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STATUE FEVER IN THE HEROICUS

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Philostratus' *Heroicus* betrays an obsession with statues that demands explanation. Just as cult statues of epic heroes litter the contemporary second-century CE landscape, so do they litter Philostratus' text. No story of a hero is distinct from an ephrasis of that hero's statue, and in practice a request for the one is a request for the other. Lifeless heroes (Protesilaus first and foremost) become vividly 'alive' in the imagination of their devotees and, occasionally, their Zoilean adversaries. As the lines between reality and fantasy blur, Philostratus' critique of material cultural practices accompanies and fortifies his better known *Homerkritik*.

καθαίρονται δ' ἄλλῳ. . . καὶ τοῖς ἀγάλμασι δὲ τουτέοισιν εὐχονται, οἰκοῖον εἴ τις δόμοισι λεσχηνεύοιτο, οὐ τι γινώσκων θεοὺς οὐδ' ἥρωας οἴτινές εἰσι.

They [sc. the Greeks] purify themselves in vain . . . They pray to these statues the way one might converse with houses: they have no clue what gods or even heroes are like.

Heraclitus, B5 DK

MOMUS: That is why you, Apollo, are no longer in favour; at present, oracles are delivered by every stone and every altar that is drenched with oil and has garlands and can provide itself with a charlatan (γόητος ἀνδρός) – of whom there are plenty. Already the statue of Polydamas the athlete heals those who have fevers in Olympia, and the statue of Theagenes does likewise in Thasos; they sacrifice to Hector in Troy and to Protesilaus on the opposite shore, in the Chersonese.

Lucian, *The Parliament of the Gods* 12 (tr. Harmon (1936))

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Philostratus is known today as a master of the ecphrastic genre. His *Imagines* richly supports this reputation: a virtuosic *tour de force*, the work is constructed around a series of paintings rendered in words. The *Heroicus*, too, is constructed around a series of physiognomical portraits that, as Tim Whitmarsh notes, ‘are brilliantly ecphrastic, providing a high level of pictorial detail’ and inevitably inviting comparison with the *Imagines*.¹ What such a comparison brings will depend on how we understand the project of ecphrasis in antiquity. The paintings of the *Imagines* may or may not be imaginary. What is real or imagined in the *Heroicus*? How credible or even plausible are its visual details? And what is to be learned from uncertainties like these? Such problems lie at the heart of ancient ecphrasis, and they take on a special urgency in the case of the *Heroicus*.

The *Heroicus* is a spectacularly outlandish work that deserves closer scrutiny, both for its own sake and for the light it can throw on the constitutive tensions of ecphrasis and their potential for literary exploitation. Ecphrasis, after all, is a beguiling device that both masks and advertises its own implausibility: ecphrases are *adynata* in motion; they never fully deliver on their promises, however much they may succeed as prodigious performances that seemingly defy gravity.² Philostratus utilises ecphrasis in the *Heroicus* to accomplish two different objectives. On the one hand, he exploits the allure and the native instabilities of ecphrasis – what it promises and what it fails to deliver – in order to baffle and entertain the reader. On the other, he leverages ecphrasis in order to engage in a critique of the literary and cultural obsessions with Homer in his own day. Both sets of concerns, though inherited, are hallmarks of imperial Greek literature. Where they intersect in the *Heroicus* is in the concrete medium of cult statues of epic heroes, which are seized on by the dialogue’s characters as an index of the past. It is here that a first clue to Philostratus’ innovativeness lies.

The statue and shrine of Protesilaus

The *Heroicus* is statue-obsessed, not unlike the way the *Imagines* is obsessed with paintings. Statues are everywhere to be seen in the work, both in the ambit of shrines and sanctuaries, where they are expected, and just as often in places where they are least expected, for

1 Whitmarsh (2013) 116.

2 This is the sober conclusion of the later Greek theorists of ecphrasis, as Webb (2009) convincingly shows, and the ancient practices justify their claims. See Ael. Theon *Prog.* 119.31–3 Patillon (του *σχεδὸν* ὀράσθαι); Sard. *Comm.* 216.20–217.5, 224.21–225.4 Rabe, esp. 216.22–4 (κἄν γὰρ μυριάκις ἐναργῆς εἶη ὁ λόγος, *ἄδύνατον* αὐτὸ κατ’ ὄψιν ἀγαγεῖν “τὸ δηλούμενον” ἤτοι ἐκφραζόμενον). Awareness of these limits is hardwired into the tradition. See Steiner (2001) ch. 2, and e.g. Aesch. *Theoioi* TrGF 78a, col. 1.5–7 on a portrait image (εἶδωλον and μ[ι]μημα) that ‘lacks only a voice’ (φωνῆς δεῖ μόνον), which is to say, *everything* that would make the image alive. For the same trope see Dio Chrys. *Or.* 12.85; Lucian, *Imag.* 1.10 καὶ μονονουχί καὶ ἀκούω λεγούσης αὐτῆς ἃ πεποιήται λέγουσα. Further, Philostr. *Imag.* praef. 4; V A 6.19.2; Callistr. *Stat.* 2.4 οὕτως καὶ τὸ ὀρώμενον ἄπιστον καὶ τὸ μὴ πιστὸν ὀρώμενον. Recent landmark studies of ecphrasis include Perutelli (1978); Fowler (1991); Elsner (1995), ch. 1; Webb (1999); Elsner (2002); Bartsch and Elsner (2007); Webb (2009); de Jong (2011); Squire (2015); Squire and Elsner (2016). Kim (2010) ch. 6 and Whitmarsh (2013) are the two best recent discussions of the *Heroicus*.

instance in descriptions of epic heroes and (once) of a still-living individual. The work is set in one such shrine, that of Protesilaus. At its centre, in its innermost sanctum so to speak, stands a statue of the hero, which becomes the focus of all that follows. Physically present throughout the entirety of the work, the statue dominates the setting: it is permanently on view.

On one level, the *Heroicus* is registering a contemporary material reality: it was enshrined material cult objects like the statue of Protesilaus, dotting the Greek landscape from the archaic period to the early third century CE when Philostratus composed his work, that preserved, kept alive and animated the heroes from the past for those living in the present.³ The proliferation of references to statues in the *Heroicus* both within and outside sanctuary settings suggests how deeply implanted these cultural habits were, but also, as will be seen, how vulnerable to criticism they could be. For as widespread as the ancient cult practices and beliefs were, they were equally subject to scorn and criticism. Heraclitus and Lucian, quoted in the epigraphs above, attest to the longevity of this resistance to statue fever. They were hardly alone.⁴ To this roster of critics we need to add one more name, that of Philostratus.

To see why, it will be helpful to recall the narrative setting of the work. A Phoenician traveller, having sailed from Egypt and Phoenicia and now stayed by adverse winds, finds himself in the company of a vintner in the vicinity of Elaeus on the Thracian Chersonese across from Troy. As it happens, the Vinedresser tends the shrine of Protesilaus and its adjacent garden. Conveniently, the Phoenician is obsessed with Homer. Seeing how eager the Phoenician is to learn as much as he can about the events and especially the heroes of the Trojan War, the Vinedresser regales him with stories in a day-long exchange, starting with descriptions of Protesilaus' features, then proceeding to tales about his exploits in the present (his daily activities and physical feats, the wisdom he dispenses and his healing powers), passing from there to appetite-whetting marvels (sightings of the bones of heroes, giants and monsters) and concluding with portraits of some of the more illustrious epic heroes as these were relayed to him by Protesilaus. Though hesitant at first, the Phoenician overcomes his initial scepticism about the revenant's bona fides as a witness to Troy and is quickly filled to his heart's content with descriptions of various heroes from the Trojan War. In due time, he becomes an epopt and is permitted to see Protesilaus, after a fashion, under the tutelage of his hierophant, the Vinedresser. But all this just a ruse, since apart from the statue of the hero, the Phoenician in fact sees nothing beyond second-hand images – images of images – that have been transmitted to him ecphrastically and, inevitably, transmuted through language. And the same is true for the reader, for whom the Phoenician acts as a proxy. That is the central irony of the work.

3 Scheer (2000) 54–77; Chaniotis (2017) §44. Cf. Lucian (quoted above); Dio Chrys. Or. 12.60; Max. Tyr. 9.7; Arr. Peripl. M. Eux. 21.2 etc.

4 See Steiner (2001) ch. 2 for further examples.

The narrative core of the *Heroicus* consists in a procession of epic heroes in portrait form. Though the procession in ways resembles a picture gallery reminiscent of the *Imagines* and in other ways resembles a Homeric catalogue, the images are made to move and act and to assume a three-dimensional reality, frequently through an appeal to their statue forms. Thus, Hector, Achilles, Nestor, Antilochus, Ajax, Euphorbus, Palamedes, Helen, Memnon of Egypt and of course Protesilaus are all either likened to statues or embodied by actual cult statues. The repeated appeal to statues is compulsive and odd, and seemingly unparalleled in ancient texts. Comparing a person to a statue is not in itself unusual, though comparing a person to his or her own statue is.⁵ What is unique about the *Heroicus* is the high concentration of both kinds of allusion and their eventual blurring, a procedure that begins and ends with Protesilaus.

