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Reflective Discourse and the Augustan Paradigm: The Origins of Modern Critical Debate

Abstract: Reader–response criticism and cultural studies are two very popular, and very diverse in their objectives, modern theoretical approaches of cultural output. Both have been employed widely since the Age of Augustus to contextualize cultural products and offer the possibility of rival alternative readings. Both presuppose close, slow and careful reading. In the present chapter, I will discuss how this process of critical, culturally determined response has been articulated in emblematic literary passages of the Augustan Age. The Augustan tradition of layered reading builds on a well-established tradition of contextualization and interpretation that originates in Roman comedy and sets in motion an intellectual process that has directed a systematic process of reframing and revising complex intertextual narratives.

Keywords: ekphrasis, intertextuality, reflective discourse, topographic memory

1 Introduction

To all those who believe in the Bloomian idea of the reflective quality of all cultural production, the "future" as perceived by people across the centuries, who share the cultural products of western education, has been and will continue to be founded on a system of contextualization principles methodologically determined by the Classics. The core of this system is "close reading",[1] which is combined with reflection and purports to the creation of interpretative frameworks which allow the subject under interpretation to transcend the limitations of time and the cultural momentum it meant to serve upon conception, and become a meaningful narrative

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1 "Close" reading is a presupposition for most recent interpretative trends: reader–response theorists engage in close readings of texts as they build interpretations based on the reader's personal response to the text. Close reading enables deconstructionists to identify inherent contradictory meanings in texts. Through close reading critical theorists study how the readers of a text respond to social markers, such as race, class and gender. A more focused version of "close" reading is "slow" reading, explored in Fuhrer's chapter in this volume.

across time.[2] Interpretation or critical response, at the core of Roman imperial culture and the cultural traditions emanating therefrom, is the signature production of the Augustan age, with its emphasis on complexity. A cornerstone of the ideology behind Augustan iconography, this complexity becomes no less a major source of inspiration for Augustan literature, both for the creation of works that are similarly nuanced, and for forging a rival, informed reaction to Augustus' narrative.[3] Complexity presupposes the generation of composite intertexts within the mind of diverse individual readers of a single narrative, and the extraction of different meanings according to the individual readers' experiences, set of referents and training in reading complex cultural narratives.

Reader–response criticism and cultural studies are two very popular, and very diverse in their objectives, modern theoretical approaches of cultural output. Both have been employed widely since the Age of Augustus to contextualize cultural products and offer the possibility of rival alternative readings. Once a cultural narrative, in the broader sense, including both literature and artwork, as well as literary descriptions of artwork (actual or imaginary), is dissociated from its creator and is surrendered to critical reception, its meaning cannot be controlled, despite efforts to the contrary by powerful elites across time. In the following pages I will discuss how this process of critical, culturally determined response has been articulated in emblematic literary passages of the Augustan Age. The Augustan tradition of layered reading builds on a well-established tradition of contextualization and interpretation that originates in the earlier period of Roman literature, specifically Roman comedy, and sets in motion an intellectual process that has directed to this day the way we approach, and often even overwrite, intertextual narratives, as a result of their compositional flexibility that enables reframing and revision of their story.

2 These ever-meaningful composite intertexts epitomize Barthes' definition of the goal of a cultural narrative as a synthesis that prompts the reader to become "no longer a consumer but a producer of the text" (1974, 4).
3 On the complex and reflective character of Augustan monumental iconography, see especially Hölscher 1984; Zanker 1987 and 1997; Galinsky 1996; Wallace-Hadrill 2008; Pollini 2012. On Roman topography as a structured and meaningful "text" promoting Augustus' narrative of the *respublica restituta*, see, for example, Leach 1988; Jaeger 1990; Edwards 1996; Favro 1996; Rehak 2006; and more recently Pandey 2018.

