

MICHELANGELO'S SEIZURE

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In Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of English

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by

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The undersigned, appointed by the Dean of the Graduate School, have examined the dissertation entitled

MICHELANGELO'S SEIZURE

Presented by Steve Gehrke

A candidate for the degree of Doctor of English

And hereby certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

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For Nadine and Chloe.

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# MICHELANGELO'S SEIZURE

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## ABSTRACT

The following is a book of poems based on the lives of several classic and contemporary painters, including Michelangelo, Caravaggio, Rembrandt, Goya, Monet, Renoir, Magritte and many others. While the poems participate in the tradition of ekphrastic poetry, they also engage with each painter's biography, as a lens through which to see each work. In the poems, many of the painters are reacting to a dramatic loss, transforming the pain of personal tragedy into art.

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The Imagined Wound:  
The Functions of Self-Mutilation in Self-Portraiture

In his essay, *Sacrificial Mutilation and the Severed Ear of Vincent Van Gogh*, Georges Bataille connects the auto-mutilation instinct to ancient sacrificial rituals meant to intercede in the relationship between man and God. Bataille claims that, in acts of self-mutilation, “all the different elements that enter into ordinary sacrifice...enter into each other and become mixed together” in the self-mutilator’s psyche (Bataille 67). According to Bataille, “the demented part of the sacrificial domain,” (69) is the only one still visible to the exterior world. The self-mutilator, in other words, has condensed the ritual into an abnormal psychological instinct by becoming God, sacrificer and victim. Modern psychologists, on the other hand, point to the dual nature of self-mutilation, one that allows self-mutilators to “escape frightening feelings of emptiness, deadness, or depersonalization,” while at the same time “coercing family, friends and involved clinicians” (Rosen vii). While neither theory deals directly with artistic representations of self-mutilation (Bataille seems more interested in Van Gogh’s personality than his paintings) both are useful in considering self-portraits of self-mutilation (henceforth: SPSM), which, I will argue, mirror actual acts of self-mutilation in their political and psychological functions. Additionally, I believe these portraits preserve the ritualistic elements of a sacrifice, one that intervenes in the relationship, not between God and man,



but between artist and viewer.

## **Typology**

Psychological professionals tend to categorize self-mutilation according to extremity (benign, agitated, crisis, psychotic) or cultural context (religious self-mutilation, puberty rights, self-mutilation in psychotic patients) (Rosen 5). Neither of these is particularly effective in typing self-portraits of mutilation. Benign acts (nail biting, ear piercing) tend to be inconsequential factors in portraits, while agitated acts (gang-related tattoos, punk-rock piercings) tend to reflect social allegiances more readily than a desire for self-harm. This leaves only the overly broad categories of crises and psychotic self-mutilation.

It might be more useful to type portraits according to their cultural context. There are a large number of feminists SPSM, for instance, and SPSM in which the artist has presented himself as a figure from Christianity. This technique might also be appealing to the art historian, as it relegates SPSM into already existing categories. But it leaves too many paintings either unaccounted for (where, for instance, to place Courbet's *The Wounded Man*?) or as the single representation from their group. It muffles, rather than exposes, the links between SPSM.

Though the role of fragmentation in modernity would require a book-length study of its own, it's clear that modernity's dedication to the fragment in all its forms, including the bodily fragment, make it the ideal breeding ground for SPSM, and indeed the

majority of SPSM are found in 20<sup>th</sup> century art. SPSM are by no means limited to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however. They can be found back as far as the 1500s, when self-portraiture moved from “the margins of Western art to center-stage” (Bell 6). Typing the paintings by period may be useful in revealing a periods’ attitudes towards portraiture, conceptions of self, and the role of the artist in society, but it absorbs SPSM into a time period rather than revealing the interconnections that I believe exist between them throughout time. For instance, during the Renaissance, Cristifano Allori painted his likeness onto the head of Holoferness, but Francisco Goya also portrays himself as Holoferness in 1820. Egon Scheile drew himself as St. Sebastian pierced by arrows three hundred years after Michelangelo inserted his face onto the flayed skin of St. Bartholomew. Gustave Courbet and Frida Kahlo both mutilated their own self-image in response to lost love. Rudolf Schwartzkogler, and the Viennese actionists, engaged in actual self-mutilation nearly a hundred years after Van Gogh cut off a piece of his own ear and gave it to a prostitute. Typing the paintings by period would dilute these connections.

Instead, I will type the portraits according to the primary function of the mutilation: psychological, political or artistic. While these categories are meant to illuminate similarities between SPSM across time-periods and stylistic trends, it is important to remember that each painting not only is defined by, but also helps define, each category.

In portraits in which the primary function of the mutilation is psychological, the imagined wound is symbolic of the artist’s psyche. While this may be true of other SPSM, psychological SPSM present the wound as *a response to* a psyche that’s been damaged, often by forces identifiable through a biographical reading of the painting. In

some paintings, the mutilation might be a response to broader psychological anxieties, such as castration anxiety.

In portraits dominated by the political function, the self-mutilation is used not only to coerce or manipulate others, but also to influence public awareness. While the coercive function of SPSM sometimes operates in a manner similar to actual self-mutilation, that is as an attempt to elicit a response such as “nurturance, protectiveness, reinvolvement, or angry condemnation,” (Rosen 48) from specific individuals, the political element in SPSM often serves a more public function. Feminist SPSM, for instance, often lay bare “the elemental feeling of violence which kindles eroticism” (Bataille 16).

Portraits that emphasize the artistic function of self-mutilation present the artist as a martyr for art, the audience, or personal aesthetics. These portraits often retain an element of sacrifice by presenting the artist as both victim and God-like sacrificer. The artistic function of SPSM often implicates the audience in the violence, especially in the hands of violent performance artists, such as Chris Burden, who actually invites his audience to participate in the mutilation by striking him with a hammer. In these cases, the audience stands in—in the sacrificial metaphor—for the community that demands sacrifice to appease the Gods.

In some portraits, the mutilation serves a secondary function. The Viennese actionists, for instance, equated bodily mutilation with both aesthetic and political freedom. Frida Kahlo’s paintings are both biographical representations of her own interior, and also “operate in wider contexts of significance such as Mexican politics, modernism, and gendered discourses” (Meskimmom 80). While placing her portraits

under the banner of Psychological SPSM suggests the primacy of the painter's wounded psyche, thus allowing us to use the psychological terminology and theory of actual self-mutilation in our reading of the painting, it's important to recognize that the mutilation's secondary function is political. The walls between these categories, in other words, are permeable rather than solid.

I would now like to present exemplary portraits in each category, as a way to demonstrate the various functions of mutilation in self-portraiture, as well as to show how employing psychological terminology and theory normally reserved for cases of actual self-mutilation can deepen our readings of SPSM.

### **Psychological Function**

Though the psycho-biographical approach to self-portraiture has been criticized for its supposed inability to “transcend personal details...and enter those details into a wider context” (Meskimmom 79), I believe that this approach to SPSM not only permits us insights into the artist's psyche and thus the painting's personal symbolism, but helps us discern, from these paintings, larger psychological truths. While “in most cases, self-mutilation is an impulsive act” (Rosen 70), psychologists have been able to parcel out the “sequence that begins with loss and culminates with the commission of the self-mutilative act” (Rosen 183) in the following manner: 1) loss or perceived threat of loss; 2) mounting tension; 3) disassociation or depersonalization; 4) irresistible urge to cut; 5) self-mutilative act; 6) tension release (183). SPSM may have less to do with the actual mutilative act and more to do with the “irresistible urge to cut” that is so often

accompanied by imagined self-mutilations. While SPSM offer little evidence of the release of tension, psycho-biographical studies of SPSM do often allow us access to the “loss or perceived loss” (183) that acts as a trigger for the eventual mutilation, along with the feelings of mounting tension and depersonalization.

Frida Kahlo consciously mutilated her own image perhaps more often than any other painter. Though her self-portrait, *The Broken Column*, makes reference to her actual physical disfigurements, Kahlo has intensified the self-mutilation to represent the unique psychological ramifications stemming from her bizarre and “horrific tram accident as a teenager” (Meskimmon 78). Though the accident is well-documented, even the most pedestrian description retains its ability to shock: “Kahlo was impaled on a metal handrail that entered her lower torso, breaking her spinal column and pelvis and exiting through her vagina” (Lindauer 55). The painting, completed in 1944, nineteen years after the incident, undoubtedly refers to the accident. Kahlo’s broken spine is represented in the painting by a broken Roman column that is exposed by a wound that stretches from her neck to her lower abdomen. Additionally, Kahlo has pierced her own image with dozens of evenly placed nails.

“Kahlo’s psychological and sexual health are [also] implicated” (Lindauer 56). The sexual connotations of the accident are self-evident. Kahlo went so far as to remark “the accident is when I lost my virginity” (Lindauer 58). Critic Margeret Lindauer suggests that Kahlo came to associate the violent penetration of the accident not only with sexuality, but with “a forced penetration, or rape” (Lindauer 58). Kahlo’s continual engagement with self-mutilation imagery may be attributed to the fact that adolescents who’ve been physically or sexually victimized often continue to cast themselves in “the

role of a victim” well into adulthood, and establish “a distorted and alienated body image” (Rosen 66). Kahlo’s triggering loss was a bodily alienation that “the psyche processes as a loss of self” (Rosen 69).

In *The Broken Column*, Kahlo has both mutilated and sexualized her own image. The damaged spine actually serves to accentuate the breasts, and a sweeping white cloth seems to be unraveling at her waist. Though tears streak the cheeks, the face itself “maintains a stoic expression,” (Lindauer 59) hinting at the depersonalization that psychologists claim self-mutilators employ to “escape the anguish associated with loss” (Rosen 186). The painting not only presents us with an act of self-mutilation, but refers directly to the loss and depersonalization that leads to the mutilation instinct.

Our disturbance at the Kahlo portrait is deepened by the erotic placement of the nails (the largest nail protrudes from the side of the breast) and by the vaginal quality of the primary wound, which has been violently penetrated by the phallic column. Psychologists tell us that the type of wound hints at the self-mutilator’s psychology. “Less disturbed individuals tend to cut, burn or disfigure an arm, leg, or stomach, while psychotics not uncommonly injure especially vulnerable and symbolic parts of their bodies, including their eyes, nipples, and genitals” (Rosen 117). This may also explain our particular disturbance at seeing Rudolf Schwartzkogler’s documentary photographs of himself with a bandaged penis, or Victor Brauner’s *Self-Portrait* with a mutilated eye. Psychotic mutilators are also more likely to “make deliberate patterns or designs with their self-mutilations” (Rosen 177), as Kahlo has done here with the fairly regular placement of the nails. The painting refers not only to Kahlo’s physical injuries, but to a psyche that came to associate sex with pain, and transferred that association into

masochistic tendencies.

