

Michelangelo's Failure

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'It was the pattern of Michelangelo's life', writes Mr Michael Ayrton, introducing a translation¹ of the great artist's sonnets, 'that in painting, an activity of which he thought little, his greatest designs were completed . . . whereas in sculpture, which he considered his proper profession, all his greatest projects failed to materialise or remained in some compromise form to mock him'. A story, then, of disappointment by distraction: an artist of outstanding genius in several media, but profoundly drawn to one in particular, finds himself repeatedly diverted, by circumstances and his patrons, from the work he most wanted to do; the result being the Sistine ceiling and the Last Judgment on the one hand, and on the other the unfinished tombs for Julius II and the Medici. And while those paintings are superb, they are unmistakably, almost pathetically, the work of a man whose deepest impulse was to carve in stone. 'Say a good word, John', wrote Michelangelo in the bizarre sonnet-letter to a friend about the discomforts of painting the Sistine vault lying on his back, 'for these dead paintings of mine . . . for this place is no good and I'm no painter'. And many years later, in a letter to Benedetto Varchi, he tries to define what he felt about the two arts. It is a hesitant, halting letter because the old man was genuinely puzzled. Varchi, writing 'philosophically', had declared painting and sculpture to be really 'the same thing', and though Michelangelo knew by experience that they weren't, he was too humble to contradict. He had always assumed, he replied, that painting was good 'the closer it approached relief and relief was bad the nearer it got to painting, so that I've always thought of sculpture as the guiding-light (*la lanterna*) of painting and that the two differ as the sun and the moon'. Now however he has changed his mind, yielding to Varchi's metaphysics, agreeing that these arts 'are one and the same'. A surprising admission; the

¹*The Sonnets of Michelangelo*. Translated by Elizabeth Jennings, with a selection of Michelangelo drawings and an introduction by Michael Ayrton. The Folio Society, 1961; 2nd ed., reset, 1962 (no price stated). I had intended in this essay to discuss Miss Jennings's translations as well, but having once started to discuss the problem raised by Mr Ayrton touching Michelangelo's mind and character, I soon found that I could not deal at all adequately with both topics in the same article.

more so if we read on a few lines and find it implicitly withdrawn in a phrase which has perhaps a profound significance, for all its casual off-hand simplicity: 'By sculpture I mean only what is produced by taking away, for what is done by laying on is more like painting'. Here surely the man himself speaks, the artist who had always found his deepest satisfaction in 'taking away', as though marked out from birth to be a discoverer and discloser of potentialities concealed in three-dimensional space, an explorer of forms in rock, that could be revealed only by *la man che ubbidisce all'intelletto*².

These last words are from a sonnet written for Vittoria Colonna, in which Michelangelo states with unusual clarity what he thought sculpture as such and in general aimed at. Through it we can glimpse, I think, the ideal he aspired to as an artist (at least under one important aspect) and so approach an understanding of his basic ideas about God and man, of what may very loosely be called his philosophy. As a youth in Florence he had, we know, been influenced by the more or less christianized platonism of Lorenzo de' Medici's circle, but this came to take a particular stamp or stress in his mind, inseparable from his unique personality and governing from within all his work—the painting, the sculpture and the poems. And some insight into this highly personal 'philosophy' of Michelangelo seems necessary before one can take up the theme of his 'pessimism' with any hope of supplementing or even, perhaps, in part correcting what Mr Ayrton has said in his extremely interesting essay—which is all a reflection on the 'profound melancholy' of Michelangelo with a view to presenting him as 'the archetypal artist'; that is, as the first image-maker we can clearly see to have crossed the frontier from craftsman to artist and so to have discovered, as Mr Ayrton puts it, 'that state of forlorn grace beyond normality', where a 'maker' finds himself confronted by overwhelming demands which have nothing whatever to do with the *external* claims of his public or his patrons.

Anyone who knows Michelangelo's poetry at all will know the sonnet I have referred to, but here are the relevant, opening lines:

Non ha l'ottimo artista alcun concetto
 ch'un marmo solo in sé non circonscriva
 col suo soverchio, e solo a quello arriva
 la man che ubbidisce all'intelletto.³

Which may be rendered: 'the greatest sculptor conceives no work in

²'The hand obedient to the intellect'.

