

March 15, 1995

4 You don't know me. How could you? You've been dead for over 300 years. Still, I couldn't resist writing. I thought you'd be interested to hear from a 20th-century painter who's been thinking about you. Plus, I've got some questions that only you can answer.

You're probably wondering why I chose this moment. Well, just the other day I was driving back to New York where I live, returning from the opening of an exhibition of my paintings, which actually are all about you. You'll get a kick out of the title: "Rembrandt Redux." It's at the Palmer Museum of Art at Penn State University, and coincides with a fine show of your prints, more than 50 of them. There's also a terrific group of etchings by a follower of yours from Pittsburgh, Leonard Leibowitz.

So while I'm driving back from Penn State, I'm listening to a song. The lyrics go like this: "Strange dear, but true dear, when I'm close to you dear, the stars fill the sky. So in love with you am I." But then later comes this: "So, taunt me, and hurt me, deceive me, desert me, I'm yours till I die, so in love, so in love, so in love with you my love am I." Now you're asking, why is he telling me this?

It so happens that at the moment I am writing, there's a murder trial going on, and the whole country, me included, is following every minute in the courtroom. Why? Because the person charged with the two grisly murders is an admired celebrity; the victims are his ex-wife and a friend of hers. And it has become public knowledge that this celebrity has a history of physically abusing his wife. He stead-

fastly maintains that he just loved his wife too much. He thinks his possessiveness, his jealousy of any interests she had outside of him are proof of his love, in fact constitute that love. And when Cole Porter who wrote that song I heard in the car writes, "taunt me, hurt me, deceive me, desert me, I'm yours till I die . . . so in love with you my love am I," he agrees with that definition of love. Well, I don't.

Stay with me, I'm coming to the point.

You had your problems with women, no? There was that messy business with Geertge Dirckx, your son Titus's nursemaid. You gave her a wedding ring and promised to marry

those people you owed money to wanted to get back at you, they decided to do it by dragging her through a humiliating public church excommunication for living out of wedlock with you. And you just stood silently by. How can you explain this to me?

Did you know, Rembrandt, that you are among the most famous, most respected artists in the world? When people think masterpiece painting, it is you who comes to mind. And the thing they value most is how you portrayed people, and yourself in all those self-portraits, with such insight, empathy, and wisdom.

I agree with the French Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas who wrote that "the presence of the face is precisely the very possibility of understanding one another. . . . To see a face is already to hear 'You

shall not kill,' and to hear 'You shall not kill' is to hear 'social justice.'" On the evidence of your paintings, I feel you saw, really and truly, the people you painted. You understood something about them as people, and about yourself too. And in that understanding you were declaring a certain morality and respect. How do I put that together with what I know about the way you behaved toward women?

I see the face of love when I look at those great paintings of Hendrickje and Geertge. I am convinced of your recognition of their vulnerability and simultaneously of their attractiveness to you. But I have to tell you I was so unsettled by the disparity between the love reflected in these images and your behavior that I made a painting about it. I put Geertge on the left, and Hendrickje on the right, side

by side within an overbearing old master frame. I always bolt thick glass sandblasted with words over my paintings and for this one I had inscribed on the glass "So you fucked the help." You, my genius painter hero, just an ordinary man.

Perhaps I've overstepped my bounds already—and I hope you'll write me back to tell me—but I do have a few other questions. From what I've been able to gather, you weren't much involved with religion. Did that have anything to do with the fact that you came from a mixed marriage? How does a child put together two opposing theolog-

Dear Rembrandt,

her, and then you brushed her aside and started sleeping with the much younger maid in the house, Hendrickje Stoffels. When Geertge sued you for breach of promise, and won, how could you go strong-arm the neighbors to say she was crazy, pressuring her own brother to help you, and have her put in a mental prison? How did you feel when you discovered that, after her friends finally got her out five years later, she was so broken she died soon after? Why, you as much as killed her.

Listen, I know a relationship always looks different from the outside. And all anyone can really go on in your case is what can be figured out from the paintings, and the paper trail from court proceedings on Geertge's breach-of-promise suit. But then later, you never married Hendrickje, the younger woman. When all



So You Fucked the Help, 1993, oil on wood, sandblasted glass, bolts. Private collection, Switzerland

ical views of the world? My hunch is that such a child would be pushed into a more active role in understanding why things are the way they are.

I've thought about you and religion quite a bit. For two reasons, I think: all those biblical scenes and portraits of Jews like Menasseh ben Israel that you painted; and the fact that you, a non-Jew, chose to live in the Jewish Quarter. Why did you move there? That decision has had a lot of meaning for me, and for other Jews, over the years. Books have been written about you in relation to Jews. Were you more comfortable living among a marginal group because you felt in some way marginal? Or was it just because you could get a better deal on a big house?

Did I already say I'm Jewish? Let me tell you, some people have odd ideas about what a Jew is or is not. For example, when I was growing up, people often assumed I wasn't Jewish because I have red hair. Jews have been accused of being schemers, murderers, deceivers, climbers, only interested in money, vulgar, and ugly with big noses. Over the centuries we've lived with this hatred, or died because of it. Or we could choose to modify or conceal our identity. What does this have to do with you?

Well, remember your self-portrait, the one shaped like an arch, after Titian? It's in a museum in London. Though it had yellowed quite a bit, it was cleaned up and now looks splendid. (Great outfit you had on.) I used this painting as the source for a work of mine, which I painted using only shades of yellow.

The following statements are on the glass over it: "In 1640 the artist may have changed the color of his hair. Just one year earlier, he had moved to an enormous house on the Jodenbreestraat in the Jewish Quarter. At the time, it was not uncommon for Jews to worry, despite their new-found freedom. Perhaps the change was related to anxiety about producing income sufficient to his expanding needs."

Each statement by itself is either true or



In 1640 the Artist..., 1994, oil on wood, sandblasted glass, bolts. Courtesy Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

unverifiable, but what is implied is a lie. I wanted to get people to imagine how they might think differently about you if they were led to believe you were Jewish. I guess you could say I traded on your renown as the World's Greatest Painter to reveal anti-Semitic assumptions. Why the yellow? That's the color of the badges Jews periodically have been forced to wear for over a thousand years. It is the color of prejudice for a Jew.

In 1967 when I was a high school student in a city called Detroit, violent race riots broke out. The city was in flames. African Americans had stopped holding back centuries of rage against White America. At the time, an African American friend issued me an "official" card that I was to keep on my person at all times. It read: "This is to certify that Ken Aptekar is an Honorary Negro, signed by a Real Negro." It wouldn't have helped me, but even so I carried it proudly. I've been considering sending

you an Honorary Jew card. Would you want it?

So that's what's on my mind these days: you, your paintings, your morality, and how you're not Jewish. I hope you know I don't just hate you. You're important to me, even if I know more about your work than I do about you. You have a story to tell, the life of an artist. There are the facts of that life, few of which are known, and then there are the paintings, those sublime and majestic and confusing traces of the long-gone you. Now, it is our pleasure and responsibility to create their meaning. I would appreciate your help, and await your reply!

Yours truly,

Ken Aptekar



A Man with a Problem, 1992, 30" x 120", oil on wood, sandblasted glass, bolts. Private collection, New York