

Book review

J.A. Emmens, *Verzameld werk*, ed. M. Emmens Vijl-brief, H.A. Gomperts, P. Hecht, E. de Jongh, G.A. van Oorschoot and P.C. van der Plank, 4 vols., Amsterdam (G.A. van Oorschoot) 1979-81.

The obsessions and fears of everyday life, the details of our emotional and sexual relations, the misgivings we have about our vocation and avocation—none of these are normally thought to be particularly relevant to the professional output of the academic writer. Occasionally we may feel that such matters cast light on the motives for his choice of subject; but for the rest we hope, as scientists or historians, that the claims of objectivity preclude revelation of the self. In most cases the polarities—for that is what they may seem to be—are simply not sufficiently interesting to merit an attempt to elucidate science by investigating personality, or vice versa; only in exceptional cases are we tempted to assess the work of the historian with the aid of information about the idiosyncrasies of his personal life or the vagaries of his feelings. But not even the revelations of a Michelet substantially affect the status of his production—much as we would like to discern some general principle behind the relations between private experience and emotion on the one hand and investigative writing on the other. Neither the advances of phenomenology nor the advent of deconstruction have yet succeeded in achieving as much. In any case, it is only rarely that the academic writer is moved to record in other than fugitive form those intimate thoughts and reflections that his professional life would seem to exclude. Only with someone like Aby Warburg do the private reflections significantly illuminate the public writings, as E.H. Gombrich has shown—and Warburg is in this respect a rare exception.

With Emmens, however, the position is different; for in the first and largest of the four volumes of his collected work the editors have gathered together all his published poetry and non-academic prose, as well as a good deal of the unpublished material they have so skillfully unearthed and sifted from his *Nachlass*. Even for the art-historical reviewer it is not easy to ignore this volume: the poetry and aphoristic writing is often of such exceptional literary quality that it invites him to confront precisely the issues outlined here and to attempt an assessment of the relations between the two aspects of Emmens's work.

Seven months before his official appointment as professor of art history and iconology at the University of Utrecht—and six months after his appointment as extraordinary *lector* in the history of art theory at Amsterdam—Emmens wrote: "Icono-

logy: the science of travesty. Art theory: the science of what cannot be known". These dicta follow a series of reflections on a variety of what he regarded as personal or art-historical travesties; but the doubt about his profession was rarely to be expressed as blatantly as here. Again and again, however, we find the most candid expressions of self-doubt, often formulated with wit and/or detachment; to what extent, then, did the feelings thus revealed affect his art-historical researches? Even if we find that we cannot get to the heart of the matter, there is abundant evidence here both of the origins of Emmens's academic interests and of his investigative procedures; and both are of considerable moment for the historiography of Dutch art—and of European art theory in general.

In the collection of poems and aphorisms entitled *Autobiographical dictionary* published in 1963, Emmens glossed *Dictionary* in this way: "The coherence of an individual is no greater than that of a dictionary". The same terrifying observation occurs with only slight variation elsewhere in the poetry and prose, but usually with slightly more Wittgensteinian a flavour: what emerges from the work as a whole is precisely the belief that the "coherence of an individual" amounts to no more and no less than that of *his* dictionary, or rather of his vocabulary. "We are all victims of our vocabulary, and yet we must use it to express something essential", he wrote in 1966. This belief underlies the most significant portion of the art-historical work, from the brilliant thesis of 1955, through *Rembrandt en de regels van de kunst* (published as a book in 1968) and including the remarkable essay written with Eddy de Jongh on the art theory of the Cobra group. If there is one aspect of Emmens's work about which we are left in no shadow of doubt, it is his conviction that only by precise definition of the critical vocabulary available to artists are we able to understand both their aims and contemporary reactions to them; and furthermore, that only by examining the subsequent history of individual terms and categories are we likely to be able to discern the evolution of responses, up to and including our own times, to particular artists and works of art. Otherwise we will tend to project our own views, or the views of powerful but subsequent writers that have formed our own, back on to the immediate contemporary context of the artists we examine. Hence the modern distortions, above all, of the status of Rembrandt in his own lifetime.

