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Wechsler: A Human Comedy: Physiognomy and Caricature in 19th Century Paris

**Judith Wechsler.** *A Human Comedy: Physiognomy and Caricature in 19th Century Paris.* London: Thames and Hudson; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982. 208 pp. 161 black-and-white ills. £18.50.

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This book is composed of five essays concerned with rather more than the subtitle conveys. It deals with disparate topics around the leit-motif caricature:<sup>1</sup> the graphic, theatrical, and literary representation of gesture, bearing (*démarche*), and facial expression as basics of the graphic rhetoric and grammar of social description.

The first chapter, "Parisian Panorama: Codes and Classifications" deals with the tradition of physiognomic and to a lesser extent phrenological investigation, with its connections to Balzac and the popular mode for *Physiologies*, which climaxed in 1840–1842. A chapter on the mime Debureau and the Théâtre des Funambules connects theater and caricature in a link which is always problematical, because the terms of comparison are so different. An actor or mime depends on a complex *sequence* of motions which, before cinematography, were impossible to preserve; whereas the caricature singles out and "holds" a characteristic or climactic pose. The idea of a coherent mimetic sequence of poses obviously derived from the theater is not developed in caricature until Willette's Pierrot in the *Chat Noir* of the 1880s (after Wechsler's cutoff point, which appears to lie around 1870).

"Caricature: Newspapers and Politics" shows how graphics entered journalism in France, for the first time, in 1830 and in a polemical form (news illustration developed later). Here we have, neatly laid out, much familiar material: Daumier, the *Poire* (Louis-Philippe as pear/fathead), censorship, and Grandville, who, illogically, is represented in Wechsler's text and illustrations by his album and book illustrations only, rather than his numerous and powerful political journal cartoons. It is also odd that Gavarni, the great lithographer, is represented only by reproductions of wood engravings after his designs. Justice is done to the lesser known Traviès, the supercession of whose primary creation, the Mayeux type, by Daumier's Robert Macaire marks the transition from "romantic" naiveté to "realist" cynicism. Wechsler correctly identifies Mayeux, Macaire, (Daumier's) Ratapoil, and (Monnier-Daumier's) Joseph Prudhomme as the chief caricature types to become part of French folklore,

like Dickens's characters did in England. One might add to the list Gavarni's ragged philosopher Thomas Vireloque.

Prudhomme, created on stage by Monnier, transposed to graphics initially by Monnier himself and then perfected and popularized by Daumier, gets a chapter to himself. He is perhaps the primary typification of the medium or grand bourgeoisie as a generality, and became so popular that he engulfed his creator, Monnier.

The final chapter, "Daumier: Strategy and Style," is perhaps the best of all, an excellent summary introduction to many important aspects of his work, which is characterized in some elegant turns of phrase. The text here does not, however, establish the familiar argument in favor of Daumier's uniqueness in terms of his relationship to the foregoing material in the theater, physiognomics, and contemporary caricature.

Much of the art treated in this book is about and for a variegated, jostling, crowded world. The book itself jostles with information, much of it familiar, some of it new. A lot of it, while not exactly out of place, is not quite in place either. It moves in and out of focus, from sequitur to nonsequitur, from the general to the particular and back, pushed along by its own weight and impetus. Wechsler is the spectator-participant in the crowd, rather than its director. For all its many correct insights and felicitous turns of expression, the book lacks coherent or sustained argument, a real sense of direction and purpose. The reader becomes a *flâneur* among some fascinating highways and byways of material; in these conditions, one is pleased to reencounter one's old friend Baudelaire, who is always bobbing up with a trenchant comment on this or that. There is a certain logic to writing a book in this way, laying it out haphazardly like the streets we roam, with little mazes and the odd dead end inside the celebrated *quartiers* and off the familiar broad boulevards.

Its primary weakness is the lack of integration into social and political history beyond the grand externals of this or that revolutionary landmark. The passage from *peinture de mœurs* to the practice of those *mœurs* is left in abeyance. There is a lot of microscopic cultural taxonomy going on, but the bigger sociological categories are missing. What is the role of caricature and popular theater and literature in the shifting sands of class? How does the artist place himself and his audience in terms of social relations and hierarchies, which is ultimately what nineteenth-century caricature (not to say all art) is about? To call the book, as Richard Sennett does in his Introduction, a "companion work to T. J. Clark's *Absolute Bourgeois*" is simply absurd; I suspect the author her-

self would disavow a comparison with this pioneer of the new Marxist art history, with its rigorous, often polemical, complex, tightly woven argument and highly self-conscious methodology.

