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Portraits (with an essay Of Masks & Myself: Notes on the Self-Portraits of February 1983)

Barry Moser

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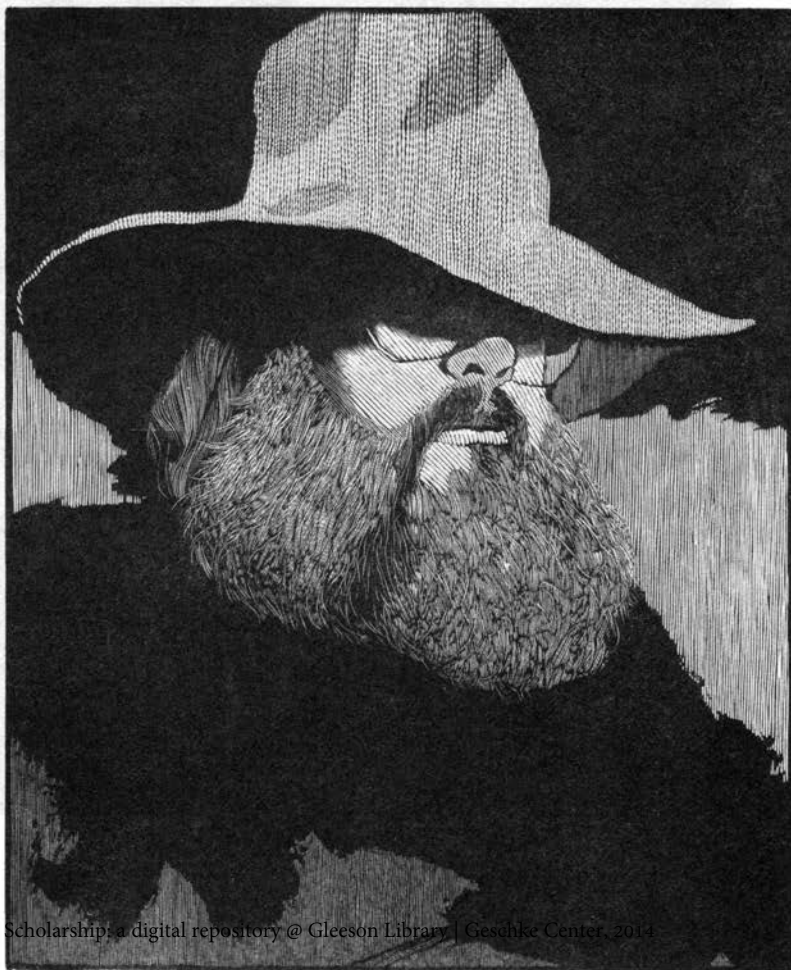
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