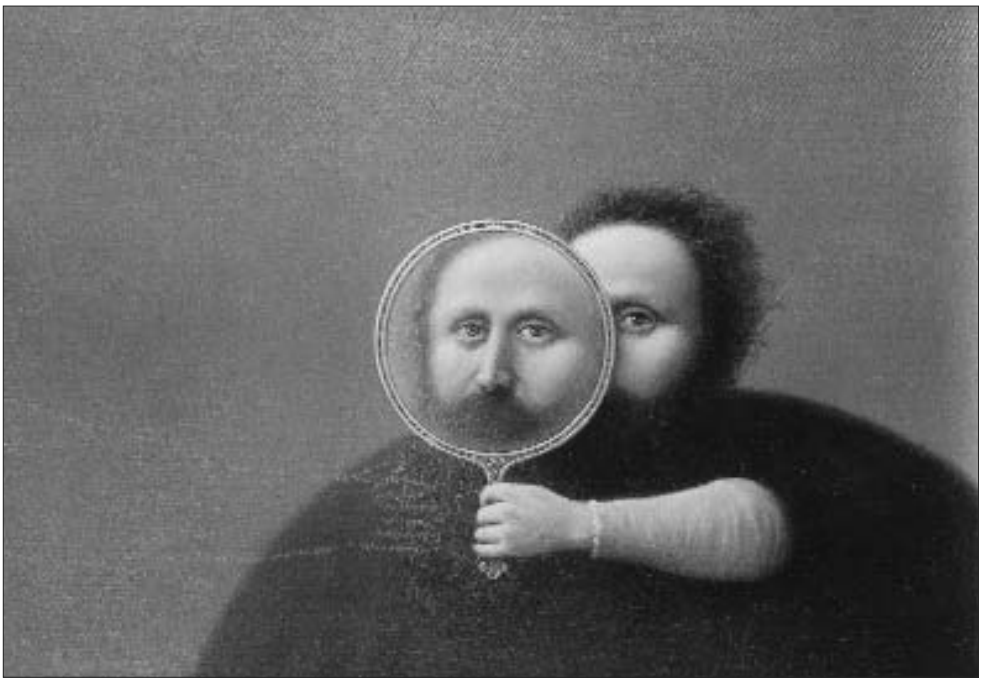

Alfredo Castaneda's* When the Mirror Dreams with Another Image *(1988)

What's in a Face?

"Loss of Face" by Charles Baxter, in *The Believer* (Nov. 2003), 826 Valencia St., San Francisco, Calif. 94110.

Though the face once seemed a window to the soul, it's gotten fogged up. How one appears no longer reveals how one is. But the blank look yields curious results for both the novelist and, possibly, the ethicist as well, writes Baxter, author of the prize-winning novel *The Feast of Love* (2000) and professor of English at the University of Minnesota.

Until around the turn of the 20th century, most people thought physiognomy reflected character. And even when it didn't (as with snub-nosed, beautiful-souled Socrates), they thought that it should. As Montaigne said, appearance should not be "the shoe made of polished leather, but the well-made shoe that reveals the shape of the foot." The Victorian novelists—Dickens, Eliot, Hardy—introduced the men and women of their books with assured and comprehensive facial interpretations.

But America in the 20th century entered what Baxter calls a "post-face" age: The exterior no longer revealed the interior. With the deal-making of the businessman came the triumph of the poker face, or the sly face, or any face but the real one. "Life has become a theater and there are actors everywhere," says Baxter. The evils of racism and other forms of discrimination caused novelists to lose faith in the ability of the face to say anything meaningful about an individual.

It's true that every child still learns to read faces as a basic social "survival skill." And even when you think that you can't judge a book by its cover, secretly you "may believe that you still can." In the literary world, too, there are some holdouts. Saul Bellow, for example, still assumes "that you can tell who a person is simply by looking at him (or her) carefully enough." Jennifer Egan's *Look at Me* (2001) and Siri Hustvedt's *What I Loved* (2003) are notable for their "considerable concentration on what remains of the face."

Yet those are exceptions. The absence of the face from the modern novel can't be explained as a simple byproduct of literary innovation. Writers may have cast their lot

with Henry James, who thought that you never "get the full sense of the person at first glance." Or maybe dwelling on the details of the face has "acquired a creepy voyeuristic overtone." Then, too, we've always known that "clothes and body language may be a sign of artifice . . . now [that] the face and the rest of the body may be completely 'engineered.'"

Baxter sympathizes with the modern skepticism toward appearances. But just as publications should continue to print photographs and painters paint portraits, novelists should keep physiognomic description in their literary repertoire, he argues, especially description of those faces that "we don't want to see . . . at all." The face is what most brings the sense of humanity—if no other characteristic—to an audience's attention. Baxter cites the French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, who "argues that the face is the unique physical presence that provokes the [audience's] obligations" to the person with the face. It's always ineluctably particular, never abstract or theoretical. Nobody's just another pretty face.

OTHER NATIONS

Saudi Arabia's War Within

A Survey of Recent Articles

Did the two suicide bombings in Riyadh last year, in which 52 people were killed, turn Saudi Arabia into a resolute U.S. partner in the war against terrorism? Washington claims so, and the ensuing crackdown on radical Islamic militants in the kingdom seems to support the claim.

But the basic situation hasn't changed much, maintains Michael Scott Doran, a professor of Near Eastern studies at Princeton University, writing in *Foreign Affairs* (Jan.–Feb. 2004). The powerful Saudi religious establishment continues to have the same enemies list as Al Qaeda (except that Al Qaeda's list also includes the Saudi royal family). The religious leaders are locked in an intense struggle with Western-oriented elements of the elite. Crown Prince Abdullah, a de facto regent during the long illness of his octogenarian half-brother King Fahd, "tilts toward the liberal reformers and seeks a rapprochement with the United States." His powerful half-brother, Prince Nayef, the interior minister and master of the secret police, sides with the clerics, says Doran.

So intense is the struggle, Doran believes, that it's quite possible that "the jihad against the United States is actually a continuation of domestic politics by other means." Saudi Arabia's fundamentalist Wahhabi religious establishment "hates the Shiites more than any other group, including Americans or even Jews," regarding them as dangerous heretics. Radical Wahhabi leaders believe that the Shiite minorities in Saudi Arabia and other countries are conspiring with the United States and Jews to eradicate their "true" Islam. By inciting hatred against the United States and linking Shiites to a foreign demon, the Wahhabis are able to weaken reformers and other domestic foes who would ease up on the Shiites.

Economic crisis is exacerbating Saudi Arabia's tensions, according to Doran. "The economy cannot keep pace with population growth, the welfare state is rapidly deteriorating, and regional and sectarian resentments are rising to the fore." Political reform is needed, but "a profound cultural schizophrenia" prevents agreement on specifics.

In 1981, when oil was selling for nearly $40 a barrel, the annual per capita income in the kingdom was more than $28,000; oil is now back near $40, but income is below $7,000. The difference is due, in part at least, to a population explosion, says Robert Baer in *The Atlantic Monthly* (May 2003). Saudi Arabia's birthrate is about 2.5 times the U.S. rate. Half the population of about 19 million (not counting five million foreign workers) is under 18.

"Saudi Arabia operates the world's most advanced welfare state, [an] anti-Marxist non-workers' paradise," writes Baer, a former U.S. Central Intelligence Agency operative. "Saudis get free health care and interest-free