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Dialectics in Vasari's Lives

Andrew Ladis's *Victims and Villains in Vasari's Lives* examines how Vasari, in his *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors and Architects* (first published in 1550 and reissued in a expanded edition in 1568) constructs his historical reading of the art and artists of the Italian Renaissance through the lens of the counterpoints to Varsari's heroes, that is, those who, either by circumstance or personality, fall victim to the narrative, the villains and victims of the Italian Renaissance. Finding his inspiration in Roberto Longhi's evocation that in order to understand Vasari, "Bisogna sapere come leggere Vasari," Ladis builds upon the work of scholars such as Paul Barlosky.[1] Ladis's volume does not contribute to an investigation of the veracity or lack thereof in Vasari's *Lives*, but rather looks at the rhetorical structure of Vasari's narrative as a highly nuanced trajectory that finds at its climax *il Divino*, Michelangelo. *Victims and Villains* captivates the reader's interest by capitalizing on Vasari's methodical conceit–the dialectic of good and evil. Finding its genesis in the 2002 Bettie Allison Rand Lectures in Art History at the University of North Carolina, the book is divided into four chapters, closely allied to their original lectures, and an envoi at the close of the book, in order to situate the discussion within the larger strategies of Vasari's text.

In the first chapter, "The Sorcerer's 'O' (and the Painter Who Wasn't There)," Ladis utilizes the anecdote of the story of Giotto's "O" in order to examine issues of moral tension through the strategy of point and counterpoint in the first part of the *Lives*, a conceptual framework that will be carried throughout Ladis's study. As Ladis points out, the use of antiheroes throughout the narrative provides not only foils but also a means to hold the reader's interest. As he notes, "For Vasari, as for many an author, the dark side was an abiding natural force and essential to his scheme, because history without error could hardly hold interest, much less be true" (p. 4). Ladis also immediately heads off the reader's next thought, acknowledging that the conceit of heroes and antiheroes evokes a literary fabrication, at odds with the attempted positivist ideas of history. However, he is quick to point out that all historical interpretation, even his own, is created from a specific point of view and that point of view is inescapably subjective and biased. Taking this into consideration, Ladis utilizes the story of Giotto's "O" to elucidate the idea that Vasari draws upon this anecdote to address two major themes within the *Lives*, the idea of the painter as an illusionist and the use of visual trickery as a means to discuss the use of naturalism and the almost magical powers of some of the greatest artists of the Renaissance.

In the same chapter, Ladis discusses Vasari's vita of Buonamico Buffalmacco, emphasizing that the playful trickster's personality did counter-demonstrate what it meant to be an artist in Renaissance Italy–that indolence and frivolity doomed Buffalmacco. Contrasting Vasari's anecdotes with foils in Buffalmacco's vita, Ladis takes Vasari's dichotomy a step further by working the conceit into his own rhetorical structure, summarizing Buffalmacco's oeuvre as "a big amusing zero, a *tondo*" (p. 29). The contrast of Buffalmacco as antihero, as Ladis points out, allows for the reader to garner a better understanding of Giotto's accomplishments and his role as the hero of the first part of the *Lives*.

In the second chapter. "Hagiography and Oblo-

quy for a Silver Age," Ladis sets up a further construct by which to evaluate the second part of Vasari's *Lives*, through the lens of the *Golden Legend* and issues of hagiography contrasted with obloquy. In particular, he sets up Donatello and Fra Angelico as artist-saints to emulate through discussion of the etymology of their names and their vitae–Donatello through his charity and Fra Angelico through the virtues of humility, innocence, and sincerity. Creating a dialectical foil to these two heroes, Ladis points out that Vasari utilizes a two-tiered approach, first through the vita of the passionate life of Fra Filippo Lippi and then through the more constructed, unmitigated evil of Andrea del Castagno. While quick to point out the chronological inaccuracies of Vasari's construction, Ladis elucidates the manner in which Vasari constructs the vices of envy and violence personified in the vita of Castagno, particularly through the libelous charge of murdering Domenico Veneziano. In this particularly personal attack on Castagno, Ladis sets up yet another dichotomous parallel, not only with the heroes of the second part, Fra Angelico and Donatello, but also between Castagno and Giotto, through a comparison of the anecdotes of Giotto and Castagno's use of rocks as substrates early in their respective careers. While Giotto's artistic overtures caught the attention of Cimabue, Castagno is said to have used either coal or a knife to etch his image into the surface, immediately conjuring for the reader ideas of the fires of hell or crimes that would ultimately lead to the same end. Taking it a step further, both Vasari and Ladis compare Castagno to Judas, "a traitor motivated by self-advantage and hatred" (p. 59). It is in these sections that the reader occasionally has a hard time deciphering between the investigation of Vasari's rhetorical strategy and a further propagation of that agenda through Ladis's heavy citation of images to further Vasari's construct–an idea that will be more fully considered in the context of the fourth chapter.

