



2004

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Recommended Citation

Kanelos, Peter (2004) "*Fama and Fortuna: Giorgio Vasari's Michelangelo*," *Quidditas*: Vol. 25 , Article 7.
Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/rmmra/vol25/iss1/7>

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***Fama and Fortuna:*
Giorgio Vasari's Michelangelo**

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I

The life of Michelangelo is set indisputably as the capstone to Giorgio Vasari's monumental, *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori scultori e architettori* (1568). Cathedral-like in its detail and expanse, Vasari's collection of biographies is itself a carefully designed and constructed work of art.¹ Its separate parts are crafted with concern for the whole; from its series of individual narratives, a single grand narrative emerges. Buonarroti's position in this is conspicuous, and purposefully so. In the first edition of the *Vite* (1550)—his biography, the only one granted a living

¹Not all critics have seen, or do see, the *Vite* in this way. For some, Vasari's account is literal, and in the strictest sense of the term, historical. An example of this is Howard Hibbard, *Michelangelo* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), which takes most of what Vasari claims at face value. The trend in recent scholarship, however, has applied to the *Vite* modes of analysis that take into account its literary character; see Patricia Rubin, *Giorgio Vasari: Art and History* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1995), and several works by Paul Barolsky, *Michelangelo's Nose: A Myth and its Maker* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State UP, 1990), *Why Mona Lisa Smiles and Other Tales by Vasari* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State UP, 1991), *Giotto's Father and the Family of Vasari's Lives* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State UP, 1992), and *The Faun in the Garden: Michelangelo and the Poetic Origins of Italian Renaissance Art* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State UP, 1994). This essay builds upon Barolsky's contention that Michelangelo consciously crafted his persona as an artist; my intent is to show the degree to which Vasari absorbed the lessons of his "master," and how he was not only complicit in mythologizing Michelangelo, but used Buonarroti's *vita* to bolster his own project and achievement.

artist—concludes the work decisively. It is the final entry and the one in which all the separate virtues that had been scattered liberally among artists and across centuries have been collected in Michelangelo’s “divine” person. In the 1568 edition, he is followed by Titian and other artists of his day, a shift that does not compromise his preeminence, but is made for reasons that only buttress his status, as will be discussed further on. Between the two editions, a separate off-print, entitled *La Vita del Gran Michelagnolo*, was issued by Vasari; the reason for this will also form part of my argument. In all cases, Michelangelo’s superlative rank is beyond question—he represents the pinnacle of artistic, if not human, achievement.

In detailing the lives of artists, Vasari records a persistent and forward march, marked by invention and innovation. It is the nature of art, he argues, to develop, and in developing, to ascend.

Having carefully turned all this over in my mind, I have come to the conclusion that it is inherent in the very nature of these arts to progress step by step from modest beginnings, and finally to reach the summit of perfection (I: 85).

Art matures, he holds, in a linear and upward manner, towards a particular end. Its progress is finite. The *telos* towards which art evolves – the excellence designated in the title of the *Vite*—is embodied in its paragon, Michelangelo.

Vasari’s book is an attempt to arrest artistic development at its peak, before it begins to ebb. He was well aware that over time and through the vicissitudes of fortune the achievements of artists have always been, sooner or later, forgotten. A trope that had from ancient times represented this abasement was that of a deluge, associated with Lethe, the river of forgetfulness. Memory, in contrast, operated to check or channel this flood, so that its damage might be mitigated. The most effective instrument of remembrance was believed to be the written word, for reasons that will be discussed. In this essay, I will illustrate how Vasari claims for himself the privilege of preserving through his writing the fame of the artists of the Renaissance. Moreover, I will contend that he

expands for his own purposes the role of writing in the service of memory. It was Vasari's belief that writing, to fulfill this aspiration, needed to be more than a record of the past, that it needed to adopt for itself the principles of art. By examining carefully what he avers of remembrance, particularly in his *vita* of Michelangelo, I will demonstrate that, for Vasari, memory is only truthful when it surpasses the imitation of nature and passes into the realm of invention.

II

The spur for the advancement of art, claimed Vasari, has always been the passion for fame. Across the broad arc of the *Vite*, this is in fact what links one artist to the next, and what makes the upward mobility of art possible. It is present, in the first entry, when Cimabue, whose works, "had made him famous," is eclipsed by Giotto, who, "inspired by a worthy ambition," obscures the reputation of his master, "in the way that a great light dims the splendour of a lesser" (I: 55). It is also the sentiment, that opens the climactic selection on Michelangelo, three centuries later:

Enlightened by what had been achieved by the renowned Giotto and his school, all artists of energy and distinction were striving to give the world proof of the talents with which fortune and their own happy temperaments had endowed them (I: 325).

What is sought by the artist is not merely the esteem of one's peers, which Vasari represents as a diluted and often volatile sort of celebrity, but rather an honor that transcends time and place. One's work is the depository of one's fame; it is through his art that the artist hopes to be remembered.

In the *vita* that opens the history, we find Vasari quoting from Dante. Cimabue's epitaph, found in Santa Maria del Fiore, remarks upon the painter's apparent preeminence in his craft: "'Twas Cimabue's belief that he did hold the field in painting. / So in life he did; but now the stars of heaven are his."² During his

²"Credette Cimabue nella pittura / Tener lo campo, ed ora ha Giotto il grido; / Sì che la fama di colui oscura" (I: 54).

lifetime, Cimabue felt that his reputation was secure. It is the poet's prerogative however to remind us of the mercurial nature of fame. Alluding to this epitaph in the eleventh Canto of the *Purgatorio*, Dante writes:

Once Cimabue was thought to hold the field
In painting; Giotto's all the rage today;
The other's fame lies in the dust concealed.³

One's reputation is never as stable as it might appear to be. This is far from the last time that Vasari will quote Dante; it is telling however that the first time the poet is called upon, this is the sentiment expressed. Moreover, Vasari appends to this quotation the interpretation of Dante's lines by a commentator writing in 1334:

Cimabue was a Florentine painter who lived at the time of the poet; he had outstanding ability, but he was so arrogant and disdainful that if anyone remarked any fault or defect in his work or if he noticed any himself...he immediately rejected it, no matter how precious it might be (I: 55).

