

1 Michelangelo, *Last Judgment*, 1534–41. Vatican, Sistine Chapel (photo: Alinari/Art Resource)

Metaphorical Painting: Michelangelo, Dante, and the *Last Judgment*

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In the lower right corner of the *Last Judgment*, Michelangelo painted an unmistakable quotation from Dante's *Inferno* (Figs. 1, 2). The figures of Charon and Minos were easily recognized by sixteenth-century viewers, and to the present day no one has seriously questioned the reference, although occasionally additional meanings have been pointed out. It is not my purpose to overturn this rare bit of consensus, nor is it my purpose to contradict the many sources that tell us how well Michelangelo knew Dante's writings. Condivi, Vasari, Donato Giannotti, and Benedetto Varchi describe Michelangelo's deep knowledge of the poet's work. Condivi claims that Michelangelo had nearly memorized it, and Michelangelo is cast as a "gran dantista" in Giannotti's dialogue.¹ Such statements may be exaggerated, but there is too much converging evidence to deny them. Indeed, Michelangelo himself wrote poems in praise of Dante, and he knew about a new commentary on Dante soon after it was published.² The problem is that the references to Dante's poem are perhaps too clear and too certain. The Charon/Minos group points to Dante like a neon sign, instructing the viewer to use Dante's *Divine Comedy* in some way to give meaning to the *Last Judgment*. Art historians have responded by connecting many other figures in the *Last Judgment* to Dante's work, almost as if by showing two clear references to the *Inferno*, Michelangelo was supplying a key to the rest of his painting, just as in the Medici Chapel the attributes he gave to *Night* serve as a key to the meaning of the other three Times of Day.³ It may very well be that we are meant to see other references to Dante in the fresco, but certain art historians have taken this to mean that every figure can be correlated with Dante's characters, leading to some very unlikely identifications.⁴

There are, however, other things that these references can

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1. G. Vasari, *La vita di Michelangelo nelle redazioni del 1550 e del 1568*, ed. Paola Barocchi, Milan, 1962, 120; A. Condivi, *The Life of Michelangelo*, trans. A. S. Wohl, Baton Rouge, La., 1976, 19, 79, 103; D. Giannotti, *Dialogi... de' giorni che Dante consumò nel cercare l'Inferno e 'l Purgatorio* (1546), ed. D. Redig de Campos, Florence, 1939, 40; and Varchi (1546), in Barocchi, ed., 1, 57.

2. For the poems, see Saslow, nos. 248, 250. Michelangelo's letter dated 1545 refers to Alessandro Vellutello's commentary, published the year before; see E. H. Ramsden, *The Letters of Michelangelo*, Stanford, 1963, no. 254. If Giannotti's dialogue accurately reflects the artist's views, then Michelangelo clearly knew Landino's commentary on the *Divine Comedy* as well as the poem itself. It is of some

interest that in Giannotti's dialogue Michelangelo argues against Landino's ideas, and that in the letter cited above he disparages Vellutello's commentary.

3. Dantesque interpretations of the *Last Judgment* were very much in vogue in the first decade of the 20th century when Kallab's and Steinmann's interpretations were published (W. Kallab, "Die Deutung von Michelangelos Jüngstem Gericht," *Beiträge zur Kunstgeschichte*, Franz Wickhoff gewidmet, Vienna, 1903, 138–53; E. Steinmann, *Die Sixtinische Kapelle*, Munich, 1905, II, 535, 572–83). Karl Borinsky (*Die rätsel Michelangelos: Michelangelo und Dante*, Munich, 1908) criticized details of these two studies but still relied on Dante for the underlying ideas in the fresco, such as the climb of souls toward Heaven. Opposing views were presented soon afterward by H. Thode (*Michelangelo: Kritische Untersuchungen* . . . , Berlin, 1908–13, II, 40–46) and A. Farinelli (*Michelangelo e Dante e altri brevi saggi*, Turin, 1918). In recent literature there have been few attempts to apply Dante to the whole fresco.

4. For example, Kallab (as in n. 3, 138ff) sees the

indicate. For example, Leo Steinberg has introduced a provocative explanation for the quotations: in order to show his disbelief in a material Hell, Michelangelo presented Hell within "poetic parentheses"—as a fiction rather than as a theological truth.⁵ Although my own interpretation is a different one, I believe that Steinberg's proposal does something very important and substantially correct: it shifts our attention away from seeing Dante as a source book of images, and instead directs it toward the value, or meaning, given to poetry itself. The question then becomes: what meaning does it have? Steinberg implies that poetry is fiction and therefore not true; consequently, Michelangelo's use of it suggests that Hell is a fiction, not an established truth within the Catholic faith. This argument recalls the words of Giovanni Andrea Gilio, whose dialogue *Degli errori de' pittori circa l'istorie* was published in 1564. One of the interlocutors objects to the inclusion of the "story of Charon" because it introduces a poetic fiction into the theological history of the Last Judgment.⁶ However, neither Gilio nor any other early critic suggests that Michelangelo does not believe in Hell; it is rather a matter of his drawing from a source that is not scriptural, therefore not "true." Gilio does not condemn Dante as propagating heretical beliefs, but rather as a poet who might mislead the unlearned. In doing so Gilio joins a long tradition of thought that opposed poetry to truth. There are many variations on the theme, beginning with Plato's banishment of poets from his ideal state. In the centuries closer to Michelangelo's own, poetry was condemned because it could undermine a correct understanding of dogma, in part because it directly appealed to the senses without control of reason, in part because the "poetic veil" could "make white appear black and black appear

Purgatorio as the source for the Resurrection of the Dead and the rising of the elect, and identifies the so-called "Niobe" group as Beatrice (see *Par.* 23.19–24) and Rachel, who is usually contemplative but loses her composure at the horror of the Last Judgment and hides in Beatrice's lap. Steinmann sees Beatrice in the woman in green near the Adam/Baptist figure (Steinmann [as in n. 3], II, 572ff). He also sees Paolo and Francesca among the Seven Deadly Sins. In both Steinmann and Kallab the references to Dante become much less precise in the upper parts of the fresco, with the one exception of the pairing of Saint Peter and Adam, a reference to *Par.* 32.118ff. Because of this strong connection to the passage in Dante, all scholars who give Dantesque interpretations agree with Vasari in identifying the man striding forward to the left of Christ as Adam.

5. L. Steinberg, "The *Last Judgment* as Merciful Heresy," *Art in America*, LXIII, 1975, 53.

6. Barocchi, ed., II, 86. All translations from Gilio's dialogue are my own.



2 Detail of the *Last Judgment*: Scenes from Dante's *Inferno*. (photo: Alinari/Art Resource)

white.⁷ The fact that poetry suggested more than a literal meaning made it open to questionable interpretations, and this was particularly dangerous when the subject was religious and when the audience had only a weak grasp of theology.

Gilio was not alone in criticizing the *Last Judgment* as a work that might not be understood by the unlearned. Lodovico Dolce, writing in 1556 and inspired by the letters of Aretino, made much the same point. In Dolce's dialogue, the Florentine defender of Michelangelo claims that the *Last Judgment* contains "profoundly allegorical meanings understood by few." The fictive Aretino responds, "In this he would indeed deserve praise, since it would seem that he had imitated those great philosophers, who hid the greatest mysteries of human and divine philosophy under the veil of

poetry, so that they would not be understood by the common people."⁸

This defense is presented as a statement to be refuted in what is essentially a negative criticism of Michelangelo's art. At the same time, however, the statement shows an awareness of the counter argument that such poetic veiling was both appropriate and necessary in treating the highest religious subjects. The divine could not be approached directly; to do so would cheapen it, making it seem as though the mysteries of faith were not beyond the grasp of mere mortals, which would be the ultimate falsehood. Such ideas had their roots in antiquity, and they too were repeated in the Renaissance. Boccaccio, for example, described the poet's work as follows: "To strengthen the authority of these songs, they enclosed the high mysteries of things divine in a

7. This is a paraphrase of the words of the Dominican preacher Giovanni Dominici, who was active in the early 15th century. See D. R. Lesnick, "Civic Preaching in the Early Renaissance: Giovanni Dominici's Florentine Sermons," in *Christianity and the Renaissance: Image and Religious Imagination in the Quattrocento*, ed. T. Verdon and J. Henderson, Syracuse, N.Y., 1990, 209–10. Some useful discussions of the traditional opposition of poetry and

truth can be found in R. J. Clements, *Picta Poesis*, Rome, 1960; C. Trinkaus, *The Scope of Renaissance Humanism*, Ann Arbor, Mich., 1983, 97–116; and L. Sozzi, "Retorica e umanesimo," in *Intellettuali e potere*, Storia d'Italia, annuali 4, ed. C. Vivanti, Turin, 1981, 49–78.

8. M. W. Roskill, *Dolce's "Aretino" and Venetian Art Theory of the Cinquecento*, New York, 1968, 164. Gilio surely knew this dialogue, although the spe-

cific points made about metaphor, as discussed below, are not found in Dolce's work.

9. G. Boccaccio, *Genealogia Deorum Gentilium*; quoted in C. G. Osgood, *Boccaccio on Poetry*, Princeton, N.J., 1930, xxxi, 51 (I have made minor revisions to Osgood's translation). Osgood points out the pedigree for Boccaccio's ideas on poetry in Isidore, Gregory, Macrobius, Lactantius, Augustine, Jerome, and Horace. See also M. Murrin, *The Veil of Allegory*, Chicago, 1969, chap. I. D. Sum-

covering of words, so that the majesty of such things should not become an object of too common knowledge."⁹ In Neoplatonic thought, which Michelangelo was exposed to as a young man, the poet's divine inspiration gives words a theological validity that is more certain than the ratiocinations of theologians.¹⁰ Only the poet could reveal the divine.

In these arguments, the poet creates a "veil" of figurative language not in order to deny the truth, but rather so that the audience will need to work to arrive at the truth. This work not only engages the viewer more completely, but also makes the truth more precious and more memorable for being difficult to attain. However, because of this participation of the audience, meaning cannot be precisely determined. This is really the main problem that Gilio's dialogue confronts, since the art of his time had become so complex that "if ten people contemplated [these paintings], they would make ten comments and not one would correspond to the others." This particular remark is made in reference to the paintings in the Cancelleria, and it is interesting that the next speaker in the dialogue argues that such indeterminacy (to use our own terminology) is excusable because the subject is not a sacred story and because these paintings would be seen by a learned audience.¹¹ Poetry and painting that includes poetic images, Gilio maintains, should not be used for subjects that involve dogma, nor should such painting appear in settings where the unlearned might impose on it frivolous or heretical interpretations.

