

# *the Simone Weil Reader*

*A Legendary Spiritual  
Odyssey of Our Time*

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## THE *ILIAD*, POEM OF MIGHT

*"The Iliad, Poem of Might," Simone Weil's most famous essay, is an astonishing contemplation of the historical crisis situation brought on by Hitler. She had first started to write it in 1939; it was published in Marseilles, in the CAHIERS DU SUD, in December 1940 and January 1941. As a permanent and universal "mirror of reality," the Iliad teaches us, above all, she emphasizes, "how to accept the fact that nothing is sheltered from fate, how never to admire might, or hate the enemy, or to despise sufferers."*

The true hero, the real subject, the core of the *Iliad*, is might. That might which is wielded by men rules over them, and before it man's flesh cringes. The human soul never ceases to be modified by its encounter with might, swept on, blinded by that which it believes itself able to handle, bowed beneath the power of that which it suffers. Those who dreamt that might, thanks to progress, belonged henceforth to the past, have been able to see its living witness in this poem: those who know how to discern might throughout the ages, there at the heart of every human testament, find here its most beautiful, most pure of mirrors.

Might is that which makes a thing of anybody who comes under



its sway. When exercised to the full, it makes a thing of man in the most literal sense, for it makes him a corpse. There where someone stood a moment ago, stands no one. This is the spectacle which the *Iliad* never tires of presenting.

*... the horses*

*Thundered the empty chariots over the battle-lanes  
Mourning their noble masters. But those upon earth  
Now stretched, are dearer to the vultures than to  
their wives.*

The hero is become a thing dragged in the dust behind a chariot.

*All about the dark hair*

*Was strewn; and the whole head lay in dust,  
That head but lately so beloved. Now Zeus had  
permitted  
His enemies to defile it upon its native soil.*

The bitterness of this scene, we savour it whole, alleviated by no comforting fiction, no consoling immortality, no faint halo of patriotic glory.

*His soul from his body took flight and sped towards  
Hades  
Weeping over its destiny, leaving its vigour and  
its youth.*

More poignant still for its pain of contrast is the sudden evocation, as quickly effaced, of another world, the far-off world, precarious and touching of peace, of the family, that world wherein each man is, for those who surround him, all that counts most.

*Her voice rang through the house calling her  
bright-haired maids  
To draw a great tripod to the fire that there might be  
A hot bath for Hector upon his return from combat.  
Foolish one! She knew not that far away from hot baths  
The arm of Achilles had felled him because of green-  
eyed Athena.*



Indeed he was far from hot baths, this sufferer. He was not the only one. Nearly all the *Iliad* takes place far from hot baths. Nearly all of human life has always passed far from hot baths.

The might which kills outright is an elementary and coarse form of might. How much more varied in its devices; how much more astonishing in its effects is that other which does not kill; or which delays killing. It must surely kill, or it will perhaps kill, or else it is only suspended above him whom it may at any moment destroy. This of all procedures turns a man to stone. From the power to transform him into a thing by killing him there proceeds another power, and much more prodigious, that which makes a thing of him while he still lives. He is living, he has a soul, yet he is a thing. A strange being is that thing which has a soul, and strange the state of that soul. Who knows how often during each instant it must torture and destroy itself in order to conform? The soul was not made to dwell in a thing; and when forced to it, there is no part of that soul but suffers violence.

A man naked and disarmed upon whom a weapon is directed becomes a corpse before he is touched. Only for one moment still he deliberates, he strives, he hopes.

*Motionless Achilles considered. The other drew near,  
seized  
By desire to touch his knees. He wished in his heart  
To escape evil death, and black destiny. . . .  
With one arm he encircled those knees to implore him,  
With the other he kept hold of his bright lance.*

But soon he has understood that the weapon will not turn from him, and though he still breathes, he is only matter, still thinking, he can think of nothing.

*Thus spake the brilliant son of Priam  
With suppliant words. He hears an inflexible reply . . .  
He spoke; and the other's knees and heart failed him,  
He dropped his lance and sank to the ground with  
open hands,  
With both hands outstretched. Achilles unsheathes  
his sharp sword,*



*Struck to the breastbone, along the throat, and then  
the two-edged sword  
Plunges home its full length. The other, face down upon  
the ground,  
Lay inert, his dark blood flowed drenching the earth.*

When, a stranger, completely disabled, weak and disarmed, appeals to a warrior, he is not by this act condemned to death; but only an instant of impatience on the part of the warrior suffices to deprive him of life. This is enough to make his flesh lose that principal property of all living tissue. A morsel of living flesh gives evidence of life first of all by reflex, as a frog's leg under electric shock jumps, as the approaching menace or the contact with a horrible thing, or terrifying event, provokes a shudder in no matter what bundle of flesh, nerves and muscles. Alone, the hopeless suppliant does not shudder, does not cringe; he no longer has such licence; his lips are about to touch that one of all objects which is for him the most charged with horror.

*None saw the entrance of great Priam. He paused,  
Encircled Achilles' knees, kissed those hands,  
Terrible slayers of men, that had cost him so many sons.*

The spectacle of a man reduced to such a degree of misery freezes almost as does the sight of a corpse.

