

Ambiguity of Textual Portraiture in Realism and Modernism

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Abstract

The article seeks to prove that literary representations of the face are effective in several ways. It will propose that the realist approach to textual portraiture (Leo Tolstoy) foregrounds the interactive role of the face and emphasizes both its spontaneous self-expression and deliberate self-creation; thus, in the semiotic sense, the face reveals and conceals simultaneously. Modernist writers (Virginia Woolf, Witold Gombrowicz, Bruno Schulz) still employ the face as an instrument of characterization but simultaneously utilize its familiar image on the level of form, as a meta-commentary or a stylistic device. In consequence, in modernism the ambiguity of its portraiture arises in both the content and form of the text, while in realism, only on the level of content. The article identifies and compares selected literary strategies that generate these ambiguities.¹

Keywords:

This article will demonstrate that realist and modernist representations of the face can function in several, sometimes contradictory ways. These contradictions are generated by literary techniques characteristic of realism and modernism. Realism and modernism serve here as heuristic categories by providing models for different types of physiognomic representations.

In nineteenth-century literary texts the face generally complements characterization and facilitates communication, being therefore limited to the content of the text. As an instrument in the 'semiotics of gesture',² it is often taken for granted, all too familiar, invisible. The reader's attention penetrates the image of the face not for itself but to reach the hidden depth of the character's personality, intentions, and emotions. This surface-depth model developed in nineteenth-century western literature under the influence of phrenology and physiognomy.³ This article will comprise a comparative analysis of ambiguities arising within the surface-depth model prevailing in realism and other models characteristic of modernism.

¹ This article was first presented as a paper on the occasion of the *Skepsi* conference *Ambiguities: Destabilising Preconceptions* (22nd–23rd May 2009, University of Kent, Canterbury).

² David K. Danov quoted in Leslie A. Johnson, 'The Face of the Other in Idiot', *Slavic Review*, Vol. 50, No. 4 (Winter 1991), p. 868.

³ Graeme Tytler, *Physiognomy in the European Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982).

Modernist texts of the early twentieth century explore the face beyond its phenomenal make-up, exposing its ambiguous character in relation to the form and content of the text. In other words, modernists separate surface and depth as elements of physiognomic dichotomy. Realists, on the other hand, explore their correspondence, emphasizing ambiguous functions of the face: as an outlet for spontaneous self-expression and as careful self-fashioning. I will argue that these two contradictory functions of the face co-exist in Leo Tolstoy's realism, in particular in his short stories 'Family Happiness' and 'The Kreutzer Sonata'. Tolstoy employs the surface-depth model but avoids physiognomic determinism by seeking alternative modes of representation. Similar explorations take place in the modernist prose of Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*, Witold Gombrowicz's *Ferdydurke* and Bruno Schulz's 'Street of Crocodiles' where the departure from the surface-depth model results in ambiguities transgressing the boundaries of narrative content.

1. Ambiguity in Realism

In Tolstoy's 'Family Happiness' (1859) the face facilitates and legitimizes narrative progress; it discloses and anticipates characters' intentions and plot events. This short story is narrated by Masha, who gives an account of her relationship with Sergei. In order to disambiguate long discursive sequences, Tolstoy manufactures a close correspondence between the signifier (facial expression) and the signified (sensation); he carefully contextualizes facial expression to test its efficacy against the semiotic capacity of verbal signifiers. The sensation 'written' in the face structures the narrative by marking stages of partners' communication. Their emotional proximity (the leading theme of the narrative) is measured by their progress in learning the art of 'reading' each other's face. Masha deciphers her future husband's identity by keenly interpreting his physiognomy: 'I noticed now for the first time that his face, which gave one at first the impression of high spirits, had also an expression peculiar to himself — bright at first and then more and more attentive and rather sad.'⁴ Sergei's facial expression anticipates the future marital discord, disclosing tale-telling 'attentiveness' and 'sadness' which later aggravate Masha as 'irritating composure'. At this early stage, Masha seeks confirmation of the growing affection between them; she finds the evidence for this not in Sergei's words but in his face:

He tried to speak, but in vain; again and again his face positively flamed up. Still he smiled as he looked at me, and I smiled too. Then his whole face grew radiant with happiness. He ceased to be the old uncle who spoiled or scolded me; he was a man on my level, who loved and feared me as I loved and feared him. We looked at one another without speaking. (p. 22)

⁴ Leo Tolstoy, *The Kreutzer Sonata and Other Stories*, ed. and with rev. trans. by Michael R. Katz (Oxford: OUP, 1997), p. 20. Further references to this text will be given in parenthesis.

