Apocalyptic and Demonic Structures in Michelangelo's Love Poetry

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Francesco Berni, in his "Capitolo a fra Bastian Del Piombo" of 1534, succinctly described Michelangelo's poetic talents as follows: "ei dice cose, e voi dite parole."[1] The word "cose" was particularly well chosen, for Michelangelo, in his poetry, gives weighty consideration to his innermost thoughts. These, in turn, were shaped by Michelangelo's early formal education. As the poet was under the patronage of the Medici family and was wont to spend many hours at Lorenzo de'Medici's home, he was undoubtedly influenced by Lorenzo's circle of friends, Angelo Poliziano, Marsilio Ficino and Pico della Mirandola. His training in Neoplatonic thought was to be the structural basis of his poetry expounding his theories of art and his experiences with love.

The adherence to the rigid doctrines of Neoplatonism provoked conflicts in the poet's inner self. This dialectical movement is best exemplified in his love poems which are metaphorically structured on his artistic theory. The struggles and resolutions of the poems follow narrative movements of descent and ascent.[2] The structural descent is from Michelangelo's world of experience to a demonic world. In these poems, addressed to Tommaso Cavalieri, Vittoria Colonna, and to a few undefined women including "la donna bella e crudele," the motif of amnesia is prominent as Michelangelo loses his identity, becomes a prisoner to his body, and experiences feelings

of alienation. At the bottom of this personal hell, he reaches a stage of conscious detachment in which he recognizes the evil that has been enveloping his soul and expresses a desire to escape by means of his imagination. This, in turn, has been infused with a newly acquired vision of love. These poems are part of his early writings to Vittoria Colonna. As he ascends from the lower world to his world of experience and from that level to a higher one, his memory is restored. Through Colonna's guidance he attains a state of self-recognition and establishes a re-identification with his self and with the love, beauty and grace of God.

In order to examine these narrative movements in Michelangelo's love poetry, a clear understanding of his artistic theory is essential. The system of education in Lorenzo de'Medici's household, of which Michelangelo was considered a member, was grounded on the maieutic method adopted by Socrates. The practice consisted of drawing forth pre-existing concepts from the student's imagination. Michelangelo applied this theory to art, and more specifically to sculpture, in asserting that the work of art, the sculpture itself, lay hidden within the block of marble as was the pure idea of the work concealed in his imagination. Through the elimination of superfluous material, the work would reveal itself, just as the idea is extracted from his mind. Neoplatonic doctrine dictated that the potential idea in the poet's or the artist's mind be realized as an ideal spiritual image:

> Io [Marsilio Ficino] voglio che voi sappiate, che il vero uomo, et la Idea dell'uomo è tutto uno. E però nessuno di noi in terra è vero uomo, mentre che da Dio siamo separati: perchè siamo disgiunti da la nostra Idea: la quale è nostra forma. A quella ci riducerà il divino amore con vita pia. Certamente noi siamo qui divisi e tronchi: ma allora congiunti per Amore a la nostra Idea ritorneremo interi: in modo che apparirà, che noi abbiamo prima amato Dio nelle cose, per amare poi le cose in lui: e che noi onoriamo le cose in Dio, per ricomperare noi soprattutto: e amando Dio, abbiamo amato noi medesimi.[3]

The application of Neoplatonic concepts to Michelangelo's theory of art is set forth in the following sonnet composed around 1528:

> Dimmi di grazia, Amor, se gli occhi mei
> veggono 'l ver della beltà c'aspiro
> o s'io l'ho dentro allor che, dov'io miro,

veggio scolpito el viso di costei.
Tu 'l de' saper, po' che tu vien con lei
a torm'ogni mie pace, ond'io m'adiro;
né vorre' manco un minimo sospiro,
né men ardente foco chiederei.
—La beltà che tu vedi è ben da quella,
ma cresce poi c'a miglior loco sale,
se per gli occhi mortali all'alma corre.
Quivi si fa divina, onesta e bella,
com'a sé simil vuol cosa immortale:
questa e non quella agli occhi tuo precorre.[4]

