The relationship between Michelangelo and Neoplatonism

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"...an idea of loveliness/Imagined or beheld within the heart."

The impact of the works of Classical sources such as Aristotle and Plato upon Italian thought during the Renaissance, and the incorporation of Classical ideas within the art of the Italian Renaissance was so profound that it influences art through the present day. The artists that were most affected by Classical thought, as it was filtered through the humanists and other intellectuals of the time, let it penetrate their art and fill it with previously unseen extents of emotion and depth. The school of thought that translated and edited these Classical notions and incorporated them into life were the Neoplatonists of the Florentine Academy, including Ficino and Pico della Mirandola, who were sponsored by the Medici. When a young man, talented in working with stone, came to live in the Medici Palazzo as an apprentice to Bertoldo, no one realized that he would come to have close contact with the Neoplatonists and would indeed bring Neoplatonic ideas to life through his sculpture. Michelangelo was an artist who took seriously the relationship of his art to God, and felt that in creating sculpture, he was coming closer to achieving a mystical union with God. Michelangelo was influenced by Neoplatonist thought in many ways, and it affected his personal thought, personal faith, and his works of art to an extent that is hard to measure.

Neoplatonic thought begins as early as the third century C.E., when the philosopher Plotinus lived and wrote his treatises on Platonic thought, which later became known as Neoplatonism. As far as Neoplatonism goes, Plotinus is the primary influence, and among Renaissance Florentine Intellectuals, he was widely read. Later his tradition was carried on by his student Porphyry, who also lived in the third century, through the Athenian School, which existed in the fifth and sixth centuries C.E.—the first Neoplatonic head of Plato's Academy being Plutarch, and down to the Florentine Neoplatonists in Renaissance Italy. Neoplatonism also had effects in non-Western realms such as Byzantium in the tenth to fourteenth centuries and in the Moslem world, Antioch and Baghdad, in the tenth century. The definition of just what Neoplatonism is is difficult to pin down, as it changes with each generation of scholars and intellectuals, and in each area of the world that it affects. There are a few ideas held by Neoplatonists over the centuries that are important to the study of Neoplatonism in relation to Michelangelo, including the views of the body, soul, beauty and mysticism.

To understand the sometimes torturous attitude of Michelangelo towards his work and the perfection he wanted to achieve, there are a few things that one must learn regarding the ideas of Neoplatonism. The first is the importance the notion of the universality of man plays in Renaissance Neoplatonism. "In the actual practice of art the conception of the universality of man expressed itself either in an attempt to depict a god-like humanity, or in the endeavour of the artist himself to be universal." Michelangelo took the former route, as he was highly concerned with the human figure as it was attached to the soul. Robb goes on to mention that "the body was actually the creation and outward expression of the soul, partaking of its beauties and deformities and clearly mirroring its passions," something that is seconded by Wallis, who writes that one of the main tenants of Neoplatonism is that "the body is the image of the soul." The main goal of the human in Neoplatonism is to become so pure through wisdom and virtue that she joins in spiritual union with the One, the divine being, which for practical purposes in this paper is assumed to be God. To do this she must climb a figurative ladder to reach the high consciousness that joining with God entails, and it is possible to take steps on this ladder through exercising of human virtues, such as love, beauty, and faith. Plotinus "identifies the soul's goal with assimilation to God through virtue; without virtue, he maintains, 'God' is a mere name."

To Neoplatonists, there are two types of beauty, in relation to humans. One, the lesser beauty, is that of the physical appearance, one that will fade into dust and leave only a shell of a human behind after it is gone. The second, and the one the Neoplatonists are concerned with, "is a splendor which streams down from the highest heavens," the Beauty that one sees when one looks past all of the physicality and outward appearance and looks into the soul of the person, and thus into the divinity of God. "This beauty then comes from the soul, and you see that once the soul is absent, the body remains pale and wasted, and there is no longer any beauty in it." If the soul is beautiful, that person will remain a Beauty regardless of what happens to the rest of her body. This is what the artist concerned with Neoplatonist ideas attempts to create through the stone, through the paint and canvas.