2 Reflective discourse on visual memories

Multivocal cultural readings of Augustan art are ideally reflected in Vergil's ekphrases. The murals decorating the walls of Juno's temple at Carthage defy a single and definite reading. The narrative theme celebrated thereupon is universally known: the Trojan war (also a classical theme for inspiration in the artistic traditions of both Greece and Rome across the centuries).[4] The pictorial narrative echoes with multiple reading audiences, yet, each reader responds to it differently: Aeneas sees hope, and reads in it a pro-Trojan reception of the Trojan war, even though most of the panels celebrate the cruelty of Achilles; still, the murals decorate the temple of Juno — logically, a pro-Trojan text could not decorate the walls of a temple honoring Juno. The commissioner of the artwork is Dido, who upon meeting Aeneas declares her admiration for the Trojan people. Then again, the Trojan war narrative as recorded on the murals is reported through the gaze of Aeneas — it is actually a sample of imposing critical response: we, the external readers who try to form our reading on the basis of the "text" that Aeneas unravels before our eyes, have our reasons to doubt the comprehensiveness of the ekphrasis disclosed: Aeneas identifies the panels on the basis of his own criteria, in the order he decides, disregarding epic chronology and imposing his own emotional reading of the individual panels upon our own.[5] In addition to the complexity of the meaning behind the multiple relationships between art, author and audience, the ekphrasis stresses the influence of audience response through close reading in the process.

Reflective discourse is an *act* and a *process,* as much as a *product*. As a dynamic process it is foremost cognitive, the outcome of a series of logically linked thoughts that are triggered or formulated through visual stimulation, literally or mentally, when we do not actually see what we interpret, but we have it verbally described to us with such vividness and detail that we virtually recreate or visualize it in our mind. An act of interpreting through reflection then is also an act of "reading"/viewing something.

In the Carthaginian murals, Aeneas has personal experience of the events he "reads", and so inhibits our own reading by applying and then projecting *his interpretation* of the visual text instead of *the text itself.* His "reading", on the other hand, of the shield he receives in *Aeneid* 8, concerns a "text" meant for others to interpret: the narrative on the shield consists of a series of famous episodes from Roman

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4 The bibliography on the ekphrases in the *Aeneid* is ample; important studies on the Carthaginian ekphrasis include Putnam 1998a; La Penna 2000; Beck 2007; Dufallo 2013, ch. 5; Kirichenko 2013.

5 For a comparison between the linear reading and the non-linear viewing, see Giuliani 2003, 27–29.

history, attested in several sources, including artistic ones, and so, subjected to assessment in diverse contexts.[6] Vergil asks readers to imagine the legendary character Aeneas in the act of contemplating a shield, which itself depicts a triumph far in Aeneas' future, though in the past of Vergil's readers. The readers are prompted to consider the interactions between Vergil's narration and the art it depicts, between Aeneas as viewer and the "text" he attempts to read, and between themselves and representations more generally. The description of the pictorial narrative on the shield as a *non enarrabile textum* (*Aen.* 8.625), a network of inextricably intertwined components (*textum*), which are impossible to tell apart in order to put together a straight and single story (*non enarrabile*),[7] seems to distinguish the art of viewing from that of reading, and privilege the importance of the former, over that of the latter. The shield becomes a visual text by which a viewing agent can connect with Roman history across time — or rather with a carefully composed version of Roman history determined by the selection of certain episodes and introduced in a particular (chronologically, but not only, determined) order;[8] just through this experience of viewing and deprived of any verbal explanation, Aeneas creates some cultural context for himself that partakes of the Roman narrative on the shield, insofar as the shield and its narrative inspire him and confirm his mission.

Though all Augustan poets share a deep interest in readers, texts and the construction of meaning, none examines this process more self-consciously than Ovid, who, throughout his corpus publicizes and politicizes the act of "reading" the Augustan Text (the multitextual narrative of the restituted Republic) by making reading, or rather the reader-response process, the subject of his writing, and by blurring the

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6 The bibliography on the Shield of Aeneas is enormous; the most important earlier studies are collected in Putnam 1998b, 234 n. 1; Gurval 1993, 209–247; Fowler 1991, 25; Williams 1981, 11. Putnam 1998b, 119–188 and 234–240, provides a comprehensive analysis of the pictorial narrative on the Aeneas' shield, directed primarily by metapoetics; illuminating is also his argument on the spatiality of the ekphrasis. Important studies that appeared in the past quarter century or so include Farrell 1997, 222–238 (esp. 224–226); Harrison 1997, 70–76; Bartsch 1998, 322–342; Ratkowitsch 2001, 233–249; Feldherr 2014.

