SIMONE WEIL

THE ILIAD, OR THE POEM OF FORCE

The Iliad, or, The Poem of Force *was written in the summer and fall of 1940, after the fall of France. It may thus be read as an indirect commentary on that tragic event, which signalized the triumph of the most extreme modern expression of force. It was originally published, under the acrostical pseudonym "Emile Novis," in the December 1940 and January 1941 issues of the Marseilles literary monthly,* Cahiers du Sud. *The present translation is by Mary McCarthy. The quotations from Homer were first translated from the French manuscript by Miss McCarthy and then checked and revised by Dwight Macdonald in accordance with the Greek text. "The Iliad" appeared in the November 1945 issue of* Politics *and was later issued in pamphlet form.*

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The true hero, the true subject, the center of the *Iliad* is force. Force employed by man, force that enslaves man, force before which man's flesh shrinks away. In this work, at all times, the human spirit is shown as modified by its relations with force, as swept away, blinded by the very force it imagined it could handle, as deformed by the weight of the force it submits to. For those dreamers who considered that force, thanks to progress, would soon be a thing of the past, the *Iliad* could appear as an historical document; for others, whose powers of recognition are more acute and who perceive force, today as yesterday, at the very center of human history, the *Iliad* is the purest and the loveliest of mirrors.

To define force—it is that x that turns anybody who is subjected to it into a thing. Exercised to the limit, it turns man into a thing in the most literal sense: it makes a corpse out of him. Somebody was here, and the next minute there is nobody here at all; this is a spectacle the *Iliad* never wearies of showing us:

. . . the horses
Rattled the empty chariots through the files of battle,
Longing for their noble drivers. But they on the ground
Lay, dearer to the vultures than to their wives.

The hero becomes a *thing* dragged behind a charit in the dust:

All around, his black hair
Was spread; in the dust his whole head lay,
That once-charming head; now Zeus had let his enemies
Defile it on his native soil.

The bitterness of such a spectacle is offered us absolutely undiluted. No comforting fiction intervenes; no consoling prospect of immortality; and on the hero's head no washed-out halo of patriotism descends.

His soul, fleeing his limbs, passed to Hades,
Mourning its fate, forsaking its youth and its vigor.

Still more poignant—so painful is the contrast—is the sudden evocation, as quickly rubbed out, of another world: the far-away precarious, touching world of peace, of the family, the world in which each man counts more than anything else to those about him.

She ordered her bright-haired maids in the palace
To place on the fire a large tripod, preparing
A hot bath for Hector, returning from battle.

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Foolish woman! Already he lay, far from hot baths,
Slain by grey-eyed Athena, who guided Achilles' arm.

Far from hot baths he was indeed, poor man. And not he alone. Nearly all the *Iliad* takes place far from hot baths. Nearly all of human life, then and now, takes place far from hot baths.

Here we see force in its grossest and most summary form—the force that kills. How much more varied in its processes, how much more surprising in its effects is the other force, the force that does *not* kill, i.e., that does not kill just yet. It will surely kill, it will possibly kill, or perhaps it merely hangs, poised and ready, over the head of the creature it *can* kill, at any moment, which is to say at every moment. In whatever aspect, it effect is the same: it turns a man into a stone. From its first property (the ability to turn a human being into a thing by the simple method of killing him) flows another, quite prodigious too in its own way, the ability to turn a human being into a thing while he is still alive. He is alive; he has a soul; and yet—he is a thing. An extraordinary entity this—a thing that has a soul. And as for the soul, what an extraordinary house it finds itself in! Who can say what it costs it, moment by moment, to accommodate itself to this residence, how much writhing and bending, folding and pleating are required of it? It was not made to live inside a thing; if it does so, under pressure of necessity, there is not a single element of its nature to which violence is not done.

A man stands disarmed and naked with a weapon pointing at him; this person becomes a corpse before anybody or anything touches him. Just a minute ago, he was thinking, acting, hoping:

Motionless, he pondered. And the other drew near,
Terrified, anxious to touch his knees, hoping in his heart
To escape evil death and black destiny . . .
With one hand he clasped, suppliant, his knees,
While the other clung to the sharp spear, not letting go . . .

Soon, however, he grasps the fact that the weapon which is pointing at him will not be diverted; and now, still breathing, he is simply matter; still thinking, he can think no longer:

Thus spoke the brilliant son of Priam
In begging words. But he heard a harsh reply:
He spoke. And the other's knees and heart failed him.
Dropping his spear, he knelt down, holding out his arms.
Achilles, drawing his sharp sword, struck

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Through the neck and breastbone. The two-edged sword
Sunk home its full length. The other, face down,
Lay still, and the black blood ran out, wetting the ground.

If a stranger, completely disabled, disarmed, strengthless, throws himself on the mercy of a warrior, he is not, by this very act, condemned to death; but a moment of impatience on the warrior's part will suffice to relieve him of his life. In any case, his flesh has lost that very important property which in the laboratory distinguishes living flesh from dead—the galvanic response. If you give a frog's leg an electric shock, it twitches. If you confront a human being with the touch or sight of something horrible or terrifying, this bundle of muscles, nerves, and flesh likewise twitches. Alone of all living things, the suppliant we have just described neither quivers nor trembles. He has lost the right to do so. As his lips advance to touch the object that is for him of all things most charged with horror, they do not draw back on his teeth—they cannot:

No one saw great Priam enter. He stopped,
Clasped the knees of Achilles, kissed his hands,
Those terrible man-killing hands that had slaughtered so many of his sons.

The sight of a human being pushed to such an extreme of suffering chills us like the sight of a dead body:

As when harsh misfortune strikes a man if in his own country
He has killed a man, and arrives at last at somoene else's door,
The door of a rich man; a shudder seizes those who see him.
So Achilles shuddered to see divine Priam;
The others shuddered too, looking one at the other.

