

The *Epistle to the Laodiceans* and the Art of Tradition*

ROBYN FAITH WALSH

For a period in 1965, Andy Warhol refused to sign his artwork. He had applied to change his name legally to John Doe, so when curator Sam Green asked which image he should use to promote a retrospective at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia, Warhol suggested a silkscreen of his *S & H Green Stamps*, but he delegated the task of arranging, printing, and signing the piece to Green. Green recalls:

... I had to sign [the *S & H Green Stamps* posters for the exhibition] all 'Andy Warhol' because he decided not to sign his work that year ... So it is actually my signature 'Andy Warhol 1965' that authenticates a Warhol as being real ... because Andy Warhol delegated the responsibility to me of making his art ...¹

Counterintuitively, Warhol's *S & H Green Stamps* from 1965 is only "authentic" if it is signed by someone other than Warhol. It is Warhol's work with Warhol's name produced by a behind-the-scenes steward who remains, for all intents and purposes, anonymous. Only the most elite critics and insiders have the interest or knowledge to comment on the validity of the print and its signature. Outside of this elite, it is simply another Warhol – another expression of a particular aesthetic narrative in the larger corpus of Warhol's art.²

* A warm thank you to John Kirby, who read drafts of this piece with enthusiasm and a keen critical eye. Thank you, also, to Jaswinder Bolina, Nancy Evans, Christina Larson, Jessica Rosenberg, Sarah Rollens, Jennifer Eyl, Justin Ritzinger, Erin Roberts, Michael Bellofatto, and the editors of this volume – Julia Lindenlaub and Chance Bonar – for their helpful insights and feedback. All translations are my own, unless otherwise noted.

¹ Quoted from an interview with Sam Green for the BBC Documentary *Warhol: Denied* (2006). For more on the relationship between Warhol and Green, consider Guy Trebay, "A Collector of People Along With Art," *The New York Times*, 6 April 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/07/fashion/07GREEN.html>. NB: I state that Green was responsible for the production of this piece based on his own testimony; however, there are catalogue raisonné which argue that some portion of the 300 lithographs made were printed by a certain Eugene Feldman. My research for this piece certainly confirms that, when it comes to Warhol's work *writ large*, proper attribution for its physical production is often contested. I am not able to delve into that issue for this contribution, but I acknowledge the difficulties of attribution and authorship in studies of Warhol overall.

² As for Green, his actions were necessary to maintain cohesion in the production and promotion of Warhol as an icon of the emerging pop art movement. While members of The Factory often helped design and mass produce prints, Green's strategic intervention actively closed a gap left open by Warhol's failure to directly "name" or authorize his work in 1965. For more

A Warhol anecdote must seem like an odd place to begin a piece on the *Epistle to the Laodiceans*. But both Warhol and Paul the Apostle signal the “constructable” nature of certain authors and artists whose personae come to supersede the bounds of their individual literary or artistic output.³ Warhol is able to allocate the responsibility of his art to a relative unknown, and that art remains “a Warhol.” Christian corpora are rife with pseudepigrapha attributed to Paul, and though these texts are not written by Paul, they nevertheless remain “Pauline.” In these cases, Warhol and Paul are treated as “textual entities” – open sources that are tightly associated with writings or artwork that bear their names but that may not belong to them in reality.⁴

The concept of an author as a textual entity alludes to the process of historical generalization that takes place when a cultural producer becomes “a name.”⁵ For some audiences, the desire to bridge perceived biographical, artistic, or literary gaps in an author’s life and narrative permits the willful or even unknowing incorporation of forgeries into the canon of that author’s work. This need for cohesion permits what Irene Peirano Garrison calls “retrospective fictions”: new works aimed at either reinforcing, expanding, or refuting already-accepted aspects of an author’s canon.⁶ Analyses of retrospective fictions often focus on the relative quality of the given “fake.”⁷ Style and composition are useful evaluative tools, but such investigations frequently slip into speculation about the motivations of the pseudepigrapher. This study, by contrast, asks what fakes reveal about the interests of those who accept them. Considering *why* certain retrospective fictions are accepted into or rejected from an author’s canon reveals a great deal about how social actors invent and inculcate new tradition(s), often at the expense of historicity.⁸ Tracing a piece of pseudepigrapha on the margins of

on the production of Warhol silkscreens and lithographs at The Factory, see Steven Watson, *Factory Made: Warhol and the Sixties* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2003); John Richardson, *Sacred Monsters, Sacred Masters: Beaton, Capote, Dalí, Picasso, Freud, Warhol and More* (New York: Jonathan Cape, 2001).

³ In using the term “constructable,” I am borrowing language from Irene Peirano Garrison, whose work will be discussed more thoroughly in what follows: Irene Peirano, *The Rhetoric of the Roman Fake: Latin Pseudepigrapha in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 10–11. Hereafter, I will also use “author” to refer, at times, to both writers and other artists. In this respect, I understand “author” and “artist” to be interchangeable.

⁴ Peirano, *The Rhetoric of the Roman Fake*, 10.

