CHAPTER VIII

MICHAEL ANGELO AS POET

SOMETHING of the rugged force which breathes from all his sculpture is to be found in Michael Angelo's poetry: at times it is as harsh and strained as the attitudes of some of his figures in *The Last Judgement*, at others it has all the depth of feeling and pathos of his *Pietà*; whilst some of the late sonnets might have been written by a fanatical priest.

After his death the manuscript of his poems went to his nephew, Lionardo Buonarroti, whose son, Michael Angelo Buonarroti, in turn inherited them. This great-nephew of the sculptor was himself a poet; and, after preparing the poems, published them in 1623. But in many instances they were not the poems the elder Michael Angelo had sent to his intimate friends, the original meaning of many passages having been deliberately altered by mutilation and transposition. In his attempt to elucidate and refine the expressions permitted to poetry in an age earlier and less prudish than his own, the younger Michael Angelo only succeeded in obscuring what he attempted to explain; so much so that Wordsworth, after translating a few of the sonnets, wrote: "I can translate, and have translated, two books of Ariosto at the rate of nearly one hundred lines a day; but so much meaning has been put by Michael Angelo

into so little room, and that meaning sometimes so excellent in itself, that I found the difficulty of translating him insurmountable." A book on Michael Angelo, "considered as a philosophic poet," based on the great-nephew's presentation of the poems, was published by John E. Taylor in 1840, but in England his poetic work was little known. In France, however, there were two translations, one, in prose, by Lannau-Rolland, and the other, in verse, by Roland Saint Cyr de Rayssac; but as these were both taken from incorrect versions, they have little or no value. And it was not until Signor Guasti, of Florence, had obtained access to the original manuscripts and published his now famous edition of the poems in 1863, that the world became aware of the fraud practised upon posterity by the sculptor's great-nephew. "We read now for the first time," writes John Addington Symonds, "what the greatest man of the sixteenth century actually wrote, and are able to enter, without the interference of a fictitious veil, into the shrine of his own thought and feeling. His sonnets form the best commentary on Michael Angelo's life, and on his sublime ideal of art." Symonds' translation of poems from this edition gave those unable to read the original the opportunity of appreciating the deep poetic feeling of the creator of the *David* and *Il Penseroso*.

Michael Angelo's fervent admiration of Dante found expression in two of the earliest of his sonnets, which are supposed to have been written when he himself was in exile. In the second he bitterly reproaches his beloved city of Florence:

> "Thankless I call her, and to her own pain
> The nurse of fell mischance; for sign take this,

That ever to the best she deals more scorn:
Among a thousand proofs let one remain;
Though ne'er was fortune more unjust than his,
His equal or his better ne'er was born."[1]

The two following sonnets, by reason of their invectives against the Papal misrule, were clearly written in Rome, and probably at the time when he was fretting under the vacillations of Julius II. in the matter of the tomb, and when his naturally austere temperament was being daily outraged by the contradiction between the expressed religion and the political ambitions of the Papacy:

"Here helms and swords are made of chalices:
The blood of Christ is sold so much the quart:
His cross and thorns are spears and shields; and short
Must be the time ere even his patience cease.
Nay, let him come no more to raise the fees
Of this foul sacrilege beyond report!
For Rome still flays and sells Him at the court
Where paths are closed to virtue's fair increase."

But to those who study Michael Angelo as an artist—either in marble or on canvas—those sonnets in which he takes his art as his theme, showing how friendship was often a source of inspiration, will prove the most interesting. As, for instance, in the following, written, probably, after the death of Vittoria Colonna:

"When my rude hammer to the stubborn stone
Gives human shape, now that, now this, at will,
Following his hand who wields and guides it still,
It moves upon another's feet alone.
But that which dwells in Heaven, the world doth fill
With beauty by pure motions of its own;
And since tools fashion tools which else were none,
Its life makes all that lives with living skill.

[1] My quotations are all taken from Symonds' translation.

"Now, for that every stroke excels the more
The higher at the forge it doth ascend,
Her soul that fashioned mine hath sought the skies:
Wherefore unfinished I must meet my end,
If God, the great artificer, denies
That aid which was unique on earth before."

In the first stanza is Michael Angelo's declaration of his ideal in art. Not the ideal too widely held by modern artists, that the man should impress his personality upon his material, creating beauty, strength, as it were, in his own image, but that beauty lies hidden in everything, and that man is guided by a higher power than art to call it forth into being. Again, in another sonnet, he shows that "just as a sculptor hews from a block of marble the form that lies concealed within, so the lover has to extract from his lady's heart the life or death of his soul," reiterating in the first four lines his leading principle, that man alone cannot create beauty:

"The best of artists hath no thought to show
Which the rough stone in its superfluous shell
Doth not include: to break the marble spell
Is all the hand that serves the brain can do.
The ill I shun, the good I seek; even so
In thee, fair lady, proud, ineffable,
Lies hidden: but the art I wield so well
Works adverse to my wish, and lays me low.

