

The *Iliad* or the Poem of Force



1. The true hero, the true subject matter, the center of the *Iliad* is force. The force that men wield, the force that subdues men, in the face of which human flesh shrinks back. The human soul seems ever conditioned by its ties with force, swept away, blinded by the force it believes it can control, bowed under the constraint of the force it submits to. Those who have supposed that force, thanks to progress, now belongs to the past, have seen a record of that in Homer's poem; those wise enough to discern the force at the center of all human history, today as in the past, find in the *Iliad* the most beautiful and flawless of mirrors.

2. Force is that which makes a thing of whoever submits to it. Exercised to the extreme, it makes the human being a thing quite literally, that is, a dead body. Someone was there and, the next moment, no one. The *Iliad* never tires of presenting us this tableau:

... the horses
made the swift chariots thunder along the paths of war
in mourning for their blameless drivers. On the earth
they lie, much dearer to the vultures than to their wives.

11.159–62

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

... All around, the black hair
was spread, and the whole head lay in the dust,
just before so charming; now Zeus has granted
to his enemies to debase it on his native land.

22.401–4

4. We taste the bitterness of such a tableau undiluted, mitigated by no comforting lie, no consoling expectation of immortality, no faded nimbus of glory or patriotism.

His soul flies from his limbs, goes to Hades,
grieving its destiny, relinquishing its strength and youth.

22.362–63

5. Still more moving and painfully contrastive is the sudden evoking and immediate effacing of another world, the distant, fragile, touching world of peace, of the family, a world where each man means more than anything to those around him.

She called to her fair-haired servants in the house
to put by the fire a large tripod, in order that there might be
a warm bath for Hector on his return from combat.
So naive! She knew not that far indeed from warm baths
Achilles' arm had beaten him down, because of green-eyed Athena.

22.442–46

6. Truly, he was far from warm baths, that hapless man. Nor was he alone. Nearly all of the *Iliad* takes place far from warm baths. Nearly all human life has always taken place far from warm baths.

7. The force that kills is summary and crude. How much more varied in operation, how much more stunning in effect is that other sort of force, that which does not kill, or rather does not kill just yet. It will kill for a certainty, or it will kill perhaps, or it may merely hang over the being it can kill at any instant; in all cases, it changes the human being into stone. From the power to change a human being into a thing by making him die there comes another power, in its way more momentous, that of making a still living human being into a thing. He is living, he has a soul; he is nonetheless a thing. Strange being—a thing with a soul; strange situation for the soul! Who can say how it must each moment conform itself, twist and contort itself? It was not created to inhabit a thing; when it compels itself to do so, it endures violence through and through.

8. A man disarmed and exposed, toward whom a weapon points, becomes a corpse before being touched. For one last moment, he calculates, acts, hopes:

Immobile, he reflected. The other approached, terrified,
eager to grasp his knees. He longed in his heart
to escape evil death, dark destiny
With one arm he grasped his knees in supplication
with the other he held and would not let go the sharp spear....

21.64–66, 71–72

9. But before long he understands that the weapon will not turn aside, and, though breathing still, he is no more than matter; still thinking, he can think no more:

So spoke this splendid son of Priam
in suppliant words. He heard a pitiless response
He [Achilles] spoke; his knees and heart failed the other;
he let go the spear and fell back, stretched forth
both hands. Achilles drew his sharp sword,
struck him at the collarbone along the neck; and full length
plunged in the two-edged sword. Face down on the ground,
he lay sprawled, and the black blood flowed, staining the earth.

21.97–98, 114–19

10. When, outside of combat, a weak and unarmed stranger supplicates a warrior, he is not automatically condemned to death; but an instant of impatience on the warrior's part is sufficient to strip him of his life. It is enough for his flesh to lose the chief quality of living flesh. A bit of living flesh exhibits vitality above all by reflex action; a frog's leg, under electric shock, twitches; the closeness or touch of a horrifying or terrible thing makes any bundle of flesh, nerves, and muscles twitch. Only the suppliant does not tremble or shiver; he has not the license; his lips proceed to touch the object for him most charged with horror:

No one saw the great Priam come in. He stopped,
grasped Achilles' knees, kissed his hands,
terrible, manslaughtering, which had slain so many of his sons.

24.477–79

11. The spectacle of a human being reduced to this degree of misery chills one like the sight of a dead body.

As when hard misery seizes someone when in his own land
he has murdered, and when he arrives at the home of another,

some rich man; a shiver seizes those who look at him;
so Achilles shivered seeing the godlike Priam.
The others too shivered looking at one another.

24.480–84

12. But this is momentary, and soon the very presence of the miserable one is forgotten:

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

24.507–12

13. Not through insensitivity does Achilles push to the ground the old man clutching his knees; the words of Priam, calling to Achilles' mind his own old father, have moved him to tears. He simply finds himself as uninhibited in his attitudes and actions as if, instead of a suppliant, an inanimate object had touched his knees. The human beings around us have by their very presence a power, belonging only to them, to stop, to inhibit, to alter each action our body traces; a passer-by does not deflect us from our path in the same way as a billboard; one does not rise, walk, or sit when alone in one's own room the same as when one has a visitor. But this indefinable influence of the human presence is not exerted by those whom a moment of impatience may rend from life before even a thought has time to condemn them to death. Before them, others move about as if they were not there; and they for their part, in danger of being reduced to nothing in an instant, imitate nonentity. Pushed, they fall; fallen, they lie on the ground, so long as chance does not prompt someone to raise them up. But even when at length they are raised up, addressed with kind words, it does not occur to them to take this resurrection seriously, to dare to express a wish; an irritated voice may return them instantly to silence:

He spoke, and the old man quaked and submitted.