*As when dire misfortune strikes a man, if in his own  
country  
He has killed, and he arrives at another's door,  
That of some wealthy man; a chill seizes those who  
see him;  
So Achilles shivered at the sight of divine Priam,  
So those with him trembled, looking from one to the other.*

But this only for a moment, soon the very presence of the sufferer is forgotten:

*He speaks. Achilles, reminded of his own father, longed to  
weep for him.*



*Taking the old man by the arm, he thrusts him  
gently away.  
Both were lost in remembrance; the one of Hector,  
slayer of men,  
And in tears he faints to the ground at Achilles' feet.  
But Achilles wept for his father and then also  
For Patroclus. And the sound of their sobbing rocked  
the halls.*

It is not for want of sensibility that Achilles had, by a sudden gesture, pushed the old man glued against his knees to the ground. Priam's words, evoking his old father, had moved him to tears. Quite simply he had found himself to be as free in his attitudes, in his movements, as if in place of a suppliant an inert object were there touching his knees. The human beings around us exert just by their presence a power which belongs uniquely to themselves to stop, to diminish, or modify, each movement which our bodies design. A person who crosses our path does not turn aside our steps in the same manner as a street sign, no one stands up, or moves about, or sits down again in quite the same fashion when he is alone in a room as when he has a visitor. But this undefinable influence of the human presence is not exercised by those men whom a movement of impatience could deprive of their lives even before a thought had had the time to condemn them. Before these men others behave as if they were not there; and they, in turn, finding themselves in danger of being in an instant reduced to nothing, imitate nothingness. Pushed, they fall; fallen, they remain on the ground, so long as no one happens to think of lifting them up. But even if at last lifted up, honoured by cordial words, they still cannot bring themselves to take this resurrection seriously enough to dare to express a desire; an irritated tone of voice would immediately reduce them again to silence.

*He spoke and the old man trembled and obeyed.*

At least some suppliants, once exonerated, become again as other men. But there are others, more miserable beings, who without dying have become things for the rest of their lives. In their days is no give and take, no open field, no free road over which anything can pass to



or from them. These are not men living harder lives than others, not placed lower socially than others, these are another species, a compromise between a man and a corpse. That a human being should be a thing is, from the point of view of logic, a contradiction; but when the impossible has become a reality, that contradiction is as a rent in the soul. That thing aspires every moment to become a man, a woman, and never at any moment succeeds. This is a death drawn out the length of a life, a life that death has frozen long before extinguishing it.

A virgin, the daughter of a priest, suffers this fate:

*I will not release her. Before that old age shall  
have taken her,  
In our dwelling, in Argos, far from her native land  
Tending the loom, and sharing my bed.*

The young wife, the young mother, the wife of a prince suffers it:

*And perhaps one day in Argos you will weave cloth  
for another  
And you shall fetch Messeian or Hyperian  
water  
In spite of yourself, under stress of dire necessity.*

The child heir to a royal sceptre suffers it:

*These doubtless shall depart in the depths of  
hollow ships  
I among them; you, my child, will either go with me  
To a land where humiliating tasks await you  
And you will labour beneath the eyes of a pitiless master. . . .*

Such a fate for her child is more frightful to the mother than death itself, the husband wishes to perish before seeing his wife reduced to it. A father calls down all the scourges of heaven upon the army that would subject his daughter to it. But for those upon whom it has fallen, so brutal a destiny wipes out damnations, revolts, comparisons, meditations upon the future and the past, almost mem-



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ory itself. It does not belong to the slave to be faithful to his city or to his dead.

It is when one of those who made him lose all, who sacked his city, massacred his own under his very eyes, when one of those suffers, then the slave weeps. And why not? Only then are tears permitted him. They are even imposed. But during his servitude are not those tears always ready to flow as soon as, with impunity, they may?

*She speaks in weeping, and the women moan  
Taking Patroclus as pretext for each one's private  
anguish.*

On no occasion has the slave a right to express anything if not that which may please the master. This is why, if in so barren a life, a capacity to love should be born, this love could only be for the master. Every other way is barred to the gift of loving, just as for a horse hitched to a wagon, the reins and the bridle bar all directions but one. And if by miracle there should appear the hope of becoming again someone, to what pitch would not that gratitude and that love soar for those very men who must still, because of the recent past, inspire horror?

*My husband, to whom my father and my revered mother gave me,  
I saw before the city, transfixed by the sharp bronze.*

*My three brothers, born of our one mother,  
So beloved! have met their fatal day.*

*But you, when swift Achilles killed my husband*

*And laid waste the city of divine Mynes,*

*Did not allow me to weep. You promised me that the divine*

*Achilles*

*Would take me for his legitimate wife and carry  
me off in his vessels*

*To Phthia to celebrate our marriage among the  
Myrmidons.*

*Therefore without ceasing I weep for you who have  
always been so gentle.*

One cannot lose more than the slave loses, he loses all inner life.  
He only retrieves a little if there should arise an opportunity to



change his destiny. Such is the empire of might; it extends as far as the empire of nature. Nature also, where vital needs are in play, wipes out all interior life, even to a mother's sorrow.

*For even Niobe of the beautiful hair, had thought  
of eating,*

*She who saw twelve children of her house perish,  
Six daughters and six sons in the flower of youth.*

*The sons Apollo killed with his silver bow*

*In his anger against Niobe, the daughters, Artemis,  
lover of arrows, slew.*

*It was because Niobe made herself equal to Leto saying:  
'She has two children, I have given birth to many.'*

*And those two, although only two, brought death to all.*

*Nine days they lay dead; and none came to bury them.*

*The neighbours had become stones by the will of Zeus.*

*On the tenth day they were interred by the Gods of  
the sky,*

*But Niobe had thought of eating, when she was weary  
of tears.*

None ever expressed with so much bitterness the misery of man, which renders him incapable of feeling his misery.

Might suffered at the hands of another is as much a tyranny over the soul as extreme hunger at the moment when food means life or death. And its empire is as cold, and as hard as though exercised by lifeless matter. The man who finds himself everywhere the most feeble of his fellows is as lonely in the heart of a city, or more lonely, than anyone can be who is lost in the midst of a desert.

*Two cauldrons stand at the doorsill of Zeus*

*Wherein are the gifts he bestows, the evil in one,  
the good in the other. . . .*

*The man to whom he makes evil gifts he exposes to outrage;*

*A dreadful need pursues him across divine earth;*

*He wanders respected neither by men nor by Gods.*

And as pitilessly as might crushes, so pitilessly it maddens whoever possesses, or believes he possesses it. None can ever truly possess it. The human race is not divided, in the *Iliad*, between the vanquished,



extends as far  
as are in play,

the slaves, the suppliants on the one hand, and conquerors and masters on the other. No single man is to be found in it who is not, at some time, forced to bow beneath might. The soldiers, although free and well-armed, suffer no less outrage.