Transformations of the face guide the reader through the turning point of the narrative, indicating and emphasizing psychological change. This change is not indicated by the physical properties of Sergei's face but by his facial expressions already interpreted by Masha. Thus, her ability to read the face is synonymous with her narrative power, and structures the narrative. This is most evident in the scene of the non-verbal declaration of passion which takes place in the garden. While the couple exchange remarks about frogs, Masha discovers another meaning in the paralinguistic of Sergei's face: 'Though he had spoken of my fear of frogs, I knew that he meant to say, "I love you, my dear one!" "I love you, I love you" was repeated by his look [...].' (p. 27) This juxtaposition of the subjects of verbal and non-verbal exchanges implies the limited capacity of verbal signifiers to denote abstract concepts and the face's special aptitude for it.

In each case, the 'meaning' of the face is determined by the subjective observations of the first-person narrator (Masha) and by narrative contextualization. This latter method proves to be efficient as it reduces the semiotic openness of the facial expression. For instance, Tolstoy extensively employs a smiling face to indicate qualitative dynamics of interaction but always carefully contextualizes it. The potential ambiguity of a smile draws the attention of Tolstoy's enthusiast, Ludwig Wittgenstein, who, after discovering Tolstoy in 1914, remained strongly influenced by the latter's moral and religious views.⁵ Wittgenstein emphasizes the uncertainty of the smile and the dangers of its misinterpretation:

I see a picture which represents a smiling face. What do I do if I take the smile now as a kind one, now as malicious? Don't I often imagine it with a spatial and temporal context which is one either of kindness or malice? Thus I might supply the picture with the fancy that the smiler was smiling down on a child at play, or again on the suffering of an enemy.⁶

Wittgenstein promotes contextualization as a means of reducing the semiotic ambiguity of facial expression since it is, he argues, potentially ambivalent: flexible and rigid, and simultaneously open and accurate.⁷ Though decontextualized facial expressions may be interpreted correctly enough to sustain interaction, they can also convey a rich variety of shades of feeling and do not easily submit to classification into 'negative' or 'positive'. Tolstoy could

⁵ The reading of Tolstoy's *Gospel in Brief* transformed Wittgenstein from an atheist into an ardent Christian. See Ray Monk, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1991), pp. 11, 32, 213.

⁶ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. by G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), p. 539.

⁷ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, ed. Cyril Barrett (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), p. 4.

not read Wittgenstein, but a mystic's intuition (the same that Wittgenstein was said to have developed after reading Tolstoy) prompted him to seek control over the ambiguous signifier.⁸

Indeed, in Tolstoy's short stories the face can both mislead its interpreter and erupt with untold stories. In 'The Kreutzer Sonata' the protagonist Pozdnyshev tells a story and simultaneously carefully conceals his face in the shade as if it could reveal his tale before he narrates it.⁹ Pozdnyshev advocates the view that the face is both an uncontrollable vehicle for manifestations of desire and an efficient instrument of deception. To prove it, he reports the first encounter of his wife and her lover-to-be, Tuchatchevsky: 'from the moment his eyes met my wife's, I saw that the animal in each of them, regardless of all conditions of their position and of society, asked, "May I?" and answered, "Oh, yes, certainly".'¹⁰ (p. 212) During the first piano concert which Pozdnyshev's (the narrator's) wife plays with the young Tuchatchevsky, Pozdnyshev registers the face's capacity to camouflage real feelings:

