MICHELANGELO READING LANDINO?
THE “DEVIL” IN MICHELANGELO’S *LAST JUDGMENT*

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Summary. In lieu of Satan, the Hell scene in Michelangelo’s *Last Judgment* features Charon and Minos, two key figures present in Dante’s *Inferno*. These figures were given an interesting psychological interpretation in the well circulated fifteenth-century commentary on Dante’s *Commedia* by Cristoforo Landino. This article compares Landino’s *allegoresis* of the two figures and a selection of Michelangelo’s poetry, as well as the artist’s drawings for and relationship to the young nobleman Tommaso de’ Cavalieri, to suggest the hypothesis that Michelangelo’s Minos and Charon were intended to symbolize the psychological experience of damnation and, more specifically, the dynamic interplay of conscience, free will, choice and volition.

In the panorama of scholarship focusing on Michelangelo’s *Last Judgment* (figure 1), some of the most intriguing debates centre upon the fresco’s iconographically atypical Hell-space that features demons and the damned, but no devil proper. The devil is present only by symbolic allusion: a serpent entwined about the figure of Minos, Hell’s judge in Dante’s *Commedia*, whom Michelangelo places in the bottom right-hand corner of his painting together with Charon, the Ferryman of *Inferno* (figure 2).¹ Pre-Renaissance representations of the Last Judgment tended to be static, stratified compositions in which Hell occupied a well-defined space. These Last Judgments typically contained images portraying the physical suffering of damnation. They often included Satan as the Antichrist figure. In Michelangelo’s *Last Judgment*, however, physical “Hell” is represented

¹It is generally accepted that Michelangelo’s Minos figure stands for the Antichrist. Iconographically speaking, the figure is a conflation of Minos and Satan: while Minos possesses a serpentine tail capable of twining about, drawing circles in the air, the serpent-as-tail in Michelangelo’s depiction is a clear reference to Lucifer. As Teodolinda Barolini noted, Dante describes only the action of Minos’s tail; its form is left to the reader’s imagination (“Minos’s Tail,” p. 448). For a detailed discussion of Dante’s Minos, see Barolini. For a discussion of the conflation of Minos and Satan, see Barnes, *Michelangelo’s Last Judgment*, pp. 118-119. See also Partridge, *Michelangelo*, p. 105.

Fig. 1 *Last Judgement*

Fig. 2 *Hell. From left to right: Cave, Charon, Minos.*

synechdotally via a depiction of its entrances: a cryptic cave that has been variously interpreted as Limbo, Purgatory, Hell’s mouth, or Plato’s cave; Charon, who is associated with the first gates of Hell; and Minos, who stands between the first and second circle of Hell—that is, between Limbo and Hell proper—in Dante’s *Inferno* (figures 3-4).² Effectively,

Fig. 3 Charon

Fig. 4 Minos

² For a discussion of Michelangelo’s departures from the Last Judgment tradition, see Barnes, *Michelangelo’s Last Judgment*, pp. 7-38. Though it was not common to include pagan or literary references in Last Judgment paintings, Michelangelo was not the first artist to include aspects of Dante’s *Inferno* in his fresco. Luca Signorelli included Charon and Minos in his Last Judgment scene in the Cappella Nuova, Orvieto Cathedral (1499-1504). Unlike Michelangelo, however, Signorelli included them in addition to Lucifer, not in lieu of him. Barnes argues that Michelangelo had intended a second painting in the Chapel that featured Satan (*Michelangelo’s Last Judgment*, p. 30). This does not explain why Minos is granted such a privileged position in the lower-right corner of the fresco in seeming opposition to Christ. Barnes believes that Michelangelo also included from Dante’s *Commedia* the figures of Geryon (*Inferno* 17), Count Ugolino and Archbishop Ruggieri (*Inferno* 32-33) as additional “gateway[s] to the infernal regions,” *Michelangelo’s Last Judgment*, pp. 114-116.

Michelangelo opted to suggest Hell rather than to depict it, and permitted himself to draw on literary figures to achieve this end.³

Michelangelo's decision to suggest rather than to depict Hell has generated much discussion on the theological ideas at the heart of the fresco. Leo Steinberg has argued that Michelangelo purposefully omitted Hell in the *Last Judgment* because the artist "disbelieved in a material Hell."⁴ For Steinberg, then, the *Last Judgment* is philo-Protestant in nature.⁵ Loren Partridge challenges Steinberg's interpretation, arguing that Michelangelo's masterpiece is thoroughly orthodox.⁶ It is not scholarship, but rather Michelangelo's fresco that is ambiguous.⁷ Destined for a male audience of well-educated mainstream Catholics who could devote time to contemplating the details of the work, Michelangelo's *Last Judgment* nevertheless reflects the same spiritual angst and theological ambivalence present in his poetry.⁸

³ This observation is not new. Valerie Shrimplin-Evangelidis's article "Hell in Michelangelo's Last Judgment" is almost entirely based on this premise. Steinberg observed that "if there was ever a painting that allocates sites without localizing their whereabouts, it is surely this fresco" ("A corner," p. 250).

⁴ See Steinberg, "The *Last Judgment* as Merciful Heresy," p. 53.

