

The Face of Immortality



*Physiognomy
and Criticism*

Davide Stimilli

The Face of Immortality

SUNY series, Intersections: Philosophy and Critical Theory
Rodolphe Gasché, editor

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Physiognomy and Criticism

Davide Stimilli

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To my parents

εὐτυχῶς μέν, ἀλλ' ὅμως
τὰ τῶν τεκόντων ὅμοιθ' ἡδιστον βλέπειν

A spirit pass'd before me: I beheld
The face of immortality unveil'd—
Deep sleep came down on every eye save mine—
And there it stood,—all formless—but divine.

Byron, *Hebrew Melodies*

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Fig. 1. Rembrandt, Aristotle with a Bust of Homer. All rights reserved. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Purchase, special contributions and funds given or bequeathed by friends of the Museum, 1961. (61.198)

Introduction: The Strategy of Immortality

Of Immortality
His Strategy
Was Physiognomy.

Emily Dickinson

Socrates shies away from passing an aesthetic judgment over Charmides when he first meets the youth who gives the title to an early Platonic dialogue. He justifies his caution by warning that he is “no measurer,” when it comes to beautiful people, but rather the proverbial “white line,” which is, of course, useless when marking off measurements on *white* stone or marble; for, Socrates confesses with his customary irony, “almost everyone who has just grown up appears beautiful to me.” He agrees, though, with all the bystanders that Charmides has “a fine face (literally, is well-faced: *eyprosōpos*),” but they are not satisfied. Everybody keeps staring at the youth as if he were a statue. His body is certainly more alluring to them than his face: “if he would consent to strip,” one says, “you would think he had no face” (literally, he were faceless: *aprosōpos*), “he has such perfect beauty of form (*eidos*).” If exposed, Charmides’s body would efface his face in the eyes of the viewers.¹

This anecdote, I contend, is more than just the tale of an occasional infatuation. It accounts for the prosopagnosia, the face-blindness to which Western culture seems to be liable.² A pre-eminence of the figure over the face is undoubtedly the legacy of Greek humanism. Hans Castorp, the protagonist of Thomas Mann’s *Enchanted Mountain*, echoes Settembrini, the Italian humanist, one of his two mentors in the novel, when he argues that “the Greek sculptors did not worry much about the head, what mattered to them was the body, that was perhaps what humanistic meant.”³ Castorp is avowedly a *dilettante*; his musings, though, would not have sounded naive

even if put in the mouth of an art historian: an authority such as Bernard Berenson could straightforwardly declare that

so unnecessary do I find facial expression, and indeed, at times, so disturbing, that if a great statue happens to be without a head, I seldom miss it; for the forms and the action, if both be adequate, are expressive enough to enable me to complete the figure in the sense that they indicate; while there is always a chance that the head, in works of even the best masters, will be overexpressive.⁴

“Overexpressive” might hardly strike our contemporary taste as a criticism. Yet, in spite of the seeming casualness of their remarks, both Mann’s character and Berenson were restating, almost word for word, one of the fundamental tenets of the grand style, as Sir Joshua Reynolds had codified it in his *Discourses on Art*, the manifesto of classicist aesthetics. Reynolds writes in the X Discourse:

As the general figure presents itself in a more conspicuous manner than the features, it is there we must principally look for expression or character; *patuit in corpore vultus* [. . .] The face bears so very inconsiderable a proportion to the effect of the whole figure, that the ancient Sculptors neglected to animate the features, even with the general expression of the passions.⁵

The price humanism has to pay in order to establish the dignity of the human figure,—to the point that the gods themselves wish to look human⁶—is the effacement of the face, the banishment from its features of even “the general expression of the passions.”

In arraying his Latin source, however, Reynolds misspells it: Statius wrote *latuit in corpore vultus*, which Reynolds’s contemporary Joseph Spence freely amplifies as follows: “the whole Beauty of his Shape [. . .] exstinguished the Beauties they had before so much admired in his Face.”⁷ More literally we may render: the face hid in the body. I take the careless spelling in Reynolds’s quote, the disregard for the letter that he so betrays, be it intentional or just a *lapsus calami*, as a symptom of his utter disregard for the face: it is obviously irrelevant to Reynolds whether the face is latent or patent in the body; what matters to him is that, either way, the body overshadows or outshines the face.

