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BEFORE YOUR VERY EYES: PLINY *EPISTULAE* 5.6  
AND THE ANCIENT THEORY OF EKPHRASIS

CHRISTOPHER M. CHINN

NOWADAYS THE WORD ekphrasis is frequently used to denote the rhetorical or literary description of works of visual art.<sup>1</sup> In the ancient world, however, its meaning was much broader, encompassing descriptions of all types, usually characterized by the common feature of vividness (*enargeia* in Greek; *evidentia* or *perspicuitas* in Latin).<sup>2</sup> In this paper I will argue that Pliny *Ep.* 5.6 contains a significant perspective on the ancient concept of ekphrasis, a concept that has in many ways shaped the modern use of the word. Ultimately I will suggest that this letter's interest in description is motivated by the existence in Pliny's time of a conception of ekphrasis that is more "modern" than we might have expected. In other words, the sophistication of Pliny's discussion seems to have quite a bit in common with modern theories of ekphrasis in spite of the fact that he, like most other writers in antiquity, does not limit the term to descriptions of works of art.

Although the word ekphrasis nowhere appears in the letter, Pliny's villa description constitutes a unique intertextual nexus of ideas associated with the term. *Ep.* 5.6 contains an epistolary introduction (1–3), a long description of Pliny's Tuscan villa (4–40), a digression that reflects on this description (41–44), and a brief conclusion (44–46). A cursory reading of the letter shows, first, that Pliny's self-reflective digression articulates a kind of theory of description and, second, that the extended villa description puts into practice

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1. Webb (1999) argues that the definition of ekphrasis as description of art objects appears to stem from 1950s accounts such as Spitzer (1955, 72) and Hagstrum (1958, p. 18, n. 34). Much earlier, however, Friedländer (1912, 83–85) had criticized this kind of definition. More recent formulations of the art-object definition of ekphrasis may be observed in Heffernan (1993, 3) and Clüver (1998, 36). Classicists too have employed such a definition, either explicitly or implicitly: Palm (1965–66, 108–17) acknowledges that ekphrasis is not limited to art objects, but limits his own discussion to them. Manakidou (1993, 4), Becker (1995, 2), and Elsner (2004, p. 157 and n. 1) do the same. Putnam (1998, p. 1, n. 1) explicitly avoids defining ekphrasis but discusses Virgil's descriptions of art objects nonetheless.

2. It appears that the only places in antiquity where the term ekphrasis is specifically associated with descriptions of works of art are in the late rhetorician Nicolaus of Myra (3.492.10–18 Spengel) and the late prose ekphrasis of Philostratus and Callistratus. For the *progymnasmata*, see Kennedy 2000; for Philostratus' ekphrasis, see Anderson 1986, 259–82. On the issue of definition, see especially Webb (1999), who critiques the "art definition" of ekphrasis and details how the term was actually used in antiquity. For other valuable discussions of the term, see Graf 1995; Fowler 1991; Bartsch 1989, 3–39; and Downey 1959.

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many aspects of this “theory.” By examining the intertextual associations constituted in the letter I will argue that Pliny’s descriptive discourse (both theoretical and in practice) synthesizes much of what is written about ekphrasis both in antiquity and today. Specifically I will try to establish that (1) Pliny refers directly to ancient theories of ekphrasis through his particular use of terminology, and (2) in so doing he presents a kind of “history” of the trope. In this way *Ep.* 5.6 represents not just a particular manifestation of ekphrastic theory but an important constitutive element of it. Before proceeding, however, let me briefly survey some recent trends in Plinian scholarship so that we can see how my approach contributes to the understanding of the letter.

Recent scholarship has emphasized the fact that Pliny’s villa descriptions (specifically *Ep.* 2.17 and 5.6) do not provide enough information about the houses for us to be able to reconstruct accurate floor plans of them.<sup>3</sup> As a consequence, scholars have searched for alternative reasons as to why Pliny would have written about his villas in the way he does. If, in other words, we cannot fully conceptualize the physical details of the house from a description of it, the description must have some other purpose. One possible explanation is that the letters reflect contemporary rhetorical practices and theories, and the villa letters in particular may be said to constitute rhetorical *laudes locorum* or *descriptiones regionum*.<sup>4</sup> Another approach is to read the letters as rhetorically constituting Roman aristocratic ideologies or identities: the description of a beautiful house is actually a kind of political metaphor delineating a Roman aristocratic lifestyle.<sup>5</sup> A third approach has been to view the villa letters as reflecting Pliny’s anxiety concerning his own wealth within the Roman rhetorical abhorrence for ostentation.<sup>6</sup> A fourth approach is to take the villa descriptions literally, but to examine the way in which space and (especially) time themselves are constituted culturally in the letters, instead of looking for specific floor plans.<sup>7</sup>

All of the approaches I have just outlined provide rich new contexts for understanding Pliny’s villa descriptions, and, in the course of such analyses, scholars have paid some attention to the relationship between Pliny’s villa descriptions and ancient notions of ekphrasis.<sup>8</sup> I am unaware, however, of any attempt to take the initial step of reading Pliny’s self-reflective digression as a theory of description. Since this passage appears to comment upon the descriptive practice of the letter, it deserves to be read as theoretical discourse.

3. For this scholarly tradition in general, see DuPrey 1994, *passim*. See also Sherwin-White 1966, 188; Bergmann 1995, 408–10; and Riggsby 2003, 167.