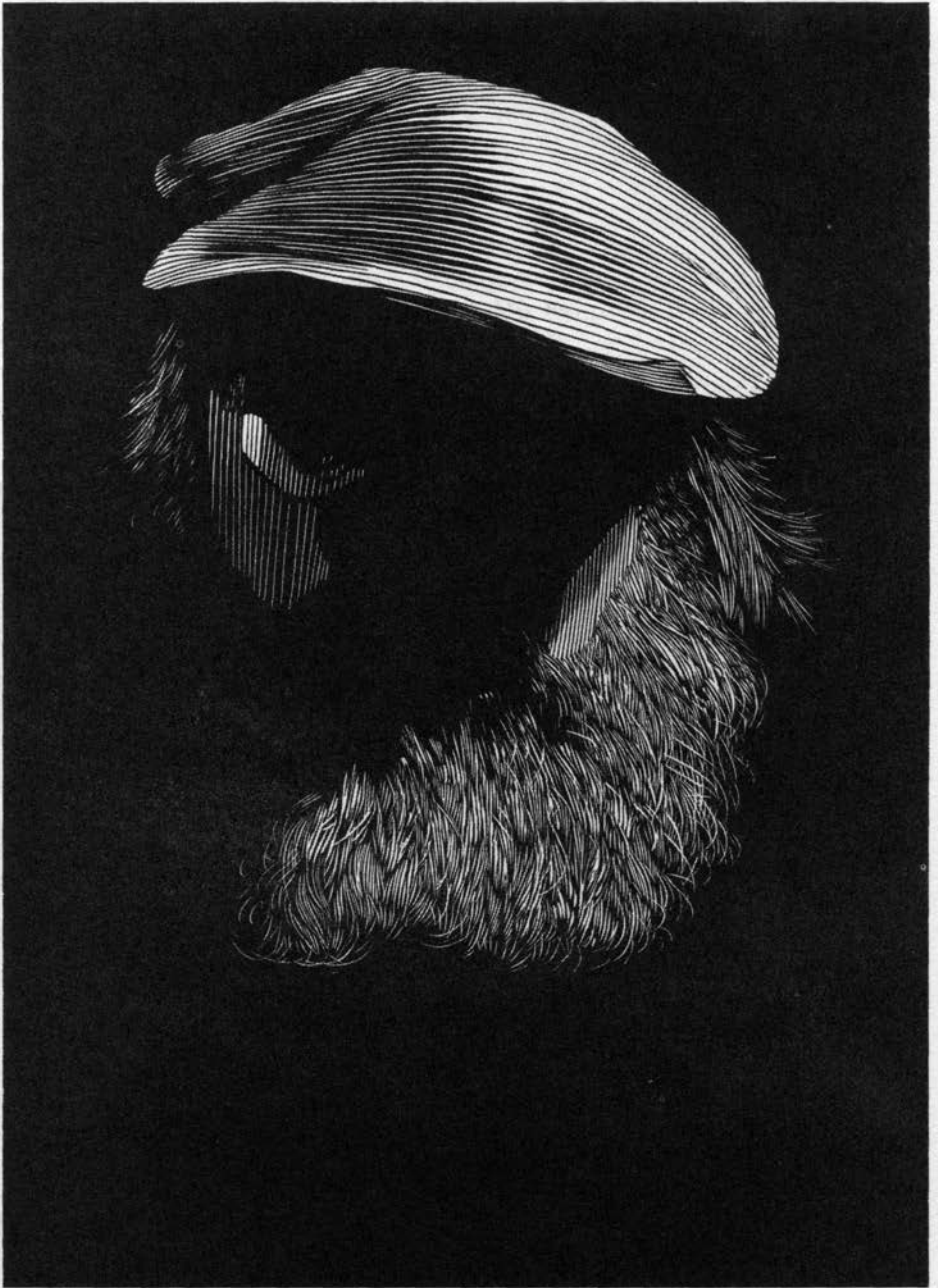
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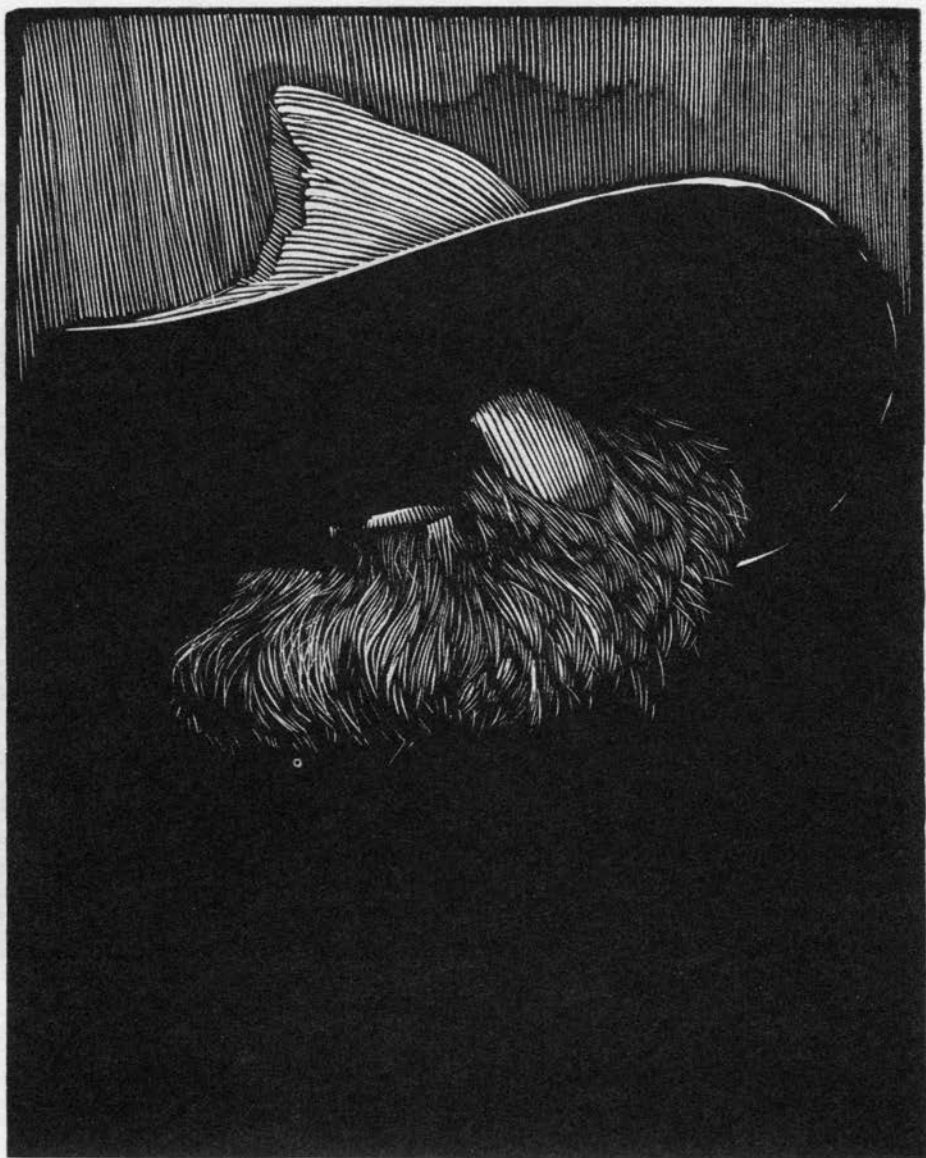
Barry Moser: Portraits

