ECPHRASIS, INTERPRETATION, AND AUDIENCE IN AENEID 1 AND ODYSSEY 8

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Abstract. In the first ecphrasis in Vergil’s Aeneid (1.441–94) describing Dido’s temple to Juno through the eyes of Aeneas, Aeneas comes across as an isolated and confused interpreter of images of his sufferings: he understands the images he sees in one way, while the external audience understands them and his interpretation of them differently. Odysseus is neither alone nor confused when he hears Demodocus’ songs in Odyssey 8. Moreover, the Odyssey—unlike the Aeneid—sees art as a basically straightforward and positive force in human life. Vergil draws on this contrast to depict Aeneas and interpretation in Aeneid 1.

The first ecphrasis in Vergil’s Aeneid (1.441–94) describes the temple to Juno built by Dido and the Carthaginians through the eyes of Aeneas. In this episode, Aeneas comes across as an emotional, isolated, and (possibly) desperately confused interpreter of images that show his own past sufferings: he interprets the images he sees in one way, while the external audience understands both the images and his interpretation of them quite differently. No other characters, with the exception of the silent Achates, participate in the scene or witness Aeneas’ emotional response. While this scene on its own creates a strong and vivid picture of loneliness, sorrow, and confusion, the effect increases if we set the scene against the backdrop of a similar scene in the Odyssey.

Demodocus’ songs in Odyssey 8, widely recognized as a parallel for this ecphrasis,1 strike a very different note from the images on Dido’s temple. Odysseus, too, feels sorrow at an artistic representation of his past suffering, but unlike Aeneas, Odysseus is neither confused nor isolated in his grief. He and the external audience share an informed understanding of what his tears mean, while the Phaeacians either do not see his sadness or do not understand the reason for it. Odysseus is not alone in his grief;2 he is not misinformed about what the songs of Demodocus mean to the Phaeacians or to himself; he and the external audience are on the same

1Putnam 1998; Knauer 1964, 376.

side of a gap of understanding about what the songs mean to him, with the well-intentioned but not fully informed Phaeacians on the other side. Moreover, the Odyssey—unlike the Aeneid—sees art as a comparatively straightforward and positive force in human life and experience.  

This article examines the gap between how Aeneas understands the images and how Vergil presents them, and Aeneas, to the external audience. It approaches this topic from the perspectives of both Aeneid 1 and of this ecphrasis in comparison to Odyssey 8. Many scholars have noticed the irony of Aeneas’ (mis)interpretation of the images he sees. A few have pointed out that in the context of the poem’s first ecphrasis, this irony makes a broader comment about the pitfalls of interpreting works of art, including Vergil’s own. No one has previously connected these two features of the passage with its Homeric allusions. Vergil depicts art and interpretation in this scene by means of three different components: Aeneas’ difficulties as an interpreter; the inherent gaps and problems of verbally describing a visual work of art (in other words, of ecphrasis itself); and the very different perspective on all these matters that emerges from the songs of Demodocus in Odyssey 8. In the world of the Aeneid, understanding art is a problematic endeavor that may in fact be impossible, but the contrast with the Odyssey heightens a sense of sorrow and loss about this inability by suggesting that in worlds other than the Aeneid’s, this may not be the case.

ECPHRASIS

Of the myriad facets of ecphrasis, I would like to touch briefly on just three that are particularly relevant for my argument. First, a verbal representation of a visual artifact entails gaps and difficulties that open up between

3 Mackie 1997 persuasively argues that the Odyssey sees song as an effective way for people to come to terms with past suffering.

4 Otis 1963, 238; Stanley 1965, 273–74; Lyne 1987, 209–10; Horsfall 1990, 135; Lowenstam 1993, 49; and Boyd 1995, 78–79, all note this feature of the scene specifically as irony. Leach 1988, esp. 312, 318, 323; and Putnam 1998, 244–45, point out the divergences of Aeneas’ interpretation from that of the external audience without using the term “irony” for it.

5 Johnson 1976, 105, says that this scene “reveals not only the confusions of Aeneas but also the confusions and, indeed, the essential fraudulence of art and of the realities that art mirrors. . . . In part Vergil reminds us that art is illusion, that his poem is illusion.” O’Hara 1990 concludes in part: “Vergil knows the ability of art, of poetry, of the Aeneid itself not only to console, but also to deceive. Analogies between Vergil’s poem and these murals, and between the poem itself and its prophecies, are suggestively implied” (183–84).

