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# LEONARDO AND REMBRANDT: THE ARTISTIC COMPOSITION OF DISCOVERING THE SUBLIME

Dedicated to the Canadian artist Patrick Cyr: [www.cyrpatrick.com](http://www.cyrpatrick.com)

By Pierre Beaudry, 10/8/17

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## INTRODUCTION

Very few artists throughout history have been able to make fundamental *discoveries of principle* and succeeded in expressing them in an artistic form of composition which expresses the function of the sublime. Leonardo da Vinci and Rembrandt Van Rijn were two of the most exceptional artists who used religious subjects to express the process of such a discovery: Leonardo's *The Last Supper* and Rembrandt's *Supper at Emmaus* exemplify such an accomplishment.

What these two artists have represented is the equivalent of the state of mind that Louis Pasteur required to make a scientific discovery as he reported the gist of the idea in the concluding remarks of his famous speech of 1882 at the Académie Française: "The Greeks understood the mysterious power behind everything. They are the ones who bequeathed to us one of the most beautiful words of our language: the word enthusiasm, from the Greek —*Ev Θεος* — an interior God."<sup>1</sup> This is precisely what Leonardo and Rembrandt have expressed in their respective paintings, but the replication of the mental quality of *en-theos* is also an extremely

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<sup>1</sup> Académie Française, [Discours de réception de Louis Pasteur](#), le 27 avril 1882.

difficult “epistemological” subject to deal with, because it requires the performative transformation of the spectator by means of an axiomatic change.

As Friedrich Schiller showed, the idea of the sublime cannot be understood in the human condition without the pathetic: “For the *pathetic-sublime* are thus two main conditions required. Firstly an animated conceptualization of suffering, in order to arouse the compassionate [co-suffering] affective state in the proper strength. Secondly a conceptualization of resistance to the suffering, in order to call the inner freedom of the heart to consciousness. Only through the first does the subject matter become pathetic, only through the second does the pathetic become at the same time sublime.”<sup>2</sup>

The challenge to the artist is to discover how to express this contradictory tension of the *pathetic-sublime* as a *discovery of principle* in painting; that is, how do you make a viewer discover a form of resolution of the tragic aspect of the human condition by way of the visual means of light, form, and color. The question comes down to discovering how the physical means of artistic composition can express the mental powers of the human mind in the suitable forms of learned ignorance as understood by Nicholas of Cusa.

The irony is that such a process of discovery does not depend on human power alone; it must also rely on the work of the Holy Spirit, because it is He who causes the “*en theos*” in us and who makes the connections between all the creative relationships we seek to understand in the transformative function of artistic composition. It is in Him, therefore, that we must seek to discover what we are looking for and not in ourselves.

Another way to look at the same problem is with the paradox of *freedom and necessity*. It is clear that all human beings are dependent on the physical nature we are born into, but we are also independent from it to the extent that we discover freedom through the power of ideas. So, if we are cognition-driven, we have the

