

VASARI'S *RINASCITA*:  
HISTORY, ANTHROPOLOGY OR ART CRITICISM?

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Vasari's *rinascita* has been the subject of many readings. In a classic essay on the Renaissance, August Buck stressed that 'Giorgio Vasari was the first to apply the tripartite notion of history developed by the Renaissance to a continuous historical process, the history of European art.'<sup>1</sup> Since the publication of Buck's paper, however, several scholars have diverged from and qualified his assessment. Paola Barocchi and Zygmunt Ważbiński demonstrated that the first (1550) and second—much enlarged—edition of the *Lives* (1568) contain contrasting attitudes towards history.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, it has been demonstrated that the term *rinascita* had currency long before Vasari.<sup>3</sup>

In a paper given at the 1974 Vasari Conference, Eugenio Garin gave a lucid assessment of several problems connected with the concept of *rinascita* in Vasari that have yet to be addressed properly.<sup>4</sup> First, he pointed to the fact that the term *rinascita* in the *Lives* has lost any connotation of social, political or religious reform. This was rehearsed and clarified in an exemplary way by Martin Warnke in an interpretation of the frontispiece to the *Lives*.<sup>5</sup> Second, Garin suggested tantalising

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<sup>1</sup> August Buck, 'Zu Begriff und Problem der Renaissance. Eine Einleitung', in *Zu Begriff und Problem der Renaissance*, ed. August Buck (Darmstadt, 1969), 1–36, 10–11. See the recent overview by Robert Black, 'General Introduction', in *The Renaissance. Critical Concepts in Historical Studies*, ed. Robert Black (London, 2006), vol. 1, 1–24.

<sup>2</sup> Paola Barocchi, 'L'antibiografia del secondo Vasari', in Paola Barocchi, *Studi Vasariani* (Torino, 1984), 157–70; Zygmunt Ważbiński, 'L'idée de l'histoire dans la première et la seconde édition des 'Vies' de Vasari', in *Il Vasari. Storiografo e artista. Atti del congresso internazionale nel IV centenario della morte. Arezzo e Firenze 2–8 Settembre 1974* (Florence, 1976), 1–25.

<sup>3</sup> Martin L. McLaughlin, 'Humanist Concepts of Renaissance and Middle Ages in the Tre- and Quattrocento', *Renaissance Studies* 2 (1988): 131–42.

<sup>4</sup> Eugenio Garin, 'Giorgio Vasari e il tema della rinascita', in *Il Vasari. Storiografo e artista.*, 259–66. See also Eugenio Garin, *Rinascite e rivoluzioni. Movimenti culturali dal XIV al XVIII secolo* (Rome, 1975), 39–48.

<sup>5</sup> Martin Warnke, 'Die erste Seite aus den "Viten" Giorgio Vasaris: Der politische Gehalt seiner Renaissancevorstellung', *Kritische Berichte* 5 (1977): 5–28. See also the important notes by Julian Kliemann, 'Su alcuni concetti umanistici del pensiero e del mondo figurativo vasariano', in *Giorgio Vasari. Tra decorazione ambientale e storio-*

similarities between Vasari's concept of *rinascita* and the ideas of Guillaume Postel. The strong emphasis on the Etruscan origin of the arts in Vasari's prohemium could reflect the influence of Postel, who published a book on Etruscan culture in Florence in 1551. Garin's argument, however, did not stop at simply stating Postel's influence on Vasari, which could have been mediated by Cosimo Bartoli or Giovanfrancesco Giambullari. He further hinted at an even deeper relationship between Postel's philosophy of history as *rinascita* and Vasari's art-historical project. Garin's central thesis was that the universal concept of 'art' was derived from the idea of an universal origin of culture and of language in Etruscan civilisation.

In my opinion, this article by Eugenio Garin is also the starting point of Charles Hope's work on Vasari's *Lives*. Hope first mounted his argument in 1995, while reviewing a book by Patricia Rubin.<sup>6</sup> A scepticism about Vasari's authorship of the *Lives* brought Hope to a new interpretation of the internal chronology of the first edition, the *Torrentina*. Hope contends that the innovative, historiographical idea of dividing the evolution of Italian art into three epochs was not Vasari's idea, but was devised by members of the *Accademia Fiorentina* from 1546, during the editing of the *Vite*. Examining the internal chronology of the first edition, Hope proves that the *Proemii*, which feature the historiographical concept of the three epochs, were written after the main bulk of the work had already been completed. Within the *Proemii*, he established a relative chronology, arguing that the *Proemio delle vite*, which tells the history of art *ab origine* through the Middle Ages to Cimabue, was composed first. It was therefore initially deemed sufficient to write a general introduction to the *Lives* recapitulating the history of art before Cimabue. From this ensued the idea of breaking the *Lives* into three epochs, each with its own preface. After this

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*grafia artistica. Convegno di studi Arezzo 1981*, ed. Gian Carlo Garfagnini (Florence, 1985), 73–82.

