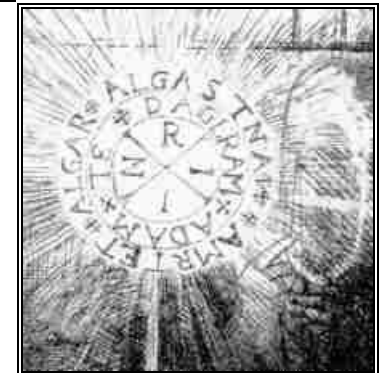
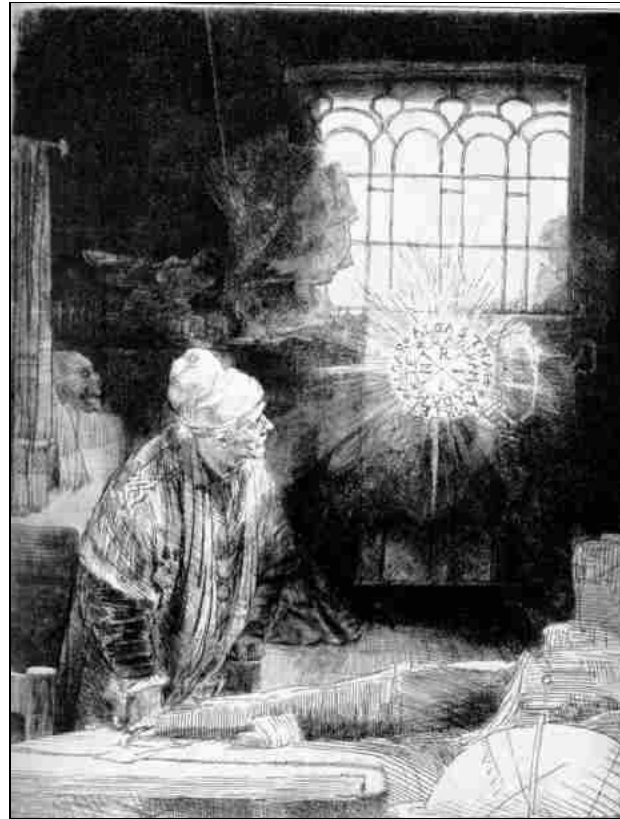


DR. FAUST, I PRESUME?

The ratio of signed to unsigned etchings being about 2:1, it not very unusual that a particular etching bears no (visible) signature, even when that etching is very famous (B 270). It is generally dated around 1652 and is presumed to represent the notorious Doctor Faust (d. 1539), already a popular literary figure in the Netherlands at the time. First described as a "Practicing alchemist" in 1679, the etching was given the Faust appellation in 1731. Latter-day scholars (H. van de Waal) prefer to see in it the depiction of a sectarian theologian named Faustus Socinus, which would explain the "Faust" derivation along the way. The subject-matter and formal content of this etching, and its analogies with the 1642 etching of St. Jerome (B 105) and related subjects from the Leiden period—a *scholar! books! a globe! a skull! a mirror! concentric circles!*—were, I gather, especially dear to Rembrandt's well-educated heart. The skull makes one of its rare appearances in the work of this son of the university city of Leiden, where skull-meditating scholars and suchlike *Vanitas* themes were a specialty. The only other instance of a personal implication in this work is the disposition of the Christ acronym "I.N.R.I." (Iesus Nazarenus Rex Iudaeorum, "Jesus the Nazarene, King of the Jews") in the center of the so-called magic circle. Notice that instead of starting with Jesus' initial "I", which is at the bottom, the circle is turned so that the "R" appears at the top, making the acronym read "R I I N": this variation in the spelling of Rembrandt's last name appears in Orlers' 1641 biographical sketch.

Q.E.D.

Note: As far as I know, this self-referring feature has never been reported in the literature. Mind the mirror!



Addendum to entry 33

The personal nexus of this last etching is movingly confirmed, in my eyes, by another etching that shares its singular formal qualities: a light background (window) and an alignment of motifs/figures. This is the representation of the Holy Family, which is providentially signed and dated 1654 (B 63), making it a close relative in time of the Faust piece. The chair on the left and the fireplace on the right remind me of the Philosopher in meditation (see entries 11 and 14), another depiction of a domestic subject from the Bible. The tight grouping and telescoping of the figures via a conspicuous circle (oval) are also reminders of this intimate and symbolic space, which I have long associated with the womb, or matrix. Significantly, the figure of Joseph(?) appears at the window outside, in the role of a spectator kept at a remove from the Mystery of Life. I would venture to say that we are also privy here to a major symbol in Rembrandt's mind, or, if you prefer, imagination. This scene has the same revelatory atmosphere as the alleged Faust etching, in which a lone scholar seems tangled in a play of mirrors reflecting his mortality and perhaps also the futility of his intellectual efforts—though it does make him arise from his chair. The coincidence of Rembrandt's last name with the Christ monogram leaves us not with a solution to this enigmatic etching, but with a major puzzle involving the spiritual alchemy of the self. Are we seeing Rembrandt fathering himself; nurturing his own light, so to speak?

