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Michalangelo and Luther - a Parallel

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Michelangelo and Luther - a Parallel.

There are four men in the world of art and literature so exalted above all others as to seem to belong to another race, namely, Dante, Shakespeare, Beethoven, and Michelangelo Buonarroti. Of these four, the story of Michelangelo, the greatest of known artists, has a background of history so extraordinary and tumultuous that it alone would give importance to any biography. Similarly, there are four men in the sphere of theology and religion so completely supreme by virtue of their peculiar achievements as to outdistance thoroughly all remaining participants in this field of endeavor, namely, St.Paul, Augustine, Chemnitz, and Martin Luther. And of these four the life of Luther, in an even greater degree than that of Michelangelo, rests on an array of events so imposing and so momentous that an account of the great Reformer's activity gains immeasurable historical worth by the mere inclusion of these tremendously significant occurrences, which shaped and moulded the paths into which they were destined to direct the history of subsequent centuries. In both cases, then, the history of the man is singularly and inextricably entangled with the history of his time. Moreover, the lives of both men occur at the end of the Old World and at the beginning of the New. Both lived at a time disturbed not only by social evolution but by great religious dissensions, which later changed the very definitions of Christian thought. And while it was Luther who con-

tributed chiefly and most generously to the movement which concerned itself primarily with questions of theological interest, Michelangelo caused a similar upheaval in Italian intellectual life affecting painting, sculpture, architecture, and poetry. Giants they were, these men, who, it is true, were unusually plentiful in this hero-blessed sixteenth century, but from whom also their names stand out in solitary and inaccessible prominence by the immensity of their achievements and by reason of the huge and colossal proportions they assumed in after-years. Their names belong to the highest class of genius and their lives, replete with extraordinary and far-reaching works, offer some of the most striking examples in history of the influence that great men can have on their own time and on the time of posterity.

The student of history, and particularly the lover of biography, coming upon two eminent and influential figures in the world's history as those of Michelangelo and Luther, is tempted to engage in a juxtaposition of the two men and their individual merits and qualities, to view them from a standpoint of relative judgment, to compare and, where divergences occur, to contrast their respective activities, character, genius, and the attendant circumstances in their lives. In the case of Michelangelo and Luther, whose labors extend largely into the same periodof time, the parallel becomes doubly attractive. For a comparison of this nature

is not dependent on a similarity or an identity of occupation of the persons concerned, unless, of course, the purpose be that of setting forth the success in a single field of human activity and learning. It may aim solely at a delineation of personal characteristics and an evaluation of historical importance, together with a summary description of the man's chief works, without resorting to a detailed presentation of his achievements which, in the case of Michelangelo, would presume a technical knowledge not present with the average scholar. It is this procedure which will be adopted in the following considerations.

Before entering upon a contemplation of moral and mental qualities it will be well to give attention to certain external features in the lives of both men and to note the interesting correspondence or contrast resulting from the comparison. Indeed, considerations of this characterare in this instance of a sufficient number and of such an attractive nature as to justify the assignment of a relatively large section for their discussion, although this be restricted to the most striking circumstances. As indicated in the introductory paragraph, the birth of both men occurred near the end of the fifteenth century, Michelangelo's preceding that of Luther by a period of eight years. In their youth both experienced parental and particularly paternal hostility to the inclinations which they evinced in the choice of a life's profession. Michelangelo's genius attracted him

irresistibly to art. But his father Lodovico, realizing that painting, at that time a less esteemed profession, held out but small advantages, remonstrated with him and treated him harshly. Condivi, his pupil, friend, and faithful biographer, reports that Michelangelo's father and uncles often beat him severely, for in their hatred of the profession of an artist and "in their ignorance of the nobility of art they deemed it shameful to have one in the house". But Michelangelo remained steadfast and Lodovico, whose opposition was more violent than obstinate, finally relaxed and allowed the stubborn youth to follow his vocation.

In like manner, Luther's growing inclination to become a monk, culminating in his entrance of the Augustinian cloister at Erfurt, brought strong and energetic opposition from his disappointed parents, with whom monastic life had no credit and who felt themselves disgraced by their son's adoption of the cowl. And while Lodovico Buonarroti could be prevailed upon to grant his son's wishes, Hans Luther remained inexorable and refused to sanction his son's conduct. A reconciliation was not effected until Martin's ordination to the priesthood, and then only through exceptional circumstances.