<sup>6</sup> Charles Hope, 'Can you trust Vasari?', *New York Review of Books* 42 (1995): 10–13; Charles Hope, 'Le Vite Vasariane: Un esempio di autore multiplo', in *L'autore multiplo*, ed. Anna Santoni (Pisa, 2005), 59–74; Thomas Frangenberg, 'Bartoli, Giambullari and the Prefaces to Vasari's *Lives* (1550)', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 60 (2002): 244–58. See also Ugo Scoti Bertinelli, *Giorgio Vasari scrittore* (Pisa, 1905), 157–223; Giovanni Nencioni, 'Fra Grammatica e Retorica', *Atti e Memorie dell'Accademia Toscana di Scienze e Lettere La Colombaria* 19 (1954): 137–269, here 210–12; Piero Scapecechi, 'Una carta dell'esemplare riminese delle Vite del Vasari con correzioni di Giambullari. Nuove indicazioni e proposte per la *Torrentiana*', *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz* 42 (1998): 101–14.

decision was made, it was necessary to adjust the lives of the artists to conform to this novel framework. Hope is persuaded that members of the *Accademia Fiorentina* were responsible for this decision. For Hope, Vasari is therefore only nominally the author of the *Vite*.

It should be noticed, however, that the people whom Hope holds responsible for this novel approach to art history are exactly the same as those mentioned in Garin's seminal article, the only difference being that Hope's philological acumen has effectively sidelined Garin's broader cultural and philosophical concerns. Although this is not the right place to discuss the many fascinating philological questions posed by the *Vite*, this paper will address just one of the points raised by Hope's thesis: can the term *rinascita* be separated so neatly from the fabric of the *Lives*? Is there just one concept of rebirth, or should we account for a wider variety of instances of rebirth? In other words, is the concept of rebirth only an historiographical category or is it also a category of art criticism? A central contention of this paper will be that art history cannot be separated from art criticism in the *Lives*. To address these questions it is necessary to take a closer look at Vasari's biographical stance. After investigating the nature of Vasari's biography in the first part, this paper will return to the concept of *rinascita* and relate it to how Vasari deals with the Middle Ages.

### *The Life of Art*

For Vasari's *Lives* to be a history of art, he had to write the lives of artists, not of men. This can help us to understand how the biography of each individual artist relates to the historiographical framework of the whole.

Birth and death are the crucial points where life and history meet.<sup>7</sup> To give just one very simple example, Vasari almost never rehearses the family history of the artists. The genealogy and descent which was of proven interest to artists themselves was replaced by a genealogy of influence for each artist.<sup>8</sup> Fathers, mothers and uncles are only

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<sup>7</sup> See the excellent article by Philip Sohm, 'Caravaggio's Deaths', *Art Bulletin* 84 (2002): 449–68.

<sup>8</sup> Laura Riccò Soprani, *Vasari scrittore: la prima edizione del libro delle 'Vite'* (Rome, 1979); Paul Barolsky, *Giotto's Father and the Family of Vasari's Lives* (University Park, 1992).

mentioned briefly. The life he wants to tell is the life which pertains to art. The period of a man's life before he became an artist is not worth telling and is not considered part of the story. In this regard, the *Life of Brunelleschi* is an exception. Filippo Brunelleschi came from a major Florentine family and was therefore in a perfect position to play a leading role in Florentine society. Vasari wrote a whole paragraph about Brunelleschi's father, his famous grandfather and the family of his mother.<sup>9</sup> Although he explicitly mentioned Brunelleschi's patrician descent, Filippo's life as an artist begins with the contrast between him and his father, who would have liked him to have become a notary. The distress of his father is Brunelleschi's admission ticket into the realm of art.

