

ELVIS BEGO

# The Selected Works of Alessandro Pope

ALESSANDRO POPE, lean, hungry, and feral-eyed, was seen climbing a desolate tree in Charleston to howl his gospel of aches. His dropcrotch chinos in tatters, his rococo coat a nasty crash against daylight, terrified old ladies gaping down in the street. A teenager took a blurry picture and it was printed in the paper. They never saw him there again.

Let it be known that Alessandro Pope ached for truth, beauty, transience, alabaster, opiates, and Sara, among other things.

He had an inscrutable face, sinuous, pained. His hair was like matted wires of scrub sprouting from his scalp. That was in his early twenties. Even then his gray, deep-set eyes were weary, and yet he was always desired.

They say something was wrong with him, but they are not sure when it began. There is broad disagreement about what “it” was. Also about who “they” are. Stories and symptoms vary.

Alessandro Pope liked to say that he was much older than he looked, that he was a methuselah, centuries young, and that he’d shaken the hand of Alexander Pope and had grinned the whole time, his teeth black with hot cacao.

Early on, Alessandro Pope and a crew of disheveled bizzaros invaded a radio station in the cathedral city of Canterbury and spent six hours airing the program exactly as planned, but the kink, or the crack, as he called it, was in the occupation. That was his Canterbury tale. When taken into custody, he said he was Pierre Menard.

One day Sara the architect was drawing a house for him on a yellow piece of paper. All she’d done was a gigantic wall with a huge door and a minuscule figure pushing it open. The light was slanted, odd, fantastical.

“Finish the house,” he said.

“Can’t the door be the house? Isn’t it enough?”

There is a cave in Crete with paintings that no hiker stumbles upon without a sense of awe. Horny bulls, flying shepherds, intricate fishbone ideograms, unknown beasts charging on the rolling walls. Alessandro Pope painted those when he was hiding from the Interpol.

Caked with mud and sick among natives in Brazil, he was served something they called *garrincha tatar*. And he got well. It was human flesh. And delicious.

It isn’t true that he stole Caravaggio’s early *Boy Pinching Boy’s Bottom* from the museum in Kassel.

It isn’t true what Damien Hirst said of him in that *Guardian* interview — that Pope was “an avant-terrorist.” Avant yes, terrorist no. Terrorist maybe. He loved the earth. If he could have fucked it, he would have. That’s what he was about.

It isn’t true that he killed a priest in Palermo. He’d never had a pistol and was never violent. Some of his friends said he’d never *been* in Palermo. The biggest lies about him were told by people who knew him least. It tends to be that way.

Alessandro Pope pinched a constable’s helmet. Not stole, pinched. The constable, aching for another move, stood staring. Make my day sort of thing. Pope stared back and held firm.

Amsterdam was delirium. Wreaths of smoke from bonfires he lit in the graveyards that he’d crash at night and in the coffee shops he’d inhale the steam of darjeeling and he’d roll down the heady straats of the Red Light District and screw his beard into little eddies, snorting the greasy air. He liked Vermeer, van Gogh not so much. He bought his coat in a thrift shop there and pranced with his porphyry cane. Yeah, pranced.

He could be ultra lucid. You’d sit talking to him and he’d nudge you toward unraveling and confession and you’d feel as though no one else existed in the world that instant but you, at least no one the least bit as

interesting. He focused his eye on you like a beautiful floodlight. And he made you fall in love with yourself.

Sara was his one debacle. She would not be possessed though they were together for years. She told him he could have whomever he liked. She was fine with it. Don't put me in a cage, I don't believe in those things, she said. That fuzzy yarn of curled hair. Those open, puzzled eyes. Her gospel of freedom, though he'd subscribed to it for years, became offensive to him. He wanted her for himself, but the door was her house.

“God doesn't think,” he once said, “therefore he isn't.”

One of his sayings became well known: “It took me ten long years and twenty short ones to do it.” There is broad disagreement about what “it” was. But it took all of thirty years.

His father taught history at Cambridge. Toward the end of his tenure, for six or seven days straight he would dismiss the class and climb out the window and down the rainspout and stroll home. Yes, it took a whole week before he was taken away. Others say the man was not his father at all.

His Italian-born mother, long suffering, long sighing at her husband's whims that aggravated unto paranoia and lunacy, became in late middle age a famous crime novelist. You know her by a pseudonym.

I saw him on a bridge in Amsterdam in his crazy coat as the wind seemed to shift and a violent gust swept the supple beret off his head and the thing glided and perched on the head of a tiny dog posted in the stern of a barge passing below. The dog didn't move though blind of a sudden. Alessandro wept, shivered, his hands clinging to the parapet.

“The *ayahuasca* is brutal,” he said. “You splinter. Your innermost being seeps out like syrup and you look at it and your face in there, reflecting back. You're never the same after. Make sure you don't try it. Or make sure you do, you know.”

His apartment in Amsterdam was bare walls, squeaky floorboards, a mattress, and a mandolin he didn't know how to play.

“Do whatever you like, Sandro.”

“I know what I want.”

“As long as you know you’re responsible for yourself.”