Bearing out the claim that Dante made, the painter has been reduced, in one generation, to a footnote, the purgatory of the once-famous—a third of a century after his death, Cimabue has been nearly forgotten; this is partially attributed to vanity. In contrast, the poet, Dante, Cimabue's contemporary, is well remembered. When the reader encounters, over one hundred lives later, the claims for Michelangelo's preeminence, it is profitable to recall this observation made so early on.

It is certainly not by happenstance that Vasari, in the beginning of his work, foregrounds Florence's greatest poet, and establishes between himself and Dante the shared privilege of assessing, and securing, the reputation of artists; nor is this the last time that he raises the subject. In the life of Alberti, an artist like

³Dante, *Purgatorio*, trs. by Dorothy Sayers (New York: Penguin, 1955).

Vasari best known for his writings, the following observation is made:

...as far as fame and reputation are concerned the written word is more enduring and influential than anything else; for, provided they are honest and innocent of lies, books travel freely and are trusted wherever they go (I: 209).

Writers have a tactical advantage over other artists—their work travels with little constraint (under most circumstances) and their opinions are generally credited. As fame is a subset of opinion, this grants them tremendous influence. One need only glance at Vasari's model, Pliny, to see the truth of this statement. The vast majority of works that Pliny describes have been lost to the world; they persist only in the pages of his *Natural History*. The artists that he neglected, or those that did not know of, have dropped forever out of memory. As Vasari explains:

An artist lives and acquires fame through his works; but with the passing of time, which consumes everything, these works – the first, then the second, then the third—fade away. When there were no writers there was no way of leaving for posterity any record of works of art, and so the artists themselves also sank into obscurity (I: 31).⁴

Vasari's conception of history is one that takes into account the rise *and* fall of civilizations. He applies this pattern to the fate of the arts as well. In his Preface to the *Vite*, he makes it clear that the barbarian wave that leveled the classical world was only the latest in a recurring series of deluges. There have always been and will always be catastrophic events that overwhelm civilization – within memory was the sack of Rome in 1527, which had great

⁴Yet as works from antiquity were being excavated with ever greater frequency in Vasari's day, the complex relationship between artist and art historian—exemplified in the figure of Pliny and the discrepancies between his description of pieces such as the Laocoön and the hard evidence at hand—was increasingly manifest. For a particularly cogent account of this issue, see Leonard Barkan, *Unearthing the Past: Archaeology and Aesthetics in the Making of Renaissance Culture* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1999), 105-117.

impact on the artists of the day. It is obvious to him that the fate of the plastic arts is precarious. The written word, however, is more resilient. Looking at the advancements of his contemporaries, it seems probable to Vasari that the arts have reached the point of perfection in the past as well, but that these achievements have been lost to the present. He suggests that men before the Flood, nearer to the moment of the Creation, produced works that were closest to the imitation of nature, from which the idols mentioned in the Old Testament descended. From these idols, no longer extant, he contends that the Egyptians learned, “to make statues of those whose fame they wanted to perpetuate” (I: 27). He offers the example of Ozimandias, whose sepulcher, also lost, is described in detail by Diodorus (and who became a symbol of the passing nature of fame for Shelley). The Greeks, according to Pliny, learned in turn of painting, sculpture and other arts from the Egyptians. Pointing to the famous description of Achilles’ shield by Homer, Vasari contends that they too must have brought the arts to the peak of perfection. Yet once again only a description, embedded in a work of writing, survives.

These ideas—of the periodic and catastrophic destruction of civilization, and of writing as the surest record of the past—are likely culled from Plato’s *Timaeus*. In this dialogue, Socrates relates the story of Solon, wisest of the Athenians, who traveling to the city of Sais in Egypt, was so over-awed with the grandeur of their antiquities that he wished to engage the Egyptians in a discussion about the most ancient things. He told them about the deepest past retained in Athenian memory, of Phoroneus, “the first man,” of Niobe, and of the Deluge and the survival of Deucalion and Pyrrha. This elicited from the Egyptians mild reproach:

O Solon, Solon, you Hellenes are never anything but children, and there is not an old man among you ... in mind you are all young; there is no old opinion handed down among you by ancient tradition, nor any science hoary with age.⁵

⁵*Timaeus*, in Plato, *The Collected Dialogues*, edited by Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1996 [first published, 1961]), 22b-c.

They informed him that there has not been a single deluge, but many, and that there have been countless other destructions of mankind, some arising from fire, others from water. Because they have been insulated from most of these by the Nile, the Egyptians have been able to preserve the art of writing, and, as a result, have knowledge of the most ancient traditions, including the founding, nine thousand years earlier, of Athens itself and of the city's greatest triumph in the conquest of Atlantis.

