Pitiful Relics: Caravaggio's Martyrdom of St. Matthew

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Pitiful Relics: Caravaggio's
Martyrdom of St. Matthew

Beneath the surface of Caravaggio's *Martyrdom of St. Matthew* (plate 1) is another painting (figs. 1 and 2). X-rays reveal an abandoned preliminary version of the scene of violent martyrdom. The underlying provisional executioners threaten to obstruct the saint's visibility. A muscular thug dominates the foreground. His helmeted head, broad back, buttocks, and tightly syncopated legs step away into unspecified depth. To his left, another soldier, in profile, lunges violently toward the same object. He steps forward, his naked torso pivots on its axis, exposing his chest to our view. He cocks back his arm and thrusts the sword in tandem with his other extended hand, which balances and directs the attack. Between the two figures, in depth, a third man elevates his hand, poised to plunge downwards toward the shared destination. The doubling and tripling of the gesture provides narrative focus and through its replication conjures a conspiratorial movement. The man in profile on the left is a skewed double of the central figure, compensating for the viewer's limited comprehension of a person seen from behind. Multiple assassins, through repetitive action and variation of pose, produce a sense of anatomical completion. One thinks of the executioners in Antonio del Pollaiuolo's *Martyrdom of St. Sebastian*, where the multiplication of partial aspects compensates for the constraints of an implied single point of view (fig. 3). The mechanical repetition of socially and ontologically "incomplete" figures in both paintings also recalls depictions of the massacre of the innocents, where soldiers in the act of visceral penetration display the artists' anatomical virtuosity. Multiple aggressors underscore the vulnerability of the sacrificial body and its imminent disintegration. In Caravaggio's initial painting, Matthew stood trapped in the interstices of that screen of brutality, holding out his fragile hand in the path of the plunging sword. To Matthew's left stood a nude ephebic acolyte or angel feebly repeating the saint's pathetic, defensive gesture. Matthew was too easily upstaged by this youthful figure. Moreover, the saint was obscured by the clash of arms to the point of being made inconsequential.

Caravaggio's initial painting of the desecration of the saintly body participated in one of the contradictions of western art beginning in the early modern era: the
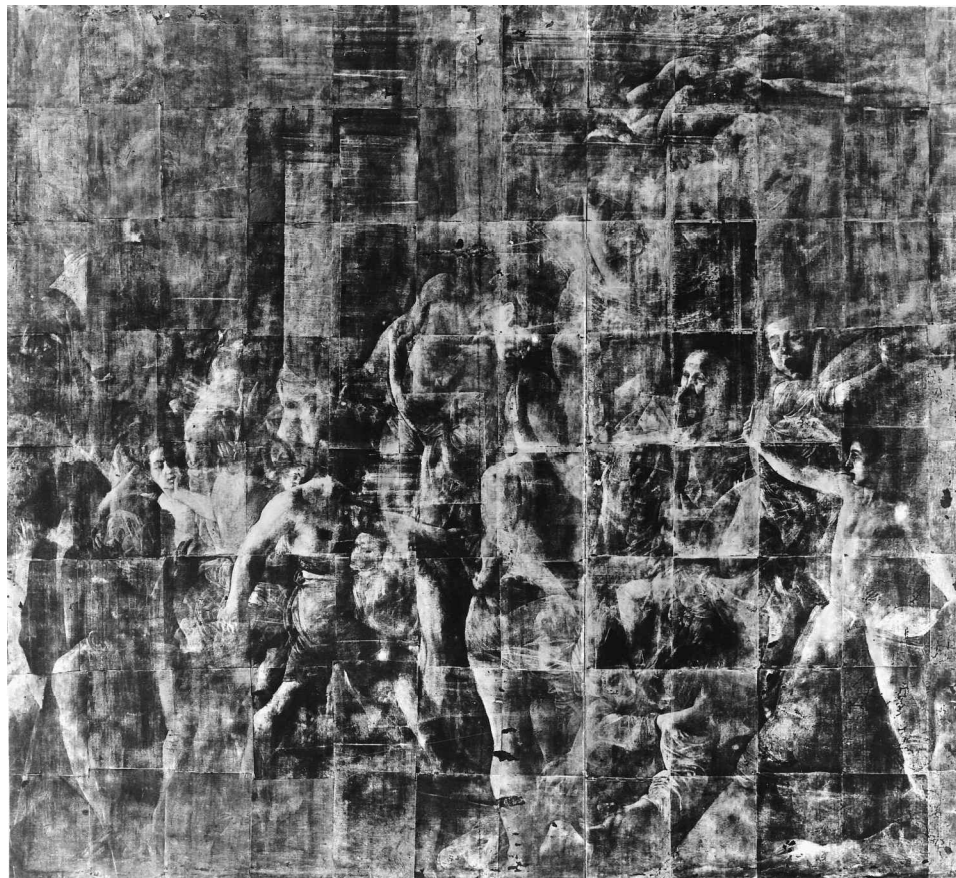
FIGURE 1. Caravaggio, X-ray photograph of underpainting for *The Martyrdom of St. Matthew*, c. 1599–1600. Contarelli Chapel, San Luigi dei Francesi, Rome. Photo: Instituto centrale per il restauro, Rome.

bodies of untouchables became central to the depiction of heroic narrative. Waiting on the wings of altarpieces or in sacred conversations, martyrs were traditionally arrested in their movement. They held the instruments of victimization against a gilt ground, but their assassins were not rendered visible. Eyes in the hand or breasts on a plate, sword wedged or stones embedded in the skull served as indices of penetration, torture, and disfiguration (fig. 4). Narrative and, by extension, mutability and mortality were held in check. When hagiography entered narrative, as it did in Pollaiuolo's painting, the impassive martyr was subjected to the gyrating pattern of executioners. The display of an active, virtuous, and noble body, the ostensible organizing principle of narrative painting (*historia*) as defined by the fifteenth-century art theorist Leon Battista Alberti and later adumbrated by others, was
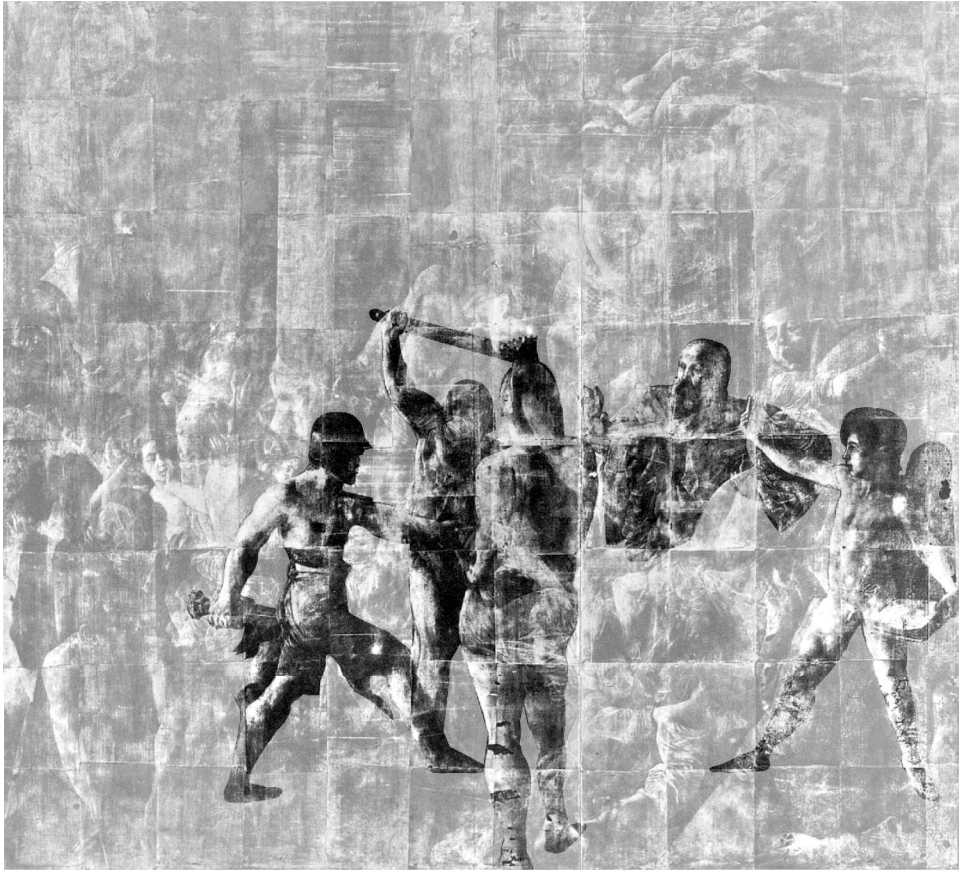
FIGURE 2. Caravaggio, digitally enhanced X-ray photograph of underpainting for *Martyrdom of St. Matthew*. Photo: Instituto centrale per il restauro, Rome. Design: Brian Ewing.

paradoxically performed by those brutes that carry out orders, or the imagined interchangeable units of a mercenary army.[1] The humanist tradition of ennobling exemplarity coexisted uneasily with the demands of Christian martyrology. As the Catholic Church promoted the cult of the saints and promulgated their martyrdom, narrative painting was obligated to put the passive victim at the center of the composition. Rather than being active, the martyr was acted upon and violated by subaltern figures. Violent action performed by a body or series of bodies with accidental features and typological particularity introduced a variety of effects that dispersed attention. The pictorial interest provided by the ignoble figure thereby challenged the centrality of the noble body. By reversing the relative terms of dominance and subordination, by turning the profane against the sacred, the active

FIGURE 3. Antonio del Pollaiuolo, *The Martyrdom of St. Sebastian*, 1475.
© National Gallery, London.

FIGURE 4. Master of the Louvre Annunciation, "Saint Stephen and a Blessed Carmelite," right wing of the *Louvre Annuciation*, Musée du Louvre, Paris. © Réunion des musées nationaux/Art Resource, New York.

against the passive, the violent martyrdom seemed to contradict Alberti's theory of *historia*. Hero and victim were made equivalent.

The underlying painting rejected by Caravaggio betrays the difficulty of the pictorial problem he faced. Indeed, the ambitious composition was in itself a challenge to his limited skills and experience as a painter. Caravaggio had been accustomed to painting modestly scaled, ready-made pictures for private consumption during his first years in Rome: androgynous boys being bitten by lizards, playing the lyre, or offering fruit (fig. 5). The proffered merchandise, oil paint on stretched canvas, thematized its own production of mimetic deception, seduction, and unconsummated desire. In these pictures, the painter had astutely combined two genres over which he had command: the still life and the half-length figure. Caravaggio's early small pictures of multiple figures, such as the *Cardsharps*, depicted only a few figures truncated by a table (fig. 6). A simple composition and a limited display of anatomy provided the occasion for selective and concentrated attention to the representation of textures and the rudimentary narrative of a confidence game, in this case, the victim caught in the conspiratorial deception of cardsharp

and accomplice. When Caravaggio was given the commission for a chapel in France's national church in Rome, he easily adapted the pictorial structure of his small paintings to the demands of the *Calling of St. Matthew* on the lateral wall of the chapel: Christ enters a tavern scene; half-length figures count money at a table, and Matthew is singled out from the motley crew for sainthood (fig. 7). However, the representation of violent martyrdom on the facing wall posed other challenges.

