

E. H. Gombrich, Review of Simon Schama, Rembrandt's Eyes, The New York Review of Books XLVII, Jan 20, Vol. 1, 2000, pp.6-10 [Trapp no.2000F.1]

Portrait of the Artist as Paradox

Rembrandt's Eyes

By Simon Schama.

Under the title Rembrandt by Himself, the National Gallery of London (sponsored by Thames and Hudson) last summer mounted an exhibition - later moved to the Hague - of painted and etched self-portraits by the Dutch master extending from his early years in Leiden to the last years of his life. There can have been few visitors who were not tempted to seek in this series the reflection of the poignant story of the miller's son rising to fame and fortune in Amsterdam only to end his life as a ruined and undefeated grand old man who recorded the traces aging with merciless objectivity. If the informative essays assembled in the catalog have aroused their desire to know more of the setting in which his tragedy unfolded, they must have welcomed the news that Simon Schama, the author of a widely read account of the Golden Age of Holland, *The Embarrassment of Riches*, had turned his attention to Rembrandt in a book which he called *Rembrandt's Eyes*.

Yet once the reader had that heavy tome in his hands he may well have felt in need not only of physical but of mental strength to master the 750 pages of text and notes, without yielding to the temptation of skipping whole sections in which Rembrandt never occurs. It turns out that, despite its title, the book offers not one but two biographies of seventeenth-century artists. Not unlike the ancient author Plutarch, who wrote the *Parallel Lives* of Greeks and Romans, Schama gives us between two covers the life of a Dutch painter - Rembrandt (1606-1669) - and that of a Fleming - Rubens (1577-1640). Yet it is only on page 26 of the book under review that we are told the reason for this coupling. We read that:

For the crucial decade of his formations, the years which saw him change from being a merely good to an indisputably great painter, Rembrandt was utterly in thrall to Rubens.

He was, in Schama's words: "haunted by the older master. He had become Ruben's doppelgänger."

I can only hope that I am not guilty of having started this here. It is true that in reviewing a number of books on Rembrandt in these pages in 1970¹ I drew attention to the range of Rembrandt's aspirations. While the majority of Dutch masters - such as Frans Hals, Ruysdael, or Vermeer - specialized in one particular genre of art, Rembrandt mastered all the genres and media of the image-making craft. I suggested that the success he enjoyed on moving to Amsterdam might well

have given him hope that he could rival the status and life style of the great master across the border, an aspiration which went notoriously wrong and ended in bankruptcy. In commenting on the contrasting "ecological niches" occupied by the two artists, I certainly did not wish to imply that Rembrandt chose Rubens as his model. Nobody who has ever visited any of the major galleries would take a painting by Rembrandt for one of Rubens, since their pictorial idioms are so utterly different.

What convinced our author of Rembrandt's obsession is an etched self-portrait on which Rembrandt evidently spent much thought and labor - for we know no fewer than eleven states through which it went. Both the attire and the pose echo a self-portrait by Rubens which must have been known in Holland from reproductions. But whatever importance we may attach to this dependence it seems to me a manifest exaggeration to speak of Rembrandt as "pseudo-Rubensian."

In his standard work *Rembrandt as an Etcher*² (recently reissued by Yale University Press), Christopher White discusses and illustrates the many states of this etching. The artist clearly aimed at presenting himself in the most dignified way, and it is not impossible (though not mentioned by White) that the portrait of Rubens guided him in this effort. Indeed, in the same book the author juxtaposes a print after Rubens's *Descent from the Cross* and Rembrandt's etching of the same subject (see illustration on page 10), but he also documents a number of other works, Italian and Northern, which evidently inspired Rembrandt.

Schama quotes the famous account which Constantijn Huygens gave in his Latin autobiography, written between the years 1629 and 1631, in which he praised the achievements of Lievens and Rembrandt but regretted their refusal to go to Italy and study the works of Raphael and Michelangelo. Strangely enough the author omits to mention that the artists had argued that such an arduous journey was unnecessary, for artists could now see the finest Italian works in Holland.³

Thus, though prints after Rubens are certainly among Rembrandt's sources, can this justify the author's devoting some third of his book to an account of Rubens's career, an account which includes thirty pages on the adultery of Rubens's father and its consequences? As one might expect, Schama tells this story superbly well, but what has it all to do with Rembrandt's eyes? To put it bluntly, this is one question the reader is not supposed to ask.

