
Rudolf Preimesberger

PARAGONS^{AND} PARAGONE

Van Eyck

Raphael

Michelangelo

Caravaggio

Bernini

The work that does not have its equal in all of art history...^{*}
 —Wolfgang Iser, 1906

Pittura Gobba: Conjectures on Caravaggio's Entombment

The smallest figure in the background of *The Martyrdom of Saint Matthew* (figs. 1, 2), painted by Caravaggio for the Contarelli Chapel in the Church of San Luigi dei Francesi in Rome,¹ and a *res mala*, or tragedy—*kat exochēn*—shows the painter himself.² He is with a bad crowd, fleeing with the murderers of the apostle.

This act of ironic self-condemnation—not isolated in his work—is not the whole truth of the figure. This figure is morally ambivalent. To achieve the peripeteia of a psychic drama, Caravaggio seems to follow the old paradigm of the invisible *emozioni dell'anima* being the same as the visible *mozioni del corpo*. He seems to be deploying at least three of the classical means and methods to express inner emotions through the medium of the figure's own body: *habitus*, *vultus*, and *gestus*.

Habitus: the paradox of a figure that is running away but, glancing back over his shoulder, suddenly stops and, thus, is motionless in a double sense. *Vultus*: Caravaggio's face looking back at the mortally wounded saint shows the clear expression of *dolore*, transformed into the expression of pity through the context of the painting. *Gestus*: the left hand, at first sight spontaneously stretched out, in reality shows the highly conventionalized gesture of pity. *Commiserationem denotat* is the caption for this hand movement in the table of gestures illustrated in John Bulwer's *Chirologia* (see Raphael essay here, fig. 5).³

Pity and fear are the two well-known Aristotelian categories connected with tragedy.⁴ But in the drama of seventeen interacting figures, the painter in the background is the only one who shows the moral *affetto* of pity. While the other positive figures show *terrore*, or fear, he is the only one reflecting the drama morally, the only one showing a total *cambiamento di fortuna*, in other words: a peripeteia of his own fate by a sudden cognition or recognition, an *anagnorisis ek peripeteias*, as Aristotle says in his *Poetics*.⁵

FIG. 1

Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio
 (Italian, 1571–1610)
The Martyrdom of Saint Matthew,
 1599–1600, oil on canvas,
 323 x 343 cm (127¼ x 135⅞ in.)
 Rome, Church of San Luigi
 dei Francesi

FIG. 2

Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio
 (Italian, 1571–1610)
 Self-portrait (detail of fig. 1)

^{*} "Das Werk, das seinesgleichen in der ganzen Kunstgeschichte nicht hat..."

FIG. 3

Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio
(Italian, 1571–1610)
Entombment, 1603–1604,
oil on canvas, 300 x 203 cm
(118 1/8 x 80 in.)
Vatican City, Musei Vaticani,
Pinacoteca, inv. 40386

As a counterpart to the viewer in front of the painting, Caravaggio is the only figure from the other side looking at the action he himself has created; the only one who, in his broad and moonlike face, reflects and mediates the action to the spectator outside the painting. In other words: the painter is the only moral authority in his work and regarding his own work.

Comparable to his ironic self-portrait in the role of Malchus, the slave of the high priest with the lantern that Caravaggio inserted into his *Betrayal of Christ* in Dublin⁶—thus producing the effect of a “double delight in imitation,” well known from the contemporary discussion of Aristotle’s *Poetics*⁷—this figure can serve as a starting point for the following conjectures on Caravaggio’s *Entombment*. A Seicento definition of *conjecture*, taken from Micraelius 1662, can serve as their motto: “Conjecture is mid-way between scholarship and ignorance: as an intellectual habit it is imperfect.”⁸

I.

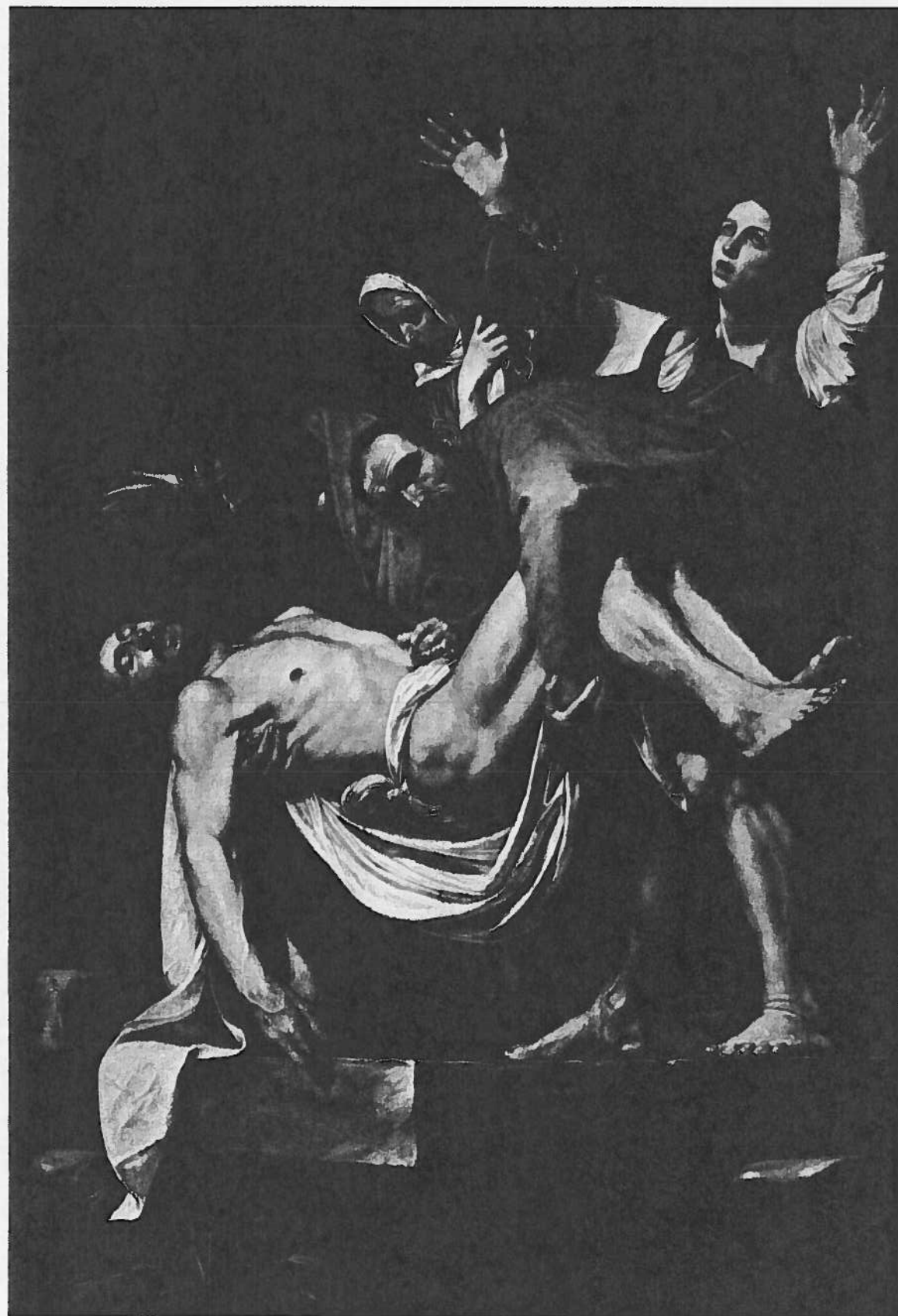
Caravaggio’s *Entombment* (fig. 3), in the Pinacoteca Vaticana, was painted in competition with Federico Barocci, Scipione Pulzone, and others as an altarpiece for one of the most public spaces in Rome, the Chiesa Nuova⁹ on the Via Papalis, the procession road from Saint Peter’s Basilica (home of Michelangelo’s *Pietà*) to the Church of San Giovanni in Laterano. The painting was taken to Paris in 1797 and restored there in a more than problematic manner. It was damaged in the areas of the head of Saint John, the body of Christ, and the legs of Nicodemus. The painting was overpainted in several places, and a yellowish varnish was added. In 1815 the painting was returned to the papal government. Since the restoration in the Pinacoteca Vaticana of 1982, some important details, namely the entrance to the tomb at the left side and the symbolic fig tree in the upper part, have again become visible. X-ray images have shown pentimenti in the clothing of Mary Magdalene and the feet of Christ.

The painting has been the object of much scholarly attention.¹⁰ One question, however, remains: the most striking figure in it is a hunchback. Why? Why the artistic demonstration of bodily *deformitas*? Why, here, the only Nicodemus with a hunchback in Christian iconography?