⁵ With reference to a “cultural producer,” I am borrowing language from Pierre Bourdieu (*The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, trans. Randal Johnson [New York: Columbia University Press, 1993], 115).

⁶ Peirano uses the term “retrospective fiction” frequently throughout *The Rhetoric of the Roman Fake*, particularly in reference to her analysis of Vergil (*The Rhetoric of the Roman Fake*, 3).

⁷ I am referring here to the title of Peirano, *The Rhetoric of the Roman Fake*.

⁸ In using words like “inculcate,” I am paraphrasing some of the language found in Eric Hobsbawm, “Introduction: Inventing Traditions,” in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 1–2.

acceptance also speaks to the negotiations that take place as “names” or founding figures are established and reimagined over time.

In the case of Paul, questions of historicity and historical biography are unquestionably complicated. Anachronistically understood as an early Christian figure, scholars tend to situate his writings and the pseudepigrapha associated with his name in terms of other religious writings, communities, and debates. Comparing Paul with Warhol helps to disrupt this pattern and reveal new taxonomies. For example, the 1965 *S & H Green Stamps* attributed to “Warhol” functions as a retrospective fiction because it is plausibly built on the scaffolding of Warhol’s recognized work.⁹ Similarly, the Latin *Epistle to the Laodiceans* (hereafter, *Laodiceans*) stands out as a pseudepigraphic text, but one with content taken almost verbatim (albeit, in translation) from Paul’s genuine letters. We do not know whether the compiler of *Laodiceans* engaged in *imitatio* strategically or as an exercise; nevertheless, the sources for *Laodiceans* are easily discernable (Appendix 1).¹⁰ The letter deviates from expectation with respect to its length and some of its terminology, but in using material from Paul’s undisputed letters, it generates what François Bovon characterizes as a “paradoxical situation” – a text that cannot be rejected outright precisely because it is, in effect, Paul’s own words.¹¹ As Bovon avers, *Laodiceans* is remarkable in that it endeavors “not to be original.”¹²

By and large, critical analyses of *Laodiceans* are unusually consistent and concise – and vitriolic. Scholars marvel at its brevity, its lackluster content, and its lack of literary innovation. Descriptors like “worthless,” “incompetent,” and “uninteresting” are common.¹³ At stake for these scholars is an obligation to account

⁹ I am careful here not to overreach and suggest that 1965 *S & H Green Stamps* by Green looks precisely like what Warhol would have created personally – who is to say that Warhol would not have made significant changes to his print, had he done the work himself?

¹⁰ I am speaking of *imitatio* in this piece in terms of its rhetorical function.

¹¹ François Bovon, “The Correspondence between Paul and the Corinthians and Paul’s Letter to the Laodiceans,” unpublished paper provided by the author (2005), 1. Several years ago, I was a research assistant for François Bovon at Harvard Divinity School, and he provided me with yet-unpublished drafts of material he had written on 1 and 2 Corinthians and *Laodiceans* to edit in hard copy. Sadly, he passed away in 2013 after several years of ill health. In preparing the present piece, I relocated his papers by chance. I have searched for a published version of the ideas represented in these found pages without success. It is possible that I have overlooked a publication or the version I have in hard copy represents an early draft of something that later appeared in a different form; however, it seems equally plausible that it is part of a larger project that was abandoned. After much consideration and consultation, I have elected to use this contribution as an opportunity to convey Bovon’s thoughts on *Laodiceans*, in a limited fashion. My interests in doing so are rooted in a desire to celebrate Bovon’s career while also respecting the (potentially) unfinished nature of this particular work. At the time of this writing, I am in discussions with editors of a proposed festschrift for Bovon about publishing these papers so others can consult them as well.

¹² “Original” in the sense of innovative; cited from Bovon, “Correspondence,” 16.

¹³ For example, n. 40–48 below.

for the existence of what they perceive to be a “stupid orthodox imitation.”¹⁴ The primary objection in such treatments is that Laodiceans is not just echoic of Paul’s authentic work, but conspicuously so; as such, no new information can be obtained from the author of this forgery about the early Christians they are presumed to represent. What is principally ignored, then, is why such an obviously “insipid” forgery was accepted into any corpora in the first place.

What Bovon typifies as a “paradoxical situation” in Laodiceans may be the key. Regardless of the intentions of Laodiceans’ author, this so-called hodgepodge of authentic Pauline phrases remains, in some measure, “Paul.” Thus, in the face of the “openness” provided by Colossians 4:16 (“see that [this letter] is also read before the assembly at Laodicea”), the Latin Laodiceans filled a void, creating a relatively innocuous intertextual stopgap for what was otherwise a serious lacuna.¹⁵ This Bovonian Paradox (if I may coin a phrase) articulates the sentiment of later commentators on Laodiceans, which tepidly acknowledged the letter as “bearing the name of Paul,” which in itself was sufficient for it to be “venerated,” if with some dubiety.¹⁶