The author obviously enjoys surprising the reader, he certainly succeeds with his opening:

After thirty salvos the cannon were obliged to cool off. So perhaps it was then that Constantijn Huygens thought he heard nightingales fluting over the artillery....

This questionable ornithological observation⁴ introduces three pages of vivid description of the siege, in 1629, of s'Hertogenbosch, a small cathedral town held by the forces of Catholic Spain,

whom the Dutch Protestants tried to dislodge. Rembrandt himself - then in his early twenties - was never involved in these cruel wars, but the military episode serves Schama to introduce the artist through a self-portrait of that year which reveals a metallic glint beneath the collar, a piece of armor called a gorget which, in Schama's words, "gave him the bearing of a soldier without the obligations."

It is in the line with his forging of unexpected links that the work under review has less affinity to an art-historical monograph than to historical fiction. Whether or not this discovery will disappoint us depends, of course, on our expectations. It is well to remember that no less an authority than Aristotle declares in his *Poetics* that fiction is superior to factual narration:

[History]... relates actual events, the other the kinds of things that might occur. Consequently, poetry is more philosophical and more elevated than history, since poetry relates more of the universal, while history relates particulars.⁵

An early episode from the life of Rubens, described by Schama, offers a good illustration of Schama's methods. In 1603, when the young painter was in the service of the Duke of Mantua, he was sent to Spain by his master to accompany a consignment of gifts including a number of paintings. His letter of May 24, 1603, from Valladolid, where the crates containing the paintings were opened, tells us what happened:

.... The pictures which were packed with all possible care by my own hand, in the presence of my Lord the Duke; then inspected at Alicante, at the demands of the customs officials, and found unharmed, were discovered today, in the house of Signor Hannibal Iberty, to be so damaged and spoiled that I almost despair of being able to restore them. For the injury is not an accidental surface mold or stain, which can be removed; but the canvas itself is entirely rotted and destroyed (even though it was protected by a tin casing and a double oil-cloth and packed in a wooded chest.) The deterioration is probably due to the continuous rains which have lasted for twenty-five days - an incredible thing in Spain. The colors have faded and, through long exposure to extreme dampness, have swollen and flaked off, so that in many places the only remedy is to scrape them off with a knife and lay them on anew.⁶

Schama does not quote this text, but writes instead:

It is possible to picture the scene. A bright spring morning, at long last, the sunlight shining through young chestnut leaves. Peter Paul with his best broad-brimmed hat protecting his head (which was already showing a little pate through his receding hair) from the sun of León; a stick pointing at the crates to be opened; walking around the horses as they shook their manes and turned this way and that, within the fenced enclosure; the coach a little way off, brightened and buffed, daintily elegant, fit for a Habsburg; a pleasant glow of vindication rising within him, an expectation of congratulations wrenched from the unwilling lips of Annibale Iberty. And then the paintings taken

into an inner chamber, the boxes stood on their ends.

When exactly did he become aware of a dry mouth, the sudden loss of breathing room within his doublet? When precisely could he see the full extent of the disaster? When the wooden boxes were opened and the nails flew into the dirt, when a wave of blighted air, redolent of rain-sodden straw and mildew, rose to his face? Did he tremble, imperceptibly except to himself, as he lifted the rotten cavases from their tin casing? Did he roundly curse "malicious fate" like a tragedian, and did he do so in Flemish or Italian (reserving expressions of Latin lament for his letter to the Duke)? The paintings looked like plague victims, their surfaces swollen, blistered and greasy. Elsewhere, the effect was more like leprosy; gobets of paint hanging in losses flakes or collecting in crumbled slivers at the bottom of the box. When Rubens lightly fingered the surface, it peeled away as easily as a reptile sloughing its skin.

