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On the Expression of Emotions in Rembrandt's Art

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Abstract Rembrandt has been characterized as "the master of the passions of the soul". His painting production has always elicited the viewers' strong emotional responses. These responses raise the question regarding why Rembrandt's work has been singled out as the quintessential example of the expression of emotions both during the 17th century, as well as in recent times. I will try to approach the issue through two different yet interconnected routes. First, I will explore the tools and terms through which the question of the expression of emotions in Rembrandt's oeuvre can be approached. Ancient rhetorical topoi, as well as ideas stemming from Dutch theater writers, drama and art theorists, scholars and art connoisseurs on the rendition of the emotions provide useful points of view. Secondly, I will approach the question by addressing certain stylistic and compositional solutions that Rembrandt suggested, which can be tied to current notions about lifelikeness and the beholder's empathy. Foremost among Rembrandt's aesthetic choices was his handling of light and of paint which accounts for a great deal of unfavorable criticism to his work during the 17th century. I would like to suggest that this handling of light and paint serves as Rembrandt's most important emotive vehicle and furthermore that it introduces us to the idea of wonder and the concept of the sublime in terms of which his depiction of emotions may be understood. Accordingly, I will try to establish an intellectual network in the 17th-century Netherlands for the sublime.

Keywords Rembrandt · Empathy · Sublime · Longinus · Lifelikeness · Stylistic and compositional solutions · Aesthetic choices

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In a letter dated in January 1639, addressed to Constantijn Huygens, secretary to the Dutch Stadtholder Frederik Hendrik, and connoisseur of the arts, Rembrandt wrote: "My Lord, because of the great zeal and devotion which I exercised in executing well the two pictures which His Highness commissioned me to make -the one being where Christ's dead body is being laid in the tomb and the other where Christ arises from the dead to the great consternation of the guards- these same two pictures (Figs. 1 and 2) have now been finished with studious application … for in these two pictures the greatest and most natural emotion (*die meeste ende die naetuereelste beweechgelickheyt*) has been expressed". (Gerson 1961, p. 38) In accordance to Rembrandt's own appreciation of his depiction of emotions, Huygens thought that Rembrandt aspired to surpass the artists of antiquity and the Italians through the portrayal of the passions to arouse the strongest possible empathy in the viewer. (Weststeijn 2013, p. 313; Slive 1988, p. 24)

In this respect, Huygens repeats a commonplace from ancient rhetoric which was taken up by Rembrandt's contemporaries. The commonplace is empathy and it involves both the orator and the audience. Quintilian claims that the orator has to be moved himself if he wants to move his audience. (Weststeijn 2008, p. 183) Horace expresses the same idea in the following terms: "It is not enough that poems should have beauty;