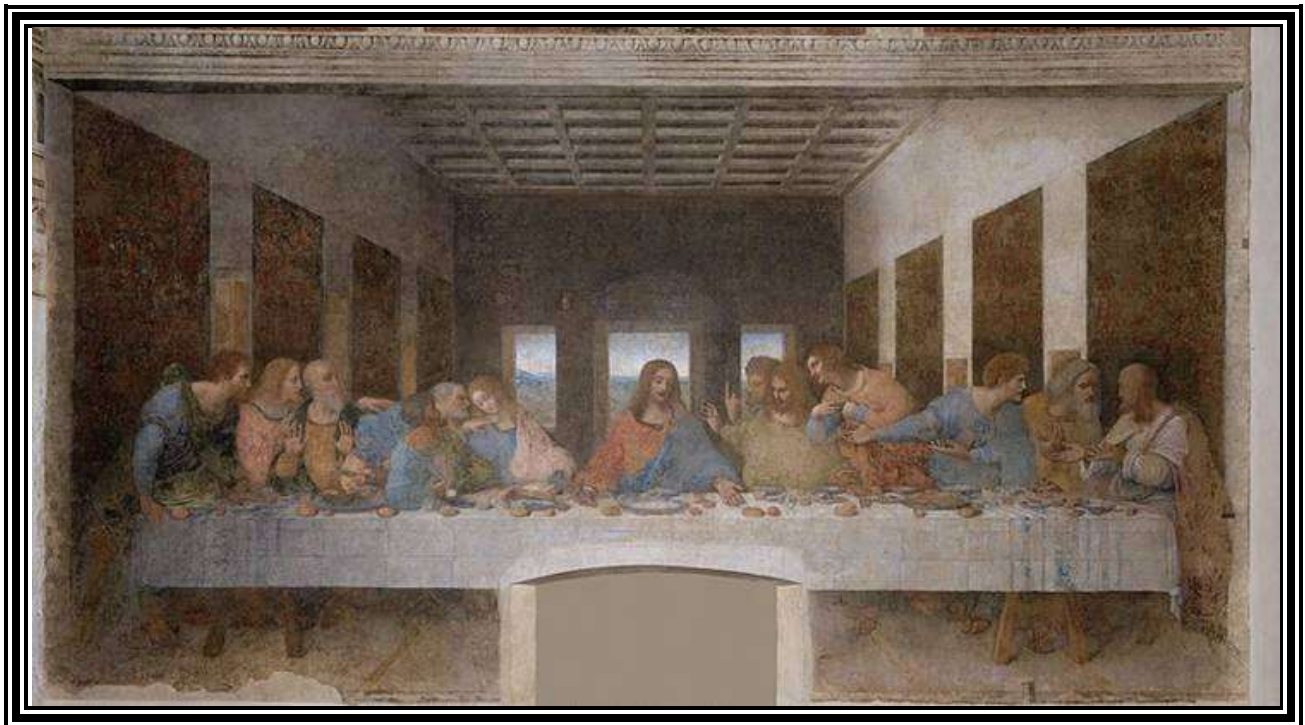
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<sup>2</sup> Friedrich Schiller, [\*On the Sublime – Toward the Further Elaboration of Some Kantian Ideas\*](#), The Schiller Institute, translated by Daniel Platt, 1986.

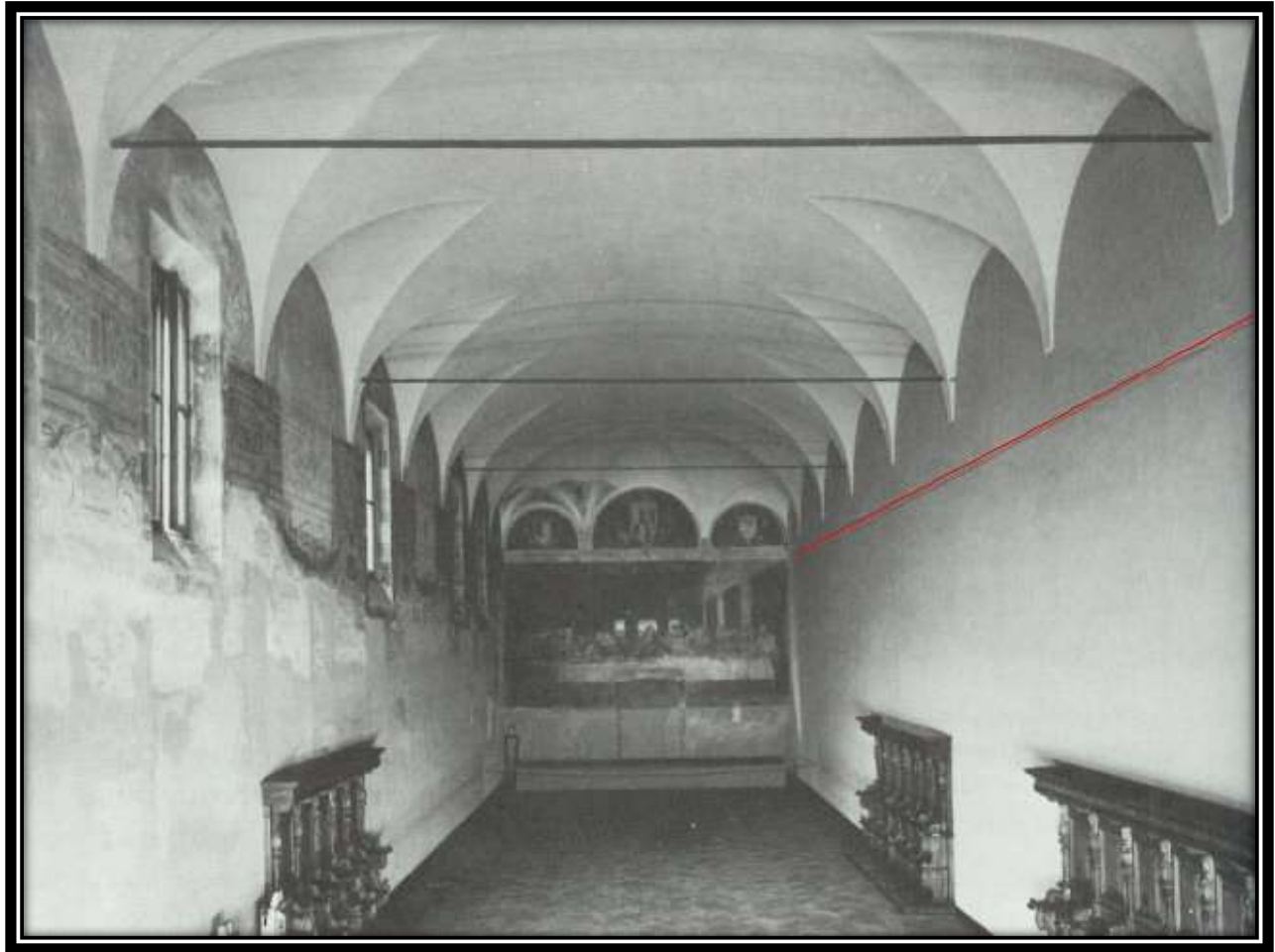
freedom to access the sublime. As Schiller put it, if we are cognition-driven, we are free; if we are self-preservation-driven, we become dependent.