During the period of youth and early manhood both formed contacts which bore unusual significance for their later activity. Michelangelo received a highly important influence while attending the school of the famous Ghirlandajo, which, if not affecting his style or method of working, certainly provided a healthy point of view and a physical and moral vigor which

acted as a powerful balance to the neuroticism of the Botticellian school. This influence has been denied on the ground that there is no direct trace of it evident in his works with the exception of only two drawings, a circumstance, however, which is due simply to Michelangelo's refusal to stoop to exact imitation. He was unwilling to be swayed by masters or surroundings, but the time spent in the school of Ghirlandajo was by no means without effect on him. Indeed, there can be no doubt that the calm, simple, and serene spirit of Ghirlandajo helped to lay those foundations from which arose Michelangelo's unusual devotion to the expression of force and his contempt for morbid sentiment. Similarly, Luther's thorough acquaintance with monastic existence, in fact, with all phases of Roman ecclesiastical life, together with his own serious and strenuous efforts to become saved according to the severest and most rigorous Roman Catholic prescriptions, exerted a tremendous influende on his reformatory activity. He himself prized this far-reaching familiarity and stated it to be of inestimable value in the oft-recurring hours of troublesome doubts and misgivings, already at that time when he regarded his activity as a vindication of the Church, but particularly after the final rupture, when his work took on the nature of direct opposition. - It is interesting to note the seemingly unlimited capacity for work possessed by both men and the ceaseless diligence with which they applied themselves to their tasks. While working at the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel Michelangelo wept at "losing his time useless-

ly". And while in the service of Clement VII he labored to the point of complete and almost fatal exhaustion until Clement, conquering the characteristic and insatiable greed of his thoroughly Medicean nature by the rational argument of the inevitable result of this continued strain on Michelangelo's resources, forbade him, under pain of excommunication, to occupy himself with anything but the tomb of Julius II.

Equally remarkable is the stupendous literary activity of Luther, embracing no less than three hundre and fifty treatises and a great number of pamphlets. And this fertility is with him not merely quantitative; on the contrary, he appears almost inexhaustible in expression as well as in ideas. And when we consider that particularly in his last years Luther suffered from a nervous malady and fromother painful diseases, due partly to overwork and lack of exercise, partly to the abuse his body sustained in his monastic life, this immense productivity seems to be the result of superhuman capabilities. -

Noteworthy, too, and worthy of mention here because it sheds light on their character, is the fact that both men gave attention to poetry. Michelangelo chose the form of the sonnet, his productions, in the opinion of Varchi, possessing "the clarity of the classic and the richness of the thought of Dante". Luther restricted himself chiefly to the composition of hymns but with such rich results, that these masterly productions, to which he imparted force, purity, and beauty of style together with a lofty and sublime sentiment, have caused

him to stand forth as the founder of German hymnology and church music. - There are other elements in the lives of both men which likewise had at least some bearing on their inner development, as for instance, Luther's married life with Katharina von Bora contrasted with the unmarried state of Michelangelo, in which he remained until his death. Michelangelo, too, spent barely more than half his life in his native country, while Luther never left Germany after his return from Rome in 1511. But a further discussion of these facts is impossiblehere, since our purpose is not that of engaging in a comparative survey of incidents for their own sakes, but rather a setting forth of personal traits which will bring to light the convictions and conception of life entertained by each man and which will answer the question, Which view is truly great, which the more heroic?

