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Simone Weil's *Iliad*: The Power of Words

Dean Hammer and Michael Kicey

Abstract: Simone Weil's work has always been appreciated for its evocative beauty, but not always for its potential contributions to political thought. In this essay, we engage in a reappraisal of her political thought, and of her relevance to contemporary politics, by way of her discussion of the power of words. Weil shares much with contemporary approaches that view the world as a text to be interpreted. But for Weil, the power of interpretation carries with it an illusion, exemplified in Weil's example of Achilles watching over his war-work, in which the world can be seen, measured, and shaped according to one's will. For Weil, the illusion of control that accompanies this perspective is undermined by our encounter with a world of physical causes and sensations that impact us, quite without us being able to control them.

Simone Weil disorients. Her writings pull one into the world of a person whose search for truth and understanding was continually confounded by a fierce intellectual individuality, uncompromising sense of purity, refusal to subscribe to doctrine, and a sense of the paradoxes and contradictions of human existence.¹ She evinces communitarian sympathies, but also a continual ambiguity toward community life.² "The city," Weil notes, "gives one the feeling of being at home," but that feeling "must be rooted in the absence of a place" (GG 86).³ Weil's spiritual individualism does not mesh with liberal

¹For a discussion of how Weil disorients stylistically, see Joan Dargan, *Simone Weil: Thinking Poetically* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1999).

²Compare for example Richard Bell's communitarian reading with Mary Dietz's in, respectively, *Simone Weil: The Way of Justice as Compassion* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998) and *Between the Human and the Divine: The Political Thought of Simone Weil* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1988), 31.

³The following works by Simone Weil are abbreviated as follows: *Waiting for God*, trans. Emma Craufurd (New York: Harper, 1951) (abbreviated as WG); *Gravity and Grace*, trans. Arthur Wills (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1952) (GG); *The Need for Roots*, trans. Arthur Wills (London: Routledge, 1952) (NR); *The Notebooks of Simone Weil*, trans. Arthur Wills (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1956) (N); *Oppression and Liberty*, trans. Arthur Wills and John Petrie (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1958) (OL); *First and Last Notebooks*, trans. Richard Rees (London: Oxford University Press, 1970) (FLN); *Intimations of Christianity among the Ancient Greeks*, trans. Elisabeth Geissbuhler (London: Routledge, 1976) (IC); *Lectures on Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978) (LP); "Human Personality," in *Simone Weil: An Anthology*, ed. Siân Miles (New York: Grove, 1986), 49–78 (HP); "The Power of Words," in *Simone Weil: An Anthology*, ed. Siân Miles (New York: Grove, 1986), 218–38 (PW); "Are We Struggling for Justice?" trans.

individualism either. Her notion of justice contrasts sharply with a Rawlsian negotiation of rights.⁴ She also analyzes the “empty hopes” of Marxian progress while admiring Marx’s analysis of oppression (OL 1; also OL 148).⁵ She “tried to embrace Christianity” on “her own terms” while exemplifying, as one commentator notes, “the cosmopolitan reach of freethinking Jewish culture” that “she resented and rejected.”⁶ She adopts a distinctive feminist stance while rejecting her own feminism. Because of her own disillusionment with an anarchist wing in the Spanish Civil War, she abandoned anarchism and later, with the rise of German power, pacifism. Furthermore, her turn from overtly political concerns toward spirituality is seen as leading to extremes of solitude, self-renunciation, and self-annihilation (see esp. GG 89). Perhaps her best-known work, *The “Iliad,” or the Poem of Force*, is identified frequently as marking this spiritual turn, leading scholars to assess her interpretation of the *Iliad* as both anachronistic⁷ and apolitical.⁸

Marina Barabas, *Philosophical Investigations* 10 (1987): 1–10 (AWS); “Essay on the Notion of Reading,” *Philosophical Investigations* 13 (1990): 297–303 (ENR); *The “Iliad,” or the Poem of Force*, ed. and trans. James Holoka (New York: Peter Lang, 2003) (IPF).

⁴See Peter Winch, *Simone Weil: “The Just Balance”* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 179–90 and Andrea Nye, *Philosophia: The Thought of Rosa Luxemburg, Simone Weil, and Hannah Arendt* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 107–12.

⁵For discussions of Weil’s view of Marx, see Nye, *Philosophia*, 62–74 and Henry Finch, *Simone Weil and the Intellect of Grace*, ed. Martin Andic (New York: Continuum, 1999), 59–69.

⁶Thomas Nevin, *Simone Weil: Portrait of a Self-Exiled Jew* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 303.

⁷Seth Schein, *The Mortal Hero* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 82–83. See also Leslie Fiedler, introduction to *Waiting for God* (New York: Harper, 1951), 12; Michael Ferber, “Simone Weil’s *Iliad*,” in *Simone Weil: Interpretations of a Life*, ed. George Abbott White (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1981), 63–85 (which is overly reliant on Snell’s outdated conception of the Homeric mind); Nevin, *Simone*, 133; and James Redfield, *Nature and Culture in the “Iliad”: The Tragedy of Hektor* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 225 n. 4. More sympathetic assessments are provided by Oliver Taplin, “The Shield of Achilles Within the *Iliad*,” *Greece and Rome*, 2nd series, 27 (1980): 17; Colin Macleod, *Homer: “Iliad,”* book 24 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 1 n. 1; Kirsti Simonsuuri, “Simone Weil’s Interpretation of Homer,” *French Studies* 39 (1985): 166–77; Graham Zanker, *The Heart of Achilles: Characterization and Personal Ethics in the “Iliad”* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 43 n. 93; and James Holoka, introduction to *Simone Weil’s the “Iliad” or the Poem of Force: A Critical Edition* (New York: Peter Lang, 2003), 1–17.

