

A detail from a painting, likely by Caravaggio, showing a hand holding a knife over a body. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the hand and the knife against a dark background. The hand is positioned as if about to cut or has just cut. The body is partially visible, with a white cloth draped over it. The overall mood is somber and mysterious.

m

**the Caravaggio enigma**

peter  
robb

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The digital edition of this book contains a list of people at the end that can be searched for throughout the text by using the search function in your ebook reader. For a full list of direct page references that detail where in the text further mentions of M's paintings occur, please refer to the print edition of this book, which can be ordered from the publisher.

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Peter Robb was born in Melbourne and has spent a lot of time in Italy, Brazil and Sydney. His books which include the best-selling *Midnight in Sicily*, have been published around the world. M won the Victorian Premier's Prize for Non-fiction and the National Biography Award, and was a New York Times' Notable Book of the Year.

‘Australia has a new major writer. He has come out of nowhere, after fourteen years of self-imposed exile. He is the enigma, the midnight man, the friend of the devil’s advocate. Peter Robb ... *M* is a perfect match between writer and subject ... written with the same detective sleuthing and cultural sophistication that made *Midnight in Sicily* a page turner.’

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M

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Also by Peter Robb

*Midnight In Sicily*

*M*

*Pig's Blood and Other Fluids*

*A Death in Brazil*

*Street Fight in Naples*

*Lives*

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M

by

Peter Robb



DUFFY & SNELGROVE  
SYDNEY

First published by Duffy & Snellgrove in 1998, reprinted 1999.

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Reprinted with corrections 1999

Distributed by Pan Macmillan

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Cover design by Alex Snellgrove

The cover shows details of Caravaggio's *Isaac & Abraham I*

Typeset by Cooper Graphics

ISBN: 1875989528 (ebook).

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I.M.

Murray Grönwall

... marquera chaque soirée de son art personnel, piquant et concis, un peu acide, excentrique, frôlant légèrement le clownesque et un charme pittoresque un peu à la Daumier, comme une poésie exotique de mime et de mezzo, mais toujours l'interprétation du rôle était rigoureuse ... acteur d'un art si riche et si présent, si habité ...

Michel Cournot

*Le Monde*

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## A NOTE TO READERS

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THE FRAGMENTS that tell us what we know about the life and death of the painter I call M float on the surface of a treacherous reality – they're lies to the police, reticence in court, extorted confessions, forced denunciations, revengeful memoirs, self justifying hindsight, unquestioned hearsay, diplomatic urbanities, theocratic diktat, reported gossip, threats and propaganda, angry outbursts – hardly a world untainted by fear, ignorance, malice or self interest. Like 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 cancelled entry, the tacit conclusion, the gap, the silence, the business done with a nod and a wink. The missing data in M's life and death make up a narrative of their own, running invisible but present through the known facts.

M's career was marked out by crimes. Convention has it 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. I turned from the records of a recent Italian past and found M living in a remote but strangely familiar world of parallel powers and crimes of state. I don't pretend to have solved or even fully articulated the problems of M's fate in this book, but I hope that after reading it people may feel that M is a lot more serious than the libel of the criminal genius allows, and that questions about what happened to him need answers. And I hope the book will leave readers dissatisfied with the exquisitely academic orthodoxy that M's life was, like his art, basically orthodox. The *wildnesses* of M's life weren't accidental but were intrinsic to the way he painted. The writer on M who'd known him best, his most disinterested contemporary biographer, remarked of M's art that *maybe that's why the poor guy had so much trouble during his life*.

Roberto Longhi, who did more than anyone to drag M's art back into view, liked to call paintings the *primary documents* in art history. Longhi said that unlike archival documents, the critic's response to the art was the only thing that couldn't be faked. M's paintings are works of his time and for his own. Looking at them long and hard again has been my own primary research, along with retracing the trajectory of his life. The documentary part pieces together the findings of long years of research by many people, whose names are found in the list of sources at the end. *M* is implicitly a report on a great and unfinished collective work of rediscovery. Not that the people who found the documents are identified and dated the canvases would likely share its conclusions. Not that that the researchers agree now among themselves, or ever did. Mine is a working hypothesis, a preliminary outline. Though the text is littered with weasel qualifiers, the scrupulous may still find here that likelihood hardens too quickly into certainty – if it weren't so, the narrative would sink under the weight of discussions of the evidence. Conclusions I think are dry enough. There's no romancing.