7 *Enarrabilis* is, according to the *OLD*, s.v., a "very rare" adjective, not found in literary texts prior to the *Aeneid*, that means something that may be related, represented or explained. Described as such, the *descriptio* on the divine shield a) is acknowledged as a narrative, a piece that tells a story; and b) is declared impossible to narrate, represent or explain.

8 See Boyd 1995, on the multiple logical inconsistencies in Vergil's style of pictorial narration; visual information that leads to visualization and narrative description are not necessarily identical, but they are complementary: the narrative is necessary to order the visual information; on p. 73, Boyd defines the pictorial narrative of Vulcan's artwork as a text that is "layered rather than linear" in terms of chronology. On temporality and reflective discourse in the Vergilian ekphrases, see recently Papaioannou 2022.

boundaries between writer, reader and text. In the diptych comprising *Am.* 1.11 and 1.12, he describes the process of elegiac courtship, and by extension elegiac composition, as a fluid drama that requires the exchange of written messages of a particular type conveyed through an intermediary who may also have access to the content of these letters and may intervene and manipulate it.[9] In the *Metamorphoses*, the artistic agon between Minerva and Arachne pits in opposite corners two clashing interpretations of the Augustan Text: Minerva, the authority of artistic creation, composes a perfectly obedient pictorial narrative that celebrates canonicity; Arachne, a par to the goddess in talent and artistic expression in every respect, experiments with a composition that observes the exact opposite trend, alike in method and message, for it is disobedient on several levels,[10] underlining the reactionary narrative theme that challenges a leading motto of the principate — *novus ordo seclorum*.[11] Also, the act of reflecting on a textual composition typically starts before the agent engaged in this kind of mental discourse realizes that he is interpreting. In those initial stages, interpretation is part of the interpreter's first acquaintance with the object of interpretation. The critical reader realizes that he is reflecting critically and communicates this realization to the audience of his interpretation, while the process is already under way. In this case, the audience needs to revert to the beginning of the reading process, identify it as interpretation and retrace the step of reading, now treating it as interpretation. When the Ovidian reader reads through Minerva's tapestry he does not know the topic of Arachne's ekphrasis; once however he realizes that Arachne treats the same ideas from an alternative perspective, he acknowledges that he needs to readjust the methodology of reflecting, on the basis of the element of antagonism which emerges to direct the process of assessing the particular content of the two tapestries.

In the *Tristia* collection, Ovid identifies himself with his compositions, which, due to the poet's exclusion from Rome, take his place and traverse the city in his stead. In *Tristia* 1.1, the sad Ovid, confined in exile, sends his book — his embodiment — to Rome; in *Tristia* 3.1, the book has espoused Ovid's reading perspective, as the entire poem is a monologue spoken by the book itself. *Tristia* 2 opens with

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9 On the narrative dynamics of the *Amores* 1.11+12 diptych, see Papaioannou 2008.

10 On obedient and disobedient ekphrases, based on what can or cannot be visually perceived, see Laird 1993.

11 Barchiesi/Hardie/O'Gorman, among others, offer fundamental arguments in favor of approaching Ovid and Augustus as two rival composers of competing representational projects. See Barchiesi 1997, esp. 7–11 and 43–44; Hardie 1997; O' Gorman 1997. On Augustus' image-making, see n. 3 above. On the reading of Minerva and Arachne as rival readers of the Augustan text, important studies include Harries 1990; Feeney 1991, 190–194; Rosati 2002, 292–297; Feldherr 2002 174–175; Oliensis 2004, 286–296.

the admission that Ovid suffers because of his readers' response to his writings, and in particular to *Ars Amatoria* — NOT because of the writings themselves!

> Carmina fecerunt, ut me cognoscere vellet
> omine non fausto femina virique meo:
> carmina fecerunt, ut me moresque notaret
> iam pridem emissa Caesar ab *Arte* mea.
>
> (*Tr.* 2.5–8)

> My poems have made so that men and women would wish to know me — not a happy omen for me. My poems have made so that Caesar should brand me and my way of life from my *Ars* which had already been sent forth.[12]

As Gibson has noted, "the author here is a passive figure; it is his *carmina* which have independently caused people to wish to know him, and it is his *carmina* which have caused Caesar's response to the *Ars Amatoria*".[13] Ovid's poems, in other words, offer a *reading* of the Roman social *mores*, and it is to this reading that Caesar reacts. This reading of social behavior (motivated by an interest in the psychology of the erotic pursuit) is combined with an overview of Roman topography in what is probably the first overview of the Urbs, in *Ars* 1, where Ovid identifies many of Augustus' recently built or sponsored monuments as appropriate landmarks for mapping the pursuit of women:

> Tu quoque, *materiam* longo qui quaeris amori,
> ante frequens quo sit disce puella loco.
>
> (*AA* 1.1.49–50)

> And you who likewise are after *material* for an enduring love, learn first of all what locations a woman loves to visit.

