The Might of Words

A Philosophical Reflection on "The Strange Death of Patroklos"

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The Death of Patroklos and Achilles' Change of Heart

> "Hektor, surely you thought as you killed Patroklos you would be safe, and since I was far away you thought nothing of me ..."
>
> (*Iliad*, Book XXII, 331-332)[1]

These are the words Achilles speaks to Hektor, whom he has just struck with a fatal blow. He reminds the son of Priam how, after stripping Patroklos' fallen body, Hektor made off with the fallen man's armour, which is Achilles' own.

Earlier, refusing to spare the life of Lykaon, another son of Priam, despite the victim's pleas for mercy, Achilles had already recalled the death of his dear friend Patroklos. On that occasion, Achilles' words to Lykaon exalt Patroklos for his prowess as a warrior:

> "So friend, you die also. Why all this clamour about it?
> Patroklos is also dead, who was better by far than you are."
>
> (*Iliad*, Book XXI, 106-107)

The dialogue preceding Lykaon's death, with this crushing remark from Achilles, who knows that he himself will not return home alive from Troy, is discussed in Simone Weil's essay "The *Iliad*, Poem of Might"[2] – a text dating, significantly, from 1938-39 – in which she singles out the figure of Patroklos within a more general discussion of the circumstances of war:

> Whoever has had to mortify, to mutilate in himself all aspiration to live, of him an effort of heart-breaking generosity is required before he can respect the life of another. We have no reason to suppose any of Homer's warriors capable of such an effort, unless perhaps Patroclus. In a certain way Patroclus occupies the central position in the *Iliad*, where it is said that "he knew

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> how to be tender toward all," and wherein nothing of a cruel or brutal nature is ever mentioned concerning him. p. 44 [3]

Yet what Simone Weil tells us about Patroklos here seems, at first glance, surprising. The *Iliad* presents Patroklos as a valiant warrior. He is sometimes designated by the formulaic expression "the disciple of ardent Ares." Has he not killed numerous Trojans and their allies in battles, including Sarpedon, the Lykian leader favored by Zeus? Announcing his death, Menelaus does not hesitate to call him by the formulaic phrase "the bravest of the Achaians," whereas Achilles labels him "the bravest of the Myrmidons," who are led by Achilles himself. If despite his warlike spirit Patroklos stands out from the rest, it is no doubt because he refrains from insulting his enemies with verbal invective. He thus steers clear of a certain excess, or *hubris*, which would have the effect of pushing him beyond the inevitable deployment of might required for battle.

But even more than Patroklos' character and his ethos, it is important to recognize the central place and pivotal role that his death plays in the poem. It is in a sense the turning point, the reversal of the Achaians' position with regard to Troy.

Let us recall: Homer's poem begins with the anger of Achilles, who, offended by Agamemnon, refuses to return to the battlefield, and it ends with Hektor's funeral rites that Achilles finally allows Priam, king of Troy and Hektor's father. Though at first favoring the Trojans, fate switches sides when Patroklos – the only one who could pull this off – convinces Achilles to lend him his armor so that he can strike terror in the enemy camp. Finally, it is Patroklos' death that brings Achilles, the son of Peleus and the goddess Thetis, back to the battlefield. Only then, in the contest between heroes, can he prove himself the bravest, even "the best of the Achaians," to use the formula that serves as the title of Gregory Nagy's masterful work.[4]

Moreover, the death of Patroklos not only foreshadows Hektor's death, but it takes the place of Achilles' death in the *Iliad*. In other words, Patroklos' death, while announcing and prefiguring Achilles' own, supplants it, serves as a substitute for the latter, which could not take place in the *Iliad*, as we shall see.

The atypical character of the narration of Patroklos' death thus appears as the corollary of the event's decisive centrality. It is

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highly probable that, confronted with various traditions, of which at least some might cast a shadow on the hero's glory – for example, those that highlight the role of the young and valiant Euphorbos – the poet arranged and combined them in such a way that the death of Patroklos appears to be due not so much to the superiority of Hektor, the victor, as to the intervention of the god Apollo acting through the young Euphorbos, who before running away is the first to strike Achilles' friend from behind. In fact, as the entire *Iliad* itself bears witness, it was self-evident that no action of great consequence could take place without the aid of the gods, who are always present in the affairs of men. In the case of Patroklos' death, this is made perfectly clear in the way the description of the death from Book XVI is condensed in Book XIX. The later book tells us – through the mouth of Xanthos, a horse that Hera suddenly endows with a human voice – that "it was that high god, the child of lovely-haired Leto, / who killed him among the champions and gave the glory to Hektor" (Book XIX, 413-414).

