Self-Portrait of a Universal Man

Leon Battista Alberti

1460s

In everything suitable to one born free and educated liberally, he was so trained from boyhood that among the leading young men of his age he was considered by no means the last. For, assiduous in the science and skill of dealing with arms and horses and musical instruments, as well as in the pursuit of letters and the fine arts, he was devoted to the knowledge of the most strange and difficult things. And finally he embraced with zeal and forethought everything which pertained to fame. To omit the rest, he strove so hard to attain a name in modelling and painting that he wished to neglect nothing by which he might gain the approbation of good men. His genius was so versatile that you might almost judge all the fine arts to be his. Neither ease nor sloth held him back, nor was he ever seized by satiety in carrying out what was to be done.

He often said that not even in letters had he noticed what is called the satiety of all things among mortals; for to him letters, in which he delighted so greatly, seemed sometimes like flowering and richly fragrant buds, so that hunger or sleep could scarcely distract him from his books. At other times, however, those very letters swarmed together like scorpions before his eyes, so that he could see nothing at all but books. Therefore, when letters began to be displeasing to him, he turned to music and painting and exercise.

He played ball, hurled the javelin, ran, leaped, wrestled, and above all delighted in the steep ascent of mountains; he applied himself to all these things for the sake of health rather than sport or pleasure. As a youth he excelled in warlike games. With his feet together, he could leap over the shoulders of men standing by; he had almost no equal among those hurling the lance. An arrow shot by his hand from his chest could pierce the strongest iron breastplate. With his left foot lifted from the ground to the wall of a church, he could throw an apple into the air so high that it would go far beyond the top of the highest roofs. He could hurl a small coin into the air with such force that whoever was with him in the church could hear clearly the sound of the coin ringing against the lofty vaulting. On horseback, holding in his hand one end of a long wand, while the other was firmly fixed to his foot, he could ride his horse violently in all directions for hours at a time as he wished, and the wand

would remain completely immobile. Strange and marvellous! that the most spirited horses and those most impatient of riders would, when he first mounted them, tremble violently and shudder as if in great fear. He learned music without teachers, and his compositions were approved by learned musicians. He sang throughout his whole life, but in private, or alone, and especially in the country with his brother or relatives. He delighted in the organ and was considered an expert among the leading musicians. Not a few musicians became more learned by virtue of his advice.

When he had begun to mature in years, neglecting everything else, he devoted himself entirely to the study of letters, and spent some years of labour on canon and civil law. Finally after so many nightly vigils and such great constancy, he fell gravely ill from the exertion of his studies. Since his relatives were neither kind nor humane to him in his illness, by way of consoling himself between his convalescence and cure he wrote the play *Philodoxeos*, putting aside his legal studies—this when he was only twenty years old. And as soon as his health permitted, he resumed his studies, intending to complete the law, but again he was seized by a grave illness as he dragged his life along through severe labour and extreme poverty. Reduced to a state of weakness and emaciation, his energies consumed and almost all the vigour of his body gone, his strength broken and used up, he became so gravely ill that when he tried to read the power of his vision seemed to fail, with rising dizziness and griping pains, and far-off crashings and whistlings dinned his ears. The doctors declared that these things came about from the exhaustion of his physique, and they advised him again and again not to persevere in his laborious pursuits. He did not obey, but in his lust for learning consumed himself by working late at night. Finally, when he found his stomach was failing him, he fell into an illness worthy to be remembered. For during that time the names of his most intimate friends would not come to him although he knew them from long usage; other things which he had seen, however, he held in mind tenaciously.

At length, on the orders of his doctors, he desisted from those studies which were most fatiguing to the memory, just when they were about to flourish. But in truth, because he could not live without letters, at the age of twenty-four he turned to physics and the mathematical arts. He did not despair of being able to cultivate them sufficiently, because he perceived that in them talent rather than memory must be employed. At this time he wrote for his brother *On the Advantages and Disadvantages of Letters*, in which booklet, taught by experience, he discussed whatever could be thought about letters. And he wrote at this time for the sake of

his soul several little works: *Ephebia, On Religion*, *Deiphira*, and more of this sort in prose; then in verse, *Elegies* and *Eclogues*, and *Discourses*, and works on love of such a kind as to inculcate good habits in those who studied them and to foster the quiet of the soul.