Caravaggio's initial composition for the painting of Matthew's martyrdom had failed to offer semantic clarity and triumphal resolution (figs. 1 and 2). The rude gang had created confusion at the center, upstaging and obscuring the plot. Recognizing Matthew had required a great deal of effort. Caravaggio seems to have apprehended the early version's failure in his radically modified composition. In the final painting, Matthew has received a sword thrust from behind (plate 1). Turning away from the altar, he spirals downward. His assailant lifts him at the wrist for the final assault. The wounded saint is fully cognizant of his imminent death. Martyrdom has become a couplet: assailant and victim, executioner and condemned. At the center, the violence is seemingly clarified into a simple opposition: Matthew gives in to superior force and brutality. Whereas in the initial composition Matthew's body was suggested by a face peering out through the screen of executioners,

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Figure 6. Caravaggio, *The Cardsharps (I Bari)*, c. 1594. Kimball Art Museum, Ft. Worth, Texas.

the overpainting's recumbent sacrificial body is prominently displayed, overlapped only by a single executioner's leg.

We might presume that the painter had learned his lesson. The specialist in genre pictures had taught himself how to paint a *historia*, or, rather, he appears to have learned how to shore up the contradictions of a history painting depicting a martyrdom. One might infer from these changes that *historia* triumphs. Some observers have put it this way: the Counter-Reformation Church had attempted to discipline painting, calling for clarity after the obscurity of mannerism and the challenges to devotional art by Reformation iconoclasts. In his first bid for a major public commission in Rome, Caravaggio successfully represented martyrdom within the structural constraints of the humanist's *historia*. Strict narrative relevance dictated the process of selection and arrangement. Alberti's call for pictorial and semantic intelligibility required clarity of form and the integrity of the heroic, masculine figure at the center of the picture. In Alberti's theory, the interdependence of the constituent parts of pictorial composition adhered moreover to a strict hierarchical structure based on an analogy to the imagined wholeness of the human body: "The parts of the *historia* are bodies, the parts of the bodies are members, the parts of the member are plane surfaces."[2] As Michael Baxandall has argued, Al-

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<small>FIGURE 7.</small> Caravaggio, *Calling of St. Matthew*, 1599–1600. Contarelli Chapel, San Luigi dei Francesi, Rome. © Alinari/Art Resource, New York.

berti imagined the *historia* as both coherent and explicable. Modeled after the grammar of a periodic sentence, composition was conceived as a "hierarchy of forms within the framework of which one assesses the role of each element in the total effect of the picture."[3] The pressure of Alberti's theory on artistic practice is registered in Pollaiuolo's scene of martyrdom, where the executioners are six regular units subsumed by the symmetrical, pyramidal composition. The two figures in the foreground firing longbows at the central nude are frontal and rear views of the same pose. The two archers loading their crossbows are similarly a replicative pair of studied anatomies. Each of their members is reducible to their constitutive modeled surfaces, uniformly shaded on the left. At center, under the martyred saint, the tree trunk offers a control for the simplified and predictable shadows cast across these members by a light source to our right. Surfaces therefore systematically cor-

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respond to the logic of volumes, volumes constitute members, and members constitute bodies, which in turn constitute the composition. The parts of the painting and the parts of the body are subsumed within the whole.

It has been assumed that Caravaggio's destruction of the initial painting of the *Martyrdom of St. Matthew* late in its production was motivated by his realization that the composition did not serve the subject's narrative purpose. That is to say, the underpainting did not sufficiently impress upon the viewer the homology between pictorial structure and the integrity of the human body. In fact, scholars have largely assumed that the overpainting was an attempt to increase the picture's clarity and legibility.[4] To master semantic and narrative relevance was the painter's brief, we are told. The artist was pressed to make the body of the martyr sufficiently intelligible even as it was subjected to the threat of violent subordination and dismemberment.

The argument is convincing insofar as Caravaggio did achieve a figure of Matthew that has a persuasive presence in the final painting. Faced with the task of painting a *historia*, Caravaggio sought to sustain the phantasm of an anatomy. Given the theoretical legacy of Alberti and a historiography that privileged Tuscan tonal painting, his success at the time would have been measured in part by this achievement. If the flower painter *cum* specialist in half-figures was to obtain further prestigious commissions, he would have to succeed as a painter of the fully articulated body in a significant narrative. Thus, the ambitious transformation of Caravaggio from the painter of half-length figures to the artist responsible for the accomplished figure of Matthew provides the strongest support for this commonly held appreciation of the painter's success.

Yet, if we accept the underpainting as the failed attempt to produce a *historia* and the final painting as its successful realization, we ignore the visual evidence of the completed work. To assume that Caravaggio's sole brief was to answer Alberti's mandate for the unified, integral human figure ignores evidence that the artist was also responding to other cultural and devotional requirements. Examination of the final painting reveals a tension between the projection of wholeness onto the figure of Matthew and a pictorial strategy whereby body and pictorial composition were violated.

This paper takes seriously the fact that the violation of saints' bodies did not occur solely in painting. Martyrs were largely venerated because of the violation to which their bodies were subjected. Thereafter, they disintegrated and were archaeologically recovered as sacred relics. Relics were the forensic traces of martyrdom, passive objects embodying narratives without representing active, integrated anatomies. I am arguing that the fragmentation of the body in Caravaggio's painting drew upon this enduring devotional figure. Indeed, it is my contention that the constitutive body of the composition was imagined by Caravaggio as a relic.

To imagine the body differently from that of the noble figure in Alberti's *historia* was not to destroy painting, let alone tradition. Caravaggio sustained and depended

on Alberti's homology between body and composition in his picture, but to different ends. The violation of a pictorial structure suggested other narratives not only of martyrdom—the violation of a body—but also of its double, iconoclasm—the violation of the material image. By describing the final painting and the historical pressures put upon its making, I am arguing that Caravaggio's pictorial decisions were a response to the demands of both artistic theory and competing cultural practices. Caravaggio's painting negotiated the contradictory pressures exerted, on the one hand, by the humanist *historia* and, on the other, by a reinvigorated Christian martyrology. If the former demanded a heroic body, the latter celebrated the abject body. If the former demanded the unity of composition, the latter dedicated itself to pictorial structure based on the principle of violation. The saint and the sacred image were both incorruptible and subject to torture, mayhem, and dispersal. Matthew's body and Caravaggio's painting were freighted with these contradictions.

Painting in Ruins

Our assumptions conspire to convince us that the body of St. Matthew in Caravaggio's painting is entirely resolved. The painter has led us to perceive wholeness largely by drawing tenuous inferences based on perceptual experience. (One leg occluded by another still exists; a leg extending into the darkness remains a leg, and so on.) Close attention to the figure unravels that illusion of wholeness. Matthew barely exists in a state of completion. The saint is a foreshortened head, a set of appendages and the suggestion of a groin. His upper trunk is occluded by abrupt foreshortening as are his legs below the knee. The torso and legs are too short and the knee is too high. The figure struggles between wholeness and fragmentation.

Caravagio's contemporaries would have seen the lack of resolution in the figure of Matthew. Domenichino, for example, corrects Caravaggio's martyr in his own *Flagellation of St. Andrew* (fig. 8), unambivalently emulating Michelangelo and his systematic use of modeling to evoke an active, expressive body. Far from an impassive ascetic, the saint actively responds to torture, twisting outward to disclose the fully articulated muscles of a heroic nude. Unlike Pollaiuolo's Sebastian and Domenichino's Andrew, Matthew is covered in cloth. Inverting the priorities of the *historia*, Caravaggio's demonstration of the anatomy is reserved for the nude, ignoble body, rather than the saint. Much of our sense of Matthew's wholeness relies in fact on the painter's depiction of fabric. Characteristically, Caravaggio's skillful rendering of the textural differentiation of substances, demonstrated in his still lifes and genre pictures, sustained the phantasm of a body in narrative largely through metonymy. Rather than exposing the saint's body and suggesting volume through modeling, the painter elided object and body through metonymic slippage: a body is invoked by a protective garment's substantive tactile presence. The curvilinear
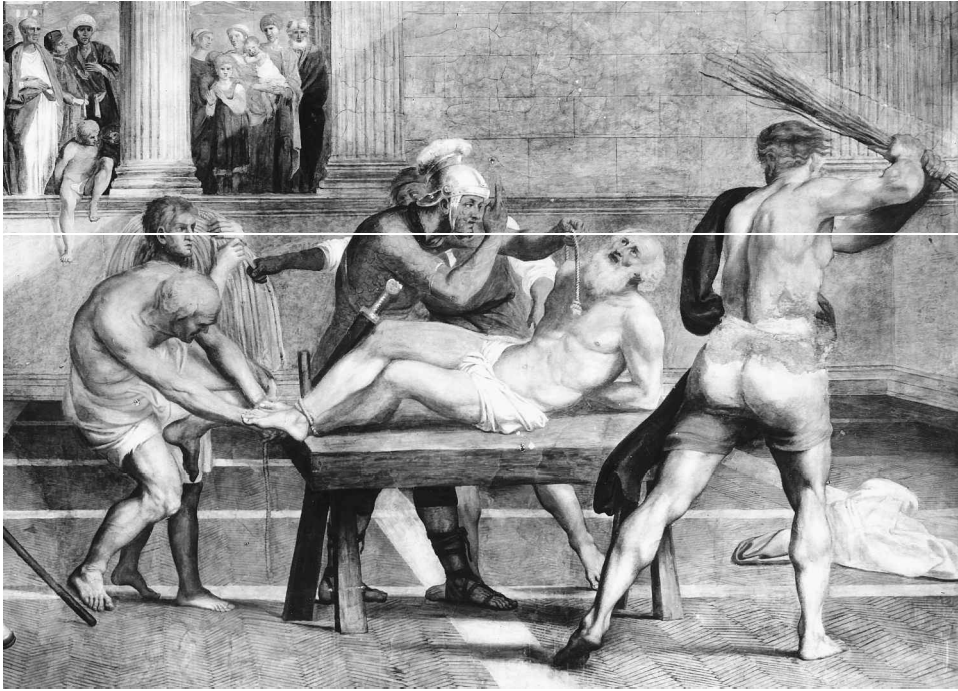
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FIGURE 8. Domenichino, *The Flagellation of St. Andrew* (detail), 1609. Oratorio di Sant'Andrea, San Gregorio Magno, Rome. Photo: Art Resource, New York.

crease and fold of textured white cloth surrounding the arms define the limits of cylindrical masses and bestow materiality by proxy. The upward arcing, braided, and tasseled cord bundles a mound of cloth, thereby interrupting the continuity of the creases that run the length of the implied torso. Yet the inferred underlying substance is tenuous. The priest's chasuble—a crumpled red silk displacement of the martyr's blood surrounded by a set of sharp opaque planes—disconnects arms and lower trunk. Matthew is read as a set of cobbled-together still lifes. The white patch that veils the projected lower body is no more than an expanded study of a nervously twisted handkerchief. A weird semblance of corporeal unity is barely achieved by this fragile envelope. There is an emptying out of mass.