The Might of Words

Let us consider the matter of might; it serves as the unifying thread for Simone Weil's powerful reading of the poem. "The true hero, the real subject, the core of the *Iliad*, is might," she states at the outset.[5] Yet Weil is not slow to add that "the might which kills outright is an elementary and coarse form of might." And she continues: "How much more varied in its devices; how much more astonishing in its effects is that other which does not kill; or which delays killing."[6] This might that does not kill, or that delays killing, is the one that Weil elsewhere describes as the first one calling for elucidation if we wish to gain a true understanding of social problems.[7]

To extend this intuition, it is useful to note that this social might, this might that does not kill (or delays killing), is above all – particularly in a traditional society – the might for which oral language serves as a repository. It is maintained and sustained only by the various forms and devices that languages offers it. The poetic language of the *Iliad* is a most striking illustration of this. Thus what calls for elucidation is the web of language, if we wish

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to understand both the poetic and the social dimensions of the poem and its performances. A study of this type was recently undertaken by Richard P. Martin, the author of *The Language of Heroes: Speech and Performance in the* Iliad.[8]

Two features of this study should be emphasized before any other consideration. The first is that Richard Martin is among those heirs to the tradition of Milman Parry and Albert Lord who – while not ignoring the corrections introduced by Milman's son Adam Parry – consider orality not only as the source that nourishes the poem, but also as what is at the root of its production, its composition. The second aspect, which goes hand in hand with the first, is Martin's receptivity to anthropological research, even to ethno-linguistic studies in fields that are quite removed from the classical domain and related areas.

This brings us also to consider in passing the question of the resistance of such comparisons or analogies. What is being defended or preserved by attempts to banish from classical studies any allusion to or comparison with different cultural universes? What ideological presuppositions give rise to such fears? At work here, beyond any doubt, is a matter of spiritual lineage, which purports to be the loftiest, even the purest possible. This is what leads to the rejection of comparisons, which might undermine the prestige and compromise the sense of superiority that are drawn from this lineage. The relation of European nations to Greece has so often been the subject of cultural claims and counter-claims of this type that it is worth dispatching the question here, without dwelling on the subject any further.

Martin's study, without in any way trying vainly to "diminish" Homer's art, is conscious of the universality of certain linguistic procedures linked to the affirmation of might and/or of social authority.[9] This is why, even if certain interpretations proposed by Martin can and should be subject to debate, *The Language of Heroes* attests to the heuristic value of a thoughtful comparatism, as well as to the necessity for classical studies to take into account current research on speech acts. This, then, is the work I will call upon first in order to renew our approaches to the *Iliad*.

Keeping in mind the theorization of speech acts by John L. Austin, and subsequently by John Searle, and starting from the

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fact that nearly fifty per cent of the *Iliad* is made up of direct discourse, that is, of *speech acts*, Richard Martin will envision Homer's heroes as "poetic performers in their own right,"[10] that is, as poet-actors in an agonistic context where competition takes place through exploits of battle and of speech. Martin will also explore the way in which the poem itself speaks about the speech acts produced by the principal heroes, both divine and human.

As for the first point, the prevalence of direct discourse, Martin demonstrates that alongside the *diegesis* – the narrative proper – Homer's poem contains a considerable proportion of *mimesis*. This corroborates Aristotle's assertion in the *Poetics*, where he designates Homer as the father not only of epic poetry but also of tragic poetry, which is mimetic poetry par excellence.

