

# Embraces in *Aeneid* 8

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## Abstract

Venus and Vulcan, Venus and Aeneas, Pallas and Aeneas, Aeneas and Evander, Evander and Pallas: all of these pairs are seen embracing one another in *Aeneid* 8. Alongside these emotive scenes of embrace, the book is peppered with embrace-related vocabulary, imagery, and metaphor, often in surprising contexts. This article weaves together these embraces in *Aeneid* 8 in relation to the thematics of the book as a whole. It is proposed that, when read together, the embraces in *Aeneid* 8 tell a story about the possibilities of knowledge in relation to the senses. Vision is the supreme sense-modality of truth in epic, as embodied in the shield of Aeneas; and yet, in book 8, embrace emerges as a way of knowing that runs counter to optical discourses of knowledge. This leads to an exploratory reconsideration of hermeneutic principles in light of Aeneas' much-puzzled-over response to the shield.

## Keywords

Vergil – *Aeneid* – touch – ecphrasis – epistemology

## Introduction

The eighth book of the *Aeneid* corroborates as well as any other the thesis advanced by Riggs Alden Smith that Vergil's is an epic of the eye, in which the “primacy of vision”, in Smith's phrase, is instituted with the aid of a titular hero whose central function in the narrative is to see and to be seen.<sup>1</sup> We open with

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<sup>1</sup> Smith 2005.

a sweeping vista of the stirrings of war in Latium reflected in the hero's anxious eyes (1-30); next, a dream-vision of a river-god followed by a waking portent (31-85); a folktale celebrating the triumph of light over darkness (184-275); a sightseeing tour of the future site of Rome (306-369); another god-given vision of battle in the clouds (520-531); and finally, perhaps the most intensely visualistic episode of the entire poem, the ecphrasis of the shield of Aeneas (615-728). In each of these scenes, Vergil allows the presence of a viewer or viewers to be felt, and again and again he dramatises the act of viewing, imbuing it with a heightened sensuality.

I would like to explore what happens if we replace sight with touch as our guiding sense-modality in the reading of *Aeneid* 8. The aim here is not to demote vision from its place of primacy, but rather to enrich the existing discourse by helping to diversify the sensorium of Vergilian epic. My central theme here is the relation between the senses and knowledge. The stage is set for me here by Andrew Feldherr, who in a recent article delves deep into the problems of vision and epistemology raised by the shield episode. My point of departure is the simple observation that Aeneas does not only look at the shield, he also *touches* it. The fact that his encounter with the shield and its images involves touch as well as sight seems to me to justify a reconsideration of the epistemological ramifications of that encounter. This reconsideration seems especially timely now that scholars in classics are energetically exploring new ways to think with all the senses in relation to antiquity.<sup>2</sup> In pursuing this goal, I will aim to be more suggestive than definitive, but in the process I hope to feel out a path towards what human geographer Mark Paterson terms “the remembering of touch”, an antidote to the forgetting of touch imposed by the dominance of the visual in image-centred cultures.<sup>3</sup>

# 1

Vergilian scholars such as Smith, followed by Andrew Feldherr, Helen Lovatt, Yasmin Syed, Jay Reed, and Fiachra Mac Góráin, have shown us how much can be gained by shining a spotlight on visual perception in the *Aeneid*.<sup>4</sup> This movement in Vergil studies finds its roots in an older approach, exemplified by

<sup>2</sup> On touch and antiquity, see esp. Purves 2018.

<sup>3</sup> Paterson 2007.

<sup>4</sup> Syed 2005; Reed 2007; Lovatt 2013; Feldherr 2014; Mac Góráin 2017. Barchiesi 2019, 418 is representative in his observation that “More than any other ancient poet, Virgil stresses the importance of the viewing subject in the construction of visual meaning”.

Heinze, Otis, and Johnson, which recognised in the Roman poet the development of a so-called 'subjective style' as a radical departure from the transparent, naturalistic objectivity of Homer.<sup>5</sup> For this earlier generation of readers, what set the poet of the *Aeneid* apart from his Greek master most decisively was his interpolation of the actors into the action of the narrative, contaminating Homeric detachment with the distorting perceptions and conflicting interpretations of individual characters.

Ever since Irene de Jong's narratological study of the *Odyssey* revealed the mediating force of focalisation and perspectivisation at work even in Homeric epic, the dichotomy has been felt less strongly.<sup>6</sup> It is now widely accepted that perspective-taking is a basic feature of all narrative, Homer included. Accordingly, the question of epic narrative is no longer *whether* it is mediated, but *how* it is mediated. Smith's thesis of the "primacy of vision" in the *Aeneid* is posed as an answer to this question. He traces in the poem the waging of a metarepresentational conflict between rhetoric and vision, in which vision is ultimately declared the victor. This symbolic victory of vision over rhetoric, he argues, accords with the forging of a new image-centric culture under Augustus.<sup>7</sup> Jay Reed proceeds along the same lines with his critical reading of Vergil's 'gaze'—his term for the poet's ability as epic narrator to enforce perspectives and to impose ethnic, political, and demographic categories on peoples and bodies by appeals to the transparency of the visual.

The thread of continuity linking this more recent focus on Vergil's visualism with the older conception of the so-called 'subjective style' is a general attitude of scepticism towards the conceit of all-seeing objectivity that epic narrative discourse seems to cultivate. Informing this sceptical stance is the awareness that the poet chooses what to show us and what to conceal, and in this act of selection he exerts a kind of power over us, a power which comes to look very much like that of ideology. In an era dominated by the "power of images", as Paul Zanker unforgettably phrased it, the Augustan poet becomes a double of Augustus himself, the master manipulator of optics; but whether this doubling takes the form of celebration or subversion ultimately comes down to point of view.

