V

THE PARADOX

Leaving behind the question of the genre of Rembrandt's painting, we still have to elucidate the picture's precise meaning inasmuch as its nuances can be recaptured without the aid of direct evidence.

According to the arguments presented above, the picture was designed to illustrate the two anatomical lessons of Laurentius, *cognitio sui* ("know thyself") and *cognitio Dei*.[171] The meaning of *cognitio Dei* is clear: it means *agnosce Deum latentem in te*.[172] But "know thyself", in its metaphysical sense alone (to say nothing of its psychological sense), has as many meanings as there are answers to the question "What is man?". Which of these meanings did Tulp intend to impress on the viewer of his portrait?

Since Tulp's use of the phrase was derived from Laurentius,[173] the obvious answer would seem to be the meaning that Laurentius had favoured. Laurentius's interpretation of the phrase was offered in the form of a miscellany of traditional notions about the uses of anatomy and of self-knowledge. One learns from anatomy that man is a microcosm. In learning the sources of the passions one learns how to conquer them. The co-ordination of the organs is a model for human co-operation, while their subordination teaches princes how to rule and subjects how to serve.[174] These are some of the meanings of "know thyself", which, in Laurentius's words, "the dissection of bodies teaches and (as it were) points out to us with a finger".[175] If Tulp's programme followed Laurentius, these would be the lessons which are also taught and literally pointed out to us by the finger of Frans van Loenen in Rembrandt's painting (Pl. 1).

However, it seems more likely that van Loenen's precept "know thyself" bears a different sense from Laurentius's. For it was, in our view, not the text of Laurentius, but the iconography of the Egbertsz. and Fonteyn group-portraits (Pls. 5, 6), that led Tulp in the first place to instruct Rembrandt to portray Frans van Loenen in the attitude of pointing to the corpse.[176] What had led Egbertsz. and Fonteyn (if we assume that it was they who determined the iconography of their pictures) to choose the skeleton or skull as their attribute was surely the fact that it combined in one image both a "know thyself" motif, which suggested anatomy,[177] and, if we may anticipate the next paragraph, a *vanitas*-motif whose natural habitat was a portrait. Having decided to illustrate the anatomical catch-phrase "know thyself", Egbertsz. and Fonteyn would

[171] pp. 31–38 above.

[172] Laurentius's chapter on *cognitio Dei* is cited in Appendix III no. **11**, pp. 71–72 below, and translated in no. **16**, pp. 75–76 below.

[173] As implied by Barlaeus's poem: see p. 33 above.

[174] Laurentius's chapter on *cognitio sui*, is cited in Appendix III no. **11**, pp. 71–72 below, and translated in no. **16**, pp. 74–75 below.

[175] Laurentius, op. cit., note 127 above, p. 8, "Praeclarum est sane sui ipsius notitiam habere, quod ipsa nos docet & quasi digito indicat corporum sectio . . .".

[176] Cf. p. 37–38 above.

[177] Cf. p. 31–34 above.

have selected the images which illustrated the pessimistic sense of the proverb, not because they preached that sense in the anatomy-theatre – if they did; it seems doubtful[178] – but because the portrait, as a genre, was considered at that time, in some quarters, as a species of the *vanitas*-picture.

A portrait was considered by some to carry, implicit on the sitter's lips, the pessimistic message, "I was once what you [the viewer] are now: a living being. What I am now, you also will be: a skeleton. The portrait shows my face as it was: a skull shows it as it is."[179] This message, in various forms, was sometimes inscribed on the canvas, and often illustrated with a skull or, less commonly, a skeleton or cadaver, in portraits of sitters who had no concern with anatomy (Pl. 19).[180]

But people who did have a professional interest in the anatomical or other properties of the human skull could, as it were, kill two birds with one stone when they came to have their portraits painted. For they could combine, in one image of the skull, both the attribute peculiar to their profession and the common attribute of portrait-sitters in general. This visual conceit was especially popular among northern European physicians and surgeons in the first two-thirds of the seventeenth century, when the medical profession was associated in the public mind with anatomical and pathological dissections. Among other examples there are portraits of this type: of the German surgeon Fabricius Hildanus (Pl. 20), of Charles I's physician Sir Theodore Turquet de Mayerne (Pl. 21), and of the Amsterdam *praelector anatomiae* who succeeded Doctors Tulp and Deyman, Frederik Ruysch (Pl. 22).

