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Kerry Downes, *Vanbrugh*. Studies in Architecture, vol. XVI. London, Zwemmer, 1977. 291 pp., 180 illus., £ 28.00 ($50.00)

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says Regin, 'on the ability of the contemporary mind in general, to have to point out that the foreign visitors in Amsterdam at that time [i.e. ca. 1650] elaborately concentrating on matters of commerce and politics, almost entirely ignored the arts of the city. . . . The magnificent fruit of Amsterdam's society was hidden from the contemporary eye. The Amsterdammers themselves, of course, valued their artists better, and esteemed Rembrandt highly. If they failed to distinguish uniqueness, they had this in common with the contemporary mind of most ages' (p. 157).

Much of this is questionable. Rembrandt was internationally famous from an early date. His etchings were widely collected, as were his pictures. The Sicilian nobleman Don Antonio Ruffo, for example, ordered several great works from him, and Cosimo III, Grand Duke of Tuscany, on his tour of northern Europe in 1667, sought him out especially in his studio. Moreover, it is surely evident that Dutch painters and painting have been tremendously popular in Europe from the seventeenth century on.

Regin describes Rembrandt as a 'failed bourgeois,' and appears to ascribe the decline of his popularity to his virtual financial bankruptcy in 1658. Yet a short while later he goes on to point out that both 'bourgeois' and official commissions still came to Rembrandt in his later years, e.g. the group portrait of the Syndics, and the *Conspiracy of Julius Civilis*. It appears that in some ways Regin is a victim of his own terminology. In many passages, 'bourgeois' appears to mean something quintessential. Yet he is aware that Amsterdam society 'comprised a number of middle classes, each vying with the other in the dynamics of social melioration' (p. 135).

Regin points out many illuminating comments and analyses of Amsterdam society and its relationship to the arts. He points out, for example, that 'burgher life was, among other conditions, strongly determined by the awareness of the *home*. The concept of the home, from a mere family shelter developed into a category of cultural authority, which played a seminal role well into the nineteenth century, until the force of mass consciousness broke it up' (p. 141). He then goes on to analyse genre pieces by Nicolas Maes and Gabriel Metsu, relating them to the home, and associated eating and drinking customs.

If much of the 'descriptive task' which the author imposed upon himself seems very well carried out, this reviewer remains unconvinced about some of the answers to the larger questions set out at the beginning. I suspect that the root of my discontent is with the use of the word 'bourgeois,' with all its Marxist, determinist associations. The classical Marxist interpretation of the contrast between the Northern and Southern Netherlands (as seen, for example, in writings of Arnold Hauser) stresses the freedom, democracy and 'bourgeois' character of the North as against the courtly, aristocratic character of the South. Hence the twin poles of the art of Rembrandt and that of Rubens. But this sociological interpretation was exploded by Frans Baudoin in his brilliant essay 'Rubens and his Social and Cultural Background' nearly fifteen years ago, and recently reprinted in his *P.P. Rubens*. By analysing Ruben's commissions in the decade after his return from Italy, Baudoin showed that Rubens received most of them from middle-class Antwerp citizens, not, as had been supposed, from the Archduke Albert and Archduchess Isabella, the Flemish aristocracy, nor Churchmen. In other words, he worked for basically the same *class* as did Rembrandt and other Dutch artists in the North, i.e. the rich middle class. The really significant differences between the art of the Northern and Southern Netherlands are to be found not in social factors, but in the cultural and religious character of the Antwerp and Amsterdam middle classes.

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KERRY DOWNES *Vanbrugh*. Studies in Architecture, vol. XVI. London, Zwemmer, 1977. 291 pp., 180 illus., £ 28.00 ($50.00).

Over the years the regal blue and gold volumes of Zwemmer's *Studies in Architecture* series have been marching across shelf after library shelf. The book under review is the sixteenth to join the phalanx, and more are on the way. Unfortunately, since the series began those desirable bindings have become less and less within the ordinary scholar's reach. When Zwemmer issued Kerry Downes's weighty *English Baroque Architecture* in 1966, the book cost slightly more than £7. Eleven years later, his *Vanbrugh*, a comparable book in terms of its large size and high-quality production, has quadrupled in price.

In spite of this, one remains eager to read the latest that Downes has written, and is not disappointed. Among his impressive list of works, this most recent one, devoted to the English architect Sir John Vanbrugh (1664-1726), seems to be the most original in approach. Within the traditional monographic framework, Downes has discarded strict chronological sequence in favour of a freer, thematic organization. He thereby avoids at the outset the tedious recitation of date and place of birth, and instead explores Vanbrugh's own home, the so-called 'goose pie house,' ridiculed by Dean Swift. In a way this unusual building serves as a microcosm of the man himself: first soldier, next playwright, lastly architect, and always social-climber. These and other aspects of his varied life are artfully woven into an unfolding story.