Whatever happened either in your country or in ours, or in any other region of which we are informed—if there were any actions noble or great or in any other way remarkable, they have all been written down by us of old and preserved in our temples. Whereas just when you and other nations are beginning to be provided with letters and the other requisites of civilized life, after the usual interval, the stream from heaven, like a pestilence, comes pouring down and leaves only those of you who are destitute of letters and education, and so you have to begin all over again like children, and know nothing of what happened in ancient times, either among us or among yourselves.⁶

Vasari himself, through the *Vite*, provides a narrative of art's recovery after a sustained submersion. The very first sentence of the first life he records carries forward the Timaeian image of the deluge:

The flood of misfortunes which continuously swept over and submerged the unhappy country of Italy not only destroyed everything worthy to be called a building, but also, and this was of far greater consequence, completely wiped out the artists who lived there (I: 49).

The *rinascita* is able to commence with the young Cimabue, only because, “fortune certainly looked kindly on this instinctive talent,” by providing for him an opportunity to paint in the company of the Greek artists visiting Florence, whose work

⁶*Timaeus*, 23a-b.

offered the contrast necessary for others to notice the youth's superior artistry. Had this moment of contingency been missed, no mentor would have arisen for Giotto, and the reemergence of Italian art would have been indefinitely delayed, if not forever frustrated.

Vasari is very sensitive to the uneven operations of fortune and misfortune. It is for this reason that he begins the *Vite* with Cimabue, and not Giotto, to call attention to the unsteady concatenation of circumstance that the Italian renaissance has built itself upon. Like Machiavelli, however, he wants to find a way to hedge in and direct chance. Machiavelli himself employs the image of a deluge—"one of those violent rivers which when they become enraged, flood the plains"—to describe the vicissitudes of fortune. He argues famously in Chapter XXV of *The Prince* that although fortune is the arbiter of half our actions, she leaves the rest in our own hands. A large measure of one's *virtù* resides in advanced preparation:

It is not as if men, when times are quiet, could not provide for them with dikes and dams so that when they rise later, either they go by canal or their impetus is neither so wanton nor so damaging.⁷

Looking attentively to the past, one can divine the means to secure the future.

Like the Egyptians of Sais, Vasari understands that, given the cycles of fortune, writing is the necessary instrument of memory. He is very direct about his role and purpose:

⁷Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trs. by Harvey C. Mansfield, Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 98.

[I]f, which God forbid, because of indifference or evil circumstances or the ruling of Providence (which always seems to dislike the things of this world proceeding undisturbed) it ever happens at any time that the arts once again fall into the same disastrous decline, then I hope this work of mine, such as it is, if it proves worthy of a happier fate may, because of what I have already said and what I am going to write, keep the arts alive, or at least may inspire some of the more able among us to give them every possible encouragement (I: 47).

There will certainly be further calamities, collapsing the façade of civilization. Vasari hopes to blunt, however, the damage that this will inflict on the arts; he imagines that, amidst the rubble, future generations will discover his *Vite*, dust off the cover and, with it as a primer, re-institute the proper principles of artistry. The resuscitation of art will have been made possible only because Vasari, uniquely situated at the crest of the Italian renaissance, had the prudence to put aside his brush and take in hand a pen.

Vital to the argument made in the *Vite* is the assumption of a “Vasarian moment.” As a contemporary and friend of Michelangelo, Vasari is able to view from the highest summit the long scope of Italian art; this elevation provides for him the broadest possible vista. It is only because he is deeply acquainted with Buonarroti as both a man and an artist that he is able to consolidate the highest principles of art and apply these to all those who have come before.

He presents this too as a critical moment of contingency. Regarding those who have seen with their own eyes Michelangelo’s masterpiece, *The Last Judgment*, Vasari remarks: “How fortunate they are, and what happy memories they have stored up, who have seen this truly stupendous marvel of our times” (I: 383). Bearing in mind that acme is followed by nadir, as well as Vasari’s claim that the *rinascita* has crested with the passing of Michelangelo, there appears to be a brief moment of opportunity, provided by fortune, to preserve for the future evidence of art’s high-water mark. As not only a close associate of Michelangelo, but also as one who has with great care surveyed the

entire field of art, Vasari is especially qualified for the project. It is a sign of his *virtù* that he has the foresight to grasp its necessity. He understands that, as one who has stored up “happy memories,” he is under obligation to provide a surrogate memory for those who will follow. He will do so by fashioning indelible pictures branded into the mind.⁸ In the *Timaeus*, Hermocrates remarks that Solon, if he had finished his tale of Atlantis, would have been as famous as Homer or Hesiod; he had made poetry of history.⁹ This too is the approach taken by Vasari.

III

Like Dante guiding his audience through hell, purgatory and paradise in the *Divine Comedy*, Vasari leads his reader through the *Vite* as if a *cicerone*; he is present throughout his history as an escort and commentator. He visits the churches and villas that are his subjects, critiques with a discerning eye the paintings and sculptures set therein, and relates anecdotes of the artists and their work that have come to him first-hand. These are biographies in which the pronoun “I” makes frequent and emphatic appearances. Vasari’s presence is in fact the anchor that brings the *Vite* so vividly before the eye of the reader. Moreover, the author is entirely unapologetic that he resides in his own work. As in Dante, this blurs the division between the narrator and his subject, an effect that Vasari encourages.

This effect is complete in the biography of Michelangelo. As Buonarroti’s story intersects with Vasari’s own memory, there

⁸That Vasari chose to include in the 1568 edition of the *Vite* portraits to accompany each of the biographies indicates his sensitivity to the memorial interrelationship of the image and the word; as Lina Bolzoni writes, “the portraits that accompany Vasari’s *Lives* condense the narration and crystallize it in memory, thus making it possible both to see and to read the memories,” *The Gallery of Memory* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 226. It may also suggest that Vasari, who was friends with practitioners of the “arts of memory,” such as Vincenzo Borghini, was aware of the conventions of artificial memory systems and gestured towards their devices (see Bolzoni, 246-47).

