A Painter of Pain: Games of Wit and Ambiguities in Caravaggio's *Boy Bitten by a Lizard*

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Looking at Caravaggio's *Boy Bitten by a Lizard* (fig. 1), what strikes us initially is the femininity of the hand gestures of the youth at the centre and his agonized expression. His effeminate elements are complemented by the flower in his hair and the loose garment exposing his shoulder. Reacting to being bitten by a lizard while reaching for two red cherries, the boy is posed against a greyish wall. On the table in front of him are various fruits of a similar greyish colour, which highlights the cherries, and a glass vase with flowers. The lizard, the cause of the boy's reaction, is barely visible. The boy is dressed in a Roman outfit— a white tunic beneath a brown toga. The red of his lips corresponds to that of the cherries. Red is the only colour that does not blend with the greyish-brown of the rest of the painting.

Boy Bitten by a Lizard is a good indication of Caravaggio's unconventional, nonconformist, and independent approach on the one hand, and his reliance on artistic trends popular at the time of his arrival in Rome, on the other hand.[1] This study seeks to explore the painting in its cultural context and to suggest that Caravaggio created itas a self-advertisement and in order to reveal his abilities as a painter.

1 For Caravaggio's arrival in Rome, see Lothar Sickel, *Sull'arrivo di Caravaggio a Roma: Lo zio Ludovico Merisi e Pandolfo Pucci*. In Michele Di Sivo and Orietta Verdi eds. *Caravaggio a Roma: una vita dal vero*, exh. cat. (Rome: De Luca Editori, 2011), 77–81.

In it, moreover, he proved his flair for wit and his gift for painterly puns. All this he achieved by accentuating obscurity, ambiguity, and the blurring of boundaries related to gender, space, self-portraiture, and realistic depiction. He thereby endowed the painting with multifaceted meanings.

It should nevertheless be emphasized that from this blur rises a clear notion of pain. The boy in the painting is coping with a painful experience, manifested in his facial expression and posture. This particular element will become a noticeable trademark in Caravaggio's artistic development.

At present there are two known versions of *Boy Bitten by a Lizard.* After much dispute, it is still not known unequivocally whether Caravaggio was responsible for both versions or for only one. And if he authored one only, which of the two is the authentic version? One painting (fig. 1) is part of the Roberto Longhi collection, the other is at London's National Gallery. Andrew Graham-Dixon suggests that the Longhi version was made in 1594/5 and that the National Gallery version is a copy made by the painter in 1600. Accordingly, this study focuses on the Longhi version.[2]

In attempting to present his abilities using self-representation Caravaggio was neither alone nor original.A famous precedent is that of Parmigianino, whose *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (fig.2) was proffered as a gift in the hope of receiving a commission from the Medici Pope Clement VII. Parmigianino sought to show his virtuoso

2 For a current reference to this unresolved issue, see Marco Grassi, *The Real Caravaggio?*. In *'The New Criterion'* 31 (2012), 28. For the acceptance of both versions as authentic, see Michael Kitson, *The Complete Paintings of Caravaggio* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), cat. no. 4; Alfred Moir, *Caravaggio and His Copyists* (New York: New York University Press, 1976), 34; Mina Gregory, *Boy Bitten by a Lizard.* In *The Age of Caravaggio*, exh. cat. (New York and Milan: The Metropolitan Museum and Electa International, 1985), 237–8; Keith Christiansen and Denis Mahon, *Caravaggio's Second Versions.* In *'Burlington Magazine'* 134 (1992), 502–4; Linda Bauer and Steve Colton, *Tracing in Some Works by Caravaggio.* In *'Burlington Magazine'* 142 (2000), 434; Andrew Graham-Dixon, *Caravaggio: A Life Sacred and Profane* (London: Allen Lane, 2010), 93; Rossella Vodret, *Caravaggio e Roma*, exh. cat. (Milan: Silvana editoriale, 2010), cat. no. 3.

abilities, on the one hand, and his own image on the other—probably to promote himself and familiarize his image at the pope's court.[3] Caravaggio's aims were apparently very similar. It would be reasonable to assume that he wanted his painting to be noticed by someone central in the Roman art world.

The information we have about the painting derives mainly from the testimonies of Giulio Mancini and Giovanni Baglione, two of Caravaggio's seventeenth-century biographers. In his *Considerazioni sulla pittura* Mancini writes that Caravaggio 'painted for sale a boy who cries out because he has been bitten by a lizard that he holds in his hand...',[4] and mentions that the painting was sold for one and a half scudi.[5] It is doubtful that Mancini actually saw the painting, given his distorted description of it.

With Giovanni Baglione we are on safer ground, since he knew the painter personally. Baglione writes in his *Le vite de'pittori scultori et architetti* that Caravaggio 'painted a boy bitten by a lizard emerging from flowers and fruits; you could almost hear the boy scream, and it was all done meticulously'. He adds that Caravaggio 'painted some portraits

3 Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori ed architettori*, 9 vols., ed. Gaetano Milanesi (Florence: G. C. Sansoni, 1878-85), vol. 5, 221–2; Sydney J. Freedberg, *Parmigianino: His Work in Painting* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1950), 202; Joanna Woods-Marsden, *Renaissance Self-Portraiture: The Visual Construction of Identity and the Social Status of the Artist* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), 133; David Franklin, *The Art of Parmigianino* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003), 11–3; David Ekserdjian, *Parmigianino* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006), 129–132; Zoltán Kárpáti, *The Alchemy of Beauty: Parmigianino, Drawings and Prints*, exh. cat. (Budapest: Museum of Fine Arts, 2009), 16–8; Faye Tudor, *All in him selfe as in a glass he sees: Mirrors and Vision in the Renaissance.* In John Shannon Hendrix and Charles H. Carman eds., *Renaissance Theories of Vision* (Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate, 2010), 176–7. For Cecil Gould Parmigianino's self-portrait was 'a witty visual conceit, typical of its century'. Cecil Gould, *Parmigianino* (New York and London: Abbeville Press, 1994), 53.

4 '*...un putto che piange per esser stato morso da un racano che tiene in mano,...*' Giulio Mancini, *Considerazioni sulla pittura* 2 vols. (Rome: Accademia Nationale dei Lincei, 1956), vol.1, 224.

5 '*...come si vedde nel Caravaggio che vendè il Putto Morso dal Racano per quindici giulij,...*' Mancini, *Considerazioni sulla pittura,* 140.

of himself in the mirror', and although he does not say so explicitly in regard to *Boy Bitten by a Lizard*, this seems to be one of them.[6] Neither Mancini nor Baglione mention a patron, and for this reason, together with the absence of surviving documentation concerning the painting and its original function, it is believed that Caravaggio created the work with the idea of selling it to the highest bidder.

This unconventional and provocative self-representation generated many interpretations and evoked a wide variety of opposing responses.[7] For Posner the painting represented homoeroticism and the devastation of love.[8] Costello saw it as an allegory for the sense of touch.[9] Slatkes focused on the symbolic elements in the work and suggested a relation to the element of fire.[10] Maurizio Calvesi found

6 Giovanni Baglione, *Le vite de'pittori scultori et architetti, dal Pontificato di Gregorio XIII del 1572 in fino a' tempi di Papa Urbano Ottavo nel 1642*, 3 vols. (Vatican: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1995, reprint of the 1642 edition), vol. 1, 136. For Caravaggio's use of mirrors, see John Varriano, *Caravaggio: The Art of Realism* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 8–10; Sybille Ebert-Schifferer, *Caravaggio: The Artist and His Work* (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum. 2012), 85.

