

Fields of Force

Simone Weil was a French philosopher and religious thinker who lived from 1909 to 1943. André Gide called her "the most spiritual writer of this century." An intellectual par excellence, Weil was also passionately committed to social justice. Her thinking was shaped by a Christian sensibility deepened by mystical experience.

Her essay "The Iliad, Poem of Might" was published in 1940-41. On the surface, it is an exploration of the centrality of force in Homer's epic. However, it was also addressed to her French compatriots living under Nazi occupation. (She was to die in London in 1943 after refusing to eat any more than the scanty rations given in occupied France; her death was ruled a suicide from self-starvation.) This essay treats in depth the rule of force in human affairs—its ability both to intoxicate the one with power and to dehumanize the victim. As such, it seemed an appropriate vehicle to use in exploring the role of force in the prisoners' lives.

Power Makes You Stupid

He who possesses strength moves in an atmosphere which offers him no resistance. Nothing in the human element surrounding him is of a nature to induce, between the intention and the act, that brief interval where thought may lodge. Where there is no room for thought, there is no room either for justice or prudence. This is the reason why men of arms behave with such harshness and folly. . . . They never guess as they exercise their power, that the consequences of their acts will turn back upon themselves. (Simone Weil, "The Iliad, Poem of Might," 163)

Tray: I used to have this aura from being in so many gun battles. I could be dead wrong but people would do what I wanted because they feared me. "You can't sell nothing in this neighborhood—you're on my turf!" It made me feel *grand*.

Dreze: It sounds almost like a drug you get high on.

Tray: Indeed.

