

Teachers – Writers – Poets

In the National Portrait Gallery

by Peter Grundy (UK)

Another week, another gallery. My protégé unbidden to join me. A gallery where I hope not to be disturbed by a schoolgirl reminding me of a summer all those years ago. Yes. I was, if not her Third Man, certainly not her first either. And if today I sit, I'll avoid all benches that are resting places for little ladies with tied-back hair.

My intention is simple. I have a free hour. Instead of spending it going from picture to picture until the time runs out, I will find just one picture - a picture already known to me - and I will sit quietly and look at it. Undisturbed.

The room I'm heading for is probably my favourite in the gallery, and strangely unvisited considering that it contains the portraits of our Romantic poets. Though the painting I like best in the room is that of John Dalton, whose atomic theory every school-boy (and I daresay nowadays, school-girl too) knows by heart: grey, slightly open-mouthed, that aquiline nose, the Quaker bearing. The face of a scientist. Alongside him, the Romantic poets look, well, to be honest, absurd. Byron with that ludicrous Albanian head-dress and botox-ed lips. All the more ridiculous for adopting the pose of someone who might be looking in a mirror and finding the reflected image so immensely admirable. Coleridge, lips also botox-ed, and with slightly bulging eyes, their pupils dilated by not a little of we-all-know-what. The fit-to-be-hung-only-over-the-mantelpiece portrait of Wordsworth at seventy-two, arms folded, a few months away from becoming Poet Laureate. Can this really be the skater who hissed along the polished ice in games confederate, and crossed the Alps without realising it?

But this is all beside the point. The picture I've come to see is a tiny pencil and watercolour sketch. A picture protected from the destructive light by a small case, like an object in a museum. A sketch

of little aesthetic merit, whose colours have faded over the two centuries since the artist put brush to paper. Said to be a poor likeness too. The portrait of an observer of manners. The portrait of a realist in an age of romanticism. Her portrait, like her writing and its anonymous publication, an antidote to the charmless self-publicist with the head-dress.

"Can she really have looked like this?" (I have a tendency to speak aloud when it's really myself that I'm talking to.)

"Perhaps she never sat for the portrait."

I find myself answering: "How do you mean?" And I turn to look at the visitor of whose presence I'd been unaware until that moment. Her hair is fair and falls in curls over her forehead. She is dressed demurely, with blouse buttoned to the neck.

"I mean that her sister knew her so well that the portrait must be a distillation of many images, and so not a true likeness of any. I mean that such 'sitting' as there may have been was for the form only."

Yes, of course. This is the difference between a portrait and a photograph - a photograph captures a fleeting moment, a portrait generalizes over many such moments. Its subject-matter is character, not physiognomy. How silly not to have thought of this before!

I notice that my companion wears no ring - and such a very, very engaging person.

"She is hard to place," I say. And feeling encouraged to explain myself - "in the sense that she doesn't look like a daughter, or a wife, or a mother."

"Yet her characters are observed from the perspective of their relatives. Mr Bennet is a father seen from a daughter's perspective, is he not?"

I'm tempted to say that it isn't as simple as this. Or to ask from what perspective we view Emma, for example. Not it seems from that of her self-absorbed father. And being motherless...

As though reading my mind, my companion continues, "Although of course the time comes when we see a young woman from the perspective of someone of their own generation."

"Or in some cases from the perspective of someone a little older?" I venture. I am thinking of Emma, of course.

Once again, a look of sharp understanding passes across my companion's face. Yes, I am undeniably older than she.

We look silently at the portrait. At the folded arms. At the small mouth. At the thin lips. At the once-pink cheeks. At the brown-green eyes that appear to be mounted on swivels. I wonder whether it's the poor skill of the artist or whether she did indeed have crooked features.

My companion makes as if to speak, and as I turn in anticipation, I see the answer to my unspoken question.

I turn back to the portrait.

That bonnet! So shapeless! I suppose she wasn't artist enough to draw the full head of curly hair.

Silence. Long, long silence.

And such exhilaration! At this moment I would surely throw away everything for the companion who views this tiny portrait with me.

No, that is not well put. Rather, no moment until this moment has meant so much or been so intense. As if there is nothing until now.

But how to proceed? We cannot talk for long about so tiny a portrait. And no other portrait seems worth a look.

Perhaps we could go to the Gallery café? Or for a drink across the road? Or perhaps even to the Club, where we might talk over dinner in a setting that would surely seem congenial to my companion?

Yes, this is the way.

"Jane," I say, turning to her..

But she has gone. I am alone in the National Portrait Gallery.

Yet still there is a wildness in the air, unexpressed and raw, and dangerous.