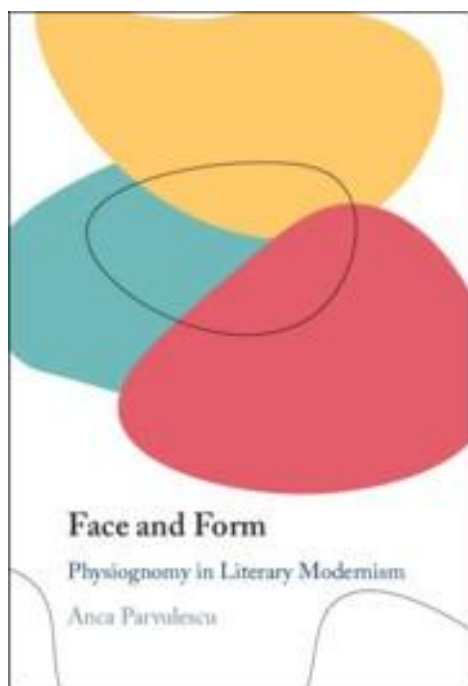


BOOKS

Anca Pârvolescu. *Face and Form. Physiognomy in Literary Modernism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2025, 196 p.



Anca Pârvolescu's latest study takes on an ambitious stake: unveiling a "history of the present" through the lenses of what she calls the "modern faciality machine" (17) – the apparatus of subject production described by Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*. The current obsession with technologies of the face (illustrated by the ubiquity of cosmetic adjustments, celebrity culture, "Instagram" faces or their equally commodified variants, facial recognition devices, or by the intensity of the debate over mask wearing by responsible citizens during the Covid pandemic, etc.) is invoked as the justification for a foray into the modernist effervescent, albeit ambivalent, reconfiguration of earlier regimes of faciality, itself drawing on the age-old identification of faces with texts to be deciphered. The book's anchorage in our collective enchantment with human faces sounds familiar but opportune alarm bells for analysts of modernity's appetite for

hyperconsumerist homogenization, mass surveillance and disinformation. Its substantive success, however, is ensured by the historicization of literary modernism's efforts to both abolish mimetic modes and counteract the drive towards anonymization through minimalist tactics of physical representation that culminate in avant-gardist efforts of self-effacement, even if they remain unable to extricate themselves from the discursive assemblages of race, ethnicity, gender, or class.

Pârvulescu situates her research within the paradigm of New Modernist Studies, replicating its extension of modernism's thematic and formal purvey, as well as its temporal and geographical reach. She traces the coagulation of the literary trope of the face, turned into a set of subjectivation strategies, and its traveling across cultures, continents (European, transatlantic, Japanese) and historical periods overlapping the span of modernity and the imperial project. The ideological lynchpin in the metamorphosis of this rich and ambiguous figure is provided by its fluctuating relationship with the lingering tradition of physiognomy. Physiognomy had found its most famous expression in the work of the eighteenth-century Swiss scholar Johann Caspar Lavater, and had made its way into the popular imaginary during the Victorian era. As Pârvulescu points out, Lavater purported to have founded no less than a "science of sciences" [that] claimed to offer a visual semiotics of the natural world," (2) decoding a correspondence between appearance and the inner significance of things. The modernist regime of faciality is approached via the artists' ambivalent positioning towards debunked physiognomic theories, simultaneously reinforcing and contesting their premises. Intellectual and aesthetic attitudes and practices of "facialization" are analyzed in the light of two very different essays produced during the age of canonical modernism – Georg Simmel's "The Aesthetic Significance of the Face" (1901) and Mina Loy's "Auto-Facial-Construction" (1919). Simmel's influential sociological appraisal tackled the human face as a privileged terrain of urban interaction and recognition via aesthetic categories such as unity or symmetry, with their respective deviations. In contrast, Loy's text elevates it as a site for creative and defiant self-fashioning through playful intermedial manipulation of social norms and aesthetic standards. As Pârvulescu concludes, Loy's ironic problematization of the sources of identity mobilized in the gesture of "auto-facial-construction" points towards both the persistence and the limitations of agency in modernity.