At this point I would like to propose two conjectures. The first: unlike Michelangelo, who in his self-ironic poem uses the word *scigno* for the hunched back he developed while painting the Sistine ceiling, Caravaggio would have used the common Italian terms *gobba* for hunchback and *fare la gobba* for hard work, and he might well have used the polysemic but negative *gobbo* for his figure of Nicodemus.¹¹

Paolo Pino would have called it “una figura tutta sforciata, misteriosa e difficile,”¹² with the figure being disturbing enough for Peter Paul Rubens to eliminate its deformity and ambiguity in his free copy in Ottawa (see fig. 9)—the paradigm of an “eristic imitation”—which transforms Caravaggio’s iconic and fragmentary work, with its attempt to synthesize the *virtù* of painting and sculpture, into the unified, complete, and logical sequence of a normal history painting, or *istoria*, with a beginning and an end.¹³

My second conjecture: Caravaggio’s painting has to do with the corpus of European artistic biography since antiquity. It has to do with the long shadows of Apelles



and Michelangelo, with Apelles' and Michelangelo's anecdotes, and anecdotes *avant la lettre*—the "primitive cell of biography" in the words of Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz¹⁴—transmitted to artists through Italian translations of Pliny, in the work of Vasari and others, and in the stream of oral tradition and conversation.

The first narration is taken from Pliny.¹⁵ Its doubtlessly Greek source goes back to the beginnings of the genre of "artist's biography" and to a particular moment in the development and flowering of Greek art theory. And if I am not wholly mistaken, it even reflects an otherwise little-known and only indirectly inferable competitive relationship between painting and sculpture, a "paragone avant la lettre" in the fourth century B.C.¹⁶

The story in question is one of the most famous anecdotal narratives in the entire history of artists' biographies; we can do no more than speculate on the extent of its oral and written circulation. Since the printing of translations of Pliny's writings, such as that by Cristoforo Landino, Italian readers also had access to this story.¹⁷ It tells of the cunning with which Apelles, the greatest painter of antiquity, succeeded in concealing a bodily defect in the figure of his high-ranking sitter—King Antigonos, who had only one eye—without compromising the truth of his portrait. The anecdote is pithy, even epigrammatic, in its brevity:

1. "He [Apelles] also painted an image of King Antigonos who was blind in one eye"—"pinxit et Antigoni regis imaginem altero lumine orbat, "¹⁸ or, in Cristoforo Landino's Italian translation, which was used in Cinquecento and Seicento Italy: "Dipinse ancora la imagine d'Antigono Re cieco da uno occhio."¹⁹
2. "and devised an original method of concealing the defect"—"primus excogitata ratione vitia condendi." Landino—omitting the words and notions of *excogitare* and *ratio*—translates this very succinctly as "& p(er) occultare el vitio."
3. "for he did it in 'three-quarter'"—"obliquam namque fecit." Landino: "la fece obliqua."

First, this defect in King Antigonos, who was called Monophthalmos or Cyclops, constitutes a special problem of *decorum*: both the artistic and social decorum of how to represent a public figure.²⁰ Second, the three-quarter image, *obliqua imago*, was not a portrait in profile, but, on the basis of the meaning of the Greek term *katagrapha*, it has been shown that it must have been foreshortened; moreover, the meaning of *obliquus* has negative connotations, such as "not straightforward," "indirect," and "obscure," with "obliquity" being a "deviation from moral rectitude or sound thinking."²¹

Two interpretations have been connected with this narrative. In his *Institutio oratoria*, Quintilian provides the most important testimony for the first interpretation when he tells us that, by concealing the physical defect of his model to preserve the sitter's dignity, Apelles offered an example of *decorum* for the good rhetorician.²² The method of concealment recommended here is that of holding back knowledge and pretending ignorance, the technique of *dissimulatio*.²³

But this is not the whole truth. The second line of Pliny's text touches on the art-theoretical content and meaning underlying the story. Faced with his noble model's undeniable defect, Apelles paints his *imago* foreshortened: not only for reasons of *decorum*, but "in order to make it appear that what is a deficiency of the body is, rather, a deficiency of the art of painting"—"ut, quod deerat corpori, picturae deesse potius

videretur,"²⁴ or, in Landino's words, "accioché q(ue)l che ma(n)cava al corpo paressi più tosto che ma(n)cassi alla pictura."²⁵

By means of classical irony and of the sophistic strategy of making the weaker argument the stronger one, the unknown Greek author here celebrates the fundamentally deficient essence of painting, on the one hand, and its triumph over the limitations of its own medium, on the other. Apelles underlines the weakness of painting and, as a result, playfully denigrates himself by means of understatement.²⁶

What was the aim of Apelles' understatement? As always in classical rhetoric, irony is an expression of superiority. By emphasizing the fundamental weakness of his own art, the Apelles of the unknown Greek source turns this into a major forte. He even turns its foible, the "vice," or *vizio*, of being bound to the flat plane and of being able to show just one aspect of the king, into a "virtue"—whereas sculpture, which cannot help but show the body from all sides, that is, with all its defects, cannot ironically use the limitations of its own medium to take advantage of the benefits of dissimulation.

Needless to say, the unknown Greek author's sophisticated reasoning concerning the limits and the advantages of painting presupposes a reasoning about painting and sculpture that has long since reached the clarity of abstract terms.

What are the historical implications of Apelles' understatement? The text reflects the effective existence of a *paragone* between painting and sculpture in the early Hellenistic or even as early as the late Classical period of Greek antiquity, whose main arguments, looking at Pliny's text, are easily deduced.

Two antagonistic concepts of mimesis²⁷ are opposed to each other here: the truth of substantial and tangible sculpture, which—in Renaissance terms—"shows what is," as opposed to the two dimensions of utterly false painting, which shows "that which is not"—*quel che non è, sia*.²⁸ In this *agon* of antiquity, painting, by its greater *ingenium*,²⁹ seems to have been the winner, as it would be again in the *paragone* of early modern times.

Who would have been the audience for Apelles' ironic visual strategy? Not the deceived, but the knowing viewer, he who knows the reality of the other side of the king. He alone recognizes the ironic dissimulation. He alone recognizes the painter's use of irony as a weapon in the dialectic contest with sculpture. He alone discerns and admires the painter's goal: a demonstration of the supremacy of the art of painting.

There were two kinds of responses to the story in early modern times. Leon Battista Alberti reduced it to the notion of *decorum*.³⁰ Like his numerous followers, he did not take up the art-theoretical nucleus of the argument. As far as I know, Benedetto Varchi, in his famous *Due lezioni* on Michelangelo and the *paragone* of 1548, is the only one who did: "Many praised the prudence of Apelles, who, when having to make a portrait of Antigonus, who was blind in one eye, gave such a position to the figure that it hid that eye, so no one could see it, and this is something a sculptor would not have been

FIG. 4

Michelangelo Buonarroti
(Italian, 1475–1564)
Pietà, 1498–99, marble,
height 175 cm (69 in.)
Vatican City, Saint Peter's Basilica

able to do in a three-dimensional work."³¹ Only the last sentence in Varchi's argument explicitly designates the subject matter that is implicit in the narrative delivered by Pliny: the contest between painting and sculpture. Unlike Alberti, Varchi makes a point of the fact that, by ingeniously turning painting's *vitium*—its confinement to just two dimensions—into a *virtus*, Apelles at the same time triumphed over sculpture.³²

What does all this have to do with Caravaggio's painting?

II.

At this point we should turn our attention to a second story. It is anonymous and in two parts. It is critical, subversive in its second part, and—at least at first sight—an example of a "counternarrative from below." The first part of the story is anecdotal in its structure, while the second part has more in common with a farce, or *facetia*. When the story was first committed to paper, in early 1564, from sources unknown to us,³³ it is likely to have been recognized as a *facetia*.³⁴

The story tells of the greatest artist of the postclassical era, who had long been granted the accolade of *divino*, yet it takes a critical approach to him. The action takes place in Saint Peter's in Rome, albeit on its margins. It takes place in spaces belonging to the old basilica—at the time when the story was told, long since demolished or about to be demolished. The story concerns one of the masterpieces of postclassical sculpture, Michelangelo's *Pietà*,³⁵ but it is focused on two major offenses of the artist. It deals, on the one hand, with his signature, provocatively large, but placed to appear "incomplete," and, on the other hand, with its counterpart, Christ's side wound, small and almost invisible. These misdemeanors are the springboard for the story, which skillfully intertwines two separate narratives. Both serve to explain Michelangelo's misdemeanors, albeit in very different ways.

