



# From sacred geometry to an old man: on the figure of the Father in Dante's *Divine Comedy* and in Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel

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## Abstract

Dante was exempt from the 15–16th century Renaissance humanists' general distrust of the medieval heritage. Among many other factors, one reason for this was the experience of shared Florentine pride and destiny. In his time, Michelangelo was considered one of the best-qualified Dante-experts. Already in his lifetime (and with his knowledge), the literature began to thoroughly explore the influence of his predecessor on Michelangelo's sculptures, paintings and poems. The paper discusses a new aspect of this influence. It seeks an answer to the question of how the representations of God can nevertheless be radically different in the *Commedia* and the ceiling fresco of the Sistine Chapel. How sacred geometry (the circles of the Trinity) is transformed into a vigorous old man, who directs the events of the creation like an aerial acrobat. The answer may be found in the Platonic theology and cosmology of Ficino's Academy, which is the continuation of the Christian trend represented by Dionysius the Areopagite and Eriugena. The Father is in motion because, along with the world and man, He also creates himself; in contrast with the "outsider" claim of *ego dominus et non mutor*; he is also part of the "concert".

**Keywords** Dante · Michelangelo · Iconography of God · Florentine Neo-platonism · Theology

From the illustrated editions of the *Commedia* published a few years after Dante's death, one of the most beautiful of which is a codex copied near Venice (1340–1354) and kept in the University Library of Budapest, to the visual interpretations created on the occasion of the seven hundredth anniversary of the poet's death, the material of the theme *Dante nell'arte* is immensely rich. It is far greater than if we

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examined the same for any work by Vergil, Shakespeare or Goethe in proportion to the time elapsed. Several hypotheses have been made regarding the *causes* for this.

Starting from the relationship of time and space as the theoretical basis for the separation of painting and poetry (Lessing) already fails the test of *Inferno*. In this *cantica*, time is locked away from the souls incarcerated here, and poetry only exists in the form of remembering the fall (and not as hope for the future). The *process*, both in essence and in appearance, often dissolves in the space of sight. A thousand signs of the suffering of sinners is seen by the traveller's eyes, heard by his ears, smelled by his nose and sometimes even felt by the touch of his finger. Beyond the fact of effect, there is a difference between the sensory impressions: while we see before us the images described by the poets, because the concepts take shape<sup>1</sup> and are thus projected on the "canvas of our minds" before our inner vision, we are only informed of the sound of crying and the stench of excrement by our mind.

The difference or contrast between succession and juxtaposition (simultaneous visibility in space) in general explains the distance of literary works from the visual ideals and specifically, the proximity of the *Commedia* to these. Beyond poetic talent, Dante's unrivalled power to make his readers see images can be explained by his theological poetics. History, the process of time, the "gate of the future" *la porta del futuro* (Inf.10.108) is here closed forever; time as an opportunity is lost, the otherworldly existence of souls has shrunk into a single moment, and time only opens backwards as a painful-nostalgic memory of the past. Besides moving into an otherworldly time that will certainly not bring real change, it may be Dante's moral philosophy that causes the unusually great significance of visuality. The authenticity of the representation of the moment is ensured by concrete objects, expressions and movements with a symbolic meaning and by the natural environment itself. For example, the smile (*riso*) of Sapienza (and Beatrice) has a theological content: it means a conviction of truth (*persuasione, understanding*) (*Convivio* 3.15.1).

Every part of the created world, which is considered to be the *effect* or work of God, carries moral content<sup>2</sup>, is a *signum*. By discovering this, not only can the divine intention be somewhat known, but it becomes a generally applicable means of characterizing the world and man in it. The Middle Ages constructed another universe above the existing one, in which reality-based elements could be partially freed from their experiential constraints and freely used and combined for the sake of the message. Dante characterized the figures with the help of natural symbolism<sup>3</sup> enshrined in tradition, adapting it to the theological concept of the otherworldly "triple empire"

<sup>1</sup> "col quale per sentenza si canta, sebbene il concetto sia indicato figuratamente". As poets use, the meaning is conveyed under a figure, *Epistole* III. 4. "Happiness ... is figured in the earthly paradise; and happiness in the eternal life, which consists in the enjoyment of the vision of God" *De Monarchia*, III.15. (Ovidio) this is said figuratively, and means something else "parla figuratamente, e in realtà intende altro". *De Vulgari Eloquentia* I.2.7.

<sup>2</sup> Not only are the moral symbols based on general experience and tradition (darkness-light, wolf-lamb, etc.) and used by literature applied, but also a systematically structured, moralised interpretation of the world based on the Bible and various "scientific" books.

<sup>3</sup> Dante did not describe the word *simbolo* in any of its forms. The semantic space of the word was occupied mostly by the *allegory* and, to a lesser extent, *figura*.

that directly indicated the judgment. The created world is not only hieratic, but hierarchical in all its parts: the dark heavy metals in the depths of the earth are drawn to Lucifer, while the shining gold that reflects the light is drawn toward the height. Eventually, the image of man, created in the image of God (*ad imaginem suam*<sup>4</sup>) and attaining his supreme happiness in the *Visio Dei* by rising through a hundred cantos, is seen but not heard by his words in the strange geometry of the Trinity. The concept of space-time, interpreted in terms of the salvation, is radically different from that of all earlier and later writers. Apart from Dante, no major artist was able to stop the eternal flow of time for a moment (as he did in the spring of 1300), nor has anyone been able to make use of the philosophical, scientific and historical knowledge received largely from their predecessors so successfully.

