Lyric Tradition and the Desires of Absence: Rudel, Dante, and Michelangelo (‘Vorrei uoler’)

Along with his painting, sculpture, and other works, Michelangelo produced a series of several hundred poems. Although he occasionally referred to this writing in his correspondence and was sufficiently pleased with many of the finished poems to exchange them privately with friends, his poetry was not fully edited and published until long after his death.¹ Michelangelo’s reticence to claim too much for himself publicly as a poet, coupled with the notoriously uneven quality of the poems, has led many critics to question whether his poetry can really stand up as important verse under close scrutiny.² Over the last several decades, however, the importance of Michelangelo’s poetry has become con-

1 The first collection was made privately in 1546, while Michelangelo was still alive. But this was too early for many of his finest poems to be included. The first full edition was not published until 1623, almost sixty years after Michelangelo’s death. This edition was compiled by Michelangelo il Giovane, the son of Michelangelo’s devoted nephew, Lionardo. Unfortunately, it was not faithful to Michelangelo’s originals. An improved edition was published by Cesare Guasti in 1863. C. Frey’s 1897 edition, because of its completeness and its faithfulness to Michelangelo’s autographs, represented a major breakthrough in the publication of the poems: Die Dichtungen des Michelagniolo Buonarroti, new ed. (Berlin: De Gruyter 1964). A fine recent edition, based on Frey’s, has been published by Enzo Noè Giardini: Michelangiolo Buonarroti. Rime (Bari: Laterza 1960).

2 Even Michelangelo’s most important supporters have often been deeply ambivalent about his verse. See Ugo Foscolo’s two seminal articles, both written for English reviews, ‘Michel Angelo’ (New Monthly Magazine, 1822) and ‘The Poems of Michelangelo Buonarroti’ (Retrospective Review, 1826), rpt. in Saggi e discorsi critici, ed. Cesare Foligno, Edizione nazionale delle opere, 10 (Florence: Le Monnier 1953) 447-59 and 469-91 (the attribution of the 1826 article is in dispute; see John Lindon, ‘Dell’ attribuzione a Ugo Foscolo del saggio intitolato “Poems of Michel Angelo Buonarroti,”’ Giornale storico della letteratura italiana 153, Fasc. 481 (1976) 87-112); and Benedetto Croce, Poesia popolare e poesia d’arte. Studi sulla poesia italiana dal Tre al Cinquecento, Scritti di storia letteraria e politica, 28 (Bari: Laterza 1933) 391-400. Natalino Sapegno was, if anything, even more skeptical in his Disegno storico della letteratura italiana, 1 vol. (Florence: La Nuova Italia 1948) 252.
siderably clearer thanks to the work of Luigi Baldacci, Enzo Noè Girardi, and Robert Clements. There is no longer any reason to doubt that Michelangelo's lyrics can be examined in detail, apart from his sculpture and painting, as a significant body of artistic products with an integrity all their own. Nonetheless, I do not intend to suggest that the lyrics should be read this way, in a sort of formalist vacuum. Rather, I propose that a feasible and, for literary studies, an especially valuable approach to Michelangelo's poetry is consideration of the details of the verse first and of the other works second (and only in the ways that the latter illuminate and help to explain the lyrics).

This procedure is the reverse of the one traditionally adopted in discussions of Michelangelo's œuvre. But it provides a unique means of appreciating how pressing certain concerns became in Michelangelo's later

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life, particularly his anxiety about salvation. On occasion this anxiety can also be gleaned from his painting and sculpture; but in his poetry it is discussed with a directness than can only be described as disturbing.  

Beyond close reading, the other major aspect of the approach is consideration of the historical development of theme and genre. By tracing such fundamental themes as absence/desire and transgression/penitence through examples of Provençal and early Italian love lyric, specifically those of Jaufré Rudel (for his strong association of desire with absence) and Dante (for his Christian reinterpretation of these themes), we can gauge the crucial shift that occurred in Italian Renaissance lyric in terms of the internal force of the individual poet's desire and will. This shift was accomplished even though many of the thematic concerns of the later lyrics appear to remain the same or to change only nominally. Despite the apparent similarities, their meanings and their effects are notably different in each poet's work. This critical method, involving literary history as well as close reading, is not the only one that can be adopted. But neither is it merely one approach among many. At present, this approach does the most justice possible to Michelangelo's lyrics because such a reading permits the understanding both of the speaker's expression and of his self-perception as displayed within the verse at hand. Such an understanding allows us as readers to appreciate the meaning of these lyrics in the fullest sense, in their aesthetic, psychological, and historical contexts.

There are many avenues into Michelangelo's later poetry, but the most direct for our purposes begins with the sonnet 'Vorrei uoler, Signior, quel che io non uoglio' (Frey 140, Girardi 87). Here is the text as Frey gives it:

Vorrei uoler, Signior, chil ch io non uoglio.

Tra 'l foco e 'l cor di iacca un uel s' asconde,
Che 'l foco ammorza, onde non corrisponde
La penna all' opere e fa bugiardo 'l foglio
L' t' amo con la lingua e poi mi doglio,
Ch' amor non giunge al cor; ne so be', onde
Apra 'l uscio alla gratia, che s' infonde
Nel cor, che scacci ogni spietato orgoglio.
Squarcia 'l uel tu, Signior! Rompi quel muro
Che con la suo durezza ne ritarda

4 In 'Michelangelo as a Baroque Poet,' Clements describes 'Vorrei uoler' as one of Michelangelo's 'most disturbed sonnets' (p. 183). The dating of the sonnet is in dispute, though most commentators feel it falls in the period after 1550. Somewhat earlier dates (1530s) have also been suggested, but without conclusive proof.
Il sol della tuo luce, al mondo spenta!
Manda 'l predico lume, a noi uenturo,
Alla tuo bella sposa, accio ch'io arda,
Il cor senz' alcun dubbio e te sol senta.⁵

As has been pointed out by Clements and others, this sonnet is striking both because of its linguistic and its thematic organization.⁶ The seemingly precious repetition in the first line, ringing the changes on the verb 'volere,' introduces the speaker's confusion in the midst of his crisis of will. This crisis has not blocked the poet's expression, but it has skewed his language to such an extent that the words simply do not come out right ('onde non corrisponde / la penna all'opre e fa bugiardo 'l foglio'). Despite his uncertainty ('ne so be'), the speaker does not doubt that love's 'fire' is alive somewhere. But to his consternation, it is absent from its proper place, the Christian's heart ('amor non giungie al cor'). The speaker's confusion and his sense of continuing transgression ('spietato orgoglio') have left him helpless to rectify the situation on his own ('ne so be', onde / Apra l'uscio alla gratia'). Therefore, his request, voiced in the tercets' series of urgent imperatives ('Squarcia ... Rompi ... Manda'), is for solution through the intervention of the missing deity ('Signior'). That is, the poet's prayer takes form as a request for a fullness which is now apparent in the poem only through its stated absence.

In the tradition of European lyric, the great singer of love for an absent

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⁵ I have adopted the text of 'Vorrei uoler' from Frey's edition because of its accurate rendition of the poet's autograph. Elsewhere I cite texts and numbers from Girardi since this edition is more generally available and is faithful to Frey except for the modernization of punctuation and spelling. The following translation of the sonnet is mine:

I would like to want, Signor, what I do not want:
between the fire and my heart arises a veil of ice
which extinguishes the fire, with the result that the pen
does not correspond to the work, and makes the page a liar.
I love you with my words [tongue], and then regret
that love does not penetrate [arrive] to my heart; nor do I know
where might open the door to grace that grows
in my heart, which would drive out all my resistance.
Rend the veil yourself, Signor, break down that wall
which in its hardness blocks
the sun of your light, to our world extinguished!
Send the aforesaid [predicted] light, proceeding to us,
to your lovely bride, so that I may burn
in my heart without any doubt, and feel only you.

