

David Pollard



Self-Portraits

Poems based on artists' self-portraits



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David Pollard

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for John and Judith

you cannot see yourself so well as by reflection. [William Shakespeare]

La pintura es poesa muda; la poesa pintura ciega. [Leonardo da Vinci]

Poema pictura loquens, pictura poema silens. [Simonides of Keos]

Ut pictura poesis. [Horace]

Self-Portrait

If art is dumb poetry then poetry is blind painting - Leonardo da Vinci

Caught like a vice among its web of mirrors,
the eye grinds back into the soul
and riven image at the dark point of light;
black flower that blooms
into the skills of matter
never can avoid the healing wound
that flows its image back into the world
beyond the other as the real precisely;
lapis lazuli that, in returning from itself
through almost non-existent surfaces,
rustles the deepest pool of failures
instrumental truth,
the eye encircling the annihilating
oils and canvas, stone and paper,
instance,
into the momentary death
and ecstasy of art that overflows perception
into failure.

Look and it will be given.

It is the eye
beyond
the work of concentration on the other
that is both I and not;
draws itself back into the here
as its familiar stranger.
Narcissus pool of glass,
reflected image of the self,
is face to face
that, kissed, dissolves in ripples
through which only art's failure can retrieve itself
back to endure
the flight of death out of its valley;
shows as the moment
between the centre and the real's transparency,
between dumb art and all the ways it speaks.

Bek (13th Century BCE)

[Tomb Mural, Aswan Stela, Egypt]

In all the riches of the new style mine -
am I with Taheret my wife
in brilliance cut into my willing service
of His Majesty who stands round me
in power and taught me the arts of stone
and all the ready colours of love.
Men, my sweet father, who raised Amenhotep into glory
knew not the Aten nor the new ways of God
whose prayers I chisel into the nerves of time
from the oppression of sand.

Ordered by Akhenaten under the sun, our god,
to chip away the old divinity of pictograms,
I carved a new style for a new time.
I did him as he was;
too close to all the imperfections
of frail dust to see into the battered metal
of the ideality of sky and perfect light,
rising and falling in the language of creation.
So will the pilgrim know him
in his dreams and afterlives
a giant to the eyes knowing,
caught in such thin, effeminate limbs
immaculate small hands,
weak chest and heavy thighs,
long, wan, sad face, large eyes half closed,
thick brows, high cheekbones under sunken cheeks
and lips with their so subtle smile,
in his long face and neck.
Thus did I cut him into the sands of time.

So was it ordered and so Bek did.

Thus am I likewise in his image and God
beside my wife in the eternal clawlines
of his dread demand.

And now in the fading colours of our tombs,
the demons of his sailing god
will ply their high long way from east to west
across the skies of all our lives.

Brother Rufillus (12th Century)

[Decorated Initial from *The Lives of the Saints*, Cod 127 fol. 244, Bibliotheca Bodmeriana, Geneva]

Inscribed

among the perfect confusion of my art,
among the malachites, vermilions, lazulis,
the letter will be (as I) red brazilwood arabic

- an R -

initialled with its origins
in fire and water
and in middle earth,
and mine own breath,
iron gall, oak-apple vinegar and gum,
even (my secret) honey and alum,
as I, Rufillus, paint myself into the letters
of the holy lives exemplary of mine,
tasked with illuming the hard signs of prayer,
the veneration of Gods holy longing
in the scriptorium of cold Chesters
weak winter fires, thin cloak and longing,
aching arse and back,
arm and finger delicate
to the point of pain,
earns revenue in another world -

The priors and the high tables
stronger wines and sweet white meat
under great Henrys and his bishops
lowering gaze all robed in passing
through the heavy geometric weight
of this worlds stones to . . .

- hush -

for we are ready for the carrels in the cloisters,
murmuring moving lips, hard seats and slanting silences
of all our suns long journey into night
to parse our lives into the Saviours words
and so avoid the fire that burns yet gives no light,
dark torch of our eternal fears,
scalding the pages anonymity
that batters at the soul of demons,
tripartite forked and tailed that
my inks touch away

- o pray tis so -

into salvation.

Maestro Mateo (c1100-c1200)

[*Portico de la Gloria*, Sculpture, Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela, Spain]

Minstrel of hammers exiled from my own creation,
I set myself to kneel eternally in prayer
becalmed behind closed lids,
just here, among the guttering incense
facing the body of James,
apostle of my devotions,
 (knowing that, once they had my money in the chests,
 the false friars would leave their masses)
carved as the curly headed angel of my hopes,
done like the rest in granite
to a black carbon sheen
and verdigris and rose carmethian,
bright in the shades of each ones humours.