At the work's centre stands the cult statue of Protesilaus, the *genius loci* and the first casualty of the Trojan War. Not the best of the Achaeans, he is 'by far the first of the Achaeans' (πολὸν πρότιστον Ἀχαιῶν, *Il.* 2.702), as his speaking name implies. The Vinedresser, Protesilaus' passionate devotee, makes this case for us. And documented cult practices in Protesilaus' name at his home in Phylace (*Pind.* *Isthm.* 1.58–9; *Philostr.* *Her.* 16.5) and near Elaeus (as reported by Herodotus, Thucydides, Pausanias, Lucian and others) back him up. Two statues have been identified as portraits of the hero, one found near Rome (*Fig. 1*), the other (a torso and a base) from Cyzicus (*Fig. 2*). Both appear to be copies of the same late fifth-century to early fourth-century bronze.⁶

The type they belong to can only with licence be said to match the description given by the Vinedresser: 'The statue is standing on a ship, for its base is in the shape of a prow, and he is set up as the ship's captain' (9.6) and dressed in a purple mantle (10.5).⁷ Though not designed for cult ritual, these statues nevertheless contributed to the popular imagination of Protesilaus. A better iconographical candidate for the Elaeian cult statue, now lost, is to be found in coins from the region (*Fig. 3*).⁸

5 For the latter cf. *Eur. Hec.* 560 with Scheer (2000) 12–13; *Pl. Chrm.* 154c πάντες ὡσπερ ἄγαλμα ἐθεῶντο αὐτόν (*sc.* Charmides, owing to his stunning beauty); *Ov. Met.* 14.320–3 (Picus and his statue; thanks to Graham Zanker for the parallel); *Dio Chrys. Or.* 21.1 (where the youth's beauty – his εἶδος – is said to be ἀρχαῖον, a nice detail noted by Larry Kim *per litt.*); *Ach. Tat.* 4.1.7 (a dream). Panthea in Lucian's *Imagines* can be a verbal or painterly image or a statue or all three at once, a medial confusion that Philostratus exploits to quite different ends and on a different scale.

6 Richter (1929); Raubitschek (1949) 143–44. For the date see Stewart (*forthcoming*).

7 All translations of the *Heroicus* (henceforth, 'Her.') are from Rusten and König (2014). The Metropolitan and British Museum statues show Protesilaus mortally wounded with a gash under his right arm. See Frel (1970); Frel (1973); Stewart (*forthcoming*). At 12.4, Protesilaus' scar (οὐλήν) is 'imprinted' or 'carved' (?) (ἐντετύπεται) on his thigh. The ambiguity is significant (see below). For ἐντυπώω used of sculpture in this sense see [Arist.] *Mund.* 399b35 τὸ ἐαυτοῦ πρόσωπον ἐντυπώσασθαί, said of Phidias and his statue of Athena.

8 See LIMC VII.1.555–6, 559 and Stewart (*forthcoming*). But even here, in the case of the coins of the Commodus type, the correspondences with the Vinedresser's account of the statue are far from perfect. See Borg (2004) for well-taken cautions about reconstructing realia from imperial ephrastic fictions.



Figure 1. Marble statue of a wounded warrior, identified as Protesilaus. Ca 138–81 CE. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Frederick C. Hewitt Fund, 1925 (25.116). Image copyright © The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Image source: Art Resource, NY

Despite his fleeting mention by Homer in the Greek Catalogue (Il. 2.698–702), Protesilaus was a much-adored figure both at home and then across the Greco-Roman world as his fame spread.⁹ As I hope will become apparent in what follows, what we

⁹ Vermeule (1992); LIMC vii, s.v. 'Protesilaos'.



Figure 2. Partially restored statue of a hero, identified as Protesilaus, striding along a ship's prow, with waves carved into the base. Roman era (Cyzicus). British Museum. Acquisition no. 1876,0903.1, 1876,0903.2

have in the *Heroicus* is less the representation of a cult statue than the hyperbolic image of one, loosely based on familiar visual artefacts and seemingly a composite of statues and coins – in short, a fantastic assemblage of epic proportions, designed to stimulate the imagination of a wide range of readers from the period.



Figure 3. Reverse of Elaeian coin (ca 184–90 CE) showing Protesilaus armed aboard his ship. (Obverse: portrait bust of the emperor Commodus.) Inv. no. 18235375. Münzkabinett, Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin. Photo credit: Reinhard Saczewsk

From this angle, the numinous heroic past looks rather ‘sublime’, and the *Heroicus* would seem to slot into the practice of pious cultural commemoration.¹⁰ Cult statuary played a pivotal role in this arena, for obvious reasons. Statues preserve the look and feel of the past in a way that texts and myths cannot: they ‘presence’ the once vital past and give beholders direct access to it, endowing it with a seemingly incontestable legibility and a credibility that not even ruins can rival. In this cultural framework, seeing is believing,¹¹ and hapticity, the ability to touch what one sees, makes the experience irresistibly palpable: it anchors belief in the body and confers on it the touch of the real.¹² That said, there are simply too many signals in the *Heroicus* warning us not to take the language of ritual and cult, and certainly not its descriptions of statues, at face value.¹³

A first consideration is the work’s conflicting aims. The desire to reanimate the epic past by reference to the way epic heroes once looked (their εἶδος) and the feats they performed produces diverging tendencies. Visualisation (ecphrasis) naturally evolves into a three-dimensional concreteness (hence the appeals to inanimate statues) but also into a cinematic display (vivid narratives about lively heroes) that clashes with the inanimacy of statues and

¹⁰ Whitmarsh (2013).

¹¹ Cf. the Vinedresser’s advice at 8.14: ‘But you must not believe what I say’; the Phoenician should travel and visually inspect the various remains of giants and monsters for himself.

¹² Cf. Dio Chrys. Or. 12.60 and Philostr. VA 6.19.4 on the erotic ‘persuasiveness’ of statues. Further, Herder (2011) 35: ‘touch alone reveals bodies’ and produces a kind of *synousia* between statues and their beholders: ‘A sculpture before which I kneel can embrace me, it can become my friend and companion: it is present, it is there. The most beautiful painting is [by contrast only] a magnificent story, the dream of a dream’ (45). On the way ‘haptic frisson’ is coupled with ‘frustrated compulsion’ in such contexts and in Herder see Slaney (2018).

¹³ So, too, Kim (2010) 196–7. More generally see Elsner (1995) 8, who contrasts ‘mystic viewing’ with “deconstructive” or ironizing self-reflections’. The *Heroicus* exhibits both tendencies, ultimately favouring the latter.

strains against the limits of ecphrastic depiction. Thus, while the nexus of ecphrasis, the legible epic past and statues make for a powerful cocktail, they are also a combustible mix. The *Heroicus* capitalises on this instability and exacerbates it at every opportunity.

The problems are only compounded in the case of Protesilaus, in whom they converge in intensified form: part-statue, part-picture and part-narrator, he occupies the precise point where the work's several medial modes come together and pull apart. He is the primary conduit to the past in the work, and yet his testimony strains all credulity. Not only did he die at the doorstep of the Trojan War, but his views about what did or did not take place at Troy are hardly unbiased. As the dialogue wears on and his accounts grow in number and detail, it becomes clear that Protesilaus has a distinct animus against Homer, perhaps even a grudge. He received short shrift in the *Iliad*, a mere 'trireme of four verses' (τριήρη τεττάρων ἐπῶν, 14.2) as he says, a peculiar phrase that conjures up his brief mention in the Catalogue of Ships and his premature death and his failed epic mission,¹⁴ while his statue with its prow-shaped base is an insistent reminder of this same fact (9.60).¹⁵ Before we know it, we are in the midst of an adversarial piece of revisionism that is worthy of a Dio or Lucian, but not of a demigod who commands impeccable authority.¹⁶ Deflationary and rationalising in style, Protesilaus' critique is calqued on prior Homeric erudition, and transparently so. There are good reasons to doubt the piety of the *Heroicus* on these last grounds alone.

Finally, a distinctly iconoclastic (anti-iconic and anti-ecphrastic) tenor can be seen to run through the work. As the representational modalities of the work pull apart, what they purport to achieve is thrown into doubt. All that remains, once the dust clears, is a many-sided attack on hero cults insofar as they fall under a more general rubric, namely the cult of Homer. In the last analysis, the *Heroicus* is not about the power of images. It is about the power and limits of the imagination. And that is what makes it so compelling and perplexing a work.

A catalogue of sights unseen

ἡμεῖς δὲ κλέος οἶον ἀκούομεν οὐδέ τι ἴδμεν.

We hear only the rumor of it and have seen and know nothing. (*Iliad* 2.486)

14 So Jacobs (1832) 41 n. Grossardt (2006) ad loc. rejects the connection; Follet (2017) ad loc. accepts it. What is meant, as Follet indicates in her translation, is something like 'a trireme and four verses all told'. 'Trireme' is of course an anachronism (cf. Serv. Dan. on Aen. 1.182, 5.119), but then Protesilaus is one too. He knows about the Persian Wars (7.6); and the shape of his statue base reflects the design of a classical-era warship (so A. Stewart, per litt.; implicit in Richter (1929) 192: 'ram'). Even 'Laodamia' is anachronistic. In the *Cyria* (PEG 26 Bernabé = Paus. 4.2.7) she is called Polydora. She goes unnamed in Homer. After its first attestation in Euripides (Protesilaus), 'Laodamia' became the standard nomenclature. Her conspicuous mention by Philostratus has a further significance (see below). At 12.1–4, Protesilaus bemoans his fate, which prevented him from accomplishing anything at Troy (μηδὲν ἐν Τροίᾳ ἐργασάμενον), without in this case faulting Homer.

