

WHAT

REMAINS OF

REMBRANDT

TORN INTO FOUR

EQUAL PIECES

AND

FLUSHED DOWN

THE TOILET

Jean Genet

REMBRANDT

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REMBRANDT TORN INTO
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AND FLUSHED DOWN
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WHAT REMAINS OF A
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THE TOILET...

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A work of art should exalt only those truths which are not demonstrable, and which are even "false," those which we cannot carry to their ultimate conclusions without absurdity, without negating both them and ourself. They will never have the good or bad fortune to be applied. Let

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them live by virtue of the song that they have become and that they inspire.

Something which seemed to resemble decay was in the process of cankering my former view of the world. One day, while riding in a train, I experienced a revelation: as I looked at the passenger sitting opposite me, I realized that every man *has the same value* as every other. I did not suspect (or rather, I did I was obscurely aware of it, for suddenly a wave of sadness welled up within me and, more or less bearable, but substantial, remain-

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ed with me) that this knowledge would entail such a methodical disintegration. Behind what was visible in this man, or further—further and at the same time miraculously and distressingly close—I discovered in him (graceless body and face, ugly in certain details, even vile: dirty moustache, which in itself would have been unimportant but which was also hard and stiff, with the hairs almost horizontal above the tiny mouth, a decayed mouth; gobs which he spat between his knees on the floor of the carriage that was already filthy with cigarette stubs, paper, bits of bread, in

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short, the filth of a third-class carriage in those days), I discovered with a shock, as a result of the gaze that butted against mine, a kind of universal identity of all men.

No, it didn't happen so quickly, and not in that order. The fact is that my gaze butted (not crossed, butted) that of the other passenger, or rather melted into it. The man had just raised his eyes from a newspaper and quite simply turned them, no doubt unintentionally, on mine, which, in the same accidental way, were looking into his. Did he, then and there, experience the

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same emotion—and confusion—as I? His gaze was not someone else's: it was my own that I was meeting in a mirror, *inadvertently and in a state of solitude and self-oblivion*. I could only express as follows what I felt: I was flowing out of my body, through the eyes, into his *at the same time as he was flowing into mine*. Or rather: I had flowed, for the gaze was so brief that I can recall it only with the help of that tense of the verb. The passenger had gone back to his reading. Stupefied at what I had just discovered, only then did I think of examining the stranger. My

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examination resulted in the impression of disgust described above. Under his drab, creased, shabby clothes his body must have been dirty and worn. His mouth was flabby and protected by an unevenly clipped moustache. I thought to myself that the man was probably weak, perhaps cowardly. He was over fifty. The train continued its indifferent way through French villages. Evening was coming on. I was deeply disturbed at the thought of spending the minutes of twilight, the minutes of complicity, with this partner. What was it that had flowed

out of my body—I had fl...—and what had flowed out of his?

This unpleasant experience was not repeated, neither in its fresh suddenness nor its intensity, but its reverberations within me never ceased. What I had experienced in the train seemed to resemble a revelation: over and above the accidents—which were repulsive—of his appearance, this man concealed, and then let me reveal, what made him identical with me. (I first wrote the preceding sentence, then corrected it by the following, which is more accurate and more disturbing: I knew that I was identical with that man.)

quite a long time. I deliberately kept it secret and tried not to think about it, but somewhere within me there always lurked a blot of sadness which, like an inflated breath, would suddenly darken everything.

"Behind his charming or, to us, monstrous appearance," I said to myself, "every man—as has been revealed to me—retains a quality which seems to be a kind of ultimate recourse and owing to which he is, in a very secret, perhaps irreducible area, what every man is."

I even thought I found this equivalence at the Central Market,

Was it because every man is identical with another?

Without ceasing to meditate during the journey, and in a kind of state of self-disgust, I very soon reached the conclusion that it was this identity which made it possible for every man to be loved *neither more nor less* than every other, and that it is possible for even the most loathsome appearance to be loved, that is, to be cared for and recognized—cherished. That was not all. My train of thought also led me to the following: this appearance, which I had first called vile, was—the word is not too strong—

at the abattoirs, in the fixed but not gazeless eyes of the sheep-heads piled up in pyramids on the sidewalk. Where was I to stop? Whom would I have murdered if I had killed a certain cheetah that walked with long strides, supple as a hoodlum of old?