This is the technique of the historical novel as it has been practised for centuries. Take what is possibly the first example of the genre fictionalising the life of an artist, *The Life and Times of Salvador Rosa* by Lady Morgan, published in Paris in 1824:

In entering the greatest city of the world at the Ave Maria, the hour of Italian recreation, - in passing from the silent desolate suburbs of San Giovanni to the Corso (then a place of crowded and populous resort), where the princes of the Conclave presented themselves in all the pomp and splendour of Oriental satraps, - the feelings of the young and solitary stranger must have suffered a revulsion, in the consciousness of his own misery. Never, perhaps, in the deserts of the Abruzzi, in the solitudes of Otranto, or in the ruins of Paestum, did Salvador experience sensations of such utter loneliness as in the midst of this gaudy and multitudinous assemblage; for in the history of melancholy sensations there are few comparable to that sense of isolation, to that desolateness of soul, which accompanies the first entrance of the friendless on a world where all, save them have ties, pursuits, and homes.

Like Schama, the author here accepts the framework of facts - Rosa did go to Rome, and entering the city he would have to pass through the suburbs - but the facts did not suffice her; she had to indulge in this imaginary musing. One can find any number of examples in which the lives of artists are fictionalised - Gobineau's *The Renaissance* (1877); Merezhkovsky's *Leonardo da Vinci* (1901); Van Loon's *The Life and Times of Rembrandt* (1957); and Irving Stone's *The Agony and the Ecstasy* (1961) - and though Aby Warburg banished this genre to what he called the "poison chest" of his library, a large number of readers may well have found that these books opened their eyes to the oeuvre of the artists concerned.

In a recent article entitled "The Reanimators", in *Harper's* magazine, Joanthon Dee complained of the growing tendency in American literature to blur or effect the borderline between fiction and fact, instancing Norman Mailer's *The Executioner's Song*. Schama knows exactly what he is doing and anticipates these strictures when he prefaces departures from the documented facts with such

words as: "We would not be far from the truth in imaging..." Indeed, he may owe his success with the reading public to his conviction that the imaginative power of ordinary human empathy is still the master key to the past. Thus he takes issue with historians who tell us that bereavement may have been less intensely felt in periods in which mortality so much exceeded what is normal today:

Historians, after all, have a vested interest in insisting that the past is a foreign country, since they like to claim a monopoly in translating its alien tongues. But sometimes they aren't needed. Sometimes the culturally conditioned response cracks apart and an emotion immediately recognizable to modern sensibilities makes itself felt.

No doubt he is right, and he is again right when he reminds us that Rembrandt's first biographer - who tells us that the artist quit the university because his only natural inclination was for painting - undoubtedly uses a stereotype, but one which may be true after all, and when he remarks elsewhere that "sometimes the Romantics are right." He surely also has a point when he insists that reaction against "genius-talk" had gone too far, and that an "overskeptical correction... has robbed Rembrandt... of so much of his extraordinary inventiveness."

But here as always it is ultimately a question of the right dosage. How much can be achieved by a careful reading of document together with a minimum of imaginary reconstruction was shown ten years ago by John Michael Montias in his ground-breaking book *Vermeer and his Milieu* - subtitled *A Web of Social History* - which has thrown floods of light on the self-effacing Dutch master. Rembrandt was not self-effacing. The archival records of his achievements, transactions, machinations, quarrels, and debts have been known to art historians for at least a century.⁷ Schama has skilfully woven most of these references into his narrative. He does not spare us the darkest episode in Rembrandt's life: the wet nurse he had hired for his son Titus accused her employer of breach of promise, and when she became a nuisance he had her put in to a house of correction.

Where Schama scores as a social historian is in the detailed description of the economic and sectarian tensions in Leiden and Amsterdam, the evocation of the neighborhood in which the artist lived, and most of all in the information he provides about many of Rembrandt's sitters, making these merchants and preachers, doctors and the members of the militia portrayed in *The Night Watch* come to life in his pages. But occasionally he forgets that "*le secret d'ennuyer est..de tout dire*"⁸. We are grateful to learn much about Dr. Tulp - who conducted the famous Anatomy Lesson - but must we also be told that his mother was displeased by his first marriage, while she could not complain of his second? What tempts Schama to cross the border between fact and fiction is evidently his conviction that Ranke's injunction to the historian to tell "how it actually happened" ("*wie es eigentlich gewesen ist*") must be extended to include the sense impression accompanying the events of the past. One of his set pieces is a portrait of Amsterdam at the time of Rembrandt's arrival, in terms of the five senses (oddly listed in Dutch: *Die Reuk, Het Gehoor, De*

Smaak, Het Gevoel, and Het Gezicht). No mere quotation can convey this tour de force, the list of pleasant and unpleasant sensations which must have assailed the visitor to the city.