Michelangelo's early *Pietà* (fig. 4) is the only sculpture that bears his signature (fig. 5), provocatively large and in a provocative location.³⁶ Deliberately flouting conventional propriety, it is placed between the Virgin's breasts. Little wonder that in his first version of a biography of Michelangelo, the *Torrentina* of 1550, Giorgio Vasari felt obliged to explain why the artist should have chosen to add such a striking signature to this work in particular: "The love he had for this work, together with the effort he had put into it, made Michelangelo do what he never did again in any other work: he left his name written on a sash encircling the bosom of Our Lady."³⁷

Amore, fatica, soddisfazione—love, effort, and a sense of satisfaction at his own work are the *raison d'être* of the signature, according to Vasari. *Amore*: Vasari alludes here to the common expression *fatto con amore*—although this was usually applied to paintings—to express that it was not a single detail or a single figure but the whole group that was made with the greatest devotion and skill. By contrast, *fatica*—associated with the specifically sculptural notion of *effort*—is reminiscent of a famous bone of contention between sculpture and painting. But the implication here cannot be merely the variously regarded *fatica di corpo*, the greater physical effort required of the sculptor at work, but rather the greater intellectual effort of the sculptor, his *fatica d'ingegno*, in other words, the effort of recognizing the potential image locked in the stone, of retaining it throughout the lengthy genesis of the work, and of liberating it without striking a single blow in error. This, then, has to serve as the reason not

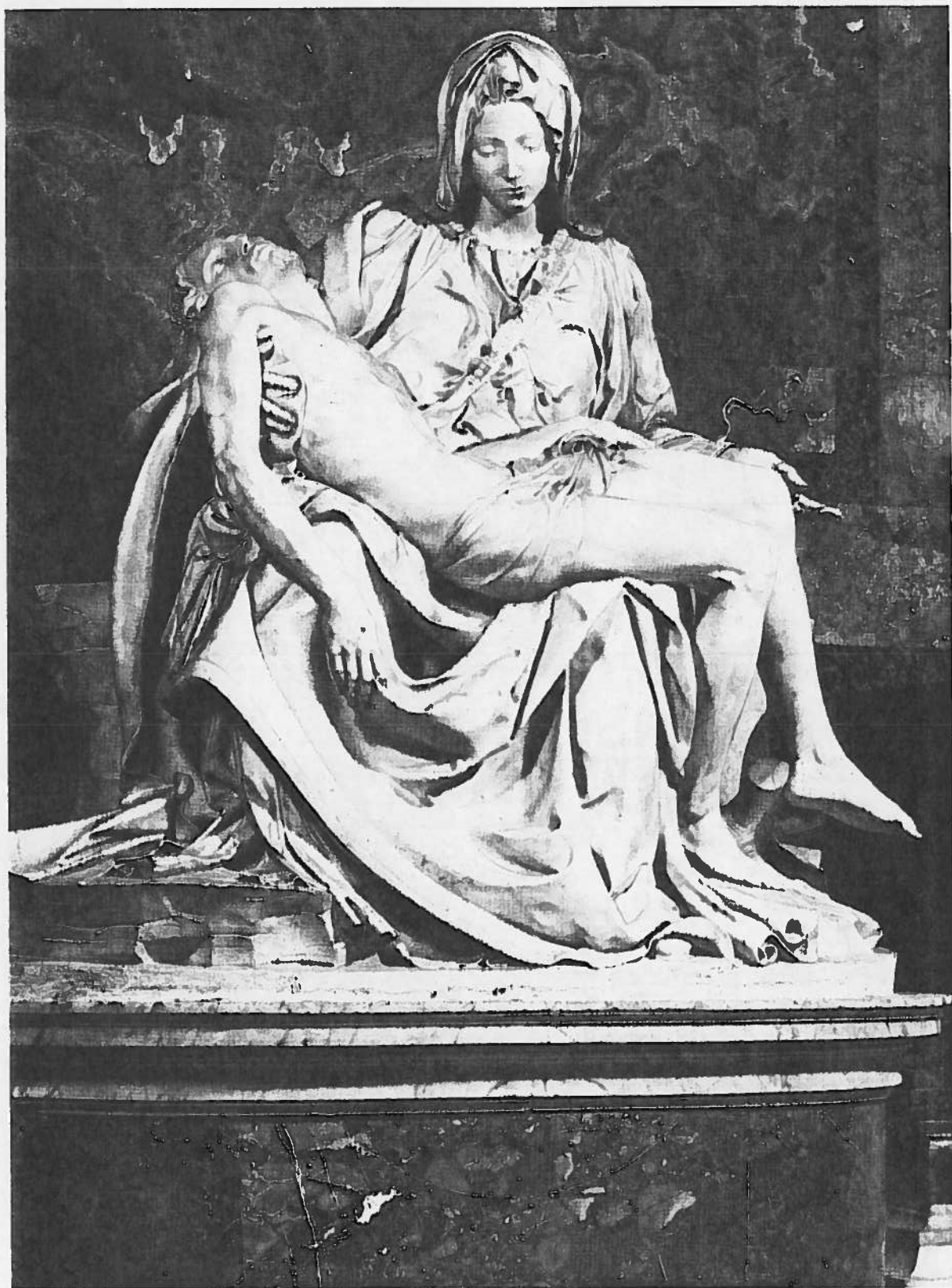




FIG. 5

Michelangelo Buonarroti
(Italian, 1475–1564)

Michelangelo's signature on the
Pietà (detail of fig. 4)

only for the strange and surprising fact that Michelangelo, for the first and last time in his life, signed a sculptural work but also that he should have done it in such a striking manner.³⁸

Michelangelo violates the "natural decorum" of his group by introducing an anachronistic attribute.³⁹ Mary's "sash," whereon he inscribes his signature, is a *cinghia*, or set of leading strings for a child,⁴⁰ underlining the humanity of Christ, but in terms of His childhood, not His Passion. By writing his own name on the leading strings, which in Vasari's words "encircl[e] the bosom of Our Lady," Michelangelo gives this motif of devotion an unusual intimacy. And since the material he portrays appears to be leather, this attribute shares the broader semantics of the Italian word: it alludes to the *cinghia* that serves not only to guide a child's first faltering steps but also to control horses and other animals.⁴¹

This is not the place to pursue further the immense amplification of possible meanings as a result of the fact that Michelangelo, together with his name, inscribes "himself" into the Virgin *cinghia*. However, of one thing there can be no doubt: in terms of artistic technique, this is an example of Michelangelo's love of paradox, the *paradoxon schema* of rhetoric, whose very nature involves upsetting, even shocking, the public's expectations, judgment, and sensitivities by aggressively inverting the natural order of things.⁴²

This is not the only paradox in this work. On the contrary! A matter that has attracted attention from the first moment and is even famous is the underlying paradox of this sculpture that concerns, not an attribute, but its very substance, namely the two figures: the Virgin Mary, a young woman, is shown holding her thirty-three-year-old son in her lap. A mother younger than her child! This, in fact, was to be the famous main critical objection to the group. With the genuine means of his art of

sculpture, that is, the two bodies, Michelangelo reveals the very core of the notion of Redemption, which is in itself a paradox: the Incarnation of the Lord through the Virgin Mary, as expressed paradoxically in the famous verses of the thirty-third canto of Dante's *Paradiso*: "Thou Virgin Mother, daughter of thy Son" (Vergine madre, figlia del tuo figlio).⁴³

The wording of the signature, as is well known, has an obvious tinge of irony: "MICHELA[N]GELUS BONAROTUS FLOR[ENTINUS] FACIEBA[T]." Rather than choosing the perfect-tense *fecit*—"Michelangelo Buonarroti, the Florentine, made this" or "perfectly made this"—he instead uses the modest, imperfect-tense *faciebat*, suggesting something short of perfection, not "he has finished and perfected it," but rather "he made it imperfectly," or, with even greater humility, "Michelangelo Buonarroti, the Florentine, worked on this." It is known that, by wording his signature in this manner, he was imitating Lysippus and Apelles, who had signed their names thus: proudly modest. The most important technique of classical irony, applied with such mastery by Socrates, the ironic par excellence—feigning ignorance, yet knowing everything—comes to light here: self-deprecation, superior understatement.⁴⁴

Unlike Socrates, with whom he would later be compared, Michelangelo not only uses language to express the notion of something short of perfection. He has also ingeniously integrated that deficiency into the sight of the signature, in that the imperfect-tense *faciebat* is itself "imperfect," it is incomplete, for the last letter, *t*, is not entirely visible but partly concealed by the Madonna's cloak.⁴⁵

This more-than-willful signature of Michelangelo's was to preoccupy and perplex his contemporaries and future generations alike. It was provocative enough to become the trigger for the above-mentioned anonymous story in two parts that has features of both an anecdote and a *facetia* and that seeks to interpret both the existence of the signature and its epigraphic oddity.

There are no indications as to the time of the first appearance of this two-part story, but its *terminus post quem* is 1499/1500 and its *terminus ante quem* early 1564. However, there is no doubt that, in their own way, both parts of this fictive narrative have a place in the expansive terrain of Michelangelo criticism. And there is no doubt that the story owes not only its fame but also its survival to Giorgio Vasari, who included it in the second edition of his *Lives of the Artists*. Nor can there be any doubt that Vasari fundamentally falsified the story by recounting only the first, defensive, self-justifying part of the story while making no mention at all of its second, critically subversive part.