I owe particular thanks to the recent discoverers who kindly talked with me about what they'd found – to John Azzopardi, Fiora Bellini, Maurizio Calvesi, Sandro Corradini, Maurizio Marini, Vincenzo Pacelli. And my deepest thanks to John Spike for his generous reception of this book's original Australian edition and his freely shared enlightenment on M's paintings. Thanks for their kindness

Pino Bianco, Marco Ciatti, Mario Croce and Princess Odescalchi. For help with books to Enzo Biss  
Lady Drysdale, Rosario Würzburger. Helen Langdon has kindly pointed out two errors of detail th  
came from quoting corrupt transcriptions. These have been corrected from the original Australia  
edition of this book. Whose publishers, Michael Duffy and Alex Snellgrove, and their staff Ga  
MacCallum, I deeply thank. I love working with people who know a wing and a prayer is the way  
fly. Thanks to Rosemary Davidson and Jack Macrae for joining the wild ride in London and New Yor  
and for not falling off. And thanks to Michael Cilia, aged ten, who got the ladder and took me dow  
into the *guva* and did not fear.

P



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M being a boy. From *MUSICIANS*, 1595.

M sick. From *SICK SELFPORTRAIT*, 1593.

M under stress. From *MATTHEW KILLED*, 1600.

M witness. From *CHRIST TAKEN*, 1602.

M devil. From Baglione's second *DIVINE LOVE*, 1603.

M at the end. From *URSULA TRANSFIXED*, 1610.

M by Ottavio Leoni.

M knight of Malta. An anonymous portrait found in Malta.

M remembered in Naples. By Battistello Caracciolo, 1611.

M murdered. From *HEROD'S FEAST* by Rubens, c.1640.

*Left to right, top to bottom:*

Mario Minniti fruitseller. From *BOY WITH FRUIT*, 1593.

Mario's fortune. From *FORTUNE TELLER II*, 1595.

Mario musician. From *MUSICIANS*, 1595.

Mario in *LUTE PLAYER I*, 1596.

Mario drunk. From *BACCHUS*, 1596.

Mario the tough. From *MATTHEW CALLED*, 1599.

Mario walks out. From *MATTHEW KILLED*, 1600.

Mario businessman. A late Sicilian engraving.

Cecco Boneri flies in. From *SAUL I*, 1601.

Cecco love. From *LOVE THE WINNER*, 1602.

Cecco adolescent. From *JOHN IN THE WILD II*, 1602.

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Cecco under the knife. From *ISAAC II*, 1603.

Cecco grown. From *DAVID II*, 1606.

Cecco's last act. From *DAVID III*, 1607.

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Mao Salini by Leoni.

Orazio Gentileschi in England by Van Dyck.

Young Del Monte by Jacopo Zucchi.

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Del Monte by Leoni, 1616.

Vincenzo Giustiniani in 1631.

Carlo Saraceni by Leoni, 1614.

Maffeo Barberini by M, 1598.

Scipione Borghese by Leoni.

Scipione Borghese by Gianlorenzo Bernini, 1632.

Alof de Wignacourt by M, 1608.

Wignacourt's page boy by M, 1608.

Paul V by M, 1605.

Ippolito Malaspina by M. From *JEROME III*, 1607.

Antonio Martelli by M, 1608.

John by M. From *JOHN IN THE WILD V*, 1604.

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From the last *JOHN IN THE WILD VIII*, 1610.

*CHEATS*, 1594

*MATTHEW CALLED*, 1599-1600

*PETER KILLED*, 1601

*LOVE THE WINNER*, 1602

*JOHN IN THE WILD IV*, 1604

*DAVID II*, 1606



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Young boys take no care, and never  
finish off their things with shadows.

*Leonardo*

We can only *describe* and say,  
human life is like that.

*Wittgenstein*

Crime was my oyster.

*Weegee*



**M**? M WAS A PAINTER. This is a book about him. His usual name was Michelangelo Merisi. The first published account of his life, though – and it was by a contemporary who'd known him – called him Amerigi. The second called him Merigi. And when he was one year old and five years old his father's name was recorded as Merici and then Morisi. The painter himself was named Merisio in Roman court documents and Morigi in another written the year before he died. The further vagaries of the written tongue transmuted him variously into Morisius, Amarigi, Marigi, Marisio, Narigi, Moriggia, Marresi and Amerighi. M himself signed his name Marisi.

