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| **Copyright © 1999 Journal of Criminal Justice and Popular Culture All rights reserved. ISSN 1070-8286**  *Journal of Criminal Justice and Popular Culture*, 6(3) (1999) 67-82  **Caravaggio: The Violent Enlightenment**  By  S. Giora Shoham Tel Aviv University  Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio was born either on September 28 1573, as one authority has it, [[1](http://www.albany.edu/scj/jcjpc/vol6is3/shoham.html" \l "one)] or between September and December 1571, according to another biographer. [[2](http://www.albany.edu/scj/jcjpc/vol6is3/shoham.html" \l "two)] Either way, he was Gesualdo's contemporary. Since he was very fond of *madrigalli* and *canzoni*, he was quite probably playing, singing or humming some of the madrigals of the prince of Venosa. Caravaggio spent his early childhood in Lombardy, and was apprenticed about the age of 12 to a mediocre Milanese painter, Simone Peterzano, from whom he learned the basics of mixing paints, choosing brushes and constructing frames.  After some years of apprenticeship in Milan, Michelangelo Caravaggio left for Rome. The first years in the capital were hard, meager and grim. At first, Caravaggio was employed by a Sicilian painter, Lorenzo, for whom he worked long hours for a pittance. Afterwards, he was engaged by the miserly Monsignor Pandolfo Pucci. Caravaggio nicknamed him 'Monsignor Insalata,' because all he fed his employee was vegetable salad. [[3](http://www.albany.edu/scj/jcjpc/vol6is3/shoham.html" \l "three)] At about that time he became seriously ill and was hospitalized in Santa Maria della Consolatione, where he stayed quite a while; it was there that he painted some of his earlier works, including, quite probably, *Bacchino Malato*, the sick Bacchus, with himself as model.  Towards the end of the sixteenth century, Cardinal Del-Monte bought Caravaggio's painting "[The Cardsharps](http://www.albany.edu/scj/jcjpc/vol6is3/cardsharps.html)", and subsequently invited Caravaggio to join the homosexual menagerie of young musicians and painters that he kept in his mansion. Caravaggio's homosexual preferences are evident from his paintings, and are known from other independent sources. We also have ample evidence of the painter's quarrelsome, violent sword and predilection for brawling. He had the psychopathic trait of ever looking for stimuli, be they creative or merely sensation-rousing. He would throw stones at his landlady, hurl artichokes at a waiter, and fight a notary at Piazza Navona, over the amorous attentions of a woman. [[4](http://www.albany.edu/scj/jcjpc/vol6is3/shoham.html" \l "four)] Caravaggio killed one Ranuccio Tomassoni after a quarrel in a ball game. This happened in 1606, after which he was banished from Rome. In all likelihood, his journey from Milan to Rome in 1592 was actually a flight following a murder he committed. His short fuse and pathological need to seek violence and dispute landed him in trouble all his life. Oftentimes he abused and assaulted his benefactors. Consequently, he was frequently obliged to flee from one place to the other, and even his death was the result of a skirmish.  In August 1603, the painter Baglione sued Caravaggio for disseminating defamatory poems about him. The courts decided for the plaintiff and **[End page 67]** Caravaggio was jailed. He was released by the intervention of the French ambassador since he was engaged in painting the side-wall of the Contarelli Chapel in the church of San Luigi dei Francesi. In October 1604, he was arrested again for assaulting a police officer, and in 1605 he injured a lawyer in the face and fled to Genoa. After his banishment from Rome, following the murder of a ball-game partner, he fled to Naples and thence to Malta. He was made a Knight of the Maltese Order of St. John, only to be expelled from it following his offending the Grand Master. He fled to Sicily, was fatally wounded in Naples, and died in Civita Vecchia on the 18th of July, 1610. This history of murder, assault and courting of violence would shame many a violent psychopath in a contemporary maximum-security prison. Indeed, we hypothesize, by a rather problematic *post-facto* inference, that Caravaggio suffered from an ever hungry, insatiable 'black-hole' personality.  The 'Black-Hole' Personality  We will now state the main points of our personality theory, which is at the basis of our exposition of the 'black hole' personality. We begin with the personality core. The scaffolding of the personality core comprises two vectors, those of participation and separation. By participation, we mean the identification of Ego with a person(s), an object, or a symbolic construct outside the self, and the individual's striving to lose his separate identity by fusion with this other object or symbol. Separation is the opposite vector. These opposing vectors of unification-fusion and separation-isolation have been used as the main axis of our personality theory in conjunction with three major developmental phases.  