

Rembrandt and the Body

At the age of sixty-three he died, looking, even by the standards of his time, very old. Drink, debts, the death through the Plague of those nearest to him are amongst the explanations of the ravages done. But the self-portraits hint at something more. He grew old in a climate of economic fanaticism and indifference – not dissimilar to the climate of the period we are living through. The human could no longer simply be copied (as in the Renaissance), the human was no longer self-evident: it had to be found in the darkness. Rembrandt himself was obstinate, dogmatic, cunning, capable of a kind of brutality. Do not let us turn him into a saint. Yet he was looking for a way out of the darkness.

He drew because he liked drawing. It was a daily reminder of what surrounded him. Painting – particularly in the second half of his life – was for him something very different: it was a search for an exit from the darkness. Perhaps the drawings – with their extraordinary lucidity – have prevented us seeing the way he really painted.

He seldom made preliminary drawings, he began painting straightaway on the canvas. There is little of either linear logic or spatial continuity in his paintings. If

the pictures convince, they do so because details, parts, emerge and come out to meet the eye. Nothing is laid out before us as it is in the work of his contemporaries like Ruysdael or Vermeer.

Whereas in his drawings he was a total master of space, of proportion, the physical world he presents in his paintings is seriously dislocated. In art studies about him this has not been emphasised enough. Perhaps because one needs to be a painter rather than a scholar to perceive it clearly.

There is an early painting of a man (it's himself) before an easel in a studio. The man is not much more than half the size he should be! In the marvellous late painting *Woman at an Open Door* (Berlin) Hendrickje's right arm and hand are the size of those of a Hercules! In *Abraham's Sacrifice* (St Petersburg) Isaac has the physique of a youth but in proportion to his father is no larger than an eight-year-old!

Baroque art loved foreshortenings and improbable juxtapositions, but, even if he profited by the liberties won by the Baroque, the dislocations in his paintings are in no way similar, for they are not *demonstrative*: they are almost furtive.

In the sublime *St Matthew and Angel* (The Louvre) the impossible space over the Evangelist's shoulder for the Angel's head is furtively insinuated, as if by the whisper the Angel is whispering into the writer's ear. Why in his paintings did he forget – or ignore – what he could do – with such mastery in his drawings? Something else –

something antithetical to 'real' space – must have interested him more.

Leave the museum. Go to the emergency department of a hospital. Probably in a basement because the X-ray units are best placed underground. There are the wounded and the sick being wheeled forward, or waiting for hours, side by side, on their trolleys, until the next expert can give them attention. Often it is the rich, rather than the most sick, who pass first. Either way, for the patients, there underground, it is too late to change anything.

Each one is living in her or his own corporeal space, in which the landmarks are a pain or a disability, an unfamiliar sensation or a numbness. The surgeons when operating cannot obey the laws of this space – it is not something learnt in Dr Tulip's Anatomy Lesson. Every good nurse, however, becomes familiar by touch with it – and on each mattress, with each patient, it takes a different form.

It is the space of each sentient body's awareness of itself. It is not boundless like subjective space: it is always finally bound by the laws of the body, but its landmarks, its emphasis, its inner proportions are continually changing. Pain sharpens our awareness of such space. It is the space of our first vulnerability and solitude. Also of disease. But it is also, potentially, the space of pleasure, well-being and the sensation of being loved. Robert Kramer, the filmmaker, defines it: 'Behind the eyes and throughout the

body. The universe of circuits and synapses. The worn paths where the energy habitually flows.' It can be felt by touch more clearly than it can be seen by sight. He was the painterly master of this corporeal space.

Consider the four hands of the couple in *The Jewish Bride*. It is their hands, far more than their faces, which say: Marriage. Yet how did he get there – to this corporeal space?

Bathsheba Reading David's Letter (The Louvre). She sits there life-size and naked. She is pondering her fate. The King has seen her and desires her. Her husband is away at the wars. (How many millions of times has it happened?) Her servant, kneeling, is drying her feet. She has no choice but to go to the King. She will become pregnant. King David will arrange for her fond husband to be killed. She will mourn for her husband. She will marry King David and bear him the son who will become King Solomon. A fatality has already begun, and at the centre of this fatality is Bathsheba's desirability as a wife.