To hear their music
 (I mean the angels)
was my passion always
 (I played the harp and laude
 until the constant dust
 burnt off my fingers from
 the delicate magic of their
 strings and intervals)
that stays much as I always knew it,
choral and organo to my dead ears
in stone.

I gave my lintel angels
each an instrument to touch into the air
in brittle silence,
cold above the arches;
made the kings, apostles and the rest
 fratres domini
 (as I)
tilt their ingenious heads
so each could show his story
 - knowing my text -
better to hear their music of the spheres.

So my great portico
of the earths powers
rises from out the stem of Jesse
into glory and the hierarchies of heaven

(rendered for Don Fernandos coin)
sweated through the heat of many summers
inspiration of the chisels claw and smoke
into its many mineral skins I left behind
orphaned from me in their eternal lives.

Giotto (1266-1337)

[*Last Judgement*, Fresco, 1304-5, Capella degli Scrovegni, Padua]

Through me,
the likeness of the Holy story
in its hills and vales
is now condemned to light
under the lazuli and stars
of the high beauties of its blood and bone
ground out into the risk of plaster and decay.
Out of a dwarf shall come forth sweetness.

My eyes transparencies can trace me
back to all the lines of natures
 (which is maximus in minimis)
quick immediacy
 (caught, the myth has it,
 and I wish no denial,
 painting my perfect sheep on stones,
 by Cimabue, my master)
of fresco already drying under the brush
of lifes own visibility and
in its moments held between
all fear and longing of illusions
driven to the edge of a dark diligence.
 - Stretch out and touch;
 admit the fingers (souls) desire to pass
 behind, beyond, and haul the image of the real
 back into this world. -
Each is a portrait owned by its master
til the hard plaster flakes and falls again
back to the stark temptations of our mineral earth.

Lazarus is my patron
as the inert interred in matter
is brought to life under my hand,
makes oil and tempera,
gum, wood and canvas, live
which is the second art of Christs
poesia; maker of passions,
births, sadness, fury, speech,
held in the moment resurrected
for eternity
 - even myself -
from little nothings.

I was elected
painter of souls;
will be
- please God and all his saints -
at the last judgement
granted peace
beyond the perfect circle of my art.

Fra Angelico (c.1385-1455)

[*Deposition of Christ*, 1438, Tempera on Panel, Museo di San Marco, Florence]

for Robert Bernasconi

What do they know of me
in the dark hammer
of a souls night at prayer
or how the colour of murmurs
can imprint itself on wood in glory?

So close and yet so far
beyond the delicate armoury of touch,
quite at the centre thus
to daily grant the horror
of his wounds dear minium
ground by me
 and eyesalt on my lips
 (Sunt lachrimae rerum)
who suffered on the cross of my depictions
once and ever but
 for me
 and my depictions sake
enrapt my sight with the delights of heaven
 and the seductive beauty of these
worldly deeds
 are not the deeds of heaven
 but their mirror that I mirror in art
and yet
 influxibus ex alto
whose judge and saviour puts my wages
on the scales of his redemptive mercy.

Habited as a holy hermit of His works
 so very simple call
to the poesia of the passage of His story,
to study which is all my skill
and my humility, unboasted
 (no to the popes archbishoprics
 and the worlds fodder)
in ordinis divi Benedicti,
to win another kingdom
under my arts retiring knowledge
and its call to failure
 - mine

and only mine -
under the dispensation of his gifts
just as we know how heavy are the golds
and blues of heavens weight that cast
their beams down to our imaginings.

Dear Lord and Christ
allow me in thy likeness
and that of all creation
- mine in yours -
to draw myself unto salvation
in thy sight.

Fra Lippo Lippi (1406-69)

[*Coronation of the Virgin*, c.1439-47, Oil on Wood Panel, Uffizi, Florence]

In adoration, tonsured,
at a respectful distance from her
coronation, prayerful,
am I drawn into the presence of glory
by the sacrifice of brush on wood
in hope of times avowal.

Carmelites were my prayers and parents.
Trapped in their routines
I painted in my habit as in life,
taught me both art and Christ
and the virginity of the Mother of God
as letters never liked me.
I butchered
 (as my father)
all my learning as my fingers itched
to scrawl rather than study
so I painted and I painted,
earned their praise,
the poorest friar in Florence,
 kept my vows
also Lucrezia and my son
 (whose family threaten
 me with death spite the
 popes promise)
as dainty fingers played
the vision of our story
into a sensuality.

