

REVIEW OF ERNST BENKARD,
UNDYING FACES

Oxford Outlook 10 no. 53 (November 1930), 628–30

Undying Faces[: A Collection of Death Masks] by Ernst Benkard, translated from the German by Margaret M. Green (Hogarth Press, 30s.)

ONLY A CONNOISSEUR of dead and dying things, who takes delight in the delicate odour of decadence and decomposition, and is able to translate his feeling into equally exquisite and fragrant language, could do justice to this book. Over one hundred death masks are reproduced in it: the majority are very arresting. If anyone doubts whether a death mask stands closer to sculpture than to photography, let him look at this book; he will, I think, be forced to admit that a death mask is often more expressive and psychologically truthful than the likeness which the sculptor modelled from the living face.

Perhaps this ought not to be so. I cannot say how it comes about, but that it is in fact so, there can be no doubt; and it is equally certain that if a museum of such casts were established it would give more delight – aesthetic or other – than portrait galleries or *vies romancées*, as seeming closer to reality.

I am not equal to giving an adequate account of the wonders of this book: I am aware that if I touch on a few only, the impression given will be misleading because incomplete. But I can do no more; and only hope that the injustice done will not be very serious.

Of the Renaissance faces, with which it starts, the most striking is that of Lorenzo Medici, which, especially in profile, is ugly, sensual, clever and strongly attractive: one understands more vividly from this than from all the writings of the time how Michelangelo or Politian could admire this man, the greatness and virility of his vices and virtues alike. But he is a gross barbarian by comparison with his neighbour in this book, the great Henry of

UNDYING FACES

Navarre, to whom nature gave far nobler, more delicate, more humorous features than ever Dupré gave him in his cold bust, and which this faithful mask alone reveals.

The book abounds in curious contrasts. You turn to the next page and look down on the massive flesh of Cromwell's face, resigned and quiet in death, and then you turn over to see the famous, exquisite mask of Blaise Pascal, still consumed by an inward flame, very frail and thin, almost burnt through into a transparent shadow. And before you have had time to recover you find yourself stared at with open contempt by the gross and [629] insolent Charles XII of Sweden, who looks no more attractive two centuries after his death, but is heavily punished by being set side by side with his great conqueror, Tsar Peter of Russia, whose vast wit, intelligence and power may still be read. The mutilated fragment of Isaac Newton, which follows, says nothing. But Jonathan Swift shows up cold and white and cruel with not a spark of humanity anywhere. And this you will not find until you come to what is, in some respects, the noblest, tranquildest face of all, that of the greatest of the humanists of the eighteenth century, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing. The extent of generosity, of intuitive sympathy with every form of human activity, of moral and aesthetic integrity, and finally of sheer simple charm contained in it is the apex of a movement and a generation of men more of whom than ever before seemed wholly disinterested and collectively devoted to a single ideal.

Perhaps this integrity was singular even then, for we have, on the next page, Frederick the Great, to remind us of other aspects of the century. It is a very remarkable face. Of a low physical type, approaching criminality, very intense, very intelligent, and with violent force in it, it is, as a face, hideous and repellent, but, at the same time, perversely fascinating, because of this accumulation of sheer powerfulness, which must attract even as it repels. Violence alone merely repels, as the hysterical face of the murdered Marat proves; and intelligence alone does not attract, as you may see for yourself, if you look at Mirabeau, who here looks weak. Then follow curious tortured faces, of Haydn, who certainly did not live unhappily, of Pitt and Sheridan and Antonio Canova, all in pain.

You turn with relief to the cast of Jean Victor Moreau, bold and wonderfully handsome; then to Napoleon. It is a very strange likeness, fresh, tender, almost feminine, and perfectly serene.

UNDYING FACES

There is nothing strong in the small, delicate features, which might easily be taken for those of a sensitive, gentle young poet. It is odd and very suggestive, but I cannot here draw the implications. Close on it follows Beethoven's cast, perhaps the most famous of all masks, and certainly the most indescribable. At any rate, it has never been done in prose. After it the rest appear little in comparison, though the nineteenth century abounds in striking faces even more than the eighteenth. In it [630] there is room for the huge, Roman solemnity of Hegel, and the curious Egyptian look of Napoleon's son, for the negroid and eager Pushkin, and the peaceful Thorwaldsen. Lortzing, who was foolish and kindly, is, with wicked irony, placed next to Heine, who at last looks grave and almost earnest. But the full dignity of the profession of letters is gathered in Flaubert, very fine and calm and conscious of his worth, with the face of an impressive grocer. He cannot be feeling altogether at ease in the company of the two fierce old men Hugo and Dostoevsky, still rugged and indomitable, and divided from each other by a comic Wagner, who wears a blissful, slightly silly smile on a chubby, childlike face. Hugo Wolf is a man in comparison, with his expression of continued mental and spiritual agony, which resembles Nietzsche in one, and Van Gogh in another, fashion.

Among the idealists must be counted both Treitschke and Lenin, who, whatever they were in reality, here impress one with a common air of pure, concentrated fanaticism, equally stubborn in both faces, but in Treitschke tempered with a certain reflectiveness, in Lenin continually seething and able to find outlet solely in violent action.

The end of this book is very tranquil. *L'Inconnue de la Seine* possesses that ideal of innocent beauty which the painters of the eighteenth century both in England and in France sought in vain; somehow they could never eliminate an element of meretriciousness which cheapened all their imagery.