Contrary to earthly experience, the image of God (*sembiante*), seen in living light (*vivo lume*) always remains the same. It is not in it that the change has taken place but in the consciousness of the beholder. During his experiences in the other world and his conversations with the souls said to be dead, Dante gets closer and closer to his own ideal type or his celestial image. By being perfected with the change (of his vision), he gains more and more knowledge, freedom and power. He wanted to practice the latter for the benefit of others based on the aesthetic principle of *docere, delectare* and *flectere*. The two conditions needed to accomplish his mission were provided by Providence: he was aware of his poetic gift and he was also sure that what was revealed to him was divine reality itself. After returning to earth, he must share his experiences with others. It is up to the poet who has the greatest responsibility for *how* he writes the celestial inspiration and *what* he describes. Especially if he must represent the Creator himself.

He preserved in his memory the true reality he had seen in its complexity and experienced in an interactive way through grace, and finally described it in order to lift his readers (*futura gente*, Par. 33,72, the whole of humanity) “from the state of misery to the state of happiness”<sup>5</sup> and to bring them round on the basis of his own objective and subjective experience. However, the person of whose appearance he says nothing is himself. He did not characterize himself with a permanent environment either, which in his case is the whole of the other world. He is the only creature to stand on the stage of the entire universe starting with the “dark forest”. The invisible Dante presented himself in the *mare magnum* of similes (*similitudini*), metaphors, poetic images and tools as the narrator-protagonist. In the recurring structures (*come quei che ... cosi/tal*), he identified himself not with adjectives but with nouns as a subject. The first metaphor presents the image of a shipwreck survivor. He then takes the form of various human activities, plants, animals, and finally that of the engineer seeking the world’s hidden law ( $\pi$ ).

<sup>4</sup> *De Monarchia* I, 8, 2 quod licet ‘ad ymaginem’ de rebus inferioribus ab homine dici non possit, ‘ad similitudinem’ tamen de qualibet dici potest, cum totum universum nichil aliud sit quam vestigium quoddam divine bonitatis.

<sup>5</sup> *Epistola* 13. 39 (15): Finis totius et partis esse posset et multiplex, scilicet ropinquus et remotus; sed, omissa subtili investigatione, dicendum est breviter quod finis totius et partis est removere viventes in hac vita de statu miserie et perducere ad statum felicitatis.

The ultimate event of interactivity is when Dante's gaze is immersed in the ever-unchanging image of God.

Non perché più ch'un semplice sembriante  
fosse nel vivo lume ch'io mirava,  
che tal è sempre qual s'era davante;

ma per la vista che s'avvalorava  
in me guardando, una sola parvenza,  
mutandom'io, a me si travagliava.

Not because more than one unmingled semblance

Was in the living light on which I looked,  
For it is always what it was before;

But through the sight, that fortified itself  
In me by looking, one appearance only  
To me was ever changing as I changed. (Par. 33, 109–114)

The sight penetrated the spectator. With the improvement of his vision and the increase in the capability of his eyes, the simple image changed into another in him: three circles. Although the perfection of his vision – in the terminology of 20th century hermeneutics, we could call it the intensification of the receiving horizon – was caused by the “external” sight, it also increased Dante's power of comprehension. Of the three striking circles of different colours but of the same area, the first two (Father-Son) reflected each other as a double rainbow, and the third one (the Holy Spirit), consisting of the *arché* of fire, emanated from these two (*filiouque*). Looking around, he saw in them the human face already mentioned (*nostra effige*, Par. 33,131)<sup>6</sup>.

Especially the well-known verse in the Book of Malachi, *Ego enim Dominus et non mutor* (Malachi 3:6) provided the Biblical basis for the medieval image of God as motionless mover. The *Gloria* of God, seated in the Empyreum, i.e. the infinite space above the celestial circles, penetrates the world rotated through the Primum mobile (Cielo cristallino, ninth circle). Further down, it is reflected more strongly in one place and less strongly in another, depending on the degree of reception (Par. 1, 1–5). The above-mentioned improvement of his eyesight cannot have been caused by the Prime Mover, effecting downwards, as the Poet had passed that on his way towards God six cantos before, at the end of 27. In the middle of the celestial rose, there is no *where* (and no *time*, either, Par. 27, 118) only God's mind (*questo cielo non ha altro dove / che la mente divina*, Par. 27, 109–110). Its movement is not caused by other heavens, but by this, that is, Love moves the others. Dante's change (= the new ability of his eyes) is a sign of his dissolution in God. (In the following five *terzinas*, which are the last ones of the work, the unification does indeed take

<sup>6</sup> Dante presented *our image* in the one hundred and thirty-first line of the thirty-third canto of the third cantica (*Paradiso*) (3 3 3 1 3 1), in the prosodic ‘place’ of the three-person one God.

place.) Adding to this Dante's passionate missionary zeal to make the world better, we may say that to some extent, through his *Commedia*, he himself also became a *mover*, a co-worker of the Creator. (This is not the first place where his self-confidence is revealed: it was the starting point of his poetics describing the other world that he knew God's judgement of every human.)

