INTRODUCTION

While Raphael lived he was thought by many to be the world's greatest painter, and for at least 300 years after his death he was widely regarded as the greatest painter of all time. By the mid nineteenth century his reputation was in decline: artistic modernism had begun to change people's ideas of what art ought to be, and because Raphael's art had become so closely identified with traditional values as to represent their very embodiment, it was bound to suffer as those values were overthrown.[1] Although artistic modernism has itself come in for serious critique in recent decades, so that we are now able to think of approaching Raphael differently, there seems to be a lingering resistance to doing so.[2] At the deepest level, perhaps, this situation bespeaks an ambivalence in our aesthetic convictions, a lack of faith in traditional modernist values and, at the same time, an unwillingness to let go of them completely. There may be little that an art-historical study of Raphael's achievement can do to relieve this larger cultural malaise, but what it can do is show that modernism has obscured just how modern Raphael really was, and that our understanding of modernity – that is, of ourselves – is incomplete until we correct that situation.

The aim of this book, while primarily historical, is thus also, necessarily, critical. Raphael's contemporaries and immediate followers saw him as having redefined the practice of art, as having exemplified a new idea of what art is. Their assessments of just what it was that made him so innovative and important are deeply revealing of their own values and aspirations and are thus indicative of the motives at work in Renaissance art generally. Some of these qualities are familiar to us: they have been handed down by subsequent criticism and art-historical scholarship and are thus part of the conceptual equipment with which we approach his work. Others, however, have been ignored by modern art historians, even suppressed: if mentioned at all, they have not been

[1] Perhaps the turning point may be dated precisely to November 18, 1853, when Ruskin delivered a public lecture in Edinburgh intended to explain the aims and methods of the Pre-Raphaelites. Making use of a startlingly simplistic distinction between "medieval" and "modern" art, he situated Raphael's frescoes in the Stanza della Segnatura at the juncture between them (Cook & Wedderburn eds. 1903–12, x, 127):

> The doom of the arts of Europe went forth from that chamber, and it was brought about in great part by the very excellencies of the man who had thus marked the commencement of decline … In medieval art, thought is the first thing, execution the second; in modern art execution is the first thing, and thought the second. And again, in medieval art, truth is first, beauty second; in modern art, beauty is first, truth second. The medieval principles led up to Raphael, and the modern principles lead down from him.

[2] Writing in the aftermath of the Raphael cinquecentenary, Ferino-Pagden 1988, esp. 216–17, noted that the great quantity of recent scholarship – much of it quite fine – had done little to bring about an overall reassessment of the artist's relevance to the modern world; her conclusion has since been endorsed by Meyer 2001, 14–15. For an example of the glibly dismissive attitude toward Raphael common even among people who should know better, see Schjeldahl 2004.

given the emphasis they deserve. To reflect upon the salient discrepancies between the earliest accounts of Raphael's achievement and those commonly on offer today is to realize how different the Renaissance understanding of its own modernity was from the way in which that modernity has been defined by modern scholarship; it is to perceive a selectivity in our orientation toward the past that, however justifiable in some ways, is yet obviously governed by the need to protect and preserve a certain image we have developed of ourselves. These discrepancies, if clearly objectified, can be used as critical tools with which to come to a new and better understanding of the Renaissance, not only of Raphael, but of the period as a whole, of the larger, deeper cultural transformation it represents, and thus of its real import for us.

Such a comprehensive work of revision ought to meet with sympathetic interest; contemporary art historians like to think of themselves as progressive and open-minded. Yet while current scholarship has yielded some fascinating new ideas, it has also been slow to discard a whole array of outmoded assumptions, some of which have had an especially crippling effect on the understanding of Italian Renaissance art. All the emphasis on exploring new themes and areas of interest, praiseworthy in principle, has tended to mask the way in which other issues are being avoided; all the emphasis on applying new interpretative methods actually obscures the refusal to do a more rigorous, more demanding kind of interpretative work. In essential respects, contemporary art history has only made access to Raphael more difficult, and any attempt to swim against the current, so to speak, is likelier to meet with resistance and resentment than encouragement. Fortunately, Raphael offers ample justification for the effort; indeed, he offers the ideal critical instrument with which to initiate a comprehensive reorientation of our thinking about Italian Renaissance art and, beyond that, the history of art as a whole. Such a reorientation may eventually prove to have an impact on our aesthetic values as well.

