

Hephaestus's Mortally- Inspired Art

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In his poem "The Shield of Achilles," W. H. Auden imagines the kind of shield a twentieth-century Hephaestus would forge for a twentieth-century Achilles. The poem closes with Thetis crying "out in dismay" as Hephaestus hobbles away from his work.¹ Thetis cries out because the shield lacks the kinds of images that would remind her son of the beauty and joy within the world. For her, such images would include "vines and olive trees, / Marble well-governed cities / And ships upon untamed seas" (2–4). Rather than please Thetis and forge his shield with these joyful images, however, Hephaestus chooses "to please her son" and provide "the strong / Iron-hearted man-slaying Achilles" (65–66) with an image of the world that coincides with his own experience of war—an experience that is contaminated by "an artificial wilderness / And a sky like lead" (7–8). Thus, in place of "ritual pieties, / White flower-garlanded heifers, / Libation and sacrifice," (24–26) Hephaestus forges executions that are watched with indifference:

Barbed wire enclosed an arbitrary spot
Where bored officials lounged (one cracked a joke)
And sentries sweated for the day was hot:
A crowd of ordinary decent folk
Watched from without and neither moved nor spoke
As three pale figures were led forth and bound
To three posts driven upright in the ground. (31–37)

The indifference that attends these executions extends into every corner of the shield, as Hephaestus replaces the games and dances that Thetis had hoped to see on his shield with rape and murder.

The bleak vision contained on the shield in Auden's twentieth-century poem is neither the vision of Homer's Hephaestus as he makes Achilles's shield, nor is it the vision of Homer himself, as he depicts Hephaestus in his artistic work. Because Homer's shield also includes

1 W. H. Auden, "The Shield of Achilles," line 63.

suffering, Auden's "The Shield of Achilles" is not precisely the antithesis to Homer's shield, but the poem does depict a wounded vision, a hollow vision of totalitarianism in which brutality and indifference have no counterweights. In this vision, beauty has no place. Auden's poem serves as a contrast to the understanding of suffering Homer communicates to his audience throughout the *Iliad*.² Homer's understanding of the beauty that attends the juxtaposition of sorrow and joy can be discerned through the character of the cripple-god Hephaestus, whose participation in creative work and suffering establishes him as the god with the most complete understanding of what it means to be human—an understanding that leads Hephaestus to forge Achilles's shield with images from mortal life rather than images from the lives of the gods. Indeed, Hephaestus's understanding of mortal life is so intimate that he appears to have a kind of kinship with mortals—at least with the godliest of mortals, Achilles. This kinship allows Hephaestus, who has suffered so much at the hands of his fellow gods and even of his own parents that he must seek solace in work, to construct a shield whose artwork supports an argument that mortal lives contain more beauty than immortal lives because of the mortal sorrow that often lurks in the background of mortal joy.

Indeed, one might come to a fuller understanding of Hephaestus's biographical situation by examining more fully this juxtaposition of sorrow and joy. This biographical explanation includes repeated reminders that sorrow attends this crippled god insofar as he is mistreated by his immortal parents, while joy attends him insofar as he recognizes in the mortal condition a sort of mirror of his own debility.

Readers first witness the abuse Hephaestus sustains after Hera and Zeus have quarreled over Zeus's assent to Thetis's request. The crippled god comforts his mother and encourages her to "stroke the Father with soft, winning words" so that "the Olympian will turn kind to us again."³ After pleading with his mother and offering her "a two-handed cup" (1.704) that he most likely had wrought himself, Hephaestus reminds his mother and the other gods present of their initial attempt to dethrone Zeus and the pain he himself sustained as he attempted to defend his mother:

"He seized my foot, he hurled me off the tremendous threshold
and all day long I dropped, I was dead weight and then,
when the sun went down, down I plunged on Lemnos,

2 For more on the place of suffering above exaltation in the *Iliad*, see John Alvis, "The Plan of Zeus," 43.

3 Homer, *The Iliad*, 1.702–03, hereafter cited in text.

little breath left in me. But the mortals there
soon nursed a fallen immortal back to life." (1.712–16)

Immediately after accepting his service and listening to his story of suffering, "the white-armed goddess Hera smiled / and smiling, took the cup from her child's hands" (1.717–18). Both his service and his story have calmed her. Like Zeus's nod to Thetis, Hera's smile communicates her acceptance of Hephaestus's request.