There can be no doubt of Schama's verbal virtuosity. He can be genuinely funny - as when Rembrandt's painting *Balaam and the Ass* prompts him to bring out the absurdity of the biblical episode - and he can rise to solemnity to match the awe and devotion of some of Rembrandt's compositions. But he is sometimes less than fastidious in his choice of words, as when he speaks of a painting as "a jaw-dropping, napkin-spilling epiphany". Moreover, no one familiar with Greek grammar could tell us that a man portrayed in *The Night Watch* was "not exactly hoi polloi" (an expression meaning "the many").

The book is prefaced by a motto by Paul Valéry: "We should apologize for daring to speak about painting," for Schama must have felt that in the *paragone* between art and literature, art generally wins. Even so, the challenge drives him close to excess. In the description of Ruben's painting *Hero and Leander* we read:

The wreath of bodies bobs and tumbles through an inky tunnel of storm-thick air and surging water. Rills of foam and spray snake through the space like voracious eels, while the pitchy gloom is shot with bolts of shrieking, acid-bright light. The painting sucks, pulls, gulps and swallows like the animal ocean itself.

One remembers Leonardo's remark in the *Paragone* that:

Your pen will be worn out before you can fully describe what the painter can demonstrate forthwith by the aid of his science, and your tongue will be parched with thirst and your body overcome by sleep and hunger before you can describe with words what a painter is able to show you in an instant.⁹

But the real problem lies elsewhere: descriptions can be adhesive. Once we have read and remembered them, we cannot help finding the picture subtly changed. Of Rembrandt's *Saint Peter in Prison* Schama writes:

An entire book of remorse is written in the nine rows of wrinkles and frown lines creasing the saint's brow.

I hesitated before giving chapter and verse, for the reader will find it hard to look at the painting of this saint without remembering that Schama counted the wrinkles. Moreover, as a man of vivid imagination, Schama cannot help projecting what he knows of a sitter (in this instance the fur dealer Nicolaes Ruts) into the painting:

Rembrandt has used different techniques of brushwork to suggest the different, but

complementary, qualities of the man: his energy embodied in the free and brilliantly lit treatment of the ruff, the fashionable fraise de confusion, and in the extremely free and thick painting of the right cuff, gray and white strokes laid rapidly over a gray underlayer. His fastidiousness is registered in the precisely rendered whiskers, mustache protruding over the upper lip, individual hairs quite deeply gouged into the panel with the back end of the brush. Thoughtfulness is suggested by the deep shadow cast by the side of his head and the catchlights dancing in the pupils between slightly pinked inner eyelids as though Ruts had sacrificed his sleep for the good of the investors.

Occasionally one suspects that, for all his mastery of language, the author distrusts the true function of words, that is, to convey meaning. This might explain the frequency with which he resorts to the stylistic figure known as oxymoron, or self-contradiction. Abraham's hand on his son's head is "at once a gesture of tenderness and suffocating brutality"; the cloth merchant's wife, Agatha Bas, "is both plain and fancy"; the painting of *The Night Watch* is "both radical and axial, centrifugal and centripetal, ...a work that contrived to be, at the same time, deeply parochial and wholly universal, flooded with the light of tradition and ventilated with the air of modernity"; "the great masterpieces of the 1660s managed at one and the same time to be physically weighty but spiritually weightless, sold and earthbound"; in that wonderful group of *Claudius Civilis*, "Rembrandt wanted to create an atmosphere both of riotous revelry and of solemn stillness", in his two paintings of Lucretia's suicide she is "made utterly naked by being ostensibly covered."

It turns out that Schama sees a similar paradox at the very heart of Rembrandt's art. From early on the painter had been fond of the story of Tobit from the Apocrypha, in which sight is miraculously restored to an old blind man. Here, we read, the artist "had found his lifelong subject: the light that lives in darkness." Later, in 1639, speaking of the almost unbearably cruel painting of *The Blinding of Samson*, apparently a present from Rembrandt to his patron Constantijn Huygens, Schama tells us:

A tragic hero pays the price for hubris, vanity, and the sins of the body... Now that his eyes were out, he could, at last, see things right.