Fig. 1 Rembrandt. *The Entombment*. 1635–39. Alte Pinakothek, Munich

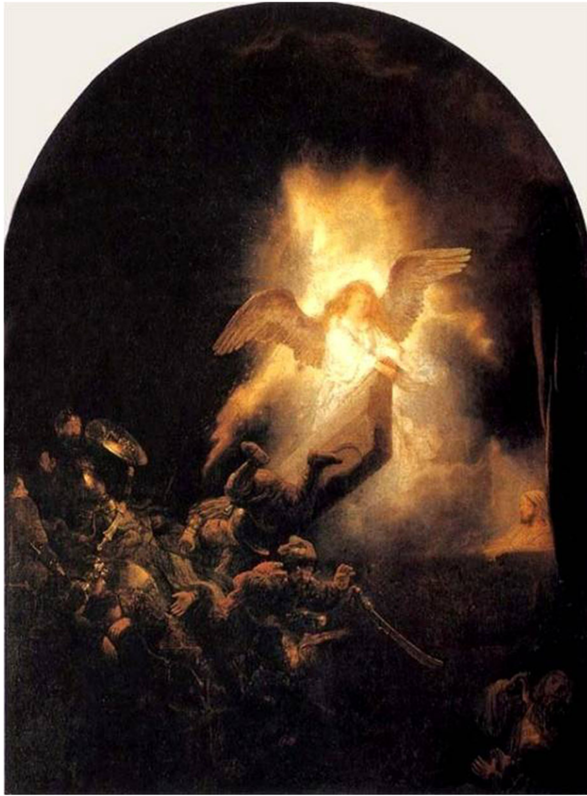

Fig. 2 Rembrandt. *The Resurrection*. ca. 1639. Alte Pinakothek, Munich

if they are to carry the audience with them, they should have charm as well. Just as smiling faces are turned on those who smile, so is sympathy shown with those who weep. If you want to move me to tears, you must first feel grief yourself; then Telephus and Peleus, your misfortunes will grieve me too, whereas, if your speeches are out of harmony with your feelings, I shall either fall asleep or burst out laughing. Sad words suit a mournful face, violent words the face of anger; sportive words become the playful face, and serious words the grave". (Horace 2000, p. 101) Here Horace both defines empathy as well as shows how emotions should be constructed and perceived. If the orator utters "violent words" anger will be expressed. By supporting a direct relationship between states of mind, emotions and their expression, he presupposes an unequivocal emotional reaction on the part of the audience. (Weststeijn 2008, pp. 175–191)

In 17th-century Dutch rhetorical handbooks the eliciting of compassion is strongly sought after, (Sluijter 2014, p. 69) while Samuel van Hoogstraten, painter and Rembrandt's former student, reiterates the above outlined idea in this way: "If one wants to gain honour in this noblest area of art, one must transform oneself wholly into an actor. It is not enough to show things indistinctly in a History; Demosthenes was no less learned than others when the people turned their backs on him … but after Satyrus had recited verses by Euripides … to him with better diction and more graceful movements, and he had learnt … to mimic the actor precisely, after that … people

listened to him as an oracle of rhetoric. You will derive the same benefit from acting out the passions you have in mind, chiefly in front of a mirror, so as to be actor and spectator at the same time.” (Weststeijn 2008, p. 183)

Franciscus Junius, another of Rembrandt’s contemporaries, a German philologist, who lived in Amsterdam and whose treatise on *The Painting of the Ancients* was translated in Dutch in 1641, offers a direct analogy between poetry and painting by asking “who […] will take it upon himself to disparage [my book], because … I have applied passages of Cicero, Horace and Quintilian from oratory and the art of poetry to the visual arts?”, (Weststeijn 2008, p. 308) to continue “Enargeia … This vertue seemeth to shew the whole matter … that the affections follow us with such a lively representation, as if we were by at the doing of the things imagined”. (Weststeijn 2008, p. 314)

“As if we were by at the doing of the things imagined” encompasses the idea of *affectuum vivacitas* and of *vivida inventio*, of the lifelike expression of emotions and of the true-to life-invention (Worp 1891, pp. 125, 128; Sluijter 2014, p. 67; Sluijter 2006, pp. 100–103) systematically articulated in the 17th-century Netherlands. For Huygens Rembrandt gave up conventional beauty for a true-to -life representation. In a beautiful *ekphrasis* describing Rembrandt’s *Judas Repentant*, (Fig. 3) he writes: “The gesture of this one desperate Judas (to say nothing about all the other amazing figures in this one painting), this one Judas, who raves, wails, begs forgiveness, but without any hope, and in whose face all traces of hope have disappeared; his countenance wild, the hair pulled out, the clothes torn, the arms twisted, the hands pressed together until they bleed; in a blind impulse, he has fallen on his knees, his whole body contorted in pitiful hideousness”. (Sluijter 2006, p. 100; Worp 1891, p. 126) Besides, in an explicit exclamation Huygens suggests “let all of Italy and all the miracles of beauty that have survived from antiquity be placed next to this … This I compare with all beauty that has

Fig. 3 Rembrandt. *Judas Repentant*. 1629. Private collection, England

been produced through the ages. This should be a lesson for all those nitwits who say that nothing is being created or expressed nowadays that has not already been done better in antiquity". (Sluijter 2006, p. 101; Worp 1891, p. 126) In Huygens's theory, Dutchness is substituted for antiquity and Italy, innate talent is substituted for learnedness and the study of classical rules. Thus, Dutchness and innate talent can express real, that is, lifelike emotion. (Sluijter 2006, p. 101)

The idea of lifelikeness runs through the Dutch theater of the period. In this vein, Jan. Vos, Dutch playwright and poet, another contemporary of Rembrandt, maintains that one finds pleasure at gazing "at creatures whose nature has refused pleasing proportions and the right highlights and shadows of their shapes". (Sluijter 2014, p. 84) Vos also mentions Rembrandt as the first among the Amsterdam painters presented in his *Struggle Between Death and Nature, or the Victory of the Art of Painting*, published in 1654, (Sluijter 2006, p. 109) while he evokes Rembrandt's crucified Christ (Figs. 4 and 5) in a poem which reads "He who portrays the wholly misshapen Christ/Has come the closest to portraying life". (Sluijter 2006, p. 199)