But this feeling lasts only a moment. Soon the very presence of the suffering creature is forgotten:

He spoke. The other, remembering his own father, longed to weep;
Taking the old man's arm, he pushed him away.
Both were remembering. Thinking of Hector, killer of men,
Priam wept, abased at the feet of Achilles.
But Achilles wept, now for his father,
Now for Patroclus. And their sobs resounded through the house.

It was not insensibility that made Achilles with a single movement of his hand push away the old man who had been clinging to his knees;

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Priam's words, recalling his own old father, had moved him to tears. It was merely a question of his being as free in his attitudes and movements as if, clasping his knees, there were not a suppliant but an inert object. Anybody who is in our vicinity exercises a certain power over us by his very presence, and a power that belongs to him alone, that is, the power of halting, repressing, modifying each movement that our body sketches out. If we step aside for a passer-by on the road, it is not the same thing as stepping aside to avoid a billboard; alone in our rooms, we get up, walk about, sit down again quite differently from the way we do when we have a visitor. But this indefinable influence that the presence of another human being has on us is not exercised by men whom a moment of impatience can deprive of life, who can die before even thought has a chance to pass sentence on them. In their presence, people move about as if they were not there; they, on their side, running the risk of being reduced to nothing in a single instant, imitate nothingness in their own persons. Pushed, they fall. Fallen, they lie where they are, unless chance gives somebody the idea of raising them up again. But supposing that at long last they have been picked up, honored with cordial remarks, they still do not venture to take this resurrection seriously; they dare not express a wish lest an irritated voice return them forever to silence:

He spoke; the old man trembled and obeyed.

At least a suppliant, once his prayer is answered, becomes a human being again, like everybody else. But there are other, more unfortunate creatures who have become things for the rest of their lives. Their days hold no pastimes, no free spaces, no room in them for any impulse of their own. It is not that their life is harder than other men's nor that they occupy a lower place in the social hierarchy; no, they are another human species, a compromise between a man and a corpse. The idea of a person's being a thing is a logical contradiction. Yet what is impossible in logic becomes true in life, and the contradiction lodged within the soul tears it to shreds. This thing is constantly aspiring to be a man or a woman, and never achieving it—here, surely, is death but death strung out over a whole lifetime; here, surely is life, but life that death congeals before abolishing.

This strange fate awaits the virgin, the priest's daughter:

I will not give her up. Sooner shall old age come upon her
In our house in Argos, far from her native land,
Tending the loom and sharing my bed.

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It awaits the young wife, the young mother, the prince's bride:

And perhaps one day, in Argos, you will weave cloth for another,
And the Messeian or Hyperian water you will fetch,
Much against your will, yielding to a harsh necessity.

It awaits the baby, heir to the royal scepter:

Soon they will be carried off in the hollow ships,
I with them. And you, my child, will either go with me,
To a land where you will work at wretched tasks,
Laboring for a pitiless master. . . .

In the mother's eyes, such a fate is, for her child, as terrible as death; the husband would rather die than see his wife reduced to it; all the plagues of heaven are invoked by the father against the army that subjects his daughter to it. Yet the victims themselves are beyond all this. Curses, feelings of rebellion, comparisons, reflections on the future and the past, are obliterated from the mind of the captive; and memory itself barely lingers on. Fidelity to his city and his dead is not the slave's privilege.

And what does it take to make the slave weep? The misfortune of his master, his oppressor, despoiler, pillager, of the man who laid waste his town and killed his dear ones under his very eyes. This man suffers or dies; *then* the slave's tears come. And really why not? This is for him the only occasion on which tears are permitted, are, indeed, required. A slave will always cry whenever he can do so with impunity—his situation keeps tears on tap for him.

She spoke, weeping, and the women groaned,
Using the pretext of Patroclus to bewail their own torments.

Since the slave has no license to express anything except what is pleasing to his master, it follows that the only emotion that can touch or enliven him a little, that can reach him in the desolation of his life, is the emotion of love for his master. There is no place else to send the gift of love; all other outlets are barred, just as, with the horse in harness, bit, shafts, reins bar every way but one. And if, by some miracle, in the slave's breast a hope is born, the hope of becoming, some day, through somebody's influence, *someone* once again, how far won't these captives go to show love and thankfulness, even though these emotions are addressed to the very men who should, considering the very recent past, still reek with horror for them:

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My husband, to whom my father and respected mother gave me,
I saw before the city transfixed by the sharp bronze.
My three brothers, children, with me, of a single mother,
So dear to me! They all met their fatal day.
But you did not allow me to weep, when swift Achilles
Slaughtered my husband and laid waste the city of Mynes.
You promised me that I would be taken by divine Achilles,
For his legitimate wife, that he would carry me away in his ships,
To Pythia, where our marriage would be celebrated among the Myrmidons,
So without respite I mourn for you, you who have always been gentle.

To lose more than the slave does is impossible, for he loses his whole inner life. A fragment of it he may get back if he sees the possibility of changing his fate, but this is his only hope. Such is the empire of force, as extensive as the empire of nature. Nature, too, when vital needs are at stake, can erase the whole inner life, even the grief of a mother:

But the thought of eating came to her, when she was tired of tears.

Force, in the hands of another, exercises over the soul the same tyranny that extreme hunger does; for it possesses, and *in perpetuo,* the power of life and death. Its rule, moreover, is as cold and hard as the rule of inert matter. The man who knows himself weaker than another is more alone in the heart of a city than a man lost in the desert.

Two casks are placed before Zeus's doorsill,
Containing the gifts he gives, the bad in one, the good in the other . . .
The man to whom he gives baneful gifts, he exposes to outrage;
A frightful need drives across the divine earth;
He is a wanderer, and gets no respect from gods or men.

Force is at pitiless to the man who possesses it, or thinks he does, as it is to its victims; the second it crushes, the first it intoxicates. The truth is, nobody really possesses it. The human race is not divided up, in the *Iliad,* into conquered persons, slaves, suppliants, on the one hand, and conquerors and chiefs on the other. In this poem there is not a single man who does not at one time or another have to bow his neck to force. The common soldier in the *Iliad* is free and has right to bear arms; nevertheless he is subject to the indignity of orders and abuse:

But whenever he came upon a commoner shouting out,
He struck him with his scepter and spoke sharply:

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"Good for nothing! Be still and listen to your betters,
You are weak and cowardly and unwarlike,
You count for nothing, neither in battle nor in council."

