FROM GROTESQUE TO VISION:  
THE JOURNEY OF THE 
POETIC IMAGINATION IN 
MICHELANGELO’S ART 

PAUL BAROLSKY 

IN MEMORY OF SYDNEY J. FREEDBERG

MICHELANGELO’S POETIC IMAGINATION can be approached in many ways. We can follow various threads through the rich tapestry of his fantasy, which is not to say we can ever completely fathom the complex weave of his poetic wanderings. Even so, I will endeavor in the itinerary we follow here to isolate and explore several episodes in the journey of Michelangelo’s poetic imagination in the hope of enriching our understanding of his pictorial poetry, of drawing nearer to the mystery of his creative powers. What I present here is tentative, hypothetical; my offering is suggestive, for no such exploration can be definitive.

Let us begin with a sheet of paper now in the British Museum, which is teeming with Michelangelo’s thoughts, both verbal and visual, datable toward 1505, when he was almost 30 years old (Hartt, Michelangelo no. 22). On the recto we find a rapid sketch, possibly influenced by Leonardo, for the artist’s unrealized Battle of Cascina, planned for the Palazzo della Signoria to celebrate a Florentine victory over the Pisans. There are also sketches for one of the projected sculptures of twelve Apostles, the very foundations of the heavenly Jerusalem, commissioned for the cathedral of Florence, dedicated to the celestial city, of which Michelangelo only began the Saint Matthew. On this sheet are also some jottings: an obscure phrase about hell and a brief Latin prayer, “Deus in nomine tuo salvum me fac”: “Save me, O God, by Thy name.”

The prayer, from Psalm 54, resonates with Michelangelo’s participation in the life and works of David. At the time of this drawing, Michelangelo had been working on his gigantic statue of the biblical hero and was also commissioned to make a bronze figure of the same subject. On a preparatory drawing for the latter work, Michelangelo wrote,
"Davie cholla fromba e io choll’archo": “David with his sling and I with my bow,” by which he seems to have meant the very “bow” of his drill.

Michelangelo as David is a theme that would inform his entire life down to his last years when his penitential poems would echo the psalms. Shortly before Michelangelo’s death, his friend Leone Leoni struck a portrait medal on which an allegorical pilgrim, standing for the aged poet, is surrounded by words from one of the penitential psalms, “Then will I teach transgressors thy ways, and sinners shall be converted unto thee.” Sixty years after the Davidic prayer of the British Museum sheet, Michelangelo prays in the voice of his beloved “humble psalmist.” Doing so, the aged pilgrim follows the path of his equally revered Dante,