This double interpretation of the skull is most clearly illustrated in a progression through three English portraits, all of which were painted within two years either side of 1650. John Evelyn's portrait by Robert Walker (Pl. 23), painted in 1648, includes a skull as a pure *vanitas*-motif, which is clarified by inscriptions of the *memento mori* type.[181] In William Petty's portrait by Isaac Fuller (Pl. 24), painted between 1649 and 1651, the sitter also holds a skull and obviously alludes to the same tradition; but the young virtuoso points with his free hand to Casserius's illustrations of the skull, thus reminding us that Petty was a Leiden student of medicine and, at this time, lecturer in anatomy at Oxford.[182] Here the skull is used in a double sense, as a *memento mori* and as a professional attribute. Third, there is the portrait of John Tradescant the younger (Pl. 25), which is attributed to E. de Critz and dated *c.* 1652. Here, while the skull

[178] Because most anatomists interpreted the phrase in an optimistic sense. Cf. p. 36 above, and Appendix III below.

[179] Roy Strong, *The English icon*, London, Paul Mellon Foundation, 1969, pp. 37–41.

[180] The cumbersome skeleton or cadaver is much less common as a portrait-attribute than the handy skull. A *vanitas*-portrait of Queen Elizabeth I, at Corsham Court, Wiltshire, includes a skeleton (James Pope-Hennessy, *London fabric*, 2nd edn., London, Batsford, 1941, colour frontispiece; R. Strong, *Portraits of Queen Elizabeth I*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1963, pp. 153–154, posthumous portraits no. 8, where it is said that "the Queen triumphs over Time and Death", though the reverse interpretation seems equally if not more apt). The Judd portrait at Dulwich includes a cadaver (illustrated by Strong, op cit., note 179 above, p. 39).

[181] The portrait is on loan to the National Portrait Gallery, London.

[182] D. Piper, *Catalogue of seventeenth-century portraits in the National Portrait Gallery*, Cambridge University Press, 1963, no 2924, pp. 275–276. However, the quarto book in the picture cannot be the work identified by Piper, which is a folio: this one is surely Julius Casserius's *Tabulae anatomicae*, Frankfurt a. M., 1632, pp. 16–17, lib. II, tab. III, bound as usual after the text of Spigelius in the same format.

alludes to the tradition represented in its pure form in the Evelyn portrait, the sitter, the former royal gardener, has also, like Petty but more unexpectedly, managed to combine it with an allusion to his own profession, by seizing on the only conceivable connexion between skulls and gardening. A certain medicinal moss was reputed to grow best on the human skull, and a skull crowned with moss is reproduced both in herbals of the time (Fig. 6) and in Tradescant's portrait (Pl. 25).[183] Again, the skull has a twofold meaning, for it would hardly have been included as the attribute of a gardener had not the tradition of the *memento mori* portrait suggested it.

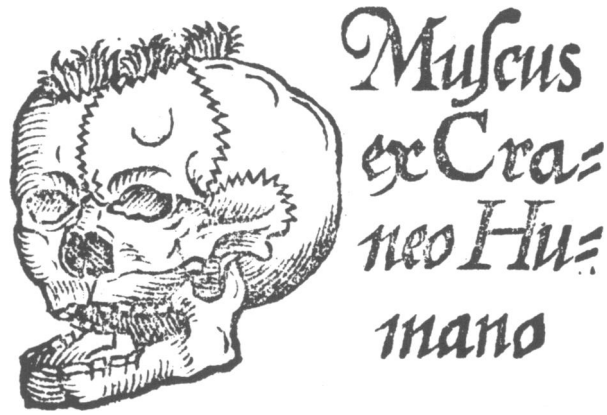

Figure 6. Moss growing on the human skull, anonymous woodcut for John Gerarde, *The herball*, London, 1633, p. 1563.

An earlier picture in the same genre is Nicolaes Tulp's portrait painted by Nicolaes Eliasz. in 1634 (Pl. 18). The skull and the melting candle not only provide the *vanitas*-motifs suitable to a portrait, but also, as the inscription shows, allude to the risks and exertions of the sitter's profession.