The first is the process of birth. The second is the crystallization of an individual ego by the molding of the "ego boundaries." The third phase, that of social separation, is a corollary of socialization, when one reaches one's "ego identity." [[5](http://www.albany.edu/scj/jcjpc/vol6is3/shoham.html" \l "five)] The strain to overcome the separating and dividing pressures never leaves the individual. The striving to partake of a pantheistic whole is ever present and takes many forms; if one avenue toward its realization is blocked, it surges out from another channel. Actual participation is unattainable by definition. The objective impossibility of participation is augmented by the countering separating vectors, both instinctual and interactive. At any given moment of one's life, there is a disjuncture, a gap, between the desires for participation and the subjectively defined distance from the participatory aims. We have denoted this gap the Tantalus Ratio; it is the relationship between the longed-for participatory goal and the distance from it as perceived by ego. [[6](http://www.albany.edu/scj/jcjpc/vol6is3/shoham.html" \l "six)] Sometimes this quest for congruity is directed against the limiting and dividing presence of the body itself. This necessitates the coming to grips with various homeostatic and defense mechanisms of the organism. **[End page 68]**  The intensity of the participation vectors may be graded in decreasing order as follows. First, the reversal of birth which is the most radical and would thus be linked to the various techniques of *unio mystica*, by the annihilation of the separate self; second, the dissolution of the ego boundary, which might result in insanity and autistic schizophrenia in extreme cases; third, the neutralization of the socio-normative separation which might display itself in crime and social deviance. Although our examples of participation happen to be deviant, since this is our subject matter in the present context, most attempts at participation are legitimate and institutionalized. For instance, the quest for the expression of creativity in any field is an institutionalized outlet for participation in the ontological sphere. The deviant counterparts to these normative attempts at ontological participation are retreatism, drug addiction, autism, suicide, and other modes of self-destruction. In some forms of schizophrenia, the patient "lets go," for he does not wish any more to hold on to his ego boundary, which was crystallized for him by his relevant others.  The normative avenues for religious participation in modern Western culture are, sadly, scarce. Consequently, many contemporary modes of participation are basically alternatives to mysticism. Love is the institutionalized melting down of partitions between individuals. This participation through affect has been considered by Sartre as an ontological impossibility while Buber considered this fusion of souls as possible for some time, through a meaningful dialogue between Ego and Alter.  When the developmental stage we wish to revert to is an early one, the closer we aim to partake of the pantheistic togetherness of early orality and the unity of omnipresence *in utero*. Hence, our congruity in our interaction with our physical and social surroundings is determined by our bio- psychological longing to revert back to our earlier bio-psychological phases of development.  Another basic premise of our theory is the fixation of separant and participant personality types. These are related to the crystallization of a separate self out of the pantheistic mass of totality, at either early or later orality. This is the ontological baseline by which the non-self (the object) defines the self. The coagulation of the self marks the cut-off for the most basic developmental dichotomy, from birth and early orality to the phase where the ego boundary is formed around the emerging individual separatum, and from later orality onwards. In the first phase, any fixation that might evolve, and thus imprint some character traits on the developing personality, is not registered by a separate self capable of distinguishing between the (external) objects that are the source of the fixation-causing trauma and the self as its recipient. The experiencing entity is a non-differentiated pantheistic totality. On the other hand, if the traumatizing fixation occurs at the later oral phase, after the objects have expelled the self from their togetherness by a depriving **[End page 69]** interaction with it, the self may well be in a position to attribute the cause of pain and deprivation to its proper source, that is the objects. Therefore, a personality typology is proposed that is anchored on this developmental dichotomy of pre-and post-differentiation of the self. The molding process is the nature and severity of fixation, which in turn determines the placement of a given individual on the personality type continuum. The types themselves are fixated by developmental chronology, the participant at pre- differentiated early orality, and the separant after the formation of the separate self. The participant core personality vector, however, operates with varying degrees of potency on both these personality types; but the quest for congruity manifests itself differently with each polar personality type. The participant aims to achieve congruity *inter alia*, by defacing and annihilating the self, melting back, as it were, into the object and thereby achieving the pantheistic togetherness and non-differentiation of early orality. The separant type, on the other hand, aims to achieve congruity by overpowering or swallowing the object. We have denoted the congruity aims of the self-effacing participant as exclusion. The object-devouring separant wishes to achieve congruity by inclusion, that is, incorporating the object in the outreaching self.  We have also conceptualized three components of the personality as related to object relationships and interaction with other human beings as follows: The *Ity* is the overall coordinating ego function of the whole personality and represents the daily encounters of the self with his surroundings. Ego's dyadic encounter with alter on the *Ity* level would be the most shallow one of routine formality and impersonal interaction. A deeper level of encounter is related to the *Atzmi*, the separant interactive component of the self. The *Atzmi*, motivated by the separant core personality vector to be deeply involved with the object, represents the dialogic level of encounter. Finally, the *Ani*, the participant core component of the self, represents the deepest level of encounter where ego aims to fuse with the object. We hypothesize the crystallization of the separate self vis-á-vis his object and other relationships as follows.  