5 Otis 1964, 41-96; Johnson 1976; Heinze 1993, 295-298. This contrast between objective and subjective in turn harks back to the naïve/sentimental dichotomy of Schiller, as a kind of rehabilitation of Vergil; see esp. Conte 2007, with Bonfanti 1985; Conte 1986, 141-184; Fowler 1991.

6 De Jong 2001.

7 Cf. Smith 2005, 182 on the book's closing sentence: "With the *Aeneid*'s final scene, the words of Turnus are silenced, but the image of Aeneas as victor over his enemy endures, as do the monuments of Augustan Rome".

If we are satisfied with the thesis that images and ideology are at the heart of the *Aeneid*, then we must place the ecphrasis of the shield of Aeneas close to that heart. Philip Hardie has shown us how to view the shield as a cosmic icon, which is to say both as an icon of the cosmic order envisioned by Augustan imperial ideology and as an icon of the *Aeneid* itself as the allegorical vehicle of that same vision of the cosmos.<sup>8</sup> As a cosmic icon, the shield emblematises the desire to attain a God's-eye view of history, in which past, present, and future are all welded together to fit within the compass of a totalising field of vision, whereby the labyrinthine machinations of fate are unveiled in perfect and immediate clarity.<sup>9</sup>

Vergil in the shield episode gives expression to this desire for *immediacy*, for an all-encompassing gaze which penetrates beyond appearances, precisely by problematising it. As Andrew Feldherr has explored thoroughly, the presence of Aeneas as focalising subject erects an epistemic barrier between the reader and the divine artistic vision of Vulcan, who, as we are told in *A.* 8.627, created the artefact 'not without knowledge of the prophets nor without insight into the coming age' (*haud uatum ignarus uenturique inscius aeu*).<sup>10</sup> Lessing pointed out long ago that in Vergil's Homeric model for this episode, the description of the shield of Achilles in *Iliad* 18, we are allowed to see a cosmic icon come into being as it is being made, as though we are looking over Hephaestus' shoulder, whereas Vergil relegates Vulcan's act of making to the pluperfect—*fecerat*: the work is already complete, and the act of viewing by Aeneas' imperfect, mortal eyes takes place at one remove from the original creative act.<sup>11</sup>

Lessing famously credited this departure from Homer to Vergil's imperfect grasp of the art of description, but Feldherr counters this with a reading that shows that imperfection is precisely the point. By distancing Aeneas as mortal viewer from the divine omniscience that informed the shield's design, Feldherr argues, Vergil foregrounds the performativity of seeing as an act of meaning-making, while simultaneously raising the question of the capacity of his epic, as an engine of poetic visions and spectacles, to intervene in this same meaning-making process.<sup>12</sup>

8 Hardie 1986, 336–376; cf. Casali 2006 on the shield as “metapropaganda”.

9 Smith 2005, 95: “In the *Aeneid*, vision offers a means for bringing the future and past together”. Cf. Quint 2018, 26: “To explain [Rome's] history of violence, epic requires *both* its ascription to a divine plan *and* a poetic artistry that rivals the divine maker in striving for a unified wholeness of form. With its circular shape and cosmic associations, the shield is an emblem of such form, the poem's miniature version of itself”.

10 Feldherr 2014.

11 Lessing 1984, 91–103. Cf. Marg 1957, 24–25.

12 Feldherr 2014, 282–283.

Performativity comes to the fore most explicitly in the three final lines of the book which let us see Aeneas seeing the shield:

talia per clipeum Volcani, dona parentis,  
miratur rerumque ignarus imagine gaudet  
attollens umero famamque et fata nepotum.<sup>13</sup>

He wonders at such things as these across the shield of Vulcan, his mother's gift, and takes joy in the image though ignorant of its contents, hoisting on his shoulder both the fame and the fate of his descendants.<sup>14</sup>

Aeneas' joy here—a rare emotion for him—does not spring from any foreknowledge he gleans from the images on the shield, but rather from his appreciation of the shield's emblazoned surface itself as a token of his goddess mother's loving concern, its aesthetic beauty a complement to her own divine grace. The description of Aeneas as *ignarus*—in pointed contrast with the *haud ignarus* Vulcan—suggests that what occasions his joy and wonder is fundamentally a *misreading* of the shield, founded as it is on ignorance of *res*, which could be read either as referring to the 'contents' or 'subject-matter' of the shield or more broadly to 'reality' itself.

Vergil would seem to be asserting here a version of the Platonic scepticism towards the truth-value of images, reinforcing the initial assessment of the shield's surface in line 625 as a *non enarrabile textum*, but the very next line negates this thesis. When Aeneas lifts the shield onto his shoulder, it has ceased to be a shield at all; no longer a text conveying messages about the fame and fate of the hero's descendants—messages which require an informed interpreter to be understood properly—its imaged surface has now miraculously shed its mediacy and crossed over into the sphere of reality, as an unmediated *icon* of that same fame and that same fate. As Feldherr puts it, *fama* and *fata*, concepts which are tied by etymology to verbal utterance, have been transferred to the physical realm in the form of the shield, where they are something to be lifted, something that, quite literally, "has weight".<sup>15</sup>

Feldherr reads this "miraculous translation from image into reality" as a moment of triumph, whereby the poet advances a claim to bridge the gap between the world of myth and the factual world.<sup>16</sup> He makes Aeneas into a

<sup>13</sup> Verg. A. 8.729-731.

<sup>14</sup> All translations are my own.