In the first of the propositions appended to the doctoral dissertation (1964) that became the Rembrandt book of four years later, Emmens states "Researches (conceived along the lines of the history of ideas) into the customary terminology of art-historical style criticism are capable of yielding an illu-

minating contribution to the historically responsible view of art to which the practitioners of art history aspire".¹ Practically every essay in these volumes testifies to the conviction so confidently if cumbersomely stated here (and with great specificity in the next proposition²); but Emmens could hardly have known how prophetic it was to be. Within a decade Michael Baxandall was to write *Giotto and the orators* (1971), in which he examined the vocabulary and categories open to fifteenth-century Italian theorists on art (and to its public) with just the precision that Emmens did in his Rembrandt book. His *Painting and experience in fifteenth-century Italy* (1972) presented a summary but practical sketch of the usefulness of his procedures; these were then tested, in an entirely different context, in *The limewood sculptors of Renaissance Germany* (1980); and now David Summers's *Michelangelo and the language of art* (1981)³ has provided us with the most sustained instance of what Baxandall has appropriately called "inferential criticism".

The approach so clearly stated by Emmens in 1964 has therefore been widely vindicated; it is only a pity that few scholars will have the patience to work through the essays gathered here, simply because they are in Dutch. Apart from anything else, they contain a great deal that is relevant not only to the history of Dutch art, but also to the history of Western art theory in general (even, for example, in the essay on "The history of Dutch art history"; no writer before Hessel Miedema has been so aware of the broader European antecedents of and connections with Dutch art theory). They also happen to be written with a grace and style unusual in modern art-historical writing: they testify, in their wit, their often epigrammatic quality, and the sheer range of vocabulary and allusion, not only to Emmens's own literary talents, but also to his constant engagement with texts and his own literary efforts. In short, they embody each one of the elements in the Aristotelian triad to which Emmens himself so insistently drew attention: *Natura* (in the shape of native talent), *Ars* (as close regard to the rules and norms of art), and *Exercitatio* (as practice).

There was one element in this triad, however, which Emmens emphasized above the others, and which thus emerges as its most crucial component. With more or less justification—and not always, it must be said, with precise or adequate justification—he saw *ars* as that element which embodied *disciplina, studium*, attention to the rules of art, theory. "The rules of art": this was the central factor which critics after 1670, according to Emmens, thought Rembrandt lacked; as a result, they regarded him as the primary heretic of his generation (but not the only heretic or even the first one, as Emmens rightly affirmed); and so his putative neglect of the rules, once identified by critics of the 'classicist' generation (as Emmens called it), formed two and a half centuries of subsequent views of Rembrandt. This insight has rich art-historical implications, but it also embodied the primary tension between the two aspects of Emmens's own work.

For all the formal discipline which he so elegantly imposed upon them, Emmens's poetry and aphorisms unsparingly reveal the insecurities which beset him. They testify to his apprehension about his often precarious psychological state, to his doubts about the success of his relations with his family and friends, to the deep misgivings he had about his pursuits as a historian. Even the poems about time and landscape are fraught with the symbolism of insecurity. But the academic investigations are based upon a stance which, ideally, must be predicated upon the greatest possible suspension of the self. In order to retrieve as satisfactorily as possible the critical standards and norms of a past generation we must also, as far as we can, suppress our own critical and literary prejudices and biases. If we write poetry, unless it is self-consciously parodistic, then we must suppress our own guidelines as we attempt, outside our poetry, to articulate the shibboleths of the past. This is the ideal state to which Emmens so single-mindedly strove in his art history. But he must have known, as we all know, that absolute suspension of the self is an academic chimera; and that in the end the most universally valid insights are likely to be achieved by the successful application of les-

1 "Ideënhistorische onderzoekingen van de in de kunsthistorische stijl-critiek gebruikelijke terminologie kunnen een verhelderende bijdrage leveren aan de historisch verantwoorde kunstbeschouwing die de beoefenaars van de kunstgeschiedenis nastreven".

"Ideënhistorische onderzoekingen" makes use of a compound that is—significantly—wholly lacking in English.

2 "De sleutelwoorden in de terminologie van de oorkonde waarin Giotto tot bouwmeester van de Florentijnse Dom wordt aangesteld, zijn niet nieuw, zoals Paatz heeft verondersteld, die er op grond van deze veronderstelling een reeds bestaand besef van de Renaissance in heeft gelezen, maar zijn geïnspireerd op de passage uit de Vulgaat waarin Beseleel en Oöliab door God als vervaardigers van de Ark des Verbonds worden aangewezen". (The key words in the document appointing Giotto *capomaestro* of the works of Florence cathedral are not new, as Paatz assumed (and from which he deduced an early awareness of the Renaissance), but were inspired by the passage in the Vulgate in which God selects Beseleel and Oöliab to make the Ark of the Covenant). This "demythologizing"

of the terms of art and the ability to uncover their roots is precisely what characterizes much of Emmens's work. Perhaps the *tour de force* of this approach is to be found—despite one or two lacunae—in the article written with Eddy de Jongh on "De kunsttheorie van Cobra, 1848-1948" (1966).

