CHAPTER 3

The Biography of a Face
Virginia Woolf's Orlando

Woolf staged the narrative structure of *Orlando* as a biography. The narrative "I" self-fashions as a biographer of Orlando, doing archival research and reflecting on historiographical dilemmas. Importantly, in her essays, Woolf repeatedly referred to the object of biography as a face. In the nineteenth century, the biographer's reticence to trace a subject's sexual history led, in Woolf's phrasing, "to the destruction of a great deal of dead matter still obscuring the true features of the human face."[1] Pointing to a shift whereby the modernist biographer could mention details that had been omitted in the past, Woolf noted, "At least he could hint that there were scars and furrows on the dead man's face."[2] In Woolf's contemporaneity, the biographer "must be prepared to admit contradictory versions of the same face."[3] This chapter argues that Woolf's formulations register a modernist shift in the history of the face. The chapter traces Woolf's emplotment of this shift, as dramatized in *Orlando* – from the early modern period to 1928. This change primarily concerns physiognomic assumptions governing the reading of faces.

Woolf's novel frames a key tenet of physiognomic discourse during one of Orlando's fictional encounters with Queen Elizabeth, when the latter "flashed her yellow hawk's eyes upon him as if she would pierce his soul. The young man withstood her gaze, blushing only a damask rose as became him. Strength, grace, romance, folly, poetry, youth – she read him like a page" (O 24–25).[4] The formulation makes use of a very consequential dash: Woolf satirizes the trope of the face-as-book, which we have also seen invoked by Proust in the previous chapter, while acknowledging its enduring force in literary history. In the history of literature that serves as a background for *Orlando*, the face is a text, meant for reading.[5] The inversion of this statement holds as well: reading demands a face. "Even a sentence (to say nothing of the single word) puts on a face," writes Walter Benjamin in *The Arcades Project*, reflecting on the nineteenth-century installment in this history.[6] The face registers as a book and the act of reading projects a face.

Orlando might turn out to be a "joke," as Woolf famously called it, with profound theoretical implications.[7]

As I mentioned in the Introduction, scholarship on physiognomy and the literary history of the face largely focuses on the nineteenth century and the eloquent overlap between physiognomy and the conventions of the realist novel. What happens to the highly influential and deeply problematic physiognomic discourse in the early twentieth century? Does physiognomy disappear from the profiles of modernist literary characters? From the reading of urban landscape, more broadly? In what relation is Woolf to this discourse? The modernist novel, more broadly? In "Character in Fiction," Woolf invokes a Mrs. Brown whose "solidity disappears; her features crumble."[8] As the inner lives of characters take center stage, their outward appearance – a hallmark of realism – is minimized.[9] And yet the eloquence projected on Lily Briscoe's "little Chinese eyes" in *To the Lighthouse* offers a different angle into the facialization of modernist characters.[10] So does Woolf's exercise of reading a woman's face in a train in "An Unwritten Novel." The composition of modernist characters certainly rebalances and condenses the combination of textual elements that constitute a character, but it retains crucial physiognomic dimensions.[11] In this chapter, I reread Woolf's *Orlando* – one of the most canonical texts of European modernism – as a case study in modernist physiognomy.

The old and the new modernist studies alike cyclically return to Woolf's mock biography.[12] Although Woolf described it as a "writer's holiday," *Orlando* has received and continues to receive intense critical attention as a complex and often contradictory palimpsest. An understanding of *Orlando* as an intervention in the history of the face sheds new light on Woolf's project and its broader modernist context. Following an analysis of Woolf's description of Orlando through a series of mock physiognomic conventions, the chapter pauses on the crisis in physiognomic reading dramatized through the confusing opacity of the character of Nicholas Greene, an instance in which, as Woolf's text puts it, "the poet has a butcher's face and the butcher a poet's" (O 77–78), a crisis subsequently amplified by the novel's depiction of faces in the urban crowd. In its last section, the chapter places this reading of the novel in dialogue with Paul Mpagi Sepuya's photographic project on *Orlando*. Sepuya's reflections on the opening scene of the novel, in which Orlando as a child is seen playing with the skull of a Moor, point to the faces occluded by what Woolf imagined as a reconfigured portrait gallery, itself an allegory of English national history.

In the Window Frame

Within Woolf's oeuvre, *Orlando* is situated between *To the Lighthouse* (1927) and *A Room of One's Own* (1929). It presents itself as a mock biography, equipped with acknowledgments, illustrations, and an index. Woolf's writing on biography – especially her two essays, "The New Biography" (1927) and "The Art of Biography" (1939) – has received considerable attention.[13] The object of modernist biography, as Woolf understands it, is the "creative fact," recreated by a biographer who is also an artist.[14] The subtitle of *Orlando: A Biography* functions as a double entendre – in the world of fiction, the text constitutes a biography of a fictional character named Orlando; in the world of fact, it is a veiled biography of Woolf's lover, Vita Sackville-West.[15] Orlando's life (vita) covers the temporal arc of modernity – from the Elizabethan period to 1928; from Shakespeare, or Shakespeare's sister, to Woolf; and from the dawn of the British Empire to its waning. *Orlando* offers a comment on the slash in modernity/modernism – and their joint and tense investment in the face. If, as Woolf wrote, "at last writers have begun to use their eyes," they see the human face anew. Arguably, across the dynamic of looking/seeing, one object of renewed attention is the face.[16]

