

Filippo Tuena
Michelangelo



Michelangelo is a thirty-year literary struggle with Michelangelo Buonarroti's biography, creations, and imagination. A work made up of works: the result of the confrontation between a writer and his life-long artistic obsession.

To contain in words a figure like Michelangelo, elusive and statuesque, luminous and fleeting, is in itself an impossible project: neither the polished whiteness of the essay nor the rutilant elasticity of the novel can succeed in doing so; nor can the lapidary testimonies of the archives. The only way to tell Michelangelo's story is to create a 'Michelangelesque' book, composed of elaborate pages and notes, documents and fiction, catalogued manuscripts and invented dialogues. Something that has within it the

resoluteness of the *Last Judgment* and the hinted features of the *Prisoners*.

In this monumental work, Filippo Tuena realises this ambition, pulling together a novel about the artist's last years with a hypothesis about his anorexia, his annotated letters with a comparison between his words and the silence of his contemporary Raphael, and the story of the great failure of the construction site of the Medici Chapel in the Basilica of San Lorenzo with a reflection on his "broken works" – the disfigured or broken statues and the unfinished ones such as the *Pietà Rondanini*. Tuena guides us on a flâneuristic and personal pilgrimage into and around the myth of Michelangelo, which for more than five hundred years has continued to fascinate and intoxicate the world with ecstasy and torment, yearning and genius, dream and sin. A titanic work that leads us to contemplate Michelangelo's immense shadow from a place outside of time and space: the point where the hands of creator and creature touch and where things end without really ever ending.

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Filippo Tuena is a writer and art critic. He won the Grinzane Cavour Prize with *Tutti i sognatori* (1999) and the Bagutta Prize with *Le variazioni Reinach* (2005).

English sample translation by Seán McDonagh

Instructions for the Proper Use of this Book

This book brings together three published texts and four working theories. The three previously published texts relate essentially to Michelangelo's works in San Lorenzo in Florence (the Laurentian Library vestibule and the Medici Chapel), which in some ways represent Buonarroti's most painful failures: works that were forgotten, abandoned or perhaps rejected because of his determined refusal to return to Florence to complete them, and because, over the years and with Cosimo's rise to power, they had taken on a political character that the artist had never wanted associated with his meditations on infinity and the strenuous labour of his works. The other element that unites them is this: the rejection of a work that over time had betrayed its purpose. In terms of writing style and structure, the texts belong to different genres: they are a novel constructed as a series of monologues by historical figures linked to Michelangelo; an annotated epistolary on which I based the novel, or a sort of justification for that polyphonic narrative; an imaginative text, a kind of monologue documenting my visit to the complex of San Lorenzo. They were written between 1997 and 2009 and published within the usual editorial gap of two or three years from writing, therefore in a period ranging from my forty-fourth to my fifty-sixth year, which then continues until 2025 with the other four subsequent texts, which are notes or working theories, reflections on other failures, other fragilities, other incomplete works, by the artist and also by me, because if one just thinks about failures and incompleteness, one ends up producing only more failures. Failure is a voracious feeling, it colours everything grey and with dull hues, creating rough forms, but it has its own vitality that can amaze and even make you fall in love. I wanted these texts to remain in the form of notes precisely because I wanted them to proclaim their incompleteness, so much so that even the bibliographical references are sometimes absent, sometimes barely mentioned or incorrectly abbreviated, as is the case with those who write with the anxiety of grasping an idea that often vanishes suddenly and irreparably. Nevertheless, I assert their autonomy, especially for the insights and unexpected juxtapositions that even I, who was writing them when these apparent inconsistencies arose, did not expect. One of these narrative intersections is dedicated to Raffaello, who, since Vasari, has been seen as a possible counterpart to Michelangelo, which seemed to me right to address, contrasting his devotion to silence and stillness with the motion of gestures and the proliferation of words in Michelangelo's works.

From this reconnaissance into the past – because republishing always means going back in time through memory – fragments of conversations have resurfaced, and observations that I hope are stimulating, which I had with art-historian friends and which I have tried to expand upon here in the original texts that alternate in the only way that was possible for me: uncertain and fragmentary, convinced as I am now that it is imperfection that defines our character, and incomprehension that measures our knowledge of things and the world. I cannot help but compare the previous writings with these, juxtaposing their differences and presumptions, their risks and errors among a few small, perhaps good, insights. But what one writes in one's forties is very different to what one writes in one's seventies, and, referring to Michelangelo, the ambitions of an artist in their prime are different to those that gratify them at the end of their career. The closer you get to the end, the greater risk becomes, the more complexities seem to rage against the project, but also the more the desire for originality leads you to tackle new forms and different symmetries. And the weight, the weight of matter, the weight of the body that makes every artistic expression difficult, every form in which thought is realised, reveals its devastating power.

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It is paradoxical, but as we age, we end up experimenting more. Having abandoned the creative mechanisms we had put into practice, we seek something new, even with the risk that this new thing may never see the light of day. At the end of this book, there is a panorama of the construction site of St. Peter's, which Michelangelo used to ride through on his horse in his later years, checking on the stonemasons at work, the labourers building, the foremen supervising the work and observing the walls that were slowly progressing, amid second thoughts, corrections and ruins to be demolished. It seems to me a fitting portrait of an artist who was buried in his cloak and spurred boots, and who, in the last years of his life, patrolled that lacerated space as if in bitter meditation or completing a laborious survey of his work. That drawing seems to show ruins in decay, but instead it documents the construction site of the greatest *Fabbrica* of the Renaissance, which the artist knows, as he travels through it, will only be completed after his death. Michelangelo is working on something that he will never see completed. It is an intriguing conclusion.

Scrolling through the text, the reader will encounter several times, either mentioned or quoted in full, part of Michelangelo's correspondence relating to his stay in Bologna, when he was working on the bronze statue of Julius II. Commenting, in correspondence to his family, on the failure of an initial casting of the statue, Michelangelo declares: "*Chi fa, falla*" ("He who does, fails"). This book revolves around this idea, totally Michelangelesque, that risk is always inherent in the work and that the closer one gets to ideal perfection, the greater the risk of shattering it. Before this, the reader will encounter other letters, several times, which are equally fundamental to understanding Michelangelo. Here are some opening lines: "With great imprudence, Signore Tomao, my dearest sir..."; "Signore Giorgio, my dear friend, regarding the library staircase..."; "Signore Giorgio, my dear friend, I am a poor writer". These may seem like unnecessary repetitions, but it will be the reader's point of view and the circumstances in which the letters appear that will provide the variety that makes them different. Because in this book, things return in different and contrasting guises. It is not a matter of repetition, but of the writer showing the same things from a different point of view, so much so that their meaning is partly changed. In the novel, a quotation from correspondence takes on a different aspect to the same words present in the correspondence, and again, something different, if only hinted at, in pages that are explicitly incomplete notes. In the writing, the preceding words substantially modify those that follow, just as the voice to which they are attributed offers its own decisive contribution to a different interpretation.

In all these years, an idea has remained in my head. I should write or should have written, sooner or later, a Michelangelesque book, and by that, I mean a book that alternates between elaborate pages and other ones that are barely sketched out. Something like the sculptures *Prisoners* or the *Hours of the Day* in the Medici Chapel. Something that delves into some parts as much as it barely touches on others. It would be something new. It would probably neither be accepted nor understood. And that would make it a stimulating challenge to take on. I was talking about it some time ago with a writer friend. I realise now that, with this book, this wish may be coming true. It is true, I no longer feel like (or perhaps there is no longer any need to) polish every page. Perhaps traces of the rough work should be left there. Perhaps showing what is incomplete is the real reason for making art. It justifies it because it helps us understand the original idea that every artist pursues or tries in vain to get back, and that what is shown is always manifestly imperfect or is only an intermediate stage in the search for perfection. However you look at it, it is the result of failure.

