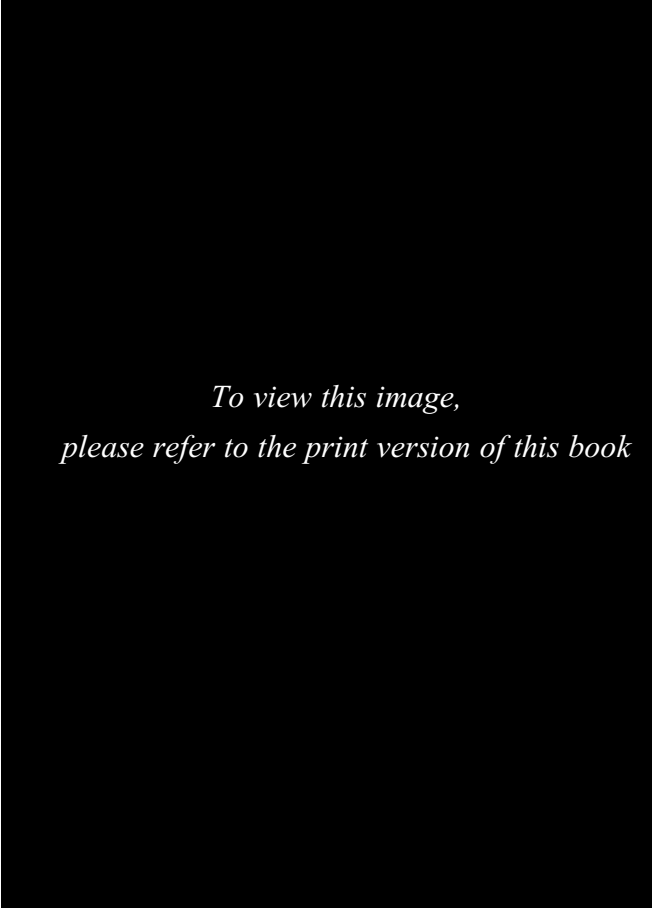


Dead Flesh, or the Smell of Painting

IN one of his paradoxical sketches (fig. 1), Rembrandt represented the central scene of the biblical story of Judges 19, arguably the most horrible story in the entire Hebrew Bible.¹ The sketch is a statement about death, signified by the movement of the dead body. This paradox can be understood as we shift attention from the represented content to the mode of representation. In this paper, I explore the intricate connections, in works by Rembrandt, between modes of representation and the subject of death. Death, I will argue, becomes itself a mode rather than a theme, and the figuration of death in this drawing, as well as in the story it responds to, uses the strongly gendered figures of a mighty man and a victimized female to point to another bond: that between death and femininity.

Svetlana Alpers is one of the few art historians to pay attention to the modes of representation in Rembrandt's works. In her recent book *Rembrandt's Enterprise*, she relates the well-known impasto of Rembrandt's "rough" style to self-reflexivity.² She claims that the application of paint in a way that necessitates specific viewing positions, like distance for the "rough" mode, implies a statement on the art of painting. This claim is based on the effect of solidity that the impasto technique highlights. Solidity of paint turns painting into a kind of sculpture, and this sculptural quality is, Alpers argues, a statement on vision. Vision, then, is a subcategory of touch, and paint is a solid object.

Impasto is only one of the devices Rembrandt uses to substantiate his statement on art as sculptural and on vision as continuous with touch. Among the others is, Alpers writes, the representation of *hands* as the crucial organ of the painter. As it happens, the sketch of the central scene in Judges 19 emphasizes hands. It is composed on a diagonal axis, connecting the hand of the killer with one of his victim's hands.³ The hand is, however, not only the organ of painting but also, in Western painting, the sign that links looking to sexual violence, as in the paradigmatic story of *Susanna and the Elders*. Moreover, the Rembrandt corpus⁴ combines the theme of manual sexual assault stimulated by vision with the kind of self-reflexivity Alpers notes, thus suggesting a connection



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1. Rembrandt, *The Levite Finds His Wife in the Morning*, 1655–6, drawing, Benesch 997. Berlin, SMPK, courtesy Kupferstichkabinett.

between visual representation and ideologies of gender. What views of gender does this corpus promote?