As the reader first encounters Orlando, she finds him posing in front of a stained-glass window:

> When he put his hand on the windowsill to push the window open, it was instantly coloured red, blue, and yellow like a butterfly's wing. Thus, those who like symbols, and have a turn for the deciphering of them, might observe that though the shapely legs, the handsome body, and the well-set shoulders were all of them decorated with various tints of heraldic light, Orlando's face, as he threw the window open, was lit solely by the sun itself. A more candid, sullen face it would be impossible to find. Happy the mother who bears, happier still the biographer who records the life of such a one! (O 14–15)

Orlando is caught mid-gesture – he is opening a window. In the visual history of modernity, windows often frame attention.[17] The description distinguishes between Orlando's body, covered in the lights of the stained-glass window, and his face, lit by the sun. The body is historicized by the heraldic lights projected on it; as it travels through time, it changes clothes and signification. By contrast, the sun-lit face separates itself from the body and the head, acquiring autonomy. Within the economy of Woolf's novel, this face travels unchanged through the ages. While the novel references

body parts, especially Orlando's memorable legs, it spotlights Orlando's face: "A more candid, sullen face it would be impossible to find" (O 14). Introduced as an ambiguously gendered mother/biographer, the narrator gives herself the task of "recording" the life of "such a one." The deictic "one" simultaneously fills in for Orlando and Orlando's face. We are reading *Orlando: A Biography*, doubling as the biography of a face:

> Orlando, to look at, was cut out precisely for some such career. The red of the cheeks was covered with peach down; the down of the lips was only a little thicker than the down of the cheeks. The lips themselves were short and slightly drawn back over teeth of an exquisite and almond whiteness. Nothing disturbed the arrowy nose in its short, tense flight; the hair was dark, the ears small, and fitted closely to the head. But, alas, that these categories of youthful beauty cannot end without noting forehead and eyes. Alas, that people are seldom born devoid of all three; for directly we glance at Orlando standing by the window, we must admit that he had eyes like drenched violets, so large that the water seemed to have brimmed in them and widened them; and a brow like the swelling of a marble dome pressed between the two blank medallions which were his temples. Directly we glance at eyes and forehead, thus do we rhapsodize. (O 15)

The visual landscape of Orlando's face follows the textbook enumeration of facial traits, in Elizabethan style. It checks the boxes for categories of youthful beauty. Whiteness stands out.[18] The biographer interrupts the list to note that she could not omit the facial units most cherished by the physiognomy of the period: eyes and forehead. The descriptions of Orlando's eyes mimic the language of sonnets. Orlando's forehead, in turn, seems to be a quotation from sculpture or perhaps the painting of a sculpture. The reader is invited to observe Orlando within the frame of the window and, in a satirical key, perform the "deciphering" moves attributed to a viewer of Orlando's portrait during the Elizabethan period. Woolf trusts her contemporary reader to know these moves – to simultaneously reproduce and ironize them. In extended intertextuality with Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, a comic intertext for Woolf's mock biography and a precursor in the overloading of faces with signification, *Orlando* introduces the reader as a character in the text and sustains a complex and ambivalent dialogue with her visual prowess.[19] This is a savvy physiognomic reader.

What are we to make of Woolf's complex mise-en-scène of physiognomic reading? Physiognomy helps Woolf historicize Orlando's face. The text embeds an implicit faith that the reader's perception has been formed by a literary tradition that trained her in the history of physiognomy.

Simply put, the history of literature Woolf frames functions as training in physiognomic reading. The reader's role is that of "making up from bare hints dropped here and there the whole boundary and circumference of a living person"; such a reader "can hear in what we only whisper a living voice; can see, often when we say nothing about it, exactly what he looked like, and know without a word to guide them precisely what he thought and felt" (O 73). These formulations – an echo of Marcel Proust's transparent envelope – amount to a version of reader-response theory: It is the reader's job to sketch the outlines of a character, from eloquent hints dropped here and there and often from eloquent silences.[20] The reader – of *Orlando* and arguably of modernist literature more broadly – is trusted to contribute the physiognomic content the novel conjures through its gaps and its subtext.[21] The text's intervention in the history of the face frames physiognomy as a modernist concern – a peculiarity of the Elizabethan period that "we" inherit.