In this dialogue between the lover and Love personified, the former seeks to comprehend the truth of beauty to which the lover may aspire. The verb "aspiro" suggests that the truthful beauty is above mortal man and is in fact the beauty of God. The lover is desirous to know if this is God's beauty which surrounds him on the exterior or if it has been projected by rays into his soul and therein formed its proper image. In the first quatrain, there is emphasis on the sense of sight, one of the three most important of the Neoplatonic senses. The words "gli occhi mei" (1.1), "veggono" (1.2), "miro" (1.3), and "veggio" (1.4) appear in accented positions at the beginning and end of the lines. The participle "scolpito" (1.4) provides the link between the Neoplatonic and Michelangelo's artistic theories. As Love will concur in its answer, the truly beautiful image of God penetrates the soul just as it is transformed from the mind of the artist to the sculpture that exists within the block of marble.

The poet feebly protests that these visions of perfect beauty ravage his soul. He quickly assures Love, however, that he longs for his soul to be consumed by flames of passion which would lead him to the divine image of beauty. Love's reply is Neoplatonic in tone as it reveals how the beauty of God, through His rays, reaches man; these enter the mortal's eyes, permeate his soul and draw it back to God. It is significant that this dialogue occurs between a lover and *Love* since, according to Ficino, "l'Amore è desiderio di fruire pulcritudine, cioé Bellezza."[5] Through spiritual love, divine beauty enters the eyes and soul of a mortal being, thereby ennobling the soul and rendering it immortal. In later poems, the poet will speak of the

immortal quality of his works of art inasmuch as they—being the "souls" of the blocks of marble—have also been infused with a vision of divine beauty.

The hierarchy of Beings is fundamental to Neoplatonic thought. God is the supreme Being who transmits His beauty and grace through the sun's rays to the Angels, to the Planets, to Man, to the Animals, to the Plants and to the Minerals. Man, in the center of the Chain, was considered in the Renaissance to be a microcosm of the universe.[6] His natural tendency is to ascend to a state of identification with God. Yet, being of mortal substance with an intellect and a free will, he might tend to fall down the Chain away from God. This tension emerges in the following sonnet:

Se 'l mie rozzo martello i duri sassi
forma d'uman aspetto or questo or quello,
dal ministro che 'l guida, iscorge e tiello,
prendendo il moto, va con gli altrui passi.
Ma quel divin che in cielo alberga e stassi,
altri, e sé più, col proprio andar fa bello;
e se nessun martel senza martello
si può far, da quel vivo ogni altro fassi.
E perché 'l colpo è di valor più pieno
quant' alza più se stesso alla fucina,
sopra 'l mie questo al ciel n'è gito a volo.
Onde a me non finito verrà meno,
s'or non gli dà la fabbrica divina
aiuto a farlo, c'al mondo era solo.

The critic F. Girardi recognizes the antecedent of the image of the hammer in Dante:

Lo moto e la virtù d'i santi giri,
come dal fabbro l'arte del martello,
da' beati motor convien che spiri;
e 'l ciel cui tanti lumi fanno bello,
de la mente profonda che lui volve
prende l'image e fassene suggello[7]

Paradiso II, 127–132

Thus the hammer of the sonnet refers, literally, to the instrument itself, and metonymically, to the artist or, more specifically, to the artist's imagination.