⁸Richard Rees, *Simone Weil: A Sketch for a Portrait* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1966), 62 (more spiritual after 1938 but still concerned with affliction in the world); Roy Pierce, “Sociology and Utopia: The Early Writings of Simone Weil,” *Political Science Quarterly* 77 (1962): 506 (political to spiritual after 1938 with change in

This essay seeks to bridge the metaphysical and spiritual world of Simone Weil with the Homeric world, suggesting that Weil provides us with a way of reading the *Iliad* that is grounded in the text and can be read in the context of her other writings. We develop this Weilian interpretation of the *Iliad* by way of one of the central paradoxes that organizes her work: the power of words. In a late essay, Weil writes, "By the power of words we always mean their power of illusion and error" (HP 76). Words emerge as instruments of oppression, used to justify or disguise cruelty, oppression, and exploitation (PW 234). Yet, words like *justice*, *God*, and *love* have "the power to enlighten" to the extent that we associate them with the transcendent mystery to which they refer and not reduce them to "anything humanly conceivable" (HP 76–77). This paradox is often seen as springing from her gnostic sense of the duality and irreconcilability of the material and spiritual worlds. Weil distrusted attempts to give concrete embodiment to the divine because it reduced the infinite to finite terms (HP 76). It makes God answerable to us. Through this gnostic interpretation, Weil is seen as not only pointing us beyond our own materiality to discern the truth of our existence, but also as seeking refuge in death as the only escape from our "perpetual torment."⁹

emphasis from "rationalist" to "romantic"); Philippe Dujardin, *Simone Weil: idéologie et politique* (Grenoble: Presses Universitaires de Grenoble, 1975), 103, 153–63; Simone Pétrement, *Simone Weil: A Life*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Pantheon, 1976), 361; John Hellman, *Simone Weil: An Introduction to Her Thought* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1982), 17; Sylvie Courtine-Denamy, *Three Women in Dark Times: Edith Stein, Hannah Arendt, Simone Weil*, trans. G. M. Goshgarian (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 2000), esp. 202–5, 218. Miklos Vetö, *The Religious Metaphysics of Simone Weil*, trans. Joan Dargan (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1994), argues for continuity in Weil's philosophic thought, organized primarily around her Platonic metaphysics. Dietz (*Between*) rejects the division of Weil's thought between political and spiritual, arguing that her works are organized around an attempt to grapple with "the dilemma of worldliness." Even Dietz sees Weil retreating to an apolitical stance (*Between*, 71, 79). Athanasios Moulakis also rejects the division between Weil's spiritual and political thought (Moulakis, *Simone Weil and the Politics of Self-Denial*, trans. Ruth Hein [Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1998], 16), positioning Weil as the inheritor of Alain's dualistic view of reality as divided between corrupt power and spirituality (150). Civic virtue, thus, appears as a "form of submission that withholds respect" (154). Bell (*Simone*) provides the most vigorous defense of Weil's politics, but overstates the extent of her communitarian sympathies.

⁹Thomas Idinopulos, "Necessity and Nihilism in Simone Weil's Vision of God," in *Mysticism, Nihilism, Feminism: New Critical Essays on the Theology of Simone Weil*, ed. Thomas Idinopulos and Josephine Knopp (Johnson City: Institute of Social Sciences and Arts, 1984), 31. Gnostic interpretations are provided by Susan Taubes, "The Absent God," *Journal of Religion* 35 (1955): 10–12; Idinopulos, "Necessity"; and Jacques Cabaud, *Simone Weil* (New York: Channel, 1964), 212. Challenges to these

Weil's interpretation of the *Iliad*, though, points to a more nuanced relationship between language, power, and force. For Weil, our way of interacting with the world is by reading, which for Weil is not just a way of giving meaning to the world, but a way of receiving meanings that, like sensations, lay hold of us and bind us. The power of words does not lie in their usefulness as instruments of earthly oppression or renunciation. Weil's reading of the *Iliad*, as it connects to her other works, suggests that the power of words lies in our ability to recognize the world by listening. Through listening, we do not transcend, but answer to, human need.

Reading and Power

Our starting point for an inquiry into the power of words lies in Weil's evolving exploration of the complex relationship between language and thought. Her dissertation at L'École Normale Supérieure, *Science et perception dans Descartes* (1929–1930), is a Cartesian attempt to understand how concepts, including our understanding of the world around us, arise out of pure thought. In her subsequent work, notably *Lectures on Philosophy* (1933–1934), she departs from this Cartesian approach because of its inability to establish a proper order between the objects we perceive. Weil argues that our sense perceptions mean something only as we respond to them. Weil thus ties thought to an acting subject, not simply an observing or thinking one. In this more materialist approach, concepts, including knowledge of self, are formed out of human reactions to, and operations on, the environment. Weil's rethinking of Descartes is important not only for the emphasis she places on the material context in which thought occurs, but also for a re-evaluation of power. Cartesian knowledge, as it made the world comprehensible through geometric and algebraic coordinates, gave humans power over the natural world.¹⁰ Weil explores the illusion of this perspective, examining the ways in which necessity, as the realm of force and constraint, "infinitely transcends us" (LP 111).

For Weil, we inhabit a world of physical causes and sensations quite outside our control. A physical sensation is "immediate, brutal and takes

gnostic interpretations are provided by Eric Springsted, *Christus Mediator: Platonic Mediation in the Thought of Simone Weil* (Chicago: Scholars Press, 1983); Claire Wolfteich, "Attention or Destruction: Simone Weil and the Paradox of the Eucharist," *Journal of Religion* 81 (2001), 359–76; and Madeline Hamblin, "Simone Weil's Theology of Evil, Love and the Self-Emptying God," in Idinopulos and Knopp, 49–54.

¹⁰On Weil's relationship to Descartes, see Vance Morgan, *Weaving the World: Simone Weil on Science, Mathematics, and Love* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), 23–35.

hold of us by surprise" because the mind plays no part in the immediate experience of the sensation (ENR 297): "Without warning a man is punched in the stomach; everything has changed for him before he knows what has happened. I touch something hot; I feel myself jump before realizing that I am being burned. Something grabs hold of me. That is how the world treats me and it is through such treatment that I recognize it" (ENR 297; also FLN 23–24). Weil compares this relationship with the external world to a "sort of dance" that "makes perception possible for us" (LP 52). The order in nature is the precondition for perception, introduced to us by the unreflective, precognitive reactions and reflexes of our body (LP 52). Those reactions are the "dance" Weil describes. A child reaches for a mother's breast; eyes squint in the sun; we pull our hands back from the flame; and we scamper in bare feet across hot pavement.