[H]er face reflected her pleasure. But catching sight of me she understood my feeling at once and changed her expression; a game of mutual deception began. I smiled pleasantly to appear as if I liked it. [...] she tried to seem indifferent, though my false smile of jealousy with which she was familiar, and his lustful gaze, evidently excited her. I saw that from their first encounter her eyes were particularly bright and [...] it seemed as if an electric current had been established between them, evoking as it were an identity of expressions, looks, and smiles. She blushed and he blushed. She smiled and he smiled. [...] Then he rose to go, and stood wearing a smile, holding his hat against his twitching thigh [...]. (p. 211)

This encounter is dominated by an exchange of simulated and spontaneous facial signals. Within a fraction of a second the expression is attuned to the context, controlled and captured after having briefly escaped control. Physiological reactions (her blushing) mingle with impulsive reactions (Tuchatchevsky's unrestrained 'lustful gaze') which slip from beneath manufactured smiles. Each contender anticipates, interrupts and stimulates the stream of fleeting impressions; each is painfully aware of the role of the face but attempts to conceal this awareness; only one physiological impulse, the twitching thigh, escapes from beneath the thin veneer of social convention, betraying the pressure of underlying tension. In this semi-staged theatre, the face releases its ambiguous interactive potential for both revelation (self-expression) and camouflage (self-fashioning). This ambiguity generates the psychological power of the face, a power which best manifests itself in the contradictory feelings of Masha in 'Family Happiness', as she gazes into her husband's face:

⁸ In one of his letters Russell anxiously observes that, since reading Tolstoy, Wittgenstein's writing and behaviour had become characteristic of a mystic. See Brian McGuinness, G. H. von Wright, eds., *Ludwig Wittgenstein: Cambridge Letters. Correspondence with Russell, Keynes, Moore, Ramsey and Sraffa* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), p. 140.

⁹ Pozdnyshev narrates the story of his marriage which he ended by murdering his wife out of jealousy.

I [...] involuntarily looked into his eyes. Suddenly a strange thing happened to me: first I ceased to see what was around me; then his face seemed to vanish till only the eyes seemed to be in my own head, and then all became confused – I could see nothing and was forced to shut my eyes, in order to break loose from the feeling of pleasure and fear which his gaze was producing in me [...]. (p. 40)

Sergei's face renders Masha vulnerable and dependent. She looks into his face 'involuntarily', and loses control since 'things [just] happen to her'. She is absorbed into her husband's physiognomy, which overshadows the forthcoming disappearance of her 'adolescent narcissism' and her future dependence on him.¹⁰ Yet his face promises both pleasure (in anticipation of its expressiveness) and fear (in anticipation of what it may conceal). In this way Tolstoy not only represents the face as a vehicle for two mutually exclusive functions (revelation and concealment) but also exposes their psychological consequences. His realist techniques of representation are, however, limited to the content of the narrative and in this sense they contrast with modernist treatments of the face.

2. Ambiguity in Modernism

In the early decades of the twentieth century, the ambiguity of the face extends to both content and form. The face can complement characterization and communication, but it can also function as a literary device, for example a meta-commentary or self-reference. Released from its own image the face can move from the sphere of vision to the vibrant territory of discourse where it can 'speak'. 'Speech cuts across vision', according to Levinas.¹¹ Representation and vision are determining and oppressive, they invite a passive perceiver; discourse is living, undetermined and demands contribution; discourse involves exchanges and confrontations with others. It is through 'speech', not through image, that our understanding of the face opens up to otherness:

Words are said, be it only by the silence kept, whose weight acknowledges [...] evasion of the Other. The knowledge that absorbs the Other is forthwith situated within the discourse I address to him. Speaking, rather than 'letting be', solicits the Other. In knowledge or vision the object can indeed determine the act, but it is an act that in some way appropriates the 'seen' to itself, integrates it into the world by endowing it with signification, and in the last analysis, constitutes it. (p. 195)

Levinas turns away from the signifying face (from the surface-depth model) and welcomes the ambiguous emancipated face that manifests itself in language. Modernists also distrusted the semiotic mosaic of the face and instead of focusing on its visual qualities they perceived it as a

¹⁰ Thus, contrary to Renato Poggioli's interpretation, Masha will never be 'the full partner of her husband'. See Renato Poggioli, 'Tolstoy's Domestic Happiness: Beyond Pastoral Love', in: Renato Poggioli, *The Oaten Flute: Essays on the Pastoral Poetry and the Pastoral Ideal* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), pp. 265-284.

