

A Shield for All Ages: Homer, Auden and the Ekphrasis Tradition

The presence of ekphrasis has been in poetry since its earliest inception. Dating back to the first instance of ekphrasis in Homer's *The Iliad* with 'The Shield of Achilles', this literary device has served to function as translation from one art to another, and perhaps more importantly, allude to greater meaning. With Homer's use of it, he epitomizes a classicist sense of glorious war, while encompassing balance and the cycle of human existence. Yet as the centuries moved on and rhetoric evolved, the function and our perception of ekphrasis changed. No longer was it about conveying an ideal or grand picture. With W. H. Auden's revival of ekphrasis in his rendition of 'The Shield of Achilles', we see the device return, but not in the same glorious or encompassing manner. He uses it to cast a bitter hand on the false glory of war, an illusion Homer takes great pride in showcasing. In the guise of ekphrasis, Auden reshapes our perception of 'The Shield of Achilles', as being not a celebrated image of war, but a disturbing one. How these two poets utilize ekphrasis in the space of over 2,000 years emphasizes the potency of the device and just how malleable even the earliest forms of poetry were.

Before deconstructing how each poem varies in employing ekphrasis, it is imperative to understand their intent. Homer's primary reason for incorporating ekphrasis is the polar opposite from Auden's motive. Whereas Homer intends to glorify war, Auden seeks to unveil its hidden atrocity. By working under the banner of the great epic narrative, Homer's use of ekphrasis plays into the poetic tradition of his time. Ancient poetry has widely been a vehicle for the beatification of war, and Homer's use of ekphrasis is no different. This is typified by Achilles' response to his mother, Thetis, when she offers him either a long but forgotten life, or a short and remembered one: 'Let me seize great glory!'¹ In many ways Achilles' emphatic statement captures the ancient belief that eternal remembrance on the battlefield is held in far greater esteem than any other endeavor. So when Hephaestus creates a shield for Achilles it is not adorned with the horrors of war, but rather its glory and rewards. The shield is meant to awe, not terrify. Along with the glory of war, Homer's intent is also to capture the human cycle from life to death. And by also capturing pre-war life, Homer is in many ways propagating the ancient adage *si vis pacem, para bellum*, meaning if you want peace prepare for war. Homer's shield of Achilles is the ultimate validation for war, and he uses the human cycle to depict its role in human civilization, while encompassing the totality of the human experience.

¹ Homer and Robert Fagles, *The Iliad*, (New York, N.Y: Penguin, 1998), p. 470.

With W. H. Auden's rendition of 'The Shield of Achilles', he is writing with very different intentions. Having experienced the harsh brutality of both World War I and II, the illusion that war is this great heroic deed is dispelled in absolute totality. Auden fundamentally breaks down the falsity that surrounds warfare. Classicism is symbolized through Thetis who watches in fright and horror as Hephaestus fashions images not of balance or chivalrous glory, but rather the aftermath of war filled with death and decay. Auden's work can only be fully appreciated when it is held in direct contrast with Homer's ekphrasis, since so much of Auden's mastery is woven into his manipulation of Homer. By vehemently rejecting Homer's glorification of war, Auden is using his ekphrasis with opposite intent. In using the same medium, rhetoric and poetical devices as Homer, Auden's primary agenda is to combat Homer's false justification of war through the same tools. Auden's secondary intent has less to do with Homer and more to do with the audience. This intent can be best studied by simply observing Thetis' reaction to the finished shield, where she 'cried out in dismay'.² The strong emotional sentiments garnered by Thetis are precisely what Auden hopes his audience will leave the poem feeling. For Auden, war is not about awe and spectacle, but rather horror and injustice. Thus the horrors that dismantle Thetis' expectations are supposed to erase the false images that linger in the reader regarding the notion of war. And so while the poem's general intent is to highlight the ramifications of warfare horror, it also serves to directly counter the Homeric beatification of war and provide an entirely different and admittedly authentic perspective.

Now that the intent of the both poets has been laid bare, it is time to move onto how they both specifically utilize ekphrasis to fulfill those intentions. The mettle upon which an ekphrasis succeeds in translating its art is in the vividness and weight of the imagery it captures. Homer's ekphrasis does not fail to provide the audience with vast and stoic images that work beautifully together to depict the dynamic range of human life. Homer chooses broad strokes to describe his ekphrasis, focusing on numerous scenes of jubilant life and activity that move from the municipality to the bucolic. He writes in vivid detail of:

² W. H. Auden, 'The Shield of Achilles', in *Selected Poems*, ed. by Edward Mendelson (New York: Vintage International, 1989), p. 199.