At the very early oral stage, described by Freud as primary narcissism, by Fairbairn as "mouth ego with a breast," and by us as omnipresent pantheism, the mouth feeds on (empties) the breast and is temporarily content. However, disturbances in feeding and other related irritations generate the agony of want and pains of anxiety. Therefore any pain, anxiety, and want that occur must be in me, and only in me, because I am omnipresent and there is nothing except the mouth-anchored me. Consequently, a fixation at the early oral phase results in the registration of a painful wanting (bad) me and a nourishing (good) something somewhere in the vague uncharted outside of me, which is, at this stage of awareness, outside of everything. This is the participant extreme of the child axis and in the following paragraph we shall describe the other extreme of the continuum. **[End page 70]**   |  | | --- | | Figure 1 http://www.albany.edu/scj/jcjpc/figures/shlomo1.jpg |   At the other extreme of the child axis is the good self, surrounded by the bad object (mother). The later oral stage of development is characterized by a partial differentiation of the infant from the mother and the development of ambivalence towards her, manifested, *inter alia*, by the child's biting of the breast in moments of aggression. The emerging separation of the self due to the deprivational interaction with mother creates an easily accessible source, and a sequential explanation, of the frustrations, deprivations, and anxieties of the infant. The non-caring, non-feeding mother who is already separate from the suffering (good) me is all- apparent and very often in front of the child's mouth. This location of responsibility is accentuated by the vengeful bite. [[7](http://www.albany.edu/scj/jcjpc/vol6is3/shoham.html" \l "seven)]  The child axis in our paradigm ranges from the "good me," surrounded by a "bad object," to the "bad me" surrounded by a "good object." This axis is based on our continuum of fixations at the early oral or later oral stages. Fixations at the early oral stage affect the omnipresent self before it has been differentiated from the pantheistic mass, which includes both himself and his environment. Consequently, every trauma, each deprivational interaction with his mother or mother-surrogate or any painful encounter with the elements, is still perceived as happening within the non-differentiated self. It should be stressed that because of the infant's inability to differentiate between himself and the object, whatever happens, it must happen within its infinite and timeless self. There is, however, a certain relationship to a nondescript, amorphous "outside," which does provide nourishment and protection, but which is not always available when needed. This good object stands for the breast-mother and its surrogate. The inward directed aggressions of the "bad me" early oral-fixated child are contrasted by the outward directed aggressions of the "good me" type, which is differentiated at the later oral stage when a clear focus for external aggression can be identified.  The mother axis, ranging from the neglecting to the rejecting mother/mother-surrogate, has been documented theoretically by Bowlby. [[8](http://www.albany.edu/scj/jcjpc/vol6is3/shoham.html" \l "eight)] If the mother or mother-surrogate is absent or neglectful, and the child is predisposed to an inner negativity, the interactional trends could be as follows. A fairly strong interaction with the object-mother is necessary at the early oral stage of non-differentiation for the ego boundary to be generated and covered with enough scar tissue in order to be sustained. If the mother is absent, neglecting or indifferent, the child may be badly traumatized from a very early age. A neglecting mother might let her infant cry to exhaustion, not hurry to protect him from the elements, and let him bump into hard objects. Consequently, the chances of the child being fixated (i.e., traumatized) at the early stage are much greater. **[End page 71]**  A more developed paradigm as related both to "normal" and predisposition to morbidity, depression and psychopathy is presented in the following diagram. The syndrome of pre-disposition to autism is much more likely to occur due to an interaction between a neglecting mother and an early oral-fixated child. As a direct corollary to this kind of mother-child interaction, the autistic predisposition is related to a life-long hazy and amorphous ego boundary, which becomes vulnerable to any outside pressure or trigger which may catalyze the onset of morbidity. The relative indifference of the autistic schizophrenic to outside stimuli is, therefore, both a syndrome and the outward evidence for the weakness of his ego boundary. His difficulty in differentiating between himself and the object is a measure of his indecision and uncertainty concerning the strength and direction of the stimuli transmitted to him.   |  | | --- | | Figure 2 Figure 2 |   The paranoiac reaction is explained by the "good me" surrounded by the bad object, which is linked to an interaction with a rejecting mother. We may expect more and stronger scar tissue to cover the nascent self in order to isolate it from the outside painful stimuli. This hypothetical model of the paranoiac pre-disposition is related to a later and post-oral fixation because the coagulation and the separation of the self happen here rather quickly. And because of stronger and more frequent injuries, the aggressive object is identified more readily, so that the differentiation between the "me" as a victim and the object as aggressor is more clearly perceived.  