In another part of his dialogue Gilio shows his awareness that Michelangelo works in what can be called a poetic manner, and that he does so in paintings of sacred history (Gilio's "pure *istorie*"). Indeed, one of the interlocutors credits Michelangelo with the invention of this manner:

Michelangelo, like one who has a lively *ingegno*, is always intent on returning art to the proper images of the famous painters and sculptors of antiquity; so he has discovered a new manner, which being pleasing, has been accepted and put into use, both in pure *istorie*, and in poetic and mixed painting. Now painters turn to the poets for their inventions. . . . Now a painter can use metaphor and metonymy charmingly and many other figures as well, provided that he knows how to order them well.¹²

To speak of metaphor and metonymy is to speak of associations and substitutions: ideas, images, or names juxtaposed in a way that plays against expectation to heighten meaning.¹³ Common usage is avoided, but meaning is not. The result is a phrase (or an image) that catches our attention because it is unusual, and yet upon further reflection reveals some truth that perhaps could not be expressed otherwise. A metaphor is necessarily open-ended; it de-

mands that the audience know the conventional meanings of its elements and yet recognize that a literal sense is not intended. It demands recognition of references and the ability to make the connections between juxtaposed concepts.

Gilio offers no specific examples of how the *Last Judgment* can be considered metaphorical. He does, however, give a fairly precise description of what he sees as Michelangelo's method in an explanation of some problematic elements of the *Crucifixion of Saint Peter* in the Pauline Chapel. There Michelangelo has omitted a number of details: the horse's bridle, and more important, the ropes and the nails which would show the atrocity of the martyrdom. An interlocutor answers:

One could respond that this is not uninspired, it being known to all that Saint Peter was crucified, and since you cannot say that someone has been hung without it being understood that he suffered a cruel and violent death, so you cannot say that Saint Peter has been crucified without the atrocity of martyrdom—the cross, the nails, the ropes, and whatever else is required—being understood. And this is what Michelangelo has done in that action, in order to ornament the mystery he has painted and in order to introduce a new usage through this new form, and to demonstrate part of the manner of that mixture, as you say, that here shows the suffering of that saint. If you look at his pose, you consider the effort exerted by a man turned upside down, which you can see in his eyes and in the twisting of his chest, which seems tormented from the pain of death. It is assumed that this new way of working will bring delight to the eyes of the viewer and beauty to the work, more than the atrocity of the nails, ropes, and chains.¹⁴

It is clear from this passage that the notion of metaphor is used very loosely. The omission of expected attributes described here might be more appropriately called *ellipsis*—an omission of easily understood words (or images in this case). Nevertheless, this example illustrates well the role of the audience in making sense of a poetic treatment of the theme. First, the viewers are assumed to know the story, then they are assumed to know what is necessary to carry out the action depicted. The omission itself causes them to look at other details (the eyes, the twist of the chest) and, in doing so, to imagine in a more vivid way the suffering of the saint. This new participation causes delight (even though the viewer might feel anguish). The unusual manner ornaments the subject, not by making it pretty or innocuous, but by riveting the viewer's attention.

Gilio cannot be said to have known Michelangelo's intentions; there is no evidence that he knew the artist personally, and his acquaintance with the *Last Judgment* was primarily through printed reproductions. However, Gilio may not

mers, *The Judgment of Sense*, Cambridge, 1987, 190–91, discusses the ideas of Thomas Aquinas, who held that metaphor was necessary to understand theology because through it the mind reached a higher understanding.

10. Trinkaus (as in n. 7), 97–99; S. Meltzoff, *Botticelli, Signorelli and Savonarola: Theologica Poetica and Painting from Boccaccio and Poliziano*, Florence, 1988, 5–8, 18; and Summers, 33–40.

11. Barocchi, ed., II, 98.

12. Barocchi, ed., II, 101–2. For Gilio's definition of "pure *istorie*," see *ibid.*, 38.

13. My definition is a paraphrase of that given in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. A. Preminger, Princeton, N.J., 1974, 490. The discussion of metaphor begins with Aristotle and continues to the present day. Of the many recent publications on the subject, I have found most useful C. R.

Hausman, *Metaphor and Art: Interactionism and Reference in the Verbal and Nonverbal Arts*, Cambridge, 1989.

14. Barocchi, ed., II, 95–96. At another point Gilio says (*ibid.*, 89) that Michelangelo's image of Noah's Ark on the Sistine Ceiling is like the figure of speech that he calls *cataprolepsis*, or anticipation, which was also used by Virgil.

have been very different from the kind of viewer that Michelangelo had in mind. He was a cleric and obviously concerned about the religious function of art, but he was also a person who could easily refer to classical or vernacular literature, and who could make analogies between literary figures and artistic devices. I would like to suggest that Gilio was aware of how Michelangelo's work was defended and interpreted, and that his conception of Michelangelo's work as "metaphorical" can be used, together with information from the fresco itself, to arrive at new interpretations of the *Last Judgment*. Furthermore, I would like to propose that Michelangelo's references to Dante in the lower corner of the fresco were made not to deny the existence of Hell, but to encourage the audience to work at finding the meaning of the scene through reference, association, and completion. The imagery not only refers to poetry, but is also itself poetic in the way it is presented. And just as in metaphor there is a kind of shift of contexts, so too does Michelangelo sometimes play literary and visual associations against each other. The purpose is not to render the painting incomprehensible but rather to veil its meaning, in order to engage the learned viewer more fully, and in so doing to make the "truth" that is found all the more precious. I shall suggest that at least one meaning that is veiled would have had particular, and possibly uncomfortable, significance for those who were most likely to have seen the fresco in the Sistine Chapel.

Seeing the *Last Judgment* as a painting done in a poetic manner suggests that Michelangelo was working in a way that could be compared to Dante's own. Such a comparison was easy to make. In the early sixteenth century Dante's poetry and Michelangelo's art were defended in very similar terms.¹⁵ Aside from defenses of his diction and his use of the vernacular, Dante was praised because his work was full of deep meaning, often quite difficult to understand but made delightful through the veil of poetry. Giovanni Battista Gelli, for example, thought Dante was intentionally difficult in order to make the reader "more attentive and more desirous of understanding."¹⁶ Gelli admired Dante's compression, obscurity, and erudition—qualities that parallel those that Michelangelo's critics noticed specifically in the *Last Judgment*. At least one of Dante's defenders compared him

explicitly to Michelangelo. Carlo Lenzoni, writing around 1550, praises Dante for treating the highest possible subject, with the aim of instruction and pleasure, written in the epic form, and presented with such clear order that to change a thing would "spoil that beauty and grace which are represented to the eyes of our mind by its perfect and universal proportion—just as they are by the *Night* and *Moses* of Michelangelo."¹⁷ It hardly matters that Lenzoni mentioned works other than the *Last Judgment*, because the comparison of Michelangelo to Dante was very nearly a commonplace. The clear reference to Dante in the corner of the *Last Judgment*, aside from whatever else it might mean, can be seen as Michelangelo's approval of this identification with Dante—a signature, as it were, by an artist who was thought of as a "painting Dante."¹⁸ Indeed, one of Michelangelo's poems in praise of Dante ends with the cry, "If only I were he!" Michelangelo yearns for Dante's virtue and his ability to enlighten the world with his vision, for which he would give up his own happiness and home.¹⁹

It was perhaps this identification with Dante as a poet of great vision that led Michelangelo to portray himself in the gruesome image of the lifeless skin. This image, not included in any known preliminary drawing and painted without the aid of cartoons, seems not to have been part of any program imposed on Michelangelo by the pope or his advisers.²⁰ It is possible that the artist was given the opportunity here to elaborate the fresco in a personal manner, while yet creating an image that would be appropriate within the context of the *Last Judgment*. The addition of Saint Bartholomew was quite fitting: it set an Apostle in a prominent and expected place (without him the *Last Judgment* has few representatives of this customary group), while the image of the aftermath of cruel punishment is both threatening and riveting—an image meant to be noticed and pondered. Here, too, Michelangelo insured that the observant viewer would be engaged by substituting an unexpected detail—the face on the skin does not correspond to that of the saint. This was indeed noticed by Michelangelo's contemporaries, and at least some seem to have recognized the features as the artist's own.²¹

At the same time, the learned observer might connect the scene with the classical myth of Apollo and Marsyas.²² The appearance of Christ would suggest this analogy since it is so

15. For the 16th-century literary criticism, see Weinberg, 819ff, and A. Vallone, *Storia della critica dantesca dal XIV al XX secolo*, I, Milan, 1981, 387ff and 553–66. Dante's theology was most at issue in the 13th century and again at the end of the 16th century, when some of the commentaries were put on the Index of Prohibited Books and there were attempts to rewrite the *Commedia* in terms of the Counter-Reformation. On the Counter-Reformation criticism of Dante, see P. Chiminelli, *La fortuna di Dante nella cristianità riformata*, Rome, 1921; and A. De Biase, "Dante e i protestanti nel secolo XVI," in *La civiltà cattolica*, LXXXVI, pt. 1, 1935, 36–46. Of special interest are two pieces attributed to Vincenzo Borghini, *Introduzione al poema di Dante per l'allegoria* and *Difesa di Dante come cattolico*, from the 1570s, in which Dante is defended as an allegory of orthodox teachings. See Mario Pozzi, *Lingua e cultura del cinquecento: Dolce, Aretino, Machiavelli, Guicciardini, Sarpi, Borghini*, Padua, 1975, 257–356. See also C. Grayson, "Dante and the Renaissance," in *Italian Studies Presented to E. R. Vincent*, Cambridge, 1962, 57–75.

16. G. B. Gelli, lecture delivered in 1543 (Paris, Bibl. Nat., ms It. 981); cited by Weinberg, 822. For the history of the positive valuation of difficulty, see Summers, 177–85.

17. C. Lenzoni, *In difesa della lingua fiorentina, et di Dante*, Florence, 1556. The treatise was published posthumously, and Gelli refers to it already in 1554; see Weinberg, 823ff. For the passage quoted, see ibid., 825, n. 9.

18. G. P. Lomazzo, *Idea del tempio della pittura*, Milan, 1590, in *Scritti sulle arti*, ed. R. P. Ciardi, Florence, 1973, 331.

19. Saslow, no. 248.

20. Saint Bartholomew's prominence in the fresco is sometimes attributed to the fact that Sixtus IV said his first Mass in the Sistine Chapel on this saint's feast day, Aug. 24, 1483; see F. Hartt, "Michelangelo in Heaven," *Artibus et Historiae*, no. 26, 1992, 191–209; this connection has been made often, e.g., by Tolnay, 114. However, the feast of Saint Bartholomew was not marked by special papal ceremonies in subsequent years. For another

explanation of the saint's presence, see B. Barnes, "The Invention of Michelangelo's *Last Judgment*," Ph.D. diss., University of Virginia, 1986, 218. In the article cited above, Hartt also repeats (196–97) the often-made observation that Bartholomew represents a portrait of Pietro Aretino, which Michelangelo included because of Aretino's animosity toward him. At the time when the fresco was painted the relationship between Michelangelo and Aretino was at least cordial; modern scholars have assumed that Michelangelo was annoyed with Aretino's flattery or with his arrogance, but there is no real evidence for this. Furthermore, Aretino himself did not recognize the image. Admittedly, he knew the *Last Judgment* only from reproductions, but his close friend Titian saw the fresco itself and did not make the association.

