

E. H. Gombrich, Vasari's Lives and Cicero's Brutus, Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes, Vol. 23, 1960. [Trapp no.1960D.1]

The famous programmatic statement with which Vasari prefaced the Second Part of his Lives culminates in his cautious formulation of an evolutionary hypothesis:

Having carefully weighed these matters in my mind, 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. And I have come to this belief because I have seen this to have happened with other faculties; since there is a certain kinship between all the liberal arts, this fact is no minor argument in favour of its truth. But what must have happened to painting and sculpture is so similar that if the names were exchanged the events would be precisely the same. Thus one can see (if one must believe those who lived close to those times and could see and judge the efforts of the ancients) that the statues of Canachus were very hard and without any life and movement, and hence rather far removed from the truth; the same is said of those of Calamis although they were slightly sweeter than the foregoing. Then came Myron who did not altogether and completely imitate the truth of nature but gave to his works such proportion and grace that they could with reason be described as beautiful. In the third phase there succeeded Polycleitus and the others who were so much praised who, as it is said and as one must believe; made their works wholly perfect. That same progress was bound to happen to painting as well, for it is said and we must believe that it was probably so, that there was little perfection in the work of those who painted with one colour only and were called monochromists. Then, in the work of Zeuxis, Polygnotus, Timantes and the others who only used four colours the lines, contours and shapes are universally praised, but no doubt they left something to be desired. But then in Erion, Nicomachus, Protogenes and Apelles everything is perfect and most beautiful and it is impossible to imagine anything better, since these not only excellently represented the forms and movements of the bodies but also the affections and passions of the mind.

The bird's-eye view of the history of ancient art which Vasari here presents in support of his theory is taken from Cicero's *Brutus* (70):

Quis enim eorum qui haec minora animadvertunt non intellegit Canachi signa rigidiora esse quam ut imitentur veritatem; Calamidis dura illa quidem, sed tamen molliora quam Canachi; nondum Myronis satis ad veritatem adducta, iam tamen quae non dubites pulchra dicere; pulchriora etiam Polycliti et iam plane perfecta, ut mihi quidem vederi solent? Similis in pictura ratio est; in qua Zeuxim et Polygnotum et Timanthen et eorum, qui non sunt usi plus quam quattuor coloribus, formas et liniamenta laudeamus; at in Aetione, Nicomacho, Protogene, Apelle iam perfecta sunt omnia. Et nescio an reliquis in rebus omnibus idem eveniat; nihil est enim simul et inventum et perfectum...

Vasari's quotation, at this central point of his argument, from Cicero's brief conspectus of art history rather than from Pliny or Quintilian's similar outlines opens up interesting perspectives. For Cicero, too, invokes the evolution of ancient art as evidence for a general law of human development: nothing can be invented and perfected at the same time. Now in the context of Cicero's *Brutus* this formulation serves a polemical purpose. The *Brutus* constitutes Cicero's defence against a criticism which the younger generation of orators with Brutus and Calvus at their head had increasingly levelled against his style. This group of "Atticists" preached a return to the restraint and clarity of the classic stylists of the fourth century. It was this element of reaction that Cicero wanted to counter with

his evolutionary picture. To go back to the time of the inventors of oratory means to forego the later improvements. It was, in fact, in support of this plea that he set out to describe the rise of Roman oratory from Cato onwards. For, to be consistent, a Roman orator should surely not preach a return to the style of the Greek Lysias but rather to that of Cato, the pioneer of Latin oratory. This is meant as a *reductio ad absurdum*. For Cicero acknowledges that for all its virtues Cato's style was "not sufficiently polished" to serve as a model and that "something more perfect" was needed.

It is at this point that Cicero adduces his example from the history of sculpture and painting which Vasari took over, and we can now see that the borrowing was not accidental. For Vasari too shows himself anxious, in the same preface, to defend himself against any suspicion of wanting to praise pioneers for their own sake: "I do not want anyone to believe me so obtuse or so lacking in judgement as not to know that the works of Giotto and of Andrea and Giovanni Pisano and all the rest...would neither deserve extravagant nor even moderate praise if we were to compare them with those who were active after them...but those who consider the quality of the times...will deem them not beautiful, as I said, but miraculous."

The many passages in this vein scattered throughout Vasari's work have been a stumbling block to those modern critics who, like Lionello Venturi, have traced (and shared) *il gusto dei primitivi*. It is all the more interesting to note that they are not as unsophisticated in their origin as they appear on the surface. They are derived from polemics against the Atticists - that is, against the "primitivists" of Cicero's time, who preferred the harsh grandeur of Attic models to the polished prolixity of the "Asiatic" school. Like Vasari, Cicero again and again returns to the problem of progress and historical relativity. Indeed, Atticus as one of his interlocutors, chides him for his charity to earlier orators; "... cum in ceteribus rebus tum in dicendo semper, quo iam nihil est melius, id laudari, quaecumque est, solet" (296). Earlier in the dialogue Cicero had accorded Crassus the honour of having almost led oratory to the summit ("iam ad summum paene esse perductam") (161). Surely, Atticus says, if Cicero pointed to Crassus's speech in support of the Servilian law as his model, he was like Lysippus calling the Doryphorus of Polycleitus his master. There is more in this self praise than mere vanity. Cicero was convinced that oratory is a skill and that absolute standards exist to measure it. What counts in the art of persuasion is the ability to persuade. The law-courts are the testing ground, the jury's verdict the test. Even the unlearned must know whether they are moved or not: "Itaque nunquam de bono oratore aut non bono doctis hominibus cum populo dissensio fuit" (185). In any contest between Cato and Cicero, it is implied, Cicero would surely win because the art of playing on the emotions has made objective progress. It is this faith in the unity of purpose throughout the vicissitudes of stylistic change that links Cicero's view of progress with that of Vasari as it has been analysed by Svetlana Alpers in another part of this Journal.

It was because he found this practical view questioned by a kind of *l'art pour l'art* aestheticism among the Atticists that Cicero turned historian to meditate on style in a historical setting. His declared intention "oratorum genera distinguere aetatibus" (74) foreshadows Vasari's programme.

No historian of any artistic evolution could fail to learn from the way ancient critics of oratory described and discussed the history of their art. These larger questions lie outside the scope of this note; but one more parallel between the structure of Vasari's *Lives* and Cicero's *Brutus* may still be mentioned in conclusion:

Cicero is unwilling to include the living in his survey of the rise of eloquence, with one exception only: he allows himself to be prevailed upon by Brutus to include a eulogy of Caesar. The dialogue form enables Cicero to turn this tribute to good purpose. One of the interlocutors is made to quote from

Caesar's lost treatise *De Analogia*, which he had dedicated to Cicero with flattering remarks. But what ever his ulterior motives, Cicero's compliment to Caesar, his praise of the great man's purity of speech and vigour of style prefigures, however remotely, Vasari's original decision to include in his account of the rise of the arts *da Cimabue in poi* only one living master, Michelangelo.

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