

CARAVAGGIO: THE SYMBOLISM OF A REALIST

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The word "realism", in talk about art, might mean anything; for instance, some of the most "abstract" artists claim to be depicting reality at a deeper level than those who paint mirrorlike images of things. But to call Caravaggio a "realist" has a quite precise sense, because it is based on the contrast with calling Caracci (and his school) "idealist". Indeed, the meaning of the term can be made clearer by contrasting two works by Caravaggio himself, both portraits of Grand Master Wignacourt. The Pitti portrait is more "realistic" than the Louvre portrait. The physical marks of age and the ravages of time are more particularly depicted in the former than in the latter portrait, where their representation has obviously been attenuated for the sake of a greater rendering of the "idea" of the "Grand-Master rôle" (implying force) which he embodies.

Nevertheless, there is no possibility of mistaking the use by Caravaggio in both portraits of what are clearly symbolic, or even emblematic, devices. In the Pitti portrait, Wignacourt holds the rosary beads and, although in non-military dress, holds his hand on a sword which appears, however, more as a sort of cross rather than as, in itself, an instrument of death – images of the hope of salvation in the face of the darkness of death. In the Louvre portrait, the Grand Master is garbed in an antiquated coat of armour, recalling his now long-past participation in battle with a quasi-heraldic emblematicism, but also contrasting his now aged physiognomy (however pictorially attenuated) with the freshness of the young pageboy, so that the portrait acquires the overtones of a meditation on the vanity of earthly glory.

Indeed, it has been often observed that in Caravaggio's pictorial language, the individual realism of the rendering of some details goes with the use of other, highly conventional particulars, for instance gestures which correspond exactly not to lifelikeness but to the prescriptions of the Classical and Renaissance textbooks for orators and iconographers, such as the uplifted arms of Paul on the ground in the Conversion scene or of Mary of Cleophas in the Deposition painting. Whatever may be said about the emblematic interpretations especially of some early works (to which reference will be made later) and about which disagreement is possible, there can hardly be any doubt that such gestures are part of a conventional sign-language, and not "realism".

More importantly, it is obvious that certain of the most realistically rendered details acquire an extra symbolic meaning because of their location in the whole composition. Realistic elements become patently symbolic because of the painting's syntax. For instance, the notorious placing of the horse's hoof at the very centre of the painting of St. Paul's Conversion clearly turns it into a symbol of one of Caravaggio's central preoccupations: the force, not to say the violence, of divine grace. This is all the more indubitable given that the rejection of the box-space of Renaissance art and the adoption of a spatial organisation which is calculated to produce extreme accentuations in the articulation of his compositions is one of the most immediately striking characteristics of Caravaggio's art.

Even more importantly, on closer inspection, it emerges that the very conjunction of realistically rendered details with other idealistically conceived elements is itself symbolic. It is very clear, in some cases, that the crudely realistic parts correspond to the expression of the mortal condition of a condemned world on the one

hand, and the idealistically refined parts to a higher realm of existence, on the other: the delicate is clearly a superior mode to the rough wherever they are explicitly juxtaposed and contrasted, as in the Matthew – Angel and Wignacourt – Pageboy dual figurations. Of course, because the inclusion of the detailed depiction of the crudely lifelike was an offence against the established conventions, they attracted more attention and their companion details of extremely polished confection tended not even to be seen. But the full meaning of the former cannot be grasped unless they are clearly perceived to be in dialectical composition with the latter, not only as antithetical, but also as infrathetical.

Above all, it is the unifying and, by universal acknowledgement, most original principle of Caravaggio's art, that is manifestly more symbolic than realistic in function: this is his use of light. It is, indeed, on this governing element of his idiolect that one has to concentrate to get at the depth of his vision. It is here, more than anywhere else, that his genius appears. In the following pages, I intend, first, to describe briefly the well-known innovations by Caravaggio in this regard; then, to discuss the three major kinds of symbolic effect which the lighting operation is deemed to have produced: detemporalisation (Brandi 1974), internalisation (Wittkower 1958, Gregori 1985), theologisation (Calvesi 1971); finally, to turn to the psychological explanations and reconsider briefly the other aspects of Caravaggio's language in the perspective of the conclusions reached about the meaning of the revolutionary lighting operation. It will emerge, I think that Caravaggio's supreme achievement is the creation of images which reveal the suspension of harsh, earthly existence on the thin but hard-to-snap thread of God's quasi-violent mercy.

