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978-1-107-04376-3 - Michelangelo's Christian Mysticism: Spirituality, Poetry, and Art in Sixteenth-Century Italy
Sarah Rolfe Prodan
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Introduction

In the fall of 1556, Michelangelo was likely surprised to be traveling through the tranquil hills of Umbria near Spoleto, far removed from the warring city of Rome, the ambitious but onerous task of rebuilding St. Peter's Basilica, and the hostile shadows of the anti-Protestant pope, Gianpietro Carafa (Pope Paul IV, r. 1555–9).[1] Though well advanced in age, having turned eighty the previous March, the courageous artist was undertaking a religious pilgrimage to the famous shrine of the Holy House of the Virgin in Loreto.[2] Tired and wary of the long road ahead, he suspended his journey in Spoleto for approximately six weeks, making the meaningful choice to stay at a Franciscan hermitage in nearby Montelucco.[3]

One wonders about this period of Michelangelo's life and what he experienced while resident for such an enviable amount of time in this exquisitely beautiful and palpably spiritual location of which St. Francis of Assisi had also been fond.[4] Eponym of the famously devout mendicant order that he founded in thirteenth-century Umbria, St. Francis was also the first mystical poet in the Italian literary tradition. Given the intense devotional quality of Michelangelo's poetry, to readers of the *Rime* it seems most natural that the artist elected to remain with the Franciscans at the Montelucco retreat for as long as he did.

The spirituality of Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475–1564) has a long history in Italian literary criticism. The adjective "mystical" has been employed to qualify not only his verses or his literary persona, but the man himself: because the poetic voice of the *Rime* yearns deeply for God, because he addresses Christ directly with effusive appeals for divine grace and presence, and because he describes in anguished, urgent, and

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at times strident tones his failure to merit salvation and to achieve divine union.[5] Because Michelangelo's spiritual poetry has been studied both synchronically and diachronically, critics have described him as a mystic for the content and tenor of his spiritual verse, as well as for the evolving character of this poetry throughout his later years. While many scholars have focused on the mystical traits of the poetry, the poetic voice, or the man in a general way, others have drawn parallels among Michelangelo or his poetry and specific varieties of mysticism or mystical philosophy, most notably, Renaissance Neoplatonism.[6] More recently, the focus has turned with notable vigor to the consideration of Michelangelo's spiritual verse in the context of the Italian Reformation.[7] The spirituality of the Italian Reformation was Augustinian as well as Platonic and Pauline. The Augustinian intellectual tradition, central to both Renaissance and Reformation culture, constitutes an important thread in Michelangelo's poetry.

When discussing human agency, Italian Augustinian humanists such as Coluccio Salutati (1331–1406) and Lorenzo Valla (1407–57) emphasized the subordination of reason to volition. As they drew attention to the inscrutability and indomitability of the will, and of human passions more generally, they echoed Augustine in asserting that it was impossible for an individual to effect self-change or moral improvement in the absence of divine grace.[8] It was the province of God alone to determine and to enable the perfection and thus the salvation of humanity, which was to be secured by faith and not by knowledge. This intellectual culture greatly influenced philosopher Marsilio Ficino (1433–99) in the elaboration of his Christian Neoplatonic anagogy of ascent[9] that became widely diffused through leading cultural figures such as Cristoforo Landino (1424–98),[10] whose Platonizing commentary on Dante's *Commedia* was well known and beloved by Michelangelo.[11] Shaped by this rich cultural matrix, Augustinian friar Egidio da Viterbo (1469–1532) played a leading role as theologian and preacher in early sixteenth-century Rome, where he had a hand in determining its artistic expressions, and quite plausibly Michelangelo's work on the Sistine Chapel ceiling.[12] Last, Italian reform piety was shaped by the Augustinian mystical theology that remained well preserved throughout the Aristotelian thirteenth and fourteenth centuries in Italian lay religious culture and confraternal life.[13] The present study intends to illuminate the Augustinian Christian

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mysticism at the heart of Michelangelo's spiritual poetry, his religious life, and his understanding of art.