One's reactions to sensations form the basis of language and thought when the dance transitions into methodical action. That is, we construct particular responses to the situations that confront us. Let us use the example of hunger. We develop methods of finding food: we farm, forage, hunt, or shop. We use language to understand why, and to affect how, some things grow and others do not. We quantify units, such as weights and measures, to perform operations on these items. An "order" is thus established through language as "the objects with which we have dealings are systematically interconnected *with each other*."¹¹ Language, as a response to sensation, systematizes the mutual relations between objects and oneself. The world becomes a network of discrete meanings, a text that we read: "I believe what I read, my judgments are what I read, I act according to what I read, how could I do otherwise" (ENR 300)?

To contemporary scholars, the claim that the world is a text is not particularly strange. However, by *reading*, Weil has something more in mind. The act of reading is not simply the way we venture into and give meaning to the world; it is the way meanings, like the sensations at their origins, penetrate us.¹² Weil poses the example of two women who have different responses, one pained and the other unchanged, to a letter they receive. What grabs the first woman is not the physical sensation, since the sensations that accompany reading (the marks on the page) are "nearly indifferent" (ENR 297). Rather, it is the "meaning which has grabbed hold of the first woman, reaching directly, brutally into her mind, without her participation, as sensations

¹¹Winch, *Simone*, 55, italics in original.

¹²Helpful discussions of Weil's notion of reading are provided by Diogenes Allen, "The Concept of Reading and the 'Book of Nature,'" in *Simone Weil's Philosophy of Culture: Readings toward a Divine Humanity*, ed. Richard Bell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), and Fernando Rey Puente, *Simone Weil et la Grèce* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2007), 89–113.

grab hold of us" (ENR 298). Letters on a page are different from a punch in the stomach, but the effect of reading can feel the same: terrible sadness, pain, joy. What engages the reader is not the sensation—the punch—but the meaning. Meanings, which seem like "simple thoughts" that come from within, actually "come flooding in from all sides," taking hold and transforming the reader "from one moment to the next" (ENR 300).¹³ The world reaches into us as we read it.

Language is most basically connected to necessity: "[T]he world of uncaring nature, the vast cold reaches of space and time, the indifferent cosmos, loss and death, illness and suffering, and all that goes with them."¹⁴ Weil's example of a punch in the stomach captures the sense in which meanings are shaped by operations that impose themselves on us, often violently. Most obviously, as Allen notes, the natural world "impinges on our bodies" by subjecting us to "wear and tear, accidents, illness, aging, and death."¹⁵ These "automatic responses" can lead us to read our situation or respond to our plight in particular ways.¹⁶ Language, though, can take on a different, creative, and imagined power because it allows us to make present what is absent, describe relationships unrelated to our needs, and "construct an order of things which depends entirely on ourselves" (LP 70).

The reactive and creative aspects of language correspond to changes in relations of power.¹⁷ Although in primitive societies nature directly asserts its brute force on humans, as societies advance, humans exercise force over other humans (OL 63; also FLN 19). "In short, wherever, in the struggle against men or against nature, efforts need to be multiplied and coordinated to be effective, coordination becomes the monopoly of a few leaders as soon as it reaches a certain degree of complexity, and execution's primary law is then obedience; this is true both for the management of public affairs and for that of private undertakings" (OL 64–65). A social physics emerges—and Weil is strongly influenced by the experience of the factory and the spectacle of conquest (both by the Romans and ultimately by Hitler)—in which power relationships between individuals are "relationships of force" (OL 171).

The change from the exercise of power over nature to its exercise over others affects how we read (or, more accurately, misread) the world. While nature has "inescapable necessities" that define both the functional need for power (the need to eat, for example) and the limits on that power (the scarcity of resources), the exercise of power over others has no built-in limits (OL 65). Weil strikes a sobering note: "What is terrible in power is that it contains the

¹³On sensations, see Winch, *Simone*, 18–31.

¹⁴Finch, *Simone Weil and the Intellect of Grace*, 35.

¹⁵Allen, "Concept," 103.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 103.

¹⁷Weil's distinction between power and force is notoriously ambiguous. On Weil's conception of force, see Dietz, *Between*, 86–90.

unlimited" (FLN 17). This language sits uneasily with Weil's understanding of the world as an array of forces that variously bind, limit, obstruct, or collide with each other. Furthermore, the claim faces empirical problems: wars do not go on forever, not everyone is extinguished, and, in fact, agreements are reached and people live side-by-side. As we will explore, there are indeed limits imposed by necessity. However, when Weil refers to the "unlimited" in the relationships of humans, she means the lack of any self-contained limit on the pursuit of power. One can only drink or eat so much, for example, until sated. With power, there is no functional limit; the power exercised over others cannot achieve its desired ends indefinitely. Nor can power ever possess or control or protect everything: there is always something else, a point of resistance, a risk that we may destroy what we desire.

Because of the inability to control one's object completely and achieve one's end, the possessor of power becomes so preoccupied with ways of increasing or enhancing power that power "take[s] the place of all ends" (OL 69). The transformation of power from a means to an end has important implications. Power is a goal that cannot coexist with the goals of other communities (such as the goal of liberty or equality); it is an absolute goal that requires an ever increasing, forceful application of resources. Power, since it is threatened whenever someone else has power, must justify the total control it seeks by presenting itself in increasingly absolute terms (PW 237). Power, thus, allies with the creative aspect of language by replacing the basic dimensions of reality—namely, that the world is occupied by other beings who have an existence and network of relationships that are independent of, and not reducible to, ours—with the flat dimensions of our imagination (GG 63). Through our imagination, we fill the world with ourselves.