It should now be apparent that, if the skull in the Fonteyn group-portrait of 1625 (Pl. 6) and the skeleton in the Egbertsz. group-portrait of 1619 (Pl. 5) illustrate the anatomical catch-phrase "know theyself", that phrase must be interpreted in the sense which its emblems also express in their conventional role as a portrait-attribute, which means the pessimistic sense *memento mori* or "recognize that you are mortal". The argument that leads to this interpretation of the Egbertsz. and Fonteyn pictures has the same implication for Frans van Loenen's gesture in the Tulp group-portrait of 1632 (Pl. 1). But we need not infer, contrary to what Barlaeus tells us, that Tulp deviated from Laurentius's more optimistic interpretation of "know thyself" when he delivered his anatomical praelections at Amsterdam.[184] The Laurentian sense was

[183] Cf. S. Selwyn, *The beta-lactam antibiotics*, London, Hodder & Stoughton, 1980, pp. 2–3; Piper, op. cit., note 182 above, no. 1089, pp. 350–351. The portrait is currently on loan to the Tate Gallery, London.
[184] Cf. p. 31 above.

suitable for the anatomy-theatre, the pessimistic sense for a portrait.

Hence, van Loenen demonstrates the pessimistic lesson of anatomy, the lesson that man is mortal, while Tulp demonstrates the optimistic lesson, teaching that man is divine and therefore immortal.[185] What we called an "inconsistency" in Paaw's view of anatomy[186] is declared to be a genuine dyad, the duality of man's metaphysical status, and this duality is given visible form in the composition of Rembrandt's painting.

The question to which all the foregoing arguments lead is: what is the significance of the juxtaposition, in the painting, of the two lessons of anatomy? Two alternative explanations suggest themselves. According to one interpretation, the two lessons are complementary, and so, by their juxtaposition, present together a complete idea of man as a creature who is earthly in some respects and divine in others. In this sense, van Loenen and Tulp would be *formally* akin to Aristotle and Plato, pointing down and pointing up, in Raphael's fresco in the Vatican. According to the other interpretation, the two lessons would be contrary, if not contradictory, to each other, and would represent man as a metaphysical antinomy, a creature both mortal and not mortal. In this sense van Loenen and Tulp would be *formally* more akin to Democritus and Heraclitus as they respond antithetically to the vanities of the whole world, the one by laughing, the other by weeping, in paintings by Terbrugghen (1628) and Johan Moreelse (before 1636), and in an engraving by Hollar ultimately after two early paintings by Rembrandt himself (Fig. 7).[187] Hence, we must decide whether van Loenen and Tulp are drawing our attention to two separate but compatible aspects of an agreed idea of man, or to two conflicting ideas of man as a whole.

If we accept the former interpretation, it is probable that the two complementary aspects of man are to be identified with the body and the soul, for the distinction between body and soul was a *topos* which faithfully accompanied the anatomical *topos* "know thyself".[188] In this view, Rembrandt's picture would be wholly, like de Keyser's and Eliasz.'s, an illustration of "know thyself", but one in which the self to be known was divided into the body, notified to us by van Loenen, and the soul, notified by Tulp. Doctrinally this would hardly differ from our original interpretation, in which Tulp was thought to be demonstrating God-in-man; for, as Barlaeus said in a lecture at Amsterdam in 1635:

> . . . the soul *is* God, or a particle of His breath. For as He lives, presides, and rules in the universe, so does the soul in the body. As He, who is eternal and immortal, moves the perishable machine of the world, so the soul, which knows not death, moves the body's crumbling clay.[189]

[185] Cf. p. 29 above.

[186] p. 34 above.

[187] A. Blankert, 'Heraclitus en Democritus', *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek*, 1967, **18**: 31–124, with many other examples.

[188] Appendix III nos. **2**, **4**, **12**, **13**, **19**, **22**, **24**, **35**, below, and Wilkins pp. 61–64 and *passim*. The key texts are Plato, *Alcibiades I*, 130e–131a and Cicero, *Tusc.* I, xxii, 52, where it is denied that γνῶθι σεαυτόν applies to the body; Cicero *de finibus* V, xvi, 44, where the proverb is said to apply to both body and mind; Cicero *ad Q. f.* III.v.7, where the object is left undefined; and Plutarch *adv. Colotem* 1119, where the object is allowed to be either a blend of body and soul, or the soul only, or only the thinking part of the soul, or the body only. This theme is the subject of a strange story in Arnold Geilhoven's *Gnotosolitos*, Brussels, 1476, fol. 3[r], where it is ascribed, apparently without justification, to Macrobius.

