

Michelangelo and the Unified World in Raphael's *School of Athens*

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“Without contraries is no progression”
—Blake

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I. Darkness

The under-examined life is all the rage these days. Overrun by cynicism, isolated by sarcasm, modern life is ruled by solipsism, largely become a Cartesian nightmare—where “no one offers guidance save those who are mocked for doing so” (Scruton 15).

As such, self-conscious has negated sentimentality and curiosity and sincerity; and, in their void, in an emotionless world, there is no space or safety for the imagination. Creativity has mostly become synonymous with the “unusual,” which itself has been demonized, often ridiculed, at best made a joke of. The artist is no longer the unacknowledged legislator of the world.

We need the new Plato, the new Leonardo, the new Shelley—need a new era like those bygone stretches of human greatness which celebrated art and mind and collectivity. The Italian High Renaissance is unarguably one such pinnacle of human achievement. More specifically, the artists of this zeitgeist brought into the world a spirit of humanism and creativity which ours is denied.

For Raphael in particular—Raffaello Santi, son of a mediocre court painter—this ethos was the selfsame duty of art, because “the aim of art is to please, to instruct, to use rhetorical elegance to educate the observer, and to create a sense of purification and renewal” (Minor 71). As proof to this ideal, look no further than Raphael’s *the School of Athens*.

To begin with, the Roman revitalization had been burgeoning while Raphael was in Florence. In fact, nearly a year before his arrival, Giovanni Battista Casali “delivered a sermon in the Sistine Chapel extolling his promotion of art and learning,” both of which had gained prominence in the new Rome, the *caput mundi*, as a consequence of Julius’s passion for the revival of classical learning” (King 180).

To Casali, this was the founding of a new Athens.

Many of the city’s improvements came directly from the Medici; notably their “great concern for reading and the spread of knowledge,” prompting them to offer the public access to Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana (Alkholy 58). Most of the Vatican library’s enormous collection, however, were not religious texts, as “sacred books, were kept in monasteries,” but rather so-called secular texts, which, available like never before thanks to Gutenberg’s inventing the printing press in the mid 15th century, included books and scrolls and manuscripts “of various topics such as poetry, history, philosophy and science,” (Alkholy 58). In short, the widespread, Pope-encouraged cultivation of knowledge provoked the revival of classical studies. This accord will be vital to the unification of classical thought and Christianity made concrete in *School of Athens*.

Julius II, three years into his pontificate, helped further ignite this very spirit for a newer, worldlier Rome, when he decided that he no longer liked his apartment’s

decorations. After leaving the traditional papal suite in a sickness brought on by his “living among the frescoes commissioned by his hated predecessor, Alexander VI Borgia,” Julius II sought to decorate his new apartments, the Stanze Vaticane (Rowland 95). Julius designated The Stanza della Segnatura “his private library of nearly three hundred books” (King 114).

The Stanza would follow the standard style in which libraries had been decorated since the Middle Ages, with the books divided into four categories (theology, philosophy, justice, and medicine¹), each of which was “represented by an allegorical female figure on the wall or the ceiling, [and] portraits of men and women who had won acclaim in these particular fields” (King 114). These scenes were meant to serve as a kind of performance, giving “human form and human personalities to the authors whose books were stored in the wooden cabinets beneath them” (Rowland 98).

While enthralled by the all of Raphael’s plans for the room, Julius was especially captivated by Raphael’s vision for *The School of Athens*, he saw it as “a brave statement of stable conviction in a highly unstable world” (Rowland 104). It was a world at once tumultuous and harmonious; threatened by war, yet endowed with increased trade and “the foundation of universities and flowering of scholarship,” all of which contributed to advancements in the perception and understanding of art (Alkholly 57). To reflect the valorization of Rome, art contained both a humanistic celebration of intellection and an idealistic canonization of human form (Kings 76).