While the composition of Kahlo's portrait dramatizes several stages of the mutilation process (triggering loss, depersonalization, mutilative act), Gustave Courbet's *The Wounded Man* acts as the physical manifestation of the changes in the artist's psyche. X-Ray photographs have revealed that the painting originally depicted "Courbet and a young woman... asleep against a tree" (Fried 65). The painting was begun in 1844, but not completed until 1854. Courbet's mistress disappeared with his son during that time, causing him great heartache. "My mind is saddened, my soul is empty, my heart and liver are eaten with bitterness," Courbet wrote to a friend in 1849 (Fried 88). After she left, Courbet revised the painting, covering the woman with a cloak, changing the expression of the man's face from peacefulness to agony, adding the sword and giving the man a wound in the chest: the transformation of the painting mirrored the changes in his psyche. Courbet seemed to be aware that he was documenting his own interior world, saying, "I have done many self-portraits of myself in various states of mind—in a word, I have written the history of my life" (Chu 186). Modern psychologists might attribute Courbet's mutilation instinct to "inwardly directed anger as a result of interpersonal rejection" (Rosen 179), though it might also be seen as a "partial" or "localized suicide," in this case the suicide of self-image, which gratifies the destructive impulses without subverting the will to live (179).

Of the many other psychological SPSM, several are notable: Van Gogh's *Self-Portrait with Bandaged Ear and Pipe* for its portrayal of the results of an *actual* self-mutilation; Giuseppe Penone's *To Reverse One's Eyes* for the direct and haunting way it presents the depersonalization necessary for self-mutilation; Arnulf Rainer's *Angst* for

naming its triggering emotion; and Chaim Soutine's *Grotesque: Self-Portrait*, which represents an entire class of paintings that present a severe enough bodily distortion to be akin to self-mutilation without portraying an actual cut. Many of these paintings represent not only the self-loathing that accompanies self-mutilation, but a self-mutilator's trademark "disorganized and diffuse" self-image, as well an "unfocused, scattered vision" caused by a self-mutilator's fragmented cognitive state (Rosen 47).

While biographical material is often helpful in determining the primacy of the psychological function in SPSM, interpretations can also be made based on the iconography of paintings. Egon Schiele's nude self-portraits, for instance, place the artist in an extremely private realm that hints at the private, internal, psychological function of the mutilation. In the following section, I will look at SPSM of a more public nature that use images of self-mutilation for political or coercive means.

### **Political Function**

While psychologists "have indicated that the attempt to coerce or control the responses of others is one of the central dynamics of self-mutilators" (Rosen 49), that coercion is not necessarily restricted to interpersonal relationships. On June 3, 1963, for instance, a Buddhist monk, Quang Duc, set himself on fire to protest repressive measures being instituted against Buddhists by the South Vietnamese government. The monk's act was meant to exert influence in a larger social arena. Political SPSM use images of self-mutilation to exert influence, both in interpersonal relationships, and on the larger social order.



Psychologists have divided “interpersonal acts of coercion related to self-mutilation” (Rosen 48) into the following sequence:

- 1) mounting intolerable tension in response to a conflict or loss
- 2) insufficient response by those involved
- 3) the self-mutilating act
- 4) assurance of the awareness of the act by those targeted
- 5) these persons experience shock and recoil, and are alarmed
- 6) these persons provide the response desired by the mutilator

(Rosen 49)

While acts of suicide, or attempted suicide, tend to represent a desire for “permanent social disinvolvement,” self-mutilative acts are often attempts at “social reinvolverment, or a return to normalcy” (Rosen 50). Many artistic representations of self-mutilation act in much the same way. Caravaggio’s disguised self-portrait as the head of Goliath in *David with the Head of Goliath* can be closely linked to the self-mutilator’s desire to “reinvolve...[himself] in a social network from which [he may] have been feeling estranged” (Rosen 50). In 1605, Caravaggio killed a man, his former lover some claim, in a knife-fight and was accused of murder. In order to avoid the death sentence, he was forced to flee Rome, traveling first to Naples and then to Malta. During this time, Caravaggio made several pleas for pardon, each time finding the response “insufficient to reduce the tension” which his forced exile was causing (Rosen 48). In 1610, after several years of exile, Caravaggio sent the portrait to Cardinal Scipione Borghese as “a desperate plea the Cardinal should pardon him” (Langdon 384), thus assuring the Cardinal’s

“awareness of the act” (Rosen 48). Here, it was the image, as opposed to the Cardinal’s personal investment, that was meant to cause “recoil or alarm” (Rosen 49).

In the painting, a young, idealized David holds out the giant head of Goliath toward the viewer. The Cardinal would have identified himself with David, whom he would know as the keeper of the flock, or the second Father of Christ. Additionally, Caravaggio has bathed the figure in an Angelic light. Normally, when David is portrayed, he is seen as stoic, or ecstatic in celebration of the triumph of Christ. But here, Carravagio has given the boy a contemplative, almost compassionate gaze that is focused on the head of the artist. Caravaggio has not only offered his artistically severed head in place of his actual head, but carefully inserted the Cardinal into the painting and provided him with the desired response. Though it’s not clear what effect the painting had on the Cardinal, evidence hints that the painting may have achieved Caravaggio’s desired result. By 1610, “the Roman art world longed for his return,” and “pardon was assured” (Langdon 388). Caravaggio’s imaginative self-mutilation had followed a coercive path similar to that of an actual self-mutilation.

More public coercive acts of self-mutilation act as both “a revolt against authority” and “an attempt to correct...destabilizing conditions the self-mutilator perceives as a threat to the community” (Favazza 191). When Michelangelo painted his face onto the skin of St. Bartholomew in *The Last Judgment* portion of the Sistine Chapel, he was both revolting against the authority of the church and attempting to correct what he perceived to be a destabilizing force in the community. By the time he painted *The Last Judgment*, Michelangelo had come to see himself as a martyr for the church, often writing in his journals about the enormous physical and emotional sacrifice

he made for the fresco and the pope. By placing his face on the skin of Bartholomew, Michelangelo not only “suggests his unworthiness before Christ,” but also connects himself to the ideas of Christian martyrdom.

The face of St. Bartholomew himself is said to be Pietro Aretino, who was petitioning to become a Cardinal at the time. Aretino was “one of the fresco’s most virulent critics” (Mancinelli 171), leading the “calls for censoring the painting before it was finished” (171). The overt symbolism of the critic holding the flayed skin of the artist is complicated by the fact that it is also the critic’s own skin that he holds. The portrait hints at the reliance between the two men: one is the skin of the other. Michelangelo also hints at Aretino’s desire to become a Cardinal by elevating him to the position of a saint, but one who has flayed the artist to become one. Michelangelo has questioned his servitude to the church, and indicted a man he saw as a threat to himself and to the community.

More contemporary political SPSM include feminist portraits, such as Nan Goldin’s *Nan One Month after Being Battered* that serves as testimony to domestic abuse, while revolting against society’s pressure to be beautiful. Jenny Saville’s *Branded* imprints the feminine image to expose the self-violence inflicted in order to conform to the standards of beauty. Other times, political SPSM are attempts to connect the artist to suffering. Anselm Kiefer’s *I Hold All Indias in my Hand* transcribes the poverty of a country onto his own image. In the next section, I will show that when the connection to suffering is more personal, the primary function of the mutilation tends to be artistic.

## Artistic Function

In her essay, “The Artist as Exemplary Sufferer,” Susan Sontag connects contemporary artists to the saints of Christian martyrdom:

For the modern consciousness, the artist (replacing the saint) is the exemplary sufferer...because he has found both the deepest level of suffering and also a professional means to sublimate that suffering...he transforms his suffering into art...discovers the use of suffering in the economy of art—as the saints discovered the utility and necessity of suffering in the economy of salvation. (Sontag 42)

George Bataille connects artists to suffering even more strongly, claiming that “Decapitation, self-mutilation of any kind in fact, is the necessary precondition for any artistic undertaking” (Bataille 65). This connection between suffering and art, which Bataille overstates, is the prominent feature of SPSM in which the mutilation functions artistically. When George Bataille connects self-mutilation to sacrifice, he also claims that self-mutilators must view themselves as “mythical, that is, ideal beings” (69) in order to reenact the sacrificial ritual. Similarly, artists use mutilation to present an idealized self, one capable of giving himself irrevocably to art.

In his *Self-Portrait as St. Sebastian Pierced by Arrows*—used on a poster that announced a 1915 exhibition of his works—Egon Schiele not only invokes the “self-glorification and pathos of suffering” (Comini 149) by aligning himself with a Christian martyr, but indicts his audience as the agents of a senseless, brutal mutilation. It is not the

artistic process that seems to be the occasion for the mutilation, but the art's public display. Critics have accused Schiele of wanting to be seen as a martyr for art, and any "persecution complex" he had would surely have been inflamed by his arrest for pornography in 1912.

Schiele's figure is at the center of the painting, recoiling from the force of arrows that pierce his entire body, some at odd angles in a possible oblique reference to the audiences' net of gazes. The body itself has become transparent, as if the artist has taken great pains to display the wounds. In his death-fall, the artist's head is thrust down, as he observes the making of the wound almost curiously, displaying the depersonalization prevalent in so many SPSM. The arms are raised, as he surrenders rather than resists the mutilation. The position of the right hand, which is oddly thrust forward, suggests a deeper complicity, as if he were preparing to shake hands (something he might have had to do at the opening) with those flinging arrows at his helpless form. The artist has displayed his suffering, and by welcoming and even participating in his own mutilation, presented his willingness to suffer completely for art.

The Viennese Actionists saw self-mutilation as an integral part of the artistic process, often using scissors, razor blades, knives, and hypodermic needles to injure themselves during performance pieces (Kaye 105). The group, comprised entirely of young males (most prominently Otto Meuhl, Rudolf Schwartzkogler and Gunter Brus) adopted "the will to be free" as their slogan. Though this undoubtedly included political freedom from what they saw as an overly restrictive Austrian government, they also strived for an artistic freedom.

The group believed that violence was at the center of the artistic impulse, and

strived for the free admittance of what they saw as the true artistic drives (Kaye 103). The entrance of the body into their performance pieces was a necessary component for their performance pieces. The audience then is placed in a position of complete complicity, by which they must confront their own drives: the cultural instinct to be disgusted by the mutilation and to help the victim of the mutilation, versus what the Actionists might call their deeper precondition towards violence. They are also confronted with the further shock that these things are being done for their pleasure. Like Schiele, the Actionists present themselves as mythical beings willing to mutilate themselves not only for art, but also for the pleasure of their audience.

While the Actionists would most likely subscribe to George Bataille's claim that "the artist is born of a wound that does not heal" (Bataille 64), they also used the body as a symbol for political repression, and at the same time attempted to embrace and display base psychological drives. Here, self-mutilation serves multiple purposes: psychological, political and artistic. In the section that follows, I will explore the ways these functions enter into a single portrait and interact with one another.

### **Ernst Kirchner's *Self-Portrait as Soldier***

Finally, in an attempt to demonstrate how these functions intermingle in portraits, I will present a reading of Ernst Kirchner's *Self-Portrait as Soldier*, challenging traditional conceptions of the painting as an anti-war portrait in favor of the complicated interaction between the psychological, political and artistic functions of self-mutilation. Kirchner began the portrait in 1915, and displayed it almost continually "beginning

around 1916” (Gordon 102).

In the painting, the artist stands before us, “depicted with historical accuracy” (Springer 7) in his Field Artillery Regiment uniform. The stump of the right arm sprouts from the rolled up sleeve of the military uniform, and occupies the lower center of the picture, so that the missing right hand is placed approximately between the artist’s and the viewer’s gaze. The gaze itself is removed, suggesting a deadened interior, or an internal wound with enough intensity to distract the artist’s attention from the external horror, or hinting that the missing hand is merely a “visible sign of inner injuries” (Gasser). A cigarette dangles from the artist’s mouth, reminiscent of the pipe in Van Gogh’s *Self Portrait with Bandaged Ear and Pipe*. The face itself is strangely narrowed, flanked by the background images of two unfinished paintings, one of which contains the figure of a female nude.

