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About Face: An Inverse Archaeology of *Ep*. 115

Victoria Rimell

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Sed in ore sunt omnia, in eo autem ipso dominatus est omnis
oculorum, Cicero *de Orat.* 3.221
'For the Romans there was no depth without surface' Barton (2001) 57
'The face *is* the man' Tomkins (1975) 551

Abstract – This essay considers *Ep*. 115, after *Ep*. 114, as a culminating chapter in Seneca's exploration of how to interpret the interplay between soul (*animus*) and appearance (*facies, uultus*). In response to this letter – an affectively intense phenomenon that presumes and invites inter-relation – I experiment in setting Seneca's juxtapositions of face-to-face encounters in poetic citations (Virgil, Ovid, Euripides) alongside psychologist Silvan Tomkins' work on faciality and its reception in psychotherapy, affect theory and theories of 'surface reading' in literary studies and in classical reception. Reading the language of the face is complicated and put under pressure in Seneca by the distinctiveness and bodily nature of different emotions, and by the notion that masking is a form of political resistance or even philosophical virtue. The letter's jarring texture, faceless author and 'inverse archaeology' of the soul as itself a *facies*, draw attention to what is lost, in human terms, when faces become unreadable. Seneca offers neither a timeless, sensuous spur for 'surface reading', nor an easy antidote to the hermeneutics of suspicion.

In *Ep*. 115 we are instructed to distinguish between an elegant appearance and the good man's radiant, refined soul; between material and spiritual wealth; or between a false, deceptive surface, and the true substance that lies beneath. Those who allow themselves to be seduced

by the superficial are petty, materialistic, immature and effeminate, we are told, in contrast to the wise, who can see true beauty beneath an ugly façade (115.3-7, cf. *Ep*.66), or, vice versa, a malevolent soul beneath a charming surface (115.7-10). The letter involves us in the now generalised ancient philosophical notions that it is impossible to see the soul, but that the face is indicative of character and intentions, and represents a culminating chapter in the *Epistles*' exploration of how to interpret the interplay between interiority and bodily façade that begins with *Ep*.11 on the meaning of blushing, and takes shape in 15, 52.12, 66.1-7, 80 and 114.[1] In Stoic thought emotions are bodily things, and Seneca emphasizes that although some emotions can to some extent be changed by beliefs, reason has little or no control over whether we frown at something sad, go pale from shock, and relax our faces in the presence of gentleness (57.4-5, 71.29, 74.31, 106.5-7).[2] For Seneca, as for twentieth-century psychologist Silvan Tomkins and his interlocutors, the face (*uultus*, *facies*, *os*) is the primary organ of affect (Tomkins (1962) 205-206).[3] Yet notoriously, the capacity to read faces – and specifically faces rather than the body as a whole – has long been put under pressure in Seneca's Rome:[4] *dissimulatio* is both a form of corruption and a mode of political resistance in Seneca, and the 'two-faced' philosopher is motivated to deny as often as confirm the correspondence between *uultus* and *animus*.

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[1]   Cf. Berno (2016) on the relationship between *Ep.* 66 and *Ep.* 115; Graver (1998) and Edwards (2019) 284-290 on the build-up to *Ep.* 114. On the importance of putting forward a good face, or persona, in Roman culture, see Barton (2001) 56-58, Bartsch (2006) 123-124, Fögen (2009). For an overview of Seneca's critical or ambivalent engagement with physiognomics, see O'Sullivan (2011) 45, Star (2012) 198-194, Edwards (2019) 287-289, with Swain (2007) 19-224 on physiognomic theory in antiquity; Gleason's overview ((1995) 111-113) identifies Seneca simplistically with the physiognomic writers. Also see Bettini's tracing of an 'anthropology of physical appearance' in Rome, which draws out the dialogue in Roman thought between instances when the *vultus* is a window onto interiority and those in which it is a false mask (2000): in both cases the *vultus* is a 'segno da interpretare' (341).

[2]   Seneca emphasizes that emotions are bodily things at *Ep.* 106.4-6. On 'pre-emotions' (*propatheiai*) such as tears, blushing and the startle reflex, see Graver (2002) 125-127 on Cicero *Tusc.* 3.80-84. On the corporeal nature of the soul and of virtue in Stoic thought, see e.g. Long (1996).

[3]   Tomkins (1962) 205-206. Tomkins (1911-1991) is often considered the founding father of Affect Theory, defining and exploring nine 'affects' in Vols. I and II of his magnum opus *Affect, Imagery, Consciousness*; cf. Demos (1995) 205-290, Sedgwick/Frank (1995), Sedgwick (2003) and Frank (2015).

[4]   Bibliography on this is vast: see e.g. Bartsch (1994) Corbeill (2004) 140-168.

In *Ep.* 67.11, for example, another key coordinate for *Ep.* 115, Lucilius is warned that certain 'goods' can have a grim or unpleasant appearance (*sunt quaedam tristis voltus bona*), and in *Ep.* 80, on the deceptive and seductive pleasures of popular entertainment, the poor man who tolerates and therefore accepts poverty smiles 'more often and more authentically' (*saepius et fidelius*, 80.6), while the rich man hides a festering anxiety beneath a happy veneer. At the same time, Seneca often remarks that the correct interpretation of facial expressions is a mark of both wisdom and professional expertise: the doctor must see his patient face to face in order to prescribe the right treatment, the gladiator watches the face of his opponent intently (22.1), and the wise man 'does not misjudge words or faces' (*non calumniatur verba nec vultus*, 81.25), which seems to imply the difficulty of the task.[5] In *Ep.* 115, I will argue, the stakes are raised: the letter's own category confusions make this a live, advanced test of our ability to distinguish substance from facial appearance, interior from exterior, or virtue from vice, and to retain some composure or *compositio animi* as we feel into and assess *this* performance of writing, *this* particular configuration of concepts.[6]

Central to my discussion of *Ep.* 115 is the observation that while Seneca warns against false exteriors, urging Lucilius to separate the messy, bodily vice of *uoluptas* from pure philosophical *amor* (after Diotima's speech on contemplating Eros in Plato's *Symposium* 211-212a[7]), the staging of this impulse is conspicuously, theatrically imperfect. *Voluptas*,

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[5]   Also see *Ep.* 66, which cites Virg. *A.* 5.344 as an example of the belief to be rejected, i.e. that (attractive) face always matches soul (*gratior et pulchro ueniens e corpore uirtus*, 66.2), with Berno (2016). Yet *Ep.* 114 examines Maecenas' physical appearance according to the laws of physiognomy, which insists on the correspondence between body/face and soul, style and man (*ab illo [sc. animo] sensus, ab illo uerba exeunt, ab illo nobis est habitus, uultus, incessus*, 114.22); cf. Berti (2018) 64-65, 184, Gleason (1995) 113. And in *Ir.* 2.33.1, it is virtuous to manipulate and interrupt this correspondence by putting on a mask (*Potentiorum iniuriae hilari uultu, non patienter tantum ferendae sunt*); cf. *Polyb.* 5.4.4-5 (*Indue dissimilem animo tuo uultum …. ut fratres …. animumque ex uultu tuo sument*), in which the aim is to maintain a protective separation between *uultus* and *animus*, while convincing others that face and emotions match (the expression *animum sumere*, take courage, plays on the double meaning of *animus* – soul/spirit, and heart/courage: see *OLD* s.v. *animus* 1, 13).