6 Of the vast bibliography on ecphrasis, I have benefited most from Fowler 1991, Laird 1993, and Barchiesi 1997. Readers interested in broader or more far-ranging discussions of ecphrasis can consult these sources and their extensive bibliographies.
Some one about of the broad arrangement of the individual images that Aeneas sees in relation to one another and in what manner they are affixed to the temple building. \textsuperscript{9} These passages that resist any definite interpretation focus attention more broadly on the difficulty of interpretation. \textsuperscript{10} In contrast, this kind of built-in difficulty or incompleteness does not really obtain in the Odyssey's descriptions of narrative art, because the Odyssey focuses on poetry rather than visual art when it describes art that tells a story. This is one of several contrasts between Vergil and analogous issues or passages in Homeric epic that heighten a sense of complexity in the Aeneid.

Second, ecphrasis entails describing visual art from the perspective of an observer—description has "a point of view" more explicitly than either a piece of visual art or non-descriptive narrative. \textsuperscript{11} This highlights the sense of an interpreter in relation to the art described. Our ecphrasis, indeed, makes this inherent feature of ecphrasis one of the most striking characteristics of the passage. Finally, ecphrasis—a description of one kind of art within a different kind of work of art—is an inherently reflexive and self-referential process. This quality makes ecphrasis a spot where larger ideas about interpretation are to be found. \textsuperscript{12} It urges us to apply ideas broadly from this particular passage about interpretation to the work as a whole, particularly since it is the first ecphrasis in the Aeneid.\textsuperscript{13}

\textsuperscript{7} Putnam 1998 and Boyd 1995 both talk about the visual properties of Vergil's description of Dido's temple. Barchiesi 1997, 278, offers a clear and concise statement of this issue: "two semiotic systems partially overlap, and in the process both images and words reveal their communicative potential as well as their limits."

\textsuperscript{8} Boyd 1995, 72, puts this as follows: the beholder "has been intentionally incapacitated (and so drawn into the text) by Virgil." Fowler 1991, 27, makes a similar point from a different perspective: "precisely because ecphrasis represents a pause at the level of narration and cannot be read functionally, the reader is possessed by a strong need to interpret."

\textsuperscript{9} Lowenstam 1993, 38, n. 4, surveys different opinions about how the individual scenes go together; Leach 1988, 312–13, notes various views about how the images are applied to a building.

\textsuperscript{10} Boyd 1995, 84: "the ambiguity of ecphrasis in the Aeneid . . . destabilize[s] clarity of perception and interpretation."

\textsuperscript{11} Fowler 1991, 29: "there is an obvious sense in which description in language inscribes a point of view more forcefully and more unambiguously than plastic art."

\textsuperscript{12} Barchiesi 1997, 272.

\textsuperscript{13} Fowler 1991, 33: "the scene is often—and surely rightly in some degree—taken as paradigmatic for the interpretation of art, both literary and visual."
In other words, Aeneas is not simply himself at this particular moment in the poem. In the vivid and sustained image of Aeneas trying to make sense of what he sees, the audience sees a broader picture of any interpreter of any work of art—including themselves as they embark on the Aeneid—grappling with the inherent and perhaps insurmountable difficulties of understanding what art shows and how it makes sense in its context(s). Odysseus, as we will see, provides a fundamentally different model for understanding art, as the Odyssey does for art in general. This Odyssean model sharpens the Aeneid's position by offering a vivid contrast against which to view what the Aeneid has to say.

**AENEAS’ REACTION TO WHAT HE SEES**

As many scholars have noted, the description of Dido's temple is as much or more about Aeneas reacting to the images as it is about the images themselves.14 This merging of image and reaction is so smoothly and effectively done that it is easy to think that ekphrasis naturally implies or requires an observer to respond to the work of art it describes, but in fact, this is not so.15 In the Iliad, for instance, the shield of Achilles is described as Hephaestus is making it (II. 18.478–608). Achilles is pleased with his new armor when Thetis brings it to him (19.15–18), but he apparently pays no attention to the details of the images or craftsmanship. When he thanks Thetis, he simply announces that he will put on the armor before moving on to his real concern, which is his fear that the corpse of Patroclus will decompose if left unburied (21–27). Similarly, the brilliance of the cloak of Jason in the first book of the Argonautica would amaze a hypothetical observer (referred to with generalizing potential optatives at 726, 765, and 767). This would-be observer appears to exist mainly as a convenient means of hyperbolically glorifying the cloak as a whole, not to describe some individual person’s real emotional reactions upon viewing it or the individual scenes it depicts.

