> They spoke to me of people, and of humanity. But I've never seen people or humanity. I've seen various people, astonishingly dissimilar. Each separated from the next by an unpeopled space.
>
> FERNANDO PESSOA

Among its many functions, the human face acts as an ambassador, on the job whenever out in the world. We are face reading, socially inquisitive animals, accustomed, most likely programmed, to respond to physiognomic expressions as signs that help us decide our own behaviour in limitless scenarios. Jonathan Miller sums up the face's repertoire very well when he writes that the face is: 'Where we are. We kiss, eat, breathe and speak through it. It's where we look, listen and smell. It's where we think of ourselves as being finally and conclusively on show. It's the part we hide when we are ashamed and the bit we think we lose when we are in disgrace.' As this list of functions runs from the organic to the emotional, there is obviously more to faces than anyone can say.

We look at others, often convinced that we may have missed a subliminal expression they could have offered or betrayed. They might be ready for us, or not quite, or not at all. Still, wherever the face leads, we instinctively follow, through its charms, embarrassments or courtesies, or sulks. How natural for viewers, then, to want to get ahead by anticipating a reflex that has not yet arrived or, as it may turn out later, was not in the offing.

The face must generally be supposed to be active, even when in apparent repose. Our facial possibilities tend to shimmer like mercury does when unconfined, as if with a will of its own. There is no telling when an expression might light up or where it could spread, dimple, or recede at any instant. This random openness would disorient us but for its social context, the particular flux of coordinated interests and manners that effects the relationship between the viewer and the viewed. In addition to their words, each of them exchanges glances, contributing to a scene as it develops. Past a certain point, however, the scene may have run out of coherence, giving to faces an inattentive and skittish look. Ralph Waldo Emerson said that his guests could tell what time it was by looking at his face.

I certainly think that faces inspire readings or misreadings, seemingly available in one moment of observation. As life is lived such moments flow together, import hovering within them. In other media, like painting, the moment is synthesized (from many others) in a gel of indicative marks; in photographs, the instant is extracted from its local impetus by a mechanical eye and shockingly stopped. Either way, physiognomy is accented in an image presented for unaccountable viewers, who look into the past from their other, present circumstances. This book deals with such frozen moments, exemplified by portrait photography from around 1900 to the present day.

The camera may immobilize its subjects, yet it by no means petrifies them. An emotional volatility that we find, or that we confer on them, is an outcome of our modern perspective. In the nineteenth century, portrait photographs by the American Civil War photographer Mathew B. Brady and the Scottish-born photographer William Notman in Canada, depicted sitters as if they were free-standing monuments, not reservoirs of feeling. On the basis of

the likenesses that were given, viewers were led to believe that a solid-state depth within the human interior had been disclosed. The surfaces of flesh had been moulded by the essence of character, rather than by circumstance. Today, we sceptics delight in the opportunity to examine idiosyncracies, reflexes and quirks, guessing at the submarine tropisms that might have informed them. We expect the pliant representation of faces that began to appear when the reserved, sententious and grave scrutiny of the nineteenth century gave way to the impulsive – and nosey – glance of the twentieth.

Given the ruthlessness of modern media, our expanded psychological sciences, and the turmoil and uproot of chaotic events, this change was inevitable. It came, of course, with a price. The interior being or soul of Victorian citizens had been considered, in public at least, as a unified and indivisible consciousness, shaped by class, racial and ethnic archetypes. Each of these was slotted into its own social niche according to the predispositions of the viewing culture. A sitter's individual experience might by chance be hinted at, but imperious social templates did not require that it be acknowledged. In this universe of generic poses, there was no call for anomalous revelation or personal theatre. But the force with which the pose was reiterated has abated since then.

Our modern communication outlets have redefined the personal – and the private – as a kind of spectacle to which unsorted viewers expect access as a matter of course. Nevertheless, if the proliferation of outlets in the twentieth century expanded the convenience, it did not automatically increase the effectiveness of its inputs. Our frenzied engagement with photographic imagery has brought a more sophisticated understanding of its limits. We are invited into the material lives of others, but at the same time the access does not seem to increase any sense that we know them better. Broad though it is in social reach, the medium famously withholds confirmation of any verity beyond the momentary reach of its physical descriptions. What truth can be conveyed by records of sensitive faces when we know them to have originated only through the tiniest blip of light, abruptly isolated in past time?

