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The reflection of high Renaissance and Mannerism of the works of Michelangelo Buonarroti in the interpretation of Irving Stone in his last biographical novel "The agony and the ecstasy"

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THE REFLECTION OF HIGH RENAISSANCE AND
MANNERISM OF THE WORKS OF MICHELANGELO
BUONARROTI IN THE INTERPRETATION OF IRVING
STONE IN HIS LAST BIOGRAPHICAL NOVEL
THE AGONY AND THE ECSTASY

Key words: Michelangelo, High Renaissance, Mannerism, biographical novel, ekphrasis

He who first drew a comparison between painting and poetry was a subtle Man who felt on himself the similarity of influence of these arts. The two domains, as he felt, show the non-existing as the existing, the appearances as the reality; both delude and we like this delusion.

Gotthold Ephraim Lessing¹

Irving Stone's last biographical novel *The Agony and the Ecstasy* focuses on the life of a versatile Renaissance artist, namely Michelangelo Buonarroti. The book touches upon all of his artistic skills and presents his achievements in architecture, sculpture, painting, drawing and poetry. Since the discussion based on such a wide range of themes and techniques would exceed by far the intentional size of this article, the subject is thus narrowed down to one particular domain, *nota bene* the most beloved by Michelangelo, i.e. sculpture.

¹ „Ten, kto pierwszy uczynił porównanie pomiędzy malarstwem a poezją, był człowiekiem subtelnym, który odczuwał na sobie podobne działanie tych dziedzin sztuki. Obie te dziedziny, jak odczuwał, przedstawiają rzeczy nieistniejące jako istniejące, pozory jako rzeczywistość; obie łudzą, a złudzenie to nam się podoba” (G.E. Lessing, *Laokoon, czyli o granicach malarstwa i poezji*, in: idem, *Dziela wybrane*, vol. 3, Warszawa, PIW 1959; translation mine – A.K.).

By following the principles of a classical Renaissance composition, Stone pays a literary tribute to the great master. The narration of *The Agony and the Ecstasy* clearly and methodically unfolds before the reader the intricate patterns of the artistic works of Michelangelo. Such an approach manifests itself, among others, in the meticulous and thus complex descriptions referring to the sculptures.

However, before proceeding to the practical consideration of the High Renaissance and Manneristic elements visible in the ekphrastic representations dealing with the masterpieces chiselled by Michelangelo, let us consider the brief characteristics of the two phases.

The **High Renaissance** period of the Italian early 16th century sculpture is influenced by the ancient Greek and Roman cultures. The artists' scale of interests shifts again towards man, his nature and earthly existence. The canons adopted by the sculptors of that period included the harmony and balance of forms, tranquillity and staticity, clear constructions and the fondness of the beauty of the perfectly proportioned human body. However, those sculptural compositions were enriched by the so-called dignified movement, i.e. the one that was implied by the poses of the figures and across the surface of the work, combined with calm and simplicity. Additionally, the figures became rounded and free standing. In other words, they did not require any frames or background any longer (the exchange of the two dimensional aspect for a three dimensional one). The relief, on the other hand, was treated as a decorative element².

As for the themes, beside religious matters, the motifs related to the secular life appear as well as the legends taken from the ancient mythologies.

Turning to **Mannerism**, it emerges at the end of the 16th century "as a reaction to the harmonious classicism and the idealised naturalism of the High Renaissance art. In the portrayal of the human nude, the standards of formal complexity had been set by Michelangelo, and the norm of idealised beauty by Rafael"³. Additionally, Mannerists were obsessed with style and technique. It is especially visible in their figural compositions in which the significance of the subject matter itself is frequently neglected. Following, the emphasis was placed on the way of presenting the nude in complex and intricate, yet often artificial, poses. In other words the Mannerists were for the elaborate and the peculiar. Nevertheless, the characteristic feature of a Manneristic figure was grace but marked by a conscious exquisite modelling visible in, for example, strangely elongated arms or legs, unnaturally small heads or idealized features of faces. Therefore the way the figures were posed made them look affected and uneasy⁴.

As it was already mentioned, the art of carving of that period was dominated by the figure of Michelangelo Buonarroti whose sculptures were characterized by

² After: K. Zwolińska, Z. Malicki, *Słownik terminów plastycznych*, Warszawa, Wiedza Powszechna 1990.

³ Available on-line <<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/362538/Mannerism>>, date of access: 12.04.2012.

