

Shields of Contradiction and Direction: Ekphrasis in the *Iliad* and the *Aeneid*

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The *Iliad* and the *Aeneid* both contain long descriptions of shields wrought by the god of fire. In the *Iliad*, Hephaestus forges an intricate shield for Achilles, bearing scenes of Greek life. In the *Aeneid*, the shield Vulcan produces for Aeneas foreshadows the glories of Rome. The ekphrastic passages in both epics combine word and image in a self-reflexive "temporal-spatial hybrid" (Klarer 3) that offers insights beyond the scope of either traditional verbal narrative or visual art. The shield ekphrases conflate these two genres of communication, producing unique commentaries on each epic's themes and objectives. Moreover, a comparison of the parallel passages in the two works illuminates the relationship between them, casting Virgil's drastic revision as a critique of the Homeric original. The shield of Achilles is one of paradox and confusion, a farrago of images that ultimately lead to understanding; Aeneas' shield, conversely, is a shield of direction, simplifying the hero's quest and celebrating his future lineage. In the *Iliad* and the *Aeneid*, Homer and Virgil manipulate language, in the same way as the fire god manipulates gold, creating distinct descriptions that celebrate and elucidate their unique heroic visions.

Achilles' shield depicts celestial bodies, cities at war and peace, celebrations and harvesting, the four seasons (Heffernan 21), and the "mighty power" of the ocean (*Iliad* 18.708-09). Lessing believes that Homer places on the shield "the very essence of all that had happened in the world by means of but a few pictures."² The shields bring together an amalgam of opposing elements of human experience: pleasure and pain; city and country; heaven and earth; law and disorder. The shield is built upon these contradictions: it is a visual artifact represented in words, visual space converted to temporal text. In addition, the layout of the shield is ambiguous: Homer never describes

¹ James A. W. Heffernan defines ekphrasis: "ekphrasis is the verbal representation of visual representation" in *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1993: 3. More generally, ekphrasis is a verbal description of an artwork.

² Quoted in Keith Stanley, *The Shield of Homer*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993: 3.

where Hephaestus places his mouldings, save "for the final placing of the Ocean River around the rim of the shield" (Heffernan 21). The tension of opposing elements that infuse the shield's decoration suggests the shield's literary function: it visually encapsulates the epic and its themes, portraying humanity through paradox and exploring free will through incompleteness.

In his introduction to the Fagles translation, Bernard Knox argues that the scenes of peace on the shield offset the violence in the main action, creating "an exquisite balance between the celebration of the war's tragic, heroic values and those creative values of civilised life that war destroys" (Knox 62). He remarks on the dichotomy between the scenes of war and the scenes of peace, ignoring the fact that in every long ekphrastic episode on the shield, peace and violence co-exist. Thus, for example, in the peaceful city, men haggle over a "blood-price for a kinsman just murdered" (*Iliad* 18.582) and in the city of war an argument develops in the attacking army over whether to share the plunder with the inhabitants of the city. Moreover, the city Knox describes as "besieged by a hostile army . . . fight[ing] for its existence" (Knox 62) is in fact torn between two factions, in a situation replete with gods and internal dissent. Furthermore, the attacked city (allegorically Troy) is defended by "loving wives and innocent children" (*Iliad* 18.599) as the "men marched out to war" (*Iliad* 18.601). Here, accompanied by Ares and Pallas Athena the men raid their "enemy's flocks" (*Iliad* 18.610), killing innocent shepherds, "playing their hearts out on their pipes" (*Iliad* 18.612). The raid culminates in a battle in which the camps "clashed and fought like living, breathing men / grappling each other's corpses, dragging off the dead" (*Iliad* 18.627-28). In the town war, the battle is not between the innocent and the guilty, just as the Trojan War is ultimately not about good and evil. Knox's reading disregards the most important element of the shield passage: opposites merge in the *Iliad* and on the shield, issues are complex, and right and wrong are ambiguous. The shield is not separate from war; rather, it is the product of war. As such, it embodies the moral ambiguities of the war through its mouldings.

In the city of war, as in the rest of poem, war is encoded³ in peace. The two are not distinct states; rather, they are mutually dependent entities, in constant flux. Furthermore, war and peace are not "two poles of the human condition" (Knox 62), they are simply the human condition. For this reason, Knox's "exquisite balance" fails: each scene involves both war and peace, as well as other contradictions. Even the direct allegories between the city at war and Troy are mired in ambiguity. Here, Athena and Ares partner to protect the city, when in the main action they are bitter enemies; and emphasis is placed on the murdered shepherds, when in the rest of the epic Achaean shepherds are not mentioned. These and other paradoxes figuring throughout the description of the shield act as an allegorical microcosm for the entire poem.

