Chapter 6

Literature and Legitimization: The Wigalois Frescoes at Runkelstein Castle

We have seen so far the various roles that ekphrasis plays in Wigalois, and have seen further how these highly visual moments in the poem, as presented in manuscripts and early print editions, contributed to different readings of the text and thus to varying notions of courtly identity among German-speaking audiences for over three hundred years. In the earliest known print editions of the Wigalois material, for instance, although the prose redactors struck nearly all of the lengthy ekphrastic passages from the text, visuality remained vital to the story’s reception.

The next step in our examination is in many ways the most interesting and complicated of all. By 1300, the production of new Arthurian romances in German had all but ceased, but this by no means meant that audiences stopped enjoying and engaging with Arthurian literature. Instead, we see the development of a primarily receptive literary culture, where the classics were remade and reinterpreted by new audiences.¹ The proliferation of Volksbücher like Wigoleis vom Rade is one example, but there were other recastings of the Wigalois material. At Runkelstein Castle in the mountains of Southern Tyrol, in the traditionally German-speaking part of what today belongs to Italy, there are the remains of a once detailed series of frescoes depicting scenes from Wigalois. Commissioned by the brothers Niklaus and Franz Vintler around 1400, the Wigalois frescoes are part of a series of murals at Runkelstein with scenes from thirteenth-century vernacular literature. Here we must ask: what happens when not only the ekphrases are abbreviated or missing, but indeed when the entire text is absent? What happens when we must rely completely on the respective visions of patron and artist, on their selection of scenes and on a purely visual interpretation of the story? At Runkelstein, the Vintler brothers had their living spaces covered, literally from top to bottom, with images from courtly literature. How did these images that tell a story relate to these peoples’ personal story, and how did they and other members of the court “read” them?

Sadly, today the Wigalois frescoes at Runkelstein are severely faded. One factor explaining their poor condition is that the paintings are outside and have

been exposed to the elements for over six hundred years. In addition, in the fall of 1868, a large section of the castle's north wall collapsed and fell into the valley below, taking with it all the images along that portion of the *Wigalois* hall. The losses are grave, but fortunately not complete. Late in the nineteenth century, Ernst Karl von Waldstein made a series of visits to Runkelstein Castle and subsequently published three articles detailing what he saw there; we are fortunate today to have not only his written testimony, but also a number of meticulously copied drawings of the *Wigalois* murals.\(^2\) Of the twenty-two images that Waldstein described and recorded, thirteen survive today.

The existing research on the *Wigalois* frescoes does not venture beyond a detailed cataloging of the images; considering the cycle's fragmentary survival, this is understandable. Nor, however, does the existing research engage to any considerable degree with other *Wigalois* scholarship. I will not suggest here that a definitive, unassailable interpretation of the *Wigalois* frescoes is possible; there is simply too much missing. I will argue, on the other hand, that examining even the fragments can tell us a great deal more about *Wigalois* and the reciprocal influence of historical contexts and fictional texts, first by looking at them together with the other fresco cycles at Runkelstein and then by comparing these fragments for the first time against the other surviving visual interpretations of Wirnt's poem. Based on my own visits to Runkelstein, this chapter will suggest that the text of *Wigalois* provides clues as to why the patrons commissioned scenes from this particular story to decorate their home, and that the *Wigalois* frescoes were a vital part of a wealthy bourgeois family's ambitious program of social climbing and self-legitimization through the visualization of secular, courtly literature. Similar to the Augsburg and Strassburg editions of *Wigoileis vom Rade*, we shall see here that ekphrasis or no ekphrasis, text or no text, the process of “reading” the highly visual aspects of *Wigalois* continued to form an image of courtliness for nobles and non-nobles alike.