

Michelangelo, a Tireless Letter Writer

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Abstract

A titan of artistic creation, the sculptor-painter-architect Michelangelo was also a tireless letter writer. Five hundred and eighteen of his letters have reached us, stretching from his youth to the eve of his death, but we know that many others have been lost. Written in a kind of familiar Florentine and in a style of minimalist 'realism' – which does not prevent the presence of either impetuous polemical flights or pages of literary indulgence – these letters deal mainly with everyday subjects: day-by-day relationships, either endearing or resentful, with his relatives, financial or property matters and, above all, the marriage problems which concerned his nephew Leonardo, the sole heir of the family. But one also discovers in them the artist's warm feelings of friendship and love, his poetic and aesthetic exchanges, his relationships, often conflictual, with his fellow-artists and patrons as well as his reflections on old age and death. All in all, these letters represent a documentary chronicle of a Florentine bourgeois family and the technical hassle of an entrepreneur's activity. If, on the one hand, the *Carteggio* does not shed light either on Michelangelo's conception of art or the way in which he realized his works, on the other it illustrates certain latent aspects of his projects, as well as of his personality, which was at the same time melancholy and aggressive, surprisingly whole and manifold. This luxuriant correspondence presents, so to speak, a 'genetic' interest, since it reveals the hidden face of the brilliant conceiver and creator, of the artist and entrepreneur struggling with the obstacles whose overcoming makes creation possible.

Keywords: Art, *Carteggio*, Familiar Letters, Michelangelo, Melancholic Disposition

1. *Introduction*

Michelangelo was a tireless letter writer: more than 518 of his letters, today readable in a bulky critical edition (Fiorato, ed., 2010) are extant; but, as I have argued elsewhere, if one considers the number of letters which were addressed to him, it appears evident that many of his replies are lost.

The initial point needs making that he did not like writing, which is easily understood when we consider his exhausting days, occupied by handling the hammer or the brush in very uncomfortable positions on his scaffolds. 'To write is for him, he says, 'un grande affanno', a painful job (Fiorato, ed., 2010, Introduction, xciii).

But should we take him at his word? What is certain is that he does not feel at his ease with a pen in his hand: to write, he says, 'non è mia professione';¹ and he is conscious of the poor quality of his epistolary style, but only when compared to that of the great literati of his time, defenders of the fine style,

who practiced the 'volgare illustre' that is, a formal, high literary language. He apologises for this to his most cultured correspondents and, sometimes, he asks his friends to help him revise his texts.

It should be recalled that Michelangelo was self-taught, living side by side with men of letters, or even persons of high rank, but neither attending university, nor enjoying the privilege of learned tutors. As is true with Leonardo da Vinci, one could say that he was an 'omo senza lettere' (Leonardo 1974, 14), an unlettered man, that is, that he did not know Latin, a fact which constituted the dividing line between the high-level literati and the rest. But it was this very linguistic *mediocritas*, which he was not proud of, that appears to us today to be one of the merits of his writing, since his style and meanings gain in spontaneity and simplicity what they lose in literary refinement.

Michelangelo's letters are therefore as unliterary as possible, albeit with amazing exceptions when he addresses some great personalities, or addressees to whom he wishes to show 'his love'. In such cases, one has the impression that he adopts a completely different style, which becomes eloquent, pompous, and hyperbolic, even verging on caricature. When meant for poorly educated people, his letters are, all in all, *factual* and *functional*: factual in the substance and functional in matter and destination. This is why his language and style are most frequently matter-of-fact and denotative. One is tempted to say that he writes as he speaks – or, rather, as he spoke when he was in Florence: his language, as Marziano Guglielminetti has pointed out, at least in his numerous business letters, recalls the practical style used by merchants in their register books, that is, in their daily management accounts (1977, 226 ff).

Now, this style which, on the whole, can be defined *minimalist* (I will not say *realistic*, for the term would imply a literary stance) and which reflects ordinary speech, this sort of first-person chronicle, at times reveals, as we shall see, some residues which can not only be attributed to a more elaborate kind of language, but also convey, without artifice or mannerism, a great documentary richness: an inexhaustible quarry of information about the history of an artist and a middle-class Florentine Renaissance family.