4. For such a reading see Gamberini 1983, 141–43, on the basis of Quint. *Inst.* 4.3.12.

5. See, e.g., Leach 1990 with the response of Riggsby 1997. Cf. these with Henderson 2002, 13–14. Henderson (2003, 120–24) also expands on the notion that the villas and the letters that describe them are enactments of self-modeling on Pliny’s part. Hales (2003, 46–47) argues that the Roman *domus* (in contrast to the Roman villa) also constitutes a locus of identity.

6. Hoffer 1999, 29–44. Cf. also Hales 2003, 20–23, on the connection between villas and ostentatious lifestyles.

7. Riggsby 2003.

8. See, e.g., Bergmann 1995, 407–9; Gamberini 1983, 141–43 and 295–97.

I am also unaware of any attempt to demonstrate the significance of Pliny's own contribution in *Ep.* 5.6 to the ancient theory of ekphrasis. The villa letters themselves seem to demand this sort of interpretation because of the simple fact that they contain extended descriptions of place, a practice reflected in ancient accounts of ekphrasis.<sup>9</sup> No matter how architecturally unsatisfactory, or how politically metaphorical, these descriptions appear to be, they still contain numerous details that serve to give the reader some idea of what the actual house is like. And the accumulation of these details deserves explanation. My project, therefore, seeks not simply to place Pliny's villa description within the context of ancient discussions of ekphrasis, but to emphasize the importance of this letter to our understanding of those very discussions.

The ancient concept of ekphrasis, as we have noted, encompasses descriptions of all types, and consequently ekphrasis can take several different forms. We will see, however, that a persistent feature of ancient ekphrasis is the quality of narrative vividness (*enargeia*), that is, the ability of ekphrastic language to create the illusion that the absent object of description is actually present in discourse.<sup>10</sup> We will also see that, apparently in conformity with this rule, Pliny is concerned to establish an intimate relationship between the actual villa he is describing and his description of it.<sup>11</sup> Let us proceed, then, by comparing the ancient definitions of ekphrasis with Pliny's descriptive practice.

In the only extant definitions of ekphrasis (as a technical term) that survive from antiquity, emphasis is placed upon the ability of the describing text to create the illusion that the described object is actually present to the audience or reader. The earliest such definition, roughly contemporary with Pliny, may be found in the *progymnasmata* of Aelius Theon. This set of elementary rhetorical exercises includes an exercise entitled "ekphrasis" for which the following definition is given:<sup>12</sup>

ἔκφρασις ἐστὶ λόγος περιηγηματικὸς ἐναργῶς ὑπ' ὄψιν ἄγων τὸ δηλούμενον.

Ekphrasis is descriptive speech, bringing what is portrayed clearly before the sight.

What is immediately apparent here is that Theon's definition implies a tropic distinction whereby ekphrasis, a trope, differs from ordinary language in

9. The rhetorical *progymnasmata* (discussed below) refer to a subtype of ekphrasis called ἔκφρασις τόπων. Aphthonius, in his *progymnasmata*, provides as an example of this an extended description of buildings in Alexandria (2.47.9–49.12 Spengel). Quintilian's *laudes locorum* (*Inst.* 4.3.12) could be a variant of this type. Some other descriptions of place in Pliny: 2.17 (the Laurentine villa); 4.30 (a spring); 6.16 and 6.20 (eruption of Vesuvius); 8.8 (source of a river); 8.17 (flooding in Rome); 8.20 (an estate at Ameria).

10. Cf. Elsner (2004, 157–58), who emphasizes how ekphrasis "mediates" between seer/object and speaker/hearer.

11. On this characteristic of Pliny's narrative, see Bergmann 1995, 409–10, and, indirectly, Myers 2000, 108–11.

12. Theon *Progymnasmata* 2.118.7–8 Spengel (trans. Kennedy 2000). The other extant *progymnasmata* (Aphthonius, Pseudo-Hermogenes, and Nicolaus of Myra) contain nearly identical definitions. The meaning of the technical terms within the discussions of ekphrasis in the *progymnasmata* is discussed by Zanker 1981. For the connection between the *progymnasmata* and rhetorical theory generally, see Henderson 1991. On the wider influence of the *progymnasmata*, see Clark 1952.

that it appeals to the sight.<sup>13</sup> This fundamental distinction is clarified a little later on in Theon's account (*Progymnasmata* 2.119.27–29 Spengel):

ἀρεταὶ δὲ ἐκφράσεως αἶδε, σαφήνεια μὲν μάλιστα καὶ ἐνάργεια τοῦ σχεδὸν ὁρᾶσθαι τὰ ἀπαγγελλόμενα . . .

The virtues of ekphrasis are as follows: most of all, clarity and a vivid impression of all-but-seeing what is described. (trans. Kennedy 2000)

In this passage it is evident that Theon does not conceive of ekphrasis as actually being able to bring absent objects “before the eyes” of listeners. What is apparent is that certain textual qualities, namely, clearness (σαφήνεια) and vividness (ἐνάργεια), can produce the illusion of such an effect. I will examine the particulars of this definition and its bearing on Pliny's villa descriptions in more detail below, but for now it suffices to note that, at least according to Theon's *progymnasmata*, ekphrasis should create the illusion that a listener almost sees the object being described, and hence is almost transported to its presence. What I would like to do at this point is to examine the ways in which Pliny's villa description engages with the problem of how to get his readers to “see” what he is describing. In particular I will look at how Pliny's descriptive practice blurs the distinction between his description and that which is being described.