³No. 15 of the translation.

his mind that is not already potential in a block of marble, embedded in superfluity; and this, and only this, is the term to which his hand moves in obedience to the mind.' Here, one notes at once, is the characteristic stress on sculpture as a 'taking away'; the product is seen as already there, somehow, in the stone, to be revealed by removal of 'superfluity' (*soverchio*). Still more noteworthy is the stress—supported of course by traditional aesthetics both classical and scholastic—on the mind or intellect; the artist conceives his work as first of all a concept, and this as guiding and governing his entire activity. But the special force of these lines—felt particularly in the last one—comes surely from the poet's assurance that he now knows, luminously, what it is that, as a sculptor, he is about; and not merely in this or that job but always and in every job. He has won an insight into sculpture as such, indeed into art as such, through his experience of lifting the potentialities of stone towards the actuality of his mind. He has seen, and delights in the sight, an intimate correspondence between the law governing art as such and the particular figures he sees growing under his chisel. One might say that he has established a double identification—objectively of mind-product (*conchetto*) and art-product (*a quello arriva*), and subjectively of his own work with that identification, with that making of two things one. He has discovered art as a universal identification and at the same time himself as achieving this; and so as identified, in a way, with art itself, in the degree that art takes effect in his individual work. It would however be risky to argue from this text alone that Michelangelo had any sense of a difference between craftsman and artist such as Mr Ayrton speaks of, or of his having achieved the status of a pure ('archetypal') artist. That is not, probably, how Michelangelo thought of himself; still less, of course, did he think of himself in 'romantic' terms as an 'outsider' emancipated, by his artist's nature, from moral and social obligations. Not that Mr Ayrton says that he did; his point being rather that Michelangelo's career is the first conspicuous instance of the archetypal artist in action (not, of course, in respect of any flouting of common morality, but in respect of a particular attitude to his job). But with this point I am not directly concerned.

What I want to stress here and now is the fact that Michelangelo's emphasis is always on mind or intellect as the vivifying, dynamic centre and source of art. This comes out clearly, despite characteristic obscurities in detail (Michelangelo is essentially a rough, difficult writer), in another sonnet for Vittoria Colonna, where he again takes the processes of sculpture as an image of the relationship between lovers:

Se è ben concetto alla divina parte
 il volto e gli atti d'alcun, poi di quello,
 doppio valor, con breve e vil modello,
 dà vita a' sassi, e non è forza d'arte.⁴

Which (with some misgiving) I would render: 'If the face and bearing of someone be fully conceived in the divine part (the artist's mind, where God's image dwells) then a double power, moving from that conception and using a transient and lowly model (the face, etc.) gives life to stones—and the result isn't due to *art* (in the sense of mere technique).' Thus the actual human face and flesh are the mere starting-point of a process which leaves them far behind; a useful example or model, nothing more. Vastly more important is the artist's *thought* of the face and flesh, their conception in his mind; and still more the fact that his mind is God's image and so has a 'divine', immortal vitality. This vitality radiates from the mind's 'divine' centre to the conceptions it forms from sense impressions; and thence, through the artist's labours, onto the blocks of stone or marble he chisels. Thus the mind, in Michelangelo's verse, appears as charged with a quasi-divine power, as a dynamic and actively *transforming* agent; which first transforms, inwardly, the sense impressions that reach it through the body, and then, with a kind of swinging movement back towards matter, transforms material stuff, touching this with its own 'divine' vitality. This view of human nature and of the artistic process is explicit and very strongly stressed in a number of Michelangelo's best love-poems and is everywhere, I think, presupposed. In a number of places he expresses it with the images of growth or increase; things 'grow' as and in the degree that the mind apprehends them and they are thereby 'interiorised' (*l'immagin dentro cresce*, the image received, through the eyes, from external beauty 'grows within' the soul); as the poet himself hopes to grow or increase through being apprehended by Vittoria in the final tercet of the last sonnet quoted above. Indeed when he touches this central theme the poet himself seems to take vigour and grow to his fullest stature, as though drawing life from the deepest insight of which he was capable; as in two of his finest sonnets for Tommaso Cavalieri, *Non vider gli occhi miei cosa mortale* and the lovely *Dimmi, di grazia, Amor*;⁵ which are the poems I would take before all others as my text if I were asked to show what Michelangelo derived from his masters in poetry, Dante and Petrarch, and what he added precisely of his own

⁴No. 14 (ii) of the translation.

⁵Nos. 52 and 25 of the translation.

—the individual touch—to their legacy. What he adds, briefly, is first that strong stress on an interior transformation of sense experience as it is brought into contact with the 'divine' mind—the stress conveyed by saying that things 'grow' within the soul—and secondly a certain extra audacity in the way he states his apprehension of the presence of God in the persons he loves (above all, of course, Cavalieri and Vittoria); an apprehension you will find in Dante and, less confidently expressed, in Petrarch, but which is affirmed with a very unusual and startling force in Michelangelo's love-poetry.

