WARTS

October 3, 2005

My Brothers,

Oliver Cromwell, Lord Protector of England in 1653, was having his official portrait painted by Sir Peter Lely, who was notorious for what art historians of today considered hasty and superficial portraiture. Cromwell, a no nonsense kind of guy who had seen to it that Charles I lost his head for being a 'bad' king, was in no mood to have his portrait painted in a hasty manner. Cromwell said to the painter: "Mr. Lely, I desire you would use all your skill to paint my picture truly like me, and not flatter me at all; but remark all these roughnesses, pimples, warts, and everything as you see me; otherwise I will never pay a farthing for it." This statement has passed into our speech today as the phrase, "Take me as I am, warts and all.", and the finely done portrait does show the real Cromwell, warts and all.

Now, this demand for realism was pretty unusual for the time. Knowing that their portraits would likely be the sole representation of their appearance for all time, the subjects sought out artists who would smooth over a few little things like lengthening or shortening the chin a bit, removing some of the wrinkles, or inventing a noble forehead they wished they had, and for sure, no warts! That's what was done for portraits and the practice continued long after Cromwell and his warts had died. The Lord Protector was buried in 1658 in the Hall of Kings in Westminster Abbey. In 1660, with the Restoration of the Monarchy which he had thrown out, by royal decree, his body was disinterred, hanged for treason, and buried below the gallows in unsanctified ground. Charles II, apparently, was a no nonsense kind of King, at least as far as where 'bad' Cromwell's body and place in history should be; it was never too late to hang a treason, warts and all.

There's another phrase we use, humorously calling someone a "Dorian Grey", which refers to a mature man who appears much younger than his age. This comes from the movie and book by Oscar Wilde, "The Painting of Dorian Grey". Dorian was a shallow person in love with his own appearance. He commissioned a portrait to capture his handsome image for all time. The portrait was perfect and he often stood before it, marveling at his own beauty. Some time passed and one day, while looking at his reflection, he noticed a wrinkle near his mouth. Dorian panicked. He declared that he'd give his soul for perpetual youth. As it happens, an ancient statue was nearby when he said this, and, as can happen with certain ancient statues sometimes, it granted him his wish. Dorian would never change or grow old; his portrait would take on all the appearances of aging for him. His face returned to its youthful beauty, and, sure enough, a wrinkle appeared in the portrait at the corner of his mouth. Years passed and Dorian stayed young and handsome while those around him aged. His portrait was changing, though. It had taken on all his aging, but it had also taken on his corrupted inner soul, evil and ugly, and he was forced to keep the portrait locked away in the attic where no one could see the terrible changes. Eternal youth soon became too heavy a burden for Dorian as those he cared for fell away from him, and he lost his sanity. Finally, he went up to the attic with a knife in hand and slashed the horrible painting. As the blade tore the painting, wounds appeared on his own body and he fell to the floor mortally bleeding. As he died, the painting returned to its original state and Dorian took on all the ugliness that the painting had held, in trust, for him.

Well. Those are two good stories, but what's the tie-in to Masonry?

In a sense, when we apply ourselves to the work of Masonry, we are painting lasting portraits of ourselves. These portraits will not be flawless; none of us is perfect in our actions or our disposition; we come to Masonry, "warts and all", though we try hard to be good. Through Masonry's teachings, we have the opportunity to smooth over a few of our imperfections before the portrait is done. Unlike poor Dorian Grey, we can change our portrait in a positive way through the exercise of Masonry's great virtues and principles. But, we must guard against painting a false portrait; we must always be true, just, and upright. By being so, we are freed from the need to bargain against our end, because, by living the way of Masonry, we are taught not to fear the future as we move closer to the Divine. These portraits of our better selves, created with the brushstrokes of Masonry, are our good and true selves. Far from hiding them away, we welcome the scrutiny of the world's honest appraisal.

Let us remember, then, that as we mount the steps of Masonry, we are not headed toward the attic; we are climbing toward the Divine. And we climb as Masons, obedient to our charge, sure in our ultimate future, confident and strong, warts and all.

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