"Therefore not love, nor thy transcendent face,
Nor cruelty, nor fortune, nor disdain,
Cause my mischance, nor fate, nor destiny;
Since in thy heart thou carriest death and grace,
Enclosed together, and my worthless brain
Can draw forth only death to feed on me."

The sonnets also show with what "religious fervour" Michael Angelo worshipped intellectual beauty, and

how, as Symonds says, "he alone in that age of sensuality and animalism pierced through the form of flesh and sought the divine idea it imprisoned." The following, with others, was addressed to Tommaso Cavalieri, a Roman nobleman, somewhat in the manner of those addressed by Shakespeare to Mr. W. H.:

"As one who will reseek her home of light,
Thy form immortal to this prison-house
Descended, like an angel piteous,
To heal all hearts and make the whole world bright.
'Tis this that thralls my heart in love's delight,
Not thy clear face of beauty glorious;
For he who harbours virtue, still will choose
To love what neither years nor death can blight.

"So fares it ever with things high and rare,
Wrought in the sweat of nature; heaven above
Showers on their birth the blessings of her prime;
Nor hath God deigned to show Himself elsewhere
More clearly than in human forms sublime;
Which, since they image Him, alone I love."

Tommaso Cavalieri was one of the friends at the death-bed of Michael Angelo, and writing of him Varchi says: "I discovered, besides incomparable personal beauty, so much charm of nature, such excellent abilities, and such a graceful manner, that he deserved, and still deserves, to be the better loved the more he is known."

Perhaps the most beautiful of all the sonnets is that beginning, "Mentre m'attrista," which is at once a prayer, a hymn, and a benediction:

"'Mid weariness and woe I find some cheer
In thinking of the past when I recall
My weakness and my sins and reckon all
The vain expense of days that disappear:

This cheers by making, ere I die, more clear
The frailty of what men delight miscall;
But saddens me to think how rarely fall
God's grace and mercies in life's latest year.
For though Thy promises our faith compel,
Yet, Lord, what men shall venture to maintain
That pity will condone our long neglect?
Still, from Thy blood poured forth we know full well.
How without measure was Thy martyr's pain,
How measureless the gifts we dare expect."

And this last, which might be called Michael Angelo's farewell to the world, to which he had set a standard in art which none have ever reached since his death, is of pathetic beauty:

"Now hath my life across a stormy sea
Like a frail bark reached that wide port where all
Are bidden ere the final reckoning fall,
Of good or evil for eternity.
Now know I well how that fond phantasy
Which made my soul the worshipper and thrall
Of earthly art is vain; how criminal
Is that which all men seek unwillingly.
Those amorous thoughts which were so lightly dressed,
What are they when the double death is nigh?
The one I know for sure, the other dread.
Painting nor sculpture now can lull to rest
My soul that turns to His great love on high,
Whose arms to clasp us on the cross were spread."

And supreme as he had been in sculpture, great in painting, colossal in architecture, and remarkable amongst the poets of his time, with these thoughts ended Michael Angelo's long life of toil and devotion to the highest forms of art.

CHAPTER IX

CONTEMPORARY PORTRAITS OF MICHAEL ANGELO IN SCULPTURE AND PAINTING

ACCORDING to the domestic records of the Buonarroti family, Daniele da Volterra made three casts from the head of the dead sculptor, two of which he is supposed to have given to Michael Angelo's nephew Lionardo, keeping the third one himself. It is not improbable that other casts, besides these three, may have been taken, and we may justly believe that all the authentic bronze heads of Michael Angelo—of which eight are known to exist—are replicas from the one death-mask. One of these bronze heads—of life size—stands in the Sindaco's reception hall at the Palace of the Conservatori on the Capitol at Rome, upon a slab of *bigio morato*. It is ascribed, but without any proof, to Michael Angelo himself; and is probably the work of his pupil, Guglielmo della Porta. According to Vasari, however, it was the work of Daniele da Volterra, for after describing the medal made by Leone, Vasari says: "Of Michael Angelo we have no other portrait but two in painting, one by the hand of Bugiardini, and the other by Jacopo del Conte, with one in bronze in full relief [by "full relief" Vasari probably meant a bust] by Daniello Ricciarelli."