Hindered by the plainly insufficient evidence offered by the single, still moment of the portrait photograph, we viewers can have little confidence in our answer to this question. But it is given weight by the story atmosphere generated by the people involved in the act of photographing. Though we are not participants in that particular context, we are given some measure of its arrangements settled or unsettled in the portrait contract. Our perception of the photograph as visual narrative has no doubt been heightened by movie conventions, with their intimacies furthered by close-ups. Their voyeuristic effect has infiltrated and kindled our involvement with portraits. In fact, cinema has bewitched us with its specious power of witness. (And this is not to mention the way portraiture has affected film styles.) Speaking of the character of a priest in a Sergei Eisenstein film, the theorist Béla Balázs writes: 'He is like the sublime image of a saint. But then the camera gives us an isolated big close-up of one eye; and a cunningly watchful furtive glimpse slips out from his beautiful silky eyelashes like an ugly caterpillar out of a delicate flower.'

It would be enjoyable to think that portrait photographs might be regarded as laconic films, but clearly they reveal a dramaturgy of their own. When they knew themselves to be before the portrait lens, sitters interviewed for temporary parts in their own lives. What mattered was neither their sincerity nor their hypocrisy, but how their complaisance qualified the transaction between themselves and the picture-maker, who had the upper hand. In film, performance is a modality of the director's control, shaped by a narrative plan unfolded in segments through time; in portraiture, photographers exert a lopsided power that is affected by their subjects' split-second behaviour, on terms that may or may not be mutually advantageous.

Except when promoted by well-schooled actors, commercial models, or oily politicians, what we see in a portrait is hypothetical, sometimes tense conduct, worked out by agents in an unstable process. Film characters are obliged not to notice the attention given to them; sitters, more evidently, have to contend with it. To viewers, the difference is between an illusion of transparent demeanour staged by impersonators, and an auto-reflective signal that people improvise hopefully when their vagrant fancy of themselves is just then caught in its act. Sitters carry on with a handicap in a chancy business, since they can only guess how they looked when the shutter was released. For portrait subjects to have been off the mark in their self-affirmation or for photographers inadvertently, or deliberately, to capture them unaware of it, was human on both their parts. With such a special panorama on view, I thought to call this book about portraits *The Theatre of the Face*.

It is a gallery of rehearsals, improvisations, finical set-ups, ad hoc encounters and ambushes, on the basis of which a serious art came of age. Of course, people continued to pose in an armoured fashion – they expected the result to confirm at least a symbolic statement of their place in the world. But, with the arrival of photo-reportage, storylines began to mingle. The environment was no longer dominated by the protocols of mutual consent dictated by the ceremonious occasion. A journalistic eye accounted for the *situations* of those it framed, the irregularities of their attention or a distracted conduct within shifting milieus. Twentieth-century portraiture unfolded in a dialogue between protocols and situations: first the one, then the other accentuated in the field.

If this remark sounds too general, it is because I have so far omitted the attitudes of photographers, some of whom gradually displaced their mercantile obligations to their subjects' self-esteem with personal or professional motives of their own. The theatre that these photographers engaged in or fabricated themselves had overtones of candour. By implication, it encompassed two kinds of reality: that of those not concerned or palpably unaware of being looked at, and that of people negotiating their way defensively, and therefore with instinctive artifice.

Before the twentieth century it would hardly have occurred to any audience that unaware or unconsenting subjects could be fair portrait game. Their confidence was once predictably gathered up during lengthy exposures with an impersonal weightiness, normal for the era. But as time went on, formal portraiture came to be perceived quite differently by later viewers and practitioners – as a showcase of expedient responses or positions taken, just as revealing and natural as off-guard behaviour. No one was privileged enough to hide anymore, least of all in the studio. It may not be an exaggeration to say that many photographers thought of themselves as free agents in the business of social and personal disclosure.

On the evidence of photography, we consider nineteenth-century manners as 'heavier' and more aloof than ours. But their self-honorific stance was naturalized by their culture and a community of values agreed on by observer and the observed alike. The persona (from the Latin verb *personare* – 'to sound through') assumed by sitters at home, or imposed on those abroad, was in either event a form of domestication. They would have looked far stranger, at the time, had they been relaxed. Everyone was stiffened – and to some extent objectified – by ideas of 'appropriate' conduct. The rules of propriety that guided them have since then been degraded. Still, their old-time semblance of rectitude evokes a certain insularity and self-enclosure – to our eyes, occasionally quaint but also, by default, mysterious. Though we live in a more permissive, not to say unbuttoned environment, this mysterious composure has been re-examined, in the light of the apparent conflict between its straight-laced intention and its teasing effect. The animation crystallized by the Parisian photographer, Nadar, in the 1850s looks more congenial to us today, but the predetermined attitude of salon portraiture all around him can have its intrigues, too.

