

ITALIAN LECTURE

Michelangelo and his First Biographers

MICHAEL HIRST
Courtauld Institute of Art
Fellow of the Academy

I

I HAVE CHOSEN for my lecture this afternoon the two lives of Michelangelo which appeared in his lifetime, that of Giorgio Vasari which concluded his *Vite* of 1550, and that which appeared three years later by Ascanio Condivi. Despite the very different circumstances of their origins, the two lives are inseparably related. For without the appearance of Vasari's *Life*, the only one of a living and still active artist included in his book, there would have been no *Life* by Condivi. Only Michelangelo's own dissatisfaction with Vasari's account could have overcome his inveterate reticence and prompted him to promote a corrective.

There are reasons for suggesting that Michelangelo had not been very well informed of Vasari's plans prior to publication, but he soon received his copy of the *Vite*, for he was one of twelve men honoured with complimentary copies. His own seems to have arrived in Rome at a

For Nicolai Rubinstein.

Read at the Academy 13 December 1995. © The British Academy 1997.

[The following abbreviations will be used: *Carteggio* = *Il Carteggio di Michelangelo*, eds. P. Barocchi and R. Ristori, vols i–v (Florence, 1965–1983); Frey i = G. Vasari, *Der literarische Nachlass*, ed. K. Frey, i (Munich, 1923); Vasari, *Vite* = G. Vasari, *Le Vite de' più eccellenti pittori scultori e architettori nelle redazioni del 1550 e 1568*, eds. R. Bettarini and P. Barocchi, 6 vols. (Florence 1966–87); *La Vita* 1962 = G. Vasari, *La Vita di Michelangelo nelle redazioni del 1550 e del 1568*, ed. P. Barocchi, 5 vols. (Milan and Naples, 1962); Condivi, *Vita* = Ascanio Condivi, *Vita di Michelagnolo Buonarroti Roma 1553 con postille contemporanee*, ed. G. Nencioni, with preface by M. Hirst and note by C. Elam (Florence, forthcoming).]

moment in the spring of 1550 close to his seventy-fifth birthday. He responded with a sonnet which Vasari would proudly publish in his second edition of 1568; there was probably a brief accompanying note but this has not survived.¹ A few months later, in August, he wrote to Vasari about the plans of the recently elected Pope Julius III for a Del Monte family chapel in Rome. He expresses no specific opinion on the extraordinary achievement of the *Lives*, referring to the book only in a play of words that his biographer was a reviver of the dead and a prolonger of the lives of the living. The tone is one of scarcely concealed irony.²

If we are to believe Vasari, his close relations with the man whom he, like others, calls divine, began a number of years earlier, on an important stay of Vasari's in Rome from 1542 to 1543. He states this in his autobiographical *coda* to the 1568 second edition. At that time, he tells us, Michelangelo showed him great friendship and encouraged Vasari to concentrate on his career as an architect.³ But everything we learn about the intimacy of the two artists from the *Vite* of 1568, published four years after Michelangelo had died, comes from Vasari himself. At the time in question, Vasari had not carried out any architecture. And everything that Vasari writes in his later account about his relations with Michelangelo should be treated with great caution, although, regrettably, this caution is still all too rarely exercised about Vasari even now.⁴ It is my conviction that the episodes we read about in the second edition are, for the most part, dated earlier than

¹ For the text of the sonnet, see Michelangiolo Buonarroti, *Rime*, ed. E. N. Girardi (Bari, 1960), p. 132.

² See *Carteggio*, iv, pp. 346–7, and for an assessment of the context Frey i, pp. 290–4. Vasari included a part of the letter in his 1568 *Life* of the artist. Michelangelo's reference to his biographer as 'risuscitatore d'uomini morti' could be read as a covert allusion to Vasari's description of him as a raiser of the dead in successfully rehabilitating the block for the marble *David* in the 1550 text: 'E certo fu miracolo quello di Michele Angelo, far risuscitare uno ch'era tenuto per morto': Vasari, *Vite*, vi, p. 20.

³ 'Nel medesimo tempo, facendo io gran servitù a Michelangnolo Buonarroti e pigliando da lui parere in tutte le cose mie, egli mi pose per sua bontà molto più affezione: e fu cagione il suo consigliarmi a ciò, per avere veduto alcuni disegni miei, che io mi diedi di nuovo e con miglior modo allo studio delle cose d'architettura . . .': Vasari, *Vite*, vi, p. 383. Vasari's first building project of any consequence was for the future Pope Julius III in 1548; see Frey i, p. 229.

⁴ Vasari's account was accepted at face value by W. Kallab, *Vasaristudien* (Vienna, 1908), p. 72, and is endorsed in P. Rubin, *Giorgio Vasari, Art and History* (New Haven and London, 1995), p. 11, despite an appropriate note of caution struck by Karl Frey: Frey i, p. 123. That Michelangelo could have offered this advice in Rome around 1550 is far more plausible.

they should be. It is, for example, telling that there is no surviving exchange of letters between the two in the 1540s.

Vasari's first securely established meeting with Michelangelo took place early in 1547, just three years before the appearance of his book. The circumstances of the encounter were not auspicious. Vasari had been asked by Benedetto Varchi—many years later the author of Michelangelo's funeral oration—to sound out the great man on the issue of the *paragone*, the rival claims of painting and sculpture. The outcome was not encouraging. Vasari reported back to Varchi that Michelangelo had little to say to him on this still fashionable topic; he had remarked that painting and sculpture shared a common end and that both were very difficult: 'dificilmente operato da uno et dall'altro'. Vasari writes that he could not get another word out of him: 'né altro potrei tra'ne da esso'. The wording of this letter does not suggest a long-established intimacy with Michelangelo.⁵

The two men met frequently from 1550; from, that is, the period after the appearance of the book, for Michelangelo was consultant on the projects which Vasari would now undertake for Pope Julius III. And it is to this time that Vasari assigns (in 1568) his conversations with Michelangelo on artistic issues planned for a never-published dialogue.

This dialogue raises a number of problems best left on one side today. Vasari's dependability on the issue has been much impugned. It is, however, worth pointing out that Vasari, in stating that the conversations took place as the two men rode round the Seven Churches in Rome in the Holy Year of 1550, was employing a literary *topos* already used several years earlier for the circumstances of discussions on art by a man who had taught Vasari for a period in his youth.⁶

⁵ For the different texts and an extensive commentary, see Frey i, pp. 185–93.