"Perugino and the Wages of Fortune," the shortest of the four chapters, functions as another cautionary tale in the role of fame in the lasting destiny of the artist. Vasari's vita of Perugino casts the artist as one full of *virtù* and *ingegno*, whose inevitable fame and fortune was unsustainable for the artist. According to Vasari, his fame got the best of him and the number of commissions multiplied so rapidly that the artist began to rely too heavily on his workshop, and his works became vacuous and insincere. Into this equation steps Perugino's most prolific student, Raphael, who, while working in the workshop of Perugino, embodied so much the work of the master that he made himself invisible. As Ladis points out, Vasari's maneuvering in this section of the *Lives* is an ironic one–while Raphael was invisible in the works from Perugino's studio, the young pupil quickly superseded his master, making Perugino invisible in the long trajectory of the art historical canon. In this manner, Vasari sets up the pupil and master not only as foils for their individual artistic styles, but also as emblems of two eras in what Ladis calls Vasari's "Neoplatonic, tripartite scheme of art's progressive rise to perfection" (p. 86). In continuing to discuss this rhetorical construct of artists standing in for the evolving ages, Ladis closes the chapter with a short discussion of two artists whose aesthetics are out of step with the advance of art: Pintoricchio and Francia, the former as an analogue to Perugino and the latter as Perugino's antithesis.

"Identity and Imperfection in the Shadow of Michelangelo" sets up a prolonged investigation of the implications of Vasari's rhetorical strategy of attempting to create a parallel between an artist's identity and his or her artistic output, including discussion of artists Perino del Vaga, Properzia de'Rossi, and Giovanni Antonio Bazzi, known as il Sodoma. It is in this discussion of what Ladis calls "flawed" or "ill-fated" souls that Vasari sets up his necessary tension in the *Lives* that allows for a final rhetorical climax in the vita of Michelangelo. Ladis clearly outlines the need for this rhetorical structure:

"Vasari's story may be understood as a psychomania [psychomachia?] of the arts, in which antiheroes are essential, not only for the sake of dramatic tension, but also for the unhesitating sense of release, triumph, and elation that attends Vasari's triumphant ending: art's ultimate salvation in the person of the 'divine' Michelangelo" (p. 111).

Staying true to his intention, Ladis does not spend much time commenting upon the vita of Michelangelo, but rather turns his attention to the artist Vasari has used as the ultimate foil to *il Divino*, Baccio Bandinelli, whose vita was not included in the 1550 edition of the *Lives*, perhaps because the artist was still living at the time of its publication. The 1568 edition does include the vita, and it is–short of Michelangelo's own biography–the longest in the *Lives*. For Vasari, Bandinelli represents treachery, and perhaps owing to Vasari's personal dislike of him, he relegates Bandinelli to the realm of the third-rate painter:

"Vasari's 'life' of Bandinelli so effectively envelops the historical person in the rhetoric of invective as to deprive him of sympathy and thereby to take him hostage forever, making of him an extraordinary literary construction, and a villain worthy of Michelangelo, and a

persona in whom art and biography converge" (p. 112).

It is also in Ladis's discussion of Baccio that the rhetorical structures of Vasari and Ladis converge, and at times instead of maintaining an appropriate distance from the subject matter, Ladis's own prose finds itself furthering Vasari's cause. Exemplified in his discussion of Baccio's alleged destruction through the shredding of Michelangelo's *Battle of Cascina* cartoon, Ladis creates a rapid-fire comparison of Baccio in the act of shredding the cartoon to the vices of *Anger*, *Envy*, and *Injustice* and many of the devils in Hell in Giotto's Arena Chapel, as well as the teeth in Baccio's own *Hercules and Cacus*. He writes, "Bit by bit, whisper by whisper, Vasari's rhetoric flays Bandinelli, peeling away a skin of pretense and deception to expose the raw, vicious truth hidden within" (p. 129). While beautifully written, such prose overtly furthers Vasari's intentions with the anecdotal story of the shredding of the cartoon. More so than in other sections, Ladis acts as an accomplice to Vasari, stepping in and furthering the rhetorical destruction of Baccio, rather than remaining an unbiased observer of the construct. Perhaps this is expected, as it reinforces his thesis, which is to examine the victims and villains in Vasari's *Lives*–and what better way to drive home his message than to overtly play into the rhetoric, emphasizing Baccio's role as the ultimate counterpoint to *il Divino*. Ladis goes as far as to state that "Vasari's Baccio is the embodiment of every vice," quickly making sure the point is driven home for the reader by his own narrative strategy, through the rapid-fire illustration of the remaining vices in Giotto's Arena Chapel in the pages of the text (p. 130). Of course this is not to say that Ladis is not aware of his own narrative conceits, as he admits that after reading Vasari's vita of Bandinelli, it is "[d]ifficult … to look upon the *Hercules and Cacus* except through the dark filter of Vasari's rhetoric" (p. 138).

Taking another page from his subject's literary toolbox, Ladis closes his four chapters in a quasi-liturgical voice:

"In Vasari's richly metaphorical vision of history, Michelangelo not only triumphs, he vanquishes, and in the end all artists must be weighed in the balance and measured against his lasting example. Present from beginning to end, Michelangelo is the salvation of art, the true light that follows the first light and at last overwhelms the darkness. But it is the misbegotten children of error, inadequacy, and imperfection … who make the Savior's long-awaited, sacred, and inevitable victory necessary and a thing of epic grandeur. Amen" (p. 138).

Opening the discussion again with a brief envoi, Ladis again emphasizes the lasting import of Vasari's work, in its careful structure, compelling plot, and unforgettable characters. In essence, Ladis's *Victims and Villians in Vasari's Lives* is a meta-narrative that is structured–not wrongly–around Vasari, not Michelangelo, as *il Divino* of the Renaissance.

Note

[1]. For example, Paul Barolsky, *Why the Mona Lisa Smiles and Other Tales by Vasari* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991).

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