*Every man of the people whom he saw he shouted at  
And struck with his sceptre and reprimanded thus:  
'Miserable one, be still, listen while others speak,  
Your superiors. You have neither courage nor strength,  
You count for nothing in battle, for nothing in the  
assembly.'*

Thersites pays dear for these words, though perfectly reasonable and not unlike those pronounced by Achilles:

*He strikes him so that he collapses with tears fast flowing,  
A bloody welt rises upon his back  
Beneath the golden sceptre; he sits down, frightened.  
In a stupor of pain he wipes his tears.  
The others, though troubled, found pleasure and  
laughed.*

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But even Achilles, that proud unvanquished hero, is shown to us at the beginning of the poem weeping for humiliation and frustrating pain after the woman he had wanted for his wife was carried away under his very eyes and without his having dared to offer any opposition.

*... But Achilles,  
Weeping, sat down at a distance far from his companions,  
Beside the whitening waves, his eyes fixed upon  
the boundless sea.*

rage;

Agamemnon humiliates Achilles deliberately to show that he is the master.

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r truly possess  
he vanquished,

*... Thus you will realize  
That I have more power than you, and all others shall tremble  
To treat me as an equal and to contradict me.*



But a few days later even the supreme leader weeps in his turn, is forced to humble himself, to plead and to know the sorrow of doing so in vain.

Neither is the shame of fear spared to a single one of the combatants. The heroes tremble with the others. A challenge from Hector suffices to throw into consternation all the Greeks without the least exception, except Achilles and his men, who are absent.

*He speaks and all were silent and held their peace;  
They were ashamed to refuse, frightened to accept.*

But from the moment that Ajax advances, fear changes sides:

*The Trojans felt a shiver of terror through their limbs,  
Even Hector's heart bounded in his breast,  
But he no longer had license to tremble or  
seek refuge.*

Two days later, it is Ajax's turn to feel terror.

*Zeus, the father, from above causes fear to mount  
in Ajax;  
He stands, distraught, putting his seven-skinned  
shield behind him,  
Trembling before the crowd like a beast at bay.*

It happens once, even to Achilles: he trembles and groans with fright, not, it is true, before a man but before a great river. Himself excepted, absolutely all are at some moment shown vanquished. Valour contributes less in determining victory than blind destiny, which is represented by the golden scales of Zeus:

*At this moment Zeus the father makes use of his  
golden scales.  
Placing therein the two fates of death that reaps all,  
One for the Trojans, breakers of horses, one for the  
bronze-clad Greeks.  
He seized the scales in the middle; it was the fatal day of the  
Greeks that sank.*



Because it is blind, destiny establishes a sort of justice, blind also, which punishes men of arms with death by the sword; the *Iliad* formulated the justice of retaliation long before the Gospels, and almost in the same terms:

*Ares is equitable, he kills those who kill.*

If all men, by the act of being born, are destined to suffer violence, that is a truth to which the empire of circumstances closes their minds. The strong man is never absolutely strong, nor the weak man absolutely weak, but each one is ignorant of this. They do not believe that they are of the same species. The weak man no more regards himself as like the strong man than he is regarded as such. He who possesses strength moves in an atmosphere which offers him no resistance. Nothing in the human element surrounding him is of a nature to induce, between the intention and the act, that brief interval where thought may lodge. Where there is no room for thought, there is no room either for justice or prudence. This is the reason why men of arms behave with such harshness and folly. Their weapon sinks into an enemy disarmed at their knees; they triumph over a dying man, describing to him the outrages that his body will suffer; Achilles beheads twelve Trojan adolescents on Patroclus' funeral pyre as naturally as we cut flowers for a tomb. They never guess as they exercise their power, that the consequences of their acts will turn back upon themselves. When with a word one can make an old man be silent, obey, tremble, does one reflect upon the importance in the eyes of the gods of the curses of the old man, who is also a priest? Does one abstain from carrying off the woman Achilles loves when one knows she and he cannot do otherwise than obey? While Achilles enjoys the sight of the unhappy Greeks in flight, can he think that this flight, which will last as long and finish when he wills, may cost the life of his friend and even his own life? Thus it is that those to whom destiny lends might, perish for having relied too much upon it.

It is impossible that they should not perish. For they never think of their own strength as a limited quantity, nor of their relations



with others as an equilibrium of unequal powers. Other men do not impose upon their acts that moment for pausing from which alone our consideration for our fellows proceeds: they conclude from this that destiny has given all licence to them and none to their inferiors. Henceforth they go beyond the measure of their strength, inevitably so, because they do not know its limit. Thus they are delivered up helpless before chance, and things no longer obey them. Sometimes chance serves them, at other times it hinders, and here they are, exposed, naked before misfortune without that armour of might which protected their souls, without anything any more to separate them from tears.

This retribution, of a geometric strictness, which punishes automatically the abuse of strength, became the principal subject of meditation for the Greeks. It constitutes the soul of the Greek epic; under the name of Nemesis it is the mainspring of Aeschylus' tragedies. The Pythagoreans, Socrates, Plato, take this as the point of departure for their thoughts about man and the universe. The notion has become familiar wherever Hellenism has penetrated. It is perhaps this Greek idea which subsists, under the name of Karma, in Oriental countries impregnated by Buddhism; but the Occident has lost it and has not even in any one of its languages a word to express it; the ideas of limit, of measure, of equilibrium, which should determine the conduct of life, have no more than a servile usage in its technique. We are only geometers in regard to matter; the Greeks were first of all geometers in the apprenticeship of virtue.