⁴ Ibidem.

a distinguished style. The flourishing of his artistic creation can be placed somewhere on the verge of the two phases mentioned above. The introduction of new, fresh ideas into the sculpture of the age marked his figures with strong personal, private and above all allegoric traits. This artistic uniqueness can be observed at its highest intensity especially in the artist's last, unfinished works, i.e. the series of *Slaves*. They are allegories of the human soul's straggle to free itself from the bondage of its "earthly prison", the body. The gigantic stone slaves can also be interpreted more directly as a fight of artistic form against mere matter. Certainly, they should be also viewed as symbols of Michelangelo's personal attitudes, his emotions and psychological conflicts and fears. It often happens that the sculptor while carving, transfers the expression of his unconscious mind. It is like a signature, a personal impress left on the work together with the pushes of a chisel. The artist is usually unaware of this aspect of the design of his composition. However, the narrator of *The Agony and the Ecstasy* is undoubtedly conscious about that fact:

As the months passed he broke into four nine-foot blocks simultaneously, creating advanced sculptural forms at one corner of each block, then tipping them over clockwise to work the other side. [...] He **knew in his carver's eye** the details of the sculptures. **In his mind they were no four separate figures but parts of a unified conception:** the somnolent Young Giant, **trying to free himself from his imprisonment** in the stone of time; the Awakening Giant, **bursting forth from his mountain chrysalis**; the Atlas, **full in years and power and wisdom**, holding God's earth on his shoulders; and the Bearded Giant, **old and tired**, ready to pass the world along to the Young Giant in a continuing cycle of birth and death. He who lived as far outside the realm of time and space as these demigods twisting and spiralling their tortured way out of their encasing blocks⁵.

The narrator draws the attention to the thoughts of the sculptor (cf. fragments in bold), making the reader conscious at the same time of their personal and thus very emotional charge. The artist's feelings first of all seem to cluster around the life stories of each of the slaves. Next, these stories impose the way the figures are being modeled. This means that the sculptor treats the marble blocks as a living matter and, by analogy, his marble figures as living persons. Among the four, *Atlas Slave*⁶ is particularly appealing to me. It emanates a tremendous will of life and want of escape, freeing himself from powerful matter. When viewed in its natural size and form in a museum, this almost three meter high figure makes the onlooker feel weak and small. It is interesting though, that *Atlas Slave* radiates almost a similar power when seen only as a reproduction in an album. Once we look at the picture, it is difficult to take our eyes off of it; the figure keeps us in a constant anticipation. The feeling of tension is established immediately. It seems

⁵ I. Stone, *The Agony and the Ecstasy*, London, Fontana Books 1963, p. 64. All the subsequent quotations come from this edition and therefore from now on will be referred to as AE followed by a page number.

⁶ See on-line <<http://100swallows.wordpress.com/2007/11/15/michelangelos-mysterious-giants/>>, date of access: 2.04.2012.

that the Atlas is eventually going to throw away the tonnes of heavy stone resting upon his head and shoulders. And we are anxious to see the face of the athlete. We almost see it; emerges tired and concerned. The immortal struggle is demonstrated in every visible part of the giant's body, in every tightness of his muscles. At the end we depart feeling slightly worn out as if we ourselves were actually the participants of the struggle. Stone's description is equally suggestive. Together with the Atlas we are bound to an eternal waiting and suspension. However, the viewer (or the reader), as if in disbelief, comes back to the Giant (his description, respectively) again and again to expose himself to that mental tension, hoping perhaps that at some point he *will* see the Atlas flinging off his stone hood. As Ervin Panofsky rightly notices, Michelangelo torments the viewer not by forcing him to walk around the figure to get to know it better, but by something completely opposite; he makes the onlooker stand in front of his stone blocks which seem to be chained to the wall or imprisoned in a niche, and whose shapes express a silent, mortal fight between the forces united for ever⁷.

Another feature of the sculpture of Michelangelo marked diligently by Irving Stone is its illusionary absence of motion. Although his compositions are mostly defined by clear vertical and horizontal lines and planes which suggest calmness and immobility, the artist's huge marble blocks are paradoxically impressively dynamic. The illusionary motion is suggestively created by few oblique and slanting lines. Because of their small number they are easily contrasted with the basic directions of carving. As a result, an opposition is created between the two parts: one closed and stiff, and the other open and full of movement. Moreover, the bulged, massed parts are also contrasted with the straight lines and flat planes, again suggesting busyness, irrepressibility and vitality.