A face is no body, *personne*. Ominously, the same adjective Plato uses apropos of Charmides, *aprosōpos*, was later used in Greek law in reference to slaves, those who have no face, hence no legal person.⁸ I take physiognomy to name the resistance to such an obliteration of the human face. In the pages that follow, however, I am not advocating the legitimacy of what Kant la-

belled “the art of spying the inside of man,”⁹ nor indulging the “physiognomical QUIXOTISM” a B-novel of the early nineteenth century diagnosed as “MORBUS INSANABILIS.”¹⁰ While conjuring up its name, I wish to elicit a different understanding of physiognomy and to advocate another physiognomy than that complicit with the very tradition of obliteration I am denouncing. Hence the usage of the term “physiognomy” in the context of my discussion entails an ambiguity of which the reader ought to be mindful.¹¹

Throughout this book, I am concerned with the language we use to talk about the face more than with the language of the face *per se*, and I am more interested in the historicity of language than in the natural and/or social history of the face.¹² A second anecdote from the *Charmides* has been very often quoted in the literature on physiognomy, especially since Addison’s essay in the *Spectator* (1711) made it current in the European-wide debate leading up to Lavater’s ephemeral renown. Socrates proceeds to question Charmides in order to test whether his undeniable beauty of appearance corresponds to an interior beauty, which to him, as we may expect, is far more important. Socrates starts by inviting the youth to simply speak: “speak, that I may see thee.”¹³ This imperative is quoted again and again by the critics intent on dismissing the interpretive claims of physiognomy: man truly reveals itself through language, not through the face.¹⁴ Language is the true face of man, for language is the face of the soul, and not just of the body: *oratio vultus animi*, a sentence Leo Spitzer elected to sum up his credo as a critic.¹⁵ Unfortunately, Spitzer misquotes his source, as well: Seneca meant *oratio* to be the *cultus* of the soul, namely, and not its *vultus*. Spitzer’s misspelling is a sobering reminder that the physiognomy of language is not necessarily more transparent than the language of physiognomy. We misspell words as easily as we mistake faces. Werner Kraft more persuasively justifies the Socratic imperative when he writes apropos of Kafka that

the essence of man is manifest in the face (*Gesicht*) and hidden in language; but since every manifestation for man is mere appearance, he can only be known in an essential manner in language.¹⁶

In language, though, the essence of man is latent or, at least, as little patent as in the face. Certainly, no immediate access to such an essence is to be gained through either face or language.

A face is a vision. This premise is almost obvious in German, in which the word *Gesicht* has both meanings, or in ancient Italian, in which *viso* (< Lat. *visum/visus*) is both the faculty and the object of vision.¹⁷ Yet, when Rilke writes in the opening pages of *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*: “A face is a face (*Gesicht ist Gesicht*),” his is not a tautology. It means, as he writes shortly before: “I am learning to see” (*Ich lerne sehen*).¹⁸ In turn, what he implies is that a vision is not yet a face. A vision becomes a face only

through language. Dante cannot translate (for him, as well as for the reader) his vision of Beatrice into a face, his “viso” into her “viso,” because, even if he sees her truly *vis-à-vis*, her beauty “transfigures itself” (*si trasmoda*) and thereby evades the figurative power of language.¹⁹ Within our mundane sphere, however, a face is always a prosopopeia, the imposition, brought about by language, of a face to a vision. Aristotle hints at such a process in the opening page of the *Physics*, where he suggests that the acquisition of language necessarily blurs in the eyes of the children the outlines of even those faces they most dearly love, and they end up “by calling every man ‘father’ and every woman ‘mother.’”²⁰ This case of early prosopagnosia suggests that language per se is not the remedy to our face-blindness. Instead of making them more visible, language effaces faces by imposing a persona on them.

