

PROSOPOPEIA TO PROSOPAGNOSIA: DANTE ON
FACEBOOK

Scott Wilson

It is well known that the poems that would later be collected in Dante's first book *Vita Nuova* emerged as part of a "social network" of fellow adolescents and poets in Florence. Among them were Dante di Maiano and a lute maker called Belacqua who may have put a *ballata*, included in the book, to music. Most importantly, Dante's main interlocutor was Guido Cavalcanti, a poet and theoretician ten years Dante's senior who would become his mentor. *Vita Nuova* establishes, in the Western tradition, love as inextricably bound to the commentary that it generates in prose and poetry. This essay looks at the centrality of ideas of love and friendship that are maintained in the interminable online commentaries on contemporary social networks, particularly Facebook. Further, this essay considers the fate of the face where it becomes no longer a phantasmatic locus of imaginary projection, but an ever-shifting marker of nodal points of data predicated on an empty mediating space for the exchange of information. As such, I am going to suggest, the relation to one's face becomes affected by a generalized psychic prosopagnosia in which the face begins to lose its previous significance in relation to the profile-image that has displaced it as the most important indicator of identity. At the same time, Facebook, supremely, provides a forum for contemporary prosopopeia, or face-making.¹ It is a machine for self-narrativization through which

¹ The interdependence of these two terms is perhaps implied in the etymology of the word face. See for example, Isidore of Seville's etymological

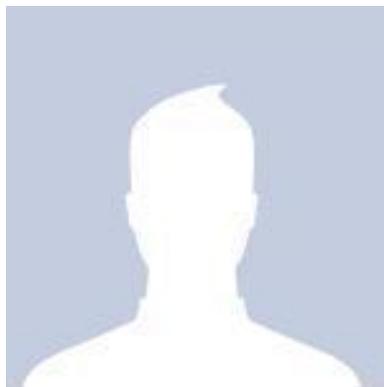
we negotiate our (self)love, online romances, filial and friendly relations, increasingly becoming our main means of self-promotion, the way we establish our market value on the basis of the pure form of an empty template. The central conceit of this essay is the formal impossibility of the amorous relation and the interminable commentary that it generates. Here is a romance between two allegorical figures: Prosopopeia, the personifier, the maker and perceiver of faces and personae everywhere, and Prosopagnosia, s/he who is unable to recognise individual faces, even or especially her own. This essay is in two columns that run side-by-side. The first, in another more fanciful conceit, conjures a Dantesque online discussion about love and commentary in the form of Facebook for those who are unfamiliar with the form (there must still be some). The second discusses Facebook, the two recent corporate histories of the company and David Fincher's film *The Social Network* in its commentary on the face and facelessness. Both parts of the essay comment obliquely on the other. The essay concludes with a discussion of Facebook as a new "trans-parental" form of governance.

definition of face (facies) in terms of recognition: "Face is called '*facies*' from effigies, image. There lies the whole depiction of a person and the recognition of anyone." Isidore of Seville, *Etymologies* edited and translated by Priscilla Throop, Charlotte, Vermont: Medieval MS, xi.1.33 Faces are continually changing "with a variety of movement", being made and un-made, by the will or "*volutas*" (xi.1.34), and thereby recognised or misrecognised according to the changing imaginary relations to different systems of symbolisation in different times and places.



*In quella parte - dove sta memora
prende suo stato, - sì formato, - come
di affan da lume, - d'una scuritate
la qual da Marte - vène, e fa demora;
elli è creato - ed ha sensato - nome,
d'alma costume - e di cor volontate.
Ven da veduta forma che s'intende,
che prende - nel possibile intelletto,
come in subietto, - loco e dimoranza.*

[In that part where the memory
resides / Love comes and as the
diaphane is brought / To form by
light, so Love is given form / By
dark from Mars; with memory it
abides. / A habit of the soul, will of
the heart, / It is created, sensate,
has a name. / From the intelligible
form we see, / Love comes into the
possible intellect, / And there it
dwells as in a thing substantial.] –
Guido Cavalcanti, “Donna me
prega, - per ch’eo voglio dire,”
Canzone XXVII, 15-23.¹



This is a movie about
kids’ faces

– David Fincher, *The
Social Network*.²⁸

On [Mark Zuckerberg’s]
own Facebook profile he
lists his interests:
“Openness, breaking
things, revolutions,
information flow,
minimalism, making
things, eliminating desire
for all that really doesn’t
matter”

– David Kirkpatrick²⁹

I. KIDS’ FACES

“It is with our faces that we
face the world, from the moment of
birth to the moment of death. Our
age and our sex are printed on our
faces. Our emotions, the open and

¹ Guido Cavalcanti, *Complete Poems*, translated by Anthony Mortimer.
London: Oneworld Classic, 2010, 59.

²⁸ David Fincher, *The Social Network*. Columbia Pictures. Sony DVD, 2010.

I

It was night on the terrace when Belacqua noticed Dante's latest post, still stuck in the first of the canti in the moon. Beatrice, linking love to the cosmic abyss, was accounting for the inconsistency of the universe, the spots on Diana's face. The lunar pock marks are not, she insists to Dante, marks of Cain, a reminder of the original fratricide, but evidence of the process of cosmic unbinding as the soul is diffused into dust: *E come l'alma dentro a vostra polve / per differenti membra e conformate / a diverse potenze si resolve* (*Paradiso* II: 133-35).²

Profile: Belacqua

🎸 A maker of musical instruments.

♥ Single. 🏠 Florence.

Philosophy

Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, Averroes, Avicenna, Albertus Magnus.

Music

Mayhem, Xasthur, Deathspell Omega, Enoch, Lurker, Rostau, particularly 'Celestial Hive Mind'.

Books

Timeaus, Symposium, Poetics, Enneads, Kitab al-Shifa, Vita Nuova, The Divine Comedy, More Pricks than Kicks, Hideous Gnosis, Les Paul in his Own Words

instinctive emotions which Darwin wrote about, as well as hidden or repressed ones which Freud wrote about, are printed on our faces, along with our thoughts and intentions . . . And, crucially it is by our faces that we can be recognised as individuals.³⁰

Neither a face, but a collection of profile pics, mug shots, icons, logos, tags, emoticons, nodes, nor a book but rather in different ways a website, screen, interface, portal, network, platform, Facebook has subjected both the face and the book to the full rigour of Mark Zuckerberg's interests. It has opened them out to a regime of 'radical' or 'ultimate' transparency, and in such a way broken them up, re-made them, revolutionized them, turned them into bits of information that flow across the bandwidth of the globe, flickering on sleek screens and laptops; no longer a Baroque enigma, glimpsed in the chiaroscuro of thought and expression, one's face to the world has become abstracted, flattened out, reduced to the minimalist white and blue lines of a profile, a wall, a newsfeed in which information about oneself is mechanically distributed across nodes and connections according to

²⁹ David Kirkpatrick, *The Facebook Effect*. London: Virgin, 2010, 11. All further page references cited in the essay.

² Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, ed. Charles S. Singleton, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973.

³⁰ Oliver Sacks, *The Mind's Eye*. London: Picador, 2010, 82.

Activities and interests

Lazing about beneath rocks, dreams of fair to middling women, rotten Gorgonzola toasted sandwiches, lobsters.

Politics

Melancology

Groups

The Late-Repentants, Petro-Punk Collective

Friends (21)

Dante Alighieri
 Cecco Angiolieri
 Samuel Beckett
 Brunetto Brunelleschi
 Guido Cavalcanti
 Donna Gentile
 Guido Guinizelli
 Eileen Joy
 Sparkles Joy
 Anna Klosowska
 Dante di Maiano
 Nicola Masciandaro
 Mark Musa
 Michael O'Rourke
 Beatrice dei Portinari
 Barbara Reynolds
 Francesca da Rimini
 Dorothy L. Sayers
 Spirito animale
 Spirito naturale
 spirito vita

Belacqua noticed that the number of his Friends had gone down from 22 to 21. It was a pathetic number anyway, and someone else had now 'un-friended' him. He sighed, tried not to feel anxious. He ought to improve the quality of his status

algorithms calculating interests on the basis of previous distributions. Evidently, desire is being eliminated relative to that which really matters, and what really matters about Facebook is the assimilation and manipulation of information according to a certain form and function. Desire, stripped of its metaphor, of the face as phantasmatic locus of imaginary projection and mystery, becomes pure mechanism, pure metonymy; a hieroglyphic faciality that flickers in a data-mirage that pulls and dissipates desire in the digital desert of shifting displacements of an endless flow of information, such that desire ultimately defaults to a drive that pulses to a different order of technological rhythm. Zuckerberg and his colleagues Sean Parker and Dustin Moskovitz called it 'the trance'. "It was hypnotic", says Parker, 'You'd just keep clicking and clicking and clicking from profile to profile, viewing the data.'" (Kirkpatrick, 93)

Kids' faces, always already repeatedly photographed (even in the womb), are further multiplied, replaced and displaced by thumbnails, icons, logos. As such, on Facebook and elsewhere in the bureaucratic, neoliberal technocosm, faces are no longer primarily objects of demand, desire or recognition, but are ever-shifting markers or nodal points of data predicated on an empty mediating

updates, post some amusing Youtube clips, get involved in a campaign, a revolution or a counter-revolution; they were all the rage this spring. He couldn't think of anything to write, had no idea what, of his miserable existence, might interest or amuse his 'Friends', half of whom he'd never met, or appeared to be dead, or half-dead, in a Limbo of inexistence. He had no idea what they could possibly want from him. Except prayer, perhaps. They should make an app. for that.

