

Bronzino and a Bronze Boar Hans Christian Andersen and Stendhal in Nineteenth-Century Florence

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Nineteenth-century art history does not seem to have been particularly fond of Italian artists of the generations immediately following High Renaissance masters such as Raphael and Michelangelo.¹ For instance, the style of works by the Florentine painter Agnolo Bronzino (1503-1572) was, as we will see, judged in rather harsh terms as ‘void’, ‘offensive’ and the result of mere ‘anatomical pedantry’. Authors with less art historically determined preoccupations, however, turn out to have appreciated other characteristics of this artist. At least the writings of two nineteenth-century poets and novelists, both great lovers of Italy and Florence, betray a surprisingly different assessment of an important work by the painter, namely his *Descent of Christ into Limbo* of 1552. They are Henri Beyle, who called himself Stendhal, and Hans Christian Andersen.

Ancient and Renaissance Masterpieces

In the first lines of his tale *The Metal Pig* Andersen (1805-1875) describes a famous statue, which Florentines affectionately call *Il Porcellino* – ‘the piglet’.² In fact the animal is a full-grown boar, cast in bronze by the Florentine sculptor Pietro Tacca (1577-1640). When the Danish author saw it, the statue was located in front of the sixteenth-century loggia of the Mercato Nuovo in Via di Porta Rossa, a stone’s throw away from Ponte Vecchio and the Piazza della Signoria, which at the time was called Piazza del Granduca. It was replaced with a copy in 2004; the restored original is now on display in Museo Bardini in Florence (Fig. 1). The statue was commissioned in 1612 by Grand Duke Cosimo II de’ Medici to be made after the example of a Hellenistic marble in the possession of the Medici since 1560 (now in the Uffizi) and to be placed in Palazzo Pitti. As it happened, the bronze was cast only in 1633 and it soon became part of a fountain near the market place loggia. Pietro Tacca added a base with a bronze water bowl decorated with motives of flowers and water animals, and from

¹ A first version of this contribution was presented at the symposium ‘Nineteenth-century views on the Italian Renaissance, organised on 21 February 2014 at the Faculty of Arts Radboud University Nijmegen by the present writer together with Prof. Dr. Paul van den Akker of the Faculty of Cultural Studies of the Open University of the Netherlands.

² A very useful source of information about the author and his works is the official website of the H.C. Andersen Center of the University of Southern Denmark (www.andersen.sdu.dk). I quote from J. Hersholt, *The Complete Andersen*, New York, The Limited Editions Club, 1949, vol. 1-6 (full text on the website, see: http://www.andersen.sdu.dk/vaerk/hersholt/TheMetalPig_e.html, 3 June 2015).

that time on water poured out of the pig's snout.³ Andersen's tale *Metalsvinet* was first published in a volume entitled *En digters bazar* (*A Poet's Bazaar*) in 1842.

The Metal Pig tells the story of a poor boy who had been spending a winter's day begging in the Boboli gardens. Tired and cold and not having collected a penny to take home, the child lacks the courage to face his mother at the end of the day. Instead, he pauses at the market place, drinks from the pig fountain, climbs on the animal's back and falls asleep. This is the beginning of a series of fantastic events, starting precisely at midnight when the pig comes to life and begins to walk around the monuments of Florence, the lad still on its back. 'It was a strange ride', Andersen writes,

first they reached the Piazza del Granduca, and the bronze horse on which the Duke's statue was mounted neighed loudly to them. The colored coats of arms on the old Town Hall glowed like transparent pictures, and Michelangelo's *David* hurled his sling; it was a curious form of life that moved about. The bronze groups of *Perseus* and the *Rape of the Sabine Women* were only too much alive; their death shriek resounded through the stately deserted Piazza.

Thus, not only the bronze boar came to life but also the famous Renaissance statues standing on the Piazza della Signoria and the Loggia de' Lanzi closing off the square on the south side - Michelangelo's notorious marble *David* of 1504, now in the Galleria dell'Accademia but then in its original place next to the entrance of the Palazzo della Signoria (or Palazzo Vecchio, Andersen's 'old Town Hall'), Benvenuto Cellini's bronze *Perseus with the head of Medusa* (1545-1554) and Giambologna's huge marble *Rape of the Sabine woman* (1581-1583) in the Loggia, as well as the equestrian statue of *Duke Cosimo de' Medici* (1587-1594) by the same artist, in the middle of the square.