I have written elsewhere that my dearest friends took refuge—I was sure they did—in a secret wound, "in a very secret, perhaps irreducible realm." Was I speaking of the same thing? A man was identical with every other man, that was what I had discovered. But was this knowledge

was *willed* by the identity (this word recurred persistently, perhaps because I did not yet have a very rich vocabulary) which was forever circulating among all men and which a forlorn gaze accounted for. I even felt that this appearance was the temporary form of the identity of all men. But this pure and almost insipid gaze that circulated between the two travellers, in which their wills were not involved, which their wills would perhaps have prevented, lasted only an instant, and that was enough for a deep sadness to fill me and linger on. I lived with this discovery for

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so rare as to warrant my amazement, and what could it profit me to possess it? To begin with, knowing a thing analytically is different from grasping it in a sudden intuition. (For I had, of course, heard people say, and had read, that all men were equal, and even that they were brothers.) But in what way could it profit me? One thing was more certain: I was no longer able not to know what I had known in the train.

I was incapable of telling how I moved from the knowledge that every man is like every other

man to the idea that every man is all the others. But the idea was now within me. It had the presence of a certainty. It could have been stated more clearly—though I will be deflowering it somewhat—in the following aphoristic way: "Only one man exists and has ever existed in the world. He is, in his entirety, in each of us. Therefore he is himself. Each is the other and the others. In the laxity of the evening, a clear gaze that was exchanged—whether insistent or fleeing—made us aware of this. Except that a phenomenon of which I do not even know the

suddenly wavered. For a long time I remained, as it were, sickened by my discovery, but I felt that it would soon force me to make serious changes, changes which would be in the nature of renunciations. My sadness was an indication. The world was changed. In a third-class carriage between Salon and Saint Rambert d'Albon in had just lost its lovely colors, its charm. I was already bidding them a nostalgic farewell, and it was not without sadness or disgust that I was entering upon ways which would be increasingly lonely and, more important, was

name seems to divide this single man ad infinitum, apparently breaks him up in both accident and form, and makes each of the fragments foreign to us."

I expressed myself clumsily, and what I felt was even more confused and stronger than the idea of which I have spoken. The idea was dreamed rather than thought; it was engendered and drawn along, or dredged, by a rather woolly reverie.

No man was my brother: every man was myself, but temporarily isolated in his individual shell. This observation did not lead me to examine, to review, all

entertaining visions of the world which, instead of heightening my joy, were causing me such dejection.

"Before long," I said to myself, "nothing that once meant so much will matter, love, friendship, forms, vanity, nothing that involves charm and appeal."

But perhaps the gaze with which I had looked at the traveller, a gaze so dreadfully revealing, had been possible owing to a very old cast of mind that was due to my life, or for some other reason. I was not very sure that another man could have felt himself flowing through his eyes into

ethical notions. I felt no tenderness, no affection, for that self which was outside my individual appearance. Nor for the form taken by the other—or its prison. Its tomb? On the contrary, I tended to be as pitiless toward that form as I was toward the one that answered to my name and that has been writing these lines. The sadness that had settled on me was what disturbed me most. Ever since the revelation that I had experienced when looking at the unknown traveller, it was impossible for me to see the world as in the past. Nothing was sure. The world

someone else's body, or that the meaning of this sensation would have been the same for him as that which I have been ascribing to it. I who had always been tempted to doubt the *fullness* of the world was perhaps now trying to slip into particular envelopes, the better to deny individuality.

"Before long, nothing more will matter..." Or perhaps nothing would be changed. If each envelope precisely sheathes a single identity, each envelope is individual and succeeds in establishing in us an opposition that seems irremediable, in creating

an innumerable variety of individuals who are equivalent: each-other. Perhaps the only precious, the only real thing that each man had was this very singularity: "his" moustache, "his" eyes, "his" clubfoot, "his" harelip. And what if his only source of pride were the size of "his" prick? But this gaze went from the unknown traveller to me, and what of the immediate certainty that each-other were only one, both *either* he or I and he and I? How could I forget that mucus?

Let us continue. The knowledge of what I had just learned

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thrusts aside the finery and shows... what? An infinite, an infernal transparency.

I thus felt deep disgust for what I was moving toward and was unaware of and what I could not, thank God, avoid, and then a great sadness about what I was going to lose. Everything around me was losing its enchantment, everything was decaying. Eroticism and its transports seemed rejected, definitively. How could I be unaware, after the experience in the train, that every charming form is, if it contains me, myself? If I wished to recapture this identity, every form, whether

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did not require that I direct my effects according to the revelation in order to dissolve myself in an approximate contemplation. Quite simply, I could no longer avoid knowing what I knew, and, come what may, I had to pursue the consequences, regardless of what they were. Since various incidents in my life had forced me into poetry, perhaps the poet would have to make use of this discovery that was new to him. But above all I had to note the following: the only moments of my life which I could regard as true, ripping

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monstrous or agreeable, lost its power over me.

