

The Modernist Face in/as World Literature

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Abstract

When Ezra Pound envisioned a “one image poem,” the quintessential image he set out to frame was that of a face. He wrote the poem anchored in this image, “In a Station of the Metro,” as a haiku. At the heart of one of the defining moments of literary modernism one thus finds, on the one hand, a renewed effort to wrestle with the representation of a face and, on the other hand, an attempt to do so on a global arc. Starting from a reading of Pound’s poem, the Introduction to this Special Issue argues for the need to assess the role the face at the intersection of world literature and global modernism.

Keywords

Ezra Pound – “In a Station of the Metro” – global modernism – *japonisme*

In a Station of the Metro

The apparition of these faces in the crowd:
Petals on a wet, black bough.

A poem often considered to have changed the history of poetry, Ezra Pound’s “In a Station of the Metro” (1913) frames an *image*: a face. Or, rather, multiple

faces. These faces are experienced as they appear and disappear, ghostly, in quick succession, in the poem's titular modern space, a station of the metro. As the reader arrives at the second and final line of the poem, which becomes recognizable as an imperfect haiku, the poem's faces are transfigured into what seems to be an artwork featuring a constellation of petals on a black bough. The conclusion of the poem calls for a new mode of perception, as the reader is challenged to simultaneously register these two planes of experience. The quintessential object of perception that facilitates this shift is the face.

Pound's imagistic faces are, to be sure, the foci of a quintessentially Euro-American context, tied, on the one hand, to a distinct tension between the hustle and ennui of the modern metro, and, on the other hand, to the fascination with Japanese and other East Asian forms. But the story of the modern face is not exclusively framed by the usual suspects of the modern European project. From Shanghai and Johannesburg to Istanbul and Melbourne, the stage upon which modern faces took shape asks for a reckoning with many of the blind spots of a global modernism represented by figures like Pound. Consider, for instance, the enduring and galvanising role of physiognomy in shaping various forms of knowledge around the world (Swain, Kim, Wang). The history of modern Japanese literature was itself profoundly shaped by the travels of physiognomic description (Bamba). In turn, modern conceptions of race have been imbricated with tacit assumptions about the form of the face. Attuned to such insights across a range of literatures and cultural geographies, the essays in this Special Issue frame the face neither as one modernist motif among others nor as a theme fixed in place; rather, they position the face at the centre of an expansive global modernist project.

A US-born poet, Pound wrote the haiku-inspired "In a Station of the Metro" in Paris, where he had moved from London. In 1914, Pound recalled a 1911 experience that led to the writing of the poem:

Three years ago in Paris I got out of a 'metro' train at La Concorde, and saw suddenly a beautiful face, and then another and another, and then a beautiful child's face, and then another beautiful woman, and I tried all that day to find words for what this had meant to me, and I could not find any words that seemed to me worthy, or as lovely as that sudden emotion ... there came an equation ... not in speech, but in little splotches of colour ... The 'one image poem' is a form of super-position, that is to say, it is one idea set on top of another. I found it useful in getting out of the impasse in which I had been left by my metro emotion ... In a poem of this sort one is trying to record the precise instant when a thing outward

and objective transforms itself, or darts into a thing inward and subjective.

POUND *Gaudier-Brzeska* 86–89

Pound's evocative articulation of this memory explicates several layers of meaning embedded in "In a Station of the Metro." The experience consists of a series of small sudden shocks. One beautiful face blurs into another, then another and another. The rapid succession in which the perception of faces occurs is crucial to the poet's recollection. The experience – fleeting yet vivid – is concomitantly a modern subjective experience of time. To capture the leap in imaginative faculty prompted by it, Pound coined a new affective term: "metro emotion." In a methodological paradox, the poet tries and fails to translate the new emotion into words that might do justice to its intensity. A conceit as old as poetry, this linguistic "impasse" acquires specific modernist meanings as Pound invokes an "equation" that imposes itself in the realm of the visual – faces appear "not in speech," but in "little splotches of color." Likening himself to a painter moving away from "portraits of fine ladies" (the portrait being the genre that historically framed the face), Pound sets out to invent the equivalent of "a new school of painting that would speak only by arrangements in colour."¹ Of course, while Pound finds a "pattern" by analogy with painting, we are encountering words on a page. The visual is invoked in service of a breakthrough in the language-based arts.

Apparition is an unusual noun for the opening of the poem. It has been suggested that Pound is using a French word – an echo of the poem's production in Paris (Bevilaqua). The word carries traces of translation, barely noticeable within the condensed imagistic language of the surrounding words. Its semantic field includes, on the one hand, ghosts, the invisible, memory, the transcendental; and, on the other, vision, movement, technology, and perception. Incorporeal and otherworldly, *apparition* is used by Pound to capture the rapid succession of what we take – in the first line of the poem – to be real, corporeal faces. The poem stages the figurative juncture where modern life is heightened and abstracted at the same time. This ambivalent experience is specifically located in Paris, as the hint of translation from French reminds us; at the same time, it is everywhere and nowhere in the modern world.

1 In turn, the formulation echoes James McNeill Whistler's call for the painter to be more than a photographer: "in portrait painting to put on canvas something more than the face the model wears for that one day ... in arrangement of colors to treat a flower as his key, not as his model" (Berryman 165).