## 1. ENTHUSIASM AND THE UNITY OF OPPOSITES

From the vantage point of epistemology, the best way to express the *unity of the pathetic-sublime* is in the form of ironies such as Leonardo da Vinci reproduced them, for example in *The Last Supper*. How did he manage to capture so authentically all these "tormented" soul-states with such intensity of sharp movements into four groups taken three by three and how did he manage to solve them through the sublime face of Christ? See my report: [LEONARDO DA VINCI, THE LAST SUPPER](#).



**Figure 1** *The Last Supper* fresco by Leonardo da Vinci, 1495-98.



**Figure 2** Refectory of the Convent of Santa Maria Delle Grazie, Milan.

As the reader can see in **Figure 2**, the receding lines of linear perspective of both the refectory and *The Last Supper* fresco all converge on the right eye of Christ, thus creating an ironic connection and a deliberate dissonance between the two dining rooms; that is, between the most turbulent supper in Christian history and the monastic dining room where the monks eat their meals in complete silence. This shocking provocation on the part of Leonardo was meant to cause an awakening in the minds of the spectators; that is, especially forcing the Monks of the Convent to reflect on the *pathetic-sublime* condition of mankind.

Upon examining the details of the fresco, the viewer cannot avoid being struck by the state of perplexity of the twelve apostles. In musical terminology, *The Last Supper* represents a series of Lydian dissonances that Leonardo may have

been the first to discover and to solve in his musical conception of Bel Canto. For me, the measure he used in his painting is best manifested in classical music. Listen, for example, to Furtwängler's interpretation of Schubert's Ninth Symphony and you will understand better what I mean by the epistemological function of artistic composition.