By contrast, Alberti is never really accepted as an artist in the *Lives*. Vasari is quite explicit: 'He was always more inclined to writing than to work, as he was of the most noble blood.'<sup>10</sup> Alberti's patrician descent is seen as one cause of his limited proficiency in building. The same qualities that make Alberti so interesting for us today—his learning, his artistic theory—were rejected by Vasari. He was too much a patrician to be fully accepted into the ranks of art. The life of the artist has to be a life of his own, different not only from ordinary life but also from the lives of noblemen or patricians. Michelangelo can serve as a prominent example. During his lifetime, Michelangelo was eager to assert his pretended descent from the counts of Canossa. This was so important for him that he let Ascanio Condivi include it in his biography, printed in Rome in 1553. By contrast, Vasari mentioned this fabulous descent only in passing. He was not at all interested in stressing this part of Michelangelo's persona, as—for Vasari—Buonarroti was the artist *par excellence*. To be part of the life of art the artist has to live for art.

To understand the relationship between the life of the artists and the life of art better, the first step should be to define the meaning of the word 'life' in the *Lives*. The word *vita* is used with different connotations: *sua vita*, *finì la vita*, *questa vita* always denote the earthly life, while *miglior vita*, *passò ad altra vita* stands for the after-life. A life can be perfect, quiet, good, most happy, solitary and saintly. Works

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<sup>9</sup> Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori e architettori nelle redazioni del 1550 e 1568*, ed. Rosanna Bettarini and Paola Barocchi (Florence, 1966–1987), vol. 3, 139–40.

<sup>10</sup> G. Vasari, *Le vite*, vol. 3, 288–9.

can have a long life or a short life in respect to the durability of their material or technique. Life in the *Vite* is also used in a metaphorical way, to distinguish between the life of men and the life of artists.<sup>11</sup>

Benedetto da Rovenzano was included in the first edition of the *Lives* as the only living artist besides Michelangelo. This extraordinary favour granted to the artist is explained in the short introductory eulogy. In 1550, Benedetto had already lost his sight and so he was 'dead for art and living for life'.<sup>12</sup> Here we may observe a distinction between two types of life: the life of the man and the life of the artist. As Benedetto was blind he could no longer contribute to the life of art. He was dead to art and living for life. The same idea is expressed in the life of Sebastiano del Piombo. Sebastiano is accused of becoming idle and lazy after being elected to an important papal office. Vasari bluntly stated that Sebastiano 'appreciated life more than art'.<sup>13</sup> In this case, the two types of life exclude each other: 'His death was no loss for art. From the moment that he was awarded the office of *frate del Piombo* he could be counted amongst the lost.'<sup>14</sup> In respect to art, Sebastiano was already dead before he died.

The life of Sebastiano del Piombo can help us to refine our categories. Vasari goes on to state that too much earthly recognition can lead to idleness in some artists. He adds that this not true of those who 'strive more after the honour of works than the comforts and amenities of an Epicurean life'.<sup>15</sup> In this instance, Vasari is clearly informed by an ideal of the virtuous life that can be traced back to Cicero.<sup>16</sup> The harmonious combination of *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa* was also prominently advocated by Cristoforo Landino. The topical critique of Epicurean life is to be found in the *Disputationes*

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<sup>11</sup> For the concept of 'life' in biography see the excellent article by Sergei S. Averintsev, 'From Biography to Hagiography: Some Stable Patterns in the Greek and Latin Tradition of *Lives*, including *Lives of the Saints*', in *Mapping Lives. The Uses of Biography*, ed. Peter France and William St Clair (Oxford, 2002), 29–37, 20–1, 25. For 'vita' in Vasari see Roland Le Mollé, *Georges Vasari et le vocabulaire de la critique d'art dans les 'Vite'* (Grenoble, 1988), 99–154; Frank Fehrenbach, 'Kohäsion und Transgression. Zur Dialektik lebendiger Bilder', in *Animationen/Transgressionen. Das Kunstwerk als Lebewesen*, ed. Ulrich Pfisterer and Anja Zimmermann (Berlin, 2005), 1–40.

<sup>12</sup> G. Vasari, *Le vite*, vol. 4, 285.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 5, 100.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 5, 102.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 5, 86.

<sup>16</sup> Cicero, *Tusculan disputations*, 1, 77–81.

*Camaldulenses*.<sup>17</sup> Though Vasari was close friends with members of the Camaldolese Order, there is not enough evidence for a direct connection to Landino's writings.<sup>18</sup> It is noteworthy that Vasari uses the terms '*vita activa*', '*vita contemplativa*' and 'Epicurean life' with apparent significance, although it is not always easy to ascertain their precise meaning and his sources.<sup>19</sup> We will come back to this, but let us first look at some further meanings of life in Vasari.