In *Ep.* 5.6, Pliny emphasizes the intimate relationship between his description and that which is described by essentially equating the act of describing (and reading about) the villa with an actual visit to it. This may be seen most clearly in the theoretical digression (5.6.41):

vitasset iam dudum ne viderer argutior, nisi proposuissem omnes angulos tecum epistula circumire. neque enim verebar ne laboriosum esset legenti tibi, quod visenti non fuisset, praesertim cum interquiescere, si liberet, depositaque epistula quasi residere saepius posses. praeterea indulsi amori meo; amo enim, quae maxima ex parte ipse incohavi aut incohata percolui.

I should have been trying long ago not to say too much, had I not suggested that this letter should take you into every corner of the place. I don't imagine you will find it tiresome to read about a spot which could hardly tire you on a visit, especially as you have more opportunities if you want an occasional rest, and can take a seat, so to speak, by putting down the letter. Besides, I have been indulging the love I have for all the places I have largely laid out myself or where I have perfected an earlier design. (trans. Radice 1963)

Here Pliny apologizes for the excessive length of his description, and justifies it by appealing to the fact that since visiting the villa is clearly worthwhile (as is vouchsafed by the existence of a description of it), a fortiori a description of the villa is even more worthwhile, since the reader can take a break from the description at his leisure, something that evidently cannot be done

13. Philostratus' *Eikones*, themselves characterized as ekphraseis (Philostr. *Iun.* 390K), seem to emphasize the contrast between seeing and reading. On this see Bryson 1994 and my discussion in the conclusion below. On the nature of tropes, see Conte 1986, 23–24 and 38–39.

during the physical tour.<sup>14</sup> This witty (if specious) argument serves to juxtapose the act of reading about the villa with actually visiting it: note the contrast *legenti/visenti*. Indeed Pliny employs the metaphor *quasi residere* in connection with the act of *reading* (the circumstances: *deposita epistula*), and hence strikingly mingles this act with a real sightseeing tour of the villa, during which one could properly “sit down” and take a break. For Pliny, the letter does not present a substantially different perceptual experience of the villa than the actual tour does. The principal difference is (evidently) that the letter is a less insistent tour guide than Pliny-in-the-flesh. Informing this ironic privileging of the textual over the sensual experience (i.e., Pliny’s playful explanation as to why we should read his letter) is the basic juxtaposition of these two terms. Pliny understates the value of the real tour in order to emphasize the value of his description. Yet the description can only be so (ironically) overvalued within an established relationship between itself and the real tour. At some level, in other words, Pliny is sincerely affirming the value of the connection between his text and “reality.” Moreover, this rhetoric of verisimilitude seems appropriate enough, given the epistolary context. According to ancient discussions of letter writing, one function of a letter is to create the illusion that the writer and the addressee are in the physical presence of one another.<sup>15</sup> What I would argue here, though, is that Pliny’s villa description goes beyond mere epistolary self-referentiality and addresses the problem of description and representation itself.

This last point becomes clear in the main body of the letter’s theoretical section (42–44). Here Pliny continues to blur the distinction between his villa description and the villa it describes by contrasting his own descriptive practice with that of several epic poets. This striking passage is worth quoting at length (5.6.42–44):

[42] in summa (cur enim non aperiā tibi vel iudicium meum vel errorem?) primum ego officium scriptoris existimo, titulum suum legat atque identidem interroget se quid coeperit scribere, sciatque si materiae immoratur non esse longum, longissimum si aliquid accersit atque attrahit. [43] vides quot versibus Homerus, quot Vergilius arma hic Aeneae Achillis ille describat; brevis tamen uterque est quia facit quod instituit. vides ut Aratus minutissima etiam sidera consecetur et colligat; modum tamen servat. non enim excursus hic eius, sed opus ipsum est. [44] similiter nos ut “parva magnis,” cum totam villam oculis tuis subicere conamur, si nihil inductum et quasi devium loquimur, non epistula quae describit sed villa quae describitur magna est.

[42] In short (for why should I not state my opinion, right or wrong?) I think a writer’s first duty is to read his title, to keep asking himself what he sets out to say, and to realize that he will not say too much if he sticks to his theme, though he certainly will if he

14. There is a great deal of irony throughout this passage, not only in this statement but also, e.g., in Pliny’s implicit comparison of himself with Virgil and other epic poets (43–44). I believe, however, that Pliny is fundamentally sincere in asserting that his villa/letter “experience” constitutes something *valuable* (on this see below). Consequently I do not believe that the digression is meant entirely as an ironic gesture of self-positioning.

15. See, e.g., Ps.-Demetr. *Eloc.* 223; Cic. *Fam.* 2.4.1, 12.30.1; Sen. *Ep.* 75.1. For an overview of these accounts, see Malherbe 1988. Perhaps Pliny is varying this tradition when in an obituary he claims to see the dead man (*Verginium video*, 2.1.12).

brings in extraneous matter. [43] You know the number of lines Homer and Virgil devote to their descriptions of the arms of Achilles and Aeneas: yet neither passage seems long because both poets are carrying out their original intention. You see too how Aratus traces and tabulates the smallest stars, but because this is his main subject and not a digression his work does not lack proportion. [44] It is the same with me, if I may “compare small things with great.” I am trying to set my entire house before your eyes, so, if I introduce nothing irrelevant, it is the house I describe which is extensive, not the letter describing it. (trans. Radice 1963)

