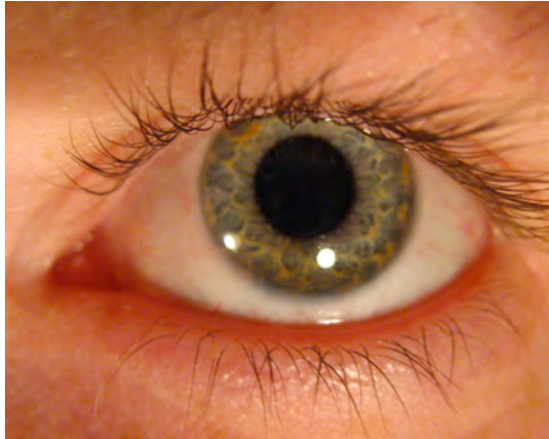


## EJGS Student portfolio



### Eyes

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Kieran Breen

«It's in your eyes... I can tell what you're thinking...»  
(*In Your Eyes*, Kylie Minogue)

It is not altogether surprising that Carlo Emilio Gadda did not particularly enjoy comparison to others. Every young artist wants his work to be fresh, exciting and new. Fresh it is, and exciting even more so, but... new? Not at all! Gadda is a melting pot of European culture and thought. He embraced both past culture and past thought. Yet at other times, perhaps at most times, he also tried to break free, and go against the trend, which fits perfectly his contradictory nature.

In this presentation I want to highlight a small (not so small) aspect of his work: an obsessive yet well informed trait. And I want to relate it to the larger picture, call it the world at large, from which it comes and where it returns (after Gadda). It is indeed from small things, as well as from big ones, that one can show how relevant this writer still is. So in order to do what I plan, it is important that we first take a step back and distance ourselves from his material. It is only from a distance that one sees the complete picture, isn't it? or shall we say that it is from a distance that one sees its causes and effects?

Let's get going by saying that the body has an enormous effect on perception: one's perception of oneself and of others, and also how others perceive us.

Judging a person's character on their physical attributes is an age-old Practice that has had *scientific* backup and *proof* associated with it. This is particularly significant with regard to the anti-Semitic policies of Nazi Germany. My chosen illustration is a typical, somewhat crude, example of the propaganda used by the National Socialists to *prove* their own misconceived racial superiority. To be superior, one needs someone else to be their inferior, an *Untermensch*. The Nazis chose the Jews to be their polar opposites, as seen in this piece of propaganda.

A prime example of the dominant Aryan race, on the left, finds himself in a rural setting, and uses his muscles to work the land. His blond hair and blue eyes are outward signs of his inner purity of heart and soul. Next to him, a Jewish Businessman, his polar opposite, further underlines



these Arian attributes. Here is a squat, balding man with his plump belly, held in by his formal business attire, and smoke is rising from his cigar. Which of these two very different men does Gadda's protagonist Ingravallo resemble the most? One could argue that, with his wig-like mop of hair and those metaphysical (diabolical) *knobs* on his forehead, we do not get (we are not meant to get) the best first impression of don Ciccio. Gadda's own conception of the character is unmistakable, and this is achieved through precise, exhaustive description. No further character ascertaining is needed: we are aware of the inspector's dual / dark personality from the very start.

Physiognomy and Phrenology may have earned a bad reputation as a result of their extensive manipulation in the favour of the Nazis, by the Nazis themselves; before this, they had a semi acceptable standing in the world of science. Never fully accepted and viewed by some as a pseudo-science, Phrenology was a theory that aimed to determine a person's character, personality and even criminality on the basis of the shape of their head – that being the area



occupied by the brain, Phrenologists were localising specific functions and attributes to this area. From the 1820s to the 1840s it was fashionable to predict a child's future via phrenological analysis. Many subscribed to this train of thought, among whom the Brontë sisters are notable. In *Wuthering Heights* one has but to read the early descriptions of Heathcliff, and his inner intent and future path become clear.

The one area where Gadda seems to go against the *trend* is with regards to beauty. Does beauty contribute to success? Recent studies think so. According to statistics, the more aesthetically beautiful you are the less likely you are to commit a crime. In fact, one American bank robber actually used his unattractiveness in his defence recently. He maintained that he was «too ugly to get a job». Gadda, however, doesn't portray his villains as physically unattractive, but rather the opposite. As an altogether fortunate man of good if not high status (he may have thought otherwise, but there you go), Gadda generally endows the lower classes with beauty. And is this what? Charitable thought? A suggestion of the good deep within (them)?