It is only natural that the religious views of the two men should be based on diametrically opposed beliefs, for Michelangelo, in spite of heated disputes with the Popes and a bold disregard of their instructions, never abandoned the doctrines taught inthe Catholic Church. His synergistic notion of earning redemption is clearly revealed in the statement made on his deathbed to Cardinal Salviati, in which he expressed regret over the fact that he had not done all that he should have for his salvation. This, of course, was in glaring contradiction to the doctrine of Luther on the complete impotency of man to do or be good, and the necessity to receive salvatin as a gift of God by faith. Never-

theless, the earnestness of Michelangelo in matters of religion, coming as it did at a period of indifference and superficiality, is an undeniable testimony to the sincerity which is a prominent characteristic of his nature. Religion had come to be regarded as a political means bestowed especially on the popes for the attainment of political ends, and much of the violence with which Roman officials raged against the Lutherans and other dissenters sprang from this source. We may note here that Michelangelo at no time formed any contact of importance with the German reformerand his followers. He had heard of them, it is true, but only as revolutionists and in his judgment of them he followed the general trend of his time which referred to certain objectionable practices among artists as Lutheran abominations and identified everything hateful and detestable with the new sect. Luther, on the other hand, although by nomeans opposed to art, was busy fighting for his soul's salvation and as a result his mind was turned into other channels than that of beauty. And so the approach to a meeting, which would have been attended with interesting consequences, should have been made by Michelangelo. - Of a different and somewhat more substantial character is the influence exerted by Savonarola on Michelangelo, with whom the latter lived in the same city. Indded, the most impressionable years of his life were spent at the time when the activity of the Florentine preacher had attained at its height. Michelangelo's position as a citizen of Florence, as friend of the Medici, as

brother to Lionardo, who had been prevailed upon to become a monk, and as a sincere Catholic Christian would very naturally cause him to assume a lively interest in the destiny of this remarkable man, "of whom all Rome was speaking". But we dare not exaggerate the influence of Savonarola's eloquent sermons or of his sombre visions and fierypurity on the youthful sculptor. True, Michelangelo, like his fellow-citizens, did not escape the contagion of fear which seized the entire city when Savonarola thundered his gloomy prophecies of the destruction of Florence by Charles VIII, King of France. When at last the king arrived Michelangelo fell a prey to the general panic which ensued and fled to Venice. But this constitutes no evidence of a religious influence. There were similar panics at a later period in his life which prove nothing but the unfortunate susceptibility of his nerves to a condition of unhealthy overexcitement, which his reason fought against in vain all his life. And whereas these were vital questions with Luther, whose soul would have been stirred to its innermost depths by their discussion and answer, the works of Michelangelo at that time strongly indicate the absence of any appreciable effect of the ideas of Savonarola. In fact, it is fair to say that he never appears so pagan as from 1492 to 1497, the years during which the tragedy of Savonarola was enacted. This is the period of the colossal Hercules, of the famous sleeping Cupid, of the Dying Adonis, and of the drunken Bacchus - works that seem almost like a defiance launched against the puritanism of the

reformer. And at Bologna, where he lived shortly after his flight from Florence, he spent his time in reading Petrarch, Boccaccio, and Dante to his protector, evidently unperturbed or at least unwilling to be further affected by the prophecies of Savonarola. In itself, this is no discredit for Michelangelo. It merely indicates that, while Luther was all his life intent on answering the questions of soul and eternity, with Michelangelo, although at all times religious, it was not until a later time, in his advanced age, when religious preoccupations gained the place of first importance.

But aside from their religious views there is another factor which distinguishes, yes, completely separates the two men. It is this, that Michelangelo's outlook on life was colored by an unfortunate pessimism, or, perhaps more correctly stated, by a pessimistic idealism, a quality which is entirely absent in the character of Luther or, if present, was never permitted permanently to assert itself. In 1509 Michelangelo wrote, "I have no friend of any kind and I do not want any". Forty years later he wrote again, "I am always alone and I speak to no one". In a sonnet he states gloomily, "To me my time brought only night". We have every reason to regard these statements not as the utterance of momentary depression but as the predominant note of his temperament. It is this feature which forms the greatest contrast between these two powerful and unusual spirits. Expressions of melancholy and gloomy despondency occur also in the life of Luther, but these are the result of religious doubts and torments which

his soul endured, which, we must be careful to note, by no means affected his general outlook on life. Even at the most trying and critical periods of his life the irrepressible buoyancy of his spirit prevailed. The evening before his entrance to the cloister of the Augustinians he spent in lively conversation and song with his university friends. And in later years, brought face to face with the most momentous issues, his cheerfulness and humor produced alike astonishment and relief among his more timorous collaborators.

