The Gay Face (and Its Abilities)

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Just when I was getting completely through dried out, balled up, anxious and empty like a gulch in a John Huston movie I went to see Strange Interlude and began to go away for a weekend on the beach into that theatre again and again now I have a pot of basil a friend gave me and am reading Keats again and realize that everything is impossible in a different way well so what, but there’s a difference between a window and a wall again.

-Frank O’Hara, 1963
“Again, John Keats, or, The Pot of Basil”

I.

In August of 2005, Out Magazine ran an article about prosopagnosia, “also known as face blindness.” This was early on in what would become something of a mini-wave of U.S. popular media coverage of this condition, and a continually developing mini-wave of academic interest too. “Like regular blindness,” the article reports, “face blindness is a problem of recognition rather than recollection: The prosopagnosiac can see faces the same way an illiterate person can see words—without making any sense of them” (Clark 42-46).

Out was covering prosopagnosia because of suggestions that the condition may “disproportionately affect gays.” A few scientists were proposing that a region of the

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brain crucially involved in prosopagnosia is “also linked to sexual orientation.” Interestingly, the piece fixates on two particular reasons—amongst many potential others that go unmentioned—that the reported data is questionable. First, “people who come out about their face blindness may be the same people who would also come out about things like homosexuality.” Second, “Most prosopagnosiacs fail to recognize the condition even in themselves.”

In narrating the story of gay prosopagnosiac “Bill,” and attempting to illustrate both of the above, the article bewilderingly entangles Bill’s recognition of his sexuality with his recognition of this other condition. In his living-out of the purportedly universal endeavor of “perpetually wondering who we should love”—and, in the process, having to deal with the matter of individual corporeal qualities of all sorts (including, for example, the absence or presence of a penis)—Bill reportedly relied upon the hair-length, rather than the facial features, of his potential sexual partners. According to the meanderings of the analysis provided by this Out article, somewhere here lies a fuzzy connection between the circumstances of the gay male and the circumstances of the prosopagnosiac.

Almost six years later, in May of 2012, Out Magazine turns out—with a different article, this time on one of its blogs—to be on the other end of a distinct, but related, discussion trend. This one involves “gay face,” which is a set of recognizable gay facial characteristics and/or a propensity among gay men—and, according to some of the research, other people too—to recognize (other) men who are gay “by face alone.” This ability had been posited by a few teams of researchers in the previous few years, and then reported on through various outlets, including Jesse Bering’s Scientific American blog on gay sexuality in February of 2009. (Between 2009 and 2012, at least one relatively well-known U.S. male comedian also began to integrate his impressions of a gay face into the stump of his act, and this may not be unrelated.) Three years later, a May 2012 Out.com posting asks in frustrated astonishment, right in its title, “Are We Really Discussing Gay Face?”

Gay men have apparently, somehow and at some point, become both recognizable and inscrutable via purported relations between their faces and recognition. Evidently, this has happened in quite a confusing manner, and in what is perhaps a new way. Relations between gay men, their faces, and recognition now seem—at least at times, and maybe in particular ways—to be interestingly self-negating ones: even where and when this recognition is understood as non-recognition or as mis-recognition, there’s a concatenation of impulses to recognize it as such. And, entailed in that very concatenation, there are also impulses not to. This is uniquely enabling, as well as uniquely disabling.
Certain reconvergences of ethics and aesthetics in critical/cultural analysis and theory, in the wake of queer theory’s influence, call out for consideration in tandem with this array of involved and intersecting fields. For example, as attention has turned from Volume I of Foucault’s *History of Sexuality* to the model of Foucault’s later volumes (and to his other, later writings and interviews), new dilemmas have arisen. Involved are not only complications about, and tensions between, the production and negation of information and knowledge where gay men are concerned, but also complications about—and tensions between—experience and visibility. These complications are appearing on and as the face of the gay male body. The resulting analytical dilemmas, or challenges, also involve issues around the opennesses of gay men, or what we might call gay availabilities (Frank O’Hara’s windows being one useful “model”), as opposed to the withdrawals, closures, defenses, and boundaries of male homosexuality (O’Hara’s walls). We have here stepped into relations between: form and force; the way things feel and the way things look; concreteness and immateriality; eclecticism and single-mindedness; directness and elusiveness; ambivalence and end-directness; lucidity and vagueness; and proclamation and allusion.

Leo Bersani, who is a leading explorer of these challenges—in work that preceded his more recent organization of the entangled sets of issues around terms such as “impersonal narcissism”1—repeatedly makes much of the idea that homosexuality is not reducible to homosexual desire, but is an expression of “a homo-ness that vastly exceeds it.” Without getting traditionally metaphysical (*avec* all that baggage), without becoming traditional Aristotelian substantializes (and having to become scientists of a funky sort, which some materialist directions seem currently to demand), and without falling back completely, or simply, into the same sort of aestheticism from which contemporary gay men allegedly emerged in the first place with figures such as Wilde (and with Modernity in general)—without falling back epistemologically, that is, into a problematically naive modernist tendency to rely on our own judgment, or intuition, or taste—here is what might be asked: how is such a “space of vast excess” to be conceptualized as envisaged (and as impelled to appear) in an array of distinct but related fields of language, logic, action, thought and capability, on and as the dynamic (but clearly already captured) face of gay maleness?

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II.

In the middle of his nuanced 1998 book, *Place For Us: Essay on the Broadway Musical*, D.A. Miller does something surprising. He opens the second chapter with a literary portrait of something that, back in the Eighties, we would have called a “bar fixture.” This one is a show tune queen in a piano bar. As an aspect of Miller’s critical method in this book and elsewhere—which, it is important to note, is partly autobiographical—the move toward such a flagrant and nouveau style seems self-consciously derived largely from Roland Barthes’ later work, as well as from Derridean deconstruction and Proust and, of course, from gay aestheticism in general.

While the other chapters of Miller’s book incorporate different visual materials, this chapter, and only this chapter, is decorated with Michael Perelman’s mid-Nineties illustrations. One of these, entitled *Broadway Bound*, is also used on the cover of the book. The Perelman sketches or paintings are all very much the same: images of a “dapper” male figure performing, solo in the frame, in coat and tails. This may or may not be the same “character” from image to image. “He” is generally in the course of one grand gesture or another, and generally against a stark, faintly studio-like background. Bear in mind, from the outset, that the figure in these images is not necessarily the figure that Miller is writing *about* in the below text, unless we mean the more “French” sense of the word “about” (connotations of “around”).

