

Allegory's Face

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My office at work is a blank face: white-washed cinder blocks. On that blank face—a face in front of which I spend many, many hours—I have taped a photographic reproduction of Simon Dinnerstein's *The Fulbright Triptych*. As I did so, I couldn't help but note that I was repeating a process the painting itself records, this hanging of art reproductions on a wall. I have never seen this painting in person; that is, I have never stood in the face of this painting. (I wonder why, even as I write this, to admit so carries within it a tone of confession.) A wall: it is a faceless face. On it we tend to hang faces, portraits of those we love, of those we admire; on the wall we hang the faces our children draw, and in the awkward contortions of those figures, we find our own children's faces. We put faces on walls so that faceless face gains expression. We give them eyes—those walls—with which to see us.

Often, after putting down a book, or finishing my notes, or sending off the latest of the endless e-mails, I look at the *Triptych* for a minute or two, and then I turn away to the next task. A triptych is a curious construction, three panels that tell a single story, but do so through suffering division. As with a nerve, there is a synapse across which the attention must leap—a form that doesn't simply invoke thinking but mimics its structure. I think about those blank spaces between the panels just as I think of those odd moments when the head shifts from one position to another, that transitional turn in which perception occurs unaccounted for, those unconscious, almost imageless moments that stitch our world into cohesiveness—a world that, paradoxically, only seems coherent by ignoring the chaotic moments of which it is constructed. I try to pay attention to those moments that seem to deny the capacity to pay attention, as futile, as almost impossible as it is to do so. When I turn away from the *Triptych*, I have a sudden flash in my head—that museum of the mind—in which I occasionally see the work of another artist. That other artist is Giuseppe Arcimboldo.

Arcimboldo created portraits out of distinct elements, discrete objects. A portrait wasn't of a person but a personification of a season or an element (the old gods).

Summer is given a face by bringing together the summer's bounty; Autumn's portrait is a collection of the fruits of late harvest: gourds, mushrooms, grape tresses, those acorns are his eyes. There is a magical principle lurking in these faces: a self made up of the world in which that self dwells, self created out of that which it also creates.

(Wordsworth: "of all that we behold / From this green earth; of all the mighty world / Of eye, and ear,—both what they half create, / And what perceive . . .")

There is in these old portraits something addictively lacking in psychology. What makes up the face is the world of which the face is made, not a constructing consciousness, but a consciousness constructed. When such a self says I it is not a word that drops out of his mouth but a leaf. (Gather together those leaves and make a portrait of Spring. When Spring speaks, perhaps you will be the word that drops from his mouth.) Bring together the objects of the world in the right way and you'll find you've made a face; it is a face that is invariably a self-portrait. This is a work we seldom know we do even as we're doing it. (Hold on, hold that thought, I need to check my e-mail.)

When I turn away from the painting, I fear the thought will be gone. Too often, it is.

Let the asterisks mark the division of the thoughts that divide the essay: the gap whose shadow life is connection. The *Triptych* offers itself as a model.

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In each panel of the *Triptych* faces abound, and when I stare at it, I find it—always through a different face—staring back at me.

I want to think about faces.

The word is both noun and verb. We must face faces; faces face us. Etymology here is telling. Latinate in source: "*facia* corresponding to form, figure, face, and related to *facere*, make, do, perform."

A face is a form and a function.

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Arcimboldo casts a shadow in the mind, creates a suspicion in the eye; one which suggests that as you walk through the day, the world could in a countless variety of ways assemble itself into a face that watches you walk by. This is not the world personified, but capable of persona. In a mind infused with an Arcimboldian vision, the field abutting the road is a face dispersed, the mountains on the horizon with the clouds mountain-like above them are a latent face. This world is also Proust's world, where the young narrator of *Swann's Way* spends his days walking down the winding paths where the hawthorn blooms, suspecting that in each thing there is a soul. This numinous world is also Emerson's world, his invocation an even more ancient idea, in which each person is but a limb or organ, or but a part of those parts, of some vaster one whose body we unwittingly construct with our own partial lives—one, also, whom we can never know. I like this feeling of subjectivity falling down into ignorance. The face here is a curious wisdom: my whole is but a part of the vaster whole, and where I find myself most complete, I am not complete; I'm partly undone, but I'm adhesive. The question is what am I next to and what is next to me? In Arcimboldo's world one must learn to ask: what face is it of which my face is part?

