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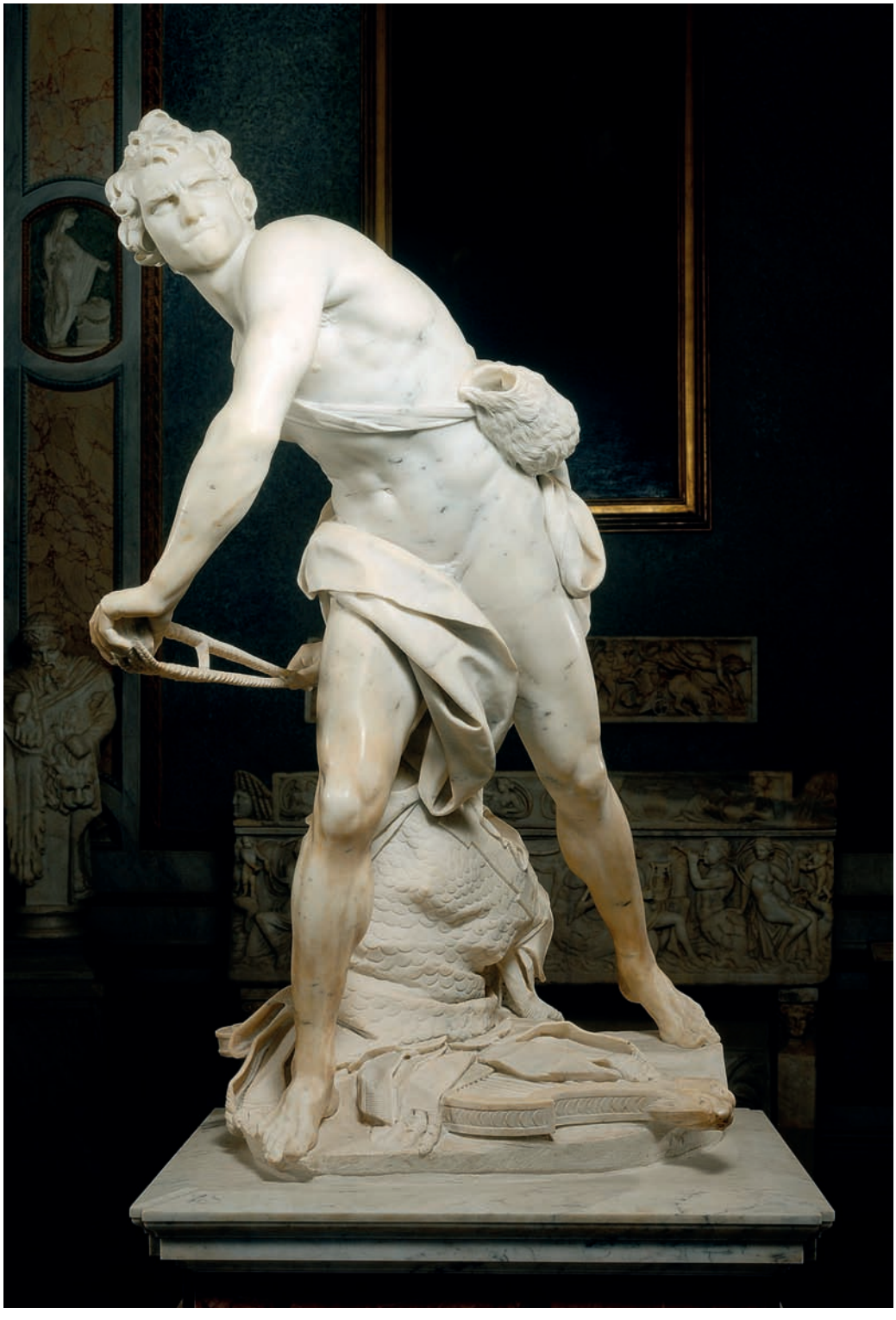
The Silence of Bernini's *David*

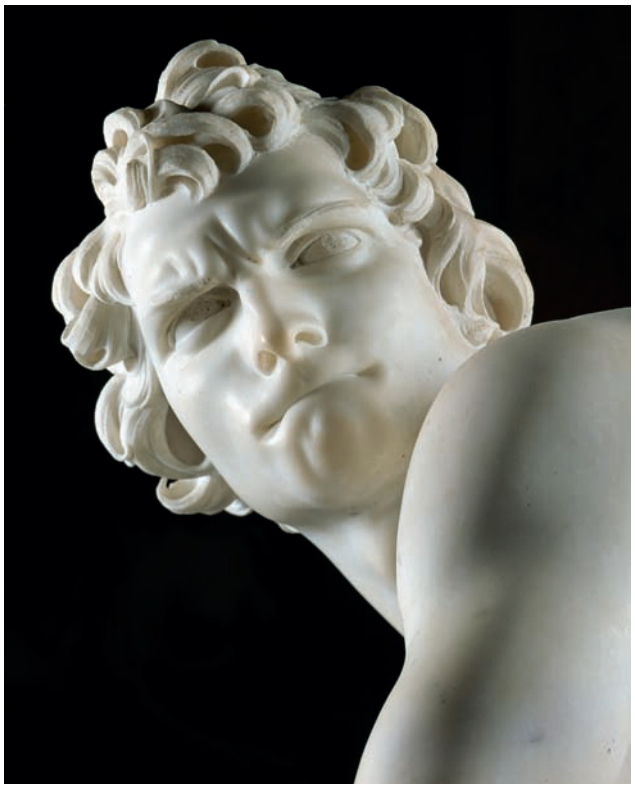
The explosive drama, both psychological and physical, of Bernini's *David* [Fig. 1] has been explained largely as a representation of expressive *topoi* from the repertory of the classical literary tradition of rhetoric.[1] These physiognomical clichés generally come with a characterological counterpart such as wrinkled eyebrows = ire, and ferocious expression = the Leonine type of the animal physiology tradition. The problem Bernini's *David* poses in this context, however, is that the most conspicuous and compelling aspect of his face has no counterpart in the rhetorical tradition, that is, his intense psychological concentration and his determined, firmly closed mouth and painfully bitten upper lip [Fig. 2]. It is as though David were straining with all his might to retain within himself a venomous outburst of the odium he feels toward his gigantic, wicked, and arrogant adversary. It might be said above all that *David*'s silence is his most conspicuous feature, and that his silence is perhaps the chief clue to the significance of what he is about to do.[2]

In fact, this very paradox of what might be called silent speech is inherent in a millennial biblical tradition of the Davidic persona detailed by the prophet himself, in Psalm 38 (39) – especially in the first two lines – which, so far as I know, has never been cited in relation to Bernini's sculpture:

> 1 I said: I will take heed to my ways: that I sin not with my tongue.
> I have set a guard to my mouth, when the sinner stood against me.



