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The Agonies of the Creator: Ekphrasis and Authorial Anxiety in Virgil's *Aeneid*

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In Virgil's Aeneid, while there is no discussion of literary texts in Aeneas's world, there are many mentions to works of art that tell a story. By reading these ekphrases and the ways that characters respond to the works of visual narrative art they describe as allegories for how audiences receive and interpret literary works, it is possible to examine Virgil's opinions on literature. This paper will examine these ekphrases to argue that the depictions of art in the Aeneid and particularly the issues of how different characters misinterpret, fail to understand, or ignore the art altogether allow Virgil to describe the anxieties he had as an author about the potential problems he might face in publishing a written narrative.

Fearing the loss of his fleet and mourning the loss of his city, Aeneas, shrouded in mist, looks on the sculpted tale of the fall of Troy and weeps. Within Virgil's *Aeneid* there are three such lengthy examples of *ekphrasis*, the literary representation of visual art, that use delicate verse and take up a lengthy amount of space. Within the *Aeneid*, Virgil's characters tell stories to one another and reference storytelling, but there is no depiction of written literature, which is Virgil's own mode of artistic expression. However, the three large *ekphrases* within the *Aeneid* all depict works of narrative art. I will demonstrate that not only were these sections of *ekphrasis* intentionally crafted to serve the purposes of developing character and alluding to Homer, but that they also act as substitutes for discussions of written literature that still allow Virgil to comment on the narrative arts with a specific emphasis on his own anxieties as a poet and author. These anxieties are not a matter of conjecture; Virgil fought the publication of what would become considered his seminal work, and in his will he requested that all copies be burned upon his death.¹ While what exactly Virgil felt was unfinished about the *Aeneid* remains unknown, his refusal to allow it to be published shows an anxiety over releasing his work for

¹ Aelius Donatus, *Life of Virgil*, trans. David Scott Wilson-Okamura, 37-39.

public consumption.

This paper uses Robert Fitzgerald's translation of the *Aeneid*² and Jaś Elsner's discussion of *ekphrasis*,³ the latter of which draws on John Dryden's translation of the *Aeneid*. The issues of working in translation can at times be severe; for example, Dryden chose to use heroic couplets for his translation, a stylistic choice that required him to adhere to a particular meter and rhyme scheme. This choice by necessity may not have permitted Dryden to use the words most faithful to the poem's original meaning. As a result, while Elsner paraphrases the scene in the beginning of Book 6 wherein Aeneas and his companions pass over Daedalus's carvings on the gold doors of Apollo's temple as "Aeneas and his companions famously 'reading through with their eyes' ... until the priestess calls them away,"⁴ Fitzgerald translates that section as saying that Aeneas and his companions "[w]ould have passed on and gazed and read" the doors' images "had not Achates... [r]eturned now with the priestess of Apollo."⁵ Where translations disagree, Fitzgerald's translation has been given primacy for its greater accuracy.

Virgil was widely read in Greek texts, and one of his greatest influences on the subject of literature was Aristotle. In his *Poetics*, Aristotle makes note of the unities of time and action, stating that an epic should focus on a single action in time; in support of this idea, Aristotle notes that Homer's *Iliad* "did not even try to treat the war as a whole, although it does have a beginning and an end,"⁶ and that "when he composed the *Odyssey* he did not include everything which happened to Odysseus."⁷ For example, Aristotle mentions that although the story of Odysseus's scar is important, the event of his wounding is not, and thus Homer was right to exclude it. Because the depiction of Achilles' shield is "emblematic of the story of the *Iliad* itself, so that the shield is a multilayered image of the poem,

² Virgil, *The Aeneid*, translated and edited by Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Random House, 1983).

³ Jaś Elsner, *Roman Eyes: Visuality & Subjectivity in Art & Text* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2007).

⁴ Elsner, 82.

⁵ Virgil, 6.52.

⁶ Aristotle, *Poetics*, translated and edited by Malcolm Heath (London: Penguin Books, 1996), 23.

