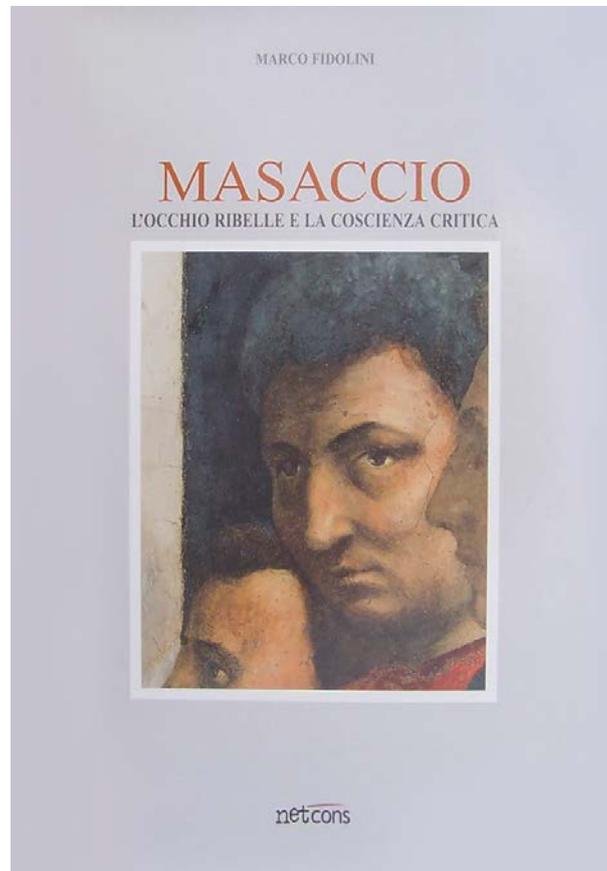


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Masaccio: rebel eye and critical consciousness

Translated by Howard Caygill

**(Masaccio – L'occhio ribelle e la coscienza critica)
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Contents

Foreword

Introduction

Masaccio: rebel eye and critical consciousness

Appendices

Suggestions for further reading

Foreword

Outside of the circuit of official commemorations of the sixth centenary of the birth of Masaccio, this book proposes a critical reflection upon the great Renaissance artist's work by means of an exegetical investigation somewhat removed from the academic canon or the philological interpretations of acknowledged experts.

The larger part of the book comprises of a chapter written in the late 1980s and published in the volume *Impegno e realta' – Da Masaccio alla Nuova Oggettività* (Arnaldo Lombardi Editore, Palermo, February 1991) but enlarged with some iconographic contributions and a number of reflections prompted by the recent restoration of the frescoes in the Brancacci Chapel and the subsequent reconsideration of certain attributions to Masaccio.

Undeniably, the character of this study, drawn from a more complex and organic theorem that attempts to trace an errant path through five centuries of art history by envisaging threads that cross and bind epochal, artistic and social barriers nevertheless marked by human awareness, will here appear perhaps more arbitrary in incomprehensible than in the earlier extended version.

Introduction

«...if ever a painter emerged fully armed and ready from the head of painting, it was Masaccio».

Roberto Longhi

In the 1986 edition of Matteo Marangoni's *Saper Vedere*, Carlo Ludovico Ragghianti wrote that the author 'looked at paintings and art generally with the eye of a painter and an artist'. Marangoni himself in 'To the Reader' published on this occasion seemed ready to chill the professional exegetes and to confound art enthusiasts by saying, among other things, that 'the ability to look, listen and read ...is the last thing that the majority of scholars and critics of art think about, busy as they are in the obstinate defence of 'attributions', in the pedantic mania for dates and in the 'opening of debates' more of cultural than critical interest'.

It may be added that the history of art criticism since Baudelaire is afflicted by controversy, even violent struggles over improbable attributions and second thoughts, of opposed formal and ideological theorems. The disputes between Longhi and Berenson, or Lionello Venturi and Salmi are probably the best known and acknowledged. Others will remember those more recent debates between Zeri and Argan, or perhaps recall the Livorno hoax that outraged a group of eminent names, Argan above all. To this may be added the ostracism of those who differ regarding the cleaning of works of art, often justifiably, such as James Beck.

Yet art and the criticism of art are and will remain a subjective business with few certainties and many questions.

With an artist such as Masaccio, of whose death we know vaguely the year and the place, the gaps on what are known to be his works are superimposed upon the biographical glimmers from dry official records. The struggle over attributions is ancient, as are the conflicts, and are only silence in front of the mastery of his bright meteor that incarnates – with Brunelleschi and Donatello – the season of the Renaissance and that made a powerful breach in the eyes of his contemporaries and later also in those of Michelangelo and Caravaggio.

Yet this remained a meteor viewed obliquely, even by Masolino, who hastily returned to being enchanted by the refined elegance of the Gothic. A 'mental disturbance' as Longhi described the painter of Panicale, who was gradually discoloured or chilled in Fra Angelico, Andrea del Castagno or in Piero della Francesca.

Masaccio is a [terrigno] artist, of a powerful and dramatic plasticity, who ignores all intellectualist connections with the line beloved of other Tuscan masters. In all, an imposing power directed at the heart of painting, with its clotted vitality, a bitterness of existence, with a severe but at the same time human vocation, that prefers the gaze upon reality (its at times terrible truth) and perhaps on human destiny. Our thoughts turn immediately

to that 'critical consciousness' attributed by Venturi to Giotto but which seems more appropriate for the Masaccio's lesson.

On this rough canvas and from a tendentious viewpoint directed at reading some of the emblematic works of Masaccio, the essay will turn to the point of projecting theorems that diverge from the more orthodox and academic readings of Masaccio literature, and as if confined to the perspective of an artistic gaze somewhat idiosyncratic and rude will recall that after seventy years Matteo Marangoni's *Saper Vedere* is still a good guide for those who wish to follow the labyrinth of art history or in any case venture to illuminate some fragment of it.