As the embodiment of this exact dualitistic spirit, and allegory of secular knowledge within the vibrant High Renaissance in Rome, the *School of Athens* “resonates backward and forward in time,” (Minor 70). It exacts “the confidence and self-sufficiency

of man to know the truth through his own intellectual efforts” (Wilken 35). It is an ode to knowledge and a perfection of forms, light to the boundless potential of the human mind. Arguably, the dynamic between Michelangelo and Raphael could serve as concrete representation of this entire dichotomy. At the very least, the timing of their overlap is importantly coincidental.

Michelangelo had been working on the frescoes for the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel for about a year when Raphael began the Stanza della Segnatura. So both artists were living and working in and around much of the same space—literally neighbors—while, separately, each of them was creating his masterpiece. The real life differences between Raphael and Michelangelo are as sharp and important as the style each artist used.

In a chessman’s equivocating of boundaries, Michelangelo sought to belittle and repulse Raphael, pinning other artists and commissions against him. Barbieri details one incident in his essay “The Competition between Raphael and Michelangelo and Sebastiano’s Role in it,” in which Michelangelo manipulated Cardinal Giulio’s patronage, his *idée fixe* for “preeminence in the field of painting,” as a means to suggest Sebastiano over Raphael for the second altar piece of the archiepiscopal church at Narbonne, thereby disfiguring Raphael’s mantle as Rome’s “prince of the painters” (Barbieri 160-61). Michelangelo held unremitting suspicions of Raphael, “whom he regarded as an envious and malicious imitator” (King 183).

Of course, Raphael had long admired Michelangelo’s abilities. He, as noted by Ascanio Condivi, “however anxious [Raphael] might have been to compete with Michelangelo, often had occasion to say that he thanked God that he was born in

Michelangelo's time, as he copied from him a style which different from the one he had learned from ...Perugino" (King 249). Yet despite this admiration, Raphael managed to return the invective. Telling perhaps is the observation that "Michelangelo was the one person in Rome on whom Raphael's charm was entirely lost (Alkholy 57). Long after the two had gone separate ways, Michelangelo wrote that, "All the discords that arose between Pope Julius and me, were owing to the envy of Bramante and Raphael" (King 183).

King also describes an ostensible interaction between the two men, in which, upon seeing Raphael leave "the Vatican in the company of his vast entourage," Michelangelo, sitting alone, sneers, "You with your band, like a bravo." "And you alone, like the hangman," replies Raphael (King 182).

Where Michelangelo preferred his own company, Raphael was often surrounded by his entourage of assistants and protégés (Rowland 99). Where Michelangelo was taciturn and slovenly and, "at times, melancholy and antisocial, Raphael was, by contrast, the perfect gentleman" (King 113).

As Charles De Tolnay contends in his examination of the Michelangelo's life and works "Michelangelo's characters are stiff and solid, 'petrified beings'" (King 151). Yet it is with these "petrified beings," his muscular colossi, "those larger-than-life figures" (King 201), which gave monumentality to the already-capacious scenes being painted into the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, gifts from a living interiority matched by the Augustine boundless mind.

True, Michelangelo's scenes do not contain the kind of crowded, buoyant, convivial, caught-in-lively-discussion type energy seen in the *School of Athens*. Instead,

his scenes often spill with “violent, every-man-for-himself struggles for survival, full of straining limbs and wrenched torsos” (King 182).

Whereas Raphael allowed ease to wash over his own work, grace, as if drifts of gauzy, prismatic light were balancing something impossibly heavy. His attention to graceful figures, their autonomous spirituality in tact, serves as proof of his “polite manner, his gentle disposition, his generosity toward others”³ (King 113).

