VASARI AND THE RENAISSANCE

F. PHILIPP

The symbolism of numbers tends to attribute a special dignity to the number three. In the triad, the third step is that of synthesis, of bringing together, of reconciliation, and thus of special importance.

I hope you have no numerical expectations of this kind tonight. When I was offered the privilege of partaking in this celebration of Professor Crawford's jubilee, my reaction was—to remain true to the triad pattern—threefold: I was hesitant to appear in such illustrious company; puzzled by this call ad Parnassum historicum because, although a historian, I am one of a somehow diluted compound; but thirdly (though not lastly) I was pleased that—in spite of these disqualifications—I was given this opportunity to present my donum parvulum to a man to whom I am greatly indebted.

Trying to solve the enigma of my selection by internal rather than external evidence, some pattern of explanation occurred to me: perhaps your kind invitation should be read emblematically? Perhaps Professor Manning Clark and I were to embody (metaphorically speaking) Professor Crawford's Janus face: History as looking into the future (if not predicting it)—the history of a young country, and History looking into the past, the distant past of an old country and civilization, of the Italian Renaissance, which saw itself as modermo in a new, value-asserting sense of the term as re-embodying the past of its affinity (classical antiquity), as buona maniera antica revived.

Perhaps this emblematic invitation was also to illustrate the missionary range of Professor Crawford's school—a bishopric in partibus (in Canberra), and in the Arts Faculty of this University, the newly-founded small parish, in whose foundation Professor Crawford took a very active, perhaps decisive part, and in which his former pupil teaches a subject—the history of Renaissance art—specially close to the heart of the founding father.

How then could I—in Renaissance terminology a seguace di Crawford—underline through my choice of subject the subtlety of your invitation? The historiography of Renaissance art somehow precariously straddling the two powers that had both exercised a strong attraction on Professor Crawford, as he told us in his Prolegomena to an intellectual autobiography (I apologize for this change of title)—this seemed the obvious choice. A choice all the more appealing since it allowed me to pay some small tribute to two great teachers who—separated by a decade and many thousand miles—had both introduced me to the vital importance and profound pleasure of the study of fontes—of primary sources: the one to Machiavelli and the other to Vasari: Professor Crawford to the former and the late Julius von Schlosser to the latter.

You will thus perhaps agree that in the choice of my subject 'necessity prevailed over freedom'. I must now attempt to persuade you, as best I can, that Giorgio Vasari was indeed a historian of some stature and significance; that he was and is an indispensable and inexhaustible source, notwithstanding that: 'One must always be on one's guard against this inventive Ulysses'. Vasari's
value as a factual source is generally recognized. (The late 19th century tended to be slightly over-sceptical in this respect, and in a good many instances Vasari has been at least partly rehabilitated—e.g. Cimabue is no longer considered a purely legendary name.) What is, I believe, not equally acknowledged by historians (as distinct from art historians) is what André Chastel calls ‘la portée de ses idées directives, de son “système”’. It is with reference to this historical perspective of Vasari that I want to suggest that his voice (and that of his forerunners) is still of considerable relevance to some current discussions. In what follows I am especially indebted to the writings of two great scholars: to Julius von Schlosser, whose Kunstliteratur or La letteratura artistica remains a treasury of insight and information. Its fifth book still contains one of the most comprehensive and penetrating analyses of Vasari’s sources, method and historical concepts. My second debt is to the brilliant writings of Erwin Panofsky, some of which are fortunately written in English (e.g. Renaissance and renascences in western art) or else partly available in English translation.

The Renaissance [writes Panofsky] has recently been the chief target of the ‘deperiodizers’... lately there has been a growing tendency not so much to revise as to eliminate the concept of the Renaissance.

For the purpose of this talk I shall single out three main lines of attack by the critics of the Renaissance concept: (i) The first proposes to deprive the Renaissance—for purposes of clarity I must adopt the pronunciation which is now, I believe, considered slightly old-fashioned—of its capital R and to see it as one of a number of renascences. For example, C. H. Haskins (The Renaissance of the 12th century, Meridian edition, pp. 5-6) though admitting that there was an Italian Renaissance, believes:

... that the great Renaissance was not so unique or so decisive as has been supposed. The contrast of culture was not nearly as sharp as it seemed to the humanists and their modern followers, while within the Middle Ages there were intellectual revivals... which partook of the same character as the better known movement of the 15th century.