7 For the vast literature on the painting, see John T. Spike, *Caravaggio: Second Revised Edition* (New York and London: Abbeville, 2010), 42–4. For an overview of the different attempts to interpret the painting, see Richard E. Spear, *The Critical Fortune of a Realist Painter*. In *The Age of Caravaggio* exh. cat. (New York and Milan: The Metropolitan Museum and Electa International, 1985), 25–7; Elizabeth Cropper and Charles Dempsey, *The State of Research in Italian Painting of the Seventeenth Century*. In *'Art Bulletin'* 69 (1987), 496; Michael Fried, *The Moment of Caravaggio* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2010), 7–9.

8 Donald Posner, *Caravaggio's Homo-Erotic Early Works*. In *'The Art Quarterly'* 34 (1971), 305. For other references to the centrality of love in this painting, see Howard Hibbard, *Caravaggio* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1983), 43–6; Varriano, *Caravaggio: The Art of Realism*, 65–8; Graham-Dixon, *Caravaggio*, 96; David Franklin, *You Know That I Love You: Music and Youth in Caravaggio*. In David Franklin and Sebastian Schütze, eds. *Caravaggio: His Followers in Rome* (New Haven and London: 2011), 136.

9 Jane Costello, *Caravaggio, Lizard, and Fruit*. In Moshe Barasch and Lucy Freeman Sandler, eds., *Art, the Ape of Nature* (New York and Englewood Cliffs: Harvey N. Abrams, 1981), 377–383; Catherine Puglisi, *Caravaggio* (London: Phaidon Press,1998), 61.

10 Leonard J. Slatkes, *Caravaggio's Boy Bitten by a Lizard*. In *'Print Review'* 5 (1976), 153.

religious implications in the painting.[11] Luigi Salerno gave it an emblematic explanation,[12] and John T. Spike regarded the painting as a practical joke, a wicked satire aimed at the type of paintings that were produced in Cavalier d'Arpino's workshop.[13] The interpretations cited here represent only a fraction of what has been published to date.

That the work provides opportunities for many interpretations demonstrates how well-versed Caravaggio was in artistic matters, not to mention his inherent ingenuity and wit. The different angles of inquiry, interpretation, and explanation beg the question: Was the painter's intention in producing a painting with so many different aspects to call attention to each and every one of those aspects? Or was there an all-inclusive intention which can only be perceived by taking note of its multiple connotations? The painting may take on additional meaning if we consider that it was meant to be understood as a complex, multifaceted work—an idea reinforced by the knowledge that it was not a commission; that the painter had to pay all the expenses related to it from his own very limited means, without knowing if he would ever be able to recover those costs.[14]

At first glance what is being depicted in *Boy Bitten by a Lizard* is quite simple. It is only a thorough examination, bearing in mind what we know about art in the late sixteenth century, that illuminates its complexity. Thus the many interpretations are crucial for a comprehensive understanding of it. They explain first and foremost that this multifaceted work is patently suited to a society that appreciated

11 Maurizio Calvesi, *Caravaggio o la ricerca della salvazion'*. In *'Storia dell' arte'* 9/10 (1971), 107.

12 Luigi Salerno, *Poesia e simboli nel Caravaggio: I dipinti emblematici*. In *'Palatino'* 10 (1966), 108; John F. Moffitt, *Poisoned Love Posited in an Emblematic Lizard by Caravaggio*. In *'Gazette des Beaux-Arts'* 140 (2002), 11–3; John F. Moffitt, *Caravaggio in Context: Learned Naturalism and Renaissance Humanism* (Jefferson NC and London: McFarland, 2004), 156–9; Clovis Whitfield, *Caravaggio's Eye* (London: Paul Holberton, 2011), 85.

13 Spike, *Caravaggio*, 43.

14 For the expenses involved in producing a painting, see Richard E. Spear, *Rome: Setting the Stage*. In Richard E. Spear and Philip Sohm, *The Economic Lives of Seventeenth-Century Italian Painters* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010), 63–113.

witty and erudite subtexts, complex metaphors, and emblematic devices.

The artistic trend that flourished when Caravaggio arrived in Rome favoured a sophisticated and complex approach to artistic creation, which the Bolognese bishop (later archbishop) Gabriele Paleotti denounced in his 1582 *Discorso intorno alle imagini sacre e profane*. In his seminal book on mannerism, John Shearman focuses on the complexity, multiplicity, obscurity, and abundance that characterize sixteenth-century art, quoting Paolo Pino's advice to painters in 1548 to 'introduce' into their works 'at least one figure that is all distorted, ambiguous and difficult...'.[15] Paleotti reacted to this approach by attempting to turn the artistic conception and perception of the religious painting in the direction of clarity and simplicity. He believed that the best way to make a religious painting was to imitate nature. There is no idea, he proclaimed, that cannot be explained in a naturalistic manner with the help of Holy Scripture and stories from the lives of the saints.[16] In 1596 Paleotti was appointed, together with Cardinal Francesco Maria del Monte, to the role of protector of the *Accademia di San Luca* in Rome.[17] This position enabled him to make his opinions

15 *'almeno una figura tutta sforciata, misteriosa e difficile...'* Paolo Pino, *Dialogo di pittura* (Venice: Pauolo Gherardo, 1548), 16; John Shearman, *Mannerism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1967), 138. In his *Paragons and Paragone* Rudolf Preimesberger uses Pino's reference in his discussion of Caravaggio's *Entombment* and its witty connections to Michelangelo's early *Pietà*. Preimesberger argues that Nichodemus' hunchback in Caravaggio's painting refers to Vasari's anecdote in which Michelangelo added his signature to his early *Pietà* after he heard someone attributing it to the 'little hunchback from Parina'. Preimesberger also points out that Nichodemus' head resembles known portraits of Michelangelo. According to Preimesberger, this is a manifestation of Caravaggio's response to Pino's call for distorted and ambiguous figures. Caravaggio plays with the figure of Nichodemus as representing both Michelangelo and himself. Rudolf Preimesberger, *Paragons and Paragone: Van Eyck, Raphael, Michelangelo, Caravaggio, Bernini* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2011), 84 and 101–6.

16 Paola Barocchi, ed., *Trattati d'arte del Cinquecento: fra Manierismo e Controriforma*, 3 vols. (Bari: G. Laterza, 1960/2), vol. 2, 218–20. See also Anton W. A. Boschloo, *Annibale Carracci in Bologna: Visible Reality in Art after the Council of Trent* 2 vols. trans. R. R. Symonds (The Hague: Government Publication Office, 1974), vol. I, 127.