She Read Him like a Book

Having produced a portrait of Orlando – concomitantly truth and fantasy – the text dramatizes two face-to-face visual encounters. One is Orlando's encounter with the queen, the other with the Russian princess. Much has been written about the dynamics of the latter, especially its gender dimension, although the text's dramatization of an inter-imperial arc to Russia remains understudied.[22] In the context of this chapter and this book, however, Orlando's meeting with the queen is more consequential. Like the episode of Orlando in front of the window, this scene freezes a mid-air gesture:

> Such was his shyness that he saw no more of her than her ringed hands in water; but it was enough. It was a memorable hand; a thin hand with long fingers always curling as if round orb or sceptre; a nervous, crabbed, sickly hand; a commanding hand too; a hand that had only to raise itself for a head to fall; a hand, he guessed, attached to an old body that smelt like a cupboard in which furs are kept in camphor; which body was yet caparisoned in all sorts of brocades and gems; and held itself very upright though perhaps in pain from sciatica; and never flinched though strung together by a thousand fears; and the Queen's eyes were light yellow. . . .
>
> By the same showing, the Queen herself can have seen only a head. But if it is possible from a hand to deduce a body, informed with all the attributes of a great Queen, her crabbedness, courage, frailty, and terror, surely a head can be as fertile, looked down upon from a chair of state by a lady whose eyes were always, if the waxworks at the Abbey are to be trusted, wide open.

> The long, curled hair, the dark head bent so reverently, so innocently before her, implied a pair of the finest legs that a young nobleman has ever stood upright upon; and violet eyes; and a heart of gold; and loyalty and manly charm – all qualities which the old woman loved the more they failed her. (O 22–23)

Orlando sees a hand; the queen sees an angle of the head. Both body fragments are facialized: They are meaningful *as if* they were faces.[23] As such, they offer information about the two characters. Deduction, as satirized by Woolf's text, is an operation of physiognomy. The textual mechanism nonetheless continues to function as a strategy of character construction.[24]

Woolf's text seems to be aligned with Georg Simmel's proposal, in "The Aesthetic Significance of the Face," that the hand is "closest to the face in organic character."[25] In the essay written while working on *Orlando*, "The Art of Biography," Woolf reviewed Lytton Strachey's biographies, comparing his *Queen Victoria* (1921) and *Elizabeth and Essex* (1928). While the challenge of the former was, according to Woolf, that Strachey had too much information on Queen Victoria at his disposal, the difficulty with the latter was a lack of detailed information on Queen Elizabeth.[26] If Strachey was a craftsman writing about Queen Victoria, Woolf speculated, he became an *artist* as he wrote about Elizabeth. With *Orlando*, published the same year as Strachey's biography of Elizabeth, Woolf aspired to the latter, a novelist doubling as a biographer. Woolf takes, from Strachey and others, the "fact" of the queen's "beautiful hand" and creatively improvises around it.[27] In turn, as the biographer stills the moment of the queen gazing at Orlando, she observes the queen deducing Orlando's personality from the back of his head. In the bend of Orlando's head, momentarily functioning as his face, the queen can read his innocence, loyalty, and charm.[28] She can also see the color of his eyes and the beauty of his legs. It is especially through the reference to Orlando's legs, which return throughout the novel, that Woolf ironizes the technology of faciality that deduces meaning from parts of the body that acquire qualities of a face.

The figure of the animal features prominently in physiognomic discourse – and in Woolf's satire. Alongside the invocation of the queen's hawkish eye, Woolf describes the archduchess Harriet, one of Orlando's admirers, as a hare. In the scene of their first encounter, Orlando is working on his poem, writing, when he suddenly notices a shadow. As the scene is repeated for three days, Orlando witnesses the "apparition" of a woman:

> For this lady resembles nothing as much as a hare; a hare startled, but obdurate. A hare whose timidity is overcome by an immense and foolish audacity; a hare that sits upright and glowers at its pursuer with great, bulging eyes; with ears erect but quivering, with nose pointed, but twitching. This hare, moreover, was six feet high and wore a headdress into the bargain of some antiquated kind which made her look still taller. Thus confronted, she stared at Orlando with a stare in which timidity and audacity were most strangely combined. (O 114)

If the expectation is for the duchess to present herself as a timid rabbit, the oxymoronic combination of timidity and audacity renders her monstrous. Since gender experimentation seems to require crossing into other categories – whether race, ethnicity, or class – the archduchess is Romanian. Importantly, she is the only other queer character in the novel who experiences a transition. While the proximity to an animal can be read as a queer motif, the physiognomic underpinnings of the text render it ambivalent.[29] Studying the duchess during a subsequent visit, Orlando hears the call of passion. But the duchess cannot function as an object of desire, with her "face a yard long and staring eyes, dressed somewhat ridiculously, too" (O 116). Archduchess Harriet Griselda of Finster-Aarhon and Scand-op-Boom is the long name of a "grotesque shadow" (O 177). While Orlando perceives the archduchess to be staring, she is concomitantly the staree.[30] The history of physiognomy has often relegated faces that deviate from classical form to the category of the grotesque; caricature is often deployed in their representation. Framed by a satire of a physiognomic discourse that posits resemblances between human and animal faces, the archduchess enters the sexual economy of the novel negatively: she cannot constitute an object of desire.[31] The character of the archduchess crystallizes Woolf's ambivalent relation to physiognomy whereby the abjection of the archduchess is critically framed, but satire risks sliding into physiognomic caricature.