In the life of Berna Sanese, Vasari stresses that, despite his early death, Berna left such an abundance of works that he 'seems to have lived a very long life'.<sup>20</sup> Here the difference between the life of art and the life of men is only hinted at. Although it is quite clear that Berna's life was long only in respect to art, his lifespan was very short. Internal to art, there is also a hierarchy of the techniques which assure the fame of the artist. In the life of Pollaiuolo, the reason why Pollaiuolo left the art of goldsmithing and turned to painting is that he 'understood that this art does not give much life to their artisans'.<sup>21</sup> Besides this, there are some interesting remarks about artists that are not fully accounted for in the *Lives*. Some artists have not achieved so much that 'their whole life can be written', but they have nonetheless contributed with some works to art.<sup>22</sup> In the first edition, Vasari explains why he did not write the lives of some Lombard painters. Although he is well

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<sup>17</sup> Cristoforo Landino, *Disputationes Camaldulenses*, ed. Peter Lohe (Firenze, 1980), 13–14.

<sup>18</sup> For Vasari and the Camaldolese Order see Giorgio Vasari, *Principi, letterati e artisti nelle carte di Giorgio Vasari*, exh. cat. Arezzo 1981 (Florence, 1981), 50–4 (Anna Maria Maetzke).

<sup>19</sup> See the excellent overview by Paul Oskar Kristeller, 'The Active and Contemplative Life in the Renaissance', in *Arbeit, Musse, Meditation*, ed. Brian Vickers (Zürich, 1985), 133–53. In this context, the figure of Giovanni Francesco Zeffi is of some interest. He was secretary to Lorenzino de' Medici until 1537, commented on Cicero's 'Tusculan Disputations', and translated the Epistles of Saint Jerome in the Badia Fiorentina. See Giorgio Vasari, *Principi, letterati e artisti nelle carte di Giorgio Vasari*, 79–80 (Anna Maria Bracciante). Furthermore, it has still to be assessed how Vasari's concept of virtue is related to Renaissance Anthropology. See Charles Trinkaus, 'Themes for a Renaissance Anthropology', in *The Renaissance. Essays in Interpretation* (London, 1982), 83–125; Thomas Leinkauf, 'Selbstrealisierung. Anthropologische Konstanten in der Frühen Neuzeit', *Bochumer Philosophisches Jahrbuch für Antike und Mittelalter* 10 (2005): 129–61. See, for example, the Stoic conception of virtue as an '*ars vivendi*': Maximilian Forschner, *Die stoische Ethik* (Stuttgart 1981), 206–7.

<sup>20</sup> G. Vasari, *Le vite*, vol. 2, 253. A 'Barna' was already recorded by Lorenzo Ghiberti, but could not be documented. Today, 'Barna' is considered a name under which different artists' work are discussed. One of which is to be identified with Lippo Memmi.

<sup>21</sup> G. Vasari, *Le vite*, vol. 3, 502.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 625.

informed about their lives, he explains that it not worthwhile to write them: 'I will not write the lives of those who are not dead or those who have not substantially contributed to and honoured the arts.'<sup>23</sup> While they may have produced many works and may have reached a certain age, their œuvre cannot be considered as accomplished. Neither have their lives been concluded by their deaths, nor have their œuvres reached the high degree of perfection necessary to be included in the *Lives*. If you are still alive, then your œuvre is not accomplished. Death, therefore, not only ends life. It crowns a life-long work.

It has already been mentioned that Vasari's biography is informed by a Ciceronian view of the virtuous life. A balance between the active and the contemplative life is advocated throughout the work. Baccio da Montelupo is censured for living more like a philosopher than like a sculptor.<sup>24</sup> This argument implies that Baccio had not lived up to the duties of an active life. The same criticism is levelled against Rustici who 'wanted always to stay alone living almost like a philosopher'.<sup>25</sup> It would be possible to quote many other examples of such censure. Vasari's criticism is always directed against solitary work which does not lead to major commissions. This is true for his critique of the late Parmigianino as well as for his censure of Leonardo. This charge can also be levelled against Andrea del Sarto, the '*pittore senza errori*'.<sup>26</sup> His lack of boldness and ambition is remarked upon by Vasari, who asserts that he had 'no daring in the deeds of life'.<sup>27</sup> Too much boldness at the expense of the side of contemplative life is discerned in the life of Andrea del Castagno. Castagno went so far that he was willing 'to take someone's life' if he was not able to outdo his works.<sup>28</sup> It may be said that Vasari was not only a judge of style as far as it is visible in a work of art; he was also a judge of the lifestyle that, in one highly significant instance, is expressly called the '*maniera di vita*'.<sup>29</sup> This is shown with almost explicit clarity in the life of Fra Giovan Angelo Montorsoli. Here, Montorsoli peregrinates from the Calmaldolensians