The poem, of course, does not begin with the word *apparition*. It begins with its title: “In a Station of the Metro.” Is this title a paratext – located outside the poem? Or is Pound using it as the first line of the haiku – very much inside the poem? The purposeful ambiguity is amplified by the use of the preposition “in.” The poem is not titled “A Station of the Metro,” which would announce a locale, a setting, introducing a poem *about* a metro station. Instead, the preposition indicates a direction, setting the poem in motion towards the metro station and, inevitably, the faces one encounters there. The affect permeating the poem, the “metro emotion,” is thus paradigmatically inter-subjective, occurring in the space *between* the faces in the metro.²

In search of a poetic form that might provide the lyric condensation and mathematical precision he is searching for, Pound adapts – translates – the Japanese form of the haiku. An “equation” of sorts (5-7-5), the haiku invites the superimposition of two images, traditionally images with a seasonal reference. In Pound’s poem, these images exist on different planes; one is “outward and objective”; the other, presumably “inward and subjective.” The threshold between the two planes materialises as a colon – a minimalist difference only visible on the page. The colon acquires the implicit force of a verb, in a poem famous for having no verbs (Ellis). Importantly, the first version of “In a Station of the Metro” did not include a colon. Then, when the poem was reprinted in *Lustra* (1916), the colon became a semicolon. Steve Ellis argues that the semicolon shifted the relation between the two lines of the poem, and the two images involved: “The relationship between them can be said to be not only more subtle but even more equivocal ... the semicolon assists the first line in overturning its subordinate position and becoming foregrounded itself” (201–7). If, as Pound presents it, the project of the poem rests in “trying to record the precise instant when a thing outward and objective transforms itself, or darts into a thing inward and subjective,” the face, long considered an index to interiority, seems to offer *the* platform for such “darting.” The modernist face, however, only promises – teases – to lead to interiority. The poem ends without a revelation of what lies behind the series of faces in the metro. Following what Alix Beeston, in the Postscript to this Special Issue, calls “the deflationary logic” of reading the modernist face, the “metro emotion” does not translate into facial depth.

The sense of spatial direction in Pound’s poem comes into sharper focus in light of his comments on the poem’s relationship to modern technology. In his explication, Pound places the word *metro* in quotation marks. The “metro emo-

2 On emotion and inter-subjectivity, see Ahmed.

tion” is surprising because “the metro” is still – in 1911–1912 – a novel means of transportation. With the Paris metro having opened in 1900 and a new line added in 1910, the crowd at the metro would have still felt novel in 1911. Like its cousin, the train, the metro produced new modes of perception and inter-subjectivity – within the city. Centrally, the perception of faces in such modern spaces changed. Reacting to this shift, Pound’s poem combines two key sites of modern facial perception: the experience of seeing faces in the crowd, usually in the street, and the experience of seeing faces in a metro station.

Of course, the crowd is a modernist leitmotif, across the political spectrum – from its revolutionary to its fascist instantiations. This spectrum is tacitly invoked by the poem’s location in the Parisian metro station at La Concorde. The historical site hosted the guillotine and the public displays of violence – attended by crowds – that accompanied the French Revolution. Subsequently, in an attempt at rebranding, La Concorde came to host the Luxor Obelisque, moved to Paris following Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt, where it was welcomed by a large crowd – a symbol of French colonialism and a testament to a long-standing European fascination (which Pound would come to share) with non-European systems of writing. In this corner of Paris, the image of the crowd in Pound’s poem is charged with multiple layers of both historical and modern meanings.

We should also recall the crowd as a leitmotif of mid and late nineteenth century painting, from where it travelled to literary spaces, becoming an enduring fascination of literary modernism.³ Likewise, Walter Benjamin’s flâneur is, centrally, a physiognomist, a reader of faces in the street. In turn, Benjamin was a reader of Edgar Allen Poe, especially his short story “A Man of the Crowd” (1840), featuring a narrator reading faces in a London crowd and being confounded by an opaque face that refuses to be read. Modernist writers like Virginia Woolf similarly framed a crisis in facial legibility. Importantly, Woolf staged the face both in the street and in a train and remained fascinated by “the game” of facial reading (Parvulescu). In combining two spaces and modes of perception – a crowd *in* a metro station, an underground street – Pound’s poem condenses in lyric form a quintessential modern experience and a central preoccupation of literary modernism.

This experience was theorised by sociologists of the time. Georg Simmel considered the modern world to be primarily visual and the human face a primary visual object. He imagined the face as the site of a series of “recogni-

3 On faces in the crowd in the painting tradition, see Abate, Larner and Nasso.

tions." Simmel argued that the visual field has been reorganised in modernity on account of new modes of spatial encounter – modern subjects encounter themselves in the urban crowd and face each other on new means of transportation. For Simmel, writing his essay "The Aesthetic Significance of the Face" in 1900, the year the Paris Metro opened for the World Exhibit (the Berlin metro was in construction and would open in 1902), the eye in modernity becomes "the interpreter of mere appearance, which knows no going back to any pure intellectuality behind appearance" (281). This "mere appearance" was produced, among other things, by new means of transportation, like the metro and the train. Starting in the 1930s, Walker Evans, who framed some of the most familiar faces of the modernist period, would design an adjacent, quasi-sociological project of secretly photographing faces on the New York subway. Simmel's "appearance," then, can be said to function as a sociological counterpoint to Pound's "apparition."