The power of this way of naming reality is that these words "stupefy the mind" by abstracting language from the conditions that make reading both possible and necessary (PW 237). We are easily seduced by the power of language since, through words, we can represent the world to ourselves, possess what is absent, and "act upon anything whatsoever" by calling it something (LP 68–69).¹⁸ By abstracting words from the obstacles that lie at their origins, we imagine that we can grasp the world in its totality. That is, there is a reverse in the flow of how one ascribes meanings. Meanings do not grab us from the outside; rather, we grab the world by defining it within us (WG 158). The power of these words is seen as residing, ironically, in their resistance to being read.

¹⁸See Winch, *Simone*, 51; J. P. Little, "Simone Weil and the Limits of Language," in *The Beauty That Saves: Essays on Aesthetics and Language in Simone Weil*, ed. John Dunaway and Eric Springsted (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1996), 41. Winch (*Simone*) provides the most complete discussion of Weil's notion of language, using Wittgenstein as his basis of comparison.

Words, thus, give rise to a terrible “fatality,” as Weil characterizes it, when they refer to a world so infinite in its scope that other humans, since they are finite and easily extinguished, present no natural limit to the exercise of that power (OL 65). Doing away with “multiple relationships” provides the guise of one’s impermeability to the forces that comprise the world (GG 62). To draw on Weil’s language, the power of words is that they feed the illusion that we can “possess exactly what we desire” (GG 67). The paradox is that these abstractions tighten the grip of the sensation of force. Desire, the force that lies in all humans and propels us toward the future (N 159), is directed toward the devouring and violent aspirations of the ego.¹⁹ We grab with force and read our own happiness and value by our power to make everything submit to our desire.

The *Iliad* and the Confrontation with Necessity

We turn now to Weil’s treatment of the fatality of power in her essay on the *Iliad*, an essay often characterized as both beautiful and “absurdly and deliberately partial.”²⁰ The conclusion is warranted: her interpretation and numerous other references that Weil makes to Homer endow the poet with a spiritual voice that transcends the historical context of the epic, if not history itself. Joined to her notion of reading, though, Weil’s discussion of the *Iliad* takes on renewed interest. Force, as related to reading, plays out in two ways in the *Iliad*. First, the wielder of force, in the endeavor to bring everything under his control, refuses to be subjected to a reading, which would violate the imagined autonomy conferred by the possession of force. Second, the wielder of force cannot imagine alternate readings since the universe presents itself as a totality that can be limitlessly penetrated and transformed by desire. The *Iliad* reveals the untenability—indeed, the self-destructiveness—of the belief that one can construct a world to one’s liking. We have focused on Achilles because he presents the most recognizable and fully developed image in the epic of the wielder of force who must confront necessity.

The *Iliad* opens in the tenth year of the Trojan War with the Achaians facing a crisis: Apollo has placed a plague on the Achaian camp because of the refusal of Agamemnon, the confederation leader, to accept ransom for a captured girl. Achilles summons an assembly to resolve the problem. Once in assembly, Achilles calls for Agamemnon to return the girl. Angered, Agamemnon gives back the girl but takes Achilles’ captured girl as compensation. Feeling dishonored because his war prize has been taken from him, Achilles refuses to fight for the Achaians, desiring (in his words) that they “eat out the heart within [them]/ in sorrow” as his comrades “drop and

¹⁹See Vetö, *Religious*, 48–49.

²⁰Fiedler, introduction, WG, 12.

die" (1.243–44). Achilles has two advantages: he is stronger than everyone else and he has a special relationship with the gods: his mother, Thetis, is a goddess and beloved by Zeus. Complacent in his knowledge that Zeus will carry out his wishes conveyed by Thetis and ensure that the Achaians will suffer, Achilles can occupy a privileged vantage point, what Weil calls an "illusion of perspective" (WG 158): he can stand on his ship, removed from, yet able to observe, the effect of his wrath. Achilles places himself "at the center of space" and arranges a hierarchy of values around him (WG 158). Homer captures this privileged perspective: like Poseidon who sits atop Mount Ida and "admired the fighting" (13.8), Achilles "look[s] out over the sheer war work and the sorrowful onrush," inflicting his will while remaining safe from the fighting (11.600). Achilles originally uses his power to achieve the goal of restoring his honor. Soon enough power becomes the end as he seeks to make the Achaians conform to his will. Achilles wants to render others helpless through the application of force.

Achilles wields the extreme power of life and death against an Iliadic landscape saturated in force. Force, as Weil begins her famous essay, is the *Iliad*'s "true hero, the true subject matter . . . the force that men wield, the force that subdues men, in the face of which human flesh shrinks back" (IPF 45). Homer confronts us with force in its most terrifying forms: fire sweeping across the plains, lions feeding on helpless deer, bodies lying face down in the dirt to become the food of dogs and birds, sons who cannot recognize fathers, and human beings desiring to devour each other's flesh. Force, Weil argues, flattens out the texture (and textuality) of the world by turning everything, including other humans, into mute beings that no longer have the capacity to resist (IPF 45). Even the "vitality" of reflex is gone (IPF 47). A world governed by force is a dreamscape—a "frictionless environment" where "nothing in the human matter around [the individual] puts an interval for reflection between impulse and action" (IPF 53; also IPF 61). Without obstacles, force in pursuit of power has no natural limit. Memory is not an obstacle. Force presses on through a powerful amnesia: the victor feels invincible, even if he has earlier suffered defeat (IPF 54). Nor are humans an obstacle; they are turned into things, mute victims weeping from "humiliation and impotent sorrow" as they confront a world where words no longer matter (IPF 51, 61).²¹

The wielder of force, however, invariably encounters friction. Friction, to recall our earlier discussion, is the condition of language and thought. "A day comes," Weil writes, "when fear, defeat, the death of beloved comrades make the soul of the warrior succumb to necessity" (IPF 58). Achilles, who wields the power of life and death even at a distance, is stopped by