⁵ In both "The *Last Judgment* as Merciful Heresy" and "A corner of the *Last Judgment*," Steinberg clarifies that he did not intend to suggest that Michelangelo was a heretic, merely that he held philo-Protestant views, which were not deemed heretical until the Council of Trent, which first convened in 1545, four years after the unveiling of Michelangelo's completed masterpiece on 31 October 1541. For a discussion of the historical and religious context in which Michelangelo operated while creating the *Last Judgment*, see Mayer.

⁶ Partridge, *Michelangelo*, p. 8. Partridge does concede that the fresco "reflects the Italian movement for Church reform," p. 8.

⁷ Many scholars have highlighted the ambiguity of the fresco. In "The *Last Judgment* as Merciful Heresy," Steinberg argues that Michelangelo intended for his Christ to be ambivalent, neither wholly judging nor merciful, neither seated nor standing (p. 50). Barnes also urges that we consider the "ambiguity itself" rather than seek to argue for one interpretation over the other: "What in the image caused contemporaries to interpret it in various ways? What might be the purpose behind the ambiguity? Is there a positive reason for wanting to create a religious image that might be open to multiple interpretations?" *Michelangelo's Last Judgment*, p. 73.

⁸ For a discussion of the Sistine Chapel audience, see Barnes, *Michelangelo's Last Judgment*, pp. 39-79, in which she shows "how some of the most unusual elements of the Last Judgment might be interpreted by an orthodox Catholic, well-educated, male audience who knew the decorum of the Sistine Chapel and who had the time to make connections between the images there" *Michelangelo's Last Judgment*, p. 69.

With this premise in mind, it is the intent of the present article to offer a plausible explanation of why in lieu of Satan, Michelangelo's Hell features Charon and Minos. The discussion will begin with a consideration of the allegorical significance of Minos and Charon in which the commentary of a highly influential late fifteenth-century Florentine Dante scholar, Cristoforo Landino, will be explored. The discussion will then turn to a comparison of Landino's *allegoresis* and Michelangelo's poetry to suggest the hypothesis that Minos and Charon were intended to symbolize the psychological experience of damnation.

Cristoforo Landino (1425-1498) was *the* Dante scholar in Florence during the first twenty-two years of Michelangelo's life.⁹ Appointed Chair of Rhetoric and Poetry at the Florentine Studio in 1458, Landino taught classical and vernacular literature in Florence until 1497. His *Comento sopra la Comedia* (1481) re-created Dante as a poet of Renaissance Florence by adding to the exegetical tradition an innovative *allegoresis* aimed at addressing the concerns of his contemporary audience.¹⁰ Commissioned by Lorenzo de' Medici, the exegetical *unicum*, as Paolo Procaccioli called it, became the most widely diffused publication of its kind.¹¹ Marsilio Ficino, Angelo Poliziano and Lorenzo de' Medici himself were among those Landino tutored. Michelangelo, who spent two formative years of his adolescence in the presence of these illustrious men while living at the palazzo Medici, was reputedly very familiar with Landino's ideas on the

⁹ For an overview of Landino's work on the *Commedia*, see Paolo Procaccioli's introduction to the *Comento*, vol. 1, pp. 9-105.

¹⁰ It is Korman who states that Landino modernizes the commentary tradition to address matters most relevant to late fifteenth-century Florentines ("Dante Alighieri Poeta Fiorentino," p. 58) and that he attempts to "reinvent Dante as a poet of the Florentine Renaissance" (p. 64). For a discussion of the programmatic nature of Landino's commentary, see Gilson, *Dante and Renaissance Florence*, p. 194.

¹¹ Procaccioli in Landino, *Comento sopra la Comedia*, p. 57. Landino's commentary was reprinted eleven times between 1484 and 1544. For a detailed discussion of the *Comento's* publication history and its diffusion, see Parker, *Commentary and Ideology*, pp. 124-158, especially the table on pp. 133-134.

¹² In his *Dialogi di Donato Giannotti, de' giorni che Dante consumò nel cercare l'Inferno e 'l Purgatorio*, Donato Giannotti included his friend Michelangelo as one of its four interlocutors. In the dialogue, Michelangelo, who was considered by contemporaries to be a *dantista* in his own right, criticizes Landino for his interpretation of the literal level of Canto IX of *Purgatorio*, p. 54. Michelangelo generally argues against Landino's literal interpretations on pp. 51, 52, 55-60, 63, 75, and 76-77.

Commedia.¹² To mitigate the harsher passages of *Inferno*, thus rendering the text more palatable to its late fifteenth-century readership, Landino superimposed upon Dante's text a level of allegorical meaning that was not only Neoplatonic, but psychological in nature.¹³ It would appear that Michelangelo, who was acquainted with both the *Commedia* and Landino's interpretations of the epic, chose to include the famous literary scholar's allegorical interpretations of *Inferno* III and V into his *Last Judgment*.

