Preliminary note: In view of the "Caravaggio 25" exhibition of Caravaggio's paintings held in Rome at Palazzo Barberini this year, I decided to include this previously unpublished essay in my journal. The two dozen paintings, many from private collections around the world, cover the time from Caravaggio's arrival in Rome around 1595 to his death in 1610, and have been on display from March 7 display to July 6. They have prompted a refocus on Caravaggio's faith and spirituality.

See the article of 25th May 2025 in the *Associated Press*:

https://apnews.com/article/pope-leo-xiv-caravaggio-exhibition-rome-76d6b8fe1ac00ac2c7633a9e7efa5d57

Gothic Biography: The Case of Peter Robb's *M*

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"Despite gaps and several 'obscure areas'",wrote Gustaw Herling in 1985, "if someone ever decides to write the Life of Caravaggio, he (sic) will have to invent a particular narrative style: hectic, abrupt, throbbing like a heart contracting and dilating" (Herling 167). By what seems to have been sheer coincidence, 1998 saw the publication of not one but three books in English purporting to reconstruct the character, life and vision of Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (1571-1610), the Italian artist whose naturalistic paintings of human figures and dazzling use of chiaroscuro so startled his contemporaries: Helen Langdon's *Caravaggio: A Life*, Desmond Seward's *Caravaggio: A Passionate Life,* and *M* by Australian author and journalist Peter Robb. Of these only *M*, for which Robb gained the National Biography Award in 2000, may be said to meet Herling's demand for stylistic invention. But although Robb's idiosyncratic style – punchy, often vernacularised, and with sudden shifts in register – seems part and parcel of his passionate engagement with his

subject's painterly concerns, sexual predilections and troubled life, it aroused considerable controversy internationally among his many reviewers.

While their tolerance varies, and even Robb's detractors allow that *M* has "verve" and a "breezy" energy,[1] the list of perceived transgressions is long. Several reviewers complain about Robb's minimising of his scholarly apparatus and his decision to call Caravaggio "M", a decision made on account of the uncertainties relating to the painter's surname (Sewell, Januszczak, Penny, Hensher, Dunne, Keller). The former criticism has also taken a more serious turn in view of the discrediting of one of Robb's important sources, *Caravaggio assassino*, a popular 1994 publication by Italian scholar Riccardo Bassani and art historian Flora Bellini.[2] Robb's practice in *M* is to embed in italics snippets from his sources, and provide references for these in end notes without any comment about their reliability. Of further irritation to art lovers and historians is his "recasting of the titles of the paintings in blunt demotic mode" (Gayford, Januszczak, Brown). "The Martyrdom of Saint Matthew", for example, becomes simply "Matthew Killed". Then there are his contractions, neologisms, and repetitiveness (Cahn, Loughery), his boldly anachronistic descriptions (Jenkins, Mitchinson, Graham-Dixon), and his insertion of profanities and coarse Australian colloquialisms (Cahn, Slattery, Jenkins, Rowland, Langdon, Mitchinson, Dyer), all in otherwise decorous and vivid historical prose. With its rapturous but also frequently slangy evocations of the paintings, *M* has been viewed variously as "terrifically energised", "overheated", "vehemently passionate and aggressively colloquial", "part biography, part costume drama, part art history manual …unashamedly populist, not to say disreputable", and "a hopelessly uncool, vulgarian performance by most art historical lights" (respectively, Mitchinson, Graham-Dixon, Craven, Spurling, Bell).

What is almost entirely overlooked in this "performance", however, is a generic feature that I perceive to be fundamental to Robb's achievement of what many readers, this one included, concede is a "gripping" exposition of Caravaggio's character, life, work and Counter-Reformation milieu.[3] This is Robb's intensive historical mining of late sixteenth-century Roman Catholic Italy for its intrinsically Gothic and "horror" elements and his use of Gothic fictional strategies. These provide his vehicle of historical explanation and the platform for the cynical, anti-Catholic rhetoric by which he seeks not only to depict the painter's life, but also interpret the paintings that struck the Marquis de Sade in 1775 as "beautiful … horror".

By his own account at the outset of *M*, Robb's project has not involved uncovering previously unknown factual information about his subject. Rather, he writes from his conviction of his own interpretation of Caravaggio's character after piecing together the research findings of others, and "looking hard and long again" at the paintings. Citing Howard Hibbard's conclusion of 1983, that "[Caravaggio's] criminality seems to be rooted in deep seated psychological problems that transcend purely social explanation" (Hibbard, 261), Robb argues that this view is "an academic updating of the academic job that was done on M three hundred years earlier", primarily by art historian Giovan Pietro Bellori, and perpetuated in comments by Stendhal, Ruskin and others (10). To counter this "great myth" of Caravaggio as psychopathic genius is Robb's primary aim:

> M's career was marked out by crimes. Convention has it that they were his. I read the record differently and see him largely as the victim of powerful interests he'd offended. I see his death as murder (A Note to Readers).

As his narrative unfolds, Robb, who, at the time of *M*'s publication had lived in Italy for over fourteen years, avows a cultural historian's concern with the accuracy and details of his meagre

documentary evidence. This is comprised of the earliest brief biographical accounts, parish, civil and diplomatic archives, *avvisi*, contracts of commission and sale, private letters, unpublished poems and recently uncovered criminal records and transcripts of trial or investigative proceedings. Certainly the first published accounts of Caravaggio by his contemporaries or near contemporaries – physician and art fancier Giulio Mancini, fellow painter Giovanni Baglione who sued M for libel in 1603, and the later art theorist Giovan Pietro Bellori – are treated with suspicion and analysed to reveal self-serving prejudices and jealousies. However, Robb eschews the relatively impartial voice of the canonical historical biographer in favour of a more subjective approach in which he takes on openly an advocatory role. In his 'Note to Readers', he likens his approach to that of "the magistrates who explore the interpenetration of politics and crime in contemporary Italy and see themselves as historians of the recent past":

> … you have to apply a forensic and sceptical mind to the enigmas of M's life and death. You have to know how to read the evidence. You have to know the evidence is there – you need a feel for the unsaid, for the missing file, the tacit conclusion, the gap, the silence, the business done with a nod and a wink. The missing data of M's life make up a narrative of their own, running invisible but present through the known facts.