1. Gianlorenzo Bernini, «David», 1623–1624, marble, Rome, Galleria Borghese. Photo: Art Resource, NY



2. Gianlorenzo Bernini, «David» (detail of Fig. 1). Photo: Andrea Jemolo/Scala, Art Resource, NY

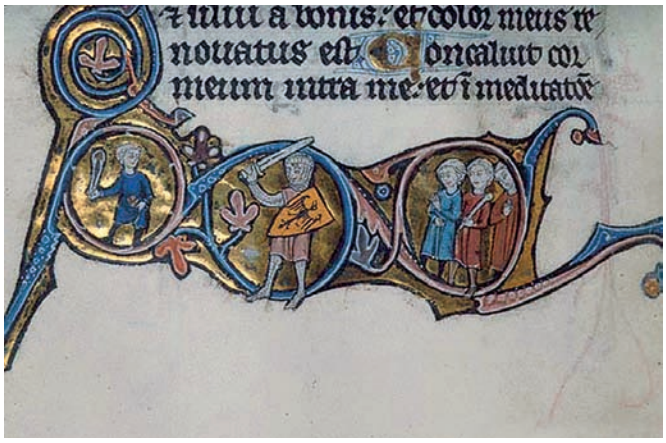
3. Gianlorenzo Bernini, «Bust of Cardinal Robert Bellarmine», 1623–1624, marble, Rome, Chiesa del Gesù. Photo: author's archive

> 2 I was dumb, and was humbled, and kept silence from good things: and my sorrow was renewed.
>
> (39 KJV)
>
> (1 Dixi custodiam vias meas ne peccem in lingua mea custodiam os meum silentio donec est impius contra me
> 2 obmutui silentio tacui de bono et dolor meus conturbatus est
> [Vulgate, 38])[3]

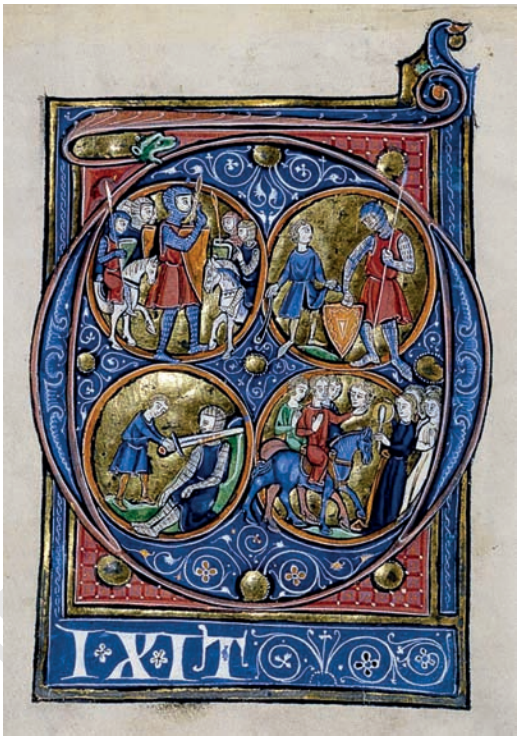
The psalm is particular in several respects. Here David speaks in the first person and vows that he will mend his ways. He promises not to sin with his tongue, and to keep a bridle on his mouth while the sinner is before him. David is thus straining to withhold his spleen against his satanic enemy. He burns with the consciousness of his own transgressions and thanks the Lord for closing his mouth.

By the time Bernini began to carve the *David* (8 July 1623 – 3 January 1624), he was in his mid-twenties, no longer the successful young up-start but a familiar in the Borghese household, head of the Fabrica of Saint Peter's under Pope Urban VIII, and member of the Vatican entourage as a Cavaliere della Croce. In other words he was a fully-fledged participant in Roman society, social and religious. It is remarkable that the *David* was completed in a period of seven months. Perhaps more remarkable is the fact that at the same time, Bernini was working on the tomb portrait of Cardinal Robert Bellarmine [Fig. 3], the Jesuit cardinal theologian and activist who had died in 1621. The tomb was unveiled in the Gesù, on 3 August 1624.[4] Bellarmine spent the last years of his life in Rome, leaving a rich legacy of religious tracts. We could speculate that Bernini may have met him; it is well-known that Bellarmine's *Art of Dying Well* (1619) was deeply important to Bernini, even until the time of his own death.[5] One of Bellarmine's most important works was a long Commentary on the Psalms, published in 1611.[6] There, Bellarmine's comments on Psalm 38 (Vulgate)/39 (KJV), are crucial.