Critical interpretations of the painting are varied, though most agree that the painting presents “the artist’s experience and perception of war as a total breakdown, both emotional and physical” (Ratgoff 136). Donald Gordon goes so far as to claim that “Kirchner shows by a wished-for amputation a deeply felt pacifism” (Gordon 145).

Those who, like Peter Springer, focus on the fact that the painting hand has been removed tend to agree that the painting presents “an artistic and sexual impotence brought on by the nameless horrors of war” (Springer 21). “Unable to paint,” Springer says, “he brandishes the raw and useless limb like an accusation” (Springer 21). Kirchner, Donald Gordon points out, has turned his back on the objects of art and sexuality, adding credence to Gordon’s claim that the missing hand serves as a metaphorical castration: “The paintings personal symbolism is one of paralysis and castration” (Gordon 102).

Additionally, critics have attempted to link Kirchner to the Christian martyrs with “the amputated hand as a saintly attribute” (Springer 20), Robert Hughes going so far as to claim that “Kirchner wanted to be seen as a mutilated saint, a victim symbolically unmanned by the army” (Hughes 68). Feminist critics have pointed out that Kirchner presents the victimizing soldier as victim, while others have pointed to the military tags displayed on the shoulders of the uniform to interpret the painting as an accusation against militarism’s ability to reduce “the individual to a number” (Springer 23) or “stifle every vestige of individuality” (Springer 41).

Though most critical interpretations agree with Donald Gordon’s claim that the painting “is one of the great war paintings because it so clearly and matter-of-factly indicts Wilhelminian Germany and chauvinistic Europe” (Gordon 102) and point to the political function of the mutilation, I would like to suggest that the function of the mutilation is primarily psychological and secondly artistic.

### **Psychological Function in Kirchner’s *Self-Portrait as Soldier***

Peter Springer points out that Kirchner’s service as a soldier was short-lived. He spent six months in a barracks far from the front lines, but never completed basic training:

He never saw the front lines. He never experienced the horrible reality of the human slaughterhouse, never took part in the carnage of the eastern front or the trench warfare of the Western front... And finally, Kirchner was never wounded (Springer 34).

While Kirchner’s lack of duty at the front doesn’t disqualify the portrait as an



anti-war statement, it does call into question “Gordon’s assertion that *Self-Portrait as Soldier* reflects ‘trauma, martyrdom, and suffering in war’” (Springer 36). Kirchner’s photographic self-portraits as soldier are useful in discerning his attitudes towards war. While critics have attempted to fit the portraits into their conception of an anti-war Kirchner by claiming that “the room looks bombed, and Kirchner seems petrified into a surreal figure” (Springer 46), Kirchner’s stance (chest and one leg thrust forward) is almost patriotic. The uniform is impeccable, and an angelic light washes down over the soldier’s face.

Kirchner proved not to have the mental or physical strength to face life as a soldier. He was temporarily discharged from the army in December of 1915 and “ordered to seek medical attention” (Springer 36). His health continued to decline and by 1916, Kirchner was consumed by “depression, disease and melancholy” (Springer 41).

Springer’s own claim that “Self-Portrait as Soldier...clearly anticipates the possibility of his deployment as a soldier as well as its consequence” (ix) is more reasonable but he misreads the painting, I think, by claiming the position of the left arm “suggests a reach for support”(8). Instead, I would argue that the outward-facing palm of the left hand, as well as its limpness and the symmetry in the position of the two arms, suggests surrender. Kirchner has placed himself in a position to defend the objects of femininity in the background, which his inadequacy as a soldier forces him to surrender. He displays the hand, not like an accusation, but as proof of his inability to defend the feminine figures. “The work was too hard for me,” (Gordon 24) Kirchner wrote after his discharge. Psychologist Casimir Dabrowski points out that “day-dreaming about ones own death, sickness, humiliation...develops itself on the basis of a feeling of inferiority,

and is a compensation for this feeling” (Dabrowski 22). Here, Kirchner indulges in an imagined mutilation to compensate for his inadequacy as a soldier. Indeed, *Self-Portrait as Soldier* is less a statement on the horrors of war, and more a statement on Kirchner’s psyche, which was poorly suited for military life.

### **Artistic Function in Kirchner’s *Self-Portrait as Soldier***

Though “it remains unclear just what inflicted the mutilation in Kirchner’s work, whether it was a shell or the man himself” (Springer 64), it’s interesting to note that, during the artistic process, the hand that does the painting is the agent of its own obliteration. If, as Springer claims, the hand “is Kirchner himself” (100) then the process itself becomes an interesting example of art as an act of self-annihilation. This may seem the happenstance of portraying oneself with a missing right-hand, but a close look at Kirchner’s *Self-Portrait* from 1913, the year before the outbreak of WWI, suggests that Kirchner conceived of the idea of art as a mutilating agent before he imagined himself as a soldier.

The similarities between the two paintings are striking. Both show Kirchner in the extreme foreground with his studio behind him. The background in each is painted in similar shades of red, and in each an unfinished canvas emerges from behind the artist’s right ear. The angles of the cigarettes are nearly identical. Peter Springer’s description of the face in *Self-Portrait as Soldier* as “frozen to a mask, the eyes...empty and sightless” could easily be applied to the 1913 portrait. The similarities are so striking, in fact, that it’s possible to imagine Kirchner actually used the 1913 self-portrait as a template when

he began work on *Self-Portrait as Soldier*. Springer points out that “the regiment number and the position of the jacket button show, this self-portrait [Self-Portrait as Soldier] obviously was not painted in front of a mirror, as one might have expected” (7). What’s most strikingly similar about the two portraits is the position of the right arm, which is thrust upwards in front of the artist’s chest in each. In *Self-Portrait*, 1913 the hand holds three paint-brushes, indicating that it too is meant to be seen as the painting hand. Though it is still intact in this self-portrait, it is crossed at the wrist by what appears to be either another brush or an artistic tool. The angle of the left hand suggests a certain tension in the wrist, as in a downward slicing, as if the right hand were about to be amputated by the artistic tool. Together, the two portraits suggest a continuum: one just before the amputation, one just after.

Moreover, Kirchner implicates the viewer in the violence by placing himself between the objects of art (the canvases in the background) and the viewer’s gaze. The gestures that worked so well in interpreting the psychological function of the self-mutilation work equally well here. The artist not only attests to his inability to defend his creation by his gestures of surrender, but actually appears to be disowning the paintings. He holds the amputated painting hand before the viewer’s gaze, as if to say, “look, I couldn’t have painted them.” Kirchner has used the figure of the soldier to dramatize what Bataille calls “the relationship of a painter with an ideal,” (Bataille 66) but has failed to live up to that ideal. The self-mutilation in *Self-Portrait as Soldier* is an act of surrender, primarily psychological, and secondly artistic.

## **Conclusion**

Applying psychological terminology and theory to SPSM not only deepens our readings of individual paintings, but may provide us with insights into the relationship between destructive impulses and the creative drive. Psycho-biographical readings of the portraits make it clear that the sequence of processes that leads to imagined self-mutilation often mirrors the sequence that leads to actual acts of self-mutilation, whether those acts are aimed at coercion or psychological relief. Many times portraits retain elements of that sequence in their composition and personal symbolism. Additionally, many acts of imagined mutilation retain elements of a ritualistic sacrifice, with the artist formulating an idealized version of himself, one capable of fulfilling the role of a “god, who is...one with the victim” (Bataille 69).

Speaking of Michelangelo’s depressiveness and self-destructiveness, the psychologist Casimir Dabrowski writes:

Becoming accustomed to suffering and realizing that it is connected with our own minds, that through its intensity and its interweaving into life it constitutes our personal property, causes in such individuals... a fervent worship of suffering and death. (Dabrowski 52)

Here, Dabrowski hints at a relationship between suffering and the creative act which falls outside the scope of this essay. It’s clear that the mirroring relationship between representative acts of self-mutilation and actual self-mutilative acts can enlarge that discussion by presenting us with a self that forms, in its own image, a suffering that is a necessary component of creation.

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## Self-Portraits of Mutilation: A Partial List

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- Robert Arneson, *California Artist*, 1982
- Francis Bacon, *Self-Portrait*, 1969
- Leonard Baskin, *Self-Portrait at Age 42*, 1964
- Herbert Bayer, *Self-Portrait*, 1932
- Hans Bellmer, *Unica*, 1983
- Hendrick Ter Brugghen, *David Praised by the Isrealite Women*, 1623
- Victor Brauner, *Self-Portrait*, 193
- Gunter Brus, *Self-Portrait*, 1964
- Chris Burden, *Shoot*, 1971
- Carravagio, *David with the Head of Goliath*, 1610
- Marc Chagall, *Self-Portrait with Seven Fingers*, 1912-13
- John Coplans, *Self-Portrait (Back with Arms Above)*, 1984
- Gustave Courbet, *Self-Portrait: The Wounded Man*, 1844-54
- F. Holland Day, *The Seven Last Words*, 1898
- Nan Goldin, *Nan One Month after Being Battered*, 1984
- Francisco Goya, *Nada. Ello lo dice*, 1819-20
- Ernst Kirchner, *Self-Portrait*, 1913
- Ernst Kirchner, *Self-Portrait as Soldier*, 1915
- Frida Kahlo, *A Few Small Snips*, 1935
- Frida Kahlo, *The Broken Column*, 1944
- Frida Kahlo, *Henry Ford Hospital*, 1932
- Frida Kahlo, *Memory*, 1937
- Frida Kahlo, *Self-Portrait with Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird*, 1940
- Frida Kahlo, *The Little Deer*, 1946
- Frida Kahlo, *Tree of Hope*, 1946
- Rene' Magritte, *The Wizard*, 1951
- Robert Mapplethorpe, *Self-Portrait*, 1988
- Angus Mcbean, *Self-Portrait*, 1947

Michelangelo, *The Last Judgement*, 1536-41  
Giuseppe Penone, *To Revere One's Eyes*, 1970  
Arnulf Rainer, *Angst*, 1969-73  
Robert Rauschenberg, *Booster*, 1967  
Reni,  
Lucas Samaras, *Self-Portrait*, 1975  
Jenny Saville, *Branded*, 1992  
Estha Sayers, *A Picture of Me*, 1995  
Egon Schiele, *Nude Self-Portrait*, 1910  
Egon Schiele, *Self-Portrait as St. Sebastian Pierced by Arrows*, 1915  
Rudolf Schwarzkogler, *Documenta V*, 1972  
Chaim Soutine, *Grotesque: Self-Portrait*, 1922-23  
Vincent Van Gogh, *Self-Portrait with Bandaged Ear*, 1889  
Hannah Wilke, *SOS Scarification Object Series*, 1974-82  
Francesca Woodman, *Self-Portrait (Talking to Vince)*, 1975

## MICHELANGELO'S SEIZURE

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“...that gaze which is not merely a messenger of the eyes, but at whose window all the senses gather and lean out, petrified and anxious, a gaze eager to reach, touch, capture, bear off in triumph the body at which it is aimed, and the soul with the body.”