Our ekphrasis, on the other hand, not only contains an individual character who responds to the images it describes, it also narrates the

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14 Friedländer 1912, 18–19, notes this feature of the ekphrasis as part of a broader contrast between his view of Homeric poetry as impartial (“der jungendlich unbefangenen Weis Homer,” 14) and the later development of a more emotional perspective. See more recently Segal 1981; Leach 1988, 311; Williams 1990; Fowler 1991. Clausen 1987, 17, suggests that Aeneas' emotion is expressed here more powerfully than anywhere else in the poem.

15 Putnam 1998, 243, following Barchiesi 1994, notes that this is the first time in ancient literature “where the narrator has us ‘see’ an artifact through the eyes of his protagonist, who, moreover, takes part in one of the scenes put before us.”
images in terms of Aeneas’ reaction to them. Indeed, the passage as a whole devotes nearly as many verses to describing the emotions, behavior, and language of Aeneas as he looks at the pictures (446–65) as it does to the images themselves (466–93). Moreover, we begin with Aeneas’s feelings and then proceed to the images that caused them, a sequence that clearly gives his feelings the leading role in the ecphrasis. Vergil makes some introductory remarks that set the scene in such a way that we question Aeneas’ judgment as an interpreter even before we have been shown what he is interpreting. We are looking for multiple ways of viewing these images before we know what they depict.

hic templum Iunoni ingens Sidonia Dido
condebat, donis opulentum et numine duae . . .
hoc primum in luco noua res oblata timorem
lenit, hic primum Aeneas sperare salutem
ausus et adflictis melius confidere rebus.
namque sub ingenti lustrat dum singula templa
regina opperiens, dum quae fortuna sit urbi
artificumque manus inter se operumque laborem
miratur, uidet Iliacas ex ordine pugnas . . .  \( \text{(Aeneid 1.446–47; 450–56)} \)

Here Sidonian Dido
was building a stupendous shrine for Juno,
enriched with gifts and with the goddess’ statue . . .
Within this grove, the sights—so strange to him—
have, for the first time, stilled Aeneas’ fear;
here he first dared to hope he had found shelter,
to trust more surely in his shattered fortunes.
For while he waited for the queen, he studied
everything in that huge sanctuary,
marveling at a city rich enough
for such a temple, at the handiwork
of rival artists, and their skillful tasks.
He sees the wars of Troy set out in order . . .16

The very first thing we learn about this temple is the identity of the goddess
to whom it is dedicated (1.446), Juno,17 who has told Aeolus in the poem’s

16The \textit{Aeneid} translations are by Mandelbaum; the \textit{Iliad} and \textit{Odyssey} translations are by Lattimore.
17The same verse also mentions Dido as the builder of the temple. This is the first of many features of the ecphrasis that provides a context for the introduction of Dido herself, an aspect of the scene that I will pass over in my discussion. Rieks 1981, 1038, discusses this briefly but comprehensively.
first scene that she views the Trojans as *gens inimica* (67). This hardly creates feelings of happiness or confidence in the external audience: 18 presumably, the temple and its images give pleasure to Juno and are so intended by the Carthaginians (whose artistry Aeneas admires at 455–56), and yet the very same temple heartens Aeneas. Vergil juxtaposes these mutually contradictory reactions (or implied reactions) without comment, without explicitly drawing the reader’s attention to the contradiction between what the images are likely to mean to Juno and what Aeneas thinks they mean for him, and without making any attempt to resolve this contradiction. Even the act of viewing is identified in two different ways (*miratur, uidet*, 456), one of which is emotional and affective and one of which is not. Thus, context, audience, and interpretation emerge right away as central, challenging, and to some degree implicit elements of the ecphrasis.

After a brief overview of the images as a group in 456, Aeneas speaks to Achates about them. Vergil has told us at 451–52 that Aeneas began to hope that his situation would improve; now Aeneas tells us the same thing:

> constitit et lacrimans “quis iam locus,” inquit, “Achate, quae regio in terris nostri non plena laboris? en Priamus. sunt hic etiam sua praemia laudi, sunt lacrimae rerum et mentem mortalia tangunt. solue metus; feret haec aliquam tibi fama salutem.”
> sic ait atque animum pictura pascit inani multa gemens, largoque umectat flumine uultum. (Aeneid 1.459–65)

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.