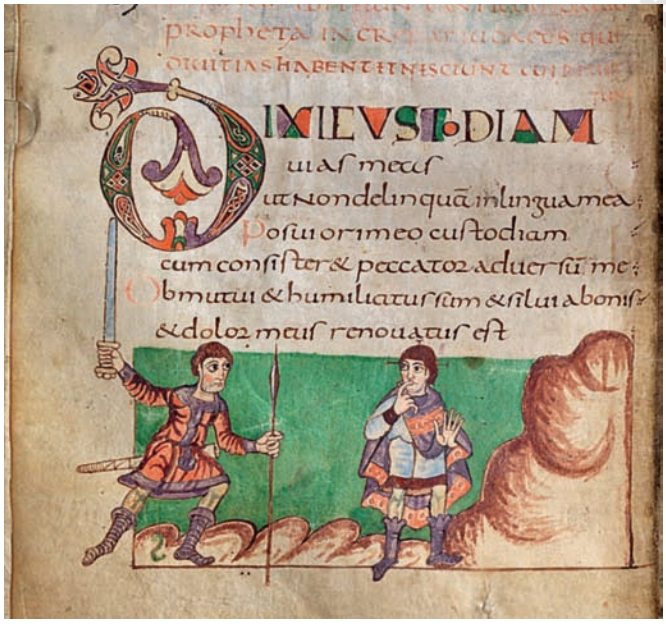
> **Explanation of the Psalm** 1 *I said: I will take heed to my ways that I sin not with my tongue. I have set a guard to my mouth, when the sinner stood against me*. David, in his solicitude not to lose true happiness, deliberated and firmly resolved to use great



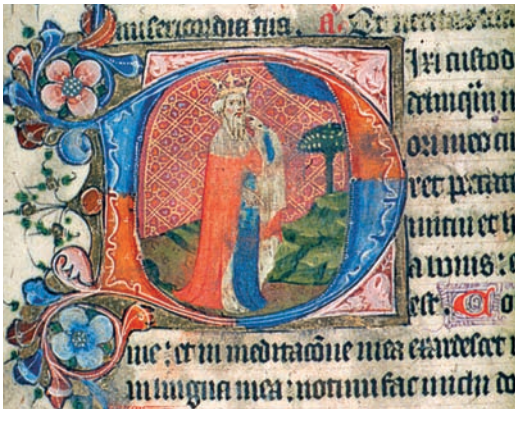
4. «David Winding his Sling; Goliath Raising his Battle Axe» (detail), 13th c., manuscript illumination, New York, Morgan Library, M. 183, fol. 54v. Photo: Library



5. «Goliath Confronting the Jews» (upper left), «David Preparing to Sling his Stone» (upper right), «David Beheading Goliath» (lower left), «Jews Rejoicing» (lower right), 13th c., manuscript illumination, Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Psalter, MS Cod. Ser. Nov. 2611, Psalm 38, fol. 72v. Photo: Library



6. «David Pointing to his Closed Mouth, Warding off Goliath», manuscript illumination, 9th c., Stuttgart Psalter, Stuttgart, Württembergische Landesbibliothek. Bibl. fol. 23, fol. 49v. Photo: Library

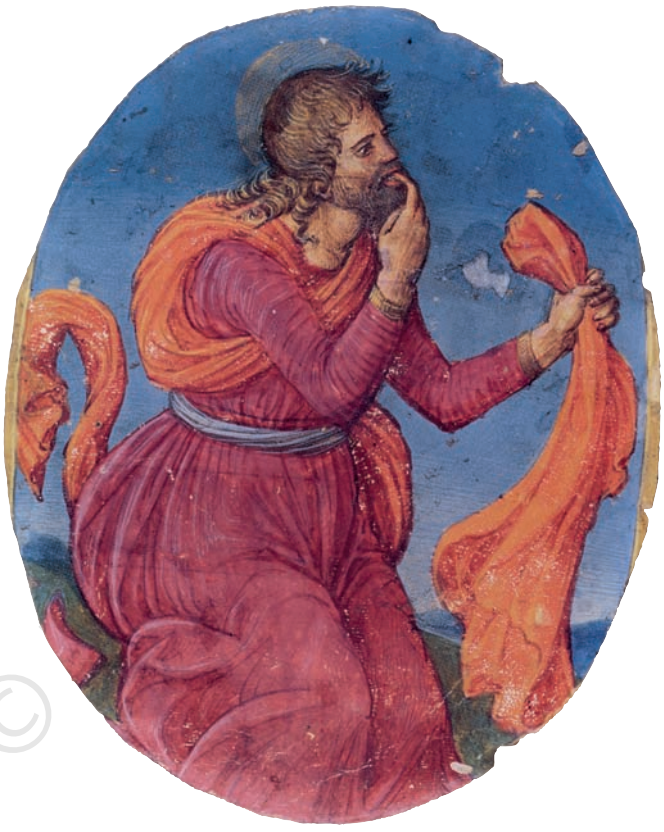


7. «King David Pointing to his Mouth», *c.* 1470, manuscript illumination, initial D (*Dixit*), Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. Don. d. 85, fol. 29r. Photo: Library

circumspection in all his acts, so that, if possible, he should not sin, even by word […]. […] I resolved and determined to consider and reflect upon all my actions. And, as nothing is easier or more dangerous than to fall into sin through our tongue; for from the inconsiderate use of it, arise 'strife, contentions, quarrels', and other evils, so numerous, that St. James said, 'The tongue is a world of iniquity'; the Prophet, therefore, emphatically says, 'That I sin not with my tongue' [Vulgate as quoted by Bellarmine: Line 2, 1st ½: **custodiam vias meas ne peccem in lingua mea**] that is to say, in this respect specially, 'I will take heed to my ways', 'that I may not sin with my tongue', for thus I will escape incalculable evils. 'I have set a guard to my mouth, when the sinner stood against me'. [Vulgate as quoted by Bellarmine, Line 2, 2nd ½: **custodiam os meum silentio donec est impius contra me**.] There is no time we are in greater danger of transgressing through our tongue than when we are provoked by detraction or by insult; and, therefore, the Prophet says, 'I have set a guard to my mouth, when the sinner stood against me'; that means, when any ill-conditioned person should irritate me by detraction, reproaches, or injurious language of any sort, then, especially, 'I set a guard on my mouth', for fear of giving expression to anything I may afterwards regret. [2 Vulgate as quoted by Bellarmine: **obmutui silentio tacui de bono et dolor meus conturbatus est**]. […] 'I was dumb', […] 'and was humbled', […] 'and kept silence from good things'; […] 'and my sorrow was renewed'. He tells us what guard he put on his mouth. 'I was dumb', I was as silent as if I had been dumb, 'and was humbled'; kept my patience in the greatest humility, 'and kept silence from good things', forbore even my just defense.