In support of this interpretation Schama summarizes a poem by Huygens offering consolation to a young lady who had lost the vision of one eye, telling her that the affliction would profit her spiritual life. It is an illuminating passage, but it is well to remember that it was part of the skill of rhetoric to argue that a loss was a gain. Thus can it really carry the weight of the author's conclusion that "Rembrandt's entire career was a dialogue between outward and inward vision," and that Rembrandt's last manner of painting (exemplified by *The Jewish Bride*; see illustration on page 6) "owed almost as much to touch as to sight"? Of this painting he writes:

The pain seems first thickly laid on and then thinned out, by scouring, scraping, or combining, giving the upper layer a fibrous, stringily matted feel. In other areas, the paint is muddily coagulate, puddle, dripped, and caked; in other spots, more granular and abraded; in other places again it

seems clayey and bricklike, as though kiln-roasted, the colors parched or flame-licked, fired tiles of pigment laid down like tesserae. In still other passages the paint surface is worked into a scarred and cratered ground...pitted and pimply with gritty excrescences...

We know that from his bibliographical footnotes that the author rightly appreciates the recent book by Ernst van de Wetering, *Rembrandt: The Painter at Work*,¹⁰ but how one would wish that he had also profited from that author's reverent and circumspect approach to the enigma of Rembrandt's ultimate painting style.

Emerging from the spell Schama tries to cast and turning to the vast body of literature on Rembrandt, one realizes how selective Schama has been in the works of the master of which he takes note. This applies most of all - though by no means only - to his etchings, on which, after all, Rembrandt's international fame rested. There is no mention in Schama's book of such monumental works, essential to an understanding of Rembrandt's religious feelings, as *The Angels Appearing to the Shepherds* (1634), *Christ Before Pilate* (1636), or of the most famous of his etchings, *Christ Healing the Sick* ("The Hundred Guilder Print," circa 1639-1649) all miles away from Rubens - or of that most moving of all palimpsests, *The Three Crosses* (circa 1660). Can it be that, being committed to a formula about Rembrandt's eyes, Schama chose to ignore what did not fit his vision?

Not long before Rembrandt was born, Montaigne wrote:

Even sound authors are wrong in stubbornly trying to weave us into one invariable and solid fabric... Anyone who turns his prime attention on to himself will hardly ever find himself in the same state twice. I give my soul this face or that, depending upon which side I lay it down on. I speak about myself in diverse ways: that is because I look at myself in diverse ways. Every sort of contradiction can be found in me, depending upon some twist or attribute: timid, insolent, chaste, lecherous; talkative, taciturn; tough, sickly; clever, dull, brooding, affable; lying, truthful; learned, ignorant; generous, miserly and then prodigal - I can see something of all that in myself, depending on how I gyrate; and anyone who studies himself attentively finds in himself and in his very judgement this whirring about and this discordancy. There is nothing I can say about myself as a whole simply and completely, without intermingling and admixture.¹¹

Do not these words of wisdom tell us all we shall ever be able to say about that series of Rembrandt's self-portraits with which I began?

1 Reprinted in *Reflections on the History of Art*, edited by Richard Woodfield (Phaidon/Oxford University Press, 1987), p.143

2 *Rembrandt as an Etcher: A Study of the Artist at Work* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 1969)

3 Seymour Slive, *Rembrandt and his Critics, 1630-1730* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1953), p.17

4 In wartime England I often heard the nightingales in the Vale of Evesham being stimulated to sing by the din of German bombers overhead

5 Loeb second edition (Harvard University Press, 1995)

6 *The Letters of Peter Paul Rubens*, translated and edited by Ruth Saunders Magurn (Harvard University Press, 1955) pp.32-33

7 C. Hofstede de Groot, *Die Urkunden über Rembrandt (1575-1721)* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1906)

8 Voltaire, *Sept Discours en vers sur l'Homme*, VI "Sur la Nature de l'Homme," v.174-175

9 *Paragone: A Comparison of the Arts* by Leonardo da Vinci, edited and translated by Irma A. Richter (Oxford University Press, 1959)

10 Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1997

11 *The Essays of Michel de Montaigne*, translated and edited by M. A. Screech (Allen Lane/Penguin, 1991). II:1, "On the inconstancy of our actions," pp.373-377