The sonnet's first quatrain advances the argument that if the artist's simple hammer is to sculpt some live form out of a block of marble, it necessarily depends on something to guide it, since by itself the hammer remains a useless instrument. In a Neoplatonic interpretation, if this hammer is a metaphor for the artist's imagination a similar style of reasoning ensues: the artist's intellect, in order to carve the image of his beloved in his soul, requires the presence of a guide. The second quatrain asserts that God's hammer makes all His creatures' hammers beautiful and comparable to the divine one. The first tercet, in a literal sense, suggests that the hammer's blow will be more efficient the higher the artist's arm is raised. Figuratively, the tercet suggests that he who raises higher the inspiration in his soul will be spiritually more richly rewarded. The movements of the hammer's blows striking downward and the soul's inspiration soaring upward work in perfect harmony, as God's divine rays of beauty descend into man's soul to cause it to rise to God. The poet realizes in the concluding tercet that the supreme artist and guide must be God, for the mortal guide, once he has died, can no longer inspire. The cumbersome syntactical structures of the sonnet as well as the preponderance of harsh sounds are in accordance with the artistic image adopted in the poem. The strident sounds refer to both the terrestrial hammer: "rozzo mar*t*ello i *d*uri *s*a*ss*i" (1.1); "or *ques*to or *qu*ello" (1.2); "i*sc*orge e *t*iello" (1.3); and to the divine instrument: "al*b*erga e *st*a*ss*i" (1.5). Michelangelo thus fuses his practical training in the figurative arts with his understanding of Neoplatonic philosophy.

The tension between upward and downward movements was indeed resolved in the preceding sonnet in favour of a movement towards God; however, the poet did allow himself to fall into a demonic world to satisfy his physical desires. Ficino acknowledges this tendency to fall:

> E noi chiamiamo Bellezza quella grazia del volto divino: e lo Amore chiamiamo la avidità dello Angelo per la quale si invischia in tutto

> al volto divino: Iddio volesse, amici miei, che questo ancora avvenisse a noi. Ma l'animo nostro creato con questa condizione, che si circunda da corpo terreno, al ministerio corporale declina: dalla quale inclinazione gravato, mette in oblio il tesoro, che nel suo petto è nascoso. Dipoi che nel corpo terreno è involto, lungo tempo all'uso del corpo serve, e a questa opera sempre accomoda il senso: e accommodavi ancora la ragione più spesso che e' non debbe.[8]

Like Dante, Michelangelo must descend to a personal hell, recognize the devil himself, and choose death, or a rebirth, through renunciation of his past experiences.

The descent into the demonic world incorporates two themes: the loss of identity and the motif of alienation. Michelangelo's poems, addressed to the unknown "donna bella e crudele," are a bitter testimony to the lover's experience of self-denial. The conflict of love derives in part from the poet's inability to deal with the nature of deceit which pervades this woman.[9] In a madrigal to the "donna bella a crudele," the Neoplatonic theme of "l'amore semplice" is figuratively represented by the sculptor who exchanges his identity for its reflection on the marble. As Frye has noted, this is a central image of descent.[10]

> S'egli è che 'n dura pietra alcun somigli
> talor l'immagin d'ogni altri a se stesso,
> squalido e smorto spesso
> il fo, com'i' son fatto da costei.
> E par ch'esempro pigli
> ognor da me, ch'i' penso di far lei.
> Ben la pietra potrei,
> per l'aspra suo durezza,
> in ch'io l'esempro, dir c'a lei s'assembra;
> del resto non saprei,
> mentre mi strugge e sprezza,
> altro sculpir che le mie afflitte membra.
> Ma se l'arte rimembra
> agli anni la beltà per durare ella,
> farà me lieto, ond'io le' farò bella.

The first two lines refer to the Neoplatonic belief that true spiritual love attracts those lovers who recognize similarities between each

other. The third and fourth verses quickly dispel any notion, however, that this madrigal is to be a homage to spiritual love. The artist does not carve the image of his beloved in his soul, the "dura pietra," but rather depicts what he sees of himself in her. He has reached the stage of self-abnegation, "son fatto da costei" (1.4), and has relinquished the love within his self in favor of his beloved. Her essence fuels his life, yet she dispassionately reflects a squalid and pale image onto the stone. "Smorto" refers to an artistic style that lacks any sort of vitality. The poet is colourless and lifeless like the "dura pietra" on which he carves.