3 There is, furthermore, an odd kinship between Emmens's likening of the art historian to the talkative security guard in a museum and Baxandall's comparison between the art historian and the talkative tourist. Emmens: "He too (i.e. the art historian) appears to be inspired by a need to bother someone just at the moment when he looks at a painting". Baxandall: "In every group of travelers, every bunch of tourists on a bus, there is at least one man who insists on pointing out to the others the beauty or interest of the things they encounter, even though the others can see the things too; we are that man, I am afraid, *au fond*" (*New Literary History* 10 (1978-79), p. 454). The major differences in their approach—apart from the substantially greater sociological dimension of Baxandall's work—lies in Baxandall's insistence on a kind of equivalence between history and criticism that Emmens would almost certainly have muted.

sons we have learned about ourselves to the analysis of the past. The realization that in this hit-and-miss process we usually miss does not mitigate the fact that it remains the only possible one. But the methodological position formulated by Emmens allows, indeed demands, a stance of apparent objectivity which only the most daring, the most self-confident of investigators would risk infringing. And with a clarity that nagged, Emmens saw himself as lacking in that self-confidence. Even in the very earliest of his collections of poetry (*Chaconne*) published when he was twenty-one, we encounter what was to become a *leitmotif* in his work—his faint-heartedness, his cowardice, what he called his *lafheid* (see the poem entitled *Voornemen*: “From today ... I will set my cowardice aside/from today I will be myself again;/ admitting my superfluity/and professing it/with a touch of grace”; and compare this with the remarkable closing line of an otherwise rather juvenile poem, from the previously unpublished anthology entitled *Eigen tijd*: “Come then, let us/cultivate cowardice rigorously”). It was to be a theme which he never outgrew; in the aphorisms of 1963 and again in 1966–67 he was still attempting to find definitions of his *lafheid*; and in 1966 he would confess that “A cowardly adolescent still lives within me”.

What we find in Emmens, then, is an intensely self-conscious intelligence, afraid of allowing intuition and the self to spill over into the art-historical writing. It is in this light that we must see his assessment, in the last pages of the book on Rembrandt, of the significance of Descartes. Here he singles out, with a poignancy that we can only now see, the posthumous and incomplete treatise entitled *Regulae ad directionem ingenii*. The citation of this work is absolutely relevant to the argument unfolded in Emmens’s book; but in producing it at this late and crucial stage, it is as if Emmens were providing a key gloss on the relations between his own intelligence and the investigation he had just concluded. To pursue this satisfactorily, *ingenium* had to submit to rules; but by subjecting his own *ingenium* to the putative rules of historical writing, by suppressing those aspects of the self revealed in the poetry and prose, he was guilty of the kind of *lafheid* of which he so frequently and so movingly wrote. Hence the incipiently destructive definitions of iconology and the history of art theory we have already quoted.

The literary writings span a more substantial period of Emmens’s life than the art-historical production. Both aspects of his work are internally consistent; in each, rather than any dramatic changes of course, we find the determined pursuit of themes whose importance in one way or another Emmens rarely doubted. From the beginning the poems are insistently self-regarding (before 1947 he described himself as “a pine tree laden with trivia—*onbenulligheden*—/contemplating myself, as complacent as the star/at its top”); they take a bleak view of the possibility of fulfilment, both personal and in one’s relations with others. Sometimes the bleakness takes the form

of the perception of his own nullity (as in *Volgens Odo*, where he regards himself as a sluggish undescribed beetle, and in the earlier poem just quoted); on other occasions it is more ostentatiously melodramatic (like Saul, in Rembrandt’s picture in The Hague, he reflects in the poem entitled *Meesterwerk*, “What I lack ... is a humble curtain with which to dry my tears”). There is, however, a certain evolution towards both literary and emotional detachment: as the editors keenly observe, it is altogether likely that the thorough study Emmens made of both antique and seventeenth-century epigrams considerably influenced Emmens’s terse style of the fifties and sixties. It may also account for a kind of detached irony absent in the earlier work, which acquires an almost terrifyingly off-hand tone in poems like *De vrije wil* (published in 1957).