²¹This language recounts Weil's own writing about her experience of the docility inflicted by necessity on the factory floor. See Simone Weil, *Simone Weil: Seventy Letters*, trans. Richard Rees (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), 14–17.

only one event: the death of his dear friend, Patroklos, whom Achilles has allowed to go into war to hold the Trojans back in his absence. The agents of force may want to discriminate, but the force they wield deludes them into thinking it is their instrument. Thus, the death of Patroklos ends Achilles' belief in the controllability of his own force. In the sorrowful wake of Patroklos' death, Achilles' mother almost cruelly reminds her son of his own desires:

What sorrow has come to your heart now?
 Speak out, do not hide it.
 These things are brought to accomplishment
 through Zeus: in the way that you lifted your hands and prayed for,
 that all the sons of the Achaians be pinned on their grounded vessels
 by reason of your loss, and suffer things that are shameful. (18.73–78)

Achilles recognizes that he has received everything he asked for, but laments that there is no pleasure in this "since my dear companion has perished, Patroklos, whom I loved beyond all other companions as well as my own life" (18.80–82). War ceases to be a game, an expression of intention, a way to inflict his revenge. War becomes a reality and force, its agent.

Reality for Weil is neither an objective entity (which we may more or less accurately represent) nor a subjective phenomenon emerging out of consciousness. Reality, as Weil's discussion of language suggests, is our "contact with necessity" that we come to know through "exploration, experiment, experience" (FLN 88, 143; also LP 30; AWS, 21; GG 101).²² In one's contact with necessity, one confronts a world devoid of what Weil calls "finality": the conformity of the universe to human purposes, intentions, or ends (WG 176–77).²³ In this encounter with the utter indifference of the universe (WG 124), one realizes, "I may lose at any moment, through the play of circumstances over which I have no control, anything whatsoever that

²²What is real, as Nye writes, "is concrete interactions between the world and human agents," a reality that may be "a physical thing, her own feelings, or her own actions" (Nye, *Philosophia*, 82, 78). See also Christopher Frost and Rebecca Bell-Metereau, *Simone Weil: On Politics, Religion and Society* (London: Sage, 1998), 58; Rush Rhees, *Discussions of Simone Weil*, ed. D. Z. Phillips (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2000), 36.

²³Winch compares Weil's treatment of necessity to Wittgenstein's notion of necessity as a product of acting in "ordered sequences of operations" (*Simone*, 61). Others have sought to place Weil's notion of necessity into a "Christian Platonism." See, especially, Louis Dupré, "Simone Weil and Platonism: An Introductory Reading," in *The Christian Platonism of Simone Weil*, ed. E. Jane Doering and Eric Springsted (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004), 9–22; Patrick Patterson and Lawrence Schmidt, "The Christian Materialism of Simone Weil," in *The Christian Platonism of Simone Weil*, 77–93; Vetö, *Religious*; Springsted, *Christus Mediator*; Diogenes Allen and Eric Springsted, *Spirit, Nature, and Community: Issues in the Thought of Simone Weil* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1994), 33–52.

I possess, including those things which are so intimately mine that I consider them as being myself. There is nothing that I might not lose. It could happen at any moment that what I am might be abolished and replaced by anything whatsoever of the filthiest and most contemptible sort" (HP 70). The suffering inflicted by force "gives us contact with that necessity which constitutes the order of the world" (WG 132). Force asserts itself as a set of cosmic limits whenever agents and their readings expand beyond their normal and acceptable bounds. Weil, for example, describes the "geometrically stringent chastisement" of the Greek Nemesis who punishes abuse of force (IPF 54).

The intoxication Achilles experiences as the wielder of force derives from his failure to read necessity. His energy—the energy that defines his life, his values, and his reality—is directed entirely toward the object of his desire, punishing Agamemnon. That energy is torn from Achilles when he loses everything he loved or desired (N 203). Weil refers to this exhaustion of physical energy as "being dead" (N 554).²⁴ The death is experienced in part as the horror of absence made real by physical suffering (WG 120–21, 118). Achilles loses a part of himself in Patroklos (18.82). This death is also experienced as the realization that it "is the future itself, the future their vocation allots" (IPF 58). For Weil, this experience is something more than the trivial realization that death is a "limit imposed on the future" (IPF 58). In Achilles' case, the warrior realizes he must die avenging Patroklos's death. The radical depletion of energy in his confrontation with necessity is what Weil refers to as affliction: "[A] simple and ingenious device which introduces into the soul of a finite creature the immensity of force, blind, brutal, and cold" (WG 135). In this "uprooting of life," Achilles plunges into darkness because "there is nothing to love" (WG 118, 121). "Scorn, revulsion and hatred" become his mode of being (WG 122). Achilles defiles himself, mourns inconsolably in isolation, refuses to eat or drink, rages uncontrollably, and kills without distinction, mercy, or even a purpose. He simply takes on the attributes of his universe: cold, indifferent, violent, lethal.

Attention and the Power of Silence

The *Iliad* as a poem of force and affliction ends in one type of silence: the muteness of individuals devoid of aspiration and prostrate before death. Priam kneels before Achilles and both weep together. The death they share is necessary for them, as Weil writes, "to be able to see things in their nakedness" (N 554). The meeting between Priam and Achilles, thus, constitutes a different type of silence, not of humans turned violently into things, but of recognition.²⁵ Achilles and Priam recognize the necessity before which they bow: fortunes shift, affliction is shared, and both are about to die. Achilles'

²⁴See especially Sharon Cameron, "The Practice of Attention: Simone Weil's Performance of Impersonality," *Critical Inquiry* 29 (2003): 225.

language is instructive. Earlier he asserted his distance from other mortals by the honor he received from the gods. Now he commiserates with Priam, describing how “we [mortals] live in unhappiness” as fortunes shift and move, bringing power one day and affliction and sorrow the next (24.526). In the encounter with Priam, Achilles is confronted with the direct experience of the ultimate powerlessness and fragility not just of being human, but also of the coherent structure of the human world. All the things that once seemed to have substance, resilience, and meaning in a human life—Achilles’ thoughts and feelings, his unshakable beliefs, his identity as a warrior, even the integrity of his body—are now exposed to the threat of total destruction by forces that he can neither know nor control.

