
How Not to Write the Biography of Michelangelo

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ALTHOUGH BIOGRAPHY is a literary art form, scholars can all too easily reject the demands of the genre. Such is the case in Michael Hirst's new biography of Michelangelo.* The author is more concerned with facts and factoids than he is with the shape of his narrative and the way in which these facts fit nicely and compellingly into a story. Hirst's book, the first of a projected two-volume work, is less a vivid and well-shaped biography than a chronological sequence of facts, as well as corrections of the errors of previous scholars—a bloodless series of readings of documents that might well serve usefully as prolegomena to a future biography. Hirst's contentious approach to previous scholarship will also prevent him from reaching the general reader, the non-specialist who is curious to know more about the art and life of the artist and how they are inextricably linked. As he plows through the documentary record, attempting to relate it to the crucial sixteenth-century biographies of Michelangelo by Vasari and Condivi, Hirst writes, strangely enough, without enthusiasm about one of the greatest figures in the history of art. He writes in an austere style that is chilling.

The unsuspecting “common reader,” looking for guidance beyond Hirst will be unaware of the fact that his “Bibliography” is a very Select Bibliography, which omits many authors who—one suspects, given the tone of the book—either arouse Hirst's antipathy or are not deemed worthy of

*Michael Hirst, *Michelangelo: The Achievement of Fame, 1475–1534*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011. x + 438 pages, 29 b/w illustrations + 24 color plates. \$40, cloth.

his consideration. Among the scholars who have written vividly about Michelangelo's life and work, writers contributing to the biography of the artist who have no place in Hirst's Select Bibliography, or are inadequately represented there, are the following: Emma Spina Barelli, James Beck, George Bull, Robert Clements, Sydney Freedberg, Howard Hibbard, Anthony Hughes, John Pope-Hennessy, Robert Liebert, Ralph Lieberman, Deborah Parker, Livio Pestilli, Lisa Pon, Charles Seymour, and David Summers. Beck, Bull, and Hughes in particular have interesting things to say about Michelangelo's life that are based on the documents and worth noting in a positive way.

Hirst's volume, which takes Michelangelo's story up to 1534, when he left Florence never to return, is divided into two parts: a 265-page year-by-year account of the artist's activities, and a 111-page apparatus of notes in which the author wages his battle against the errors of previous scholarship. He writes, as all of Michelangelo's modern biographers do, in the shadow of the great sixteenth-century biographies of the artist. I mean Vasari's life of Michelangelo from 1550, Condivi's biography of the artist of 1553, which reflects Michelangelo's voice and is thus partially autobiographical, and Vasari's revised account in 1568, which absorbs much from Condivi's narrative. These biographies are available in various English translations, and they remain an excellent point of departure for any reader who wants an introduction to the artist.

Discussing the art of Michelangelo, which is what makes the artist's life story compelling in the first place, Hirst is strangely perfunctory. When he speaks, for example, of the *Crucifix* in Santo Spirito, in Florence, he observes that although its attribution to Michelangelo "has not gone unchallenged," "the singularity of the work confirms its attribution." Surely an attribution is based on more than singularity. Writing of the unfinished *Entombment* in the National Gallery, London, he speaks of the painting's "astounding invention." The reader is left wondering exactly what

the author means by this suggestive assertion. He might be so generous with his expertise as to tell us.

Hirst moves from year to year, from work to work, from argument to argument—from the *Battle of the Lapthis and the Centaurs*, made during the period when Michelangelo worked in the Medici gardens, to the *Crucifix*, to the *Bacchus* and *Pietà* carved in Rome, to the *David* and Sistine ceiling frescoes and beyond, scarcely describing these and still other works at all. It is as if these works are merely documents, unread documents at that. No event in the life of an artist is more important, however, than the art itself. Reflecting the artist's imagination, art is the central fact in the artist's life story or biography. Of Michelangelo's art and artistic imagination, however, we hear almost nothing in Hirst's book. Hirst says little about the great statue of the *David*, for example, and so we must turn to Charles Seymour's book, *Michelangelo's David: A Search for Identity*, unmentioned in the Select Bibliography, for penetrating insights into the ways in which Michelangelo identified with his subject. Similarly, we must turn back to Vasari for clues to the mysteriously youthful Mary of Michelangelo's *Pietà*. Vasari quotes a poem by Giovan Battista Strozzi in relation to the *Pietà* in which Mary is described as mother, spouse, and daughter of Jesus, an embellishment of Dante, the poet so beloved of Michelangelo. Strozzi encourages us to see the mystery of Michelangelo's idealized Dantesque Mary, who as mother and daughter at once transcends time.