[6]   Cf. 115.18: *non perducent te apte verba contexta et oratio fluens leniter. eant, ut uolent, dum animo compositio sua constet.* Here Seneca seems to acknowledge, in elegant *uerba contexta*, that the letter itself does not model harmonious authenticity or constancy, but rather acts as a spur for readers who engage with it as a phenomenon to assert their own autonomy, to find their *compositio animi* by experiencing the storms that challenge it.

[7]   For Dressler (2016) 138 *Ep.* 115 is 'essentially a set-piece of Platonic provenance'; Cf. Starnone (2020) 36-37. On Stoic attitudes to eros, see Nussbaum (2002), Bartsch (2005).

and the seductive visage of Venus herself, seem to pollute the letter's contemplation of the good man's 'inner virtue', which is itself described as a(nother) 'dazzling face'. In what is by now a familiar strategy, the letter is punctuated by fragments of poetry that themselves, Seneca notes, 'lend fuel to our passions' (*adfectibus nostris facem subdant*, 115.12) by (on the face of it) praising wealth as the ultimate good. While on one hand we are encouraged to reject the corrupting temptations of poetry, the letter does not permit us to pretend that those temptations lie elsewhere, and puts acute pressure on our ability to discriminate, to interpret, and to channel our affective response, which will be a measure of our progress and ethical fibre relative to the 'good man'. The letter's own style is gushing and affectively intense, and its poetic citations (from Virgil, Ovid and Euripides) involve us in a pattern of what Deleuze calls 'planar relations':[8] that is, rather than being led vertically from the superficial and deceptive to the profound and true, we meander horizontally between face-to-face encounters in literary texts which afford a constellation of different approaches to faciality, from different subject positions, and churn up the dilemma of relating, in the present.[9]

Paradigmatically here, form and affective appeal work in provocative dialogue with the letter's literal content, and make philosophical progress contingent on our engagement with a jarring and emotive text.[10] The letter form, which evokes but cannot match the face-to-face meeting between writer and addressee, becomes a vital phenomenological space in which to scrutinise the opening opposition between style and substance, surface and depth, and to experience anew the particularity of the human face as a moving, reactive screen that is different from any other façade – an idea also at the core of Silvan

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[8]   Deleuze-Guattari (2009); cf. Sedgwick (2003), who invokes planar relations in exploring 'the irreducibly spatial positionality of beside', which 'seems to offer some useful resistance to the ease with which beneath and beyond turn from spatial descriptors into implicit narratives of, respectively, origin and telos.' (8).

[9]   Cf. Butler (2016) who expands the spatial metaphors of depth and surface to explore the history and future of the study of antiquity as 'the very pose by which the human present turns its attention to the distant human past' (14). See esp. essays by Purves and Matzner in the same volume.

[10] Cf. Rimell (2013), (2015) 113-156, (2017); Gunderson (2015) (e.g. 7: 'Seneca never radically segregates form from content. The medium and the message are fundamentally interrelated. In fact one could correct this to "they are ethically related". Seneca thinks closely about the ontological status of philosophy-as-discourse'). Cf. Attridge (2004) 150-170 on the interaction of form and content in the 'act-event' of the literary text, which takes shape in our encounter with it.

Tomkins' work on affect. On one hand, we might allow *Ep.* 115 to take shape as a lecture on rejecting face-value readings and on cultivating a hermeneutics of suspicion: Rita Felski could be describing Seneca when she writes that the 'critic seeks to shock untrained readers out of their complacency', their 'obdurate attachment to what is'; the work of critical analysis, she adds, 'simply is this work of estrangement, the labor of disrupting continuities and severing attachments'.[11] Yet on the other hand, the letter lingers and invites me to linger, after Tomkins, upon layer upon layer of surface, while offering neither a timeless, sensuous spur for 'surface reading' nor an easy antidote to hermeneutics.[12] A Stoic acuity in interpreting faces for what they conceal and reveal is not only difficult to reconcile with a commitment to masking as a necessary, context-specific defence against autocratic surveillance: it also calls attention to what is lost in the midst of what Felski calls 'enstrangement', the process by which we unlearn how to look people in the eye and to respond directly to what their faces show, as they react to us looking.

I. Feeling it

Seneca begins *Ep.* 115 by stating that he doesn't want Lucilius to get too anxious about words and composition (115.1):

> *Nimis anxium esse te circa uerba et compositionem, mi Lucili, nolo.*

> I don't want you to be too anxious about words and their arrangement, my dear Lucilius.[13]

This alludes, implicitly, to the previous letter, *Ep.* 114, a critique of self-indulgent or 'effeminate' experimentation in oratory and writing, which like a man's dress, posture, walk and gestures betray his moral

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[11] Felski (2015) 83-84.

[12] Key explorations of 'surface reading', which rejects the spatial model of Freudian archaeology or of 'reading for the symptom', alongside the construct of the critic as suspicious detective exerting his expertise on the inert, deceptive text, include Best/Marcus (2009), Felski (2015); my thoughts in this essay are much stimulated by those who have focused on the 'depth' of surfaces via post-Freudian theories of attachment, and via Silvan Tomkins' idiosyncratic work on affects and facial expression, especially Sedgwick (2003), Brinkema (2014), Frank (2015); cf. Cheng (2009), Apter/Freedgood (2009).

[13] This and all other translations are my own.

character. The anti-exemplum here is of course Maecenas, who minced about in floaty togas that matched his 'loose speech' and questionable virtue, and who embodied the Ciceronian axiom *imago animi uultus* ('the face is the image of the soul', *de Orat*. 3.221). In other words, this is not an abstract anxiety: Seneca has just caused it, or is acknowledging he may well have caused it, in the previous letter. As he warned when he wrote of *compositio* in 114.15, there are so many (unspecifiable) ways to go wrong: *[ad compositionem transeamus]. Quot genera tibi in hac dabo, quibus peccetur!* ([Let's now turn to composition]. In this, how many kinds of fault can I show you!').[14] But we also note that Seneca isn't saying he doesn't want Lucilius to have had an affective response, only that he doesn't want it to be too much, *nimis*; the pleasure-pain of this 'too-muchness' will reverberate performatively throughout the letter, in the overwhelming experience of the man we imagine trying to look virtue in the face (115.3-6), and in the excess of brightness (*splendor*) that cuts off our vision of the good soul (*splendore nimio repercutiunt*, 115.6; cf. *splendorem illi suum adfunderent*, 115.3). Implicitly, Seneca is going to be measuring the extent of this provoked anxiety, or rather, as he says in the final line of the letter, he is going to will Lucilius to measure it, to evaluate his progress according to his degree of freedom from fear and desire (*[animus] qui profectum suum uita aestimet et tantum scire se iudicet, quantum non cupit quantum non timet,* 'a soul that makes life the test of its progress, and realises that the amount it knows is proportional to the degree to which it is free from desire and from fear',115.18). Virtue, in Roman and especially Roman Stoic thought, always requires a witness, someone to observe it.[15]

There is something barbed in what Seneca says next, in the opening lines of our letter (*habeo maiora, quae cures,* 'I have greater matters for you to care about', 115.1). If that got under your skin, he seems to imply, just wait and see what I've got to worry you now. *maiora* promises progress, the hard way, relative to a lesser challenge, and the letter will later evoke *maiora* as 'greater losses' that cause immense distress (see 115.16: the more riches a man possesses, the greater his agony [*maiore tormento*]; our sorrows are heavy [*magna*], but seem even more than that [*maiora*]), before ending with the promise of *nihil maius*, the security of philosophy (see 115.18: 'And so philosophy can provide this for

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14   Berti (2018) 27-28, 152 notes the link with 115.1.