It is clear that Bernini's interpretation of David's internal emotions as expressed in his tightly closed lips follows precisely this line of meditation.

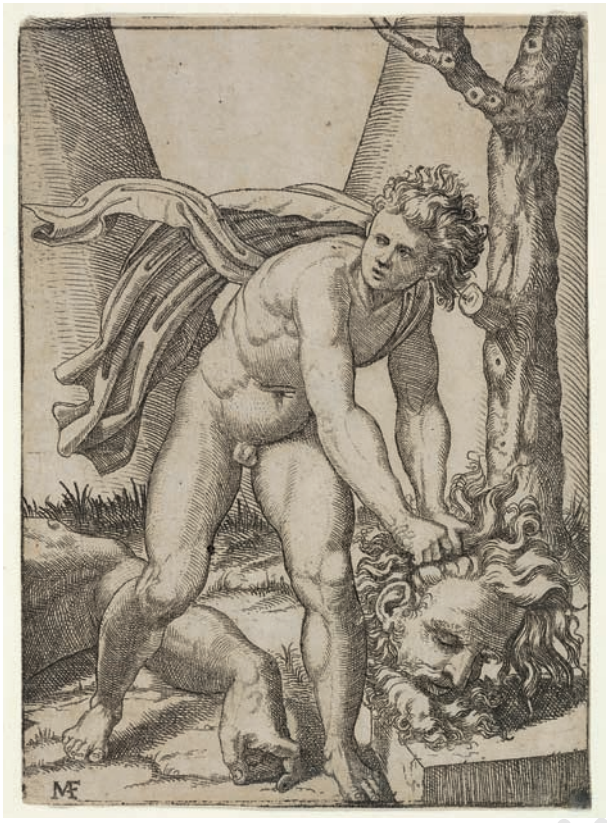
Bellarmine, in his commentary, is relying on the millennial tradition of psalter interpretation in which the phrase *when the sinner stood against me* was understood as David's foe Goliath. In some Psalters the psalm is illustrated with David shown casting his stone toward his enemy [Fig. 4], and also beheading the Philistine giant [Fig. 5].[7] Others show David forcing himself to be silent: a particularly trenchant early example of the wordless David is the illustration of the psalm in the famous ninth-century Stuttgart Psalter, where Goliath lunges threateningly, raising his battle axe and holding his spear, while David holds up one hand to ward off the menacing evil adversary, and points to his shuttered mouth [Fig. 6].[8] Such medieval images illustrate the fundamental irony of the psalm, which expresses the humility and bitter self-recriminations through which the glorious, indeed miraculous victory was achieved. The pointing gesture remains paramount for centuries, applied both to the youth and to the mature King David [Fig. 7].[9] A still later, quite beautiful depiction of the pointing David appears in a detached miniature by



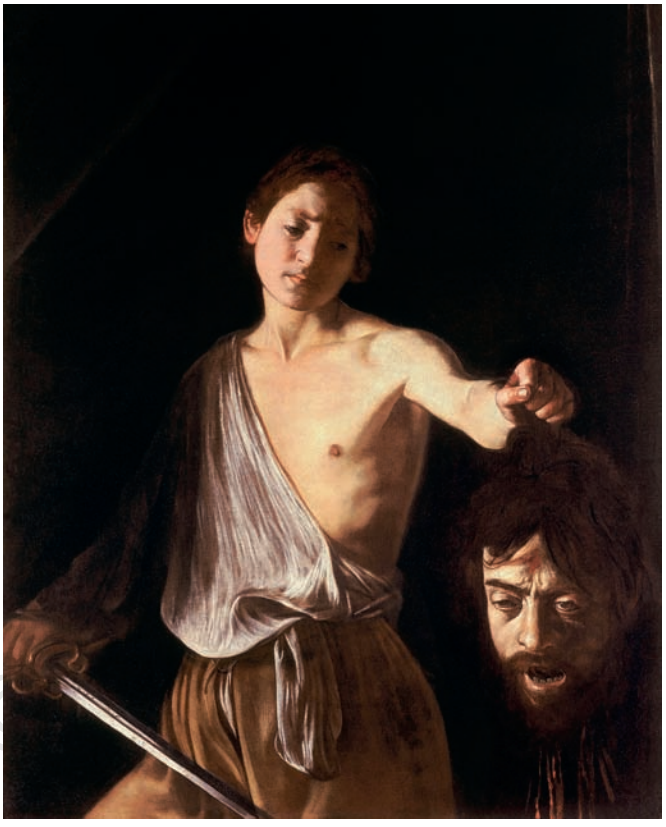
8. Liberale da Verona, «David pointing to his Tongue», the letter *D*[*ixit*], manuscript illumination, Private Collection. Photo: *Mantegna e le arti a Verona*, no. 57, p. 287

the Veronese painter Liberale da Verona (1441–1526), where the fully-clad figure offers up a fragment of his raiment as he points vigorously to his mouth. The image is extracted from the initial letter D of first word of the psalm, DIXIT [Fig. 8].[10] In following this tradition, Bernini resolves the emblematic 'pointing gesture', by transferring its meaning to David's own portentous action through the determined expression of biting the lips. He may even have known the seemingly unique forecast (as far as I know) provided by Torquato Tasso who had used it to express the holding back of strong anger of one of his romance characters:

> Tacque: e 'l Pagano al sofferir poco uso
> **Morde le labbra**, e di furor si strugge.
> Risponder vuol, ma 'l suono esce confuso.
> Siccome strido [roar] d'animal che rugge:
> (*Gerusalemme Liberata*, Canto VI, 38)[11]



9. Marc Antonio Raimondi, «David Picking Up the Head of Goliath», *c.* 1515–1516, engraving/etching, New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, acc. 2012.136.91. Photo: Museum