Importantly, for Simmel, the face as such – before it appears in a painting or a poem – has an aesthetic dimension. The face in everyday life is an aesthetic form. Let us note that the word *beautiful* appears three times in Pound's description of the experience in the Paris metro: "a beautiful face, and then another and another, and then a beautiful child's face, and then another beautiful woman." The shock Pound describes and its accompanying emotion are symptoms of an aesthetic experience. The faces in "In a Station of the Metro" are thus twice aestheticized – in the first line, as Pound recalls their appearance in their everyday beauty; and in the second, as they are transposed into another aesthetic realm. The face acquires a meta dimension, its doubling functioning as a commentary on aesthetic experience, in this case within literary language. And yet the face retains its materiality; much as readers might experience faces as "apparitions," they carry a fleshy face themselves. Pound's poem exploits this double nature of the face – everyday object of perception and aesthetic form.

If the face is a form, Simmel argues, we need to develop a formalism for its analysis (Parvulescu). Simmel borrowed such formalism from painting. Pound, in turn, likens himself to a painter. Both images in the poem are visual – faces in the metro; petals on a bough. Both have an aesthetic dimension. But the second image is visual in a different sense – it "darts" into another artistic medium, a visual artwork. Pound announces and frames here a central dimension of modernist literature: its intermediality.⁴ This intermediality is multi-directional: Painting offered an archive of faces as counterpoints to literary

4 On the intermediality of Pound's work, see Preda.

faces. Pound's use of the term "super-position" is borrowed from graphic art. Modernist photography was similarly interested in merging two images; and early photographs often gave the impression that they captured *apparitions*.⁵ In turn, early cinema, as theorized especially by Béla Balázs, developed as an artform through its finetuning of the closeup. The essays in this Special Issue shed new light on modernist intermediality, as revealed by the specific intermediality needed to frame the modernist face.

Although it is rarely the focus of discussions of "In a Station of the Metro," Pound's choice of the face as a pivot for his poetic experimentation is thus hardly surprising.⁶ The human face presents a challenge to modern forms of perception and inter-subjectivity. It works as a platform on which questions of formal innovation and intermediality are posed and contested. Faces have a complicated yet generative relation to human vision, memory and cognition. They prompt reflections on the act of interpretation and reading. They are often thought to summon a "world," as in the line from James Baldwin cited in Maria Siciliano's essay in this Special Issue: "his face was bigger than the world ... all that had ever happened since time began was in his face." For Pound, the face is an image and a moment, a scene and a feeling. But it is also, as the modernist texts examined in this Special Issue powerfully demonstrate, an incitement towards a particular kind of literary expression.

1 Global Modernist Studies and World Literature

The move from the first to the second line of "In a Station of the Metro" dramatizes a leap not only into a different aesthetic register, but concomitantly into global modernism. Pound's second line overlays the perception of a face with the temporary beauty of a petal, a recurrent theme in travelling haikus (Houwen *Ezra Pound* iii). In turn, petals are often associated with femininity, a motif in Japanese prints. In the first version of the poem, Pound used visual spacing between the words of the two lines of the poem:

The apparition of these faces in the crowd
Petals on a wet, black bough.

⁵ The relation between modernism and photography has been analyzed by Beeston and Grøtta.

⁶ Hugh Kenner narrates the transition from post-Symbolism to Imagism as a movement from the uses of the face in Arthur Symons's poem "Pastel" to Pound's "In a Station of the Metro" (184).

The space after the word “petals” invites a pause, a long breath. In this interval, one soaks in the fragility of faces/petals – before one encounters the background against which they are set, a “wet, black bough.” One is reminded that the metro station is underground, one descends into darkness (Kenner 184). The blackness of the bough sets the implied whiteness of faces/petals in stark relief. But this pause also invites reflection on another kind of leap: from European to Japanese forms. Across this arc, the invocation of blackness in the poem can be understood as an ekphrastic translation of a Japanese print; the prints of Suzuki Harunobu, in particular, placed their figures against a background of black ink (Arrowsmith *Museum* 126). In turn, the intense whiteness of faces/petals concomitantly invokes the widespread use of powder in Japan, which hybridized local and global racial taxonomies.⁷

The anecdote pertaining to the poem’s production in Paris is exemplary of the complex politics of the juncture where transatlantic modernism meets a more global modernism.⁸ Gertrude Stein, Claude McKay, Ernest Hemingway, HD, Djuna Barnes – American modernists converged in Paris, confirming its status at the time as the capital of an increasingly global “world republic of letters” (Casanova). In Paris, they encountered a fascination with East/West comparison, a form of Orientalism that often worked in an anti-Orientalist spirit – Jahan Ramazani’s description of the politics of “In a Station of the Metro” (114). James McNeill Whistler was a key figure in *japonisme*, his work circulating between East and West and becoming an inspiration, including for Japanese artists (Ono). Pound saw a Whistler exhibit at the Tate in 1912, an occasion on which he declared his desire to carry into poetry the kind of experimentation Whistler had brought to painting (Berryman 170). Pound was likewise familiar with London-based *japonisme* via his acquaintance with Laurence Binyon (Kishbaugh). He saw the prints collected and curated by Binyon in the British Museum in 1909 and again in 1912 (Arrowsmith *Museum* 116). Rupert Arrowsmith notes that the word “apparition” appears in Binyon’s catalogue (*Museum* 127). Pound’s work, and “In a Station of the Metro” in particular, can thus be said to be metonymically announcing one arc of global modernism, which witnessed many other heterogeneous, multidirectional, asymmetric exchanges.⁹

Modernism was a “traveling culture,” in the sense James Clifford gives to the phrase. Clifford starts from the observation that many avant-garde and mod-

7 For the historical connotations of white powder, see Copeland.

8 Pound’s transnational biography includes his stay in Italy and his embrace of fascism.

9 This multidirectionality includes the translation of Pound’s work in Japan and its dialogue with post-WWII Japanese-language poetry (Houwen “A Treasure” 141). It likewise includes the dialogue many contemporary poets establish with the work of Pound (Ramazani 101).