17 Melchior Missirini, *Memorie per servire alla storia della romana academia di S. Luca fino alla morte di Antonio Canova* (Rome: De Romanis, 1823), 69; Luigi

known to painters working in Rome. In a way, Caravaggio may be seenas implementing Paleotti's ideas, in that he depicted even the most important religious and holy men of the past as if they lived in the poor villages of contemporary Italy.[18]Some scholars have laid special emphasis on this aspect of his art. 'No one would doubt', wrote Irving Lavin, 'that the revolutionary naturalism and proletarian content of his great religious paintings served a deep moral and spiritual purpose'.[19] And Troy Thomas wrote: 'Through his choice of models and his presentation of them, he created in his paintings his own version of the simple Christianity of the ancients'.[20]

Yet it seems that although the ideas reflected in Paleotti's treatise were appreciated, they did not create the desired effect. Contrary to Paleotti's ideology, what continued to prevail was an admiration for witty and sophisticated artwork. Two of the most appreciated and respected painters in Rome at that time were Cavalier d'Arpino and Federico Zuccari, neither of whom seem to have followed Paleotti's idea.[21] Caravaggio himself, referring to the two, used the term *valenthuomo*, which indicates his appreciation of their work.[22]

Salerno, *The Roman World of Caravaggio: His Admirers and Patrons*, in *The Age of Caravaggio*, exh. cat. (New York and Milan: The Metropolitan Museum and Electa International, 1985), 17; Sandra Gianfreda, *Caravaggio, Guercino, Mattia Preti: Das halfbfigurige Historienbild und die Sammler des Seicento* (Emsdetten and Berlin: Edition Imorde, 2005), 49.

18 Charles Dempsey, *Caravaggio and the Two Naturalistic Styles: Specular versus Macular*. In Genevieve Warwick, ed., *Caravaggio: Realism, Rebellion, Reception* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2006), 93; Varriano, *Caravaggio: The Art of Realism*, 75–6.

19 Irving Lavin, *Divine Inspiration in Caravaggio's Two St. Matthews*. In '*Art Bulletin*' 56 (1974), 59.

20 Troy Thomas, *Expressive Aspects of Caravaggio's First Inspiration of Saint Matthew*. In '*Art Bulletin*' 67 (1985), 640.

21 For Zuccari's success and fame, see Walter Friedlaender, *Caravaggio Studies* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969, reprint of the 1955 edition), 65–9. For Cavalier d' Arpino, see Spear, *Rome: Setting the Stage*, 70–1.

22 Walter Friedlaender, *The Academician and the Bohemian: Zuccari and Caravaggio*. In '*Gazette des Beaux-Arts*' 33 (1948), 28;Friedlaender, *Caravaggio Studies*, 276; Keith Christiansen, *Caravaggio and L'esempio davanti del naturali*. In '*Art Bulletin*' 68 (1986), 421; Clare Robertson, *The Invention of Annibale Carracci* (Milan: Silvana Editoriale, 2008), 136; Ebert-Schifferer, *Caravaggio*, 156.

According to Keith Christiansen, imitating nature was not the sole artistic consideration for Caravaggio; there were additional aspects of painting that he valued, otherwise he would have been less impressed by d'Arpino and Zuccari. Christiansen cites Vincenzo Giustiniani's famous letter to Teodoro Amayden, in which he wrote of his admiration for a complex artistic presentation that combines naturalism with stylization in a work of art.[23] This would certainly fit Caravaggio's unique approach.[24]

Caravaggio produced *Boy Bitten by a Lizard* in Rome precisely while seeking recognition, success, and perhaps even a wealthy patron. Each painting he produced in the absence of a commission was done with these objectives in mind.[25] This is especially true in paintings containing his own image, as is the case in *Boy Bitten by a Lizard*. From a material cultural point of view, Caravaggio was producing commodities for sale on the open market. From the point of view of a young painter trying to make his mark in the local art industry, *Boy Bitten by a Lizard* can be seen as a commercial poster, an advertisement, a business card meant to obtain publicity and exposure.Caravaggio was building his reputation in terms of the quality of his products. This may explain his sophisticated approach.Elizabeth Cropper has remarked on Caravaggio's outstandingly aggressive public assertion of his own value.[26] Sybille Ebert-Schifferer claims that Caravaggio learned much about marketing in Cavalier d'Arpino's workshop.[27] And indeed,

23 Christiansen, *Caravaggio and L'esempio davanti del naturali*, 421–2.

24 Jacob Hess asked with regard to the *Martyrdom of St. Matthew* why Caravaggio regressed to mannerism, adding such figures as naked men in the lower corners. Troy Thomas, writing about Caravaggio's *serpentinata* pose of the angel in his first *Inspiration of St. Matthew*, claimed that it derived from mannerist sources. Jacob Hess, *The Chronology of the Contarelli Chapel*. In '*Burlington Magazine*' 93 (1951), 197; Thomas, *Expressive Aspects of Caravaggio's First Inspiration of Saint Matthew*, 646. For mannerist tendencies in Caravaggio's *Martyrdom of St. Matthew*, see also Franca Trinchieri Camiz, 'Death and Rebirth in *Caravaggio's Martyrdom of St. Matthew*. In '*Artibus et Historiae*' 11 (1990), 93.

25 Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, 17 and 21; Graham-Dixon, *Caravaggio*, 75.

26 Elizabeth Cropper, *The Petrifying Art: Marino's Poetry and Caravaggio*. In '*The Metropolitan Museum Journal*' 26 (1991), 194.

27 Ebert-Schifferer, *Caravaggio*, 62.

Caravaggio's early paintings accomplished their mission. According to Baglione these paintings attracted the attention of no less a man than Cardinal del Monte, who was, as mentioned above, protector of the *Accademia di San Luca* in Rome together with Gabriele Paleotti.[28] Joachim von Sandrart claimed in 1675 that it was *Boy Bitten by a Lizard* that made Caravaggio famous throughout Rome.[29]

Elizabeth Alice Honig refers to Dutch still lifes as commodities, and to Frans Snyders' paintings of market stalls piled with worldly goods as purchasable objects.[30] This idea can be interestingly applied to the still life objects in Caravaggio's painting as analogous to the painting itself. The boy reaching towards the cherries (and being caught in the act by the lizard) could thus be seen as analogous to a potential buyer reaching for the painting. Taking the analogy one step further, could the patron-seeking painter himself be seen as a purchasable commodity? At first perceptionthe still life suggests the common message of Memento Mori, yet it can also be viewed as a sophisticated way of addressing the real purpose of this painting—seeing the painter, if ever hired by a patron, as that person's 'commodity'.

For a talented young painter such as Caravaggio, trying to find his way at the outset of his career in Rome, it would have seemed natural to enter the workshop of a successful painter like Cavalier d'Arpino and to try to attract those precious potential patrons who still dominated the Roman art scene in the last decade of the sixteenth century.[31] In this Caravaggio was no different from his fellow painters, and his early paintings should be assessed in this historical and cultural setting.

Obscure, complex, and witty ideas, as well as a blurring of

28 Baglione, *Le vite de'pittori scultori et architetti*, vol. 1, 136. For Baglione's reliability, see Hess, 'The Chronology of the Contarelli Chapel', 193; Friedlaender, *Caravaggio Studies*, 229. See also Graham-Dixon, *Caravaggio*, 98.

