

## MICHELANGELO and SHOSTAKOVICH :

from *terribilità* to *terribilità***Part I: Talking of Michelangelo?**

It isn't common knowledge that Michelangelo (henceforth 'M') wrote poetry; nor will many readers of modern poetry be familiar with its qualities. In fact, M (1475-1564) is arguably the first major visual artist to make a significant contribution to the literature of his time. Upon his death, he was certainly considered a leading lyrical poet of his day, even though most of his poetry hadn't yet been published. Nevertheless, Vasari's 'Life of Michelangelo' in 1550 – probably the first biography of a western artist to be published during its subject's lifetime – encouraged its readers to:

“... read the lovely *canzoni* and the magnificent sonnets, written with the greatest of care, made into songs by famous poets and musicians, read and commentated by learned men in the most celebrated academies throughout Italy.”

Hardly faint praise. But when the permanent tomb for *Il Divino* (as M was often called) was unveiled in Santa Croce, the figure representing the poetic muse in the temporary constructions had vanished, leaving only her sister arts to mourn his passing. If his poetry was already moving into the shadows then, and if it remains there today, perhaps it's because so much of that shadow is cast by himself, by the sheer cultural bulk of his other major works. It would be a mistake, though, to put the compulsion to translate him (felt by generations of major poets) down to mere curiosity or reverential rub-off. The intensity of poetic engagement with M, for some of our greatest poetic minds, goes far beyond the passing reference by TS Eliot, that other great admirer of Dante, in his memorable refrain imitating Laforgue: “In the room the women come and go/ Talking of Michelangelo.”

So, what *are* the qualities of this poetry? Well, the rooms (or should I say, stanzas?) M builds for his own poetic comings and goings rarely extend beyond the epigram, sonnet or modestly-lengthed madrigal. He sticks mostly to the first person, projecting experience fully-felt. The surface is confessional, faintly modern in that respect; but, underneath, his preoccupations and tone are as universalised and formalised as those of Dante for Beatrice or Petrarch for his beloved Laura. His ideas draw on the traditional palette of his time, particularly Renaissance thought, and might create, for some modern readers, a somewhat stylised and archaic air; yet the language is wrought and condensed, with a tough intellectual drive behind it, the approach self-made – in fact, quite innovative for its era. To the modern ear, he bears – in some ways – a familial resemblance to the Elizabethan poets. Noted in ordinary speech as “habitually veiled and ambiguous, for his words often have two meanings”, there's certainly complexity in his poetic phrasing and sense, particularly in his 'middle' years. This convolution, compounded with a tendency to present involved ideas in shorthand, courts confusion and may even reflect incompetence and hurriedness as much as brilliance; but, often enough, M's language and prosody strain to reflect the struggle of passion and experience. Here's a glimpse, in the opening of one of his sonnets to Tommaso dei Cavalieri:

In the same way that pen and ink embrace  
The high and the low style and the middle,  
And rich pictures or crude are in the marble,  
Whichever our wits are able to express,

Thus, my dear Lord, perhaps within your breast  
No less than acts of pride there are the humble.

[Creighton Gilbert, 82]

He's not single-voiced, either. In one poem he claims "I have made acquaintance too with urine", and in the next: "Love that fears and respects/ What the eyes cannot see/ Keeps me from your fair face". He can be direct, blunt and demotic, especially in the 'miscellaneous pieces' (the ones that don't deal with love or religion). M isn't a passive rehearser, then, of the Neo-Platonic concerns and Petrarchan style of his time, but their active reformer, as he was across all of his artistic output. In architecture, according to Vasari, "all artists owe a vast and eternal debt to Michelangelo because he has broken the chains and bonds that kept them working in an old habitual way, while Robert N. Linscott highlights how "he was a unique synthesis of the new Humanism and the old Christianity". To claim that his ingenuity and individuality with stone and paint had nothing *at all* to do with his qualities as a poet would be, well, sensational. That, alone, should encourage the noughties to dust the poetry down. Perhaps his degree of 'difficulty', when it remains unsmoothed by translation, might actually cause M to sit better with a modernist readership (acclimatised to *The Waste Land* or the likes of Charles Olson) than he may have done with some of his contemporaries. I'm probably overstating the case here, but I do wonder if reading M in his day might have been a little like someone comfortable with the mannerisms of Georgian Verse, trapped within its 'Doggerel March', being introduced to the work of, say, Ivor Gurney or David Jones. How much of a paradox would it be, I'd ask, to propose M as the first proto-Modernist poet?