The theme of unreciprocated love returns in lines five and six. The beloved's image does not live within the poet's soul and his reflection is almost dead inside her. He compares her bitter and heartless nature to the "dura pietra," his sculpting block. The terminology he adopts to portray his character is rather a depiction of her mercilessness: "mentre mi *strugge* e *sprezza,* / altro sculpir che le mie *afflitte* membra." (11. 11–12). These harsh terms expose the beloved as a conceited being who disdains her lover and dares him to extract the beauty which they both know lies within her. In Neoplatonic terms, this haughty "donna bella e crudele" is an assassin:

> E chi non ama l'Amante è in colpa di omicidio, anzi è ladro, micidiale e sacrilego. La pecunia dal corpo è posseduta: e il corpo dall'animo: adunque chi rapisce l'animo, dal quale il corpo e la pecunia si possiede, costui rapisce insieme l'animo, il corpo, e la pecunia; il perchè come ladro, micidiale e sacrilego si debbe a tre morti condannare.[11]

The term "afflitte" aptly describes, both physically and spiritually, the poet's tortured being. The beloved proudly presents herself as an obstacle to his sculpting and to his love. The lover-sculptor, however, appeals to the one weakness of his beloved. He gently reminds her that he has the power, through the artistic medium, to eternalize her beauty. He proposes to execute this plan on the condition that she reciprocate his love. The artist thus expresses an important theoretical point that works of art can overcome nature and time. Regard-

less of what else happens, he can record the present moment for posterity.

The second major theme in the demonic world is the force of alienation:

> This lower world is a world of increasing alienation and loneliness: the hero is not only separated from the heroine or his friends, but is often further isolated by being falsely accused of major crimes.[12]

To the extent that there is any truth to the commonplace concerning Michelangelo's homosexuality, he certainly would have been sensitive to the possibility of accusations in that regard. Ficino's *Comento* provides a Neoplatonic rationale for the love between men:

> Ma questa ragione, copiosamente dimostra Fedro, e pone tre esempi d'Amore: uno di femmina di maschio innamorata, dov'e' parla di Alceste moglie di Admeto, la quale fu contenta di morire, per il suo marito; l'altro di maschio innamorato di femmina, come fu Orfeo di Euridice; terzo di maschio a maschio come fu Patroclo di Achille: dove dimostra nessuna cosa quanto Amore rendere gli uomini forti.[13]

In the following sonnet, written around 1534, Michelangelo proudly justifies his feelings for Tommaso Cavalieri.

I' mi son caro assai più ch'i' non soglio;
poi ch'i' t'ebbi nel cor più di me vaglio,
come pietra c'aggiuntovi l'intaglio
è di più pregio che 'l suo primo scoglio.
O come scritta o pinta carta o foglio
più si riguarda d'ogni straccio o taglio,
tal di me fo, da po' ch'i' fu' berzaglio
segnato dal tuo viso, e non mi doglio.
Sicur non tale stampa in ogni loco
vo, come quel c'ha incanti o arme seco,
c'ogni periglio gli fan venir meno.
I'vaglio contr'a a l'acqua e contr'al foco,
col segno tuo rallumino ogni cieco,
e col mie sputo sano ogni veleno.

The Neoplatonic tone to the poem emanates from the second verse, "poi ch'i' t'ebbi nel cor più di me vaglio." As the image of the beloved is engraved in the lover's heart, the latter experiences a rebirth which includes a greater sense of worth. He compares this personal feeling to the objective world of art. He states that a block of marble, a sheet of paper and a canvas increase in value once a sculpture, a poem or a painting emerges. Once again, he reverts to and objectifies himself as a target whose quality enhances as he is struck with Cupid's arrow. In keeping with the Neoplatonic tradition, the poet only refers to Cavalieri's eyes. The reflection from these through the poet's eyes arouse feelings of love in his heart. He is not ashamed of these sentiments and treats them as would a knight-errant his magical accoutrement or his arms. His love for Cavalieri serves as a vanguard to all those who accuse. The poem whirls into a frenzy at the end as the poet assigns parareligious miraculous healing powers to this love.[14]