10. Caravaggio, «David with the Head of Goliath», 1609–1610, oil on canvas, Rome, Galleria Borghese. Photo: author's archive

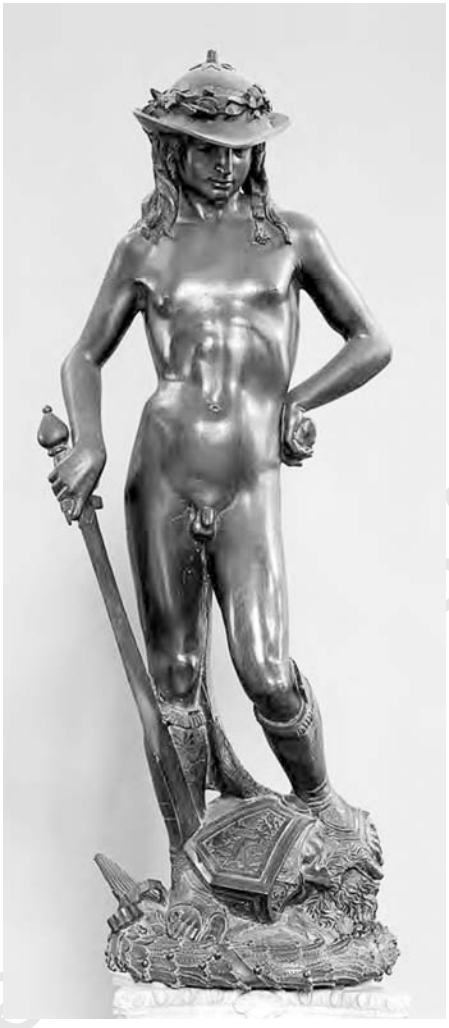
It is worth remembering that in 1970, Hans Kauffmann, who was particularly aware of the relevance of Bellarmine for Bernini's thinking, comprehended the humility and self-abnegation in the *David*.[12] He is the only art historian to do so. Kauffmann also provided a penetrating formal history of David's open pose, including reference to a striking print by Marc Antonio Raimondi of *David Grasping Goliath's Severed Head* [Fig. 9], said to be after a design by Raphael, but he did not make reference to Psalm 39 or to David's aggressively sealed lips. However, he did allude to the Church Fathers: Saint Augustine (354–430) and Saint John Chrysostomus (d. 407), whose understanding of David's feat was epitomized by the motto 'non mole, sed virtute' (not with might but with virtue).[13] He further noted that the Fathers related David's refusal to wear armor to the martyrs who confronted their enemy without weapons, and quoted Gregory the Great who described the benign nature of David's anger as *ira virtuosa* (virtuous anger). He also singled out John Ridewall (Johannes

11. Caravaggio, «David with the Head of Goliath» (detail): sword

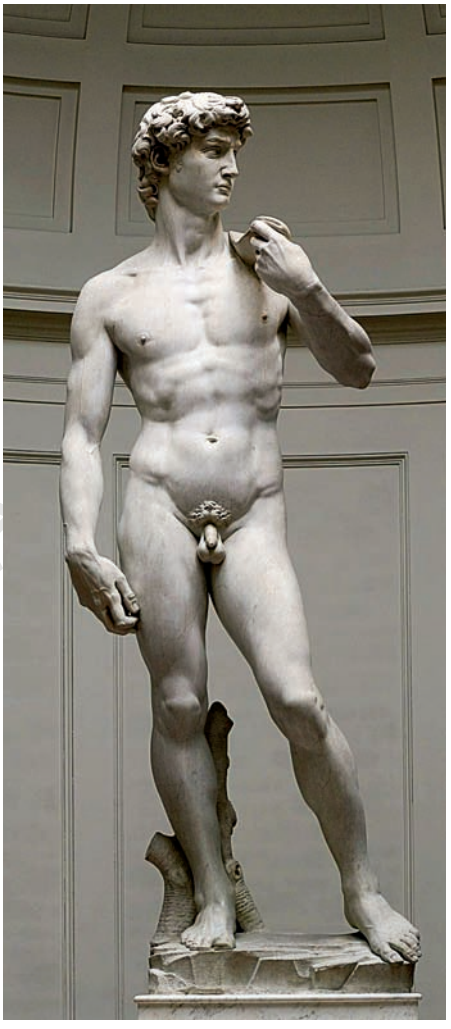
Ridovalensis, d. 1340) as saying that anger can be borne of charity: 'ira quae nascitur ex caritate'. The issue of David's humility, in fact, is already explicit in the account of the event given in the Old Testament, where David speaks, again in his own name, of his heroic victory in God's name:

> [46] This day will the Lord deliver thee unto mine hand; and I will smite thee, and take thine head from thee; and I will give the carcasses of the host of the Philistines this day unto the fowls of the air, and to the wild beasts of the earth; that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel. [47] And all this assembly shall know that the Lord saveth not with sword and spear: for the battle is the Lord's, and he will give you into our hands.
>
> (Samuel I, 17, KJV)