15   In the *Letters*, see e.g. *Ep.* 25.5.

you – indeed in my view nothing greater exists'). But those 'greater things' are not only elsewhere: they are also here, in the richly ornate and passionate dimension of this letter, in which we are remineded great losses 'fall heavily [*incidunt*] on us' and make us groan with pain (*ingemescunt*, 115.16): as others have noted, *maius* is already a motif for tragic amplification in Seneca's plays, and seems to encode here the affective intensity of the letter.[16]

Seneca then tells Lucilius that he should start by focusing not on *how* to write, but *what* to write, and with the aim not of writing it, but feeling it (115.1):

> *Quaere, quid scribas, non quaeadmodum; et hoc ipsum, non ut scribas, sed ut sentias, ut illa, quae senseris, magis adplices tibi et uelut signes.*
>
> You should seek what to write rather than how to write it; and this too, not with the aim of writing it, but of feeling it, so that you might make what you have felt more your own and as it were put your signature on it.

Lucilius should not be overly concerned with style – that would be vain and superficial behaviour, typical of the young men who take far too much time worrying about their hair (115.2, cf. 114.21).[17] Instead, he should write authentically, own what he writes, put the seal of his own body, experience and sentiment onto it. 'Is Seneca himself modelling this authentication here?' we might ask.[18] It's hard to tell, and Seneca doesn't tell us. The invitation to 'look right into' the style, or *cultus animi*, of this text hovers just under the surface.[19]

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[16] Discussion in Schiesaro (2003) 31, 130-131.

[17] Here Seneca channels his father addressing his sons at *Controu.* 1 pr. 8-9: his 'signature' is hardly his own.

[18] Cf. Attridge (2004) 154-156 (after Derrida (1982)) on the singularity of the literary text: 'A valid signature always carries the meaning: "I, the bearer of such-and-such a proper name, wrote this in person in a particular place and at a particular time, intending it as an act of authentication" '. The first-person Senecan letter, stamped with a particular place in time, always already calls attention to this situatedness and datedness: see e.g. Ker (2009) 147-176 on epistolary time; Cf. Kennedy's classic article on Ovid's *Heroides* (1984), with Henderson's idiosyncratically timely response (1986), and Rimell (1999). Also cf. Edwards (1997): 'Which is the real voice of Seneca? Is there a real voice?' (34).

[19] *Inspicere* e *perspicere* are key verbs in this letter, and encode philosophical introspection and (self-)examination throughout the *Letters* and *Dialogues*: *si nobis animum boni uiri liceret inspicere*, 115.3; *poterimus perspicere uirtutem*, 115.6; *inspice, et scies*, 115.9; cf. *iuuat inspicere et cirumire bonam conscientiam, CI.* 1.6; *si uerum adfectum eorum inspicias,*

The style typical of a corrupt and fickle character, Seneca writes, is as preened and manicured as the fashionable young men enamoured of it: it reveals, or perhaps, attempts to conceal, 'something broken' (*aliquid fracti*, 115.2; cf. *oratio … infracta*, 114.1[20]). But the epigrammatic thesis statement *non est ornamentum uirile concinnitas* ('*concinnitas* is not a manly ornament'115.3) seems to announce how difficult it will be to analyse appearances in the here and now of this letter. As Margaret Graver (1998) 615 notes, it's not obvious that *concinnitas* should have negative connotations ('If *concinnitas* is not a "masculine ornament", then what is?'). It means something like 'neatness', 'symmetry', or 'elegance', almost in opposition to *aliquid fracti*:[21] the *OLD* entry (s.u. *concinnitas* 1a, 'excessive ingenuity or refinement') depends on a complacent reading of this passage that is not attuned to Seneca's methodology of inciting reactive critical thinking in an epistolary relationship. Seneca seems to suggest that we should reject an 'ornamental' style, but that we should nevertheless aim to cultivate the correct appearance, the face of masculine virtue. Instead of expressing the moral substance of the writer or orator, *oratio* is always an *ornamentum*, something that 'decorates the face', as the etymology *ornare mentum* suggests.[22] The implicit ideal of an *ornamentum uirile* is almost oxymoronic, especially when later in the letter the noun is used in a derogatory sense for decorative cladding on walls and ceilings, symbolic of superficiality and decadence in contemporary life (*parietibus aut lacunaribus ornamentum*, 115.9[23]), and then, ambiguously, in reference to the apparent praise of wealth in poetry at 115.12 ('verses… in which wealth is praised as if it were the only glory and decoration [*decus ornamentumque*] of life'): it is unclear here whether, in the latter case, *ornamentum* is the corrupt term that would be used

Ep. 22.10; *inspicere debemus*, *Ep*. 42.6; *cum uoles ueram hominis aestimationem inire et scire, qualis sit, nudum inspice*, *Ep*. 76.32.

[20] Gleason (1995) 112: 'the words *fracta* and *infracta* connote effeminacy through a kind of semantic double determination. Words or voices that are "broken" are weak, and therefore feminine'. On the importance of virility in Roman oratory, also see e.g. Gunderson (2000), Connolly (2007). Cf. Quint. *Inst*. 8.18-22.

[21] Cicero uses *concinnitas* in a positive sense: Cf. *Orator* 149, *Brutus* 325.

[22] *OLD* s.v. *ornamentum* 1, 'animal harness'; Cf. Isid. *Orig*. 19.30.1: *ornamenta dicta eo quod eorum cultu ora uultusque decorentur*.

[23] See also *Ep*. 8.5, where *ornamentum* and *decus* are a negatively connoted pairing: *contemnite omnia, quae superuacuus labor uelut ornamentum ac decus ponit*. Cf. Cheng (2009) on cladding.

of the 'distinction' of weath by decadent poets, or whether Seneca himself is using it, counter-intuitively and disruptively, as almost a synonym for *decus.*

This is our way into *Ep*. 115, the partner letter to 114, which as well as decrying the fashion for novelty in *oratio*, discussed the effect of this creativity on the audience, which may or may not include Lucilius, or us. Seneca noted in 114.11 that such experimentation is designed to confuse the hearer and make him doubt himself (*audienti suspicionem sui fecerit*). He added here that it's no good sticking to plain speech either – that's just shabby (*in sordes incidunt*, 114.14), although that perfect middle ground between high style and the banal seems hard to grasp, especially when there's no getting away, we infer, from the bodiliness of form: as Seneca put it in 114.4, outlining two 'corrupt' extremes, the poetic speaker depilates his legs, while the plain speaker doesn't even bother plucking his armpits, so presumably ignoring the body isn't an option either.[24] What's more, he reminded us, what counts as experimentation differs over time, and in any epoch novelty quickly becomes the norm, so that involuntary imitation of such style doesn't necessarily indicate a corrupt *animus*. In any case, vices are so intertwined with virtues that everyone is tainted, even the famous role-models we are encouraged to admire (114.13).

