

Rick Brown: A Bloody Torpor: The Banality of Violence in Auden's "The Shield of Achilles"

W. H. Auden was a mercurial poet, frustrating and fascinating for his vibrant juxtaposition of the banal and poignant in his challenging poetry. His influences were legion, stemming from specific political issues such as warfare and class to more personal concepts such as Auden's constantly changing relationship with Christianity and his own homosexuality. One of the most powerful of the thematic strains that runs throughout Auden's work is the theme of warfare, especially in its relation to Auden's moral ambiguity and sometimes irreconcilable views on whether one should or should not engage in conflict. Perhaps the most interesting and relevant of the poems arising from Auden's interest and horror at the wages of war is "The Shield of Achilles," a work that paints a hideous portrait of modern life characterized by inevitability and martial horror and set amidst the classical lyricism and vitality of the Iliad of Homer. First published in 1953 and later included in the eponymous anthology *The Shield of Achilles* in 1955, the poem is constructed with alternating stanzas depicting the construction of Achilles' shield and a cruel, nameless war waged in modern times, with both strands of the poem ending in tragic fashion. As the poem develops, Hephaestus creates a shield adorned with unexpectedly banal and barren images, and the war continues on for the hapless inhabitants of the modern world. In "The Shield of Achilles," Auden juxtaposes the classical imagery of Hephaestus's construction of the eponymous shield with brutal modern imagery to illustrate the anxious meaninglessness of modern life, the warfare engendered by it, and the cruel social realities that lie behind both.

Auden's poem is replete with images of the absence of hope and meaning in modern life, and these images are made all the more poignant for their juxtaposition with the vibrance of the classical imagery of the Iliad. The world Auden describes in "The Shield of Achilles" is a horrific one, one bereft of inner meaning and whose only catalyst is the posturing of figures of authority. The environment is, as Auden describes, a "plain without a feature, bare and brown, / No blade of grass, no sign of neighborhood, / Nothing to eat and nowhere to sit down" (9-11). A featureless expanse physically and metaphorically, it is an environment in which the individual is a pointless being without any singular meaning. In essence, it is a world in which the individual has been crushed under the weight and enormity of life itself. The narrative of the poem describes a modern variation of the human race that can no longer be reduced to single individuals; it is, rather, an "unintelligible multitude" that is, at best, less a body of human beings than a statistical anomaly (Auden, 13). Their world is one defined by the absence of personal meaning, and they have become so degraded that they have taken to silently occupying their space as a "million eyes, a million boots in line, / [w]ithout expression, waiting for a sign," seeking not for personal revelations but for any sign of authority (14-15).

It is a form of life far removed from the vibrance and singular personal experience that defines the classical imagery of the Iliad, which Auden references in his description of Hephaestus's creation of Achilles' shield. The world that Thetis inhabits is one that stands in sharp contrast to Auden's modern environment, being defined in Auden's verse by the sheer brilliance of its construction, one in which "vines and olive trees" and "[m]arble well-governed cities" are prominent features (2-3). As Thetis watches Hephaestus fashion her son's shield, she

imagines futilely that the imagery he crafts upon it will reflect her world's magnificence, its "ritual pieties, / [w]hite flower-garlanded heifers," and "[l]ibation and sacrifice" - for her, unlike the masses of modern life, there is no question as to life's hope and inherent worth (Auden, 24-26). Thetis's world is the antithesis of the cruel, impersonal world that Auden describes. Robert Pack explores this in his article "The Idea in the Mirror: Reflections on the Consciousness of Consciousness," stating that Auden uses the Homeric, mythical vision of life to provide a sharp contrast with the mundane, scientific reality that modern people live in, one in which the individual cannot appeal to personal or social meaning (61). Rendered against the fantastic imagery of Homer, the meaninglessness of that modern life is made all the more stark and unmerciful.

Such as in Homer's epic, Auden's poem also alludes to brutal fits of warfare and mindless slaughter resulting from the stagnant torpor of modern life, which he equates with his version of the shield of Achilles. In the modern world Auden depicts in the poem, the masses march blindly to conflict, being roused by ethereal voices of authority to take up any number of meaningless, supposedly just causes. In the words of Auden,

No one was cheered and nothing was discussed;

Column by column in a cloud of dust

They marched away enduring a belief

Whose logic brought them, somewhere else, to grief (19-21).

They do not question the bizarre situation that compels them to fight, and thus they willfully partake in militaristic actions against whatever other masses they are exhorted to destroy. As such, their world is propagated with horrifying events resulting from their acts and those of their enemies, such as the binding of "three pale figures ? [t]o three posts driven upright in the ground," an event that Auden describes in rather Biblical imagery (36-37). These occurrences do not trouble the masses, however; rather, they are simply taken as reality. This mindless acceptance is hardly surprising, given the futility and hopelessness of the world they exist in. Humanity in Auden's modern world has actually ceased to be, as life has left them stunted; as the poem mentions, they "lost their pride / And died as [individuals] before their bodies died" (43-44).

