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MEMORY AND FACES : ANOTE ON TWO POEMS  
BY KINGSLEY AMIS & JAMES DICKEY

By

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The apparition of these faces in the crowd;  
Petals on a wet, black bow.

(Ezra Pound)

There is a limit to human experience. No matter how much we talk about creativity in art, there is only so much the imagination can invent. This leaves all artists to face the same crises, to experience the same emotions, and basically to react to situations in more or less the same way. Expression, however, is different. We speak of originality in art. What we mean is originality of expression, hardly ever of theme. Life is all there for artists to pick from. What they select and how they select their material is what we are really concerned with as admirers of their work.

There is also the problem of influences. Very often we look at a masterpiece and it "rings a bell". This or that writer, composer or painter has been influenced either by someone working in his own particular field or by other artists outside it. Examples are too numerous and too well known for me to make these my primary concern here. I have, however, raised the problem because the two poems I have chosen to deal with here are instances of this : "Departure;" by Kingsley Amis and "Faces Seen Once" by James Dickey. (1)

In both poems the main idea revolves round the sensation of anguish at the thought of faces, very dear, or seen only once, which get blurred after absence or departure. The attempt to recall the preciseness

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(1) "Faces Seen Once" from *Buckdancer's Choice* by J.Dickey.

of features grows slowly desperate when eyes "tire of peering down a narrow vista" (Amis). For one month after parting the eye is capable of remaining faithful. The poet focuses on it as it reflects the image of the absent face, rather than on the face itself. The faithfulness implied in the words "stays true" is extended to the image of the sentry freezing at his post. The natural warmth of the human eye, and the feeling instigating this warmth, are made to contrast with the coldness of this image. The eye grows lax with staring into space, and in this void, tries to recapture that absent face.<sup>(1)</sup> The image "behind the eye" gets blurred by other shifting images and thoughts. The eye remains motionless, lost in a void, then begins to grow restless in its search. The attempt to catch fixed outlines does not succeed entirely. The poet prefers to retain them "innocently blurred" in his mind.

The eye is the focal point of the poem. Many subsidiary details are centred round it. It is personified and embodies characteristics not pertaining to it.

Perhaps it is not too late to crane the eye —

(The eye, not the neck). But it is the mind's eye, and as such, possesses properties beyond the physical plane. It cannot capture tangible details because it is itself intangible. At first it sees (stanza 1, 1.2), but then, as the month runs out, *peers* (1.3) and loses sight of facial movements (Stanza 2, 1.3) in the cluttered up path of memory (Stanza 3, 1.4). Yet it is better to retain the memory of a face that is dear than have it become a mere "bland refraction of sweet mirrors". The eye is a mirror at the moment of vision, but vision becomes hazy if the object seen is no longer there.

The use of adjectives, like that of some of the verbs in the poem, is interesting (note verbs like *craves* and *cranes*, rather than "cranes itself", a kind of internal rhyme two stanzas apart). The eye is "true" "lax", "faithful", "frozen", and "corrupt", all in one breath. The avowals in a cluster, like a spray, are "wilted", the face, lost in time is "still and free". Gradually it grows into something more personal: "you, distant and small."

The poem "Departure", in four stanzas, preserves a certain formal shape, and is written mostly in iambic pentameter, with a regularity which

seems to beat time to the movement of the days as they recede into oblivion, one by one.

Very similar in theme is James Dickey's "Faces Seen Once". I do not think that the word "once" necessarily refers merely to the number of times the face is seen, but rather also perhaps, to the clinging quality of it as it persists in the memory.

Faces seen once are seen  
To fade from around one feature,  
leaving a chin, a scar, an expression  
Forever in the air beneath a streetlight,  
Glancing in boredom from the window  
Of a bus in a country town ...

The eye is again the central image of the poem, but memory blends it with other eyes, with

... Someone's blue eye  
Transforming your boyhood are weeping  
For an only son drowned in warm water  
With the French fleet of Senegal.

This eye eddies forth into a face, not young but "cancer-clamped", that of a great-grandfather. Then miraculously it relaxes and with the flashback wateriness of a motion picture, slips back through waves

Smiles again with the lips of a newsboy.

Some face is there with all its amorphousness and all its clarity, a clarity which congealed features reveal as they crop up in the street—a memory glows under a streetlamp in the dark.