24.571

14. At least some suppliants, once granted their wish, become again men like others. But there are still more miserable beings who, without dying, have become things for life. In their days there is no play, no space, no opening for anything that comes from within. These are not men living harder lives than others, or socially inferior to others; they are an alternative human species, a hybrid of man and corpse. That a human being should be a thing is a logical contradiction; but when the impossible has become a reality, the contradiction lacerates the soul. This thing aspires at all times to be a man or a woman, and never attains the goal. This is a death that extends throughout a life, a life that death has frozen long before putting an end to it.

15. The maiden, daughter of a priest, will suffer this fate:

I will not return her. Before that old age will seize her,
in my home, in Argos, far from her homeland,
moving along the loom and lying in my bed.

1.29–31

16. The young woman, the young mother, wife of the prince, will suffer it:

And perhaps one day in Argos you will weave fabric for another
and you will carry the water from the spring Messeis or Hypereia,

despite yourself, under the compulsion of hard necessity.

6.456–58

17. The infant heir of the royal scepter will undergo it:

Those women no doubt will go in the hold of the hollow ships,
myself among them; you, my child, either along with me
you will follow and perform degrading labor,
toiling under the eyes of a pitiless master

24.731–34

18. In the eyes of a mother, such a destiny is more awful for her child than death itself; the husband hopes to die before seeing his wife reduced to it; the father calls all the plagues of the heavens down on the army that subjects his daughter to it. But so brutal a destiny nullifies the curses, the rebellions, the comparisons, the thoughts of the future and the past, almost the memories of those it has befallen. It is not the part of the slave to be faithful to his city and his dead.

19. When one of those suffers or dies who have made him lose everything, who have sacked his town, massacred his people before his eyes, only then does the slave weep. Naturally, for only then are tears permitted him, even required of him. But in slavery, are not tears ready to flow as soon as they may do so with impunity?

She spoke weeping, and the women wailed,
taking Patroclus as pretext each for her own anguish.

19.301–2

20. At no time may the slave express anything except what is pleasing to his master. This is why, in a life so bleak, no emotion can germinate and animate him a bit except love of the master; every other path is barred to the gift of love, just as for a harnessed horse, the shafts, the reins, the bits bar all roads save one. And if by some miracle there appears the hope of becoming someone one day, by some favor, to what lengths will they not go in thankfulness and love for those very men against whom the recent past should inspire revulsion:

My husband, to whom my honored father and mother gave me,
I have seen before my city stabbed by the sharp bronze.
My three brothers, whom a sole mother bore with me,
so beloved! they have found their fated day.
But you did not let me, when my husband was slain by swift Achilles,
and the holy city of Mynes was sacked,
you did not let me shed tears; you promised me that godlike Achilles
would take me for his wedded wife and would take me in his ships
to Phthia, to be married among the Myrmidons.
So unceasingly I bewail you, you who were always so sweet.

19.291–300

21. No one can lose more than the slave loses; he loses his entire inner life. He may regain a bit of it only when there seems to be a chance to alter his fate. Such is the realm of force: this realm extends as far as that of nature. Nature also, when essential needs come into play, effaces inner life and even the grief of a mother:

Since even Niobe of the lovely locks thought to eat,
she whose twelve children perished in her home,
six sons and six daughters in the bloom of their youth.
Apollo slew the boys with his silver bow

in his wrath against Niobe; Artemis who loves the arrows slew the maidens.
All because she had likened herself to fair-cheeked Leto,
saying "she has two children; I, I have borne many."
And those two, though they were only two, had made all the others die.
Nine days they lay in death; no one came
to bury them. The people had become stones by the will of Zeus.
And on the tenth day, they were buried by the gods of heaven.
But she thought to eat, when she grew tired of tears.

24.602–13

22. No one has ever described with such bitterness the misery of man, which renders him unable even to comprehend his misery.

23. Force wielded by others dominates the soul like an excessive hunger, since it comprises an unending power of life and death. And it is a realm as cold and harsh as if it were governed by inert matter. The man who finds himself on all sides the weaker is solitary even in the heart of cities, more solitary even than the man lost in a desert.

Two urns are positioned at the threshold of Zeus,
where are held the gifts he grants, the one sort bad, the other good....
The one on whom he bestows deadly gifts he subjects to insults;
a fearful need hunts him across the divine earth;
He wanders and gets the respect of neither men nor gods.

24.527–28, 531–33

24. As pitilessly as force annihilates, equally without pity it intoxicates those who possess or believe they possess it. In reality, no one possesses it. People in the *Iliad* are not segregated into conquered, slaves, suppliants on the one side and conquerors and masters on the other; every human being may at any moment be compelled to submit to force. The warriors, though free and armed, submit no less to commands and insults:

Every man of the host whom he saw and caught shouting,
he struck with his scepter and scolded thus:
"wretch, hold your tongue, listen to others speaking,
your betters. You're neither brave nor strong,
you're worthless in battle, worthless in the council."

