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Face-to-Face Encounters with Eliotian Faces: Holding a Mirror to the Face of Modernity

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"The apparition of these faces in the crowd
Petals on a wet black bough."

"In the Station of the Métro," Ezra Pound

Introduction

On several occasions around 1922 some of T.S. Eliot's relations noticed that the poet had got into the unexpected habit of wearing face powder:

> The Sitwells noticed, while dining with him [...], that he was wearing face powder: "... pale but distinctly green, the colour of forced lily-of-the-valley". Their observation confirmed what Virginia Woolf thought she had seen – green powder on his face. The year before she suspected that he painted his lips, and in March 1922, Clive Bell told Vanessa Bell that Eliot "has taken to powdering his face green – and he looks interesting and cadaverous" (Ackroyd 136).

Whether this cosmetic mask was a means for the poet to incarnate a dramatic *persona* or the role of a dandy, a way to keep a safe distance from others or else a subtle sign to disclose a psychological unease, what stands out here is his conscious *use* of his face. Eliot was drawing attention to this specific part of his body, probably the most expressive part.

Mainly relying on what is known about Eliot's personal life and his strained relationship with his first wife, many readers and scholars have repeatedly noticed the awkward and painful treatment inflicted by Eliot on physicality—especially with his poetic, suggestive treatment of salacious sexuality—or even his purposeful

defacement and effacement of bodies[1]. In spite of such countless well-grounded analyses, still little attention has so far been paid to the role of corporeality in Eliot's poetic oeuvre.

Our purpose will be to focus, not on bodies as such, but on faces—what Georg Simmel has called the "peninsular"[2] part of the body, connected to the corporeal main territory by the neck only.

The idea of the face as a construct was born in the sixteenth century with the emergence of the western conception of intimacy. In painting especially, the face had hitherto not been represented as that of an individual: faces were stereotypical and therefore not detailed. In the sixteenth century, the face became one of the physical means to express the most intimate emotions and was gradually considered as the physical location where identity is crystallised.[3]

As the only bodily part left unclothed, at least in western cultures, the face literally exposes the self to the "other." It is on this idea that Emmanuel Levinas grounds his philosophy of ethics: the face is the corporeal manifestation or exteriorisation of one's self. It receives and welcomes the other but its inherent mystery and secrecy are never fully unveiled. And even to oneself, one's own face somehow remains a mystery, especially as one only perceives its *mediated* image: through its reflection in a mirror, a glass-window, the surface of water, its re-production on a painting, a photograph or in a film.

Both the locus of identity *and* the holder of an eternal secrecy, the nature of the face is therefore somewhat dual and has led several critics to point out the significant nuance between "having" and "being" a face. For Deleuze and Guattari, "on se coule dans un visage plutôt qu'on en possède un" (Deleuze, Guattari 217). One, so to say, merely incarnates *a* face. David Le Breton is less firm on that point and advances that the individual is *torn* between being and having a face. On the one hand, one feels that one's face is the incarnation of one's identity and, on the other hand, one witnesses the effects of time on one's face and no longer recognises the face (s)he now "has" (Le Breton 168).

The coexistence of these indeterminacies highlights the unsteady nature of the face, an unsteadiness which was substantially heightened in the first era of the

twentieth century. The potential stability of the face is indeed jeopardized by the immediate context, by this world in which the essential points of reference and framework of ideas have been shattered by modernity. As they are usually listed together, the main figures that, since the end of the nineteenth century, have radically transformed the western thought are Nietzsche, Darwin and Freud, and the ideological changes brought about by each of them have more or less directly influenced the idea and representation of faces: since Nietzsche, the thought that man was made in God's image has been jeopardized; after Darwin, man has become increasingly aware of the inherent animal nature of his physical features and constitution; and with Freud, man has started to comply with the idea that he is driven by unconscious forces, not quite visible on the (sur)face. These three names (among others), along with the historic events of the Great War, have all partaken in the ideological upheaval of the period. What D.H. Lawrence calls "the old stable ego"[4] is felt to be threatened, for man is disoriented, plagued with feelings of scepticism, alienation, and with moral tiredness.

Partly because of these moral and ontological revolutions, the modern individual can no longer recognize his / her face in traditional (visual or written) representations. One's face and the feeling of one's face are truly deeply enshrined in the immediate historical *Zeitgeist*.

> Tout moderne [...] ne saurait ignorer qu'il ne cherche pas à cerner n'importe quel visage, mais le visage de son temps [...]. Il nous est impossible d'ignorer que le visage de notre temps est vide — partiellement, temporairement, définitivement, absolument selon les regards, mais dépourvu de tout, dépourvu de Tout tant que nous ne parvenons pas à le remplir d'une valeur. Je n'en veux pour preuve que le nombre étonnant de figures de la vacuité qui se rencontrent au hasard des déambulations, des lectures, des rêveries (Costantini 108).

For Michel Costantini, modern faces are necessarily conceptualized, and thus represented as reflections of the indeterminate (and, according to him, vacuous) thoughts of modernity.

To the staging of moral, ideological and, sometimes, ontological vacuity, many modern artists have preferred to emphasize movements of disintegration and fragmentation—the afflictions of civilisations. Such phenomena are blatantly at work

in the visual arts of the period which adopted fundamentally new techniques to re-present bodies and faces threatened with disintegration. Cubism and Expressionism started highlighting man's internal conflicts in resorting to techniques of fragmentation and violent juxtapositions of forms and colors.

The representation of faces in poetry and prose—modern or not—by nature fundamentally diverges from visual representations. In painting, photography or films, a face is present almost each time a human being is represented. But since a face cannot possibly be amputated (even when it is left blank, as in Malevitch's work for instance, the face *is* represented by its vacuity), in writing, it works differently. A writer's outlining of a character's face proceeds from a will to draw the reader's attention to that specific body part—while a face may be present in a painting and not attract the viewer's attention. To use Roland Barthes's phrase[5], the face might not be the *punctum*, that is to say, the first detail that draws the viewer's attention. However the linearity of the text compels the reader to come face-to-face with the description of the face.

Taking account of the historical, ideological and aesthetic situation during which Eliot wrote the earlier part of his poetic oeuvre, this article seeks to analyse the extent to which Eliotian faces partake in a process of reflection of the peculiar modernity in which they are inscribed. What do these faces reveal about the perception and concerns of the early twentieth-century individual?

With this question in mind, the first part of this study focuses on the representations of faces as potential indications of man's position in the modern universe. Attention then turns on the distorted and blank Eliotian faces as social and ontological symptoms. Such representations are eventually considered from a strictly poetic perspective as they are related to T.S. Eliot's theory of poetry.

I – Faces: Mirrors of man's position in the modern world

> "Ours is essentially a tragic age" (*Lady Chatterley's Lover*, D.H. Lawrence[6])

1- Post-Nietzschean faces

Before the revolution prompted by Nietzsche's announcement of the death of God, man was said to be made in the image of his Creator. In Genesis 1:26 one reads: "And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness." But if has God died, man still lives, unguided in a disoriented civilisation. Focusing on self-portraits, Michel Costantini raises this issue of the disappearance of the divine "model":

> Comment voulez vous alors qu'un peintre, un vrai peintre de notre temps s'intéresse encore [...] à sa propre figuration comme image de Celui à l'image de qui nous serions faits ? Que voulez vous que de la sainte Face il fasse ? (Costantini 93).

And Murielle Gagnebin asserts: "L'homme laid est l'homme qui a rompu avec Dieu [...]. C'est l'homme qui a cessé être le reflet de Dieu" (Gagnebin 95). Man is ugly when he has lost his "model."

Because the old harmony regulated by the divine hand is lost, the artist himself is now tasked with reconstructing man's face. The representation of contorted faces had formerly been an offence to God, as it blasphemed His image. Modern artists, however, if they wanted to be faithful to the shattered symbioses of their day, had no other choice but to revert to distortion. In "Morning at the Window" for instance, the Eliotian "I"-voice describes the sudden appearance of "twisted faces" from a hellish nowhere:

> The brown waves of fog toss up to me
> Twisted faces from the bottom of the street (ll.5-6, *CP* 27).

If Eliot distorts, he also fragments. No face in his poetry is described entirely, in detail. He repeatedly confronts the reader with fragments of faces only (often "eyes") or facial expressions (like "grins" and "smiles"). In "Rhapsody on a Windy Night," whose title foresees the idea of composition (as opposed to natural harmony), Eliot, when he summons a woman's face, combines fragmentary focus and distortion:

> [...] "Regard that woman
> Who hesitates towards you in the light of the door
> Which opens on her like a grin.
> You see the border of her dress

> Is torn and stained with sand,
> And you see the corner of her eye
> Twists like a crooked pin" (ll.16-22, *CP* 24).