But perhaps those critical readings that have always thronged the history of painting are not as illegitimate as some would have believe and have given rise in the twentieth century to sharp pens sometimes more authentic and decisive than the brushes themselves.

Masaccio: rebel eye and critical consciousness

From Alberti's *On Painting* to the recent restoration of the Brancacci Chapel many illustrious scholars have confronted the question of Masaccio – occasionally in an exemplary way – reconstructing an overall picture that leaves few open questions, at least at the level of a critical reading. To return to sound more deeply the ever profound depths of this genius and hopefully to add some small contribution is to be honest a rather improbable task.

But for my part I have no intention of embarking upon such a desperate adventure, also because competing with those critical philological studies is beyond my competence and in any case does not form part of the plan and ambition of this work.

For what drives me, as may already be evident, are the humanly more convincing and pressing questions; in any case, I do not intend to absolve myself from the role expected from any reader of a work of art, namely to doubt authoritative judgements. I shall do so by limiting myself to those fragments of Masaccio that directly involve my working hypothesis, raising them to artistic prototypes and regarding them as the body of a theorem that produced followers or tendencies up to New Objectivity, even if certain coincidences and parallel occasions drawn a posteriori might seem forced.

One would find oneself in good company were one to be ironic about a 'communist' or 'anti-bourgeois' Masaccio¹, doubting the existence of his 'rebel eye' or preferring to adorn it with ruffled romantic passion in order to lead it to the safe ground of great painting, to reduce to a single coincidence that perennial concern to swallow whole pieces of reality in order to vomit them up in a lucid critical consciousness, without stopping even 'to look at the nails'².

Or we might embark, driven by other winds, on the ship of return to order together with Carra or Rosai (figs. 1, 2; p.18)³.

But let us look at Masaccio and his rebellions.

The pyramidal block that from Arnolfo becomes painting in Giotto serves as the structure for Masaccio's Madonna and child in the Sant'Anna, La Madonna col Bambino e angeli (Sant'Anna metterza), 1424. The comparison with Giotto's Ognissanti Madonna (1306-10) make it possible to establish, beyond the affinity of monumental structure, a different approach to reality (figs. 3,4,5; pp. 19,20).

Giotto's Maesta in spite of the credibility of its sculptural form and the concreteness of the swollen breasts and prominent knees or the desire to communicate earthly gestures and sentiments, still remains ineffable on its throne, raised and distant, erected sacramentally to display the maternal block and the child almost fixed in the act of blessing. In the perpetual separation of the heavenly and the mortal which subjects us in an aura of divine contemplation, the dogmatic diaphragm imposes unsurpassable

psychological limits even if Marangoni's 'popolana' 'healthy and strong...betrays her plebian origins'⁴.

The impasto of Masaccio's painting is also of plebian earth, but the look of the Madonna and Child, as in the later Pisan altarpiece (fig.6; p.21) assume completely unforeseen aspects revealing, in contrast to the Giottesque prototype, beyond the obvious formal resolutions of the Renaissance a realistic measure of quite a different intense human interaction.

This austere figure of a woman is imbued with a new earthly sensibility, that with a dignified maternal pride, almost regal, and with rustic simplicity, shows her own son at a human level. It is from this authentic pride, of assured maternal certainty, that emerges all of the expressive power that every woman knows how to reveal in such circumstances, to the point of hindering us, if necessary, from meeting the new light in her gaze. It is precisely these eyes that without refusing yet exclude us from the full event of intimacy; they are full of an intense humanity, and their apparent emotional distance does not establish supernatural barriers. Who knows how often we escape the gaze of our women, that makes us reflect and question male arrogance and its pretentious and stupid prerogative of a moral rigour and consciousness irrevocably assigned to the stronger.

In the anti-aesthetic and severe character of this Madonna there are already present those secure and transgressive marks that will explode flashing and urgent on the walls of the Carmine.

No-one could or should exaggerate the social significance (and above all these in this way) of the pictorial outcomes of Masaccio's realism, let alone reduce them to a revolutionary intent with which we are familiar from modern history. No-one should interpret the expressive language of the Valdarnesian artist as if his fifteenth century achievements, like an incandescent comet travelling towards us, prefigured or touched the threshold of our understanding of socio-political culture. Obviously none of these approaches is acceptable. The occasion for the revolt and critical consciousness of the painter emerged from his troubled participation in the dramatic human condition, in the lucid intellectual and artistic tension that transformed religious and everyday events into a permanently questioned reality, angular, earthbound and insecure in its existential dimension. The attempt inspired by Croce to contrive an intuitive Masaccio seems inappropriate, even comic, not to speak of those even more insolent efforts that see the artist on the scaffolding of the Trinity getting help from the hand of his friend Brunelleschi to sketch out the plan of the perspective (figs. 7, 8; p.23). Equally amusing, on the other hand, is the unhappy definition of naturalism often hung on the work of Masaccio in the chapters of the history of art dedicated to him, so reducing and in my view confusing the expressive power of his active and dynamic language, always inquiring into the substance of reality, its deeper significance and its human implications, far removed from any superficial recording, however high the aesthetic quality, of a passive eye directed toward the facts of nature.

What is more, even the painters of the Northern school such as Masaccio's contemporary Van Eyck or the later Holbein cannot

appropriately be listed under naturalism (if anything they should be spoken of in terms ante litteram of Magical Realists or visionary painters), transcending their rigorous objectification in the most lucid treatments of the everyday that rise on many occasions to pitiless and hyper-real metaphysical theorems (figs. 9, 10; p. 24).

Thus, to return to the main question, it seems appropriate to follow the rebellion of the artist in the light of these considerations.

If we ascribe solely to Masaccio, as is almost unanimous*, the urban background of Masolino's *The Healing of the Lame* and the *Resurrection of Tabitha* (Brancacci Chapel 1424-1425) it will be less difficult to convince ourselves of the artist's critical consciousness of the artist expressed in a linguistic symbiosis relative to the task of reality (fig.11; p. 25).