In these sections Pliny argues that so long as one remains within the compass of one's stated topic, there is no limit to the length of a description: length is irrelevant if one's *titulus* and one's content are consistent. In support of this claim Pliny adduces as examples the epic descriptions of Homer, Virgil, and Aratus (I will discuss this strategy in a little more detail below).<sup>16</sup> Indeed the example of Aratus allows Pliny to argue that extended description is justified if the writer explicitly intends to write descriptively: Aratus' entire poem is intended to be a description, and therefore no one objects to it as such: *non enim excursus hic eius, sed opus ipsum est*. Here Aratus' poem is not only characterized as (totally) descriptive discourse: it is also equated with the very subject matter of that discourse. It is as if reading Aratus' poem is the same as looking at the constellations it describes. Accordingly, as the culminating statement of this argument, Pliny justifies his own practice by saying *non epistula quae describit sed villa quae describitur magna est*. The length of his description, in other words, is only proportionate to the size of the villa itself, which in turn is his stated topic.<sup>17</sup> According to this logic, then, the length of the villa description is aesthetically appropriate. This rhetorical ploy has the further result of effectively equating physical and discursive extent, which in turn serves to blur the distinction between the actual villa and descriptive discourse: Pliny's rhetoric elides the letter's size in the face of the villa's. By blurring the distinction between description and villa, and consequently between reading and seeing, Pliny attempts to create the illusion of the presence of the physical house within the context of reading a letter. On the theoretical level, then, it appears that Pliny construes his villa description in terms of what Roland Barthes has called “the reality effect,” whereby the propagation of details in narrative discourse serves to create the illusion that the referents of discourse are actually present to the reading subject.<sup>18</sup> This reality effect is, as we have seen, the hallmark of the definitions of ekphrasis found in the *progymnasmata*. In terms of its general conceptualization, then, it appears that Pliny's theory of description accords well with the ancient rhetorical concept of ekphrasis.

16. DuPrey (1994, 11) discusses this passage in terms of ekphrasis. As will become clear below, his discussion employs an inadequate definition of the term (8–9), which leads him to the conclusion that Pliny is inventing here a particular subclass of the trope. Henderson (2003, 121–22) reads this passage as a form of Plinian justification of his self-image.

17. Indeed Pliny “proves” his Aratean proposition by privileging his description over his explanation of it. In other words, he relegates his descriptive theory to a digression (*excursus*).

18. Barthes 1986.

Pliny's concern to make the (absent) object of description present in his descriptive discourse may be seen in practice in the letter in a couple of ways. First, in the actual villa description we find the rhetorical attempt to present the reader of the letter with a visual perspective on the villa.<sup>19</sup> Pliny thoroughly "confuses" the act of visiting his property and reading about it when he dilates on the beauty of the surrounding countryside (5.6.13):

magnam capies voluptatem, si hunc regionis situm ex monte prospexeris. neque enim terras tibi sed formam aliquam ad eximiam pulchritudinem pictam videberis cernere: ea varietate, ea descriptione, quocumque inciderint oculi, reficientur.

It is a great pleasure to look down on the countryside from the mountain, for the view seems to be a painted scene of unusual beauty rather than a real landscape, and the harmony to be found in this variety refreshes the eye wherever it turns. (trans. Radice 1963)

Notice Pliny's final statement here: the scenery is like a painting (*formam . . . pictam*), and the viewer's eyes will be "restored" not only by its variety but also by its description (*descriptio*).<sup>20</sup> Through this striking metaphor Pliny effectively places the acts of viewing and reading in the same category. What Pliny seems to be doing here is once again mingling the prospective act of actually visiting his villa with the act of reading a description of it.<sup>21</sup> A viewer's eyes are depicted in the text as looking around at the scenery, and yet these eyes are themselves somehow affected by the textual description of this very scenery: scenery, that is, which is likened to a painting (a representation). In this way visual and descriptive acts are merged into a single perceptual experience.

The second way in which Pliny attempts to blur the distinction between his description and the villa he describes is by placing emphasis upon the villa's own "textual" qualities. As both Sara Myers and Bettina Bergmann have pointed out, Pliny presents his villas as texts to be read.<sup>22</sup> A good example of this may be seen in his description of the gardens: in them are located several hedges that have been pruned into, among other things, the shapes of letters and words, including Pliny's own name (5.6.35):

alibi pratulum, alibi ipsa buxus intervenit in formas mille descripta, litteras interdum, quae modo nomen domini dicunt modo artificis: alternis metulae surgunt, alternis inserta sunt poma, et in opere urbanissimo subita velut illati ruris imitatio. medium spatium brevioribus utrimque platanis adornatur. post has acanthus hinc inde lubricus et flexuosus, deinde plures figurae pluraque nomina.

19. Riggsby (2003, 171–72) argues that Pliny is attempting to reproduce a kind of perceptual experience by describing the villa in terms of "qualitative space."

20. Most uses of the term *descriptio* listed in *TLL* refer to descriptions, frequently written. In Cicero's philosophical works the term can mean something like "schema" (*TLL* II.D), which does not seem applicable here. Pliny himself refers to certain digressions in one of his speeches as *descriptiones locorum* (*Ep.* 2.5.5). Henderson (2003, 121) argues that in our passage (5.6.13) "Pliny turns his home into the image of his writings, the *Letters*."

21. Henderson (2002, 20) notes that this passage also implies the artistic creator of this "picture," namely, Pliny himself. This implicit metaphor (Pliny-as-visual artist) may be seen as a fleshing out of Pliny's overall textualization of the visual in the letter.