The greatest figure of 19th-century Hungarian literature, the Calvinist János Arany had a deep knowledge of Dante's poetry. It is with this question that he ended his ode to the Florentine poet:

Lehet-é e szellem az istenség része?  
Hiszen az istenség egy és oszthatatlan;  
Avagy lehet-é, hogy halandó szem nézze  
A szellemvilágot, teljes öntudatban?

May this spirit be a part of divinity?  
Though divinity's one and indivisible;  
Is it possible for mortal eyes to behold  
The spirit world yonder in full self-awareness?

Par. 25, 67–75 allows for an affirmative answer. The new soul, inspired into the created perfect brain (*cerebro*) by the Prime Mover and uniting with the previous one will become *one* soul (*un'alma sola*). The *spirito novo* is the indivisible Being within existence. The quote from Malachi continues as follows: *et vos ...non estis consumpti* ([therefore] ye ... are not consumed). It is partly by this quote that medieval theology 'proves' God's unmoving nature: the essence of all change is that something becomes what it had not been before. With transformation, it gains or loses existence compared to its previous state. There is no divine Being in the fullness of things and time that has not been in it before and then suddenly became or that is lost from it. (In one of Dante's most important readings, Boethius (Boëthius 1934, Book 5) emphasized that, with regard to God, eternal means not only that He has existed since the beginning of the world and will exist until the end of it, because in that case, even He would have a past and a future, something that *was* and something that *will be*, but He stands above time and possesses its fullness in every moment.)

The intellectuals of the Quattro- and Cinquecento, especially during the period when national pride in Florence was gaining strength, paid even more attention to Dante than before, regarding him not only as a poet but also a theologian, natural scientist and philosopher. During Michelangelo's funeral ceremony, organized by the Academy of Florence in the church of San Lorenzo, his friend Benedetto Varchi emphasised the importance of the influence of Dante, who had been no less a philosopher than a poet. Art is not only a grandson of God, but is also able to go beyond the forms offered by the created world, especially in architecture: a palace is more sophisticated than a cave<sup>7</sup>. When conquered, transformed and elevated by

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<sup>7</sup> "ARCHITECTURE is so worthy a thing, and so astonishing, that ART, the grandson of GOD, as Dante, .... who was no less a philosopher than a poet, and who used to say in other things that Art, like a daughter, must imitate and follow Nature; in Architecture, Art surpasses and precedes it. Nature therefore thrives in caves and pits, but not in houses and palaces. ... not only the most excellent, but mediocre

artistic talent, nature becomes able to receive even the highest ideas. (With his linguistic and visual means, Dante wanted to most faithfully follow what he saw in each moment.)

The age felt Dante ever closer to itself and could increasingly find the source of its own ambitions and worldview in those of its great compatriot. The *Commedia* was illustrated (most famously by Botticelli) and the author's figure and portrait were represented on frescoes and canvases made for large church or secular commissions. Dante's features (his thin, medium build, sharply cut face, Roman nose and ear protection cap) were fixed in the iconographic tradition and thus became recognizable to everyone.<sup>8</sup> Domenico da Michelino painted Dante on the north wall of the cathedral as showing the three empires of the *Commedia* to Florence (*La Commedia illumina Firenze, The Comedy Illuminating Florence*, 1465). Just to mention a few of the most significant works: Luca Signorelli places him in the cathedral of Orvieto (Cappella, San Brizio, cc. 1500), Giorgio Vasari depicts him in the company of Tuscan poets and philosophers<sup>9</sup> (with books and globes in front of him, 1544), and in the *Stanza della Segnatura* in the Vatican, Raphael puts him in the company of the greatest theologians<sup>10</sup> (Disputation over the Most Holy Sacrament, 1509), as well as the greatest poets (Parnassus, 1510–1511). And perhaps it is also him that we can see as Christ's predecessor (Zerubabbel) in the lunetta of the Sistine Chapel. The Accademia of Florence sent a *Memoriale* to Pope Leo X (Medici) in October 1519, reiterating their earlier request to transport Dante's bones from Ravenna to Florence, the signatory promising to make the sepulchral monument. "*Io Michelagnolo Schultore il medesimo a Vostra Santità suplico, offrendomi al Divin Poeta fare la Sepoltura sua chondecente, e in loco onorevole in questa Cictà*" (Passerini, 1893, p. 53). There was another common element for the artist Michelangelo: he was exiled from Florence in September 1529, thus also becoming an *exul immeritus* of the city.

During a discussion of art analysis in 1546, held with the participation of four Florentine academics, Michelangelo had two memorable contributions: one was philological and the other concerned the interpretation of allegory. According to the former, Dante's journey did not start at dawn on Good Friday, as claimed by the highly respected Cristoforo Landino, who had been dead for half a century, but a day earlier, on Thursday. (Mes. Michelagnolo: Smarrissi adunque Dante nella selua di notte. Et la mattina che fu quella del Giovedì Santo). Contrary to the statement of Giannotti, who depicted the event (i. e. Dante did not know history well enough) the sculptor's opinion was: «Bruto e Cassio non significhi Bruto e Cassio, ma coloro che tradiscono la maestà imperiale et per Cesare non indenda Cesare. Ma la maestà imperiale» (Brutus and Cassius do not mean Brutus and Cassius, but those who

Footnote 7 (continued)

architect, is admired and esteemed by the most excellent people, ... because of the excellent methods and benefits he gives to the generations and communities of men". (Varchi 1564, p. 6)

<sup>8</sup> On the miniatures of the mentioned codex, a completely different, somewhat corpulent body and full face are depicted.