Of "that woman"'s face, the reader sees not merely the eye but the distorted, metallic "corner of her eye." Facial distortion contaminates the nonhuman world as "the door" is compared to a "grin" and, later in the poem, the moon "winks a feeble eye" (l.62). Harmony, whether human, nonhuman or cosmic, is undergoing fragmentation and distortion. In another poem, "Mr. Appolinax," whose eponymous *persona* was made after Bertrand Russell when he was a visiting professor at Harvard, the idea of a collapsing physical and facial harmony is triggered by a quasi-surrealistic image:

> I looked for the head of Mr. Appolinax rolling under a
> chair
> Or grinning over a screen
> With seaweed in its hair (ll.13-5, *CP* 31).

The speaker imagines a head cut off from its body (as is verified by "its hair" instead of "*his* hair") and a distorted face. Thus de-humanised, Mr. Appolinax eventually mingles with organic matter, very far from being made in God's image. Such an imaginary beheading already occurs in "Prufrock," where the protagonist has a vision of himself: "though I have seen my head (grown slightly bald) brought in upon a platter..." (l.82, *CP* 15). Yet, as the concessive clause points out, this vision is not enough to turn Prufrock into a prophet, and he himself immediately blocks any such analysis: "I am no prophet – and here's no great matter" (l.83). Prufrock, as a post-Nietzschean subject, has nothing to "see," no hidden meaning intimated to him by God. The Godless modernity does not enable him to announce prophecies. His beheading is probably more "foresuffered" (to use Tiresias's term in *The Waste Land*) than foreseen. Another example, taken from "Whispers in Immortality," de-constructs the apparent harmony of man's face and head:

> Webster was much possessed by death
> And saw the skull beneath the skin (ll. 1-2, *CP* 52).

The elements ("skin" and "skull") of man's facial unquestioned consistency are split and exposed to the reader's eye.

Such a loss of unity as is suggested here, consequential in part to Nietzsche's announcement of the death of God—the "model" of creation—, finds tangible expression in early twentieth-century painting too. But along with strictly religious concerns, several scientific advances led to a shift in sensibility and means of

perception: the development of X-ray by Roentgen in 1895 made the exploration of man's body possible (it enables to see "the skull beneath the skin"); this was, at another level, later doubled by Freud's theory of the unconscious. In 1905, Einstein exposed his theory of relativity and proved the existence of a fourth dimension. The old harmony is thenceforth completely overturned and a new perceptual understanding of man and of the world begins to thrive. Picasso, in his portraits of Dora Maar for instance, well renders this deep awareness of a loss of unity. He deconstructs the traditional representation of faces. This "disintegration of the human image" by "impressionism, cubism and futurism" (O'Connor 221) suggests, among other things, a dying (or already extinguished) spirituality. The spiritual harmony evoked by the former unity of the face (which Georg Simmel had thought eternal[7]) is in truth substantially dismantled.

If, not unlike some painters of his time, Eliot recurrently twists faces, one may actually notice a change when the poet, after a long period of religious doubt and scepticism, converts to Anglo-Catholicism (in 1927). From that moment on, as he enters a form of religious stability, the distorted faces of the pre-conversion period somehow disappear from his poetry. In *Ash-Wednesday* (1930) the face that turns up on several occasions is significantly inspired by the idealised veiled face of Dante's Beatrice. Later, in *Four Quartets*, faces vanish:

> See, now they vanish,
> the faces and places, with the self which, as it could, loved
> them
> to become renewed, transfigured, in another pattern
> ("Little Gidding", III, ll.14-6, *CP* 195).

If certain occurrences are still related to uneasiness ("strained time-ridden faces"), the pain and unease they suggest is trivial in comparison with those conveyed by the "twisted" faces of the earlier stages of Eliot's poetry. The restoration of the poet's ties with God subtly surfaces in his representations of appeased faces.

2- Post-Darwinian faces

In 1859, with the publication of *The Origin of the Species*, Charles Darwin struck another blow to man's conception of his nature and position in the universe.

Thenceforth definitely no longer a descendent of God, man is told that he shares an undeniable number of physical features with animals. The Great Chain of Beings is overthrown as man's characteristics are now inscribed in a continuum with animal species.

The animalisation of the "other"'s face is not rare in modern literature—Joseph Conrad's novels provide interesting illustrations—, an inclination which has on several occasions been considered as precursory of impending racist ideologies. But analogies between man's face and animal features had been drawn at least since the eighteenth century. It was then intensified by the publication, in 1890, of Darwin's *Expression of the Emotions*. Darwin, for instance, asserts that when a man sneers and shows his canine teeth,

> it reveals his animal descent [...]. We may readily believe from our affinity to the anthropomorphous apes that our male semi-human progenitors possessed great canine teeth [...]. Our semi-human progenitors uncovered their canine teeth when prepared for battle, as we still do when feeling ferocious, or when merely sneering at or defying some one (Darwin 194).

And Darwin, in his conclusion on facial expressions, stresses the innate constitutional link between man and animal:

> We have seen that the study of the theory of expression confirms to a certain limited extent the conclusion that man is derived from some lower animal form, and supports the belief of the specific or sub-specific unity of the several races (Darwin 285).

In "Sweeney among the Nightingales" the main protagonist puts forth animal physiognomy:

> Apeneck Sweeney spreads his knees
> Letting his arms hang down to laugh,
> The zebra stripes along his jaw
> Swelling to maculate giraffe (ll.1-4, *CP* 56-7).

The reader is almost a witness to the *persona*'s metamorphosis into an animal. A sense of grotesque proceeds from the heterogeneity of Apeneck's face ("ape," "zebra," "giraffe" and man) and from the animality contained in his first name.

Though rather few, there are other occurrences of facial animal features in Eliot's poetry, like "bats with baby faces in the violet light" (l.379, *CP* 73) in *The Waste Land*. The hybridization thence produced—doubled by the "in-between" luminosity

of the “violet hour”—appears as a combination of the anthropomorphism of the “bats” with the zoomorphism of “babies.” More than in Sweeney's case, a sinister disgust is aroused by this unexpected encounter, especially by the coexistence of the terror suggested by the “bats” and the innocence of the “babies”. Another episode in *The Waste Land* introduces animality on a man's face. The passage from “The Fire Sermon” depicts the repeated visits of a young clerk to the typist's apartment where they have “undesired” (l.238) and mechanical sexual intercourse. The young clerk:

> Endeavours to engage her in caresses
> Which still are unreproved, if undesired.
> Flushed and decided, he assaults at once (ll.238-240, *CP* 68).

The young man's face is “flushed”[8] and the verb “assault” retrospectively incites the reader to see such blushing as the physical translation of the protagonist's animal instinct. His face unveils the animal nature of the sexual act. This transient image is enough to picture the encounter of man and animal features on the sinister background of salacious, sinister sexuality.

Even though they are quite scarce, the grafts of animal features on Eliotian faces are almost invariably designed to disclose the grotesque and disgusting aspects of man's innate animal descent. Unlike others of his generation, like D.H. Lawrence for instance, who repeatedly endeavored to make modern readers aware of their close ties with animal nature, thus highlighting man's instinctive nature, Eliot handled such links (when he did) on a derogatory or grotesque note. He seems to be intimating that man's innate animality does not deserve to be rescued. It is grotesque, uncontrollable, disgusting. Michel Blay, in his Bergsonian analysis of the early twentieth-century man's condition as being “closed” in a highly mechanical and technical dynamic, asserts that man, despite Darwinian writings and their consequences, has eventually cut himself off from organic and animal nature:

> L'homme a donc parcouru un long chemin sur la route de l'évolution puisque, porté par l'élan vital, il a abandonné le végétal et l'animal (Blay 29).

It remains somewhat uncertain whether Eliot reverts to the evocation of such disconnections in order to make the reader react to the tragic situation, or, on the contrary, so as to express his idea that, as Blay proposes, modern man has irrevocably “gone much further” than his initial animal nature. What seems obvious,

however, is Eliot's uneasiness with animality when hybridized with humanity, as though the former were dangerously contaminating the latter.

An ultimate case of peculiar (counter-factual) zoomorphism deserves attention, when “Prufrock” wishes he had been a pair of claws:

> I should have been a pair of ragged claws
> Scuttling across the floors of silent seas (ll.73-4, *CP* 15).

In expressing such a regret, Prufrock is voicing his wish for his face's disappearance. The mental projection of his synecdochical metamorphosis into a lower scale animal is therefore readable as the expression of a quasi-suicidal desire to see his face—the locus of his identity—vanish. Like in the previous examples, animality threatens the stability and harmony of man's integrity and identity.

If Eliot's representations of faces in his poetry have (consciously or not) been more or less affected by the main religious and biological questions of the turn of the century, what seems to have been even more pregnantly influential is the immediate tangible world plagued with the traumatic impact of the Great War.

3- Early twentieth-century faces of desolation

No war before the Great War had been so much driven by technical innovation and mechanical devices, almost to the point of using human flesh as pieces of machinery[9]. Such innovations surely altered man's conception of his own self and of his own body.

T.S. Eliot, unlike other poets of his generation like Wilfred Owen for instance, is anything but what is commonly understood as a “war poet.” However, though he was never sent to the front, in his poetry— and notably through faces—the psychic and physical terrors of the war period tend to show up.