Indeed, some extremists have gone so far as to enthron e the Renaissance of the 12th century as the one and only true Renaissance, perhaps with some support from the economic historians. (ii) The second line of argument stresses the basically medieval character of the Renaissance. Thus D. Bush (The Renaissance and English Humanism, p. 68) writes:

Whatever qualifications a larger survey might compel one to make, they would not alter the main conclusion that the Renaissance was fundamentally medieval (and fundamentally Christian).

(The latter is not synonymous with the former, as the author tends to suggest.) (iii) Thirdly, some students—perhaps a majority—of economic history, of political institutions and of the history of science tend to deny that in their respective fields significant advances (i.e. significant to later periods) were made: on the contrary they speak of stagnation, if not regression. With the latter line of attack I shall deal only obliquely since it is not directly relevant to the approach I shall take. The core of my argument will be, that to the historian of Renaissance art (by which I understand very roughly the art of Italy from about 1300 to the middle of the 16th century), the concept of a Renaissance with capital R is indispensable, because testified to by his material, both monumental and literary. If this is so, and if a brief investigation of the history and semantics of the term and of the concept Renaissance can demonstrate that we have here an instance
of a genuine historical 'self-definition' (to use Panofsky's term) or self-realization, then I believe we might well by-pass the economic historian's objection by simply reverting to the original, more specific and limited meaning of the term or at least to a usage of it in which the cultural content is strongly emphasized, i.e. the revival of something rather than of everything at a given time.

That the civilization of a period is based on a definite social and economic sub-structure is of course a truism. But it is also—I believe—becoming increasingly evident that the relation of sub-structure and super-structure is not a simple, unicausal one, that it is indeed notoriously evasive of a clear-cut definition. The brilliant failure of the late Dr. Antal's learned attempt to apply a fairly rigid Marxist system to this relation of art and society is known to many of you. This relation can be studied in its most concrete form in the field of patronage. But here too the relation between wealth and active patronage is far from simple: for what matters, as far as the support of the arts is concerned, is not how wealthy a man or a community is, but how much of this wealth they are willing to spend on commission or collecting. The Florence of the Bardi and Peruzzi was, we are told, more thriving economically, more go-ahead than that of Cosimo de' Medici. Nevertheless, the range of the latter's patronage, the amounts spent were infinitely larger. It has in fact been suggested by a brilliant economic historian, R. S. Lopez (and before him by Dr. Antal, though with a different direction of argument), that some stagnancy in the field of industrial investment may have stimulated a greater inclination to invest in the luxury of art—and it may well stimulate such an inclination, though it would hardly account for it. Cultural activities have their own momentum, their own tradition—have, I believe, a certain degree of autonomy. Woelfflin once wrote that the effect of picture on picture was perhaps more important than any other (external) impact. Perhaps one could—with many a grain of salt—say the same about patronage: meaning that it has its autonomy, its own conventions and traditions, in which religious ideas, love of art, social prestige and perhaps even the nature of the investment market inter-mingle. The concrete instance—the individual patron—will have to be investigated with unbiased historical curiosity.

Let me then, after this light skirmishing, return to the first two objections raised. Neither the existence of classical survivals in medieval culture, and of distinct earlier revivals or renascences, nor the existence and importance of medieval—or, to be more precise, Gothic—elements in Renaissance art, both in style and iconology, is denied by art historians who have substantially contributed to the study of both. "The very definition of a period as a phase "marked by a change of direction" implies continuity as well as dissociation." That such a decisive change of direction took place in the visual arts has been asserted from Boccaccio to Vasari. We shall look at some moments of this continuous tradition and at its slight shifts of emphasis, and ask ourselves whether this self-confessed revival of the arts was also viewed as rebirth (i.e. as a rebirth of the art of classical antiquity). The ultimate question: whether to interpret this tradition (in Panofsky's phrase) as 'self-definition or self-deception' can of course only be answered vis-à-vis the monuments. Here I have to ask your indulgence for performing Hamlet without the Prince. An eminent member of the History School unfortunately absent (in Oxford or Cambridge?) has often remarked how easy it must be to lecture on the history of art—one simply shows a few nice slides and
that is that. But it is not only in trying to confute this absent critic that I have deprived myself of this natural advantage: I could hardly adequately document my point without grossly over-imposing on your time and even more neglecting my hero Vasari than I shall do in any case. You must therefore take on trust what I shall summarize in the briefest form.