⁷ Aristotle, 51a.

created by and embedded within the poem,”⁸ it serves as one of several “actions,” in the Aristotelian sense, that Homer adds to his poem without these actions being extraneous to the plot. Similarly, Homer uses Odysseus’s four-book speech both to narrate a stretch of time that would be impossible to convey in an epic considering Odysseus’s lengthy stay with Circe and Calypso, and also to provide additional characterization for Odysseus without intruding too far on the plot during this narration. Virgil uses these same concepts, particularly *ekphrasis*, to similarly bend Aristotle’s rules while still including information that he wants to convey.

When Aeneas arrives in Carthage, he enters the grand temple to Juno. Along the edge of the roof of the temple are metopes, sections carved to express important ideas to the temple’s patrons. The subjects of these metopes can take the form of a narrative describing a historical or mythological event. The metopes in the temple that Virgil describes are used to tell the story of the Trojan War, the events of which take place before the events of Aeneas’s story of how he fled the sacked city. The wall art is a parallel to Demodocus’s oration in the *Odyssey*, with the *Aeneid* substituting temple bas-reliefs for Demodocus’s words. Virgil takes this thread up again with the description of Aeneas’s shield, on which is “wrought the future story of Italy, / The triumphs of the Romans.”⁹ Describing this shield allows Virgil to describe events that do not fall within the unity of time maintained in the *Aeneid* but which are nonetheless crucial to convey. Virgil is comfortable applying the Homeric tropes he co-opts to different forms and repurposing them to fit his narrative needs. Moreover, as Michael C. J. Putnam argues, this scene and its depiction of Achilles are a mirror to Aeneas, anticipating the end of the *Aeneid*. By the end of the poem Aeneas “[f]aces a Turnus who is both Priam, as he stretches his hands forth to meet Achilles in prayer, and Hector, as he prepares to meet his doom.”¹⁰ Virgil is willing to make a reference with this

⁸ James A. Francis, “Metal Maidens, Achilles’ Shield, and Pandora: The Beginnings of ‘Ekphrasis,’” *American Journal of Philology* 130.1 (2009): 12, retrieved from Project Muse on 6 December 2013.

⁹ Virgil, 8.850.

¹⁰ Michael C. J. Putnam, “Dido’s Murals and Virgilian Ekphrasis,” *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*, Vol. 98. (1998): 259.

level of subtlety between the first and last books of the *Aeneid*. The *ekphrasis* of Juno's temple references Homer's use of Demodocus to move Odysseus to tears, and it also provides additional narrative information outside the restraints of the unity of action to which Virgil adheres. While Homeric epics contain information about events that occur outside of the action of the story, the inclusion of this information in the narrative occurs within the bounds of conversation or reminiscence. The *Aeneid*'s delivery of extra information in this way preserves the unity of time that Aristotle outlines in a similar method to what Homer uses.

In addition to the works of Aristotle, the corpuses of ancient Greek and Roman writing were rich in discussions and criticism of art. Classical art criticism focused on vastly different concepts than those of contemporary art criticism. In the earliest periods artists were mostly concerned with questions of style, composition, and form. Philosophers, as demonstrated in Plato's dialogues, were concerned much less with these questions and instead focused on the idea of the arts as a form of *mimesis* and artwork's relation to reality, or how people "could be affected by exposure to the arts."¹¹ Thus, these philosophers and art critics believed that, "particularly in the case of the young, society should harness and control the arts as an educational force."¹² Jerry Jordan Pollitt notes that by the time Cicero was writing treatises, "someone [had] hit upon the idea of comparing specific orators with specific sculptors and painters[,] thereby creating a comparative canon."¹³ This approach brought the idea of literature and art as comparative fields to the Roman consciousness, especially because Cicero, the most influential writer of the empire in that time, introduced this perspective. However, literature and art share a feature that literature and oral storytelling do not. Unlike an orated poem or story, which has an author or speaker present to lend gesture and emphasis to the words, after an artist completes a work of visual art he or she must move on, unable to add, remove, or emphasize any part of it. In this way, visual art mirrors

¹¹ Jerry Jordan Pollitt, *The Ancient View of Greek Art: Criticism, History, and Terminology* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 31.

¹² Pollitt, 31.

