

# Caravaggio as Necessary Angel: “The Seven Acts of Mercy” as a Figure for Learning from Naples

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“Remember that Naples, the Pio Monte and Caravaggio are one.”

- Count Leonetti, Director of Pio Monte della Misericordia

Terence Ward, who has graced us with excerpts from his recently published book, *The Guardian of Mercy*, provides in this volume the most explicit instance of dialogized writing or a doubled text. Its theme is set out in his book’s subtitle: *How an Extraordinary Painting by Caravaggio Changed an Ordinary Life Today*. The ordinary life is that of a humble Neapolitan named Angelo Esposito, who serves as the guardian of Caravaggio’s *The Seven Acts of Mercy*, the altarpiece for the church of Pio Monte della Misericordia in Naples and perhaps the artist’s greatest and most astonishing and dramatic painting. Angelo will also serve as Terry’s ad hoc mentor in comprehending both the extraordinary enigmas Caravaggio has embedded within his masterpiece and those other ordinary enigmas—be they merciful or unmerciful—that life in contemporary Naples obliges one to confront.

His narrative impels us to read *Otherwise*, that is, to read through “sliding doors,” the metaphor that Terry uses to describes his bold experiment in doubling his narrative. The reader is presented alternately with a first-person and present-tense narrative dedicated to Terry’s and his wife Idanna’s encounters with Naples, the guardian, and Caravaggio’s altarpiece, and a third-person and past-tense narrative of Caravaggio’s flight from Rome after killing a man and his sojourn in Naples, where he found protection from the bounty on his head and earned the commission for what would become one of his most definitive and gaze-boggling works.

But Caravaggio finds much more in Naples, creating his masterpiece by incorporating into it the spectacles and bodies that sixteenth-century Naples presented him with. Although essentially a biographical narrative, Terry places the reader in Caravaggio’s head and gaze, and presents the process not only by which the masterpiece was generated but also by which Caravaggio turns himself into a work of art.

Ward stages a profound cultural encounter with Naples—the Naples experienced by Caravaggio and the contemporary Naples of the guardian— by which Caravaggio’s *Seven Acts of Mercy* becomes an icon of *napoletanità*, a sacred emblem of the major forms of grace the city bestows and a call to “remember that Naples, the Pio Monte and Caravaggio are one.” (The minor and profane version of that grace, as Terry points out, is the expression of generosity in the practice of the *caffè sospeso*, a secular act of mercy.)

Caravaggio as a painter is an angel of violence, and in the painting that violence is expressed formally by the folding of the vertical into the horizontal, by the folding of light into darkness to create the infinity of chiaroscuro, by the folding of the chaos of sixteen figures into the order of the seven acts of mercy, by the folding of the sacred into the profane by which the ordinariness

and materiality of the profane is sacralized. Caravaggio's religious paintings—above all, *The Seven Acts of Mercy*—require their viewers to be necessary angels in the sense elaborated by Wallace Stevens: “Yet I am the necessary angel of earth, Since, in my sight, you see the earth again.” In *The Seven Acts of Mercy*, we see the earth in the faces, gazes, and bodies of the Neapolitan street people that Caravaggio used as models and transformed into compassionate auratic figures.

And Terry's doubled text also requires its readers to be necessary angels through which we bear witness to acts of mercy in both the painting and present-day reality and by which we experience through our empathy as viewers/readers the grace that Caravaggio embedded in his painting and requested for himself by painting it. Within the main narrative of the ordinary but troubled life of the guardian or keeper of Caravaggio's masterpiece, Terry folds the counter-narrative of the Neapolitan episode of Caravaggio's extraordinary and troubled life and his creation of the painting that was grounded in his experience of Neapolitan street life, the *lazzaroni* and *scugnizzi* of Spaccanapoli, serving as models for the sixteen figures that collide in an astonishing montage that not only defined the Baroque and its spectacle culture but also would open the way to the aesthetics of shock that comes to define modernism.

Similarly, Naples requires those who wish to comprehend it to be “necessary angels,” and Caravaggio's masterpiece can serve as a model for confronting Naples through gaze-work and face-to-face work by which the epiphany of a face is recognized as a visitation. Terry describes the Naples experienced by Caravaggio in which he finds mercy. Terry writes: “*Caravaggio will reenact the shocking tumult that confronts each new arrival to this metropolis. In his eye, Naples is a place with no center, a place where words fail. Brimming with life and death. In this city of cities, he will create a universal human-scape of our world.*” Angelo's vision of contemporary Naples corresponds: “*In Naples, we live in chiaroscuro . . . between the sun and moon, life and death. That's what I think Caravaggio found here: life's true face.*”<sup>1</sup>

The double narrative provides the reader with an engaging reading experience that is rendered dynamic by the counterpointing of the italicized chapters dedicated to flashbacks of Caravaggio and the flash-forwards centered on Angelo, whose troubled life mirrors Caravaggio's. What results is a shifting narrative, a temporal montage by which the reader assumes perspective by incongruity, thereby mirroring the incongruity imposed by the viewing of Caravaggio's altarpiece and the congruity requisite for performing acts of mercy. By writing *Naples Otherwise*, Ward stages a powerful encounter with the city that dialogizes its history and present reality and in which impersonal and personal voices constantly collide in ways that epitomize this volume's attempt to encounter Naples deliriously as a Chaosmos and a contact zone, as the city that makes you repeat its discourse.

<sup>1</sup> Ward, Terence, *The Guardian of Mercy: How an Extraordinary Painting by Caravaggio Changed an Ordinary Life Today* (New York: Arcade, 2016). Reprinted by permission of Arcade Publishing.