He also acknowledges his project as tentative and incomplete:

> *M* is implicitly a report on a great and unfinished collective work of rediscovery. … Mine is a working hypothesis, a preliminary outline. Though the text is littered with weasel qualifiers, the scrupulous may find here that the likelihood hardens too quickly into certainty – if it weren't so the narrative would sink under the weight of discussions of evidence. Conclusions I think are dry enough. There's no romancing.

There's no romancing. Robb highlights the extent of his conjectures, but with this last flourish appears not to discern the conventions of fiction utilised in his revisionist myth-making. In my view

his deployment of the narrative strategies of Gothic fiction complement his book's undeniably Gothic setting, and play a significant part in giving page turning vigour to its five hundred pages.

Most familiar to readers of Gothic horror fiction in the Protestant tradition is Robb's attitude to and representation of the Italian Catholic Counter Reformation past as unremittingly barbaric. He makes no effort to temper this view by referral to positive aspects of the reforms that occurred following the Council of Trent in 1563. In contrast, both Seward and Langdon focus on the spiritual legacy of Cardinal Borromeo in plague-ridden Milan where, in 1577 at age six, Caravaggio lost all the men in his family. At this time the duchy of Milan was under the jurisdiction of Spain, but on entering his archbishopric of Milan in 1565, six years before Caravaggio's birth, Borromeo devoted himself to reformation of his very large diocese to a Tridentine state. While his zeal was undeniably authoritarian, he was systematic in attempting to stamp out abuses by eradicating the sale of indulgences and ecclesiastical positions, excluding the Spanish Inquisition, building churches and hospitals, and fostering clerical education through the establishment of seminaries, colleges and communities for the education of candidates for the priesthood. Believing that ignorance had led to a widespread drift among the clergy and laity from church biblical teachings, he was formidable in his attempts to detect and stamp out heresy, but he also directed much effort towards catachesis and instruction of the young which led to the establishment of the first Sunday school classes. All of this supported the fresh obligation on previously absent bishops and parish priests to reside in their dioceses, to preach each Sunday, and give religious instruction to their parishioners. This made a significant difference to parish communities, including that of Caravaggio, whose brother Giovan Battista Merisi became a priest. Robb, however, elides such facts, concentrating instead on Borromeo's asceticism, regulatory obsessions with church architecture and decoration, and penitential and other decrees. He makes no attempt to enter sympathetically into a quotidian

religious outlook that embraced ritual devotion, care of the poor and sick, penitential ardour, conversion, martyrdom, and the differing thought and ministries of new and reformed religious orders.

Robb's contrasting approach to that of his fellow art historians could not be more marked. Seward in his short study that at times itself approaches an adventure story, generalises that Caravaggio "was shaped by the plague", and that in his charismatic ministry Borromeo 'embodied the Catholicism of the Counter-Reformation' to which Caravaggio responded artistically (*Caravaggio: A Passionate Life* 6, 15). While also acknowledging the extreme violence of an Italy that shocked foreigners, Seward counters this with details of Borromeo's self-sacrificing work among the poor, sick and dying. He enlarges on the reforming Cardinal's affirmation of good works and transubstantiation, the dogmas to which Protestantism was most hostile, giving explanatory weight to Borromeo's decrees that acts of charity and mercy, the Last Supper, the Madonna and martyrdom, depicted without affectation, should be "the proper subjects for painters". However, it is Andrew Graham-Dixon, in his much acclaimed, later biography *Caravaggio A Life Sacred and Profane* (2010), who pinpoints more directly and convincingly the influence of Borromeo's powerful ministry on Caravaggio as painter of religious subjects. In his discussion of the importance of visualisation to Catholic spirituality, Graham-Dixon emphasises Borromeo's preference for "particular forms of popular Christian visual spectacle: events and phenomena that were literally 'vulgar' in the sense of being aimed directly at the *vulgus*, the crowd, the general mass of people." (*Caravaggio* 36). Elaborating at length on the theatricality of the *sacro monte,* a sacred mountain tradition of folk art, with its chapels of carved and painted figures -- likenesses intended to bring the Bible to life, and which also had roots in traditions of high realism at the start of the Renaissance -- Graham-Dixon concludes that both this tradition and that of the emotive,

highly realised terracotta sculptures of northern Italy "played a crucial role in shaping the imagination of pious Italians" and "were also deeply influential on Caravaggio" (36-44). In her reconstruction of Caravaggio's extraordinarily violent time, Langdon explains Caravaggio's violence as "governed by complex codes of honour" (*Caravaggio: A Life* 6) and, in her discussions of the ways in which the Catholic painter carried out each of his commissions to fulfil the needs of his patrons and the church, she supplies a breadth of political, religious and art-historical detail. Without the benefits of Andrew-Dixon's access to the numerous archival discoveries that had been made in the fourteen years since the publication of her biography, Langdon, in the utilization of her sources, negotiates conservatively between accounts partly emplotted by historical actors and her own formal imposition of meanings to achieve as close or plausible a congruence as possible. Any speculation is worded very tentatively. Undeniably, she still fashions a narrative, but her exposition does not appear to be driven by the conventions of a genre of fiction. In contrast, Robb, in the manner of many late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Gothic novelists, constructs a heroically liberal protagonist who, living on "the Gothic cusp", is superior to, and clashing with, the reactionary cultural forces of a menacing and powerful Catholic environment to which he ultimately falls victim.

