

The Shield of Achilles

by

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Source: *Studies in Comparative Religion*, Vol. 10, No. 2. (Spring, 1976). © World Wisdom, Inc.
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The reflection of the uncreated in the created necessarily presents itself under diverse aspects, and even under an indefinite variety of aspects, each of which has about it something whole and total, so that there are a multiplicity of visions of the cosmos, all equally possible and legitimate in so far as they spring from the universal and immutable principles.

Titus Burkhardt.

To every shield, there is another side, hidden.

A. N. Whitehead.

In the Hesiodic account of the world-ages, preserved in the ancient writing known to us as the *Works and Days*, the poet briefly describes the age of the heroes. He tells us that the heroes were “nobler far” than their immediate predecessors and in this they reversed for a time the downward drift of history to degeneration that he has been describing. The heroes reflected in their natures something of the integral wholeness of men in the Golden Age. It was as though for a moment the river of time flowed back on itself in brief eddies, caught up in memories of its source. And this act of remembrance wrought, as all such acts of remembrance do, happier destinies for many men than had been the common lot of those born into the age that had just passed away. For these earlier men of bronze, men insatiate of war and violence, had destroyed each other and gone down into Hades—“terrible though they were, black death seized them: they passed from the light of the sun and left no name.”

Then:

The Son of Cronos made yet another race of men to live on the bounteous earth, and these were godlike men—a race of heroes. Many died in grim battle fighting for the flocks of Oedipus around seven-gated Thebe... yet others, sailing over the great gulf of the sea to Troy, perished for fair-haired Helen’s sake. Their death hid them. But to the rest Zeus, the Father of gods and men, gave a dwelling at the ends of the earth, where free from all care they live on the Islands of the Blessed in the deep-eddying Ocean... there untouched by sorrow, those happy heroes dwell... and Cronos rules over them...

The heroes were men born into a world disrupted by the violence of the Age of Bronze, and were necessarily warriors—yet warriors who were never forgetful of the gods that are forever. men who “lifted up their hands in prayer to the broad heavens”, and prayed “that war and strife might cease from among men”. They were men for the most part simple, passionate, unreflecting. Their virtues were the virtues of warriors—truthfulness and courage. Their vision of the world was the vision of the warrior: “God is day and night, winter and summer, war and peace, surfeit and hunger...” “War is father of all, king of all; some he makes gods, some men; some bond, some free...” “The name of the bow is life. Its work is death...” such are some of the utterances of Heraclitus, the philosopher who saw most deeply into the heart of the hero. We shall have occasion in what follows to recall more than once other of the fragmented sayings of Heraclitus that have come down to us.

In this world of war and peace, amid the issues of slavery and freedom a man’s character is his fate. The hero is the man who works out his destiny centering, in truth and courage, to the fiery element in his own soul: for this fiery element in his soul is the reflection of the divine creative fire that brings the worlds into being. In battle the body of the hero is protected by his shield. And his soul is protected by that which his shield symbolizes—the totality of his world vision. In seeking in some degree to share this vision we may turn to the description given in Homer, towards the end of the eighteenth book of the *Iliad*, of the forging of the Shield of Achilles.

The shield is wrought out of the elemental metals—gold, silver, bronze and tin—by the divine artificer Hephaestus, the God of Fire. Even so the cosmos is wrought by the everliving divine fire eternally differentiating itself into the many, and the never-ending returning movement of the many to itself. This cosmic process of return out of the conflicts of the many and the restoration demanded by Justice, of equilibrium at the source, is war issuing in peace. The everliving fire centered in itself beyond all worlds lies at the heart of all worlds from it flow all movement, all life, all knowledge. It is the Eternal: “that which never sets”, that which at the end of each world-age destroys the old and kindles the new. It may be truthfully called by other names such as Zeus, justice, wisdom, logos. It is both willing and unwilling to be so called. Willing in that such names reflect qualities in its nature: unwilling in that in essence it lies beyond all such qualities. This divine fire forges into existence the structured cosmos.

