Gianlorenzo Bernini's *Blessed Ludovica Albertoni:* The Agony and the Ecstasy

Jean P. Lindsay

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Prof. W. Eugene Kleinbauer

Charles Scribner has called the *Blessed Ludovica Albertoni* [Fig. 1] Bernini's *Requiem.* John Pope-Hennessy greatly praised this work, stating, "It is on this sublime figure rather than on the *Saint Theresa* that his [Bernini's] claim to be accepted as the peer of the very greatest Italian artists must ultimately rest."[1] Aldous Huxley was driven to write

> Here, as in the case of the same artist's more celebrated St. Teresa, the experience recorded is of a privacy so special that, at first glance, the spectator feels a shock of embarrassment. Entering those rich chapels in San Francesco [a Ripa] and Santa Maria della Vittoria, one has the impression of having opened a bedroom door at the most inopportune of moments, almost of having opened *The Tropic of Cancer* at one of its most startling pages.[2]

As one of the finest-executed and best-conceived works of the Italian Baroque, this sculpture deserves the close attention it has received from art historians and critics. Unfortunately, most of the discussion of the *Ludovica* appears in the form of extended physical descriptions. They concentrate on the fine materials that were used, the integration of all the parts of the chapel, and the ecstatic swooning of the *beata*. But recent studies have served well to elucidate the meaning of the main sculpture and the central concept that Bernini planned for this monument.

Heinrich Wölfflin brings his formalist approach to bear on this sculpture. In his *Principles of Art History*, he states: "While the baroque intersperses the centralised composition of the Renaissance with plane in order to bring out its recessions, it must, of course, within a given plane motive, provide for recessional effects in such a way that the impression of a plane cannot even arise. Bernini's recumbent *Beata Albertona* [sic] lies completely in a plane parallel to the wall, but the form is so furrowed that the plane has become inapparent. How the planimetric character of a mural tomb is neutralised has already been demonstrated in the works of Bernini."[3] For Wölfflin, "Every view is complete, and yet urges to a constant change of standpoint. The beauty of the composition lies in its inexhaustibility."[4]

The close examination of the formal elements of a work seldom fails to reward the viewer richly. In the case of this work, Wölfflin's observation about the relation of the *Ludovica* to the plane is very insightful for the history of tomb sculpture. Earlier Renaissance and Baroque tomb sculptures, even those which were highly figural, had inclined towards maintaining the solid frontal plane.[5] The central sculpture of the blessed and the Sicilian jasper cloth that spills down from her bed definitely marks a change in approach for tomb figures. All discussants of this piece delight in expounding the finer details that ebb and flow from the *beata's* form: her drapery, her writhing form, her deeply drilled open mouth [Fig. 2]. Bernini's use of these curvilinear, constantly changing forms allows the viewer to forget, at least momentarily,

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[1] J. Pope-Hennessy, III pt. 3, p. 114.
[2] A. Huxley, pp. 178-179.
[3] H. Wölfflin, pp. 112-113.
[4] Ibid., p. 113.
[5] Perlove examines some of these works as comparanda to the *Ludovica*. S. Perlove, pp. 21-27, pls. 36, 37, 39, 40-42.

that the figure itself resides within a fairly restrictive plane. Certainly, the careful investigation of the formal elements of a work can help the viewer or scholar appreciate not only the visual forms of the work, but also its iconographic details. For the modern art historian, however, knowing the forms of a work is only a first step towards a full acquaintance with it. Terms which concerned Wöfflin, such as beauty, demonstrate a judgmental approach to the visual arts that has fallen into great disfavor in our time. So too has the deterministic view of artistic styles that Wöfflin espoused. The forms of a work can help us to appreciate its quality, but cannot fully explain how or why the work was created in its own particular way.