Friends uncertain of the surname just called him Michelangelo, or Michele or Michelagnolo, and people who felt uncertain about that as well or who simply knew him less intimately called him generically after the small town of Caravaggio in the province of Bergamo, just east of Milan – where he almost certainly wasn't born but where he spent part of his childhood and where his parents' families came from. M was most likely born in Milan and that was where he learnt to paint. He was born in 1571, although his friends thought he was born in 1573 and indeed so did everyone until recently, on account of M's adjusting his age to make himself a couple of years younger when he went to Rome. Genius was more appreciated in youth and M in Rome was almost a late starter, still unknown when other painters his own age were at the top of the heap and employing him in assembly-line work. He died in 1610 in an unidentified location, probably on July 18. M didn't so much die as go missing. He disappeared and his body was never found. No one witnessed his death. Or those who did weren't talking.

His fifteen surnames and the dates and places of his birth and death weren't the only uncertainties about M's life. A lot of what happened between those extremities was no less uncertain. What is known today derives largely from the memories of two contemporaries writing a couple of decades after the events they recalled, ten years or so after M had died. Artists' lives, in those days, were brief. Often in the living, always in the writing. A painter's life was about as long as a who's who entry or a note in a tourist guidebook. This was what artists' recorded lives mostly were, chronological lists of works with a note on technique or the odd illustrative anecdote thrown in. The most intelligent and ambitious of these assemblages – Vasari's in the mid sixteenth century and Bellori's a hundred years later – elaborated an idea of painting that each artist's career was used to illustrate. Neither the individual artist's inner life nor the minutiae of his social existence – the staples of modern biography – was felt worth retailing to anyone interested in the work.

The idea of the inner life spread its dire wings a couple of hundred years after these painters' lives were lived and written, and so did that related idea of unearned greatness now called celebrity. In the nineteenth century they called it genius. The matter of the artist's daily round was ignored because everyone knew that a painter's life was mostly hard and dirty yakka. Time later cast a patina on the old ways, but hard work never acquired real glamour. The early artists' lives were remote, primitive

and immensely sane. The people who wrote them were tolerably well informed, close to what they described, and in M's case they're still the main source of knowledge. Nevertheless the first published accounts of M were deeply self serving narratives, each cut and shaped to fit the author's thesis. Each one's version of M was wholly sus. The first was written by a painter he'd humiliated who was out to settle the score for history. The second was by an intellectual whose subtle art historical interest required him to do a personal demolition job on M.

There are more reasons for knowing little about M than a seventeenth century lack of interest in other people's private lives. M lived in a time of ideological cold war that'd split late sixteenth century Europe as deeply as any political divide has riven the old continent in the twentieth. The rise of protestant power in northern Europe had set off a defensive and totalitarian involution of power in catholic Italy. The counter reformation put Italian culture on a war footing – asserted the catholic church's claim to total control of Italians' minds and bodies. It was launched seven years before M was born and it conditioned his whole life. 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. Art was the carrot, and was enlisted to serve the purposes of the church militant by channelling the imagination's energies into the runnels of catholic doctrine.

Italy wasn't a society that adapted easily to totalitarian control and the church's repressive ambitions were only intermittently and imperfectly realized. The terror network was patchy, and there were usually mitigating elements even in the very worst regime art. The terror and the art were pretendire nevertheless. 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.

In everyday life, this meant that – in a way people once hadn't in Italy – you kept to yourself, measured sure you didn't talk loosely, and were even more careful about what you put down on paper. It wasn't an age that encouraged gossip, speculation, table talk, wit, paradox or any of the freer and more playful activities of the mind – even among friends. Careless talk cost lives, usually your own. The kind of easy social trafficking was ended that'd once run between the powerful and the artists they patronized, between clergy and lay intellectuals, aristocrats and businesspeople, men and women, old and young. Venice kept up its dazzling promiscuity and Florence a vigorous cultural resistance, but they were now the exceptions and deeply suspect to Rome. The easy brilliance of Italian city culture was gone. Social life was wary, veiled, edged with mistrust. It wasn't a time to leave traces of your private life. Particularly if your ideas and attitudes or your behaviour were likely to draw unwelcome attention. Things, it was understood everywhere, remained among friends. Even the higher clergy, who were anything but nonconformist, kept up their private correspondence in a kind of archly allusive doublespeak and when they were dealing in matters of state it was understood that letters would be destroyed, or the real information saved for word of mouth.

