commune à tous les hommes,” Weil, # 72) (“no man is set above or below the common condition”). Then follows a list of poor victims, including Lycaon.

Does Weil, then, get the Lycaon episode wrong, as some have suggested? She excerpts, she inserts ellipses, she uses portions of the text to prove certain points she wishes to make. But Homer’s Lycaon is still there, dying a pitiful death at the hands of Achilles, a suppliant (like Priam) turned into a thing while still alive, an object of force. Both victor and victim will eventually meet this fate, as Achilles says, but here the main victim is Lycaon. Weil is not mistaking or mis-telling the tale.

Even if it were the case that Weil is here misreading the *Iliad*,¹⁸ as she has also been accused of doing in other passages,¹⁹ these “misreadings” do not vitiate Weil’s entire encounter with the *Iliad*. But what she ends up with is not Homer’s *Iliad*. It is Simone Weil’s *Iliad*.²⁰

The criticisms of Weil for her alleged misreadings of the *Iliad* can, I believe, be linked to her identity as a female author who is writing about a masculine epic poem and about war.²¹ Many female critics have found her readings or misreadings to be a legitimate and

18 — Ferber (1981/1976 : 70) cites Harold Bloom’s term “strong misreading” here. On “misreadings,” see the review by Laura Miguélez-Cavero of Levitan and Lombardo’s translation of *Tales of Dionysus : the Dionysiaca of Nonnus of Panopolis* in *BMCRe* 5/25/2023; the reviewer says : “With such a variety of approaches it is difficult to give a fair overview of this project. In some cases (e.g., books 28, 35) it would probably be more accurate to talk of a creative response or reaction to a particular book of the *Dionysiaca* than of a translation. This is only a problem if you expect a literal translation of the Greek text.”

19 — Another mistake or misreading that has been pointed out is Weil, # 74, where she says that Euphorbus “had seen only one day of war,” whereas in fact he had already slain twenty men (cf. Homer *Il.* 16.806-15).

20 — The issue of the “translations” of Homer by Simone Weil is further complicated by the fact that we have Holoka or Lombardo translating Simone Weil’s text from the French. Thus we are twice removed from Homer’s Greek. As Carne-Ross says about Logue’s *Patrocleia*, Weil “has managed to get inside the poem again and has discovered that, after all these years, it is still breathing” (Carne-Ross 2010b : 164).

21 — This is not meant to be essentializing. My interest is in how we are conditioned both to write and to read/receive in a gendered way.

creative approach to Homer.²² Until recently Weil was one of few women to have translated and/or commented on the *Iliad* (another was her close contemporary, Rachel Bespaloff),²³ or to have translated classical epics.²⁴ Many female Homeric scholars have focused on the *Odyssey* - - a poem that does not often speak of war and violence and that includes a number of female characters - - and not his bloody *Iliad*.²⁵

Alice Oswald, a British poet, has written a remarkable meditation on the *Iliad* entitled *Memorial: An Excavation of the Iliad*. Oswald shares much with Simone Weil. Like Weil, Oswald pares the lengthy epic of the *Iliad* down to its bare bones and sees life snuffed out, living beings turned into nothing:

Poor Archeptolemos

Someone was there

And the next moment no one (*Memorial*, p. 33)

Like Weil’s “The *Iliad* or the Poem of Force,” Oswald’s *Memorial* is almost entirely fashioned from Homer without ultimately being Homeric. Homer’s epic is stripped down to the devastating consequences of violence, the bereavement and mourning of those left behind. And, like Weil, Oswald has been accused by a male reviewer (who betrays a lack of understanding of Homer, Weil, and Oswald) of “playing fast and loose” with Homer and his similes and taken to task for her “Frankenstein transplant of similes from the original.”²⁶

One only need read some of the descriptions of what makes the *Iliad* so appealing to male critics and translators to understand why it might have repelled women critics and translators or caused them

22 — For example, Simonsuuri 1985 : 169.

23 — Weil alternates passages of “translation” (as she herself thought of them) and commentary. Recently a number of female scholars have translated and written commentaries on the *Iliad* (see note 1). See, for example, the on-going *Basler Iliaskommentar*, a series from the University of Basel that has produced several volumes and has more in process. While the two lead editors are male scholars (Anton Bierl and Joachim Latacz), many of the editors of the individual volumes are female (e.g., Marina Coray, Martha Krieter-Spiro, Magdalene Stoevesandt, Katharina Wesselmann).

