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Michelangelo's Poetry and Iconography in the Heart of the Reformation. Introduction

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Introduction

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Admirers of Michelangelo's art who decide to read his poetry are often left with a frustrating first impression: verses of enigmatic beauty emerge clearly from a somewhat obscure verbal matter, made impenetrable at times by a deeply personal use of language and by the density of references to a complex cultural context. At first glance, Ambra Moroncini's book might give the idea of intensifying rather than dissipating this opacity. Indeed, the first of her original and firm critical gambits consists of privileging an interpretation that is by no means predictable: in her opinion, Michelangelo's poems are to be read neither as an intimate diary (as they have tended to be read from the age of Romanticism) nor as a meta-discourse on art (as those who come to his poetry from his art tend to read them to this day), but mostly as texts of essentially religious inspiration. Such a critical proposition may intrigue both the ordinary and the specialist reader. The scholar of Renaissance literature generally withdraws in dismay when confronted with the exceptional complexity of the religious history of that period, the subtlety of the theological disputes, the multiplicity of the forms of dissent and the winding paths of lives marked by dissimulation, secrecy and exile. The reader's diffidence is even more justified because the studies of religious history of the early modern era have undergone extraordinary advances in these past decades, not least following the opening of the Roman archive of the Holy Office to the public in 1991, leading to a production of boundless and constantly updating scientific literature. On the other hand, a number of significant problems may in turn discourage specialists in religious history who wish to study Michelangelo's poetry. In addition to the difficulty of the artist's poetic language, we often have the fragmentary character of the texts, as well as the frequently uncertain identity of their addressees or inspirers. Doubts over the dating of Michelangelo's poems are also problematic, particularly in the field of religious history, where the most radical changes may occur within the space of only a few years.

But the first merit of Ambra Moroncini's book is exactly that of building a bridge between studies of Michelangelo's poetry and those of the religious history of the early modern era, a bridge that is as sturdy as it is easy to cross. The reader – specialist and non-specialist alike – is held by the hand and guided with congenial clarity by an author whose knowledge of the religious history of

the sixteenth century is just as sound as that of Michelangelo's poetry and art. Indeed, the journey that the reader will undertake in her company will prove to be as enjoyable as it will be full of captivating surprises. Moroncini's ability to present a complex matter in a lucid manner is evident from the first chapter of the book, devoted to 'Religious culture and spirituality in early modern Italy' and which should be recommended to any graduate student concerned with the Italian Renaissance, but which will offer interesting ideas and information to those who have been examining these themes for years. Based on the most influential and recent studies, the main episodes of Italian religious dissent in the fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth centuries are presented in such a way as to highlight both the fundamental continuities and the most significant fractures. The author distinguishes five essential moments: a) the virulent criticism of ecclesiastical corruption found in some of Dante's well known anti-curialist verses and in Petrarch's Avignon sonnets; b) the aspirations to spiritual renewal expressed by various figures of Florentine culture, especially Marsilio Ficino and Girolamo Savonarola; c) the penetration in Italy of the ideas and writings of Luther, which were often artfully assimilated to or – for reasons of prudence – confused with those of Erasmus; d) the Fifth Lateran Council (1512–1517), marked by the important opening speech delivered by the Augustinian prior Giles of Viterbo and by the radical proposals for the reform of the Church put forward by the Venetians, Tommaso Giustiniani and Vincenzo Querini; and e) Juan de Valdés' teaching in Naples, which from about the mid-1530s began to circulate amongst the evangelical circles of the Italian aristocratic élites. The thoughts of the Spanish reformer eventually found a point of convergence in the *Ecclesia Viterbensis* (1541) of Cardinal Reginald Pole, and, subsequently, in the publication of the *Trattato utilissimo del Beneficio di Cristo* (1543), the most important devotional treatise of sixteenth century Italian Evangelism. Compelling in itself, this overview is particularly illuminating with respect to Michelangelo who, between his youth in Florence and his old age in Rome, comes into more or less direct contact with all of these expressions and figures of religious dissent – including some that have hitherto been given less scholarly focus. Moroncini has the merit of attracting attention to these figures, in particular to that of the already mentioned Giles of Viterbo and, above all, to the Florentine Antonio Brucioli, translator of the Bible into the vernacular and courageous promoter of reformed ideas (Brucioli's influence on Michelangelo's religiousness will be clearly proposed in Chapters 3 and 5). Although different from one another, these voices of religious dissent draw on common models (Paul and Augustine) or put forward common proposals to resolve the crisis of Christianity: the return to an interior spirituality that is not mediated by ecclesiastical rites and institutions, and the emphasis on *faith* as the only means of redemption for the Christian, regarded as too deeply corrupted by sin to be saved by virtue of his own will and his own actions. Before being the subject of fierce theological discussions or official condemnations, such ideas circulated widely in Italian society and, in particular, in the culturally and spiritually advanced circles frequented by Michelangelo, spurring a lively and relatively