It wasn't coincidental that though M had a cultivated and fluent hand, the only written traces he left of his life were a couple of scribbled receipts. Or that beyond the business accounts of a few

commissions, the only records of his daily life should've come from police reports and court transcripts. It was in the nature of a police society that people – some people – ran to the authorities with complaints and denunciations on the slightest excuse, and their long, excited, voluble, angry, evasive verbatim statements are the only place where the very form and pressure of ordinary daily life in these years still lives. The record of ordinary life during the counter reformation in Italy was essentially the criminal record. And since M had his share of run ins with the authorities – more than his share, to be frank – the traces of these that have been found among the vast and worm-eaten records of people's trouble with the law are all we know about how M lived from day to day.

The critics didn't leave much. All the old accounts of M's life and work, in their original Italian, German and Dutch, with introductions and parallel English translations, fit into forty or so pages, most of them on the paintings. Fifty years ago Roberto Longhi printed all the critical discussions of M's work up to the early twentieth century, by Italian, French, English and German writers, in fiftyodd small pages. A good part of those pages were filled by his own commentary. Three hundred years of discussion of M's art and life fit easily into fifty pages. M the man survives as a name in the archives, but the archival facts don't add up to a fully upholstered life. They offer dots to connect numbers to colour, grounds for hypotheses, data for a mind generated identikit, and what follows here is no more than such an outline. An hypothesis. The outline offered here will fade when more becomes known, but no imaginable archival finding is likely to make the painter M a reader friendly figure. People always found him prickly, his enemies found him violent. His intimates never talked. If you want to know M now, you can poke round a few palaces, alleys and prison cells, quite a few gloomy churches, some ports, a deserted beach or two. Which won't tell you much. And you can look long and hard at the paintings.

The paintings. The art historians have hammered out a workable canon and a chronology of M's work. It's a great collective achievement and years and years of patient drudgery lie behind it. A hundred years ago M's paintings were mostly still rotting in attics and cellars and decaying churches hidden under crusts of filth, while M's name labelled scores of clumsy copies and crass derivations by later painters who aped his work. Bringing M back to life and sight has been a long, complex and fraught undertaking. The soot of candle smoke, layers of yellowing varnish and crude overpainting have been removed from painting after painting. Rotting canvas, cracked paint, ripped fabric have been nursed back to stable material existence. Images that seemed beyond repair have come back to life, imperfect but real. There are still paintings to be found, doubts to be settled, works to be reordered. But now you can move through a fairly sure sequence of work and try to match the paintings to the known events of M's life. It's been like this for less than a decade.

The paintings are M's great secret. They still have, for a lot of people, the peculiar inaccessibility of the wide open. They delight and disconcert by seeming, like certain works of Tolstoy and Chekhov, to have nothing to do with art at all. They seem to go straight to shocking and delightful life itself, unmediated by any shaping intelligence. The appearance, of course, misleads. In a time when art was a prisoner first of ideas and then of ideology, M undertook a singlehanded and singleminded exploration of what it was to see the reality of things and people. He did it with a rigour that, like the work of Leonardo a hundred years before him, meant as much to the origins of modern science as it did to modern art – more so in a way, since what Leonardo wrote about in art only became real in M's hand.

M rendered the optics of the way we see so truly that four hundred years later his newly cleaned paintings startle like brilliant photos of another age. These images came out of an attention to the real that ignored the careful geometries of renaissance art as scrupulously as it excluded the dogmas of religion. No other painter ever caught a living bodily presence as M did.