Consider, by contrast, Pollaiuolo's Sebastian (fig. 3). The artist's convincing display of a predictable set of anatomical relations in space leaves little to be imagined. Because of the artist's skillful drawing of anatomical structure, his recall of ancient sculpture, and his consistent management of tone, Sebastian's body is unified and intact even while being penetrated. If the graceful contour drawing puts undue weight on linear design at the expense of plasticity, the artist compensates by sur-

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rounding the figure with a circuit of surrogate viewers. The two archers in depth look upon the back of the body that we cannot see.

Was Caravaggio simply incapable of achieving anatomical mastery? Is Matthew proof of his deficiency? Caravaggio's limited training may account in part for his hesitant treatment of the saint's body. Pollaiuolo was clearly more proficient in his virtuoso exhibition of the anatomy, grounded in the practice of drawing. Caravaggio's attempt to press beyond the limits of anatomical proficiency registers as awkwardness. However, this thesis that Caravaggio had insufficient anatomical knowledge to make Matthew as convincing as Pollaiuolo's Sebastian (or Domenichino's Andrew) is undercut by his figure of the executioner. Here Caravaggio confidently represents a full-length nude. The executioner's torso pivots on an anchored leg, registering the force necessary simultaneously to wield the blade and to extend his other arm toward his victim. In this figure, the painter is demonstrating newly found capacities. Firm, sinuous contour lines on the left side of the body are fixed by a dark ground. Despite his representation of shrill light and his deployment of abrupt shifts in tonality, the artist conveys his commitment to a fully constituted body in relief. In this figure, the agitated loincloth serves as an accent to, rather than a substitute for, anatomical proficiency.

Caravaggio's limited skills cannot fully account either for the strangeness of the martyr's eclipsed body or more generally for the picture's refusal to render complete the ancillary bodies that would anchor the central couplet. Even in the final version, the saint is caught in the inchoate weave of witnesses. The central narrative incident is framed by a spiraling group of fleeing, panic-stricken neophytes or coconspirators. The painter has orchestrated confusion. Contrast these piecemeal figures to those gravitating around the central figure in Domenichino's *Flagellation of St. Andrew* (fig. 8). As in Pollaiuolo's *Martyrdom of St. Sebastian*, where the artist exhibited his full command of the differences between the tense body's application of force to a crossbow and a longbow, Domenichino's thrashing brute in the foreground complements the convincing anatomical display of the tortured body. Both artists based their compositions on the predictable relations of active figures in space.

By contrast, the representation of the forceful centrifugal dispersal of the reactive figures in the *Martyrdom of St. Matthew* is contradicted by the intensive fixation on tenuous, seemingly arbitrary juxtapositions. On the left side of the picture, an extended hand appears to graze another hand in depth (plate 1). Figures (or rather, partially revealed synecdoches of surfaces or members) seem to be placed according to the chance coordinates of a single represented viewing position. Relations between objects in space are held ransom to an arbitrary opticality. Rather than a collective model of responsiveness suggested by the coordination of figures, relationality here is subject to violent incoherence.[5] Our suspicion regarding Matthew's incompleteness takes its cue from the failure of the surrounding figures to adhere to a predictable system.

In the upper left, for example, a man falls, hands upheld. Below him, in the left
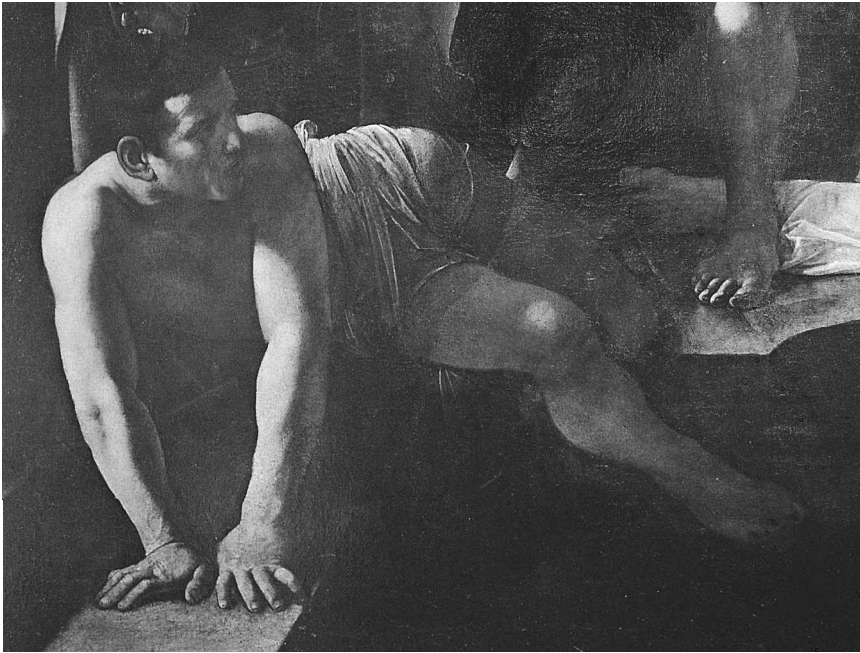
FIGURE 9. Caravaggio, *The Martyrdom of St. Matthew* (detail of plate 1).
© Scala/Art Resource, New York.

corner, another seminude man pivots on his hip and tentatively plants his hands on the ground (fig. 9). The hands are too near to each other to offer stability to the head balanced between the shoulders. This figure is Matthew's reversed and inverted double. The presence of his body is largely inferred from the evidence of a torso provisionally grafted to a pair of thinly painted legs projecting back into depth. The figure is oriented in conflicting directions. In other late-sixteenth-century paintings *repoussoir* figures such as this man at left served as demonstration pieces of the artist's invention: to display, if not to surpass, anatomical mastery. Predictably, in Caravaggio's first major public commission, the painter similarly attempted to garner authority through his rehearsal of Michelangelo's own demonstration pieces, the *ignudi* on the Sistine Chapel ceiling. Yet, the overt awkwardness of the figure at the left dismantles the masterful citation, underscoring instead the seemingly chance encounter of light and flesh.[6] In the corner, the arms and head echo an ovoid shape with a conspicuous gap, like the yoke of an ox.

At this site in the composition, as in the fracas in the upper left, Caravaggio rehearsed the skills he had developed in genre painting: a seemingly arbitrary perspective onto the figure emphasizes the perception of the incidental and the provisional and can thereby produce a veristic effect. (The success of this highly contrived

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strategy led critics like Caravaggio's seventeenth-century biographer Giovanni Pie-
tro Bellori to mistake this technical effect for a mere passive response to a tableau
vivant of models.)[7] In addition, a seemingly unplanned or unmotivated accident of
light illuminating surfaces underscores "the real."[8] Objects are not systematically
anchored to a coherent source of light (as in Pollaiuolo or Domenichino). Nor is
the primary effect one of relief. Caravaggio's emphasis on the viewer's partial
knowledge of the figure undercuts any secure grasp of the human body as a compre-
hensive whole. The radical disruption of the transition between illuminated surface
and opaque shadow presses the limits of our perception and thereby interferes with
our capacity to infer the presence of a body. The strategy is repeated in the hovering
angel who consists of appended aggregates of flesh. Even in the most resolute figure,
the executioner, the contours on the right side are degraded by opaque shadows
that threaten to contaminate the integrity of the body's surfaces. Rather than ful-
filling the promise of unity, light subjects the composition to violent disintegration.
Artistic citation is subject to the violence of ephemeral perception in a harsh light.

On the right, in the corner of the canvas most proximate to the viewer in the
chapel, a cleft between a man's shoulder blades offers a gaping maw (fig. 10). This
body casts an opaque shadow upon itself, thereby undermining the capacities of
graduated modeling to suggest a volume. The fragment of the back, incised by
shadow, is grafted onto two heads and a dislocated arm. A greasy red ear erupts
near the deep crevasses of a strained, wrinkled neck. Bodies are disassembled and
disengaged from the historical event. Expressiveness is blocked and the master nar-
rative threatens to collapse.

In this corporeal melee, modeled surfaces do not ineluctably evolve into the
integrated members of unified bodies, which serve as the constituent elements of a
composition. Normatively, in Italian tonal painting (such as Piero della Francesca's
Dream of Constantine in Arezzo; fig. 11), an object's attached or self-shadow suggests
a predictable set of relations. An object's projection obstructs the illumination of
its own surface. In a pictorial composition, numerous bodies predictably respond to
the simplified direction of light. Incremental gradation of tone registers the viewer's
relative proximity to the surfaces of an object. In addition, the discreteness of a
member or body is inferred from its capacity to occlude other objects and therefore
interfere with our perception of an adjacent surface, member, or body. A cast
shadow is conventionally reserved for the representation of an object's obstruction
of the illumination of the immediate ground or a contiguous object. From the oper-
ation of a cast shadow we infer the separateness of bodies, material discontinuity,
and ontological difference.[9]