Already in the second decade of the century Gerbrand Adriaensz. Bredero, another Dutch poet and playwright, familiar with the painters of his time, supports the from life ideology by stating "the best painters are those who come closest to life, not those who

Fig. 4 Rembrandt. *The Raising of the Cross*. ca. 1633. Alte Pinakothek, Munich

believe it is witty to strike attitudes alien to nature, to twist and bend limbs and bones, which they often elevate and contort too unreasonably, beyond the bounds of what is proper and fitting". (Sluijter 2006, p. 208; Bakker 1995, p. 152)

The belief that emotions can be expressed in a lifelike manner is in line with the prescriptions provided by the French philosopher René Descartes and the French painter and art theorist Charles Le Brun. Le Brun based his theory on the expression of emotions on Descartes's analysis of the impact of the soul on the human body. Huygens, ardent admirer of Rembrandt's art, was also closely acquainted with Descartes, while Descartes and Rembrandt may have known each other. (Westermann 2000, p. 13) Rembrandt's early self-portraits seem to testify to Descartes's and Le Brun's formulas. In his *Self-Portrait in a Cap Laughing* (Fig. 6) his toothy grin, and half-closed eyes recall Le Brun's description of laughter which includes "the eyebrows arched over the eyes but with the inner ends lowered, the eyes almost shut, the mouth open and showing the teeth", (Montagu 1994, p. 137) as well as the Flemish art theorist's Karel van Mander's similar description of gladness at the beginning of the century. (Miedema 1973, Vol. I, p. 166) In turn, these prescriptions recall contemporary *ekphrases*, such as the one by Huygens, mentioned earlier. By assigning individual facial features and bodily parts certain expressions and postures

Fig. 5 Rembrandt. *The Descent from the Cross*. ca. 1632–33. Alte Pinakothek, Munich

drawn from experience, emotion becomes recognizable, while its lifelikeness is ensured. A number of Rembrandt's self-portraits, often considered as studies of specific emotions, seem to verify the ancient idea about the beholder's empathy by enacting the most natural expressions, meaning, expressions drawn from some kind of experience, and, consequently, leading the beholder to what he should feel.[1]

However, the perception of the emotional state of these expressive faces shifts in their later fate. The Leiden printmaker Jan Gillisz. van Vliet worked closely with Rembrandt, making prints after some of Rembrandt's paintings. These prints include one showing only the head of Judas from Rembrandt's *Judas Repentant* and the *Head of a Laughing Soldier*. (Figs. 7, 8, 9 and 10) A few years later the English graphic artist Richard Gaywood combined the two prints into a joined image which he titled *Democritus and Heraclitus*. (Fig. 11) Even though the two philosophers are known for their emotions, laughter and tears, respectively, similar to those of Rembrandt's soldier and Judas, the change of identity of Rembrandt's figures by Gaywood implies an alteration of their emotive experience. (Schwartz 2014a, pp. 68–70; Schwartz 2014b, p. 109) To put it differently, this example may be thought to break the idea of the prescribed relationships between emotions and expressions, such as suggested by Descartes or Le Brun. (Keestra 2014, pp. 95–99) In the words of the Getty Research Institute at the Scholars and Seminars Program devoted to the theme of the passions in 1997–99, "… the ungovernability [of the passions] threatens … to be lost by the cultural conventions that attempt to fix, ritualize, and control them". (Meyer 2003, p. 2)

If so far I have outlined certain theoretical terms and empirical tools by means of which the issue was perceived, now I will attempt to investigate a different venue which could shed some light on Rembrandt's expression of the emotions. I will approach the question by considering certain compositional and mostly stylistic and aesthetic choices that he pursued systematically. His two versions of an *Entombment* provide an interesting example. Compared to the earlier Munich *Entombment* the Hunterian *Entombment* (Fig. 12) is characterized by the simplification of the figure group around Christ, the replacement of the woman behind Christ holding him by his shoulders with a male figure, probably Joseph of Arimathea, face to face with the dead Christ but mainly by the more central placing of Christ and the more unified light source which focuses on Christ's body. (Black and Hermens 2012, p. 56) I would like to suggest that the changes Rembrandt brought in the later version accumulate in a tighter composition, and, what is more important, in an emotionally more dramatic effect. The action is more contained and leads the beholder's eye directly to the dead body of Christ. No longer distracted by different views or episodes, the beholder can perceive better the emotion of the scene and eventually sympathize with it.

