THE INFLUENCE OF ART ON DESCRIPTION IN THE POETRY OF P. PAPINIUS STATIUS. DISSERTATION

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The Influence of Art on Description in the Poetry

OF

P. Papinius Statius

BY

THOMAS SHEARER DUNCAN

DISSERTATION

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Much has been written on the relation of poetry to the plastic arts. The text of the discussion has been stated usually in the form in which it appears in the opening sentence of Lessing's *Laocoön*:—'Painting is poetry in silence, poetry is painting in speech' (Phillimore's translation). The various critics have been concerned with showing the limitations of the comparison, with emphasising the fact, in one way or another, that the two arts have different spheres, and the canons of the one cannot be strictly applied to the other.

The text goes back to Simonides of Ceos. So we are told incidentally by Plutarch (*Quaest. Conviv.* 9, 15, 2 f. 748 A.): *καὶ ὅλως ἔφη μεταθήσειν τὸ Σιμωνίδειον ἀπὸ τῆς ζωγραφίας ἐπι τὴν ὄρχησιν · ποίησιν γὰρ εἶναι τὴν ὄρχησιν σιωπῶσαν, καὶ φθεγγομένην ὄρχησιν πάλιν τὴν ποίησιν.* (Cf. Plut. *de aud. poet.* 17 f., and see also the introduction to the *Laocoön*, p. xvii). The definition passed over into Hellenistic discussion on poetry and was repeated often. Note, for example, the reference in the *Auct. ad Herenn.* 4, 28, 39, where it is cited as a familiar definition, being used by the orator as an example of the figure 'commutatio'; 'item, poema loquens pictura, pictura tacitum poema debet esse'; and Cicero, *Tusc.*, 5, 114; 'Traditum est etiam Homerum caecum fuisse: at eius picturam, non poesin videmus': with Horace's well-known phrase (*A. P.* 361), 'ut pictura poesis. (See Christ, *Griechische Literaturgeschichte*, I, p. 219.) A full treatment of the discussions on the subject is given by W. G. Howard, 'Publications of the Modern Language Association of America,' vol. 24 (1909), pp. 40-123.

Homer had inspired the sculptors. The story was told that when Phidias was asked by his collaborator Panaenus in what type he would embody his conception of Zeus, he quoted the famous lines from Homer:

ἦ καὶ κυανέῃσιν ἐπ' ὀφρύσι νεῦσε Κρονίων
ἀμβρόσιαι δ' ἄρα χαῖται ἐπεῤῥώσαντο ἄνακτος
κρατὸς ἀπ' ἀθανάτοιο, μέγαν δ' ἐλέλιξεν Ὄλυμπον.

Macrobius (*Saturn.* 5, 14) gives his version of the story: 'Phidias, cum Iovem Olympium fingeret, interrogatus de quo exemplo divinam imitaretur effigiem, respondit archetypum Iovis in his se tribus Homeri versibus invenisse: nam de superciliis et crinibus totum se Iovis vultum collegisse.' (Cf. Val. Max., 3, 7. Strab., 8, 354). This relation of sculpture to poetry is expressed thus by Spence (*Polymetis,* p. 3): 'When you look on the old pictures or sculptures you look on the works of men who thought much in the same train with the old poets': and again (p. 45), 'the stories told in marbles may sometimes help one to find out the meaning of a passage in the ancient poets; and the poetical stories may sometimes explain the old marbles.'

And not only was the parallel between poetry and sculpture drawn early, but a kinship between the various arts was affirmed. This is expressed by Cicero in the opening section of the *Pro Archia* and taken by Spence as one of the mottoes for his *Polymetis:* 'omnes artes, quae ad humanitatem pertinent, habent quoddam commune vinculum, et quasi cognatione quadam inter se continentur.' Again, Dryden, in his notes on the *De arte graphica* of Du Fresnoy, apropos of this relation says; 'Painting and Poesy are two sisters which are so like in all things that they mutually lend to each other both their name and their office: one is called dumb poesy, and the other a speaking picture': and he cites Tertullian (*de Idolatria,* 8 f. 110), translating as follows, 'There is no art which is not either the father (*sic*) or the near relation of another' (nulla ars non alterius artis aut mater aut propinqua est). The passage in Tertullian appears in a discussion of the idea that the general principles of one art underlie another, that one art engenders another.