Caravaggio transgressed these conventions. In his revised composition, rather
than having cast shadow represent the contiguity of discrete objects, shadows are
cast by objects onto themselves. The extreme opacity of an attached shadow makes
it read as a cast shadow. That is to say, a self-shadow mimics or collapses into cast
shadow. Caravaggio's radical use of chiaroscuro produces the strangeness of the
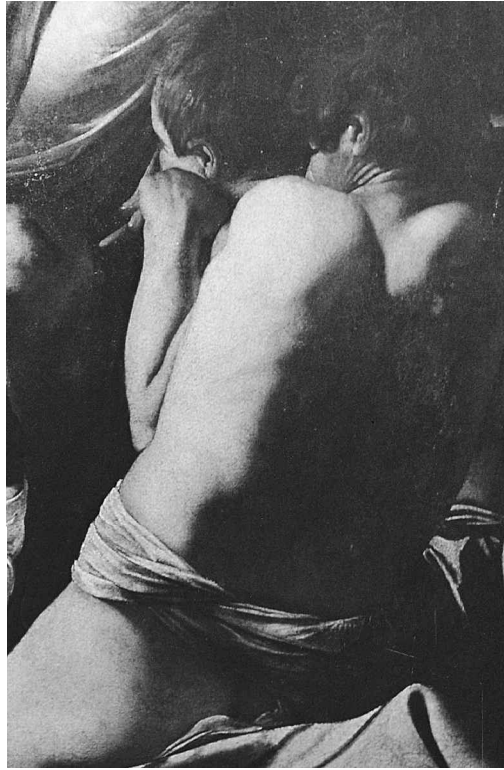
FIGURE 10. Caravaggio, *The Martyrdom of St. Matthew* (detail of plate 1).
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gaping hole where flesh belongs. If the light raking a body abruptly leaves a part of its continuous surface in complete darkness, the effect is one of corrosion, self-annihilation. Light and shadow create relief, but if a body is severely divided by luminosity and opacity, it is disrupted. Surfaces become discontinuous. Planes do not adhere. Members fail to cohere into a body. As corporal integrity is compromised, bodies fail to constitute a knowable space and they refuse to coalesce into a pictorial structure in conformity with Alberti's composition. This occurs not only because the body appears incomplete but also because the cast self-shadow alienates the object from itself. (As I have stated, conventionally, in western representation, shadows are cast on adjacent or discontinuous bodies.) Here recourse to the term *naturalism* is of limited usefulness. Far from bolstering the real, the seemingly accidental illumination of objects in Caravaggio's painting ultimately produces doubt regarding the integrity and presence of bodies. Radical tonal disjunction elicits a rupture between surface and void, undercutting the seamless continuity of planar surface to member, member to body, and body to composition.
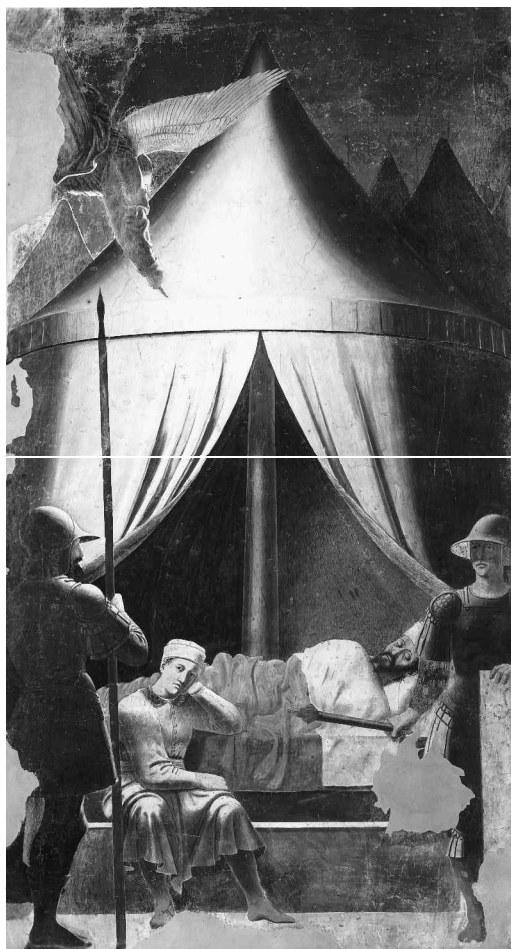
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FIGURE 11. Piero della Francesca, "The Dream of Constantine," 1455. From *Legend of the True Cross.* San Francesco, Arezzo. © Alinari/Art Resource, New York.

Thus, if Caravaggio had meant to shore up the *historia*, it was not in the terms coined by Alberti. In his painting, the strain on the unity of composition (and its constituent surfaces, planes, members, and bodies) betrays a pictorial strategy, rather than inadequate skills. The peripheral figures in the overpainting of the *Martyrdom of St. Matthew* bear the greatest burden of signifying the collapse of form. They register the endpoint of the capacity of discrepant tones to suggest volume. The bodies on the margins point to a failure of legibility that anticipates (or foreshadows) the pell-mell spectacle of Matthew's imminent disintegration as violated martyr. The result ultimately draws attention to our inability to know fully where boundaries terminate or, even, whether the body under the threat of dismemberment exists beyond what we know. Caravaggio's painting interrogates the viewer: When is a contour a cut? (Caravaggio would make literal this pictorial strategy in

his *David with the Head of Goliath* of 1610.) Compare the effect of St. Matthew's satellite fragments to Pollaiuolo's two henchmen confidently delivering the measured arrows to the unseen yet coherent target or Domenichino's orchestration of figures around the displayed victim. In the *Martyrdom of St. Matthew* composition is a ramshackle phantasm of surface, plane, member, and body momentarily propped up in order to be violated. Far from clarifying the narrative and stressing the intact condition of the central body, as in Pollaiuolo and Domenichino, Caravaggio's use of the homology between composition and body dismantled Alberti's *historia*. He left painting in ruins.

The previous sentence will not strike some readers as surprising. After all, Nicolas Poussin's well-known remark that Caravaggio destroyed painting was used as the point of departure for Louis Marin's meditation on the Italian painter.[10] Based on a statement attributed to Poussin, Marin's title, *To Destroy Painting*, flags a desire for an art that threatens to deconstruct itself.[11] Poussin's remark about an artist who flirts with the destruction of art cannot illuminate how Caravaggio's painting coordinated martyrdom and iconoclasm unless we return the picture to its historical moment, however. Treated in isolation, Caravaggio's handling of chiaroscuro may seem idiosyncratic to us—an object yielding the occasion for extended formal description—but his picture in 1600 existed within a visual and political culture preoccupied with the destruction of saints as well as art.

Martyrdom

There was no clear fit between Caravaggio's pictorial decisions and Tridentine decrees concerning the role of images. His painting for the Contarelli Chapel nevertheless was made in response to emergent devotional requirements. Protestant attacks on the veneration of saints, their images, and their relics led Catholics to dedicate themselves to the exemplary passive body subject to violation by the instruments of tyrannical power. Indeed, immediately prior to the conception of Caravaggio's project, Rome saw the production of an ambitious series of martyr pictures. In the 1580s, passive bodies of saints were elaborated in a seemingly endless series of permutations: torture, mayhem, execution, dismemberment, and desecration.[12] In 1582, Pope Gregory XIII commissioned a series of thirty frescoes for Santo Stefano Rotondo al Celio. The painter Pomarancio depicted the early Roman martyrs, such as those who had been killed by the emperor Nero. A series of engravings after the frescoes immediately appeared, joining the numerous publications of prints in the coming decades depicting the martyrdom of the early Roman saints and the desecration of their bodies.[13]

Devotion to historical martyrs was also directly inflected by a spate of contemporary killings. The militancy of the Counter-Reformation Church produced a generation of devotees who willingly sought to imitate the early martyrs. In 1583,

FIGURE 12. After Niccolò Circignani (Pomarancio), *Martyrdom of Blessed Edmund Campion and Others in 1581*, 1583. Engraved by Giovanni Battista Cavalieri, *Ecclesiae Anglicanae Trophaea* (Rome, 1584), plate 33. Courtesy of The Getty Research Library, Los Angeles.

only a few years after the martyrdom of the Irish priest Edmund Campion in England, frescoes were painted in the English College in Rome and quickly reproduced in a portfolio of engravings with the intention of "exciting the faithful" into imitation of their martyred compatriots (fig. 12).[14] In the two decades before the execution of the Contarelli Chapel by Caravaggio, ambitious painting programs and prints linked the Roman Empire's persecution of the Christians with contemporary violence inflicted by Protestants. In these English Recusant frescoes, the anachronistic armor of the executioners was intended to identify the Anglicans with imperial power against a colonized Irish Catholic, reenacting the mutilation and dispersal of the bodies of the early Roman martyrs.

Such historical allusions were central to the project in the Contarelli Chapel

in the French national church in Rome. Caravaggio had inherited a program that emerged in direct response to the first wave of brutal religious war in France. The Contarelli Chapel had been dedicated to St. Matthew some thirty years earlier by the French Cardinal Matthieu Contrei (Matteo Contarelli). The chapel was to be decorated with six episodes in the life of Matthew, including his conversion and the events culminating in his martyrdom as a missionary in Ethiopia. Contrei had originally commissioned the Matthew cycle for his chapel in 1562, only three years after the death of Henry II, which marked the legalization of the Reformed Church and the proliferation of Calvinist print propaganda in France.[15] Setting a precedent for a recurrent phenomenon in French history, a politically impotent royal minority fomented civil war. The violent conflicts that ensued throughout the century no doubt contributed to the delays in the realization of the chapel's decorative program. The imagery of the chapel, however, did not lose its relevance. The theme of conversion and martyrdom of a saint was consistent with the Roman Church's cobbling together of decrees justifying religious images in response to the wave of iconoclasm in France. Moreover, the death of St. Matthew at the hands of a heretical monarch would have underscored the dangers for European Catholics of rule by a king alienated from the Roman Church—even more so, by an actual Huguenot.

Expiation

The delay between the initial commission for the Contarelli Chapel in 1565 and the final execution by Caravaggio in 1600 suggests that the painter had inherited not only a program but also a politics. The resumption of work on the chapel in the French national church by Caravaggio around 1600 was prompted by his supporters, pro-French cardinals who wanted to complete the work in time for the Jubilee, thereby celebrating the recent abjuration of Calvinism by Henry of Navarre after decades of bloody civil war.[16] The pictures in the Contarelli Chapel therefore entered into an economy of international political exchange. By all appearances, Henry of Navarre was willing to swap religious conviction for political power. Contemporaries were as cynical as was Karl Marx, who in *Capital* quoted the aphorism attributed to Henry IV ("Paris vaut bien une messe"). The chapel was part of a campaign to assuage any doubts about the legitimacy of the king's conversion.[17] The renewed attention to the chapel by the Vatican gave testimony to the pope's absolution of the monarch. Furthermore, the imagery of martyrdom at the hands of a heretical king had an expiatory function: Henry the heretic had been reincarnated into a Gallican Hercules ready to slay the discordant hydra of heresy.[18]

Given Henry IV's attempts to forge a political alliance with the papacy and the Roman Church's claims to a unified Catholic Europe, one might expect to find the project in France's national church in Rome to be in conformity with the theoretical

arm of the Counter-Reformation Church. In the wake of iconoclasm, the artistic theory of the Roman Catholic Church attempted to regulate numinous images. The representation of historical actions that could be emulated was understood to be less dangerous than an iconic image that might be confused with its prototype.[19] Cardinal Gabriele Paleotti, who wrote a systematic treatise on art in collaboration with St. Charles Borromeo, argued that religious painting must imprint upon the heart "heroic and magnanimous deeds." In order to reform the *historia*, Paleotti criticized obscurity, incomprehensibility, and the risk of amassing "a multitude of figures and actions, which confuse your sight and intellect."[20] Elaborating in his treatise the schematic guidelines handed down by the Council of Trent (1563), Paleotti was sustaining the art-critical tradition of Alberti: history painting should serve to honor and encourage virtue.[21] For Paleotti, martyrdom was an ideal topos for the *historia*:

To hear the narration of the martyrdom of a saint, the fervor and the perseverance of a virgin, the passion of Christ Himself, this is something that really touches us inside; but to have in front of our eyes, set in live colors, here the saint tortured, there the virgin martyred and in another place Christ nailed [to the cross], all this undoubtedly so much increases our devotion that those who do not acknowledge it are made of wood or marble.[22]

Indeed, the late-sixteenth-century Roman Catholic Church's demands for the visualization of martyr narratives from its own early history was consistent with one aspect of Caravaggio's brief.