In this case it does not suffice to review the urban-pictorial prototypes of Giotto's frescoes or the Siennese frescoes of Ambrogio Lorenzetti. The Florentine architecture of the background [to the Masolino] and the inventory of the everyday activities of the citizenry painted on the walls and in the windows carry a new ethical and formal significance that cannot be reduced to its antecedents; Masaccio's invention cannot be reduced by referring it to Giotto's Paduan urban representations (certainly unknown to the Renaissance artist) nor to those of the Bardi Chapel, taken up by followers of Giotto and by the precise Maso di Banco, or to the even more defined and complex cityscape of Ambrogio Lorenzetti's fresco of *Good Government* (1338-1340) in Siena. (The latter is an extraordinary document of urban and rural reconstruction through which moves a human ant-heap of every social rank – from builders to shopkeepers, from courtly processions to peasants working in the field; and then there are the women hanging out of balconies and windows and the objects hung outside along with the washing out to dry), figs. 12,13,14; p. 26.

It would be difficult to accept Francastel's reservation directed to overturning the priority of Masaccio and Masolino, naturally to the detriment of the former.⁵

Indeed, this fragmentary cityscape of Florence testifies to a will to narrate all the connections informing human events, in which the presence of architectural citation and their social equivalents (much more descriptive and banal for their narrative fixity in the preceding artists, even apologetic in Lorenzetti) transcends the most petty reality to communicate a network of psychological and existential situations tied to earthly concerns. The human condition revealed in this chapter from daily life and its essential and material expressive-formal valencies, stripped of any embellishment or cosmetic narrative, erupts from the surface fragmenting the the apostolic narrative painted by Masolino that attempts to impose itself upon our view. It is precisely the ideological contrast between two antithetical realities (and not only pictorial) that overturns the expressive presence of the fresco, in that Masolino's work (inseparable from late-Gothic refinement, references to courtly manners or to theatrical fictions even though these are masked by a veneer of solidity and a plasticity allied to chiaroscuro; perspectival constructions and a veiling of human emotions, all superficially and academically captured by the bristles of the brush of the older collaborator

in a 'mental confusion'⁶) gives way to the marginal part of the fresco that surpasses the foreground scene of miracles, just touched by the feet of St Peter and company.

This peripheral fragment [of cityscape] conforms to a precise intention of the artist, determined strongly by an immanent moral consciousness, by a radical awareness of the fragility of the human condition and by an emotional involvement in everyday events.

An ideological break with the medieval rule is already evident in this part of the fresco in the separation of the religious tie and its pathos from human action and sentiments; a break between the apology for the court and its domination and the bitter and grey givens of reality. The new expressive will and content, with its constant concern to recover human dignity - evident in the most marginal piece of fresco by Masaccio, perhaps drawing us into 'the feelings of a grey florentine day'⁷ by means of a sober inventory of the everyday hung from the windows and traced in the figures in the piazza – regenerates the hypothesis of a rebel eye and a deliberate critical consciousness.

It is appropriate to recall at this point that acute passage from Longhi who interpreted and emphasised, as no-one else knew how, the psychological intricacy of this extraordinary artistic undertaking, when, in polemic with Salmi⁸ he wrote: «...Not even the little monkeys who run along jangling the window frames, the miserable sheets hanging outside, the little cages or baskets, surprise or distract us too much; nothing else is spoken of but the grim mood of late afternoon, nothing happening, an old sermoniser sitting outside the gate, the young man who consumes his bile by rubbing his back against the fresh plaster of the wall, the bourgeois who, arriving, rests absorbed on the shutter, and even the child followed closely by an old woman relative weeps and shrinks because they are taking him to church»⁹(fig. 15; p. 28).

It does not really matter that the plaster is not so fresh or that the old woman had perhaps other ties to the child or was following him by chance: we can leave such extra-ordinary fantasies to the scholars. What is of interest is the substance of this interpretation, full of secure evidence of psychological reality of social links masterfully expressed in those observations that speak of 'grim mood' 'nothing happening' or affirmed in the 'consumes his bile' or 'weeps and shrinks'.

It is here, even in these insignificant events that Masaccio's language sharpens itself and rebelliously cuts through the celebrative conventions (religious or otherwise) or the power of the patron, in order to flow freely and finally to lapse into the void – then as today – of a numbing and banal reality, restless sometimes resigned, to express itself as a free but interactive moral consciousness in a world of true human beings.

No artifice, therefore, directed at mitigating the hard and sharp marks of an anti-heroic reality which make civic consciousness and then history in that negation of a preconstituted, soliciting and inexistent order.

If this is really the case – and it does not seem otherwise to me – it becomes necessary to draw from these torn, peripheral details of the picture a significance, beyond great painting, that of an expressive meditation on

the human condition of the other Florence, beyond the emerging architectural splendour, from the laborious swarm or rather the new light of the Renaissance. For the bitter intent of this pictorial episode is to show a lethargic and mediocre city, almost lost in the everyday grey of street and piazza that is repeated everywhere in that slow and monotonous breath of domestic life, barely hidden or revealed by the wood of the shutter or the coating of plaster.

In Masaccio's background is understood in this way, it prefigures new hopes and rebellions that traverse history beyond the pictures of Masaccio until our time, whether one wishes with Berti to refine it in terms of some 'tragic anti-bourgeois irony'¹⁰ of Masaccio's almost certain Berlin Desco, preferably viewed under a microscope and seen to emerge with irritation in the faces of the 'mercenary musicians' of the splendid Longhian reading of the facts (fig.16; p.30). It is certain that the artist expressed this rebellious thought in many sections of the Carmine frescoes, together with the sentiments and passions of more violent tragedy.