Fig. 1 Pietro Tacca, *Il Porcellino* ('The Piglet'), casted 1633, bronze, Florence, Museo Bardini.

³ A. Nesi (ed.), *Il Porcellino di Pietro Tacca, le sue basi, la sua storia*, Firenze, Edizioni Polistampa, 2011; A. Cagnini, 'Il Porcellino di Pietro Tacca, vicende storiche e problematiche di restauro della base originale', in: *OPD restauro*, 23 (2011), pp. 58-81. For more on the sculptor, e.g.: F. Falletti (ed.), *Pietro Tacca: Carrara, la Toscana e le grandi corti europee*, Firenze, Mandragora, 1997.

The animation of lifeless objects is extended to other works of art.⁴ When pig and boy reach the Uffizi palace the animal decides to enter the building. ‘Hold fast’, he says, ‘Hold fast now, for I am going up the stairs’. Once arrived in the art gallery, they admire ancient marbles like the Hellenistic *Medici Venus* and Roman copies after Greek originals depicting two wrestling gladiators and a kneeling man sharpening his sword, and also renaissance paintings, notably the *Venus of Urbino* by Titian. It is a manifestation of Anderson’s religious-moralistic inclination that the pagan and voluptuous figures obey to the Virgin Mary, Christ and the saints:

Near [Titian’s *Venus*] were the portraits of two lovely women, reclining on soft cushions, with beautiful, unveiled limbs, heaving bosoms, and luxuriant locks falling over rounded shoulders, while their dark eyes betrayed passionate thoughts. But none of these pictures dared to step forth from their frames. The goddess of beauty herself, the *Gladiators*, and the *Grinder* remained on their pedestals, subdued by the halo around the Madonna, with the infants Jesus and St. John. The holy pictures were no longer just pictures; they were the saints themselves.

After having visited the Uffizi gallery, the pig proceeds toward the Franciscan church of Santa Croce to admire the funerary monuments dedicated to, among others, Michelangelo, Dante and Machiavelli - in sum ‘the pride of Italy’. Then, all of a sudden, the animal hurries back to the market place and the boy ‘seemed to lose consciousness, and felt an icy coldness - and then opened his eyes’. After these intriguing nocturnal adventures the story loses its pace somewhat. Upon waking ‘half slipped from the metal pig’, the boy returns home but almost immediately runs away from his angry mother. Later that day an elderly glove-maker finds him in Santa Croce, hidden behind Michelangelo’s tomb. The old man and his wife take pity on the boy and foster him and later their neighbour, who makes a living as an artist, teaches him to draw and paint. The end of the story is set in the year 1834 when the narrator visits an exhibition in the Florentine Accademia where among the works on display is a painting showing ‘a handsome ragged boy leaning, fast asleep, against the metal pig of the Via Porta Rossa’. The frame of the painting is fitted with a laurel wreath and a black ribbon to commemorate the painter - of course one and the same as the boy of the beginning of the tale - who turns out to have died only recently. Although Andersen is known to have stayed in Florence for the first time in 1834, the account of the Academy exhibition seems to spring from literary imagination.⁵

Bronzino: The Descent of Christ into Limbo

From an art historical viewpoint *The Metal Pig* is interesting because of the characterisation of certain art works existing in Florence, most of them stemming from either the classical tradition or the Florentine High Renaissance. Yet, the work that attracts the boy’s special attention and which is described more fully than any other in the tale is a painting by the Florentine master Agnolo Bronzino (1503-1572). The narrator calls attention to the painting, informing the reader that the sheer abundance of works of art in the museum bewildered the young protagonist, and that ‘only one picture really took hold of his thoughts’ - an altarpiece signed and dated in 1552 by Bronzino. It is described how ‘the boy gazed longer at this picture than at any of the

⁴ The phenomenon of art works coming to life, as such, will not concern us here. Of course, it is in keeping with a topos in classical and renaissance literature from Pygmalion to Michelangelo, and beyond; see e.g. D. Freedberg, *The power of images. Studies in the history and theory of response*, Chicago University Press 1989; K. Gross, *The dream of a moving statue*, University Park, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006 (first ed. 1992).