For some scholars, the note of human helplessness before the gods makes the *Iliad* inferior to a later Western ethical tradition.²⁶ Others point to Achilles as increasingly autonomous, acknowledging his role in bringing pain to all those around him, including his enemies (24.542).²⁷ Achilles, for example, speaks in the first person: “I” give my father no care, “I sit here in Troy,” and I “bring nothing but sorrow to you and your children” (24.540–43). Reconciling these two positions is so difficult because Achilles’ expression of the mortal subordination to the gods occurs in the same passage as the preface to his first-person account of the misery he brings. Even more troubling, Achilles at one point threatens Priam with violence, even after Achilles’ apparent renunciation of the devastation he has wrought.

The difficulty of reconciling these seemingly contradictory impulses is traceable to our Kantian efforts to understand moral action as deriving from an autonomous, volitional will rather than as a response to necessity. Weil provides an alternate perspective in which Achilles’ recognition of necessity alters his illusion of perspective. Put more starkly, in the encounter with Priam, Achilles is momentarily “outside any point of view” (N 224):²⁸ the warrior code is silent, the advice of comrades irrelevant, the pursuit of his desires contradictory and impossible, and his own death already practiced

²⁵We can place this silence in Weil’s negative theology, derived from her reading of Plato and the Gnostics, that sees the presence of God, truth, and beauty in its absence in the world. See Dupré, “Simone,” 9–22, and Patterson and Schmidt, “Christian,” 81. I am emphasizing how this absence returns us to, or immerses us in, the world. On this return, see Patterson and Schmidt, “Christian,” 82–85.

²⁶This debate is reviewed in Jenny Strauss Clay, *The Wrath of Athena: Gods and Men in the “Odyssey”* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 215–39; Vincent Farenga, *Citizen and Self in Ancient Greece: Individuals Performing Justice and the Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 181–85; and Dean Hammer, “Homer and Political Thought,” in *Cambridge Companion to Greek Political Theory*, ed. Stephen Salkever (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

²⁷See Dean Hammer, *The “Iliad” as Politics: The Performance of Political Thought* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2002); Farenga, *Citizen*, 68–108.

²⁸See also Finch, *Simone Weil and the Intellect of Grace*, 39.

in his earlier desecration of himself. Reduced by force, only two desires remain, and Achilles fluctuates between them. One is the impulse of violence, acquiescence to the obliterating logic of force. The other is the desire to redeem the only power that cannot be completely annihilated by force, the power to say "I" (WG 147).²⁹ One can read Achilles' words to Priam as the assertion of this power: even though the gods have told him that he needs to return Hektor's corpse, Achilles emphasizes that he himself is minded to do so (24.560–61). Achilles also restores power to Priam, however reluctantly. For Weil, Priam is initially a thing without power of presence, unable "to stop, to inhibit, to alter" anyone's actions (IPF 48). The power to say "I" is restored to Priam when Achilles recognizes that his reading of Priam is incomplete and that he cannot impose his own description on the king.³⁰ This recognition is for Weil the beginnings of justice: "To be continually ready to admit that another person is something other than what we read when he is there (or when we think about him). Or rather: to read in him also (and continually) that he is certainly something other than what we read—perhaps something altogether different" (N 43).³¹

A different reading of the power of words emerges from the debris of force and the silence of Achilles and Priam joined in affliction. These words are neither the abstractions of glory that lead warriors to their deaths, nor the clash of ideologies, nor the outrage at perceived wrongs that lead Achilles to watch pitilessly as his comrades are slaughtered. The interplay of large words with small, loud noises with silence, empowers the language of the *Iliad*. Power is vested not in the fixed abstractions of honor and glory to which life is made to conform but in small words elicited by specific conditions, relations, and limits to which we find ourselves subject (see PW 222–23).

The *Iliad* confronts us with the contradiction that lies at the heart of reading: although words make the world comprehensible, they also disguise their own incompleteness. Poetry functions for Weil by organizing words so that their relationships—how they resonate with other words, how they are repeated, how they are brought into tension with each other—reveal this incompleteness by making "silence perceptible" (N 32).³² Weil shows that, if we pay attention, we may see that the *Iliad* is bathed in these quiet words, words associated with touch: the tactile sensation of another person that cannot be

²⁹This power is also the power to refuse. See Winch, *Simone*, 102–19.

³⁰Ferber seems unfair to Weil here, suggesting that Weil misreads the Greek (which she does) when indicating that Achilles pushes Priam to the floor and then claiming that Weil "recognizes she has not done justice to this scene" and "contradict[s]" herself when describing this encounter as a luminous moment ("Simone," 71–72).

³¹On Weil's conception of justice, particularly in its contrast to a Rawlsian position, see Winch, *Simone*, 179–90. See also Richard Bell, "Reading Simone Weil on Rights, Justice and Love," in Bell, *Simone Weil's Philosophy of Culture*, 229.

³²On the relationship between poetry and silence, see especially Little, "Simone."

duplicated by an abstraction. Thus, against the backdrop of Achilles' declaration that the Achaians will suffer for dishonoring him, Patroklos gently says to an injured warrior that he will not leave him in "affliction," holding the injured comrade as he tends his wound (11.840). Thus, against the backdrop of Hektor's wish to perform some great deed so that he will be remembered, Andromache longs only that her husband had reached out to her in bed, held her in his arms, and left her with one "last intimate word" that she could remember (24.744). Thus, when Priam comes to plead for the return of his son's corpse, Achilles touches the old king's hand, a hand raised in supplication but transformed into a gesture of recognition. Priam "gaze[s] upon Achilles, wondering at his size and beauty" and Achilles, in turn, "gaze[s]" at Priam and "wondered, as he saw his brave looks and listened to him talking" (24.629–32). In his encounter with Priam, Achilles recognizes "that the sufferer exists, not only as a unit in a collection, or a specimen from the social category labeled 'unfortunate,' but as a man, exactly like [him], who was one day stamped with a special mark by affliction" (WG 115). Attention is noticing that which is deprived of personality. One pierces the anonymity imposed by affliction, noticing another not as a thing but as a being who can be seen, heard, and touched (WG 125, 146–47; HP 50).