Aeneas assumes that the people who made the images understand their contents in basically the same way that he understands his own past. 19

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18 E.g., Hardie 1998, 77.
19 This is clearly the implication of *sunt hic etiam*, 461. Austin 1971, 156–57, reads it this way, but Horsfall 1995, 107, n. 39, reads *hic* as meaning “here in the temple” rather than a more general notion of “here.”
In Aeneas, they arouse sadness at remembering past suffering (459–60) and reassurance\textsuperscript{20} that others value the Trojans’ exploits and feel sorrow about them (461–62). Except for the word \textit{aliquam} (463),\textsuperscript{21} he never questions his own understanding of what the images mean or wonders whether pictures stand for something different for the unknown artists than they do for him.\textsuperscript{22} This speech, in other words, depicts Aeneas in the act of misinterpretation. Yet it also shows him quite unaware that he might be misinterpreting what he sees.

Vergil, however, makes this clear in the following verses, thus bracketing what Aeneas says with language that either implicitly (\textit{templum Iunoni ingens Sidonia Dido / condebat, 446–47}) or explicitly (\textit{animum pictura pascit inani, 464}) casts doubt on how well he understands what he is seeing. While Aeneas wholeheartedly gives himself over to the images he sees and the emotions they arouse in him, the narrative voice evidently has grave misgivings. The description after Aeneas speaks, and our understanding of it, hinge on the word \textit{inanis}. In the \textit{Aeneid} it means both “empty” or “insubstantial”\textsuperscript{23} and “in vain” or “useless,”\textsuperscript{24} a sense in which it appears several times in the last quarter of the poem as a modifier for \textit{spes}.\textsuperscript{25} Both of these meanings make sense in our verse. The images are literally without physical substance,\textsuperscript{26} but the spectrum of uses for \textit{inanis} in the \textit{Aeneid} implies that they are also somehow not living up to the hopes or expectations that Aeneas has expressed about them.\textsuperscript{27} 10.627, in particular (\textit{spes pascis inanis, “you feed on empty hopes”}), provides an interesting parallel for our passage: Jupiter explicitly tells Juno that she is cherishing false hopes if she thinks she can change the ultimate fate of Turnus or the course of the war in Italy, and the parallel phrasing between that passage

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{20} Leach 1988, 311. Clay 1988, 197, n. 7, takes a similar position. He says that “Aeneas is cheered because he has discovered the traces of humanity—Vergilian humanity—on the Carthaginian shore.”
\item \textsuperscript{21} Johnson 1976, 105, notes the negative implication of this word, but he calls the implications “no doubt largely unconscious” on Aeneas’ part. Conversely, they are not at all unconscious for Vergil, to whom the doubt the word implies should be mainly attributed.
\item \textsuperscript{22} See Leach 1988, 318, for a clear and helpful description of Aeneas’ “interpretive bias.”
\item \textsuperscript{23} As with the wind (7.593, 10.82) or several times for things Aeneas encounters in the underworld in Book 6 (e.g., 269, 740).
\item \textsuperscript{24} E.g., for Dido’s tears (4.449).
\item \textsuperscript{25} See 10.627, 10.648, 11.49.
\item \textsuperscript{26} In spite of which they provide substantive nourishment (\textit{pascit}) to Aeneas. I am indebted to Richard Tarrant for this observation.
\item \textsuperscript{27} Barchiesi 1994, 120, although without detailed consideration of how \textit{inanis} is used in the \textit{Aeneid}.
\end{itemize}
and ours suggests that Aeneas, too, may be misguided in “dar[ing] to hope” (sperare . . . ausus, 450–51) at the sight of the temple.

Throughout the part of the ephrasis that describes Aeneas viewing the images, then, Vergil pairs vivid descriptions of Aeneas, wholeheartedly seeing and feeling in response to the pictures, with strong signals from the surrounding narrative that he is failing to understand what he is looking at. This sets the hopeful Aeneas adrift on a sea of contextual clues casting doubt on him as an interpreter; it suggests more generally that, while understanding works of art is a deeply engaging and emotional activity for people, it is also easy to make mistakes or to fall short while doing it.28

HOMERIC ALLUSIONS

The images on Dido’s temple depict events from the Trojan War, incidents that in many cases would be known to Vergil’s readers from the Iliad. It is only in the Iliad (not the Odyssey) that we find descriptions of visual narrative art that depict human activities. The shield of Achilles in Iliad 18 is an obvious example. In addition, when we first meet Helen in Iliad 3, she is weaving a piece of fabric on which she represents the Trojan War.

τήν δ’ εὐρ’ ἐν μεγάρῳ ἡ δὲ μέγαν ἵστον ὑφαίνει,
δύσακα πορφυρίνα, πολέας δ’ ἐνέποισεν ὑδόλους
Τρώων θ’ ἐποιδόμον κολ ‘Ἀχαιών χαλκοχιτόνων,
οὐς ἐθέν εἶνεν ἑκατόν ἀρηγὸς πολιαμών·

(Iliad 3.125–28)

She came on Helen in the chamber; she was weaving a great web, a red folding robe, and working into it the numerous struggles of Trojans, breakers of horses, and bronze-armoured Achaians, struggles that they endured for her sake at the hands of the war god.