As the friendship between Michelangelo and Cavalieri intensifies, the sense of alienation, not just from society, but from Cavalieri himself, deepens in the poet's mind. He becomes unsure of himself as he loses control of his imagination which no longer follows his natural instinct. In the following sonnet this tension becomes apparent through the poet's analogy between art and love:

Sì come nella penna e nell'inchiostro
è l'alto e 'l basso e 'l mediocre stile,
e ne' marmi l'immagin ricca e vile,
secondo che 'l sa trar l'ingegno nostro;
cosí, signor mie car, nel petto vostro,
quante l'orgoglio è forse ogni atto umile;
ma io sol quel c'a me proprio è e simile
ne traggo, come fuor nel viso mostro.
Chi semina sospir, lacrime e doglie,
(l'umor dal ciel terreste, schietto e solo,
a vari semi vario si converte),
però pianto e dolor ne miete e coglie;
chi mira alta beltà con sì gran duolo,
ne ritra' doglie e pene acerbe e certe.

The first quatrain expounds, with the use of the verb "trar," Michelangelo's maieutic theory of art. The poet places the onus on the artist and the lover to extract respectively the perfect form which pre-exists in the ink and in the block of marble, and the positive qualities from the soul of the beloved. The lover, however, is unable to fulfill this duty. The conflict arises since in Neoplatonic love, the lover depends totally upon his beloved for his existence. At this point, the lover feels imprisoned within himself. Instead of drawing out any positive image from Cavalieri's soul, his imagination is restricted to portraying his own morose semblance.

While the first quatrain is devoted to the role of the imagination in the plastic arts, and the second quatrain relates specifically the poet's use of his intellect, in a Neoplatonic sense, to create art, the remaining two tercets present general reflections on the use of the imagination. In brief, "Chi *semina* sospir, lacrime e doglie, [. . .] però pianto e dolor ne miete e *coglie*" (underlining mine) is analogous to the aphorism of one reaping what one sows. The pure rain falls on the planted seeds like God's grace enters the souls of men. If, however, the rain waters bad seeds, which have been planted not by the rain but by the farmer, good crops should not be expected to grow. Similarly, God's grace and beauty are diffused by rays of love into man's soul, and love, in Neoplatonic terms, is the desire and enjoyment of beauty. It is the lover's responsibility, therefore, to acknowledge these gifts from God in the loved one's soul and should he refuse, his love will remain unreciprocated. The last two verses, albeit addressed to an indefinite third person, summarize the conflict which resides in the poet's soul. A deep sense of anguish overwhelms his imagination, and so, his attempts to draw forth from his beloved any sentiment other than bitter pain, are futile. This tension is a direct result of the poet's awareness of having lost control of his imagination to achieve his desired effects. This signals a further loss of identity and the poet continues his journey of descent.

Once the poet reaches his private hell, he must choose between passively remaining in this closed world or actively escaping to a higher and nobler world. He decides to pursue the latter course and, as such, he must follow two patterns of ascent: the first, leaving this

hell to reach the ordinary level of experience, and the second, departing this world of experience to attain a paradisal level. His ascent from a lower world is initially full of strife, yet a positive air pervades these poems as the poet's will to emerge victoriously from his hell is clearly projected:

> Sì come per levar, donna, si pone
> in pietra alpestra e dura
> una viva figura,
> che là più cresce u' più la pietra scema;
> tal alcun' opre buone,
> per l'alma che pur trema,
> cela il superchio della propria carne
> co' l'inculta sua cruda e dura scorza.
> Tu pur dalle mie streme
> parti puo' sol levarne,
> ch'in me non è di me voler né forza.