Ovid's emphasis on reading goes hand in hand with the transformation of the Roman cityscape, which is introduced as material potentially fit for compositions subject to readings that intend to serve or comment on the socio-political momentum. The politicization of architecture (and the transformation of Roman mapping and identity as a result) is essential for advancing the Augustan ideology, and it is celebrated as such in the *RGDA* (esp. 19–21). In response to Augustus' architectural remodeling of the capital, elegiac poetry advances its own mapping of urban Rome,

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12 Translations throughout are mine unless otherwise noted.
13 Gibson 1999, 21.

which becomes the backdrop for the realization of love.[14] The speaker of Ovid's *Ars Amatoria* designs his own Roman landscape, at *AA* 1.67–88, as he identifies specific monuments on the Forum and the environs, including the porticos of Livia and the Danaids, the theatres of Pompey and Marcellus, the temple of Isis, a Jewish synagogue, Fora, the Circus Maximus, and on top of all the temple of Palatine Apollo, Augustus' most prominent addition on the Palatine and, in Ovid's cityscaping, the vantage point through which the mapping of Rome is assessed.

3 Reflective discourse and topographic memory

The *Art of Love* was published in 2 CE, shortly after the completion of Augustus' reforms, including his building program, and comprises an almost instant response to (and immediate appropriation of) the *Princeps*' new cityscape.[15] Less than a decade later, transplanted in Tomi against his will, Ovid in his *Tristia* conveys a different statement on the Augustan cityscape. In *Tristia* 3.1, Ovid's new book, the speaker of the introductory elegy of the collection, arrives in Rome and becomes the eyes through which the exiled poet reacts to topography: the book encounters a cityscape that has been revised so thoroughly that the reader/book becomes confused. The book's ultimate destination is the Palatine; the course that it is instructed to follow is the archetypal tour of the hill as mapped out by Evander and Aeneas (*Aen.* 8.306–369), the first tour of Augustan Rome in the course of Roman mythochronology. In Book 8 of the *Aeneid*, Vergil's audience receive their first tour of the early site of Rome through the eyes of Aeneas and his host and leader of the tour, King Evander, the legendary founder of the area. Simultaneously with the sojourn, Aeneas receives information about a set of monuments with cardinal significance, for the essence of historical Rome in Vergil crosses paths with the Roman historiographical and annalistic tradition that had formulated and controlled the broadly embraced memory of the Roman past.[16]

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14 Several studies of the formation of the erotic subject through travel in the reconstructed city include Edwards 1996; Boyle 2003 (discussing *AA* 1.1.49–50 on pp. 19–20); Welch 2005.

15 On Rome as memorialized in the topographical descriptions recorded in the texts of the Late Republican and Augustan authors, see the collection of essays in Östenberg/Malmberg/Bjørnebye 2015 (especially the papers by Corbeill/Spencer/O'Sullivan); also Davies 2017.

16 On the topography of Evander's Pallanteum as a historical palimpsest asserting the continuity of Roman history, see Wiseman 1987, 390–395; White 1993, 182–190; Fantham 1997; Klodt 2001, 11–36; Marincic 2002; Papaioannou 2003; Lowrie 2009, 168–172.