--Marcel Proust

*SELF PORTRAIT AS THE HEAD OF GOLIATH*

When, in Naples, estranged  
from his paternal Rome,  
Caravaggio dreamed the boy  
he killed back onto the tip  
of his blade, his sword bending  
again under the boy's sudden weight,  
he worked all night, with oils  
and dread, and self-love, which is the eye  
at the center of our grief, altering  
the lines of the lips, darkening each hair  
on the beard, and swirling his gaze  
into the giant's eyes, until his own face  
bloomed like an exiled flower  
from the stalk of Goliath's neck,  
loose veins dangling like roots, and when  
he had finished, two brushes drying  
on a windowsill, the city  
blushing with an early dawn  
below, he could hear  
the sellers' carts being wheeled  
into the marketplace, he could sense  
himself, each painted atom,  
in a mound of fruit spilled into the street,  
the arc of his life, for the first time  
in months, cast out beyond his fear,  
so that he knew there might be  
some small portion  
of pleasure, even in the dying,  
some sweetness. Then,

because the murderer inherits  
the sins of the murdered one,  
or because of exile and arrogance,  
all those miles to Rome, like the stations  
of the cross, because of anxiety,  
or the fruit sellers, outside, calling forth,  
greedily, their own portions  
of the day, the most famous  
painter on earth felt his death  
warrant flutter like a flag above the Rome  
inside of him, and when he turned  
back to the painting, when he stared  
into the spotlight of his face, his head swinging  
in David's hand, like a lantern,  
as if it might guide them, fearless,  
through the valley of their myth,  
he felt the self evaporate,  
the way a reflection is absorbed  
into a stained-glass window,  
so that he could pray not for pardon  
or forgiveness, but for the boy he killed  
to be called forth into the frame,  
into David's face, made tender  
by the slaying, resurrection light  
all along his skin, so that he  
could ask with humility,  
and for more than himself: *of sins,*  
*are all our paintings made?*

PART ONE



*SELF PORTRAIT WITH DOCTOR*

*after Goya*

Heat-struck, bleached, a sucked pit  
rolling in the mouth of his fever, he lies there,  
ready for the leech,  
anxious, brave, his soul stamping  
in the bull-ring of his consciousness,  
but fragile too, a blown-glass stomach,  
the bones in his wrists like chalice  
stems, the first leech soft upon his skin,  
like a brush-tip, like a tongue,  
the doctor probing,  
trying to look inside,  
as if he might drop his lantern  
into the sinkhole of the lungs,  
then scooping  
his arms around him from behind,  
so that Goya dreams  
he's a soldier  
being dragged from the front,  
the beautiful Spanish dust kicked up  
into his eyes, the doctor urging him  
to cough the bullets of infection  
out, though when Goya feels the rim  
of the water-glass flush against his lips,  
it's as if the reared-back horses change  
to marble in his gaze, rifles  
losing their erections,  
bullets leaving only clothes-lines  
in their paths, so that he's hiding himself away again,

smuggled in the basket  
of laundry his mother carries  
through the yard, wobbling, trying not  
to let her see, the wind  
fluttering the shirt-tail of his hair,  
his body  
turned now to equal parts tenderness  
and rage, the crossed swords  
of his ribcage being raised  
even as the doctor prepares  
to dunk him in the washing tub again,  
using his forearm like a blindfold  
to protect the eyes, though,  
all at once, Goya glimpses  
his own face, a watery self-portrait  
that wrinkles through his mind--  
which is how I saw him that morning,  
in the dialysis room, more than a dozen years ago,  
strung between my draining tubes as the machine churned  
the blood out of me,  
his face wrinkled and pale,  
flapping like the tail of a deer,  
a streak of white that I followed  
through the green forest light of a seizure.

*MONET GOING BLIND*

*Work of the eyes is done, now  
Go and do heart-work  
On all the images imprisoned within  
--Rilke*

1. Remembering Camille

It's like the art of making a woman  
    blush from across  
the room, that kind of looking--  
    hollowing, aggressive--  
but internalized now, so that even  
    as he feels the light  
glinting off the buttons of his coat,  
    as he hears the light  
playing his buttons like a flute,  
    the avalanche  
of his beard teased into a mist,  
    as if at any moment  
he might begin to float, he can't help  
    but think that he is merely  
old, the watery self flowing  
    always inward now. He holds  
the brush, not like a baton  
    to the music of the shore,  
not like a scalpel or a key,  
    not the way a mother holds  
a spoon to the child's mouth,  
    but almost, yes, like an arrow  
he is drawing, with experience

and love, from the chest  
of a dying man, so as to let the wound  
bleed out, the way,  
years earlier, when he'd looked  
deep enough, into church-  
stone, or the impossibly intricate mind  
of the haystack, he'd  
slowly remove the injection of the gaze,  
he'd begin to reel  
the gaze in, so that the jeweled  
secrets, the hard pitted light  
at the quietness of objects, would leak  
into the air, would haunt  
the exterior--a membrane, a mirage.  
It's blinding, he thought,  
the pace with which the mind  
converts light into more  
than itself, that holy photosynthesis,  
into field dust and mood,  
into memory, the infinity of twigs,  
linseed upon the grindstone,  
bits of oil paint splattered in  
the snow, like colored bird-  
droppings, his wife once  
joked. And when she lay  
dying, the doctor saying his good-byes,  
Monet, knowing he shouldn't,  
stood before her, already mixing  
the colors, a drip-cloth  
unrolled across the carpet,  
three-legged easel

locked in place. Awash in a torrent  
of blankets, she lay  
all night for him, a reluctant muse, drifting  
through the insomnia  
of lanterns, as he swayed at the edge  
of her bed, almost fatherly,  
but doing something  
she couldn't quite name,  
not quite a blessing or a spell,  
but trying to lure  
something out of her, something  
she wanted, all at once,  
desperately to keep, until there  
was sweetness  
in the air, something she could  
have sworn was a mist  
of her perfume. At Giverny,  
standing on the platform  
he had made, with brush cup  
and easel built in, pulleys  
anchored to the bridge,  
Monet remembers her  
as he lowers himself  
through the wind,  
as he walks out everywhere  
on the diminishing  
tightrope of his sight. Her whole life,  
he thinks, packed,  
with the landscape, into memory's  
foolish mothball light.  
Below him, the lilies,

shifting and tethered,  
appear as footprints across the water,  
the tracks perception  
leaves, though all motion  
is exterior to them,  
a display of current, of wind.

Once, with his second wife,  
in Venice, a pigeon landed  
on the tips of his fingers,  
then disappeared into his sleeve.

A moment of panic,  
the coat shucked off in flurry,  
the pigeon loosed,  
and his first wife floating towards  
the ceiling again as he stood  
there shivering, the coat  
lying rumpled at his feet.

## 2. Self Portrait with Cataracts

*It's appalling, the way the light escapes--*

*Monet*

Because art gives our own loss  
back to us, camouflaged  
as beauty, because the self,  
distilled, echoes back  
through harbor stone and lily,  
through rose-arch  
and wisteria, he paints, finally,  
himself retreating  
into the foxholes of his eyes,  
his whole face smudged  
beneath the cataract's gleam,  
drowning in the broth light,  
one eye covered completely  
when he paints,  
the other planetary in the atmospheric  
glass, his monocle,  
gold-rimmed, radiating scowl-lines  
around the eye, so that when  
he places the canvas on the floor  
as if to look on a landscape,  
he sees, among the white-tipped reeds  
and the bridge-line  
frowning across the wrinkles  
of the face, two birds  
where the eyes had been,  
their feathers tucked in,

heads bowed, not moving at all,  
    though their feet paddle  
desperately beneath. Hovering  
    like that--ethereal,  
not a self, but a wave  
    curled up out of the self,  
so its reflection is its source--he feels  
    a storm break inside  
his face as a light mist rises  
    from the paint, the way,  
years earlier, the ground floor  
    abandoned to the flood,  
he stood, upstairs, watching torn  
    leaves smeared across  
the water, violent and seductive,  
    like the trail of clothes  
across a bedroom floor, although--  
    he remembers remembering  
this--it was February, so that he  
    was watching, not leaves,  
but the ruins of his own uprooted  
    garden, a flotilla  
of marguerites and bellflower,  
    processional of blue  
thistle, pink sumac, Alice,  
    behind him, shivering  
in the bed, feverish, leukemia  
    passing through her,  
poisonous as color through a leaf,  
    the hook of each breath  
unstitching something inside,



as if she were becoming  
the rattle in the shutters,  
as if she were slowly turning  
herself into the window  
he was gazing through,  
so that he knew, even then,  
that he would never  
not be looking through her,  
each morning, in the mirror,  
his face laid on top of her face.

When she died, he prayed,  
one night, for whatever comes  
to lean down over him  
and pluck the flowers of his sight.

Going blind, he imagined,  
was a way to feel her  
leaving him again, as his first  
wife had, his whole life now  
like a fist loosening from  
around the moment of his birth.

But the hand keeps  
longing for the weight  
of the amputated brush,  
and his hand, freed finally from  
grief, like a moth  
from candle wax, would unfurl  
each stroke from the memory  
of tendons, of light, as now,  
leaning down  
to darken out the eyes,  
he remembers, at the window

again that night, seeing,  
    on the surface, like a tiny  
lighthouse tumbled from  
    the shore, the lantern  
he had hung one morning  
    in a tree, still lit, the severed  
branch holding it up above  
    the waves. And how later,  
when she grew silent, he held  
    a small mirror just above  
her mouth, then swiped, almost  
    thoughtlessly, a finger  
through the breath  
    he'd captured on the glass.

*THE ANATOMY LESSON OF DR. TULP*

*after Rembrandt*

The split body is taboo, must not be looked upon--  
not even by the doctor, vacant beneath the charcoal of his hat,  
his hands working on their own, one cleaving

the muscles open for the light, all sexed leaves and petal-  
swarm, sheared away from the trellis of the bones,  
the other hand mirroring the motions these muscles

would permit, which is where the students look, trying to see  
the cadaver's reflection in the doctor's skin, like Perseus  
capturing Medusa in his shield, as if one glimpse of the dead

man's soul might turn their coppery faces into stone. Audacious,  
self-adoring, a devil's tail of hair silking down his back,  
Rembrandt will not be distracted, not by the book-light

texting the body, not by the dumb-show of the doctor's  
hand, not by the muscles in his own arm which constrict  
and separate as he paints, as he prepares to flatten the body,

make it into color, shades of light, perspective, what the soul  
might be if he could capture it, like a moth trapped in an upturned  
glass, the suffocating wing-flutter arrested on his brush,

though it's his own soul he unearths, of course, the cadaver's  
skin turning slowly into the frozen, winter-light of memory,  
the plagued and anemic village of his childhood, all ice-floe

and broken arteries, a mud-horse breaking an ankle in the slush,  
reared back, the death-cart toppled in its wake, the dull-eyed,  
naked bodies spilling through the artist's mind, the death-flies,

the stench. Is this what I have to wade through, he thinks,  
the sloppy intestines of these streets, art like a rag pressed  
against a gagging mouth, a way to hold the horror back?

