

## Sculpting the Text: Ekphrasis in Ovid's Story of Phaethon

There are four traditional extended ekphrasis about plastic art in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*: a description of the Sun-god's palace in Book Two, descriptions of both Minerva's and Arachne's tapestries in Book Six, and a description of an elaborated goblet in the account of the Trojan War-saga in Book Thirteen. While these four artistic representations do stand out as examples of poetic high art in the poem, many elements of traditional ekphrasis also appear in the narrative proper, as others have recognized. Ovid's epic in general offers a pageant of visual imagery, with frequent references to eyes and vision. Ovid includes references to art with some frequency in his narration, and he introduces descriptions of landscapes with phrases such as "mons erat" (3.143) ("there was a mountain") and "vallis erat," (3.155) ("there was a valley"), which represent a common formula for signifying ekphrasis. While the boundaries which demarcate Ovid's formal ekphrastic passages seem readily evident, they are not hard and fast. The story of Phaethon in Book Two offers an especially compelling study of the liminal and elusive nature of Ovidian ekphrasis.

Book Two begins with the ekphrasis of the palace of the Sun, where Ovid describes the dazzling materials and craftsmanship, concentrating on the carved silver doors. The doors depict the tripartite universe, which as Stephen Wheeler has shown, resonates with the initial cosmogony in Book One. The last image of the ekphrasis is of signs of the zodiac on the right and left doors. The ekphrasis stands alone, but elements of it bleed into the later description of Phaethon's disastrous flight.

After the ekphrasis of the palace, Ovid appears to move on to the narrative proper. Phaethon enters the palace, and Ovid describes what Phaethon sees. The Sun-god, wearing a purple vestment, sits on a throne, accompanied by Day, Month, Year, the Centuries, and the

Hours. In describing the figures which surround the Sun, Ovid uses "a dextra et laeva,"(2.25) ("on the right and left") recalling his description of the constellations on both doors of the palace just a few lines before. He says that the Hours are "positae spatiis aequalibus,"(2.26) (placed at equal distances) suggesting that they are arranged deliberately as a work of art. Rather than just naming the four Seasons, he offers distinguishing elements of each figure's appearance. Spring wears a flowered crown, Summer wears a crown of grain, Autumn is stained with crushed grapes, and Winter has white hair. In offering these features, Ovid in fact presents the Seasons as statues, which of course require such identifying markers. Indeed, the scene is easily read as an ekphrasis of pedimental sculpture, for example. Ovid presents the return to narrative proper as another ekphrasis, then, confusing the boundaries between description of physical art and narration.

Later, in narrating Phaethon's encounter with his father and doomed attempt to drive the chariot, Ovid offers subtle references back to the ekphrasis of the doors. In attempting to convince Phaethon of the danger, the Sun points to specific signs of the zodiac, including the Bull, the Haemonian Archer, the the Lion, the Scorpion, and the Crab. The Sun then attempts to coach his son on driving the chariot, instructing him not to drive too far right towards the Serpent or too far left towards the Altar (2.138-9), again referring to signs of the zodiac. His use of "dexterior" (too far to the right) and "sinisterior" (too far to the left) here especially recalls his description of the placement of zodiac signs on the right and left doors in the ekphrasis. As Phaethon flies through the air, he sees the zodiac signs up close (2.173,196) and the many lands below. In his long list of places affected by the flaming chariot, Ovid frequently uses language which recalls not only the ekphrasis of the doors but which also recalls the original cosmogony in Book One. In describing how the seas react to the scorching heat, Ovid says that Doris and her

daughters grow warm as they hide in caves (2.269), thus again alluding directly to the ekphrasis of the doors, where Doris and her daughters appear (2.10-13). As Phaethon sees the heavens around him and the lands and seas below him, he is looking at and hurling through a magnified image of the universe represented on the carved doors.

The story of Phaethon, with its fluid use of ekphrasis, invites Ovid's audience to consider the poem not only as verbal art but also as a series of scenes on physical art.