Miller writes:

With the same unshrinking determination that another kind of man might evince in scarifying a too delicate pair of hands, he has sacrificed the natural beauty of his face to its vivacity of expression. Instead of having a face, he makes them; and though his features are good, they never repose long enough for their owner to be held good looking. On the contrary, they are always busy rolling, darting, tilting, arching, narrowing, puffing, flaring, puckering, biting, and otherwise assisting a discourse that, on the part of a man to whom language comes fast and fluently, seems curiously unsure of its ability to be understood. Not enough, in ordinary conversation, to entrust his point to overstatement, repetition, an emphasis of inflection; in addition, it must be captioned by a grimace that would make it literally as plain as the nose and other parts of his face. What would be his despair if he knew that his interlocutors accept his communication (provided they do) only after they have voided the whole violent drama of its performance—when, with every probability corrected, every excess reapportioned, all that is left them to consider is some platitudinous “grain of truth” whose sheer familiarity
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condemns such unnecessary fanfare still further? Yet, of course it is out of such knowledge that there descends over his face, even to the point of somewhat muffling his speech, that spirit of self-negation which (perhaps mindful of the lifted eyebrow that is its signal, or of the tension that it breathes into the other features as well) every beholder calls archness. For, as if these features were not sufficiently busy revealing the hyperexpressive intention confided to them, they simultaneously take on the extra feature of ironizing it: embedding within all its signs other signs that make it impossible to take straight, and so solicit the marginalization that it will be accorded in any case. Small wonder that so lively a face often looks “tired,” exhausted by the exorbitant muscular expenditures to which the intuition of their futility has only added; or that so theatrical a face sometimes acquires an inscrutable air, having chosen to withhold what it can’t give away. (31-32)

That final line, about the inscrutability of this face, has to be read a few different ways. The emphasis in the first reading goes something like, “…so theatrical a face sometimes acquires an inscrutable air, having chosen to withhold what it can’t give away” [Emphasis mine]. This reading implies that no one will take what it has to give, even for free—i.e., as a gift—let alone for a price (or, proverbially, for a song). But you also have to read this sentence with something like an equal emphasis on all of the words in the final clause, and with a perfectly steady intonation throughout that clause: “…having chosen to withhold what it can’t give away.” Or, you can read it with the following emphasis: “…having chosen to withhold what it can’t give away” [Emphasis mine]. In both of these latter readings, the emphasis is placed on the opposition to what it potentially could, or theoretically should, be able to give away—as well on the opposition to what it can give away, i.e., reveal. In other words, the emphasis in these latter readings is on an impossible secrecy: a withholding that effaces itself as intention and as choice, partly through the possibility that there’s no way to withhold in the first place, and nothing to be withheld.

This concluding double entendre thus engages the partly Derridean deconstructive figures of both the gift and the secret, which Miller repeatedly uses in these pages and elsewhere in his writing. But this (more than) double entendre itself both hides and reveals an impossible air of secrecy and/or inscrutability, and/or ambivalence, about the relation of Miller’s work to the entire Foucauldian historicist account of the invention of homosexuality as a specific category that was, as Foucault himself famously says in Volume I, “written immodestly on his face and body because it was a secret that always gave itself away” (43). Foucault even more famously describes this procedure in other words in “The Subject and Power”: “This form of power that applies itself to immediate, everyday life, which categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, and
imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognize and others have to recognize
in him” (212).

In one sense, Miller seems in this book just as certainly possessed by Michel
Foucault as his bar fixture seems passionately possessed by the self-reflexive practice
of his own receptive mimicry of all those show tunes, amongst other things. At least
since the influence of Gender Trouble, a well-dispersed assumption has been that
there’s an important, complicated relationship between homosexuality and the copy,
and between homosexuality and mimicry. But are there not hints of a “beyond” here
too? Is not Miller possibly, or at least partially, also motioning toward reversing at
least some aspects of typical understandings of Foucault’s account and, in the
process somehow making those seem obsolete… or inadequate… or something?

In other words, is Miller not making a gesture that veers sharply toward what is
behind Bersani’s assertion about the “essential homo-ness that exceeds desire,”
despite the epistemological and stylistic scandal that could be said to inhere in such
an insistence? For, first of all, the question arises as to whether this vast expanse is
different from, say, (Heidegerrian) “being” in general—or whatever is left of it. If so,
what makes this substantively different? If not, on what model do we think it? Is it a
transcendental expanse, like “God” once may have been? And so on.

In any case, Miller seems potentially critical of that sort of “Foucauldian” (anti-)
historicism, especially on the evidence of this chapter. At least, he is acting a bit, well,
difficult about what he seems to think are the limits of at least some received
versions of that account at the time that he writes this book. And he seems to be
sticking to this mysterious something else precisely by turning to this portrait of this
gay figure and his face in this chapter, and then by sustaining it for much of the
chapter’s length. But if Miller’s woolly brand of descriptivism in these passages is
critical of a certain sort of rampant Foucauldianism (as well as an array of associated
trends), it’s critical in a way that is very hard to put one’s finger on, but very
interesting to consider.

This is to say that there’s something about Miller’s dynamic social physiognomy,
and social dialectics, that warrants attention, perhaps especially now that the language
of, say, the “open secret” might seem like really old news. It has to do with the
specific manner in which Miller’s portrait is a dynamic one: the written equivalent of
something that would have to be translated into moving images in order to be made
visual; or else into a Benjaminian (post-) dialectical flash of superimpositions.
Naturally, neither form of visuality would be sufficient for a complete translation
from the realm of the letter. But this is not just for the usual reasons. It’s due to the
concrete sort of dissolution between internality and externality that Miller is both
enacting and describing in his book: a processual dissolution and re-figuration of, and recursive passage between, not only supposed boundaries between the insides and outsiders of the “subject” (and face) of Miller’s portrait-without-a-subject in these pages, but also between and across various supposed thresholds between worlds of discourse (and other worlds too).

By approaching these dynamics as dynamics, Miller is also invoking (if inadvertently) the face and faciality in ethical, aesthetic, and semiotic traditions that include such influential discussions of that key “thing” for recognition called “face” as—to give an abbreviated litany of the currently-quite-cited accounts that may, at first, seem excessively eclectic—Hegel’s, Levinas’s, Deleuze’s and Guattari’s, Peter Sloterdijk’s, and Giorgio Agamben’s. Then there is one co-written by Bersani himself, but published subsequent to Miller’s book.

III.