The representation of the early martyr in the Contarelli Chapel was also a response to other pressures to which the heroic figure of the *historia* fell victim. During the last decades of the sixteenth century, images of the St. Bartholemew's Day massacre of Huguenots were repressed by the proliferation of images devoted to the victimization of Catholic martyrs. Caravaggio's formal indebtedness to the recent imagery of Huguenot violence therefore had a political valence. In the engravings for Richard Verstegan's *Theater of Cruelty* (1587), as well as in paintings at Santo Stefano Rotondo and the English College known from prints, we witness an ambivalence toward the unity of pictorial composition comparable to Caravaggio's *Martyrdom of St. Matthew* (fig. 13).[23] Each series of pictures uses an anachronistic cellular composition, with the numbing, monotonous recapitulation of atrocities, burnings, tortures, and dismemberments represented in atemporal episodes dispersed in a landscape. Temporal and spatial unity are sacrificed, leaving a pictorial archaism that may refer to the martyr pictures of the early Church.[24] The captioned visual index also works to keep idolatry at bay, stressing that the picture is an artless mnemonic device.

In Caravaggio's *Martyrdom*, the dispersal of figures and vertiginous pictorial structure far exceed the obsessive replicative effects of other martyr paintings and their printed counterparts. But the literal representation of violence enacted on Matthew's body is more radically displaced onto the violation of the composition. The saint momentarily coalesces at the center of the picture. Yet the peripheral

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FIGURE 13. Richard Verstegan (Richard Rowlands), "Horribilia scelera ab Huguenotis in Gallijs perpetrata," in *Theatrum Crudelitatum Haereticorum Nostri Temporis* (Antwerp, 1587), plate 49. Courtesy of The William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, University of California, Los Angeles.

connective tissue of surfaces, members, and bodies does not bind the pictorial structure. The vacillation between contour and cut, across and within fragmentary bodies, threatens to undo the composition on which the integrity of the saint's body ultimately hinges. The painting acknowledges the conditions of composition as a surrogate body, sustaining the homology between body and canvas. Yet, as the pictorial structure stages its own disintegration, Matthew's integrity is threatened and martyrdom is imbricated in an iconoclastic gesture. In order to defend the status of the religious image, there is paradoxically a close identification between the martyrdom and the violation of pictorial unity. Why would the picture, as I am arguing, seem to stage its own destruction and flirt with iconoclasm?

Iconoclasm

Caravaggio's conflation of martyrdom and the representation of the destruction of art was not anomalous. Although at odds with the Church's theoretical commitment to Alberti's *historia* as a check for idolatry, this undoing of the ontological distinction between flesh and stone, or blood and paint, was a central strategy
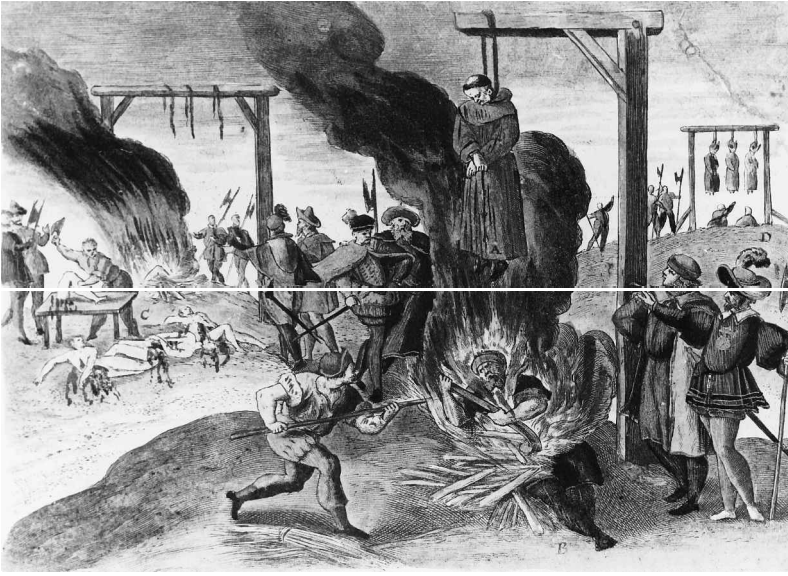
Pitiful Relics: Caravaggio's *Martyrdom of St. Matthew*   127

FIGURE 14. Richard Verstegan (Richard Rowlands), "Schismaticorum in Anglia crudelitas," in *Theatrum Crudelitatum Haereticorum Nostri Temporis,* plate 29. Courtesy of The William Andrews Clark Memorial Library.

of other Counter-Reformation visual practices. The appropriation of iconoclastic imagery was an important feature of numerous contemporary paintings and prints railing against the violence of the heretical Protestants. The passive dismembered martyr's body was purposefully confused with the destruction of the venerated sticks and stones of art. In one print, a crucifix is attacked in tandem with a fleshy double, a priest crucified and shot at the altar. In another, the burning of a statue of King David at the feet of a hanging martyr functions as a "double torture" (fig. 14).[25] Despite decrees to the contrary, the very confusion between deity and material object that the Calvinists deplored was exploited in such prints. Art was depicted as having the agency for feeling and expression.

Counter-Reformation writers claimed that the Catholic Church was a victim of the iconoclasts and their apocalyptic world, that the anarchic heretics outside the walls of Rome were subjecting Catholics to the same fate as was suffered by the early Christian martyrs. Antonius Paulus provided a list of atrocites:

Seditions and discord [have been] stirred up, the sacred and profane all mixed up and confused; everything [has been] filled with turbulent and discordant cries . . . [;] the images of the saints and monuments [are] everywhere prostrate, religious practices polluted; all divine and human laws [are] violated.[26]

In devotional texts and prints, the Catholic narratives of iconoclasm portrayed the destruction of the image as well as the confusing of Christ, Mary, or saint as a sec-

ond passion and uncanny martyrdom.[27] While the Calvinists attacked the images because of idolatry's confusion of prototype and representation, Catholic propaganda (outside art theory and Tridentine decrees) enlisted this mimetic confusion in order to represent iconoclasm as a contemporary symbolic reenactment of martyrdom. A painted print depicting a second mocking and crucifixion exploited the confusion between the hue of flesh and polychrome sculpture, immolated statues and martyrs (fig. 15). In yet other prints, a shipwrecked Madonna and child drown in the embrace of a priestly amputee, victims of Huguenot pirates, or the Virgin hangs from the neck of a crucified Franciscan.[28] Far from disavowing the confusion between deity and prototype, Counter-Reformation imagery collapsed these categories in order to dramatize the power of sacrilege.

Caravaggio's staging of the massacre of the body of the saint at the altar did not merely illustrate this notion of the martyred object. His picture's radical contrast of light and dark threatened to disintegrate the unity of composition, thereby thematizing the destruction of the painting itself. The conflation of martyrdom and iconoclasm was enacted by attacking the body as constituted in pictorial form. Hence, Caravaggio's violent disarticulation of the legacy of Alberti. Far from recuperating the integrated heroic body modeled after ancient sculpture as the structural organizing principle of the *historia*, Caravaggio's representation of the catastrophic threat to history painting depended on performing the disintegration of the antique referent. Any reader of the classicist Giovanni Pietro Bellori might simply attribute Caravaggio's apparent deficiency in anatomical representation to his ignorance of the statues of classical antiquity. But the value Bellori assigned to antiquity was different from the understanding of antiquity in 1600. For Caravaggio and his immediate audience, as distinct from Bellori in the 1670s, the body as pictured by Caravaggio was not incompatible with the antique body. In order to make this argument, I must specify what antiquity meant in Counter-Reformation Rome. Far from having ancient sculptures stand in for anatomical completion (and Winckelmannian desire), the ancient object of archaeology around 1600 was closely identified with its destruction.

Archaeology

Only three years before Caravaggio painted St. Matthew, a procession through Rome celebrated the transfer of the recently excavated physical remains of three early Christian martyrs to a church dedicated to their devotion.[29] Significantly, the spectacular parade of 1597 was modeled after a Roman triumphal entry, proceeding through sites saturated with imperial memory. Appropriating the political symbolism of triumph for the condition of martyrdom, the historian Cardinal Baronio proposed an oxymoron: the saint was a victorious victim. When the remnants of the bodies passed through the Arch of Titus, the imperial monument was

FIGURE 15. Richard Verstegan (Richard Rowlands), "Noui Evangelij fructus,"
in *Theatrum Crudelitatum Haereticorum Nostri Temporis*, plate 23.
Courtesy of The William Andrews Clark Memorial Library.

rededicated to a virgin martyr saint whose blood was represented as a trophy. Baronio's conception of martyr relics as imperial spoils was central to the archaeological construction of history around 1600.

Indeed Cardinal Baronio had collaborated with the antiquarian Antonio Bosio, who famously rummaged the catacombs for archaeological traces of the early Roman Church. Bosio's posthumously published *Roma Soutteranea* (1634) had helped the erudite Republic of Letters reconstitute the material remains of antiquity.[30] My emphasis here is that Bosio's archaeological project of 1599–1600 was contemporaneous with Caravaggio's renovation of the Contarelli Chapel at San Luigi. Central to Bosio's textual project was the history of the broken bones of martyrs, the burning and the inundation of the martyrs' flesh.