Availing himself of a rhetoric which leaves us in no doubt of his own anti-Catholicism, Robb makes of M a wilful, enigmatic genius – "the first modern painter "(5) - whose whole life was "conditioned" by the "totalitarian" world of Counter-Reformation Italy:

> Coercion and persuasion were its twin prongs. The inquisition was the stick, a vast repressive machinery that worked through informants and secret courts to meet ideological deviance with humiliation, prison, torture and burning alive. Fear and suspicion pervaded the culture. The imminence of terror lurked in what you read, what you did for sex, how you dressed, what you thought about religion, what you knew about science, where your

> political allegiances lay. It drove private life underground. M lived in a time of bureaucratic power, thought police and fearful conformism, in which arselickers and timeservers flourished and original minds were ferociously punished or condemned to silence (3).

In this prison house of ideology, M, with his brilliant "singlehanded and singleminded exploration of what it is to see the reality of things and people" (5), is not simply co-located in his enlightened achievement with Galileo, Monteverdi, Cervantes, Marlowe, Donne and Shakespeare. He emerges as having, anachronistically, the disposition and outlook of a late twentieth-century free spirit: socially difficult, volatile, subversive, and predominantly gay, albeit open to heterosexual activity and attachment. The parallel to be drawn here is with the (albeit mostly virtuous) heroes of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Gothic fiction. Although not real historical figures like M, they are located in a despotic Italian past, are in conflict with its political and religious regime, and are endowed anachronistically with the sensibility and liberal principles of their authors' eighteenth-century Protestant English readers (Baldick, Mighall).

The young M's first employment in Rome is depicted as demeaning and monotonous, copying devotional painting, for Monsignor Pandolf Pucci, whom he nicknames "Monsignor Insalata" for his meanness. His next set of experiences, painting still life to order in the "big and busy art factory" of the mannerist painter Guiseppe Cesari (37-8), who gains large papal commissions, further feeds his disillusionment and alienation and makes him ill enough to spend time in the Consolation hospital. From this period, through his five years under the patronage and protection of Cardinal del Monte at the great Medici palazzo Madama, and beyond, M struggles to come to terms with the prevailing values in art and religion, the rigorous policing of a system of decorum in painting and "furious sexual policing" (208, 187). On three occasions his paintings are not installed or are removed from churches (including St Peter's in Rome) because of their

unwavering realism. His "Mary Dead" ("The Death of the Virgin") of 1604, for example, is taken down and locked away by the barefoot Carmelites of the church for which it was destined, in all probability because, for the beautiful young woman laid out in a red dress at the centre of the painting, death is "pure absence …the end of the road" (290). The painter's use of ordinary people such as prostitutes and pilgrims as models for his paintings instead of idealised saintly figures, the sensuality of his work, his daringly innovative use of light and dark, "the irruption of reality" into his rendering of religious themes, his liking for boys – all are deemed to place him in the precarious position of having to defend himself and his art against jealous competitors, imitators and detractors, as well as against institutional hostility. Novelistically, in incremental stages as M's unyielding genius gains recognition, Robb establishes a Gothic environment of pervasive threat as the *raison d'être* for what he claims were his hero's unremitting persecution, "hairtrigger touchiness" (283), defensive violence, and eventual assassination.

M's rise to fame begins in 1595 when his much admired "Cheats" (usually titled "The Cardsharps") is bought by Cardinal Francisco del Monte, himself an enigmatic but enlightened man with a passion for science and supposedly homosexual tastes. When Del Monte gives M a home, the painter begins to be patronised by a circle of wealthy collectors, and is construed as gaining access to knowledge about optics and optical instruments, a copy of the manuscript of Leonardo's Book of Painting, and the thought of Galileo, Guidubaldo Del Monte, and Giordano Bruno. After the brilliant success in 1600 of his "Matthew Called" and "Matthew Killed", an assured, capricious, compass and sword carrying M is firmly positioned to arouse the envy, hatred and jealousy of his fellow painters, such as Giovanni Baglione and Guiseppe Cesari (219-20), and, with his later paintings, to offend the sense of decorum of powerful men of the cloth, "thought police" such as the cardinals Ottavino Paravicino and Cesare Baronio, confessor to Pope Clement VIII (211). With

cinematic bravura, Robb cuts from the dangerous jostle and snip-snap of "the floating Roman street life of prostitutes, soldiers, gulls, beggars, gamblers, bravi, street boys, artisans, painters, unassimilated intellectuals and younger sons" (49), to the activities of financiers and the enormously wealthy ecclesiastical hierarchy and their families in acquiring paintings to furbish Rome's churches, chapels and newly built or extended palazzi. Accounts of M's frequent implication in factional eruptions of violence in taverns, brothels, in the streets and on the tennis courts, where he finally kills his old adversary, Ranunccio Tomassoni, thus alternate with those of his bids for commissions and the execution of his paintings for barons, bankers and covetous, conspiratorial prelates. The atmosphere "has something about it of a cold war Manhattan and a lot about it of a preindustrial Hollywood". Art is officially seen as an important instrument of faith inculcation and promulgation of church glory, "the building and decorating trades [are] on a roll", and Rome is "the world's great image factory" (31, 33).

