

# Eric Voegelin's and Simone Weil's return to Ancient Greece

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## ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

Received: May 19, 2020 • Accepted: February 21, 2022

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### SUMMARY

Two enigmatic figures of 20th-century political theory, Eric Voegelin and Simone Weil, stand out with idiosyncratic receptions of ancient Greek texts. Both thinkers diagnosed that, as political agents in late modernity, we have unlearned to read world-making ancient texts and their narratives in their cosmic dimension and thus lost what has rooted European culture and history. Against this backdrop, Voegelin and Weil share 'antidotal' practises of combining historically and generically distinct material. These practices aim at fathoming a primordial experience at work in European narratives. With this comparative analysis of Voegelin's and Weil's symbolic readings (exemplified in this paper by passages from the *Iliad*, the History of the Peloponnesian War, and the Symposium), I present some considerations how their combinatory imagination of ancient material could supply late modern political agents with a pathos, a meaningful self-world relationship that was thought to have gone missing.

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### KEYWORDS

Eric Voegelin, Simone Weil, Greek genius, reception, ars combinatoria, intertextuality

"D'où nous viendra la renaissance, à nous qui avons souillé et vidé tout le globe terrestre ? Du passé seul, si nous l'aimons."<sup>1</sup>

– Simone Weil

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<sup>1</sup>WEIL, S.: *La Pesanteur et la grâce*. Paris 1988, 199.

Any act of reception struggles, particularly when trying to gain access to the past. Against this backdrop G. E. Lessing was speaking about bridging the ‘revolting, broad ditch’ referring to modern readers trying to interpret texts from antiquity. In what follows, I am not dealing with the past as it might have been but with the phenomenon when historical artifacts produce shared meaningful imaginations of antiquity while facing the challenges of late modernity. With a comparative arrangement,<sup>2</sup> I aim at investigating the experience of the so-called ‘Greek genius’ [*génie grec*] made by the two political theorists Simone Weil (1909–1943) and Eric Voegelin (1901–1985). Both authors wrote independently of each other in France and Germany, respectively in the United States. However, these two thinkers have witnessed a renaissance of their thought especially within Anglo-American political philosophy and theology. One finds their names increasingly mentioned next to each other.<sup>3</sup> This comparative analysis highlights the eminent and productive role of ancient Greek texts within the political theory of these two thinkers.

In the eyes of most classicists, such reconfigurations of ancient Greek literature seem arbitrary and historically ill-informed, whilst scholars in political science generally neglect them as ephemeral historical episodes with little to no relevance for current political affairs. Against this backdrop the imaginative readings we find in Weil and Voegelin appear to be more cherry picking or even *eisegesis* rather than philology. Yet, both 20th-century authors appear to be driven by a similar pathos. Here, my guiding question is not if Weil and Voegelin are philologically right or wrong, or whose interpretation exceeds in terms of today’s philological scholarship, but what is at stake for both political theorists when focussing on Greek texts while facing the horrors and crises of their time. The answer is: They are looking for a primordial experience of something larger to appear together with the textual mosaics emerging out of different texts.

## BIOGRAPHICAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL BACKGROUND OF ERIC VOEGELIN AND SIMONE WEIL

Born into a German Protestant family in 1901, Eric Voegelin studied political science at the University of Vienna where he became professor at the faculty of Law.<sup>4</sup> After he had written critically about Nazi race ideology, he fled persecution and emigrated to the United States in 1938 holding chairs at several American universities before returning to the University of

<sup>2</sup>Cf. DE GRÈVE, C.: “Comparative Reception”: A New Approach to “Rezeptionsästhetik. In JOST, F. (ed.): *Aesthetics and the Literature of Ideas: Essays in Honor of A. Owen Aldridge*, London 1990, 233–240.