Importantly, over the first two chapters of the novel, Orlando becomes a writer; his literary project, sustained throughout the novel, is a poem titled *The Oak Tree*. Much as the reader sees Orlando, in search of poetic inspiration, write outdoors, Orlando, a would-be literary theorist, comes to the same conclusion pertaining to poetic language as his Russian formalist contemporaries: "Green in nature is one thing; green in literature another" (O 17). As Orlando repeatedly sits down to write, the object he sees, the object he wrestles with as a writer, is a face. And faces in nature are one thing; faces in literature another. This is because, Orlando reasons, nature is already an artist, and it plays tricks on us. One such trick: "the

poet has a butcher's face and the butcher's a poet" (O 77–78) – the sentence registers as one of the strongest condemnations of physiognomy in literary modernism. Since nobility and cruelty might switch faces – or wear the same face – physiognomic reading reaches an impasse. Nature's tricks are amplified by memory, figured as a capricious seamstress, weaving incongruous things together. Thus, as Orlando picks up his pen and dips it in ink, following this series of reflections, he sees "the mocking face of the lost Princess" (O 79). Shocked by the apparition, Orlando spills his ink, which leaks onto the page, leading to the substitution "for the face of the Princess a face of a different sort . . . this is the face of that rather fat, shabby man who sat in Twitchett's room ever so many years ago when old Queen Bess came here to dine" (O 79). Trying to recover the identity of this man, Orlando's memory "added to the forehead and eyes, first, a coarse, grease-stained ruffle, then a brown doublet, and finally a pair of thick boots" (80). "A poet, I dare say" (O 80), comes the conclusion.[32] Elizabeth M. Shore has identified Proustian elements in this scene, whereby Orlando's memory is overlaying two faces as a function of an involuntary recall.[33] Much like Proust's narrator arrives at his literary project when presented with a gallery of aging faces, Orlando's self-perception as a poet emerges out of an experience of recalling two overlaid faces – young princess and shabby poet. Memory projects details onto these faces, as Proust might put it, as if they were a transparent envelope. The writer, dipping the pen into this blotted image, nonetheless continues to wrestle with the receding memory of both faces, individually and in their muddled combination, even as one imagines that the poem one writes is titled *The Oak Tree*.

Scenes in the History of the Face

Having started and lingered in the Elizabethan period, the novel proceeds to march through history – selectively offering other scenes in the history of the face.[34] Most significant is the description of writer and critic Nicholas Greene. As Orlando sends his coach to bring Greene – "a very famous writer at the time" (O 84) – to his estate, he is confused by the writer's appearance:

> There was something about him that belonged neither to servant, squire, or noble. The head with its rounded forehead and beaked nose was fine; but the chin receded. The eyes were brilliant but the lips slobbered. It was the expression of the face as a whole, however, that was disquieting. There was none of that stately composure, which makes the faces of the nobility so

> pleasing to look at; nor had it anything of the dignified servility of the face of a well-trained domestic; it was a face seamed, puckered, and drawn together. Poet though he was, it seemed as if he were more used to scold than to flatter; to quarrel than to coo; to scramble than to ride; to struggle than to rest; to hate than to love. This, too, was shown by the quickness of his movements; and by something fiery and suspicious in his glance. (O 84)

Orlando's "knowledge of mankind" includes a historicized faith in his ability to read Greene's appearance. He deploys his physiognomic perspicacity to place people in a hierarchy. Where does Greene belong? His forehead, eyes, and nose pass the test of nobility. But his chin and lips disturb the unity of the noble face. Looking for either the "stately composure" of the nobility or the "dignified servility" of servants, both legible on the face, Orlando discovers a third, unknown type – the middle class. Discernible on Greene's face and his movements – before he and Orlando exchange a word – is his quarrelsomeness, a facial trait foreshadowing his critique of Orlando's literary ambitions.

We are quite far from Orlando's encounter with the queen. Physiognomic reading is at work in this description; Orlando certainly reads Greene "like a page." But he is confounded, taken aback – there is no confident dash here, no hawkish piercing of the soul. Though with the help of his dogs – known as "better judges both of identity and character than we are" (O 170) – Orlando can intuitively anticipate Greene's betrayal, he cannot fully place him. In particular, "something fiery and suspicious in his glance" does not translate into immediate knowledge of character. When Orlando runs into Greene again in the Victorian period, the class-determined perception returns. Greene, now a professor, is more polished, but Orlando can see through the facade of nouveau riche signs: "He had grown sleek: literature had been a prosperous pursuit evidently" (O 279). Greene now has a "pink, plump face" (O 276). Weight gain comes across as a physiognomic sign of literary opportunism. The portrait of Greene helps Woolf mark a shift in the history of the face to acknowledge an incongruous arrangement of inside/outside. The arrangement confirms the conclusion of the earlier scene in which the face of the Russian princess merges with that of the shabby poet: "nature . . . delights in muddle and mystery" (O 78). Greene muddles the physiognomic waters. The face might not be the mirror of the soul after all.

