

*Maria
Poprzeczka* Flaxman, 1793
— Picasso, 1903

During his last stay in Barcelona in the spring of 1903, Picasso painted the picture *La Vie* considered the most enigmatic of his formative works. It depicts a couple of naked lovers and, facing them, a mother with a child sleeping in her arms. In the background between these two groups two pictures are visible one above the other — sketches of naked, covering human figures which define the scene as an artist's studio. *Andromache's Parting with Hector* is John Flaxman's drawing of 1793 which he prepared as one of his illustrations of *The Iliad*. It depicts a married couple locked in a farewell embrace and a nurse-maid with their child standing nearby. A summarily treated structure visible in the distance makes up the background.

In both Flaxman's and Picasso's works the arrangement of human figures is very similar: the two groups are standing stock still, that of a man and woman clinging to each other and that of a woman with a child. A fundamental difference between them however, lies in the relation of those figures to their surroundings. Flaxman presents his scene from a distance, leaving considerable spaces of empty background on both sides while Picasso frames the two groups close together. He tightly and evenly cuts the margins so that his figures seem not to have enough room within the limits of his canvas. Such is the principal similarity and principal difference. Others, perceived as one compares the two pictures, are of lesser importance. The groups of the man and woman and child are not aligned. In Flaxman's picture, the latter is somewhat withdrawn (which may be explained by the nurse-maid's secondary role), while in Picasso's they are advanced to a barely perceptible degree. The figures of the woman with the child are very similar in the two pictures: their faces are shown accurately in profile and their bodies in an almost frontal view. The arrangement of their attire is the same folded around their hands and flowing downward in straight folds reaching their feet. A difference is seen in the presentation of the child, who in Flaxman's picture, sitting on the nurse-maid's arm, embraces her neck and, in Picasso's, sleeps nestled on her breast. More differences are displayed in the groups of men and women. The most important is that, in the case of Picasso, both are naked. It is in one and the same gesture that Picasso's woman puts her hand on the man's shoulder and rests her head on it, as if she has just moved from his left to his right shoulder and thus exposed her profile. And here, an astounding detail appe-

ars: passing from one to the other position, the woman has let go of the man's hand which remains half-open in a strange, inexplicable gesture as if still holding her hand. Finally, the direction in which the human figures look in the two representations are also different. Flaxman's Hector looks at Andromache while the nurse-maid looks at him and his wife taking leave of him. In Picasso's picture, the naked man and the woman with the child look into each other's eyes. The mother gazes persistently, the man tries to evade her eyes and it is precisely this line of their looks that is the line of the greatest tension in this picture. However, the very last remark exceeds the scope of comparison assumed here of the elementary arrangement of details in the two pictures.

Comparing forms and representations is among the fundamental tasks of an art historian. Perceiving and proving similarities and differences provides the basis for a whole university course on the history of art, presenting its styles, schools and artistic milieus. A considerable part of the efforts of the traditional history of art was and is aimed at finding and indicating models, patterns and stereotypes making up sources for the forms studied. In sum, this allows one to look at European art as a vast sequence of imaginative tradition and to formulate the conviction that 'art is primarily born by art itself'¹. Such a comparison as that presented above is, to a considerably narrower extent, also among the most routine duties of an art historian when proving the existence of a 'source' or 'graphical prototype' of the work of art he analyzes. In studies on early art, there are innumerable examples of conscious or unintentional, sometimes even concealed, use of workshop patterns, copy works through engravings of the old masters and the technique of their illustrative graphic art. Such borrowings are usually treated as something obvious in all types of traditional art, as observing conventions and canons as well as in typifying secondary and poor art. Discovering a prototype for the work of an eminent artist happens to be a real surprise. Romanticism has inculcated in us the conviction — which we do not want, or cannot, get rid of — that all great artistic individuals are marked precisely by an imaginative inventiveness, that due to them models are formed for later art devoid of that creative force, an art whose role is not to create any more, but merely to continue. The statement that great innovators of 19th-century art made use of graphic, frequently imperfect, patterns was at first quite a surprise. At present, it is a well-known fact that, for example, Goya availed himself of emblematic compendia and iconology, as well as of propagandist leaflets, Constable — of illustrations from textbooks for amateur painters, Courbet — of provincial obituaries and the impressionists — of pictures published in tabloids, of photographs and other second-rate visual ma-

¹ Z. Kępiński, *Impresjoniści u źródeł swych obrazów (The Impressionists at the Source of Their Art)*, Wrocław 1976, p. 8.

terials offered by the increasingly improving technique of reproduction. The routine use of popular folk art by early 20th-century avant-garde is a separate subject.