“Oh, really? And here I was, thinking you were responsible for me.”

“I’m not Alessandro Pope. You’re looking at the wrong mirror, darling.”

“Everything is mirroring. Everything reflects, Sara.”

He was, it is said, allergic to linen. When he painted, he painted on walls. Any and anybody’s walls would do, and did. He didn’t have an easel.

All you can do is impose a will onto a little corner of the world. Crack the hardened enamel a bit. Impart dream to the real. Bend the continuum. That is art. This is how he talked sometimes.

All those walls of his, those walls that stab you in the gut with their crystal naïveté, the broken color, and the long curved line. One by one they topple now, the buildings, in these modern cities that grow ever more invisible, cities that destroy themselves each year and rise anew, harnessed in cranes, shedding skin as eagerly as some imperiled cartel lord. Alessandro Pope was vanishing from the moment he’d appeared.

The thing he did to the façade of 10 Downing Street in 2003. The contraption he’d built to lob the paint, to make those slanted splotches and streaks, mixing optically. Odd, fantastical. It was accidental abstract expressionism. The American embassy in Malta that same year was different. I saw pictures of it.

He talked about spirals. He liked malleable things. Rigid shapes are dead forms, he said. Certainties. This is why he loved his supple beret. Doubt is supple too. Doubt is alive.

In Caracas he found Jesus, a wounded mongrel that he nursed and fed prawns and kassava. Jesús, rather. Jesús saved him too in a way. He loved that dog.

The first time I met him was on some rooftop, all red and flickering, spikes of thought shooting from my pulsing brain. Everybody howling, glimmering, jostling in joy. He wore a funny coned hat and said, “I am Pope Alessandro. Who are you?” What I said, no one knows anymore.

The back of his head was beautifully curved. In those later years when he'd shorn his locks, he had the stark aura of an ascetic. He never smiled. It occurs to me now that he may have had troubled teeth. The alarm in his eyes was attention incarnate. He was infatuated by everything.

That episode in the tiny village in Algarve. The enormous casks of wine that he'd gathered at two ends of a stony street and then had them blessed by an unwitting deacon before rupturing the vessels and flooding the cobbles. Peasants frolicking and swimming in the blood of Christ. It was a brief deluge. He stood atop a little polystyrene raft handing out baguettes, a contented Noah. The Catholic press was outraged. He was deported of course, banished from Portugal. José Saramago, ailing in his own exile, wrote an op-ed in his defense.

“Why is it strange?” he said.

“It just is.”

“But what about it is strange?”

“Everything.”

“You got that precisely wrong. Nothing is ever strange.”

That morning in Amsterdam when plumes of smoke appeared from the building across from his apartment and he took that famous picture with his old Leica: the naked woman in the window with her bleary mascara and dark hair all tousled, waving the teddy bear at someone down in the street.

He was not addicted to carnage. The besieged cities he entered under the cover of night were nothing but the cracked spaces of the real that he talked about. He had a hunger for empathy, for otherness. To look into eyes and comprehend. He wanted to contain stories and multitudes. In part, he was getting away from Sara.

Alessandro Pope built a giant wooden horse and had it smuggled at night into the main square in Sassari, Sardinia. It took the authorities a week to pry their way in and no they did not find soldiers in the horse's belly but three hundred and ninety-seven copies of Alexander Pope's version of *The Odyssey*. He claimed that the sequence *three nine seven* had some mystical properties, whether according to the kabala or Paracelsus or Newton, I don't know. The horse is now deposited in the warehouse of the city's archeological museum.

Not much is known about his year in Morocco. All he brought back was a terra-cotta tagine and some dried apricots and a burn on his thigh the size and shape of a tarot card.

One day in autumn Alessandro Pope wandered with Sara the architect in antique Ostia, the dead city. He found an ancient ring hidden behind a loose stone. It was inscribed in Latin: FOR MY FAITHLESS LESBIA. A classicist friend told him it might well have been an ironic gift from Catullus himself. That was me. He gave it to Sara shortly before they broke the final time.

Then there's that night in Calabria when he'd been wandering in the wild and a storm gathered. He came to an old villa by a dirt road and knocked to find cover. The huge door was unlocked. He went in. Room upon room and no one about, as though they'd fled that day from some rumor of plague. When he came to a great dark hall, he realized something was up there in its black depths. I picture him, dim and tiny at the bottom of the vast room. He heard the slow rustle and flutter of great wings and a flurry of cooled air reached him down there. He said it was like the wing of madness had loomed over him. Auguries. The house was like the one in Sara's drawing, he insisted.

He walked into a china shop in London one evening and smashed everything. It might've been a Tibetan solidarity thing.

Then a couple of years passed without a sighting and we knew that he was gone. He did not grow old. Maybe he'd turned into something else, a giant bird rustling among ruins. I do know he'd tried hard to try hard.

Another thing comes to mind. Many years ago, a girl he'd bedded in New Orleans watched as he, sick and warped by withdrawals, looked from the window at the clamorous, rain-soaked street, whispering, with a blue note, "What a world, what a mad, bent, pitiful, and magnificent world this is."