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Faces in Defoe's *Roxana*

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Roxana's chameleon-like narrator constantly re-invents herself and reveals a relish for and a mastery of disguise, in the literal sense. Yet at the very moment when she parades in her infamous Turkish dress before a masked audience, Roxana is perhaps the least disguised of all in the sense that unlike the others, she offers her naked face for everyone to see and admire:

I had no mask, neither did I paint, and yet I had the day of all the ladies that appeared at the ball, I mean of those that appeared with faces on. As for those masked, nothing could be said of them, no doubt there might be many finer than I was... (*Roxana* 180¹)

This is not the only time that she insists on the purely natural quality of her beauty; she previously referred to her face as "the mere work of nature" (*R* 72). But this passage encapsulates the double movement which characterizes so much of Roxana and of *Roxana*, built as it is upon a tension in which Roxana's face arguably plays a crucial role and which takes several forms: between exposure (the face wears no make-up) and concealment (the body is disguised), revelation and hiding behind a mask, naming and anonymity, the natural and the artificial, etc. In this she resembles Defoe's other fictional autobiographers, as Homer O. Brown explains:

Defoe's narrators seem obsessed with concealing themselves, but the impulse leading them towards exposure appears equally strong. Complete concealment is impossible, perhaps not even desirable. On the one hand there is the insistence on building a faceless shelter around the self, but, on the other, a recurring compulsion to move out into the open².

But the traditional dichotomy between face and facelessness, face and mask (another formulation of the one which opposes self and persona), is somehow subverted in the very passage I just quoted, which thanks to the phrase "with faces on" also suggests a form of interchangeability or at least of equivalence between "face" and "mask", two terms which at first sight have antithetical meanings. At Roxana's balls, one can almost indifferently put on a mask or a face, bringing onto highly unstable ground the whole question of identity and presenting a very modern view of the self as performative, as a series of roles or masks as

¹ The references are to Oxford's World Classics edition, hereafter abbreviated as "*R*"; almost all extracts come from the digital version available on www.gutenberg.org, hence the differences in spelling, punctuation and capitalization.

² "The Displaced Self in the Novels of Daniel Defoe," *ELH* 38 (1971): 562-90, 569.

several critics have argued³. But Roxana's repeated definition of herself as a whore also hints at the need for a more stable view of the self, and it is this pull into two opposite directions that I would like to explore here from the perspective of Defoe's complex approach to the human face, more specifically to the female face.

I will begin with the analogy between face and mask in the passage quoted above, an assimilation warranted by the dictionary, in which the phrase "put on a face" is synonymous with "put on a mask or a disguise". A caveat first: given the supposedly highly moral context set up by the preface, we should not endow too quickly the concepts of "face" and "mask" with the moral values they are often associated with, in the West at least⁴, where "face" is equated with truth and receives a positive value while "mask" stands for lying, a negative value which the word "grimace" rather than "mask" carries in the novel⁵. The first two examples of Defoe's use of the phrase "put on a face" in *Roxana* invite us to use caution in this regard:

he [*the Brewer when threatened with bankruptcy*] bustled a little about it, indeed, at first, and put on a face of business (R 9)
But now he [*the Landlord*] put on the face, not of a man of compassion only, but of a man of friendship and kindness (R 26)

They concern very different characters, the foolish husband and the reliable landlord, to very different effect: the Brewer only pretends to be the businessman he most certainly is not while the Landlord will prove to be a true and kind friend to Roxana. Rather than providing a moral commentary or explaining that their appearance, of business or of kindness, corresponds to a hypothetical essence, Roxana's formulations stop at the surface of these characters, suggesting that access to truth is limited to that surface, that it is impossible to go beyond what is offered to view, to reach the interiority of these characters. She makes the same point when discussing her own situation later on in the novel:

I had begun a little, as I have said above, to reflect upon my manner of living, and to think of putting a new face upon it, and nothing moved me to it more than the consideration of my having three children, who were now grown up; and yet that while I was in that station of life I could not converse with them or make myself known to them; and this gave me a great deal of uneasiness [.....] "Why, Amy," says I,

³ Amongst other,s Elizabeth Napier in *Defoe's Major Fiction, Accounting for the Self*, Newark, U of Delaware P, 2016, Part Two: "'Meer Manage': The Performing Self".