The most momentous—indeed epoch-making—aspect of the new pictorial language, coeval of the dolce stile nuovo, which 'arose in Etruria' at the turn of the duecento to the trecento has recently been described as 'the birth and rebirth of pictorial space'. The theoreticians of the 15th century describe it as perspectiva. (Dürer: 'a Latin word meaning a view through something', or in Alberti's famous simile: 'I describe a rectangle ... which I imagine to be an open window, through which I view whatever is to be depicted there.' (De Pictura).) It is in Giotto's work that the decisive, though not the first step is made: the creation of an empirically—though not mathematically—constructed space. Even disregarding—as I must in this context—all other revolutionary aspects of Giotto's art (to many of which Vasari refers at length), this reconquest of pictorial space represents a Copernican revolution in the pictorial arts.

To make certain that we do not misread the significance of the phenomenon to which I have alluded we turn now to testimonies of the trecento: or, as Panofsky calls it, the 'self-definition' of the age. That Giotto was, less than half a decade after the completion of the frescoes in the Arena Chapel in Padua, already a famous artist worthy to be named pari passu with two well-known poets is evident from the so frequently quoted passage in the 11th canto of Dante's Inferno (verse 94), starting with the words 'Creedette Cimabue ...'. 'Cimabue was thought to hold the field/ in painting; now Giotto is acclaimed by all/ so that he has obscured the former's fame./ Thus has one Guido taken from the other/ the prize of language ...'. At about the same time or a few years later (1313) a north Italian chronicler, Riccobaldo Ferrarese, mentions him as 'eximius pictor Florentius'—adding a rudimentary oeuvre catalogue. In 1334 a solemn document of the Priori degli arti appoints Giotto 'homo expertus et famosus Florentius pictor' as chief architect (or provedditore) of the Cathedral: a wholly unprecedented decision since Giotto was not a sculptor or stone-mason but a painter, as the document explicitly states.

We have here an anticipation of the unison of the three plastic arts—Giotto was also supervising the sculptural decoration of the Campanile—all children of disegno, as Vasari is the first historian to emphasize. These were witnesses of Giotto's fame: two decades later, in the early 'fifties, Boccaccio draws the first outlines of a new historical scheme according to which Giotto does for painting what Dante and Petrarch had done for poetry.

In our age [he writes, in the early 'seventies, to Jacopo Pizzinghi] more illustrious men have come from heaven, who wish to raise up again with all their strength the oppressed art of poetry and to recall it from exile into its former abode. (The concetto of exile is anticipated by an early trecento poet, Benedetto Campesani of Vicenza who, before 1328, begins his poem De resurrectione Catulli poetae Veronensis with the following line: 'Ad patriam venio, longis a finibus exul'. Dante, Boccaccio continues, had drunk the honeyed waters of the fount of Helicon, which was lost many centuries ago, though he had reached it not by the path that the ancients had followed, but by certain by-ways entirely
unknown to our ancestors’. Nevertheless he ascended Parnassus and ‘awakened
those half-sleeping sisters the Muses and drew Phoebus back to his lyre’. But it
was Petrarch ‘who began to follow the ancient path with such fortitude of heart,
such ardour of spirit, such acuteness of talent . . . that no hindrance could stop
him . . .’ Thus ‘he opened the way for himself and those who wished to follow
him . . . he restored Apollo to his ancient beauty and brought back the Muses,
soiled by rusticity, to their pristine beauty’.

