

'Ut Pictura Poesis': Jonson and the Painted Subject

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Early Modern corporeality has lately become a prominent field of study within the larger topic of early modern subjectivity, particularly in the works of Gail Kern Paster, Jonathan Sawday and Michael Schoenfeldt. Such work has re-focused the critical lens on how representations of the body and its attendant disciplines, anatomy and physiology, might have informed early modern theories of subjectivity. In this paper, I argue that Ben Jonson complicates materialist views of the body by using the trope of the portrait in order to construct selves that are comprised of both interior, ineffable qualities as well as external physical characteristics. Jonson argues that because of its very status as a mere imitation of Nature, a portrait can only gesture to the innate qualities possessed by the body that it represents rather than accurately render them. Unlike painting, poetry, according to Jonson, can render both the physical appearance and the inward character of the person whom it describes because it can imitate humanity more perfectly than any other artistic medium.

For Jonson, the portrait and its attendant effects are to be regarded with suspicion, particularly since he often juxtaposes the discipline of painting with the practice of poetry in order to assert poetry's superiority when it comes to rendering often elusive emotional and psychological states. Jonson often argues that a portrait can only render the exterior lineaments of its subject because a painter was chiefly concerned with reproducing certain visual effects that rely solely upon representations of surface qualities such as color, and light and shadow. The painters of Jonson's day, however, reject this view. In his *Treatise on the Arte of Limning*, Nicholas Hilliard claims that rendering the likeness of a person consists in three points, the most important of which is "the grace in countenance, by which the affections appear, which can neither be well used nor well judged of but the wisser sort."¹ For Hilliard, the most important aspect of rendering a body on canvas is to paint the face in such a manner that the "affections" appear. This is, of course, a concern consonant with any artistic medium; how can one manipulate language, paint or marble in order to render effectively the "affections"? Significantly, Hilliard recognizes that the materiality of the medium in which he was working was distinctly different from the "affections" he was attempting to render. The particular duality that Hilliard

¹ Hilliard, Nicholas, *The Arte of Limning*, Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1983, p. 23.

makes distinct indicates that the process of representing the living subject of a painting entailed a manipulation of the physical materials in order to render that which was either immaterial or possessed of a materiality entirely alien to the medium that was attempting to render it. Hilliard's assertions, then, complicate Jonson's arguments about the efficacy of poetry when it came to rendering elusive subjective states.

The rest of this paper argues that Jonson's belief in the superiority of poetry to painting in representing both emotional states and the human body stems from Jonson's theory of rhetoric, a theory that imbues rhetoric with the power to render the thing itself. For Jonson, the fact that language can refer or defer to objects is a secondary consideration, one for which painting is as suitable as poetry. Jonson can claim the superiority of poetry because it can render the intangible qualities of the mind and the heart by collapsing the space between poetic language and the thing it is attempting to render. Poetry, according to Jonson, can become the thing or quality that it represents, rendering unnecessary the metaphorical distance upon which painting relies. If poetic language collapses the boundaries between language and the objects it represents, one of the consequences of that collapse is that the distance between language and the subjects that it renders also collapses. Such a belief in the power of language is especially evident in Jonson's poems about portraits and painting.

I begin with Jonson's poem, "My Picture Left in Scotland" because it demonstrates his suspicion of and anxieties about painted modes of self-representation:

I now think, Love is rather deaf, than blind,
 For else it could not be,
 That she,
 Whom I adore so much, should so slight me,
 And cast my love behind:
 I'm sure my language to her was sweet,
 And every close did meet
 In sentence, of as subtle feet,
 As hath the youngest he,
 That sits in shadow of Apollo's tree.

Oh, but my conscious fears,
 That fly my thoughts between,
 Tell me that she hath seen
 My hundreds of grey hairs,
 Told seven and forty years,
 Read so much waste, as she cannot embrace
 My mountain belly, and my rocky face,
 And all these through her eyes, have stopped her ears.²

The deafness that the speaker ascribes to cupid and, by implication, his beloved, is the first indication that this poem will problematize traditional modes of both

² All quotations of Jonson's poems are from *The Complete Poems*, London: Penguin Publishing Ltd., 1988. This poem occurs on p. 140.

seduction and pictorial representation. The reason that the speaker is preoccupied with the aural and not the visual is evident in the second stanza. Despite the speaker's poetic skill, the beloved's attention is still clearly on his body. The speaker, in fact, feared just such a phenomenon, noting that his "conscious fears" have been confirmed because she has seen his "hundreds of grey hairs" and his growing "waist," both indications of his "seven and forty years." Unlike the speaker's portrait in Donne's "Elegie: His Picture," for example, the portrait in Jonson's poem represents an older, care-worn personage, not an idealized young man. The speaker's despair arises from the fact that both he and his beloved recognize that his physical imperfections inhibit his attempted seduction.