The effect of intense chiaroscuro, as well as of painted reflections, commented upon by his contemporaries as a result of direct experience, thus as amounting to lifelikeness and the beholder's empathy (Slive 1988, pp. 95–97) is very frequently employed by Rembrandt in his paintings as a means to heighten the dramatic impact, such as in *The Rest on the Flight into Egypt*. (Fig. 13) Similarly, his handling of rich paint, his renowned thick impasto adds to the dramatic effect, such as in the *Conspiracy or Oath of Claudius Civilis*. (Fig. 14) This tactile quality evokes another *topos* of the

[1] On the period's empirical attitude toward the rendering of the emotions, see Chapman 1990, pp. 10–21.

Fig. 6 Rembrandt. *Self portrait in a Cap Laughing*. 1630. Rijksprentenkabinet, Amsterdam

period about how painting becomes "action at a distance". This is why artworks are expected to elicit reactions in animals, such as dogs barking, as Hoogstraten describes, or in humans, who stretch out their hands from the desire to touch the painted body.

Fig. 7 Rembrandt. *Judas Repentant* (detail with the figure of Judas)

(Weststeijn 2013, p. 324) Similarly, Junius thought that a work of art was “apprehended by sense, not by talke”, (Weststeijn 2016, p. 4) “these Images do follow us so close, that wee seeme to travell, to saile, to bestirre our selves mightily in a hot fight”. (Weststeijn 2016, p. 15) The emotional power of Rembrandt’s images was actually singled out by several of his contemporaries. In a well-known passage Hoogstraten attributes specific artistic dexterities to specific painters. According to him, Dürer focused on draperies and Caravaggio on naturalness, Rubens was praised for his rich compositions, Anthony van Dyck for his grace, Rembrandt for the passions of the soul. (Weststeijn 2013, p. 305)

Why is Rembrandt’s work distinguished for the rendition of the “passions of the soul”? Is it the lifelikeness of the depicted emotions, and from which perspective one accounts for it? Instead of pursuing the idea about lifelikeness and empathy further, I would like to dwell on his trademarks, his handling of light and of paint, not as symptoms of naturalness, as many of his critics thought, but as means that carried away the beholder with astonishment, enthusiasm, awe, which encompass the effect of the sublime. I will attempt to trace certain responses to Rembrandt’s work and certain ideas from his milieu that evidence some familiarity with the Longinian sublime. The reason I suggest Longinus is owed to the fact that there is no treatise on the sublime in Netherlandish artistic or literary theory prior to Rembrandt. The issue begins to be discussed systematically in the eighteenth century with the Dutch aesthetic theorist Balthazar Huydecoper and in a rather didactic tone. Huydecoper views poetry as a

Fig. 8 Rembrandt. *Laughing Soldier*. ca. 1630. Mauritshuis, The Hague

Fig. 9 Jan Gillisz. van Vliet after Rembrandt. *Repentant Man*. 1634. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

sublime art as long as it "proclaims praise for the Creator". (Eyck 2012, p. 139) Nicolas Boileau's French translation of Longinus's work was published after Rembrandt' death, in 1674.[2]

Although Longinus never really offers a clear definition of the sublime, his descriptions can shed some light on a new manner Rembrandt's building of emotion could be perceived. For Longinus the sublime was characterized by its power to amaze, to overwhelm with violent emotion, with the elemental force of nature. In a beautiful passage we read that "by some … instinct we admire not … the small streams … but the Nile, the Danube, the Rhine, and even more than these the Ocean. The little fire … does not strike us with as much awe as the heavenly fires, in spite of their often being shrouded in darkness; nor do we think our flame a greater marvel than the craters of Etna, whose eruptions throw up from their depths rocks and even mountains, and at times pour out rivers of that earth-born, spontaneous fire. In all such circumstances, I would say only this, that the useful and the necessary are readily available to man, whereas what is out of the ordinary always excites our wonder". (Longinus 2000, p. 155, Langton 2012, p. 164)

This sense of drama, majesty, infinity and even menace may be seen in Rembrandt's dramatic, overpowering landscapes of heavy windswept skies, such as in his *Stormy Landscape*, (Fig. 15) in stark contrast with Rubens's idyllic, familiar, inviting, more contained sceneries, (Fig. 16) or with the serene classicistic landscapes, fashionable in

[2] For an overview of the sublime in 17th-century Netherlandish scholarship, see van Oostveldt and Bussels 2016, pp. 1–5.