While pondering the attitudes toward women in works ascribed to “Rembrandt,” I have come across cases where women can be read as represented sympathetically, as in the Berlin *Susanna*, more or less negatively, as in *The Blinding of Samson*, and ambivalently, as in *Bellona*. And what about the *Wedding of Samson*, modeled upon Leonardo’s

Last Supper, where the bride has been given the central and lonely position of Christ? Rather than an affirmative, monolithic ideology of gender, then, I found a plurality of possible positions that the corpus leaves open. But this plurality is built upon a common concern in the gendered works, a concern for the most frightening aspect of life and the most urgent motivation for, yet challenge to, representation: *death*. Death is a challenge to representation, for it is a moment that nobody can describe, an event that nobody can escape, a process that nobody can narrate. As Foucault said: One cannot say, "I am dead."

Death is clearly gendered in the drawing of Judges 19. It represents the moment when the traveling Levite, who has exposed his wife the previous night to gang-rape, finds her the next morning on the threshold of the house. Consistent with the social conflict that informs Judges and is played out in language games, as I have argued elsewhere, the drawing depicts the victim at the entrance of the house, positioning her as a threshold-figure, as the embodiment of transition.⁵ The drawing represents the central moment of the intrication of language and violence: the moment where the woman is no longer able to speak. In this moment, her dead flesh is seen, misunderstood, addressed, and already announces the coming moment when, in the end, her husband will dismember her and send the pieces of her flesh to the tribes of Israel, misused in a radical perversion of speech.

At the same time, *vision* plays a crucial role in this horror story. Mis-seeing and un-seeing the woman is the painful act that this "Rembrandt" represents. Thus the central scene of vision has a special meaning for visual representation. Her death and the story of it are not only violent but also narratively ambiguous. She dies, we might say, several times, or rather, she never stops dying. It is this aspect of her dying that makes this drawing so central to the reflections on death and on representation in "Rembrandt": An event that is punctual and non-narrational is turned into a slow process represented as the climax of narrative and, then, becomes a visual work that challenges the limits of visual representation. Whereas the event is turned from punctual into durative, the representation of this already perverted death in a still medium further explores and undermines the limits of the realm of the speakable. The moment of this endless deferral of death that Rembrandt chose to represent is one in which vision becomes a speech-act. The morning after the gang-rape, the woman's husband opens the door to go on his way, and "*behold*, there was his wife, fallen down, and her hands [were] on the

threshold" (Judges 19:27).⁶ Two verbs, then, generate this drawing: to *open* and to *behold*.

According to Umberto Eco, signs are those things that can be used in order to lie.⁷ This definition helps to understand the "lies" in the drawing, two oddities easily explained away by technical considerations yet insistently meaningful once we look at the image as a discourse: the movement of a dead woman, signified by the lines under her slightly blurred right hand, and the ghostlike transparency of the living man, signified by the continuous line of the stone on which he is supposed to stand. The lines under the woman's hand appear to be a shadow; yet, from a realistic point of view, this is impossible—the house would stand between the sun and the woman. The line continued through the man's body right above his feet can be seen as a technical imperfection, an earlier draft that should have been erased. Well, it hasn't been, so it isn't. Once we see that non-erasure as meaningful, the man recedes further into irreality. The steps on which the woman lies emphasize the solidity of her body, compared to which his image is singularly flat. From irrelevant and hardly visible imperfections, these two oddities become signs: lies that contradict the "official story." Rephrasing Eco's words in Harold Bloom's terms, Jonathan Culler places the lie with the reader: A sign is everything that can be misunderstood.⁸ Misreading is the key to semiosis, just as mis-seeing is the key to opening the woman's body and to representing her death. Misreading is a reading that refuses to read, the attempt to explain away details that don't fit the coherence of the image or the coherence of the reader's ideological commitments. The two details mentioned above, for example, are exemplary signs in this view: They are bound to be misread, and if read, they upset our reading.

In "Rembrandt," then, there are women who are feared and therefore hated who need to be appropriated by violence. These women are potential mates—the bride who must be violated to be *opened*. On the other hand, there are women who are harmless because they have already been violated. These are the victims, women as social figures of marginality with whom the subject "Rembrandt" can identify. With the first class of women, the subject has a relation of contiguity, which implies a continuity he might fear because it endangers him; with the second, he has a metaphoric relation that implies the distance and separation that allows sympathy without entailing danger. Both classes, however, meet in their representation, in death that is: Ultimately, the one must be killed and the other has been killed already. Death becomes an activity, narrativ-

ized and visualized at the same time, that must *take place* (in the double sense of the phrase).