Crucial to the novel's portrayal of other characters' faces, including Greene's, is the fact that Orlando's face does not change. A reader of Proust, Woolf might have found in Odette's face, following her transformation into Mme Swann, a model for an unchanging face.[35] Between

Orlando the man and Orlando the woman, "Their faces remained, as their portraits prove, practically the same" (O 138). Note that portraits function as proof, evidence – perhaps a reference to Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891). In dialogue with the dandy tradition, Woolf's novel dramatizes a theory of gender performativity in which gender changes rest in clothes and fashion. "It is clothes that wear us and not we them" (O 188), reads Woolf's influential sentence, which acquires aphoristic force. One becomes a woman by performing gender norms, centrally clothing norms.[36] In Woolf's telling, clothes sculpt the body and condition its movements and tics. Since the face is unclothed (a presumption in need of qualification), it would seem that it is resistant to gender changes. And yet, as Giles Deleuze and Félix Guattari argue, subjectivization and facialization go hand in hand. Since gender is a mode of subjectivization, the change in clothes triggers a new tic of the face: "[H]aving now worn skirts for a considerable time, a certain change was visible in Orlando, which is to be found even in her face . . . the woman takes a sidelong glance at it, full of subtlety, even of suspicion" (O 188). Gender appears on Orlando's face as "a sidelong glance." Woolf's focus on a barely perceptible detail of the face aligns with Simmel's argument, invoked in the Introduction, that a change in one element of the face reorganizes the entire face.[37] Among the details of the face, Simmel proposed, "a way of looking" has the capacity to affect it most: "The height of this extraordinary dynamic effect is achieved with a minimal movement of the eye."[38] For both Simmel and Woolf, the smallest shift in the movement of the eye reorganizes the landscape of the face. Woolf's momentous sentence, "He was a woman" (O 137), finds its counterpoint in the smallest change in Orlando's face.

The Face in the City

The novel's next section fast forwards to the Victorian era. As Orlando travels to London, the train becomes a privileged site for the observation of faces. This is another point where Woolf's fiction meets and challenges Simmel's sociology of the senses, which argued that modern means of transportation facilitate the observation of faces in extended duration, leading to shifts in perception.[39] Woolf dramatized a relation between the perception of the face and modern means of transportation in *Jacob's Room* (1922) and *The Waves* (1931). In *Orlando*, the narrator notes that the invention of the train "changed the face of Europe" (O 273). The face is here a metaphor for the reconfiguration of space – at scale – as perceived anew through the train window. The train, however, does not only shift

one's perception of what one sees as one looks out the window. Waiting in train and metro stations created new social and aesthetic relations – a premise amplified by Ezra Pound's experimentation with the image of the face in "In a Station of the Metro" (1913), to which we return in Chapter 5. Additionally, given its interior spatial arrangement and distribution of seating, the train forces passengers – strangers – to face and observe each other.[40] The train is a space of face reading. Indeed, Woolf's "An Unwritten Novel" (1920) sketched a character starting from the face of a woman the narrator observes on a train, dramatizing the temptation and ultimately the failure of face reading as a mode of character construction.

Orlando's encounter with the city results in a soundscape perceived as a cacophonous uproar. Not knowing what to make of the sound, Orlando switches to her formerly reliable visual skills:

> She looked anxiously at people's faces. But that confused her still more. Here would come by a man sunk in despair, muttering to himself as if he knew some terrible sorrow. Past him would nudge a fat, jolly-faced fellow, shouldering his way along as if it were a festival for all the world. Indeed, she came to the conclusion that there was neither rhyme nor reason in any of it. Each man and each woman was bent on his own affairs. (O 274–75)

Orlando loiters through a city that appears, almost cinematically, as a montage of faces. Confused by city traffic, Orlando looks for meaning in the faces around her, trusting her old physiognomic tact. She finds it reassuring that, within the crowd – a sea of featureless, undifferentiated faces – a face flashes here and there. But now such faces only provide "as if" scenarios – as if one were joyful, as if one were desperate. As the narrator of "An Unwritten Novel" wonders, the observer finds herself asking, "Have I read you right?"[41] The cityscape – urban space as opaque book – remains a cacophonous riddle.

Consequentially, as the novel approaches its end and reaches the modernist moment, Woolf sends Orlando on another walk in the city. Woolf's essay "Street Haunting: A London Adventure" (1927) describes the "central oyster of perceptiveness, an enormous eye," that governs the experience of "street rambling."[42] Read together, "Street Haunting" and the ending of *Orlando* chart Woolf's version of *flânerie* – supplementing the account offered by Benjamin's reading of Edgar Allan Poe and Charles Baudelaire. As Susan Buck-Morss argues glossing Benjamin, within the modern city, "Meanings are read on the surface of things: 'The phantasmagoria of the flaneur: reading profession, origins and character from faces.'"[43] As a function of what Buck-Morss calls "the double exposure

of past and present," the flaneur imagines himself a reader of faces.[44] At the same time, the flaneur is himself a face in the crowd as, in Benjamin's words, he "sees himself flashing up physiognomically . . . Even the eyes of passers-by are hanging mirrors."[45] What the cityscape offers, when seen through the prism of what Benjamin calls the "physiognomy of the crowd," is a dialectic of faceless crowd and flashing face.[46]

This dynamic is amplified for the flaneuse. The street-haunting episode at the end of *Orlando* adds a twist to the modern fate of the face. Following a stroll during which window shopping becomes the primary object of perception, Orlando pauses to take out her mirror:

