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Michelangelo's double self-portraits [Review]

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Edith Balas. *Michelangelo's Double Self-Portraits*

Michelangelo's Double Self-Portraits. by Edith Balas

Review by: Patricia Emison

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In an article of 1983 (*Art Bulletin* 66 [December 1983], 665–71), Balas argued that the four Boboli *Slaves*, now in the Accademia, were never intended for the Julius tomb, but instead for the San Lorenzo facade. Her point was vigorously rebutted by Howard Hibbard (see also Balas's reply, both in *Art Bulletin* 66 [December 1984], 673–78).

Here Balas picks up the thread again, asserting that any association between not only the Boboli *Slaves* but also the *Victory* and the Julius tomb is spurious. The

Victory, she believes, was made as a private Neoplatonic visualization of Michelangelo's respect, or rather love, for Tommaso Cavalieri as a David/Hercules hero and of himself beneath as "physically and spiritually inferior" (43). It is a "double self-portrait" in that Michelangelo is said to have identified with the David/Hercules type implicit in the young victor as well as with the older and defeated man; this is the part of the argument not anticipated elsewhere. The statue would then have been made by his private initiative and for his own enjoyment.

Secondly, she identifies a self-portrait in the *Conversation of St. Paul*, other than the one generally recognized in the figure of the saint himself. Balas's second self-portrait is the head turned to the left, with his right arm raised above his head, a younger figure who is also aligned with the shaft of heavenly light. This "double self-portrait" she believes cinematically tells of Michelangelo's spiritual evolution over the years, and displays "the unresolved contradictions in Renaissance ideology between ancient paganism and Christianity" (62).

Balas's interpretations remain loyal to the work of great predecessors in the tradition of Renaissance art history: De Tolnay and Panofsky, as well as, more recently, Summers and Steinberg. Not only does she state that, "There can be no question of Michelangelo's allegiance to Neoplatonism" (57), but the artist is said to have felt guilty about his Neoplatonism, as well as "the pagan iconography of his art," and "probably, certain aspects of his private life" (63). The doubleness of the portraits is never discussed in terms of an artist's tendency to "dipping se," as Leonardo deprecatingly put it. Moreover, once resemblance is no longer required of portraiture, the whole genre evaporates into airy nothingness. The face of the vanquished man is scarcely identifiable on visual grounds with any particular visage. The question of finish, incidentally, does not come up (Balas has said elsewhere she considers the *Victory* finished).

For those who are less convinced than Balas that Michelangelo suffered from torment and guilt produced by unresolved neopaganism (rather than some self-berating quite characteristic of Christian spirituality in the time of Savonarola), less convinced also that Michelangelo's love of his work could not extend to the troublesome Tomb, and that Michelangelo's relationship with Cavalieri would have prompted him to execute a major sculpture while being pursued by powerful patrons, or that a hook-nosed companion of Saul on the way to Damascus need be the broken-nosed Michelangelo, much here remains highly dubious. Michelangelo's poetry is cited as evidence for interpreting the sculptures, but is not taken seriously as an adequate form of expression in itself. Perhaps this betrays a more modern than Renaissance estimation of poetry.

The granddaddy of treatments of portrait of Michelangelo is the unfortunately relatively inaccessible opus by Ernst Steinmann of 1913, *Die Portraitdarstellungen des Michelangelo*. Oddly, it does not appear in Balas's bibliography, although Steinmann's [sic] also useful *Michelangelo in Spiegel seiner Zeit* (1930) does. Balas's book is not a study of portraits of Michelangelo, but of self-identifications with figures in his art. Of that we might hope there could be no end; we might hope to do some ourselves. More resolvable is the question of whether we want to

continue to see Michelangelo in a Romantic light, as the great, tormented genius who synthesized, at a cost, the pagan and the Christian eras, or whether the time has come to reinvent the paradigm. We might begin to speculate afresh about what a man extraordinarily impatient of contemporary conventions, yet stuck in a world hardly acquainted with the word rebellion, might have been up to.

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