Such tropes again exemplify how, after the manner of late eighteenth-century Gothic fiction writers, Robb cynically makes use of a form of anachronism to divest sixteenth-century Rome of what Matthew Lewis, in the opening page of *The Monk*, calls "true devotion" (Lewis, 7) Robb focuses on the reign of Clement VIII, although there were no fewer than ten popes during Caravaggio's lifetime, and the Council of Trent, closed by Pius IV in 1563, and his institution of the Tridentine Creed, had generated some positive elements for the population in the revival of religious life and Marian devotions. Yet the Catholic church throughout is depicted by Robb homogeneously as materialistically corrupt and stiflingly medieval, led by vain popes and ambitious cardinals who rival each other in the fight to maintain Catholic dogma and recreate Rome as home and symbol of a reformed Catholicism "on a newly monumental scale", even as they live lives of hypocritical wealth and self-indulgence. Describing the repressive measures of Pope Clement VIII

Aldobrandini, Robb tells us that he was “a fussy hands on pope’” of whom the Venetian ambassador said, “he wants to know everything, read everything and give all the orders” (48). Robb later documents dispassionately how Clement, described by contemporaries as ‘”fleshy and fat”, was given to ‘public outbursts of penitential tears” and “public mortifications of the flesh” which amazed the people, and how cardinals writing about his continuous painful attacks of gout noted that he voraciously consumed fish, gourmet foods, and “hearty wines or French clarets”. Returning from this Gothic monkish stereotype to his subject, Robb adds cynically that

> The holy year of 1600 demanded some effort of artistic propaganda and Clement redecorated the Clementine chapel in Saint Peter’s (146-7).

Trapped in this past religious regime of “penitential theatre”, and forced to contend with the whims and delusions of its hierarchy, Robb’s intransigent and subversive M thus becomes an anachronism, a fictional counterpart of the modern secular biographer and his readers.

The turbulence and civil unrest in Spanish-governed Milan during M’s early apprenticeship to Simone Peterzano and the pervasive violence and terror in Rome during his brilliant years of fame are given prominence and brought into contiguous relationship with events in M’s life and the stunning realism of his paintings so that they, too, take on an explanatory, subversive function. For example, Robb comments that, in his “Fortune Teller I” of 1594, M painted “an instantly recognisable scene of the kind of thing the Pope was trying to stamp out “(p. 49). Again, he asserts of M’s “Penitent Magdalen” of 1597 that it

> recalled not so much the prostitute saint’s regret and renunciation as the punitive treatment courtesans were getting in Rome, the police whippings that might come a girl’s way if she plied her trade outside the narrow

parameters allowed (80).

Here it is salutary to compare Andrew Graham-Dixon's detailed description of this painting for his close attention to its devotional aspects and its congruence with the type of visualisation of biblical stories inspired by Borromeo:

> Caravaggio's Magdalen [seated very low to the ground, and seen as if from above] is no emblem, but a person in turmoil. She sits in darkness, but above her an abstract wedge of light intrudes, as if to dramatize the light of Christ entering her soul. The painter depicts her in the immediate aftermath of her conversion – the moment is just after Christ says, 'Thy faith has saved thee; go in peace.'
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> When Caravaggio imagined the Magdalen in this way, when he thought about the heart of her story and asked himself how to bring that story to life, he was doing just what Carlo Borromeo had asked the preachers of post Tridentine Milan to do (*Caravaggio* 139-141).

With little or no regard for the spiritual aspect and devotional power of Caravaggio's religious paintings, Robb builds to the contextual juxtaposition of his hero's activities with the sort of fearful contemporaneous situations and events that provided the very stuff of late eighteenth and early nineteenth century Gothic horror novels and plays.

The most dramatic sequence begins with Francesco Cenci's long confinement of his daughter Beatrice and his second wife Lucrezia, in "his castle overlooking a precipitous bramble filled terrain in remote mountainous country east of Rome" (84). Here Francesco reputedly attempted to rape his stepson, may have raped Beatrice and, from all accounts, certainly imprisoned and beat her. These events and the dramatic ones that followed – the cruel interrogation, torture and public beheading in 1599 of Beatrice for the murder of her father – are recounted memorably by

Robb over several pages. The lack of clemency of Clement VIII (whose chief motives, Robb tells us, were to keep in check unruly baronial families, "reaffirm the role of the head of the family", and acquire what remained of the Cenci family's immense, largely ill-gotten wealth) was an important aspect of the conduct of the case. Pleas from the Roman clergy, diplomats, aristocrats, and high prelates, and an attempt by her lawyer at a last-ditch defence were to no avail. Both Beatrice and her stepmother were beheaded, while her brother

> Giacomo was tortured with red hot irons during the procession through the city and then clubbed down, his throat cut, his body hacked to pieces on the public stage. Young Bernardo kept fainting as he was made to watch his brother and sister and stepmother die. While this was happening Clement VIII celebrated a low mass for their souls a short distance away (87).

Asking rhetorically whether M was in the crowd that followed Beatrice Cenci to the chopping block, Robb uses the terrible events of "the Cenci episode" to claim 1600 as the date of M's painting of Saint Catherine of Alexandria at the wheel, and have him paint it as "a beautiful and unyielding young noble girl crushed by an earlier regime".

The degree to which Robb's construction of M's mental outlook, gender relations and perception of his work at this time relies on the embedding in detail of such horrific stories as those of the Cenci and the burning alive of Giordano Bruno at night in an Inquisitorial auto-da-fé (129-30), is highlighted by the contrasting way in which Helen Langdon emplots these events relatively briefly among the many others of the Roman Catholic Jubilee year of 1600. Quoting from contemporaneous letters and reports that describe the "most saintly fashion" in which Beatrice had died and the way in which she had "moved all Rome to compassion", Langdon's comment is on the emotional and spiritual fervour of the time:

> Beatrice seemed to have attained sanctity through suffering, and her story began to merge with those of the Roman martyrs. … Vialardi described how 'All the populace ran to weep over the body until midnight, and to put lighted candles around it (*Caravaggio: A Life* 162).