21. In a letter to Vasari dated May 1, 1545, Don Miniato Pitti remarked that the skin was beardless while the saint had a long beard; see A. Chastel, *A Chronicle of Italian Renaissance Painting*, trans. L. and P. Murray, New York, 1984, 190, 279. F. La Cava (*Il volto di Michelangelo scoperto nel Giudizio*

reminiscent of the Apollo Belvedere, one of the treasures of the Vatican collection. Christ's judgment sets in motion comparisons with the judgment of Apollo on Marsyas, whose flayed skin is held by an executioner. But Apollo's judgment takes place in a very different context connected with the arts. Marsyas was an arrogant, wild flutist who dared to challenge a god; Apollo played the lyre, a symbol of restraint, order, and harmony. While most Renaissance artists might have sided safely with Apollo in representing this contest, Michelangelo's portrait on the skin shows that he did not.²³ The key to the meaning of this image may be in the association of Marsyas with *audacia*, or daring, as he was in a Renaissance commentary on Ovid.²⁴ Audacity, while always bordering on arrogance and pride, was seen by at least some Renaissance critics as the quality that artists needed most in order to create their greatest works. It was a quality that was often associated with Michelangelo—an association which he seems to have embraced.²⁵

Dante himself used a reference to this myth when he asked for inspiration at the beginning of the *Paradiso*:

O good Apollo, for this last labor make me such a vessel of your worth as you require for granting your beloved laurel. Thus far the one peak of Parnassus has sufficed me, but now I have need of both, as I enter the arena that remains. Enter into my breast and breathe there as when you drew Marsyas from the sheath of his limbs. (*Par.* 1.13–21)

The reference to the myth of Marsyas comes at an equivalent point in the *Divine Comedy* and in the *Last Judgment*, when both poet and painter attempt to convey the highest glories of Heaven. Dante, however, does not say that he is Marsyas; rather, he asks to be filled with the inspiration that enabled Apollo to win the contest.²⁶ In the *Last Judgment*, Michelangelo puts himself in the realm of the elect, but in the form of a lifeless skin. Seen in the context of the myth of Apollo and Marsyas, he is identifying with an arrogant creature who tried to compete with the god of poetry. The metaphor suggests that Michelangelo is competing (however foolishly) with the creative powers of God, and with the creative imagination of Dante.

finale, Bologna, 1925) first published the idea that the skin is Michelangelo's. The best argument in support of the identification is that it agrees with Michelangelo's known portraits. While no written documents show that Renaissance viewers recognized the portrait, in an engraved copy by Nicolas Beatrizet (1562) the name of Michelangelo is inscribed just below the skin as if it were a label; see *The Illustrated Bartsch*, xxix, ed. S. Boorsch, New York, 1982, no. 37 (257). There has been only one attempt to refute La Cava's identification: C. Angelieri, "L'autoritratto di Michelangelo nel *Judizio Universale*," *Miscellanea*, 1942, 231–51.

22. Such a connection has been made by several scholars, including Borinsky (as in n. 3), 301; E. Wind, *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance*, New York, 1958, 155–57; and most recently, although to a different purpose, R. S. Liebert, *Michelangelo: A Psychoanalytic Study of His Life and Images*, New Haven/London, 1983, 348–54.

23. On Renaissance representations of the myth, see P. P. Fehl, "The Punishment of Marsyas," in *Decorum and Wit: The Poetry of Venetian Painting*,

The image gains additional meaning from the fact that in Neoplatonic exegeses Marsyas was considered a symbol of earthly desire, of the base physical appetites of man that needed to be cast aside before divine inspiration was possible.²⁷ Such ideas would have been familiar to Michelangelo from his youth and they are often expressed in his poetry, where Michelangelo writes of his struggle to free himself from base passions in order to be worthy of love, art, and salvation.²⁸ Michelangelo presents himself at the Last Judgment as a mere skin at the moment when the elect regain their glorified bodies. It is an unresolved moment, a question whether the artist will be inspired and filled with the daring needed to create a worthy vision, or whether that artistic pride will be judged the greatest of all sins. It is autobiographical statement of enormous ambition and enormous self-doubt.

If the group of Christ and Saint Bartholomew holding his skin can be seen as a reference to the invocation at the beginning of the *Paradiso*, then the image becomes a veiled reference to the poet himself and to his achievement, setting up the entire *Last Judgment* as a poetic work equivalent to the *Divine Comedy*. The poetic references, and specifically references to Dante's poetry, were both appropriate and expected in depictions of Hell. This was traditionally the area in a Last Judgment where artists could use the most imagination (as, for example, in Giotto's Arena Chapel fresco and the Florentine Baptistry *Last Judgment*). There were many people in the Renaissance, and Michelangelo was among them, who believed that artists were like poets in that they had the right to make what does not exist, to invent, to use their imaginations to transform the truth.²⁹ In a sense the word "poetic" became a synonym for "imaginative": the more imaginative a work the more poetic.³⁰

Dante himself was probably inspired by the graphic torments seen in medieval renderings of the Last Judgment, which he then expanded and organized into his complex system of circles and *bolge*—the pouches that comprise the eighth circle.³¹ But artists quickly appropriated Dante's vision as their own, using references to his *Inferno*—sometimes very accurately, sometimes very loosely—to produce their own images of horrors never seen by human eyes.

Essays in the History of the Classical Tradition, Vienna, 1992, 130–49. Edith Wyss ("The Myth of Apollo and Marsyas in Italian Renaissance Art, 1460–1575," Ph.D. diss., University of Maryland, 1991) has shown that in the Renaissance Marsyas almost invariably represented a lack of inspiration and the absence of culture.

24. Fehl (as in n. 23), 371, n. 5, where he cites Regius's commentary on the *Metamorphoses*, Venice, 1565, 131.

25. Summers, 131–37. Summers gives special emphasis to the dialogue of Francisco de Hollanda, in which Michelangelo says that "poets and painters have license to dare to do, I say to dare, what they choose." Michelangelo's audacity seems also to be at issue in much of the negative criticism of the *Last Judgment*. Aretino makes much of the artist's arrogance in a letter of 1545, and many of Dolce's criticisms revolve around Michelangelo's lack of restraint. Aretino's letter is transcribed in Chastel (as in n. 21), 278–79, trans. 191–95. For Dolce's criticism, see Roskill (as in n. 8), 167.

26. This is also the reading that Landino gives the verse; in addition he uses his commentary on this verse as an opportunity to discuss the Neoplatonic concept of divine furor; *Dante con l'Esposizione di Cristoforo Landino et di Alessandro Vellutello, riveduto e ridotto alla sua vera lettura per Francesco Sansovino Fiorentino*, Venice, 1564, fols. 281ff. This edition includes the commentaries of Landino from the 1483 edition, alongside those of the later authors.

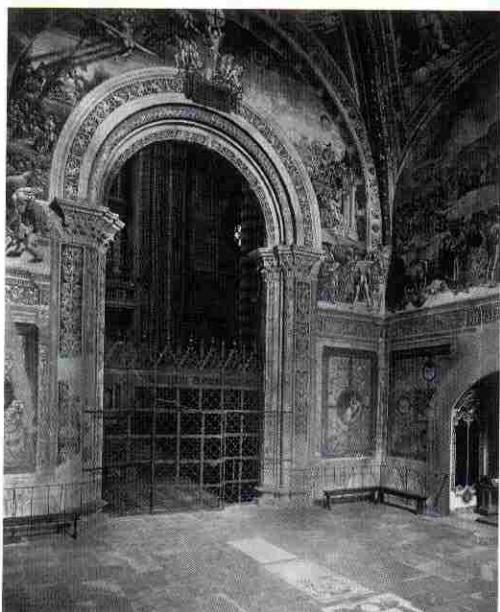
27. See A. Chastel, *Art et humanisme à Florence au temps de Laurent le Magnifique*, Paris, 1959, 52, where he cites G. Pico della Mirandola's exegesis of the myth from *De genere dicendi philosophorum* (1485).

28. Saslow, nos. 94, 152, 161 (all of which were written during the time when Michelangelo was at work on the *Last Judgment*).

29. Summers, 17.

30. Gilio in Barocchi, ed., II, 18–20.

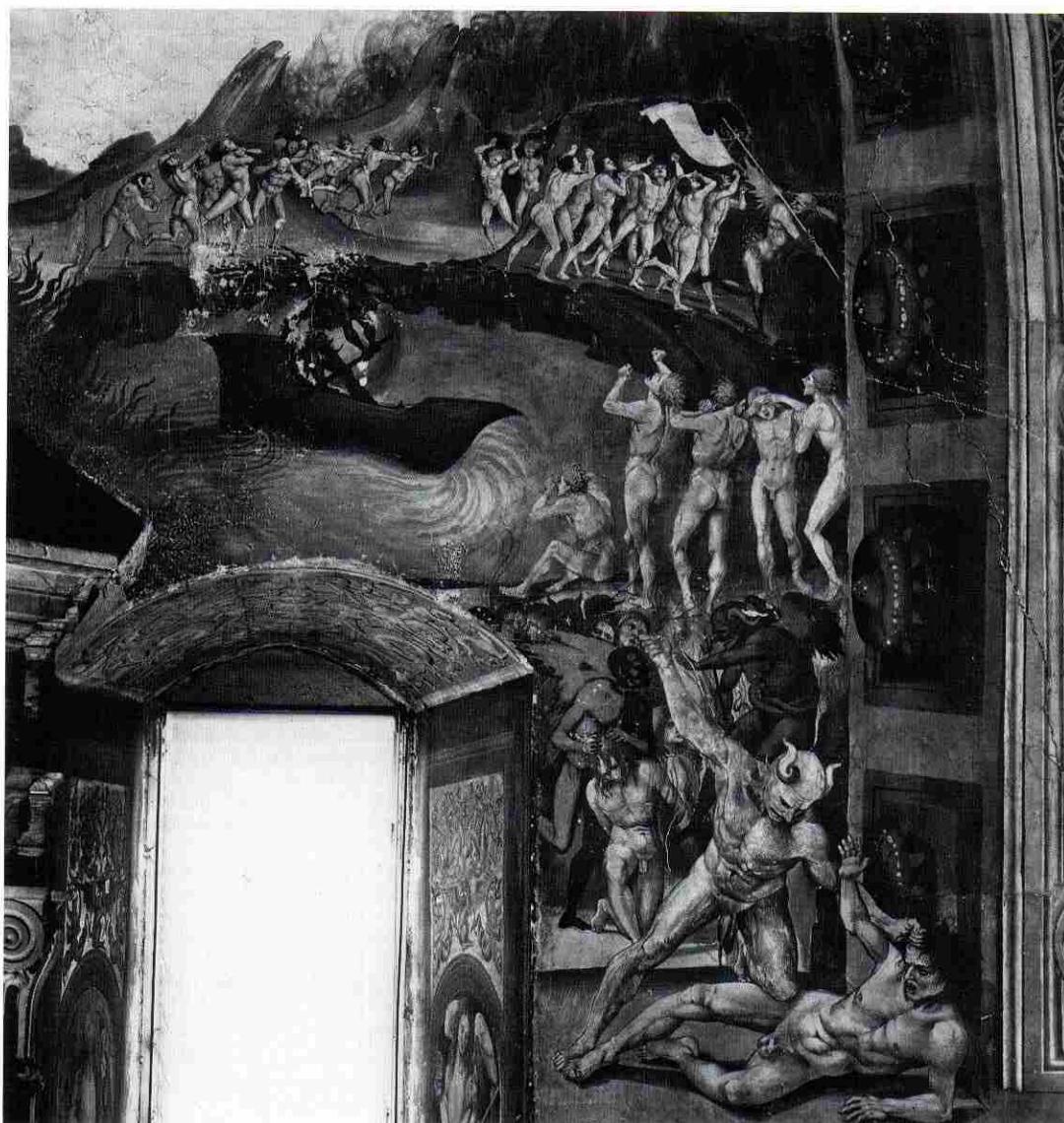
31. See A. Morgan, *Dante and the Medieval Other World*, Cambridge, 1990.