Two distinct forms or ways of renovatio can already be discerned: Dante
reached the holy mount ‘by certain by-ways’ unknown to the ancients; Petrarch
follows the ancient path. We shall see such a bifurcation become an important
cue to the historiography of Renaissance art; it will take the form of a distinction
between return to nature and return to classical antiquity.

About twenty years before this letter we find in the Decameron (VI, 5)
Boccaccio’s famous reference to Giotto (who appears in the novel—as he and
other famous artists did in so many trecento and quattrocento novelle—as a
famous wit and joker).

His genius was of such excellence [writes Boccaccio] that there was nothing produced by nature,
the mother and operator of all things . . . which he did not depict by means of stylus, pen or
brush with such truthfulness that the result seemed to be not so much similar to one of her
works as a work of her own. Wherefore the human sense of sight was often deceived by his
work and took for real what was only painted. Thus he restored to light (ritornata in luce)
this art which for many centuries had been buried under the errors of some who painted to
please the eyes of the ignorant rather than satisfy the intelligence of the experts (de savi dipegnendo),
and may rightly be called one of the lights in the glory of Florence.

Boccaccio’s phrase about Giotto’s deceptive naturalism is probably a topos, a
formula borrowed from classical literature, viz. Pliny’s famous ‘sparrow anecdote’
(N.H. XXXV, 36) told about Zeuxis: ‘He produced a picture of grapes so suc-
cessfully that the birds flew up to the stage buildings [where the picture was
hung].’ But this does not mean that the formula is an empty formula: both Renaissance art and literature will consistently use such formulae at their highest
level and fullest emotional pitch.

Thus, less than twenty years after Giotto’s death, he is viewed as the founding
father of a new art, having resuscitated the art of painting after many centuries,
by means of his radical naturalism (of which the most momentous aspect is his
re-conquest of pictorial space). How constant this image remains through the
Renaissance down to Vasari is, I believe, highly significant. Politian’s epitaph of
Giotto in Santa Croce (quoted in Vasari’s Life) still reads like a summary of
Boccaccio: ‘Ille ego sum per quem pictura extincta revixit.’ I
record only briefly some slight modifications of the Giotto image.

Filippo Villani in an interesting short chapter of his De origine civitatis
Florentinae eiusdem famosis civibus (c. 1400), a chapter then containing the first
summary of a Florentine art history,18 introduced Cimabue (up till then a
shadowy figure) as a master, or so to speak as John the Baptist of Giotto: ‘He was
the first to call back to verisimilitude (ad naturae similitudinem) the antiquated
art of painting, that had chidishly strayed from reality.’ Villani is to my know-
ledge the first to introduce the conceit (reserved by Vasari largely for Michel-
angelo) that he (Giotto) ‘was not only comparable to the classical painters in
fame but even superior to them in art and genius’ (arte et ingenio preferendus).
Ghiberti, our main and most perceptive witness of trecento art, sees first in
Giotto the father not only of a naturalistic but also of a classical art. He attained l’arte naturale and, by not transcending the true proportions (misure), also gentilezza (grace, refinement, beauty). It is also Ghiberti who first tells that most evocative artist anecdote: the shepherd boy, watching his father’s sheep and drawing them on a rock as Cimabue passed by veggiendo aver l’arte da natura and took him as disciple. The concept of natural untutored genius is again antique, though not the story repeated in a strange tone of poetical intensity by Leonardo and of course by Vasari—who finds it meaningful in three other instances.

The notion, then, that a decisive, indeed basic change: a restoration or renewal in painting, had occurred at a definite time, is a common assumption of all Renaissance historiographers. It is only shortly before the middle of the quattrocento that this notion is explicitly made to embrace the two sister arts, sculpture and architecture. Lorenzo Valla in his Elegantiae Linguae Latiniae (1435-44) extends the analogy of literature not only to painting (as do Boccaccio and subsequent writers) but to the other two of the ‘Fine Arts’.