ernist artists lived in hotels in Paris: “I’d been struck by how many of the Surrealists lived in hotels, or hotel-like transient digs, and were moving in and out of Paris. And I was beginning to see that the movement was not necessarily *centered* in Paris, or even in Europe ... I began to imagine rewriting Paris of the twentieth and thirties as travel encounters – including New World detours though the Old – a place of departures, arrivals, transits” (104). Clifford de-centers the cosmopolitan travel of European and American expatriates in the definition of “traveling culture,” to foreground the movement of heterogeneous subjects and objects: “travel, or displacement, can involve forces that pass powerfully *through* – television, radio, tourists, commodities, armies ... cultures as sites traversed – by tourists, by oil pipelines, by Western commodities, by radio and television signals” (103). Modernism, then, is a traveling culture not primarily on account of artists like Pound converging on Paris, but on account of the forces that pass through most cultures of the world during this period. Wars criss-cross the world; modernism unfolded during the years leading to and between two world wars. Commodities traverse the world – as a function of an increasingly global capitalist market, which undergirds an integrated modern world-system. These commodities produce globalized figures like the Modern Girl around the World – recognizable across cultures.¹⁰ Unequal means of transportation striate the world – trains, ships, cars; many travel on foot. Photography and cinema move around the globe. In terms proposed by the Warwick Research Collective, global modernism, thus understood, is a niche of *world-literature*, the literature registering the *modernity* of the world-system.

At the same time, Clifford foregrounds the historical taintedness of the word “travel,” its association with artists like Pound: “I struggle, never quite successfully, to free the related term ‘travel’ from a history of European, literary, male, bourgeois, scientific, heroic, recreational, meanings and practices ... I hang onto travel as a term of cultural comparison, precisely because of its historical taintedness, its association with gendered, racial bodies, class privilege, specific means of conveyance, beaten paths, agents, frontiers, documents, and the like” (110). Such taintedness refers to Pound’s politics and his embrace of fascism. It also refers to the limitations of metropolitan/cosmopolitan/exilic modernism. Caren Kaplan has foregrounded, already in the mid-1990s, what for quite some time was the narrow geographical reach of modernism and the modernist studies attending it: “The internationalism of modernism does not extend below the Mediterranean, far into Asia, or south of the US border. Lagos, Buenos Aires, Delhi, and Tokyo are not yet members of this ‘imperium of civilization’” (29).

10 The figure of the modern girl has been traced by Weinbaum et al.

Since then, Laura Doyle and Laura Winkiel have further foregrounded the geopolitical dimensions of modernism, arguing that this metropolitan modernism mapped itself onto the history of colonialism and its racial system.¹¹ It also mapped itself onto a globalized “country and the city” dynamic, as theorized by Raymond Williams: metropolitan centers like Paris – and later London and New York – doubled as centers of cultures while former colonies registered as rural and provincial.¹² Subsequently, projects like Alys Moody and Stephen J. Ross’s *Global Modernists on Modernism: An Anthology* have done important work to correct early accounts of the internationalism of modernism, which nonetheless continues to haunt this conversation.¹³

Pound’s relation to the haiku acquires renewed – and ever more complex – legibility when framed at the juncture where transatlantic modernism intersects a broader global modernism. As Andrew Houwen emphasises, Pound thought the significance of his poem might only be understood in Japan, which he imagined as resisting modernizing forces (*Ezra Pound* v). Meiji Japan was a modern and modernizing literary landscape. Arrowsmith describes an influx of cultural forms circulating within Japan synchronously with European modernism (“Transcultural”). The circulation and embrace of these forms led to a vivid debate about modernity and the risks of Occidentalism. In this context, “traditional” forms, like the haiku, were rejuvenated in an attempt to offer a counterpoint to imported forms.¹⁴ Moody and Ross posit one of the features of global modernism: “The revitalization of tradition is as important for modernism as the break with the past and the demand for absolute novelty” (12). The revitalization of the haiku in Japan was a modern phenomenon – synchronous with Pound’s adaptation of the haiku as a mode of experimentation in English-language poetry.

Importantly, in 1911–1912, the years in which he revised “In a Station of the Metro,” Pound was engaged in a conversation on world literature. Rabindranath Tagore visited England in 1912, occasion on which he met Pound. Tagore

11 On global modernism, see also Hayot and Walkowitz; and Wollaeger.

12 On the “country and the city,” see Williams; and Skurski and Coronil.

13 Josephine Park argues that the transnational turn in modernist studies – and its attendant debates – have amounted to an attempt to overcome the politics of modernist internationalism, which nonetheless continue to cyclically return. Park invokes “the promiscuity of a planetary consciousness: such large-scale efforts may be hitched to repressive or emancipatory political ambitions” (185). For a parallel account of the politics of the transnational turn in debates about world literature, see Cheah.

14 Houwen argues that haikus were reinvented in Meiji Japan; the infrastructure of this reinvention was, among other things, Japanese intellectuals’ widespread interest in Herbert Spenser’s “unity of image” principle (*Ezra Pound* i).

received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1913, the year “In a Station of the Metro” was published. Significantly, Tagore had his own relation to Japan and the question of modernity. When Tagore visited Japan in 1916, he saw a non-Western model of modernity, aligned with his hope for a non-mimetic path to the modern: “those who have the true modern spirit need not modernize ... Modernism is not in the dress of the Europeans ... True modernism is freedom of mind, not slavery of taste” (246–7). Mimetic forms of modernization were, of course, at work in Japan as well, especially as they pertained to an increasing desire to adapt and enlist European colonial infrastructures in the service of a Japanese empire (Mizutani). What Tagore seems to have found in Japan, however, are signs of a critique of what we have come to refer to as the “diffusion” argument (first in Europe, then elsewhere).

