

Wojciech Rubiś\*, Paulina Tendera\*\*

## **Artistic Thinking – Thinking of the Essence (the Self-portraits of Rembrandt van Rijn)<sup>1</sup>**

### Abstract

Looking at Rembrandt's self-portraits we follow the course of his artistic development, which clearly reflects three significant stages of the artist's life. But can these stages be applied to the life of any man? We ask this question because of the main problem discussed in this article – the problem of the essence, which Rembrandt fulfilled in his work. In general, the topics, Rembrandt undertakes, concern the ethos, and similarly in his self-portraits we encounter the ethos of an adolescent, mature and elderly man.

### Key words

painting, interpretation, neo-Platonism, self-portrait, Plotinus

An interesting thesis regarding the portraits and self-portraits of Rembrandt van Rijn was put forward in 2006 by James A. Schirillo and Melissa A. Fox. In their article "Rembrandt's Portraits: Approach or Avoid?"<sup>2</sup> they investigated the emotional background of Rembrandt's works, pointing, among other things, to the fact that approx. 74 % of his female portraits had been painted from the left profile, while the same applied to only about

---

<sup>1</sup> Research work funded by the National Science Centre under The Preludium Program: UMO-2012/07 / N / HS1 / 00438.

<sup>2</sup> See: J. A. Schirillo, M. A. Fox, *Rembrandt's Portraits: Approach or Avoid?*, "Leonardo" 2006, Vol. 39, No. 3 pp. 253–256.

\* Institute of Philosophy  
Jagiellonian University  
Email: w.rubis@gmail.com

\*\* Centre for Comparative Studies of Civilisations  
Jagiellonian University  
Email: paulina.tendera@gmail.com

26% of male portraits. Rembrandt would supposedly avoid the left male profile as irritating in reception, whereas the left female cheek creates – according to Schrillo and Fox – a very sensual and erotic representation. The left side of the face often represents negative emotions, expression, sexuality, while the right one reflects positive emotions, particularly in representations displaying the lower two thirds of the face. On the basis of their research, the authors conclude about (1) the social conditioning of male and female portraits as well as (2) Rembrandt's very emotional and often also romantic, sexual and sensual attitude to female portraits<sup>3</sup>. The interesting results of this psychological research bring us into the realm of philosophical reflection: the emotions that Rembrandt's portraits and self-portraits evoke are partly of a social nature, and we tend to read them similarly – wherever the artist is willing to do it, he helps us to correctly and truthfully read his intentions and feelings reflected in the painting. In this way, Rembrandt lays out a new path and prompts us with an idea how to plough through the surface of the painting, through its artistic and aesthetic layer, to comprehend the content of the work and, eventually, reach its hidden essence.

The psychological discoveries aside, let us point out that as the years went by, Rembrandt's paintings became more intriguing, emphasising the spiritual part of the subjects as well as their inner beauty. The late portraits were painted hurriedly, almost carelessly. They exhibit many expressive values and sometimes show the nonchalance of the genius, contrasting perversely with his deep recognition of the essence. Rembrandt's late paintings have the typical thick layers of paint, whose uneven application underlines the highly contrasted chiaroscuro: the representations are ever darker, yet the light is more and more lively, warm and throbbing, flickering. This very light will be the subject of our deliberation, first of all because it is of particular importance to Rembrandt, but also because we want to interpret his self-portraits applying statements of the philosophy of light, and on that basis draft a particular concept of artistic thinking.

Rembrandt's works may be grouped in a number of ways, beginning with the division into adolescent and mature period, to the particular cycles and themes. We can see the difference between the earlier and later self-portraits when comparing the early works (particularly the "adolescent" ones) with those painted after 1659. However, in the present article we applied a more detailed division, distinguishing three major

---

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 253.

periods: (i) adolescent self-portraits (particularly the cycle painted between 1628–1629), (ii) the middle period, and (iii) the mature one (from 1659 on).