And the more one reads his poems the more the impression grows that this intuition of God's presence in created things (or, if that is to say too much, this conviction that God is visible in them) is absolutely fundamental for an understanding of that 'profound melancholy' which Mr Ayrton notes in Michelangelo. In passing, I don't feel that 'melancholy' is quite the right word here; it suggests a *passive* depression which I at least cannot find in even his darkest poems, not in the gloomy and morbid introspection of his more sensual poems for Cavalieri, nor even (where I suspect Mr Ayrton would find it) in the great penitential sonnets of his old age where the poet seems to be writing on his knees before his crucifix. Nor is this the sort of impression Michelangelo seems to have left on those who knew him well, men like Vasari and Condivi (for a charming 'refutation' of the charge that the Master's love of solitude was morbid and antisocial see ch. 62 of Condivi's 'Life'). But let us not quarrel over words. It is obvious that Michelangelo was a deeply troubled man, intensely self-critical and introspective, and with this, and evidently to some extent because of this, he appears to have been so indifferent to the enormous public fame which surrounded him during the last forty years of his long life that one is almost compelled to accept Mr Ayrton's phrase: 'a sense of failure which cannot be comforted by applause and a distrust of applause so profound that it is a kind of *hubris*.' And we may accept too—with a qualification which it is the purpose of this essay to suggest—the statement of the 'central paradox' presented by Michelangelo as 'one of success and failure, the failure of a super-human achievement in the light of an even more super-human ambition'. This ambition Mr Ayrton does not define precisely, but it is clear that he identifies it with the response of the artist as such to some mysterious claim that confronts him once he has been brought by genius and temperament (as Michelangelo eventually was) to the point where he is no longer working for society, whether as applauding or paying him, nor for human love, nor for money, nor

for anything else except . . . except what? 'Solely for himself and his God' says Mr Ayrton, with his eye on the last carvings, particularly on the Rondanini Pietà; or again he says 'to follow those last thirty years . . . is to watch a supreme master move towards the lonely and desperate condition of one who is answerable only to himself. And that is to watch a man embark upon a work *which cannot be finished*.' The italics are apt; and I think that Michelangelo would have agreed that the effort represented by his art was one that could not be terminated in this world, just because it felt squarely behind it the thrust of an immortal spirit. And one can imagine that other 'archetypal' man of the Renaissance, Leonardo da Vinci, agreeing that art was an endless task; but for quite different reasons. For Leonardo the eye was 'the sovereign organ' and art chiefly a technique of rendering the visible appearance of bodies in light or shadow. Great extravert that he was, he saw art in terms of man's insatiable curiosity about the natural world. Michelangelo, obviously, is at the opposite extreme; all his sculpture and painting and poetry show that for him only one natural object had any deep importance or interest—the naked human body. The rest of the visible world hardly counted. This point Mr Ayrton brings out very clearly and he goes on to suggest that as Michelangelo's 'wisdom and pessimism' (his introversion, let us say) increased, the difficulty of art increased for him *pari passu*: that since he saw art as essentially a 'taking away', the more he spiritually withdrew from the visible world the more uncertain he became as to what should be taken away and what left; until perhaps a final suspicion took hold of him, that 'all material may be superfluous'.

And this may well be the line to take in attempting to explain the later work of Michelangelo, the unfinished 'Slaves', the Rondanini Pietà. I would add however a further consideration, one which might indeed supplement and confirm this interpretation of Michelangelo's artistic 'failure' (or at least his apparent *sense* of such failure) but which I want to use as a key to that other—though not unconnected—'failure' that his life represents and to which Mr Ayrton only alludes in passing, in a rather slighting reference to 'the spiritual implications of platonic love'. I refer to his deep sense of being a *moral* failure, a sinner; a feeling that recurs intermittently in all his poetry and which dominates in the last poems. And this of course is to consider, behind the artist, the man and the Christian.

Condivi speaks touchingly of his master's love of beauty, hinting at the spiteful slander aroused by Michelangelo's delight in beautiful young

men (though in fact it seems to have aroused curiously little) and going on to recall the chastity of his conversation and the disinterested universality of his love of beauty. But the great focus, certainly, was human beauty; and the poems, with a candour surely beyond question, tell us why: it was that he saw the human body as sign and instrument of a spirit created in God's image. And this was no mere theory for him but a profound conviction, as his poems show (they are, in a way, a private journal). In the superb sonnet to Cavalieri already mentioned, *Non vider gli occhi miei*, that conviction is drawn out dialectically into a contrast between spiritual and corporeal beauty, and so to a passing beyond the latter to the former, and beyond this in turn to the Creator which it images. The poem's whole movement hinges on the idea that the soul's likeness to God implies a capacity for life such as nothing mortal can satisfy. Seeing through Cavalieri's mortal eyes his immortal soul, formed to likeness of Life itself, Michelangelo turns spontaneously towards that Life, discovering in love its own affinity to Life: *transcende nella Forma universale*.