So where does this leave Lucilius between letters 114 and 115, as he formulates a response to *this* experimental writer, who is his elder and teacher, and who may presumably also be 'destroyed' by someone pointing out *his* errors, his loose ends, his lack of firm direction? (Cf. *quos si quis corrigit, delet*, 114.12). Letters, by definition, go both ways. Lucilius may well be anxious now, if he takes the bait to read himself, as well as Seneca, between the lines of these juxtaposed letters. And as *we* respond to Seneca writing a letter about how writing communicates the true, feeling self, what forces of encounter are set in motion? What constitutes an authentic or proper affective response to *Ep*. 115, a 'love letter' that begins with the prospect of the reader's anxiety, and overspills with the writer's 'burning desire' to look virtue in the face?[25]

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[24]   Graver (1998) 614-615 notes the ambiguity.

[25]   Cf. Gunderson (2015) 7: 'What can Seneca tell you that will genuinely touch you in your *animus*?'. The conference from which this volume was born was entitled 'Seneca's Love Letters'.

II. Facetime

Just as, counterintuitively, the correct or virtuous style is a (masculine) 'ornament' in 115.3, so the radiant soul of the *uir bonus*, as in *Ep.* 66, is itself pictured as a 'face' (*facies*), in the ensuing passage (115.3):[26]

> *Si nobis animum boni uiri liceret inspicere, o quam pulchram faciem, quam sanctam, quam ex magnifico placidoque fulgentem uideremus, hinc iustitia, illinc fortitudine, hinc temperantia prudentiaque lucentibus!*

> If we were permitted to look into a good man's soul, oh what a beautiful, holy face we would see, how it would shine out magnificent and gracious, radiant on one hand with justice and moderation, on the other with bravery and wisdom!

The use of *facies* here and in 115.4 (*si quis uiderit hanc faciem*), which (unlike *uultus*) can mean both face and beauty,[27] underscores the paradoxical vision of the good soul as a shiny, physically attractive surface that emanates 'elegance' (*elegantia*, 115.3) and 'grace' or 'glory' (*quantum … decoris*, 115.3). The dazzlingly beautiful 'face' of the virtuous soul, which already in this passage is implicitly compared to a 'loveable' female divinity (*Nemo illam amabilem, qui non simul uenerabilem diceret*, 115.4), now seems dangerously similar to the surface-level, effeminate *cultus* deployed by the young to seduce their audiences in 114.9 and 115.2: the adjective *uenerabilem,* twinned with *amabilem*, anticipates the citation of Virgil *A.* 1.327ff. at 115.5, and points towards the goddess of desire, Venus.

The affective intensity with which Seneca imagines marvelling at the radiant soul of the *uir bonus* is hard to miss, and builds to a climax in sections 3-4 of the letter, where chains of abstract nouns and superlatives tumble out in breathless polysyndeton, just as those many virtues are seen to pour splendour (*splendorem … adfunderent*, 115.3) over this man's soul. Seneca exuberant literary style, which enacts the feeling of being overwhelmed with religious wonder before this *pulchram faciem*, seems

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[26]   See *Ep.* 66.6-7, where the *animus bonus* is *pulcherrimus*, and represents the 'face' of virtue (*talis animus uirtus est. Haec eius est facies, si sub unum ueniat aspectum et semel tota se ostendat*): cf. Inwood (2007) 161.

[27]   *OLD* s.v. *facies.* Discussion in Bettini (2000).

far from 'relaxed'or *remissus* (cf. *magnus ille remissius loquitur*, 'that great man speaks in a more laid-back manner', 115.2).[28]

Seneca's excitement in sections 3-4 culminates in two elaborate questions that invite others to be similarly overawed (*Ep*. 115.4):

> *Tum euocante ipsa uultus benignitate productus adoret ac supplicet, et diu contemplatus multum extantem superque mensuram solitorum inter nos aspici elatam, oculis mite quiddam sed nihilominus uiuido igne flagrantibus, tunc deinde illam Vergili nostri uocem uerens atque attonitus emittat?*

> Then, led by the kindliness of his face, should he not bow down and worship? And having for a long time contemplated a far superior countenance, surpassing those we are accustomed to look upon, soft-eyed yet nevertheless flashing with life-giving fire, should he not then, in awe and reverence, pronounce that voice of our Virgil?

Seneca then quotes *A*. 1.327-328, and line 330, cutting off the end of 328. This is the first of three clusters of poetic citations in *Ep*. 115, all linked by the theme of looking at and 'reading' the face.[29] We are asked to recall Aeneas' encounter with Venus disguised as a virgin huntress in *Aeneid* 1; then, more obliquely, after several allusions the *cultus* of elegiac lovers, and to the allure of Ovidian illusion in sections 9-11, we are given a snapshot of the sun god's palace at the start of *Metamorphoses* 2, and remember the tragedy that begins when Phaethon cannot appreciate what lies inside his father's heart, in part because he cannot look at his too-dazzling face. Finally, we must confront a bundle of lines spoken by Greek tragic characters (presumably from plays which do not survive) and translated into Latin, together with a translated extract of Euripides' *Danae*, where Bellerophon declares that the 'goodness' of money is more attractive and charming than the face of Venus, followed by Seneca's prose commentary on the mistaken response of a real-life, face-to-face audience at the theatre, which also seems to contradict his own introduction to the citations (*nec apud*

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[28] The adverb *remissius* is perhaps itself prone to mislead: cf. Macrobius on Maecenas, with Graver (1998) 629-630 on Macrobius' familiarity here with the *Moral Epistles*: *idem Augustus, quia Mecenatem suum nouerat stilo esse remisso, molli et dissoluto, talem se in epistulis quas ad eum scribebat* (*Sat*. 2.4.12); effeminate 'laxity' in style can be contagious in an epistolary relationship.

[29] On Seneca's citation of poetry (especially Virgil and Ovid) in the letters, see esp. Mazzoli (1970), Degli'Innocenti Pierini (1990), (2005), Timpanaro (1994) 299-330, Rimell (2015) 131-134, 142-147, 185-194.

Graecos tragicos desunt, qui lucro innocentiam, salutem, opinionem bonam mutent, 'Even among the Greek tragic poets there are some who would trade purity, soundness and good reputation for wealth' 115.14). The translation from Greek into Latin (Seneca's or someone else's?) means these excerpts are *novissimi* in more ways than one (*hi novissimi versus* = 'these brand new lines/lines just quoted above', 115.15): as an interpretation and transposition that is said to function, in context, as the focus for an audience's self-righteous misinterpretation, Seneca's translation of Euripides puts a glaring spotlight on how formal surfaces generate meaning as we encounter them from our own idiocultural and affective positions, as well as on the possibility that the preceding, oddly decontextualised readings both of tragic verses and of Ovid *Met.* 2.1-2, 107-108 are also (to be) set up as shallow and plebeian. Unlike Euripides, whose capacity to direct the reception of the play in this vignette is then channeled by Seneca in 115.16, our author never leaps up to show his face, or to lend a logic to his provocations.

The lines cited from *Aeneid* 1 come just before Venus exploits Dido's maternal love to infect her with the destructive fires of *amor*, via her son, Cupid. The same slippage between potentially annihilating erotic desire and maternal love is staged in the snippet from Euripides, where Bellerophon rates money over 'the pleasure of the mother' (*uoluptas matris*), or the sweet light emanating from Venus' *uultus* (115.14). It is also picked up in the recollection of the Phaethon myth as told in Ovid *Met.* 2, if we remember that Phaethon seeks the truth of his origins from his father because he has doubts about whether his mother is concealing a sexual *culpa* beneath a veil of chastity, a *falsa imago* (which of course turns out *not* to be false after all).[30] His question about paternity is really about his mother's sexuality, and about 'virtue' more broadly (cf. *Met.* 1.751-775, 2.35-38[31]): he wants to know whether or not his mother is a Venus type, whereas Aeneas wonders whether this Venus-type goddess is his mother.