The first aspect is Caravaggio's use of light as a structuring principle in his painting. The assignment to light of a function similar to that of perspective in a Renaissance painting has its roots in Leonardo's practice and theory, followed in part by several Lombard painters and occasionally by Raphael himself. Knowledge of it had been undoubtedly picked up by Caravaggio during his apprenticeship in the Milan studio of his eclectic teacher, Simone Peterzano, which began in 1584 (the year of St. Carlo Borromeo's death). Years before, Leonardo had recognised that light and shadow were organising principles in the structure of the world and could be likewise in the composition of a painting. For him, a painting was essentially a static design plus *lume* (derived light, as against *luce*, source light). He was not followed in this way of conceiving a painting by his immediate successors and imitators, but the concept was taken up by some slightly later Lombard painters, especially the Brescian Savoldo.

No doubt, the realisation of the possibilities of light as a means of volumetric synthesis – that is as an alternative instrument to chiaroscuro design for the individuation of three-dimensional figures on a two-dimensional surface, was fostered by the development of the "new science" (Spezzaferro). While the Venetian painters had developed the idea of "composing with colour" (using chromatic contrasts, e.g. yellow/blue corresponding to light/shadow), as against the Florentine idea of a black-and-white design which was coloured afterwards, the new way of composing with light allowed the painter to still achieve the rigorous delineation of bodies, with a precise indication of ground and a quasi-sculptural quality of relief. This gives to Caravaggio's works, for instance a sense of classicism (especially in the more monumental ones, such as the Beheading of St. John) as distant from impressionism as it is from Bolognese academicism.

The second aspect of Caravaggio's use of light stems from his implicit realisation of the basic error of the new metaphysics which went with the new science: the identification of "presence" with the occupancy of space, with three-dimensional measurability. Caravaggio, on the contrary, clearly realised the validity of the medieval view that presence could be ascertained in another way than by attention to bodies filling up space in a way that could be calculated in terms of length, breadth and height – namely by the perception of the exercise of force. Light was an ideal means for the manifestation of this kind of presence, all the more detectable the more violent the force, of almost an incorporeal nature (Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II, 52, 1). Indeed, the fact that, in Caravaggio's work, the light emanates from a single hidden source is one of its best known features. Equally well recognised are the most conspicuous of the results: in the Angel guiding Matthew in the writing of the Gospel, the Angel shows himself primarily as a force that wraps itself

round the body of the Evangelist; in the Conversion of Paul, the horse appears as a mass of light issuing superhuman force. Thus, light is used in Caravaggio not only as a means for bringing out the three-dimensionality of bodies on a flat surface at the suggestion of the new science, but also as a means of indicating presences which are not easily ascertainable in bodily terms but can be just as sharply manifested through the representation of their felt force in terms of extraordinary luminous effects. The outflowing light in fact does not serve primarily to pick out some natural detail, as might the flashing of a lantern or a torch (source-light), but to determine a particular way of seeing the world as a whole, comparable to the medieval perception of supernatural force refracted from ordinary objects, like a horse or clothing.

The third obvious aspect of Caravaggio's light-operation is precisely its massive exploitation of darkness as the obverse side to illumination by the flaring out of immanent light from a hidden source. It has been rightly noted that spectacular tenebrosity is hardly found in any of Caravaggio's "secular" works. But even so, a comparable effect is obtained. Colour tones as rich as Titian's and details as gorgeous as Giorgione's appear to be magically transposed into an existence suspended in the void; it is as if they are withdrawn from the hurly-burly of the world of becoming and change into some Parmenidean sphere of pure Being. The effect is basically analogous to that obtained by the dark zones in the most impressive of his sacred masterpieces. Here, at any rate, Caravaggio achieved perhaps the greatest representations of eloquent silence in Western art. His bold, vast, almost monochrome spaces enveloped in shade and shadow, are empty but vibrant; they constitute a dimly resounding background, in which the echo of faded-out presences can be heard, and glimpses of prisoners behind bars, half-muted, half-reverberating existences, can be spied looming out of some heavily weighted limbo, such as the nocturnal yard of the *Burial of St. Lucy* (Ordile 1985, Pavone 1985). Two-thirds of this image is occupied by an uneventful wall and only flashes of narrative hover in the other third; analogous are the images of the *Beheading of the Baptist*, or that of the penitent *Mary Magdalene*. Clearly, the darkness is only meaningful in terms of its relationship to the light. The dialectical contrast is underlined by Caravaggio by his adoption of an orthogonal basis for his compositions, usually with the square as module (as opposed to, say, the spiral or pyramidal constructions typical of Michelangelo).