I do not know why the arts most closely approaching the liberal arts—painting, sculpture in stone and bronze, and architecture, had been in so long and deep a decline and almost died out together with literature itself; nor why they have come to be aroused and come to life again in this age (hoc tempore excitentur ac reviviscant).

The same notion of the revival of the Fine Arts is implied in the famous prologue of G. B. Alberti’s De Pictura (1435-6) which may well be the source of Valla’s remark.

The historical situation is truly reflected by the historians: neither in sculpture nor in architecture can we find a radical stylistic change analogous with that in early trecento painting. The stylistic situation is still clearly reflected in Vasari’s list of trecento artists (in his first book: the great majority of names are those of painters). But while all the interpretations of the renewal of painting had viewed it as a return ad naturae similitudinem (perhaps with the exception of Ghiberti), the other theme: return to classical antiquity (ad antiquitatem) is affirmed first with reference to sculpture and even more to architecture. Cristoforo Landino writes of Donatello (in his Dante commentary of 1480) not only that he was distinguished by the variety, vivacity and order of his composition, by his power to convey movement but also that he was a great imitatore degli antichi and knew much of perspective. As to architecture, we are told in Filarete’s treatise (1460-4) how he heard:

that the people of Florence had started to build in the classical manner (a questi modi antichi) . . . and when I associated with them they woke me up . . . [and I] thus rejected questi moderni . . . ; the noble edifices that existed in Rome . . . seem to me to be reborn so as to become visible again (mi pare rinascere a vedere).

The hero of this revival is of course Filippo Brunelleschi, whose biographer (Antonio Manetti?) tells us that he had ‘renewed and brought to light that style of building alla romana et alla antica’, whereas before him all the buildings were German (tedeschi) and called modern (moderno).

On the other hand, apart from Ghiberti’s perceptive remarks on Giotto and his trecento favourite Ambrogio Lorenzetti, we find no reference to the classical inspiration in trecento or early quattrocento painting. The same Landino who had praised Donatello as imitatore degli antichi describes the great Masaccio as
'an excellent imitator of nature ... good in composition ... wholly devoting himself to the observation of reality and the relief of figures and as proficient a perspectivist as any of his contemporaries.' 24 The same dichotomy is still echoed in Vasari's assessment of this generation. Only in the third phase of Vasari's historical triad—what we call the High Renaissance—is this dichotomy (ad similitudinem naturae—ad antiquam) fully resolved: a return to the ancients becomes equated with a return to perfected nature—the doctrine of classicism.

The concept of rebirth necessitates the historical corollary of a medium aevum—a middle, an in-between age. When Petrarch had in 1338, one year after his first visit to Rome, expressed in the famous passage of his Africa (IX, 453ff.) the hope 'of a better age in store—for you who will outlive me', he had established the pattern: 'After the darkness has been dispelled (tenebris discussis) our grandsons will be able to walk back into the pure radiance of the past—the golden age of classical antiquity. He uses a clearly Christian terminology to reverse the Christian schema of history. These tenebrae, this age of darkness, slumber and decay are first historically defined (as far as the Fine Arts are concerned) by the architectural writers of the quattrocento. Filarete describes how:

... as the letters declined in Italy ... so did this art (of architecture) and stayed this way as a result of the ruinous invasions of Italy and the wars of those barbarians who ravished and subjugated her several times ... Italy was swamped with customs and traditions from north of the Alps, imported not by real architects but by painters, stone masons and particularly gold-smiths who practised what they liked and understood ... Big buildings came to be fashioned in the likeness of tabernacles and censers. 25

Brunelleschi's biographer (and perhaps echo) Manetti reiterates this theory of external destruction, ('The Tedeschi filled all Italy with their buildings and various countries beyond the mountains. ') But he also refers to what we now call the Tuscan Proto-renaissance—that classical interlude of the 11th and 12th centuries whose main monuments in Florence are San Giovanni and San Miniato. He associates it—wrongly, but with some dim awareness of the Carolingian renovatio—with Charlemagne, 'but since this dynasty did not last very long ... the style of the barbarous invaders came to predominate again and lasted down to our days, up to the time of Filippo'. 26