And yet M was able to make art so breathtakingly objective only because he was peculiarly true to his own subjective way of seeing. His visual explorations laid bare his own psyche and his own susceptibilities with a touching frankness and courage – he knew quite well that what and how he painted showed as much of himself as it did of the people on the canvas. M's peculiar personal honesty has more to do with Cézanne than with the painters who preceded him, and in the end it's the reason he fascinates people today. M was the first modern painter. The enigma of M the man is that so little of the few known facts of his amazing life seem to match the subtle and penetrating mind he painted mirror. Right from the outset of his fame, M the man was known around Rome in the first years of the seventeenth century as a difficult and violent and antisocial person – *wild* was the word most people used – and the later events of his life seemed to confirm the early judgement with devastating finality. The worst and most lasting effect of M's personal history was that it fed back into his art – was fed back into his art by hostile intellectuals – to distort the nature of what he'd done. You needed it, that hard shell, to defend his art and his person in a violent and intolerant time. There had been years before the fame, when he was happy and secure and productive, when he drew no unwanted attention at all.

M's early work stunned his contemporaries because it seemed so real. He dazzled them with a drop of water on a leaf. The quality of his bare skin sent people into delirium. The effects he achieved made people take startled notice, after he took Rome by storm in 1600, of the polemical simplicity of the way he saw art. You painted, M said, from life. You painted what you saw and *a good man* in painting knew how to do *natural things*. The very best – and though it was his own practice M never quite saw this – knew, like himself, how to put the natural things they saw straight on to canvas. Forget the interference of preliminary drawing. Drawing was convention, drawing was received ideas, drawing falsified life, was the implication. M didn't draw.

Attitude like this was bound to disturb a profession that saw an arduous training in drawing as the very basis of all art. Not to mention a church that – like the Hollywood studios of a later age – had a stranglehold on the major employment opportunities and saw painting not as a way of showing real life but as the medium for transmitting a set of tightly controlled messages. The counter reformation church demanded and got endless images of the early Christian martyrs and their various grisly deaths. It was the church's way of going back to its roots. People were utterly familiar with and quite unfazed by pictures of torture and death. Pain was the mental wallpaper of the age. Then M did a severed head and you saw for the first time what sawing through a neck was like. M showed you how an old man felt when his hands were nailed down. The irruption of reality into religious art was bound to cause trouble and it did. Almost as soon as he burst on the scene M found himself under attack. The established painters hated him because he subverted the professional structure through which they had risen – and made the exhausted contortions of *la maniera* at the end of its line look silly. What they most hated was the way M – quite despite himself, because he was a loner – became the universal ideal of the younger painters in Rome as the seventeenth century began. They aped his personal style in life

and made his work the paradigm of modern art. Even the middleaged painters started awkwardly trying to change stylistic horses in mid career.

M could handle professional jealousy – more or less, in his own violent way – but the institution's hostility was another and more sinister matter. The church's ideologues had laboriously set up and were rigorously policing a system of *decorum* in painting, which dictated what was and what wasn't acceptable in art. It was all set out by cardinal Paleotti in 1584, when M was a boy apprentice painter. Nudity and eroticism were out. So was anything from the pagan classical past – *false gods*. Pain and death were idealized. Anything faintly tainted with heretical incorrectness was anathema. Nothing from real life was to intrude that might diminish or distract from the improving and uplifting image. Dignity was essential. Humour was banished. So was fantasy. Anything *new* of any kind was banned. The trouble, as with the chin jutting totalitarianism of a later age, was that *decorum* didn't occur naturally. A painter who worked only from life was pretty soon going to run into serious difficulties. M duly did.

He was born in 1571, seven years after Michelangelo died, who was the last and greatest artist of the Italian renaissance, and twenty one years before Montaigne, the first modern European writer and a man who thought entirely for himself. M was born seven years after Marlowe, who invented modern drama, and Shakespeare, who was the modern European literary imagination – and seven years after Galileo, who made the solar system undeniable and the church's world view irrelevant. Shakespeare and Galileo both outlived M. So did Monteverdi, who was four years older than M and invented opera, and Cervantes, who was twenty four years older and invented the modern novel. Bruno, who was twenty three years older and a tough little nut from Naples, might've outlived him too, if Bruno hadn't been burnt alive in Rome's campo de' Fiori in 1600 for rethinking the universe. M himself was endlessly resilient and had plenty of fight in him to the end, but by 1610 he'd used up at least nine lives and after that there were no more. These names all belonged to the brief amazing moment in Europe's history when the sixteenth century passed into the seventeenth and the modern mind was born. In Italy, if you looked at M's fate and Galileo's, the modern mind might seem to have been smothered at birth. But what M and Galileo did soon spread abroad – was known elsewhere long before they died.