The source of the power of words shifts from the capacity to speak to the capacity to read that relies on what Weil calls "attention."³³ This key term in Weil's vocabulary does not translate easily. Semantically, its root relates to the Latin *ad tendere* ("to stretch toward") and the French verb *attendre* ("to wait for").³⁴ These seemingly contradictory denotations are captured in the examples of Patroklos, Andromache, and Achilles, who associate their own touching with what Dietz describes as a "quiescent readiness" to receive.³⁵ For Weil, attention "consists of suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty, and ready to be penetrated by the object; it means holding in our minds, within reach of this thought, but on a lower level and not in contact with it, the diverse knowledge we have acquired which we are forced to make use of" (WG 111). Attention is a kind of interpretive forbearance in which reading consists paradoxically of suspending, without forgetting, our readings. We become Achilles in his tent whose own suffering provides the context for him to see Priam in an entirely different way.

The truth of words does not inhere in the capacity to get one's way, or to drown out contending words. The truth of words lies paradoxically in their power to reveal things not completely formulable in language (HP 69): the innumerable relationships that comprise one's connection to the world. The

³³On attention and reading, see Dietz, *Between*, 96–103; Winch, *Simone*; Bell, "Reading"; Allen, "Concept," 93–115; Sharon Cameron, "The Practice of Attention," 216–52; and Vetö, *Religious*, 41–55.

³⁴Helpful here is Dietz, *Between*, 96–97.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 99.

array of relationships multiplies even as Achilles speaks: his relationship to Patroklos and his father, Peleus, but also his relationship to his comrades, the Trojans, Hektor, and now Priam. The words only hint at the readings that emerge from the silence that Priam and Achilles share.

The *Iliad* and Justice

Weil characterizes the *Iliad* as “the most beautiful and flawless of mirrors” by which we can view ourselves today (IPF 45). Weil’s mirror does not invite us to stare admiringly at our own beauty but disorients by exposing the illusion of power. In our modern age, we join Achilles as he stands on the bow of his ship. Only the illusion of power acquires for Weil both geometric force and visual clarity with a post-Renaissance idea of perspective that combines algebraic coordinates with a new science of optics.³⁶ Simply put, we can occupy a perspective that allows us to see, measure, and affect the world. There is, to be sure, nothing particularly wrong with Googling earth, for example, or tracking and targeting potential dangers to one’s own community. For Weil this geometry entices by its power to see, measure, and shape the world according to our will. The stance itself, Weil stresses, is bound up in language that places the individual at the center of a universe that is seen as conformable to intention and is judged with respect to oneself.

Employing the language of geometry (in a way very different from Descartes), Weil provides not so much a vision as a stance by which to orient oneself to the world. Where Achilles assumes an Archimedean perspective of a “fixed point of view” (FLN 270), Weil adopts the language of plane geometry, which deals with properties of figures in a plane: “Plane geometry is an exercise in thought without a point of view. Everything is on one plane. In every sphere, it is an indispensable purification of thought to set out the subject on one plane, thus eliminating any point of view about it, by the use of deductive intelligence. However, several cross-sections have to be taken, as in a mechanical drawing. A single cross-section leads to error” (FLN 270). There is no longer an all-inclusive perspective, but only cross-sections that incompletely render the complex interconnections that intersect at different points and transect different planes.

Weil’s geometric examples, as Nancy points out, derive from her own brand of Platonism in which mathematics, as the language of necessity, constitutes our only knowledge of the material universe.³⁷ The examples can sound cold and her stance, “closed to the world and

³⁶See Finch, *Simone Weil and the Intellect of Grace*, 38–39.

³⁷See Michel Nancy, “The Limits and Significance of Simone Weil’s Platonism,” in *Christian Platonism of Simone Weil*, 29; Vance Morgan, “Simone Weil and the Divine Poetry of Mathematics,” in *Christian Platonism of Simone Weil*, 95–114; Allen and Springsted, *Spirit, Nature, and Community*, 47–50; and Puente, *Simone*, 119–20.

noncommunicative."³⁸ There is certainly evidence of this, particularly in Weil's language of solitude and detachment. The interpretive forbearance she describes is conditioned by our rootedness as beings who read and who are read. That rootedness has two implications that follow from our previous discussion: since reading and being read are the only ways that we exist, we are pushed into the world to perceive as much as possible (FLN 19); and since reading and being read are always in error, the world pushes back. Weil suggests that justice mediates between these two contradictory aspects of the human condition: a willingness to admit that things may be different from what we have assumed, or read.

Weil's notion of justice is challenging. Justice does not come into existence as it is negotiated, codified, or enforced. In fact, Weil has little patience for notions of rights, characterizing them as a "shrill nagging of claims and counter-claims" tied more to social prestige than affliction (HP 64). Rights are, for Weil, possessions that are attached to persons or groups and can be exercised or not.³⁹ To that extent, rights are connected to power—the power to argue for, act on, and enforce particular claims. Justice, on the other hand, is impersonal, carrying with it obligations. For Weil, justice makes us attend not just to those who speak, but also to the voiceless, the afflicted, and the obscure. Justice, in this context, does not emerge among the abstractions and categories articulated by nations or collectivities (HP 50–51; also NR 3). By what criteria, Weil might ask, can a people within one sovereign territory expect resolution of a claim of injustice by another nation? What is the status of a claim of suffering that arises from within the boundaries of a declared enemy? As odd as Weil's argument may sound, she is accurate in one sense: the powerless cannot impose laws and rights on the powerful in the international arena. Thucydides' Melian dialogue suggests the unnaturalness of the powerful seeking the consent of those who cannot refuse (IC 174). Consent is for Weil the unnatural act of mediation by which that which is unequal is made equal. It is an ability to say, "What are you going through?" (WG 115).