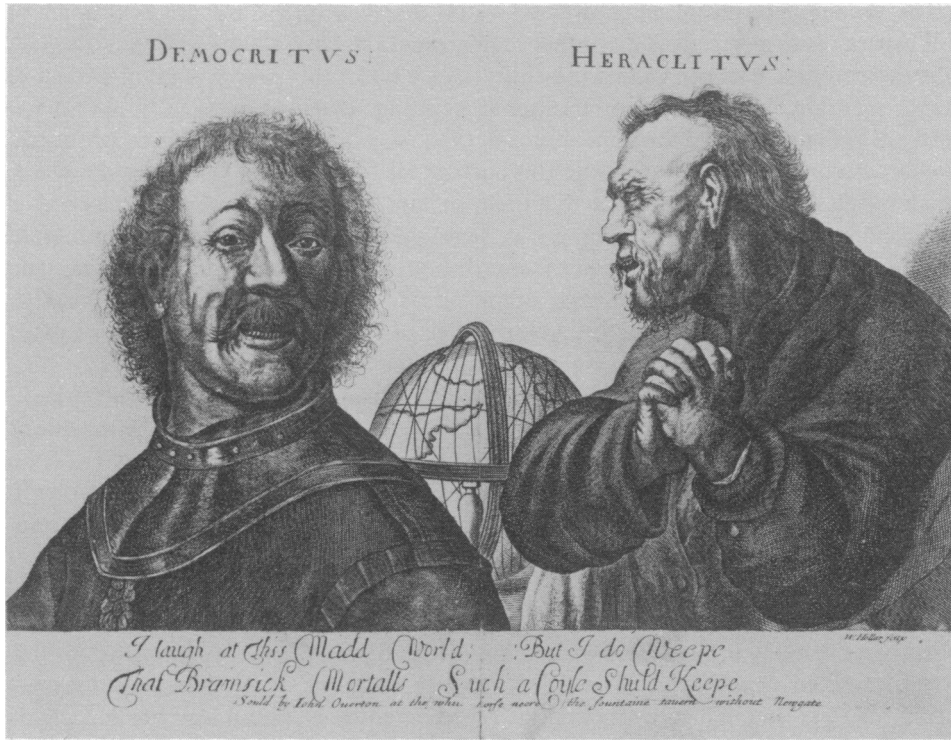

Figure 7. Wenceslaus Hollar, Democritus and Heraclitus, engraving, *c.* 1674, after two etchings by J. J. van Vliet after two paintings by Rembrandt.

But although as doctrine this interpretation may be acceptable, as the subject of an emblematic portrait it seems too vague and bland: vague, because the hand was less closely associated with the soul than the brain or heart, and bland because the idea lacks the piquancy, the simultaneous capacity to please and to disturb, that characterizes the ideas which emblems were generally used to convey. We find this quality in Tulp's emblematic portrait by Eliasz. (Pl. 18), where the candle preserves its utility only inasmuch as it is not used, but not in the commonplace idea that man is composed of a complementary mortal body and immortal soul.[190]

---

[189] C. Barlaeus, *Oratio de animae humanae admirandis*, 1635, in his *Orationum liber*, Amsterdam, 1643, p. 100, "ut dicentes illud, quod pene est verum, falsum tamen dicant. Hi animam Deum esse perhibent, aut divinae aurae particulam. Vti enim ille in Vniverso, ita animus in corpore vivit, praesidet, imperat. uti ille perituram mundi machinam agitat, ipse aeternus & immortalis; ita animus mortis ignarus fragile ac luteum corpus."

[190] However, if it were shown, first, that the Latin oration which Tulp gave in Amsterdam on 2 January 1629 to inaugurate his anatomical praelectorate (Thijssen, op. cit., note 31 above, p. 36) had as its text *nosce teipsum*, which would seem very probable by analogy with note 137 above, *and*, second, that that oration was identical with the oration 'de animi et corporis συμπαθείᾳ' which Tulp made in Amsterdam before 1638 (J. Beverovicius, *Exercitatio in Hippocratis aphorismum de calculo*, Leiden, 1641, p. 186), which would seem possible on the evidence of note 188 above, *then* the relation between body and soul (the subject of the latter oration), being a question raised by the injunction "know thyself" (the supposed subject