⁴ On this subject, see Hans Belting, « Le Visage et le masque », *Faces. Une Histoire du visage*, trad. Nicolas Weill, Paris, Gallimard, 2017.

⁵ See for instance "How did my blood flush up into my face when I reflected how sincerely, how affectionately, this good-humoured gentleman embraced the most cursed piece of hypocrisy that ever came into the arms of an honest man! His was all tenderness, all kindness, and the utmost sincerity; mine all grimace and deceit" (R 300).

"is it not possible for me to shift my being from this part of the town and go and live in another part of the city, or another part of the country, and be as entirely concealed as if I had never been known?"
"Yes," says Amy, "I believe it might; but then you must put off all your equipages and servants, coaches and horses, change your liveries—nay, your own clothes, and, if it was possible, your very face." (R 207-208)

Here again Roxana limits herself to the surface, considering change from a purely external perspective⁶: she does not write about changing her manner of living, but about changing the face, *the appearance* of her manner of living⁷. This is of course to be linked to her entire career: instead of trying to change herself and truly reform, which would require a minimum of introspection, Roxana merely puts on one disguise after the other, and we'll return to the question of her superficiality below.

However, the move from the figurative to the literal sense of "face" in the second paragraph of the passage quoted above articulates the fundamental problem at the heart of such a conception (of the self, of knowledge, of self-knowledge): "you must... change your liveries—nay, your own clothes, and, if it was possible, your very face" (R 208). Defoe almost juxtaposes the two here to reveal how irreconcilable they are by contrasting the versatility of the one (the figurative) with the unescapable fixity of the other (the literal). For as Amy points out, it is literally impossible to have several faces; "I'll be a Quaker today" does not amount to "I'll have a Quaker's face today". To the figurative or artificial faces I just mentioned, to Roxana's disguises corresponds only one literal or natural face, which acts as a marker of identity and in Roxana's case introduces a form of stability, of singularity, in her shape-shifting plurality. That accomplished actress and mistress of deception, who self-consciously refers to her career as "the vast Variety of Scenes that I had acted my Part in" (R 200), can be recognized thanks to her face, which metonymically functions as her identity. The same goes for instance for the thieves who attack and murder the jeweller. They remain shrouded in anonymity and escape punishment largely because their faces remain hidden: "as to their faces, that he could know nothing of, because they had all of them masks on" (R 54). Seeing Roxana's face is "knowing" her, in the sense of recognizing her, of knowing who she is, whatever is the name that she goes by at the time; but also in a deeper sense of "knowing"

⁶ As Elizabeth Napier explains, "When Roxana [...] speaks of her intended reformation after her dismissal of the lewd lord as "putting a new Face upon it" (207), her use of the metaphor of the mask reveals her tragic inability to conceive of change in any other than a superficial way. Her Element is superficial and sensual... such a focus on outsides, however often she regards herself in the glass or in Amy or Susan, will do little more than postpone the work of self-analysis in which she must engage" (*Defoe's Major Fiction, op. cit.*, 46).

⁷ Cf. also "I must go back here, after telling openly the wicked things I did, to mention something which, however, had the face of doing good" (R 188): is Roxana implying that this "something" – inquiring about her children and trying to help them – appears to be good but is not, appears to be good and is good, or is she merely focusing on surface again and implying nothing at all?

as we will see later. She holds up twice a fan before her face to avoid being identified, first by the Brewer, then by the Dutch Merchant:

I could not be deceived; I passed so near him that I almost brushed him with my clothes, and looked him full in the face, but having my fan before my face, so that he could not know me. (R 85)