The quattrocento attempts of Ghiberti and Manetti to describe the historical process leading from antiquitas over the medium aevum—the tenebrae to the renovatio of the 14th and early 15th century—found no true successor in the quattrocento or early cinquecento. The interest in art theory, culminating in Alberti's writings, was far stronger than that in history. Such so-called forerunners of Vasari as the Book of Antonio Billi are of no historical significance; they are of a strongly compulsory character. Vasari's own imense opus may possibly have started on similar lines. In his second proemio (to Book II) he emphasizes (very pointedly though rightly) the distance of his completed work (first edition, 1550) from

a mere list of the artists with an inventory of their work, so to speak . . . I have remarked that those historians, who are proclaimed by common consent to have written with the best judgment have not been contented to confine themselves to a bare narration of facts . . . but have investigated the methods, means and ways (modi, ed i mezzi e le vie) of past men of valour . . . Such are the methods of those who regard history as the mirror of human life . . . not merely to write down a dry record of events . . . but to set forth the opinions, counsels, decisions and plans of men, the causes of successful and unsuccessful actions.
That the reference is to classical historians and the great Florentine historians of his time is obvious; his aims are—as he sets out below and in the general proemium of the whole work—to preserve the names and works from being forgotten and gradually consumed [by time], to defend them as much as I can from this second death, to keep them as long as possible in the memory of the living—the old hallowed historical notion of a memoria, of a ktema eis aeion. The two other motifs (second proemium) can be circumscribed by the Horatian prodesse et delectare: to assist the arts by the examples of great achievements, and next to give the 'pleasure derived from things both past and present'. The pattern of the work is set out in the first proemio:

We will proceed to deal ... with the rise of the arts to perfection [which is done by means of a summary of Pliny, a mediocre compilation of his friend Adriani], their decline and their restoration, or, to put it better, renaissance (della loro perfezione, e rovina e restaurazione, o per dir meglio Rinascita).

The noun rinascita is here used for the first time; but its (now obsolete) German equivalent Wiedererwachsung had been jotted down earlier (in 1523) by Albrecht Dürer, with the same meaning, viz. referring to the rebirth of classical art. Three years after Vasari, the French word we use today appears as 'heureuse et désirable renaissance de toutes espèces de bonnes disciplines' in the dedicatory epistle of the Observations by the French naturalist Pierre Belon.

Vasari's account of the decline of the arts, mainly contained in the first proemium (with some reference to it in the life of Arnolfo di Cambio—wrongly called di Lapo) is astonishingly detailed, though inevitably full of chronological and factual errors. But the two previously given causes—the inroads of the barbarians (Filarete, Manetti) and the 'perfervid zeal of the Christian religion' (Ghiberti) are now seen as joint rather than unrelated causes. To them Vasari adds what we might describe as autonomous cause, the decline of late Roman art documented by a stylistic analysis of the Arch of Constantine, 'so that one has the impression that the art of sculpture had begun to decline even before the coming of the Goths and other barbarous and foreign nations'. 19th century archaeology still works consistently with this notion of decay, which Vasari had also documented by reference to 'the medals of Constantine'.

For Vasari, as for his forerunners, the depth of decay and very antithesis of the buona maniera greca is a two-headed beast: in painting what Ghiberti had described (in the second book of his Commentarii) as la rozzezza greca (the crudeness of the Greek) and what we now call Byzantine art; in architecture, following Filarete and Manetti, la maniera di tedeschi. The term Gothic (gotico) is never used by Vasari, though the Goths are mentioned as co-inventors of this abomination—Vasari's chronology is very frequently, though not consistently, astray. It is with regard to the maniera di tedeschi that Vasari—himself an architect of considerable competence—waxes most eloquent in his disapproval. These passages, to be found mainly in the first chapter of the technical introduction and in the second proemio, are of great interest in two respects: Vasari's caricature of Gothic architecture shows an acuteness of stylistic analysis unrivalled, I believe, at least before the later 18th century; nothing like it is to be found north of the Alps where the Gothic is still a living language. We have here in negative terms the same phenomenon of historical distance which in the mid 15th century coins the terms media aetas (or aevum) and antiquitas, and which turns antiquity from
'a possession and menace into an object of passionate nostalgia'. For the medieval renascences antiquity was a dim inheritance; for the Renaissance, Pan was dead—to be reborn.38

Dislike may sharpen the eye as much as love, perhaps even more: Vasari writes:

For they did not observe that measure and proportion in the columns that the art required, or distinguish one order from another... but mixed them all together, with a rule of their own that was no rule, making them very thick or very slender, as suited them best.