The cosmos is imaged by the Homeric warrior to himself as a sphere. Across the horizontal diametrical plane stretches the flat disc of the earth encircled by the vast streams of Oceanus—ever flowing back into itself. The earth is covered by the inverted bowl of the overworld—a bronze¹ dome across which the sun, moon, and stars move in their risings out of Oceanus in the east, to their settings into Oceanus in the west. Earth rests on the under-world of Erebus and Hades rooted at its greatest depth in the gulfs of Tartarus. About the upper hemisphere of the

¹ Bronze: the third transmutation, as the world-ages unfold, of the Empyrean fire into the containing hemispheres of the cosmos. The cosmos as such cannot be other than limited and shaped.

overworld glitters the threefold light of the Empyrean. The brazen walls of Tartarus are enclosed by threefold darkening layers of night. The cosmic sphere is held in an outer wheel of darkness and light which in its rotations reflects into the cosmos the cycles of birth and death at all levels of existence, from that of the cosmos itself to all that comes to be within it. “For the same cause that brings us out into the light of the sun, brings on dark Hades too”. Within the circle of the earth the individual souls move at death to the streams of Oceanus whence they gravitate down into the underworld to emerge into new states within the earth-circle—or, after a sojourn in the Islands of the Blessed, may be attracted up into the overworld and on into the Empyrean; that is, to a state of being beyond the circles of the cosmos.

These journeyings of the soul are conditioned by its nature as a reflection of the divine fire. “Of soul thou shalt never find boundaries, not though thou trackest it on every path; so deep is its cause...” For its cause is one with the everlasting fire itself. So the hero lives and dies seeking to preserve his soulfire unquenched, to return at death beyond the circles of the cosmic fires to the everliving divine fire: the one source and end of all. His living seeks to be a continual act of remembrance of his source: an awakening from the sleep of forgetting, from the death of utter forgetting. And his dying, as return to source, is symbolized in his deathrite of immolation by fire.

In some such sort as this is the vision of the cosmos that served to protect and shield the soul of the Homeric hero and to preserve it into eternal life. And of this the Shield of Achilles as forged by Hephaestus is the symbol both in what it emphasizes and in what it omits.² The wrought shield in its structures holds no black iron. For the soul of Achilles is not destined to face the deadening weight of the age yet to come. His shield is made of gold and silver, of bronze and tin, for it must hold within itself, structured into protective shape, all the metallic influences inhering in the cosmic process up to and including the age in which he himself lives. Omitted too from the shield is any representation of the underworld. The attention of the hero is to be directed to and concentrated on the earth wherein he is to work out his destiny, and to the overworld to which he aspires.

And what aspects of the world are imaged on the shield for the acceptance and delight and protection of the warrior? The broad earth itself; and over the earth the circlings of the unwearied sun, the moon at the full, and the constellations across the heavens. And, under these high presences, the cities of men wherein are marriages and torchlit feastings and dance and song. And the fields of men wherein are ploughing and seedtime and harvest and vineyards and honey-

² The Shield of Achilles may be compared in this respect with the Hesiodic Shield of Heracles in which the figure of Fear stands staring from the centre, a reflection of the Age of Bronze in the full tide of its cruelty and violence. In the *Iliad* the coming Iron Age is fore-shadowed by the iron tip of the arrow of Panders launched in violation of a sacred oath (*Iliad* Bk. 4, Line 123). This is the only occasion in which Homer describes an arrow or spearhead as “made of iron.”

sweet wine and summer departing before approaching winter to the sounding lyre and the delicate voices of boys singing the Linos-song. The ways of peace.

But the paths of war also; men and dogs poised in a threatening circle around lions devouring a bull; ambushed youths slain as they play on their pipes among their cattle at the fords of swift-flowing rivers; women and children and old men at the walls of endangered cities.

And the protections of law—resolution of dissension in peace. The folk gathered to witness an issue of homicide and the mode of settlement—old men sitting on polished stones in a circle that images the circles of the cosmos, and rising to speak in turn—the staves in their hands recalling, to the remembrance of all who are present, Hermes the messenger of Zeus—as they seek fair judgment.

For all these things, the works and days of men on the earth, the shield as forged by Hephaestus for Achilles, enjoins a certain joyful acceptance—an acceptance of the natural order of things under heaven: an order arising from the attunement of opposite tensions as of the bow or the lyre.