As Viola Starnone (2020) explores, Seneca seems to be the first of many writers to betray an impulse to normalise what is already disturbing in the encounter between Aeneas and the face of *Venus*

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[30]   Compare the *falsa lux* that can conceal inner evil, at 115.7.

[31]   Esp. *Met.* 2.37 (*nec falsa Clymene culpam sub imagine celat);* the *falsa imago* is not, in this case, false (Phaethon's mother is telling the truth). Cf. *falsa lux* at *Ep.* 115.7, describing the gleam of riches and power which can distract us from an evil or sorrowful soul.

disguised as a *uirgo* in *Aeneid* 1. As it becomes an illustrative *ornamentum* in Seneca's letter, the question *o quam te memorem uirgo?* – 'how should I call you, maiden?' or 'how should I remember you?', or in other words, 'do I know you?' – starts to sound like a question about how we remember this scene, about how we make Virgil *nostrum*, 'our own' (115.4), and about how much (and what kind of) affect we can allow ourselves in exploring this analogy. How aroused or anxious are we, or should we be, in imagining seeing the glorious face of the *uir bonus* as the beautiful face of a young girl, or of the goddess of sex herself, the very source of erotic excitement? There is no one, quips Seneca, who would not burn with love to see such a vision (*nemo non amore eius arderet, si nobis illam uidere contingeret*, 115.6), where *eius* and *illam* can refer either to *uirtus* or to her, Venus-*uirgo*. Imported into this new context, the citation suggests to us a vision of Aeneas struck by something like desire for his own mother, and ready to offer her a sacrificial victim (Dido?) as proof of his devotion (cf. *multa tibi ante aras nostra cadet hostia dextra*, *A.* 1.344). Dido's fate is sealed in *Aeneid* 4 when she and Aeneas sacrifice sheep and a heifer to Ceres, Phoebus, Lyaeus and Juno, 'guardian of the bonds of marriage', after which she wanders the city in a frenzy like a wounded deer (4.54-73), before falling on altars she has prepared herself (*hoc rogus iste mihi, hoc ignes araeque parabunt? A.* 4.676).

   The analogy makes us acutely aware of what is unseen and unspoken, or non-verbal, in both texts. We will never see the great man's soul directly, only imagine the experience as looking at a divine face, through the medium of fiction (and hear not the voice of Aeneas, but *illam Vergili nostri uocem*, 115.4). It is going to be a bit like when Aeneas looked at a face he was not sure he recognised. And at 115.6, the *splendor* that impedes our capacity to look either at a divinity such as Venus or at the *facies-anima* of the *uir bonus*, or even, later, at the tortured soul hidden behind the gleam of riches or flashy power (*quamuis multus circa diuitiarum radiantium splendor inpediat*… 115.7) seems indistinguishable from the splendour we imagined radiating from that two-dimensional or face-like soul (*faciem … fulgentem*, 115.3; *faciem… fulgentioremque*, 115.4; *splendorem illi suum adfunderent*, 115.3). Paradoxically, if we develop the visual sharpness necessary to see virtue (*perspicere uirtutem*, 115.6)[32], the implication is that we will be blinded

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32   Cf. Bettini (2000) 341 on *perspicere* (*vultus*).

(again) and dumbstruck by that very vision. Seneca's juxtaposition of facades ensures that we are always at a step removed from the face-to-face experience, yet this displacement also attunes us to Aeneas' affective experience, at the moment in which he encounters his mother but does not recognise her, and is not acknowledged by her as her son. Even his partial recognition *o dea certe!* in the second half of *A.* 1.328 is chopped off here, leaving us to fill in the gap. But this is less about a drama of exposure or an experience of knowing what was there all along, beneath the surface, as an invitation to engage with the intricate texture of this disrupted relational moment that is brought into relief in Seneca's faceless text.

III. Skin on skin

It is difficult to look virtue in the face, and the problem is in part a cultural one, Seneca muses in 115.8-11. Like children delighted by coloured pebbles, imperial subjects seek pleasure in gleaming surfaces – marble colonnades from Egypt or Africa, ceilings lined with gold – and are accustomed to cheating their own eyesight. Ironically, this lust for silver and gold, so symbolic of our lack of moral and philosophical depth, has been implanted deep within us by our parents (*admirationem nobis parentes auri argentique fecerunt, et teneris infusa cupiditas altius sedit creuitque nobiscum*, 115.11) – another reminder, after *A.* 1.327-330, of the crucial role played by caregivers, and especially mothers, in teaching us to read what Silvan Tomkins calls the affect language of the face: superficiality runs deep. It is not just a matter of honing our senses with philosophy so that we can finally see beyond deceptive surfaces: everyone already knows that 'beneath all this gilding lurks some ugly wood' (115.9). This is about the prospect of giving up the pleasure of the lie, and more than that, about the more disturbing prospect of interrupting the process by which we have attached to our parents, and continue to attach to our (flawed, damaged) loved ones, by noticing and responding to what lights up their faces. The pleasure of seductive illusion, and the anticipation of intimate connection, is already parsed in 115.9 in Seneca's near-citation of Ovid's poem on beautifying the face, the *Medicamina faciei femineae*. Overtly or covertly, the lines '…*cum auro tecta perfudimus, quid aliud quam mendacio gaudemus. Scimus enim sub illo auro foeda ligna latitare*'

transform into prose vv. 7-8 of Ovid's poem, well before Seneca cites
the *Metamorphoses* (Ovid *Med.* 7-8):

> *culta placent. auro sublimia tecta linuntur.*
>   *nigra sub imposito marmore terra latet.*[33]

> What is cultivated gives pleasure. High ceilings are lined with gold,
>   and black earth lurks beneath marble cladding.

In lines 43-50 of the *Medicamina*, Ovid briefly pays lipservice to the
need to cultivate interior virtue as well as exterior charm, so that face
and character match (*ingenio facies conciliante placet*, 44), yet in context
this seems more like a hook to remind women that they will lose their
looks with age and must strive to keep up the act on all fronts. This fickle
allusion to a philosophical trope is surely not the model Seneca wants
us to heed? In any case, what are we to make of the irony that Seneca
has summoned (covertly) the Augustan poet of illusion *par excellence* in
support of a philosophical and moralistic dismantling of illusion as cor-
ruption? What is it to look beyond the moralising topos of gilded wood,
and find the face of the Ovidian *puella*? We might also be reminded that,
in Ovid, the erotics of illusion operates in tandem with the excitement
of exposure, the thrill of peeping inside, of teasing and being teased.[34]
'Shut your bedroom door', he warns his female addressees (with a wink
to his male audience) in *Ars* 3.228, in a passage that dialogues with and
sits beside the *Medicamina* (Ovid *Ars* 3.227-232):

> *cur mihi tota tuo causa est candoris in ore?*
>   *claude forem thalami: quid rude prodis opus?*
> *multa uiros nescire decet: pars maxima rerum*
>   *offendat, si non interiora tegas.*
> *aurea quae splendent ornato signa theatro,*
>   *inspice, contemnes: brattea ligna tegit.*

> Why must I know the cause of the whiteness of your face?
>   Close the bedroom door: why display unfinished work?
> It suits men to not know a great deal: most of your doings

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[33] Cf. Seneca *Ep.* 16.8 *ut terram marmoribus abscondas*; 86.7; Petronius 135.8 v. 2. Rosati
(1985) 64-65.