Of Michelangelo's *Creation of Adam*, unarguably one of the most famous works in the entire history of art, Hirst says not a word. We must return to Vasari who writes of Michelangelo's Adam: "A figure whose beauty, pose, and contours are such that it seems to have been fashioned that very moment by the first and supreme creator rather than by the drawing and brush of a mortal man." Sydney Freedberg has embellished Vasari's powerful comparison of Michelangelo to God in his writing on the Sistine ceiling, when he says of this fresco in his book, *Painting of the High*

Renaissance in Rome and Florence: “For the moment of this fresco God and Michelangelo enjoy a confusion of role: God acts the classical sculptor.” Hirst, by contrast, is remarkably indifferent to the artistic character and drama of biography, to the ways in which a life is shaped or given form, to the way in which the fictive biography is, in a sense, the outcome of the art. Somebody once said, “The artist creates the art, but the biographer creates the artist.” The Michelangelo who is divorced from his art in Hirst’s biography is stillborn. Hirst may on occasion refer to Michelangelo’s emotions, but such references convey little feeling or affect. The prose is too flat.

Hirst cares most about the facts. Fair enough. He cares too little, however, about the interpretation of the facts. He insists with great urgency that Michelangelo worked as a youth in the Medici gardens and then was shaped by the culture of the Medici who appreciated his talent. But here he is flogging a dead horse since no modern scholar doubts that Michelangelo worked in the garden; indeed everybody cites the famous letter that refers to Michelangelo in the garden. The issue is how to interpret this extraordinary moment? Did Michelangelo really pick up a chisel and hammer for the first time in that garden to carve a Faun, a laughing Faun, whose laughter was delightfully echoed by Lorenzo de’ Medici who discovered his talent but laughed at Michelangelo’s naiveté? Although he acknowledges that the story is lively, Hirst summarizes it in a mechanical way. I urge the curious reader to turn back to and savor in full Condivi’s charming account or Vasari’s delightful retelling of this tale.

Hirst wants to establish the importance of the distinguished classicist Poliziano in Michelangelo’s formation in this crucial Medicean moment, which is a nice idea, but he strangely ignores so much of the potential evidence at hand or deals with it too briefly. He alludes to Michelangelo’s signing his Rome *Pietà* in the imperfect (“faciebat”) as a reflection of Poliziano’s writing about this form of signature. Yes, but we need to remember too that the signature in the

imperfect was associated by Pliny specifically with the work of the exemplary ancient sculptors Apelles and Polyclitus—a further point that Poliziano might well have suggested to him. Moreover, when Michelangelo signed his work “faciebat,” he omitted, as has been noted, the “t” at the end of the verb; in other words he wittily signed in the imperfect imperfectly. Is this clever conceit also something that came to him from Poliziano?

Scholars have also noticed another detail in Michelangelo’s art that suggests the erudition of Poliziano. When Michelangelo carved his *Battle of the Lapiths and Centaurs*, he represented among a host of otherwise youthful figures a singular old man holding up a stone with two hands. This figure, the only old figure in the relief, suggests the artist’s self-comparison to Phidias, since according to Plutarch, Phidias portrayed himself as an old man holding up a stone with two hands on a battle relief. The not unreasonable inference here is that the learned Poliziano suggested this classical allusion to the artist, an allusion that implicitly suggests the comparison of the modern artist to the ancient sculptor. In his comparison, Michelangelo, seemingly under Poliziano’s spell, was also invoking another topos, that of the *puer senex*, since the young Michelangelo was demonstrating a skill comparable to that of the aged artist Phidias. Moreover, since the warriors of Michelangelo’s scene engage in battle primarily with large rocks, we might well wonder whether there is here a trans-lingual pun as the Lapithae lapidate their adversaries. Do we not see yet again the intervention of the profoundly learned Poliziano?

