

Modernist Verbal and Visual Portraiture: The Artistic Construction of the Portrait's Subject

NATALIA MORZHENKOVA

Abstract: In the twentieth century the appearance of a great number of innovative verbal and visual portraits, created by modernist writers and painters, haunted by questions of identity and human representability, was determined by the tangible shift in sociocultural ideas about selfhood and the manners of its construction. Analyzing the poetics of literary and pictorial portraits created by Gertrude Stein, Virginia Woolf, William Carlos Williams, Ezra Pound, Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso, Vincent van Gogh, and Paul Cézanne, this paper focuses on the intermedial flexibility of this genre and investigates the strategies of destruction and deformation of traditional referential portrait conventions through the juxtaposition of mimetic and non-mimetic elements, the “still life” approach to portraiture, intertextual scaffolding, activation of genre memory, and the parodization of the concept of resemblance. It demonstrates that the indexical tracing of the individual's particular identity as a traditional function of portraiture is replaced in modernist portraiture by the fluid process of identity construction and erosion.

Keywords: modernist portraiture, literary portrait, non-mimetic representation, Gertrude Stein, Virginia Woolf, William Carlos Williams, Ezra Pound

The term “literary portrait” is very thought-provoking, as it refers directly to the question of the relationships between the arts and the dialectic between word and image. It encourages us to think broadly, searching for links between different art forms and revealing the counterpoints that they create for each other. What do we mean when we use the word “portrait” to define literary texts? Is it just a metaphor, which arose due to an inclination to establish similarities and substitute one thing for another? Is it a manifestation of the idea of a synthesis of the arts (akin to Horace's “ut pictura poesis,” Simonides of Ceos' “painting is mute poetry, poetry a speaking painting,” or Philip Sidney's poetry as a speaking picture) that goes back to the archaic period?

In the context of this article, the notion of a portrait is used in relation to genre as a cross-media process rather than a fixed, distinctive entity. A broad understanding of genre invites us to look at the literary portrait through the lens of the philosophy of portraiture in which the notion of personality is constantly transformed and rethought. Every cultural and historical era puts forward its portrait and its understanding of a person, which is revised generationally. However, genre transformations do not mean that the previous generic forms are completely rejected as useless ballast. A genre always implicitly preserves in its memory the past. The novelty of innovative forms can be appreciated and perceived only by comparing them with the old ones.

The conventions and codes of both a pictorial and a literary portrait depend simultaneously on the genre memory and the general artistic principles of the aesthetic-historical paradigm within which a portrait is created. For example, Gertrude Stein directly connects the technique of portraiture, that is, how portraits are “made,” with the zeitgeist: “The thing that is important is the way that portraits of men and women and children are written, by written I mean made. And by made I mean felt. Portraits of men and women and children are differently felt in every generation and by generation

one means a period of time” (Stein, “Portraits and Repetition,” 99). It is notable that Stein’s portrait vision developed in close dialogue with the modernist pictorial practice of portraiture. Such intense interaction of the literary modernist portrait with its visual counterparts is characteristic of the period. It is no coincidence that she uses the verb “make,” blurring the distinction between the production of visual and verbal portraits. Indeed, in the modernist portrait, emerging between verbleness and visuality, the interdependence of the image and the word (what Michel Foucault defined as seeable and sayable in his essay on René Magritte’s painting entitled *This is Not a Pipe*) is clearly visible.

I. Against Representation: A Challenge of Modernist Portraiture

Haunted by the question of human representability, modernist artists deeply explored the cultural and historical conditionality of the portrait, revealing its dynamic essence based on the complex interaction between the artist, portrayed subject, and the audience. The pursuit of physical resemblance and visual verisimilitude traditionally associated with the portrait is replaced by the idea of a model as an artificial construct of the artist’s imagination, which implies both a creator and a viewer. Challenging the traditional portrait’s referential purposes and interrogating its indexical connection with a particular subject beyond the picture, modernist portraiture made this process of construction almost tangible.