Just one written source contains the full story. When Giorgio Vasari was preparing the second edition of his artists' biographies—which was published in 1568 as the *Giuntina*—and was collecting additional information on Michelangelo,⁴⁶ he received, in early 1564, a letter with its writer's recollections of the recently deceased artist. This letter has survived only as a copy, without an address or the sender's name, but it seems to have been written by a member of Michelangelo's own circle—possibly by Michele degli Alberti or Michelangelo's onetime servant Antonio del Francesco—but the content of the other *ricordi* contained in the letter and the use of the first person singular appear to point to Daniele da Volterra. The letter itself was found among papers belonging to Vincenzo Borghini, who is known to have worked with Vasari on the *Giuntina*.⁴⁷ Yet the mode of address, "Vostra Signoria," suggests that it was written to Vasari, and not to the clergyman Borghini.

The opening phrase explicitly states the letter's intention: recollections of Michelangelo. It reads: "I am writing these few memories, as You ordered me to do, though

with the reservation that You will pick out of the thorns the rose, which will be the truth, and this [will be] in the things that You will judge to be worthy of mention."

This is followed by the first *ricordo*, the two-part story of the *Pietà* in Saint Peter's:

And so I say: After he had made the *Pietà* of the Fever, large groups of people came to see it, and one day he happened to be there again, when someone said: "Who made this work?" And another responded: "It was made by our little hunchback from Parina." And he stood silent; but the following night he snuck into the church with a little light and some chisels and wrote those letters [the signature].⁴⁸

End of part one! Evidently this is not just a tale of wounded artistic pride. It is also a drama of an individual's identity in danger. Michelangelo had a deformed, provincial doppelgänger, a *gobbo* from Lombardy, who was threatening to steal his fame.

The fictitious story does not stop here. Its pointed conclusion generates a second narrative, whose protagonist now is no longer the artist. In this, a new character appears in the shape of a *murata*, that is, one of the nuns who lived in the strictest seclusion in adjoining rooms of the basilica—in effect "walled in" and therefore called *le murate di San Pietro*—who received food and Holy Communion through windows.

While not being able to see the *Pietà*, the *murata* in this case hears all the better, which leads her to two false conclusions:

And in one of the opposite rooms stood a *murata*, and, believing that it was someone who wished to ruin this image, she wanted to cry out; but when she realized the truth, she thanked him very much for having made such a beautiful group. And she begged him to give her a little from the wound in the side of our Lord. And he, moved by such devotion, removed a certain amount of chips with a little dust and gave it to her; then, in order to thank him, she made him an omelet, and he ate it in that very place that same night.

End of the second action. There follows the concluding sentence, which returns to the opening of the story, connecting the two parts and also providing the justification for the whole story: "And this was the reason that he wrote these letters, which one can truly see have been made at night, almost in darkness, for they are not complete."⁴⁹ So far the two-part narrative! I can only superficially touch on a few aspects of it.

"After he had made the *Pietà* of the Fever..." Like many other things in Rome, Michelangelo's *Pietà* was a "wandering stone." Its designation as the *Pietà della febbre* refers not to its original location but to its second one, where the writer of the letter would have been able to see it in 1564. Commissioned by French crown cardinal Jean de Bilheres Lagrulas and completed in 1499/1500, the finished work stood for only a few years in the Cappella del Re di Francia (fig. 6), a late classical rotunda built onto the south nave of old Saint Peter's in 390–95 as an imperial mausoleum and known since the eighth century as the Capella Regis Francorum. Here, too, the remains of Saint Peter's legendary daughter Petronilla were buried.⁵⁰

According to the logic of the story, which is a story of origin, the events would have taken place in this space, which was the group's first location. However, in 1564, when the story was committed to paper, the Cappella del Re di Francia had long been demolished. It had been replaced by the new Saint Peter's, which—with building work

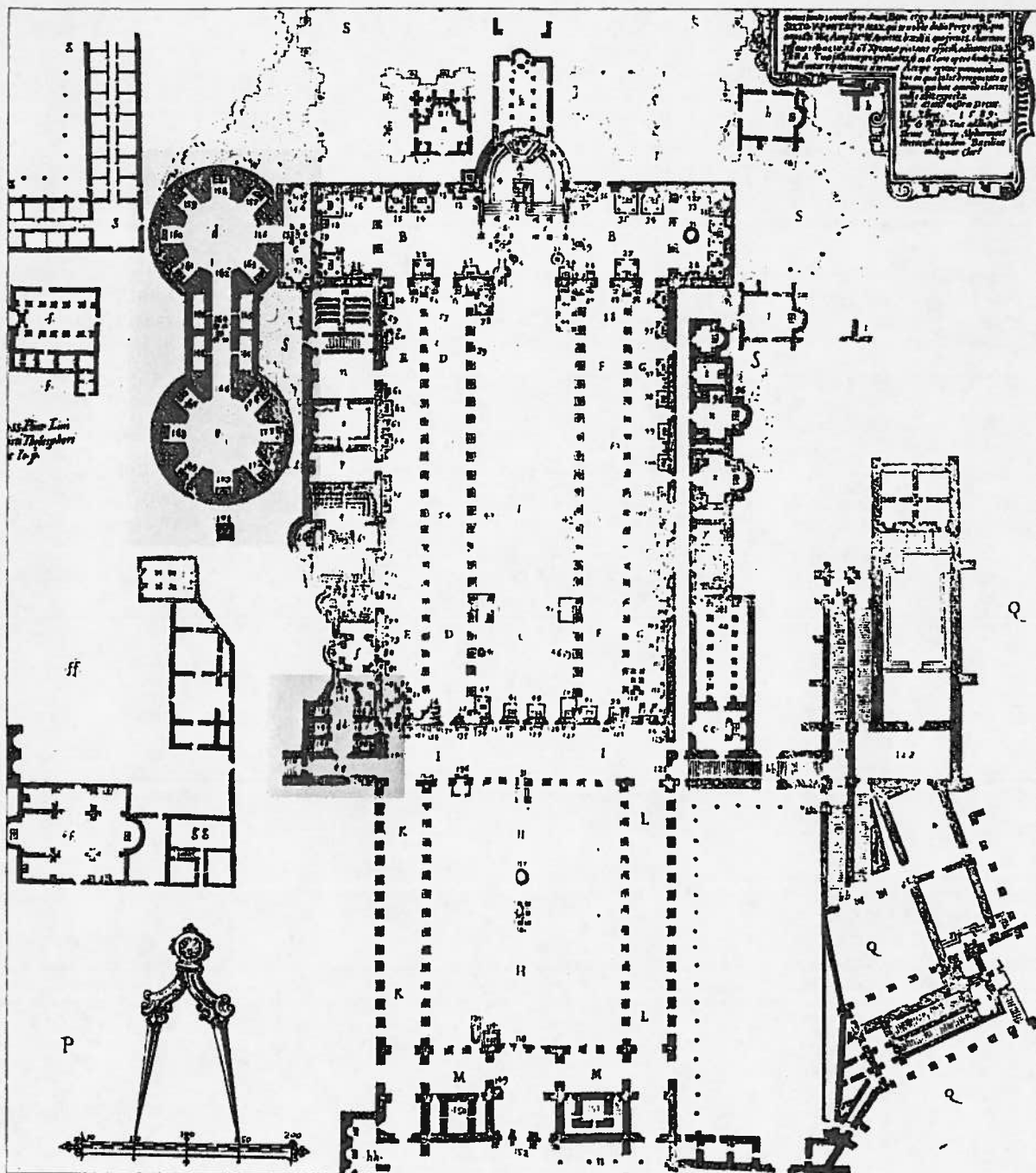


FIG. 6

Tiberio Alfarano (Italian, fl. 1571–90)

Groundplan of Old Saint Peter's Basilica, detail of the Cappella del Re di Francia [d], the first location of the *Pietà*, and the adjacent side rooms and the old sacristy, or Sant'Andrea [e], where the venerated image of Mary of the Fever originally was displayed. Chapels of Santa Petronilla and Santa Maria della febbre, 1589/90. From Tiberio Alfarano, *De basilicae vaticanae antiquissima et nova structura* (Rome: Tipografia Poliglotta Vaticana, 1914 [1981 printing])

FIG. 7

Tiberio Alfarano (Italian, fl. 1571–90)

Groundplan of Old Saint Peter's Basilica, detail of the Secretarium of Gregor the Great, also called Santa Maria della febbre, the second location of the *Pietà* [dd, ee, and s], 1589/90 (see fig. 6)

having started in 1506—had involved large-scale demolition. At some time unknown to us but probably shortly after 1506/7, Michelangelo's group was moved into the Secretarium of Gregor the Great, a chapel at the southeast corner of the old basilica, which one entered from its narthex (fig. 7).

