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“Dwelling With Books As Stones”

Lisa Pon

I WAS SITTING IN THE LIBRARY. YES, I WAS. THE BOOKS HAD NOT LONG been on their shelves, for the Fine Arts Library itself had only recently opened: it was 1992 and the FAL was as new as the incoming first-year graduate students, of which I was one. But unlike Walter Benjamin unpacking his library, I felt no “mild boredom of order” in the shelved reference books. Instead I delighted in the sequence of spines all aligned on the new grey shelves of the expansive, luminous reading room. The wooden chairs, high-backed and hard-bottomed, unlike the leather thrones at Houghton Library, were uncushioned (so as to discourage sleeping, we were told) and placed around the long wood tables in the center of the space.

Many mornings I chose not to sit at one of those communal tables, secluding myself instead in one of the small nooks between the short reference shelves that lined the sides of the reading room. There at the end of each one was a single desk the same grey as the shelves, and my favorite cubby was lined with various reference editions of Giorgio Vasari’s *Lives of the Artists*. Sitting there, I could reach out my hand and grab a volume of the critical edition edited by Paola Barocchi and Rosanna Bettarini. This extraordinarily useful set has the texts of both editions published during Vasari’s lifetime running in parallel at the top and bottom of each page. It allows the young student and the seasoned scholar alike to compare the two texts, published in 1550 and 1568, with ease. In many ways, that nook was, to quote Benjamin again, my “dwelling with books as the building stones,” and I spent many hours in it. I read Vasari there, and also in the Fine Arts Library stacks two levels below, and in Houghton. In my second year, I wrote my qualifying paper on Vasari there. That essay became one of my first publications; my most recent publication on Vasari just appeared in the *Boletín del Museo del Prado*. In the dozen years since I graduated, I’ve read Vasari in many places and also in the nowhere of the Internet. Each time, part of me returns to that nook in the Fine Arts Library, disappearing inside, as is only fitting.

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