It is above all the nudes of the Brancacci Expulsion from Paradise (1424-1425)¹¹ that recall the fragile human condition in that dramatic and brutal expulsion of pain and shame that runs shivering through all our history from the fifteenth century (fig.17; p.31). Never has pictorial horror been so identified with human action as to re-emerge true, lacerating and cruel – but also more foolish – in the military massacres and the violence of our time (from concentration camps, to Hiroshima and beyond) bearing an terrestrial punishment of extravagant pain, finally more absolute and desperate than in tragic power than biblical destiny. Even in this disturbing fresco, today restored to legibility and to its original nudity, it is possible to extract with great expressive violence, beyond the formidable and renewed formal values, that earthly intention directed and aimed at the heart of a brutally interrogated reality.

It is here, as elsewhere, that the name Giotto is cited, if not as a direct formal link then at least in the expressive recall of the dramatic tension of Adam and Eve imprisoned in their torturous humanity, pointing also to the Paduan frescoes of the Massacre of the Innocents (or perhaps more plausibly, following Marangoni, the Pistoian and Pisan examples of the pergami of Giovanni Pisano)¹² (figs. 18, 19; pp.32).

Without doubt the highest and original outcome of Giotto (and the comparison from a distance is more agreeable in pictorial rather than sculptural terms) is already an example of an expressive drama that reveals, in the re-appropriation of human sentiments, a new and painful reality in the story from the gospels. But the pathos stamped above all in the face of the women – where a suspicion of antique tragedy practically changes them into a group of lamenters – and in the child that writhes away from the massacre remain irrevocably confined in sculptural form, without exceeding the demand of the image to reach and involve us emotionally (and what can be said of that cruel heap of little bodies on the pavement that still does not astonish us?)¹³ Perhaps the pitiless presentation of the flagellants appears crueller and weighted down with earthly passions, partly fixed in sadistic and outrageous expressive gestures.

For the remainder, a dynamic tension is present throughout the Paduan cycle with a relation to reality that is enacted within the scenic fiction – Gombrich's positive observation on *Compianto del Christo morta* ('We seem to be witnesses of a real event as if it was played on a stage')¹⁴ is valid also for the rest of these frescoes and offers another interpretative approach (fig. 20; p.34).

By virtue of being a witness or an observer of a scene played on a theatrical stage, even if only for a moment or for the extended time of a play, however extra-ordinary, we are captured and made to participate in an illusory armchair existential fiction hardly exceeding the limits of superficial emotion. What is at issue, in short, are the provisional stimulations marked by the limits of the stage.

There is none of this in Masaccio's creation.

Our participation is no longer that of a spectator of a drama, even intensified, that takes place on the painted walls. We are totally and reflexively involved in the human tragedy of the two naked bodies, about to shiver and suffer, to become ashamed. There is no physical or imaginative barrier that will relegate us to the role of emotional witnesses of a play, and the exchange between the painted image and our reality is continuous, symbiotic, ineluctable. It is our own existence that is played out before us and that takes us brutally by the throat, as in those most painful and anxious moments of our everyday life. It is the perennial story of the human condition that is repeated in every tragedy; when pain becomes uncontainable and gives up every intimate reserve, without hiding itself, in order to communicate the turmoil of emotions, even in its physical totality, and to find human consolation.

The body of Adam that rises and bends itself in its desperate injury, careless of its virile nudity (and it is certainly no accident that the right leg withdrawn to make a step is where today has been rediscovered the insolent male member),¹⁵ coagulates an expressive potential of a reality without precedent, apodictic, bitter, rebellious, anti-bourgeois in fact.

In the face of Eve another human scream – more lacerating and modern than the bestial scream of Munch – tormented and terrible, born of a suffering torn from the flesh, lived in a chilling shiver to the point of cancelling any biblical trace to impose an earthly, impetuous and indelible warning to our conscience (figs. 21, 22; p. 35). Never again will there be a similar onslaught of pain breaking so alarmed and alarmingly into painting, surpassing even temporal confines, beyond every school or formal revolution, maintaining intact its expressive force and artistry of enduring contemporaneity, numbingly to question or better, to confound us ('but who really knows whether somebody glancing across at this thankless figure would not have taken it for "one of the usual contemporary daubs!"')¹⁶

Certainly these bodies kneaded out of flesh, moulded and lit by a pitiless light, are constrained to tread the earth in a real penetration of space; they continue to walk side by side together and incessantly remind us of the fragility of human nature and its immanent destiny.

This new expressive tension, this brutal and heavy drama of reality cannot be led back to a simple temporal or formal diaphragm that separates the extra-ordinary medieval season of Giotto from the dawn of the Renaissance, but rather an impassioned and vigilant moral consciousness rooted in the painting of Masaccio. It seems inappropriate to speak of a return of a 'reborn Giotto' even, or above all, in the light of what happened after Masaccio, when the temporal breaks become even more evident and all in favour of the new minds.

It would not be too difficult to find in the most celebrated episode of the Brancacci Chapel (The Tribute, 1425), beyond the contingent event of the Castato and the warning to respect and apply the law, Masaccio's task of restoring the marks of existence, especially for that expressive, psychological typology masterfully undertaken in the faces of the Apostles. Also in that case human reality exceeds the gospel narrative and the civic allusion to the Catasto and achieves a human reconstruction, authentically taking place in that central cylindrical bucket penetrated by air and internally excavated like the Coliseum¹⁷(figs.23, 24; p.37).

There is a pulse of life in that corporeal diversity of young and old, in the most gentle and beardless complexion as in the coarse or marked by common rags. In this tense debate or the confused hearing, betrayed by furrowed brows, frowns of astonishment, perhaps lost, that show in their disarming illiterate simplicity, a difficulty in understanding (it is probable that the disciple between Christ and the tax-collector is also hard of hearing) and untying the conceptual dialectical knot – purely verbal – of the protagonists to the debate. Not even the faint sign of an expressive truce of any formal softening in that group of resigned men bowed by fatigue – if not for the Christ with 'the face of wax and honey'¹⁸; hardly young and upright such as the blond St John or better groomed and more certi than the presumed Brancacci¹⁹(fig.25; p.38)

Another coarse world of bitter humanity that passes over these troubled faces with heavy bodies planted on the receding earth; beyond them is a building and the mountain humps that remind we Valdarnese of Pratomagno.