In *Forms of Being: Cinema, Aesthetics, Subjectivity*, Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit incorporate an approach to the face as “a certain mode of registering the world.” In their words, “the forms that it [the face] absorbs constitute the identity of the absorbing consciousness.” The face is “like a camera whose point of view is not mediated by the objects it is filming, but is directly visible on the registering instrument itself” (135). In this understanding, the face individuates, but not just primarily on the basis of “personality” or anything like that. Bersani and Dutoit here seem partly to be explicating gestures and devices from Deleuze and Guattari’s chapter on faciality in their 1980 publication *A Thousand Plateaus*, according to which “it is not that the subject chooses its face, but that the face chooses its subject” (168).

In the process of facialization, for Bersani and Dutoit, faces are co-individuated with the very worlds we see them registering—thus bringing these worlds into being, since “the looking,” as they put it, “is simultaneous with the asking” (143). So, what you may have thought of commonsensically as being “inside” the face, or behind or beneath it (the internal, intention, the signified, the impression, content, the cause of superficial signification effects, the substrate, and so forth) does not in this approach necessarily, temporally, or logically precede what is on the face’s “outside”: the external, its surface, its expression, the effect of “feelings,” the face’s context or milieu, the signifier, names, things, landscape, the earth, the rest of the body, etc. Or, at very least, that’s not the case in the ways that common sense and a number of other forces—maybe including desire, as well as pragmatics in at least one sense—perpetually tend to lead us back to thinking and enacting.
In Deleuze and Guattari’s terms, Bersani and Dutoit thus place the face “subjacent” to meaning. Everything that doesn’t necessarily mean anything about facial expression, though, can nonetheless be understood as potentially crucial to this world-making and to these worlds that are made—and thus understood as being part of its economy and ecology, even if it doesn’t necessarily function as meaning or as signification per se; that is, even if it isn’t “communication,” because there isn’t anything “communicated” by the face other than form itself. This “communication of forms,” as Bersani and Dutoit call it in other work together—and which Bersani discusses in his useful published conversation with Tim Dean, Hal Foster, and Kaja Silverman—is an aspect of relationality. It’s just what they call a “non-interpretive” mode of relationality. That is to say, it is different and distinct from “epistemological appropriation.” It involves, for them, a very Bataille-influenced sort of “self shattering” in which, to satisfy one’s drives, one must continually “die to the world,” which kind of includes what is sometimes called “the other.”

For Bersani and Dutoit, it appears that even the very invocation of such relationality is always going to have the force of both ethics and aesthetics behind it. They are implicitly drawing from Foucault’s discussion of the Greek *askesis,* now understood as a mode of self-relationality and becoming that is crucial in Foucault’s later work on ethical and aesthetic subjectivity. This is discussed at length vis-à-vis male homosexuality in, among other places, Halperin’s *Saint Foucault.* The point for the moment is that, for Bersani and Dutoit, getting analytically subjacent to representation need not be the bankrupt, corrupt, or at least highly dubious sort of quasi-Heideggerian critical gesture that many people might today assume it is bound to be—a disavowal of ethics, or a most questionable reformulation of the ethical.

For instance, addressing the objection that the past exists as signification and as traces of it to be continually interpreted and reinterpreted, Bersani and Dutoit write: “to aestheticize our relationality is not to remove ourselves irresponsibly from the past, but rather to live in proximity to it” (67). For them, “affect” therefore becomes the aestheticization of our relationship to the past, and of the openness of the totality conjoining it with the present via bodies and events. This does not necessarily reduce history and historicity to useless vestiges via uninteresting mechanisms, since the question of how the past is aestheticized in the “present” is the question of the future after genealogy.²

² This is especially interesting when taken in relation to the connections made by Claire Colebrook in her essay “Queer Vitalism” New Formations 68 (Autumn 2009).
Here is Miller’s bar fixture, in action, again:

The ingestion of alcohol (as distinct from its application in the form of cologne, where mere proof of use is required) has similarly to bear the supplementary mark of sophistication, here inscribed by the fanciful nomenclature of the “cocktail,” that once mystifying set of names which he can never now pronounce without taking secret pride in the worldly initiation that has entailed their correct usage, or—what is the same thing—without feeling deep relief, whenever he orders a “screwdriver,” a “grasshopper,” a “greyhound,” a “Manhattan,” that the bartender does not scowl, or smirk, or give any other sign of being asked to bring forth from his shaker a tool, an insect, an animal, the whole metropolis. (29-30)

So, this “character”—who, rather than having a face, makes them, as Miller has told us—is here in the process of drinking and ordering a drink, of thinking about drinking, of smelling of cologne and smelling cologne (and/or thinking about cologne), and of relating to the bartender, among other people. Perhaps flirting, perhaps being intimidated, perhaps asking and getting and giving, felicitously and maybe infelicitously. His discourse can be called free indirect, and, yes, it can be called campy. But neither term does it justice anymore. This is a dispersion over a whole set of potential instances, or scenes, that overflies any of them as narration, by implication possibly dissolving the very possibility for usefulness of any given instant, and thereby problematizing His exposition as presence. In effect, this makes Him even more spectral. Yet, the use of the word “cocktail”—via the invocation of medicine and the 1990s, as well as the could-be-considered precious or démodé fashion of a few semi-anachronistic names that ring of potentially compromised virtue or modesty or bodily integrity (“screwdriver,” “grasshopper,” “greyhound,” and “Manhattan,” not to mention “cocktail” itself)—here charges the “worldly initiation that has entailed the correct usage of their names” with public as well as personal history, and maybe with specific streams of historicity too. This therefore includes the projection of and to an outside, and aspires to giving him some sort of foundation in time.

To this extent, He—Miller’s character and all that his face re-presents, in its singularity as well as its too-docile typicality—aspires to existing, as Belgian “problematologist” Michel Meyer might say, in response to history, which sometimes means posing passionate questions of it (278). Indeed, Miller does conclude this chapter, by which time he is speaking in the first person, talking about “the finitude of human forms…or at least the finitude of the types by which I classify them” (64).
But to reduce all of this to one affective umbrella (camp, nostalgia, melancholia) and/or one discursive umbrella (free indirect discourse)—and to “always historicize” from the “materialities” of such rubrics of pluralized affect or discourse in general, the way one still, arguably, conventionally does in much gay, lesbian, and queer studies—clearly wouldn’t be enough for Him. There’s got to be more to Him, and for Him, than that. That seems to be the demand here, and it issues forth only partly from His “excess.”