¹¹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. by Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2007), p. 195.

movement, an event. Unlike in realist fiction, in modernism the face can 'speak' from beyond the narrative content, on the level of literary form.

In *Orlando* (1927), Virginia Woolf employs faces as vehicles for her critique of both romanticism and realism. Woolf portrays her eponymous hero with irony, focusing on those 'noble' characteristics of his physiognomy that 'predestine' him to an excellent career:

The red of cheeks was covered with peach down; the down on the lips was only a little thicker than the down on the cheeks. The lips themselves were short and slightly drawn back over teeth of an exquisite and almond whiteness. Nothing disturbed the arrowy nose in its short tense flight; [...] he had eyes like drenched violets, so large that the water seemed to have brimmed in them and widened them; and a brow like the swelling of a marble dome pressed between the two blank medallions which were his temples.¹²

Woolf's detailed description of the thickness of down and the shape of the mouth forms an ironical overstatement. Expressions such as 'almond whiteness' and 'drenched violets' mock the affectedness of romantic clichés; the shape of the nose ironically refers to classical ideals of facial aesthetics. The eyes, brows and temples appear majestic and dignified due to the 'architectural' lexis ('marble dome', 'medallions'). As a result, Orlando's face is endowed with the status of a 'holy' edifice. The ambiguity of this portraiture is produced by the coexistence of an informative function (characterization) and a meta-commentary on the literary traditions of realism and romanticism. In the first sense Orlando's face implies inclinations to pomposity, hypersensitivity and excessive introspection; in a second, it imitates mimetic representation and romantic sensationalism. A similar twofold function has the face of a poet encountered by Orlando: the description is not just informative but also lodges a critique of aesthetic judgement. Orlando's free indirect speech reveals psychologically convincing desperation as he scrutinizes the poet's face in search of 'nobleness':

There was something about him which belonged neither to servant, squire or a noble. The head with its rounded forehead and beaked nose was fine, but the chin receded. The eyes were brilliant, but the lips hung loose and slobbered. There was none of that stately composure which makes the faces of the nobility so pleasing to look at; nor had it anything of the dignified servility of a well-trained domestic face; it was a face seamed, puckered, and drawn together. (p. 82)

The meticulous, aesthetically oriented portraiture has some informative value but at the same time functions as literary criticism. It parodies the physiognomic tradition (the surface-depth model accepted by realists), social conceptualizations of human physiognomy and the rule of 'beauty mystique', i.e. the tendency to translate physical beauty into a moral category.¹³ The face serves characterization but can also be read as a critical commentary. It functions as a

¹² Virginia Woolf, *Orlando* (Oxford; New York: OUP, 1998), p. 15.

¹³ See Anthony Synnott, 'Truth and Goodness, Mirrors and Masks Part II: A Sociology of Beauty and the Face', *The British Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 41, No. 1 (March 1990), pp. 55–76.

vehicle for a meta-text, as a template which can be written into and imitate another structure than its own, simultaneously commenting on it.

The ambivalence of the face represented in Bruno Schulz's 'The Street of Crocodiles' (1934) is founded on the disruption of facial architectonics. In Schulz's ekphrasis of the face it loses its coherent spatial organization:

The sales girls move [...] between the rows of books, grey and papery like prints, their faces full of pigment, the dark pigment of brunettes, of a glossy greasy blackness, which, lurking in the eyes, suddenly sprang out in a shiny zigzag like a cockroach. But in their burning blushes, in the spicy stigmata of their beauty spots, in the timid patches of their dark dawn, a race of a congealed black blood betrayed itself. This hyper-intense colouring, this mocha, thick and aromatic, seemed to stain the books which the sales girls held in their olive hands, their touches seemed to dye the books and leave in the air a dark rain of freckles, a smudge of tobacco, as does a truffle with its exciting aromatic odour.¹⁴