<sup>15</sup> Feldherr 2014, 282.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 283.

proxy for Vergil's reading public, whose active participation in the meaning-making process is forwarded as instrumental to the miracle of myth-made-real.<sup>17</sup> This reading of the shield episode is inspiring, but it leaves me with a nagging question: Why insist so pointedly on Aeneas' failure to comprehend what he is seeing? If the act of taking up the fame and fate of his descendants is to carry so much symbolic and poetological weight, what does it mean for us that this crucial act is performed in ignorance?

## 2

I follow the mainstream interpretation when I translate the adjective *ignarus* in 8.730 with a concessive force: Aeneas takes joy in the *imago* *despite* his ignorance of the *res*. Whether we construe the genitive *rerum* with *ignarus* or with *imagine*,<sup>18</sup> the underlying notion is the same: that there is some kind of dissonance or contradiction between the joy Aeneas experiences and his inability to interpret the images and to discover their full historical significance. Susan Wiltshire confronts the paradox of Aeneas' oblivious joy by referring back to the moment in book 2 when the hero had taken up on his shoulders, not a shield, but his own father:

In spite of all he has learned in the intervening period—from Helenus's prophecy in Book 3, from the oracle at Delos, from his visit to the Underworld, from the shield itself—Aeneas knows no more than he did at the beginning. He has shifted his gaze, however, from the past to the future, from his father to posterity. It is still an unknown and open future, but he can embrace it now with some confidence and perhaps even with a fleeting moment of joy.<sup>19</sup>

Wiltshire's reading invites us to further gloss the word *ignarus* as follows: 'although he has *learned* nothing'. By qualifying the hero's joy as 'fleeting', she seems to suggest that the concessive force of *ignarus* applies to the fulness of his emotion, as though we would expect his joy to be more consummate if he only knew everything that Vergil's contemporary audience knew about

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> See Gransden 1976 *ad loc.* on the ambiguity.

<sup>19</sup> Wiltshire 1989, 30.

the events depicted on the shield.<sup>20</sup> But we could just as easily attribute this concessive force to the reader's expectations regarding Aeneas as to Aeneas himself. We might *expect* Aeneas' reaction to be hesitant or tentative at best, Vergil implies, but instead he welcomes it with nothing less than *gaudium*.

Wiltshire captures the spirit of Aeneas' naïve welcome in her well-chosen word "embrace". Embrace is familiarly used as a metaphor for accepting realities, not by submitting them to proof, but by coming to terms with them.<sup>21</sup> To embrace a truth is not to add it to an accumulated store of knowledge, but to incorporate it into one's lived world. Embrace is a non-propositional relation to propositions. The metaphor of embrace is a natural companion to the concept of destiny, because destiny, belonging as it does to the future, is unknown and unknowable except by divine revelation. Divine revelations of destiny are usually seen or heard; embrace is achieved through touch. When Venus appears to Aeneas disguised in book 1 to guide his path, her revelation that the comrades he feared dead are alive and well fails to lift his spirits precisely because her disguise leaves him feeling cheated of his mother's touch:

quid natum totiens, crudelis tu quoque, falsis  
ludis imaginibus? cur dextrae iungere dextram  
non datur ac ueras audire et reddere uoces?<sup>22</sup>

Why do you, cruel in your own right, so often mock your son with false images? Why is it not allowed to join hand to hand, to listen and reply in genuine speech?

Aeneas' reaction to the *imago* of his mother here is the reverse of his reaction to the shield: he is no longer *ignarus* of his comrades' fate, nor of the direction he should take next, but he cannot *embrace* these welcome truths with joy because of the duplicitous *ethos* which Venus adopted in conveying them to him.

By contrast, when Aeneas lifts Anchises onto his shoulders, steeling himself to escape death at Troy and seek his destiny elsewhere, the bodily contact between father and son is as intimate as any embrace: 'get up onto my mine',

20 Lyne 1987, 208-209 detects dramatic irony here: "The pictures on the shield in fact mean one thing to us, another to Aeneas." Cf. Syed 2005, 70: "The power to control his emotional responses to the world is what makes Aeneas special in contrast with other characters. His ability to impose a positive interpretation on the spectacles of his and his people's past and future fame gives him the strength to pursue his destined course."

21 OLD s.v. *amplector* 6; *complector* 4.

22 Verg. A. 1.407-409.

he says; 'I shall lift you onto my shoulders, nor will the effort weigh heavily on me; wherever need takes us, we will share in peril as one, and for us both there will be but one salvation' (*ergo age, care pater, cervici imponere nostrae; | ipse subibo umeris nec me labor iste gravabit; | quo res cumque cadent, unum et commune periculum, | una salus ambobus erit*, 2.707-710). But when his father's spirit appears to him in book 5 and again in book 6 dispensing prophetic insights, Aeneas can only respond by begging him for the embrace he cannot give (5.741-742, 6.697-702). After death, the *imago* is all that remains, 'a mere breath that flits about and flutters away like a dream', as Odysseus' dead mother explains to him during his own descent into the underworld (*Od.* 11.204-224). Aeneas' fruitless attempts to embrace his father's phantom, as with his wife's in book 2, may well strike us as symptoms of a lingering recalcitrance to fate, a reluctance to leave the past behind and embrace the future.