Belacqua turned away from the fatuous discussion on Facebook, turned down *The Funeral of Being*, and lay his face upon his thigh.

The News Feed continued to update itself.

Dante Alighieri

*A ciascun'alma presa e gentil core
nel cui cospetto ven lo dir presente,
in cio che mi rescrivan suo parvente,
salute in lor signor, cioe Amore.*

[To every loving heart and captive soul / into whose sight these present words may come / for some elucidation in reply, / greetings I bring for their great lord's sake, Love.] (*Vita Nuova*, III)³

View all five comments:

Dante di Maiano Dante, go wash your bollocks and clear

space for the exchange of biometric and economic information. They constitute, in the phrase of Zuckerberg, a "social graph, in the mathematical sense of a series of nodes and connections. The nodes are the individuals and the connections are the friendships ... we have the most powerful distribution mechanism that's been created in a generation" (Kirkpatrick, 217).

This destiny of the face was always, precisely, envisaged in the Facebook's initial logo, designed by Zuckerberg's friend and classmate Andrew McCollum. He used "an image of Al Pacino he'd found online that he covered with a fog of zeros and ones – the elementary components of digital media" (30): the close up of the Hollywood star is rendered increasingly unrecognisable, intelligible only as lines of digital code. Say hello to my little friends. This image, and indeed Facebook generally, is perhaps a symptom that the relation to one's face has become affected by a generalized psychic prosopagnosia in which we no longer recognise the face that has been displaced by the digital profile-image. It is easy to see how the general imperative to have a face, or to make one, or to make a persona, an identity or profile is linked to a general disquiet about

³ Dante Alighieri, *Vita Nuova*, translated by Mark Musa, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992.

your head. Or take a sample
of piss to your doctor.

☞ Cecece Angiolieri likes this.

Mauro Senatore *O Deo, che
sembra quando li occhi gira! /
dical' Amor, ch'io nol savria
contare* (my favourite lines of
those times)

Guido Cavalcanti This is
the point where I teach him all
he knows.

Barbara Reynolds In his
own poems Cavalcanti
showed how terms from
physiology and psychology
could provide a new
vocabulary in which to
analyse the effects of love,
terms which Dante
borrowed.⁴

☞ Guido Cavalcanti and
Dante di Maiano like this.

Dante di Maiano And
which you borrowed from
Albertus and Averroes.

Guido Cavalcanti

In place of memory, inhabiting
Form, yet born of darkness and
war, a force invades the soul and is
created, given a name: *amore*.

Beatrice dei Portinari

L'anima mia vilement' è sbigotita [My

faces. Common distaste for one's
passport photograph ('that's not
me!') that, in digital form, has
become ubiquitous as a marker of
personal identity throughout the
(online) world of techno-
bureaucracy is of course linked to
the criminal mug shots that
heralded the introduction of
universal policing and surveillance
from the nineteenth century. In
comic fashion, it was this
ambivalence that Zuckerberg
exploited in his first foray into the
world of college facebook in the
development of the notorious
Facemash. As the movie-
Zuckerberg notes in Fincher's film,
"some of the people on the
Kirkland facebook page have pretty
horrendous facebook pics," and
following the suggestion of
comparing them with farm animals,
Zuckerberg set up a site in which
the passport-style photos of female
students can be compared and
ranked. Therein, Zuckerberg
turned the relatively 'horrendous'
faces of bureaucratic record into
digital objects of exchange,
currency representing differential
value in an online libidinal
economy.

According to David
Kirkpatrick, many people view
Facebook as 'a platform for
narcissism' (13), but the
photographs do not primarily

⁴ Barbara Reynolds, *Dante: The Poet, the Political Thinker, the Man*. London: IB
Tauris, 2006, 19.

spirit is so vilely distressed]. In Cavalcanti, love is a fatal malady of the soul, an irruption in the heart of cosmic forces, sombre and violent.

Donna Gentile

“Love is a form of mental illness not yet recognised by any of the standard diagnostic manuals.” Stuart Sutherland, *International Dictionary of Psychology*, 2nd Ed. 1996.

Zachary Price But really, what’s so bad about mental illness?

☞ Myung-hye Chun and Ayşe Mermutlu like this.

Öykü Tekten We are all mad anyway. However some still prefer having their own mental dictionaries to define *things* rather than using the *official* ones.

☞ Ayşe Mermutlu likes this.

Nicola Masciandaro

Diagnostic manuals are an unrecognised form of love.

☞ Ayşe Mermutlu and Öykü Tekten like this.

Guido Cavalcanti

Love is not just an effect of commentary, love is always already commentary. *Elli è creato*. Created of prosopopeia, given a name to name nameless horror, love assumes a face to veil an incomprehensible facelessness, *E*

function as a support for flattering self-representation. “MySpace was a world of carefully posed glamour shots, uploaded by subjects to make them look attractive. In Facebook, photos were no longer little amateur works of art but rather a basic form of communication” (155-6). Facebook photographs are, in that sense, the faceless, endlessly fluctuating record and guarantee of existence predicated upon an anxiety about existence (the in-existence of Facebook), about having a life that Facebook both guarantees and supports. Shaun Dolan from New York, a 25 year old assistant in a media firm, is quoted saying “my generation is unbearably narcissistic ... when I go out with my friends there is always a camera present, for the singular goal of posting pictures on Facebook. It’s as if night didn’t happen unless there’s proof of it on Facebook” (Kirkpatrick, 206). Supremely, Facebook provides a forum for contemporary prosopopeia, that is, personification or face-making. It is a machine for self-narrativization through which contemporary Narcissus can negotiate his or her (self)love, online romances, filial and friendly relations, increasingly becoming the main means of self-promotion, the way people must establish their market value on the basis of the pure form of an empty template. Over this empty, minimal space, flow billions of images. “By

non si pò conoscer per lo viso (XXVII: 63).

Guido Cavalcanti BTW. This is precisely what I suggested Dante make evident with *Vita Nuova* after the death of Beatrice. Death resides like the shadow of Mars in the hollow of love, its condition as infinite commentary. His little book is a diagnostic manual for poets and lovers, both therapeutic cure and viral poison.

Guido Guinizelli “Some people would never have been in love, had they never heard love talked about.” La Rochefoucauld.

Beatrice dei Portinari ALL people.

Cecce Angiolieri Oh not that tired old cliché :(You’ll be getting out your Roland Barthes and Jeanette Winterson next ;) There was a young girl from Firenze / Who met an old Priest called Mackenzie / she . . . [This content is currently unavailable]

Samuel Beckett

Yes, I loved her, it’s the name I gave, still give alas, to what I was doing then. I had nothing to go by, having never loved before, but of

late 2009,” Kirkpatrick writes, “Facebook was hosting 30 billion photos, making it the world’s largest photo site by far” (156). But Facebook is not really an archive or reservoir, nor even a great lake of images into which Narcissus may gaze, but an ocean of data made up of multiple streams and eddies of information distributed according to the movements of previous information that feeds itself more information in traces of transient interests, photos, tags, posts, comments, likes, groups, affiliations, selections in a great churn of profile-love and ‘friendships’.

The myth of Narcissus that from Ovid to Freud provides the classical pattern for the psychic structure of love and love poetry (not to mention the reflective *philia* of knowledge and self-knowledge from the Socratic tradition onwards) reaches its apotheosis in the courtly tradition of western epideictic poetry from the Troubadours, Dante and Petrarch. Here, the luminous, reflective face of the beloved is the highly formal, generic inspiration which provides the impetus to forge the poetic personae that sets the pattern for the emergence of the self-reflecting, self-making modern individual. Narcissus is a figure for modernity in various ways, not least to the degree to which it is an *image* that he falls for rather than a person. As such he is a figure for the

course had heard of the thing, at home, in school, in brothel and at church, and read romances, in prose and verse, under the guidance of my tutor, in six or seven languages, both dead and living, in which it was handled at length. I was therefore in a position, in spite of all, to put a label on what I was about when I found myself inscribing the letters of Lulu in an old heifer pat or flat on my face in the mud under the moon trying to tear up nettles by the roots.⁵

Dante di Maiano Everyone knows it's important to name the symptom; you have to give a name to the trauma, it is the first indispensable step on the way to a diagnosis. *Nomina sunt consequential rerum.* Then you take your piss to the doctor.

Lulu You know you make me want to SHOUT!

Guido Cavalcanti This wild and sovereign force, 'è fero ed è si altero' (XXVII: 3), we called 'Lord', Dante and I, 'del segnor'. But love is not a Prince like Emperor Henry VII, it is, rather, like chance, 'd'un accidente' (XXVII: 2), a purposeless miracle.

