

ON A REMBRANDT SELF-PORTRAIT

I feel a thrill of electric expectancy like that of a lover when I go to visit the perspicacious old Dutchman; leaving the insistency of London outside the National Gallery door and making my way along the familiar corridors to find him waiting, penetrating and impassive in his gaze as ever. I feel goose pimples steal along my body and have the desire to get on my knees in front of this old man and ask his forgiveness.

Why?

What alchemy has been wrought on this roughly worked oil paint to transform a self-portrait of a slightly paunchy, blotchy-skinned and irascible old man into an object of such presence and one of the major achievements of our civilization?

Great art draws us out of the current of time and allows us momentary access to the universal; allows us insight into the very condition of being human—the fleeting and transient nature of our consciousness. A book I have just been reading puts it thus:

“It is certainly true that a criterion for true art as opposed to its cunning counterfeit is its ability to take us where the artist has been, to this other different place where we are free from the problems of gravity. When we are drawn into the art we are drawn out of ourselves. We are no longer bound by matter, matter has become what it is: empty space and light.”

Sexing the Cherry

-as human beings we are caught in a flux of constant change; our viewpoint, our experience is constantly altering and the essential nature of ourselves and the world remains ungraspable. Great art captures in its petrified form truths that are eternal and universal and allows us to escape beyond ourselves for a moment. Each time that I come back to Rembrandt I have changed; I have proceeded through time and space and have been caught in the momentary triumphs and failures with which we deny truth. I chase the tail of my dreams and through lack of courage lose it again. Here, in the National Gallery I find it again in the features of an old man.

The twentieth century has made a cult out of the artist's personality; it is more interested in what the artist had for breakfast than in his paintings. Yet

painting is self-sufficient; it is the expression. If the painter wanted to explain himself in words he would write. Besides, painters are rarely very interesting as personalities; they live through their painting and it takes an egotistical and selfish personality to maintain the required degree of single-mindedness to produce consistently enough to make progress. True art is a jealous mistress and will not brook rivals of affection or splits in loyalty. If you try to cheat on her, she walks out- few are those that have the courage to remain with her and pay the price she exacts. Even Rembrandt's most fervent admirers cannot pretend that he rated highly in terms of sympathetic personalities. His self-portraits often idealize himself, often showing him dressed up as some prominent personage, but behind the mask and the dressing up cupboard remains an unwavering self-scrutiny that is not deceived. There is a seeking behind and beyond time.

Here is the greatness; in the simplicity of a man looking at himself without deception, in facing the terms of life in its reality and in pouring a life-time's dexterity with paint and brush into an observation without pity, pretension or excuses: "Vanity, vanity, all is vanity". True heroism is not ostentatious, but facing the true reality of what being human is in all its limitations. To do so requires an honesty, a stripping bear of oneself in a way human kind finds hard to bear. It requires a giving up which is vertiginous.

And so I come out of my life to a timeless moment in which Rembrandt watches himself, I watch Rembrandt and he scrutinizes me and, like final judgment, there is nowhere to hide: Rembrandt is neither deceived nor impressed. He has cleared a space for contemplation and demands the same honesty that he displays. His truth is uncompromising: "The only wisdom we can hope to acquire is the wisdom of humility, humility is endless". None of the successes that the world can offer can help you; first nights in big galleries, favourable reviews and doctoral theses crumble in front of time. Eventually there is just oneself to be faced over and over again, in one's own terms.

The final self-portrait Rembrandt painted shows him peering, an ugly and bent thickness of paint out of the darkness into which he seems about to vanish. He is laughing as all great men eventually laugh and, while laughing at himself, I think he is also laughing at us-.