Looking at Rembrandt's self-portraits we follow the course of his artistic development, which clearly reflects three significant stages of the artist's life. But perhaps these stages can be applied to the life of any man? It is not a trivial question and we ask it because of the main problem discussed in this article – the problem of the essence, which Rembrandt fulfilled in his work. In general, the topics Rembrandt undertakes concern the ethos, and similarly in his self-portraits we encounter the ethos of an adolescent, mature and elderly man (perhaps by now it became an archetype). The ethos of a youth can be characterised by openness, it is not symbolically filled, it has no metaphysical content, and its aesthetics is vital and bright. The ethos of a mature man has no metaphysical content, but there are symbols and metaphors present in it (usually related to his wealth and social stratum). Finally, the ethos of an elderly contains representations of metaphysical values (among others in the typically composed light) and symbols (this time related to his genius, painterly profession, etc.).

## Adolescent portraits

Undoubtedly, the adolescent works of Rembrandt are very fresh and subtle in their way of representing the subject. They very ably capture youth and the glare of the figure – a bright, light and smoothly spread chiaroscuro gives an impression of sensitivity. The way of experimenting with self-portraits tells us something about the author's introspection, it shows his interest in himself and in the possibilities of transposing the almost imperceptible changes in the looks of the maturing young man onto the canvas. An example of such an adolescent work is the self-portrait of 1629<sup>4</sup>. This typical depiction has been endlessly copied by the disciples and followers of Rembrandt: a representation in half-profile, with very clearly situated patches of light, significantly underlines the character of the subject and maximises the expressive value of the painting.

The chosen adolescent portrait is to some degree exceptional, as the

---

<sup>4</sup> Additional information: Rembrandt van Rijn, *Self-Portrait*, 1629, oil on canvas, currently in the National Museum of Indianapolis.

light – to a much higher degree than earlier – smoothes and illuminates the cheek. Following Schirillo and Fox’s intuition, we should say that the strong exposure of the lower part of the right profile is the best composition for a male representation, associated with positive and optimistic feelings.

The background in this painting is already very dark (this tendency Rembrandt followed till the end of his life and it became a characteristic of his painting, combined with strong light accents) – he might have been afraid of this intensity of dark colours just two or three years earlier. But here he succeeded in depicting the satin skin, shining with youthful, fresh eroticism, underlined with the slightly parted, naturally glossy lips and white teeth. In this painting we can also see his slight beard. In a similar self-portrait of 1627 the eyes would also be covered, but the background remained relatively bright, and the separate strands of hair and neck are clearly distinguished. Similarly, in the self-portrait of 1628 the bright background emphasises the dark silhouette of the artist. The strands of hair are accented, this time with light brown. The unsmoothed cheek clearly shows the movements of the brush, the mixing of colours. The eyes are only marked. These three adolescent portraits form a consistent cycle.

In Rembrandt’s early works we can note a clear interest in youth, life and vitality, but also some kind of artistic thinking, in which the focus is on sensual beauty. Although Rembrandt was at that time 25–26 years old, these portraits are – and we would like to emphasise that – “adolescent” but not “immature”. Actually, the very opposite: it seems that his great talent was immediately visible and realised, however the subject painted and contemplated in the creative act required a different, still light and casual expression. The early self-portraits of Rembrandt illustrate the essence of youth, its prime and glare, its freedom – it is what the “adolescent artistic thinking” is all about. Despite the unusually beautiful captures of light, which can already be considered unequalled in their artistic aspect, from the philosophical point of view it is the eyes that matter to us. We can see that the portraits hide them or show them with no light (another self-portrait of 1629<sup>5</sup>; the same pose, the eyes can be seen, but they do not reflect any light). The cultural tradition, particularly Platonic, suggests that this operation can be interpreted as a secretiveness of heart and mind, inaccessibility or absence of spiritual content in the painting. The artist’s expression in that case is clearly directed towards light and sen-

---

<sup>5</sup> Compare with Rembrandt van Rijn, *Self-portrait*, 1629, oil on canvas, currently in: Alte Pinakothek in Munich.

sual beauty, and the grace of his figure is underlined with external warm and sensual light.