🐉 Georges Bataille likes this.

frequently illusory and self-deluding aspect of love, especially unrequited love, of being in love with love, or of *amor fou*. And since Narcissus in his delusion if not madness does remain faithful to his love even to the point of death, he is both an ironic and tragic figure for the truth of love and the love of Truth. To the degree that Narcissus is also taken as a figure for vanity or self-regard or the self-love and romantic egotism of the modern individual, this is an effect of a double delusion. The (self) identification of the romantic egotist is predicated upon a misrecognition of the self-love of Narcissus that it takes as its model and template. The curious thing about Narcissus is that his own face is the very thing that he fails to recognise in falling in love with its reflection. The self-making or prosopopeia that finds its amorous structure in the myth of Narcissus is strangely predicated on a case of prosopagnosia, the condition that names an inability to read or recognize faces, even or especially one's own face.

Prosopagnosia is a figure from modern neuroscience, describing an inability to recognise faces. Martha J. Farah writes, "most prosopagnosics complain of an alteration in the appearance of faces. Although they have no difficulty perceiving that a face is a

⁵ Samuel Beckett, *First Love and other Novellas*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 73.

Nicola Masciandaro It's like trying to name a beautiful, dangerous, and indifferent animal passing through the room that no one else seems to see (but which they must if they are seeing anything).

Barbara Reynolds

“Cavalcanti strives to analyse the nature of love in relation to psychology, setting forth the inherent tensions between the real and the ideal, between the senses and the mind, which render the experience destructive and disintegrating rather than joyful and fulfilling.”⁶

Guido Cavalcanti ‘He’, Love, is the personification of the new and the miraculous, *La nova- qualità move sospiri*, the strange and the marvellous, offering access to unimaginable knowledge born solely and paradoxically from the burning passion that takes away the reason proper to knowledge. Prosopopeia is addressed to a profound prosopagnosia from which it is derived, an impossible formless – *non format* – beauty that cannot be comprehended from the face, ‘*E non si pò conoscer per lo viso*’ (XXVII: 63), or the mirror that it offers; always in excess of language and the face, it is not a question of

face (and do not generally mistake wives for hats), they often speak of seeing the parts individually and losing the whole or gestalt.”³¹ Agnosias are important for cognitive neuroscience in determining, among other things, whether cognition is the effect of an over-arching ‘functional architecture’ or a more modular system comprised of contingent features that have arisen due to specific evolutionary problems. Prosopagnosia, suggesting as it does that faces are ‘special’ objects of cognition, implies the latter.

The poetry of courtly love, Dante and Petrarch oscillates between prosopopeia and prosopagnosia. In its positing of a generic face comprised of a blazon of highly conventional features (since Petrarch these have been golden hair, black eyes, ruby lips etc.), there could be said to be something prosopagnosic about the poetry of courtly love. At the same time, the fixation on certain isolated aspects of the face (common in the case of people with prosopagnosia) is in amorous poetry both the condition and the means of the production of poetic subjectivity as an effect of the interminable amorous commentary on its own anxiety concerning the desire of the beloved that it generates. As we

⁶ Dante Alighieri, *La Vita Nuova*, translated by Barbara Reynolds. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984, 14.

³¹ Martha J. Farah, *Visual Agnosia*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004, 94.

a figure of speech or rhetorical ornament . . .

Dante Alighieri *E questo mio amico e io ne sapemo bene di quelli che così rimano stultamente* [And this friend of mine and I know quite a number who compose rhymes in this stupid manner].

Beatrice dei Portinari

I am the faceless face of nameless horror! LOL

☞ Donna Gentile *con 7 l'altre donne* like this

View all 9 comments:

Nicola Masciandaro Horreo ut intelligam

Dante Alighieri You are the face of bliss, beatitude and Theology.

Francesca da Rimini His passion burns like the corpse of God, cackle.

☞ Xasthur likes this

Cecco Angiolieri @ Beatrice: you are the number 9, babe, the de-mathematization of number – not measure nor metrics but diagram. ;)

Professor Daniel Charles Barker 9=0, the key to decimal

will see, a similar problem with faces is, for psychoanalysis, a common effect of anxiety. In its understanding of prosopagnosia, neuroscience makes a ‘platonic’ distinction between form and perception whereby “object recognition is accomplished by repeatedly transforming the retinal input into stimulus representations with increasingly greater abstraction”;³² the process that transforms the raw ‘stuff’ of perception into the pattern of ‘things’,³³ thereby producing the formal template, the Platonic Ideal necessary for face recognition. At the heart of the myth of Narcissus, then, as prosopagnosiac pattern for courtly love, hidden it seems from view, is the tale of a profound alienation predicated upon a disjunction, a radical heteronomy between eye and brain, perception and form, in which the organism negotiates the traumatic limits of its own reality beyond all possibility of ‘Narcissistic’, that is self-loving reappropriation.

II. ROMANCE

Unrequited love, according to *The Social Network* (2010), David Fincher’s movie about kids’ faces, was the premise for the production and expansion of Facebook. Movies and the books upon which they are frequently based as

³² Farah, *Visual Agnosia*, 3.

³³ Farah, 18.

syzygetic complementarity, the graph of abstract intensive waves of distribution controlling the social networks of competitive decentralization.

☞ Robin MacKay and Ray Brassier like this.

Samuel Beckett Extraordinary how mathematics helps you to know yourself.

Dante di Maiano Been counting farts again?

Guido Guinizelli Enough! *Amor e 'l cor gentil sono una cosa.* Love and the noble heart are but one thing.

Georges Bataille What I suddenly saw, and what imprisoned me in anguish -- but which at the same time delivered me from it – was the identity of these perfect contraries, divine ecstasy and its opposite, extreme horror.⁷

☞ Guido Cavalcanti likes this

Francesca da Rimini

*Per più fiare li occhi ci sospinse,
Quella lettura, e scolorocci il viso:*

narratives are linked to a long literary tradition in which prosopopeia is a central and formative trope, casting often inhuman or superhuman forces into human forms (Gods, spirits, Ideas and so on). *The Social Network* thus recasts the technological sophistication of writing code and developing Facebook and the complexity of backroom legal battles into the form of a love story. Thus a certain facelessness (computer hacking and corporate lawyers) becomes transformed through the process of prosopopeia so that Zuckerberg-Eisenberg becomes the ‘face’ and metaphor for Facebook. What is the quality of this face and can it really serve as a metaphor for an online procedure in which faces are transformed into digital profiles with everything that implies?

According to *The Accidental Billionaires*,³⁴ Ben Mezrich’s book on which the movie is based, it is the unstated romance between Eduardo Saverin and Mark Zuckerberg that provides the narrative tension, hinging on the question of betrayal. While the betrayal essentially concerns

⁷ Georges Bataille, *Tears of Eros*, translated by Peter Conner. San Francisco: City Lights, 1990, 207.

³⁴ Ben Mezrich, *The Accidental Billionaires: Sex, Money, Betrayal and the Making of Facebook*. London: Arrow Books, 2010. All subsequent page references cited in the essay.

Ma solo un punto fu quell che ci vinse.
Quando leggemmo il disiato riso
Esser baciato da cotanto amante
Questi, che maid a me non fia diviso
La bocca mi baciò tutto tremante
Galeotto fu il libro e chi lo scrisse:
Quell giorno più non vi leggemmo avante
 [Time and again our eyes were
 brought together / by the book we
 read; our faces flushed and paled. /
 To the moment of one line alone
 we yielded: / It was when we read
 about those longed-for lips / now
 being kissed by such a famous
 lover, / that this one (who shall
 never leave my side) / then kissed
 my mouth, and trembled as he did.
 / Our Galehot was that book and
 he who wrote it. / That day we
 read no further . . . (*Inferno* V: 130-
 38)⁸

Francesca da Rimini Beyond
 the Book and the
 Commentary, Love is the
 experience of the divine that is
 lacking, of the divine *as*
 lacking, and yet this is at the
 very heart of the divine. I am
 in Hell (*Inferno* V 127-38). But
 is it any better for Him? I will
 post something on this soon.

Pope Boniface VIII
 Blasphemer!

control of the business involving
 the dilution of share prices, in the
 book this is refigured as a love
 triangle, a struggle between Savarin
 and Sean Parker for the affections
 and loyalty of Zuckerberg. The
 narrator remarks on Eduardo's
 jealousy after Zuckerberg's move to
 California leads to Parker's
 increasingly central role in the
 company, "maybe he was starting
 to think like the crazy girlfriend he
 was already considering dumping,
 maybe being a little jealous"
 (Mezrich, 174). Much of this
 remains in *The Social Network*, but
 the movie frames its own narrative
 by resurrecting a more obscure if
 conventional figure, the young
 woman whose face rebuffs
 Zuckerberg's advances and thereby
 inadvertently launches untold
 billions of profiles, status updates,
 comments and 'likes', as if it were
 the uncontrollable expression of a
 monstrous passion. "I need to do
 something to take my mind off her.
 Easy enough, except I need an
 idea," he writes on his blog
Zuckonit, before conceiving the idea
 of Facemash which will ultimately
 lead to theFacebook and
 Facebook.³⁵ About 50 minutes into
 the film, after Facebook has gone
 live and taken Harvard by storm
 such that he and Eduardo are

⁸ Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy* Vol.1: *Inferno*, translated by Mark Musa. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984.

³⁵ Fincher, *The Social Network*. Facebook was initially called theFacebook, a change in the film attributed to Sean Parker.

Dante Alighieri How did that old bastard get in here? Block him, unfriend him! Unfriend him!