Heady, vacuous stuff, you may say. Possibly; but it has its importance, both because it contains a genuine idea, it is very far from being mere erotic fancy (and in this sense the term 'vacuous' certainly will not do) and also because it represents with particular clarity a crucial moment in the life of a great Christian spirit. Let us put the matter, perhaps rather crudely, thus: that Michelangelo underwent, at an unusually deep level of experience, the temptation inherent in Christian humanism generally and in Platonist Christian humanism in particular; the temptation to take the image of God in man (accepted from Christian tradition) as constituting of and by itself a disposition to union with God. The traditional notion he is working with is, of course, that of the soul as an immaterial substance which, since it depends immediately upon and is the image of God, transcends the body and all mortal things. But he marks this common conventional teaching with a very individual—and dangerous—stress, or rather a double stress: first, an emphasis on interiority, and then, and deeply connected with that, a stress, already noted, on mind as a dynamic force or energy. The stress on interiority is clearly an aspect of his Platonism. It leads him always back and away from the body and all 'mortal trash' towards some inner point of incomparably greater nobility. I have spoken of his use of the image of growth and it is worth insisting that when Michelangelo speaks of bare knowing and loving (as distinct from the art-process of making) he always represents external things as growing through

contact with the mind—growing up and into the mind—and never of the mind itself growing through experience of things. It is a one-way movement, and its term, at the summit of the mind, is an inward contact with God which—and this is the point—Michelangelo, at least in his more exalted moments, tends to represent as a *necessary* conclusion to the process. ‘There, within’, he says to Cavalieri, ‘I found him (God) who assails with love the soul that is like him’.

The metaphor of God ‘assailing’ the soul is characteristic and so is the bold assumption that this assault *must* conclude the process, or at least *this* process, of natural love. In the poems to Vittoria Colonna he returns again and again to this conviction that in the beloved he knows and loves God. For example, in *La vita del mio amor*: ‘when love distinguished our souls from God, it (i.e. God’s creative love) gave me a clear eye (the eye of the mind) and to you light and splendour; nor can my soul not see him (God) in that in you which dies (i.e. even in your body).’⁶ Not that Michelangelo is unaware of the obstacles in the way of this movement towards God, his own weakness and sensuality. On the contrary! But we find him either speaking as though such obstacles come from another part of himself, distracting the soul from *outside*, as though, once the intellectual part is left free to follow its natural course it must reach God, since nothing hinders it from *within* (this is the theme of *La vita del mio amor*); or else, calling on his favourite images drawn from sculpture, he will represent himself as material to be fashioned by the beloved (Vittoria) to her own likeness, which of course is a divine one. (*Se è ben concetto alla divina parte*).

What I am suggesting then is that Michelangelo, as a result of his special form of Platonism and of a singular capacity for intuitive contemplation, for seeing sensible things as the ‘outward’ of spiritual being, was tempted to envisage the way to God as a *necessary* movement, once the intellectual soul had, as it were, got under way. He never states this, of course, and it may never have crossed his conscious mind; but a good deal of his poetry might well imply it. His special gift was a vivid apprehension of the nobility of the human soul as God’s image, and of all visible beauty, but especially human beauty, as showing the presence of God. These apprehensions, together with superb technique, made him a tremendous artist. But they also seem to have drawn his spiritual life dangerously to the side of *mere* contemplation—of a contemplation which of itself, by its own sheer dynamism, must, he seems often to imply, draw the whole man inwards from the sensible world

⁶No. 28 of the translation.

and upwards to God. In this way of representing the movement towards God the moral factor is overlooked, or stated ambiguously, and Christ is not present at all. But Christ dominates, and from the cross, the final sonnets; and these express magnificently that sense of personal, human failure which is so essential an element in repentance. He still clamours for the sight of God (*Deh, fammiti vedere in ogni loco!*⁷) but he now knows that no human means, no beauty of body or mind will avail him to reach it (*Tu sol puoi rinnovarmi fuora e drento*⁸). Perhaps it was death above all, Vittoria's death and the imminence of his own, that brought this home to him; one by one the images were failing in which he had thought to find God, until none was left but Christ; until at last he saw quite clearly that only God's active love, coming to meet his own, could bring his heart to peace:

Né pinger né scolpir fia più che quieti
 l'anima, volta a quell'amor divino,
 ch'aperse a prender noi in croce le braccia.⁹

⁷'Oh let me see You everywhere'. No. 72 of the translation.

⁸'You alone can renew me outwardly and inwardly'. *Ibid.*

⁹'Neither painting nor carving can ever again satisfy the soul that has turned to that divine love which on the cross opened its arms to receive us'. No. 65 of the translation.

Nuclear Deterrents: Intention and Scandal

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It is difficult to persuade people to reflect seriously about moral questions concerning war. Most people who turn to the subject of war are primarily interested not in the choice between moral and immoral acts but in the search for 'a practicable defence policy.' Such people—especially if they are Christians—may occasionally recognise that the possession of nuclear weapons is what moral theologians call a proximate occasion of sin but they often feel that they are faced by a dilemma.