⁶ Vasari writes in the second edition *Life of Michelangelo*: 'Era in quel tempo (1550) ogni giorno il Vasari con Michelagnolo; dove una mattina il Papa (Julius III) dispensò per amorevolezza ambidue, che facendo le sette chiese a cavallo, ch'era l'anno santo, ricevissino il perdono a doppio; dove nel farle ebbono fra l'una e l'altra chiesa molti utili e begli ragionamenti dell'arte et industriosi, che'l Vasari ne distese un dialogo, che a migliore occasioni si manderà fuori con altre cose attenente all'arte': Vasari, *Vite*, vi, p. 83. Opinion has been divided over the implications of this passage; there is a useful overview in *La Vita* 1962, iv, p. 1567. Some scholars have accepted the reality of Vasari's intention (no trace of any text has been found), whilst others have argued for a different conclusion, based on a letter of Vasari to Duke Cosimo of April 1560: Frey i, pp. 559–60. In this letter, Vasari writes of his repeated recent meetings with Michelangelo and of their exchanges over the design of the projected new bridge (the 'ponte Santa Trinita') in Florence, and then refers to 'molti ragionamenti fatti delle cose dell'arte per poter finire quel Dialogo che gia Vi lessi, ragionando lui et io insieme.' Frey, followed by others, believed that this was not a 'dialogo

In the early 1550s, Vasari may well have seized the chance to deepen his knowledge of Michelangelo's life. But the situation was never an easy one, for he would become deeply implicated in Duke Cosimo's efforts to entice Michelangelo to return to his native Florence, perhaps the most eagerly sought objective of his artistic programme. The attempt did not succeed but the issues involved cast a shadow over Vasari's relations with the old man and the biographer's mortification emerges in the 1568 *Lives* (when Michelangelo was dead), above all in those laments over Michelangelo's failure to exchange, in Paola Barocchi's words, the purgatory of the Fabbrica of St Peter's for the Medicean paradise which awaited him.⁷ Vasari was also not alone in encountering problems in his attempts to discover how the artist's abandoned Florentine projects should be completed. The San Lorenzo library still lacked its staircase. One or two of Michelangelo's own surviving letters about these issues survive and are at best evasive, at worst obfuscatory.⁸

Put briefly, I think we may conclude that, although Vasari's 1550 *Life of Michelangelo* is the only one of an active artist included in his book, the fact did not play an important part in its composition. Although his subject had been, so to speak, a live target, Vasari had not been in range. There remained further problems for the biographer

michelangiolesco' but the text of one of Vasari's *Ragionamenti*. But this is not very credible. Could the old artist and Vasari have had long discussions about the latter's paintings in Palazzo Vecchio which Michelangelo had never seen? Against Vasari's dependability about a dialogue, one can cite the point I have raised in my text: his adoption of the *topos* of discussions about art whilst engaged in a 'cavalcata'. Pierio Valeriano had only recently employed the same device in his introduction to Book XXVII of his *Hieroglyphica*; here too, the interlocutors visit the Seven Churches on horseback: '. . . A questi giorni santi ultimamente passati . . . essendo venuto per il perdono con esso voi a visitare le sette chiese . . .'. The group proceed to discuss the study of sculpture. See Pierio Valeriano, *I ieroglifici ovvero Comentarj delle occulte significazioni de gl'Egittij e altre nazioni* (Venice, 1625), pp. 58–9; first Latin edition Basle, 1556. Without further evidence, the problem of the alleged dialogue cannot be resolved and Paola Barocchi was justified in leaving the issue open. The fact remains that Vasari does not tell us that the projected dialogue with Michelangelo concerned his own work; if it had, his reticence is uncharacteristic.

⁷ See *La Vita* 1962, p. xxx, where a letter of Michelangelo's is cited referring to Rome as the 'avara Babilonia', echoing Petrarch.

⁸ Vasari eventually took on the task, earlier assumed by Niccolò Tribolo, following the latter's death in 1550. For Michelangelo's vagueness, see his letter to his nephew Leonardo of 28 September 1555, or that of the same moment to Vasari in which he writes: 'Mi ritorna bene nella mente come un sogno una certa iscala, ma non credo che sia a punto quella che io pensai allora, perché mi torna cosa ghoffa . . .': *Carteggio*, v, pp. 45–8.

engendered by Michelangelo's very longevity. Some of the benefits which might have been expected to accrue from dealing with a living man were absent because, for the artist's distant youth, those familiar with events were long since dead. For example, only one of Vasari's close Florentine friends involved in the preparation of the *Lives* was even alive when Michelangelo began the marble *David* in 1501.⁹ It is to this aspect of Vasari's situation, lack of personal knowledge, that Condivi most damagingly refers in his subsequent account (although Vasari is never specifically named). And it was this charge of Condivi's which led, in turn, to the introduction of autobiographical accretions in the revised Vasari *Life* of 1568, a number of which are complete fictions.¹⁰ Indeed, it may have been the very nature of Condivi's book, devoted exclusively to Michelangelo, that led Vasari to take the remarkable step of issuing his enormously expanded 1568 *Vita* as a separate publication, with the same pagination but with its own dedication, something which has been claimed as the first offprint in the history of printing.¹¹

Vasari seems to have completed the manuscript of the Michelangelo *Vita* in the middle of 1547. He succeeded in reporting the artist's appointment as head of the Fabbrica of St Peter's but missed the correct

⁹ This was Pierfrancesco Giambullari, who was born in 1495. Another significant collaborator, Cosimo Bartoli, was born as late as 1503. However, it is worth noting that his father, Matteo Bartoli, had known Michelangelo and in 1518 had sought to find him a *cantiere* where he could construct a workshop. See the artist's letter to Cardinal Giulio de' Medici, undated but of the autumn: *Carteggio* ii, p. 109. This working space is for 'questa opera, cioè le figure di marmo e di bronzo . . .'. E. H. Ramsden, in *The Letters of Michelangelo* (London, 1963), i, pp. 278–9, redated the letter to 1521 and identified the project with the New Sacristy at San Lorenzo. But no bronze statues were envisaged for the chapel, whereas they were explicitly planned in the 1518 contract for the church façade; see G. Milanesi, *Le Lettere di Michelangelo Buonarroti . . .* (Florence, 1875), p. 671. Given Matteo Bartoli's known competence as a bronze founder, Michelangelo could well have seen him as a future collaborator.

¹⁰ Vasari's most transparent attempt to rebut Condivi's strictures is his claim in the 1568 *Vita* that much of his 1550 information had come from Michelangelo himself: '. . . dove molti ricordi di cose aveva avuto dalla voce sua il Vasari . . .': Vasari, *Vite*, vi, p. 83. The autobiography is, of course, even more self-assertive. But Kallab, *Vasaristudien*, pp. 24–5, whilst discrediting Vasari's claim to have studied with the master, did not appreciate how large a part Condivi's book had played in the adjustments of 1568.

¹¹ I owe this suggestion to an unidentified participant in a seminar held at the Villa Spellman, Florence, in April 1995. For the offprint, see U. Procacci, in *Giorgio Vasari. Principi, letterati e artisti nelle carte di Giorgio Vasari . . . , Pittura vasariana dal 1532 al 1554 . . .*, exhibition Arezzo 1981 (Florence, 1981), pp. 284–5. For the claim that it is the first of its kind, see B. H. Breslauer in *The Book Collector*, vi (1957), p. 403.

subject of Michelangelo's second mural in the Pauline Chapel (preparations for which were already under way in 1546). As is well known, both Paolo Giovio and Annibale Caro were reading parts of the manuscript of the *Vite* before the end of 1547. Whilst encouraging, neither could help very substantially with information about Michelangelo, least of all about his early years. Giovio had written a very brief account of the artist many years earlier, a manuscript not published until the eighteenth century. It comprised only thirty printed lines and, despite the friendship, it is clear that Vasari had not read it.¹² Caro, about whom I will have more to say later, a man of exceptional literary culture, was not an historian. From his letter to Vasari he seems to have been chiefly concerned with style; he exhorts Vasari (without total success) to write simply.¹³

Vasari's errors and omissions in his *Life of Michelangelo* of 1550 are very conspicuous. And while one school of modern art history would consider censure of them anachronistic, that cannot have been the view of the subject himself. Indeed, both the existence of *Condivi's* book and the contents of its text demonstrate that Michelangelo read his birthday present (or at least that part pertaining to himself) rather carefully. The mistakes are, not surprisingly, especially grave over the early years. Vasari states that Michelangelo had been born in Florence. More seriously, he was completely unaware of the young man's stay in Bologna in 1494–5 after the expulsion of the Medici. It is an episode to which, surely at the artist's instance, *Condivi* devotes special attention in his own book.¹⁴ Vasari seems to have had little chance to study the very early sculpture in Florence; nowhere

¹² For the most accessible text, see *Scritti d'Arte del Cinquecento*, i, ed. P. Barocchi (Milan and Naples, 1971), pp. 10–12. Both Karl Frey and W. Kallab noted that Giovio's text was unknown to Vasari. It is, for example, telling that whilst Giovio refers to Cardinal Riario's part in the episode of the sleeping *Cupid*, Vasari makes no reference to him in his 1550 text.