St. Peter *Quelli ch'usurpa in terra il loco mio ... / fatt'ha del cimitero mio cloaca / del sangue e della puzza* [He that on earth has dared usurp that place of mine ... / has made my burial-ground a running Rhine / of filth and blood] (*Paradiso* XXVII, 22-27).⁹

Samuel Beckett

Love brings out the worst in man and no error. But what kind of love was this exactly? Love-passion? Somehow I think not. That's the priapic one, is it not? Or is this a different variety? There are so many, are there not? Platonic love, for example, there's another just occurs to me. It's disinterested. Perhaps I loved her with a platonic love? But somehow I think not. Would I have been tracing her name in old cowshit if my love had been pure and disinterested?¹⁰

View all 16 comments:

Cecco Angiolieri You're obsessed with shite.

☞ Dante di Maiano and

attracting serious female attention, Zuckerberg is again rebuffed by Erica Albright at dinner with friends. His response is further sublimation: "We have to expand," he says and plots the Facebook's move on to the campuses of Yale, Princeton, Stanford and beyond. The thwarted romance with Albright also provides the film's central question or dilemma concerning Zuckerberg's person or moral character. It is of course the central prosopopeia of the movie, the personification of the question concerning the beneficence of Facebook itself, Zuckerberg's 'gift' to the world.³⁶

At the end of the scene in *The Thirsty Scholar* that forms the prologue to the movie, Albright memorably ends their brief relationship by correctly predicting that he is likely to become "a very successful computer person" before adding, "but you are going to go through life thinking that girls don't like you because you are a nerd. And I want you to know from the bottom of my heart that that won't be true. It'll be because you're an asshole." The question of whether Zuckerberg is just an (ironically) socially awkward nerd or an 'asshole' capable of intellectual

⁹ Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy* 3 *Paradise*, translated by Dorothy L. Sayers and Barbara Reynolds. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

¹⁰ Beckett, *First Love*, 73-4.

³⁶ For Zuckerberg's enthusiasm for potlatch and gift economies, see Kirkpatrick, *The Facebook Effect*, 287-8.

Brendan Behan like this

Dante di Maiano Anal eroticism. There's the counting too, remember.

Beatrice dei Portinori Writing in the cowpat of the heart, counting . . . music, moody food of love . . . love seems to be an effect of the incursion of in-human particulate systems. Did someone say the word signifier?

Cecco Angiolieri "The poetry of courtly love tends to locate in the place of the Thing certain discontents of the culture."¹¹

Beatrice dei Portinori What thing?

Dante di Maiano You.

Cecco Angiolieri The Thing's thingness consists in its hole or vacuole: the void that holds.

Dante di Maiano Isn't that Heidegger?

Beatrice dei Portinori Are you saying that the most important thing about me is

theft, exploitation and betrayal of friends and colleagues (not to mention a systematic invader of privacy and sinister controller and manipulator of the personal information of huge populations around the world) is left for the cinema audience to decide. By the end of the film, Albright's initial objection to Zuckerberg's *ressentiment* towards the athleticism of rowing crew and the elite Harvard Final Clubs (later embodied by the Winklevoss twins) combined with his snobbery concerning Albright's own social and intellectual status, has been compounded by numerous other instances of arrogance and betrayal of close comrades. These include, perhaps, conspiring with the police to bust his colleague and rival Sean Parker for taking cocaine with interns at a Facebook celebration party that Zuckerberg himself suspiciously failed to attend. "I'm not a bad person," he says in the final scene of the movie, apparently to himself, yet is overheard by the female lawyer involved in his court cases with Savarin and the Winklevosses. The lawyer concurs, though informs him that he will have to settle with the twins because he would have no chance convincing a jury of this; his "clothes, hair, speaking-style,

¹¹ Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* 1959-1960, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan* Book VII, edited by Jacques-Alain Miller and translated by Dennis Porter, London: Routledge, 1992, 150.

my hole? OMG Do me a favour.

Dante Alighieri *Ella è quanto de ben pò far natura / per essempla di lei bieltà si prova* [She is the sum of nature's universe. / To her perfection all of beauty tends] (XIX, 49-50)¹²

Beatrice dei Portinori Blow into my trumpet and see if your sublimation still holds up.

Cecco Angiolieri “By means of a form of sublimation specific to art, poetic creation consists in positing an object I can only describe as terrifying, an inhuman partner.”¹³

Guido Guinizelli Signifier, inhuman, faceless? How can that be?

Beatrice dei Portinori Language is an alien virus consisting of letters that mortify, that turn all to waste, to litter :)

☞ Jacques Lacan and William Burroughs like this

Guido Guinizelli Surely love is an effect of sight – love at first sight – a vision of excess!

likeability” all testify against him. It is a question of perception and self-presentation. “You’re not an asshole, Mark,” she concludes, “you’re just trying so hard to be.” The utterance of the word ‘asshole’ is a repetition and recalls the first scene of the film, triggering Zuckerberg’s memory of Erica Albright. Left alone in the half-light, Zuckerberg stares yet again into the screen of his laptop and types her name into the Facebook search engine. He scans her profile intently, his cursor hovering over the ‘Friend Request’ button, presses it and waits, looking unblinking at the screen. He refreshes the page a number of times before the credits start to roll, the cinema audience unsure whether the end of the film suggests the likelihood of resumed romance or the ironic pathos of the formal instigator of many millions of new friendships and romances remaining unable to connect with his only love apart, perhaps, from the screen he stares through and his reflection at the digital profile.

It is this final cinematic image of an unsatisfied Narcissus gazing at the screen of a laptop that dominates *The Accidental Billionaires*. “To an outside observer” Mezrich writes, “the relationship [Zuckerberg] had with his computer seemed much smoother than any relationship he’d ever had

¹² Dante Alighieri, *La Vita Nuova*, translated by Barbara Reynolds.

¹³ Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 150.

Dante Alighieri She appeared to me almost in the beginning of her ninth year, and I first saw her near the end of my ninth year. (*Vita Nuova*, II)¹⁴

Dante di Maiano *quasi*. Almost.

II

Dante Alighieri

At that moment, and what I say is true, the vital spirit, the one that dwells in the most secret chamber of the heart, began to tremble so violently that even the least pulses of my body were strangely affected; and trembling, it spoke these words: “here is a god stronger than I, who shall come to rule over me.” At that point the animal spirit, the one abiding in the high chamber to which all the senses bring their perceptions, was stricken with amazement, and speaking directly to the spirits of sight, said these words: “now your bliss has appeared.” At that moment, the natural spirit, the one which dwells in that part where our nourishment is attended to, began to weep, and weeping, said these words: “Alas wretch that I am, from now on I shall be hindered

with anyone in the outside world” (42 see also 98-9). While the book is written in the third-person, the narrative’s perspective is largely that of Eduardo Savarin, so a reader is led to perceive a certain frustration in comments like “Mark sat there in silence, lost in his own reflection as it danced across the screen” (99). Eduardo, in both the book and the movie, is the vehicle of identification and wonder at the boy genius, the world’s youngest self-made billionaire. In the book and in the movie it is the blank impassivity of Zuckerberg’s face that provides the point of fascination for Eduardo and the audience, the movie-Zuckerberg, played with a beautiful ‘autistic’ vacancy by Jessie Eisenberg, prepared to give only the absolute minimum of attention to anything (lawyers, the legal process, potential advertisers) other than the image of his own genius. For the narrator/Eduardo, Zuckerberg “never seemed happier than when he was looking at his own reflection into that glassy screen” (*Mezrich*, 42): *ma più ne colpo i micidiali specchi / che ‘n vagheggiar voi stessa avete stanchi* [but most I blame those murderous mirrors which you have tired out with your love of yourself] (Petrarch, *Canzionere*

¹⁴ Dante Alighieri, *Vita Nuova*, translated by Mark Musa, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992.

often.” Let me say that from that time on Love governed my soul . . . (*Vita Nuova*, II.30)

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Spirito vita “Here is a god.” But who or what is this idol? I know not nor what relation it has to God, the One, *al-Lah* or Yahweh. Is it a simulacrum? A semblance, an illusion? Is it a demon in the guise of a god? God or demon it is an apparition, a form that makes the whole body tremble, displaces me from my seat in the heart and mortifies me . . . how is it possible that this form reduces me to an experience of formlessness?

Spirito animale Yes I was amazed, but at the same time it leaves me cold. You’ll notice that the *beatitudo*, the ‘bliss’, is not mine but is rather something offered to the perception of sight at the level, as it were, of appearance. It does nothing for me. This *beatitudo* makes of the pleasure of form a limit. We are not yet here confronting the problem of Universal Form which lies beyond the threshold of pleasurable perceptions (but what could be beyond the limit of

46; 7-8).³⁷ Zuckerberg here is described in his self-absorption, from the perspective of the narrator, as if he were a cruel mistress indifferent to the agonized anxieties of the lover, a sovereign beauty like Petrarch’s Laura or Dante’s Beatrice. Indeed, Savarin’s first encounter with Zuckerberg takes something of the form of an *inamoramento*, a love at first sight, as his face is described in a blazon of striking attributes including, quite conventionally, his eyes:

. . . a prominent nose, a mop of curly blondish brown hair, and light blue eyes. There was something playful about those eyes – but that was where any sense of natural emotion or readability ended. His narrow face was otherwise devoid of any expression at all. And his posture, his general aura – the way he seemed closed in on himself, even while engaged in a group dynamic, even here, in the safety of his own fraternity – was almost painfully awkward. (Mezrich, 15)

Eduardo is significantly struck by

³⁷ Francesco Petrarch, *Rime Sparse*, edited by Richard Durling, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986.

pleasurable forms other than formless agony?) Out of the mass of perceived data, the Active Intelligence must produce the appropriate abstraction to enable the apprehension of the soul and its pleasurable objects. The animal spirit of the brain “extracts information about local visual properties before computing the larger scale structure of the image.”¹⁵ But this is still only an approximation of Universal Form, produced through the animal spirit’s adaptation to the Outside. I, the brain, am this threshold, the neuroplatonian locus of the heteronomy between form and perception.

