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AFFETTI, DEVOZIONE E RETORICA
NEL LINGUAGGIO ARTISTICO DEL PRIMO BAROCCO ROMANO

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BERNINI'S BUST OF THE MEDUSA: AN AWFUL PUN



Bernini, Medusa. Rome, Musei Capitolini

The history of art as an intellectual discipline suffers from what might be called an endemic disability when it comes to expressing visual ideas in words. It is a well-known fact that antiquity left nothing for the visual arts to compare with the vast body of classical theory and criticism centered upon the expressive and persuasive use of words, in various literary genres, and especially in the domain of forensic oratory, or rhetoric. A consequence of this discrepancy is that much of the language of art that developed subsequently, notably in the Renaissance, was borrowed from the domain of literature¹. The title of the present paper uses, *faute de mieux*, one of these loan concepts in two forms, in name and in example, in order to convey the thought which, as I believe, underlies a particular work of visual art. In English, the term *pun*, meaning specifically the equivocal use of a single word with more than one meaning, is itself singularly appropriate to its meaning because its origin is quite mysterious – the etymological equivalent, as it were, of the uncanny, illuminating effect such plays on words can sometimes achieve². And ‘awful’ is here meant to suggest both that which is reprehensible, and that which is terrifying, stunning – in the present case, indeed, petrifying.

The purpose of this essay is to call attention to what seems to me one of the most remarkable and least appreciated of the numerous *obiter dicta* by and attributed to Bernini in the contemporary sources³. The statement is recorded, in slightly varying form, indirectly by his biographers, Baldinucci and his son Domenico Bernini, and in Bernini’s own words in Chantelou’s diary of the artist’s visit to Paris in 1665: “He said that among the works of antiquity, the Laocoön and the Pasquino contain, in themselves, all the best of art, since one sees in them

all that is most perfect reproduced without the affectation of art (figs. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5). The most beautiful statues existing in Rome were those in the Belvedere and among those still whole the Laocoön, for its expression of emotion, and in particular for the intelligence it displays in that leg which, already being affected by the poison, seems to be numb. He said, however, that the Torso (fig. 6) and the Pasquino seemed to him more perfect stylistically than the Laocoön itself, but that the latter was whole while the others were not. The difference between the Pasquino and the Torso is almost imperceptible, not to be discerned except by a great man, and the Pasquino was rather better. He was the first in Rome to place the Pasquino in the highest esteem, and it is said that he was once asked by someone from beyond the Alps which was the most beautiful statue in Rome, and that when he responded, the Pasquino, the foreigner thought he was mocking him and was ready to come to blows”⁴.

It should be said at once that Bernini was not the first to appreciate the Pasquino; even the popular Rome guidebooks pointed out the high quality of the group⁵. But as far as I can discover, Bernini was indeed the first (and perhaps also the last) to give it the highest rating among the statues of Rome. That he meant the evaluation seriously is evident from the critical compositional role the Pasquino played throughout the early series of heroic male figures, Aeneas, Neptune, Pluto, and David; the theme reverberates again years later in the centerpiece of the Fontana del Moro – perhaps with a particular significance, since the fountain is located in the adjacent Piazza Navona (figs. 7, 8, 9, 10, 11)⁶. Among the many points of interest in this anecdote, two concern me here. The first arises from the fact, surprising to our

¹ The point is made in the classic study by LEE 1967, 6 f.

² See *The Oxford English Dictionary* (13 vols. Oxford 1961) VIII, 1594, center column.

³ The basic studies of Bernini’s views on art and art theory remain those of BARTON 1945-1947 and SCHUDT 1949.

⁴ The texts concerning the Pasquino, on which I have commented in another context (Lavin 1990, 32), are as follows: “M. le nonce, changeant de matière, a demandé au Cavalier laquelle des figures antiques il estimait davantage. Il a dit que c’était le Pasquin, et qu’un cardinal lui ayant un jour fait la même demande, il lui avait répondu la même chose, ce qu’il avait pris pour une raillerie qu’il faisait de lui et s’en était fâché; qu’il fallait bien qu’il n’eût pas lu ce qu’on en avait écrit, et que le Pasquin était une figure de Phidias ou de Praxitèle et représentait le serviteur d’Alexandre, le soutenant quand il reçut un coup de flèche au siège de Tyr; qu’à la vérité, mutilée et ruinée comme est cette figure, le reste de beauté qui y est n’est connu que des savants dans le dessin” (CHANTELOU 1885, 25 f.). “Diceva che il Laocoonte e il Pasquino nell’antico avevano in sé tutto il buono dell’arte, perché vi si scorgeva imitato tutto il più perfetto della natura, senza affettazione dell’arte. Che le più belle statue che fossero in Roma eran quelle di Belvedere e fra quelle dico fra le intere, il Laocoonte per l’espressione dell’affetto, ed in particolare per l’intelligenza che si scorge in quella gamba, la quale per esser già arrivato il veleno, apparisce intrizzita; diceva però, che il Torso ed il Pasquino gli parevano di più perfetta maniera del Laocoonte stesso, ma che questo

era intero e gli altri no. Fra il Pasquino ed il Torso esser la differenza quasi impercettibile, ni potersi ravvisare se non da uomo grande e più tosto migliore essere il Pasquino. Fu il primo il Bernino che mettesse questa statua in altissimo credito in Roma e raccontasi che essendogli una volta stato domandato da un oltramontano qual fusse la più bella statua di quella città e rispondendo che il Pasquino, il forestiero che si credette burlato fu per venir con lui a cimento” (BALDINUCCI 1948 [1682], 146). “Con uguale attenzione pose il suo studio ancora in ammirar le parti di quei due celebri Torsi di Hercole, e di Pasquino, quegli riconosciuto per suo Maestro dal Buonarota, questi dal Bernino, che fù il primo, che ponesse in alto concetto in Roma questa nobilissima Statua; Anzi avvenne, che richiesto una volta da un nobile forastiere Oltramontano. Quale fosse la Statua più riguardevole in Roma? e rispostogli, Che il Pasquino, quello diè sù le furie, stimandosi burlato, e poco mancò, che non ne venisse a cimento con lui; E di questi due Torsi era solito dire, che contenevano in se tutto il più perfetto della Natura senza affettazione dell’Arte” (BERNINI 1713, 13 f.).

