

THE HEADS SPEAK

The shadow of Lombroso is elongated: from the insane asylum of Pesaro - where the anthropologist, physician and criminologist was named director in 1871 – his shadow projects over the collectively dark ages of the twentieth century, and it still hovers in an unsettling way over the lights that illuminate the way for neurobiology today. Inspired by positivism and Darwin, and aided by a more than dubious empirical method, Lombroso produced a criminal anthropology that aspired to have great influence over the fields of psychiatry and law: the born criminal possessed specific psychological and anatomical traits in which could be seen the sparse distance separating him from the animal. Thus, the person who manifested prominence of the zygomatic arch or prognathism was considered prone to great unpredictability and impulsiveness of character. To enter into Lombroso's laboratory, as the sculptor Román Hernández and the poet Mária Russotto have done, is to travel three avenues simultaneously: the credulous history of the science of anthropological anatomy, the shameful history of eugenics, and the enthralling history of the connection between the visual and the emotional.

Physiognomy and phrenology – which have their roots in Hippocrates, Aristotle and the Arab culture, and were reformulated during the Middle Ages before being revived once again by the humanists in the nineteenth century – always aimed at establishing analogies between physical characteristics (essentially the face and cranium) and human behavior. So, there's nothing new under the sun. Not even those dark revelations provided with such conviction by Lombroso, to wit: the median occipital fossette he located for the first time in the brain of the Calabrian brigand Giuseppe Vilella, which he repeatedly confirmed with his scalpel in autopsies performed on delinquents, and which became for him a clear stigma of the “atavistic man.” That is, until the advent of neurobiology which refuted the eminence of that fossette by referring to frontal lesions of the cortex, deficiencies in certain neurotransmitters and limbic system disorders.

Nowadays, the science of neuroanatomy has confidently arrived with its bloodless imaging instruments (positron emission tomography, electro- and magneto-encephalography, magnetic resonance and functional magnetic resonance imaging, etc.) for virtually dissecting the

cortex and representing its neuronal cartography, and it finds biometric, topological and neurochemical data on the brain that, according to its scientific method, encode cognitive, emotional and behavioral dysfunctions. The images – whose abstract nature we must bear in mind – seem to suggest a kind of neo-phrenology that especially concerns philosophers, but is no less disturbing for scientists. Lombroso had a clear vision in his time: he proposed the creation of insane asylums for the permanent confinement of criminals and dangerously deranged persons, and he attempted to exonerate these subjects of moral and penal responsibility insofar as he essentially considered them to be a lost link between man and animal. Nonetheless, science today discovers within itself nuances that permit the temporary suspension of opinions regarding the assignment of moral, ethical and social responsibility. It not only contemplates a future of manipulating the human genome, susceptible to determining aggressive responses, and it can now consider the ablation of cortical areas implied in antisocial behaviors. Also, and above all, it conceives of the possibility – real and constantly verified – that the behavior and conscious activity of the subject intervene on the neuronal substrata of violence. The essential modifying ability of the brain is its plasticity: learning – or the simple fact of thinking – alters the activity of neuronal populations, configuring new cortical maps that may vary their functionality. Thus, cerebral patterns may be modified all through life. Philosophy, in concert with this perspective, postulates a progressive process of emotional complication for the individual which aids in the “re-programming” of the individual not only in the areas of behavior but also on the hormonal and biochemical level. In this way neurophysiology relativizes the determinism that it certified in the first place, re-establishing the possibility of free will and, consequently, of responsibility.

But Lombroso did not believe in education or in socialization and much less in biochemical plasticity. He believed in the transparency of physical matter, in its psychic and ethical attributes. And to enter into that Lombrosian laboratory today is to interrogate once again that bony, carnal matter. But the answers will not be the same. Román Hernández and Mária Russotto work from the interior of the Lombrosian psycho-physical connection, nuancing and diluting its pathological implications, redistributing the supposed and revealing anatomical marks of dangerous insanity among a more suffering than perverse humanity, one in which we fragmentarily recognize ourselves. In their laboratory they conduct this task: a reading of psychic emotions, passions and complexities that are not condemnatory in their reference to the infrahuman, but rather they are understood as common human nature. And if there are indeed

psychophysical correspondences, they are not certified by science but rather held in and held up to doubt by the imagination.