And it is clear that anyone who wants to write about Michelangelo must consider the profound

difference between an unfinished work and one that has been destroyed; between one that, even in its incomplete form, fulfils its function and one that is shattered by a sort of artistic hubris, which inevitably leads to facing risk rather than avoiding it. Preferring to plunge the blade into the wound rather than circumscribe its purulent mark.

I must insist once again. The text I present to the reader consists of pages that are apparently complete and pages that are almost left half-finished due to disinterest or, on the contrary, almost torn apart by an all-consuming anxiety that I would dare to call Michelangelesque, and that leads to the interruption of the works we love most. The idea clumsily repeats the thoughts of the artist who inspired it, and a meditation on the time that has elapsed between the various sections of the book, which, looking back, seems immeasurable, at least from my point of view, because it is not only a question of years passed by but also of fulfilled or failed expectations, of enthusiasm that was either propositive or unrealistic, as now appears today with hindsight.

Perhaps it seems a negative work, a representation of indifference or perhaps self-destruction (which is the paradox that accompanies every creative work), but as I write these introductory and explanatory notes, a song performed by Jeanne Moreau comes to mind, which is the musical transposition of some verses by Oscar Wilde taken from a work – The Ballad of Reading Gaol – that addresses the theme of too much love as a cause of destruction: “Each man kills the things he loves”, those verses recite. Perhaps this is true, we kill the things we love, we tear them apart and in tearing them apart we kill also ourselves. But, ultimately, it’s because we love them too much.

Anorexic Michelangelo NOTES I

Finding Oneself in Different Evils

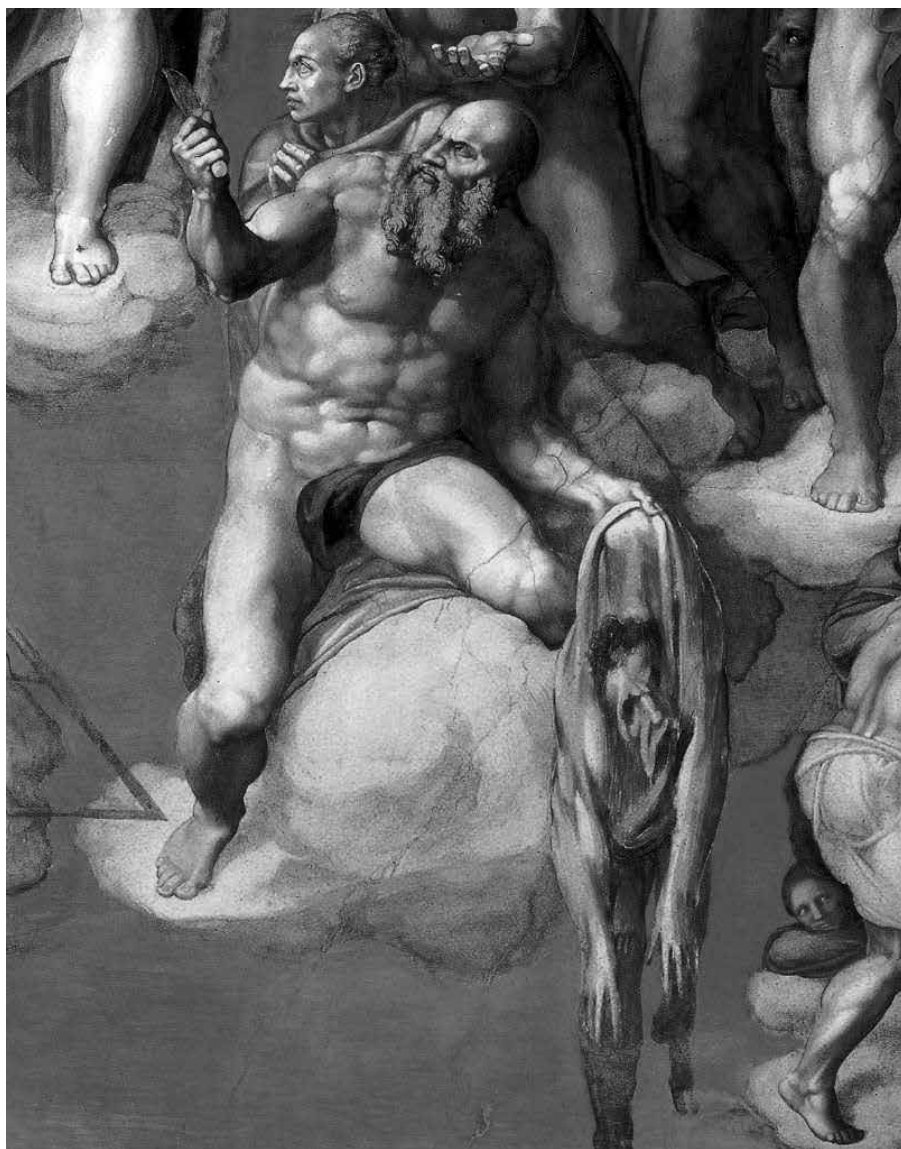
It's no coincidence that the most famous self-portrait of Michelangelo is the distorted image of an empty shell, a deflated air chamber, an incredibly thin and shapeless membrane; it dramatically hangs, lifeless, in the crowded void of the *Last Judgement*. The eyelids in that puppet's face look like they have been sucked into the darkness of the now eyeball-less eye sockets, however, an attentive observer should notice that the abandoned arms and especially the hands in the foreground show some dimensionality, even if supported by a very volatile material, like air that remains in a deflated doll. If all the others present at the triumph of Christ maintain their carnal dimensions – in fact, they regain them precisely thanks to the Resurrection of bodies – Michelangelo represents himself as a container of something that no longer is; finally liberated of a weight that, nevertheless, gave him form.

On the crowded wall of the fresco, just below, pushed by an irresistible ascending current, other bodies liberated by the irrevocable sentence of the Judgement re-acquire their carnality to join the number of chosen ones that form a chaotic backdrop around the Divine Judge. The deflated and inert sack of Michelangelo's body, supported, in deliberate contrast, by the vigorous physique of Saint Bartholomew, instead carves out a moment of stillness in the frenetic vortex of the depiction. It is a body – the shell of a lifeless body – similar to the wretched skin of a rabbit that remains in the hand of the butcher that skins it. But not only. In the total absence of gravitational force that dominates the centre of the fresco, only that image seems to be subject to its rules. Despite all of its lightness, it hangs dramatically like a rag in the absence of wind, while the powerful physique of the man that supports it is incongruously and solidly portrayed on a cloud that keeps him a short distance from Christ the Judge. The flayed skin of Michelangelo shares instead the downfall of the damned. Rather than reaching above, it submits to the laws of gravity of the underworld, and if he were not held by Saint Bartholomew, he would fall into the abyss.

Therefore, it would seem that at the Resurrection of flesh, the body of Michelangelo appears incomplete, as if that external reunification of the soul and body were missing only for him, as if it were not a prize but rather, once again, a hindrance. As if not even the salvific gesture of Christ could resolve the conflict, the impediment that in life this body represented for the artist. And the fact that he comes to be grasped like prey by the saint that was himself flayed as torture, by being painfully and bloodily deprived of the appearance of a body or of its most external and visible component, it is a not insignificant sign of hidden desire, as if the artist had wanted to represent his wish to liberate himself once and for all, for eternity, of the membrane that impeded his contact with the outside world. A very thin but nevertheless extremely resistant and tough membrane. An epidermis, a superficial figure that nevertheless characterised him perfectly. And in life, what was contained in that drained skin was muscle, flesh, bone – and food.