Robb states that "Beauty for the Neoplatonists was a transcendent grace existing eternal and unchangeable..." Once the artist or philosopher saw this Beauty, they were that much closer to their spiritual union with God. Love, according to Neoplatonists and internalized by Michelangelo, was the "infinite desire for an infinite being;..." The desire for this Beauty of the soul was wrapped up in the love for the person within whom the artist or philosopher can see the Beauty. The ideas of Love and Beauty of the Neoplatonists are wrapped up well by the somewhat gruesome words of Dixon, who says, "The beloved woman who looked so much like an angel in her wedding gown,...looks very different when, in ferverish sweat, she is vomiting into a basin. All are the beloved." The love for this woman is the

love of the Beauty of her soul, and even when she is sick, or decaying, that love will not change or lessen, for to see the Beauty and love it is to be closer to God.

Another concept of importance that figures in Neoplatonism and in Michelangelo's life is that of mysticism. Webster's defines it as "the belief that direct knowledge of God, spiritual truth, or ultimate reality can be attained through subjective experience." In the early stages of Neoplatonism, according to Plotinus, the direct union with God, or the One, was thought only to be achieved by philosophers who could study the spiritual journey in depth. This was amended by Plotinus' student Porphyry, who thought "that it [philosophy] was too difficult for the average man;...he recommended the practice of theurgy..." This was also known to Neoplatonists as mysticism, and it became the focus as opposed to the amendment in parts of the Florentine Academy. Ficino was a supporter of this, though indirectly, for he believed that joining in spiritual union with God "is open to every one who 'seriously devotes his Mind to the pursuit of the true, the good and the beautiful;' but consummate happiness comes only in those exquisite moments when contemplation rises to ecstasy," or in other words, in the practice of mysticism through contemplation. Michelangelo took this idea of mysticism and internalized it, except instead of contemplation being the only route to this bliss, Michelangelo added the attempt of his to work stone, depicting infinite Beauty in finite stone, which is why he always demanded perfection of himself. There was a "presence of the spiritual in the material" that Michelangelo was always aware of and always wanted to release.

The question then arises whether Michelangelo himself was a Neoplatonist, or whether he merely adopted the ideas and made them fit to his notions of philosophy. While it may be easy to assume that because he attended the Academy in Florence and was taught in his early years by Ficino, Pico and others who contributed substantially to the body of work on Neoplatonism, that he was indeed from the school of Neoplatonism. Erwin Panofsky claims that Neoplatonism was so profound an influence upon the famous sculptor that "Michelangelo was the only one who adopted Neoplatonism not in certain aspects but in its entirety,...as a metaphysical justification of his own self." He goes on to explain how Michelangelo incorporated the tenets of Neoplatonism into his works of art and his poetry.

The opposing view comes from John Dixon, who shapes Neoplatonism as more of a movement than a specific philosophy, and that Michelangelo was a part of this movement, but that he took the ideas of Neoplatonism and made them his own. "There is too much evidence for Michelangelo's involvement in Neoplatonism to dismiss it, yet to label him as a Neoplatonist is to make him into something he wasn't." Neoplatonism allowed Michelangelo a vehicle for "expressing certain attitudes" and helped him to better understand his own determination to

perfect his statuary and his deep faith in God. After hearing these arguments, it makes more sense that Michelangelo molded Neoplatonism and synthesized it with his already extant beliefs, creating a very strong personal philosophy.