2.198–202

25. Thersites pays dearly for his very sensible words, words just like those Achilles speaks.

He struck him; he buckled, his tears sprang forth,
a bloody bruise formed on his back
under the golden scepter; he sat in fear.
In a sad daze he wiped his tears.
The others, despite their irritation, laughed and took pleasure at the sight.

2.266–70

26. Even Achilles, that fierce, invincible hero, is presented to us at the beginning of the poem weeping from humiliation and impotent sorrow, after they have taken away before his very eyes the woman he wanted for a wife, and he dared not oppose it.

... But Achilles
sat weeping, away from his comrades, apart,
at the edge of the foamy waves, gazing on the wine-dark sea.

1.348–50

27. Agamemnon has intentionally humbled Achilles to show that he is the superior:

Thus you will grasp
that I count for more than you, and all others will think twice
before treating me as an equal and opposing me.

1.185–87

28. But a few days later, the supreme chief weeps in his turn, forced to demean himself, to supplicate, and he bears the pain of doing so to no avail.

29. The disgrace of fear spares no warrior. Heroes tremble like the others. A single challenge by Hector is enough to dismay all the Greeks without a single exception, save for Achilles and his men, who are absent:

He spoke and all were silent and held their peace;
they were ashamed to refuse, scared to accept.

7.92–93

30. But as soon as Ajax comes forward, fear changes sides:

A shudder of fear weakened the limbs of the Trojans;
the heart of Hector himself leapt in his breast;
But he was no longer free to shudder or flee.

7.215–17

31. Two days later, Ajax, in turn, feels terror:

Father Zeus on high makes fear grow in Ajax.
He stops, stunned, puts behind him the seven-hide shield,
and trembling looks all around at the host, like a beast.

11.544–46

32. A moment of fear and trembling comes to Achilles himself, though, truth be told, before a river, not a mere man. Excluding him, all without exception are shown beaten at some point. Valor contributes less in determining victory than does blind destiny, signified by Zeus's golden scales:

At this moment Father Zeus used his golden scales.
He placed in it two fates of all-reaping death,
one for the horse-breaking Trojans, one for the bronze-clad Greeks.
As he grasped the scales in the middle, the Greeks' fatal day tipped down.

8.69–72

33. By virtue of its blindness, destiny institutes a type of justice, blind as well, that exacts from men at arms a punishment in kind; the *Iliad* had formulated that code long before the Gospels, and in almost the same phrases:

Ares is just and kills those who kill.

18.309

34. Though all are destined from birth to endure violence, the realm of circumstances closes their minds to this truth. The strong is never perfectly strong nor the weak perfectly weak, but neither knows this. They believe they are of different species; the weak man does not consider himself like the strong, nor is he regarded as such. He who possesses force moves in a frictionless environment; nothing in the human matter around him puts an interval for reflection between impulse and action. Where reflection has no place, there is neither justice nor forethought: hence the ruthless and mindless behavior of warriors. Their sword plunges into a disarmed opponent at their knees; they vaunt over a dying man, telling

him the insults his body will undergo. Achilles cuts the throats of twelve Trojan youths on the pyre of Patroclus as casually as we cut flowers for a grave. In wielding their power they never suspect that the consequences of their actions will afflict them in turn. When one can silence an old man with a word, cause him to tremble and submit, does such a one consider the curses of a priest to be of any consequence in the eyes of soothsayers? Does he forbear to appropriate the woman Achilles loves, knowing that neither has any choice but to submit? When Achilles delights to see the wretched Greeks flee, can he grasp that this flight, which will continue and end at his whim, will cost his friend and even himself their lives? Those to whom fate has loaned force perish through their over-reliance on it.

35. It is impossible that they should not perish, since they neither consider their own force to be limited nor recognize that their relations with others are a balance of unequal forces. Other men do not pause in their actions to have some regard for their fellow man; they conclude that destiny has granted them every license and none to their inferiors. From this point, they overstep the force at their disposal—inevitably, for they fail to see its limits. They are then surrendered ineluctably to chance, and things no longer obey them. Chance sometimes helps, sometimes hurts them; they are exposed quite naked to sorrow, without the armor of power that had shielded their spirit, with nothing to insulate them any longer from tears.

36. This geometrically stringent chastisement, which spontaneously punishes the abuse of force, was the primary issue in Greek thought. It constitutes the heart and soul of epic; under the name “Nemesis,” it is the subject of Aeschylean tragedy; the Pythagoreans, Socrates, Plato move from this starting point to their reflections on man and the cosmos. The concept is familiar wherever the spirit of Greek thought has penetrated. This Greek idea perhaps survives as “karma” in regions of the East pervaded by Buddhism. But the West has lost it, lacking even a word for it in any of its languages. The notions of limit, measure, balance, which should shape the conduct of life, are employed only in a mundane way in the technical sphere. We are geometricians of mere matter; the Greeks were, from the outset, geometricians in the apprenticeship of virtue.

37. The progression of war in the *Iliad* comprises a simple seesaw movement. The victor of the moment feels himself invincible, even though a few brief hours earlier he encountered defeat. He forgets that victory is ephemeral. At the end of the first day of the campaign recounted in the *Iliad*, the victorious Greeks could undoubtedly have gained the object of their efforts, namely Helen and her riches; at least if one imagines, as Homer did, that the Greek army had reason to believe Helen was in Troy. The Egyptian priests, who must have known, stated to Herodotus much later that she was actually to be found in Egypt. At all events, that evening, the Greeks do not want her any more.

