Michelangelo reconsidered from first principles many aspects of building that his contemporaries took for granted. His questioning stance may have been a result of his compressed architectural education and his imperfect assimilation of traditions, or of resistance to those traditions. In either case, in the Medici Chapel, and even more in the Laurentian Library and vestibule, he introduces uncertainty into otherwise well-established architectural conventions regarding the relation between architecture, ornament, and sculpture; the representation of structure; the definition and appearance of the wall; and the relation between ornament and function. By creating visual tension, contradiction, and paradox through his unorthodox handling of architectural conventions, Michelangelo induces viewers and visitors into perplexity about the underlying principles and finalities of his architectural designs.

The position Michelangelo adopts in relation to architectural tradition is not unlike the one Socrates takes towards received philosophic truths in Plato’s dialogues, and in particular in *Meno*. As in other dialogues, Socrates provokes his interlocutor Meno into realizing that he does not in fact know what he thought he did (in this case about the nature of excellence). But in this dialogue, Meno talks back, accusing Socrates of playing the role of a stingray. In a vivid account of aporia as a form of paralysis, Meno claims that “the stingray numbs anyone who comes near enough to touch it, and I think you’ve done the same kind of thing to me. My mind and my mouth are literally torpid, and I have no answer for you.” In defending himself from Meno’s accusations, Socrates states, “It’s not that I make other people stuck while being clear myself; no, I make other people stuck by virtue of the fact that I’m stuck myself.”

The idea of Socrates making others stuck because he is stuck himself parallels to Michelangelo’s approach to architecture and its effect on visitors and viewers. Like Socrates, with his relentless series of questions about the nature of some abstract notion (virtue, excellence, etc.) the questions
Michelangelo posed through his architecture had the potential to freeze visitors. But also like Socrates, Michelangelo did not undertake this project merely with a spirit of provocation. Rather, Michelangelo’s architectural inquiry arises from a genuine position of unknowingness. Michelangelo was by no means either ignorant or naïve—no more than Socrates was. But while Socrates seems to willfully forgo the knowledge and assumptions he has inherited, Michelangelo’s knowledge about architecture was incomplete from the outset. Thus his uneven education may have allowed him to see the assumptions of architecture as an outsider would. The first part of this paper will explore the questions Michelangelo poses in the Medici Chapel and Laurentian Library, how he does so, and how they arouse bafflement while deploying Michelangelo’s own perplexity. The second part will consider how Michelangelo’s provocations initiated a dialogue with, and in some cases flummoxed, sixteenth-century writers on architecture.

But how can architecture pose questions? While contemporary scholars often refer to architecture as a language, obviously its means for doing so are not as direct as those of oral or written language. Instead, architecture can raise questions in the minds of attentive and informed observers by challenging existing conventions and by introducing unexpected juxtapositions. In these cases, the viewer compares the new and challenging forms in front of him with his memory of standard or authoritative forms, and tries to assess the reasons for the variation.

This process may sound abstract, but it is documented in at least two sixteenth-century responses to Michelangelo’s Medici Chapel and Library by Cosimo Bartoli and Francesco Bocchi. In the first part of this essay I will consider a few of the problems Michelangelo raises in his early architectural projects, and in the latter half I will analyze how his contemporaries responded to these challenges. These texts provide a means of evaluating Michelangelo’s effectiveness in posing questions that his contemporaries felt compelled to address.

The Medici Chapel

In the Medici Chapel, commissioned by Cardinal Giulio de’ Medici (later Pope Clement VII) in 1519 to commemorate the recent deaths of Lorenzo, duke of Urbino, and Giuliano de’ Medici, duke of Nemours, Michelangelo dismantled the traditional separation between architecture and sculpture. His drawings suggest he barely acknowledged the divisions commonly assigned to architectural and sculptural elements at his time. To be sure, the façade project for San Lorenzo had included discrete spaces for sculptural relief, following the model of triumphal arch architecture. However, by refusing to collaborate with Jacopo Sansovino, who would have made the architectural frame while he would have solely executed the sculptures, Michelangelo had already begun to resist the traditional division of labor between architecture,
ornament, and figurative sculpture—or *quadro*, *intaglio* and *figure*—as established in early-sixteenth-century Florence.  