At the beginning of time, in the formation of that body, according to the Michelangelesque idea, it is God himself who intervenes. A few metres away from that portrayal of his own deflated body, Michelangelo had realised, decades earlier, almost in the exact centre of the roof of the Sistine Chapel, a depiction of the creation of Adam, in some ways canonical, for others totally innovative and subversive. This image too is very famous. The right hand of God the Father, in a whirlwind of creative will, is a few centimetres from Adam's. Vital energy has just been transmitted, the body of

man, perfect, awakens from a never-ending dream, full of hidden memories that with time will flourish again, and it finally offers itself to life. But why not consider that this divine gesture, beyond generating life, produces a devastating event: the definitive separation from one's creation. From that point on, the body of man is dramatically alone. Creation is an act that separates, that delineates existential solitude, that awakens man from his own comforting torpor. The body of man is the new element that creation produces. It is the body that the man – and his memory – will have to deal with because it is a body that has its own life, that demands, that desires, that has yearning for something lost but also has to deal with its physicality. From there to the critical act of the offering of the apple – a few metres, once again an apparently minimal distance, separate the two scenes on the Sistine vault – there is, however, an infinite distance. The bite of the apple – a physical gesture – puts man in conflict with his own body, measures the distance with pre-existence, generating repressed and frightening pleasures. In the last instance, it damns him. And all of this occurs through the totally physical and apparently natural act of introducing food to the body, which Adam carries out, pushed by curiosity, by the desire to taste something that doesn't belong to him and that damns him.



Maternal Milk

...and in the vineyard of Settignano, three miles from the city, where he had a small farm inherited from his ancestors (the place that is copious with stones and everywhere full of quarries of boulders that are continually worked by stonemasons and sculptors who for the most part are born in that place), he was given by Lodovico Michelangelo to the wife of a stonemason to be wet-nursed in that house. Whereupon Michelangelo, speaking one time with Vasari, jokingly said: Giorgio, if I have any talent, it came from being born in the lightness of air that is found in your town of Arezzo; just as from the milk of my wetnurse, I also took the chisels and mallet, with which I make the figures (Vasari, vii, p. 1379).

This fragment is almost at the beginning of the Vasarian biography, and the memory of the wet nurse, from whose step-motherly breast the young boy artist suckles milk and chisels, is perhaps the first image Michelangelo has of himself. His memory, evidently helped by the almost mythical stories of his childhood, cannot go beyond that limit; beyond that, an impenetrable fog stretches out and it is peculiar that the landscape in which the event takes place is rocky, desolate, "everywhere full of quarries of boulders" and the presence of the stonemasons that work them has something of a Dantesque circle of hell about it, of forced labour, of damnation. It is in this atmosphere that Michelangelo imagines himself in his earliest infancy.

Even Ascanio Condivi, to whom Michelangelo almost dictated his biography in the 1550s – Vasari's was revised and completed in 1568 – reports this confidential conversation, colouring it, however, with a more philosophical tone – this too probably suggested by the maestro:

The wet nurse was the daughter of a stonemason and likewise married to a stonemason. For this reason, Michelangelo is said to have said, no wonder he took such delight in the chisel, joking for the sake of adventure, or perhaps even saying it earnestly, to know that the wet nurse's milk has such power in us, that often, by transforming our body's temperature, it transforms one inclination into another, very different to the natural one (Condivi, p.8)

And anyway, if the image of the wet nurse from which he sucks the purest milk remained alive in the memory of the artist – though it is also true that this milk appears contaminated by contact with the instruments of the stonemason, mixed with the dust of the rock that covers the landscape of Settignano – food will always retain for him, in its most essential sense, something perfect, sacred, incorruptible, even if always ready to transform itself on the inside of the human body into something contaminated, diabolical, corrupt.

The comforting, benevolent, maternal feminine figure is absent from Michelangelo's destiny. The women he will meet later will be devoid of affection; they will be sterile, cold. And for this reason, the image of Michelangelo's wet nurse and his very first exile as an infant in Settignano will play such a large part in the incipit of biographies of the artist that follow the grievous circumstances that accompany the return to family of the boy given away to a wet nurse.

The environment needs to be reconstructed, as if it were a theatrical scene. The fire lit at the end of the room, the wet nurse with the voluptuous breasts that tends to the little boy near the fireplace while outside, in the rocky and sun-drenched natural scene described by Vasari, the blows of the stonemason's chisels echo, and the marble dust and stone chippings materialise, planting themselves within the door's cracks, and the fine dust that twirls lightly when the rays of the sun illuminate the shadow of the house. This domestic atmosphere comes to be erased forever when, around 1478, Michelangelo is brought back to his family in Florence. Here are the siblings with whom he has little in common, and his mother, who will die in 1480, depriving him again of the warmth of a feminine figure. Therefore, the abandonment of the wet nurse nurturer carried out

with the child's full knowledge, and probably against his wishes, follows his mother's death; a lacerating and ferocious tear, like that of the umbilical cord.

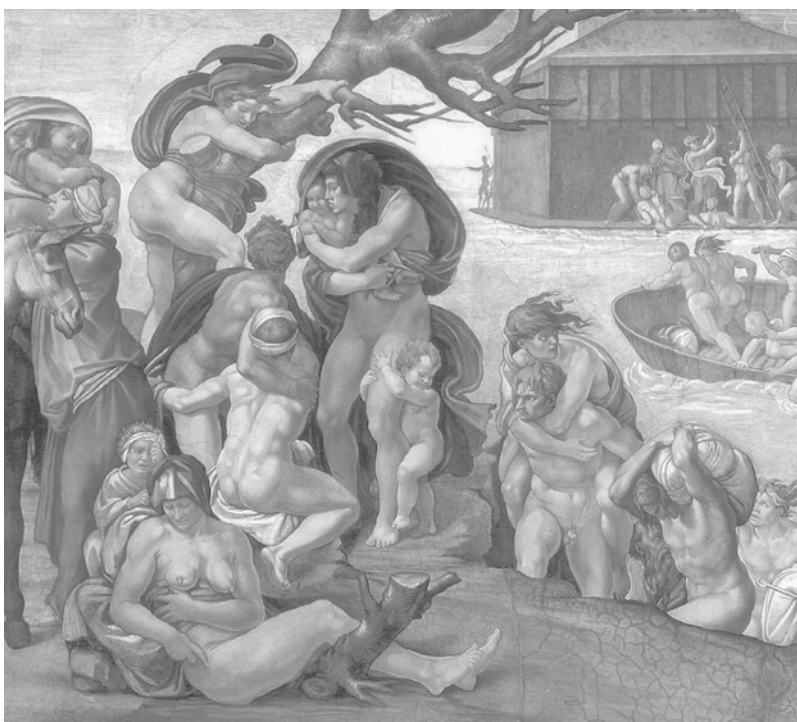
The oldest known sculpture by Michelangelo is the *Madonna della scala*, a 'stacciato' bas relief in marble that belonged to the family of the artist until his nephew Leonardo donated it to the Grand Duke Cosimo. An immature test, executed at seventeen years old, but sublime for its personal implications, for the already decisive style, for the sentimental splendour that it induces. It is the first of many depictions of the mother of God accomplished by Michelangelo, in the *apparent* act – and the Italics will be explained later – of breastfeeding her son. The action, or rather the depiction, because the action is almost absent, is set in an unreal, almost metaphysical space. The Madonna is sitting on a perfect cube devoid of depth. To her left, five little steps almost out of scale lead to a large door in front of which three children play. On her left leg, the Madonna is holding the child who *turns his back* to the audience and places his head on his mother's breast. On the far right, sketched in minuscule dimensions, the figure of Saint Joseph appears, almost an extraneous onlooker to the depiction. Despite the scene undoubtedly portraying breastfeeding, the Madonna is only partially shifting the fabric that covers her breast. Some fabric is gently placed on the child's head, who assumes, however, a posture not at all congruent with the gesture of suckling milk. His back is erect, his torso isn't bowed, and his head is turned to the side as if no gesture was being depicted in that moment. Neither is the mother's gaze directed towards the child, as usually happens not only in reality, but also in almost all artistic depictions of breastfeeding. The Madonna stares straight ahead, in a direction that goes beyond the frame of the relief and towards a point that cannot be identified. Despite the three children assuming animated poses, the scene is quiet and still. Very cold. But it is the invisible face of the child that is almost hiding behind the mother's garment that provides the most distressing detail of the entire depiction.