But of course, *appearances can be deceiving*. As these two photos show, slight changes in grooming and attire can completely change someone's outward appearance. The same person (myself) is photographed here, and yet on first glance *they* (the *two* different subjects in the photo) couldn't have less in common – they are, basically, polar opposites. Untidy and unshaven, the *chav* stumbles into frame with a beer can in his hand and his other holding his cigarette to his mouth. The *debonair* also has a cigarette, yet holds it delicately. He appears intelligent from a mixture of expensive attire (and glasses) and his rigidly controlled posture. The accessories we wear can accentuate our wealth, as do Liliana's prized family jewels and delicate clothes in *Quer pasticciaccio* – she has all the publicly displayable trappings of wealth.

Yet, such things are misleading. A pauper can dress as a prince and vice versa. Our first judgements of people may be based on such frivolities as clothing and appearance, something which is indeed part and parcel of don Ciccio's job as an inspector of the law – i.e., he must pass judgement on others. But don

Ciccio needs more than a mere cigarette and an unshaven face to find a guilty party for the Menagazzi jewel theft and Liliana's horrific murder.

What does a person do when they lie? A lot of people would say that they avoid someone's glance and would blink a lot. They would be surprised to find that they have more scientific fact behind them than they would have believed! Gadda takes the time to describe the expression and particularly the reaction on his characters' faces. This ranges from the little girls with open mouths, outside the crime scene, to Liliana's *facial hiding* («celandosi dietro alla cortina dei sorrisi», QP 9). Now, there is a lot more to the latter than the Weaver English translation manages to put across. A *celata* (from the same root as the verb used above) is a visor on a coat of armour. In this knowledge, we can and must go further than just read Liliana's «curtain of smiles» as a form of convenient, stylised social deception – she is actually *protecting* her inner thoughts, as perhaps I am protecting my inner thoughts in the pictures below. Perhaps not. Or not enough.



Here are some facial expressions in accordance with the Facial Action Coding System (FACS). Look at them individually and decide what distinguishes one from the other. Name an emotion for each and support your choice with reasons. Check your answers below.



This may seem like old hat and common sense, but it is fresh and new, as seen in recent studies conducted by world authority on micro-expressions Paul Ekman. In his latest interview with *New Scientist Magazine* he discusses how such seemingly frivolous matters are being used to fight terrorism. He has recently been successful in identifying what he calls the *Hinckley Expression*, named after the person who attempted to kill former president Ronald Reagan. Only visible to the trained eye, HE is reported to betray the intentions of a would-be murderer moments before they act. Ekman believes that we are good at sensing good in others and are naturally gifted to tell if someone is telling us the truth. The problem is that, whereas we can sense the truth, we are not nearly as skilled at sensing deception in others. A mere 1% of the population (the so-called *masters of deception*) can detect any deceit at all, and only 4% of the population (the so-called *natural born liars*) can lie, know they are doing so, and not leave any indication, not even the involuntary gestures that can contradict what they are saying. Both of these categories tend to be employed in relevant professions (police, actors... lawyers), and have great success in their work, sometimes not even knowing their natural predisposition for it.

From a biological point of view eyes tend to show emotion more clearly than other parts of the face, though not in all cases. Blended emotions are also best told through this organ. In fact, the eyes will reflect the reaction of the other muscles. Surely, this is biological proof of what we have believed for centuries. Back in Shakespearean times, scientific knowledge was of course less advanced than it is at present, leading to a belief in and reliance on superstition (am I getting this right?). Indeed, Shakespeare is a good example, when talking of European culture of the time.

A1S4L12-13 — *There is no art to find the mind's construction in the face*

A1S5L61-62 — *Your face [...] is a place where men may read strange matters*

A1S5L65-62 — *Look like th'innocent flower, but be the serpent under't*

What conclusions can be drawn? Earlier we said that clothing and other material accessories can be used as disguises. We also made the point that deception through standardised forms of expression (a kind of *accessorising* still, if you want) is definitely possible and can be easy. Hiding (protecting) one's feelings and intentions by means of a *straight face* is clearly a more troublesome art to master. Yet for Ingravallo (the investigator in our midst) knowing all this doesn't help in his quest to find the murderer: to get to a truth. Staying with the metaphor, I therefore suggest that we proceed in the following manner. A suspect is before us. We have inspected his outer appearance, and then zoomed in to a degree, in order to take in his facial expression. But all to little avail. Perhaps, then, as a last attempt, we will go further in – and focus on his eyes.