However, the frescoes that reveal most intensely the rebel eye and critical consciousness of Masaccio are the two proud and disconcerting narrations of Peter painted in the wings of Brancacci Chapel.

In St Peter who heals the sick with his shadow (1426-27) can be found expressed most forcefully that socio-urban character of everyday reality already powerfully fixed in the Florentine background of Tabita. In this fresco, beyond the little evangelical procession or the miraculous presence of Peter tied to the earth by a slow confident tread or the absorbed face of a sage that resists our gaze (as in the Madonna Metterza) in the full austere awareness of the his mission, there are three ascending human pyramids that emphasise and reinforce the perspectival flight of this street corner hardly broken by a tiny rectangle of sky. (Here as elsewhere the use of a perspectival plan never exceeds the expressive rendition of the real; in fact the use of the new spatial rules is restricted to the instrumental role of intensifying the significance of earthly things – with the same intent and

measure reserved to human representation. After Masaccio, how different the calculated and impeccable architectural models confined by a classical utopian discipline!). The street - or better the chiasso – is not very different from the gap to the left of the Tabita that breaks up the buildings and the perspectival flight, extends in the umbilical foreshortening of the houses in this extra-ordinary passage of urban reality to the point of providing beyond the architectural differentiation and diverse building materials (brick, plaster) – an inventory of dwelling that implies existential claims and intent. The extension itself of the urban theme – of equal dignity and pictorial value to the figures – is accomplished without theatrical intent or exaggerated and intellectualistic application of perspective, supports the hypothesis of a Masaccio in constant pursuit of the ethical project of a reality set to human measure, even where human presence can only be intuited.

In this poor part of Florence with its deprived population, perhaps even greyer and dull than the background of Tabita, emerge the deformed and the beggars as if from a hiding place for the passing of a stranger with clothing a little more decorous and they adopt, ragged and petulant, waiting imploringly and servile in that ritual and ostentatious wrinkling of gestures.

The Apostolic event of the miraculous would have appeared roughly like this in the eye of the painter (fig. 26; p. 39).

Of three of the unfortunates, the one standing already healed – or paid alms – shows himself to be dutiful and devout, dignified and grateful in his sincere and profound expression of human affliction. The other, older and more ragged, bending over too modest to raise his eyes, obsequiously composed and leaning forward in uncertain and fearful expectation of an event. And then the youngest, who raises himself, stretching perhaps doubtfully, leaning on a tiny crutch, confident almost insolent, his eye defiantly on the Apostle while a dazed grimace is stamped upon his swollen snout. (fig.27; p.40)

These three characters epitomise the dramas and passions of a suffering humanity, marginalised and persecuted by a cruel and tormenting destiny; the evangelical episode bestows religious significance upon the existential drama of all mankind, in that painful participation in everyday events that are ever repeated in the streets of the world.

There is a social element in the compositional interaction between men and houses, to the point of recalling through the young body pitilessly ruined by evil the tormented human trunks on ball-bearings which, skimming the walls and pavements of the post war years and cruelly represented by Dix and Sander (figs 28, 29; p.41).

What can be said of the other, parallel story of the saint – The Distribution of Goods and the Death of Anania (1427) ? (fig. 30; p.42).

If here too – as in the Tribute- there is a presumed allusion to the new law of the Catasto of 1427, the civic message of Masaccio might be enriched by further historical meanings, without however modifying the already considerable expressive and moral intensity of the human content and social claims proposed in this final extraordinary pictorial lesson.

The composition in question differs from its twin fresco by an architectural-urbanistic relation of a different tenor. No longer the perspectival row of houses along a wretched street but rather a deep spatial corner framed by towered buildings and just beyond the city limits a ring of hills stretching as far as a snow-peaked Pratomagno and into the blue abyss of the sky.

The city opens itself to the countryside mixing its people in a pressing wretched urbanism prepared to raise peasants to the level of citizens, albeit marginal and indigent.

Once again this picture speaks of the poor and their painful existence, and the evangelical warning is not as significant and determining as elsewhere, in spite of the painful intensity of the face of Peter or the sudden and mortal fall of Anania. But our gaze would not be so powerfully gripped by just this extra-ordinary insertion of countryside, or the Titianesque castle at the peak of the hill (fig.31; p.43) or even the powerful rendition of volumes filled and modulated by colours fused with light; stubbornly we look at the group of wretched city-dwellers who on the left of the fresco, divided in half by the edge of the building, are in contrast with the other group, even in spite of the subtle tie of the network of hands. (Who knows whether this division of people – the infirm and the ragged city dwellers opposite the apostolic group – does not allude, beyond the evangelical meaning – to other displaced meanings. But even taking for granted the Christian reading of a communal division of goods, or as plausible the exhortation to pay the Catasto, probably suggested by the warning of the divine punishment of Anania, the ethical content of the ethical tangle in these miserable figures, does not alter a jot Masaccio's critically conscious return to reality).

Yet another wretched cripple, this time more dignified, consciously severe even calm, with an assured glance, direct, intelligent. The figure is masterfully characterised with its pronounced baldness, the natural neglect of the hairs on the neck and the weak beard along with the limp haversack. Rigid in a precarious equilibrium. (Here too a comparison with Giotto might be useful, namely with his cripple painted in the Drusiana fresco, or with the wretched in Buffalmacco's Triumph of Death (figs. 32,33; p.44).

A little further on there is the miraculous figure of a woman with child. Immediately one is reminded of the maternal body of the Metterza and to other Madonnas that hold and display sons in this dynamic and ruffled pose. But if the Madonna of Masaccio is of the people, austere and aware of her role as mother, this woman betrays in her cylindrical and rude body the even lower social status of the robust peasant. And the face, framed by a rustic rag, remains fixed and ungrateful, weakened by a heavy gaze and resigned in its bitter grimace. Not even the discomfort of the strong grip of the arm that supports the child – or the certainty of receiving some money – can budge the human drama that is consumed in the breast and mind of this woman.