In Bosio's *Roma Soutteranea*, the reader witnesses violent dismemberment structured by a cataloging impulse. Not only did the early Roman Christians experience the pain of burning flesh, but their bodies were desecrated: exposed to the birds of the air, the animals of the earth, and the fish of the sea.[31] The saints were subject to elemental dispersal. Bosio's archaeological text made the violation of syntax a devotional instrument. Each chapter is an index to infamy: the disposal of bodies in wells, fire, the sea, lakes, and sewers. The pagans, fearing the power of these relics, longed to banish them. Unlike the archaeologist or physical anthropologist

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who produces a fully reconstituted artifact, Bosio devoted himself to describing the disintegration of sacred remains: some bodies simply maimed, others lacerated into a thousand pieces, and still others torn apart by horses, members and intestines strewn.[32]

As a result of the systematic mayhem and multiple martyrdoms recounted by Bosio, the relics of the saints were mixed and mingled. Ultimately, the bones were recuperated through the diligence of the early devotees and divine intervention, separating profane from sacred, individual saint from saint, often with the assistance of a miraculous vision.[33] The discovery of an uncorrupted body of the early Christian martyr St. Cecilia in 1599 was thought to be such an occult event precipitated by the research of the historian Antonio Gallonio.[34] Immediately after the exhumation of her body, Bosio's history of the virgin saint was published.[35] The antiquarian's search among the remnants of a dispersed hagiography served as the context for the phantasmatic appearance of an inviolable body.

Bosio's text was part of a broader archaeological practice that was contemporaneous with Caravaggio's painting. Bosio and Caravaggio may seem strange bedfellows in light of the fact that Caravaggio was subsequently represented as a foil to those painters who modeled their art after classical antiquity. Yet in 1600 antiquity was defined in very specific terms by Counter-Reformation antiquarians. Bosio's archaeological project was indebted to those contemporaneous tracts relating the recent atrocities committed against sacred images. Bosio's narrative of the ancient Roman treatment of the Christian relics was intended to prefigure the recent spate of martyrdoms and the desecration of Catholic bodies. The early Christians, in the face of the disintegration of coreligionists, devoted themselves with "exquisite diligence" to the reconstitution and veneration of their material remains.[36] In Bosio's scheme, the full range of devotion depended upon a meditation on the destruction of the body and its ultimate reconstitution. He described a devotional archaeology where forensic evidence bore the trace of the narrative of martyrdom, but also, importantly, his relic was an artifact that bore the traces of an iconoclastic narrative. Bosio's description of the relics recapitulated Protestant assaults on devotional objects and the remains of saints, dissolving the differences between martyrdom, mayhem, and iconoclasm (fig. 16).

Ekphrasis

Bosio's morbid catalog and contemporary accounts of sacrilege participated in a devotional behavior with shared textual antecedents. The writings of the early Church justified the representation of both martyrdom and the desecration of sacred remains. The rhetorical performances of description, ekphrases, by the writers of late antiquity provided models for the vivid evocation and enumeration of atrocities.[37] The historian Cardinal Baronio and the archaeologist Bosio turned

FIGURE 16. Richard Verstegan (Richard Rowlands), "Horribilia scelera ab Huguenotis in Gallijs perpetrata," in *Theatrum Crudelitatum Haereticorum Nostri Temporis*, plate 47. Courtesy of The William Andrews Clark Memorial Library.

specifically to the writings of the fourth-century Latin poet Prudentius who described the visual representation of martyrdoms in the places of Christian worship, the Roman catacombs, thereby refuting the claim that the early Church did not venerate images.[38] For the Counter-Reformation theologian Baronio, Prudentius's descriptions of the ancient precedents for religious art offered a rebuttal to Jean Calvin's and Martin Luther's theses that the Church had decayed in its second millennium.[39] The archaeological discovery and salvage of the catacombs confirmed the testimonies of early Christian witnesses.[40] Bosio cited Prudentius as he explored the catacombs and searched for archaeological evidence to confirm the Christian poet's writings.[41] Significantly, Prudentius's description of ancient paintings offered a devotional language in response to art. The art criticism of the early Christians who responded to martyrdom paintings let Bosio imagine the catacombs as both mass grave and underground picture gallery. I believe that the subterranean art criticism offers a way for us to imagine the linguistic protocols of Caravaggio's immediate audience.

In *Crowns of Martyrdom*, Prudentius inserted ekphrases of paintings he found in the catacombs. In the midst of anonymous markers, "mute marbles, which shut up the tombs in silence and only indicate the number," the poet commemorated the

tortures endured by the Christians: "Here sounded the grating of the chains they dragged, there the crack of leathern lashes, or the crashing of the rods, while the claw pierced the hollow framework of their ribs, laying open deep cavities and tearing of their vitals."[42] Mutilation leads to crucifixion, immolation, and drowning. A saint is dragged across a landscape by a team of wild horses: "The body is shattered, the thorny shrubs which bristle on the ground cut and tear it to little bits. Some of it hangs from the top of rocks, some sticks to bushes, with some the branches are reddened, with some the earth is wet."[43] The event is painted on the wall above the martyr's tomb (an otherwise silent slab). Multicolored marks elide the traces of the body and the brush: "I saw the tips of rocks dripping . . . and scarlet stains imprinted on the briers, where a hand that was skilled in portraying green bushes had also figured the red blood in vermilion. One could see the parts torn asunder and lying scattered in disorder up and down at random." The description of the pictured martyrdom shifts to the depiction of the saint's devoted disciples who, following the zigzag course of the horses, collected the mortal remains: "One clasps the snowy head . . . while another picks up the shoulders, the severed hands, arms, elbows, knees, bare fragments of legs." The devoted Christians are so thorough, wiping dry the sand and dust of even the smallest trace of blood that the body is ultimately fully reconstituted: "Now the thick wood held no longer any part of the sacred body, nor cheated it of a full burial. The parts were reviewed and found to make the number belonging to the unmutilated body."[44]

It is no surprise that the historian Baronio praised Prudentius and that the archaeologist Bosio imitated him. The early Christian source justified not only the cult of saints but also the veneration of pictures and relics. Prudentius also offered a linguistic protocol for the veneration of images. By turning to the fourth-century text and the early Christian painting, Baronius and Bosio bypassed the art criticism of Alberti and the paintings to which it attended. Michael Baxandall explains how Alberti's theoretical attention to composition displaced a tradition of ekphrasis and its attention to particular kinds of paintings that displayed copiousness. Or, rather, unstructured profusion was castigated by Alberti for being *dissolutus* or "disconnected" relative to the disciplined "variety" he prescribed. Alberti's *historia* depended upon this shift in linguistic practice from the humanist revival of the sprawling late Greek sophistic ekphrasis to the hierarchical structural imperative and decorous economy of the periodic sentence.[45]

But in 1600, the recuperation of ekphrasis permitted the imagining of martyrdom and encouraged a devotional practice organized around the relic rather than the body that coalesced in narrative painting. For the reader of Prudentius, the saint's body was subsumed by a painted landscape, like so many dashes of vermilion pigment in a scene that would otherwise be a measured green. The text's viewer contemplates and recites the profusion and diversity of elemental traces, entrails, and shafts of grass. Dispersed body parts are collected and counted, tallying up to a quantitative if not a structural whole. By analogy, it is difficult to cite Prudentius.

Not because the text has an integrity that is compromised by the extraction of a phrase. Rather, the text is incompatible with Alberti's notion of composition. In Prudentius, imagery rallies around the principle of substitution and "abundant diversity" rather than "strict narrative relevance of each represented object or figure."[46]

The revival of Prudentius had consequences for Caravaggio's immediate public. A painter who disturbed the conventions of tonal painting offered a picture that turned "disconnectedness" into a virtue. Baxandall's account of the dominance of Alberti's theory is a melancholic allegory of the historical standardization and regularization of Northern Italian painting cultures, where the "single-minded reference of all represented things to the narrative end" prevailed.[47] Andrea Mantegna's structural imperative triumphs at the expense of Pisanello's fanciful accretions. Artistic theory is victorious over ekphrasis. Utility takes precedence over things. Caravaggio's painting inverted those cultural priorities.

Antipanegyric

I have argued that Caravaggio's painting was a response to a set of historical pressures in which martyrdom, iconoclasm, and archaeology overlapped in the figure of the relic during the Counter-Reformation. The relic negotiated the conflicted requirements of the Tridentine Church because not only did it trace a redemptive martyrology; it also was a concrete residue of the threat of dissolution posed by the saint's confusion with a violent and polluted world. Taken to its radical conclusion, the martyr's trace dissolves to the point of indecipherability and non-recognition.

A contemporary description of the operations of the relic, albeit by a hostile witness, helps us attend to the ways the instability of the forensic trace inflected Caravaggio's representation of martyrdom. Jean Calvin's satirical sixteenth-century *Treatise on Relics* exploited the anxieties inherent in the fragmentation of the body as relic. During his mock imaginary pilgrimage through Europe, the reformer mapped a macabre geography, or as he called it, "a forest of bones":

It's true that the lumps of Saint Andrew, found here and there, offer some recompense, because in Rome, at St. Peter's, he has a head. In the church of Saint-Chrysogone, a shoulder, at Saint-Eustache, a rib, at Saint Esprit, an arm; and at Saint-Blaise, God only knows what other part; and at Aix-en-Provence, a foot. . . . Saint Bartholomew left his skin in Pisa, as well as a hand. At Trèves, there is I don't know what member. At Fregus, a finger.[48]

Unlike the devout recitation of the piecemeal saint in the poem by Prudentius, Calvin's comprehensiveness as a cataloger of relics unravels the authority of the saints' material remains. Like Erasmus before him, Calvin's rational numeration reduced them to parts that did not add up: either too many or not enough. According to Calvin's calculations there were enough splinters of the cross to build a large ship

or a sufficient quantity of skull fragments to make St. John the Baptist's head the size of an ox. Significantly, St. Matthew is in Calvin's red column. Aside from some odd bones in Trèves, Matthew only has an arm in Rome.[49] Calvin's text points to the absence of Matthew's historical body. Only some bones and an arm were easily confused with the medley of forensic traces. Calvin also appropriated the sacred ekphrasis, subjecting the body to the violent paratactic effects of language.

Caravaggio's painting of Matthew's martyrdom, therefore, had to negotiate the hagiographic narrative and the lack of a coherent historical body resulting from the hacking at the body's members and its dispersal. Rather than reintegrating the body as a whole in the *Martyrdom of St. Matthew*, Caravaggio strangely hesitated to offer a complete body. Matthew threatens to collapse under the weight of the drapery. The clump of fabric pivots and an arm is held aloft before the phantasm of a whole, albeit abject, body. The relic embedded in that field of shards recapitulates the constitutive act of subordination and violation. Disintegration of the saint is an effect of the pictorial structure.