While Hera's reaction to Hephaestus's story is significant, she is not the only immortal who is pacified by him. After all, before Hephaestus approached his mother, "throughout the halls of Zeus the gods of heaven / quaked with fear" (1.686–87). While Hephaestus's winning words seem to calm his mother most, his actions and the service he provides all the gods improve the atmosphere of the entire hall:

Then dipping sweet nectar up from the mixing bowl
he poured it round to all the immortals, left to right.
And uncontrollable laughter broke from the happy gods
as they watched the god of fire breathing hard
and bustling through the halls. (1.719–23)

Because Hephaestus is willing to make himself an object of derision in the hall, he transforms the atmosphere there from one of fear to one of feasting:

That hour then
and all day long till the sun went down they feasted
and no god's hunger lacked a share of the handsome banquet
or the gorgeous lyre Apollo struck or the Muses singing
voice to voice in choirs, their music ringing. (1.723–27)

Were it not for the laughter Hephaestus calls forth upon himself, the halls would not be filled with the music of Apollo and the Muses, and the gods would not be filled by "the handsome banquet." Because Book One closes with "Olympian Zeus" and "Hera the Queen" sleeping side by side (1.732,35), we know that through his service and through his acceptance of the abuse hurled upon him, Hephaestus has succeeded in resolving the domestic dispute and restoring order to the assembly.

In recognizing the cruelty with which Hera has treated Hephaestus, one might be surprised to observe that Hephaestus risks his

own well-being to protect his mother and calm the other gods. Hephaestus himself tells his wife Charis of this cruelty when Thetis asks him to make Achilles's armor:

"Thetis saved my life
 when the mortal pain came on me after my great fall,
 thanks to my mother's will, that brazen bitch,
 she wanted to hide me—because I was a cripple.
 What shattering anguish I'd have suffered then
 if Thetis had not taken me to her breast, Eurynome too,
 the daughter of Ocean's stream that runs around the world." (18.461–67)

Hephaestus is overjoyed to see Thetis because she was more of a mother to him than Hera ever was. While Hera "wanted to hide [him] because [he] was a cripple," Thetis and Eurynome nursed him back to health. This story of Hephaestus's suffering is related to the story about the mortals on Lemnos nursing him back to life because both highlight how lesser powers correct the ugliness present among the gods. While mortals correct the ugliness in the first story, Thetis does so in the second. Though herself a goddess, Thetis's status as the wife of Peleus leads one to wonder if she has adopted a mortal understanding of affection. Because both Thetis and the mortals on Lemnos care for him more fully than his own immortal parents, and perhaps because he sees in the mortal condition a sort of mirror of his own debility, Hephaestus develops an affinity with humans.

Through this mirror, Hephaestus recognizes what causes Achilles the most pain—his preoccupation with and misunderstanding of glory. By choosing to display the beauty of mortals who suffer rather than that of immortals who live at ease, Hephaestus demonstrates that he recognizes the significance of the decision Achilles faces concerning the "two fates [that] bear [him] to the day of death."⁴ As Achilles says,

"If I hold out here and I lay siege to Troy,
 my journey home is gone, but my glory never dies.
 If I voyage back to the fatherland I love,
 my pride, my glory dies . . .
 true, but the life that's left me will be long,
 the stroke of death will not come on me quickly." (9.499–505)

4 For further evidence that shield's "manufacture is closely bound up with [Achilles's] mortality," see Seth Schein, *The Mortal Hero*, 141.

Achilles is unique among mortals insofar as he can choose whether he will die an early but glorious death or live a long but inconsequential life. While one would think that his decision to accept a glorious death would free Achilles from any concern with mortality, it actually leads him to a preoccupation with the life that is left for him. This preoccupation shows that Achilles misunderstands his options. He thinks that he has chosen a short but honor-filled life when, in fact, he was promised *immortal glory*—glory that would attend his name *after* his death. His complaint to his mother shows that this misunderstanding is the source of his rage against Zeus and Agamemnon when Briseis is taken from him:

“Mother!