<sup>9</sup> Marsilio Ficino, Cristoforo Landino, etc.

<sup>10</sup> Right in front of him towards the ostensory are two church-father bishops: Ambrose and Augustine, as well as two scholastic professors: the Dominican Thomas and the Franciscan Bonaventura.

betray the imperial majesty and Caesar does not mean Caesar but the imperial majesty, Giannotti, 1859, pp. 14 and 61).

In 1545–1546, Michelangelo wrote two sonnets about Dante, beginning *Dal ciel discese...* and *Quante dirne si de'*. The most important topics in these are the following: light (*lucente stella, splendore, raggi suoi*), a descent (*discesa*) from heaven to earth; a bitter (*aspro*) and undignified (*indegno*) exile by the ungrateful, evil and ignorant people of Florence and finally, the return (*ascesa*) to the contemplation of things immortal (*contemplare Dio*). The final *terzina* states the artist's complete identification with Dante's destiny (*Fuss'io pur lui*) and the acknowledgement of the predecessor's unattainable greatness (*simil uomo né maggior non naque mai*)<sup>11</sup>. Similarly to János Arany's "earthly dream" wandering into the world, Dante appears here not only as a human being but as an *idea* descending into the hostile environment of matter, returning to the celestial sphere after leaving its beneficial effects behind.

Like the biographer Ascanio Condivi<sup>12</sup>, Benedetto Varchi, who presented Michelangelo's poems at the Academy of Florence (1546), emphasized that the sculptor knew the *Commedia* almost by heart. Furthermore, everyone was aware of the profound impact Dante had on the artist, starting from the Pietà in the Vatican. Varchi also listed the effects that were most evidently converted into images, citing the appropriate *terzinas*:

"And I have no doubt that Michelagnolo, just as he imitated Dante in his poetry, has imitated him in his other works, not only giving them that grandeur and majesty that can be seen in Dante's concepts, but also endeavouring to do what he had done in his sentences and words, either in marble or with colours. And who doubts that, in painting the Judgement in the Chapel of Rome, he did not have the work of Dante, which he has all in his memory, always before his eyes? And not to speak of general things, who sees that Carone of his, who does not immediately remember that *terzina* of Dante's? .... Who does not remember, when he sees Minos, that other one in the fifth canto of the *Inferno*? And whoever sees his Pietà, does he not see in a living, true marble that sentence of that verse which Dante showed to be no less a painter than a poet? 'Morti gli morti, e' vivi parean vivi' ('Dead are the dead, and the living seem alive'). And if anyone wishes to see how to describe the figures painted by Michelangelo, no less a poet than a painter, he should read Dante almost throughout, but particularly in the tenth and twelfth canto of *Purgatorio*. And who does not see in the Child of the Madonna of the Chapel of San Lorenzo those two miraculous comparisons expressed in marble? One in the 23 (vv. 121–123) of Paradise:

<sup>11</sup> Buonarroti (1975), pp. 282 and 284. Sonnets numbers 248 and 250. The adoption of words and phrases is detectable in many places. Dante's verses were perceptibly alive in Michelangelo's mind.

<sup>12</sup> E si come s'è molto diletto de ragionamenti de gli huomini dotti, così ha preso piacere della lettione de gli scrittori tanto di prosa, quanto di versi, tra i quali ha specialmente ammirato Dante, diletto del mirabil ingegno di quel huomo, qual egli ha quasi tutto a mente, Condivi (1553), p. 45v and above: "del quale è sempre stato studioso" p. 36v.

E come fantolin, che `n ver la mamma  
Te[nde] le braccia, poi che `l latte prese,  
Per l'animo che `n fin di fuor s'infiamma;

And as a little child, that towards its mother  
Stretches its arms, when it the milk has taken,  
Through impulse kindled into outward flame,

and one in 30 (vv. 82–84):

Non è fantin, che sì subito rua  
Col volto verso il latte, se si svegli  
Molto tardato da l'usanza sua.  
There is no babe that leaps so suddenly  
With face towards the milk, if he awake  
Much later than his usual custom is,

But who will ever be able, I do not say to praise, but to marvel so much as to suffice at the wit and judgement of this man, who, having to make sepulchres for the Duke of Nemors and Duke Lorenzo de' Medici, expressed in four marbles, as Dante does in his verses, his very high concept? Therefore, wishing, as far as I am concerned, to signify that for the sepulchre of each of them not only one hemisphere was appropriate, but the whole world, he placed Night and Day on one, and Dawn and Dusk on the other, so as to place them in the middle and cover them, as they do the earth. This thing was also observed in several places by Dante, especially in the first canto of Paradise." (Varchi, 1546, pp. 57–58.)

The effect was more and deeper than repeating an element of the verbal message in visible form. In this sense, it is unlikely that the sculptor would have drawn or painted a 'second' *Commedia*<sup>13</sup>. Some of Dante's ideas did not merely influence Michelangelo 'from the outside', but deep inside, at his most specific moment of artistic intuition, as in the drawing *non vi si pensa*.