Weddings and wedding feasts in one | and under glowing torches they brought forth the brides | from the women's chambers, marching through the streets | while choir on choir the wedding song rose high | and the young men came dancing.³

These concepts of weddings, choral songs and dancing echo the ancient values of completeness and unification. The expansiveness of his images encompasses the spectrum of life, and therefore includes all the trappings that come with that grand experience. He approaches the images with a fair amount of objectivity, and so is not afraid to juxtapose images of jubilation with images of conflict. A fine example of this lies just after Homer describes the wedding ceremony between the two cities. He suddenly writes of, 'People massed, streaming into the marketplace | where a quarrel had broken out and two men struggled | over the blood-price for a kinsman just murdered'.⁴ In quick succession the images shift, emulating the dynamic nature of life. And because the strife spills out onto the marketplace, the notion that domestic affairs infiltrate the public sphere is clearly symbolized in this image. Furthermore, the transition of violence from one space to another is indicative of its infectious quality. In images like this, found throughout the ekphrasis, Homer is injecting a ranging cast of societal themes and life enduring problems. From weddings to quarrels to eventual death, the motif of a lifecycle, as previously noted, is recapitulated.

Auden's imagery is less concerned with embodying the entirety of the human cycle, and more focused on the potency of each individual image as they pertain to the horrors and injustice of modern warfare. With such imagery as 'barbed wire enclosed an arbitrary spot,' one cannot help but recall images of the 20th century trenches.⁵ Auden chooses a less ornate approach, and adopts a more authoritative voice, casting the tone and meaning of the poem in direct contrast with Homer. He projects a darkly nihilistic world that is devoid of the honor and glory Homer upholds. In Auden's world 'girls are raped' and 'two boys knife a third', there are no images of joviality or grandiosity.⁶ The starker imagery is distinctly contrasted by the festive Homeric imagery of, 'men and women in a dance | moving their sweet limbs'.⁷ This shift in tone adds to the potency of Auden's bleak war imagery. By trading in Homer's scenes of joy for scenes of

³ Homer and Fagles, p. 483.

⁴ Ibid., p. 483.

⁵ Auden, p. 199.

⁶ Ibid., p. 199.

⁷ Ibid., p. 199.

despair, Auden is attempting to unearth the true nature of war that Homer has so well buried in poetical decorations.

The diametrically opposed views that Homer and Auden uphold in their ekphrasis' can be fully appreciated also through a close examination of the landscape imagery within each. In Homer's imagery, the landscape takes the bearings of 'a thriving vineyard loaded with clusters, bunches of lustrous grapes in gold, ripening deep purple and climbing vines shot up on silver vine-poles'.⁸ This is a time ripe for harvest and thus the imagery reflects a life worth living. Through the emphasis on the pastoral, Homer is once again reinforcing the seasonal cycle, as well as the nature of the seasons. Auden, when carving out his ekphrasis, inverts Homer's landscape into an infinitely darker tone. No longer is the landscape full of lush nature, but now 'a plain without a feature, bare and brown, | No blade of grass of neighborhood, | Nothing to eat and nowhere to sit down'.⁹ Auden is systematically breaking down the imagery found in Homer's ekphrasis, and reaching further if we interpret it symbolically. The bountiful life so vividly detailed by Homer has become barren and withered in Auden's piece, a consequence of perpetual war. Even through the use of nature, Auden is fueling the notion of decay and loss. These two contrasting landscapes poignantly reflect the opposing opinions the two writers hold in regards to war. For Homer, war leads to potential life and civility; for Auden it leads to the loss of humanity.

For both Auden and Homer, the structure of their ekphrasis' has been carefully considered. They are not haphazardly fashioned together, but rather acutely formed with an underlying purpose. With an emphasis on reiterating the concept of cycle, Homer structures his images to begin with the elements, a natural starting point. This is seen when Hephaestus chooses to first fashion the base elements on the shield. From there he adds the aforementioned weddings and strife that occur within the cities before expanding out to the rural fields. Yet when all is said and done, and vicious images of lions fighting bulls read alongside 'a shaded glen for shimmering flocks to graze', a perfect contrast is made between death and life.¹⁰ With the shimmering flocks, Homer is returning to the simplicity of childhood. And with the next line, 'young boys and girls, beauties courted', the earlier concepts of wedding and unification

⁸ Homer and Fagles, p. 485.

⁹ Auden, p. 198.

¹⁰ Homer and Fagles, p. 486.

returns.¹¹ Themes that were introduced in the poem's beginning are returning to emphasize a complete cycle. The Greek poet finally closes his ekphrasis in a most fitting manner with, 'he forged the Ocean's River's mighty power girdling round the outmost rim of the welded indestructible shield'.¹² Having begun with the elements, he thus concludes with the elements. Such full circle finality in the structure shows that Homer is not only injecting the concept of cycle via the imagery and tone, but also in how the ekphrasis is structured.

Auden takes a more idiosyncratic approach to his structure. The stanzas that include Thetis, classicism personified, are flanked by the very images that shock and terrify her. It is almost as if the 'ragged urchin' and 'artificial wilderness' are suffocating her.¹³ The structure also feeds into the contrast between Thetis' idyllic expectations and the horrors of war. 'So while she looked over his shoulder for athletes at their games', she instead finds 'but a weed-choked field'.¹⁴ Auden's decision to alternate stanzas is sustained throughout the entire ekphrasis, creating an almost rhythmical effect. This rhythm provides the reader with their own sense of expectation, for we come to recognize very early on that everything Thetis expects is ruined soon after. The naive hope she values is an attitude Auden teaches the reader not to uphold. So while the imagery, as previously noted, is an obvious dismantling of Homeric values, from analyzing the structure it becomes clear that the arrangement of the stanzas are also aiding in that dismantlement.