Think of this *discovery of principle* as an axiomatic transformation taking



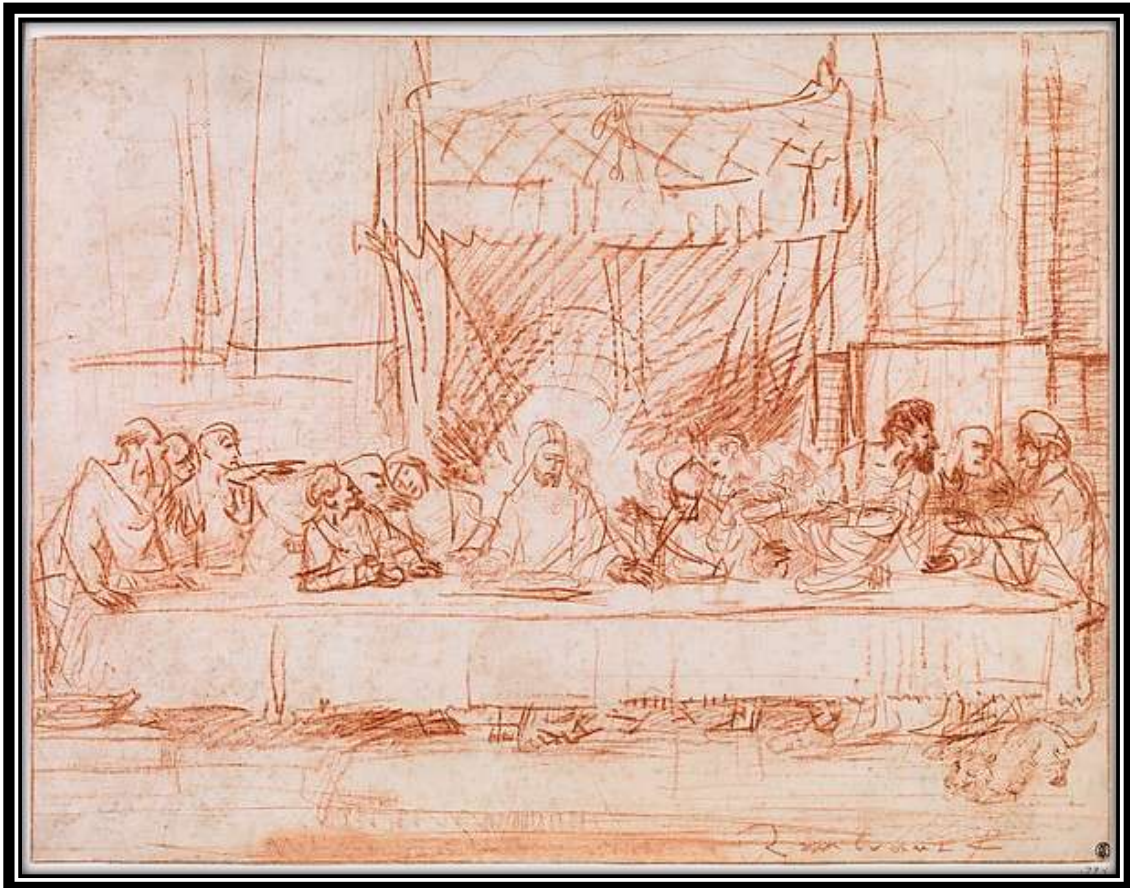
place in your mind between two different geometries; that is, as if your mind was going through the experiment of changing from a two dimensional world into a three dimensional world; and that such a moment of register shift singularity, as exemplified by the tenor passing tone at F#, required your mind to go through a complete inversion into the opposite of what is to be expected of your reaction to suffering. The challenge is to discover how such a subject of sublimity can be expressed in a painting format; that is to say, by resolving, in one form or other, the tragic dilemma of the human condition.

**Figure 3** Detail of the sublime face of Christ.

Leonardo's fresco was meant to be a universal epistemological scene and not merely an intimate and personal psychological experience or spiritual exercise. This is a distinction which the great majority of priests have never been able to explain to people; but which Saint Augustine and Nicholas of Cusa, amongst others in the tradition of Saint Paul, knew how to communicate very well. Leonardo and Rembrandt were of the same Platonic school in the simultaneity of eternity. They understood the problem, and they were using the most efficient means to solve it.

As a Platonist, Leonardo understood that the painting had to have a performative function aimed at changing mankind. The religious name for this is

“salvation,” but the artistic name for it is “axiomatic change.” Rembrandt agreed with that epistemological function of painting as well.



**Figure 4** Rembrandt van Rijn, *The Last Supper* after Leonardo da Vinci. 1634-35

The question Leonardo’s fresco posed to art historians was: Why did Rembrandt not succeed in making a painted composition of the same subject? As you can see, his drawing (**Figure 4**) is a copy of Leonardo's fresco, but without the inclusion of the viewer into the process of change.