You gave me life, short as that life will be,
 so at least Olympian Zeus, thundering up on high,
 should give me honor—but now he gives me nothing.
 Atreus’s son Agamemnon, for all his far-flung kingdoms—
 the man disgraces me, seizes and keeps my prize,
 he tears her away himself!” (1.416–22)

Achilles expects to be given honor “now.” This confusion over the timing of the glory that is his due remains with him even as he prepares to “go and meet that murderer head on, / that Hector who destroyed the dearest life [he knew]” (18.135–36). Rather than forget his own glory as he seeks revenge for Patroclus’s death, he considers how his decision to avenge his friend will secure his own fate:

“For my own death, I’ll meet it freely—whenever Zeus
 and the other deathless gods would like to bring it on!
 Not even Heracles fled his death, for all his power,
 favorite son as he was to Father Zeus the King.
 Fate crushed him, and Hera’s savage anger.
 And I too, if the same fate waits for me . . .
 I’ll lie in peace, once I’ve gone done to death.
 But now, for the moment, let me seize great glory!” (18.137–44)

Even though Achilles is willing to accept “the same fate” as Heracles, he will not wait for glory. Instead, he implies that he will only be ready to “lie in peace” after seizing “great glory” for the moment. While his love for Patroclus has led him to accept an early death, it has not removed from him his concern for living honors.

Just as Achilles misunderstands when he will gain immortal glory, so too does he misunderstand the nature of his mortality in believing that his life, because it is short, should also be free of pain. This misunderstanding is only corrected as he listens to Priam's request for the body of his son:

“Remember your own father, great godlike Achilles—
as old as *I* am, past the threshold of deadly old age!
No doubt the countrymen round about him plague him now,
with no one there to defend him, beat away disaster.
No one—but at least he hears you're still alive
and his old heart rejoices, hopes rising, day by day,
to see his beloved son come sailing home from Troy.
But I—dear god, my life so cursed by fate . . .
I fathered hero sons in the wide realm of Troy
and now not a single one is left, I tell you.” (24.570–79)

Priam only intends to establish a parallel between himself and Peleus in order to win Achilles's empathy. He happens to strike the very chord that has moved Achilles throughout the book as, unintentionally, he draws a parallel between the lives of these old men and the life Achilles could have chosen to live. Homer makes this parallelism clear as Priam's description of himself could serve as a response to Achilles's earlier speech to the embassy concerning the two fates available to him. While, in that speech, Achilles suggests that he is tempted to choose long life rather than a glorious death, Priam speaks of being “cursed by fate” in living “past the threshold of deadly old age” (24.577,71). This threshold is the same one that Peleus faces, and it is the same one that Achilles himself would have faced had he returned to his beloved fatherland. When complaining to his mother about Zeus's injustice, Achilles implies that missing this threshold would be a great loss. However, after considering the pains borne by both Priam and Peleus, Achilles changes his attitude towards that threshold. He grieves “for his own father” and “[fills] with pity . . . for [Priam's] gray head and gray beard” (24. 593,603). This change of attitude is significant in that Achilles learns to distinguish mortal life from immortal life only after considering the suffering of these elders alongside the suffering he has borne thus far in his own short life: “So the immortals spun our lives that we, we wretched men / live on to bear such torments—the gods live free of sorrows” (24. 613–14).

If Achilles's distinction between mortal life and immortal life is

correct, then Hephaestus and Thetis are unique among the immortals insofar as they live mortal lives. While Thetis's mortal life is wrapped up in the knowledge that her husband and her son will die, Hephaestus's mortal life is lived out in the torments he bears—torments that are akin to those borne by mortals. Because he himself has experienced mortal pain and the restoration that mortal beauty can bring, Hephaestus can understand Achilles's suffering and create a shield that beautifully depicts mortal suffering.