Self-Portrait ac. 42





Self-Portrait in Sporting Cap



Self-Portrait in Deep Shadow, Sun Hat



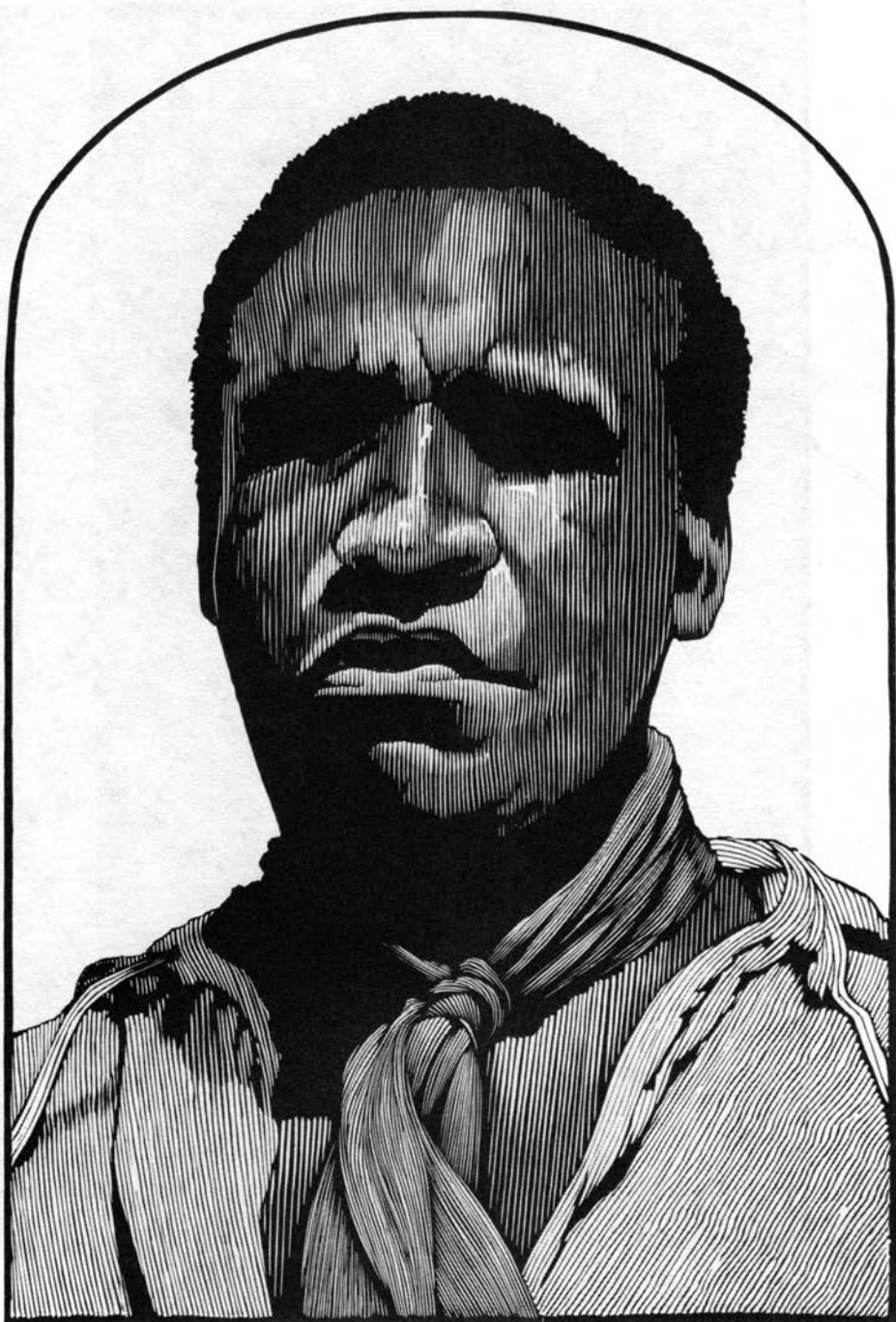
Self-Portrait with Laurel Garland



Papposilenos



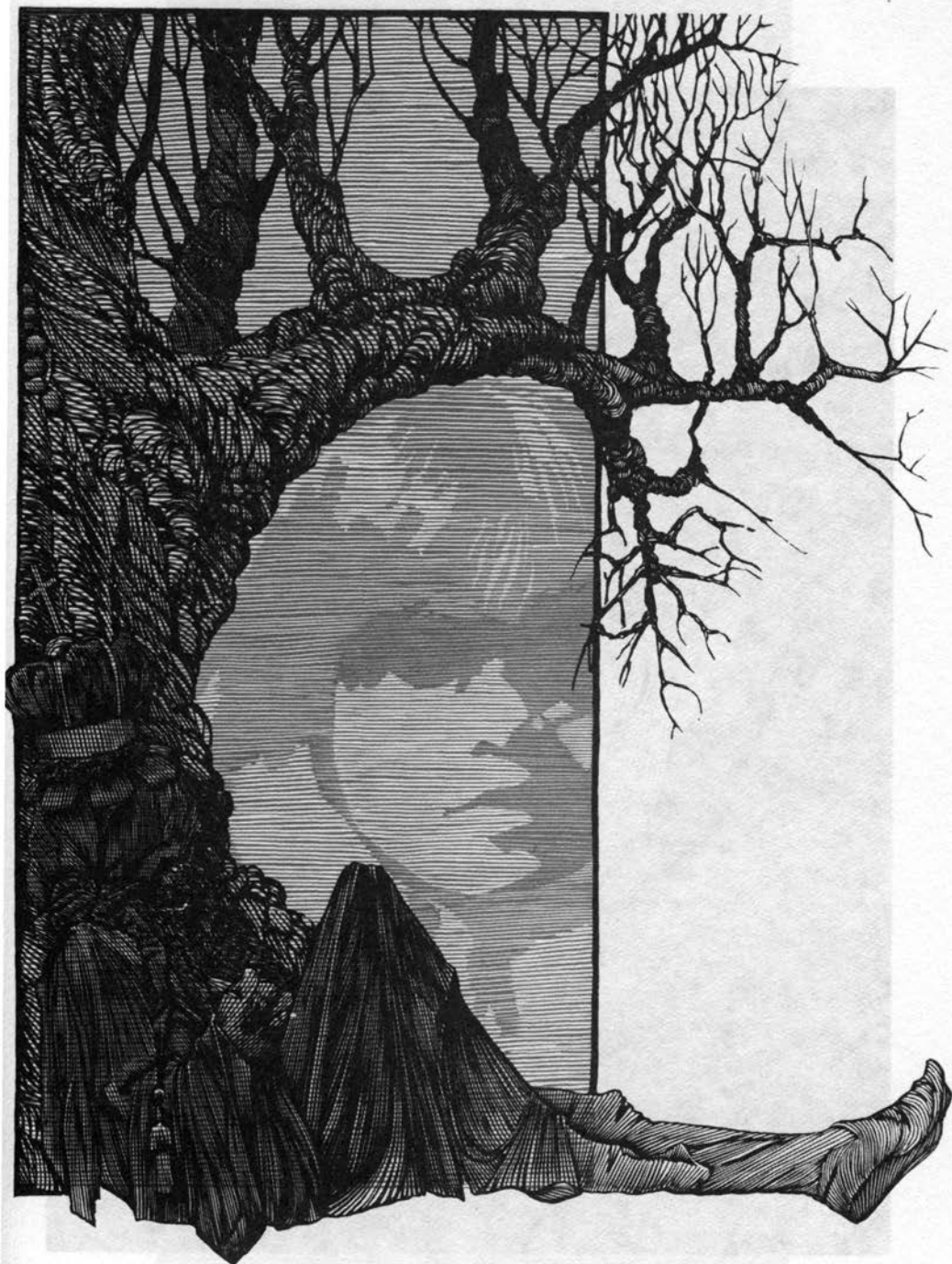
Huck from *Huckleberry Finn*



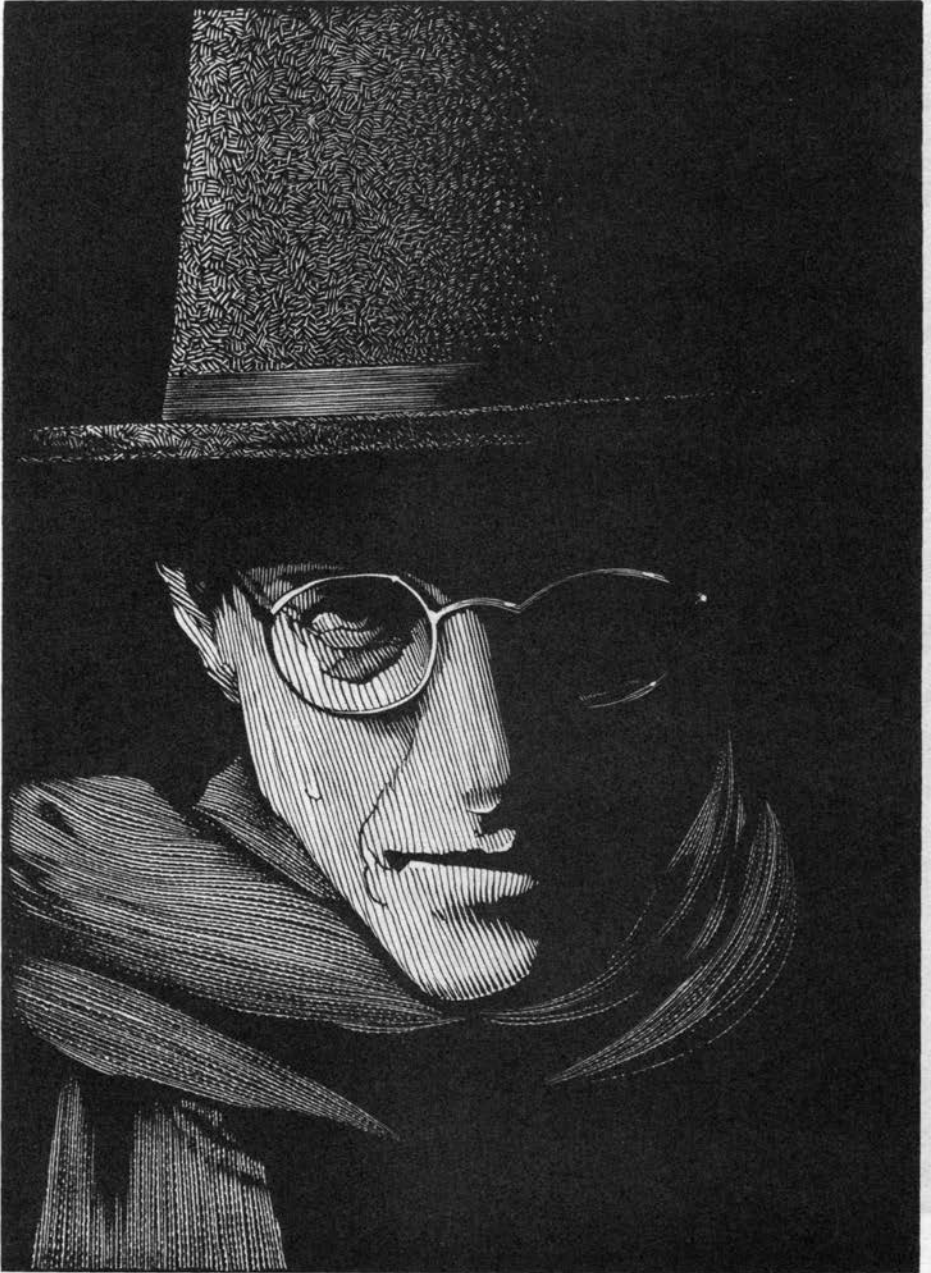
Jim from Huckleberry Finn



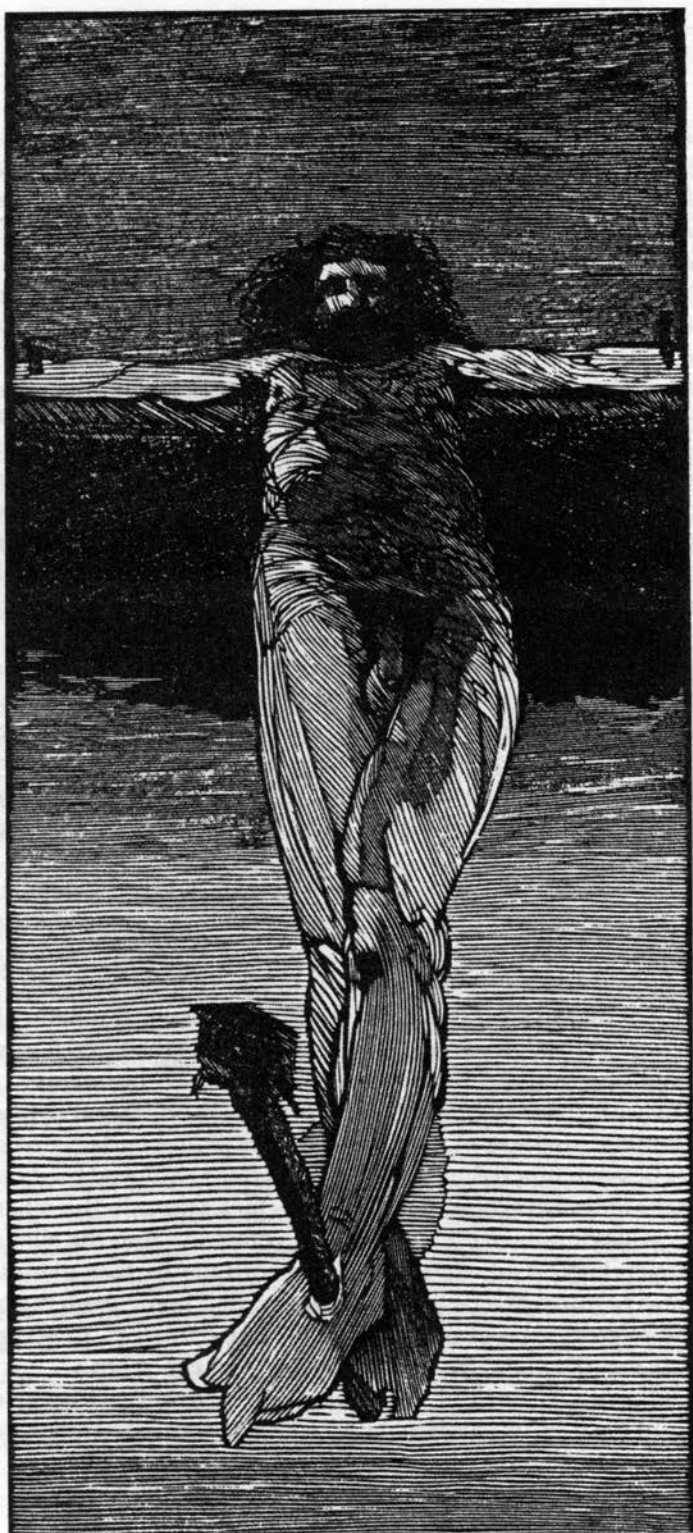
The Cheshire Cat from *Alice in Wonderland*



Alice in the Red King's Dream from *Through the Looking Glass*



Victor Frankenstein from *Frankenstein*



Of Masks & Myself

Notes on the Self-Portraits of February 1983

The man who writes about himself . . . writes about all men.

—G. B. Shaw