3 View of the Cappella Nuova, Orvieto Cathedral (photo: Alinari/Art Resource)



4 Luca Signorelli, *Acts of the Antichrist*, 1499–1504. Orvieto Cathedral, Cappella Nuova (photo: Anderson/Art Resource)



5 Signorelli, detail of the *Last Judgment*, 1499–1504: Scenes from Dante's *Inferno*. Orvieto Cathedral, Cappella Nuova (photo: Alinari/Art Resource)



6 Signorelli, *The Damned*, 1499–1504. Orvieto Cathedral, Cappella Nuova (photo: Alinari/Art Resource)

In the process, though, the references to the *Inferno* became less precise, with the complex structure of Dante's Hell reduced to seven *bolge* for the seven deadly sins, as seen, for example in Fra Angelico's numerous versions of the Last Judgment. It is probably the case that the image of Hell that lived in the minds of Renaissance people was something like Dante's Hell; Minos, especially, appears regularly in popular poems and plays about the afterlife.³²

Michelangelo fits into this tradition, populating his Hell with fantastic forms, some of which refer to the panoply of demons and torments found in Dante's *Inferno*. But Michelangelo's knowledge of the *Divine Comedy* went beyond the simplified, popularizing level, and his audience in the Sistine Chapel had the time, and presumably the knowledge, to appreciate more subtle references. In this area of the *Last Judgment* Michelangelo demanded much of his audience: to refer back to the literary text, to ask how a variant could be meaningful, to make connections with other paintings in the chapel, and to balance their own expectations about the Last Judgment with the scene presented.

Michelangelo's inclusion of Charon and Minos is a reference not only to Dante, but also to another important painting of the Last Judgment—the one by Signorelli in the Cappella Nuova in Orvieto Cathedral (Figs. 3–6). Michelan-

gelo was deeply impressed by this cycle; Vasari reports that he gave it the highest praise and "respectfully" borrowed many figures from it.³³ These borrowings are easy to see in the fresco: some figures among the risen dead, for example, are very close in both works. More important for my purposes, though, is the fact that Michelangelo also borrowed the idea of quoting the opening cantos of Dante's *Inferno*—Charon and Minos appear in the bottom right corner in Signorelli's *Last Judgment* (Fig. 5).

Signorelli's use of Dante goes further, however, and makes an interesting comparison with Michelangelo's reference to Dante's invocation. Around the base of his *Last Judgment* cycle, Signorelli painted a high decorative border, which sets the whole cycle off as if it were on stage (Fig. 3). In this border, Signorelli has painted portraits of the great poets, including Dante surrounded by medallions showing scenes from the *Purgatorio*.³⁴ The poets are seen, as it were, through openings in the panels, and some of them even lean out to get a better view of the spectacle above. Signorelli includes his own portrait, standing on the stage as if he too were an observer of this fictive scene (Fig. 4). Like the poets, and especially like Dante and Virgil who are surrounded by their works, Signorelli is "real" while his creation is imaginary. Rather than illustrating Dante (like Michelangelo, he uses

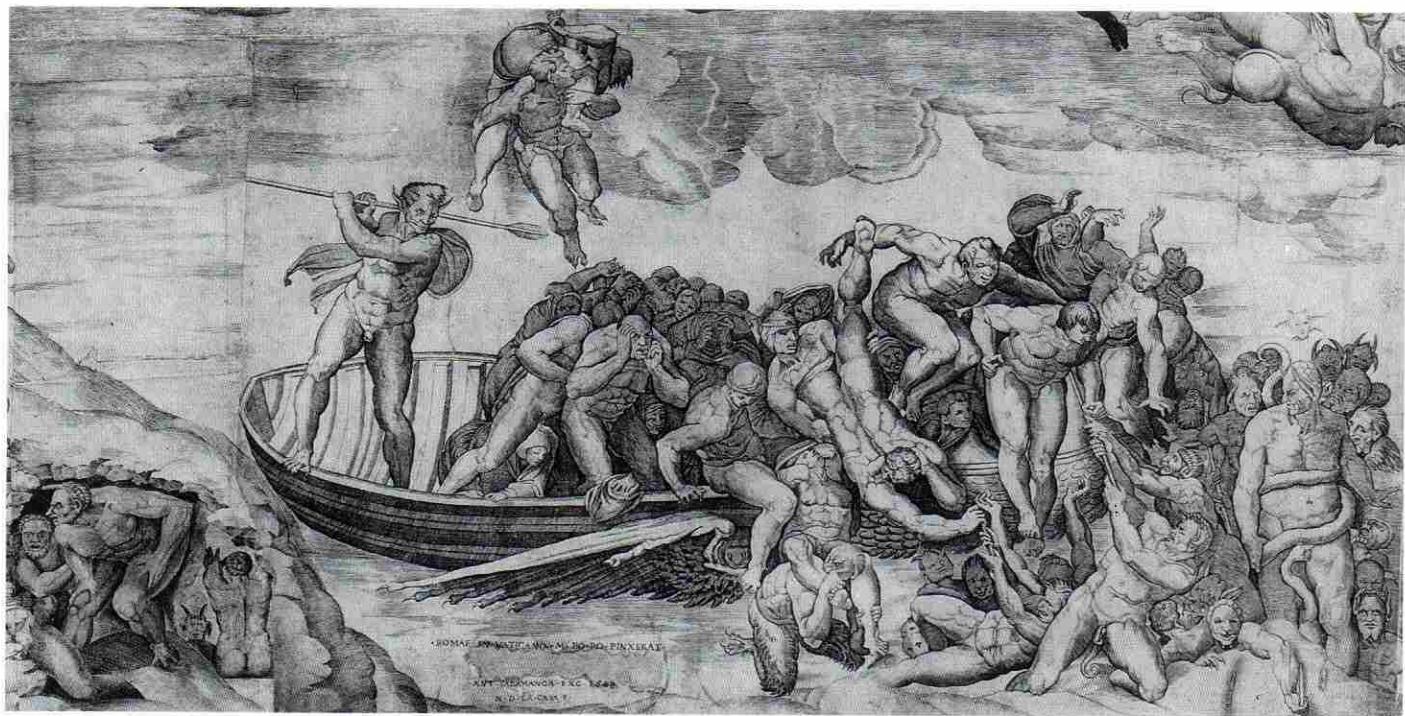
32. See Marucci, Marzo, and Romano, eds., nos. 303, 647; and the 15th-century play by Feo Belcari, in L. Banfi, ed., *Sacre rappresentazioni del Quattrocento*, Turin, 1963, 114, 143. There was evidently a popular custom of placing a coin in the mouth of a dead person in order to pay Charon. This practice is said to dupe "stupid people" in C.

Curione, *Pasquino in estasi . . .*, Rome, 1547, n.p. Cerberus, another mythological being who figures prominently in Inf. 6.13–15, is mentioned as if he were a devil in the popular booklet *Juditio universale ovvero finale . . .*, Perugia, 1578, n.p.

33. G. Vasari, *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori scultori ed architettori nelle redazioni del 1550 e 1568*, ed. P.

Barocchi and R. Bettarini, Florence, 1971, III, Text, 637.

34. For illustrations and another interpretation of the portraits, see R. M. San Juan, "The Illustrious Poets in Signorelli's Frescoes for the Cappella Nuova of Orvieto Cathedral," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, LII, 1989, 71–84.



7 Niccolò della Casa, copy of Michelangelo's *Last Judgment*, detail, engraving, 1543. New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1962; The Elisha Whittelsey Collection, The Elisha Whittelsey Fund, 1959 (photo: Metropolitan Museum of Art)

only two or three real quotations) Signorelli compares himself to the poet—just as Dante created an immense vision of the afterlife, so Signorelli creates an encompassing vision of the end of the world.

Michelangelo, however, was also a poet, and I think that his quotations from Dante's *Inferno* show that he was identifying not only with the man, but also with his manner. His method of quoting Dante is the best indication of this. Michelangelo knew his Dante well; he surely could have portrayed the figures of Charon and Minos precisely as they are described in the text had he chosen to do so. In fact, not a single Dantesque figure, no matter how easily recognizable, actually conforms to Dante's description. It is safe to assume that the variations Michelangelo gave to Dante's figures were done consciously and thoughtfully, not from some misunderstanding based on imperfect knowledge.