Although the Humanists often dug a deep trench between the new era, characterised by the wished-for *renascentes litterae* and the preceding 'dismissible' *media aetas*, even deeper than it was in reality, they considered Dante to be completely their own. (The only notable exception was Pietro Bembo [*Prose della volgar lingua*, 1525].) Michelangelo did not study regular theology in some Dominican or Franciscan faculty but at the academy of philosophers developed around the Medici court, whose members wanted to extend and strengthen Christianity with Platonic

<sup>13</sup> In a biography from 1760, entitled *Vite*, Giovanni Bottari mentions a shipwreck that took place between Livorno and Civitavecchia, during which Michelangelo's copy of the *Commedia*, published by Cristoforo Landino and illustrated by Michelangelo on the wide margins with drawings of numerous naked people, was lost at sea. Piva (2010), pp. 117–148.

ideas. Marsilio Ficino wrote in his commentary to his translation of Plato (1469): “*Il Bene è essa supereminente essenza di Dio: la Bellezza è un certo atto, ovvero raggio, di quindi per tutto penetrante.*”, Orazione 2<sup>a</sup>, Cap.5<sup>o</sup>, Good is the supereminent essence of God: Beauty is a certain act, or ray, therefore completely penetrating). The relationship of God and the world is similar to what we can read in the first *terzina* of *Paradiso*: (*la Gloria di colui...*, Ficino, 1934, p. 33). Like the Sun, Ficino continued, illuminates the four bodies (fire, air, water and earth), so does God’s ray illuminate the Mind (*Mens*), the Soul (*Anima*), Nature (*Natura*) and Matter (*Materia*). Furthermore, just as a man who discovers the light of the former looks up from them and beholds the light of the Sun, so a man who can perceive beauty in the mind, soul, nature and matter, beholds and loves the radiance of God in them, and even sees God himself “*per detto fulgore esso Dio vede e ama*”.

In the 15th-century Christian interpretations of Plato, earthly man came much closer to God than he had before. Dante’s tiresome pilgrimage, which required *ad personam* grace in this world, not only became shorter and freer but was attainable almost ‘locally’. The hierarchy between the celestial and earthly worlds was simplified and became dynamic movement (*circulus spiritualis*). The ideas and real beauty could be experienced here, too, if one acquired the right skills and could extract them from the rough matter. The Biblical or mythological persons who, could see God and the secrets of His creative work through their exceptional intuition while still living on Earth attained particular importance. On the consoles of the ceiling (*volta*) of the Sistine Chapel, five pagan sibyls and seven Jewish prophets read, describe or observe the history of creation right above them, which had taken place much earlier. The young prophet Jonah, sitting above the Last Judgment, was particularly immersed in the sight. Shortly after Michelangelo, Raphael was also inspired by this topic: in the church of Santa Maria della Pace (Cappella Chigi, Rome, c. 1515), four sibyls, aided by seven angels, decipher the meaning of the sentences written on sheets of paper from the aspect of salvation history.

*Theologia platonica*, reconciled to Christianity, assumes an ineffable God who, following the scholastic tradition, is an out-of-world, transcendent, undivided, full (*uniformis*) Being and who, at the same time, is also present in all the things of the world outside of mere matter (*omniformis*). Continuing the teachings of the thousand-year-old Christian Platonism, Ficino stressed that the two are not opposites but a mutual equalization: *coincidentia oppositorum*. Dante described the Greek Pseudo-Dionysian Areopagite (5-6th centuries) as a “mortal man who revealed secrets”, and mentioned his Celestial Hierarchy (Περὶ τῆς Οὐρανίας Ἱεραρχίας, *De Coelesti Hierarchia*), known in Latin translation in the Middle Ages, as the model for his own Paradise (Par. 10, 115; 28, 130, 137)<sup>14</sup>. The name of the translator of his works, Johannes Scotus Eriugena, is not mentioned in the *Commedia*, and Dante could not have agreed with him about the absence of Evil, nor about the doctrine of apocatastasis. Had the Church been more suspicious at the end of the 9th century, he, too, could have been accused of heresy. Nevertheless, the influence of the

<sup>14</sup> In Dante, the angelic orders look upwards (like Beatrice) and dominate as well as attract those below them, as God attracts them (*tutti tirati sono e tutti tirano*, Par. 28, 129, and Par. 5, 5–6).

Scottish-Irish monk has been demonstrated by scholars on some important points in the basic issues of 15th-century theological Platonism<sup>15</sup>.

Saint Thomas bridged the gap between the two different concepts of Existence and the existing (“Dieu ne s’est rien ajouté par la création du monde, il ne se retirerait rien par son anéantissement”, Gilson (1969)<sup>2</sup> p. 97) by applying the principle of *omne agens agit sibi simile* and the analogy between God and man. The Platonists brought the two closer together. Having created a universe which is without borders yet not infinite, standing apart from Him yet not separated, God continues to create himself. Ficino expressed this relationship by using two different voices of three verbs. God is described with the active forms, while the creation with the passive ones: He fills the world without being filled by it (*impleo, non impleor*), penetrates it without being penetrated (*penetro, non penetror*), and contains it without being contained by it (*contineo, non contineor*). God instilled the ray of his face, universal beauty in angels (in hierarchical order), in the soul (*anima*) as well as in worldly matter, and yearning for it is love. In the first two, beauty, mediated by light, is disembodied. In the third one, united with a body, it shines softly. Here, beauty lies not in the body but in the mind beholding it. The *pictures (pititure)*, appearing on the different levels, are named differently: in angels, they are *esemplari* (examples, patterns) or *ideas*; in the souls, *ragioni* (reason, causes) or *notizie*<sup>16</sup> (knowledge, information); and finally, in worldly matter, they are *immagini* (images) and *forms*, which become visible through the light of the sun. These were instilled (*infonde*) by the divine power and grace into parts of the created world as if into children: “tutto quest ordine del Mondo che si vede, si piglia dagli occhi: non in quel modo che egli è nella materia de’corpi: ma in quel modo che egli è nella luce la quale è negli occhi infusa.”<sup>17</sup> (Therefore, this order of the world is not seen as it is in the material of bodies but as seen in the light penetrating the eye.)