"Well, well," says she, "I would have him see thee for all that, as plainly as thou hast seen him." "No, but he shan't," says I, "for I am sure he don't know me in this dress, and I'll take care he shan't see my face, if I can help it;" so I held up my fan before my face, and she saw me resolute in that, so she pressed me no farther...[*Quakeress*] though thy tongue will not confess it [*that you know him*], thy face does. (R 218)

When she playfully pretends to be a Muslim, on account of the Turkish dress she's wearing, her face, her "Christian's face" (R 175), gives her away. Faces can betray, as Roxana well knows: "What my face might do towards betraying me I knew not, because I could not see myself" (R 284). She cannot "escape her face", as the Quakeress acknowledges: "though thy tongue will not confess it, thy face does". The Quakeress reads on Roxana's face the confession that is not forthcoming in words – the irony being that in the general context of the novel, since the reader obviously cannot "see" Roxana's face but only her words on the page, the extent of her "confession" remains extremely limited.

The face may reveal what language does not or cannot express, or will not (as in this instance). On numerous occasions such as this one, Roxana's face transparently conveys emotions which she is reluctant to put into words, although sometimes her facial expressions require interpretation and explanation, preventing any attempt at generalization:

he [*the Prince*] perceiv'd Tears to run down my Cheeks; My Dear, says he, aloud, what mean these Tears? My Lord, said I, after some little Check, for I cou'd not speak presently, I beseech you to believe me, they are not Tears of Sorrow, but Tears of Joy (R 72)

Nonetheless, very often her tears and blushes⁸ reveal what she tries to conceal but to no avail (or so she says), as in the following instance:

I could never hear him say so, but though secretly it pleased me, yet it so closely touched me another way that I could not refrain sighing, and sometimes tears; and one time in particular it so affected me that *I could not conceal* it from him; but when he saw tears run down my face, *there was no concealing* the occasion from him; he was too importunate to be denied in a thing of that moment; so I frankly answered [...] (R 80-81, emphasis added).

⁸ Roxana blushes at several point, e.g. "We had some very agreeable conversations upon this subject, and once he told me, with a kind of more than ordinary concern upon his thoughts, that he was greatly beholden to me for taking this hazardous and difficult journey, for that I had kept him honest. I looked up in his face, and coloured as red as fire" (R 103-04); "I coloured as red as blood itself could make a face look" (R 173), etc.

This represents a degree of transparency surprising in the most opaque of Defoe's narrators⁹, but the legibility of Roxana's face is again limited to the surface, her face lending itself only to a surface reading, not unlike her narrative which is very difficult to see through. It occurs only in specific situations, as she reacts to a particularly overwhelming feeling; the Prince or the Quakeress read one expression on Roxana's face, not her personality, which remains hidden from them (she lies to them both and is not detected). Like Roxana herself when she uses the phrase "put on a face" for the Brewer and the landlord or in other circumstances, as we have seen, they stop at the surface and do not access what a modern reader would call her "inner self", which is a problematic concept in Defoe anyway¹⁰. At this point I'd like to replace briefly these considerations in a wider context regarding the symbolical value of the face in the early 18th century, a time when it was not uncommon to try and decipher personality traits on a person's face¹¹, to render the human face legible and understandable, a reliable signifier for the character's signified. Physiognomy represented an epistemological system assimilating face and personality; you could know a person, not just their identity but their character and propensities, by analysing their facial features. This perspective would be granted a mock-scientific veneer at the end of century with Lavater's theories, but at the beginning of the century, and especially in fiction, the correspondence between what a person looks like and his or her worth takes on a moral dimension: to a person's outer beauty corresponds, or should correspond, his or her inner beauty (increasingly "her" as the century moves on). Of course Roxana's great beauty conceals a morally despicable personality. But Defoe articulates a reflexion that goes far deeper than the commonplace "beware a pretty face", he does not merely stress the opposition between appearance and essence, he interrogates the epistemological assumptions upon which such a system of reading human beings is based. Furthermore, he explores the impact of Roxana's beauty on her life and on her character, questioning the link between a woman's face and her fate.