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 625.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., vol. 4, 296.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., vol. 5, 476.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., vol. 4, 342.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., vol. 4, 397.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., vol. 3, 351.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., vol. 5, 111.

to the Franciscans in La Vernia in search of a religious order and a way of life in which he can ‘attend to *disegno* and to salvation’.<sup>30</sup>

This ideal of the virtuous life as a balance of the active and the contemplative lives is set apart from those lifestyles that, for Vasari, are simply unbalanced and, therefore, utterly condemnable. A certain Bartolomeo Torri from Arezzo not only exaggerated his research into anatomy, but also thought that ‘to be some sort of a philosopher, dirty and without a rule in life would be a way to become great and immortal’.<sup>31</sup> Here, what could have been a contemplative life seems to have gone out of control and can no longer be described as a virtuous life in Vasari’s terms. There are several artists who are criticised for living ‘a life like a man who was more a brute than a human’.<sup>32</sup> A whole company of Florentine artists is censured for ‘pretending to live like philosophers while they lived like pigs and animals’.<sup>33</sup> Here, an ideal of life close to that of the Cynics is strongly rebuked.

This overview of the meanings of ‘life’ in Vasari’s art history should have revealed that ‘*vita*’ is by no means a neutral category in the *Lives*. To this should be added that life and art are interrelated categories in the early-modern artist’s biography. A certain ideal of life has consequences for the concept of art. Furthermore, as history is understood in the *Lives* as ‘life’, it can only have serious consequences for the historiographical stance of the whole work.

### *The Lives as History*

As Waźbiński and Barocchi have pointed out, the first edition of the *Lives* is close to Paolo Giovio’s understanding of biography.<sup>34</sup> Human-

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 492.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 186.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., vol. 4, 61.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., vol. 5, 404.

<sup>34</sup> See above, note 2. On biography, see also Friedrich Leo, *Die Griechisch-Römische Biographie nach ihrer literarischen Form* (Leipzig, 1901); Arnaldo Momigliano, *The Development of Greek Biography* (Cambridge MA, 1993); Patricia Cox, *Biography in Late Antiquity. A Quest for the Holy Man* (Berkeley, 1983); Daniel Madelénat, *La biographie* (Paris, 1984); Walter Berschin, ed., *Biographie zwischen Renaissance und Barock* (Heidelberg, 1993); Thomas Hägg and Philip Rousseau, eds., *Greek Biography and Panegyric in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley, 2000); Thomas Schirren, *Philosophos Bios. Die antike Philosophenbiographie als symbolische Form. Studien zur ‘Vita Apolonii’ des Philostrat* (Heidelberg, 2005). For the notion of ‘history’ in the early-modern period, see the recent re-assessments by Gianna Pomata and Nancy G. Siraisi, ‘Introduction’,



ists like Giovio saw biography as part of history, although they also drew a distinction between biography and encomium.<sup>35</sup> In contrast to Plutarch—for whom histories were unlike lives—the humanists developed their own idea of biography. The emphasis on character likened the biographer to the portrait painter and became the key to the understanding of both life and works.<sup>36</sup> In his dedicatory letter to Cosimo I, Vasari explicitly mentions that he wrote the *Lives* with the 'pencil of a draftsman'.<sup>37</sup> This biographical stance was combined with the ambitious historiographical scheme of the three epochs. As suggested by Erwin Panofsky, the idea of the birth, youth and maturity of art was modelled after Lucius Annaeus Florus' *De gestis romanorum*, which appeared in an Italian translation in 1546.<sup>38</sup> Accordingly, the whole work can be understood as a 'biography of art'. In Antiquity, it was quite common to use this approach for encomia of cities.<sup>39</sup> Therefore, the history of art and the lives of the artists followed the same model. This mingling of history and biography severely limited the ability to sustain a consistent historical outlook in the *Lives*. This can be inferred from a prominent example. Michelangelo's *Last Judgement* stands at the end of the first edition of the *Lives*. In Vasari's narrative it is also conceived of as a judgment of art. Before the conclusion of the work, the thought arises: how will paintings of the past and the future stand up to this comparison?<sup>40</sup> The judgment of the historian is blended with the topical *ecphrasis* of the work. Here, art history and the artist's biography are one: they can not be separated easily.