Spirito naturale This trauma makes me weep, but I am determined to weaponize that which hinders me, since it hinders only the axiomatic verity and somatic integration of my interiorized horizon. I shall mobilize the Insider so that this localized trauma may be deepened into the exteriorizing absolute thereby transforming the horizon of this liver into an immanent terroristic weapon.

the ‘prosopagnosia’ of courtly passion in which a “discrete number of physical attributes” becomes the focus of rapt attention, yet the face itself, as Petrarchan scholar Isabella Bertoletti notes, “never comes together as a portrait.”³⁸ Zuckerberg’s faceless face, ‘devoid of expression’, is the central part and focus of Savarin’s amorous frustration: “Eduardo stared at Mark, but, as usual, couldn’t read anything from his blank expression” (Mezrich, 115). But if this prosopagnosia is an effect of Eduardo’s passion, it seems to be shared by others including the Winklevoss twins for whom it was also “hard to read the kid’s face” (73). In this movie about kids’ faces, Zuckerberg’s expressionless face is the metaphor for a generation whose lives are spent staring into screens, large or small, most hours of the day, at work or leisure, shadowy faces coming in and out of focus. An ‘accidental’ billionaire, there is nothing remarkable about Zuckerberg in his ever present fleece, T Shirt and flip flops, but as such he functions perfectly as a blank screen for projection and identification in the book and the movie. But the faceless screen offered to the world by the movie-Zuckerberg is precisely the

¹⁵ Martha J. Farah, *Visual Agnosia*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004, 19.

³⁸ Isabella Bertoletti, “Petrarch’s *Rerum Vulgarium Fragmenta*: Mourning Laura,” *Quaderni d’italianistica*, XXIII (2002), 2, 25-43, 26.

Spirito vita Nature's been reading Reza Negarestani's blog again, *Eliminative Culinarism*.

Spirito naturale → Spirito vita

Reza Negarestani, 'On the Revolutionary Earth: A Dialectic in Territopic Materialism' written for Dark Materialism, Kingston University, London.

Spirito animale Does this mean you are going to become an anorexic suicide bomber mad for love of the absolute?

Spirito naturale It's not what you think. The absolute is pure contingency; it is neutral and incommensurable. To make oneself into a bomb would be to give oneself over to the energetic index of exorbitance: that is counter-revolutionary.

Spirito vita
Why?

Spirito naturale
Because it would be to bind oneself, economically, within the affordable duplicity of capacity and excess.

paradoxical personification of a digital culture in which reading and cinematic forms of identification have given way to a different order of 'interactivity'. Here again, Zuckerberg is the metaphor for a generation shaped by computers to such a degree that it seems to have altered their subjectivity, "there was something very computer-like about the way he spoke; input in, then input out." (Mezrich, 20) The faceless face of Zuckerberg, its 'blank expression' and 'unreadability' is, then, another form of literary prosopopeia, but paradoxically of a generalized prosopagnosia, a personification of Facebook's digital erasure – or overwriting – of both the face and the book.

III. FACEBLIND

"It is with our faces that we face the world, from the moment of birth to the moment of death."³⁹ In *The Mind's Eye*, Oliver Sacks evokes the essential importance of the face only to confess that he has had problems identifying faces "for as long as I can remember" (83). Sacks has 'developmental' prosopagnosia, which is a much more common form of the condition than prosopagnosia that is 'acquired' because of brain damage, stroke or degenerative diseases. Following publication in 1985 of his case history "The Man

³⁹ Sacks, *The Mind's Eye*, 82. Subsequent page references cited in the text.

Spirito animale Even as you spectacularly unbind yourself with Semtex ☺

Spirito vita Can we get to the point. We have an alien intruder Dante calls 'Love' that is having paradoxical but ultimately deleterious effects, at least in so far as the spirit of life is concerned. I likened it to a god. From whence comes it and what relation does it have to the One or, if you like, the Absolute?

Spirito animale Tradition would say through the eyes. '*Pegli occhi fere un spirit sottile*' (Cavalcanti, *sonetto XXVIII*).

Spirito naturale Yes but for Cavalcanti this spirit is not love, love is only a contingent effect – '*l'accidente*' – of this spirit's subtle incision and traumatization of the mind's interiorized horizon: *Pegli occhi fere un spirito sottile, / che fa 'n la mente spirito destare*, [A delicate sharp spirit through the eyes / strikes home to wake a spirit in the mind] (XXVII: 1-3).¹⁶ The question is whether love can be a revolutionary force of exteriorization, or is it

Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat,"⁴⁰ Sacks began to receive many letters from people comparing themselves with the subject of Sacks's case history. Sacks began to realise that "my' visual problem was not uncommon and must affect many people around the world" (90). Indeed, Ken Nakayama, who has set up the research centre Faceblind at Harvard University, "has long suspected that prosopagnosia is relatively common but underreported" (107).⁴¹

Like many with developmental prosopagnosia, Sacks has difficulty even recognising his own face:

On several occasions I have apologized for almost bumping into a large bearded man, only to realize that the large bearded man was myself in a mirror. The opposite situation once occurred at a restaurant with tables outside. Sitting at one of the sidewalk tables, I turned to the restaurant window and began grooming my beard, as I often do. I then realized that what I

¹⁶ Guido Cavalcanti, *Complete Poems*, XXVIII, 65.

⁴⁰ Oliver Sacks, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*. London: Touchstone, 1985.

⁴¹ See www.faceblind.org

counter-revolutionary?

Spirito animale But you didn't let me finish. How far is the contingency determined by number, and in this case the number 9? Is it related to the Trinity or to the Neoplatonic One? Or zero, the plane of intensity? Is it a cause or an effect of numerological psychosis? Is it the key to the mode of proliferation of libidino-schizo-capital, \$99.99, the ultimate diagram of capitalist counter-revolution, its machines "incarnating market mechanics within their nano-assembled interstices and evolving themselves by quasi-darwinian algorithms that build hypercompetition into 'the infrastructure' . . . time itself."¹⁷ Is your absolute mathematizable or the principle of de-mathematization?

Spirito naturale It is not a question of cause or origin but of the structure of ururtrauma and the infinity of traumatic interconnections. The secret is to investigate the nature of its force as trauma. Negarestani's master here is Sandor Ferenczi.

had taken to be my reflection was not grooming himself but looking at me oddly. There was in fact a gray-bearded man on the other side of the window, who must have been wondering why I was preening myself in front of him. (Sacks, 2010, 85)

In his book, Sacks is concerned with possible neurological bases for his condition, but his anecdotes here correspond to psychoanalytic and literary models. In the first instance, there is an unmistakable moment of an 'uncanny' shock at the apparition of the double, while in the latter instance, the shock occurs at the disturbance of narcissistic satisfaction. While Sacks struggles to recognise his face, he confesses to a certain fascination with it, 'preening himself' in front of a mirror. In both instances it is the frame and screen of the mirror / reflective window pane that provides the condition for misrecognition. While he is a neuroscientist, Sacks has a background in psychoanalysis and in his discussion takes the trouble to give an account of the development of face recognition. Citing Everett Ellinwood, Sacks writes about how the mutual

¹⁷ Nick Land, *Fanged Noumenon*. Falmouth: Urbanomic, 625-6.

Spirito vita I suggest we risk a Ferenczian interpretation of Dante's dream.

Spirito vita

Nine years after the first traumatic encounter, Dante meets his object once again, precisely – he emphasizes the precision of number here on more than one occasion – on the ninth hour of the day. The repetition betrays the action of the automaton, that is to say, the unconscious. Is this a numerological unconscious or one structured like a language? It seems to be the former. In any case it is described: “In my reverie a sweet sleep seized me, and a marvellous vision appeared to me. I seemed to see a cloud the colour of fire in my room and in that cloud a lordly man, frightening to behold, yet apparently marvellously filled with joy. He said many things of which I understood only a few; among them was ‘I am your master’. It seemed to me that in his arms there lay a figure asleep and naked except for a crimson cloth loosely wrapping it. Looking at it very intently, I realized that it was the Lady of the blessed greeting, the lady who earlier in the day had favoured me with her salutation. In one of his hands he held a fiery object, and he seemed to say these words: ‘Behold your heart’. And

smiling between mother and child, from about two and a half months, initiates “the processes of socialization . . . The reciprocal understanding mother-child relationship is possible only because of the continuing dialogue between faces” (82-3). In this way the imitative relation with the mother provides the ground and support for the moment of self-identification in the mirror image, as Lacan famously explicates. But even at the moment of the “inaugural experience of recognition in the mirror,” the child requires the support and confirmation of the mother who, for Lacan, represents the Other and thus ratifies “the value of the self-image.”⁴² The face of the mother is, then, the ‘ur-face’ that provides the pattern for the child for all future faces including, especially, his or her own face, imbuing it potentially with a foreignness that is reinforced, in turn, by the self-image itself that is located in reverse form in the mirror:

It is at that place, at the place where in the Other, there is profiled an image of ourselves that is simply reflected, already problematic, even fallacious; that it is at a place that is situated

⁴² Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan X: Anxiety* 1962-63, translated by Cormac Gallagher from unedited French typescripts, Karnac Books, III, 4.

after a short while he seemed to awaken the sleeping one, and through the power of his art made her eat this burning object in his hand. Hesitantly, she ate it. It was only a short while after this that his happiness turned into bitterest weeping, and weeping, he folded his arms around this lady and together they seemed to ascend towards the heavens. I felt such anguish at their departure that my sleep could not endure; it was broken and awakened.”¹⁸

Spirito naturale Well obviously it’s about child abuse.