This beauty is present in the juxtaposition of joy and sorrow that allows Hephaestus to distinguish the healthy city (the one at peace) from the sick city (the one at war) according to the kinds of work done in each. Though the first city Hephaestus forges is a city at peace, the second city he forges shows that in times of war one cannot distinguish between the work of soldiers and the work of women, children, and elders. War requires that all members of the community be involved:

They armed for a raid, hoping to break the siege—
loving wives and innocent children standing guard
on the ramparts, flanked by elders bent with age
as men marched out to war. (18.598–601)

The work of these wives, children, and elders exists in stark contrast to the work of the inhabitants of the first city forged, where everyone is concerned with a wedding feast during which young men dance and women stand "moved with wonder" (18.579). Though the joyful feast is disturbed by a quarrel between two men, the work of the citizens is clear. Their work is to seek justice. While the "elders bent with age" (18.600) of the second city are not fit for war, they are fit to act as judges in the first city, where "the city elders sat / on polished stone benches, forming the sacred circle, / grasping in hand the staffs of clear-voiced heralds, / and each leapt to his feet to plead the case in turn" (18.587–90). While this first city contains a community concerned with the work of justice within its walls, the second city is at war with a foreign community.⁵ In the struggle between strangers represented on the shield and throughout the *Iliad*, violence extinguishes justice, and even the innocent suffer. In both representations, the violence of soldiers, depicted as their "work," is to kill without judgment. Senseless slaughter is found outside the walls of the second city on the shield, where two scouts cut down innocent sheep,

⁵ For his argument concerning the relationship between the cities on the shield and Troy, see Oliver Taplin, "The Shield of Achilles," 6–14.

oxen, and shepherds:

Come they did, quickly, two shepherds behind them,
 playing their hearts out on their pipes—treachery
 never crossed their minds. But the soldiers saw them,
 rushed them, cut off at a stroke the herds of oxen
 and sleek sheep-flocks glistening silver-gray
 and killed the herdsmen too. (18.611–16)

The scouts think nothing of the innocent shepherds focused on their peaceful work. There are no elders present to judge the soldiers. Instead, the slaughter of the innocent brings more violence, and the battle between the besiegers and the besieged commences.⁶

Though the violent “work” of the soldier is not the final representation of work forged on the shield, it does establish the kind of sorrow that should be juxtaposed with the remaining representations. With each description of the creative, life-affirming work of farming, harvesting, and the like, the audience remembers the shepherds cut down in the midst of their song. C. Scott Littleton states that “it is against this backdrop of internecine military conflict that *all* the events described by Homer take place.”⁷ These “events described by Homer” include the events on Hephaestus’s shield. Homer, through the constant use of simile and metaphor, has taught his audience always to see one thing in juxtaposition to another. We cannot help but imagine these scenes of life with an underlying sadness, acknowledging their end in death. The presence of death is in our minds as we imagine fallow fields, kings’ estates, vineyards, pastures, meadows, and even dances, all of which lend these scenes the “note of sorrow” necessary for our true appreciation of their beauty.⁸ We have before us joyful lives that are bound to slip away, lives that may be snatched from us at any moment, lives which are mortal. No such joyful lives are depicted on Auden’s twentieth century shield—a shield forged to depict totalitarian power and its absolute indifference to beauty and fragility. But Hephaestus’s shield, like Homer’s *Iliad*, is filled

6 For more on the absence of art in Achilles’s warfare, see Alvis, “The Plan of Zeus,” 44.

7 C. Scott Littleton, “Some Possible Indo-European Themes,” 134.

8 For a beautiful description of “the note of sorrow” (14) that comes from the sea, see Matthew Arnold, “Dover Beach.” While Arnold focuses on the beauty of this single “note of sorrow,” Hephaestus listens to notes of sorrow and dances along to notes of joy, recognizing and appreciating the presence of both.

with such beauty.⁹ This beauty is only made more radiant as the grotesque moments that fill much of the action of the epic become the notes that ring underneath Hephaestus's forgings.¹⁰ While there is an undercurrent of the grotesque in Hephaestus's representations of peaceful work, the grotesque is *not* the focal point that it is in Auden's "The Shield of Achilles." Instead, as Oliver Taplin argues, Homer's shield of Achilles "makes us think about war and see it in relation to peace."¹¹ The following descriptions of the presence of the grotesque underneath the peaceful scenes on the shield are provided as evidence of their existence below strikingly beautiful descriptions of scenery and of creative, life-affirming work.

