

W.H. Auden's 'The Shield of Achilles': Modern Sensibility & Unheroic Present

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Abstract

The Shield of Achilles is a poem by W. H. Auden first published in 1952, and the title work of a collection of poems by Auden, published in 1955. It is Auden's response to the detailed description, or ekphrasis, of the shield borne by the hero Achilles in Homer's epic poem the Iliad. The paper attempts to analyse the poem in-depth taking into considerations its historical importance and the allusions it reflects on the passivity and hollowness of heroism in the postmodern world. The paper also deals with the stylistic and technical achievements of the poem and how the glory and magnificence of war is subverted within the structure. The paper attempts to explore the relationship between war and modern technology as reflected in the poem.

Keywords: Modernism, Heroism, Poetry, Postmodern, War

W.H. Auden is an outstanding modern poet, standing next only to W.B. Yeats and T.S. Eliot. He justified throughout his career the position he quickly attained as the leader of a generation that followed Yeats and Eliot. He may not be as profound as Yeats or Eliot, but he is "an intelligent, sensitive, fluent and generous man of his age", and his poetry is a great 'civilizing force'. The place and significance of this civilizing force can never be obliterated from the pages of the history of English poetry. In 1970, John Fuller remarked that "for breadth, wisdom, myth, moral power, and sheer technical excitement, Auden is the greatest living poet writing in English." In 1974 Anthony Thwaite wrote, "Though both Robert Lowell and Philip Larkin are fine poets, the death of Auden takes away the last Anglo-American poet to have an international audience. It is difficult for poets to cross linguistic frontiers, but Auden did so." With his death in September

1973, Auden has become a part of history itself, but 'the words of a dead man are modified in the guts of the living'.

It is in poetry that readers have the sharpest sense of what the 'modern' is. Yet it is hard to suggest a single and simple touchstone for the note of modernity in poetry. Perhaps the nearest we can get to it is the presence in a poem of a feeling of harsh, unresolved complexity; Catullus, for instance, is very 'modern' when he says:

I hate and I love. And if you ask me how,

I do not know: I only feel it, and I'm torn in two

Again, modern poetry is difficult, complex and abstruse. In this connection G.S. Fraser writes, "I think much modern poetry is very difficult, and that it does not always repay the labour of working it out. There are times when we turn with relief to poetry that is not modern. Simplicity and clarity are perennially refreshing. Difficulty, however, has its proper place in literature; our world, and our place in it, is increasingly hard to understand and the sense of that difficulty has been increasing for more than a hundred years. A false, or affected, simplicity is a detestable thing." [Fraser 45]

In one of his essays Eliot wrote that modern poetry must be difficult. In his early poetry Auden tried to be both obscure and difficult so that he could be reckoned as a 'modern' poet. In his early poetry obscurity is caused mainly by two reasons: his manipulation of language and syntax, and secondly by his intention of writing for a small, self-contained audience. A.S. Collins is of the view, "The early poetry of Auden is marked with uncertainty and obscurity. Like all young poets he had to work his technique, and at first he was hampered by a feeling common to his fellows that they were speaking in isolation with the result that he, and they sometimes indulged in a private language, whose allusions were shared only by their friends." Few more painfully obscure books have ever been published than Auden's *The Orators* of 1932.

Similarly some parts, particularly the central section, of *Spain* 1937 are quite difficult to understand, and could never have a wide appeal. At other times the rhetoric is strained, and we don't feel that this voice speaks confidently for a large community. The language is sometimes obscure because of omissions or ellipses, its lack of sequence or its private metaphor, the difficult allusions or the technical terms of psychology; sometimes articles or relative pronouns or connectives are omitted. But poets such as T.S. Eliot and Dylan Thomas are more obscure than Auden. In this connection Narsingh Srivastava writes, "The striking difference lies in the point that Auden invariably leads us to thinking state rather than a feeling state of mind. The intellect plays a greater part in the intuitive design of his poetry, and we are generally led from

experience to idea, from feeling to thought, or to a thoughtful assessment of the experience.” [Narsingh 78]

No doubt, Auden’s early poetry was difficult to understand, but with the passing of time his style became more clear and lucid, and easy to understand. He was not impenetrably ‘difficult’, much of the time, for all his assured modernity.