Thersites pays dear for the perfectly reasonable comments he makes, comments not at all different, moreover, from those made by Achilles:

He hit him with his scepter on back and shoulders,
So that he doubled over, and a great tear welled up,
And a bloody welt appeared on his back
Under the golden scepter. Frightened, he sat down,
Wiping away his tears, bewildered and in pain.
Troubled though they were, the others laughed long at him.

Achilles himself, that proud hero, the undefeated, is shown us at the outset of the poem, weeping with humiliation and helpless grief—the woman he wanted for his bride has been taken from under his nose, and he has not dared to oppose it:

. . . But Achilles
Weeping, sat apart from his companions,
By the white-capped waves, staring over the boundless ocean.

What has happened is that Agamemnon has deliberately humiliated Achilles, to show that he himself is the master:

. . . So you will learn
That I am greater than you, and anyone else will hesitate
To treat me as an equal and set himself against me.

But a few days pass and now the supreme commander is weeping in his turn. He must humble himself, he must plead, and have, moreover, the added misery of doing it all in vain.

In the same way, there is not a single one of the combatants who is spared the shameful experience of fear. The heroes quake like everybody else. It only needs a challenge from Hector to throw the whole Greek force into consternation—except for Achilles and his men, and they did not happen to be present:

He spoke and all grew still and held their peace,
Ashamed to refuse, afraid to accept.

But once Ajax comes forward and offers himself, fear quickly changes sides:

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A shudder of terror ran through the Trojans, making their limbs weak;
And Hector himself felt his heart leap in his breast.
But he no longer had the right to tremble, or to run away. . . .

Two days later, it is Ajax's turn to be terrified:

Zeus the father on high, makes fear rise in Ajax.
He stops, overcome, puts behind him his buckler made of seven hides,
Trembles, looks at the crowd around, like a wild beast. . . .

Even to Achilles the moment comes; he too must shake and stammer with fear, though it is a river that has this effect on him, not a man. But, with the exception of Achilles, every man in the *Ilaid* tastes a moment of defeat in battle. Victory is less a matter of valor than of blind destiny, which is symbolized in the poem by Zeus's golden scales:

Then Zeus the father took his golden scales,
In them he put the two fates of death that cuts down all men,
One for the Trojans, tamers of horses, one for the bronze-sheathed Greeks.
He seized the scales by the middle; it was the fatal day of Greece that sank.

By its very blindness, destiny establishes a kind of justice. Blind also is she who decrees to warriors punishment in kind. He that takes the sword, will perish by the sword. The *Iliad* formulated the principle long before the Gospels did, and in almost the same terms:

Ares is just, and kills those who kill.

Perhaps all men, by the very act of being born, are destined to suffer violence; yet this is a truth to which circumstance shuts men's eyes. The strong are, as a matter of fact, never absolutely strong, nor are the weak absolutely weak, but neither is aware of this. They have in common a refusal to believe that they both belong to the same species: the weak see no relation between themselves and the strong, and vice versa. The man who is the possessor of force seems to walk through a non-resistant element; in the human substance that surrounds him nothing has the power to interpose, between the impulse and the act, the tiny interval that is reflection. Where there is no room for reflection, there is none either for justice or prudence. Hence we see men in arms behaving harshly and madly. We see their sword bury itself in the breast of a

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disarmed enemy who is in the very act of pleading at their knees. We see them triumph over a dying man by describing to him the outrages his corpse will endure. We see Achilles cut the throats of twelve Trojan boys on the funeral pyre of Patroclus as naturally as we cut flowers for a grave. These men, wielding power, have no suspicion of the fact that the consequences of their deeds will at length come home to them—they too will bow the neck in their turn. If you can make an old man fall silent, tremble, obey, with a single word of your own, why should it occur to you that the curses of this old man, who is after all a priest, will have their own importance in the gods' eyes? Why should you refrain from taking Achilles' girl away from him if you know that neither he nor she can do anything but obey you? Achilles rejoices over the sight of the Greeks fleeing in misery and confusion. What could possibly suggest to him that this rout, which will last exactly as long as he wants it to and end when his mood indicates it, that this very rout will be the cause of his friend's death, and, for that matter, of his own? Thus it happens that those who have force on loan from fate count on it too much and are destroyed.

But at the time their own destruction seems impossible to them. For they do not see that the force in their possession is only a limited quantity; nor do they see their relations with other human beings as a kind of balance between unequal amounts of force. Since other people do not impose on their movements that halt, that interval of hesitation, wherein lies all our consideration for our brothers in humanity, they conclude that destiny has given complete license to them, and none at all to their inferiors. And at this point they exceed the measure of the force that is actually at their disposal. Inevitably they exceed it, since they are not aware that it is limited. And now we see them committed irretrievably to chance; suddenly things cease to obey them. Sometimes chance is kind to them, sometimes cruel. But in any case there they are, exposed, open to misfortune; gone is the armor of power that formerly protected their naked souls; nothing, no shield, stands between them and tears.

This retribution, which has a geometrical rigor, which operates automatically to penalize the abuse of force, was the main subject of Greek thought. It is the soul of the epic. Under the name of Nemesis, it functions as the mainspring of Aeschylus's tragedies. To the Pythagoreans, to Socrates and Plato, it was the jumping-off point of speculation upon the nature of man and the universe. Wherever Hellenism has penetrated, we find the idea of its familiar. In Oriental countries which are steeped in Buddhism, it is perhaps this Greek idea that has lived on

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under the name of Kharma. The Occident, however, has lost it, and no longer even has a word to express it in any of its languages: conceptions of limit, measure, equilibrium, which ought to determine the conduct of life are, in the West, restricted to a servile function in the vocabulary of technics. We are only geometricians of matter; the Greeks were, first of all, geometricians in their apprenticeship to virtue.