Physiognomy, I suggest, may point the way out of the impasse between the prosopagnosia of vision and the prosopopeia of language. Henry More, the Cambridge Platonist, renamed it “prosopolepsia,” by transliterating a New Testament term the Vulgata renders as *acceptio personarum*,²¹ and Tyndale “parciality.” The Hebrew verb **וְשָׂא פָנָיו**, after which the Greek noun was probably coined, refers to the gesture of lifting up the forehead of somebody kneeling in front of us.²² But to More, as the translation by Tyndale also implies, the word had a negative connotation: he uses it to refer to a minor vice in his system of ethics, the inclination to pass a judgment over somebody just at first sight. As I take it, physiognomy is unabashedly the name of such a partiality toward the face, without any negative connotation attached: the acknowledgment of the uplifted face, its recognition as human at first sight. In spite of its recurrent claims to the status of a science, physiognomy is indeed bound to remain a prosopolepsia, an acceptance, or just a reconnaissance, of the other’s face *prima facie*: we do not reach any knowledge through physiognomy, we can only acknowledge faces, or recognize them. Recognition is “that which is sweetest when we meet face to face,” Seneca writes in one of his letters,²³ but no knowledge is at stake in such an encounter: the relationship to the face of the other, as Emmanuel Levinas has persuasively argued, is never reduceable to a mere relationship of knowledge.²⁴

Homer has a word for the sense that allows a mortal to recognize a divine countenance in disguise. That word is *noos*, which is used in reference to this physiognomical capability in the Homeric poems, before becoming the common noun for understanding in later Greek.²⁵ As applied to the human countenance, physiognomy is then a secularization of the ability to recognize the gods, but is also the dawn of understanding as such. We can then understand ourselves, I hope, how Euripides could call recognition “a god” in a verse of his play *Helen* that has been a *crux* to the interpreters, precisely because of their failure to see in the Aristotelian *anagnō̄r̄isis* anything more than a theatrical device. The protagonist invokes the gods to witness as she deifies recognition itself: “You gods! For recognition is a god.”²⁶ Here the invocation

is certainly not meant to invite the appearance of a *deus ex machina*, but rather to remind us that the recognition of a human face is always a divination, the possible recognition of a divine in a human countenance. And in recognizing as such we are ourselves recognized as god-like, for every face might be a god's. "How could we see the light, if the eye were not sun-like?"²⁷

The German scientist Wilhelm Ostwald mocked Goethe's (revival of Plotinus's) rhetorical question by suggesting that, if we apply the same principle to reading, it becomes patently absurd: in order to read, the eye would have then to be ink-like.²⁸ But the paradox is only apparent. When confronted with particular obscure handwritings, the Renaissance philologists resorted to the principle "it is necessary to divine, rather than to read (*divinare oportet, non legere*)," which was misunderstood as if it were a loose principle of interpretation,²⁹ but the translation "to guess" would be almost blasphemous here. "To divine" is the proper term when we take up the challenge of "reading that which was never written:"³⁰ reading, too, *is* a god.³¹

Walter Benjamin proposes a solution to the "enigma," as he calls it, of his inability to recognize people, which may also supply a reason for our collective prosopagnosia, our collective loss of *noos*: "I do not want to be recognized, I want myself to be taken for somebody else."³² Such a desire to hide, to be mistaken is a clear symptom of shame. In the diagnosis of the psychiatrist, "the wish inherent in the feeling of shame" is: "I want to disappear as the person I have shown myself to be," or: "I want to be [seen as] different than I am."³³ Even more basically:

"I feel ashamed" means "I do not want to be seen." Therefore, persons who feel ashamed hide themselves or at least avert their faces. However, they also close their eyes and refuse to look. This is a kind of magical gesture, arising from the magical belief that anyone who does not look cannot be looked at.³⁴

Rather than magical, or more fundamentally than magical, such a gesture is dictated by our mimetic instinct, which makes us all look for a disguise and warns us that our best chance at being overlooked is by not looking at. In either case, it is an archaic reflex that still dictates our reaction to the face.