15 Protesilaus' ship, all that remains of him in the *Iliad* (13.681, 16.286), plays the exact same role there.

16 Kim (2010) 196–7.

In electing to recreate the epic past by means of ecphrasis, Philostratus has made a natural choice. At stake in the reception of Homer at any point after the eighth century is the visibility of the past, which can be made available in the present only by means of second- or third-hand representation, imagination and picturability. On the other hand, these same problems are endemic to Homer too. The question ‘What did Homer see and know?’, prompted by his virtual confession at the head of the Catalogue of Ships just quoted, troubled the poet’s afterlife from an early date, and for good reason: the question determined what later audiences could reliably know about the epic past in the absence of first-hand accounts. In this regard, Philostratus’ approach to ecphrasis is touching a raw nerve. He is tapping into a centuries-old tradition of questions and answers about what could and could not be seen of the ever-receding Homeric past in the ever-progressing modern present.¹⁷

We can be quite certain that Philostratus is responding to the particular problem that Homer’s invocation of the Muses created for posterity. In fact, the whole of the *Heroicus* is organised around the poet’s confession from *Iliad* 2 and the Greek and Trojan catalogues that it prefaces. In order to appreciate how this is so, we will need to consider the scenario that sets the dialogue in motion even before the Phoenician meets the Vinedresser, namely the dream of the Phoenician, which serves as a virtual allegory for all that follows.

The night before making landfall at Elaeus, the Phoenician dreams he is reading Homer’s catalogue of the Achaeans from the *Iliad*. As the heroes pass before his eyes, he decides to invite them aboard his ship, mistakenly thinking he has room for them all. He wakes up, startled at what he has proposed to himself, and then is overcome with a shudder: the dream is a bad omen, since ‘for those who are in pursuit of something, visions of the dead imply failure’ (αἱ γὰρ τῶν ἀποθανόντων ὄψεις ἀργοὶ τοῖς ἐσπουδακόσι, 6.5; tr. modified). This is indeed an inauspicious prelude to a work that is concerned precisely with visualising the dead spirits of the Homeric past, the more so as the Phoenician is just the kind of person he names, someone who is in pursuit of that past. The remainder of the *Heroicus* is a wish-fulfilment, structured around the Vinedresser’s catalogue of heroes – his collecting of their bodies – in what really amounts to a kind of lucid dreaming. For as the Phoenician himself says, ‘We shall also talk about the catalogue of heroes (περὶ τοῦ καταλόγου τῶν ἡρώων), as you have promised; and collecting them onto the ship (τὸ καταλέγειν σφας ἐς τὴν ναῦν) and collecting their story (τὸ συλλεξαμένους τὸν περὶ αὐτῶν λόγον) before embarking (ἐμβῆναι) amount to the same thing’, 6.6; tr. modified).¹⁸ The plot of the *Heroicus* thus arcs towards a literalisation of the dream’s Catalogue (cf. 25.17), albeit one that never quite gets realised. We should remember, too, that the Phoenician’s first contact with Protesilaus, however fleeting, will

17 See Porter (2021) ch. 4 (‘What Did Homer See?’).

18 ἐμβῆναι alludes to the embarkation of the Greeks in the Catalogue (ἐμβαινον, Il. 2.619: ἐμβέβασαν, 2.720), as re-enacted in the Phoenician’s dream fantasy (καὶ ξυνεκάλουν τοὺς Ἀχαιοὺς ἐμβῆναι τὴν ναῦν, Her. 6.3), and to the imminent departure of the Phoenician, which is marked by frequent nautical imagery in the dialogue.

have occurred in his dream. Lest there be any doubt about this, we need only recall the first mention of Protesilaus in 2.7, to which the Phoenician, on hearing the name, knowingly responds, ‘You mean the one from Thessaly?’ (εἰ τὸν ἐκ Θεσσαλίας λέγεις;). ‘Yes’, the Vinedresser replies, ‘the husband of Laodamia, as he likes to be called’ (ἐκεῖνον λέγω, τὸν τῆς Λαοδαμείας· τοῦτὶ γὰρ χαίρει ἀκούων). The Vinedresser is alluding to the Greek Catalogue (Il. 2.699–701), fresh in the Phoenician’s mind thanks to his dream. And just to make sure that the reader does not miss the cross-reference, the exact same run of ‘verses recited by Homer about him’ is quoted piecemeal and paraphrased at 12.3. The reader is being directed right back to Homer. The remainder of the dialogue strains to bring Protesilaus back to life in a massive effort of overcompensation for this reticence – 22,000 words of prose for a mere ‘trireme of four verses’!¹⁹

And yet, for all his eagerness to see the past and despite everything that he is told and shown, the Phoenician remains a voyeur, not a viewer, and the same is true of the Vinedresser and, by extension, the reader. The analogies with reading, where everything begins for the stranger and for us, are evident. Reading, too, can be a form of lucid dreaming. And this is exactly what Philostratus seems to want to tell the readers of his work. The only picture we are permitted to see and not merely imagine is the process of picturing itself. Thus, it is correct to say that the dream ‘performs in miniature’ what goes on ‘in the *Heroicus* as a whole’.²⁰ All that is missing is one more step: just as the dream is interrupted – indeed, ruptured – by its own (failed) fantasy,²¹ so too does the work interrupt its own fantastic dream (ἐνύπνιον, 6.2) from start to finish.²²

Chronologically, the dream-Catalogue is the outer frame to the narrative frame, and it fades inconspicuously into the background once we step into the dialogue. But structurally, the Catalogue remains in place as the guiding framework of the *Heroicus*.²³ Everything that transpires subsequently – that is, virtually the whole of the work – is a canny response to the Phoenician’s unsatisfied desire (ποθῶ, 7.1) to bring the heroes back ‘on board’.²⁴ Whether we should attribute this canniness to a manipulative Vinedresser who is more than happy to oblige the Phoenician’s fantasy, or to Philostratus alone as he operates quietly behind the scenes, remains to be determined. In any case, both operate with the same tools, and it is to these that we may now turn.

19 A grotesque inversion of the poetics of Hellenistic miniaturisation.

20 Platt (2011) 244.

21 Better yet: fantasy of failure, since the failure is built into the dream itself (the heroes do not fit) and not only into the dreamwork (its form, viz. its significance as an interrupted dream).

22 Philostratus is implicitly labelling Homer’s poetry a dream-image. For the same point, made explicit now, see Dio Chrys. Or. 11.129, where the same word is used: ἐνύπνιον.

23 See 43.10–11, a preliminary closing parenthesis of sorts describing how Homer went about constructing his Catalogue through empirical fieldwork. Homer’s collection of the epic heroes’ stories there (ξυνελέξατο) recalls the collection of their stories at 6.6 (συλλεξαμένους).

24 Homer, to be sure, activates the same longing, which his poems partly fulfil in our imagination. But that longing is forecast already in the poems, the most pertinent example being the pothos that Protesilaus’ fellow soldiers have for their now absent leader: πόθειόν γε μὲν ἔσθλὸν ἔόντα (Il. 2.709)

Homer in the round

Epic heroes are reanimated in the work in three ways: (i) through ecphrastic descriptions of their embodied persons (σώματα) or their surrogates (ἀγάλματα); (ii) through narrative retellings of their exploits; and (iii) through their epiphanies as visions, dreams or ghosts, which are again told in tales about them that normally include ecphrastic description. The fluidity and fungibility of these three points of access to the great personalities of the past is what gives the dialogue its life. No story of a hero is distinct from an ecphrasis of that hero or his statue, and in practice a request for the one is a request for the other. Of course, the requester-in-chief is the story-greedy Phoenician, the great consumer of the epic past (though he is by no means alone in that role; the Vinedresser is the prototype). His requests for information about the epic heroes are typically answered by an ecphrasis of the hero's physical features that then shades off into an (ecphrastic) narrative of that hero's actions, a move that effectively blurs this formal distinction (for saying is a kind of seeing) and equates the evidentiary value of ecphrasis and of story-telling (for both attest equally well or badly to the past). To take one example, consider 6.6, where the Phoenician implores the Vinedresser to oblige him with a catalogue of heroes as told by Protesilaus, by which the Phoenician understands both 'stories of Troy' (Τρωϊκά, 7.2, 7.6, 7.12 etc.) and descriptions of the heroes' features and characteristics. But the pattern can go the other way, as when an ecphrasis of Neoptolemus' appearance whets the Phoenician's appetite for a further, digressive, narrative about Achilles: 'Oh boy, here comes *another story!* (Ἄλλος αὖ λόγος ἦκει)', the Phoenician giddily exclaims (53.1; tr. modified). Descriptions of statues and ghosts complement these retellings.