Let us begin with Landino's analysis of Minos, and thus of *Inferno* V, where Hell's judge first appears in the *Commedia*. Dante narrates his arrival at the *doloroso ospizio* (l.16), the entrance to the second circle of Hell:

Così discesi del cerchio primaio
giù nel secondo, che men loco cinghia
e tanto più dolor, che punge a guaio.
Stavvi Minòs orribilmente, e ringhia:
essamina le colpe ne l'intrata;
giudica e manda secondo ch'avvinghia.
Dico che quando l'anima mal nata
li vien dinanzi, tutta si confessa;
e quel conoscitor de le peccata
vede qual loco d'inferno è da essa;
cignesi con la coda tante volte
quantunque gradi vuol che giù sia messa.
Sempre dinanzi a lui ne stanno molte:
vanno a vicenda ciascuna al giudizio,
dicono e odono e poi son giù volte.
"O tu che vieni al doloroso ospizio,"
disse Minòs a me quando mi vide,
lasciando l'atto di cotanto offizio
"guarda com' entri e di cui tu ti fide;
non t'inganni l'ampiezza de l'intrare!" (*Inf.* V, 1-20)

(Thus I descended from the first circle into the second, which girds less space, and so much greater woe that it goads to wailing. There stands Minos, horrible and snarling: upon the entrance he examines their offences, and judges and dispatches them according as he entwines. I mean that when ill-begotten soul comes before him, it confesses all; and that discernor of sins sees which

¹³ For a detailed discussion of the "psychologized *allegoresis*," see Gilson, *Dante and Renaissance Florence*, p. 200. Gilson and Parker both discuss the Neoplatonic and psychological dimension of the commentary. Parker suggested that Landino revised the allegorical level of interpretation so as "to blunt the apparent cruelty" of text, Parker, *Commentary and Ideology*, p. 93.

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. “O you who come to the abode of pain,” said Minos to me, when he saw me, pausing in the act of that great office, “beware how you enter and in whom you trust; let not the breadth of the entrance deceive you!”¹⁴

Minos stands in the entrance growling, examining sins, judging the guilty and assigning them to the appropriate circle of Hell by twirling his tail: the number of times it turns equals the circle to which the sinner must descend; when sinners appear before him they confess everything. He warns Dante to mind the entrance, which is wide, but deceiving (because the exit is narrow). Commentators who preceded Landino were consistent in interpreting the literal and moral meaning of the passage: Dante’s Minos was the same son of Zeus and Europa described by Virgil in the *Aeneid* (VI, 568-572); he symbolized Divine Justice.¹⁵ Landino, however, added an entirely innovative and psychological significance to the passage.¹⁶

In his gloss of lines 4-6, Landino argues that Minos stands for the conscience of the damned man:

Nè è altro Minos che el giudicio della conscientia [...] Questo è da Virgilio discripto in forma d’huomo, ma Danthe lo configura chome bestia dandogli la coda et el ringhio, che è proprio del cane. Ma non è senza cagione, perchè intende per Minos la conscientia dell’huomo dannato, cioè che ha già facto habito de’ vitii, perchè chostoro sono rimorsi dalla conscientia, la quale non è più huomo, perchè tale rimordimento non gli rimuta dal male operare. Imperochè hanno spento in loro el lume della ragione, per la quale siamo huomini, ma solamente gli stimola, et fagli diventare furiosi. Onde si può dire che la conscientia ne’ dannati et in quegli che hanno facto habito de’ vitii sia una crudelissima fiera.
(*Comento*, Inf. V, 1-15, ll. 35-45)¹⁷

(Minos is none other than the judgment of conscience [...] Virgil described

¹⁴ Translation by Singleton from Dante, *The Divine Comedy*, pp. 47 and 49. All translations of the *Commedia* are Singleton’s.

¹⁵ Landino relied heavily on Francesco da Buti’s commentary. See Procaccioli’s introduction to the *Comento*, p. 55.

¹⁶ Landino divides the Minos passage into two parts for analysis – lines 1-15, and 16-24 respectively. See the *Comento*, pp. 444-449.

¹⁷ Lines 35-45 of Landino’s comment to *Inferno* V, 1-15 in the *Comento sopra la Comedia*.

him in the form of a man, but Dante portrays him growling like a beast, giving him a tail, like a dog. But this is not without reason, because by Minos he means the conscience of the damned man, that is [those who] ha[ve] made a habit of vices, because those who are no longer men are pricked by their conscience, because the remorse/gnarling does not prevent them from behaving badly because in them the light of reason, which makes us men, is extinguished. It only stimulates them and causes them to become furious/wild. Hence it can be said that the conscience of the damned and in those who made a habit of sins is a very cruel wild beast.)¹⁸

Though Virgil described Minos as a man, writes Landino, Dante presents him as an animal (*bestia*), growling (*el ringhio*) and with tail (*la coda*), because, the conscience of sinners is like a snarling dog (*cane*) that goads them (*perchè chostoro sono rimorsi dalla conscientia*). Sinners are no longer men, Landino clarifies, because the goading/remorse (*rimordimento*) of their conscience failed to change their mind and stop them from behaving badly (*non gli rimuta del male operare*). “*Perchè chostoro sono rimorsi dalla conscientia*,” Landino plays upon the twin uses of the verb ‘*rimordere*’ (*rimorsi*), which signifies ‘to bite again’ or ‘to bite back,’ on the one hand, and indicates the pricking action of the conscience when one feels regret or remorse, on the other. Since the light of reason (*el lume della ragione*) that makes us human (*per la quale siamo huomini*) is extinguished (*spento*) in the damned, explains Landino, the conscience of sinners only stimulates them (*ma solamente gli stimola*), causing them to become furious/wild (*et fagli diventare furiosi*). In sum, the conscience of the damned, those who made a habit of vices, is an incredibly cruel wild beast (*la conscientia ne’ dannati et in quegli che hanno facto habito de’ vitii sia una crudelissima fiera*).