> Women were not nearly as roundabout in their ways, she thought, powdering herself with the greatest unconcern, as they had been when she herself first turned woman and lay on the deck of the *Enamoured Lady*. She gave her nose the right tint deliberately. She never touched her cheeks. Honestly, though she was now thirty-six, she scarcely looked a day older. She looked just as pouting, as sulky, as handsome, as rosy. (O 302)

Upon her transition, Orlando has learned about femininity as a repertoire of tricks (O 156). In contrast to the facial norms of the past, which involved a rhythm of veiling and unveiling, women now apply makeup in public. The gesture does not necessarily, or not always, mark women's sexual availability, their status as commodity. Nor does it imply, as Benjamin would have it, that women "appear as 'mass produced' through the 'masking of individual expression' under makeup."[47] As we have seen in the Introduction, a decade before *Orlando*, Mina Loy's pamphlet "Auto-Facial-Construction" (1919) had called for modern subjects to become "masters of their facial destiny."[48] The strategies proposed by Loy are inseparable from consumer culture and especially makeup. Women of the period, in Loy's view, were becoming experts in what we might call an "authenticity effect" within a new force field of faciality. Aligned more with Loy than Benjamin (a character in *The Waves* is "surveying her face like an artist"), Woolf's Orlando uses cosmetics to amplify the authenticity effect of an unchanging face.[49]

Importantly, the novel returns to Orlando's face in its very last scene: "The cold breeze of the present brushed her face with its little breath of fear. She looked anxiously at the sky. It was dark with clouds now" (O 328). The face is no longer in the sun; the novel that spotlighted this face must come to an end. Since in *Orlando* clouds come over Britain to indicate a historical shift, the clouds over the character's face at the end of the novel likewise gain historical weight. Orlando retires to the country to be with her dogs; from now on, she will only gaze at her dogs' faces.[50]

A visual comment on Orlando's face at the end of the novel, the last photograph of Sackville-West included in the novel is taken from a distance. It is a portrait of sorts, but the face is distant, as if seen by a passer-by. Orlando has escaped what Baudelaire called "the tyranny of the human face," also a leitmotif of *The Waves* ("the passing of face and face and face").[51] The framing of this face is anchored in its flight from the urban crowd. This last shift in *Orlando* witnesses an awareness, which Simmel shares, that there is "no going back to any pure intellectuality *behind* appearance."[52] Alongside photography and cinema, and in conjunction with them, the literary face, including Orlando's at the end of the novel, has entered a game of surface reading.

Orlando and Racial Difference

In 2019, the Aperture Foundation hosted a photography exhibit inspired by Virginia Woolf's novel *Orlando: A Biography* (1928).[53] Tilda Swinton, the actor who played Orlando in Sally Potter's 1992 cinematic adaptation of the novel, curated and wrote an introduction for a special issue of *Aperture* dedicated to the show. Most photographs in the exhibit present themselves, in one way or another, as portraits. They range from photographic experiments with fashion and makeup in the performance of gender and sexuality to reflections on facial feminization surgery. Collectively, they testify to the iconic status of Woolf's modernist novel, especially its continuing relevance to changing discourses on gender and sexuality. The photography exhibit also invites a rereading of the novel, especially when it comes to its revision of the portrait genre and its encounter with photography. Centrally, the faces that look back at the viewer from the pages of *Aperture* call for a reassessment of *Orlando*'s framing of the face.

The 2019 Aperture exhibit inspired by *Orlando* featured a series of photographs by Paul Mpagi Sepuya. He focused his photographic encounter with Woolf's novel on the opening scene of the novel, omitted in Sally Potter's film. This scene frames Orlando as a boy engaged in a curious game: "HE – for there could be no doubt of his sex, though the fashion of the time did something to disguise it – was in the act of slicing at the head of a Moor which swung from the rafters" (O 13). The play with pronouns the novel dramatizes is announced in this first sentence. So is the text's theorization of the relation between gender and clothes. The intertextuality with *Don Quixote* (Orlando is engaged in a metaleptic act of chivalric heroism) sets the stage for the metatextual commentary on the history of

literature and the genre of biography. Within the economy of the novel, the Moor in this scene is leaping out from the pages of both fictional and historical books: "Orlando's father, or perhaps his grandfather, had struck it from the shoulders of a vast Pagan who had started up under the moon in the barbarian fields of Africa" (O 13). The text invokes, in its modernist minimalism, English colonial exploits in Africa and their resonances in literature – *Don Quixote* and *Othello*.

The gender dynamics of this opening scene have Orlando engage in sword play to show that, although a man in the lineage of his fathers and poised to inherit them, he does not quite belong in their company. Having opened the window that frames his portrait, Orlando abandons the violent sword game and turns to his real passion, writing. Instead of becoming an imperialist warrior, he becomes a writer – and a woman writer at that. For such a writer, the novel proposes, "all the gold in Peru will not buy him the treasure of a well-turned line" (O 75). Elizabeth Hirsh avers that the novel "insinuates an alternative – that is, a queer – history of England."[54] Does Orlando as a queer woman writer nevertheless inherit the legacy of violence that brought this skull into her home?[55] Does the text invite us to conceptualize a relation between the writing of literature and the imperial pursuit of gold? The scholarly conversation around this scene has largely interrogated Woolf's anti-imperialism, with questions of race often remaining marginal.[56] What can a focus on the face add here?