¹³ Pollitt, 60.

literature, as when a written poem is published, the poet no longer has control over how it is interpreted and received by its audience. As Virgil was notoriously reluctant to publish the *Aeneid*, we can assume that this was also a concern for him. Using his characters' readings or misinterpretations of the subjects of his *ekphrases* is Virgil's way of speaking through them on the subjects in which he was invested. Therefore, using the *ekphrases* in the *Aeneid* as sites of interpretation can provide insight into Virgil's thoughts on literature.

The first scene of the *Aeneid*, which takes place in the temple of Juno in Carthage, provides a particularly glaring example of an anxiety Virgil may have had. It is hard to ignore "that the murals decorate an edifice exalting the goddess who, as the poem's opening lines remind us, is the arch-enemy of the Trojans."¹⁴ Carthage was, furthermore, a rival to Rome. Aeneas is moved by these images, saying to his companion, "what region of the earth, Achates, / Is not full of the story of our sorrow? Look, here is Priam. Even so far away / Great valor has due honor; they weep here / For how the world goes."¹⁵ For an artist crafting devotional works to Juno, a notably capricious deity who easily develops and holds grudges, creating a work that sympathizes with the hated Trojans would be a suicidal endeavor. Within Carthage there is no evidence of discontent or divine wrath; on the contrary, the city is a bustling center of industry and flourishing enterprise, and the harmony with which the citizens work is a symbol of Dido's skill and talents as a ruler. The implication, then, is that Aeneas misinterprets the art in the temple due to his sorrow at the loss of his home city of Troy. A misinterpretation such as this shows that Virgil is aware that an audience may misinterpret a work's meaning based on personal experiences, which may then point to an anxiety he had about the possible misinterpretation of the *Aeneid*.

As aforementioned, Greco-Roman literary and artistic criticism in the time of Virgil were mostly concerned with the mechanical aspects of style, diction, and form. According to Pollitt's encyclopedia of Greek terms for art criticism, the most pressing concern to classical artists was that of the verisimilitude

¹⁴ Putnam, 247.

¹⁵ Virgil, 1.625.

of the artistic representation. Pollitt mentions the often-cited argument “that the ancient Greeks did not have a word for what we now call ‘art’ and therefore presumably did not have the conception of what the word *art* expresses.”¹⁶ The word used was *technē*, a complicated concept that Pollitt cautiously defines as “[o]rganized knowledge and procedure applied for the purpose of producing a specific preconceived result.”¹⁷ There is even less data about the concept of a proper way to interpret art as having a meaning, rather than as a method of attaining mental health. However, despite the lack of data, I disagree with the notion that Greeks did not interpret a meaning from art, or that the primary goal of art was to mimic reality. The specific result is not always simply a close mimetic copy of the original, and Aristotle’s *Poetics* involves a discussion of what provides the greatest emotional effect on the reader or playgoer. Virgil’s worry seems to have been that art in general—and, by extension, the *Aeneid*—can be received incorrectly; the fact that Aeneas’s bias and personal experiences lead him to interpret the sculptures in a certain egocentric way reflects this anxiety. Yet Juno and the people of Carthage shed no tears on behalf of the Trojans, of course. Additionally, it is possible that Aeneas’s misinterpretation of the reliefs on the temple and its intent is meant by Virgil to demonstrate deficiency in the talent of the artist, who may have been unable to properly craft his work well enough to preclude poor interpretations; if this is the case, this idea would reflect Virgil’s concerns that his own skill would be similarly insufficient to ensure that the messages he wanted to convey in the *Aeneid* would be received correctly. This is also the only *ekphrasis* in the *Aeneid* in which the artist is anonymous, and the use of an anonymous artist could demonstrate another anxiety on Virgil’s part: that his name and connection to his masterpieces would fade over time, and this separation from his work would further allow later readers to interpret his works in a way that would flatter themselves or reflect their own experiences instead of in the way that Virgil meant for his work to be interpreted.

The final lengthy *ekphrasis* in the *Aeneid*, which describes the artwork that decorates Aeneas’s

¹⁶ Pollitt, 32.