Bovon was fond of speaking of “useful books” rather than viewing so-called non-canonical writings through a strict lens of orthodoxy and heresy. He sought to understand how gospel harmonies, pseudepigrapha, and so forth were valued by various Christian groups, as evidenced by their presence in antique canons. Indeed, the acceptance of retrospective fictions like pseudepigrapha requires a social group for whom the authorial name in question has some utility. Social movements, for example, often craft associations with a founding figure in order to establish a point of origin and a focal point of authority. Whether we are analyzing an artistic movement like Pop Art, or what we today call Christianity, invoking a symbol of authority is a powerful way to establish “august roots” for new movements and, in the process, evoke a sense of group solidity.¹⁷ Laodiceans helped establish and maintain Paul’s status as a founding figure and provided a narrative bridge in his development as a “textual entity.” Reconsidering the history of Laodiceans and its reception offers an opportunity to reassess how, as Peirano puts it, “the ancient approach to authorship was characterized by the

¹⁴ Bovon, “Correspondence,” 20. In this section, Bovon is not calling Laodiceans a “stupid orthodox imitation” himself but noting that this tends to be one of the two lenses through which scholars view the letter, the other being “subtle marcionite [sic] rewriting.”

¹⁵ See Peirano (*The Rhetoric of the Roman Fake*, 10–11) for an analysis of intertextuality.

¹⁶ Irena Backus, “Renaissance Attitudes to New Testament Apocryphal Writings: Jacques Lefevre d’Etaples and his Epigones,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 51 (1998): 1175.

¹⁷ William E. Arnal, “The Collection and Synthesis of ‘Tradition’ and the Second-Century Invention of Christianity,” *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 23 (2011): 193–215, quotation on 199: “even modern groups seeking to define themselves and their identity in the *present* do so by inventing or laying claim to an ancestral identity which unifies, identifies, and gives them august (or respectable, or congenial) roots.” Also consider Hobsbawm, *The Invention of Tradition*, 9.

inability to distinguish between a real author and his literary persona.”¹⁸ It also helps us reconsider to what extent saying we have a cohesive and authentic “Paul” is part of the art of constructing tradition.

1. Laodiceans: Reception History and Scholarship

Laodiceans as we have it today is an apocryphal letter of indeterminate origin that managed to remain on the fringes of the Pauline canon from at least the sixth to roughly the sixteenth century.¹⁹ Refuted by some as a Marcionite forgery (or, in some cases, refuted for purely stylistic reasons), it was equally accepted by others as a genuine letter of the apostle Paul, with debate about its authenticity continuing until the Council of Trent.²⁰ Close analysis indicates that the letter is pseudepigraphic, adapted from Paul’s letter to the Philippians and augmented with lines from numerous other Pauline letters (Appendix 1). Laodiceans is, in effect, Paul’s words translated, reproduced, and curated by persons other than Paul.²¹

Any discussion of “Laodiceans” must begin with clarifying *which* Laodiceans, as there are several attestations to a letter by this name among early Christian writers. As noted above, the existence of the epistle is principally tied to Paul’s letter to the Colossians. Setting aside the authenticity of Colossians for a moment, Colossians 4:16 signals a compelling lacuna:

καὶ ὅταν ἀναγνῶσθῃ παρ’ ὑμῶν ἡ ἐπιστολή, ποιήσατε ἵνα καὶ ἐν τῇ Λαοδικέων ἐκκλησίᾳ ἀναγνῶσθῃ, καὶ τὴν ἐκ Λαοδικείας ἵνα καὶ ὑμεῖς ἀναγνῶτε.

And when this letter has been read to you, see that it is also read before the assembly at Laodicea, and that you yourselves read the letter which will be forwarded from there.

This reference to an otherwise unknown Pauline letter acted as an open invitation for writers with a variety of interests to supply the would-be missing material.

¹⁸ Peirano, *The Rhetoric of the Roman Fake*, 11.

¹⁹ A letter to the Laodiceans was known in both of the so-called western and eastern churches; however, the Latin Laodiceans circulated primarily in the west. Bovon points out that the Antiochian teachers Theodore of Mopsueste and Theodoret of Cyrrhus condemned Laodiceans “probably in a polemic against western voices favorable to the letter. Epiphanius in an obscure passage seems also to have been aware of the letter and to be hostile to it. Later Timothy, presbyter of Constantinople, who became patriarch in 511 CE, says that there is a letter to the Laodiceans, but that it is a forgery of the Manicheans ([perhaps] a confusion with the Marcionites)” (Bovon, “Correspondence,” 22). Overall while the western fathers looked upon Laodiceans favorably, the apocryphal third letter to the Corinthians found greater reception in the eastern church.

²⁰ Laodiceans was ultimately eliminated from the canon by the Council of Trent (1545–1563).

²¹ Some analysts claim that Laodiceans may have additionally relied on Colossians, 1 Corinthians, and 2 Peter: Melissa Harl Sellew, “Laodiceans and the Philippians Fragments Hypothesis,” *Harvard Theological Review* 87 (1994): 17–28, esp. 28, Appendix 1.