29 Friedlaender, *Caravaggio Studies*, 264.

30 Elizabeth Alice Honig, *Making Sense of Things: On the Motives of Dutch Still Life*. In *'Res'* 34 (1998), 172.

31 Salerno, *The Roman World of Caravaggio*, 17–8; Genevieve Warwick, *Allegories of Eros: Caravaggio's Masque*. In Peter Gillgren and Mårten Snickare, eds., *Performativity and Performance in Baroque Rome* (Farnham and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012), 145.

boundaries, were popular in painting when Caravaggio arrived in Rome with the aim of becoming a successful painter. These games of wit were much appreciated by members of the upper classes. Sybille Ebert-Schifferer mentions these complex semantic games as popular in the Milanese cultural environment at the time when Caravaggio embarked on his professional journey.[32] Elizabeth Cropper comments on the witty and playful *concetti* in Caravaggio's *Sleeping Cupid* and *Medusa*, as seen through Marino's poetic lens.[33] David Stone also remarks on the period's appreciation of witty subtexts and brilliant *concetti* in his discussion of Caravaggio' *David and Goliath*.[34]

Yet as mentioned above, in contrast to the work's mannerist complexity and blurred boundaries, what emerges with great clarity in *Boy Bitten by a Lizard* is the centrality of pain. In the painting pain strikes the viewer immediately upon seeing the boy's panic-filled facial expression.This is surely the most impressive element in the painting. Caravaggio was probably one of the most adept painters of his day in depicting the physical reaction to pain; violence surrounded him and became a central aspect of his art.[35] 'What is being enacted here with such excessive theatricality', writes Ebert-Schifferer, 'is the expression of pain, one of the key affects any painter worth his salt had to master'.[36] What we should note is that Caravaggio made a self-portrait with such an agonized expression, and that this contributes to his self-marketing

32 Ebert-Schifferer, *Caravaggio*, 42 and 83.

33 Cropper, 'The Petrifying Art', 194 and 200–204.

34 David M. Stone, *Self and Myth in Caravaggio's David and Goliath.* In Genevieve Warwick, ed., *Caravaggio: Realism, Rebellion, Reception* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2006), 42.

35 David Stone has gone as far as suggesting that Caravaggio was responsible for building his own myth connecting his life and his art, which was described by his early biographers. In his self-representations in both *Sick Bacchus* and the Borghese *David* he emphasized a darkness that was later described as typical not only of his style but also of his temperament and behaviour. He should be held responsible, writes Stone, for creating a self-abasing image in his depictions of himself, both in these paintings and in other self-representations. Stone notes the painter's own character and self-fashioning, using the famous proverb: '*ogni dipintore dipinge sé*'. Stone, *Self and Myth in Caravaggio's David and Goliath*, 37.

36 Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, 349; Ebert-Schifferer, *Caravaggio*, 85.

as a specialist in scenes that represent pain. This early representation of a response to pain marks the beginning of what will eventually become a central feature of Caravaggio's art. During his short career he was very much engaged in producing paintings in which a reaction to pain is manifested and emphasized. For example, the most striking artistic element in his *Martyrdom of St. Peter* (fig. 3) is the saint's agonized gaze at the nail that has penetrated his hand. In this painting he manages to make the viewer almost physically feel the saint's pain.

Indeed, throughout his career Caravaggio was occupied with the presentation of agonized expressions in response to physical pain; and, as will be argued below, in his striving for recognition he emphasized his flair for producing painful scenes. In this he was adhering to established pictorial norms.[37] His ability to convey pain is first and foremost discernible in *Boy Bitten by a Lizard.*

Otherwise, the elements that dominate the painting are obscurity and the blurring of gender, spatial, and depictive boundaries. All these realms are touched by the ambiguity of what is depicted and conveyed. Let us begin with what is seemingly the work's most conspicuous ambiguity—that of gender.

The assumption that the figure in Caravaggio's painting is a boy originates with Baglione, who recognized Caravaggio's image and consequently assumed the figure to be male. As long as the painting remained in Caravaggio's hands, every viewer must have identified the image in the same way.

Baglione mentions an art dealer named Valentino who showed Caravaggio's productions to Cardinal del Monte so that he could assess the artist's capabilities.[38] (Exactly which pictures the cardinal saw remains a mystery; Christiansen and Andrew Graham-Dixon suggest such scenes as the *Fortune Teller* and the *Cardsharps*,[39] which may

37 John Varriano, *Caravaggio and Violence.* In '*Storia dell'arte*' 97 (1999), 318.

38 Baglione, *Le vite de'pittori scultori et architetti*, vol. 1, 136; Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, 1983, 23 and 352. Andrew Graham-Dixon identifies Valentino as Costantino Spata, an art dealer whose shop was near San Luigi dei Francesi. See Graham-Dixon, *Caravaggio*, 97.

39 Christiansen, 'Caravaggio and *L'esempio davanti del naturali*', 423; Graham-Dixon,

certainly be true, since these two paintings did enter the cardinal's collection.) The cardinal was probably pleased with what he saw because he commissioned Caravaggio to make the *Concert*.[40] He also bought other paintings from Caravaggio and by the time of his death owned a large number of his works. Indeed, as pointed out by Creighton Gilbert, the cardinal's collection contained more works by Caravaggio than by any other painter.[41]

There are no records showing that Cardinal del Monte saw *Boy Bitten by a Lizard*. For our purposes what is interesting is that there was a middleman who actually showed potential patrons Caravaggio's work, and that at least in the case of the cardinal, he succeeded in establishing a connection between the painter and the patron. In any case, it is safe to assume that this work had a quality that could draw the attention of such a man, who owned a very large collection of paintings.[42] In this regard I would mention the *Medusa* (fig.4), a painting that is recorded as one the cardinal actually did commission from Caravaggio a few years later. On the basis of the similarities between the two works, one could argue that the Medusa commission was an indication not only of what the cardinal appreciated in Caravaggio's work, but also that he might at least have seen *Boy Bitten by a Lizard* and been inspired

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Caravaggio, 98. For the role of Valentino see also Friedlaender, *Caravaggio Studies*, 58. For Caravaggio's use of art dealers and Valentino's role as a mediator between Caravaggio and Del Monte, see Ebert-Schifferer, *Caravaggio*, 77, 80, and 90.

40 Baglione, *Le vite de'pittori scultori et architetti*, vol. 1, 136; Giovanni Pietro Bellori, *The Lives of the Modern Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, Alice Sedgwick Wohl, trans. (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 180; Posner, *Caravaggio's Homo-Erotic Early Works*, 307.

41 Creighton E. Gilbert, *Caravaggio and His Two Cardinals* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995, 111–2; Keith Christiansen, *A Caravaggio Rediscovered: The Lute Player*, exh. cat. (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1990), 10; Moffitt, *Caravaggio in Context*, 147.

42 Patrizia Cavazzani, *Painting as Business in Early Seventeenth-Century Rome* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008), 86; Yvan Loskoutoff, *Cardinal Del Monte as a Collector of Antiquities: 'The Cupid Affair' (1596)*. In *'Journal of the History of Collections'* 25 (2013), 19–20 and 24. See also, Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, 29–35; Gianfreda, *Caravaggio, Guercino, Mattia Preti*, 77.

by it to become Caravaggio's first important patron.[43] The similarities between *Boy Bitten by a Lizard* and the *Medusa* are described later in this essay.

If Valentino did show the painting to potential patrons, they would not have recognized the painter's image in it, being unfamiliar with the artist, who was still unknown in Rome. This has important implications for the interpretation of the painting. Without prior knowledge that the depiction is a self-portrait, the essence of the painting would have been a moralistic, emblematic message—one of the messages that were acknowledged in modern scholarship and detailed above. The question of gender would not have arisen, nor would self-portraiture. It may be assumed that whoever saw the painting would have regarded the figure as being that of a girl, the fair sex being commonly chosen to represent a personification or allegory.