<sup>3</sup>Cf. COURTINE-DENAMY, S.: La chasse aux démons: Eric Voegelin et Simone Weil: points communs et divergences, In GONTIER, T. (ed.): *Politique, religion et histoire chez Eric Voegelin*, Paris 2011, 67–87; cf. ROBINSON, S. – WHITNEY, D. – TREPANIER, L. (edd.): *Eric Voegelin Today. Voegelin’s Political Thought in the 21st Century* Eric Voegelin Today. London 2019; and POLLARD, D.: *The Continuing Legacy of Simone Weil*, London 2015; cf. HAHN, K.: *Die Tragödie des Politischen in Europa*. Münster 2017, 23; ZAGAJEWSKI, A.: A Defense of Ardor. New York 2005, 9; cf. COURTINE-DENAMY, S.: Simone Weil and Eric Voegelin: Two Paths to the Same Truth. In *Voegelin in View* (2012), available at: [voegelinview.com/hunting-the-devils-simone-weil-and-eric-voegelin-pt-1](http://voegelinview.com/hunting-the-devils-simone-weil-and-eric-voegelin-pt-1) [25.2.2022]; cf. SCHMIDT, L.: Simone Weil on Religion: A Voegelinian Critique. In *Cahiers Simone Weil* (1992) 263–273.

<sup>4</sup>Cf. HENKEL, M.: *Eric Voegelin zur Einführung*. Hamburg 1998, 13–35; SANDOZ, E.: *The Voegelinian Revolution: A Biographical Introduction*. Baton Rouge 1982, 33–70; cf. EMBRY, C. R. – GLENN, H.: *The Eric Voegelin Reader: Politics, History, Consciousness*. Columbia 2017, ix–xxvii.



Munich in 1958.<sup>5</sup> Throughout his academic career Voegelin pursued his inquiries into the political lessons of Greek antiquity. During the German post-war debate on the proper understanding of modernity, Voegelin applied his studies in Greek thought to criticise the autonomy of modernity (notably Hans Blumenberg) and highlighted its roots in religion along philosophers like Carl Schmitt, Karl Löwith, and Jacob Taubes<sup>6</sup> as well as theologians like Hans Urs von Balthasar,<sup>7</sup> and Ernst Troeltsch.<sup>8</sup> Voegelin aimed at avoiding questions of historical categories and classifications and moved instead to, as he puts it, the “true field of history” that was the “soul of mankind”.<sup>9</sup>

Voegelin’s concept of ancient Greece was shaped by the assumption that Greek history was marked by a gradual decline, by a series of deadly crises, each of which forced its thinkers to break new ground in understanding human existence and social realities. His reception of Greek sources was driven by his cultural theoretical premises of gradual decay and highlighted a supernatural element in the development of the ‘Greek genius’. In dialogue with the axial age theorists Karl Jaspers and Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, Voegelin defined experiences of deep crises as the decisive power in the development of Greek political thought.

In 1909, Simone Weil was born into a Jewish family in Paris. Her life of 34 years was framed by the events of the two wars and of the interwar period. Her intellectual biography was influenced by her older brother, the famous mathematician André Weil (1905–1998) who introduced her to ancient Greek language while being children. She was accepted as one of only three women at the prestigious *École Normale Supérieure*, the cadre factory of the French intellectual elite, together with Simone de Beauvoir in 1928, studying alongside Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Paul Nizan, and Jean-Paul Sartre. In 1931, Weil started a career as secondary school teacher for girls in various provincial towns. There she taught Ancient Greek, Mathematics, and Philosophy.<sup>10</sup> Here, it is noteworthy to mention that Weil’s didactic approach to ancient text material did not correspond with the historical critical scholarship of her time. In her Greek classes, she trained her pupils in techniques looking for figurative and symbolic meaning rather than teaching them the achievements of 19th-century philology. Nonetheless, whenever possible, Weil preferred to use text-critical editions and occasionally amended editorial decisions therein. In class, Weil did not like the use of French translations because she regarded the ancient Greek language itself as a distinct work of (sonic) art. She encouraged her students to memorise key passages by heart rather than knowing just the storyline or the arguments of a text. Here, Weil applied a somatic technique she called *attention* [waiting, *attente*, as well as

<sup>5</sup>Cf. HUND, W.: The Racism of Eric Voegelin. In *Journal of World Philosophies* 4 (2019) 1–22.

<sup>6</sup>Cf. KNÖBL W.: *Die Kontingenz der Moderne. Wege in Europa, Asien und Amerika*. Frankfurt a.M. 2007, 72.