It seems that the portrait’s unrecognition (partial or, in some cases, absolute) was much more in line with the modernist concept of an individual, whose identity is unstable and impossible to grasp. This new anti-realist approach to portraiture is evident, for example, in Jean Cocteau’s series of pencil sketches “Self-Portrait without a Face” (1910-1913), in which we see only head and shoulder outlines of the artist, while his face is blank.¹ The title itself sounds like a contradiction in terms. The absence of a face — a key component of a traditional portrait — turns this image into an anti-portrait, challenging our key genre expectations. At the same time, the outline of the drawing still makes it possible to identify the depicted figure as Cocteau.

It should be mentioned that an image of a faceless man interrogating the traditional reliability of human face recognition and symbolizing the modern human condition becomes a crucial figure of the modernist anthropological vision. Cocteau’s self-portrait provides an illustrative case of the metonymic fragmentation of a portrayed subject who loses his undivided totality and coherent identity. In this sense, Cocteau’s faceless self-portrait is a graphic echo of Guillaume Apollinaire’s pantomime, “What time does a train leave for Paris?” (“A quelle heure un train partira-t-il pour Paris?”, 1914), featuring a faceless flute player, moving across Paris.² Entirely, or almost, faceless models can be found in a great number of modernist portraits: for example, Vanessa Bell’s faceless portrait of Virginia Woolf, as well as the faceless portraits by Casimir Malevich and Giorgio di Chirico.

A similar trend is observed in modernist literature. Analyzing literary representation of a face as a text, Holger A. Pausch underlines a crucial transformation of the status of human face in the literary portrait at the beginning of the twentieth century. Being fragmented, reconstructed, and distorted, a human face was no longer considered as a readable image, representing the vital traits of a character; it turned into “an autonomous, non-representational, and self-referential linguistic image” (Pausch 350-351). As an example of this transformation, Pausch explores fragmentation and reconstruction as the key narrative procedures employed by Proust in *In Search of Lost Time* to create a verbal image of Albertine’s face (355). Analyzing a great number of modern literary portraits, he comes to the conclusion that a few minimal markers are enough to depict a modern face, because “in the narrative space of Modernity ... the portrayal of the face is not essential any more” (358). Let it be borne in mind that a dramatic change in modernist portraiture is inextricably linked with the emergence of the concept of the face as an experimental surface. For example, in her tellingly titled advertising pamphlet *Auto-Facial Construction* Mina Loy describes a human face as a sculptural configuration that can be created through a process of self-fashioning and reconstruction.

It is typical of modernist portraiture to replace full-face depiction with various fragments and details. Describing modernist literary anti-portraits, Kamila Pawlikowska underlines that they often “escape materialism of the flesh and focus on the inner qualities” (83). Modernist emphasis on individual interiority manifests in a move away from external objective realism and a tendency to depict characters as unfinished and fragmented. This representational shift determines the reduction of the outside perspective and the turn to an inside one in modernist portraiture, which tries to accent the interior invisible essence of an individual rather than capture a physical likeness. The destruction and deformation of the referential portrait image became perceived as a more satisfactory way to reflect artistically the authenticity of persons in their proteanism and diversity. The modernist rejection of considering portraiture in terms of realism and verisimilitude was also facilitated by the fact that the non-artistic documenting functions of the portrait were taken over by photography.³

We find a similar principle of portraiture in the avant-garde literary portraits of Stein, who was often criticized for accumulating irrelevant details while leaving the subject of her writings blank. Analyzing Stein’s portraits, Ulla Haselstein notes that in her portraits created before 1912, there is not even visual imagery, although they were created under the influence of the post-impressionist visuality of Matisse, Picasso, and Cézanne (730). Her literary experiment with the portrait genre was encouraged by Picasso’s attempt to refocus the portrait from representing the model by virtue of a resemblance between the image and sitter onto the artist’s freedom to construct and interpret the portrayed subject. Regarding this devaluation of verisimilitude in Picasso’s portraits, it is important to remember that during the twentieth century, portraiture shifted its focus away from the subject’s identity toward the artist’s perception and conceptualization.