In the year before he was thirty, moreover, he wrote in his native tongue, for the benefit of his relatives, in order to be of use to those who were ignorant of Latin, some books in Tuscan, the first, second, and third of *On the Family*, which he finished in Rome ninety days after he began them, but these books were uncultivated and harsh, not wholly Tuscan. For because of the long exile of the Alberti family he was educated among foreign peoples and did not possess his native tongue, and it was difficult for him to write with elegance and refinement in a language he had not been accustomed to use. But in a short time, thanks to his great zeal and industry, he mastered it, to such an extent that his fellow citizens, eager to be called eloquent in the Council, confessed that for the occasion they took not a few ornaments from his writings to adorn their own orations.

Besides these he also composed before he was thirty many dinner speeches, especially those facetious ones, "The Widow," "The Deceased," and others like them; many of these, however, because they did not seem to him sufficiently mature in form, although they were very entertaining and occasioned much laughter, he consigned to the flames lest he give occasion to his detractors to accuse him severely of levity. To those who disparaged what he had written, whenever they uttered their opinion in his presence, he gave thanks and received it, rejoicing that their admonition would lead to improvement. He felt, however, that it would be easy for anyone to support the opinion that his writing should be highly approved, and even if it pleased less than he wished, he should not be blamed, since he did not judge himself differently from other authors. For to each one, he said, it was forbidden by his own nature to do better than he was able to do; indeed, it should be considered enough if one fulfilled one's duty with all one's strength and ability.

He was always extremely circumspect in his habits lest they should in any way be subject to suspicion or censure, and he asserted that detractors were the worst evil in the life of man. For he had learned that they wound the reputation of good men not less by jesting and out of sheer pleasure than through indignation and wrath; and that such a wound could not be healed by any remedy because of the treacherous character of the ulcer they had caused. He wished by everything in his life, every gesture and every word, both to be and to seem worthy of the good will

of good men; and together with other things, on three especially, he said, every art should be lavished. Art should be added to art lest anything seem to be done artfully when one is walking about in the city, riding a horse, or speaking. For in these things one must watch on all sides in order not to displease anyone greatly.

Although he was affable, gentle, and harmful to no one, nevertheless he felt the animosity of many evil men, and hidden enmities, both annoying and very burdensome; in particular the harsh injuries and intolerable insults from his own relatives. He lived among the envious and malevolent with such modesty and equanimity that none of his detractors or rivals, although very hostile towards him, dared to utter a word about him in the presence of good and worthy men unless it was full of praise and admiration. Even by these envious ones he was received with honour face to face. But, in truth, when he was absent, those who had pretended to love him most slandered him with every sort of calumny, wherever the ears of the fickle and their like lay open. For they took it ill to be exceeded in ability and fame by him who, far inferior to them in fortune, had striven with such zeal and industry. There were even some among his kinsmen (not to mention others) who, having experienced his humanity, beneficence, and liberality, conspired against him most ungratefully and cruelly in an evil domestic plot, and those barbarians aroused the boldness of servants to strike him with a knife, blameless as he was.

He bore injuries of this kind from his kinsmen with equanimity, more in silence than by indignantly resorting to vengeance or permitting the shame and ignominy of his relatives to be made public. He granted them more than enough in praise and recognition. He could not be induced by injuries to hate anyone whom he had once loved, but said that evil men could so easily outstrip good men in doing harm. For he thought it should be considered more suitable for the good to endure injuries rather than to inflict them, and therefore it was not an equal struggle between those unwilling to offend and those who were ready to excite trouble. And so he broke the impetus of the shameless by his patience, and so far as he could, saved himself from calamity solely by the cultivation of virtue. He was commended by good and studious men. He was most acceptable to not a few princes. But because he detested all forms of ambition and adulation he was less pleasing to many than he would have been if he had been closer to more of them.

