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The English Corpus for the LBC project

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1. General introduction ^[1]

Using corpora for the development of electronic dictionaries has become a standard procedure, as its outcomes have proven to be «far more exhaustive, authentic, and reliable than printed dictionaries compiled manually with lexical databases obtained from secondary sources» (Dash 2008: 85). Although systematic adoption of this procedure is relatively recent, in England it can be said to have a tradition dating back to the eighteenth century: it was Samuel Johnson, the author of the first comprehensive dictionary of the English language (1755), who pioneered methods for studying empirical data by collecting sample usages of terms or expressions from the period 1560 to 1660 (Crystal 2007: 214). Nowadays, corpora such as the *British National Corpus*, *The Bank of English*, and *The Cambridge International Corpus* attract increasing attention because of their potential usefulness to both theory and practice.

The LBC Project, which includes among its aims the creation of a multilingual specialised dictionary focusing on Florence's artistic heritage, relies primarily on the creation of corpora and lexicons tailored to its specific research questions. Central to the project is the compilation of texts that offer the widest possible perspective on how Florentine artworks and other works of cultural significance have been «put into words» throughout the centuries. The English corpus for the LBC Project was developed chiefly over the course of 2018, with the addition of eighteen new sources and extensive revision of the extant ones. These operations have allowed reaching the significant but provisional milestone of one million words, only the first

step of a work in progress that will require greater expansion and fine-tuning, given the vast bulk of resources available in English in both printed and electronic form.

The criteria adopted for this sample corpus are in line with the methodological guidelines offered by McEnery and Hardy (2012), which emphasize not only the importance of contents but also of size, representativeness, and balance. As Francesca Bianchi notes, specialised corpora can also afford to be smaller than general corpora (2012: 34); yet, the popular phrase variously attributed to Bob Mercer and Fred Jelinek, «more data is better data», is still valid (see Hans 1992: 110). The context-based and domain-specific information of words is best obtained from large and multidimensional language corpora: indeed, a larger corpus makes it easier to retrieve «a reasonable number of hits for infrequent or rare linguistic events» (Bianchi 2012: 33). In short, when the corpus has adequate dispersion and contains vast amounts of information, the findings can be more precise and detailed.

To date, the English corpus for the LBC project is still under development and embraces a variety of text types – including works of fiction, essays, guides, technical writings – produced in a time span that extends from the sixteenth century to the present day. Indeed, a great variety of relevant samples is essential to form (cautious) generalizations; accordingly, the LBC corpora have all the same design and are articulated in the same set of sub-corpora, which, as far as the English language is concerned, will be balanced within themselves, but also balanced against one another in terms of size (within their particular sampling frame). One of the main macro-categories adopted is the conventional distinction between fiction and non-fiction – although, as might be expected, the border between these two categories is occasionally porous; this is the case, for instance, with an unconventional guidebook to the city of Florence and its monuments, John Ruskin's *Mornings in Florence* (1875), to which we will return shortly. Actually, I believe that occasional difficulties in classification can turn into an advantage, as texts can be situated into a *continuum* which allows overlapping and reciprocal integration.

The literary sub-corpus in English is especially rich, and it comprises both works in prose and verse. Although contemporary novels are not neglected, it currently includes especially literary texts from nineteenth century England. The reason for this temporary imbalance lies in the fact that travel-related writings in English flourished after 1815, due to a combination of economic, social, political, and cultural changes that occurred in both Italy and England. With the end of the Napoleonic wars, Italy ceased to be the sole domain of the wealthy travellers on the Grand Tour and opened the door to middle-class tourism. Substantial improvements in transportation systems contributed to attracting increasing numbers of visitors from all around the world. Countless Victorian travellers started writing about their Italian experiences, producing, as John Pemble notes, «Sketches, Notes, Diaries, Gleanings, Glimpses, Impressions, Pictures, Narratives, and Leaves from Journals about Tours, Visits, Wanderings, Residences, Rambles, and Travels» (1987: 7). Thus, Italy became «a major inspiration of Victorian writers» (*Ibid.*); among the best-known authors who used their Italian experiences in literary works are Robert Browning, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Charles Dickens, Benjamin Disraeli, George Eliot, George Gissing, George Meredith, Algernon Swinburne, William Thackeray, and Anthony Trollope. Victorians also wrote about Italy in a range of genres; a wide selection of non-fictional

writings on Italy from the Victorian period is currently under review for inclusion in the corpus in a computer-readable format.