And so he made her nubile stomach and navel the focus of the entire painting. He placed them at the level of the servant's eyes. And painted them with love and pity as if they were a face. There isn't another belly in European art painted with a fraction of this devotion. It has become the centre of its own story.

On canvas after canvas he gave to a part of a body or to parts of bodies a special power of narration. The paint-

ing then speaks with several voices – like a story being told by different people from different points of view. Yet these 'points of view' can only exist in a corporeal space which is incompatible with territorial or architectural space. Corporeal space is continually changing its measures and focal centres, according to circumstances. It measures by waves, not metres. Hence its necessary dislocations of 'real' space.

The Holy Family (Munich). The Virgin is seated in Joseph's workshop. Jesus is asleep on her lap. The relation between the Virgin's hand holding the baby, her bare breast, the baby's head and his outstretched arm is absurd in terms of any conventional pictorial space: nothing fits, stays in its proper place, is the correct size. Yet the breast with its drop of milk speaks to the baby's face. The baby's hand speaks to the amorphous landmass which is his mother. Her hand listens to the infant it is holding.

His best paintings deliver coherently very little to the spectator's point of view. Instead, the spectator intercepts (overhears) dialogues between parts gone adrift, and these dialogues are so faithful to a corporeal experience that they speak to something everybody carries within them. Before his art, the spectator's body remembers its own inner experience.

Commentators have often remarked on the 'innerness' of Rembrandt's images. Yet they are the opposite of ikons. They are carnal images. The flesh of the *Flayed Ox*

is not an exception but typical. If they reveal an 'innerness' it is that of the body, what lovers try to reach by caressing and by intercourse. In this context the last word takes on both a more literal and more poetic meaning. Coursing between.

About half of his great masterpieces (portraits apart) depict the act or the preliminary act – the opening of the outstretched arms – of an embrace. *The Prodigal Son*, *Jacob and the Angel*, *Danaë*, *David and Absalom*, *The Jewish Bride* . . .

Nothing comparable is to be found in the *oeuvre* of any other painter. In Rubens, for instance, there are many figures being handled, carried, pulled, but few, if any, embracing. In nobody else's work does the embrace occupy this supreme and central position. Sometimes the embrace he paints is sexual, sometimes not. In the fusion between two bodies not only desire can pass, but also pardon or faith. In his *Jacob and the Angel* (Berlin) we see all three and they become inseparable.

Public hospitals, dating from the Middle Ages, were called in France Hôpitaux-Dieu. Places where shelter and care were given in the name of God to the sick or dying. Beware of idealisation. The Hôtel-Dieu in Paris was so overcrowded during the Plague that each bed was 'occupied by three people, one sick, one dying and one dead'.

Yet the term Hôtel-Dieu, interpreted differently, can help to explain him. The key to his vision, which had to

dislocate classical space, was The New Testament. 'Who lives in love lives in God and God in him . . . We know that we live in him and he in us because he has given us of his Spirit.' (The First Epistle of John. Ch.4)

'He in us'. What the surgeons found in dissecting was one thing. What he was looking for was another. Hôtel-Dieu may also mean a body in which God resides. In the ineffable, terrible late self-portraits, he was waiting, as he gazed into his own face, for God, knowing full well that God is invisible.

When he painted freely those he loved or imagined or felt close to, he tried to enter their corporeal space as it existed at that precise moment, he tried to enter their Hôtel-Dieu. And so to find an exit from the darkness.

Before the small painting of *A Woman Bathing* (London) we are with her, inside the shift she is holding up. Not as voyeurs. Not lecherously like the Elders spying on Susannah. It is simply that we are led, by the tenderness of his love, to inhabit her body's space.

For Rembrandt, the embrace was perhaps synonymous with the act of painting, and both were just this side of prayer.