The progress of the war in the *Iliad* is no more than this play of the scales. The victor of the moment feels himself invincible, even when only a few hours earlier he had experienced defeat; he forgets to partake of victory as of a thing which must pass. At the end of the first day of combat recounted in the *Iliad*, the victorious Greeks could doubtless have obtained the object of their efforts, that is, Helen and her wealth; at least if one supposes, as Homer does, that the Greek army was right to believe that Helen was in Troy. The Egyptian priests, however, who ought to have known, affirmed later to Herodotus that she was in Egypt. In any case, on that particular evening, the Greeks did not want her.

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*'Let us at present accept neither the wealth of Paris  
Nor of Helen; each one sees, even the most ignorant,  
That Troy now stands at the edge of doom.'  
He spoke and all among the Achaeans acclaimed.*

What they want is no less than all. All the riches of Troy as booty, all the palaces, the temples and the houses as ashes, all the women and all the children as slaves, all the men as corpses. They forget one detail; this is that all is not in their power; for they are not in Troy. Perhaps they may be there tomorrow, perhaps never.

Hector, that very day, succumbs to the same fault of memory:

*For this I know well in my entrails and in my heart;  
That day will come when holy Ilion shall perish  
And Priam of the mighty sword and Priam's nation.  
But I think less of the sorrow prepared for the Trojans,  
Less of Hecuba herself, and of King Priam,  
And my brothers, so many and so brave,  
Who will fall to the dust beneath the enemy's lash,  
Than of you, when one of the Greeks in bronze  
armour  
Shall drag you away weeping, and rob you of your liberty.  
For myself: may I be dead and may the earth cover me  
Before I hear your cries or see you dragged away.*

What would he not give at this moment to avoid such horrors which he believes inevitable? All that he can offer must be in vain. Yet only two days later the Greeks fled miserably, and Agamemnon himself wanted to take to the sea again. Hector, who by giving way a little might easily have obtained the enemy's departure, was no longer willing to allow them to leave with empty hands:

*Let us build fires everywhere that their brilliance  
may enflame the sky  
For fear lest into the darkness the long-haired Greeks  
May flee away and throw themselves upon the broad  
back of the seas. . . .  
Let more than one carry a wound to digest even at  
home,*



*And thus may all the world be afraid  
To bring to the Trojans, tamers of horses, the  
misery of war.*

His desire is carried out, the Greeks remain, and the next day, at noon, they make a pitiable object of Hector and his forces.

*They, fleeing across the plain, were like cattle  
Which a lion coming in the night drives before him. . .  
Thus the mighty Agamemnon, son of Athens, pursued them,  
Killing without pause the hindmost; thus they fled.*

In the course of the afternoon, Hector regains advantage, withdraws again, then puts the Greeks to rout, is set back in his turn by Patroclus' fresh forces. Patroclus, pushing his advantage beyond its strength, ends by finding himself exposed, unarmed, and wounded by Hector's javelin, and that evening the victorious Hector receives with severe reprimand Polydamas' prudent advice:

*'Now that I have received from the crafty son  
of Kronos  
A glorious victory near the ships, forcing the Greeks into  
the sea,  
Fool! Never voice such counsel before the  
people.  
No Trojan will listen to you; as for me, I  
forbid it.'  
Thus spoke Hector, and the Trojans acclaimed him.*

The next day Hector is lost. Achilles has pushed him back across the whole plain and will kill him. Of the two, he has always been the stronger in combat; how much more so now after several weeks of rest and spurred on by vengeance to victory against a spent enemy! Here is Hector alone before the walls of Troy, completely alone awaiting death and trying to gather his soul to face it.

*Alas! if I should retreat behind the gate and the  
rampart  
Polydamas would be first to shame me. . .  
Now that by my folly I have destroyed my people,*



*I fear the Trojans, and the long-robed  
Trojan women.*

*And I fear to hear it said by those less brave  
than I:*

*'Hector, too confident of his strength, has lost  
our land.'*

*But what if I put away my arched shield,  
My stout helmet, and leaning my lance against  
the rampart*

*I went forth to meet the illustrious Achilles?  
But why now should my heart give me such counsel?  
I will not approach him; he would have no pity,  
No regard; he would kill me if I were thus naked,  
Like a woman.*

Hector escapes none of the grief and ignominy that belong to the ruined. Alone, stripped of all the prestige of might, the courage that upheld him outside the walls cannot preserve him from flight:

*Hector, at the sight of him was seized with  
trembling. He could not resolve*

*To remain. . . .*

*It is not for a ewe nor for an ox-hide,  
Nor for the ordinary compensations of the hunt that  
they strive.*

*It is for a life that they run, that of Hector,  
tamer of horses.*

Fatally wounded, he augments the triumph of the victor by his vain entreaties.

*I implore thee by thy life, by thy knees, by thy  
parents.*

But those who are familiar with the *Iliad* know the death of Hector was to give but short-lived joy to Achilles and the death of Achilles brief joy to the Trojans, and the annihilation of Troy but brief joy to the Achaians.

For violence so crushes whomever it touches that it appears at last external no less to him who dispenses it than to him who endures it. So the idea was born of a destiny beneath which the



aggressors and their victims are equally innocent, the victors and the vanquished brothers in the same misfortune. The vanquished is a cause of misfortune for the victor as much as the victor is for the vanquished.

*An only son is born to him, for a short life; moreover  
He grows old abandoned by me, since far from home  
I linger before Troy, doing harm to you and to your sons.*

A moderate use of might, by which alone man may escape being caught in the machinery of its vicious circle, would demand a more than human virtue, one no less rare than a constant dignity in weakness. Further, moderation itself is not always without peril; for the prestige which constitutes three-fourths of might is first of all made up of that superb indifference which the powerful have for the weak, an indifference so contagious that it is communicated even to those who are its object. But ordinarily it is not a political idea which counsels excess. Rather is the temptation to it nearly irresistible, despite all counsels. Reasonable words are now and then pronounced in the *Iliad*; those of Thersites are reasonable in the highest degree. So are Achilles' words when he is angry:

*Nothing is worth life to me, not all the rumoured  
wealth of Ilium, that so prosperous city. . . .  
For one may capture oxen and fat sheep  
But a human life, once lost, is not to be recaptured.*

Reasonable words fall into the void. If an inferior pronounced them he is punished and turns silent. If a leader, he does not put them into action. If need be he is always able to find a god to counsel him the opposite of reason. At last the very idea that one might wish to escape from the occupation bestowed by fate, that to kill and to be killed, disappears from the consciousness.