open debate in which the distinction between orthodoxy and heterodoxy was often quite blurred.

The same qualities of synthesis and clarity of exposition are found in the second chapter ('Vittoria Colonna: Matriarch of Italian Petrarchism and *Christi ancilla* of the Italian Renaissance'), devoted to an undisputed protagonist of Italian spiritual life in the sixteenth century who was also the main mediator between Michelangelo and the evangelical circles. A woman of extremely high aristocratic lineage – in contact with the greatest figures of Italian culture in the early sixteenth century such as Sannazaro, Bembo, Castiglione and Ariosto, to name a few – Vittoria Colonna is the first woman writer in the vernacular to obtain unanimous public recognition of her literary qualities. If Colonna's fame, so great in her lifetime, wanes after her death (1547) and is then eclipsed for centuries, it is not for merely literary reasons, Moroncini suggests. It is instead probable that the defenders of Roman Catholic orthodoxy may have wanted to silence a voice that had proved to be uncomfortable and even threatening for them. Indeed, having abandoned love poetry of Petrarchan inspiration in memory of her late husband, by the middle of the 1530s Vittoria Colonna put her poetic talent to the service of a message that was openly evangelical: the celebration of the figure of Christ the redeemer is animated by the conviction of salvation by faith alone. Through accurate commentary on some intelligently selected texts, Moroncini illustrates the main formal, philosophical and doctrinal characters of this poetry. Marrying Petrarchan rhetorical devices with the energetic attitudes of Savonarola's preaching, as well as drawing from Neo-Platonism ascensional schemes and light symbolism of Pauline origin, Colonna expresses a passionate devotion to the redeeming figure of Christ dead on the Cross. Her absolute trust in salvation comes solely from the very pure 'divine gift' of grace in accordance with the religiosity of the Valdensian disciples she assiduously frequented – Bernardino Ochino, Cardinal Gaspare Contarini and Reginal Pole among the most prominent. While pointing out that the mediating role of the Church and the authority of the pope do not receive attention in Colonna's writings, Moroncini also appropriately observes that the figure of the Virgin Mary shines as a trusting witness of her Son's crucifixal triumph over sin, rather than as a means of intercession in favour of sinners.

These two first chapters constitute the solid foundation for the three following sections, where an articulated and intertwined critical discourse on the poetry and art of Michelangelo is constructed. The third chapter ('Michelangelo's poetry: a religious journey from Neo-Platonism to the credo in *sola fide*') proposes a critical review of a traditional periodization of Michelangelo's poetry: one that, at an early stage, opposes the influence of Neo-Platonism and the impact of Savonarola's preaching, only to later postulate (in the late 1530s) a religious conversion elicited by his encounter with Vittoria Colonna. Moroncini does not contest the idea of an evolution but tones down the more rigid antitheses and, accordingly, identifies elements of profound coherence and continuity. Rather than insisting, as many are still doing, on the strong opposition between a Laurentian culture with a tendency to paganism and the ascetic rigourism of