The psychopathic reaction in our paradigm is indeed only partially related to our scheme. In addition, the whole theoretical structure of psychopathy is rather hazy. [[9](http://www.albany.edu/scj/jcjpc/vol6is3/shoham.html" \l "nine)] We could even hypothesize that this type of reaction, which could be more meaningfully related to our paradigm, is what Cleckley calls the mask of sanity. [[10](http://www.albany.edu/scj/jcjpc/vol6is3/shoham.html" \l "ten)] He claims that psychopathy in its true form is a morbid syndrome covered by an outward fragile facade of partial sanity, which crumbles down under pressure when the individual experiences a severe shock. Indeed, the interaction of the "good me" with a neglecting mother leaves a rather inchoate interaction with the bad object, which is not as potent as the actual deprivational interaction with a present mother or its surrogate. The interaction with the bad object results, therefore, in a partial ego boundary in a sense that it has the outward appearances of a boundary but it is rigged and perforated by gaps, which make it vulnerable.  Finally, we have hypothesized the depressive reactions as linked to the interaction with a rejecting mother at the early oral stage. This produces a "bad me" surrounded by a good object. This is the ideal intro-punitive reaction and it is constantly reinforced by the aggressive object, whose authority to repress and depress the "bad me" is legitimized by the core personality structure, which **[End page 72]** imputes positivity to its surrounding objects vis-á- vis the negative self-concept.  The "normal" personality core would be related to a more central tendency of the core personality to be formed around the intersection of the axis where the mother tends to be more accepting and the fixations are not extreme. However, when fixations are extreme in both the early oral phase and the later oral phase, and the *Ity* coordination is rather faulty, due to a lack of socialization and an absence of dialogical child-parent relationship, the personality core would be bimodal with a marked partial "bad me," surrounded by a "good object," as well as a "good me" surrounded by a "bad object" core, with no coordinating linkage and psychological defenses between the two. We therefore have a kind of segmented schizoid personality as conceptualized by the British oralists [[11](http://www.albany.edu/scj/jcjpc/vol6is3/shoham.html" \l "eleven)], which marks a badly coordinated personality that tends to fluctuate between extreme moods. There is no strong socially interacting *Ity* to synchronize the two divergent core personality components. Hence, the center "does not hold" syndrome exists, which we will now describe.  The early oral fixation of a segmented schizoid personality would encourage a longing for the object, which is the movement of warm milk, food and well- being from the outside to the inside. The nascent core personality at this pantheistic stage would perceive deprivation and abuse by the parents as reinforcing the "bad me." This "bad me" will be cognitively perceived later on with the crystallization of the personality as an abysmal lack, a non-satiety which longs to be requited and filled up. Hence, this "black hole" of hunger and thirst aims to satisfy the ever augmenting desire for the absorption of the "good object." However, if the deprivation is continuous, as with Caravaggio after his father died when he was six, it would effect also a later oral fixation with a bad object, and so the paranoid part of the personality would also be apparent.  Caravaggio's mother was left with four children, the eldest barely six, for whom she had difficulty providing. She could well be described hypothetically as either a physically or mentally absent mother. Therefore, we have a combined insatiable quest for a "good object" to flow into the ever-augmenting 'black- hole,' coupled by a distrust and hatred of all the relevant others. Hence, the non-coordinated personality, with extremely fixated polarities and a gaping black hole in between, was progressively predisposed from infancy to absorb all stimuli which momentarily relieves want, pain and deprivation until hunger is generated again. This biological predisposition is, of course, complimented by the psycho-cognitive one since the oral attachment of all young primates to their parents, as shown by ethologists, is so strong that its deprivation by the parent exacerbates the 'black-hole' longing initially generated by the biological pre-disposition. **[End page 73]**  Caravaggio as a 'Black Hole' Personality  Having assumed that Caravaggio had an early childhood developmental fixation, which affected a 'black-hole' personality with an interactive *Atzmi* component and an early oral *Ani* participant component, without the coordinating *Ity* to hold them together, the symptomatology of our protagonist's character amply vindicates our assumption.  One can hardly find clear evidence for oral fixations even with contemporary cases, yet the outward manifestations of Caravaggio's 'black-hole' personality are solidly affirmed by his many biographies. He was constantly aggressive, even at great harm to himself. He had an 'internal saboteur.' Whenever things were going for him, an inner disrupter would 'decide' that they should not go for him, and he would get in a brawl, offend the powerful or hit a police officer, so that he would be arrested, banished, or forced to run for his life; yet all the time he was conscientious with his work, brilliant in its execution and quite punctual in meeting completion and delivery dates. [[12](http://www.albany.edu/scj/jcjpc/vol6is3/shoham.html" \l "twelve)]  *[The Death of the Virgin](http://www.albany.edu/scj/jcjpc/vol6is3/death-virgin.html)* and *[The Penitent Mary Magdalene](http://www.albany.edu/scj/jcjpc/vol6is3/marymag.html)*  Indeed, there seems to have been two persons within his body. One vain, uncontrollably aggressive, ever ready to start violent escapades; the other an authentic