Although the Medici Chapel was unusual in being an entire space dedicated to commemoration, its architectural layout depended on the conventions of the wall tomb and the monumental altar. It was a tradition Michelangelo certainly would have known, not least through his involvement with the Piccolomini altar in Siena. Yet in the chapel, he willfully forgets many of the conventions he had learned, especially regarding the predominance of sculpture over architecture.

This is most apparent in an extraordinary sheet at the British Museum (*Corpus* 180 recto; Fig. 7.1). Its multiple layers demonstrate that Michelangelo has not given primacy to either the figural or architectural components, but instead allowed their morphology and scale to evolve in relation to one another. Perhaps as an effect of the layers of ideas contained in the single sheet, the development of these ideas appears as an organic, dynamic process, in which the vertical architectural elements push on and constrain the figures, while the figures, leaning on the architecture, react to the pressure by “pushing back.” The drawings reveal how Michelangelo forced himself to “un-know” what he would have learned about the *quadro* in the Florentine tradition—principally, its concept of containment.

The figures defy the architecture through their own skeletal structure: they lean, they lie, and they bend as they withstand the architectural thrust. The drawing demonstrates how the binary relationship between figure and frame could generate a productive tension, allowing one to enliven the other through active interference. For example, the scale of the figures and of the architectural elements seem to shift in relation to one another, and the sheet records the numerous variants of these sets of proportional relations. In the right-hand niche, the blank, square panel is flanked by two diminutive figures, who rest their elbows on it. But these must belong to an earlier scheme, because they look strangely small in comparison to the reclining river god below and especially the towering central figure. The central figure seems to belong to the general heightening of the architectural members that can be seen occurring in four stages in the left-hand bay, with the pediment gradually rising and being transformed from triangular to semi-circular. In these studies, Michelangelo provides extremely minimal
points of external reference, and the only logic for the development of the forms and designs is relational.

The drawings for the chapel show Michelangelo thinking simultaneously about the architectural and sculptural elements and allowing them to evolve in tandem, as equal players. Although the designs are comprised of many single elements used previously in other compositions, their originality in this context lies chiefly in the extent to which the figures and architecture are interdependent. This is a significant shift from the Sistine Ceiling, where a separate intermediate zone negotiates between figures and frame. It is also distinct from the anthropocentrism of the 1513 Berlin and Uffizi tomb designs: there, the figures either identified themselves with the architecture or were bound to it in the form of herms or of prisoners. In the series of studies for the single and double Medici tombs, the figures lean on, hide under, and slide off the architecture, but the architecture is also inconceivable without them.

Architectural frames are employed, but without the presence of actual architectural orders. This ambiguity is typical of Michelangelo, whose orders are often difficult or impossible to categorize according to strict typologies such as Doric, Ionic, or Corinthian. This is a major point, because including the orders meant fixing a large number of other features, not just the morphology of the capitals or bases, but also the height of the column shaft and the distance between the columns. The only explicit sign of classical vocabulary is the pediment of the window niches, but even these are made to appear as geometric flourishes, mirroring the curve of the upside-down wreath and the double curves of the sarcophagus. Without the system of the orders to govern them, architectural elements become even more fluid than the human figures, which at least in their internal proportions—the size of head relative to the height of the body, for example—are relatively fixed.

Despite elaborate iconographical readings of the chapel’s sculpture, the drawings demonstrate that the number and character of figures were in continual flux. This suggests that the meaning attached to the figures must have evolved fluidly with the design rather than determined the design from its conception. Furthermore, while figure and frame are traditionally posed in binary opposition, in Michelangelo’s drawings the two are often indistinguishable. In the British Museum sheet, the figures seem to frame the architecture more than the other way around.