In his "The Iconography of Action: Bernini's *Ludovica Albertone*," Frank H. Sommer does in fact deal with the iconography of this work, but the important part of his article deals with the psychological moment that the blessed is experiencing.[6] Sommer investigates a subject of great concern to Seicento art critics, the *affeti*, or the "movements of the body that express the affections and passions of the soul…."[7] He introduces a book, written in 1624 by the Flemish Jesuit Hermann Hugo, called the *Pia desideria*. The book became one of the most popular devotional works of the 17th century and was dedicated to Bernini's patron, Pope Urban VIII Barberini. Sommer feels that there is good evidence that Bernini used the *Pia desideria* as the basis for the *Ludovica*.

Hugo's work is divided into three sections for devotions—the *Gemitus Animae Pœnitentis*, the *Desideria Animae Sanctae*, and the *Suspira Animae Amantis*—and contains emblems engraved by Boethius a Bolswert, one of which is remarkably similar to the *Ludovica* in form [Fig. 3]. In the third section, relying on the Song of Solomon for its imagery, the soul is shown in various stages of divine love. The 32nd emblem is based on the line, "Fulcite me floribus, stipate me malis; quia amore langueo." The *Pia's* accompanying verse states, "O Amor! O quantis populas mihi viscera flammis! O Amor! O animi blande Tyranne mei! O Amor! Ah tantos quis pectore comprimat ignes? Parce, vel in vapidos dissoluor cineres."[8] Sommer believes that this is a reference to an abnormal psychological phenomenon known to mystical theologians as the "Incendium amoris."[9] He further places this phenomenon in the context of other contemporary mystics, such as St. Teresa of Avila, St. Stanislaus Kosta, and St. Philip Neri. He quotes from Thurston's *The Physical Phenomena of Mysticism*, with reference to St. Philip Neri: "This inward fire was such that it sometimes made him swoon, forcing him to throw himself on his bed, where he is said to have lain occasionally a whole day without any

[6] F. Sommer, pp. 30-38.
[7] R. Lee, pp. 217 ff.
[8] H. Hugo, p. 277.
[9] F. Sommer, p. 34.

other sickness than that of divine love."[10] Bernini probably knew about this description of ecstasy; his nephew, with whom he talked frequently, was a member of the Oratory of Rome—which St. Philip Neri had founded.

Sommer studies in detail the iconography of the decorative details in the chapel, especially the jasper cloth that tumbles outward from Ludovica's bed. He considers the cloth not to be a pall, which it is commonly called, but rather a blanket. She has not gone to bed, he reasons, because she is fully clothed and wearing shoes. She feels faint and has laid herself down. Experiencing the *incendium amoris*, she has thrown off the blanket, which is tucked firmly under her bed.

> She is in the throes of what looks much like an epileptic fit; yet her face is calm and peaceful, for she is flooded by the Divine Light symbolized by the physical light coming from the concealed window to the left, and she is consoled by the "apples" represented in the background. The pomegranates of the frame [Fig. 4], the red blanket of the pedestal, the action of the actress together find their explanation in Hugo's poem and its commentary. Frame, light, statue, and pedestal are woven together to make one complete whole, each part of which helps us to understand the others, to see that Bernini intended Ludovica's action to represent religious ecstasy.[11]

Sommer's psychological approach to the *Ludovica* is important for the relation of these ecstatic states to naturally occurring human phenomena. Too frequently in this century, when people read about the experiences of Hildegard of Bingen, St. Teresa of Avila, and the Blessed Ludovica, they are quick to emphasize (and, indeed, snicker at) the sexual nature of these descriptions. For the inhabitants of Counter-Reformation Europe, and even earlier, mystical experiences had a tangible physical and spiritual reality. These ecstasies were not dismissed as insanity or blatant lust, but were actively sought and experienced. This teaches us much about how Ludovica and Bernini related to their world—how they thought about their position in the universe and what they considered the right path a Christian should take. Problems do occur with this method, however. When dealing with as shaky a human institution as psychology, one must exercise caution in positing psychological states as the basis for experiences and responses. While his method has proved fruitful to the study of art, Sigmund Freud's theories about Leonardo have been brought into question. Human psychology, being a "science," advances constantly, discovering new reasons for behavior and discarding old theories. Hence, psychology is not a firm enough basis for explaining the salient features of a work of art.