The embarrassment that the speaker feels at his bodily imperfections is not an isolated phenomenon. Gail Kern Paster argues that the humoral body and its attendant excretions such as urine and blood were consistently the sites and causes of early modern embarrassment, much as they are today. She isolates various instances of both internal and external functions of the Galenic body and argues that they are "textually complex signifiers of embarrassment formations in early modern English culture."³ While the poem does not

³Paster, Gail Kern, *The Body Embarrassed: Drama and the Disciplines of Shame in Early Modern England*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993, p. 21. While Paster's conception of the Jonsonian body is gleaned from his plays, the idea of embarrassment and the ways in which it cannot be overcome in this poem resonate particularly with Paster's theories.

contain any instances of humoral excretion, the body and the speaker's anxiety that his beloved will recognize its decay are what foil the speaker's attempt to convince her that he is still desirable. In this instance, the male speaker, despite the apparent skill of his rhetoric ("every close did meet," "my language to her was sweet" etc.) still acknowledges the persuasive influence of sight on the female gazer. The physicality of the description, particularly "my mountain belly" and "my rocky waist," and the acknowledgement that these physical attributes contain more power to dissuade than rhetoric to persuade illustrates the difficulties that Jonson faced in his championing of rhetoric. Significantly, the body in the poem is a *painted* one. In this particular poem, however, Jonson admits no such possibility as Hilliard does, that a portrait can contain, to use Hilliard's word, "affections." The speaker turns to the evocative possibilities of spoken poetic rhetoric precisely because he believes, at least in this instance, that his picture is unable to represent anything but his unfortunately decrepit physical state.

Jonson asserts the primacy of poetic rhetoric at the expense of painted representation in a number of his works, most of which tend to relegate the painted image to a merely physical sphere. In the poem "Eupheme," Jonson's paean to the memory of Lady Digby, the divisions between the disciplines of poetry and painting again appear. In the third and fourth sections of the poem, Jonson specifically addresses a painter who, we

assume, has been commissioned to paint a portrait of the late Lady Digby. The third section, entitled "The picture of the body," sees Jonson giving instructions to the portraitist:

Sitting, and ready to be drawn,
 What makes these velvets, silks, and lawn,
 Embroideries, feathers, fringes, lace,
 Where every limb takes like a face?

Send these suspected helps, to aid
 Some form defective, or decayed;
 This beauty, without falsehood fair,
 Needs naught to clothe it but the air,

Yet something, to the painter's view,
 Were fitly interposed; so new
 He shall, if he can understand,

Work with my fancy, his own hand.⁴

The first stanza highlights the tension between poetry and painting. The "velvets, silks, and lawn," are the trappings or props of the portraitist and do not, according to the poet, have place in such a setting since Lady Digby's form is so "perfect" that that it requires no such accessories. Despite the Neo-platonic, erotic idealism of these stanzas, what is especially telling is Jonson's comment that the painter requires these accoutrements because of his "view"--his belief that the

subject of the portrait should be rendered according to his visual perception of her. In this poem, Jonson argues that there is a distinct relationship between the two-dimensional physicality of the painter's props and the end result of his painting. Further, Jonson calls for a subordination of the painter's hand to the poetic imagination, since, for Jonson, the poet's rhetoric can more completely capture Lady Digby than can the painter's brush. Such claims for the primacy of poetic rhetoric are to be expected from a poet and are hardly surprising. What I particularly wish to emphasize, however, is that part of what Jonson's claims reflect bears directly upon not only renaissance debates regarding the primacy of one art form over another, but also the important role that the body plays in Jonson's view of the self.