At the moment, the non-fiction section of the English corpus consists mainly (but not exclusively) of materials published within the last fifty years; among them, website tourist information, the issue of Newsweek's book series *Great Museums of the World* devoted to the Uffizi, and an historical essay discussing the House of Medici, who were the patrons of various artists and architects of the Renaissance. This section also includes the most ancient text of the corpus, Giorgio Vasari's *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*. First printed in 1550, the book was revised and re-published in 1568 in an expanded form with the Florentine typographer Jacopo Giunti; only the English version of this edition of Vasari's work, also known as the «Giuntina», is included in the corpus. A well-known collection of biographies of artists from the late Middle Ages to Vasari's time, the *Lives* provides not only detailed chronological information about each artist's work, but also the author's personal opinions about good artistic practice and – as common among ancient biographers – some amusing anecdotes.

The texts collected so far in the English corpus shed new light on the cultural relevance of the *Lives*, which was selected as a key point of reference for the whole LBC project. Of course, the English literary sub-corpus was not created with a specific conceptual framework in mind. Currently, however, it does show much internal coherence, in that most of its texts are connected to one another at various levels, interlinking web-like and extending outward primarily from Vasari's book. In the following part of my paper, I propose to describe this rather unexpected web of connections by following its main threads and knots.

2. Some insights into the corpus

While the second edition of the text was under preparation, Vasari discussed the *Lives* with his friend Vincenzo Maria Borghini, a well-known historian and philologist. In a letter dated August 14, 1564, the latter commented on the purpose of the book in these terms:

Il FINE di questa vostra fatica non è di scrivere la vita de' pittori, né di chi furono figliuoli, né quello che e' feciono d'ationj ordinarie; ma solo per le OPERE loro di pittori, scultori, architetti: che altrimenti poco importa a noi saper la vita di Baccio d'Agnolo o del Puntormo. E lo scriver le vite, è solo di principi et huominj che habbino esercitato cose da principi et non di persone basse, ma solo qui havete per

The PURPOSE of your work is not to write the lives of painters, nor whose sons they were, not what their typical actions were, but only about their WORKS as painters, sculptors, and architects. It is of little importance for us to know about the lives of Baccio d'Agnolo or of Pontormo. The writing of lives is suitable only for princes and men who have practiced princely things and not of low people, but here you have only as your end the art and

fine l'arte et l'opere di lor mano (Vasari 1930: 102).

the works by their hand (Trad. in Sohm 2007: 6).

Vasari seems to have followed Borghini's advice, as the second edition of the *Lives* emphasizes how its purpose is to move above and beyond narrow biographical elements, towards a timeless and supra-individual treatment of art, or a universal *historia*. Vasari established new methods of looking at art history, which had a profound impact on historiography; even more importantly, the *Lives* exerted a centuries-long influence on the way people perceived and described the Italian Renaissance.

As for the texts included in the corpus, such influence is apparent in nineteenth-century English poetry, for instance in Robert Browning's collection *Men and Women*. Browning discovered the *Lives* during the six months he spent in Pisa with his wife Elizabeth Barrett in 1846. Not only did the couple live in a house designed by Vasari, near Piazza dei Miracoli, but they also became «fond of digging» at the book of the *Lives* edited by Gaetano Milanesi and published between 1846 and 1857 (Barrett Browning, letter of 13 April 1853 to Julia Martin, qtd. in Browning 2007: 294). For Browning, this text became a sort of guide to visit much of the art in Tuscany, as well as an important source of inspiration for his works.