Weil is not arguing for impassivity in the face of danger, or a world where force is no longer operative. Nor does she believe one can make the world through words. Her stance is grounded in what she describes as reality: the encounter with the necessity that one anticipates or the necessity to which one succumbs. At times necessity confronts us like a punch in the stomach, changing how we view reality. At other times, we can change how we read: an act of freedom in which we "*meet with*" (rather than attempt to overcome) an obstacle, allowing what is outside us to pass through our consciousness and to be part of our experience (FLN 26). As Springsted notes, "To

³⁸Dietz, *Between*, 79.

³⁹See Edward Andrew, "Simone Weil on the Injustice of Rights-Based Doctrines," *Review of Politics* 48 (1986): 62–68.

know . . . is to have developed as personal capacities the abilities to feel what is going on in the world and to respond to it as directly as my hand obeys the wish to lift it or as my hand withdraws from something that is hot."⁴⁰ To return to Weil's discussion of the *Iliad*, the awareness of friction cultivated through sensitivity to the needs and values of others elicits an "interval" between "impulse and action" (IPF 53).⁴¹

We have, admittedly, tempered some of Weil's thought. Maintaining a non-perspective devoid of ego is so fatiguing that it is only possible by way of a "supernatural faculty."⁴² Stated in its most challenging terms, the act of following God through the act of decreation, in which one approximates the withdrawal of God from the world by extinguishing oneself, is for Weil a nearly unattainable practice of death.⁴³ "Our existence is made up only of his waiting for our acceptance not to exist" (GG 78). Weil's language is troubling: "When I am in any place, I disturb the silence of heaven and earth by my breathing and the beating of my heart" (GG 89). Weil's claims here are often seen as the nihilistic consequences of her Gnosticism in which, accepting the dualism of matter and spirit, she ultimately embraces death—even suicide—as the only way to achieve spirituality.⁴⁴

However much it seems as though Weil embraces death, saving human lives is ultimately her concern (PW 222). For her, dying (through decreation) and saving lives are connected, though not completely reconcilable. Weil does not want us to die but to "see a landscape as it is when I am not there" (GG 89). That is, by relinquishing our privileged vantage point, by renouncing (even momentarily) the imagined power of words to make a world, we bring others into view as something more than instruments or obstacles of desire. Despite the abstractness and detachment of much of her language, and what is seen as her acquiescence to necessity and suffering as a "special sign of the love of God," Weil ends with recognition of our human circumstances.⁴⁵ The one obligation for Weil is respect, which is "effectively expressed in a real, not a fictitious, way; and this can only be done through the medium of Man's earthly needs" (NR 6). Lacking the fulfillment of these needs, which Weil counts as both physical and moral, humans fall little by little into a state resembling death (NR 7).

If Weil's argument hinges on accepting her understanding of God, then her philosophic approach will not be necessarily persuasive to our political age. However, God, as Springsted notes, is a "transforming presence" that is also an absence: a way in which we change our participation in the

⁴⁰Eric Springsted, "Spiritual Apprenticeship," *Cahiers Simone Weil* 25 (2002): 337.

⁴¹See, especially, Rhees, *Discussions*, 23–29.

⁴²Vetö, *Religious*, 32.

⁴³See Cameron, "Practice of Attention," 248, for a discussion of the implications of attention.

⁴⁴See Taubes, "Absent," 11.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 14.

world.⁴⁶ God acts as an absence that not only reminds us of the necessity that diminishes the power of our perspective, but also summons individuals to consent freely to the importance of others. Moreover, as Weil notes, any approach, including her Christian approach, must appeal by way of its universality. “Beauty,” as Weil remarks, “is something to be eaten; it is a food. If we are going to offer the people Christian beauty purely on account of its beauty, it will have to be as a form of beauty which gives nourishment” (NR 93). That need for nourishment leads Weil to ask the question, “Politics for what?” She points toward its role in addressing our rootedness and participation in collectivities that give vitality to human expression (NR 148, 163).

As important as collectivities are for giving continuity to human existence by connecting the past with the future (NR 8), human expression must be recognizable beyond these boundaries (NR 162). That is, Weil seeks to negotiate between the importance of local and national attachments and the obligation to recognize that “one’s own particular country only constitut[es] one among” a “great number of life-giving nuclei” (NR 162). Ultimately, such recognition cannot rest with a collectivity since groups cannot think. Moreover, as we saw in our discussion of Achilles, collectivities cannot feel. As Weil writes, “This poignantly tender feeling for some beautiful, precious, fragile and perishable object has a warmth about it which the sentiment of national grandeur altogether lacks” (NR 170). For those reasons the “collectivity should have *as much need as possible* of the individual, i.e. of thought (which is the one thing that cannot be abstracted from the individual)” (FLN 27; italics in original).

How that is possible is not entirely clear in Weil’s terms, but it suggests the radical expansion of democratic claims of participation, transparency, and accountability into international organizations, global business, and foreign policy. It also demands responsibility of those who participate, a willingness to employ words of proportion: “ideas of limit, measure, degree, proportion, relation, comparison, contingency, interdependence, interrelation of means and ends” (PW 222). Words, at that point, lose their capital letters and become simply a way to grasp, however incompletely, some concrete reality or activity. The story of Achilles is the story of such clarification; it is the story of will that bows to necessity, of abstractions turned into recognition, and of speaking transformed into listening. Such attention, as Weil tells us, may have the effect of saving lives.

⁴⁶Springsted, “Spiritual Apprenticeship,” 344. Springsted also argues that Weil challenges us to enter into a dialogue about the historical and cultural values to which we subscribe. See “Conditions of Dialogue: John Hick and Simone Weil,” *Journal of Religion* 72 (1992): 33–36.