This dynamic aspect of death is readable in the gesture of the woman's hand on the threshold, important in both the text and the drawing. Beyond the dichotomy of literal and figurative-symbolic signs, the detail of the hand becomes a meta-statement on the text's narrativity. Narrativity and display are two conflicting modes of representation that collide and collude in a narrativization of vision. The gesture, as the drawing presents it, is the self-reflexive "lie" that counters the misreading both text and drawing thematize. That misreading is represented in the composition, which we can now read as a meta-statement on the work's theatrical display.

The textual moment picked out for visualization is well chosen. Reading visually, as the introductory exclamation "behold" suggests we might, we see how the man almost steps over the body of his wife—his first misreading of the sight presented to him; then he orders her to stand up—a second misreading, now of his position of power; and when nobody answers, we see him charge her on his donkey to take her home and, in his utter lie, cut her up for semiotic misuse. The drawing foregrounds the confusion about the moment of death rather than helping the viewer domesticate it by adding the short lines under the woman's right hand. In order to represent her death, then, the drawing must let her move.

Opening the body is an emblematic act in other representations of death in "Rembrandt." Taking the Judges drawing as a cue, we can look at these from the perspective of the impossibility to speak death as experience: to say "I am dead." The representation of death will hover between the narrative and the descriptive, breaking down one of the most dogmatic but also most problematic dichotomies of narrative theory. It will also hover between two aspects of its own impossibility: the first person and the present tense.

How, then, can we read "I am dead" rather than "she is dead"? One attempt can be seen in two drawings of the corpse of the executed murderer Elsje Christiaens (figs. 2 and 3).⁹ In the profile, the axe is directed inward, and its upper point, like an arrow, functions as an index. It points to the woman's mouth, the silenced organ of speech. In the other drawing, it points outward; also, the woman's head is framed, violently confined, by the beams from which the axe hangs. This confining function is taken over, in the profile, by the central trunk of the gibbet and the

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2. Rembrandt, *A Woman Hanging from the Gallows*, 1654–6, drawing, Benesch 1105. New York, courtesy Metropolitan Museum of Art.

3. Rembrandt, *A Woman Hanging from the Gallows*, 1654–6, drawing, Benesch 1106. New York, Dr. A. Hamilton Rice (?).

ropes that hold her body in place. In each work, the confinement of the body is emphasized by the very challenge put to it. The drawings demonstrate the need to hold a body that tends to escape the limits designed by the ropes. And in both cases, the woman's hand is the counterinstrument. The hands of the murdered criminal seem to escape the hold of the very ropes that cause her arms to move upward. This is especially striking in the profile drawing, where a sense of movement seems actually inscribed in the woman's right arm. If the right arm is the one that

has wielded the axe to kill, the left arm is, by comparison, the dead one, contained by the axe that is hung on its side.

In both works, emphasis falls on the woman's womb. The very deadness of the body, its quality of "hangedness," makes the womb protrude and, thereby, at least visually escape the confinement of death. The axe is the instrument of confinement in the drawings. Syntactically, the axes are juxtaposed to the wombs, but as the instruments of confinement, they also subordinate the "clause" of *Elsje's* body. In the frontal drawing, the axe wards off exterior attempts to bring the body to life by gaining access to it—"she is dead"—while in the profile drawing, it prevents the body from coming to life, from speaking that is, from saying: "I am dead."

These drawings are descriptive and describe the state of death within the ritual of public display as exorcizing guilt. Description is used here as the mode that helps bridge the gap between the evenemential yet inner "I am dying" and the descriptive yet outer "she is dead," thus getting as close as possible to the impossible "I am dead" through the interiorization of guilt. Description, then, serves to portray the inner experience and the outer display as a uniquely self-divided whole.

Through this mediation, the ritual is stripped of its exorcizing effect, which would discharge the identification. By diverting the temporal mode of narrative, which proposes identification as a provisional rite of passage, to descriptive stillness, death becomes the experience of the very ambiguity between state and event. As in melancholia, the guilt-ridden death of the other is turned inward, thus killing, threatening to kill, or at least affecting, the "I."