Vanbrugh is not an unusually long book. In any event, the architectural part of Vanbrugh's career spanned only some twenty-eight years, during which time he produced relatively few, if important, buildings. The first half of the text (126 pages), which chiefly concerns this reviewer, involves his biography. The rest, nearly as long again, contains information about

both sides of the architect's family, and a full transcription of the recently discovered Vanbrugh account book for 1715-26. A word or two about this second half should suffice to explain its usefulness. The genealogical portion helps to show Vanbrugh's mercantile background on the paternal side, and his mother's aristocratic connections, which he turned to good account when it came to finding patrons for his works. One may question why Downes devoted quite so long a section to this topic, which his genealogical tables make clear enough in most cases. All of us, however, will welcome the publication of Vanbrugh's complete account book, the fullest such eighteenth-century architectural document I know to have appeared in print. In addition there are many appendices, which make *Vanbrugh* a mine of documentary material. Finally, 160 large-size plates illustrate the work. Many are drawings hitherto unknown, or unusual views of familiar monuments taken by Downes himself. I was surprised to find missing a picture of the characteristic finials from the destroyed portion of Eastbury, so a photograph of my own is included here (Fig. 1). These huge objects, now scattered about as bollards, are like the petrified eggs of some long-gone pterodactyl. They sum up so much about the swaggering Vanbrugh, of whom a facetious epitapher once wrote:

Lie heavy on him, Earth, for he
Laid many a heavy load on thee.

FIGURE 1. Eastbury, Finial (Photo: P. du Prey).

As most of Vanbrugh's buildings are well known by now (Castle Howard, Blenheim, Seaton Delaval), Downes's task lay with condensing the material to manageable size, which he has done very well. His documentary researches have confirmed some doubtful attributions like the Kensington Water Tower, or Robin Hood's Well. By contrast, he has removed from Vanbrugh's authorship the celebrated letter to the Commissioners of the Fifty New Churches, and has given it – somewhat tentatively – to Nicholas Hawksmoor instead. Apart from these smaller issues, the major contribution of the first half of the book is Downes's analysis of what he calls Vanbrugh's 'elusiveness of . . . imagination.' Downes states more clearly than ever before in the literature what he sees as two distinct facets of the architect's stylistic personality.

One aspect of Vanbrugh's expression is the style he called the 'Castle Air.' He originated this in connection with rebuilding the existing castle of Kimbolton in 1707-09. Downes suggests several sources for Vanbrugh's romantic proto-Gothic revivalism. Vanbrugh's youth spent in the walled city of Chester is given as one reason for his predilection for fortified silhouettes in his buildings. The nostalgia of an old solider – who never saw battle – may also be a contributing factor. But the most telling influence, to my mind, has been omitted by Downes, although Laurence Whistler discussed it as long ago as 1938. For four years (1688-92), Vanbrugh languished in French jails on charges of having spied. From the scene of his arrest at Calais, he was transferred to the great *donjon* prisons of Vincennes and to the Bastille. Whatever else he saw of architecture while abroad, we know he saw a great deal of mediaeval fortresses – both from the outside and from within! Perhaps in his later attempts to impart a castle-like flavour to his architecture (notably in his own homes of Chargate and at Maze Hill) there was an element of intentional self-mockery.

The second aspect of Vanbrugh's artistic personality stressed by Downes is the architect's purported 'conversion' late in life to the then fashionable neo-Palladian style. But in this instance I find Downes's argument unconvincing. He seems for one thing to equate neo-Palladianism with the incorporation of a few pseudo-Palladian motifs, such as the one he erroneously calls the Venetian window. The window type, more properly associated with Sebastiano Serlio (hence the correct term *Serliana*), is not grounds enough for calling certain late Vanbrugh buildings neo-Palladian. Nor is the architect's acquisition of a copy of Palladio reason to assume a self-conscious switch of allegiance in Vanbrugh's last years. Certainly the relation between Colin Campbell's neo-Palladian Houghton, and the contemporary south façade design for Vanbrugh's Grimsthorpe, is close. Nonetheless the relationship between these two men remains unclear. Campbell, who could indulge in servile flattery, expressed gratitude to Vanbrugh (*Vitruvius Britannicus*, I, 5) in a way that rings sincere. So maybe Campbell ought to be seen as being Baroque rather than Vanbrugh as neo-Palladian. If with Vanbrugh there is an increasing tendency towards simplicity, that is something often found with the works of elderly artists of genius. The new serenity of late Vanbrugh would, therefore, resemble the cubistic style of Palladio only in a generic way.

In conclusion, a note may be permitted about the uneven writing of the book. Some sentences are irritatingly, almost teutonically, long, without the punctuation or the inner logic of the German language. Elsewhere, there are well-turned phrases, and passages full of witty insight. At moments like those, when Downes's sense of fun shines through, I almost feel that the old humorist, Vanbrugh, is laughing alongside him.

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