Commenting on the *horribilmente ringhia* of *Inferno* V, 4, Landino specifies that there is nothing that snarls and barks and threatens more than the conscience, which stimulates night and day the minds of those who have committed sins: *nessuna cosa è che più horribilmente ringhi et abbaï et minacci che la conscientia, la quale dì et nocte stimola chi ha commesso el delicto* (ll. 61-63). Landino summarizes: “the conscience reminds you of the sin, reason condemns you, and anxiety afflicts you” (*la conscientia ti ricorda el peccato, et la ragione ti condanna, et l’ansietà t’affligge*, ll. 104-106). This allegorical interpretation on Minos is consistent with Steinberg’s interpretation of Hell in Michelangelo’s *Last Judgment*:

It is not the smart of the sensible body nor fear of the pangs to come that torments, but horror of abysmal guilt [...] the pains of Hell are but the

¹⁸ All translations of Landino are mine.

shame and remorse of the sinner made aware of his state; the undying worm spoken of in the Gospels (Mark 9:44) is not applied physical torture but psychic agony.¹⁹

Landino does not stop at the conscience in his analysis of Dante's Minos. He enters, rather, through key words in the Italian version of the epic, into a discussion on free will and grace in which he clarifies that by the "house of suffering" (*doloroso ospizio*, l.16) Dante intended the act of contemplating vices (*cioè al doloroso albergho, cioè alla contemplatione de' vitii*, ll. 10-11) specifying that man can enter into vices by himself through free will, but he cannot escape them without divine grace: *Può l'huomo per se medesimo col suo libero arbitrio entrare ne' vitii, ma non può senza la divina gratia uscirne* (ll. 16-17). Landino's allegorical interpretation of Charon in the *Divine Comedy* likewise centres upon the matter of free will and its use.

Charon appears in the *Commedia* in *Inferno* III, 82-87 as an old man with white hair in a boat that carries the damned across the Acheron to Hell:

Ed ecco verso noi venir per nave
un vecchio, bianco per antico pelo,
gridando: "Guai a voi, anime prave!
Non isperate mai veder lo cielo;
io vengo per menarvi all'altra riva
nelle tenebre etterne, in caldo e 'n gielo. (*Inf.*, V, 82-87)

(And behold, an old man, his hair white with age, coming towards us in a boat and shouting, "Woe to you, wicked souls! Do not hope to see Heaven ever! I come to carry you to the other shore, into eternal darkness, into fire and cold.)

The demon's eyes are aflame and he beats with his oar those who are slow to cooperate:

Caron dimonio, con occhi di bragia
loro accennando, tutte le raccoglie;
batte col remo qualunque s'adagia. (*Inf.* V, 109-111)

(Charon, his eyes like glowing coals, beckons to them and collects them all, beating with his oar whoever lingers.)

According to Landino, Charon ferrying the damned across the Acheron to the gates of Hell on his boat denoted a comment upon choice and volition:

¹⁹ Steinberg, "The *Last Judgment* as Merciful Heresy," p. 53.

[m]olti pongono Charone per la morte, la quale separando l'anima del peccatore dal corpo la conduce allo 'nferno. Alchuni vogliono che Acheronte sia el disordinato appetito. Ma a me pare dargli el medesimo senso, el quale gli demo ne' nostri dialogi scripti sopra Virgilio. Diremo adunque che intendendosi per Acheronte el moto che fa là l'animo di passare nel peccato, Charone sia el libero arbitrio, et la nave sia la volontà, et el remo la electione. (*Comento, Inf.* III, 82-99, ll. 4-10)

(Many suppose that Charon is death, which separates the soul of the sinner from his body and leads it to Hell. Some state that the Acheron is immoderate appetite. But to me it seems [right to] give him the same meaning that we did in our written dialogues on Virgil. We will say then that the Acheron is the means by which the soul passes into sin, Charon is free will, the ship is volition, and the oar is choice.)

The river Acheron is the impetus that causes the soul/mind to pass into sin. Charon is free will, the boat is volition, and the oar is choice. Charon on his boat acts in accordance with divine will to carry across the river (of temptation leading to sin) those who have *chosen* to exercise their will (volition) knowingly and irresponsibly to commit sin. The flames in his eyes symbolize the misguided will of the damned:

Imperochè el libero arbitrio ha una fiamma, che è el lume dell'intelleto, el quale gli mostra el bene, et un'altra, la quale è l'ardore della concupiscentia posto nella sensualità, et questo lo 'nvita a' mondani dilecti. Dixe Charon dimonio che quello libero arbitrio el quale traporta l'anime allo 'nferno non è el libero arbitrio guidato dalla gratia di Dio, ma quello che è seducto et ingannato dalla diabolica tentatione. (*Comento, Inf.* III, 100-111, ll. 31-36)

(Because free will has [one] flame that is the light of reason, which shows us the good, and another [flame] that is the ardour of concupiscence in sensuality, and that invites it [free will] to worldly offences. Charon says that the free will that transports the soul to Hell is not the free will guided by the grace of God, but the one that is seduced and fooled by diabolical temptation.)