¹³ For this much-discussed letter of 15 December 1547, see Frey i, pp. 209–10 and Frey's own comments, pp. 210–13. Caro's most familiar remark is that the written word should conform to the spoken one: 'In un'opera simile vorrei la scrittura apunto come il parlare.'

¹⁴ Vasari's ignorance of Michelangelo's statues on the Arca of San Domenico is noteworthy, the more so as he elsewhere states that, prior to starting work in San Michele in Bosco in mid-summer 1539, he was shown all the most famous paintings in Bologna; see Vasari, *Vite*, vi, p. 378. The *lacuna* could be construed as evidence that Vasari was as yet not collecting material for a future book, although the energy he devoted to familiarising himself with paintings in Bolognese private houses might point to a contrary conclusion. Vasari himself refers to the Arca in 1550, but limits himself to noting the small narrative reliefs of Alfonso Lombardo; there is no word about the sculpture of Niccolò dell'Arca either.

mentioned is so conspicuous an example of Michelangelo's early skills as *The Battle of the Centaurs*, which may have been accessible.¹⁵ But the text contains misunderstanding of a much more serious kind. Michelangelo's notorious flight from the court of Pope Julius II in 1506, the prelude to the tragedy of the papal tomb, is placed by Vasari midway through work on the Sistine Chapel ceiling, a consequence of a quarrel between patron and artist over a visit of the pope to the chapel. Thus, its part in the story of the Della Rovere monument is altogether obscured. We find an extraordinary and vivid recital of the episode, culminating in the artist's flight to Poggibonsi, in Condivi's book of three years later.¹⁶ But deficiencies extend to many periods of the *Life*: witness the statement that Michelangelo had returned to Florence only after the siege of the city had ended in 1530—a confusion which might have been construed as sparing the artist a highly embarrassing episode but which Condivi's subsequent account would, in a fashion, amend. Almost every omission and error would be made good in the amplified *Life* of 1568 in a feat of astonishingly massive revision.¹⁷

We should, however, note that Vasari did not wish, or did not have the time, to change the most lengthy passages of what we may call stylistic appreciation between his two editions, even in a rather sensitive context like his long evaluation of the *Last Judgement*, a work which had acquired an ever greater notoriety in the intervening period. Some of the most familiar passages, like that on Michelangelo's

¹⁵ Vasari correctly assigns Michelangelo's work on the never-completed *St Matthew* to the early Florentine years of the sixteenth century: Vasari, *Vite*, vi, pp. 21–2. His misunderstanding revealed elsewhere about the Florentine Cathedral *Apostles* commission suggests that the information in the Michelangelo *Vita* came from someone else and was never reconciled with the misinformation we are given in the *Life* of Andrea Ferrucci: *Vite*, iv, p. 257. Here he dates the *Apostles* commission to the end of the second decade of the sixteenth century (after Cardinal Giulio de' Medici had assumed power in Florence) and states that Benedetto da Maiano (d. 1497), the young Jacopo Sansovino, Michelangelo, Baccio Bandinelli, and Ferrucci were each assigned an *Apostle* at the same time, a confusion made worse in the second edition.

¹⁶ For Vasari's confusion, see *Vite*, vi, pp. 35–6. He corrected himself, in the light of Condivi, in the 1568 Michelangelo *Vita*. But he had recounted a similar story in the 1550 *Life of Raphael* and this he completely failed to change in the second edition. I have relegated to a brief appendix observations on Vasari's statement that Pope Julius II had also wanted the artist to paint the walls of the Sistine Chapel.

¹⁷ Although it is repeatedly stressed, reasonably enough, that Vasari's decision to end his 1550 *Vite* with Michelangelo's *Life* emphasises its unique and privileged place in his history, it is worth noting that, in terms of length, the *Vita* is not much longer than that of Raphael.

architectural licence in the New Sacristy, could scarcely have been altered for the better, but here we confront the problem of how far a passage such as this is, in effect, the work of a collaborator.¹⁸ Such extended and ambitious evocations of Michelangelo's achievements were not Condivi's chief concern; they were not, to put it differently, the issues foremost in Michelangelo's mind when he promoted the publication of a very different book in 1553.

II

Whilst we know a great deal about Vasari, about Condivi we are very poorly informed. Had he not written the book that here concerns us, he would—at best—have warranted a footnote as a frequenter of Michelangelo's circle and workshop and as the recipient of an exceptional present from the master, a cartoon which Condivi endeavoured to translate into a painting on panel. Both cartoon and painting survive, the former in the British Museum, the latter in the Casa Buonarroti.¹⁹ Probably born in 1524 or 1525, Ascanio Condivi came from Ripatransone in the Marche. The circumstances in which he moved to Rome are still frustratingly obscure, but it is probable that he was there by 1546 at the latest. Ripatransone was in the papal states and Condivi's later career shows that he occasionally visited the city on business relating to his birthplace.²⁰ In his book, he states that Cardinal Niccolò Ridolfi was his Roman patron and it was almost certainly in the circle of Ridolfi that he met the subject of the future book. Prominent in the household was Donato Giannotti, both confidant of the cardinal and a good friend of Michelangelo's. Michelangelo's familiarity with Giannotti may have extended back to 1520 in Florence and was almost certainly renewed in

¹⁸ The vocabulary employed, the actual word order (for example the sequence 'misura, ordine e regola'), and the conceptual framework, suggest that this canonical piece was written not by Vasari himself but by Cosimo Bartoli; but the proposal cannot be elaborated on here.

¹⁹ For the cartoon, see J. Wilde, *Italian Drawings in the Department of Prints and Drawings in the British Museum, Michelangelo and his Studio* (London, 1953), pp. 114–6. Condivi's painting, now in bad condition and heavily repainted, is reproduced in C. de Tolnay, *Michelangelo, The Final Period* (Princeton, 1960), pl. 333. It came late into the Casa Buonarroti collection and its early history remains completely obscure.