The most recent, and one of the most helpful, examinations of the *Ludovica* is to be found in Giovanni Careri's *Bernini: Flights of Love, the Art of Devotion*. Careri is critical of Sommer's and Perlove's writings on the work, and prefers to concentrate on Bernini's idea and execution of the *bel composto*. His approach is conceptual somewhat deconstructionist. He focuses on the connections made between Ludovica and St. Anne, in the painting by Giovanni Battista Gaulli, and

[10] H. Thurston, p. 211.
[11] F. Sommer, p. 35.

Sta. Francesca Romana in the frescoes on either side of the altar. While he agrees with some of the theories put forth by Sommer and Perlove, Careri feels that their textual emphasis is a handicap.

> The first [problem of method] concerns the relationship between religious art and theology, and leads us to ask ourselves under what conditions a painting, sculpture, or work of architecture may be 'explained' by a theological principle. This is a question that I cannot hope to resolve entirely, but it is extremely relevant today because in recent years theologically based interpretations of artworks have burgeoned without the methodological implications of such an approach ever being discussed. In many cases, a summary theology replaces a summary iconology, with the same function of denomination: the immense wealth of stories, interpretations, ideas, and principles culled from the theological and exegetic tradition is used as a huge dictionary in which the names and functions of religious figures may be found, just as the mythological traditions of ancient Greece and Rome are used to explain a large number of Renaissance works. However, as Michael Baxandall has recently pointed out in a book dedicated to the limits of 'applied' iconology, the Greek and Christian traditions taken over in their entirety are so vast and have developed over such an enormous arc of time that they make an infinite number of interpretations possible.[12]

Preferring to study the meaning of the work, Careri finds that the flaming heart that figures so prominently in this chapel [Fig. 5] is a pictogram for spiritual passion. This symbol does not represent Ludovica's sudden and unique emotion but generalizes this emotion, allowing the experience to be more accessible. The sculpture is translated into the language of concepts and can be assembled into a montage with the other elements of Bernini's design. Baldinucci stresses the idea that Bernini was the first artist to attempt a union of architecture, painting, and sculpture in such a way that together they created a beautiful whole (the *bel composto*).[13] Each element is related to the other in the functioning of the whole; one element leaps to the next. Careri illustrates this motion between elements by using the example of Sergei Eisenstein's *Nonindifferent Nature*. For Eisenstein, one category of works of art express the structural laws inherent in organic phenomena. He defines this category of artworks as "pathetic works," that is, demonstrative of pathos. After a long quote from Eisenstein about the centrifuge scene in "The Old and the New," Careri states

> Eisenstein's analysis of the centrifuge sequence shows us in an exemplary way how the intensive dynamic of qualitative transformations may associate leaps in emotional content (doubt, expectation, hope, joy) with leaps in the form of expression (images, metaphors, numbers, size, color, black and white, figures, and non-figures). This way of composing is very similar to the method Bernini adopted in his Albertoni *composto*, in which leaps of content (pleasure, pain, life, death) are associated with leaps in the form of expression (story, emblem, pose, folds, size, color). Eisenstein's theory of "the pathetic condition" seems to furnish our analysis of the Albertoni *composto* with an applicable theoretical model: the idea that a work of art is a field of conflict where the concrete and the conceptual stand in opposition to each other and then are reunited by means of a chain of conversions into a syncretic dimension.[14]

It is in this analysis that Careri makes his most profitable contribution to the understanding of this work of art. While this paper refers to the figure of the *beata* itself, it should be remembered that Bernini intended the Altieri Chapel

[12] G. Careri, p. 57.
[13] F. Baldinucci, p. 74.
[14] G. Careri, p. 81.