In contrast to this brief picture, the Homeric parallel for describing artistic representations at the kind of length that we find in our ephrasis in the Aeneid comes from the songs of Demodocus in Odyssey 8.

28I fundamentally disagree here with Parry’s essentially optimistic and positive view of art’s redemptive power (1989, 95–96). His view is much closer to that of the Odyssey than the Aeneid, and as I will suggest below, the Aeneid’s view takes shape partly by contrast with the Odyssey’s. Horsfall 1995, 107, n. 40, contrasts the emptiness of animum pictura pascit inani with Demodocus’ words: the pictures Aeneas sees, he argues, “are devoid of life, of substance, of real comfort; a sharp contrast to Demodocus’ words.”
This is a difference between the two Homeric epics that is widely known: the *Iliad* is not often concerned with poetry or self-referential statements about poetry or itself as a poem, whereas the *Odyssey* is quite self-conscious and reflective about poetry. However, scholars have not discussed the flip side of this interest in poetry, namely, the *Odyssey*’s lack of interest in artistic media other than poetry or storytelling for narrating human experience. This different treatment of art in the two Homeric epics is one of the Homeric distinctions or categories that Vergil acknowledges by collapsing, blurring, or inverting (or some combination thereof) that Homeric distinction or category. The *Iliad* describes visual art that tells a human story, but the *Odyssey* tells a story specifically about the Trojan War with the kind of length and detail that we find in our ecphrasis. There is no single, simple Homeric parallel for Vergil’s ecphrasis, even though it evokes aspects of both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Here, as often, Vergil draws on several different Homeric parallels that are in some sense at odds with one another so as to focus attention on something without giving any easy answers about it. Here, the Homeric parallels illustrate the parameters and nature of narrative art.

The *Odyssey* parallel to our ecphrasis goes beyond the general notion of a detailed artistic narrative about Trojan War. Extensive situational similarities call to mind what Demodocus sings in *Odyssey* 8 in connection with the images on Dido’s temple. The scholars who have discussed this parallel at any length have talked only about Demodocus’ first song. In fact, I will argue, both of Demodocus’ Trojan War songs underlie our ecphrasis. Once again, Vergil draws on several Homeric

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29 E.g., Segal 1994, 9; Thalmann 1984, 158. Mackie 1997 discusses the unique perspective of the *Odyssey* on song and storytelling, partly by contrasting it with the *Iliad*’s. None of these scholars discuss any non-verbal art form as a comparison or context for poetry.

30 Helen in the *Odyssey* provides an illustration of this contrast: whereas the Helen of *Iliad* 3 weaves a picture of the Trojan War, the Helen in *Odyssey* 4 tells a story of her adventures at Troy.

31 Recently Putnam 1998, 268–69; also Knauer 1964, 166–67, and 376. Both of these scholars say that the *Aeneid* parallel for Demodocus’ third song, about the Trojan Horse, is Aeneas’ own narrative in Books 2 and 3 (Knauer 1964, 170). In this scheme, Iopas’ song is parallel to the second song about Ares and Aphrodite. I am not arguing against this interpretation. Several different strands of Homeric allusions can and often do exist simultaneously in one passage of the *Aeneid*. Rather, I wish to add another layer of Homeric allusion to this picture.

32 A few scholars have mentioned without discussion that the third song contributes to our ecphrasis (Horsfall 1995, 107, n. 40; Knauer 1964, 376, which cites the third song in the index as a parallel for Aeneas’ emotional remarks in 459–65; Williams 1963, 272), but none have explored in any detail how this allusion affects our understanding of the passage.
passages, none of which is an exact parallel for his own verses. This prevents the reader from making an easy identification between our ecphrasis and any one Homeric passage, which might be seen as the “key” to the Vergil passage that alludes to it. It is analogous, at a different level, to the complementary perspectives on narrative art from the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* that underlie the basic notion of artistically representing past experience in the Trojan War.