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in *Historia. Empiricism and Erudition in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Gianna Pomata and Nancy Siraisi (Cambridge, Mass., 2005), 1–38 and Anthony Grafton, *What was history? The art of history in early modern Europe* (Cambridge, 2007).

<sup>35</sup> T. C. Price Zimmermann, 'Paolo Giovio and the Rhetoric of Individuality', in *The Rhetorics of Life-Writing in Early Modern Europe. Forms of Biography from Cassandra Fedele to Louis XIV*, ed. Thomas F. Meyer and D. R. Wolf (Ann Arbor, 1995), 39–62, 40–1.

<sup>36</sup> For biographer and portrayer in Giovio, see his letter to Girolamo Scannapeco in Paolo Giovio, *Scritti d'arte. Lessico ed ecfrasi*, ed. Sonia Maffei (Pisa, 1999), 336–40.

<sup>37</sup> G. Vasari, *Le vite*, vol. 1, 3.

<sup>38</sup> Erwin Panofsky, 'The First Page of Vasari's 'Libro': A Study on the Gothic Style in the Judgment of the Italian Renaissance', in *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (Garden City, 1955), 169–235.

<sup>39</sup> Laurent Pernot, *La Rhétorique de l'Éloge dans le Monde Gréco-Romain* (Paris, 1993), vol. 1, 191–202. This approach was also advocated by Francesco Patrizi: see Francesco Patrizi, *Della historia dieci dialoghi*, in *Venetia: Appresso Andrea Arrivabene* (1560), fol. 24r.

<sup>40</sup> G. Vasari, *Le vite*, vol. 4, 75.

In the second edition, this mix of biography and history was revised. Vincenzo Borghini, who advised Vasari on the second edition, criticised him for failing to acknowledge the rules of biography:

The aim of your work is not to write the lives of painters, nor to say whose sons they were or what ordinary deeds they accomplished, but only [to describe] the works of the painters, sculptors and architects;... Writing lives is the privilege of princes and men who have accomplished princely deeds...<sup>41</sup>

As Waźbiński has already noted, this argument accorded with the rules that Francesco Patrizi had set out in *Della historia*.<sup>42</sup> Borghini criticised the suggestion that the ideal of the harmonious combination of the active and the contemplative lives should be applied to artists. In describing their works and leaving aside their 'ordinary deeds', Borghini wanted to establish art as part of the contemplative life. This would have made writing a history of art much easier. It would have eliminated the conflicts between the life of art and the lives of artists. This goal was only partly achieved in the second edition.

### Rinascita and History

It has frequently been argued that one of the characteristic traits of Vasari's historical model is the idea of progress.<sup>43</sup> The idea of progress

<sup>41</sup> Karl Frey and Hermann-Walther Frey, *Der literarische Nachlaß Giorgio Vasaris* (Munich, 1930), vol. 2, 102. See Julian Kliemann, 'Giorgio Vasari: Kunstgeschichtliche Perspektiven', in *Kunst und Kunsttheorie 1400–1900*, ed. Peter Ganz (Wiesbaden, 1991), 29–74, 57; Joan Stack, 'Artists into heroes: the commemoration of artists in the art of Giorgio Vasari', in *Fashioning identities in Renaissance art*, ed. Mary Rogers (Aldershot, 2000), 163–175; Peter Michelsen, 'Der Künstler als Held und Charakter: über die biographische Darstellungsweise in den "Vite" des Giorgio Vasari', *Archiv für Kulturgeschichte* 84 (2002): 293–312.