⁹*Timaeus*, 21b-d.

is a transformation in the narrative: the pronoun “I” is filtered out as the author begins to refer to himself in the third-person:

It was at that time, in 1525, that Giorgio Vasari was taken as a young boy to Florence by the cardinal of Cortona and placed with Michelangelo as an apprentice (I: 365).

Vasari is now too a subject of the *Vite*; he too is a figure with a role to play in the history of Italian art. We begin with an account of his entry into the craft, by now, a familiar pattern. Like both Cimabue and Michelangelo, Vasari is apprenticed to a master; like them as well, he will be given an opportunity to supersede his master’s artistry. Of course, it is predetermined that he cannot surpass Michelangelo in painting, sculpture or architecture. Yet Michelangelo concedes to Vasari superiority in another form, the art of memory.

The “Vasari” who interacts with Michelangelo within his biography has a definite role. He intercedes with the Pope on Michelangelo’s behalf, advises Buonarroti on public projects, and even, during a tour on horse of the seven churches of Rome, engages Julius and Michelangelo in a dialogue on the uses of art. He is seen repeatedly as an advocate for Michelangelo and as a custodian of the artist’s reputation. In fact, in an earlier biography, that of Salviati, Vasari, when only a boy, risked himself for Michelangelo’s sake. In one of the periodic uprisings against the Medici, a mob had damaged the statue of *David* standing outside the Signoria. An arm lay shattered in the plaza for days; no one would recover the pieces for fear of reprisal. The young Vasari and his companion, Salviati, “without thinking of the danger, amidst all the soldiers on guard...found the pieces and carried them off” (II: 276). They saw them returned to the Medici, who later restored the arm to its proper place with iron pins.

In this spirit of honorable preservation, the biographer later in life hands to Michelangelo a copy of the first edition of the *Vite*, a scene recorded in the 1568 edition:

Vasari had that year seen completed in Florence the printing of his biographies of the painter, sculptors, and architects. He had not written the biography of any living master (although there were several older artists who were still alive) with the exception of Michelangelo, who received it with great pleasure. In it, in fact, were details of many things that Vasari had heard from Michelangelo's own lips, he being the oldest and wisest of all the craftsmen (I: 393).

Then dramatic reversal occurs—just as the author of the *Vite*, Vasari, becomes a subject within his own work, so now does his subject, Michelangelo, become an author. Moreover, it is not only the details of his biography nor the ratification of his great pleasure that he contributes, but also his divine gift of poetic expression. In response to the *Vite*, an evidently grateful Michelangelo sends to Vasari a sonnet, “Se con lo stile e co’ colori avete,” in appreciation. Vasari includes in the 1568 edition this poem “in memory of [Michelangelo’s] loving kindness;” its subject, however, is the resuscitative power of Vasari’s own memory.

With pencil and with palette hitherto
 You made your art high Nature’s paragon;
 Nay more, from nature her own prize you won,
 Making what she made fair more fair to view.
 Now that you learned hand with labour new
 Of pen and ink a worthier work hath done,
 What erst you lacked, what still remained her own,
 The power of giving life, is gained for you.
 If men in any age with Nature vied
 In beauteous workmanship, they had to yield
 When to the fated end years brought their name.
 You, re-illuminating memories that died,
 In spite of Time and Nature have revealed
 For them and for yourself eternal fame.¹⁰

¹⁰This translation of the sonnet ‘Se con lo stile e co’ colori avete’ is by John Addington Symonds (Vasari, I, 394). For the original text of the sonnet, see Michelangiolo Buonarroti, *Rime*, ed. E. N. Girardi (Bari, 1960), 132.

The narrative here turns back on itself and produces a commentary on its own efficacy. As a vehicle of remembrance, it presents its own endorsement from the subject that is being remembered. It provides, in loving memory of Michelangelo, Michelangelo's praise of the *Vite* as a medium of memory. The inclusion of the poem by Vasari is strategic. It sharpens our focus on memory and establishes it as the central function of the *Vite*. From Michelangelo, one learns that that Vasari's brings to light "memories that died." Thus the very task that Vasari had already set for himself, that of perpetuating the fame of artists, has already, before the work itself is at an end, been declared successful.

Throughout the *Vite*, it has been the function of poetry to assess the reputation of the artists catalogued. In many of his biographies, Vasari includes verses by others in praise (sometimes in derision) of his subjects. What is commonly lauded is the artist's ability to imitate the life-giving aspect of nature. In the *vita* of Donatello one finds, for example, an epitaph that concludes, "To the marble he has given life, emotion, movement. What more can nature give, save speech" (I: 189)? Likewise, on the tomb of Fra Filippo Lippi is carved: "My touch gave life to lifeless paint, and long / Deceiv'd the mind to think the forms would speak" (I: 222). Vasari, through Michelangelo's sonnet, is also celebrated for his ability to give life. With a masterly stroke, Vasari has changed places with his subject so that he might receive from him his praise. Moreover, he is declared by the greatest of artists *to be an artist*. Vasari's art of memory is commended as superior; his pen and ink have produced a work worthier than the brush. This is merited because he has found a way to circumvent the normal cycle of fame (and fame for an artist is an extension of his life), dictated by fortune, by giving to his subjects what other artists have been unable to—the power of speech.