Aeneas' visit to Pallanteum, according to Vergil's narrative, spreads over two days. On the day of his arrival, he witnesses the anniversary celebration of a festival in honor of Hercules' passage through Latium that helped establish peace and civilization in Latium — a passage that triggered Roman cultural memory and left its indelible marks on the Roman topography. The following day, Aeneas familiarizes himself with a location that will host the core of the Roman capital in the generations to come. Several of the sites and monuments mentioned were built much later. Next to the Carmental gate and shrine (337–8), the ruins of Janus' town on the Janiculum (355–7), the Argiletum (346), the grove where the Arcadians saw Jupiter (351–2), and above all the community of Pallanteum itself (359–61), Aeneas also sees several famous landmarks that came into existence during later times, but would have been familiar to the Romans of his day: the Asylum grove on the Capitoline (342), the Lupercal, presumably the location where the she-wolf suckled Romulus and Remus (343), and which had been restored in Vergil's time by Augustus (cf. *RGDA* 19), the Tarpeian rock (347), the Forum and the Carinae (361). The anachronisms are not the only innovation in Vergil's account of the early days of Rome. Vergil's description corresponds to topographic reality, and it presents the era of early Rome as an actual, orderly historical narrative.

Like Vergil's Aeneas Ovid's new book makes its way through a new city in the company of a guide, who in this case remains conveniently anonymous. Allegedly instructed by this guide on the landmarks and monuments expected to see and the roads to traverse, as these have been recorded in the earlier literary mappings-interpretations, including those of Ovid himself and Vergil, the book fails to identify them. As a result of this confusion, the book tries to produce a new reading of the Palatine cityscape, put together on the basis of the topographical *signa* it selects. This reading, however, lacks coherence, because the book is not aware of the cultural and political context tied to each of this *signa* (or because it sticks to the landmarks Ovid remembers standing in those same locations prior to his exile), hence the topographical narrative the book produces is different from the one Augustus wishes to advertise through these landmarks, many of them added to the Palatine landscape by the *princeps* himself. Additionally, according to the reading advanced by Pandey, the itinerary chosen by the book becomes an indirect critique of Augustus' interventions on the traditional Republican landscape. The book vaguely identifies as starting point of its itinerary the *fora Caesaris* (27) — without specifying which forum is meant —, before it reaches the Temple of Vesta (29) and the building next to it, "the small palace of ancient Numa" (30). Then the book turns off the path to the Palatine and passes through the *porta Palati* (31), the main entrance to the hill, before it reaches the location "where Rome was first founded" (32), a paraphrasis for the temple of Jupiter Stator, and finally the house of Augustus, which

seems to have "doorposts conspicuous for their shining arms and a house worth of a deity" (34: *fulgentibus armis/conspicuos postes tectaque digna deo*), clearly toying with the double function of the place as both the house of Augustus and the temple of Apollo built next to it. The phraseology that describes each monument elicits recollection of additional monuments that either are silenced or have been replaced, and prompts the reader to put together his own travelogues along the same route but through potentially different monumental *signa*. Since each of these *signa* was carriers of political and historical meaning, the composition is subject to diverse interpretations depending on the knowledge, perspective and allegiance of the readers.[17]

Nicolet/Favro have argued that mapping the urban center of Rome developed in the Augustan period,[18] yet the earliest surviving poetic transcript of a journey through the city of Rome is recorded in the speech of the Choragus in Plautus' *Curculio*, a composition no less nuanced than its Augustan counterpart descriptions of similarly serving as malleable commentary on contemporary cultural and political trends.[19]

At Plautus, *Curc.* 462, the extradramatic Choragus character takes the stage, turns to the audience and offers to guide them through the Roman Forum (*Curc.* 466–486) — even though the play is set in Epidaurus:

> In the interim and until he comes back, I'll show in which place you can easily find which sort of person, so that no one strives too laboriously if he wants to meet someone, be it a man of vice or a man without vice, be it worthy or a worthless character. Anyone who wants to meet a perjurer should go to the assembly place. Anyone who wants to meet a liar and a braggart must look for him at the temple of Venus Cloacina, and anyone who wants to meet rich and married wasters must look below the colonnaded hall. In the same place there will also be grown-up prostitutes and men who ask for formal guarantees from prospective debtors. Those who contribute to shared meals are on the fish market. At the lower end of the market decent and wealthy people stroll around; in the middle part of the market next to the open drain are the mere showoffs. Arrogant, garrulous and malevolent people are above the Lake, ones who boldly insult their neighbor for no good reason and who have enough that could in all truth be said about themselves. Below the Old Shops there are those who give and receive on interest. Behind the temple of Castor there are those whom you shouldn't trust quickly. In the Tuscan Quarter there are the people who sell themselves. In the Velabrum you can meet the miller or the butcher or the soothsayer or those who turn or give others the opportunity

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17 See the discussion on the travelogue of the book in *Tristia* 3.1, and the multiple ambiguities resulting *en route* causing recurrent questions that problematize the Augustan rewriting of the Palatine, in Pandey 2018, 120–129. For Michalopoulos 2021, the Roman map in *Tristia* 3.1 captures an idealized image of Rome, designed to offer Ovid a mental escape and so help him endure the reality of his exile in Tomi.