A much-visited Marian image of grace from the fourteenth century, *Mary of the Fever*, or *Santa Maria della febbre*, had been taken from the second rotunda on the south side (see fig. 6)—which served as a sacristy and remained intact until the eighteenth century—and placed on the high altar of the Secretarium of Gregor the Great. From then until it was demolished in 1606 to make way for Carlo Maderna's facade, the Secretarium was referred to almost exclusively by the name of the painting *Santa Maria della febbre*, or simply as *la febbre*, which epithet was added also to Michelangelo's *Pietà*.⁵¹ Fra Mariano da Firenze was the first to record its presence in writing. At some point between 1516 and December 1517, he saw it there along with the sarcophagus of Saint Petronilla. This was the second station of its wanderings.

"...large groups of people came to see it, and one day he happened to be there again." In these lines it is clear that the story has the hallmarks of the genre that would later be called anecdote, a short and often anonymous account of a historical event of minor importance but great significance that ends with a factual or linguistic point. An anecdote characteristically falls into three sections: first the *occasio*, followed by the *provocatio*, and finally the concluding point in the form of either a *dictum* or a *factum*.⁵²

The *occasio* of a conventional anecdote is brief. It is trivial. It alludes to and relies on the listener's or the reader's previous knowledge—all features of the beginning of this story: the artist Michelangelo, unrecognized, in the midst of the audience and in front of his own work! Reference has quite rightly been made in this connection to his Classical forerunner "Apelles latens post tabulam," that is, Apelles hiding behind his own painting. The story goes that the greatest painter of the ancient world displayed his work in an alley and hid behind it to eavesdrop on the comments of the passersby. He heard a cobbler remarking that the sandal was not well painted, so Apelles proceeded to correct the offending item. When the cobbler came back the next day and started to criticize the leg, Apelles stepped out from his hiding place and chided his incompetent critic with a comment that has gone down in history as "Let the cobbler stick to his last."⁵³

However, our story does not merely copy the ancient prototype. Only the *occasio* is similar—the artist unrecognized or unseen by his public. But it does not copy the continuation or the conclusion, not its *provocatio*, and certainly not the final point. Thus it is worth asking whether an equally famous but very differently weighted prototype—the wounded artistic pride of the sculptor—may not be more closely related to the Michelangelo anecdote. This is the story of the fame and immortality denied to Phidias, reported by Plutarch, Cicero, and Dio Chrysostom; the story of the greatest sculptor of antiquity, who was prevented from signing his statue of Athena Parthenos, and who instead carved his own self-portrait into the shield of the virgin, half-hidden, it is true, but taking cunning revenge on those who would deny him fame and immortality by devising a structure that would collapse in on itself if anyone should try to remove the signature in the form of a crypto-portrait.⁵⁴

The second part of the conventional anecdote is the *provocatio*. This typically takes the form of a question arising out of the situation established in the *occasio*.⁵⁵ This applies in the case of our story. For when someone looking at Michelangelo's *Pietà*

asks, "Who made this work?," the answer reveals that the speaker is from Lombardy, a local patriot, yet one scornful of the fact that the sculpture was made by "our little hunchback from Parina."

Gob(b)etto, the little hunchback, was the nickname of the sculptor Cristoforo Solari (ca. 1460–1527) from Angera on Lake Maggiore. The term *gobbo*, which carries socially and artistically negative connotations, was used for other artists, too, not just to express their deformity and dwarflike appearance. A *gobbo*, whose sight since antiquity was usually taken as an ill omen, was a symbol not only of ugliness but also of ambiguous morals.⁵⁶

The third and final part of the conventional anecdote is the conclusion with its point.⁵⁷ Once again our story fits the standard pattern: "And he stood silent, but the following night he snuck into the church with a little light and some chisels and wrote those letters."

The artist's riposte to the public's *provocatio* is silence and silent action, in other words, a *factum*. The underlying *topos* is readily recognizable: the artist should let his work do the talking! Yet, it is hard to overlook the fact that the imagined nocturnal carving of the signature might not reflect a widely known, real feature of Michelangelo's life, namely his habit of working through the night, for which he used to don a cap with a goat-tallow candle attached to it that gave him sufficient light to work by while leaving both his hands free. But what may also come to light here is the link with the *topos* of the *amica obscuritas*, the connection between the darkness of the night hours and the creativity of the lonely genius.

Here, too, the artifice of the story is evident. On a technical level, the conclusion with the nocturnal carving of the signature is highly sophisticated. For it combines both types of point: it is both *factum* and *dictum*. The sculptor's action may be silent but it is not wordless, for while his signature may be only incised, it is as eloquent as any *dictum*. Unlike Phidias before him, Michelangelo does not add a nameless, voiceless crypto-portrait of himself, recognizable only by those who knew how he looked in real life: his signature speaks also to those who read it, its letters cut through the silence of visual expression. They can and should be read out loud: "Michelangelo, the Florentine, made this."

There is also skilled artifice in the intertwining of the two parts of the story. The concluding point of the first is, in fact, the *occasio* of the second. The nocturnal chisel blows of the first part summon a new *dramatis persona* for a new drama: the *murata*, the walled-in nun.

The choice of this figure should already hint that the second part of the story is closer to a *facetia*, which had typically been replete with impropriety, misunderstandings, and misinterpretations ever since Poggio Bracciolini had used the term to refer to his collections of witty, epigrammatic, extreme, even unseemly tales.⁵⁸

It is worth noting also that the *murate* of Saint Peter's were in fact *malmariate*—badly married women—who could, through an ecclesiastical process, escape domestic misery by becoming cloistered nuns, *sanctimoniales*. It is hard to assess what their actual social status may have been. However, it is clear that they served the Church, and that they would have taken care of the laundry for those connected with the sacristy in Saint Peter's. Hence the social asymmetry in the second part of the story.

The setting of the story was described in 1452 by the Nuremberg pilgrim Nikolaus Muffel: "And then there is an entrance into a delightful chapel... and in the entrance

to this chapel, where the walled-in women lie, who let themselves be walled in, as there are many rooms in Saint Peter's Church and in other churches in Rome, where the devout women let themselves be cloistered and can see and [where they] receive the sacrament through holes, through which they also receive bodily nourishment."⁵⁹

Muffel talks of the closeness of the *murata* to the Cappella del Re di Francia, precisely the chapel where Michelangelo's *Pietà* was placed in 1499/1500 (see fig. 6). Is this the locus of the story? The *Pietà* within earshot of the *murata* in its first location? Is the storyteller aware of a situation that came to an end at the latest by 1506/7, when foundations had to be laid for the piers of the cupola and southern transept of new Saint Peter's, so it was then, at the latest, that the Cappella del Re di Francia was demolished, and Michelangelo's group was moved to its second location? Our story—with its two parts, whose time of origin is as uncertain as the time when they were joined into one narrative, but which we know was written down in early 1564—affords us no direct answers to this question.

One thing is certain: when the *Pietà* was moved shortly after 1506/7 to its second location, it was followed by the *murata*—and their laundry room and ironing chamber. They followed the *Pietà* into small side rooms off the chapel, originally known as the Secretarium of Gregor the Great, but then called "Santa Maria della febbre," where Michelangelo's work was positioned on the right-hand side altar. The *murata*'s wall backed onto the chapel wall, so once again they were within earshot⁶⁰ (see fig. 7). Thus this chapel, too, could have been the setting for the story, as discussed further below.

Wherever the story is played out in the narrator's imagination, it is about not seeing, about hearing and misinterpreting. The *murata* cannot see the *Pietà*, but she can hear the sound of chisel blows: "And in one of the opposite rooms stood a *murata*, and, believing that it was someone who wished to ruin this image, she wanted to cry out." So although the *murata*'s senses are not deceived, her logic and comprehension are confused. She hears perfectly clearly but interprets the sounds wrongly. Yet even when she realizes her first logical mistake, she again misinterprets the sounds: "but when she realized the truth, she thanked him very much for having made such a beautiful group. And she begged him to give her a little from the wound in the side of our Lord."

Twice she misinterprets the chisel blows, once as the sound of destruction—in *malum*—and once as the sound of completion—in *bonum*. For—so her pious logic tells her—this has to be the sound of the sculptor chiseling out the wound in Christ's side, the only thing still lacking in this work, and the thing that will make it perfect in its true, that is, religious, sense.

To understand the second failure in the devout *murata*'s logic, two factors should be kept in mind: First, the immense importance to the faithful of the wound in Christ's side; and, second, the hardly impressive manner—in the narrator's opinion—in which Michelangelo had realized this part of the sculpture.

First: the Passion's piercing spear wound in Christ's side is not described in the Gospels of any of the three Synoptists, but is exclusive to the author of the Gospel according to Saint John. It proves that Christ truly died on the Cross and that he did not have a sham body. It vouches for the reality of the Redemption. Blood and water that flowed from the wound point in the famous "pneumatic interpretation"—established already in the very early Church—to the sacrament at the altar and of baptism. The wound that "opened His heart" is the door to Redemption, the portal to Heaven, and so on and so forth, right down to the worship of Jesus' heart in the modern era.⁶¹

In northern European images of the *pietà*, the *Vesperbilder* of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the wound in Christ's side is therefore often strikingly and sharply accentuated: large and with gushing blood. The *murata* in our story hopes to attain a special degree of grace when she asks for marble dust and splinters from the body of Christ, and specifically from the wound in Christ's side—with all its soteriological significance.