The reader should not be surprised to discover that Rembrandt could not paint a picture of this subject because Leonardo knew in advance, in the simultaneity of eternity, that he had found a *limiting condition* that no other artist could ever go beyond; no more that someone could go beyond the *Ode to the Joy* of Beethoven or the *Ninth Symphony* of Schubert. Rembrandt knew that and this is what every artist must also rigorously discover in his art; that is, the *boundary*

*condition* that closes the loop on the treatment of a subject whose purpose is to “save” the viewer from bestiality and banality of daily life. And that is what makes him immortal. That is what Schiller called freedom, as he properly identified the issue: “Only as sensuous beings are we dependent, as rational beings we are free.”<sup>3</sup> That is also the *en-theos* of Pasteur which is absent in the art forms of today and which needs to be restored and implemented in a future renaissance. How can we express the sublime condition of the creative principle which allows us to save the human soul epistemologically? This is the question that we have to answer today, if we are to make another step forward, beyond the practice of religion.

The mental turbulences which the Apostles experience three by three, in Leonardo's *The Last Supper*, represent dissonant states of mind with respect to the crisis that Christ caused when he said to them: “***One among you will betray me.***” Here, Leonardo shows how to solve the problem of the *union of opposites* by means of the sublime as expressed in the face of Christ (**Figure 3**).

Each of the four groups of three apostles is in a state of tormented perplexity portraying unresolved dissonances that can be expressed on the keyboard by a series of minor thirds. For example, the interval of 6/5 between C and E-flat is dissonant because it contains three degrees (C-D-E) which are condensed into one, as in the triple-connectedness of the *Filioque*.

Each of these minor thirds is in a state of unstable equilibrium with respect to a resolved harmonic relation such as, for example, the interval C and E. Since each group of three, taken in isolation, cannot find its own resolution without the others in the composition as a whole (using four groups of minor thirds), each minor third remains suspended and powerless to solve the quandary that Christ has put them into. This is not only a personal psychological affair, but an axiomatic condition of the universal and epistemological nature of the human mind; a quandary that every human mind is required to address and solve in order to axiomatically transform humanity as a whole. This is how the "Mass" was meant to replicate the dynamic of *The Last Supper*.

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<sup>3</sup> Friedrich Schiller, [\*On the Sublime – Toward the Further Elaboration of Some Kantian Ideas.\*](#)

Let's take the idea a step further. If you compare the tormented situation of the apostles at the critical moment of Leonardo's *Last Supper* with that of the discovery of Rembrandt's *Supper at Emmaus*, you will understand that all the conditions of a single *discovery of principle* have been gathered in the two cases, but in different ways: one using musical dissonances, the other using *chiaroscuro*.<sup>4</sup>

The essential issue is to know how to solve the paradox of *the unity of opposites* as Cusa taught his monks. The problem is the same as the treatment of the unity of light and darkness; but in the case of *The Last Supper*, light cannot play the role that "*chiaroscuro*" imposes on the subject matter, because *chiaroscuro* is meant to express *intimacy within a theatrical setting*. That was the problem that Rembrandt had to solve and that is why he debated the matter over a period of at least twenty years (1628-1648), because Leonardo had taken the subject of the Last Supper to the highest level and out of intimacy. The only option left to Rembrandt was to solve the problem of the *unity of the pathetic-sublime* with the disciples at Emmaus.

## 2. REMBRANDT AND THE PARADOX OF THE SUPPER AT EMMAUS

In Rembrandt's *Supper at Emmaus*, 1648, the mental turbulence of the two disciples is both universal and personal, and the covenant must be expressed by the appropriate intimate treatment of *chiaroscuro*. The difficulty, however, is to find the right state of mind for the three different characters. How did Rembrandt find the satisfactory measure that will cause a change in the mind of the viewer? Rembrandt made several attempts which I have added below, but the important thing now is to discover how he succeeded, as illustrated in **Figure 5**.

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<sup>4</sup> Rembrandt composed several other drawings and paintings of this difficult subject, most notably, *Supper at Emmaus* (1629), *Jesus' Disappearance from Emmaus* (1648), and *Supper at Emmaus* (1648 [first version]). None of those three attempts reflected the discovery of principle that he was able to express in his final version.





