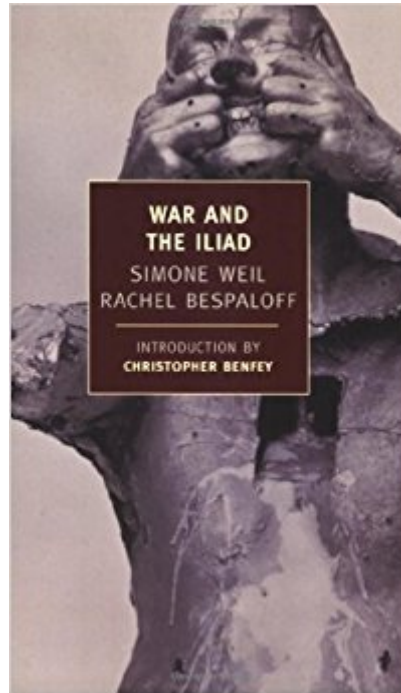




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War And The Iliad



Synopsis

War and the Iliad is a perfect introduction to the range of Homer's art as well as a provocative and rewarding demonstration of the links between literature, philosophy, and questions of life and death. Simone Weil's *The Iliad, or the Poem of Force* is one of her most celebrated works--an inspired analysis of Homer's epic that presents a nightmare vision of combat as a machine in which all humanity is lost. First published on the eve of war in 1939, the essay has often been read as a pacifist manifesto. Rachel Bessaloff was a French contemporary of Weil's whose work similarly explored the complex relations between literature, religion, and philosophy. She composed her own distinctive discussion of the Iliad in the midst of World War II--calling it "her method of facing the war"--and, as Christopher Benfey argues in his introduction, the essay was very probably written in response to Weil. Bessaloff's account of the Iliad brings out Homer's novelistic approach to character and the existential drama of his characters' choices; it is marked, too, by a tragic awareness of how the Iliad speaks to times and places where there is no hope apart from war. This edition brings together these two influential essays for the first time, accompanied by Benfey's scholarly introduction and an afterword by the great Austrian novelist Hermann Broch.

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Customer Reviews

Mary McCarthy translated both of these great essays on the ILIAD written during the Occupation by two of France's leading intellectuals with the intention of publishing them both together, but entanglements with the estate of Simone Weil made this impossible until now. The great Greek

literary works about warfare and civilization were much on the minds of French intellectuals during World War II, and these two essays are among the most remarkable fruits of that thematic obsession. Homer's literary inheritor, the seventh-century BCE poet Archilochus, wrote, "The fox knows many tricks, the hedgehog only one, but it is a good one." The great twentieth-century philosopher Isaiah Berlin thus grouped the preeminent figures of Western culture into the categories of "foxes" and "hedgehogs." In her essay here, Weil shows herself to be a hedgehog, pursuing one theme relentlessly and obsessively but exceptionally persuasively. In pursuit of her argument that the Iliad is a poem about force she herself reenacts such violence upon the characters, stripping the characters of their names (such that Andromache becomes "the wife," Priam "the suppliant") in order to make her point that they are de-humanized by the processes of war. Even with this in mind, however, it would be hard to think of a more encompassing or poignant reading of the poem, though Rachel Bespaloff, who apparently read Weil's piece while writing her own study of the Iliad and altered her argument to accommodate Weil's, may well out-do her.

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