The child, on the contrary, is restless with boredom, unaware of so much suffering. With one hand on his head and the other holding his mother, or perhaps playing with that robust neck that emerges from the humble garment. He too is dressed in wretched clothes, the left-overs of a

rag, like the bundle on the head of the woman – showing his little bum swollen and misshaped by the pressure of the maternal arm (fig. 34; p. 36).

Beyond the space of these two masterful figures – near to the cripple – there is an old bent woman with a penetrating eye and a bald head that emerges unexpectedly; also a young woman – perhaps pregnant – with hands on her belly, absorbed and subdued.

In nineteen days of work Masaccio was able in these two frescoes to communicate an insuperable tangle of human gestures and agitation – of anxiety contained with dignity and brutal social insolence, of disappointed hopes and ancestral resignation, with his rebel eye putting together in that crude pictorial reality the weave of a fragile and suffering humanity.

I do not know if reality with its valances, always angular and ungraspable, found an integrated certainty in the painting of this genius and whether it would be possible to reconsider the critical readings of a crowd of eminent scholars. Certainly, one must try and untangle men from heroes, even at the risk of losing oneself in the forest of Masaccio's reality. Since the reality of this artist – according to each case and in order to cite his examples – implies readings that are, let us say, various: '...in spite of all his concreteness Masaccio is not a realist, because his reality is an heroic legend' (Venturi)²⁰ or '...a humanity of heroes but heroes who stride across our earth' (Procacci)²¹.

But the certainties, perhaps, are other than this and if the project of painting contains – as I believe it does – beyond the formal values of a specific artist a linguistic breath more profound and vital, Masaccio has succeeded in the restoring the expressive symbiosis that inevitably produces ideology.

While the concepts of reality, naturalism and humanity or heroes are widely discussed, it may all the same be appropriate to consider the choices of this artist. The intentional and provocative choice of a fragile, bitter and resigned reality that is elsewhere almost always timidly noted in marginal roles, softened in folkloristic or didactic representations or even degraded into pious images for the false emotions of the powerful.

It would be very difficult to rethink this extra-ordinary lesson in painting and critical consciousness without being wounded, even in the head, by a language so brutally penetrating and questioning.

I believe that the derisory term of 'anti-bourgeois painter' – his moral commitments and his human emotional participation – is more than justified by a confrontation of the works themselves along a path that from Giotto continues until today. For the rest, the Masaccian meteor will express all of its singular power up until its physical disappearance, but the results of the Renaissance that followed soon after were not filtered through the rebel eye of Masaccio. The new protagonists almost insensible to human fragility and destiny, with a brusque turn, distanced themselves by other routes, perhaps even reflecting upon the vigorous plastic lessons of the young master and their perspectival/spatial applications. His mastery of volumetric plasticity is unravelled in the devotional imprint of Fra Angelico, the labyrinth of [perspectival] flights and viewpoints in Paolo Uccello or in those magnificent

and theorems of rarified metaphysics in the great Piero della Francesca (figs. 35, 36, 37; pp. 47-8).

After it would become even more difficult to rediscover the brutal antagonism of mankind in those extra-ordinary works of intellect completely devoted to the conquest of the centre of the world or to chasing after utopian harmonies and mythological dimensions. Masaccio's rebellion and his lacerating adventure in everyday banality held its breath for the subsequent history of art, surfacing occasionally for air, perhaps to breathe with the lungs of Caravaggio (fig.38; p.48) to arrive intact and to alarm our own enlightened and knowing reason.

The rebel eye and critical consciousness of Masaccio does not appear to us as the product of a distorted and capricious interpretation, nor even the irritating coincidence of an epochal infortunio.

It is of little importance if this work today appears too singular and modern (and what then should we think about Leonardo, that equally unrepeatable eventchance, if we look beyond his genius as an artist at that flight of science that they have licked until our time?). It remains to us to bow before the evidence of the facts (the works) and to recognise their irresistible existential urgency that have overcome five centuries of painting and history.

It would be well to keep present as an ethical point of reference in this segmented itinerary the Masaccean constant.

***Postscript**

It is probable that the recent restoration of the Carmine frescoes will correct the critical philological trajectory of Masaccio studies.

From what can be gathered from the considerable amount of material published on the progress of the work – still in course – it does not seem as if, beyond the prestigious restoration that has permitted a rich technical documentation and the recovery of colours and fragments of the original plaster, fragments and sketches, that the pictorial core of Masaccio will propose any essential changes to the best readings of the work of the artist.

Of considerable significance, however, following its cleaning, is the complete ascription to Masolino of the background to the Tabita fresco (Casazza and then Berti 1988) if with some minor doubts on the part of the more obstinate regarding the bilious 'youth' and the 'old sermoniser' (fig.39; p.50).

According to this new critical proposal, the Fatti of Longhi are left dated and wobbly, dragged along behind the successive cantonate up to the recent restoration.

There emerges, at least from this piece of fresco, a new and unexpected Masolino, more earthly and close to Masaccio, and certainly less dumfounded than suggested by the Longhian 'mental confusion'.

It would be difficult, however, to establish whether and how much of the background to the Tabita – the only possible proof of the realism and critical consciousness of Masolino – owes to the proximity or even the hand of Masaccio.

With regard to the un-Masaccean tetti (fig.40; p.50) or other considerations regarding the piece in question it is possible to advance a number of hypotheses. The comparison of the recovered ornamented medals ascribed respectively to Masolino (feminine head) and Masaccio (male head 'even if drawn from a Masolinian idea' – Berti 1988) does not in my view contribute to clarifying the importance and the inflections of any collaboration between the two artists.