The total dematerialization of the portrayed subjects and the extreme foregrounding of her experimental style are evident in Stein’s portraits “Matisse” (1910–1911) and “Picasso” (1910–1911), which were created out of a sense of competition and solidarity that arose between the artists and the writer. The proper names given in the titles of these literary portraits contrast with the emphasized abstractness, achieved through the repetition of long chains of rhythmically connected, but semantically reduced phrases such as “certainly some said this of him” (Stein, “Matisse” 37–38):

One was quite certain that for a long part of his being one being living he had been trying to be certain that he was wrong in doing what he was doing and then when he could not come to be certain that he had been wrong in doing what he had been doing, when he had completely convinced himself that he would not come to be certain that he had been wrong in doing what he had been doing he was really certain then that he was a great one and he certainly was a great one. Certainly every one could be certain of this thing that this one is a great one. (37)

We observe here an interesting onomastic tension: while the proper names refer to the singular clearly defined subjects, the text itself annuls their images. The artists’ names in these portraits are constantly replaced by the pronoun “one” with its referential duality (“one” refers to a certain individual, and at the same time is very general). This deliberate whirling repetition of the pronoun creates a distancing effect, removing the text both from the proper names, stated in the titles, and from Matisse and Picasso as artists with individualized modes of existence.

Various kinds of dissonances and contrasts, revealing a tense dialogue between the author and the model, mark modernist portraits with their new attitude to the representational goal. In this context, let us look Henri Matisse’s portrait “Woman in a Hat” (1905), which became a scandalous sensation at the Salon d’Automne of 1905 from where it was acquired by Leo and Gertrude Stein. The variegated and disordered chaos of color spots, at first glance, is rather unrelated to the silhouette of the model; there is a complex tension between a realistic outline and unnatural imaginative color. This non-mimetic color construction forms a kind of altered portrait, which is in a complex, fascinating plastic relationship with the heroine, and in general with the traditional mimetic, realistic portrait. It is noteworthy that a modernist portrait encourages not only new relations between the artist and the subject but also intense dialogue with the previous genre canon.

II. Juxtaposition of Different Modes of Representation

The combination of various modes of representation is characteristic of modernist language in general and the modernist verbal and visual portrait in particular. This juxtaposition of realistic and imaginative elements, for example, can be seen in portraits by the Austrian artist Gustav Klimt, who set quite realistic heads and figures on emphatically decorative backgrounds. The similar overlapping possibilities of realistic (or let us say “reality congruent”) and imaginative modes we can find also in Virginia Woolf’s “Waiting for Déjeuner,” included in a series of eight sketches called “Portraits” (236–237). The portrayed subjects are Monsieur and Madame Louvois who are having their lunch in an urban café. The very choice of the place itself refers to Impressionist aesthetics. In a wide range of Impressionist paintings, the atmosphere of immediacy and directly observable everyday urban life is conveyed through the topos of a café, functioning as a cultural and social institution of the bourgeois city environment.

Constructed by analogy with the syntactic pattern of the adverbial clause of time introduced by the subordinate conjunction “when,” Woolf’s portrait consists of two groups of parallel episodes:

When the humming birds quivered in the flower’s trumpet; when the vast slab-footed elephants squelched through the mud; when the animal-eyed savage pushed off from the reeds in his canoe, when the Persian woman picked a louse from the hair of the child; (...).

When the waiter in his creased shirt, shiny coat, apron tied in the middle and sleeked back hair spat on his hands when wiped the plate to save the trouble of rinsing it; when the sparrows in the road collected over a spot of dung; when the iron gates of the level crossing swung to; (...) when the lights flickered over the Cinema announcing the new Jungle Film; (...) when the grey-blue clouds of the northern hemisphere let a grey-blue patch shine for a moment on the waters of the Seine: — Monsieur and Madame Louvois stared at the mustard pot and the cruet; at the yellow crack on the marble topped table. (236).