Of Caravaggio's work she records simply that "the themes of martyrdom and violent death appeared" but sets the date of "St Catherine of Alexandria" earlier than Robb, at around 1598-99. While she, too, asserts that the model for the painting is the courtesan Fillide Melandroni and infers that Caravaggio had "tried to imagine [Catherine] in his own violent times", and that "she is a disturbingly modern and real woman", Langdon draws back from imputing to the painter any motive of subversion. Like Robb, she does use the execution to trace the source of horrifying realism and immediacy in Caravaggio's depiction of the beheading in his "Judith and Holofernes" of the same period. But she further vitiates what for Robb is Caravaggio's subversive singularity by noting that another contemporary young painter, Artemisia Gentileschi, as well as playwrights and poets, appear to have been affected imaginatively by the horror of the Cenci execution.

For Robb, M is a subversive, unable to believe in the abstractions of Catholicism and denying salvation by emphasising human violence, pain and suffering. Of M's increasingly intense use of spatial darkness in his later paintings, he writes:

> Darkness was the dream medium in which the images swam. Darkness smoothed and obscured the illogic that linked things in the mind. The conniving gloom of a Roman chapel suggested and enhanced the darkness of the mind and the darkness of the world (281).

Gustaw Herling, in contrast, opines that Caravaggio's

> handling of chiaroscuro is considered a way of revealing the invisible. At the same time it is a form of veiling the visible with mystery. Caravaggio's chiaroscuro throbs with the need to make religious sensitivity and imagination part of the commonplace and to dramatize them tangibly in life.'(Herling 167)

If such "religious sensitivity" and a spiritual dimension in the paintings are absent from Robb's account, they are displaced by his focus on human dramas and subtexts of homo-eroticism. The paintings are, according to Robb, "M's great secret" in which he "laid bare his own psyche and his own susceptibilities with a touching frankness and courage" (5). Accordingly Robb's descriptions of the paintings constitute the primary strategy by which he takes us into "the darkness of the mind" of his subject.

Although he makes assertions such as "M wasn't happy" (41),'or (of "Francis & Angel") "M's erotic take on saintly ecstasy was an analogue to the mute longings of his Mario paintings" (78), Robb does not put words into M's mouth, directly or in free indirect discourse, as in a novel. Instead, the paintings are recreated verbally in a striking mixture of vulgar locutions and sentential precision, and are used to locate M in a mental landscape of coarse irreverence yet artistic sensitivity. For example, the year of "Love the Winner", painted for Vincenzo Giustiani in 1602, is "the year of the nude boy Cecco" and "joyous untrammelled energy", "the year M thought he could get away with anything" (195, 198). Of the painting itself Robb writes:

> M's still life – the violin, the lute, the music, the armour, the coronet, the set square and the compass, the pen, the manuscript and the bay leaves, the great globe itself, glinting with goldleaf stars under the boy's soft bum – was exquisite, as good as anything he'd done, but not enough to draw eyes away from the grinning boy. His eagle's wings were formidable, but the dark predator's feathers only set off the bare skin and pliable body. The frontal nude with his legs spread made you look at him alone. The painting afforded no other resting place for

> the eyes. Prepubescent Love filled most of the canvas with his compact torso and his immature dick was the painting's inescapable visual focus (191-2).

At other times the effect is more ribald, a travesty of official church discourses about the saints and martyrs, as in the following descriptions of "John in the wild II", commissioned by Ciriaco Mattei for the name saint of his eldest son:

> Mattei got M's *owne boy* filling the canvas in a state of full frontal nudity – at least in the sense of exposed genitals, though he was twisting around from sideways on – grinning out over his shoulder in a maturer and more insolently sexy way than he'd grinned as Love (199).

> John in the wild was the unlikeliest religious painting ever done and went on confusing people forever over what it was of. The lamb of God being a randy old ram and John's usual cross nowhere to be seen didn't help. It was a one in a million coincidence of the moment of sexual exultancy and the peak of avant garde notoriety. The taunting irreligious fuck me John for the doting Matteis was a one off hit. (204)

The language here is reminiscent of the vulgar but more grotesque speech by which characters transgress religious orthodoxy in Friedrich Schiller's notoriously anti-clerical play, *Die Räuber* (1781), itself often closely linked to the subversive nature of late eighteenth-century *Schauerromane* and English Gothic novels.[4] Moreover, when described in such terms, as if this were the painter's intention or motivation, the painting becomes in some sense a counterfeit. Its status is not unlike that of the portrait, supposedly of the Madonna, but really of the seductive and treacherous Matilda, which hangs in Ambrosio's cell in Lewis's *The Monk,* and which stirs in the monk 'impure thoughts" of kissing the holy virgin's mouth and pressing his lips to her "snowy bosom"(Lewis, 41).

On occasion, Robb's excursions into M's subversive mentality do approach free indirect style and are humorous, as in the following vignette:

> What made M see Saul so differently now? A look at Annibale Carracci's altarpiece. This was the painting his own had to cohabit with, and like M's first Saul, Carracci's painting was bright, packed, solid, energetic. Its strong sculptural design made it all the harder not to see that the whole thing was deeply, truly inane – the virgin breaststroking her way upward through the air with a slight smirk on her face, eyeballs rolling heavenward, half a dozen bodiless winged heads of bellcheeked cherubs peeping out beneath her armpits and feet (161).

But the transgression suggested can also be much darker, as in M's time in Naples in 1607 when for a short time "physical pain became strangely congenial to M's art … cutting into a new and strange vein of private feeling" (394). In a discussion of five or six closely related paintings of Christ or Sebastian showing "a powerfully sculptural male being tortured by a couple of workmen", Robb focuses on "The Whipping", painted for the family chapel of the De Franchis.

