

ON THE MISRECOGNITION OF FRIENDS

D. GRAHAM BURNETT

Shearjashub Spooner's eccentric three-volume *Anecdotes of Painters, Engravers, Sculptors and Architects, and Curiosities of Art* (1865) rehearses the following tale:

Jean Ranc, an eminent French portrait painter, was sometimes annoyed by impertinent and vexatious criticism. Having exhausted all his talent upon a particular portrait, the friends of the sitter refused to be pleased, although the sitter himself appears to have been well satisfied. In concert with the latter, Ranc concerted a plan for a practical retort. After privately painting a copy of the picture, he cut the head out of the canvas, and placed it in such a position that the original could supply the opening with his own veritable face, undetected. After all was ready, the cavaliers were invited to view the performance, but they were no better pleased. Falling completely into the snare, the would-be critics were going to condemn the likeness, when the relaxing features and hearty laughter of the supposed portrait, speedily and sufficiently avenged the painter of their fastidiousness.

My own copy of this work here features a penciled marginalia in nineteenth-century hand, which reads: "Qu: did Chas. Reed [*sic*] steal this for his Peg Woffington?"

He did not. Charles Reade's fictionalized life of the eponymous popular (Irish) Georgian actress was originally published back in 1853. My annotator was correct, however, that *Peg Woffington* contains a scene departing from the same conceit: Peg is the sitter, and she and her artist Triplet conspire (on the inspiration of a French anecdote; Ranc is unmentioned) to, as she puts it, "criticize criticism" by placing her theatrical countenance though his unfinished portrait and subjecting this tableau to the judgment of a gaggle of admirers and aficionados.

The same story, I subsequently discovered, is explicitly tied to Ranc in an earlier account that likely inspired both Spooner and Reade: to wit, Antoine-Joseph Dezallier D'Argenville's 1745 *Abrégé de la vie des plus fameux peintres*, which was widely reprinted and translated well into the nineteenth century. Interestingly, though, D'Argenville expects his readers already to be familiar with the whole incident on account of a still earlier version, this one in verse: "Le Portrait," by the academician Antoine-Houdar de LaMotte, published in his *Fables nouvelles* of 1719. Disconcertingly, LaMotte's treatment—which does not name Ranc—is elsewhere

alleged to recount an incident in the life of Ranc's rough contemporary, the feckless Jacques Autreau.¹ And Gasparo Gozzi, writing in *L'Osservatore veneto* of 7 October 1761, sets the whole tale in Florence.

Be all that as it may, it is in LaMotte's *ur-text* that the anecdote achieves its fullest expressive power, and the following three observations are based on that version.

First, "Le Portrait" must be understood as a secularized inversion of Peter's denials of Christ at Jerusalem (Matthew 26:69–75, Mark 14:66–72, Luke 24:54–62, and John 18:15–27). LaMotte meticulously affords the "friends" three discrete occasions to acknowledge their own, and it is only upon their third denial that the long-suffering face intones a grave "C'est moi"—a phrase we might here consider the *ecce homo* of enlightenment solipsism. After all, though the joke is in some sense "on them," these friends have cruelly abandoned the sitter in the hour of his reckoning with (im)mortality (in its *mondain* eighteenth-century guise—durable beaux-arts representation).

Second, this peculiar stemma presents, I believe, a significant and philosophically inflected prehistory of the story recently told by Jordan Bear and Albert Narath in these pages concerning Cassius M. Coolidge and the "comic foreground"—those life-size boardwalk cartoons that feature oval holes in place of a character's face, allowing passers-by the opportunity for a kind of low-stakes drag performance ("Head Trips," *Cabinet* no. 33). There, recall, the authors recovered the unlikely invention of this ubiquitous feature of American popular culture, and offered a compelling account of its function as a façade through which the masses might pursue "recreation" in several senses. Sifting the anecdote of "Le Portrait" suggests the need for a still deeper genealogy of the pierced canvas and the existential-cum-representational conundrums it presents.

Finally, this tale of friendship and image making can perhaps serve as a helpful pendant to Pliny's immortal account (*Natural History*, book 35, chapter 43, §12) of the origin of representation itself—his story of Butades' daughter, who, facing the departure of her lover, traced his profile on her wall. If Pliny there gave us the mythopoetic birth of painting, LaMotte effectively prefigures its death—and, suggestively, its rebirth as performance art. In Pliny, of course, it was love that made the first portrait as a primordial act of mimesis and memory. By contrast, in "Le Portrait," friendship disdains the *imago* as merely pale reflection. What love gave, friendship renounces.

Our friends, it would seem, defy recognition.

¹ See, for instance, Nick Childs, "Jacques Autreau," *Burlington Magazine*, vol. 109, no. 771 (1967), pp. 335–339, at p. 336.