Sculptor and poet enter into a dialogue. One of them represents the Lombrosion project in such a way that the other may deactivate the interpretation of the nineteenth-century anthropologist. Certainly, these heads are submitted to measurements and interventions; first, the sculptor summarily strips them of personalized traits, he prepares them for an autopsy whose objective is neither personality nor persona, but rather type and specimen. On each one there remains a fine down, an earring dangling from a lobe, but nothing that might hinder appreciating the eminence of the orbital capacity, the cranial form, the maxillary breadth, the auricular curvature. The nudity and tonal homogeneity of the flesh incites a manipulation stripped of circumspection, and the science of the anatomist has proceeded accordingly, leaving traces of his intervention: written annotations on the cranium, the insertion of small valves, incisions, staples, mappings and codes that convert the heads into supports for scientific knowledge and writing. More than emphasizing characteristics of phenotype, it is this physical submission to scientific language that extracts the heads from their condition of individuals. Upon them, science speaks in writing – sealing their mouths – in a cryptic language, which is the most efficient formula for power. These are heads that have been executed – torn from a living body – and submitted to a judgment in line with Lombrosian science.

In the accompanying poems, Margara Russotto restores language to the heads. The relationship between sculpture and poem is not illustrative but rather creates an intervention of an ethical nature in the Lombrosian laboratory. The speakers are no longer the criminal “atavistic men” that Lombroso believed he was studying but rather a plurality of human voices that imbue the faces with a profile of fragility. To be human is to feel divided (*suspended in curious /introspection. / They have condemned us to absence / (...) / Are we merely / fatal disjunction?*); to be human is to experience the disorder – the torment – of love, its violence, the void it leaves behind (“Oriental Wisdom”); to enter into the *utmost quiet desperation*; to know intimate otherness (*I’m you / and I’m the other*); to let oneself be absorbed by music (“Transmutations”); to fall into the deception of consciousness (*I calculate / therefore / I believe I exist*); to be a prisoner of fear (*I know the thing exists / It’s vital organ beats / on the tongue*); to feel that one is possessed (*Some evil animal / has laid its eggs / in my head*); even to perceive the continuity of

nature in oneself (*the legendary memory / of other pulsating species*) or to let oneself be magnetized by the myths of creation (*the impetuous water of creation / rises above rocky crags. / All that I have lost / I have*).

Precisely because it does not believe in condemnation, this poetry does not need to present itself as redemptive. Therefore, from within there also speak – because they are human – the not so benign passions: *uncontrolled arrogance* disguised as modesty, or covetousness. The poetic voice maintains a certain distance from the scientific discourse such that irony can permeate some of its objectives: (that *sinful biology in a mere smile* that is expressed – precisely – by the supposed thick lips of covetousness, a biology that could perhaps have been virtuous merely by not smiling). Or the face that acts as a mirror and returns to the Lombrosian anthropologist the reflection of himself that is confused with the savage object of his observation: “Anthropologist Anthropophagus” *Devouring Indians / illiterate / uneducated*. An anthropologist that, in a less ironic but more exemplary way, would be the figure evoked in another poem, “Fred Murdock,” ethnographer – in the homonymous story by Borges – and, finally, librarian at Yale, keeper of a secret transmitted by the Indians that he would hold close until his death, manifesting his respect for the different other, as well as his distance from Lombroso, the great judge.

Finally, for Margara Russotto, the mirror is the ultimate face, through whose supercilious arches the speaker glimpses a delightful countryside landscape that serves at the same time as a landscape of the spirit. A portrait of the artist, the poem says, of that artist that *in repose / is silent*: perhaps the very sculptor who created the head. In this reading of the face, we see summarized the interpretative distance between Lombrosian science and poetic imagination. Whereas for Lombroso, the genius of the artist was a relative of pathological insanity, the title of the poem – “Morbidezza” – with its polysemy, restores the possibility of another understanding: “morbid,” yes, but not “sick” but rather “delicate” and “soft.” For it is language itself that often provides knowledge that helps correct science.

Amelia Gamoneda

(Trans. Peter Kahn)