artist, scorning publicity and the aesthetically "in." *Niente belloto*, nothing beautiful, was his motto. [[13](http://www.albany.edu/scj/jcjpc/vol6is3/shoham.html" \l "thirteen)] Whenever he could, he would vie for self-expression in his art as against the expectation of the rich and powerful others, even if they were his patrons. This accounts also for his extreme originality, and for the extremism of whatever he did. His early paintings were in the Lombard tradition, but even then he rejected the manneristic style and made nature his model, for which he was badly criticized by adherents of the dominant trend to imitate (mimesis) the classics. He always rejected artistic convention, fads and fashion, following his inner convictions. In Rome, he was influenced by the Venetians Titian and Giorgione, but he was bolder in the expressionistic presentation of his subjects. He expressly exaggerated the foreshortening of his subjects, like the horse and the fallen apostle, so as to convey the tumultuous inner *psychomachia*, the inner struggle leading to the conversion of St. Paul. He despised the elitism of Raphael, and painted saints and apostles as common men. He enraged the church hierarchy and the artistic cliques by painting the dead Virgin modeled as an old, drowned whore, her body inflated and rigidified by *rigor mortis*. He empathized with the explosive violence of Tintoretto and admired Leonardo's *Last Supper*, which he might have studied in Milan. Yet, his *chiaro-scuro* is more extreme and dramatic than Leonardo's *sfumato*. Caravaggio's starkly contrasting shadows and the light flooding his accentuated subjects are extremely innovative since the illumination seems to come from nowhere, as if it sprouts from the inner self of the **[End page 74]** artist to trigger, maieutically, a torrent of light within the viewer's *psyche*.  This technique helped Caravaggio to achieve a most innovative effect in his religious paintings. The Counter-Reformation developed the powerful methods of practical mysticism, the sacralization of routines and the stratification of everyday life. One can see in the religious paintings of Caravaggio one such attempt at *enthousiasmos* in the Greek sense, of imbuing holy revelation into the vicissitudes of history. This was ordained by St. Ignatius de Loyola's *exercitia spiritualia*, and interpreted by Filippo Neri, a contemporary of Caravaggio, in Rome. [[14](http://www.albany.edu/scj/jcjpc/vol6is3/shoham.html" \l "fourteen)] The notion that one can seek salvation even through sin, provided one *sincerely repents*, exists in Caravaggio's art. We have mentioned Mary, the mother of God, depicted in death as a swollen cadaver of a whore. Caravaggio's *The Penitent Mary Magdalene* indeed conveys the excruciatingly painful transformation of a whore into a saint.  *[The Crucifixion of St. Peter](http://www.albany.edu/scj/jcjpc/vol6is3/st-peter.html)* and *[The Conversion of St. Paul](http://www.albany.edu/scj/jcjpc/vol6is3/st-paul.html)*  *The Crucifixion of St. Peter* depicts the dazed pain of an old peasant, who cannot bear to watch his torture, showing the peasant's bewilderment at his martyrdom. Nobody had before painted martyrs in such a humane and down-to-earth credibility, yet with a sublime resignation which lends an immediate aura of holiness to their suffering. Caravaggio depicts Christ as a peasant as well, which the historical Jesus most certainly was. Moreover, the horse in the painting of the dramatic conversion of St. Paul, which takes up most of the canvas, is a coarse, plebeian, peasant horse.  *St. Matthew and the Angel* (Destroyed in 1602)  The first version of the inspiration of St. Matthew shows a proletarian, barefoot peasant or artisan, visibly illiterate, since an angel guides his hand with the writing instrument on the open book. The exertion of writing is evident both in the heavy grasping of both the writing instrument and the book by the saint, as well as the painful twisting of the toes of his left foot. This conception of St. Matthew's revelation was violently criticized and rejected. Indeed, it was taken as an affront to an apostle who was presented as all but an illiterate peasant. Caravaggio withdrew this painting, and evidently had it destroyed. Later, he painted a more acceptable version of [St. Matthew and the angel](http://www.albany.edu/scj/jcjpc/vol6is3/st-matthew-angel.html).  Yet the first version is the more interesting one and a better clue toward an understanding of Caravaggio and his art. We have described Caravaggio's personality as disrupted by a 'black-hole,' so that it has two non-synchronized core parts: a participant 'bad me' surrounded by a 'good object', and a separant 'good me' surrounded by a 'bad object.' These two non- aligned components represent two different cognitive orientations. The separant stands for the experiential mythogenes of history and the participant for the **[End page 75]** mythogenes of longing for transcendence. The process of creativity, for Caravaggio, was also a therapeutic 'mending,' a 'tying up' of his disrupted personality components into meaningful coherence for at least the duration of the creative process. Hence, the historical figure of St. Matthew - - the coarse simpleton subject to the vicissitudes of the here and now -- is aligned with the angelic mythogenes of longing for *enthousiasmos* -- the descent of grace which would, eventually, transform the illiterate peasant into an apostle of God. Indeed, the light coming from 'nowhere,' from transcendence and, of course, from the painter's inner self, highlights St. Matthew and the angel, and floods both figures in a synchronic harmony which stands for the painter's own longing to patch up the violent rift in his person.  