The art of Picasso, the 'great representative of historicism'², which constitutes a permanent dialogue with tradition, studied in the aspect of its sources, reveals a vast and fascinating museum of imagination³. In this museum, is there any place for Flaxman's drawings? His name is mentioned in connection with Picasso's works only in the context of the latter's illustrations of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in which Picasso undertook Flaxman's tradition of contour drawings for the Greco-Roman author's works⁴. As a matter of fact, this comparison turns out to be disadvantageous for Flaxman whose rigid contours are opposed by Alfred Barr to Picasso's resilient, unconstrained lines. The comparison is, therefore, rather general in character and, in this case, one has to do with the convergence of two, definite representations. Finding a certain element which relates one to the other — is a method of proceeding usually adopted in cases of similar yet distinct pictures. In penetrating an artist's imagery and reconstructing his visual possibilities, one looks if only for a slight evidence that this artist 'could see' the representation which he assumed, consciously or unintentionally, as a basis for his work. Such an approach to the 20th-century artist's work is absolutely ineffective, however since an artist living in our century 'could see' everything, not only the whole artistic past, available to him through the history of art, museums and reproductions, but also all non-artistic representations, exotic or common, which he could perceive and assimilate because of aesthetic liberalism. Out of the irresistible need for innovation he could make use of them in his own work⁵.

Thus, the question should not be whether the artist 'could see', but why, out of the thousand representations he saw, he selected precisely this one. However, in the case of Picasso's picture, even this question seems to be ungrounded. All that we know about this picture and its painting is the evidence of a profoundly personal character of his work⁶.

² Z. Ostrowska-Kęblińska, *Historyzm w architekturze XIX wieku (Historicism in 19th century Architecture)*, [in:] *Interpretacja dzieła sztuki (Interpreting Works of Art)*, Warszawa 1976, p. 109.

³ In reference to the Blue Period: A. Blunt, P. Pool, *Picasso: The Formative Years. A Study of His Sources*, London 1962.

⁴ A. Barr, *Picasso: Fifty Years of His Art*, New York 1946, p. 158.

⁵ A photograph of Picasso (on the frontispiece of the above cited book by Blunt and Pool), sitting against the background of a straw mat. Photographs, reproductions and postcards, including *Gioconda*, Rubens' picture and trashy photographs of some beauties — a sample of young Picasso's iconosphere — are stuck behind the mat.

⁶ Cf. Blunt, Pool, *op. cit.*, and P. Daix, G. Boudaille, *Picasso: The Blue and Rose Period: A Catalogue Raisonné of the Pictures 1900—1906*, New York 1967, p. 58 and foll., cat. IX, 13. Detailed biographic information concerning the

