

the moment when all time comes to an end. The
most tragic self-portrait I have ever seen is Rembrandt's
Self-portrait with Two Dogs, 1661, which shows him
in his eighties, blindfolded, seated and holding a dog in
each hand. He has lost his sight, but he holds on to
his dogs, who are his guides.

The late Rembrandt self-portraits contain or embody a paradox: they are clearly about old age, yet they address the future. They assume something coming towards them apart from Death.

Twenty years ago in front of one of them in the Frick Collection, New York, I wrote the following lines:

The eyes from the face
two nights look at the day
the universe of his mind
doubled by pity
nothing else can suffice.
Before a mirror
silent as a horseless road
he envisaged us
deaf dumb
returning overland
to look at him
in the dark.

At the same time there is a cheek, an insolence, in the painting which makes me think of a verbal self-portrait in a story I like very much by the American polemicist and fiction writer, Andrea Dworkin:

I have no patience with the untorn, anyone who hasn't weathered rough weather, fallen apart, been ripped to pieces, put herself back together, big stitches, jagged cuts, nothing nice. Then something shines out. But these ones all shined up on the outside, the ass wiggler, I'll be honest, I don't like them. Not at all.

Big stitches, jagged cuts. That's how the paint is put on.

Yet, finally, if we want to get closer to what makes the late self-portraits so exceptional, we have to relate them to the rest of the genre. How and why do they differ from most other painted self-portraits?

The first known self-portrait dates from the second millennium BC. An Egyptian bas-relief which shows the artist in profile drinking from a jar that his patron's servant is offering him at a feast where there are many other people. Such self-portraits – for the tradition continued until the early Middle Ages – were like artists' signatures to the crowded scenes being depicted. They were a marginal claim that said: *I also was present*.

Later, when the subject of St Luke painting the Virgin Mary became popular, the painter often painted himself in a more central position. Yet he was there because of his act of painting the Virgin: he was not yet there to look into himself.

One of the first self-portraits to do precisely this is Antonello da Messina's which is permanently in the

National Gallery, London. This painter (1430–1479) who was the first southern painter to use oil paint had an extraordinary Sicilian clarity and compassion – such as one finds later in artists like Varga, Pirandello or Lampedusa. In the self-portrait, he looks at himself as if looking at his own judge. There is not a trace of dissimilation.

In most of the self-portraits that were to follow, play acting or dissimilation was endemic. And there is a phenomenological reason for this. A painter can draw his left hand as if it belonged to somebody else. Using two mirrors he can draw his own profile as if observing a stranger. But when he looks straight into a mirror, he is caught in a trap: his reaction to the face he is seeing changes that face. Or, to put it in another way, that face can offer itself something it likes or loves. The face arranges itself. Caravaggio's painting of Narcissus is a perfect demonstration.

It is the same for all of us. We play-act when we look in the bathroom mirror, we instantly make an adjustment to our expression and our face. Quite apart from the reversal of the left and right, nobody else ever sees us as we see ourselves above the washbasin. And this dissimilation is spontaneous and uncalculated. It's as old as the invention of the mirror.

Throughout the history of self-portraits a similar 'look' occurs again and again. If the face is not hidden in a group, one can recognise a self-portrait a mile off, because of its particular kind of theatricality. We watch

Dürer playing Christ, Gauguin playing the outcast, Delacroix the dandy, the young Rembrandt the successful Amsterdam trader. We can be moved as if by overhearing a confession, or amused as by a boast. Yet before most self-portraits, because of the exclusive complicity existing between the eye observing and the returned gaze, we have a sense of something opaque, a sense of watching the drama of a double-bind which excludes us.

True, there are exceptions: self-portraits which do look at *us*: a Chardin, a Tintoretto, a copy of a Frans Hals self-portrait when he was bankrupt, Turner as a young man, the old Goya as an exile in Bordeaux. Nevertheless, they are few and far between. And so how is it that during the last ten years of his life Rembrandt painted nearly twenty portraits which address us directly?

When you're trying to do a portrait of somebody else, you look very hard at them, searching to find what is there, trying to trace what has happened to the face. The result (sometimes) may be a kind of likeness, but usually it is a dead one, because the presence of the sitter and the tight focus of observation have inhibited your response. The sitter leaves. And it can then happen that you begin again, referring not any more to a face in front of you, but to the recollected face which is now inside you. You no longer peer; you shut your eyes. You begin to make a portrait of what the sitter has been left behind in your head. And now there is a chance that it will be alive.

Is it possible that Rembrandt did something similar

with himself? I believe he used a mirror only at the beginning of each canvas. Then he put a cloth over it, and worked and reworked the canvas until the painting began to correspond to an image of himself which had been left behind after a lifetime. This image was not generalised, it was very specific. Each time he made a portrait he chose what to wear. Each time he was highly aware of how his face, his stance, his appearance had changed. He studied the damage unflinchingly. Yet, at a certain moment, he covered the mirror so that he no longer had to adjust his gaze to his gaze, and then he continued to paint only from what had been left behind inside him. Freed from the double-bind, he was sustained by a vague hope, an intuition, that later it would be others who would look at him with a compassion that he could not allow himself.