What was the cause of Michelangelo's inability to overcome the despair that ruled in his mind which at other times was capable of such lofty conceptions and tremendous achievements? Condivi writes, "From his youth Michelangelo had consecrated himself not only to sculpture and painting but to all other arts with such devouring energy that he had to separate himself almost entirely from the society of men. For that reason many considered him proud, and others eccentric or mad. In reality it was hislove of work alone, his labor without respite, which made him solitary, for he was so filled by the joy and rapture which his work gave him, that the society of men did not offer him any pleasure, but rather bored him by distracting him from his own thoughts. Like the great Scipio, he was never lesslonely than when he was alone". This passionate wolitude was the very soul of the genius and of the work of Michelangelo, but its inevitable result was the constantly recurring feeling of hopelessness and dejection. Convinced tha t his mind had so little

sympathy with other men that he was compelled to be satisfied with himself, he resorted to seclusion and thus consciously or unconsciously deprived himself of one of the greatest measures of support at his command in conquering and dispelling the gloom which darkened and embittered his life. Luther, on the other hand, was by the very nature of his work thrown into such frequent and active contact with human beings as to remove almost all possibility of settling into a gloomy and despondent solitude. And, as a matter of fact, it was his own cheerful nature which supplied rather than received comfort and encouragement, particularly in the difficult and strenuous years of constructive reform.

Michelangelo's desire for solitude, his inability to work with other men, is an eccentric quality and therefore unpleasant. True, eccentricity, when accompanied with extraordinary achievements, can be condoned. But it is all the more gratifying to find in the greatness of Luther no disagreeable oddity but a constant and pleasing conformity to the natural laws of the human mind, a fact which accounts for the unusual appeal he has exercised, actively during his life and by the record of his activity at the present time. Moreover, it is well to note here that at the basis of all eccentricity there is at least a small measure of conceit. This principle may not always find a ready acceptance, but its truth will become apparent upon careful reflection. Its validity is attested in the case of Michelangelo, Condivi's remark as to the absence of pride in the character of Michel-

angelo notwithstanding. For in his aforementioned desire for solitude he was impelled not only by the apathy which he experienced among his colleagues but also by a sincere contempt for the works of other artists. This is in striking contrast with Luther's readiness to acknowledge readiness and even superiority in other men with whom he worked. It calls to mind his laudatory judgment on the success of Melanchthon in drawing up the Augsburg Confession in which he finds nothing to "improve or change". And not only does he recognize the worth and value of other men's efforts, but his own activities, both as a scholar and teacher, appear to himself always as "weak, poor, and small"; the attainments of a mere "prattler" as compared with the feats of Melanchthon and other men of the time.

True, Michelangelo also does not hesitate to disparage his own achievements. Toward the end of his life he deplored the fact that he was compelled to stop just as he was learning the alphabet of his profession. Such statements are with him not the expression of a false modesty but are(~~the~~)genuine utterances of his thoroughly sincere and truthful nature. But while granting his own deficiency he accords even less merit to others. Perugino, who had begun the fresco on the entrance wall of the Sistine Chapel, he despised with all his heart and very frankly called him a "blockhead". Raphael he likewise regarded with contempt because "all his talent came from study and not from nature". Still greater was his contempt for the common people as regards their

judgment in artistic matters. His stand here, too, is in marked contrast to the position of Luther who held that the "gemeine Mann", a favorite expression with him, is deserving of all love and respect and who, by carrying out this assertion, has come to be regarded as one of the greatest champions of the people of all times. Michelangelo, on the other hand, although, like Luther, opposed to tyranny in government, scorned the opinions of the populace and maintained that it possessed no sense of proportion, of symmetry, of selection, in fact, no artistic spirit as such. This prejudice of Michelangelo may be due to his high descent to which he attached great importance. Michelangelo's father, a Podesto or Governor of Caprese, was born in an ancient family of distinguished descent, going back in ancestry to the thirteenth century. Indeed, the Buonarroti family claimed origin from the Counts of Canossa, illustrious not only by their antiquity but also by their connection with imperial blood. When we compare with this the lineage of Luther, born of poor, honest, and upright but nevertheless uncultured, almost uncouth peasant folk, we can more readily account for the existing difference in their attitude toward the masses. Incidentally, the fact that Luther, in spite of his insignificant parentage, fearlessly opposed error regardless of the noble rank or powerful station of his adversaries is an important tribute to his daring and manly courage. In Michelangelo it was largely his sense of high descent which stood by him in his relations with the great and on the other hand separated him

from the large number of artists and artisans accustomed to greater and more candid subservience than he allowed himself.