Irving Stone not only notes the traces of dynamism observed in Michelangelo's figures but also underlines their importance. He does it by making overt references to the notion of movement:

Moses, **holding** the stone tablets under one arm, would be eight feet tall and massive even though seated. Yet what he was after was not an awareness of volume but of inner weight and structure. By **pushing one leg sharply backward** he **set into action a dynamics** of balance, **creating** a space-famine which was nourished by the monumentality of the vertigo caused by the **withdrawn** leg [AE 573].

The words in bold in the above quotation suggest movement firstly because of their generic meaning (hold, push, set in action, withdraw, dynamics) and secondly because of the continuity aspect (**holding**, **pushing**, **creating**). Additionally, the overall vitality of the description is furthermore enhanced by such words as "space-famine" and "nourished" since they induce thoughts referring to something or someone who is alive. Subsequently, *Moses*⁸, from the description is not a mere

⁷ E. Panofsky, *Studia z historii sztuki*, Warszawa, PIW 1971.

⁸ See on-line <http://24.media.tumblr.com/tumblr_l91054bl191qde9vzo1_400.jpg>, date of access: 2.04.2012.

lifeless marble figure. The three-dimensional aspect of the real masterpiece is skilfully reconstructed in the suggestive verbal expression created in the novel. Both portrayals of Moses, i.e. the ekphrastic and the marble one, proclaim inner life dynamism; in both the figure shows an inclination to act, to move, to do something. The Moses' left leg is slightly retreated, with the toes touching the floor which implies the intention of leaving the chair he is seated in. As we can easily imagine, the right foot is firmly and assuredly resting on the floor creating a solid base, the centre of gravity, for the Moses' body while the act of standing up from the seat. Additionally, his head is turned as if something caught his attention. He is making a decision. In a short while he is probably going to exercise his power of judgment, to implement his resolution. Stone's narrator also notices that:

What had moved Moses was the passionate resolve that his people must not destroy themselves, that they must receive and obey the Commandments which God sculptured on the stone tablets, and endure [AE 574].

The next point concerning the sculpture of Michelangelo Buonarroti is going to focus on his *figura serpentina*. The term was coined in Mannerism and means the upward spiralling composition infiltrating the space around it. Contrary to the High Renaissance figures which remind us about two-sided relieves rather than a free-standing statues, Manneristic blocks were round and three dimensional. Apart from it, *figura serpentina* is full of twists and turns which, quite surprisingly, do compose a unity, yet only when combined with the viewer's imagination. The Manneristic round sculptures, thus, had a hundred of faces, depending on the onlooker's point of view⁹. His *David* is a typical example of *figura serpentina*:

To mark the **frontal projections**, David's **left knee, right wrist, the left elbow and the shoulder**, he affixed nailheads in the marble. With these fixed points established he was ready to carve the **upsurging line from the knee through the thigh and chest**, delineating David's physical stamina; [...] To protect himself he had left half again as much marble at the rear as he would ultimately need, keeping in mind the fact that **there were forty views of a statue as one walked around it**. He had designed David as an **independent man**, standing clear of all space around him. The statue **must never be fitted into a niche**, stood against a wall, used to decorate a facade or soften the harsh corner of a building. **David must always be free**. The world was a battlefield, man for ever under strain, precarious on his perch. David was a fighter; not a brutal, senseless ravager, but capable of achieving freedom [AE 413–414].

The phrases in bold openly refer both to the three dimensional aspect of the work being sculptured and the multi-approach to the emerging figure. Additionally, the narration brings out the importance of the emotional interpretation of David.

⁹ It has been already mentioned (cf. Panofsky's opinion on page 4) that discussing Michelangelo's free-standing figures one should bear in mind that though they can be viewed from many angles they always force the on-looker to concentrate on one particular, dominating vista which strikes as complete and final. This might partially stem from the fact that Michelangelo was not particularly fond of such "walk-around" figures. He often preferred, quite against the artistic fashion, to see them placed in a niche or near the wall.

Unlike other Mannerist representations of the Goliath's avenger with the use of *figura serpentina*, Michaelangelo's presentation is exceptional in a couple of ways. First, because of its size and second, because of its posture and the decorative elements¹⁰.