Because, meanwhile, the state of relationality with the bartender, which seems tenuously (that is, for the moment) secure, is made either more tenuous or not tenuous at all—it is made impossible as “tenuousness”—by the fact that there is no clear “moment” here to begin with. The dissemination across scenes and gestures and senses has already traveled into the names of the cocktails themselves, as well as into all of the forms that they do and do not bring forth—including the affects that come with them like charms. Those affects: forms of this world, finite ones, which finally register as this character’s disintegrating face rather than on it. This is a registration on and of the “whole metropolis,” and not just of the metropolis as it is, or was, or will be, at a given instant. No, his face is finally produced with and as the whole metropolis. Here, then, lies the insistence that maybe He doesn’t only exist in response to history. Even with the seeds of his intensive sophistication, all these words and things flying by, and all of their potential conjuring, if you read closely, much of this may well be pretty much already totally lost on him, and in him, anyway. (And probably sooner rather than later.)

Is it that surprising, then, that it would be the word and thing “alcohol” that would bring on this proto-Borgesian mini catalogue of his world, which turns out to be semi-magical once again, at least for the moment? (“Who knew!?”) Is it surprising that it is this that would raise the specters of passages from one world to another, worlds of future and past which haunt him and which he haunts? Is it surprising that “alcohol” would raise the possibility of another world where his demand is responded to differently, where the imperatives to both demand and respond appear as different ones, and where the one who demands and the one who responds are distinct from one another? Or, is it the conjuring of the catalogue itself that makes all of this materialize? After all, the banal idea of the expression of previously locked-in contents—of everything this cocktail and its catalogue of names will and will not proceed to bring out in him, and bring out of him (vomit, truth, nastiness, more feyness, his story, ugliness, aging, death, satisfaction, possibly some beauty, maybe diarrhea, and perhaps, at some point in the evening, even his sign)—is still very much part of his world. And these passages between outer and inner are, of course, going to involve His “out folded inner linings,” which Gilles Deleuze aptly reminds
us in his book on Foucault are bound—like the constitution of any inside or interiority—to be alimentary before they are sexual (102).

Furthermore, this landscape of His expression’s forceful dispersion, despite all obvious impulses to keep it formed one way or another, travels through Miller’s book, as a whole, in an equally dramatic way. In fact, Miller’s Table of Contents looks like a Playbill, itself promising three Scenes that are each apparently self-inflated enough to think that they are full-blown Acts: Scene 1) In the Basement; Scene 2) At the Bar; Scene 3) On Broadway. Sequentially, these invoke precisely those thresholds at and across which initiation occurs, and “sophistication” develops (along with all its attendant habits): passages between private and public, or between too young and too old, which—while always having already come to pass—are, especially in His case, also still in dizzying process.

Plus, each of these scenes and their myriad attendant passages are themselves dispersed further into multiplicity. For instance, “On Broadway” involves being there, and having been there, in at least two senses: outside or inside the theater, as well as on the stage or off of it. And whether we are talking about the old Times Square or the newer one makes another notable difference. (Then there’s the song, and the Fosse biopic.) Continually aroused exiles from, and movements toward and into, each of the scenes and passages of Miller’s program for his book—not to mention its already described character list of faces and scapes and names and positions, entangled together at their roots—are momentarily relieved only by some false stop or another, in yet another move tastefully made, on some fixation or another.

This is due only partially to the pathetic irony of the book’s title. Its graphic format also comes into play in this regard. The involvement of “Somewhere,” those utopian/not-utopian Stephen Sondheim lyrics of potentially infinite deferral from West Side Story, is apparently not enough to stop this sliding either. (“There’s a place for us… There’s a time for us…Somewhere…We’ll find a new way of living…Somehow. Someday. Somewhere.”) This may be why Miller’s book’s title is placed in brackets on portions of the book’s outside, such as its spine. Miller also omits the singular article, making it [Place for Us]—and not just in the interest of “diversity.” He thereby adds yet another prototypically post-structural or deconstructive question mark to the ontological and historical status of both this “place for us” and the very possibility of its conceptualization, the question of where this “place” might be, and what it means—as well as what it looks like—to think or experience or phantasize it. These are no-fun questions and issues whose no-fun answers and evasions are already given in the questions themselves, though they are given there in the spirit of levity: In the Basement! At the Bar! On Broadway!
Somewhere “here,” in other words, His impossible face and its impossible worlds have become emblems in and of history. Quite unapologetically and unremittingly, though, they’ve simultaneously become emblems of whatever’s recognizably, unrecognizably, and misrecognizably outside of history.

V.

How much more specific can we be about the mechanisms that make for these inclusions and exclusions? How much more specific can we be about the mechanisms that make for the multiple dimensions of these many-sided emblematizations, and for the ways their individual dimensions do and do not finally cohere? How “specifically generalizable” is their distinction from other such mechanisms of moving in and moving out? And how do we now think that? If we take seriously the presumption that, in talking about gay faciality, we are talking about something that is not reducible to signification, discourse, history or even perception—the gay face being not too dissimilar from Judith Butler’s “lesbian phallus” in this regard—what are the contours not of this so-called face itself, but of its “unique” forms and forces of dissolution before thought and experience? For, put another way, the forms of this facialization are the contours of its impossibilities; the specific, irreducibly singular contours of its very indissolubility as (im)possibility. Might gay faciality develop particular paths of fugitivity from thought and knowledge, and from and in relationality, whenever and wherever relationality exceeds knowledge?

In other words, the gay face would need to be thought as a “specular supplement.” In this sense, thinking about it would involve engaging in a corporeal as well as incorporeal brand of materialism, and necessitate remembering what Butler says elsewhere in *Bodies that Matter*.

Paradoxically, the inquiry into the kinds of erasures and exclusions by which the construction of the subject operates is no longer constructivism, but neither is it essentialism. For there is an “outside” to what is constructed by discourse, but this is not an absolute “outside,” an ontological thereness that exceeds or counters the boundaries of discourse; as a constitutive “outside,” it is that which can only be thought—when it can—in relation to that discourse, at and as its most tenuous borders. The debate between constructivism and essentialism thus misses the point of deconstruction altogether. (x)

These “erasures and exclusions” by which subject construction operates are crucially related to desubjectivation and desubjugation. They are related to Bersani’s
formulating the subject as constantly “dying to the world,” and to the contagious found-phrase “night of the world,” with which Lacan and Žižek were once particularly infatuated. They are also related to Bersani’s discussions of, and impulses to discuss, “the gay absence” and “the gay presence” in *Homos*. The instance of desubjectivation, in this little post-Lacanian lineage, involves, in one form or another, a becoming of something other than subject: becoming some form or substance that is not recognizable as “subject.” In this line of thought, subjectivization always involves desubjectivization at its (absent) core.