⁵ As far as I am aware, there is no record of the painting in question in a 1834 exhibition in the Accademia. For Anderson’s travels, see J. Andersen, *Hans Christian Andersen*, Frankfurt am Main-Leipzig, Insel Verlag, 2005, especially pp. 668-673.

others' and that, again, inanimate objects showed physical, human reactions, for 'as the metal pig rested quietly before [the painting], a gentle sigh was heard. Did it come from the picture, or from the breast of the animal?' The narrator explains that

[m]any probably pass this picture unnoticed, yet it contains the essence of poetry. It is Christ descending to Hell, but He is not surrounded by souls in torment; no, these are heathen. [...] The expression of the children's faces is most beautiful in their certainty that they are going to Heaven. Two little ones are already embracing each other; one stretches a hand out to a companion below, and points to himself as if to say, 'I am going to Heaven!' All the older people stand around doubting, or hoping, or humbly bowing in prayer to the Lord Jesus.



Fig. 2 Agnolo Bronzino, *The Descent of Christ into Limbo*, 1552, oil on canvas, Florence, Museo dell'Opera di Santa Croce Tacca.

The painting in question is a huge canvas depicting the *Descent of Christ into Limbo* (Fig. 2). According to Christian theological convictions first sanctioned officially by pope Gregory the Great in 593, on the edge of Hell a 'Limbo of the fathers' existed, holding the righteous souls of those who had died before the moment in which Christ brought redemption to mankind by his death on the cross. One of the first activities of the resurrected Saviour was to go down there to come to the rescue of these waiting souls. Also new-born children who had died before having been baptised, but are innocent by definition, were included in the concept. Depictions of the theme typically show Christ, who is loosely wrapped in a shroud or loin cloth and holding a cross staff or crossed banner to symbolise his victory over death, reaching out to Old Testament figures like Adam and Eve, Moses and David, as well as biblical figures of more recent times like Saint John the Baptist and the 'good thief' who had been crucified together with Christ and had repented just moments before he died.⁶

In 1568, Bronzino's contemporary, the artists' biographer Giorgio Vasari, identified some of the biblical figures in the painting as portraits of at that time well-known Florentines. The grey-bearded man dressed in blue on the upper left might be a self-portrait of Bronzino, who was not only a painter but also a poet and appropriately presented himself in the guise of the biblical king-poet David holding a lyre.⁷ As appears from the quotation above, Andersen's boy on the boar's back was particularly struck by the sight of little children in the painting's lower right hand corner who, unlike the somewhat worried adults, are clearly confident of their redemption.

The altarpiece was commissioned by the wealthy Florentine merchant Giovanni Zanchini to adorn his own family's chapel in Santa Croce. It remained in its original location until 1821 when it was transferred to the Uffizi, where Andersen must have seen it (nowadays it is in the Museo dell'Opera di Santa Croce). Although, the painter and his work met with unfavourable comments on a certain cold affectation and lack of emotion during the earlier twentieth century, it is fair to state – as Elisabeth Cropper did in the catalogue of the 2010 Bronzino exhibition in Florence – that the 'brilliance of Bronzino, his elegance, wit, literacy, artistic independence and social complexity have all been rehabilitated'. Although she seems to have reservations about the painter's later works, such as the *Descent into Limbo*, with its sculptural quality, and its 'hyperrealistic' portrayal of sixteenth-century Florentines, and grotesque demons accompanying Christ, she concludes that exactly this 'radical conception [...] has much to say to modern painters and beholders'.⁸

Bronzino and the Nineteenth Century

The appreciation for Bronzino's sixteenth century 'mannerist' style has fluctuated over time.⁹ In his day the painter was indisputably one of the leading artists in Florence, working on commissions for the most sophisticated and highly placed patrons, including

⁶ For the theme and its iconography, see e.g.: W. Bieder, *Die Vorstellung von der Hollenfahrt Jesu Christi*, Zürich, Zwingli Verlag, 1949; E. Kirschbaum (ed.), *Lexikon der christlichen Ikonographie*, Freiburg im Breisgau, Herder, 1974, vol. 2, coll. 322-331.

⁷ G. Vasari, *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori scultori ed architettori nelle redazioni del 1550 e 1568* (R. Bettarini, P. Barocchi eds.), Firenze, Scelte, 1966-1987, vol. 6, pp. 234-235. See also: R. W. Gaston, 'Iconography and portraiture in Bronzino's Christ in Limbo', *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz* 27 (1983), pp. 41-72; C. Falciani & A. Natali (eds.), *Bronzino, artist and poet at the court of the Medici*, Firenze, Mandragora, 2010, pp. 304-305, cat. VI.5.