Second: our story is fundamentally critical of the artist, in a manner that takes the form of a positively classical, rhetorical *provocatio*.⁶² For what is its core other than the challenging and polemically exaggerated accusation that the artist has left his work unfinished? Instead of adding Christ's redemptive side wound, which would have completed it and would have made it perfect, Michelangelo chiseled out his own signature. Christ without a side wound, a sculpture that was not complete and not perfect!

This is a clear example of the technique of *provocatio*. Contrary to the facts of the matter, the partisan narrator suggests that Michelangelo has failed to carve the wound in Christ's side. And we can see very clearly how he criticizes the artist's application of his signature by, as it were, pitting it against the side wound, as though it were a matter of one or the other, to the extent that it seems that one has come in the way of the other, to the extent that the fiction of the noncompletion of the work, seen in the nonexistent side wound, could become the pivotal point in his polemical story.

FIG. 8

Agostino Carracci
(Italian, 1557–1609), after
Michelangelo Buonarroti
(Italian, 1475–1564)
Pietà, 1584, etching
Vienna, Graphische
Sammlung Albertina



It is possible to identify—or at least outline—two preconditions of this strange narrative provocation. First: in order that the perfect beauty of Christ's body, its *perfezione*, not be marred by a bodily defect, Michelangelo did in fact imply rather than represent the *vitium* of the wound. The side wound is small, bloodless, and barely visible. So much so that in some engravings of the group, such as that by Antonio Salamanca, Giambattista de' Cavalieri, or Agostino Carracci (fig. 8), it is hard to make out, even scarcely visible.

Second: it seems that possibly the conditions that prevailed in the second placement of the *Pietà* may have played a part in the provocative story of the missing wound. The conditions were less than favorable, for the Secretarium (see fig. 7), where it was placed above the first side altar to the right, was not only cramped but also dark. Complaints about the poor view visitors had of the group have come down to us.⁶³ It was here that Condivi, Vasari, and countless others saw Michelangelo's work before it was moved in 1568 to its third location, above the main altar of Sixtus IV's choir chapel. The author of our story must have been one of these countless visitors, for it was the situation in the second location, where the wound was so difficult to make out, that made it easier—or possible—through the introduction of the *murata*, to take the drama to its provocative point, suggesting that by incising his own signature instead of carving a wound in Christ's side, Michelangelo had failed to attain true *perfezione* in his work.

This fundamental criticism of the artist is voiced by the *murata*. While twice erring in her interpretation, she is quite right in her final conclusion. When she realizes that the person wielding the chisel is Michelangelo, she correctly assumes that the work is not yet finished. The truly provocative nature of the drama—as so often—comes to the fore in an inversion: Although anonymous and socially inferior to the artist, the devout *murata* is the superior character of the dramatic action. Hers is the superior understanding. In contrast to the artist, she knows what his work needs to attain perfection: it needs the missing wound in Christ's side.

Now the subtext of the story looms into view: the literary fiction of disappointed expectation and criticism on the part of the devout confronted with an outstanding work of art: a critique of Michelangelo! It is hardly surprising to find here almost exactly the same topical main motif culminating in the criticism of the *Last Judgment* in the Sistine Chapel, which went so far as to call for its demolition: an excess of art—*troppa arte e troppo sapere*—in Michelangelo's work, and too little religious and moral propriety.

Leaving aside the question of the actual social and intellectual origins of the narrative, in other words, leaving aside the question of whether or not this really is a "counternarrative from below," its critical, even subversive, content becomes very clear when in the following passage the conflict between the two kinds of *perfezione* is taken further still, and not only are the pious expectations of the *murata* not met but the artist even blatantly deceives her: "And he, moved by such devotion, removed a certain amount of chips with a little dust and gave it to her."

Michelangelo in the deeply questionable role of the "pious trickster"!⁶⁴ His deceit is a particular deceit, for not only do the splinters not derive—as the deceived *murata* fondly believes—from the wound in Christ's side, but—ironically—they come from precisely the opposite source. According to the provocative logic of the story, Michelangelo tricks her with utterly false relics: with dust and splinters from his own artist's signature, which he has carved out instead of the wound in Christ's side.

The conclusion of the story follows the standard anthropological pattern of exchange,⁶⁵ with "gift and gift in return": "Then, in order to thank him, she made him an omelet, and he ate it in that very place that same night."

False splinters, false dust in exchange for an omelet! This is a prime example of a socially asymmetric and unjust exchange. Michelangelo makes a gift of something worthless, knowing it to be worthless. Meanwhile the deceived *murata* believes she is in possession of something of great value. According to the custom of the poor, she gives the artist "all too little"—*troppo poco*—in return: a simple omelet, which has only a very low exchange value, but which in fact is worth more than the, in effect, worthless gift she has received—although she does not know this.

Supposed splinters from the wound in Christ's side! One may well ask to what extent there are analogies here or points of contact between this story and a complex of legends that we know to have been of significance to Michelangelo late in his life, that is to say, the legend of the first Christian sculptor, Nicodemus—the father of contemporary Nicodemism—the biblical figure who assisted at the Deposition of Christ, who was spurned and pursued by the Jews, who carved from memory, in Ramoth Galaad, the first plastic image of the crucified Christ, the *Volto Santo* of Lucca. The splinters of wood from that piece developed a miraculous power. Placed on the ailing limbs of the faithful, they brought relief and healing.⁶⁶

Did the value of the splinters of marble from the *Pietà della febbre* lie in their healing powers? Are we to assume that the *murata's* wish was connected with a medical application? A medicinal, magical function for the sculpture in a side room of Saint Peter's? Practices of a similar kind involving marble dust—from the marble column in Rome, for instance, where Saint Bibiana was scourged—was prescribed, that is to say, consumed, as a remedy for epilepsy?⁶⁷

Our story ends with cooking and eating: "she made him an omelet, and he ate it in that very place that same night." Why this cooking and eating at the grave of Petronilla? The *murata's* action has a remarkably concrete connection to the tradition of the daughter of Saint Peter associated with this place. According to the legend—significantly—Petronilla had a fever, was healed, arose from her bed, and cooked for Christ, which is why her name is invoked against fevers.

Nikolaus Muffel reports on this tradition connected with her burial place, which he even regards as biblical: "And then there is the grave of Saint Petronilla, the daughter of Saint Peter, who had a fever, got up from her sick bed and cooked for the Lord, as the Gospel tells us."⁶⁸ Could this be why our story ends with cooking and eating? With an "imitation of Saint Petronilla" by the *murata*? The *murata* of Saint Peter's as his "daughters," his "Petronille"?

A final sentence of the story, which once again raises the main question of the narrative, also provides a cryptic interpretation of the epigraphic oddity of the signature: "And this was the reason that he wrote these letters, which one can truly see have been made at night, almost in darkness, for they are not complete." The concluding sentence is not a genuine part of standard anecdotes, or *facetiae*, but rather recalls the literary genre of the *exemplum*.⁶⁹ And it leads back to the first action.

Obviously, the second part of the story with its critical and subversive content belongs to a religious and social stratum that Vasari or his ghostwriter could not accept. No wonder he included only its first part in the 1568 *Giuntina* edition of the *Vite*.

Vasari manipulates the text by constructing a sharp opposition between Lombardy and Central Italy. He transforms the neutral "gran concorso di gente" of his source

into "a great number of strangers from Lombardy," and follows the same strategy in turning the *gobetto da Parina* into *il gobbo nostro da Milano*—"Our hunchback from Milan."⁷⁰ In other words, it is a hopeless and ridiculous *paragone* between the greatest artist since antiquity, who came from Tuscany, and a *gobbo* from Milan.

Again, what does all this have to do with Caravaggio's painting?

III.

Caravaggio's *Entombment* (see fig. 3) is a classical example of *invenzione*.⁷¹ And what is its *invenzione*? The fiction that here the *imago* as a whole should present itself not frontally but from the side; the sculpturally structured group of figures turned to the left at an oblique angle to the picture plane⁷² and seen not from the correct side but from a false one. It is an *imago obliqua* as a whole, which ironically seems to present its *faccia* or *maestà*, not to the viewer, but toward the high altar of the Chiesa Nuova and the Eucharist.

What is the essence of an *imago obliqua*? Its deficiency. The viewer is denied the main, or frontal, aspect. For a split second, for the short instance of perplexed *inganno*,⁷³ he is persuaded by the painting itself, which guides his perception—working with false expectation, deprivation, and disappointment—in a word, he feels compelled to correct the deficiency of what he is seeing, to complete the painting by virtually walking around it to gain the better and correct aspect. In a—theoretically—second step of the reception, which happens almost at the very same moment, everything turns into *disinganno*, the sudden understanding of the deception, just before, in a third step, the artist gains his true objective: the well-known effect of *stupore e meraviglia*. In other words, the simple and well-known dialectics of *inganno*, *disinganno*, and *stupore e meraviglia*.