⁶ 'Michelangelo as a Baroque Poet,' 183, and The Poetry of Michelangelo, 295, 328.
beloved was, of course, the Provençal poet Jaufré Rudel. Even though
the linking of absence and desire also occurs in the works of other Pro-
vençal poets, the association is by far the strongest in Rudel’s verse. This
motif is particularly notable in Jaufré’s best-known poem, ‘Lanquan li
jorn son lonc en mai.’ Following are five of the seven stanzas in the ver-
sion recently edited by Rupert Pickens:

1 Lan quand li jorn son lonc e mai
M’es bels douz chans d’auzels de loing,
E quand me sui partitz de lai
4 Remembra ‘m d’un’ amor de loing;
Vauc de talan enbroncs e clis,
Si que chans ni flors d’albespis
No ‘m platz plus que l’inverns gelatz.

iv Be ‘m parra jois qan li qerrai
Per amor Dieu l’amor de loing,
24 E s’a lieis plai, albergarai
Pres de lieis, si be ‘m sui de loing.
Adoncs parra ‘l parlamens fis
Qand drutz loindas er tant vezis
28 C’ab bels [digz] jauzirai solatz.

v Ben tenc lo seignor per verai
Per q’ieu veirai l’amor de loing,
Mas per un ben qe me n’eschai
32 N’ai dos mals, car tant m’es de loing.
Ail car me fos lai peleris
Si qe mos fuszt e mos tapis
Fos pelz sieus bels huoillis remiratz!

vi 36 Diesus qe fetz tot qant ve ni vai
E fermet cest’ amor de loing
Me don poder, qe ‘l cor eu n’ai,
Q’en breu veia l’amor de loing
40 Veraimen en locs aizis,
Si qe la cambra e ‘l jardis
Mi resembles totz temps palatz.
Ver ditz qui m'apella lechai
44 Ni desiran d'amor de loing,
   Car nullos autors tant no'm plai
Cum jauzimens d'amor de loing;
   Mas so q'ieu vuoiill m'es tant ahiis
48 Q'enaissi'm fadet mos paireis
   Q'ieu ames e non fos amatz.

Mas so q'ieu vuoiill m'es tant ahiis ...
52 Qe'm fadet q'ieu non fos amatz!

There are two ongoing controversies over 'Lanquan li jorn.' One concerns whether or not an allegorical reading is possible and/or appropriate, and the

7 Rupert T. Pickens, The Songs of Jaufré Rudel, Studies and Texts, 41 (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies 1978) 164-9. This edition supplants Alfred Jeanroy's landmark 1924 edition of the poems since Pickens takes into consideration the extremely active body of contemporary criticism dealing with Jaufré's work. The following translation is Pickens's:

1. When the days are long in May / I like a sweet song of birds from afar, / and when I have gone away from there / I am reminded of a love from afar; / I go bent and bowed with desire, / so that song nor hawthorn flower / pleases me more than frozen winter.

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1v. Indeed, joy will appear to me (it will seem a joy to me) when I seek from her, / for the love of God, the love from afar, / and if it pleases (I please) her, I shall lodge / near her, although I am far away (from afar). / Then will conversation seem noble / when a far-away lover is (I am) so close / that I shall enjoy solace with fair [words].

v. I hold indeed the lord to be true / through whom (wherefore) I shall see the love from afar; / but for one good thing which befalls me from it, / I have two griefs because she (it) is so far away from me. / Ah! would that I were a pilgrim there / so that my staff and my cloak / might be reflected in (beheld by) her beautiful eyes.

vi. God who made all that comes or goes / and guaranteed this love from afar / give me strength, for I have the heart for it, / so that I may soon see the love from afar / truly in proper (nearby) places, / so that the chamber and the garden / might resemble to me forever a palace.

vii. He speaks the truth who calls me covetous / and desirous of love from afar, / for no other joy pleases me so much / as enjoyment of love from afar; / but what I want is so hateful to me, / for thus did my godfather fix as my fate / that I should love and not be loved.

viii. But what I want is so hateful to me ... / Cursed altogether be the godfather / who fixed as my fate that I should not be loved! (pp. 165-9)
other concerns the identification of the 'pairs,' or 'godfather,' of ll. 48, 51. If the poem is read as a religious allegory, the lover's love is sacred and his goal is the spiritual reunion of his soul with God through the Virgin (or through crusade to the Holy Land). If, on the other hand, his love is secular, then his goal is sexual union with his beloved, designated by Jaufré's wonderfully romanticized vida as a princess of Tripoli whom he had never seen (‘laï el renc dels Sarrazis,’ ‘Lanquan li jorn,’ II, 13). These two realms of love, courtly and religious, are often portrayed as similar in Provençal verse, though the extent of their actual overlapping is far from certain in ‘Lanquan li jorn.’ But whether the speaker's 'crusade' is to be holy or profane, allegorical or literal, the point stressed throughout the poem is not the presence of the poet's love but, instead, the absence of his love's object. It may appear that the presence of desire and the absence of its object are coincidental in the poem rather than being necessary conditions of the poet's song. But after consideration of Jaufré's other verse and that of certain predecessors suggested throughout the criticism (most often Latin forerunners, such as Ovid and Propertius, but occasionally Arabic ones as well), it becomes clear that in Rudel's verse absence and desire go hand in hand.

Now in one sense, the situation of the poet and his 'amor de loing' is paradoxical, and Paolo Cherchi is undoubtedly correct to describe it as 'emblematic' of what Leo Spitzer had termed 'le "paradoxe amoureux" qui est à la base de toute la poésie troubadouresque: amour qui ne veut posséder, mais jouir de cet état de non-possession.' Moreover, this type

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8 The question of religious allegory has attracted the greatest interest. In different ways, positions have been staked out by writers as diverse as Jeanroy, Leo Spitzer, Salvatore Battaglia, Kurt Lewent (no); Irénée Cluzel, Salvatore Santangelo, Paul Zumthor, Yves Lefèvre, André Burger, René Nelli, Michelangelo Picone (maybe); Carl Appel, Mario Casella, Grace Frank, D.W. Robertson, and Diego Zorzi (yes, though in varying senses). To date the best summary of the criticism is Silvio Pellegrini's Jaufré Rudel e la critica, in his Varietà romanze, ed. G.E. Sansone, Biblioteca di filologia romanza, 28 (Bari: Adriatica 1978) 171-8.

Identification of the 'pairs' has incited almost as much commentary. The definitive treatment, which asserts the 'parenté psychologique et intellectuelle de Guillaume IX d'Aquitaine et de Jaufré Rudel,' in Studi in onore di Angelo Monteverdi, 2 vols. (Modena: Società Tipografica Editrice Modenesse 1959) Vol. 1, 403-42.

9 For the Latin background and an implicit warning in regard to the Arabic examples, see Paolo Cherchi, Andrea Capellano i trovatori e altri temi romanzi, Biblioteca di cultura, 128 (Rome: Bulzoni 1979) 12-15, 52-5.

10 Cherchi, 13-14; Spitzer, L'Amour lointain de Jaufré Rudel et le sens de la poésie des troubadours, Studies in the Romance Languages and Literatures, 5 (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina 1944) 1-2.
of situation, in which the experience of absence leads to the poet’s singing, is precisely the one described in the opening stanza of ‘Lanquan li jorn.’ It is not the poet’s hearing of the faraway birds ‘douz chans’ that gives rise to his song, as though presence led to presence. Rather, it is the poet’s departure from the birds which triggers his memories of another figure of absence, his ‘amor de loing,’ and these memories then give rise to the poem (‘E qand me sui partitz de lai / Rememra·m d’un’ amor de loing’).