In the poem *Fra Lippo Lippi*, which is included in the corpus together with *One Word More* and *Old Pictures in Florence*, Browning shows to be familiar with the life and works of the Carmelite painter Fra Filippo di Tommaso Lippi as it is reported in Vasari's text:

Dicesi ch'era tanto venereo che vedendo donne che gli piacessero, se le poteva avere, ogni sua facultà donato le avrebbe: e non potendo per via di mezzi, ritraendole in pittura, con ragionamenti la fiamma del suo amore intiepidiva. Et era tanto perduto dietro a questo appetito, che all'opere prese da lui quando era di questo umore poco o nulla attendeva (Vasari 1971: 331).

It is said Filippo was so lustful that whenever he saw women who pleased him, he would give them all his possessions just to have them, and if he could not, as a middle course, he cooled the flames of his amorous passion by talking to himself while painting their portraits. He was so obsessed by this appetite that when he was in such a libidinous humour he paid little or no attention to the projects he had undertaken (Vasari 1998: 193).

To illustrate this point, Vasari continues by narrating the story of Lippi's escape from the house of Cosimo de' Medici to indulge in his pleasures (1998: 193), an occurrence which constitutes the narrative background of Browning's dramatic monologue. In both the *Lives* and the poem, Lippi is presented as a multifaceted figure who possesses exuberant creativity but is caught in a tension between his «instinctive delight in the world» (Slinn 1982: 56) and the religious self-restraint purported by the duties of monastic life.

Fra Lippo Lippi is replete with pictorial elements, as well as allusions to paintings and places of interest in Florence, with special emphasis on the buildings associated with the Medici family. Indeed, the «house that caps the corner» (line 18; Browning 2013: 485)^[2] is Palazzo Medici Riccardi, from where the Medici used to govern Florence; «St. Laurence» (line 67, 488) is the

church of San Lorenzo, and the «convent» located «Over the bridge» (lines 90-91, 488) in the south bank of the river Arno is the Church of the Carmine, where Lippi completed some of his first important frescoes. In addition, «Jerome knocking at his poor old breast» (line 73, 489) could refer to Lippi's painting of the nativity with St. Jerome (*Adorazione del Bambino con i Santi Gerolamo, Maddalena e Ilarione*), now preserved in the Uffizi Gallery, while «Something in Sant'Ambrogio's» church depicting «God in the midst, Madonna and her babe» (lines 346-348, 503-4) might refer to Lippi's Coronation of the Virgin (*Incoronazione Maringhi*), now also in the Uffizi.

Beside Vasari's *Lives*, precious resources for Browning's production came from the city of Florence itself, where the poet lived from 1847 to 1861 at Casa Guidi (now a museum), a house that overlooks the Pitti Palace from the intersection between Piazza San Felice and Via Maggio. Once established in Florence, Browning read widely on the city's cultural history; such protracted interest in art provided the foundation for the poem *Old Pictures in Florence*, which discusses various artists from the twelfth to the sixteenth century. Besides mentioning Giotto (lines 15, 17, 24, 133, 233, 287; 2013: 410-34), «The Michaels and Rafaels» (line 51, 413) and Leonardo da Vinci (line 64, 414), he comments on «Bigordi» (also known as Domenico Ghirlandaio, line 201, 425), «Sandro» (Botticelli, line 202, *Ibid*), Alesso Baldovinetti (line 215, 426), and many others. The poem also focuses on lesser known Italian artists such as Niccolò Delli (called «Dello», line 64, 414), Nicolo the Pisan (Nicola Pisano, line 179, 423), Lorenzo Monaco (line 208, 425), and «Margheritone» of Arezzo (line 217, 426): Browning's point seems to be that «A younger [artist] succeeds to an elder brother, / Da Vincis derive in good time from Dellos» (line 64, 414), that is, the great art of the sixteenth century finds its foundations in the works of minor but significant figures, who are worth more careful consideration.