A 1984 study by Elizabeth Belfiore collects the scenes in the epic in which Aeneas embraces or attempts to embrace a family member, and she argues that these scenes tell the story of a dramatic change in our hero effected in the transition from the poem's Odyssean first half to its Iliadic sequel.<sup>23</sup> In the first half, she suggests, Aeneas' vain embraces express a misguided attachment to individuals whose time has passed, whereas by the time he reaches Italy, he has learned to think in terms of the collective, the future, and the greater good.<sup>24</sup> The turning point is the moment when Venus appears with the gifts made by Vulcan and seals her offering with an embrace:

At Venus aetherios inter dea candida nimbus  
dona ferens aderat; natumque in ualle reducta  
ut procul egelido secretum flumine uidit,  
talibus adfata est dictis seque obtulit ultro:  
'en perfecta mei promissa coniugis arte  
munera. ne mox aut Laurentis, nate, superbos  
aut acrem dubites in proelia poscere Turnum.'  
dixit, et amplexus nati Cytherea petiuit,  
arma sub aduersa posuit radiantia quercu.  
ille deae donis et tanto laetus honore  
expleri nequit atque oculos per singula uoluit,  
miraturque interque manus et brachia uersat  
terribilem cristis galeam flammisque uomentem,  
fatiferumque ensem, lorica ex aere rigentem,

<sup>23</sup> Belfiore 1984.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.



sanguineam, ingentem, qualis cum caerulea nubes  
solis inardescit radiis longeque refulget;  
tum levis ocreas electro auroque recocto,  
hastamque et clipei non enarrabile textum.<sup>25</sup>

But Venus was there among the clouds in the aether, bright goddess, bearing gifts; and when she saw her son there in the secluded valley, on his own beside the cool river, she spoke to him in words such as these, and brought herself before him readily: 'Behold, my promised gift is complete by the handiwork of my husband. Henceforth do not hesitate, child, to coax the proud Laurentians or fierce Turnus into battle.' Cytherea spoke and sought her son's embraces; beneath a nearby oak she deposited the glittering battle-gear. Delighted by the gift of the goddess, by so great an honour, he cannot be satiated and takes in each separate thing with revolving eyes; in wonder, he turns over between his hands and arms the helm, terrible-crested and belching flame; the death-dealing sword; the corselet of bronze, hard, blood-red, and hulking, like a darkling cloud when it is set aglow by the rays of the sun and shines far and wide; then the polished greaves of amber alloyed with gold, and the spear, and the untellable fabric of the shield.

Belfiore asks why Aeneas suddenly seems less interested in his mother's physical presence than in the gifts she brings, now that she offers her embrace freely.<sup>26</sup> However, she herself points out that Venus' embrace here symbolises the arming of Aeneas which her gift achieves: the goddess encircles him with her body in a protective gesture to simulate what the armour will do for him when he goes into battle.<sup>27</sup> It is fitting, then, that Aeneas responds to her gesture by focusing his attention on the gifts themselves, not only gazing on them in wonder but also feeling them between his hands and arms, as though he were returning his mother's embrace through them.

This conceptual link between arming and embrace is adumbrated in the scene where Venus enlists her husband's aid in forging the gifts for Aeneas. In this interaction, the word *amplexus* occurs twice. First Venus punctuates her verbal appeal with an affectionate touch:

<sup>25</sup> Verg. *A.* 8.608-625.

<sup>26</sup> Belfiore 1984, 27.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 26-27. Cf. Putnam 1985, 16, who finds eroticism in Venus' embrace of Aeneas.

... niueis hinc atque hinc diua lacertis  
cunctantem amplexu molli fouet.<sup>28</sup>

as he hesitates, the goddess nestles him with her snow-white arms on either side in a tender embrace.

Then, acquiescing to his wife's request, Vulcan seals the agreement with sex:

optatos dedit amplexus placidumque petiuit  
coniugis infusus gremio per membra soporem.<sup>29</sup>

he gave her the hoped-for embraces and pursued peaceful slumber all through his limbs, having poured himself into his wife's lap.

Thus the gifts with which Venus hopes to gird her son in a protective embrace themselves find their genesis in a marital embrace, almost as though the artefacts had been engendered through sexual reproduction—a conceit that Venus corroborates by referring to herself as *genetrix* in v. 383.

The origins of the *arma* in Venus' seductive touch has interesting consequences for our understanding of the shield in particular and Aeneas' reaction to it. We have already noted the diametric opposition between the *haud ignarus* Vulcan who forms the images on the shield and the *ignarus* Aeneas who falls short of comprehending those images. Describing Vulcan as *haud ignarus* in the act of shaping the shield's images suggests that the exercise of his craft is also the exercise of a share of knowledge which he possesses, and hence that those images are themselves a repository of that knowledge. In the same sentence in which Vergil tells us that the god works 'not without knowledge of the prophets nor without insight into the coming age', he employs the epithet *ignipotens* to remind us that the god's chief domain of influence is the element of fire, thereby emphasising the continuity between his mastery of metalworking and his masterful knowledge of fate (626-629).

However, when Venus uses her sexual allure to entice the *arma* out of the fire-god, we can see that she is also, in her own way, *ignipotens*. Vulcan's arousal upon being caressed by the goddess of love is imagined as a 'customary flame' (*solitam flammam*, 389) and a 'familiar warmth' (*notus calor*, 390) that penetrates him to the marrow and weakens his bones. In the forging scene, we look on as 'bronze and golden metal flow in streams, and biting steel turns to

<sup>28</sup> Verg. A. 8.387-388.

<sup>29</sup> Verg. A. 8.405-406.

liquid in the huge furnace' (445-446); but Vulcan also appears to turn to liquid in reaction to Venus' heat, as he 'pours himself into her lap' (*coniugis infusus gremio*, 406). As Fratantuono and Smith point out, the adjective *molli* modifying *amplexu* in v. 388 hints that her warming touch (note the verb *fouet*) is not only soft and tender but also *softening*, as though Vulcan were a lump of raw material to be moulded.<sup>30</sup> The goddess is melting down and reshaping her husband to conform to her designs just as he will shape molten metal into the *arma* of Aeneas.<sup>31</sup>

The notion that Venus uses the fire of erotic passion to harness the creative energy of the fire-god adds point to v. 393, where we see her reacting to his reaction to her sex appeal: *sensit laeta dolis et formae conscia coniunx*. Venus takes pleasure in her sexual dominance, and this passage portrays that dominance as a form of knowledge: the goddess is *formae conscia*, 'cognizant of beauty'. The context invites us to understand *formae* as referring to her own beauty in particular, but it also hints at the more general truth that the goddess of beauty of course possesses special knowledge about beauty. It is this special knowledge of beauty, attraction, and seduction that lets her devise tricks (*doli*) like the one she has just played on her husband; though moved by her beauty, he is not *consci*us of its power as she is, or else the trick could not be called a trick.