The first group of “when” episodes are rhythmic, and poetically marked descriptions of an exotic landscape and a Parisian street, correlated simultaneously with the narrator’s imagination and direct observation. The act of imagining flows into the act of perceiving: imaginary slab-footed elephants, animal-eyed savages, and the Persian woman are replaced by observable realities of the cityscape (a waiter wearing a shiny coat and apron, sparrows, lorry with iron rails, etc.). The mention of a new jungle film in the Paris episode semantically links it to the exoticism of the previous description. Interestingly, the same rhythmic-syntactic pattern of the “oriental” and Parisian episodes establishes an equivalence between them. For the artist’s eye, fantastic images of the East, and details of everyday life lying before the eyes have the same aesthetic value.

In the structure of the portrait, two episodes, built as accumulating image streams, formally function as subordinate clauses with the repetitive conjunction “when.” However, their formal subordinate function, which consists in introducing the chronotopic setting, contrasts with their poeticness and abundance. The emphatic beauty and aesthetic elaboration of the “background” underline the prosaicness of the portrait’s main subjects, who are paralyzed in their dull immunity to the picturesque of this life (“Monsieur and Madame Louvois neither saw nor heard,” “Monsieur and Madame Louvois stared at the mustard pot and the cruet; at the yellow crack on the marble topped table”) (“Portraits” 236). Against the background of this exuberant imagery, the “main” fragments from a syntactic point of view, associated with the images of the portrayed Madame and Monsieur Louvois, look emphatically prosaic and “empty.” Life seems to dry up when the focus shifts to the dining couple. The background is much more interesting than the “key” subjects of this portrait, who turn from unreceptive automaton characters into animal-like figures (“the eyes on Madame and Monsieur Louvois lit with lustre; *for* down on the marble topped table in front of them the sleek haired waiter slapped a plate of tripe”) (“Portraits” 236). These automaton and animal metaphors can be regarded as figures of lack correlating to the “dehumanization” of the portrait in modernist

aesthetics and challenging our expectations to recognize the portrayed subject as an objectively represented individual.⁴

In Woolf's portrait, the connection between the portrayed characters and the author is externally established through the wordplay. The surname of the heroes of the portrait (Louvois) contains, like the surname of the writer herself, a "wolf" component (cf. French Louvois - louve, she-wolf; English homonym Woolf-wolf). Maggie Humm sees in this similarity of surnames an explicit invitation to read this text as "a performative self-portrait of mocking self deflection" (Humm, "Portraits" 98). This observation is relevant here because it underlines the modernist artist's evident presence in the portrait in the role of the constructor of her sitter.

However, I would like to point out another interpretative possibility of these surnames' echoing. If the characters' "wolf" component is associated with their bestial gluttony, on the one hand, unexpected in the bourgeois civilized and urban environment, but on the other hand, anticipated by the exotic natural imagery of the first paragraph, the author's wolfness seems to have a certain Hellenistic mythological allusiveness. "Wolf" is one of the epithets of Apollo, the god of art and artistic inspiration (Apollo of Lyceum, from *lyceios* - "wolfish"). It is notable that being deeply fascinated with Greece, Woolf frequently uses a Hellenistic intertext in her writings. In this portrait, the wolfness seems to have two contrasting dimensions - animal and cultural. Thus, the married couple is portrayed through the second "portrait" - the "portrait" of the artist, who is a point of convergence, where the acts of observation and imagination combine and overlap. In the process of portraiture, a "raw" non-artistic human is transformed into an artistically reflected subject that is dehumanized due to stepping away from conventional verisimilitude into expressive distortion and deformation.

One of the efficient techniques of the modernist subject's dehumanization is blurring the boundary between portrait and still life. In modernist portraits, we can often find additional genre schemes of still life or landscape. For example, Cézanne's portraits, traditionally defined as anti-psychological and similar in many ways with his still lifes (Tobin 8). Cézanne's special "still life" approach to portraiture manifested even in the particular requirements that the artist put forward for his models. He demanded complete immobility from sitters during many hours of sessions.

The trend towards genre contamination of a portrait with a still life can also be found in a literary modernist portrait. For example, Stein calls her literary Cubist still-life prose poems from the collection of verbal "portraits" in *Tender Buttons* (1914). From Stein's perspective, the genre of a portrait is determined not by what or who is depicted, but by the method of depiction. Speaking about the significance of this genre for her works in her lecture "Portraits and Repetition," she writes about "portraits of anything," no matter a person or an object (100). First of all, a portrait for her is a plane, a surface, providing "simple" looking and the experience of things in their immediate existence.