Of special importance is Howard Hibbard's observation that Caravaggio must have subscribed to the Pauline and Augustinian theology that divine grace and mercy are determined by God alone, irrespective of man's deeds. [[15](http://www.albany.edu/scj/jcjpc/vol6is3/shoham.html" \l "fifteen)] This view was prevalent in sixteenth century Rome, and was suitable for Caravaggio, who could murder, injure, insult and engage in pederasty, and yet believe he would receive God's grace. Moreover, the Counter-Reformation awarded supreme importance to the conformity to church authority. *Perinde ac cadaver*, obey like a corps, was the motto of the Jesuits. This mandate, decreed for political reasons, was again quite useful for the Borgia, Medici and Berberini Popes, who were all highly immoral, as well as for Cardinal Del-Monte and his homosexual entourage, including Caravaggio. One need not be moral, righteous, or of good deeds; the acceptance of the authority of the church is enough to fare God's grace. It would follow that God, too, need not be moral or righteous, or even comprehensible to humans, since his grace would by necessity be mediated through the authority of the church, which is through the pope, the infallible entity. Hence, God may be, and is, arbitrary. Hence, the crucifiers of St. Peter are performing their tasks in cold disinterest, serving an arbitrary God, who has forsaken His only begotten Son to die on the cross. "All my sins are mortal," uttered Caravaggio after having painted the beheading of St. John, [[16](http://www.albany.edu/scj/jcjpc/vol6is3/shoham.html" \l "sixteen)] implying that in the eyes of God, he is not a sinner and may yet obtain grace. What with God being cruel, harsh and arbitrary, as depicted in the sacrifice of Isaac, who knows that he is to be slaughtered and has no happy ending in store for him. Caravaggio's attitude towards transcendence is one of distrustful acceptance. One may achieve revelation, therefore, through a creative dialogue, but disaster may be meted out, time and again, without warning. This might well be the meaning of the horse's hoof aimed at St. Paul's head coincidental to the saint's revelatory conversion.  *[Head of Medusa](http://www.albany.edu/scj/jcjpc/vol6is3/medusa.html)*  The swashbuckling image of Caravaggio, as the cad about town hunting for his next victim, is skin deep. The inner Michelangelo Merisi was driven, frightened and sad. His self image as Medusa, the snake-coiffured queen of the Gorgons, shrieks fright and the **[End page 76]** excruciating pain of the stifling judgment by the generalized and specific others.  *[David with the Head of Goliath](http://www.albany.edu/scj/jcjpc/vol6is3/david-head-goliath.html)*  The same agony exudes from the severed head of Goliath, which is debauched and reflects an inner rot. This is Caravaggio's inability to ward off the stigmata hurled at him from all sides, a good part of which he knew to be justified; his fractured personality could not but cope with these stigmata in the only way it could; pass judgment on himself by means of his art. *David with the Head of Goliath*, another self-portrait, is an appeal for mercy on the severed head whose infernal agonies could have fared him some attenuating circumstances. Never has there been a more desperate attempt to bridge over an inner abyss by an artist through an endeavored dialogue between his disrupted core personality components.  *[The Martyrdom of St. Matthew](http://www.albany.edu/scj/jcjpc/vol6is3/st-matthew-martyr.html)*  Caravaggio must have considered himself a victim of hostile circumstances beyond his control and hence stemming from transcendence. This is apparent in *The Martyrdom of St. Matthew*, in which the old apostle lies on his back with his hands stretched in incomprehensible horror against his tormentor. Meanwhile, the painter himself peers from behind a column at this arbitrary cruelty. There are just a few steps from seeing oneself martyred by the depriving others/objects to perceiving oneself as the chosen, the anointed, the Christ as self-image. The notion of Christ as self-image is the most powerful role-model for projective identification. Our self as Christ being ever crucified in our daily tribulations is especially apt for the fiercely competitive, separant Occidental societies where indeed Christianity has been more readily adopted than in the participant, and less competitive, Oriental cultures. In the rapid rat- race of achievement-oriented cultures, the Christs are both the Sisyphean *arrivistes* and participant self- effacing individuals. The separant achiever is constantly crucified because there is ever an inevitable gap between his insatiable appetite for 'swallowing' the world (controlling his objective and human surroundings) and his actual achievement. Hence, the extra-punitive orientation of the *arriviste* is to blame his betrayal on the specific or generalized others. These betrayals legitimize his identification with the betrayed Christ.  The participant, on the other hand, is constantly taken advantage of. His self-effacing orientation *vis-á-vis* the carnivorous others, make him a natural and ready-made victim, yet his identification with Christ enables him to reinforce his sense of uniqueness and to perceive the assaults of the surrounding others as proof of it. The participant suffers the abuses of the others while constantly carrying his saving cross, which serves as a dignifying force-field and guards his sense of uniqueness. Moreover, the image of Christ carries the separant's unrealizable quest for his omnipotence in **[End page 77]** Christ's kingdom to come -- when the betrayed, 'the meek,' shall inherit the earth. This is the epitome of the achievers' wish fulfillment! 