The progress of the war in the *Iliad* is simply a continual game of seesaw. The victor of the moment feels himself invincible, even though, only a few hours before, he may have experienced defeat; he forgets to treat victory as a transitory thing. At the end of the first day of combat described in the *Iliad,* the victorious Greeks were in a position to obtain the object of all their efforts, i.e., Helen and her riches—assuming of course as Homer did, that the Greeks had reason to believe that Helen was in Troy. Actually, the Egyptian priests, who ought to have known, affirmed later on to Herodotus that she was in Egypt. In any case, that evening the Greeks are no longer interested in her or her possessions:

"For the present, let us not accept the riches of Paris;
Nor Helen; everybody sees, even the most ignorant,
That Troy stands on the verge of ruin."
He spoke, and all the Achaeans acclaimed him.

What they want is, in fact, everything. For booty, all the riches of Troy; for their bonfires, all the palaces, temples, houses; for slaves, all the women and children; for corpses, all the men. They forget one detail, that *everything* is not within their power, for they are not in Troy. Perhaps they will be there tomorrow; perhaps not. Hector, the same day, makes the same mistake:

For I know well in my entrails and in my hearts,
A day will come when Holy Troy will perish,
And Priam, and the nation of Priam of the good lance.
But I think less of the grief that is in store for the Trojans,
And of Hecuba herself, and of Priam the king,
And of my brothers, so numerous and so brave,
Who will fall in the dust under the blows of the enemy,
Than of you that day when a Greek in his bronze breastplate
Will drag you away weeping and deprive you of your liberty.

But as for me, may I be dead, and may the earth have covered me
Before I hear you cry out or see you dragged away!

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At this moment what would he not give to turn aside those horrors which he believes to be inevitable? But at this moment nothing he *could* give would be of any use. The next day but one, however, the Greeks have run away miserably, and Agamemnon himself is in favor of putting to the sea again. And now Hector, by making a very few concessions, could readily secure the enemy's departure; yet now he is even unwilling to let them go empty-handed:

Set fires everywhere and let the brightness mount the skies
Lest in the night the long-haired Greeks,
Escaping, sail over the broad back of ocean . . .
Let each of them take home a wound to heal
. . . thus others will fear
To bring dolorous war to the Trojans, tamers of horses.

His wish is granted; the Greeks stay; and the next day they reduce Hecto and his men to a pitiable condition:

As for them—they fled across the plain like cattle
Whom a lion hunts before him in the dark midnight . . .
Thus the mighty Agamemnon, son of Aterus, pursued them,
Steadily killing the hindmost; and still they fled.

In the course of the afternoon, Hector regains the ascendancy, withdraws again, then puts the Greeks to flight, then is repulsed by Patroclus, who has come in with his fresh troops. Patroclus, pressing his advantage, ends by finding himself exposed, wounded and without armor, to the sword of Hector. And finally that evening the victorious Hector hears the prudent counsel of Polydamas and repudiates it sharply:

Now that wily Kronos's son has given me
Glory at the ships; now that I have driven the Greeks to the sea,
Do not offer, fool, such counsels to the people.
No Trojan will listen to you; nor would I permt it . . .
So Hector spoke, and the Trojans acclaimed him. . . .

The next day Hector is lost. Achilles has harried him across the field and is about to kill him. He has always been the stronger of the two in combat; how much the more so now, after several weeks of rest, ardent for vengeance and victory, against an exhausted enemy? And Hector stands alone, before the walls of Troy, absolutely alone, alone to wait for death and to steady his soul to face it:

Alas, were I to slip through the gate, behind the rampart,

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Polydamas at once would heap dishonor on me . . .
And now that through my recklessness I have destroyed my people,
I fear the Trojans and the long-robed Trojan women,
I fear to hear from some one far less brave than I:
"Hector, trusting his own strength too far, has ruined his people." . . .
Suppose I were to down my bossed shield,
My massive helmet, and, leaning my spear against the wall,
Should go to meet renowned Achilles? . . .
But why spin out these fancies? Why such dreams?
I would not reach him, nor would he pity me,
Or respect me. He would kill me like a woman
If I came naked thus . . .

Not a jot of the grief and ignominy that fall to the unfortunate is Hector spared. Alone, stripped of the prestige of force, he discovers that the courage that kept him from taking to the shelter of the walls is not enough to save him from flight:

Seeing him, Hector began to tremble. He had not the heart
To stay . . .
. . . It is not for a ewe nor the skin of an ox,
That they are striving, not these ordinary rewards of the race;
It is for a life that they run, the life of Hector, tamer of horses.

Wounded to death, he enhances his conqueror's triumph by vain supplications:

I implore you, by your soul, by your knees,
by your parents. . . .

But the auditors of the *Iliad* knew that the death of Hector would be but a brief joy to Achilles, and the death of Achilles but a brief joy to the Trojans, and the destruction of Troy but a brief joy to the Achaeans.

Thus violence obliterates anybody who feels its touch. It comes to seem just as external to its employer as to its victim. And from this springs the idea of a destiny before which executioner and victim stand equally innocent, before which conquered and conqueror are brothers in the same distress. The conquered brings misfortune to the conqueror, and vice versa:

A single son, short-lived, was born to him.
Neglected by me, he grows old—for far from home
I camp before Troy, injuring you and your sons.

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A moderate use of force, which alone would enable man to escape being enmeshed in its machinery, would require superhuman virtue, which is as rare as dignity in weakness. Moreover, moderation itself is not without its perils, since prestige, from which force derives at least three quarters of its strength, rests principally upon that marvelous indifference that the strong feel toward the weak, an indifference so contagious that it infects the very people who are the objects of it. Yet ordinarily excess is not arrived at through prudence or politic considerations. On the contrary, man dashes to it as to an irresistible temptation. The voice of reason is occasionally heard in the mouths of the characters in the *Iliad*. Thersites' speeches are reasonable to the highest degree; so are the speeches of the angry Achilles:

Nothing is worth my life, not all the goods
They say the well-built city of Ilium contains. . . .
A man can capture steers and fatted sheep
But, once gone, the soul cannot be captured back.