18 Nicolet 1991; Favro 1996.

19 My analysis of the *Curculio* topography follows Papaioannou 2021, 23–33.

to turn. [Rich and married wasters at the house of Leucadia Oppia]. [Trans. De Melo (2011), Loeb, with minor changes]

The Choragus identifies eleven individual locations in the Forum, yet several of them were not in use or cannot be identified with precision in Plautus' day:[20] the *Comitium*, the convention point of perjurers (470); the temple of Venus Cloacina, the hangout place for liars and braggarts (471); the/a basilica, where afflicted husbands and prostitutes are found (472–473); the *Forum Piscarium* ('fish market'), a problematic location, probably the food market, and the hangout for dining-club members (474, *conlatores symbolarum*); the lower part of the Forum (475), where wealthy and noble citizens gather; the *Cloaca maxima* (476), a gathering place for those who like to show off; the area 'beyond' the Lake (*supra lacum*), a space in the Forum that has not been identified, and a hangout for sinister characters (477–479); the *veterae tabernae*, the traditional location of the bankers (480); the temple of Castor (481), a place frequented by people with bad credit; the Etruscan quarters, yet another location in the Forum favored by prostitutes (473); and, finally, the Velabrum, hangout place of the merchants prone to cheat — bakers, butchers and soothsayers (484).

The Choragus offers simultaneously a topographical overview of the Roman Forum and an overview of the *palliata* — critics additionally argue that the Choragus actually sees both the locations he identifies and representatives of the groups of people he ties to each of these locations.[21] Yet, archaeological studies on the topography of early 2nd-century Rome inform us that the forum spreading before the eyes of the Choragus was not the same as the one described in the text. Rather, Plautus' description reflects contemporary Roman cognitive understanding of geographical space, which in turn dictates the topographical inaccuracy, purporting to comment indirectly through it on the impending transformation of the Roman civic landscape: indeed, a few decades later the greater area of the Forum will undergo transformation and from an area of private and commercial activity will become one of public, political significance.

The Choragus' arrangement of architectural monuments and physical locations in association with individuals of distinct social/professional classes reflects the fluidity of the Roman civic landscape at the turn of the 3rd c. BCE — a landscape very much under construction. In the year 210 BCE a great fire broke out on the

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20 On the topography of the Choragus' tour, see Sommella 2005 and Goldberg 2018.

21 Fundamental study on the political reading of this unique comic passage is Moore 1998, 131–39; 219–22, identifying additional parts in Plautus' plays where Roman topography and Roman life disturb and blend the boundaries separating the world of the spectators from Greek dramatic time. Moore's mapping is revisited in Marshall 2006, 40–42.

north side of the Roman Forum, where a series of shops (*tabernae*), including the bankers' shops, the *tabernae argentariae*, were located. Livy offers a detailed description of the catastrophe (AUC 26.27.1–4):

> a fire [...] broke out in several places at once about the Forum. At the same time the seven shops (*tabernae*) which later were five, and the bankers' offices (*tabernae argentariae*), now called Tabernae Novae, caught fire; then private houses (*privata aedificia*) took fire — for there were no basilicas then — the quarries [*lautumiae*; a stone-quarry district on the east slope of the Capitoline], and the Fish Market [*forum piscatorium*; located behind the *tabernae* and north of the Forum] and the *Atrium Regium*. The Temple of Vesta was saved with difficulty chiefly by the aid of thirteen slaves, who were purchased by the state and manumitted.