22. Myers 2000, 127, and Bergmann 1995, 410. Cf. Henderson 2003, 121. Baroin (1998) discusses how Roman houses could be textualized as mnemonic devices for oratory. Henderson (2004, 142–44) discusses the interaction of the visual and textual in Seneca's villa descriptions.



Between the grass lawns here there are box shrubs clipped into innumerable shapes, some being letters which spell the gardener's name or his master's; small obelisks of box alternate with fruit trees, and then suddenly in the midst of this ornamental scene is what looks like a piece of rural country planted there. The open space in the middle is set off by low plane trees planted on each side; farther off are acanthuses with their flexible glossy leaves, then more box figures and names. (trans. Radice 1963)

Literally fashioned into discourse, the gardens of the villa offer themselves as a textual supplement to an actual tour, mirroring the role of Pliny's own description. Notice how the box hedge is said to be "disposed (*descripta*) into a thousand forms." Pliny is perhaps playing on the meaning of the adjective *descripta* in order to refer to the representational qualities of both the hedge and the letter describing it. We could compare this passage with 5.6.13 (quoted above), in which Pliny states that the eye of the reader/viewer will be refreshed by the *descriptio* of the landscape. In any case it is clear that Pliny's playful language serves to mix up our notions of the visual and the textual: just as the visual aspect of the villa may be said to infect Pliny's narrative, so also the textual qualities of his narrative become assimilated into the landscape. In fact the gardens described in this passage are said to present an imitation of the natural surroundings of the villa (*ruris imitatio*), which again emphasizes their representational nature. But by figuring the gardens as representational, Pliny implicitly compares them to the representational qualities of his own descriptive text.

I argued earlier that Pliny's theoretical statements in this letter appear to recall in general terms the prescriptions for ekphrasis found in the *progymnasmata*. We can see this connection more clearly when we examine in detail how Pliny's terminology overlaps with Quintilian's and, ultimately, that of the *progymnasmata*. In looking at his theoretical digression we saw that Pliny overtly compares his villa description with the actual experience of visiting the villa. We recall that after comparing his own descriptive discourse with that of Homer, Virgil, and Aratus, Pliny characterizes his letter as an attempt "to place the entire villa before your eyes" (*totam villam oculis tuis subicere*, 5.6.44). It seems clear that the phrases *subicere oculis* and *subiectio sub oculos* have a pedigree as a technical term of rhetoric. Cicero (*Or.* 139, quoted by Quintilian at *Inst.* 9.1.45) contrasts the act of "putting the matter before the audience's eyes" (*saepe etiam rem dicendo subiciet oculis*) and brevity, thus rendering it a kind of trope of amplification.<sup>23</sup> For Cicero, the trope is useful to achieve emotional impact in speaking. Gellius also appears to be using the phrase in this sense.<sup>24</sup> Variations on the phrase *subicere oculis* occur frequently in historians in a less technical sense of

23. We might compare here Pliny's characterization of *descriptiones locorum* as a form of amplification, contrasted with brevity (2.5.5).

24. *at cum in simili causa apud M. Tullium cives Romani, innocentes viri, contra ius contraque leges virgis caeduntur aut supplicio extremo necantur, quae ibi tunc miseratio? quae comploratio? quae totius rei sub oculis subiectio? quod et quale atque acerbitatis fretum effervescit?* (NA 10.3.7).

vivid presentation.<sup>25</sup> Pliny himself uses the phrase in this sense at *Ep.* 4.1.3, where he writes to his father-in-law that he is going to stop at his Tuscan villa to take care of some business, not to “put it before the eyes”: *non ut agros remque familiarem oculis subiciamus*.<sup>26</sup> Here Pliny appears simply to be using the phrase as periphrasis for seeing. I will argue that Pliny in his villa description in *Ep.* 5.6 is using the phrase *subicere oculis* in a technical sense, and that in particular he is following his teacher Quintilian in his discussion of vivid narration and description in the *Institutio Oratoria*. Let us therefore look in detail at what Quintilian has to say about *sub oculos subiectio* (*Inst.* 9.2.40–43):<sup>27</sup>

illa vero, ut ait Cicero, sub oculos subiectio tum fieri solet cum res non gesta indicatur sed ut sit gesta ostenditur, nec universa sed per partis: quem locum proximo libro subiecimus evidētiaē. et Celsus hoc nomen isti figurae dedit: ab aliis hypotyposis dicitur, proposita quaedam forma rerum ita expressa verbis ut cerni potius videantur quam audiri.

With regard to the figure which Cicero calls *ocular demonstration*, this comes into play when we do not restrict ourselves to mentioning that something was done, but proceed to show how it was done, and do so not merely on broad general lines, but in full detail. In the last book I classified this figure under the head of *vivid illustration*, while Celsus actually terms it by this name. Others give the name of hypotyposis to any representation of facts which is made in such vivid language that they appeal to the eye rather than the ear. (trans. Butler 1921–22)