⁵ See LAVIN 1990, 43 n. 51.

⁶ It might be said that Bernini’s preoccupation with the Pasquino distinguishes the contrapostal action of his figures, which he developed from the serpentine movement he learned from his father: compare Pietro Bernini’s St. John the Baptist in S. Andrea della Valle (LAVIN 1968, where the infusion of the spirit of antiquity generally in Bernini’s early work is stressed). Nor was Bernini’s interest in the Pasquino purely formal. He

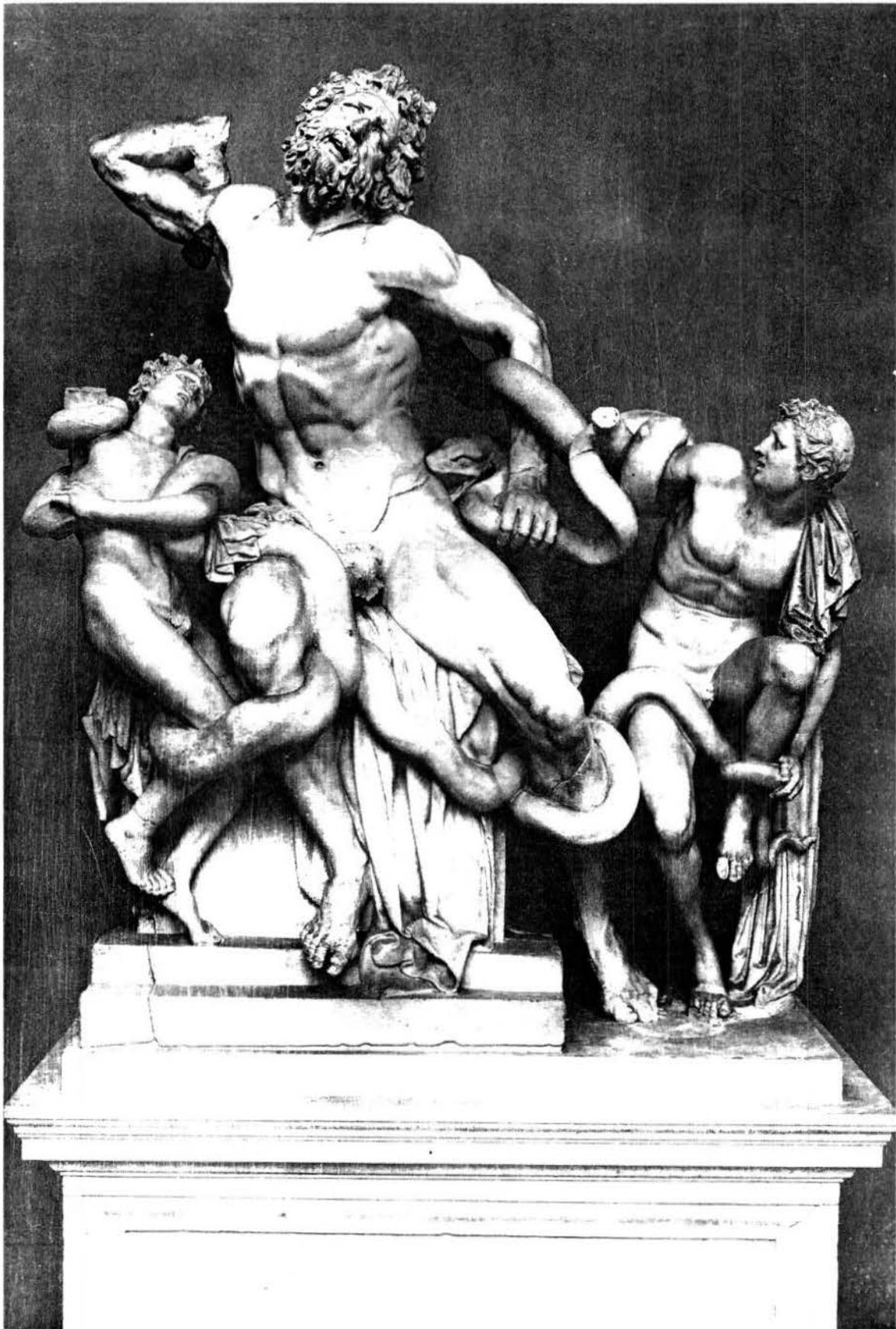


Fig. 1. *Laocoön*, Cortile del Belvedere, Vatican, Rome



Fig. 2. 2a. Laocoön, heads of Laocoön's sons. Cortile del Belvedere, Vatican, Rome

modern sensibility, that Bernini found in the Laocoön and the Pasquino all the perfection of nature, *without* the affectation of art. Conversely, Bernini's esteem for the emotional content of the Laocoön is hardly a surprise coming from the Italian Baroque artist *par excellence*. It is important to learn, however, that the full – or indeed overblown visual rhetoric we tend to perceive in Hellenistic style, Bernini regarded not even as a justifiable exaggeration but as the epitome of naturalism. And we can only understand his emphasis on the Laocoön's unaffected naturalness in the expression of emotions, in terms of an ideal or heroic notion of beauty – precisely the concept implicit in his view that the sculpture comprised all the good in art because it reflected all the most perfect in nature. Particularly moving in his eulogy – and this is the second point in the passage I want to address

certainly appreciated the tradition of anonymous public satire with which the sculpture was associated, since he undoubtedly referred to it (rather than himself, as usually assumed) when he spoke of “un homme” in Rome “à qui le public a toujours rendu la justice qui était due à son savoir, quelque chose qu'on ait pu dire et faire contre lui; ce qui fait voir que si le particulier est injuste à Rome, enfin le public ne l'est pas” (CHANTELOU 1885, 59); Bernini may have linked this high moral function with the noble style of the work. Although identifications varied, all understood the group as portraying an heroic action of salvation; see HASKELL/PENNY 1981, 192.