Over the centuries, Michelangelo's poetic production has undergone a multitude of readings spanning biographical, historical, formalist, aesthetic, gendered, and psychoanalytic approaches, among others.[14] Collectively these studies have yielded a fecund array of complementary and conflicting analyses of Michelangelo as a poet. Despite the rich contributions of these plentifully diverse analyses, Michelangelo's poetry remains mysterious and resistant to generalizing qualifiers. The challenges that beset the modern reader intent on broaching the enigmatic religious or spiritual verses of the *Rime* are not insignificant, nor are they new. The first timeless quandary results from what to make of Michelangelo's intimately expressive poetry that presents as so genuine that it seemingly demands an autobiographical approach.

Critics defending a personal reading of Michelangelo's *Rime* variously emphasize the visibly spontaneous manner in which many verses were composed, the belief that he did not write poetry with an eye to publication, or the fact that he indeed produced lyric commentaries on historical circumstances in the margins of letters and worksheets. Yet Michelangelo manifestly engaged in metrical composition as an intellectual exercise and not just as a medium of personal reflection or confession. On some of the same sheets where Michelangelo scribbled ostensibly impromptu poems or lyric fragments, be they of his own making or by more established poets such as Petrarch or Dante, he also engaged in concerted efforts to craft original verses by rewriting a poem or developing an idea or *concetto* in different ways, struggling in the process with the more formal aspects of versification – rhyme and meter.[15] Leonard Barkan's recent analysis of Michelangelo's autograph folios and their *marginalia* renders ever more transparent just how consistently and intricately drawing and poetry accompanied each other on his pages.[16] That Michelangelo's intentions between 1542 and 1546 in revising a selection of his poetry remain uncertain only further complicates the already delicate critical predicament.

In Italian literary criticism prior to 1960, when Enzo Noè Girardi published the first and only critical edition of the *Rime* that remains authoritative (though not unchallenged) to this day, there was a tendency to cull Michelangelo's verses for evidence of the poet's psychology

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and religiosity. This rather uncritical approach was pejoratively termed *psicologismo*, *diarismo*, and *biografismo* by Girardi and his contemporaries who, following his lead, urged for greater objectivity and historicity in approaches to Michelangelo's verses.[17] Their aim, instead, was to affirm that the artist was an authentic poet, not merely a dilettante versifier.[18] Though scholars no longer treat Michelangelo's poetic corpus as a psychological or spiritual diary, analyses of his *Rime* do continue to discuss the mysticism evident in his verses.[19]

The mystical constructs and conceits that abound in Michelangelo's spiritual poetry are of two general varieties. Each one corresponds to a paradigm of human salvation and to the means for achieving it. The first consists of a progressive ascent through purgation and contemplation. It envisions a moral trajectory punctuated by moments or acts of conversion. The second views redemption as the consequence of an instantaneous and metaphysical transformation. Historically, Italian Evangelism and Italian mysticism encompass both. In examining Michelangelo's mysticism, one must take all these factors into account. However, not all analyses of Michelangelo and mysticism mention or investigate the poet's connection to Italian Evangelism.[20] Conversely, not all studies on Michelangelo and the Italian Reformation have discussed mysticism per se. *Michelangelo's Christian Mysticism* seeks to bridge the gap between these two areas of investigation to provide a more nuanced understanding of Michelangelo, his poetry, and his art.

The matter of the artist's religious beliefs and his relationship to proto-Protestant ideas, such as the efficacy of Christ's blood and justification through grace by faith alone, or *sola fide*, constitute the focus of many investigations on Michelangelo and the Reformation. An abundant majority of these analyses center on *sola fide* and on the poet's understanding of Christ's role in the life of the Christian and in the economy of salvation. In addition to participating in theological discussions, however, the reform-minded Catholic intellectuals known as the *spirituali* engaged in devotional activities such as meditation on the Crucifixion and on Christ's blood. Thus, to the extent that scholars have sought evidence of proto-Protestant or philo-Protestant ideas in Michelangelo's later spiritual verses, so too have they touched on the matter of his real or rhetorical mysticism, even if the word "mystical" itself does not appear in the text of these studies.[21]

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Each of these analyses inevitably addresses Michelangelo's connection to the Catholic reform movement in Italy or his friendship with poet Vittoria Colonna (1490–1547), with whom he exchanged poetry and for whom he produced art. They do so first, because fervent prayer and the personal development of an intimate relationship with Christ were typical of reform devotion, and so they became features of Michelangelo's poetry composed during the same time period; second, because the verses Michelangelo composed over the course of his friendship with the mystically devout and reform-minded poet seem to reflect a deep and abiding spiritual change within the artist.