Talking of paradox, it veins everything M wrote. For instance, his imagery often deploys stock approaches; but the poems overall feel fresh, as though they have no mask. He deploys paradox itself, as a key conceit of Neo-Platonic poetry, but often manages to do so in paradoxical fashion. The paradox continues through to his very name, whose etymology seems to question M's divinity even as it asserts it: Angelo, which needs no unpacking, and Michael, which stems from a question: *Who is like God?* Perhaps the name imitates his notoriously paradoxical character: as much prickly, arrogant and panicky as it was intelligent, devotional and hard-working, always setting himself impossible goals, and at least as fierce with his own shortcomings as everyone else's. Legendary long before his death, commissioned by the most powerful leaders of his time, he was also solitary, abstemious, negligent in his appearance and domestic habits – the kind of man who, like Prufrock, might have confessed: "I grow old... I grow old... / I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled."

Dmitri Shostakovich, himself growing old through long and debilitating illness, completed the non-orchestral version of his *Suite on Verses of Michelangelo Buonarroti* (scored for bass voice and piano) in 1974. Forced by disability to compose with his left hand, he responded to the poet's dark intensity with his own, absorbing and utilising the left-field energy of M. A grandness of symbolic intent and a formalised intimacy chime between the two great minds here, both artists working with a spare yet rich efficiency whose rare glimmers of warmth are thereby all the more affecting. The dying Shostakovich told his son Maxim that he wished the orchestral version of the piece to be considered his '16<sup>th</sup>' symphony, a request we must surely grant if austere magnificence were the sole criterion. The *Suite* can be thought of as three thematic trios of song, assembled with a prelude and postlude. Together, the song cycle creates a testament, a symbolic representation of the archetypal make-up of a life. In a letter to his friend and long-term correspondent Isaak Glikman, Shostakovich wrote of M's poems:

"I find it hard to make any judgment about Michelangelo, but it does appear to me that the essence has come through. And by the essence of these sonnets, I had in mind: Wisdom, Love, Creation, Death, Immortality".

Actually, the poems Shostakovich chose were not only sonnets: they included a madrigal and two epigrams. M found the sonnet form, as with his sculpture, sometimes difficult to carry through. The looser madrigal (built up using irregularly rhyming lines, usually ending with a rhyming couplet) seemed, in some ways, more to his liking and forms a major part of the over 300 poems and fragments (though, as the fragments testify, it's likely that many poems have been lost altogether). But the truncated (i.e. the so-called 'unfinished') sonnets still carry a strong sense of completion that isn't paralleled, in any simple way, by those artefacts he abandoned either through the jockeying or death of patrons, through financial or practical

problems, or because of his frequent dissatisfaction, his innate sense that the exquisite forms he arrived at in his mind hadn't been reified, in spite of his extraordinary craftsmanship.

This problem of making an ideal rendering finds an uncanny equivalent in the various attempts to translate M's poetry. He was taken on by, among others, Rilke, Jennings, Emerson, Longfellow and Santayana. Wordsworth gave up ("I attempted, at least, fifteen of the sonnets, but could not anywhere succeed"), outlining in 1805 to Sir George Beaumont the trio of pitfalls awaiting any would-be translator of M. First, there are convolutions and obscurities of syntax and meaning ("the most difficult to construe I ever met with"). Second, M's Dantesque qualities of "majesty and strength", but delivered in a rugged style not at all in keeping with the sonorous, unwrinkled surface of the Petrarchan conventions he occasionally wrote in, but mostly *away from*. Finally, there's his extraordinary compression and intensity of expression, which caused Wordsworth to admit:

"so much meaning has been put by Michael Angelo into so little room, and that meaning sometimes so excellent in itself, that I found the difficulty of translating him insurmountable".