James A. W. Heffernan, in his book *Museum of Words*, discusses a number of formal contradictions in Homer's ekphrasis. He focuses on "representational friction, which occurs whenever the dynamic pressure of verbal narrative meets the fixed forms of visual representation and acknowl-

³ A word suggested in David Foster Wallace's "David Lynch Keeps His Head" in his *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again*. Boston: Little Brown, 1997: 205.

edges them as such" (Heffernan 19). Furthermore, "the friction also occurs when the poet's language registers the difference between the medium of visual representation and its referent" (Heffernan 19). Homer, through the eye of the working forge, describes a field being plowed:

...the crews would turn back down along the furrows,
pressing again to reach the end of the deep fallow field
and the earth churned black behind then, like earth churning,
solid gold as it was—that was the wonder of Hephaestus' work (*Iliad* 18.635-38).

The fire god deliberately makes gold look black, as he later stains Death's cloak red "with human blood" (*Iliad* 18.626). The fantastic representation aggrandises the description in a way suitable to epic, and "reminds us that [Homer] is representing representation" (Heffernan 19). This self-reflective characteristic of Homer's ekphrasis strengthens the allegory, emphasising its relation to the greater work, and endows visual art with the magnificent, seemingly infinite power of language.

Homer expands on this "representational friction" by incorporating sound into his golden shield. In the vineyard scene, a young boy plays a lyre "so clear it could break your heart with longing . . . his fine voice rising and falling low" (*Iliad* 18.665, 11.667). Heffernan comments: "Homer makes no distinction between what the artist actually puts on the shield and what can be inferred about the narrative context surrounding the moment putatively depicted" (Heffernan 11). The status of the shield is ambiguous: ultimately, it is impossible to visualise the divine work, as it violates our expectations, much as does the entire epic. Even the proposed function of the shield—to protect Achilles after he has finally decided to go to war—is questionable. It is an "indestructible shield" (*Iliad* 18.709) for a destructible man. The scenes on the shield represent civilisation, in particular, a civilisation that Achilles uses to protect himself. Heffernan argues that the armour represents "the life it is . . . designed to protect," an armament full of men and women unshielded, "fully exposed to the spears of the enemy" (Heffernan 11). But the shield is not made to protect civilisation; it is made to glorify Achilles. In the *Iliad* the individual is continually placed ahead of the community. Achilles enters the war to revenge the death of Patroclus, not to save the Greek fleets. Moreover, Achilles knows his fate: he will die soon after killing Hector. The shield serves Achilles in promoting his fame; it is not immortal in its invincibility, but rather in the status it will bring to the hero. This knowledge inflames Achilles' fighting spirit—"the more he gazed the deeper his anger went" (*Iliad* 18.19.19)—until he kills his enemy. For the reader, the shield, in both form and content, serves as an extension of the epic's scope, expanding its themes into all aspects of human life.

The construction of the shield also allegorises the role of fate in the *Iliad*. There is discord between fate and free will, with Homer never completely accepting or rejecting either one. Hephaestus sculpts the lives of men and women on the shield just as Fate fashions the lives of the poem's characters. But the fire god, like Homer, rarely resolves any of the episodes he depicts: on the shield, incomplete incidents resonate from the epic frame, leaving the intent of the passage "open-ended" (Nagy 195). The "litigation scene" (Nagy 200), which Gregory Nagy describes as marking the inception of the "polis" in the poem, "begins in media res, when one man refuses to take money as a recompense for the killing of another" (Heffernan 17). The "plaintiff wishes . . .

revenge, not ransom" (Nagy 200). The scene abruptly ends before a set of judges, with a prize to the judge who speaks the "straightest verdict" (*Iliad* 18.592). The parallels between this episode and the dispute involving Achilles and Agamemnon are obvious; in addition, however, the structure of the scene parallels the structure of the epic. Homer presents both the *Iliad* and the shield as works in progress: certain events are expected, but never guaranteed. The power of fate is always in doubt. Characters routinely verge on escaping their destinies, and stories are left open, with many possible endings.

On the shield of Achilles contradictions coalesce into an object of astounding beauty. The paradoxes of the shield are also those of the narrative. In both, there is no encompassing morality to order and judge the momentous episodes described. In the *Iliad*, gruesome scenes of violence and death, meaningless war, selfish motives, and individual heroics combine to form "the greatest epic poem in literature" (Knox 63). The epic, and on a smaller scale the shield, contain all the elements of human experience—beauty, violence, and love—locked in the conflict of unending paradoxes.