Not only does Michelangelo contribute a sonnet to his own biography in praise of the biographer, but Vasari includes as well numerous letters addressed to "My dear Giorgio." The subject of most of these missives is, alternately, Michelangelo's awareness of his impending death and Vasari's ability to preserve life. The

letter of 1 August 1550 is typical. It begins with Michelangelo's concern for the new foundations for the church of San Pietro; the details are of little importance to the narrative at this point. The letter is produced by Vasari for the sentiment on which it closes:

... seeing you [Vasari] are a man who brings the dead back to life, I am not at all astonished that you should prolong the life of the living, or rather that you should snatch from the hands of death and immortalize those who are scarcely alive. Such as I am, then, I am yours. Michelangelo Buonarroti. Rome (I: 395).

Michelangelo is given a voice in his own *vita*, granting an impression of vitality and participation, but it is a voice that is carefully moderated by the themes that Vasari wishes to advance; as he confesses, he is Vasari's.

While Michelangelo is portrayed as putting ever greater confidence in Vasari's ability to memorialize, his own memory, as he approaches death, is shown to be deteriorating. Vasari initially praises his subject's power of recollection:

Michelangelo enjoyed so profound and retentive a memory that he could accurately recall the works of other after he had seen them for his own purposes that scarcely anyone ever remarked it (I: 425).

It appears that one function of memory is to adapt it in the service of art for one's own purposes. But Michelangelo's ability is slipping; he himself comments on this, once again in his letters. Vasari, hoping to execute Michelangelo's design for a staircase in the library of Duke Cosimo, requests a description of the plan, to which the artist replies, "believe me if I could remember how I planned it I would not need to be asked" (I: 400). The project falls through; with a loss of memory there is a loss to the arts. The number of times that Vasari calls attention to Michelangelo's failing memory in the last third of his *vita* is striking. It emphasizes that, even in the most vigorous of minds, this faculty is

in and of itself insufficient. Without aid, remembrance is set adrift. In another letter, Buonarroti interjects,

I am wandering from subject to subject because I have lost my memory and my wits, as writing is not my profession I find it very irksome (I: 401).

Aware of the necessity of memory for art and of writing for memory, Michelangelo is willing to cede to those whose profession it is the task of recording those details of his life that are rapidly slipping from his grasp.

IV

If one were to read exclusively Vasari's 1568 account of the life of Michelangelo, one would sense only profound concord and shared purpose between these two men. This effect is precisely what Vasari aimed for. The poems, letters, and conversations included in the *vita* attest to their solid friendship; they indicate as well Michelangelo's recognition of his dependency on Vasari to secure his legacy and Vasari's willingness to take on the assignment. Yet this apparatus, through which Michelangelo endorses his own *vita*, is absent from the 1550 edition and is added in the later edition only after the artist's death in 1564.

Something occurred during the intervening years, something that would cause Vasari not only to revise the biography of Michelangelo, but to reaffirm the relationship they shared. Vasari admits in the later edition that he felt it necessary to defend himself against claims that he had exaggerated his connection to his principal subject and had presented a distorted portrait of the artist in his *Vite* of 1550. Thus in support of his work he presents what appears to be hard evidence. To prove, for example, that Lodovico, Michelangelo's father, had in fact apprenticed his son to Domenico Ghirlandaio, as Vasari claimed in the 1550 *vita*, he copies an entry from Lodovico's journal, as well as a receipt for his son's services. He then explains why he is compelled to include this data:

I have copied these entries straight from the book in order to show that everything I wrote earlier and am writing now is the truth; nor am I aware that anyone was more familiar with Michelangelo than I or can claim to have been a closer friend or more faithful servant, as can be proved to anyone's satisfaction. Moreover, I do not believe there is anyone who can produce more affectionate or a greater number of letters than those written by Michelangelo and addressed to me. I made this digression for the sake of truth, and it must suffice for the rest of the *Life* (I: 328).

The person to whom this aside is directed is, on the surface, Ascanio Condivi, who published in Rome in 1553 his own life of Michelangelo, *Vita di Michelagnolo Buonarroto raccolta per Ascanio Condivi da la Ripa Transone*. In this work, Condivi directly challenges Vasari's veracity. On important details, such as Michelangelo's apprenticeship to Ghirlandaio, Vasari is contradicted. According to Condivi, the young Michelangelo was never a formal student of any artist, but rather stole away when studying letters in Florence to seek out the company of various painters. For good measure, he adds that Michelangelo learned to paint entirely of his own accord, through observation of the natural world. "Michelangelo," he explains,

... worked with such diligence that he would not apply color to any part without first consulting nature. Thus he would go off to the fish market, where he observed the shape and coloring of the fins of the fish, the color of the eyes and every other part.¹¹

His work was so admired that Ghirlandaio, the preeminent Florentine painter of the day, claimed in public that it had come from his own workshop. This lie, grounded in envy, had been propelled further by unscrupulous biographers:

¹¹Ascanio Condivi, *The Life of Michelangelo*, trs. by Alice Sedgwick Wohl, edited by Helmuht Wohl (University Park: Pennsylvania UP, 2000), 10.