Here the excessive plasticity of the face spills out from its source; fleeing from itself, it breaches its own formation. While realists speculated over the materialization or spiritualization of the face, Schulz introduces in-between forms such as 'liquidization' and dissemination. In his text, facial boundaries are blurred and their formal correspondences are liberated into a free play of autonomous elements. The ambiguity of this portraiture is generated by the coexistence of indexical value and the openness of surrealist description; as a result, the ekphrastic text, instead of focusing on a circumscribable object, not only departs from it but also provides a model for a systemic deconstruction. The face's imposition onto a given space would be a reverse operation. In Schulz's text it occurs when a city boulevard structurally resembles the face; it is compact, dense and cohesive in the centre, but turns indistinct at the periphery; its façade constitutes its sole content:

in a little section in front of us everything falls correctly into a pointillist painting of the city boulevard while on the sides this improvised masquerade already thins out and disintegrates, incapable of enduring its role, falls into bits of plaster and oakum behind us, falls into a junk room of some enormous empty theatre. The tension of a pose, the artificial seriousness of the mask, the ironical pathos tremble on the surface of this skin. (p. 53)

Schulz understands the face as a metonymy for a spatial configuration in which the centripetal force which draws the elements together is weakened and no surface-depth dichotomy occurs; the paper-thin façade substitutes for the content. This façade manifests itself as a pure signifier, its substance corresponds to the exterior and it is no more than a 'pose', a 'mask', a 'surface' (p. 53). Yet, the 'trembling' on the skin surface announces the presence of sensation as if the boulevard and the face were forms of existence in themselves. The ambiguity of this portraiture resides in the face's familiar phenomenality ('the skin', 'the mask', 'surface')

¹⁴ Bruno Schulz, *Sklepy Cynamonowe Sanatorium pod Klepsydra* (Kraków: Zielona Sowa, 2002), p. 52 (my translation).

promising the referent (the depth) and simultaneously refusing to represent it, refusing to form a dichotomist structure of surface and depth. Schulz's text illustrates how the face loses its traditional signifying function but gains flexibility and independence in the process of becoming a unique and capacious template.

Formal variations trigger the co-existence of the familiar and a newly discovered otherness. In Gombrowicz's *Ferdydurke* (1937), familiarity and otherness co-exist when the author 'formalizes' the familiar facial grimace by presenting the following scene: two students 'fight' the duel of grimaces: 'constructive and beautiful faces' against 'ugly and destructive counter-faces'.¹⁵ Here, the grimaces do not appear in their ordinary context of social interaction but are intensified, compressed and distilled from it. The schoolboys' innocent game is transformed into a 'duel' in which the face becomes a deadly weapon. Ambiguity arises where decontextualized grimaces preserve indexical value (e.g. a smile still has positive connotations) but also open a vast hermeneutic space which allows Gombrowicz to generate his own theory of form. He sees the face as an allegory of a formative structure which violates the substance. The totality of the face, the formal correspondences between parts, the centripetal force that draws them together like a magnet — all represent structural interdependencies of an abstract form. Gombrowicz's theory of form proclaims formlessness and indicates 'innocence' and 'immaturity' as its allies; all these are symbolically destroyed by the grimaces in the course of the 'duel'. In *Ferdydurke* Gombrowicz announces the necessity to rebel against the 'face' as a symbol of a totalizing form; in *A Kind of Testament* he explains the terror of form itself:

just as worms and insects creep and fly all day long in search of food, so we, without a moment's respite or relief, perpetually seek form and expression, struggle with other men for style, for our own way of being; and when we travel in a tram, or eat, or enjoy ourselves, or rest, or engage in business, we are perpetually in search of form, and we delight in it, suffer for it or adapt ourselves to it, we break or violate it, or let ourselves be violated by it [...].¹⁶

Individuals who qualify for this last category, who surrender themselves to this 'formal imperative',¹⁷ deform themselves in a negative sense. Gombrowicz encourages positive 'formlessness' — that is, 'heretical aggression' against the form — and insists that any 'revision of European Form could only be undertaken from an extra-European position, from where it is slacker and less perfect' (p. 68). One must 'shake free' from the form and renounce 'Western

¹⁵ Witold Gombrowicz, *Ferdydurke*, trans. by Eric Mosbacher (New York: Marion Boyars, 2005), p. 65.