There is further evidence of Michelangelo’s connections with Poliziano in an early poem by Michelangelo, both sensuous and immensely playful, in which the poet imagines himself tightly bound to his beloved, a poem which, as scholars have remarked, was influenced by Poliziano’s poetry. (Hirst for some inexplicable reason gives relatively little attention to the place of poetry in Michelangelo’s biography.) Finally, David Summers has written eloquently and

suggestively about Michelangelo in relation to Poliziano, but these suggestive associations between poet and artist are mysteriously ignored.

Hirst also avoids many wonderful anecdotes that add color to the artist's life, stories that we can imagine he ignores precisely because they are not factual and are thus incompatible with his dogmatic positivism. He chooses to ignore the truthfulness of these fictions; he ignores the role they play in shaping the artist's life story. We recall, for example, how in Vasari, Piero Soderini is said to have criticized Michelangelo's *David* because the nose was too large, upon which Michelangelo climbed a scaffold and, pretending to correct his error, dropped some marble dust without touching the statue. At this, Soderini was made to appear foolish because he criticized the artist's error and then praised the improvement to the statue even though Michelangelo had not made any corrections. *Se non è vero è ben trovato*. If not true, the story has verisimilitude, because it reflects Michelangelo's pride and ingenuity as well as the critic's flawed judgment. Vasari's story points also to Michelangelo's rich sense of humor that we find throughout his poetry, as well as in his art and letters. Although Hirst does talk about one amusing letter by Michelangelo, he otherwise ignores the comic side of Michelangelo. One could write a book about Michelangelo's wit and humor.

The main problem with Hirst's biography is that there is no narrative thrust to it at all, since it is fractured time and time again by argumentation over the *facts* of his life. Yet the various anecdotes about Michelangelo that Hirst avoids are the cement of fiction that binds the facts to biography. Consider, for example, a delightful tale about Michelangelo's drawing of a hand told by Condivi, which one presumes Hirst ignores because he thinks it apocryphal. According to Condivi's story, the man who acquired Michelangelo's *Sleeping Cupid*, which was made as a forged antique buried in the ground, sent a gentleman to Tuscany to identify the author of this forgery. When he reached Michelangelo's

house, he suspected that the artist was the man for whom he was searching. He then asked Michelangelo to display something of his work, but because he had nothing to show, Michelangelo drew a hand. When the visitor considered this drawing, he was convinced that Michelangelo was his man, and he urged the artist to come to Rome, which would be a great place to display his talents.

The charm of this story, which has always been regarded as fiction, lies in its double entendre. The gentleman from Rome, who came to Florence in search of the hand that made the *Cupid*, was shown a drawing of a hand from the hand of the artist whom he sought. The hand in this witty story is thus emblematic of Michelangelo's identity. Condivi's knowing reader would have recognized that the story was a witty variation on the story of Giotto's O. When a visitor to Giotto from Rome wanted a demonstration of the artist's skill, according to Vasari, the painter rendered a perfect O, the letter emblematic of Giotto's name, with its pronounced double O sound. Just as the O was self-reflexive, a condensed signature, so Michelangelo's drawing of a hand was a signature piece. If Condivi's fiction comes from Michelangelo himself, as one might surmise, it reflects Michelangelo's skill as storyteller or *novelliere*. Reporting aspects of his life story in old age through Condivi, Michelangelo was in this case writing under the spell of Vasari's story of Giotto's O—a surprising reversal of roles.

In the history of biographical writing on Michelangelo, there are several milestones. After the marvelous books of Vasari and Condivi, which are far more than information, far more than facts or errors, far more than mere fiction, there is Herman Grimm's monumental book, Walter Pater's deeply biographical essay on Michelangelo, John Addington Symonds's classic biography of the artist, and Giovanni Papini's spirited, immensely engaging biography, the latter a work that deserves to be reprinted. But that is not all. Two years ago, William Wallace published with Cambridge University Press a lively biography of the artist, a vivid nar-

rative that is based on the kind of documentation used by Hirst. Wallace writes, however, with real flair in an inviting prose that is both accessible to the general reader and instructive to the scholar. If one wants an up-to-date biography of Michelangelo, grounded in the documents but also sensitive to the art, I recommend Wallace's book, especially because it goes more deeply and with more nuance into the social history of Michelangelo's world. Wallace, I might add, is especially good on the playfulness of Michelangelo, a topic almost entirely missing from Hirst's dour text. We might almost say that whereas Hirst greets Michelangelo with a sneer, Wallace approaches the artist with a smile.