According to Dante Gabriel Rossetti, the competence that Browning developed in art history during his stay in Florence was «superior to that of anyone he had ever met, including Ruskin» (Korg 1983: 100). The comparison was not unwarranted: there is a close connection between Browning and John Ruskin, whose *Mornings in Florence* is part of the corpus, since the two men formed a friendship based on mutual admiration, deeply influencing each other's works. Of course, Ruskin was familiar with Vasari's *Lives*, and at times he was critical of it as, after all, he was critical of most writings on art by his contemporaries. *Mornings in Florence*, as can be easily inferred from the title, describes six morning tours in this city; these itineraries, however, amount to a rather idiosyncratic handbook for travellers. As mentioned above, Ruskin blurs the boundaries between travel book, guide, literary fiction, and private journal, in that he dwells upon subjective impressions or describes personal experiences, often assuming an ironic and provocative tone. Talking about Ghirlandaio's works in Santa Maria Novella, for instance, he suggests to his readers: «Look at the Madonna, carefully. You will find she is not the least meek – only stupid, – as all the other women in the picture are» (1904: 26). Ruskin's unconventional compositional practice is displayed also in his direct and often peremptory addresses to his readers:

Get this little bit of geography, and architectural fact, well into your mind. There is the little octagon Baptistery in the middle; here, ten minutes' walk east of it, the Franciscan church of

the Holy Cross; there, five minutes' walk west of it, the Dominican church of St. Mary (1904: 5-6).

If Ruskin was «a major influence on [Henry] James» (Luckhurst 2009: xiv) and on his *Portrait of a Lady*, Claude J. Summers (1987) has demonstrated that both Vasari and Ruskin's views on art are central to another text of the corpus, E. M. Forster's *A Room with a View* (1908). In the second chapter of the novel, Lucy Honeychurch, Mr Emerson and his son George head to the Peruzzi Chapel in Florence to observe the frescoes by Giotto. Here, the Ascension of Saint John (*Ascensione di san Giovanni*) functions as a distorting mirror that reflects the worldview of the characters, their interior lives, and their conception of art. This sort of deceptive effect of Giotto's art reminds the reader of Vasari's biography, where the artist is described as very skilled in creating optical illusions and inclined to play tricks with his painting (1998: 34-35).

Vasari's discussion of Giotto, namely of the bell tower in Santa Maria del Fiore, appears in another text of the corpus, *Casa Guidi Windows* by Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Vasari specifies that the construction of the bell tower was left unfinished at Giotto's death:

Doveva questo campanile, secondo il modello di Giotto, avere per finimento, sopra quello che si vede, una punta ovvero piramide quadra alta braccia cinquanta, ma per essere cosa tedesca e di maniera vecchia, gli architettori moderni non hanno mai se non consigliato che non si faccia, parendo che stia meglio così (Vasari 1967: 115).

According to Giotto's model, this bell tower was supposed to have as its finishing touch above what is now visible a point or, rather, a four-sided pyramid fifty armslengths high, but since it was a German construction in the old style, modern architects have always advised against adding this, believing it to be better as it now stands (Vasari 1998: 32).

In *Casa Guidi Windows*, Barrett Browning compares Giotto's «Campanile» to an «unperplex'd / Fine question Heaven-ward» (lines 69-70), suggesting that its incomplete form is a tribute to human aspiration, and thus agreeing with Vasari that «the tower is best as it stands, representing the beauty and openness of the future» (Pollock 2016: 168).

Elizabeth's perspective on Florence is very different from her husband Robert's; while he focuses mainly on the cultural history of the city, she engages chiefly in Italian contemporary politics. *Casa Guidi Windows*, for instance, is rich in references to Italian art and literature, but it also contains the speaker's personal impressions of the political events in Tuscany, which the speaker observes from a window and, therefore, with simultaneous distance and participation. In the poem, the hope of a new Italy takes form amongst the artistic heritage of the city and finds expression «'Twixt church and palace of a Florence street!» (line 10, 2009: 238), in a perfect intermingling of past and present. Although thematically concerned with social and political questions, *Casa Guidi* contains a wealth of words associated with cultural heritage: 11.5 per cent of the words in this poem are identified by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as related to the fields of art and architecture, which is very close to the 13.1 per cent of *Old Pictures in Florence* and 12.5 per cent of *Mornings in Florence*. Thus, the corpus

reveals that Barrett Browning talks about Florentine women, children, and the people in the procession as if they were works of art, fixing them in a static and almost statuary eternity.