Clearly, all this is not irrelevant to the essential themes of his subject matter: conversion and death, as the major moments of dramatic passage from one state to another and the spatial co-presence of the earthly and the divine juxtaposed in some sort of violent contact. It is natural that the very individual illumination of Caravaggio's paintings should have been read as having an intent beyond that of naturalism and interpreted symbolically.

The first symbolic dimension which the Caravaggesque light has been seen to assume is that of representing the possible transcendence of temporality. Perhaps no one has insisted on this interpretation more eloquently than Cesare Brandi. King Chronos is, as it were, once again dethroned in the imagery of Caravaggio. He uses light to fix the form of the most significant, the most expressive, the most universal moment of an otherwise passing episode, to elevate into a poetic timelessness the quintessential residue of a historic occurrence, to halt the brusqueness of a diachronic movement in the instant of its most burning intensity, to immobilize the most dramatic aspect of an event in an eternal serenity. Let us not think just now of the glacial fixity of the Medusa image, but rather of the many cases where the Caravaggesque light cuts off the real-life multiplicity of gesticulation and reduces vision only to single, static gestures. The Angel's fingers, flexed like the luteplayer's on top of Matthew's heavy, very unscribelike hand, do not seem to be *moving* the Evangelist's but synchronically asserting the permanent need of every man for a tangible transfer of light if our illiteracy vis-a-vis God's language is to be overcome. An unflinching light seems to be the source of the power in Judith's hand as, with horrified look, she severs Holofernes's head. Caravaggio's light seems to make shouts about to issue from open mouths to stick in throats. It abstracts from the Heraclitean mobility of things the points of intersection (to use T.S. Eliot's phrase) of the timeless with time.

A second symbolic function that has been attributed to the special lighting system of Caravaggio's painting concerns space: internalisation. This term should not be taken to refer merely to the absence of sunlight. The

natural improbability of the luminous sources often do not serve to indicate a physically internal location. (Actually in some cases the critics cannot agree as to whether a scene is located outside or inside). For instance, Cinotti (1983) holds that the scene of the *Call of St. Matthew* has an interior, Hibbard (1983) an exterior setting; the argument is based on the way in which the windows and shutters are represented. It is that darkness is very like a wall: it creates an opaque screen which gives you the feeling of being hemmed in. For instance, in the *Burial of St. Lucy*, the main figures seem packed on the edge of the canvas while behind them empty space yawns abysmally. The feeling given is that persons are forced by the weight of circumstances to contain emotions, to concentrate force, to wrap themselves up in themselves: they appear self-withdrawn, self-enclosed, often driven into marginal situations. Despite their sometimes gigantic size (e.g. the gravediggers in the St. Lucy burial) and, in any case, the almost palpable physicality of their bodies, the distribution of light and dark gives to corporeal things a sense of only relativistic reality. The face of Lucy herself is seen from an inverted angle and appears vividly toned; sharp foreshortening and perspectival twists, accentuated by thrusts of scorching light, subvert the conventional looks of things. The overall surface hues of earthy browns and greyish whites are made to appear almost surreal by rare vivid red and purple patches (the deacon's robe and the blessing hand of the bishop). Thus, the feeling is not simply one of (temporal) blockage, but of (spatial) blockage within oneself. Just as one group of critics alleged that the light made time unreal and forced us to view things *sub specie aeternitatis*, so another group of critics say that the light forces us to reject the usual external viewpoint and look upon things *sub specie interioritatis*.