And so the blue and only
crossed my eyes with gold
and lazuli and cineba,
our grand apothecary ground into art
for Cosimo
always al dente,
solid, certain,
full of grace
 (a little less of monk
 and Judas to his masters
 after enslavement to the Moors)
renounced the world by a back door,
returned it to church walls as they ordered

in true humility to what my art demands,
human not pietistic,
and take my place among the saints
close to my dying Virgin
 (they paid twelve hundred
 good Florentine lire)
solid and reliable in such company
 an onlooker
 dissimulating as in life
 to make
Iste perfectit opus!

Hieronymus Bosch (1450-1516)

[*Garden of Earthly Delights; Hell*, Oil on Oak, c. 1500, Museo del Prado, Madrid]

I hide behind the silvered water
where you seek my image
and find it thus inverted.
My drolleries are understood too well
in times of brigands, plagues, the internecine
wars of Satan and his corrupting churches
 - where nothing holy lives
 nor virgins strive
 against their own mortality -
under a crescent
 (whisper it)
 and Cathar moon.

(What hope can a brush strive for
among the rebel dogmas that
enslave the spirits of lost souls?)

Thus I paint myself
into the very midst of deaths republic
and the triumph of broken eggs
bone bleached like wombs
 and I and I
 - helpless among this
 demoned and tormented body -
under a halo dance
around the flagon pipes
of such absurdity,
played by a dame of arms and legs
uprooted into broken boats
afloat the language of hells frozen waters
peopled within creation,
 - theirs,
 mine -
observe the open bark
and branches
rich with drunkards
stark against their destiny
 - in me,
 in mine -
and demon beaks
and knives that fornicate
and Christ upon a cross.

If I, then viewer,
thee.

Andrea Mantegna (1431-1506)

[*Presentation in the Temple*, c.1460 Tempera on Canvas, Gemldegalerie, Berlin]

You and I, Simeon,
can text the heavenly message
borne in mere paint,
designed to be a sign
of our salvations studied beauty.
The Holy family
that I came startled to
from other hopes
fulfilled in paint
is heavy framed
to show your story
as real and statuesque
and touchable,
as prophecy can petrify
a texture of the Sacred words
into the confined space of art.

Am I timid? - yes -
yet solid as very flesh.
I show my face slightly surprised
among the figures made by me
and see enough in courage to remain
drawn gently and aside to
colour in the minds prophetic eye.

Holy dove greyed and subtled
back into the minds dimensions
and the mysteries of creation -
I did it - I - why not allow
my presence in paint
across the story
that St Luke
(patron saint of artists)
tells of childhood and salvation?

The promise of immortals will be mine,
revealer shown and seen in holy
reverence to that little face
- both his and mine -
that held the greatest story of them all
and made it visible and reverend
and revered.

Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519)

[Red Chalk on Paper, 1510, Palazzo Reale, Turin]

Too much even for me
is in the ghostly face
of this half holy prophet
silver bearded by too much past
into one last dimension
of my story
and the lips knowing
too much.
 (the secrets in the lips
 always and uncertain smile).

The fall was all my life
and reasoning beyond
any reluctant grant to tell
of how and how.
The incapacity for
revelation is apart from sight,
apart from the very colour
of our apprehensions
into the yellowing and chalky splendour
 of its mineral,
 of its vegetable
truths can shimmer
if you have the art,
the hand and eye
and time
to be another smaller god
born beyond paradise
can smell its perfumes
at the lips taste
of the forbidden fruit
and breathe the last airs
of its sweet music in the visible.

I tried and tried
and failure is the fruit of it
 - the pride of it
 into deaths knowing -
and the last call of its
ambiguous bells.

Albrecht Drer (1471-1528)

[Oil on Wood, 1500, Alte Pinakothek, Munich]

Even my paint is wealthy
of my time and care.
The line is all my secret,
silverpoint and cut
in copperplate and wood
to detail out lifes seen dimensions
of the eyes own lauding
from virgins to a humble turf
imaged from Italy
where I escaped the plague
and my new harpy.

The century turns
precisely as the pools inverted imagery
and call of echoes
stares back as Christ in furs
and gold and generations
in close up yet remote.

Each hair is paid for,
pencil-like, precise;
each in its place
of studied gold,
my very halo
touched with the leaf of heavens vanity.
I am the very texture of the love
I oil onto the greater canvas of my fame.

Lucas Cranach the Elder (1472-1553)

[Oil on Wood, 1550, Uffizi, Florence]

Lucas the painter
black cloak, simplicity,
the hands that do the work that cannot save
but as the eye can know and hides from.
Found Luther and his theses, found myself,
found God, his woundsblood, granting hope
among so many desperations of this earth,
arced into my silvered beard and head,
into the wisdom painted by my faith
please God elected by my creed
into the kingdoms of its faithful showing.