<sup>42</sup> Z. Waźbiński, 'L'idée de l'histoire dans la première et la seconde édition des "Vies" de Vasari,'

<sup>43</sup> Wolfgang Kallab, *Vasaristudien*, ed. Julius von Schlosser (Vienna, 1908); Julius von Schlosser, *Die Kunstliteratur: ein Handbuch zur Quellenkunde der neueren Kunstgeschichte* (Vienna, 1924); Erwin Panofsky 'The First Page of Vasari's "Libro"'; Svetlana Alpers, 'Ekphrasis and Aesthetic Attitudes in Vasari's "Lives"', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 23 (1960): 190–215; Ernst H. Gombrich, 'Vasari's "Lives" and Cicero's "Brutus"', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 23 (1960): 309–11; Gombrich, 'The Renaissance Conception of Artistic Progress and its Consequences', in his *Norm and Form. Studies in the art of Renaissance* (London, 1966), 1–10 and 137–40; Hans Belting, 'Vasari und die Folgen. Die Geschichte der Kunst als Prozess?', in *Historische Prozesse*, ed. Karl-Georg Faber (Munich, 1978),

underpins the cumulative growth of artistic achievement and points towards the third era, the era of perfection. Gombrich suggested that this schema of linguistic perfection was adapted from Cicero's *Brutus*.<sup>44</sup> Without doubt, this is one of the lasting accomplishments of the *Lives* as historical narrative. What has attracted less attention is that the idea of progress and the concept of *rinascita* are closely linked. In a key passage, Vasari speaks of the '*progresso della sua rinascita*'.<sup>45</sup> At first sight, this may seem strange and it is indeed striking how cyclical and linear models of history were combined. What is more, the concept of *rinascita* is linked to the idea of an universal origin of culture. In the *Proemio delle vite*, it is said that art as a principle was perfect from the beginnings of time.<sup>46</sup> As evidence for the fact that, in principle, art is an innate ability of man, Vasari adduces the example of children who grew up in the wilderness without teachers. Stimulated by their talent, they begin to draw on their own, following only 'these beautiful paintings and sculptures of nature'.<sup>47</sup>

Vasari's historical model therefore operates with two interrelated concepts of art: art as principle (*disegno*)—which is invariable—and art in the form of styles (*maniere*) which are variable. Whereas art

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98–126; Ursula Link-Heer, 'Giorgio Vasari oder der Übergang von einer Biographie-Sammlung zur Geschichte einer Epoche', in *Epochenschwellen und Epochenstrukturen im Diskurs der Literatur- und Sprachgeschichte*, ed. Hans-Ulrich Gumbrecht and Ursula Link-Heer (Frankfurt am Main, 1985), 73–88; Robert Williams, 'Vincenzo Borghini and Vasari's "Lives"' (Unpublished PhD thesis, Princeton University, 1988); Georges Didi-Huberman, *Devant l'image: question posée aux fins d'une histoire de l'art* (Paris, 1990); J. Kliemann, 'Giorgio Vasari: Kunstgeschichtliche Perspektiven'; David Cast, 'Reading Vasari again: history, philosophy', *Word & Image* 9 (1993): 29–38; Patricia Rubin, *Giorgio Vasari. Art and History* (New Haven, 1995); Paul Barolsky, 'Vasari and the historical imagination', *Word & Image* 15 (1999): 286–91; Philip Sohm, 'Ordering history with style: Giorgio Vasari on the art of history', in *Antiquity and its interpreters*, ed. Alina Payne, Ann Kuttner and Rebekah Smick (Cambridge, 2000), 40–54; Alina Payne, 'Vasari, architecture, and the origins of historicizing art', *RES* 40 (2001): 51–76.

<sup>44</sup> See E. Gombrich, 'Vasari's "Lives" and Cicero's "Brutus"'. Carlo Lenzone used the *Brutus* for his history of the Florentine language, written in the 1540s. See Carlo Lenzone, *In Difesa della lingua fiorentina; et di Dante con le regole da far bella et numerosa la prosa* (Florence, 1556), 20.

<sup>45</sup> G. Vasari, *Le vite*, vol. 2, 32.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 11–12. Vasari uses Alberti's Aristotelian theory of a naturalistic origin of art in *De statua* and combines it with the idea of god as first artist from stoic and platonic thought. See Jean Rouchette, *La Renaissance que nous à léguée Vasari* (Paris 1959), 21–26; Leon Battista Alberti, *De statua*, ed. Marco Collareta (Livorno 1998), 31–52.