By far the most important document of the attitudes toward Raphael among his contemporaries and immediate followers is the biography contained in Giorgio Vasari's *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, first published in 1550, thirty years after Raphael's death, then again, enlarged and revised, in 1568.[3] Although not the first overview of his life and work, it is the first substantial one, and is further supported by its placement within a comprehensive account of what we call Italian Renaissance art. The most striking feature of the biography is its passionate enthusiasm, the sense of urgency and excitement that animates it and that gathers force as it proceeds. Although modern readers are likely to find it hyperbolic, and though the sober historian will point out that its information is often wrong and its accounts of some important things incomplete or misleading, it has great documentary value nonetheless: it gives us a deeply revealing indication of what Raphael was felt to have accomplished, of what his example meant to those around him and to younger artists eager to emulate him. Although Vasari was certainly a writer with a particular agenda, other texts of the period support and supplement the image we receive from him, so that he cannot be dismissed as idiosyncratic; and since his account defined the terms in which Raphael would be discussed for several centuries, it obviously succeeded at expressing something of fundamental and enduring importance.

In some ways the *Lives* is a very familiar text, in others, not. Vasari presents the history of art as a progress through three stages of development resembling the growth of a living thing: he calls them "ages" (*età*), evoking the proverbial notion of the "ages of man."[4]

[3] Throughout this study, citations from Vasari are taken from the edition of Bettarini and Barocchi 1966– (B/B), which presents the texts of the 1550 and 1568 editions together; references to the still widely used edition of Milanesi 1906 (M) follow in parentheses. The complete texts of both the 1550 and 1568 versions of the Life of Raphael are also presented in Shearman 2003, but without commentary. For passages presented here in English, the DeVere translation (DV) has usually been used, though rarely without modification. For a comprehensive commentary on Vasari's biography, see Gründler ed. 2011; for a thematic analysis, Rubin 1995, 357–401; for a psychoanalytic interpretation, Huntley 1988.

[4] For Vasari's concept of progress, see Rubin 1994; important older sources include Gombrich 1966, 1–10; Gombrich 1971; and Panofsky 1972. See also Williams 1997, 51–7; Sohm 2001, esp. 86–114; and Williams 2010. The idea that the three-part division of the *Lives* should be attributed to Vasari's scholarly advisors, advanced in Frangenberg 2002, is rejected by Pozzi & Mattioda 2006, 22, n. 45.

The first, which runs from the late thirteenth to the early fifteenth centuries, corresponds to "birth and infancy"; the second, from the early to the late fifteenth century, to "youth"; the third, which begins in the late fifteenth century and lasts until Vasari's own time, to "maturity" and "perfection." This progress is most obvious in the steady development of artistic naturalism, from the first efforts of an artist like Giotto to imitate the visual effects of volume and spatial disposition, to Masaccio's application of the new technique of linear perspective, to the inclusion of all sorts of refinements – more convincing effects of lighting and atmosphere, more accurate treatment of the body, more powerful and persuasive expression – in the work of Leonardo da Vinci, the figure who inaugurates the third age.

Progress is also evident in other ways, however: art not only becomes more naturalistic, it also becomes more beautiful. This is especially evident in sculpture, where progress takes the form, not only of increased fidelity to nature, but of increased approximation to the classical ideal, and finally the surpassing of both nature and antiquity in the work of Michelangelo. It is also evident in architecture, which, since not representational in the same way as painting and sculpture, achieves perfection by imitating ever more accurately the forms and principles of classical antiquity, but also, eventually, and – again, especially in the work of Michelangelo – by surpassing them as well. Even in painting, however, progress is evident in other things than naturalism; one of the most important is narrative. Giotto's pictures are more effective at telling the stories they illustrate than those of the painters who came before him, Masaccio's more effective than Giotto's, Leonardo's than Masaccio's. For Vasari, the art of pictorial narrative reaches perfection in Raphael.[5] This achievement is significant enough in itself, but, as we shall see, it also points to something much deeper.

Painting and sculpture improve, too, in the way they are able to express increasingly complex abstract ideas, most obviously by appropriating the devices of symbolism and allegory. Vasari credits Giotto with having invented pictorial allegory, and he also understood this aspect of painting to have reached perfection in the third age, in the elaborate decorative programs, with their erudite iconography, common in the mid sixteenth century, of which Vasari's own projects – some described at length toward the end of the *Lives* – are arguably the most impressive examples. In this development, too, Raphael's role is important: his decorative projects set a new standard of visual richness and conceptual sophistication, and they provided the model for such work all over Italy – indeed, all over Europe – for several generations. The fact that Vasari assigns as much importance as he does to the expression of abstract ideas has been largely ignored by modern scholars, a blind spot created by our belief that allegory is somehow fundamentally incompatible with the emphasis on the "real" that seems to be so obvious in Renaissance naturalism. Yet Vasari plainly sees no contradiction and regards both naturalism and allegory as similarly useful means of expanding art's expressive or conceptual – discursive – range.