In Demodocus’ first song, which most interpreters agree lies behind our ecphrasis, he sings about an otherwise unknown quarrel between Odysseus and Achilles. From the plot standpoint, the parallels between this song and our ecphrasis are easy to see: each is the artistic representation of his own past experiences at Troy that the hero first hears when he gets out of the storm-tossed sea and makes his way to the buildings of civilization. Upon being confronted with this retelling, the hero weeps (*Od. 8.73–86*):

οὐδεὶς ἄρ’ ἀοιδὸν ἀνήκεν ἀειδέμεναι κλέα ἀνδρῶν, οἴμης τῆς τότ’ ἄρα κλέος οὐρανὸν εὐρύν ἵκανε, νεῖκος Ὀδυσσῆος καὶ Πηλείδεω ‘Αχιλῆος, ὃς ποτὲ δηρίσαντο θεοὺς ἐν δαιτὶ θαλείῃ ἐκπάγλοις ἐπέεσσιν, ἄναξ δ’ ἀνδρῶν Ἀχαμέμνων χαίρε νόφρ, ὃ τ’ ἄριστοι Ἀχαιῶν δηριώσατο. ὃς γάρ οἱ χρείᾳς μνῆματο Φοῖβος Ἀπόλλων

Πυθοὶ ἐν ἄγοθείῃ, ὦθ’ ὑπέρβη λαίνον οὐδόν χρησίμους· τότε γάρ ὅταν κυλίνδετο πήματος ἀρχή Ἰορῆσέ τε καὶ Δαναοῖσι Δίως μεγάλου διὰ θυλὰς. τούτ’ ἄρ’ ἀοιδὸς ἀείδει περικυλτός· αὐτάρ Ὀδυσσεὺς πορφύρεον μέγα φάρος ἐλών χρεία στιβαρεῖ ἄκα κεραλῆς ἐρύσεσ, κάλυψε δὲ καλά πρόσωπα· ἀιδέτο γάρ Φαῖηκας ὑπ’ ὀφρύσι δάκρυα λείβων.

The Muse stirred the singer to sing the famous actions of men on that venture, whose fame goes up into the wide heaven, the quarrel between Odysseus and Peleus’ son, Achilles, how these once contended, at the gods’ generous festival, with words of violence, so that the lord of men, Agamemnon, was happy in his heart that the best of the Achaians were quarreling; for so in prophesy Phoibos Apollo had spoken to him in sacred Pytho, when he had stepped across the stone doorstep to consult; for now the beginning of evil rolled on, descending

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33 In addition to those already cited, Clay 1988 is also useful.
on Trojans, and on Danaans, through the designs of great Zeus.

These things the famous singer sang for them, but Odysseus
taking in his ponderous hands the great mantle dyed in
sea-purple, drew it over his head and veiled his fine features,
shamed for tears running down his face before the Phaiakians.

Despite the broad similarities already noted, Demodocus’ song differs
noticeably from the images Aeneas sees on the temple insofar as it depicts
an event from the Trojan War that not only is not well known but that
may have been created for the context.\textsuperscript{34} Whether or not we believe that
the story is an invention—it is unknown from other sources—it seems
doubtful that an audience would have been able to identify it as a Trojan
War incident at all without the aside in 81–82.\textsuperscript{35} In contrast, the images
on Dido’s temple all depict well-known parts of the Trojan War story
that an audience would easily recognize.\textsuperscript{36}

The third song of Demodocus, in which he sings about the Trojan
Horse (\textit{Od}. 8.499–535), has a different set of plot similarities to our
ecphrasis: both the images on Dido’s temple and Demodocus’ third song
offer a third-person narrative of the hero’s own experiences at Troy that
precedes the hero’s own retelling of his adventures to his host(ess). In
fact, the third song resembles the necphrasis more closely than the first
song does in terms of both its subject matter and its construction. To
begin with, the third song narrates a famous incident from the Trojan
War, as do the images on Dido’s temple, whereas the first song retells an
otherwise unknown event. Moreover, the narrators in both the third song
and the necphrasis refer to a character while describing the work of art
in question. As we have seen, Vergil repeatedly mentions that Aeneas is
looking at the images and weeping as the images he sees are described,
while the Homeric narrator refers to the bard singing several times during
the third song of Demodocus (\textit{ἀοιδήν}, 499; \textit{ήπειαν}, 514; \textit{ὀξεῖα}, 516). The
Homeric narrator emphasizes the creator of the work of art and Vergil
the observer of it, but in both scenes the art is narrated partly in terms
of the actions of a character who is integrally concerned with it.