Wechsler is not unaware of the concept of social alienation, but it remains at the level of traditional, idealizing art-historical psychology: the artist personally alienated from society. "Except for Daumier, all the caricaturists discussed here lived their lives in increasingly tense and abrasive relations with society and ended in isolation and despair" (p. 109). So far, so good, but not far enough: the next and necessary step is to figure out how this alienated relationship is transposed into the art and how the audience is made its accomplice, and/or how far the audience is allowed to distance itself from characters and situations made to appear ridiculous while standing as representative, often enough, of its own class; how far extreme and marginal behavior becomes just another amusing spectacle for people basically satisfied with the present scheme of things, or fearful that any change will be for the worse. Above all, one must try to determine who this audience is: I take it to be basically a petty bourgeoisie in a state of flux, shifting its alliances as it struggles for survival and advantage.

It is misleading to say that this "popular" art, theater, and literature was designed for a "mass of dislocated urbanites" (Sennett), without distinguishing "a mass" from "the masses." The *Charivari* under Louis-Philippe sold only around 2000 copies; it was relatively expensive (it had to be, publishing a hand-pulled lithograph on good paper every day) and obviously reached far fewer people than the new cheap press with its truly mass-appealing *feuilletons*. Daumier's audience was a relative elite of radical intelligentsia, essentially petty bourgeois in outlook, with little attachment to the working class, and by no means always progressive. Idealizing Daumier and his mentor Philipon as art historians generally do, Wechsler praises their primary vehicle, the *Charivari*, as "for thirty years the leader of the journalistic and caricatural campaigns on behalf of betrayed Republican principles." It could be shown, however, that this journal was among the traitors: as other radical or republican organs went out of business under Napoleon III, the *Charivari* was there on the sidelines cheering the imperial and imperialist military endeavors in Russia and Italy. At such times the *Charivari* appears as an ideological prop of the regime; but for a complete picture we await the much-needed biography of the journal. In the 1840s it had campaigned against socialism and feminism (the latter a favorite target of Daumier); and *Charivari*'s representation of the working class, as in European caricature magazines generally, tends to be unfavorable, if not outright hostile.

The spectrum of social identification among caricaturists and journals remains to be discerned. It is not always evident, although broad colorations are: Gavarni, avowedly contemptuous of the lower classes with moments of compassion for their poverty; Grandville, often supportive of working-class militancy and revolutionary ideals; Daumier-Philipon, oscillating in the middle.

The physiognomic tradition, despite its scientific, formalist-aesthetic, and humorous concerns, was imbued with a class and racist bias of its own. The physiognomic ideal and ultimate reference point for all variations was always the classical, Greco-Roman type with the long straight nose and vertical facial angle; the further this angle receded, the more negroid, simian, and bestial the associations. Theories of evolution played their part here. In nineteenth-century caricature the lower classes are generally depicted as brutish and subject to extreme physiognomic variations; the bourgeoisie are assimilated to such variations and degradations in order to show individual moral debasement. Compare facing pages of Daumier lithographs (146–147): the bourgeoisie are merely weird and a bit silly looking; the lower-class types are rendered as downright stupid and even menacing.

A new avenue of research opens up with respect to the application in practice of physiognomic theory. Is it really true that published theories of correspondence between the proportions of the human head and face, and the fundamentals of individual human character, were used as a guide in social practice—in choosing a spouse, friend, associate, or employee?<sup>2</sup> We are warned today that interviewers may judge candidates not only by their verbal language but also by their body-language, which includes of course appearance generally. We do not need to be reminded today that "good looks" (i.e., conformity to a norm reinforced, via art and the physiognomic tradition, by advertising) helps. But we do not consciously apply old physiognomic rules, by which certain facial characteristics were associated with certain moral traits; instead we go by intuition, which does not exclude inherited baggage like the association, say, of lack of chin with lack of willpower; and the "racist" preference for straight, and thin or slightly aquiline noses in the classical-Wasp tradition, over noses of different shape associated with nonwhite races, persists.