... there have been some who, writing about this rare man, though not having (as I believe) frequented him as I have, on the one hand have said many things about him which never were so, and on the other hand they have left out many things which are most noteworthy.¹²

As the only published account of Buonarroti's life then in circulation was that of Vasari, his target is ill-concealed.¹³

Vasari, as has been noted, felt this provocation to be a serious one. The *vita* of Michelangelo was the center of his work, the life to which all other *vite* were tethered. If someone were able to cast doubt on his association with Buonarroti, or on Buonarroti's confidence in his project, it would discredit the whole. Vasari's response was shrewd. Not only did he completely revise and expand his life of Michelangelo, incorporating as we have seen evidence of Michelangelo's sanction, but he published this new version as a separate off-print. In so doing, he was able to make accessible to the widest possible audience his own edition. A single, slim volume, like *Condivi*'s, could be purchased by almost anyone with an interest in Michelangelo; in mid-sixteenth century Italy, this was a wide audience indeed.¹⁴ Vasari, who had already gained considerable fame for his first edition of the *Vite*, was confident that interest his *La Vita del gran Michelagnolo* would swamp over his competitor's work; given that *Condivi*'s *Vita*, soon out of print, was lost to the world for over two-hundred years, his confidence was not misplaced. Yet even though he was able to

¹²Condivi, 3.

¹³It appears, however, that Michelangelo was not above fabrication for his own ends, as Barolsky and others have argued. Hard evidence placing the artist as an apprentice in the workshop of Ghirlandaio is extant, including a note in Ghirlandaio's own hand indicating that on the 28th of June, 1487, a young Michelangelo di Lodovico collected a debt of three florins for his master. See Jean K. Cadogan, "Michelangelo in the Workshop of Domenico Ghirlandaio," *The Burlington Magazine*, 135, no. 1078 (Jan., 1993), 31.

¹⁴See Lisa Pon, "Michelangelo's Lives: sixteenth-century books by Vasari, Condivi, and others." *The Sixteenth Century Journal*, 27 (1996), 1015-1018.

ensure that his work would become the standard, there was a deeper issue at hand for Vasari.

Condivi's claim that he collected his material directly, "from the living oracle of [Michelangelo's] speech," was firm, as scholars have demonstrated.¹⁵ In fact, Michelangelo was so displeased with his own portrayal in Vasari's original, 1550 *Vite*, that he himself engaged Condivi to write what we would today call an "authorized" biography. He felt that Vasari, whom he knew only slightly, had completely misrepresented him.¹⁶ Condivi therefore served as a conduit for Michelangelo's discontent.

This presented a rather thorny problem for Vasari. He had invested, as we have seen, so much in his representation of Michelangelo that it would be virtually impossible for him to acknowledge publicly any strain between himself and his most important subject. Fortunately for Vasari, and by an odd twist of fate, he and Michelangelo had become friends later in life, after the publication of the 1550 edition, and he preserved assiduously the letters and sonnets that the artist sent him. He was able thereby, as has been shown, to fold these documents into the later *vita*, giving an impression of seamless cooperation.¹⁷ Thus his presentation to Michelangelo of the first edition of the *Vite*, which in reality occasioned backlash and Condivi's response, is followed, according to Vasari, by Michelangelo's donation of a sonnet praising Vasari's skill as a writer and claiming that memory is a matter of artistry.

¹⁵Pon, 1017.

¹⁶See Johannes Wilde, "Michelangelo, Vasari, and Condivi", in *Michelangelo: Six Lectures*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978).

¹⁷Michael Hirst, rightly in my opinion, expresses a high degree of skepticism regarding the intimacy of these two artists. He points out that many of the episodes in the 1568 edition recounting their "friendship" are misdated, giving the impression that Michelangelo and Vasari became close to one another as early as 1542. See Hirst, "Michelangelo and his First Biographers," *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 94 (1997), 63-67.

It is this conception of memory that gave Vasari the latitude to reconstitute the character of Michelangelo to suit the greater purpose of his work. Although his argument is subtle, it is clear: writing is the necessary instrument of memory, yet it is to be considered not simply as a matter of record, but fully as an application of art. The writer is not a “mere dyer,” but one who exercises the creative faculty of invention. The only direct reference to *Condivi* by Vasari in the *Vite* finds fault in him not as a competing biographer, but as a painter:

Ascanio spent years on a picture for which Michelangelo provided the cartoon, and all in all the high expectations he aroused have gone up in smoke. I remember that Michelangelo, taking pity on Ascanio for his lack of facility, used to help him personally, but it was of little use (I: 422).

Condivi hardly seems to be a figure in which Michelangelo would invest his reputation. In Vasari’s account, Michelangelo felt sorry for the hapless *Condivi*, whose deficiencies as an artist are severe and incontrovertible. These deficiencies—provocatively represented as an inability to finish what Michelangelo has given him to complete—also, by Vasari’s standards, disqualify *Condivi* as a serious competitor in the realm of biography.

Buonarroti declared in his sonnet to Vasari, it is the prerogative of the artist to make “what [Nature] made more fair to view.” If Vasari’s writing, as this same sonnet suggests, is practiced as an art, then his history is beholden not to mere representation, but to the same principles that he has demarcated for other artists. The role of memory then, at least in this literary manifestation, is not one of replication, but of invention. In Rubin’s phrase, the artist, for Vasari, was capable of “creating new forms” that “give life to inanimate matter.” The author of the *Vite* goes far, as we have seen, to show that Michelangelo believed, that he, Vasari, was also one capable of granting such life. He accomplishes this through a new form of writing, a hybrid of history and poetry, which he distinguishes as doing honor to “art by art” (I: 439).

This phrase is used to describe the memorial services orchestrated by the Florentine Academy after Michelangelo's death, the purpose of which was,

to display ingenious inventions and works full of vigor and charm created by the knowledge and dexterity of our craftsmen, and thus to honour art by art (I: 439).

These take up a considerable part of the final quarter of the *vita*. This is not surprising, as Vasari was deeply involved with the Academy. Yet his treatment of the parades, orations and monuments seems a bit heavy-handed—the detail nearly drives the narrative to a halt.