<sup>7</sup>Cf. OPITZ, P. J.: Die Gnosis-These. Anmerkungen zur Eric Voegelins Interpretation der westlichen Moderne. In OPITZ, P. J.: (ed): *Eric Voegelin, Der Gottesmord. Zur Genese und Gestalt der modernen politischen Gnosis*. München 1999, 21–22.

<sup>8</sup>Cf. VOEGELIN, E.: *Die Neue Wissenschaft*. Paderborn 2004, 109.

<sup>9</sup>Cf. WEISS, G.: Between Gnosis and Anamnesis: European Perspectives on Eric Voegelin. *The Review of Politics* 62.4 (2000) 753–776.

<sup>10</sup>Cf. PÉTREMENT, S.: *La Vie de Simone Weil*. Paris 1978; cf. CABAUD MEANEY, M.: *Simone Weil’s Apologetic Use of Literature: Her Christological Interpretations of Ancient Greek Texts*. Oxford 2007; REY PUENTE, F.: *Simone Weil et la Grèce*. Paris 2007; cf. ACCORINTI, D.: Simone Weil, Reader of the Dionysiaca. In SPANOUDAKIS, K. (ed.): *Nonnus of Panopolis in Context: Poetry and Cultural Milieu in Late Antiquity with a Section on Nonnus and the Modern World*. New York 2014, 461–486.



paying attention] that entailed painstaking hermeneutics, gradually dissecting the text while paying attention to the richness of meaning, textually and phonosemantically, by unfolding layer by layer. To exercise this practice while fleeing Jewish persecution after 1940, her biographers state that Weil carried a copy of the Greek *Iliad* with her at all times.<sup>11</sup>

Unlike Voegelin's proper working conditions at elite institutions, Weil's were limited, as she had hardly access to academic libraries and text critical source material, except for her little mobile library. As Michel Narcy has pointed out, Weil's reception of ancient authors suggests a standard canon which was present in most bourgeoisie private libraries in early 20th-century European metropolises.<sup>12</sup>

It should be noted that Weil's inclination for ancient Greek culture was closely tied to the rejection of her own Jewish heritage.<sup>13</sup> Her philosophy teacher Émile-Auguste Chartier (1886–1951) underpinned Weil's philhellenism<sup>14</sup> by a fierce reprobation of the concept of God he had seen at work in the Old Testament. Additionally, a dominant philhellenic as well as anti-Jewish intellectual culture<sup>15</sup> dominated Weil's personal development. This marks a key difference between Weil's and Voegelin's reception of Greek sources: The latter explicitly develops his readings based on a special relationship between Jewish and Greek heritage.

## THE GREEK GENIUS IN THE READING EXPERIENCE OF VOEGELIN AND WEIL

As we will see, Eric Voegelin conducted an imaginative style of reading akin to that of Simone Weil, focusing on symbolic meanings rather than on its literal sense. This permitted both political thinkers to anchor their interpretation of ancient authors also beyond historical contexts and to install selected passages as landmarks amidst late modern aporias. Against this backdrop, both Weil's and Voegelin's sparing reliance upon historical-critical scholarship, e.g., concerning biblical studies, is not surprising.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>11</sup>Cf. DU PLESSIX GRAY, F.: *Simone Weil*. London 2001, 166; cf. CABAUD MEANEY (n. 10) 7.

<sup>12</sup>To make his point, Narcy used Erwin Schrödinger's (1887–1961) personal library, one of the best documented of this kind, as material benchmark and portrayed how Schrödinger's library corresponded widely with the canon of ancient authors that continuously feature in Weil's writings, cf. NARCY, M.: Avant-propos 1: Le domaine grec. In DEVAUX, A. A. – DE LUSSY, F. (edd.): *Simone Weil (Œuvres complètes, tome VI:I)*. Paris 1994, 19–34.

<sup>13</sup>The young laicist nation France witnessed a revival of Celsus' anti-Judaic coined philhellenism as presented in Origen's treatise *Contra Celsum*: Against the backdrop of the Dreyfus affair Celsus was celebrated as 'Voltaire of antiquity'. Weil mirrored certain aspects of this Celsus revival. Here, it becomes especially evident how reception of antiquity shaped and was shaped by current political debates. Cf. FÉDOU, M.: *Christianisme et religions païennes dans le Contre Celse d'Origène*. Paris 1988, 610–611.