## Rembrandt's middle self-portraits

The meaning of the *Self-Portrait with a Dead Bittern* is analysed by Scott A. Sullivan in his article<sup>6</sup>. The text discusses first of all the socio-cultural background of the painting. Against the landscape of the 17<sup>th</sup> century Netherlands, Sullivan points to the exclusive meaning of hunting. The sport was accessible to the noblemen, the social stratum in which Rembrandt was included after marrying Saskia van Uylenburgh. In the presented portrait we do not find any metaphysical content, but symbols and props appear, which are supposed to link the subject to the social stratum: in this case a bird held proudly with the right hand and a hunter's costume. According to the convention of the male portraits, Rembrandt shows his right cheek, reflecting bright, warm sunlight.

For the sake of our deliberation it is important to note that Sullivan points to those characteristics of the work, which are typical of all the Rembrandt's middle portraits. Above all, we read that these works were probably inspired by the art of Rafael and Titian<sup>7</sup> (the self-portrait of 1640 is given as example): Print 3 – *Self-Portrait* of 1640 (the painting can be compared to the later *Self-Portrait in a Soft Hat* of 1642, in which a similar composition and posture was used<sup>8</sup>).

What do Rembrandt's middle self-portraits have in common with the works of Rafael and Titian? First of all, the deepened focus on the appearance of the portrayed person and – what is new in respect to the ado-

<sup>6</sup> S. A. Sullivan, *Rembrandt's Self-Portrait with a Dead Bittern*, "The Art Bulletin" 1980, Vol. 62, No. 2, pp. 236–243.

<sup>7</sup> "One should recall, too, that the *Self-Portrait of 1640* was inspired by Raphael's *Portrait of Baldassare Castiglione in the Louvre* as well as by Titian's *Portrait of a Man* (the so called *Aristo*) in the National Gallery, London. Rembrandt saw and sketched Raphael's painting during an Amsterdam auction of 1639, and Titian's portrait (or a copy of it), may have been known to him throughout the Amsterdam collection of Alonzo Lopez". Web Gallery of Art, [online] <http://www.wga.hu/cgi-bin/highlight.cgi?file=html/r/rembrand/27self/13sp1640.html&find=Self> [accessed: 30.08.2014].

<sup>8</sup> The analysis of this work was undertaken by Ernst van de Wetering and Paul Broekhoff in: *New Directions in the Rembrandt Research Project, Part I: The 1642 Self-Portrait in the Royal Collection*, "The Burlington Magazine" 1996, Vol. 138, No. 1116, pp. 174–180.

lescent portraits – the above mentioned, very clear emphasis put on his belonging to a higher social class. These works express the painter's involvement in social life, in everyday life, sometimes in politics. Numerous interpretations of these portraits claim that all these three painters show themselves as significant and rich members of a higher social stratum, deliberately using various props (e.g. expensive fabrics, costumes reserved for or typical of noblemen, jewellery).

The given examples of the adolescent and middle portraits help us understand the transformation which happened over the years in the artist himself, and which gave foundations to the development of his artistic thinking. The adolescent portraits illustrate the artist's outlook on life, in the beginning just a vital one and later in the middle portraits transformed into a hunger for social life, a need for professional fulfillment taking the form of financial and social gratification. The adolescent portraits show an amazed, joyful, curious face; the middle ones show the implementation of the ethos of a middle aged man – wealthy, professionally active and socially respected.

Light plays an important role in the early portraits, but as a sign of organic, material life; it is a natural light. The situation changes in the late (mature) portraits – there light gains a deeper, more intriguing meaning, it becomes a source of numerous interpretations and speculations, and therefore may be analysed from various philosophical perspectives. In our paper though, we would like to focus on the interpretation inspired by Platonic theory.

## Late self-portraits

The mature portrait we would like to discuss here was painted at the turn of 1668/69, and it currently belongs to the Wallraf-Richartz Museum in Cologne. Its numerous interpretations suggest that in painting oneself as a smiling elderly man, Rembrandt van Rijn was supposedly inspired by the bust of Heraclitus, which he had at home<sup>9</sup>.