The poem is very moving. The faces fade in and out of each other with the imprecision of ripples which do not quite drown everything connected with them, not the expression forever caught in the light of that same streetlamp every time it is passed by. These faces shifting as on a screen, move like the wind, escaping every time the poet tries to put a finger on them. They elude him. Mercurial concentration only brings about the grotesque image of a rusty pipe trembling in mist, about

to break into waves of fragile sand under the water's edge. Suddenly all its faces fall into the one shape of the only one face the poet wishes to see.

In your mind you touch it  
Joining that other, knowing  
That finally something must break  
Or speak.

This is a peak moment in the poem. Suddenly, however, the grotesque breaks in like a bad dream, bringing back the first image of the silver tooth (1.9). The face is one that is loved; the silver tooth makes it tangible. It is the poet's pain which stands out here : his sense of loss and the unbearable quality of his sorrow (*unbearable* here a transferred epithet which has the simultaneous effect of both shocking and moving one). Whether or not a poet has read the other's work or been influenced by it matters little. The result is never entirely the same. Dickey's poem is brilliant, like a confused dream, shapeless perhaps, if compared with Amis's poem, but then disturbed dreams have no shape. There is perhaps too much order in Amis's poem, but there is also the shared experience which both artists have translated into words. There is the sorrow and the joy.

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(1) There is something here which brings to mind the face of Helen of Troy — "that face" — in Yeats's poem "Long-legged Fly".

APPENDIX

DEPARTURE

by Kingsley Amis

For one month afterwards the eye stays true,  
And sees the other's face held still and free  
Of ornament; then fires of peering down  
A narrow vista, and the month runs out.

Too lax, this eye will crave the merit of  
A faithful sentry frozen at his post,  
And not a movement seen; yet ranges over  
For other tracts, its object loath corrupt.

Nor should I now swell to halloo the names  
Of feelings that no one needs to remember,  
Nor caper with my spray of wilted avowals  
To clutter up your path I should wish clear.

Perhaps it is not too late to crane the eye  
And find you, distant and small, but as you are;  
If not, I will retain you honestly blurred,  
Nor a bland refraction of sweet mirrors.

APPENDIX  
FACES SEEN ONCE  
by James Dickey

Faces seen once are seen

To fade from around one feature,  
Leaving a chin, a scar, an expression

Forever in the air beneath a streetlight,  
Glancing in boredom from the window  
Of a bus in a country town,  
Showing teeth for a moment only,  
All of which die out of mind, except  
One silver one.

Who had the dog-bittern ear ?  
The granulated lids ? The birthmark ?

Faces seen once change always

Into and out of each other :  
An eye you saw in Toulon  
Is gazing at you down a tin drainpipe  
You played with as a dull child  
In Roberstown, Georgia.  
There it is April; the one eye

Concentrates, the rusty pipe

Is trembling; behind the eye  
Is a pine tree blurring with tears :

You and someone's blue eye  
Transforming your boyhood are weeping  
For an only son drowned in warm water  
With the French fleet off Senegal.

( continued .... )

Soon after, the cancer-clamped face  
Of your great-grandfather relaxes,

Smiles again with the lips of a newsboy.  
Faces seen once make up

One face being organized

And changed and known less all the time,  
Unsexed, amorphous, growing in necessity  
As you deepen in age.

The brow wrinkles, a blind, all-knowing  
Questioning look comes over it,  
And every face in the street begins

To partake of the look in the eyes,

Every nose is part of that nose  
And changes the nose; every innocence and every

Unspoken-of guilt into it,  
Into the face of the one  
Encountered, unknowable person who waits  
For you all over the world  
In coffee shops, filling stations, bars,  
In mills and orphan asylums,

In hospitals, prisons, at parties,  
Yearning to be one thing.

At your death, they — it is there,

And the features congeal,  
Having taken the last visage in,  
Over you, pretesting its smile,  
The skin the indwelling no  
Color of all colors mingled,

( continued ... )

The eyes asking all thereis.

Composed, your own face trembles near

Joining that other, knowing

That finally something must break

Or speak. A silver tooth gleams;

You mumble, whispering "You

Are human, are what I have witnessed.

You are all faces seen once."

Through the bent, staring, unstable dark

Of a drainpipe. Unity hears you —

A God-roar of hearing — say only

"You are in angel's too-realized

Unbearable memoryless face. "