¹⁷ Pollitt, 32.

shield, is noteworthy particularly for its length and for the effort taken to express its beauty. The description of Aeneas's shield references Homer's description of Achilles' shield, both of which were made by the Greco-Roman god of fire and forging, whom the Greeks called Hephaestus and the Romans called Vulcan. As does Homer with Achilles' shield, Virgil devotes much verse to describing the skillful craftsmanship of Aeneas's shield, narrating the story it depicts, and giving it qualities of movement and sound so vivid that it could only exist in the imagination and in literature, never in reality. He makes use of paradox, describing that on the "mid-shield, / The pictured sea flowed surging, all of gold, / As whitecaps foamed on the blue waves."¹⁸ Of course the ocean cannot be gold and blue at the same time, but such is Vulcan's skill that the images in gold are seen as though in color. Throughout the *ekphrasis* there is repeated mention of Vulcan as the shield's creator and the shield as an object created and crafted. Virgil is invested in reminding the reader of the artificial nature of the object and makes use of the unique qualities of writing. There is no reason that Virgil cannot say that the shield is gold, blue, white, red, and silver all at the same time, or that it shows people speaking different languages, or that it shows movement. Virgil demonstrates that he can describe with beauty things that not only could never exist, but which also defy imagination. However, even the work of Vulcan himself is not immune to the problems that Virgil feared would vex his poem. When presented with a beautiful, impossible work of art crafted by the god of fire and metalworking himself, Aeneas, "knowing nothing of the events themselves, / ... felt joy in their pictures, taking up / Upon his shoulder all the destined acts / And fame of his descendants."¹⁹ In comparison to the dramatic, tearful reaction that Aeneas has in Juno's temple, his only emotional response to the events shown on this incomparable masterpiece is that he "felt joy in their pictures." To Virgil, this muted reaction can be seen as a lack of appreciation for the creator's mastery due to Aeneas's ignorance of and lack of connection to the events depicted. Because Aeneas does not have the same emotional connection to the future of Rome that he has to the sack of Troy, his

¹⁸ Virgil, 8.908.

¹⁹ Virgil, 8.989.

ability to connect with these events on a visceral level is limited; he is thus unable to enjoy the images to the same extent that Virgil's Roman audience was intended to appreciate them.

To make an analogy, even if Virgil were to refine his work to the same level of perfection that Vulcan achieved when crafting Aeneas's shield, it would not ensure that contemporary or later audiences would properly understand and appreciate his work because of their potential ignorance of the historical context surrounding the poem. Virgil's anxiety about this possible fate of his work is easily understandable and was also somewhat prophetic. When Aeneas is in the underworld, Anchises shows him the Roman heroes yet to be born, which allows Virgil to heap praise on contemporary Roman figures without straying outside of the unity of time to which he has chosen to restrict himself. However, there is a potential moment of confusion to a modern reader in this account: "See there, how Marcellus comes / With spoils of the commander that he killed,"²⁰ Anchises says, but then, referring to a different figure, says with grief, "Child of our mourning, if only in some way / You could break through your bitter fate. For you / Will be Marcellus."²¹ With two Romans both named Marcellus, a reader has to be aware of the fame of the men and the tragedy concerning the younger Marcellus's death in order to fully understand that section of the narrative. While the average modern reader is not the *Aeneid*'s intended audience, Virgil was basing his epic on texts centuries older, so the thought of an enduring legacy would not have been alien to him. This particular reference did not have such a legacy, as the younger Marcellus's death during the writing of the *Aeneid* does not survive in the popular imagination.

The second *ekphrasis* that appears in the *Aeneid* is the most problematic one, narratologically speaking. In *Narrate and Describe: The Problem of Ekphrasis*, Don P. Fowler outlines a hierarchy of *ekphrasis* from a narratological point of view: the narrator or character describes art, the reader perceives it, and the author, who is writing to the audience on a metatextual level, sets it all in motion. This hierarchy can be seen most clearly in the *ekphrasis* of Juno's temple, in which a craftsman creates

²⁰ Virgil, 6.1157.