24 — See note 1. The first translation of the complete *Iliad* (into French) by a woman was a prose translation by Anne Le Fèvre Dacier, published in 1711; in 1716 she published a prose translation of the *Odyssey*. More recently there are translations of both the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* by an Italian woman, Rosa Calzecchi Onesti : *Iliade* (Turin : G. Einaudi, 1950); *Odissea* (Turin : G. Einaudi, 1963). See also Sheila Murnaghan, Introduction to Stanley Lombardo, trans., *Homer Iliad* (Indianapolis : Hackett Publishing Co., 1997), xvii-lviii. Sarah Ruden’s recent translation of the *Aeneid* (Yale University Press, 2008) was the first by a woman; Alison Keith has also worked on women in (Latin) epic : A. M. Keith, *Engendering Rome : Women in Latin Epic* (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2000).

25 — Nancy Felson, *Regarding Penelope : From Character to Poetics* (Princeton, 1994); Lillian E. Doherty, *Siren Songs : Gender, Audiences, and Narrators in the Odyssey* (Ann Arbor, MI, 1995).

26 — Logan 2012.

to treat the *Iliad* in an idiosyncratic way. In a review in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* of various *Iliad* translations, Willis Regier quotes George Steiner's answer to the question "Why are there so many *Iliads* in English?" Steiner's answer, Regier says, can be boiled down to two words: noble manliness.²⁷ Here is Steiner: "There shines through the *Iliad* an idealized yet also unflinching vision of masculinity, of an order of values and mutual recognitions radically virile."²⁸ "Small wonder" then, Regier claims, "the epic has appealed to warrior nations like England and the United States" (p. 1). And small wonder that such a work might not often attract women with its radical virility, or that, when it does attract women, they choose to approach it differently.²⁹

Why would someone like Simone Weil be drawn to translating a work so virile in nature and one that has attracted so many male translators? Weil was clearly driven both by her experience growing up during the Spanish Civil War and under the Nazi occupation of her native France. War was all around her. She was led too by an early and unusually deep-seated response to and revulsion from the violence of war and the effects it has on all human beings, victims and victors alike, turning them into things or objects.³⁰ She was attracted (if we can use this word) not by "the joys of war" but by its devastating, bloody, life-robbing ability to turn everything into "all day permanent red," as Christopher Logue so vividly put it in

27 — Regier 2012.

28 — Steiner 1996, cited by Regier 2012 : B12.

29 — See for a recent broadside against the new translation of the *Iliad* by Emily Wilson, the X/Twitter postings (on 8/26-27/2023) by a certain Max Meyer (who says that he took one year of Greek). Among other denunciations, he calls her translation of the *Odyssey* "abominable," "a crime against the classics," and calls her translations "Woke Homer" (all of this is tied into her feminist agenda). He criticizes her "agenda," which was revealed in her interview in the *New York Times Magazine*, where it is said that Wilson has given Homer's epic "a radically contemporary voice." He says that Wilson was praised in *Eidolon* "for deliberately changing the meaning of passages through feminist translation." He then gives a series of "a few normal translations" (all by male translators) to show how terrible Wilson's translation is. He further excoriates another recent female translator of the *Iliad*, Caroline Alexander, for "butchering" the *Iliad* in 2015. For a much more measured and interesting assessment of Wilson's new translation of the *Iliad*, see the article in *The New Yorker* 9/18/23 by Judith Thurman. She discusses the gendered aspects of her translations which are "the first in English to jettison slurs or euphemisms that mask the abjection of women in a society where a goal of war, according to the *Iliad*, was to rob men of their women and where female captives of every rank were trafficked for sex and domestic labor... To the degree that [Wilson] is outraged, it's by the sexual politics of her vocation." "The 'faithful' translation", [Wilson] writes, "is a 'gendered metaphor.'" Thurman says, "It presupposes a wife-like helpmeet whose work is subordinate to that of, as Wilson says, a 'male-authored original'" (p. 52). Elsewhere, Thurman quotes A.E. Stallings who says that "some critics think a certain grandeur is missing" (p. 49).

30 — For Weil's own experience of watching factory workers (including herself) being turned into things or slaves, see her *Waiting for God*, p. 66.

his version of the *Iliad*.³¹ Writing about and translating Homer’s *Iliad* – the story of a war so long ago – helped Weil to cope with and try to explain the violence and wars of her times, the Spanish Civil War and WW II, and the invasion of the Nazis.³²