It is worth looking more closely at these figures, beginning with Charon, the boatman charged with the delivery of souls to Hell. Dante describes him as "an old man, his hair white with age." He has "grizzled cheeks," "wheels of flame about his eyes," "eyes like glowing coals," and he "beats with his oar whoever lingers."³⁵ Dante's Charon is based on the description of the boatman in Virgil's *Aeneid*:

A grim warrior guards these waters and streams, terrible in his squalor—Charon, on whose chin lies a mass of unkempt, hoary hair; his eyes are staring orbs of flame; his squalid garb hangs by a knot from his shoulders. Unaided, he poles the boat, tends the sails, and in his murky craft convoys the dead—now aged, but a god's old age is hardy and green.³⁶

Michelangelo's Charon is not precisely like either Dante's or Virgil's. His eyes bulge, but they do not burn. His hair is

thick and dark; his face is not grizzled, although he does wear a long mustache. While he has the strong, muscular body that Virgil suggests, his small, fluttering drapery does not quite seem to be a "squalid garb" (although it is interesting that the recent cleaning has revealed a very green body). In fact, were he not so clearly standing in a boat with oar in hand, it would be difficult to say that this is Charon at all. Unlike his literary counterparts, Michelangelo's Charon has a catlike muzzle, long pointed ears, and claws. It has been pointed out how much he resembles a medieval devil pushing sinners into the mouth of Hell.³⁷ While the lack of horns seems to keep his identity as a mythological creature intact, the comparison is apt and fits well with other variations Michelangelo gives to the figures drawn from Dante's text. As I will show, the entire group is associated with expected Christian images. In a metaphorical way, Charon is like a devil, a tormentor, but he is also a transporter of souls.

Charon's gesture, suggesting that he is beating the sinners, may be explained simply by this association, but a more precise meaning can be found by referring to Dante's text. There an attentive reader would find that Charon's action is directed at those who linger on the shore, not those already in the boat. Charon's swing would drive the damned souls *into* the vessel, just as Steinberg has proposed, but that is precisely the purpose of the gesture in Dante's text.³⁸ Charon's action, rather than something that will affect the figures nearby, can be read as a reference to the preceding moment described by Dante. His gesture, then, is a reference to the *Inferno* rather than a mimetic scene; his glance might be seen as a link between two passages in the text.

Charon's boat similarly points to the text, but this time in a more complex way. The boat in Michelangelo's painting seems to have wings. One of those wings could be seen as

belonging to a demon who crouches just below the boat (an association I will consider below), but the feathers continue on the side of the boat, to the viewer's right of this figure. These feathers are very evident now that the fresco has been cleaned (though they are still obscured by grime in the available photographs), and they were clearly visible to some of the earlier copyists such as Niccolò della Casa, whose engraving was made in 1543 (Fig. 7). A viewer who knew Dante's work well would recall that Charon's boat does not have wings or feathers, and might at that point consult the text. What that viewer would find is a metaphor at the very end of the third canto, in which Dante compares the sinners first to leaves falling in autumn, and then to "a bird at its call"—the falcon diving instinctively and without volition when recalled by its master.³⁹ Dante's metaphor substitutes the image of the bird for the sinners; Michelangelo's substitutes the boat for both the bird and the sinners that the boat contains. In this he was perhaps influenced by Landino's Neoplatonic interpretation of the boat as free will, but Michelangelo gives visual form to that concept by referring again to Dante's text.⁴⁰

The metaphor of flight is also useful in connecting this image to that of Minos, since in Dante's text they are separated not only by the river Acheron, but also by two descents: the first to the circle of Limbo, where the ancient poets exist in relative tranquility, then to the second circle where Minos stands. This character, as easily recognizable as Charon, is described in canto 5:

There stands Minos, horrible and snarling; upon the entrance he examines their offenses, and judges and dispatches them according as he entwines. I mean that when the ill-begotten soul comes before him, it confesses all; and that discerner of sins sees which shall be its place in Hell, then girds himself with his tail as many times as the grades he wills that it be sent down. Always before him stands a crowd of them; they go, each in his turn, to the judgment; they tell, and hear, and then are hurled below.⁴¹

Michelangelo depicts Minos as a grand but fleshy creature with ass's ears, snarling (as in the *Inferno*), but with a snake, not his tail, wrapped around him. He holds the snake with his right hand, points back with his left. But there are no souls before him to claim his attention; instead, he responds to an anxious demon who seems to call him from behind, pointing toward the arriving boat.

I shall return to this figure, but at this point I want to emphasize how few are the clues that allow both the modern viewer and Michelangelo's contemporaries to recognize

Dante's characters. Charon is a boatman swinging an oar and Minos has something wrapped around himself. These are identifications based more on gestures and functions than on physical appearances. With this in mind I would like to suggest that two other images might also refer to scenes in the *Inferno*. The first of these is the demon carrying one of the damned on his back just below Charon's boat (Fig. 2); he seems to have wings, although these are the same wings that belong to the boat in another frame of reference. This creature recalls either Geryon from canto 17 or the unnamed demon who delivers a barrator to a lake of boiling pitch in canto 21.⁴² The latter may seem to resemble Michelangelo's figure more, but the description in the text is rather general: Dante's devil is winged, but he walks, and the sinner is flung like a piece of meat over one shoulder, held by the tendons.⁴³ This description corresponds somewhat more closely to the demon above and to the right of Charon who bears a sinner to the infernal regions, just as Dante's devil delivers the barrator.

As for Geryon, Dante gives a vivid description:

His face was the face of a just man, so benign was its outward aspect, and all his trunk was that of a serpent; he had two paws, hairy to the armpits; his back and breast and both his sides were painted with knots and circlets. Tartars or Turks never made cloth with more colors or groundwork and pattern. . . . All his tail was quivering in the void, twisting upward its venomous fork, which had the point armed like a scorpion's.⁴⁴

The demon in question in the *Last Judgment* has longish ears, furrowed brow, and pointed teeth, but except for the fact that he has hairy legs (which may be an inversion of Geryon's hairy arms), there is little that corresponds to Dante's description. But again, Charon's and Minos's physical appearances do not fit Dante's description; only their gestures do. In the *Inferno*, Geryon's action is vividly drawn:

As the bark backs out little by little from its place, so Geryon withdrew thence; and when he felt himself quite free, he turned his tail to where his breast had been, and stretching it out, moved it like an eel, and with his paws gathered the air to himself. (*Par.* 17.100–105)

Michelangelo's creature (without horns, like Charon and Minos and unlike most of the other devils in the fresco) draws up his legs and is about to take flight. Furthermore, a man climbs upon his back from within the boat while another is already astride him. These two figures recall the moment when Virgil and Dante mounted the beast (*Inf.* 17.85–93). The one in front seems to swoon with eyes closed, unable to

35. *Inf.* 3.82, 97–99, 109–11. I have used Singleton's translation for all passages from Dante.

36. *Aeneid* 6.298–304, trans. Singleton, I, pt. 2, 53.

37. R. Feldhusen, *Ikonologische Studien zu Michelangelos Jüngstem Gericht*, Unterlegenhart-Bad Liebenzell, 1978, 65. Thode ([as in n. 3], 44) first pointed out the similarity of Charon to medieval devils.

38. Steinberg, 255–56.

39. *Inf.* 3.117. Singleton (I, pt. 2, 55) explains the image from falconry and points out that Dante

himself altered a metaphor of Virgil's in this passage.

40. See A. Field, "Cristoforo Landino's First Lecture on Dante," *Renaissance Quarterly*, XXXIX, 1986, 18.

41. *Inf.* 5.5–15. Minos is also found in the *Aeneid* (6.432–33), but Virgil gives no description of Minos's appearance and says only that he presides over an urn containing votes that will decide the place of souls in the underworld. Of some interest is

the fact that Plato speaks of Minos as an underworld judge, a half-divinity, who was upright in his earthly life (*Apology* 41a); in *Gorgias* (524a, 526c) he is presented as the most just of the underworld judges, holding a golden scepter.

42. Tolnay, 42, pointed to the connection with *Inf.* 21.25–36.

43. *Inf.* 21.31–36; see also Singleton's commentary on the lines in question.

44. *Inf.* 17.10–17, 25–27.



8 Michelangelo, detail of the *Last Judgment*: Minos (photo: Alinari/Art Resource)

see his descent, just as Dante in his terror was at first unable to see his downward path (*Inf.* 17.113–14).

The wings behind the demon again suggest a movement downward in space, the flight of Geryon (who does not have wings in the text), but more important, a movement across the text, skipping verses while yet suggesting them. In Dante's text Geryon has a significant function: like Charon and Minos he appears at the beginning of a major division of Hell. Geryon is the creature that carries Dante and Virgil from the seventh circle to the eighth, the many-pocketed Malebolge. He appears at the precise mid-point of the book, where the structure of the *Inferno* becomes more complex. Although only two circles of Hell lie below the point where Geryon is mounted by Dante and Virgil, they are the deepest circles, representing the many variations of the sin of fraud. Geryon is a symbol of all this, the "soul image of fraud." It was in precisely this manner that Geryon was portrayed in an

45. *Dante col sito et forma dell'inferno*, Venice, 1515. It is dedicated to Vittoria Colonna, although it would not have been necessary for Michelangelo to have seen a copy belonging to her in order to know the image. This small edition of Dante, without apparatus except for the illustration mentioned and a diagram of the Inferno (possibly designed by

Bembo), was quite popular. It was used by Benedetto Varchi, who annotated a copy, and by Dolce, who based his edition on it. See B. Richardson, *Print Culture in Renaissance Italy*, Cambridge, 1994, 58, 117, 128.

46. *Inf.* 32.124–29. Tolnay, 108, pointed out the Ugolino group and gave references to earlier literature.

illustration to the 1515 Aldine edition of the *Divine Comedy*. In this simple depiction of the entire Inferno, Geryon is a large, winged figure who marks the point through which all must pass to reach the lowest circles of Hell.⁴⁵

There is another reference to Dante in the two heads, almost impossible to make out in available reproductions, at the very bottom right-hand corner of the fresco (Fig. 8; cf. Fig. 7). The lower face stares directly out at the viewer (one of the few figures that do so), while the other bites the top of his head—a reference, although again with variations, to Count Ugolino and Archbishop Ruggieri from cantos 32 and 33 of the *Inferno*. Ugolino and Ruggieri are described in Dante thus:

We had already left him when I saw two frozen in one hole so close that the head of the one was a hood for the other; and as bread is devoured for hunger, so the upper one set his teeth upon the other where the brain joins with the nape.⁴⁶

The two are frozen together in the ice of Cocytus for the conspiracy that eventually turned them against each other. In the end, the archbishop had Ugolino imprisoned and left to starve with his children; the text implies, but leaves unspoken, that Ugolino ate their bodies.

In bringing together these four references to Dante, all recognizable in spite of their variations from the text, Michelangelo drew from the third, fifth, seventeenth, and thirty-third cantos. Thus he represented the gateway to the infernal regions, the true beginning of Hell where sins are punished (omitting any reference to the peaceful Limbo), the center of the poem, and finally the very depths of Hell, with Ugolino frozen in the mire around Satan. This selection masterfully compresses the whole *Inferno*. It is worth recalling that compression was recognized as a figure of speech and one that was particularly admired in Dante's work.