Once the viewer became acquainted with the painter, new layers of meaning (or a second step of reception, to use Rudolph Preimesberger's characterization)[44] would have accrued to the painting. He would have been surprised to realize that the image was a self-portrait. That one of its viewers could have been Cardinal del Monte can be gathered from his later commissions—first the *Lute Player*, later the *Medusa*. In the Del Monte commissions the painter again depicted the main protagonist according to his own image, but again obscured its gender identity. Indeed, Bellori identified the figure in the *Lute Player* as that of a woman.[45] What I mean by the blurring of boundaries in *Boy*

43 Of interest here is Baglione's indication that the cardinal was involved in obtaining for Caravaggio his first major commission—that of the Contarelli chapel. In Caravaggio's work in the chapel one can find ambiguities typical of the paintings discussed here. Baglione, *Le vite de'pittori scultori et architetti*, vol. 1, 136. For a recent discussion of these ambiguities, see Lorenzo Pericolo, *Caravaggio and Pictorial Narrative: Dislocating the Istoria in Early Modern Painting* (London: Harvey Miller, 2011), 219–25.

44 Preimesberger, *Paragons and Paragone*, 100.

45 Bellori, *The Lives of the Modern Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, 180. See also Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, 35; Varriano, *Caravaggio*, 59. For gender ambiguity in these early works, see Posner, *Caravaggio's Homo-Erotic Early Works*, 301; Franca Trinchieri Camiz, *The Castrato Singer: From Informal to Formal Portraiture*, In *'Artibus et Historiae'* 9 (1988), 172; Warwick, *Allegories of Eros*, 51.

Bitten by a Lizard is that Caravaggio does not provide viewers with enough visual cues to enable them to decide whether the central figure is a boy or a girl. This feature caused Donald Posner and John Moffitt, for example, to describe it as an androgynous youth.[46]

What if Baglione had remained silent and never identified the figure in the lizard scene as a boy? The feminine hand gestures, the flower in the hair, the very red lips, and the bare shoulder might have been considered significant enough to suggest that the figure Caravaggio had depicted was that of a girl.

When it comes to style, Caravaggio's *Boy Bitten by a Lizard* is a tour de force in its realistic depiction of different forms and textures. In his depictions of fruits and flowers Caravaggio proved himself to be a virtuoso at still life painting. This has been acknowledged by Francesco Scannelli, who wrote not only that Caravaggio was an imitator of the truth (*immitatione del vero*) but emphasized his talent for depicting real objects.[47] Regarding Caravaggio's realism Bellori wrote that he 'took nature alone for the object of his brush'.[48] It was this ability, according to Bellori, that brought Caravaggio fame and many followers.

Nevertheless, ambiguity is apparent in the painter's approach to reality. Here we find ourselves dealing with the same obscurity as in the case of the protagonist's gender. It is manifested first in the dissonance between what is real and what only seems real but is not. This is emphasized by the contrast between the painter's depiction of the fruits, flowers, and lizard, on the one hand, and the unrealistic narrative on the other. Caravaggio's depiction of the lizard biting has nothing to do with reality. As Donald Posner has pointed out, in each and every interaction between men and lizards that appear in a domestic environment, the latter will always flee.[49] But let us, for the

46 Posner, *Caravaggio's Homo-Erotic Early Works*, 302; Moffitt, *Poisoned Love Posited in an Emblematic Lizard by Caravaggio*, 5; Varriano, *Caravaggio: The Art of Realism*, 58.

47 Francesco Scannelli, *Il microcosmo della pittura* (Bologna: Nuova Alfa Editoriale, 1989, reprint of the 1657 edition), 51–2.

48 Bellori, *The Lives of the Modern Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, 180.

49 In a short note devoted to the question of whether Caravaggio painted a lizard or

sake of argument, accept the idea that lizards do bite. In such a scenario in real life, the victim's reaction would be quite different from what Caravaggio depicted. The instinctive reaction to suddenly inflicted pain is to pull back the afflicted body part while turning the head toward the cause of pain. In fact, this is the emphasis in the *Martyrdom of St. Peter*, where the saint is gazing at the nail that has painfully penetrated his hand. Caravaggio's boy not only does not pull back his hand, he does not even turn his head towards the cause of the pain. It may be assumed that a perceptive viewer was expected to notice this distortion of reality.

This is what Charlotte Houghton regards as a sophisticated and brilliant 'error' that would have been noticed by art lovers. In her magnificent article focusing on the acceptance of and response to Pieter Aertsen's *Meat Stall* in Antwerp, she argues that the painter's so-called mistakes were committed on purpose, intended to attract the attention of experienced local connoisseurs to the underlying meaning of the painting.[50] Houghton's subject is a 1551 painting in Antwerp. But even forty-five years later, in Rome, such erudite and witty paintings were popular among the art lovers who Caravaggio hoped would sponsor his work.

Another unrealistic element in *Boy Bitten by a Lizard* concerns the perception of space. In his painting Caravaggio depicted the boy with his back against a wall, in front of him a table with a vase filled with water and flowers. The round vase is like a convex mirror supposedly reflecting the entire room: in it a window at one end of the room is visible, and another window is reflected on the other side of the

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a salamander, Donald Posner persuasively argues that the animal in question is a lizard. The green lizard in Caravaggio's painting is common in Italy and has no reputation for biting. See Donald Posner, *Lizards and Lizard Lore, with Special Reference to Caravaggio's Leapin' Lizard.* In Moshe Barasch and Lucy Freeman Sandler, eds., *Art the Ape of Nature: Studies in Honor of H. W. Janson* (New York and Englewood Cliffs: Harry N. Abrams and Prentice-Hall, 1981), 389. See also Ebert-Schifferer, *Caravaggio*, 81.

50 Charlotte Houghton, *This Was Tomorrow: Pieter Aertsen's Meat Stall as Contemporary Art.* In *'Art Bulletin'* 86 (2004), 293. See also Dror Wahrman, *Mr. Collier's Letter Racks: A Tale of Art & Illusion at the Threshold of the Modern Information Age* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 60.

vase.[51] The windows seem to frame the chamber. The room is empty, with only a shadowy figure shown next to the first window. The painter, who must have stood with his canvas in a prominent place at the centre of this room, is missing from the reflection. Unlike other painters who included reflected items in their paintings, here Caravaggio does not follow the rule of realistic vision. Jan van Eyck in his *Arnolfini Wedding Portrait* (fig.5) depicted a convex mirror on the opposite wall, with the painter's face reflected in it (fig.6). Quentin Massys placed a convex mirror in his *Money Changer and His Wife* (fig.7) that is directed to the left; next to the window reflected in the mirror one can see the portrait of a man (fig. 8). Pieter Claesz, in *Vanitas with Violin and Glass Ball* (fig.9), depicted a crystal ball on a table, in which the image of the painter is reflected (fig.10).[52] Titian depicted a distorted image in his *Allegory of Marriage*, known also as *The Allegory of Alfonso d'Avalos* (fig.11). In this painting Titian also played with the reflections of the two main female figures, whose faces are reflected in the shield of the male figure. Lastly, Bartolomeo Bettera painted a work in which the image of the painter is reflected twice (fig. 12); in his *Musical Instruments with Two Glass Spheres and a Male Bust*, one can see the image of the painter in both crystal balls on the far edge of a table covered with many musical instruments (fig. 13).[53] In Caravaggio's painting the vase-mirror involves a deception, because it should at least have shown an image of the painter at work.[54]

One last example of an absence of realism in Caravaggio's painting can be deduced from the actual position of the real mirror on

51 For Caravaggio's optical illusions in this painting, see Marcin Fabiański, *Rifrazioni nella pittura al tempo di Caravaggio*. In *'Artibus et Historiae'* 28 (2007), 209–11.