Considering Landino's allegories of Minos and Charon together, the meaning of Michelangelo's Hell scene might well be a reminder of how it is that one arrives in the infernal fires: the misuse of free will leads to a guilty and punishing conscience that after death ultimately becomes punishment in Hell. These themes of conscience, free will, choice and volition are central to Michelangelo's contemporary poetry.

Consider Michelangelo's poem G70 composed in 1534. A sestina, it is

based on the repetition of the six key words—*arbitrio*, *lega*, *cielo*, *disciolse*, *andai*, *venti*—each of which concludes a line of stanza. In this sestina, the poet laments that his free will has been overpowered and that his volition is no longer his own because it has been bound by his beloved (presumably by his own obsession with the young nobleman Tommaso de' Cavalieri). Consider the first two stanzas:

Crudele stella, anzi crudele arbitrio
 che 'l potere e 'l voler mi stringe e lega;
 né si travaglia chiara stella in cielo
 dal giorno [in qua?] che mie vela disciolse,
 ond'io errando e vagabondo andai,
 qual vano legno gira a tutti i venti.
 Or son qui, lasso, e all'incesi venti
 convien varar mie legno, e senza arbitrio
 solcar l'alte onde ove mai sempre andai.
 Così quagiù si prende, preme e lega
 quel che lassù già 'll'alber si disciolse,
 ond'a me tolsi la dote del cielo. (G70, 1-12)

(O cruel star, or rather, cruel will / that constrains and binds my power and my volition! / There's been no bright star working for me in heaven / since the day on which my sail was unfurled, / and so I have wandered about and gone astray / like an empty ship turning in every wind. // Now here I am, weary, and in those enflamed winds, / I must launch my boat, and without any will / plow those same high waves over which I've always gone. / Thus down here is seized (and it crushes and binds) / what earlier was plucked from a tree up there / and by which I've deprived myself of the gift of heaven. //)²⁰

The poet curses first the ruling planet at his birth and then his own will: since he and his free will were born, he has had no star, simply choice (power to choose) and volition (will to choose), which have led him astray. Ship imagery is evoked as a metaphor of the improper use of the will.²¹ The

²⁰ Translation by James Saslow from Buonarroti, *The Poetry of Michelangelo*, p. 177. All translations of Michelangelo's poetry in this article are by Saslow.

²¹ Dante's Minos is located at the entrance to the circle of the lustful. It is here, in canto V of *Inferno*, that we encounter the famous lovers—Paolo and Francesca—whom also Michelangelo included in his *Last Judgment* and whose kiss while reading the romance of Lancelot and Guinevere led to their death at the hands of Francesca's husband and their eternal damnation for not having the time to repent. Their punishment is to be forever bound to each other and buffeted about by winds symbolic of their passion (ll. 28-33, 43-45).

poet suffers from that which was plucked from the tree above—from having picked the apple, that is, having succumbed to temptation—an unmistakable reference to *Genesis* and the devil as serpent. He must continue his journey, though salvation will forever escape him, because his lustful desires bind him to his beloved and so to ultimate and eternal damnation. All three elements of Landino's *allegoresis* of Charon are present in this sestina: free will, choice, volition. Just as Landino had argued that one who enters into sin through his own free will, cannot liberate himself by himself, so the poet affirms that he cannot free himself without outside intervention:

Ché scior non si può chi se stesso lega.
 Così l'atti suo perde chi si lega
 e salvo sé nessun ma' si disciolse. (29-31)

(one who binds himself can't untie himself. // One who binds himself loses control of his own actions, / and no one has ever untied himself by himself.) (p. 177)

This theme of the divided will is central to other poems written by Michelangelo during the poetic season known as the Cavalieri period that began a few years before he accepted the *Last Judgment* commission. Consider, as a paradigmatic example, the sonnet *Vorrei voler* (G87) written in the early 1530s.²² The opening two quatrains describe how the poet's will is perilously divided and how, unable to love the Lord, he knows not where to look for grace:

Vorrei voler, Signor, quel ch'io non voglio:
 tra 'l foco e 'l cor di ghiaccia un vel s'asconde
 che 'l foco ammorza, onde non corrisponde
 la penna all'opre, e fa bugiardo 'l foglio.
 I' t'amo con la lingua, e poi mi doglio
 c'amor non giunge al cor; né so ben onde
 apra l'uscio alla grazia che s'infonde
 nel cor, che scacci ogni spietato orgoglio. (G87, 1-8)

(I wish I wanted, Lord, what I don't want: / between my heart and the fire hides a veil of ice / which moderates the fire, so that my deeds / don't match my pen, and makes my page a liar. // I love you with my tongue, and then

