Rembrandt’s ‘Christ Presented to the People’ – 1655
A Meditation on Justice and Collective Guilt

Rembrandt’s etching of Christ presented to the people is a monumental work, full of enigmas that have not as yet been satisfactorily interpreted. One might have expected that the many changes which it underwent through its seven stages would have been explored as the result of an organic process of continued wrestling with the basic problems implied in the drama represented.

To be sure, several aspects, such as the composition and especially the aesthetic merits of the architectural setting have been discussed in some detail, but hardly any attention has been given to the central figure, in all probability Barabbas or to the meaning of the changes in some features of the Herms and in the physiognomies of the protagonists and the bearded giant, all introduced in the sixth state. Even where the removal of the frontal crowd in the fifth state has been discussed, this was treated mainly as a problem of a more or less pleasing design. The question of why some radical changes occurred at the same time has not been posed at all. In short, the bearing of these changes upon the inner meaning of the portentous scene on the Tribuna, and their exploration as a document reflecting the creative process of the artist, has never been seriously attempted, nor has the puzzling fact that not even the seventh and last state can be considered as the final accomplishment of the work.

The print exists in seven states and the changes made in each state permit an insight into the fermenting mind of the artist. Our question will be: do the changes embodied in the seven states reflect the struggle of the artist to find a more pleasing aesthetic composition, or are they determined by a sort of inner logic? In other words, are they all stations in a path progressing towards a certain idea or meaning or message of the work? Do these changes reveal this inner wrestling, or—in sharper formulation—does the sequence of the states, their relation and comparison, reveal more of the meaning of the whole than each state taken by itself? Are the states variations on a theme, a closer and closer approach to the embodiment of an idea which was already present in some way in the first state, or did new ideas enter during the struggle for the best embodiment of the first idea?

The theater in which this tragic scene unfolds is a courtyard with no far vistas, almost oppressive in its pedantic symmetry (Fig. 1). The side walls are only suggested. From the back wall, a large, precisely square block springs forward with a wide, black central door leading to the tribune flanked by two stone blocks, a large and a small one. The symmetry is enhanced by the corresponding doors and win-

1. This essay is basically the paper I read on January 29, 1960 at the annual meeting of the College Art Association in New York. Additions concern references to Rembrandt literature published since that date—for instance, Kenneth Clark’s recent Rembrandt and the Italian Renaissance, London, 1966, and to theological problems such as Deicide and the collective guilt of the Jews discussed during the Ecumenical Council, Vatican II, 1963–1965. Of the friends with whom I have discussed my interpretation, I am especially grateful to Professor Hans van de Waal, who made many stimulating as well as critical suggestions. Miss Mary McClane and Mr. James Draper most kindly helped in the preparation of the script.
dows in the back wall, left and right, and by the two allegorical herms high up on large pedestals projecting from the central wall.

The symmetrical architecture has often been violently criticized—for instance, by Carl Neumann, who calls it "a horribly intentional, theatrical schematism"^2, and by Richard Hamann, who speaks of "a negation of space" and of "large, empty planes which try to engulf you from all sides"^3.

Instead of defending Rembrandt, we shall proceed with our analysis: this rigid enclosure of stone is filled with teeming life—people in various stages of agitation. We may distinguish three groups: in the foreground is a vivacious, gesticulating crowd so compact that it takes an effort to disentangle the arms, shoulders and legs—it seems, at least at first glance, almost like one many-headed beast. Yet it is not an amorphous, anonymous crowd such as we find in works of Goya or Daumier; there are many individualizing touches. We distinguish old and young, men and women, several children^4, and many concrete details such as hands and sticks, knives, sabers, waterpitchers and pieces of garments. Apart from the single persons watching from each window opening^4a, and the protagonists on the stage, we have two main masses of onlookers: one large group extending from the bearded patriarch in the left lower corner towards the right, up to the end of a balustrade separating them from a ditch in front of the stage, and a smaller group, less compact, on the steps descending from the door at the back right, continuing down into a cluster of people in the right corner and terminating in one single, detached person in front of the right corner of the stage—an agitated, elderly man whose gesturing is forcefully underlined by the deep dramatic shade on the front wall of the tribune.

A glance at the works of some of Rembrandt's predecessors may be rewarding. Well known, of course, are the representations by Dürer, Lucas van Leyden, Nicholas de Bruyn and Callot. Dürer represented the Ecce Homo twice—in his large Passion, an excited, turbulent discussion, and in his small Passion, an extremely condensed, quiet and intense meditation on the problem.

Lucas van Leyden, in his early etching of 1510, created a masterpiece of construction in linear perspective, anticipating many details of Rembrandt's composition, and it was certainly known to Rembrandt. Lucas already had the tribune, the central portal and the two side doors and the spatial gap and barrier separating the crowd from the stage. He emphasizes the crowd in the center of the front, just as Rembrandt did up to the fifth state, when he radically removed the middle crowd. In Lucas' print, the scene is set in a wide town square with far vistas, and distant buildings and mountains. The whole composition is wonderfully asymmetrical, with a near building at the left and a far outlook on the right. There is no Barabbas.

Nicolaes de Bruyn approached the subject at least twice. One of the versions (Fig. 2) resembles that of Lucas in several regards: the oblique view from near left to far right, the towerlike palace of Pilate—here with two medallions of Roman emperors left and right of the central door, and the same wide

4. It may be significant that all children face the tribune, unlike those in the Ecce Homo representations of Lucas van Leyden and Nicolaes de Bruyn, where most infants do not focus on the central scene.
4a. Dr. S. J. Gudlaugsson kindly pointed out to me that the motif of the lady and soldier in the left upper window, illustrating Pilate's wife and the messenger (Matthew 27 : 19), was evidently taken from J. Wierix's *Ecce Homo* drawing in the Vienna Albertina (Fig. 28).