The progress of art is thus multifaceted, involving naturalism, but also beauty, narrative, and the capacity to express complex abstract ideas. There are other dimensions to it as well. An important one – perhaps the most important, yet one that also tends to be suppressed in modern scholarship – is the increasingly manifest interdependence of painting, sculpture, and architecture. The three arts are linked by their common basis in design (*disegno*); they are, Vasari says – again having recourse to a biological metaphor in order to naturalize his thesis – the three daughters of that single father. They are thus united in principle, but their historical development also involves the progressive demonstration of their interrelation. Artists are increasingly able to work in both painting and sculpture or sculpture and architecture, and it is Michelangelo who brings this process to completion as well: he brings each of the arts to perfection individually, but in so doing also exposes the single foundation they share, the fact that they all seem to issue from a single source. As Vasari says at the very beginning of his book, in the

[5] Noted, for instance, in Alpers 1960.

preface (*proemio*) to the *Lives* as a whole, where he first advances his historical scheme:

> [I]n our age, divine goodness has given us Michelangelo Buonarroti, in whom both of these arts [painting and sculpture] shine perfectly and appear so similar and so closely united that painters are stupefied by his paintings and sculptors admire and revere his sculpture. And so that he need not rely on some other master to provide settings for his figures, nature has given him the understanding of architecture … Well may we affirm that those who call him divine make no mistake, for he has divinely gathered into himself the three most praiseworthy and ingenious arts that are found among men, and with these, in the manner of a god, he gives us infinite benefit.[6]

Before Michelangelo is the artist who surpasses nature or the ancients, he is the artist who demonstrates the unity of the three arts, and it is upon this realization of their fundamental unity that their ultimate perfection depends. The achievement of this perfection, in turn, makes their historical development retrospectively coherent and thus makes the history of art – Vasari's book itself – possible. The exposition of history in the biographies that then follow serves as an extended proof of this theoretical idea. Modern critics have been quick to point out the limitations and inconsistencies of Vasari's thought, but they seldom even notice the fundamentally and – in its own way rigorously – demonstrative structure of his book.[7]

Though Michelangelo is the crucial figure in revealing the unity of the three arts, Raphael and his followers are also masters of *disegno* and able to practice them all with assurance. Raphael himself, active as a painter, decorator, and architect, did not carve marble or cast bronze, but he did provide designs for sculpture: his followers, imitating his example, practiced an even greater range of applied design – everything from architecture, urban planning, and theatrical spectacle to tapestries, prints, and ornamental tableware. Vasari obviously regards such omnicompetence as confirmation of the fact that *disegno* is indeed the single source of all excellence in art – the principle or essence of art – and thus as further proof of his theoretical position. Because Raphael's followers have been so numerous and so effective at disseminating his way of doing things, moreover, they have played an important role in enabling the arts to flourish all over Europe. The rivalry between Michelangelo and Raphael, remarked upon by their contemporaries and given such emphasis in subsequent literature, is treated by Vasari in an understated fashion that often disappoints modern readers but that actually shows a superior degree of critical and historical insight.

Vasari's notion of the development of art over time and its relation to the progress of culture is expressed in the second *proemio*:

> Considering these things carefully, I have judged it to be in the nature and of the particular quality of these arts that from humble beginnings they gradually reach perfection. I am strengthened in that belief – and it is no

[6] B/B I, 26–7 (M I, 103–4; DV 19):

> Ma nella nostra età ci ha prodotto la bontà divina Michelagnolo Buonarroti, nel quale amendue queste arti sì perfette rilucono, e sì simili et unite insieme appariscono, che i pittori delle sue pitture stupiscono, e gli scultori le sculture fatte da lui ammirano e riveriscono sommamente. A costui, perché egli non avesse forse a cercare da altro maestro dove agiatamente collocare le figure fatte da lui, ha la natura donato sì fattamente la scienza dell'architettura … E ben possiamo certo affermare, che e'non errano punto coloro che lo chiamano divino; poiché divinamente ha egli in sé solo raccolte le tre più lodevoli arti e le più ingegnose che si truovino tra' mortali, e con esse, ad essempio d'uno Idio, infinitamente ci può giovare.

This theme is restated at the beginning of Michelangelo's biography: B/B IV, 3–4 (M VII, 135–6).