The destruction came at a time of major changes for Rome, as it was becoming the leading power of the Mediterranean. A century and a half prior to Actium, the influx of great wealth offered the leaders of the Republic a similar opportunity to rewrite and reinterpret civic space through rebuilding.[22] Several of the locations identified in the Choragus' tour were affected and underwent reconstruction in the years immediately following the catastrophic fire of 210. By the time the *Curculio* is composed, the architecture of the Forum was radically redrawn and extensively renovated. Anticipating Ovid's walking tour through a landscape that is a composition filtered through complex rules, the Choragus prompts his audience to capture in their memories the current image of the lower forum, a shapeless space that is ever evolving in the comic imagination — an image soon to disappear in light of the sweeping architectural changes that will transform it in the following decades into a well-defined, fixed and controlled square.

4 Reflecting on Roman compositions from a temporal distance

In the last section of this chapter, I would like to focus on how readers of a different era and not necessarily sufficient knowledge have embraced the experience of Aeneas and Ovid's book as a model of reflecting upon artistic narratives and interpret them inside a cultural context that contemporary readers create. My case study will be an emblematic piece of monumental Roman narrative and political significance,

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22 On the transformation of the Roman Forum into a politically-determined public space during the 2nd and the 1st centuries BCE, and the architectural changes in the area, see recently Russell 2015, esp. 43–95.

the Arch of Titus, showing how the very arch since conception did not intend to inform the public so much as to inspire a sense of shared purpose — notwithstanding the narrative dynamics of culturally determined imagination to compensate for the readers' potential ignorance.

The Arch of Titus is a prime example for observing cultural studies at work across centuries and study postculturalism at work. The monument is what historian Pierre Nora calls a *lieu de mémoire*, a "site of memory" — a physical place or object that acts as a container of collective memory. For Nora, sites of memory should have three aspects, material, symbolic and functional, which need to co-exist. These sites, further, are created from a combination of memory and history, and their primary mission is to stop time and block the process of forgetting.[23] In his important multivolume work *Les Lieux de Mémoire*,[24] Nora argues that people are obsessed with memory because they have fragmented it through historical consciousness, a diachronic application of reader-response criticism. This criticism, which is determined by individual perspectives, firm cultural readings, has caused people as a community to move from holistic, shared memory (and group identity) to fragmentary sites of memory trying to preserve some part of the grandeur of the ancient past reflected in the monument. This fragmentation has rendered monuments or sites of memory ever open to new readings, depending on the cultural recontextualization of each ancient monument across centuries. The Arch of Titus is a unique site of memory, for it has existed for almost two millennia and has become with remarkable consistency the mirror to reflect multiple different cultural and political perspectives, often contradictory among themselves.[25]

The dedicatory arch was built to preserve the memory of Roman victory over Judaea in 70 CE. Since the beginning, it was conceived as a readily accessible pictorial text annotated with an inscription that comprises only the most essential information:

Senatus/Populusque Romanus/
Divo Tito Divi Vespasiani F(ilio)/Vespasiano Augusto

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23 In his *Between Memory and History*, the 1989 English translation of his introduction to his 1984 anthology titled *Les Lieux de Mémoire*, Nora talks about the sites of memory as "physical sites within which legacies of memory have crystallized and toward which there is an attempt to historicize" (Nora 1989, 7). The same term, which in Nora's broad definition accommodates many different texts, from legends, to stories, to concepts, is defined more narrowly in relation strictly to physical sites where commemorative acts take place in Winter 2009.

24 Translated in English and edited in three volumes by Lawrence Kritzman (= Nora 1996).

25 A recent reference study on the Arch of Titus and its meaning across the ages as a site of memory is Fine 2021, an output of the Yeshiva University Arch of Titus Project.

> The Senate and the People of Rome, to the divine Titus Vespasian Augustus, the son of the divine Vespasian

The interior artwork depicts the triumphal parade of Titus bringing the spoils of Judaea, the sacred objects of the Temple of Jerusalem (the golden Showbread Table and the seven-branched Menorah), to Rome. The Temple objects painted golden yellow, projected grandeur, triggering memories of triumph and glory for the Romans. Further, they communicated the definite subjugation of the Jewish nation and culture, including, of course, Jewish religion — a leading cause for rebelliousness on the Jewish part. For Ida Östenberg, this emphasis on the display of religious objects of distinct geographic and ethnic origin (other than Roman, of course) on monumental art is unique in the history of artistically representing Roman triumphs, and striking as a result. It foremost shows that Jewish culture and the Jewish religion were entwined, and were understood by victor and defeated alike, and reflected as such.[26]