There would be a lot to say about the contents of Michelangelo's *Carteggio*.² Here, instead of compiling a long inventory of the small data contained in the letters, I will limit myself to discussing three important issues:

- his relationship with his relatives and, in particular, the problem of the social promotion of his family;
- his reflections on art and his relationships with collaborators and patrons;
- finally, an intimate issue: his melancholic disposition and vision of sickness and death.

2. *Negotiating the Social Promotion of His Family*

About two thirds of Michelangelo's letters are exchanged with members of his family. The fact that for most of his artistic life he lived outside Florence obviously

explains such intense epistolary exchanges, as later will happen to Mme de Sévigné because of her long periods of separation from her daughter, Mme de Grignan.

Michelangelo's relationships with his relatives – which are often hearty, affable and even warm – were however far from always being smooth; and the quarrels and grudges which split the Buonarroti family, nearly always owing to issues concerning economic interests and property, outline a *saga* which is a mirror reflecting the avatars of the bourgeois society of the time.

In terms of biography, reading his letters one becomes aware that, as Michelangelo's reputation and opulence grow, he becomes the true head of the household, the mentor of his brothers and, even more, of his nephew Leonardo, who appears to be his privileged correspondent. Thus, he day by day takes care of the numerous problems of his many relatives, concerning himself about their daily existence and health, the purchase of property, the creation of a textile workshop for his brothers, almsgiving and other deeds of charity, recriminations against the nonchalance of his relatives, marriage negotiations on behalf of his nephew, and so on.

One of the preoccupations which obsess his mind as he grows old is his own social status and that of his family, which was of modest origins and condition, even though many of its members had been employed by the *Signoria* of Florence. Thus, his letters frequently reveal concern about the social promotion of his lineage.

His first important commissions, generously remunerated, allowed him not only to grant his family regular assistance – a fact which often determined susceptibilities and frictions – but also make purchases, in the form of heavy investments, meant to accrue his assets and those of his family. For him, these acquisitions were not simply meant to secure – as sometimes he affirms – an income for his old age, but also satisfy his desire for prestige, something which he acknowledges in various letters: 'è non truovo che a Firenze sien durate le famiglie, se non per forza di cose stabile' (II, 73; letter 318);³ and, more explicitly, in the following passage:

Circa il comperare la casa, io vi affermo il medesimo. Cioè che cerciate di comperare una casa che sia onorevole, di mille cinquecento o dumila scudi, e che sia nel quartier nostro, se si può... Io dico questo perché una casa onorevole nella città fa onore assai, perché si vede più che non fanno le possessione, e perché noi sia(n) pure cittadini discesi di nobilissima stirpe. Mi son sempre ingegnato di risuscitar la casa nostra, ma non ho avuto frategli da ciò. (II, 56-57; letter 298)⁴

It is affirmed that Michelangelo – all his biographers underline this fact – boasted that he came from the grand noble Canossa family (II, 80; letter 327). This genealogical pride does not appear to have any consistency, but it clearly shows his anxiety about the defence of the reputability of his lineage. In many letters, he emphatically reminds his father and brothers of their dignity as Florentine citizens, their noble origin and the role once played by the Buonarrotis in the government of their city.

More concretely, Michelangelo's correspondence bears witness to his anxiety to deliver his family from their status as craftsmen and minor officials, by proudly

reminding them of their origins (II, 56-57 and 76-77; letters 298, 323). We know that he refused to be considered a salaried artist who traded in his works. And he admonishes his brother Buonarroto, who meant to marry a lower-class but well-off girl, by saying: 'Anchora ti dico che a me non piace impacciarsi per avaritia con uomini più vili assai che non se' tu' (I, 61; letter 66).⁵

