

## INTO THE LABYRINTH: THE CONSTRUCTION OF A 21ST CENTURY POETICS

Marc Vincenz. *Sibylline*. Ampersand Books, 2016.

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Oracular voices, informed and insistent in their singular music, rise off the pages of *Sibylline*, Marc Vincenz's new and magnificent book-length poem. These utterances detail weighty matters, antique virtues, and visionary pronouncements. Yet the tone is light, both daring and luring the more adventurous readers into this Johan Huizinga-like brave new world of *homo ludens*. Here man as player must negotiate the twists and turns of an artistic, modern, albeit well-constructed, labyrinth.

Vincenz introduces his collection of auguries by conjuring up the Italian Renaissance. He does this with a quote from one of Michelangelo's poems in which the painter (with a wink) defends his consequential poetic skills. Then, presumably, Michelangelo assumes his role as Vincenz's premier voice in the hurly burly and harmony to follow.

In fact, at the very least, the reader will hear three voices: Michelangelo as interpreted by Vincenz's muse, Vincenz channeling Michelangelo, and the end voice or the reader himself or herself. And, make no mistake, there are many others who slip in their cameo comments from the hinterlands of space and time.

Upon entering *Sibylline's* intricacies readers find themselves embroiled in a political argument that pits invigorated humanism against its wealthy enablers, the renaissance patronage system that made everything happen. The strategy of man's need to express and control his destiny rubs against mysticism and the inherent sexism of the old world order. The title of the opening subsection, *An unsurpassed rule of thumb*, alludes to the corporal punishment a man could reasonably inflict on his wife. Michelangelo, as channeled by Vincenz, suggests that his fellow artists found an answer to this cultural conundrum in the ancient mythologies, implying, of course, future applications. The poet explains,

In the next great commission  
it's the taste that matters—

glorifying the original sins  
of the *maestro della bottega*.

& the birth of Venus,  
Botticelli's pagan mythologies—

to stop the devil dancing  
on his shoulders,

that master of misogyny.

For the most part scholars now agree that the so-called dark ages were not as dark as once thought. In spite of catastrophes like the Bubonic Plague, mankind progressed with the help of Dante, Thomas Aquinas, and others in a way that opened intellectual paths into the miraculous flowering that would become the Renaissance period. Aristotle, Virgil, and Ovid were still known and preserved and that certainly helped. Vincenz extolls Neoplatonism and the beginnings of the heroic in part I, the subsection entitled *& to measure the light of all things*. He couples this with a thin reference to Niccolo Machiavelli's realpolitik. Keep in mind that the point of sibyl-speak is not the past but the future. Vincenz and/or his voices seem to see man's destiny entering a new world of liberation. Consider these lines touching on the role of art,

...into the hands of dictatorships,  
Despotisms or democracies

& other magical words that rattle  
in the spiritual comfort of relics,

in the concrete substance  
that civilizes—

where the true nature  
of a building

is forgone space.

More explicitly in part I, subsection iv entitled *& in the Pantheon where Rafael was buried* Vincenz alludes to Rafael's School of Athens and the allegorical conflict between Platonist and Aristotelian philosophies. In this painting Aristotle points to the earth signifying materialism with man as the only measure. One might ask: has art ushered in a new salvation, a destiny for succeeding ages? Then, moving on to Michelangelo's *The Creation of Adam*, the poet's muse lauds the continuance and the power of human generation. The subsection ends this way,

Watch!

As Plato points  
toward heaven  
Aristotle points  
toward the dirt.

& as God touches the finger of Adam,  
so Adam touches the hand of another—

so tantalizingly tender  
that spiral upon spiral

in the spirit  
of the index finger.

Following the arcs and swirls of Vincenz's spatial illusions and architectural breaths, the reader will find himself in the climactic subsection vii in part II, *On the Sun's consciousness*. The oracle of the moment delineates the present state of the art world and the problematic transition out of and into a new perspective, a coalescence of somewhat alienated realities. What lies behind the curtain? Questions abound,

How to handle the modern?  
How to find a kiss  
for the whole world?

Behind a beautiful curtain  
the objects of mystery and desire.

The dislocations.

& the savage made assailable through—

impromptu, flimsy,

but deadly serious  
pure plastic rhythm.

Again in subsection x, part II *& the disposable*, another oracular admonition that sketches our present system of elitist art supported by the profits of capitalism. Not the swashbuckling dynamic capitalism of the Renaissance that birthed civic humanism, but a tired pessimistic capitalism mired in static contradictions and prescribed formlessness. A celestial vocalist explains,

Watch closely!

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Here come the corporate collectors.

Abstractions have become ordinary  
 & the myth of progress  
 Grinds down to a tiretrack.

What controversy?

By opening up his poetic tableau into a series of fields and keeping his vocal lyricism intact Vincenz delves bravely into the labyrinth's darkness searching for art's future. In his own voice (as I interpret it) in section xi, part II, *Where's the leverage in pluralism*, he notes,

The phantoms inform  
 But do not transform

Indeed, today transformation may depend on driven, perhaps brash individuals—the Benvenuto Cellinis of our time. In this contemporary urban maze the Minotaur divides, replicates, and lurks everywhere. Poisoners abound. The poet's quest itself redefines thanklessness. Just as the Renaissance rediscovered the known and the emerging classics, today's artists have the Renaissance itself as a model, a freshly observed neo-Renaissance. Remember also that the Renaissance was no time for disengaged academics; it was rather a period of brutal strife, revenge politics, and seismic upheavals. As the old norms, bereft of certainty and even meaning, collapsed into themselves, creative giants began to appear and create their own contexts.

Marc Vincenz, a goldsmith of auguries, may have started something consequential, defying inertia, even unstoppable, with this firebrand-of-a-book etched with energetic fore-wisdom and ethereal illuminations.