This eye business is at the root of one of Gadda's smallest obsessions – my selected eye references at the end bear witness to it. Once again, his obsession is *our* obsession, in an anthropological sense. An obsession spanning the millennia, and taking us straight back to Egyptian times, about which evidence

is certainly not lacking. Indeed, once you start looking for references to eyes in culture, whichever the culture and regardless of the age, you begin to find them absolutely everywhere.

Let's start then (rather randomly) with the Egyptians. This striking symbol was the *wadjet* – the Eye of Horus, believed to provide protection from the sky god usually depicted in the shape of a falcon.



This symbol was famously found under the twelfth layer of bandages on the boy Pharaoh Tutankhamun. In a comparative analysis of symbols, one could perhaps contrast the *Eye of Horus* to the *Evil Eye*. Where the Egyptian symbol was thought to provide protection for those who deigned to make use of it, the *Evil Eye* is in fact still commonly *cast*, still commonly believed in various regions across the world. Success evokes envy and this envy can be channelled into a resentful stare that brings about misfortune on the recipient's part. Another eye symbol with unnervingly deep seated power is the *Eye of Providence*. Also known as the *All Seeing Eye*, the Eye of Providence is usually depicted as an eye contained within a triangle with rays of light coming from it. It does not require a great leap of the imagination for this icon to turn into a reminder of the all-seeing God watching over us and over our accountability to him. The widest circulation of the



symbol must surely be through the One Dollar note, something that every American has in his / her pocket. A great controversy surrounded the decision for its inclusion in the design, due to members of the original design



committee's Freemasonic ties and to the nature (or religious associations) of the symbol itself. Debate was hushed, but not silenced, by protests that the symbol was not an exclusively Freemasonic symbol, but shared with many other groups and beliefs around the world.

This All-Seeing Eye could be thought to have a twin in recent popular literature. *The Lord of the Rings*, which frequently tops both critics and readers lists, has its own version of the *Eye of Providence* – the Eye of Sauron. Made of fire, it stares threateningly from the top-most tower of the dark lord's fortress and never sleeping, sees through time, space, and... flesh.

More recent literature has not neglected its cultural heritage – how could it? And so eyes do continue to have an important role to play in contemporary story telling. This happens nowhere more so than in the global literary phenomenon that is *Harry Potter*. The general plot is widely known, but many devoted fans would hesitate when asked the following question. In *Harry Potter*, the dark wizard Voldemort practises the art of Legilimency, a form of magical mind reading. A wizard-like version of our don Ciccio, Voldemort uses this skill to detect deceit and lies from others. Well, how does he do it?

The answer is surprisingly unmagical. Voldemort looks the suspect in the eyes. At the climax of the fifth instalment, he declares that he can «see the truth staring out from his [Harry's] worthless mind». Voldemort is not actually the sole person to use this to his advantage. His arch-enemy Dumbledore is frequently described as having a gaze that penetrates, and on occasion uses Legilimency for good. The two characters may stand on opposing sides, yet they show that it is not possible to separate good and evil in any sharp and defined way. And of course, these two leaders are emphatically separated by

different eye colours. Red and cat-like slit eyes belong to Voldemort – whereas Dumbledore has *strikingly* blue eyes. We all (and don Ciccio is a prime example of this) have faults, those so-called negative aspects of our personalities. Some of us, however, are *simply* controlled by the negative rather than the good.

Cinema does generally mean even bolder eye business. Eyes had a central role to play, for instance, in the 1982 film *Blade Runner*. In the opening sequence the eyes of the protagonist reflect flames in the distance. This is an interesting point for us to reach, having gone thus far in our enquiry. Till now, in fact, we had not taken into account that the eye is also a reflecting medium, reflecting external factors – a very impersonal reflecting surface.

As a student of foreign languages, I have sometimes struggled to learn *strange* idiomatic expressions. As *clichéd* as they may be, idioms are hugely important to lend one's language a sense of authenticity while at the same time giving insight into the mentality behind them. It is well known that the English language has a diverse and wide spanning pool of idiomatic sayings, and, fortunately for me, there are many relating to eyes.

To pull the wool over someone's eyes

To be more than meets the eye

Beauty is in the eye of the beholder.

Of course, this idiomatic talent is not exclusive to the English language: whereas in English we say that something extremely expensive *costs an arm and a leg*, an Italian would say *costa un occhio della testa*. It is indeed only in the comparison that the Italian idiom becomes truly poignant. Why is the eye the most valuable thing to Italians? Another good Italian idiom is *leggere negli occhi*. In them, in those eyes that is, there must be more than first *meets*

*the eye*, quite literally – you are reading no less than someone’s mind, in fact. It is interesting that the eyes (anatomically in front) should come to represent and substitute what lies behind them.