Vasari, however, is attempting to press home a point that, once again, validates his project as a whole. In order to clarify for his readers the purpose of this pageantry and splendor, he includes a number of letters from preeminent Florentines discussing between themselves the nature of this activity. As with the correspondence of Michelangelo, these letters are threaded together by a single sentiment: Borghini states that the Academy is resolved, “to do some honour to the memory of Michelangelo Buonarroti;” Duke Cosimo is enthusiastic about, “preparations to honour the memory of Michelangelo Buonarroti” (I: 433, 434). There is an overwhelming consensus that it is proper and necessary to remember the accomplishments of Michelangelo, and that this is best achieved through art that reflects upon art. That this is fitting is attested to by Vasari:

One can truthfully say that Michelangelo was most fortunate not to have died before our Academy was established, considering the magnificent pomp and ceremony with which it honoured his death (I: 440).¹⁸

¹⁸Of course, the pageantry put on at the funeral of Michelangelo was also used by the Academy to advance its own purposes and status. Both Vasari and the Florentine Academy advocated “license”—artistic freedom attending to, yet overriding, artistic precedent—as the necessary foundation for contemporary art. Pointing to the practice of Michelangelo for validation, both Vasari and the Academy were heavily invested in maintaining Buonarroti's reputation. See Alina A. Payne, “Architects and Academies:

Yet fortune, as we have seen, is fickle. Speeches and rituals are ephemeral; busts and murals, though tangible, are also transitory. If Michelangelo's fame is to be extended beyond this moment, it must rely on another vehicle. The *Vite*, in which the fleeting ceremony and fading oratory have already found reprieve, offers itself as such a conveyance.

The extent to which Vasari allowed the imaginative to displace the factual in pursuit of this goal is difficult to gauge. This is because he finds in memory a plasticity that allows it to be shaped not unlike a work of art. According to the principles that he himself had laid down in the theoretical portions of the *Vite*, the highest function of art is not imitative, but creative. This, however, does not imply absolute autonomy on the part of the artist. The artist must first master the representation of nature. Only after having proven this skill is he at liberty to impress upon his work his own style, his *maniera*. This is done not to add luster, neither to the artist, nor to his art, but to increase the emotional resonance of the work; in this way, the artist takes what nature has given and improves upon it. Vasari, who defined Mannerism, held this to be the highest application of art and considered Michelangelo to be its prime exemplar. He argues that all art had evolved towards this moment, when it would be able to surpass mere representation. This is what he defines as "giving" life, rather than copying it. It is clear that he felt compelled as well to apply to the art of memory his own *maniera*.

As has been noted above, when Vasari recalls his first encounter with Michelangelo, he slips into the third person: "Giorgio Vasari," he tells us, "was placed with Michelangelo as an apprentice" (I: 365). One assumes, of course, that this is being drawn from the author's own memory. Yet just as Michelangelo misrepresented his apprenticeship with Ghirlandaio, so too does

Architectural Theories of *Imitatio* and the Literary Debates on Language and Style," in *Architecture and Language: Constructing Identity in European Architecture, c. 1000—c. 1650*, eds. Georgia Clarke and Paul Crossley (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000), 118-133.

Vasari alter his own history. The suggestion that he learned his craft as an apprentice under Michelangelo is patently false. The premise of the claim however is, for Vasari, perfectly true. The “Vasari” of the *Vite* is the product of an artistry learned from Michelangelo, a way of shaping one’s identity as if a work of art. What complicates this situation in the *Vite* is the dynamic relationship of author and subject. At times, it appears that Michelangelo is the one who dictates how we will perceive Vasari; on other occasions, Vasari commands our perception of Michelangelo. What is hidden is the hand of the author who plays these two critical characters off one another.

In the sonnet that we have already looked at, “Se con lo stile e co’ colori avete,” Michelangelo evidently praises Vasari and explains to the reader of the *Vite* the value of the work: it is a triumph of art over nature, of memory over time. Its success at bringing to life those who have passed is apparent in this very moment: the tender appreciation of Buonarroti, relayed in his own voice through this poem, creates a vivid image of the artist. The translation that we have referred to, that of John Addington Symonds, captures perfectly the celebratory tone of the poem:

You, re-illuminating memories that died,
In spite of Time and Nature have revealed
For them and for yourself eternal fame.

Michelangelo, in gratitude, wishes through his own poetry to honor Vasari’s art, impressing on the reader its worth. He, too, constructs an image for the audience, that of his biographer as associate and accomplice. The fate of their reputation—how they will be remembered by future generations—is one that is shared. Michelangelo appears to have an interest in promoting the efficacy of Vasari’s memory.

This, however, in spite of appearances, is the impression that *Vasari* would like to leave with his reader. His Michelangelo is often a simulacrum, animated to suit the needs of Vasari’s narrative. In this instance, Vasari has actually stripped from Michelangelo his voice and appropriated it for his own ends. “Se

con lo stile,” was written not in praise, but in derision of Vasari. It was, as claimed, penned in response to the *Vite* of 1550; but, as Hellmut Wohl indicates, it was intended rather to mock Vasari’s efforts.¹⁹ Michelangelo held a very low opinion of Vasari as a painter; therefore, as in the translation that Wohl offers, the emphasis must fall on the first word of the poem, the “if:”

If you had with your pen or with your color
 Given nature an equal in your art,
 And indeed cut her glory down in part,
 Handing us back her beauty lovelier,

You now, however, with a worthier labor,
 Have settled down with learned hand to write,
 And steal her glory’s one remaining part
 That you still lacked, by giving life to others.