Auden, like T.S. Eliot, is a representative poet of the nineteen-thirties. His characteristic work has always shown an acute consciousness of the modern situation as perceived by the intelligentsia of the time. His poetry of the 1930s is related to the discontents, the mingled sense of guilt and frustration among the upper, upper-middle and professional classes, in England after the First World War. He captured the mood ‘of our time’. He was ‘modern’, he spoke of the time in which he lived, and dealt with contemporary ideas and topical events. He gave expression to the modern sense of loss and anxiety without the apparatus of polyglot scholarship such as *The Waste Land* presented.

Auden’s poetry is made of experiences directly gained from a close understanding of life and a profound concern about its problems. Narsingh Srivastava says, “Auden’s greatness lies, in the first place, in the representative character of his poetry as well as the modernity of his sensibility. He has represented the dilemmas of our age more fully than any other modern poet has done, and in the minute analysis of the moral and spiritual ailments of the lost and misdirected individuals of our age he is unsurpassable, indeed.” [Narsingh 102]. Ours is the age of disintegration, uncertainty and anxiety, and Auden has rightly named it as the “Age of Anxiety”. Auden’s concern with the political and social situation in the thirties, his employment of the modern psychological theories in the interpretation of man’s inner dilemmas, his emphasis on the multi-dimensional nature of man, his treatment of the problem of anxiety and despair in man’s life, and his final acceptance of religious humility and faith as the unerring solution of these problems place him in the forefront of the representative poets of the twentieth century. Auden established his modernity writing in the thirties a new kind of revolutionary poetry in a new idiom, entirely different from the romantic lyricism of the Georgians and their predecessors. Communism as well as Freudianism had an imaginative appeal for him not merely as dialectic but as a way out from the prevailing frustration, degeneration, and disillusionment of his generation. Similarly, the validity of his religious poetry of the forties and onward lies in the fact that it makes us understand the peculiar position of man in an age of disbelief better than we could ordinarily do. There have been numerous leading intellectuals and writers like Aldous Huxley, Ernest Hemmingway, and T.S. Eliot who have shown a similar development in their career as we find in Auden, and who have been occupied more with the place of faith in the modern man’s life than with anything else. Auden has gone along with these great writers in search of faith, and his career presents the development from a man of lost generation to a man of faith. This course of

Auden's development also suggests the consistent growth of a mind which has been fully alive to the insurmountable pressures of the times on the one hand, and the necessity of an integrating principle like love or faith on the other.

"The Shield of Achilles" is the title poem in the volume of poems entitled *The Shield of Achilles*, published in 1955. The lyric is divided into three parts, and each part consists of three stanzas. Thus there are nine stanzas in all. It is a fine lyrical poem in which Auden puts the classical myth of Achilles and his shield to the service of his art as a modern poet to bring out the contrast between the heroic past and the unheroic present. Auden's handling of the myth is dexterous and highly appropriate in underlying the desolation, cruelty, and uninspiring barrenness of the contemporary scene.

In this lyric Auden has used the mythical technique popularized by T.S. Eliot to make his comments on the modern condition. The mythical method consists in juxtaposing the past and the present, with the past serving as a comment on the present. In order that the parallelism may be effective, Auden alternates the reminiscences of the glorious past of the classical world and its legendary beauty with the contemporary scene which cuts into this past and produces an antithetical and negative effect. The contemporary scene is rendered in terms of military operations and senseless violence with implications of religion and art. Thus, Auden's poem is a carefully balanced and well-integrated whole in which we find more than one level of meaning. The myth has been worked to a deep significance. According to Monroe K Spears, in the poem "the shield symbolizes art, image of the human condition. Auden's version however is mock-heroic, contrasting the Homeric description of the life, the modern artists must represent. In the shield of art Hephaestus (the artist) shows Thetis (the audience) not the classical city but the plane of modern life on which multitudes are ordered about by totalitarian rulers (a faceless voice reciting statistics through a loudspeaker. Instead of the "ritual pieties", we have barbed wire enclosing "arbitrary spot" where there is a travesty of the crucifixion being performed by bureaucrats while "ordinary decent fold" watch, --- in which helpless individuals are shamefully deprived of human dignity before death." [Monroe 66] Thus by using the mythical technique Auden has telescoped whole ages of history within the compass of a small lyric, and commented upon the spiritual decay and desolation in the modern age. He expresses emotion directly with simplicity, directness and force. This poem is unusual in presenting tragedy without comment.