Between the 1530s, when Michelangelo first became acquainted with Vittoria Colonna, and 1547, the year she died, Michelangelo routinely portrayed her in his poetry as an instrument of grace; more specifically, as an instrument of divinely inspired refashioning, rebirth, and renewal. In these metrical compositions, the dynamics of the spiritualized beloved and the inferior, besotted lover who becomes ennobled, or conversely, who fails to be elevated, by the metaphysics of his enamorment does not merely hark back to the *Stil novo* (new style) tradition of Italian love poetry. It echoes patterns of interaction among *spirituali* in light of their new and evolving Christocentrism and their concept of and relation to the Holy Spirit, which they believed operated within their circle and through its members. A consideration of Michelangelo's spiritual poetry in relation to the lived experiences and devotional practices of Italian reform-minded intellectuals, and not just to the ideas of Italian Evangelism, will thus offer a more nuanced understanding of their character.

Michelangelo's Christian Mysticism has four primary goals. First, to explicate the mystical constructs and conceits in Michelangelo's poetry – individual compositions and the corpus as a whole – in light of a much more detailed sociohistorical context than was available to earlier scholars, thus furthering current understanding of Michelangelo's spiritual life in the context of the Italian Reformation, on one hand, and in relation to his spiritual poetry, on the other. Second, to complement recent biographies and depictions of the artist as an enterprising businessman, a self-fashioning social figure, and a committed Nicodemite, respectively.[22] Third, to contribute a deeper understanding of select Michelangelo paintings and drawings in consideration of the mystical constructs and conceits identified in the present study. And, fourth,

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to shed light on Italian reform piety and theology by clarifying the traditions of mysticism and soteriology of earlier generations as these were present in the lay religious culture of early modern Italy.

Though this study essentially reaffirms the intuition that Michelangelo's Neoplatonism corresponded to lived experience by elucidating his idiosyncratically theologized art metaphors in view of what it meant to be a *spirituale*, and by reframing the Platonized Dante of late fifteenth-century Florence as a primary inspiration, alongside Augustine, of Michelangelo's mystical verses, this book does not claim that Michelangelo was a mystic. Rather it characterizes the poet as a sensitive and devout mystical seeker – a notable but altogether natural expression, it merits underscoring, for an early modern Italian.

This study considers "mystical" those of Michelangelo's verses in which the poetic persona addresses Christ, yearns for God, requests an intersubjective encounter with the divine, or describes a direct or mediated experience of the numinous. While poetry containing mystical or metaphysical content is present from the beginning in Michelangelo's verses, it becomes prominent through the 1530s and 1540s, with a plausible devotional use of poetry emerging or intensifying during that period. A similar trajectory occurs in the development of Michelangelo's creative production, for which one may distinguish between art containing mystical narratives and the mystical sacramentality of art that aims to engage its viewers in the mysteries of faith or to facilitate their ascent toward the divine. This study addresses both the content and the function of Michelangelo's poetics and his later aesthetics.

Michelangelo's poetry and art are considered in light of the meaning they held and the function they fulfilled for their creator. In this sense, *Michelangelo's Christian Mysticism* adopts a biographical and historical approach. Its privileged method of analysis, however, is intertextuality. This study examines the parallels among Michelangelo's spiritual verses and other socially and culturally relevant historical documents including Vittoria Colonna's letters and poetry, and the Italian reform treatise the *Beneficio di Cristo*. This approach accommodates Michelangelo's fragmentary compositions as well as his more meditated and conceptual pieces while simultaneously allowing for the consideration of Michelangelo's poetry as a medium of devotion and as a laboratory for the vetting of new forms and ideas.