Yet we can recognize only if we are willing to be recognized. Only by looking at, we will be looked at in return; only by smiling at, we will be smiled at in return. "A smiling mouth *smiles* only in a human face,"³⁵ and only, I would add, at another human face. In so doing, however, we become ourselves divine. Virgil's imperative at the end of the fourth eclogue: "Begin, baby boy, to know thy mother with a smile," seems to put the burden of recognition solely on the child, but then we learn that he, "on whom his parents have not smiled,"³⁶ has been denied intercourse with the gods, namely,

both the ability to recognize and be recognized as god-like. Only by being recognized as human, we learn how to recognize the gods. Only when we recognize a human countenance, we are recognized as god-like.

In a note attached twenty-five years later to the *Introduction à la méthode de Léonard de Vinci*, Paul Valéry comments upon a fragment Leonardo probably intended to use in his projected treatise on anatomy: "The organization of our body is such a marvelous thing," Leonardo writes, "that the soul, although *something divine*, is deeply grieved at being separated from the body that was its home. *And I can well believe that its tears and sufferings are not unjustified . . .*"³⁷ Valéry invites us to consider

the enormous shadow projected here by an idea in process of formation: death interpreted as a *disaster for the soul*! Death of the body as a diminution of the *divine thing*! Death moving the soul to tears and destroying its dearest work, by the ruin of the structure that the soul had designed for its dwelling!³⁸

Its mourning shows clearly enough that the soul is not indifferent to the body, to use Leibniz's *litotes*,³⁹ but its sorrow is ultimately relieved by the certainty that the separation will only be temporary. Rather than considering such an idea as opposed to the "wholly *naturalistic*" philosophy of Leonardo, as Valéry does,⁴⁰ I see in it the culmination of a tradition that goes back to Tertullian. To the initiator of the figural reading⁴¹ the body was certainly no *signum mortificationis* (as the Jesuit Naphta, Hans Castorp's other mentor, would have it),⁴² but rather a foreshadowing of the eventual figure of the soul, the face was not a *facies hippocratica* but rather a *veronica* of the coming Messiah. It is by a similar train of thought, I believe, that Emily Dickinson was led to define physiognomy the "strategy of immortality" in one of her most enigmatic poems, the expression I have chosen as the title of this introduction.

Independently from any belief in the resurrection of the flesh, I suggest that such a strategy is most relevant to the battle-field of literary studies.⁴³ "What is interesting to a writer is the possession of an inward certitude that literary criticism will never die," Joseph Conrad wrote;⁴⁴ reversing this disarming declaration of dependence, what is interesting to a critic, I believe, is the possession of "an inward certitude" that literature will never die. To strengthen such an inward certitude is the final goal of my work.

What gives to Proust's art a unique degree of universality "in a non-religious world," according to Adorno, is that he "took the phrase of immortality literally," and he did so "by concentrating on the utterly mortal."⁴⁵ Thus, in our fully secularized world, we take the phrase of immortality literally only by taking the letter as immortal, even if only for strategic reasons. I use the

word “physiognomy” also to name an approach aware of the unavoidable, yet not unredeemable, materiality of the body and of language.

In the wake of such an awareness, there is hence no reason to mourn the soul, either. Body and soul fall and stand together, as it were. And when we laugh, they also laugh together. Philo of Alexandria has a deeply moving exegesis as to why Abraham falls and laughs at the same time, when God lets him know that Sarah will bring him the child they had so long wished for, now that she is ninety. He explains that Abraham

falls as a pledge that the proved nothingness of mortality keeps him from vaunting; he laughs to show that the thought that God alone is the cause of good and gracious gifts makes strong his piety. Let created being fall with mourning in its face; it is only what nature demands, so feeble in footing is it, so sad of heart in itself. Then let it be raised up by God and laugh, for God alone is its support and its joy.⁴⁶

It is an eloquent example of Philo’s allegorical reading. But Philo refers to his method also as a *φυσιογνωμονεῖν*, a verb I will not try to translate, as the most recent editors of his works misleadingly do, as “to judge of the real nature of things,” but rather simply transliterate as “to physiognomize.”⁴⁷ His usage suggests that in Philo’s eyes the opposition between the literal and the allegorical, which Tertullian tried to bridge with his figural reading, was mediated by a mode of interpretation we may call physiognomical. Benjamin hinted at a similar possibility, I believe, when he listed a “physiognomical criticism” among the future tasks of the critic in his notes for a never completed essay on “The Task of the Critic.”⁴⁸ I venture to supplement his insight with a formula: the task of the physiognomical critic is to transliterate. In so doing, the critic redresses what is, truly, the failure⁴⁹ of the translator and, contrary to the obliteration brought about by translation, furthers the survival of the letter, on which the very survival of literature is dependent.

