THE FATE OF ONE'S FACE

With Some Remarks on the Implications of Plastic Surgery

BY JOOST A. M. MEERLOO, M. D.

I

During the past few years, the writer has seen several women patients going into psychotherapy who had undergone plastic operations upon their faces. Besides their pre-operative complaints of bodily inferiority, they complained after operation about a certain grief and loss and withdrawal from company, a feeling of depersonalization which they could not verbalize well, but which gradually became clearer after further psychological exploration. Personal experience with cases of this kind has shown so many similar elements that when, in clinic or consultation, a patient comes for psychotherapy after plastic surgery, the writer can almost predict this schizophrenia-like syndrome. The inner motivations of the patients may differ. The mental complaints may be part of a deeper schizoid withdrawal, or they may not belong to such a deeply-involved mental process, yet, the reaction to the operation is increased withdrawal.

In one 25-year-old girl, the result of the beautification, paradoxically, nearly became ruinous. She had her nose straightened and, after this operation, found herself suddenly courted by young men as never before. She came to the writer in a suicidal panic because of this new experience of “sexual persecution.” However, she had enough logic and sense of the rational to criticize the strange selective attitude of the boys: “As if the boys were only in love with a small nose.”

This close interrelation of the reaction to one’s own face and that of the fantasied or real observer inspired the investigation of the deeper psychodynamics of the artificial faces that modern surgical technique delivers. The writer was particularly stimulated to work along this line when he became aware that an epidemic of plastic surgery is going on among teen-agers wanting to correct prominent “Semitic” (Armenoid) noses—often forced to such operations by their parents or the example of a beautified friend. The surgical euphemism “face-lifting” often covers up the reality of cultural or ethnic minority feeling. Recent Dutch publications on this subject relate comparable experiences.¹ ²
II

The Face as Expression, as Mask and as Mirror

The classical "science" of physiognomy attempted to point out special characteristics in man's face as representative of special personality traits. Particularly in popular psychology, many books are written in which numerous keys are given to the human soul by making a merely superficial study of man's outward appearance and facial features. Lavater and Gall, in the beginning of the nineteenth century, tried to present the first systematic basis for the varied subjective opinions about man's face. The difficulty with making physiognomy scientific is that it has never been possible to express facial variations in measurable symbols. Only the recent more systematic explorations regarding the body constitution and the relation between body-form and character (Kretschmer, Böhle) have given a more stable foundation to this science. But, as a matter of fact, such research has resulted in the acknowledgment that there is actually more discrepancy than correlation between facial details and human characteristics. This impels one to ask why we, on first encounter with other persons, judge them by their facial appearance. At every initial encounter, the first thing a person observes is the face of the other. Love at first sight occurs so frequently among us because the "beloved" very often reflects memories of faces from one's own childhood. Sexual prologue begins in the face, in the so-varied, mimic gestures expressing the language of yearning.

That the face is a prime organ of emotional expression is a matter of common experience. It is, in particular, the first impression of somebody else's face that makes the most intense emotional appeal. One recognizes directly gestural and mimetic behavior. By the time the person is seen again, that "intuitive" insight is mostly lost. Children are in a continual, dialectic relationship with the facial expressions of their parents. They observe and read their parents' feelings from their faces, react to them and imitate them. This is part of the mostly unconscious mimetic and gestural communication that continually develops until cultural habit and emotional repression put an end to it. In general conversation the facial expression changes repeatedly, depending on the partner and on the language of mutual mimicry.