That "sometimes" before the "so excellent" is telling; but the overall thrust here is that M doesn't yield easily to paraphrase. This explains why the phrasing and meaning between different translations sometimes varies wildly. One has to ask, indeed, how much of what Shostakovich read in 1974 in the edition by Abram Efros was an accurate or sensitive recasting of the original manuscripts? It seems Shostakovich himself didn't find these Russian versions uniformly successful. If the issue of translation is perennially thorny, we find ourselves in a particularly dense part of the thicket with M. To illustrate this, let me quote the opening lines of an English rendering of Shostakovich's fourth song, *Separation*:

Dare I my treasure,  
Exist without you, a torment to myself,  
Since you are deaf to my entreaties to ease the parting?

Now, those same lines of the madrigal as translated by Creighton Gilbert:

How will I ever dare  
Without you, my beloved, to keep alive,  
If I can't ask you to help me as I leave?

Meanwhile, here are the closing lines of *Morning* (according to Felicity Ashbee, Creighton Gilbert and Anthony Mortimer respectively) whose final statements barely resemble each other in intent and tone:

And the simple girdle, caressingly encircles [her]  
As though whispering: "I will not part with her"...  
Oh, how much work there is here for my hands!

And I believe the simple sash that's knotted  
Says to itself, I'd fasten here forever!  
How would it be then that my arms would act?

And round her waist the simple girdle seems  
to whisper low: here let me cling forever.  
Just think what I could circle with my arms.

... and the opening complexion given (by those same translators) to *Love*:

Oh say, my Love, has [now] in very truth  
This longed-for beauty appeared...?

Love, do my eyes, O tell me as a favor,  
See the actual beauty I desire...?

I beg you, Love, to tell me if my eyes

see truly the true beauty that I seek...

... and, here, extracts from the final song, *Immortality*...

I live in you, whose plaints I listen to,  
Since friend and friend are mirrored in each other.

... Since one in love takes on the other's form,  
I stay alive in you, who see and weep.

... since lovers are transformed into each other,  
live on in you who see me now and weep.

Finally, look at the opening quatrain of *To the Exile*, rendered by Longfellow (in the reproduction I have) as...

What should be said of him cannot be said;  
By too great splendor is his name attended;  
To blame is easier those who him offended,  
Than reach the faintest glory round him shed.

... and compare it with Symonds' version:

No tongue can tell of him what should be told,  
For on blind eyes his splendour shines too strong;  
'Twere easier to blame those who wrought him wrong,  
Than sound his least praise with a mouth of gold.

Even from these few snippets (selected without any great attempt to highlight the contrast) it's clear just how variously the hammers and chisels of translators may fall. Some have opted (mistakenly, I feel) for systemising the work, ironing out apparent inconsistencies, making informed decisions concerning what M probably meant. Editors too, of course, can profoundly thwart a work. Indeed, with M there are echoes of what happened in the editing of Emily Dickinson. As far back as 1623, when an edition of M's poetry finally appeared though Michelangelo the Younger, it was horribly sanitised to suit the taste and etiquette of the new times. Cleansing the text of peculiarity and irregularity, M's grand-nephew 'completed' truncated sonnets using prudent syntax and discreet rhetoric, and even altered the gender of pronouns in the poems to Cavalieri to avoid the charge of homoeroticism, a move reversed (in English) by John Addington Symonds, but not before the latter part of the *nineteenth* century. Unfortunately, Symonds himself opted for a poeticised diction already well past its sell-by date, a voice bearing insufficient equivalence, I'd argue, to M's. 1863 finally saw a critical edition based on the original manuscripts, produced by Cesare Guasti, that gave sensitive and accurate vent to their idiosyncrasies. In 1960, Enzo Girardi's edition supplied a definitive text for modern translators. So impenetrable are many of the poems, though, that both Guasti and Girardi felt it necessary to provide prose paraphrase.

