

What We Don't Know

to recognize

March 26, 1926

Meeting up with Yourself

I'm not thinking of the alter ego, but of one's reflection in a mirror. It happened to me while I was at the tailor's, left by myself for a minute to undress. While I was doing this with all the absent-mindedness which a person acquires over the years while undressing, I sighted in front of me, in profile, a man who was looking out from somewhere in the corner and unbuttoning his vest, just as I was. ^{then} ~~It~~ struck me as being very disagreeable, not perhaps because this fellow was undressing in my presence, but because his face in profile was completely foreign to me and yet at the same time painfully familiar. I remained standing and looked him over; he left off unbuttoning and turned toward something which I couldn't see; I must say that at the moment he looked rather silly. Only when he took off his vest at the same time I did, did I grasp that it was I myself in a triple mirror. This mirror is one of the most perverse inventions in the world, for it snatches away that veil of secrecy with which a man covers himself. There is something unnatural about a man seeing his own nose in profile; it deprives him of the secure illusions he has about himself. It is the destiny of man that he would rather measure the height of the Himalayas than catch sight of the lines of his own nose. If we don't see the tip of our nose, it isn't because we are shortsighted, but because the said nose is our own. As long as a person doesn't see his own profile, he remains something unknown and unrecognizable to himself; he bears something on his face, the appearance of which he is clearly uncertain about; he knows all kinds of things about himself, but the deep secret of his nose, which is revealed to every passerby, remains hidden from him. I've just been reading about how, with the help of some kind of microphone or amplifier, a man supposedly can hear his own voice; I think it must be equally as painful to catch sight of one's own profile. I could say that it isn't me and that this unknown person somehow unjustly

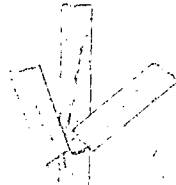
passes himself off as me; that it is an interloper who accompanies me everywhere and yet at the same time hides from me. Heaven knows how women can stand sitting before triple mirrors and examining that strange and unfamiliar thing called one's own face. A man doesn't like to see himself; and if he wants to visualize Man, he has to think in terms of his ^{friends and} neighbors.

Kind Reader

I don't really know why he is called "kind reader"; for I don't know if he is kind, just as I don't know if he is as red-haired as the Emperor Barbarossa or as bald as a Roman senator; I simply cannot visualize him and I think he will remain a mystery to me to the end of my days.

Sometimes it happens that a very respectable gentleman comes up to you and says, "~~By the way~~ I am Mr. So-and-so, and I read your article about — " The moment you come to know your reader in this way, you lose him; for this gentleman is no longer the mysterious kind reader, but the important Mr. So-and-so; he is a gentleman with a goatee and a definite opinion; he is an acquaintance of yours. With each person you meet face to face, the enigmatic Reader recedes further; this isn't he; for Kind Reader isn't any of the people you know; he is the embodiment of all the people you don't know.

But if I try to give at least some features to this unknown person, I find that somehow I cannot imagine Kind Reader as being particularly kind, smiling or enthusiastic; rather, I imagine him as a very stern, glum creature who accepts my book or article into his hand as a judge accepts a court file. I think he has long whiskers, like Father Time; and what's even worse is that he knows everything and understands everything about whatever I write, for he represents all occupations. No error of mine, no ignorance, no blunder nor stumble of mine escapes his eyes; he catches me red-handed whenever I make a mistake or when he knows a subject better than I do. He doesn't say anything; he only twitches his eyebrows at me in malicious delight, because he has found me out: aha, young fellow, you couldn't cope with that. His knowledge is astonishing and probably



unlimited; if I confuse Audion lamps with Davy lamps, he notices it; nor does it escape him when in my botanical ~~ignorance~~^{innocence} I mistake, for instance, St. John's-wort for snapdragons. Friends, I'm afraid of him! Often when writing I pause and scratch out what I have just written, for I'm not sure of myself before Kind Reader. He is terrible, being unknown; if he is called kind, it is from a strange fear; it is necessary to flatter him.