What would Miller’s text—with all of this contextualization—therefore lead us to understand that we are talking about in talking about gay faciality? We’d be talking about a passage back and forth between subjectivation and desubjectivation, though not a passage involving some singular threshold, let alone one that can be thought in just one or two dimensions. After Deleuze and Guattari and O’Hara and Bersani, you could say that we would be talking about “systolic” and “diastolic” operations, though any linear, temporal sequentiality implied by those terms would also have to be understood as schematic, and possibly metaphorical.

It is as unthinkable to me as it seems to be to other people—a least from the articles on the gay face with which I began this essay—that the particular penetrabilities of this gay face and of gay facialization, as well as their impenetrabilities, do not have rhythms of their own, with some distinction from other rhythms. I’m not sure it’s relevant whether it’s my own “blindness” to recognition that insists on this assertion—at least not the way something like that would have been relevant back in the day/realm of “ideological criticism.” As Butler is well-cited for stating clearly elsewhere in her earlier works, identification is disidentification. This gay visage has somehow, at some point, seemingly come into its “own.” It has arrived, that is: it has arrived decked out in its particular openings and closings, in all its potential and actual clenchings and unclenchings (only some of which involve His “actions”), and in all the countless connections and circuits between these. Following Deleuze and Guattari, we can call these the “bivocalities and biunivocalities” of His facialization, which of course function via various assemblages of power.

The presumption that these pulsations cannot be sensed makes no sense to me. It might even be downright dishonest. Their rhythms are obviously sensed every day all over the place, in both their oldness and their newness: in his withdrawals and returns, his enfoldings and unfoldings, and all the goings back and forth between face and landscape as their pathways are progressively, dynamically projected on this (absent) face and on all that surrounds it. How could certain rhythms not adhere to these pathways and their production, and to all worlds to which these promise
“entry?” Or, at least, how could certain rhythms not adhere *in* them, from outside, via this visage’s very unrecognizability—or mere semi-recognizability—given currently existing categories of knowledge. That is, given its grounding incoherence, or the “insensibility” that just won’t leave it alone.

We are talking about rhythms of processual relations between passages, meant in both the spatial and the temporal sense. Relations between what Deleuze and Guattari call, on the one hand, the face’s *signifiance*: the “white walls” of its syntagmatic propulsions, “which the signifier needs to bounce off of, but which the signifier does not construct alone” (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 168). Think here of the stereotypical expanse of blank, shiny gay cheek or forehead. On the other hand, there is the face’s “subjectivation,” to which its *signifiance* must relate: the “black holes” of subjectivity, “the abyss of consciousness or passion,” or the paradigmatic. The “puncture holes” of the eyes couldn’t be further from “windows to the soul” here, even if they might also be that. For Deleuze and Guattari, *signifiance* makes sure that subjectivity “does not dig its hole alone.” Think of the imbrications of the gay gaze with the “village idiot’s.”

In other words, the unrecognizability of the gay face should be approached as a distinct and perhaps, in part, symptomatic form of, at very least, conceptual unrecognizability. A conceptual unrecognizability that both lingers and foretells in the spacings and timings of its silences. A conceptual unrecognizability that is, clearly, always involved in the happenings of gay and lesbian history, from the level of the micro all the way up to that of World, and from the subhistorical through the historical, and upwards further all the way to the surprahistorical.

The involved conundrums date back partly to Freud. As Henry Abelove has fruitfully explicated, while Freud was a supporter of what we would today call gay rights, he refused to support a gay movement premised on the idea that these people were “a distinct species” and “a group of a special character” (17). This, for Freud, is precisely what They were trying to represent themselves as. But everyone can “make” a homosexual “object choice.” In the unconscious, everyone already has. For Freud, the “separate species” argument ran counter to the findings and methods of psychoanalysis.

How can His rhythms be His, in the face of such challenges? This is more than a question of strategic essentialism, and of to whom homosexuality belongs. (In Abelove’s interesting explication, Freud is insistent on making it belong to everyone, equally.) And it’s more than the same old queer vs. gay pickle. Because the stick in the spokes of this “universal availability” is more than the “historical specificity” of a person or a people. It is now an aesthetic and ethical demand—that is, an affective...
demand, and one which, as we have seen, also involves the outside of history (if even by seeming to involve the deepest insides of historical being)—which is given force and form by the rhythmic relations between specificity and universality with which and as which we thus end up living and which, in turn, simultaneously give form and force to the (self-negatingly) irreducible difference of those rhythmic relations. It is presence itself as an aesthetic/ethical/affective demand that, it is now clear, is fundamentally at issue here—not simply voluntarist modes of (self-)representation, or modalities of ability based simply on that.

VI.

Bersani and Dutoit acknowledge that “we know very little about the viability” of what they are there calling “aesthetic subjectivity.” As opposed to the psychological or political subject, the subject of signification, and perhaps even the subject of desire, what they are there calling the aesthetic subject is the subject who “withdraws from being.” It reminds us, they write, of our responsibility “not to be.” And it prompts us to “attain the levity of imaginary being.”

In addressing the “arts of existence” in his late work, the “singular sense of poesis by which the subject makes itself into its own oeuvre” (the move in Foucault’s late work in which Deleuze was especially interested in his book on Foucault), Foucault notes (as Butler quotes him on it):

> [the style of askesis] will be critical to the extent that, as style, it is not fully determined in advance, it incorporates a contingency over time that marks the limiting capacity to the field in question. So this stylization of the “will” will produce a subject who is not readily knowable under the established rubric of truth…Critique would insure the desubjugation of the subject in the context of what we would call, in a word, the politics of truth. (“What is Critique?” 32, 39) [Emphasis mine]

Butler reminds us, while dealing with this closely and carefully in her own very useful essay “What is Critique? An Essay on Foucault’s Virtue,” how difficult it will be to understand this self-stylization in terms of any received understanding of intent or deliberation:

…For an understanding of the revision of terms that his usage requires, Foucault thus introduced the terms ‘modes of subjection or subjectivation.’ The terms do not simply relate the way a subject is formed, but to how it becomes self-forming (221)….the line between how this subject who endeavors to form itself is formed, and how it becomes self-forming, is not
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easily if ever drawn…. For it is not the case that the subject is formed and then turns around and begins suddenly to form itself. On the contrary, the formation of the subject is the institution of the very reflexivity that indistinguishably assumes the burden of formation. The ‘indistinguishability’ of this line is precisely the juncture where social norms intersect with ethical demands, and where both are produced in the context of a self-making which is never fully self-inaugurated. (220) [Emphasis mine]

What is emphasized here is that self-making is the context of/for the production of the social, not just vice-versa. The fetishization of a certain notion of the “political”—by a host of influential humanities theorists since Queer Theory blossomed, most of whom are not “Queer Theorists” at all—often makes us forget this, and can be especially damaging in tandem with the serious (and perhaps unconscious) phobias about “aestheticization” that sometimes accompany this fetishization. This too often helps allow us, both within and outside queer theory, to fall back rather casually into thinking primarily of only one side of this: the social as the context for self-making.