52 For Pieter Claesz's mirror, see Sylvia Ferino-Pagden, *Parmigianinos Selbstportrait: Materie und Reflex*. In *Parmigianino und der europäische Manierismus* (Milan: Silvana Editoriale, 2003), 51.

53 I would like to thank Ornat Lev-Er for kindly bringing to my attention both Pieter Claesz's and Bartolomeo Bettera's depictions of a painter at work in the reflection of a mirror. For a discussion on the convex mirror, see Louis Marin, *To Destroy Painting*. Trans. Mette Hjort (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 126–35.

54 Marin, *To Destroy Painting*, 126–7.

the table in front of the boy. The placement of the boy behind the table with the fruits and the vase, and with his back to the wall, makes one wonder what space is reflected in the vase. The actual mirror that the painter must have used for making his own image had to be positioned on that same table or on some surface in front of the table in close proximity. So the open space between the vase and the window does not exist. That the painter makes it impossible for the viewer to draw a line that defines the borders of the room is another ploy used by Caravaggio to remain vague. But the last two points are valid only if the viewer identifies the painter in the figure.

That said, let us turn now to the other painting by Caravaggio in which his self-representation is unprecedented and unconventional—his *Medusa* (fig.4).[55] This painting is well-documented: It was commissioned by Cardinal del Monte and sent to the Grand Duke of Tuscany, the former Cardinal Ferdinand I de' Medici.[56] It entered the Duke's collection on 7 September 1598. As with *Boy Bitten by a Lizard*, a second version exists; it was found only in 1994 and today is part of a private collection in Milan.[57] The entire work, completed on a wooden convex platform, resembles a shield (*rotella*) bearing a representation of the beheaded Medusa. Here Caravaggio once again depicted his own image. And as in *Boy Bitten by a Lizard*, the face is characterized by an agonized expression that conveys the successful conclusion of Perseus' attempt to behead the Medusa. Gilbert called it 'an extreme experiment in facial distortion caused by violent stress'.[58] Ovid's slain Medusa is seen here with an open mouth, fear in her eyes, and blood streaming from her throat.

The Medusa represents the power of the gaze,[59] which is the essence of the mythological story itself: He who sees her turns to

55 For the *Medusa* as a self-portrait, see Ebert-Schifferer, *Caravaggio*, 104.

56 Baglione, *Le vite de'pittori scultori et architetti*, vol. 1, 136; Bellori, *The Lives of the Modern Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, 181.

57 Ermanno Zoffili ed., *Caravaggio: The First Medusa* (Milan: Continents, 2011), 157–8.

58 Gilbert, *Caravaggio and His Two Cardinals*, 125.

59 Cropper, *The Petrifying Art*, 204; Marin, *To Destroy Painting*, 118–9.

stone.[60] She is also an embodiment of the anti-art. Art needs to be seen; destruction through the gaze is the opposite of what the viewing of art is all about.[61] Watching, looking, seeing, are the sources of knowledge and wisdom;[62] therefore the Medusa's war against those who see becomes a threat to the goddess of wisdom, Minerva. This is why after Perseus kills the Medusa her image becomes a symbol of Minerva and is affixed to her shield.

The choice of the Medusa as the subject of this painting was that of the patron. We can only guess at the message that Cardinal del Monte was trying to deliver to the recipient of the shield. The poet Giovanni Battista Marino, who was inspired by Caravaggio's *Medusa*, regarded her image as the protector of the duke.[63] The shield should also be seen as a diplomatic gift that was meant to express a friendly wish for the duke's safety.[64] It conveys a message of protection, as if the cardinal's wish was that all the duke's enemies should turn to stone upon gazing at his shield.[65] John Varriano has suggested that it was meant to replace a painting by Leonardo da Vinci that was part of the Medici collection, last mentioned in a 1587 inventory.[66] Graham-Dixon

60 Hal Foster, *Medusa and the Real*. In '*Res*' 44 (2003), 181.

61 Marin, *To Destroy Painting*, 136–43; Cropper, *The Petrifying Art*, 204; Christopher Braider, *Baroque Self-Invention and Historical Truth: Hercules at the Crossroad* (Aldershot and Burlington: Ashgate, 2004), 88.

62 For the concept of knowledge and its connection to sight, see Tudor, *All in him selfe as in a glass he sees*, 180.

63 Friedlaender, *Caravaggio Studies*, 89; Salerno, *Poesia e simboli nel Caravaggio*, 110; Cropper, *The Petrifying Art*, 204.

64 Marin, *To Destroy Painting*, 113.

65 Cardinal del Monte might have been aware of the duke's intention to embark on a crusade. For his expedition plans, see Suzanne B. Butters, *Contrasting Priorities: Ferdinando I de' Medici, Cardinal and Grand Duke*. In Mary Hollingsworth and Carol M. Richardson, eds., *The Possessions of a Cardinal: Politics, Piety, and Art 1450–1700* (University Park: Pennsylvania Press University Press, 2010), 188–190.

66 John Varriano, *Leonardo's Lost Medusa and Other Medici Medusas from the Tazza Farnese to Caravaggio*. In '*Gazette des Beaux-Arts*' 130 (1997), 76; Varriano, *Caravaggio: The Art of Realism*, 24; Gianfreda, *Caravaggio, Guercino, Mattia Preti*, 21; Mina Gregory, *Caravaggio's First Medusa*. In Ermanno Zoffili ed., *Caravaggio: The First Medusa* (Milan: Continents, 2011), 22. For artistic gifts, see Alexander Nagel, *Gifts for Michelangelo and Vittoria Colonna*. In '*Art Bulletin*' 79 (1997), 649–55. On diplomatic artistic gifts, see Anthony Colantuono, 'The

has suggested that the painting was meant to compete with Leonardo's painting.[67] The cardinal might also have sought to compliment the duke on his wisdom by sending an attribute of Minerva, the goddess of wisdom.

That Caravaggio gave the female Medusa his own image does not confuse us. We refer to this image as that of a woman, even though there is nothing in the painting to indicate this beyond the connection with the mythological creature—there are no flowers in her hair, no bare shoulders, no feminine hand gestures.[68]

What is important for us is Caravaggio's choice of using his own image as a model for *Medusa*; it has nothing to do with the patron's message. It seems reasonable to assume that the Grand Duke of Tuscany was not familiar with Caravaggio's facial features; after all, he returned to his native town in 1589, the year he was married, before Caravaggio arrived in Rome from Milan,[69] so the message of the painting is irrelevant to Caravaggio's self-depiction as the Medusa.

The painter may have wished to emphasize the same ambiguity that can also be found in *Boy Bitten by a Lizard* regarding the perception of reality. On the one hand, the Medusa is a reflection of his own image, a mimesis. On the other hand, it is an imagined creature that does not exist and is thus a deviation from what is real.

