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MICHELANGELO, PYTHAGORAS, AND PANOFSKY

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There is probably no doubt that the series of Michelangelo's late drawings representing the Crucifixion are not only among the most fascinating, but also among the most mysterious works—and not only of Michelangelo, but of European art in general. Two of these drawings—one from the Royal Library, Windsor (12761r), and one from the British Museum (W.81; see Fig. 1), portray Christ hanging on a Y-shaped cross. Recently, I tried to explain the origin of the peculiar shape of these crosses by comparing them to fourteenth-century *crucifigi dolorosi*, one of which, in Condivi's opinion, inspired the original form of Michelangelo's lost cross depicted above the head of the Virgin Mary in his famous drawing of the *Pietà* for Vittoria Colonna. The *crucifigi dolorosi* often used a cross of this shape; and although their crosses have generally not been preserved to our own times, it is still possible to guess their former shape according to the position of Christ's hands. The exceptional shape of Michelangelo's crosses may be further compared to some crosses by Giovanni Pisano, whose work could be one of the sources for Michelangelo's dynamic approach to the sculptural volume, especially in his early period.¹ There is, however, still another explanation of the strange Y shape of the crosses appearing in Michelangelo's late period. In the treatise *De litteris monosyllabis Graecis et Latinis* by Decimus Magnus Ausonius, we may read about the letter Y: "Pythagorae bivium

ramis pateo ambiguus."² The works of Ausonius were first printed by Bartolomaeus Girardinus in Venice in 1472 and thereafter by Julius Aemilianus Ferrarius in Milan (1490), Johannes Tacuinus in Venice (1494 and 1496), and Thaddaeus Ugoletus in Parma (1499). Today, all of these editions are widely accessible in European libraries. In the mid-sixteenth century, when Michelangelo's drawings were created, the oeuvre of Ausonius was published by Ioannes Tornaesius in Lyon in 1558. Thus, we may conclude that Ausonius's symbolic reading of Y could have been easily known to Michelangelo.

What, then, was actually meant by the term *bivium Pythagorae*? The reply is practically automatic to each student of art history because the topic was analyzed by no less than Erwin Panofsky in one of his early texts. The *bivium of Pythagoras* is that moment when one chooses either a materialistic or a spiritual way of life. It was, in antiquity no less than in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, represented by depictions of *Hercules at the Crossroads*, inspired by Hesiod and by the known narrative of the Sophist Prodicus. The (pseudo- or neo-) Pythagorean motif of a mystical-magical interpretation of the letter Y, inherited from antique authors like Persius (A.D. 34–62), Maximinus (pseudo-Virgil), or the Christian writer Lactantius (A.D. c. 240–c. 320) and known throughout the Middle Ages, became popular among