"The erotic quest," I said to myself, "is possible only when one supposes that each human being has his own individuality, that it is irreducible, and that the physical form accounts for it, and it only."

What did I know about the significance of the erotic? But I felt disgust at the thought that I circulated in every man, that every man was myself. If, for a short time thereafter, every conventionally beautiful male form retained any power over me, it was, so to speak, by

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apart my appearance and exposing... what?

A *solid vacuum* that kept perpetuating me? I had known those moments during a few bursts of really holy anger, and in equally blessed states of fear, and in the rays—the first—that shot from a young man's eyes to mine, in our exchange of glances. And in the traveller's gaze that entered me. The rest, all the rest, seemed to me the effect of a false point of view induced by my appearance, which itself was necessarily fake. Rembrandt was the first to expose me. Rembrandt! That stern finger which

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reverberation. This power was the reflection of the one to which I had so long yielded. A nostalgic farewell to it too. Thus, each person no longer appeared to me in his total, absolute, magnificent individuality: as a fragmentary appearance of a single being, it disgusted me more. Yet I wrote what precedes without ceasing to be troubled, to be haunted, by the erotic themes that were familiar to me and that dominated my life. I was sincere in speaking of a quest on the basis of the revelation "that every man is every other man, as am I"—but I knew I wrote that too in

order to rid myself of eroticism, to try to get it out of my system, in any case to keep it at a distance. A congested, eager penis, standing erect in a thicket of black curls, and what continues it: the thick thighs, then the torso, the whole body, the hands, the thumbs, then the neck, the lips, the teeth, the nose, the hair, and lastly the eyes, which cry out for the transports of love as if asking to be saved or annihilated—and does all of this fight against the fragile gaze which is perhaps capable of destroying that Omnipotence?

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heavy, they smell, they shit. However delicate her face and serious her expression, *The Jewish Bride* has an ass. You can tell. She can raise her skirts at any moment. She can sit down, she has what it takes. *Mewow Trip* too. As for Rembrandt himself, the fact is even more obvious: starting with the first self-portrait, the mass of flesh increases from one painting to the next, until the very last, which it reaches in definitive form, though not void of substance. After losing what was most dear to him—his mother and his wife—it is as if this

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Our gaze can be quick or slow, depending on what we look at as much as on us—perhaps more. That is why I speak of the quickness, for example, that thrusts the object toward us, or of a slowness that makes it ponderous. When our eyes rest on a painting by Rembrandt (on those he did in the last years of his life), our gaze becomes heavy, somewhat bovine. Something holds it back, a weighty force. Why do we keep looking, since we are not immediately enchanted by the intellectual liveliness that knows

strapping fellow were trying to lose himself, unconcerned about the people of Amsterdam, to disappear socially. "To want to be nothing" is an oft-heard phrase. It is Christian. Are we to understand that man seeks to lose, to let dissolve, that which, in one way or other, singularizes him in a *trivial* way, that which gives him his opacity, in order, on the day of his death, to offer God a pure, not even iridescent, transparency? I don't know and don't care. As for Rembrandt, his entire work makes me think that he had not only to get rid of what encumbered him in his

everything and all at once—about, for example, Guardi's *arabesque*? Like the smell of a barn: when I see only the bust of the sitters (Hendrijke, in the Berlin Museum) or only the head, I cannot refrain from imagining them standing on manure. The chests breathe. The hands are warm. Bony, knotted, but warm. The table in *The Syndics* rests on straw, the five men smell of cow dung. Under Hendrijke's skirts, under the fur-edged coats, under the painter's extravagant robe, the bodies are performing their functions: they digest, they are warm, they are

effort to achieve the aforementioned transparency, but also to transform it, to modify it, to make it serve the work. (To free the subject from his anecdotal self and to place him in a light of eternity. Recognized by today, by tomorrow, but also by the dead. A work that was offered to the living of today and tomorrow but not to the dead would be what? A painting by Rembrandt not only stops the time that made the subject flow into the future, but makes it flow back to the remotest ages. By means of this operation Rembrandt achieves solemnity. He

thus discovers why, at every moment, every event is solemn: he knows it from his own solitude. But he must also get this solemnity down on canvas, and it is then that his taste for the theatrical—which was so keen when he was twenty-five—serves him.) It may be that Rembrandt's immense grief—the death of Saskia—turned him away from all ordinary joys and that he observed his mourning by metamorphosing gold chains, swords and plumed hats into valves, or rather into pictorial fetes. I don't know whether this beefy Dutchman wept, but around 1642