[7] The failure to appreciate the theoretical sophistication of the *Lives* is due in large part to the simple fact that almost no one reads it from cover to cover. English translations, moreover, even De Vere's, otherwise the most complete, omit what Vasari called the *parte teoretiche*, the discussion of the materials and principles of architecture, sculpture, and painting that precedes the biographies, thus presenting a misleading image of the book as a whole. The assumption governing this omission, that the "history" presented in the biographies can simply be detached from its theoretical presuppositions, is then attributed to Vasari himself as an indication of his theoretical *naïveté*.

> small argument in favor of its truth – seeing that the same thing has happened in other fields of endeavor, since among all the liberal arts there is a certain kinship. Something so similar must have happened in painting and sculpture in other times, that if the names were changed around, they would fit into their new circumstances perfectly.[8]

Vasari is saying several things at once in this passage: first, that the progress of the arts in the Renaissance is paralleled by progress in other fields of learning; second, that a correspondence also exists between the historical development of the visual arts in the Renaissance and in ancient times; and third, that these analogies confirm the correctness of his account. That the historical development of the arts should parallel that of other fields of learning, furthermore, is proof that they share in the discursive, conceptual, rational nature of liberal disciplines; that they develop in the same way, even in different epochs, is proof of their susceptibility to rule, hence also of their rational nature.

But there is yet another dimension to the progress of art, made explicit in the *proemio* to the third part of the *Lives* and reinforced by the context as a whole, which is that speed and efficiency of production also improve over time:

> But what matters most of all to this art [painting] is that it is nowadays reduced to such perfection, and is so easy for someone who possesses skill in design, in invention, and in the handling of colors, that where a master painter once took six years to make one picture, we can now make six pictures in one year; I can swear to this for I have seen it done and done it myself: and [what is more] our works are more finished and perfect than those of even the leading masters of the past.[9]

Modern readers tend to find this passage either laughable or offensive or both, an embarrassing give-away that shows Vasari's attitude toward his profession to have been almost simple-mindedly mercenary. For us, the emphasis on efficiency of production is suggestive of industrialization, of something like the very opposite of art. Yet in a pre-industrial world, one in which mass-production had not yet become the norm nor made its sinister potential fully felt, the idea of rapid, systematic execution might well have been an exciting and appealing one: it offered the possibility of increased productivity and profits, of course, but, on a higher conceptual level, the susceptibility of art to rationalized methods might be taken as a further demonstration of its rational, hence, truly "liberal" nature. As we shall see, the dangers of formulaic methods were well understood by Raphael and his contemporaries, and even if, as Vasari points out, Raphael occasionally failed to avoid them, he also managed to demonstrate the productive potential of such methods in a way that became profoundly influential. He could thus be credited with having developed a more efficient and rational mode of production, and thus with helping to bring about a new understanding of the work that artists do, a new idea of what art is.

[8] B/B III, 7 (M II, 96; DV 299):

> Queste cose considerando io meco medesimo attentamente, giudico ch' e' sia una proprietà ed una particolare natura di queste arti, le quali da uno umile principio vadino appoco appoco migliorando e finalmente pervenghino al colmo della perfezione; e questo me lo fa credere il vedere essere intervenuto quasi questo medesimo in altre facultà: che per essere fra tutte le arti liberali un certo che di parentado, è non piccolo argumento che e' sia vero. Ma nella pittura e scultura in altri tempi debbe essere accaduto questo tanto simile che, se e' si scambiassino insieme i nomi, sarebbono appunto i medesimi casi.

[9] B/B IV, 10 (M IV, 13; DV 774):

> Ma quello che importa il tutto di questa arte è che l'hanno ridotta oggi talmente perfetta e facile per chi possiede il disegno, l'invenzione et il colorito, che dove prima da que' nostri maestri si faceva una tavola in sei anni, oggi in un anno questi maestri ne fanno sei: et io ne fo indubitatamente fede, e di vista e d'opera; e molto più si veggono finite e perfette che non facevano prima gli altri maestri di conto.