*. . . we, to whom Zeus  
From our youth to old age, has assigned the struggle  
In painful wars, until we perish even to the last one. . . .*



Already these combatants, as so much later Craonne's, felt themselves 'wholly condemned'.

They are caught in this situation by the simplest of traps. At the outset their hearts are light, as hearts always are when one feels power within one and against one only the void. Their weapons are in their hands; the enemy is absent. Unless one's soul is stricken by the enemy's reputation, one is always stronger than he during his absence. An absent enemy does not impose the yoke of necessity. As yet no necessity appears in the consciousness of those who thus set forth, and this is why they go off as if to a game, as if for a holiday freed from the daily grind.

*Where have our braggings gone, our vaunted bravery,  
Which we shouted so proudly at Lemnos  
While gorging upon the flesh of horned bullocks,  
And drinking from cups overflowing with wine?  
Saying: against an hundred or two hundred Trojans  
Each one would hold combat; and here only one is  
too much for us!*

Even when war is experienced, it does not immediately cease to appear as a game. The necessity that belongs to war is terrible, wholly different from that belonging to peaceful works; the soul only submits to the necessity of war when escape from it is impossible; and so long as the soul does escape, it lives irresponsible days, empty of necessity, days of frivolity, of dream, arbitrary and unreal. Danger is then an abstraction, the lives which one takes seem like toys broken by a child, and no more important; heroism is a theatrical pose soiled by artificial braggings. If, added to this, an influx of vitality comes to multiply and inflate the power of action, the man believes that, thanks to divine intervention, he is irresistible, providentially preserved from defeat and from death. War is easy then, and ignobly loved.

But for the majority of soldiers this state of soul does not last. The day comes when fear, defeat or the death of beloved companions crushes the warrior's soul beneath the necessity of war. Then war ceases to be a play or a dream; the warrior understands at last that



it really exists. This is a hard reality, infinitely too hard to be borne, for it comprises death. The thought of death cannot be sustained, or only in flashes from the moment when one understands death as a possible eventuality. It is true that every man is destined to die and that a soldier may grow old among his comrades, yet for those whose souls are subservient to the yoke of war, the relationship between death and the future is different than for other men. For those others death is the acknowledged limit pre-imposed upon their future; for these warriors, death itself is their future, the future assigned to them by their profession. That men should have death for their future is a denial of nature. As soon as the practice of war has revealed the fact that each moment holds the possibility of death, the mind becomes incapable of moving from one day to the next without passing through the spectre of death. Then the consciousness is under tension such as it can only endure for short intervals. But each new dawn ushers in the same necessity. Such days added to each other make up years. That soul daily suffers violence which every morning must mutilate its aspirations because the mind cannot move about in a time without passing through death. In this way war wipes out every conception of a goal, even all thoughts concerning the goals of war. The possibility of so violent a situation is inconceivable when one is outside it, its ends are inconceivable when one is involved in it. Therefore no one does anything to bring about its end. The man who is faced by an armed enemy cannot lay down his arms. The mind should be able to contrive an issue; but it has lost all capacity for contriving anything in that direction. It is completely occupied with doing itself violence. Always among men, the intolerable afflictions either of servitude or war endure by force of their own weight, and therefore, from the outside, they seem easy to bear; they last because they rob the resources required to throw them off.

Nevertheless, the soul that is dominated by war cries out for deliverance; but deliverance itself appears in tragic guise, in the form of extreme destruction. A moderate and reasonable end to all its suffering would leave naked, and exposed to consciousness, memories of such violent affliction as it could not endure. The terror, the pain, the exhaustion, the massacres, the deaths of comrades, we cannot believe that these would only cease to ravage the soul if they were



drowned in the intoxication of force. The thought that such vast efforts should have brought only a negative, or limited profit, hurts too much.

*What? Shall we allow Priam and the Trojans, to glory  
In Argive Helen, she for whom so many Greeks  
Have perished before Troy, far from their native  
land?*

*What? Would you abandon Troy, the city of wide streets,  
For which we have suffered so many afflictions?*

What does Helen matter to Ulysses? Or even Troy with all its wealth, since it can never compensate for the ruin of Ithaca? Troy and Helen matter to the Greeks only as the causes of their shedding so much blood and tears; it is in making oneself master that one finds one is the master of horrible memories. The Soul, which is forced by the existence of an enemy, to destroy the part of itself implanted by nature, believes it can only cure itself by the destruction of the enemy, and at the same time the death of beloved companions stimulates the desire to emulate them, to follow their dark example:

*Ah, to die at once, since without my help  
My friends had to die. How far from home  
He perished, and I was not there to defend him.  
Now I depart to find the murderer of one so beloved:  
Hector. I will receive death at whatever moment  
Zeus and all the other gods shall accomplish it.*

So it is that the despair which thrusts toward death is the same one that impels toward killing.

*I know well that my fate is to perish here,  
Far from my loved father and mother; but still  
I will not stop till the Trojans have had their  
glut of war.*

The man torn by this double need for death belongs, so long as he has not become something different, to another race than the living race. When the vanquished pleads that he may be allowed to see the



light of day, what echo may his timid aspiration to life find in a heart driven by such desperation? The mere fact that the victor is armed, the other disarmed, already deprives the life that is threatened of the least vestige of importance. And how should he who has destroyed in himself the very thought that there may be joy in the light, how should he respect such humble and vain pleadings from the vanquished?