⁸ E. Cropper, 'The *fortuna critica* of Agnolo Bronzino', in: Falciani & Natali, *Bronzino*, cit., p. 33.

⁹ As it is not my intention to repeat Cropper's (*Ivi*, pp. 23-33) discussion of the appreciation of Bronzino from the sixteenth century onward, I limit myself to the *Limbo* painting. For the meandering assessment of sixteenth-century 'mannerism', see J. Shearman, *Mannerism*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1967, and P. van den Akker, *Looking for lines: theories on the essence of art and the problem of mannerism*, Amsterdam, AUP, 2010.

members of the powerful Medici family.¹⁰ Vasari praised Bronzino's *Descent into Limbo* highly for its delicacy of style, naturalness and the sheer beauty of the nude bodies of 'men, women, children, the old and the young' depicted.¹¹ It was precisely the figures' nudity however that contributed to a much less positive assessment in art criticism from the end of the sixteenth century onward, when art literature kept repeating the opposing positions of admiration for the artist's virtuosity on the one hand and the inappropriateness of his nudes on the other.

Only from the very last years of the eighteenth century onward did opinions of Bronzino seem to become more art historically motivated. Luigi Lanzi, in his *Storia pittorica della Italia* (1795-1796), discussed Bronzino as one of the sixteenth-century followers of Michelangelo who mainly copied parts of the latter's nude bodies and then assembled them without much concern for three-dimensionality. According to Lanzi, Bronzino's colours are superficial and he judged the *Descent into Limbo* more fit for an 'academy of the nude' than for a church altar.¹² Perhaps it was exactly this opinion that induced the friars of the Franciscan convent of Santa Croce to have the altarpiece removed and transported to the Uffizi some two decades afterward. Museum piece or not, the English critic John Ruskin, in his *Modern painters* of 1846, was outspoken in his dislike for the pictorial qualities of the work:

vile as it is in colour, vacant in invention, void in light and shadow, a heap of cumbrous nothingness and sickening offensiveness, and of all voids most void in this, that the academy models huddled together at the bottom show not so much unity or community of attention to the academy model with the flag in its hand above, as a street crowd to a fresh-staged charlatan.¹³

By the end of the 1800s criticism of Bronzino's allegedly superficial and laboured style reached a peak. In *The Florentine Painters of the Renaissance* of 1896, for instance, the American connoisseur Bernard Berenson remarked on the painting that 'Bronzino's ideal in composition' was '[t]he nude without material or spiritual significance, with no beauty of design or colour, the nude simply because it was the nude'.¹⁴ Three years later, in his study on Italian Renaissance art entitled *Die klassische Kunst*, Heinrich Wölfflin classified Bronzino among the painters whose works represent the 'decline' of the High Renaissance style. In works by those artists the Swiss art historian recognised a lack of observation of nature and an inclination to construct 'motives and movements in personal formulae and making of the human body a purely schematic machine of limbs and muscles'. The *Descent into Limbo* he regarded as being symptomatic of these faults; to stand in front of it, he writes,

¹⁰ For Bronzino's life and works, see e.g. D. Parker, *Bronzino. Renaissance painter and poet*, Cambridge, CUP, 2000, pp. 133-167; M. Brock, *Bronzino*, Paris, Flammarion, 2002.

¹¹ '[V]i sono ignudi bellissimi, maschi, femine, putti, vecchi e giovani, con diverse fattezze e attitudini d'uomini che vi sono ritratti molto naturali': Vasari, *Vite*, cit., vol. 6, p. 234.

¹² 'È questa una tavola più a proposito per un'accademia di nudo, che per un altare di chiesa [...]': L. Lanzi, *Storia pittorica della Italia*, Bassano, Remondini, 1795-1796 (reprint 1968-1974), vol. I, p. 149. For Lanzi's remarks on Michelangelo's epigones: pp. 137-138.

¹³ J. Ruskin, *Modern painters*, London, Allen, 1903 (*Complete works*, E.T. Cook & A. Wedderburn eds.), vol. II, p. 101. For some other, unfavourable, nineteenth-century assessments of Bronzino's work in general, see Cropper, 'The fortuna critica', cit., pp. 26-27.