All in all, then, when discussing M's poetry in English, the impediments of distortion and interpretation can't be overstated. The underlying tragedy here is that for nearly a quarter of a millennium, the 1623 edition held sway. It brought M's poetry a degree of fame and, in some ways, accessibility, but robbed it of the essential character of the man. By clamping down on his restless and plural energy, M the Younger had effectively given M (the poet) a full frontal lobotomy. Even so, something of the poetry's core energy still percolated through the political and aesthetic correctness to reach the ear of subsequent poets – and of a certain Russian composer.

In Part II, we'll scan Shostakovich's *Suite* song by song, to see what can be gleaned of both men.

**Part II: Hammers and Chisels –**

**Shostakovich's *Suite on Verses of Michelangelo Buonarroti***

*M = Michelangelo; S = Shostakovich; AM = Anthony Mortimer; CG = Creighton Gilbert; MP = Mario Petrucci.*

Song titles belong to S (M didn't give titles to poems).

Part I of this article examined the nature of M's poetic output and the specific problems (in his rather special case) of translation, touching on his connection with Shostakovich. Here, by means of the *Suite*, we focus more squarely on the parallels between poet and composer.

**Song 1/ Prelude. *Truth.*** [Sonnet 6: CG + AM] Written c. 1511.

Shostakovich's austere and august opening brass in the orchestral version sets the tone for the entire *Suite*. The first song, *Truth*, is based on the sonnet M addressed to Pope Julius II (a somewhat military type), probably composed to reflect on the many difficulties with the Sistine Chapel, but certainly emphasising the severity of life and work:

"...to take fruit from so withered a tree." [MP]

Its message contrasts sharply with what comes next.

**Song 2. *Morning.*** [Sonnet 4: CG + AM] Written c. 1507 (or 1508?)

This piece, directed at the idealised beloved, is really to do with Beauty. It captures M's early sense of sensuality, later to be transformed as the means to God:

"Upon her breast, through all the hours, that dress..." [MP]

S delivers, in response to the latter, a contemplative, operatic pastiche.

**Songs 3 + 4. *Love & Separation.*** [Sonnet: 40 CG, 42 AM] Written c. 1529-30.  
[Madrigal: CG only, 12] Written before 1518?

"Or is her beauty here, in me, to form  
forever my gaze as her face in stone?" [MP]

M's ideas in these poems (a 'dialogue-driven' sonnet and a madrigal) present good examples of his Neo-Platonic slant. At that time, poetic protestations of love for men and women alike were part and parcel of sensibility, an expression of the transcendency of love as much as a way of discharging, in acceptable fashion, its ardour, both heteroerotic and homoerotic. It could be conceived that M was as abstract as he was (perhaps) defensive about his sexuality, but he was actually following convention. He addressed such poems to the poet and widow Vittoria Colonna, Marchioness of Pescara; to Cecchino dei Bracci; and to Tommaso dei Cavalieri (aged 23 when M first met him in his 57<sup>th</sup> year). Throughout, the Platonic tone stresses how love is essentially a spiritual matter, with beauty taking form in the lover's soul, reflecting an ultimate Beauty.

In general terms, M's love for Cavalieri led to raptures of transcendence; with Colonna, to a deep and more measured moral reform. But he was also much influenced by the austere preacher Girolamo Savonarola – something of a Florentine 'John the Baptist' – and never really resolved, in the poems, his conflict concerning whether to revere or reject physical beauty. *Separation* enjoyed a much earlier musical incarnation, being set by Bartolomeo Tromboncino and published (in Naples) in 1518, probably the first of M's poems to be printed. It's interesting how S nudges these two songs together: *Love* wooing us sombrely,

eerily, with its haunting strings, its little shocks and spasms; and *Separation* renewing, *in extremis*, its final, hopeless assertion of devotion.