In the *Aeneid*, Aeneas' shield untangles the paradoxes presented in the *Iliad*. The shield "re-imagines" (Heffernan 22) the Homeric original, centering it in Virgil's moral landscape and using it to celebrate the achievements of Rome. Like Homer, Virgil creates a shield beyond the scope of the visual arts; but unlike Homer, he uses the representational friction and temporal-spatial ambivalence that characterise ekphrasis to enhance the majesty of his epic, more than to reflect his themes. The shield does offer some allegorical references to the greater epic, but not to the same extent as Homer's shield. Primarily, the shield serves as a synopsis of the history of Ancient Rome, relating Aeneas' trials to his objective: Augustus' ascendancy. The pictures on the shield illustrate "Roman victories over moments of peril and crisis" (Eden xx) and, according to S. J. Harrison, emphasise the escape of "the city-state of Rome . . . from destruction or from demotion from its Italian and (later) Mediterranean hegemony" (Harrison 71).

Harrison, in his essay, "The Survival and Supremacy of Rome: The Unity of the Shield of Aeneas," gives a detailed analysis of all the historical events depicted on the shield. He discusses the "[t]he mother wolf" with the "twin boys at play around her teats" (*Aeneid* 8.854-855), relating them to Romulus and Remus and their escape from "intended infanticide" (Harrison 71). He continues, using Livy's histories as his guide, to delineate the other episodes on the shield. "Vivid in the centre" (*Aeneid* 8.912) of the shield is a description of Augustus' victory at Actium. Here, at the focal point of both the shield and epic, Augustus Caesar battles "Antonius with Barbaric wealth / And diversity of arms" (*Aeneid* 8.926-927). He drives Cleopatra in "a frenzy out of Egypt" (*Aeneid* 8.943) and she is pictured "pallentem morte futura" (*Aeneidos* 8.709). Every scene depicted is a triumph for Rome and thus a triumph for Aeneas. The shield provides the last chronological marker in the epic; it illustrates an end to Aeneas' tribulations, providing closure in ways that the *Iliad* does not.

Virgil's shield also contains some elements of allegory. Heffernan cites the similarity between Virgil's treatment of Cleopatra with his treatment of Dido. Both are terrified of the passage of time (Heffernan 34), and like Cleopatra, Dido is "pallida morte futura" (*Aeneidos* 4.644). Another

important allegorical element in Virgil's Homeric revision is his choice to represent the shield as a finished product instead of a work-in-progress as in the *Iliad*. The shield is finished when we read about it in the poem; the future of Rome and Aeneas has already been set in gold. The ekphrasis of the shield ignores debates between free will and fate; instead, like much of the epic, it concentrates on the divine and fated greatness of Rome.

On the shield, it is clear who is in the right (Romans) and who is in the wrong (non-Romans). We read of the lineage of "so excellent a man every way as Virgil's Aeneas" (Sidney 483). Here, the shield serves a political function as well as an artistic one. It "represent[s] and perpetuate[s] political authority" and associates Rome with the gods, turning Augustus into a deity (Heffernan 35). The shield subverts the aims of Homer, adapting them to meet the needs of Virgil's audience. At the end of the description, when Aeneas sees the armour, he feels "joy in the pictures" (*Aeneid* 8.990), yet knows "nothing of the events themselves" (*Aeneid* 8.989) even though he has a direct, fated future. He is the antithesis of Achilles, who understands that his shield means both his glory and his death (yet remains ignorant of how he will die). The political and moral landscape of the shield also emphasises the ideal Roman character, exemplified in the "excellent" Aeneas in the epic and Augustus on the armour. The future Emperor captures the "conquered races" (*Aeneid* 8.976), rather than killing them, and fights for society, rather than himself, leading all of Rome—"both senators and people, / Household gods and great gods" (*Aeneid* 8.917-918)—into battle against the shameful Antony and Cleopatra.

The shields are thus more than mere ornaments; they represent in both form and content the aims, themes, and philosophies of each epic. In addition, they encompass the characteristics of their age, demonstrating the superb skill of both Homer and Virgil. The ekphrastic descriptions combine visual space with textual time to surpass the properties of cause and effect narration and traditional sculpture and metalwork. The shield of Achilles is a morally ambiguous conglomeration of ideas and emotions. It is an allegory not only of the *Iliad*, but also of all human life. The shield of Aeneas manipulates the conventions established by Homer, producing a shield of glorious clarity, deifying Rome and showing the purpose of Aeneas's hardships. Homer's shield raises questions concerning the interaction of war and beauty. In the poem and on the shield the relationship between the two is paradoxical and troubling. Virgil's shield disregards this problem, placing beauty and glory as the logical consequence of war, celebrating bloodshed and Rome's subsequent hegemony.

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