And around earth—“around the uttermost rim of the strongly wrought shield”—flows the ever-circling divine river Oceanus. Flows from its source at the risings of the sun: thalean water³ from the ever-living fire. Oceanus the begetter of all becomings, initiator of all destructions, the generating waters of all possibilities flowing in the twilight where the down-reflected light of the overworld meets the upcast shadow and dark of the underworld. Oceanus: that unfathomably strange river into whose waters we cannot step twice for other waters are ever flowing on to us, in whose waters we both are and are not; waters flowing in that circle wherein every point on the circumference is at once an end and a beginning, a forgetting and a regeneration.

Such was the Shield Hephaestus forged and laid at the feet of Thetis, the mother of Achilles. “And like a falcon she swooped down from snowy Olympus” bearing it to her son. She finds him weeping beside the body of Patroclus. The black fires of Tartarus burning in the soul of Achilles have incurred retribution. He has sinned against justice, against the divine fire in his own soul. He has prayed that his own comrades suffer defeat in battle. He has brought bitter sorrow to himself and to his people. Now he is defenceless in soul and body. He has lost his armour to Hector; the armour given by the gods to his father. And Patroclus is dead.

Every man in every age—be it of gold or silver or bronze or iron—bears within himself the potentialities of all the ages. Any man may at any time turn his eyes back to the source. The virtues of the hero—truthfulness and courage—effect creative and redeeming transfigurations in all situations, in all wars both outer and inner, both visible and invisible. In his dereliction, Achilles—the man of war—prays “that war and strife may cease”. He wills to return to source.

³ The thalean waters: the “chaotic” waters flowing in the void separating the overworld and underworld, out of which arises by crystallization the islanded Earth-disc.

But in his return he must follow the paths of his destiny. His pyre can only be kindled by the funeral fires of Patroclus and Hector. For Achilles is fated to die in battle himself as soon as he has slain Hector; even as Hector in the slaying of Patroclus brings on his own death at the hands of Achilles. So now for Achilles his acceptance of the Shield involves his acceptance of his own death in the near-future fighting at the Scaen Gate. The Shield will protect him until his fated death which is yet self-chosen. He chooses the fiery death of the warrior rather than to live on into old age—for “greater dooms win greater destinies” in a world where all movement is the movement of the one ever-living fire in all its transformations dying into rebirths—where life is not broken by death but perpetually renewed. So Achilles, the grief of the people, accepts the Shield and moves along the paths of return.

“The paths of return”. And with the return, compassion will flow once more in the heart of Achilles. In the presence of Priam, as the old man stretches out his hands in supplication to the face of the man who has slain his sons, there enters into the heart of Achilles the desire for weeping—and he lifts up the old man by his hand and weeps and speaks to him. “Ah, unhappy man, many and terrible are the woes thou hast endured in thy soul...and now thou hast come alone to meet the eyes of him who has slain thy sons, so many and brave...and we hear that of old thou too wast happy and blest...but now ever around thy city are battles and slayings of men....”

And, at the end of the *Iliad*, we glimpse Achilles once more. Having returned to Priam his dead son, he promises to hold up the fighting until the funeral fires have burnt the body of Hector. Then in farewell he clasps the old man’s right hand at the wrist—“lest he should know fear in his heart.”

A last gesture: of acceptance, reconciliation, and final restitution.

In this brief study only the barest outline of the symbolism of the Shield of Achilles and its interpretation has been attempted. Readers who care to pursue the subject more fully into the fields of early Greek cosmology and religious symbolism will be rewarded with a wealth of insight into traditional doctrines in general. The varying points of view of Hesiod, Heraclitus, Pythagoras, Parmenides, Empedocles and Plato—who reflect the profounder aspects of the tradition—may be accepted as expressive of a totality of vision lying beyond the purview of any particular one of them.

For the purposes of this essay readers may be referred more especially to the eighteenth book of the *Iliad*, lines 462 to the end, and Hesiod’s *Works and Days*, lines 109-201.

The Fragments of Heraclitus have also been freely drawn upon.