Of interest is that the round frame of the painting with the self-portrait resembles a mirror, as if the shield is a mirror, writes Louis Marin.[70] The shield as a mirror is a well-known device that is manifested, for example, in Tasso's 1581 *Gerusalemme Liberata* when Carlo and

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Mute Diplomat: Theorizing the Role of Images in Seventeenth-Century Political Negotiations', in Elizabeth Cropper ed. *The Diplomacy of Art: Artistic Creation and Politics in Seicento Italy* (Milan: Nuova Alfa Editoriale, 2000), 51–76; Daniel M. Unger, *Guercino's Paintings and His Patrons' Politics in Early Modern Italy* (Farnham and Burlington VT: Ashgate, 2010), 7–10.

67 Graham-Dixon, *Caravaggio*, 157.

68 For the blurring of boundaries in *Medusa*, see Avigdor W. G. Posèq, *Caravaggio and the Antique* (London: Avon Books, 1998), 27–8. Posèq remarked upon the hermaphroditic character of her presentation.

69 Gregory, 'Caravaggio's First *Medusa*', 20.

70 Marin, *To Destroy Painting*, 135 and 136.

Ubaldo confront Rinaldo with his own image in the shield given to them for this purpose by the Wiseman of Ascalon.[71] Caravaggio's shield-mirror shows a frozen, realistic image of the painter himself. There is nothing that reflects the real better than a mirror; and yet obviously Caravaggio's hair did not consist of snakes. This depiction embodies what we admire about Caravaggio—his ability to create scenes as if they represent reality, even if the scene and image are totally imaginary.

Also, there is a parallel between the painter and Perseus, the slayer of the Medusa, in that both used a mirror for their actions. The painter uses a mirror for his self-representation, while Perseus used a mirror to kill the monster. It seems the artist identified not only with the Medusa but with Perseus as well.

But what did the Medusa signify for Caravaggio? On the one hand, she is a reflection of the anti-art since she kills the beholder. On the other hand she turns those who look at her to stone, like a sculptor. In this she recalls the work of the artist who tries to imitate nature. Caravaggio is commenting on the critique of his work by portraying himself as the embodiment of anti-art, as well as a realist painter.[72]

What is primarily of interest to us is the connection of this Medusa commission to Caravaggio's *Boy Bitten by a Lizard*. The similarities between the two paintings may shed light on Cardinal del Monte's reasons for embracing Caravaggio and his art in the first place. Both paintings are elusive and provocative, and they have a violent, painful element that is manifested in the protagonist's facial expression. Similarly important are two issues addressed in both paintings that relate to self-portraiture: gender (or sexual ambivalence) and realism. Both works clearly have one feature in common—they deal with issues about which Caravaggio is not explicit. He remains vague and thus maintains the blurring of boundaries typical of late mannerism. Whatever the issue raised by Caravaggio, the viewer is left in doubt regarding the painter's

71 Torquato Tasso, *La Gerusalemme Liberata di Torquato Tasso con la annotationi di Scipion Gentili, e di Giulio Guastavini* (Genoa, G. Pauoni, 1617), canto 14, verse 77.

72 For Caravaggio in the eyes of his contemporaries, see Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, 46–8.

Figure 1. Caravaggio, *Boy Bitten by a Lizard,* 1594-5. Florence, *Fondazione di Studi di Storia dell'Arte Roberto Longhi.*

Figure 2. Parmigianino, *Self Portrait in a Convex Mirror.* c.1524. Vienna, *Kunsthistorisches* Museum.

Figure 3. Caravaggio, *Martyrdom of St. Peter*. ca. 1604. Rome, Cerasi Chapel.

Figure 4. Caravaggio, *Medusa*. 1597-8. Florence, *Galleria degli Uffizi*.

Figure 5. Jan van Eyck, *Arnolfini Wedding Portrait*. 1434. London, National Gallery.

Figure 6. Jan van Eyck, *Arnolfini Wedding Portrait* (detail). 1434. London, National Gallery.

Figure 7. Quentin Massys, *Money Changer and His Wife*. 1514. Paris, *Musée du Louvre*.

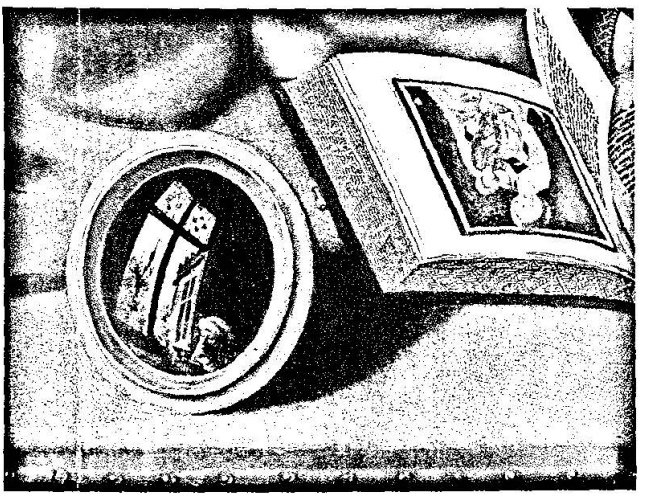

Figure 8. Quentin Massys, *Money Changer and His Wife* (detail). 1514. Paris, *Musée du Louvre*.

own opinion in the matter. It seems as if what really interested him was to remain elusive. The only truly explicit element in both paintings is the pain expressed in them. That Cardinal del Monte sponsored the later painting may allow us to assume that it is precisely the double meaning and witty intention that pleased him. But this remains only a conjecture.

In *The Intellectual Life of the Early Renaissance Artist*, Frances Ames-Lewis makes a distinction between two types of self-representation that are related to our discussion: automimesis and self-portraiture.[73] In the first type an artist uses his own image merely as a model. In the second, the artist depicts himself as such, focusing on his own identity. The difference is crucial: In automimesis the viewer is not supposed to identify the painter in the painting; in a self-portrait, he is expected to do so. In both *Boy Bitten by a Lizard* and *Medusa* the image is a complex representation, making it difficult to decide whether or not the beholder was supposed to identify the figure as a self-portrait. When Valentino, the art dealer, introduced *Boy Bitten by a Lizard* to potential patrons, and when Del Monte sent the *Medusa* to the Grand Duke of Tuscany, none of the viewers of the paintings could have been familiar with how Caravaggio looked. In the first case, after the viewer met the painter in person, he would have found it intriguing to realize that the boy in *Boy Bitten by a Lizard* was a self-portrait. It would be interesting to know if this same revelation occurred to the Grand Duke of Tuscany, if and when he learned that his newly received *Medusa* was in fact a self-representation.

Other important connections between the two paintings relate to the mirror. In neither is an actual mirror involved; in both, it is only insinuated. In *Boy Bitten by a Lizard* the mirror is suggested by the reflection of the vase. In *Medusa*, it is the self-portrait in the round shield that makes the viewer associate the frame with a mirror. The mirror is especially important in connection with the Medusa because of Perseus' manner of slaying her. In both representations what is most

73 Francis Ames-Lewis, *The Intellectual Life of the Early Renaissance Artist* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), 211. See also Marin, *To Destroy Painting*, 103.

important is the gaze. The *Medusa* is a representation of the anti-art because one cannot look at her; looking at her means death. A mirror is also a representation of this impulse because what is reflected in a mirror is absolute realism without the possibility of interference. The counter-gazing of the boy who is looking at the viewer is an insinuation of the power of the gaze, as is the Medusa's avoidance of the viewer's eyes. In both cases it is the painter himself who is looking (or not) at his beholder.