But Lessing raises a protest against assuming too close a connection between poetry and the plastic arts. He warns us (*Laocoön,* pp. 85, 86) against the assumption that poets bor-

row every description from works of art. On this score he finds great fault with Spence for proceeding on the hypothesis that the poet imitated the painter in every case. 'I lament,' says he, 'that so useful a book as the *Polymetis* otherwise would have been, should, through the tasteless whim of substituting for the natural fancy of the old poets one derived from another art, have become so repulsive and so much more injurious to classical authors than the watery commentaries of the most insipid etymologist could ever have been.' Lessing's study, of course, was proceeding on the assumption that the *Laocoön* was the work of a sculptor later than Vergil, and that the poet was the source of inspiration for the artist: hence his rather harsh criticism. In the light of subsequent discovery his criticism does not seem to rest on so sure a foundation. However, he continues (p. 94), 'Of the mutual resemblance which subsists between poetry and painting, Spence has the most extraordinary notions. He thinks that both arts in the opinion of the ancients were so closely bound together that they went hand in hand, and the poet never lost sight of the painter nor the painter of the poet.' The truer theory, in his judgment, was that poet and sculptor and painter drew their themes from a common source, and presented them differently, each according to the limitations of his art, and according to the mind with which he saw the material. 'The gods and spiritual beings,' he says, 'as represented by the artist, are not entirely the same as those which the poet makes use of. To the artist they are personified abstracta which must always maintain the same characteristics if they are to be recognized. To the poet, on the other hand, they are real acting creatures which, in addition to their general character, have other qualities and affections which, as circumstances afford the opportunity, predominate.' The difference is expressed admirably by Boissier (*Promenades Archéologiques:* 'Pompéi et Rome,' p. 353), 'Quand Horace dit que la poésie est comme la peinture il n'entend pas exprimer une vérité absolue et qui ne souffre pas d'exception. Il savait bien, ce fin

critique, que, si leur but est semblable, elles suivent des routes différentes pour y arriver. La peinture, qui travaille directement pour les yeux, est bien forcée de donner aux personnages de belles attitudes. Elle ne peut rien présenter au regard qui le choque, car l'image ne s'effaçant pas, l'impression durerait et deviendrait plus fâcheuse par sa durée même. Le poète au contraire, qui s'addresse à l'imagination et peint d'un trait, peut se permettre des fantaisies qu'on ne pardonnerait pas au peintre.'

If, however, the kinship between poetry and the plastic arts was recognized early, the assertion of the difference between them is also of early date. Lessing might have gone back to Pindar for a text for his protest against the confusion of the two. Pindar opens the fifth Nemean by asserting that he is no sculptor, that the product and method of his art is far different: and Mezger (after Schelling; see Mezger, Pindars Siegeslieder, p. 335) remarks on the appropriateness of the reference to statuary, inasmuch, as at the time when the ode was written, sculpture flourished in Aegina.[1]

The poet and the artist, then, must not be judged by the same standard. The excellence of a poet is not to be judged by his ability to draw pictures, or afford material for a picture. On this score, Lessing runs counter to Count Caylus who makes this, as it were, the touch-stone of the poet: 'cette réflexion m'avait conduit à penser que le calcul des différens tableaux, qu'offrent les poèmes, pouvait servir à comparer le mérite respectif des poèmes et des poètes. Le nombre et le genre des tableaux que présentent ces grands ouvrages auraient été une espèce de pierre de touche du mérite de ces poèmes et du genie de leurs auteurs.' Much harm is done, in his judgment, by the failure to observe the difference between the function of poetry and that of plastic art. To this failure he attributes the mania, in poetry, for descriptive painting, and in painting, for allegory.

And this mania for descriptive painting in poetry was char-

[1] This note was suggested by Professor Gildersleeve. See Pind. N. 5, 1-3.