But lest this reference to Michelangelo's occasional independence be regarded as evidence of a trace of real courage, mention must here be made of another phase of his character which is likewise in sharp contrast to that of the German reformer. It is the tragic and constantly recurring indecision, the result of that unconquerable element of timidity in his nature, which unfortunately marked all the great undertakings of his life and which persisted until the end of his long and phenomenally productive career. This anxious and fearful faintheartedness was not always apparent. On the contrary, it is ofttime characteristic of this quality to conceal itself under external violence and rudeness. It was so with Michelangelo. His brusque treatment of other artists and his insolence toward his donors made it difficult for anyone to live with him and made it impossible for him to work harmoniously with fellow-craftsmen. Luther presents just the opposite picture in his acitwity of translating the Bible, on which he worked jointly with contemporary scholars. But Michelangelo's roughness did not represent his true character. At the bottom there was fear, fear which caused him to waver and procrastinate with every work, fear which robbed him of the force to refuse a task which was unworthy of him. "His genius was heroic, his will not so at all." "It must be admitted that this violent genius was always timid in action; he never incurred any risk through struggling against the powers of this world on po-

litical or religious grounds. He was afraid of compromising himself. He was afraid of everything. He was always afraid."

These are not the words of a jealous contemporary but they come from his enthusiastic biographer, Romain Rolland, who recognizes Michelangelo's greatness and terms him a "colossal mountain which inspires in those who dwell at the foot an invincible desire to reach the top", and adds that at no time were there men "who were less capable of climbing those austere and sublime heights". But in spite of these admirable traits he does not hesitate to find fault with Michelangelo because of his disgusting hesitancy which he failed to overcome all his life. - What an enormous contrast to the resolute character of Luther! Nothing was more distasteful to him than weakness and readiness to yield to error. If ever in his early years there were instances of vacillation these were due to insufficient instruction and a consciousness of his own inability to pass judgment on the controverted questions. But if convinced that his cause was just nothing could deter him in his ardor to struggle for it. At Worms he braved the world, not in a foolhardy way but after quiet and protracted reflection - an indication of even greater courage - and with a firm determination based on definite convictions, which he feared not to defend with the supreme sacrifice. Perhaps the contrast will become even more apparent when we consider the interesting parallel in the lives of the two men which is furnished by the fact that both were called upon to lead a revolution, if this term may be applied to the Refor-

mation in Germany. In 1529 Michelangelo was made Governor-General and thus placed at the head of the Florentine insurrection, and in the year 1521 Luther's stand at the Diet of Worms made him the most prominent figure and the undisputed leader in the Protestant reofrmatory movement. But what a difference in the discharge of duties is here displayed! Fearing the conspiracy of a treacherous general, Michelangelo left the city in hasty and ignominiousflight. Indeed, he had only been driven into the revolution by his despair of the city's fate and by the belief that his life was practically lost, a circumstance which finally brought to the surface and into action his secret but nevertheless ardently republican sympathies. Luther, although originally not purposing a revolt, was by no means unwilling to serve as a leader in the new movement, and when once persuaded that as a result of the bold expression of his convictions he had come to be regarded as the logical person to guide the rapid developments, he fearlessly and faithfully applied his energies as loyal helmsman to the great cause. "Reckless of consequences, of danger, of his popularity, and of his life, he blurted out the whole truth as he saw it, despite all cardinals, popes, kings, and emperors, together with all devils and hell." Even though we do not share his ideal, his undaunted courage in daring it and his great moral strength to labor for it must command our repect.