For Jonson, and for early modern poets in general (and perhaps all poets), different modes of either self- or other-representation are inevitably bound up with both subjectivity and the generic distinctions that differentiated their art form (rhetoric) from other representational modes. Renaissance comparisons between the arts of poetry and painting often, especially in the case of writers trained in the Humanist tradition, tended to claim for poetry a power and an effect that painting was not capable of producing. Near the beginning of his *Apology*, for example, Sir Philip Sidney makes perhaps his best-known observation regarding the power of poetry. "Poesy," he says, "therefore is an art of imitation, for so Aristotle termeth it in his word mimesis,

⁴*Poems*, p. 237.

that is to say, a representing, counterfeiting, or figuring forth—so to speak metaphorically, a speaking picture.”⁵ Sidney refers to the poetic image as a *speaking* picture, which implies that rhetoric enlivens an image in a way that a painting cannot. Poetic rhetoric can thus be more rife with the lineaments of life than a painting because it causes the picture to speak, again implying that poetry can render more completely than painting the personage or object it seeks to imitate.

Jonson confirms this view in the next section of the poem. Fittingly, he entitles this section “the mind,” again reaching beyond the realm of the strictly physical. To the painter, he says

Painter, you are come, but may be gone,
Now I have better thought thereon,
This work I can perform alone;
And give you reason more than one.

Not, that your art I do refuse:
But here I may no colours use.
Beside, your hand will never hit,
To draw a thing that cannot sit.

You could make shift to paint an eye,
An eagle towering in the sky,

⁵ Sidney, Sir Philip, *An Apology for Poetry*, in *Critical Theory Since Plato*, ed. Hazard Adams, Forth Worth: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich College Publishers, 1992, p. 146.

The sun, a sea, or soundless pit;
But these are like a mind, not it.⁶

Here, Jonson grants painting more power than he has previously, acknowledging that it can work metaphorically: the painter can render an eagle, the sun, etc. and have any of those objects function as a figurative representation of the mind itself. In the last line of the third stanza, however, Jonson makes a distinction. He implies that portraiture is limited *because* of its metaphoric function. Because of this function, a painting, the speaker implies, is only able to render a likeness of the mind and not the mind itself.

The speaker then voices his hope that his poetry will be able to render the totality of Lady Digby herself:

I call you muse; now make it true:
Henceforth may every line be you;
That all may say, that see the frame,
This is no picture, but the same.⁷

In a fascinating turn of events, the speaker expresses his desire to collapse the metaphorical distance between poetic rhetoric and the object that it is attempting to render. In Jonson’s paradigm, the poetic line becomes the thing itself, thus obviating traditional poetic concerns regarding the ineffectiveness of the written word when rendering a physical object. The poetic line collapses the

⁶ *Poems*, p. 238.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 238.

space between itself and Lady Digby by inscribing such a perfect imitation of her that there is an absolute erasure of the “frame” which signifies the division between the realm of artistic representation and the realm of the real. The equation of the poetic line with the poem’s subject also extends beyond the merely physical. Because the speaker has previously noted the fact that portraiture can only render a likeness of the mind and not the mind itself, and because he claims that poetry can capture the totality of its subject, it is possible to assume that the “you” to whom the speaker refers includes Lady Digby’s mind as well as her body. This creates for poetic rhetoric the possibility of rendering subjective states that are beyond the capabilities of the painter. Such a claim also indicates that, for Jonson, language was able to penetrate through the external and render that which is internal (Lady Digby’s “mind”).

The correspondence between language and the things it imitates is in large part informed by Jonson’s investment in the classical notion of *imitatio*. Richard Peterson argues that “both as metaphor and practice, imitation stands at the center of Jonson’s choice of content, his method of treating his materials, and his very view of life.” Peterson further states that, for Jonson “it is the process of imitation, despite its initial gathering in of fragments, that when successful gives greatest originality and greatest cohesiveness to a literary work or to a life.”⁸

⁸ Peterson, Richard S., *Imitation and Praise in the Poems of Ben Jonson*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981, pp. 1-2. For further arguments,

In such a process as Peterson describes, rendering (imitating) an object or subject so exactly that there is no perceivable difference between art and nature is the crowning achievement of the poet.