“Let none now accept either the goods of Paris,
or Helen; even a dolt can see
that Troy is now on the brink of ruin.”
He spoke, and all among the Achaeans hailed his words.

7.400–403

38. They want nothing less than the whole. All the wealth of Troy as booty, all the palaces, the temples, and the houses in ashes; all the women and children slaves; all the men corpses. They forget one detail: that all is not in their power, since they are not in Troy. Maybe they will be there tomorrow, maybe not.

39. Hector has the same lapse of memory that very day:

Since I know this well in my guts and my heart;
a day will come when holy Ilion will perish,
and Priam, and the people of Priam of the good spear.
But I think less of the sorrow in store for the Trojans,

and of Hecuba herself, and of king Priam,
and of my brothers who, so many and so brave,
will fall in the dust under the blows of the enemy,
than of you, when one of the bronze-cuirassed Greeks
shall carry you off in tears, stripping you of your freedom....
As for me, may I be dead and the earth have recovered me,
ere I hear you cry or see you carried away!

6.447–55, 464–65

40. What wouldn't he give at this moment to avert the horrors he believes unavoidable? But he could only give in vain. Two days afterward, the Greeks have fled wretchedly, and Agamemnon even wants to take to sea again. Hector, who could easily have secured the departure of the Greeks by a small offer, is no longer even willing to permit them to go with empty hands:

Let us burn fires all around and let the glare go heavenward
for fear in the night the long-haired Greeks
escape making a break onto the broad back of the sea....
Let many carry wound marks with them to digest at home ...
so that all the world may shrink from
bringing grief-causing war to the Trojans, breakers of horses.

8.509–11, 513, 515–16

41. His desire is realized; the Greeks remain; and next day, at noon, they make a piteous thing of him and his men:

They fled across the plain like cattle
that a lion, coming on them in the night, chases before him
Thus the mighty son of Atreus, Agamemnon, pursued them,
killing without fail the hindmost; they for their part fled.

11.172–73, 177–78

42. In the course of the afternoon, Hector regains the upper hand, retreats again, then routs the Greeks, then is repulsed by Patroclus and his fresh troops. Patroclus, who pursues his advantage beyond his forces, ends up stripped of his armor, wounded, and exposed to Hector's sword. That evening victorious Hector harshly quashes the sensible counsel of Polydamas:

"Now that the devious son of Cronus has granted me
glory by the ships, thrusting the Greeks to the sea,
imbecile! don't propose such counsels before the people.
No Trojan will listen to you; I for my part will not allow it." ...
So spoke Hector, and the Trojans shouted assent.

18.293–96, 310

43. The next day Hector is lost. Achilles makes him retreat across the whole plain and goes in for the kill. He has always been the more powerful of the two in battle; how much more so after several weeks of rest, transported by vengeance and victory, facing a worn-out enemy! And there is Hector alone before Troy's walls, utterly alone, awaiting death and trying to brace his soul to face it:

Alas! if I go behind the gate and the rampart,
Polydamas will straightaway shame me....
Now that I have lost my men through folly,
I fear the Trojans and the Trojan women in their trailing robes,
and I dread to hear it said by those less brave than I:
"Hector, overconfident in his strength, has destroyed his country." ...

Yet if I were to put down my curved shield,
my good helmet, and, leaning my spear on the rampart,
if I were to go to meet famed Achilles?...
But why does my heart counsel me such counsels?
I will not approach him; he would have no pity,
no respect; he would slay me, if I were thus exposed,
like a woman....

22.99–100, 104–7, 111–13, 122–25

44. Hector evades none of the pain and shame that befall the luckless. Alone, stripped of all the prestige of force, the courage that kept him outside the walls does not keep him from fleeing:

Hector, at the sight of him, was seized by trembling. He could not steel himself to stand firm....
... It is not for a ewe or an ox hide
that they struggle, the usual race-prizes;
it is for a life that they run, that of Hector, breaker of horses.

22.136–37, 159–61

45. Mortally wounded, he enhances the triumph of the conqueror by his futile entreaties:

I beg you by your life, by your knees, by your parents....

22.338

46. But the audience of the *Iliad* knew that Hector's death would give only fleeting joy to Achilles, and the death of Achilles only fleeting joy to the Trojans, and the annihilation of Troy only fleeting joy to the Achaeans.

47. Thus violence overwhelms those it touches. In the end, it seems as external to the one who wields it as to the one who endures it. Here is born the notion of a destiny under which executioners and their victims are similarly innocent: conquerors and conquered are brothers in the same misery, each a heart-ache to the other.

A single son was born to him, born to a short life; and
he grows older without my attentions, since far from my homeland
I remain at Troy to work evil against you and your sons.

24.540–42

48. The tempered use of force, indispensable to the escape from its machinery, would demand super-human virtue, as rare as steadfast dignity in weakness. Further, moderation itself carries risks, for the prestige that is three-fourths of force consists above all of the magnificent indifference of the strong toward the weak, an indifference so contagious that it infects even those who are its object. But it is not usually political considerations that counsel excess. The temptation to excess is virtually irresistible. Reasonable words are sometimes spoken in the *Iliad*; those of Thersites are reasonable in the highest degree. So, too, are those of the angry Achilles:

Nothing is worth my life, not even all the goods they say
Ilion holds, that city so prosperous....
Because one may take cattle and fat sheep as booty
A human life, however, once lost, cannot be recouped.