However, even while the poet’s situation appears paradoxical (and this type of paradox did provide the framework for countless examples of love poetry through the later Middle Ages and beyond), it also appears to be a perfectly normal part of human experience. The perception of absence gives rise to desire; or, in more prosaic terms, you only ‘want’ what you do not have. Because this thematized model of desire is basic to everyday experience rather than aberrant or foreign to it, there is no need to substitute something other than the absent beloved as the ‘true’ goal of desire in troubadour verse. This is the reason why Paul Zumthor, for instance, is only partially correct in his well-known description of the ‘circularity’ of the song:

*Chanter*, qui est *aimer* (et vice-versa), action sans objet, en se déployant, c’est-à-dire en perpétuant son procès pendant la durée d’un certain nombre de strophes, engendre sa propre substantification, la *chanson*, qui est l’amour (et vice-versa). *Joie* se réfère à la fois à cette action et à ces substances: elle est l’action, la substance, en tant que ressenties et réfléchies sur le sujet, consciemment et dangereusement vécues par lui.\(^{11}\)

True, the ‘chant’ is the embodiment of the poet’s desire. But this is not to say that ‘aimer’ is an action ‘sans objet.’ Such a formulation, if acceptable when applied to ‘Lanquan li jorn,’ would indeed ‘solve’ the controversy over allegorization in Rudel’s lyric by exposing the entire question of external reference as a red herring. The important object of examination would then be the psychological mechanism or structure of ‘chanter/aimer’ and only that. Whether desire is directed at God, a real woman, or poetry itself would be immaterial.

Zumthor’s analysis is tempting, but it can only succeed by treating as secondary what Rudel’s poems themselves treat as primary.\(^{12}\) Moreover,

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12 In treating Rudel’s work, and especially ‘Lanquan li jorn,’ Zumthor is less formuliac and far more incisive. See his *Langue et techniques poétiques à l’époque romane*. 
acceptance of such a generalized formulation risks serious misreadings of the very poems from which the formula appears to be deduced. Merely because a question is irresolvable does not mean it is unimportant or secondary. There is an absent object in Rudel's verse even though that object is often obscured (as though by a *senhal*) and historically unidentifiable. The object is not merely a feint but is instead a necessary part of the relation if the dialectic of desire is to continue. Far from being an action *without* an object, desire, in Rudel's lyrics, is an action *cut off* or somehow *barred from* its object.

This consideration brings us to the second controversy in the criticism of *Lanquain li jorn*. As in the case of the idealized 'amor de loing,' neither the identity nor the exact nature of the 'pairis' can be determined from the available evidence. The figure remains enigmatic even after all the possibilities of interpretation have been exhausted (the most often mentioned being a representative of the lyric tradition itself, such as Guillaume d'Aquitaine, the lady's husband or 'gilos,' the poet's actual godfather or even his father-in-law, a capricious demon, or, in a religious reading, Adam).

As is true in the controversy over religious allegory, this final irresolvability contributes to making Rudel's poetry so suggestive and so challenging. Moreover, investigation of the possibilities of reference need not be limited to historical figures. The important point to be made is that there are both an interdiction and an interdictor openly referred to in the poem. According to the poem, the interdiction has been made in a moment in time (*Q'enaissi-m fadet mos pairis / Q'ieu ames e non fos amatz*, ll. 48-9 — my emphasis, as in all subsequent quotations from primary sources). But once given, it is prolonged in the poet's continuing state of non-fulfillment (*Qu'm fadet q'ieu non fos amatz*, l. 52). The poet realizes that what he says he wants is therefore blocked, and he acknowledges that this situation is far from easy ('Mas so q'ieu vuoiill m'es tant ahs ... / Toz sia mauditz lo pairis'). Nonetheless, he neither questions nor challenges the function of the interdiction. He continues to love, but his love is not, and by decree cannot be, returned.

This, then, is the situation as set forth by the poem: absence gives rise to desire and desire gives rise to the poet's song, but desire itself is never to be fulfilled, never to secure its object. What Jaufré in another poem

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*(11*–*12* siècles), Bibliothèque française et romane, série C, iv (Paris: Klincksieck 1963) 205-17. Nonetheless, the idealist assumptions are in force here as well. Despite Zumthor's exemplary structural analysis, I cannot agree with him that the 'allusion' to the love *de loing ... n'a pas d'objet; elle n'a qu'un sujet, qui est le poème même' (p. 217).
terms the flame of love ('Quan lo rius de la fontana,' 111) remains alive despite the necessarily partial solace of 'icy winter' ('Lanquan li jorn,' l. 7). As he affirms so clearly in 'Quan lo rius de la fontana' (iv, 22), 'De desire mos cors non fina.'

Although the poet's predicament does seem difficult, he appears neither confused nor lacking in resolve. His only request is for 'strength,' and it is directed at the very figure whose power is in some special though uncertain way connected with the most 'joyfully' sensual aspects of the speaker's beloved ('Be·m parra jois qan li qerrai / Per amor Dieu l'amor de loing,' ll. 22-3). The poet's request for God's aid in sustaining his already firm heart occurs in stanza vi:

Dieus qe fetz tot qant ve ni vai  
E fermet cest' amor de loing  
Me don poder, qe·l cor eu n'ai.

Oddly enough, the mention of the godfather's interdiction follows in the very next stanza. Once again, Rudel wants to have it, and indeed does have it, both ways. He wants his beloved and at the same time he is certain of not being able to possess her, at least not in reciprocal consummation. Meanwhile, between absence and fulfillment, desire remains.

So, even though there is a request for aid as well as an absolute interdiction in the poem, there is very little sense of transgression or penitence on the part of the speaker. The one note of transgression and perhaps of remorse ('Mas so q'ieu vuoil m'es tant ahi') is sounded in relation to the poet's paradoxical situation, not in regard to an offended deity or to an internal crisis of will. The result, as expressed in the poem, is not the confusion of the speaker's will but the apparent hardness of an already determined destiny, of the fate decreed through the external agency of the 'paires.'

This certainty of non-fulfillment gives the poem its sentiment of longing without crisis, of paradox without confusion. And this assessment holds true even at the end of the poem, when what appears to be incipient rebellion near the close of stanza vii (ll. 47-9) becomes, in the tornada, the acceptance of the speaker's fate. Indeed, even the poet's curse on the 'godfather' ('Toz sia mauditz lo pairis') is robbed of its immediacy by being placed within the highly stylized repetition of the concluding lines. The song ends, but the desire giving rise to it must continue since the poet's situation must remain without resolution. Again: 'De desir mos cors non fina.'

13 The *vida* 'solves' the predicament of absence/fulfillment in typically romanticized
The motif of desire for an absent object as a spur to poetic creation came to Dante through the Provençal and the early Italian lyricists. But rather than a lady in a distant castle, or one trapped in a turret by a terrible monster, or one surrounded in court by dangerously mischievous lauzengiers, the object of Dante's desire was a woman of the city, his beloved Beatrice. Dante describes the origin and growth of his love for Beatrice in the Vita nuova, which unites the traditional aspects of the Provençal lyrics, razos, and vidas. Before Dante, these had been separate elements of a poet's œuvre, collected (and in the case of the razos and vidas usually composed) long after the poet's death. Part of Dante's great invention was to bring them all together in his 'little book' while giving them a formal unity and a singleness of purpose unique in medieval literature.

As a poet, therefore, Dante adopted the forms and themes of the Provençal and Italian lyric tradition, but at the same time he broke with tradition by adapting them to his own ends in two ways. First, he gave the motifs of absence and desire, and of transgression and penitence a definite temporal development. In doing this, he made the stuff of his own life into a narrative. Second, he 'read' this text (with the aid of divine revelation) in a specifically Christian sense. So Dante's book is not just any book about any life, but the autobiographical story of the development of the dolce stil novo and the formation of the Christian poet, singer of the one true Love.