The examples of the corner of a woman's eye that twists painfully as though to hook the reader with its “crooked pin,” and the “twisted faces” that surge up like uncanny appearances “from the bottom of the street,” are enough to subtly render the violence of the atmosphere. In “Humoresque” as well, a poem written in youth, Eliot draws attention to his dead marionette's “mouth twisted to the latest tune” (l.10, *CP* 602). If faces are no longer made in God's image, they are also distorted by

immediate circumstances, even by music. The dead marionette, before that, produces "a dull grimace":

> But this deceasèd marionette
> I rather liked: a common face,
> (The kind of face that we forget)
> Pinched in a comic, dull grimace (ll.5-8, *CP* 602).

The piece of cloth and wood is "pinched" in an oxymoronic grimace, both "comic" *and* "dull," as though the only form of comedy now possible were necessarily belittled or even cut short by tediousness. Even toys which are supposed to be entertaining show distorted facial features.

Twisted facial expressions and grimaces are pregnantly evocative of a deep unease. Just as the war disturbs the peaceful situation of nations and offends the enemy, the grimace challenges the natural peace of a face at rest and is often meant as an insult to or an assault on the other it is facing.

In *The Waste Land*, a scene in a pub stages a face-to-face conversation between Lil and her friend (the "I"-voice). Lil listens to the other woman's blaming her for not taking care of herself before the return of her husband from the war:

> Now Albert's coming back, make yourself a bit smart
> He'll want to know what you done with that money he gave you
> To get yourself some teeth. He did, I was there,
> He said, I swear, I can't bear to look at you
> And no more can't I, I said, and think of poor Albert,
> He's been in the army four years, he wants a good time,
> And if you don't give it him, there's others will, I said.
> Oh is there, she said. Something o' that, I said.
> Then I'll know who to thank, she said, and give me a straight look.
> HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME
> If you don't like it, you can get on with it, I said.
> Others can pick and choose if you can't.
> But if Albert makes off, it won't be for lack of telling.
> You ought to be ashamed, I said, to look so antique.
> (And her only thirty-one.)
> I can't help it, she said, pulling a long face.
> It's them pills I took, to bring it off, she said.
> (She's had five already, and nearly died of young George.)
> The chemist said it would be all right, but I've never been the same.
> You *are* a proper fool, I said... (ll.139-62, *CP* 66).

A strained atmosphere is conveyed by this scene unequivocally contextualised in the midst of the Great War. Lil's decaying teeth fragment her face. Albert expressed

disgust at his wife's face ("I can't bear to look at you";) Lil's friend imparts that she herself feels offended by such a decaying spectacle ("And no more can't I") and Lil's face is further distorted as she "pull[s] a long face" and, at the very end the passage, when called "a proper fool," she is pictured as wearing a sort of buffoon's grimacing face.

The immediate world fragmented by war, the fragmentary nature of the verbal exchanges and Lil's fragmentary mouth and distorted face, all converge to build up a scene of utmost moral and physical desolation. The ravages of war are not held at bay. They are recentered in the protagonist's face, into her mouth.

Grins, also, appear on several occasions and partake in the suggestion of a pervasive uneasiness. Referred to earlier, the light opens on the woman "like a grin" ("Rhapsody on a Windy Night"). "Mr. Appolinax"'s head is imagined "grinning over a screen." In "Whispers of Immortality," the reader comes face-to-face with the terrifying image of "breastless creatures under ground / Leaned backward with a lipless grin" (ll.3-4, *CP* 52). The reader is in fact more repelled by the mutilated mouth that produces the grin than by the grin itself. In "Sweeney among the Nightingales," one comes across the oxymoronic hypallage, "a golden grin" (l.32, *CP* 57).

One may assume that all these examples of "grins" and grimaces which suggest suffering, uneasiness, awkwardness and can be read as signs of inner turmoil and unrest, would be positively counterbalanced by the various occurrences of "smiles." Yet, none of these "smiles" is positively connoted.

In "Rhapsody on a Windy Night" the moon "winks a feeble eye / Smiles into corners" (ll.62-3, *CP* 25). "Feeble" belittles the frankness of the smile which is further reduced by its being limited to "corners." In "Morning at the Window," in the midst of "the twisted faces," there passes "an aimless smile that hovers in the air / And vanishes..." (ll.8-9, *CP* 27). The "smile" has lost its pregnancy. David Le Breton explains that, for the most, "smiles" partly depend on an established code:

> Le sourire et le rire sont les expressions d'une ritualité [...]. Ils appartiennent à un univers de significations [...]. Leur apparition ne relève pas du hasard, mais repose sur des conditions sociales (Le Breton 126).

This random smile is therefore de-ritualised, dis-connected from the system of meaning in which it should be partaking, and it thus discloses the loose ties that now precariously hold the macrocosm together. It is a signifier that is escaping its significance.

In "Portrait of a Lady" the fragility of the "smile" surfaces as the poem stages a scene in which a lady rambles on while her uneasy male visitor makes silent comments.

> "[...] Youth is cruel, and has no more remorse
> And smiles at situations which it cannot see."
> I smile of course,
> And go on drinking tea (ll.48-51, *CP* 19).

The lady attributes "smiles" to "cruel" youth, hence (consciously or not) stressing the latter's cynicism and ignorance. Then, with "I smile of course," the male protagonist, besides signalling the forced—or automatic—nature of his smile (as is underlined by "of course"), by analogy includes himself among those "cruel youth." Thus subtly intertwined with "cruelty" and falsehood, the usual benevolent nature of the smile is substantially deflated. Later in the poem, this trend is carried further when the male figure, who all along, confronted to the woman's torrent of words, has been attempting to remain "self-composed", suddenly "flares up": "My smile falls heavily among the bric-à-brac" (l.92, *CP* 20). His smiles ends up being one fragment among others, a fragmentation poetically reflected in the succession of three monosyllabic terms, two of which with plosive consonants. This facial and prosodic accident reveals the *persona*'s state of anxiety.

Eliot finds still another way to suggest desolation. In "Rhapsody on a Windy Night," the moon suffers from "small-pox": "The moon has lost her memory. / A washed-out smallpox cracks her face" (ll. 65-6, *CP* 25)—with "crack" placing emphasis on the dryness of the demolition. In *The Waste Land*, the flushing clerk who makes assault on the typist is introduced as "the young man carbuncular" (l.231, *CP* 68). Both faces bear ostentatious symptoms of the diseased civilisation in which they evolve. But as with grotesque images like "bats with baby faces" or the "golden grin," the reader's reaction to these unexpected faces may waver between profound disgust and surprise, even humour. In both cases, it is the distance towards these diseased faces that triggers the reader's reaction: (s)he is either repelled by disgust

(distance from sanity) or amused by the anomalous faces (distance from normality). And yet, the distance is painfully reduced because what Eliot shows through these infectious faces is the very immediacy of the modern reader's world and situation.

Probably more obviously related to psychological reactions to the Great War is a prose-poem significantly entitled "Hysteria." The "I," a male figure, is enthralled by a woman's laugh, "the single laughing woman in Eliot" (Pinkney 21).

> As she laughed I was aware of becoming involved in her laughter and being part of it, until her teeth were only accidental stars with a talent for squad-drill. I was drawn in by short gasps, inhaled at each momentary recovery, lost finally in the dark caverns of her throat, bruised by the ripple of unseen muscles. An elderly waiter with trembling hands was hurriedly spreading a pink and white checked cloth over the rusty green iron table, saying: "If the lady and gentleman wish to take their tea in the garden..." I decided that if the shaking of her breasts could be stopped, some of the fragments of the afternoon might be collected, and I concentrated my attention with careful subtlety to this end (*CP* 32).

The "I" intrudes into the face through the breaches caused by the woman's folly: her mouth is wide open and offers an entrance to the male protagonist who is then breathed in as she "gasps." He pictures himself in the inner country of the woman's face. This adventure is nevertheless cut short: the "cavern of her throat" is "dark," revealing nothing, muscles are "unseen" and the "I" is "lost." Depths are unfathomable. Not unlike the mythical Medusa, the Eliotian terrifying face has a petrifying effect on the male speaker who, forcing his attention on another object, however manages not to be caught in her snare. For Tony Pinkney though, this obscure face is not a sort of Gorgo but rather the image of a threatening "voracious and cannibalistic vagina" (Pinkney 19), "a *vagina dentata*" (*ibid* 20). And though at first willing to penetrate it, the male protagonist fears the dispersion of his ego and thus chooses to hold himself in check. The bellicosity that emanates from the two-fold confrontation—intersubjective and intrasubjective—is semantically reactivated when her teeth are depicted as "accidental stars with a talent for squad-drill." Her mouth is turned into a war battlefield on which the male "I" is psychologically "bruised" and shocked. This subtle analogy is especially eloquent as questions

around female hysteria were raised again at that precise time when soldiers were found to be afflicted with "shell-shock."[10] Peter Childs explains:

> Shell-schock posed the greatest questions to British psychiatry in the 1920s. The expression was first used by C.S. Myers in 1915, and the world's popularity with doctors may well have had something to do with its contrast to the term "hysteria," usually then reserved for women (Childs 164).