There are two pairs of paintings on death, one of each belonging among the most famous "Rembrandts": the slaughtered oxen and the "anatomies." The slaughtered oxen (figs. 4 and 5) display the opened body and represent the naked flesh of death.¹⁰ The "personnel" are the same in each work: the gigantic, all-dominating mass of dead flesh, and the woman in the background, apparently a maid. The colors, yellowish and reddish, are those of the pallor of death and of the blood of violence. The direction of the "gibbet" and consequently of the body does not brutally face the viewer. This obliqueness allows us to see the outside and the inside at the same time.

Two major differences between the two paintings are the substance of paint and the distribution of semiotic labor between the members of the "cast." The work in Glasgow is painted in a medium mode of

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4. Rembrandt, *Slaughtered Ox*, 1643, painting, Bredius 458. Glasgow, courtesy Glasgow Art Gallery and Museum.

5. Rembrandt, *Slaughtered Ox*, 1655, painting, Bredius 457. Paris, Musée du Louvre; photo courtesy Réunion des Musées Nationaux.

paint application, neither extremely “fine” nor extremely “rough.” As a consequence, the substance of the paint does not strike the eye, nor does the work draw attention to itself. The painting remains representational, realistic, in the way a “third person” novel without narratorial intrusions is assumed to operate. The deictic traces of the subject of representation, although never really absent, are secondary. The dead body is clearly delimited, and although it is flayed like its sister in Paris, the paint confines it like a skin. We see death as a given, not as a construct. But its very givenness allows us not to see it. Since it goes without saying, as the saying goes, death does not impose itself.

Similarly, the maid is represented at work, turning away from us as well as from the corpse. She seems to just be there, as an effect of the real, as a token of “life” within the scene of death. She becomes the para-

doxical female presence of still-life that, according to Norman Bryson, is repressed yet whose traces are returning in the very subject matter of the genre that is the fruit of her activity, of her life.¹¹ She has to be in the background to be part of the display. The spatial continuity between her body and the mass of flesh is slightly troubling, especially since she, too, has her head down and her bottom up, but this pose can easily pass unnoticed.

The Louvre painting is much more famous, primarily because of the daring roughness of the handling of the paint, generally considered a feature of the late “Rembrandt.” It is particularly striking here, given the relatively small size of the work. In spite of the imposing quality of this paint, it is possible to shy away from its radical implications. For example, it has been interpreted as expressive and evocative, and Alpers rightly points out that this is obviously how Soutine reoriented the motif in his *Flayed Ox* of 1939. This choice implies that Soutine has been blind to the imposing self-referentiality of paint-handling that, as the French say, *crève les yeux*; it “pierces the eye.” This piercing obviousness should not surprise us: we know that what pierces the eye blinds. Thus we know from Freud’s metaphor of the name of regions on a map and from Lacan’s analysis of Poe’s “Purloined Letter” that the over-visible can become invisible.¹² The “Rembrandt” drawing of the *Entombment* (fig. 6) similarly foregrounds Jesus’ head so much that it becomes invisible.¹³

Soutine, then, despite his strong response to the paint-handling, behaves like Poe’s positivist prefect who is too systematic not to be blind. He has treated the impasto as a “third person” narrative mode: By displacing the relation between the work and its subjectivity, he took the work as expressing *something else*; the corpse, rather than itself.

In contrast, a self-referential interpretation raises the question of the relation between this painting-self and the representation of death. It is not enough to claim that the case made for art as work dictated the “rough” mode. The substance of the paint is also the substance of death. And the substance of death is dead, stinking flesh. What we have to deal with—what the work does not spare us—is the effect of the putrifying smell of painting. The medium for overcoming death that painting had become in the age of portraiture becomes here the medium for overcoming the nonrepresentability of death.¹⁴

The substance of paint as flesh affects every aspect of the dead body. The roughness not only conveys the making of the work; it also loosens the boundaries of the body—its outside—and makes the fusion that is

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6. Rembrandt, *Entombment*, ca. 1640, drawing, Benesch 482. Amsterdam, courtesy Rijksprentenkabinet.

inherent to rotting. The flesh represented, therefore, stinks, and its stink contaminates the representation itself. In addition, while the relatively “neutral” brushwork in the Glasgow Ox allowed us to differentiate between inside and outside of the body, the Louvre work exposes dead flesh on both sides. The opened body is turned inside out: There is no outside left, all we see is inside. Instead of being in a butchery, we are within a body.

