PHILLIP LOPATE

On Shaving a Beard

I have just made a change that feels as dramatic, for the moment, as switching from Democrat to Republican. I have shaved off my beard. Actually I clipped it away with scissors first, the I went in for the kill with a safety razor. The first snip is the most tentative: you can still allow yourself the fantasy that you are only shaping and trimming, perhaps a raffish Vandyke will emerge. Then comes the moment when you make a serious gash in the carpet. You rub the neighboring whiskers over the patch to see if it can still be covered, but the die is cast, and with a certain glee the energy turns demolitionary.

As I cut away the clumps of darkness, a moon rises out of my face. It lights up the old canyon line of the jawbone. I am getting my face back. I lather up again and again and shave away the bristles until the skin is smooth as a newborn's—the red irritation spots where the skin has reacted to the unaccustomed blade seem a sort of diaper rash. When I am done, I look in the glass and my face itself is like a mirror, so polished and empty are the cheeks. I feel a little sorry for the tender boy-man reflected before me, his helpless features open to assault. The unguarded vacancy of that face! Now I will have to come to terms again with the weak chin, the domineering nose, the thin, sarcastic-pleading lips.

Our men, on the other hand, will tell you that a kiss without facial hair is like a roast beef sandwich without mustard. They consider beards a mark of virility, trustworthiness, and bohemian sensitivity. Obviously, the image systems break down in the face of individual tastes. Nevertheless, it is still possible to say that beards connote freedom, telling the boss off, an attitude of "gone fishing"; men often grow them on vacations, or after being booted from the White House staff, like Ehrlichman. [Even Admiral Poindexter grew a mustache.] Clean-shavenness, on the other hand, implies a subscription to the rules of society.

A major division in the bearded kingdom exists between those who revel in no longer having to bother with maintenance, letting Nature have its luxuriant bushy way, and those who continue to keep a razor nearby, prudently pruning or shaving the cheeks every few days.

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A well-clipped beard on a kindly man looks as proper as a well-kept lawn on Sunday. On the other hand, there are beards with a glint of cruelty—beards trimmed to Caligulaesque exactitude. I had thought to be one of the pruners, but went too far, lacking the razor-sharp finesse.

Having shaved the beard off, I take my first cautious steps into society. I am dreading those who will ask why I did it, then settle back for a long soul-bearing explanation. What will I reply to those who are quick to say, "I liked you better the other way"? My impulse is to step on their toes, but we must not punish honesty. Once, when I was teaching in P.S. 90, I shaved off my beard, and the children, who were familiar with me as a hairy man, were so outraged that all through the first day of the new regime, they ran alongside and punched me. Children are good at expressing a sense of betrayal at change.

Those who are bearded for the long haul either tend to view the new me with something like a Mennonite's disapproval at backsliding, or are relieved that one who had appeared a member of the brotherhood was exposed in the nick of time as turncoat. A few friends, who pride themselves on their observational powers, make helpful comments like: You look fatter. You look thinner. You look younger. You look older. The majority say nothing. At first I think they are being polite, not meaning to broach a subject that might make me self-conscious. Then, out of frustration at their not having noticed, I finally call my naked face to their attention. They say: "I thought there was something different about you but I couldn't put my finger on it. Besides, you keep going back and forth, Lopate, who can keep up?"

**CONSIDERATIONS**

1. In his first sentence, Lopate had to make a choice between "from Democrat to Republican," and "from Republican to Democrat." Did he make the right choice? Explain.

2. Why is Lopate unable to state decisively how a man's beard affects the opposite sex?

3. Lopate's smoothly written essay seems effortless, but a careful reader will find many unusually apt word choices, evidence that the writer did not toss off the piece casually. Note some of those choices and explain why they are real contributions to the essay.

4. In what sense, if any, does Lopate's essay explore deeper territory than the whiskers on his face?

5. There are a few capitalized words and phrases in the essay that you may not recognize: Vandyke, League of Hirsutes, Mephistophelian, Caligulaesque, P.S. 90, and so on. What do you lose if you do not bother to look them up?

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