<sup>14</sup>Especially implied in Kant and German Idealism, cf. STANGNETH, B.: Antisemitische und Antijudaistische Motive bei Immanuel Kant? Tatsachen, Meinungen, Ursachen. In STANGNETH, B. – HUBMANN, G. – RÜLLMANN, A. (edd.): *Antisemitismus bei Kant und anderen Denkern der Aufklärung*. Würzburg 2001, 11–124.

<sup>15</sup>Cf. WITTE, B.: Christus Dionysos. In WITTE, B. (ed.): *Moses und Homer*. Berlin 2018, 97–134; cf. KURTZ, P. M.: How Nineteenth-Century German Classicists Wrote the Jews out of Ancient History. In *History and Theory* 58 (2019) 210–232; cf. CANCIK, H. – CANCIK-LINDEMAIER, H.: Philhellenisme et Antisemitisme en Allemagne: Le cas Nietzsche. In BOUREL, D. – LE RIDER, J. (edd.): *De Sils-Maria à Jérusalem. Nietzsche et le judaïsme. Les intellectuels juifs et Nietzsche*. Paris 1991, 21–46.

<sup>16</sup>Cf. HOGAN, M. P.: Editor's Introduction. In HOGAN, M. P.: (ed.): *Order and History, Volume 1: Israel and Revelation*. Columbia 2001, 1–14; CARBAJOSA, I. – SCOTTI MUTH, S.: Introduction. In CARBAJOSA, I. – SCOTTI MUTH, S. (edd.): *Israel and the Cosmological Empires of the Ancient Orient*. Leiden 2021, 1–33.



Facing challenges framed by two World Wars and its interlude of social, political, and economic radicalisations, both theorists were looking for sustainable authors of crises. For this paper, comparing Weil and Voegelin and their way of combining sources, I will focus on Homer, Thucydides, and Plato. This selection is primarily based on Weil. For her, the three selected authors hold a special position because they echo an experience of war and human tragedy. Yet, for Weil, none of them had simply mirrored and reproduced structures of violence. Instead, all three ancient authors had provided, in their respective style and genre, textual testimonies that promised to Weil to be capable of revealing and overcoming latent mechanisms of violence in the 20th century. Yet, as it turns out and we will see, these three authors are also of importance for Voegelin. Needless to say, both Weil and Voegelin draw on many more ancient authors, among others Sophocles, Aeschylus, and Euripides.

Reading ancient texts, Simone Weil used selected passages and combined them with passages taken from different texts. Subsequently, she re-read the emerging new creation as if the previously distinct texts mutually interpreted and completed each other. This hermeneutical practice can be labelled as *ars combinatoria* following a tradition popularised by the medieval Spanish polymath Ramon Llull (ca. 1232–1316). Weil got acquainted with these techniques of ‘creative intertextuality’ through the work of French Surrealism. Weil rejected surrealism because of a moral relativism she saw at work in their art but adopted their methods. Such a potpourri of textual fragments, for her, was not an open and arbitrary game without rules but was confined to a set of selected elements, even if such a mosaic keeps its boundaries fluid. Its key agency was movement towards moral good, continually reorientating the emerging relationships. On the one hand, different texts were combined with each other on a moral basis. On the other hand, previously related texts were separated. Against this backdrop, Weil separated, for example, the *Odyssey* from the *Iliad*. Here, she writes concerning the *Iliad* that

“[...] in any case, this poem [the *Iliad*] is a miracle. Its bitterness is the only justifiable bitterness, for it springs from the subjections of the human spirit to force, that is, in the last analysis, to matter. This subjection is the common lot, although each spirit will bear it differently, in proportion to its own effect [...] The *Odyssey* seems merely a good imitation, now of the *Iliad*, now of Oriental poems.”<sup>17</sup>

In contrast to the moral and apologetic style of Weil, Eric Voegelin was arguing in a more nuanced fashion. However, he too arrives at the conclusion separating the *Iliad* from the *Odyssey* to continue to work with the *Iliad* for his crypto-theological enterprise. In this regard, Voegelin writes that