<sup>47</sup> G. Vasari, *Le vite*, vol. 2, 11–12.

is invariable, style has a history. This is fairly clear in the case of artists without teachers. Artists like Cimabue or Giotto revolutionised art without previous artistic education. This led Cantimori to say that, for Vasari, ‘art is reborn, not Antiquity that for him has definitively died’.<sup>48</sup> This idea of immutable art and variable styles is held in common with members of the *Accademia Fiorentina*. In this respect, the writings of Giovanni Battista Gelli are revealing. In his writings about the Florentine language, Gelli posits an immutable language—Hebrew—and mutable languages—like Florentine, Greek, Latin and German.<sup>49</sup> The Florentine language has a history. But whereas the Florentine language can grow, reach perfection and decline, Hebrew cannot. For Gelli, the Florentine language was derived from Hebrew, so the link between the variable and the invariable is very similar to that in Vasari’s *Lives*.<sup>50</sup> This helps us to understand how Vasari conceives of art as an abstract, immutable principle, and how that is related to his concept of history. In the preface to the second part of the *Lives*, Vasari distinguished between an absolute judgement—according to which Giotto and Cimabue cannot be praised for their work—and a historical judgement that has to acknowledge and praise their considerable achievement.<sup>51</sup> Absolute judgment is appropriate for art, whereas historical judgment is adequate for styles. History and art criticism are therefore two possible and interrelated modes of dealing with art: both are present in the *Lives*.

This can also be said of Vasari’s concept of the Middle Ages. ‘*Media aetas*’ is a flexible concept in Vasari’s art history. It stands for art from Antiquity to the fifteenth century. It seems clear that this has to be seen much more as a tool of art criticism than as a clear-cut historiographical concept. In his *Proemio delle vite*, Vasari assembles a wide variety of works under the labels ‘*maniera tedesca*’ and ‘*maniera greca*’. These

<sup>48</sup> Delio Cantimori, ‘Sulla Storia del Concetto di Rinascimento’, *Annali della R. Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa* 2 (1932): 1–40, 3.

<sup>49</sup> This passage is to be found in the so-called *Ragionamento sulla lingua*, first published in 1551 with Pier Francesco Giambullari, *Della lingua che si parla e scrive in Firenze* (Florence, 1551). See Giovanni Battista Gelli, *Dialoghi*, ed. Roberto Tissoni (Bari, 1967), 289–99.

<sup>50</sup> See, for example, his manuscript *Dell’origine di Firenze*, c.1541–44. See Giovanni Battista Gelli, ‘Dell’Origine di Firenze’, ed. Alessandro D’Alessandro, *Atti e memorie dell’Accademia Toscana di Scienze e Lettere La Colombaria* 44 (1979): 59–122, at 119. It has to be stressed, however, that Gelli changed his ideas about the origin of language considerably from 1541 to 1551.

<sup>51</sup> G. Vasari, *Le vite*, vol. 3, 13–14.

works share no distinguishing stylistic features. Although Vasari's attempt to write a first sketch of the history of medieval art is remarkable, it is reductive to understand it only as a historiographical achievement. Vasari never refrains from a judgment of quality which in the case of the *media aetas* can only be negative. This can be inferred from an interesting example. In the second enlarged and revised edition of this preface, Vasari refers to the *Storie di Teodelinda* in San Giovanni Battista in Monza.<sup>52</sup> Asserting that this work was commissioned by the Langobard princess herself, he criticised it harshly. Today, this fresco cycle, painted by Francescino and Gregorio Zavattari, is dated to c.1444.<sup>53</sup> It is quite obvious that in this case, Vasari's judgement is far from being historical as the date can be inferred from a legible inscription. Rather, it must be understood as a criticism of a late medieval courtly style which, as a connoisseur, Vasari could not accept. Therefore, the concept of '*media aetas*' in Vasari is both a category of art criticism and a historiographical notion.

Vasari's *Lives* are as much history as they are a form of art criticism. This is due to a biographical approach which encompasses the concept of the Renaissance. The historical narrative is borne by the concept of style, while art is for Vasari an eternal principle without history. Vasari was certainly influenced and helped by the scholars of the *Accademia Fiorentina*, although it is not easy to separate a historiographical concept from the corpus of the *Lives*. The relation between the single biography and the overwhelming history of art narrated in three epochs is precisely one of the most noteworthy features of the *Lives*. In both, history partakes of biography in many ways. Therefore, we can truly grasp the meaning and influence of Vasari's Renaissance only if we consider the *Vite* as a whole.

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., vol. 2, 23. Here Vasari's text is an adaptation of Paul the Deacon, *Historia Langobardorum*, IV, 22.

<sup>53</sup> Roberto Cassanelli and Roberto Conti, eds., *La Capella di Teodelinda nel Duomo. Architettura, decorazioni, restauri* (Milan, 1991), 145 and 94–8.

Renaissance? Perceptions of Continuity  
and Discontinuity in Europe,  
c.1300–c.1550

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