In the course of the Vita nuova, Beatrice is the object of the poet's desire and at the same time the vehicle through which divine love operates. It is important that Dante depicts Beatrice as an agent rather than as either a worldly woman signifying only earthly pleasures or an allegorized representation of the deity. In this way, the narrative combines seemingly antithetical elements of medieval perspective. Whereas a strictly secular lyricist would have seen only Beatrice and, in the words of Charles Singleton, 'a saint's love would have sought only God,' the final hope of Beatrice's lover is 'that he may one day see her who in her turn sees God.'

But even though Beatrice is central to Dante's understanding of his life,

14 Because of the occasional indications of temporality in Rudel's verse, Spitzer sees Jaufré as 'un des rares prédécesseurs de Dante' (L'Amour lointain de Jaufré Rudel, p. 48 n. 16).

she is not the primary focus of the narrative. Rather, Dante portrays his own understanding of his inspiration as the crucial phenomenon of his story — a development with multiple aspects, all subject to change over time. Because of this central focus on the internal growth of the Christian poet’s understanding, the Vita nuova embodies a model of Christian learning and knowledge. For Dante, this knowledge comes through reflection, through looking back over time.

The central moment of the Vita nuova is the passing of Beatrice from this world, her transmigration, as the Paradiso has it, to a world beyond time (xxx1, 37-8). Of course, the poet had been in love with Beatrice while she was still on this earth. But only with her departure from the world of men could Dante’s love and the poetry it inspires be understood in their full meaning. This is why it is important that for Dante knowledge comes through both revelation and reflection. Indeed, at first his world had been a book whose meaning neither he nor his closest friends could read. He had passed around his lyrics and had received many responses, but before Beatrice’s departure, and the revelations surrounding it, no one could comprehend the poetry’s true meaning:

A questo sonetto ["A ciascun alma presa e gentil core"] fue risposto da molti e di diverse sentenze; tra li quali fue risponditore quelli cui io chiamo primo de li miei amici…. E questo fue quasi lo principio de l’amistà tra lui e me, quando elli seppe che io ero quelli che li avea ciò mandato. Lo verace giudicio del detto sogno non fue veduto allora per alcuno, ma ora è manifestissimo a li più semplici. (iii, 14-15)16

In the narrating present of the work, then, Beatrice, as in courtly lyric, is the absent woman. She is ‘unavailable’ in temporal and spatial terms (as she had perhaps been in social terms as well, though within the fictional narrative the historical fact of her betrothal to another man is carefully circumnavigated).

The narrator had first seen what he terms ‘la gloriosa donna della mia

16 This sonnet was answered by many, who offered a variety of interpretations; among those who answered was the one I call my best friend .... This exchange of sonnets marked the beginning of our friendship. The true meaning of the dream I described was not perceived by anyone then, but now it is completely clear even to the least sophisticated.’ All translations of the Vita nuova are from Mark Musa, Dante's Vita Nuova: A Translation and an Essay (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press 1973). For the text of the Vita nuova, I have used Le opere di Dante, 2nd ed., Testo critico della Società Dantesca Italiana (Florence 1960); for the Commedia, the edition of Giorgio Petrocchi, La Commedia secondo l’antica vulgata, Società Dantesca Italiana, 4 vols. (Milan: Mondadori 1966-67).
mente' at the age of nine years (II, 1). Three spirits — the vital, the natural (sensible), and the organic — immediately appear to inform the youth of the importance of this 'beatitudine vestra.' After the passage of another period of nine years, the narrator again encounters the object of his desire. The instance of this encounter, followed by the further appari-
tion of spirits and the narrator's growth in 'l'arte del dire parole per rima,' gives rise to the first of the subsequent poems ('A ciascun'alma presa'). The remainder of Dante's narrative is the account of his progress in regard to a series of encounters and immediate separations. In the early chapters, the repetition of these somehow unsuccessful encounters ('poi che la mia beatitudine mi fue negata,' XII, 1) defines the development of the poet with respect to his activities as a man and as a writer. A similar organization, on a larger scale, then permits him to grasp the unified meaning of his prior existence after Beatrice's death and the subsequent appearance/withdrawal of the 'mirabile visione' of the concluding chapter. As in the earlier chain of visions and withdrawals, encounters and separations, this culminating moment inspires the poet first to silence but eventually to further speech, and to more truly inspired speech at that: 'io vidi cose che mi fecero proporre di non dire più di questa benedetta infino a tanto che io potesse più degnamente trattare di lei' (XLI, 1-2). 17

As Beatrice becomes fully idealized, initially as the 'absent woman' of tradition and later as the true 'beatitudine' of the dolce stil novo, the poet's desire is desexualized without diminishing the energy it supplies to his growing creativity as a poet. This purification is accomplished not only through the play of absence and desire but also through that of transgression and Christian penitence. This process is demonstrated by Dante's rebukes of his 'maladetti occhi' for their excessive interest in the all too earthly 'donna' of the later chapters (XXXVII, 2 et passim). His repentance is described in Chapter XXXIX, after another vision of the 'gloriosa Beatrice': 'lo mio cuore cominciò dolorosamente a pentere de lo desiderio ... contra la costanza de la ragione' (2). For the poet, the action of penitence is then embodied in his poetry on his return to the active celebration of Beatrice and Amore (XXXIX).

In the Vita nuova, the poet's sense of worldly transgression mixes with his youthful feelings of inadequacy and unworthiness. In the early chapters, the mockery of the women witnessing the spectacle of his youthful infatuation only adds to the bitterness of his failure in his tearful crisis of will, and so ultimately to his reaction as a poet and to the

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17 'I saw things that made me resolve to say no more about this blessed one until I would be capable of writing about her in a nobler way.'
creation of the poems. After these early failures, Dante is inspired to express his desire ‘... not in the [barred] fulfillment of action but in verse’: ‘Queste parole fa che siano quasi un mezzo, si che tu non parli a lei immediatamente, che non è degno’ (xii, 8). Dante’s worldly failures as a youth eventually lead to his success as a Christian poet. Penitence, as a part of love itself, also gives rise to poetry.

For the poet, then, the verse is not merely ‘a means’ among others, even in these early stages;18 rather, in the compactness of its art, it is a privileged locus of meaning. In a famous sonnet, Dante describes himself and Beatrice in regard to others and to the poetic expression of true Love:

Ne li occhi porta la mia donna Amore,  
   per che si fa gentil ciò ch’ella mira;  
   ov’ella passa, ogn’om ver lei si gira,  
   e cui saluta fa tremar lo core,

   Quel ch’ella par quando un poco sorride,  
   non si pò dicer né tenere a mente  
   si è novo miracolo e gentile. (xxi)19

18 In the often quoted definition of Purgatorio xxiv, Dante identifies Amore, and its perception, as the efficient cause of his verse and the irreducible inspiration of the sweet ‘stil novo’:

   T mi son un che, quando  
   Amor mi spira, noto, e a quel modo  
   ch’è ditta dentro vo significando.’ (52-4)

   T am one who, when Love inspires me,  
   takes note, and goes setting it forth after  
   the fashion which he dictates within me.’


In this passage, Amore seems unified and purely positive. But this definition is the result of the poet’s growth in understanding. In the Vita nuova, the poet’s relation to Amore still depends on its components of absence and desire, interdiction and transgression.