In days when job qualifications were generally less palpably documented than today, one had to judge more by appearances, and physiognomic and phrenological "science" purported to offer some ground rules. If it is evident that these rules tended to a kind of broad racist bias, it remains to determine how such rules functioned to support class bias. When the nineteenth-century novel, which is chock-a-block with

physiognomic theory in its crudest and most sophisticated guise, singles out for praise virtuous working-class characters, he or she will generally have a clear, honest, frank, etc., face—the association of course is with regularity of proportion, “refined looks” that upper-class people were supposed to inherit and possess by right. Irregularities were associated with vice, folly, oddity, and the lower classes generally. Dickens’s moral aristocrats are all “good looking” and lacking in physiognomic peculiarities.

But fiction and caricature are one thing; social reality is another. In one famous instance we can judge how nearly a particular physiognomic prejudice changed the course of history: the upper-class Charles Darwin himself tells us how close he was to being rejected by the captain of the HMS *Beagle*, who judged his nose to be wanting in energy and determination.

A few words on the word “physiognomy.” By the nineteenth century this had come to refer to the human face and how to read it, and to exclude appearance, posture, and the figure as a whole, a broader reference which survives in Lavater. “Physiognomy” in reference to a particular face or kind of face was often shortened, in English, to “phisog,” or “phis” (or “phiz”). But in reference to the “science” of reading the face, the term “physiognomics” would be preferable, failing the archaic “physiognomy,” which did not establish itself, perhaps because it is a bit of a mouthful to pronounce. But one expert in aesthetic matters, and himself a noted caricaturist, Rodolphe Töpffer, tried to make it stick in French by using it in his *Essai de physiognomie* (1845). This seminal work, which E. H. Gombrich rescued from relative obscurity, is nowhere mentioned by Wechsler; this is a pity, because Gombrich has shown how Töpffer was the first to emphasize the conventional, arbitrary nature of physiognomic indicators, which hitherto had been regarded as fixed and constant. Töpffer established a kind of systematic antimethod of physiognomic variation designed to subvert the accepted methods and assumptions. He subjected faces and figures to modes of playful, even “unconscious” simplifications and permutations which leapfrog Daumier into contemporary cartoon and graphics. He is the witty demystifier of all the pseudo-scientific nonsense hanging around physiognomics, phrenology, and craniology.

And now a note on notes. It is symptomatic of the loose rein that Wechsler holds on her material that text and notes to the text are not too well differentiated. There are whole paragraphs, like one listing the various editions of Lavater’s famous treatise, which should obviously be relegated to the notes; and there are in the notes section several mini-essays or subappendices running into whole columns, containing ancillary and (perhaps) inessential matter of a

technical nature. Is this a tactic to reduce the physical size of the book? Authors enjoined by the publisher to cut back a text (our name is legion, for we are many) will sympathize. But one must have faith, despite Reagan, that life will continue on this planet and that opportunity will present itself to decant these hypertrophical parentheses elsewhere.

On the subject of notes, I am impelled to enter an injunction to and against any editors and publishers within eyeshot of this review to spare us bodies of notes numbered by chapter with no page superscription (e.g., “notes to pp. 1–37” at the head of the corresponding page) to help us find our way. This common negligence amounts to malpractice. In conjunction with the even more annoying and unnecessary failure to provide references from text to illustrations (which are very copious here), it shows a damnable contempt for the convenience of readers, and a false sense of economy. Authors must henceforward insist on special clauses in their contracts, and then be prepared to sue.

Caricature, which came truly of age in the nineteenth century, is a complex phenomenon, and requires one to observe certain lexicographic niceties. With an author so concerned with and adept in taxonomy, one is surprised to encounter lapses in classification such as that of Hogarth and Gavarni as caricaturists. Hogarth himself protested against the application of this, for him, derogatory label for his genius in comic characterization, and even produced a print called *Characters and Caricaturas* to demonstrate the difference. Gavarni was praised by contemporaries for *not* indulging in caricature, for being (in the words of Jules Janin) superior to Daumier insofar as he offered the undistorted, unexaggerated “truthful portrait” and “spiritual daguerreotype” of the age. It is well to remind ourselves that the absolute preeminence accorded today to Daumier over all other caricaturists or graphic satirists of his time was not necessarily the consensus of the nineteenth century. This book offers material for other judgments.

## Notes

- 1 Another important new addition to our knowledge of nineteenth-century French caricature is Beatrice Farwell’s *French Popular Lithographic Imagery 1815–1870*, University of Chicago Press, with microfiche illustrations. The work is planned in twelve volumes, two of which have appeared.
- 2 My colleague Irene Bierman tells me that traditionally in the Ottoman empire all important civil service appointments, especially in the army and among the Janissaries, were made on a physiognomic basis.