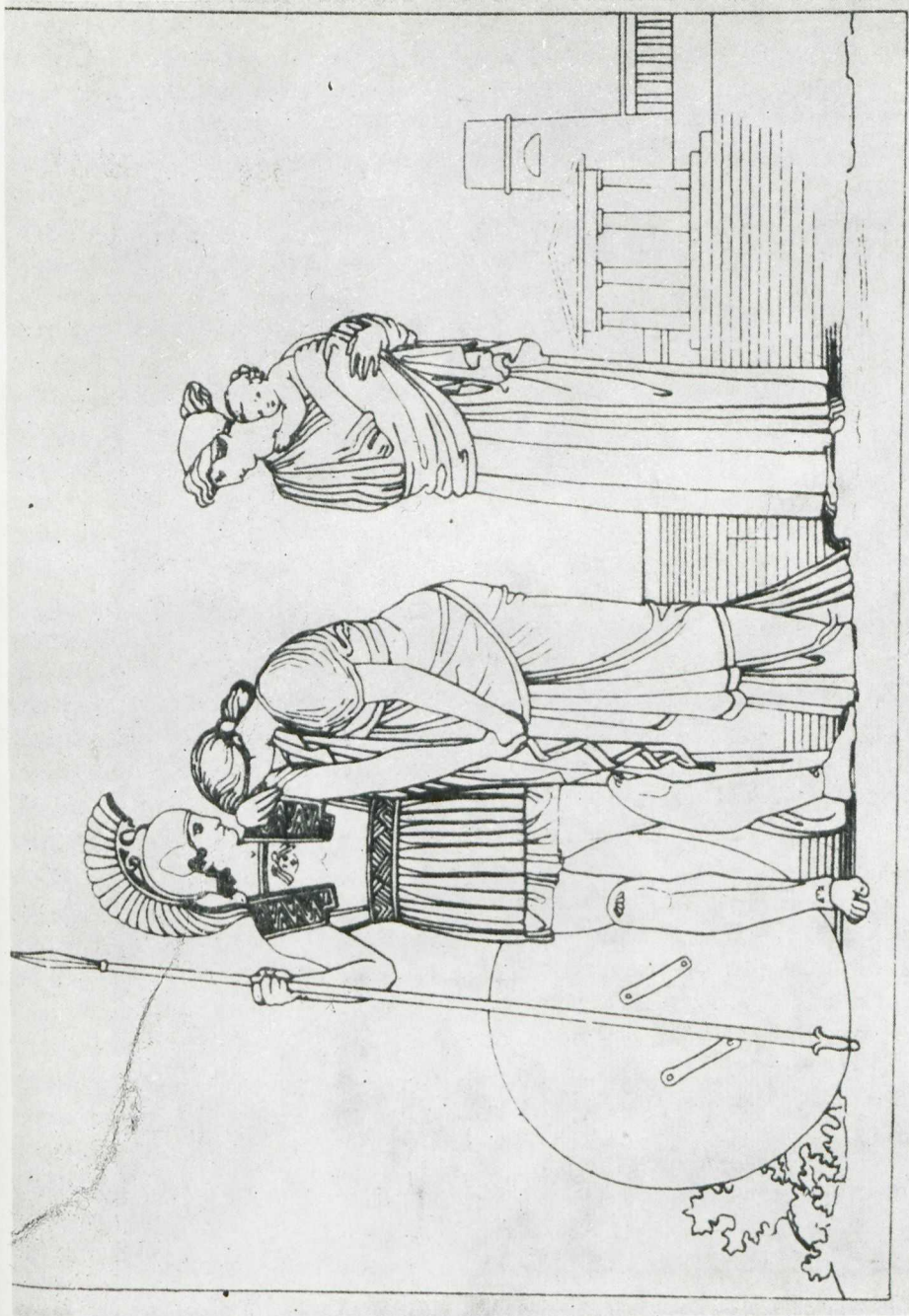
Sketches for this picture (one of them in a letter precisely stating its date) present only the couple of naked lovers, its background being more unequivocally determined as an artist's studio, with pictures mounted on easels and the man having distinct self-portrait features. In the final version of this picture Picasso replaced his own face with the features of Casagemas, a young talented Spanish painter. Casagemas' violent death, a suicide in the perfect *peintre maudit* style⁷, was committed in one of the Parisian cafés in February, 1901. This became for Picasso the stimulus to paint several pictures, both 'documentary' portraits of the deceased on a bier and the visionary *Evocation*, arousing mental associations with *The Burial of Count Orgaz* by El Greco. Thus, instead of a self-portrait Picasso painted a 'necromantic' (as it could have been termed by Adolf Basler) portrait of his friend, a change which had to result in altering the general idea of the picture.