Technically these works are enormously skillful (the experimentation with metre and assonance, particularly in the collection *Een hond van Pavlov* of 1969, give the full measure of his craftsmanship); in their wit and spareness they come close to both Auden and Empson, whom Emmens admired and several times beautifully translated. One should not, of course, forget that there are a number of other poems, of considerable quality, which simply and uncomplicatedly evince Emmens’s commitment to and pleasure in the antique and the Dutch past. But the unremitting self-examination, the near narcissism of the early poetry is never wholly given up, and the same qualities are distilled into the aphorisms of the early sixties. In them are the most lucid acknowledgments and analyses of motives and motivation, and of the conflict between intellectual ambition and neurosis. Thus, tellingly, in *Ophouden*: “... All my life I have only been able to do something when I have sworn to others that I do not really want to do it. As if I can only do something with repugnance, as if I betray an ideal by doing something with pleasure, as if others should not know that doing it really gives me deep satisfaction”. Beside that perception one must set the reflections on “cowardice”, faint-heartedness, on what he saw as his laziness, and the fact that without the frequent collaboration with others, much of his work would not have been realised.

And so to the art-historical career. Effectively, it lasted just sixteen years. It began with the thesis of 1955 and the article “Ay Rembrandt, maal *Cornelis* stem” which formed part of it but was published in 1956. It ended with the article on Aertsen and Beuckelaer which he read in Brunswick just before his suicide in 1971 but which only appeared in 1973. Almost exactly in the middle comes the book, *Rembrandt en de regels van de kunst* (1964, published commercially in 1968). The remaining articles are often rather slight, but taken together they all present a remarkably consistent view of the themes which preoccupied Emmens—to such an extent that it is often possible to predict the point of a piece after the always lucid, frequently lapidary opening paragraphs.

“Apelles and Apollo”—this was the title of the thesis and

thus he announced the two main threads of his art-historical concerns. It was a brilliant performance, fully meriting the decision to publish it here. The editors rightly observe that the relations between word and image were to dominate every stage of his subsequent researches; but "Apollo" too, because what mattered for Emmens were the formal constraints on image-making, the rules, that could only be articulated by theory. The thesis is thus much more than a simple revision or a straightforward re-examination of the consequences of the Horatian parallelism between painting and poetry. Not surprisingly, Emmens moved swiftly to the implications of the various ways in which the superiority of word over image were expressed, from antiquity to the seventeenth century. Evident throughout is his sympathy with the notion that words are in the end more durable, that words are necessary to capture the spirit (*geest*) of the picture. Here and in the chapter that was to become the article on Vondel's lines on Rembrandt's portrait of Anso, Emmens examined the manifold ramifications of the relations between the soul of the picture on the one hand and its material form on the other, and of the way in which the poets and theorists thought those polarities could be conveyed. With great subtlety and in a way that has not, as far as I know, been paralleled in other art-historical writings, he scrutinized the complex interconnections between classical art theory and Calvinist views of the potential limitations of painting and sculpture; and of their consequences for seventeenth-century Dutch art in general. From here he moved to his other basic themes: the rise of the academies and the various stages in the social emancipation of the artist, "the glorious moment at which art abstracted itself from manual craft (*handwerk*) and was promoted to a liberal art", as he put it at some point between 1958 and 1961.

The importance of these topics emerged most clearly in the book on Rembrandt and art theory, with its analysis of how the *modern* view of Rembrandt as an artist misjudged in his own time is a distortion derived from academic art theory after 1670, after the writings of Jan de Bisschop in the first instance, and then Sandrart, Pels, et al. In it Rembrandt's apparent failure to adhere to the "rules" was seen to be consistent with his deficiencies in personal morality, his obsession with money, his choice and treatment of subjects. But these are all matters which have been acutely reviewed by Miedema.⁴ What now emerges from the collected writings is how frequently Emmens was to return to the theme of how modern views of artists are in the first instance determined by modern needs and prejudices, and in the second frequently derive from academic art theory. The review of the Goltzius exhibition in 1958, the flawed but suggestive essay on Velazquez (1961), and the piece on the Cobra group (1966) all begin in this manner. Throughout there is the insistent denial that "misunderstanding is and always has been, *a priori*, the artist's lot." He attacked this view in a topical and polemical piece of 1964, entitled "Is er

behoefte aan geschiedvervalsing?" (Is there any need for the falsification of history?) In each case the aim was to reveal modern misconceptions and distortions—either on the part of the public or (in the case of the Cobra article) of the artists themselves—by subjecting the language of art and the conventions of art theory to rigorous historical scrutiny.