> this painting no longer pretended to be a drama … thugs and victim were left alone in their intimacy. … The massive inertia of Christ's pale torso held the incipient violence in check. The whole thing was so perfectly balanced – giving and taking, acting and suffering, pain and pleasure that the beating seemed voluptuously suspended in the darkness, taken out of time, as your eye moved slowly round its anticlockwise circuit (395-6).

By placing the encoding of sexual themes at the heart of so many of M's paintings, Robb keeps in view the painter's supposed continuing tension with and subversion of the Church's ideological demands for pious iconography and the idealisation of pain and death in religious art. The painter's sensibility is by this means, too, made anachronistically gay, a term employed on occasion by the author *avant la lettre*.

M's supposed sexually fulfilling and ongoing relationship with the Cecco, his boy model for "Love the Winner", is also central to the narrative. According to Robb, the facts that M was erotically drawn to boys and treated his own erotic feelings in his art were unproblematic for his contemporaries unless they wanted to use them to their advantage against him in a vicious libel trial or explain the dazzling vividness of "Love the Winner" with gossip about the model. Nothing in people's sex lives had actually changed except that, with an Inquisition increasingly attentive to matters of personal morality, people found it too dangerous to talk about sex of any kind. After M had killed Ranunccio Tomassoni, by wounding him in the groin in a brawl, his "unfortunate fate of being known as a painter assassin, the killer genius and gay icon had nothing to do with his private life and everything to do with the startling freshness of his art "(327). Pain and male nudity were ubiquitous in painting but usually went unremarked, "until M did a naked boy or an old man being murdered". Then, suddenly, it was as if people were seeing them for the first time because

> M never made that furtive concealed masochistic identification of sex and pain that ran like a central nerve through the religious art of the time – even the mimed rape in his second Isaac & Abraham was frankly violent and openly sexual (327-8).

In sum, according to Robb,

> Being frank about sex in repressive times was what made M first a shocking and later an iconic figure. … There was nothing unusual about M's sexuality or the way it was reflected in his art. … Repression made the art and the life sexually daring and subversive (328-9).

Clearly, Robb's main strategy for achieving M's interiority assumes that the paintings "reflect" the

painter's reality, including his psychological states, such as sexual longing or fulfilment, suffering, guilt, fear and dread – all intense emotions or heightened states of mind characteristic of heroic victims and villains in Gothic novels. In particular, M's turbulent state as a hunted man after killing Tomassoni in May 1606 is tied to the increasingly dark strain of violence and suffering which Robb perceives in M's painting.

To explain the killing itself, Robb sifts through political complications and the conflicting reports found in *avvisi* and other records to conclude that M was being menaced and stalked by the thuggish, pro-Spanish Tomassoni, until finally he was "bailed up and fought his way out", though not before being himself severely wounded in the head (341). Nevertheless, however obnoxious the twenty-three year old Tomassoni might have been, the thought that he has killed a man continues to haunt M:

> M had to think of himself as a killer, and nothing in his life and art from now on would give grounds for believing he was ever less than appalled. Or that the awareness ever left him (349).

The episode also leaves M with a price on his head. In his absence, the painter was placed under *bando capitale,* which meant that anyone within the territory covered by the court's jurisdiction had the right to kill him, with the option of severing his head and presenting it to the judge to claim the reward offered. But custom had made it also possible that he could be killed while on the run in a foreign territory, or seized and brought back to Rome for the same punishment without trial. While Helen Langdon retreats from the long term implications of what she acknowledges to be "a truly terrible sentence" by commenting on the "deep ambiguities over Caravaggio's status" that have remained problematic for researchers (*Caravaggio: A Life* 162), Robb's M becomes irrevocably a *bandito*, whose ignominious image and details can be displayed in public places to invite strangers

to kill him and collect the reward. Like any purveyor of horror Gothic, Robb dwells on the chilling and gruesome (346-7) before thickening his plot with mysteries and a sense of M's "own impending fate"(421).

In contradistinction to other art historians, Robb also identifies this fearful time as the date for M's painting of "the most intimate and desolating work he'd ever do"--"David II", a painting of the young boy David holding Goliath's severed head, "not as a victory offering but staring down with a tragic regret".[5] The head, "appallingly human in death", is uncannily M's own and the boy holding it out in sorrow is Cecco who, in real life now seventeen and also a victim of the violence, is conjectured as having accompanied M into hiding. Moreover, when Robb tells us that in "David", "M painted his own wanted poster" (p. 356), he does more than attribute to the painter a dark wit amidst his anguish. Robb's *concetto* constitutes a narrative strategy that changes the dynamic of our reading. Emplotted in this way at this point, the painting of David/Cecco and Goliath/M resonates uncannily in the manner of revelatory portraits found in many Gothic tales dating back to Walpole, by hinting at a dark ironic secret. Perhaps M's "owne boy"-- or a boy -- will be the painter's undoing. Robb thereby sets the pace for his opening and filling of hermeneutic gaps once his M is on the run, not only from papal justice but from an unidentified enemy on Malta as well.