Spirito animale Hmmm, but you don’t need Ferenczi and his obsession with child abuse to see that this is a scene of anxiety (Dante comes to realise this just as he wakes) at the phantasmatic proximity of the father as frightening figure of joy and incomprehensible knowledge, or *père jouissance* as they say in France.

Spirito vita But I have no memory of child abuse.

Spirito animale The spirits of vision saw nothing.

Spirito naturale We could

with respect to an image that is characterised by a lack, by the fact that what is called for there cannot appear there, that there is profoundly orientated and polarised the function of the image itself, that desire is there, not simply veiled, but essentially placed in relation to an absence, to a possibility of appearing determined by a presence which is elsewhere and determines it more closely, but, where it is, ungraspable by the subject, namely here, I indicated it, the o of the object, of the object which constitutes our question, of the object in the function that it fulfils in the phantasy at the place that something can appear.⁴³

It is the paternal naming of the lack that is supposed to stabilize the (self)image, hooking it on to the symbolic order, such that disturbances in the symbolic fabric may produce a destabilization and questioning of the value and reality of the image. Such a de-stabilization exacerbates the enigma of the

¹⁸ Dante, *Vita Nuova*, III, 6-7.

⁴³ Lacan, *Seminar X*, IV, 2.

have repressed it. His mother died when he was a child ... did he imagine and fear replacing her in his father's affections? Psychic exchange . . . remember he used usury as a pretext for denouncing his father . . .

Spirito animale The scene is always already fantasy; I'm a strict Freudian on this point. In the dream we clearly see the narcissistic splitting of the ego into the little girl Beatrice as ideal ego. The father picks up the child naked out of bed, the unconscious apparently returning to the original scene of trauma. As Dante dreams himself as a little girl in order to become the object of his father's obscene enjoyment, all that remains is his heart and the theft of the lost object that is consumed by his own imago. He was 9 when it happened; Beatrice was nine, and seeing her again 9 years later triggers the memory of the perversion of paternal love. The French would say

Other's desire, causing the *objet petit a*, Lacan's object-in-desire, to manifest itself in the strangeness of the image. Jean-Claude Maleval writes, "*l'objet a se manifeste, c'est volontiers par l'entremise du surgissement d'une image perturbée, étrangéifiée.*"⁴⁴ Maleval notes that while the specular image is ordinarily an object of narcissistic satisfaction, when it is no longer recognised as such it lacks adhesion and becomes uncanny, often taking the appearance of a strange and pervasive double.⁴⁵ While the specular image may begin to lose its narcissistic satisfaction, the trauma of its emergent strangeness and lack of recognition does not render it any the less anxiously fascinating. Maleval cites a case study concerning 'Jean-Pierre' who, during the long hours he spent before the mirror saw nothing but a blank image (*vide*). "*Elle lui semblait déshabillée. 'C'est moi, disait-il, mais j'ai peine à me reconnaître. Mon image manque de sens.*"⁴⁶ That the image lacks sense or meaning is crucial for Maleval because it indicates that the subject is not fully incorporated into the symbolic order: "*elle témoigne nettement que la texture*

⁴⁴ Jean-Claude Maleval, "Il n'y a pas d'angoisse psychotique," *Quarto* (2005) 11, 66-73, 66.

⁴⁵ "*L'image spéculaire est ordinairement un objet de satisfaction narcissistic, mais quand elle n'est plus reconnue comme telle, le manque colle à elle, et elle devient un objet unheimlich, qui prend souvent l'apparence de l'image étrange et envahissante du double,*" 66.

⁴⁶ Maleval, "Il n'y a pas d'angoisse psychotique," 70.

that it is precisely the failure of symbolic law to protect the child from the oppressive presence of the parent that ushers in psychosis and the reign of number – and what are we anyway but psychotic symptoms?

Spirito naturale There is no psychotic anguish (Maleval)

Spirito vita But you’ve missed out the interesting part wherein, if we follow Ferenczi we can see that the incursion of the force of trauma has the same symptoms as love: a “frightening whirlwind, a terrible vertigo” and a waning of the natural spirit such that he dreams of death and dematerialization.¹⁹ We all know Dante’s morbid attachment to the dead: the dead girl, the legions of the damned, the souls tortured in purgatory and those in heaven, even St Paul, still raging about some rival paternal figure, Pope Boniface VIII, supposed to be enjoying himself at Dante’s expense. The dead girl: what does he actually write when he hears she has died? Nothing, he just

*symbolique du sujet se défait.*⁴⁷

Facebook is of course a site teeming with symbols of various kinds but its means of authenticating identity is not simply predicated on ‘the name of the father’, the paternal function that for Lacan names maternal lack, thereby substituting desire for demand. Authentic naming is indeed essential to Facebook; its key difference from previous social networking sites is precisely that it attempts to prohibit and restrict the multiplication of different, false or playful, identities. But in the context of its peculiarly privatized yet open space, it is not simply parental authority or the state that authenticates identity; rather it is one’s ‘Friends’. Kirkpatrick writes, “these friends validate your identity. To get this circular validation process started you have to use your real name” (13). One’s ‘Friends’ on Facebook adopt a ‘trans-parental’ function in the authentication of both self-image and symbolic identity. Facebook’s Friends are not simply those friends gained over a lifetime’s social interaction at school, work and leisure. These friends are subjected to a different regime of online sociality that may include people you have never met or know very

¹⁹ Sandor Ferenczi, *Final contributions to the problems and methods of psychoanalysis* (Reprinted London: Karnac Books, 1994), originally published in 1930, 222-223.

⁴⁷ Maleval, “Il n’y a pas d’angoisse psychotique”, 70.

goes on and on again about the number 9. She has become pure number, if she was ever anything else, a number that abstracts and sucks the spirit of life out of him, turning him into a mechanomic writing machine. Here, no doubt, we can see how desire is numerologically de-mathematized and death-driven towards the inorganicism of the heavens. Let's go to *Paradiso* ☺

Spirito naturale But this number is not simply economy, not just calculation. Numerology is surely a form through which trauma becomes nested in the psyche, numbers marking a certain gradient of the universal that is at the same time exterior to the interiorized horizon of family romance.

Spirito animale That's a way of putting it.

III

Belacqua awoke having dreamt about the lobster. "Christ!" he said to himself, "it's alive." He saw it exposed, "cruciform on the oilcloth,"²⁰ dreaming that the lobster was God made flesh, God made lobster-flesh with claws and antennae, maybe even tentacles.

little about, a regime that collapses distinctions between professional colleagues, intimate friends, lovers, family, people with shared interests or alliances, even perfect strangers. The principle that determines these Friends as a collection seems to be quantity, the latter being the metric of value or prestige that is established through a competitive market in 'friendships'. "Friending had an element of competitiveness from day one, as it had on MySpace and Friendster. If your roommate had 300 friends and you only had 100 you resolved to do better . . . causing it to spread faster" (Kirkpatrick, 92). Soon it was not uncommon for people to have thousands of Friends all over the world, Facebook thereby modifying if not changing forever the meaning of the term 'friend' to something like a 'node' or link in a network of connections describing a 'social graph' for the distribution of information.

Where desire becomes affected by anxiety (and sometimes anger and upset) in the context of Facebook it is no doubt an effect of the law of competition to which desire and the value of identity is subject, where the subject is variously 'friended' or 'unfriended' according to the whims of online popularity among a multiplicity of different interests. This anxiety is perhaps compounded by

²⁰ Samuel Beckett, *More Pricks than Kicks*. London: Picador, 1974, 18.

Perhaps it was all the nonsense being posted on the web about Lovecraft lately, but he imagined God “in the depths of the sea” breathing secretly in his lobster pot Empyrean. Out he has been plucked and is going now alive into an inferno of scalding water.

Well, thought Belacqua, it’s a quick death, God help us all.