²¹ Virgil, 6.1197.

art for the Carthaginians, Aeneas and the narrator describe and interpret the art for the reader, and Virgil creates the situation for the audience. The same concept is present in a more subtle way for the *ekphrasis* concerning Aeneas's shield, with Vulcan as the artist making a shield for Aeneas, Virgil-as-narrator describing the shield, and Virgil-as-poet using it as an overt reference to Homer for his audience. This convention, however, is subverted in the *ekphrasis* of Daedalus's doors. It is only for Apollo that Daedalus creates this temple, and Apollo does not need a mortal's craft to demonstrate his power. Furthermore, the *ekphrasis* of Daedalus's temple doors is not an obvious reference to previous epics by Homer, and it does not provide information for a character's class, means, or character; as such, it pauses the action to seemingly narrate a sculpture seen by no one that depicts events largely irrelevant to the poem's plot. Yet even though this *ekphrasis* does not advance the plot, it is invaluable for the insight it provides into Virgil's anxieties.

Daedalus's doors, despite their masterful craftsmanship, do not have an audience. Achates is sent ahead and retrieves the Sibyl before any of the Trojans can visit the shrine to Apollo and enjoy its sights. Nonetheless, Virgil devotes many lines to describing them, ending thus:

In that high sculpture you, too, would have had
Your great part, Icarus, had grief allowed.
Twice your father had tried to shape your fall
In gold, but twice his hands dropped.
Here the Trojans
Would have passed on and gazed and read it all,
Had not Achates, whom they had sent ahead
Returned now with the priestess of Apollo.²²

The beginning of this quotation is a climactic emotional moment. The narration of Daedalus's story as shown through his art has thus far omitted the tragedy of his son's death, which is addressed here in the most bitingly tragic moment of the *Aeneid*. The line after this selection immediately mentions that the Trojans did not see Daedalus's masterpiece and that it went unappreciated. Yet even if the Trojans had seen the temple, they would not have felt the same sense of tragedy that Virgil's intended audience

²² Virgil, 6.47.

does. Only by mentioning the omission and the reason for it is Daedalus's grief expressed. It is easy for a poet to narrate that something is too tragic to be written or said, but it is next to impossible for a visual artist to do so. The most telling part of this *ekphrasis* is Virgil's use of the word *perlegent*. From the infinitive *legeret*, "to read," *perlegere* implies reading thoroughly, reading aloud, or scanning in detail. Aeneas "felt joy"²³ when he saw Vulcan's shield, and he stops to "feast his eyes and mind on a mere image"²⁴ in the temple at Carthage. This *ekphrasis* is most closely associated with close literary scrutiny. Jaś Elsner states that Aeneas "is presented as looking at (or reading about) Daedalus's creations, whose agonies Daedalus seems to live through and witness as Aeneas watches."²⁵ The Fitzgerald translation notably does not mention Aeneas's appreciation of the doors. The temple is mentioned and the doors are described as Aeneas and the Trojans enter, and the poem states that they "would have" read the images, but they were called away. Rather, it is the audience who views the image, a fact that serves to highlight the neglect that Daedalus's images receive from the characters in the poem. Virgil's anxiety here is thus twofold. Firstly, there is the worry that nobody will read his poems and thus, that his concern that his work may go unseen and unappreciated despite its merits. The second anxiety that Virgil expresses in this scene is that he might fail in the way Daedalus failed—that is, that Virgil could become emotionally unfit to complete his work—and in a way, this fear became reality. Virgil resisted the *Aeneid's* publication, and wanted the copies in circulation burned; he was unable to accept seeing his manuscript out of his hands, unsatisfied with its completion to his death.

Narrative visual art and literature are similar in that once they are completed or published, their creators may no longer revise them, leaving the works open to misinterpretation and neglect. Virgil was very aware of not only this shared concern for visual art and written narrative released for public consumption, but also how this possible fate could befall his own work, which is evident in the scenes

²³ Virgil, 8.990.

²⁴ Virgil, 1.132.

²⁵ Elsner, 83.

where he employs *ekphrasis* in the *Aeneid*. Virgil uses this literary device to describe how his characters misinterpret, misunderstand, or overlook narrative visual art in order to express his own fears that an audience might do the same to his own works. We will never know if Virgil had an Icarus of his own that his hands left unwrought; Virgil's *Aeneid* clearly was doomed in his eyes, never to be properly appreciated by its audience or even by its creator.

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