Savonarola, the author emphasizes that Michelangelo's poetry is marked from the very beginning by a very strong spiritual impetus that feeds as much on Neo-Platonic culture as on certain aspects of the friar's sermons. Even though some poems admit moments of more candid sensuality (as in certain sonnets for Tommaso Cavalieri), the spiritual tension always remains very high, sheltering it from the formalism of much of contemporary Petrarchan poetry. What Moroncini highlights in this chapter is that Michelangelo voiced in his verse the sense of the sinner's radical impotence with respect to the omnipotence of God way before his encounter with Vittoria Colonna: a concept expressed with particular force in the fragment *Vivo al peccato, a me morendo vivo* (datable to 1525) in which – following Giorgio Spini and Salvatore Caponetto – Moroncini identifies Lutheran undertones. The critical review in this chapter is carried out through well-balanced apportioning of two complementary tools: the careful reinterpretation of Michelangelo's texts in light of possible philosophical or theological models, and the reconstruction of possible encounters or contacts with leading figures in the religious milieu of those years. I will confine myself to recalling two of Moroncini's interesting critical suggestions. First, the reinterpretation of various poetic texts of the 1520s and 1530s – especially of the sonnet *Vorrei voler, Signor, quel ch'i' non voglio*, which has been analysed in light of a truly cogent comparison with a passage from *The Confessions* by Augustine. Second, the proposal to identify possible mediators of the reformed ideas both in Antonio Brucioli and in Giles of Viterbo, but also in the Augustinians of the convent of Santo Spirito in Florence, in particular in Agostino Mainardi who, already in the early 1520s, had been criticized by the Catholic authorities for his Lutheran sympathies.

The poetic dialogue and iconographic correspondence between Michelangelo and Vittoria Colonna, with which the fourth chapter of the book is engaged ('Michelangelo's poems and drawings for Vittoria Colonna: a sentiment of *beauty and equally infinite grace*'), does not determine, therefore, a 'conversion' by the artist, but brings to full fruition a religious response to a spiritual unease which had tormented Michelangelo for decades. The relationship between Michelangelo and Vittoria Colonna, which was extraordinary from every point of view – human, religious, literary, and artistic – is studied by Moroncini with no indulgence whatsoever for the false romantic aura that has long surrounded it, but, on the contrary, through a careful and original contextualization of their poetic and artistic dialogue in the discourse of the Reformation. With regard to poetry, the author traces a very convincing line of development: in the early texts for Colonna, Michelangelo mixes the theory of Neo-Platonic love with Dante's poetic theology, shaping his 'divine' woman into a sort of new Beatrice with a salvific power. Subsequently, the figure of the woman emerges more and more clearly as that of an earthly agent of divine grace and Michelangelo's verse allows no reciprocity in spiritual worthiness, but rather demands admission of his radical unworthiness and powerlessness. Moroncini's analysis of these poems inspired some of the most stimulating pages of the book. A particularly interesting point is her suggestion to read Michelangelo's most famous sonnet