He does so by clearly taking the human face outside of the natural realm. Contrary to the body, which needs to be dressed to become culturally and socially acceptable, and in spite of Roxana's insistence on her face as "the meer work of nature" (R 72), the face in general and Roxana's in particular are not natural givens but cultural constructs, a system of signs, as

⁹ When Roxana dissimulates, there are no direct, explicit references to her face, see p. 260 for instance.

¹⁰ As Elizabeth Napier writes, "inwardness is a concept which remains largely alien to Defoe, at least in its modern psychological sense. Defoe in part still clings to a paradigm of the self that figures it as external... Modern readers, with their gaze directed inward, can only go so far, as a result, in a quest for [D's characters] "true" selves." (*Defoe's Major Fiction, op. cit.*, p. xxi). This is of course a particularly valid point for a character who claims to speak of herself "as if I was speaking of another-body" (R 6). See also Peter New, "Why Roxana can Never Find Herself", *MLR*, 91: 2 (Apr., 1996), 317-329.

¹¹ See Belting, *Faces, op. cit.*, 104

various philosophers and art historians in particular have shown¹². This does not come only from the fact that its expressions are construed as signs for others to interpret, as we have seen; more fundamentally, the complete lack of details concerning Roxana's supposedly famous face (eye or hair colour, for instance) and its relative imperviousness to age grant it an abstract quality reminiscent of the artifice of a mask (which does not age either), leading readers to consider it and her in the light of an abstraction that is "beauty" or "woman" rather than a particularity. Faces play a symbolic role, which is borne out in the novel by the only face which stands out, apart from Roxana's: the Jew who harasses Roxana is gratified with "a devil's face" (R 115); in other words, Roxana sees his natural face through the prism of what she imagines of his personality. As for Roxana herself, the symbolic value she attributes to her own face, the prism through which she sees it, is made perfectly clear when she realizes that her Prince doubts the purity of her skin: "I put a Handkerchief into his Hand, and taking his Hand into mine, I made him wipe my Face so hard, that he was unwilling to do it, for fear of hurting me" (R 72). The violence of this gesture and the pain she inflicts upon herself by proxy in the process of cleaning her face are particularly striking, especially since it is a twofold process, first with the handkerchief and then with the "Cup-full of hot Water" she asks for in the next paragraph. It is difficult not to think of the cleansing role of water in an episode perhaps reminiscent of Lady Macbeth's compulsive hand-washing: "will these hands ne'er be clean?" (V, 1) becomes "will this face ne'er be clean?" Roxana's face, not hands, is the instrument of the sin she tries to scrub away, all the more so as she will refer to her "dirty History" two pages later (R 75, emphasis added). Her alluring face becomes the very mark of her whoring, making the saying especially apt for her: her face really is her fortune.

The saying is true in the two meanings of "fortune". First, as regards wealth, I don't need to develop that the pleasure of contemplating her beautiful face and of possessing her desirable body enable her to run a hugely profitable trade; the link of character with coinage and the commodification that it entails¹³, the assimilation of Roxana to a sum of money, are sufficiently evident for me to move to the other sense of fortune, destiny. The moment that seals Roxana's fate, when she chooses to be a prostitute, occurs not with the Landlord (I will not go into the reasons why she sleeps with him here) but with the Prince, at one very specific moment when he invites her to look at her face in a mirror:

¹² See for instance "Visagéité" in *Mille Plateaux* by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Paris, Minuit, 1980.

¹³ Deidre Lynch in particular has argued that Defoe's construction of character links his "persons" with the commodity market in which their search for stability unfold. "We are, in part, drawn again and again to Defoe because of the ontological unpalatability of this premise and the fact that it may be true", Napier comments (*Defoe's Major Fiction, op. cit.*, xxii).