The other poems by Barrett Browning included in the corpus follow a similar procedure, and contain an average of 12 per cent of words related to art. *A Tale of Villafranca* describes Florence's reaction to the armistice of Villafranca di Verona, signed on 11 July 1859, which put an end to the second War of Independence and delayed any project of an Italian reunification. Images of mourning and resignation recur also in *A Child's Grave at Florence*, where the closing lines reverse the conventional meaning of the Annunciation – in Barrett Browning's text, an Angel anticipates imminent death:

Some smiling angel close shall stand
In old Correggio's fashion,
And bear a LILY in his hand,
For death's ANNUNCIATION (lines 129-132; 1849: 1304).

Once again, the political discourse implied in these lines is not devoid of references to the history of art; Correggio's *Annunciation* (dated around 1524-1525) is a fresco fragment now preserved in the National Gallery of Parma. However, Correggio's angel does not «bear a LILY in his hand», as in most of the canonical fourteenth- and fifteenth-century imagery of the Annunciation; in the second part of the stanza, therefore, Barrett Browning might be thinking of paintings such as Leonardo's *Annunciation* (dated around 1472-1475), now preserved at the Uffizi Gallery.

In the poem *The Dance*, the «piazzone» (line 6) at «the Cascine» (line 1, 2009: 277) offers the background for another reflection on war: a Florentine lady invites some officers from the French camp to dance with the Italian women, and the men who witness the scene manifest their approval. Finally, *A Court Lady* describes a woman's visit to the hospital, where she meets soldiers from different parts of the Italian peninsula; the brave men who fought for their homeland are all, equally, «in the Court of the King» (line 8).

A fascination with the Italian political situation emerges in another text of the corpus, *Amours de Voyage* (1849) by Arthur Hugh Clough. Similarly to Barrett Browning, Clough uses Roman and Florentine works of art as a backcloth on which the Italian Risorgimento can be projected:

*Is it Florence we follow, or are we to tarry yet longer,
E'en amid clamour of arms, here in the city of old,
Seeking from clamour of arms in the Past and the Arts to be hidden,
Vainly 'mid Arts and the Past seeking one life to forget?*
(lines 341-344; Clough 2003: 154, italics in the original)

Clough's novel in verse is arranged in five cantos, or chapters, as a sequence of letters describing a group of English travellers caught up in the 1849 political turmoil. His personal experience must have been inspiring in this sense: in the spring of that year, amidst the battles between France and Italy, he repeatedly asked Giuseppe Mazzini to grant him a permit

to visit the Vatican art gallery. Later, Clough confessed he had been ashamed to «bother the Dictator [...] with my trivial English-tourist importunities» (1957: 257).

Clough died in 1861 in Florence, where he had gone to nurse his failing health, but he always remained a foreigner there, as in the other European cities that he visited. In this sense, *Amours de Voyage* lacks Barrett Browning's passionate political involvement, revealing instead a sense of perplexed uncertainty regarding Italy's projects of reunification. A similar relationship to Italy characterized the life of George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans), who, unlike the Brownings, was never «at home» in Florence: she spent only six weeks in this city, in 1861, gathering material for *Romola* (1863).

The historical novel *Romola*, included in the corpus, is set in Florence between 1492 and 1498, two important dates for the history of the city: the first saw the death of Lorenzo de' Medici, the second that of Savonarola. Lorenzo de' Medici's demise marked the beginning of a period of political instability that led to the so-called Italian Wars (1494-1559), so, probably, Eliot saw a similarity between Renaissance and nineteenth-century Italy, then embroiled in the Wars of Unification (1848-1870). In the novel, it is the cultural heritage of Italy that establishes a connection between the past and the present:

The Loggia de' Cerchi stood in the heart of old Florence, within a labyrinth of narrow streets behind the Badia, now rarely threaded by the stranger, unless in a dubious search for a certain severely simple door-place, bearing this inscription: QUI NACQUE IL DIVINO POETA (Eliot 1863: 9).