Among the Italian princes and among foreign kings, witnesses and heralds of his virtue were not lacking. He did not make use of their favour for any revenge, however, although he was continually disturbed

by new injuries and could easily have avenged himself. When in the course of time, moreover, it came about that his private fortune was of great value to those by whom he had been gravely injured, he preferred to pay them back with kindness, benefits, and all kinds of philanthropy rather than to take revenge, so that the scoundrels regretted they had injured such a man. When he had given his relatives the first, second, and third books of *On the Family* to read, he resented the fact that among all the Albertis, even the most leisurely, scarcely one could be found who deigned to read even the titles of the books, although those very books were sought out by foreigners; and he could not stomach it when he observed some of them openly making fun of the whole work and of the author's intention as completely inept. As a result of that affront he would have thrown into the fire those three books which he had just finished if certain princes had not prevented him. He conquered his indignation with a sense of duty, however, and after three years he offered to the ingrates a fourth book, which he had added to the first. "If you are honourable you will love me henceforth," he said, "but if you are dishonourable, your dishonour will become offensive to you." By these very books, many uneducated and even crude fellow citizens of his became devoted to letters. He counted them as brothers, and all others eager for learning, and whatever he came to know, he voluntarily communicated to them. He turned over those discoveries of his which were worthy and important to any who could use them. When he heard that a learned man of any kind had arrived, he would at once work his way into a position of familiarity with him and thus from any source whatsoever he began to learn what he was ignorant of. From craftsmen, architects, shipbuilders, and even from cobblers he sought information to see if by chance they preserved anything rare or unusual or special in their arts; and he would then communicate such things to those citizens who wished to know them. He pretended to be ignorant in many things so that he might observe the talents and habits and skill of others. And so he was a zealous observer of whatsoever pertained to in-born talent or the arts.

He wholly despised the pursuit of material gain. He gave his money and goods to his friends to take care of and to enjoy. Among those by whom he believed himself loved, he was not only outgoing about his affairs and his habits but even about his secrets. He never betrayed the secrets of another but remained silent forever. He would not produce the letter of a certain traitor by which he could have gravely harmed that vile enemy, but from time to time, when that evil reviler, the author of the letter, did not desist from his biting, he was moved only to say, smiling, "Tell me, my good man, do you remember having written any letters?" And,

turning to a most annoying detractor, he would say, "I shall endure the lies that you tell about me. I shall gladly let you show by your lying what each one of us is like, in whatever you wish. By broadcasting in this way you actually succeed better in revealing your own lack of modesty than in vituperating me shamelessly. By laughing at these absurdities of yours, I bring it about that you accomplish nothing except to displease yourself when you depart from me in a state of frustration."

He was by nature prone to wrath and bitter in spirit, but he could repress his rising indignation immediately by taking thought. Sometimes he deliberately fled from the verbose and the headstrong because with them he could not subdue his wrath. At other times he voluntarily submitted to the bold, in order to grow in patience. He would summon his friends to him, and while he held continual conversations about letters and learning with them, and while they were writing, he would dictate little essays and at the same time would paint their portraits or model in wax. In Venice he portrayed the countenances of his friends far away in Florence, whom he had not seen for a year and months on end. He used to ask young boys whether they recognized the portrait he was painting, and said that nothing could be called skilfully painted if it was not at once recognized by the young. He copied his own expression and likeness so that from this painted and modelled semblance he would be more easily known to strangers approaching him.

He wrote some books entitled *On Painting*, and in this very art of painting he created works unheard of and unbelievable to those who saw them, which, enclosed in a small box, he showed through a tiny opening. You could have seen there great mountains, vast plains, and the immense bay of an encircling sea, and then regions far remote from view, even so distant that one's vision failed. He called these things "demonstrations," and they were such that both the experienced and the inexperienced insisted that the things seen were not painted but real and natural. There were two kinds of "demonstrations," one which he called diurnal, the other nocturnal. In the nocturnal demonstration you could see Arcturus, the Pleiades, Orion, and sparkling constellations of this kind; and the moon shone, rising above the lofty peak of rocks and cliffs, and the nightly stars gleamed. And in the diurnal demonstration there shone here and there, illuminating widely the immense orb of the earth, a star that glitters after the "early born" Aurora, as Homer says. He inspired admiration in certain distinguished Greeks who were experts in matters relating to the sea. For when he showed them this invented mass of the world through the little opening, as I have said, and asked them what they had seen, they replied, "We saw a fleet of ships in the

midst of waves. We shall have it with us before noon, unless that thundercloud to the east of the sun and that threatening tempest harm it as it hastens here. For already we observe the sea quaking, and there are signs of danger in that the sun casts too many sharp rays over the sea."