to be seen in its entirety [Fig. 6]. The communication of pathos from the artwork to its viewers is very important to this work and the era in which it was created. In the Counter-Reformation, the personal religious experience was significant. Its significance stemmed not only from giving the worshipper a more fulfilling interaction with the Catholic Church, but its primary goal, of course, was the redemption of the worshipper's soul. Bernini, a devout Catholic who attended Mass at least twice a week for most of his life and participated in the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola, had this aim foremost in his mind. However, one may be moved to ask: What does Sergei Eisenstein's understanding of his movie have to do with a 17th-century tomb sculpture? Careri's linking of these works may seem compelling in his book; but there are not necessarily conceptual ties between them, nor between their functions. This pairing matches one of the most religious art works ever created, and a film produced by one of the most anti-religious societies in history. How certain can we be that the pathos of the first is in any way similar to that of the second?

The most thorough and helpful investigation of the *Ludovica Albertoni* is that by Shelley Karen Perlove, in her book *Bernini and the Idealization of Death: The* Blessed Ludovica Albertoni *and the Altieri Chapel*. Perlove gives a full account of the chapel's physical layout, the life of the blessed, the beginning and official foundation of her cult, the commissioning and visual context of the sculpture, and iconographic analyses of the chapel's parts. The extensive collection of texts (including primary sources in the appendices) and visual sources for Bernini's sculpture sets this book firmly in the method of socio-cultural history. Perlove especially details Ludovica's beatification, Bernini's commission, and the meanings of the chapel elements. Bernini's commission is particularly interesting. He designed and carved the sculpture himself and did not have his assistants work on it. He was not paid for the chapel work, for a rather unhappy reason; his brother, Luigi, was caught in 1670 sodomizing a young boy and as a consequence was exiled from Rome and all of his financial holdings were confiscated. Gianlorenzo tried desperately to make amends, personally appealing to the pope on Luigi's behalf; he even made donations amounting to the princely sum of 26,000 *scudi*. After the completion of this work, in 1675 Gianlorenzo's efforts were rewarded when Luigi was released from exile and his property was restored.[15]

Although Perlove's book is full of such fascinating information, the most helpful sections are at the end of the book. Chapter 7 is crucial to an understanding of the *Ludovica* and the Altieri Chapel. Bernini was laborious in preparing for his death. It must be remembered that he was in his seventies during the creation of the chapel; in 1673, he lost his beloved wife, Caterina. Meditating on death, devotional works in the tradition of the *Ars Moriendi* and Thomas à

[15] S. Perlove, pp. 12-14. See also V. Martinelli, pp. 204-227.

Kempis's *Imitation of Christ*, and general preparations for dying well were widespread during this period. Bernini was no exception, and indeed he was an enthusiastic participant.[16] For 40 years he attended the meetings of the Jesuit confraternity, the Congregazione Spirituali della Buona Morte, which prepared its members for the transition from their earthly lives to their heavenly ones. The confraternity and the devotional works focused on preparing for death based on five principles, similar to the aims of the *Pia desideria*: (1) a willing submission to death; (2) the resistance to temptations; (3) an affirmative response to the interrogations of faith; (4) the use of Christ's Passion as a model; and (5) the devotion to holy images.[17] The *Ludovica Albertoni* is Bernini's visual representation of the Good Death—the gift of spiritual passion from God that allows the person to be freed from their physical prison and assists the blessed on their transportation to the heavenly spirit world. Perlove believes that Bernini pinned his own hopes for salvation on this work, and describes it as a personal votive for him at the end of his life. The *Ludovica* was, for the artist, filled with his own hopes, fears, and aspirations for his salvation.[18]

Perlove's scrutiny of Bernini's era—the popular texts of the day, the religious institutions in which he actively participated, the visual and theological sources for the chapel, and other such circumstances surrounding this commission—demonstrate why the social and cultural methodology is so beneficial for our understanding of a work of art. It must be said that it depends on what the art historian wants to learn about an object; if one wishes to understand the work in the abstract, then the construction/deconstruction/post-structuralist methodology (as represented by Careri here) performs admirably. If one wishes to understand the art work as its contemporaries would have appreciated it, then one must come to terms with the cultural history of that period—its rulers, political events, poets, musicians, philosophers, etc. Careri's warning, that historians who rely too heavily on contemporary texts may be dangerously restricting themselves to the detriment of the overall picture of the artwork, is very significant. The methodology which has not been used yet with reference to the *Ludovica* is feminism; this is disappointing, since the feminist methodology would have thought-provoking things to say about this work. The best way to approach a work of art may be to use several methodologies—and try to see the artwork from several perspectives.