²⁰ The most useful biographical study of Condivi remains C. Grigioni, *Ascanio Condivi, la vita e le opere* (Ascoli Piceno, 1908). Much of the material in a more recent book, G. Settimo's *Ascanio Condivi, biografo di Michelangelo* (Ascoli Piceno, 1975), derives from the earlier work.

the brief period of the last Florentine republic.²¹ Giannotti played a role in the drawing up of the final contract for the tomb of Julius II in 1542. More significantly, he was the author of two dialogues concerning Dante's journey through Hell, in both of which Michelangelo is cast as one of the interlocutors.²² Unlike the artist, but like his protector Ridolfi, Giannotti was a declared rebel, one of that group of Florentine *fuorusciti* who enjoyed the passive protection of Pope Paul III and the friendship of Michelangelo.²³

Condivi's stay in Rome did not long outlast the appearance of the *Life* in the late summer of 1553; two years later he was back in the Marches.²⁴ Nevertheless, he could be described as upwardly mobile; in 1555 he married no less than the niece of the celebrated Annibale Caro, who had offered stylistic advice to Giorgio Vasari in 1547. The re-emergence of Caro's name here is significant. For, once one has held in one's hand the surviving letters of Condivi, the conclusion is inescapable that he was incapable of writing the text of the 1553 *Life* as we now read it in print. The contrast between his epistolary skills and the book

²¹ A biography of Giannotti does not exist. For a useful profile, see R. von Albertini, *Firenze dalla repubblica al principato* (Turin, 1970), pp. 145–166 (1st ed., *Das florentinische Staatsbewusstsein im Übergang von der Republik zum Prinzipat* (Bern, 1955)). There are several important contributions by R. Ridolfi; most useful here is his 'Sommario della vita di Donato Giannotti' in *Opuscoli di storia letteraria e di erudizione* (Florence, 1942), pp. 55–164. There is further important material in R. Starn, *Donato Giannotti and his Epistolae* (Geneva, 1968).

²² The best available edition of the dialogues (first published only in 1859) is *Dialogi di Donato Giannotti*, ed. Redig de Campos (Florence, 1939).

²³ For the group, still awaiting a detailed study, see Ridolfi's *Opuscoli*, pp. 132 *et seq.* Giannotti had served as secretary to the Dieci in the last republic, was subsequently exiled and moved to Rome and Ridolfi's circle in 1539. Absent from Rome from 1543 to 1545, he remained close to Michelangelo. It is likely that he and Luigi del Riccio planned an edition of the artist's poetry which fell through after the latter's death in 1546. It was Luigi who wrote the letter to Roberto Strozzi in July 1544, reporting the artist's offer to make at his own expense an equestrian bronze statue of Francis I for the Piazza della Signoria if the French king would liberate Florence from Medicean rule: *Carteggio*, iv, pp. 183–4).

²⁴ It has been claimed that Condivi was elected to the Accademia Fiorentina in September 1565; D. Summers, *Michelangelo and the Language of Art* (Princeton, 1981), pp. 24 and 465, n. 48. The new member was called 'M. Aschanio da Ripa' (Florence, Biblioteca Marucelliana, Codice B III 54, 15^r). However, this same Aschanio played a very active role as member in 1566 and 1567 (see 16^v, 22^v, 23^r) when, as shown by Grigioni, pp. 24 *et seq.* and 123 *et seq.*, Condivi was busy as property purchaser, painter, and local administrator in Ripatransone. It would seem that the identification must be abandoned.

was already clear to Gaetano Milanesi in the nineteenth century.²⁵ More recently, Johannes Wilde adduced a number of reasons why Caro is likely to have acted as reviser—or even ‘ghost writer’. Indeed, in a neglected aside, he went so far as to call Condivi ‘the ostensible author of the book’.²⁶ He listed a number of points indicating Caro’s involvement. Caro is described as having recently become a friend of the artist, although no independent record of this friendship exists. His name is included alongside those of Bembo, Sannazaro, and Vittoria Colonna as one of the best poets to have taken Petrarch as a model. Condivi would marry Caro’s niece two years after the appearance of the book. The simplicity of the style of the *Vita* also conforms closely to Caro’s own literary prescription given to Vasari in 1547, referred to above. Further, a letter of Caro’s of August 1553, to which I will return, shows his familiarity with Condivi’s text.²⁷ Other points could be added. It is important to recall that both Caro and Condivi came from the same area of Italy, the Marche.²⁸ And the inclusion of the name of Giovanni Guidiccioni among the poets who follow Petrarch, which seems to have puzzled Wilde, goes even further to strengthen the case, for Guidiccioni had been one of Caro’s most esteemed early patrons.²⁹

A close comparison of the text of the *Vita* with comparable texts of Caro has not yet been undertaken, although the appearance of a critical edition of Condivi’s book now allows a detailed philological analysis.³⁰

²⁵ G. Milanesi, ‘Alcune lettere di Ascanio Condivi e di altri a messer Lorenzo Ridolfi’, *Il Buonarroti*, 2nd ser., III (1868), pp. 206–13. They were reprinted on pp. 73–5 of Grigioni’s book (see above n. 20). All four were written in the summer and early autumn of 1551. One is now missing, but another, not mentioned by Milanesi, of 4 July 1551, exists: the group is in the Archivio di Stato, Florence, Acquisti e Doni, 67, Insert 1). Milanesi, on the evidence of their ‘grande rozzezza di stile’, concluded that the Michelangelo *Vita* had been worked over by a collaborator, and although he did not name Caro, subsequent editors of the *Life* assumed that this was in his mind. A letter of Condivi’s to Michelangelo from the Marche, similarly ill-written, also survives (*Carteggio*, v, p. 61; there dated May 1556 with a query).

²⁶ J. Wilde, *Michelangelo, Six Lectures* (Oxford, 1978), p. 8.

²⁷ This letter of Caro’s, of 20 August 1553, for which see A. Caro, *Lettere Familiari*, ed. A. Greco, ii (Florence, 1959), pp. 147–8, explains that he has delayed writing because he was awaiting the appearance of the *Vita*. Wilde inferred from the letter that Caro knew its contents prior to publication, but a doubt must remain, for Condivi’s *Life* appeared in two slightly different issues, the later one incorporating significant additions. Both issues have the same title-page with the date 16 July 1553.

²⁸ Condivi’s marriage to Porzia Caro actually took place in the Marche, at Civitanova, from where the Caro family originated.

²⁹ Caro had been briefly in Guidiccioni’s service from 1539 to 1540; for his grief at his death, see *Lettere Familiari*, i (1957), pp. 240–247. Caro had actually served as ‘revisore’ of his patron’s *Canzoniere* at the author’s wish.

³⁰ See Condivi, *Vita*.

In fact, only one prose text can usefully serve, Caro's translation of Longo Sofista's *Amori pastorali di Dafni e di Cloe*, a narrative where the parallels of construction and vocabulary are very striking. However, it is worth adding here that one highly idiosyncratic usage in the book, the adoption of 'corna delle lunette' in the long description of the Sistine ceiling, finds a remarkable parallel in Caro's well-known letter to Taddeo Zuccaro of 1562 concerning the projected murals at Caprarola. When he turns to the lunettes, Caro uses 'corni' and 'corno' repeatedly.³¹

That it was Condivi who accumulated the material for the *Vita* is not in doubt; that it was Annibale Caro who fashioned or refashioned its presentation to the reading public is, if not proven, extremely probable. We can note that Condivi, in the title of the book, '*Vita . . . raccolta per Ascanio Condivi*', is described as the collector or assembler, and while the choice of word is not decisive, it is nevertheless noteworthy. His claim to familiarity, his 'stretta dimestichezza', with the subject of the book, strongly pressed in the dedication to the reader, is beyond doubt, as is the claim to have collected his material with great patience from the master himself, 'dal vivo oraculo suo'. Even in this dedication, the polemic with Vasari is implicit, as has been long recognised.³²

Condivi declares his aim is twofold: to record the life and to record the work. He wishes to set the record straight; and here we at once enter into the world of ambiguity which surrounds Condivi's text, an ambiguity veiled by its seemingly simple language, plain narrative structure and the 'ostensible' author's own disclaimers. In a way entirely different from Vasari's partial survey, Condivi's account too is a very incomplete one despite its fascinating detail. In taking the opportunity to correct and make good Vasari's *Life* of 1550, the aim behind the book was biographical self-vindication, a literary act of *ex post facto* self-protection, one above all else (as long recognised) concerned to clear the artist's name over the protracted saga of his failure to complete the tomb of Pope Julius II who had died in 1513, exactly forty years before the appearance of Condivi's *apologia*.