9.401–2, 406, 408

49. But reasonable words fall into the void. If an inferior speaks them, he is punished and silenced; if a superior, he does not abide by them in his actions. And there is always some god to recommend the irra-

tional course. In the end, the very notion that one might want to evade the career allotted one by fate—that of killing and dying—vanishes from the spirit:

... we whom Zeus
has designated for suffering from youth to old age
in grievous warfare, till we perish to the last man.

14.85–87

50. These warriors, like those at Craonne much later, sensed that they were “the condemned.”

51. They have fallen into this condition through the simplest of snares. At the outset, their heart is light, as always when a force faces mere void. Their weapons are in their hands; the enemy is absent. Except when one has a spirit downcast by the enemy’s reputation, one is always much stronger than an absent opponent, who imposes no yoke of necessity. No necessity appears yet to the spirit of those going forth in this way, as if to a game, a holiday free from daily care.

What happened to our boasts, used to bolster our brave selves,
which you at Lemnos made in your vanity,
gorging yourselves on the meat of straight-horned oxen,
drinking from cups brimming with wine?
That each against one or two hundred of these Trojans
could hold his own in battle: and behold one alone is too much for us!

8.229–34

52. Even after a first taste of it, war does not instantly cease to seem a game. The necessity proper to war is terrible, another thing altogether from that connected with peace; the soul will submit to it only when it cannot escape it any longer; and, as long as it manages to escape it, it passes days empty of necessity, days of play, of dream, whimsical and illusory. Danger is then an abstraction, and the lives one destroys are like playthings broken by a child and just as inconsequential; heroism is histrionic and besmirched by boasting. If for a moment a surge of energy amplifies the power of action, one feels irresistible, divinely exempted from defeat and death. War is then a lark and vulgarly loved.

53. But for the majority, this situation does not last. A day comes when fear, defeat, the death of beloved comrades make the soul of the warrior succumb to necessity. War then ceases to be a game or a dream; the warrior finally understands that it actually exists. It is a harsh reality, infinitely too harsh to tolerate, for it embraces death. The idea of death is insupportable, except in short bursts, when one knows that death is in fact possible. It is true that every man is destined to die and that a soldier may grow old in battles, but for those whose soul is bent beneath the yoke of war, the connection between death and the future is not the same as for other men. For others, death is a limit imposed on the future. For soldiers, it is the future itself, the future their vocation allots. That men should have death for their future is unnatural. Once the practice of war has made clear the possibility of death contained in every moment, thought becomes incapable of passing from one day to the next without encountering the image of death. The spirit is then strained so much that it can endure only a short time; but every new dawn brings with it the same necessity; days joined to days fill out years. The soul undergoes duress every day. Each morning it amputates itself of all aspiration, for thought cannot travel in time without encountering death. Thus war expunges every concept of a goal, even the goals of war. It expunges the idea of an end of war. The possibility of a situation so violent is unthinkable outside that situation; an end to it unthinkable within it. Thus, one does nothing to effect this end. One’s hands cannot cease to hold and wield weapons in the presence of an armed opponent; the mind should devise a way out but has lost all ability to devise such a thing. It is occupied entirely in violating itself. Always among human beings, as regards slavery or war-

fare, insufferable agonies persist by their own inertia and appear from outside easy to bear; they persist because they sap the resources needed to escape.

54. None the less, the soul subjected to war cries out for deliverance, but deliverance itself appears under a tragic and extreme guise, the guise of destruction. A moderate, reasonable aim would expose thought to an agony so violent as to be unendurable even in reminiscence. The terror, the grief, the weariness, the massacres, the comrades slain—only the intoxication with force can drown out all these things that rend the soul. The idea that boundless effort should bring little or no gain is painful.

What's this? Shall we let Priam and the Trojans brag
of Argive Helen, she for whom so many Greeks
have died at Troy far from their native soil?...

What's this? Do you want us to leave the city of Troy of the wide ways
for which we have suffered so many hardships?

2.176–78, 14.88–89

55. What, after all, is Helen to Ulysses? What indeed to him is Troy, filled with riches that won't compensate for the ruin of Ithaca? Troy and Helen are important only as causing bloodshed and tears for the Greeks; mastery of Troy and Helen means mastery of fearful memories. When the existence of an enemy has compelled the soul to destroy in itself what nature has put there, that soul believes it may heal itself only by the destruction of the enemy. At the same time, the death of well-loved comrades induces a grim emulation of their dying:

Oh, to die this instant, since my friend has had
to fall without getting my help! Very far from his homeland
he has perished, and he did not have me to avert death....
Now I go to find the killer of a man so dear,
Hector; death I shall find at the moment when
Zeus wishes to bring it, he and the other gods.

18.98–100, 114–16

56. The selfsame despair impels toward both death and slaughter:

I know full well that my destiny is to die here,
far from my beloved father and mother; but still
I'll not stop till the Trojans have had a bellyful of war.

19.421–23

57. The man possessed by this double appetite for death belongs, so long as he does not change, to a race quite unlike the race of the living.

58. When the beaten man begs to be allowed to see another day, what response can this meek wish for life find in such hearts? The very possession of arms on one side and their lack on the other divest the imperiled life of nearly all its significance. And, when one has abolished in oneself the thought that to see the light of day is sweet, how will such a one respect that thought in this humble and futile entreaty?