February 1983 began with the passionate delight of a beautiful woman, in what Seamus Heaney has called “the lovely and painful covenants of flesh.” Hers was the taste of clean flesh, like the taste of sun-warmed fruit picked fresh from dusty August fields, the sweet juice filling my mouth and dusty spirit. For four weeks her beauty and her body filled me and set me on a course of introspection which I can best describe as a sense of the radically concentric: broad layers of creativity surrounding the violent magma of the self.

That was how the month began. It ended with the cold, passionless fuck of a whore. Call it what it was: the ugly and painful betrayal of the flesh, leaving an aftertaste of ripening meat. The drunken ugliness of that conclusion to things set me on a course of introspection more downward spiralling than concentric, penetrating as it did into an unknown and unfamiliar self dwelling beneath the self I thought I understood.

When I was a boy, I used to explore Nick-a-Jack Cave, a deep, black cavern outside of South Pittsburg, Tennessee. My friends and I used to descend into that cave regularly, and on more than one occasion we found ourselves (or thought ourselves) lost in that dark womb. That sensation touched in us a thick, black silence. Lost in the belly of the earth, we wept. When we came, at last, back out into the light, it was as if we had come back into possession of our own calm breathing.

So it was with this recent exploration into self-portraiture. I began with the familiar surfaces of my face—with its planes and textures and idiosyncrasies—in much the same way that I once explored the familiar river and the ledges and boulders of Nick-a-Jack’s mouth. But what risk was there in staying near the light, in not venturing into the silence of the unknown dark? And what risk to stay with the surface planes and textures and features of a face and a body familiar to me from the other side of the mirror, instead of staking out the perimeters, pushing the self toward evil darkness, if only to find out where it lies?