That this was the overriding concern which lay behind the publication of the book is confirmed by the letter of 20 August 1553 written by Caro to a member of the court of Urbino, followed by a second one

³¹ For Condivi's usage, see *ibid.*, p. 30. For Caro's employment of 'corni' and 'corno' see *Lettere Familiari*, iii (1961), pp. 132, 136, 137, and 138. As pointed out to me by Giulio Lepschy, Caro and Condivi are uniquely credited with this usage in an architectural context in the Cinquecento; see S. Battaglia, *Grande Dizionario della Lingua Italiana*, iii (Turin, 1964), p. 790, no. 20.

³² See Condivi, *Vita*, p. 4.

dated 17 November, after the book had been read in Della Rovere circles.³³ The earlier refers to the text's emphasis on the story of the tomb, and Michelangelo's explanations for its protracted history, his 'giustificazioni'. Caro concedes that much can be said against the artist, alludes to the role which successive popes had played in holding up progress with the project, and asks that Duke Guidobaldo della Rovere pardon him, 'e sarà cagione di prolungar la vita a quest'uomo singolare e anco di renderlo consolatissimo . . .'.³⁴ The second letter again refers to the responsibility of others, the dead pope's executors, and two successive popes whom Michelangelo had served against his will, 'come esso dice, contra sua voglià'.³⁵ In both, Caro acts as mediator between the artist, close to his eightieth birthday, and the still unappeased Duke of Urbino. He implicitly confirms that the *Condivi* text is a *pièce justificative*.

We need not review here what the book refers to so unforgettably as 'la tragedia della sepultura', or the repeated charges of financial bad faith which had been levelled at the artist in both private and public. His unease over his vulnerability to such accusations is reflected in letters written decades before the appearance of the book. The issue continued to haunt him and his predicament became almost unbearably acute in the period immediately following the completion of the *Last Judgement* in the autumn of 1541. The long delay of Duke Guidobaldo della Rovere in ratifying what would prove to be the final contract between the family and the artist coincided with Pope Paul III's insistence that he proceed with painting in his recently completed chapel. In 1542, Michelangelo came close to breakdown and his desperation is manifest in the text of a letter of October, in which he declares, in a passionate *coda*, that all his troubles had been created by Bramante and Raphael, both dead for decades.³⁶ The crisis continued, as a notorious letter of Pietro Aretino to Michelangelo of 1545, later to be published, clearly shows. Duke Guidobaldo remained unreconciled.³⁷

³³ For the earlier, *Lettere Familiari*, ii, pp. 153–4.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 147–8.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 153.

³⁶ *Carteggio*, iv, pp. 150–5.

³⁷ Aretino's text is printed in *La Vita* 1962, iii, pp. 1260–2. Frustrated in his attempts to get a work out of the artist, Aretino writes: 'Ma se il tesoro, lasciatovi da Giulio acciò si collocassero le sue reliquie nel vaso dei vostri intagli, non è stato bastante a far che gli osserviate la promessa, che posso però sperare io?' *Condivi*'s own repeated employment of the word 'infamia' when he turns to the tomb is very striking. We find it in the passage concerned with events following Julius's death (*Condivi, Vita*, p. 36), in the discussion of the situation after Clement VII's summons of the artist to Rome after 1530 (*ibid.*, p. 44), and again when he describes the final stage of the 'tragedia' where he writes: 'E questo è quel di che Michelagnolo si duole, che in luogo di grazia se gli veniva, n'abbia riportato odio e acquistato infamia' (*ibid.*, pp. 48–9).

Condivi's story is less the triumphalistic one of Vasari than that of an artist forever battling against adversity. There emerges from the later book the picture of a man consistently diverted from his true goal, less the protean creator than an agonised victim, surrounded by foes at the papal court when painting the Sistine ceiling, confronted by plaster that grows mould, wracked by physical discomfort, tormented by the incessant plotting of Raphael and the ceaseless importunities of Pope Julius. One or two passages in the book appear to reflect Michelangelo's letters written years earlier, and it seems possible that Condivi had access to copies.³⁸

Vasari, writing his *Vita* in the later 1540s, had shown no understanding of the significance of the history of the tomb for the artist; indeed his account is extremely vague.³⁹ The story of the project runs so insistently through Condivi's book that, when he reaches the final phase, he actually apologises for dwelling on the subject at such length.⁴⁰

But the issue of the tomb colours many other aspects of the *Vita*. On each occasion when Michelangelo takes on a new assignment, Condivi reports his deep unwillingness to proceed. One exceptionally striking example is the passage where he turns to the façade of San Lorenzo, assigned to Michelangelo by Pope Leo X and Cardinal Giulio de' Medici. The book dwells on his profound reluctance to accept the commission. We are told that the artist left Rome for Florence in 1516 grieving over being diverted from the tomb, 'piangendo'. We cannot reconcile the picture here presented with the artist's appropriation of the entire project for himself. His biographer goes so far as to stress that Michelangelo was compelled to shoulder the whole burden alone, '... sopra di se tutto quel peso . . .'. Yet there survives an angry letter of Jacopo Sansovino to the artist remonstrating with him over his

³⁸ For this portrayal as agonised hero, I am indebted to Paola Barocchi in *La Vita*, 1962, pp. XXV–VI.

³⁹ Wilde recognised that some of Vasari's remarks must have especially wounded the artist (*Six Lectures*, p. 12). Vasari even confuses Guidobaldo della Rovere with Francesco Maria.

⁴⁰ It has been suggested that Condivi introduced an erroneous statement that 'Prigioni' were planned for the project of 1505, an error sanctioned by the artist himself (see J. Shearman in A. Esch and C.L. Frommel (eds.), *Arte, Committenza ed Economia a Roma e nelle Corti del Rinascimento* (Milan, 1995), pp. 224 and 240, n. 34). However, this ignores the fact that Vasari had referred to 'Prigioni' for the first project in his own text of three years earlier, an account which cannot have been known to the artist himself before publication.

brutal exclusion of the younger sculptor from any share in the gigantic programme of statues.⁴¹

Again, episodes are mobilised to drive home the same message. Some of these are wonderfully vivid, such as that of the visit of Pope Paul III and a group of cardinals to the workshop at Macello de'Corvi just after the death of Clement VII in 1534. Paul is insistent that Michelangelo must continue with the project of painting of the *Last Judgement* on the altar wall of the Sistine Chapel. Cardinal Ercole Gongaza is reported to have remarked that the *Moses* alone was a sufficient honour for Julius II's tomb.⁴² These details certainly came from the artist himself and do not strike one as invention. But the apologetic context is unmistakable. Michelangelo had been the prisoner of the popes, a thesis to which Caro returns in his letters of 1553. We are encountering the myth of the reluctant Michelangelo presented in his pupil's pages.