Pound wrote a hyperbolic essay on Tagore, later qualifying and retracting his praise, comparing Tagore unfavourably to Japanese art.¹⁵ “In a Station of the Metro” could not be more different formally than Tagore’s poems. Likewise, Pound’s investment in Japanese art could not be more different. Similarly, his concept of literary circulation could not be more different.¹⁶ What this historical configuration reveals, however, is that in the years 1911–1913, Pound was, like Tagore, engaged in an exercise in theorizing “world literature.”¹⁷ His framing of the modernist face in “In a Station of the Metro” belongs to an effort to think “the world” starting from what he calls a “luminous detail” (Park 184); the face is such a luminous detail.¹⁸ Debates about global modernism thus meet ongoing debates about the promises and limitations of the concept of world literature, themselves with a modernist genealogy. Echoing the Warwick Research Collective’s concept of world-literature invoked above, Moody and Ross write: “Modernism has always been global, and this global disposition is inextricable from the radically unequal power relations that characterize modernity itself” (13).

Necessarily, global modernism extends the historical purview of modernism. While a backwards historical extension is possible (especially to the nineteenth century novel and its physiognomic investments), in this Special Issue, this extension occurs in a forward movement. Articles in this Special Issue operate

15 The essay can be found at <https://fortnightlyreview.co.uk/2013/04/rabindranath-tagore/>.

16 On Tagore’s concept, see his “Visva Sahitya.”

17 Park identifies Pound’s globalizing methodology in “I Gather the Limbs of Osiris,” published in 1911–1912.

18 Pound’s later engagement with the work of Ernest Fenollosa in conjunction with the Japanese tradition of Noh plays would amplify this awareness. On Pound’s “Japanese mediation of China,” see Bush.

on an arc between the early twentieth century and the various global extensions of modernism across the twentieth century and into the contemporary.¹⁹ One of the stakes of this Special Issue thus becomes to offer an account of “the contemporaneity of modernism,” as seen through the angle of the face.²⁰ To give only one example, Lynda Ng’s essay analyses Nella Larsen’s use of masking in *Passing* in juxtaposition to Tony Birch’s reframing of this modernist literary device in *The White Girl* (2019), against the historical background of the White Australia Policy. But all essays in the Special Issue are, in one way or another, *comparative* – plotting relations both across cultural geographies and across literary temporalities.

2 Face Studies

The study of the face has led to a vast, multidisciplinary scholarly conversation.²¹ Studies have often focused on the place of the face in the work of individual authors or single facial features or facial expressions, in articulating the face’s powerful aesthetic and semiotic force. In *Shakespeare and the Art of Physiognomy*, for instance, Sibylle Baumbach traces a poetics of the human face through various strategies of nonverbal communication. Framing the face as a zone in which impression and expression meet, Baumbach studies early modern physiognomic discourse to show how, in Shakespeare’s work, “faces are perceived as open books and cryptic documents” that can be “read, re-read, and misread” in relation to a range of “manipulative forces” (9). Graeme Tytler has, likewise, traced the emergence of the composite portrait as a mode of character construction in the modern European novel, demonstrating its anchoring in physiognomic culture. Working in the history of emotions, Stephanie Trigg’s formative work on the “emotion machine” of faciality in Jane Austen’s novels explains how “facial syntax is a familiar convention of novelistic discourse,” one that necessitates asking: “How do literary texts name and communicate emo-

19 The modernist face wanes during and immediately after WWII, when its instability and ambiguity is erased by eugenics (Schmölders).

20 On the contemporaneity of modernism, see D’Arcy and Nilges.

21 Despite a growing scholarship on the face and face reading around the world, often with reference to multiple physiognomic traditions, scholarship on faces remains indebted to a constellation of critical studies with a European genealogy: Emmanuel Levinas on the ethics of the face; Georg Simmel on the face’s aesthetic qualities; Walter Benjamin on photography’s impact on face perception; Erving Goffman on face as a system of honor; Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari on what they call “the faciality machine”; and Hans Belting on the relation between face and portraiture.

tions? How are emotions and affects shared in the social world of the novel, and the imaginative world in which the reader participates?" (186). In turn, Tina Post has shown how deadpan, a form of facial inexpression, can function as a mode of resistance to the expectations of dominant expressive culture.

While scholarship on the literary face is extensive – and coextensive with work on affect and expression – the face in modernism, specifically, has received more limited attention. Essays like Holger Pausch's "The Face of Modernity," Margaret Werth's "Modernity and the Face," and Maurizia Boscagli and Enda Duffy's "Joyce's Face" have offered glimpses into the kinds of questions we might ask of the modernist face. Working in a similar frame, Kamila Pawlikowska has examined "a-physiognomic" literary depictions of the face in novelists such as Edgar Allan Poe, Leo Tolstoy, Nicolay Gogol, and Virginia Woolf. Modernist studies has implicitly focused on the face in its investment in intermediality – painting, photography, cinema (Welchman; Grøtta; Steimatsky). Finally, two recent monographs – Rochelle Rives' *The New Physiognomy: Form, Face and Modern Expression* and Anca Parvulescu's *Face and Form: Physiognomy in Literary Modernism* – frame questions of form in relation to modernist faces. In doing so, they trace an arc of relation between the formalism of the face in modernism and facial recognition surveillance in contemporary digital culture.