Its effect is best seen in comparison with Michelangelo's two predecessors, Nardo di Cione and Signorelli. Nardo's fresco in S. Maria Novella illustrates all of Dante's Inferno but emphasizes none of it, and Minos and Charon appear as small, rather undistinguished figures in the upper regions to the left (Fig. 9). Charon is a dark, winged devil, alone in his boat. Minos is a skeletal figure with white mustache and beard, and bulging eyes, resembling Michelangelo's Charon more than his Minos. He is, of course, wrapped in his identifying tail.

A much closer visual source is Signorelli's image (Fig. 5). It is probably from the older artist that Michelangelo got the idea of focusing on the two mythical figures from the entrance to Hell. Signorelli's Charon is now almost illegible, but he can be made out steering his boat toward the waiting souls; Minos is a winged devil holding a pitchfork, again a

47. *Inf.* 19.52ff; 22.81; 23.103ff. The exceptions are Pope Anastasius, whose sealed tomb is placed among the heretics (*Inf.* 11.8ff, although, as Singleton notes, the person in question was in fact the emperor Anastasius), and Cardinal Ottaviano degli Ubaldini, who is also among the heretics for his Epicureanism (*Inf.* 10.120).

small figure, lacking the kind of monumentality that Michelangelo gives him. Of some interest is the fact that in Signorelli's fresco, Minos's tail comes from between his legs, and it is not clear whether it is a tail at all. This too might have been suggestive to Michelangelo. The proposed references to Ugolino and Geryon may also stem from Signorelli's work, but they appear in a completely different scene (Fig. 6). In Signorelli's fresco of the damned, there is a flying demon carrying a woman, but there are other flying devils as well, so there is little reason to think that this is a reference to Dante's image. Below and to the right in the same scene, a devil gnaws on the head of a sinner, but again this is amid similar torments and the victim is female. While the image may have been suggested to Signorelli by Dante, he has taken it away from that context and made it merely another torment. Michelangelo, on the other hand, emphasizes the reference to Dante by grouping all these images together, constructing, in effect, a drama that is more unified than even Dante's poem. At the same time, a single identifying motif of one figure reinforces the identifying trait of another, and makes the reference to the poem more emphatic. The sources of Nardo di Cione's and Signorelli's paintings also show that another visual "text" had become established in which these two figures are clearly devils. Michelangelo works between the two sources—the one visual, the other textual—with the result that his characters retain some of their devilish appearance, while referring more suggestively to the actual written source.

If the contemporary viewer recognized the reference to Geryon here, he might also have realized that a more pointed criticism was being made. Those who stood close enough to the fresco to see some of the details I have described were almost all members of the clergy. While Dante mentions nameless cardinals, popes, and clerics among the avaricious in the fourth circle, most of his references to specific members of the clergy are in the cantos devoted to the fraudulent—again the parts of the poem that are symbolized by Geryon. In addition to Archbishop Ruggieri, these include Pope Nicholas III among the simonists, Fra Gomita, whom Dante calls the "vessel of every fraud," in the fifth *bolgia*, and the two friars among the hypocrites in the sixth *bolgia* (where in fact all the sinners wear habits).⁴⁷ Of special interest is the tale of Count Guido da Montefeltro, a Franciscan who was persuaded to sin by the offer of false absolution by Pope Boniface VIII. Dante reserves a place for Boniface among the simonists, but Guido's soul is wrested away from Saint Francis after his death by a devil and sent to the lower *bolgia* of the False Counselors. Minos is so infuriated by this man's sins that he wraps his tail around himself eight times and then bites it in anger (*Inf.* 27.126). This passage may lie behind Michelangelo's substitution of a snake for Minos's tail, which winds around him and bites (or



9 Nardo di Cione, *Hell*, detail, 1352–57. Florence, S. Maria Novella, Strozzi Chapel (photo: Alinari/Art Resource)

otherwise "engages") his genitals. Minos's expression shows anger, although the focus of his gaze and the reason for his anger are not clear. They may be directed at the newly arrived sinners toward whom the demon behind him points; his anger then is precisely comparable to that which he felt toward Guido. The viewer might then realize that the only person who truly stands before Minos is the viewer himself, and might wonder if he were not the object of Minos's wrath.

To consider the snake a moment longer, it seems as though the substitution of a snake for a tail does not take a great leap of the imagination, nor does the association of either snakes or tails with male genitalia. The Italian word for tail, *coda*, was used in the sixteenth-century as slang for penis, and it is, in fact, his own "coda" that Minos bites in the line cited above.⁴⁸ The sexual allusions were not lost on the common viewer, as a pasquinade that criticizes the fresco demonstrates. Minos, who is described but not named, is seen as a symbol of sodomy and of sodomites, who are condemned by Christ to fire and to the company of the serpent for eternity.⁴⁹

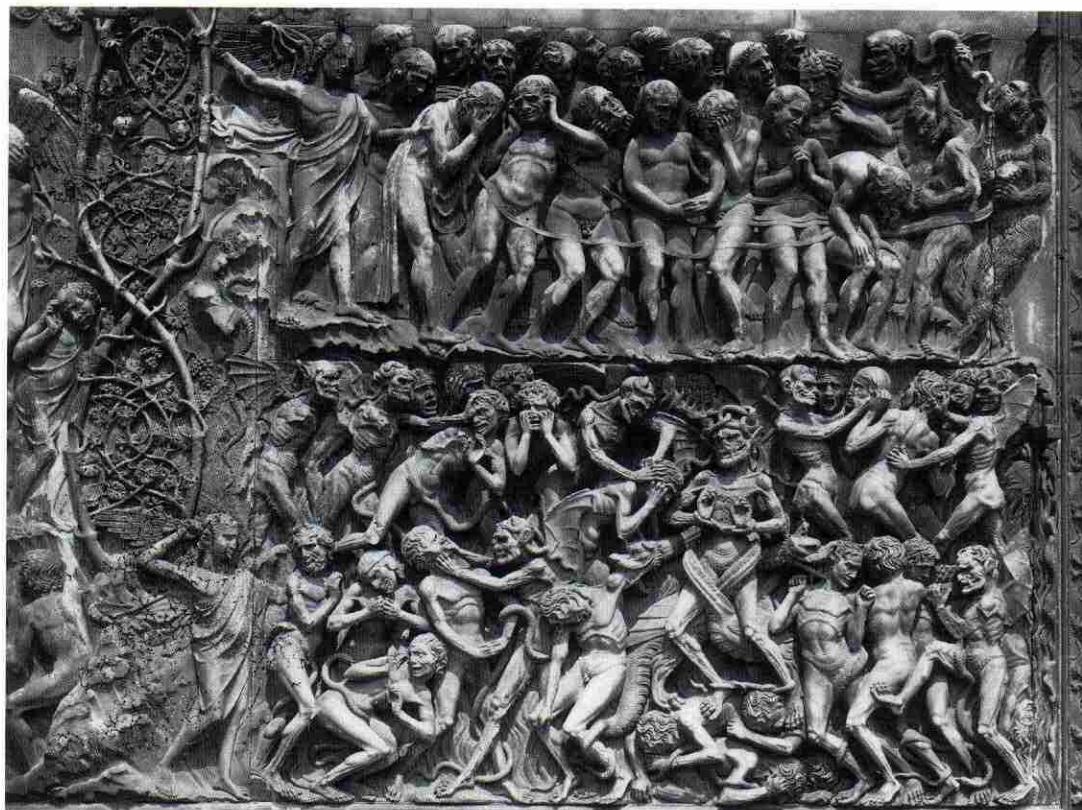
Such associations, however, are not usually made with Minos, the judge of souls in Dante's text. They are much more common in images of devils and particularly of Satan. It is probably superfluous to point out examples of snakes tormenting sinners in Hell, coiling about them and biting them. Devils, too, are shown wrapped in snakes; one that makes an especially good comparison with Minos is the demon by Lorenzo Maitani from the Orvieto façade (Fig.

48. See the examples of the use of *coda* in the *pasquinate* published in Marucci, Manzo, and Romano, nos. 512, 574. Of interest for Minos's gesture of holding the tail/snake, *pasquinata* no. 617 (ibid.) says of Paul III: "questo papa è pien d'inganni e frode, e sa dove i demon tengon le code." The expression "tengon le code" means "to be mali-

cious, or crafty," and was used by Boccaccio in *Decameron*, 7.7.149. I am not arguing that Michelangelo knew this poem or that he was directing a similar scathing criticism toward his patron, only that this expression is one that he might have had in mind when painting the image of Minos.

49. Ibid., no. 462; see also ibid., no. 456 and

accompanying notes. The commentary by Landino (as in n. 26), fol. 31, on the figure of Minos is also of some interest in this context. He says that Dante gives Minos a tail to show that he is no longer fully a man, but has become bestial. Minos, in Landino's interpretation, stands for the conscience of the damned who can no longer feel remorse.



10 Lorenzo Maitani, *Last Judgment*, detail, lower right, ca. 1320. Orvieto Cathedral façade (photo: Alinari/Art Resource)

10). Most interesting are the many images of Satan that show snakes emerging from his lower body (as in Nardo's fresco at S. Maria Novella or in the Florentine Baptistry mosaics), or wrapped around him (as in Maitani's relief or in Vecchietta's painting for the Ospedale in Siena). Steinberg has already noted how rarely Minos, as opposed to Charon, was named by sixteenth-century observers of the fresco, and he goes on to reidentify Minos as Maliosa on the basis of a figure labeled as such in a print derived from the Campo Santo fresco of Hell.⁵⁰ It seems to me that this new identification is unfounded and that the conflation is really between Minos and Satan.⁵¹ In all earlier Last Judgments it is Satan who stands in the bottom corner. He is always a huge figure, often obscene, sometimes wrapped in snakes, standing or seated squarely before the viewer.⁵² In Dante's *Inferno*, Ugolino appears next to Satan, just as he appears next to Minos here. Furthermore, and suggestive of Dante's image of Satan, the lower part of Minos's body is hidden by rocks.

Michelangelo's Minos is also very fleshy, but he is not merely fat. Instead, his upper body curiously suggests a woman's. In this case the reference seems not to be to Dante or even to the visual tradition, but to Michelangelo's own work on the Sistine Ceiling. A similar sort of male/female form was used there for the figure of God the Father; it is most obvious in the Separation of Light and Dark. In the *Last Judgment* Michelangelo quotes his own work, now to make the viewer compare the figure of God at the first moment of creation to a creature in the depths of Hell. If this figure is seen as Satan rather than as Minos, the comparison becomes significant. Satan was the angel who saw himself as the equal of God; the fall of Satan and the other rebel angels is sometimes associated with the moment of the separation of light and darkness.⁵³ The appearance of this figure would be an appropriate inversion if it were seen as an image of Satan, emphasizing at once the pride and the foolishness of the devil.