This at once powerful and malleable narrative attracted across the centuries reactions by an incredible variety of audiences, including the Church from Medieval times onwards, artists, literary authors and politicians, all the way to the appropriation of the seven-branched golden Menorah by the State of Israel to become the emblem bridging ideally the old and new, and standing not just for Jewish emancipation, but actually for Jewish national assertiveness. The statement by Ari Berman, the President of Yeshiva University, on the occasion of the completion of the Arch of Titus restoration project by YU, aptly captures this cultural reading:

> The Arch of Titus has a unique place in Jewish memory. Celebrating Jewish catastrophe, it has been an open sore for Jews for nearly two millennia. But in the twentieth century this symbol which represented exile and destruction was redeemed to represent salvation and return. For in the years after the creation of the Jewish state, the seven-candled menorah, the exact same one that had been carved on the Arch of Titus nearly 2000 years ago, became the symbol of the seal of Israel.
>
> <div align="right">(Fine 2021, xvii)</div>

Ari Berman's postcultural reading of the Arch of Titus stands at the end of a long and impressive series of close reflections on this monument across the centuries, ideally attesting to the inherent power of Classical narratives to invite diverse readings which feed on each other while simultaneously attempting to overwrite each other. As such, the political embrace by the Jewish state of an emblematic visual statement of Roman authority over forces of destabilization, comes at the end of a

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26 Östenberg 2021, 34.

long process of close reinterpretations that began with the restoration of the monument in its present form under the sponsorship of Pope Pius VII. As the frieze and the inscription were preserved only on the side towards the Colosseum, Pope Pius took advantage of the opportunity to add his own reading of the monument and direct the new cultural context of the Arch. The new inscription runs as follows:

> Insigne religionis atque artis monumentum/vetustate fatiscens/Pius Septimus Pontifex Maximus/ novis operibus priscum exemplar imitantibus/fulciri servarique iussit/ anno sacri principatus eius XXIIII

> As a very remarkable monument of both religion and art/had weakened from age,/Pius the Seventh, Supreme Pontiff,/by new works on the model of the ancient exemplar/ordered it reinforced and preserved/in the 24th year of his sacred leadership.

This monumental inscription mirrors Titus's memorial inscription. Pius has planned his inscription to look like the twin of Titus, in size, the font chosen, its arrangement on the surface of the monument, its length, and above all the vocabulary employed, which comes from the traditional Roman political and religious terminology (*pontifex maximus, exemplar, principatus*).[27] Through this inscription on what was at the time one of the most conspicuous monuments of the ancient Roman past still visible, Pius ranks himself next to Titus and claims to be the spiritual successor of the Roman emperors. Additionally, by restoring a distinguished *lieu de mémoire* left unfinished, Pius projects himself as the gatekeeper not just of Titus' memory, but more broadly of the very cultural message which the Roman emperor originally intended to advance through this Arch — a message conveniently open and transhistorical.

5 Conclusion

Augustan literature canonized reflective discourse in the understanding of the human experience. In literary texts across the generic spectrum participants in a group setting are called to interpret and assess alternative perspectives by challenging simultaneously rival assumptions. This process sits today firmly at the core of transformative learning regardless of discipline, as it requires critical reaction to and ongoing dialogue with one's cultural surroundings; the latter may involve a small group, the community, or even one's life experience more broadly. Additionally,

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27 On the politics and ideology behind Pius VII's restoration of the Arch, including the construction of a new inscription, see Caffiero 2021.

in-depth study of Augustan literature, arguably a major expression of the Classical literary production, involves training in understanding and appreciating the function of complexity and ambiguity, concepts that have been at the foundations of organizational theory over the past decades, and have operated as a lens through which the many facets of organizational life, including strategic thinking, decision-making, persuasion policies and client management, have been understood and refined. Training in the Classics, especially the literature of the Augustan era, enables perceptive readers to comprehend the ever more pervasive presence of ambiguity in social constructs, and master central ideas of complex systems that govern the human existence, including the smooth interaction among heterogeneous agents, the inevitability and importance of nonlinearity, and the need to ever adapt, learn and evolve.

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