

# The Face of Immortality



*Physiognomy  
and Criticism*

**Davide Stimilli**

# The Face of Immortality

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Rodolphe Gasché, editor

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Physiognomy and Criticism

Davide Stimilli

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To my parents

εὐτυχῶς μὲν, ἀλλ' ὅμως  
τὰ τῶν τεκόντων ὅμμαθ' ἥδιστον 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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I would especially like to thank Rodolphe Gasché for welcoming my book in his series.



**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

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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.<sup>1</sup>

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.<sup>2</sup> 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.”<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup>

“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.<sup>5</sup>

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 human<sup>6</sup>—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 [. . .] extinguished the Beauties they had before so much admired in his Face.”<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> 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,”<sup>9</sup> nor indulging the “physiognomical QUIXOTISM” a B-novel of the early nineteenth century diagnosed as “MORBUS INSANABILIS.”<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup>

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.<sup>12</sup> 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.”<sup>13</sup> 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.<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup>

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.<sup>17</sup> 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*).<sup>18</sup> 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.<sup>19</sup> 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.’”<sup>20</sup> 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 Vulgate renders as *acceptio personarum*,<sup>21</sup> and Tyndale “parciality.” The Hebrew verb **נָשָׂא פָּנִים**, after which the Greek noun was probably coined, refers to the gesture of lifting up the forehead of somebody kneeling in front of us.<sup>22</sup> 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 parciality 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,<sup>23</sup> 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.<sup>24</sup>

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.<sup>25</sup> 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 *anagnōrīsis* 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.”<sup>26</sup> 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?"<sup>27</sup>

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.<sup>28</sup> 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,<sup>29</sup> 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:"<sup>30</sup> reading, too, *is* a god.<sup>31</sup>

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."<sup>32</sup> 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."<sup>33</sup> 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.<sup>34</sup>

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,"<sup>35</sup> 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,"<sup>36</sup> has been denied intercourse with the gods, namely,