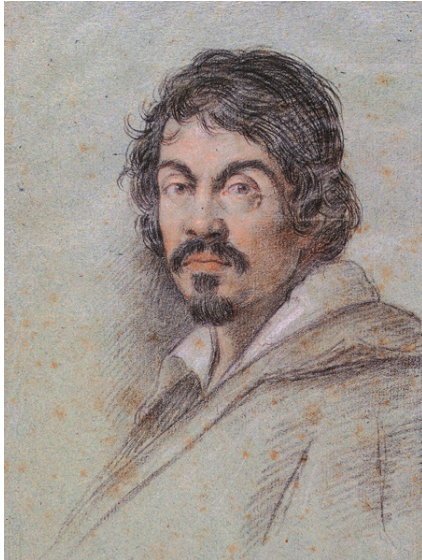


# Caravaggio: a contemporary view

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Once I was asked to name my favourite painter. I hesitated, searching for the least knowing, most truthful answer. 'Caravaggio'. There are nobler painters and painters of greater breadth of vision. There are painters I admire more and who are more admirable. But there is none, so it seems — for the answer came unpremeditated — to whom I feel closer.

The few canvases from my own incomparably modest life as a painter, which I would like to see again, are those I painted in the late '40s of the streets of Livorno. This city was then war-scarred and poor, and it was there that I first began to learn something about the ingenuity of the dispossessed. It was there too that I discovered that I wanted as little as possible to do in this world with those who wield power. This has turned out to be a life-long aversion.



Ottavio Leoni, Portrait of Caravaggio, c. 1621.

The complicity I feel with Caravaggio began, I think, during that time in Livorno. He was the first painter of life as experienced by the *popolaccio*, the people of the back streets, *les sans-culottes*, the *lumpenproletariat*, the lower orders, those of the lower depths, the underworld. Interestingly enough, there is no word in any traditional European language which does not either denigrate or patronise the urban poor it is naming. That is power.

Following Caravaggio up to the present day, other painters — Brower, Ostade, Hogarth, Goya, Gericault, Guttuso — have painted pictures of the same social milieu. But all of them — however great — were genre pictures, painted in order to show others how the less fortunate or the more dangerous lived. With Caravaggio, however, it was not a question of presenting scenes but of seeing itself. He does not depict the underworld for others: his vision is one that he shares with it.

In art-historical books Caravaggio is listed as one of the great innovating masters of chiaroscuro and a forerunner of the light and shade later used by Rembrandt and others. His vision can of course be considered art-historically as a

step in the evolution of European art. Within such a perspective a Caravaggio was almost inevitable, as a link between the high art of the counter-reformation and the domestic art of the emerging Dutch bourgeoisie, the form of this link being that of a new kind of space, defined by darkness as well as by light. (For Rome and for Amsterdam damnation had become an everyday affair).

For the Caravaggio who actually existed — for the boy called Michelangelo born in a village near Bergamo, not far from whence come my friends, the Italian woodcutters — light and shade, as he imagined and saw them, had a deeply personal meaning, inextricably entwined with his desires and his instinct for survival. And it is by this, not by any art-historical logic, that his art is linked with the underworld.

His chiaroscuro allowed him to banish daylight. Shadows, he felt, offered shelter as can four walls and a roof. Whatever and wherever he painted he really painted interiors. Sometimes — for 'The Flight into Egypt' or one of his beloved John the Baptists — he was obliged to include a landscape in the background. But these landscapes are like rugs or drapes hung up on a line

across an inner courtyard. He only felt at home — no, that he felt nowhere — he only felt relatively at ease inside.

His darkness smells of candles, over-ripe melons, damp washing waiting to be hung out the next day: it is the darkness of stairwells, gambling corners, cheap lodgings, sudden encounters. And the promise is not in what will flare against it, but in the darkness itself. The shelter it offers is only relative, for the chiaroscuro reveals violence, suffering, longing, mortality, but at least it reveals them intimately. What has been banished, along with the daylight, are distance and solitude — and both these are feared by the underworld.