Despite the idiosyncrasies of the book, Condivi's narrative is dense with important information, much of it absent from any other early source and, of course, subsequently ruthlessly exploited by Vasari for his 1568 *Vita*. Particularly rich is his account of Michelangelo's youth, an emphasis certainly owing to Vasari's many *lacunae*. As already remarked, the book dwells at length on the young man's stay in Bologna. Whilst the dependability of Condivi's information is now frequently disparaged, much of it concerning Michelangelo's youth can be confirmed.⁴³ His remarks about the chronology of the Sistine ceiling, although persistently rejected by almost all modern art

⁴¹ For Condivi's account, see *ibid.*, pp. 36–7. For Sansovino's letter, see *Carteggio*, i, p. 291, where he bitterly remarks: 'E non mi ero avisto anchora che voi non faciesti mai bene a nessuno . . .'. Michelangelo's insistence here on presenting his own record of events must have been given greater urgency by Vasari's acute and antagonising comment, in his *Life* of 1550, that it was precisely his exclusion of collaborators which led to the consequent failure of the undertaking: 'Laonde Michele Agnolo si risolse di fare un modello e non volere altro che lui, in tal cosa, superiore o guida dell'architettura. Ma questo non volere aiuto fu cagione che né egli né altri operasse . . .'; Vasari, *Vite*, vi, p. 51.

⁴² Condivi, *Vita*, pp. 46–7.

⁴³ It has recently been stated that, outside of Vasari's and Condivi's accounts, there exists no evidence of the direct youthful association of the artist with Lorenzo de' Medici; P. Barolsky and W. E. Wallace, 'The Myth of Michelangelo and il Magnifico' in *Source: Notes in the History of Art*, XII, 3 (1993), pp. 17–19; repeated in P. Barolsky, *The Faun in the Garden* (Philadelphia, 1994), p. 102. Yet for other evidence we need look no further than Sebastiano del Piombo's letter to Michelangelo of 27 October 1520, where he recounts how Pope Leo X (son of Lorenzo and exactly the same age as the artist) spoke of his being brought up with Michelangelo: '. . . et quando parla di vui par rasoni de un suo fratello, quassi con le lacrime agli ochii, perché m'a decto a me vui sette nutriti insieme . . .': *Carteggio*, ii, p. 253.

historians, has, again, been confirmed by the recent restoration, even to the detail that Michelangelo began the histories with the scene of the *Flood*.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, we need to remain on guard. Domenico Ghirlandaio is dismissed as of no significance and Bertoldo's name in connection with the garden of San Marco is suppressed. Such silences owe to Michelangelo's wish to present himself as an autodidact—the pupil of nobody. Of necessity, given the circumstances, Condivi was dependant on one source alone. Again, the persistent concern with money must also come from the artist. We are told repeatedly how much the artist was paid for his works, a reflection of the old artist's anxiety about the fragility of his reputation.⁴⁵

Another aspect of the book concerns the issue of the *non-finito*. We have only to open any illustrated account to be at once confronted by it. Michelangelo's chronic failure to finish his carvings had become, by the 1540s, a truth generally perceived, and preoccupation was not confined to the court of Urbino. Writing to Pierluigi Farnese at Piacenza in 1545, a member of the papal court close to Paul III unflatteringly describes both Michelangelo's obsessive concern to hold on to his income from the revenues derived from the River Po and to his failure to complete his projects: ' . . . non vuol lavorare l'opere cominciate'.⁴⁶

Most of Michelangelo's significant unfinished sculptures are omitted from Condivi's *Vita*. The only major exceptions are the *St Matthew* and the statues in the New Sacristy at San Lorenzo. We hear nothing about the two *tondi* begun for Bartolommeo Pitti and Taddeo Taddei, an omission all the stranger in that Vasari had referred to both of them in his *Life* of three years earlier. Vasari had, we may notice, specifically referred to their incomplete state: ' . . . abbozzò e non finì due tondi di marmo . . .'.⁴⁷ Yet Condivi mentions, albeit with a confusion over the medium, the group of *Virgin and Child* of the same period as far away as Bruges. The group for the Mouschron, however, unlike the *tondi*, had been brought to the pitch of perfection at which Michelangelo aimed for his carvings. Many of the unfinished works were left out, it seems safe

⁴⁴ Condivi correctly states that half the vault had been painted when work broke off in 1510 and was revealed the following year. For his remark about the *Deluge*, see Condivi, *Vita*, p. 33, and for recent confirmation, F. Mancinelli in *La Cappella Sistina: la volta restaurata: il trionfo del colore* (Novara, 1992), p. 52.

⁴⁵ Condivi's remarks about what had been paid and spent in working on the pope's tomb are not persuasive. His statement that Michelangelo had spent all of the thousand ducats initially provided for materials at Carrara during Julius's lifetime is untrue.

⁴⁶ For the text of this extraordinary letter, see *La Vita* 1962, iii, p. 1463–4.

⁴⁷ Vasari, *Vite*, vi, pp. 21–2.

to conclude, because they were unfinished; whatever they may represent for modern admirers of the *non-finito*, for the artist they constituted failure. In other words, whereas Vasari's omissions in 1550 owe primarily to ignorance, Condivi's are deliberate and contrived.⁴⁸

Perhaps Condivi's silence about the bust of Brutus can be explained in the same way; but in the case of this exceptionally strange omission, other considerations may have come into play. The bust was carried close to completion by Michelangelo, and was subsequently worked on by Tiberio Calcagni. We know that the work was undertaken for Cardinal Niccolò Ridolfi, the moral leader of the exiles implacably opposed to Duke Cosimo's regime and the man whom Condivi refers to as his own patron. Thus, the *Brutus* must have been known to the biographer.⁴⁹ The work is still most frequently dated in the late 1530s and related to the murder of Duke Alessandro de' Medici by his cousin Lorenzino, hailed as a new Brutus, in January 1537. The event was celebrated by the Florentine republicans whose hopes were subsequently to be cruelly dashed by the success of Cosimo. Nearly a hundred years ago, however, it was suggested that Michelangelo made the bust not to commemorate the assassination of the hated Alessandro, characterised in Condivi's text as 'feroce e vendicativo', but to honour the memory of the man who had done the deed, Lorenzino, himself cut down by Cosimo's agents outside San Polo in Venice in February 1548.⁵⁰

This is an attractive idea, but another proposal is more plausible. Roberto Ridolfi suggested that this enigmatic sculpture could date from

⁴⁸ Condivi's most striking misstatement is over the identity of the true patron of the *Bacchus*, see, for this, M. Hirst and J. Dunkerton, *Making and Meaning: The Young Michelangelo* (London, 1994), p. 29.

⁴⁹ That the *Brutus* was made for Ridolfi is stated by Vasari in the 1568 *Life* (*Vite*, vi, p. 104). This is confirmed by no less than the artist himself, in one of a series of comments he would later make on Condivi's text, discussed below, p. 80. Michelangelo is recorded as saying that 'per lui [i.e. Ridolfi] incominciò quella testa di quel Bruto che li donai'; see U. Procacci, 'Postille contemporanee in un esemplare della vita di Michelangiolo del Condivi,' in *Atti del Convegno di Studi Michelangioleschi* (Rome, 1966), pp. 279–94; the reference to *Brutus* on p. 292). Condivi's silence is even stranger when we recall that he himself was involved in making a bronze bust of Sulla for the cardinal's brother, Lorenzo. See the letters published by Milanesi cited above, n. 25.