This Eliotian scene, therefore, seems to be transferring the international conflict into a psychological one. The woman's terrifying laugh is heard as a cry—the cry that tears the surface of her face but also echoes the terrifying contemporaneous mass of sounds caused by a massive, mechanised war. Michel Blay beautifully depicts the machines of war in the process of reducing humanity to an everlasting "cry":

> Elles tuent frénétiquement avec le bruit incessant, grinçant, grisant et rythmé des mitrailleuses, dans l'assourdissante explosion de shrapnells qui empoigne, dans le déversement anonyme des gaz asphyxiants […]. Des fantômes d'hommes courant, gesticulant, ne sont plus que des cris sans corps, des corps explosés, anéantis, des cris [...]. Rien, l'humanité n'est plus qu'un cri tendu où la modernité rêvée des peintres [...] s'effondre dans le fracas même de ce cri ; *une bouche ouverte* où cependant il faudra bien, plus tard, y lire l'ultime voix qui fait que le chant de l'humanité est toujours possible (Blay 86-7, my emphasis).

The violence of war as mediated by facial representations is also perceptible in *The Waste Land* when Eliot introduces the mythological figure of Philomela. The latter is represented on a wall in the opening scene of "A Game of Chess":

> Above the antique mantel was displayed
> As though a window gave upon the sylvan scene
> The change of Philomel, by the barbarous king
> So rudely forced; yet there the nightingale
> Filled all the desert with inviolable voice (ll. 98-101, *CP* 64).

Eliot borrows from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* which tells the Greek myth of Philomela's ordeal. After raping Philomela, King Tereus—her brother-in-law—cuts out her tongue in order to prevent her from revealing the truth. She is eventually transformed into a nightingale and is then able to flee and escape his rage. With the introduction of the figure of Philomela, Eliot inserts the image of a mangled face, of the mutilation of an inner organ of the head—a mutilation that can still be concealed

behind the face. If, truly enough, as in "Hysteria," violence occurs against the backdrop of a man-woman confrontation, in this scene one may also read the mythical version of the immediate violence of the war and its consequences, like the soldiers' butchered corpses[11].

Still in *The Waste Land*, in a scene which stages a neurasthenic woman (another pathology,) one comes across another type of mutilation which, like the "lipless grin" pointed out earlier, arouses disgust and unease. The woman talks nonsense and convokes the image of "lidless eyes":

> The hot water at ten.
> And if it rains, a closed car at four.
> And we shall play a game of chess,
> Pressing lidless eyes and waiting for a knock upon the door (ll.135-8, *CP* 65).

Though possibly a means for Eliot to express an extremely acute sense of vision, the image remains fraught with ideas of mutilation.

A sense of crisis then shows in numerous Eliotian faces. They reveal what Anne Wright sees as "the accelerating deterioration in the quality of life" in modern western societies; and they express the "madness, heartbreak and violence" that are "endemic" in their contemporaneous modern world (Wright 3). Wright goes further when she more clearly exposes what she means by the "crises" which plague early twentieth-century modernity: "crisis is the distant or imminent threat of cataclysmic disruption of the familiar" (Wright 3). In leading the faces to the verge of disruption, but never to their complete disruption (since some features have to be preserved for the face to be recognisable), Eliot is inflicting a sense of modern crisis to his poetic faces. For modern men who are used to seeing their face reflected in mirrors and photographs, the familiar is suddenly made strange, anomalous, by Eliot's poetic representations. The integrity of man's identity, which partly finds its location in the face, is threatened.

As a last example of facially expressed desolation, one may quote one of the several weeping faces encountered in Eliot's oeuvre. The poem "A Cooking Egg" ends on an image of a weeping crowd in a diner:

> Over buttered scones and crumpets
> Weeping, weeping multitudes
> Droop in a hundred A.B.C.'s (ll. 31-3, *CP* 45).

"Multitudes," "hundred," the repetition of "weeping" and "droop" concur to produce a sense of profound heaviness and contaminating demoralisation. Grief is not an individual but a collective experience—though not a shared experience, as a sense of fragmentation is elicited in the image of multitudes scattered in a hundred places whose name ("A.B.C's"), too, suggests disconnection, each letter, like tears "over buttered scones and crumpets," falling one by one on the page. This image fairly reveals the anxiety of the age, a generalized ordeal yet endured individually, "each in his prison" (*The Waste Land*, l.413, *CP* 74).

If Eliot, in thus recentering so many images of weak, hideous, grotesque and sometimes repugnant human faces, is handing a mirror to the effects of the immediate historical environment, one must keep in mind that such poetic focus on ugliness was, of course, existing before the period of the Great War. With "twisted faces," "the young man carbuncular," "washed-out small-pox," "bats with baby faces," Apeneck Sweeney with his jaw "swelling to maculate giraffe," or even Lil and her poor teeth, T.S. Eliot is more or less inscribing himself as an heir to Baudelaire. For the nineteenth-century French poet, human ugliness was a mystery that now deserved to be exploited and potentially analysed. Ugliness and disgust became the focus (and at times, the themes[12]) of his poetry: they were shocking in so far as they introduced what had so far not been expected to be found in poems. Hugo Friedrich summarises Baudelaire's impact on poetry as such: "Avec plus de force que jamais l'a-normalité se proclame désormais le propos même de la poésie moderne" (Friedrich 56). Poetry is renewed by the introduction, at its core, of the banal, the hideous, the grotesque, the hybridisation. In a poem entitled "Le Masque," Baudelaire perceives an "exquise grimace" in the masked face. This double distortion—facial and also semantic with the oxymoronic collocation—reappears, as we have seen, in Eliot's "golden grin." Such poetic and artistic enthusiasm for ugliness and distortion at the turn of the century was, according to Murielle Gagnebin, a means to be true, to seek—and potentially find—truth, and to do justice to reality (Gagnebin 51). Ugliness is no longer a mistake of nature but simply its truth. And for that specific reason, in certain areas and aspects of modern art and

poetry, one discerns “la quête d'un art volontairement orienté vers la laideur” (Gagnebin 153).

T.S. Eliot's strength is to connect man's ugliness to the world in which it is staged. The connection is established through echoes, but also through metaphors that employ facial parts as vehicles. As has already been quoted, the moon's face is showing human disease (“A washed-out small-pox cracks her face”): man's ailment is projected onto the cosmos, imparting that, in the modern world, both man and cosmos have entered a process of deterioration. In “What the Thunder Said,” the dryness of the land makes mountains suffer as it would thirsty human beings: “dead mountain mouth of carious teeth that cannot spit” (l.349, *CP* 72). With its metaphorical teeth, this geological face—a conjunction of death, ailment and impotence—brings the reader back to the *persona* of Lil who loses her teeth after having undergone either an abortion or a miscarriage: “I can't help it, she said, pulling a long face. / It's them pills I took, to bring it off, she said. / (She's had five already, and nearly died of young George).” Lil and mountains are brought together by their teeth and death. Both are, in a same fashion, collapsing, dying, drying out. This device reappears in “The Hollow Men” with “In this hollow valley / This broken jaw of our lost kingdom” (ll.55-6, *CP* 84). Both “valley” and “men” are hollow and the face of the world is breaking down and almost animalised. As a final example, we may quote a passage from *Ash-Wednesday*: “the stair was dark / Damp, jaggèd, like an old man's mouth drivelling” (III, ll.9-10, *CP* 93), image which more or less refers back to the *persona* of “Gerontion,” who, in fact, is hardly more than “an old man's mouth drivelling”: “Here I am, an old man in a dry month” (l.1, *CP* 37).

All in all what is suggested is that the ugly, collapsing and diseased Eliotian faces are immersed in an ugly, collapsing and diseased immediate environment. Human and non-human are caught together in an irrepressible process of disfigurement.

Eliot's representations of faces or fragments of faces are, so to say, a window to his *Zeitgeist*. The old harmony is lost and superseded by a world of trauma. Man is disoriented, no longer made in God's image and (though quite reluctantly with Eliot)

is forced, when facing his own face, to admit his kinship with animal nature. But the Eliotian faces seem to be expressing more than just man's significantly shattered position in the cosmos as well as his terrors and anxieties felt as a witness to, or an actor of, the most violent war spectacle ever staged. When closely analysed, those faces, though never exhaustively decipherable, are nonetheless readable as social and ontological symptoms. How can modern men face one another? How are faces perceived (and mentally conceived) in modern society? What does Eliot tell the reader about modern ontology when the faces he outlines are blank or represented in a homogeneous flow?