\textsuperscript{34} Finkelberg 1987, with bibliography.
\textsuperscript{35} This aside raises a fascinating narratological question: does it belong to Demodocus’ song or to the main narrator? de Jong 2001, \textit{ad} 81, does not take an explicit position, although she points out that the word \textit{πήμα} and the metaphor of evil “rolling towards” people are both found primarily or exclusively in character speech.
\textsuperscript{36} Although at the mythological time that the \textit{Aeneid} takes place, these events were just beginning to become known, as Aeneas’s speech to Achates reminds us (459–60).
Demodocus’ song leaves off at 520, and the narrative turns to the grief-stricken Odysseus, whose tears are compared, in a deservedly well-known simile, to those of a recently widowed resident of a captured city who is being driven away from her husband’s body by his killers (Od. 8.521–33):

toút’ ἄρ’ ἀοιδός ἔειδε περικλυτός· αὐτάρ Ὀδυσσεύς
tήκετο, δάκρυ δ’ ἔδεεν ὑπὸ βλεφάροις παρειάς,
ὡς δὲ γυνὴ κλαίησι φιλὸν πόσιν ἀμφίπεσοῦσα,
ὡς τε ἐής πρόσθεν πόλιος λαῶν τε πέσασιν,
525 ἀστεῖ καὶ τεκέεσσιν ἀμύσας νηλεῖς ἤμαρ·
ἡ μὲν τὸν θυευκοντα καὶ ἐπαίροντα ἰδύσα
ἀμφ’ αὐτῷ χυμένη λίγα κοκυῖει· οἱ δὲ τ’ ὀπίσθε
κόπτοντες δούρεσι μετάφρενον ἠδὲ καὶ ὄμους
εἰρειν εἰσανάγουσιν, πόνον τ’ ἐξέμεν καὶ οὐζὸν·
530 τῆς δ’ ἐλεεινοτέταρ ἄχετ φθνύθουσι παρειαῖ·
ὡς Ὀδυσσεύς ἐλεεινὸν ὑπ’ ὁφρύσι δάκρυν εἶβεν.
ἐνθ’ ἄλλος μὲν πάντας ἔλανθανε δάκρυα λείβοιν,
Ἀλκίνοος δὲ μιν οἶος ἐπεφράζατ’ ἢδ’ ἐνόησεν

So the famous singer sang his tale, but Odysseus melted, and from under his eyes the tears ran down, drenching his cheeks. As a woman weeps, lying over the body of her dear husband, who fell fighting for her city and people as he tried to beat off the pitiless day from city and children; she sees him dying and gasping for breath, and winding her body about him she cries high and shrill, while the men behind her, hitting her with their spear butts on the back and shoulders, force her up and lead her away into slavery, to have hard work and sorrow, and her cheeks are wracked with pitiful weeping. Such were the pitiful tears Odysseus shed from under his brows, but they went unnoticed by all the others, but Alkinoös alone understood what he did and noticed . . .

This passage is much longer and more moving than the straightforward description of the weeping Odysseus after Demodocus’ first song (83–85), although both songs conclude with the same verse, τούτ’ ἄρ’ ἀοιδός ἔειδε περικλυτός· αὐτάρ Ὀδυσσεύς (83 = 521). What Odysseus does in response varies: after the first song, he hides his weeping, while after the third, he weeps without concealment; the narrator gives even more prominence to his tears with the simile that describes them. Moreover, this simile has something of the artistic self-consciousness of Vergil’s ecphrasis, although the third song achieves its self-consciousness in a quite different way. The
simile of the widowed woman, in addition to providing a very effective and vivid picture of Odysseus’ grief, also picks up the song of Demodocus where it leaves off—this is what “winning the war” (πόλεμον... νικήσας, 519–20) would actually involve.37 It would be an overstatement to say that there is a similarity of technique between the third song and the ecphrasis in their evocations of the hero’s tears, but there is certainly a similarity of effect.

While the third song and the ecphrasis resemble each other in the ways I have described, Vergil generally creates differences as well as similarities between his poetry and his Homeric models, and our passage is no exception. As often, Vergil brings out the differences between his poetry and its Homeric predecessor(s) rather than glossing over or ignoring them, and the differences make an important contribution to the meaning of the ecphrasis.38 Although the source of and reason for Odysseus’ tears when he hears the third song are unclear,39 they have a role to play in the narrative: Alcinous notices them and asks Odysseus questions about himself that Odysseus ultimately answers with his tale in Books 9 to 12. In other words, Odysseus’ tears connect him both to Alcinous and, partly via the simile, to the external audience. Aeneas’ emotions, in contrast, have no impact on other characters in the poem, as none are present at the time (with the exception of Achates, who does not actively participate in the scene).40 This contrast between the ecphrasis and similar scenes in the Odyssey underlines the point that Aeneas’ tears are not integral to the plot. They are there because they themselves are what the story is about at this particular moment.41