The marble architecture of the chapel as built brings into question the boundaries between architecture and sculpture by its extreme refinement, its incorporation of strictly sculptural elements, and its lack of tectonic purpose (Fig. 7.2). This is perhaps most apparent in the blind windows above the doors (Fig. 7.3), which anticipate the ambiguous tabernacles of the library vestibule. Their layers of inset, blank planes, their protruding pedestal supporting nothing, and their use of ornamental festoons and discs derived from sarcophagi all possess the abstraction of architecture without fulfilling any structural function; their “uselessness” makes it apparent that, like sculpture, their only purpose is aesthetic and symbolic.
7.3 Michelangelo Buonarroti, Medici Chapel, S. Lorenzo, Florence, detail with blind windows. Author photo.
The Laurentian Library

In the Laurentian Library (1524–59), commissioned by Clement VII, Michelangelo takes architecture’s most basic narrative about structure and function and in various ways subverts or dramatizes it (Fig. 7.4). Most obviously, he does this with the massive columns—in materials, volume, and scale, they are fit for the exterior of a building, but Michelangelo treats them as if they were ornamental sculpture, placing them in recessed niches, within a highly adorned wall composition. The irony is that despite this ornamental treatment, they are in fact the structural members. The walls, which protrude between the columns, appear to be load-bearing but are composed of lightweight rubble and therefore do not support the vestibule’s architecture.11

One aspect of aporia is defined as follows: “a puzzle or problem in the sense of a specific question articulated so as to have two opposed sides with apparently good reasons on both sides.”12 This may sound like a specifically philosophic, rhetorical or at least linguistic way of understanding aporia, and one with limited possible application to architecture. And yet there is a way in which this definition might describe the visual aporia proposed by Michelangelo in the library vestibule, at least with regard to the enigma of the structural system and its representation. The two sides of this aporia could be formulated as follows: On the one hand the wall, because it is most prominent, must be the structural element, and hence the columns must be
merely decorative because they are set into it; on the other, the columns must be the structural member because that is their conventional role, even though they are now set into the wall. In this case, although the latter statement is true, interpreters might hesitate about the resolution of this architectural conundrum. Should convention be heeded under any circumstances? Or should the switch from a structural function to a decorative one bring about the dismissal of a traditional principle? The architecture itself does not help untangle the alternative because no one can guess Michelangelo’s solution to the question by merely observing the vestibule. Thus, Michelangelo intentionally posited this ambiguity, setting up the terms of a puzzling “dialogue” with any visitor prepared to engage in it.

The paradoxical relationship Michelangelo establishes in the library between the actual and the representational structure undermines the primary narrative of architecture, which concerns how the building is being held up. By doing so, he questions the authority and validity of this narrative, implying through his example and by comparison that there have always been degrees of truth and of fiction in it. In the Greco-Roman tradition, free-standing columns appear to hold up the roof of a building, and generally do; but beyond this, the situation becomes less transparent. Engaged pilasters allude to free-standing columns, but typically do not have a structural purpose, instead acting as ornament applied to the surface of the load-bearing wall. In some cases, however, the pilaster is where the pier breaks through the wall, exposing its structural system. Similar complications surrounded ornamental elements of architecture. Far from being arbitrary, many of these refer to some structural aspect of the building—even though this is typically a mere vestige, with no actual relation to the building’s structure. An oft-cited example—most probably known to Michelangelo—are the triglyphs in a Doric frieze, which according to Vitruvius refer to the timber beams that in wood constructions would have jutted out above the columns, and which since served as a reminder in stone architecture of its more modest origins in wood.\textsuperscript{13} Even this is a matter of dispute, and it is possible that the triglyphs are remnants of framing devices for the metopes.\textsuperscript{14}

The renewed interest in Vitruvius in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries reinforced this sense of the rational connection between the representation of structure and actual structure. Yet both at the broad level of the columnar and wall system and at the detailed level of the tabernacles, capitals and other ornaments, Michelangelo suggests the arbitrary and contingent nature of these relationships.

An analysis of key details may illuminate the nature of the questions Michelangelo was asking through his built architecture. For example, the tabernacles in the vestibule present a number of jarring and contradictory pieces of information to the visitor (Fig. 7.5). Their overall contour suggests aspects of a door, a blind window and a niche. But it is a door that one cannot reach or walk through, a window that emits no light, and a niche that contains nothing.
Looking more closely, further contradictions emerge. The tabernacle features a protruding base, as if to support a statue, yet the base seems too thin and flimsy, and the niche too narrow, to support a monumental sculpture. Even the components of its frame defy both conventions and logic. The details within the tabernacle reveal how Michelangelo introduces ambiguity and complexity at every turn: at each moment that the visitor begins to understand what he sees, Michelangelo thwarts that certainty. Within the tabernacles, the tapered pilasters and their partial fluting, the hanging, misplaced dentils, the inset capitals and the implied double capital all confound the visitor’s ability to classify and make sense of what he sees.