A part of Caravaggio's Roman audience in the seventeenth century—divided into at least three or four classes of reception by contemporary theory—must have been able and disposed to follow his rhetorical demonstration of feigned three-dimensionality, or *rilievo*, culminating in the two *scorci meravigliosi*, or "marvelous foreshortenings," namely the stone and the elbow of Nicodemus, with its *rilievuccio*, as Cennino Cennini had called the small white spot at the foremost point of the painting's *rilievo*.⁷⁴

This demonstration of artificial *rilievo* on the flat picture plane is obviously meant to contrast with the simple and artless *tutto rilievo*, or three-dimensionality of sculpture, which simply "shows what is"—*quel che è*. In other words, a part of the audience must have been able and disposed to recognize the most common of all commonplaces in Italian art theory and practice, the *paragone* between painting and sculpture.⁷⁵

But we may assume that the same audience was less sensitive to the complementary quality, which is Caravaggio's special interest in the picture plane and the more or less hidden geometry of the painting.⁷⁶ It seems like a symbol for the ambiguity of its aesthetic structure that the one point in which its *rilievo* seems to culminate—the elbow of Nicodemus—is the very point in which the geometric organization of the plane culminates: here, and at no other point, is exactly where both the vertical and the horizontal golden sections intersect.⁷⁷

It is a commonplace in Caravaggio scholarship that the painting paraphrases

Michelangelo's *Pietà* in Saint Peter's (see fig. 4). The body of Christ with its dangling right arm, his left hand, even the details of her clothing and the role of the stone as a basis for the group—they are all related to the famous three-dimensional prototype. They all show Caravaggio's *paragone* with the greatest artist since antiquity, they all show his eristic imitation of Michelangelo. The body of Christ, without the *grazia* and *dolcissima aria di testa* of its prototype⁷⁸ and obviously *ritratto dal naturale*,⁷⁹ seems to be a *manifesto* of Michelangelo criticism.

The question can be raised whether and how much Caravaggio participated in the well-known *topoi* of Michelangelo criticism around 1600: the criticism of his showing *troppa arte*, *troppo sapere*, *troppa anatomia* and his lack of *decorum*, criticism of the monotony of his muscular nudes, regardless of differences in age or sex.⁸⁰ More to the point, the question can be raised whether or not it is a straightforward criticism of the *Pietà* in Saint Peter's when Caravaggio dramatically accentuates the side wound, which Michelangelo had avoided, considering it a *vitium* in the Savior's corpse. Might it not be the well-known *topos* of criticism of the *Pietà* emerging in the painting when Mary is represented as an old woman? And might it not be a fundamental criticism of Michelangelo's sculptural mimesis and its not being able to overcome the stone when Caravaggio—in a *paragone* between his painting and Michelangelo's sculpture—demonstrates the greater *perfezione* of painterly imitation by polemically correcting Christ's right hand, touching a real stone and not a stone that pretends to be the mantle of Mary, as in the *Pietà*!

Whether or not it is related to the contemporary Aristotelian aesthetic discussion, the figure of Nicodemus embodies the paradox of the beauty of the deformed.⁸¹ Deliberately reversing the discretion of Apelles, Caravaggio brings forth the physical defect of his figure by showing it from its bad side. He actually shows the hunchback of Nicodemus, his body bent over like that of a toiling slave.

But that is not all. The double *deformitas* of Nicodemus, his "having a *gobba*" and "making a *gobba*," as a consequence deforms his clothes as well. His tunic has ridden up at one point, exposing his *brutte parti*.⁸² The viewer, of course, would have to see this *vitium* of exposure, were it not turned into profile, in other words, were there not the *vitium* of painting itself, its forever being unable to show or unveil more than one side of a body to the viewer.

Rubens, for his part, had detected this *vitium* of Nicodemus as well and corrected it (fig. 9). In this respect, too, he restored the aesthetic and moral *decorum* of the figure. He eliminated the hunchback and raised Nicodemus so that—contrary to Caravaggio's figure—Nicodemus's head is higher than his body. He included Nicodemus in the action and covered his back *in toto* with a mantle. Caravaggio though, shows the *vitium* of the seminudity of Nicodemus and at the same time disguises it demonstratively through another one: the *vitium* of the art of painting to be confined to just two dimensions.

Obviously the *perfecta deformitas* of Caravaggio's figure of Nicodemus is a demonstration of his own *perfezione* of imitation. "To show art"—*mostrare l'arte*—seems to be the function of this figure. Is it the only one?

"His face was round, the brow square and lofty, furrowed by seven straight lines, and the temples projected considerably beyond the ears, which were rather large and prominent... his nose was somewhat squashed... his eyes can best be described as being small... the lower lip thicker and projecting a little."⁸³ Not all, but most of the elements in Vasari's description of Michelangelo's physiognomy appear in the woodcut

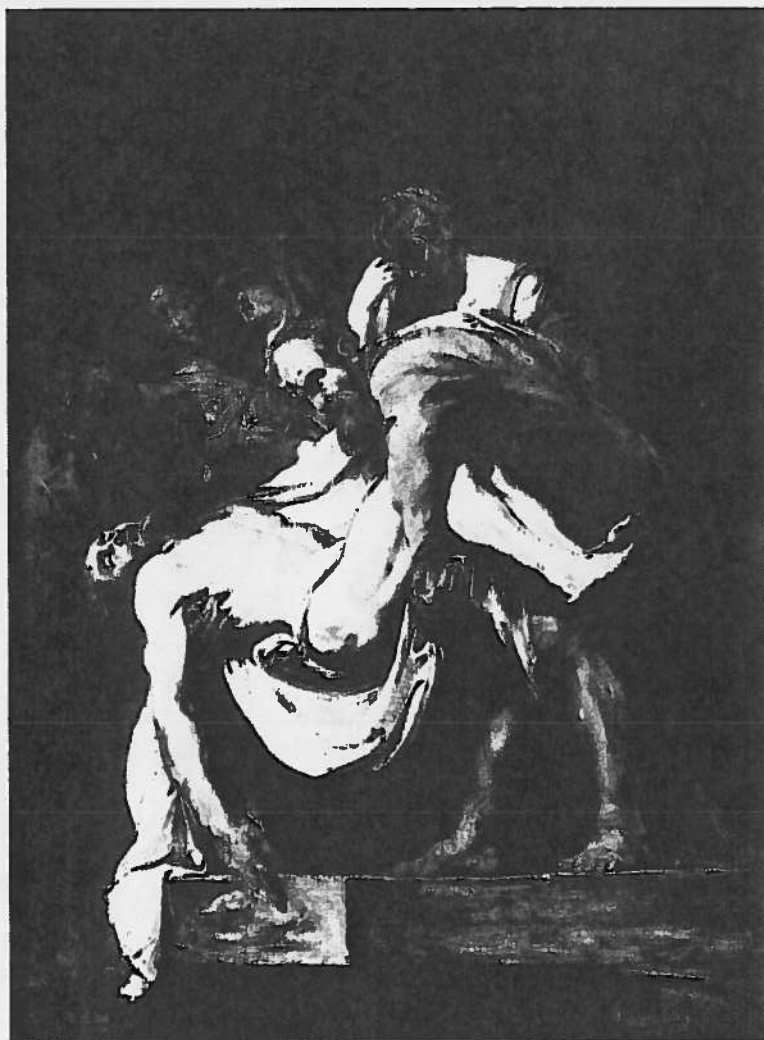


FIG. 9
Peter Paul Rubens
(Flemish, 1577–1640), after
Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio
(Italian, 1571–1610)
Entombment, ca. 1612–14,
oil on oak, 88.3 x 66.5 cm
(34 3/4 x 26 1/4 in.)
Ottawa, National Gallery of
Canada, inv. 6431



FIG. 10
Giorgio Vasari (Italian, 1511–74)
Portrait of Michelangelo, 1568,
woodcut, 22.7 x 16 cm
(9 x 6 3/8 in.)
From Vasari, *Le vite* (Florence:
Giunti, 1568), 3:717



FIG. 11
Caravaggio (Italian, 1571–1610)
Head of Nicodemus
(detail of fig. 3)



illustration with his portrait in the second edition of the *Lives of the Artists*, published in 1568 (fig. 10). Not all, but most are seen in Caravaggio's head of Nicodemus (fig. 11). The hunched figure, bent forward, embodies a paradoxical allusion to the portrait.⁸⁴ "*Una figura tutta sforciata, misteriosa e difficile.*"⁸⁵ Could its mystery or enigma consist in this allusion to the physiognomy of the deceased Michelangelo?