[34] The *Medicamina* itself takes us behind closed doors, and allows us to glimpse the
messy creative process that produces the final seductive, deceptive face: see Rimell
(2006) 41-69.

would offend, if you didn't keep them hidden away.
Look closely at the golden images gleaming in the ornate theatre
        and you'd think them cheap: foil covers up the wood.

In parallel with Ovid, yet in different times, Seneca writes at 115.9:

Brattea felicitas est. Inspice, et scies, sub ista tenui membrana dignitatis quantum mali iaceat.

It's a gold-leaf happiness. Look beneath, and you'll know how much evil lies hidden beneath that thin veneer of dignity.

Read (nostalgically) alongside Ovid's facing texts, Seneca's precept lures the reader in. Ovid's advice to inspect not just faces but (love) letters may also linger here, on the 'skin' of Seneca's book: *inspice, quodque leges, ex ipsis collige uerbis / fingat an ex animo sollicitusque roget* ('Inspect it closely, and in what you read deduce from the words themselves whether he is faking it or whether he is really distressed and writing from the heart', *Ars* 3.471-472). Does Seneca practice what he preaches at 115.1, putting his true, feeling self into this letter? Will we find out if we look hard enough at or 'into' the page?[35]

Sections 9-13 of the letter take us from deceptive decoration, the deceptive face of dishonourable public figures, and the valorisation of material gain, to the corrupting influence of poetry that seems to praise wealth. As an example of this, Seneca cites Ovid *Metamorphoses* 2.1-2 and 107-108. In parallel with *A.* 1.327-330, these lines (and the story that takes place between them) also re-create an experience of unreadable or displaced facades, and thematise another kind of substitution. That is, they describe the sun-god's palace and his golden chariot, which both seem to emit his golden light but are at one or more steps removed from the Sun himself:

Regia Solis erat sublimibus alta columnis
clara micante auro

The Sun-god's palace, soaring with high columns

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[35] See De Man's expansion of this question in his essay on Wordsworth ((1984) 83-92). Cf. Kamuf (1986) 325, who summarises: 'Poetic knowledge would be the knowledge that there is no face-to-face possible with the totalizing surface of language, which cannot be circumscribed as an entity, and that all forms of knowledge, of sense-making or face-making, depend 'on a surface which it prohibits us from finding'.

and flashing bright with gold

Seneca then quotes *Met*. 2.107-108:

aureus axis erat, temo aureus, aurea summae
curvatura rotae, radiorum argenteus ordo

the axle was gold, the pole gold, the tires of the wheels
gold, with a ring of silver spokes

He introduces this second citation with the instruction *eiusdem currum aspice*, which replaces Ovid's *adspice uultus / ecce meos* (2.93-94). Crucially, whereas in Ovid's text (in the lines Seneca skips over), Phoebus tells Phaethon to look at his face, we are to look at the golden chariot, a radiant proxy (*Met*. 2.93-95):

adspice uultus
ecce meos: utinamque oculos in pectora posses
inserere et patrias intus deprendere curas!

Look at my face:
if only you could look into my heart too, and
understand a father's cares inside him!

Phoebus Apollo's wish that Phaethon look at his face and inside his heart has already been taken up and restated by Seneca at 115.3 when he refers not to himself, as Phoebus does, but to the idealised *uir bonus* (*Si nobis animum boni uiri liceret inspicere …* [cited and translated above]). As we've already noted, the *animus bonus* we wish to look at is presented in this passage as yet more surface, another *pulchra facies* that shines out with such splendour, it would stupefy us, if were we to be able to fix our eyes on it (*nonne uelut numinis occursu obstupefactus resistat?* 115.4). The analogy linking *uir bonus* to Venus to Phoebus Apollo makes sense insofar as the 'faces' of all three figures dazzle with their divine light. Yet the distinctive complexities of these *exempla* and the differences between them are disruptive, especially so when we try to map the philosophical import of Virgil's and Ovid's scenes in relation to the initial paradox that the wise man's soul beneath his ordinary physical face is itself a *facies*.[36]

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[36]   A grey area or blind spot, has appeared in 114 and widens now in 115, between, on one hand, the idea that inner character is reassuringly revealed in outward

What are we to do, then, with the notion that 'poetry puts a torch under our passions' (115.12)? What will Virgil, Ovid and Euripides in Latin do to me, or make me feel? How to react to what looks like a highly superficial reading of Ovid's Phaethon story as promoting the praise of material wealth and golden surfaces over moral goodness? Have we forgotten the price Ovid's Phaethon pays for his oedipal error, or – in philosophical terms – for letting the forensic examination of facades give way to a different kind of illusion?[37] Are we *really* to believe that Ovid's text endorsed an unthinking love of gold? Or are we to reject not Ovid's poetry itself, but this (superficial) perspective on it, which instrumentalises the *Metamorphoses* as a shiny bit of cultural capital to be chopped up and worn as some kind of *ornamentum* that suits Nero's brash 'golden age'? The anti-exemplum of the *regia Solis*, displaced from *Met.* 2.1, might even look like a poker-faced denunciation of Nero's *Domus Aurea*, especially as the comparison of Nero to Phoebus Apollo becomes a staple of Neronian literature – although Nero's youth and love of gold (not to mention the great fire of 64 that would be his legacy) seem in retrospect to align him with Phaethon.[38] Or might the moral of *Met.* 2, read through this letter, lie in what is *not* explicitly presented to us here – Phaethon's inability to see his father, whose instruction to 'look inside' is now taken up by Seneca in the first part of this letter?

Elsewhere in Seneca, the Phaethon of Ovid *Met.* 2 has been held up not as a misinterpreter of faces but as exemplum of the Stoic who aims for the heights of virtue, even if he is destined to fall short, at *De providentia* 5.10-11 (citing *Met.* 2.63-69, and 79-81) and at *De vita beata* 20.5

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appearance, corresponding to Stoic doctrines concerning the corporeal nature of virtue, and on the other hand the idea that inner virtue, itself a kind of 'pretty face' (*pulchram faciem*, 115.3), is often hidden beneath an appearance of sordid 'lowliness and disgrace', *infamia* and *humilitas,* (115.6). Note that these descriptions of physical appearance are already judgements of 'inner' moral qualities in Latin. Our ability to see clearly beyond this surface, which reveals not a depth but a further figurative or literal surface, is only a future potential, expressed in a chain of conditional clauses at 115.6, before we revert to the much simpler idea that a glitzy surface can hide a myriad of sins.

[37]   Cf. Schiesaro (2014) on Ovid's 'remythologisation' of Lucretius.

[38]   Cf. Seneca *Apoc.* 4; Lucan 1.47-48 (the earth is not afraid of Nero playing Phaethon/ Apollo); Rebeggiani (2013) with further bibliography, cf. Champlin (2005) 112-144, Schiesaro (2014). The Letters never explicitly mention Nero, notoriously: see Edwards (2021), esp. on possible references to Nero's palace in Sen. *Ep.*90, 173-176; cf. Gowers (1994) on reading Neronian literature under the implicit 'glare' of Nero.