The feminine figure has the magnificence of a classical sculpture, almost an enthroned Demeter, a hieratic depiction, participating but so distant that the bas relief actually seems to suggest a missing gesture rather than an act of maternal love, with which the audience seems to not be able to participate in any way, kept far from the child's back and far from the face directed towards the maternal womb, and which doesn't allow itself to be recognised. One has to imagine the child that latches onto the nipple, but nothing in the depiction suggests anything similar. Neither the child's posture nor the mother's attitude allow us to affirm that the *Madonna della scala* is depicting a breastfeeding scene. Rather, it depicts something that must still happen or has already happened: something that isn't taking place in that moment. Michelangelo negates as much as he tries to affirm. Mother and son remain distant, distracted, dramatically alone, even if so close. The three children on the stairs are busy, perhaps playing a game, but they are absolutely indifferent to the *non-action* in the foreground. One of the three, firmly placed on the looming stairs is holding onto the balustrade and seems to unfurl drapery that is lost behind the figure of the Madonna; the other two fight on the floor to which the stairs lead.

The centre of the depiction is fixed on the juxtaposition of the left, oversized hand of the Madonna, and the relaxed hand of the child that seems to suggest a distant manner, as if he were sleeping. Nature is totally absent, replaced by the solid volumetry of the stairs and by the cube that functions as a chair. Like this, the relief seems to depict a detachment rather than a physical union, and the disoriented gaze of the Madonna is directed towards a time yet to come and not towards a spatial place, however distant. And the setting so bare, essential, rocky, can't help but recall Settignano, "copious with stones and everywhere full of quarries of boulders."



And so, is the *Madonna della scala* perhaps the depiction of a wet nurse and not the Mother of God? The nurse and mother will be succeeded almost immediately by the father's second wife, a woman who will not give birth, who will not breastfeed and who, even if from a good family and with good qualities, will never manage to distinguish herself in the family environment. A functional presence in the domestic structure, with affection absent.



So, the breasts, once voluptuous, become withered, sterile. Michelangelo will remember when he sketches those of the supine woman who appears in the foreground in the fresco of the Flood, to which a scared child futilely grasps, and who, in despair, is shedding torrents of tears. Almost a self-portrait from memory at such a young age, bewildered, hungry. And the tragedy of the situation is not created so much by the submerged fate that belongs also to the child, uselessly sheltered on the desolate upland that will soon be submerged, as much as the sense of sterility that emanates

from the exhausted woman to whom he turns in vain. And sterile are the incinerated trees, the apparently calm but lacustrine and lifeless sea, all of the desolate nature that surrounds them. This desert vision accompanies almost all of Michelangelo's depictions of nature and landscape in his early paintings, but will reach its fiercest form in his last paintings, the frescos of Paolina, where the artist, by now in his seventies, seems to have travelled the entire path of knowledge to have arrived at the essential question: the solitude of man.

Vasari, an astute and ambitious biographer, is a theorist of a new figurative ideal that has in Michelangelo its unsurpassed model. Often, he comes to be compared with other artists to celebrate his moral integrity. Thus, what is parsimony in him, in others appears as avarice; that which is generosity, elsewhere transforms into prodigality; the privacy of one is the sullenness of others. The comparison isn't always obvious, but the juxtaposition of similar experiences, the echo of comparative comments, remains impressed in the memory of the reader.

The importance of maternal milk is an element that appears on few occasions in *Lives*, but when it occurs, it is not without significance, especially if Raffaello is the point of comparison:

Raffaello was born in Urbino, a very famous city in Italy, in 1483 on Good Friday at three o' clock in the morning, the son of Giovanni de'Santi, not an excellent painter, but a man of good talent and capable of guiding the children on the good path, which, unfortunately for him, had not been shown to him in his youth. And because Giovanni knew how important it is to raise children not with the milk of wet nurses, but from their own mothers, when Raffaello was born – to whom his name was given at the baptism as a good omen – he wanted, not having other children, as he didn't have later, that his own mother should breastfeed him, and that in his tender years he should rather learn his father's customs at home than in the homes of peasants and commoners; and brought up like this, he began training him in painting, seeing that to art he was very much inclined, and with exceptional talent... (Vasari, iv, p. 316).

Since his birth, Raffaello seems kissed by fortune, as if his terrestrial journey, commencing on the important day of Good Friday, was destined to lead him to magnificent results. Vasari emphasises precisely this happy beginning, this enviable family life: the maternal milk given generously in the early years, which nourishes the child, and then, the caring and attentive paternal guidance to encourage the natural artistic inclinations of his son. How different from the solitary and seemingly affectionless childhood that befell Michelangelo, and to the conflicts with his father following the emergence of his son's desire to undertake a career as an artist.

Only one other time does Vasari return to the relationship between maternal milk and artists, in regard to the even more unfortunate childhood of Perin del Vaga, one of Raffaello's many apprentices. In the year 1500, he is just two months old, and he becomes an orphan in Florence after his mother dies of the plague. Such is his father's misfortune that he can't even pay for a wet nurse, and the newborn is fed milk from a goat that was grazing at a nearby villa. The father then remarries in Bologna with a woman whose children and husband had died from the plague. "She ended up feeding Piero with the plague-ridden milk" (Vasari, v, p. 588), the historian pronounces with an incredible image.

Here, the milk, not only foreign like that of Michelangelo's nurturer, is malignant, plague-ridden even. And the subsequent cases of Perino's wretched life seem to find origin precisely in these poisoned breasts. Even when he will have moments of success, it will always remain something, like a scar, like a mark of fate that leaves him with an unhappy existence. The extreme poverty of Perino in his youth is reflected, then, with the passing of the years, in a sort of curse that leads him to bad habits, and then, through a completely different journey, but comparable to that of his difficult first

days, to death. It is that milk, first of the wild goat, and then plague-ridden, that seems really to mark a destiny fraught with difficulty and setbacks.

We must return to the Raffaello-mother Michelangelo-wetnurse question. Vasari perhaps had in mind, at the beginning of the respective *Lives* of the two artists, the realisation of a sort of parallelism to Plutarch, even if then the space dedicated to Michelangelo will become so abundant that the idea must have been shelved. But since, with the wild exception of Perin del Vaga, no other reference to the importance of maternal milk is made throughout the entire course of *Lives*, maybe this singular attention to breastfeeding as responsible for future artistic events shouldn't be underestimated.