Under this new light even my article (which preceded the publication of the results of the restoration) on the social implications of the architecture and the background to Tabita – all attributed to Masaccio – would or has become invalid. Perhaps the critical error might eventually reveal itself macroscopic and irrational for not having recognised it as such, and in the expectation of being taken literally keep the text bound to its time.

Less clamorous seem to me the result of another cleaning (St Peter healing the sick) where sky and architecture, including the corinthian capitals (elements almost completely intuitable even before the restoration even by way of the obscurity of the fresco) do not modify the physiognomy of the wretched corner or in any case the existential implications, even if anticipating an 'Albertian' architecture (Baldini, *Critica d'arte*, n.9, 1986).

Appendix

The chapter on Masaccio published in 1991 but written during the period of the restoration of the Brancacci Chapel (as is evident from the postscript) might appear dated after a decade. It contains some exegetical incongruencies that in the light of a series of new critical philological proposals require rethinking and correction in the light of the new view of Masaccio's work. The recent critical contributions would seem to overturn or anyway adjust questions of attribution, collaboration and artistic stature.

The debate re-opens, or closes, with at least two leading attributions that have always divided scholars and that urgently re-emerged after the cleaning of the frescoes.

These concern the face of Christ painted in the Tribute and the background to the Tabita today assigned, the first to the hand of Masaccio the second to that of Masolino.

Roberto Longhi's *Fatti di Masolino e Masaccio* thus collapses, or at least mutates into *misfatti* that involves series of art historians and raising the old problem of attributions and respective cantonate.

Now the presumed Masolinian Christ with the face of 'wax and honey'²² (fig. 46; p.56) seems to be softened by the same Masaccio, which is not to confuse him with the bitter humanity of the Apostles²³ and thus plausibly to devalue the Longhian episode and together with this whatever other delusions, including those of the present writer.

As concerns the background [to Tabita] the acute analysis of Longhi would seem to transmute into a splendid literary exercise if those ragged figures and buildings were in fact painted by the hand of Masolino. So much for 'mental confusion'!

In place of the opposition of the two artists or the primacy of Masaccio over Masolino emerges a new interpretation that requires (if true) other reflections and valencies on late-Gothic painting, as perhaps already intimated in 1951 by Pierre Francastel. After the restoration the presumed collaboration of Masaccio is reduced to the perspective plan with the execution of the picture ascribed totally to Masolino²⁴. Indeed, apart from the medallion heads more in agreement with the Masolinian optic, it is difficult to imagine the artist of Panicale so enlightened (but only at this point) to understand architecture and the corresponding realist annotations. As if the vicinity to Masaccio was so imposing shared and above all metabolised to confuse the two artists at that point? (It does not seem to me that Masolino has provided other examples of such urban-pictorial production – fig. 47; p. 57).

For the rest, the appearance of the two ornamented medallions (but in this case without agreement on attribution) assigned to Masolino (female head) and Masaccio (male head) tends to confuse even more the collaboration or mutual influence. It is the case that the female head, attributed by some scholars to Masaccio does not seem to be of great foram-pictorial quality (figs. 48, 49; p. 57).

Beyond the mistakes (on the other hand even Longhi did not have the eye to prefer Carra in place of Chirico or even to speak ill of Van Eyck and to praise Rubens)²⁵ what is astonishing is the impact of the restoration on the Brancacci.

It seems as if there are few differences between a painting of the fourteenth and the eighteenth century after that has been carried out over a decade. The works display everything, or almost, in an attractive postcard quality that challenges the sizzling covers on the magazine racks or the hypersophisticated affiches executed digitally. It happened thus in the case of the Brancacci and Sistine chapels.

James Beck (but also the polemical Federico Zeri) has become an implacable and troublesome follower of the trails of the restorers, apparently discredited, lashing out wherever possible. The case of Jacopo della Quercia's masterpiece Tomba di Ilaria del Carretto was cleaned, according to this scholar 'with Spic & Span and shined with Johnson's wax'²⁶ and ended it may be recalled, before the court.

The same Beck asks how it is possible that 'the work of three artists [Masolino, Masaccio and Filippino Lippi] who were entrusted discrete parts of the decoration should today seem so uniform? Was it the aim of the restoration to render homogeneous the complex of the frescoes? [he continues] In its present state the differences between Masaccio and Masolino no longer seem relevant, contrary to the opinion of contemporaries and to Masolino's frescoes at Empoli and Castiglione Olona. Even more disturbing is the sensation that Filippino Lippi is no longer distinguishable from the two artists that worked a half century before him'²⁷.

But there is more: the cleaning (or skinning) and the repainting often contributes to manipulating the authenticity of a work of art, removing or adding tears to the picture that endorse contemporary taste. Now reconstructions of gaps are carried out in watercolour that produces the effect of presumed original authenticity, an operation difficult for the eye unfamiliar with current museum practices to see and not only those.

In such a context it is difficult to orient oneself. To all this we must add, in the specific case, also the noise surrounding a triptych such as that of St Giovenale that slips increasingly from the hands of the Masaccio brothers working together – it seems to me – into those of the, when all is said, mediocre Scheggia (fig. 50; p. 59).

It remains finally to ask whether once again the pragmatic Marangoni was not right to look at the work of art with the eye of an artist.