The first four verses of the poem present a clear statement of Michelangelo's theory of art. His method of sculpting is depicted as a series of contrasting movements: "per *levar*[. . .] si *pone*/in pietra [. . .] *dura*/una *viva* figura/che là più *cresce* u' più la pietra *scema.*" The verb "levar" suggests a rising motion, thus emphasizing the poem's movement of ascent in a Neoplatonic sense. This verb, when applied to the artistic theory of drawing forth a living form from within a block of marble, acquires a figurative meaning parallel to the action of giving birth. The elimination of the superfluous to reveal the living substance is comparable to the cycle of death and rebirth. This birth of the sculpture signifies liberation. The motif of escape is essential for the ascent from the lower world to succeed. Through the artist's creative act, this sculpture, stripped of its superfluous matter, has also regained its own identity.

The poet then proceeds to discuss himself in terms of his maieutic theory of art. The comparison—"sì come" . . . "tal"—indicates that he is engaged in the process of regaining his identity. The poet, through his art, is experiencing a rebirth. He feels like a prisoner in his body. It is a positive sign, however, that he recognizes his body as the suppressing factor, for this reveals that he has established a

distinction between his body and his soul. Just as the block of marble is "dura," so too is he enveloped in a "dura scorza." Just as he perceives that a living sculpture lies within the marble, so too does he realize that "alcun' opre buone" reside within his soul.[15]

The concluding appeal to Vittoria Colonna introduces the theme of love, as it is through the lady's guidance that the poet will ascend to a state of rediscovered identity. He is aware that his liberation will take place through her teachings of God's love, beauty and grace. The reappearance of the verb "levarne" connects the artist's ability, through his creative act, to liberate the sculpture within the block of marble; and the ability of the lady, through love, to restore the identity of the pure soul within the unrefined and harsh exterior of the poet. The expression of lethargy in the concluding verse is excusable, for the poet has just reached the stage of conscious detachment. His appeal for help indicates a willingness to escape his present condition and to ascend to a new life.

While the movement of descent from the world of experience to the lower world entails a loss of identity and a sense of alienation, the movement of ascent from the world of experience to the Earthly Paradise restores the broken current of memory and establishes a sense of belonging. The reconstruction of the poet's identity will be achieved simultaneously through the artist's imagination and his lady's love which will guide his soul to God. The Neoplatonic and artistic images are fused in Michelangelo's love poetry in this journey of ascent as they were in the movement to the lower world.

In the following madrigal the poet has reached a stage in which he can identify with the beauty and grace of God established both through his artistic creations and through the spiritual love infused in him by the lady:

Per fido esemplo alla mia vocazione
nel parto mi fu data la bellezza,
che d'ambo l'arti m'è lucerna e specchio.
S'altro si pensa, è falsa opinione.
Questo sol l'occhio porta a quella altezza
c'a pingere e scolpir qui m'apparecchio.
S'e' guidizi temerari e sciocchi
al senso tiran la beltà, che muove

> e porta al cielo ogni intelletto sano,
> dal mortale al divin non vanno gli occhi
> infermi, e fermi sempre pur là d'ove
> ascender senza grazia è pensier vano.

The opening image refers both to the birth of the poet and to his maieutic theory of art. In this original state of innocence he was given the Idea of beauty as a spiritual mentor to teach him to love God and to serve his imagination. The passive voice, "mi *fu* data" (1.2), is important in establishing the Neoplatonic mood of the poem for it underlines the poet's continual dependence on God. This guide of beauty is described as a light and as a mirror. The light implies the grace of God which is instilled in man by the rays of the sun. The mirror in this sense loses its demonic attributes and refers instead to the mirror of God's beauty which is reflected from God into man's soul. The functions of the light and of the mirror, however, are subject to man's visual sense. It is only through the eye that man can receive the rays of God's grace and beauty before they enter the soul. Once the rays have penetrated the eyes, his imagination will *literally* have been brought to great heights. The poet, in exteriorizing his thoughts into concrete works of art, will be manifesting on earth God's Idea of beauty.