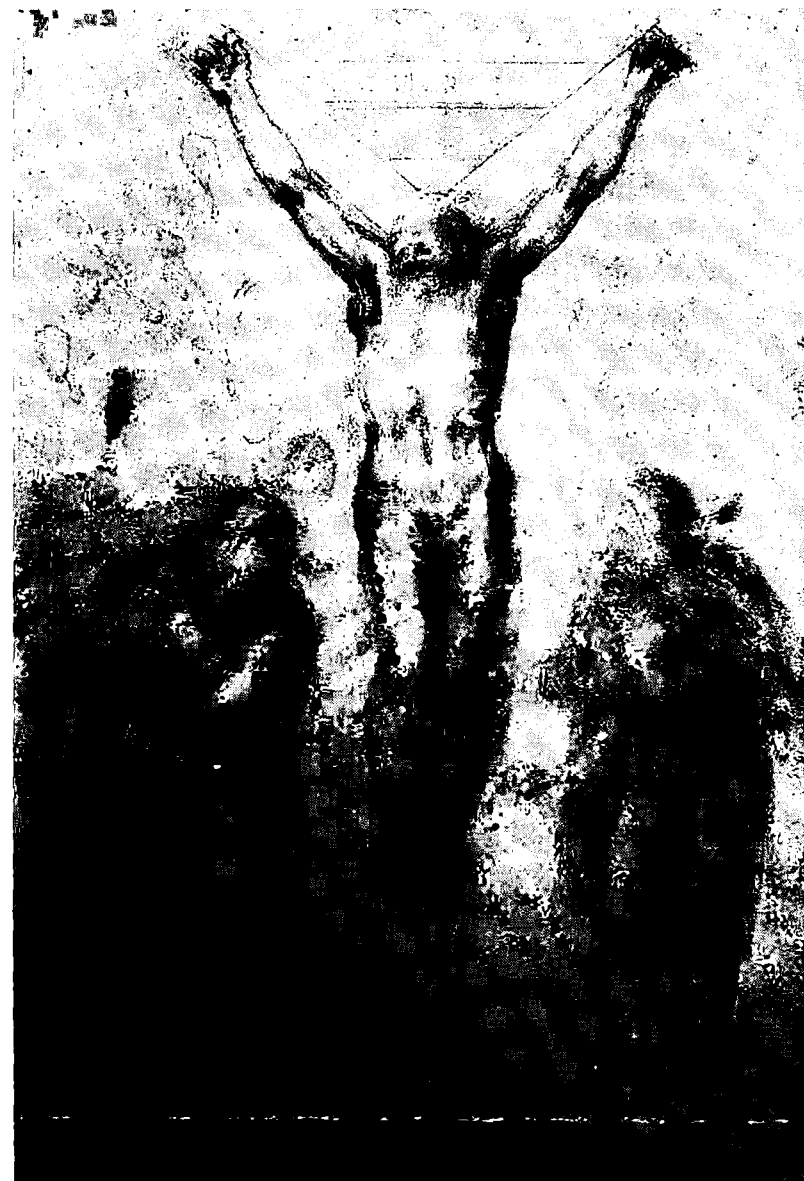


Fig. 1 Michelangelo, *Crucifixion with the Virgin and Saint John*. British Museum, London

humanists as early as the fourteenth century, a fact recorded by Petrarch. In a woodcut illustration from the Latin translation of the most popular work by Sebastian Brant, whose *Das Narrenschiff* (1494) was made accessible to the broader European audience as *Stultifera Navis* in 1497, we can find the *Y* form inscribed into the landscape where Hercules' decision takes place.³ It was typical for Panofsky, in his broadly based study, to almost completely omit the medieval tradition of the *bivium* motif, although we find it both in medieval Latin treatises and in such fundamental texts of European vernacular literature as Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival*, *Lancelot*, or, last but far from least, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, which was in fact the only one of the above-mentioned texts known with all certainty to Michelangelo.⁴ It seems that Michelangelo's late drawings (as well as other works by the master) should not be interpreted solely on the basis of humanist culture, but rather as the result of an undisturbed continuation of what we call "medieval" tradition, in which the *bivium* served as a metaphor for an individual's free will (*arbitrium liberum*) to choose between good and evil.

Taking this into consideration, it is necessary to correct the prevailing view of "Renaissance" art, with its supposed connection to the new, "humanist" literature of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Given the aforementioned conclusion, nothing seems easier than to suppose that Michelangelo chose the *Y* form for his late *Crucifixion* drawings merely to convey the idea that Christ's Cross represented a crucial moment of decision for the viewer: looking at these pictures, the spectator could either choose to dedicate his or her life to sensual pleasures or devote it to moral deeds. Michelangelo

lived when the printed book became an integral part of western European civilization.⁵ He could assume that the "reader" of his drawing would be perfectly able to identify the extraordinary form of the Cross as referring to the letter *Y*, just as he might expect the viewer to read his drawings from left to right. The Pythagorean interpretation of *Y* may serve to support the idea that a human being is endowed with the free will to choose either good or bad—an idea that would conform to Catholic doctrine, opposing the Lutheran dismissal of good deeds and the Calvinist teaching of predestination.

At this point, it is necessary to introduce a substantial correction to what has been written above. Despite the fact that modern texts on Michelangelo abound with hints of his literary inspirations, the artist did not, in fact, read Latin.⁶ It seems evident that we cannot consider this sculptor capable of a convoluted interpretation of ancient authors in his works. Moreover, we do not know the purpose of his late drawings, and nothing indicates that they were to be interpreted by highly educated men or women.

What can we do if a logical, rational interpretation of a work—based on the unspoken presupposition that the Florentine giant was versed in Latin texts—disappears? We can consider the reasons why *Y* serves as a meaningful form—why it was an inspiration for both Ausonius (and Persius, Lactantius, Brant, *et al.*) and Michelangelo. Taken as a purely geometrical form, the cross is both a sign and a tool of an absolute division of space or pictorial surface. Historically, the Cross was a variant of the world tree: it is an *arbor mundi*, which represents the *axis mundi*.⁷ The mythological roots of the Cross determined its psychological value, which is currently capitalized in the famous *Baumtest*: the way a person sees/

perceives a tree with its roots, trunk, and crown can be used to diagnose his/her mental state. By changing the shape of the Cross, Michelangelo not only added a new verbal meaning to the scene, but altered our subliminal reading of his drawings. If a "normal," stable Cross is suddenly replaced by a *Y*-shaped one, we automatically perceive its diagonals as an expressive form: the ends of its arms should not be inscribed in a circle, a closed geometrical figure, but rather in an oval—a dynamic and unstable form. Stillness is replaced by movement, stressed by the dynamic postures of the Virgin Mary and Saint John, whose bodies rotate toward the spectator. Such a reading is made stronger by the fact that we—just like sixteenth-century viewers—are used to Latin crosses. The neo-Pythagorean symbolization of the letter *Y* omits this broader potential of its form—it is a typical post-interpretation, playing with the rich context of ancient literary tradition, but neglecting all nonliteral contents.