Suggestions for further reading

- R. Longhi, Breve ma veridica storia della pittura italiana, 1913/1914 e Sansoni, Firenze, 1988.
- L. Venturi, Il gusto dei primitivi, 1926 e Einaudi, Torino, 1972.
- C. Carrà, Impressioni su Masaccio, in Il Vasari, 1- 2, 1930.
- M. Marangoni, Saper Vedere, 1930 e Garzanti, Milano, 1986.
- M. Salmi, Masaccio, Roma 1932 e Milano, 1948.
- R. Longhi, Fatti di Masolino e Masaccio, in Critica d'Arte, 1940.
- L. Venturi, Come si comprende la pittura, Roma, 1947 e Einaudi, Torino, 1975.
- E. Gombrich, La storia dell'arte, 1950 e Einaudi, Torino, 1966.
- U. Procacci, Tutta la pittura di Masaccio, Milano, 1951
- P. Francastel, Lo spazio figurativo dal Rinascimento al Cubismo, Einaudi, Torino, 1960.
- L. Berti, Masaccio, Milano, 1964.
- F. Bologna, Gli affreschi della Cappella Brancacci, Milano, 1965.
- J. Beck, Masaccio – I documenti, 1978 e ed. it. 1986.
- F. Zeri, Cappella Brancacci: è un vero scandalo, in La Nazione, 15 novembre 1989.
- U. Baldini e O. Casazza, La Cappella Brancacci, Olivetti-Electa, Milano, 1990.
- M. Fidolini, Impegno e realtà – Da Masaccio alla Nuova Oggettività, Arnaldo Lombardi Editore, Palermo, 1991.
- J. Beck, Restauri – Capolavori & affari, Marco Nardi Editore, Firenze, 1993.

Notes

¹ Luciano Berti, *Masaccio* (1964)

² Roberto Longhi, *Fatti di Masolino e di Masaccio* (1940)

³ The question Masaccio's Twentieth century, and the specific of Masaccio-Carra or Rosai is full of equivocations. Personally I consider the plastic-chiaroscuro element drawn and recovered from Masaccio's lexicon in simple formal terms is insufficient to qualify the supposed return of the Renaissance figure. Too often Masaccio is mobilised by Longhi (Carra) and Arcangeli (Rosai) in order to certify the quality of the two artists (not high in the former even more dated in the latter). The argument however exceeds this work, even if in the chapter on New Objectivity there are some nuanced references to Carra and Rosai that can partially be connected with this note.

⁴ Matteo Marangoni, *Saper Vedere* (1930)

⁵ Pierre Francastel's treatment of the two artists in *Lo spazio figurativo dall Rinascimento al Cubismo* (1951) attempt on several occasions to redimension the figure of Masaccio. Without going too deeply into the argument, in itself questionable and available for inspection in the text itself, I will limit myself to citing some significant fragments: 'Masaccio was taken in order to find a hero...it is said that Masaccio had created a new art in the frescoes of the Carmine' or again 'Beside Masaccio appears the sacrificial figure of Masolino and I do not see why, if not out of homage to Vasari, we prefer the former'. He exaggerates absurdly when alluding to the two gaudily dressed youths in the Tabita fresco, perhaps thinking of some other fresco – 'I admit that the group of youths out for a walk is one of the best moments of Masolino of Masaccio, but deny that it is a revolutionary theme' – which seems a lot to me!

⁶ Longhi, op.cit.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Longhi, in his much cited *Fatti di Masolino e di Masaccio* considered Salmi's reserve concern the attribution to Masaccio of the background figures of the Tabita as an 'emergency measure at the level of content'. According to Salmi, the novelistic narrative of these figures are more appropriately ascribed to the 'loquacious Masolino'.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Berti, op.cit.

¹¹ I consider the chronological issues involved in the execution of the frescoes of secondary importance for this Masaccian rereading. In any case, the question of the progression of execution and the *tempi* are debatable, even if the *Documenti* of James Beck (1978) appear to suggest on the basis the artists declaration of income that Masaccio's participated on the fresco cycle after July 29 1427 ('Masaccio had great debts and yet at the same time no-one owed him money, which suggests that he had little if any outstanding work'). The declaration of income by the artist would not be sufficient to support the hypothesis of work at the Carmine in 1427 if, as seems more plausible, Masolino and Masaccio worked side by side from the beginning of the cycle. (O. Casazza, *Critica d'Arte*, n.9, 1986)

¹² Op.cit.

¹³ Perhaps Toesca's suspicion of the collaboration of another artist on the grounds of the superficial drama and a certain reduced dynamism (elements that in my view are constant in many Giottesque works) are unfounded. There remains the fact, however, that the conception expresses a drama that is far too theatrical.

¹⁴ Ernst H. Gombrich, *La storia dell'arte* (1950)

¹⁵ This anatomical insolence in a body close to natural size contains the ideological and expressive meanings of a rebellion that cannot be related to the Giottesque *Judgement* in Padua. In fact, in the Scrovegni Chapel, beside the terroristic intention rooted in dogma of the infernal massacre of the sinners (even if more human) regenerated from the romanian nightmare of Coppo di Marcovaldo, one has to sharpen ones sight to be able easily to distinguish those who show their circumcised penises. (Insolence is not associated with the contemporary frontal member, even feminine, Adam of Masolino (figs. 41, 42, 43; p.50)

¹⁶ Op.cit.

¹⁷ The question of the presumed Roman journey that Masaccio is thought to have made in 1425 and the later execution of the *Tribute* (revived in the group of the Apostles with the memory still completely turned to the architecture of Rome) as proposed by Longhi and reaffirmed by Ferdinando Bologna, has led to the thought of a 'human colosseum'

¹⁸ Longhi, op. cit., (the intervention of Masolino at least at a formal level on the face of Christ is almost accepted)

¹⁹ The presumed Brancacci is certainly more reliable than the generic line of Vasari of whoever who would want to identify to effigy in question with Masaccio's face. To tell the truth such a hypothesis is quite wild; it is enough to look at that face in profile in that rectangle of shadow two steps from *San Pietro in cattedra* to reconstruct the appearance of our rebel (figs.44, 45; p.54).

²⁰ Lionel Venturi, *Come si comprende la pittura* (1947)

²¹ Ugo Procacci, *Tutta la pittura di Masaccio* (1951)

Notes

²² R. Longhi, *Fatti di Masolino e Masaccio* (1940)

²³ U Baldini – O. Casazza, *La Cappella Brancacci* (1990)

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ R. Longhi, *Breve ma veridica storia della pittura italiana, 1913-14* e Sansoni, Firenze 1988

²⁶ J. Beck, *Restauro – Capolavori e affari*, Marco Nardi Editore, Firenze, novembre 1993

²⁷ *Ibid.*