On this issue, the climax is an episode which concerns his brother Gismondo, the lame duck of the family, who had decided to live in Settignano, one of their lands, as a peasant. Michelangelo sharply deplored the fact that his brother was the family's disgrace: '... che Gismondo torni abitare in Firenze, acciò che con tanta mia vergogna non si dica più qua che io ò un fratello che a Settignano va dietro a' buoi' (II, 57; letter 298).⁶

On many occasions he rebuked his brothers – who were less infatuated than him with matters of nobility – because they lacked ambition, and reminded them of his tireless devotion in his efforts to promote his family. To the same Gismondo he writes:

... io son ito da dodici anni in qua tapinando per tucta Italia, sopportato ogni vergogna, patito ogni stento, lacerato il corpo mio in ongni faticha, messa la vita propria a mille pericoli solo per aiutar la chasa mia; e ora che io ò cominciato a rrilevarla un poco, tu solo voglia esser quello che schompigli e' rrovini in una ora quel che i' ò facto in tanti anni e chon tanta faticha... (I, 47; letter 48, postscriptum)⁷

In short, in Michelangelo one constantly finds the preoccupation to deliver the Buonarroto's from their popular condition – a condition connected with craftsmanship, small commerce and public office –, with the aim of promotion to the ranks of the republican oligarchy, which manifested itself in the acquisition of an honourable mansion and a rich estate. Altogether, Michelangelo aspires to a sort of kinship with the bourgeois nobility of a Ghibelline inclination.

This obsessive vagary of an artist has often been made fun of but he took his infatuation very seriously. Indeed, two kinds of reasons may have determined this aspiration to social climbing. On the one hand, his prodigious artistic – and also financial – success, which made him a universally known 'divine' artist; on the other, and correlatively, his numerous and sometimes intimate relationships, not only with the greatest artists of the time, but also with the rich Florentine and Roman bourgeoisie, who were connected with banking (Luigi del Riccio, the Strozzi's, the Ridolfi's) and with high politics (Soderini, the Pope and Cardinals). Thus, we may conclude that, during the whole of his career, he practically and objectively changed his social status, and allowed his family to do the same.

3. *Reflections on Art*

Coming to our second point, Michelangelo's observations on art, one is sometimes disappointed to see that works of art and aesthetic reflections do not

occupy much of his correspondence. However, the information he does give about this field and the sparse appreciations which he formulates of his trade, cast valuable light on his creative activity as an artist, and also as an entrepreneur.

It is evident that Michelangelo was not interested in artistic speculation. He clearly reveals this in his reply to the famous consultation called *il paragone* (the comparison), launched by the Medicean historiographer Benedetto Varchi, in which the Florentine man of letters asked the great artists of his time to express their opinion on whether sculpture or painting was the superior art.

In this contest, Michelangelo adopted an ambivalent, though courteous, attitude, holding aloof from either position, while affirming the superiority of sculpture, his craft *par excellence*. But he ends his reply – not without disingenuousness – by writing that it would be well to sign a peace treaty between these two arts and ‘... lasciar tante dispute; perché vi va più tempo che a far le figure...’; and, further on: ‘Infinite cose, e non più decto, ci sare’ da dire di simile scientie; ma, come ho decto, vorrebbon troppo tempo, e io n’ò poco, perché non solo son vechio, ma quasi nel numero de’ morti’ (II, 66; letter 309).⁸

These remarks may explain why, in his *Correspondence*, one finds so few reflections on the nature, function and theory of art even in the letters addressed to his illustrious artist friends like Vasari, Cellini, Sebastiano del Piombo, Bronzino, Ammannati. It is clear that for Michelangelo art is a matter of practical achievement rather than intellectual speculation. Exceptions are rare: in a very didactic letter dating from the years 1550-1560, meant as a critique of a project by his rival Sangallo, he discourses, taking inspiration from Vitruvius, on the homology between the different levels and ornaments; and, taking the human face and its symmetries (eyes, ears) and asymmetries (nose, mouth) as an example, he concludes: ‘E per[ò] è cosa certa che le membra dell’architettura dipendono dalle membra dell’uomo. Chi non è stato o non è buon maestro di figure, e massimo di notomia, non se ne può intendere’ (II, 185; letter 471).⁹