Yet, this fear of aestheticization is a well-founded one. The aestheticization/deaestheticization binary’s complex relations with the politicization/de-politization binary famously became central to various forms of totalitarianism in the course of the Twentieth Century. I suggest that we see that the other side of this entire coin is precisely what Bersani and Butler have paradigmatically been trying to re-insert into these considerations in the above writings, and for very good reasons. The forgetting/repression/suppression of aestheticization’s ethicality in the gay male case is a forgetting of a history (the central relation between homosexuality and aestheticism, which helps constitute, again, even its modern “origin” for some theorists) as well as probably an instance, pure and simple, of what might be at stake in our continuing concern, after deconstruction, with the “forgetfulness of being in history.”

Self-production and social production happen together. They are each other’s contexts. Put another way, as Reinhart Koselleck has shown in his analysis of the term “bildung” and its relations to history in Germany, it is culture, if anything, that unstably conceptually quilts the making of the social and the making of the self together as a continual setting-to-work of mimetic process, and corollary poietic processes. “Gay” is one mode of the subjectivation, as well as one mode of the desubjectivation, that is forever attached to subjectivation-in-general and desubjectivation-in-general.
VII.

As we have previously seen, Miller writes:

Yet of course it is out of such knowledge that there descends over his face, even to the point of somewhat muffling his speech, that spirit of self-negation which (perhaps mindful of the lifted eyebrow that is its signal, or of the tension that it breathes into the other features as well) every beholder calls archness. For, as if these features were not sufficiently busy revealing the hyperexpressive intention confided to them, they simultaneously take on the extra feature of ironizing it: embedding within all its signs other signs that make it impossible to take straight. (31)

There are reasons that the word “archness” is italicized here. As Miller points out, one thing the arch is not is straight. In becoming itself, in originating itself from itself—at least to the extent that it originates in line—it becomes less straight, just as do the eyebrows as they make more and more of a point, moving further and further above the registering apparati of the eyes. [The eyes are organs about which Miller has very little to say in this chapter, given his analyst’s, and literati-Bathesian’s, fixation on voice and gesture—and on face—as the sites, or (non-)instances, where the relevant visitations will eventually appear to have situated themselves.] But to the extent that the arch separates one space from another or one time from another, and one attitude from another, it does this less completely than do other forms. Its content spills outside of its form, and vice versa. And this happens in a distinct manner (i.e., in a manner different than occurs with other forms or figures). It is a passage that is not quite one, and a threshold that is not quite one, from which one is foreclosed and via which one becomes trapped both spatially and temporally, though out in the open. This, too, needs to be thought in at least three dimensions; not in the two dimensionality, or non-dimensionality, that a line sketched on paper might help you to picture. It needs to be thought in as many dimensions as humanly possible.

The arch sometimes purports to be sharper in its demarcations than it then seems a minute or two later. In architecture and civil engineering—architecture also begins with the arch—it is “a curved member that is used to span an opening, and to support loads from above.” In fact, Encyclopedia Britannica tells us that the arch actually formed the basis for the evolution of the vault. And that “arch construction

3 In terms of these “non-instances,” it is important to remember the before the colon component of Deleuze and Guattari’s chapter on faciality in A Thousand Plateaus: “Year Zero: Faciality.”
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depends on a wedge.” Origin of the vault, then, and originating in wedge. The wedge is its originary thing, as spring-wound with the force of that thing as the arch is. Guarded secrecy is the arch’s originary stuff.

The arch aspires to strength, and to sharpness. Coming from a necessary (primal, mythological, etymological) intrusion into or onto something, no wonder it does. Especially since the wedge, which cuts, and which has edge, ostensibly needs to be lodged into or onto something—though who knows into or onto what? Alone, arch therefore dissolves into indiscernibility or indistinction. (Remember, archness is “a spirit of self-negation” for Miller.) This archness thus invokes some thing, on the inside or on the outside (either and both), which calls for negation.

His thing: wedge of His world. What He knows, or thinks He knows. What He remembers and recognizes, or believes He does. What He thinks, or what He thinks He thinks. It seems to be a form for his thought and its peregrinations, and a form of his thought and its movements. A form for what He has seen, or thinks He has seen, as well as for what He, not necessarily successfully, assures you, with that brow of his, that he does see and will see. (He didn’t, doesn’t, and won’t miss it.) This archness is a wink, in a way, but an impossibly temporally extended wink. His problem; the image of his thought.

“Arch,” Webster’s and others tell us: “principal, chief, first, foremost, main, primary, major, greatest, highest, leading.” But are these things self-negating? Well, arch is also, according to other dictionaries, “mischievous, roguish, waggish, wily, provocative, sly, frolicsome, playful, coy, inappropriate, impertinent, perky, saucy, frivolous and inappropriately playful.” “Marked by a deliberate and often forced irony, brashness, or impudence,” also says Webster’s. A stance of the face, then, but abstracted from itself to the extent that it seems deliberate or forced, thus seeming both troublesome and typical as a stance, in the existential sense. And it will seem deliberate and forced, even when it doesn’t. Remember what Miller says about the “whole violent drama of its performance” (32) needing to be voided before his communication will be accepted...if it is accepted.

This archness is thus related to what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick calls, in an essay that crucially involves the D.A. Miller who writes this and who writes of this, the “startling, juicy displays of excess erudition” that are “defining elements of classical camp performances” (“Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading,” 150). They’re startling, she understands that. Sedgwick gets that this archness is often not going to be pretty, and that it is related to the “paranoia” that she sees as circulating around such practices (though it is also potentially related to the beyond of that paranoia), as well as around what she calls their “rich, highly interruptive affective variety.” It’s
that wedge, again and again appearing—somehow participating in the “prodigal production of alternative historiographies” that these practices, for Sedgwick, entail.