The bronze bust of Michael Angelo with drapery on

the shoulder, and with the head bending forward, in the Bargello Museum at Florence, belonged to his servant, Antonio del Franzese, and was probably worked from one of the death-masks. But the most remarkable of these busts of Michael Angelo for its lifelike character is that in the Castello Museum at Milan, modelled by Giuseppe Bossi. Besides these, there is the bust in the Louvre, generally known as the Piot bust of Michael Angelo; the draped bust which forms the centre of the artist's tomb in the church of Santa Croce at Florence; that in the Casa Buonarroti in Florence attributed to the sculptor, Marcello Venusti; and the strikingly lifelike bust, in bronze, presented by Mr. Woodburn to the Ashmolean Museum at Oxford, of which a photograph has been taken for this book by the kind permission of the curator.

The bust on the master's tomb is carved in marble, and, according to Vasari, was the work of Giovanni Battista Lorenzi, and was taken from the death-mask, "che fu ricavato della maschera di lui dopo la sua morte." The bust at Oxford is probably one of the originals cast by Daniello Ricciarelli. Vasari also states that a medal of Michael Angelo was made by the Cavaliere Leone, the portrait being "very lifelike," and "on the reverse of which and to humour him, he represented a blind man led by a dog, with these words around, 'Docebo iniquos vias tuas, et impii ad te convertentur,' and because the phrase pleased Michael Agnolo greatly, he gave Leone a model in wax by his own hand of *Hercules crushing Antaeus*, with some of his drawings." Many copies were made of this portrait medal, which is in bronze, circular in shape, and two and a quarter inches

in diameter. The signature of the artist, "Leo," appears beneath the bust, and within a beaded edging is the following: "MICHAELANGELUS. BONARROTUS. FLO. R. AES. ANN. 88." On the reverse, also inscribed within a beaded edging, is "DOCEBO INIQUOS VIAS TVAS ET IMPII AD TE CONVERTENTUR," taken from the fifty-first Psalm, the thirteenth verse: "Then shall I teach thy ways unto the wicked, and sinners shall be converted unto thee."

There is a unique specimen of this medal in silver in the Victoria and Albert Museum, and an inferior one, in bronze, in the British Museum. A model of the medal, in coloured wax, was given to the latter museum by Mr. Fortnum; it is elaborately modelled, and is a trifle smaller than the original. Although the artist's signature, "Leo," does not appear on the wax model, it is undoubtedly by the same hand. At the back of the wax model the following inscription is written on a piece of paper:

RITRATTO
DI
MICHELANGIOLO
BUONARŌTI, FATTO,
DAL NATURALE DA
LEONE ARETINO
SUO AMICO

'I am sending to your lordship, by the favour of Lord Carlo Visconti, a great man in this city, and beloved by his Holiness, four medals of your portrait; two in silver, and two in bronze. I should have done so earlier but for my occupation with the monument (of Medeghino), and

[British Museum

MEDAL OF MICHAEL ANGELO BY LEONE

for the certainty I feel that you will excuse my tardiness, if not a sin of ingratitude in me. The one inclosed in the little box has been worked up to the finest polish. I beg you to accept and keep this for the love of me. With the other three you will do as you think best. I say this because ambition has prompted me to send copies into Spain and Flanders, as I have also done to Rome and other places. I call it ambition, forasmuch as I have gained an overplus of benefits by acquiring the goodwill of your lordship, whom I esteem so highly. Have I not received in less than three months two letters written to me by you, divine man; and couched not in terms fit for a servant of good heart and will, but for one beloved as a son? I pray you to go on loving me, and when occasion serves, to favour me; and to Signor Tomao dei Cavalieri say that I shall never be unmindful of him."

From this letter, which is dated 14th March, 1561, and written in Milan, it seems clear that Leone made his medal at Rome in 1560, that it was cast at Milan, and sent to Michael Angelo early in the spring of the following year. And the number of reproductions of this medal in various collections is explained by Leone's own statement that he had sent replicas to other countries. It is believed that Leone's original model of the profile, which he made from life, and from which he made the medallion, is the one in the Victoria and Albert Museum. J. A. Symonds describes it as "an exquisite cameo in flesh-coloured wax upon an oval black ground." It is framed in gilt metal and is glazed, with the Italian inscription quoted above, on the back, which translated, runs "Portrait of Michelangiolo Buonarroti taken from the life, by

Leone Aretino, his friend." "Comparing the relief in wax," says Symonds, "with the medal, we cannot doubt that both represent the same man; and only cavillers will raise the question whether both were fashioned by one hand. Such discrepancies as occur between them are just what we should expect in the work of a craftsman who sought first to obtain an accurate likeness of his subject, and then treated the same subject on the lines of numismatic art. The wax shows a lean and subtly-moulded face—the face of a delicate old man, wiry and worn with years of deep experience. The hair on head and beard is singularly natural; one feels it to be characteristic of the person. Transferring this portrait to bronze necessitated a general broadening of the masses, with a coarsening of the outline to obtain bold relief. Something of the purest truth has been sacrificed to plastic effect by thickening the shrunken throat; and this induced a corresponding enlargement of the occiput for balance."