In Stein's writings, we can see a certain parallel between the portrait surface and the image of America as a wide surface without historical depth. In "Portraits and Repetitions," she writes about this ability of contemporary Americans to think about the world without any connection with established contexts:

In short this generation has conceived an intensity of movement so great that it has not to be seen against something else to be known, this generation does not connect itself with anything, that is what makes this generation what it is and that is why it is American... (105)

A "flat" perception of the world is possible where there is no sense of the depth of history, where everything exists and coexists on one surface. For Stein, overcoming memory (including historical memory), connected with the sense of time, is the task of overcoming narrative linearity. Her portraiture destroys linear connections and eliminates the process of remembering that is incompatible with true "pure" existence: "In other words the making of a portrait of any one is as they are existing and as they are existing has nothing to do with remembering any one or anything" ("Portraits" 105). Stein emphasizes that in the process of portraiture, the subject is "carried out" from the

illusory linear narrativity and placed on the surface of “pure” immediate being. Portraiture for the writer means moving away from realistic mimetic vision, removing the illusion of similarity to life, trying to convey the universal schemes of “pure” being, which treats human life not as a linear development, but a being in the “eternal present.” According to Stein’s understanding of portraiture, the immanent features of a portrait are its universality and superindividuality.

Portraying human subjects or non-human objects, Stein treats them in a similar way, negating the distinction between a portrait and a still life. Rejecting the dialectic separation between an object and a person and depicting the animate and the inanimate as ontologically equal are typical of Cubist painting, challenging the difference between a portrait and a still life.

In analyzing the modernist still life approach to portraiture, let us turn to Ezra Pound’s “Portrait d’une femme” (1912):

Your mind and you are our Sargasso Sea,
 London has swept about you this score years
 And bright ships left you this or that in fee:
 Ideas, old gossip, oddments of all things,
 Strange spars of knowledge and dimmed wares of price.
 Great minds have sought you — lacking someone else.
 You have been second always. Tragical?
 No. You preferred it to the usual thing:
 One dull man, dulling and uxorious,
 One average mind — with one thought less, each year.
 Oh, you are patient, I have seen you sit
 Hours, where something might have floated up.
 And now you pay one. Yes, you richly pay (57).

Metaphorically calling the heroine of the poem Sargasso Sea in the first line, the author introduces the image of a motionless “mortifying” surface, correlated with the portrait’s surface. The heroine’s passivity defines her image, turning her into an ideal model for a portrait painter (“Oh, you are patient, I have seen you sit / Hours, where something might have floated up”) (57). Interestingly, this ability of the patient heroine to “sit” for many hours (the verb “to sit” has the meaning “to pose for a painter”) unexpectedly echoes the above-mentioned requirements of Cézanne for his models. Pound constructs the portrait of his aging model through a chain of images of strange old things (oddments of all things; dimmed wares of price; the tarnished, gaudy, wonderful old work; idols and ambergris and rare inlays; your riches; your great store; deciduous things; strange woods half sodden), which, like the wreckage of ships, have been accumulating around her. In this technique of “dismembering” the portrayed person into disconnected elements, we can recognize the general orientation of modernist portraiture towards the fragmentation of the model, turning it into “nature morte.” This irrevocable fusion of the subject with the environment is clearly emphasized in the final lines of the poem, which simultaneously affirm (“Yet this is you”) and cancel the very possibility of the subject’s portrait representation:

Strange woods half sodden, and new brighter stuff:
 In the slow float of differing light and deep,
 No! there is nothing! In the whole and all,
 Nothing that’s quite your own.
 Yet this is you (58).

A similar continuity of space between the portrayed model and the background can be observed in the poem “Portrait in Greys” (1917) by William Carlos Williams. This literary portrait depicts the poet’s wife, Florence, as inseparable from a grey landscape that represents the absolute confluence of interior and exterior spaces:

Will it never be possible
to separate you from your greyness?
Must you be always sinking backward
into your grey-brown landscapes—and trees
always in the distance, always against/a grey sky? (99).