As such, this interpretation is similar to Panofsky's science of iconology, playing mainly with literary meanings of a scene whose psychological content becomes completely unimportant: the complex pictures are reduced to emblems. Such an approach was comfortable for art historians, writing their texts in cozy, air-conditioned libraries, but devastating for the arts, which was now

exposed to all imaginable freaks of social climate, exposed to all possible readings by viewers from varied social groups and with different educations, but always reacting to the actual subject.

In this context, it may be useful to recall that Panofsky himself still spoke about the *Wechselverhältnis zwischen Textüberlieferung und Bildüberlieferung* in 1930.⁸ It is a pity that the great art historian, and particularly his countless followers of the second half of the twentieth century, abandoned this dialectical approach in favor of a more rigid search for verbal equivalents to visual realities. Whereas literary theoreticians have stressed long ago the difficulties relating to the unclear mixture of systematic and non-systematic elements in a work of art, the tension between the rational decoding and mainly sensual perception of a work, and so forth,⁹ it seems that art history fortified itself with the convenience of once-and-for-all given meanings of one-dimensional works.

Standing in front of Michelangelo's late *Crucifixion*, we do find ourselves at the crossroads, as if the old master wanted to warn us about not reducing a picture or sculpture to its potential literary source, to advise us to study not only the verbal sources of images, but the connections between the literary texts and the psychological meanings that are implied in the overall organization of pictures.

NOTES

1. P. Kalina, "Crucifixus dolorosus: Zur Forschungslage und zur Begriffsbestimmung, mit einem Exkurs zum späten Michelangelo," *Umění* 49 (2001): 398–410. The same opinion was simultaneously expressed by A. W. G. Posèq, "Aspects of Laterality in Michelangelo," *Artibus et historiae* 40 (1999): 96.

2. *Decimi Magni Ausonii Burdigalensis Opuscula*,

ed. S. Prete (Leipzig: 1978), p. 135. *D. Magni Ausonii . . . opera*, ed. Ioannes Tornaesius (Lyon: 1558), p. 112.

3. E. Panofsky, *Hercules am Scheidewege und andere antike Bildstoffe in der neueren Kunst* (Leipzig and Berlin: 1930). For the Pythagorean *Y*, see esp. pp. 44, 64–68. The most important literary sources

were Lactantius, *Divinae Institutiones* VI.3.1; Persius, *Saturae* III.55; Petrarca, *Epistolae* I.8. Cf. further A. Brinkmann, "Ein Denkmal des Neupythagoreismus," *Rheinisches Museum für Philologie* N.F. 66 (1911): 616–625; F. Cumont, *After Life in Roman Paganism: Lectures Delivered at Yale University on the Silliman Foundation* (New Haven: 1922), pp. 150–153. *Id.*, *Recherches sur le symbolisme funéraire des Romains* (Paris: 1942), pp. 422–431, describes a row of ancient crypto-Pythagorean epitaphs using the symbolism of Y. F. Dornseiff, *Das Alphabet in Mystik und Magie*, 2nd ed. (Leipzig and Berlin: 1925), gives an extremely valuable overview of mystical interpretations of letters in various cultures. It is characteristic that the Greeks did not consider the idea of the divine origin of the alphabet, which was typical for the majority of ancient cultures (see pp. 5–7; on the Pythagorean Y, see p. 24).

4. The motif of the Pythagorean *Y/bivium Pythago-*

rae was mediated by Isidore of Seville and used by Arnold of Lübeck, Bruno of Magdeburg, Guillaume de St. Thierry, Richard de Bury, and others; see W. Harms, *Homo viator in bivio: Studien zur Bildlichkeit des Weges* (Munich: 1970).

5. For the rapid diffusion of printed books in the sixteenth century, see esp. L. Febvre and H.-J. Martin, *L'Apparition du livre* (Paris: 1958).

6. *The Poetry of Michelangelo: An Annotated Translation*, ed. and trans. J. M. Saslow (New Haven: 1991), pp. 352–353.

7. A brilliant semiotic interpretation of the universal tree was given by V. N. Toporov, "Drevo mirovoje," in *Mify narodov mira* (Moscow: 1987), pp. 398–406, with bibliography.

8. Panofsky, foreword (without pagination).

9. See, for example, J. Lotman, *The Structure of Artistic Text*, trans. Ronald Vroon (Ann Arbor, Mich.: 1977), p. 57.

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