It is sometimes pointed out that the late works of Rembrandt are filled with contemplative silence, which became a carrier of a spiritual con-

---

<sup>9</sup> Based on Web Gallery of Art, [online] <http://www.wga.hu/index1.html> [accessed: 4 September 2009].

tent<sup>10</sup>. He succeeded in expressing this content with almost no movement (in stillness?) and in perfect concentration on the inner experience of the portrayed person, expressed through silence and without the traditional and conventional tools of human expression. This ability makes Rembrandt understandable not only to his contemporaries, but also to us. In a way, he was beyond convention, in the pure experience of feelings.

In Rembrandt's portraits and self-portraits (even in the discussed "Heraclitus"), the iconography is built in such a way that all the symbols, historical motifs and allegories refer us directly to the pure human feeling<sup>11</sup> – the feeling of one's own e s s e n c e. This principle can also be established as the main rule of artistic thinking. Rembrandt aims at removing the traditional iconographic categories from his painting by giving their representations individual, human faces. These are no longer motifs from the biblical or mythological history, as it happens, for instance, in case of the *Jewish Bride*, in which, as it is commonly believed, Isaac and Rebekah are presented, or in the *Return of the Prodigal Son*, but stories liberated – as Białostocki suggests – from the categories of time and space; human stories. They can be described in general categories only, in ideas such as e.g. the idea of grace, love, charity, and the like<sup>12</sup>. In the case of Rembrandt, all the elements of his work can be read and experienced as parts of the human history and life, which intensifies the aesthetic experience of the work.

\* \* \*

Our interpretation of Rembrandt's works consists in trying to reach their sense – the essence of the painting, the idea it expresses, and through them, the artistic thinking typical of Rembrandt. We start with the inspiration of Plotinus, since it was him, as the first among Platonists, who had, in a significant way, developed the reflection over art and beauty, which later became typical of the neo-Platonic school. For the reasons common-

---

<sup>10</sup> Comp. J. Białostocki, *New Look at Rembrandt Iconography*, "Artibus et Historiae" 1984, Vol. 5, No. 10, p. 19.

<sup>11</sup> Ibidem, p. 9.

<sup>12</sup> Comp. idem, *Ikono-graphische Forschungen zum Rembrandts Werk*, "Münchner Jahrbuch der bildenden Kunst" 1957, III F, VIII, pp. 195–210.

ly known to philosophers, a deeper search for the essential meanings in the experience of art against the background of Platonic philosophy, does not make much sense. We can only speak of looking at the beauty itself, and by linking it to art, we would act against the wishes of Plato himself. Hence, we can only speak of the later Platonism.

Through his philosophy, Plotinus made a synthesis of Platonism. This is why in his works we encounter many thoughts borrowed directly from Plato, or reaching back even further, to Parmenides, particularly when it comes to the metaphysics of light. The latter plays a significant role in the portraits and self-portraits of Rembrandt. It is worth remembering that Plotinus himself never claimed to have founded a new philosophy. Just the opposite: he believed that he faithfully repeated and explained the views of Plato<sup>13</sup>. Yet, the ancient philosophy and symbols of light are based on a tradition still older than Platonic: "Greeks tended to represent not only life and death, but also different aspects of beauty and goodness and their opposites in terms of light and darkness"<sup>14</sup>. In this way, "it becomes clear why light [...] makes an exceptionally expressive metaphor for the unspeakable nature of the deity, or the principle of the universe"<sup>15</sup>. Light has remained such a metaphor and symbol until our times.