In "The Shield of Achilles", which presents the meaninglessness of a life without faith, we find a successful example of Auden's use of a conceptual construct instead of direct treatment of experience. Thetis's observation of her son's shield, in expressing the views of her own design, provides a dramatic context for an objective presentation of the horrors of a world without faith. Auden's mythopoetic imagination enables him to attain a double focus and thereby turn the Homeric legend into a befitting analogy to the post war world of today. The beauty of the poem

lies in the double edged irony which suggests, on the one hand, a parallel between the classical world and the present, and on the other reveals the contrast between the expectations of Thetis and the reality painted on the shield. Although the intention of the poet is not chiefly the symbolic painting of landscape but to make the description highly suggestive, the picture of “A pain without feature bare and brown, “ as also without any sign of vegetation and neighborhood, persists throughout the poem as sign of contrast to the cherished virtues of the classical city of “vines and olive trees” of “ritual pieties”, dances and games. The whole description reminds us, as much of a similar picture in Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, as of a spiritless totalitarian state or the modern valueless world of mass civilization. The remarkable aspect of the poem is, no doubt, its imagery which Auden uses for the setting to be carved out on the shield. The image of “An unintelligible multitude” marching “column by column in a cloud of dust”, of the three pale figures who “were led forth and bound /to three posts driven upright in the ground”, and of “a ragged urchin, aimless and alone”, combine to intensify the negative aspects of the horrors of a world without the idea and hope of redemption.

Allan Rodway says that amidst so much, and such varied work, it is difficult, and perhaps invidious, to claim prominence for any one poem. Yet there are grounds for saying that “The Shield of Achilles” is Auden’s great poem – at any rate if we agree that the idea of greatness includes a certain degree of public importance and public appeal in a work. It is not easy, indeed in those terms to think of a greater poem in this century. One element of its merit is that it combines profound import with utter simplicity. Like most major poets of the modern and post-modern periods, Auden is often obscure, though in the end it is usually possible to understand it. The diction is central, the syntax normal and logically ordered, the form heightens without hindering the sense, and the rare rhetorical devices are kept strictly relevant to the needs of theme.

Though not vocative in the way of most odes, but rather a crisp narrative of vivid scenes and actions (“She looked...”, not ‘O look...’), this poem possesses the main features usually associated with the ode; namely a certain elevation of sense that the poet is raising above personal matters to speak in a measured responsible way on something of general importance, and the use of a contrasting and comparative method.

What we have said so far is not so much counterpointing of past and present or the legendary and the actual, as a timeless contrast and comparison between the Arcadian and the utopian (as Auden uses these terms). The Arcadian represents the principle of harmony, the utopian that of order; the one community is largely rural and even the people in its small cities have some rapport with nature; the other community is urban-based, complex, overpopulated, and subject to a highly-organised imposed order. The timeless quality drives in part from the mingled suggestions of the recorded Greek past in the short-lined stanzas, and the real present (in the

others). But more particularly it derives from the use of myth. Hephaestus and Achilles are eternal types of the armament manufacturer and the warmonger, the nymph Thetis of the decent human civilian. As those types are reflected, by implication, in the authoritarians and victims of the 'realistic' stanzas they too are absorbed into the mythic ambience; so the poem becomes 'not for an age but for all time'.

We said earlier that myth, as used by Auden, is really symbolic metaphor writ large, in that it both concretises and universalizes. We might add that it is unlike history because it is not factual, but like history in that it is explanatory; and it is unlike the novel because it is not mimetic, but like the noble in that it is invented. All these features are to be found here. Auden is enabled to present, in its essence, one of the direct forms of the baffle of being: the contrast between ideas of harmony and humane community, and practices of mas-manipulation, moral blindness, and militarism he is able to condense recognizable worlds, as it were, into a timeless metaphor of themselves. To carry our own metaphor further, we could say that the vehicle of the metaphor that the poem as a whole can be seen as is the shield, while its tenor is to horrible gap between Ought and Is.