⁵⁰ For this proposal, see F. Portheim, 'Beiträge zu den Werken Michelangelo's,' in *Repertorium für Kunstwissenschaft*, XII (1889), pp. 150–5. There are no strong grounds for dating Michelangelo's *Brutus* around 1539. Its block-like forms are, in fact, close to those of the 'Florentine Duomo' *Pietà* begun in the second half of the 1540s. The date of 1539 seems to have derived from the fact of Giannotti's arrival in Rome in that year.

the period when Giannotti composed his two dialogues to which I have already referred, in both of which Michelangelo makes an appearance. The second dialogue is substantially devoted to the topic of Dante's merciless treatment of Brutus in the *Inferno*, a long-standing problem for Florentine republicans since Landino's commentary on the poem. In the second edition of 1568, Vasari (who evidently knew nothing about the bust when preparing his 1550 text), even goes so far as to state that Michelangelo made the *Brutus* for Cardinal Ridolfi at Giannotti's instance.⁵¹

Roberto Ridolfi's suggested date of around 1546 for the dialogues and the bust could explain why the artist broke off work on it and why Condivi maintained his silence about it in the *Vita*. For a letter of Michelangelo's of October 1547, addressed to his nephew Leonardo in Florence, makes it very unlikely that the *Brutus* was begun after this date and at the same time accounts for its incomplete state. In this astonishing letter, Michelangelo disavows every connection with his closest Florentine friends in Rome, the *fuorusciti* who lived in constant danger from the agents of Duke Cosimo. It is a letter of amazing and even shocking disclaimers, one for the most part kept at arm's-length by the artist's biographers. Michelangelo has never had the hospitality of Filippo Strozzi's house when gravely ill; he has, indeed, only reluctantly (if at all) acknowledged the greetings of Florentines in the street. Yet this panic was not groundless; the letter is in reply to one of Leonardo's reporting imminent new moves on Duke Cosimo's part against the exiles.⁵² In the light of this letter, I would suggest that the

⁵¹ Ridolfi (*Opuscoli*, pp. 128 *et seq.*) proposed a connection between Giannotti's composition of his two dialogues and the making of the bust. He argued for a date of around March 1546 for the dialogues and suggested that they could have been planned for the artist's seventieth birthday and that the sculpture could have been the artist's reciprocal present to his friends. He did not, however, completely exclude that the bust might have commemorated Lorenzino (*ibid.*, p. 130, n. 2). He persuasively reaffirmed the date for the dialogues in 'Antonio Petrei, letterato e bibliofilo del Cinquecento,' *La Bibliofilia*, XLIX (1943), p. 53. Unfortunately, D. J. Gordon, 'Giannotti, Michelangelo and the cult of Brutus,' in Fritz Saxl (1890–1948) *A Volume of Memorial Essays* . . . (London, 1957), pp. 281–96, did not know Ridolfi's arguments and his piece remains inconclusive. They have been given weight by T. Martin, 'Michelangelo's *Brutus* and the Classicizing Portrait Bust in Sixteenth-Century Italy', *Artibus et Historiae*, XXVII (1993), pp. 67–83.

⁵² For the letter, *Carteggio*, iv, pp. 279–80. Dangerously ill in the summer of 1544, Michelangelo had been taken to Palazzo Strozzi to be nursed back to health in the rooms of Luigi del Riccio. The palace was in the Via de'Banchi and probably occupied part of the present-day Palazzo Niccolini. A notarial act involving the artist had been drawn up in Strozzi's courtyard as recently as March 1545; see E. Rufini, *Michelangelo e la Colonia*

artist abandoned work on the *Brutus*, so pregnant a political symbol, not for the bizarre reason offered by its later inscription, but because of fear. We may note that Lorenzino's murder followed Michelangelo's letter by no more than four months.

Condivi's suppression of the *Brutus* brings us back once more to the dependence of the biographer on the artist, and raises the last issue to which it is possible to allude here, the issue of how far the text accurately reflects Michelangelo's own words. For Karl Frey, Condivi's little book was literally an autobiography, 'seine Selbstbiographie'.⁵³ Despite the manifold reflections of Michelangelo's wishes and evasions I have tried to indicate today, I hesitate to endorse completely Frey's judgement. Frey had no chance, as we have, to take account of a remarkable fact, first revealed by Ugo Procacci in the 1960s, that Michelangelo, at a later date, made his own criticisms of and corrections to the *Vita* of his *discepolo*. Written into the pages of a copy of the *editio princeps* which Procacci owned, these marginal comments reflect how the old man regarded the text he had inspired. These *postille*, written in a cultivated hand which has still not yielded the secret of its identity, are quite varied in character. Some are relatively trivial corrections, some of great importance, some vividly indicative of the old artist's exasperation, some, like the correction to Condivi's hard words about Bramante, once more self-protective.⁵⁴ With the *postille*, therefore, we have one further twist in the story of the life that Michelangelo wished to present to the world, and, at the same time, a further problem in assessing the status of a biography which is so simple to read and so far from simple to penetrate.

Fiorentina a Roma (Naples, 1965), pp. 11–13. Duke Cosimo's new decrees against the *fuorusciti* were published in November, recapitulating previous measures (especially those of the Bando of 1539). For the text, see L. Cantini, *Legislazione Toscana raccolta e illustrata da Lorenzo Cantini*, I (Florence, 1800), pp. 363–5. Talking with declared rebels was proscribed, and the artist's extensive property holding in and around Florence could have been at risk. Even in Rome, the *fuorusciti* lived in real danger. See, for example, a letter of Cosimo's ambassador in Rome of 8 March 1542 where he reports that Piero and Roberto Strozzi could have been murdered four nights before: '... e posso dire di veduta che si poteva con una facilità e a man salva finire la guerra . . .'; quoted in *Legazioni di Averardo Serristori . . .*, ed. G. Canestrini (Florence, 1853), pp. 120–1.

⁵³ See *Le Vite di Michelangelo Buonarroti scritte da Giorgio Vasari e da Ascanio Condivi*, ed. K. Frey (Berlin, 1887), p. XXV.

⁵⁴ For these glosses and Elam's comments, see now Condivi, *Vita*, forthcoming.

Appendix: Vasari and the Sistine Chapel

Some of the most problematic statements in Vasari's 1550 *Life* are those referring to Pope Julius II's wish to have not only the vault but also the walls of the chapel frescoed by the artist. Vasari in the first instance writes: 'Era già ritornato il Papa in Roma e, mosso dall'amore che portava alla memoria del zio, sendo la volta della cappella di Sisto non dipinta, ordinò che ella si dipignesse . . .'.⁵⁵ A little further on, he continues: '. . . Ma pure per commissione del Papa et ordine di Giulian da San Gallo fu mandato a Bologna per esso (Michelangelo); e venuto che e' fu, ordinò il Papa che tal cappella facesse, e tutte le facciate con la volta si refacessero; e per prezzo d'ogni cosa vi misero il numero di XV mila ducati.'⁵⁶

While Wilde came to accept the accuracy of this information of Vasari and while, recently, its possible validity has been proposed with intricate arguments by Shearman, it seems to be true that Vasari's source for his statement (nowhere referred to in *Condivi's Life*) has remained completely undiscussed.⁵⁷ However, Vasari must have gained his information somewhere, and how he came to form his proposal is the more problematic in that no other source printed in the sixteenth century appears to refer to the much larger project to which he alludes. I should like to suggest here that he could have reached his conclusion from the evidence of a letter of Michelangelo's own.