'Here I suffer but wait, I'll show you yet! When He comes I am going to overcome and prevail and subjugate all my betrayers.' The participant may also identify with the suffering Christ, because his self-effacing is an apt precursor to the partaking in the Godhead. This fantastic appeal of Christ as a self-image in separant cultures, where everyone, irrespective of his personality type, can find solace by identifying with Him, may account for the almost universal prevalence of Christ and his symbols.  The church was quick to realize His universal function in reinforcing both separant power and participant self-effacing meekness. Hence, His image lends credence, authority and benediction to all social institutions, churches and courts of law. Fighting knights and competing sportsmen bear his image. At birth, He is the first one to benedict the newborn, and He is the last one to accompany the soul and the body back to their origin.  *[The Taking of Christ](http://www.albany.edu/scj/jcjpc/vol6is3/taking-christ.html)*  The need to be martyred has both separant and participant connotations. The separant achiever, creative artist or scientist, when persecuted, hurt or blocked in his professional endeavors, can always reinforce his sense of choice by his martyrdom, stating that his enemies persecute him because they are jealous of his excellence, which they may well be. The creative innovators, when martyred by the institutional cliques, hunted by the power structures and blocked by individuals or groups whose vested interests are injured by their innovations, may find solace in history. They will bring to mind the cases of Galileo, Jordano Bruno, Van Gogh and many others whose persecution was partially derived from their genius, because their innovation was far-reaching enough to rock the boats of their persecutors. The martyrdom of the creative innovator thus reinforces his self-image as a creator of worth, and supports his claims to excellence by identifying with the martyrdom of other innovators and with the martyrdom of Christ, the archetypal religious innovator. *The Taking of Christ* portrays a gripping drama of the inevitability of betrayal by the other. Yet, this betrayal is a necessary step in the process of beautification. The embracing of Christ by Judas and the clutching of their hands indicates a partnership in the creation of a savior through betrayal. Jesus and Judas are partners in the creation of Christ, and Caravaggio peers with approval on the fatal embrace from the upper right hand corner of the canvas.  *[The Calling of St. Matthew](http://www.albany.edu/scj/jcjpc/vol6is3/st-matthew-calling.html)*  Caravaggio's inner revelation is affected by the painter, peering á la Narcissus at his reflection in the water. This self-contemplation makes for at least a temporary synchronization of his fractured self into a functional unit to carry out the creative mediation **[End page 78]** between self, artistic medium and viewers. Especially effective are Caravaggio's revelatory scenes depicting an *enthousiasmos* from transcendence via the inner self into objects, others and life-forms in history. The most striking example is *The Calling of St. Matthew*.  Christ stretches out his hand in a stylized limp gesture, not unlike Caravaggio's God stretching out his hand to the newly created Adam. This limp gesture forms a synaptic junction that allows for a maieutic flow of dialogue between God and man, transcendence and history. This is not a tactile, epistemic directive that is authoritarian and does not leave an independent, innovative leeway by man and within man. The incredulous 'who, me?' gesture of Matthew is both a sign of humility and unequivocal acceptance, since doubt is a dialectic which might lead to a higher awareness following a process of soul searching. Matthew's call for authentic *enthousiasmos* does not allow a negation, but only a short, inner conflict to come to terms with the flooding, revelatory light, which seems to emanate from the upper right hand corner; although from the glow on the saint's face, the illumination seems to sprout from within. There is, probably, no better portrayal of the synchronic, sacred time flowing from Christ through the mediation of St. Peter and flowing into and mingling with the profane diachronic time of Matthew, who is not yet beautified, since he has not yet accepted his divine calling.  However, the most innovative works of Caravaggio are the reflexive ones, in which the painter is both observer and observed, object and subject, within history and outside it. We shall comment on two of these reflexive paintings: *St. Francis in Ecstasy* and *David and Goliath*.  *[St. Francis in Ecstasy](http://www.albany.edu/scj/jcjpc/vol6is3/st-francis.html)*  In the first painting, both St. Francis and the angel have the same facial features, very similar to Caravaggio himself. This is a depiction of dialogue of the painter with his tortured self. It is a sublime effort of *enthousiasmos*, of the infusion of the angelic grace into the agonized face of the saint, aiming to extricate himself from his sore, inflicted body, and join his sacred alter ego in divine bliss. In this painting Caravaggio lets us know that his only chance to bridge over his internal abyss, his 'black- hole,' is through the inner 'mending' of his art, linking miraculously both history and transcendence with himself as the arena in which this *coincidentia oppositorum* takes place.  *[David and Goliath](http://www.albany.edu/scj/jcjpc/vol6is3/david-goliath.html)*  With *David and Goliath*, we have a fusion of the two types of time. The diachronic time of Caravaggio's Goliath, ravaged by the temporal hazards of drink, drugs, sex and violence; and the pure sacred time of Caravaggio's David, exuding a longing for compassion, grace and salvation for everyone, including his **[End page 79]** corrupt and decapitated alter ego. Caravaggio, the artist, is the anthropic site within whom the mortal conflicts are resolved, momentarily at least, while engaging in the art of creativity. And he becomes the mediator, the son of God, franchising the barrier between the agonies of the here and now and the bliss of the ever-after. In the process, his inner 'black- hole' is patched, glossed and bridged-over for another cycle of Sisyphean creativity, until the stone-burden rolls down in another binge of violent self destruction only for the artist to bend down and start pushing the Sisyphean rock upwards in a creative dialogue *da capo*. The artist, through his dialogue with his object via the artistic medium, creates a new reality which is not only his own and within history, but also divine through the creative, authentic domain.  