The starting point for every description of the epic heroes is, of course, Homer. He is the original ecphrastist; everything evolves from there. Consider the case of Hector. At one point, we learn how Protesilaus praises not only Hector but also what Homer says about him:

He says Homer has described (διελθεῖν) splendidly his riding the chariot, fighting or taking counsel, and the fact that Troy depended on him and no one else. And the boasts that Hector delivers in Homer's poem, threatening to burn the Greeks' ships, are just like the hero's impetuosity; for he used to say many such things during the fighting, with an extremely terrifying look and a loud voice (ἐκπληκτικώτατα δὲ ἀνθρώπων βλέψαι καὶ φθέγγασθαι μέγα). (37.1)

And yet Homer does not have the final word. From here Protesilaus moves on to features in Hector's profile that have no foothold in Homer:

He was smaller than Ajax the son of Telamon, but no worse in the fighting, where he demonstrated something of Achilles' fervour. He reviled Paris for cowardice, and for being too devoted to his looks; even though wearing one's hair long was a common practice for the kings and their sons, Hector considered it beneath him because Paris

did so. His ears were battered, not from wrestling ... – rather he used to try his strength against bulls, and for him grappling with these beasts was related to warfare: ... he used ... to practise for battle by standing up to their bellowing, daring the tips of their horns, turning back a bull's neck or, if wounded by him, not giving up. (37.2–4)

Without batting an eyelash, Protesilaus slides from Homer's description to his own. We might be tempted to call Protesilaus' elaboration an imaginary *ecphrasis*, since it is an embellishment of Homer. Protesilaus would disagree, claiming that his account exists on a more solid footing than Homer's. By complementing Homer with a competing account of his own, Protesilaus is levelling the playing field, claiming for himself an independent authority as unimpeachable as Homer's, but also preparing the ground for a stiffer challenge to Homer. This is the implied threat of the opening remark, 'Protesilaus praises not only Hector but also what Homer says about him.' What happens when they do not agree? A good deal, but never in Homer's favour.²⁵ But Protesilaus is not yet done with his levelling operations.

Next, we are given a brief description of Hector's statue (*ἄγαλμα*) at Ilium. Though it 'depicts him as a young stripling', Protesilaus insists that 'he was handsomer and taller than that', and from there he launches into a revisionist account of Hector's death at Troy. He died, Protesilaus states, not while 'running away or having dropped his arms (that is Homeric slander (*συκοφαντεῖσθαι*))', but while gloriously standing his ground and fighting ferociously to the bitter end (37.5). The revision is less radical than what we find in Dio's *Trojan Oration*, where we learn that it was Hector who slayed Achilles (*Or.* 11.104–11) and that Troy never fell (11.27, 34, 37 etc.),²⁶ but it is nevertheless a distortion of what Homer says. Protesilaus pre-empts criticism of his own position, which is obviously vulnerable to objections (it can be no more verified than Homer's), by turning the tables on Homer. But why reference the statue? Why dispute the image? Superficially, Protesilaus is claiming first-hand authority as an eyewitness to Hector, trumping both the authority of Homer, whose knowledge came second-hand (43.7–16), and of this one representation of Hector in stone. But there is more to the reference than that.

As it happens, the reference looks back to the first glimpse of Hector offered by the *Heroicus*, once again in response to a request by the Phoenician to describe in full what Hector really was like. 'Get ready for a detailed account' (*ἄκουε διὰ πλείονων*), the Vinedresser warns, and then he launches into a portrait, not of Hector's person, nor of Homer's version of events, but of Hector's statue at Ilium:

The statue of Hector in Ilion looks like a demigod (*ἡμιθέῳ ἀνθρώπῳ ἕοικε*), and reveals much of his character if one looks at it properly (*ἐπιφαίνει τῷ θεοροῦντι*

25 *ὁμολογεῖν* is used to signal moments of agreement (e.g. 27.8, 42.2) Disagreements are marked in other, stronger, ways.

26 Philostratus more gently exploits the same idea at 55.3: 'Troy never fell' (*κοῦ πέσε Τροία*).

αὐτὸ ξὺν ὀρθῷ λόγῳ): for it seems self-confident, fierce and alert, bursting with splendour, and its youthful beauty doesn't need long hair. It is so lifelike that it attracts the observer to touch it (οὕτω τι ἔμπουν ὡς τὸν θεατὴν ἐπισπάσασθαι θιγεῖν). The statue is set up on a spot in Ilion visible to all (ἐν περιβλέπτῳ), and has performed many good deeds both for the city and individuals, which is why they address prayers to him and celebrate games in his honour. During these he becomes so excited and involved in the contest that the sweat drips off him. (19.3–4; tr. slightly modified)

We might well wonder if it is the selfsame statue that is being described in the earlier and later passages, so different are the two descriptions. We should further wonder whether Protesilaus' 'correction' of the statue by means of a truer-to-life portrait in the later chapter ('he was handsomer and taller than that') is inspired by Hector's living frame or by the statue from the earlier chapter, which has a lifelike quality all its own. Philostratus' text leads us to suspect that it is the statue from the earlier passage, where presumably it has been assessed from a 'proper' perspective, that provokes the later glowing description of Hector, not the other way around. It is certainly the more elaborate of the two. But then, from what perspective does the later passage give us a description of the same statue? How trustworthy is it?

Whatever the answer, the existence of the statue contradicts the Phoenician's assumption that Hector 'was one hero who never was seen (μηδομοῦ φαίνεσθαι)'. 'I felt badly for Hector', he adds, thinking that Hector 'has vanished (ἀφανής ἐστι) as far as people are concerned, and simply rests in peace' (19.1; tr. modified). But the Phoenician's assumption further tips us off to the way in which heroes are thought to be 'seen' in the present, namely through their shrines and sanctuaries, their statues or their ghostly epiphanies, though (once again) each of these generally implies the other, as in Hector's case: Hector's shrine and statue had been preserved, after all, as has his ghostly spirit (18.6, to be discussed below). As reassuring as the existence of the cult and statue of Hector may be, the incommensurability between Protesilaus' two accounts of the same statue hints at a deeper ambivalence that runs through the *Heroicus*. Statues are and are not valued as a way of accessing figures from the past, and the work cannot seem to make up its mind as to how trustworthy these portraits really are.

For example, if you are like the Vinedresser and lucky enough to be able to commune with a hero directly, you will recognise that such physical replicas are a *pis aller*. The statue of Protesilaus is worn down and altered with age and use. 'But that doesn't concern me; for I can see and talk with (ξύνεμι) Protesilaus himself, and no statue could be more pleasing to me than he is' (9.7; tr. modified). If, on the other hand, you are an epic hero like Protesilaus who is possessed of a 'divine and blessed' soul and has emancipated himself 'from the body', you do not need to commune with gods and gain knowledge of them 'by worshipping statues and mental approximations (ὑπονοίας)

[i.e. ‘imaginings’]²⁷ when you can commune with them directly (ξυνουσίας φανερός [ποιούμενοι])’ (7.3; tr. modified). For the rest of us, statues are there, and they are an indispensable route to recovering the past.

Iconic confusions

The prominence of statues in the *Heroicus* is strategic and deliberate. Paintings and other media are entirely absent from the work,²⁸ which leaves the stage free for the interplay of ecphrasis, statues and *eidōla* of ghosts and heroes. Of these, statues are the reference standard, at least for human contact. Even when ghosts are not explicitly likened to statues, the connection is implied: the cues to visualising heroes are given through the heroes’ palpable and iconic representations in the visible world. Thus heroes, brought back to life, sweat, they are covered with blood, they brandish weapons, they stalk or leap from the ground, their tombs and statues (metonymies for themselves) are glorified or sullied, and they shout or call out and avenge themselves (18.2–6) – all of this attested behaviour for cult statues whenever they spring to life.²⁹ Even the still-living pancratiast, the famed Phoenician named Helix, is familiar to the Phoenician stranger from his several bronze statues (15.1).³⁰

The appeal to statues left and right in the *Heroicus* feels like a nervous tick, especially when the references appear to be gratuitous, as with Helix; or as in the case of the Trojan warrior Euphorbus, who is described as having looked ‘like a statue (ἐοικέναι γὰρ αὐτὸν ἀγάλματι) of long-haired and delicate Apollo’ (42.3); or that of Nestor: ‘I can also present to you Nestor’s statue (ἄγαλμα)’ (26.13); or that of Ajax, whom Protesilaus describes as ‘a statue of warfare’ (ἄγαλμα πολέμου, 35.7). The last two uses of ἄγαλμα are not simply gratuitous; they are semantically weird. But they too have a testimonial value of a sort: they give the descriptions a touch of the real.³¹ The net effect of all this vibrant materiality is a heightened feeling of ξυνουσία, the preferred term in the work for being in the company of presences from the past.³² And the most persistent and durable of these experiences are sought out in the medium of hard stone. While there is something reassuring about the sensation, the need for reassurance is more telling than the reassurance itself: it borders on a compulsion, which leads in turn to referential uncertainties. For exactly who or what is ever being ‘touched’?

27 See Philostr. *V A* 6.19.4 for the term.

28 The sole exception is the passing mention of painters (ζωγράφοι) of giants (8.7) and, perhaps, Paris’ mascara (!) (τὸ ὄμμα ἐγγράπτο, 40.6). Of course, statues were painted and ecphrases of them could be chromatic. See 10.5, describing the purple of Protesilaus’ tunic, equivocally said of his statue and his ghost.

29 See n. 3 above.

30 There is a subtle irony here, make of it what one will: Helix, alive, enjoys a plurality of statues (ἀνδριάντες, as they can only be called), whereas the long-gone epic heroes enjoy only one ἄγαλμα each. On the other hand, the heroes’ statues are described, the mortal remains featureless.

31 Grossardt (2006) ad 35.7: ‘allerdings auch auf einige reale Statuen des Helden angespielt sein dürfte’, citing examples from Pausanias and Strabo. For Ajax as an object already in Homer see Grossardt, *ibid.*; Purves (2015).

32 ξυνουσία: 4.11, 7.1; ξύνεμι: 4.10, 5.1, 9.7 etc.