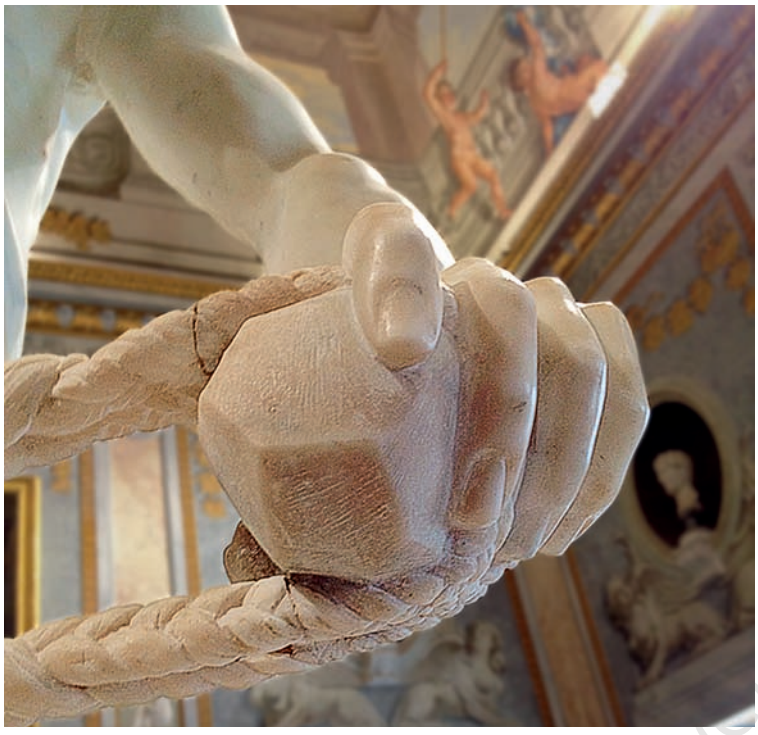
It seems possible, indeed probable, that Bernini's understanding of David's inner feelings about his victory was inspired by yet another, visual source that was close at hand. Caravaggio's awesome picture of *David with the Head of Goliath* [Fig. 10], painted for Cardinal Borghese, was in the Gallery where Bernini surely saw it. In it, David's pathetic, melancholy expression seems revolted by the horrific trophy he displays [Fig. 17]. Caravaggio's Goliath was identified early as a self-portrait, and a barely discernible inscription on the blade of his sword [Fig. 11] has been related to a powerful passage in Saint Augustine's commentary on Psalm 33, 4, in which David as the figure of Christ evokes the maxim 'humilitas occidit superbiam' (humility kills pride).[14] The fact that in Psalm 38 (39) David speaks for himself, in the first person, lends deeper meaning, and perhaps explains the fact, reported in their biographies of the artist by his son Domenico and Filippo Baldinucci, that Bernini portrayed himself as the giant killer, with the then Cardinal Maffeo Barberini (who in thirty days, on 6 August 1623, would be Urban VIII) holding the mirror. Following Donatello's triumphant nude *David* [Fig. 12] with the trophy of his victory and a garland wreath at his grieved feet, and Michelangelo's completely nude giant [Fig. 13], Bernini's *David* is also completely nude except for a swath of drapery blown around by the violence of his pent up but aggressive movement. Bernini's figure is unprecedented in that the emblems of David's dual nature, his rejected military cuirass and the psalmist's redeeming devotional harp, are displayed at his feet. Usually understood, implicitly or explicitly, as an egregious display of arrogant pride and egotism, it was Bernini's way of expressing, silently, that his gift – that is, intelligence and capacity to conceive and execute a way to destroy the fearsome enemy, unarmed, without combat, and from a distance – was divinely inspired.



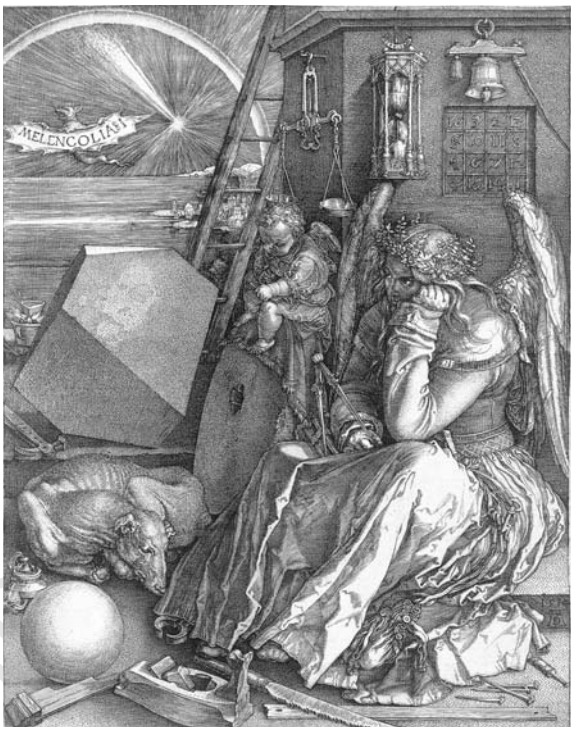
12. Donatello, «David», bronze, 1440, Florence, Galleria Bargello. Photo: author's archive



13. Michelangelo, «David», marble, 1504, Florence, Galleria dell'Academia. Photo: author's archive

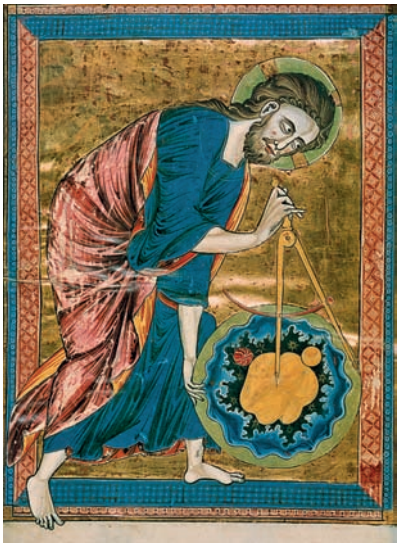


14. Gianlorenzo Bernini, «David» (detail of Fig. 1): David's stone. Photo: author



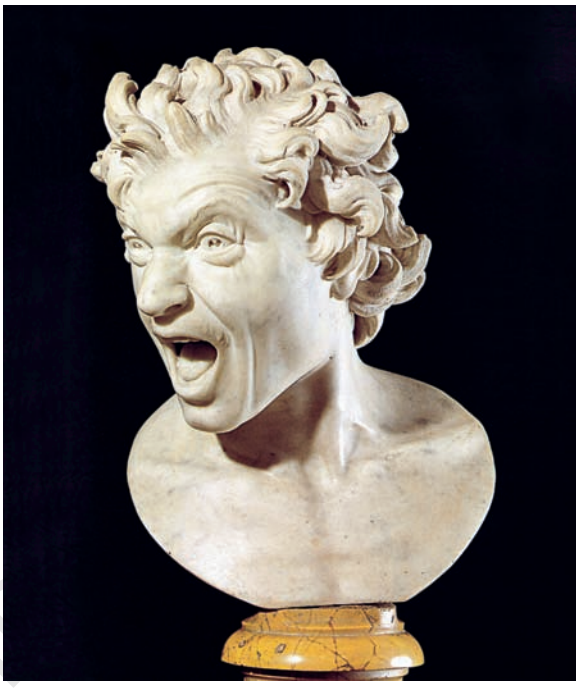
15. Albrecht Dürer, «Melencolia I», engraving, 1514. Photo: Public Domain