But words of reason drop into the void. If they come from an inferior, he is punished and shuts up; if from a chief, his actions betray them. And failing everything else, there is always a god handy to advise him to be unreasonable. In the end, the very idea of wanting to escape the role fate has allotted one—the business of killing and dying—disappears from the mind:

We to whom Zeus
Has assigned suffering, from the youth to old age,
Suffering in grievous wars, till we perish to the last man.

Already these warriors, like Craonne's so much later, felt themselves to be "condemned men."

It was the simplest trap that pitched them into this situation. At the outset, at the embarkation, their hearts are light, as hearts always are if you have a large force on your side and nothing but space to oppose you. Their weapons are in their hands; the enemy is absent. Unless your spirit has been conquered in advance by the reputation of the enemy, you always feel yourself to be much stronger than anybody who is not there. An absent man does not impose the yoke of necessity. To the spirits of those embarking no necessity yet presents itself; consequently they go off as though to a game, as though on holiday from the confinement of daily life.

Where have they gone, those braggadocio boasts

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We proudly flung upon the air at Lemnos,
Stuffing ourselves with flesh of horned steers,
Drinking from cups brimming over with wine?
As for Trojans—a hundred or two each man of us
Could handle in battle. And now one is too much for us.

But the first contact of war does not immediately destroy the illusion that war is a game. War's necessity is terrible, altogether different in kind from the necessity of peace. So terrible is it that the human spirit will not submit to it so long as it can possibly escape; and whenever it can escape it takes refuge in long days empty of necessity, days of play, of revery, days arbitrary and unreal. Danger then becomes an abstraction; the lives you destroy are like toys broken by a child, and quite as incapable of feeling; heroism is but a theatrical gesture and smirched with boastfulness. This becomes doubly true if a momentary access of vitality comes to reinforce the divine hand that wards off defeat and death. Then war is easy and basely, coarsely loved.

But with the majority of the combatants this state of mind does not persist. Soon there comes a day when fear, or defeat, or the death of beloved comrades touches the warrior's spirit, and it crumbles in the hand of necessity. At that moment war is no more a game or a dream; now at last the warrior cannot doubt the reality of its existence. And this reality, which he perceives, is hard, much too hard to be borne, for it enfolds death. Once you acknowledge death to be a practical possibility, the thought of it becomes unendurable, except in flashes. True enough, all men are fated to die; true enough also, a soldier may grow old in battles; yet for those whose spirits have bent under the yoke of war, the relation between death and the future is different than for other men. For other men death appears as a limit set in advance on the future; for the soldier death *is* the future, the future his profession assigns him. Yet the idea of man's having death for a future is abhorent to nature. Once the experience of war makes visible the possibility of death that lie locked up in each moment, our thoughts cannot travel from one day to the next without meeting death's face. The mind is then strung up to a pitch it can stand for only a short time; but each new dawn reintroduces the same necessity; and days piled on days make years. On each one of these days the soul suffers violence. Regularly, every morning, the soul castrates itself of aspiration, for thought cannot journey through time without meeting death on the way. Thus war effaces all conceptions of purpose or goal, including even its own "war aims." It effaces the very notion of war's being brought to an end. To

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be outside a situation so violent as this is to find it inconceivable; to be inside it is to be unable to conceive its end. Consequently, nobody does anything to bring this end about. In the presence of an armed enemy, what hand can relinquish its weapon? The mind ought to find a way out, but the mind has lost all capacity to so much as look outward. The mind is completely absorbed in doing itself violence. Always in human life, whether war or slavery is in question, intolerable sufferings continue, as it were, by the force of their own specific gravity, and so look to the outsider as though they were easy to bear; actually, they continue because they have deprived the sufferer of the resources which might serve to extricate him.

Nevertheless, the soul that is enslaved to war cries out for deliverance, but deliverance itself appears to it in an extreme and tragic aspect, the aspect of destruction. Any other solution, more moderate, more reasonable in character, would expose the mind to suffering so naked, so violent that it could not be borne, even as memory. Terror, grief, exhaustion, slaughter, the annihilation of comrades—it is credible that these things should not continually tear at the soul, if the intoxication of force had not intervened to drown them? The idea that an unlimited effort should bring in only a limited profit or no profit at all is terribly painful.

What? Will we let Priam and the Trojans boast
Of Argive Helen, she for whom so many Greeks
Died before Troy, far from their native land?
What? Do you want us to leave the city, wide-streeted Troy,
Standing, when we have suffered so much for it?

But actually what is Helen to Ulysses? What indeed is Troy, full of riches that will not compensate him for Ithaca's ruin? For the Greeks, Troy and Helen are in reality mere sources of blood and tears; to master them is to master frightful memories. If the existence of an enemy has made a soul destroy in itself the thing nature put there, then the only remedy the soul can imagine is the destruction of the enemy. At the same time the death of dearly loved comrades arouses a spirit of somber emulation, a rivalry in death:

May I die, then, at once! Since fate has not let me
Protect my dead friend, who far from home
Perished, longing for me to defend him from death.
So now I go to seek the murderer of my friend,
Hector. And death shall I find at the moment
Zeus will it—Zeus and the other immortal.

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It is the same despair that drives him on toward death, on the one hand, and slaughter on the other:

I know it well, my fate is to perish here,
Far from father and dearly loved mother; but meanwhile
I shall not stop till the Trojans have had their fill of war.

The man possessed by this twofold need for death belongs, so long as he has not become something still different, to a different race from the race of the living.

What echo can the timid hopes of life strike in such a heart? How can it hear the defeated begging for another sight of the light of day? The threatened life has already been relieved of nearly all its consequence by a single, simple distinction: it is now unarmed; its adversary possesses a weapon. Furthermore, how can a man who has rooted out of himself the notion that the light of day is sweet to the eyes respect such a notion when it makes its appearance in some futile and humble lament?