**Song 5. Anger.**

[Sonnet 10: CG + AM] (date uncertain: 1512?)

M was not averse to the sharper emotions, with regard to injustices he suffered personally as well as those he felt pervaded the corrupt and base society he was ill-fated to live in. Leaning on the precedent of Petrarch, he rebuked Rome, setting his sights on the militarised papacy and the trafficking in sacred objects:

“From chalices they’re forging helm and sword,  
Christ’s blood is sold in buckets...” [AM]

Not surprising, in that case, that a punching, twisting tempestuousness should irrupt into the music at this juncture; though the manner in which it storms us is impressive, even by S’s standards.

**Songs 6 + 7. Dante & To The Exile.**

[Sonnet 246 (CG), 248 (AM)] Written c. 1545-6  
[Sonnet 248 (CG), 250 (AM)] Written c. 1545-6

These pay heavy homage to Dante, whose life and work found enormous resonance with M, in his style and philosophical demeanour generally, and in artefacts in particular (as in *The Last Judgement*). M was something of an authority on Dante, and it is one of the great evils of entropy that his volume of drawings in illustration of *The Divine Comedy* were lost at sea. M was compared favourably with Dante in his own day, and here wallows gloriously in the association: Dante, the exiled and mistreated genius, troubled and fuelled by unattainable love. The autobiographical parallels are fired by imaginative suggestion as well as lived experience. S enters the equation, too, choosing these poems in the context of Solzhenitsyn’s recent exile from the Soviet Union. He captures the poem’s qualities – and its topical political overtones for him – with a brilliant pulsing edginess, sounding the orchestra for its most darkly reverential, troubled depths.

**Song 8. Creativity.**

[Sonnet 44 (CG), 46 (AM)] Written c. 1528.

Perhaps not as active across as many fields as his great rival Leonardo, M’s creative gifts were nevertheless extraordinarily varied, though he claims (in Sonnet 5) “I’m no painter”. His architectural skills were self-taught, and he may even be the inventor of what might be called ‘the artistic placebo’. In one story, the Florentine republican Soderini tells M that the nose of his *David* seems too thick. M surreptitiously scoops up some marble dust, then pretends to chip away at the offending appendage, letting the dust filter out of his hand. “I like it better,” comments Soderini. “You have given it life.”

The source poem for this segment of the *Suite*, its thinking again cast in a Neo-Platonic mould, has often been thought to mark the death of Vittoria Colonna, Marchioness of Pescara, M’s late Platonic love who corresponds in many ways to the early love of Dante, Beatrice. This intense devotional energy was picked up, perhaps, by S who dedicated the *Suite* to his wife Irina. It turns out that M’s sonnet more probably relates the passing of his virtuous brother, Buonarroti, whose son Lionardo is addressed in a footnote to the poem.

In his musical rendition of *Creativity*, S absorbs the physicality of the sculptor’s craft into his own composition, forcing upon us – insistently and provocatively – the percussive energy of chisel and hammer. With its aggressive flurries of inspiration, S seems to hack the very air into submission. M may not be particularly visual in his poetic imagery, but there are a number of metaphorical references to sculpting and casting:

“I do believe, if you were made of stone,  
loved with a faith like mine, you would awake” [AM 54]

“I shall be made eternal in the flame,

being struck not out of iron, but of gold.” [AM 63]

“The best of artists can no concept find  
that is not in a single block of stone,  
confined by the excess; to that alone  
attains the hand obedient to the mind.” [AM 151]

“It is not just the mould,  
empty of art, that waits to be full filled  
from the fire with molten silver or gold...” [AM 153]