The uncertainty affects no one more than Protesilaus. Every mention of this hero in the dialogue refers, implicitly or explicitly, to his statue form, which is permanently on display as the dialogue unfolds. In his appearances, which are nothing other than the Vinedresser's descriptions of him, he hovers uncertainly between a seemingly living person (twice resurrected at that, 2.10) who is endowed with bodily attributes (including a 'scar imprinted on his thigh', 12.4), a ghostly apparition (φάσμα, 4.2) 'purged of its body' (7.3), and a concrete *agalma* (9.6, 10.5). A reader can only wonder whether Protesilaus is a revenant or a fantasised projection of his *agalma*.³³

In case this seems far-fetched, we need only recall that Protesilaus has his own complicated relationship to statues in prior literature and myth. The bizarre and erotic dealings between his wife Laodamia and the *agalma* (or *simulacrum*) of her deceased husband Protesilaus is retold in various versions (Hyg. *Fab.* 103–4; Ov. *Her.* 13.102–12; Lucian, *Dial. mort.* 28; Euripides' lost *Protesilaus* was a significant source). Commenting on Il. 2.700, Eustathius spells out a detail that is otherwise implicit in each of these stories, namely that Laodamia preferred consorting (συνουσίαν) with her dead husband's statue over converse (ὁμιλίαν) with the living – not unlike the Vinedresser (1.7). And so, when we are told that Protesilaus likes to be called 'the husband of Laodamia' (τὸν τῆς Λαοδομείας, 2.7), an odd-sounding preference to be sure, the allusion is not only to the Catalogue of Ships, where Laodamia is referenced but not named, but also to this wider mythological background in which Protesilaus' several forms of appearance are conflated: in both contexts he is a statue, a dream and a ghost all in one – in short, a *simulacrum*.³⁴ The same confusions haunt the bulk of the remaining heroes, whose appearances in whatever form are tagged by references to statues, most commonly in the course of an ecphrastic description of their looks. In each case, we have an instance of a longing (*pothos*) for the dead that is 'realis[ed] . . . by means of images'.

While ecphrasis is the primary means by which the past enters into the present in the *Heroicus*, the sheer power of ecphrasis is its undoing. Like an overexposed photograph, it strains to efface itself and to give way to the experience of sensation itself, an impossible desire. Instead, the work's images leave the reader with an experience of their own artifice. Philostratus literalises what ecphrasis seeks to do: he gives it a Pygmalion-like dimensionality by referring descriptions of persons to descriptions of things and then back again. In this, he is re-enacting – staging, really – the age-old competition between

33 The conflation of an *agalma* and the divine presence it embodies, which can be enjoyed through *synousia* with the *agalma*, is captured in a parallel passage from Plotinus (6.9.11): ἃ ἐξελθόντι τοῦ ἀδύτου πάλιν γίνεται πρῶτα μετὰ τὸ ἔνδον θέαμα καὶ τὴν ἐκεῖ συνουσίαν πρὸς οὐκ ἄγαλμα οὐδὲ εἰκόνα, ἀλλὰ αὐτό. Eitrem (1929) 26, who adduces the parallel, fails to recognise that Philostratus is subverting and not endorsing this logic.

34 Ov. *Met.* 13.109 with Reeson (2001) 177. On the erotic attraction of statues, exemplified in this case by Laodamia, see Neer (2010) 50: 'Graveyards and sanctuaries are important sites of such desire [i.e. longing for the dead], and sculpture is its catalyst. Statues of the desirable dead, or the beautiful gods, offer fantasies of reunion and gratification that succeed only in myth. Laodameia, the wife of Protesilaos, is a paradigmatic case . . . This story is one of phantasmatic gratification – the realization of fantasy by means of images.' Steiner (2001) 193 n. 31 notes the confusions around which 'edition' of Protesilaus it is that Laodamia embraces.

the plastic and verbal arts and pretending to plump for images,³⁵ all the while instituting a new version of the Liar Paradox: all texts are false, and here is a verbal image to prove it. Despite their being the only direct conduit to visual reality in the work, texts in the *Heroicus* are indeed demoted for being an inferior conduit to reality as compared with images. The Phoenician stranger reads Homer (6.3) but cannot get enough of him. His boundless appetite for more details than the poems can supply is the pretext for the *Heroicus* as a whole. The same bias accounts for Protesilaus' challenge to Homer's authority as a witness to the past. The truth lies not in texts, as Protesilaus well knows (he reads Homer as closely as any critic does, 7.4), but in rendering what is no longer visible apprehensible through embodied sensation. Visibility alone is not enough. This further explains why painting is so conspicuously absent from the work. Paintings do not include among their affordances the possibility of communing with the heroes of the past in an intimate way, and the same holds for texts. One reads Homer's poems. One wants to touch the cultic statues of Homeric heroes. Try touching Homer's verbal images. Try stopping yourself from touching (or kissing) a statue of Hector.

Of course, some do resist the charms of heroic statues, but woe to those who do. An Assyrian youth desecrated Hector's statue, libelling the hero and even seeking to reidentify the image as that of Achilles (a revision worthy of Dio).³⁶ In revenge for this Zoilean behaviour (Lucian, *Imag.* 2.24), Hector had him violently drowned (18.6). Here we need to ask, was it Hector or his ghost emanating from the statue ('a tall man in armour ... commanding [the river] loudly in a barbarian tongue') who enacted this revenge? Once again, there is no way to tell. In the *Heroicus*, such boundaries are not policed. At the very least, we can see how heroes, too, can identify with their statues. That said, the Vinedresser is not one of those who resist the charms of statues. On the contrary, he is to be counted among those who have 'altered the appearance' (ἐξηλλάχασι τοῦ εἶδους) of Protesilaus' statue with incessant fondling, oiling and festooning with votives and garlands (9.6, 11.3), no doubt as their most enthusiastic representative.³⁷ The statue is situated in his private garden (4.2–4). One suspects that he has appropriated the cult to himself and is now idling in a fantasy world of the past, an eternal 'golden age ... more suited to heroes than to men' (2.1). And whenever Protesilaus comes, as often as 'four or five times a month', 'he is glad to be embraced by me (χαίρει περιβάλλοντι [sc. μοι]), and allows me to kiss him and linger on his neck' (11.2). The question the *Heroicus* invites us to ask is whether what the Vinedresser embraces and kisses is Protesilaus' ghostly apparition or his statue.³⁸ To put the same question in a different form, when the

35 See Schnapp (1994) on 'the psychology of statues' when animated.

36 See Or. 11.106–11.

37 Prayers could be written on wax tablets and affixed to statues, as could coins (Lucian, *Philops.* 20). See Versnel (1981) 32–4, citing *Her.* 9.6, *inter alia*. ἐπισφραγιζόμενοι τὰς εὐχάς (9.6) is without parallel in Greek but quite similar to *uotum in alicuius statuæ femore assignasti* (Apol. 54, quoted by Versnel (1981) 32 n. 123).

38 Compare 19.3 again: Hector's statue 'is so lifelike (ἔμπνοον) that it attracts the observer to touch (θγγεῖν) it'. And compare Lucian, *Philops.* 19, retailing (and mocking) ghost stories about domestic votive statues that climb down

Vinedresser describes Protesilaus' bodily features and looks (his εἶδος, 10.1), is he giving an ecphrasis of Protesilaus' apparition or his statue? There is simply no way to tell.

Consider another example. Implored by the Phoenician to describe his darling hero, the Vinedresser rattles off a list of his attributes, including his fragrance ('sweeter than myrtle'), charming eyes, blond hair 'of moderate length: it seems to overhang his forehead (ἔστι γὰρ ὡς ἐπικρέμασθαι τῷ μετώπῳ) rather than cover it', and 'the shape (ιδέα) of his nose is angular (τετράγωνος), just like a statue's (οἶον ἀγάλματος)' (10.2–3).³⁹ He also happens to 'look most handsome nude, for he is compact [or "well-built"] (εὐπαγής) and light [or "nimble"] (κοῦφος), like the herms one sees at race-courses' (ὥσπερ οἱ δρομικοὶ τῶν ἐρμῶν) (10.4; tr. modified).⁴⁰ The Phoenician chimes in, 'I can see [or "picture"] (εἶδον) the youth, Vinedresser, and I am in awe of your friend. Does he wear armour or something else?' An odd question: exactly what has the Phoenician seen? Odder still is the response, 'He wears a [purple] mantle in the Thessalian fashion, . . . just like this statue over here' (ὥσπερ τὸ ἄγαλμα τοῦτο) (10.5; tr. modified).

Once again, has the Vinedresser been describing, ecphrastically, the statue or the wispy ghost of Protesilaus? The answer may not matter if the ghost resembles a herm and his own cult statue. As we have seen, the ghost, 'when he comes', is not elusive 'like smoke, as in the poets' (11.2). On the contrary, the Vinedresser can throw his arms around him (περιβάλλοντι) and cling to his neck. All of which leads to the next question, or at least suspicion: is Protesilaus anything other than his statue? That is, is the Vinedresser talking himself into a vision of Protesilaus whenever he stands before his image in stone, much the way the Greek army, preparing to leave Troy, 'fell on [Achilles'] tomb and imagined they were embracing Achilles (τὸν Ἀχιλλεῖα ὄοντο περιβάλλειν)' (51.13)? Or is he merely fabricating his experiences for the benefit of his Phoenician guest while both are standing before Protesilaus' statue? Either way, there is no reason not to award to Philostratus the same sly scepticism and playful irony that is shown by Lucian or Dio, given their fundamental resemblances as cultural critics under Rome and as revisionist critics of Homer and his disciples.⁴¹

Further clues or winks to the reader support the possibility that we are in the midst of a fantasy or hoax. Though the Vinedresser ritually feeds his statue-friend, 'I have never encountered him eating, nor have I known him to drink. I do, however, pour him a

from their pedestals at night and then ramble about the house while singing, bathing, horsing around (παίζει δὲ ὄλης τῆς νυκτός) and generally making mischief (21).