Saskia dead, the world and social judgments have little weight. One must imagine him—while Saskia is dying—perched on a ladder in his studio, grouping the figures in *The Nightwatch*. Whether he believes in God? Not when he paints. He knows the Bible and uses it. Obviously, all I have just said is of any importance only if one accepts the fact that all was, by and large, false. Intellectual play and insights on the basis of the work of art are not possible if the work is finished. The work would even seem to confuse the intelligence, or to restrict it. The fact is that I

he experienced the baptism of fire, and his early nature, which was bold and conceited, was little by little transformed. For at the age of twenty the fellow does not look as if he were easy to get on with, and he spends his time before the mirror. He likes himself, he thinks a lot of himself, so young and already in the mirror! Not to spruce up and rush off to a dance, but to gaze at himself, complacently, in solitude: Rembrandt with the three moustaches, with the puckered brows, with the uncombed hair, with the haggard eyes, etc. No anxiety is visible in this sham

have been playing. In a certain way, works of art would make fools of us were it not that their fascination is proof—unverifiable, though undeniable—that this paralysis of the intelligence combines with the most luminous certainty. What that certainty is I do not know. The origin of these lines is the emotion I felt (in London, twelve years ago) in the presence of Rembrandt's finest works. "What's wrong with me? Why do I feel like that? What are those paintings that I can't shake off? Who is that Mevrow Trip? That Mynheer..."

quest of self. If he paints architectural settings, they are always operatic. Then, gradually, without departing from his narcissism or taste for the theatrical, he modifies them: the former in order to attain the anxiety, the frenzy, which he will transcend; the latter, to derive from it the joys—also haggard—of the sleeve of the "Jewish bride." With Saskia dead—I wonder whether he didn't kill her, in some way or other, whether he wasn't glad she died—anyway, his eyes and hand are free. From then on, he launches out into a kind of extravagance as a painter. With

No. I never wondered who those ladies and gentlemen were. And it is perhaps this more or less definite absence of questions that shook me. The more I looked at them, the less the portraits referred me to anyone. To no one. No doubt it took me some time to reach the disheartening and thrilling conclusion that the portraits done by Rembrandt (after the age of fifty) have no reference to identifiable persons. No detail, no cast of features, has reference to a trait of character, to an individual psychology. Are they schematized and thus deperson-

alized? Not at all. One has only to recall the wrinkles of Margaretha Trip. And the more I looked at them, hoping to grasp or approach the personality, as it is called, to discover their individual identity, the more they fled—all of them—in an infinite flight and at infinite speed. Only Rembrandt himself—perhaps because of the acuteness with which he scrutinized his own image—retained an element of individuality: at least attention. But the others, *if I had regarded that profound sadness as negligible, fled without allowing anything of themselves to be grasped.*

distinct matter that is not ashamed to be what it is. Candor of the ploughed, steaming fields in the early morning. I do not yet know what the spectator gains, but the painter gains the freedom of his craft. He presents himself as the mad dauber that he is, mad about color, thus losing the hypocrisy and pretended superiority of the fabricators. This is perceptible in the late paintings. But Rembrandt had to recognize himself as a man of flesh—of flesh?—rather of meat, of hash, of blood, of tears, of sweat, of shit, of intelligence and tenderness, of other things too, ad

Negligible, that sadness? The sadness of being in the world? Nothing other than the attitude which human beings adopt *naturally* when they are alone, waiting to act, this way or that way. Rembrandt himself, in the self-portrait at Cologne in which he is laughing. The face and background are so red that the whole painting makes me think of a sun-dried placenta. You don't have room enough to move far back in the Cologne Museum. You have to take a diagonal view, from an angle. That is how I looked at it, but head down—my head—turned

infantium, but none of them denying the others, in fact each welcoming the others. And I need hardly say that Rembrandt's entire work has meaning—at least for me—only if I know that what I have just written is false.

*Translated from the French
by Bernard Frechtman*

around, if you like. The blood rushed to my head, but how sad that laughing face! It is when he starts depersonalizing his models, when he prunes objects of all identifiable characteristics, that he gives them the most weight, the greatest reality. Something important has happened: the eye recognizes the object at the same time as it recognizes the painting as such. And it can never again see the object otherwise. Rembrandt no longer de-natures the painting by trying to merge it with the object or face that it is supposed to represent: he presents it to us as