For Quintilian, the term *sub oculos subiectio* denotes vivid description, and Pliny’s allusion to this phrase in his villa description seems appropriate enough. The initial part of the definition states that the object of description is shown not as a whole but through its parts (*nec universa sed per partis*). Obviously the villa descriptions emphasize details: in *Ep.* 5.6 Pliny says he has proposed to go through every corner of the villa (*omnes angulos . . . circumire*, 41). Hence the modern preoccupation with deriving a floor plan from the letter. Quintilian’s definition also states that *sub oculos subiectio* occurs when something is described not as static and complete, but in the process of becoming (*cum res non gesta indicatur sed ut sit gesta ostenditur*). We could argue that Pliny’s villa descriptions, since they purport to provide tours of his houses, present each villa as an unfolding perceptual process.<sup>28</sup> In other words, we appreciate the villa as a completed building only by experiencing it bit by bit. On both counts it appears that both of Pliny’s villa descriptions present the qualities evinced in Quintilian’s definition of *sub oculos subiectio*. In fact, Pliny’s descriptive practice in general seems to

25. See, e.g., Livy 3.69.2, 7.11.6, 8.32.12, 25.24.11, 27.26.10, 30.11.3, 37.26.6, 40.21.2, 42.13.1, 44.3.8, Val. Max. 2.5.5, 3.5.1, 4.6.praef., 7.2.2, 5.2.praef.

26. Cf. 8.20.1: *ad quae noscenda iter ingredi, transmittere mare solemus, ea sub oculis posita negligimus*. . . .

27. On this passage, and the terminology contained therein, see Zanker 1981, 298–300; Scholz 1998; and Leach 1988, 13–18. Cf. also Vasaly 1993, 19–20, and Bartsch 1989, 7–10.

28. Riggsby (2003) argues that the villa descriptions contain the owner’s general experience and do not present a specific tour. Nevertheless, the descriptions still present the experience in serial fashion.

conform to this definition, a fact that may be seen simply by looking at his other descriptions of place. A particularly striking example is Pliny's description of a spring near Lake Como and the stream issuing from it (*Ep.* 4.30).<sup>29</sup> Here Pliny naturally enough describes the stream in a serial narration as it tumbles down the hillside, emphasizing details as he goes, and all the while employing the vivid narrative present tense. Vivid narration, as defined by Quintilian, seems to be a hallmark of Plinian descriptive practice, especially when he describes places.

I would like, however, to focus more specifically upon Quintilian's contrast between seeing and hearing in his definition of *sub oculos subiectio*, and how Pliny seems to echo this contrast in the "theoretical" section of *Ep.* 5.6. Now we have seen how Pliny blurs the distinction between his descriptive discourse and that which is described in order to create the illusion of the described object's presence in the text: reading about the villa is the same as visiting it (5.6.41). We also find that Quintilian's definition of the term *sub oculos subiectio*, quoted above, contains the same idea. Quintilian tells us that *sub oculos subiectio* is characterized by the illusion of the presence of the object of description: we are told that the trope makes us almost see what we are really hearing. This is evident in the contrasts in this passage between ideas of seeing and hearing: *indicitur/ostenditur* and *cernilaudiri*. The similarity of contexts suggests that Pliny is using a technical term from Quintilian, a term which, we shall see, is defined much as ekphrasis is defined in the *progymnasmata*. Thus Pliny would appear to be using Latin terms associated with concepts which are in turn associated with ekphrasis.

Let me elaborate a bit the connection between Quintilian and the *progymnasmata* so that we can establish a basis for comparing Pliny's descriptions and the ancient concept of ekphrasis. First of all, as Ian Henderson has pointed out, it is likely that Quintilian either had access to the *progymnasmata* or was working within the same set of educational precepts as they were.<sup>30</sup> Therefore it is likely that Quintilian was familiar with the Greek concept of ekphrasis. And as Graham Zanker has argued, this seems supported by Quintilian's discussion of terms associated with his notion of *sub oculos subiectio*. We have seen how the term *enargeia* is integral to the definitions of ekphrasis in the *progymnasmata*. Note the adverb ἐναργῶς in Theon's initial definition (2.118.7–8 Spengel, quoted above), and the abstract noun *enargeia* later on in his account (2.119.27–29 Spengel, also quoted above). At several points in the *Institutio Oratoria*, the Greek word *enargeia* is equated with the Latin word *evidentia*; see, for example, the following passage: *sunt qui adiciant his evidentiam, quae enargeia Graece vocatur* (Quint. *Inst.* 4.2.63; cf. 8.3.61 and 6.2.32). As we have seen in a passage quoted earlier, Quintilian equates *evidentia* with the term *sub oculos subiectio*: he classes the latter under the

29. Cf. especially 8.8 and 8.20. The former letter also seems to juxtapose the acts of seeing the described objects and reading about them: *vidistine aliquando Clitumnum fontem? si nondum (et puto nondum: alioqui narrasses mihi), vide; quem ego (paenitet tarditatis) proxime vidi.*

30. Henderson 1991.

heading of the former (9.2.40). Therefore it appears that the term *enargeia* is associated with both ekphrasis (in the *progymnasmata*) and *sub oculos subiectio* (in Quintilian).<sup>31</sup> Notice, moreover, how in Quintilian's discussion of these terms we encounter the contrast between speaking/hearing and showing/seeing, and how this contrast points to the difference between texts characterized by *evidential enargeia* and "normal" narrative (*Inst.* 6.2.32 and 8.3.61–62):

insequitur enargeia, quae a Cicerone inlustratio et evidentia nominatur, quae non tam dicere videtur quam ostendere, et adfectus non aliter quam si rebus ipsis intersimus sequentur.