I am at your knees, Achilles; have a thought for me, have mercy;
I am here as a suppliant, O son of Zeus, worthy of respect.
Since at your home I first ate the bread of Demeter,
that day when you seized me in my well-cultivated orchard.
And you sold me, sending me far from my father and my people,
to holy Lemnos; a hecatomb was given for me.
I was ransomed for three times that price; today's dawn is for me
the twelfth since my return to Ilion,

after so many tribulations. I who am now again in your hands
by a baneful destiny. I must be contemptible to Father Zeus,
who again delivers me to you; for a scrap of life only my mother
has borne me, Laothoë, daughter of the aged Altos....

21.74–85

59. What a reply this feeble wish receives!

Come, friend, die also yourself! Why do you complain so?
Patroclus too has died and he was a much better man than you.
And I—do you not see how comely and tall I am?
I am of noble lineage, my mother a goddess;
but for me, too, there is death and a harsh destiny.
There will come a dawn, or an evening, or a midday,
when some warrior with his weapons will strip away my life, too....

21.106–12

60. When one has had to sever oneself from all aspiration for life, it requires a heart-rending effort of altruism to value life in another. One cannot imagine any of Homer's warriors capable of such an effort, except possibly the one who in a sense is at the center of the poem—Patroclus: he "knew how to be gentle to all," and in the *Iliad* he commits no inhumane or cruel act. But how many men have we known of, in many millennia of history, who have evinced such a godlike altruism? One could hardly name two or three. Lacking this altruism, the conquering soldier is like a scourge of nature; possessed by war, he, like a slave, though in an entirely different fashion, becomes a thing, and words have no more appeal to him than to matter. Each, in contact with force, is subjected to its inexorable action, which is to render those it touches either mute or deaf.

61. Such is the character of force. Its power to transform human beings into things is twofold and operates on two fronts; in equal but different ways, it petrifies the souls of those who undergo it and those who ply it. This characteristic reaches its extreme form in the milieu of arms, at the instant when a battle begins to incline toward a decision. Battles are not determined among men who calculate, devise, take resolutions and act on them but among men stripped of these abilities, transformed, fallen to the level either of purely passive inert matter or of the blind forces of sheer impetus. This is the ultimate secret of war, which the *Iliad* expresses in its similes. In these, warriors are likened either to fire, flood, wind, fierce beasts, and whatever blind cause of disaster or to frightened animals, trees, water, sand, whatever is affected by the violence of outside forces. Greeks and Trojans, from day to day, sometimes even from hour to hour, submit by turns to one or the other transformation:

As when a bloodthirsty lion attacks cattle
as they graze in a vast-spreading marshland
by the thousands ...,
... And they all shudder—so then were the Achaeans
in panic put to flight by Hector and Zeus the father,
all of them....

As when destructive fire descends on a thick wood;
and the swirling wind carries it everywhere, then the trunks
uprooted fall under the assault of the violent fire;
just so Agamemnon the son of Atreus made fall the heads of the
fleeing Trojans

15.630–32, 636–38; 11.155–59

62. The art of war is merely the art of provoking such metamorphoses, and the tools, the techniques, even the death inflicted on the enemy are only means to this end; it has for its true end the very soul of the combatants. But these metamorphoses pose an enigma, and the gods, who so fascinate us, are their authors. However it happens, this twofold petrifactive property is fundamental to force, and a soul in contact with it eludes it only by a kind of miracle. Such miracles are rare and ephemeral.

63. The thoughtlessness of those that wield force with no regard for men or things they have or believe they have at their mercy, the hopelessness that impels the soldier to devastate, the crushing of the enslaved and the defeated, the massacres, all these things make up a picture of unrelieved horror. Force is its sole hero. A tedious gloom would ensue were there not scattered here and there some moments of illumination—fleeting and sublime moments when men possess a soul. The soul thus roused for an instant, soon to be lost in the empire of force, wakes innocent and unmarred; no ambiguous, complex, or anxious feeling appears in it; courage and love alone have a place there. Sometimes a man discovers his soul during self-deliberation, when he tries, like Hector before Troy, to confront his fate all alone, unaided by gods or men. Other moments when men discover their souls are moments of love; hardly any pure form of love among men is missing from the *Iliad*.

64. The guest-host tradition overcomes the blindness of combat even after several generations have passed:

So I am your beloved guest in the heart of Argos....
Let us avoid each other's spears, even during battle.

6.224–26

65. The love of a son for his parents, and of a father or mother for a son, is always displayed briefly and touchingly:

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

18.94–95

66. So too fraternal love:

My three brothers, whom one mother bore with me,
so beloved....

19.293–94

67. Marital love, doomed to unhappiness, is of a surpassing purity. The spouse, in evoking the disgraces of slavery that await his beloved wife, omits that one the mere thought of which would blot their tenderness. Nothing is so frank as the words his wife addresses to a man about to die:

... It would be better for me,
having lost you, to be under the earth; I will have no
other succor, when you have met your destiny,
only griefs....

6.410–13

68. No less moving are the words spoken to the dead husband:

My husband, dead before your time, so young; and I, your widow,
you have left alone in my house; our child yet small
whom you and I, now unhappy, had together. And I fear
he will never grow up....
For you did not hold my hand and die in bed,
spoke no wise word, that always

I might reflect on night and day shedding tears.

24.725–28, 743–45

69. The most beautiful friendship—that between comrades in arms—forms the theme of the last books of the *Iliad*:

... But Achilles

wept, dreamt of his well-loved comrade; nor did sleep
all-dominating take him; he tossed to and fro ...