The closely analogous macro- and microcosmos are a constant dynamism, continuous circulation, a kind of *circulus spiritualis*. Its uppermost part is the ineffable *Unity*, the *Essere Supremo*, and below it is the *Mens cosmica*, which is separated from it and ceaselessly beholding and loving it, thus gaining energy. Below these is the *Anima cosmica*, the sphere of dynamic causes. Continuing our descent, we get from the trans-lunar into the sub-lunar, the sphere of *Nature*. The lowermost plane is not *giudecca*, Lucifer and his empire frozen in ice, but *Materia*, matter without images and forms, point zero, nothingness, the absence of life, passive resistance, where *calling* falls on deaf ears. The Homo microcosmos

<sup>15</sup> Érigène 1995 II. p. 182. In the section: *La nature créée in créatrice*: “Mais si l’effet n’est rien d’autre que sa cause qui se crée en lui, nous pouvons donc en déduire que dieu se crée en tant que Cause dans ses effets.” 687C. Deus omnia in omnibus, 1.Cor. 15.28. God may be all in all. Some important citations: “omnia quae facta sunt in Deo, Deus sunt”, “omnis visibilis et invisibilis creatura theophania, id est divina apparitio, potest appellari”. God creates Himself in all His creatures. “Deus in creatura mirabili et ineffabili modo creatur, seipsum manifestans...” Russel (1999), pp. 81–89 and 272–273. Bryson (2009), pp. 63–98.

<sup>16</sup> In the Stanza della Segnatura, Raphael makes a slight distinction between divinarum rerum *notitia*, causarum *cognitio* and numine afflatur as parts of the “intermediate sphere”.

<sup>17</sup> Ficino (1934), p. 69, Orazione V, Cap. 4.

(parallel with the macrocosm) is the unity of body and soul. Nearest to the Supreme Being is the *anima prima*, whose two parts are *Mens* and *Ratio*. The former is the equivalent to the *intellectus divinus*, and the latter is an exclusively human ability: “anima rationale che partecipa della mente divina e che usa il corpo”, “centro dell’Universo”, “legame che connette Dio e il mondo”.

In the 15th century, the intention of seeing and representing the face of God, the hieratic and hierarchical structure of the world (even if differently), the creative and connecting power and symbolism of light, and even the consciousness of the creator, were not new ideas compared to Dante. For him, hell was very close, and getting there was a real danger. Its ‘delegates’ are part of our environment. The three earthly beasts at the beginning of the work, crawling animals, poisonous plants and underworld monsters are the constituent elements of nature partly possessed by evil, against which we must guard ourselves if we do not want to suffer eternally. History, full of sinful people, took a wrong turn, which is why the poet must undertake superhuman missionary activity. The chariot of the Church was thoroughly battered by heresy and the corruption of the popes.

The new theorists and artists of the Medici-circle were undoubtedly different from their predecessors, even Dante, in one thing. The repression of hell and the devil temporarily eliminated the Manichean view from their minds. They turned with complete and naive trust to the beauty of the material world, deprived of active Evil by Plato (and themselves). The essential idea of their moral philosophy was that man could improve society by *virtue* and *gusto*. Christian theology and religious sentiment could be given new momentum by spiritual cooperation with various apocryphal beliefs or ones completely unrelated to Christianity.

It was during this optimistic period that the nude statue of David was sculpted (1501–1504). The work is the triumph of spirit rising above instinctive animal power. The victory was due to the correct assessment of space and the purposeful accuracy and effectiveness of action (*De Monarchia* 2, 9, 11 attributes the success solely to God’s intervention). The Pietà (San Pietro, 1499) and the first line (as well as the continuation) of St Bernard’s prayer are natural paradoxes. The seated mother, with the rocks of the Golgotha at her feet, took her dead son in her lap. Two gorgeous young people – the mother looking even younger than her child. The theological explanation is found in St. Bernard’s prayer: “daughter of your son” (*figlia del tuo figlio*, *Par.* XXXIII. 1–39). It is as much a natural impossibility as the *vergine Madre* and the other paradoxes in the first terzinas of the last canto. The celestial will, submerged into the world, changed the laws of nature. The two are only antagonisms according to earthly thinking, which does not consider that the Son is as much a creator as the Father. Besides the doctrine of the Trinity, there may have been another reason for Mary’s obvious youthfulness. The sculptor did not carve the Mary of the time of Jesus’s death into marble, but of the moment of conception: the joyous event when God was incarnated into a human body. Mary’s expression is calm, her eyes almost closed, her gaze rather thoughtful than desperate or tormented. The artist’s mark on the strap drawn across Mary’s chest says MICHEL.A[N]GELVS BONAROTVS FLORENT[INVS] FACIEBAT (this is the sculptor’s only signed work).