(*Non ha l'ottimo artista alcun concetto*, 151) in light of the Aristotelian distinction between 'potentiality' and 'actuality' used both by Varchi in his famous *Lezzione* and (with a theological connotation) by Gasparo Contarini in his treatise *De libero arbitrio* (written in 1536 and dedicated to Vittoria Colonna). The comparison with the latter text allows Moroncini to interpret sonnet 151 as an admission of moral powerlessness and at the same time as a declaration of complete trust in the action of divine grace. The highest point of the relationship between Michelangelo and Colonna is then discussed when analysing three admirable drawings the artist gave as a gift to his 'divine' woman: the *Crucifix* (London, British Museum), the *Pietà* (Boston, Isabella Stewart Gardner) and *Christ and the Samaritan Woman* (now lost). Here Moroncini considers several critical interpretations, especially the particularly innovative reading of Alexander Nagel, who has highlighted the existing affinity between the form itself of this exchange – the gift – with the central theme of evangelical spirituality, namely the salvific 'gift' of divine grace. Moroncini's focus, however, is on the theological content of these figurative and verbal exchanges, as well as on the circulation of the images and on their possible public use in the context of the promotion of evangelical ideas. The adherence of Michelangelo's drawings to the religiosity of the *spirituali* linked to Cardinal Reginald Pole is so perfect as to lead the author to wonder whether these 'presentation drawings' given to Colonna could actually have been destined to feature on the frontispieces of three fundamental texts elaborated in Pole's evangelical *côterie*. The drawing of the *Crucifix* is discussed as being plausibly intended as the frontispiece of the *Beneficio di Cristo*. The *Pietà* could have been an ideal illustration for Colonna's *Pianto sopra la passione di Cristo*. Finally, the lost drawing of *Christ and the Samaritan Woman* is considered as being envisaged or requested by Colonna for helping the circulation of Federigo Fregoso's translation of Luther's *Foreword of the Epistle of Saint Paul to the* Romans, a text pointed out by Moroncini as circulating from the mid-1540s with the frontispiece featuring an engraving depicting Christ and the Samaritan woman at the source. However, the artist's wariness at such a theological exposure 'might explain Michelangelo's reluctance to consider his drawings as their frontispieces, or anything other than gifts'. These hypotheses are obviously impossible to confirm, but they suggestively invite us to wonder what may have happened to the *Beneficio di Cristo* and to the credo it conveyed if, upon its publication, it had been accompanied by a drawing by the most celebrated official artist of the Roman Church.

The fifth and final chapter ('Poetry and theology in Michelangelo's last frescoes') is perhaps the most daring chapter in the book. Moroncini begins by directly confronting one of the most controversial questions in the studies of Michelangelo: none other than the interpretation of the *Last Judgement*, executed in precisely the same years (1536–1541) in which the spiritual and poetic dialogue of the artist with Colonna intensified. By addressing the criticisms that had condemned the fresco's 'obscenities' and 'licenses of invention' since its discovery, Moroncini discusses the theological message of the fresco as an expression of Michelangelo's true faith. She constructs her innovative interpretation by

drawing upon Michelangelo's poetry and on texts by St Paul, Savonarola, Luther and Brucioli. Her compelling analysis will lead the reader to consider that the nudity that scandalized the artist's contemporaries should be interpreted as Michelangelo's way of underscoring the deep-rooted sinful condition of a humanity that can achieve salvation only by confiding in divine grace and in the redemptive power of Christ. Moroncini's comprehensive interpretation also offers a new reading of the much-discussed figure of St Bartholomew: by giving his own features to the flaccid skin that the saint holds suspended over the infernal abyss, Michelangelo may have wanted to represent the unworthiness of his condition as an incorrigible sinner; the scowling face of the saint may instead express the artist's anguished uncertainty about the charitable or punitive nature of divine justice.

Michelangelo's enfranchisement from iconographic tradition in favour of a markedly evangelical symbolism is persuasively pursued by the author in the two frescoes of the Pauline Chapel. The comparison with poems by Colonna and texts by Valdés, Dante and Brucioli, makes it possible to read both the *Conversion of Saul* and *The Crucifixion of St Peter* as an austere message to return to the roots of Christian spirituality. Notwithstanding, the death of Vittoria Colonna (1547), the proscription of the doctrine of salvation by faith alone on the part of the Council of Trent (1547) and the failed election of Reginald Pole to the papal throne (1549) determined the gradual defeat of attempted Church reform by the *Ecclesia Viterbensis*. Shortly afterwards, in fact, with the election of Paul IV Carafa in 1555, marginalisation would become active persecution with sensational trials and convictions. Michelangelo, however, did not cease to believe his 'true' faith, as testified by one of his very last poems, which tells us that *to change a person's fate belongs to divine power alone* (274: 14). Besides, even if the encounter with Colonna and the evangelical movement had been a fundamental experience for him, his spiritual quest had started much earlier, was far more personal and did not die away. This is one of the main findings of this beautiful book by Ambra Moroncini, so competent in reconstructing forgotten dialogues and intense collective experiences, following closely, with sensitivity and historic perspicacity, the intense spiritual, poetic and artistic journey of a great and solitary man.