It's almost paralyzing now, the stillness of the corpse's face,  
the sprung bowels, the wet and marbled muscles turned  
over in the light, then the sound of something tearing, and a darkness

revealed in him, death in the upturned soil of the heart, venomous,  
swift, so terrifying that it must be taken in with a shadow-  
glance and peak, like a poison downed in sips, like the one scene

I can't quite imagine from my life, corpse-like beneath the surgery lights,  
the doctors masked, slowly breaking into me, like outlaws gathered  
around a safe, the tissue-spreaders, the clamps, the dead man's kidney

coiled atop the surgeon's hand, already polluted, the infection hidden,  
like a flame at the center of the coal, a piece of death lowered into me,  
though I can't see any of it until I see it in Rembrandt's scene,

the doctor, in his witches' hat, one hand clamping the tendons,  
his other training its shadow on the wall as the dead man reaches  
through the puppet-sock of the doctor's robes to take control,

and Rembrandt, unblinking, seemingly unchanged, works  
and waits for God's love to come down, sharp and cruel as a spade

which misses, again, the swifter beast coiling back inside of him.

*RENOIR, ARTHRITIC*

He's up early, considering the body,  
its wetness, the bladder  
like a puffer fish, the bowels  
swallowing and swallowing,  
mucus, come, blood, the soft crab  
of the heart, darkly breathing,  
the lungs spread out in the chest  
like wings of a manta-ray,  
not to mention the rich coral  
of brain, the whole body  
a trapped sea, netted in the skin,  
perception itself just the motion  
of the waves, the boat-wake  
of experience healing into memory,  
so that lying there, waiting to ring  
the tiny silver bell that brings the nurse,  
he feels his arthritis like a drought  
inside of him, knowing the curative waters  
at Bourbonne are no good, no good  
the medicinal drip, his hand bruised  
this morning where the brush was  
strapped to it, though perhaps a bit of cloth  
might be used between his fingers  
and the wood, so that he can  
continue to paint, to become  
his rose-filled models, to feel  
the elasticity of them, their fluidity  
even in the hard desert-turtle  
of his hand, so that he can continue

staring through the three-pronged  
compass of the easel, until he gives  
the signal and the canvas is raised  
before him, like a sail, and he begins  
to work, leaning forward, squinting,  
drifting towards the horizon that he makes.

## THE BROKEN COLUMN

Hair blown back, wind-  
lines capturing  
her waist, the central wound  
hung from neck  
to navel, like a scarf one  
wears to accentuate  
the breasts, she stands before  
us, pierced and  
martyred, an air-brushed St.  
Sebastian, the nails  
arranged across her body,  
like a dressmaker's  
pins, as if to hold the skin  
in place, though it's  
the eerie radiance of her face  
that ignites the gaze,  
like a blast of rain that touches  
gasoline, so that there  
opens in me a room  
in which she paints,  
morning-light, palette and a bowl  
of fruit, half-a-dozen  
pillows stuffed behind her back,  
her spine, like a stack  
of broken plates, aching to keep  
her head in place  
as she dissolves into the pattern  
of the nails, like  
an acupuncturist, or as if she's



sticking pins into a map,  
each instant of her life a city  
I don't have access to.  
When I pretend that I can knot  
the nothing of our pasts together--  
her surgeries and mine--  
I understand that I have not suffered  
enough, that it's myself  
I keep being grafted to,  
that I am just a voyeur  
in the scene, the hard knuckles  
of her gaze slamming the door on me,  
so that the room dissolves  
just before--I've imagined this--  
Diego leans down to unbuckle  
the orthopedic straps  
that hold her pelvic bones in place.

*MICHELANGELO'S SEIZURE*

When it happened, finally,  
on the preparation bridge,  
where he had stood all morning  
grinding the pigments, grooming  
his brush-tips to a fine point  
so that he could thread Eve's hair  
like a serpent down her back,  
his head rocked forward on the bell-chain  
of his spine, the catwalks  
rattling as he fell, a paint-  
bowl splattering the ceiling,  
then spinning like a dying bird,  
to the cathedral floor, frightening  
the assistant who--trained  
in such matters--huffed up  
the footbridge to wedge  
the handle of a wooden brush  
between the mouse-trap of the teeth,  
to keep the master from biting off  
his tongue. Did the choir-box  
fill with angels? Did the master  
feel the beast rising up in him  
to devour the pearl of heaven  
at the center of his brain? If you  
were that assistant, kneeling  
next to the stampeded body,  
smelling the quicklime in the air,  
the boiled milk of plaster, seeing him  
tangled in the body's vines, voiceless,

strained, would you call it rapture?  
The assistant didn't either, didn't even  
consider it, or think to pray,  
but sat watching as the spirit clattered  
back inside of him, like a chandelier  
lowered from a ceiling--  
and when it was over, he thought  
he heard the artist curse softly  
as he surfaced, a small word, violent,  
so that when the master walked outside  
to get some air, the boy sat atop  
the scaffolding, eating his orange  
and letting the fruit peels fall,  
like drips of flame, feeling freer  
in a way, almost glad. Outside,  
it was fall, the city proud  
with chimneys. Ragged, clouds  
of plaster in his beard, his mouth  
hollow, aching like an empty purse,  
Michelangelo could still hear  
the tortured voices on the ceiling  
calling out for completion,  
amputated, each face shadowed  
with his own, which he would paint,  
one morning, with the witchcraft  
hushed inside his veins,  
onto the flayed skin of St.  
Bartholomew, crumpled, fierce,  
with two dead bugs crushed  
into the paint, like that bit of terror,  
he would think, sealed inside

of everything He makes. Is this  
what I have inside of me? Must heaven  
be achieved with our pain? Now  
he lifted his fingers to his lips,  
to the wasp's nest of his mouth,  
and withdrew, with the ease of spitting  
out an apple stem, a tiny splinter  
of wood that had sunk into his tongue.

*LATE SELF PORTRAIT*

*after Rembrandt*

Outside, the city suffocates, infected with death-carts,  
    ash-heaps in the yards, beds  
        burned or dumped in the canals,  
    some stained, some with imprints sunk in, like canvases,  
    he thinks, the whole history of art  
swept forward on the current of our loss. Contemplative,  
    cold, his vision stepping out  
        to the balcony again, Rembrandt sees  
    nothing that he needs, and so retreats back  
        into the castle of his inwardness. If the soul,  
  
he thinks, is a stone dropped in the center of the face,  
    the face sealed back over it, but wavering,  
        changed, then this morning he must paint  
    more distantly, self-love abolished to the province  
        of the weak, the mirror turned away from him,  
the canvas laid out on a stretching board, the brush-tip  
    revealing, beneath the splints of the initial lines,  
        the eroding cliff-edge of his brow,  
    the tumbles of hair almost statuary now, gray  
        as chilled breath, each gesture unwrapping  
  
the package of his face, the way he longs to unravel  
    these loose bandages of age. For years now,  
        watching himself aging in the paint,  
    he's felt the two ends of his life advancing towards  
        each other with their lances drawn, a confrontation  
that ends, always, with Saskia on the bed again, her body thinned

to a field the horses of her illness ramble through,  
the smell of snake oil and vinegar  
in the room, the soiled sheets, her lungs shredded  
by the bloody cough that even now

he hears echo through the house. When she died,  
he could not see, for days, through the dusting  
of his grief, until he revived a painting  
he had made of her, humble, unadorned,  
and smothered her not in the sores that inhaled her  
in her final days, but in a velvet skirt and furs,  
peacock feathers in her hat, her drowned light  
resurrected into pearls, as if death  
were the ascension into royalty, or as if to make a gem  
of her, something he could store in the jewelry box

of memory. Even now he needs just a glimpse  
of it before he turns away--the dust, light-struck,  
catching in his throat--to crush  
the whole scene into the eyes, or so he can place a lock  
of her in the middle of the canvas, rendered  
in a penetrating, venomous light, a dab of death  
in the orpiment, like light from a keyhole,  
as if he might look into her dying as he paints,  
like a boy who kneels before a door, mischievous,  
full of wonder, until that other, colder self

drops the curtain of his face back over her again.

PART TWO

*CARAVAGGIO'S THE DEATH OF THE VIRGIN*

Not humility, but the animal inside  
that brought him here, the artist fugitive,  
pensive beneath the rafters of a barn,  
hiding out, his hands shamed with blood,  
the future coming at him with a knife  
as he plumps the hay together for a bed,  
then kicks it astray, his interior lightning-  
struck, made visible by the suddenness  
of his crime, the blood-thrum and God's presence  
hammering inside of him, the man's face  
carved onto the tablet of his memory, Caravaggio  
pacing, tearing at his shirt, wanting God  
out of him, thinking, isn't that how the Virgin  
felt, water-broke among the horse-stench,  
the slop, pain thorning deeper in her side  
with each heave, the child crowned,  
Joseph dumb-struck, trembling, one hand  
ready at the blood-pail, one hand turning  
the shoulders, trying to unscrew the child  
from his mother's heart, though Mary  
only thought *out, I need it out*, and the animals  
around them lie down in the straw, already  
hungry for the after-birth. But it's her death-  
scene that unveils itself inside of him now,  
Caravaggio feeling the images encircling  
his heart, the way men close around a fight,  
the eyes floated out across the surface of her face,  
the body pale, breached, something glittering  
swifted off in a confusion of wings, though she



must be in red, he thinks, the sun setting in her  
dress, the Apostles astonished by its crimson  
folds, their faces darkened by the shadow  
of the savior's hand, the master turning them  
away from the body, from his first temptation,  
the nipple that ripened in the child's mouth,  
deep and red as the inside of a plum,  
the infant desire flaring into blood-lust  
when the breast was pulled away, like the fury  
we feel when love's withdrawn, which is why  
he killed him, Ranuccio, his once-lover, the artist  
pinning a corsage of blood onto his chest,  
Ranuccio falling, stung, reaching dumbly  
for his breast, like the gesture Caravaggio  
will give the Virgin's hand when his canvases  
are brought to him, as if she were buttoning  
her dress, because she was also the first to tell  
the child *no*, wasn't she? The first to deny him.

*MAGRITTE IN NEW YORK*

“I hate my own history”

Magritte

Looking out upon the hushed  
    glass towers, the catwalks  
    and metal spires, the top  
    of the Empire State Building,  
    like the spike on a soldier’s hat,  
the whole city, he thinks, built  
    by an imagination more savage  
    than he’d guessed, Magritte sees his own  
    mother lit up beneath the candelabra  
of the Brooklyn Bridge, lifting her nightgown  
    up above her knees to mount  
    the moon-slick railing, the night behind her,  
    clotted with the traffic  
    of the stars. He can see her slippered  
footprints winding out behind her  
    like the punctured roll of music  
    a player piano has eaten into song,  
    so that he can almost hear  
a singing as she falls, foghorns  
in the distance, gulls startled from the girders  
    when her gown peels up  
    around her, like an umbrella opened inside-  
    out, like a woman lowered  
    through a cabaret, which is how they found her  
on the shore that night, more than forty years  
    ago, her head bound inside  
    the nightgown,



over in his hand, like a water-snake twisting  
its belly towards the light.

*SELF PORTRAIT AS ST. SEBASTIAN PIERCED BY ARROWS*

*after Egon Schiele*

All form is under the anxiety  
of being looked at,  
of being looked into,  
gaze after gaze rippling  
through the body, like sound waves,  
until the entire body  
is a listening, is a scream called back  
in all directions  
from its core. At home,  
watching Wally  
in the stutters and twitches  
of sleep, I can mine,  
without touching, a whimper  
out of her, then the flickering  
of eyelids, like moths slowing  
themselves to land,  
until I have teased  
her awake with my stare.  
When we fuck,  
we are two mirrors  
pressed together, each filled  
with the other's emptiness.  
After, we sit and talk,  
and I watch the flaws  
settle back into her face.  
Here, I am refused reflection,  
refused color. Wally smuggles in  
pencils in her hair.