On Mount Sinai, God set an example (*exemplar*) to Moses according to which he had to construct the tabernacle (Ex 25:39). With the other world revealed, Dante also received such a ‘pattern’. Having found the right block of marble and seen in it what he had been looking for, the sculptor, following the intuition of his mind, is able to create celestial beauty in this world by the cooperation of matter and spirit. The *idea*, inherent in the perfect marble, must be freed from the ‘prison of matter’ *per forza di levare* (by the power of taking away), removing the excess. This is what Michelangelo’s best-known Sonnet 151 (1538-41/44) speaks about, revealing not only issues of the psychology of creation, related to morality, but also technical procedures:

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

Not even the best of artists has any conception  
that a single marble block does not contain  
within its excess, and that is only attained  
by the hand that obeys the intellect.

The idea is inherent in nature. The task of the artist is not to look at transcendental forms, but to find celestial beauty in his surroundings and to make its arrival here on earth evident. Any *concetto* of the artist, including the one relating to God, lies within the stone, and it depends on his talent whether he is able to give it life. It is not Cupid or the lady (*donna leggiadra, altera e diva*, i.e. Vittoria Colonna) who is at fault if his art does not attain his desired purpose or his hand does not obey his mind (*intelletto*). The recipient of the poem carries both death and mercy (*Pietà*) in her heart but, because of his insufficient talent (*basso ingegno*), the artist can only invoke the former. However, the other one, the hope of the *ritorno*, is also included in it as a call. To release the sculpture, the marble block must also *answer* the artist’s call and be his co-creator by its hidden content “wanting to be freed”.

Michelangelo later returned to the *Pietà*-theme several times, but no longer with the serenity of the beginning or the joy of the arrival of beauty, but with doubts, along with the fear of the *second* death. The first death, the detachment from the body, or the idea of *return*, could even be a source of joy, but the second one, the loss of the soul, is real annihilation. In a drawing of the *Pietà*, made for Vittoria Colonna, is inscribed a line from Dante (*Non vi si pensa quanto sangue costa*, They think not there how much of blood it costs, *Par.* 29, 91). Michelangelo continued the *Pietà* motif in the drawing quoting the Dante-line in a group of statues larger than life-size which he intended to place on the altar above his own tomb. Between 1547 and 1555, he worked on it almost every day in the Roman villa of Francesco Bandini. In their biographies of Michelangelo, both Condivi and Giorgio Vasari repeatedly return to the history of the group of statues carved from one block. Mary, stricken with pain, can hardly hold the dead Christ, with Nicodemus (Joseph of Arimathea?) behind and Mary Magdalene beside them: “the master has done tiresome work and created a truly divine statue *opera faticosa, rara in un sasso e veramente divina; e*

*questa, come si dirà di sotto, restò imperfetta et ebbe molte disgrazie; ancora ch'egli avessi avuto animo che la dovessi servire per la sepoltura di lui a' piè di quello altare dove e' pensava di porla*" (Vasari, 1993 p. 71). However, he could not cope with the problem caused by the "impurity" of the material: he found a lot of quartz in the too hard marble, and the chisel often threw out sparks. (It was not like the material that the divine sculptor had carved the scenes of pride and burden-carrying in Canto 10 of Purgatory.) Michelangelo felt the problem indicated by Dante most directly, *in vivo*:

Vero è che, come forma non s'accorda  
molte fiata l'intenzion de l'arte,  
perch'a risponder la materia è sorda;

True is it, that as oftentimes the form  
Accords not with the intention of the art,  
Because in answering is matter deaf; (Par. 1, 127–129)

The idea of material that frustrated the artist was present even in Dante's treatise on political theory. "When the artist is perfect, and his instrument without fault, any flaw that may appear in the form of the art can then be imputed to the matter only. Thus, since God is ultimate perfection, and since heaven, his instrument, suffers no defect in its required perfectness (as a philosophic study of heaven makes clear), it is evident that whatever flaw mars lesser things is a flaw in the subjected material, and outside the intention of God working through Nature, and of heaven."<sup>18</sup>

The sculptor "became angry at the marble block, for he was greatly annoyed by the veins in the stone", and finally, losing his temper, smashed the marble. Thanks to the begging of his servant, he did not crush the work to dust, but allowed him (and Bandini) to take it away. "Buonarroti had such high artistic demands on himself that if ... he would find the slightest flaw in it, he immediately left it and started working on another block of marble. But the marble was not only hard, but also had many emery marks, so that when he struck it with his chisel, ..., the marble would catch fire, and then he would uncover a hair on it that bothered him. To these shortcomings was added that one day he was made, in the fury of work, to remove too much marble, for which he received a damage to an elbow of the Mother, which gave him so much passion, that in anger he took the mallet and also broke all the marble, although he said that this work had come to him in disgust for the importunity of Urbino his servant, who did not cease to urge him to finish it. And it is very surprising that he should have gone to such an evil extent as to break it" (Vasari, 1568, p. 762).

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<sup>18</sup> *De Monarchia*, II. 2.3: And just as, when the craftsman is perfect and his instrument is in excellent order, if a flaw occurs in the work of art it is to be imputed exclusively to the material; in the same way, since God attains the highest perfection and his instrument (i.e. the heavens) cannot fall short of the perfection appropriate to it (as is clear from those things philosophy teaches us about the heavens), our conclusion is this: whatever flaws there are in earthly things are flaws due to the material of which they are constituted, and are no part of the intention of God the creator and the heavens; and whatever good there is in earthly things, since it cannot come from the material (which exists only as a potentiality), comes primarily from God the maker and secondarily from the heavens, which are the instrument of Gods handiwork, which is commonly called nature.