There is something odd about the way this trick of Venus plays out which demands an explanation. Her goal is to make Vulcan craft the gifts for Aeneas as soon as possible. Vulcan shows that he appreciates the need for haste when he orders the Cyclopes *praecipitate moras* (443): put aside all delays and get the task done. Why then does Venus seem content to put the god to sleep before the work can even begin? One explanation is that this scene is an adaptation of the Διὸς ἁπάτη episode of *Iliad* 14, where Hera enlists the aid of Aphrodite and Sleep to put Zeus into a post-coital slumber, all so that she can support the Greek side in the war without his meddling.

In its immediate context, Venus' trick may appear innocuous enough, but comparison with the Homeric model shows that her wifely embrace finds its intertextual roots in a much more violent act. In Homer, Hera uses sex as a means of overpowering Zeus' mind and senses, rendering him helpless (*Il.* 14.160). In Vergil, Vulcan appears to be in full control of his faculties when he creates the shield, but the Homeric subtext encourages us to conceive of

30 Fratantuono and Smith 2018, 487. The idea of a softened or molten Vulcan plays into the etymology of his title *Mulciber* (appearing on the shield in 724) from *mulcere* (cf. *mulcere* of Mars' wolf, 634).

31 I refer the reader here to the illuminating comments of Feldherr 2014, 285-288 on the interplay of solid and liquid in the description of the shield as an allegory of the creative powers of art and imagination.

Venus' persuasion as a form of covert domination analogous to the ἀπάτη of Zeus. Couple this with v. 394, where Vergil tells us that, when Vulcan replies to Venus, he 'speaks in the fetters of eternal love' (*aeterno fatur deuinctus amore*), as though he has already been constrained to assent, and we are left with a nagging suspicion that the fire-god has somehow been duped.

The shield of Aeneas, then, is ultimately the product of Venus' ἀπάτη of Vulcan, the sexual stratagem by which she dominates his senses and co-opts his powers for her own purpose. Woven into the fabric of the shield is Vulcan's prophetic knowledge of future history, but Aeneas responds to it not only as the work of the god of the forge but also as the gift of Venus, *dona parentis*. The *arma* are an extension of his mother's warm protective touch, a prosthetic embrace.

### 3

Here we can discover a new explanation for why the shield's images are all but meaningless to Aeneas and yet can bring him joy. The wonder he feels in response to the shield does not arise from communion with the transcendent knowledge of Vulcan mediated by his divine art. It is not that he fails to understand the images fully or that he wilfully imposes an optimistic interpretation on their content;<sup>32</sup> rather, he acquires no knowledge whatsoever from the shield because he simply does not interact with it as a receptacle of information to be emptied for his consumption. To Vergil's readers, for whom the images detailed in the ecphrasis belong to a storied past, the shield naturally appears as a deep well of meaning which demands a hermeneutic response; but while we readers are busy sounding the depths of the shield's images, Aeneas is content merely to graze across its dazzling surface with eyes and hands.<sup>33</sup>

There is a sense, then, in which Aeneas' way of looking at the shield, finding in it no edification but only the touch of the goddess of pleasure, ultimately *resists* the way of seeing enjoined by the ecphrasis in the text. The ecphrasis seduces the reader with the fantasy of possessing the all-seeing eye of Actian Apollo, glaring down from the heavens and dispensing judgment with arrows as true in their flight as his gaze is piercing in its powers of discernment. To see with the sight of Apollo is to be the perfect interpreter, to know right from wrong, winner from loser, and to cast away all shadows of doubt. Before the

32 *Contra* Syed 2005, 69-70.

33 On 'surface reading', see Best and Marcus 2009; Felski 2015, 52-84; Purves 2016.

terrible gaze of Apollo, those who are destined for defeat can only flee into darkness and obscurity, following Cleopatra into the concealing embrace of the Nile:

Actius haec cernens arcum intendebat Apollo  
desuper; omnis eo terrore Aegyptus et Indi,  
omnis Arabs, omnes uertebant terga Sabaei.  
ipsa uidebatur uentis regina uocatis  
uela dare et laxos iam iamque immittere funis.  
illam inter caedes pallentem morte futura  
fecerat ignipotens undis et Iapyge ferri,  
contra autem magno maerentem corpore Nilum  
pandentemque sinus et tota ueste uocantem  
caeruleum in gremium latebrosaque flumina uictos.<sup>34</sup>

Perceiving this, Actian Apollo was bending his bow from above: at this terror all the Egyptians, the Indians, all the Arabs, all the Sabaeans were turning to flee. The queen herself was seen setting sail and summoning the winds to her aid, even now loosing the slackened ropes. The fire-god had fashioned her amid the slaughter, paling in the face of death, being swept away by the waves and the north-west wind; but opposite her he had fashioned the Nile, his great body in mourning, opening wide his bosom and calling to the defeated with all of his attire, summoning them into his cerulean lap and his concealing streams.<sup>35</sup>

But there is no such piercing light in Aeneas' eyes, and he is not armed with the insight necessary to demarcate light from shadow as Apollo does. Instead, as he lifts the shield onto his shoulder, the dazzling face of the work turns outward, away from his inquisitive gaze, and fits itself to the spectacle of his body, joining itself to him as an ornament of his heroic frame.

