Antonella Fenech Kroke. Giorgio Vasari: La fabrique de l’allégorie: culture et fonction de la personnification au cinquecento
Giorgio Vasari: La fabrique de l’allégorie: culture et fonction de la personnification au cinquecento by Antonella Fenech Kroke
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It is almost impossible to write a review of a valuable book such as the highly acclaimed and learned work by Antonella Fenech Kroke, Giorgio Vasari: La fabrique de l’allégorie, without entering into the current ongoing discussion regarding the authorship of Vasari’s Vite. This is even more evident given the fact that, in 2011, Marco Ruffini published an equally acclaimed work on Vasari based on directly contradictory assumptions (Art without an Author: Vasari’s Lives and Michelangelo’s Death).

Antonella Fenech Kroke concentrates on the omnipresence of Vasari as an artist but does not focus on the question of the authorship of his reputed writings. In fact her aim is to explore the issue of “culture and function” of personification during the sixteenth century, as her subtitle indicates. We should begin by stating that the author’s central assumption, which is frequently repeated, is that, around the middle of the century, the language of allegory is still in its heyday, thanks above all to Vasari as a painter, before it fell into a rigid and formalized repertory.

The author is in fact firmly convinced that the fifth decade of the century was the golden age of allegory (“l’apogée du langage allégorique”), mainly thanks to Vasari, citing the example of his cycle on the vaults of the Monte Oliveto refectory in Naples. Allegory at that moment acquires a symbolic and semantic pregnancy never hitherto attained, even substituting the future linguistic tools through which it would itself be diluted, for example at the time of the complicity between Vasari and Borghini.

Kroke inserts a long chapter as a bridge between one era and the other and between the two phases of Vasari’s activity before and after his constant engagement at the court of Cosimo from the 1550s on. In these pages she reconstructs the main developments of both trattatistica dedicated to the behavior and of that dedicated to the education of the prince. In doing so she comes to important conclusions, on one hand concerning the status of the ideal artist personified and disseminated by Vasari and, on the other, concerning the ideal sovereign exemplified in Cosimo I.

The definition of this model-orientated aspect is useful for explaining that effect of semantic amplification, as it is defined in the book, in which we can find
also the allegoric system displayed in Palazzo Vecchio. The consequence is that the
author reevaluates fully the function of Vasarian Ragionamenti, the importance of
which has been necessarily, yet foolishly, mortified by those who deny Vasari the full
authorship of the Vite.

The most convincing and fascinating part of the book is, however, the
section dedicated to “tools,” i.e., to the ways in which Vasari uses personification
through time from Venice to Naples to Florence, inserting it in ever differing
contexts and therefore diversifying its role and function. These are precious pages
in which the well-known frames — so dear to Panofsky — of Vasari’s Libro de’
disegni, are now compared to what we know about the scenes of Aretino’s Talanta
and to three different systems of arranging the spartimento, recognized by Kroke
within the decoration following the transformation into a royal palace of Palazzo
Vecchio.

Among the annexes, the author inserts an incredibly useful Répertoire des
personnifications vasariennes. Organized in alphabetical order, each entry includes
the definition of the respective allegory, a relative description, textual sources, and
the place in which the work was executed and is conserved.

Reservations could arguably be made regarding the fact that the author takes
for granted, without a preliminary discussion, categories such as Mannerism or
Counter-Reformation, considering them absolute concepts. The content, however,
is well researched but at times a little lengthy with numerous digressions, resulting
in a work that perhaps could be considered too expansive. A slightly shorter and
more succinct work might have been preferable.

The virtue of this work lies in its bringing to the surface the methods employed
by Vasari in conceiving and executing his painted cycles, which are rich in allegories.
This invites the reader of the Vite to rethink the text in the light of these patterns. In
this respect the book is highly recommended, precisely because terms such as disegno
or spartimento are now enhanced with a fuller meaning.

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