The time of the story, as already mentioned, is 1492; Eliot's «now», instead, refers to the act of narration, which presumably takes place in the nineteenth century, when the Loggia de' Cerchi had long stopped being a busy area of the city. The unexpected connection between the «before» and «after» suggests to the readers that, although major changes have occurred, the story that they are about to read bears significance for their present situation. Indeed, various scholars have read *Romola* as an allegory of both the Italian Risorgimento and Victorian England (cfr. Morse 1993: 351).

It is not surprising, considering the previous discussion, that even Eliot's novel is deeply indebted to the *Lives*. William Sullivan remarks that Eliot read Vasari's work in 1861, presumably when in Florence, and used it as a rough draft to elaborate the character of Piero di Cosimo (1972: 391). According to Vasari, the historical Piero was brutal to the point of savageness and unpleasantly bizarre; similarly, Eliot depicts Piero as «freakish», «whimsical», and «crusty» (1863: 21, 43, 117). However, behind a cynical and brusque surface, Eliot's Piero hides admirable personality traits, which seem to be a creation of the writer's imagination. She appropriates the historical figure of Piero, rereads and transforms it, because she does not propose to be faithful to available biographical documentation, but rather use it to convey a moral message. In this respect, *Romola* finds significant points of contact with the thought of Ruskin, who believed that the Italian Renaissance marked the beginning of a moral decadence caused by «over-refinement» and «over-luxuriance» (1979: 4) among other factors. In the same vein, Eliot emphasizes the corruption, amorality and licentiousness of a time and place where

«lust and obscenity, lying and treachery, oppression and murder, were pleasant, useful, and, when properly managed, not dangerous» and «sublime artists were at hand to paint the holy and the unclean with impartial skill» (1863: 95).

The English corpus for the LBC project contains further texts that shed light on the Victorian experience of Florence, such as poems by Edward Robert Bulwer-Lytton, Elizabeth Barrett Browning's friend Isa Blagden, and William Leighton. Charles Hobday's *A Golden Ring: English Poets in Florence from 1373 to the Present Day* has been a precious point of reference in order to identify English authors who devoted their works to Florence; many poems discussed in this essay are about to be added to the corpus, among them *At Florence* and other Florence-related poems by William Wordsworth, *On The Medusa of Leonardo Da Vinci in the Florentine Gallery* by Percy Bysshe Shelley, *In the Noon-day's Golden Pleasance* by Theodosia Trollope, *Inscription for the Neglected Column in the Place of St. Mark at Florence* by Horace Walpole, and *By the Arno* by Oscar Wilde.

Other texts soon to be included in the corpus are John Murray's *Handbook for Travellers in Northern Italy, Part II: Parma, Piacenza, Modena, Florence, Pisa, Lucca and Tuscany*, which is much-quoted (and questioned) by Ruskin; Bernard Berenson's works on Florence, from which E.M. Forster's drew much for *A Room with a View*, and Francesco Bocchi's *Le Bellezze della città di Fiorenza*, originally published in 1591 and translated into English as *The Beauties of the City of Florence* by Thomas Frangenberg and Robert Williams (2006). These (and other) additions will further expand the network of interconnections among the texts included in the English corpus, a network that involves both literary and non-literary works, both English and Italian authors; in so doing, the corpus will not only provide useful information for linguistic work, but also tell a story of the century that witnessed the presence of the most foreign resident writers in the history of Florence.

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Notes

[1] For an Italian version of this paper see the collection *I corpora LBC* (Firenze University Press), edited by Riccardo Billero, Annick Farina, and Carlota Nicolàs Martìnes.

[2] The editions of the primary texts cited in this paper may differ from those added to the English corpus for the LBC Project. Here, I have used recent critical editions of various works, which contain updated scholarly discussion; in the corpus, the choice of editions depends on a variety of different factors, not last the availability of machine-readable texts.



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