II- Closed and blank faces: social and ontological signs

1- Facing the other

In the western world, one exhibits one's face, defenceless, interposing no intermediary between the self and the other. According to the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, one's face worries, disturbs, asks questions to the other. It is therefore not seen as a frontier that encloses the self but rather as a means of openness. The face offers itself in its nudity and welcomes the other and, because of this very nudity, is made vulnerable and incites the other to murder. But the highly paradoxical nature of the face (as Levinas understands it) is that, along with this principle of opening and invitation to murder, the face is also a primal injunction imposed on the other: the biblical order, “thou shalt not kill.” For Levinas, this is precisely the “meaning” of the face: a vulnerable invitation to murder *and* a prohibition from murdering. For this reason, the philosopher chooses the face as a fundamental element in the articulation of his theory of ethics. The face of the other judges me and reminds me of my duty and responsibility towards him / her. It questions my spontaneity as it bursts into the enclosed “*embourgeoisement*”[13] of my self. In the mean time, I must answer the other and meet his / her requirements. The other's face is both supplicant (for my benevolent action) and highly demanding and deontic; it is both my inferior and my tyrant; and it can never be possessed by me as the face's otherness is irreducible. Freedom and even transcendence are prompted by these facial ethical exchanges.

As a consequence, disfiguring has no other meaning than murdering and, for Levinas, the face provides the sole and most powerful weapon with which to murder: "L'altérité qui s'exprime dans le visage fournit l'unique « matière » possible à la négation totale" (Levinas 216). When one's "ethical resistance"[14] yields, the ethical contract established by the face-to-face situation is violated, and the other's very *being*[15] is annihilated. A defaced face loses its integrity which has been spoilt by the violent actor. Apprehended against this moral-ethical backdrop, face-to-face encounters staged by T.S. Eliot all seem to be working the other way round, that is, on a principle of closure.

Marta Sinicka draws our attention to the peculiar types of social relations emerging in this period of desolation, relations which derive from the increasing tendency of modern men to verge on "loneliness and isolation" (Sinicka 87). Facing and dealing with others have become a constraint as the old human communion is gradually melting away. The weakening of a common religion—among other things, like doubts and ontological questions—has substantially dissolved the hitherto strong social and moral ties of common creeds. This sense of fragmentation of the notion of group and of social (and hence moral) exchanges is quite pregnant in T.S. Eliot's poetry. Because, as Marta Sinicka firmly asserts, "the impossibility of vital social experience is characteristic of modern man" (Sinicka 88), the latter has turned his back on collectivity and has fallen into a private world, exclusively nourished by his intimate experiences, thoughts and memory: he has got his self enclosed within himself[16]. If Levinas conceives the face as a means of openness and exchange, the modernity that surfaces in Eliot's early poetry seems to be going against this principle. Eliot's faces tend to thwart intersubjective communication.

"Prufrock" illustrates the difficulty for a modern individual to adopt a social and moral posture before the other, markedly as he expresses his awareness of being "solidified" by the others' eyes—acting almost like Gorgo:

> And I have known the eyes already, known them all—
> Eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase,
> And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin,
> When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall,
> Then how should I begin
> To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways?
> And how should I presume? (ll.55-61, *CP* 14-5).

This petrifaction of the other's face into a formula has nothing of the liberating virtue suggested by Levinas. Rather, it constrains Prufrock.

Apparently deeply aware of this judging and shaping principle (my face is made by the others who look at it[17]), Prufrock, on several occasions, expresses uneasiness and even ontological fears.

> There will be time, there will be time
> To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet (ll.26-7, *CP* 14).

Prufrock here imparts his fear of offering the nudity of his face to the other. He therefore inscribes face-to-face encounters in a sort of ritual, while "there will be time"—self-reflected by its repetition—procrastinates the ritualised preparation of his face, as though he shunned the moment of encounter (and this distancing is all the more emphasised by the use of "you" instead of "I").

Prufrock's anxiety of exhibiting the nudity of his face has before that been hinted at when he fancies the comments the others might make on his increasingly scattered hair:

> And indeed there will be time
> To wonder, "Do I dare?" and, "Do I dare?"
> Time to turn back and descend the stair,
> With a bald spot in the middle of my hair—
> (They will say: "How his hair is growing thin!") (ll. 37-41, *CP* 14).

With this apparently marginalised parenthetical comment, isn't Prufrock betraying a fear of exposing his now hardly protected head to others' eyes? He later tackles the issue again: "Shall I part my hair behind?" (l.22, *CP* 14). His anxiety to let go, to be himself before the other, is also expressed in his way of constricting the upper part of his body with stiff items of clothing:

> My morning coat, my collar mounting firmly to the chin
> My necktie rich and modest, but asserted by a simple pin—
> (ll.42-3, *CP* 14).

His face is firmly constrained and he is thus attempting to adopt a social *persona* as he holds in check the locus of his identity.

The convergence of Prufrock's doubts ("shall I part my hair behind?"), procrastination ("there will be time") and rigid elaboration of a social *persona* when it comes to confront one's face to the face of the other, lead Christopher Butler to

assert that "Prufrock is incapable of facing up a very conventional social situation" (Butler 104). According to this same critic, Eliot's *persona* is torn between, on the one hand, the firmness of moral judgements and, on the other hand, the modern tendency to promote a new psychology at the expense of moral responsibility. Caught in a double-bind situation, Prufrock seems to be failing on both sides: his fragmented discourse reveals his highly unsteady psychological state (often considered schizophrenic by critics) and his physical attitude (as it surfaces in his discourse) makes almost clear that he literally shuns social judgements.

This fear of social and moral judgement, as more or less tangibly embodied in facial attitudes or comments about faces, appears elsewhere in Prufrock's monologue and in other poems. Prufrock, in his mental wandering, points out the pretence which, as he seems to be suggesting, is more often than not what motivates the smile:

> Would it have been worth while,
> To have bitten off the matter with a smile (ll.90-1, *CP* 15).

Left typographically unmarked, Prufrock's interrogation appears more as a comment on the common deceptive nature of the smile than as a genuine question. But in dismissing the smile in a counterfactual context ("*would* it have been...") he eschews potential blames of hypocrisy. He comments on a facial expression which he did not dare to show.

In "Portrait of a Lady," the moral questioning emerges in relation to smiling as well. The male protagonist imagines that one day soon the lady whom he is facing might die:

> Well! and what if she should die some afternoon
> Afternoon grey and smoky, evening yellow and rose;
> Should die and leave me sitting pen in hand
> With the smoke coming down above the housetops;
> Doubtful for a while
> Not knowing what to feel or if I understand
> Or whether wise or foolish, tardy or too soon...
> [...]
> And should I have the right to smile? (ll.14-24, *CP* 21).

Smiling, like for Prufrock, is therefore not comprehended as a natural facial expression. In the case of Prufrock, it is introduced as a pretence, and here, as a "right" that one should be granted on specific occasions. In Lil's passage, ethical dimensions are also ascribed to the face. The "I" voice tells Lil: "You ought to be

ashamed, I said, to look so antique," with both "ought to" and "ashamed" bringing moral and social notions into the scene.

These examples of Eliotian faces, which raise questions left unanswered or express a duty to respect the moral and social codes, evince deep uneasiness and now and then disclose a fear of being judged by one's face. Prufrock, in procrastinating face-to-face encounters, dodges social and moral judgements; the male *persona* in "Portrait of a Lady" is cautious and asks for permission before smiling; and Lil's co-speaker dictates what "ought to" be felt when one's face disrupts social peace.

This feeling of a risk of offending is translated more pregnantly when, still in "Portrait of a Lady," the male *persona* fights against his own self in order to remain impassive before the Lady's flow of words. Unlike "Prufrock" who raises questions prior to a social confrontation, the *persona does* face the lady (and her unsubtle allusions and disturbing propositions) but neither opens to her nor offers the nudity of his face. However, as the poem goes on, his self-possession gradually weakens:

> I keep my countenance
> I remain self possessed (ll.77-8, *CP* 20)
>
> "Perhaps you can write to me."
> My self-possession flares up for a second (ll.93-4, *CP* 20)
>
> My self-possession gutters; we are really in the dark (l.101, *CP* 21).

Fearing to lose face, he wants to "possess" his own self. His face is closed and encloses his self within, cutting his identity from the ethical exchange. David Le Breton defines impassibility as a controlled form of autism: "L'impassibilité devient une exigence de tous les instants, une stratégie pour survivre, une forme d'autisme contrôlé au coeur même du lien social" (Le Breton 260). The male *persona* keeps the nudity of his face covered, with high difficulties, till, at the end, his "self-possession gutters." As soon as he no longer "possesses" his self, the scene shifts to "dark," a metaphorical darkness which acts as a new veil to cover the nudity of his face.

In Eliot's early poetry, face-to-face situations could be read as symptomatic of an anxiety to expose the nudity of one's face to the other's view. Such a paralyzing unease encloses the face and spoils the intersubjective exchange. The connection

between individuals is lost. "Hysteria" actually provides an interesting illustration: there is no exchange between the male speaker and the hysterical woman's face. If somehow fascinated by her hysterical laugh, he is terrified, "inhaled" and "bruised." While Levinas highlights the dual nature of the face-to-face situation, insisting on the face as both supplicating and deontic, in Eliot's poem the male *persona* seems to be apprehending the sole deontic nature of the woman's face. He has to struggle in order not to submit entirely.