At the beginning of *Genesis*, God created by his word: the word *dixit* is repeated before each day of the creation in the Biblical text. (The seventh *dixit* orders the possession of the earth by man.) In Michelangelo's frescoes in the Vatican, God creates the universe not by speech but by movement and pointing. On the ceiling fresco of the Sistine Chapel, before Jonah's rapt gaze, God appears six times in the five panels of the vault near the main wall. The first day of the creation is illustrated by the division of light and darkness. In the second panel, in a larger space, He appears twice at the creation of the Moon and the Sun: once above the plants towards the depth of the painting, as if floating inwards; and again, on the right, pointing to the Sun and the Moon from the opposite side. The colour of the sun rising at the creation is orange; but the Doomsday Sun on the vertical wall, behind *Sol invictus*, is yellow. In the third, again smaller panel, the Lord divides water and earth. The first three frescoes, besides the plants being merely indicated, depict the creation of inorganic nature with great emphasis. The Lord, as a conductor, directs the process of the creation of things with wide movements. As in the beginning, His soul (*Spiritus Dei*) floated upon the waters, so here, his figure clad in a body moves upon the creatures coming to life beneath, around and through him. He moves together with them. Three times out of six, the visible God seems to fly, spreading his arms wide like an aerial acrobat or a muscular astronaut stepping out into space. Neither immobility (*non mutor*) nor the gesture of keeping a distance from the created world (*dixit*) are displayed. On the *volta*, Michelangelo transforms the notion of a static creation, completed in the past, into a dynamic event in the state of becoming, *in statu nascendi*. (Animals are also left out of this creation.)

Organic beings are represented by humans incarnated as man and woman, possessing consciousness. God creates them when He appears for the fifth and sixth times. In the case of Adam (in a wider space), His movement is very purposeful; He arrives not so much from above (as we would expect), but rather from the side. At the moment of the near encounter, the yet unconscious body of the ancestral father receives existence, which is in part similar to God's. Thus, he will become able to continue and complete the creation. As a personal element, the hills around Michelangelo's home town, Caprese, emerge on the horizon. In front of them, Adam is lying on the ground and God passes existence to him from the air with the secret power of His index finger, without a touch, in an immaterial way. The Lord reaches with the finger of His right hand towards Adam's limp (still passive) left arm, in need of support, and his forefinger. God's muscular body and beardless face are identical with those of the new Adam. Adam's limp arm is transformed into Christ's, who, with the invisible power of the movement of his arms, moves the whole cosmos and mankind.

According to certain interpretations, Michelangelo's depiction of the descent of the Lord surrounded by eleven angels exactly follows the structure of the cross section of the brain.<sup>19</sup> If it is indeed so, we see an illustration of the verses of Purgatory (Pg. 25, 67–75), cited above. During the creation of Eve, God is standing on earth. By the upward pull of his right hand, even without touching, He is helping

<sup>19</sup> Meshberger (1990). On this question and newer research: [www.dio\\_cervello\\_michelangelo.htm](http://www.dio_cervello_michelangelo.htm) and on other sites.

the ancestral mother to come to an independent life from beside the reclining Adam. The heavily accentuated movement is clearly different from the official iconography of the time; even from the rigid figure of the Father in Raphael's *Disputa (divinarum rerum notitia)*, depicting a theological debate in the nearby Segnatura Hall. Various explanations may arise. From this point of view, the most acceptable explanation is to assume that Michelangelo, under the influence of his Platonic masters, orchestrated a God whose existence, although eternal, does not end with the creation of the world and man, but actually becomes complete in them. He moves, because with creation, He too, gains an *omniformis* existence.

As Eve is being lifted up from beside Adam (not from inside of him), the Lord is standing on the ground, looking deep into the eyes of the ancestral mother, who is drawn up and toward Himself by His right hand, with His secret power, without touching. The creation of both Adam and Eve is done not only by the movement of the hand but, at least as much, by the bridging power of gaze, vision, and light. The biological environment is schematic here, too: only a dry, severed tree trunk with an also dry branch growing from it to the side. The former is parallel to the figure of Adam, the latter to Eve. (The tree of the Fall, on the other hand, is green.) The movement of the Father projects that of the Son (Christ the judge looks before himself, and has no eye contact with anyone). Souls revolve around the upward-pointing right and downward-casting left hand of Helios Pantocrator, who has the strength of a gladiator and who passes the last judgement, like planets around the sun. (This is how it appeared in Dante's Paradise, too.) The universe is pervaded by an invisible moving force.<sup>20</sup> Michelangelo modelled the face of Christ upon the features of the pagan sun god, the ancient statue of Apollo of Belvedere and depicted him without a beard and clothes, for nothing may obscure this Sun.

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<sup>20</sup> In a copy of *The Last Judgement*, painted immediately after its completion, God is seen above Christ in the central axis of the work, following the iconographic tradition. His movement repeats that in the ceiling fresco, with the dove below him and Christ below it (Marcello Venusti, 1549, Museo di Capodimonte, Naples). In another copy (Giulio Clovio?, first half of 16th century, Casa Buonarroti, Florence), He is seen in a huge sun-disc, surrounded by angels on a cloud.

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