Now that we have sufficiently digressed from Gadda, we can return to him sufficiently informed and knowledgeable about one of his (and yet not exclusively his) fixed ideas. He is clearly obsessed with eyes. Mentions of eyes are frequent, tend to crop up in bursts and clusters, as the selected references at the end will show. Significantly, Gadda does not have that many things to say about the topic. A few strong, well defined characteristics and phrases do however come up, again and again:

1)

Eyes are almost *always* in the plural:

*du oci fermi* (QP 20)...

*du quarti di luna* (QP 99)...

*due archi orbitali* (QP 188)...

*quei due occhi neri* (QP 260)...

*due occhi, fece che la Tina impaurì* (QP 264 end)

This is a rather superfluous effort to make, I would think, as one assumes that a person has two eyes – an abnormality, not the default feature, should draw the attention and be mentioned. But it is true that many other physical aspects that come in pairs, in Gadda are named and numbered as forming a pair. Even don Ciccio’s notorious *bernoccoli metafisici*, in the opening page of the novel, are quite appropriately *two*. Eyes too, and somewhat surprisingly, are later described as *bernoccoli* (QP 202) – which serves as another instance to show that, like all else, eyes can have distant metaphorical relations. The basic duality of all things, however, is the real

key here. Everything (absolutely everything) has its opposite, like the negative to the positive pole, and without such arrangements the universe would (supposedly) cease to function. Even don Ciccio and the early descriptions of him have something of a Doctor Jekyll and Mr Hyde quality to them. There is always two to everything. This is a man of the law, and yet even he has dark, mysterious and diabolical aspects to his character. He certainly has his two *bernoccoli* on the forehead: surely a right one, and a left one... Make what you can of it.

2)

The colour of these *two* eyes is also significant. Despite black being *the* colour for eyes in *Pasticciaccio*, Virginia is described as having a pair of eyes «diversi da come ce l'avemo tutte» (QP 144) – *her* kind of black seems to be blacker than anything that has ever been seen, a manifestation of the Devil itself. And whereas it is often blue eyes that end up being constructed culturally as give-away signs of mental instability, here in the *Pasticciaccio* we come across a lot (a real lot) of «lampi neri» (QP 258) – round, orbital, flashing black eyes fixed (with murderous intent?) on *their* object. There is no end to the depths of Black these pitch-black *ponds* can fathom. And yet this one darkness is also changeable, in a way. Light flickers in the eyes, and emotion – «l'ira le sbiancò l'occhio» (QP 260) – can have a huge effect on the shade, intensity and bottomlessness of colour.

3)

Most importantly is how eyes are shown to be our best friend and worst enemy almost simultaneously. They can be used as a weapon to break down our opponent's defences and render them vulnerable, just as Ingravallo does. He uses his gaze – «fermo e crudele» (QP 260) – to get the information he wants to get in his investigations. However, there are also times when he himself falls victim of the gaze of others. On the very same page as the last example, Tina's eyes are described as «puntati sulla

cuticagna: [Ingravallo] se ne sentiva trafiggere il collo». Perhaps this is why, at least in the Geremi film adaptation *Quel maledetto imbroglio*, he chooses to hide his eyes, and thus himself, behind his large sunglasses. In this, he is quite like Marcello, the protagonist of Fellini's *La dolce vita*, protecting / disguising himself.



Gadda never revealed his reasons, nor gave away any clues for this little obsession of his. But **that does not mean** that we cannot make an educated guess. Such an introverted and socially awkward man knew that the eyes of the world were on him, particularly after *Pasticciaccio*'s success, and must have felt particularly cornered and utterly vulnerable. Not unlike his suspects, then, among them the much cornered Ines Cionini, he must have been only too aware that every involuntary gesture and movement of his *writing*, however tiny, gave his critics yet more crucial evidence that he was indeed the *guilty party* – an author totally undeserving of the huge success he had achieved. Hence, metaphorically?, literally?, the big shades.

### Selected eye references

**QP 20 – Gera uno sguardo implacabile, du oci fermi... come un serpente... come un autòma...**

TAM 29 – His eyes were merciless, steady and hard... like a snake's... like a robot...

**QP 99 – nel rimirare quegli occhioni sora Amalia fonni fonni, cerchiati de du quarti de luna blu che je daveno riscontro ai du quarti de luna d'oro che ciaveva agli orecchi...**

TAM 146 – Gazing into those deep, big eyes of signora Amalia, circled by two crescent moons which were pendants to the two golden crescents she wore in her two ears...