2- Age and alienation

Prufrock's anxiety about showing the nudity of his head naturally corresponds to the anxiety of age and of the others' seeing his age on his face. Facial deterioration is not merely physical, it is not only a gradual collapse of facial features or hair loss. It also corresponds to the disfigurement of one's identity. The young and adult face stands for a "reference" which, with time, alters: "Le vieillessement ressemble à un mal qui ronge le visage de référence" (Le Breton 174).

Prufrock's constant expression of his unease with the idea of others' witnessing his physical decay (he mentions his "head (grown slightly bald)" (l.82), the "bald spot in the middle of [his] hair," his hair "growing thin") discloses his distress over his declining power of seduction. In "Gerontion" the *persona*, whose name is obviously related to old age, points out the loss of his senses, four of which exclusively located on the face:

> I have lost my sight, smell, hearing, taste and touch:
> How should I use them for your closer contact? (ll.59-60, *CP* 38).

The precipitated ageing, poetically conveyed by the intensified rhythm of the first of these quoted lines, shuts Gerontion's face from the rest of the world. Facial "contacts" are extensively undermined as face-to-face *exchanges* are made impossible.

Such an accelerated ageing exposed to view by facial functions or features is also at work in the line quoted several times already: "you ought to be ashamed to look so antique" (addressed to Lil). Lil's teeth—like Prufrock's hair—precipitate her towards old age, as is clearly pointed out by the hyperbolic use of "antique"—while she is "only thirty one" (ll.60-1, *CP* 66).

In one of Eliot's French poems, "Dans le Restaurant," ageing once again shows on the face of a protagonist. The poem functions as a succession of intermingling voices and thus renders the atmosphere of a noisy restaurant:

> Mais alors, vieux lubrique, à cet âge...
> « Monsieur, le fait est dur.
> Il est venu, nous peloter, un gros chien ;
> Moi j'avais peur, je l'ai quitté à mi-chemin.
> C'est dommage ».
> Mais alors, tu as ton vautour!
> *Va t'en te décrotter les rides du visage ;*
> Tiens, ma fourchette, décrasse-toi le crâne. (ll. 15-22, CP 51, my emphasis).

This image which metaphorically covers the wrinkled face with mud or, worse, excrements, arouses disgust and envisages facial ageing in almost scatological terms. Echoing Bottom in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, face and behind are mixed.

In these examples, getting old, as it is revealed or suggested by altering facial features, is experienced as one's withdrawal from one's own self. The ageing of the physical locus of identity (the "reference") is, in a sense, a dispossession.

If age alienates Eliotian *personae* from their faces and from others, such feelings of self-alienation are quite symptomatic of the period. David Chinitz even declares that modern culture is afflicted by the "twin plagues of skepticism and alienation" (Chinitz 80). It is not simply time going by that tears man out of his "reference", but also the immediate historical and ideological context. There reappears, then, the difference pointed out in the introduction between "having" and "being" a face, as some of Eliot's *personae* seem neither to "be" nor to "incarnate" their faces, and, on several occasions, when they "have" a face, the possession is obviously threatened.

In "Portrait of a Lady" again, the man who, though constantly reminding the reader that he "possesses" his self, betrays his feeling of alienation from his face:

> I feel like one who smiles, and turning shall remark
> Suddenly his expression in a glass (ll.99-100, *CP* 21).

The simile breaks the identity between "I" and "the one who smiles." The *persona* then "has" a face and is distanced from it – a distance immediately corroborated by "his." This type of discrepancy between *persona* and smile transiently appears, though quite differently, in "Morning at the Window" when one comes across the "aimless smile" mentioned earlier. In both examples, the facial sign is alienated from

the individual who produces it. Following Richard Sheppard, who places such a feeling at the heart of modernity— "a sense of dispossession, of not being at home, is central to the modernist experience" (Sheppard 60) —one may once again read in these specific orphaned smiles the allusion to a much broader modern situation, much generalised feeling of alienation specific to this period—as the Expressionist painters have shown, for instance, in projecting "an alienated self onto the environment, painting the way the reality felt, not the way it looked" (Childs 119).

This passage from "being" to "having" and to nearly "losing" one's face necessarily gradually deprives faces of personal features. What appear then, and this is patent in some of Eliot's poems, are masses of homogeneous and anonymous faces.

3 – Anonymity, homogeneity, passivity

Twentieth-century urbanisation significantly altered the position of the individual. Far from generating interrelationships, as in the nineteenth century, the city encouraged a sort of de-humanised individualisation. Christopher Butler analyses:

> The great city [...] threatens its inhabitants, who feel anonymous within the mass and cut off from the face-to-face relationships which were supposed to be typical of the smaller, "organic" societies, from which so many of them had emigrated in the early decades of the nineteenth century (Butler 132).

In "In a Station of the Metro" Ezra Pound subtly sketches those modern faces caught in the frenzy of public transport:

> The apparition of these faces in the crowd
> Petals on a wet black bough.

T.S. Eliot, now and then, also draws our attention to processions of anonymous city-faces, especially in *The Waste Land*:

> Unreal City,
> Under the brown fog of a winter dawn
> A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
> I had not thought death had undone so many.
> Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,
> And each man fixed his eyes before his feet (ll.60-5, *CP* 62).

Men at first appear as a homogeneous mass, and then as a gathering of identical entities as "each man" extracted from the flow looks down at his own feet, strictly

avoiding face-to-face relationships. Such an image of a mass of identical beings has already been mentioned in relation with "twisted faces":

> The brown waves of fog toss up to me
> Twisted faces from the bottom of the street
> (ll.5-6, *CP* 27, "Morning at the Window").

The "brown waves of fog" is echoed by "the brown fog" and by the image of the "flow" in *The Waste Land*. Faces are undifferentiated, individually indiscernible. On a more positive note, in "At Gradation 1905"—a poem written in youth—one comes across "flitting faces": "we go like flitting faces in a dream," (l.61, *CP* 594) —besides the simile which reduces men to faces, the oneiric detachment blurs the singularity of each face.

The suggested fluidity introduced by such terms as "flowed," "waves," "toss up" and "flitting" is substantially undercut, first by the proximity of three of these terms with a negatively connoted one ("brown," "death," "twisted") and, second, by its possible evocation of the modern incessant movement of speed. The apparent fluidity actually turns out to be a perpetual movement which entraps the modern individual, who, as a consequence, never looks back, and never feeds upon the past. The movement goes forward, unquestioningly. As early as 1909, the Italian Futurists famously glorified such mechanical incessant speed, possibly rooting their idea in Bergson's "*élan vital*." But the mechanisation of modernity and of modern life (like modern production of art according to Walter Benjamin in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction"[18]) have considerably de-humanised the "*élan vital,*" turning it into what Michel Blay variously calls "*l'élan vital mécanisé*" (Blay 57) and "*l'élan vital technicisé*" (Blay 81). If individualisation endures modernity, and is even, in some aspects, toughened by the intensifying isolation of each individual, individual *identity* still dissolves. And in choosing to represent undifferentiated faces caught in a flow, T.S. Eliot imparts his awareness of such a typically early twentieth-century powerful tendency.

Two scenes in *The Waste Land* nonetheless stage moments of attempted recognition. One scene, which comes second in the unfolding of the poem, is intertextually resonant with the opening of the journey to Emmaus when the risen Christ appears to two disciples. At first, the latter fail to recognise him. The Eliotian

"I" expresses his annoyance at not being able to discern this mysterious third person whose face is covered by a hood:

> Who is the third who walks always beside you?
> When I count there are only you and I together
> But when I look ahead up the white road
> There is always another one walking beside you
> Gliding wrapt in a brown mantle, hooded
> I do not know whether a man or a woman
> But who is that on the other side of you? (ll.359-365, *CP* 73).

While in the Bible the disciples then recognise the figure of Christ, Eliot chooses to keep the mysterious face inaccessible. The figure with a hidden face, whose identity therefore remains unrevealed, then proliferates and gives way to a homogeneous mass of still concealed and mysterious faces:

> What is that sound high in the air
> Murmur of maternal lamentation
> Who are those hooded hordes swarming
> Over endless plains..." (ll.366-9, *CP* 73).

The various questions asked by the "I" are definitely left unanswered. The individual is lost in a mass.

Among these "hordes" and "crowds" of the "Unreal city" in *The Waste Land*, there does occur, at one point, a strange moment of recognition. At the end of the "Burial of the Dead," just after witnessing the spectacle of the "crowd" over London Bridge, the "I"-*persona* calls out Stetson, as though the latter's individuality and identity were standing out:

> There I saw one I knew, and stopped him, crying: "Stetson!
> "You who were with me in the ships at Mylae!
> "That corpse you planted last year in your garden,
> "Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?
> "Or has the sudden frost disturbed its bed?
> "O keep the Dog far hence, that's friend to men,
> "Or with his nails he'll dig it up again!
> "You! Hypocrite lecteur! – mon semblable, – mon frère!" (ll.69-76, *CP* 62-3).