I clasp tight your knees, Achilles. Have a thought, have pity for me.
I stand here, O son of Zeus, a suppliant, to be respected.
In your house it was I first tasted Demeter's bread,
That day in my well-pruned vineyard you caught me
And sold me, sending me far from father and friends,
To holy Lemnos; a hundred oxen was my price.
And now I will pay you three hundred for ransom.
This dawn is for me my twelfth day in Troy,
After so many sorrows. See me here, in your hands,
Through some evil fate. Zeus surely must hate me
Who again puts me into your hands. Alas, my poor mother Laothoe,
Daughter of the old man, Altes—a short-lived son you have borne.

What a reception this feeble hope gets!

Come, friend, you too must die. Why make a fuss about it?
Patroclus, he too has died—a far better man than you are.
Don't you see how handsome I am, how mighty?
A noble father begat me, and I have a goddess for mother.
Yet even I, like you, must some day encounter my fate,
Whether the hour strikes at noon, or evening, or sunrise,
The hour that comes when some arms-bearing warrior will kill me.

To respect life in somebody else when you have had to castrate your-

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self of all yearning for it demands a truly heart-breaking exertion of the powers of generosity. It is impossible to imagine any of Homer's warriors being capable of such an exertion, unless it is that warrior who dwells, in a peculiar way, at the very center of the poem—I mean Patroclus, who "knew how to be sweet to everybody," and who throughout the *Iliad* commits no cruel or brutal act. But then how many men do we know, in several thousand years of human history, who would have displayed such god-like generosity? Two or three?—even this is doubtful. Lacking this generosity, the conquering soldier is like a scourge of nature. Possessed by war, he, like the slave, becomes a thing, though his manner of doing so is different—over him too, words are as powerless as over matter itself. And both, at the touch of force, experience its inevitable effects: they become deaf and dumb.

Such is the nature of force. Its power of converting a man into a thing is a double one, and in its application double-edged. To the same degree, though in different fashions, those who use it and those who endure it are turned to stone. This property of force achieves its maximum effectiveness during the clash of arms, in battle, when the tide of the day has turned, and everything is rushing toward a decision. It is not the planning man, the man of strategy, the man acting on the resolution taken, who wins or loses a battle; battles are fought and decided by men deprived of these faculties, men who have undergone a transformation, who have dropped either to the level of inert matter, which is pure passivity, or to the level of blind force, which is pure momentum. Here in lies the last secret of war, a secret revealed by the *Iliad* in its similes, which liken the warriors either to fire, flood, wind, wild beasts, or God knows what blind cause of disaster, or else to frightened animals, trees, water, sand, to anything in nature that is set into motion by the violence of external forces. Greeks and Trojans, from one day to the next, sometimes even from one hour to the next, experience, turn and turn about, one or the other of these transmutations:

As when a lion, murderous, springs among the cattle
Which by thousands are grazing over some vast marshy field. . . .
And their flanks heave with terror; even so the Achaians
Scattered in panic before Hector and Zeus, the great father.

As when a ravening fire breaks out deep in a bushy wood
And the wheeling wind scatters sparks far and wide,
And trees, root and branch, topple over in flames;

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So Atreus' son, Agamemnon, roared through the ranks
Of the Trojans in flight. . . .

The art of war is simply the art of producing such transformations, and its equipment, its processes, even the casualties it inflicts on the enemy, are only means directed toward this end—its true object is the warrior's soul. Yet these transformations are always a mystery; the gods are their authors, the gods who kindle men's imagination. But however caused, this petrifactive quality of force, two-fold always, is essential to its nature; and a soul which has entered the province of force will not escape this except by a miracle. Such miracles are rare and of brief duration.

The wantonness of the conqueror that knows no respect for any creature or thing that is at its mercy or is imagined to be so, the despair of the soldier that drives him on to destruction, the obliteration of the slave or the conquered man, the wholesale slaughter—all these elements combine in the *Iliad* to make a picture of uniform horror, of which force is the sole hero. A monotonous desolation would result were it not for those few luminous moments, scattered here and there throughout the poem, those brief, celestial moments in which man possesses his soul. The soul that awakes then, to live for an instant only and be lost almost at once in force's vast kingdom, awakes pure and whole; it contains no ambiguities, nothing complicated or turbid; it has no room for anything but courage and love. Sometimes it is in the course of inner deliberations that a man finds his soul: he meets it, like Hector before Troy, as he tries to face destiny on his own terms, without the help of gods or men. At other times, it is in a moment of love that men discover their souls—and there is hardly any form of pure love known to humanity of which the *Iliad* does not treat. The tradition of hospitality persists, even through several generations, to dispel the blindness of combat.

Thus I am for you a beloved guest in the breast of Argos . . .
Let us turn our lances away from each other, even in battle.

The love of the son for the parents, of father for son, of mother for son, is continually described, in a manner as touching as it is curt:

Thetis answered, shedding tears,
"You were born to me for a short life, my child, as you say . . ."

Even brotherly love:

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My three brothers whom the same mother bore for me,
So dear. . . .

Conjugal love, condemned to sorrow, is of an astonishing purity. Imaging the humiliations of slavery which await a beloved wife, the husband passes over the one indignity which even in anticipation would stain their tenderness. What could be simpler than the words spoken by his wife to the man about to die?

. . . Better for me
Losing you, to go under the earth. No other comfort
Will remain, when you have encountered your death-heavy fate,
Only grief, only sorrow. . . .

Not less touching are the words expressed to a dead husband:

Dear husband, you died young, and left me your widow
Alone in the palace. Our child is still tiny,
The child you and I, crossed by fate, had together.
I think he will never grow up . . .
For not in your bed did you die, holding my hand
And speaking to me prudent words which forever
Night and day, as I weep, might live in my memory.

The most beautiful friendship of all, the friendship between comrades-at-arms, is the final theme of The Epic:

. . . But Achilles
Wept, dreaming of the beloved comrade; sleep, all-prevailing,
Would not take him; he turned over again and again.