He applied himself more in his work to investigating things of this kind than to making them known, for he always served genius rather than fame. His mind was never free from meditation and deliberation. He rarely stayed at home out of the public eye without deliberating upon something, and also pondered at dinner between courses. Hence he seemed excessively silent and solitary, and sorrowful in countenance, but he was not at all morose in his manners; on the contrary, among his intimates, even when he was discussing serious matters, he always showed himself agreeable and, though maintaining his dignity, even gay.

There were those who collected many sayings of his, both serious and humorous, which he usually brought forth on the spot and quickly, rather than by premeditation. ...

We have his letters to Paul the Doctor in which he put in writing the coming disasters of the fatherland years in advance; and he foretold the fortunes of the popes which were to come about in the twelve years following. His friends and intimates relate that the political movements in many other cities and the acts of princes were foretold by him. He had within himself a ray by which he could sense the good or evil intentions of men towards himself. Simply by looking at them, he could discover most of the defects of anyone in his presence. He used all kinds of reasoning and great effort, but in vain, to make more gentle towards himself those whom he had learned at one glance would be inimical. He bore their hostilities calmly, however, as if they were a kind of fatal necessity, and in every dispute he intimated that he would strive more moderately than was perhaps his right, except in returning favours of mutual benefit. He could hardly bear to see anyone exceed him in benevolence, excluding ambition, however, which was so alien to him that he even ascribed his own deeds, worthy of memory, to his elders in his book *On the Family*. And he also put in his own works the titles of others, and there exist whole works devoted to the fame of his friends.

He could endure pain and cold and heat. When, not yet fifteen, he received a serious wound in the foot, and the physician, according to his custom and skill, drew together the broken parts of the foot and sewed them through the skin with a needle, he scarcely uttered a sound of pain. With his own hands, though in such great pain, he even aided the ministering doctor and treated his own wound though he was burning with fever. And when on account of a pain in his side he was continually

in an icy sweat, he called in musicians, and for about two hours he strove by singing to overcome the force of the malady and the agony of the pain. His head was by nature unable to endure either cold or wind; but by persistence he learned to bear them, gradually getting used to riding bareheaded in summer, then in winter, and even in raging wind. By some defect in his nature he loathed garlic and also honey, and the mere sight of them, if by chance they were offered to him, brought on vomiting. But he conquered himself by force of looking at and handling the disagreeable objects, so that they came to offend him less, thus showing by example that men can do anything with themselves if they will.

When, to refresh his mind, he went out from home into the marketplace and saw all the artisans hard at work in their shops, often on his return he would at once resume his work as if warned by some grave censor, saying, "We too must exert ourselves in the task we have undertaken." In the spring when he saw the fields and the hills in bloom and noticed all the plants and trees bearing the greatest promise of fruit to come, deep sadness overcame him, and he would reproach himself in these words, "Now you too, Battista, must bring forth some fruit from your studies!" And in the autumn when he saw the fields heavy with the harvest and the trees laden with fruit, he was so afflicted with sadness that he was even seen on occasion to weep from sorrow and heard to murmur, "See, Leo, how on all sides witnesses and accusers of our idleness surround us! For what is there anywhere in nature which in the course of a whole year does not produce something of great advantage to men? But you, what do you have that you can bring forth, by virtue of profession, for the public good?"

He took extraordinary and peculiar pleasure in looking at things in which there was any mark of beauty or adornment. He never ceased to wonder at old men who were endowed with dignity of countenance, and unimpaired and vigorous, and he proclaimed that he honoured them as "delights of nature." He declared that quadrupeds, birds, and other living things of outstanding beauty were worthy of benevolence because by the very distinction of their nature they deserved favour.

When his favourite dog died he wrote a funeral oration for him.

Whatever was done by man with genius and with a certain grace, he held to be almost divine; and he so respected anything achieved that he insisted even poor writers were worthy of praise. The sight of gems, flowers, and especially pleasant places more than once restored him from illness to good health.

[Source: Leon Battista Alberti, *Opere volgari*.
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