*I am at thy knees, Achilles; have pity, have regard  
for me;  
Here as a suppliant, O Son of Zeus, I am worthy of  
respect:  
It was first at your house that I ate the bread of  
Demeter,  
When from my well-tended vineyard you captured me.  
And selling me, you sent me far from my father and  
my own,  
To holy Lemnos; a sacrifice of one hundred oxen were  
paid for me.  
I was redeemed for three hundred more; Dawn breaks  
for me  
Today the twelfth time since I returned to Ilium  
After so many sorrows. Again at the mercy of your  
hands  
A cruel fate has placed me. How Zeus the father  
must hate me  
To have delivered me to you again; for how small  
a part in life  
Did my mother, Laothoe, daughter of the ancient  
Altos, bear me.*

See what response this feeble hope gets!

*Come friend, you must die too! Who are you to  
complain?  
Patroclus was worth much more than you, yet he  
is dead.  
And I, handsome and strong as you see me,  
I who am of noble race, my mother was a goddess;  
Even over me hangs death and a dark destiny.  
Whether at dawn, in the evening, or at noon  
My life too shall be taken by force of arms. . . .*



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Whoever has had to mortify, to mutilate in himself all aspiration to live, of him an effort of heart-breaking generosity is required before he can respect the life of another. We have no reason to suppose any of Homer's warriors capable of such an effort, unless perhaps Patroclus. In a certain way Patroclus occupies the central position in the *Iliad*, where it is said that: 'he knew how to be tender toward all', and wherein nothing of a cruel or brutal nature is ever mentioned concerning him. But how many men do we know in several thousand years of history who have given proof of such divine generosity? It is doubtful whether we could name two or three. In default of such generosity the vanquished soldier is the scourge of nature; possessed by war, he, as much as the slave, although in quite a different way, is become a thing, and words have no more power over him than over inert matter. In contact with might, both the soldier and the slave suffer the inevitable effect, which is to become either deaf or mute.

Such is the nature of might. Its power to transform man into a thing is double and it cuts both ways; it petrifies differently but equally the souls of those who suffer it, and of those who wield it. This property of might reaches its highest degree in the midst of combat, at that moment when the tide of battle feels its way toward a decision. The winning of battles is not determined between men who plan and deliberate, who make a resolution and carry it out, but between men drained of these faculties, transformed, fallen to the level either of inert matter, which is all passivity, or to the level of blind forces, which are all momentum. This is the final secret of war. This secret the *Iliad* expresses by its similes, by making warriors apparitions of great natural phenomenon: a conflagration, a flood, the wind, ferocious beasts, any and every blind cause of disaster. Or else by likening them to frightened animals, trees, water, sand, to all that is moved by the violence of external forces. Greeks and Trojans alike, from one day to the next, sometimes from one hour to the next, are made to suffer in turn these contrary transmutations.

*Like cattle which a murderous lion assaults  
While they stand grazing in a vast and marshy meadow  
By thousands . . . ; all tremble. So then the Achaians*



*In panic were put to rout by Hector and by Zeus the  
father.  
All of them. . . .  
As when destructive fire runs through the depths  
of a wood;  
Everywhere whirling, swept by the wind, when the trees  
Uprooted are felled by pressure of the violent fire;  
Even so did Agamemnon son of Athens bring down the heads  
Of the fleeing Trojans.*

The art of war is nothing but the art of provoking such transformations. The material, the procedures, even the inflicting of death upon the enemy, are only the means to this end; the veritable object of the art of war is no less than the souls of the combatants. But these transformations are always a mystery, and the gods are the authors of them because it is they who excite men's imaginations. However this comes about, this double ability of turning men to stone is essential to might, and a soul placed in contact with it only escapes by a sort of miracle. Miracles of this sort are rare and brief.

The frivolity, the capriciousness of those who disrespectfully manipulate the men or the things which they have, or believe they have at their mercy, the despair which drives the soldier to destroy, the crushing of the slave and of the vanquished, the massacres, all these contribute to make a picture of utter, uniform horror. Might is the only hero in this picture. The resulting whole would be a dismal monotony were there not, sprinkled here and there, luminous moments, brief and divine moments in the souls of men. In such moments the soul which awakes, only to lose itself again to the empire of might, awakes pure and intact; realizes itself whole. In that soul there is no room for ambiguous, troubled or conflicting emotions; courage and love fill it all. Sometimes a man is able to find his soul in deliberating with himself when he tries, as Hector did before Troy, without the help of gods or of men, all alone to face his destiny. Other moments wherein men find their souls are the moments when they love; almost no type of pure love between men is lacking from the *Iliad*.

The tradition of hospitality, carried through several generations, has ascendancy over the blindness of combat:

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*Thus I am for you a beloved guest in the heart of  
Argos. . . .*

*Let us avoid one another's lances, even in  
the fray.*

The love of a son for his parents, of a father, or of a mother, for the son, is constantly expressed in a manner as moving as it is brief:

*Thetis replied, shedding tears:  
You were born to me for a short life my child,  
as you say. . . .*

Likewise fraternal love:

*My three brothers born of our same mother  
So cherished. . . .*

Married love, condemned to misfortune, is of a surprising purity. The husband, in evoking the humiliations of slavery which await his beloved wife, omits to mention that one of which only to think would be to forecast memories that would soil their tenderness. Nothing could be more simple than the words spoken by his wife to the husband who goes to his death:

*. . . It were better for me  
If I lose you, to be under the ground, I shall have  
No other refuge, when you have met your fate,  
Nothing but griefs.*

No less moving are the words addressed to the dead husband.

*You are dead before your time, my husband; so  
young, and I your widow  
Am left alone in the house; with our child still  
very little,  
Whom we bore, you and I, the ill-fated. And I  
doubt  
He will ever grow up. . . .  
For you did not die in bed stretching  
your hands to me,*



*Nor spoke one wise word that for always  
I might think on, while shedding tears day  
and night.*

The most beautiful friendship, that between companions in combat, is the final theme of the epic.