While the tabernacles at first appear to be functional but are rendered utterly ornamental, Michelangelo adorns functional elements with such complexity that their function seems almost supplementary. This is the case with the doors on the inside of the reading room, which both in...
their front and side view appear to be not one door but two, layered over one another, with both a round and triangular pediment, and multiply framed by half columns, a blank, inset, vertical panel, and at the innermost layer, a continuous molding (Fig. 7.6). Viewed from the side, the discrete conception of the two levels is even more apparent, in the physical isolation of the impost block above the half column and in the floating character of the architrave below the pediment (Fig. 7.7). If these elements had been physically connected to each other and to the wall, they would not have such a jarring effect. But here as elsewhere, the discontinuities, and physical ruptures that Michelangelo introduces remove any certainty regarding the logical origin of conventional forms. By taking the most functionally direct element—the door as threshold—and making it into an immensely complex and physically weighty three-dimensional object, Michelangelo utterly disjoins form and function.  

7.7 Michelangelo Buonarroti, *Laurentian Library*, Florence, detail, side view of the door inside the reading room. Photo credit: Ralph Lieberman.
Michelangelo’s Interlocutors

Inevitably, the questions that arise in the minds of visitors confronted with Michelangelo’s work have much to do with their own concerns and those of their time. By the latter half of the sixteenth century, when Cosimo Bartoli and Francesco Bocchi were writing, Vitruvianism had become much more dominant in architectural culture than it had been when Michelangelo actually built the Medici Chapel and Laurentian Library. Thus it is not surprising that Bartoli and Bocchi share several concerns. First, they both address the question of Michelangelo’s variation from Vitruvian models. Secondly, they consider how an alternative source of authority might be established, and they both arrive at the idea that approval by popular consensus constitutes an apt substitute for ancient textual authority.

Bartoli, in his *Ragionamenti Accademici* (1567), found elaborate ways of defending Michelangelo, with specific reference to his use of the orders. In the form of a dialogue, two interlocutors discuss the merits and potential flaws of Michelangelo’s use of the Doric order in the library vestibule. Bartoli’s observations hinge on the idea that Michelangelo only *somewhat* varied from the ancients. Never does the notion of violating or transgressing the rules enter Bartoli’s discussion; indeed he contrasts Michelangelo’s limited infringements of conventions with those of Gothic architecture. The first speaker (“MC”) observes that Michelangelo “used the Doric Style [maniera] to make the columns; but he did not observe the proportions [misure] of the ancients.” His interlocutor (“MV”) asks: “Is he blamed or praised for this?” MC’s response implies that the taste of the Florentines is fickle, and thus it depends on who you ask. Personally, however, MC considers Michelangelo’s work praiseworthy, “because even if he has varied from the ancients, he has kept the proportion of his own …” The discussion continues on the difficulty of varying from the ancients, with MC asserting that he who does so successfully—as judged by most men—“is not in any way inferior to the ancients …” Bartoli’s dialogue indicates that Michelangelo’s architecture was a source of controversy, and that responses to it varied widely. The defense of his work focuses on the delight it produces, and on the idea that varying from the ancients is even more difficult than copying them. The account hinged on the idea that Michelangelo is able to delicately negotiate the territory between license and transgression.

Bocchi, in his *Bellezze della Città di Firenze* of 1591, provides some idea of how sixteenth-century commentators responded to the challenges posed by Michelangelo’s difficult architecture. Bocchi constructs his defense of Michelangelo’s architecture in a twofold manner, through broad statements (such as “architecture is not an art that imitates nature”) or by a detailed parsing of individual elements, focusing on the most anomalous ones. Bocchi’s focus on individual elements parallels Michelangelo’s practice, as revealed both through his drawings and the completed architecture. While Bocchi’s descriptions demonstrate his attempts to come to terms with architectural
vocabulary, even more significant are the polemical passages, in which he seems to be replying to an absent critic. These are also the passages in which Bocchi seems to be responding most directly to Michelangelo’s questions.