**QP 144 – Al momento buono sapeva chiudere un occhio o aprirli tutt’e due, invece...**

TAM 212 – At the right moment, he knew to close his eyes, or open them on the other hand...

**QP 144 – Da quegli occhi fermi, neri pungenti...**

TAM 214 – Black, piercing eyes...

**QP 150 – Diversi da come ce l’avamo tutte. Come fussi una strega, una zingara. Due stelle nere de l’inferno... pareva ch’er diavolo se fussi vestito da donna. Quell’occhi te metteveno paura. Ciaveveno come un’idea, dento, de volesse vendicà...**

TAM 223 – Different... like a witch or a gypsy. Two black stars right out of hell. Looked like a devil disguised as a woman... Those eyes were scary. It was like they had an idea in them of getting revenge on somebody...

**QP 153 – «Er cognome suo...»: la Ines abbassò gli occhi: arrossì a prender tempo: a fabbricare la settantatreesima bugia...**

TAM 227 – «His last name?»: Ines lowered her eyes. She blushed to gain time to fabricate her seventy third lie...

**QP 155 – ... du occhi fermi, strafottenti: che promettevano il meglio...**

TAM 230 – ... two steady, mocking eyes which promised the best...

**QP 188 – ... due archi orbitali lo sfavillare puntato delle iridi, nere, o quasi: paura vera o sospetto, reticenza, derisione, insidia...**

TAM 277 – ... two orbital arches, the pointed flashing of the irises, black, or almost: authentic fear, suspicion, sentience, derision, deception...

**QP 200 – ... con lo sguardo presago e seducente di colei che indovina al solo atto i moventi e le intenzioni dell’attore, con occhi lucidi e intenti...**

TAM 294 – ... gaze of one who guesses from a single movement the motives and intentions of the mover with intent and glistening eyes...

**QP 200 – La luce de’ suoi occhi mutò, si fe’ cattiva, maleaugurante e pressoché sinistra a momenti...**

TAM 295 – The light in her eyes changed, became evil, malevolent and almost sinister, at times...

**QP 202 – Le palpebre le si richiusero un istante come a presagita voluttà: presagita per dovere, per obbligo professionale. Gli occhietti significarono, con lo sfavillio d'un attimo, il consueto benessere: a chi? A che cosa? Il malanimo intanto, sulla di lei fronte, aveva lucidato a cera i due bernocchi, due fortilizi tuttavia tenuti dal demonio...**

TAM 297 – Her eyelids closed a moment, as if in foretasted voluptuousness: Foretasted out of duty... out of professional obligation. Her little eyes signified... with a moment's flashing... polished the two bumps... two strongholds still held by the devil...

**QP 228 – Gli occhi... La rabbia le andava conferendo uno sguardo, le prestava una faccia...**

TAM 335 – Her eyes... rage giving her a gaze... lending her a face...

**QP 258 – Un viso, un par d'occhi... lampi neri!**

TAM 380 – A face... a pair of eyes!... black gleams!

**QP 260 – La scrutò nel volto, con l'occhio fermo e crudele di colui che vuole smascherare l'inganno...**

TAM 381 – He examined her face, with the steady, cruel eye of one who wants to unmask deceit...

**QP 260 – L'ira le sbiancò l'occhio, il volto quasi ad un oltraggio imprevisto...**

TAM 382 – Wrath whitened her eyes... her face, as if at an unforeseen outrage...

**QP260 – Quei due occhi neri e furiosi... Ingravallo se li sentiva puntati sulla cuticagna: se ne sentiva trafiggere il collo...**

TAM 382 – Those two black and furious eyes... Ingravallo felt them aimed at his nape... felt them piercing his neck...

**QP 262-63 – Sguardo soccorrevole... gli occhi, gelatinosi e vetrosi nel color bigio ... La quieta spenta della sua guardata... Occhieggiamento italiano...**

TAM 385 – Greedy gaze... eyes, gelatinous and glassy in their tan colour... the spent quiet of her gaze... Italian eyeing...

**QP 263 – Sguardo di lince...**

TAM 386 – Lynx eyes...

**QP 264 (final page) – Due occhi, fece, che la Tina impaurì, questa volta...**

TAM 387 – His eyes were such this time, Tina was frightened...

**QP – C.E. Gadda, *Quer pasticciaccio brutto de via Merulana* (Milan: Garzanti, 2006)**

TAM – C.E. Gadda, *That Awful Mess on the Via Merulana*, transl. by W. Weaver (New York: New York Review of Books, 2000)

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