19 The power of Love borne in my lady’s eyes  
   imparts its grace to all she looks upon.
According to the language of the poem, *Amore* is rendered accessible to mankind through Beatrice's eyes and smile in the *emanatìo* of divine love. Nonetheless, for the poet at this point, as well as for the fictive passersby, this is an external vision, the mirror image of *Amore*. All can see the unity of their being thanks to the purifying agency of divine reflection, as the verbal echo of 'mira ... miracolo' concisely emphasizes. But even though the sonnet describes a 'miraculous' moment, one of potentially overwhelming illumination for the poet and for others, it is not yet the scene of ultimate and prolonged comprehension: 'non si pò *dicer né tenere a mente / si è novo miracolo e gentile.*'

Again, as is clear from the narrative, full understanding cannot occur until after Beatrice's departure and absence. Her passing is predicted in the dream-vision of Chapter xxiii, which combines her death with the sacrificial imagery of Christ. Oddly enough, the poet's imagination both foretells the beloved's future ('Di necessitade convene che la gentilissima Beatrice alcuna volta si muoia') and, through the vagaries of his 'erronea fantasia' and the chants of the 'donna scapigliate,' links his fate with hers: 'Tu pur morrai .... . *Tu se'morto* (3-4).

The narrative's announcement of the death of Beatrice's father in Chapter xxix leads into this vision, and the news of Beatrice's death follows shortly after, in Chapter xxviii. The confusion of the dreamer with the object of his desire, portrayed within a besieged imagination and accompanied by the chorus of hags, indicates the gradual psychological internalization of the previously random tensions between interdiction and transgression. Moreover, only in Chapter xxvi, falling between this central sequence and Beatrice's actual death, do the poet and others begin to experience 'in memoria' the full effects of the divine *emanatìo*: 'e non solamente ne la sua presenzia, ma *ricordandosi di lei, mirabilemente operava.*'

This progressive internalization of a higher moral order, effected through an external threat to the poet's own earthly aspirations ('Tu pur morrai'), represents the beginning of the poet's realization and acceptance of his true role in Christian society. Through the poet's internalization of the divine will, Beatrice becomes fully idealized, a process that the nar-

All turn to gaze at her when she walks by,
and when she greets a man his heart beats fast,

*   *   *   *   *

The image of her when she starts to smile
dissolves within the mind and melts away,
a miracle too rich and strange to hold.
rative posits, in suggestively Oedipal images, by means of the (real) death of a father figure and the potential death of the youthful dreamer. The subsequent strengthening of the poet-subject brings the self-confidence of the Vita's second part as well as Dante's mature awareness of his skills and of his task, of his role (in a social as well as a literary sense) as chief celebrant of 'qui est per omnia secula benedictus.' As Dante begins to understand the design of his life, he becomes the foremost 'chiosatore' (or 'scholiast') of his own book (xxviii, 2). Now fully capable of both polished composition and literary excursus, the poet willingly produces for his audience both 'foul papers' and final copy, as the two 'cominciamenti' of Chapter xxxiv demonstrate. The knowledge previously hidden behind the mask of God's 'language' is by this time fully manifest to all those possessed of the requisite Christian understanding and 'cor gentil' so that the overt connection between Maria and Beatrice of the 'primo cominciamento' is no longer necessary and is, accordingly, struck as the principal emendation of the poet's second version.

Similar to Augustine and to Saint John, and in part to Freud, Dante conceives of understanding as occurring in the present but as arising from the past, from previously incomprehensible 'memoria,' with the revelation of prior meaning as the central moment of human comprehension. The initial part of Dante's life as a Christian poet was written before he could fully read its meaning, spoken before he could truly speak it, and becomes available to the mature poet only through the miraculous agency of Beatrice, just as God's overall creation becomes fully comprehensible only with the earthly appearance and withdrawal of 'the Word ... made flesh.'

Nevertheless, the very narrative which seems to represent a model of self-knowledge ends not with a unified affirmation of the laws of human understanding but with a concluding caveat. The narrator experiences the 'mirabile visione' but defers further description 'infini a tanto che io potesse piu degnamente trattare di lei.' Dante's 'book' does not finally conclude any more than does the epistemological progression of his narrative. For the human avatar of the creating consciousness, knowledge and its expression are not yet perfectly united. At the conclusion of the Vita nuova, this disjunction attests to the remaining distance between the

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20 John 1:14. This and subsequent biblical references are to the King James' Version of 1611. However, all passages have been compared to the Vulgate and to the New English Bible (Oxford and Cambridge: Oxford Univ. Press/Cambridge Univ. Press 1961) When differences in the translation are important, the language of the Vulgate and the New English Bible (NEB) is included in the text immediately following the King James' Version.
speaker and the true object of his desire. The *figure* of Beatrice can give meaning to this opposition, but *she* still cannot cancel it. Even at the end of the *Vita nuova*, the dialectics of absence and desire remain in force. And they lead not only to the *Commedia*, but also, by different routes, to the works of Dante's Renaissance successors.

In the book of his 'new life,' Dante's treatment of the problems of the individual understanding and will in regard to the themes of absence and desire, transgression and penitence, represents the author's early development in relation to the materials of his verse. These problems were eventually resolved by his election as a Christian poet and his initiation into the mysteries of divine love. As Virgil explains in the *Purgatorio* shortly before taking leave of his fully prepared pupil, 'libero, dritto e sano è tuo arbitrio' (*xxvii*, 140). The 'little book' thus documents the *beginnings* of Dante's path on the way to the final vision of the complete, and at least momentarily unified, Christian poet. Indeed, the culminating moment in Paradise comes when the poet's *desire* ('disio') and *his will* ('velle') are at last at one in the moving *presence* of divine Amore, 'Tamochi move il sole e l'altra stelle' (*xxxiii*, 143-5).

For Rudel and the Provençal poets, such problems had been secondary. Individual will and the questions of reason, liberty, and responsibility which the concept of the will entails were hardly preoccupations of the early European lyricists in the insular courts of Provence. But for Michelangelo, the poet's crisis of will, along with the anxiety of salvation to which it was consistently linked, was not only central, as it had been for Dante; it was also, in Michelangelo's most impressive verse, unresolved. In his later poetry, the extraordinarily open statement of this crisis is what revivifies and dramatizes the traditional themes of the love lyric, of absence and desire, transgression and penitence.

The expression of the poet's crisis of will in 'Vorrei uoler' is particularly emphatic. The opening's intricate play on 'volere,' broken only by the apostrophe of the sonnet's divine addressee, appears at first to be completely original. Although such contrivance is common in the Baroque verse following Michelangelo, examples in previous lyric poetry of this rhetorical, semantic, and thematic arrangement are rare. Nonetheless, an important model does exist, though not in the lyric tradition. Given the concerns of 'Vorrei uoler' — the sonnet's expression of confusion, transgression, anxiety, and, somehow, of hope — it is not surprising that Michelangelo's model is found in Paul:

14 For we know that the law is spiritual: But I am carnal, sold under sin.
15 For that which I do I allow not: for what I would, that I do not; but what I hate, that I do.
16 If then I do that which I would not, I consent unto the law that it is good.
17 Now then it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me.
18 For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing: for to will is present with me; but how to perform that which is good I find not.
19 For the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do.

22 For I delight in the law of God after the inward man:
23 But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members.
24 O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?
25 I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord. So then with the mind I myself serve the law of God; but with the flesh the law of sin.

(Romans vii: 14-19, 22-5)

Now it is true that the classical statement of the problems of desire and action occurs not in Paul’s writings but in Aristotelian ethics. Ovid, too, had described the conflict between passionate desire and the will to act according to reason (Metamorphoses, vii, 20-2). There was also an influential assessment of the conflict of the ‘two wills’ in Augustine’s Confessions (viii, 5), and the problem of the will was indeed a favorite topic of the Church Fathers. Moreover, the entire question of ‘libero arbitrio’ was the subject of a great deal of discussion in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Important academic and religious tracts dealing with ‘free will’ were published throughout Europe (written by Lorenzo Valla, Pietro Pompanazzi, Erasmus, Luther, and others). But of all these, Paul’s description of the problems was undoubtedly the most important for Michelangelo’s sonnet, both because of Michelangelo’s sympathy for Paul’s religious experience and because of the intricately developed statement of the problem in Paul’s epistle.