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Many psychological analyses of Michelangelo, his art, and his poetry focus on the matter of his guilty conscience, including the psychodynamics associated with the artist's plausible homoeroticism.[23] These readings need to be complemented by a spiritual one that envisions the poet's expressions of sinful culpability less as spontaneous confessions than as a sustained and, in part, rhetorical spiritual exercise. In his letters, Michelangelo engaged in hyperbole, presenting himself as more vexed than he was, for example, so as to achieve a specific response from his reader.[24] So, too, in some of his poetry did he exaggerate his guilt and his fear so as to achieve a particular spiritual outcome. Michelangelo was devoted to the social and financial betterment of his family. Why not also to moral and spiritual self-improvement when this was the reigning ethos, and when pious self-fashioning carried important weight in the cultural currency of the day? A social self-consciousness on the part of Michelangelo in his religious life almost certainly coexisted with true mystical sensibility and authentic spiritual aspirations – a paradox, perhaps, but the one need not preclude the other.

The present volume consists of two interrelated micro-studies, one literary and the other cultural and sociohistorical. Part I, "Michelangelo and Renaissance Augustinianism," comprises four chapters. Together they identify in Michelangelo's poetry an Augustinian mystico-moral ascent through conversion. These chapters examine an attendant and insufficiently explored pneumatological dimension that Michelangelo's spiritual verses encompass. Centering on Dante's *Commedia* and on the Augustinian, Platonizing *allegoreses* that permeate Landino's *Comento* to the grand epic, this section argues that these two works constitute, in addition to the *Confessions* and other selected works by Augustine, important sources for the Augustinian character of Michelangelo's spiritual verses. More specifically, the presence in Michelangelo's *Rime* of navigational metaphors and of a complex interplay of habit, free will, choice, and volition, together with the themes of *acedia* (incomplete love of God) and recidivism (spiritual regress) that they develop, are shown to reflect Augustine's spirituality, especially as it is embodied and preserved in the *Confessions*.

Part I is structured according to the elements of this Augustine-inspired soteriological paradigm as Michelangelo incorporated it into the content and the structure of an early poem, G18. Chapter 1, "'The Sea, the

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Mountain and the Fire with the Sword': An Augustinian Pilgrimage?", discusses Augustine's understanding of man's graded spiritual ascent to God in terms of the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit. An extended close reading follows of G18, a seven-verse poem that allegorizes an Augustinian mystical scheme at the heart of the *Commedia* via figural references to the sea, to the mountain, and to the fire with the sword.

The second chapter, "'The Sea': The Vicissitudes of Inordinate Love, or Hell as Habit," analyzes navigational imagery in Michelangelo's *Rime* in light of the *Commedia* and its Augustinian echoes. This chapter shows that Michelangelo's use of the sea and the ship to render, allegorically, the psychological experience of damnation is uniquely consistent with Landino's glosses on those verses of the *Commedia* to which Michelangelo's poetry alludes. This chapter additionally examines representations of Christ in Michelangelo's navigational poetry and the attendant matter Michelangelo's literary persona raises about the respective roles of faith, choice, habit, sin, and the will in salvation.

Chapter 3, "'The Mountain': *Acedia* and the Mind's Presumption to Ascend," examines representations in the *Rime* of the soul's climb, which are shown to constitute not only a Neoplatonic anagogy of ascent, but also a Dantean and Augustinian purgatorial one aimed at correcting the pilgrim speaker's will so that he might succeed in loving the Creator above the creature. This chapter considers the role of beauty and of concupiscence in contemplative ascent, and the related sin of *acedia*.

The fourth chapter, "'The Fire with the Sword': Grace and Divine Presence," explores the significance of the fire with the sword in the writings of Augustine, Dante, and Michelangelo, where it symbolizes divine presence. This chapter analyzes the descriptions of grace and divine protection in Michelangelo's late poetry, many of which involve the literary persona's direct addresses to Christ or indirect allusions to the Holy Spirit. It concludes that the pilgrim speaker in Michelangelo's spiritual poetry is an Augustinian wayfarer in particular.

The four chapters comprising Part II, "Michelangelo and Viterban Spirituality," collectively explore Michelangelo's poetry, art, and aesthetics in light of the spirituality of the reform-minded intellectuals animating the Viterbo circle. This study suggests that the portrayal of Vittoria Colonna in Michelangelo's poetry as an instrument of grace effecting the artist's spiritual refashioning, rebirth, and renewal reflects

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a theology of the Holy Spirit that was dear to the *spirituali* community and central to its members' self-perception, namely as spiritual friends and mystical intercessors.