50. Steinberg, 234 and 265, n. 37.

51. The print that Steinberg uses as evidence for this identification (fig. 8) is only loosely based on the fresco, in which the figure is reversed and holds the snake in her left hand. Also, in the Campo Santo fresco the figure is not labeled as Maliosa, but rather "Enrico indovina," that is, the sorceress Erichtho; a similar figure in Fra Angelico's *Last Judgment* in the Museo di San Marco is not labeled at all. As far as I know, Maliosa is not commonly represented in Italian art.

52. Similar observations have been made by A.

Basserman, *Orme di Dante*, trans. E. Gorra, Bologna, 1902, 489; and Feldhusen (as in n. 37), 65.

53. E. G. Dotson, "An Augustinian Interpretation of Michelangelo's Sistine Ceiling, Part I," *Art Bulletin*, LXI, 1979, 238.

54. This figure has been seen as a reference to *Inf.* 19.66ff, where Dante describes the simoniac pope Nicholas III with burning feet thrust upside down into a small hole; Kallab (as in n. 3), 141. However, Nicholas's body is not visible, except for his feet; there is no way of knowing whether he has anything around his neck. On the other hand, Dante does

portray the Usurers in the third ring of the seventh circle with money bags around their necks (*Inf.* 17.55). It seems that here Michelangelo is not so much quoting Dante as drawing from the same medieval tradition in which avarice was often depicted in this way. It is interesting, though, that Dante in *Inf.* 7.46–48 especially points out the popes, cardinals, and clerics in the circle of the Avaricious.

55. J. W. O'Malley, *Praise and Blame in Renaissance Rome: Rhetoric, Doctrine, and Reform in the Sacred Orations of the Papal Court, c. 1450–1521*, Durham, 1979, 160, 187–88, 215, 224, with citations of

This reference to the sin of pride might connect the Hell scene to the group above. This group is often referred to as the Seven Deadly Sins, yet only two sins are referred to unambiguously: avarice and lust. This is very likely an example of synecdoche, of suggesting a set of something by giving only the attributes of one or two of its components. However, the fact that the two sins specified are so closely related to criticism of the papal court is very telling. Of the seven deadly sins, three were especially singled out as those that prevailed in Rome and those that led to corruption in the Church: avarice, lust, and pride. These vices had a long tradition of being associated with the popes, and Michelangelo makes sure the point is not lost by hanging the papal keys as well as a sack of coins around the neck of Avarice.⁵⁴ This need not be seen as Michelangelo's own personal criticism of the papacy, nor should it be thought of as reflecting Lutheran or heretical views. Historically, such criticism was delivered in sermons for the pope by preachers selected and approved by the Vatican's official theologian; in one case such a sermon was given by a reigning pope.⁵⁵ The emphasis on these particular sins should be seen as self-criticism by the highest ranking members of the Church, a warning to those who most needed to hear it.

There is perhaps another quotation in this corner of the *Last Judgment*: Minos and the devil behind him are very similar to the figures of Isaiah and the little angel that draws the prophet's attention on the ceiling. The demon behind Minos's right shoulder has been said to point to the newly arriving sinners, or to the mound in the center, as if disagreeing with Minos's decision.⁵⁶ This devil, however, is strangely disconnected from the other figures around him. He points at no one in particular; in fact, his gesture is directed at an area where Charon's bark mysteriously dissolves into a rocky outcropping. Once again, just as in the Charon scene, it is very probable that the viewer was not meant to make a narrative connection here, but to see this quotation as a separate sign referring to a text. In this case the reference is to Isaiah's prophecies, where we find one of the most vivid predictions of the Last Judgment in the Old Testament:

The Day of the Lord is coming indeed, that cruel day of wrath and fury, to make the land a desolation and exterminate its wicked people. The stars of heaven in their constellations shall give no light, the sun shall be darkened at its rising, and the moon refuse to shine. . . . I will check the pride of the haughty and bring low the arrogance of ruthless men. (Isa. 13:9–11)

15th-century sermons. See also D. R. Howard, *The Three Temptations: Medieval Man in Search of the World*, Princeton, N.J., 1966, 44–55; and M. W. Bloomfield, *The Seven Deadly Sins: An Introduction to the History of a Religious Concept, with Special Reference to Medieval English Literature*, East Lansing, Mich., 1952. Howard points out that the three sins correspond to their antitheses in the three monastic vows of poverty, chastity and obedience.

56. Steinberg, 242.

57. Biblical quotations are from the New English Bible. This image is also recalled in Jacopone da

It is again in Isaiah that we find a striking image that corresponds to the appearance of the mound in the center of the lowest zone of the fresco:

Get you into the rocks and hide yourselves in the ground from the dread of the Lord and the splendour of his majesty. Man's proud eyes shall be humbled, and the loftiness of men brought low, and the Lord alone shall be exalted on that day. For the Lord of Hosts has a day of doom waiting. . . . Then man's pride shall be brought low . . . while the idols shall pass away utterly. Get you into caves in the rocks and crevices in the ground from the dread of the Lord and the splendour of his majesty.⁵⁷ (Isa. 2:10–19)

Although this mound has been explained as Limbo, Purgatory, the mouth of Hell, or the Hell that will be emptied on the Last Day,⁵⁸ it is more closely connected with the landscape on the left side of the fresco than with the infernal regions on the right. It seems to represent something that occurs on the Last Day, not in eternity. The inhabitants of this cave, both human and demonic, are reacting to something in fear or horror. On the basis of the passage from Isaiah, it appears that what they react to is the glory of Christ in the Second Coming. Their reaction may be even more specific. Under normal circumstances, this hill would have been seen behind a great crucifix, one that contained a relic of the True Cross. Michelangelo can hardly have thought that his fresco would have been viewed without the presence of that crucifix, even though modern photographers almost never admit its presence. When seen with the cross in place, the demons within the hill flee from it or scream as they look up toward it. It is a scene that recalls another passage from an apocryphal description of the Last Days:

And then shall appear the sign of the Son of Man from Heaven with power and great glory; and then the worker of unrighteousness himself shall behold [it] with his ministers, and he shall gnash his teeth vehemently, and all the foul fiends shall be put to flight.⁵⁹

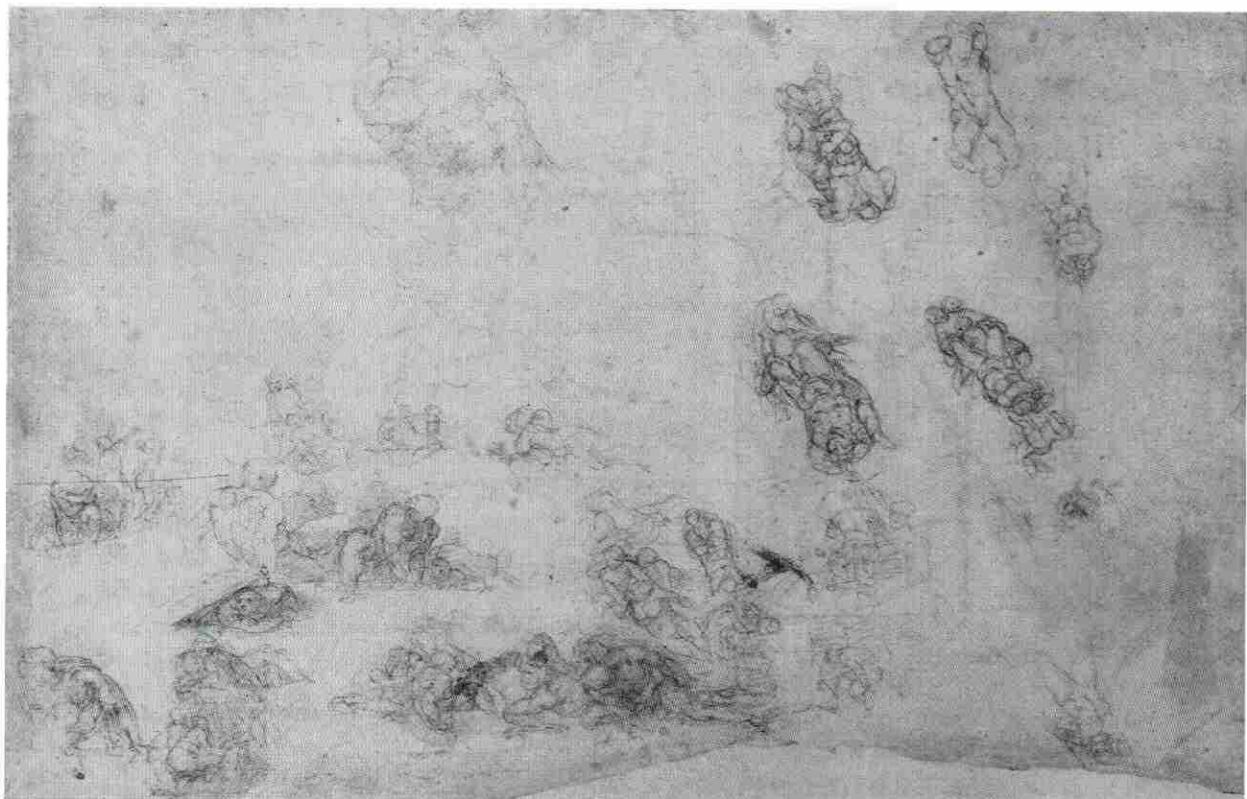
There are other reasons to think that this hill or cave was meant to represent a separate incident, symbolic of the confounding of the devil and his followers at the Last

Todi's poem on the Last Judgment: "Who is this mighty sire, this king of great stature? I should like to go down beneath the ground, such is the fear that he puts in me. Where can I flee from his hard face? O earth, make a covering for me"; F. de Sanctis, *History of Italian Literature*, trans. J. Redfern, New York, 1968, i, 38–39.

58. Tolnay (28, 104–5, n. 23) calls it Limbo and considers its close proximity to the altar to be symbolic of Christ's descent into Limbo after his Crucifixion, anticipating the Second Coming. French writers almost always call it Purgatory; see

Steinberg, 268, n. 54. Feldhusen (as in n. 37), 31, is among those who identify it as the mouth of Hell; she sees its source in the Etruscan tumulus which became the ancient entrance to Tartarus, shown as a dark cave (83). Steinberg (242–45) regards it as a symbol of the impermanence of Hell, noting the figure who seems to be pulled out from the left side of the hill and citing Rev. 20:13, "Death and Hell gave up their dead that were in them."

59. From the Pseudo-Johannine Apocalypse, chap. 16, quoted in W. Bousset, *The Antichrist Legend*, London, 1896; repr. New York, 1982, 234–35.