The second interpretation, however, which discerns in the picture a conflict of authorities, does perfectly satisfy this requirement. Its second advantage is the fact that the contrast between man's mortality and immortality was already a pervasive theme in many kinds of representational painting, and was especially apt in the portrait, which preserved the appearance of the living sitter long after his or her death. A characteristic example would be the portrait of Sir Thomas Chaloner the elder, which is dated 1559 and attributed to a Flemish hand (Pl. 26).[191] Here the sitter holds a balance of which one pan, containing jewels and a globe, is outweighed by the other, in which rests a book. The last line of the inscription, "Pondus inest menti, caetera vana volant", sums up the emblem, and other verses articulate the thought behind it: worldly possessions vanish like smoke or a click of the fingers, but the thinking mind survives death and gains greater glory in its afterlife.[192]

A second such portrait, closer to Rembrandt's time, is the Holme family portrait, dated 1628, in the Victoria and Albert Museum. Two rebuses painted on the outside of the wings of this triptych (Pl. 27) illustrate a paraphrase of 1 Corinthians XV. 22: on the left, "WEE MUST [DIE ALL (supplied by a clockdial)]" and on the right "YET BY [CHRIST (supplied by a figure of Christ)] LIVE ALL". Many other portraits play on the same contrast either symbolically[193] or through inscriptions, an example of the latter being Dürer's engraving of Wilibald Pirckheimer, with its legend "VIVITVR INGENIO, CAETERA MORTIS ERVNT" (Fig. 8).

Among the many other genres which employ this bipartite motif is still-life painting. Some so-called *vanitas*-pictures, such as that reproduced in Pl. 28, imply that the futility of lives doomed to extinction, as represented by a skull and other objects, is redeemed by the possibility of resurrection, as signified by the presence of ears of corn.[194]

A third and most relevant genre pervaded by these ideas is anatomical illustration. The bipartite motto "VIVITVR INGENIO ..." which appeared in Dürer's Pirckheimer portrait of 1524 (Fig. 8) is conspicuous also in Vesalius's anatomy-book of 1543 (Fig. 9), and the skull-but-corn motif, which was illustrated here in a Dutch

---

of the former oration), would probably have been the subject of Rembrandt's picture also. On present evidence this seems improbable, since the speech mentioned by Beverwijck was made when he was "starting out in the medical profession" (Beverovicius, loc. cit.): according to Banga (op. cit., note 29 above, p. 288) Beverwijck had returned from study in Italy *c.* 1617, and was already established as city-physician at Dordrecht in 1625, four years before Tulp's inaugural oration. The question remains open.

[191] National Portrait Gallery, London, no. 2445; R. Strong, *Tudor and Jacobean portraits*, London, HMSO, 1969, vol. 1, pp. 45–46. Currently exhibited at Montacute House, Somerset (National Trust).

[192] Strong, ibid., prints the text and gives a not very reliable paraphrase. Is it possible that Chaloner's left thumb and middle finger demonstrate that "click of the fingers" (*crepitus presso pollice dissiliens*) which is mentioned in the poem?

[193] This may be the sense of those portraits in which the sitter is accompanied by a skull (for death) and a flower (for resurrection?): e.g. London, National Gallery no. 1036, portrait of a man, Netherlandish school *c.* 1535 (?); Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum no. 1290. Al, portrait of Pompeius Occo by Dirk Jacobsz. 1531; the Hague, Mauritshuis no. 695, portrait of a woman, Flemish school *c.* 1615. It is only in some cases that we can be sure that the flower is also a *vanitas* motif.

[194] I. Bergström, *Dutch still-life painting in the seventeenth century*, London, Faber & Faber, 1956, pp. 154, 177–178, 182, 307. B. A. Heezen-Stoll, 'Een vanitasstilleven van Jacques de Gheyn II uit 1621', *Oud Holland*, 1979, **93**: 217–250, calls pictures of this type "afwijkende vanitasvoorstellingen", divergent *vanitas*-representations (p. 220).

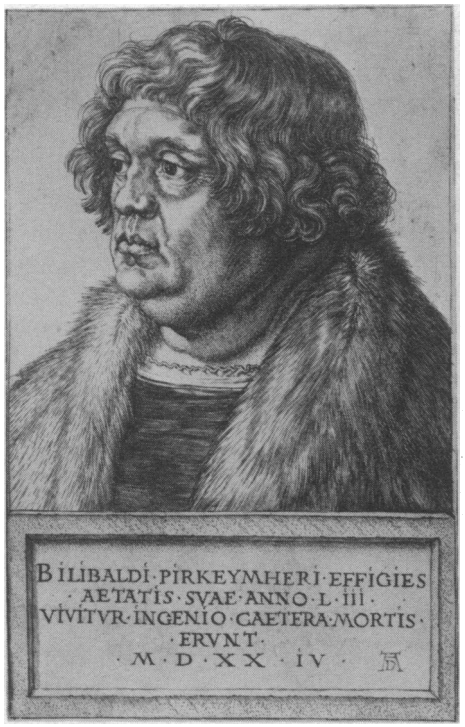

Figure 8.