¹⁶ Witold Gombrowicz, *Ferdydurke*, trans. by Eric Mosbacher (London; New York: Marion Boyars, 2005), pp. 81–82.

¹⁷ Witold Gombrowicz, *A Kind of Testament*, ed. by Dominique de Roux, trans. by Alastair Hamilton (London: Dalkey Archive Press, 2007), p. 73.

maturity'.¹⁸ To face otherness is not only to face others but to accept oneself as containing this otherness. In Gombrowicz's view a liberated human being

would no longer think of himself as a father but as simultaneously father and son, and he would no longer write as a clever, subtle, and mature man, but as a clever man always reduced to stupidity, as a subtle man reduced to crudity, an adult perpetually reduced to childhood.¹⁹

Gombrowicz presents himself as the hero of such an encounter with otherness. His 'romantic theory of incompleteness' invites multiplicity and difference, confrontation and exchange; in all of them the face has the qualities of an event.²⁰ Like Levinas, he wants to transcend the visual with its 'negation by representation' (typical to realists) because '[t]he permanent openness of the contours of its [the face's] form in expression imprisons this openness which breaks up form in a caricature.'²¹ By deforming the representation of the face and transforming its political power into a theory of 'anti-facialization', he attempts to explain the ideology of form. Discourse rather than vision appropriates the face into its territory proper; while, in the visual, it submits to the power of its own imposed form obliterating itself, in the discursive, it speaks as an anti-formal manifesto.

Conclusion

Ambiguity of textual portraiture is produced in the course of both reading and writing. When the face is embedded within the content, ambiguity is inscribed within its semiotic potential as a sign. This ambiguity embraces two alternative interpretations of the function of the face: on the one hand, revealing arbitrary functions which are synonymous with the role of a reliable narrator, and, on the other, serving as an instrument for concealment and manipulation. These mutually exclusive functions are founded on the surface-depth model where the signified is an unobservable 'content' of the signifier. In modernist texts, the ambiguity of the face thrives on the interplay between form and content; the reader may wonder whether its meaning is literal or figurative. By the very application of the second type of reading the surface-depth dichotomy is broken (or opened up), exposing the full potential of facial heterogeneity. The ambiguity of the modernist face resides in its resistance to semantic closure and its escape from its own

¹⁸ Gombrowicz explains this in *A Kind of Testament*: 'when *Ferdydurke* was translated into other languages, I realized to what an extent its disrespect could irritate certain cultivated Germans or Frenchmen or all other representatives of western maturity. The book can be quite indigestible for those who attribute a certain importance to their person, their convictions and their beliefs, for a 'dedicated' painter, scientist, or ideologist.' (p. 68).

¹⁹ Witold Gombrowicz, *Ferdydurke*, trans. by Eric Mosbacher (New York: Marion Boyars, 2005), p. 85.

²⁰ Valérie Deshoulières, 'Witold Gombrowicz: Toward a Romantic Theory of Incompleteness', in: Ewa Płonowska-Ziarek, ed., *Gombrowicz's Grimaces: Modernism, Gender, Nationality* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1998), pp. 51–64.

²¹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. by Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2007), p. 198.

determining image. It ceases to signify in a traditional sense; instead, it is transformed into a flexible matrix, a template, a literary device or a critical meta-commentary and thus participates in meta-textual discourse. While in realism the face contains, in modernism it overflows; while in realism it conceals and reveals, in modernism it envelops. It is no longer just a layer in a binary structure, but an autonomous entity manifesting its ambiguous role in belonging to both content and form.

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