The poet is utterly convinced of this Neoplatonic interpretation and, as such, has regained his own sense of identity and developed an understanding between his self and the Idea of the beauty of God. This unequivocal statement, "S'altro si pensa, è falsa opinione" (1.4), suggests a recognition scene:

> It appears in the polarizing between two worlds, one desirable and the other hateful, the triumphant upward movement of the living hero rising from the dead dragon, the point that expresses the reader's identity with a power of life strong enough to smash through any kind of barrier or danger.[16]

The poet, in fact, is not oblivious to the danger of a fall, for he too was once pulled down ("tiran") and attracted by physical beauty. His strength of character lies in the ability to recognize and argue against this human weakness by which he was once enslaved. He knows from experience that it is audacious to believe that without

the grace of God, man can partake of His beauty. Through the mortal eyes the beauty of God *moves* ("muove") and *brings* ("porta") every healthy and honest ("sano") mind back to God. These verbs of action and the adjective "sano" are in direct opposition to the static verb "fermi," and to the adjective "infermi," which characterizes those who worship physical beauty. As "sano" in a figurative sense denotes honesty, by analogy "infermi" suggests something immoral: those who refuse to acknowledge the light of God will be permanently fixed in a closed circle of Hell. Michelangelo has reconciled his past with his present in his ascent from a lower world to his world of experience, and he now concentrates on bringing some part of his present into the future. He hopes to achieve this through pursuing God's Idea of beauty both in his art work and in his soul.

It would not be correct to assume, however, that Michelangelo adhered, till his death, to this philosophy. After 1545, the doctrines of the Counter-Reformation were more stringently enforced and Michelangelo's group of moderates was compelled to disband. The symbiotic relationship that had developed between his Neoplatonic interpretation of love and his theory of art was ruptured. The following sonnet is one of the best examples of his writings which presents this fracture:

Giunto è già 'l corso della vita mia,
con tempestoso mar, per fragil barca,
al comun porto, ov'a render si varca
conto e ragion d'ogni opra trista e pia.
Onde l'affecttüosa fantasia
che l'arte mi fece idol e monarca
conosco or ben com'era d'error carca
e quel c'a mal suo grado ogn'uom desia.
Gli amorosi pensier, già vani e lieti,
che fien or, s'a duo morte m'avvicino?
D'una so 'l certo, e l'altra mi minaccia.
Né pinger né scolpir fie più che quieti
l'anima, volta a quell'amor divino
c'aperse, a prender noi, 'n croce le braccia.

The first quatrain applies the familiar nautical imagery to represent the poet's journey toward God. His life, the "fragil barca," has

finally arrived at the Day of Judgment when he will be required to recite the episodes, both good and bad, of his existence. In his account to God in this poem, he is first of all ashamed of his artistic creations which caused him to be worshipped as a pagan idol and an earthly king. He then chastizes himself for the wasted time and energy spent on thoughts of love. The principal cause for consternation is the uncertainty of the fate of his soul. While he has reconciled his love of physical beauty with that of the spiritual beauty of God, he is unable to find any sense of spiritual comfort in his art work. The movement of ascent, established at the end of the poem, reveals the poet's desire to be enveloped in Christ's arms. During these remaining years of the artist's life, his poems express the hope for salvation achieved through spiritual love. It is a great tragedy that his art could not have formed a positive part of his thoughts on salvation, for his intellect had persistently enjoyed such a prominent role in fusing his theories on art with his Neoplatonic beliefs.[17]

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Notes

1. Francesco Berni, "Capitolo a fra Bastian del Piombo," in *Opere di Francesco Berni,* ed. E. Camerini (Milano: Edoardo Sonzogno, 1877), pp. 94–97.