The book's chapters provide a series of resourceful, erudite and carefully woven close readings, mapping the itinerary of facial tropes across global modes of identity interpellation. The first section brings to the fore the shift in the "politics of the face" (23) staged by the writing of Thomas Mann between the publication of *Death in Venice* (1912) and that of the 1939 essay "Brother Hitler," which registers an anxious awareness of the dangers of physiognomic categorization. The discussion of Mann's novella, so central to the traveling modernist canon, exposes the mechanisms of domesticating exotic or unruly faces by casting them as ethnically or sexually aberrant, or by ekphrastic absorption within Western norms of beauty, as illustrated by Aschenbach's aestheticizing gaze. However, modernism's combative energies are salvaged by the analysis of Aschenbach's eventual "dandification" (39), which destabilizes predominant subject-object hierarchies through cosmetic practices of partial "auto-facial-construction." The next section, dedicated to the affordances of facial semiotics for Proust's investigation of memory, continues to zoom in on the modernist project of agential recuperation in the figure of Odette, who escapes Swann's physiognomically-inspired attempts at objectification by undergoing a process of material "refacialization" (62) that rallies the poses of others (including technological others, in the guise of photographic snapshots) in the service of aesthetic and social self-fashioning.

Perhaps the most interesting part, chapter 3 reinterprets Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* as an ironic deconstruction of the reciprocal summoning of texts and faces, investing its sequence of "scenes in the history of the face" (72) with far-reaching implications for "the temporal arc of the modern" (82). The successive encounters between Orlando and Elizabeth I, the Archduchess Harriet Griselda of Finster-Aarhon and Scand-op-Boom, Nicholas Greene, the Roma travelers she joins after her transition to femininity, random faces in London crowds, as we draw nearer to the twentieth-century, and her husband Marmaduke Bonthrop Shelmerdine, are subsumed into the novel's (mostly subversive) interventions in imperial, gender, racial and social structures, reinforced by the acts of auto-facial-construction identifiable in the reproduction and manipulation of the famous Vita Sackville-West photographs. The chapter's coda explores *Orlando's* continuous relevance for the present by focusing on the dialogue between Woolf's satirical critique of the imperial tradition of pictorial and literary portraiture and the work of photographer Paul Mpagi Sepuya, occasioned by an exhibition dedicated to the novel by the Aperture Foundation in 2019 (77-82). According to Pârvolescu, Sepuya's engagement with the latter's opening scene, which has young Orlando playing with the skull of a Moor brought home as a trophy by one of his ancestors complicates Woolf's thematization of racial violence by supplementing the absence of the other's face through snapshots of Western representations of Arab figures, themselves multiply mediated and submitted to a critical viewer's gaze.

The book's next section pursues the intermedial entanglements staged by the exchange of gazes among subjects and objects of representation in Gertrude Stein's attempt to oppose the modern reification of faces and individuals through polemical reversals of portraiture conventions and radical tactics of self-effacement. Her expert curation of her position as a modernist author, including the mythologization of her Picasso portrait, the staging of her Man Ray photograph or her genre-crossing "(auto)biographical" narratives are shown to aim at achieving "mastery through the control of face" (96). Nevertheless, Pârvolescu's close scrutiny of modernism's imbrications with capitalism and historical modernity unveils the inescapability of the face, as Stein's experiments with defacement and even effacement are inevitably haunted by her authorial presence. Still, Stein's "exercises in facialization" (92) fomented creative responses to the convention of facial legibility, as witnessed by their impact on Nella Larsen's *Passing* and its performative auto-facial-constructions. Finally, chapter 5 deals with the circulation of culturally translated physiognomic tropes into transcontinental and postwar territories, turning to an interpretation of Kōbō Abe's novel, *The Face of Another* and its interrogation of the global technologization and commodification of the face.

What makes it difficult to summarize the value of Anca Pârvolescu's study is its generous address to the interests of multiple audiences. As a contribution to the growing archive of New Modernist Studies, it provides a fresh and complex take on a host of topics: intermediality, the intersections of race, gender and colonialism in the construction of the subject, the enduring legacy of modernism in our troubled present, its ability to furnish us with instruments and strategies for resistance, as well as to direct our awareness to the persistence of ossified conventions of representation.

Although Pârvulescu does not neglect the ethically paramount modernist attention to the intractability of other people's lives, best illustrated by Woolf's meditations in "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" and "An Unwritten Novel," she intentionally focuses on "modernism's temptation to think otherwise" (126) – that is, to succumb to the lure of knowability. However, by constantly reminding us that the face is always "the face of an other, a stranger" (119), the book continues to perform modernism's ethical work.

Petronia POPA-PETRAR

Babes-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania
E-mail: petronia.petrar@ubbcluj.ro