Fig. 10 Jan Gillisz. van Vliet after Rembrandt. *Man with a Neckpiece, Laughing*. 1632–36. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

Fig. 11 Richard Gaywood. *Democritus and Heraclitus*. 1650–60. British Museum, London

Fig. 12 Rembrandt. *The Entombment*. ca. 1640. The Hunterian, University of Glasgow, Glasgow

the mid 17th-century Netherlands, such as by Aelbert Cuyp. (Fig. 17) His strong chiaroscuro, quick brushstroke and almost monochromatic palette serve to portray a

Fig. 13 Rembrandt. *Rest on the Flight into Egypt*. 1647. National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin

Fig. 14 Rembrandt. *The Conspiracy of Claudius Civilis*. ca. 1661–62. Nationalmuseum, Stockholm

powerful nature, in Longinus's words, "not the household fire, but those of the heavens, shrouded in darkness", in the *Stormy Landscape*. Lifelikeness is not necessarily the point here though. As it has been suggested, Dutch landscape painting selectively altered or stereotyped nature for the sake of more powerful emotive effects. (Walsh 1991, pp. 109–110, Goedde 1986, pp. 139–149) Rembrandt's transformation of Adam Elsheimer's *Flight into Egypt* (Fig. 18) towards a more dramatic note in a less hospitable nature enveloped in a strong chiaroscuro made of thick pigment is interesting in terms of an awe-inspiring response. (Westermann 2000, pp. 188–189)

According to Longinus the sublime does not persuade or gratify, it amazes, it transports with wonder. (Langton 2012, p. 184) Wonder was the first of all passions, according to both Descartes and Le Brun, caused by something rare and extraordinary.[3] Longinus's sense of wonder reaches its climax when it conveys extreme emotion, which he associates with the sublime. His description of an oath in Aeschylous's *Seven Against Thebes* brings about violent feelings as he says the warriors swear "by War and Havoc and Terror, the lover of blood". (Longinus 2000, p. 134) Rembrandt's *Oath of Civilis* lacks idealized gentleness. The coarse, barbaric faces of the Batavians, the ancient inhabitants of Holland, the disfigured face of Civilis, the oath by sword, instead of the more genteel handshake, preferred by other painters, follow Tacitus's *Historiae* and *De origine et situ Germanoum liber*.[4] But aside from the careful reading of the text, Rembrandt's choice to present a rough scene, coincides with Longinus's oath "by War and Havoc and Terror", aided by his thick impasto and the dramatic alternation of light and shadow. This is the point where chiaroscuro and thick paint do not serve as tools of

[3] On concepts relating to the sublime, such as *meraviglia* and *ekplexis*, see van Oostveldt and Bussels 2016, p. 4. On the baroque passion for *novità* and the *prodigioso*, see Langton 2012, pp. 164–165.

[4] For the relationship of Rembrandt's *Oath* to its literary sources, see Golahny 2003, pp. 184–191 and Blanc 2009, pp. 237–253.

Fig. 15 Rembrandt. *Stormy Landscape*. 1637–39. Herzog Anton-Ulrich Museum, Braunschweig

liveliness that prompt the emotions by underlining the important. They do more. By hiding anecdotal details, by focusing intensely on the coarse faces, they create an unsettling atmosphere, a feeling of imminent threat or fear.

Fig. 16 Rubens. *A shepherd with his Flock in a Woody Landscape*. 1615–22. National Gallery of Art, London

Fig. 17 Aelbert Cuyp. *Landscape with Horseman and Peasants*. 1658–60. National Gallery of Art, London

Scenes of sudden apparition, revelation, miracles and shock interestingly share the same characteristics, strong light that highlights forcefully the central theme, broad and thick brushstroke that leaves out anecdotal details and unidealized features. In his early 18th-century biography of Rembrandt, the Dutch Arnold Houbraken seems to write in terms of the sublime referring to Rembrandt's *Christ at Emmaus*. (Fig. 19) There we read that Rembrandt managed through his "attentive contemplation of the variety of Affects" to show how the disciples at Emmaus, when Christ suddenly appeared, were

Fig. 18 Adam Elsheimer. *The Flight into Egypt*. 1609. Alte Pinakothek, Munich

Fig. 19 Arnold Houbraken, after Rembrandt, *Supper at Emmaus*. 1718–21. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum

"transported by astonishment and wonder". (Weststeijn 2008, p. 213) Similar traits are to be seen in other scenes of miracle, such as in *Christ in the Storm on the Sea of Galilee*, (Fig. 20) or of extreme shock, such as *The Blinding of Samson*, (Fig. 21) probably offered by Rembrandt and refused by Huygens on the grounds of *subitus terror*. (Slive 1988, pp. 22–23).