It is worth asking about the actual source of beauty and aesthetic experience for Plotinus. If we compare Rembrandt's late self-portraits and their beauty created through light, then these elements should be interpreted as manifestations of intellectual beauty. For Plotinus, the first beauty is simply the Mind, as is the cause of all life, all existence and beauty related to it. Everything which exists, which is alive, which thinks, turns itself completely towards this beauty, because it comes from the Mind and has a nature similar to it. Who has not seen beauty yet, loves it as goodness, but who has seen the true beauty, wants it for its beauty alone. Plotinus writes:

And so the soul, having accepted a current from there [from the Mind] gets a shock and is tossing and turning in ecstasy... and in this way love is born. But previously it remained insensitive even to the mind, although it is beautiful, because on one

---

<sup>13</sup> Comp. D. Dembińska-Siury, *Pomiędzy Platonem a Plotynem, czyli o preneoplatonizmie*, "Studia Filozoficzne" 1980, nr 9, pp. 87–88.

<sup>14</sup> W. J. Verdenius, *Parmenidesa koncepcja światła*, "Przegląd Filozoficzny" 2005, nr 2 (54), p. 282 [trans. M. Bręgiel-Benedyk].

<sup>15</sup> S. and A. Blandzi, *Dobro światła – światło Dobra. Znaczenie światła w gnozeologii antycznej i w myśli wschodniego chrześcijaństwa*, "Przegląd Filozoficzny" 2005, nr 2 (54), p. 39 [trans. M. Bręgiel-Benedyk].



hand the soul's beauty is inactive until it shines with the light of Goodness, and on the other hand the soul itself lies fallow and remains inactive towards everything<sup>16</sup>.

For Plotinus the artistic activity as well as beauty itself (intellectual, but also sensual) became as important as Platonic ideas. In the context of Platonic philosophy, we should underline that Plotinus adopted his concept of beauty mainly from the *Symposium* and the teachings of Diotima<sup>17</sup>. The information is suggestive enough, given that only in this dialogue Plato allows a possibility of accepting the value of sensual beauty. He expresses his opinion in the concept of the "way of love", which can be compared to the "rising way" from the *Republic*<sup>18</sup>. Dobrochna Dembińska-Siury writes about the teachings of Plotinus:

The beauty of the material world, of the physical things, is like descending of the beauty itself, descending of the idea of beauty into the darkness of matter; descending and capturing, shaping, merging many into one, bringing order and pervading with reason<sup>19</sup>.

For Plotinus, Beauty is the essence of the given thing manifested in sensuality, its divine element, a manifestation of the absolute itself. John P. Anton supports this argument, writing: "Plotinus taught that Beauty is a divine essence and one of many manifestations of the absolute"<sup>20</sup>. Such manifestation can be seen in every portrait of Rembrandt, but it is an essence mixed with the subject of the work, with the presented ethos: the adolescent self-portrait presents the essence of a human being, but in an incomplete, potential way, or should we say, it presents an essence being realised. A middle self-portrait shows us a fulfilled male ethos, but still unfulfilled spiritual essence of a human being. Only late self-portraits depict the fulfilled human essence, while additional elements like emblems or parts of clothing have only a symbolic meaning and are related to the values and ideas, and not to reality (i.e. belonging to a particular social stratum). This is how we understand the brushes and easel in these

<sup>16</sup> Plotyn, *Enneady*, tłum. A. Krokiewicz, t. I, Warszawa 1959, VI.VII.22 [trans. M. Bręgiel-Benedyk].

<sup>17</sup> Comp. J. P. Anton, *Plotinus' Conception of the Function of the Artist*, "The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism" 1967, Vol. 26, No. 1, p. 96.

<sup>18</sup> Comp. P. Tendera, *Światło-Piękno. Platona dwie drogi mądrości*, "Kwartalnik Filozoficzny" 2010, Z. 37 (1).

<sup>19</sup> D. Dembińska-Siury, *Plotyn*, Warszawa 1995, p. 50 [trans. M. Bręgiel-Benedyk].

<sup>20</sup> J. P. Anton, op. cit., p. 92.

works: they are related to genius, maturity, the idea and creative power, not merely to the artistic profession.

According to Plotinus, the real beauty of a thing comes into being though the participation of this thing in the “rational thread coming from the divine land”<sup>21</sup>. From here it is very close to the specific way of thinking typical of a creator – artistic thinking. Frankly speaking, Beauty is one of the three Platonic intellectual fundamentals (also adopted by Plotinus) and finds its place between absolute Goodness and Truth<sup>22</sup>. Beauty is given to an object either by nature or out of the artist’s will and intellect: “...sometimes it is nature itself to grant a rock its beauty, sometimes it is art”<sup>23</sup>.