Vergil thrusts forth the shield to our readerly gaze as an enchanted object that offers second sight, the power to peer through the mists of time. By the very act of *touching* the shield, lingering on its surface without sinking into its unfathomable depths, Vergil's hero advances an anti-ecphrastic reading of the very ecphrasis of which he is the privileged subject. As the shield presents

34 Verg. *A.* 8.704-713.

35 The concept of darkness and concealment is also expressed in terms of embrace in the memorable nightfall expression of v. 369: *nox ruit et fuscis tellurem amplectitur alis*.

itself to the touch of a human hand, it is, for the duration of that touch, no longer a magic looking-glass, but a shield: a shield to clasp an arm, to shield a body, to save a life; a gift of a mother to her son. “Hindsight as foresight”, as Auden famously objected, “makes no sense”, and when Aeneas encounters his shield, he senses no such thing; for under his touch, the shield is not (yet) the oracle of “Roman history in the future tense”, reaching impossibly into an imaginary time that is both past and future at once, but a gift given and received in the living present.<sup>36</sup>

## 4

I have suggested that Aeneas responds to the shield as though it were a maternal embrace, but let’s not forget that Venus does find a moment, in v. 615, to give him a literal hug as well. Placed as it is at the transition point between her speech announcing the gift (612-614) and its physical production (616), this verse puts us in mind of the role of embrace in the rituals of social life. In the *Aeneid* and elsewhere, the embrace is recognised as one of the observances proper to meetings and partings. The partners of an embrace do what they do in order to give bodily expression to a sense of togetherness that might otherwise be merely metaphorical. But togetherness, we know, must at one time or another yield to apartness, and custom demands that we mark the occasions on which a period of togetherness is either commenced or concluded.

Such embraces of hello and goodbye feature prominently in the episodes with Evander and Pallas.<sup>37</sup> Upon first meeting Aeneas, Pallas clasps the Trojan tenaciously by the hand to lead him to an audience with his father Evander (*excepitque manu dextramque amplexus inhaesit*, 8.124), prefiguring a moment of intimacy that will be shared between them aboard ship in at 10.159-162, not long before the prince’s tragic death in the tradition of Homer’s Patroclus. Once Evander and Aeneas meet, the king studies the hero’s form like a work of art (8.152-153), then joyfully proclaims that their meeting is almost like a reunion for him, so vividly and so fondly does he recall meeting Anchises in his youth (*ut te, fortissime Teucrum, | accipio agnoscoque libens! ut uerba parentis |*

36 Auden 1976, 455, “Secondary Epic”. In the terms of Hans Gumbrecht’s aesthetics, Aeneas’ touch discovers the shield as ‘presence’ precisely insofar as it refuses the search after ‘meaning’ (Gumbrecht 2004).

37 Putnam 1985, 6-8 (= 1995, 33-35) responds eloquently to the scenes of embrace involving Evander and Pallas, working them into a broader thesis on eroticism in the *Aeneid* which nicely complements the present discussion.

*et uocem Anchisae magni uultumque recordor!*, 154-156).<sup>38</sup> The Arcadian proceeds to unfold the whole story of his meeting with Aeneas' late father, not omitting the desire he felt to be near the man and join hands with him (*mihi mens iuuenali ardebat amore | compellare uirum et dextrae coniungere dextram*, 163-164). Aeneas' coming now enables Evander to rekindle his youthful *amor* for the dead father in the person of the son, offering Aeneas his hand in token of friendship just as he desired long ago to join hands with Anchises (169).<sup>39</sup>

In these exchanges, the clasping of right hands enacts the mutual staking of a pledge.<sup>40</sup> Each party extends an open hand to be tested by the other's touch, demonstrating the absence of hostility and the commitment to cooperation. Evander soon follows up this initial token of benevolence with a much weightier one in the form of the gift of Pallas (*hunc tibi praeterea, spes et solacia nostri, | Pallanta adiungam*, 514-515). It is telling that Evander uses a cognate of *iungere* when he speaks of yoking his son to Aeneas as well as when he speaks of joining hands with him and his father;<sup>41</sup> the implication is that offering his hand and offering his son are complementary gestures, and symbolically equivalent. In pledging his allegiance to Aeneas, Evander honours the memory of Anchises and the close bond he shared with him as a youth; in pledging his son to Aeneas, he recreates that bond anew in the next generation.<sup>42</sup>

Evander further reinforces this sense that the joining of Pallas and Aeneas is an extension or repetition of his old attachment to Anchises when he reveals that his own son now bears the gifts Anchises left him at his parting: a quiver and arrows, a gold-woven *chlamys*, and a pair of golden bridles, the gear of budding manhood (166-168). Later on in the book, when Pallas rides to war with Aeneas as a recruit to the Trojan cause, this same *chlamys* will make him shine brighter than any of the company, just as Lucifer outshines all the other stars in the sky (587-591). In passing on these gifts to his son, it is as if Evander has passed on to him the youthful beauty which originally attracted Anchises to himself—a beauty which is figured, poignantly, as an article of clothing which can be donned and doffed (*tum mihi prima genas vestibat flore iuventas*, 160). Drawing out this metaphor, we can say that, insofar as Aeneas to Evander's

38 The second sentence could be understood either as 'How well I recall ...!' or 'How much I am reminded of ...!'; i.e. Evander refers both to the strength of the initial impression that Anchises made on his memory and to the force with which the sight of Aeneas brings the memory of Anchises back to him.

39 See Lloyd 1999 on the erotic aspect of Evander's connection with Anchises.

40 On the *dextrarum iunctio* in Roman culture in connection with the symbolism of the hand, see Corbeill 2004, 20-24.

41 *dextrae coniungere dextram*, 164; *iuncta est mihi foedere dextra*, 169.