– is the fine subtlety with which he singles out for praise the leg that rigidifies (*intirizzata*) at the first touch of the serpent's fangs. Virgil in his famous description of the event makes no reference to such a process, and it seems clear that Bernini understood this transformation as a metaphor for the miraculous paradox of the sculptor's capacity to bring stone to life by portraying the onset of *rigor mortis*⁷.

In my view Bernini in this passage must have had in mind a modern work he greatly admired and carefully studied, the Farnese Gallery, where Annibale Carracci had manipulated the heritage of antiquity with grandiose artificiality in order to demonstrate the power of art (the power of love, in terms of the mythological narrative) to obliterate the distinction between fact and fiction (fig. 12)⁸. This artifice was patently evident in what might be called the double *paragone* em-

D'ONOFRIO 1986, 444, also notes the relation of the Moro to the Pasquino.
⁷ VIRGIL, *Aeneid* II 199-227 [The Loeb Classical Library, London 1967-1969].

⁸ The amatory theme of the gallery has been emphasized above all by DEMPSEY (most recently, 1995). The vault bears the date 1600, evidently in reference to the marriage in that year of Ranuccio Farnese to Margherita Aldobrandini; one of the scenes, *The Rape of Cephalus*, corresponds to a play by Gabriello Chiabrera produced for another marriage in the same year (LAVIN 1954, 278-284).



Fig. 3. Pasquino. Rome, Piazza del Pasquino

bedded in the complex imagery and formal illusionism of the ceiling: *ut pictura poesis* with respect to the relationship between two temporal states, the past made present by words (mainly in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* – itself, after all, a text about magical transformations of reality) and their vi-

sual equivalents in paint and stone; and *ut pictura sculptura* with respect to the relationship between two existential states, one polychrome but painted on a flat surface (that is, visually true but physically false), the other monochrome but sculpted in the round (that is, visually false but physically true)⁹. Specifically, Bernini's observation concerning the Laocoön's leg inevitably calls to mind what were perhaps the most conspicuous and portentous depictions of such a transformation, the pictures of Perseus rescuing Andromeda and slaying Phineus on the facing end walls of the Farnese Gallery (figs. 13, 14, 15). In the first scene the pale coloration of the body of Andromeda seems to allude to Ovid's comparison of her nude body chained to the rock as resembling a marble sculpture; and for the episode of Perseus killing the sea monster, Carracci adopted a version of the story in which Perseus dispatches the beast not with a sword, as in Ovid, but by petrifying it with the head of Medusa, a process that the stony color of the animal indicates has already begun. In the Phineus scene the competition among the arts in the representation of nature is given an additional turn through a specific reference to one of the acknowledged masterpieces of antiquity. Perseus wields the Medusa's head toward the enemy band, while Phineus recoils in fear, his upper body undergoing the unholy transformation from flesh to stone – metamorphosed proleptically into its obvious sculptured prototype, the Belvedere Torso (fig. 6)¹⁰. Given the exalted reputation of the Torso, Carracci's reference to it here constitutes an ironic thrust in the epic battle of the visual paragone. Having intruded in Perseus' wedding feast to abduct the bride, the defeated Phineus pleads for mercy. Perseus responds ironically by sparing his cringing enemy a proper warrior's death by the sword, and using instead the Medusa's head to turn him into 'a monument' of stone for permanent display in his father-in-law's house¹¹. The putatively heroic remnant of the classical sculptor's art thus embodies one of antiquity's notorious cowards¹²! The conceit, that painting recreates the transformation words can only describe and sculpture can only recall, is epitomized in the story of Perseus and the Medusa, which Carracci co-opts as a metaphor for the virtue of the Farnese – and his own¹³.

⁹ On the significance for Bernini of this aspect of the illusionism of the Farnese Gallery see LAVIN 1980, 42-45. On the Gallery in general in relation to the painting-sculpture *paragone* see SCOTT 1988. The literary paragone with *poesis* as metamorphosis has not been emphasized.

¹⁰ On these transformations see SCOTT 1988, 252 f., DEMPSEY 1995, 95 f. Bellori carefully noted the color changes in these scenes (see n. 13 below). For repercussions of these themes in Rubens, see MULLER 1981-1982.

¹¹ OVID, *Metamorphoses* V 226-228 [The Loeb Classical Library, London 1984]: "nullo violabere ferro, quin etiam mansura dabo monumenta per aevum, inque domo soceri semper spectabere nostri".

¹² The irony – one is tempted to call it *persiflage* – is augmented by the ref-

erence in the pose of the figure as a whole to a famous ancient warrior type, the 'kneeling Persian'; see MARZIK 1986, 113 n. 3, SCOTT 1988, 253 n. 15.

¹³ Bellori's Christian-moralizing interpretation of the vault of the Farnese gallery has been rejected by recent scholarship, but the significance of the Perseus scenes on the walls as an allegory of Virtue cannot, and has not been doubted: DEMPSEY 1968, 365; POSNER 1971, 123. A politicizing view of the Gallery has been offered by MARZIK 1986, while the ethical content of the wall scenes has been reconfirmed by RECKERMAN 1991, 98-103.

