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**Cellini’s *Life***

Abstract

The book I am preparing takes the title of the series in which it has the privilege of appearing (*Renaissance Lives*, Reaktion Books, London) in a double sense. On the one hand, it deals with the life and work of the goldsmith, sculptor and caster Benvenuto Cellini (1500-1571). At the same time, however, it does so along the lines of his *Vita*, the artist's autobiography. With this he achieved no less, indeed far more, fame than with the numerically small number of his works of art - each of which though is a capital testimony to incomparable mastery. Like any other artist, Cellini assumed that his works would speak for themselves. And indeed, not only as an artist, he was always a man of action, of doing. At the same time, however, he, the author also of sonnets, was a virtuoso of words; he was one of the few of his guild to be accepted into the *Accademia Fiorentina*, a literary association. Towards the end of his life, when commissions began to dwindle, he turned increasingly to writing. In the last decade of his life, he wrote a treatise on goldsmithing and a treatise on sculpture, further sonnets and, last but not least, the exorbitant description of his *Life*, with which he not only created a monument to himself and his work, but also prefigured the modern artist *par excellence*.

Since the book was first published posthumously in 1728, it has been questioned as to its truthfulness. The self-fashioning of its author has been revealed and all the patterns according to which it was constructed have been exposed. All of this is more or less indisputable and has made the *Vita* the founding text of auto-fictional literature, as it were. My attempt starts from a different basic assumption. Everything Cellini reports is true. Not in the sense of an accounting truth, but rather in that of an "ecstatic" truth, as the film director Werner Herzog has recently claimed for himself as an artist. It is not the degree of truth but the category of authenticity with which Cellini describes the events of his life, it is his writing that should and must be believed.

The sculptor did not write down this autobiography with his own hand, as the book lets us know with a confession at the beginning. At first Cellini had begun to fill in a few pages himself, but then he had doubts as to whether he would not lose too much time in doing so, and moreover it seemed to him too vain that his hand, destined for nobler deeds, should waste itself on such an undertaking. Then his eyes fell on a sickly boy in his studio, who was not made for the arduous tasks that were involved in a sculptor's workshop: "I now began to let him write; while I worked on my statues, I dictated my life to him, and because I found considerable pleasure in it, I worked more persistently and created far more works". So while Cellini devotes himself to sculpture - his marble “Crucifix” is largely created during this period - he describes his life to the scribe. This should not be misunderstood as a deliberately staged *sprezzatura*, with which Cellini would have wanted to emphasize the effortless creation of his literary work. It is the opposite: every inflection a physical movement, every chisel stroke a word - nothing better explains the vital rhythm of the *Vita*, the powerful language, its literal plasticity. *Dire* and *fare* find each other, and work and life could not be more closely connected. Rarely has the intercalation of the artist's life in his work been more vividly expressed, just as the work here in turn chants the course of life. Reason enough to investigate this bodily correspondence in Cellini's two “lives”.

*Vita di Benvenuto Cellini orefice e Scultore Fiorentino, da lui medesimo scritta, Nella quale molte curiose particolarità si toccano appartenenti alle Arti ed all’Istoria del suo tempo, tratte da un’ottimo manoscritto, e Dedicato All’Eccelenza Di Mylord Boyle*. Antonio Cocchi ed., Naples 1728 / probably to escape papal censorship, however, a fictitious printer and place of printing are given: »In Colonia. Per Pietro Martello«

*Due Trattati, uno intorno alle otto principali arti dell’oreficeria. L’altro in materia dell’arte della scultura; dove si veggono infiniti segreti nel lavorar le figure di marmo, & nel gettarle di bronzo* (First edition Florence 1568)