**Figure 5** *Supper at Emmaus*, 1648 by Rembrandt van Rijn.

First and foremost: the *discovery of principle* that Rembrandt could not make with the subject of *The Last Supper*, he was able to make with the *Supper at Emmaus*. He succeeded in replicating the dynamics that exist among the three subjects of this epistemological experiment; that is to say, among Christ, Cleopas, and a third unnamed disciple. One of the three is in the process of changing the other two. Furthermore, it is important to understand that a *discovery of principle* always requires such a triply-connected transformation involving three distinct subjects and three distinct moments in a process of transformation.

Those moments are clearly identified in the Gospel of Saint Luke.

First, there is a state of ignorance where Luke said: “***But their eyes were restrained, so they did not know him.***”

Second, there is the shock where Christ rebuked them saying: “***O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! Ought not the Christ to have suffered these things and to enter into His glory?***”

Third, there is the discovery where Luke said: “***He took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they knew Him; and He vanished from their sight.***”<sup>5</sup>

This process of discovery is all the more powerful from the epistemological point of view because the experience represents the unique cognitive question of how the *filioque* works within the creative process. The error to avoid is of reducing the “spiritual” event, which is the work of the Holy Spirit, to an individual religious or psychological dimensionality. This is a universal epistemological experience of the first order, not merely a personal spiritual exercise.

The two disciples recognize that their minds also had to go through a state of perplexity, which is the appropriate state to be in before making a discovery of principle. This is both a risky and fearful decision to make, but this is also how the fear of God gets dissipated, as the epistemological nature of their state of mind is

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<sup>5</sup> Luke 24; 16-31. [New King James Version](#).

reported by one of the two saying to the other after the discovery: ***“Did not our heart burn within us while He talked with us on the road, and while He opened the Scriptures to us?”***<sup>6</sup> This experience is the recognition of a mental state of axiomatic transformation going from a lower manifold to a higher manifold; that is to say, involving the disappearance of a previous lower state of mind (as a state of sense perception) and its replacement by the higher state of assimilation of a purely cognitive object transmitted to reason through history; that of a *discovery of principle* emerging from the totality of human development. It is not surprising either that such a historical discovery also took place in 1648, the year of Peace of Westphalia.

In reality, it is the dependency on *public opinion* that is being rejected and which disappears. This is always the way a *discovery of principle* takes place by passing through the disappearing traces of a "phantom shadow," like the experiment in Plato's Cave when the prisoners break the shackles of sense perception and decide to leave their enslavement behind. This is what the observer must discover in front of Rembrandt's painting; that is, solve the dissonance of other directedness and discover the unity between believing and understanding, which Saint Luke identified in 24:31 when he said: ***“Then their eyes were opened and they knew Him; and He vanished from their sight.”***

This, however, cannot be taken literally, because what is to be painted is not an object of sense perception which disappears. The sublime paradox of *the unity of faith and reason* must be represented only from the top down; that is, ***“endued with power from on high.”***<sup>7</sup> Therefore, what has to disappear is not the object of sense perception but the function of the physical dependence on sense perception within the process of the *discovery of principle*. How do you make such a disappearance appear? And how do you make it visible to the mind of the viewer in such a way as to make him experience the same *discovery of principle* as that of the disciples of Emmaus?

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<sup>6</sup> Luke 24:32.

<sup>7</sup> Luke 24:49.

Rembrandt introduced the moment of discovery through the medium of a very soft and calming "*chiaroscuro*" with a supernatural source of light coming "*from on high*", which warmly illuminates Christ's glorified body and the top of the tablecloth where he is breaking the bread. However, breaking the bread, which is the high point of the Mass, also means breaking with the axioms of our bad habits for the love of mankind. As Saint Jean-Marie Vianney put it, if one really understood the Mass, One would be willing to "die of joy."<sup>8</sup>

Thus, the two disciples have calmly internalized the same discovery that Jean-Marie Vianney had made, understanding that giving your life for mankind is the only true joy. Nothing extraneous or excessive disturbs the moment. They realize in the calm glow of this paradoxical moment that such an inversion brings about the *unity of faith and understanding*.



**Figure 6** Detail of the dynamic between Christ and the two disciples at Emmaus.

The lighting of the central part of the scene makes the moment intimate and discrete. Even the servant is not aware of what is taking place, because this experiment is only taking place in the minds of these three actors and the viewers.