The position of the maid partakes of the same effect. The reassuring distinctness of the maid from the ox in the early work secures boundaries: *She* is alive, *it* is dead. It is meaningful that the butchered body in the earlier work is more filled, less empty than in the later work. As it is also farther from the spectatorial plane, the confrontation with dead flesh is less emphatic and self-imposing. The increase in the substantiality of dead flesh comes with an increase in emptiness, hence, a decrease in *represented* substance. Increase-with-decrease is a display: a display that unplays the fabula of the play.

The emptiness of the body in the Louvre painting is emphasized in yet another way. In the lower part of the body are two pins or nails. These nails are not necessary to fix the body to the stand, for that function is taken care of by the ropes with which it is attached at the top. The

nails' only possible function, then, is to hold the body open. Rather than an effect of the real, they may be assigned an effect of openness. They also entail an effect of violence, bringing the work one step closer to a crucifixion.

The effect of the nails is to emphasize the openness of the body, which is not "really" greater in this work but represented more self-consciously. It is thus that the decrease of represented substance becomes an increase of deadness. The body is here an empty body. The nails display the inside of the body and the nothingness it reveals. And as Gérard Dessons remarks, no body could be more appropriate to represent the nothingness inside the body than the castrated, de-gendered ox.¹⁵

The maid is not working here as maids do, cleaning up the blood of the butchery. She is looking, or trying to. The intensity of her effort to see is emphatic, but the direction of her look is unclear and her eyes are empty. She bends her head, and thereby narrativizes this work. But her eyes are not quite focused on the dead flesh. She seems to look at the viewer, but not quite clearly. The eyes are intense, yet empty, as if "looking" were a problematic activity. Between state and event, emptiness is narrated here.

There is another lie readable here. The maid's head is fully represented, but her body is unreadable. She seems to be cut off underneath her bosom, at the beginning of her belly.¹⁶ The white apron that makes the top of her belly protrude disappears in the dark background further down. Where her body ends, that of the ox begins. There is contiguity here again, but this time more problematic, less easy to ignore, than in the other painting. The similarity in position between the maid and the ox in the earlier work is replaced here by complementarity. Where the outer representation of her body stops, the gigantic inner body seems to take over. According to this painting's syntax, the opened inside is a replacement of the woman's body. The emptiness of the ox's body becomes the representation of the womb: Only announced, alluded to by the woman's apron, it "pierces the eye" in the dead body. Death is, here, the very stage upon which gender and representation change roles.

"She is dead": It has been stated already in the drawings, but here the staging of death reaches a more disturbing closeness—for the woman looks at the viewer while also, through the emptiness of her eyes, taking on an iconic relationship of signification with the empty body. In other words, she becomes "us" while becoming "it." If the viewer is willing to go along with this effect, the miracle is accomplished, and the painting says: "I am dead." But since this statement requires the violent

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7. Rembrandt, *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp*, 1632, painting, Bredius 403. The Hague, courtesy Mauritshuis.

representation of emptiness—through the nails—simultaneously with the radical representation of decay—through the substance-in-fusion of rotting flesh—it can only be said in the grammar of emptiness: in the feminine form.

The Louvre *Ox* leaves, however, one dimension underexplored. The toll decried by this radical statement on death as gendered is an abstraction, albeit concretely necessary, from the social construction of representation. To be sure, such an abstraction is part of the “argument”: The secrecy of the empty female body is the necessary condition for its centrality to the challenge of representation.

This work, staged in a liminal, intermediate space, positions death outside of life. The limbo of the dark stable seems far removed from the social theater, and the unreality of the maid in the second work, who is cut in half, contributes to this effect. Just as the husband in the Judges drawing was crossed out by a line so that he became “just lines,” a pure representation, so the maid, here, is cut through by the metonymy of the gigantic, blown-up version of her body. But the very aloneness of the

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8. Rembrandt, *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Jan Deyman*, 1656, painting, Bredius 414. Amsterdam, courtesy Rijksmuseum.

woman and her “other half” on the stage of death obliterates the radical contrast between dead flesh and the life of the masterful manipulation of representation.