What was M like? His fame was blinding among artists. Real fame always has its special moment. At a certain point in the life trajectory the image becomes fixed, iconic, timeless. M's image was formed in Rome in those very first years of the seventeenth century, when he'd just turned thirty. This was a critical time. The news even then was quickly carried north to the Netherlands by painters working in Rome.

**There's a man** called M who's doing wonderful things in Rome ... he's already famous ... he's got no respect for the work of any master, not that he openly praises his own ... says everything's triviality and child's play, whatever it's of and whoever painted it, if it hasn't been done from life ...

The north sent its eager young followers down to Rome. But M had no assistants, no school, worked alone and angrily repudiated painters who took up his art as a style. M's views on art were radical and dismissive of the usual skills and precepts. He rejected ideas and ideals. He seemed to eliminate art

all he cared about was life, getting life right. The fame was always edged with a notoriety that people felt – had to do with his art. People related the thrilling newness of the dismissal to M's unpainterly behaviour. That news too sped quickly north.

– when he's worked for a fortnight he goes out for a couple of months with his rapier at his side and a servant behind him, moving from one tennis court to another and always looking for fights or arguments, so he's impossible to get on with.

Right from the start – and this in 1601 was the earliest news – M's fame was shading into notoriety. An enemy remembered that

M was overly passionate and a bit wild. He sometimes looked to get his own neck broken or put someone else's life at risk. Quarrelsome men hung out with him ...

And years and years later people remembered how

he and his young crowd had the run of the streets, tough and high spirited people – painters and fighters – who used the motto *nec spe nec metu* – without hope or fear.

Almost from the start things went badly wrong for M, as wrong as they went right. The rich commissioned his canvases for modish city churches – and the priests knocked them back. Then the private buyers pounced. The richest and most discriminating collectors never doubted M, but institutional endorsement seemed to elude his work. Each rebuff was a very public affront. His overshadowed rivals were delighted. Opportunists in the art world went on aping his style, not understanding a thing. Around this time M's name started appearing in the police records of Rome. Appearing often. There was a string of violent incidents and a major libel trial. He fled the city after an assault, but the matter was settled and M returned. Things only got worse. The moment the fame and the notoriety coincided and became the same thing, the moment when M's image was fixed forever, came in 1606. There was a street fight near the tennis courts, when M was badly wounded and one of his opponents bled to death. It was the moment he fled Rome a second time. And the second time he never got back. He was still trying, and almost in striking distance, at the time of his sudden death four years later. The year was 1610 and M wasn't yet forty.

After that, it was easy for a hostile critic to lock the painting into the life. If M the painter had been famous in his mature work for his powerful contrasts of light and dark, painting his models in a darkened room to bring out their form more vividly, that could be moralized to fashion an image of a painter who

from his sweet pure early manner ... was driven by his own temperament into the other dark one that was like his own murky and combative behaviour.

Looked at like that, M's whole life was shown as one long desperate flight from himself.

First he had to leave his home town and Milan and later he was forced to flee from Rome and Malta, to hide around Sicily, run risks in Naples and then die wretchedly on a beach.

It was a seductive story, a great myth if you wanted to bury an awkward presence. Like all great myths it was made from elements of reality and ungainsayable. It served its purpose as the shock recognition faded and people got tired of the real. Artists like Bernini took what they could use from M and lifted off from real life into the bravura rhetoric of the baroque. And like all great myths, the story took on a life of its own. After two hundred years of oblivion it was the myth of M that resurfaced first.

*A wicked man*, said Stendhal. The fable of M the ill starred genius was bound to please in the age of the *poète maudit* and even more in the later age of the sexual outlaw. The strangest index of impotency was the way the myth of darkness got built into the foundation of an academic growth industry. The standard text on M in English spoke in 1983 of *the obvious and indisputable streak of cruelty in M's art* and ventured confidently that

*his criminality* seems to be rooted in deep seated psychological problems that transcend purely social explanation.

From a painter like that, how could pictures be other than *flawed and peculiar*? Maybe it isn't surprising. This late twentieth century stirring of the man's imputed psychosis with the supposed flaws of his paintings is an academic updating of the academic job that was done on M three hundred years earlier. It still drips down. At the end of 1996 readers of the *Sunday Times* colour magazine in London were reminded that M *was probably an evil man* and that *inner darkness infected everything that M painted*.