2. The structures of apocalyptic and demonic imagery and their respective terminologies have been adopted from the definitions ascribed to them by N. Frye in his works, *The Anatomy of Criticism* and *The Secular Scripture.*

3. Marsilio Ficino, *Sopra lo amore o ver' Convito di Platone: Comento di Marsilio Ficini Fiorentino sopra il Convito di Platone,* ed. G. Ottaviano (Milan: CELUC, 1973), p. 128.

4. Michelangelo Buonarroti, "Dimmi di grazia, Amor, se gli occhi mei," in *Rime,* 2nd ed., ed. E. Barelli (1975; rpt. Milano: Rizzoli, 1981), p. 85. All subsequent poems are from this edition.

5. Ficino, p. 36.

6. Paul O. Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought and the Arts* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), pp. 102–10. Kristeller discusses Ficino's Pomponazzi's and Pico's theories of man's place in the universe.

7. Dante Alighieri, *La Divina Commedia,* ed. C. H. Grandgent and Charles S. Singleton (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1972), *Par.* II, 127–132.

8. Ficino, pp. 66–67.

9. Northrop Frye, *The Secular Scripture: A Study of the Structure of Romance* (1976: rpt. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982), p. 183. According to Frye, this is a typical female role or attitude in literature:

> The imagination, as it reflects on this world, sees it as a world of violence and cunning, 'forza' and 'froda.' The typical agent of cunning is a woman, whose main instrument of will is her bed: in the *Iliad* even the greatest of goddesses, Hera, decoys Zeus in this way in an effort to aid the Greeks. Thus the 'forza-froda' cycle is also that of Ares and Eros, both of which, for human beings, end in Thanatos or death. Ares and Eros are functionaries of Venus, whose alternative form is Diana of the triple will, the white goddess who always kills, and whose rebirth is only for herself.

10. Frye ascribes evil and mysterious powers to the mirror image, be it a mirror, a reflecting pool, a picture, tapestry or statue. He states that "[. . .] disappearing into one's own mirror image, or entering a world of reversed or reduced dimensions, is a central symbol of descent." See: N. Frye, *The Secular Scripture,* pp. 108–109.

11. Ficino, p. 35.

12. Frye, *The Secular Scripture,* p. 115.

13. Ficino, pp. 18–19. In another oration (p. 143), we find the following statement:

> Dimanderà forse alcuno, da quali persone massime, e in che modo si allacciano gli amanti: e in che modo si sciolgono. Le femmine facilmente pigliano i maschi; e quelle più facilmente, che mostrano qualche effige masculina. I maschi ancora più facilmente pigliano gli uomini, essendo a loro più simili che le femmine: e avendo il sangue e lo spirito più lucido, più caldo e più sottile, nella qual cosa si appiccano le reti di Cupidine.

14. Clements, pp. 109, 190.

15. Alma B. Altizer, *Self and Symbolism in the Poetry of Michelangelo, John Donne, and Agrippa D'Aubigné* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973), p. 23. Alma Altizer proposes the following explanation for the attribute "trema" referring to his "alma":

> Fear, throughout Michelangelo's poetry, is associated with beauty (whether it be the beauty of art or that of the beloved) and desire, which for Michelangelo is ultimately a desire for infinite beauty. And the desire for infinite beauty is inextricably connected to a yearning for self-liberation—liberation of the soul from the body, and of the spirit from matter.

16. Frye, *The Secular Scripture,* p. 163.

17. Michelangelo's love poetry, when assembled and read in a loose biographical order, follows to a degree the structural patterns of a romance novel. He experiences conflicts in his youth and middle age which inevitably pull him down into

a demonic world where he loses his identity and becomes alienated from his society. Through regained self-confidence he makes a reappearance and ascends to his ordinary world of experience and beyond, to the extent that his exhaustive concern for the salvation of his soul becomes mystical in nature. The love poems of Michelangelo, composed up till the latter part of his life, are the true embodiment of the vitality of this extraordinary man who lived each moment of his life to its fullest, whether it cast him down into a demonic world or raised him to the heights of heaven.

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