The rhetorical and thematic organization of the opening of ‘Vorrei uoler’ parallels the complexity of Paul’s formulation (‘For the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do,’ 19). The speaker’s sense of transgression, alluded to in the sonnet (‘spieta orgoglio’), is explicit in the epistle (‘but I am carnal, sold under sin. ... sin that dwelleth in me,’ 14, 17). In the epistle this sense of sin is more intimately connected with the ‘flesh’ than it is in ‘Vorrei uoler.’ But there are many instances of a similar consciousness of offending carnality in Michelangelo’s other verse, linked most often, though not exclusively, to his homosexuality (‘Cangiar non posso ’l vecchio mio antico uso; ‘col trist’uso radicato e forte,’ Girardi 161, 292). In Paul’s epistle the author’s will is firmer than in ‘Vorrei uoler’ (‘to will is present with me,’ 18). But in
each text the writer's consternation at his inability to obtain grace through worldly action is apparent (but how to perform that which is good I find not,' 18; 'ne so be', onde / Apra l'uscio alla gratia,' 11. 6-7). Moreover, it is clear that in both authors' quests for grace, words themselves are not enough:

I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord.
So then with the mind I myself serve the law of God;
but with the flesh the law of sin. (25)

I t'amo con la lingua e poi mi doglio,
Ch'amor non giunge al cor. (11. 5-6)

Nonetheless, both authors remain certain that grace does exist. These are statements of frustration and anxiety, not of despair. Moreover, as a writer, Michelangelo seems to believe that the correct expression of his desires (and so at least the beginnings of a solution to his problems) is already present in potentia in the piece of paper over which his pen moves. But his graceless situation makes the paper lie, and the meaning comes out wrong ('onde non corrisponde / La penna all'opre e fa bugiar do il foglio,' ll. 3-4). This self-conscious statement of the artist's difficulty is more complex than it may initially appear. The underlying concept is similar to Michelangelo's theory that the sculptor's stone already contains the finished work of art in the stone's unworked state and that the sculptor's task is, therefore, to free this preexisting image from its ground, as explained in the sonnet 'Non ha l'ottimo artista alcun concetto' (Girardi 151). Paul, too, is sure of grace's existence ('For I delight in the law of God after the inward man,' 22). But, like Michelangelo, he is unable to attain it on his own ('But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind,' 23).

Despite their confusion and consternation, then, both Paul and Michelangelo feel that a solution to their conflicts is possible. Moreover, a means of attaining Christian grace is suggested in each work. For Paul, the stated agent of purification is Christ ('Who shall deliver me from the

21 Clements reads 11. 3-4 of 'Vorreui voler' as indicating the difficulties inherent in language and cites a letter to Cavalieri in which Michelangelo makes this point (Michelangelo's Theory of Art, xviii-xviii, and The Poetry of Michelangelo, 295). Clements is certainly correct as far as he goes. But I think that the similarity to the theory expressed in 'Non ha l'ottimo artista alcun concetto' is also important and should be mentioned in this context.
body of this death? ... I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord,' 24-5). In ‘Vorrei uoler,’ the agency of access to grace is less definite. True, this type of ambiguity, as in Rudel’s verse, contributes to the fascination that Michelangelo’s poetry continues to hold. 22 Nevertheless, in this instance it seems clear enough that ‘il sol della tuo luce’ and ‘il predico lume’ refer in general to the deity and, more specifically, to Christ (‘il sol’; ‘al mondo spenta’; ‘a noi venturo’), that is: not to the final judgment itself but to the agent of judgment, the central character of Michelangelo’s imposing fresco in the Vatican’s Sistine Chapel.

While these texts are similar in many respects, there are also two important differences. First, the confusion of the sonnet’s speaker, expressed in every line of the quatrains, is noticeably greater than the stated confusion in the epistle. There are several reasons for this dissimilarity. Michelangelo’s conception of the individual does not break down into the traditional dualities of early and medieval Christian thought. There is no simple good/evil opposition at work in Michelangelo’s sonnet as there is in a great deal of medieval verse and in Paul’s formulation (‘Now then, it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me,’ 17). In ‘Vorrei uoler,’ the problems of desire and will are thoroughly mixed and internalized within the individual. This is not merely a matter of casting out evil but of purification of the entire speaking subject.

In this active confusion, the traditional pairings of absence and desire, and transgression and penitence are blended in a new way. In Dante, the departure of Beatrice from the world led eventually to reunion and fulfillment in the final vision of Paradise. The poet’s language was, perhaps, never entirely adequate to describe what he perceived at the conclusion of the Paradiso (‘Oh quanto è corto il dire e come fioco / al mio concetto!’ xxxiii, 121-2). But Dante’s vision itself was at last complete. However, in Michelangelo’s sonnet, the absent object of desire is not merely a worldly lover or a figure who will eventually lead the poet to the deity. Instead, the figure is an integral part of the Godhead. The speaker’s request for an active presence is therefore both more powerful and more direct than in traditional love lyric. Moreover, this request is not made by a speaker who had transgressed and is now penitent. The speaker continues to transgress God’s law and at the same time continues to repent the evil of his being and the infirmity of his will (‘Vorrei uoler ... quel ch’io non uoglio’). Within the sonnet, this internalization and

22 Girardi notes the effects of the ambiguity in the poem in Studi su Michelangelo, 116. He also discusses the two other cruxes in the criticism of the sonnet: whether ‘Signior’ is God or Cavalleri (probably God, according to Girardi) and whether the ‘bella sposa’ is the Church or the speaker’s soul (probably the soul, or ‘anima’).
blending of the traditional themes of absence and desire, transgression and penitence, result in a lyric expression which is at once difficult and breathtakingly novel. Michelangelo recasts old metal, but the coin he strikes is genuinely new.23

This play of old and new, together with the special type of intertextuality which it creates, is also apparent in the tercets. In these concluding sections of the poem, the second major difference between Michelangelo's sonnet and Paul's epistle becomes particularly significant. Whereas Paul's description of his difficulties is just that, a description rather than a request, Michelangelo's sonnet takes the form of a confession and also of an entreaty. The speaker's request for the intervention of the absent agent of purification makes the sonnet far more dramatic than the descriptive format of Paul's epistle or even that of many of the lyrics of the scuola siciliana or the stil novo. But even though the quatrains of 'Vorrei uoler' express confusion and the tercets add urgency to this expression, the statement of the poet's request is far from disorganized. The splitting of the tercets' opening line recalls the apostrophe of the poem's beginning and initiates the subsequent series of imperatives. What appeared earlier as an address now recurs as an exclamation ('Signior!'). The descriptive lines of the quatrains thus give way, after formal reintroduction of the sonnet's addressee, to the contrasting tense and mood of the conclusion. And along with the series of imperatives, both the verbal play on 'sol ... sol' (11, 14) and the regular rhyme scheme (cde cde) add to the sonnet's formal unity.