The fact that the picture was the result of Picasso's personal experiences and of his shock caused by a close contact with death need not necessarily prove that the origin of its form was not influenced by some previously seen image. (As a matter of fact *La Vie* contains an unquestionable quotation from another artist's work: the lower canvas in the background repeats a drawing of Van Gogh's *Sorrow*⁸). The picture is composed of two groups: a man with a woman and a woman with a child, which in fact constitutes a fundamental similarity with Flaxman's drawing. And so, 'the embrace' and 'motherhood' are two motifs combined in one representation which appear and reappear throughout the whole 'blue period' of Picasso's art. As a matter of fact it is due to this combination that this picture has become a synthesis of that whole period, its closure and its summing-up. Thus, the question whether or not Picasso 'could see' Flaxman's illustrations prepared for *The Iliad* and whether or not they could influence him in painting his picture is an unnecessary question. Whether he saw them or not (as he obviously could) is quite pointless with regard to the genesis of the picture which was primarily the result of Picasso's creativity during those years. This reasoning is not aimed at defending Picasso's romantically understood 'originality', since this concept is absolutely irrelevant to his works. The comparison of Flaxman's drawing and Picasso's picture, while it

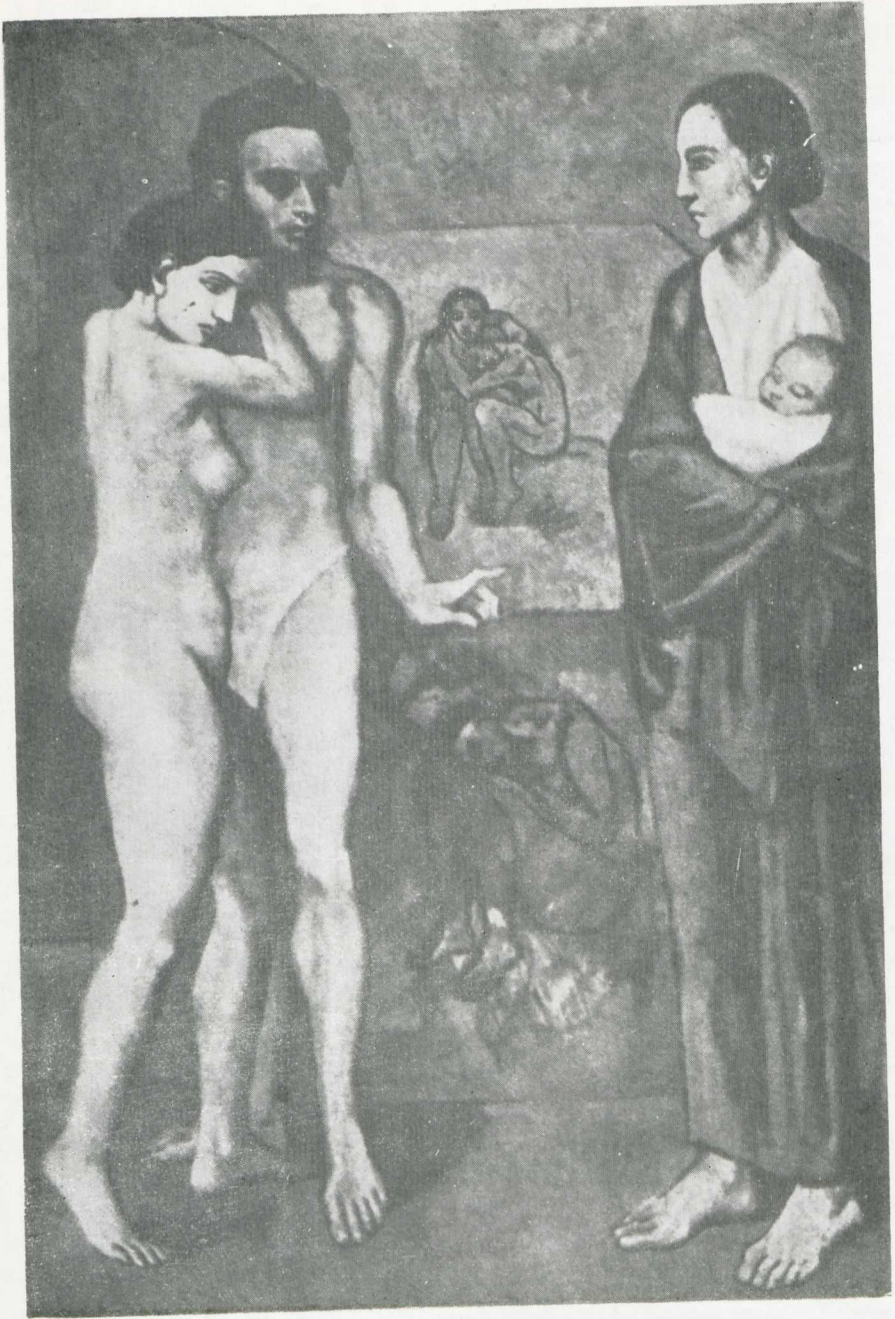
circumstances of the painting's origin is given by P. Daix, *Picasso et la poétique de la mort*, "Tel quel", XC, 1981, p. 38—44.