In Socratic dialogue, the purpose of aporia is potentially cathartic: it can “purge the interlocutor of the pretense of knowledge” in the hope that he may take up the search for knowledge.\(^\text{19}\) The responses that the library elicited suggest that it provoked a dialogue of this particular kind, either implicit or explicit. Michelangelo plays quite specifically with the visitor’s sense of his own knowledge and its limits. The architectural elements he employs seem familiar, and yet they are just beyond the bounds of recognition.

Aristotle’s notion of aporia or perplexity (in some regards deriving from Plato) has been described as causing astonishment.\(^\text{20}\) In this sense it perhaps corresponds to Vasari’s astonishment in regard to the Sistine Chapel—the “stupore” of its visitors—or to Bocchi’s sense of being stunned—or “abbagliato.” For Aristotle as for sixteenth-century commentators, one consequence of bafflement can be the loss of language. The various sixteenth-century texts included here reflect the authors’ double response to the library: on the one hand, they are stunned into silence, but on the other, they force themselves to articulate their silencing in words. While it is difficult and perhaps false to distinguish these two levels of reactions, they might correspond to Aristotle’s distinction between the sensory response and the intellectual one.\(^\text{21}\) In other words, the phenomenological effect of Michelangelo’s vestibule stops or stuns the visitor, but its intellectual effect may encourage the visitor to engage in a dialogue with the work.

The interest of Bocchi’s writing lies not only in the substance of his observations, some of which are very astute, but also in the signs of struggle betrayed by his text. Bocchi describes the power of beauty to silence speech; writing of the candelabra, he claims that they are “carved with festoons, grotesques and other ornaments, so exquisitely fanciful that they overwhelm the faculty of speech and all thought (“vincono per sua bellezza ogni facoltà di parole, & ogni pensiero”).\(^\text{22}\) Bocchi furthermore writes that the library “elicits wonder in those most expert.” Similar to Vasari’s account of visitors to the Sistine Chapel being “struck dumb,” the notion of wonder is very different from the kind of learned, studied cleverness that many sixteenth-century works evoked.

Descriptive language typically—perhaps inevitably—begins with identification. But Michelangelo makes this first step difficult. In painted works such as the Sistine Ceiling or the Last Judgment, he obscures the identifying features of stock figures, and includes many figures of ambiguous or indeterminate meaning.\(^\text{23}\) In architecture, it had taken several decades to clarify the various parts of the orders and what they stood for, as Giuliano da Sangallo’s careful diagrams, and Francesco di Giorgio’s mistaken ones, attest. But Michelangelo’s deliberate inversions and twists of familiar syntactical arrangements makes naming and identification a problem all over again. Forms look familiar, but do not strictly adhere to the morphology or
position of nameable architectural parts. Much writing about architecture relies on the idea that architecture is a language. It is primarily intended as a metaphor of the way in which architecture signifies, but it also describes the set of terms frequently employed for architectural elements. Most of these are defined and identified both by their function and by their morphology. Michelangelo’s routine displacements of architectural details and subversions of their functions create some fundamental difficulties in this system. Thus Bocchi’s protestations—that “words cannot express” what he sees—is not merely rhetorical.

Bocchi’s struggles to write about Michelangelo’s architecture suggest the extent to which linguistic description depends on anchors, codes, and known symbols. Without these cues, description has to resort to ideas such as the inadequacy of language and the impossibility of description; the idea of being “stunned” or “disoriented”, and the vague invocation of “beauty.” From this point of view, Michelangelo’s architecture truly operates like the numbing of Socrates’ stingray, paralyzing the interpreter by inhibiting his abilities to define the artwork. Part of the sixteenth-century critical backlash against Michelangelo might be accounted for in relation to this frustration at the failure of language. In the absence of mimesis, allegory, or imitation, the interpreter or critic is left with few ways of doing his job.