Each of these scenes contains multiple distinct notes of sorrow, present as reminders of suffering. The note present in the fallow field is the black earth, which must be tilled multiple times before being ready for farming and which may someday swallow the dead: "And he forged a fallow field, broad rich plowland / tilled for the third time, and across it crews of plowmen / wheeled their teams, driving them up and back" (18.629–31). Homer's audience is called to realize, at the very moment of reading these peaceful lines, that these fields will not always be used for farming, for sustaining life. At some point in the future, the work of tilling the land will serve only to soften the ground for the soldiers who have been denied proper burial rites. Perhaps even more disturbing is the possibility that battles have already been fought on this soil, and that the dead are providing the very nourishment necessary for human life. The shield's connection of death to farming may also be found in the act of cutting grain in the same way and with the same tool Kronos uses to vanquish his father. The work of using a scythe is attended by sorrow:

And he forged a king's estate where harvesters labored,
reaping the ripe grain, swinging their whetted scythes.
Some stalks fell in line with the reapers, row on row,
and others the sheaf-binders girded round with ropes. (18.639–42)

Swinging scythes and swinging swords are parallel forms of work. The victims who do not "fall in line with the reapers" are bound "with ropes" and held for ransom or sold as slaves. The king's silent response

9 For his argument that, throughout the *Iliad*, darkness is darkened by beauty and beauty is made more radiant by violence, see David H. Porter, "Violent Juxtaposition," 19.

10 For an argument that the coexistence of the bleak and the bright are necessary to the epic and its heroes, see Jasper Griffin, "Homeric Pathos and Objectivity," 186. For a similar argument, see Simone Weil, "The *Iliad*," 25.

11 Taplin, "The Shield of Achilles," 15.

to the successful harvest is similar to the king's expected response to the tragedies of war, with one clear difference. The king responding to a successful harvest "rejoic[es] in his heart" while the king responding to the death of his soldiers, in victory or in defeat, "[sorrows] in his heart" (18.648).¹² This sorrow is identified most completely in the vineyard, where, as the workers pick grapes, "their hearts leaping in innocence," all hear the sorrowful note of a young boy plucking his lyre, "so clear it could break the heart with longing, / and what he sang was a dirge for the dying year, / lovely . . . his fine voice rising and falling low" (18.662, 665–67). The boy's "dirge for the dying year" is the musical equivalent to Hephaestus's art and the third forging of music into a shield whose sorrowful song is heard underneath its images.

Hephaestus nears the completion of his work in much the same way he began it, with a scene of courting that may even precede the marriage portrayed in the first city. Martin Revermann notices that the final dancing scene on the shield contains no music.¹³ Instead, the boys and girls dance in silence. He calls this silence a textual mistake because it is a break in Homer's pattern of including music within scenes of dancing. Revermann, however, may have missed Homer's understanding that the creative work of forging the shield, heating and hammering, heating and hammering, provides the music for the dance. The tune to which these boys and girls dance may be likened to the tune to which Mark Van Doren walks when he identifies an "Undersong" in all creation that is sung even in silence: "In wonderment I walk to music pouring / Out of so dark a source it makes no sound."¹⁴ The sorrow under the shield's silent song is made explicit in the description of the boys and girls dancing, during which time "the boys swung golden daggers hung on silver belts" (18.699). Though the daggers themselves, within the dance, may provide little more than decoration, they cannot be understood as mere decoration within this epic filled with warfare. Rather, the dance is a moment of joy resting on a sorrow clearly envisioned.