⁷ A police report, describing the event in detail, cited in the documentary part of the book by Daix and Boudaille, *op. cit.* A previously unknown description of Casagemas' suicide left behind by the Catalonian sculptor Manolo Huguet was published in T. Reff's *Themes of Love and Death in Picasso's Early Work*. An appendix in: *Picasso in Retrospect*, New York 1980, pp. 29—30.

⁸ B Iunt, Pool, *op. cit.*, ill. 118.



I. J. Flaxman, *Andromache's Parting with Hector*, 1793, London, British Museum



2. P. Picasso, La Vie, 1903, The Cleveland Museum of Art

does not tell anything of the artist's dependence, is a very telling example of a case in which the historian of modern art's simple and tried research methods may turn out to be deceptive.

Thus, the Flaxman — Picasso comparison is not one more of Picasso's confrontations with tradition, those confrontations which, capitalized by André Malraux, were considered by him historic events. The convincing similarities between the two representations remain, however, an open question. They may be examined after all not from the viewpoint of dependence and influence, but as two representations independent of each other with a similar arrangement of forms as their common denominator. Such an approach to this comparison provides a convenient observation point, more strongly it emphasizes some features of each of the two pictures and, finally, it arouses certain interpreting temptations. The first possibility of comparison regards 'style'. Seemingly, it would be difficult to find better material for a classroom stylistic exercise or a more salient example of the opposition of rigorous classicism versus expressionistic modernism. It turns out, however, that the principal contrast between Flaxman's linearity and Picasso's painting results primarily from differences in the two artistic techniques. Following Wölfflin's scheme, we notice that even the spatial relations disturb a simple pattern of opposition. In the case of the two pictures, the arrangement of figures is almost monoplanar and although, as stated at the beginning, the space is extensive in Flaxman's drawing and confined in Picasso's picture, it is obscure in both and the few elements determining it are rather ambiguous. The stylistic comparison is, in addition, more difficult for Picasso's picture is in this respect not uniform at all. The rigid, lumpy figure of the woman with child is presented in an 'ugly' manner and the coarsely smeared paint and black contour make the solid folds of her attire and her clumsy feet heavier. The way of painting the two lovers is already similar to slight rubbings of Picasso's 'pink period' and El Greco's influence, emphasized by all experts, is expressed primarily in slenderized forms, soft modeling and manneristically affected gestures. The nudes are almost academic (Barr did not hesitate in comparing *La Vie* to a 'drawing-room machine')⁹ and the mother is expressionistic in style. The stylistic incoherence of this picture is a presaging of *Demoiselles d'Avignon*, a picture painted by Picasso four years later and whose particular parts document the artist's gradual passage to another style.

More distinct and numerous oppositions are observed in the iconographical plane. First, Flaxman's illustration of a literary text was replaced by Picasso with a representation which is not supported by any verbal explanation and consequently is not encumbered by the function

⁹ Barr, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

of translating definite verses into visual forms¹⁰. The question of reception, therefore, is quite different. To understand this drawing properly, it is enough to read *The Iliad*, without knowing anything about Flaxman. The comprehension of Picasso's picture cannot be secured by any text. To understand it, we have to know Picasso's life in those times, to be conversant with all his friendships and love affairs, his emotional and mental states and, in addition, to enter into the spirit of the then Catalonian modernism. The heroes of *The Iliad* have been replaced in his picture by anonymous *misérables* whose living conditions we may only guess. The artist himself? His model? Likewise, instead of unshakable Homeric moral imperatives, here we receive a moral message, very suggestive, but vague and not unequivocal. Flaxman's drawing, illustrating a definite moment of the Homeric epic, is embedded in a diachronic narrative. However, the scene of leave-taking it presents, even devoid of its literary apposition, places itself in time, implies a certain 'before' and a certain 'after', and thus becomes a turning point and opens a new period in the heroes' lives. Picasso's picture, on the other hand, is closed within its own time interval or, properly speaking, within its own timelessness and this is precisely the factor which intensifies its palpable, allegorical character.

