***Caravaggio: The Final Years*, National Gallery, London**
23 February-22 March 2005

The self-portrait: the glazed blank staring half-closed eyes, the mouth fixed open in a rigid cry, the whitish waxen flesh, the blood streaming in gouts from the severed neck. Well, he does himself no favours, does he? The artist puts his own ruined face on the decapitated head of the proud fallen giant Goliath - held up by the hair, hanging from the hand of the victorious, beautiful young David. Against a pitch-black background, the broken fall of light misses the hair and catches only the frozen livid death's head, this horror mask, looming out of the darkness like a screaming ghoul.

One of the perks of being alive in the last hundred years, along with the car, the plane, the cinema etc, has been the ability to enjoy the work of Caravaggio. Up to about a century ago very few people were able to get a real kick out of it. Today practically everybody has the knack. Caravaggio now stands as *the* artist of his age… just as he did then. At his death in 1610, aged 39, he wasn't an undiscovered genius, awaiting posterity's belated recognition. He was the most influential, controversial painter in Europe. He then went into one of the longest hibernations in art history - and emerged again as, distinctly, an artist for our time.

The violence, the shock high-contrast lighting, the drama of glimpses and flashes, the low and dirty realism, the closely observed bodies, the suddenness, intimacy and actuality of his religious paintings: that's what excited and offended his contemporaries, and what excites and moves us now. He was named as "an evil genius, who worked without precepts", whose art was devoted to "seeking out filth and deformity" and consisted of slavishly copying from life devoid of intellectual input. Poussin said simply: "he came into the world to destroy painting". But there was no arguing with the sheer force of Caravaggio's revolution: the visual impact of the work, its rapid success in Rome around 1600, its irresistible Europe-wide influence throughout the century. It got everywhere. It's in Velazquez, in Rembrandt, in Rubens, even in Poussin.

Contemporaries liked to link Caravaggio's art with his dark looks, his dark nature - proud, gloomy, angry, violent, unhappy and unhinged – "the dark style that is connected to his disturbed and contentious temperament". And it's become pretty common (Derek Jarman, Peter Robb) to link the art with the actual life. That self-portrait in *David with the Head of Goliath*, for instance: isn't this Caravaggio

showing himself under sentence of death?

That's where the National Gallery's "Caravaggio: The Final Years" at begins. In 1606 Carvaggio killed an enemy in a fight, and fled from Rome. They were wandering years. He moved south, to Naples, to Malta, to Sicily, back to Naples. Each place, he got taken up and admired, painted a couple of masterpieces, got into trouble or got frightened, moved on. In Malta, he had himself elected to The Knights of the Order of St John, then had a fight, was stripped of the prestigious knighthood, imprisoned, escaped. At the end, on the way back to Rome to be pardoned, he was arrested at some outpost for lack of papers, missed his boat transport, got stranded in high summer on a remote and swampy stretch of coast, tried to go on by land, caught fever, and "died as miserably as he had lived", as one biographer reminds us.

A Byronic figure: and Byron recognised the affinity, talking of "my finest ferocious Caravaggio style". (It's strange that Caravaggio didn't get a wholesale Romantic revival in the early 19th century.) And if you're biographically inclined, you may well see in the works of the last four years intimations of impending doom or criminal guilt and penitence - see this in their encroaching darkness (often assisted by physical deterioration), their cellars and prisons and catacombs, their blank walls and cavernous voids. There's certainly a shift of key from the brilliant and assertive performances of the Roman years. The vision is graver, and grander. The meaning of light changes.

In fact things keep changing. There are 16 paintings in this small and astonishing show, and almost every one is a turning point. In the *Flagellation* you see how Caravaggio uses illumination to edit the action even more radically than before, turning the light on here, switching it off there - bring up that thigh, eliminate that head - building a scene from fragments of physical intensity. While next to it, *The Crucifixion of St Andrew* shows a dramatic distancing between the sanctified act of violence and its onlookers, who are portrayed as neither heartless tormentors nor pious sympathisers but as people who are contemplating the incident with great interest; as people in short who are looking at a picture. What a marvellous martyrdom! It puts the actual viewer severely on the spot.

The images become ever more urgent and fragmented. Faces, body gestures, familiar from earlier works are reused in new combinations, new meanings. *The Martyrdom of St Ursula* is a staccato composite of bits, highlights, flecks of paint and convulsion,

crammed but barely holding together. Light is here no longer a flash of revelation, nor a blast of power, nor a caressing touch; it is a flinch, a grab from the darkness.

Huge overbearing emptinesses often fill the top half of these scenes. And at the bottom the ground becomes a crucial element, the ground level, and the body's relation to the ground. In *the Burial of St Lucy* (Syracuse) the dead saint is flat out on the ground. In *The Beheading of John the Baptist* (Valetta) the prophet's head is pinned to the ground. (Both those great pictures are unfortunately absent from the London show.) In *the Adoration of the Shepherds*, they bow to a Madonna and Child who are beneath them, lying on the stable floor. In the *Raising of Lazarus* (from Messina, as big as a wall) the drama is between the ground, the flesh and the falling light.

This is the picture. The stiff naked body of Lazarus, its arms stuck out in a crucified stance, lies - supported by bystanders - at a diagonal, about 40 degrees off the horizontal. It seems to be being elevated in a rotation, like the arm of a great machine. But you can't be sure if the action is going forward or backward, if the body is rising or falling. The image so clearly echoes a Deposition picture, Christ's corpse being *lowered* from the cross, and that likeness puts a strong downward pressure on the body.

Caravaggio in his prime painted several times the inner miracle of conversion, someone's life turned around by what they suddenly see - St Matthew, St Paul, St Thomas, the Emmaus Pilgrims. He never painted physical miracles, like levitations, transformations, healings. He does here. But the picture can't fully credit its resurrection, or at any rate conceives it, not as an abrupt and magical reversing of mortality - "Lazarus, come forth!" Jesus shouts in the gospel - but as a strenuous feat of engineering, a stone-henge exhumation, the corpse winched and levered back into life against massive opposing forces.

The light opposes. It falls like gravity on the body, holding it down to earth. Jesus, with his commanding face and bidding arm, is hardly visible, hardly illuminated. This is no duet for saving God and fallen Man. All attention is on the naked human, rigid, but not halfway standing upright, under a heavy mortal pull towards the ground. And the flesh itself is no longer Caravaggio flesh, it's the flesh of late Titian, the strokes roughly dragged and fractured and flickering. There's a great swelling of emotion from the torso of Lazarus, picked up by the man who supports and embraces him, by

the woman who presses her face against his still dead face.

And then you notice the corpse's raised hand, with the index finger that stands straight upright, flexed, the sign of life coming back, with one of those fragmentary light catchings, just the bare edge of the finger illuminated against the dark ground, a line, a flame. This is beyond horror show. It's a painting that, like Titian's*Flaying of Marsyas* - hanging in this same room two years ago - finds something staggering, not in anything we do, but in the fact that humans have bodies, that we have life and death.