Even in a post-industrial world, however, Vasari's passage has a relevance we cannot ignore. One imagines that Andy Warhol would have liked it:

> When Picasso died I read in a magazine that he had made four thousand masterpieces in his lifetime and I thought, "Gee, I could do that in a day." So I started. And then I found out, "Gee, it takes more than a day to do four thousand pictures." You see, the way I do them, with my technique, I really thought I could do four thousand in a day. And they'd all be masterpieces because they'd all be the same painting. And I started and I got up to about five hundred and then I stopped. But it took more than a day, I think it took a month. So at five hundred a month, it would have taken me about eight months to do four thousand masterpieces … It was disillusioning for me to realize it would take me that long.[10]

If Vasari's comment seems to us like a reduction to absurdity, we must admit that the point of absurdity actually lodges much closer to home. The fact that replication is a feature of art with which we have grown familiar and are capable of assessing in positive terms does not seem to have inclined us any more favorably to Vasari. And if we are able to recognize the fact that one of Warhol's achievements was to have reoriented our consideration of the relation between art and other forms of production, why can we not accept that Vasari may want to point us in the same direction? Here, too, we encounter a blind spot, a resistance to recognizing the ways in which Renaissance art anticipates aspects of artistic modernism and postmodernism.

Vasari's idea of progress is thus both more complex and more profound than is usually acknowledged, and despite its rejection at the hands of modern art history, it is an emphatically modern one. We should recognize it as a way of insisting that the historicity of art is an essential manifestation of art's identity and importance as a practice; its deeper theoretical purpose is to establish the place of art in relation to all other human activities and thus to the totality of human activity that is history. It is both a product of and an attempt to describe a dramatic historical event, the complex process by which art came to be redefined in response to the deeper pressures of cultural transformation, the emergence, that is, of a modern idea of art. Often dismissed by modern readers simply as a means of justifying Vasari's own regional tradition, it should rather be seen as a way of dramatizing the difficulty – the work – of being modern, and the especially demanding work that modernity requires of artists. Raphael's place in that process is described in such a manner as to emphasize how central his contribution to it was.

A skeptical reader might yet object that to rely on Vasari is to risk superimposing the biographer's views back onto his subject. There may be aspects of Raphael's achievement that Vasari undervalues, misses entirely, or actually suppresses, yet despite these shortcomings, he is still a valuable historical tool; indeed, his very lapses are often indicators of important historical realities. He was certainly projecting his own way of seeing and thinking onto Raphael, but it is equally true that his way of seeing and thinking had been shaped in significant part by his experience of Raphael, and if we find ourselves wanting to ignore what he has to say, it almost certainly has less to do with our methodological conscientiousness than with a desire to superimpose our own way of seeing and thinking, to justify our own prejudices. Vasari's biography is not the only way to look at Raphael, nor is it the best way, but it can serve as the starting point for a historical approach that enables us to take account of our own blind spots and to reckon productively with them.

The first chapter of this book concerns an aspect of Raphael's achievement to which Vasari gives special attention: the principle of stylistic eclecticism or what might be called "synthetic" or "critical" imitation. The third *proemio* introduces this theme, providing a brief inventory of the innovations of the various artists who contributed to the perfection of art in the years around 1500:

[10] Warhol 1975, 148.

> [B]ut most graceful of all [was] Raphael of Urbino, who, studying the works of the older masters as well as those of the moderns, took the best from all of them and put it together, enriching the art of painting with that complete perfection which one saw in ancient times in the figures of Apelles and Zeuxis, and even more, if one can [dare to] say it, [as would be proved] if it were possible to compare [their works with his].[11]

Toward the end of the biography itself, Vasari included a more elaborate description of Raphael's stylistic development. Having learned one style from his putative master, Perugino, the young artist moves to Florence, where, faced with the innovative work of artists like Leonardo and Michelangelo, he fashions himself anew. He combines what he can of the outstanding qualities of the artists he admires, and this synthesis forms the basis of his mature style. Raphael establishes his artistic identity by borrowing and reintegrating elements from the work of others; in so doing he brings painting to "complete perfection" (*intera perfezzione*). The style he achieves is more than a personal style in the usual sense; it is something like a super-style or meta-style.

The imitation of other artists was a long-standing feature of artistic training and had been theorized at least since the time of Cennino Cennini in the late fourteenth century; it had also been extensively theorized in literature, especially vigorously by some of Raphael's literary friends. The emphasis that Vasari places on Raphael's successful integration of different styles indicates his awareness of how important the issue had become: it reveals a recognition of the fact that contending with the variety of possible styles was one of the tasks that ambitious artists now had to face, and that the emergence of this situation marks an important moment in the progress of art. From the imitation of nature, emphasis shifts to the imitation and creative recombination of formal and expressive effects found in the work of other artists. Engaging a kind of higher coding more commonly identified in the Renaissance with poetry, painting adjusts its focus, so to speak, from nature to culture: it does not cease to be concerned with nature, of course, but any engagement with nature is now understood to be mediated by concepts and conventions that must themselves be thematized.