We would speak of the free handling of decorative forms, of absolute, i.e. non-anthropomorphic instead of relative proportions, which made Thomas Gray remark, on visiting Amiens, that it was 'beset with thousands of small statues'. 'Indeed their buildings have more the appearance of being made of paper than of stone and marble,' writes Vasari. We speak of the translucency of form, the dematerialization of stone. One could continue for a good while with such sets of positive-negative evaluations.

The second interesting aspect of Vasari's relation to the maniera di tedeschi is often described as his inconsistency: he praises such high and late medieval monuments of Tuscan Gothic as Santa Croce, Arnolfo di Cambio's Santa Maria del Fiore, Orcagna's Or San Michele and the Loggia dei Lanzi. Is the explanation to be found in Vasari's campanilismo—his local patriotism? Vasari himself was clearly aware of this antinomy of rejection and praise; he explains repeatedly what we might call his double standard—most explicitly in the second proemio:

Nor would I have anyone believe that I am so dull and poor in judgment that I do not know that the works of Giotto, of Andrea Pisano, of Nino and of all the others whom I have put together in the first part by reason of their similar style (similitudine della maniera), if compared with those who laboured after them, do not deserve extraordinary or even mediocre praise; or that I did not see this when I praised them. But whosoever considers the standard of those times (la qualità di quei tempi) will hold them not merely beautiful but miraculous.

Finally and conclusively in his own Vita:

To those to whom it might appear that I have over-praised many craftsmen, whether old or modern, and who comparing the old with those of the present age might laugh at them, I know not what else to answer, but that my intention has always been to praise not absolutely but, as the saying is, relatively (non semplicemente ma come s'usa dire, secondo ché—the scholastic distinction between simpliciter and secundum quid) and in truth I do not know what would have been said of Giotto, as of the old masters, if he had lived in the time of Buonarotti; whereas the men of this age, which is at the topmost height of perfection, would not be in the position that they are, if those others had not been first such as they were before us.

Must we not then concede Vasari some concept of 'historical justice'? Within the structure of his great work, which describes not the development (i.e. as I use the term here, a sequence in time), but the progress of the Renaissance of art (il progresso della sua rinàscita)—that is, a time-sequence of ascending values, he was as an art historian faced with an 'intractable' situation: the three sister arts—daughters of un padre comune, l'arte del disegno, united and thus subject to a parallel development (in his Vite they appear for the first time under one cover, so to speak)—pass through three typical phases: the primitive one of infancy (fanciulezza); a second transitional stage (adolescence) in which considerable advances have been made, to a final stage of perfection, the third età of perfect disegno and divine grace, culminating itself in the divino Michelangelo, 'who is supreme not in one art but in all three at once. He surpasses not only all those
who, as it were, have surpassed nature, but the most famous ancients who undoubtedly have surpassed her.' This is the true *buona maniera moderna* initiated by Leonardo (contemporary of Botticelli but in whom we still see, with Vasari, the first High Renaissance master) and based on the *buona maniera antica* as finally revealed 'by some of the finest works mentioned by Pliny: the Laocoon, the Hercules, the great Torso Belvedere, the Venus, the Cleopatra, the Apollo and endless others.' (Vasari, *Proemio III.*)