Thirdly, these temporal and spatial symbolic effects obtained by Caravaggio's light have been seen to synthesize in a precisely theological sense. The Biblical imagery of light is well-known. The most relevant aspect is the establishment by theologians of the term "*lumen gratiae*" (the light of grace) as a correlative of "*lumen gloriae*" (the light of glory). The "light of grace" is taken to be, by Catholic theologians, the means by which, in this life, the world can share in the life of God Himself and receive a foretaste of His Beatific Vision, the fullness of which will be made possible only after death by the "light of glory". Caravaggio's age is dominated by theological controversy centred on the topic of grace. It is notorious that one of the great bones of contention between Catholics and Protestants was the relation between grace and nature. Later on, Catholic Theology itself was divided by a bitter polemic between Dominicans and Jesuits on the relation between grace and free-will. Hence, it is natural that some critics should rather have seen Caravaggio's light operation as a representation not just of a generic elevation into eternity of forms rescued from the ravages of time, or of a kind of spiritualisation of matter, but more precisely of grace transforming nature and of the divine salvific will defeating the gravitational pull of death. In such a context, it ceases to be incidental that, for instance, in the *Martyrdom of Matthew*, the light emanates from a kind of clothing; because, throughout the Bible, fallen nature is associated with nakedness, and grace with white and luminous robes. Moreover, the experience of death and the descent into the depths of darkness, as seen in the perspective of a theology centred on Christ's death and resurrection, is a necessary condition of salvation. Even the representation in painting of such phenomena as the refraction of light in glass and water did not merely have a scientific and technical interest, but was felt to be (certainly by some Dutch artists, and probably in their wake by Caravaggio as he meditated on Narcissus, self-love, death of self, Baptism) symbolic of the interpenetration of grace and nature.

Finally, there are those (among them Roettgen 1974, Frommel 1971, Hibbard 1983) who think that the depth of Caravaggio's meaning will not have been plumbed until his works are seen as the expression of his troubled psychology. The generally accepted picture of Caravaggio as a human being tends to make us expect that his art, like Leonardo's, will lend itself to psychoanalytic probing. However, it should not simply be assumed that his paintings will necessarily be illuminated by knowledge of his infant experiences and their aftermath. This will only be the case if in his paintings, as in Leonardo's, there are enigmas and puzzles that can be resolved and some obstacles to our understanding can be removed by seeing them as disguised expressions of unconscious desires. Are there such enigmas in Caravaggio's works?

A first case could be adduced by citing the self-portraits which Caravaggio has introduced into his works.

Admittedly, it is not unusual for artists to picture themselves (as they are also often pictured by others) with a Saturnine complexion, and especially in Caravaggio's age as born with a melancholic temperament (e.g. Lomazzo's self-portrait at Brera). Caravaggio seems to have assigned his own features to a jaundiced Bacchus (1593), a beheaded Goliath (1609) and other characters identification with whom may however not implausibly be taken to imply a more than ordinary measure of self-hate. In fact, there have been critics who have observed that Caravaggio became an orphan at the age of 6, when his father (Fermo Merici, "maestro di casa", apparently meaning a sort of architect, or Buildings Officer, for the Sforza-Colonna family, which was closely linked both to distinguished members of the Order of St. John and to the Borromeo family) and his grandfather both died of the plague (1577).

The sensitive child might well have experienced this loss unconsciously as paternal abandonment, with a consequent curdling (according to psychoanalytic theory) of the spirit of rebelliousness in him, and the complication of his relationship to his mother (who died in 1590) and the rest of his family. Some anecdotes in this connection do not seem to be consistent with well-established historical facts and dates, notably the famous episode in which Michelangelo is alleged not to have recognized his priest brother in Rome, and may well be embroidery by hostile biographers (Patrizi 1921). However, if it is granted that Michelangelo's early experiences as a member of the Merisi family did create psychological (as well as other) problems for him, were these of such a particular nature as to have significantly affected his painting in a manner different from the normal pattern? Undoubtedly, he often depicted androgynous kinds of figures (as he also showed an unusual penchant for low-class and dark personages). He is also alleged to have shown an incredible degree of possessiveness in his relations with one or two close friends. However, he is also reported to have had at least two female liaisons (Menicuccia and Lena) and certainly less homosexual feeling is manifest in his work than in that of, say, Leonardo or even Michelangelo. The androgynous figures, when they occur, are, however, sufficiently justified by the subject matter; after the illumination of the significance of androgyny in Renaissance art by such scholars as Edgar Wind (1958), even its use in sacred contexts is hardly any longer surprising to anyone who is aware that the transcendence of sexual differentiation is a very frequent motif in Renaissance theological accounts of the eschatological destiny of humankind and the fullness of its reintegration in Christ. It is not even necessary to justify the beardless, chubby faced Christ at the Emmaus supper scene on the ground that the Gospel account stresses that he appeared *in alia effigie* ("with a different semblance") to his pre-Resurrection look, and was consequently not recognized by the disciples; the whole composition, with its parallelogram of light inserted in the rectangle of darkness, is too powerfully evocative of eschatological transformation for the need to arise of seeking other explanations. Thus, while the clarification of Caravaggio's early biography has proved undoubtedly useful in setting out the network of relationships which explain how and why he obtained his commissions and his movements from here to there, I doubt if there are in Caravaggio's work the kind of sexual knots visible in that of, say, Leonardo which cry out for explanation in psychoanalytic terms, even if such explanations could be plausibly extracted out of the ascertained knowledge of the Merisi family background as they can out of Leonardo's.