“[...] on the basis of the preceding analysis we can venture to formulate the relation between the two epics. The *Iliad*, so it seems, is much richer in its exploration of the mysteries of action than the second epic. It is hardly permissible to consider the *Odyssey* an advance beyond the *Iliad* with regard to theology or religious sentiments. At most one can say that in the prologue in heaven Homer states in explicit terms the problem that occupied him all through the *Iliad*, i.e., the aetiology of evil.”<sup>18</sup>

One thing that strikes when reading Weil and Voegelin together is that both pivot the term *μεταξύ* in their encounter with the ‘Greek genius’. Here, they refer to the dialogue between Diotima and Socrates (Symposium 202e) when the Greek priestess describes *Ἐρω*ς to Socrates as

<sup>17</sup>Weil, S.: The *Iliad*, or the Poem of Force. *Chicago Review* 18.2 (1965) 5–30, 27.

<sup>18</sup>VOEGELIN, E: *The World of the Polis*. Order of History Vol. II, Baton Rouge 1957, 107.



mighty agent by claiming: γὰρ πᾶν τὸ δαιμόνιον μεταξύ ἐστὶ θεοῦ τε καὶ θνητοῦ [as all daimonic is in-between God and the mortal]. To express meaning of an agency, implied in the term μεταξύ, Weil refers to an imaginative architecture of bridges:

“It was the revelation of human misery, of God’s transcendence, of the infinite distance between God and man. Haunted by this distance, Greece worked solely to bridge it. This is what made her whole civilization. Her mystery religion, her philosophy, her marvellous art, that science, which was her own invention, and all the branches of it, these were all so many bridges between God and man. Except for the first, we have inherited all of them. We have built them up much higher. But we believe now that they were made to live in. We are unaware that they are only there to be passed across; we do not know, if we crossed over, whom we should find on the other side. In the minds of the best of the Greeks there dwelt the idea of mediation between God and man, of mediation in the descending movement by which God seeks man. This is the idea expressed in the notion of harmony, of proportion, which is at the centre of all their thought, all their art, all their science, and of their whole conception of life.”<sup>19</sup>

Erich Przywara (1889–1972) argues that Weil’s reading of Plato transcends into the realm of “the primordial, not only of the great Ionians (Parmenides and Heraclitus), but explicitly into the primordial of myth, just as her *source grecque* is only seemingly Plato, but according to a deeper meaning of reality it is Homer and the Greek tragedies in which myth is alive”.<sup>20</sup> Analogously, Voegelin writes that the Platonic term μεταξύ expresses an even fuller meaning in Anaximander and Heraclitus, as he writes that

“reality in the mode of existence is experienced as immersed in reality in the mode of nonexistence and, inversely, nonexistence reaches into existence. The process has the character of an In-Between reality, governed by the tension of life and death.”<sup>21</sup>

In his abundant work *Order of History* Voegelin understands μεταξύ as permanent place, the human being stuck in-between two poles of existence. Here, it is important that μεταξύ for Weil (in contrast to Voegelin) does not mean to dwell in-between but to constantly pass across.

Voegelin also builds his argument less on a moral question and more on the principle of order. In this regard, Voegelin writes that

“[...] the structures emerging in the Metaxy through the progression of consciousness as lines of meaning in history have established the vast field in which the investigations concerning the meaning of history still move today [...] these various modes of experience require different symbols for their adequate expression, while the reality experienced and symbolized remains recognizable the same [...] two symbolisms are equivalent in spite of their phenotypical differences, if they refer recognizably to the same structures in reality.”<sup>22</sup>

It is important to bear in mind that while the practice of symbolic reading is based in part on historically mediated intertextual references, there is no actual history of reception or history of

<sup>19</sup>WEIL, S.: *Selected Essays 1934-1943*. London 1965, 46.

<sup>20</sup>Transl. by the author from German: PRZYWARA, E.: Edith Stein und Simone Weil – Zwei philosophische Grundmotive. In HERBSTRIETH, W. (ed.): *Edith Stein – eine große Glaubenszeugin*. Anweiler 1986, 231–247, 231.

<sup>21</sup>VOEGELIN, E.: *The Ecumenic Age. Order of History Vol. IV*. London 2000, 233–234.