39 τετράγωνος is applied to Palamedes' nose at 33.39. He, too, is statuesque, even if he is not explicitly likened to an ἀγάλμα. Grossardt (2006) ad 10.3 compares Philostr. VA 7.42.3, where a τετράγωνος nose is predicated of a living person and compared to the nose of a herm.

40 The mention of 'herms' jars even more than it puzzles (Whitmarsh (2013) 114–15; Miles (2018) 57 n. 42). But that is, I take it, exactly the point of this blunt analogy between Protesilaus as a person and as a lifeless block of marble, as also noted by Whitmarsh (2013) 119.

41 Lucian's *Zeus Tragoedus* features a faculty meeting of the statues of the gods who assemble and then argue about the relative value of their constituent materials (7). Homer comes in for praise (as a poet) and criticism (as a false witness) later in the dialogue (39). Elsewhere, Lucian pokes fun at the conflation of statues, persons and ghosts (*Philops.* 19–21; n. 38 above).

libation [‘Trankopfer’, Grossardt] (σπένδω γε αὐτῶ) in the evening with wine from these Thasian vines, which he himself planted.’ The Vinedresser goes on to list other offices that he performs for his hero: ‘I serve him fruits of the season at noon ... I pour milk into this cooler and say, “Here is the liquid of the season for you to drink.” When I’ve said this I depart, and what I’ve left is eaten and drunk quick as a wink (θῆττον ἢ καταμῦσαι [lit., “quicker than it takes to close my eyes”, i.e. blink])’ (11.9). And we are assured that Protesilaus is ‘someone who likes garlands (φιλοστέφανος γάρ τις) and makes the flowers more beautiful whenever he is among them (ὅποτε περὶ αὐτὰ εἶη)’ (11.3). All of this activity smacks of votive offerings for a cult statue.⁴² But there are other hints that create still more suspicion that Protesilaus is a cult statue that has come to life in the imagination of his most enthusiastic votary.

The Vinedresser is suspiciously vague about the attributes of Protesilaus: ‘I suppose he is somewhere around twenty years old’ (γέγονε μὲν γὰρ ἄμφι τὰ εἴκοσι πού μάλιστα ἔτη, 10.2; tr. modified) and stands ‘perhaps (τάχα) ten cubits tall’ (ca 15 ft; 10.4), a large but not implausible height for an over life-size statue.⁴³ Protesilaus’ athletic movements are traceless: ‘When he runs, one can’t even find his tracks (οὐκ ἂν εὔροις ἴχνος), and his foot makes no impression on the earth’; the ground is left unmarked (ἄσημος, 13.3). The image is loaded. Protesilaus is famous for not leaving footprints on the ground (as at Troy) – or, if one prefers, for having left virtually no trace in Homer – but also for his powerful leaping ability (he could outleap Achilles, or so he boasts, 14.3), a prowess he continues to show: when he runs he becomes airborne (μετέωρος) without touching the ground⁴⁴ ‘as if he were skipping across the waves’ (13.3), again as at Troy – and as portrayed by his statue and especially its base (9.6; Fig. 2). Prowess or futility? His first leap at Troy was his last (νηὸς ἀποθρόσκοντα, Il. 2.702). Literary allusions aside, we are also being encouraged to wonder whether there is a spirit who actually runs around the racetrack at all. Is the hero ἄσημος? Or is he nothing but his own σῆμα (Her. 9.1)?⁴⁵ Further, he boxes with shadows (σκιάς ... γυμνάζεται) and hurls a discus with such force that it disappears above the clouds (13.2). Protesilaus flirts dangerously with invisibility. And as he does, the Vinedresser’s credibility suffers in turn. It increasingly looks like his experiences with Protesilaus are the product of his imagination alone.

42 For statues (and tombs) decked with garlands see Dio Chrys. Or. 12.60; Lucian, Philosp. 19 and the epigraph to this essay; Longus 3.12.3; Her. 53.11; Grossardt (2006) ad 11.3; van Straten (1981) 78.

43 Cult statues reported to have measured the same height are found in Hdt. 9.81.1, Paus. 5.25.12 and Zen. 5.82. Julian, Ep. 79.16–21 Bidez reports having seen a ‘big’ statue of Achilles (without indicating dimensions, except to say that it takes up an entire open-air courtyard and hence must be colossal) and a diminutive Hector (presumably life-size), facing off much like David and Goliath (see Rose (2014) 260). The preserved statues of Protesilaus are considerably smaller. The Metropolitan statue measures ca 2.21 m (7 ft 3 in) from the plinth to the crest of the helmet (Richter (1929) 187 n. 4).

44 This resonates interestingly with 1.2 βαδίσεις δὲ ποῖ μετέωρός τε καὶ ὑπὲρ πάντα τὰ ἐν ποσὶ, a sign of the Phoenician’s dream-like state, which, paradoxically, is censured by the Vinedresser.

45 Conversely (if somewhat illogically), Protesilaus leaves large imprints (ἴχνη) on the racetrack from walking, not from running (13.3). These traces are likewise left to the Phoenician’s imagination.

If this is right, then the Vinedresser can be said to be performing what an ecphrasis allegedly does, by making Protesilaus' statue move in his mind.⁴⁶ When he boasts, 'or I can see and talk with Protesilaus himself, and no statue could be more beautiful [or "dearer to me"] than him [or "that one"] (καὶ οὐδὲν ἄν μοι γένοιτο ἄγαλμα ἐκείνου ἴδιον)' (9.7), we can take him at his word: Protesilaus is that statue, and the statement presents the tautology of the Vinedresser's experience, since the person and the statue are identified in his mind. Such confusions are rife in the *Heroicus*. Living and dead persons exchange properties with statues to such a remarkable extent that the boundaries keeping them apart are in danger of collapsing altogether. A few more examples drawn from Protesilaus' gallery of heroes as retailed by the Vinedresser will help to drive the point home.

We may begin with Nestor, whose ecphrasis is introduced in a provocatively ambiguous way: 'I can also present to you Nestor's statue (ἄγαλμα), for Protesilaus describes (ἐρμηνεύει) him in the following way' (26.13). The language is intentionally strained. Rather than supposing that *agalma* is a near-synonym for 'portrait' or 'description' here,⁴⁷ we should recognise that *agalмата* supply the template for physiognomical descriptions in the *Heroicus*. To 'see' Nestor (or any other historical figure in this work) is to imagine him in statue form.⁴⁸ Such is the idiom of the work. And because *agalma* does double duty in this way, we continually need to ask whether Protesilaus is describing persons or their statues at any given moment. The language that follows in this account of Nestor is decidedly ambiguous: 'He always looks cheerful (φαιδρὸς μὲν ἀεὶ φαίνουτο) and about to smile (καὶ ἐν ὀρμῇ μειδιάματος), with a dignified and symmetrical beard (γενειῶν δὲ σεμνῶς τε καὶ ξυμμέτρως) ... He stands erect (ὀρθόν), and unbowed by age (καὶ μὴ ἠττώμενον ὑπὸ τοῦ γήρωος)' (26.13). For all his animacy, Nestor remains strangely frozen in a pose.

Euphorbus, mentioned above, resembles a statue of Apollo. A brief ecphrasis surrounds the statement in support of the claim (42.3). Ajax was 'a statue of warfare' (35.7) on account of his towering height, his beauty and his strength (35.2; 35.7). Neoptolemus resembles his father, but 'falls short of him just as beautiful men fall short of statues' (52.1), which invites us to see Achilles as a statue, a form he will soon take alongside the statue of Helen in a shrine they share on the Black Sea island of Leuke (τὰ δὲ ἐν αὐτῷ ἀγάλματα Ἀχιλλεύς τε καὶ Ἑλένη ὑπὸ Μοιρῶν ξυναρμοσθέντες, 54.3). Philostratus appears to be going out of his way to create this scenario: Helen's statue is attested nowhere else, and it may be an ad hoc invention,⁴⁹ following the unspoken requirement of the work that heroes should be represented by their statues. Equally to the point, the last remark about

46 This is a hyperbolic version of what recent literary theorists have called 'enactive immersion' or 'metalepsis'. See Allan, de Jong and de Jonge (2017); Grethlein and Huitink (2017).

47 'Bild': Jacobs (1832) 41; 'description': Whitmarsh (2013) 119.

48 Grossardt's translation of ἄγαλμα here is justified: 'Standbild.' We can add Antiochus to the list of heroes who are compared to statues insofar as he 'resembled his father' (26.14).

49 So Grossardt (2006) ad 54.3.

Neoptolemus reads like a general caveat not to ‘believe’ what statues lead us to see, reinforcing the same caution voiced by Protesilaus quoted earlier: statues are rough approximations and mere suggestions of the real thing (7.3) – a curious thought issuing from a hero who is identified by repeated references to his statue form (the cult statue, his nose, the herms) and is otherwise not to be seen, at least not verifiably. But perhaps what we really should be on our guard against is not statues *per se* but the way they are read and interpreted. Each instance of a statue’s description in the *Heroicus* is no more than a verbal exegesis, governed explicitly or implicitly by the verb ἐρμηνεύειν.⁵⁰ Recall how in the case of Hector we have two competing accounts of the selfsame statue that appear to cancel each other out. And recall too how the statue of Protesilaus is said to have been altered in its appearances as a result of overuse (9.6). One instance of this overuse, beyond anointing with oil, draping with dedicatory wreaths and statue-hugging, is overreading. The Vinedresser excels in all these practices.