Light is essential to Plotinus’ philosophy, because from the perspective of emanationism, it is the Excellence itself that grants light to all beings, uniting at the same time all creatures. In the concept of the real presence of Excellence in the created world, the traditional Platonic dichotomy of intellect (idea) and matter is overcome: the spiritual world becomes the most subtle form of the existence of matter<sup>24</sup>. The sensual part of a human being and its representations is not only a manifestation of spirituality, but also this spiritual element actually creates beauty. In many ways, this principle applies to Rembrandt’s self-portraits. The later neo-Platonists, such as Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite and Johannes Scotus Eriugena, had considerably contributed to the development of the theory of emanationism. Dionysius would call Beauty the theophany of God whose contemplation in the act of *ekstasis* allows to reverse the process of emanation and return to the unity with the Creator<sup>25</sup>. From their teachings the concept of deification of human develops, which can be applied to the metaphysical interpretation of Rembrandt’s self-portraits. In a broader context, emanationism is also accepted by the founders of the Florentine Academy, laying the foundations for the idea of beauty typical of the neo-Platonic trend.

Plotinus himself taught that the eye of a wise man can notice a flash of idea in material objects<sup>26</sup>. In this way, everything that is beautiful in

<sup>21</sup> Plotyn, op. cit., I.VI.2.

<sup>22</sup> Comp. J. P. Anton, op. cit. p. 93.

<sup>23</sup> Plotyn, op. cit., I.VI.2.

<sup>24</sup> Comp. A. H. Armstrong, «Emanation» in Plotinus, “Oxford Journals” 1937, Vol. 46, No. 181, p. 64.

<sup>25</sup> Comp. M. Manikowski, *Pierwsza zasada. Świat stworzony i drogi poznania. Pseudo-Dionizy – jego filozofia*, Kraków 2006, p. 112.

<sup>26</sup> Plotyn, op. cit., I.VI.3.

a physical sense, echoes its inner truth – this is how the essence can be seen. However, it is not always like that – the inner beauty, the intellectual beauty which shines through the material body despite the changes time makes to it, is far more important and perfect. The same happens to Rembrandt's self-portraits, in which – thanks to their author's artistic thinking – the essence becomes visible. And yet, we can ask once again: the essence of what?

Plotinus' hierarchy of beings assumes that the closer a being is to the One, the more light, intelligence and truth there is in it. For a human, getting closer to God means entering the sphere of light, accepting the gift of grace and care of Providence. Later philosophers, e. g. Pseudo-Dionysius, would teach that no cognition or enlightenment is possible without hierarchy. It means that no such thing as natural cognition exists, because every cognition comes from the higher beings<sup>27</sup>. This theory was also supposed to apply to beauty, looking at which – from Platonic perspective – becomes in fact an experience of grace and enlightenment. This rule can be applied in two ways. Firstly, we can talk about seeing the image of Rembrandt as a person filled with grace (possessing the ability of artistic thinking). Secondly – and it is a consequence of emanationism and the real presence of Oneness in matter – about the spectator's participation in seeing beauty and the strictly intellectual understanding of an aesthetic experience (about the spectator's participation in the artistic thinking of the creator).

From this perspective, the life of a painter immortalised in the canvases is a depiction of his perception of the principle of spiritual life and one's own inner essence, a complement of the emanation process through the spiritual return to Oneness. This process is the actual subject of artistic thinking. Thus the changes made to the artistic values of particular works are valid to their philosophical description, particularly in the realm of the philosophy of light. According to Plotinus, it is the role of art and beauty to help a human being to reverse the emanation process and return to the One (which is the moment of shining that Albertus Magnus called *resplendentia*). Undoubtedly, in Plotinus' philosophy the role of an artist is exceptional. Through his art he displays his own proximity to the Idea, and remains bright with the glare of supreme Perfection.