*... But Achilles  
Wept, dreaming of his much-loved companion;  
and sleep  
That overcomes all, would not take him; as he  
turned himself from side to side.*

But the triumph, the purest love of all, the supreme grace of all wars, is that friendship which mounts up to brim the hearts of mortal enemies. This quells the hunger to avenge the death of a son, of a friend. It spans, by an even greater miracle, the breach that lies between the benefactor and the suppliant, between the victor and the vanquished.

*But when the desire to drink and to eat was appeased,  
Then Dardanian Priam began to admire Achilles;  
How mighty and handsome he was; he had the look  
of a god.  
And Dardanian Priam, in turn, was admired by  
Achilles,  
Who gazed at his beautiful visage and drank in  
his words.  
And when both were assuaged by their contemplation  
of each other. . . .*

Such moments of grace are rare in the *Iliad*, but they suffice to make what violence kills, and shall kill, felt with extremest regret. And yet such an accumulation of violences would be cold without that accent of incurable bitterness which continually makes itself felt, although often indicated only by a single word, sometimes only by a play of verse, by a run over line. It is this which makes the *Iliad* a unique poem, this bitterness, issuing from its tenderness, and which extends, as the light of the sun, equally over all men. Never



does the tone of the poem cease to be impregnated by this bitterness, nor does it ever descend to the level of a complaint. Justice and love, for which there can hardly be a place in this picture of extremes and unjust violence, yet shed their light over the whole without ever being discerned otherwise than by the accent. Nothing precious is despised, whether or not destined to perish. The destitution and misery of all men is shown without dissimulation or disdain, no man is held either above or below the common level of all men, and whatever is destroyed is regretted. The victors and the vanquished are shown equally near to us, in an equal perspective, and seem, by that token, to be the fellows as well of the poet as of the auditors. If there is a difference it is the affliction of the enemy which is perhaps the more keenly felt.

*Thus he fell there, overcome by a sleep of bronze,  
The ill-fated, far from his wife, while defending  
his people. . . .*

What a tone to use in evoking the fate of the adolescent whom Achilles sold at Lemnos!

*Eleven days his heart rejoiced among those he loved  
Returning from Lemnos; on the twelfth once again  
God delivered him into the hands of Achilles,  
who would  
Send him to Hades, although against his will.*

And the fate of Euphorbus, he who saw but a single day of war:

*Blood drenches his hair, hair like that of the Graces.*

When Hector is mourned:

*. . . the guardian of chaste wives and of little  
children.*

These words are enough to conjure up a picture of chastity ruined by violence and of little children taken by force of arms. The fountain at the gates of Troy becomes an object of piercing



nostalgia when the condemned Hector passes it running to save his life.

*There were the wide wash basins, quite near,  
Beautiful, all of stone, where splendid vestments  
Were washed by the wives of Troy and by its most  
beautiful daughters,  
Formerly, during the peace, before the advent of  
the Achaeans.  
It was this way that they ran, fleeing, and the  
other following behind.*

The whole *Iliad* is overshadowed by the greatest of griefs that can come among men; the destruction of a city. This affliction could not appear more rending if the poet had been born in Troy. Nor is there a difference in tone in those passages which tell of the Achaeans dying far from home.

The brief evocations of the world of peace are painful just because that life, the life of the living, appears so full and calm:

*As soon as it was dawn and the sun rose,  
From both sides blows were exchanged and men fell.  
But at the very hour when the woodsman goes home to  
prepare his meal  
From the valleys and hills, when his arms are wearied  
From cutting down great trees,  
and a great longing floods his heart,  
And a hunger for sweet food gnaws at his entrails,  
At that hour, by their valour, the Danaans broke  
the front.*

All that has no part in war, all that war destroys or threatens, the *Iliad* envelops in poetry; this it never does for the facts of war. The passage from life to death is veiled by not the least reticence.

*Then his teeth were knocked out; from both sides  
Blood came to his eyes; blood that from his lips  
and nostrils*



*He vomited, open-mouthed; death wrapped him in  
its black cloud.*

The cold brutality of the facts of war is in no way disguised just because neither victors nor vanquished are either admired, despised or hated. Destiny and the gods almost always decide the changing fate of the combatants. Within the limits assigned by fate, the gods have sovereign power to mete out victory and defeat; it is always they who provoke the madness, the treachery, by which, each time, peace is inhibited. War is their particular province and their only motives are caprice and malice. As for the warriors themselves, the similes which make them appear, victors or vanquished, as beasts or things, they cannot make us feel either admiration or disdain, but only sorrow that men could be thus transformed.

The extraordinary equity which inspires the *Iliad* may have had other examples unknown to us; it has had no imitators. One is hardly made to feel that the poet is a Greek and not a Trojan. The tone of the poem seems to carry direct proof of the origin of the most ancient passages; although history may never give us light thereon. If one believes with Thucydides that eighty years after the destruction of Troy the Achaeans in turn were conquered, one may wonder whether these songs, in which iron is so rarely mentioned, may not be the chants of a conquered people of whom perhaps some were exiled. Obligated to live and to die 'very far from the homeland' like the Greeks before Troy, having, like the Trojans, lost their cities, they saw their likeness in the victors, who were their fathers, and also in the vanquished, whose sufferings resembled their own. Thus the truth of this war, though still recent, could appear to them as in the perspective of years, unveiled either by the intoxication of pride or of humiliation. They could picture it to themselves at once as the fallen and as the conquerors, and thus understand what never the defeated nor the victorious have ever understood, being blinded by one or the other state. This is only a dream; one can hardly do more than dream about a time so far distant.

