LAOCOÖN

An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

But I shall attempt now to derive the matter from its first principles.

I reason thus: if it is true that in its imitations painting uses completely different means or signs than does poetry, namely figures and colors in space rather than articulated sounds in time, and if these signs must indisputably bear a suitable relation to the thing signified, then signs existing in space can express only objects whose wholes or parts coexist, while signs that follow one another can express only objects whose wholes or parts are consecutive.

Objects or parts of objects which exist in space are called bodies. Accordingly, bodies with their visible properties are the true subjects of painting.

Objects or parts of objects which follow one another are called actions. Accordingly, actions are the true subjects of poetry.

However, bodies do not exist in space only, but also in time. They persist in time, and in each moment of their duration they may assume a different appearance or stand in a different combination. Each of these momentary appearances and combinations is the result of a preceding one and can be the cause of a subsequent one, which means that it can be, as it were, the center of an action. Consequently, painting too can imitate actions, but only by suggestion through bodies.

On the other hand, actions cannot exist independently, but must be joined to certain beings or things. Insofar as these beings or things are bodies, or are treated as such, poetry also depicts bodies, but only by suggestion through actions.

Painting can use only a single moment of an action in its coexisting compositions and must therefore choose the one which is most suggestive and from which the preceding and succeeding actions are most easily comprehensible.
Similarly, poetry in its progressive imitations can use only one single property of a body. It must therefore choose that one which awakens the most vivid image of the body, looked at from the point of view under which poetry can best use it. From this comes the rule concerning the harmony of descriptive adjectives and economy in description of physical objects.

I should put little faith in this dry chain of reasoning did I not find it completely confirmed by the procedure of Homer, or rather if it had not been just this procedure that led me to my conclusions. Only on these principles can the grand style of the Greek be defined and explained, and only thus can the proper position be assigned to the opposite style of so many modern poets, who attempt to rival the painter at a point where they must necessarily be surpassed by him.

I find that Homer represents nothing but progressive actions. He depicts bodies and single objects only when they contribute toward these actions, and then only by a single trait. No wonder, then, that where Homer paints, the artist finds little or nothing to do himself; and no wonder that his harvest can be found only where the story assembles a number of beautiful bodies in beautiful positions and in a setting favorable to art, however sparingly the poet himself may paint these bodies, these positions, and this setting. If we go through the whole series of paintings as Caylus proposes them, one by one, we find that each is a proof of this remark.

At this point I shall leave the Count, who wants to make the artist's palette the touchstone of the poet, in order to analyze the style of Homer more closely.

Homer, I say, generally gives only one single characteristic to each object. To him a ship is a black ship, or a hollow ship, or a fast ship, or at most a well-manned black ship. He goes no further than this in describing a ship. But the departure, the sailing away, the putting in to shore are the things which he combines in a detailed picture—one which the artist would have to break up into five or six individual pictures if he wanted to put the whole of it on canvas.

Even when Homer is forced by peculiar circumstances to fix
our attention longer on a single object, he still does not create a picture which the artist could imitate with his brush. On the contrary! By means of countless artistic devices he places this single object in a series of stages, in each of which it has a different appearance. In the last stage the artist must wait for the poet in order to show us complete what we have seen the poet making. For example, if Homer wants to show us Juno's chariot, he shows Hebe putting it together piece by piece before our eyes. We see the wheels and axle, the seat, the pole, the traces, and the straps, not as these parts are when fitted together, but as they are actually being assembled by Hebe. It is only to the wheels that Homer devotes more than a single epithet; he shows us the eight bronze spokes, the golden rims, the bronze tires, the silver hubs, one by one. We might almost say that since there was more than one wheel, exactly as much additional time had to be devoted to them in the description as would have been required to fasten them on separately in reality.¹

"Η βη δ' ἀμφ' ὀχέωσι θοῶς βάλε καμπύλα κύκλα, χάλκεα ὑτάκυμα, σιδηρέω ἄξων ἄμφις. τῶν ἐτοὶ χρυσῆ ἵπποι ἀφθιτοί, ἀπόστρη ὑπερθεν χάλκε τόπλασσαν προσαρρότα, θαύμα ἰδέσθαι. πελάμαι δ' ἄργυρον εἰς περίδρομοι ἅμφωτερωθεν. διήθος δὲ χρυσώσει καὶ ἀργυρέσων ἱμάσιν ἐντέταται, δοκιμαῖ καὶ περίδρομοι ἀντυγές εἰσιν. τοῦ δ' εἶ ἄργυρος ῥυμὸς πέλεν αὐτάρ ἐν ἀκρῷ ἄργυρ δὸς χρυσεὶν καλῶν ἕνυν, ἐν δὲ λεπαδα κάλ' ἐβαλε, χρύσει."²