Plotinus' philosophy of light found its followers in Pseudo-Dionysius, Augustine, Robert Grosseteste or Johannes Scotus Eriugena. These philos-

---

<sup>27</sup> Comp. E. Stein, *Drogi poznania Boga*, tłum. G. Sowiński, Kraków 2006, p. 133.

ophers laid foundations for the Platonic “faction” of the medieval metaphysics of light. According to the translation of Saracen, Pseudo-Dionysius introduced the concept of *claritas*, meaning a glare, which later developed synonymous terms like: *splendor*, *refulgentia*, *lux*, *lumen* and the like<sup>28</sup>. All these can be related to painterly activity. Sometimes we use them to describe only the sensory light, sometimes the reflected one, or the one emanating out of a particular object. *Claritas* however, is something more than this, it is an overriding category, persistently related to emanationism. Being a divine light, but simultaneously participating in every being, it crosses the border between *lux* and *lumen*. *Claritas* flaring up in a human being is a sign of his completeness, beauty and proximity to God.

In the portrait of 1668 we experience a certain kind of perfection emanating from the figure of the painter. It might be a result of an awakening which opened the soul of the artist to the experience of true Beauty. In this painting, the artist managed to perfectly present the intellectual and spiritual beauty shining through the gray and deteriorating material sphere. The instant of the flaring human essence, the inner truth was captured. However, it is not the moment of the soul opening to beauty, it is not the moment of ecstasy as described by Plotinus<sup>29</sup>. The person depicted in this painting is already enlightened. But the spectator, moved by the bright look and glare of this person, cannot help but thinking of ecstasy – here it presents itself as something already accomplished, but also permanently altering the image of a man. The artist invites us to participate in beauty, to actually take part in artistic thinking.

The painting reflects the ontological situation of the artist, his shining figure that reveals his true essence. The light comes from the painter, perhaps it is an emanation of the One, the Reason (*Nous*) – it is the light that had accompanied a person from the time of birth, but was only revealed through beauty and art. Plotinus would say that as opposed to Goodness, Beauty becomes a purpose to a person only after it has been experienced. Typical for the later philosophers, e.g. Thomas Aquinas, is a statement about the actual identity and conceptual distinctness of Beauty and Truth. Much of the neo-Platonism was also adopted by Hegel who in his *Lectures in Aesthetics* taught that beauty is the truth implemented, while the truth is the actual content of beauty.

---

<sup>28</sup> More on the subject in: W. Stróżewski, *Claritas: Uwarunkowania historyczne i treść estetyczna pojęcia*, “Estetyka” 1961, R. 2, pp. 125–144.

<sup>29</sup> J. P. Anton, op. cit., p. 93.

For Plotinus himself, light and beauty were a special measure of being. In this perspective, Rembrandt appears to have been a spiritually fulfilled individual, fully aware of himself, happy, carrying the mystery of his own existence. Perhaps the inner peace which we can feel looking at the painter's portrait is a result of accepting the ups and downs and the necessity of sometimes tragic circumstances, which still have their deeper sense. Plotinus wrote that like grace, our own light is bestowed upon us by the supreme beings. Recognising our own spiritual element is the first step to reverse the process of emanation and return to the One. We read in *Enneads*, that Plotinus tries to return everything that is divine in him to the divine in the universe<sup>30</sup>. We are convinced that a deeper sense of these words is revealed when we look at Rembrandt's self-portrait.

In this perspective, artistic thinking becomes a route to perfection, back to the origins, to the truth itself. This approach is reflected in the sensory sphere, in the artist's development as an individual, and in the general historic process which is expressed in the development of art – reaching its perfection and actual object.

But still... The provocative and mysterious smile of the artist might be hiding many different feelings. It might conceal compassion or pity for human life, the revealed truth about its inevitable finitude, the premonition of the coming end. A smile in the "golden hour" of life. Some commune with excellence, divinity, and create beauty through works that will outgrow their life in time and value. We pity the finite life, the yet unspoken words, the un-lived feelings and emotions, and beauty we have to leave behind. These are moments and values of which we can never have enough.