If we consider other famous representations of David of Italian Renaissance like Donatello's figure in bronze from c. 1440s¹¹; Ballano's¹² and Verrocchio's¹³ *Davids*, both in bronze, from 1470s; or Bernini's *David* in marble from 1623–1624¹⁴, Michelangelo's *David* seems to be the most monumental of all, which symbolically corresponds to the greatness of the deed by the mythical youth. Next, the other *Davids* are presented in a far too elaborate way. The over-abundance of decorative elements drives the onlooker away from the story of David, let alone the emotions of the boy, towards the aesthetic pleasures only. On the other hand, Buonarroti's approach to the myth and its protagonist is as simple and honest as the form and the material (white marble) he decided for. Nether rich clothes (Ballano), unnecessary items (the hat of Donatello's *David* or some piece of material strangely draped around Bernini's *David*'s leg and waste), weapons out of proportion (Ballano) nor Goliath's cut head (Donatello, Bellano, Verrocchio) strangle and restrict the freedom of both: Michelangelo's *David* and its onlooker.

Let us now turn to another characteristic element of High Renaissance and Mannerism also skilfully employed by the sculptor, i.e. *contraposto*. This sculptural scheme originated by the ancient Greeks and was later mastered by Michelangelo. In *contraposto* the human figure is poised in such a way that the weight rests on one leg (the so-called engaged leg), freeing the other leg, which is bent at the knee. With the weight shift, the hips, shoulders, and head tilt, suggesting internal organic movement. The figure can be draped or nude. A perfect *contraposto* is beautifully exemplified in the already referred to *David*. It is one of the most splendid Greek kind of representation of heroes.

He had met the challenge of the deeply ploughed area by tilting the figure twenty degrees inside the column, designing it diagonally, on the bias, down the thickness of the marble, so that David's left side could be fitted into the remaining marble. [...] The David pulsed with life in every fibre of its body, beautiful bluish-grey venings running up the legs like human veins, the considerable weight already firmly carried on the right leg [AE 409–411].

¹⁰ See on-line <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:David_von_Michelangelo.jpg>, date of access: 2.04.2012.

¹¹ See on-line <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Donatello_-_David_-_Floren%C3%A7a.jpg>, date of access: 2.04.2012.

¹² See on-line <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Bartolomeo_bellano,_davide_con_la_testa_di_golia,_padova,_1470-1480.JPG>, date of access: 2.04.2012.

¹³ See on-line <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Museo_pushkin,_calchi_verrocchio,_david_01.JPG>, date of access: 2.04.2012.

¹⁴ See on-line <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:David_Bernini_1623.jpg>, date of access: 2.04.2012.

Scrutinising the original work, we can admire the statue in its full magnificence. The composition can be effortlessly divided into two parts: static and dynamic. The right-hand side of the statue is smooth and composed. The decision has been already made: he will try to kill Goliath to strike for freedom. David's right hand enclosing the stone becomes a symbol of everyone who faces a similar resolution. Contrary to the smooth and stable right side, the left side of *David*, from the outstretched foot all the way up to the disorderly, ruffled hair, is openly active and dynamic. It reflects the still existing emotions of fear, hesitation and doubt. Engaging himself in the fight equals giving up his previous idyllic life of a shepherd for ever. He seems to know that if he wins, he will get entangled into ruling and war. Thus, he is not so sure he wants to be a winner. He is like every man: reflecting upon the nature of things but also forced to act and make decisions. He cannot run away from it. That would mean cowardliness. Therefore David appears as a symbol of everlasting duality of human life, the duality of our dreamy ideals and the actions to be performed.

Finally, the true implementation of anatomic knowledge of the sculptor in his works should be mentioned. The anatomy aspect ought to be perceived in this particular case as important and outstanding. The opinion of Vasari on that matter about the body of Christ from Michelangelo's yet another sculptural composition, namely *Pieta*, can easily be applied to *David* as well:

nor let anyone think to see greater beauty of members or more mastery of art in any body, or a nude with more detail in the muscles, veins, and nerves over the framework of the bones [...]. Here is perfect [...] harmony in the joints and attachments of the arms, legs, and trunk, and the pulses and veins so wrought, that in truth Wonder herself must marvel that the hand of a craftsman should have been able to execute [...] a work so admirable¹⁵.