Discussing the archive, which also begins with the arch, Jacques Derrida asks at the outset of *Archive Fever*: “How are we to think of there?” (1). Commencing with his typical etymological excursus, Derrida famously says of “archive’s” roots:

Arkhe, we recall, names at once the commencement and the commandment [that is, the beginning and the “thou shall not”]. This name apparently coordinates two principles in one: the principle according to nature or history, there where things commence—physical, historical, or ontological principle—but also the principle according to the law, there where men and god command, there where authority, social order are exercised, in this place from which order is given—nomological principle [And by invoking *nomos* here he is invoking practical normative law or convention, partly as a “mid-point” between *mythos* and *logos*]….The meaning of archive comes from the word arkheion: initially a house, a domicile, an address, the residence of the superior magistrates, the archones, those who commanded. The citizens who thus held and signified political power were considered to possess the right to make or represent the law. On account of their publicly recognized authority, it is their home, in that place which is that house where the official documents are filed. The archones are first of all the documents guardians. They do not only insure the physical security of what is deposited and of the substrate. They are also accorded the hermeneutic right and competence….It is, thus, in this domiciliation, in this house arrest, that archives take place. The dwelling, this place where they dwell permanently, marks the institutional passage from the private to the public, which does not always mean from the secret to the non-secret. (2-3)

Derrida later says, of the word’s other root:

Arca, this time in Latin, is the chest, the “ark of acacia wood,” which contains the stone tablets. But arca is also the cupboard, the coffin, the prison cell, or the cistern, the reservoir. (23)

The wedge, the stone, the cupboard: “Digging the hole that subjectivation needs in order to break through it,” in Deleuze and Guattari’s words (168). The arch and the stone: apparently related to what Giorgio Agamben calls the face’s “tragicomedies of appearance.” By this Agamben means “the law that the face uncovers only in as much as it hides, and hides only to the extent that it uncovers” (94). But for Agamben, unlike for Derrida, this tragicomedy of appearance does not fundamentally have to do with “something that could be formulated as a signifying
proposition of sorts.” And “nor is it a secret, doomed to remain forever incommunicable” (95-96). Is this not precisely why Miller clearly makes reference to His archness as a quality that “every beholder” calls “archness”? For the indispensable value of Miller’s book is that he is insistent upon addressing Foucauldian forms of (sometimes quite “universalist”) self-evidence at the same time that he is adapting the Barthesian/Derridean pathos of secrecy, gifting, and secret gifting. This, in turn, is apparently related to what Miller, at another point in his chapter, describes as:

the form of that habitual muscular concentration with which, as a child, he learned to belie the perturbation of his features, and so established the (smiling or serious or just blank) mien of rigor mortis that he still assumes at being looked at. (40)

VIII.

So, again, to the extent that this gay face contains history—through its tiredness, its once having sort of anticipated the whole metropolis, its having learned rigor mortis, and so on—it is also the place or instance where history, and the figural form of history, apparently evaporate. Or whereat they have already evaporated, maybe always and perhaps originally, and transformed themselves into some other substance. This is not necessarily a secret evaporation/transformation. But it is almost one that is no more perceptibly or sensibly part of any other such evaporation/transformation than it is different from any other such “event.” Put another way, it’s just one of the “scenes” where being in particular, being something or other, and being this or that are bound to quite publicly dissolve back into being itself. To borrow Robert Venturi and Denise Brown’s famous formulation, the gay face is almost all right for just these reasons.

Miller writes, in obvious frustration:

For what could be particularly gay about any representation at a time when, on penalty of demonization, nothing particularly gay was allowed to enter it? And even now, what kind of evidence could establish this particular gayness in a culture where, homosexuality remaining a quasi criminal charge to be proven, doubt will hasten to fortify any room, however infinitesimal, that is left for it to occupy? (39)

Miller is evidently talking, here, as much about the landscape of post-“queer” sexuality studies as he is talking about the U.S. cultural context in general at the time that he writes this book. While that cultural context has of course changed since
then—we are now post-*Queer Eye*, for instance (i.e., after the official news that gay men and straight men have discovered each other), and post-*Brokeback Mountain* (please insert similar translation yourself), post-the Supreme Court having ruled the way it ruled in the summer of 2003 and since, post-Obama having been willing to come out and say he favors recognition of gay unions, post-the end of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell,” and blah blah blah (to cite some of the more “positive” developments)—these changes simply recomplicate, and give new form and force to, what he is asserting here. The operations have changed but the effect, in crucial ways, remains the same. Just as does the underlying problem.

What exactly is that problem, again? Recall “subjective poiesis,” which unfolds through what Michel Foucault called:

those intentional and voluntary actions by which men not only set themselves rules of conduct, but also seek to transform themselves, to change themselves in their singular being, and to make their life into an *oeuvre* that carries certain aesthetic values and meets certain aesthetic criteria…the problematizations through which being offers itself to be, necessarily, thought—and the practices on the basis of which these problematizations are formed. (*The Use of Pleasure*, 10-11)

Judith Butler, in reading Foucault on this issue, calls this a “sense of poiesis without recourse to which there can be no ethics and no politics.” Butler also discusses the connection of this to the desire *not* to be governed: “This is not a desire not to be governed at all, but a desire not to be governed this way or that way, in the name of this or the name of that, by these people or those people.” And she proceeds to discuss how Foucault deals with the apparent fact that this system of thought simply cannot ground the claim of an originary freedom. To Butler, this is what makes it anti-foundationalist, and what makes it genealogical in the Nietzschean sense. The Nietzsche on which it depends, Butler writes, is the one who is “seeking to find how the very notion of origin became instituted, and ends up not only describing that process of the development of fictions, but, where that description becomes an instance of value production, enacting the very process that it narrates” (“What is Critique? An Essay on Foucault’s Virtue” 227-228).

Butler writes:

The subject who is formed by the principles furnished by the discourse of truth is not yet the subject who endeavors to form itself. Engaged in arts of existence, this subject is both crafted and crafting, and *the line between how it is formed, and how it becomes a kind of forming, is not easily, if ever, drawn. For it is not*
the case that the subject is formed and then turns around and suddenly begins to form itself. On the contrary, the formation of the subject is the institution of the very reflexivity that indistinguishably assumes the burden of formation. *The indistinguishability of this line is precisely the juncture where social norms intersect with ethical demands, and where both are produced in the context of a self-making which is never fully self-inaugurated.* (227) [Emphasis mine]

**IX.**

On the topic of the argument for his character’s difference—that is, for the (impossible) originality of his self-origination as a member of a species or a people or a class, or some category (any category) of those orders—Miller says that, “from the labors of so improbable, so impossible an argument, he will sometimes need to repose in the experience of self-evidence” (39). Miller later adds: “Indispensable to his treachery, therefore, is his complete somatic compliance with the stereotype of himself” (38).