The grey landscape is both the internal “space” of the person being portrayed and the external portrait surface, referring to the chameleon-like modernist subjectivity that is involved in an endless process of transformation.

The trend to blur the border between portrait, still life, and landscape manifests in “Portrait 3” from the above-mentioned series of portraits by Virginia Woolf (“Portraits” 238). The model of this portrait is a French, solid-looking peasant woman. Here the writer rather gives a “reflection of a reflection,” an “image of an image,” building her verbal portrait as a description of a potentially existing pictorial portrait, created in postimpressionist style. Woolf’s model is emphatically simplified. Her brightly lit face without shadows is “painted” with warm vivid primary colors red and yellow:

She was sitting in the sun. She had no hat. The light fixed her. There was no shadow. Her face was yellow and red; round too; a fruit on a body; another apple, only not on a plate. Breasts had formed apple-hard under the blouse on her body (238).

This description activates our mental vision and recalls the extreme simplicity of Van Gogh’s color scheme, which he got by reducing the usual palette to primary colors. Then the woman’s silhouette begins to transform into natural objects around her. Behind the round outlines of her face and chest, the author, looking at the model, sees the roundness of an apple, the shape of her eyes corresponds to leaves, and the roughness of the whole image is compared to the tree bark.

It is noteworthy that the effect of the traditional selfhood’s dissolution in Cézanne’s and Van Gogh’s portraits is achieved, among other techniques of their visual languages, by eliminating the distinction between foreground and background. Activating background, they dehumanize their models, establishing an ontological equivalence of human and non-human components of the environment. The similar principle of a portrait merging with the landscape elements is found also in Woolf’s portrait “The Frenchwoman in the Train,” in which Maggie Humm sees an echo of Van Gogh’s portraits of peasant women (*Modernist Women* 4). Behind the portrait description of Madame Alphonse, a French woman with yellow teeth and large earrings, the entire “landscape” of the French tradition emerges in various material signs (the olives of Provence, the sounds of the Mediterranean Sea, language of Molière, baskets of grapes, ducks in wicker cages, ice cream in cornets, men playing boules by a plane tree) (Woolf, “Portraits” 239). Superindividual characteristics begin to appear behind individual traits, interrogating the concept of individualistic selfhood, disconnected from the “external” world. The elements of the immediate and observable environment act here not as a portrait background, but as a means of overcoming the individualistic subject.

Moreover, this portrait reads as a self-reference to the writer’s pivotal essay “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” (1924), in which she reflects on the impossibility of an objective portrait, as the way the subject is presented differs from artist to artist. Exemplifying her arguments about the inevitable subjectivity of portraiture with the case of Mrs. Brown, an unknown fellow-passenger, Woolf underlines that an artist’s creative consciousness in its turn is conditioned by national literary tradition (“A French writer would rub out all that; he would sacrifice the individual Mrs. Brown to give a more general view of human nature; to make a more abstract, proportioned, and harmonious whole”) (10). In this claim, we observe the above-mentioned trend of a modernist portrait to merge the boundaries between a model and an artist. In the process of portraiture, based on complex intersubjectivity, Woolf underlines the status of modernist selfhood as an act of construction, a narrative process rather than a stable essence.