Vasari thus credits Raphael with having both identified and solved a problem central to the practice of painting in the modern world, and in so doing, with having discovered a new dimension of discursive potential, redefining the art of painting in conceptually more advanced, more self-reflexive, more modern terms. The principle of synthetic or critical imitation would be elaborated in even more complex ways in the course of subsequent decades and, in codified form, remain a fundamental element of academic art theory for several centuries; it would remain, that is, the model for sophisticated creative activity throughout the early modern period. Its importance is obviously related to the growing awareness of different stylistic possibilities that accompanies the increasing internationalization of European culture, to the pressure that an intensified awareness of diverse regional traditions puts on the autonomy of any single one, the pressure that difference puts on identity. Vasari's account suggests that Raphael's achievement was to have created a specifically supra-regional, transnational style, and that its specifically transnational or "universal" quality was part of what was felt to make it modern.

Synthetic imitation was one of the ideas against which artistic modernism rebelled most forcefully, and we still approach it with suspicion. We cannot forget William Blake's contemptuous dismissal of the teachings of Joshua Reynolds, or John Ruskin's vehement condemnation of academic "manufacture," or, in French criticism, the impatience with traditional formulae that reaches a climax in Émile

[11] B/B IV, 8–9 (M IV, 11–12; DV 773):

> [M]a più di tutti il graziosissimo Raffaello da Urbino, il quale studiando le fatiche de'maestri vecchi e quelle de' moderni, prese da tutti il meglio, e fattone raccolta, arricchì l'arte della pittura di quella intera perfezzione che ebbero anticamente le figure d'Apelle e di Zeusi, e più, se si potesse dire o mostrare l'opere de quelli a questo paragone.

Zola's celebration of *naïveté*,[12] or, yet again, after Walter Benjamin, the emphasis on the irrational sources of our mimetic impulses.[13] The rational calculation of personal style runs counter to the assumption that art is the expression of a distinctive individual personality, yet calculation as a critique of *naïveté* also figures prominently in modern art, in Marcel Duchamp's readymades, for example, or Warhol's remarks already cited. Our own ambivalence is striking: we cannot quite renounce our belief in authentic subjectivity even though we recognize how tenuous it is: we know that our identity is determined by all sorts of factors that lie beyond our control, and that even to the extent that we are able to fashion and express it, we do so with the conventional material of signs. We have learned that our identity is not innately ours but the provisional product of a complex social process. The principle of synthetic imitation identified with Raphael thus contains a critical potential that modernism has not exhausted or rendered obsolete.

Synthetic or critical imitation marks a new phase in the history of art not just because it introduces a new technical challenge, but because it also documents a new, more significant relation between art and subjectivity. At the same time, it marks a new phase in the history of culture as a whole: it documents the awareness that to live in culture is to have to reconstitute oneself in a realm of representations, that selfhood is not natural but the product of a certain kind of work, that it is in fact artificial, *the product of art*. If Raphael's achievement spoke to the practical concerns of intellectually ambitious artists eager to make a place for themselves in a newly expanded, diversified, and competitive market, it also responded to the deeper nature of subjectivity as it was coming to be defined in modern society; it answered the need for a new kind of selfhood as a response to the pressures of an increasingly complicated cultural environment. If identity is – can only be – a product of art, moreover, the artist becomes the archetypal self: his or her efforts document the work of being a self and the cultural work that selfhood, in turn, performs.[14] Since subjectivity is just one of the things art constructs – and not an end in itself – we might understand the new relation of art to subjectivity as pointing to something else as well, as presupposing an awareness of ethical or moral implications. We might even go so far as to suggest that what is most deeply at stake in the modern interdependence of art and subjectivity is the possibility of moral agency.

The second chapter, the core of the book, concerns Raphael's skill at storytelling, the way in which it was understood to depend upon a mastery of the principle of decorum, and the way in which that principle, in turn, was understood to point beyond itself to the deeper systematicity of representation. Vasari introduces this theme in his brief summary of Raphael's achievement in the third *proemio*:

> [N]ature was vanquished by his colors, and his [power of] invention was effortless and correct, as anyone who looks at his narrative pictures (*istorie*) may judge for themselves, for they are similar to the writings [they illustrate], showing the settings and buildings similar to those [in the stories], as well as the features and the clothing of the people, both native and foreign, everything as he wished. Beyond that, [he gave] the gift of grace to the heads – young, old, and female – reserving modesty to the modest, lewdness to the lewd, and to children mischievousness in the eyes and playfulness in the poses. So too the

[12] For a summary of the modern emphasis on *naïveté*, see Williams 2009, esp. 126–44. The problematic nature of individual identity, especially as mediated by language – the problematic that might be exemplified by Rimbaud's "Je est une autre," or Beckett's "Do they believe I believe it is I who am speaking?" – is, of course, one of the central preoccupations of modern thought, finding elaboration in many of the most important theorists associated with postmodernism.