The destruction of the boundaries between pure and impure, sacred and profane, was the chief danger of the veneration of relics. Misreadings occurred in the forest of bones. Lack of intelligibility put the worshiper at risk. For Calvin, celebrants were seduced into believing that some profane shred of cloth was the winding-sheet that had enveloped Jesus.[50] Or worse, many bones of horses and dogs were taken for those of Peter and Paul.[51] According to Calvin, pilgrimage was riddled with seductions and deceptions. He ended his treatise on relics by comparing the failure to recognize them to the dangers of iconographic misreadings.

When the feast of St. Etienne came, hats and badges appeared bearing not only the image of the Saint but also images of the executioners who stoned him. . . . The poor women, seeing the executioners, mistook them for companions of the saint.[52]

According to Calvin, poor women misread the assassins as disciples of the martyr. Calvin helps us identify the productive instability of Caravaggio's martyrdom. The sacred and profane were confused through contiguity. For Calvin, relics underscored the danger of pollution:

All is so burned and confused, that adoring the bone of a martyr, puts one in danger of adoring the bone of some brigand or thief, or better that of an ass, or a dog, or a horse. One is not able to adore only a ring of Our Lady, or some such, without being in danger of adoring the bangles of some whore.[53]

Calvin's logic was in no way original. In fact he rehearsed one of the long-standing anxieties within the Catholic Church itself. Hagiographies cited the testimonies of ghosts of decapitated robbers who testified that the veneration of their bones was "an error of the multitude."[54] Calvin stole from Erasmus the mythic figure of the fraudulent relic-seller who pawned off the severed arm of a hanged man as a relic.[55] Veneration invites misrecognition.

One productive response to the anxieties inherent in the disintegrated relic was

to shore up the boundaries between categories. This was St. Charles Borromeo's formula. He gave instructions on how a relic should be contained and labeled, classified, named, and hermetically sealed.[56] The reliquary protected the noble bones from being confused with those of the dog, the thief, and the prostitute, thereby preserving hierarchical significance. But such a reliquary also arrested the narrative embodied in the relic in order to suppress death and to abolish time itself.[57] Borromeo not only eliminated the relic's narrative function, his well-appointed reliquary checked the dispersal of the remains necessary for the ekphrasis of Prudentius.

Caravaggio's *Martyrdom of St. Matthew* provided an alternate reliquary and an alternative to composition, inviting the recuperation of ekphrasis. In the *Martyrdom*, the phantasm of wholeness in the figure of Matthew was made as an offering. Yet the painting—the central figure, the ancillary figures and the pictorial structure—recapitulated a history of mutilation, dismemberment, and social impurity through the commingling of classes as well as the threat to compositional unity. The predictable relationships between surface, plane, member, body, and composition found in Italian tonal painting were severed. In Pollaiuolo's *Martyrdom* and Domenichino's *Flagellation* subordinate incremental figures bolstered the integrity of the central figure and the narrative of violence. In Caravaggio's *Martyrdom*, the disjunction between object and cast self-shadow represented the alienation of an object from itself. Caravaggio's painting staged its own dissolution and thereby recapitulated the assault on saints, art, and relics by the heretics. The fragment was not only a trace of the narrative of mutilation but also a figure for the disintegration of narrative relevance.

Fragment. Ultimately, members and maws congealed into a pictorial surface. Shadow assumed a material weight. The identity of relic and living body collapsed in ways that underline the tense relation between figure and ground in Caravaggio's painting. Out of the dangers of dissolution, out of popular mistaken devotion, pictorial structure was organized through the disconnectedness of a surface riddled with sacred and profane bodies.

Pitiful Relics

In Gregory Martin's late-sixteenth-century guide to *Sacred Rome*, the English pilgrim recited an ekphrasis delivered by St. Gregory of Nazianzen dedicated to some "relics" taken as the object of his veneration.[58] No doubt Martin was responding to Calvin's famous attack on relics. Indeed, Greek authors of the fourth century, such as St. Gregory of Nazianzen, provided historical and theological precedents for the devotion to relics.[59] But rather than apologizing for the necessarily fragmented and irrational condition of the relic, Martin drew upon the authority of Gregory's characteristic inversions of the encomiastic ekphrasis. Turning away from praiseworthy objects, such as the lavish spolia of an imperial triumph, or even

Christianity's repertory of miraculous images, instruments of the passion, or saintly bones, Gregory directed his gaze toward those profane "men dead and yet living, in many partes of their body maimed and mangled, and in such manner miserably deformed." For Gregory, the abject bodies of beggars on the streets were saintly and worthy of a rhetorical performance of ekphrasis.

These living pitiful relics cannot certainly define, which partes of the body they may more bewaile: those that are cutte of and starke dead, or those that yet remaine in the body: those which the disease hath utterly consumed, or those that are yet leaft of the disease: for those be miserably consumed and wasted, these are more miserably preserved: those are rotted before the burial, these no body wil vouchsafe to burie.[60]

The body or pitiful relic was imagined as "a lamentable lumpe or fardel" contemplating its own members as if they were moribund objects disconnected from itself. Only collectively do these fragments adhere:

They lie together as a Societie of diseased: al being companions in miserie, but with great varietie every one diversely provoking compassion by diverse maladies: broken and worne away for famine, having not so much as the bodily instruments to begge withal, lacking voices to mourne, tonges to speake, handes to put forth and make supplication, feete to goe, breath to sing, eies also to see.[61]

The individual body exists only as a fabric of absences, members that do not act, that mingle and are confused as an irreducible matter: "framed and compacted of the same clay whereof we were first created, knitte alike with sinowes and bones, arayed with skinne and flesh as all the rest of mortal men."[62] One might say, like a disconnected picture of confused but varied abundance.

Since Alberti, the enumerative and differential properties of "varied abundance" had been precipitated out of, and controlled by, the unity of composition and narrative relevance. Pictorial structure, drawing its analogy from grammar, disciplined plenitude and difference.[63] Pollaiuolo's composition is modeled after the operations of a well-tooled sentence. In the late sixteenth century, the citation of the ekphrases of the early Christian Church offered a different pattern of reception that was responsive to an aesthetic of excess and disconnectedness.[64]

Matthew was a pitiful relic. In Caravaggio's painting, his completion is contingent on his blade-bearing abject double. Overcome by the nude executioner, the integrity of this awkward clump of fabric is only a delay (however convincing) in its imminent disintegration. The figure is momentarily hinged on interspersed surfaces of flesh and opaque gaps as in the web of presences that surrounds him in a community of fardel. Yet, as in the ekphrasis of the society of pitiful relics, Matthew's sinews and bones are knit together, however provisionally, by Caravaggio's painted surface rather than by the tonal structure and anatomical resolution of Pollaiuolo's composition. For Caravaggio, attention is patterned instead by the violent alternation of acute veristic passages and opaque surfaces.

By doing violence to composition, exposing the disconnectedness of surface to

plane, plane to member, member to body, and body to body, Caravaggio circumvented Alberti's composition. The canvas shuns anatomical unity disciplined in the service of narrative relevance. Admittedly, Caravaggio was responding to a demand for narrative art and was attempting to sustain the *historia*. However, his second version of St. Matthew's martyrdom betrays a radical reworking of the homology between the unity of the body and the unity of pictorial composition. While Alberti's *historia* sought to preserve the saint's body as the organizing principle for the unity of composition even under the threat of disintegration, in Caravaggio's painting the ruin of a martyr's body and the violation of pictorial organization by formal homology constituted a devotional practice. In fact, the saint's actual forensic remains were an immanent representation that embodied desecration, destruction, and archaeological recovery. Caravaggio's painting was a response to a set of Counter-Reformation historical pressures in which martyrdom, abjured heresy, iconoclasm, and archaeology overlapped in the object of the relic. From this set of practices emerged a mode of art criticism that was responsive to Caravaggio's painting.

Caravaggio's picture reclaimed pictorial effects and linguistic practices atrophied by the discipline of *historia*. He invited the performance of the verbal protocols of the ekphrasis. Yet the disarticulation of wholeness was not a nostalgia for Pisanello's pictorial generosity and its invitation for enumerative descriptive performances. As Caravaggio painted the *Martyrdom of St. Matthew*, he did not entertain the liberties of material differentiation free of narrative as he had in his still lifes. Instead, he displaced the phantasm of an intact body onto the ruin of composition. In the interstices of parts, metonymy continues to produce parasitical narratives rather than ontological closure. History is found in gaps between intelligibility and opacity. A shadow is a cut. A member is a scrap. A discrete patch of light on a surface reveals a fragment standing in for the whole, bearing the traces of desecration. A heroic active body is substituted by a relic that both commemorates the exemplary individual and embodies the act of martyrdom. But in the opaque connective tissue of the canvas between these pitiful relics resides a space for history, where the threat of pollution dramatizes the material conditions of the Counter-Reformation.

Notes

1. For Leon Battista Alberti's treatise *On Painting* (1435), see Michael Baxandall, *Giotto and the Orators: Humanist Observers of Painting in Italy and the Discovery of Pictorial Composition, 1350–1450* (Oxford, 1971).

2. Alberti cited and translated by Baxandall, in *Giotto*, 130. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

3. Ibid.

4. Howard Hibbard stressed the pictorial solution offered by Titian in Caravaggio's resolution of the problem of the relatively small scale of the figures "engaged in complex activity throughout a deep space"; Howard Hibbard, *Caravaggio* (New York, 1983), 104, 106. For a balanced account of the Caravaggio scholarship, see Catherine Puglisi, *Caravaggio* (London, 1998).

5. For a different reading of relationality in Caravaggio's painting, see Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, *Caravaggio's Secrets* (Cambridge, Mass., 1998).

6. Caravaggio rehearsed this citational strategy in his *Amor vincit omnia*. I would like to thank Loren Partridge for his comments regarding Caravaggio's pervasive disarticulation of Renaissance citation.

7. Giovanni Pietro Bellori, *Le vite de' pittori, scultori e architetti moderni* (Rome, 1672). For a translated extract of the life of Caravaggio see Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, 360–74.

8. See Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (New York, 1974).

9. See Michael Baxandall, *Shadows and Enlightenment* (New Haven, 1995), 1–15.

10. Louis Marin, *To Destroy Painting*, trans. Mette Hjort (Chicago, 1995).

11. André Félibien, *Entretiens sur les vies et sur les ouvrages de plus excellens peintres anciens et modernes* (Paris, 1725), 4:194.

12. Alexandra Herz, "Imitators of Christ: The Martyr-Cycles of Late Sixteenth Century Rome Seen in Context," *Art Bulletin* (1981): 53–70.