Another medal of Michael Angelo, closely recalling that of Leone, appears in Litta's great book on the illustrious families of Italy. It has nothing upon the reverse, and is three and one-eighth inches in diameter. A third one, also in bronze, presents the master's face at an earlier period of his life. This is signed with the letters A. S., and bears Michael Angelo's name around it. On the reverse, the three sister Arts are represented at a table, on the sides of which three leaves are intertwined, the device adopted by the great sculptor. Later in life, according to Vasari, he changed these three wreaths into three crowns. The motto, placed at the top, on this medal runs, "Labor omnia Vincit." In the British

Museum there is a medal in lead, on the obverse of which appears Michael Angelo's profile; whilst on the reverse, placed amidst implements for painting, sculpture and architecture, is a representation of the Tower of the Belvedere. There is also in existence a handsome medal, by Santorelli, of which a bronze-gilt copy is in the British Museum, with bust of the master, in profile, on the obverse: this medal is likewise figured in Litta's book. Finally, there is a smaller medal with Michael Angelo's head in profile, looking to the left.

Among contemporary portraits and engravings of Michael Angelo one of the most authentic is that introduced by his pupil, Daniele da Volterra, into a group of figures of the Apostles, in the foreground of his fresco of *The Assumption of the Blessed Virgin* in the Chapel of the Crucifix in the Church of the Trinità dei Monti, at Rome. The master appears on the right hand of the spectator, clothed in red, and standing by a column, with outstretched arm. Michael Angelo's head is also introduced into a copy of his own *Last Judgement*, painted by Marcello Venusti, and now in the Museum at Naples: there is an engraving of this portrait in Duppa's life of the master. The life-size portrait of Michael Angelo, full-face, in the Casa Buonarroti, is supposed to have been painted by himself, but neither of those in the Gallery of the Uffizi or in the Capitol at Rome can be ascribed to him. There is a tradition that he sat for his portrait to Giuliano Bugiardini, and that when, at the end of two hours, the artist asked him to look "on his other self on the canvas," Michael Angelo exclaimed, on seeing the representation of himself, "Che diavolo

avete fatto? Voi mi avete depinto con uno degli occhi in una tempia."

It is not known what became of this portrait, nor of one painted by Jacopo del Conte.

Of the contemporary engraved portraits of Michael Angelo, there is one, with his head, placed in a circle with a long legend below stating his age to be seventy-two, and dated MDXLVI, which Bartsch says is by Bonasoni, drawing his deduction from the signature "Julu. B. F." This is copied in Harford's "Life of Michael Angelo." There is a powerful engraving of the master, in a plain oval, dated 1545, when he was seventy-one. Besides these there is the three-quarter engraving by Giorgio Ghisi, also in an oval, with a long Latin inscription; it is signed "G. M. F.": Ghisi being called "il Mantuano." This engraving is very rare; but there is a specimen at both the British and Victoria and Albert Museums. Another engraving, with an ornamental oval border, representing Buonarroti in a fur cap, is attributed by Passerini to Ghisi. The engraving, referred to by G. Grau, in which Michael Angelo is represented as wearing a felt hat, is supposed to be the work of Francesco d'Ollanda. In Count Luigi Passerini's work, entitled "La Bibliographia di Michelangelo Buonarrotti," is the following list of engraved portraits of the master belonging to the sixteenth century.

1. By an unknown engraver, in imitation of the one by G. Ghisi, dated 1556.
2. A portrait, engraved by "Lewis G.," after a pen drawing attributed to Baccio Bandinelli.
3. A whole-length of Michael Angelo, seated near a window, inscribed: "Michael Ang. Bonarotus. Florentinus: Sculptor. Optimus. Anno Aetatis suae 23." [Of this there is a copy in the Print Room at the British Museum.]
4. Michael Angelo in his study surrounded by statues. Inscribed: "A. S. (Antonio Salamanca), 1548." [There is a copy of this very rare engraving in the British Museum.]
5. A full-face, in a fur cap. Dated LXXIV. By Adone de Mantova. This engraving was reprinted by Niccolo Nelli in 1550.
6. A portrait, engraved by Lamberto Susterman, dated 1546. Inscribed: "Michael Angelius Buonarroti: Nobilis: Florentium: Anno Aet. LXXI."