The narrator of Irving Stone very much consents to the viewpoint which is fairly exemplified in various descriptions referring to that very aspect of *David*:

What he wanted was the outward expression of blood, muscle, brain, vein, bone, tissue; true, convincing, lifelike, in beautiful proportion: David in the warm palpitant human flesh, with a mind and spirit and a soul shining through; David quivering with emotion, the cords in his neck pulled taut by the head turned hard to Goliath [AE 430].

As we can see in the above, the meticulous treatment of the marble body which looks so real that it seems it is enough to make a small cut to see the blood and the pulsating muscles is quite diligently noticed. For only by knowing the placement and movement of the inner organs of the body can the sculptor endow his figures either with life and vitality (*David*) or to show the emaciated, tormented body of the dead (*Pietà*).

¹⁵ G. Vasari, *Life of Michelangelo Buonarroti*, in: idem, *Lives of the Artists*, 2nd ed. (1568), available on-line <http://www.mcah.columbia.edu/arhumanities/pdfs/arthum_michel_reader.PDF>, date of access: 10.04.2012.

The marble figures of Buonarroti seem to be caught in a certain moment in natural pose and gesture as if with the use of a modern camera. And this is exactly what Michelangelo's compositions resemble, i.e. photographs¹⁶. On the one hand, they are realistically rendered when it comes to physical aspects, and on the other, they are extremely suggestive and referring to the onlookers' feelings. When combined, these two elements of Buonarroti's workshop result in an emotionally true and objectively rendered whole. Following, every sculpture by Michelangelo is additionally supplied with artist's individual emotional frame. His works are highly personal, created on the basis of his innermost thoughts and feelings. Similarly, a photographic picture, though it is a true visual representation of a figure or an object, etc., is very subjective despite its illusionary objectivity. Usually being deeply moved by the picture, we associate ourselves with its theme and atmosphere, ignoring or rather forgetting about its taker. And it is his very choice of emotions and his very choice of a particular moment; ours is only secondary and reduced to a mere decision whether we like the picture/sculpture or not.

Summing up, there is no doubt that this Renaissance artist, who worked continuously until six days before his death, managed to carve into his works the major trends of the epoch. Yet, it should be added that he did it in his own personal way, using an individual vista and perception. No other artist of that time was so successful in a natural portraying of the changes creeping and establishing themselves in the world of art of those days as well as his own passions. One can read from the works of Michelangelo like from an open book. And *vice versa*: one can see the sculptures while reading the ekphrastic descriptions of Irving Stone. Moreover, Buonarroti's immense contribution to the re-establishing of the old canons of a perfect terrestrial reality in a new light is also duly recorded on the pages of *The Agony and the Ecstasy*. The very spiritual independence, the High Renaissance and Mannerist ideals of earthly perfection combined with the ancients stories emanating from the works of Michelangelo Buonarroti are all exceptionally rendered and skilfully reflected in the narration of the novel by Irving Stone. The book splendidly marries the two indispensable elements of Michelangelo's art, namely the realistic and the personal. What is more, the novel in question, just like the works by the Renaissance sculptor, manifests the universal aspect of art. Although it presents but a tiny fragment of the artistic input of Michelangelo, the narrative serves at the same time as an artistic presentation accounting for the whole. Thus, reading the ekphrastic description in *The Agony and the Ecstasy* one experiences similar emotions as when looking at the works of Michelangelo. Stone's narrator allows the reader to participate in the artist's spiritual life related to all its hopes, pains, sorrows and joys. And by doing so, he leaves the reader with long-lasting impressions and images accompanied by certain, unshakeable emotions, very much like Michelangelo's *Slaves*.

¹⁶ See on-line <http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/1/1f/Michelangelo%27s_Pieta_5450_croppedcleaned>, date of access: 2.04.2012.

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Summary

The Reflection of High Renaissance and Mannerism of the Works of Michelangelo Buonarroti in the Interpretation of Irving Stone in His Last Biographical Novel *The Agony and the Ecstasy*

The article focuses on the artistic elements of Italian High Renaissance and Mannerism in the narrative structure of the biographical novel about Michelangelo Buonarroti, *The Agony and the Ecstasy*, by Irving Stone. The discussion of the above is limited to one selected aspect of narration, namely a description. The analysis includes ekphrastic passages referring to the most well known, monumental sculptural pieces by Michelangelo Buonarroti. The aim of the article is to establish the extend to which the literary descriptions form the novel by Irving Stone reflect the character and style of the 16th century sculptures of Michelangelo.