And turned from all the gaudy
varnishing of saints,
the lustre art can save
through its deceptive skills,
and on to line and texture drawn
into the clearest incarnation of the word.
The logos taught us faith rather than works;
simplicity, acceptance, less Herr Aestheticus;
Christ, his apostles, our reformers
and less art (or the appearance of it);
gave us the master,
gave us words to deal into the sacred
reader of our studies;
frontispieces for the works,
his family and princes
 (of the church also
 whipped money from the temple as the popes learnt
 the inverse art of grabbing it from us)
indulge them nothing but the power
of a small brush to what the fates allow it.
Granted all that and my inheritance also.

Michelangelo (1475-1564)

[*Last Judgement*, Fresco, 1536-41, Sistine Chapel, Rome]

Sonnet 86

The brush is blind to all the cunning eyes
Immediacy of this our pilgrim heart
And pumps the eager atrium of its art
Into the egos cunning to disguise.
The mirrors loss between intent and act
In its dissimulation of the sharp incision
Displaces all the fingers loss of vision.
That is the sight that my addiction lacked.
My face is in the least expected crease
Of limb or torso muscled into being.
Such that my fears will flay me in the pyre
Of my last judgement, wait for a release
To life, into the real of sudden fleeing,
Into the art I made of my desire.

Sonnet 104

The wide minds muscles are constrained to show
The outlines of our Gods creative power
In me who know enough to never cower
Behind the harsh display it needs to grow
Into the cages of imprisoned eyes
and grant immortals their mortality
Of bad smells, temper and brutality
Is where the angels show their purpose lies.
Can draw forbidden lusts that take their toll
Of quiet and friends that should our old age warm,
Of those who need not give their soul for hire.
I paint from heart and yellow bile and soul,
Clawing my chisel to angelic forms,
Yet can I do no other in his fire.

Raphael Sanzio (1483-1520)

[Tempera on Wood, 1506, Uffizi, Florence]

Sweet always child of skill
that never left me;
easy, I always knew
the single lines transformative power
to out-dimension all the speaking eyes complexity
towards the true and life-lit glance
into the form of being
caught on the running pale of early hope,
the proud head tilted confident
and smile about the lips
can sketch towards completion
 (learnt of Vannuci, Leonardo, Michel,
 Brother Bartolomeo and the rest
 who took my latent gift for storia and taught me
 how to form a new world from the old)
but in my fathers blood
of quaint Urbinos
Montefeltro clash of courtiers gave me
the courtesy to fever out my way to mastery
 of Rome and Julius
commands for might and breadth.
The ease of sprezzaturas dancing grace
I learned of Castiglione yet still
centred it in the sceptic eye
and speed of execution.

Trust to configuration and the eye
grounded in the line the brush adorns;
its these can grant dimension, depth,
the real over its stark simplicity,
pounce or blind stylus always first
that grants our common sense to all.

Built on the shoulders
of those earlier relics;
 Pheidias, Praxiteles,
 Florentine tombs,
 too many Roman ruins -
the spirit made marble,
seen and half shown
behind the veil of arts construction
in the face of Gods corporeal beauties,

ideal Madonnas of first mornings
newly found in the antiquity of my yearnings
can step sweet voiced into the frame
of early singing for so little time
over the Paschal Triduum until the
immortal hope and resurrection of my gifts.

Hans Baldung (1484-1545)

[*The Melancholic Sentiment* or *The Head of Saturn*, Black Chalk on Paper, 1516, Graphische Sammlung Albertina, Vienna]

I am as Saturn,
melancholic
in black chalk
wild on paper.
Think me,
think Drer bewitched.
I was by his fine brush
and thins
prised into detail
hair by hair
which cruelled me to strength
something fantastical,
wild and naked to the body
and all my virgins, prophets
pale yellows into ground black,
my reds impure, greys dirty
and, of course, my green arsenical
and dangerous
turning gruesome
- grien - grienhals -
distorted,
flaring into the reformations
flight from death in chiaroscuro;
malaria, malicious and schismatic popes
and wars that led to heretics
heretical tics and witches and wild men
and sorcery.

Not for me the Malleus Maleficarum;
Id rather broomsticks, pitchforks,
shovels, toads eyes, spiders
intestines ground round
with pickled children,
strangers living beyond
the fall of Christ
cut into limewood
- diabolus ex machina -
and they sell.
 (and yet, lest you forget,
 I did the great retabulum
 at Freiberg).