¹⁴ 'Bronzino, Pontormo's close follower, had none of his master's talent as a decorator, but happily much of his power as a portrait-painter. Would he had never attempted anything else! The nude without material or spiritual significance, with no beauty of design or colour, the nude simply because it was the nude, was Bronzino's ideal in composition, and the result is his *Descent into Limbo*': B. Berenson, *Florentine painters of the Renaissance*, New York-London. Phaidon, 1896, p. 82.

is like looking at an anatomical museum; everything is anatomical pedantry and there is no trace of straightforward observation. The sense of texture in materials, an appreciation of the softness of flesh, or a feeling for the beauty of the surface of inanimate objects, all seem to have died out.¹⁵

What, then, could have been the reasons why the boy in the story of the metal pig, and perhaps also its author, Hans Christian Andersen, felt so attracted to the painting in the 1830s? For one thing, as we have seen, the description draws specific attention to the children depicted – three nude boys not yet ten years old, who bore a ‘most beautiful’ facial expression. One could assume the tale’s protagonist being attracted by the mere presence in the painting of children of about his own age.¹⁶ After all, apart from images like those of the Christ Child, the young Saint John the Baptist and the occasional portrait of an infant prince or patrician, there are not many paintings in the Uffizi depicting young children, let alone the nameless ones in the Limbo painting. Also, we recall that the narrator declares that the work ‘contains the essence of poetry’. Was Andersen aware of the artist’s poetical inclinations, and was his admiration literary-determined? Or was it his own poetical sensibility that drew him to the painting? Whatever the case might be, it is perhaps telling that a second nineteenth-century admirer of Bronzino’s *Descent into Limbo* who may have been more of an art expert than Andersen, but certainly was a fellow *homme de lettres*, was the French diplomat and novelist Stendhal (1783-1842).

Stendhal and the ‘Stendhal syndrome’

Stendhal first visited Florence in 1811. In his travelogue *Rome, Naples et Florence*, published in 1817, he describes how, after a visit to the church of Santa Croce, he was overcome by deep emotions caused by the impression the city and its artistic treasures made upon him. ‘I was’, he declares, ‘seized with a fierce palpitation of the heart; the wellspring of life was dried up within me, and I walked in constant fear of falling to the ground’ – symptoms later, in the twentieth century, taken as typical of a psychosomatic disorder caused by the confrontation with impressive works of art, dubbed ‘Stendhal syndrome’ from which quite a number modern day tourists appear to suffer during their stay in Florence.¹⁷ The exact place where Stendhal says to have remained dumbfounded by ‘perhaps the most lively pleasure painting has even given me’, is the chapel at the end of the left transept of Santa Croce, which then belonged to the Niccolini family. The rectangular space, begun in 1582 by architect Giovanni Antonio Dosio (1533-1611) is richly adorned with polychrome marble incrustations, statues, among others, of the Old Testament prophets Moses and Aaron by Pietro Francavilla (1545-1615), two oil paintings by Alessandro Allori (1535-1607) and an oval cupola frescoed only in 1664, with depictions of the Assumption of the Virgin surrounded by four sibyls by Baldassare Franceschini called Il Volterrano (1611-1689).

¹⁵ ‘Die Kunst ist völlig formalisiert geworden und hat gar keine Beziehung mehr zur Natur. Sie konstruiert die Bewegungsmotive nach eigenen Rezepten und der Körper ist nur noch eine schematische Gelenk- und Muskelmaschine. Tritt man vor Bronzinos “Christus in der Vorhölle” (Uffizien), so glaubt man in ein anatomisches Kabinett zu sehen. Alles ist anatomische Gelehrsamkeit; von naivem Sehen keine Spur mehr. Das stoffliche Gefühl, die Empfindung für die Weichheit der Haut, für den Reiz der Oberfläche der Dinge scheint abgestorben’: H. Wölfflin, *Die klassische Kunst, eine Einführung in die italienische Renaissance*, München, Bruckmann, 1899, p. 186; quotations after the English edition: *Classic art*, London, Phaidon, 1948, p. 202.

¹⁶ Thanks are due to Jeroen Stumpel who offered this suggestion.

¹⁷ ‘En sortant de Santa Croce, j’avais un battement de cœur, ce qu’on appelle des nerfs à Berlin; la vie était épuisée chez, moi, je marchais avec la crainte de tomber’. Stendhal, *Rome, Naples et Florence en 1817*, see: V. Del Litto (ed.), *Stendhal, Voyages en Italie*, Paris, Gallimard, 1973, p. 480. For the syndrome itself, see: G. Magherini, *La sindrome di Stendhal*, Firenze, Ponte alle Grazie, 1989.