The stagnation of their life has destroyed them, and it is that stagnation that Auden so potently equates with the shield Hephaestus fashions for Achilles. As the article "Hephaestus' World: The Shield" by Eva Brann notes, the desolation of Hephaestus's shield is thoroughly modern in its imagery (42). Unlike the shield constructed in the Iliad, which is defined by its beauty and wonder, the eponymous shield of the poem is adorned with cruel, unbroken expanses of nothingness, featuring only an "artificial wilderness / [a]nd a sky like lead" (Auden 7-8). The base monotony of the shield is unrelieved by expanses of Thetis's lush greenery and seas; indeed, its only truly distinguishing feature is the harsh horizon between land and sky, a line which is, according to the article "The Poet and the Postwar City," largely meaningless in the "irrational wildernesses of metallic artifice" (Pearsall). Like modern life, the shield is stagnant, deadened, and featureless; it is cruel in its ambiguity and lack of meaning, and that absence of hope is the very essence that drives the people of Auden's poem to commit acts of horror in the hope of pleasing ethereal authorities.

At the heart of Auden's poem is a critique of the social realities that generate people willing to

engage in such bloodshed, and Auden makes magnificent use of Thetis's harsh realization to illustrate the unanticipated consequences arising from false and immoral values. The unbridled cruelty and horror of the modern world Auden describes is best detailed in a passage from the poem about an unnamed boy's perception of reality:

That girls are raped, that two boys knife a third,
Were axioms to him, who'd never heard
Of any world where promises were kept,
Or one could weep because another wept (56-59).

The boy, like most others of his world, lives in an atmosphere that is beyond hellish; it is illogical and viciously arbitrary. Auden's modern world has not only anesthetized its inhabitants on an individualistic and creative scale, but it has also destroyed any moral sensation that might have stayed their hand from committing acts of atrocity. Without the barest perception of a world that might abhor strife and violence, humanity has become simply unable to conceive of a reason not to propagate both. When the masses of Auden's world seek to please ethereal voices of authority, they do so likely hoping that they will find some sense of meaning. Because of their conditioning, however, although they do not aspire to become murderers, they become so nonetheless.

Their harsh epiphany is echoed by Thetis, who finds that the shield she has so desperately sought in order to protect her son is adorned not with images of beauty but of meaningless monotony. Like the inhabitants of Auden's modern world, Thetis is a product of her environment, which, although quite different from that of the harsh, impersonal modern masses, is just as misleading and deadening. Her world is that of classical Homeric virtue and beauty - great cities of wonders, religious rites that pervade life and grant it meaning, and an individualistic need for glory. That glistening fantasy obscures hard social realities, however; it does not show the privations of the poor or the dying wounded of the battlefield, choosing instead to celebrate pleasant imagery such as "athletes at their games" and "[m]en and women in a dance" (Auden 46-47). That world shapes her entire being, and as John Lucas comments in his essay "Auden's politics: power, authority, and the individual," what Thetis truly wishes is that Hephaestus will honor her distorted, "heroic" view of reality (162). What she finds in his shield, however, is a symbol of the futility of her son's life, of the hopeless future of "[i]ron-hearted man-slaying Achilles / [w]ho would not live long" (Auden, 66-67). The shield's barren visage reminds her of that stark truth, which is, in its inevitability and hopelessness, quite akin to the desolation of the hideous world Auden describes. Her perception, like that of the anesthetized masses, is ultimately proven misguided, and it leads to consequences that will define not only her life but that of her son's.

Such realizations lie at the center of "The Shield of Achilles," Auden's harsh juxtaposition of classical vitality and wonder and the hopelessness, warfare, and cruel social realities of modern life. In Hephaestus's shield, Auden depicts lives irreparably damaged by an absence of meaning, and ultimately driven to violence in the vain hope of achieving it. The cruel logic that runs throughout the poem is that of modern life, of wars motivated by the thinnest of justifications and lives defined not by their expression but by their lack thereof. In many ways, the poem is the realization of Auden's hell and humanity's reality, and its relevance has only deepened as the very fabric of life becomes continually more absurd. By contrasting the quiet horror of existence and warfare with the splendor and beauty of Thetis's hopes for

Hephaestus's creation, Auden makes a damning observation of the darker aspects of an impersonal, amoral modern world. For Auden, dispirited by World War II and the loss of any remaining innocence he might have had about the motivations of humanity, "The Shield of Achilles" was not only a magnificent artistic achievement, but the startling articulation of a hope dispelled. If Thetis is left in anguished realization at the end of the poem, so too is the reader.

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Publication Status:

Original Criticism [4]

Criticism Target:

W. H. Auden [5]

Review Process:

Single Review

Author:

Rick Brown [6]

Poem:

The Shield of Achilles [7]

Source URL: <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/criticism/rick-brown-bloody-torpor-banality-violence-audens-shield-achilles>

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