The obvious question regards the acquaintance of Rembrandt's Netherlandish contemporaries with the notion of the sublime, notably with Longinus's text. One clear indication is to be found in Hoogstraten himself. Hoogstraten cites Longinus's central principle of the sublime. He translates the ancient Greek term *ύψος* as "truly great" (waarlijk groots) and he defines it as "that which appears before our eyes each time anew … which is rather impossible to banish from our thoughts; the memory of which seems to be constantly, and as if indelibly, engraved on our hearts". (Weststeijn 2008, p. 155) Elsewhere he describes reactions to paintings as extreme experience. He talks of the viewer as finding himself embroiled in a "terrifyingly confused inner struggle", or imbued with "a vivid sense of inexpressible joy". (Weststeijn 2008, p. 156) The same extreme reaction to painting is articulated by Huygens in regards with Rubens's *Medusa* (Fig. 22) which delighted him "by the vivid and charming cruelty of the matter".[5] (Heinen 2010, p. 162) It is also expressed by the Dutch scholar Johannes Gerardus Vossius, who in his

[5] For the sublime and the myth of the Medusa, see Eck 2016.

Fig. 20 Rembrandt. *Christ in the Storm on the Sea of Galilee*. 1633. Property of the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston

treatise on painting, *De graphice*, published in 1650, writes that the works of Protogenes inspired terror. (Weststeijn 2008, p. 155).

A direct reference to the sublime comes from the dedication to the play *Lucifer* by the Dutch poet and playwright Joost van den Vondel, presented in Amsterdam in 1654: "Inspired with this hope, my muse is encouraged from afar to dedicate to your Imperial Majesty this Tragedy of Lucifer, whose style demands a most liberal degree of that gravity and stateliness of which the poet, speaks":

"Sublime in style and deep in tone, The tragic art doth stand alone."

The poet is Ovid, Rembrandt's most important source for his mythological scenes.

Vondel continues, saying that "though whatever of the requisite sublimity may be wanting in the style will be compensated by the subject of the drama, and the title, name, and eminence of the personage who, the mirror of all ungrateful and ambitious ones, doth here invest the tragic scene, the Heavens; from which he, who once presumed to sit by the side of God, and thought to become His equal, was cast, and justly condemned to eternal darkness". (van den Vondel 1654, n.p.)

As Rembrandt knew Vondel, having provided drawings of actors for Vondel's *Gijsbreght van Aemstel*, a tragedy about a medieval Dutch hero (Westermann 2000,

Fig. 21 Rembrandt. *The Blinding of Samson*. 1636. Städelesches Kunstinsitut, Frankfurt

p. 132) in 1638, it is safe to assume that he may have been familiar with Vondel's mention of the sublime.[6]

Early in the century, in 1611, in his *De constitutione tragoediae*, the Dutch scholar and tragic poet Daniel Heinsius advises all tragic poets to have Longinus's *On the Sublime* "by memory". (Heinsius 1971, pp. 121–122) Heinsius, who was also a professor of Greek and History at the University of Leiden, had close contacts with Vondel and Huygens. It is therefore plausible that the Leidener Rembrandt was aware of Heinsius's appreciation of Longinus's work. (Meijer 1971, pp. 100–103)

The Longinian sublime is also explicitly referred to in Franciscus Junius's *Painting of the Ancients*.[7] According to Junius, "must not the Artificers here give too much scope to their own wittes, but make with Dionysius Longinus some difference between the Imaginations of Poets that doe intend onely "an astonished admiration" and of Painters that have no other end but "Perspicuitie". And he continues by saying that "… Perspicuitie, the brood and only daughter of Phantasie, so highly commended by Longinus, for whosoever meeteth with an evident and clear sight of things present, must needs bee moved as with the presence of things". (Junius 1991, p. 58) If lifelikeness ensures emotion, loftiness is also a concern for Junius. Quoting Longinus once more, we read: "Magnificent thoughts come by nature, and cannot be taught, sayth Longinus, Nature should fit us to high conceited and lofty things". (Junius 1991, p. 219) Junius's treatise was read widely, but we do not know if it was among

[6] For the relationship between Rembrandt's evolution of the depiction of emotions to Vondel's works and theoretical ideas on the rendering of the passions, see Sluijter 2010, pp. 285–305.

