

October 1, 1988 (Vol. 4, no. 3)

Dear Colleague:

Have you seen the murals on the construction site outside of Memorial Library? One large slab of whitewashed wall is covered with a dense thicket of graffiti, which range in theme from the obscene to the sentimental, and artworks, which range in skill from the crude to the accomplished (Spiderman, for instance) though even the skilled work shows little originality. Another smaller wall is covered by a bold semi-abstract design of construction workers, and is executed as a joint effort by art students. I wondered how long it would be before envy and resentment will seek to deface it. Who do the art students think they are? Superior beings? Sad to say, after only one week the vandals set to work. Even the Daily Cardinal called the defacers vandals rather than freedom fighters.

Rembrandt. Who does he think he is? Why should we even now, centuries later, defer to his genius and humanity? Well, a sort of defacement is in progress--moustaches are being added on tastefully and in a dry scholarly fashion. Rather than speak of Rembrandt's genius, let us speak of Rembrandt's Enterprise. In reviewing this book by Svetlana Alpers, Mark Stevens asks: "What is Alpers' enterprise? She may not know it, but there is a sense in which she is interested in usurping some of Rembrandt's authority. It is the figure of the scholar, one feels, that here asserts cultural primacy. By confining [Rembrandt] to his period and place, he is made a man only of his time, not for all time. As a result, our sense of connection with the artist weakens." Instead of admiring the artist, our admiration is made to turn to the scholar-critic who, "in showing himself aware of the constraints of history, now seems to stand above time" ( New Republic, August 22, 1988).

Disrespect has an important role to play in our moral-intellectual well-being. But so does respect. We are right to be driven by a sense of injustice, but we should also be driven by a sense of justice; and these do not come down to the same thing. We rejoice to see the waning of the politics of arrogance, but it is no great improvement to put in its place the politics of resentment.

Best wishes,