Stendhal describes how, after he had the chapel especially opened for him, he admired its decoration, making specific mention of Volterrano's *Sibyls*.¹⁸

It is interesting to note that in the description of the 'point of emotion where heavenly sensations caused by the fine arts meet passionate feelings',¹⁹ Stendhal does not mention the various late mediaeval and renaissance artists, such as Giotto, Donatello or Michelangelo, whose works count among Florence's greatest attractions, but rather a monument begun in the late sixteenth century and finished in a lavish, classicist-baroque fashion in the seventeenth. It is also interesting that Stendhal had penned a somewhat different version of the story in his original diary, six years before. On 27 September 1811 he describes his visit to the Niccolini chapel in Santa Croce. The group of Sibyls in Volterrano's cupola he judges 'grandiose: it is alive, it resembles nature in relief': but, in the same breath, he declares to have seen something even more impressive:

I thought I would not find anything as beautiful as the Sibyls, but then my servant halted me almost perforce to look at the *Limbo*. I was almost moved to tears. [...] Painting had never given me such pleasure. [...] I had never seen anything this beautiful.

At first, Stendhal believed the altar piece to have been painted by the seventeenth-century Bolognese painter Giovanni Francesco Barbieri, called Il Guercino (1591-1666) whom he said he admired very much – incidentally, again a Baroque painter, rather than a master belonging to the Florentine Renaissance canon. Stendhal remained overcome by emotions for two hours, and admitted that he was annoyed to learn that the work had in fact been painted by Bronzino, an artist of whom he had never heard. Nevertheless, when describing in his diary how he was almost moved to tears by the unexpected sight, he admitted that '[t]hey come to my eyes now that I am writing this'.²⁰

In Stendhal's oeuvre there is another reference to the *Descent into Limbo*. In February 1817 he and 'seven or eight other travellers arrived from Florence' and were having dinner at an inn in the Tuscan town of Torrenieri where the landlord's two young daughters served the party at the table. Stendhal found the girls of an 'uncommon beauty', and commented that 'one would say that Bronzino had taken them as models for the female figures in his famous *Limbo* painting'.²¹ Whereas critics

¹⁸ 'J'ai parlé à ce moine, chez qui j'ai trouvé la politesse la plus parfaite. Il a été bien aise de voir un Français. Je l'ai prié de me faire ouvrir la chapelle à l'angle nord-est, où sont les fresques du Volterrano. Il m'y conduit et me laisse seul. Là, assis sur le marche-pied d'un prie-Dieu, la tête renversée et appuyée sur le pupitre, pour pouvoir regarder au plafond, les Sibylles du Volterrano m'ont donné peut-être le plus vif plaisir que la peinture m'ait jamais fait.' : Del Litto, *Stendhal*, cit., p. 480.

¹⁹ 'J'étais arrivé à ce point d'émotion où se rencontrent les sensations célestes données par les beaux-arts et les sentiments passionnés': *Ibidem*.

²⁰ 'Quant aux quatre Sibylles, je n'en puis rien dire que d'assez fort: c'est grandiose; c'est vivant, ça paraît la nature en relief. [...] Je croyais ne rien trouver d'aussi beau que ces Sibylles, quand mon d[omesti]que de place me fit arrêter presque par force pour voir un tableau des *Limbes*. Je fus touché presque jusqu'aux larmes. Elles me viennent aux yeux en écrivant ceci. / Je n'ai jamais rien vu de si beau. Il me faut de l'expression, ou de belles figures de femmes. Toutes les figures sont charmantes et nettes, rien ne se confond. La peinture ne m'a jamais donné ce plaisir-là. Et j'étais mort de fatigue, les pieds enflés et serrés dans les bottes neuves: petite sensation qui empêcherait d'admirer le bon Dieu au milieu de sa gloire, mais que j'ai oublié devant le table des *Limbes*. Mon Dieu, que c'est beau. / Je fus tout ému pendant deux heures. On m'avait dit que ce tableau était du Guerchin; j'adore ce peintre au fond de coeur. Point du tout: on me dit deux heures après qu'il est d'Agnolo Bronzino, nom inconnu pour moi. Cette découverte me fâcha beaucoup': V. Del Litto (ed.), *Stendhal, Oeuvres intimes*, Paris, Gallimard, 1981-1982, vol. 2, pp. 782-783. See also Ph. Berthier, *Stendhal et ses peintres italiens*, Genève, Droz, 1977, p. 114.