It is not.²¹

Who is speaking here? The authorial voice, terse and appropriately authoritative, countermands his character’s prayer for a quick death. As such he denies the prospect of God’s small mercy in the stress of sacrifice, underscoring the pathos of the equivalence of all His creatures at the level, at least, of suffering. But in so doing the equivalence is extended, as if in the shape of so many nested traumas, all the way to God himself, in a way already intuited by Belacqua, returning us to the idea of divine suffering. God is a large marine crustacean, sentient and splendid until, plucked from his watery universe, he gasps at the limpid exterior surface of his own milieu. Does he catch a glimpse therein of his reflection at the very point where he is exposed to the creation of a new airy cosmos? *Behold, I am.* In the form of a lobster, the self-reflection of the absolute survives “the Frenchwoman’s cat and his

Facebook’s commitment to ‘transparency’ and the automated, hyper-visibility represented by the introduction of the News Feed in September 2006 in which “your every move on Facebook might become news for your friends” (Kirkpatrick, 296). The News Feed “treated all your behaviour identically – in effect telescoping all your identities, from whatever context, into the same stream of information” (211). Activity is necessary to produce the visibility that is the pre-requisite for one’s popularity – quantified by an algorithm that distributes information according to the number of ‘likes’ and ‘comments’ received by the various posts, profiles, groups and pages. For Sherry Turkle, it is this un-homely nature of Facebook, in which the home becomes transparent, that is most anxiety producing:

Facebook feels like “home,” but you know that it puts you in a public square with a surveillance camera turned on. You struggle to be accepted in an online clique. But it is characterized by its cruel wit, and you need to watch what you say. These adolescent posts will remain online for a

²¹ Samuel Beckett, *More Pricks than Kicks*, 18.

witless clutch” only to be plunged again into the scalding depths so that Belacqua can “lash into it” for his dinner. Its geochemistry now the alien Insider fulminating with anonymous materials . . . Belacqua pauses, scrolls down the text: “*Here trauma as the self-excision or self-reflection of the absolute, transplants exteriority within interiority and fabricates topologically nested gradients of the universal.*”²²

It is Beatrice who both anticipates and answers Dante’s questions concerning the nature of God and creation. Concerning the ‘where’ and the ‘when’ of God, Beatrice says:

*Non per aver a sé di bene acquisto,
ch’esser non può, ma perché suo splendore
potesse, risplendendo, dir “Subsisto,”*

*in sua eternità di tempo fore,
fuor d’ogne altro comprender, come i
piacque,
s’aperse in nuovi amor l’eterno amore.*

[Not to increase His good, which cannot be, /But that His splendour, shining back, might say: / *Behold, I am*, in His eternity, / Beyond the measurement of night and day, / beyond all boundary, as he did please, / new loves Eternal Love shed from His ray.] (*Paradiso*, XXIX.13-18)²³

lifetime, just as those you “friend” on Facebook will never go away. Anxieties migrate, proliferate.⁴⁸

For the subject of Facebook, two poles of anxiety and inhibition are produced concerning the desire of the Other where the insistence of the Other’s desire is indicated by the News Feed. Or rather it is perhaps not desire so much as an abstracted demand that is rendered infinite by the News Feed. ‘I’ am ‘fed’ news by Facebook before I have the opportunity to ask or look for it; it flows down my page in an infinite yet unique stream, ‘mechanomically’ selected especially for me. For Lacan, famously, it is not lack that produces anxiety, but the lack of the lack. “What is most anxiety-provoking for the child, is that precisely this relation of lack on which he establishes himself, which makes him desire, this relation is all the more disturbed when there is no possibility of lack, when the mother is always on his back, and especially by wiping his bottom, the model of demand, of the demand which cannot fail.”⁴⁹ Facebook is continually massaging the organ of exchange, of the exchange of data

²² Reza Negarestani, “On the Revolutionary Earth.”

²³ Dante, *Paradise*, 309.

⁴⁸ Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together*. New York: Basic Books, 2010, p. 243.

Both Dorothy L. Sayers and Barbara Reynolds gloss these verses on the moment of creation by highlighting the importance of God's desire for self-consciousness. "The act of creation and the things created could not add to God's goodness, which is infinite. His motive in creating was that His reflected light ('splendour') should shine back to him in self-awareness."²⁴ "Why did God create?" [Beatrice's] answer is that God created not to increase His good, which cannot be, but in order that His reflected light might shine back to Him self-existing and in self-awareness."²⁵ God in his solitude, it seems, was not content persisting in the boundless immanent goodness of eternity, he required a moment of (self)transcendence in which he could properly realise himself through becoming apparently for the first time truly aware of himself through looking at the mirror image of himself in the light of his self-illumination. *Subsisto!* God in a flutter of jubilation reassures Himself of His splendour by looking in the mirror of creation,

and information, rendering it smoother, quicker, more efficient. The anal register, here, is also consistent with Zuckerberg's morality which informs and justifies both his commitment to transparency and his apparent belief that privacy is an impediment to an open society, "To get people to this point where there's more openness – that's a big challenge . . . The concept that the world will be better if you share more is something that's pretty foreign to a lot of people and it runs into all these privacy concerns."⁵⁰ Zuckerberg goes on to say that "having two identities for yourself is an example of a lack of integrity . . . the level of transparency the world has now won't support having two identities for a person" (199). In other words, it will be impossible to separate the personal from the professional, the private from the public, the intimate from the open; one's dirty linen continually exposed as information proliferates on the internet and elsewhere.

This is Facebook's "radical social premise" and it is easy to see

⁴⁹ Lacan, *Seminar X*, IV, 10.

²⁴ Dorothy L. Sayers in Dante, *Paradise*, 314. See also Ibn Arabi et al on the hadith 'I was a hidden treasure that was not known, so I loved to be known.'

²⁵ Barbara Reynolds, *Dante*, 392.

⁵⁰ Mark Zuckerberg, quoted in Kirkpatrick, 200. Kirkpatrick suggests that "Zuckerberg sees privacy as something Facebook should offer people until they get over their need for it." (203)

and lo from his Eternal self-love flow all the new loves (*nuovi amor*) of his creatures from the angels to humanity. The mysticism of God: to desire everything?

Dante wrote in *Il convivio* that love is the cosmic force that establishes the affection and relation between all things (Section III, chapters 2-3: 285). In Virgil's great Discourse on Love from *Purgatorio*, he emphasises that love is not only a contingent but also a neutral force, source of evil as well as good.

*Quinci comprender puoi ch'esser convene
amor sementa in voi d'ogne virtute
e d'ogne operazion che merta pene.*

[Bethink thee then how love must be the seed / In you, not only of each virtuous action, / But also of each punishable deed.]. (*Purgatorio*, XVII. 91-96; 103-5)²⁶

This cosmic love, that is essentially an effect of divine self-love, is internally riven, like all love, with the ambivalence with which it conflicts all relations and affections. What deficiency, imaginary or otherwise – what trauma – produced this infinitesimal moment of divine vanity and celestial narcissism? When he looked in the

that it has a revolutionary potential: a neoliberal communism that abolishes privacy yet sustains the individual in relation to a generalized narcissism of absolute visibility and transparency. “There is not narcissism and non-narcissism” insisted Jacques Derrida in an interview that broached his relation to his own photographic image, “there are narcissisms that are more or less comprehensive, generous, open, extended.”⁵¹ Is Facebook such a comprehensive, generous, open, extended narcissism? A genuinely revolutionary narcissism?

IV. THE STRUCTURE THAT TOOK TO THE STREETS

David Kirkpatrick begins *The Facebook Effect*, the authorized history of the company, with an account of Facebook's utility as a “political tool.” He tells the story of a campaign against the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Columbia (FARC); it is, then, not so much an account of Facebook's revolutionary potential, but rather, in this instance, its effective means as a tool for counter-revolution, for popular revolt in support of a weakened and ineffective state.

“Oscar Morales was fed up,” begins the book, because the

²⁶ Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy 2 Purgatory*, translated by Dorothy L. Sayers. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984, 198-9.

⁵¹ Jacques Derrida, *Points: Interviews 1974-94*, edited by Elisabeth Weber. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995, 199.

mirror of creation did He see his own face or that of a stranger or of a mass of faceless creatures hymning praise, or did he see nothing? Was God's face part of the Creation, God produces himself for himself in an act of divine prosopopeia? *Behold, I am.* Is this pride – the very sin for which Lucifer is cast into the inferno?

Belacqua puzzled once again over the paradox, peering into his laptop in silence, lost in his own reflection as it flickered across the screen. "Infinite regress," he murmured. "It's traumatized Gods all the way up."

Exhausted, Belacqua lay his face upon his thigh. His News Feed continued to update itself.

"... it can be deepened, another trauma by which the infinite interconnected traumas can be widened – it is the one that makes sure the narcissistic wound keeps bleeding."²⁷

"I love you, even if you don't want it."

"I desire you, even if I do not know it."

"I'm not mad, I function."

"To love someone is unforgivable."

Columbian's holiday period, like much of the country apparently, was being disturbed by "the suffering of a little boy named Emmanuel" who was being held hostage along with his mother Clara Rojas and others including the politician Ingrid Betancourt by FARC. Expectation was high that at least little Emmanuel, if not all the hostages, would be released by Christmas 2007 as a result of negotiations between the guerrillas and Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez. By the New Year the boy still hadn't been released, but to everyone's surprise in early January the Colombian President Alvaro Uribe announced that Emmanuel was no longer in the hands of the FARC, but in foster care. For Morales and many others, this was the last straw. "People were happy because the kid was safe, but we were so fucking angry [...] we felt assaulted by the FARC. How could they dare negotiate for the life of a kid they didn't even have? People felt this was too much. How much longer was the FARC going to play with us and lie to us?" (Kirkpatrick, 1-2).