Those who live precariously and are habitually crowded together develop a phobia about open spaces which transforms their frustrating lack of space and privacy into something reassuring. He shared those fears.



Michelangelo da Caravaggio, *The Calling of Saint Matthew*, 1599-1600

*The Calling of St. Matthew* depicts five men sitting round their usual table, telling stories, gossiping, boasting of what one day they will do, counting money. The room is dimly lit. Suddenly the door is flung open. The two figures who enter are still part of the violent noise and light of the invasion. (Berenson wrote that Christ comes in like a police inspector to make an arrest.)

Two of Matthew's colleagues refuse to look up, the other two younger ones stare at the strangers with a mixture of curiosity and condescension. Why is he proposing something so mad? Who's protecting him, the thin one who does all the talking? And Matthew, the tax-collector with a shifty



conscience which has made him more unreasonable than most of his colleagues, points at himself and asks: Is it really I who must go? Is it really I?

How many thousands of decisions to leave have resembled Christ's hand here! The hand is held out towards the one who has to decide, yet it is ungraspable because so fluid. It orders the way, yet offers no direct support. Matthew will get up and follow the thin stranger from the room, down the narrow streets, out of the district. He will write his gospel, he will travel to Ethiopia and the South Caspian and Persia. Probably he will be murdered.



And behind the drama of this moment of decision is a window, giving onto the outside world. In painting, up to then, windows were treated either as sources of light, or as frames framing nature or an exemplary event outside. Not so this window. No light enters. The window is opaque. We see nothing. Mercifully we see nothing because what is outside is threatening. It is a window through which only the worst news can come; distance and solitude.

Caravaggio was a heretical painter: his works were rejected or criticised by the church because of their subject-matter, although there were church figures who defended him. His heresy consisted of transposing religious themes into popular tragedies. The fact that for *The Death of the Virgin* he reputedly took as a model a drowned prostitute is only half the story: the more important half is that the dead woman is laid out as the poor lay out their dead, and the mourners mourn as the poor mourn. As the poor still mourn.

'There's no cemetery at Marinella or Selinunte, so when somebody dies we take him to the station and send him to Castelventrano. Then us fishermen stick together. We pay our respects to the stricken family. "He was a good man. It's a real loss, he had lots of good years ahead of him." Then we go off to tend to our business in the port, but we never stop talking about the deceased and for three whole days we don't go out to fish. And close relatives or friends feed the mourners' families for at least a week.' [*Sicilian Lives* by Danilo Dolci. Writers and Readers. London, 1982. p. 209.]

Other Mannerist painters of the period produced turbulent crowd-scenes but their spirit was very different; a crowd was seen as a sign of calamity — like fire or flood — and the mood was of terrestrial damnation. The spectator observed, from a privileged position, a cosmic theatre. By

contrast, Caravaggio's congested canvases are simply made up of individuals living cheek by jowl, co-existing in a confined space.

The underworld is full of theatre, but one that has nothing to do with either cosmic effects or ruling class entertainment. In the daily theatre of the underworld everything is close-to and emphatic. What is being 'played' may any moment become 'for real'. There is no protective space and no hierarchical focus of interest. Caravaggio was continually being criticised for exactly this — the lack of discrimination in his paintings, their overall intensity, their lack of a proper distance.

The underworld displays itself in hiding. This is the paradox of its social atmosphere and the expression of one of its deepest needs. It has its own heroes and villains, its own honour and dishonour, and these are celebrated by legends, stories, daily performances. The latter are often somewhat like rehearsals for real exploits. They are scenes, created on the spur of the moment, in which people play themselves, pushed to the limit. If these 'performances' did not take place, the alternative moral code and honour of the underworld would be in danger of being forgotten — or, to put it better, the negative judgement, the opprobrium of the surrounding society would advance apace.