Jerome answered pope Damasus’s inquiry about the meaning of the Hebrew word *hosanna*, which had been left untranslated in the Greek and Latin version of the Scriptures, by arguing that “it is better to accommodate the ear to a foreign-sounding idiom, than to bring home a false understanding of the foreign language (*magis condecet [. . .] peregrino aurem accomodare sermoni, quam de aliena lingua fictam referre sententiam*).”⁵⁰ Such a principle would well serve the task of the transliterator, if I may also venture to coin a new word,⁵¹ Jerome might be invoked as their patron saint,⁵² his answer to Damasus be their manifesto. It is an example of both common sense and extraordinary humility. Aristotle displays similar qualities in the *Rhetoric* when he justifies the recommendation that “we should give our language a ‘foreign air’” by

grafting onto it *glōttai*, or foreign words, with the surprisingly enlightened observation that “men feel the same in regard to style as in regard to foreigners and fellow-citizens,” namely, “men admire what is remote, and that which excites admiration is pleasant.”⁵³ It is in comedy, according to the Aristotelian author of the tractatus Coislinianus, that every character is made to speak in only one language, without *glōttai*: the countryman in the language of the country, the foreigner in a foreign language.⁵⁴ But that is why, transliterating Aristotle, they sound *idiotic*.⁵⁵ “La translittération,” on the other hand, “a je ne sais quoi de plus intelligent.”⁵⁶ It reminds us of the unity of all languages, for every word was once a foreign word, before acquiring a familiar physiognomy. It also reminds us that “the secularisation of language is only a *façon de parler*, a phrase,”⁵⁷ for in every language, and not just in the Israeli Hebrew that inspired Gershom Scholem’s remark, the memory of a divine language is still alive.

In a letter to Scholem, in which he advocates the translatability of Hebrew into German, Franz Rosenzweig comes close to formulate a Freudian theory of the foreign word when he implies that foreign are those words that can *never* come back home: “Worte, die *nie* heimkehren können.”⁵⁸ Said otherwise, words we can never remember. On the other hand, only those words that can come back home, that we can remember, are, in a Freudian sense, uncanny (*unheimlich*), when they resurface unannounced to memory. Paradoxically, then, one has to conclude that foreign words are not *unheimlich* in a Freudian sense, though they are not necessarily “a nothing, idols (*Götzen*),—אֱלֹהִים,”⁵⁹ as Rosenzweig denounces them. Such an extreme statement fully reflects the horror of polytheism of the author of *The Star of Redemption*. But I do not believe that the author of *Moses and Monotheism* shared Rosenzweig’s disdain for foreign words. Foreign words are not just a nothing to Freud, they rather deserve our attention because, like proper names, they are most liable to be forgotten. In his discussion of the *Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, Freud starts his analysis of the disturbances of memory precisely from proper names and foreign words. As opposed to both categories, what he calls “the current vocabulary of our own language, when it is confined to the range of normal usage,” namely, common nouns and the other parts of speech, seem “to be protected against being forgotten.”⁶⁰ Our own language is, in other words, better protected against forgetfulness than a foreign language, with the exception of proper names. Such a conclusion points toward an affinity between the two categories that are thus excluded from our recollection: both proper names and foreign words are words whose origin *latet*, is hidden from us.⁶¹ If we pursue this train of thought to its utmost consequences, we may attempt to formulate a truly Freudian theory of the foreign word: foreign words are those words we fail to remember, which, in Freudian terms, means: we repress. As Ernst Jones puts it, within Freudian theory “a failure to remember is regarded as synonymous with a not