(citing the final words of Phaethon's epitaph at *Met.* 2.328).[39] Yet in the context of *Ep.* 115, both Phaethon and his father look comically blind: in telling his son to look him 'in the face' and to observe the facial affect and features that prove his fatherhood (*Met.* 2.91-92), Apollo does not seem to realise that his is the one face Phaethon cannot look at directly: Phaethon is blind to the truth if he does not look at his father, but will also be blinded if he looks into the *lumina* – the lights/eyes – of the sun (cf. *Met.* 2.21-23). In the case of the *uir bonus* in 115.3-6, the idea is that the luminous 'face' of his soul is hidden beneath an ordinary façade; in the case of Apollo, the blazing light emitted by the façade conceals the shared physicality and biological-emotional connection between father and child that runs deep, *in pectora*, but would be also presumably be transmitted instantaneously on the face.

In other words, the invitation to look at (*aspice*), or into, *Met.* 2 in this letter, points towards a human principle in direct conflict with the axiom that beautiful surfaces mislead: the virtue 'buried in the body' and concealed by 'too much light' in 115.6 *would* be visible on Apollo's face, if only Phaethon were able to look at it. As Silvan Tomkins (1995) posits, studying facial affect is a kind of 'inverse archaeology', a term which assumes that 'the surface of the skin is where it is at, not deep within us'.[40] Instead of assuming that inner bodily responses are the 'chief site of emotions', Tomkins regards them as of secondary importance to the expression of emotion through the face, which has 'priority over visceral changes because of its speed, visibility and precision'. Rapidly shifting and inter-relational affects are located on the surface where they appear, and as they participate in complex 'feedback loops' that move inward and outward, to the self and to others, or sometimes to the self as others (Tomkins in Demos (1995) 284-290, Tomkins (1962) 113-134, cf. Frank (2015) 7). Read next to Seneca's facades, Ovid's Phaethon story seems to suggest something similar: it draws our attention, obliquely, to the first tragedy that will lead to the catastrophe of Phaethon's death – the moment of the unreadability of

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[39]   On Seneca's interest in Phaethon, see Degli'Innocenti Pierini (1990) 251ff. and 2005 on the 'cryptocitation' of Ovid *Met.* 2.193 at Sen. *Ep.* 90.43; Berno (2003), 93, 261-263 (on Seneca's citation of Ovid *Met.* 2.264 at *Nat.* 3.27.13; and implicit reference to the Phaethon myth as an example of hubris at *Nat.* 6.2.9).

[40]   Tomkins in Demos (1995) 284-290 (part of a plenary address given at the annual meeting of the International Society for Research on the Emotions, July 15, 1990, entitled 'Inverse archaeology: facial affect and the interface of scripts within and between persons').

Phoebus Apollo's face, or the moment at which a father's connection and love for his son cannot be read on a face that cannot be looked at, a face whose *lumina* tragically and ironically destroy the sight of others. Human surfaces, here, are not necessarily deceptive: in theory everything is shown, or would be shown, on the father's face, had it been possible to see it. Phaethon's vulnerability to being seduced by shiny gold things now looks less like a moral flaw, or an aggressive drive to take the father's place and punish him, and more like a Freudian *Verschiebung* or displacement: he cannot see the father's face, and therefore cannot bond with him, or have that bond validated, and so he fixates on a substitute whose radiance he *can* bear.[41] Seneca performs this displacement, as we've seen, in replacing Apollo's appeal *adspice uultus* with *currum aspice*, inviting us to take up the subject position of Phaethon, just after his inadequate encounter with his father. Because he cannot identify with the father through an interaction of facial scripts, which in Freudian terms would have allowed him to progress to the next developmental stage, Phaethon is stuck in a violent Oedipal struggle which now does not just represent the violent urge to usurp the father, in opposition to 'healthy' identification, but is also motivated by another need that does not quite emerge in Freud but only in his subsequent interlocutors: the need to relate, face-to-face. We are then witness to the annihilating consequences, for the child, of that failed inter-connection.

Indeed, the tragedy that unfolds in Ovid *Met.* 2, when Phaethon decides to drive his father's chariot, fixates on the violence inflicted on faces, which seems to symbolise the traumatic impact of failed attachment. Father Apollo begins by trying to protect Phaethon's face by annointing it with a *medicamen* reminiscent not only of the balm

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[41]   This is in a sense the other side of Choisy's 'Phaethon complex', the name she gave to the unconscious, self-destructive desire of illegitimate children to punish their absent or unknowable parents (see Choisy (1950)): from an attachment theory perspective, Ovidian Phaethon's uncontrollable desire to drive the chariot might be read not only as self-harm/revenge but as an adaptive defence against the pain of failed connection, a way of reproducing a simulacrum of that connection via the chariot whose jewelled yoke is an artficially responsive surface (*clara repercusso reddebant lumina Phoebo*, 'they returned their bright lights/eyes to the reflected rays of Phoebus', *Met*. 2.110). Compare Bowlby's description of healthy attachement as the dyadic regulation of emotions in the interaction with the care-giver: 'These visual, prosodic-auditory, and tactile stimuli are rapidly transmitted back and forth between the infant's face and the mother's face in a context of affect synchrony, and are processed and stored in implicit-procedural memory in internal working models of the attachment relationship' (Bowlby (1969) 11-12).

Medea uses to protect Jason from the fire-breathing bulls, but also, poignantly, of the cosmetics Ovid teaches his lovers to use as part of their toolkit for deceptive seduction (*tum pater ora sui sacro medicamine nati / contigit*, *Met.* 2.122-123): in other words, the father's cure does not simply fail, it also reinscribes the inauthentic, 'Ovidian' faciality that has led to this tragic trajectory.[42] As Phaethon, inevitably, begins to lose control, we watch his face change as if in close-up: he is panic-stricken (*pauet*, 2.169), and grows pale from fear (*palluit*, 180); we see him seeing, his eyes darting back and for in terror (*despexit*, 178; *suntque oculis tenebrae*, 181; *prospicit occasus, interdum respicit ortus*, 190; *uidet trepidus*, 194; *hunc … / … uidit*, 198-9; *orbem / adspicit accensum*, 227-228). As the earth starts to burn, the faces and bodies of Ethiopians are scorched black as the hot blood is drawn to the surface of the skin (235-236),[43] and faces of gods shrink back: Neptune tries and fails to lift his face from underneath the sea (270-271); the earth herself manages to lift up her smothered face (*oppressos uultus*, 275) but can scarcely speak, her eyes singed, ashes covering her face (284); finally, she withdraws (*rettulit os in se*, 303). Phaethon, his hair ablaze, falls like a star and Eridanus receives and bathes his steaming face (*fumantiaque abluit ora*, 324). Meanwhile, his grief-striken father hides his face (*condiderat uultus*, 330). His mother Clymene is bereft, and when her daughters, the Heliades, are turned into trees, leaving just their faces exposed, she tries desperately to hold onto them by 'joining kisses' to their mouths (*oscula iungat*, 357) – the final echo of the initial trauma of being unable to establish a relationship of trust with her son by receiving and sending facial responses (*Met.* 1.765-775). Ovid shares with Francis Bacon the 'peculiar project' of dismantling the face (Deleuze (2004) = (1981) 20), a project that runs through and is transformed by faceless Seneca's response in this letter.[44]

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[42]   Cf. Horace *Epod.* 3.11-12, where raw garlic is both a protective and a poisonoius *pharmakon*.