His considerations on art concern his own works hardly at all; they are simply made the object of allusions which are for the most part technical and professional. Thus, the fusion of the gigantic statue of Pope Julius II, in Bologna, which at first seemed to have miscarried, will be the object of about a dozen of anxious letters to his family (I, 26-37; letters 28-37). With yet stronger reason, the object of other anxious letters was the sculpting of the tomb of the same Julius II, whose execution implied four projects and subsequent contracts, and whose realisation, gradually reduced, will extend for many decades. In any case, this gigantic work will cause Michelangelo great torments (what will be called the ‘tragedy’ of the tomb), which will accompany a large part of his career (1505-1545). It is also necessary to consider the laborious extraction and routing of the marbles from Carrara to Florence or Rome and, above all, the endless building site of St Peter’s, staked off with dramatic vicissitudes, as well as with contrasts with his companions and rivals.

Whatever the actual facts may have been, and not mentioning explicit paranoia, it is clear that ‘the great master’ was constantly led to explain himself,

justify himself, to be self-critical, revealing, by these attitudes, his demanding, scrupulous temperament, but also a tendency towards bad conscience, or even a sense of guilt (I, 42, letter 44; I, 123, letter 140; I, 160-161, letter 182). André Chastel went as far as to argue that this titan had a sort of 'complexe d'échec' (1958, 130-133). On the other hand, there are no allusions to the initial failure of the Sistine Chapel, and only a few humorous reflections, levelled at Aretino, about the 'scandal' of the nudes in the *Last Judgement* (I, 193; letter 220).

On the whole, what prevail in his letters are instructions, both explicative and rectifying, accompanied, on occasion, by sketches (II, 182; letter 467) directed to the collaborators who worked under his guidance, such as the reconstruction, again addressed to Vasari (which he made by heart) of his project for the staircase of the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, which occupies half a dozen letters (among which II, 155; letter 434 and II, 156; letter 435). The same applies to two letters, addressed to Vasari, in which he deplors and rectifies, with the help of some sketches (II, 182; letter 467) the gross mistake made by his master builder, Bastiano Menotti, in the building of a chapel in St Peter's Basilica.

Most allusions to his works or construction sites are therefore what Enzo Noé Girardi calls 'working letters' (1974, 352) by the artist, craftsman and entrepreneur: that is to say, they express preoccupations concerning the preparation, development and realisation of his works, which are in most cases seen from the technical, financial and even juridical points of view.

Altogether, however, his 'artistic' allusions and reflections which appear to be external, are of great interest, since they present – albeit in the negative – an aspect which can be defined as *genetic*: indeed, they reveal the hidden face of the inventor and creator of genius, that is, of the artist-technician coping with obstacles and difficulties whose painful surmounting will make the 'creation' possible.

4. *The Melancholic Disposition*

'La mia allegrezza è la malinconia, / e 'l mio riposo son questi disagi' (Fiorato, ed., 2011, 267, ll. 25-26),¹⁰ writes Michelangelo in one of his poems. Melancholy is indeed for him a permanent spiritual disposition which finds confirmation in some of his art works, and especially in his poems. Even though the torments of his mind and soul are, in his letters, less visible than in the *Rime*, the letters profusely convey the intimate conflicts by which Michelangelo was accompanied throughout the whole of his career. One can say that anguish and melancholy are dominant attitudes with him, and to these feelings, by contrast and compensating counterpoint, is opposed an occasional 'comic' disposition based on satire, irony and humour.

In his correspondence there are no sombre confessions like the one which emerges in his 'nocturnal' sonnet (104), where he writes about the distribution of fortunes, which is governed by the sun and the moon 'Onde 'l caso, la sorte

e la fortuna / in un momento nachuer di ciascuno; / e a me consegnaro il tempo bruno, / come a simil nel parto e nella cuna' (*ibid.*, 104, ll. 5-8).¹¹

It is evident that Michelangelo, nailed to the imperatives of everyday life, was too deeply engaged with his material needs and obstinacy to realise his titanic works to find the leisure to indulge, in his letters, in his saturnine disposition. But the numerous avatars of his artistic career must have largely contributed to worsening his natural sombre disposition. It is revealing that in his correspondence the most excruciating moments of anguish (let alone mourning) derive from his professional problems.