The fifth chapter, "The Benefit of Christ," focuses on the Christological dimension of Michelangelo's late poetry, which it considers in relation to the *Beneficio di Cristo*, the *lauda* tradition in fifteenth-century Florence, the traditional roles of Christ and of the Holy Spirit in Italian mysticism, and in contemporary lay religious culture. A close reading of select verses shows that this poetry, though indubitably influenced by the *Beneficio di Cristo*, is also reminiscent of earlier *laude*. This chapter argues that what appealed to Michelangelo in the reform treatise were those aspects of the work that are most consistent with monastic and mendicant piety already present in early modern Italian culture. It also emphasizes that as Michelangelo approached old age and the end of his life, his turn to Christ is consistent with recommended preparations for a good Christian death.

Chapter 6, "The Action of the Spirit," turns to the role of the Holy Spirit in Christian spirituality. It examines sociability within the *Ecclesia viterbiensis* and the pneumatological dimension of Viterban spirituality in terms of the Augustinian concept of the friend of the bridegroom (*amicus sponsi*) to which Colonna alludes in an important letter retained by Inquisitors for the trial of Michelangelo's friend and fellow reform-minded intellectual Giovanni Morone (1509–80). This chapter both reviews and enriches a vibrant discussion of the *Rime* in relation to gift giving and to justification by grace through faith.

The seventh chapter, "Michelangelo's Viterban Poetics," examines Michelangelo's poetry occasioned by his friendship with Vittoria Colonna in light of the spirituality and sociability of the *Ecclesia viterbiensis* identified in the previous chapter. It examines descriptions and metaphors of art, ascent, and divine refashioning present in Michelangelo's verses in consideration of how his reformist friends characterized each other as providential and mystical instruments of the divine. It argues that the salvific intercession of the idealized beloved in the life of the poetic persona of the *Rime* allegorizes the role Vittoria Colonna assumed in the lives of Michelangelo and other *spirituali*.

Chapter 8, "Aesthetics, Reform, and Viterban Sociability," considers Michelangelo's aesthetics of reform in light of the value and function

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of devotional art. Intended to transform rather than to edify its early modern viewers, devotional art served as an instrument of mystical contemplation – an accessory to grace and to the mysteries of faith. This chapter considers the features of spiritually efficacious art. It suggests that Michelangelo's projected *canzoniere* – a series of poems revised by the author and ordered by others in preparation for plausible manuscript dissemination – stimulates reflection on the aesthetic preconditions of successful contemplation. This chapter additionally furnishes a novel interpretation of the *Christ and the Samaritan Woman* transmitted to posterity through the work of Nicolas Béatrizet (d. 1565) that Michelangelo had prepared as a presentation drawing for Vittoria Colonna.

Michelangelo's Christian Mysticism is a broad and sustained investigation of Michelangelo's theology that complements, connects, and contextualizes existing analyses by interrogating the mystical character of Michelangelo's religious art and the nature of his spirituality through an examination of his poetry and of the cultures of lay piety to which his verses point. The present analysis of Michelangelo and reform considers, as other do, such key elements as the figure of Christ and the theology of grace, but it additionally considers the role of the Holy Spirit in personal piety and in collective religious life to provide not only an overview of Michelangelo's theology, but also a sense of how he lived it. Leaving aside the matter of Michelangelo's contribution to poetic or artistic innovation in the context of reform – an important topic, but one that is well represented in current scholarship – this study addresses, rather, the theology of religious mystery and the sacramentality of art from an experiential and narrative point of view.

The portrait of Michelangelo that emerges from the present study is not merely that of a Christian intellectual versant in the rhetoric of the Catholic Reformation, but rather a devotional poet inspired by Augustine and contemporary lay religious culture, and a boldly striving artist whose sacramentally minded focus on the presence, absence, and operation of grace in the world now sustained and now stymied him in performing the physically, psychologically, and spiritually exacting duty of producing sacred art capable of engaging its viewers in the mysteries of faith.

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