It is not merely that we are gazing at social assumptions from another time, but really with a different sense of time. In the nineteenth century, the maintenance of the sitter's stance and the moment of the 'take' were in equilibrium. There would have been little interest in any preceding or succeeding incident. The duration of the pose was integral to itself, a kind of 'time out' from inconsequent behaviour. Given such an established stasis, specific clients received images that they could cherish as talismans, file as documents, or keep as mementoes. But for us, with our more fluid and indefinite awareness of temporal life, the 'time out' of the formal portrait comes to have the unexpected power and wonder of a phenomenon, a thing that anyone might consider worth having a picture of. We tend to regard the archaic dignities of a community, circulated by portraiture throughout the world, quite knowingly from across a divide and another vantage. They now become emblematic of others, however cryptic, shown in all the obsessive magnitude of their distinctive forms.

How this re-evaluation was brought about is the theme of the linked chapters that follow. They trace the rise of portraitists' focus on the immediate, unique conduct of subjects who experience an unspecified pressure. Photographers grew sensitive to the historical conditioning or plight of the sitter, and could make it an almost tangible implication of their work. Edward Sheriff Curtis's portraits of the 'North American Indians' are scented with an elegaic aura, while Sebastião Salgado's migrants are grated and burdened by an atmosphere of suffering. Photographers did not hesitate to bring their own empathies to bear on the relationship between the nervous display of subjects and their inimical surroundings.

Whatever its political rationale, the attitude was justified by photographers who simply took for granted the need of their work for expressive manoeuvre.

Earlier practices had been accredited – and channelled – by their loyalty to pre-fixed categories of status and function. Main Street studio work, as well as celebrity shots and the social survey genres come to mind. The services provided by these specialized domains of visual control were not always benign and not always rigorous. An explorative spirit began to make free with this imprecision and to colonize its ambiguities. Since around the 1960s, portraiture by artists and activists augmented the field of the genres but blurred their focus. What resembled a fairly conventional treatment could well have a subversive motive. It is fair to say that Andy Warhol was among the earliest, and certainly the most influential of those artists who impelled the process, now in full spate. He continuously appropriated and manipulated media portraits, such that they became ironic commentaries on their sources.

Twentieth-century photographic portraits operated against the backdrop of modernism, a conditioning that was both anti-naturalistic and highly conceptual. When artists took to photographing their own personas, it was no accident that self-portraiture should have become such an erratic genre. Here was a private mode for indulgence of the id, where desire vied with presence in a theatre whose impersonations were deliriously fictive. Artists tried on multiple egos and sometimes emulated the traits of the opposite sex. Claude Cahun and Yasumasa Morimura, with very different motives, are masters in this field. Inevitably, such performance presents itself as a masquerade, one whose wishful import disclaims what it seems to confide. Self-portraiture nevertheless whispers of conceits and fantasies that more discreet modes were unwilling to imply.

No one can remain on a gossip circuit for very long without a proven record of indiscretion. Twentieth-century portraiture enjoys a certain glamorous repute on this score because of its unseemly depiction. I refer to charged imagery that would not have gained access within the defended borders of polite society, except that the media have loosened them. Media outlets certainly assume that celebrity has a genuine, interior self, all the more enthusiastically excavated when it may appear to be soiled. A general overview of twentieth-century portraiture uncovers a kind of insubordination replete with charm, hype, ferocity, or pathos – lurid effects produced at no great distance from the historical experience of their time. Weegee's tabloid portraits were nothing if not indiscreet, and he was applauded for them. Just as modernism retreated from appearances, so portraiture withdrew from social etiquette.

For all that they were enlarged by their brashness or tragic dimension, the images still endure more narrowly as outcomes of diplomacies frequently overstepped or fallen short. They were transactions of which the sitters' accessibility and the photographer's visual style give disparate clues. When photographers receded into their own imaginative zone, they took stock of this performance spectacle and made it their theme. It implies nothing less than a kind of 'seeing through', a penetrating gaze that retroactively intensifies our perception of the human face. I follow the clues, as if into some lost exchange, not out of friendliness to the parties involved but as a student of performances, eager to detect their fluctuations. Maybe there is an echo, here, of the original meaning of the word 'portrait', from the Latin verb *portrahere*, meaning 'to draw' or 'to draw out'.