From such impressions arises that *enargeia* which Cicero calls *illumination* and *actuality*, which makes us seem not so much to narrate as to exhibit the actual scene, while our emotions will be no less actively stirred than if we were present at the actual occurrence. (trans. Butler 1921–22)

itaque enargeian, cuius in praeceptis narrationis feci mentionem, quia plus est evidentia vel, ut alii dicunt, repraesentatio quam perspicuitas, et illud patet, hoc se quodam modo ostendit, inter ornamenta ponamus. magna virtus res de quibus loquimur clare atque ut cerni videantur enuntiare. non enim satis efficit neque, ut debet, plene dominatur oratio si usque ad aures valet, atque ea sibi iudex de quibus cognoscit narrari credit, non exprimi et oculis mentis ostendi.

Consequently we must place among ornaments that *enargeia* which I mentioned in the rules which I laid down for the statement of facts, because vivid illustration, or, as some prefer to call it, representation, is something more than mere clearness, since the latter merely lets itself be seen, whereas the former thrusts itself upon our notice. It is a great gift to be able to set forth the facts on which we are speaking clearly and vividly. For oratory fails of its full effect, and does not assert itself as it should, if its appeal is merely to the hearing, and if the judge merely feels that the facts on which he has to give his decision are being narrated to him, and not displayed in their living truth to the eyes of the mind. (trans. Butler 1921–22)

The antitheses in these two passages (*dicere/ostendere; narrari/ostendi*) make it clear that for Quintilian too, *enargeia* produces the illusion of seeing what is being narrated. Moreover, as we have seen, the general notion of creating the illusion of the presence of the described object lies behind the term ekphrasis. It appears that Quintilian ascribes this same notion to his concept of *evidentia*. Since *evidentia* is effectively the same concept as *sub oculos subiectio*, it follows both that this latter term and ekphrasis are names for the rhetorical device whereby a "reality effect" is created in descriptive discourse. Therefore it appears likely that ekphrasis and *sub oculos subiectio* refer to the same concept. Pliny's letter is obviously descriptive and, as we have seen, it also strives for a "reality effect" by blurring the distinction between description and that which is described. Thus when Pliny deploys the phrase *oculis tuis subicere* in such a context, he appears to be drawing on the technical rhetorical tradition of ekphrasis.

31. Zanker 1981, 298–99.

In order to assess the direct connection between Pliny and the *progymnasmata*, let us finally examine Pliny's allusion to epic poetry in his theoretical digression. One striking element in the intertext between Pliny's villa description and the concept of ekphrasis is established when Pliny compares his villa description to, *inter alia*, the description of the shield of Achilles in *Iliad* 18. As we have already noted, in order to justify the length of his description, Pliny somewhat speciously appeals to the precedent of Homer and his extended description of Achilles' shield. This allusion has two effects. First it establishes the epic description of shields as a literary topos. From Pliny's perspective, in other words, there is a specific literary type, namely, the epic description of shields, to which his own description can be formally compared. Second, the allusion to the shield also recalls the *progymnasmata*, which are replete with Homeric examples (Theon, *Progymnasmata* 2.118.8–14 Spengel):

γίγνεται δὲ ἐκφρασις προσώπων τε καὶ πραγμάτων καὶ τόπων καὶ χρόνων. προσώπων μὲν οὖν οἷον τὸ Ὀμηρικόν, “γυρὸς ἔην ὤμοις, μελανόχροος, οὐλοκάρηνος.” καὶ τὰ περὶ τοῦ Θερσίτου, “φορκὸς ἔην, χωλὸς δ' ἕτερον πόδα, τὸ δὲ οἱ ὤμῳ κυρτὸ ἐπὶ στῆθος.”

There is ekphrasis of persons and events and places and periods of time. An instance of ekphrasis of persons is, for example, the Homeric line [*Od.* 19.246, of Eurybates], “Round-shouldered, swarthy-skinned, woolly-haired,” and the lines about Thersites [*Il.* 2.217–18], “He was bandy-legged, lame in one foot, and his two shoulders stooped over his chest.” (trans. Kennedy 2000)

Near the beginning of the exercise, Theon provides examples of the various types of ekphrasis from various classic texts. The first set of examples he gives, quoted here, derives from Homer and illustrates the concept of “ekphrasis of persons.” Homer was of course an essential writer in ancient education, and an important source of material in ancient rhetorical training. It makes sense, therefore, that Theon would use Homeric examples in his text. More significant for our purposes, however, is the fact that Theon, a little later on, uses the shield of Achilles as an example of a specific kind of ekphrasis (*Progymnasmata* 2.118.21–24 Spengel):

αἱ δὲ καὶ τρόπων εἰσὶν ἐκφράσεις, ὅποῃ τῶν σκευῶν, καὶ τῶν ὄπλων, καὶ τῶν μηχανημάτων, ὃν τρόπον ἕκαστον παρασκευάσθη. ὥς παρὰ μὲν Ὀμήρῳ ἡ ὀπλοποιία . . .