The present tense and the first person still leave implicit a third deictic dimension, the “here” of the social, signified in relation to the second person whose metonymic extension the subject is and in relation to whom the subject needs to be defined, demarcated, and confined. This dimension is central in a final set of two works, in which the display of death and self-representation are staged on the social theater, where death produces mastery but where the genderedness so uncannily foregrounded in the late *Ox* seems pushed back: the “anatomies” of Drs. Tulp (1632) and Deyman (1656) (figs. 7 and 8).¹⁷

The anatomies are about death in an obvious way. Yet the very qualities that defined death in the Louvre *Ox*, genderization and the loosening of boundaries, seem less obvious here. In neither of the anatomies is the paint-handling foregrounded, and the social setting, although suggesting a smell of death, does not emphasize the force of the represen-

tation, the smell of painting. These works are also in the two colors of death—pallor and blood—as well as in the shape of death—bodily openness. Unlike the “Oxen,” the corpses are human, and, unlike each other, the place, meaning, and function of the open wounds differ.¹⁸

The anatomies display a conventionalized theatrical event. They are reassuring as well as unsettling paintings. The *Tulp* demonstrates mastery over death and death as a source of knowledge. The surgeon becomes the *other* of the artist, the other artist, or the *you* in relation to whom the subject of painting is positioned; this mastery is *here* yet irretrievably not in *me*. Yet the intense looks of all figures do not confirm this clear place of mastery. The generalized looking focuses and disperses the attention, directed toward a definite object yet away from the corpse as well as from the master. It betokens as well as disperses Tulp’s mastery. Fascination is combined with the impossibility of *facing* mastery over death. The surgeon’s left hand, making the gesture of understanding, of subtle grasping—the gesture of holding and wielding the painter’s brush, the knower’s pen, or the surgeon’s knife—forms a triangle with two other hands: his right hand, which actually makes the gesture rather than representing or imitating it, and the dissected hand of the corpse. Being about to pull the muscles so as to make them realize—or figure—the gesture, the surgeon is about to move beyond the domain of knowledge: He will make the corpse move. For his left hand to make sense, the corpse must be brought to life. This rivalry with the Divine Maker is also a competition with the artist, who is solely capable, or trying to be, of resolving the paradoxes of representation. No wonder the men are holding their breath.

Dessons’ little 1987 book *L’odeur de la peinture*, whose title I borrow for this essay, has been inspired primarily by this painting. This choice of focus is astonishing, for the main theme of the book is the opening of the body. If this painting is of an anatomy, it presents the dead body as remarkably closed. The fleshy belly and thighs have a substance that is as far removed as possible from the Louvre *Ox*. The flesh is not rotting. The skin is intact except for the arm, which is clearly set off from the rest of the body both by color and by disproportioned size. The boundaries between dead corpse and live doctors are clear-cut, so to speak, both in composition and in color.

Strangely, Dessons finds the later *Deyman* less daring. Time and again he verges on the (in)sight of the “indecenty” of the *Ox* yet represses the eye-piercing obviousness of its return in the *Deyman*. Thus he speaks of the white and red stuff that fills the “abdominal [and abominable]

cavity” of the *Ox* only. Dessons turns the *Tulp*, and by extension the series of works on the opened body, into a statement on art alone, de-voiding it of its disquieting references to the issues at stake in the death works. To open up *his* closing statements into a more complex perspective on the fascination these works exercise, I will, in my turn, wind up my argument in interaction with this text. Speaking of the maid in the Louvre *Ox*, whose deadly, because intransitive, look he has just evoked, he writes of “her indefinite status: she does not have the social authority of the surgeons of Amsterdam, and her ambiguous status: half visible, she is half hidden, inscribing the painting within the violation of a taboo.”¹⁹

Pushing back this guilty violation of clarity that comes with the opening of the body in slaughter, in sex, and in representation, Dessons chooses the *Tulp* as the exemplary discursive representation, as the “model for the discourse on death and on *jouissance*, model . . . for the constitution of a writing of the body, the surgical practice proposes for the painter a model of manipulation, where the right usage of the hand is *figuring*, not *decomposing* [italics mine].”²⁰ Figuring, when opposed to decomposing, not only stands for design, for drawing, as opposed to paint-handling—so central for “Rembrandt”—but also (insofar as drawing is so much closer to writing than paint-handling) for writing as opposed to a radically different representational practice. The opposition seems to repress the complementarity of the two, as expressed in Cynthia Chase’s title *Decomposing Figures*. Strangely enough, what Dessons is doing here in his essay on the body is trying to get rid of what “Rembrandt” proposes as the *body* of representation in favor of a defleshed writing. This move reverts to an old version of the word-image opposition that privileges the word. If we look at the impasto paintings, for example, the *Suicide of Lucretia* in Minneapolis, the anatomies can hardly compete with these in power of representation precisely because of the way decomposing is *done*, not *figured*. Against Dessons, then, I would say: Indeed, decomposing *is* (part of) the right usage of the hand, and if only the social authority of the surgeons could be integrated with the physical authority of the inside of the female body, we would have surmounted the last remnant of resistance that hampered the representation of death because it hampered an understanding of representation beyond the word-image opposition: death’s social place as source of knowledge, as the key to reading, and as the model of art.