Concerning the second point, that is, the way in which the poem speaks about speech, Martin establishes a distinction between speech designated as *muthos* and speech designated as *epos*. According to Martin, the term *muthos* is the marked term, and announces an act of public language that is endowed with authority, the authority to confer the rank of the person to whom the speech is attributed; whereas *epos*, as a more general, unmarked term, serves to designate any type of utterance. Thus private speech, even if dense, would be considered *epos*, whereas authority-bearing discourse, which has the power to command and to exert social control, would fall under the term *muthos*.[11]

From a sociolinguistic point of view, the distribution of speeches functioning as *muthos*, which make up only one sixth of the total body of direct discourse, is particularly significant. Among the gods, Zeus is the one to whom the greatest number of speeches presented as *muthos* are attributed. Zeus is also the pre-eminent utterer of speeches exerting the might of command. But since he is not alone, and he addresses himself either horizontally, to the other gods, or vertically, to men, he himself does not escape the pressure of being heard by the other gods and must count on the possibility of their intervention and interpellation. The same goes for mortals. Among the heroes, there is also a hierarchy that is closely tied to the social might of speech, to the power of uttered words to effect victories in the competition that pits the heroes against one another. The great wayward hero, Achilles, is

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the one to whom the greatest number of *muthoi* are attributed, a fact to which we will return.

Also worthy of attention is the other form of discourse imbued with social might, speech that conveys insult, threat, or blame, *neikos*. Finally, the third form of socially effective speech is that which relates to facts, to the high points of memory. These "performances of memory," as Martin calls them, can be compared to the *medium* of the poem itself, and to the performance of the bard. Here, thanks to socially recognized formulaic elements, the hero brings the facts he invokes in the service of his present, pressing goals: for example, forcing the interlocutor into a different position. Thus Phoinix, as Achilles' tutor, who is charged with instructing him so that he may excell in both actions *(erga)* and speech *(muthoi)*,[12] describes his own past as a way of convincing Achilles to end his refusal to return to the battlefield. This strategy of appropriation of the past through speech – formulaic speech – has its equivalents in other cultural contexts. But we also know that where the persuasive might of all the speech addressed to Achilles failed, the death of Patroklos succeeds, as if the evidence of this death, of this body that is forever silenced, were more effective that all the evocative might of speech that serves memory. It is important above all to honor this dead body, the body of Patroklos, to surround him with all the customary rituals, those entrusted to codified gesture and to speech alike. The rites lavished upon the body provide a glimpse of the limits of speech.

From what we have seen, it is easy to understand how Richard Martin can envision the heroes of the *Iliad* as *performers*, as a stylistic analysis bears out. *"Heroes are their own authors, performers in every sense."*[13] His vision is supported by reasons of three orders: "the discoveries of anthropologists; comparative material provided by other traditional literatures, and Homeric poetry itself." Martin cites Victor Turner:

> *Each culture, each person within it, uses the entire sensory repertoire to convey messages: manual gesticulations, facial expressions, bodily postures, rapid, heavy, or light breathing, tears, at the individual level; stylized gestures, dance patterns, prescribed silences, synchronized movements such as marching, the moves and "plays" of games, sports, and rituals, at the cultural level.*[14]

Martin then mentions the fieldwork performed by Michael Herzfeld among Cretan hillsmen, from which it emerges that the

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style of "performance" is what makes the man, what defines him in the community's eyes. This amounts to saying that the audience of villagers does not hesitate to make aesthetic judgments (evaluative judgments combining ethics and aesthetics) on the basis of the tacit convention that determines its collective sense of a "poetics of virility," made up as much of gestures, attitudes, and actions as of speech. This understanding of style within the context of social dynamics will enable Martin to take a fresh approach to the question of the performance of heroes in the *Iliad,* not without first discussing the ideal of "speaking well"[15] in a number of traditional societies. In particular he refers to the formal speech training of aristocratic children in Burundi. The quality of being "fair-spoken" includes all the possible registers of oral communication.

And he analyzes the linguistic performance of some of the heroes of the *Iliad,* beginning with the oldest of these heroes, the wise Nestor. His first *muthos,* addressed to Achilles and Agamemnon, a speech to which I have already alluded above, has been recognized as a model of rhetoric. According to Agamemnon's own comments, Nestor's speech is made *kata moiran,* or fairly, because in it Nestor justly apportions the praise and the blame that is due each individual. The analysis of Nestor's speech, introduced by the epithet *heduepes* ("sweeter than honey" [*Iliad,* Book I, 249]) underlines the binary rhythm that is typical of recourse to proverbs ("Do you also obey, since to be persuaded is better" [I, 274]), reminiscences, sententious maxims, and reiterations. Martin concludes that this must have been the type of discourse that the archaic Greeks appreciated and considered wise.