Achilles, or the Lipless

Can we attribute to Michelangelo the name of an ancient hero, equally quick-tempered, equally colossal, and in many ways as brusque as the Florentine artist? Might he resemble Achilles – the Achillean – the Lipless, an epithet that highlights the deprivation of breastfeeding during the Greek hero's infancy? Achilles is the seventh son born from the marriage of Peleus and Thetis. While the mother, through the magical and cathartic practice of burning their bodies, renders the six eldest children immortal and sends them to Mount Olympus to save them from the fate of corruption, Peleus steals the youngest from Thetis before the wife manages to complete the horrendous spell that was supposed to guarantee her immortality, even at the cost of non-existence. The magic turns out to be incomplete, and the boy's heel is only slightly burned; Peleus will then find a way to replace it with that of a giant, Damysus, famous for his speed and because he will promise to Pelide the epithet of 'swift-footed', but which will constitute the corruptible part of his son's body. Then, Thetis, indignant, leaves her husband and returns to the marine depths, bestowing on that abandoned son the name of Achilles, since he had never placed his lips on her breast.

The myth has different variants, the most significant is the attribution of the name of the hero to the centaur Chirone, to whom it was trusted, while the best known relates to the different and less brutal manner used by Thetis to guarantee the invulnerability of the little one: submerge him by the heel in the waters of the Styx, a river not coincidentally infernal and therefore boiling with flames.

As you can see, the situation can be reduced to a dispute over custody of the couple's children in the process of a legal separation. Here emerges the fragility of the husband-wife relationship and vice versa, the deep bond that unites parents and children. Both Peleus and Thetis believe they are acting, according to their own capabilities and practices, for the good of the children, even if at the cost of the lacerating split of the family unit.

It should not be overlooked, this underlining of the barbaric solution that, in the first version of the myth, Thetis uses to guarantee immortality for her children: the destruction of her body, its violation through the purifying pyre. The circumstances that lead Peleus to save Achilles from the fire, condemning him to mortality, render the Achaean hero an exemplary figure, extremely melancholic, solitary, and quick-tempered, as if his existence were a sort of punishment or the result of a failed act. A character that is very similar to that belonging to Michelangelo.

Achilles' ire is the central theme of the entire *Iliad*, even if only some verses address it. Achilles very easily takes offence and, rather than going into a rage, his first option is to leave the scene of the dispute. He deprives his adversary of his presence. He is left with it eating away at him ferociously,

in a stubborn and self-destructive way. He refuses contact with others, he renders himself ascetic, having previously been active. He refuses. He says no. Or, better yet, he doesn't say anything: he chooses silence. The subject is treated not only in the Homeric poem but also in an almost infinite series of classically inspired paintings where Achilles' solitude, his rejection of the habits of his peers, becomes the principle element of his artistic depictions.

Michelangelo will do the same in many situations. Escape is one of the solutions that he most frequently chooses when conflict becomes unsustainable. He flees from artistic rivalries, flees from commitments, flees from his works, leaving them incomplete. The abandonment of the construction site for San Lorenzo has the same characteristics as Achilles' gesture of crossing his arms in the final year of the Trojan War. The hero's exile coincides with that of the artist. Both pronounce a 'no' that appears prophetic. You have betrayed me. Good. Deal with it on your own. Both cross their arms. Their lips clamped shut. They remove themselves from the context. Escape, understood as fasting or silence, is one of the main resources that a psychotic patient has to affirm their identity. An offended child does the same. And so do those who suffer from anorexia.

The Nose

It has been said: Michelangelo flees from those who can hurt him, flees from his rivals. But, the only rival from which he can't escape is his own body, which remains attached to him like an anemone and which he has to come to terms with, even though it is totally opposed to that of his ideal body. His is a fragile body, and it can fall to pieces.

In his youth, subjected to a lightening-quick and unpredictable gesture of rage, while he was carefully copying the frescos of Masaccio in the church of Carmine, an indelible mark will remain on his face: the punch thrown by Pietro Torrigiano that will leave his nose disfigured. There are three different testimonies: Condivi, Vasari, and Cellini, who reports Torrigiani's version himself. After that act, Michelangelo's face ends up assuming grotesque features. This is how Benvenuto Cellini reports Torrigiano's testimony in his recollections:

This Buonaaroti and I, as children, we used to go and learn in the church of Carmine, at the chapel of Masaccio; and because Buonaaroti had the habit of ridiculing anyone who drew, one day, being bored by his talk, it vexed me much more than usual, and with my fist gripped tight, I gave him such a hard punch on the nose, that it felt to me like it were but a wafer; and so marked by me he will remain for as long as he lives (Cellini, xii).

The two biographies of the maestro are fairly more concise in the account of Pietro's aggression: "Being a wicked man, one known as Torrigiano of Torrigiani, a beastly and arrogant man, he almost tore the cartilage off his nose with one punch, and he was carried home as if dead." (Cond, 65). "Because, moved by cruel envy, he was always looking to abuse him with deeds or words; so that one day when they came to blows, Torrigiano gave Michelangelo such a hard punch on the nose, that he broke it in such a way that it was forever flattened for as long as he lived." (Vasari, iv, p.259).

At least one of Michelangelo's drawings remained relevant to a copy of the lost fresco of Masaccio, *The Festival of Carmine*, probably completed shortly before receiving the nose-breaking punch, a mutilation that will remain a characteristic trait of the artist, with all the consequences that come with it: difficulty breathing, and a grotesque and humiliating appearance.

Following this, Torrigiano will suffer a terrible and truly anorexic fate. Involved in a peculiar scam

regarding the value of a certain compensation for his sculpture, he will come to be imprisoned in Seville and will die of starvation and depression, having decided to refuse food: "Because this Torrigiano became so depressed, not eating for many days, and consequently becoming very weak, little by little, his life came to an end; and so with the denying himself of food, he liberated himself of the shame that would have fell upon him, being, as was believed, condemned to death" (Vasari, iv, p.263).

The Left Hand

The artists of the sixteenth century were left-handed. Leonardo, Michelangelo, Raffaello, Sebastiano del Piombo, Raffaele da Montelupo. And the list could be even longer. Maybe it's the evolution of the opposite cerebral hemisphere that causes the anomaly that, nevertheless, creates problems, especially in drawing, as underlined by Raffaele da Montelupo, and which creates once again a sort of conflict between the naturalness of the body and the decorum and soul of the artist:

I don't want to leave out saying that I am naturally left-handed, and having the left hand readier than the right, I used to write with that, and the maestro didn't pay attention, it being enough for him to see that I was writing well; I always wrote, and even drew some of Morgante's battles (as there was someone in the school who read him) with my left hand. Now this manner of mine of writing with my left hand, because I hold the page lengthwise, many who saw me would marvel at this, it seeming to them more Hebrew than anything else, nor did they believe that while I was writing, it could be read, and this occurred to me on several occasions: to give just one example, when I had to collect some money from a notary in the office of a Florentine merchant, putting the page in front of me and seeing it held lengthwise, he couldn't believe it; even letting me write a line and then reading it, it seemed impossible to him that I was able to read like this; when I had wrote a verse, he took it, and seeing that it was very legible, he called perhaps ten notaries to come take a look. Once I had the collection, I wrote again with my right hand, because it was writing very well then, where I then left it. Here it can also be mentioned how I draw with the left hand, and once when I was in Rome to draw the Arch of Trasimeno at the Colosseum, Michelangelo and Brother Bastiano del Piombo passed by, and stopped to take a look, and because both of them were left-handed, for which reason they didn't do anything with their left hand apart from things requiring strength; and they stayed for a bit to watch me, marveling greatly; something that perhaps neither of those two had ever done before... (Vasari, iv, p. 552).

