

“Virgil and Ekphrasis”

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A. Ekphrasis: “the verbal representation of visual representation” (Heffernan, 3).

B.

“. . . and people were speaking up on either side, to help both men. But the heralds kept the people in hand, as meanwhile the elders were in session on benches of polished stone in the sacred circle and held in their hands the staves of the heralds who lift their voices. The two men rushed before these, and took turns speaking their cases, and between them lay on the ground two talents of gold, to be given to that judge who in this case spoke the straightest opinion” (Iliad, 18.502-508).

“He made upon it a soft field, the pride of the tilled land, wide and triple-ploughed, with many ploughmen upon it who wheeled their teams at the turn and drove them in either direction. And as these making their turn would reach the end-strip of the field, a man would come up to them at this point and hand them a flagon of honey-sweet wine, and they would turn again to the furrows in their haste to come again to the end-strip of the deep field. The earth darkened behind them and looked like earth that has been ploughed though it was gold. Such was the wonder of the shield’s forging” (Iliad, 18.541-549).

C.

“He sees the wars of Troy set out in order:
the battles famous now through all the world,
the sons of Atreus and of Priam, and
Achilles, savage enemy to both.
He halted. As he wept, he cried: ‘Achates,
where on this earth is there a land, a place
that does not know our sorrows? Look! There is Priam!
Here, too, the honorable finds its due
and there are tears for passing things: here, too,
things mortal touch the mind. Forget your fears;
this fame will bring you some deliverance.’
He speaks. With many tears and sighs he feeds
his soul on what is nothing but a picture” (Aeneid, 1.647-659).

“Elsewhere young Troilus, the unhappy boy --
he is matched unequally against Achilles --
runs off, his weapons lost. He is fallen flat;
his horses drag him on as he still clings
fast to his empty chariot, clasping
the reins. His neck, his hair trail on the ground
and his inverted spear inscribes the dust.
Meanwhile the Trojan women near the temple
of Pallas, the unkindly; hair disheveled,
sad, beating at their breasts, as suppliants,
they bear the robe of offering. The goddess
averts her face, her eyes fast to the ground” (Aeneid, 1.671-682).

D.

“And facing this, he [Daedalus] set another scene:
the land of Crete, rising out of the sea;
the inhuman longing of Pasiphaë,
the lust that made her mate the bull by craft;
her mongrel son, the two-formed Minotaur,
a monument to her polluted passion.
And here the inextricable labyrinth,
the house of toil, was carved

.....
And Icarus, you also would have played
great part in such work, had his grief allowed;
twice he had tried to carve your trials in gold,
and twice a father’s hand had failed” (Aeneid, 6.32-47).

E.

“Across the center of the shield were shown
the ships of brass, the strife of Actium:
you might have seen all of Leucata’s bay
teeming with war’s array, waves glittering
with gold. On his high stern Augustus Caesar
is leading the Italians to battle,
together with the senate and the people,
the household gods and the Great Gods; his bright brows
pour out a twin flame, and upon his head
his father’s Julian star is glittering” (Aeneid, 8.874-883).
“. . . And facing them, just come
from conquering the peoples of the dawn,
from the red shores of the Erythraean Sea --
together with barbaric riches, varied
arms -- is Antonius. He brings with him
Egypt and every power of the East
and farthest Bactria; and -- shamefully --
behind him follows his Egyptian wife” (Aeneid, 8.888-895).

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