There are several reasons why Neoplatonism was so attractive to Michelangelo when he came into contact with the Florentine Academy and began to sit in on their gatherings. One of the most important was the idea of Beauty, which explained to Michelangelo why he was so obsessed with the human figure, that he could see the Beauty in those whose souls were pure. He saw this Beauty as an extension of the purity and divine qualities of God, and he wanted to come as close as he could to that Beauty in his artwork. This is what saved him from insanity, the form of mysticism that he created, adapting it from the mere contemplation of Neoplatonism. Michelangelo's form of mysticism was to work the stone, and to attempt to find that Beauty in the marble, to find the "presence of the spiritual in the material"

This became an fixation with Michelangelo, the notion that the soul (spiritual) is trapped in the body (material), and that its main goal is to escape and enter the immortal realm of the Divine. Once this idea is understood, it becomes painfully evident in Michelangelo's style of sculpturing in figura serpentinata--twisted figures that were wrapped in and around themselves. It also becomes obvious that so many of his unfinished figures can seen as almost climbing out of the stone they are trapped within, aching to be free of the stone and free from their mortal bodies. Michelangelo's Victory, created between 1527-30 for the tomb of Pope Julius II, is a prime example of not only the twisted figures, but also of this pain of mortal trappings. The "young man with his haunting, blank eyes" should be a figure filled with pride at having conquered the older man, such as Vincenzo Danti's later Honour Triumphant over Falsehood, which shows Honour as a strong, proud figure pushing Falsehood to the ground. But Michelangelo's young man has such a grave countenance, leading one to believe that this figure, alongside Michelangelo himself, sees this victory as a hollow one because he has not been freed from his body to join God.

This link between the body and the soul is one that cannot be severed permanently except through death, and if one if lucky, it can be temporarily escaped through mysticism--brief glimpses of the beauty and immortality of the soul. Michelangelo contended that "the human body [is] the 'carcer terreno,' the 'earthly prison' of the immortal soul, [and] he carried out this much-used metaphor in tortured attitudes of struggle or defeat." Paging through any art history book with figures of Michelangelo in it, one can immediately see the figures of which Panofsky speaks, from the Battle of the Centaurs, one of his earliest works, to the Victory, to the Deposition, where Nicodemus struggles to hold the twisted figure of Christ, whose body visibly anchors the souls of those around him. Mary Mag-

dalen, Nicodemus, and Mary are struggling with the contradictory thoughts of the soul of Christ joining in ecstasy with God and their own deplorable mortality. This is an idea that perhaps Michelangelo himself struggled with, thus, as many people have rumored, placing his portrait on the figure of Nicodemus, holding the shell of Christ.

In his statue of Moses, though, Michelangelo offers hope, especially according to Panofsky, who was profoundly affected by this sculpture. Moses along with St. Paul, he says, "were...the greatest examples of those who through a perfect synthesis of action and vision attained spiritual immortality even during their lives on earth." Michelangelo saw this, and was able to convey the purity of thought and soul of Moses in his working of the stone. Condivi, a contemporary of Michelangelo, described Moses as "in the attitude of a contemplative thinker, his face full of light and the Holy Spirit,..." Michelangelo seems to offer hope in the way of showing the effects of traveling the two roads to God, through the vita activa, the active life, and the vita contemplativa, the contemplative life. These are both paths taken by Neoplatonists, and date back to Plotinus, and his notion that the study of philosophy will lead one to a higher consciousness and will lead one closer to God. The other path was emphasized by the student of Plotinus, Porphyry, and also later by Ficino, as has been mentioned before, in the form of theurgy, or mysticism: performing acts that are so spiritual as to allow one to see the divinity of God.

The tombs of the Medici are illustrative of the notions of the vita activa versus the vita contemplativa, as well as other ideas of Neoplatonism. They depict two Medici, Lorenzo and Guiliano, in poses of the two types of paths to union with God: Guiliano, "holding a baton as Captain of the Church,..." represents the Active Life, and "Lorenzo, who died insane, is depicted in the Classical thinker's pose, his face thrown into dark shadow..." represents the Contemplative Life. Landino, according to Panofsky, another member of the Florentine Academy, compares the two "principles of action and contemplation to two wings both of which 'carry the soul to higher spheres'" but Panofsky goes on to say that in the end, although he had tried to be partial, Landino couldn't help but lean towards Plotinus and the higher importance of the contemplative principle.