13. See the series of engravings by Giovanni Battista Cavalieri, after Niccolò Circignani (Pomarancio), in *Ecclesiae mititanis triumphi* (Rome, 1585). Another series of engravings served for a book of *Histories* dedicated to the early Roman virgin martyrs. Antonio Gallonio's *Historia delle sante vergini romane* (Rome, 1591) was commissioned by Baronio, as was Gallonio's *Historia della vita e de' gloriosi santi Flavia, Domitilla vergine, Nereo et Achilleo* (Rome, 1597), which commemorated the ceremonial transfer and reinterment of the saints' remains. See notes 28 and 34.

14. Giovanni Battista Cavalieri, after Niccolò Circignani (Pomarancio), *Ecclesiae Anglicanae Trophaea* (Rome, 1584), plate 33. See Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, 103–4, fig. 58.

15. Philip Benedict, "Of Marmites and Martyrs: Images and Polemics in the Wars of Religion," in *The French Renaissance in Prints from the Bibliothèque Nationale de France* (Berkeley, 1994), 109–37.

16. Caravaggio received protection from Vincenzo Giustiniani and his brother Cardinal Benedetto Giustiniani, who had a direct hand in the negotiations for Henry IV's papal absolution. Caravaggio's patron Cardinal del Monte, who was the representative of the Duke of Tuscany, also had a direct political interest in the marriage of Henry IV with the Duke's niece, Marie de Medici. The project's completion was summoned through the direct intervention of Cardinal Baronio and the *Fabricca*, the papal council that was directing the completion of the new St. Peter's.

17. See, for example, Louis Richeome, *Trois Discours pour la Religion catholique: des miracles, des saincts, & des Images* (Bourdeaux, 1599).

18. Corrado Vivanti, "Henry IV, The Gallic Hercules," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 30 (1967): 192–93.

19. Even before the crisis of the sixteenth century, the abuses of idolatry were checked

by the theoretical and practical promotion of intelligible narrative art; Michael Baxandall, *The Limewood Sculptors of Renaissance Germany* (New Haven, 1980).

20. Giuseppe Scavizzi, *The Controversy on Images from Calvin to Baronius* (New York, 1992), 411.

21. Gabriele Paleotti, *Discorso intorno alle imagini sacre e profane* (Bologna, 1582), 178.

22. Cited in Scavizzi, *Controversy*, 228.

23. Richard Verstegan, *Théâtre des cruautés des hérétiques de nostre temps, traduit du latin en françois* (Anvers, 1588), 35. Originally published as *Theatrum crudelitatum haereticorum nostri temporis* (Antwerp, 1587). See A. G. Petti, "Richard Verstegan and Catholic Martyrologies of the Later Elizabethan Period," *Recusant History* 5 (April 1959): 64–89.

24. Herz, "Imitators of Christ," 58.

25. "Jadis lorsque Néron, ce monstre infâme et traˆtre / Voulut ôter la vie à Sénèque son maˆtre, / Il lui laissa son sang tirer tout doucement: / Mais Henri, par son schisme en plus fiére nature / S'étant tout transformé, d'une double torture / Fit ce sien confesseur mourir cruellement"; Verstegan, *Théâtre*, 35.

26. Antonius Paulus, *De Adventu Sancti Spiritus Deque Christianae Reipublicae Stabilitate Oratio*, cited in Frederick J. McGinness, *Right Thinking and Sacred Oratory in Counter-Reformation Rome* (Princeton, 1995), 131.

27. See, e.g., Petrus Canisius, *De Maria Virgine* (1577), cited by Emile Mâle, *L'art religieux de la fin du XVIe siècle, XVIIe siècle et du XVIIIe siècle* [*L'art religieux après le Concile de Trent*] (Paris, 1951), 20.

28. For the icon hanging around the Franciscan's head see Bartolomeo Ricci's engraving "Bungi in urbi Iaponie," in his *Trivmphvs Iesv Christi crvcifixi* (Antwerp, 1608), 34.

29. Richard Krautheimer, "A Christian Triumph in 1597," in *Essays in the History of Art Presented to Richard Krautheimer* (London, 1967), 174–78.

30. When Antonio Bosio died in 1629, nearly all the engravings and text had been prepared. Ludwig Pastor, *History of the Popes* (St. Louis, 1936–1953), 33:437. Antonio Bosio, *Roma Soutteranea* (Rome, Latin edition, 1634; Italian edition, 1650); further citations of this work will be to the Italian edition. For Nicolas Poussin's drawings after Bosio's engravings see Pierre Rosenberg and Louis-Antoine Prat, *Nicolas Poussin. Catalogue raisonné des dessins* (Paris, 1994), nos. 242, 243, 244.

31. "Non contenti gli empij, e crudeli Idolatri, che i corpi de' Santi Martiri soffero nel fuoco, & esposti ad esser divorati da gli Ucelli dell'aria, e da gli animali della Terra; volsero ancora dargli in preda a'pesci del Mare, facendoli gittare nell'istesso Mare, ne' Fiumi, Laghi, Pozzi, e Chiauiche con grosse pietre al collo, acciò non potessero da' Christiani esser sepelliti"; Bosio, *Roma*, 11.

32. "In mille pezzi fù lacerato, e diviso il corpo di S. Ippolito Martire, legato a Cavalli indomiti' e le membra sue, & intestini surono girtate per diversi campi, da'qualii Christiani con somma diligenza le raccolfero: onde Prudentio dice di lui"; ibid., 16.

33. "Ne minore apparue la Divina Providenza in distinguer le sacra ossa de' Martiri dalle profane: (con le quali erano d'industria confuse, e mescolate) poiche scrive Sozomeno, che per commandamento divino furono scelte le offa delli sopradetti Santi Martiri Eusebio, Nestabo, e Zenone dalle altre profane, dicendo . . . Da' Cadaveri profani ancora furono distinti per volontà di Dio li corpi di Santi Giuliano, e Celso Martiri; apparendo miracolosamente sopra quelli le Anime de' medesimi Santi in forma di Vergini, de quali si dice ne gli atti loro"; ibid., 23.

34. Antonio Gallonio, *Historia delle sante vergini romane con varie annotationi e con alcune vite*

brevi de' santi parenti loro. E de' gloriosi martiri papia e Mauro soldati romani . . . (Rome, 1591), 212. Gallonio's historical closet drama presented many of the details of the saint's relics in advance of their discovery and description.

35. Antonio Bosio, *Historia passionis B. Caeciliae virgins* (Rome, 1600). Bosio also recorded the event in his archaeological work. "E se doppo la prima sepoltura, per ingiuria de' tempi, i luoghi de' sepolcri loro venivano ad esser negletti, & erano incogniti, molti di essi Santi continuarono la cura delle Reliquie loro, ancora doppo centinara d'anni; come habbiamo di Santa Cecilia, che riuelò a Pasquale Primo il suo corpo l'anno del Signore 821"; Bosio, *Roma*, 27.

36. Bosio, *Roma*, chap. 9: "Della cura, e diligenza de' Christini in cercare, e sepelire i corpi de' Martiri," 28.

37. Late-sixteenth-century Rome saw a revival of the writings of SS. John Chyrsostom and Gregory of Nazianzen, whose responses to martyrdom revealed their indebtedness to the ekphrasic mode of Byzantine rhetoric. In addition to his dedication to images of martyrdom, Gregory XIII was devoted to his namesake Gregory of Nazianzen, as well as to Basil, Gregory of Nyssa, and St. John Chrysostom, because of their writings on the veneration of relics. See note 58.

38. Herz, "Imitators of Christ," 70.

39. *Annales Ecclesiastici* (I, Luca, 1738, 458, par. 120), cited in ibid., 70 n. 169.

40. For Baronio on the discovery of the catacomb of "Priscilla", see Herz, "Imitators of Christ," 68. Baronio restored his titular church with early Christian art including a column with an ancient relief of a saint pursued by a sword-bearing soldier; ibid., 69.

41. Bosio, *Roma*, 16 (see note 31).

42. Prudentius, "Peristephanon," in *Prudentius*, trans. H. J. Thomson (London, 1953), 305, 309.

43. Ibid., 313.   44. Ibid., 315.

45. Baxandall, *Giotto*, 121–39.

46. Ibid., 135.   47. Ibid.

48. Jean Calvin, *Traité des reliques* (1543), Jean Calvin, *Three French Treatises*, ed. Francis M. Higman (London, 1970), 84–85.

49. Ibid., 83.   50. Ibid., 67–68.   51. Ibid., 82.   52. Ibid., 96.   53. Ibid.

54. For the miracle attributed to St. Martin of Tours, see Eric Waldram Kemp, *Canonization and Authority in the Western Church* (Westport, Conn., 1979), 22.

55. Erik von Kraemer, *Le type du faux mendiant dans les littératures romanes depuis de moyen âge jusqu'au XVIIe siècle* (Helsinki, 1944), 243. On Erasmus, see Stéphane Boiron, *La controverse née de la querelle des reliques à l'époque du Concile de Trente (1500–1640)* (Paris, 1989).

56. E. C. Voelker, "Charles Borromeo's *Instructiones Fabricae et Supellectilis Ecclesiasticae*, 1577: A Translation with Commentary and Analysis," (Ph.D. diss., Syracuse University, 1977).

57. Describing the early Christian Church's veneration of relics as a radical departure from both the Jewish and Roman pagan funerary practices, Peter Brown writes: "How better to suppress the fact of death, than to remove part of the dead from its original context in all too cluttered grave? How better to symbolize the abolition of time in such dead, than to add to that an indeterminacy of space"; Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago, 1981), 78.

58. Richeome cited St. Basil: "Celuy qui touche le corps du Martyr reçoit sanctification par la vertu cachee en iceluy," Louis Richeome, *Discours des sainctes reliques* (Paris,

1606), 43. He also quoted St. John Chrysostom's invitation to touch the relics (51) and St. Gregory of Nazianzen's description of miracles induced by relics. We are reminded that this treatise was dedicated to Henry IV. On relics, see Brown, *Cult of the Saints.*

59. On the cult of relics in late antiquity, especially among Greek writers, see Hippolyte Delehaye, *Les origines du culte des martyrs*, 2d ed. (Brussels, 1933), 61, 63, and 75. In the Roman Church of the third to the fifth centuries, the disinterment (from the catacombs), the transfer of the mortal remains to a church, and the veneration of relics was more exceptional than in the Greek Church (63).

60. Gregory Martin, *Roma Sancta* (Rome, 1581), 191–92.

61. Ibid.   62. Ibid.

63. Baxandall, *Giotto*, 135.

64. In light of this argument, the unexpected use of ekphrasis by Bellori in his *Le vite de' pittori* will be explored in my book in progress: *Caravaggio's Pitiful Relics: Painting History After Iconoclasm.*