42 Cf. Quint 2018, 124.

eyes is the image of Anchises in his prime, he is also therefore a *new* Anchises, freshly clothed in the flower of youth.<sup>43</sup> Pallas likewise represents to Evander a new blossoming of his own adolescence, and accordingly, the union of Aeneas and Pallas will be like a renewal or a rejuvenation of their fathers' old intimacy.

The binding force of the gifts that change hands between these two mirrored father-son pairs is manifested in Evander's description—which is at once an ecphrasis and a memory—through the aesthetically charged word *intertextam*, 'interwoven' (167). The interwoven fates of Troy and Arcadia, soon to be affirmed through Evander's pledge to join the war against the Rutulians, are adumbrated in Aeneas' greeting speech to him (127-151) which unfolds the shared descent of the two houses from *maximus Atlas* (136).<sup>44</sup> In terms of narrative function, we may say that the purpose of this genealogical excursus is to declare to the reader that this alliance was already written in the stars before the Trojans ever came to Latium. We may also be right to observe that it forms part of the setup for the payoff of pathos once Pallas eventually dies.<sup>45</sup> But these points aren't quite sufficient to account for how Vergil slows the passage of time to linger on this occasion of Aeneas and Evander meeting face to face, each pausing to recognise in the other something of himself. So many strands of fate converge and intertwine in their meeting that the reader is compelled to stop for a moment, to stand back and take it all in, as if gazing at a painting, a tapestry, a well-wrought engraving.

Notice how Evander responds to this same genealogical account by drinking in, not the words themselves, but rather the immediate bodily presence of the one who speaks them: *ille os oculosque loquentis | iamdudum et totum lustrabat lumine corpus* (152-153). In their roving over every region of the speaker's form, Evander's listening eyes enact a mode of attention which, I would suggest, is particularly appropriate to this eighth book of the *Aeneid* with its motif of interwoven embraces. Aeneas' genealogical self-introduction to Evander is one of many microcosms of the epic within the epic, mirroring the central *mise-en-abyme* that is the shield. We recognise these tableaux as microcosms because they iconically represent some aspect of the epic as a whole. And yet there are important differences in the way we *experience* the microcosm and the whole.

A microcosm is not a perfect replica; its production is attended by effects of compression, distortion, or perspectival shift. The microcosm may also yield

43 Cf. Dido's regret that her union with Aeneas failed to produce a 'little Aeneas' who would 'restore' his father to her by his resemblance (*paruulus ... Aeneas, qui te tamen ore referret*, 4.328-329).

44 Note *coniunxere* (133).

45 At which point Aeneas will recall the father's trusting embrace: *non haec Euandro de te promissa parenti | discedens dederam, cum me complexus euntem | mitteret ...* (11.45-47).



sensory affordances which are unavailable in the encounter with the whole. The shield presents us with a microcosm of the epic which can be touched, handled, carried. Likewise, Evander pays attention to Aeneas' account of himself by paying attention to the tangible bodily presence 'glossed' by his words. To Evander in this moment, Aeneas is not a signifier of the all-encompassing tapestry of fate into which his being is woven. He is a living presence, a familiar face that invites a warm embrace.

There can be no epic of embraces. Embraces mark the points of transition between togetherness and apartness. The Odyssean epic hero embarks on an epic journey, and is drawn into the circuit of many embraces along his path. But the time of each embrace, while it is happening, is a hindrance to the hero's progress. It may even be an obstacle in itself, like the desirous embrace of a Dido or Calypso. To see heroic figures lingering in the moment of an embrace is therefore to recognise in them a desire for delay in the hero's progress and stagnation in the epic plot. We have already seen how Aeneas' attempts to embrace ghosts embody this impulse of narrative resistance. Evander flashes before our eyes a nightmare image of such an embrace between living and dead in his description of Mezentius' monstrous torments:

mortua quin etiam iungebat corpora uiuis  
componens manibusque manus atque oribus ora,  
tormenti genus, et sanie taboque fluentis  
complexu in misero longa sic morte necabat.<sup>46</sup>

Yes indeed, he would join dead bodies to living, fastening hands to hands and mouths to mouths, a form of torture, and so by a long demise would he kill them, streaming with blood and gore in their wretched embrace.

The precise cause of death in this horrific scene is not specified; it is expressed as if the live victim dies merely by extended contact with the corpse and its effluvia. Mezentius' capital punishment plays on the dread of contagion and the spread of decay. But it also strikes terror in the hearts of onlookers by its violent transgression of the divinely sanctioned boundaries between the living and the dead. Here we find perhaps the clearest justification for the epithet *contemptor deum*, with which he is named at the beginning of the book (8.7; cf. 7.648, *contemptor diuum*).<sup>47</sup> The punishment can be read as a perversion

<sup>46</sup> Verg. A. 8.485-488.

<sup>47</sup> Different explanations are offered by Serv. A. 8.7 (because he waged war *contra pios*) and Macr. Sat. 3.5.10 (citing a story about Mezentius' impiety from Cato's *Origines*).

of the normal practice of embracing or kissing a recently deceased loved one in a final farewell before proper burial.<sup>48</sup> But it also casts a grim shadow over the farewell embrace between Evander and Pallas:

tum pater Euandrus dextram complexus euntis  
haeret inexpletus lacrimans ac talia fatur.<sup>49</sup>

Then father Evander, clasping the hand of his departing son, clings to him insatiably and speaks as follows with tears in his eyes.

When father and son next meet, one of them will be dead. The father's fear is that the order of birth will be inverted and his son will die before him—which is, of course, what happens. What brings him to tears is not the hero's fear of disgrace and ignominious defeat, but the father's fear of loss, a fear which shows no regard for the necessity of war. His embrace, like Aeneas' grasping after ghosts, is an attempt to hold onto what cannot be held.