Mirror-less, unseen, I am fed  
    straight out  
into my perception, exiled  
    into mop-handle  
and rags, into cell door,  
    my attention coiled  
into bed springs,  
    the frightening imbalance  
of a chair. Down the hall,  
    men sing to each other  
across the rows, invisible,  
    trying to melt the prison bars  
with their singing, to charm  
    the bars into snakes.  
Each morning, in the murky,  
    tadpole light  
of an early dawn, we stand  
    beneath the showers,  
as if beneath halos, our pores  
    opening, releasing  
their steam, as if we might bind  
    together in the air,  
as if, floating among soap bubbles  
    and groans, we might form  
a collective deity. But objects  
    keep commanding us--  
spigots and drain holes erupting  
    through the fog--  
their presence echoing so deeply  
    that their weight must be  
what's holding us in place.

I have taken the body  
to the edge of collapse  
in exchange for my release.  
I have translated the body  
into snarl, into deadfall  
and crumb. I have prayed to be flayed,  
walking naked  
through an eruption of bees,  
and I have woken  
not to birdsong or the echoing  
of hobnails down the hall,  
but to the sound of my own angelic  
twitching, the nerves  
like a chorus of plucked strings,  
a quiver of quivering,  
a hundred difficult muses  
launching their instructions  
through the air. Even now, I wait  
for their arrows  
to enter me, like pins into a voodoo  
doll, each pulled straight  
through, so that it hauls a piece  
of flesh away--hunks  
of fat, the meandering veins--  
their arrows made impotent  
when my outline finally crumbles  
at their feet. Model  
for my executioners, mirror-less,  
my shadow bricked  
into the wall, I stand, body  
slack, abandoned

to its perpetual slouch, though  
    one hand rises now,  
palm open, like a handshake,  
    or an offering.

*Let them come for me,*

    I think, *let them take*  
*the painting hand first.*



*THE DEATH OF POINTILLISM*

*after Seurat*

Drought, gravel, broken glass, the houses  
    in the distance like toppled carts  
abandoned in the street, the channel  
    narrowed to a wind-plucked hair,  
to a broken guitar string shriveling beneath  
    the song-less trees. No wind,  
no rain, no motion in the scene, so that he must  
    draw time, the shadowed quiet,  
the weightless air (the greatest feat, Seurat  
    once said, might be to make art  
seem like work again), must break  
    the landscape into seed, each kernel  
pearled with light, like the globe  
    Vermeer hung from a young girl's ear.  
But how to re-assemble these crumbs  
    back into wheat, how to heal  
an evening sky grown ripe with stings,  
    the mind working to un-mince, un-shred,  
like trying to take back that shattering thing  
    that can't be unsaid? Like light,  
he thinks, lying is made of particles, words  
    dropped or muffled with a cough,  
so that he sees the channel narrow to a life  
    he keeps trying to navigate--the wife  
erased from speech, the un-willed son--  
    until days from now, stricken,  
his breath peeled back to a switch that beats  
    and beats inside his chest, he bids

his parents to his bed to stand next to them,  
the four of them like directions  
on a compass, each face a distant port,  
so that he understands there is no reaching  
them, that like a choir rising, at its end,  
to a single voice, life is mended only  
as it evaporates, the body swept up into a sandstorm,  
he imagines, scattered, then rebuilt  
around its missing core, as if he might die  
exactly as he paints, with a shattering  
that reforms the whole. Already, though,  
he feels his lies uncoiling inside  
of him again, charmed from the basket  
of his body, his parents vanished,  
his son God-knows-where, and a world away,  
his wife, at the sink, crying, snapping  
peas, looking down into her hands,  
into the peeled back husks and at  
all the withered globes torn open to the light.

*VANITAS FOR ROBERT MAPPLETHORPE (1946-1988)*

1.

He wanted only to live long enough to see the fame,  
and for years he was God of the rhino whips  
and studs, God of the anus, cinched like the top of a purse,  
of the well-timed press release,  
gossip carved by the knife-edge of his tongue,

the whole muscled world lounging in the perfume of his gaze,  
the open mouth of his camera lens inhaling  
every pose, until he had captured them: the chiseled,  
the gorgeous, the famously ornery.

Now the fear grows out of him, the way a boy's dark hair

falls over his face, so that he's blinded by it,  
so that even when he sleeps  
with a light on in his room, he thinks his own breath  
might extinguish it, his lungs fire-cleaned  
and drained, AZT patrolling in his veins, his spine

a whipping post to which the tortured body clings,  
though, for the press, his body is the mess  
at a party's end, the buffet wrecked by a hundred passing  
appetites, the magazines reporting AIDS  
as if it were a fashion trend, he thinks,

though having the clippings read to him, each morning,  
he understands more deeply that dying *is* his fame,  
doctors and flowers always on the way, the heart monitor's coverage

around the clock, loved ones, fans,  
the spotlights of their prayers, all of them breathless

as they wait for his soul to step out from behind the stage,  
as if it might shine above him when he dies,  
like his own marquee.

2.

Or, he knows, some hoping  
it might come out stained, black  
as a furnace door, or the slip-card that concealed  
the cover of the magazine he stole, sixteen  
and too ashamed to pay, the blind man  
behind the counter chasing him for months inside his dreams,  
calling *Thief! Stop that little fag!* In hell,  
his mother said, there was a clock that chimed each hour,  
*you will not get out, you will not get out*, though yesterday,  
hobbled by a coughing fit, blacking out,  
he felt his body folded into a paper boat and released  
across a stream. What happens  
to all the undeveloped film inside the mind,  
to the boxed up wardrobe of our fantasies, he thinks,  
as he lies with a sketchpad flopped across  
his lap, bed-sore, uninspired, one eye blind,  
the other weak, numbly scribbling  
the knotted tie of his signature a hundred times,

“his final odd piece of ego and pornography,” they’ll say,  
    “a ball of yarn unrolled from the center  
of a narcissistic mind,” though he sees it as that thicket  
    of tangled selves we leave behind  
when the soul has picked the body’s locks,

his own body now like a photograph  
    torn up in rage, so that everything left behind,  
he thinks--memory, art--is left in pieces, like shells  
    abandoned when the tide withdraws,  
though already another tide, muscular, enormous,

moves inside the muted room with starlight  
    curled inside its breaks, so that he feels not scared,  
but awe-struck, dwarfed, like a small boy hurrying  
    to scrawl his name into the sand  
before it is erased by the censoring waves.

*JACKSON POLLOCK DRIVING*

Mile by mile, the road unwinds backwards  
through his mind, until he feels the whole system  
of highways and interstates inside of him,  
masculine, instinctive, its form constructed  
to let the motion through, though lately,  
beneath each line, the underpass

of his second thoughts unfurls, doubt eating away  
at each canvas, like grub worms  
beneath a field, so that he's drawn  
into the spread roots of the painting  
that isn't being born, his instinct fracturing,  
like spidered glass, until he's nearly overcome

with the desire to let the paint can drop, boot-prints  
wandering the frame, or something subtler,  
a few lingering brush-flicks, olive-drops  
of color splitting open on the vines,  
as if even his failure could be his own,  
which may be how he'd feel, he thinks, if his tires

angled from the road, the asphalt curling off behind him,  
like a whip swung at him and missed,  
the car turned over, its beautiful underside  
of struts and muffler pipes glinting  
in the light. Does it have to be like that now, he thinks,  
amputating, swift, the roulette ball of our random lives

dropped into the basket on some universal wheel?

Or can its motion be reversed? Raging,  
baffled by the critics, he'd held  
a knife up to a canvas and shouted, "you ought  
to be able to slice a painting open like a chest."  
And what would he have found?

Veins? An orchard grove? Some other tangled life,  
like the one sliding out beneath him  
as he drives, a woman's head on his shoulder, the oil-  
drippings of her hair spilled across his shirt, knotted,  
intricate, random as skate-marks  
on a frozen lake, the road polished to mirage,  
  
as if he could dive into it, he thinks,  
the pond of what-he-might-have-been,  
that other world, where he turns, no,  
doesn't turn the wheel, and the radio turns to static,  
and the road keeps winding out before him like a wick.

*FRANCIS BACON IN HIS STUDIO*

1.

Like a man sitting inside his own decay,  
the mine-walls of decorum chipped away

by the chisel of his inwardness: cartons  
and rags, the snake-skins of a thousand

empty paint tubes among a garden  
of brushes, mixing tins, toppled cans,

cigarette butts, wrappers, every interior  
exhausted, except his own, which breaks all form

open to search for the seed of itself,  
as if it were a con-game, the jewel

passed from shell to shell, while the dumbstruck  
artist searches the rubble for the one lost crumb

that can solve the surface, the one that dropped  
when the flap of skin fell open on his face.



2.

Long before the flap of skin peeled back like a corn-husk, he thought, *how odd it is to have been born*

*with a face at all.* He kept imagining its imprint in his mother's womb, solidified there, like hand-prints

in concrete, though his real face kept changing, like the surface of a lake, carved by stress, aging,

the lightning quick switch-blades of other people's glances, so that each morning he had to sweep

away the old face with a lather brush and splash a new one on when he had finished. Not a mask

exactly, but like wearing a weather-map, or the face of a clock, which isn't worn, but drawn and erased

and redrawn by the erratic light inside a room, so that he felt like a character from some cartoon,

caught inside those claustrophobic boxes, like panels of a triptych. Always the face wobbled, like Cezannes'

fruit, so that he kept having to adjust himself to fit behind it, as if he were trying to get comfortable

inside a straight-jacket, squirming, his face turning

around him like a globe, as the soul tried to worm

to the surface, to wriggle through the coils and twists  
of thought and eat the light before it was extinguished

in the cells. Working one night, a fissure perforated one side  
of his face, the web loosening around the spider of an eye

until that flap of skin slouched forward, like a woman fainting,  
that dramatically, and his darkness spilled into the painting.