Michelangelo, along with his copious statuary, also wrote many sonnets about his philosophies of Neoplatonism, and "the philosophical ideas which were with them for the most part conventional assumed with him a character at once imaginative and passionate," something that was also indicative about his sculpture. These poems were written after he met Tommaso Cavalieri and Vittoria Colonna, and for each he felt the deepest love, the Neoplatonic Love. Robb states that "they [Vittoria and Cavalieri] are beings of flesh and blood yet as truly expressions of ideal beauty..." It is the ideal beauty within them that inspires this love within Mi-

chelangelo, and in his poems to these people Michelangelo shows his struggles with desire and love. Robb also pinpoints the two central themes of Michelangelo's poetry: loss and unappeased desire. Desire for Michelangelo became somewhat of a problem. His love of the human form in all of its beauty and glory sometimes represented itself in feelings of love and desire for men and women. Michelangelo stood by Ficino's notion of love as "the motive power which causes God...to effuse His essence into the world, and which, inversely, causes His creatures to seek a reunion with Him." Without this concept, Michelangelo and most Neoplatonists would be at sea, for they would not feel the pull towards God, and thus lose the reason for their existence.

Michelangelo's desire was problematic for two reasons. One, his love for those of the male gender wasn't supported in any way by the Catholic Church, to which Michelangelo needed to abide by for patronage. His extreme devotion to his religion "would not excuse homosexual desires," and so he tended to sublimate them into his work. The second reason is that within Neoplatonism desire was not always followed with love, and a very strong distinction was made between the desire of the flesh and of the soul. Ficino was against desire of the flesh, which he named amor ferinus, or 'bestial love,' and called it a disease, and said that "it is a form of insanity caused by the retention of harmful humours in the heart." Therefore it was a saving grace that he could avoid this by transforming sexual desire "into the love of beauty which leads the soul closer to God." This love, represented by the Venus Vulgaris, is the material image of Beauty as it is "realized in the corporeal world," and if it is taken one step further, it leads to the ideal beauty, as represented by the Venus Coelestis, the celestial Venus, who is the divine beauty.

Michelangelo also struggled with the death of his beloved Vittoria, how her life was affected by his love, and how he could resolve his tortured feelings about her. Michelangelo realizes tragically that the world will continue as if she had not been here, and her beauty "must soon be gathered back into the darkness." Wondering if Vittoria has achieved immortality, he writes the poem Sol perchÃ" tue bellezze... which demonstrates his subscription to the notion of Platonic reincarnation, that the beauty of Vittoria's soul will live again and always. "The beloved's beauty may grow less with the lapse of time, but cannot die."

Still to preserve your loveliness on earth
Eternal, I believe that nature hastes
From time, who steals the charms he brought to birth,
To garner all his slow defection wastes,
And cherish it to bring it forth again
With happier fate and more excelling power
As one who shall return to dwell with men

With your serene, angelic face for dower.

This maintains the divinity of Beauty and of Love, and reinforces Michelangelo's faith in Neoplatonism, that he could find an answer to such a pressing personal dilemma.

Michelangelo, according to Robb, would have been an incredible artist no matter the time period, but the fact that he lived in Renaissance Italy and was influenced by Neoplatonism colored his soul and his art deeply. Without the synthesis of his devotion to God and the tenets of Neoplatonism, he would have been an even more tortured soul, perhaps even devoting himself to one of the Monastic orders to get closer to God. It can be argued that the greatest contribution of the Florentine Academy to the time was "its making available to the West of those ancient philosophers whose works had been previously known only indirectly." Instead the Florentine Academy saved the world from the loss of an extraordinary through its beliefs in the divinity of Beauty and Love, and through the impact that these ideas had on Michelangelo. Michelangelo's relationship to God was serious and pure, and he felt that in creating sculpture, his personal form of mysticism, he was giving something beautiful back to the one that had created him, and that he was coming closer to achieving a mystical union with God.