When he turned to the analysis of individual works of art the results were often less successful. Significantly, the most obviously deficient aspect of the Rembrandt book is the discussion of the iconography of individual works at the end. Of the eight works analyzed there, only the discussion of the etching of the *Rolwagentje* (B 194) now seems wholly plausible; the interpretations of the rest, like that of *Las Meninas* and of Dosso Dossi's *Jupiter painting butterflies*, seem too strained, or pushed too far. But this should hardly come as a surprise. At the very end of his review of *Rembrandt en de regels van de kunst*, Miedema adduced Alciati's dictum in the introduction to his *Emblemata* (1531) that "Verba significant; res significantur". In one sense the phrase may be taken as full justification of Emmens's concern with language and theory; these are matters that are fully amenable to the specific art-historical task he set himself. But the commitment to language and the belief in its primacy could not but prevent him from seeing that the meaning of figured objects ultimately goes and remains beyond the immediate terms used to describe them—whether in the present or the past—and the theory that surrounds or supersedes them. What Alciati realised and what his modern art-historical users often forget is that words are never direct equivalents, translations, of the image they describe or the meaning those images convey. In an odd way there is tacit acknowledgement of just this in the many pages on the ways in which the epigrams on portraits provide them with the permanence and "soul" that would otherwise—in the absence of words—remain elusive and evanescent.

But for one so deeply aware of the sources of the dichotomy between word and image in the classical tradition, and for one whose interests were so avowedly literary, the search for equivalence between words and the meaning of subjects was destined to founder. There could be no easy link between the analysis, however keen, of appropriate vocabulary and theory on the one hand, and the significance of things on the other.

For Emmens's attempt to forge such a link, however, there is much reason to be grateful. Some of the slighter essays here do little more than take up oft-repeated themes, but there are others which bear unexpected fruit. To take only one example: the piece on the discovery of oil painting, turns Vasari's elevation of *disegno* over *colore* into a convincing demonstration of the historiographic necessity of the view that a Netherlandish painter should have invented oil painting. Some essays, such as that on J.H. Moesman, are written with an affectionate elegance that was wholly characteristic of Emmens's style (the irony of Moesman's own apparently negative response to it,

⁴ In *Oud Holland* 84 (1969), pp. 249-56.

however, will not have been lost on Emmens), while others, such as those on Dou's paintings of a *Quack* and a *Trumpeter*, and on Rembrandt's *Slaughtered ox* suggestively reflect or adumbrate a number of iconographic discoveries of the middle and late sixties, all of which seem to have sprung from an extraordinarily fruitful merging of interests in Utrecht at about this time. It was in 1967 that Eddy de Jongh published his sustained demonstration of the relations between emblematic illustration and Dutch genre painting entitled *Zinne- en minnebeelden in de schilderkunst van de zeventiende eeuw*, a work that can be seen to represent the single most important interpretive breakthrough in the historiography of this strand of Dutch art. His "Erotica in vogelperspectief" (*Simiolus* 3 [1968-69], pp. 22-74) further exemplified the use of his procedures, while in 1971 the essay "Realisme en schijnrealisme in de Hollandse schilderkunst van de 17de eeuw" accompanying the catalogue of the exhibition *Rembrandt en zijn tijd* further generalized and refined their importance. At the end of that year Emmens died. Less than three weeks before his death he gave the lecture on the market and kitchen pieces of the sixteenth century entitled "Eins aber ist nötig". Although it takes up a number of themes—notably that of the opposition between the active and the contemplative life—which had already appeared (though only recently) in his writing, seen as a whole it represents a major change of direction. By now the move from theory to interpretation was almost complete. It

was done with great skill and confidence, and the reader of these volumes can only be left with a sense of regret that such researches would be pursued no further.

Both publishers and editors deserve compliment: the former for the elegance and clarity of all four volumes; and the latter both for having unearthed so much and for the acuity of their editorial comments. These are appended with just the right mixture of candor and tact, and pay scrupulous attention to the most relevant bibliographic material to have appeared since 1971. With their aid we may now appreciate the full import of Emmens's work and be in a better position to understand the aura which has grown round his name, an aura of which no reader of this journal can be unaware. It is a pity that the public for these volumes outside the Netherlands will necessarily remain limited: the technical means of the poetry deserve wider attention than the audience that will be able to assess it, and the sustained analyses of the history of art theory have implications that extend far beyond the boundaries of Dutch culture. But if the *pietas* and the *industria* of the editors succeed in widening that public, their labors will have been justly and appropriately rewarded.

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