The remarkable fact is that, even with their analogous motifs Flaxman's drawing and Picasso's picture have to be assigned to quite different iconographical circles. The scene of *Parting* is a subject which found great future only in 19th-century art where it was presented innumera- bly in the form of patriotic, melodramatic and sentimental leave-takings. Picasso's picture was preceded by many centuries of iconographical tradition of the cyclic presentations of human life. Those who described *La Vie* pointed out the popularity of this subject in painting of the turn of the century, citing primarily Munich, but also Toorop, Klinger and Klimt¹¹. The pictures of all these artists are symbolic transformations of the representations of various stages of human life and, consequently, belong to a great circle of vanity images. However, the changes introduced by Picasso are considerable in extent. Instead of a cyclic presentation there is a confrontation between youth and adulthood, eroticism and motherhood, or maybe (which would be so close to the spiritual atmosphere of the turn of the century) love and death¹². For, the

¹⁰ Only literary influences are here indicated which could induce Picasso to undertake this subject, such as: Gauguin's *Noa-Noa* (Daix, Boudaille, *op. cit.*, p. 60) and Maeterlinck's *The Song of Unloved Apollinaire* (Blunt, Pool, *op. cit.*, p. 20).

¹¹ Blunt, Pool, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

¹² Blunt and Pool (*op. cit.*, p. 115) indicate a similarity of the figure of mother to the image of Death from Maeterlinck's play. Speaking of theatrical comparisons, it is worth mentioning that the scene of *La Vie*, separated from the iconographical tradition, would become only a scene from a trivial melodrama —

man has the features of the deceased. In his studio, he was surprised not by a wronged woman, but by death. It is her eyes that there is no escape from. How can the picture called *La Vie (Life)* still be a picture of Death? If so, this Death, once again in accordance with that epoch's obsessions, is, at the same time, Birth, it brings termination, but, at the same time a new life. One more element, the background, is of great importance for placing Picasso's picture in the iconographical tradition. It is one of the examples of the frequently analyzed motif of an artist's studio as a place of religious cult (in this case, it replaced the ancient temple which in Flaxman's drawing was the scene of leave-taking). Of the many 19th-century presentations of this subject, there occurs one, somewhat surprising, analogy — that to Courbet's *Atelier*. The similarity lies not so much in the pictures themselves as in the artists' intentions. The two young artists, Courbet and Picasso, sum up in these works all their hitherto collected artistic and life experiences. Both of them break with immediate contemporary subject matter and undertake the toil of forming an allegorical picture. Both of them place their 'allegories' in a painter's studio, although Courbet uses artistic and social ideas (or, as recently maintained, Masonic) and Picasso — philosophical and moral ideas as the contents of their works. Both of them situate 'a picture within a picture' in the center of their composition. And, finally, both of them have left behind works which provoke interpretation. The last-named analogy is already investigative in character.

Comparing once again Flaxman's drawing with Picasso's picture, one can notice that a complete reversal of the rank of particular figures has occurred in them. Only two heroes, Hector and Andromache, locked in a farewell embrace, appear in Flaxman's illustration. The nurse-maid, with the child, is only a passive eyewitness to the scene and plays a secondary role, she is limited only to an additional explanation of the couple's situation: Hector takes leave of his wife, as well as of his whole family life. In Picasso's picture, the figure of the woman with a child, regardless of how we may interpret it, is of decisive importance

the lovers surprised by the abandoned and wronged mother. An attempt at including the picture *La Vie* in the old iconographical tradition was also undertaken by Reff, *op. cit.*, p. 13—16 who, placing it in the sphere of representations of love and death, expressed the opinion that connecting it with the idea of various stages of human life was hardly convincing. The contrast between two women, one symbolizing the mundane and the other the celestial love, seemed to him to be of fundamental significance. The emblematic representation of the Tree of Life, with Adam and Eve on the one and Mary on the other side, as an opposition of Sin and Death to the Eternal Life, was indicated by Reff as the nearest iconographical model. With all the similarities taken into account, this kind of representation seems to be too elaborate as a direct prototype.