Furthermore, the breaking off which determined, about 1534, his definitive departure from Florence occasioned the fact that, during about thirty years, cut off from his family and from friendly cultured Florentine relationships, he was to experience a trying isolation, only assuaged by a few solid Roman friendships, but made heavier by intense and passionate daily work.

Pursued or induced solitude, or pursued because it was induced: it is not easy to distinguish between these different stances. But it is certain that his hypochondriac unsociability, accompanied by a sort of asceticism, could only intensify his misanthropic 'desolation' of which the sinister 'capitolo'¹² 107 of the *Rime* intends to give a burlesque vision: 'T' sto rinchiuso come la midolla / dà la sua scorza, e povero e solo, / come spirto legato in un ampolla.' (*ibid.*, 267 ll. 1-3).¹³

In his letters, we find some intimate cogitations, which are at the same time more direct and more radical. Already in 1509 he wrote from Bologna to his brother Buonarroto: 'Io sto qua in grande afanno e chon grandissima faticha di chorpo, e non ò amici di nessuna sorte; e no' ne voglio; e non ò tanto tempo che io possa mangiare el bisonio mio' (I, 49; letter 50).¹⁴ Other statements, scattered through many decades, confirm this situation and spiritual condition: 'T' non ò preso la provigione già è passato l'ano e co[n]bacto con la povertà; son molto solo alle noie, e òne tante che mi te[n]ghano più occhupato che non fa l'arte...' (I, 166; letter 188).¹⁵ Elsewhere he says: '... no ne so niente, perché non pratico con nessuno, né con altri' (II, 118; letter 378);¹⁶ and he moans about his terrible anguish which prevented him not only from living but also from painting: 'non posso vivere, non che dipingere' (II, 19; letter 248).¹⁷

Poverty, which, on the other hand, was intermittent and temporary, was certainly not the main cause of this melancholic solitude, and sometimes one senses in his letters other psychological reasons, more closely connected to his stern and distrustful character: 'Io ò pochissime pratiche in Roma... e se io richieggo un di questi d'una cosa, per ognuna richieggon me di mille: però mi bisogna praticar pochi' (II, 92; letter 344; postscriptum).¹⁸

He always shunned company, except that of a few rare and gratifying friends, like Luigi del Riccio, the writer Donato Giannotti, the marchioness and poet Vittoria Colonna, the painter and disciple Sebastiano del Piombo, and a few others. With yet stronger reason, he abhorred frivolities; and there is a striking contrast between his austere way of living and that of Leonardo,

Raphael, or Giulio Romano, who aspired to living like lords. Therefore, certain letters witness the fact that now and then convivial company gave him great solace, and also regret for certain lost friendly encounters. As he writes to Sebastiano del Piombo: ‘... el vostro amicho capitano Chuio e certi altri gentilomini volsono, lor gratia, che io andassi a cena chon loro, di che ebi grandissimo piacere, perché usci’ um pocho del mio malinchonico, o vero del mio pazzo...’ (I, 163; letter 185).¹⁹

It is necessary to acknowledge that in about fifteen pleasant letters addressed to intimate friends, there appear some moments of serenity, abandon, even joviality, which are rare in his *Carteggio* as a whole, where anxiety and anger dominate.

Certainly, during the last years of his life, his solitude becomes a tragic, and even unbearable burden. Thus, when he thanks his nephew Leonardo for sending him some flasks of good wine, he bitterly notices that there is no one left with whom to share it, because all his friends have disappeared (II, 166; letter 448).²⁰ And, although he has always tried to keep his nephew at a distance, he now, after the death of his collaborator and friend Urbino in 1555, addresses a real call for help to him. In the end, during the last weeks of his life, he sends six subsequent letters to the same Leonardo, asking him to join him in Rome to assist him in his last instants. Unfortunately, Leonardo will arrive too late: his uncle had passed away, thankfully comforted by the presence of the painter Daniele da Volterra and by his old ‘lover’ Tommaso Cavalieri.