The underworld's survival (and pride) depends upon theatre, a theatre where everyone is flamboyantly playing and proving himself, and yet where an individual's survival may well depend on his lying low or his not being seen. The consequent tension produces a special kind of expressive urgency in which gestures fill all the space available, in which a gesture may be expressed by a glance. This amounts to another kind of overcrowding, another kind of density.

Caravaggio is the painter of the underworld, and he is also the exceptional and profound painter of sexual desire. Some critic somewhere accused me of impertinence towards Caravaggio's homosexuality. Whoever he was, he was very mistaken. It is precisely there that my admiration for Caravaggio begins. Beside him most heterosexual painters look like pimps undressing their 'ideals' for the spectator. He, though, had eyes only for the desired.

Desire may change its character by 180 degrees. Often, when first around, it is felt as the desire to have. The desire to touch is, partly, the desire to lay hands on, to take. Later, transformed, the same desire becomes a desire to be taken, to lose oneself within the desired. From these two opposed moments come one of the dialectics of desire; both moments apply to both sexes and they oscillate. Clearly the second moment, the desire to lose oneself within, is the most abandoned, the most desperate, and it is the one that Caravaggio chose (or was compelled) to reveal in many of his paintings.

The gestures of his figures are sometimes — given the nominal subject matter — ambiguously sexual. A six year old child fingers the Madonna's bodice; the Madonna's hand invisibly caresses his thigh under his shirt. An angel strokes the back of St. Matthew's evangelical hand like a prostitute with an elderly client. A young St. John the Baptist holds the foreleg of a sheep between his legs as if it were a penis.

Almost every act of touching which Caravaggio painted has a sexual charge. Even when two different substances (fur and skin, rags and hair, metal and blood) come into contact with one another, their contact becomes an act of touching. In his painting of a young boy as Cupid, the feather of one of the boy's wing-tips touches his own upper thigh with a lover's precision. That the boy can control his reaction, that he does not allow himself to quiver in response, is part of his deliberate elusiveness, of his half-mocking, half-acknowledging practice as a seducer. I think of the marvellous Greek poet — Carafy:

For a month we loved each other  
Then we went away, I think to Smyrna,  
To work there' we never saw each other again.

The grey eyes — if he lives — have lost their beauty;  
The beautiful face will have been spoiled.

O Memory, preserve them as they were  
And, Memory, all you can of this love of mine  
Whatever you can bring back to me tonight.



Michelangelo da Caravaggio, Boy Bitten by a Lizard, c. 1594

There is a special facial expression which, painted, exists only in Caravaggio. It is the expression on Judith's face in *Judith and Holofernes*, on the boy's face in the *Boy Being Bitten by a Lizard*, on Narcissus's face as he gazes into the water, on David's as he holds up the head of Goliath by the giant's hair. It is an expression of closed concentration and openness, of force and vulnerability, of determination and pity. Yet all those words are too ethical. I have seen a not dissimilar expression on the face of animals — before mating and before a kill.

To think of it in sado-masochistic terms would be absurd. It goes deeper than any personal predilection. If it vacillates, this expression, between pleasure and pain, passion and reluctance, it is because such a dichotomy is inherent in sexual experience itself. Sexuality is the result of an original unity being destroyed, of separation. And, in this world as it is, sexuality promises, as nothing else can, momentary completion. It touches a love to oppose the original cruelty.

The faces he painted are illuminated by that knowledge, deep as a wound. They are the faces of the fallen — and they offer themselves to desire with a truthfulness which only the fallen know to exist.

In Caravaggio's art, as you would expect, there is no property. A few tools and recipients, chairs and a table. And so around his figures there is little of interest. A body flares with light in an interior of darkness. The surroundings — the world outside the window — can be forgotten. Only the worst news can come from there. The desired body disclosed in the darkness — which is not a question of the time of day or night but of life as it is on this planet — the desired body, disclosed like an apparition, beckons beyond, not by provocative gesture but by the undisguised fact of its own sentience, promising the universe lying on the far side of that skin, calling you to leave.