²² For a discussion of the divided will in Michelangelo's poetry, see Mussio, "The Augustinian Conflict in the Lyrics of Michelangelo."

regret / that love doesn't reach my heart; yet I don't know where / I might
open a door to grace, so it can spread / within my heart, and chase out all piti-
less pride. //) (p. 208)

Like a mystic, the poet beseeches the Lord to shed his light—symbol
of grace and the power to illuminate—on him and thus resolve his bind:

Squarcia 'l vel tu, Signor, rompi quel muro
che con la suo durezza ne ritarda
il sol della tuo luce, al mondo spenta!
Manda 'l preditto lume a noi venturo,
alla tuo bella sposa, acciò ch'io arda
il cor senz'alcun dubbio, e te sol senta. (G87, 9-14)

(Rend that veil, you, O Lord, break down that wall / which with its hardness
keeps delayed from us / the sun of your light, extinguished in this world. //
Send that promised light, which we will see someday, / to your beautiful
bride, so that my heart / may burn free from any doubt, and feel only you.
//) (p. 208)

Only the promised light can save Michelangelo.

Having addressed the parallels between Landino's allegorical interpretation of Charon in the *Commedia* and the corresponding themes of free will, choice and damnation in Michelangelo's poetry, let us consider the allegory of Minos and the conscience of the damned man for which he stands. In the canzone G51 written at the beginning of the 1530s, Michelangelo as poet lamented being ill-prepared for divine judgment and of being betrayed by his own conscience (symbolized by the mirror), which failed to save him from choosing sin though he was ultimately free to have chosen otherwise:

Oilmè, olimè, ch'i' son tradito
da' giorni mie fugaci e dallo specchio
che 'l ver dice a ciascun che fiso 'l guarda!
Così n'avvien, chi troppo al fin ritarda,
com'ho fatt'io, che 'l tempo m'è fuggito:
si trova come me 'n un giorno vecchio.
Né mi posso pentir, né m'apparecchio,
né mi consiglio con la morte appresso.
[...]

I' vo lasso, oilmè, né so ben dove;
anzi temo, ch'il veggio, e 'l tempo andato
mel mostra, né mi val che gli occhi chiuda.

Or che 'l tempo la scorza cangia e muda,
 la morte e l'alma insieme ognor fan pruove,
 la prima e la seconda, del mie stato.
 E s'io non sono errato,
 (che Dio 'l voglia ch'io sia),
 l'eterna pena mia
 nel mal libero inteso oprato vero
 veggio, Signor, né so quel ch'io mi spero. (G51, 1-8, 23-33)

(Alas, alas, I have been betrayed / by my fleeting days and by the mirror / that speaks the truth to all who look hard at it! / That's what happens when one delays too long at the end, / as I have done, while time has fled from me: / he finds himself in one day, as I have, old. / And I can neither repent, nor prepare myself, / nor ask for guidance, with death so near to me. [...] So, alas, I go wearily on, but hardly know where; / or rather, fear to know – for I see it, my past / shows it to me, and closing my eyes can't help. / Now that time is changing and sloughing off my hide, / death and my soul are still battling, / one against the other, for my final state. / And if I am not mistaken / (God grant that I may be), / I see, Lord, my eternal penalty / for having, though free, poorly grasped or practiced the truth, / and I don't know what I can hope for.//) (pp. 135-136)

While in canzone G51 it is the poet's imminent death rather than the Apocalypse that he treats, one immediately identifies in the reference to time sloughing off the poet's hide what James Saslow termed "an anticipation" of the flayed skin of Saint Bartholomew upon which Michelangelo imposed his own portrait in the *Last Judgment*.²³ In fact, Leo Steinberg, drawing a line along the face of the flayed skin in the painting discovered that extending the line in both directions, revealed a personal "mystical itinerary" in the *Last Judgment* that extends from the serpent biting Minos's genitals, through Charon and the *disperato* or condemned one (whose thigh bears snake marks), through Christ's wound and the diameter of the crown of thorns to the head of Christ nailed to the cross.²⁴ The alignment of these figures seems too precise to constitute sheer coincidence, especially when one considers that the ideas illustrated in the *Last Judgment* correspond to those Michelangelo explored in his poetry.²⁵ Indeed, Berthold

²³ Saslow in Buonarroti, *The Poetry of Michelangelo*, p. 136

²⁴ Steinberg, "The Line of Fate," p. 431.

²⁵ This is not to suggest that the Hell scene of the *Last Judgment* represents a personal autobiographical expression so much as the articulation of a *topos*, the journey of everyman as sinner as it was understood during Michelangelo's time. This comment may be applied to much (though not all) of Michelangelo's poetry.