5. *Old Age, Illness and Death*

The titanic work of Michelangelo reveals an exceptionally strong temperament and a very sturdy physical constitution, as is confirmed by the age of his death, uncommon at that time: eighty-nine years. More than by illness, which in a way spared him and which suggested reflections that were sombre but rather hopeful and even facetious, he was obsessed by old age. As happens in his *Rime*, this obsession appears very early in his writings: ‘... perché io sono vechio, non mi pare, per megliorare dugiento o trecento duchati al Papa in questi marmi, perderci tanto tempo...’ (I, 105; letter 119),²¹ he wrote to Domenico Buoninsegni, the Pope’s superintendent of commissions, when he was forty-four. Since then, allusions to age will become a leitmotif by which he justified the many failures or delays in delivering his works; but this does not exclude a concrete and sincere consciousness, which was evidently subjective, of premature ageing: ‘Io ò grande obrigo, e son vechio e mal disposto, che s’io lavoro un dì, bisogna che io me ne posi quatro’ (I, 145; letter 164).²² In spite of an exhausting work, Michelangelo seems to have been particularly impervious to strain and, all in all, illness does not seem to have much persecuted him. Sometimes he succumbed, even seriously, as happened in June, 1544, which is not astonishing, since that was the year in which he completed the

creation of his prodigious *Last Judgement* in the Sistine Chapel. This we know from a letter dated 23 June 1544 which Michelangelo's faithful friend Luigi del Riccio wrote to Roberto Strozzi, informing him that Michaelangelo was seriously ill and that he had convinced him to be sheltered and cared for in his home (II, 26; letter 259).

But, a month later, Michelangelo, recovered, quips on his health troubles: 'Son guarito e spero vivere qualche tempo, poi che 'l cielo à messa la mia sanità in man di maestro Baccio e nel trebbian degl'Ulivieri' (II, 27; letter 260).²³

What most vexed him, especially during his last years, were the consequences which his infirmities could produce on his professional activities, since these sometimes kept him at home and only allowed him to direct the work on St Peter's construction site from a distance, using his collaborators as intermediaries, a thing which could produce serious failures:

... ond'io n'ò passione e non poca, perché sono i' maggior fatica e fastidio, circa la cose della fabrica ch'i' fussi mai; e questo è che nella volta della capella del re di Francia ... per esser vecchio e non vi potere andare spesso, è natovi un certo errore che mi bisogna disfare gran parte di quel che v'era facto. (II, 176; letter 462)²⁴

Michelangelo did not fear death more than illness. His firm faith, which made him consider death as a transition to a better world and a liberation from human miseries, allowed him to see death as a non-redoutable event. This Christian vision does not prevent him from painfully suffering from the death of his relatives, who were numerous, considering the old age of his death. These deaths inspired some deeply sorrowful letters, accompanied by the anxiety to know whether his dear ones had died as good Christians.

But it was the death of Vittoria Colonna, his spiritual friend, in 1547, and, later, that of his servant, collaborator and dear friend Urbino that brought from him the most heart-rending accents, accompanied by deep personal meditation. To his nephew Leonardo, he expressed, on January 4, 1556, his total dismay for this last loss:

Avisoti come iersera, a dì 3 di dicembre, a ore 4, passò di questa vita Francesco decto Urbino, con grandissimo mio affanno; e àmmi lasciato molto afficto e tribolato, tanto che mi sare' stato più dolce il morir con esso seco, per l'amor che io gli portavo ... onde a me pare essere ora restato per la morte sua senza vita, e non mi posso dar pace. (II, 158; letter 437)²⁵

And two weeks later he entrusted the following meditation to Giorgio Vasari:

Voi sapete come Urbino è morto; di che m'è stato grandissima gratia di Dio, ma con grave mie danno e infinito dolore. La gratia è stata che, dove in vita mi teneva vivo, morendo m'ha insegnato morire non con dispiacere, ma con disidero della mo[r]te. (II, 159; letter 439).²⁶