[13] Benjamin 1978. See also Adorno 1997, esp. 285–9; and Jay 1997.

[14] This formulation should provide at least a preliminary indication of the way in which the present study, while informed by the approach to "subjectivity effects" characteristic of what used to be called "new historicism" in the study of Renaissance literature – as exemplified, say, by Fineman 1991 – also seeks to maintain a certain distance from it. For a general consideration of the new historicist account of early modern subjectivity see Martin 2004. An especially sophisticated example of new historicist art history is Campbell 1997.

> draperies, the folds of which [are] neither too simple nor too intricate, but [are done] in just such a way that they seem real.[15]

All the details of Raphael's *istorie* serve the immediate purpose of making the image a persuasive illustration of the story it depicts, but this perfect suitability of form to function stands for something deeper, the resolution of a comprehensively, objectively correct relation between art and nature, representation and the world.

As elaborated in ancient rhetorical and poetic theory, decorum involves the adjustment of the form of a work to its subject matter, audience, and purpose; it governs the relation of the details of a work to each other and of the work as a whole to its functional context. A speech in which human actions are described, for instance, must make those actions seem to be consistent with the characters who perform them and with the conduct of such characters in real life; it must also represent them in a manner that contributes to the overall argument and that thus serves the larger purpose of the speech. Ancient rhetorical theorists recognized that the orator must have a comprehensive understanding of human nature to be able to characterize persons properly as well as to appeal to the different kinds of persons that make up his audience. This comprehensive knowledge is also required of the poet by writers such as Aristotle and Horace: for Aristotle, it is precisely the way poetry reveals the general truths of human nature that makes it worthy of serious philosophical interest. The importance of decorum in painting was established in similar terms by Renaissance theorists such as Alberti and Leonardo, so that the emphasis Vasari gives it, both in the *Lives* generally and the Life of Raphael in particular, would have seemed like the natural way to prove the kinship of painting to the literary arts, of the visual arts to language, and of art to reason.

As the heirs of modernism, we have a very hard time conceiving of decorum as anything but a repressive idea. For us, it is the principle that compels art to follow social norms, to reinforce stereotypes; it is the principle of censorship, the very antithesis of creativity. Renaissance artists and theorists certainly knew that decorum could work in restrictive ways, but they also saw it as a liberating, empowering concept and almost always discuss it in enthusiastic terms. Like the orator or poet, a painter who knows how to observe decorum is able to elaborate his ideas more effectively: he is able to dress his private imaginings in a seemingly objective system of shared perceptions and values, to ground them in the apparently universal laws of human nature. Decorum permits art to engage social codes and thus to redefine itself as a practice centrally concerned with social reality; in so doing, it establishes the centrality of representation to social life but also reconstitutes art as a higher, more systematic, more self-conscious form of representation.

While theorists tend to discuss decorum most fully in connection with *istorie*, a writer like Vasari offers abundant indication that it also operates in other types of pictures – in devotional images or portraits – and such pictures could be said to exemplify it in an even more impressive and deeply revealing way. A successful Madonna picture, for instance, persuades us that its characterization is appropriate, and it does so by seeming to reveal those inward qualities – virtues – that the Virgin Mary might be thought to possess in exemplary degree. The ability of such a picture to trigger the recognition and contemplation of abstract qualities – purity, humility, grace – in the beholder's mind is linked to the traditional and primary function of such images, to elicit prayer, but it might also be understood to require the painter's philosophical understanding of the qualities involved, and thus offer the viewer an invitation to sustained, philosophical reflection upon them, a *discursive* form of reflection that might yet be entirely in keeping with their devotional function. More than an instrument for persuasive

[15] B/B IV, 9 (M IV, 11; DV 773–4):

> Laonde la natura restò vinta dai suoi colori; e l'invenzione era in lui sì facile e propria quanto può giudicare chi vede le storie sue, le quali sono simili alli scritti, mostrandoci in quelle i siti simili a gli edificii, così come nelle genti nostrali e stane le cere e gli abiti secondo che egli ha voluto; oltra il dono della grazia delle teste, giovani, vecchi, e femmine, riservando alle modeste la modestia, alle lascive la lascivia, et ai putti ora i vizii negli occhi et ora i giuochi nelle attitudini; e così i suoi panni, piegati né troppo semplici né intrigati, ma con una guisa che paiono veri.