Male critics have faulted Weil for, among other things, not understanding the joy of Homeric warfare. George Steiner refers to her “deeply felt but bizarre interpretation of the *Iliad* as a poem of suffering – a reading almost blind to the wild joy and ferocity of archaic warfare which makes the epic blaze.” To be sure, Weil does displace onto the *Iliad* her moral repugnance to the atrocities around her in France, but is it not true that we all read and receive such monumental works in the light of our own situations and preoccupations? If one reads Christopher Logue’s versions of Homer’s *Iliad*, for example his *Patrocleia* or *All Day Permanent Red*, one finds exactly the same phenomenon: a vastly rewritten version of the *Iliad*, which also draws on experiences out of World War II to make sense of brutal warfare in any place, any time.³³ Homer’s meaning and his attitude toward war are not, indeed, perfectly clear, and, like Weil, he shows an impartiality towards Greeks and Trojans, victims and victors that lends itself to an interpretation such as we find in Weil.³⁴

In conclusion, we must ask how Simone Weil is regarded today, and why, if she was so wrong in her translations and her commentary, we still read and admire her. As James Holoka says, “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 (insofar as it may be recaptured).”³⁵ Some might agree with Steiner’s assessment of Weil’s work as “a perverse reading of the *Iliad*.”³⁶ But we could also

31 — Logue 2003.

32 — In a similar vein, Primo Levi tried to describe the dehumanizing power of force in the Nazi death camps in his *Survival in Auschwitz*: “the drowned... form the backbone of the camp, an anonymous mass... of non-men who march and labor in silence, the divine spark dead within them... one hesitates to call them living; one hesitates to call their death” (Levi 1961/1958 : 82).

33 — See on this Carne-Ross 2010b; Benfey 2005 : xiii and note 5. Benfey talks about Logue’s “creatively ‘rewritten’ passages from the *Iliad*” (and indeed Logue’s 2003 work is entitled *All Day Permanent Red: The First Battle Scenes of Homer’s Iliad Rewritten*). Logue juxtaposes “the Russian advance on Berlin with sulking Achilles” (Benfey 2005 : xiii, n. 5).

34 — Although Weil certainly responded to a Homer that did not take sides, Homer’s impartiality is not self-evident to all readers of the *Iliad*. Many readers have seen a pro-Greek undercurrent. See the book by M. Stoevesandt, *Feinde – Gegner – Opfer. Zur Darstellung der Trojaner in den Kampfszenen der Ilias* (Basel : Schwabe 2005). See also the reviews by Irene D.F. de Jong (*Mnemosyne* 60 [2007], 669-70) and M. M. Willcock (*Bryn Mawr Classical Review* 2006.05.03). Stoevesandt posits that Homer is not impartial and that he makes the Greeks more prominent in the epic, more successful in battle, and more efficient at killing the enemy.

35 — Holoka 2003 : 11.

36 — See Holoka 2003 : 16, n. 41.

concur with Simonsuuri that Weil's work is "a useful legitimate misreading of a kind that is vital for the tradition of literature,"³⁷ or with Oliver Taplin, who says that Weil's essay "was not written for scholars and is not argued in the academic mode: it none the less conveys a fundamental understanding of the *Iliad*."³⁸

In Simone Weil's *The Iliad or the Poem of Force*, then, we get a stark, one-sided view of war and of heroism, of what it means to be a part of a community at war. Like Alice Oswald or Christopher Logue, Weil gives us a compelling view of Homer's *Iliad* unlike any we have seen before. Her passionate response to war, filtered through Homer, makes the *Iliad* come alive in a new way; hers is a deep reading. Saul Bellow, in *There is Simply Too Much to Think About*, remarks on a student who attempts to explain Achilles' dragging Hector around Troy in circles by saying that circles and geometry are important in the *Iliad*. The professor explains: "No, it is because Achilles was angry." Bellow says that the schoolboy "takes refuge in circles" because he cannot cope with the real feeling that the *Iliad* inspires in its evocation of anger and death. The student is, Bellow says, "doing no more than most civilized people do when confronted with passion and death. They contrive somehow to avoid them."³⁹

Simone Weil never avoids the feelings evoked by warfare and death in the *Iliad*. Sometimes she might change the meaning. But I would argue that poetry is best (and perhaps only) understood "by working from the world you live and work in," by making connections between the world in the poem and your own world.⁴⁰ This is what Simone Weil, Rachel Bepaloff, Christa Wolf, Adrienne Rich, Louise Glück, and Alice Oswald have done. The world is richer for their "misreadings."

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37 — Simonsuuri 1985 : 169. On the topic of how we can grapple with such an uncertain past, see Frischer 2014 : 2, who is commenting on Winckelmann's "imaginative reconstruction of the Greek and Roman past" (quote from Harloe's book on Winckelmann, p. xxi).

38 — Taplin 1980 : 17 (=1998 : 112).

39 — Bellow 2015 : 92-5 (quote from p. 94).

40 — Tatum 2013 : 24; he is referring to work by Michael Putnam on the *Aeneid*.

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