And when Homer wants to show us how Agamemnon was dressed, he has the king put on his garments, one by one, before our eyes: the soft chiton, the great cloak, the beautiful sandals, the sword. Now he is ready and takes up his scepter. We see the garments while the poet is describing the act of dressing; another poet would have described the garments themselves down to the smallest fringe, and we should have seen nothing of the action itself.²

¹ Iliad V. 722-751. ² Ibid., II. 43-47.
Here the scepter is called merely paternal and imperishable, just as a similar one is elsewhere described merely as the golden-studded scepter, χρυσέως ἱλοιος πεπάμενον. But what does Homer do when we require a more complete and accurate picture of this important scepter? Does he describe the wood and the carved knob in addition to the golden studs? Of course he would do so if the description were intended for a handbook of heraldic art, so that at some later time an exact duplicate of it could be made. And I am quite certain that many a modern poet would have given us just such a heraldic description, in the naive belief that he himself had painted a picture because the painter can follow his description with the brush. But what does Homer care how far he outstrips the painter? Instead of an illustration he gives us the story of the scepter. First it is being made by Vulcan; next it glitters in the hands of Jupiter; now it is a symbol of the dignity of Mercury; now it is the martial wand of the warlike Pelops; now it is the shepherd’s staff of the peaceful Atreus, etc.

And so finally I know this scepter better than if a painter were to place it before my eyes or a second Vulcan in my very hands. I should not be surprised if I found that one of the ancient commentators on Homer had praised this passage as being the most perfect allegory of the origin, development, strengthen-

3 [Ibid., I. 246.]
4 Ibid., II. 101-108.
ing, and ultimate hereditary succession of royal power among men. I should smile, to be sure, if I were to read that the forger of the scepter, Vulcan, as the personification of fire, of that which is most important to man’s preservation, represented the alleviation of all those general wants which induced the first men to submit to a single ruler. Or if I were to read that the first king, a son of Time (Zeüs Krónion), was a venerable patriarch who was willing to share with or even relinquish his power entirely to an eloquent and able man, a Mercury (Διακτόρφ 'Αργείφοντη). Or that the clever orator, at a time when the young nation was threatened by foreign enemies, handed over his authority to the bravest warrior (Πέλοπι πληκτίτιφι). And that the brave warrior, after he had subdued the enemy and secured the realm, could manipulate this power into his son’s hands; who in turn, and as a peace-loving regent and benevolent shepherd of his people (πολύφιν λαών), brought them prosperity and superabundance, and at whose death the way was paved for the richest of his relatives (πολυφρι θεότη) to appropriate by means of gifts and bribes, and afterwards to secure for his family as if it were a property he had purchased, that which only confidence had bestowed before and merit had considered a burden rather than an honor. I should smile at all this, but it would strengthen my regard for the poet to whom so much can be attributed. But this is not my present concern, and I am regarding the history of the scepter merely as an artistic device, by means of which the poet causes us to linger over a single object without entering into a tiring description of its parts.

Again, when Achilles swears by his scepter to avenge the contemptuous way in which Agamemnon treated him, Homer gives us the history of this scepter. We see it verdant on the hills; the iron divides it from the trunk, deprives it of its leaves and bark and renders it suitable to serve the judges of the people as a symbol of their godlike dignity.⁵

⁵ Ibid., IV[Π]. 234-239.
Homer was not so much concerned with describing two staffs of differing shape and material, as to give us a clear image of the difference in power which the two staffs symbolized. The one the work of Vulcan; the other, cut from the mountainside by some unknown hand. The one an ancient possession of a noble house; the other destined to fit the hand of any who might chance to grasp it. The one wielded by a monarch over many islands and over all of Argos; the other held by one from the midst of the Greeks, to whom, with others, the guardianship of the laws had been entrusted. This was the real difference between Agamemnon and Achilles; a difference which Achilles himself, in spite of all his blind rage, could not help but acknowledge.