PART THREE

*THE BURNING OF PARLIAMENT, 1834*

*after J. M. W. Turner*

He can see the flames settled deep in their faces,  
    that reflective urge he's noticed lately in the skin,  
all the onlookers hypnotized,  
    tipsy in the half-shells of their boats,  
    some praying, some clasping jugs of wine,  
as they turn towards Parliament, rooting themselves  
  
into the mud, the strangled chain of each anchor turning  
    spinal underneath, like the smoke that unknots  
continually above, almost umbilical,  
    though it anchors the sky to the dead,  
    the consumptive, industrious smoke, marbled  
with ashes and grains of exploded glass, on its way to convert  
  
the screams of the dying into rain. Walking out along the dock-  
    boards of his vision, a glob of yellow  
on his palette, like a coin  
    he dips into with his brush,  
    as if the whole color might be spent  
on the extravagance of flames, Turner feels the fire  
  
become a small glow that fills him as he paints,  
    like a secret growing in importance,  
as if, when he lets it back out  
    into the landscape,  
    it might restore the holy mystery, might end  
the authority of shape. Palette knife, mineral spirits dissolving

in a solvent cup, umbrella pluming from the mud,  
    each brushstroke a flamboyant wound, the way,  
in his father's barber-shop,  
    for the first time being shaved,  
    among water froth and steam, the gleaming metal,  
soap stirred onto a lather brush, the scissors chirping like a beak,

he felt, as punishment for some forgotten sin, his father  
    twitch his wrist, just slightly, to make  
a nick into his skin,  
    the crushed petals of his blood  
    darkening a cloth, the moment already clotted  
in his face. Though now, as his father's gesture renews itself

as paint, as epileptic flinches on the canvas,  
    each motion quick as flipping a watch lid  
closed, the past awakens  
    into candle-dust and hue,  
    a match-stroke grown into the flickering landscape,  
so that, standing there, with the wind-caught flames slurred

above the bay, he begins to see the present as a shore  
    from which to watch the past disintegrate,  
the way, bored, he traced  
    his outline onto the steam-  
    fogged window of his father's shop,  
then let the cold leak in, and breathless, watched himself

evaporate, his ghost-self trapped in the suffocating  
    glass, as he imagined being tossed  
through the window

of his own body, the body  
shattering behind him. And doesn't  
freedom, at last, have to be like that--fracturing, bold--  
  
the self a border we cross and cross into flames, which,  
even now, are less a destruction  
than the eviction of what lay,  
for years, ripening within,  
each board erupting with the sizzle passed  
down through the wick of his veins, the coin-glint  
  
from Parliament's chambers swirled into the paint,  
as if its arguments and pleas, the deep red  
gloves pulled on  
by the executioning judge  
could be sewn together in the blaze. Once,  
with sleight of hand, his father polished a coin into a cloth,  
  
then tossed the bankrupt fabric in the air, as if the money  
might lay vaulted in the steam, though  
at the time, confused,  
awe-struck in his father's light,  
he felt as if the coin might be locked  
in him, hard and inextinguishable, radiating beneath  
  
the skin, erupting, like the spirit, through the pores,  
though later, sweeping--now the image  
slides out behind the paint,  
as Parliament collapses  
in a heap--he found the coin, still  
smoldering, beneath the mound of a day's forsaken hair.

*THE MACHINE GUNNER'S LETTER*

*(as Otto Dix)*

1.

How, you write, will I survive? With instinct, trigger-eye,  
the soldiers like turtles flipped over in the mud, limb-flail and broken  
shell. These thoughts move through me as I write, a telegraph tape  
slipping through fingers. The lumberjack, they call me,  
timber in the field, green blemished by red-splatter, like leaves at fall's  
beginning. Behind the gun, I am eternity, I am time looking out  
from the inside of a clock, the click-stop finger that marks  
the finish line. My body, knuckle-ache and recoil, records each loss,  
tally-marks on the black slate of the heart. I am the vomit-taste in the mouth,  
what they know is watching, though they race towards me as I  
hand death out, a parade-master tossing candy to the crowd. Later, under star-  
flutter, the night opening parachutes as it falls, I have to pick, like needles  
from a pin-cushion, the splintered death out of me. How once, I made  
your body gleam, the tongued lips, boot-polish on the nipples,  
your skin rubbed with orange peels. I could have, then, painted  
beautifully. Now, even the most gentle touch dissolves, my finger harp-strumming  
the trigger, grenade pin held between the teeth. Love, all night the gun,  
cartridge oil, rivet, barrel clip, puts itself together in my mind.  
It's so quiet out there, I can almost hear the maggots trash-  
picking the fields, or the final woman-call a body makes. Someone should rat-  
skitter through the foxholes, the moonstricken thistle-bush,  
and close their awful, glowing mouths. Someone should, mercy-  
handed, swift, sew this trench-line closed. Tomorrow, more men will ladder  
the trench wall, mud-faced, horrible, caravan towards me in the dawn.  
How will I survive? I will kill the same man over and over until I've killed them all.

2.

Shell-glow, tracer flare, shock troops huddled in a dawn field  
affixing their masks. These glints of beauty, aren't they  
just the gilded edge of the sword, a muffle for the cruelty?  
Mother, I've seen boys  
with bat-poison in their veins, rabid, climb the trench walls  
and let themselves be shot, have seen the recruits, target-faced, naive,  
linger on the fire-step, their heads bobbed above the parapet,  
like trench-line puppeteers. I have pearled the bullet deep into the broken  
oyster of each face. Last night, a hole opened in me and closed.  
I dream-walked through the fields, unharmed, healing  
shell-holes with a touch, the seed-bag of my body slowly  
tearing open as I walked. When I woke, rats at my boot-leather,  
the moon with its machete at my throat, I could hear the shrapnel sing,  
could hear the instruments of war play themselves inside of me, the  
whole trench an orchestra pit where I conducted  
the music of the gun, each snap-trigger note moving backwards through my hand,  
until my body was the absence of a song, a white-nothing firing at the advancing  
troop-line of the dawn, at the field-breath, at the mist,  
the building sea-wall of the dead, all chest wounds  
and buckle glint, bayonets of sunlight breaking through the fog.  
I remember the kitchen-light,  
bathwater boiling on the stove, you lice-picking  
my hair, fingernail and turpentine, dropping them,  
one by one, into the lantern flame, hovering above me with bible-verses  
in your voice, the curse of rodents, locust-plagues, telling me  
we are, each of us, earth-sky divided in the veins, death a way to sort the filthy  
from the clean. Fingernail and turpentine,  
who will pick these memories out of me?  
The corpse-light rising from the fields,



the nail-hole of each nerve opening as I up-tilt the gun,  
like a conductor marking the crescendo  
of a song, my aim noses skyward, as if to kill  
the emptiness I know is there, the emptiness that rots inside of everything, inside  
our ration packs, the quick-lime, inside the ripening  
grenades, inside the shit-fumes that smoke the air, inside the burnt-out  
sockets of the gassed, the beehives of their lungs,  
inside the canteens of our hearts, inside the boot-water rats,  
the maggots that punctuate each corpse, inside the dead laid out  
all night upon the field, open-mouthed, code-breakers baffled by the language  
of stars, inside these words, inside everything I paint,  
inside the quick-saluting boy I death-slouched against the parapet, the dog-tags  
already torn from his throat, inside the spirit of the boy,  
mother-trained, following orders even as he dies, a hand held up  
at the exit of himself, then waving him through, waving him  
into kitchen light, bathwater boiling on the stove,  
where you first told me of the polished soul, where,  
as if to demonstrate the violence with which it enters us, you pressed  
a fingernail sharp against my cheek, shining, bullet-tipped.

*GASSED*

*after John Singer Sargent*

They might as well be walking towards a firing squad, blind-folded, single-file, a guide wire strung between them, each man a wounded Theseus crawling back up from the underworld,

though this thread leads only to the infirmary, where the gas will shut their bodies down, will move between the bodies' rooms and snuff each lantern out. The dying grasp at their pant-legs

as they pass, as they wobble along the duckboards just above the mud gasping at their feet, the steaming trash heaps of the dead, the battlefield sloppy as a butcher's floor, all blood

and aftermath, the dusk-glint of God turning to put his knives away. Looking out through the insect eyes of his mask, fatigued, Sargent can't quite believe he's not imagined them,

called them up from the foxholes of a torched and rubble mind, a mind battered by three weeks at the front, burrowed into itself and paranoid. At home, he worked slowly, sitting for days

with his models, spoonfuls of pigment tapped onto the scales, working the empathetic muscles until he could roll the stone of each face away. He painted through the nights when the black-

out curtains fell, Paris, light-starved and feverish with sirens, the newsstands charred, the smoldering grill-pits of bombed-out cars, the city blown back, in scraps, through his memory,

so that even now when a flock of poisoned birds begins to fall,  
one by one, into No Man's Land, like descending souls,  
he sees them as cathedral stones, *Saint Gervais* collapsing

again with his niece inside, Sargent, astonished, absorbed,  
but not quite there, brushing the air-borne plaster from his coat  
like snow, watching the wheelbarrows teeter under the rubble-

weight, the stretchers hauling off the faithful dead, one man  
mouthing, for eternity, a final hymnal note, and the girl's face  
erased but everywhere, in the rag-pile of the church, reflected

in the cobblestone, his mind, in pain, unable to see her death  
except in metaphor. Even here, where the bodies are given  
a brief skeletal radiance in the shell light, as if he really might see

into them, he edits the horror out, no vomit, no severed limbs,  
the faces a touch too bright, each man with his hand  
on the shoulder of the one in front of him, like elephants

hooked snout to tail, the men washed and strung along  
the line, as if he might make our soiled history clean again.  
Or is it just another drop of poison stirred into the wine,

he thinks, a way to make the wretched tolerable? What else  
could he do, an old man who knew by now this war  
would be the end of him, who knew even if he could paint

the blistered, naked bodies, the shit streaking down the inside  
of a man's thigh as he walks, the white angel-maggots burrowing  
into a face, his mind, at its core, could not help making things

beautiful. With the night turning purple as the gas disperses through the atmosphere, Sargent works with his mask slung across his shoulder like an extra face, letting his inspiration

filter all doubts away as he sutures the men back together with a pencil tip, as he feels them moving through his thoughts like a line of text, written nearly a century later by a man

with a book of paintings open on his desk, who sits and watches the rain fall into the empty flowerpots outside his window, which he can't help seeing as the upturned helmets of the dead.

*DOUBLE ELEGY, 1918*

1. Edith Schiele on her Deathbed

Flickering, erased, her face claims him  
as it defeats itself, the citrus cheeks,  
windsock of her pony-tail,

though he sees this only inwardly,  
in his reversible gaze. The rag of the real  
face, lacquered, medicinal,

might be lifted away, might be wrung  
out in the sink, as the soul might be twisted  
from the body as she squirms

in a claustrophobic sleep, the sheets  
soaked in ice-water, a heat in her  
that could sizzle grease, the tugboat

of each cough dragging up a bit  
of lung, the fetus dead or dying,  
the radiant spill of cells starting

to poison it, the ember of each cell  
darkening as it falls, the snake-  
skin of the umbilicus closing down.

The sun, like a curled fox, unwinds  
into dawn outside the window,  
and Schiele tries only to sketch her

as she fades, to see how few lines  
he can draw her in. If he could share  
the thinning fact of her, like an ice-

cube passed between their mouths  
during sex, he could recreate her dying  
when she's gone, the pages flipped forward

so all that's left is the fossil of a cheekbone,  
or the bottom lip, like a last splash of liquor  
rimmed inside a glass, and then less than that--

the dark crumb of a mole, the eye's  
packed ash, some irreducible flake of her,  
like the one infected cell, just now,

he inherits from her breath.

## 2. The Death of Egon Schiele

Three days later, that cell like a shout  
that calls the rebels  
from the woods, like a mis-struck note  
that pollutes a song,  
or the first drop of rain upon a shoulder,  
has turned his body  
to mudslide, to oil-spill, a disaster  
that finds no town near  
and so destroys itself, like the shot  
that killed the Arch-Duke,  
Schiele thinks, though what's inside  
of him, he knows,  
was fired straight from the rifle  
of his Edith's mouth,  
the infection like a drop of poison  
in him now, slithering,  
expanded into memory, the gasoline  
fumes of his breath,  
as the bed begins to take him in,  
an unrolling of muscles  
and roots, as if he were trying to embrace  
Edith below, death  
a loneliness that won't be resolved,  
or as if he were shoveling  
trenches again, uniformed, sweating,

blind in a forest  
of spade-handles, fatigues, curses,  
    weeks without knowing  
where Edith was, or with whom,  
    as he doesn't know now,  
a thought that crawls through him,  
    as all his thoughts crawl  
down the ladder of themselves  
    and other thoughts come  
to spill the earth back over them,  
    though it's him they're digging  
into it, isn't it, his body a stretch of dirt  
    that must be cleared  
away, the men circled above,  
    their faces all cigarettes  
and mud, the shells launched  
    above their heads leaving  
tracings in the air. "Mother, I need  
    the oxygen!" he calls,  
and the black-hearted spades  
    keep erasing the weakening earth.