Another of Nestor's decisive speeches is the one he makes to Patroklos urging him to speak to Achilles in such a way as to change his friend's mind. In fact, when Patroklos tries to persuade Achilles, he does not simply repeat as his own the words Nestor had prescribed – proof that the heroes enjoy a certain freedom of speech, that they adapt their discourse to the circumstances, as the bard himself did. But Nestor does appear as a master of speech, because he enlists words of praise to reach his goal. No doubt this is what authorizes him (in Book X, 212-214), when the Achaians' situation appears desperate, to promise *kléos,* the glory conferred by words, by the oral transmission of heroic deeds, to the one who

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will go under cover of night into the Trojan camp to discover their plans. Nestor then occupies the place of the poet himself, the one to whom the heroes owe their *kléos.*

It is impossible to recapitulate here all of Martin's revelations about the performance "style" of each of the principal heroes, but the case of Agamemnon will serve to give an idea of the less successful performances. One of the linguistic resources of the Atrian king is *neikos,* insult or invective, which betrays the uncertainty he feels about the illocutionary might of his speech. Thus when Achilles asks Agamemnon to give the order to disperse after Patroklos' funeral, the request must be understood ironically: "Son of Atreus, beyond others the people of the Achaians will obey your words [*muthoi*]" (Book XXIII, 156-157).

In sum, each hero can be identified by his style. His way of speaking delineates his character, reveals his *ethos.* This notion encompasses the moral and social aspects of the person, but also the figure's importance in the poet's eyes, the greater or lesser esteem in which the poet holds him. In this connection, it is worth noting the place accorded Hector, just after Achilles: in Homer's eyes, Achilles and Hector are the two greatest heroes of the *Iliad*. This is Homer's way of speaking of the Achaians and Trojans *kata moiran,* without manicheism, without ethnocentrism, and in this fairness lies Homer's grandeur, about which Simone Weil commented: "The extraordinary equity which inspires the *Iliad* may have had other examples unknown to us; it has had no imitators. One is hardly made to feel that the poet is a Greek and not a Trojan."[16]

The poet's even-handedness towards the enemies and the suffering undergone by both camps does not prevent us from appreciating the merits of each hero according to a hierarchy of values that pit them against one another. As much by his actions as by his speech, it is indeed Achilles who is the best of the Achaians. To demonstrate this, Richard Martin tackles what is customarily referred to as Achilles' deviant language. His language, like the others', is made up of traditional formulas, even though new elements are also present. These formulas, however, are arranged in such a way as to give Achilles' speech a personal tone, which sets him apart from the others. In sum, through the very composition

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of his discourse, Achilles stands out, and the audience can then hear him – in every sense of the term – as a peerless hero.

Martin also suggests that Homer identified with his hero, inasmuch as, among the singers of epic poems of his time, Homer may have stood out as the best. Let us recall moreover that in Book IX, when the other Achaian leaders come on a mission to convince Achilles to return to battle, they find him playing the cithar and singing of heroic exploits, *kléa andrôn,* the exploits of men. Achilles himself is therefore a bard, as is the one who sings and perpetuates glory, *kléos.*

The poet is thus the one who sings and commemorates in words what he has not witnessed, but what the Muses have inspired in him. In the *Iliad,* the narrative part of the poem resounds with the disasters and horrors of war. Alongside the description of the din and furor of battle, there is also the description of pain and sorrow in the death of a son or friend. Thus Achilles mourns Patroklos.