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[16] Ibid., p. 48. He was actively engaged in charity and distributed alms anonymously through a servant. He painted a devotional image, the *Sangue di Cristo*, which he kept at his bedside as a devotional image "in life and in death."
[17] See R. Bellarmino's *De arte bene moriendi*, which Bernini certainly knew.
[18] S. Perlove, p. 50.

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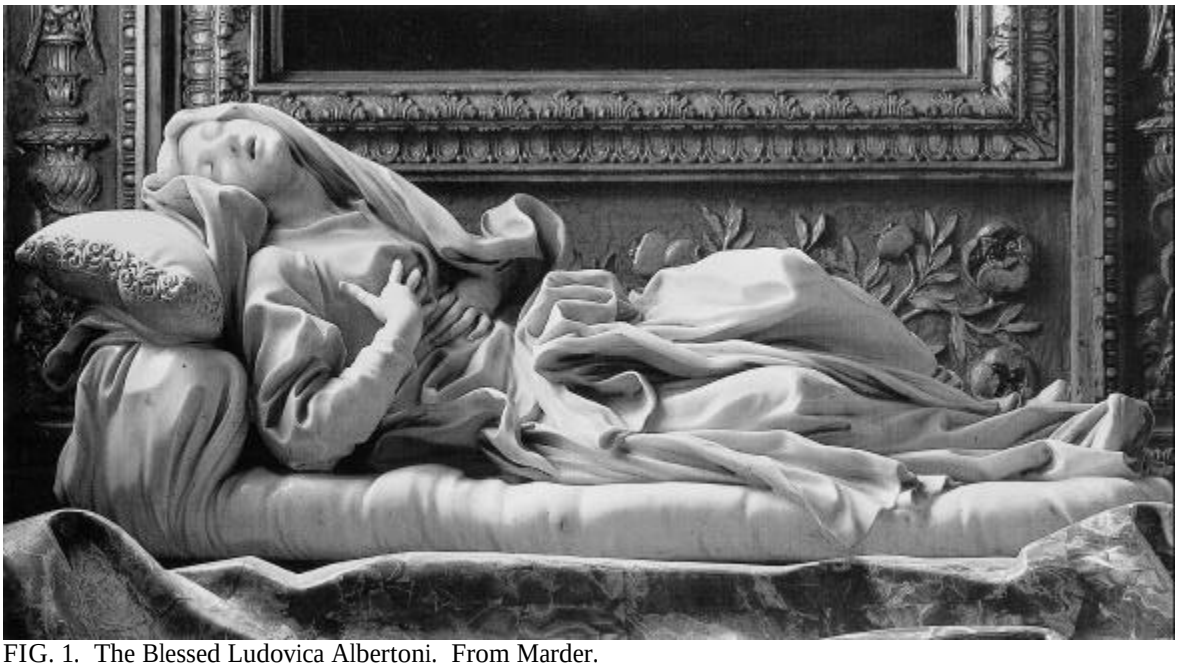

FIG. 1. The Blessed Ludovica Albertoni. From Marder.

FIG. 2. Close-up of Ludovica's face. From Marder.

FIG. 3. Engraving from Hugo's *Pia desideria* by Boethius a Bolswert. From Sommer.

FIG. 4. Pomegranates on the back wall of the Altieri Chapel. From Careri.

FIG. 5. The flaming heart at Ludovica's feet. From Careri.

FIG. 6. Overview of the Altieri Chapel. From Marder.