Because of the formal adroitness and the thematic complexity of the concluding sections, these lines, like the sonnet's opening, might appear entirely original. But again, this is not the case. The first line ('Squarcia1 uel tu, Signior! Rompi quel muro') is identical to a line in a sonnet composed by Michelangelo's great friend, Vittoria Colonna, as was first pointed out by Clements.24 Furthermore, the motif of the 'torn veil' can be traced back through the tradition preceding the Cinquecento. This motif occurs in Petrarch (in 362, along with the motif of the 'gelo') and at a critical moment in Dante, as the pilgrim awakens to the splendors of the

23 Baldacci links Michelangelo to the 'nuova lirica' of Della Casa and Berni rather than solely to sixteenth-century 'petrarchismo,' in Lineamenti della poesia di Michelangelo. In a different context, Nesca A. Robb had pointed out the novelty of Michelangelo's verse in her Neoplatonism of the Italian Renaissance (London: Allen & Unwin 1935) 240, though I disagree with her reading of Michelangelo within a framework which is primarily Neoplatonic' rather than Christian.
24 The Poetry of Michelangelo, 328; and 'Prayer and Confession,' 105-6
garden in *Purgatorio* xxxii (l. 71). But the image can be traced to its source, and again the source is Paul:

12 Seeing then that we have such hope, we use great plainness of speech: [Vulgate: multa ficucia utimur; NEB: we speak out, boldly]
13 And not as Moses, which put a veil over his face, that the children of Israel could not steadfastly look to the end of that which is abolished:
14 But their minds were blinded: for until this day remaineth the same veil untaken away in the reading of the old testament; which veil is done away in Christ.
15 But even unto this day, when Moses is read, the veil is upon their heart. [Vulgate: velamen positum est super cor eorum; NEB: a veil lies over the minds of the hearers.]
16 Nevertheless, when it shall return to the Lord, the veil shall be taken away.
17 Now the Lord is that spirit: and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. (II Corinthians 3: 12-17)

Paul describes the 'veil' as obscuring the understanding of the children of Israel. 'Even unto this day,' it remains upon the minds of those who do not accept Christ as the Lord. As in Michelangelo's sonnet, Christ is again the agent through which purification is accomplished ('Nevertheless, when it shall turn to the Lord, the veil shall be taken away'). Moreover, the association of Christ with the Holy Spirit is clear in this section of the epistle. And with the revelation of the Spirit comes the solution to the problems of understanding and desire in true Christian liberty ('where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty').

In the tercets of 'Vorrei uoler,' Michelangelo's request for divine presence recalls these same religious and moral motifs:

Squarcia'l uel tu, Signor! Rompi quel muro
Che con la suo durezza ne ritarda
Il sol della tuo luce, al mondo spenta!
Manda'l predicto lume, a noi venturo,
Alla tuo bella sposa, accio ch'io arda,
Il cor senz'alcun dubbio e te sol senta.

But just what sort of religious aspiration is this? How is the speaker to attain grace when neither the reason nor the will is adequate to reach the

25 'e dico ch'un splendor mi squarciò il velo / del sonno' (I tell that a splendor rent the veil of my sleep). There is also an oblique reference to the concept of 'veiled' truth in *Inferno*, ix, 63, as pointed out by John Freccero in 'Medusa: the Letter and the Spirit,' *Yearbook of Italian Studies* (1972) 1-18.
stated goal? The religious concerns underlying both the poet’s expression of his anxiety about salvation and his request for divine solution recall a doctrine of particular significance in the sixteenth-century debates over free will: justification by faith. Aspects of this doctrine can be found in the writings of Augustine, Aquinas, Savonarola, and others; but, again, its main source occurs in Paul (Galatians ii: 16-21, Romans i: 16-17, and especially Romans iii: 22, 28: “the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon them all that believe ... Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law”).

These and similar passages explain why Paul’s writings were crucial to Luther in the Reformation’s attacks on the law of works (‘deeds’) and the role of priestly mediation so dear to the Church in Rome. The centrality of this doctrine also accounts for the polemical tone of the sixteenth-century theological debates over the nature of the will. But this discussion was not limited to the major figures in the North, nor was the doctrine’s espousal unheard of in Italy. Juan de Valdés brought it with him from Spain when he travelled first to Rome and then to Naples in the 1530s. The group influenced by his teachings included Vittoria Colonna and, through her, Michelangelo. This is one of the reasons why Paul was so important for both poets. The doctrine provided a means of admitting the sins of the flesh and even the continuing infirmity of the will without losing all hope of salvation. As Michelangelo requests of the deity in another poem: ‘Tomm’a me stessio e famm’un che ti piaccia!’ (Girardi 161). Michelangelo did not consciously espouse the theological doctrine in any formal sense, nor did his works demonstrate an equally strong interest in its implications throughout his later life. But the concept of salvation implicit in the doctrine was important in ‘Vorrei uoler’ for a special reason: it provided a religious solution to Michelangelo’s psychological and moral problems. Unfortunately, the doctrine remained controversial, and it was eventually condemned as heresy.

But even though the Roman Church looked askance at justification by faith and at the threats to the Church’s organization and function which the doctrine entailed, Michelangelo was never censured. This may have been due to any of several causes: the subtlety of Michelangelo’s stance (hints of which can be discerned in his poetry and perhaps in his frescoes, possibly even in the Sistine Chapel); the fact that the grounds of his aspirations for salvation continued to change; or his extraordinary importance to the Church as an artist.26 We will probably never know the

26 Leo Steinberg speculates on some of Michelangelo’s heretical beliefs, gleaned from his frescoes, in Michelangelo’s “Last Judgment” as Merciful Heresy, Art in America 63 (Nov.-Dec. 1975) 48-63. There is also a recent collection that treats Michel-
reason for sure. Nonetheless, this conception of grace and its effects on Michelangelo’s verse contribute to the great diversity between Michelangelo’s poetry and seemingly familiar expressions of lament in Petrarch’s sonnets (62, 68, 362, 365, et passim) and in the lyrics of Petrarch’s Cinquecento epigoni. And, to a certain extent, they account for the real similarity between the confessional verse of Michelangelo and that of later sonneteers, especially in the Protestant North.

I have dwelt on the religious aspirations implicit in ‘Vorrei uoler’ because of their importance for understanding the crisis of will expressed in the poem. But it would be misleading to treat the sonnet’s religious aspect as the only important object of inquiry. Indeed, the strange passivity of the experience inherent in the religious doctrine — which implied, for Michelangelo, that if the individual had faith, the deity would act — finds expression in ‘Vorrei uoler’ not so much through the imagery of religion as through that of sexuality.

Along with the lyric’s traditional themes, this language justifies treatment of ‘Vorrei uoler’ as a love poem, rather than solely as a religious sonnet. The language of desire begins with the poem’s first line, but the flame of love is unable to reach the speaker’s icy heart. This situation represents a ‘heartfelt’ Petrarchian internalization (264, 362), though with greater complexity in Michelangelo, of the fire/ice dialectic which had been objectified and external in Rudel’s ‘Lanquai li jorn.’ In the second quatrains, the imagery of love continues with actively sensual connotations (‘I’ t’amo con la lingua’). The subsequent imagery of the tercets is organized around the request for both a presence and a revelation. The veil must be torn, the wall broken, the light sent into the darkness. The result, the speaker hopes, will be the burning of the lover’s heart in the fire of love’s full presence.

Up to now I have described the speaker’s statement as expressing only the veil/wall/darkness around his heart. But, as with the loving ‘lingua’ of the second quatrains, there is a further reading of these lines. This reading is suggested by the text itself through the concluding characterization of the speaker’s role: ‘la tuo bella sposa.’ The mention of the ‘sposa’ organizes the imagery of matrimony and more specifically that of the experience of the virgin bride (‘bella sposa’). In the context of the love poem, the imagery of the tercets evokes not only the bride’s heart but also that other veil/wall/darkness which is torn, broken, lit

with the fire of love on the wedding night. In the language of the poem, the absent ‘sol della tuo luce’ is to return as the bright presence, the ‘predicto lume.’ Similar to the pen which impregnates ‘il foglio’ and permits the page to give birth to its meaning, the presence of the beloved will at last make the meaning of the bride’s existence ‘true,’ in the moment when rational doubt (‘dubbio’) is gone and only sensual feeling remains (‘e te sol senta’). The reference to the bride at the conclusion of the sonnet thus unites the preceding series of concrete images (the veil, the wall, the light) and makes the reader ‘read’ them in a new way. What had appeared as a random or only casually connected series suddenly takes on a reordered and thus a fuller meaning. The ‘concetto’ is implicit in the images themselves, but the complete sense of the poem becomes liberated only through the careful practice of the poet’s craft and the progressive-regressive process of reading. Such retroactive reordering of what had seemed a random series of concrete images, a technique found occasionally in earlier Renaissance lyric and quite often in the Baroque poetry of the following century, is especially powerful in Michelangelo’s sonnet. The emphasis here falls not only on the technical creation of meaning, but on the overall sense of Christian meaning itself. The bridegroom’s possession of the ‘bella sposa’ would liberate the meaning of the soul’s existence, just as Christ’s promised return would clarify the preexistent meaning of God’s worldly creation. The hope expressed in Michelangelo’s sonnet, therefore, is that the divine Creator and the human artist can, somehow, consort together.