With "I saw one I knew" the "I" *persona* imparts that his eye was able to discriminate Stetson's face for, as Le Breton remarks, recognition mostly operates through the face: "Il est socialement absurde de concevoir des hommes sans visage dont on puisse se souvenir" (Le Breton 201). Yet, the conjunction of several elements jeopardizes the validity of this scene of recognition. First, with the reference to "Mylae," the "I" voice

blends the ancient war with the Great War. With this convergence of ancient history with immediacy, the scene breaks from temporality and stands as an atemporal evocation of war. Stetson's face therefore is, likewise, that of a universal figure, not that of a mortal individual who could be called out in the street. Moreover, no proof is given to the reader that Stetson recognizes back. Does he even exist? In this deathly atmosphere, could he not be an apparition or a vision of the "I"-*persona* potentially afflicted with shell-shock? Lastly, as the Baudelairian final line might be imparting, Stetson could very well be the "I" himself, so "*semblable*" that he becomes identical with "I." So even if this face seems to be standing out, it is not truly discriminated, individualized, but remains blurry and fairly indistinct.

The anonymous flowing, flitting, and blurry faces in Eliot's poetry produce a movement which, as was earlier pointed out, truly contrasts with the movement of other modern poets and artists. In outlining what Anne Wright, in her analysis of *The Waste Land*, depicts as "a faceless and nameless crowd, bored and submissive" (Wright 170), Eliot is proposing a passive movement of faces who *submit* to the unsteadiness of modernity. Unlike the Futurists, who glorified speed, and, for other reasons, D.H. Lawrence for instance, who promoted the Heraclitean flux and blood vitality, the movement pictured by T.S. Eliot rather suggests futility, loss and, possibly, waste. These flitting faces are redolent of sterile unsteadiness and such waste is also pregnantly conveyed by Eliot's representation of blank or void faces.

4- Faceless, featureless

If individual specificities are lost in homogeneity or in (con)fusion, Eliot, now and again, goes so far as to erase all facial features completely, either by producing blank or hollow faces, or in relegating faces to the margins of the poem's frame.

Richard Sheppard, in his study of early twentieth-century modernity, draws attention to the evaporation undergone by individuals. According to the critic, "a crucial problem of modernity [is] the need to recenter the 'I' precisely because it is felt to be in danger of evaporating" (Sheppard 54). This sense of evaporation has already been pointed out, more or less directly, on several occasions: the old harmony is lost; the ties between men's faces, as well as between man and his face, are dissolving;

"aimless" smiles evaporate; and the recurrent foggy atmosphere[19] thwarts the visual access to faces.

Eliot shows this absence of faces in blocking the reader's visual access. Some faces remain marginal, as with Stetson for instance, whose face remains unseen. In "Portrait of a Lady," the focusing eye never rests on the lady's face. The poem does not keep the promise made by the title of a "portrait": it produces no ekphrasis and the Lady remains faceless.

In the opening scene of "A Game of Chess" as well, the woman's face is not depicted, though the setting tends to incite the reader to imagine her in an act of self-contemplation, facing a dressing-table mirror. But the reader has no access to her face and, to picture it in his / her mind, can only rely on the cliché of Cleopatra's face summoned by the opening lines: "The Chair she sat in, like a burnished throne, / Glowed on the marble..." (ll.77-8, *CP* 64).

The reader's inaccessibility to some of the Eliotian faces is somehow *mis en abyme*, in *The Waste Land,* with the scene of the "hooded hordes": the "I"-*persona*, like the reader in the examples just quoted, has no visual access to the "third person"'s face. And in "Rhapsody on a Windy Night," the "I"-voice, facing a child, complains: "I could see nothing behind that child's eye"[20] (l.40, *CP* 25). Deciphering or simply seeing the other's face turns out to be an aporetic endeavor.

Such modern aporia is somehow demetaphorised in "The Hollow Men." The epigraphic reference ("a penny for the Old Guy") already designates the hollow brittle head of Guy Fawkes with his sparse facial features. The "hollow men" then, "leaning together" (l.3, *CP* 83), have empty heads too and, apparently, no face, no locus of identity. They are deprived of vision ("The eyes are not here / There are no eyes here" (ll.52-3, *CP* 84)) and can therefore experience no face-to-face relationship. Their lips, a facial organ that serves the exchange, no longer kiss but dryly mouth formulated prayers: "Lips that would kiss / form prayers to broken stones" (ll.50-1, *CP* 84).

Though explicitly inscribed in a folklore—which is fading (as the regressive nursery rime suggests towards the end of the poem)—this poem nonetheless calls

attention to the condition of T.S. Eliot's contemporaries. Michel Costantini's remark (already quoted in the introduction) partly corroborates this idea: "Il nous est impossible d'ignorer que le visage de notre temps est vide [...]. Je n'en veux pour preuve que le nombre étonnant de figures de la vacuité qui se rencontrent au hasard des déambulations, des lectures, des rêveries" (Costantini 108). For indeed, Eliot's hollow heads and faces inscribe themselves in an artistic trend of the period. The Greco-Italo pre-surrealist painter, Giorgio de Chirico, in *The Disquieting Muses* (1916) and *Hector and Andromache* (1917), produces empty faces, devoid of features. A little later, the Russian painter Kazimir Malevitch, after his Cubo-futurist period, paints empty faces. More frontal and much flatter than Chirico's, Malevitch's faces appear completely void, but for a loose beard once in a while (as in *Two Peasants* (1928-30)). Though art critics are still hesitant about the meaning of such facial vacuity in Malevitch's work, one may still read in it a sense of dizziness, loneliness and, possibly, fatality.

Not necessarily prompted by the same motivations, emotions or observations, different modern artists were apt to erase facial features—thus indirectly negating identities—and this may be readable as the translation of an anxiety regarding the state of modern man's integrity.

Eliot's representations of faces are troubling because of the violence they may evoke, their closed condition, their grotesque nature, their vacuity or the homogeneity in which they dissolve. If what is conveyed by these faces is a discourse on modernity and on modern man, to conclude I would like to suggest that such faces may also be seen – to a moderate extent – as imparting a metapoetic discourse on Eliot's own conception of formal poetry writing and on his "theory of impersonality."

III- Conclusion – Eliot's poetic representation of faces: a metapoetic discourse on some aspects of his conception and theory of poetry

1- Disfiguring textuality: formal discontinuity and intertextuality

The formal nature of Eliot's poem is characterized, for the most, by discontinuity. *The Waste Land* is built on a succession of portions of discourse, not always obviously connected with one another. On the surface, concatenation sometimes operates only weakly and, to make the poem aesthetically meaningful, Eliot relies on the reader's reaction to such textual fractures and internal echoes. At the end of "The Hollow Men," even the layout collapses as it bursts into two parts and two typographies:

Here we go round the prickly pear
Prickly pear prickly pear
Here we go round the prickly pear
At five o'clock in the morning.

Between the idea
And the reality
Between the motion
And the act
Falls the shadow
For thine is the Kingdom
Between the conception
And the creation
Between the emotion
And the response
Falls the shadow
Life is very long...
(ll.68-82, *CP* 85).

Not unlike several of the faces that appear in Eliot's poems, the old and traditional textual harmony is shattered.

The monologues of "Prufrock" and "Gerontion" are also highly discontinuous and are both grounded on a very weak central consciousness. If, physically, the face is the locus of identity, then its equivalent in a poem would be the poetic voice. Physical personality finds its poetic image in the "I" of the poem. But both in "Gerontion" and "Prufrock," the consistency of the "I" is substantially weakened—Prufrock has for long been seen by critics as schizophrenic (the opening "you and I" is likely to be referring to the same person, himself), and Gerontion has entered a stage of advanced decrepitude. For Levenson, neither Prufrock nor Gerontion can

"hold [his] monologue together" (Levenson 163). As faces decay and are fragmented, monologues "fall apart; the[ir] centre cannot hold."[21] What Eliot might be wanting to reveal through the fragility of these poetic "I"s is the limited nature of the monologue form. In his essay on "William Blake" (published in 1920, the year of the publication of "Gerontion") Eliot remarks: "You cannot create a very large poem without introducing a more impersonal point of view, or splitting up into various personalities" (*SE*, 321). Isn't Eliot here preparing the grounds for *The Waste Land* (published two years later,) in which faces dissolve the identity among crowds—that way becoming "impersonal point[s] of view"—and where various faces (and poetic "I"s) are juxtaposed?

For a great deal of his poetry, Eliot relies on intertextuality. *The Waste Land*, most particularly, is famous for being a collage of various textual fragments borrowed from a great variety of English and foreign texts (Chaucer, Shakespeare, Dante, Baudelaire, de Nerval, St Augustine, the Bible, the Upanishads, etc.). In his essay on Philip Massinger, Eliot fully supports such a practice: "Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal" (*SE* 206). In so stealing from other texts, Eliot disfigures them. In pulling out only a few fragments, he alters the identity of the primal text—*as* it appears in the new text. Such disfigurement naturally echoes, to a slight degree, that of the faces in his poetry.