Michelangelo Merisi de Caravaggio, the painter whom Burckhard denoted as 'of low taste,' appears today on the bill of the 100,000 Lire. The painter whom Bellori called 'the destroyer of the art of painting' is considered today to be the most important artistic innovator of the seventeenth century. He joins Van Gogh and Gesualdo in delineating the horizons of artistic possibilities, even at the price of their own self-destruction.  **ENDNOTES**  [[1]](http://www.albany.edu/scj/jcjpc/vol6is3/shoham.html" \l "oneref) Walter Friedlander, *Caravaggio Studies*, Princeton 1955, Princeton Univ. Press. p. XXIII  [[2]](http://www.albany.edu/scj/jcjpc/vol6is3/shoham.html" \l "tworef) Howard Hibbard: *Caravaggio*, London 1983, Thames and Hudson, p. 1.  [[3]](http://www.albany.edu/scj/jcjpc/vol6is3/shoham.html" \l "threeref) H. Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, op. cit. p. 8.  [[4]](http://www.albany.edu/scj/jcjpc/vol6is3/shoham.html" \l "fourref) W. Friedländer, *Caravaggio Studies*, op. cit. p. 119.  [[5]](http://www.albany.edu/scj/jcjpc/vol6is3/shoham.html" \l "fiveref) E. Erickson, The problem of identity, *Journal of the American Psychiatric Association*, 1956, *4*, 56- 121.  [[6]](http://www.albany.edu/scj/jcjpc/vol6is3/shoham.html" \l "sixref) S. Giora Shoham, *The Myth of Tantalus: A Scaffolding for an Ontological Personality Theory* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1979), chapter 1.  [[7]](http://www.albany.edu/scj/jcjpc/vol6is3/shoham.html" \l "sevenref) S. Giora Shoham, *Sex as Bait* (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1983), chapter 6.  [[8]](http://www.albany.edu/scj/jcjpc/vol6is3/shoham.html" \l "eightref) J. Bowlby, *Maternal Care and Mental Health*. Geneva, Switzerland: World Health Organization, 1951.  [[9]](http://www.albany.edu/scj/jcjpc/vol6is3/shoham.html" \l "nineref) S.G. Shoham, Psychopathy as social stigma: A myth revisited, *Corrective Psychiat. and J. Soc. Ther.*, 1967, 13 (No. 1), 21-41.  [[10]](http://www.albany.edu/scj/jcjpc/vol6is3/shoham.html" \l "tenref) H.M. Cleckley, *The Mask of Sanity*. St. Louis, Mo.: Misby, 1964. **[End page 80]**  [[11]](http://www.albany.edu/scj/jcjpc/vol6is3/shoham.html" \l "elevenref) E. Goffman, *Characteristics of Total Institutions*, Symposium on Preventive and Social Psychiatry. Washington, D.C.: Walter Reed Army Inst. Research, 1957.  [[12]](http://www.albany.edu/scj/jcjpc/vol6is3/shoham.html" \l "twelveref) H. Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, op. cit. p. 147.  [[13]](http://www.albany.edu/scj/jcjpc/vol6is3/shoham.html" \l "thirteenref) W. Friedlander, *Caravaggio Studies*, op. cit. p. 117.  [[14]](http://www.albany.edu/scj/jcjpc/vol6is3/shoham.html" \l "fourteenref) Ibid. p. 9.  [[15]](http://www.albany.edu/scj/jcjpc/vol6is3/shoham.html" \l "fifteenref) H. Hibbards, *Caravaggio*. op. cit. pp 130-31.  [[16]](http://www.albany.edu/scj/jcjpc/vol6is3/shoham.html" \l "sixteenref) Ibid. p. 264.  **REFERENCES**  Bowlby, J. (1951). *Maternal care and mental health*. Geneva: World Health Organization.  Cleckley, H. M. (1964). *The mask of sanity*. 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Psychopathy as social stigma: A myth revisited. *Journal of Corrective Psychiatry and Social Therapy*, *13*(1), 21-41.  **LIST OF PAINTINGS**  *The Calling of St. Matthew*, 1599-1600; Oil on canvas, 10' 7 1/2" X 11' 2"; Contarelli Chapel, San Luigi dei Francesi, Rome http://www.hipernet.ufsc.br/wm/paint/auth/caravaggio/calling/index.html **[End page 81]**  *The Cardsharps*, ca. 1595; Oil on canvas, cm 94.15 x 131.25; Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth http://www.hol.gr/cjackson/caravagg/p-carava37.htm  *The Conversion of St. Paul*, 1600-1601; Oil on canvas, cm 230 x 165; Cerasi Chapel, Santa Maria del Popola, Rome http://www.artonline.it/edicola/cdarte/caravaggio/images/219gcd04.jpg  *The Crucifixion of St. Peter*, 1600-1601; Oil on canvas, cm 230 x 165; Cerasi Chapel, Santa Maria del Popola, Rome http://www.hipernet.ufsc.br/wm/paint/auth/caravaggio/st-peter.jpg  *David and Goliath*, undated; Oil on canvas; Prado, Madrid http://www.hipernet.ufsc.br/wm/paint/auth/caravaggio/david-goliath.jpg  *David with the Head of Goliath*, 1597-98; Prado, Madrid http://sgwww.epfl.ch/berger/Caravage/E/dianumberVG.cgi?number=0065  *The Death of the Virgin*, 1605-06; Oil on canvas; Louvre, Paris http://www.hipernet.ufsc.br/wm/paint/auth/caravaggio/death-virgin.jpg  *Head of Medusa*, after 1590; Oil on canvas mounted on wood; Uffizi http://www.hipernet.ufsc.br/wm/paint/auth/caravaggio/medusa.jpg  *The Martyrdom of St. Matthew*, 1599-1600 http://sgwww.epfl.ch/berger/Caravage/E/dianumberSG.cgi?number=martyre  *The Penitent Mary Magdalene*, 1594-95; Galleria Doria-Pamphili, Rome http://sgwww.epfl.ch/berger/Caravage/E/dianumberRG.cgi?number=0018  *St. Francis in Ecstasy*, ca. 1595; Oil on canvas; Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut http://metalab.unc.edu/cjackson/caravagg/p-caravag9.htm  *St. Matthew and the Angel*, 1602; cm 295 x 195; Contarelli Chapel, San Luigi dei Francesi, Rome http://www.artonline.it/edicola/cdarte/caravaggio/images/224gcd04.jpg  *The Taking of Christ*, 1602; Oil on canvas; National Gallery of Ireland http://www.bc.edu/bcorg/avp/cas/artmuseum/saintssinners.html  **[End page 82]** |