

The Face of Woman

... an editorial

The Paulist Father John Kirvan once said that man comes to surface in literature; that it is in novels and plays and poems that theologians must begin to look for man revealed; that, speculate on concepts of man as we may, Eliot has given us a concrete revelation of man in Prufrock as Joyce has in Stephen and as Hemingway has in the impotent Jake Barnes, and that it is with these men that we must begin.

But if man comes to the surface in his literature, then so does woman, and in an even more vivid way. For every Oedipus or Creon there is an Antigone or Medea; for every Hamlet a Gertrude, for Aaron a Tamora; and today, images such as Martha in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, Sibyl of *The Invisible Man*, or the tragic Mouchette of Bernanos' last novel, whom John Updike has signalled out as a prototype of our deadly, death-of-love days. It is not a flattering picture; the image of woman in the contemporary arts is a degraded one.

Yet literature is not all. Since the electronic revolution, the image of woman has become a face on a film screen or in a photograph. No longer in our mind's eye, as Daisy or Brett would have to be, woman is now set boldly before us in media that are geared to have more of an effect on us than reality itself, or than any of the previous arts. The medium is the face of woman at the Christian Pavillion at Expo—a trick photo on which the several features of her face rotate and change, suggesting that she is all women and yet only one—or the medium

is the tortured face of Ann Bancroft in *Pumpkin Eater*, Rita Tushingham's trusting, bewildered face in *Taste of Honey* or *Girl With the Green Eyes*, Kim Stanley's remarkable face that switches from valiant to harridan in the flick of an eye in *Seance on a Wet Afternoon*. And the message? The message is these faces. Not what they tell us, not what they symbolize or represent, but only these magnificent faces. They say more than commentary. They are simply there.

They confront us with the mystery of woman. Use her as a suburban statistic or discuss her as a theological prenote and you miss the point, which is that she can be known only as any mystery is known: in the darkness of faith and love, not in the universal but rather in her singularity.

And what if woman is never known in love? Perhaps this is what she fears most; that no one, not even her own father, will ever know who she is, accept and love her for what she is. She knows that she is not the shifting face at the Christian Pavillion, but rather that she is one, herself, and must be known and loved as that.

But there is strength in her weakness as well. Ironically, it is the strength of dependence, the power of incompleteness, the force of the one who must lean—all absurd paradoxes in a society that makes it possible for everyone, man or woman, to be self-sufficient. Perhaps the true glory of woman lies in her very dependence and incompleteness, which gives the lie to our absurd self-sufficiency when confronted by death or by birth. She holds the key to our human condition, and her face betrays it. The moment in which Miss Tushingham watches her sailor depart for the high seas holds the secret agony of loneliness and abandonment we all hide in our hearts. Her face on the screen brings it to the surface, and we are strangely, wonderfully moved. Her face is no longer a Platonic form, as Daisy was for Gatsby (and as Gatsby was for himself), or Stephen's series of fancied loves in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. No—it is here, it is the truth, and we know it to be so. Be it the faces we have mentioned or faces from real life: an old lady begging for a priest's blessing at a hospital for terminal cancer patients; a young novice on holiday; a mother who sees her new-born son for the first time; the face of a student who wants to learn or a teacher who wants to teach. These are the faces of women, of woman. Like the trick photo at the Christian Pavillion, they are all and one at the same time; unlike that photo, however, the burning reality of their singular selves comprises the one and the many of it. It is not a

matter of features but of persons. Here the beauty and the mystery reside, and when we know that beauty and that mystery we must thank God for granting us so marvelous a grace.

For man is saved in the love of a woman, and is in some sense as dependent on her as she is on him. It was not good for man to be alone in the first garden, and throughout the salvation history of the Old Testament Yahweh saves Israel in the metaphor of a man being attracted to a woman, both spousally and paternally; finally, through a woman as humble as she is mighty, God's own Son took flesh in her womb and was born to save us. And we are still being saved through her, in her, as she brings us to God's own saving Son and ours.

In a remarkable passage from *Gaudium et Spes*, the Council Fathers have suggested that it is through the loving union of man and woman expressed in the fruitfulness of a family that man comes most easily to know "the true structure of reality." Here perhaps the redemptive role of woman comes full circle in being identified with a renewed awareness of reality itself; for it is in our marriage to the world—our being a part of it as it is a part of ourselves—that we come to know the magnificence of the Incarnation. We learn that it encompasses the entire cosmos, and not our private souls alone. It is this cosmic dimension that the mystery of woman begins to make clear to us. Only faced with her image, for example, can we begin to understand what an old priest meant when he exclaimed that Mary was all creation! Only faced with the image of woman can we begin to understand that we are not alone, nor were we ever meant to be. Only faced with the love of a woman can we begin to know what it means to be loved in the Father from all eternity, before the earth was and before the mountains came to be.

The electronic revolution has brought us to the face of woman; it is her own best argument for her stillness, her suffering, her inexhaustible love. At the last, we can only say with the poet Yevtushenko:

*When your face came rising
above my crumpled life,
the only thing I understood at first
was how meager were all my possessions.
But your face cast a peculiar glow
on forests, seas and rivers,
initiating into the colors of the world
uninitiated me.*