[43]   The immense heat, which draws blood to the skin, artificially produces the phenomenon of facial affect described in Sen. *Ep.* 11.5 (*nam ut quidam boni sanguinis sunt, ita quidam incitati et mobilis et cito in os prodeuntis*). Shame and embarassment are impossible to fully regulate so that they don't appear on the face, Seneca warns, even for the wise: see Graf (2020) 1-5 for discussion of the blush as transcending a 'traditional ethical system' in Seneca.

[44]   Ovid's interest in 'dismantling' the face begins, we might say, in the *Medicamina* and *Ars Amatoria*, and is played out in key passages of the *Metamorphoses*: Phaethon's combusting, melting face in book 2, Actaeon's human-animal face, the image of terror before it is torn apart in book 3, Narcissus' perfect mirror distorted by his

In the next paragraphs (14-15), Seneca's commentary on the audience's superficial or emotional response to a staging of Euripides' *Danae* casts the spotlight more explicitly on our reading, or the letter's reading, of *Met.* 2. On that occasion, Seneca recalls, the playwright jumped up indignantly and asked the audience to wait and see what happens rather than taking one character's opinions as representing the play's moral message (115.15). Bellerophon, who declares in this passage that money is the greatest good, and cannot be matched even by a mother's passion (*uoluptas matris*) or by the sweet glow of Venus' face (*tam dulce si quid Veneris in uultu micat*), will meet his just punishment in the end. The author's agitation seems to spur a similar excitement in the writer of this letter, who interrupts his descriptions with a series of emotional exclamations that almost soar to the heights of sections 3-4, quoted earlier (*Ep.* 115.16):[45]

> *O quantum lacrimarum, quantum laborum exigit! Quam misera desiderat esse, quam misera e partis est! Adice cotidianas sollicitudines, quae pro modo habendi quemque discruciant. Maiore tormento pecunia possidetur quam queritur. Quantum damnis ingemescunt, quae et magna incidunt et uidentur maiora!*

> How many tears, how many toils does greed demand! How miserable it wants to be, how miserable it is in its winnings! Think too of daily worries, which torture each person in proportion to his gain! The possession of riches causes even greater agony than the pursuit of riches. How we groan over our losses, which fall heavy on us but which seem even heavier!

Maiore tormento and *maiora*, picking up *habeo maiora quae cures* at the start of the letter, alert us to Lucilius' anxiety and worries, which are implicitly being measured here. We are asked, once again, to think of the face, but indirectly this time, in the image of greed causing many tears (*o quantum lacrimarum, quantum laborum exigit*, 115.16).[46]

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tears in the same book (3.474-475), the transformation of beautiful Medusa into the terrifying face of death in 4.800-804, the bloody head of Itys thrust into his father's face at 6.659, etc.

[45] See Graf (2020) 4 on sagehood itself as 'a state of buzzing affective plenitude' in Seneca.

[46] Cf. Brinkema (2014) 1-25 on tears: ' The tear demands interpretation, but that reading does not point inward toward the depths of the soul—it remains a surface reading always, a tracing of the bodily production of the sign that signifies only its refusal to reveal itself.' (17).

The lesson drawn from this particular performance is followed by Lucilius' imagined intervention at 115.17 ('But surely men think that the rich man is happy and want to be like him?'), which Seneca then corrects – although his argument relies on admitting that no man is content with his prosperity: *nemo enim est, cui felicitas sua, etiam si cursu uenit, satis faciat* (115.17). 'What, *no-one*, not even you, dear Seneca?' we are bound to ask.[47] If only we could see his face as he wrote this, look into his *lumina*. At the end of the letter, Seneca concludes that no arrangement of words can help you develop as a philosopher, (*non perducent te apte verba contexta et oratio fluens leniter*, 114.18). He stops short of saying 'and that includes this letter'.

IV. Mask or no mask

Ep. 115 leaves us longing for some cue beyond the actor's mask (a raised eyebrow perhaps, a smirk, an emphatic frown). Throughout, the Letters' form and enactment of epistolary exchange foster intimacy between two, but must also register the impossibility, or postponement, of intimacy; there is something that remains just out of reach. And perhaps what lies just out of reach is not, as in that seductive literary-critical construct, a true depth, but another shimmering surface. The opposition between surface and depth, between false exteriority and true interiority, presumes that surfaces are either sure indicators of depths, or are a false front that conceals an entirely different depth. Yet Seneca suggests, in ways that resonate with contemporary affect theory and Silvan Tomkins' work on faciality in particular, that surfaces are themselves complex, moving and hard to decipher, and that depths are not just communicated but nuanced and transformed on human surfaces. Tomkins' conviction that facial expression is both learned and innate, private and social, and that 'the face is sometimes opaque, sometimes ambiguous, but often enough deeply illuminating'[48] seems to be shared by Seneca, who over the course of his prose works presents a range of context-specific accounts of how the face can be read, and of to what extent facial affect (and what kind) can be manipulated, is voluntary or involuntary. Sometimes faces betray character and tell the truth (especially if anger is the active emotion: e.g. *qualem intus putas esse animum,*

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[47]   Cf. *Ep*. 20.10-11, where it is possible to have huge wealth, and be great-souled.

[48]   Tomkins (1975) 560, repr. Demos (1995) 278.

cuius extra imago tam foeda est? 'What kind of soul lies within, do you think, when the outward impression is so horrible?', *Ir.* 2.35.4); other times they are masks that conceal emotions and character (*cetera [sc. uitia] licet abscondere et in abdito alere*, 'other vices may be concealed and nurtured in secret', *Ir.* 1.1.5). At the close of *Ep.* 11, Lucilius is to choose as his model for self-regulation the man whose face 'carries his soul before him' (*ipse animum ante se ferens uultus*, *Ep.* 11.10), yet the letter has presented the inability to prevent (pre-)emotions such as shame and embarassment manifesting themselves on the face as both inevitable and an unfortunate vice.

The unstable relation between facial surface and psychic depth in Senecan thought is both politically and emotionally freighted. We may be tempted to read *Ep.* 115 as a jolting performance of *dissimulatio* in which the author demands authenticity from Lucilius, while concealing himself and implying he will never be seen. But at the same time, the letter draws our attention to what is lost or deferred when we lose faith in the affective reponsiveness of human beings to the faces of others, a conversation in which we are made, and learn, in relation. The poker face is a political strategem, but also – as the 'still-face' psychology experiments of the 1970s remind us – the origin of trauma.[49] We must 'see through' or be immune to facades, and train ourselves not to take things at face value, yet – via the stories of Aeneas and Phaethon – we must also consider the consequences of failed or disrupted authentic face-to-face relation: a lack of belonging or security, a fractured self, the poisoning of our capacity to love. Tomkins describes facial affect as 'the interface of scripts within and between persons'; Seneca's project in *Ep.* 115, I have suggested, is about to what extent we can experience those movements of feeling and thinking in the act of reading.

Victoria Rimell
University of Warwick
V.Rimell@warwick.ac.uk

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[49] On the still-face experiments, which were led by American developmental psychologist Edward Tronick, see Tronick (1997), Robinson (2010).

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