The second element which may seem to invite explanation in terms of the psychology of the artist is the amount of violence depicted in his work. This has given rise to the suspicion of some sado-masochistic trait in his character, manifested in a kind of search after self-punishment and his identification with such figures as Goliath decapitated by the puny David. Certainly the established record of his conduct in this regard is notable. For instance, over a six-year period, his sheet would read as follows:

19th November 1600:	complaint by Girolamo Stampa of assault
28th August 1603:	sued by Baglione for libel
24th April 1604:	accused by waiter of plate thrown in his face
October - November 1604:	twice imprisoned for insulting police
28th May 1605:	up for abusive carrying of arms

29th July 1605	complaint by Pasqualone of assault
September 1605:	incident of stone throwing at window (Prudenzia Bruna)
24th October 1605:	wounded by falling on his own sword
28th May 1606:	kills Ranuccio Tomassoni di Terni in a brawl, involving six other persons, another of whom (Antonio da Bologna, fighting on Caravaggio's side) was also killed, with Caravaggio himself severely wounded in his head, and then condemned to death <i>in absentia</i> .

It has, of course, been pointed out that several of these incidents are ludicrously trivial, and that litigiousness of the sort at the turn of the sixteenth-seventeenth centuries was not at all uncommon, especially in artists' circles – one has only to think of Christopher Marlowe and, closer to Caravaggio, G. B. Marino and the Cavalier D'Arpino (also condemned to death). Perhaps, there is a reflection of the hot-blooded violence of the age parallel to that found in Caravaggio's art in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and *King Lear*, which were also written in 1605 – 1606. It is certainly the case that the violent element in Caravaggio's work deserves a closer scrutiny than it has received so far (and than can be given to it here) especially in relation to the psychology of sacrificial and self-sacrificial ritual and behaviour. But once more I doubt if much help is to be found through probing the individual traits of the Merisi family background, rather than the socio-cultural context of the age.

The third element, in fact, in Caravaggio's work that has provoked attempts at psychological interpretation is the strong interest in emargination and social exclusion very clearly reflected even in the formal characteristics of his great compositions, as has already been hinted above. It is certainly not by chance that shadowy peripheries are among the most fascinating areas in his production. But once again I think it is doubtful if the understanding of this very important aspect of Caravaggio's art is likely to be more enhanced by exploration of his unconscious rather than by consideration of the cultural values of his environment. Even such scholars as Gash (1980), Moir (1982) and Cinotti (1983), who have been not at all prone to accept the emblematic and theological interpretations of Caravaggio's early genre work, have acknowledged the influence of St. Philip Neri and his Oratorians (who actually commissioned work from Caravaggio) in the rôle which marginal existence plays in Caravaggio's *opus*. Bologna (1974), Hibbard (1983) and Roettgen (1974) (inclining to attribute the "plebeianism" of Caravaggio to guilt-feelings and other psychological compensatory urges) have contested the view that this aspect of Caravaggio's art is an expression of adherence to what has been called the "Pauperist wing of the Counterreformation" namely the alliance of St. Philip Neri and the Borromeos. It is, of course, well known that, Cardinal Federico was not only the predecessor, as Patron of the Academy of St. Luke, of Caravaggio's patron in Rome, Del Monte, and related to Costanza Colonna, marchioness of Caravaggio, but also the bishop who as Manzoni depicted him, addressed himself to the "roughest and most abandoned of his people", who fondled "filthy and potbellied children", who preferred "poor to frugal meals, poor to simple dress". The shadowy representatives of collective participation in the drama of salvation through death who figure as an obscure and shambled chorus in Caravaggio's final masterpieces do not seem to call for any other explanation than awareness of the "Fools for God" spirituality and the reversal of earthly hierarchy highlighted by a Judeo-Christian tradition that stretches from the *anawim* of the Old Testament to the *new Left Catholics* today.