Michelangelo and Sebastiano, both left-handed, force themselves to write and draw with the right, Michelangelo leaving the left to the "things requiring strength", that is, in other words, to the chisel work, because writing, but especially drawing, with the left and following a direction of the traditional style (from left to right), it is difficult to see what one is drawing without lifting one's hand from the paper. Once again, an apparently natural gesture is oppressed and traced back to habit, forcing oneself to work against one's own natural inclinations. The body once again enters into conflict with predispositions and aspirations. This rigour, the imposing of a natural gesture over another, studied gesture, recurs also in his writing. For this to be expressive, for it to truly reach the objective he intends, a sort of "correction" is necessary. To put into writing one's own "left-handed" thoughts entails a sort of "right-ification" of the pen stroke, an almost monastic rule. The act of force, of impetus, is corrected by the "unnatural" yet contemplated course of the pen. Here, too, the body enters into conflict with intellect. A saying by George Braque comes to mind: "I love the rule that corrects emotion." To this poetic declaration, Pierre Boulez responded many years later, an apparently very rigorous musician, and who to Braque's words he counters with their (apparent) opposite: "I love the emotion that corrects the rule." The equilibrium between opposites, experience, and impulse. We are torn apart by this continuous and irresolvable conflict.

THE GREAT SHADOW

Dramatis Personae

Cosimo i de' Medici
Leonardo Buonarroti
Sebastiano Luciani, aka del Piombo
Wet nurse
Mother
Stepmother
Pietro Torregiani
Tommaso de' Cavalieri
Francesco Amadori, aka Urbino Clemente VII
N.N., friend of Febo di Poggio
Luigi del Riccio
Donato Giannotti
Iacopo Melegghino
Francisco de Hollanda
Cecchino Bracci
Vittoria Colonna
Ascanio Condivi
Bartolomeo Baronino
Giorgio Vasari
Cornelia Colonelli
Daniele Ricciarelli da Volterra
Antonio del Francese
Federigo Donati
Simone de' Berna
Bartolomeo Ammannati
Agnolo Allori, aka Bronzino
Benvenuto Cellini
Giovan Battista Strozzi
Francesco de' Medici
Benedetto Varchi
Battista Lorenzi
Roberto Ubaldini
Alessandro Pallantieri
Diomedes Leoni
Nicolas Cordier
Giacomo del Duca
Antonio del Duca
The deputies of the Fabbrica di San Pietro

The Question

Cosimo de' Medici, Grand Duke of Tuscany

(They escort me to the audience chamber. The windows are blacked out. On the inlaid marble top of a console table, there is a lit candelabra. The butler asks me not to ask too many questions, to limit myself to the essentials. I nod. We stand waiting. At the end of the hall is the throne, empty. The Grand Duke is late. The Grand Duke is ill. Very ill. He tires easily, says the butler who escorts me. I assure him that I will ask him just one question. Then I will speak to the clerk; I will ask him for the correspondence, if the Grand Duke will give me permission to see it. In any case, you would have to see it with the clerk, the butler warns me; it is impossible to access the Medici archives without the assistance of the Grand Duke's clerk. I understand, I reply. Yes, your lot always say you understand, but then you want to go rogue. You offer money to the archive employees so they will show you confidential papers, open hidden cabinets, reveal state secrets. This is not a state secret that I am seeking. Oh, no? And what do you know about secrets? What do you know about what goes on in the Grand Duke's heart, why he makes a request and in what spirits he even accepts a refusal, he, the man who conquered a state and is second only to the Pope, the Emperor and the Kings?)

(A palace servant precedes him, thumping the floor with a large engraved and gilded wooden club. The Grand Duke, he shouts. The butler stiffens and then bows his head. He motions for me to do the same. But I want to see the old man. To see what he has been reduced to. Then I see him. He walks, while leaning on a cane. The servant is supporting him. He drags himself along. He drags behind him a large cloak adorned with the fur of stoat. He is not wearing his crown, but the gold and flintlock of the Distinguished Order of the Golden Fleece glitters on his chest. His mouth is half open and his lower lip askew. He looks like a simpleton. A thin thread of drool is trickling from his mouth. The servant wipes his chin. His head is bent to one side. One shoulder is slumped. The entire left side of his body seems to have withered away. It looks like it belongs to someone else, to another version of himself, but scrawnier, and oh so small. Then, when he finally sits on the throne and rests his paralysed arm on the armrest and has his cloak adjusted, for just a moment he looks like a healthy old man. But the servant is always there to wipe the saliva dripping from his chin. With his right hand trembling, the Grand Duke Cosimo of Tuscany invites us to come closer. The butler escorts me. Then, when we are just a couple of metres from the throne, he moves away from me and goes to whisper something in Cosimo's ear. The Grand Duke nods. He looks at me. He struggles to keep his head upright. He trembles. He looks at me and seems not to understand what he is looking at. Nor where he is looking. The butler whispers something else to him. The Grand Duke remains still. Then he whispers something to the butler. He is astonished with what he hears. He moves away from the Grand Duke and approaches me. He wants to be alone with you, he tells me, visibly concerned. I don't know if I should allow that. If the Grand Duke ordered it, I reply. I don't know if I should. The servant is always there, I say. He's deaf. He purposely chose him, so he cannot hear what he says. So, he's not as stupid as he seems, I tell myself, and then finally, then finally, the butler walks away. I hear his footsteps behind me as he reaches the door at the end of the hall. The door opens, the butler leaves, the door closes. Now we are alone, the Grand Duke, the deaf man, and me.

Why weren't you able to bring Michelangelo back to Florence, I ask him. That's what I wanted to know. Nothing else. The Grand Duke looks at me, seemingly not having understood. I insist. Why didn't he want to return home? That's all I want to know. Why did he call him and why did the divine Michelangelo turn him down? Cosimo smiles, as best he can, with his drooping lip and the left side of his face remaining motionless, expressionless. He remains silent. Perhaps I should repeat the



question again. Perhaps he did not understand or does not want to answer. I look at the deaf man, hoping he will instruct me on what to do or say. But even his gaze is lost in the emptiness of the room whenever he's not leaning over the Grand Duke and attending to the trickle of drool running from his lip. I sigh again and repeat the question. But Cosimo finally moves and, with a laborious gesture, motions me to be quiet, and slowly bows his head, as if to say yes, yes, I understand, and breathes deeply. He points to a stool by the wall. I go and get it and place it in front of the throne. The Grand Duke wants me to be seated. And once I have sat down, finally, he speaks.

Oh, how long. How long it has been. I don't know why time just flies around this strange, foolish head of mine. Whirlwinds, you understand, whirlwinds. Zephyrs. Gusts of wind. I don't know, call them what you like. I'm as still as a marble statue and time just passes me by. Forwards and backwards. Forwards and backwards. I see others, men, animals, things even, spinning around me like a carousel. Time. Past time. It enters like the wind in an empty hall. Yes, I remember. How could I not remember? What would I be without memories? Without even those. A breath of air. A memory. Oh, yes. There was a time when I had great desires because a great man has great desires. And a half-man has half-desires. But because he had great desires, the desires continue to evolve, great and perfect, yet now they accompany a half-man like myself. And the half-man that I am now tinkers around with these great desires of the past, and I feel like a small foot in big, wide leather boots. I wallow in these desires, in these palaces that are built for me, and I am already imagining the tomb and the beautiful chapel where I will be buried. This is a great desire. And what you say too is a great desire. Buonarroto in Florence, Buonarroto in my house, working for my family. A great desire. Yes. I had it too. And why on earth did Michelangelo say no to me? Ultimately, because he was a scoundrel. A great troublemaker.

Once I asked him for a portrait. A marble bust that would portray me according to my merit and my role. I had been Duke for just a few years, I had acquired a taste for commanding, and I had this idea of having myself portrayed like the ancient Roman emperors, with their armour, their stern gaze looking towards past conquests, or perhaps towards future ones.