This integration, then, is accomplished in the *Deyman*. It is often noticed how the opened abdomen demonstrates that this anatomy oc-

curred according to the convention but that the surgeon is not dissecting the body but, rather, the brain.²¹ It is also true, however, that this either/or scheme may obscure an important connection between the two body parts, as well as what they stand for. The dark red cavity is symmetrical with the yellowish substance of the brain. Not only are they of the same dimension and form, the latter would nicely *fit inside* the former, thus, again, providing metaphor with a metonymical basis. If we recall the two colors of the substances in the *Ox*, it becomes possible to read this complementarity of form as another token of self-referentiality.

The figuration is a triangle, not a binary opposition. Attentively looking *into the abominable cavity*, the doctor on the left is solemnly holding the basin of the skull. The skull-cup is juxtaposed to the abdomen as its metonymical metaphor, and thus it draws attention to the importance of looking as a rhetorical device of figuration. The eyes of the corpse are shadowed, but the aggressive directness of the pose, the arms, feet, and head turned toward the viewer, suggests that the corpse itself is looking—both at and with the viewer. The body is thus shown in an ambiguous way: alive or dead, male or female, it cannot be told with certainty. The left breast looks quite fleshy, and the immense cavity recalls the emptiness of the *Ox*.

The confrontational pose draws the viewer into the work. It works with the relation I-you within the here. What we have, then, is an integration of womb and brain, of the *Ox* as the experience of death and its intensity (through identification with femininity—"I-she am dead") and the anatomy as the knowledge of death, with its authority placed elsewhere.

Finally, the surgeon has been cut off so that, for the modern viewer, the you has merged into the I. This effect did, of course, not occur when the painting was whole, but maybe it is fortunate that it is not whole now, for its intensity has increased with the decrease in its size. Thus, this work, which Dessons does not see, accomplishes what the author himself writes about toward the end of his essay, apropos the programmatic quality of the *Tulp* but in important ways *mal à propos*: "It was necessary to make a painting where the subject be no more defined as an act of imitation, in allegiance with the order of the sign, but as a conflictual subject, taken in a double relation to the social and the unconscious."²² What this work, and by extension all death works in "Rembrandt," suggests is precisely this *conflict within* that, in the age of Descartes and the great anatomies, inaugurates modern representa-

tion; this double relation that is not a matter of juxtaposition but that contemporary theory has so much trouble freeing from an opposition. To get out of such a dichotomy, we may take the Louvre Ox as a pretext for the *Deyman* and then use it as a comment to read the earlier *Tulp* as a work struggling to stay away from the genderedness of death and of (its) representation; the representation of that which, as this reading of “Rembrandt” suggests, will become the mastery of painting beyond the social mastery of the surgeon.

NOTES

This paper is a revised version of a part of the final chapter of my book *Reading “Rembrandt”: Beyond the Word-Image Opposition* (Cambridge, 1991).

1. *The Levite Finds His Wife in the Morning*, drawing, Benesch 997, Berlin, Kupferstichkabinett.

2. Svetlana Alpers, *Rembrandt’s Enterprise: The Studio and the Market* (Chicago, 1988).

3. The claim that this man is in fact the murderer of his wife has been argued at length in my book *Death and Dissymmetry: The Politics of Coherence in the Book of Judges* (Chicago, 1988).

4. I consider as part of this corpus all works traditionally ascribed to Rembrandt and therefore part of the cultural construction “Rembrandt,” which thus becomes a culturally flexible text rather than an historically validated metonymical figure (where the author receives authority if and only if the existential, “real” contiguity between the person of the artist and the works he produced can be certified to the satisfaction of twentieth-century criteria). In order to mark this use of the corpus, I will henceforward put the name of the alleged artist in quotation marks.