Finally, there is direct discourse in which other voices than those of the warriors make their lamentations heard. These voices – mostly women's voices, Trojan voices, in private dialogue with those close to them – hold forth with *epea* which, despite their conventional nature, nevertheless convey heart-wrenching sorrow. I am thinking here of Andromache's lamentation to her dead husband; the audience hears what the dead warrior cannot:

> Now you go down to the house of Death in the secret places
> of the earth, and left me here behind in the sorrow of mourning,
> a widow in your house, and the boy is only a baby
> who was born to you and me, the unfortunate. You cannot help him,
> Hektor, any more, since you are dead .... (Book XXII, 482-486)

Simone Weil quotes this passage in the course of a sort of progression of moments that allude to love, friendship, *philia,* that is, everything that is beautiful and noble in life, everything that war has the effect of destroying, crushing, annihilating. But the triumph of the purest love among human beings takes place when, she writes, "friendship rises in the heart of mortal enemies." Here she is referring to the moment just before the poem ends when, despite all that has just happened, Achilles and Priam look upon each other in mutual admiration, when Achilles, reminded of his own father, ends up acceding to Priam's entreaties and grants him

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Hector's body,[17] so that the Trojan hero's funeral rites may be celebrated by his loved ones.

> Nothing precious is despised, whether or not destined to perish. The destitution and misery of all men is shown without dissimulation or disdain, no man is held either above or below the common level of all men, and whatever is destroyed is regretted. The victors and the vanquished are shown equally near to us, in an equal perspective, and seem, by that token, to be the fellows as well of the poet as of the auditors.[18]

Such remarks invite us to linger again on the vocabulary of suffering, of affliction, as well as on that of the songs of lamentation that are part of the funeral rites. Gregory Nagy notes that the two words used to designate pain, sorrow, mourning – *penthos* and *akhos* – are often accompanied by the epithet *alaston,* which means "unforgettable." Nagy maintains that the unforgettable*(alaston penthos / akhos* stands in a special but antithetical relation to *kléos aphtiton,* that is, undying glory. "With his *akhos/penthos* over Patroklos, 'Achilles enters the realm of *kléos.*' "[19] In other words, it is because the death of Patroklos has forced him to experience an irremediable sorrow that Achilles takes the decisive step that enables him to accede to eternal glory in the memory of men, thanks to the poet's song.

This unforgettable sorrow, which must be publicly manifested, is naturally expressed through sobbing and tears – all the heroes of the *Iliad* weep – but also through spoken and sung lamentations of a ritual nature, which the *Iliad* uses two terms to designate: *gooi* (the plural form of the noun *goos*), the lamentations of parents and loved ones; and *thrênoi,* the songs chanted by the bards or *aoidoi.* Thus Andromache leads the *goos* for Hector, as Achilles had done for Patroklos. Hector's death, in a sense the inevitable sequel to Patroklos' death, can thus be seen as a parallel of that earlier death. Moreover, in descriptions of the public mourning over Hector's body, we are told that the bards were seated next to the body in order to lead the funerary songs or *thrênoi,* with the women alternately taking up the song in antiphony. Still, Nagy remarks, the epic poem presents the contents only of the *gooi,* whereas the *thrênoi* are only alluded to, without any indication of their contents. I would like to suggest that the explanation for this may be that the epic poem itself is one long threnody, an extensive lamen-

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tation on the death of the heroes and the destruction of Troy, the "sacred Ilion" that gives the poem its title.

Analyzing the ritual lamentations of the funeral rites, Nagy wonders why the *Iliad* had to end before Achilles' death. He puts forth what strikes me as a rather illuminating hypothesis, based on passages describing the rituals performed by the women of Elis to honor Achilles on the occasion of the Olympic games. Since these are mourning rites, Nagy is led to conclude that, while the epic poem confers *kléos* upon Achilles, it is from worship that the hero obtains the celebration of sorrow, of unforgettable pain (*akhos / penthos*) associated with his death. We are thus referred to hero worship within the *polis*, as an evolution of the ancestor worship that is still represented in name Patroklos or *Patro-klées*, "the glory of the fathers."

To conclude these brief remarks, I would like to return to the point at which I began, Simone Weil's reading of the *Iliad* as the poem of might. How can this understanding of the poem be reconciled with a reading that holds the epic's ultimate objective to be *kléos*? Precisely, I would suggest, by keeping in mind that other aspect of the celebration of heroes, where what is sung is the misfortune of death by violence, by might – might that they had no choice but to use, but which they must in the end suffer themselves, ineluctably. Or as Weil herself writes: "Might appears here in all its rigidity and coldness, always accompanied by its fatal results from which neither he who uses it, nor he who suffers it, can escape."[20]

Such is the tension that pervades Homer's epic poem. While singing the glory that attaches to heroic battle – without in the least attenuating the misery of war, without masking the horror of its destruction – has the *Iliad* not contributed to changing the values associated with archaic warrior society, while preserving its memory? Isn't this – in addition to the poetic might of his composition – why Homer became the pre-eminent educator of Greece?