By whatever means, this poem is a miraculous object. The bitterness of it is spent upon the only true cause of bitterness: the subordi-



nation of the human soul to might, which is, be it finally said, to matter. That subordination is the same for all mortals, although there is a difference according to the soul's degree of virtue, according to the way in which each soul endures it. No one in the *Iliad* is spared, just as no one on earth escapes it. None of those who succumb to it is for that reason despised. Whatever, in the secret soul and in human relations, can escape the empire of might, is loved, but painfully loved because of the danger of destruction that continually hangs over it. Such is the spirit of the only veritable epic of the western world. The *Odyssey* seems to be no more than an excellent imitation, now of the *Iliad*, then of some oriental poem. The *Aeneid* is an imitation which, for all its brilliance is marred by coldness, pomposity and bad taste. The *chansons de geste* were not able to attain grandeur for want of a sense of equity. In the *Chanson de Roland* the death of an enemy is not felt by the author and the reader in the same way as the death of Roland.

Attic tragedy, at least that of Aeschylus and of Sophocles, is the true continuation of the epic. Over this the idea of justice sheds its light without ever intervening; might appears here in all its rigidity and coldness, always accompanied by its fatal results from which neither he who uses it, nor he who suffers it, can escape. Here the humiliation of a soul that is subject to constraint is neither disguised, nor veiled by a facile piety; neither is it an object of disdain. More than one being, wounded by the degradation of affliction, is here held up to be admired. The Gospels are the last and most marvellous expression of Greek genius, as the *Iliad* is its first expression. The spirit of Greece makes itself felt here not only by the fact of commanding us to seek to the exclusion of every other good 'the kingdom of God and his righteousness' but also by its revelation of human misery, and by revealing that misery in the person of a divine being who is at the same time human. The accounts of the Passion show that a divine spirit united to the flesh is altered by affliction, trembles before suffering and death, feels himself, at the moment of deepest agony, separated from men and from God. The sense of human misery gives these accounts of the Passion that accent of simplicity which is the stamp of Greek genius. And it is this same



sense which constitutes the great worth of Attic tragedy and of the *Iliad*. Certain expressions in the Gospels have a strangely familiar ring, reminiscent of the epic. The adolescent Trojan, sent against his will to Hades, reminds one of Christ when he told St. Peter: 'Another shall gird thee and carry thee where thou wouldst not.' This accent is inseparable from the idea which inspired the Gospels; for the understanding of human suffering is dependent upon justice, and love is its condition. Whoever does not know just how far necessity and a fickle fortune hold the human soul under their domination cannot treat as his equals, nor love as himself, those whom chance has separated from him by an abyss. The diversity of the limitations to which men are subject creates the illusion that there are different species among them which cannot communicate with one another. Only he who knows the empire of might and knows how not to respect it is capable of love and justice.

The relations between the human soul and destiny; to what extent each soul may mould its own fate; what part in any and every soul is transformed by a pitiless necessity, by the caprice of variable fortune; what part of the soul, by means of virtue and grace, may remain whole—all these are a subject in which deception is easy and tempting. Pride, humiliation, hate, disdain, indifference, the wish to forget or to ignore—all these contribute toward that temptation. Particularly rare is a true expression of misfortune: in painting it one almost always affects to believe, first, that degradation is the innate vocation of the unfortunate; second, that a soul may suffer affliction without being marked by it, without changing all consciousness in a particular manner which belongs to itself alone. For the most part the Greeks had such strength of soul as preserved them from self-deception. For this they were recompensed by knowing in all things how to attain the highest degree of lucidity, of purity and of simplicity. But the spirit which is transmitted from the *Iliad* to the Gospels, passed on by the philosophers and tragic poets, has hardly gone beyond the limits of Greek civilization. Of that civilization, since the destruction of Greece, only reflections are left.

The Romans and the Hebrews both believed themselves exempt from the common misery of man, the Romans by being chosen by



destiny to be the rulers of the world, the Hebrews by the favour of their God, and to the exact extent in which they obeyed Him. The Romans despised foreigners, enemies, the vanquished, their subjects, their slaves; neither have they any epics or tragedies. The Hebrews saw a trace of sin in all affliction and therefore a legitimate motive for despising it. They saw their vanquished as an abomination in God's sight and therefore condemned to expiate their crimes. Thus cruelty was sanctioned and even inevitable. Nor does any text of the Old Testament sound a note comparable to that of the Greek epic, unless perhaps certain parts of the poem of Job. The Romans and Hebrews have been admired, read, imitated in actions and in words, cited every time there was need to justify a crime, throughout twenty centuries of Christianity.

Furthermore, the spirit of the Gospels was not transmitted in all its purity to successive generations of Christians. From the earliest times it was believed to be a sign of grace when the martyrs joyfully endured suffering and death; as if the effects of grace could be realized more fully among men than in the Christ. Those who remember that even the incarnate God Himself could not look on the rigours of destiny without anguish, should understand that men can only appear to elevate themselves above human misery by disguising the rigours of destiny in their own eyes, by the help of illusion, of intoxication, or of fanaticism. Unless protected by an armour of lies, man cannot endure might without suffering a blow in the depth of his soul. Grace can prevent this blow from corrupting the soul, but cannot prevent its wound. For having too long forgotten this the Christian tradition has been able only very rarely to find that simplicity which makes each phrase of the accounts of the Passion so poignant.

Despite the brief intoxication caused, during the Renaissance, by the discovery of Greek letters, the Greek genius has not been revived in the course of twenty centuries. Something of it appears in Villon, Shakespeare, Cervantes, Molière, and once in Racine. In the *École des Femmes*, in *Phèdre*, human misery is revealed in its nakedness in connection with love. That was a strange century in which, contrary to what happened in the epic age, man's misery could only be revealed in love. The effects of might in war and in politics had

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always to be enveloped in glory. Doubtless one could add still other names. But nothing of all that the peoples of Europe have produced is worth the first known poem to have appeared among them. Perhaps they will rediscover that epic genius when they learn how to accept the fact that nothing is sheltered from fate, how never to admire might, or hate the enemy, or to despise sufferers. It is doubtful if this will happen soon.