24.3–5

70. But the purest triumph of love, the supreme grace of wars, is the friendship that stirs in the hearts of mortal enemies. It can cause to vanish the thirst to avenge a slain son or friend; by an even greater miracle, it can close the gap between benefactor and suppliant, victor and victim:

But when their desire for drink and food was appeased,
then Dardanian Priam started to marvel at Achilles,
how large and handsome he was; he had the look of a god.
And in turn Dardanian Priam was admired by Achilles,
who looked at his handsome face and listened to his words.

And when both were satisfied in contemplating each other

24.628–33

71. These moments of grace are infrequent in the *Iliad*, but they suffice to convey with deep regret just what violence has killed and will kill again.

72. However, such an amassing of violent acts would leave one cold but for an accent of incurable bitterness that constantly makes itself felt, even in a single word, turn of a verse, or run-on line. This is what makes the *Iliad* unique, this bitterness emerging from tenderness and enveloping all men equally, like the bright light of the sun. The tone always is imbued with bitterness but never descends to lamentation. Justice and love, totally out of place in this depiction of extremes and unjust violence, subtly and by nuance, drench all with their light. Nothing of value, whether doomed to die or not, is slighted; the misery of all is revealed without dissimulation or condescension; no man is set above or below the common human condition; all that is destroyed is regretted. Victors and victims are equally close to us, and thereby akin to both poet and listener. If there is a discrepancy, it is that the misfortune of enemies is perhaps experienced more grievously.

So he fell there, to sleep the sleep of bronze,
unfortunate man, far from his wife, defending his people

11.241–42

73. What a tone to evoke the fate of the youth Achilles sold at Lemnos!

For eleven days he rejoiced in his heart among his loved ones,
after his return from Lemnos; on the twelfth, once more
God delivered him into the hands of Achilles, who had
to send him to Hades, though he did not want to go.

21.45–48

74. And the fate of Euphorbus, who had seen only one day of war:

The blood soaked his hair, hair like that of the Graces....

17.51

75. When Hector is bewailed as

... protector of chaste wives and small children,

24.730

the words suggest purity defiled by force and children offered up to weapons. The spring at the gates of Troy becomes an object of heartbreaking nostalgia when Hector runs past it to save his doomed life:

There were large basins nearby,
handsome, all of stone, where the resplendent clothes
were washed by the women of Troy and their comely daughters,
in time past, peacetime, before the Achaeans ever came.
Past these they ran, the one in flight, the other pursuing behind.

22.153–57

76. The entire *Iliad* is overclouded by the worst of human calamities, the destruction of a city. This calamity could not seem more heartrending if the poet had been born at Troy. But his tone is the same when Achaeans perish far from their homeland.

77. Brief hints of the peacetime world give pain, insofar as this other life, this life of the living, seems tranquil and fulfilling:

As long as the dawn lasted and the day rose,
the missiles found their marks on both sides and men fell.
But at the same hour when the woodcutter goes to prepare his meal
in the vales of the mountains, when his arms are weary
from cutting the huge trunks, and his heart has had enough,
and the hunger for tasty sustenance roils his belly,
at this hour, the Danaans in their valor broke through the battle-line.

11.84–90

78. In the *Iliad*, all that exists outside war, all that war destroys or jeopardizes is arrayed in poetry; not so the deeds of war. The transition from life to death is not veiled by any reticence:

Then his teeth blew out; from both eyes
the blood started, open-mouthed he spewed blood
from lips and nostrils; death wrapped him in its black cloud.

16.348–50

79. The cold brutality of war's deeds is disguised not one iota, since neither victors nor victims are idolized, reviled, or despised. Destiny and the gods almost always determine the shifting fortune of battles. Within the limits imposed by destiny, the gods highhandedly dispense victory and ruin. They are always the ones to provoke the stupidities and betrayals that, time and again, preclude peace; war is their true *métier*, whim and malevolence their only motives. As for the warriors, the similes that liken them—victors and victims—to beasts or objects can elicit neither admiration nor scorn but only sorrow that men may be so transfigured.

80. The exceptional impartiality that pervades the *Iliad* may have parallels unknown to us, but it has had no imitators. It is difficult to detect that the poet is Greek and not Trojan. The tone of the poem seems to attest directly to the source of its oldest parts; history will perhaps never shed a clear light on this. If one believes with Thucydides that eighty years after the fall of Troy the Achaeans suffered conquest in their turn, one may ask whether these songs, in which iron is seldom mentioned, are not those of the exiled remnants of a conquered people. Constrained to live and die “far from their homeland,” like the Greeks fallen at Troy, and having like the Trojans lost their cities, they identified both with the victors,

who had been their fathers, and with the victims, whose misery was like their own. The reality of this still-recent war appeared to them across the years, tainted neither by the intoxication of arrogance nor by disgrace. Able to envisage themselves at once as victors or vanquished, they therefore understood what the blinded victors and vanquished could not. This is only a conjecture; one may hardly do more than guess about times so remote.