He appears to be waiting for death with peace of mind: 'Son vechio e qua duro gran fatica mal conosciuta; e fo per l'amor di Dio, e in quello spero e non in altro' (II, 187-188; letter 475).²⁷

From that moment, death appears to him as 'a friend' to whom he tries to get accustomed. Thus, to Duke Cosimo I who encouraged him to come back to his homeland, he wrote: '... non mi resta a ffare altro poi che... tornarmi a Firenze con animo di riposarmi co la morte, con la quale di e nocte cerco di domesticarmi...'. (II, 176-177; letter 462).²⁸

The evocation of his last hour at times takes on in his writings a certain poetic pregnancy (which happens rarely in his correspondence), suggesting an expressive and imaginative language: 'sono alle venti 4 ore e non nasce in me pensiero che non vi sia dentro sculpita la morte' (II, 153; letter 430).²⁹

But the old titan will fight to the end; he will persist in directing, as we have seen, those working on the completion of St Peter's Basilica and negotiating, up to the last weeks of his life, with the exacting supervisors of the building site. The last letters which we possess deal mainly with the great architectural realisations which were added, at the end of his career, to the prestigious frescoes of the pontifical chapels.

Thus, Michelangelo's death in 1564 will coincide with the apogee of his Roman, Italian and European glory.

6. Conclusion

I wish to conclude this selective analysis of the contents of Michelangelo's letters with a general observation, by insisting again on the historical meaning of his *Correspondence*.

It was not possible to show here the copious and exactly documented witness of Florentine and Roman sixteenth-century micro-history offered by Michelangelo's letters. In addition, one of the great merits of Michelangelo as a writer is that, through his letters as well as through his poems, he appears to be, together with Piero della Francesca, Ghiberti, Leonardo, Cellini and Vasari, one of those who most contributed to 'l'entrée des artistes en l'écriture' (Lucas Fiorato, 1989, 67 ff.): an activity which was normally the prerogative of highly cultured literati and in which, before him, artists did not have a place. To this one should add a special peculiarity in literary history: as underlined by André Chastel, Michelangelo is 'le premier artiste don't on possède une importante correspondance' (1958, 130).

This is why, through his writings, both personal and collective, we can say that Michelangelo contributed to the republic of letters with an epistolographic monument which appears exceptional although arising from the experience of everyday life, as he lived it day by day.

¹ Writing 'is not my profession' (Fiorato, ed., 2010, I, 88; letter 99). This letter is addressed to his brother Buonarroto and was written on 16 June, 1515. All quotations from the letters are

taken from this edition and are followed, in parenthesis, by vol. number, page and number of letter as given in it.

²For this copious display of information, see my 'Introduction' in Fiorato, ed., 2010, vol. I, xi-cxxv.

³'I do not think that in Florence families have lasted if not thanks to their estates'. To his nephew Leonardo, 15 October 1547.

⁴'On the question of buying a house, I repeat what I said, that is, that you should try to buy an honourable house, worth one thousand or one thousand and five hundred *scudi*, and, if possible, located in our area... I say this because an honourable house in the city gives you great honour, because it is more visible than are estates and because we are descended from a most noble stock. I have always striven to restore our house, but my brothers have not matched up with the task'. To his nephew Leonardo, 4 December 1546.

⁵'I tell you again that I do not like that, out of avarice, one compromises oneself with people of much lower condition than we are'. To his father Lodovico, early April 1512.

⁶'... that Gismondo comes back to live in Florence, so that here [in Rome] one does not say any more that I have a brother who in Settignano walks behind the oxen'. To Bartolomeo [Ferratino], end of 1546 or beginning of 1547.

⁷'... I have been toiling all over Italy for the last twelve years, suffering all disgraces, enduring privation, tearing my body in every hardship, put my life in a thousand perils only to help my family; and, now that I started to relieve it a little, only you are the one who messes up and spoils in one hour what I have done in so many years and with so much toil'. To his brother Giovan Simone, between July and August 1509.