In the silence and dark of Nick-a-Jack, armed only with the cold, carbide light each of us carried alone, we were stripped to our essen-

tials, carried forward by the thrill of our own adolescent madness, the machismo edge of fear. And so with the journey of these self-portraits, rendered somewhere near, perhaps, the mid-point of the way, aetat.42: a solitary voyage like those of Ulysses, Aeneas, Dante, Alice. Only I could carry my cold, solitary light into that interior each of us has heard whispered about. And this journey too required something of that all-but-forgotten egocentric, adolescent insanity I had known as a boy. What I did not anticipate as I began the descent was that very palpable fear of darkness and abandonment which soon began to overwhelm me.

When my oldest daughter saw my studio filling up with gargantuan self-portraits, she said to me with the casual directness only young adults show: "You sure do think a lot of yourself." Hurt, I snapped back at her: "If all you see is me, then you don't understand the self-portrait." For in the exploration of the self, of one's face and one's shape, and especially as one looks into the cave of one's own eyes, the artist begins to explore the recesses of all men, beast and gods. I think I surprised and bewildered my daughter by telling her that each of us leaves his or her parents either by choice or by death, just as our children must sooner or later leave us. That we can leave our lovers, as I have, for a short period, or we can leave them for good. And the truth is that with most of the people we meet in our lives, the question of leave-taking will be beside the point. But the truth also is that we can never take leave of self. For the self is omnipresent and inescapable. When, therefore, the artist begins to explore this terrain, he begins to explore the only omnipresent and universal world he will ever come in contact with.

When I began this series of self-portraits, I played with images familiar to me: the self as Bacchus, as Priapus, as Faunus. And I felt comfortable with this sexual, half-pathetic, half-comic self. But soon I began to explore other self-deformations and transfigurations as well. These were masks I think we have all worn at the most intimate level: masks of truth and masks of falsehood, masks of profanity and masks of irreverence, masks of passion and desire, of empathy and celebration, the mask of the moral dwarf and the mask of the freak, the transfigurative masks of the saint and the martyr. And how many of us have not, like Satan, played with the masks of Christ and of God?

Masks are like the sweet red flesh of the yewberry which covers its poisonous seed, the illusion of immortality covering the fact of our mortality. And so the mask of the carnival freak and the mask of the dead Christ, the mask of the achondroplastic dwarf and the mask of the pierced Sebastian in his homoerotic passion, the mask of contempt we

put on for the arrogant politician or the bigoted religionist, the mask of ribald humor, the mask of pathos and of pain: all enshrined in the husk which hides our rotting deaths. For that which is corporeal will pass away, "food for worms," as Zorba teaches us. But the Masks themselves, those manifestations of the artist's compassion and of the universality of his poor humanity: these, we hope, *are* immortal.

And yet, just as the yewberry's sweetness needs salt, so I need the taste of truth. And what began as a playful interlude with myself soon led downward into that Archimedean spiral which became more and more suicidal.

A young blond woman, her back towards me, suns herself on a Tortolan beach and I fantasize about her in the warm afternoon light. She gets up to leave, pulling her shirt over her head with thalidomide-deformed forearms and hands: hands inverted and folded back on themselves. How in God's name, I ask myself, could I explain my Self-Portrait as Carnival Freak to this woman? I ask myself that question over and over. "I am an artist," I hear myself saying. Hoping that she would understand. Hoping that *I* will understand. For myself, I know I have yet to drive the cold iron spikes of exploration into the quivering nucleus of myself which I saw reflected in that woman and the other two. All three strangers to me, but mirrors in which I saw reflections of those elements of myself—beauty, ugliness, deformity. Then again, in them I may have met my muse—that trinity of god, man and brute.

We are, each of us, made up of many people and wear different masks at different times and in different company. My self-portraits of February 1983 began with the axiom that, as masks are both concave and convex, so the masks of self-portraiture attempt to explore the "I" worn both outwardly and inwardly. I did not begin with the idea of Everyman, though I think I ended there. Elsewhere I have said that since each of us identifies on some level with the hero, I borrowed my own face and body to en flesh Odysseus, hoping therefore to remind myself and others that we are all wanderers . . . and even heroes. I hope these even more naked self-portraits will serve something of the same purpose.

Barry Moser