The words that Evander uses to express his fear are infused with the affect of this embrace. Seeing his son depart, Evander first channels the Homeric Nestor, recalling his recalling of a lost youth when he could fight alongside the younger generation (560-567). The old man's speech, like Nestor's, is an old man's ramble, a diversion, a tedious yet pathos-filled periphrasis. When he finally circles back to the present business of goodbyeing (*nunc*, 568), it is the touch of his son's clasped hand that seems to jolt him out of his reverie. This embrace becomes the focal point of a complex and impossible wish:

o mihi praeteritos referat si Iuppiter annos,  
...  
non ego nunc dulci amplexu diuellerer usquam,  
nate, tuo, neque finitimo Mezentius umquam  
huic capiti insultans tot ferro saeua dedisset  
funera, tam multis uiduasset civibus urbem.  
at uos, o superi, et diuum tu maxime rector  
Iuppiter, Arcadii, quaeso, miserescite regis  
et patrias audite preces. si numina uestra  
incolumem Pallanta mihi, si fata reseruant,

48 This killing embrace also eerily echoes the death throes of the monster Cacus in Hercules' grip: *hic Cacus in tenebris incendia uana uomentem | corripit in nodum complexus, et angit inhaerens | elisos oculos et siccum sanguine guttur* (259-261).

49 Verg. A. 8.558-559.

si uisurus eum uiuo et uenturus in unum,  
 uitam oro, patior quemuis durare laborem.  
 sin aliquem infandum casum, Fortuna, minaris,  
 nunc, nunc o liceat crudelem abrumpere uitam,  
 dum curae ambiguae, dum spes incerta futuri,  
 dum te, care puer, mea sola et sera uoluptas,  
 complexu teneo, grauior neu nuntius auris  
 uulneret.<sup>50</sup>

O, if Jupiter were to restore to me my bygone years ... I would never be torn from your sweet embrace now, my son, and the gloating Mezentius would not have visited such grievous destruction with the sword upon this his neighbour's head, nor bereft our city of so many of its people. You gods above, and you, Jupiter, mighty ruler of the gods, I beg you, pity the Arcadian king and hear a father's prayers. If your will is keeping Pallas safe for me, and destiny, if I am to see him and unite with him while I yet live, I pray for life; I submit to enduring whatever toil. But, Fortune, if you threaten some unspeakable disaster, let me break off this cruel life now, now while my fear is uncertain, while my expectation for the future is in doubt, while I hold you, dear boy, my only joy, my latter-day joy, in my embrace, and let no eviller news wound my ears.

What Evander articulates here is no less ambitious than a prayer to negate the passage of time and to dwell in the eternal present of his son's embrace. First he wishes to be restored to Pallas' age so that he can walk hand in hand beside him and thus never be torn from him again; but this he acknowledges to be impossible. His thoughts then turn from the past to the future, and the question of whether or not he is fated to see his son again (*si uisurus eum uiuo*, 576). Instead of wishing for a reunion, he prays for his own fate to be aligned with his son's: either let me live to see Pallas alive, or let me die instantly rather than live a moment longer in the vain hope of meeting him again. In essence, Evander is praying never to be released, except by death, from Pallas' grasp, if that release means sending his son to his death. But he is also praying specifically to be spared the pain of receiving the *grauior nuntius* (582) that will announce his son's death. What he fears is not death alone, but futurity and the possibility of change; his most earnest hope is that things will remain the same as far as can be. Both his hope and his fear are framed in relation to the embrace which forms an emotional centre and reference point for his speech.

<sup>50</sup> Verg. A. 8.560, 568-583.

The emotional meaning of the embrace is encapsulated in three successive *dum*-clauses in vv. 580-582: 'now while my fear is uncertain, while my expectation for the future is in doubt, while I hold you, dear boy, my only joy, my latter-day joy, in my embrace ...'. The solace of the embrace resides precisely in its now-ness: whatever fate and fortune have in store for the future, father and son are together *now*, their togetherness attested by touch. The future is in the hands of the gods, but the present is already here, in *my* hands; the only question is how long this moment may last. But there is comfort in this very uncertainty. The phrase *spes incerta futuri* gives expression to it. The phrase *spes incerta* by itself would be enough to convey the notion of 'uncertain hope'. In this context, the genitive *futuri* has a limiting force. It is only with respect to the future that Evander's hope is uncertain. Within the intimate present of the embrace, everything is certain, *certa*, empirically guaranteed.

Having read the *Aeneid* (or, at any rate, once we've reached the end), we know that Evander's hope will be cheated and Pallas must die. Likewise, when Aeneas admires the shield, we are not *ignari* as he is of the *res* which it portrays. Vergil's legendary heroes know nothing of the future from which we gaze back on them. But this ignorance, as I hope to have shown, can be exploited for effects other than the familiar ploy of dramatic irony. Our knowledge as latter-day readers may be more complete than that which Aeneas and Evander possess in their respective scenes of ignorance, but we miss something important if we only pay attention to the fact that we know something the characters don't. Both Aeneas and Evander peer into the mists of an unknowable future in these moments. It is part of the epic poet's task to lay claim to the unknowable by appeal to the realm of Fate. Aeneas and Evander are therefore peering in the same direction as Vergil's reader; and yet we witness both of them turning away from the unknowable and towards the known, and finding something there, something palpable and true: hope (*spes*) and joy (*gaudium*). Could we find anything in these surprising responses to emulate in our own reading? Is there a way to read Vergil by touch as well as sight? Might we find a way to embrace the embrace?<sup>51</sup>

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