A more obvious parallel between intertextuality and the representation of faces in Eliot's poetry lies in the idea of blurred distinctions. Like the indistinguishable faces that flow over London Bridge in *The Waste Land*, borrowed fragments merge with the body of Eliot's own text and their "strangeness" is likely to remain unnoticed by non-erudite readers. "Stolen" fragments almost melt into Eliot's poems and become their "*semblable*" (depending on the reader's prior knowledge). Like with human faces in a modern "unreal city," the original "identity" of the borrowed fragment dissolves. The harmony of its initial (con)text is shattered by the intertextual practice, and the origin of the fragment is lost. Not unlike modern men's situation, the unrecognized intertextual fragment loses its ties with its original creator (the author). But for the few readers who have an insight into the secret

workings of Eliot's poems, the other readers are disoriented, assuming they are confronted to a homogeneous text, to a smooth Eliotian (sur)face. Eliot offers readers a deceitful face which is not entirely genuinely his, as some of its features are in fact grafts.

2- T.S. Eliot's "Impersonal theory of poetry"

In his now well-known essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," published in 1917, T.S. Eliot exposes what he himself calls his "Impersonal theory of poetry" (*SE* 18), through which he means to give emphasis to the necessity for the poet's personality to disappear from his poetry. If the poet's intimate emotions are what genuinely triggers the process of creation, the "personality" who experiences such emotions must have disappeared from the final work of art: "the emotion of art is impersonal" (*SE* 22), Eliot asserts. He proceeds: "the progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality" and, immediately afterwards, he refers to "this de-personalisation" (*SE* 17). The ideas of "sacrifice," "extinction" and "de-personalisation" imply a progressive dismantlement: a personality *does* exist and the poet's purpose is to get rid of it in the creation. Eliot's representation of faces can therefore possibly be understood as a metapoetic discourse on the act of poetic creation: in twisting faces, in erasing them, in afflicting them with disease ("small-pox," "carbuncular," loose teeth), isn't Eliot, to a certain extent, trying to "sacrifice," "extinguish" and (as the face has so far been considered as the locus of identity,) "de-personalise" faces, as he does with the poet's personality? In the same essay, he adds: "Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality but an escape from personality" (*SE* 21). Such escapes are objectified or staged by Eliot's way of relegating several of his poetic faces to the margins of poems, as though these faces were "escaping" the frame of poetry. As we have seen, there are features or faces that literally eschew "personality," like the "aimless smile" or the male-*persona* in "Portrait of a Lady" who "feel[s] like one who smiles." So, partial ekphrases, blank, unseen, diseased, collapsing, ageing and dissolving faces may have a metapoetic

value in so far as they, to some relative degree, de-metaphorise the poet's sacrifice of his personality.

Expression, therefore, seems to be closely related to suppression. The suppression of facial features by mutilation (like "lidless eyes" or "lipless grins" for instance), the suppression of facial harmony by grimaces, awkward smiles or fragmentation and the suppression of fruitful exchanges in face-to-face situations, are all expressions of the poet's idea of man's condition in the first two decades of the twentieth century. At another level, if Eliot seeks the suppression of his personality from his poems, through poetic images, he nevertheless somehow stages—and subtly comments on—*his* own self-suppression. For indeed, is his presence not readable in the faces of certain *personae*? Though slightly anachronistic, in Prufrock's ritual-like preparation of his face "to meet the faces that [he] meets," the reader may read the image of the Eliot who wears make-up and face powder—probably, like Prufrock, uneasy with the idea of being observed or recognized. Eliot constrains his personality in the periphery of poetry and behind the intertexts and the masks of his *personae*, just as Prufrock holds his face in check with his "collar mounting firmly to the chin." Likewise, the male-*persona* in "Portrait of a Lady," fearing to see his "self-possession flare [...] up," "possesses" his facial appearance as best he can. He keeps his countenance. As for Eliot, by theorizing on the "Impersonal theory of poetry," is he not imparting that he seeks to "possess" his personality in the margins of poetry, that he keeps his true self in check, behind and beyond the surface of the text? Just as his *personae* manipulate their faces to look impassive, Eliot manipulates poetic language to disappear from the poem. Still in the same essay, he remarks:

> The poet has not a "personality" to express, but a particular medium which is only a medium and not a personality, in which impressions and experiences combine in peculiar and unexpected ways (*SE* 20).

He keeps his medium in check and, in this way, "encloses" his personality outside the frame of the poem. A true poet of modernity, therefore, Eliot is in unison with his contemporaries who are "enclosed" behind their faces.

As I noted already, one has to wait until *Ash-Wednesday* to spot a significant appeasement of facial features. Eloquently, this poem is the first in which Eliot, though never openly "personal," speaks of his self, of the ordeal of his own intimate

religious quest. The face has now truly become a locus of exchange, of transcendence, of building up a relationship, especially with God. If, at the beginning of his quest, the poetic "I," still plagued with doubts, "renounce[s] the blessèd face" (l.21, *CP* 89), later in the poem, towards the end, as he has climbed the stairs of conversion, he asserts, "No place of grace for those who avoid the face" (l.166, *CP* 96). It is in facing God's face that man is accepted in His realm, when he has turned his face to God's. In slightly opening the enclosure of impersonality in his poetic representation of faces, it seems that Eliot no longer feels the need to distort, erase or shun faces, as though he were about to be ready (but, in fact, he never truly was) to let the reader unveil some of his emotions and aspects of his personality.

NOTES

[1] The very first body the reader encounters in Eliot's *Complete Poems* is an image used in a simile to describe the sky: ".... when the evening is spread out against the sky / like patient etherised upon a table" ("The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock", ll.2-3). The double withdrawal established by the reduction of the body to almost a corpse and by its contrafactual nature (used as a comparison) straightaway marginalizes the body from the poetry.

[2] « *L'unité du visage en soi est renforcée du fait qu'il est posé sur le cou, ce qui lui confère par rapport au corps une situation péninsulaire, laissé pour ainsi dire livré à lui-même, et le vêtement qui recouvre le corps jusqu'au cou agit visiblement dans le même sens* » (Simmel 140).

[3] And this is corroborated by the different modern types of ID: individuals figure on official documents with a photograph, not of their whole body, but of their face only.

[4] In a letter dated on June, 5th, 1914, *Letters II* (1913-16), eds. George J. Zytaruk and James T. Boulton, 1981, p.183.

[5] « punctum *c'est aussi : piqûre, petite tache, petite coupure – et aussi coup de dés. Le* punctum *d'une photo c'est ce hasard qui, en elle, me point (mais aussi me meurtrit, me poigne)* » (Roland Barthes. *La Chambre Claire – Note sur la Photographie*. Cahier du Cinéma, Gallimard, Seuil, 1980, p.49).

[6] D.H. Lawrence, *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928). London: Penguin, 1994, p.5.

[7] « *Toute figuration particulière a besoin, pour produire son effet esthétique, que ses parties soient cohérentes, solidaires, tout écartement ou écartèlement des parties est laid, parce qu'il interrompt et affaiblit le lien avec le centre, c'est à dire la domination visible de l'esprit sur l'environnement de notre être* [...]. La structure du visage, elle, rend d'emblée quasi impossible pareille centrifugalité, pareille déspiritualisation » (Simmel 141, my emphasis).

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[8] Darwin actually mentions that "the young blush much more freely than the old" (Darwin 244).

[9] Michel Blay writes: « *Chacun finit par tuer – peur ou gloire –, entraîné par la grande machine à broyer où chacun devient machine, machine à tuer ; mécanisation des hommes excluant toute émotion – rêve du nouvel homme. La machine et la mécanique tiennent le haut du pavé dans la grande tuerie de la mise en forme et en ordre* » (Blay 86).

[10] Rebecca West, in *The Return of the Soldier*, has famously explored this pathology.

[11] Blaise Cendrars in *L'Homme Foudroyé* proposes powerful descriptions of these bodies (rather, corpses) caught in the act of being mutilated and dehumanised.

[12] For instance "Une Charogne" in *Les Fleurs du Mal*.

[13] I am borrowing the term from, Bernard Munono Muyembe. *Le Regard et le visage – De l'Altérité chez Jean-Paul Sartre et Emmanuel Levinas*. Peter Land : Berne, Frankfurt/M, New York, Paris, 1991; p.162.

[14] « *La résistance éthique* » (Levinas 217).

[15] « *La représentation du visage me met en rapport avec l'être* » (Levinas 233).

[16] cf. title of Michel Blay's book: *Les Clôtures de la modernité*.

[17] « *le façonnement du visage est toujours le fait de l'autre* » (Le Breton 125).

[18] Walter Benjamin. « The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction », *Illuminations*. Trad. par Harry Zorn. London: Pimlico Edition, 1999, pp.211-44.

[19] "the yellow fog" in "Prufrock", "the smoke and fog of a December afternoon" in "Portrait of a Lady", "he brown waves of fog" in "Morning at the Window" and "the brown fog" in *The Waste Land*.

[20] This fragment is borrowed from Jules Laforgue, "Pierrots": « *ces yeux! Mais rien n'existe / Derrière* ».

[21] W.B. Yeats, "The Second Coming" (1920).

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