Hub argued that in the *Last Judgment* Michelangelo depicted ascension more so than resurrection. Drawing on Michelangelo's poetry and the mystical connection between love and death, Hub convincingly argued that "the aspect of salvation in Christ's resurrection is not only the traditional pledge of our all redemption [sic] but rather a subjective allegory of his own personal experiences and aspirations in love."²⁶ In Michelangelo's fresco, the gates to Hell are the pangs of conscience that result from choosing or desiring wrongly, and so the Hell scene in the *Last Judgment* is a borrowed allegory of misdirected free will and the guilty conscience that any educated male at the time should have been familiar with. Since the role of tempter is the only one Satan plays in a soul's journey to and through the various entrance[s] to Hell (symbolized in the fresco by the cave, Minos, and Charon), he appears in the *Last Judgment*, symbolically, as the serpent in the garden.

Steinberg identified in a much more general way the parallels between Michelangelo's *Last Judgment* and his poetry that this paper examined in detail:

The artist himself, as his poems attest, felt unfit for salvation, yet hoped for remission. As a believer, he lived his later years in the throes of uncertainty, between hope sprung from his knowledge of Christ and the consciousness of deserved reflection flowing continually from self-knowledge. And this dualism seems to me to have found expression in the fresco. I refer to the contrast between the depicted experience of the condemned and the response it elicits [...] Charon's passengers undergo varied emotions – from horror to resignation, from howling despair or shame to calm acquiescence, and from full self-absorption to fraternal aid. The one thought shared by all is that they believe themselves to be verging on Hell, and on a Hell self-inflicted. Self-knowledge attained [...] they see only their earned, imminent exile.²⁷

Steinberg's view is corroborated by psychological and psychoanalytic interpretations of Michelangelo's *Last Judgment* and of drawings the artist produced during the same time period that he was preparing sketches for the fresco.

Robert S. Liebert provided one of the most detailed analyses of the intrapsychic tensions evidenced in the *Last Judgment*.²⁸ Arguing that Michelangelo "successfully masked his own private drama" in the fresco,

²⁶ Hub, "...e fa dolce la morte," p. 107.

²⁷ Steinberg, "A corner of the *Last Judgment*," pp. 259-260.

²⁸ Liebert, *Michelangelo*, pp. 331-360.

Liebert observed that the painting contained “not merely a judgment of the external world” (p. 341), but that it “also represented a bitterness of a more inner-directed nature” (p. 345). For Liebert, “the question of why Michelangelo felt that he was vulnerable or deserving of damnation is central to the painting” (pp. 358-359). Liebert asserts that through the central figures of Christ, the Virgin and Saint Bartholomew (representing Father/male Other, Mother, and the artist respectively), Michelangelo enacted the drama of “his own inner conflict between forbidden impulses and guilt, reproach and fear of retribution” (p. 355).²⁹ In Liebert’s assessment, “homosexual impulses” were an almost certain element of the artist’s intrapsychic tensions in general, and of the “inner dialectic that underlies the very center of the drama which constitutes the center of the *Last Judgment*” in particular (p. 360). Together with matricidal and patricidal rage (pp. 359-360), these homosexual impulses contributed to a guilty conscience and “demanded a reduction in tension through retributive fantasies of damnation” such as the kind suggested by the flayed skin of the excoriated Saint bearing the portrait of Michelangelo” (p. 360).

The forbidden impulse of homoerotic desire has received the most comprehensive scholarly treatment of the plausible causes of Michelangelo’s self-reproach (or in the case of the *Last Judgment* of his self-damnation). It is the only one to have been almost universally accepted. In Saslow’s words, Michelangelo’s “yearning for mystical union with a powerful and supportive man was the distinctive and dominating passion of his life.”³⁰ However sacred or profane the expressions to which the drive for union with an idealized/archetypal male figure gave rise, it is indisputable that the artist’s homosexual yearnings engendered a level of subjective distress so significant (and so conscious) as to be pressingly evident in the artist’s letters and poetry and indirectly attested in letters and texts by contemporaries. Psychoanalytic studies of Michelangelo’s artistic production during the 1530s (when the artist was working on the *Last Judgment*) focus on his relationship to Cavalieri, the drawings he gave to the young nobleman (or that were inspired by him), and the theme of sacred and profane love. Saslow’s seminal study on the myth of Ganymede in the Renaissance is of particular relevance for its treatment of the operation of homosexual desire within Michelangelo’s psyche and as it is reflected and portrayed in his artistic output.

²⁹ This particular argument, which develops Wind’s thesis about the myth of Apollo and Marsyas as a key to interpreting the Apollo-like Christ and the flayed Saint Bartholomew, begins on p. 347 and concludes on p. 357.

³⁰ Saslow, *Ganymede in the Renaissance*, p. 52.