The similarities with the iconography of Michelangelo's portraits—the bust, once attributed to Daniele da Volterra, and its copies; the above-mentioned woodcut in Vasari's *Giuntina*; the portrait of Jacopino del Conte—are self-evident enough to speak of a recognizable allusion. Yet Nicodemus's features, in the heart of Caravaggio's painting, are almost equally clearly inscribed with difference. Going beyond Michelangelo's satyrlike portrait type, Caravaggio has rendered the head vulgar and ugly. Added to which there is also the alienating effect of the reddish-brown hair.

Allusion to...not representation of...Michelangelo. Allusion implies limits of resemblance. This is not to say that some of Nicodemus's features do not hark back to a certain male model Caravaggio had used for his painting *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas*.⁸⁶ If this is so, it might reflect his well-known theoretical position on the question of imitation. The rhetorical question is: how could Caravaggio—who had bound himself exclusively, at least in theory, to the principle of *ritrarre dal naturale*—paint a likeness or *similitudo* of Michelangelo, whom he had never in his life seen? How could he, in rhetorical—and that means, theoretical—terms, do it without a living model? Did he, in fact, use one, thus combining *arte* and *natura* even for Michelangelo's posthumous image, creating a *verisimilitudo* of his lost physical appearance in a deeper and more reflected sense?

Did Caravaggio's contemporaries perceive the allusion to Michelangelo's features in Nicodemus's bowed head? Were there some members of the public who recognized

FIG. 12

Peter Paul Rubens
(Flemish, 1577–1640)
Head of Nicodemus
(detail of fig. 9)

FIG. 13

Leone Leoni (Italian, ca. 1509–90)
Michelangelo portrait medallion,
obverse, 1560/61, cast bronze,
diam. 5.8 cm (2 3/8 in.)
London, The British Museum,
M0161 A62a

FIG. 14

Michelangelo Buonarroti
(Italian, 1475–1564)

The Florence Pietà, ca. 1550,
marble, height 226 cm (144 in.)
Florence, Museo dell'Opera
del Duomo

them in the painting? There is one witness who can indirectly vouch for this, namely, Peter Paul Rubens. Evidently he recognized Michelangelo's features in Caravaggio's painting. For this is the only explanation for the fact that he, too, in his free copy, now in Ottawa (see fig. 9), gives Nicodemus Michelangelo's facial features (fig. 12), although these are his "better" features. For Rubens releases the head from its vulgarity and ugliness and reinstates the figure's dignity in that respect, too. He clearly bases his head of Nicodemus on another of Michelangelo's portrait types, on the more noble, official *vera effigies* seen in Leone Leoni's medal (fig. 13) of 1560/61.⁸⁷

Why the allusion to Michelangelo in a figure of Nicodemus? The answer is simple: the biblical figure of Nicodemus is the prototype of the Christian sculptor and was depicted by Michelangelo himself in his *Florence Pietà* (fig. 14). This sculpture was originally destined for his tomb in Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome, and around 1600 it was placed in the Bandini vineyard on the Quirinal, alluding to the hill of Golgotha, one of the public sculptures of Rome,⁸⁸ which was known to Caravaggio.

A complex figure, Nicodemus, the *princeps judaeorum*, was a Pharisee and member of the Synedion, who went to visit Jesus at night; in the beginning, Nicodemus was his "secret disciple." It is to him that Jesus addresses his kerygmatic words of rebirth out of water and spirit. With his uncomprehending question, "How is it possible for a man to be reborn when he is old?," Nicodemus stands as an example of not understanding. Jesus reprimands him ironically, "You are a teacher in Israel and you don't know that?"⁸⁹

In the view of the Church, Nicodemus is a confessor and semimartyr. For, in accordance with the meaning of his name, *Niko-demos*, that is to say, *victor populi*, victor over the people, he bears witness to Jesus as the Messiah and is therefore prosecuted like a martyr. He is stripped of his social standing and his possessions, chased from his town. Gamaliel will take him into his country house, nourish him, and clothe him.

There, in Ramoth Galaad, Nicodemus will carve the image of Christ. According to the older version of the legend—which is a real sculptor's legend—he will do it without any model except for that "interior image" alone that he "in terms of quantity and quality" is carrying in his memory. In its augmented version—created in the thirteenth century and probably already reflecting the success of the *Veronica* in Saint Peter's—the sculptor is following a painting as his model. And this painting, created by God himself, is the image made of blood and sweat on the Shroud of Christ, which, as is well known, was identified around 1600 with the Turin *Sacra Sindone*.⁹⁰

Did Caravaggio, by demonstratively violating the social *decorum* of his figure—Nicodemus with naked feet in the short coarse tunic of a craftsman—allude to his fate of being impoverished and pursued? Did he, at the same time, allude here to the sculptor Nicodemus and his art of sculpture as an *arte meccanissima* in comparison to painting? Was he, by means of this ancient stereotype of the banausic, badly dressed, and stooped sculptor dating back to classical times,⁹¹ alluding to Michelangelo as a sculptor? Did Caravaggio make the allusion for that part of his Roman and Italian audience of 1603 who knew how Michelangelo had looked, who knew that he had made the *Pietà* in Saint Peter's and that paintings sometimes have to do with the most common of all art-theoretical commonplaces: the *paragone* between painting and sculpture?



But why, then, a Nicodemus with a hunchback? Why a *gobbo*, whose face alludes to Michelangelo? Why the dramatic discrepancy of at least two contradictory identities in one figure? Obviously Caravaggio was applying the problematic device of rhetorical paradox, the scheme the classical *rhetor* uses when representing the hopeless or at least weaker side in court.

The absurd correlation between Nicodemus, a *gobbo*, and the facial traits of Michelangelo looks like a paradigm of the difficult *paradoxon schema*. For what else is the paradox than a sentence that, in its logic, is not self-evident but absurd, that shockingly offends the public's sense of truth, justice, and values, that offends their common sense, a sentence that, however, contrary to all expectation, does in the end tell the truth? It is an ugly genre, or *genus turpe*, that at the same time requires great skill and is therefore admirable, an *admirabile genus*.⁹²

What might be the underlying truth of the paradox of a *gobbo* with Michelangelo's face? Caravaggio, obviously, is constructing and deconstructing references. On the one hand, the *gobbo* resembles Michelangelo; on the other hand, he cannot really mean Michelangelo Buonarroti. It must be another, or a second, Michelangelo, who has the same first name but is a *gobbo* at the same time.

The paradox of two contradictory identities in one figure is resolved only for the viewer who knows Vasari's narrative. If he puts into words the notions of Michelangelo Buonarroti, Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, *gobbo* and *pietà*—all alluded to in the painting—he immediately—not by way of discourse but in a sudden recognition—is able to connect them to the Michelangelo who made the *Pietà* of Saint Peter's and to the "gobbo of Milan" in Vasari's narration who did not.

For the beholder who knows that Caravaggio is called Michelangelo and mainly spoken about by that name only, the physiognomic traits of Michelangelo Buonarroti appearing in the midst of a painting by Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio reveal nothing other than the traditional technique of allusion, which uses a *tertium comparationis*, common to both sides.

The *tertium comparationis* here is the first name *Michelangelo*. In the painted face of Michelangelo Buonarroti the informed spectator can recognize the allusion to "another" or "second" Michelangelo: Caravaggio, who bears the same first name.

By the notion "of Milan," where the young Michelangelo Merisi had lived and where he received his first training, the informed spectator can see in the *gobbo* a witty allusion to Caravaggio himself, who is Michelangelo-like, another or second Michelangelo even, but at the same time merely a *gobbo*, who could never have made the marble *Pietà* in Saint Peter's. Nevertheless, he, too, has made a *pietà*, comparable to the one in Saint Peter's, albeit only painted and from the wrong side, oblique, with its negative connotations of that, and so on and so forth.

It is the well-known method of understatement. Once more irony in its classic form shows itself. Once more, one should recall the semantic ambiguity of the word *gobbo*, which means "hunchbacked," "arched," "bent," "to be crooked" and has morally negative connotations. But, on the other hand, a *colpo gobbo*, for instance, is a nasty trick but one with good results.⁹³

And more than that: not only Nicodemus but the painting, too, has a hunchback. If one consults, for instance, the 1612 *Vocabulario della Crusca* or another Italian dic-

tionary, one can discover that for the Italian-speaking beholder there are two hunchbacks, or *gobbe*, in the painting, a real and a metaphorical one. Nicodemus's elbow is the second *gobba*, for in Italian—as in other European languages, too—*gobba* is nothing other than the popular synonym of *prominenza* or *rilievo*.⁹⁴

In other words: the irritating visual motif of Nicodemus's *gobba* provides the keyword to understanding the structure and the essence of the painting. In Caravaggio's strategy, which recalls the sharp and aggressive style of *acutezza*,⁹⁵ his painting is a *pittura gobba* with all the ambiguous connotations of the self-irony of the painter as well as that of the art of painting.