

Dear Editors,

Seth Schein's piece on Rachel Besspaloff's "*On the Iliad*" (Spring/Summer 2018) reminded me of an unresolved detail concerning Mary McCarthy's 1945 translations of Simone Weil's "The Iliad, or the Poem of Force" that's been nagging at me for some years. The circumstances surrounding that English version's first appearance in *Politics* is the stuff of Outer Cape Cod history, if not legend.

This is the narrative I've been told, whose general outlines have been confirmed by published biographies of those involved: That summer after the first bomb on Hiroshima, on one of the oceanside beaches of Truro facing toward Europe, McCarthy set to work on the translations from the French, sand getting into her typewriter keys. Dwight MacDonald served as first American editor/publisher; Nicola Chiaromonte and Niccolo Tucci played intellectual advisors; and even Hermann Broch himself stopped by.

It was Dwight's son Mike (a seventeen-year-old at the time of the translation) who told me that the lines from the Homeric Greek in McCarthy's translation of Weil had been done by his father. (Dwight had seriously studied Classics while at Exeter; McCarthy gave up after one year at Vassar.) I've always been struck by these prosodically elegant interpretations, sensitively tuned to Weil's specific train of thought as well as to the Homeric original:

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

In his introduction to the the 2005 NYRB volume incorporating the two essays (as well as Broch's "The Style of the Mythical Age"*) Christopher Benfey points out the way Weil has manipulated her *Iliad* quotations to support her essay's argument, sometimes in contradiction to the original text. Benfey specifically points out Weil's omission of the adverb "gently" in her discussion of Achilles' response to the Priam's famously touching address. I know that Benfey is right, and yet I am still moved by the delicacy of MacDonald's lines and Weil's subtle observation of human ges-

tural behavior and power dynamics (to which, it seems to me, a woman would be especially sensitive) which follows:

It was not insensibility that made Achilles with a single movement of his hand push away the old man who had been clinging to his knees; Priam's words, recalling his own old father, had moved him to tears. It was merely a question of his being as free in his attitudes and movements as if, clasping his knees, there were not a suppliant but an inert object. Anybody who is in our vicinity exercises a certain power over us by his very presence, and a power that belongs to him alone, that is, the power of halting, repressing, modifying each movement that our body sketches out.

When Besspaloff occasionally quotes the *Iliad* text (as Schein usefully notes in his essay) she uses the Budé. Despite her reserved use of specific textual reference, Besspaloff's interpretation of the Priam-Achilles encounter is a more "accurate" interpretation of the Homeric lines—in that the gentleness of Achilles is a recognition of his and Priam's shared humanity.

By curious coincidence Benfey enlists the translation of Robert Fagles to show the divide between Homer and Weil. (His counterproposal is the literal, "Those words stirred within Achilles a deep desire / to grieve for his own father. Taking the old man's hand / he gently moved him back . . ." etc.) I say "curious coincidence," as it was Fagles (at a 2005 conference at Boston University) to whom I mentioned Mike MacDonald's claim. Fagles said that he knew all that; it was "common knowledge." And so when I ran the subject by Mike again, I told him of my interaction with Fagles. Mike said he didn't know how this might be widely known, as he'd thought of it as somewhat of a family secret. And it certainly does not appear that Benfey knew of MacDonald's apparent contribution of over 250 lines of Homer to what he acknowledges as a "superb translation."

And so my question to *Arion* readers is this: Is indeed MacDonald's part in the McCarthy translations so universally acknowledged as to go un-footnoted? I myself would be thoroughly convinced that the translations are indeed MacDonald's through stylistic analysis alone. I could go into specifics about his distinctive translation approach; I could also delineate some of his opinions about versification (as expressed to poet-friends such as Schwartz, Berryman, and Agee) that might be relevant. He closely read (and felt free to criticize!) contemporary poetry. But for my purposes

here, I would note MacDonald's recognition of the Homeric impulse in Benet's description of Pricketts charge (as quoted in *Masscult and Midcult*) which captures quite exactly how he heard the Greek:

So they came on in strength, light-footed, stepping like deer,
So they died or were taken. So the iron entered the flesh.

And here's some of MacDonald's own Homer, composed in the summer of 1945 among a community of exiles from Europe who'd themselves recently crossed the Atlantic:

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

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