But the purest triumph of love, the crowning grace of war, is the friendship that floods the hearts of mortal enemies. Before it a murdered son or a murdered friend no longer cries out for vengeance. Before it—even more miraculous—the distance between benfactor and suppliant, between victor and vanquished, shrinks to nothing:

But when thirst and hunger had been appeased,
Then Dardanian Priam fell to admiring Achilles.
How tall he was, and handsome; he had the face of a god;
And in his turn Dardanian Priam was admired by Achilles,
Who watched his handsome face and listened to his words.
And when they were satisfied with contemplation of each other . . .

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These moments of grace are rare in the *Iliad,* but they are enough to make us feel with sharp regret what it is that violence has killed and will kill again.

However, such a heaping-up of violent deeds would have a frigid effect, were it not for the note of incurable bitterness that continually makes itself heard, though often only a single word marks its presence, often a mere stroke of the verse, or a run-on line. It is in this that the Iliad is absolutely unique, in this bitterness that proceeds from tenderness and that spreads over the whole human race, impartial as sunlight. Never does the tone lose its coloring of bitterness; yet never does the bitterness drop into lamentation. Justice and love, which have hardly any place in this study of extremes and of unjust acts of violence, nevertheless bathe the work in their light without ever becoming noticeable themselves, except as a kind of accent. Nothing precious is scorned, whether or not death is its destiny; everyone's unhappiness is laid bare without dissimulation or disdain; no man is set above or below the condition common to all men; whatever is destroyed is regretted. Victors and vanquished are brought equally near us; under the same head, both are seen as counterparts of the poet, and the listener as well. If there is any difference, it is that the enemy's misfortunes are possibly more sharply felt.

So he fell there, put to sleep in the sleep of bronze,
Unhappy man, far from his wife, defending his own people. . . .

And what accents echo the fate of the lad Achilles sold at Lemnos!

Eleven days he rejoiced his heart among those he loved,
Returning from Lemnos; the twelfth day, once more,
God delivered him into the hands of Achilles,
To him who had to send him, unwilling, to Hades.

And the fate of Euphorbus, who saw only a single day of war,

Blood soaked his hair, the hair like to the Graces' . . .

When Hector is lamented:

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

In these few words, chastity appears, dirtied by force, and childhood, delivered to the sword. The fountain at the gates of Troy becomes an object of poignant nostalgia when Hector runs by, seeking to elude his doom:

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Close by there stood the great stone tanks,
Handsomely built, where silk-greaming garments
Were washed clean by Troy's lovely daughters and housewives
In the old days of peace, long ago, when the Greeks had not come.
Past these did they run their race, pursued and pursuer.

The whole of the *Iliad* lies under the shadow of the greatest calamity the human race can experience—the destruction of a city. This calamity could not tear more at the heart had the poet been born in Troy. But the tone is not different when the Achaeans are dying, far from home.

Insofar as this other life, the life of the living, seems calm and full, the brief evocations of the world of peace are felt as pain:

With the break of dawn and the rising of the day,
On both sides arrows flew, men fell.
But at the very hour that the woodcutter goes home to fix his meal
In the mountain valleys when his arms have had enough
Of hacking great trees, and disgust rises in his heart,
And the desire for sweet food seizes his entrails,
At that hour, by their valor, the Danaans broke the front.

Whatever is not war, whatever war destroys or threatens, the *Iliad* wraps in poetry; the realities of war, never. No reticence veils the step from life to death:

Then his teeth flew out; from two sides,
Blood came to his eyes; the blood that from lips and nostrile
He was spilling, open-mouthed; death enveloped him in its black cloud.

The cold brutality of the deeds of war is left undisguised; neither victors nor vanquished are admired, scorned, or hated. Almost always, fate and the gods decide the changing lot of battle. Within the limits fixed by fate, the gods determine with sovereign authority victory and defeat. It is always they who provoke those fits of madness, those treacheries, which are forever blocking peace; war is their true business; their only motives, caprice and malice. As for the warriors, victors or vanquished, those comparisons which liken them to beasts or things can inspire neither admiration nor contempt, but only regret that men are capable of being so transformed.

There may be, unknown to us, other expressions of the extraordinary sense of equity which breathes through the *Iliad;* certainly it has not been imitated. One is barely aware that the poet is a Greek and not a

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Trojan. The tone of the poem furnishes a direct clue to the origin of its oldest portions; history perhaps will never be able to tell us more. If one believes with Thucydides that eighty years after the fall of Troy, the Achaeans in their turn were conquered, one may ask whether these songs, with their rare references to iron, are not the songs of a conquered people, of whom a few went into exile. Obliged to live and die, "very far from the homeland," like the Greeks who fell before Troy, having lost their cities like the Trojans, they saw their own image both in the conquerors, who had been their fathers, and in the conquered, whose misery was like their own. They could still see the Trojan war over that brief span of years in its true light, unglossed by pride or shame. They could look at it as conquered and as conquerors simultaneously, and so perceive what neither conqueror nor conqured ever saw, for both were blinded. Of course, this is mere fancy; one can see such distant times only in fancy's light.

In any case, this poem is a miracle. Its bitterness is the only justifiable bitterness, for it springs from the subjections of the human spirit to force, that is, in the last analysis, to matter. This subjection is the common lot, although each spirit will bear it differently, in proportion to its own virtue. No one in the Iliad is spared by it, as no one on earth is. No one who succumbs to it is by virtue of this fact regarded with contempt. Whoever, within his own soul and in human relations, escapes the dominion of force is loved but loved sorrowfully because of the threat of destruction that constantly hangs over him.

Such is the spirit of the only true epic the Occident possesses. The *Odyssey* seems merely a good imitation, now of the *Iliad,* now of Oriental poems; the *Aeneid* is an imitation which, however brilliant, is disfigured by frigidity, bombast, and bad taste. The *chansons de geste,* lacking the sense of equity, could not attain greatness: in the *Chanson de Roland,* the death of an enemy does not come home to either author or reader in the same way as does the death of Roland.