storytelling, decorum thus permits painting to reveal the essences of things, to represent not just visible particulars but invisible universals. When Vasari says that Raphael reserves "modesty to the modest, lewdness to the lewd," his wording suggests this revelation of essence. Other writers fall back on similar locutions.[16]

As moderns, we also resist the claim that decorum has anything to do with truth. We may admit that it allows artists to engage concepts, including social codes, but it can only serve to reinforce stereotypes, collective illusions, myths. We would say that a Renaissance writer who insists on the naturalness of decorous characterizations simply shows that he fails to grasp their conventional quality, the fact that our ideas of decorum are not grounded in nature at all but are cultural constructs. We should remember, however, that stereotypes, generalizations, and abstract ideas are real historical products, conceptual artifacts, vital practical tools that people make and use to address the challenges they face. Modeling them, defining and redefining them, promoting their contemplation, discussion, and critical revision is crucial to social life and, increasingly, to the role of art. Implicit in the Renaissance emphasis on decorum, and in the relation of decorum to truth, is the realization that the capacity of art to engage and articulate abstract concepts is thus essential to its social function: art's ability to mobilize the deepest subjective resources – the faculty of representation on which abstract thought depends – is essential to its being able to perform that function effectively.

As moderns, our resistance to truth claims goes even deeper, however: it is rooted in a profound and pervasive anti-rationalism, the assumption, first positively articulated in the eighteenth century and associated with the development of "aesthetics," then reinforced by Romanticism and all forms of Neo-Romanticism, that art is essentially irrational, that whatever truth it may contain is inaccessible to rational formulation.[17] The use of abstract nouns to imply truth content of some kind arouses our particular resistance to idealism.[18] Yet to insist that a picture or statue reveals the idea or essence of an object, person, or abstract quality is a way of saying that representation does something both specific and significant, that it is not transparent, but has a content – performs a work – of its own. The idealistic language of Renaissance writers on art should thus be seen as documenting the awareness that representation mediates our relation to the world, that it is an active principle, motivated and transformative, the basis of all knowledge and of the possibility of all purposeful action, the point where both self and society come into being. This awareness anticipates the preoccupation of modern philosophy – of phenomenology in particular – with establishing the place of subjective experience in the constitution of reality; it thus anticipates modern thought in ways that modern thought itself has suppressed.[19]

[16] According to the painter and theorist Paolo Pino (Barocchi ed. 1960–2, I, 109), for instance, painting is "una specie di natural filosofia," which "imita la quantità e qualità, la forma e virtù delle cose naturali." In another passage (107) he says it "distingue gli effetti amorosi, scuopre la falsa adulazione, il fuoco dello sdegno, il vivo della fortezza, lo grave della fatica, il terribile della paura, la proprietà di natura, l'intrinseco dell'animo, l'ingeniosità dell'arte e, ch' è più, la vita e la morte."

[17] For a summary of this development, see Williams 2009, esp. 92–118, 144–56. That various forms of anti-rationalism – nourished by phenomenology, psychoanalysis, and post-structuralism – continue to figure prominently in contemporary writing about art, might thus be seen as another indication of the way in which certain traditional modernist assumptions have remained stubbornly resistant to critique. Belting 1994 – in which a divide between the medieval and modern strikingly similar to Ruskin's is simply displaced from Raphael back onto Alberti's rationalistic theory of painting – has been especially influential among art historians.

[18] Even those modern writers who reject the anti-rationalist basis of modern esthetics, such as Gombrich 2002, have no patience with idealism, and so desperate is the desire to discredit idealism that an effort has been made (Cropper 1991; Cropper 2000) to show that the seventeenth-century art theorist Giovan Pietro Bellori – the author of the most important formulation of the doctrine of academic idealism – was not, strictly speaking, an idealist at all. For an ambitious attempt to demonstrate the relevance of idealism to modern thought, see Pippin 1997.

[19] This formulation should serve to indicate that the present study, while sensitive to phenomenological concerns, yet seeks to steer clear of the anti-rationalism that most advocates of phenomenology regard as the source of its greatest appeal. The value of phenomenological approaches lies primarily in the ways in which they probe those aspects of art that elude rational articulation; their characteristic weakness – exemplified even by the learned and insightful discussion of Renaissance poetic and rhetorical language in Grassi 1970 – is their tendency to assume that art itself is essentially irrational. While there may well be many aspects of art that defy explanation in terms of rational calculation, and we, as moderns, may tend to value them above all, any account that seeks to minimize or dismiss such calculation disqualifies itself as a basis of comprehensive understanding and is thus methodologically unacceptable.