



The Primacy of Vision in Virgil's Aeneid

Riggs Alden Smith

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One of the masterpieces of Latin and, indeed, world literature, Virgil's *Aeneid* was written during the Augustan "renaissance" of architecture, art, and literature that redefined the Roman world in the early years of the empire. This period was marked by a transition from the use of rhetoric as a means of public persuasion to the use of images to display imperial power. Taking a fresh approach to Virgil's epic poem, Riggs Alden Smith argues that the *Aeneid* fundamentally participates in the Augustan shift from rhetoric to imagery because it gives primacy to vision over speech as the principal means of gathering and conveying information as it recounts the heroic adventures of Aeneas, the legendary founder of Rome.

Working from the theories of French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Smith characterizes Aeneas as a *voyant-visible*, a person who both sees and is seen and who approaches the world through the faculty of vision. Engaging in close readings of key episodes throughout the poem, Smith shows how Aeneas repeatedly acts on what he sees rather than what he hears. Smith views Aeneas' final act of slaying Turnus, a character associated with the power of oratory, as the victory of vision over rhetoric, a triumph that reflects the ascendancy of visual symbols within Augustan society. Smith's new interpretation of the predominance of vision in the *Aeneid* makes it plain that Virgil's epic contributes to a new visual culture and a new mythology of Imperial Rome.

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