In the summer of 1610, people in Rome were stunned to hear that M was dead. The ever resourceful ever resilient, ever active, self renewing M? One admirer who'd known him thought his early death was simply irresponsible.

*He lost* a good ten years of his life and some of his fame through his own wildness ... if he'd lived longer he would've grown ...

Another – an enemy at that – wrote that

*If M hadn't* died so soon he would've done art a lot of good with his fine style of painting from life ...

The modern experts could've told M's contemporaries a thing or two. The modern view is that his paintings show M at the end of the line. M, for his critics looking back, had been heading for death on that *deserted beach* for years, and he arrived there right on time. They'd seen it coming a mile off. The paintings had foretold it all. Modern critics are so convinced by their myth of the way it all panned out that they've persuaded themselves that M's great and tragic painting of his boy lover Francesco Boneri as David – sadly holding out a severed head impressed with M's own ravaged features – was done in the last months of his life, an intimation of the coming end, a *summum* of an ill spent life, a tragic awareness of nothingness and an ironical last minute peace offering to the man who held M's life in his power. It's indeed a deeply, complexly, plangently seductive idea. But the story's wrong, disproven by M's style. That *David* was painted four years earlier.



The wrong dating of this bleak and powerful painting matters a lot to anyone trying to make sense of M's life. The error's doubly false. It shifts the emotional gravity from M's tragic year of 1600 when he painted this *David* – in the time of lucid desperation that followed the killing in Rome. And the painting's own iconic power lends a falsely self aware and tragic finality to his last months, or even years – as if M by 1610 were resigned and knowingly going to meet his death. It's a misreading that spills over into his other last paintings and throws everything awry. The four year switch is false about his art and false about his life at once. It feeds back into the old story. The old myth.

The known facts of M's life were few, and still are. The facts came from the archives. The parish archives of births, deaths, marriages, censuses, payments recorded to builders and craftsmen. The civic archives of last wills and testaments, painting commissions, bank transactions, contracts, sales and receipts. The diplomatic archives of letters, reports, requests and orders that were flying around the Vatican and the courts and ministates of Italy. The *avvisi* – the sharp and knowing little unofficial daily news reports from Rome that were the forerunners of journalism – were always a good source. The serendipitous archives of a few private letters, unpublished poems, whole books in manuscript form in private circulation among a certain élite – which included two of the most valuable sources of information on M's art. And the criminal records. These, when the archivist Bertolotti first got into them in Rome a century and a bit ago, turned up the amazing record of M's unknown libel trial in 1603, and the whole series of M's run ins with the law in his Roman years. More's lately been found and yet more will be. But the findings from the archives need a framework, a context, a meaning. The meaning, the core narratives of M's life, came from two men who'd known M in Rome. The myth came fifty years on, from a third man who'd never known M, but who'd once loved his work.

GIULIO MANCINI WAS a good man to write about M. He combined, as no one else ever would, three remarkable qualities. He knew M and his milieu in Rome at first hand. He was informed and intelligent about art. He had no axe to grind about M as a man. Mancini was a physician from Siena. Like M – who was thirteen years younger – he moved to Rome in the autumn of 1592, apparently after trouble at home and time in jail. He made a brilliant medical career in Rome. It peaked in 1623 when he was appointed personal physician to his old friend the newly elected pope Urban VIII Barberini, even though Mancini moved in libertine intellectual and artistic circles and was known as an atheist with an irregular private life. Maffeo Barberini had himself once been an ambitious young intellectual with advanced views, and had commissioned a couple of paintings from M, one his own portrait. People said that as a doctor Mancini was a rapid and brilliant diagnostician, and some of these visual skills seemed to flow on into a critical interest in painting. He was also known for a certain deftness in extorting paintings he liked from wealthy, ill and psychologically vulnerable patients.

Mancini wrote several self help guides for people on the make, all for private use – one was called *How to get ahead in Rome* and another *Courtierspeak*. He also wrote a book on dancing, a tourist guide to art in Rome and a text called *What is drawing?* His *Considerations on painting* were another arriviste's handbook – a diagnostic guide for novice art collectors which circulated in manuscript among Mancini's friends. It included – along with tips on how to tell a fake – accounts of the leading contemporary painters and their work, and M was one of these. Mancini wrote it nine years after



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