

Rembrandt and Spinoza. A study of the spiritual conflicts in seventeenth- century Holland. By W. R. Valentiner. 87 pp.+ 13 pl. (Phaidon Press), £ 1 ls.

Valentiner's book has already been strongly criticized by some colleagues mostly on account of the weakness of its method.¹ No doubt to compare a philosopher to an artist is a difficult thing to do, especially when they belong to different generations in the seventeenth century. Even Valentiner could not provide us with any real proof that the two men ever met, and all the descriptions of mutual friends or acquaintances do no more than romanticize our picture of seventeenth-century life in Holland. I must confess that I cannot help regarding Valentiner's last book rather sentimentally and uncritically. These essays (which cover a wider field than the title may suggest) speak of the writer's deep concern with spiritual conflicts in general. Valentiner's personality, his attitude towards basic problems in the past and in the society of today, emerge from these few pages as directly as ever, and all those who had the privilege of meeting this noble, sensitive, gifted personality will appreciate this last document for its human character. The protestant attitude to the world (p.46), the instinct for self-preservation in the man of genius (p.63), the mystical correspondence between outside experience and inner development in their lives (p.66), the situation of the man of action and the genius (pp.84 and 88) - all these thoughts and observations may be marginal for the professional historian, but they are real and valid on another level of human contact and understanding. It would be wrong to conclude from what I have said above that Valentiner's essays are without value for art-historical research. His observations on Rembrandt's connexion with the Mennonites are fundamentally correct and have been corroborated by the publications of Rotermund and Wijnman.² Rembrandt's interest in classical art is rightly stressed. When trying to link up representatives of art with those of philosophy it must be remembered that Vermeer (and not Rembrandt) belongs to the same generation as Spinoza (both were born in 1632). It is obvious that Spinoza rationalistic ideas are related to Vermeer's architectural style, built up from 'a skeleton of vertical and diagonal lines'. Both express in similar ways a characteristic tendency of late seventeenth-century Dutch culture. Valentiner is aware that the picture of Dutch civilization, of Dutch freedom, is not complete without the opposite, dark forces of intolerance and hatred, which threatened to undermine the greatest men of the century. The story of the unhappy Koerbaghs is not evoked for their picturesque horror, but as a warning to those who refuse to believe that the lives of extraordinary people are on the verge of disaster at any moment. The Epilogue accompanied by quotations from Thomas Wolfe brings out most strikingly Valentiner's belief in the lesson that great men teach us: 'What have we, who are filled with uncertainty, to fear so long as we are protected by the spirit of such geniuses [Rembrandt and Spinoza], who are hovering over mankind as long as human beings continue to exist?' It is good to be reminded that history and art history have a direct bearing on the conduct of our lives.

H. GERSON

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¹ See j. BIALOSTOCKI, *Kunstchronik*, u [1958], p.77, and the excellent review in the *Neue Ziiricher (eitung)* [27th March 1958].

² H. M. ROTERMUND: *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* [952], and H. F. WIJNMAN: *Jaarboek Amstelodamum* 30 [1933], P.93. Regarding so-called portraits of Spinoza (besides those claimed by Valentiner) see j. LEVY in *Der Kunstwanderer* [1928], p.486; the same in *The Connoisseur* 90 [1932], p.317. FRANZ LANDS- BERGEP. (*Rembrandt, the Jews and the Bible* [1946], p.53) is very sceptical regarding the attempts at identifying Jewish portraits by Rembrandt.