[7] On the relationship between Longinus's and Junius's treatmet of the sublime, see Nativel 1994, pp. 721–730.

Fig. 22 Rubens and Frans Snyders. *The Head of Medusa*. 1617–18. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna

Rembrandt's unidentified books from his personal library.[8] (Weststeijn 2013, pp. 306–308) Huygens, however, owned a copy of it and he may have introduced Rembrandt to it. (Weststeijn 2016, p. 12)

To use Hoogstraten's own words the aim of an artwork is to move the viewer so that he is "terrified by a violent action … or moved to compassion by an unjustice done"; and furthermore, "Seneca also says that a tremendous Painting of a tragic outcome touches our mind". (Weststeijn 2008, p. 188) If Hoogstraten's words agree with Longinus's idea about violent emotion as a source of the sublime, and I think they do, I also think that Hoogstraten's teacher, Rembrandt, provides a painted equivalent in his *Blinding of Samson*, owned by Huygens.[9] Rubens's *Prometheus Bound* (Fig. 23) was probably the model for Rembrandt's image. Rubens shows the eagle's beak in Prometheus's liver and its claws in his head, but Rembrandt did much more by means of the knife plunged into Samson's eye, emphasized by his typical chiaroscuro. Besides, Rembrandt's Samson is not the classically shaped figure painted by Rubens, but a debased, violent figure. (Sluijter 2015, pp. 42–48; Schwartz 2014a, pp. 75–76; Westermann 2000, pp. 128–129; Schama 1999, pp. 421–423) Even if this image could be characterized as lifelike, namely, the opposite of an idealized imagery, or according to a typical critique of the period, as following nature, albeit too much, meaning not observing the classical rule, (Slive 1988, p. 90) I propose to see this scene in a similar manner as Huygens viewed Rubens's *Medusa* which delighted him "by the vivid and charming cruelty of the matter".

Dutch playwrights, such as Pieter Cornelisz Hooft, and the aforementioned Bredero and Vondel translated classical drama. Seneca, whom Hoogstaten mentioned, was one

[8] On Rembrandt's inventoried books, see Golahny 2003, pp. 237–239.

[9] On Rembrandt's letter to Huygens concerning the *Blinding of Samson*, see Slive 1988, pp. 21–22.

Fig. 23 Rubens and Frans Snyders. *Prometheus Bound*. ca 1611–12. Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia

of the frequently translated and imitated authors in the Netherlands. Although Seneca never wrote a treatise on the sublime, such as Longinus did, his tragedies suggest the idea of the sublime in several occasions. Given Rembrandt's acquaintance with the work of several dramaturgists of his time,[10] it is tempting to trace Seneca's expressions of the sublime. Just as Longinus, Seneca portrays nature in sublime terms in his *Agamemnon*: "Young night had spangled the sky with stars; the sails, deserted by the wind, hung low. Then from the mountain heights there falls a murmur deep, worse threatening, and the wide-sweeping shore and rocky headlands send forth a moaning sound; the waves, lashed by the rising wind, roll high -when suddenly the moon is hid, the stars sink out of sight, skyward the sea is lifted, the heavens are gone … dense fog o'erwhelms the dark and, all light withdrawn, confuses sea and sky."[11] (Seneca 1985, pp. 41–43) This is a raging nature that encompasses the idea of terror, one of the common denominators of the sublime, and one that Seneca and Longinus shared. (Pyplacz 2007, pp. 289–301) Seneca's description matches Houbraken's, Rembrandt's biographer's, description of Bonaventura Peeter's painted seascapes: "Bonaventura Peeters . . . painted sea storms and ships in danger of wreck due to all kinds of sad sea disasters . . . He depicted how Aeolus in a wrathful mood presses the clouds with his storm winds from four directions, and squeezes them so that they burst out with a dangerous roar of lightning and thunder, with blow on blow batter the sails,

[10] On the relationship between the literature and the visual arts of the period, see Schenkveldt 1991, pp. 115–136.

[11] On Seneca's concept of the sublime, see Gunderson 2015. On the relationship between the Senecan and the Longinian sublime, see Staley 2010, pp. 42–47.

Fig. 24 Rembrandt. *Self portrait as Zeuxis*. 1665–67. Wallraf-Richartz-Museum, Cologne

masts, topmasts, and the hull of the sea ships, so that splinters fly about the ears of the sailors, who in this disaster predict with tightened lips their last hours. Then again how Neptune, disturbed by the pride of the sea rocks, stirs up the brine, and from the immeasurable depths, comes ashore against them with his triple staff, spattering the highest peaks with foam; and how the ships fall into those breakers." (Blanc 2016, p. 9) In turn, Houbraken's description recalls the sublime effect of Rembrandt's overdramatic land, sea and skies.