Vasari praised both Raphael’s “flawless character” and the flawless artwork that flooded out of it (King 112). He even decried many of Raphael’s predecessors as overrun by “a certain element of savagery and even madness” (Vasari 666). Vernon Hyde Minor, in his analysis *Art History’s History*, describes Vasari’s vocabulary for the *School of Athens* as “primarily one of praise,” with near-superfluous attention to the work’s subjective impression, defending the hugeness of its ideas with words such as “the ‘excellent,’ the ‘indescribable,’ the ‘remarkable,’ the ‘inexpressible,’ and the ‘admirable,’”—with, above all, marked and canonical reverence ceded to one in particular: “the marvelous.”

Marvelous (*meraviglia*), in this context, denotes more an artwork’s transcendental ability to invoke veneration, to succeed in inspiring an absolute wordless deference—the supernal afflatus in a piece of art. This sensation is part of Vincenzo Borghini, in *Michelangelo and the Art of Language*, contends are the three categories of art⁴, which correspond to the three aims of rhetoric (to teach, to delight, and to move) and the three kinds of rhetoric (the simple, the middle, and the grand), all of which combine to deign to *meraviglia* itself the “highest form of oratory, the grandest manner” (Minor 70). In short, “all things that cause *meraviglia* please you.”

A good example of the effect of *meragilia* on Raphael is his adding the Heraclitus figure to the forefront of the *School of Athens*—which itself sounds curiously similar to Michelangelo’s subversive late night autograph to the *Pietà*.

It is clear that Raphael secretly made the addition, as “the Michelangelo figure does not appear in the Ambrosiana drawing, and that the surface of the fresco clearly shows signs that the plaster was cut and the figure with the stone block was added later” (Bell 642). But what would so engender Raphael to add, a year after the fresco’s completion, a depiction of Michelangelo as *pensiero* in *School of Athens*, “the slouching body, the crossed feet, the heavy head supported by a hand,” the hulking frame bent forward across the forefront of the painting, bemused inwardly as if no less unaware of his place within the work as his place within our world? (King 283)

Because the figure idles self-imprisoned—reserved, inward, lost: self-absorbed, downcast, without a single follower—haplessly “outside the teacher-student groups through which, in Raphael’s view, knowledge was transmitted” (King 233). Ross King avers that Raphael’s addition is at worst playful—as Heraclitus was renowned for a surly disposition and lack of popularity—but most likely homage to the Sistine Chapel’s ceiling.

Despite his status as outsider, Michelangelo contemplated the meaning and exactness of beauty (Wilken 35). In this light, Raphael’s adding the *pensiero* figure to the fresco is his reverence of *meragilia*, and his reverence for the genius it came from. He appears to be saying that he, despite all his charm and his fame and power, is lacks some important force which simply flows from Michelangelo—and that he is somehow less the genius for it.

As answer to this, Ross King offers Edmund Burke's differentiation of the beautiful and the sublime: "[T]hose things we call beautiful have smoothness, delicacy, softness of color, and elegance of movement. The sublime, on the other hand, comprehends the vast, the obscure, the powerful, the rugged, the difficult—attributes which produce in the spectator a kind of astonished wonder and even terror" (King 235).

Testament to this divine beauty, Michelangelo contained also a gentleness and delicacy often overlooked. For instance, Ascanio Condivi, a pupil and eventual biographer of his, held that "Michelangelo loved not only human beauty but universally every beautiful thing" (Minor 66).

Interestingly, while many of his sentiments are largely Platonic, he did not believe in *symmetria*, instead holding that "beauty is immeasurable; its power to attract us is what is significant" (Minor 66).

One of Michelangelo's poems depicts the way beauty "creates in the heart of the observer a longing, a desire, a sense of being unfulfilled. We suffer from our aspiration and our need. But art offers some hope and consolation. There is something in the painting or sculpture that is pure, that embodies the eternal beauty. More than Plato believed possible, art can contain the eternal," winding inward as he expertly knew how, but with the humanity to do so for the sake of us all, for the retrieval of beauty.