In a letter, M wrote: “By sculpture I mean what is made by taking something away: what is done by adding something is like painting”. Likewise, his poetry both extends and adds to the tradition whilst paring it back to what is essential. Because M sometimes wrote lines responding to the physicality of creating artefacts, there’s a temptation to trawl the poems for clues to his artistic philosophy; but few have given equivalent attention, it seems, to how his practice in visual art might cast light on the poetry. For instance, the restorations of the Sistine ceiling show (albeit controversially) that M favoured the technique of *cangiamento*, deploying bold colour contrasts to invoke modelling, an approach not at all at odds, I feel, with his poetic drive and instinct. The poems, for this reader, don’t come across as chiaroscuro (in its gentler sense). But, even if it turns out that the interactions between pen, hammer and brush are not really overt in the poetry, they certainly existed in the man, not least in physiological terms. According to Vasari, his work on the Sistine Chapel so damaged his eyesight that for some time he could only read on his back. Clearly, in physical terms, M was as put upon as he was famously robust:

“Beard skyward, nape of neck pressed back upon  
my hump, I’m hollow-chested like a harpy;  
the brush keeps dripping till my face looks gaudy,  
more like mosaic than anything you’d tread on.” [AM 5]

Both M and S remind us that creativity is no easy path. Each, in his manner, in his own political era, was acutely aware of the many aspects of submission and of risk – the possible ‘takings away’ – a creative life could entail, even at the most basic somatic level...

“Lumbagoed, ruptured, knackered – that’s the way  
my toil has left me...

... My skin’s a sack for gristle and old bones,  
I’ve got a hornet buzzing in my head,  
and in my bladder there are three black stones.” [AM 267]

**Song 9. *Night*.** [G. Strozzi + Epigram 245 (CG), 247 (AM)] ~ 1545-46?

To compliment M’s sleep-filled (yet vital) figure, *Night*, Giovanni Strozzi wrote the first quatrain of this piece, claiming that the statue in the Medici Chapel was so life-like she would, if woken, speak. Even for M, the sculpture *is* remarkable. Her facial serenity contrasts sharply with the energised, awkwardly-posed torso, a visual paradox heightened by its musculature, arising from the practice of working female figures from male models. S creates contrast, too, by returning to quieter tones, quoting from his Fifth String Quartet and from ‘The Poet’s Death’, the 10<sup>th</sup> movement of his 14<sup>th</sup> symphony. This internal re-appropriation by the composer is apt, given that the poetic text itself enacts a voice within a voice. The second quatrain is M’s reply to the first, a tart epigram that ventriloquizes his sculpture to make (it’s been said) a wry observation on Strozzi’s political associations. Or are those words M put in the stony mouth of the poem again providing some aspect of psychological/ spiritual autobiography?

“... As long as hurt and shamefulness endure.  
I call it lucky not to see or hear...” [CG, p.138]

**Song 10. Death.**

[Sonnet 293 (CG), 295 (AM)] Written after 1555.

By returning to the opening trump of ‘Truth’, S links death and injustice with archetypal intensity. He lived much of his life under Stalin. Diagnosed with an uncommon form of polio in 1965, and suffering the first of his heart attacks in 1966, of his limbs only his left arm was unaffected by breakage or debility. As for M, he was caught up in one of Italy’s most damaging political periods, with its rival factions and the switching allegiances of Popes that culminated in the sack of Rome, and plague, under Pope Clement VII in 1527, a calamity that sounded, for some historians, the death knell of the High Renaissance. M was even called upon to fortify the resulting Florentine republic against papal siege in 1529. As for physical turmoil, few can be ignorant of what M put up with for his art. His acute sense of bodily vulnerability is stressed in a rare (and unusual) self portrait, a detail in *The Last Judgement*, where the martyred Saint Bartholomew holds up his flayed skin to reveal M’s distorted face. Perhaps this sense of ennobled insecurity helps to explain why he’s such a resonant poet of old age. The later poems carry a remorsefulness, a rag-and-bone yearning, a hard-won enrichment through simplification of delivery and an opening up of style, worthy (at its best) of the ageing Yeats. His demeanour in the poems becomes stripped, concerned that a long life may mean greater danger of damnation, that his attempts to sublimate desire as Platonic love – and even his art itself – were themselves forms of distraction or ensnarement:

“Painting and sculpture will no longer serve  
to calm my soul, turned to that love divine  
whose arms were opened for us on the cross.” [AM 285]

For Symonds, M moved in his thinking from Dante, through Plato, to Christ, to whom the artist turns, in profound disappointment, for a modicum of hope and comfort that often seems almost as cold as the stone he worked. Both M and S were deeply marked by the trials not only of physical hardship but of adverse politics. The poems, and the music, leave us in no doubt that these men were lifelong savants of struggle and mortality.