In fact, how Odysseus understands the stories of his own past never comes up in either of these passages. Odysseus is not thinking about what the songs mean, either to himself or to the Phaeacians. He simply weeps with sorrow. The narrator does not say why he weeps, apparently assuming that his reasons are self-evident. It is necessary to explain why

37Nagy 1979, 100–101.
38Otis 1963, 311–12.
39Odysseus’ reasons for asking for the Trojan Horse from Demodocus are also mysterious. Goldhill 1991, 51–52, rehearses different suggestions but offers no conclusion of his own among the various possibilities. Walsh 1984, 3, points out that “[Odysseus] seems almost to welcome the sensation of grief” but does not say why Odysseus might feel this way.
41Johnson 1976, 101, argues that Aeneas’ tears “emphasize... the artistic content of this scene, namely, lacrimae rerum”; this is slightly different from my reading.
he conceals his weeping (86) but not why he weeps in the first place. These emotions give rise to a sense of irony because someone in the scene does not understand what is happening and the external audience does, but the confused interpreters here are the Phaeacians, not Odysseus, and what they fail to understand is his reaction to the song, not the song itself. There is no sense in this scene that interpretation of song presents a gulf of meaning that a character/listener has to step across and where he might miss his footing.

More broadly, the notion of art in the ecphrasis in Aeneid 1 differs fundamentally from that of Odyssey 8, or indeed, the Odyssey as a whole. Demodocus is an oral singer performing a song within a song. There is a kind of singleness of artistic vision, not only here but throughout the Odyssey, that comes from the fact that oral singing is the only narrative art form that the Odyssey shows us. Although ecphrasis per se entails a multitude of artistic perspectives, the sense of artistic and interpretive multiplicity at Dido’s temple becomes much stronger when we compare it with the unity and consistency of both art and hearers of art found in the Odyssey.

CONCLUSION

The ecphrasis at Dido’s temple is at least as much about interpreters and interpretation as it is a depiction of a particular set of images in the newly founded Carthage. The scene highlights Aeneas as the observer of the images rather than the images themselves. As an interpreter, he is alone, both literally (except for the mute Achates) and figuratively, insofar as the narrative voice consistently casts doubt on his understanding of what he sees. The external audience, which is privy to the narrator’s misgivings about Aeneas, watches him going about the business of interpretation, but it has a fundamentally different impression of the situation than does Aeneas. The literary device of ecphrasis brings in a complementary set of ideas about interpretation: ecphrasis of a visual artifact contains built-in gaps because of the differences between words and images, into which an interpreter almost by definition will feel himself invited to step. At the same time, it is fruitless to imagine that there is one definitive way to describe, or to interpret, a visual artifact described in a verbal medium. Moreover, these features of ecphrasis give rise to more general and basic meditations about how an observer goes about making sense of works of art. Someone who reads an ecphrasis is both drawn into interpretation and bound to fail at finding one single way to explain everything encountered in the ecphrasis. Because Aeneas stands out so strongly in
our ecphrasis, we can see him as a sort of Everyman of interpretation whose problems in understanding one particular work of art dramatize the inherent difficulty—and perhaps impossibility—of interpretation.

The Homeric parallels for our passage underline these features in a couple of different ways. First, the various Homeric allusions prevent any one passage or notion from acting as the key to understanding our ecphrasis. At the same time, the songs of Demodocus in Odyssey 8 underline the Aeneid’s complex and somewhat gloomy view of interpretation by putting forward a quite different view within a broadly similar narrative context. Odysseus, like Aeneas, arrives in a strange place and experiences an artistic representation of his own past, at which he weeps. However, Odysseus is not alone. He weeps among the Phaeacians, and the external audience shares his emotion, most notably through the extended simile after Demodocus’ third song. Interpreting song is barely an issue in this scene. The Phaeacians initially do not understand why Odysseus weeps, but when they learn his name and his story, they easily grasp the reasons for his behavior. Similarly, there is no suggestion that any interpretive hurdles or problems exist for Odysseus as he listens to Demodocus. Moreover, the representing medium and the represented art have the same form in the Odyssey, so that this scene does not open up the interpretive gaps and questions that multimedia ecphrasis does in the Aeneid. In sum, the similarities between Odysseus and Aeneas make us all the more aware of the differences: Aeneas’ solitude, his difficulties of interpretation, and the inherent problems of interpretation per se. Moreover, although these difficulties seem inevitable for Aeneas within the world of the Aeneid, the very different situation of the somewhat similar Odysseus implies that this need not be so. This makes us more sorry that for Aeneas (and for us), there may be no access to the Odyssey’s view of art and interpretation.42

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