

In December 1940 and January 1941 Simone Weil published a piece entitled “L’*Iliade* ou Le Poème de la force.” During the same turbulent period, Erich Auerbach, exiled in Istanbul, wrote *Mimesis*, a history of Western literature which opened with a famous comparison of Homer and the Old Testament. If we were to review the twentieth century for the best succinct “large picture” accounts of the significance and values of the *Iliad*, these two studies, classics in the field of literary interpretation, would be considered major landmarks.

Of Weil it has been said, for example, that her work provides “a profound and true account of the poem and of other things besides” (Griffin); “I know of no better brief account of the *Iliad*” (MacLeod); it “conveys a fundamental understanding of the *Iliad*” (Taplin). Auerbach’s work has been described as “brilliant” (Silk) and “the greatest and most influential literary humanistic work of the past half century” (Said). Both works have been much reprinted and anthologized, and both were issued in new editions in 2003.

It appears that what no-one has done is to elicit and engage the “dialogue” between these two quite contrasting, and often conflicting, accounts of Homer. In this paper, I propose to locate, from a careful reading of these texts, the crucial areas of agreement and disagreement, consider the degree to which the readings were shaped by the pressure of extraordinary circumstances in history, and assess the extent to which they characterize a predominant twentieth-century view of Homer.

These much-lauded works by writers outside the discipline of Classics were both written under conditions that have become legendary. In each case, by bringing Homer into relation with the Hebrew Bible, they advanced a religious and moral program, with notable preconceptions about what constitutes a classic. Although Weil and Auerbach both presented very partial accounts of Homer, and were in many ways poles apart, it will be argued that, despite their marked differences, they shared significant presuppositions. One might juxtapose Auerbach’s view that Homer’s “make-believe” merely induces us to “forget our reality for a few hours” with Weil’s argument that the *Iliad* provides “the most beautiful mirror” of the irruptive reality of force. At the same time, both pictures are significantly shaped by a conception of “la misère de l’homme.” The general question remains of the extent to which, in their different evaluations of the *Iliad* as either a pure mirror of reality or a seductive Siren-song, they capture a predominant note of twentieth-century disenchantment, lost illusions and pessimism – a wasteland under a leaden sky of which Auden’s poem, “The Shield of Achilles,” may serve as an emblem.