



Though a constant feature of urban or suburban landscapes, the phenomenon of the policeman's smile never ceases to puzzle and even amaze. Over the centuries our most illustrious writers and thinkers have grappled with its mystery, inspiring quizzical ecstasies of which Thoreau, in a letter relating one of his rare trips into the city, provided perhaps the paradigmatic example: "The policeman smiled with a royal calmness, his instincts of conquest, of ferocity, the entire heredity of his species, the will of seduction and love of the snare, the charm of the deceiver, the kindness gloving a cruel purpose, all that appears and disappears alternately behind the laughing veil and melts into the crucible of his smile..." While this seems *prima facie* to go too far, the large number of common idioms is further evidence of the continuing popular fascination with police smiles. One need only cite a few: "like a smile on a cop," used to indicate the speaker finds a turn of events or nearby architectural feature particularly sinister; "close but no cop's smile," for an unconvincing performance of bullying whose intention is paradoxically to display the contempt in which the performer holds bullies; "hit the cop on the smile," to be dangerously right. There are nearly as many idioms as there are policemen - nearly as many, therefore, as there are smiles.

A degree of poetic mystification, acceptable for the production of artful prose, is abhorrent when it grafts a skin of mystery onto one facet of this most crucial social organ. The civilian wishing to know more has only to consult the relevant procedural manuals, which are easily procured.

An officer is issued his smile at the same time as his badge and his gun. Officers wishing to procure their own smiles may consult the appropriate office for a list of authorized vendors. This is generally discouraged, as the large-scale uniformity of smiles aids in officers' mutual recognition in the event of a confrontation situation. Like the revolver, each smile accumulates its own little quirks over a lifetime of use: this one has a tendency to jam at the punchline of a superior's joke, that one stretches unexpectedly to a grimace in the face of an infant. Good officers pride themselves on recognizing and remembering their smiles' slight malfunctions. The urban legend that an officer is required to keep the regulation smile in their desk drawer or in the precinct's property safe when not on active duty is utterly false. In fact, most departments recommend that an officer wear either their issued smile or an approved alternative expression at all times, unless the officer is likely to be in a situation where wearing that smile might be dangerous or have a high risk of theft. Approved alternative expressions selected for size or ease of concealment include, but are not limited to, the tight-lip, the under-mustache, the leer, and the smirk. Most officers do indeed wear smiles off duty, mitigating the risk of awkwardness or even danger when, anonymized in street clothes, a civilian might catch them off guard with a smile of their own.

An officer's smile has a multitude of uses: it can both escalate and deescalate, act as a lure or (if properly bleached) a secondary light source. The most expertly wielded smiles can also reactively induce a sense of overall well-being even in the face of senseless chaos and violence undertaken by their wearers. A kind of sympathetic magic makes the corners of the mouth of the world lift ever so slightly. Turn that frown upside down, the policeman's smile says.

A smile is always dangerous when not properly handled by licensed authorities. Of course, it is not only the police who have access to smiles, or other multi-use facial expressions that need to be deployed and maintained with care, and unlicensed civilian smiles are a major problem. Many departments, particularly in urban areas, have instituted smile buyback programs, including amnesty days when the public is invited to surrender their smiles without penalty, toward an eventual, hoped-for state monopoly on smiles.

The public facts about a policeman's smile are as inarguable as the public fact of the smile itself. Others, however, unsatisfied with the transparent self-sufficiency of the smile and its uses, apply more esoteric hermeneutics. Some suggest that the use of smiles is an unconscious analog to mimicry or travesty in the animal or insect world, providing a means of assimilating into an environment, or, like the mask of the lantern fly, held out to terrify enemies quite independently of any exercise of the officer's will. Some psychologize the smile, seeing its deployment as a kind of less-lethal sublimation when an officer is not engaged directly in their primary labor. Still others, positing that police officers are in a sense the institutional means for producing mass psychasthenia, argue that the smile is a tool for depersonalizing both officer and target, allowing the state to surround and digest them in a kind of phagocytosis. The most mystical deny any possible knowledge beyond the smile's bare visual impression. These last maintain that a policeman's smile must be totally different from our own expressions of joy or awkwardness or sympathy, that their smiles are mere false cognates or unintentional evolutionary convergences, ciphers for some transcendental affect in fact known only to policemen, and whose purest expression is the expressionless exercise of their function. Our interpretation of their smiles is as illusory as seeing the Man in the Moon, whose smile we intuitively understand even though we see it isn't there; as delusional as calling the swaying of the mantis among tall grass *praying*, when its purpose is purely predatory.

We now know that all such speculation couldn't be further from the simple, accessible truth. Not that such debates of scholastic complexity are devoid of beauty or interest. They are tales fit for children, as ornately fallacious as the long-discredited, legendary account of Zhuang Zhou, the philosophical policeman from the era of the Warring States who could not decide whether it was he, the policeman, who smiled, or whether his smile smiled him, and who, as we all surely remember, falls ever and again asleep frowning perplexedly, only to dream up the smiles that spasmodically possess him, when he wakes.