*Translated by Marta Bręgiel-Benedyk*

---

<sup>30</sup> Plotyn, op. cit.

Czesław Miłosz

**So Little**

I said so little.  
Days were short.

Short days.  
Short nights.  
Short years.

I said so little.  
I couldn't keep up.

My heart grew weary  
From joy,  
Despair,  
Ardor,  
Hope.

The jaws of Leviathan  
Were closing upon me.

Naked, I lay on the shores  
Of desert islands.

The white whale of the world  
Hauled me down to its pit.

And now I don't know  
What in all that was real.

*Translated by Czesław Miłosz and Lillian Vallee*

## Bibliography

1. Anton J. P., *Plotinus' Conception of the Function of the Artist*, "The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism" 1967, Vol. 26, No. 1.
2. Armstrong A. H., «*Emanation*» in *Plotinus*, "Oxford Journals" 1937, Vol. 46, No. 181.
3. Białostocki J., *Ikongraphische Forschungen zum Rembrandts Werk*, "Münchner Jahrbuch der bildenden Kunst" 1957, III F, VIII.
4. Białostocki J., *New Look at Rembrandt Iconography*, "Artibus et Historiae" 1984, Vol. 5, No. 10.
5. Blandzi S. and A., *Dobro światła – światło Dobra. Znaczenie światła w gnozeologii antycznej i w myśli wschodniego chrześcijaństwa*, "Przegląd Filozoficzny" 2005, nr 2 (54).
6. Dembińska-Siury D., *Plotyn*, Warszawa 1995.
7. Dembińska-Siury D., *Pomiędzy Platonem a Plotynem, czyli o preneoplatonizmie*, "Studia Filozoficzne" 1980, nr 9.
8. Manikowski M., *Pierwsza zasada. Świat stworzony i drogi poznania. Pseudo-Dionizy – jego filozofia*, Kraków 2006.
9. Plotyn, *Enneady*, tłum. A. Krokiewicz, t. I, Warszawa 1959.
10. Schirillo J. A., Fox M. A., *Rembrandt's Portraits: Approach or Avoid?*, "Leonardo" 2006, Vol. 39, No. 3.
11. Stein E., *Drogi poznania Boga*, tłum. G. Sowiński, Kraków 2006.
12. Stróżewski W., *Claritas: Uwarunkowania historyczne i treść estetyczna pojęcia*, "Estetyka" 1961, R. 2.
13. Sullivan S. A., *Rembrandt's Self-Portrait with a Dead Bittern*, "The Art Bulletin" 1980, Vol. 62, No. 2.
14. Tendera P., *Światło-Piękno. Platona dwie drogi mądrości*, "Kwartalnik Filozoficzny" 2010, Z. 37 (1).
15. Web Gallery of Art, [online] <http://www.wga.hu/cgi-bin/highlight.cgi?file=html/r/rembrandt/27self/13sp1640.html&find=Self> [accessed: 30.08.2014].
16. van de Wetering E., Broekhoff P., *New Directions in the Rembrandt Research Project, Part I: The 1642 Self-Portrait in the Royal Collection*, "The Burlington Magazine" 1996, Vol. 138, No. 1116.
17. Verdenius W. J., *Parmenidesa koncepcja światła*, "Przegląd Filozoficzny" 2005, nr 2 (54).







FIGURE 1. REMBRANDT VAN RIJN, *SELF-PORTRAIT*, 1629  
(NATIONAL MUSEUM OF INDIANAPOLIS)



FIGURE 2. REMBRANDT VAN RIJN, *SELF-PORTRAIT WITH A DEAD BITTERN*, 1639  
(GEMÄLDEGALERIE ALTE MEISTER IN DRESDEN)



FIGURE 3. REMBRANDT VAN RIJN, *SELF-PORTRAIT*, 1640  
(WEB GALLERY OF ART)



FIGURE 4. REMBRANDT VAN RIJN, *SELF-PORTRAIT*, 1668  
(WEB GALLERY OF ART)