In his photographic experimentation with this literary scene, Sepuya photographs a window overlooking the sea. This window collects all the window references in *Orlando*: The frame for Orlando's portrait, the train window, window shopping.[57] At the same time, it functions as a meta-commentary on the novel's use of photography. "All early photography," writes Lutz Koepnick, "was window photography. Allowing light to enter the engineer's workspace, the window provided the conditions for the possibility of reproducing the visible word."[58] Doubling as a mirror in which the photographer is barely visible, the window does a different kind of framing work as one moves from Woolf's text to Sepuya's photograph (via Potter's film). In the latter, the sun pouring in through a grid of windowpanes functions as a lighting source for two photographs of seventeenth-century paintings. These photographs give face to the faceless skull in Woolf's opening scene. One is a photograph of a painting titlted *Turbanned Moor*, by a follower of Aert de Gelder; the other is a photograph of a painting by Charles Mander III, *Moor with a Turban and Armor*.[59] If, in Woolf's novel, Orlando's body is historicized by the heraldic lights projected on it, in Sepuya's work the act of historicizing is done through

Orientalist portraiture.[60] The two stylized portraits, barely visible in the sunlight, filter the viewer's gaze. There is no model in the window frame, no Orlando. Instead, the sun illuminates the window itself, directing the attention of the viewer (who doubles as a reader of *Orlando*) toward images Woolf's text invokes in passing but ultimately omits from the frame.

Woolf's *Orlando* constitutes a major reference point for Sepuya's photographic practice. "My turn to literature," he states in an interview, "developed as a way toward understanding portraiture.. . . Literature, and specifically twentieth-century modernists' dealings with sexuality, offered a space where the text itself was the meeting ground of dynamic forces."[61] As a mode of intertextuality, Sepuya incorporates book fragments into his photographs, most of which are portraits and self-portraits. He refers to *Orlando* as "one of the most influential writings for me on the nature of portraiture."[62] A palimpsest interrogating the multiplicity of the self, *Orlando* has been conducive to Sepuya's photographic reflection on the nature of biography. Sepuya frames the question of "Why am I making portraits?" with reference to Woolf: "It is in Woolf's *Orlando* [1928] and Nugent's *Smoke, Lilies and Jade* [1926] that I began to see reflected my own drives to working in portraiture, the transformation of the author's and the subject's instability into a text/image, and the author's desire and aim laid bare."[63] An iconic, canonical text, Woolf's novel helps Sepuya illuminate the politics of the face in the history of portraiture.

Sepuya's experimentation with Woolf's novel reframes *Orlando* itself as a portrait – one that unfolds in time.[64] Woolf's writing on the visual arts and visual culture is well documented.[65] So is the fact that Woolf insisted on illustrating *Orlando* with eight images: Five are of Orlando, one of Sasha, one of Duchess Harriet, and one of Shelmerdine. Of the five images of Orlando, two are paintings of Sackville-West's ancestors and three are photographs of Sackville-West.[66] The novel presents itself as an exemplar of what W. J. T. Mitchell calls "mixed art," in which "the ekphrastic encounter" with the history of portraiture is not "strictly figurative."[67] In other words, the text not only verbally describes visual works of art; it includes visual images within its pages. While the reproduced paintings require ekphrastic engagement, the photographs are largely trusted to speak for themselves.[68] Charles Darwin's use of photographs in his *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872) comes to mind, as a foil for the use of photography as evidence and documentation. But Woolf is closer to Strachey's use of photography in *Eminent Victorians*, where images often do not confirm or support the written text, but, rather, complicate it.[69] Stylistically, the photographs of Sackville-West evoke

those of Woolf's aunt, Julia Margaret Cameron, and her penchant for theatricality, masquerade, and costume.[70] In other words, in addition to indexically pointing to Sackville-West's face, the photographs invite speculation on auto-facial-construction.

Crucially, for Sepuya, race is not an added element to the complexity of Woolf's novel. "It's one of my favorite novels and I have re-read it over and over at different points in my life, personally and artistically," Sepuya states, "and it's troubling that the only place I find an *in*to the text is through the position of the Moor whose head is being swung at with such childish casual violence." As a Black reader, Sepuya finds a handle that "white readers have skipped over for generations."[71] If *Orlando* is a portrait, Sepuya shows it to be suffused with racialized images – in its framing initial scene and throughout the text ("hints dropped here and there"). In the context of the 2019 photography exhibit foregrounding the queer dimensions of Woolf's work, Sepuya's camera places queerness in an interlocking relation to race, inviting a rereading of key nodes in Woolf's novel.

Invoking the pleasures of her cross-dressing practice while living in Paris, Sackville-West mentioned that part of her self-fashioning involved darkening her face and hands: "I browned my face and hands."[72] In order to dramatize what Woolf describes in her diary as "a diversion or two about women's love," Sackville-West painted her face.[73] Following Loy's reasoning in "Auto-Facial-Construction," Sackville-West could be said to have engaged in an act of refacialization – as a dark-skinned man. Makeup, that roundabout trick, served as a tool. Juxtaposed with the crossing of the class threshold in Orlando's encounter with Nell, the racial masquerade that Sackville-West described superimposes itself on the scene of Orlando as a woman dressing as a "noble Lord" (215). What the novel refers to as "her masculinity" (217), the play with pronouns foreshadowing contemporary masculinity studies, is produced via the mediation of race.

