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Dilate and describe: Pliny 5.6 and the concept of ekphrasis

In this paper I argue that Pliny Epistle 5.6 offers an extremely significant point of access to the ancient concept of ekphrasis, a concept that has informed much modern literary criticism. Although the word ekphrasis nowhere appears in the letter, Pliny's villa description constitutes a unique intertextual nexus of ideas associated with the term. Epistle 5.6 contains a description of a villa accompanied by a commentary on that description. A cursory reading shows (1) that Pliny's self-commentary articulates a kind of theory of description and (2) that the description itself puts into practice many aspects of this "theory." Moreover, by examining the intertextual associations constituted in the letter it is apparent that Pliny's descriptive discourse synthesizes much of what is written about ekphrasis both in antiquity and today. Thus Epistle 5.6 represents not just a particular manifestation of ekphrastic theory but a constitutive element of it.

There are several ways in which Pliny brings together the disparate ideas associated with ekphrasis. For one, Pliny overtly compares his villa description with the actual experience of visiting the villa. This comparison recalls the discussions of ekphrasis in the progymnasmata, elementary exercises in rhetoric which contain the only extant definitions of the term from antiquity. Moreover, Pliny refers to this textual "reality effect" in terminology that derives from Quintilian's (and, apparently, Cicero's) discussion of enargeia. The term enargeia is itself integral to the definitions of ekphrasis in the progymnasmata. Hence Pliny's descriptive praxis and his theoretical statements appear intertextually to reflect technical rhetorical usage.

Another and very significant intertext is established when Pliny compares his villa description to, among other things, the description of the shield of Achilles in Iliad 18. This comparison not only constitutes a recognition that the epic description of shields is a literary topos, but also recalls the progymnasmata, which employ the shield of Achilles as an example of specific kinds of ekphrasis. However, Pliny's allusion to the epic shields acts as a rhetorical justification of his extended villa description, and thus he construes the shield of Achilles as the tropological source of his description. In mentioning the shield as justification for his own description, Pliny anticipates the strategy of many modern theories of ekphrasis which attempt to obtain an ancient pedigree for their definitions by appealing to the shield of Achilles. Moreover, Pliny effectively incorporates epic shield descriptions, his own villa descriptions, and rhetorical terminology into a single category of narrative discourse. This implies a theory of description that is more encompassing than those of the progymnasmata or the rhetorical handbooks by themselves.

Based upon such intertextual observations as outlined above, I argue that Pliny's Epistle 5.6 constitutes as much as it reflects the ancient concept of ekphrasis. Indeed we can discern many specific parallels between Pliny's villa descriptions and those of poets such as Statius (e.g. *Silvae* 1.3 and 2.2). Hence Pliny's letter, constituted as a "theory of description," takes on new importance in our view of the relationship between rhetorical theory and poetic practice.

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