This world is also Simon Dinnerstein's world.

Here is the most simple, most obvious fact about *The Fulbright Triptych*: it is full of faces.

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What is the story of a face? It is wounded, and it stares at us through its wounds (eyes). It is wounded, and speaks through its wound (mouth). The face that tells a story is also a story itself. It says: there is no art without damage. Faces: we read them, and we listen.

Facing the Right Panel:

Simon Dinnerstein sits on a wicker-bottomed chair in his own painting. Note: he does not occupy the central panel. He is in the periphery of his own painting, he is not the center; and above his head, as if the embodiment of some thought, hangs a

potted spider plant; and as if springing from the plant's own thinking, is an austere portrait of an austere man; it looks as if the green fronds are his collar's ruff, but where his body should be sits our artist's body, sitting within the absence of the body of the face above him. Other faces surround them: the repeated black-and-white squares of the photo booth; snapshot of a woman holding a dog; postcard of an Assyrian king in stone relief, a child's monster spewing forth fire and destruction (though there is nothing on the page for it to destroy); portrait by a French artist of the early Renaissance in which the curtains' cloth is as exquisite, or more so, than the man painted; the identity photo on a Russian exit visa; a man and woman in erotic embrace. (Let us note, too, that the only face that turns away from us in the entire painting is this man kissing this woman, his hand between her legs, her hand around his penis.) These faces are assembled—I see them almost as a nimbus, aura, or precipitate cloud—around the artist's face.

Facing the Left Panel:

A woman weeps, but she is a painting. To be more accurate to the wonder of the *Triptych*, I should say the woman weeping is a painting of a reproduction of a painting: part of the underlying ethos of the *Triptych* is a radical mimesis in which Dinnerstein replicates not only the grain of the wood on floor and wall, not only the drapery of cloth and how in cloth-folds light catches, but more remarkably, in reproducing reproductions, he returns to them the aura of authenticity that reproduction threatens or denies. In some profound reversal of mechanical reproduction, Dinnerstein inverts the photo of the painting into the painting of the photo. (I might go further and note that the hypnotic quality of the *Triptych*, perhaps the underlying drone of its greatness, is the imperceptible work of the gaze that witnesses a return to origin, to originality—but more on that wonder later.) The weeping woman's portrait is surrounded by children's drawings, by photos, by a typographical γ , by snapshots, by a spelling test. (They all look real but aren't real, but in the world of the *Triptych* are all the more real, one might even say *ideal*, for the schism a reproduction of a reproduction creates in the gazing mind of the viewer.) Reproduction is not simply here a mechanical means: photo, postcard. Beneath the hanging plant, whose small leaves seem to be the weeping woman's tears stilled in the air and given life, sits the artist's wife, and on her lap, their baby daughter. Reproduction is also a biological fact in the painting, not

simply an issue of craft. One might assume, rightly or wrongly, that the ephemera attached to the particleboard walls are put there as inspiration, (or as reminders of previous inspiration), of those documents whose importance isn't merely in their own formal beauty, but in how that beauty influences what the artist himself must create. Here tradition comes dressed in thumbtacks; here tradition wears a little loop of transparent tape behind its head. This museum, this museum on the wall, is the living one. It is a creative allegory; but it is not the only creative aspect of the *Triptych*. For there sits the daughter on his wife's lap, the physical realization of the erotic photo pinned to the right-hand column, where the question is no longer art but life—except, that division is false. For here, too, all the life is art, all the art is life. If it is vivid it is because it is living.

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Note: at the time of painting the baby girl did not yet exist.

Time, it doesn't behave. The *Triptych* has on its walls history. In its lap it has the future.

Art: it links the past to the future. This is the nature of the creative act, that it provides a present tense that cannot cease being present, the poet's holy *is*, the painter's whole *now*, that is so only by virtue of opening within itself, within its own formal life, that creative conduit between differing worlds: what has been done and what will be done. Art is a threshold art.

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I have avoided speaking about what I most want to speak about, feeling innately that the complexity of the painting must be set up before its complexity can be explored. Here is what I've ignored—

Facing the Middle Panel:

The middle panel, by definition, separates the left panel from the right. The *Triptych's* middle panel also separates husband from wife and child.