81. Whatever the case may be, this poem is a miraculous thing. Its bitterness rests on the only just cause for bitterness—the subjection of the human spirit to force, that is, in the last analysis, to inert matter. This subjection is the same for all mortals, though souls bear it differently according to their goodness. No one in the *Iliad* is spared it, just as no one on earth is spared. No one who yields to it is regarded as contemptible for this reason. All who escape the empire of force in their innermost being and in their relations with their fellow men are loved, but loved in grief at the threat of constantly impending destruction. Such is the spirit of the only true epic that the West possesses. The *Odyssey* seems only a good reproduction of the *Iliad* in some places, of oriental poems in others. The *Aeneid* is an imitation, granted a brilliant one, marred by frigidity, ostentation, and poor taste. The *chansons de geste*, lacking impartiality, fall short of grandeur; the author and the reader of the *Chanson de Roland* do not feel the death of an enemy as they do that of Roland.

82. Attic tragedy, at any rate that of Aeschylus and Sophocles, is the true descendant of epic. The concept of justice enlightens it without ever interfering in it. Force here appears in its cold rigidity, always attended by the lethal effects that neither those who use it nor those who suffer it may escape. The abasement of the soul under its coercion is neither disguised, nor mitigated by facile pity, nor held up to scorn. More than one being wounded by the degradation of misfortune is offered for us to wonder at. The Gospels are the final splendid expression of the Greek genius, as the *Iliad* is the first. The spirit of Greece may be seen here not only in the command to seek “the kingdom and the justice of our heavenly Father” to the exclusion of every other goal but also in the revelation of human misery in a being at once divine and human. The accounts of the Passion show that a divine spirit, joined with flesh, is affected by unhappiness. It shudders before suffering and death and feels itself in the depths of anguish isolated from men and from God. The experience of human misery gives these accounts that nuance of simplicity that typifies the Greek genius and so charges Attic tragedy and the *Iliad* with value. Certain words strike a note curiously similar to that of the epic: the Trojan youth, sent unwilling to Hades, comes to mind when Christ says to Peter: “Another will gird you and carry you where you do not want to go.” This nuance is intrinsic to the spirit of the Gospels, since the experience of human misery is a requirement of justice and love. Whoever fails to grasp that every human soul is subject to changing fortune and necessity can neither regard as peers nor love as himself those separated from him by the chasm of chance. The diverse restrictions that weigh on men give birth to the illusion of discrete species incapable of communicating. It is impossible to love and to be just unless one understands the realm of force and knows enough not to respect it.

83. The links between the human soul and destiny, to what extent each soul selects its own ideal, what pitiless necessity modifies in the soul according to the vagaries of fortune, what elements virtue and grace can preserve intact—in such questions lies are seductively easy. Arrogance, degradation, hatred, contempt, insensibility, the wish to forget or overlook—all contribute to this temptation. In particular, nothing is more rare than a just presentation of misfortune. In depicting it, one nearly always pretends that abasement is innate in the unfortunate or that the soul may endure misfortune unscathed, without its thoughts being uniquely altered. The Greeks had a force of soul that allowed them, for the most part, to avoid self-delusion; they were compensated for this by understanding how to attain in all things the highest degree of insight, purity, and simplicity. But the spirit transmitted from the *Iliad* to the Gospels

via the philosophers and tragic poets hardly ever breached the borders of Greek civilization; and, after the fall of Greece, nothing remained but reflections of that spirit.

84. The Romans and Hebrews both thought themselves exempt from common human misfortune, the former as a nation destined to be master of the world, the latter by the favor of their God and precisely in proportion as they were obedient to him. The Romans despised foreigners, enemies, the vanquished, their subjects, their slaves; thus they had neither epics nor tragedies. They substituted gladiators for tragedies. The Hebrews saw misfortune as indicative of sin and consequently a proper justification for contempt. They considered their beaten foes repellent to God himself and damned to atone for crimes; this made cruelty permissible, even mandatory. Thus no passage of the Old Testament strikes a chord comparable to that of Greek epic, except possibly certain parts of the Book of Job. Throughout twenty centuries of Christianity, Romans and Hebrews have been admired, read, emulated in deeds and words, cited whenever a crime needed justification.

85. Moreover, the spirit of the Gospels was not handed down uncontaminated through successive generations of Christians. From the beginning, the joyful willingness of martyrs to suffer and die was deemed a sign of grace, as if grace could do more for men than for Christ. Those who consider that even God himself, once he had become human, contemplated the severity of destiny with a tremor of anguish ought to know that human misery may be disregarded only by those who have camouflaged the severity of destiny in their own eyes by an illusion, an intoxication, or a figment of the imagination. The man unshielded by an armor of lies cannot suffer force without its defiling his very soul. Grace may forestall this taint from corrupting, but it cannot prevent the wound. Having forgotten it so thoroughly, the Christian tradition has only very seldom recovered the simplicity that makes each phrase of the Passion narratives so poignant. On the other hand, the practice of forcible conversion concealed the effects of force on the souls of those wielding it.

86. Notwithstanding the brief intoxication with rediscovered Greek literature during the Renaissance, the Greek genius has not revived in twenty centuries. Something of it appears in Villon, Shakespeare, Cervantes, Molière, and once in Racine. Human misery, vis-à-vis love, is stripped bare in *L'École des Femmes* and in *Phèdre*; an odd century to be sure, which, contrary to the epic era, perceived the misery of man only in love, while always cloaking in glory the results of force in warfare and in politics. One might possibly cite a few other names, but nothing the peoples of Europe have produced matches their first known poem. They will perhaps rediscover epic genius when they learn to believe nothing is protected from fate, learn never to admire force, not to hate the enemy nor to scorn the unfortunate. It is doubtful whether this will soon occur.