II. Light

In the classical approach, doubt leads to virtue, virtue leads to excellence; and excellence leads to a fuller Being, a totality. Classical philosophy, more so than that of modern Weltschmerz, willingly trusts in this humanist's balance. Think of Socrates' maxim regarding life examination; striving toward the right; through truth and wisdom and excellence above all; yearning for the best possible state of your soul.

Broadly speaking, "the relation between Christianity and classical culture focuses on the great issues of philosophy," (Wilken 35), whereas Ancient theory singly involves the "simplicity and grandeur" (Minor 88).

Crucial to the overall dichotomy of classical thought and Christianity and of paramount worth to the convergence of these two ideas is the importance of the intellectual faculty. It alone unifies the spiritual and the corporeal, allowing us as human beings to transcend the physical realm—through mathematics, language, music, etc. The maturity of this communicative nature, as it is the nature of art, is what one critic holds as "distinguishing Christian from late classical art, in which style is pursued for its own sake, and content valued as a point of departure" (Cookmaraswamy 102).

Viz.: "As Pope Julius and his contemporaries firmly believed, only long experience of ancient wisdom had made it possible for the Apostles to grasp the meaning of the Christian gospel at the dawn of the Roman Empire" (Rowland 104).

In the fresco, the figure of Plato, for example, is cradling in his left hand *Timaeus*, which presented the birth of God as triad, as unified Trinity, while with his other hand he raises a finger—in diametrical opposition to the wearied bent in the yet-to-be made *Creation of Adam*—preeminently upward, revealing that the source of all knowledge is the spirit of God and “directing the viewer’s attention to look toward heaven and the dome of Raphael’s great hall to find the three-in-one divinity to which the fresco, the Stanza, and the papacy itself are dedicated” (Bell 646, Rowland 105). Plato’s is the realm of total otherness, kept by loyalties to immaterial reality, and its role as storehouse of all Types, it is the actuality: the soul.

Plato’s notion of beauty involves more a process of imitation (*mimesis*), as achieved through a hierarchical scheme of ordering “in relation to a thing’s proximity to the realm of forms”; essentially, the copying of nature—itsself a copy, albeit a bolder, clear replica of what Plato refers to as “the True, the Good, and the Beautiful”—“therefore, a work of representation derives but is distanced from absolute existence: it is a suggestion, elicitation, evocation, shadowing...” (Minor 31).

In line with his theory of recollection as it relates to learning or knowing and his analogy of the line as it relates to perception or attunement, Plato maintains that “our souls had a vision of beauty before they entered the body,” the experience of beauty as we know it therefore amounting to our ability to open ourselves into that supply of prefigured beauty (Minor 33). “All this,” Plato explains, “was the plan for the god who is forever for the god who was sometime to be” (Plato 23), that the divine is reflected on this earth, and that “we love that reflection because of what it represents” (Minor 66).

The figure of Aristotle, on the other hand (so to speak), holds his *Nicomachean Ethics*, which “will be distilled by Jesus into two rules: love God and love your neighbor,” while motioning slightly down and outward with an extended hand, the five fingers spread as reminder of each of the senses, as obeisance to his world of sense-perception—the realm of earth, of the four primordial elements and their ceaseless drift and hang, each solidified by our awareness of empirical atonement (Rowland 105). This is the world of matter, material—the potentiality, the object: the body.

The classicalism and Christianity together achieve incredible harmony within the figures, within the piece, within the wall, within the room. The stage-like space the figures, swelling in full-life repose, conduct themselves on appears neither grounded nor free-standing; somehow as ethereal as it is concrete.

There are also “a large Renaissance portico with a magnificent Ancient Roman-style barrel ceiling that opens into a spacious hall”; a perfectly-sectioned marble stairway raised with four gradual steps; the giant-scale of the domical sphere, supported by illusionistic arches, with the Roman Doric order preferred by Bramante (Wilken 35). Lining the underbelly of the arch reside ancient figures, hidden but not entirely impotent, within their niches.