<sup>8</sup> Jean-Marie Vianney, [\*Méditations Eucharistiques\*](#), Librairie Emmanuel Vitte, Lyon, 1907, XI Méditation, pp. 82-89.

Unless the viewer discovers that this has been created for his benefit, and is able to relive this moment in his own mind, he will also be oblivious to what is taking place so discretely in this painting.

The viewer has to pay attention to the dynamic relationship between the two disciples and Christ and discover that the two disciples are looking in the eyes of Christ who is looking upward into the future, behind the left shoulder of the viewer. The scene is forecasting what is to come and the question that Christ is posing to the viewer: “Are you able to survive without doing what I have done? Are you capable of dying for mankind?” That is what the disciples are discovering in their calm and resolute vision; the one on the left is quietly praying and giving thanks, while the one on the right is more forwardly assimilating the cognitive experience. Neither of them is fearful or mesmerized by the event, because Rembrandt is transmitting to the viewer, the resolution of the *unity of the opposites*; that is, the *unity of belief and reason*.

Thus, the epistemological principle of the experience of the *Supper at Emmaus* makes you discover how to believe and to understand the nature of the divinity of Christ, performatively and in the simultaneity of eternity, ***but only after having done away with the dependency on and fearfulness of public opinion; that is, having done away with the fear of the disapproval of God.*** This is precisely the state of sublime that Schiller attributes to his understanding of divinity when he says: “If the conceptualization of divinity is to become practically (dynamically) sublime, then we may relate the feeling of our security not to our being, but rather to our principles.”<sup>9</sup>

This experience may be taking place in an apparent fleeting moment of Truth in the Face of God; but it is, in actuality, a lasting moment of mental inversion for the two disciples who might, from that moment on, retain only a vague memory of what they have actually discovered, but who will have to concentrate all of their energy into remembering how to report this to the Apostles that they will soon meet back in Jerusalem. ***This act of making someone else discover a principle of discovery*** is not only the confirmation by Rembrandt of the

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<sup>9</sup> Schiller, Op. Cit.

classical function of artistic composition, but is also the highest expression of love of mankind. And that is the true nature of God, as man is able to discover and replicate for others. Schiller says: "Thus the Deity, conceived of as a power, that can admittedly cancel our existence, but as long as we still have this existence, can have no influence over the actions of our Reason, is dynamically sublime - and also only that religion, which gives us this conception of the Deity, bears in itself the seal of sublimity."

In conclusion, I might add that Rembrandt avoided two dangers which would have ruined his chances of solving the paradox of the *unity of faith and reason*. The first is that he avoided the traps of visual effects. The following **Figures 7, 8,** and **9** are clear examples of such temptations, and that is the reason why Rembrandt was never entirely satisfied with these works and kept returning to the same subject, over and over again over more than a twenty year period.



**Figure 7** *Supper at Emmaus* (1629)



**Figure 8** *Supper at Emmaus* (1648 [1])



**Figure 9** *Jesus' Disappearance from Emmaus* (1648)

The second danger is the trap of “Pure Reason” as Schiller identified it in his criticism of Kant. The *unity of faith and reason* cannot come from our ability to defy the mighty power of nature but in discovering the sublime power of reason as a gift of insight given to man by the Holy Spirit.

This means that man must not attempt to overpower nature with his reason. Man cannot achieve his true independence by attempting to win over the power of nature through his cunning or his creative ability to improve on nature with artistic bravado or scientific and technological progress. He can only arrive at his true independence by way of abandoning his physical challenge to nature and come into harmony with it, through discoveries of principle; and that is accomplished through paradoxical means of willfully overcoming the frightful. As Schiller identified the task: “To experience the sublime it is thus absolutely required that we see ourselves fully isolated from every physical means of resistance, and seek succor in our non-physical self. Such a subject matter must therefore be frightful to

our sensuousness, and it is that no more, as soon as we feel we are a match for it through natural strengths.”<sup>10</sup>

This is the reason why man can only be sublime by succumbing to the frightful, but without fearing it. The two disciples at Emmaus are no longer fearful of God because they have gotten to know Him through discovering the sublime.

**FIN**

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<sup>10</sup>Friedrich Schiller, *[On the Sublime – Toward the Further Elaboration of Some Kantian Ideas](#)*, The Schiller Institute, translated by Daniel Platt, 1986.