5. See *Death and Dissymmetry*.

6. I translate as “wife” the word *pilegesh*, usually rendered as “concubine,” a translation that I believe to be utterly ideological and misogynistic. These women are not “secondary” wives, of poor origin and close to slaves, as is commonly assumed; they are wives according to a different marriage system where after “marriage” the woman stays in the house of her father, her “husband” visiting her intermittently. This system can be called patrilocal. The hypothesis that Judges 19 deals with a violent transition from patrilocal to virilocal marriage explains a great number of oddities in the text. For an extensive argumentation, see *Death and Dissymmetry*.

7. Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington, 1976), “Introduction.”

8. Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (Ithaca and London, 1983).

9. *A Woman Hanging from the Gallows*, drawing, 1654–1656, Benesch 1106, private collection; *A Woman Hanging from the Gallows*, drawing, 1654–1656, Benesch 1105, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art.

10. *Slaughtered Ox*, panel, 73.3 × 51.8 cm, 1643(?), Bredius 458, Glasgow, Art Gallery and Museum; *Slaughtered Ox*, panel, 94 × 69 cm, 1655, Bredius 457, Paris, Musée du Louvre.

11. Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life* (Cambridge, Mass., and Cambridge, U.K., 1990), chap. 4.

12. The debate on Poe’s story and Lacan’s interpretation has been published in *The Purloined Poe: Lacan, Derrida & Psychoanalytic Reading*, ed. John P. Muller and William J. Richardson (Baltimore, 1988).

13. *Entombment*, drawing, undated, Benesch 482, Amsterdam, Rijksprentenkabinet.

14. On the relation between portraiture as a genre and death, see Ernst van Alphen, *Francis Bacon and the Loss of Self* (Cambridge, Mass., 1992).

15. Gérard Dessons, *L’odeur de la peinture: Essai sur une question posée par Rembrandt à la peinture représentative* (Paris, 1987).

16. As in the Judges drawing, this cut can be explained away quite easily. Realistically speaking, the maid is standing behind a typically Dutch half-door. This kind of realistic explanation shies away from the *effect* of this feature, however—from the cut as sign, that is.

17. *The Anatomical Lesson of Dr. Nicholaes Tulp*, canvas, 169.5 × 216.5 cm., 1632, Bredius 403, The Hague; *The Anatomical Lesson of Dr. Jan Deyman*, canvas, 100 × 134 cm., 1656, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum. The *Tulp*, considered Rembrandt’s first great success, has been studied much more extensively than the *Deyman*. See William Schupbach, *The Paradox of Rembrandt’s “Anatomy of Dr. Tulp”* (London, 1982); and William S. Heckscher, *Rembrandt’s “Anatomy of Dr. Nicholaas Tulp: An Iconological Study* (New York, 1958).

18. For a different view of the relation between representation and disfiguration, see Michael Fried’s *Realism, Writing, Disfiguration: On Thomas Eakins and Stephen Crane* (Chicago, 1987).

19. “Son statut indéfini: elle n’a pas l’autorité sociale des chirurgiens d’Amsterdam, et trouble: visible à demi, elle est à demi cachée, inscrit le tableau dans la violation d’un interdit” (Dessons, *L’odeur de la peinture*, 76).

20. “Modèle pour le discours sur la mort et sur la jouissance, modèle . . . pour la constitution d’une écriture du corps, la pratique chirurgicale propose au peintre un modèle de la manipulation, où le bon usage de la main, c’est figurer, non triturer” (ibid., 49). I have chosen to translate *triturer* as “decomposing” in order to oppose it to “figuring” in an allusion to Cynthia Chase’s masterful

Decomposing Figures: Rhetorical Readings in the Romantic Tradition (Baltimore, 1986).

21. Horst Gerson relates the *Deyman* to the first modern *Anatomical Lesson*, J. J. van Calcar's title page for Andreas Vesalius's *De Humani Corporis Fabrica* of 1543. See his *De schilderijen van Rembrandt* (Alphen aan de Rijn: Icob). Vesalius is represented dissecting the uterus of a woman—considered the site of evil—while *Deyman* dissects the site of the soul (398). It is needless to say how much more relevant this comparison becomes in the present context.

22. “Que le sujet ne soit plus l'exercice de la mimesis, mais bien la peinture elle-même dans sa matérialité et sa gestuelle, dans ses rapports pulsionnels avec le sujet peignant. Il fallait un tableau où le sujet se définisse non plus comme acte de copie, allégeance à l'ordre du signe, mais comme instance conflictuelle, prise dans un double rapport au social et à l'inconscient” (Dessons, *L'odeur de la peinture*, 71).