<sup>22</sup>VOEGELIN (n. 21) 247.



ideas at stake here: Instead, the resonances between the different texts provide a disclosure of a primordial experience of something larger that is not really a temporal category but drives history and thus leaves implicit historical traces of something other than history. This does not mean that this primordial reality is ahistorical and sometimes shines through into history. Instead, it means that such textual mosaics portray something not solely dependent on recognisable lines of historical reception.

Another reference is Thucydides. For Voegelin and Weil, the father of history most notably rethinks the relation between the Athenians and the Melians in the famous dialogue in Book V of the *History of the Peloponnesian War*. Dated 416 BC, Athens was 15 years into the war with Sparta and the Melians, although closely related to the Spartans, had remained neutral while an Athenian fleet was sent to capture Melos. Here, Voegelin writes:

“If we understand the ‘reality’ described by Thucydides as an apocalyptic nightmare, we gain a first approach to Plato’s much-misunderstood ‘idealism’ as the attempt to overcome a nightmare through the restoration of reality [...] Neither can Plato’s analysis of the metaxy structure in reality be fully understood, unless the reader is as conscious of the Ionian symbolism in the background as was Plato.”<sup>23</sup>

Weil parallels Voegelin and highlights Thucydides’ style of ‘naked honesty’ that discloses the reality of inner-worldly ‘justice’ as given solely in the actually impossible event of an equilibrium of forces: ‘Justice manifests itself within human rationality only between equal necessities. Those in positions of power do what their power permits while the weak have no choice but to accept it’ [δικαία μὲν ἐν τῷ ἀνθρωπείῳ λόγῳ ἀπὸ τῆς ἴσης ἀνάγκης κρίνεται, δυνατὰ δὲ οἱ προύχοντες πράσσουσι καὶ οἱ ἀσθενεῖς ξυγχωροῦσιν] (Thuc. 5. 89). Weil was astonished by the lucidity of understanding that the Athenians were no different than the Melians, everyone could be destroyed by a greater force. The positions of power and submission were random and interchangeable in the end. Thucydides’ Athenians had assured that the Melians would act in the same manner towards the Athenians if the balance of power had turned around because ‘of the gods we believe, and of men we know, that by a necessary law of their nature they rule wherever they can’ [ἡγούμεθα γὰρ τό τε θεῖον δόξῃ τὸ ἀνθρώπειόν τε σαφῶς διὰ παντὸς ὑπὸ φύσεως ἀναγκαίας, οὗ ἂν κρατῇ, ἄρχειν] (Thuc. 5. 86). For Weil, the latter verse demonstrates a concept of god(s) that does not think of supernatural but of more-than-human beings as deities, and places both god(s) and men alike under the imperative of an imbalance of power. Based on this passage in Thucydides, Weil defines the concept of the supernatural as the almost impossible renunciation of power by the superior position in a situation of evident power imbalance. Consequently, for Weil, the supernatural does not consist in extraordinary phenomena and miracles but in a social reality expressed as the absence of ‘natural’ power executed against a weaker counterpart.

The French philosopher consequently links Thucydides with the *Iliad* – not just in terms of historical intertextuality but in light of her practice of symbolic reading. In her widely acknowledged 1940 essay *The Iliad, or The Poem of Force* Weil imagines that “the true hero, the true subject, the centre of the *Iliad* is force: Force employed by man, force that enslaves man, force before which man’s flesh shrinks away”.<sup>24</sup> Her style of reading the *Iliad* inherits a tendency

<sup>23</sup>VOEGELIN (n. 21) 164.

<sup>24</sup>WEIL (n. 19) 22.





to depersonalise the protagonists in favour of a symbolic reading depicting the manifold agencies of force. No one, neither victor nor victim, is in control of force or can escape its grip. Force turns every being into a thing, into inert matter, even while one is still alive and in control of action. Thus, force is the true subject, and all heroes are always already symbols of their tragical role on the stage of the true agent, force.