In both paintings the use of self-presentation provides an added layer of meaning to what would otherwise remain emblematic or allegorical. In both works the painter blurs boundaries in terms of gender and the perception of reality. The animals play an important role, and in both cases Caravaggio made a real effort to depict them—the lizard and the snakes—in a way that is as close to nature as possible.[74]

Boy Bitten by a Lizard is an unconventional, indeed unprecedented form of self-portrait; to the best of my knowledge there is no other such self-representation in early modern Europe before Caravaggio's. Nor does there exist a painting in which a painter depicted himself in such a provocative manner, one that might give rise to negative sentiments. Caravaggio's choice is not only a denial of the entire tradition of self-portraiture as it emerged during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries; it is also a straightforward and conscious proclamation that contradicts everything his predecessors were trying to assert about their place on the social ladder.[75]

74 On the lizard, see endnote 49. On the snakes, see John Varriano, Snake Eyes: Caravaggio, Ligozzi, and the *Head of Medusa*. In *'Source'* 24 (2004), 14–7; Whitfield, *Caravaggio's Eye*, 106–7; Graham-Dixon, *Caravaggio*, 156; Gregory, *Caravaggio's First Medusa*, 16.

75 The literature is vast so I refer to only a few examples. See Woods-Marsden, *Renaissance Self-Portraiture*, especially 3–9; Ames-Lewis, *The Intellectual Life of the Early Renaissance Artist*, 228–43. For references to specific case studies, see especially, Svetlana Alpers, *Interpretation without Representation or the Viewing of Las Meninas*. In *'Representations'* 1 (1983), 30–42; John Wetenhall, *Self-Portrait on an Easel, Annibale Carracci and the Artist in Self-Portraiture*. In *'Arte International'* 27 (1984), 49–55; Joel Snyder, *Las Meninas and the Mirror of the Prince*. In *'Critical Inquiry'* 11 (1985), 545–7; Luba Freedman, *Titian's Independent Self-Portraits* (Florence: L. S. Olschki, 1990), 65–9; David Carrier, *Poussin's*

Figure 9. Pieter Claesz, *Vanitas with Violin and Glass Ball*, c. 1628. Nuremberg, *Germanisches Nationalmuseum.*

Figure 10. Pieter Claesz, *Vanitas with Violin and Glass Ball* (detail), c. 1628. Nuremberg, *Germanisches Nationalmuseum.*

Figure 11. Titian, *Allegory of Marriage*, known also as *The Allegory of Alfonso d'Avalos*, c. 1530.Paris, *Musée du Louvre.*

Figure 12. Titian, *Allegory of Marriage*, known also as *The Allegory of Alfonso d'Avalos* (detail), c. 1530. Paris, *Musée du Louvre.*

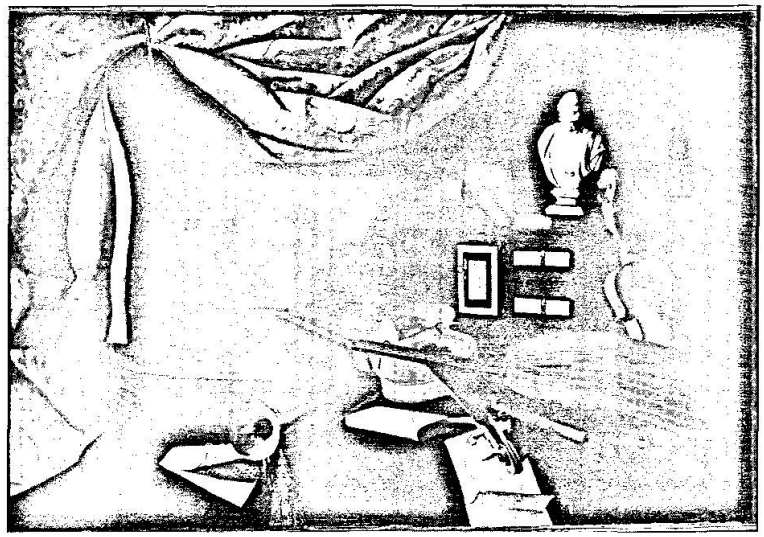

Figure 13. Bartolomeo Bettera, *Musical Instruments with Two Glass Spheres and a Male Bust*, c.1650. Private Collection.

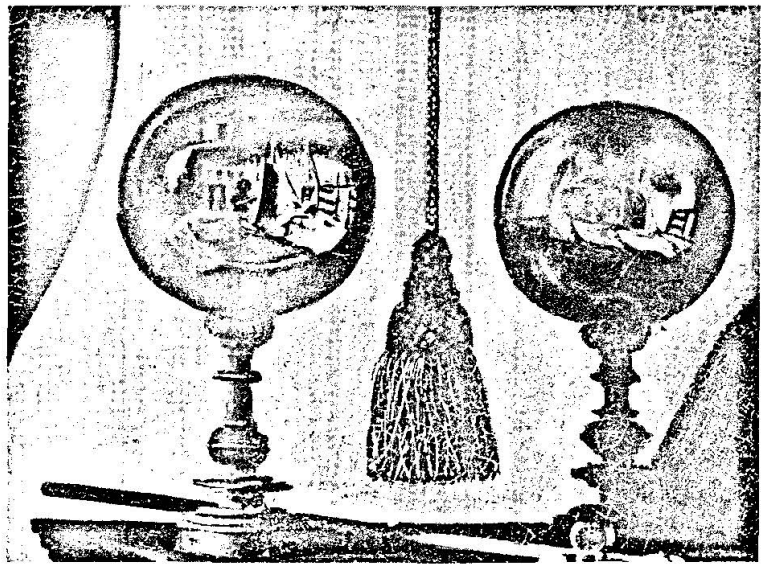

Figure 14. Bartolomeo Bettera, *Musical Instruments with Two Glass Spheres and a Male Bust* (detail), c.1650. Private Collection.

Beyond the sophistication of a representation that blurs pictorial and ontological boundaries, there is also a very physical representation of pain. The painter provokes the viewer twice: first by his challenging gaze, and secondly by the ambiguity of the painting. Against a blurred and ambiguous background, the painter gazing at the viewer is crying out in pain. The only certain aspect of this painting is the unequivocal physical pain marked by the boy's facial expression.

It could have been for the purpose of promoting himself in Rome that Caravaggio created this early work in which his facial features are discernible. This painting could have been a kind of 'business card', meant to impress potential Roman patrons with his virtuoso skills. Promoting one's artistic abilities seems a reasonable endeavour for an ambitious painter aware of his own potential.

In the painting Caravaggio emphasized two aspects that eventually became very dominant in his oeuvre—his stark representation of pain, violence, and death, and his witty, provocative blurring of boundaries. This last aspect seems at first sight to indicate a very clear intention, but the work's sophisticated and brilliant 'errors' make the viewer unsure about their true meaning.

Paintings: A Study in Art-Historical Methodology (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993), 3–26; Antonio Paolucci, *Botticelli and the Medici: A Privileged Relationship*. In *Botticelli: From Lorenzo the Magnificent to Savonarola* (Milan: Skira Editore, 2003), 69–72; Daniel M. Unger, *The Pope, the Painter, and the Dynamics of Social Standing in the Stanza della Segnatura*. In *'Renaissance Studies'* 26 (2012), 269–287.