²¹ 'Pour compléter les agréments de la soirée, nous sommes servis à table par deux jeunes filles de une rare beauté, l'une blonde et l'autre brune piquante; ce sont les filles du maître de la maison. On dirait

ranging from Luigi Lanzi around 1800 to Heinrich Wölfflin a century later criticised the lack of naturalness in Bronzino's painting, on the contrary it was exactly the convincing presence of this quality that pleased Stendhal. In the establishment in Torrenieri two beauties from Bronzino's altarpiece seemed to have come to life, just like the sculptures and paintings in Hans Christian Andersen's tale of the *Metal Pig* would do some fifteen years later.

The 'Essence of Poetry'

However much Stendhal appreciated a good painting, his emotional reaction to the overwhelming impression Florence made on him was not caused by looking at works of art alone. For in Santa Croce, where the episode of his confusion is set, he had first seen the grave monuments of great Florentines, and he mentions explicitly how 'the idea of being in Florence, and the proximity of the great men whose tombs I had just seen' contributed to the state of ecstasy he attained. Furthermore, he writes that '[a]bsorbed in the contemplation of sublime beauty, I saw it from close by, I was, so to speak, able to touch it'.²² It is hard to tell if Stendhal, by using the adjective 'sublime' actually referred to the concept of 'the sublime' as it had been formulated by eighteenth-century philosophers such as Edmund Burke (1727-1797) and Immanuel Kant (1724-1804).²³ Yet, in his description of his experience, he clearly referred to something other, more encompassing, than the mere form and style of a work of art.

In Bronzino's *Limbo*, both Stendhal and Andersen apparently appreciated external features that were not the primary concern of contemporary art critics. Perhaps it took the eye of a nineteenth-century literary man and his poetical imagination to recognise aspects such as the ability of painted figures to come to life and a splendour that is emotionally overwhelming. Characteristics that were formulated in Stendhal's words as 'sublime beauty' and in Andersen's as 'the essence of poetry'.

Keywords

Agnolo Bronzino, Hans Christian Andersen, The metal pig, Stendhal (Henri Beyle), reception

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que le Bronzino a dessiné d'après elles ses figures de femmes, dans son fameux tableau des *Limbes*, si méprisé des élèves de David, mais qui me plaît beaucoup comme éminemment toscan': Del Litto, *Voyages*, cit., p. 504.

²² 'J'étais déjà dans une sorte d'extase, par l'idée d'être à Florence, et le voisinage des grands hommes dont je venais de voir les tombeaux. Absorbé dans la contemplation de la beauté sublime, je la voyais de près, je la touchais pour ainsi dire.': Del Litto, *Stendhal*, cit. p. 480.

²³ For some basic introductions to the concept, see: S. H. Monk, *The Sublime. A study of critical theories in XVIII-century England*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1960 (first published in 1935); Ph. Shaw, *The Sublime*, New York, Routledge, 2006.

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RIASSUNTO

Bronzino e il porcellino

Hans Christian Andersen e Stendhal nella Firenze del XIX secolo

La storia dell'arte dell'Ottocento non sembra aver avuto particolarmente a cuore gli artisti italiani delle generazioni successive ai grandi maestri rinascimentali, quali Raffaello e Michelangelo. Così, ad esempio, lo stile delle opere del pittore fiorentino Agnolo Bronzino (1503-1572) veniva giudicato con termini alquanto ostici come 'vuoto', 'offensivo', o come il risultato di 'pedanteria anatomica'. Autori con meno preoccupazioni determinate dalla storia dell'arte lasciano tuttavia intravedere di aver apprezzato altre caratteristiche di questi artisti. Almeno gli scritti di un poeta ed un romanziere, ambedue grandi amatori dell'Italia e di Firenze, rivelano una valutazione sorprendentemente diversa di un'importante opera del pittore, la sua *Discesa di Cristo al Limbo* del 1552. Si tratta di Hans Christian Andersen e di Stendhal. Questo contributo alla ricezione dello stile 'manierista' del quadro sulla *Discesa al Limbo* del Bronzino prende in esame sia la critica d'arte del XIX secolo che il modo con cui l'opera è stata trattata dall'immaginazione letteraria, così come risulta dal racconto di Andersen intitolato *Il porcellino di bronzo* e dal resoconto originale delle esperienze di Stendhal a Firenze, considerate poi come i sintomi della 'sindrome' che porta il suo nome.