In a rather enigmatic way, Weil hints at the possibility that Patroclus' character serves as instrument of force and personifies the contagious effect of its violence: Referring to verse 671 in book XVII – “he knew how to be gentle with everyone” [παῖσιν γὰρ ἐπίστατο μέλιχος εἶναι] – Weil calls Patroclus the one “who dwells, in a peculiar way, at the very centre of the poem”<sup>25</sup> paralleling her introductory note that “the centre of the *Iliad* is force”.<sup>26</sup> Analogously to the gentleness of Patroclus, force presents itself as gentle to everyone who desires it. In fact, it is the last fight and ultimately the death of Patroclus that puts an end to the ambivalent stalling of Achaean warfare and initiates Troy's doom. Here, one can see the Homeric *μοῖρα* in its inevitable certainty at work. However, due to necessity that rules reality, *ἀνάγκη*, the heroes are blindfolded by the ambiguous dynamics of force and cannot imagine their own doom already lurking. However, doom can hit everyone suddenly and randomly as blind destiny, *τύχη*, what Weil finds explicated in Thucydides. In this regard, Weil writes about the *Iliad*'s heroes that

“[...] their own destruction seems impossible to them. For they do not see that the force in their possession is only a limited quantity; nor do they see their relations with other human beings as a kind of balance between unequal amounts of force [...] they conclude that destiny has given complete license to them, and none at all to their inferiors.”<sup>27</sup>

Weil envisaged the Homeric *μοῖρα* as ambiguous combination of *τύχη* on the one hand and *ἀνάγκη* on the other hand, referring to verses 69–71 in book VIII and arguing that “victory is less a matter of valor than of blind destiny, which is symbolised in the poem by Zeus's golden scales”.<sup>28</sup> In the context of the permanent ambiguity between *ἀνάγκη* and *τύχη*, she writes that

“[...] only he who has measured the dominion of force, and knows how not to respect it, is capable of love and justice. The relations between destiny and the human soul [...] is fraught with temptations to falsehood [...] by the will to oblivion or to ignorance.”<sup>29</sup>

The geometry of force, the combination of *τύχη* and *ἀνάγκη*, cannot become meaningful from a point within the world but needs the Platonic transgression towards the threshold of the cave, expressed in the term *μεταξύ*. The political equivalent of *μεταξύ* consists in (mostly impossible) opportunities of an equilibrium in the balance of power, as denied in the Melian dialogue. For Weil and Voegelin, this impossible but saving equilibrium of power manifests itself particularly in the in-between of two poles of experience that Voegelin calls the immanent and transcendent. Weil calls this mode of existence “a painful conception of existence, like all whose

<sup>25</sup>WEIL (n. 19) 22.

<sup>26</sup>WEIL (n. 19) 6.

<sup>27</sup>WEIL (n. 19) 14.

<sup>28</sup>WEIL (n. 19) 13.

<sup>29</sup>WEIL (n. 19) 28.





eyes are open; but their pain had an object, it had a sense in relation to the happiness for which man is made”.<sup>30</sup>

In the following part, I conclude with some considerations about how stepping out from human strategies [cf. *ἐν τῷ ἀνθρωπείῳ λόγῳ*, Thuc. 5. 86] and engaging with symbolic readings could help late modern readers.

## TODAY'S RELEVANCE OF VOEGELIN'S AND WEIL'S SYMBOLIC READINGS

Eric Voegelin and Simone Weil favoured symbolic readings of Greek literature among many reasons because it also revived a hermetic tradition which is tied most notably to Pythagoras and Plato. However, this gnostic element needs not to be understood as somewhat exclusive but rather as a critical method of questioning and relativising existing hegemonies of belief: It basically says that all knowledge is incomplete and seeks addition. This also corresponds to the etymology of *σύμβολα* as a ring of clay, broken in half, served to recognize each other by matching the halves. Both Voegelin and Weil found the experience of different texts mutually amplifying each other toward something larger as being lacking in late modern readers.