The second node in the novel requiring rereading in light of Sepuya's photographs involves the discussion between Orlando and her husband Shelmerdine regarding their shared interest in Black women. "The biscuits ran out" is deployed as a euphemism for Shelmerdine's desire and it foregrounds the couple's tacit understanding of each other: "He was surprised and delighted to find how well she had taken his meaning" (O 258). On the margins of this shared secret, the two engage in a gender-bending game: "'Are you positive you aren't a man?' he would ask anxiously, and she would echo, 'Can it be possible you're not a woman?'" (O 258). Orlando's queerness is construed in this scene as a function of "tolerance," concomitantly sexual tolerance and tolerance to racial difference. The question of the

Black woman's desire – vis-à-vis Shelmerdine's advances or Orlando's fantasy of seduction – is never broached. In the economy of the novel, the Black woman the text invokes in passing remains faceless.[74]

Finally, following Sepuya's restaging of *Orlando*, it is crucial to note that there is a broader, inter-imperial geopolitical imaginary at play in Woolf's text, unfolding between the British Empire and the Ottoman Empire.[75] The third, related task is therefore to factor in the novel's invocation of Orlando's relationship with the Romani people she encounters in the Ottoman Empire.[76] Two forms of Orientalism are collapsed into one in *Orlando*'s third chapter: First, a tradition of Orientalizing Istanbul/Constantinople, a tendency in line with Woolf's diary entries during her 1906 visit to the city.[77] Second, a tradition of Orientalizing the Roma (including through the linguistic conventions still at work in modernist studies). It is in relation to the depiction of Romani people and the fantasy regarding their gender norms that Orlando's transition occurs. Like Sackville-West, who claimed her skin pigmentation drew on her Romani ancestry, Orlando "fancied a certain darkness in the complexion" (O 121). Passing for Roma eased one's passing for the other sex.[78] The Orientalizing of gender norms associated with Romani women, inherited from nineteenth-century romantic painting, erases their history of oppression. The Roma were enslaved in parts of the Ottoman Empire during Orlando's time in Constantinople, within an institution that legalized enslaved women's sexual exploitation.[79] This history of enslavement needs to be placed in a relational framework of reference with the practices of sexual exploitation the British Empire facilitated, including the one alluded to in the exchange between Shelmerdine and Orlando.[80] Sepuya's photographs thus function as an invitation to revisit and revise our understanding of the multidirectional, inter-imperial workings of race in the novel, as it intersects its queer investments. His photographs give face to Woolf's skull, reframing the conventions of portraiture Woolf challenged, but only selectively.

The Face Is the Thing

In writing *Orlando*, Woolf trusted satire to achieve a balance between truth and fiction: "satire is to be the main note . . . my own lyric vein is to be satirized." She recalled her desire vis-à-vis the project: "I want fun. I want fantasy. I want (& this was serious) to give things their caricature value."[81] *Orlando: A Biography* acquired Tristram Shandy-like qualities. While there is a biographical-realist impulse behind the project, the overall spirit of the

text is satirico-experimental. One can hear the laughter of the biographer echoing through the text.[82]

As satirical experimentation, the text accomplishes an eloquent task: Orlando's face travels through the temporal arc of the modern. "The face is the thing," Woolf wrote, bemoaning the lack of women's portraits in the National Portrait Gallery in London. Writing about "Mrs John Stuart Mill," the philosopher's wife, Woolf pointed to the fact that "She had no face.... Without eyes or hair, cheeks or lips, her stupendous genius, her consummate virtue, availed her nothing."[83] "I have no face," echoes Rhonda in *The Waves*.[84] Woolf remedied this injustice by bringing women's portraits not into the National Portrait Gallery but into the gallery of English literature.[85] The face of Orlando/Vita, which Woolf injected into the history of the portrait, was nonetheless sketched in a formal relation to racialized faces that the modernist history of portraiture continued to erase – the Orientalized figures Sepuya retrieves. If "on or around 1910 human character changed," we might be reminded that "character" doubles as a physiognomic concept. Much like Minnie, the character sketched in "An Unwritten Novel," Orlando functions as what Amy Bromley refers to as "an allegory of modernist literary character."[86] Importantly, for Woolf, "character-reading" is an activity that bridges the literary and the sociological. In Woolf's "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," the change in "character" is exemplified by the class-determined figure of the cook. Jane Marcus plots a relational arc between this cook and the Black woman of *A Room of One's Own*, writing, "Woolf's passage recalls the invocation of the word *fine* to refer to a particularly good example of a type."[87] Tracking the change in "character" as a change in the history of the face allows us to read it as a shift in the discourse on physiognomy. In turn, retracing the text's emplotment of the history of the face allows us to decipher residues of the physiognomic discourse woven into its fabric.