There are also ekphrases of processes, such as implements and weapons and siege engines, describing how each was made, as the making of the arms [of Achilles] in Homer [*Il.* 18.478–614]. . . . (trans. Kennedy 2000, with modifications)

As Ruth Webb has pointed out, the fact that Theon alludes here to the shield of Achilles has given rise to the modern tendency to figure this Homeric description as the first example of ekphrasis in Western literature.<sup>32</sup> In the context of Theon's *progymnasmata*, however, the shield of Achilles appears merely as an example of a specific kind of ekphrasis (the ekphrasis of *τρόποι*). In the context of Pliny's letter, on the other hand, the allusion to the epic

32. Webb 1999, 7–9.

shields acts as a rhetorical justification for his extended villa description. For Pliny, the shield justifies the fact of description itself, and does not simply exemplify a particular kind of description. Thus Pliny construes the shield of Achilles as the tropological source of his villa description and perhaps of his descriptive practice in general. In doing so, he anticipates the strategy of many modern theories of ekphrasis that attempt to acquire an ancient pedigree for their definitions by positing the shield of Achilles as the first example of the trope.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, by addressing all these issues in a single letter, Pliny effectively incorporates epic shield descriptions, his own villa descriptions, and rhetorical terminology into a single narrative category. This implies a theory of description that is at the same time more specific (as a rhetorical term) and more encompassing (as a term applicable to various literary genres) than those of the *progymnasmata* or the other rhetorical handbooks by themselves.<sup>34</sup>

I started by stating that the ancient concept of ekphrasis is a useful context in which we can read Pliny's villa letters. It should be clear at this point that *Ep.* 5.6 does indeed engage with discussions of ekphrasis on some level. But what is significant about Pliny's descriptive theory is that it contains a nexus of ideas that (1) brings together in a synthesized way the several conceptual strands in the ancient accounts of ekphrasis, and (2) provides in many ways an ancient basis for the modern critical use of the term. We should note here that Pliny does not limit his conception of ekphrasis to the description of works of art, and therefore does not explicitly anticipate this feature of modern critical practice. Nevertheless, it seems clear that in many other respects Pliny's descriptive "theory" in *Ep.* 5.6 writes a kind of history of ekphrasis as a technical term that finds echoes in modern accounts of the concept. This may be seen in at least three ways. First, Pliny conceives of ekphrasis not simply as a rhetorical exercise that can draw on authors such as Homer for inspiration, but as a literary trope that begins with Homer and extends down to Pliny's own time. In other words, Homer becomes the origin of the trope (or perhaps even of the later subgenre) and his poetry is included in its development. Homer is not just source material to be exploited in the later *progymnasmata* but is their generic antecedent. We have seen how this sort of account is common in standard works on ekphrasis that generally refer to the shield of Achilles as the first example of the term. Taken the other way, this observation leads to my second point, namely, the fact that Pliny's synchronic account posits the Homeric shield of Achilles as the source of all ekphrastic types. This may be contrasted with Theon's *progymnasmata*, which views Achilles' shield as a example of a single subtype of ekphrasis (ἐκφρασὶς τρόπων). Pliny, on the other hand, views descriptive passages in all types of epic poetry, descriptive epistles, and (presumably) rhetorical exercises in description as being instances of the same concept. As we have seen, most

33. See, e.g., Heffernan 1993, 9–45, and Hagstrum 1958, 19–22. For the supposed relationship between ekphrasis and epic poetry in general, see Kurman 1974.

34. For an example in a non-elementary rhetorical handbook, see Dion. Hal. *Rhet.* 10.17.

modern accounts of ekphrasis assume that the term refers to identifiable passages in all kinds of literature. Thus Pliny, by exploiting Latin technical terms that appear to be equivalent to ekphrasis, appears to be widening the applicability of the concept to a variety of literary types.

Third, we can perhaps connect Pliny's practice of "confusing" textual and visual entities with the later *Eikones* (prose descriptions of paintings) of Philostratus, and with the earlier tradition in Hellenistic epigram of describing, among other things, statues and paintings. Norman Bryson has argued that Philostratus often reaches a point in his descriptions of paintings where language breaks down and the narrator must simply exclaim, "Look!"<sup>35</sup> This constitutes the revelation of a moment when the description and described object merge into one, much like Pliny's textual topiaries. Simon Goldhill has argued that Hellenistic epigrams that describe works of art dramatize the act of interpreting visual representations, and in so doing comment upon the interdependency of narrative and iconic "messages."<sup>36</sup> Interpretation, as a form of text or discourse, must present itself as a supplement to visual representation, while at the same time visual representation must offer itself up to language to be imbued with meaning. Pliny, by mingling villa description and the described villa, seems to be striving toward a similar effect. In this way, then, Pliny perhaps anticipates the underlying problem of representation inherent in descriptions of works of art. In other words, by focusing on the interrelation of the textual and the visual, Pliny's "theory" reflects Hellenistic epigram while it looks forward to the prose ekphraseis of the Second Sophistic and, ultimately, to the modern definition of ekphrasis as the description of works of art.

Thus it is both the presence in Pliny's text of the synchronic continuity between the shield of Achilles and the later evolution of technical terminology, and the fact that he explores the issues of representation in description, that demonstrate the significance of the letter's conception of description. Indeed the juxtaposition of all these issues marks out Pliny's theory as an important moment in the history of ekphrasis as it is construed in modern works on the concept. Again, the epistolary context of his descriptive "theory" (41–44), and its engagement with rhetoric and poetry, shows how specifically he conceived of ekphrasis as a technical term applicable to all kinds of literary contexts. Pliny's theory of description seems "modern" to me precisely because it seems to reflect a developed concept of literary criticism. We have in this letter a technical term derived from the rhetorical handbooks and applied both in theory to poetry and in practice in Pliny's own descriptions. Thus, instead of employing the "floor-plan model" to read Pliny's villa letters, we might better understand them as negotiating the problem of description in a way that is meaningful to both ancient and modern literary criticism.

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35. Bryson 1994.

36. Goldhill 1994.

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