There exists a majolica plate of the sixteenth century, upon which Michael Angelo is represented in half-length, in profile, wearing a wide-awake hat and long cloak. In one hand he holds a handkerchief, the other rests upon his leather belt. Wreaths are placed on either side of the figures: this plate is said to have been copied from a drawing in the Escurial.

On the whole, I think, the most interesting and probably the most lifelike portrait of Michael Angelo, next to the busts at the Louvre, at Milan, and at Oxford, is the oil painting of the great sculptor in an embroidered cloak, now in the Capitol at Rome.

CHAPTER X

THE INFLUENCE OF MICHAEL ANGELO

WITH Michael Angelo died the Renaissance in Italy. His art had been the crown and flower of the most fecund period of European culture since the days of ancient Greece. Michael Angelo cannot be placed in comparison with any other artist, for he stands supreme, high above all, and dwarfing the rest, like some mighty mountain amongst lesser heights. Yet it cannot be denied that, on the whole, the influence of this great genius was harmful to art. It is true that he founded no school, but he had legions of imitators who, as is always the case, exaggerated his faults and caricatured his style; and in the course of time these apings of his manner went from bad to worse until, in the painted ceilings of Verrio and Laguerre, we see the very bathos of a style which, its badness notwithstanding, can be traced to the influence of the great frescoes of *The Last Judgement* and those upon the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel.

The French critic, Taine, has written that the four men exalted beyond all others to such a degree as to seem to belong to a race above ordinary mortals are Dante, Shakespeare, Beethoven, and Michael Angelo. And I think it is not too much praise of this last to say, that of the four he was the most astonishing in grasp of intellect and in actual physical performance, combining as he

did talents that placed him first amongst all painters, sculptors, and architects.

And yet, in reading the story of that crowded existence, how tragic it is to find that, with all his talents, the man himself was one of the saddest and loneliest of mankind. In one of his letters he says that it would have been better for him if he spent his life in making matches instead of statues. There are passages in other letters that read like the lamentations of Job, weary of all earthly things: and yet the man who wrote them was honoured by all his countrymen, princes stood uncovered before him, and the Pope made him sit upon his right hand: the possession of his slightest works was eagerly competed for by kings and princes, but not until life was ebbing from him did Buonarroti seem to find peace, when he turned his thought to his Heavenly Father and to the Divine Compassion which, as he wrote in one of the most beautiful and almost the last of his sonnets, "opens its arms on the Cross to embrace me."

Michael Angelo's colossal figure has been aptly said by a French art writer, Charles Clement, to close the great art movement inaugurated in Italy by Dante and Giotto, and carried on by the Orgagnas, the Brunelleschis and Leonardo da Vinci.

Although surpassed by some of his contemporaries in some of the fields of art in which he laboured, his sombre and tremendous genius marks all his creations. He had no ancestors in his line of art; nor had he descendants, for he was one of those exceptional beings who are beyond rivalry or comparison; of Michael Angelo may be said "prolem sine matre creatam," and with him died the greatest of all geniuses. "My science," the master

once declared, "will create an ignorant rabble of followers," and he is not responsible for those who failed so piteously to imitate and follow in his steps.

Painter, sculptor, architect, engineer, poet and patriot, Michael Angelo takes his place amongst the Dantes, the Brunelleschis, the Raphaels, and the Leonardos; and of them all he is the greatest, the most amazing genius of the modern world.

CATALOGUE OF THE WORKS OF MICHAEL ANGELO

Arranged according to the Galleries in which they are contained

PAINTINGS.

BRITISH ISLES.

NATIONAL GALLERY.

THE ENTOMBMENT OF OUR LORD. Unfinished. 5 ft. 3 in. × 4 ft. 11 in. [790.] (See p. 60.)

THE MADONNA AND INFANT CHRIST, ST. JOHN THE BAPTIST AND ANGELS. 3 ft. 4 in. × 2 ft. 6 in. [809.] (See p. 59.)

A DREAM OF HUMAN LIFE. Painted from a design by Michael Angelo by one of his scholars. 2 ft. 1 in. × 1 ft. 9 in. [8.] (See p. 74.)

HOLKHAM HALL.

Copy in grisaille of the celebrated Cartoon of Pisa, which was never finished, and was eventually destroyed and the fragments scattered. From this copy the engraving of Schiavonetti was made. (See pp. 16, 17.)

ROYAL ACADEMY.

Very fine copy of the Cartoon of the Leda. (See p. 72.)