In Bellori's interpretation Perseus, representing reason, prudence, and honesty in the defeat of vice, may be an allegory of the artist himself,



Fig. 4. Menelaos carrying the body of Patroclus. Florence, Loggia dei Lanzi



Fig. 5. Antonio Lafreri, Pasquino, engraving



Fig. 6. Torso Belvedere. Cortile del Belvedere, Vatican, Rome



Fig. 7. Bernini, *Aeneas and Anchises*. Rome, Galleria Borghese

I believe that Carracci's display of artifice in the service of truth was crucial to the genesis – by a process of visual and conceptual inversion, a sculptor's *paragone* – of one of Bernini's most remarkable and least considered works.

who rescues beauty by his transformatory power, which Bellori likens to that of the poet. "Ma, per toccare la moralità della favola, Perseo viene inteso per la ragione dell'animo, la quale riguardando nello scudo di Pallade e regolandosi con la prudenza, tronca il capo al vizio figurato in Medusa, mentre gli uomini affissandosi in esso senza consiglio divengono stupidi e di sasso" (BELLORI 1976, 54); "... Perseo, cioè la ragione, e l'amor dell'onesto..." (77). Bellori emphasizes the intellectual content of the Farnese gallery: "dobbiamo avvertire che la loro forma richiede spettatore attento ed ingegnoso, il cui giudizio non resta nella vista ma nell'intelletto" (56). For Bellori the essence of Carracci's portrayals of the Perseus episodes are the material transformations, not only of living beings but also of inanimate things into stone, thus equalling the poet's capacity to give life to objects by making them participants in human emotions: "tiene per li capelli la formidabil testa di Medusa e l'opponne contro la balena, che già impallidisce in sasso e diviene immobile scoglio" (73; and 54, as above); "... Tessalo, il quale vibrando l'asta ed opponendo lo scudo, in quest'atto in cui si muove resta immobile e cangiando in bianca pietra" (74); "... e l' compagno che lo segue di fianco, armato anch'egli, s'irridisce in bianca pietra" (74); "... Fineo supplice e genuflesso, che avendo riguardato Medusa, in quel punto allora s'indurisce in sasso, serbando il senso stesso con cui si raccomanda, ed una morte con l'altra commuta. Questa figura



Fig. 8. Bernini, *Neptune (reversed)*. London, Victoria and Albert Museum

I refer to the *Medusa* in the Capitoline Museum (figs. 16, 17), which bears an inscription on its pedestal recording that it was donated by Marchese Francesco Bichi in 1731, and describing it as the work of a *celeberrimus statuarius*¹⁴.

tutta ignuda è differente dall'altre nella sua trasformazione, vedendosi con tutto il petto di bianco marmo e 'l resto del corpo in varia mistione tra 'l sangue vitale e la riggidezza della pietra, contaminanate le coscie da pallida inarnazione" (74); "... In questa favola Annibale, all'uso de' poeti si servì dell'impossibilità per iacrescere la meraviglia, dando senso alle cose inanimate; poiche si rende impossibile per natural che l'armi e le vesti di gli assaltatori di Perseo restino impietrite da Medusa, non avendo nè vista nè vita. Questa impossibilità e falsificazione di natura fu usato da' poeti con le virtù varie attribuite all'armi favolose, alle pietre ed alli sassi, facendoli partecipi d'umani affetti" (74). And he cites Ovid himself who refers to the defeated companions of Phineus as armed statues: "ed Ovidio stesso descrivendo questa favola chiama statue armate li trasformati assaltatori..." (74 f.). And to complete the *paragone* metaphor Bellori describes the paintings as Annibale's most noble poem, in which he artist was so elevated by his ingenuity that he won immortal praise: "Pose nel vero Annibale ogni più esquisita industria nel ritrovare ed ordinare le favole con gli episodii di questo suo nobilissimo poema; così può chiamarsi tutto il componimento, nel quale egli prevalse tanto e tanto si elevò con l'ingegno, che acquistossi al nome suo un'ornatissimo lode immortale" (75).

¹⁴ The inscription on the pedestal is as follows: MEDUSAE IMAGO IN CLYPEIS/ ROMANORUM AD HOSTIUM/ TERROREM OLIM INCISA/



Fig. 9. Bernini, *Pluto and Proserpine*, Rome, Galleria Borghese



Fig. 10. Bernini, *David (reversed)*. Rome, Galleria Borghese

Although the sculpture is otherwise undocumented, its stunning (I use the word advisedly, as will become evident) quality – the powerfully expressive physiognomy and the brilliant display of technical virtuosity in the fragile locks,



Fig. 11. Bernini, *Fontana del Moro*. Rome, Piazza Navona

twisted, perforated and daringly suspended in space – inevitably evoke Bernini's name, and the attribution to him has been generally accepted¹³. I want to discuss certain aspects of the sculpture that have not been commented up-

NUNC CELEBERRIMI/ STATURARIJ GLORIA SPLENDET/ IN CAPITOLIO/ MUNUS MARCHI/ FRANCISCI BICHI CONS/ MENSE MARTIJ/ ANNO D/ MDCCXXXI (FORCELLA 1869-1884 I, 78, no. 230). Bichi was elected Capitoline Consul of Rome in 1731 and 1740 (FORCELLA 1869-1884, XII, 13, 14). Likely candidates as patron of the sculpture would be Cardinal Alessandro Bichi (1596-1657), who shares a splendid tomb with his brother Celio (1600-1657), including remarkably fine portrait busts of both, in the church of S. Sabina (DARBY 1961, 134 f., 143; see the biographical inscription in FORCELLA 1869-1884 VII, 313, no. 640); Alessandro was a particular protégé of Bernini's patron Pope Alexander VII. Celio a notable jurist of the Roman Curia. Also, Cardinal Antonio Bichi (1614-1691), nephew of Alexander VII, whose portrait was made by Bernini's pupil Baciccio (GRAF/WORSDALE 1994, 61, fig. 63). On Alessandro, Antonio and Celio see *Dizionario biografico* 1960 X (1968), 334-347.