Michelangelo's pessimism was idealistic, not, of course, insofar as it denied the reality of things, but

because its central teaching was this that nature is evil. Accordingly, his prescription for young artists who wished to form an idea of the beautiful was not to begin by drawing from nature, "which is almost always weak and mean", but to rely entirely on the ideal furnished by their imagination. On the other hand, those who make use of nature should, in hisopinion, already be skillful enough to recognize its faults and correct them. This theory, as an artistic principle, has, of course, no correlative in the life of Luther. But the basic thought, according to which it is practically impossible to detect goodness in the order of our world, finds a counterpart in Luther's numerous expression on the satisfactory arrangement of the universe, to which Michelangelo's pessimism is in direct and complete opposition. While Michelangelo preferred to engage in introspection and sought for beauty in his imagination, Luther discovered this quality when he looked out on the stars and gratefully considered the "good master-workman" that made them, or on the violets "for which neither the Grand Turk nor the emperor could pay", or on the yearly growth of corn and wine, "as great a miracle as the manna in the wilderness". It is one of the greatest differences in the character of the two men. In the explanation of it there can be no doubt that in this instance the difference in the religious beliefs formed at least an important contributing factor to the remarkable and irreconcilable divergences of their opinions. Not as though Michelangelo's melancholy nature would have been ma-

terially affected by contact with, and acceptance of, Luther's doctrine; nor, on the other hand, that Luther's cheerfulness was altogether the result of his success in gaining assurance of his salvation. Both qualities, as indicated previously, were an essential part of their respective characters. Nevertheless, Luther's firm conviction that he possessed not an angry but a "gracious and loving Father", whose guiding motive in ordering and preserving the universe was infinite love and affection, made it all the more possible for him to derive joy and pleasure from the contemplation and the company of the various forms of nature, even though this joy be frequently marred by the far-reaching and constantly reappearing consequences of man's initial disobedience; and there can be no doubt that an acquaintance with this fact, a realizationof the loverather than of the wrath of God, would in like manner have greatly altered Michelangelo's gloomy outlook on life, which to a large extent was the result of the intense but unrequited longing for love of his tender and affectionate nature.

A perusal of the above considerations may tempt one to ask, Who is the greater? But this question is hardly a just one, since each labored in an entirely different domain. Both are unquestionably at the pinnacle of their profession. The grandeur of Michelangelo's genius combined with an enormous productivity and an astounding capacity for work remains unparalleled in the artistic world. There is no comparison between the influence which he exerted and that of

the other masters of the sixteenth century. His immense achievement in decorating the vault of the Sistine Chapel, his sublime and at the same time overwhelming painting of the Last Judgment caused even the most hostile factions to recognize his triumph, to worship him as their master, their leader, and the god of drawing. - Luther's stupendous work of church reform, his matchless ability to direct the hearts of an entirenation by which he prevented the Reformation from becoming a radical and violent revolution, his phenomenal mind, which was capable of the most childlike faith as well as of the most sophistical dogmatical distinctions, and his ceaselessly creative genius in constructive reform stamp him one of the greatest figures in ecclesiastical and secular history. His activity marks a new era in European history and its influence is felt in all Christian nations at the present day. If,then,we measure both men by the results each attained, by the scope of their activity and by the sphere in which they exerted an influence, the person of Luther would unquestionably be regarded as the greater. But even when we disregard their work and, as far as it is possible to disconnect achievement and character, restrict the query to the character of the two men, asking, Who possessed traits that gave proof of a truly heroic nature? we are justified in pronouncing a judgment which favors the German reformer. The mere fact that the character of the one man is to a great extent melancholy and that of the other chiefly sanguine, does not stamp the latter as the greater. But when this melancholy is combined with a

decided pessimism, which can detect no good in nature and which succumbs to hopeless gloom and despair, the justice of the decision becomes evident. The most prominent element in the character of Michelangelo is a tragic one - despondency; the predominant trait in the nature of Luther is undeniably heroic - implicit and confident trust in the benevolent, because divine, guidance of events. The study of Luther's life calls forth particularly one emotion - admiration; and while the story of the life of Michelangelo likewise arouses unbounded wonder for the tremendous achievements which were his, nevertheless, the predominant sentiment which a contemplation of his activity creates is that of pity and sympathy, pity for him who

"Wrought in a sad sincerity:
Himself from God he could not free".

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