Anti-ecphrasis

The *Heroicus* works hard to give something like an ecphrastic account of the epic past. That is, it takes its cues from images – snapshots – of the past and, in seeking to make these vivid and lively in the present, rotates them into moving images – stories – about the heroes it commemorates. But in doing so, the *Heroicus* undercuts the effects it achieves, in part simply by drawing attention to the instabilities – the uncertainties and excessiveness – of its own imaginative enterprise. The work is at once destructive, playful and sophistic. This is widely recognised.⁵¹ Less well recognised is the fact that the *Heroicus* is to a surprising degree anti-ecphrastic by design: it pulls against its own visual tendencies by casting them in doubt at every turn. In order to see how deeply implanted this tendency of the work is, we need to go back to the scenario that sets the dialogue in motion, namely the dreamwork of the Phoenician, which functions as a virtual allegory for the dialogue as a whole. And because the dream belongs to the Phoenician stranger, it is only logical that we should begin by assessing his role and status.

Given the elaborate framework of the dream-setting, exactly who or what shall we say the Phoenician is? A stranger (ξένος) from foreign parts who happens to resemble an Ionian Greek (the Vinedresser mistakes him for an Ionian, given his Ionian attire, and is surprised to learn that this way of dressing ‘is native (ἐπιχώριον) to us Phoenicians also’, 1.1), the Phoenician, I propose, is not ‘really’ a Phoenician or a non-Greek outsider, but is rather a figure for anyone who, seduced by the poems’ descriptive vividness (*enargeia*) and the brilliant attractions of the heroic past, seeks direct contact with the epic heroes and compulsively identifies with Homer and his poems. The Phoenician’s costume is a

⁵⁰ Examples of the same ambiguity are found at *Her.* 25.7, 26.13, 26.15 and 33.38, and elsewhere in Philostratus’ corpus. See Grossardt (2006) ad 2.2 and 25.7 for further examples.

⁵¹ See e.g. Bowie (1994) 184–7; Borg (2004) 42, 51–2; Kim (2010) 196–7; 214; Whitmarsh (2013); Borg (2014) 254.

dead giveaway of this passion, just as the name of Plato's rhapsode Ion is a transparent clue to the latter's own identifications.⁵² To identify with the past in this way is to accept one's own complex status as both a native and a stranger (for the past is a foreign country to which we somehow belong and somehow do not), to don Ionian garb (metaphorically speaking) and to go native (or at least to try).

That said, the greatest instance of this kind of impassioned yearning appears on the side of the Greeks themselves. There is much that is liminal in this work,⁵³ but nothing is more liminal or troubling than the space that intervenes between the Greeks and themselves whenever they confront the gap that separates their present and their past. And so, while in literal terms the Phoenician is a Hellenised foreigner,⁵⁴ from another angle he represents a foreignised Hellene, or better yet, an allegorical Greek, a Greek who yearns for a deep *synousia* with his past, however estranged that past may be, and however much a *xenos* he is to it.⁵⁵ He knows far too much about Homer to be anything else, having been reared on the Homeric epics and on other Greek myths from childhood (7.10). Uncannily strange yet familiar, the Phoenician's presence is meant to disturb a Greek reader.⁵⁶ Undeniably alien, but then again not quite fully foreign, he figures the Greeks' own strangeness to themselves.⁵⁷ Access to the remote past comes about in no other way: to 'feel classical' one must first be taught how to do so, which means learning to appreciate as deeply proximate and familiar that which is historically alien, and then to live in the precarious gap between now and then.⁵⁸

But while the Phoenician exemplifies the posture of a Greek in the face of the Homeric past, that posture is shown to be complex and somewhat contorted. He wants to insert himself almost physically into the Homeric stories. His dream points to this and to the reverse operation as well, namely the insertion of the grand past into the narrow confines of the much smaller contemporary present. Symptomatically, the more he hears about the Greek warriors who took part in the expedition against Troy, the more he feels as if he

52 Ion is all but named in the opening words of Philostratus' dialogue: Ἴων ὁ ξένος ἢ πόθεν; The stranger's reactions to Homer (enthusiasm, possession (κατέσχημαι, 23.2), the sensation of 'being there') are identical to Ion's. Cf. Plato, *Ion* 536d5–6: ἐγὼ κατεχόμενος καὶ μαινόμενος Ὅμηρον ἐπαίνω. See n. 59 below. On Plato's general presence in the dialogue see Whitmarsh (2013) 104 with n. 17 for secondary literature.

53 Whitmarsh (2013), esp. 111 and 122.

54 For all his signs of assimilation to Greek culture, he remains a stranger in the eyes of the Vinedresser (1.3: 'You Phoenicians'), as is only to be expected (Lucian, *Deor. conc.* 4: Dionysus, whose grandfather on his mother's side was a Syrophoenician (Συροφονικὸς), is 'not even Greek'; Pausanias, n. 57 below), and in the eyes of contemporary scholars (Aitken (2004); Berenson Maclean (2004); Whitmarsh (2004); Whitmarsh (2013) 109–12).

55 Dio's Borysthenian adventure (*Or.* 36) illustrates how this estrangement from the epic past can border on revulsion.

56 Similarly, Whitmarsh (2004) 249. On the sometimes troubled relationship between Greeks and Phoenicians in the imperial era see Kaldellis (2019).

57 For a close and I believe overlooked parallel and arguably a source see Pausanias' anecdote (7.23.5–8) about a Phoenician stranger who wanders into the sanctuary of Aesculapius near Aegium and falls into a discussion with the periegete about Greek and Phoenician religion very like that which frames the *Heroicus*. On Pausanias as a possible influence on Philostratus in other areas see Dickie (1997) 15–20; Alcock, Cherry and Elsner (2001) 30, 49–50, 254.

58 Porter (2006).

were himself one of them (ἡγοῦμαι δὲ καὶ τῶν ἐπὶ Τροίαν ἐστρατευκότων εἶς εἶναι), so ‘possessed’ is he (τοσοῦτον κατέσχημαι) by their stories (23.2). Homer appears to have made the same kind of identification; he does not behave like a poet but imagines that he is a ‘fellow soldier’ (συστρατιωτής) enjoying immediate *xynousia* with the Greeks (οὐχ ὡς ὑποτιθέμενον ἀλλ’ αὐτὸν ξυγγεγονότα τοῖς Ἀχαιοῖς ἐν Τροίᾳ, 27.12).⁵⁹ But the Phoenician also resists the very thing he seeks. Discretion and common sense get the better of him, at least at first, and perhaps fear too, for he recognises that his project of recovery is doomed to fail – his dream is a harbinger of nothing good. Hence the initial reluctance of the Phoenician to believe in the myths of Homer, for, as he says, ‘I’ve never met anyone who was an eyewitness to them [sc. the events told in myths] (οὐδενὶ πω ἑωρακότι αὐτὰ ξυγγέγονα), but rather one says he heard it from someone else (ἐτέρου ἀκηκοέναι), another says he imagined it so (ὁ δὲ οἶσθαι), and still another is excited by some poet (τὸν δὲ ποιητῆς ἐπαίρει)’ (7.9).

In voicing these doubts, the Phoenician is not showing his true colours as a barbarian. On the contrary, he is once again adopting a perfectly tried and true Greek posture. Scepticism towards myth and the insistence on first-hand verification of legend were deeply ingrained in the Homeric tradition from Xenophanes to Herodotus, Thucydides, Hellanicus, Antisthenes, Zoilus and Palaephatus (*Incredible Tales* (Περὶ ἀπίστων)), and from there into the imperial era. Dio, Lucian and Philostratus all echo this tradition, often by quoting from it.⁶⁰ But if doubting myth is a natively Greek attainment, so is half-hearted scepticism. Told that Protesilaus’ warrior companions continue to haunt the battlefields at Troy, the Phoenician replies, in good Greek fashion, ‘By Athena, . . . that I cannot believe (ἀπιστῶ, νῆ τὴν Ἀθηνῶν) – although I wish it were so’ (3.1), and he invites the Vinedresser to convince him otherwise. The Phoenician, in other words, embodies the conflicted conscience of a Greek. How should one behave towards the epic past? How close to it should one get? These are the central questions of the dialogue, and the real source of its engagement with ‘Greekness’ under Rome.

As the Phoenician edges towards credulity, the dialogue edges further away from rewarding credulity. Though structured as a revelation, even as a ‘mystical revelation’, the work reveals nothing, just as the Phoenician sees nothing at all, at least not at first hand.⁶¹ The Vinedresser is himself cloaked in disguise, and misleadingly so.⁶² How secure is the evidence of the eyes, in fact? And how trustworthy a witness is the

59 Cf. Pl. Ion 535b–d for the same illusion (παρὰ τοῖς πρῶγμασιν οἰεταὶ σου εἶναι ἡ ψυχή οἷς λέγεις ἐνθουσιάζουσα;), owing to the attractions of Homeric *enargeia* (c4). The template is in fact Homer himself, who is both remote from and proximate to what he describes. See Porter (2021) 133–5.

60 Cf. Dio Chrys. Or. 11.1–10 and 92; Lucian, Philops. 1–2, 28 (ἀπιστεῖν), and *passim*. On the relevance of Herodotus and Thucydides see Kim (2010) and Whitmarsh (2013); on Palaephatus see Kim (2010) and Hunter (2016).