There is, likewise, a heterogeneous scholarly tradition of thinking about the modernist literary face in a global context. The same kind of risks and warnings that attended Pound's exercise in East/West comparison attend this critical effort. William Empson's *The Face of the Buddha*, long lost and recently edited by Arrowsmith, witnesses an early attempt to connect aesthetic debates on facial form. Erving Goffman's appropriation of the concept of facework from Chinese discourses stems from an impulse to bridge the social meanings of the face (Frow). James T. Siegel's efforts to test the resonances of Simmel's theory of the face in Japan likewise belong to this framework. Paul Ekman's desire to prove the universality of facial expression, which led him to design experiments around the world, including in Japan, can be understood as participating in this long-standing fascination. The politics of these critical efforts straddle the Orientalist/anti-Orientalist figuration identified by Ramazani in Pound's "In a Station of the Metro" – and function as a warning horizon for methodologies in contemporary studies of global modernism.

In dialogue with this scholarship, we see two assumptions undergirding the global dimension of the modernism described in this Special Issue. One, a certain configuration of faciality travelled globally as a social form. This configuration is most visible in the emergence and global spread of cosmetic surgery, including in Japan, during the modernist period and in its aftermath.

Surgeons used textbooks that borrowed from European physiognomy and art, leading to hybrid models of facial beauty. In turn, the desire for cosmetic surgery was often mediated by an increasingly global popular culture (Siegel documents the global travels of a system of facial expression through sport). Second, and most central to this Special Issue, a *literary* discourse of faciality travelled around the world, including to Japan.²² According to Kōjin Karatani's *Origins of Modern Japanese Literature*, the emergence of modern Japanese literature in the Meiji period led to a semiotic inversion, which included the representation of interiority as face – in other words, to the facialization of subjectivity and challenges thereof. Karatani's argument is not, however, limited to Japan. In arguing that the global circulation of the novel form led to the travels of a certain concept of literary character, necessarily equipped with a face, Karatani is offering a forceful, non-European theory of global modernism.

It is in this second sense that we also understand the title of our Special Issue, "The Face in/as World Literature": We trace configurations of the face in global modernism as a niche of world literature, but we are also interested in a literary semiotics that travels as face. Thus, Rochelle Rives places a site of British modernism, which imagined itself as a form of "world art," in relation to Epsom's search for the face of the Buddha in Japan and across Asia. Stephanie Trigg's essay examines configurations of facial beauty in the first half of the twentieth century in Australia, which travel through the figure of "the modern girl" who deviates from patriarchal norms. Lynda Ng's essay traces challenges to the comparative production of race through discourses of the face vis-à-vis the experience of passing, on an arc between the Harlem Renaissance and indigenous cultures in late twentieth century Australia. In turn, Maria Siciliano's essay follows the sedimentation and resistance to a mode of physiognomy that travelled to US practices of policing, as well as comparative strategies of facial opacity.

Collectively, the essays in this Special Issue frame the modernist face as a surface without depth, a platform for projection and self-creation. As Beeston puts it in the Postscript, "The modernist face/text is thus framed as an object that refuses to grant the knowledge – narrative, ideological, or personal – it seems to proffer." The essays also frame the face as mobile, a traveling technology and thus one vehicle for the mobility of global modernism. The essays trace an exciting three-pronged arc across Europe, the Americas, and Australia,

22 Parvulescu develops this argument on the margins of a reading of Kōbō Abe's novel, *The Face of Another*, in conjunction with Kōjin Karatani's *Origins of Modern Japanese Literature* (Abe; Karatani).

thereby offering a unique set of readings that are not usually brought together. In so doing, the contributions offer a distinctive new angle on the global travels of modernism, as seen through a range of diverse physiognomic, semiotic, and rhetorical systems ascribed to the face. Across this literary landscape, the reader of the Special Issue will witness the modernist face being performed, deformed, veiled, rendered opaque – and *read* by a range of actors. In ethical terms, what emerges from the study of the modernist face in a global framework – alongside recent studies of contemporary culture by Tina Post and Namwali Serpell – is the emergence of a right to facial opacity.

3 Writing the Modernist Literary Face

The essays in this Special Issue extend existing important work on the face to new authors, new literary geographies, and new literary networks, framing it across a reconsidered and revived modernist literary landscape. From discussions of James Baldwin to Christina Stead, they take up questions of subjectivity, portraiture, self-expression, representation, and faciality against the backdrop of a more capacious appreciation of modernism as a period of transnational impulses. While engaging closely with their chosen texts at hand, the authors galvanize the growing field of faciality studies to reveal the complex – but ultimately not so surprising – centrality of the face to modernism's artistic, philosophical, technological, and social project. In doing so, they force a reconsideration of modernism and the face beyond what a reading of Pound's poem, in all its complexity, allows.

These essays are the outcome of a particular configuration of scholarly collaboration. Several contributions started as presentations at the American Comparative Literature Association (ACLA) meeting in Chicago in 2023. The conversation between a few contributors continued during a seminar titled "The Face as Scene," organized by Karin Peters and Bastian Piejko, during the 2023 Congress of Romance Studies in Leipzig, Germany. Two seminars at the Modernist Studies Association, "The Face in the Street" (Brooklyn, 2023) and "Portraits and Anti-portraits" (Chicago, 2024; organized by Rochelle Rives) focused explicitly on modernist faces. Finally, "Figurements: A Symposium on Literature and the Face" (Melbourne, 2024; organized by Stephanie Trigg, Tyne Daile Sumner, Joe Hughes and Guy Webster) offered a platform for the finetuning of the project, including this Introduction.