to the drama of the whole scene. She is the source of conflict, she introduces the anxiety and the sense of danger so strongly emanating from the picture. She causes the reception of the picture to be an opposition full of tension. Opposition of love and death? Of life and death? The scene of parting does not contain any element of conflict, it presents the submission to destiny resulting from moral commands. The expressive character of the two representations is radically different, although their static arrangement has remained intact, with unchanged postures and gestures, even with the same direction of look. What has been changed pertains to the intensity of this look. This same motif turns out to be not only a form of another iconographical subject, but also a reflection of quite a different archetypical situation.

The attempt at establishing a relationship between Flaxman's drawing and Picasso's picture has led us to a conclusion about the peculiar situation of the historian of modern art. However deceptiveness of tested methods is by no means the only difference. Each of the problems mentioned above could be developed and enriched by comments and footnotes, for each of them has an extensive 'literature of the subject'. The most extensive one is of course dedicated to Picasso himself. It has been pointed out that the desire to exhaust the state of studies causes the history of art to become the history of historians' own views¹³ and that, like modern art, it becomes more and more self-centered thematically. Paradoxically enough, in the case of Picasso, such a danger is not imminent, since the state of studies is practically out of grasp. The shadow which, despite recent exhibitions, seems to fall on Picasso's art is perhaps caused by the superabundance of words written on this subject. A historian of modern art not only selects the subject and method of his studies, but also undertakes the risk of unconsciously following an already well beaten path. But, if it is impossible to command all such knowledge one can try at least to be aware of the distance between different viewpoints and realize the limits upon which all possible interpretations are contained. In the case of *La Vie*, one of the opposite poles may be the viewpoint of Rudolph Arnheim who availed himself of certain outlines taken from the picture for illustrating his thesis that the shared contour is perceptually ambiguous¹⁴. Thus, what might seem a vague reminiscence of the figure of prehistoric Venus turns out to be part of a woman's and man's united bodies. For the greatest opposition

¹³ K. Kalinowski, *Zagadnienia interpretacji 'Św. Teresy' Berniniego (Interpreting Bernini's 'St. Theresa')*; in connection with W. Ranke's article *Bernini's 'Heilige Teresa'*, [in:] *Interpretacja dzieła sztuki (Interpreting Works of Art)*, Warszawa 1976, p. 167.

¹⁴ R. Arnheim, *Art and Visual Perception: Psychology of the Creative Eye*, Berkeley and Los Angeles 1969.

to this abstract 'visual exercise', an excerpt from Carl Jung's essay about Picasso may be considered in which he thus refers to the motifs of this picture as follows: 'So beginnt Picasso mit den noch gegenständlichen Bildern in Blau, dem Blau der Nacht, des Mondscheins und des Wassers, dem Teut-Blau der ägyptischen Unterwelt. Er stirbt, und seine Seele reitet auf einem Pferd ins Jenseits. Das Tagleben klammert sich an ihn, und eine Frau mit dem Kinde tritt mahrend zu ihm. Wie der Tag ihm Weib ist, so die Nacht, was psychologisch als die Dunkle und harrt auf ihn in blauer Dämmerung, pathologische Ahnung erweckend'¹⁵.

How, in this scale of problems, can we place the questions about the similarity of *La Vie*, to the classicistic illustration of Homer's poem? Should the sources of their formal similarity be sought in some faraway common prototype? Or perhaps in the current expressive formulas made use of, as widely accepted phrase, of the so-called 'visual rhetoric' of European art? These formulas will only multiply the questions provoked by this mysterious blue picture with its mysterious azure.

Translated by Jerzy Dłutek

¹⁵ C. G. Jung, *Archetypen und Symbole*, [in:] *Wirklichkeit der Seele: Picasso*, 5 publ. — Olten-Freiburg im Breisgau 1978, p. 126; first published in "Neue Züricher Zeitung", November 13, 1932.