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KATHERINE INDERMAUR

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Facing the Mirror: An Essay, in August 2021.



N.B. THE TITLE, *III*, IS PRONOUNCED
BY REPEATING THE PERSONAL PRONOUN
"I" ONCE AFTER A BRIEF PAUSE.

The face signifies the Infinite.

EMMANUEL LEVINAS

I start the fire I suffer.

NARCISSUS, OVID'S

METAMORPHOSES III.465

If I could only see more clearly my own seeing—

Mirror. From the Latin *mirare/mirari*, to look at or to be surprised, to look at with wonder. Mirror and miracle are cousins of wonder.

To mirror. To mimic exactly. Two margins and the air between them. And the light to cleave them.



As a child I|I stood staring at the reflection of my|my eyes in the bathroom mirror switching off and on the overhead light. In the on position: the quick closing of the center of my|my black-point eyes, the shock of light swelling the blue. In the off: the center growing dark open to dark open, like ears hoping to listen.

To see our own eyes is to gaze straight at the lag rooted in the loop of light from mind to mirror and back. If I|I blinked quickly enough, I|I could sometimes catch a glimpse of my|my eyes completely shut.



There is no objective mirror.

A looking glass. See? The glass is looking.

Every morning I|I paint my|my self-portrait. I|I paint my|self soft and pink. I|I layer us on.

Mirrors have the tiresome effect of not getting in the way.



Clarity can be distilled from matter is a belief we hold when looking. Not how it is, but how it looks.

How hard it is to continually recognize my|my face.



In German, *Gesicht* means both face and vision, the root *-sicht* an ancestor of sight. Light and sight, sister words. Face as site of first contact. Eye contact. In a mirror, I|I make contact with my|my desire for contact. Eye and I|I,



a between.

I|I look in the mirror like it is a type of convincing, staring the facts of my|my existence in a light-echo face like a song sung into a canyon and come back softer, longer.

I|I want light to reveal, but it only travels—passive from the start. Every seeing distorts the world.



The geometry of my|my face is fractal, a Mandelbrot set, the coastline I|I thought I|I'd mapped. The closer I|I look, the more there is to see.

The reward for looking deeply is like an afternoon spent at one window—how the day opens, deepens within a frame. The features of the face are a quiet infinity.



The mirror's between is fracture. Refracted light. What kind of solipsism is this, the self split? Can we even say "I" and remain one? A schism in speaking. I|I as riven as world.

Fracture everything eyetouch.

A practice: At home, early morning, take a pad of sticky notes and a pen. Start in the kitchen. If you can see your face in the object, put a number on the sticky note and stick it to the object. Suggestions: Knives (1-4). Spoons (5-8). Plates (9-19). Bowls (20-28). Rings (29-30). Earrings (30-38). Glitter (39). Mason jar lids (40-44). Perfume bottle tops (45-46). Sunglasses (47-48). Patent leather shoes (49). Belt buckles (50). Hair clips (51). Computer screens (52). The door to the microwave (53). Lids to pots and pans (54-56). Lids to candles (57-59). The teakettle (60). The mirror (61).

The final sticky note is the number of faces looking back. How many you you live with. How many you you are.

One of the cardinal virtues, Prudence, is often signified by a beautiful young woman holding a mirror. Originally conceived by Plato to be a useful virtue for those with the power to make decisions, Prudence is the mirror on the wall telling you the fairest girl is someone else.

The mirror enables self-correction, like smoothing my hair, or pulling basil from between my|my teeth, or anything that begins as fixing.



I read about a woman with dysmorphia whose glance in a mirror begets hours of fixing and fixing and fixing her hair. She keeps her shiny metallic toaster in a cupboard. She keeps her workplace free of reflective surfaces. She lives afraid of mirrors, of what switch they flip in her.



What good are surfaces? Beyond touching, we want to push. We want to tear. Light, as particle and wave, spans both surface and depth. I|I peel back the periphery.