Bocchi employs several words—“stupefatto” and “abbagliato”—while Vasari often invokes the idea of stupore, all of which convey the idea of being overcome, and rendered silent, by the vision of beauty. Benedetto Varchi, describing his amazement at Michelangelo’s accomplishment, employs terms that evoke bodily sensations: his “pulse trembles”; “his blood turns to ice”; his “scalp tingles” all just by the thought of the artist. Although Renaissance commentators would probably not put it in these terms, stupore seems to correspond to the moments when sensation overtakes intellect.

Bocchi also responds in other ways to the complexity and ambiguity of Michelangelo’s architecture. He begins his analysis with an important assertion—“architecture does not imitate nature”—the implication being that, unbound by the constraints of mimesis, there is no absolute standard of judgment, and no absolute referent. He goes on to free Michelangelo of the other major source of authority. He suggests that the antique forms that are regarded as authoritative are in fact merely conventional, based on consensus and nothing else. Bocchi thus distances architecture from the two main sources of aesthetic authority: nature and the antique, and thereby sets the stage for Michelangelo’s manipulations, which he describes as forming “another rule”: “un altra regola.”

Bocchi is at his most astute, however, in his account of the vestibule’s distinctive brackets (Fig. 7.8). He writes that they “are used as ornament,” and, unlike columns and pilasters, “they cannot sustain weight.” He continues: “they adorn the place … the brackets are ornaments to the building and nothing else.” As Bocchi’s description implies, the importance of the brackets lies in part in the fact that they are emblematic of the general transformation
of architectural forms that usually denote function into ones that are purely ornamental. In the context of the passage as a whole, he is making a case for the importance and validity of beauty as a function for architecture. As Bocchi recognizes, Michelangelo abstracts and aestheticizes architectural elements in the library by lifting the fiction according to which they represent function.

A key passage occurs after the main description, when Bocchi writes of the library’s reception. He relates that some have been troubled “because they do not find in Michelangelo’s work what is written in the pages of Vitruvius.” However, he says, “they have not exercised much intelligence as they look.” They must understand that unlike painting, “architecture is not an art that imitates nature.” He suggests that “if one forgets for a moment what Vitruvius wrote,” one can begin to appreciate Michelangelo’s work. He argues that
even in antiquity, “things became law that were not law before” because of public approval, and it was in this way that “rules and measure were given to buildings.” He wonders: “if this process was not unreasonable, why should it not hold for Michelangelo today as it did in ancient times?” Bocchi’s words tell us a great deal about the terms in which sixteenth-century architecture in general was perceived and understood in the Renaissance, and about how in his opinion Michelangelo’s work demands new criteria. His characterization of the critics, dissatisfied because they do not find the rules of Vitruvius in Michelangelo’s architecture, suggests a kind of narrow literalism among observers and critics of architecture, possibly a consequence of decades of increasing focus on the architectural canon and on the orders. Bocchi’s point about architecture not imitating nature is more complicated. His aim, I think, is to suggest that, unlike painting, architecture is not bound to be faithful to external things in the world. The idea that it is invented and improved by man is crucial in that it allows Bocchi to emphasize Michelangelo’s personal innovations.

Bocchi’s invitation to forget what Vitruvius wrote is particularly bold in the context of the heightened orthodoxy regarding Vitruvian rules in the late sixteenth century. Bocchi then asserts the essentially arbitrary nature of tradition, and the idea that there was nothing intrinsically authoritative about the ancient forms that have come to assume the status of orthodoxy, and that they only became that way over time. Thus, he reasons, Michelangelo’s works should be able to follow a similar pattern.

Another sixteenth-century writer and artist, Pirro Ligorio, also responded to Michelangelo’s particular mode of deflecting conventional meaning, but more critically. Ligorio laments the loss of rules and of appropriate meaning in Michelangelo’s architecture, implying that it is a sign of moral decline. His critique occurs in the midst of a discussion of grottoes, and more precisely of the complications of assigning signification to grotesques. In a parallel to Gilio’s critiques of Michelangelo’s followers for their denigration of religious subject matter in favor of artifice, Ligorio contrasts the appropriateness of religious symbolism in ornamentation with Michelangelo’s use of arbitrary grotesque forms.