The final text of this letter has not survived but two incomplete drafts do so, addressed by the artist in Florence to the man on whom he greatly depended at the papal court, Giovan Francesco Fattucci. The two drafts have been convincingly dated to December 1523 by the editors of the *Carteggio*; what is clearly Fattucci's reply survives and is dated 30 December.⁵⁸ These drafts have been repeatedly discussed in the literature, but the text of the lengthier one, published as the earlier in the *Carteggio*, must be reviewed once more. The artist's view of past events contained in it is, as we shall see, highly idiosyncratic. Turning to the chapel, Michelangelo first refers to a change in the programme of

⁵⁵ Vasari, *Vite*, vi, p. 33.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

⁵⁷ Wilde expressed his acceptance in an unpublished lecture, 'Michelangelo and Raphael,' given at the Warburg Institute in March 1957. For the more recent arguments, see J. Shearman in K. Weil-Garris Brandt (ed.), *Michelangelo, La Cappella Sistina, Atti del Convegno Internazionale di Studi, Rome, March 1990* (Novara, 1994), pp. 29–36.

⁵⁸ For the drafts, *Carteggio*, iii, pp. 7–11 and for Fattucci's reply, pp. 12–13.

the project for the ceiling. He states that, after expressing his dissatisfaction with the earlier plan, Pope Julius allowed him a free hand to paint what he wanted, down to the histories below: ‘. . . Allora mi decte nuova chommissione che io facessi ciò che io volevo, e che mi chontenterebe, e che io dipigniessi insino alle storie di socto. In questo tempo, quasi finita la volta el Papa ritornò a Bologna, ond’io v’andai due volte per danari che io avevo avere, e non feci niente . . . Ritornato a Roma mi missi a far chartoni per decta opera, cioè per le teste e per le faccie actorno di decta cappella di Sisto, e sperando aver danari e finire l’opera non potecti mai octenere niente . . .’.⁵⁹ The briefer draft alludes to the change of programme, that is, its enlargement, and states that he never received his proper payment for the larger programme; there is no reference to cartoons for the ‘facciate’.⁶⁰

There exists a very real possibility that Vasari knew Michelangelo’s final and now lost letter sent to Fattucci and based his statement about the frescoing of the chapel walls on it. That Vasari and Fattucci were on friendly terms has never been recognised but is borne out by a neglected and remarkable fact: that Michelangelo addressed his first surviving letter to Vasari, to which I have referred above, not to the painter himself but to Fattucci. Fattucci and Michelangelo had, so to speak, exchanged places when this letter was written on 1 August 1550; the artist was now in Rome, the cleric in Florence and a canon of the cathedral. In writing to Vasari, Michelangelo adds a covering note to Fattucci himself, interesting on several counts but of which the opening words are our concern here: ‘Messer Giovan Francesco, amico caro, acadendomi iscrivere costà a Giorgio pittore, piglio sichurtà di darvi un poco di noia, cioè che gli date la letera che sarà in questa, stimando che sia amicho vostro . . .’.⁶¹ It is important to note that this evidence of friendship between Vasari and Fattucci dates from only a few months after the appearance of the 1550 *Vite*.

A comparison of Vasari’s remarks with the information in Michelangelo’s longer draft goes a little way further in strengthening the suggestion of dependence. In both texts, we find first a general reference to the commissioning of the ‘volta’ and then, subsequently, the added

⁵⁹ *Carteggio*, iii, p. 9.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁶¹ *Carteggio*, iv, p. 344. The note to Fattucci was first published as long ago as 1923 in Frey i, p. 290 n.

amplification that Pope Julius had also wanted the redecoration of the chapel walls.⁶²

The hypothesis that Vasari could have based his remarks on the lost letter would explain why he persisted with the same statements in the second edition of 1568, despite *Condivi*'s total silence about such a project; he could have presumed that he had the sanction of the artist's own words. To accept the hypothesis is, of course, to recognise that Vasari's dependability turns on that of Michelangelo's information.

A few further words about the contents of Michelangelo's longer draft seem, therefore, required. Michelangelo's whole preoccupation in writing to Fattucci was to attempt to justify his conduct over many years concerning the money he had received from Pope Julius II; the letter was prompted by a current crisis. However, his attempted self-exoneration extends further back, as far as 1503 when he had received the commission for twelve marble *Apostles* for Florence Cathedral and, in 1504, became engaged in the project to paint the *Battle of Cascina*. The draft which concerns us is replete with inaccuracies, all presented in self-defence; the artist's dependability or otherwise does not, in other words, rest only with what he writes about the Sistine Chapel. He states that he had transported to Florence most of the marble for the twelve *Apostles*, a remark with serious financial implications which the surviving documents do not confirm. He claims that he had undertaken to paint half of the Sala del Gran Consiglio in Palazzo della Signoria, a grossly misleading statement, made only worse by the added remark that he had made the cartoon for the work and had deserved appropriate remuneration.⁶³ As we have seen, he states in the passage quoted, that when Pope Julius II left for Bologna on 1 September 1510, almost the whole ceiling had been completed: '. . . quasi finita la volta.' His remarks about the issue of the tomb are also suspect. He writes that, following the pope's death early in 1513, Cardinal Leonardo della Rovere wished to increase the scale of the tomb.⁶⁴ This is contradicted in the account which would be published in *Condivi*'s *Vita*, where we

⁶² Vasari adds a postscript to his account, where he states that the artist continued to put his drawings for the walls in order after the completion of the vault and while working on the tomb of Julius II; *Vite*, vi, p. 50. Then malignant fortune intervened in the form of the pope's death. Different arguments notwithstanding, I find this passage (probably his own) irreconcilable with Michelangelo's flatly factual statement to his father of October 1512: 'Io ò finita la chapella che io dipignieuo . . .'; *Carteggio*, i, p. 137. He does not use the word 'volta'.

⁶³ *Carteggio*, iii, p. 7. The *Bathers* cartoon was only for a part of his mural.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

are told that in 1513 the executors considered the earlier scheme to be too big.⁶⁵

Michelangelo's statements in this much cited text require, therefore, an approach of great caution. The remark in the longer of the drafts, that he had freedom to paint 'insino alle storie di socto' is difficult to reconcile with a project to redecorate the walls of the chapel without imposing a strained interpretation on the words he uses.⁶⁶ His remark about cartoons for the 'teste' and 'faccie' raises problems also. Its truth involves our believing that he proceeded to the last preparatory design stage for the walls when the second half of the vault still awaited its decoration, behaviour especially difficult to credit in the case of an artist who habitually left his design procedures to the latest possible moment.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Condivi, *Vita*, p. 36.

⁶⁶ Shearman (p. 31, n. 8) has suggested that this phrase, 'insino alle storie di socto' may be interpreted inclusively, and that the artist here refers to his assignment to paint wall narratives. But such an interpretation seems at odds with comparable examples of his own usage. Compare his request from Rome for the measurements of Florence Cathedral: '. . . da dove comincia la lanterna insino in terra . . .': *Carteggio*, iv, pp. 271–2. Or '. . . Le rivolte di decte alia dal mezzo in sù, insino al riposo di decta scala . . .': *Carteggio*, v, p. 43. Or again, in the same letter: '. . . dal mezzo in giù, insino in sul pavimento . . .' (ibid.). Or: 'Cioè decta volta, per osservare el nascimento suo insino di terra . . .': *Carteggio*, v, p. 117.

⁶⁷ For the fact that, when free to do so, Michelangelo never made designs until he had to, see M. Hirst, *Michelangelo and his Drawings* (New Haven and London, 1988), pp. 35–6. For the evidence suggesting that the artist only started to design parts of the second half of the ceiling as late as September 1511, see *ibid.*