Efforts to locate documentation concerning the Medusa bust and the Bichi family, for which I am much indebted to Bruno Contardi, have so far been unsuccessful.

¹³ First published and attributed to Bernini by FRASCHETTI 1900, 405, who mentions two bronze (*recte* marble) copies in the Louvre, and notes the attribution to Bernini by NIBBY 1838-1841 II, 626; WITTKOWER 1981, 208 f.; NAVA CELLINI at first doubted but later, 1988, 30, emphatically affirmed the attribution ("... inconfutabile e l'opera dichiara, a chi l'esamina senza pregiudizio, tutta la sua suggestione ed anche la rarità del suo significato"); FAGIOLO DELL'ARCO 1967, cat. no. 83; aspects of the iconography of the sculpture have been discussed by POSEQ 1993. The extremities of the interlace of snakes have been broken off at many points, so the sculptural pyrotechnics would have been even more spectacular originally.

on, and which together help to define its distinctive character and significance.

The physiognomy and expression are quite different from the riveting repulsiveness usually attributed to the Medusa, as in Caravaggio's famous version of Minerva's shield (fig. 18). Bernini's Medusa also seems to reflect the tradition, exemplified by the famous Medusa mask from the Palazzo Rondanini (fig. 19), that she was the most beautiful of the three Gorgon sisters, and the only one who was mortal; her deadly appearance was Minerva's punishment for having defiled the temple of the maiden goddess of truth and wisdom¹⁶. Moreover, rather than screaming out her horrendous cry, she seems to suffer a kind of deep, moral pathos, a conscious, almost meditative anguish of the soul; this affective passion is clearly related to, but also quite different from the utter abandon of Bernini's bust of the *Damned Soul*, with which the Medusa is commonly compared (fig. 20). I think it no accident that in discussing the work, and affirming the attribution to Bernini, Antonia Nava Cellini, with her wonted perspicuity, compared the head to the splendid *réprise* of the head of Laocoön in the Galleria Spada, which Italo Faldi had earlier attributed to Bernini (fig. 21)¹⁷. As we shall see presently, I suspect that the peculiar expressive quality of the Capitoline head has a significance of its own. Here I want to emphasize the irony that, in this sense, the sculpture, in contrast to what might be called the hyper-realism of Caravaggio's painting, has the 'natural' affectivity Bernini admired in the classical works.

The Capitoline sculpture owes much of its impact to the fact that it is an independent, free-standing work of art. In the case of the Medusa, whose *raison d'être*, as it were, consists in her severed head, this isolation and self-sufficiency constitutes a startlingly evocative visual pun. The nearest precedent for a Medusa's head sculpted fully in the round was brandished before the people of Florence by Cellini's great figure of Perseus in the Loggia dei Lanzi (figs. 22, 23). Despite the obvious differences both in form and context, I doubt whether the Capitoline sculpture would have been conceived without Cellini's example, and not only for formal reasons. The Perseus was endowed with an unequivocal moral and political message, as a warning to the actual and potential enemies of Duke Cosimo de' Medici, liberator and defender of the Florentine Andromeda¹⁸.

In another respect the Capitoline sculpture differs from

Cellini's, and indeed from all previous depictions of the subject, as far as I can discover. The work does not actually represent the head of Medusa, as normally conceived. Part of the essence of the myth involves the severed head alone, its use as a physiognomical talisman with fascinating eyes and dripping blood that engendered the myriad serpents of the Libyan desert¹⁹. Bernini's sculpture, however, does not represent the head, but a bust of the Medusa; it is not a transfiguration of the mortal apotropaion as such, but a portrait of the 'living' monster. Medusa herself has been metamorphosed into stone, and in this context the image seems to make still another pun, this time on the traditional topos of the portrait as an analogue of the living subject. One of the most celebrated instances is in fact another anecdote recounted by Bernini himself and his biographers about his portrait of Monsignor Pedro de Foix Montoya (fig. 24). Cardinal Maffeo Barberini, the future Urban VIII, with various other prelates, visited Bernini's studio and saw the bust, just as the sitter himself entered the room. By way of introduction, one of the visitors said of the portrait, "This is Montoya turned to stone"; to which Cardinal Barberini added, addressing the sitter, "This is the portrait of Monsignor Montoya", and, turning to the sculpture, "and this is Monsignor Montoya"²⁰. The anecdote, and the phraseology as well, are redolent of the story of the Medusa, except that in the Capitoline bust the conceit, or rather the wizardry of the artist, is turned against the Medusa herself. To make an independent, free-standing portrait bust of the Medusa is a stunning idea, comparable indeed to Bernini's equally unprecedented depictions of human souls as portrait busts: independent, self-contained images of extreme psychological states. But whereas in the 'soul portraits' the bust form served to evoke the disembodied human spirit, I suspect that in this case it alludes to the power of the artist to hold the mirror up to human nature in its most terrific aspect. Bernini must have been familiar with the famous madrigal written by Giambattista Marino to celebrate Caravaggio's Medusa shield, then in the collection of Grandduke Ferdinando de' Medici²¹. The poem, which is included in the section devoted to painting in Marino's collection of poetic evocations of works of visual art, *La Galleria*, is significant in our present context because it makes two important inversions of the classical story. Perseus had avoided being petrified by looking at the Medusa only as a reflection in Minerva's pol-

¹⁶ OVID, *Metamorphoses* IV 794-803. On the 'humanization' by Phidias of the grotesque gorgoneion of early Greek art, see BUSCHOR 1958.

¹⁷ FALDI 1977.

¹⁸ See BRAUNFELS 1948, 3-7; further to the Medicean political symbolism of the sculpture in MANDEL 1996, with intervening literature. One wonders whether Cellini's conception, which is based on Etruscan bronze statuettes (*ibidem*), might have engendered the other familiar

traditions of heroic victors displaying the repugnant heads of defeated monsters: David with the head of Goliath, Judith with the head of Holofernes.