Bernini in fact provided a clue to this divine weapon in the very object that will carry out God's will: the stone loaded in David's sling [Fig. 14]. This is no ordinary stone, but a missile with the faceted shape of a polyhedron. One of the Platonic solids, the polyhedron is perhaps the most important configuration in the Archimedean panoply of geometric relationships because it incorporates the Golden Rule.[15] Bernini evidently drew on Albrecht Dürer's famous engraving *Melencolia I*, where the concentration of the winged personification on the polyhedric stone (and the demon of her state), dominates the field [Fig. 15]. While the scene is strewn with the tools and instruments of mechanical arts, the winged woman deep in thought is portrayed in an attitude of arrested contemplation. She holds a caliper, a common symbol of Geometry, which in turn reflects the inscription over the entrance to the world of pure ideas in Plato's Athenian Academy: 'Let no one enter here who is not a geometer'. And in turn the caliper she holds, but does not use, evokes the medieval tradition of God as *Deus artifex* who designs and creates the universe with this instrument of all-encompassing measure [Fig. 16].[16] This is the deeply personal inner sense in which the *David* is a self-portrait. The same confession of self-abrogation underlies the one other Bernini self-portrait in stone, the *Anima dannata*,



16. «Deus Artifex», *Bible Moralisée*, 1220–1230, manuscript illumination, Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Cod. 2554. Photo: Library

17. Caravaggio, «David with the Head of Goliath» (detail of Fig. 10)



18. Gianlorenzo Bernini, «Anima dannata», 1619, marble, Rome, Palazzo di Spagna. Photo: author's archive

who screams in absolute, ultimate terror. It can scarcely be coincidental that Bernini's *Damned Soul*, to a great extent, mimics Caravaggio's Goliath [Figs 17 and 18]. The metaphor entails a certain irony, which Bernini repeated some years later when he said, in self-denigration, that the success of the proportions of the *Baldacchino* in relation to the vast interior of Saint Peter's basilica was achieved 'by chance' because no rule could determine them, only the ingenuity and mind of the artist, which is to say, quoting the quasi imponderable phrase coined by Michelangelo, no less, *giudizio dell'occhio* [Fig. 19]. In a way, *giudizio dell'occhio* is the sum total of what I have to say about Bernini's *David,* but I think the crux of what Bernini had to say about David was indeed the wondrous stone that dispatched the giant with a single blow from his sling. The polyhedron acquired a virtually mystical significance from its embodiment of the Platonic *Divina Proportione.*

19. Bernini, «Baldacchino», 1634, bronze, Rome, Saint Peter's. Photo: author's archive

Versions of this material were first presented at the International Conference, 'Il Silenzio delle Immagini: Teorie e processi dell'Invenzione Artistica', Rome, 2015, proceedings to be published by the Musei Vaticani, and at the annual meeting of the Renaissance Society of America, New Orleans, 2017.

1 The most thorough-going protagonist of this kind of literary iconography in the work of Bernini is Rudolf Preimesberger; concerning the David, see R. Preimesberger, 'Themes from Art Theory in the Early Works of Bernini', in *Gianlorenzo Bernini. New Aspects of his Art and Thought. A Commemorative Volume*, ed. by I. Lavin, University Park, PA, and London, 1985, pp. 1–22; R. Preimesberger, 'Ein grimassierender Selbstdarstellung Berninis', in *World Art. Themes of Unity in Diversity, Acts of the XXVIth Congress of the History of Art*, ed. by I. Lavin, vol. II, University Park, PA, 1989, pp. 416–421; R. Preimesberger, 'Zu Berninis Borghese-Skulpturen', in *Antikenrezeption im Hochbarock*, ed. by H. Beck, S. Schulze, Berlin, 1989, pp. 109–127; R. Preimesberger, 'David', in *Bernini Scultore, La nascita del Barocco in Casa Borghese*, ed. by A. Coliva, S. Schütze, exh. cat., Rome, 1998, pp. 204–219.

2 On the theme of silence in art the most helpful study remains that of K. Langedijk, 'Silentium', *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek*, XV, 1964, pp. 3–18.

3 Particularly helpful studies of the psalter traditions are: *The Illuminated Psalter: Studies in the Content, Purpose and Placement of its Images*, ed. by F. O. Büttner, Turnhout, 2004, A. Goldschmidt, *Der Albanipsalter in Hildesheim und seine Beziehung zur symbolischen Kirchensculptur des XII. Jahrhunderts*, Berlin, 1895, and G. Haseloff, *Die Psalterillustration im 13. Jahrhunderts: Studien zur Geschichte der Buchmalerei in England, Frankreich und den Niederlanden*, [s.l.] 1938.

4 The most recent review of the circumstances is by X. Salomon, 'The Lost Monument to Cardinal Robert Bellarmine', in *The Holy Name: Art of the Gesù: Bernini and His Age*, Philadelphia, 2018, pp. 125–144. On p. 131, Salomon refers to my work saying I wrongly 'argued that Bernini was present at the burial of Bellarmine in 1622 and may have seen the body of the cardinal' (referring, incorrectly, to my footnote concerning a document of 1841!). I must emphasize that Salomon's report is a gross and deliberate misrepresentation of my discussion of the Bellarmine bust. I do not say, nor do I imply, that Bernini had been present at the funeral of 1622. However, it is an indisputable fact that Bernini's bust reflects the description of the state of preservation of the head, torso, arms and hands of the cardinal's cadaver as described in the 1622 exhumation documents and confirmed in the 1841 report. See I. Lavin, 'Five New Youthful Sculptures by Gianlorenzo Bernini and a Revised Chronology of His Early Works', *Art Bulletin*, L, 1968, pp. 223–248, esp. nos 134 and 135.