61 Elsner (2009) 14: Philostratus ‘explodes letter-writing, re-invents ephrasis, takes *Homerkritik* into areas of mystic revelation from which it could hardly recover’. Similarly, Platt (2011) 249. ‘Could hardly recover’ seems an overstatement. Posidonius jeeringly labelled Aristarchus a mantis for confusing scholarship with clairvoyance (Ath. 16.634d).

62 He is an urban Greek pretending to be a rustic, that is, a cultural ‘transvestite’ (Whitmarsh (2013) 113).

Vinedresser?⁶³ Is he manipulating the naive stranger?⁶⁴ Quite possibly, though he may be manipulating himself as well. Protesilaus, who never set foot on Troy (12.1; 12.4), makes for a shabby eyewitness, and the work revels in this incongruity, as does Protesilaus, albeit subtly. His revisions of Homer are all countervisions, based on claims of fact that are not reported, noticed or wanted by Homer. Turning the tables on Homer, Protesilaus takes a perverse pleasure in pointing out what Homer never saw and in rejecting what Homer claims to have seen.

A case in point is Homer's most famous and most visually riveting ecphrasis, the Shield of Achilles. Challenging Homer's pictures of Achilles' armour (it is 'not as Homer describes it'), Protesilaus strips the shield of all its ecphrastic details – 'cities and stars, wars, farming, marriages' – by abolishing this object from the story of Troy. Achilles had only *one* set of armour, nor did Patroclus wear it as he went out to meet Hector in battle: 'Those divine arms were an invention of Homer', as were all their decorative elements. 'Meanwhile, the armour that Achilles did own 'was made without pictures and simply (ἄσημα καὶ σῶφρονα)' (47.2–5), much the way Protesilaus' high-speed circuits around the running course leave no trace (ἄσημος, 13.3). Having eviscerated Homer, Protesilaus offers instead a rationalisation for this mistake, following a demythicising and deflationary pattern that is used elsewhere by both Protesilaus and the Vinedresser and that falls in line with traditional rationalisations of Homer. Because the armour refracted the sunlight and produced a 'rainbow' effect (ἶρις), it appeared to 'surpass human skill'. Hephaestus was just a poeticism (47.5).⁶⁵ By expunging (ἐξαίρησθω, 25.12; διαγράφει, 48.11) these and other passages from Homer (a procedure directly modelled after Plato and not only after the scholia)⁶⁶ and filling the holes with revisionary content, or simply leaving them without content at all, Protesilaus is 'de-ecphrasing' Homer.⁶⁷

The emphatic insistence that Helen was nowhere to be seen at Troy (23.28, 25.10 and 12; 54.4; cf. 24.2 for a novel rationalisation) metapoetically names this same strategy. In Protesilaus' controversial reading, which builds on the revisionist accounts of Stesichorus and Herodotus, Helen is an empty blank and a blind spot in Homer's narrative, the central axis around which it futilely turns, not all that differently from Protesilaus in the *Heroicus*, who is a phantom in his own right. Absent from Homer, she is invisible twice over, for the details of her physical appearance are nowhere described by Homer (a

63 For doubts see Grossardt (2006) 1.74–83 and ad 43.16; Kim (2010) 210–11; Whitmarsh (2013).

64 As noticed by Rusten in Rusten and König (2014) 38–45.

65 In case there are any doubts, Philostratus knows better: 'Is this [description] not the height of vividness?' (*Imag.* 10.17), said of a painting based on Homer's Shield.

66 Republic 3 is full of deletions and rejections of Homer's text (athetesis), done in the language of an Alexandrian editor (e.g. Σ II. 10.397–9b τελέως ἐξελεῖν; 19.365–8a διαγραφέντων αὐτῶν; 21.195b; Σ Ar. Plut. 797; Ath. 4.181c), as at 387d1 (ἐξαίρησομεν) and 387b1 (διαγράφομεν). Her. 48.11 is actually quoting this last passage from the Republic. I discuss Plato's practice and its impact on the scholia in 'Homer between rhetoric and philosophy', paper presented at the Department of Classics, New York University, May 2017.

67 Zenodotus famously athetised the Shield but did not abolish it. He merely pared it down to a bare mention (Σ II. 18.483a). Protesilaus' athetesis is differently motivated but also more extreme than Zenodotus'.

notorious deficiency); she is simply said to be ‘of the white arms’, ‘shining among women’ or ‘lovely-haired’, epithets she shares with other women. Nor does Protesilaus rush to fill in that particular gap. Instead, he leaves it to burn like an ecphrastic hole in Homer’s poetry. At the other extreme, the sheer surplus of eidolic images of heroes by itself creates a visual blur: ‘Although spirits (εἶδωλα) have been seen [at Troy], it’s not yet clear to which hero each of them belongs, since different ones appear at different times, with variations in appearance, age and armour’ (21.1) – much like light diffracted in a rainbow pattern, which creates a different kind of visual blur – one achieved by *overexposure*.⁶⁸

Finally, the work ends on a note of ineffability, refusing to speak at all: ‘But since you have lavished on me stories of heroes, I won’t ask you any more how [Protesilaus] came back to life, since you say that he considers this off-limits and a forbidden topic (ἐπειδὴ ἀβεβήλω τε καὶ ἀπορρήτω φῆς αὐτὸν χρῆσθαι τούτῳ τῷ λόγῳ)’ (58.2). But this is not news. We were warned about Protesilaus’ reticence at the outset of the work: ‘How he came back again after that [i.e. after his first resurrection and return to Hades] he hasn’t told me, although I’ve long desired to know it – he claims to be keeping a secret of the Fates (Μοιρῶν τι ἀπόρρητον, ὡς φησι, κρύπτων)’ (2.11; cf. 2.9). The reference to the *aporrhēton* marks a first and then final refusal of the ecphrastic medium itself. The religious language is but a cloak.⁶⁹

In undermining the capacity of ecphrasis from within, this strategy, which is shared by the invisible narrator of the work, recalls the ancient appreciation of ecphrastic limits: ecphrasis points to its own defections; it is intrinsically an impossible genre. But the criticism of Homer rests on one further paradox: his poetry, while famously vivid, is notoriously vague in its details. It conveys the impression that it is delivering crystal-clear images, but it does so only by a kind of legerdemain. Dio is explicit about this fact in his twenty-first *Oration*, where he registers a frustration with the absence of Instagram-like portraits of the majority of the epic heroes and heroines, who are known for their beauty but otherwise remain visual ciphers (17).⁷⁰ Unsurprisingly, the Homeric scholia, for all their enthusiasm about the poems’ *enargeia* (which is not to be confused with visual detail),⁷¹ show next to no interest in ecphrasis at all.⁷² They have very little material to work with. And when ancient Homeric scholars try to picture, say, the cup of Nestor or other objects, whether manmade or natural, they get tangled up in heated debates over the details while finally agreeing on nothing.⁷³

68 With τὰ μὲν ὀρώμενα εἶδωλα οὐπω δῆλα ὅτου ἕκαστον· πολλὰ γὰρ καὶ ἄλλοτε ἄλλα, διαλλάττει δὲ ἀλλήλων καὶ ἰδέα καὶ ἡλικία καὶ ὄπλοις (21.1) compare τὰ δὲ ὄπλα κατεσκευάσθαι μὲν ἄσημα καὶ σόφρονα, συγκεκράσθαι δὲ αὐτοῖς ποικίλιμα ὕλης, μεθιστάμενον ἐς ἀνγὰς ἄλλοτε ἄλλας, ὅσας ἡ ἴρις (47.5).

69 Platt (2011) 249 notes the religious overtones of the later passage. But Protesilaus is playing a conventional literary game, as he does with Homer’s parentage and birthplace (44.5 σιωπάται ταῦτα).

70 In *Or.* 11.129, Dio complains that Homer’s poetry is ‘obscure and vague’ (ἄκριτον καὶ ἀσαφές’).

71 Grethlein and Huitink (2017) 8–10; cf. μὴ τελέως, etc. in *Ael. Theon Prog.* 119.31–5 Patillon.

72 A TLG search of the Homeric scholia produces thirteen instances of ἐκφρασι- words (nouns and verbs).

73 Gaunt (2017) usefully collects the evidence for Nestor’s cup. The Greek and Trojan walls are another example (Porter (2011)).

Homer quite simply cannot be pictured, at least not with any degree of confidence or coherence, and at times not at all.⁷⁴ Ancient geographers agreed. Strabo's complaint about Homeric topography is exemplary: 'Homer ... leaves us to guess about most things' (εἰκόλεῖν περὶ τῶν πλείστων παρέχων, 13.1.1). The paradox of Homer is that he suggests visual clarity without affording it. Philostratus does much the same, with one crucial difference: his work is about this gap.⁷⁵ We could say that Philostratus is providing a much-wanted imaginative supplement to Homer. The alternative, which is more plausible given the way the *Heroicus* unfolds, is that he is bringing out what ancient readers like Dio and Strabo already knew and is commenting on this dissatisfaction. But as is so often the case in revisions of Homer, Philostratus' primary target is not Homer, but Homer's readers – either those who naively seek to recover a fully embodied and intimate experience of Homer, or those who, like himself, pretend to know how to deliver this impossible fantasy.

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74 The Shield of Achilles is a notoriously elusive object. See Fittschen (1973); Squire (2013), esp. 158–9.

75 The two Homeric poems do something quite similar by treating the capture of Troy as an absent presence, i.e. as an ephrastic hole. The effect is calculated to lure and frustrate the listener. See Dio Chrys. *Or.* 11.29 etc.; Porter (2021) 149–50, 238 n. 39.

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