Una Roman D'Elia

The Poetics of Titian's Religious Paintings

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. Pp. xvi, 265.

The fulcrum of Una Roman D'Elia's study of different genres, and Titian's management of them, is the concept of decorum. As the author shows, Titian seems to have been more successful than most in dealing with the appropriateness of setting in his paintings, all the more remarkable since a theory of genres was not given coherent and concrete form until the end of the sixteenth century.

Starting with "Christian Pastoral," D'Elia explores a number of arbitrary genres with the aim of showing how Titian smoothly brought together religious and secular forms and ideas within his art as part of the process of "negotiating decorum," to use the author's phrase. Landscape provided the most cogent vehicle for persuading the viewer that the secular and the sacred could be fused to craft an individualistic form of genre, but there was a problem: the yoking of an essentially pagan tradition of pastoral, traditionally enlivened by the erotic capers of nymphs and shepherds, with such explicitly Christian narratives as the Flight into Egypt. Situating Christ's flight in the natural world could be problematic for some critics, especially Titian's friend Pietro Aretino, who was uneasy about the "Christian pastoral" of *The Flight into Egypt*. For Aretino, this painting and its grisly companion, *The Massacre of the Innocents*, dealt with narrative action rather than "pastoral contemplation," although he did conceive of such momentous Christian events as the Resurrection in pastoral terms. D'Elia shows how this harked back to a pagan golden age in which sensuality reigned in the world rather than chastity, a residue accounting for the passionate intensity in "Christian pastoral" works like Titian's *Noli me Tangere*, whose intimacy recalls pagan narratives of love and loss such as that of Orpheus and Eurydice.

D'Elia's book moves on to consider another aspect of "pagan poetics," the use of the sculpture group of the Laocöon to show the anguish of Christ's passion. After navigating through Renaissance and modern debates on the Laocöon, D'Elia tackles the issue of the sculpture as an appropriate model for Christian suffering. Its reception in literary circles seems to indicate skepticism on this point: it provided either a metaphor for medical suffering or a vehicle for jokes about orgasm. And Aretino rejected the connection between Christian agony and the Laocöon completely, since to him the Trojan priest did not suffer in the same way as Christian martyrs did. However they suffered, the violence of martyrdom had utility for the Church, especially in the Counter-Reformation. D'Elia draws on debates about decorum at the end of the sixteenth century in displaying the violence inflicted on Christ; she

points out that Counter-Reformation authors scorned the emotional restraint and beautification of skin by painters who refused to show Christ bloody or deformed, an aesthetic that has resonance for our times: one thinks of Mel Gibson's graphically violent *The Passion of the Christ* and the controversy surrounding it.

It is in discussing the aesthetics of violence that this book scores highly, because it provides an insightful and helpful summary of ideas on the "moral value of the spectacle of violence." Examining the enormously influential, though lost altarpiece *Assassination of St Peter Martyr*, D'Elia discusses the influence of Aristotle's *Poetics* which stimulated debates on tragedy in the 1540s and later, and which definitely affected this composition. Titian's "tragic painting" evolved within a context in which authors, some known to the artist—see the catalogue of Titian's writer friends at the back of the book—not only theorized about tragedies, but wrote them too. Reverting to the issue of genres and decorum, D'Elia frames this problem of defining tragedy within an invented genre, "Christian tragedy." Acknowledging the oxymoronic nature of this idea—the Christian narrative was resolved through redemption with a happy ending, as in Dante's *Commedia*—the author nevertheless does show how tragedy enters into a Christian context. Dramatists of the medieval and Renaissance periods thought of Christian martyrdoms as sacred tragedy; thus the Massacre of the Innocents was the tragedy that followed the "comedy" of the nativity. Where poetics was concerned, the style of tragedy depended upon elevation, more noble and reserved than other styles; this restraint was easily transferred to the visual rhetoric of dramatic martyrdoms in Giovanni Bellini and Titian's versions of the assassination of St Peter Martyr, although the latter was more economical in its figuration, and hence more effective as painted tragedy.

Reverting to the problem of the overlapping of sacred and profane genres, D'Elia turns her attention to the emotive figure of Titian's Magdalene, arguing that the artist's small paintings of Mary Magdalene were analogous to the Christian Petrarchan poems fashioned by Titian's literary friends. Here we embark upon the problem of decorum again: how could a secular genre of poetic sensuality be used to describe a Christian scene? Addressing this question, D'Elia introduces yet another label, "Christian Petrarchism," a term for the blending of the chaste and erotic as in the writings of Vittoria Colonna and Castiglione who both observed virtuous qualities in the "fallen body" of the Magdalene. Colonna "wrote love poems to Christ," and praised the Magdalene's spiritual qualities in erotic terms; Castiglione incorporated the Magdalene into his discussion about love in the famous *Il Cortegiano*. Although Aretino employed the same poetic and sacred conventions, his tone was more satiric, comparing the Magdalene to pagan sculptures like the Phidian Venus, as well as

joking about an imaginary saint resembling the Magdalene, Santa Nafissa, who was both sinful and saintly. D'Elia's final type of painting, the Annunciation, might seem suited to the humble and domestic, but she argues that the scene should be seen in epic terms, especially as Aretino perceived of it in that way. Space precludes a detailed exposition of the author's ideas here, but the governing theme seems to be that Titian created—possibly under the influence of Aretino's descriptions of the Annunciation—a new treatment of the subject: “a turbulent moment of heavenly descent.”

In striving towards a new poetics of Titian's art, D'Elia risks the creation of a scheme reliant upon an arbitrary division of types and genres, but that reflects the limitations of labels rather than the author's approach. Identifying fresh genres is not D'Elia's purpose anyway: the predominant idea within this valuable new study is that the over-determination of genres reflects, to use her own words, “..the increasing importance of aesthetics over context or even content.” This struggle between aesthetics and decorum would endure into the era of the Counter-Reformation with poets such as Tasso and Marino violating the rules of the past, and in the case of the latter, bringing horror and delight together as in his own poem *La Strage degl' Innocenti*, which inspired a new poetics of painting in the seventeenth century.

DAVID PACKWOOD, *University of Warwick*