Ligorio argues that in the context of tombs, in which life has been interrupted, it may be appropriate to have interrupted or broken architectural orders. But Michelangelo employs them thoughtlessly (“senza altro pensamento”) in other types of structures including temples (he may be alluding to St. Peter’s), in which architectural elements, whole and complete, are necessary. He specifies, at the end of a long passage criticizing Michelangelo’s followers, that he is not saying this out of mean spiritedness, or to detract honor from anyone’s merits, but because “if they had invested their art with meaning they would have made something more worthy of praise.”

Several interesting implications emerge from Ligorio’s discussion. First, Ligorio questions the earnestness of Michelangelo’s engagement with the antique, suggesting that he drew motives and forms from antiquity
haphazardly or irresponsibly, and without the gravity and reflection they required. Mainly, he believes Michelangelo took ancient forms out of context, and applied them to a new context for which they were unsuitable. Secondly, Ligorio’s distinction between forms with meaning (“significato”) and without sheds light on various theories regarding the meaning of grotesques; Ligorio implies that in some cases they have no meaning (and he disapproves).

The responses of sixteenth-century writers to Michelangelo’s architecture suggest that it induced in them a state of aporia. While it is unlikely that either Michelangelo, or the writers, had the concept of aporia specifically in mind, it nonetheless helps to illuminate the philosophic and psychological mechanisms at play in the invention and reception of the Laurentian Library.

The Stingray Effect

Socrates’ method involves relentlessly interrogating received ideas until his interlocutor, recognizing his ignorance, reaches a point of complete paralysis. While this approach has no precise parallels in architecture, Michelangelo’s designs for the Medici Chapel and Laurentian Library engender a similar effect of bafflement and disorientation in the learned viewer by questioning both the underlying assumptions and formal conventions of traditional building. Michelangelo does this by deliberately subverting visitors’ expectations and by creating forms of manifold complexity and apparent contradiction. The mixed reception of his work—registered in the defensive tone of his admirers—is a testament to his success in opening a dialogue about architecture. Indeed, Michelangelo’s architecture draws ironic attention to certain elements of the architectural tradition, bringing into question an entire set of conventions regarding how architecture signifies. At the same time, he demonstrates how architecture can match both the formal flexibility and the expressive capacity of painting and sculpture, as well as its paradoxes and perplexities. By creating puzzling disruptions of function and meaning in the definition of architecture, Michelangelo employs the stingray effect not only to stun and baffle the visitor, but also to propose ambivalent new solutions to traditional architectural problems. Like Socrates, Michelangelo suspends certainties and conventions and thereby establishes a new basis for knowledge and, in his case, artistic invention.