In terms of this concluding imagery, then, the speaker in the tercets appears to be feminine and the absent object of desire masculine. What are we to make of this contorted imagery? True, ‘l’anima,’ or the speaker’s soul, is feminine in Italian, and this might explain the gender of the ‘bella sposa.’ But the system of erotic imagery is far more elaborate than anything such a grammatical ‘solution’ would take into account. Moreover, the recurrent confusion of gender within the grammatical forms (‘suò durezza’; ‘tuo luce’; ‘tuo bella sposa’) only emphasizes the indications of gender in the poem. No matter how the imagery is construed, the situation remains complex: the speaker is baffled and in a cer-

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27 Gianfranco Contini discusses the use of powerful, concrete imagery in Michelangelo’s verse in ‘Una lettura su Michelangelo’ (orig. ‘Il senso delle cose nelle poesie di Michelangelo,’ 1935-1937), collected in his Esercizi di lettura. Sopra autori contemporanei con un’appendice su testi non contemporanei, rev. ed. (Turin: Einaudi 1974) 242-58. The imagery of the veil, the wall, and the light also occurs in a sexual context in the Song of Solomon, though it is very dispersed.
tain sense passive rather than active, hoping to be invaded rather than to invade, to be filled with the impregnating light of the Godhead’s grace.

As depicted graphically in Michelangelo’s fresco of the conversion of St. Paul in the Vatican’s Pauline Chapel (1542-50), this combination of confusion, passivity, and absence — absence which suddenly becomes an active union in the blinding light of pure presence — is the hallmark of a certain type of human experience, of mystical communion.28 For Michelangelo, as distinct from Paul, mystic desire remained that: hope rather than fulfillment. Nonetheless, Michelangelo’s sonnet posits a type of fulfillment which is neither masculine nor feminine but in some ways both, internal, rationally inexpressible, verifiable only through the total unity of its experience (‘e te sol senta’), and which seems today as overwhelmingly erotic as Bernini’s seventeenth-century representation of Santa Teresa in ecstasy.29

This kind of lyric expression, encompassing religious and sexual anxiety, hope, and the self-consciously stated suggestion of purifying violence directed against the speaker, is new in the Renaissance. It continues in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in the poetry of Santa Teresa, John Donne, and others.30 Because of this poetry’s theological and moral complexity, its intertextual resonance, and, in its most accomplished examples, its formal excellence, it represents far more than merely a statement of ignorance and confusion or an exquisite stage-setting for masochism. At stake in these poems is the problem of the individual will in relation to the deity. The absent bridegroom is at once the one transgressed against and the potential agent of correction and purification.

28 For a systematic description of the phenomenon of mystic communion, see William James, ‘Mysticism,’ in The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature, Being the Gifford Lectures on Natural Religion Delivered at Edinburgh in 1901-1902 (New York: Longmans, Green 1902) 379-429. According to James, the four ‘marks’ of mystic experience are its ineffability, noetic quality, transiency, and passivity.


30 The most interesting similarity between the poetry of Donne and that of Michelangelo occurs in one of the Holy Sonnets, ‘Batter my heart, three person’d God.’ The mixture of prayerful request and sexual innuendo, presented through the imagery of violence, reason, imprisonment, liberty, and marriage, is evocative of Michelangelo’s later poetry, especially ‘Vorrei uoler.’ (Altizer mentions this sonnet by Donne, pp. 86-7, but she discusses only the concluding tercet, and not in direct relation to Michelangelo’s verse.)
Perhaps not so strangely, while the sense of the individual artist as individual grew in the Renaissance, the problems of isolation and freedom grew with it. Along with increased individual freedom came self-consciousness, introspection, and unresolved doubt. At the same time, the internal force of the isolated individual's desire and will became crucial. The internalization of the dialectics of absence and desire, transgression and penitence, shape not only the speaking subject of Michelangelo’s verse, but also the speaker’s anguish. The results of such blending of Christianity and humanism in the Renaissance, in sharp contrast to either the medieval lyricists’ expressions of confidence or the growing self-assurance of Dante’s pilgrim, were, on occasion, the most moving statements of anxiety in European lyric prior to the social and moral disruptions of the nineteenth century.

In Michelangelo’s frustration, his sonnet’s speaker calls for correction through Christ, the divine Light. But in the poetry, the desired union which would suddenly correct all was never described as occurring. The revelation which was granted to Dante, and which made the meaning of his art and life fully comprehensible, was denied to Michelangelo. The bridegroom remained absent. In Michelangelo’s later sculpture, however, this was not the case. The features carved into the Florentine Pietà’s hooded background figure — which is leaning to bear up the fallen Christ in the role of Joseph of Arimathea — are those of Michelangelo himself. The extraordinary importance which this monumental deposition had for Michelangelo as a man and as an artist has recently been discussed by Irving Lavin. According to Vasari, Michelangelo intended the sculpture for his own tomb. He continued to devote his energies to it well into the 1550s. In the composition, Michelangelo casts himself as the one who supports the spiritual reunion of Christ and Mary. He thus assumes an active, linking presence between divine and human, male and female, life and death, in the attitude of everlasting peace.

This attitude of consolation and assurance is far more confident than anything found in the poetry. It may be going too far to say, as de

31 ‘The Sculptor’s “Last Will and Testament,”’ *Allen Memorial Art Museum Bulletin* 35, Nos. 1-2 (1977-78) 4-49. The erotic aspects of this and other pietàs are discussed in detail in Steinberg’s “The Metaphors of Love and Birth in Michelangelo’s Pietàs,” in *Studies in Erotic Art*, eds. Theodore Bowie and Cornelia V. Christenson (New York: Basic Books 1970) 231-336. Steinberg points out, in contrast to de Tolnay, Mary Magdalene’s importance to the essential conception of the Florentine Pietà as the figure of profane love repentant in ‘her dual role as lover and penitent.’

32 Fausto M. Bongioanni, in his essay ‘Sul travaglio religioso di Michelangelo,’ *Rivista di sintesi letteraria* 2 (1935) 273-95, points out that one of the later poems (Per
Tolnay does, that the artist's assumption of such a role in this symbolic 'sposalizio' indicates that 'Michelangelo seems to have come to terms with death, which now appears to him to offer the supreme peace of the soul.' But the figure in this self-portrait is clearly far more content than that in at least one famous earlier example, the ghostly skin with Michelangelo's features held by Saint Bartholomew in the fresco of the 'Last Judgment.' Moreover, the sculpture does resolve, albeit figuratively, the dialectics of absence and desire, transgression and penitence, which torment the speaker of 'Vorrei uoler.' But again, the desires seemingly fulfilled in the silence of stone continued unabated in the lyrics, in which the traditional association of desire with absence was so strong, as the works of Rudel and the younger Dante as well as the obviously more tortured lyrics of Michelangelo attest. These unfulfilled desires remained present through all the poetic works of Michelangelo and past them, into the again shifting poetic currents of the centuries following, as the enduring desires of absence.

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croce e grazia e per diverse pene,' Frey 162, Girardi 300) does indicate that Michelangelo had found peace and that the artist 'non ha peccato invano' (294-5). Nonetheless, in the poem discussed by Bongioanni, the speaker still remains separated from the object of his desire.