He stood up, and taking me by the hand, led me to a large looking-glass, which made up the pier in the front of the parlour. "Look there, madam," said he; "is it fit that that face" (pointing to my figure in the glass) "should go back to Poitou? No, madam," says he; "stay and make some gentleman of quality happy, that may, in return, make you forget all your sorrows;" and with that he took me in his arms, and kissing me twice, told me he would see me again, but with less ceremony. (R 59-60)

Even though the Prince designates her figure, it is her face that he draws attention to, a face which by metonymy comes to represent Roxana herself and determines her "career" of "making gentlemen happy" – the repetition of the verb "take" and the kisses in this short passage leaves no doubt as to the nature of the happiness to be conferred. Her face is her fate, seeing her is knowing her indeed. Beyond that, to return to that crucial scene, the Prince invites Roxana to look at herself in a mirror, and – since they're both looking – to look at herself being looked at, construing her as turned towards the outside, not merely subjecting herself to the "male gaze" but identifying her perspective with it (note the objectification in "that face" – she is looking upon herself as an object to be looked at). She is asked to identify with the surface of a face seen in a mirror, not even *her* face, a part of her own body, but "that face", which eventually reduces her to a surface clearly external to herself, or, to put it differently, to pure spectacle, a view of herself which she endorses and to which the numerous *tableaux* in which she describes herself throughout the novel testify¹⁴ – this point has been addressed in particular by James Maddox, who insists on the role played by her time with the Prince in Roxana's self-formation and definition¹⁵.

Because of the abstract quality of Roxana's face, such a line of reasoning may be extended to the female face in general, an interpretation suggested by the research conducted by film critics such as Laura Mulvey or art historians like John Berger. Mulvey's famous analysis of how women characters on-screen are coded with "to-be-looked-at-ness"¹⁶ concerns primarily Hollywood film actresses but her claims can be extended to all women in

¹⁴ E.g. R 16-17.

¹⁵ "... during [Roxana's] time [with the Prince] her growing consciousness of her beauty comes to reinforce her already well-developed attention to the observing eyes of others. Roxana, acutely sensitive to the possible scorn in others' eyes, longs to see admiration beaming from the eyes of one so prestigious as the prince and so she becomes victim to that other-directedness which is the occupational hazard of the very beautiful... Exactly because she both fears and reveres the eyes of others, Roxana labors to present herself as a polished, two-dimensional, depthless surface; she wishes to be looked at, but never seen into. The strategy of this self-presentation is especially clear in her account of the three years she spent living in absolute seclusion in Paris as the prince's mistress. [...] the fascinating glimpses that Roxana gives of those years reveal [...] an intensely public world, in which the prince is spectator at Roxana's formal self-displays. Each of the lovers, after all, exists for the other as a polished porcelain surface: Roxana is in love with the prince's rank, while the prince is in love with Roxana's great beauty. There is in Roxana's descriptions of these scenes nothing like our idea of a "private self"; instead, their three years are spent in a constant display of their different forms of prestige." James Maddox, "On Defoe's *Roxana*", *ELH*, 51: 4 (Winter, 1984), 672-73.

¹⁶ In "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", *Screen* 16: 3, October 1975, 6-18.

the line of art historian John Berger's contention that men and women have a different kind of presence, or more accurately, that their presence has been construed differently over the centuries, that they have learned to see themselves in the world differently. Berger explains that to be a woman in culture is "to be looked at":

Men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object—and most particularly an object of vision: a sight. (*Ways of Seeing*, London, Penguin, 1972, 47)

To conclude, I'd like to raise the question whether the face of such a woman is still a face. It no longer is that most human of all body parts, the part that connects us to other human beings, an interface between interiority and exteriority; on the contrary, its being perceived as purely two-dimensional prevents us partly from recognizing it as human, stopping us at the threshold of the human, at the "pre-face", so to speak. What should be familiar is defamiliarized. The more naked the face, and thus theoretically the more open to scrutiny, the more uncanny (in the Freudian sense) the experience of the viewer; this feeling accounts to some extent for the uneasy experience that is reading *Roxana*, a novel whose narrative may be dressed up like its heroine's body, but where the surface of the narrator's words alienates readers instead of provoking their sympathy.