5 See I. Lavin, 'Bernini's Death', *Art Bulletin*, LIV, 1972, pp. 158–186 (revised and reprinted in I. Lavin, *Visible Spirit*, vol. I, London, 2007, pp. 287–353).

6 First edition: Roberto Bellarmino, *Explanatio in psalmos*, Rome: Bartholomeum Zannettum, MDCXI; modern edn: *Explanatio in psalmos*, ed. by J. Fèvre, Frankfurt a. M., 1965. English translation by J. O'Sullivan, *A Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, London, 1866 (re-published, London, 2015).

7 On these miniatures, see *The Illuminated Psalter*, and D. Thoss, *Französische Gotik und Renaissance in Meisterwerken der Buchmalerei: Ausstellung der Handschriften- u. Inkunabelsammlung der Österreichischen Nationalbibliothek. Otto Pächt Gewidmet*, Vienna, 1978, pp. 72–74, esp. 74.

8 F. Heinzer, *Wörtliche Bilder: zur Funktion der Literal-Illustration im Stuttgarter Psalter* (*um 830*) (*Wolfgang Stammler Gastprofessur für Germanische Philologie Vorträge*; Heft 13), Berlin and New York, 2005, p. xx.

9 Illumination of D (*Dixit*), first line of Psalm 38, Oxford, Bodleian Library, Ms Don. d. 85, fol. 29^{r}.

10 *Mantegna e le arti a Verona, 1450–1500*, ed. by S. Marinelli and P. Marini, exh. cat., Venice, 2006, cat. no. 56, pp. 287ff.

11 The pagan bit his lip, consumed with fury –
he was not used to suffer such talk before –
and wanted to say – but the sound came out confused
and garbled in an animal growl or roar –.
Jerusalem Delivered: Gerusalemme liberata, ed. and trans. by A. M. Esolen, Baltimore, 2000, p. 35.

12 H. Kauffmann, 'David', in *Giovanni Lorenzo Bernini. Die figürlichen Kompositionen*, Berlin, 1970, pp. 51–58, esp. p. 57.

13 These sources are cited in Filippo Picinelli, the great expositor of the underlying meaning of things, *Mundus symbolicus*, Cologne, 1687, vol. I, pp. 200–203, along with many other epithets pertaining to David.

14 This was the brilliant psychological intuition of Hibbard, who first cited Augustine's gloss in relation to Caravaggio's picture: H. Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, New York, 1983, p. 267. The passage was also deemed relevant to the inscription by M. Marini, *Caravaggio. Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio* '*pictor praestantissimus*', Rome, 1987, pp. 586–577, and by D. M. Stone, 'Self and Myth in Caravaggio's *David and Goliath*', in *Caravaggio. Realism, Rebellion, Reception*, ed. by G. Warwick, Newark DE, 2006, p. 41. A strong case for Augustinian theology underlying the darkness in Caravaggio's *Conversion of St Paul* has been made by T. Racco, 'Darkness in a Positive Light: Negative Theology in Caravaggio's *Conversion of Saint Paul*', *Artibus et Historiae*, no. 73, 2016, pp. 286–298.

15 I was first alerted to David's extraordinary stone by a lecture presented by my good friend Marcello Fagiolo, delivered first at a symposium organized by Lydia Saraca Colonnelli, 20 May 2014, celebrating my discovery of the juvenile sculptures by Bernini, now displayed in the Museo di Arte Sacra di San Giovanni dei Fiorentini in Rome. He later developed the material in two excellent articles, one published: 'La furia e il tormento: il David pittorico di Bernini', *Studiolo*, 14, 2017, pp. 96–119, and the other, 'Il Tempo del Desiderio e della Metamorfosi nel giovane Bernini', about to be published in *La Strenna dei romanisti.* In both Professor Fagiolo speaks of the polyhedron, overlapping in many ways my own arguments here. I want to thank the esteemed Dott.sa Colonelli, and express my appreciation and admiration for Prof. Fagiolo's contributions to my work.

16 See the discussion of these themes in the *Melencolia* engraving in J. L. Koerner, *The Moment of Self-Portraiture in German Renaissance Art*, Chicago and London, 1996, pp. 25 ff., and p. 462 n. 30. Bernini may very well have known Dürer's *Melencolia*: the appreciation, collections, and influence of his engravings was so vast in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in Italy, three voluminous scholarly tomes have been devoted to the subject. See *Dürer e l'Italia*, ed. by K. Herrmann Fiore, Milan, 2007; *Dürer, l'Italia e l'Europa*, ed. by S. Ebert-Schifferer, *et al*., Milan, 2011; G. M. Fara, *Albrecht Dürer: originali, copie, derivazioni*, Florence, 2007. Polyhedra were discussed by Dürer himself in his textbook *Unterweysung der Messung*, Nuremberg, 1525, and by Luca Pacioli in

his *Compendio divina proportione*, Milan, 1509. On the mathematics of the polyhedra see J. V. Field, 'Rediscovering the Archimedean Polyhedra: Piero della Francesca, Luca Pacioli, Leonardo da Vinci, Albrecht Dürer, Daniele Barbaro, and Johannes Kepler', *Archive for History of Exact Sciences*, L, no. 3/4, 1997, pp. 241–289. It is surely significant that in the post mortem legacy of Bernini's younger brother Luigi, who died in 1681, the year after Gianlorenzo, the considerable library included a copy of a 1594 Italian translation of Dürer's treatise on the symmetry of human bodies, S. McPhee, 'Bernini's Books', *Burlington Magazine*, CXVII, no. 1168, 2000, p. 444, No. 20.