More vigilant are the statues of Apollo and Minerva, who languidly oversee the proceedings, shaped bold and tufted sharply, congruent to the overarching dyadic thrum.

Apollo, according to Rowland, acts as yet another mediating body in the accord of Church and antiquity; he even “stands as a reminder that in many ways Apollo stood as the ancient Greco-Roman precursor to the figure of Christ” (Rowland 105).

Similarly, Minerva (Gk.: Athena), adheres to a virginal goodness—born from the head of her father, a painful thought though a seminal gift to all creation, Minerva is “a foreshadowing, according to Egidio da Viterbo, of Christ’s birth to the Virgin Mary, and, as the ancient goddess of reason and wisdom, precursor to the Virgin” (Rowland 105).

Thus we have again the earth and the heavens, the marbled steps and decorated archways mere floating supports kept adrift by the ideas above and below them—with secular earth embracing Adam-scorched sand; heaven of Forms extolling heaven of God eternal.

Perfectly in charge of this are the two philosophers which are literally, figuratively, and emotionally dividing the fresco. They are placed within “a lunette shape; of classical architecture (along with the values it implies) which dominates the space, perspectival; the figures are distributed evenly; light clarifies and reveals the position of every figure. The whole is ideal and universal, embracing time from the Athenian Golden Age until Raphael’s present’ embracing Athens to Rome”; and with this “harmony he creates a world that is sufficient, logical, and legible” (Minor 71).

Raphael has evolved beyond the single-vanishing point perspective to allow a more harmonious, more accurate understanding of the figures symbolic presence; although, just as in the *Last Supper* (a clear influence on *School of Athens*, especially in the use of pyramidal composition and mathematical linear perspective), your eyes are always lead back along by the strategic “interlocking and interweaving of the grouped figures to the two central figures at the vanishing-point, as all parts of this fresco converge on the center, but the whole vision is broken up into a number of isolated groups;” the figures are grouped in unity, yet each retains its own individuality and shape

(Alkholy 56). But unlike the last supper, there are over fifty figures in *School of Athens*, made all the more complicated by the fact that Raphael “did not leave any personal notes on his program” (Bell 639).

The characters within the piece achieve a perfect assemblage into some infinity of long-flung stillness. The mathematics communicates a celestial dialect we chanced upon given. The architecture serves as both ideal setting for a meeting of this magnitude and unabashed secular monument to knowledge, keen smile of its underlying geometry. All of which is important in establishing the clearly secular scene under clearly secular architecture within the fresco, which then promotes a flowing harmony, contained within the sacred walls of the Holy City. More important is that we, we as humans, as bodies containing souls, are being honored with this dichotomy.

There is, however, one exception to all continuity and balance; one disruptive presence: Michelangelo. Whose figure is the centrifugal force of these battling contraries. Swept again by the off-gazing introvert, the dismayed count—the weaver of the sublime at the very front of the crowd, almost looking beyond any reach—captured by something, assuredly of beauty, Michelangelo gazes past even himself, a sky-kempt remnant, an order of disruption to the harmony of division, alone the tireless palimpsest. Can he see the next Athens?

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Footnotes

¹ The standard model does not include poetry but medicine; King suggests Raphael's addition is "no doubt because of Julius's preference for poets over doctors" (King 114).

² Although, whether the story is true or not, there is more to suggest that Rafael saw influence over enemy, at least enough to depict several of his rivals/influences into his paintings. Take, for instance, his depiction of Plato in *School of Athens*, who—with "bald crown, gray-blond locks, a long, wavy beard—is usually understood to be a portrait of Leonardo," with the undoubtable twofold irony of his affecting Da Vinci's staid, Aristotelian meta-biological approach across Plato's sober disdain for artists within his ideal city (King 181).

³ Which Vasari attributed to "the fact that [Raphael] was breast-fed by his mother ... instead of being sent to a wet nurse" (King 112).

⁴ The other two are *varietà* (variety) and *imparare* (learning).