The Gothic novelistic momentum of Robb's final chapters can be gauged by again comparing his treatment of key events with that of Helen Langdon. Concluding her account of the highly coloured sequence of events that took place during Caravaggio's time on Malta, Langdon once more acknowledges a legacy of problems for the historian. The order of events appears comparatively straightforward: Caravaggio's arrival on the island with the galleys of the Order of St John and reception into the illustrious Order as a Knight of Ubidienza (obedience) through special

papal authorisation, his painting of the portrait of the Grand Master, "Alof de Wignacourt", for which he was rewarded by Wignacourt with the Cross of Malta, his huge painting of "The Beheading of John the Baptist" for the Oratory of the Cathedral of St John in Valletta, and his enjoyment of the rewards, pleasures and rich lifestyle of a cosmopolitan society. But the cause of Caravaggio's sudden reversal of fortune is made puzzling by the vagueness of her source, Bellori, who simply reports that

> because of his tormented nature, he lost his prosperity and the support of the Grand Master. On account of an ill-considered quarrel with a noble knight, he was jailed and reduced to a state of misery and fear. In order to free himself he was exposed to grave danger, but he managed to scale the prison walls at night to flee unrecognised to Sicily, with such speed that no one could catch him (*Caravaggio: A Life* 360)

By taking secret flight, Caravaggio had breached a rule of the Order. In consequence, he was deprived of his habit *in absentia* and "thrust forth like a rotten and fetid limb", an event duly recorded. But the crime that had caused his imprisonment was not at any point mentioned; nor was Carravaggio's name amongst those on a list of crimes committed by Knights of the Order in that year. Robb, unwilling to leave this gap unfilled, and casting doubt on Bellori's "subtly moralizing version of M", exercises a Gothic hermeneutics of suspicion with the question:

> What if the very noble knight were Wignacourt himself (436)?

On the strength of his reading of the "intense interest" in the outward gaze (i.e. towards the painter) of Wignacourt's young page in M's portrait of the Grand Master (415-6), Robb postulates that "sex with a page would have been the ultimate outrage" and that "maybe M had bedded one of Wignacourt's favourite boys" (437-8). It is a hypothesis that will eventually link together, in the

manner of Gothic and offspring detective novels, M's strange fear in Sicily whence he fled from Malta, the murderous attack made on him later in Naples, and "the impenetrable mysteries" (489) of his remote death on the way back to Rome.

To explain M's spasm of rage in Messina when he reputedly slashed to ribbons his newly painted canvas of "Lazarus raised", Robb emphasises the stress and fear driving the painter's aggression, and that his patron and acquaintances were unaware that he was "a hunted man in danger of his life". Fear is used also to account for his carelessness about his dress, his sleeping in his clothes with his dagger at his side, his distraction, restlessness, itinerant life, and the rapid, fluid, "oneiric" or "hallucinatory'"qualities of his brushwork at this time (p. 449). Midway through Chapter 19, the narrator builds suspense with statements such as "the darkest mystery was what happened now" (p. 469); and again, as M prepares to leave Naples for Rome, that "forces were gathering around M and it wasn't clear how far M himself was aware of what was going on" (p. 470)' In fine detail Robb speculates how "the likely forces working to aid M were intimately bound up with the hostile ones working to destroy him" (471). Chapter 20 opens dramatically with the statement

> M disappeared. No hard evidence ever came to light about what happened to him (479).

But by close ratiocination, Robb trawls through the many possibilities he perceives in a culture of silence, intrigue and conspiracy to assert that:

> M's enemy from Malta found him at last (485).

This claim contrasts greatly with the brief official accounts by Caravaggio's contemporaries,

Baglione and Bellori, which Robb interrogates but Langdon accepts. As recounted by Langdon, in the summer of 1610, Caravaggio left the Palazzo Cellamare in Naples, the residence of his protector the Marchese Costanza, to return by felucca to Rome where he was assured of a pardon from the Pope. He travelled with a safe conduct from Cardinal Ferdinando Gonzaga. However, when the felucca put in at a tiny coastal port, he was arrested, perhaps by mistake, and imprisoned in an isolated fortress castle. By the time he had bought his way out, his boat had set sail with his belongings, including his paintings destined for Cardinal Scipio Borghese, nephew to the Pope. In a frenzy, Caravaggio had followed the boat up the coast on foot, but in the desolate malaria infested swamps of the region became ill with fever and died, possibly in an infirmary at Porto Ercole. The last postulate, recently confirmed by researchers (Graham-Dixon, *Caravaggio* 428-431), Robb perceives as a cover-up.

Ultimately it is for his predilection for boys and unspeakable crime that Robb has M surreptitiously persecuted, ambushed and murdered on the lonely beach somewhere between Naples and Rome -- perhaps decapitated or strangled, sewn into a sack and thrown into the sea (489-90) – and most likely on the orders of Alof de Wignacourt with the collusion of the papacy and, reluctantly, M's long-time protectors the Colonna family. As one reviewer remarked, it is "a terrific ending" (Farkas). One might also add that it is an indubitably Gothic closure, with elements of intrigue, revenge, abjection, punishment and the uncanny fulfilment of M's worst fears as bodied forth in his paintings, especially his "David and Goliath". In narrative terms, it is multiply-determined.

Today's readers of biography want palpable presence – reality effects and the experience of "getting inside the subject's mind". But this cannot be done if personal documents, such as diaries,

journals and letters by the biographee do not exist. So the historical biographer may choose to focus on writing a cultural history of the subject, which, of itself, can be most illuminating. Defending his "provisional construct made out of fragments", against Langdon's complaint about his reliance on Bassani and Bellini's *Caravaggio assassino,* Robb has argued that "her 'entirely orthodox' religious painter is no less tendentious a construct than [his] radical realist drawn to boys".[6] To the extent that all reconstruction of a past life is a narrative construction discursively mediated by an "inescapably situated" historian, one can agree. However the biographer's desire to achieve a satisfying and conclusive coherence and be rhetorically persuasive can lead to the casting of events in the mode of a particular narrative genre. And this in turn can leave readers feeling uneasy that both story and meaning have been imposed on events, rather than drawn from them. This is especially the case if, as in the case of Robb, the biographer refuses to accept that not everything is susceptible to reconstruction. Historians are, after all, justified in arguing that "if you lack the evidence, you should face the fact"(Hume 119), or as Langdon puts it, "dead voices must be allowed to keep their silences too".