¹⁹ OVID, *Metamorphoses* IV 618-620.

²⁰ BALDINUCCI 1948, 76; cf. BERNINI 1713, 16; CHANTELOU 1885, 17.

²¹ See the rich discussion of the Caravaggio-Marino relationship and its implications for the poetry-painting pragon, by CROPPER 1991.



Fig. 12. Annibale Carracci, Galleria Farnese. Rome, Palazzo Farnese

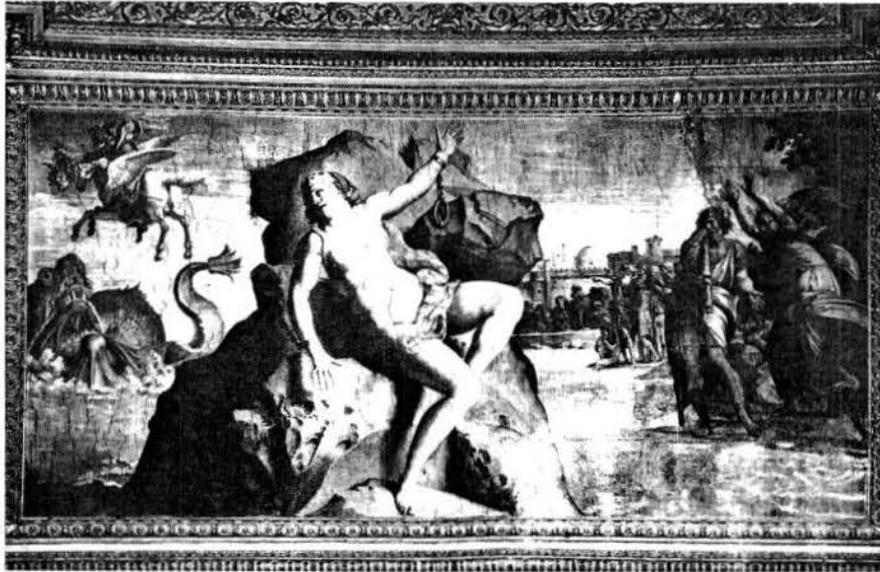


Fig. 13. Annibale Carracci, *Perseus and Andromeda*, Galleria Farnese. Rome, Palazzo Farnese



Fig. 14. Annibale Carracci, *Perseus and Phineus*, Galleria Farnese. Rome, Palazzo Farnese



Fig. 15. Annibale Carracci, *Perseus and Phineus* (detail), Galleria Farnese. Rome, Palazzo Farnese



Fig. 16. Bernini, Medusa. Rome, Musei Capitolini



Fig. 17. Bernini, Medusa. Rome, Musei Capitolini



Fig. 18. Caravaggio, Medusa. Florence, Galleria degli Uffizi



Fig. 19. *Medusa Rondanini*. Munich, *Glyptothek*

ished shield, whereas Marino's poem begins by referring to the enemies who will be turned to stone by looking upon the Grandduke's shield itself: "Now what enemies would not be quickly turned to cold stone regarding that fearsome and cruel Gorgon in your shield...?"²² Caravaggio's image, which in the classical story can only be a mirror, has instead the wondrous power of reality itself: like the actual Medusa, it can turn the Duke's adversaries to stone. The poem concludes by transferring the Medusa's power to the Duke, declaring that Ferdinando's real defense, his 'true Medusa', is his own valor: "But yet! That formidable monster is of little use among your weapons, since the true Medusa is your valor"²³. Marino's association of personal virtue with the power of the Medusa was, following the leads of Cellini and Caracci, a critical step in transforming the image into a sort of

²² "Or quai nemici fian, che freddi marmi/ non divengan repente/ in mirando, Signor, nel vostro scudo/ quel fier Gorgone, e crudo...?" (MARINO 1979 I, 31).

²³ "Ma che! Poco fra l'armi/ a voi fia d'uopo il formidabil mostro:/ che la vera Medusa è il valor vostro" (MARINO 1979 I, 32).



Fig. 20. *Bernini, Anima Dannata*. Rome, *Palazzo di Spagna*

reverse reflection of personal moral rectitude. A further step occurs in two, less well known poems, a madrigal and a sonnet, that Marino included in the section of *La Galeria* called "Statue". Here portrayals of the Medusa are indeed treated as independent, sculptured images. Both poems are based on the conceit that, unlike Caravaggio's picture, the Medusa, which turns viewers into stone, is itself here turned to stone. In the madrigal the image speaks: "I know not if I was sculpted by mortal chisel, or if by gazing into a clear glass my own glance made me so"²⁴. In the sonnet, the poet speaks: "Still alive one admires the Medusa in living stone; and whoever turns his eyes toward her is by stupor stoned. Wise sculptor, you so vivify marble that beside the marble the living are marble"²⁵. Although to my knowledge there is no classical warrant for the idea that the Medusa was turned to stone,

²⁴ "Non so se mi scolpi scarpel mortale./ o specchiando me stessa in chiaro vetro/ la propria vista mia mi fece tale" (MARINO 1979 I, 272).

²⁵ "Ancor viva si mira/ Medusa in viva pietra;/ e chi gli occhi in lei gira./ pur di stupore impètra./ Saggio Scultor, tu così 'l marmo avivi./ che son di marmo a lato al marmo i vivi" (MARINO 1979 I, 272).



Fig. 21. Bernini (?), *Head of Laocoön*. Rome, Palazzo Spada

it was not Marino's invention²⁶. He was preceded and no doubt inspired by a poem by the Andrian poet Luigi Groto, entitled, significantly, *Scoltura di Medusa*: "This is not a sculpture by him who changed it into stone, but Medusa herself. [...] Looking into a mirror to regard herself, she turned to stone"²⁷. Groto's poem on the transformatory power of vision becomes especially poignant when one recalls that he was blind and was famously known as *il Cieco d'Hadria*. These are the only instances I have found of the conceit that clearly inspired the Capitoline sculpture: the Medusa is herself turned to stone by gazing into the reflexive chisel of the sculptor, whose virtue lies in mirroring the truth in stone with all the vividness of life.