Notes

1 The status of ornament in the Renaissance has been explored by Payne in several publications (1999 and 2000), primarily in relation to architectural treatises and other textual sources, as well as by Bulgarelli 2008, in relation to Alberti. This essay develops from ideas presented in Brothers 2008. I am grateful to Alexander Nagel for his insightful comments on my text and to Lorenzo Pericolo for his patient shepherding.
2 Plato b, 112.
3 Plato b, 113.
4 The phrase “self-stinging stingray” is from Matthews 1999, 43–52, who uses it as a chapter title: “Shared Perplexity: The Self-Stinging Stingray.”
6 The attribution of the altar, traditionally to Andrea Bregno, has been questioned by Hirst in Hirst and Dunkerton 1997, 78, 84–5, who thinks Michelangelo could have partial responsibility for the architecture; and Hemsoll 2003, 36–7, who believes Giuliano da Sangallo was involved. Caglioti 2005, 428, 478–9 has reasserted the attribution of the entire altar to Bregno.
7 A similar observation is made by Chapman 2005, 171.
8 Wilde 1954, 23, recognized this quality, as well as the way in which it related to Michelangelo’s other projects.
9 On the understanding and canonization of the orders in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, see Thoenes and Günther 1985.
10 Lingo 1995, reached a similar conclusion based on a study of the drawings for the Magnifici Tomb.
11 Ackerman 1986, 95–119, provides an insightful analysis of the library’s structure.
14 The metopes may have originally been decorative panels. This alternate reading of the origin of triglyphs was suggested by Professor Malcolm Bell in conversation, and is implied by Cook 1951 and Cook 1970 (essays to which he kindly directed me).
15 The tensions and complexities that Michelangelo introduces here were not entirely invented by him, but belonged to a moment of highly intellectual architecture generated in Florence and Rome in the first decades of the sixteenth century. Just down the street from the Laurentian Library, on via Sangallo, Raphael’s Palazzo Pandolfini offers another excellent and roughly contemporary example. In that case, the complexity arises from the way Raphael complicates the definition of the wall as a neutral surface by alternating the window frames with blank panel insets.
16 The reception of Michelangelo’s architecture is also discussed by Payne 2000, and Elam 2005 b. The discussions of architecture by Bartoli and Bocchi also coincide to some extent with considerations of the “questione della lingua”; on the relation between this and architectural debates, see Payne 1999, esp.160–5, and Davies and Hemsoll 2000.
17 “M.A. Ditemi un poco, io so che voi doveste nel disegnare questa facciata osservare qualche ordine o Dorico, o Ionia, o Corintio, di qual di questi in vero vi serviste voi? M.C. Del Dorico M. Agnolo, più che di alcuno altro; ma non però lo volli osservare appunto come gli Antichi. M.A. Perché? M.C. Dirovvi, gli antichi come voi sapete si servivano di quest’ordine nel fare quelle sorti di muraglie, che le volevano, che fussino sode gagliarde, et stabilissime, et per dire brevemente, che servissino quasi che per bassa de gli altri ordini Ionici, Corinthii, o Co[m]positi, che vi havessino ad andare sopra, qua[n]do volevano che le muraglie loro havessino più d’un ordine l’uno sopra l’altro. Ma io in
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Michelangelo’s incapable imitators were vividly described by Ligorio as “Michelagnolastri.” He wrote, “there are pagan tombs all ornamented with frivolities and broken and fragmented tabernacles, extravagant because of conflicts within them ... things free of the Vitruvian discipline ... studied by
Michelangelo, applied by him out of appropriate context in sacred buildings, and beyond decorum ... in which he was followed by other Monstrous Michelangelos (Michelagnolastri) ... Thus without being careful to carve [in sacred buildings] vases and sacrificial instruments and symbols of Christ ... he has had carved there bats’ wings and masklike fantasies of brutal and strange form, in the place of seraphim” (Ligorio Libro dell’antichità, vol. VI, c.1570; unpublished translation by John Shearman).

17 Politis 2006, 89.
21 According to Politis 2002, 153, Aristotle suggests a contrast between learning based on a series of questions and learning based on perception, and opposes intellectual knowledge versus sensory knowledge.
22 Bocchi a, 241, and Bocchi b, 263.
23 Nagel 2000 writes about slippages between pagan and religious figures; O’Malley 1986 discusses the ambiguity of the Sistine Chapel’s ignudi.
24 According to Summers 1980, 173, “stupore” refers to the phenomenon of art overwhelming sensory perception.
25 Varchi, Orazione funerale, 8; cited by Summers 1980, 172.
26 “Le mensole poscia, le quali nell’architettura sono usate per ornamento, & perché sono leggieri, no[n] possono sostener peso, come di colonne, & di pilastri, se bene si considera in questa fabbrica del Buonarrotto, sono degne (però che sono bellissime) di lode, & non di biasimo. Elle adornano il luogo, poste al diritto delle colonne, & non reggono alcun peso: posciaché le colonne si reggono in sul sodo del muro, come si vede, & le mensole sono di ornamento all’edifizio senza più” (Bocchi a, 284; the passage is discussed by Elam 2005b, 79–80; Williams 1998 places this passage within the larger context of Bocchi’s aesthetic ideals).
27 Bocchi a, 265.
28 Pirro Ligorio, Libro dell’antichità (c.1570, Archivio di Stato, Turin, m.s.j.a. iii, 10, vol. 8, fols. 157v–158r).
29 Summers 1972, 150–7, has argued persuasively that Michelangelo’s use of grotesques in the Medici Chapel provides a key to understanding much of what he sought to achieve architecturally. Yet, if Ligorio is correct, then one of the chief traits of Michelangelo’s use of grotesques is precisely that they had little or no specific meaning attached to them, and certainly not the original meaning which they had in antiquity.