One way of dealing with the problem could be to decline to call such cultural histories "biography" – as indeed, *post facto,* Robb himself has actually done in interviews.[7] Another point to consider is Martin Jay's, that "it is not so much the subjective imposition of meaning, but rather the intersubjective judgement of meanings that matters"(Jay 105). Biographies, like any histories, are only as persuasive as they are deemed to be by the community of historians who read them; and review of the plausibility of Robb's (re)constructions by art and other historians is already well under way.[8] For example, Graham-Dixon has called Robb's book a "quasi biography" and his conspiracy theory about the murder of M "fanciful" (*Caravaggio* 489, n. 152). If, on balance, Robb's Gothic bio-novel still gains more lasting popular approbation than vilification, it is because

M remains not only compulsively readable, but also in some way authenticates for its fans, as did late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Gothic novels for contemporaneous devotees, their sense of themselves and their culture.

Endnotes

[1] One exception is Sewell who, in a notoriously scathing review finds nothing to praise: 'Manic and meandering, masquerading as a monument of scholarship, … this useless prolix book deserves only to be pulped'. Another is Januszczak who writes, 'This astonishingly awful book does nothing right.' Cahn writes that ' " Caravaggesque" provocations, vulgarity, neologisms, colloquial jargon, Australian slang, and smart-alecky allusions mar the verve of Robb's prose.' Gayford alludes to Robb's 'breezy style'.

[2] Bassani and Bellini had claimed that their work was based on new documents that Bassani had discovered in the criminal archives of Rome and confirmed by reference to other documents from the Vatican library. But their claims were invalidated in Rome a year after their book's publication. In a letter to the editor of *Times Literary Supplement*, Helen Langdon drew attention to the scandalous exposure of Bassani and Bellini's publication by the archivist, Sandro Corradini, as 'based on non-existent sources and genuine material to which names, and incidents have been added.' Although Corradini's findings were presented at a conference in Rome in 1995, Robb does not allude in M to the controversy they caused. Langdon writes at greater length about what she sees as the adverse effect of the findings of Bassani and Bellini on Caravaggio studies generally, in her review in *The Burlington Magazine, w*hile Ingrid Rowland also alludes to the controversy in her review of *M.*

[3] Ravitch calls it a 'gripping narrative', Farkas, a 'gripping tale' Bell enthuses that *M* is 'a great read: it grabs, it kicks, it lives', while Jenkins comments that '… Robb offers a thriller-ish and persuasive tale'. Campbell writes: 'He [Robb] has succeeded in bringing the artist back to life…' and Gayford, despite seeing *M* as 'breathtakingly self-indulgent', allows that 'there are pages on which Caravaggio really does seem to move and snarl again.' Morton also concludes that 'as a study of a turbulent man in turbulent times, *M* is hard to beat' and Sharkey argues that 'the energy of [Robb's] subject is matched by prose that leaps off the page.' Only John McDonald comments on its generic mix, claiming that *M* 'marks the birth of an entirely new genre: a blend of biography,

art history and belles-lettres, written with the urgency of a detective novel'.

[4] For a discussion of the reception of Schiller's *Die Räuber* in England and the threat its profanity was considered to pose to religious and ideological orthodoxy, see Peter Mortensen, 'Robbing The Robbers: Schiller, Xenophobia and the Politics of British Romantic Translation' *Literature and History*, 11, 1, Spring 2002, 41-61.

[5] Langdon sets the date of 'David with the Head of Goliath' at 1609, shortly before Caravaggio's death, and explains its eroticism in terms of its biblical context: "David's gaze is tender, and the two are bound up in a relationship with erotic resonance, underlined by the phallic sword. In the biblical story David's relationship with Goliath is homoerotic; and the word David means beloved." However, she also perceives the head as that "of the artist left for dead at the Cerriglio [in Naples], wounded beyond recognition" and of "an artist with reason to imagine his own execution," as well as "a darkly witty conceit" (384). Hibbard, who also dates the painting provisionally at 1609-10, reads the self-portrait as 'an explicit self-identification with Evil—and with a wish for punishment' (262).

[6] See Robb's resourceful reply to Langdon in his letter to the editor of the *Times Literary Supplement.* Langdon's letter to the editor of the *TLS* was written in response to the review of *M* by Alan Jenkins in the *TLS.*

[7] See Canning, where Robb is quoted as saying, "I told the Australian publisher it was simply 'a book about Caravaggio. I didn't plan it as a life at all.''' In an item in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 March, 2000, p. 3, about his acceptance of the National Biography Award, Robb is also reported as having asked his publisher specifically not to classify the book as biography. His own comments, upon receiving the award, also included the following statement: 'Conventional biography tends to accumulate the external facts but take the art, the inner life for granted. It dodges the crucial questions about why this person created this art.'

[8] See Rowland, Spurling, and Langdon, *Burlington Magazine.* For consideration of Helen Langdon's claim that Robb has been 'severely damaged by the trap' of *Caravaggio assassino*, see the article by Luke Slattery.

In a *Reuters* report from Rome by Shasta Darlington, 21 December 2001, Guiseppe La Fauci, a researcher and architect, was reported to have found 'a scrap of paper on which the priest originally recorded Caravaggio's death before transcribing it into a ledger.' 'The document reads: "On July 18, 1609 in the S. Maria Ausiliatrice hospital Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, painter, died of illness.' Due to a difference in the calendar at that time, that puts his death as July 18, 1610.' However, Graham-Dixon in his biography of Caravaggio (481, n. 157), writes that this "death certificate … is entirely inconsistent with the manner in which deaths were conventionally noted down in Porto Ercole – i.e. as entries in the book of deaths. I am sure the document is a forgery".

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