Attic tragedy, or at any rate the tragedy of Aeschylus and Sophocles, is the true continuation of the epic. The conception of justice enlightens it, without ever directly intervening in it; here force appears in its coldness and hardness, always attended by effects from whose fatality neither those who use it nor those who suffer it can escape; here the shame of the coerced spirit is neither disguised, nor enveloped in facile pity, nor held up to scorn; here more than one spirit bruised and degraded by misfortune is offered for our admiration. The Gospels are the last marvelous expression of the Greek genius, as the *Iliad* is the first: here the Greek spirit reveals itself not only in the injunction given

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mankind to seek above all other goods, "the kingdom and justice of our Heavenly Father," but also in the fact that human suffering is laid bare, and we see it in a being who is at once divine and human. The accounts of the Passion show that a divine spirit, incarnate, is changed by misfortune, trembles before suffering and death, feels itself, in the depths of its agony, to be cut off from man and God. The sense of human misery gives the Gospels that accent of simplicity that is the mark of the Greek genius, and that endows Greek tragedy and the *Iliad* with all their value. Certain phrases have a ring strangely reminiscent of the epic, and it is the Trojan lad dispatched to Hades, though he does not wish to go, who comes to mind when Christ says to Peter: "Another shall gird thee and carry thee whither thou wouldst not." This accent cannot be separated from the idea that inspired the Gospels, for the sense of human misery is a pre-condition of justice and love. He who does not realize to what extent shifting fortune and necessity hold in subjection every human spirit, cannot regard as fellow-creatures nor love as he loves himself those whom chance separated from him by an abyss. The variety of constraints pressing upon man give rise to the illusion of several distinct species that cannot communicate. Only he who has measured the dominion of force, and knows how not to respect it, is capable of love and justice.

The relations between destiny and the human soul, the extent to which each soul creates its own destiny, the question of what elements in the soul are transformed by merciless necessity as it tailors the soul to fit the requirements of shifting fate, and of what elements can on the other hand be preserved, through the exercise of virtue and through grace—this whole question is fraught with temptations to falsehood, temptations that are positively enhanced by pride, by shame, by hatred, contempt, indifference, by the will to oblivion or to ignorance. Moreover, nothing is so rare as to see misfortune fairly portrayed; the tendency is either to treat the unfortunate person as though catastrophe were his natural vocation, or to ignore the effects of misfortune on the soul, to assume, that is, that the soul can suffer and remain unmarked by it, can fail, in fact, to be recast in misfortune's image. The Greeks, generally speaking, were endowed with spiritual force that allowed them to avoid self-deception. The rewards of this were great; they discovered how to achieve in all their acts the greatest lucidity, purity, and simplicity. But the spirit that was transmitted from the *Iliad* to the Gospels by way of the tragic poets never jumped the borders of Greek civilization; once Greece was destroyed, nothing remained of this spirit but pale reflections.

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Both the Romans and the Hebrews believed themselves to be exempt from the misery that is the common human lot. The Romans saw their country as the nation chosen by destiny to be mistress of the world; with the Hebrews, it was their God who exalted them and they retained their superior position just as long as they obeyed Him. Strangers, enemies, conquered peoples, subjects, slaves, were objects of contempt to the Romans; and the Romans had no epics, no tragedies. In Rome gladiatorial fights took the place of tragedy. With the Hebrews, misfortune was a sure indication of sin and hence a legitimate object of contempt; to them a vanquished enemy was abhorrent to God himself and condemned to expiate all sorts of crimes—this is a view that makes cruelty permissible and indeed indispensable. And no text of the Old Testament strikes a note comparable to the note heard in the Greek epic, unless it be certain parts of the book of Job. Throughout twenty centuries of Christianity, the Romans and the Hebrews have been admired, read, imitated, both in deed and word; their masterpieces have yielded an appropriate quotation every time anybody had a crime he wanted to justify.

Furthermore, the spirit of the Gospels was not handed down in a pure state from one Christian generation to the next. To undergo suffering and death joyfully was from the very beginning considered a sign of grace in the Christian martyrs—as though grace could do more for a human being than it could for Christ. Those who believe that God himself, once he became man, could not face the harshness of destiny without a long tremor of anguish, should have understood that the only people who can give the impression of having risen to a higher plane, who seem superior to ordinary human misery, are the people who resort to the aids of illusion, exaltation, fanaticism, to conceal the harshness of destiny from their own eyes. The man who does not wear the armor of the lie cannot experience force without being touched by it to the very soul. Grace can prevent this touch from corrupting him, but it cannot spare him the wound. Having forgotten it too well, Christian tradition can only rarely recover that simplicity that renders so poignant every sentence in the story of the Passion. On the other hand, the practice of forcible proselytization threw a veil over the effects of force on the souls of those who used it.

In spite of the brief intoxication induced at the time of the Renaissance by the discovery of Greek literature, there has been, during the course of twenty centuries, no revival of the Greek genius. Something of it was seen in Villon, in Shakespeare, Cervantes, Moliere, and—just once—in Racine. The bones of human suffering are exposed in *L'Ecole*

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des Femmes and in *Phèdre,* love being the context—a strange century indeed, which took the opposite view from that of the epic period, and would only acknowledge human suffering in the context of love, while it insisted on swathing with glory the effects of force in war and in politics. To the list of writers given above, a few other names might be added. But nothing the peoples of Europe have produced is worth the first known poem that appeared among them. Perhaps they will yet rediscover the epic genius, when they learn that there is no refuge from fate, learn not to admire force, not to hate the enemy, nor to scorn the unfortunate. How soon this will happen is another question.

The Chicago Review *is grateful for permission to reprint this essay here. Its theme, clearly, is as timely now as when it first appeared.* The Iliad or the Poem of Force *is still available in pamphlet form and may be obtained by writing to Pendle Hill Publishing Company, Wallingford, Pennsylvania.*

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