The concept of *imitatio* appears in a number of Jonson’s works, particularly those in which artistic representation is the chief subject. In his praise of his friend John Rutter’s play, *The Sheperds Holy-day*, Jonson remarks

I have read
And weigh’d your Play: untwisted ev’ry thread,
And know the woofe, and warpe therof; can tell
Where it runs round, and even: where so well,
So soft, and smooth it handles, the whole piece,
As if it were spun by nature, off the fleece.

The play, according to Jonson, is worthy of praise because Rutter has woven classical conceits and authors into the work so effectively that it appears to be the product of nature rather than art. This correspondence of art to nature also informs “Eupheme” and contributes to Jonson’s ideas regarding the superiority of poetry. Because the poet can so skillfully weave various “threads” in order to create a work that captures the totality of the thing or person it represents, he is thus a superior craftsman to the painter.

some very much at odds with Peterson’s, see G.A.E. Parfitt’s “The Nature of Translation in Ben Jonson’s Poetry,” *Studies in English Literature* 13, no. 2, pp. 344 – 59 and Ira Clark’s “Ben Jonson’s Imitation,” *Criticism* 20, no. 2, pp. 107 – 27.

Jonson takes up this theme again in his response to a poem sent to him by the painter Sir William Burlase. Burlase's poem reads in part

To paint thy worth, if rightly I did know it,
 And were but painter half like thee, a poet;
 Ben, I would show it:
 But in this skill, my unskillful pen will tire,
 Thou, and thy worth, will still be found far higher;
 And I a liar.

Following Jonson, Burlase recognizes the limitations of his own medium, noting that despite his best efforts to paint the "worth" of his friend, he would be a "liar" because Nature (Jonson and his worth) would still far exceed his ability to represent it. Jonson's reply to Burlase returns to the physical body that was the source of embarrassment in "My Picture Left in Scotland," but also re-emphasizes the superiority of poetry to painting:

...Though I seem of a prodigious waist,
 I am not so voluminous, and vast,
 But there are lines, wherewith I might be
 embraced.

'Tis true, as my womb swells, so my back stoops,
 And the whole lump grows round, deformed and
 droops,
 But yet the tun at Heidelberg had hoops.

You were not tied, by any painter's law
 To square my circle, I confess; but draw
 My superfluities: that was all you saw.

Which if in compass of no art it came
 To be described by a monogram,
 With one great blot, you had formed me as I am.

But whilst you curious were to have it be
 An archetype, for all the world to see,
 You made it a brave piece, but not like me.

O, had I now your manner, mastery, might,
 Your power of handling shadow, air, and sprite,
 How I would draw, and take hold, and delight.

But, you are he can paint; I can but write:
 A poet hath no more but black and white,
 He knows no flattering colours, or false light.⁹

While the first stanza's description of the speaker's body echoes that of "My Picture Left in Scotland," even more intriguing is the way in which Jonson continues the theme of painting as metaphorical description and poetry as physical equivalency. Jonson here praises painting in a way not seen in the previous poems, expressing admiration for Burlase's "manner, mastery" and "might" and for Burlase's ability to express the "sprite," calling to mind Hilliard's comments about portraiture expressing or capturing the "affections" of the painter's subject. Jonson goes further in this poem than in any other in conceding that the painter's art can indeed at least

⁹*Poems*, p. 199.

express or capture the “sprite” of the sitter, but he still questions its ability to render anything beyond a superficial physical likeness. According to the speaker, Burlase was unable to see beyond the sitter’s “superfices” (“that was all you saw”) and thus the painter formed the speaker’s body “with one great blot.”

The likeness of the sitter that Burlase paints, however, is “not like me,” calling into question the painter’s inability to render either the ineffable or the physical, since in this case the “me” can refer to either the physical likeness of the sitter or his “sprite.” The poet, on the other hand, confined to the “black and white” of his writing, which is less prone to metaphorical exaggeration, is able to avoid the “flattering colours” and the “false light” of the painter and can therefore represent more precisely whatever the subject of the poem happens to be. Although Jonson concedes the representational possibilities of painting more fully in this poem than in “Eupheme,” he also again regards poetic rhetoric and the objects it represents as equivalent. In Jonson’s paradigm then, the aesthetic desideratum is the collapse of the mimetic distance between language and the subject so that the self and the language that represents it are indistinguishable from one another. According to Jonson, this can only be accomplished if rhetoric is thought superior to painting, which can only at best render the outer trappings of the self and not its hidden interior.

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