⁸'... to leave aside all these quarrels which require more time than to make figures'; 'one should say many things, which have no longer been said, of such disciplines; but, as I said, it would take too much time, and I have little because I not only am old, but almost count myself among the dead'. To Benedetto Varchi, between April and June 1547.

⁹'... this is why it is certain that the limbs of architecture come from the limbs of man. Those who have not been, or are not, good masters of figures, and especially of anatomy, cannot be proficient in it'. To cardinal Rodolfo Pio from Carpi (?), 1557-1560 (?).

¹⁰'My joy is melancholy, / and my tranquillity are these discomforts'.

¹¹'From these in one moment there were born the chance, destiny and fortune of each of us; and to me they bestowed dark time, which I resembled at birth and in the cradle'.

¹²By 'capitolo' is meant a series of short stanzas in terza rima, usually of a burlesque character.

¹³'I am imprisoned as is the marrow / in its case, and poor, and lonely, / as a spirit imprisoned in a phial'.

¹⁴'I live here in great anguish and with great bodily effort, and have no friends at all; nor do I want to have; neither have I time enough to eat as I need'. To his brother Buonarroto, 17 November 1509 (?).

¹⁵'I have not taken my pension since more than one year and I strive with poverty; I am utterly alone facing annoyances and I have so many that they take much more time than does my art'. To Giovan Francesco Fattucci, 24 October 1525.

¹⁶'I know nothing, and I associate with no one'. To his nephew Leonardo, 22 August 1550.

¹⁷'I can neither live nor paint'. To Luigi del Riccio, October-November 1542.

¹⁸'I have very few acquaintances in Rome... and if I ask something from these people, for each one they will ask me a thousand. And therefore I must associate with few'. To his nephew Leonardo, 18 January 1549.

¹⁹'Your friend captain Chuio and some other gentlemen were so kind as to invite me to dine out with them, and I was very pleased about this, because for a short time I abandoned my melancholy, not to say my madness'. To Sebastiano del Piombo, May 1525.

²⁰To his nephew Leonardo, 4 July 1556.

²¹ 'since I am old, I do not think that to waste time only to make the pope save two hundred or three hundred ducats would be worth while'. To Domenico Buoninsegni, 2 May 1517.

²² 'I have many engagements and am old and in ill health, so that if I work one day I have to rest four'. To Bartolomeo Angelini, 18 (?) April 1523.

²³ 'I have recovered and hope to live some more time, for heaven has entrusted my health to the hands of maestro Baccio and to good vine trebbiano of the Olivieri'. To Luigi del Riccio, between end of July and beginning of August 1544.

²⁴ 'I am greatly anguished, for I have more exertion and tribulations regarding the construction site than I ever had; and the reason is that in the vault of the king of France's chapel... since I am old and cannot go there frequently, a certain mistake appeared and so I have to undo a great part of what I had done'. To Duke Cosimo de' Medici, before 22 May 1557.

²⁵ 'I wish to inform you that last night at four o'clock Francesco, called Urbino, passed away, to my great grief, this left me much afflicted and tormented, so much that it would have been sweeter to die with him, for the love I bore him... and so it seems to me that I have remained lifeless after his death and cannot take comfort'. To his nephew Leonardo, 4 January 1556.

²⁶ 'You know that Urbino died, which has been for me a great grace from God, but also a heavy harm and an infinite pain. The grace was that, while in life he kept me alive, dying he taught me how to die, not with displeasure but with longing for death'. To Giorgio Vasari, 23 February 1556.

²⁷ 'I am old and here I work very hard unacknowledged; and I do it for God's sake, and in that and only in that I trust'. To his nephew Leonardo, 2 December 1558.

²⁸ '... it only remains to me... to come back to Florence with intent to rest there in death, with whom day and night I try to become acquainted'. To Duke Cosimo I de' Medici, before 22 May 1557.

²⁹ 'I have reached my twenty fourth hour, and no thought is born in me but death is sculpted in it'. To Giorgio Vasari, 22 June 1555.

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