The middle panel is occupied by the artist's table, on it the tools of his artistry, and in the black table's middle, the art piece he's working on—save that we can never here forget the aesthetic remove that is the painting's double-pulsed heart: the art piece, the engraving on which he is in the painting working on, is not the engraving, but a painting—in oil and gold leaf—of the engraving. (Reality in the *Triptych* is Daedalus's labyrinth, at the center of which the Minotaur works on his self-portrait, not from a mirror, but from a photo of himself some other person—ancestor or sacrificial victim—snapped.)

Behind and below the desk are two heaters that run on steam; such heaters sound alive when the steam moves through them, groaning, popping, an arthritic old man anthropomorphized in the room, a tutelary spirit maybe, an ancestor in the pipes, but maybe that goes too far—the painting is silent, after all.

Above the heaters are two windows, and through the windows, the German village this Jewish family, post-World War II, post-Holocaust, has come to live in for a time, to create in the midst of that history a work of art, a work of art that minds the past (exit visas, family photos) even as it predicts not only the creative future (engraving), but the procreative one (child).

Tacked or taped to the walls of the middle panel are reproduced reproductions: a Persian miniature; a photo of Georges Seurat's painting *Les Poseuses*, showing models nude before a reproduction of his *La Grande Jatte*; a letter written in black ballpoint ink; a paraphrase from Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*: "a language must be rooted in some collection of forms of life, and every particular form of life could be other than it is."

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Reproduction is one form of life—child, art—that always makes another of what already is.

Painting is philosophical work—at least it is when the painting thinks, when the painting too is some collection of forms of life.

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Among the many faces cataloged in the *Triptych* there is another face, an Arcimboldian face, and this face fills the entire middle panel. It stares at us as directly as does Simon Dinnerstein, as does his wife, as does his not-yet-existing daughter.

For eyes this face has windows. Through the windows we see what this face sees—the German village with the shingled roofs—which means this face is two-faced: it stares *at* us, but we stare *through* it.

Now we are inside the face we face. Now the painting is that face we wear over our face; I do not mean a mask. Sometimes (and this is where Dinnerstein stuns me) we must put on a face, not to hide our own, but to more fully reveal it. This painting is one such face: our eyes see through its eyes, and what we see is a world. The world—see Wittgenstein—is what we have from which to make art, and in making art, also make ourselves. We have this world; we have no other. Sometimes we cannot see this fact through our own eyes, in our own face, and so art lends us its eyes, lends us its face, not to protect or mask our own, but to remove the mask our own face has unknowingly become, to remove from our eyes the embroidered veil we have mistaken for our vision. This countenance is allegory's face (I can hear, in the steam pipes as they heat up with thought, Arcimboldo begin to laugh).

The allegory is thick because it is real: when the heat kicks on, the windows must steam, must become opaque. And then, tacked to the walls are those reproductions of works that are themselves a thinking, a thinking that inspires even as it respires, and as thought is itself a certain kind of reproduction of the world as it is perceived, so now these careful reproductions of reproductions take on their thoughtful life. Inside the face is the face's thinking.

And sitting on the table, this mouth of a table, the tools of expression wait, encircling that which they express.

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The left panel and the right panel, they stare out at us, they face our face. The middle panel is the face we put on, almost as if the artist on one side, and the artist's family on the other, must become somehow our ears. Life, then, listens. That is, life is a form of listening—of perceiving—to the thoughts listening engenders, and in engendering,

creates the art that is of the world and pours back into the world. Whose face isn't, in each season, constructed of the fruits of that season? What a strange and visionary wisdom exists inside the *Triptych*, that in the middle of our face there is a face, and on it the evidence of many other faces, each in their odd way our own. This isn't the face we speak with, but the face that speaks through us. When we speak through it we do so to hear what it is that's being said (we do this as ourselves when we are more than merely our own, when we are, so to speak, double-faced); when we see we look so as to see what it is being shown. Art makes us this audience to ourselves—at least great art does. This is not selfish, but includes the self. We return to such art not simply to be in the face of it, but to reclaim by it, through it, by means of it, our own face. Great art gives us that face, our face. We return to see it so we can see. We return to it because, in doing so, in the miracle of creative attention, that true reciprocity, it returns us to ourselves.