In Florence, it was believed that a bust by Michelangelo was the best you could get. In the Medici Chapel, there are depictions of Lorenzo and Giuliano. What would it cost him to make a third one for me? And I would have been happy with a bust too, only from the diaphragm up. We're not talking about a full figure, like those in the burial chapel.

That was the first refusal. He said no. Even though I knew he had sculpted a bust of Brutus for the republican cardinal Ridolfi. For the rebels, he makes a bust of the tyrant killer, but for his Duke, he won't make a portrait? That was Michelangelo at the time. Completely against me.

I had taken such a fancy to the idea of having any kind of portrait that then Benvenuto ended up making me the bust. But he made it in bronze and didn't make me an emperor. I disliked this so much that the result was banishment - of the bust - to Portoferraio, on the island of Elba, in the most distant province of my land.

He used to tell lies, you know. To me, he told me lies. He confessed to desires he did not have; he said he wanted to return when he did not want to return; he said he felt like a slave to Rome, to the Pope, and he was neither a slave to the city or to the Pope. I flattered him. I wrote to him. I had him be written to. And him, nothing. You know, he said he would return, that he wanted nothing more than to return. And he didn't come back. He dragged his heels for so long that, in the end, he died. The devil took him away. You know how. Slowly, dragging him by his feet, day after day. Little by little, he was buried away. As happens to great old men who accidentally outlive their times, their greatest moments.

So, I had reduced myself to wanting an old man in Florence. Even before I became the idiot I have become, I was an idiot already, a perfect and complete idiot, if that's what I wanted back then: an old man in Florence. To give counsel, you understand. Because what do you expect from an old man with trembling hands? Opinions, views, thoughts, in short. An old man, who is great and half dead, with a rotting body; what can he do but shit out little constipated thoughts. For example: I would like the cornice of the building to be like this, with ovules and Greek frets. Thoughts, do you understand? The vault of the Duomo, for example, the curvature, I would like it to be a little more accentuated. It's already been done, the vault of the Duomo, and you can't tear it down. Right. And what would I have wanted from an old man who would just shit out little thoughts? The façade of San Lorenzo. Yeah, that one. The family church. Our honour is without a façade. Only bricks. Make me a sketch, divine Michelangelo, make me a sketch of the façade of the church of San Lorenzo, of the façade of our Medici Chapel. And what sketch could an old man with a trembling hand and dim eyesight make? Ideas. That's it, that's what he could have suggested: ideas.

After the refusal of the bust, I swore to myself that I would never, ever ask Michelangelo for anything again. But I couldn't resist. I wanted so much for him to come back to Florence, to work for me.

And I had it written to him, by Giorgio the painter and architect, I believe. It was during the Siena period, I think. That crafty Giorgio had returned from Rome, disgusted with Pope Julius III, a sodomite and a miser who paid him poorly and not often. Now, I too, if I can, pay poorly and not often, and the less I pay, the more that artists find ways to work well. This is the great science of patronage: to make a closed purse glitter with gold as much and as often as possible. And so, I had Giorgio return to Florence. He is a spoilt type who loves luxury, and with a little pretence, I made him mine. But Michelangelo loved him, and I thought that if Giorgio recommended it, he would return to Florence. I practically dictated the letter to him. Oh, it was a masterpiece of rhetoric. Without a doubt. A masterpiece you say? Hell of a masterpiece, that, with all that rhetoric and fine writing, had no effect whatsoever. In fact, one might say he didn't even read it – one might say.

And what did I ask him, then? 'The Duke desires nothing more than to benefit from your reasoning and advice, without wearing you out with work.' That's what I had Giorgio write. And then, because he had a new grandson, I asked Giorgio to put a few words in the letter that would move him. And he, the great sycophant he is, came up with this great big invention and wrote: "Your grandson, who in spirit knows the divinity of his predecessor's sculptures, paintings and architecture, I believe that, seeing you, would unwind the words to thank you". What a load of bollocks! Don't you think? "Unwind the words" - what does that mean?! I relied on this man to bring Michelangelo back to Florence. What a fool. And to think that I wasn't even the half-man I am now.

The funny thing is that Michelangelo replied. But it took him a month to reply. A month! What was he doing that was so important that he made us wait a month? And do you know what he said? I remember the reply very well. 'Know for certain that I would dearly love to lay my weak bones to rest beside those of my father.' You understand – as a dead man! Not a word for me, for the work he could have done in Florence. He thought only of returning as a dead man. As indeed he did. It seems to me that great man knew what he was talking about.

Fate decreed that I would have to be content with Giorgio Vasari. But every year, when I thought Michelangelo was convinced that his hour of death had come and that he finally wanted to return to Florence to die, I had a letter written to him. The usual things, the same arguments always came to mind. I always flattered him in the same way. As a fool, as a senile old man. And there was no one in the palace who could come up with anything better than the nonsense Giorgio wrote to him. No one. I ask myself, what do I pay them to do, my advisers who do not advise? What do I pay



them to do?

When I used to go to the Laurentian Library, I would say to myself: this scoundrel Buonarroti does something perfect and he doesn't finish it. Look at the staircase, I said to myself, it's a masterpiece in the mind of the man who designed it. But did it turn out the way he wanted? The way he imagined it? Or did he get fed up with it so quickly that he left it to someone else to finish, someone who resembles him, who imitates him, who mimics him, and who is then ultimately all that I am allowed of him. You understand: the greatest prince in Italy has as his architect one of Michelangelo's creations, a zealot, a second-rate figure. If there were no Michelangelo, then the gentleman Giorgio would truly be the best, or one of the best. There are people who equal him, but that does not mean they surpass him. No, that is not the case. In short, they are equal. He is good, if I still understand anything and have a shred of brain left that isn't cooked. But with Michelangelo alive, who could say that Giorgio was better? No, no one could say that. And, you understand, then the question immediately arose. Why didn't I take him, he who is the best and Florentine; why did I leave him in Rome to make mediocre popes immortal? They are rattled off like the beads of a rosary and then end up in the rubbish heap of the past, of what has been. And all that remains is the work of this little spider sculptor and architect and painter and poet and thinker. Of this man who uses the brain that God gave him on a whim. And he says no to his Duke. And he says, yes, I'll come, as soon as I finish this thing for the Pope, yes, I'll come, I can't wait, my heart melts at the thought of returning to my homeland and dying there, perhaps, and that my bones may rest in my homeland, this is my only desire, my Duke, to die in my homeland, to sink into the sweet soil and disappear and become earth and dust, and from land, return to my land. Ah, illusions, ah, desires. Ah, the things we would have liked and could not have. How unfulfilled desires ruin us. Perhaps it is so: the half-man that I am is nothing but the half of what I desired and did not achieve. Do you understand? The half that is dead is what I could not have, and the half that is alive is what I had. In the dead part, I put my wife Donna Eleonora, the Spanish woman, *muy hermosa, caliente*, even if *mas fria del vierno*. And *los niños* that the malaria from the mouth of the River Arno took away from me, before their time. *Los niños y mi novia*. Things of the past. And Michelangelo who did not come. Who said no. This too I put in the dead part. Everything else, everything I had, I put in the living part, in this trembling and quivering living part that remains. That speaks with difficulty, that writes with difficulty, that hears poorly, that wets itself and shits itself. This living part that remembers, suspended in a sea of memories, and I no longer know which ones I remember. It picks them like a boy under an orange tree. It gathers the fruit at random, the ones that seem nicest, the ones with the reddest, roundest, most fragrant skin.