Michelangelo does not commend Vasari’s ability to give life, he derides it. This is certainly evident in the action that he took soon after writing this sonnet, deputizing Condivi so that he might dictate to him his version of the story. Vasari, however, understood that interpretation is a matter of context, that it is the prerogative of the artist to guide his audience in its appreciation of his work. The most effective method, he believed, was to impose one’s *maniera* without making it felt as an imposition. By placing Michelangelo’s poem in proximity to letters that commend Vasari, the poem itself is read as laudatory. Thus a sonnet commemorating memory is reshaped through the artistry of its subject. Taking advantage of the fluid nature of interpretation, Vasari blends memory and *maniera*, the presentation of the past with the franchise of the present, adding meaning to each.

In one of the most personal moments of the *Vite*, Vasari, sent one evening by Julius II to retrieve a design from Michelangelo, is met by the artist at his door with a lamp in hand. Looking inside, Vasari notices the leg of a Christ that Michelangelo is working on; Buonarroto, not wishing for this piece

¹⁹Wohl’s Introduction to *Condivi*, xvii.

to be seen, drops the lamp, leaving the two in darkness. While a servant fetches another light, Michelangelo muses,

I am so old that death often tugs my cloak for me to go with him. One day my body will fall just like that lamp, and my light will be put out (I: 429).

The glimpse of the leg recalls the arm of the David that the youthful Vasari had risked himself to preserve. He is committed, as he has shown throughout the *vita*, to securing the glory of Michelangelo, even when it is Michelangelo himself who seems to be impeding his project. In spite of obfuscation and darkness, Vasari will find a way to perpetuate the light.

The perfection of Michelangelo, as represented by Vasari, is intended not to deter further accomplishment, but to induce it; the artist ought not to copy Buonarroti's work, but emulate him. Like the ideal Prince, his portrayal is intended to show that the way is open for those with *virtù* to follow; he addresses his fellow artists in the same spirit as Machiavelli, who wrote:

Here there is readiness, and where there is great readiness, there cannot be great difficulty, provided that your house keeps its aim on the orders of those I have put forth. Besides this, here may be seen extraordinary things without example, brought about by God; the sea has opened; a cloud has escorted you along the way; the stone has poured forth water; here manna has rained; and everything has concurred in your greatness. The remainder you must do yourself. God does not want to do everything, so as not to take free will from us and the part of the glory that falls to us.²⁰

The images of deluge, now that the way of containment has been revealed, are benign. Michelangelo, at least as Vasari would portray him, is the miracle sent by God,

²⁰Machiavelli, 103.

... so that everyone might admire and follow him as their perfect exemplar in life, work, and behaviour and in every endeavour, and he would be acclaimed divine (I: 325).

A number of artists, including Titian, have followed his lead; Vasari offers this path to others. Yet as Michelangelo himself wrote, “working in hard stone to make the face / of someone else, one images his own.”²¹ Vasari, in addressing others, exemplifies in the *Vite* how he would have them proceed, by building on art through art. He accomplishes this, following Dante, through his own art of memory—the portrayal of memorable images in a “visible speech”—“*visibile parlare*”—that his readers will hold in their minds.²²

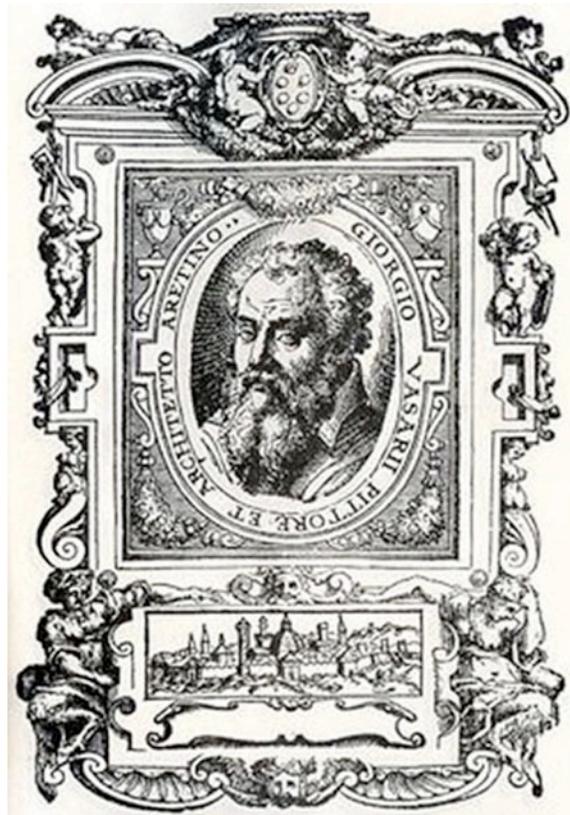
The endpiece of the 1550 edition shows a winged Fame flying above three grounded women holding the instruments of the three arts discussed in the *Vite*. There is, both in this image and in the book itself a conspicuous absence. In his home in Arezzo, Vasari had, on the domed ceiling of one room, painted Fame, represented by a trumpeting angel, with four spandrels branching off, each containing a separate angel engaged in one of four pursuits: Painting, Sculpture, Architecture and Poetry. The trumpet call both announces their success and urges them onward. Equal to the three arts celebrated in the *Vite* is the excellence of a fourth, poetry. Vasari, whose pen records the memory of artists with lovely colors and creditable inventions, hopes through his writing to secure for them, and for himself, an unending glory.

²¹Michelangelo Buonarroti, *The Complete Poems of Michelangelo*, trs. by John Frederick Nym (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 122.

²²*Purgatorio*, x: 95. This phrase is noted in Rubin, 285.

(Editor's choice)

Giorgio Vasari: Self-Portrait



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