

E. H. Gombrich, Sleeper Awake! A Literary Parallel to Michelangelo's Drawing of the Dream of Human Life, Festschrift für Konrad Oberhuber, ed. Achim Gnann and Heinz Widauer, Milan, Electra, 2000, pp.130-2 [Trapp no.2000B.1]

The interpretation of Michelangelo's drawing, usually referred to as The Dream of Human Life¹ (fig 1) offers no major difficulties. It shows a youth, who has apparently been sleeping with his head on a globe, being aroused by a winged angel descending from on high, sounding a trumpet. Beneath the globe we see an assembly of masks – possibly signifying dreams or illusions – while the figure is surrounded by sketchy adumbrations of groups representing the Seven Deadly Sins. Only five of these are clearly identifiable: on the left, *Gula*, or Gluttony (a man turning a spit, one at an empty table, another drinking a bottle), and *Luxuria*, or Lust (couples making love); and on the right-hand side from the top down, *Avaritia*, or Covetousness (a hand holding a purse), *Ira*, or Anger (fighting groups), and *Acedia*, or Sloth (with sleepers). Two vices, *Invidia* and *Superbia*- Envy and Pride – cannot easily be identified. Clearly the beautiful youth is summoned by the trumpet call to abandon his life of vice, and look up to Heaven for his salvation.

It must remain an open question how far the surviving painted versions of this composition reflect Michelangelo's intention. The London version (fig 2)² has three somewhat enigmatic heads on top of the first figure of *Gula* (turning the spit). It also varies and partly conceals the figures of *Luxuria*, and shows two heads in the clouds above and two beside the head of the dreamer which are not discernible in the drawing. A figure biting its hand next to the money bag and the fighting group may well be intended to represent *Invidia*, but whether it was added by the copyist, or corresponds to Michelangelo's intentions is not clear. The moral message of both versions is so central to the Christian faith that we can assume it to have been the subject of major sermons in the XVI century, no less than before or after. We cannot therefore be sure that a Latin poem by Giovanni Francesco Pico della Mirandola (the nephew of Giovanni Pico)³ published in 1532, must necessarily be the source of Michelangelo's ideas, but some of its images are so close to the drawing, that this possibility may be considered. The most striking parallel is the title: *A misero moribundae vitae sommo ad perpetuam foelicis vitae vigiliam excitatio*, and in the opening lines (represented in facsimile on fig 3), which return again and again to the elusiveness of apparitions which have tempted the sleeper, who should rather raise his eyes to heaven (1.31). Any further correspondence with Michelangelo's invention stops here, when the learned humanist gives examples of the brevity of human triumph – as illustrated by the life of Pompeius (1.44) (in the marginal commentary Pico adds the significant name of Cesare Borgia, (1.73)) – and the fate of the works of Varro, once “famous throughout the world” (1.130), and by the short-lived prosperity of Babylon and other cities which now lie in ruins (1.77). An English translation of the first forty-three lines follows:

By the Lord Francesco Pico della Mirandola, Count of Concordia, a call to rise from the wretched sloth of mortal life to the perpetual vigil of the happy life. Oh mortal race, will it never be granted you to be roused from your ancient wretchedness? Why do you at one moment open your sleepy eyes, only to close them again in the next? Are you perchance lying by Lethe's murmuring shore, weighed down and stupefied? Indeed, glimmering forms, standing ranked through everchanging emptiness, retain your gaze. You fail to lay hold of lasting joys, and the greatest apparition, imitating truth, wantonly beguiles your senses with false desire. Will you now avert your face, turning your benighted eyes away in disgust, and raise them heavenwards at last?

Now that the mist has been driven back, now at long last you may turn eyes shrouded with darkness and evil cloud away to the ethereal regions, to the heights of Olympus. Wherever it is granted us to

go, thither it is our duty to ascent on the wings of virtues, after the seasons of this miserable life have run their course. We shall reach the winning post after a brief race.

There, a perpetual kingdom and peaceful pleasure shall be granted to good men of every kind; utterly immune from evil shall they be, and happy forever: a blessed end indeed. For this sleep which you now enjoy is brief, full of passion, great evil and sadness, and swifter and more fleeting than the southeast wind. The objects of your desires and fears are constantly floating from you; the renowned kingdoms of wealth, beauty and the honours of human praise sweep past as swiftly as a wave upon a river; and all around extends a vast sea of cares.

As drifting smoke bites into watering eyes but then is dispersed in the upper air, so cares afflict the mind. Desire itself rages fiercely as it seeks its object and, trembling, engrosses us and detains us with the miserable fear of being despoiled of the beloved. Now, that vanity, those dreams of rewards which you ardently pursue, you will nowhere find, and even that which you have found will slip from your very hands as smoke into thin air.

Why does you love cause you to be oppressed by such fear of being forsaken? You fear a vain thing. For, even before you grasped it, it had escaped with swift flight into thin air behind you. Nothing on earth is constant. Proteus did not change into as many shapes as the old poets have found ways of portraying custom. How many different countenances human affairs present! Those clear things whose visible face is now seen, will soon lie hidden and dark, and those propitious things which now smile upon you with flattering success, having but turned their face, will mourn and fade, enfeebled by baser things.

The poem ends with a description of the blessed in heaven, and the promise that “As you forget your earthly father, eternity calls you into the perpetual light.”

1 Courtauld Gallery. For a full description and bibliography, see L. Dussler, *Die Zeichnungen des Michelangelo*, Berlin 1959, p. 268, no.5889, who also lists the various painted versions based on the drawing.

2 National Gallery, *The Dream* (After Michelangelo).

3 See C.B. Schmitt, *Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola (1469-1533) and his Critique of Aristotele*, The Hague 1967, p. 199, for full title and publication details. Some biographical facts about the poet, who had been an ardent follower of Savonarola, and a sworn enemy of the “paganising tendencies” of the Renaissance, are mentioned in my *Symbolic Images: Studies in the Art of the Renaissance II*,. Oxford 1972, p.105, a revised version of my study Hypnerotomachiana, in: *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 1951.

4 Printed jointly with Giovanni Francesco Pico della Mirandola, *Dialogus in tres Libros divisus, Titulus est Stix...*, Bologna 1532, British Library 1609/791. It would not appear to have been included in the Opera Omnia published in Basel in 1557.

5 I am greatly obliged to Mr. David Lingham, who helped me clarify some of the obscurities of the poem and provided the translation printed in the text.