²⁶ Curiously, in his essays dealing with Caravaggio and Medusa imagery, MARINO 1995, 118 (cited by CROPPER 1991, 204), 'imagines' a Medusa who petrifies herself by looking at her image reflected in the shield; and he gives no source for the idea. A variant on the theme occurs in a magrigal by Marino on a *sculpture* of Andromeda, in which the monster is turned to stone, obviously based on the same version of the story adopted by Carracci (see above), and the poet does not know whether it is the work of the Medusa or of Love or of Art: "Ma che resti di marmo/ non so s'opra sia questa/ (veggendo ch'è scolpita ogni sua parte)/ di Medusa, d'Amore, o pur de l'Arte" (MARINO 1979 I, 271; cited in connection with the Farnese Gallery by DEMPSEY 1995, 33).



Fig. 22. Benvenuto Cellini, *Perseus*. Florence, Loggia dei Lanzi

For a contemporary viewer the Medusa would have had two, contradictory moral associations, which in the Capitoline sculpture have become complementary. Partly no doubt owing to her association with Minerva, the Medusa was an emblem of wisdom and reason: according to Lomazzo, just as the Medusa turned men who looked upon her into stones, so wisdom silences those who do not understand²⁸; for Cesare Ripa, the head of Medusa shows the victory attained by reason over the enemies of virtue, rendering them dumb, even as the head of Medusa rendered dumb those who looked at her²⁹. In the *Ovide moralisé*, on the other hand, the serpents engendered by the blood flowing from Medusa's head are interpreted as the evil thoughts that

²⁷ "Non è scoltura di colui, che'n sasso/ Cangiava questa, ma Medusa stessa./ Pero tien, chi qua giungi, il viso basso!/. . . Che poi, che gli occhi in uno specchio tenne,/ Per stessa mirar, sasso diviene" (cited by FUMAROLI 1988, 173 f.).

²⁸ "Lo scudo, sotto la tutela di Minerva, significava riparo, e con la testa di Medusa in mezzo, sapienza: perciocché, sí come quella faceva diventar gl'uomini che la guardavano sassi, cosí la sapienza ammutisse quelli che non sanno" (LOMAZZO 1973-1974 II, 406).

²⁹ "... testa di Medusa... dimostra la vittoria, che há la ragione de gli inimici contrarij alla virtú, quale gli rende stupidi, come la testa di Medusa, che faceva restare medesimamente stupidi quelli, che la guardavano" (RI-



Fig. 23. Benvenuto Cellini, *Head of Medusa*. Florence, Loggia dei Lanzi

spring from evil hearts³⁰. It is noteworthy in our context that the same attribute is taken up by Ripa in his description of Envy, which might well be identified with the Medusa: "Her head is full of serpents, instead of hair, to signify evil thoughts"³¹. A common attribute of Envy is that it devours itself, and there may be a specific allusion to this theme in the motif, prominently displayed beside the Medusa's left cheek, of the snake biting its neighbor's head³².

Bernini's suffering, petrified Medusa, whose serpentine tresses embody evil thoughts, as a warning to the wise, may thus be seen as an emblem of moral victory achieved by silencing the ignorant. And this interpretation in turn suggests a time and motive for the creation of her portrait bust. Wittkower perceived that the Medusa is not an early work.

PA 1603, 426. Cited also by POSEQ 1993, 20, who, although in a different sense, also stresses the moral nature of the Capitoline sculpture).

³⁰ "Derechief par les serpens qui furent engendrés du sang cheant du chief de la Meduse sont entendues les mauvaises pensées qui procedent de mauvais couraiges" (DE BOER 1954, 162).

³¹ "Ha pieno il capo di serpi, in vece di capelli, per significatione de' mali pensieri..." (RIPA 1603, 242). On Envy with the snake hair of the Medusa, see DE TERVARENT 1958-1964 I, cols. 167-168.

³² The same motif occurs, as Wolfgang Prohaska kindly reminded me, in Rubens's painting of the Medusa's head in Vienna (see most recently SUT-



Fig. 24. Bernini, *bust of Monsignor Pedro de Foix Montoya*. Rome, S. Maria di Monserrato

He assigned it rather to what he regarded as a deliberately classicizing period of Bernini's development, about 1635. Maurizio and Marcello Fagiolo dell'Arco then made bold to place it still later, in the mid-1640's, relating it stylistically to elements of the tomb of Urban VIII (figs. 25, 26)³³; they also noted the appearance, much earlier, of Medusa heads in the sculptured ornament of the Palazzo Barberini (fig. 27), alluding no doubt to Minerva as the patron of the arts, and to the Divine Wisdom that is the main theme of the interior fresco decorations³⁴. This association has particular resonance in our present context because of the long-standing analogy between the Medusa's petrifying effect and the stunned bewonderment engendered by the work of art that wisdom creates through ingenuity and labor³⁵.

TON 1993, 245-247).

³³ For a summary chronology of the Urban VIII tomb see WITTKOWER 1981, 198 f.

³⁴ SCOTT 1991, 194 f.; the accompanying swans refer to a literary group that met in the adjacent room. A drawing by Bernini with studies for the doorway tympanum was published by Harris 1968, 390, no. 12, and 1977, no. 20, and payment for his work on the relief in the 1630's is recorded (see Scott 1991, 53 f. n. 71, 194 n. 14).

³⁵ On this point, which also underlies Dempsey's interpretation of the Perseus scenes in the Farnese Gallery, see SUTTON 1993, 246.