In his chapter on Michelangelo in *Ganymede in the Renaissance*, Saslow analyses six of Michelangelo's drawings in the context of the artist's contemporary relationship with Cavalieri (*Ganymede*, *Tityos*, *Fall of Phaethon*, the *Children's Bacchanal*, *Archers Shooting at a Herm*, and *The Dream*), highlighting the psychological dynamics at play.³¹ On the one hand, the artist's letters, poems, and drawings for Cavalieri "constitute a single, multilayered homage to the ideals of Platonic love as exemplified for Michelangelo" by Cavalieri, who seems to have "satisfied" the poet's "deep longing for an earthly love that foreshadows the divine" (p. 28). On the other hand, the drawings are also characterized by their eroticism. As an example, the *Ganymede* that was offered privately to Cavalieri and that is supposed to symbolize the poet's feelings for the young man possessed a dual iconographical significance: though the myth of Ganymede represented (mystical ascent through) Platonic love and it could thus denote longing for divine union (especially in humanist circles of the Quattrocento), it also served as "an embodiment of homosexuality" and was widely known as an "archetype of the sexual attraction of a mature man to a youth" (p. 29). The juxtaposition of sacred and profane longing in the presentation drawing for Cavalieri is not without tension: Michelangelo's *Ganymede* "is shadowed [...] by the darker emotions of ambivalence, guilt, and fear of punishment" (p. 33). The *Ganymede* is not the sole work to embody this intrapsychic conflict nor is it only by considering the Cavalieri drawings in relation to each other that the themes of desire and guilt emerge. As Saslow himself notes, *The Dream* also narrates the artist's "awareness of the conflict between sexual temptations and the dictates of divine will" (p. 45).

Of the six Cavalieri drawings, *The Dream* (1533) makes the most comprehensive autobiographical statement. Maria Ruvoldt's iconographic analysis of the drawing, which she believes to have been prepared for presentation to Cavalieri, reveals not only how conscious Michelangelo was of his conflicting desires for mystical and homoerotic union, but how aware he was of his own melancholic nature and its attendant strengths and dangers. *The Dream* features a nude youth (symbol of the human mind/soul)

³¹ Saslow is not the first to see inner conflict arising from homosexual impulses as a dialectic underpinning drawings the artist presented to Cavalieri. Liebert himself makes similar connections in his treatment of the *Last Judgment*. Saslow's study is nevertheless the first detailed, comprehensive analysis of the phenomenon. His major contribution is in considering the drawings not only as discrete works, but also in relation to each other (pp. 34-47) and as they reflect the artist's intrapsychic dynamics (pp. 51-59).

reclining against a ball (symbolizing the Earth) that sits atop a box on which the male is perched and that contains masks, including a self-portrait of Michelangelo. An angelic visitor descends towards the reclined nude with a trumpet aimed at the young man's forehead and in the background clouds are peppered with illustrations of vices, particularly erotic ones. As "an allegory of the human soul awakened to virtue from vice,"³² the image portrays the nude youth awakening from "sleep to melancholic rapture" upon sight of the approaching angelic trumpeter. Though the iconography of the drawing lends itself to multiple interpretations relevant to Michelangelo as a man and artist (such as a consideration of the nude as a dreamer capable of saintly visions and possessing strong powers of invention), the young nude clearly stands for melancholy—for the melancholic temperament and for "melancholic inspiration as a blend of positive gifts and dangerous temptations" (p. 148). As Ruvoldt summarizes, Michelangelo's *The Dream* depicts the self-portrait of "a melancholic figure simultaneously blessed by divine inspiration and tempted by sinful inclinations" of an erotic nature (p. 152).

Michelangelo's artistic productions, his letters and his poetry from the 1530s all reflect deep changes at work within the poet, whose father's death in 1531 (plausibly) catalyzed a series of inner transformations that manifested in the successful establishment on the part of the artist of the deep, sustaining relationships that he shared with Cavalieri and Colonna and that became increasing Platonic as Colonna came to hold a powerful position in the affective world of the artist. Liebert noted that Michelangelo's thought changed drastically between 1534 and 1537.³³ John E. Gedo likewise observed that Michelangelo's character "underwent important changes when he was about 60 years of age" and that "this revolution in Michelangelo's inner being took place while he was painting the immense fresco."³⁴ Saslow argued that the death of Michelangelo's father presented the artist "with an opportunity for psychic regeneration by transformation into a new identity"³⁵ that the poet accepted. While for Liebert, the *Last Judgment* constitutes "a genuine act of confessional piety," for Gedo, it is rather "an avowal of Michelangelo's conversion."³⁶ Though none of these observations prove the hypothesis that Michelangelo drew his iconography from Landino, they do suggest that a psychological interpretation of Hell

³² Ruvoldt, *The Italian Renaissance Imagery of Inspiration* p. 142.

³³ Liebert, *Michelangelo*, p. 356.

³⁴ Gedo, "Mourning, Perversion and Apotheosis," p. 296.

³⁵ Saslow, *Ganymede in the Renaissance*, p. 52.

³⁶ Liebert, *Michelangelo*, p. 345; Gedo, "Mourning, Perversion and Apotheosis," p. 297.

is warranted. Future studies of Landino's commentary on the *Commedia* and of Michelangelo's art may well provide more detailed proof of my hypothesis that Michelangelo drew from Landino in elaborating the Hell scene of his iconographically innovative *Last Judgment*.³⁷

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³⁷ Shrimplin-Evangelidis suggested that the Christ portrayed in the *Last Judgment* may also be inspired by Dante's *Commedia*, by *Paradiso* and the deity as the sun in particular, but I have not found any specific links between Landino's commentary to those passages and Michelangelo's handling of them ("Michelangelo's Sun-Symbolism," pp. 627-629). Landino's approach to each *cantica* was different, and the style of psychological interpretations of the *Commedia* are mostly prevalent in his exegeses of *Inferno*.

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