In this context, it is easier to understand the cohabitation in Caravaggio's work of the crudely naturalistic details and an emblematicism of a heraldic type. Both belong to the language of the cultural milieu to which he spiritually belonged; an analogous combination is found in the poetry of the age with its equal eagerness for direct observation and methodical didacticism. This emblematicism appears in such works as the *Beheading of St. John*, which focuses and holds up, as in a cinematic or theatrical "freeze", the moment when the executioner, having already delivered the death-blow with an appropriately large weapon, then takes out the dagger (called the *misericordia* the "mercy-dagger") with which to finally sever the head from the body

to which it is still connected by a thin thread of skin – the so-called *coup-de-grace* (“grace-blow”). The centrality in the composition of the mercy-dagger would be even more emblematic if it were proven that the Oratory of the Conventual Church of the Knights of St. John for which the great canvas was painted was, in fact, managed by the *Compagnia della Misericordia* (or Confraternity of Mercy) in charge of the care and burial of condemned men and who would have been adepts of the pauperist spiritual tradition. At any rate, there is no doubt that, in this work as in many others, Caravaggio followed some detailed recommendations made to painters by Cardinal Federico Borromeo in his *De Pictura Sacra* – notably that the prison building be shown as the background to the execution. The often noted fact that Caravaggio, who never signed another painting, in this case inscribed his name in red, as part of the composition, with the blood dripping from the Baptist’s head, is not just a pathetic identification by the painter who was aware (as his patrons most probably were not) of the death-sentence hanging over his own head, but a way of generalising emblematically the message of the Baptist’s martyrdom: the submission to sacrifice as the condition for the remission of sin.

A similar emblematicism appears in the prominence of the column in the Madonna of the Rosary painting, because it was painted for Luigi Carafa-Colonna (and there is, perhaps, also a similar allusion in the Flagellation). In the light of this practice, the allegorical readings of the early genre works become more credible: that the boy bitten by a lizard in the midst of cherries is a moralistic piece about the pain that snaps out like a tiny, toothy dragon out of the bed of sensual pleasure; that the ugly child with thick, swollen lips and bloated, livid body, thought by some critics to be dead, smothered in darkness, under a harsh, corrosive vertical light that seems to internally mangle the very matter of the painting, called the Sleeping Cupid, represents the renunciation of erotic pleasures in celibacy; that the Sick Bacchus (believed to be a self-portrait done when the painter was sick at the Hospital of the Consolation) with his bloodless, white lips and strikingly raised knee, represents the expectation of the metamorphosis from death to life; that the various fruit baskets, with their grapes, pomegranates, apples and sometimes figs are (like some of their Flemish prototypes) allegories – as they were certainly taken to be by Cardinal Federico Borromeo, who himself acquired the simplest one of them, and greatly admired the undoubtedly metaphysical Dutch still lifes (and Jan Brueghel: “*quid amabo nisi quod enigma est?*”) alongside the 13th century Christian flower basket mosaic of St. Clement; that music, as it features in the scene of the *Flight to Egypt* (where the score which appears in the painting has been deciphered to be a motet in honour of the Virgin by the Franco-Flemish musician Noel Bauldewijn on lines from the Song of Songs: *Quam pulchra es et quam decora*, and the age/youth, or rather time/eternity contrast is sharply depicted) and perhaps also in the Leningrad *Luteplayer* and the New York *Concert*, is an additional emblem of grace, reinforcing the light symbolism; that the flourishing vegetation in contrast with the dead tree (in the *Flight*), like the living plants beneath the (dead) stone (in the *Deposition*), are also emblematic allusions to resurrection; and so on.

Clearly, the emblematic images do not assume the same force and richness of meaning when in isolation as they do when seen as the abstract, ideal counterpart to concrete, realistic detail – indeed as parts of a single, unfolding opus, consisting of the painter’s entire production. This entire production appears to be dominated, when seen in its integrality, by a unique and unifying intuition: that of earthly existence poised on a knife-edge, of a world held in suspension over an abyss of total darkness by the intangible force of a divine light which, at the stroke of the blackest hour, hurtles and extracts from the phenomena ravaged by time and on the verge of death their eternal essence. Hardly anyone could doubt that the power with which this vision is rendered in many, various ways does not flow from the painter’s life-history, but it seems quite comprehensible in relation to the known, overt facts of his life and age, without any great addition to our understanding being required or derivable from such probing of recondite, abnormal experience peculiar to the artist as psychoanalysis has so far been able to provide.

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