Morales set up a Facebook Group called *Un Millon Voces Contra Las FARC* (A Million Voices Against FARC). Information about the Group and its plea was rapidly distributed through Facebook's 'social graph', and in a few weeks

²⁷ Reza Negarestani, "On the Revolutionary Earth."

“E a la riva / cuopre la notte già col piè
Tunisia.”



the Group had thousands of members, and a large demonstration was organised. The demonstration attracted the attention of the Press as indeed did

the novel means of its organization and the campaign spread further – in the process expanding the number of Facebook users since it was new to Columbia and associated only with ‘kids’ (4). The very visibility of the numbers of the Group emboldened the campaigners – “Facebook gave Columbia’s young people an easy, digital way to feel comfort in numbers to declare their disgust” – and the site itself provided a key point of organization and liaison. “Facebook was our headquarters ... It was the newspaper ... the central command ... the laboratory” (Morales quoted by Kirkpatrick, 5). President Uribe eventually succeeded in negotiating the release of the hostages but the Facebook campaign and the demonstration were credited with applying pressure on the FARC. Oscar Morales’s “group and the subsequent demonstration made him into a national and international celebrity” (6).

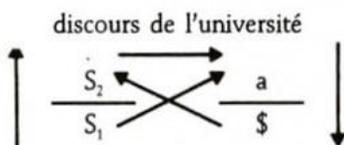
The anecdote illustrates nicely how Facebook establishes a social bond though the production of ‘faces’: the new technology of the social networking site enables Oscar Morales to become the face of the protest against FARC, and ultimately achieve ‘celebrity’. In Seminar XVII Lacan famously organizes the social bond across four terms:

<u>agent</u>	<u>other</u>
truth	production

It is clearly Facebook and the Group it enables (*Un Millon Voces Contra Las FARC*) that is the ‘agent’ here, addressed to the ‘other’ whose reference is FARC. The authority and ‘truth’ of the Facebook Group is grounded in the *number* of members of the Group galvanized in relation to the guerrillas. Although they were in the thousands rather than millions (there not being enough Facebook users in Columbia at the time), millions of people did demonstrate in cities across Columbia, inspired by the Group. In contradistinction to the inhuman facelessness of FARC, then, Facebook produces Oscar Morales as the (human) face of a Group actually made up of

thousands of other faces like so many pixels or the digital code into which the face dissolves in the original Facebook logo.

The four main forms of the social bond for Lacan are the discourses of the Master, the Hysteric, the University and the Analyst. It seems to me that Facebook, appropriately given that it was developed at Harvard, is an example of University discourse in which knowledge (S₂), supported by the signifier of the master (S₁), is in the position of agent which, through its address to the lack constitutive of desire (*objet petit a*), produces the subject (\$).



A certain modification is necessary however in order to discuss Facebook as a form of social bond with regard to this structure. Facebook is certainly a product of the University, but does not so much represent the ‘knowledge’ of the University as its ‘information’; it is not the agent of operative knowledge, but operative information. As such the structure can organize all the rankable degrees of University life on the same plane from social grooming to academic and professional achievement.⁵²

Famously, Facebook was developed at Harvard in a kind of perversion of its bureaucratic procedures. All Universities, colleges and fraternities have a ‘facebook’ of passport-style photographs that are held along with other information as a record of its staff and students. Zuckerberg and his colleagues, initially through Facemash leading to theFacebook used these procedures as a means for student enjoyment: self-promotion, narcissism, dating, voyeurism and so on. From the very beginning there was something ‘superegoic’ in the way in which its ‘obscene’ content (inspired by the initial idea of comparing female students’ faces to farm animals for example) was conveyed by the apparent neutrality of bureaucratic form.

⁵² Not surprisingly the University has adopted the structure both in the form of the pan-academic networking site Academia.edu (that is linked to Facebook itself) and within individual universities (including my own) where it is used as a tool that can bring together social, pastoral, pedagogic and administrative functions into the same space in ways that are, in my view, far from unproblematic.

Accordingly, the signifier (S1) that is the governing support of Facebook (S2) is not the name of a Master or a governing Idea of the University (Truth, Culture, Excellence), but a number (1) that stands for numbers generally, metrics, statistics, quantification and so on. The ‘knowledge’, then, if there is any, is statistical information that is operative through the manipulation of computerized data through the use of algorithms. With the Oscar Morales story, number (*Un Millon Voces*) provides the hyperbolic, even performative command that brings the Group into being as a mass, and its authority as a number provides its ‘comfort’ and security.

As everyone knows there is something uncanny about passport photographs and their inability to deliver a satisfyingly narcissistic image of one’s face (enabling them to be compared to farm animals, for instance). *I don’t recognize this image; it’s not me!* It is as if the photo booth steals some aspect of the face essential to its enjoyment as a mirror image. The digital face-making, or prosopopeia of Facebook, is predicated upon a generalized prosopagnosia (or prosop – *a* – gnosia) where the *a* stands for the lost enjoyment stolen by the bureaucratic passport photograph. However, the theft of enjoyment in the Oscar Morales story concerns the fact that he and his countrymen were cheated by the FARC of the collective joy that would have been brought by the sight of the face of Emmanuel, his suffering relieved by his release on Christmas day. The fact that he was quietly released by the hostages into a foster home without fuss or announcement seems to have produced an irrational rage in the Columbians, strange given the possible alternative: “People were happy because the kid was safe, but we were so fucking angry” (Kirkpatrick, 1). It is therefore into this gap, marked in its absence by the suffering or joyful face of Emmanuel in the field of mediatized visibility, that Facebook pours its information, a million faces combining to producing Oscar Morales as Columbia’s first Facebook star, making him “a national and international celebrity” (6). As such, however, he inevitably loses something, loses his offline, off camera ordinariness, becoming vulnerable to the harsh light of media attention and expectation as a hero of political and moral virtue.

Lacan presented his theory of the four discourses in the context of the events of May 1968, most notably in a rowdy exchange with students at Vincennes.⁵³ Memorably, Lacan claimed that “the

⁵³ See ‘Impromptu at Vincennes’ in Jacques Lacan, *Television*. NY: Norton, 1990, 117-28.

aspiration to revolution has but one conceivable issue, always, the discourse of the master.”⁵⁴ At the same time, as Matthew Sharpe notes, Lacan also made the claim that university discourse “is increasingly becoming the dominant structure of social relations.”⁵⁵ While Lacan initially had in mind “the societies of the now-former Soviet bloc,” Sharpe shows that new forms of advertising in their ‘superegoic’ appeal to transgressive (as opposed to officially sanctioned) enjoyment are organized according to the same structure, since advertising “faces, and educates, a more or less unformed, ignorant individual” which it compels to consider, “from a quasi-superegoic position of neutral self-observation ... what we *really are* and *really want*, beneath whatever social masks and roles we may from time to time have taken up.”⁵⁶

Since about 2008, Facebook’s core business, its means of making money, has been advertising, but it is claimed that this is purely a means rather than an aim, and in any case “the word *advertising* is really no longer the right word for what is going on at Facebook” (Kirkpatrick, 263). Rather, Kirkpatrick argues that Facebook provides a space in which producers and consumers interact to the point of becoming indistinct as mutual users of the site. From the beginning “Thefacebook had no content of its own. It was merely a piece of software – a platform for content created by its users” (31) in which marketers can now pay for visibility for their products but “can no longer control the conversation” about them (263). For Mark Zuckerberg, Facebook ‘monetization’ merely generates the revenue necessary for a much more profound social project. The company is “founded on a radical social premise – that an enveloping transparency will overtake modern life” (Kirkpatrick, 200), and this premise is the foundation of Facebook’s utopian promise. As the story of Oscar Morales relates, Facebook can be an effective tool working for popular causes in the aid of the state – no doubt in other states it can work against them. As such, however, Facebook is not a neutral ‘tool’ for the political expression of popular reason. It is a form that is itself transformative of other political structures, ushering in *a new kind of governmentality*. “In a lot of ways,” Zuckerberg argues,

⁵⁴ Lacan, *Television*, 126.

⁵⁵ Matthew Sharpe, “The ‘Revolution’ in Advertising and University Discourse” in Justin Clemens and Russell Grigg (eds) *Reflections on Seminar XVII*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2006

⁵⁶ Sharpe, *Reflections on Seminar XVII*, 309.

“Facebook is more like a government than a traditional company. We have this large community of people, and more than other technology companies we’re really setting policies” (Zuckerberg, cited in Kirkpatrick, 254). While particular technology companies are always vulnerable to the rapid exploitation of new technological innovations and a certain boredom threshold concerning their formats, Facebook has it seems made a decisive breakthrough in its reformatting of the social bond. In its infinite streams of commentary, ‘likes’ and followers of Groups and interests, Facebook has transformed the meaning of ‘Friendship’ and opened it up so that a transparent – or ‘transparental’ – love has become the principle of a new technology of neoliberal governance. Whatever the fate of Facebook, for this model to become truly revolutionary would require a further turn clockwise towards the discourse of the Master in which love for the face of the ‘transparental’ One, the index of the multiple, supports the total operationalization of social reality without remainder other than the facelessness that is produced as its surplus and condition.

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