Nevertheless, an attempt to 'draw out' personalities (by seeing through them) would be a far more questionable project than to elucidate pictures, the motive of this book. My dictionary defines 'face value' as a money value printed on bonds or financial instruments. But the phrase is also defined more figuratively as 'apparent value': do not accept promises at face value. In photographs, the promise of face values are the outcomes of occasions that had very specific cultural, entrepreneurial, political, institutional or artistic usages, which invite us in on as many tracks. An investigation of uses, for instance, is technical, while the enquiry into modes and genres needs to be historical. One such historical topic is the way typical studio portraiture was transformed in the middle of the twentieth century by one of its workers, August Sander, into a gripping study of social roles, with repercussions that continue to this day. Or, to cite another, quite different episode: how a modernist critique of humanism and individualism produced a ghostly anti-portraiture towards the end of the twentieth century. No one would deny that its technical and historical lineaments are germane to the theatre of the face. The trouble with them is that, while they are relevant, in the end they are also cold. For warmth and sensuality, I travel into another zone, that of portrait stories.

Just as it is difficult to navigate without a map, so it is hard to interpret a portrait situation without a script. One has to fathom the effects of nerves and egos on each other, through pictorial crosscurrents. However obscured their dialogue, an impression of it is central to our portrait experience. There are stories in vernacular portraiture, where an awkward narcissism seeks to disguise itself; stories in social reformist portraiture, where subjects refuse to be diminished despite their travail, loneliness, or humiliation. Some people draw support from the groups they are in; others wither when isolated from their community. Certain faces tell of resentment, others of pleasure, others are treated as a type. The pictures tremble with such possibilities, which flash out from their transactions and can be felt. Warmth comes from this feeling – a feeling of what it was like for those particular people at that time.

I fly my own colours here, as a critic. Critics vent their subjective responses, so mine will be obvious. For me, much of the eloquence of the face comes from the singularity of its action, no matter how amateur the actor. It is possible to feel more involved with a flawed actor than with the polished behaviour of a notable or a worthy (not always the same). We are separated from one another by only puny differences in genetic make-up, but we are also marked by visible distinctions of class, race, fortune, and culture. Global portraiture sets them all a-dance before us: difference and sameness jiggled in unlikely locales. But the roll call of human destinies also includes those of people who were in deep trouble, sick, maimed, or mad. Life laid down their condition to them, just then at the mercy of outsiders with cameras. The pictures that resulted should be addressed, I think, like the others, but also as dramas specifically infused with moral challenges.

In practice, the moral stance of the picture is combined with its imaginative rendering, each at risk or to profit from the other. Often that tension incites judgement, all the more so as the realist aesthetic of the genres becomes increasingly transgressive. Even as they might open their hearts, portrait photographers such as Lewis Hine or Josef Koudelka jockeyed for advantage. Even as they refined their techniques, their subject could be painful to behold. They permitted themselves many liberties, but on behalf of a candour that would be repressive to deny. Diane Arbus extended our capacity to perceive alarm or smugness, melancholy or shame, with full allowance for the embarrassment they might cause. The literal silence of photography restricts the animus of such work and also its sympathy, whatever the status or condition into which it probes. Many portraits following Arbus reveal a current of liberalism, laced with irony, and possibly a bad conscience. Yet it was to their credit that, on the whole, they neither condescended to nor romanticized their sitters. They teach that the first real step in one's understanding of others is to get beneath stereotypes, to show people who do not hesitate to exist, regardless of any generalizations about them. These picture-makers were often upright, intrepid characters, though not on the side of the angels. When I think otherwise, I say so, and explain why.

Despite their achievement or their fame, many of these photographers – sadly – could not be discussed in these pages. To select from such a busy stage, a writer must make some hard decisions. I ask readers to forgive the detours I sometimes take, in order to notice the points to which I return. Each section has a curved, thematic trajectory of its own. There were significant artists who did not fit into it, and marginal figures who did, for they typified or advanced the possibilities of the theme. I particularly regret the omission of Edward Weston, Berenice Abbott's portrait of James Joyce, Alexander Rodchenko's pictures of Miaskovsky, Henri Cartier-Bresson's mid-twentieth-century portraits, and also the work of Seydou Keïta, Malick Sidibé, Tina Barney, Judith Joy Ross, Bertien van Manen and John Deakin. They were casualties (if that is not too presumptuous a word) of expositions that took me elsewhere. A more horizontal view would have been less controversial, but would have distorted the shape and stalled the movement of the story.

When the findings of history, a discussion of uses and the reconstruction of story blend with criticism, portrait content, I hope, is enlivened. Still, the narratives within it keep on turning, like the expressions on faces, themselves. In 2005, a disfigured French woman received a successful face transplant. Greeted with wonder, this unprecedented event altered her identity, but did nothing to cancel her mortality. Portraiture brings home to us images of mortality, especially poignant when they show us the fullness of life. For our prime throws into relief all those other states which imply the uncertainty or the brevity of our promise. The images comprise a memory book of consciousness, lit or harrowed by face values that no longer exist. Yet they are contained in pictures that I think are a wonder to share.