In conclusion, I would like to borrow the 18th-century definition of the sublime as distinctive from the beautiful supplied by Edmund Burke in his *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, 1757: "For sublime objects are vast in their dimensions, beautiful ones comparatively small; beauty should be smooth, and polished; the great, rugged and negligent; … beauty should not be obscure; the great ought to be dark and gloomy; beauty should be light and delicate; the great ought to be solid, and even massive." (Brady 2013, p. 23) For Burke terror is the "ruling principle of the sublime". (Brady 2013, p. 24) Besides, for Kant "the beautiful and the sublime are grounded in a feeling of the subject. With the beautiful, it is a feeling of pleasure, while the sublime involves a complex feeling described as negative pleasure". (Brady 2013, p. 73)

Such mixed emotions are often associated with the sublime. (Brady 2013, pp. 40–42) These ideas, I think, relate strongly to Longinus's association of the sublime with

powerful emotions, such as "astonishment", (Longinus 2000, p. 133) sometimes fear (Longinus 2000, p. 134) as well as pleasure. His quotation of one of Sappho's poems serves very well the idea about the combination of positive and negative feelings, the fusion of the most extreme and intense manifestation of these emotions: "A peer of the Gods he seems to me, the man who sits over against you face to face, listening to the sweet tones of your voice and the loveliness of your laughing; it is this that sets my heart fluttering in my breast. For if I gaze on you but for a little while, I am no longer master of my voice, and my tongue lies useless, and a delicate flame runs over my skin. No more do I see with my eyes, and my ears hum. The sweat pours down me, I am all seized with trembling, and I grow paler than the grass. My strength fails me, and I seem little short of dying". (Longinus 2000, pp. 126–127).

Certain critical reactions to Rembrandt's work bring forth a similar feeling of mixed pleasure and displeasure. According to André Félibien, one of his 17th-century critics, referring to one of Rembrandt's portraits, all the colors were broken and it was painted with such an extraordinary impasto that the face seemed to have something hideous about it when one looked at it closely. (Slive 1988, p. 119) (Fig. 24) Elsewhere Félibien suggests that Rembrandt has made powerful portraits that gave a very good effect. (Slive 1988, p. 118).

I do not wish to enter the discussion on the sublime further at this point, yet it needs to be pointed out in brief that the Longinian sublime, referring primarily to rhetoric is not to be identified, for example, with Junius's treatment of the sublime, directed to painting and concerned with the beholder's share in the painter's evocation of a virtual reality mostly by means of the artwork's lifelike quality, as Weststeijn suggests. (Weststeijn 2016, p. 5) I would also like to stress that Rembrandt participates in a network of art critics and theorists, playwrights, art connoisseurs and scholars who explicitly or inexplicitly refer to the sublime which seems to become a rising concept in the 17th-century Netherlands. So far, there is no evidence as to how much aware Rembrandt was of it. But, I do think that a number of his works seem to convey the effect of the sublime. To put it differently, Rembrandt did not paint the sublime. Nevertheless, certain aspects of his work could be read as sublime. As Blanc suggests, instead of looking for a textocentric approach, we should speak of a sublime sensitivity, based on sublime experience. (Blanc 2016, p. 20) And, in the words of Immanuel Kant, "the broad ocean agitated by storms cannot be called sublime … All we can say is that the object lends itself to presentation of a sublimity discoverable in the mind". (Riding 2013, p. 4, Lamb 1995, pp. 10–11) Besides, in Boileau's words, the sublime is a "je ne sais quoi that it is easier to feel than speak about". (Gilby 2013, p. 2, Boileau 1966, p. 1)

To use his student's version of the sublime, Hoogstraten's, once more, when looking at a Rembrandt one can feel "terrifyingly confused [with] inner struggle", or imbued with "a vivid sense of inexpressible joy", it is "impossible to banish [it] from our thoughts, the memory of which seems to be constantly … engraved on our hearts", (Weststeijn 2008, pp. 155–156) or, in Longinus's terms, Rembrandt "sweeps the audience off their feet in amazement". (Longinus 2000, p. 130) Until further evidence on the awareness of the sublime comes to light, we could at least locate it in the effect experienced by the beholder of Rembrandt's images, already described eloquently by Rembrandt's milieu.

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