Translated from the French by Jennifer Curtiss Gage

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Notes

1. *The Iliad of Homer,* trans. with an introduction by Richmond Lattimore (Chicago and London, 1951).
2. Simone Weil, "The *Iliad,* Poem of Might," *in Intimations of Christianity among the Ancient Greeks,* ed. and trans. Elisabeth Chase Geissbuhler (London and New York, 1957), pp. 24-59; *La Source grecque* (Paris, 1953), pp. 11-46; in *Oeuvres complètes* II, "Ecrits historiques et politiques" (Gallimard, 1989), 3, pp. 227-253.
3. Simone Weil, "The *Iliad,* Poem of Might," p. 44; *La Source grecque,* p. 31; *Oeuvres complètes,* p. 244.
4. Gregory Nagy, *The Best of the Achaeans: Concepts of the Hero in Archaic Greek Poetry* (Baltimore and London, 1979).
5. Weil, "The *Iliad,*" p. 24; *La Source grecque,* p. 11.
6. Ibid., "The *Iliad,*" p. 25; *La Source grecque,* pp. 12-13.
7. See Simone Weil, *Oeuvres complètes,* (note 2 above), p. 53.
8. Richard P. Martin, *The Language of Heroes: Speech and Performance in the* Iliad (Ithaca and London, 1989).
9. It should be noted that the distinction between might and power, which can be found for example in the work of Hannah Arendt, was already developed before the theorization of the political; the distinction already takes shape in Nestor's speech to Achilles and Agamemnon in the first book of the *Iliad,* where Achilles is called the strongest *(karteros)* because he is the offspring of a goddess, whereas Agamemnon is the more powerful or the one who rules *(pherteros)* because he commands more men.
10. Martin, (see note 8 above), p. 42.
11. Ibid., ch. 2, "The Heroic Genres of Speaking." On page 66, we read: *"I submit that the Greek equivalent for 'important speech of social control' is muthos."*
12. *Iliad,* Book IX, 442-443; see also Martin, chapter 3, "Heroes as Performers."
13. Martin, (see note 8 above), p. 90.
14. Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theater: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York, 1982), p. 9.
15. The translation is Richmond Lattimore's (*Iliad,* Book I, 248).
16. Simone Weil, "The *Iliad,* Poem of Might," p. 51; *La Source grecque,* p. 36; in *Oeuvres complètes,* (see note 2 above), p. 248. However, several centuries after Homer, the siege of Troy was to be seen by the Greeks as manifesting the conflict between Europe and Asia. Is this to be understood as the effect of the war against the Persians? In any case, as Pierre Vidal-Naquet aptly remarks in his introduction to the *Iliad,* " even this notion must be nuanced. "There were always, within the Greek world itself, facts to counter this vision of things" (Paris, 1975, p. 76). He then enumerates a series of well-documented facts that attest to the heroization and even the worship of Hector among the Greeks. Thus the pertinence of Simone Weil's remarks on the fairness of the *Iliad* are confirmed.
17. For an interpretation of the poem as a whole and Hector's importance within it, see the fine study by James M. Redfield, *Nature and Culture in the* Iliad: *The Tragedy of Hector* (Chicago, 1975).

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18. Simone Weil, "The *Iliad*," pp. 48-49; *La Source grecque*, pp. 35-36; *Oeuvres complètes*, (see note 2 above), p. 248.
19. Gregory Nagy, *(see note 4 above)*, p. 102; Nagy cites D. Sinos, "The Entry of Achilles into Greek Epic" (Ph. D. dissertation, The Johns Hopkins University, 1975). In Nagy, see in particular part II, chapter 6, "Lamentation and the Hero."
20. Simone Weil, "The *Iliad*, Poem of Might," p. 52; *La Source grecque*, pp. 39; in *Oeuvres complètes*, (note 2 above), p. 251.

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