11 Michelangelo, *The Resurrection of the Dead*, sketch. Windsor, Royal Collection, H.M. Queen Elizabeth II



12 Detail of Fig. 11

Judgment, rather than to illustrate the realms of Purgatory or Hell. A drawing at Windsor Castle (Figs. 11, 12) shows the hill along with other motifs from the lower left corner of the fresco. The hill itself is quite close to its appearance in the fresco, and it stands in precisely the same relationship to the Resurrection of the Dead in both sketch and painting. But there is a significant difference between the two. In the drawing a seated figure with what appears to be a scale is enthroned upon the hill, and another figure, evidently wearing a halo, clings to the side with a gesture of pleading. The first figure seems to derive from that of Saint Michael, who at one point in the design process stood above the altarpiece; this can be seen in a drawing at Casa Buonarroti (Fig. 13), in which the figure of Saint Michael was sketched and then partially erased. The halo and pose of the second figure suggest that it is the Virgin Mary; although the pose seems awkward, it is very close to the one Michelangelo gave her in the fresco, only in reverse so that she looks toward the damned rather than the elect. This may be a reference to the apocryphal stories about the Virgin's descent into Hell that lived on in the art of Giovanni Pisano.⁶⁰ In one version of the myth Mary prays on the Mount of Olives to be shown the torments of the damned, and Saint Michael is sent to escort her to Hell; after seeing the horrible punishments inflicted on sinners, she begs Christ to give them respite. The close relationship between the Virgin and Saint Michael recalls other popular sources, since several versions of the miracles of the Madonna tell how she defeats the devil by tipping the scales that the archangel holds. Although the slightness of this sketch precludes a precise interpretation, it does seem fairly certain that it represents an episode derived from apocryphal sources, one that gives special emphasis to the Virgin's role as mediatrix.⁶¹

Such an emphasis was appropriate in a chapel dedicated to the Assumption of the Virgin. It was also common in the context of the Last Judgment; even though arguments were made that the Virgin could not intercede on the Last Day, she continued to appear in this role in art and in popular plays. Indeed, it may have been too common, or perhaps too controversial, to remain clearly expressed in the fresco. The image was veiled, literally and figuratively. There is very good evidence that in the sixteenth century a tapestry was used as a temporary altarpiece during special ceremonies in the Sistine Chapel. Such an altarpiece is seen in a print by

Ambrogio Brambilla, dated 1582 (Fig. 14).⁶² Paul III commissioned a tapestry of the Coronation of the Virgin (a theme related to the dedication of the chapel) in 1537 or 1538. There is a document affirming that this same tapestry was used for an altarpiece in the chapel in the eighteenth century; it probably served the same purpose much earlier.⁶³ The possibility that it was commissioned specifically to act as an altarpiece set in front of Michelangelo's *Last Judgment* is supported by the composition of fresco itself. The dimensions of the tapestry fit well in the lower area. If the tapestry were in place, the trumpeting angels would hover just over its top edge, and the empty space that now isolates them from the other groups in the lower part of the fresco would be eliminated. The use of the tapestry would allow the image of the Virgin still to be present near the lower regions of the fresco, but it would be removed spatially and conceptually from the *Last Judgment* itself.⁶⁴

In the fresco, the signs of salvation granted at the very last moment and through extraordinary intervention are omitted. Such a development could be explained in a number of ways. For example, it might be said that a reference to the popular myths of Mary's intervention was avoided to express the idea that the works needed to attain salvation must be done in the individual's lifetime, and that judgment of the soul at the time of death would have made last-minute struggles moot. It might also be argued that Michelangelo believed in predestination. However, other details of the fresco work against either of these interpretations. The struggling group just to the left of the central mound is one of these. This group was obsessively reworked in the Windsor Castle drawing (Fig. 12); it clearly represented a concept that Michelangelo felt was important to include. The presence of the group suggests that even at the *Last Judgment* the fate of an individual might still be changed. What it does not show, however, is how that change could come about, since there are no longer any obvious signs of intercession in the fresco.

This dilemma could be resolved, however, if the struggling group were related to one other passage from Dante, this time from the *Purgatorio*. In the fifth canto (100–108), a last-minute prayer saves Buonconte da Montefeltro: "I ended on the name of Mary, and there I fell, and my flesh remained alone. . . . The Angel of God took me, and he from Hell cried, 'O you from Heaven, why do you rob me?'" The

60. It is represented in Giovanni's pulpit in the Duomo of Pisa. The legends are summarized in M. R. James, ed., *The Apocryphal New Testament*, Oxford, 1924, repr. 1975, 563.

61. If this is correct, the hill might refer specifically to the Mount of Olives overlooking the valley of Josephat, where Mary prays in the legend, where Christ ascended into Heaven, and where he is to return on the Last Day. It was also on this hill that the Antichrist, according to legend, was enthroned and where he was slain; see Bousset (as in n. 60), 227–29.

62. Bibl. Apost. Vat. Riserva S 6 (130). This is the second state of an engraving by Lorenzo Vaccari, dated 1578. The use of tapestries as altarpieces in the Sistine Chapel continues to the present day,

although by at least the 18th century the subjects of the tapestries varied according to the feast. See G. P. Chattard, *Nuovo descrizione del Vaticano*, Rome, 1762, 42.

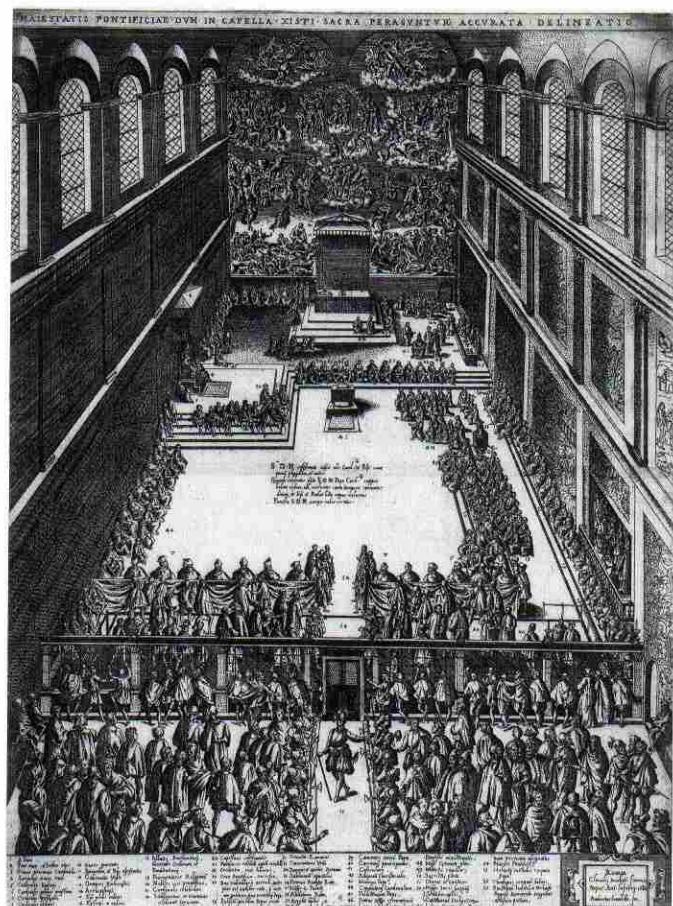
63. The tapestry (14 x 10 ft.; 4.28 x 3.07 m) is now in the Galleria di S. Pio V. It is mentioned in Vatican inventories in 1544 and again in 1555, where it is said to have been sent to Paul III by Cardinal Erard de la Marck (d. 1538), bishop of Liège and archbishop of Valence. Based on a design by Raphael which was engraved by the Master of the Die, the tapestry cartoon has been attributed to Lambert Lombard. The arms of Paul III are found on the border, and it may have been given to the pontiff on the occasion of his naming the cardinal legate a latere in 1537. See *Raffaello in Vaticano*, exh. cat.,

Vatican City, Milan, 1984, 296; and J.-K. Steppe and G. Delmarcel, "Les Tapisseries du Cardinal Erard de la Marck, prince-évêque de Liège," *Revue de l'Art*, xxv, 1974, 44–47. Although the tapestry would cover some of the trumpeting angels if it were installed today, the bottom edge of the fresco was raised approximately 17½ in. (45 cm) after the fresco was completed. This additional space brings the top of the tapestry just below the group of angels.

64. This suggests a double appearance of the Virgin in the *Last Judgment*, since she is also shown above. There are many precedents for this, including the *Last Judgment* at Torcello and the *Last Judgments* by Giovanni Pisano and Giotto.



13 Michelangelo, *The Last Judgment*, sketch. Florence, Casa Buonarroti (photo: Gab. Fotografico Soprintendenza Beni Artistici e Storici di Firenze)



14 Ambrogio Brambilla, *View of the Sistine Chapel*, engraving, 1582. Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana (photo: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Archivio Fotografico)

passage, which seems to describe Michelangelo's group well, praises the power of the Virgin to intercede at the last moment. If this connection is correct, Michelangelo used the group to express the notion of the Virgin's intercession indirectly, by way of a reference that required the intermediary step of Dante's text to complete its meaning.

With the tapestry in place Charon and the left portion of his boat would also be covered. With these two changes, the whole lower part of the fresco would look much more like a traditional Last Judgment, with the mouth of Hell, sinners tumbling into the abyss, and Satan in the corner. It is interesting that something like this effect is seen in the sketch at Casa Buonarroti, which represents one of Michelangelo's earliest ideas for the fresco (Fig. 13). There are no references to Dante in that sketch, and no trace of Saint Bartholomew or his skin. These "poetic" images were conceived at a later stage in the design process, perhaps

immediately before they were painted, since they do not appear in any composition sketch. They seem to add a layer of complexity to a simpler concept. The additions can be thought of as polishing the work—like a sculpture, but even more like a sentence or a poem.

As a poet, Michelangelo was aware of how words could be doubly significant, how they could suggest by analogy, how a well-chosen phrase might evoke a much larger meaning.⁶⁵ Why then should we continue to insist that his images merely illustrate texts, or that they be read at a very literal, mimetic level? To do so does a disservice to Michelangelo, to his audience, and to the importance of his painting in the most sacred part of the most sacred chapel in Christendom. There can hardly have been a more appropriate place to paint poetically, since as Boccaccio put it, poetry was invented to present the gods with a more "polished and artistic" manner of speech, which would engage the minds of the learned.⁶⁶

65. For some examples of Michelangelo's poetic method, see Saslow, 41–44; and G. Cambon, *Michelangelo's Poetry: Fury of Form*, Princeton, N.J., 1985, esp. chap. 3.

66. Boccaccio (as in n. 9), 51.

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