As Pound's poem suggests, modernist poetry was preoccupied with faces, but, at the juncture where global modernism meets world literature, the essays in this Special Issue confirm that the genre that most centrally took on this

challenge is not poetry, but the novel. The novel, of course, is also the most global literary genre. The novel's emergence in Japan, for example, is inextricably linked to translation; the Japanese novel is, from the beginning, engaged in global debates about the promise and limits of the form (Shimei). But if poetry is invested in questions of the face via prosopopoeia (giving face to poetic voice), the novel has its own investment in the face in the concept of character. Although other literary objects and landscapes are often facialized, it is, centrally, characters who need or acquire a face.

Rochelle Rives's essay, "Strange Faces: Wyndham Lewis and World-Art," places the portraits produced by Wyndham Lewis in a global framework through the lens of what Lewis called "world art" and in comparative relation to the work of Ezra Pound and William Empson. Rives revisits Lewis's work in portraiture as an investment in the politics of vision, with the face as an exemplary object of vision. Lewis was in search of a modernist form that could accommodate a face imagined as simultaneously unique and replicable. In his portraits, the face externalizes not a "personality," but an intensity or a mood. In turn, Lewis's self-portraits used the face as a prosthesis.

Stephanie Trigg's "The Face of the Australian Girl in Miles Franklin's *My Brilliant Career* (1901) and Christina Stead's *For Love Alone* (1930s)" takes us to the heart of early twentieth century Australia in two coming of age stories by women writers. The comparative reading of Miles Franklin's *My Brilliant Career* and Christina Stead's *For Love Alone* moves from a moment, exemplified by the first novel, when "the textual mediation of the face is barely brought into question" to one, in the second novel, where the "haunted scene of facial encounter deliberately distorts the image of the human face." Trigg argues that Franklin and Stead's novels are not just indicative of the flowering of early modernist Australian feminist fiction but are also deeply implicated in a wider global preoccupation with the aestheticization of female faciality as an index to the politics of marriage. Across a series of compelling close readings, the essay shows how the modernist novel's intersubjective modes help us understand the ways in which female facial beauty – and its foil, ugliness – is assessed and measured.

Lynda Ng's "Facecraft: Dispelling Racial Fictions and Seeking Ancestry in *Passing* and *The White Girl*" frames the history of the face within a genealogy that goes back to racialized Enlightenment taxonomies. The essay traces an arc of relation between Nella Larsen's novel *Passing* and Tony Birch's *The White Girl*. Across a century, these narratives of passing into whiteness are concerned with racial uplift – one in the early twentieth century US (defined by segregationist policies), the other in early twenty-first century Australia (inheritor to the White Australia Policy). The juxtaposition of these two texts reveals narratives

of passing to be reliant on the device of facial masking as access to whiteness. Here, the face is both a surface of racial projection and of the sedimentation of ancestry.

Maria Siciliano's essay, "Face Reading: Physiognomy in James Baldwin's *If Beale Street Could Talk*," re-reads James Baldwin's novel to show how the face operates at the intersection of evidence and ambiguity, knowing and inscrutability, familiarity and strangeness. Baldwin's novel stages a range of instances of facial reading, which function narratively to elicit and ultimately fail to provide evidence in the legal case at the heart of the plot. Siciliano identifies three inter-related categories of facial reading at work in the text: racialized, subversive, and reparative. In turn, Baldwin's trajectory between the US, France and Turkey – as well as visual representations of his face as author – offer an opportunity to consider the global travels of a discourse of faciality.

Alix Beeston's "Postscript: Nella Larsen's Faces" concludes the Special Issue. The essay builds on Beeston's *In and Out of Sight: Modernist Writing and the Photographic Unseen*, a study of the intersection of modernist literature and photography, to place Larsen's 1928 novel *Quicksand* in relation to her author photographs (made by James L. Allen and Carl Van Vechten). The essay argues that, although the novel's protagonist is constantly being scrutinized, the face refuses to grant knowledge. In Beeston's reading, the novel analogizes the painting of Helga Crane's face within the novel to the narrator's overdetermined description of the same face. The inscrutability performed by Helga's face travels to Larsen's own photographs; her face "only feigns to grant us access." At this end of the Special Issue, this postscript eloquently foregrounds "the face as a problem in both epistemological and narrative terms, that is, as a surface which collects and repels language, making and marking the poverty of description."

4 The Future Face: Hybridity, Artificiality, Data

Why look back at the face in global modernism today? Our current moment is increasingly defined by two factors that, together, underpin the cultural history of the face: the self-invention of "personality" and the visual. As recent years have witnessed a global investment in the collection, surveillance, and analysis of personal data towards commercial means, so too has digital media capitalised on the unprecedentedly seductive value of visual materials: targeted advertising, deep fakes, selfie culture, profile optimization, and so on. In the engine room of this revolution, the biometric data of the human face has emerged as one of the most lucrative capitalist value chains for both public and private corporations. No longer simply a conduit to identity verification,

the face is now a portal into complex emotion-tracking software, personal preferences, self-improvement in the form of face filters, cosmetic enhancement, photoshopping, and even age and genetic prediction algorithms. New digital technologies have thus intensified the long-standing insight that visual culture is, at its core, a culture of the face (Zilio).