But it is not only where Homer combines such further aims with his descriptions that he disperses the image of his object over a kind of history of it; he does this also where his sole object is to show us the picture, in order that its parts which in nature we find side by side may follow one another in his description just as naturally, and keep pace, as it were, with the progress of the narrative. For example, he wishes to show us the bow of Pandarus: a bow of horn, of such and such a length, well polished and tipped, on both ends with gold. What does he do? Does he dryly enumerate all these things, one after the other? Far from it! That would be to show us such a bow and to describe how it was to be made, but not to paint it. He begins with the wild goat hunt, from whose horns the bow was made. Pandarus had lain in wait for the goat in the rocks and had killed it. The horns were of an extraordinary size, and for that reason he ordered them to be made into a bow. The work on the bow begins, the artisan joins
the horns together, polishes them and tips them with metal. And so, as I have said, we see in the poet’s work the origin and formation of that which in the picture we can only behold as completed and formed.  

If I were to set down all the examples of this sort, I should never finish the task. They will occur in great number to everyone who is familiar with his Homer:

He drew, holding at once the grooves and ox-hide bowstring and brought the string against his nipple, iron to the bowstave. But when he had pulled the great weapon till it made a circle, the bow groaned, and the string sang high, and the arrow, sharp-pointed, leapt away, furious, to fly through the throng before it."

*(Iliad IV. 105ff., tr. Lattimore)*

**NOTES, CHAPTER SIXTEEN**

**Note a, p. 79**

[Lessing's play on the words "palette" (*der Farb[en]stein*, literally "color-stone") and "touchstone" (*der Probierstein*, literally "testing-stone") is untranslatable, and the irony of the lines is unfortunately much weaker in the English version. The translation of *Farbstein* as "palette" is somewhat free, since the word actually means "pigment cake," or, in Lessing's time, the stone on which the painter prepared his colors.]

**Note b, p. 80**

["Then Hebe in speed set about the chariot the curved wheels eight-spoked and brazen, with an axle of iron both ways. Golden is the wheel's felly imperishable, and outside it is joined, a wonder to look upon, the brazen running-rim, and the silver naves revolve on either side of the chariot, whereas the car itself is lashed fast with plaiting of gold and silver, with double chariot rails that circle about it, and the pole of the chariot is of silver, to whose extremity Hebe made fast the golden and splendid yoke, and fastened the harness, golden and splendid, . . ." *(Iliad V. 722-31, tr. Lattimore)*]
"... and put on his tunic, beautiful, fresh woven, and threw the great mantle over it. Underneath his shining feet he bound the fair sandals and across his shoulders slung the sword with the nails of silver, and took up the sceptre of his fathers, immortal forever."

(Iliad II. 43-47, tr. Lattimore)

"... Powerful Agamemnon stood up holding the sceptre Hephaistos had wrought him carefully. Hephaistos gave it to Zeus the king, the son of Kronos, and Zeus in turn gave it to the courier Argeiphontes, and Lord Hermes gave it to Pelops, driver of horses and Pelops again gave it to Atreus, the shepherd of the people. Atreus dying left it to Thyestes of the rich flocks, and Thyestes left it in turn to Agamemnon to carry and to be lord of many islands and over all Argos."

(Iliad II. 101-8, tr. Lattimore)

"in the name of this sceptre, which never again will bear leaf nor branch, now that it has left behind the cut stump in the mountains, nor shall it ever blossom again, since the bronze blade stripped bark and leafage, and now at last the sons of the Achaians carry it in their hands in state when they administer
the justice of Zeus. And this shall be a great oath before you: ..."

(Iliad I. 234-39, tr. Lattimore]

Note f, p. 84

["Straightway he unwrapped his bow, of the polished horn from a running wild goat he himself had shot in the chest once, lying in wait for the goat in a covert as it stepped down from the rock, and hit it in the chest so it sprawled on the boulders. The horns that grew from the goat's head were sixteen palms' length. A bowyer working on the horn then bound them together, smoothing them to a fair surface, and put on a golden string hook."

(Iliad IV. 105-11, tr. Lattimore]

NOTES, CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Note a, p. 87

[The two strophes which Lessing quotes are taken from a well-known poem, Die Alpen ("The Alps"), by Albrecht von Haller (1708-77). Von Haller was a Swiss botanist and physician who became a professor of medicine and botany at the University of Göttingen. From early youth he wrote poetry and considered Virgil his ideal. Die Alpen, which appeared in 1732, betrays the influence of Thomson without, however, really achieving the poetic quality of the "Seasons." Von Haller, like