In his 1938 essay *Figura* Erich Auerbach (1892–1957) criticised that “the figural or typological or phenomenal structure is not sharply distinguished from other, allegorical, or symbolical forms”<sup>31</sup>. Against this backdrop, he highlighted the historical character effective between the initial experiences that had produced the text and the latter interpretive experiences of the reader. Indeed, when looking into these debates it is hard to distinguish between terms like symbol, icon, myth, emblem, image, sign, and so on. Nonetheless, Auerbach may help to locate Voegelin's and Weil's practice of symbolic readings. In line with Auerbach, Voegelin and Weil did not aim at undertaking allegorical interpretations of ancient texts in the sense of seeing the significance of a literary work beyond its original meaning.<sup>32</sup> In contrast to Auerbach however, they both distinguished allegory and symbol because they thought that allegorical interpretation in the mentioned sense cuts off the symbolic dimension from the primordial experience of something larger. While allegorical re-attributing guarantees continuity and relevance in the history of reception, it also buries the symbolic origin in myth. In this respect, Voegelin considered allegorical interpretation to be directed against the Greek genius and blamed it for the gradual decline of Greek civilisation, or as he puts it:

“The deformation of philosophic analysis becomes tangible in the transition from the Platonic-Aristotelian aloofness from Allegoresis to the Stoic acceptance of the method. As a philosopher Plato has no use for an allegorical interpretation of Homer and Hesiod. He experiences divine reality as the ordering force in the cosmos and in personal existence; he recognizes his dialectical exploration of

<sup>30</sup>Transl. by the author from French: DEVAUX, A. A. — DE LUSSY, F. (edd.): *Simone Weil Œuvres complètes*. Tome VIII.I. Paris 2012, 475.

<sup>31</sup>AUERBACH, E.: *Figura*. In AUERBACH, E. (ed.): *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature*. Minneapolis 1984, 11–76, 60.

<sup>32</sup>Cf. JAUSS, H. R.: *Allegorese, Remythisierung und neuer Mythos. Bemerkungen zur christlichen Gefangenschaft der Mythologie im Mittelalter*. In FUHRMANN, M. (ed.): *Terror und Spiel. Probleme der Mythenrezeption*. München 1971, 187–209.



structures in reality as a movement of thought in the Metaxy; and he knows that divine reality beyond the Metaxy, if it is to be symbolized at all, can be symbolized only by the myth.”<sup>33</sup>

In this context, myth does not mean a compendium of cultural material, not a catalogue of objects of cultural memory. On the contrary, myth, as Voegelin applies it, unmasks philosophies of history as illusion once they claim history to be fully accessible. Such a symbolic relationship between past and present does not imply a higher, metaphysical system of truth, or even an oracle of late modern *μῦθος*. In their practices of symbolic reading, Voegelin and Weil instead pleaded for a habitus of *μεταξύ*, however, as a form of existentialist self-world-relationship that does not aim to seize power or truth, but to experience what Aristotle calls *πάθος*: an affective transformation of one’s being in-between. However, mythologies easily revive obscure delusions within political environments, especially in the postfactual age. New myths and arbitrary interpretations of ancient texts turn into a dangerous ideological instrument, as the 20th century bears witness to. Thus, all readings of the ancient Greek material must remain an obstacle, a ‘revolting, broad ditch’, as Lessing had put it – if one wants to stay faithful to the mode of *μεταξύ*. Symbolic readings may offer a possibility to fertilise the discrepancy between source and one’s own experience, to gain a primordial experience of something larger.

János Pilinszky (1921–1981) who introduced Simone Weil to Hungary<sup>34</sup> uses the term ‘creative imagination’ to describe similar symbolic techniques to access the past. Pilinszky writes that

“[...] reality and incarnation in the world has been damaged, the last accomplishment has been fissured once originally trusted to our imagination [...] art has become the morality of imagination: an exhaustive labor contributing to the accomplishment of reality and that of the incarnation of creation [...] has a predilection for choosing the past or more so, the tragic, the irremediable, the shameful and the unsolvable. In art, praying for the dead means incarnating them.”<sup>35</sup>

Symbolic readings can incarnate the past by seeking its completions (*σύμβολα*) in the lives of readers – this might be also the reason why for Eric Voegelin and Simone Weil symbolic readings also became politically relevant.

<sup>33</sup>VOEGELIN (n. 21) 83.

<sup>34</sup>WEIL, S.: *Ami személyes, és ami szent*. Ed. PILINSZKY J. Budapest 1983.

<sup>35</sup>Cited from SEPSI, E.: Attention and Creative Imagination in the Work of Simone Weil and János Pilinszky. In KALLAY, K. ET AL. (edd.): *The Arts of Attention*. Budapest 2017, 35–53, 41.