The “hybrid face” that has emerged at the intersection of digital technology, mass culture, advancements in biological sciences, and the rise of Artificial Intelligence, has ushered in a new age in which the face appears detached from “its corporeal substratum” – transformed into “a pure simulacrum constructed by machines” (Leone). Attempts to monetize this emerging regime have proliferated in recent years, offering a glimpse into a future defined by the face as an index to lucrative marketable data (Hill). From controversial implementation of live facial recognition in aid of dynamic pricing²³ to the use of tracking technologies by authoritarian governments seeking to censor democratic protest,²⁴ datafied analysis of the human face is now a fully-fledged global industry comprised of increasingly diverse commercial interests. Yet, as Mark Andrejevic and Neil Selwyn remind us in the introduction to *Facial Recognition*: “There is always something suspect lurking in the promise of machine recognition: a pastiche of human interaction.” The grand illusion of facial recognition’s supposedly neutral digital infrastructure should thus be treated both with critical suspicion and in the context of the long history of physiognomic and cultural factors that we have outlined. Moreover, emerging assessments of facial recognition technology’s unmistakably biased, gendered, and often racist programatics necessitates a heightened (re)investment in the humanistic study of the face, and a scholarly return to the face across literary, philosophical and other fields.

In taking up this challenge, we seek to show how the multifaceted artificial face of the present has a clearly identifiable precursor in the modernist inter-medial face. This throughline is made conceptually evocative and humanly affective in the pages of literary texts, but such representations find their genesis in global events that have shaped and determined the way the face has come to be understood into the present. Recent developments in cosmetic surgery, for instance, function as reminders that the first cosmetic facial procedures were designed during the modernist period, especially in the aftermath

23 “S.T.O.P. Condemns Brooklyn Wegmans Facial Recognition Pilot.” <https://www.stopspying.org/latest-news/2024/10/24/stop-condemns-brooklyn-wegmans-facial-recognition-pilot>.

24 ‘In Hong Kong Protests, Faces Become Weapons.’ *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/26/technology/hong-kong-protests-facial-recognition-surveillance.html>.

of facial injuries and deformations suffered by soldiers in World War I (Lubin; Rives). In similar ways, concerns about the physiognomic dimensions of facial recognition technologies return us to modernist photographic, cinematic and literary experiments in physiognomic taxonomies. These developments themselves have well-established precursors, not least the extent to which computerized facial reading techniques can be seen as a “re-articulation of the *mechanizing impulse* that motivated the adoption of photography by the positivist sciences in the nineteenth century,” as Kelly Gates has examined (7). Indeed, the modernist moment offers an intensification for thinking about how a complex range of global developments descended upon the face – its cultural force, its scientific history, its technological influence, and its literary capacities.

To put this convergence another way, if Pound’s “In a Station of the Metro” reacts to the experience of encountering a multitude of anonymous faces in subways and trains of the early twentieth century, the poem’s preoccupation with the relation of the face to emergent technologies, despite all the limitations we have foregrounded, might have something to tell us about the eerie contemporary experience of the datafied, digitalized face – the face as, quite literally, our passport. The essays in this Special Issue demonstrate both that the face was already global in modernism and that the literary dramatization of this predicament could only unfold within a global arc. In doing so, the essays also speak in powerful anticipation of literary representations of the face in our current moment. Contemporary novelists, in particular, have been attentive to the ways in which the face is now embedded in a global digital network of commercial and government infrastructures, from facial recognition at border crossings and smartphone Face ID to the circulation of deepfakes and AI-generated profile photo modifications – and to artistic contestations of these developments (Schmuckli).

One such novel, Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Klara and the Sun* (2021), dramatizes the social and familial implications of live facial recognition; both from the perspective of human subjects and from the point of view of an artificial intelligence machine capable of deciphering human expression and gesture. As Tyne Daile Sumner explains, contemporary fiction provides a space in which “complex intersubjective exchanges narrated from the perspective of an intelligent machine” offer a new way of understanding “face reading” in the AI age (3). While set in a speculative future where machine intelligence has become fully integrated into everyday domestic life, *Klara and the Sun* evidently redeploys recognisably modernist themes and forms. The novel’s investment in tropes of visual abstraction and technology-induced ennui, for instance, echo prior literary modernist experiments that sought to grapple with the effects of photographic reproduction, mass industrialization, and avant-garde artis-

tic constructions. Moreover, as much as modernism ruptured the equivalence between the face and interiority, Ishiguro's novel stakes a claim in showing how facial recognition technology remains incapable of fully comprehending facial expression as an index to subjective consciousness. Although the novel's protagonist Klara is able to detect faces, she frequently mis-reads affect off the human face. An example of a contemporary "world author," Ishiguro frames the face within a metamodernist formal predicament that speaks to the concerns collectively taken up by the essays in this Special Issue.²⁵

While the material covered herein is by no means an exhaustive survey of the "global" in the modernist period, we hope it presents a meticulous starting point for a reconsideration of the literary face – its relation to industrialization, artistic innovation, racial and gender dynamics, mobility, and transcontinental scientific knowledge circulation. In conversation with a broad constellation of scholars who have written about the face across literary periods, we hope to galvanize a new theoretical conversation by using the face as a point of departure for revived readings of modernist texts. Laying fresh petals upon a well observed bough, our aim is to show how pressing humanistic and technological debates of the present have a great deal to glean from modernism's deeply paradoxical yet endlessly generative investment in the face. "One idea set on top of another," to use Pound's expression. A series of unmaskings; a literary critical about-face.

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25 On Ishiguro and world literature, see Wong and Yildiz.

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