To generalize, we may say that the first three stanzas express the State as organization, the next three the State as Idea (sublimated into religion and, therefore, involving the persecution of heretics) while the last three exemplify the consequences effected by such a State. More particularly, the detailed revelation remarkably combines plainness with power, largely because of very subtle stylistic effects and very cogent choice of metonymic examples.

In this mythicized documentary, as we may style it, the legendary shield is not presented mimetically. Not even a shield fashioned by a god could picture so much ---and in any case the scene seems to change every time Thetis looks at it. A magic mirror, revealing the future as well as the present and showing what is true rather than what is desired, is what it really acts as a device that permits the poet to concentrate great scope in a small compass.

The Grecian stanzas contrast internally as well as contrast with the contemporary stanzas. The repetition of the first and fifth lines evokes a sense of humility's repeated disappointment, as what is hoped for and expected turns into something quite contrary. The last stanza, however, changes the pattern to give a double twist in the tail. The shining metal of the shield, symbol of armaments and death, is replaced by 'the shining breasts' of Thetis, a symbol of beauty and life. We find out, too, that the anonymous 'She' is in fact the mother of Achilles – a reminder of the special grief of war among the general ones. And the legendary hero (burlesqued by the urchin) is ironically deglamorised as the favorable adjective 'strong' is followed by 'iron hearted, man slaying' and it is revealed that his defensive armament only ensures that he 'would not live long'.

The turn in the first stanza is, of course, intelligent and logical. It would have been hypocritical for an armaments' manufacturer – especially one with a god's vision – to portray scenes worthy of Keat's 'Grecian Urn' on his work. 'An artificial wilderness' is more to the point: 'artificial' because the shield is a work of artifice, and also because war will make a wilderness of what nature and pastoral work have made fruitful (a new twist to Auden's art/nature theme).

A similarly judicious choice of words is found elsewhere: 'congregated', from its association with religious gatherings, takes on a bitter irony, 'unintelligible' suggests not only the mind boggling vastness of the army, but its meaninglessness (what sense can be made of getting half a million together and turning them into robots?). So too, 'enduring' seems to imply a belief foisted on to people from without, and in context it also hints that it will bring suffering rather than happiness. 'Pale figures' carries over tones of long incarceration as well as fear, and 'vacancy', in the paradoxical content of 'aimless' and 'well-aimed', clearly refers to a moral void as well as a physical wasteland.

The two types of stanzas are linked in so far as the long-line stanzas tease out in a more documentary way what was implicit in the concise symbolic picture of the shorter lines stanzas. Stanza-form supports content, though, in a more general sense: such a wide-ranging poem needs not merely the plethora of concrete examples, which give it a body and impact that plain preaching could never achieve, but needs also a corset of regular rhyme and metre to keep them in shape and help them towards an odal dignity. It is one way of attaining elevation without becoming stilted. Where Auden does use language of 'mass and majesty' he is careful to avoid the trap many writers of odes fall into: that of choosing it from a register of special poetic diction. 'An unintelligible multitude', 'an artificial wilderness', 'libation and sacrifice', 'the mass and majesty of the world', are all made up from everyman's vocabulary. Alliteration, again, is used with extraordinary tact, quite unobtrusively underlining an already powerfully ordered sense. Witness, for instance, the repeated labials of 'an unintelligible multitude/ A million eyes, a million boots in line' (one might note the also the apt rows of short vowels); or 'could not hope for help and no help came' (noting also the abstention from conventional heroics or lucky escape); or, again, the way these lines are quietly woven together by sound as well as sense: 'any world where promises are kept/Or one could weep, because another wept' (noting here, as elsewhere, the sense of measured comment given by parallelism: 'one/another', 'weep/wept').

The panoramic sweep, the slight distancing of the strict form, the measured restraint of the diction, the mythical ambience, and the prevailing perspective (of reality seen through art) all combine to lend credibility to the indictment in a poem at once somber and lucid.

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