What was that winter like? It was the year before *mi novia* died, when we went to Rome to visit Pope Pius, to pay homage to the Milanese Pope who took my name and my coat of arms. He created a lineage that he did not have. But yes, let Pope Pius do what he wanted to do, if he wanted the coat of arms with the spheres, let him take it. It brought us prestige too. The third pope in half a century. And so, we went to pay homage to our humble relative, of the cadet branch, which wasn't even a cadet branch, it was nothing, nothing at all. A Milanese Medici. And so, we went to Rome. When was that? October 1560, I think. Around then, anyway. A long time ago, a very long time ago, when we and the court went to pay homage to the Pope. But I, as you'll have understood very well, because you are less stupid than I was told you were, had gone to Rome for Michelangelo. To flatter him, to take him away with me. And what do you do when you want to bring someone away from where they are? You show them what they don't have there and what they could have elsewhere, in Florence, for example. You show them sculpted porphyry, for example. And so I did, I brought him an oval piece of porphyry with the portrait of Christ and I said to him, look at what you

could do in Florence if you came, I would give you the secret of sculpting porphyry, the secret of the water that reinforces the iron. And this secret, I have it, and I would gift it to you if you came. So, I went with the oval of Christ to Michelangelo's house and he welcomed me at the door, and the crowd was all around us, at Macel de' Corvi, and they watched us and applauded, and when I passed by, they shouted "Spheres! Spheres!" which is the cry they make when they want to pay homage to us Medici. And Michelangelo let me into the hovel that is his home. Behind me came a servant carrying the oval portrait. Look, Michelangelo, I said to him, look at what we can do in Florence. And I said it with pride, because the Egyptians and the Greeks and the Romans before us had been the only ones who knew how to work that blood magma that cannot be tamed either by fire or a steel tip. And Michelangelo, when he saw it, fell as if into a bowl of jujube syrup, he just melted, turned to milk, liquid, liquid, docile as a baby. Porphyry, he said, what devilry is this? How did you find the *tempra*? What did you put in it, snake blood? What other devilry have you found? The secret, Michelangelo, the secret, I said, is not here in Rome; the secret of this marvel is in your home, in Florence. And just think, you who are the greatest of sculptors, and whom no one can match, here in Rome, you don't know what the right *tempra* is for sculpting porphyry, but a stonemason in Florence knows, one whom I employ and who makes portraits of my family and of Christ because I like having them, I alone, and they make them with porphyry, infinite and eternal like the fame that will survive me. This is what I said. And Michelangelo bent over the oval portrait of Christ, admired it and caressed it as if it were the sweetest flesh of the most beautiful girl in Florence, and said how marvellous it was. Only this he said: how marvellous. And I saw his mind, his imagination, his thoughts lightly flying, flying away. Towards Florence, towards home.

I said, it's done. I've convinced him. Look there, how he admires it, my beautiful oval of porphyry, this beautiful profile of Christ, this labour of the workshop, all science and no art. And I looked around, how happy and blessed I was. And I said to myself, these two or three statues that the old man is working on, I'll take them back to Florence, along with him, right away, and I'll have him finish them, and then I'll put them in San Lorenzo, in the burial chapel, and if the old man stays alive a few more years, I'll have him finish them nice and clean and neat. Maybe I'll get some boys from the workshop to help him, I'll put them next to him to work with the emery, to finish what he doesn't know how or doesn't want to finish. But yes, maybe that's what will happen, that he'll finally want to have a workshop and teach the art to some of our own, and maybe, with Michelangelo at home, we'll even start a school. I'll put them in the palace, maybe. Of course, he'll want to go to Via Mozza, to his home. Great curmudgeon that he is.

These were the things I thought about in those days, when *mi novia*, *luz de mi vida* was still alive, and so were the boys, and Cardinal Giovanni, that splendid boy who was my pride and joy, even if he was so reserved. Despondent, I told myself, but a genius. And I didn't know how despondent I would be myself, at the mouth of the Arno, watching Eleonora die, and with her our children. But it is the Lord who gives life, ours are only desires, and his deeds.

Now, this thing with Michelangelo that you remind me of, reminding the half of me that is still awake, takes me back to the time when I still believed that my actions and desires were my own. Both of them, do you understand? I wanted and I had. I believed that I wanted and that I had. And sometimes it did happen. But fate decided otherwise. My time, the time of fulfilled desires, was all in my youth and ripeness. Old age for me has been the time to bow my head. Many times, I have recited *fiat voluntas tua* when fate has been adverse to me, many times I have cried out to heaven, and after crying out, I have bowed my head. What else could I do? What else?

So, not even the porphyry oval convinced him. Perhaps he could have solved it if there had been a

doctor in Florence who could treat the kidney stones he suffered from. Malicious fate wanted that I suffered from them too, during those days in Rome, so we discussed the discomfort, the remedies, the pain we felt every time we tried to urinate. But what doctor could I offer him, if not the incompetent and inept one who did not even know how to treat his Duke?

We were sitting on two stools in the hall on the ground floor of his house, which serves as his study, and we were complaining. Does it hurt, he asked me. Very much, I replied. And what remedies have you used? Those prescribed by my doctor. And you? He told me about his, Realdo, who prepared herbal teas and injections for him and, with much study, patience and suffering, had cured him of that ailment, except that it returned from time to time to torment him. The words of old and sick men. And as I think about it and my mind returns to those events, to the two of us, sick and tired, sitting on the stools in the study, in the light of a flickering lantern, as I return to those moments, I wonder what flashed through my mind, and why, instead of thinking about my own peace of mind, I went to bother that old man who was sick and tired, and near to the end. The truth is that the end, for him, did not come until three years later. And finally, when he died, we brought him to Florence.

But since I was elsewhere at the time, I took no interest in the funeral and left it to Prince Francesco to attend, if he wished; to Benedetto Varchi to read the funeral oration; Giorgio Vasari to prepare the catafalque; and my Florentines to mourn the remains of that bad-tempered man who, while alive, had not wanted to honour my memory with a work that would last longer than the very short time we are given to live.

But just as old people almost always achieve distance from passions and ire, so now do I feel melancholy about my anger and almost laugh at it. My sick part neither suffers nor enjoys and therefore is indifferent. My healthy part suffers from the pains that pester me, and so certain boasts and certain whims seem futile to me. It is true: I have handed out much more anger than was fair, as well as grudges, and vendettas. And now that my vision is clouded, my mind dull, and yet I see better than before and am sharper than when I was young and in my prime, I would be magnanimous. I was not so then, because I served the God of resentment and it seemed to me that power could not tolerate rejection. Such are the follies that are committed inopportunely, such are the points of pride that now appear to me as mistakes, and yet while I was committing them, they seemed to me to be right, to be the right thing to do.

You have to get used to listening to recriminations when you go digging up the dust of time and rely on the memories of old people. You'll see, this will be a story of old people, of people who remember, of people who are gone, finished, sterile. You'll soon get bored of them: paralysed, hemiplegic, capricious, whiny old people. But maybe I'm wrong. The truth is that when you go looking in the past, you must trust the memory of old people. The older we are, the more we have seen. We don't necessarily remember everything. Remembering is an art, especially when you are this age. Maybe we remember well, but only a few things, just a few. And so, you have to patch everything together. Stitch the fragments of fabric together; at times, adding something new. Embellish, to make the thing better, you understand. Isn't that what people want? Someone who knows how to tell a story? If that's what you want, I'm not your man. As you have seen, I am but half a man.

The living and the dead. That's who you'll go looking for. Both of them. Trust me, I'm half alive and half dead. And I'm so poised between life and death that the black blood of my dead part mixes with the red blood of my living part, and my thoughts of life are diluted with the nothingness of death. I have little experience of the afterlife and know little about the dead. As for the living, they

will never be sincere. They will always put their story first, because they believe it to be more important. Beware of lies and beware of flattery. You will recognise both because they will always feel out of place.

Florence, Palace Hall, Autumn 1570