**Song 11/ Postlude. Immortality.** [Epitaph 192 (CG), 194 (AM) fused with 188 (CG)]

“... to comfort this world I lived,  
so these thousand true souls in my breast  
cannot be dust...” [MP]

S’s *Suite* was written in anticipation of the demi-millennial celebration of M’s birth. For most artists in our 15-minute culture, a reputation spanning 500 years must indeed seem like brushing fingers with immortality. Both men are eloquent on mortality; each had time aplenty to contemplate and square up to it. S often wrote music that flapped back in the grim face of the Reaper. But here, in this strange ‘epilogue’ to his great song cycle, he combined two of the 48 epitaphs on the death of the teenage Cecchino dei Bracci in 1544 (written by M as a favour to the boy’s uncle, Luigi del Riccio), yoking them together to provide a commentary on his own imminent death (and what might lie beyond it) that’s as hopeful as it is ironic. He recycles a melody he wrote at 9 years of age, making of it an uncanny toy march, a funeral song forged in the nursery. For M, the epitaphs catch him, for the most part, in an unusually dry and impersonal mood; nevertheless, these two particular portions of his sequence whispered close in S’s ear, who voiced in music his seismically subdued response, as if a last leaf were about to fall from its tree.

Throughout the *Suite*, S worked with stark anticipation and acceptance, perhaps even transcendence. He generated rhythmic asymmetries, and chromatic and tonal variation, but all in service to a single, darkly luminous quality irradiating every note. In M’s poems, too, one is struck (through all their evolution and variety) by a profound sense of unity, by a plural and spirited expression of the same temperament and craft radiating from his material artefacts: that imposing grandeur, that *terribilità*, he manages to meld so passionately with a highly personalised style. It may be pat to say ‘there’s poetry in all his works’; but (as is



usually the case) the soft and oversweet flesh of the cliché hides a stone of truth. Elizabeth Jennings observed of M that “the dominating feature is vehement energy, an energy which is mastered by a longing for order”. That observation is equally valid for S. The purity and ceaseless striving that runs through M’s poetry makes the same chord that S, ultimately, is concerned with sounding. Neither wilted in their art, not even close to death. As M puts it in one of the fragments:

“Nobody has the whole of it  
before he reaches the limit  
of his art and his life.” [AM, fragment 35]

Among M’s final works is a sketch of an old man, captioned with the words *ancora imparo* – “I’m still learning”. How poignantly those words relate to S’s unexpected use, now, in the endgame of his *Suite* – indeed, of his writing career – of that disarming, childlike melody. S and M: each an inextinguishable spark in the cultural firmament. In memory of both, let the last say be Dante’s, in the closing lines of *Paradiso*:

Here, that force for lofty phantasy failed –  
Now, all my volition, all my desire,  
Moved easily, evenly, as that wheel  
Love turns through our sun and through every star.

*The Divine Comedy: Paradiso, Canto 33 [MP]*

### **Principal sources for the extracts:**

*Michelangelo: Poems and Letters*, Anthony Mortimer (Penguin, 2007). ISBN 978-0-140-44956-3.

*Complete Poems and Selected Letters of Michelangelo*, Creighton Gilbert (Vintage, 1970). ISBN 0-691-00324-6.

*Shostakovich Song Cycles: Record notes; Transliterations and English translations*, Felicity Ashbee, after Abram Efros (EMI, 1977).

This article is based on a (much shorter) piece by the author, **broadcast by Radio 3**, 15 May 2009.

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