

## BEARDS: THE GRAIN OF THE FACE

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For most men, every morning's soap opera rehearsed in the mirror on the skin around the chin is a tussle between culture and nature. To shave or to let grow, to assert or to accept: ticklish decisions guided by history, fashion, belief and self-image, each new day's re-recognised reflection throwing back the realisation that from one sunrise to the next, change sprouts relentlessly as a natural outgrowth defies the visage of our smoothed-out world. Matted into the fibres of the beard lies a web of intricate, hushed questions around the presentation of the self and its teeming otherness. While many of these might equally be expressed in cultivations such as hairstyles, pubic hair, hair from moles or on the toes (and here reluctantly leaving aside the nuanced problems of the moustache), none of these have quite the unsettled character of the beard: as public as can be yet marginal at the same time, proclaiming difference, pushing out in the unexpected place as dune grass sprouts from shifting sand to announce a transition. With the beard, the delicate aesthetics of self-presentation and identity, focused above all around the facial features, is both extended and threatened by the disorder of its growth.

Nothing shows this better, perhaps, than early photographic portraits of bearded men, the new medium picking out every bristle and snip: from the faces in endless images of stern, self-assertive and magnificently still gentlemen or labourers twist a hundred opulent styles of facial hair, jutting into the spaces beyond the jaw. If the nineteenth century, as Walter Benjamin argued in his *Arcades Project*, is the age when the ornament and excess of interior design become institutionalised, then this is also the era when beards – whose style in

previous eras had been dictated by stricter fashions – morph into furniture for the head. Phantasmagoria of the face: sproutings, tufts, bibs and flanges of hair line the margins where physiognomy turns to fantasy.

The opulent growths sported by members and contestants in today's beard and moustache clubs and championships attest to the continued fascination of extravagant facial hair, but in many Western societies (unlike those lands and cultures where it primarily carries religious significance), the workaday contemporary beard leads a marginal, ambivalent existence. (I remember hearing long ago - it scarcely matters if this is true - that in socialist Albania it was illegal to have a beard. I pictured dissidents in deep hiding, covertly cultivating whiskers and sideburns, and wondered at what point 5 o'clock shadow became a matter for the secret police.) For the adult male, a beard is perhaps the single most visible marker of sexual difference; but as well as gender, issues of class, social standing, working practice and taste are all reflected in both the design and the taboos around beards. A sign of maturity, beards have long been associated with dignity, knowledge and insight, and the choices of the late Classical world – a beard for the philosopher, a clean-shaven face for the soldier, the flowering of the intellect versus the discipline of the limbs – continues today in a world where facial hair is often the prerogative of specific intellectual and subcultural domains. As though to guarantee the beard's ambiguous status, however, in Western culture it is also saturated with very different values. The pirate, the circus strongman, the farmer: beards as untrammelled bodily power, as virility, as a force of nature and a disdain for the preened identity. Then there are the outsiders' beards, the unkempt beards of outcasts, hermits, tramps and visionaries, the desperate beards of incarceration and alienation...

For popular representations, above all since the 1960s, certain styles of beard have also come to signal the fervour of ideas, radical passion, revolutionary commitment. Images of the melancholy Russian beard – Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, bristling with an intensity bordering on madness – prepare for the great pantheon of revolutionary beards: Lenin's fanatical goatee, Che Guevara and Castro's intense, brooding wisps, and towering over them the magnificent, rampant manes of Marx and Engels. This strand of political beards signal credentials and commitment, gravitas and thought only for a utopian tomorrow. (By corollary the clean-shaven jaw, the face of business, the obsessive control and suppression of nature's will by the razor becomes the face of capitalism, where to shave means a desperate attempt to sculpt

the self, to put the irrational soul to the blade: an incision between vulnerable ego and grubby world.) This delicate visual language is crudely primitivised in today's mass media caricatures opposing clean-shaven Western political leaders with their designated opponents. Here, in implicitly racist terms, the swarthily hirsute signals the terrorist, fanatic or bandit as though letting grow a beard betrays some uncontrolled or unknowable excrescence bursting from the head, an unreason at the seat of reason, the *barbe* in barbarian. In a society dominated by flattened-out images, facial hair sprouts outwards against the paper, itches the pixels.

All of these representations feed the widespread belief that the beard represents a mask, beyond the licensed surface of the public self of an identity card picture, at the very spot that must be most ethical: a duplicity (some double-ness of the self). Unchecked in a primitive return of Mr Hyde, it inches out from the smooth skin that differentiates us from the bestial and covers the public face as though in a curse, like Sleeping Beauty hidden behind the forest of thorns. In vintage photographs or website thumbnails, facial hair seems a scribble on the chin, a de-facing. More than a mask, a masquerade: facial hair plays at reversals of identity, watches them grow from within, tracked each morning at the edges of the mirror. Gathering around the mouth, nose and ears, at the intersection of the senses, it is easy to mistake it as muffling messages, adding unfamiliar accents to language, an interference. More than this, however, the beard sketches a fanning out of sensory mechanisms, above all a projection of oration as it gradually extends the body: the beard is a language curling towards its secret destiny from follicles deep within the tissues, a tiny crystallisation of the breath or the utterance, just as at the other extreme of change stalactites secrete the whispered water-borne words of the earth into the void.

Thus, with a nod to Roland Barthes, we might characterise these hairy forms as the Grain of the Face: that *élan* where that intangible part of identity becomes material, speech to be grasped, twisted or stroked. In this moment, in a world where idealised body representations would turn us into ever more bland and indistinguishable images, the problem of stubble – of that slow emergence where one thing turns to another, not yet beard, no longer just face - is a moment when the self starts to sing a song with a texture unmistakably its own.

## **Images**

Edmund Płoski, early Polish socialist activist exiled in 1885 for 20 years on Sakhalin Island, the author's maternal great-grandfather.

František Dryje, poet, author and essayist, member of the Group of Czech and Slovak Surrealists.