This final dance is not to be interpreted as a moment of leisure but as an act of creative work that should be juxtaposed to the work of Achilles, the man Littleton describes as "far and away the most warlike figure in the epic."¹⁵ Achilles is the hero behind the shield, strengthening

12 For more on the significance of the king on the shield, see Alvis, "The Plan of Zeus," 31.

13 See Martin Revermann, "The Text of *Iliad* 18.603–06," 29–38.

14 Van Doren, "Undersong," lines 1–2.

15 Littleton, "Indo-European Themes," 138.

its “Undersong.”¹⁶ He joins in the shield’s dirge the moment he picks it up and, in doing so, in addition to bringing death and destruction to others, he accepts an early death. His own work on the battlefield is destructive rather than creative and is therefore a painful denial of the dance Hephaestus forges as the penultimate note to the shield’s song. This dance is understood neither as a form of leisure nor as a form of destruction but as creative work comparable to that of a potter:

And now they would run in rings on their skilled feet,
nimble, quick as a crouching potter spins his wheel,
palming it smoothly, giving it practice twirls
to see it run, and now they would run in rows,
in rows crisscrossing rows—rapturous dancing. (18.700–05)

Such a description of the dancer as a potter reminds us that Hephaestus is a dancer, as clarified by Homer’s description of his work: “With that / he heaved up from the anvil block—his immense hulk / hobbling along but his shrunken legs moved nimbly” (18.479–81). Homer provides an entire scene developing the splendor of Hephaestus’s movement, and Hephaestus’s most impressive dancing takes place as he forges the shield. His work is never separated from the scenes he creates. Nearly every description begins with a reminder that the shield is a work of art *he* makes, a beauty *he* forges.¹⁷

Just as the shield can never be fully understood without reference to its maker, the *Iliad* cannot be appreciated without reference to Homer.¹⁸ Hephaestus’s insights are, at the same time, Homer’s insights. The similarity of these insights becomes less surprising if one remembers that, at least according to tradition, Homer, like Hephaestus, has a debility of his own. As Kenneth Atchity points out, this debility—Homer’s blindness—informs his understanding of the human condition in the same way that Jorge Luis Borges was informed by his blindness¹⁹:

16 For a discussion of the relationship between Achilles and the shield he carries, see Schein, *The Mortal Hero*, 142.

17 Homer reminds his readers of Hephaestus as the maker of the shield throughout Book 18, including in lines 547, 558, 565, 572, 629, 638, 639, 654, 670, 686, 689, and 708.

18 For an argument that Hephaestus’s shield and Homer’s *Iliad* are examples of “sublime art” that reaches towards the same goal, see Schein, *The Mortal Hero*, 142. For an argument that “the Shield can be read as a metaphor for Homeric poetry,” see Andrew Sprague Becker, “The Shield of Achilles,” 142. For an argument that one might even be able to view the shield as a metaphor for epic poetry, see Louise Cowan, “Introduction: Epic as Cosmopoesis,” 3.

19 Whether or not Homer himself was blind is insignificant. What is significant is that he demonstrates an ability to see “the unseen shape of things.”

Borges's personal experience of blindness led him to poignant insight into what the Greek tradition considered the explanation of that brilliant Homeric clarity. Only the blind, as Oedipus learns from Tiresias, can see, without the confusion of the senses, the true form of things human and divine. Therefore the truest philosopher is he who sees only the unseen shape of things, the clearest poet he who sees as a philosopher.²⁰

Both Hephaestus, the crippled smith, and Homer, the "poet who sees as a philosopher," provide insight into the human condition in recognizing that suffering, though a necessary part of it, does not define it. Whereas Auden and his twentieth-century Hephaestus leave no room for joy, Homer and his crippled smith embrace both the joy and the pain that fill our lives. Perhaps this investigation into the crippled smith tells us something significant about the soul of the blind Poet who forged this poem—the soul Louise Cowan identifies as the soul that *discovered* epic: "It has been customary to say that Homer invented the epic; it would be more accurate, however, to say that he discovered it, for the epic is the portrayal of something potential in the human soul from the beginning, though not known until expressed in poetic form."²¹ Homer expresses that which our souls long to express. He gives voice and breath to both our song of mortal sorrow and our song of mortal joy.²²

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20 Kenneth Atchity, "Introduction," 4.

21 Cowan, "Introduction," 24.

22 Those of us convinced that no one can understand the depths of our suffering might consider listening to the people Van Doren called his "great friends." For his praise of the great heroes of literature, including Homer's Achilles, see Van Doren, "My Great Friends," 506.

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