Finally, Miller sums up what he has been trying to work with and through in this chapter of [*Place for Us*]:

> It is not that gay men are denied access to the sphere of cultural origination, but that as the price of admission they must surrender all right to being recognized in this identity, which now seems responsible for the melancholy of the place [i.e., the bar at which this occurs], and for the irony of a practice that is truly bearing witness to an intimate, fundamental, and even spectacular truth that may not be told anywhere, for that matter, but here, in this shabby-pretentious ghetto bar, where it must be as overstated as everything else about the man to whom its revelation is entrusted. (37)

Hence, Miller’s “place for us” turns out to be in brackets as much because you can’t get *out of it* as because you can’t *get in*, since there’s no border, no difference—and this is not simply because it is “imaginary.” (The basement, the bar, Broadway, the ghetto, and the whole metropolis are most certainly not simply imaginary.) More particularly, the issue turns upon, in the terms in which Butler has put it in her essay on Foucault’s “What is Critique?”, *the indistinguishability of that line between how the subject is formed and how the subject becomes self-forming, which is precisely the juncture where social norms intersect with ethical demands, and where both are produced in the context of a self-making which is never fully self-inaugurated.*

> It is precisely this line that has become his arch. And it keeps becoming it as he keeps passing through it, around it, under it—foreclosed from it, but still trapped in
its radically open, deterritorialized center. Caught up in all of its passages that are not quite passages, sites of origination from which nothing can originate. The ethical norms and demands which are bound to be (re)produced along with his self-making originate, impossibly, there. He does participate in their productions. In fact, it is largely that participation of which he makes a show, and out of which he makes his show. It’s also his secret, though. Its impossible recognition turns around the possibility that the sphere of “cultural origination” has somehow supplemented itself with precisely the “difficulty of understanding the terms” of this “late Foucauldian” thought—“given received notions of ‘intention’ and ‘deliberation’”—such that his treachery is finally produced as a purely formal effect of this very difficulty. And it appears as a “purely formal” effect too, complicating matters only further for him, especially because He is not really of very pure form.

Ironically, this is precisely what makes possible his “somatic compliance with the stereotype of himself,” in Miller’s words—his odd and unique ability to hide behind himself, in these kinds of post-Narcissistic manners. A “purely formal” treachery, it makes that compliance possible as it continually appears as the non self-resemblance of this indistinguishable line on and of his face, and on and of his world. So, he reposes in this production of himself as identical to himself, almost the way “Jackie Brown” does while she drives away to “Across 110th Street.” Without viable models of specifically gay intention and deliberation and adjudication, and without the ability to be able to recognize them, is it not understandable that he will end up resting right “there?”

X.

In essence, He is here face-to-face with Giorgio Agamben’s proscription at the end of his own essay on the face: “Be only your face,” Agamben writes, “Go to the threshold. Do not remain the subjects of your properties or faculties, do not stay beneath them: rather, go with them, in them, beyond them” (99).4

Well, that’s very inspiring. But He’s been there and done that. The passages are there on his face, in all of its arches and its thresholds and its lines, and they are elsewhere in his world too, not to mention his other worlds. Passages of his presence and absence as keeper. Keeper of his own papers and whatever on earth they might read in the future, and for the future. Keeper of his otherness, which cannot, of

4 Note, for my purposes here, the connection of this to Foucault’s very famous comment, in his “Introduction” to The Archaeology of Knowledge, that “I am no doubt not the only one who writes in order to have no face.” The lines that immediately follow: “Do not ask who I am and do not ask me to remain the same: leave it to our bureaucrats and our police to see that our papers are in order. At least spare us their morality when we write.”
course, be kept. Keeper of the commitments to which he never really acquiesced, and of the short and not so short-circuits of what he sometimes still manages to think of as his desire. Keeper of his landscape and of all its shining secrets, which can contain no real loss. Keeper of his failed support for and of something that persists nonetheless. Keeper of his exposition, and the time of its stopping. The lingo of his tomorrow; archon turning always to stone, residence becoming chest or coffin in yet another new way; principle according to nature always becoming principle according to law. Until it all happens differently. Again.

His face is the fiction of this rhythm, and of the notion that it is descriptive; the notion that this is the rhythm of a true fiction.

Miller knows the tune all too well, and he knows that it must go in quotes too: “I will find in no book what I find when I look at that face.” How can he not know this? Barbra Streisand gets way too emphatic about it during the celebrated medley toward the end of Color Me Barbra.

But like his “text,” is he arch inside and out? Not quite a window, not quite a wall? “Please, play over by the window,” one conventionally asks of the pianist. “And I’ll help you out.” For, ultimately, this archness is also related to what Sedgwick calls the “glue of surplus beauty, surplus stylistic investment, and unexplained upwellings of threat, contempt, and longing” that characterizes gay aesthetics, and whose movements could be assumed to be precisely what Miller is imaging with his face-figure.

Again, I think that to reduce this to camp would be to do it a more or less serious historical, and/or unhistorical, disservice. This writing wraps itself with a coyness, and yes even with a failed coyness: a forced and redoubled irony, from which it has to be seen to originate even though it hardly originates there, forever weaving an excessively imitative Barthesian and Proustian “garland of language” that extends from the very being of this “subjectless portrait,” which verges pitifully on type. This is the (no)thing of which Miller himself makes himself guardian, somewhere in the course of that act of poised, failed, bravura self-possession and dispossession: a portrait whose potential subjects proliferate as it, and the book in which it is contained, proceed to unravel. Now anonymous, now an amalgam, now autobiographical, now based on someone or another, some place or another, some time or another. Now it gives image and voice to the conceptual persona who thinks Miller’s analysis, now to some other kind of narrator, now to a series of the author’s “others”—including at times, if one is lucky, his reader. But now it targets the addressees and the recipients of the very works under discussion in Miller’s book: Broadway musicals and their songs. Now his mother and father. Now the former
and potentially dead lovers. Now a virtual collection of further, but definitely not endless, possible interlocutors.

What Miller says of his character is, of course, equally true of himself: “He makes up for the insolence of producing gay meaning by producing it as nonsense, in defiance of not just established interpretations, but even established principles of interpretation” (36). He just can’t do it in too recognizable a manner.

If possible, it is that for which he will be judged.