Fig. 25. Bernini, tomb of Urban VIII, detail, Rome, St. Peter's



Fig. 26. Bernini, tomb of Urban VIII, detail, Rome, St. Peter's

The converging eyes and puckered, close-knit brows that suggest the Medusa's 'revolving lights' (*vertentem lumina*)⁶⁶, the puffed and dimpled cheeks and chin and bowed, open lips that render the Capitoline head at once pathetic and vulnerable, all find close analogies in these works. Another remarkable insight of Nava Cellini was to add a comparison to the figure of Truth, made at the same time (fig. 28). In fact, the two heads seem complementary in their extravagant expressivity.

To my mind this latter relationship is the key to the meaning of the work, because it corresponds to the period after Urban was succeeded by his, and hence Bernini's arch-enemy, Innocent X. Bernini at that time fell into profound, if temporary, disfavor, and was the subject of assaults from all sides, both on his integrity and on his ability. In describing

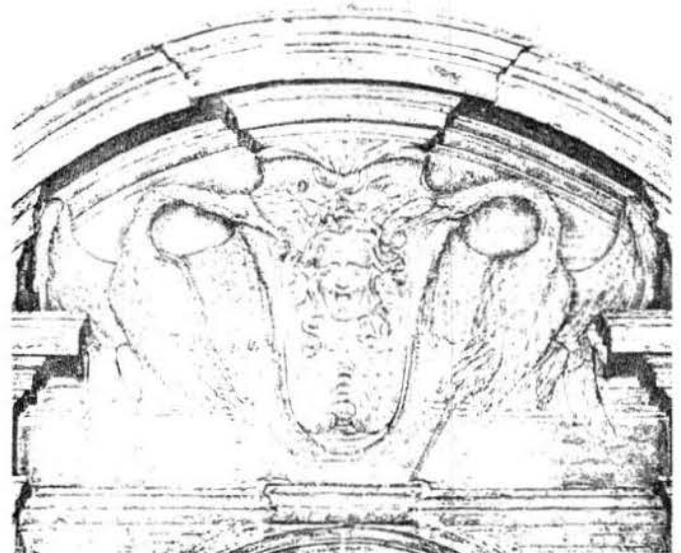


Fig. 27. Bernini, overdoor of Palazzo Barberini, Rome

⁶⁶ VIRGIL, *Aeneid* VIII 438 (cf. above n. 7).



Fig. 28 Bernini, *Truth* (detail). Rome, Galleria Borghese

this black period in the artist's career, the biographers emphasize a particular trait of his character, which I suppose a modern analyst would call 'sublimated'. Bernini did not languish in fruitless self-pity, but sought to silence his adversaries by demonstrating his virtuosity, producing some of his most beautiful works: "Only the Cavaliere, who was then the subject of all the rumors, remained silent; and although he received new and vigorous offers from the King of France and Cardinals living there to enter the service of that Monarch, he would never consent, saying that 'Rome sometimes misperceives, but never loses sight, meaning that it is a city in which virtue is sometimes contested but never approached by envy'. And in all those four years, which was a short time for his emulators, he bore the situation with a constant affectation of the spirit, without vain laments, which are usually neither offense nor defense, but used his virtue as consolation and remedy for those evils. For in that same period, in which he seemed abandoned by fortune, he made Rome see the most beautiful works he had ever made, confirming with acts of valor, that he had been disinheri-

ed by the words of his adversaries, but was nonetheless persuaded that as the false is accented by speed, so truth in its good faith will rise again the more beautiful for the delay, and in time. And he illustrated this thought, which was a consolation for him, with a marvelous group, in which Time was represented discovering truth. He portrayed a most beautiful woman in marble..."¹⁷.

My guess is that the Medusa, like the Truth, was meant to join in Bernini's defense (perhaps in vindication of the Barberini, as well), stunning his detractors into silence with the most awesome and effective weapon at his disposal, his chisel. If this hypothesis is valid, then Bernini's Medusa may be a kind of ironic self-portrait: the demonstration of the transformative power of his art embodied not only the visual inversion of the point of the myth, and his contempt for affectation, but also his exercise of that power in the service of a higher moral purpose. The bust embodies the noble victory of true virtue over false evil, the engaging witicism of a stony image of petrification, and the disturbing expression of tragic suffering.

¹⁷ BERNINI 1713, 80-81: "Il solo Cavaliere, che era il soggetto allora di tutti i discorsi, si taceva, e benché ricevesse nuovi, e gagliardi stimoli dal Rè di Francia, e Cardinali colà dimoranti, di portarsi al servizio di quel Monarca, non volle giammai acconsentirvi, dicendo, che *Roma qualche volta travede, mà non giammai perde la vista, con inferire, Esser una Città, in cui tal volta vien contrariata dall'invidia la virtù, mà non mai appressa*. Et in tutti que' quattr'anni, che furono breve spazio di giuoco a suoi Emoli, comportò quel caso non con affettazione di animo costante, nè con lamenti inutili, che non sogliono nè offendere, nè difendere, mà con servirsi della sua virtù per consolazione, e rimedio di que' mali. Poiche in quel medesimo tempo, in cui pareva abbandonato dalla fortuna, fece vedere a Roma

le più belle Opere, che facesse giammai, autenticando co' fatti il suo valore, che dagli Avversarii era disereditato colle parole, persuaso eziandio, che sì come suole il falso prender vigore dalla prestezza, così la verità della sua buona fede risorgerebbe più bella colla dimora, e col tempo. E quest'istesso sentimento, che fù a lui di consolazione, espose a noi con un meraviglioso Gruppo, in cui rappresentasi il Tempo, che scuopre la Verità. Finse egli una bellissima Donna in Marmo...". I suspect that this whole passage may have been intended to contrast Bernini's attitude in adversity to the notoriously morose and refractory Borromini, Bernini's chief rival and antagonist during this period of disfavor. Domenico describes Borromini's bitter attacks in the preceding paragraph.