*SELF PORTRAIT AS SOLDIER*

*after Ernst Kirchner*

We'd like to imagine some clean remove.

Because the mind can't absorb the shrapnel-spray,

the nails and shim embedded beneath the skin,

a shortage of anesthesia at the front,

the pauses in the sawing more awful

than the sawing, we'd like to think the arm

was shortened by some hard-swung bayonet, the arm

made level with its sleeve. The mind, at the front,

amidst the casual bootlace cross of bullets, the awful

ripening of grenades, finds no easy remove,

no retreat from teeth blown free of heads, the arterial spray,

the doctor, too late, pulling back the curtains of the skin,

his hand disappearing into the quicksand of the skin.

Even consciousness, eventually, longs to be removed,

though the body may not obey, may not embrace the spray

of arms falling from the sky. *Arms* and *arms*,

Kirchner just now gets the pun. Afloat in the awful

bathwater light of his studio, the suffocating front

like a fog inside of him, death counts from the front

and Wagner on the radio, the weakness in his arms

spreading to his hands, any or all of it so awful

that he stuffs the hand, like a shell, into the barrel of his skin,

a loaded sacrifice, as if one wound might forgive the spray

of boys across a continent, as if once removed

the hand might re-order the world, the front  
dissolved, trenches rising into trains, bullet-spray  
verticalled into rain. All night, from its sleeve, the arm  
sinks and surfaces, the hand erasing itself from the skin  
of the canvas, raised before the artist's gaze, which seems removed,  
deadened, so that what we feel isn't empathy, but some awful

self-recognition, the feeling that what is awful  
about the world is what is awful about us, that the front,  
the war, the chemical past has been transplanted beneath the skin,  
that it inflates in the blood cells, dark, un-removable,  
echoing through gene-pools, shaping the ethereal spray  
of consciousness, fired in the kilns of arts and arms,

so that even if, as Kirchner dreamed, we could spray the past out  
with a hose, all skin and awfulness, the form of thought the front  
has left us with is armed against our quietude, our sweet remove.

*THE RAFT OF THE MEDUSA*

*after Theodore Gericault*

It's like standing all day on a trapdoor, the anticipation  
worse than whatever waits below, the raft  
rigged beneath their feet, cursed, their ship decomposing  
on some tribal shore, and the life-boats,  
where finer men eat with knife and plate, unburdened

when the captain, maddened by his crew's slow pace,  
cuts the tow-ropes, as if to drop the curtain  
on this make-shift stage, the frayed-rope ends sinking  
in the waves, a birth-cry rising from the planks  
as the deserted men watch their noble brothers float away

on loaves of bread, already eyeing the water-jugs, the diminishing  
shoreline of each man's chest, the water  
saying *what have you done, what have you done* as it crests  
across their feet, the horizon taking down the sail  
each wave-tip makes. And what *have* they done? The sharks

of paranoia circling the crumb of each man's faith,  
the sail ragged as their bodies on its wooden  
spine, and a trail of corpses left behind, like campfires  
abandoned on the forest floor, burnt-out,  
some men slipping off the edge, a few throats slashed

in the middle of the night, their clothes ripped off  
and waved, not like rescue flags,  
but like handkerchiefs thrown down at the beginning  
of a fight, death the admission that must be paid

for each new day, the flesh used, at first, for bait,  
  
until the saliva triggers in the glands, and each corpse  
    becomes a suitcase that's been rifled through.  
Like a lid removed from a pot of stew, Gericault thinks,  
    years later, toxins steaming up when the skin  
is peeled away, the body laid out in the basement of the morgue,  
  
where he's come to copy death in a plague of lines,  
    the canvas still half-finished, adrift somewhere on  
his cottage floor because, though he's seen the arm-muscles  
    made thin at death, like strips of wax, felt the teeth  
ground down to nubs of chalk, he can't quite finish it.

He's brushed the bodies together on the canvas, like a stack  
    of leaves, aimed the arrowhead of the sail away  
from them, so that the viewer must feel the desperation  
    of their reach, only the dead looking out,  
save one man that he's cloaked in an aura, a crust of red,

who wanders the sea-bottom of his own ravaged mind.  
    Still, there's something unfinished in the scene,  
something not quite said, until, later, in his uncle's  
    bed, floating on the buoyancy of hips, he  
and his aunt rowing towards completion, her body

splashing up through the bottom of his own, he looks  
    down into the smoke and oil of her eyes  
and feels something like a mutiny rise up inside  
    of him, so that he understands he really  
could leave his uncle weeping on the floor, overthrown,

though, all at once, he feels marooned when he has come,  
his aunt turning away from him again,  
dressing quickly, sighing, “What have we done?”  
so that watching her smooth the covers  
with her palm, the canvas remakes itself inside of him again,

the scene shaded now with all the broken oaths of France,  
lives cut off by the velocity of guillotines,  
the constitution unrolled like a carpet for the King  
to walk across on his way back to the throne.  
He will make them see the sail as a royal crest about to fall

from the edge of their gaze, a tortured flag twisted  
in the hand of the final healthy man, the bodies below,  
monumental, cold, all he has to stand upon, which is how he feels  
as he’s ghosted from his uncle’s home, defiant,  
mean, on his way to build, from this suffering, a new regime.

*THE DEATH OF SARDANAPALUS*

*"I have seen the death mask of my Gericault! To die among all one  
has created, in all the passion and vigor of youth..."*

--Eugene Delacroix

Operatic, bold, the sultan laid out in his ghostly robes,  
all ruined luxury, opium-faced, reposed,  
the whole scene, candlestick and drapery, about to be torched,  
the Kingdom spilling its jewels at his feet.  
Here is suicide made opulent, harem-girls rubbing oil

into their skin to make their corpses gleam, sword-  
blades singing through the horses' throats,  
a slaughterhouse concerto, and Delacroix, frenzied  
as a conductor beneath his dark symphony  
of hair, trying to paint the motion in, as if one symbol-

crash of inspiration might ignite the scene, the horse-  
blood, ashes, drops of poison in the wine,  
the rebels just outside the door, the sultan thinking, *let them  
conquer nothing, the pearl-dust  
of a vanished history*, though it's France he paints,

playing the sheet-music of its past on a foreign instrument,  
an elegy for the cities Napoleon plundered  
in retreat, plucking what he could from the grape-  
bunch of each city's gems, the rest left to shrivel  
beneath the bee-storm of a blaze, or the monarchy restored,

like a slow internal bleeding, though to love the self,  
Delacroix thinks, is to love our ruined history,  
the shadow of his country's borders collapsing in his veins,

the way, at death, the edges of the body flee,  
so that it's Gericault he calls into the scene, horse-thrown,

capsized, his body being swallowed by the dust-storm  
of its own retreat, each breath like a nail yanked  
from wood, and his paintings, those bent and mournful faces  
he made of the insane, arranged about the bed,  
as pallbearers, Delacroix thought then, the master having sealed

himself into the asylum of each frame. Ragged, obedient,  
feeding twigs of Gericault into the furnace  
of the sultan's face, Delacroix feels the master taking  
hold of him as he paints, the way in a lesson  
he'd latch onto a wrist, the ego heeled when the master

tightened the collar of his grip, as if to paint as someone  
else was to paint blameless, unconstrained,  
like soldiers touched by the King's spirit as they fight,  
though it's just another romance, isn't it,  
like Gericault thinking heaven lay scattered in the paint,

or believing the sultan, robe-swaddled, wrapped  
in the darkening clouds of his defeat,  
condemning and condemned, feels each wound  
open in him a corresponding scream,  
while his most faithful servants, open-mouthed, insane,

swallow jewels wrapped in cubes of bread, thinking  
they'll smuggle a piece of the master's soul  
with them to their grave. Don't they know,  
by now, that no earthly thing--not mercy,

skin or oil--will stop the invasion of the blades?



*GOYA AT THE MADHOUSE*

So this is where a love of the imagination leads,  
Goya thinks, boarded-up inside his deafness,  
quarantined, silence inside of him like embalming fluid,  
the whole scene swirling around him as he draws,  
as if he's come here to watch a storm from the quietest  
of rooms, to feel each scream wash up  
against him and retreat, men grappling  
with each other, some naked, some muddied with  
their shit, one man hung in chains, one eating  
his shadow off another's back, though most wander  
through the mine-shafts of their interiors, oblivious  
to the rubble of the others, curled up or sifting  
through the hourglass of sleep. So this is where it leads,  
the hieroglyphic mind, the grapeshot  
of our fantasies ignited in the groin: self-pollution,  
widow's mites, leprosy. Last month, fevered, chattering,  
the dust-gnats of infection devouring  
the petals in each ear, he saw, above him,  
a ceiling hung with snakes, constellations  
in his bed fleece, lice in the dark hair of the night,  
the doctor drawing a vial of ashes from his wrist,  
so that he felt himself disappearing,  
as if he were being devoured by the larva  
in the doctor's eyes, by the madness  
rising through the infinity of roots the mind unrolls

through the flesh's darkest soils, madness carving  
its way up the totem of the spine,  
prehistoric, raw, from the body's Godless aquifers,  
until he began to see thought  
as the salt the body's stormy ocean twirls weightless

through the air, our chain-linked logic unable  
to keep caged the animal of our history,  
each revolution giving rise to the bloody code,  
the Inquisition, the guillotine.  
So this is where it leads, starvation, dunking tubs

and whirling chains, the attendant in the corner with  
a lashing stick, our reason the mortar  
with which authority lays its bricks, these men  
the windfall apples of their age  
or strapped, from birth, into the wheelchairs of their destinies.

So this is where a lifetime of painting leads, staring up  
all day into the rotunda of the mind,  
drawing now one man with a paper crown, one quailed  
beneath the soft beak of a Hussar's cap,  
trying to suggest a balance in the filth, as if the inmates

were working towards a common goal, like shipbuilders,  
as if the madhouse might rise  
on a battlement of shrieks, each inmate walking  
the gangplank of his sanity, he thinks,  
like the time, as a boy, he found himself trapped

atop the catwalk in a barn, the ladder dropped below,  
sealed inside the asylum stench  
of straw and pigeon shit, the dark complete,  
until, creeping forward, he popped  
the hay-loft window and looked upon a landscape

he could not reach, the crops fenced in by stone,  
the farmhouse too distant for his screams,  
which is how he felt when his madness finally broke,  
lofted, alone, waiting for art to let down its ropes  
and lower him back into the flattened world below.

## VITA

Steve Gehrke was born in Mankato, MN in 1971. He holds a B.S. in English from Minnesota State University, Mankato, an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Texas, Austin, where he was a James Michener Fellow. His first book, *The Resurrection Machine*, was selected for the John Ciardi Prize for Poetry and published by BkMk Books in 2000. His second book, *The Pyramids of Malpighi*, won the Philip Levine Prize, and his most recent collection, *Michelangelo's Seizure*, was selected for the National Poetry Series and is forthcoming from the University of Illinois Press. Next year, he will join the faculty at Seton Hall University in New Jersey, where he will be moving with his wife, the poet Nadine Meyer, and their daughter Chloe.