Rembrandt's 'Eques Polonus'

To H. Gerson in friendship

I

Of all the famous works of Rembrandt the so-called Polish Rider in the Frick Collection (Fig. 1) is one of the most puzzling*. It is the case with several of Rembrandt's pictures and drawings—especially in the later period of his art—that their precise subject-matter is difficult to establish1. Here, however, not only the theme but the very category into which the picture should be placed remains uncertain. 'Is it an equestrian portrait, a historical figure, the soldier of Christ?' asks A. B. de Vries, and he continues: 'All these possibilities have been put forward and they prove that the boundaries between religious, historical paintings and portraits have faded away'. 'This young horseman does not, in the first place, present us with the question of who he is but what he is: a wanderer in the lonely scenery, lost in thought and soon hidden from our view . . . '2. For Jacob Rosenberg also it 'remains an open question' whether the Polish Rider 'can be considered a genre motif, or belongs to the category of portraiture'3.

Three studies devoted to this fascinating picture during the last few decades have approached it from different points of view, proposing various interpretations of its form and content. Professor Julius S. Held's fundamental article published in 19444 contained statements which have, to a large extent, found acceptance and have found their way into general art literature. In Held's opinion the picture is not a portrait but a poetical composition endowed with some allegorical meaning, difficult to formulate precisely but close to that of a Christian Soldier. Wilhelm R. Valentiner, in his essay, purported to see in the New York canvas a historical portrait, that of the mediaeval Dutch hero, Gijsbert van Amstel, the mythical founder of Amsterdam5. In the last contribution Zdzislaw Zygu1skijr. has gathered evidence from the history of costume and weapons6 on the basis of which he endeavours to prove that

* The present paper was presented as a lecture on May 22nd 1967 at the Courtauld Institute of Art in London; subsequently the lecture was delivered in Cracow (1967) and in Moscow (1968). Since its first presentation several colleagues have expressed their opinion and/or helped me in many ways to improve the content or the presentation in this study. There are art historians who accept my idea and there are others who do not. I have hesitated long time to publish the paper, taking into account the critical opinions. Since however the opinions of scholars vary as concerns some religious problems, since a Polish historian of religious thought Doc. dr Z. Ogonowski has not found errors in my presentation of facts in his field, and since my hypothesis has been already made public— with my agreement—in the new catalogue of the Frick collection as well as in the book by R. H. Fuchs, Rembrandt in Amsterdam, Rotterdam, 1968, p. 49-50, I decided to accept the kind invitation of 'Oud-Holland' and to venture the publication of my paper. Needless to say I should like to ask the reader to be aware all the time of the hypothetical character of my theory. I am indebted for help and criticism to professors E. H. Gombrich (London), J. S. Held (New York) O. J. de Jong (Groningen), Z. Ogonowski (Warsaw) and at the first place to H. Gerson (Groningen). To Mr. Hugh Paget, Director of the British Institute in Warsaw I am indebted for his help in giving this study the English wording.

1. It is of course impossible to tell whether Rembrandt actually wanted his works to be ambiguous. Often he omitted to give satisfactory cues for the understanding of the subject. This problem is discussed recently by Christian Tümpel, 'Ikonographische Beiträge zu Rembrandt', Kunstchronik, xix, 1966, pp. 300-302.


the picture is not a fantastic composition made up of elements of Eastern European costumes and armour but a true portrait based upon direct observation not only of Polish costume and weapons but of the harness and equipment of a horse and the manner of bestriding it characteristic of Poland. Żygulski, who produced evidence of several examples of costume and weapons which have survived, identical or almost identical with those represented in the Rembrandt’s picture, maintains that, because of this fidelity to historical detail the picture is to be considered as a portrait of a real person. He did not, however, deny the possibility of there being other levels of meaning and he admits that the picture could have been conceived as an allegory.

It is not the intention of the writer to refute the view of Valentiner which he holds to be mistaken. He takes as his points of departure the findings of Held and Żygulski in so far as he finds them complementary rather than in conflict. He thinks that there are important truths in the articles of both Held and Żygulski, neither of whom, however, gives a satisfactory answer to the question of the origin of the picture.

In order to go a stage further than my predecessors I must first recapitulate the main points in their statements upon which I would like to base my further investigation. Held’s study was an important contribution in the first place because he has shown convincingly that there is no continuity in the use of the modern name of the picture—the Polish Rider—or of the term Lisowczyk (frequently used in Polish art literature) which means a soldier of the Lisowski corps, a name which appeared first in the nineteenth century. The picture was bought probably in Holland and brought to Poland at the very end of the eighteenth century (in 1791) by Michał Kazimierz Oginski, the Grand Hetman of Lithuania, as A. Ciechanowiecki7 discovered a few years ago. At that time it was called Cosaque à cheval. Held studied the elements of the costume and weapons of the rider in the picture and did not find definite evidence of his being Polish. He therefore came to the conclusion that the rider was meant to be a representative, in a general way, of an Eastern European army, Polish, Hungarian or otherwise. Closing in this way the problem of the identity of the rider Held went on to investigate the expressive content and the implied allegorical meaning of the work.

It is for this reason that Held’s conclusions are subjected to criticism in Żygulski’s article. The latter, a specialist in the history of Polish costume and wapons, claims that the New York picture is a realistic portrait and he furnishes precise analyses of the appearance, costume, arms, position in the saddle and gestures of the rider as well as of the appearance of the horse. Żygulski’s findings, based as they are on specialized Polish literature on the subject which was not accessible to Held and upon the large comparative material, seem to prove that the rider in the Frick picture was actually a Polish rider. While it is true that the members of the Lisowski corps are not recorded later than 1630, it is equally true that their characteristic features were very similar to those of the Polish light cavalry in the following decades. Żygulski also points out that the horse represented in the picture is ‘perhaps not the best representative of the Polish breed . . . nevertheless it is a good and genuine example of the light cavalry horse’.