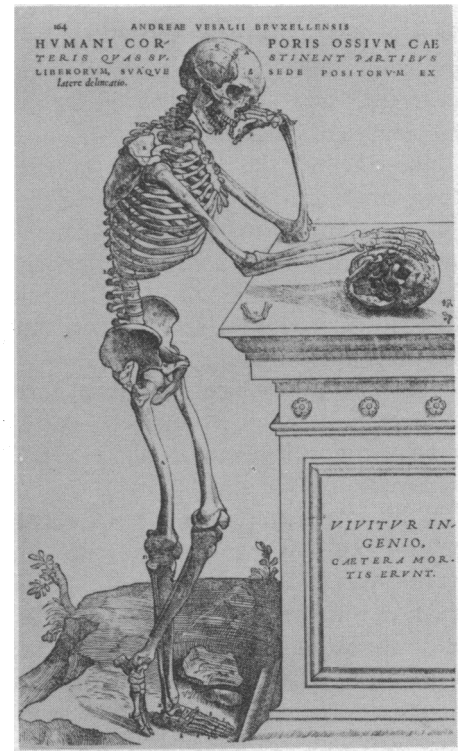

Figure 9.

Figure 8. Albrecht Dürer, portrait of Wilibald Pirckheimer, engraving, 1524.

Figure 9. Lateral view of the human skeleton, anonymous woodcut after a design by Johan Steven van Kalkar (?) and Domenico Campagnola (?) after dissections by Andreas Vesalius for his *De humani corporis fabrica*, Basle, 1543, p. 164.

still-life of 1659 (Pl. 28), also appears in a Dutch anatomy-book of 1654, where the pessimism of a skull engraved on the title-page is tempered by the presence of a vast swag of vegetation (Pl. 29).

The master-genre on which these others draw is funerary art, of which the contrast between the mortal and the immortal is the central subject. The funerary portrait is a common type, and all the other elements of the contrast are found on a tomb such as that of Archbishop Law of Glasgow, who died in 1632, the date of Rembrandt's Tulp picture. On this monument (Pl. 30), which was erected by the archbishop's widow, we find again the bipartite inscription contrasting death and resurrection; the skull and cross-bones which illustrate the first half of the inscription; and the golden ears of corn which illustrate the second.

In many of these works the contrast is weighted towards optimism: man's earthly remains, his body, possessions, and power, die, but his divine element, mind or soul, lives on. Rembrandt's picture (Pl. 1) also seems to show the same optimistic tendency, for the attention of the surgeons is not suspended evenly between van Loenen and

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0025727300070198 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Tulp, but mostly inclined towards the latter, who teaches the optimistic lesson *est Deus in nobis*. Interpreted thus, Rembrandt's picture would bear out the remark, originally made of a different kind of painting, that Dutch pictures of the early seventeenth century "display an overwhelming preference for . . . underlining the importance of salvation".[195]

Nevertheless, the two poles of the contrast are more equivocally related in Rembrandt's painting (Pl. 1) than in the other works to which we have likened it. For although Tulp's optimistic argument preponderates, van Loenen's pessimistic message still stands, and the juxtaposition of the two conflicting doctrines, both of them considered valid, has the effect not of a compromise, but of a paradox. Man is stated to be, in Hamlet's words, both "the quintessence of dust" and yet "in apprehension how like a god"; or in Tulp's own paradoxical phrase, *homo animal vere divinum*.[196] The subject of the picture is therefore not the two lessons but the antinomial paradox of their co-existence. Each lesson, but especially the more emphatic optimistic one taught by Dr. Tulp, gains greater significance in the face of the assertion of the other.