The correspondence of a triad of evolutionary steps with the ages of man is a favourite notion of ancient historians, though used with reference to state or nation. Schlosser had already named the author to whom Vasari was most strongly indebted: Lucius Annaeus Florus, whose *Epitome rerum romanarum* was published in Italian translation in 1546.31 But in Florus, maturity is followed by the fourth age of senescence (*senectus imperii*). Vasari carried the analogy between historical and biological evolution explicitly only to the stage of *maturitas*, of perfection. True, we find dark hints (in the second edition) that after the climax of Michelangelo 'one fears a recession rather than hopes for further advancement'. But optimism prevails on the whole over the pessimistic mood of his age, the age of Mannerism. Perhaps it is the Christian notion of absolute progress through a triad of world ages (*ante legem, sub lege, sub gracia*—or, the Joachimites saw it, the three ages of father, son and Paraclete). Vasari had furthermore a classical model of such a triad of progress (though without the biological analogy) which he paraphrases in his second *proemio*:

I have come to the conclusion that there is a property and a particular nature inherent in those arts that from humble beginnings go on to improve by small degrees and finally attain the peak of perfection.

Such an evolution had also occurred in antiquity, 'if one must believe those who lived close to those times'. Both in sculpture and painting, the three ascending phases are traced. The documentation is a paraphrase of Cicero's *Brutus* (70), as Gombrich has recently shown. To avoid the correspondence of decline, the decay of the dark ages could be accounted for by the outer catastrophes of barbarian invasion and Christian hostility to the arts (though Vasari had himself, you will remember, admitted the factor of 'autonomous' decline); to appease the misgivings about contemporary symptoms of an artistic deadlock (with respect to the imitators of Michelangelo) the second edition introduced in Raphael's middle *maniera* an antidote: The means of art (*disegno*) have been carried to utmost perfection by Michelangelo; the artist must now cultivate the end of art—representation—*invenzione*, in which Raphael excelled.33 (Shaky as the theory may be, the assessment of the historical crisis is perceptive: the 17th century will indeed be Raphaelian rather than Michelangelesque.)

But by envisaging the *progresso della rinascita* as a series of contributions leading to the attainment of the perfect rule, each individual performance had to be judged according to this *perfetta regola* and at the same time—for Vasari fused *art theory* and *art history*—each phenomenon must be judged according to its time-place location, i.e. historically, or in Vasari's terms, by the standard of the *natura dei quei tempi*. The 18th and (mainly) the 19th century have in a long and laborious development separated these two principles and it is just (to quote Panofsky):
...because we are conscious of this distinction that we are able to envisage a synthesis which may ultimately succeed in interpreting the historical process with due regard to 'artistic problems' and conversely, to appraise the 'artistic problems' from a historical point of view.34

I still remember Schlosser's long and intricate meditations on this dilemma of our discipline.

Vasari was the first to face this dilemma valiantly, and must for this and other reasons be called the true father of art history. His famous 19th century editor Gaetano Milanesi still treats him, judges him as one would judge a 19th century historian—the most absurd approach imaginable', as Schlosser remarks. Surely we must assess a historical pioneer in his own words—secondo che—and remember that 'a beginning however small' (and his was not) 'is ever worthy of no small praise'.35

NOTES

1. Moderno (modernus) may in Renaissance usage mean either 'recent' or 'of the present time'. Before Vasari the usage oscillates between these two meanings. With reference to art the latter usually implies a positive, the former a negative evaluation. Thus Cennino Cennini writes in praise of Giotto: 'Il quale rimutò l'arte del dipinge...in the likeness of maniera vecchia e il Moderno—in the sense of maniera antica and maniera moderna as terms 'moderno' and its subsequent medieval usage cf. E. R. Curtius, Europäisches Literatur und Lateinisches Mittelalter, ch. XIV, esp. pp. 257-9.


6. The document (12.4.1334) is fully given in W. Braunfels, Mittelalterliche Stadtbaukunst in der Toskana.

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12. The document (12.4.1334) is fully given in W. Braunfels, Mittelalterliche Stadtbaukunst in der Toskana.


15. Panofsky, Renaissance and Renascences in Western Art, p. 8.


23. Ibid., pp. 108-7 (Princeton ed.).


26. See note 23.


30. Panofsky, Renaissance and Renascences, p. 113.


35. '... e il principio, ancora che piccolo, è degno sempre di lode, non piccolo' (Proemio II).