From what has been discussed, Homer and Auden have taken two very divergent paths in their developing of ekphrasis. It seems that everything Homer crafts, Auden takes and reshapes in a darker shade. The effect is day and night, and further exhibited in their use of religious imagery. As previously noted, Homer makes no attempt to shy away from including the great cosmos in his work. He writes in the second stanza:

There [Hephaestus] made the earth and there the sky and the sea | and inexhaustible blazing sun
and the moon rounding full | and there the constellations, all that crown the heavens, | the
Pleiades and the Hyades, Orion in all his power too.¹⁵

¹¹ Homer and Fagles, p. 487.

¹² Ibid., p. 487.

¹³ Auden, pp. 198-99.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 199.

¹⁵ Homer and Fagles, pp. 482-83.

The Greek poet is making a concerted effort to encompass the very beginning of time. As Hephaestus, in true godlike fashion, hammers the earth and sea and sky and heavens into being, we, the reader, are starting from the very root of time. It is not only earthly images being sculpted, but now celestial bodies as well. In addition to including the totality of human existence, he is also striking a cord with his readership by including religious images on faith and scripture; transcendent qualities that hold greater resonance.

And when Auden is submerged in the murk and grim images of nihilistic war, he finds space to include a most fitting biblical allusion. He writes that a crowd of ordinary watched, ‘As three pale figures were led forth and bound | To three posts driven upright in the ground’.¹⁶ The inclusion of Christ-like symbolism halfway through an almost hopeless poem serves to place the poem in a greater context. What is being endured in the trenches and behind the barbed wire is no different from the barbaric cruelty placed upon Christ. The comparison has less to do with deifying the victims of war and more to do with emphasizing the exhausting, helplessness of it all. There is no question that Homer and Auden are doing two very different things with the implementation of religious imagery, but the fact that they are incorporating it serves to draw the reader further in. No longer are these poems about mortal men and strife, but now resonant high above, in a place where immortality flourishes. Perhaps in doing so, the ekphrasis gains some eternity too.

While ‘The Shield of Achilles’ represents two vastly antithetical things for Homer and Auden, it is still possible to look at them as part of a greater whole. When approached through the lens of war, it becomes evident that Homer is exploring life before war, while Auden is depicting life after war. The length to which Homer details the shield leads readers to believe that he is alluding to something more than just the human experience. In many ways the passage serves as the calm before the storm. For soon after Thetis provides her son with the armor, it is the shield that awakens the beast in Achilles that will not stop until the topless towers of Ilium are set ablaze. But before war came to Troy, was it not a city where:

¹⁶ Auden, p. 199.

The heralds were setting out the harvest feast, | they were dressing a great ox they had slaughtered, | while attendant women poured out barley, generous, | glistening handfuls strewn for the reapers midday meal.¹⁷

‘The Shield of Achilles’ literally illustrates the calm before the Trojan War. And so if Homer’s shield is indicative of pre-war life, it quickly becomes apparent that Auden’s ekphrasis is the post-war experience. Auden takes Homer’s symbolism and furthers it. He begins with the soldiers on the battlefield, ‘a million boots in line,’ but ends with the aftermath of war represented by the ‘ragged urchin, aimless and alone’.¹⁸ In this, Auden is not necessarily usurping Homer’s bucolic ideals of pre-war life, but merely showing an evolution of life after the storm, after war. The progression is stark, though the relationship remains. The poems could be read together with one shield telling the prologue and the other conveying the epilogue. They both fit along the same ring. A suitable shape for is not the shield’s circular form reflective of a continuum? Homer makes sure to emphasize that, ‘the crippled Smith brought all his art to bear | on a dancing circle, broad as the circle Daedalus | once laid out’.¹⁹ Even in the physical construction, the shield is representative of more than just an instrument of armor, but a symbol of perpetual cycles.

Between Auden and Homer, the elasticity of ekphrasis is on full display. Even with over 2,000 years between them, both are still able to employ the same tools in different capacities, while still remaining true to the literary tradition of ekphrasis. While one might speak of warfare in terms of great glory and the human cycle, the other speaks of it to counter previous rhetoric and emphasize the true, harrowing nature of it all. These opposing views, challenging each other, show how ekphrasis can evolve and be fashioned without restriction to time or place, yet still maintain a lineage. Homer and Auden represent the farthest ends of the poetic spectrum, but because both ekphrasis’ speak to each other, it is only natural to speak of them in the same breath. The intent of Auden and Homer might be vastly dissimilar, but both are still working under the auspices of warfare and symbolism beneath the image. Like two paths, these two poems sometimes run parallel, at other times intersect, and even occasionally merge. For the

¹⁷ Homer and Fagles, p. 485.

¹⁸ Auden, p. 198-99.

¹⁹ Homer and Fagles, p. 485.

reader, the choice is vast. To choose one is not to lose the other, for chances are, somewhere along the path you will encounter the other, and just might change your course.

Bibliography:

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