If this interpretation is correct, Rembrandt's picture of 1632 (Pl. 1) is not only a portrait, but also a "metaphysical painting" comparable to the "metaphysical poetry" that was circulating in Amsterdam at precisely that time. The love of paradox which characterized such literature was Italian in origin, being derived from Ovid, Petrarch, and sundry Cinquecento poets, and this Italian gift was diffused northwards in verse and prose, in Latin and the vernacular, in manuscripts and printed books. It entered the Netherlands both directly from Italy and through the literatures of other nations, notably France, which had already absorbed it.[197] One such literary vehicle was the group of nineteen English poems by John Donne which were translated into Dutch between 1630 and 1633 by Constantijn Huygens, a knight of James I's creation and a personal acquaintance of Donne.[198] One of those at Amsterdam who read with delight the manuscripts of these translations of Donne was the poet Caspar Barlaeus,[199] whom we have already met as the author, in 1639, of the poem in which the two Laurentian lessons of anatomy were ascribed to Dr. Nicolaes Tulp.[200]

It seems not to have been noticed in previous discussions of the work that this short Latin poem by Barlaeus is itself a fine example of the "metaphysical" type, and so, not only in subject but also in treatment, a literary counterpart to Rembrandt's painting as we have interpreted it. The value of Barlaeus's poem in clarifying the mood and

[195] Miedema, loc. cit., note 118 above.

[196] W. Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, II, ii. Tulp (1641), III c.4, p. 188.

[197] Leonard Forster, *The icy fire*, Cambridge University Press, 1969, pp. 1–60, 'The Petrarchan manner', gives an outline sketch of this process. A. E. Malloch, 'The techniques and function of the renaissance paradox', *Studies in philology*, 1956, **53**: 191–203, adds a dash of scholastic argument to the mixture.

[198] J. A. van Dorsten, 'Huygens en de engelse "metaphysical poets",' *Tijdschrift voor Nederlandse taal- en letterkunde*, 1958, **76**: 111–125. Rosalie Colie, 'Constantijn Huygens and the metaphysical mode', *Germanic Review*, 1959, **34**: 58–73. On Huygens and Rembrandt see Slive, op. cit., note 54 above, pp. 9–26.

[199] F. F. Blok, *Caspar Barlaeus: from the correspondence of a melancholic*, Assen and Amsterdam, van Gorcum, 1976, pp. 144–146.

[200] pp. 31–33 above.

meaning of Rembrandt's picture can only be appreciated from a reading of the whole work, which is therefore cited in translation here and in the original language in an appendix below.[201]

Caspar Barlaeus

On the place for anatomies which has recently been constructed at Amsterdam

Evil men, who did harm when alive, do good after their deaths:
Health seeks advantages from Death itself.

Dumb integuments teach. Cuts of flesh, though dead,
for that very reason forbid us to die.

Here, while with artful hand he slits the pallid limbs,
speaks to us the eloquence of learned Tulp:

"Listener, learn yourself! and while you proceed through the parts,
believe that, even in the smallest, God lies hid."

The poem is a plexus of oxymora, in which good and evil, speech and silence, life and death, Infinite and infinitesimal are pointedly juxtaposed. The couplets, each containing at least one paradox, next within each other like Chinese boxes, so that the enigmatic opening verse epitomizes the paradox of the poem as a whole: that within the quintessentially mortal, the cadavers of executed criminals, man could recognize the divinity in which lay his hope of eternal life. In Rembrandt's painting (Pl. 1) we find the identical subject, a comparable method, and a similar conclusion, but with the more pessimistic tinge that is suitable for a portrait.

While Frans van Loenen, like Dr. Egbertsz. and Dr. Fonteyn, points out the obvious mortality of man, Dr. Nicolaes Tulp reveals the more elusive element that does not die. If our interpretation is correct, it was this metaphysical contrast that the civic anatomist of Amsterdam in 1632 claimed to teach through anatomy. To preserve this lesson for posterity, Nicolaes Tulp entrusted it not to a printer but to a painter, a young man recently arrived in the city from Leiden. The sitters are long dead, but thanks to Rembrandt's art of durable pigments the picture survives today to exemplify its own message. Portrait, history-picture, emblem-picture, "metaphysical" picture, and finally *exemplum sui;* devised by a physician, realized by surgeons, and figured by a painter: such a fusion of genres and federation of skills illustrates the crowning attainment of unity in diversity, that paradoxical and most desirable quality in any work of art.

[201] The edition of the poem published in Appendix IV below and the translation presented here both differ from the transcript and English version published by Heckscher (pp. 112–113).