III. An Intermedial *Dialogue* with Visual Art

Being highly self-reflexive and focused on the crises of representation, literary modernist “portraits” are often constructed through a dialogue with paintings. Examples of this trend toward cross-mediality are remarkably numerous. For instance, in “Letters on Cézanne” (“Briefe über Cézanne,” 1907), Rainer Maria Rilke mentions his special fascination with the artist’s portraits and the influence of Impressionist portraiture on the language of some of his poems (52). He even tried to translate into a verbal form two of Cézanne’s portraits (a portrait of the artist’s wife in a red armchair and one of his early self-portraits), which impressed him with their treatment of individuals as “purely visual objects” (Bridge, 681, 685). Some of Rilke’s poems can be easily read as ekphrastic translations of paintings into poetry. For example, the poem “Balcony” (Der Balkon, 1907) is created as a poetic quotation of a group portrait by Edouard Manet in his painting “Le Balcon” (1868). Speaking about the direct dialogue between literary and pictorial modernists’ portraits, we might turn to Charles Baudelaire’s poem “Portrait” (“Le portrait”) with its central image of a dying beloved, echoing Manet’s portrait of Jeanne Duval. Emilie Sitzia remarks that these two portraits “unveil the double relationship between Manet and Baudelaire,” as well as “between text and image” (150). From her point of view, these portraits emerge in the process of a fruitful collaboration, in the context of which Manet uses the poet’s theoretical underpinning to create his portraits while Baudelaire employs the artist’s images to write his portrait poem.

It is noteworthy that modernist reflection on the portrait genre was not limited by a dialogue with its contemporary pictorial portraiture. Consider, for example, the poem “Portrait of a Lady” (1920) by William Carlos Williams. The title refers to a certain genre portrait scheme, the main component of which is a model’s emphasized dignity and outfit, corresponding to the social status of “lady.” In this portrait poem, Williams marks a specific artistic tradition, with which he enters into a parodic game, mentioning French painters Jean-Antoine Watteau and Jean Honoré Fragonard. These two names evoke the Rococo tradition: Watteau is considered the first significant master of Rococo painting, while Fragonard is often regarded as the last major painter of this style. Rococo art presented a whole gallery of ladies’ portraits, distinguished by genteel sentimentality, and sophisticated, coquettish, seductive femininity, decorated with the finest lace and silk.

Williams’s “Portrait” opens with a playfully erotic comparison of female thighs with apple trees:

Your thighs are apple trees
 whose blossoms touch the sky.
 Which sky? The sky
 where Watteau hung a lady’s
 slipper. Your knees
 are a southern breeze — or
 a gust of snow. Agh! what
 sort of man was Fragonard?
 — as if that answered
 anything. Ah, yes — below
 the knees, since the tune
 drops that way, it is
 one of those white summer days,
 the tall grass of your ankles
 flickers upon the shore —
 Which shore? —
 the sand clings to my lips —
 Which shore? (129)

Portraiture’s conventional emphasis on a face is parodically shifted to an anonymous and traditionally taboo part of a female body. The parodic essence of this metaphoric comparison of female

charms with the beauty of natural objects is marked by hyperbolization, turning legs into tall trees and enlarging the female image to a monstrous size. The parodization of the erotic imagery is reinforced in the line, where a polemical “voice” interrupts this description with the unexpected question “Which sky?” The answer to this question reveals the intertextual nature of the previous image (“The sky /where Watteau hung a lady’s slipper”) (Williams, “Portrait” 129). The sky turns out to be a Rococo painted sky. We understand that the poem is a poetic ekphrastic description of a scene from Fragonard’s painting “The Swing” (1795), featuring a pink coquette on a swing, her shoe flying in the sky, and a male beloved to whom this gesture is addressed. Taking into account the obviousness of this apparent allusion to Fragonard’s painting, it remains unclear why Watteau is pointed to as the author of the scene with a lady’s slipper hanging in the sky. It seems that this confusion of the artists’ names is a kind of literary game that corresponds to the Rococo masquerade with its disguised identities.

Questions occur throughout the text, interrupting the flow of the poem’s erotic imagery with their direct interrogation. The metaphoric description of the ankles, which are like “tall grass,” flickering “upon the shore,” is broken in on by the question “on which shore?” that is obsessively repeated, disturbing the poetic flow (Williams, “Portrait,” 129). Within the portrait, there is a deliberate inconsistency and disharmony, caused by this interrogating voice cutting off the chain of erotic metaphors that are used to create a verbal rococo-style portrait of the lady. The “voice” that stubbornly asks the same question (“which shore?”) is ignored by the poet’s “voice” that delivers a metaphorical description. The playful sophistication of the erotic imagery is parodically reduced through this importunate interrogation, that can be associated with the reader or the model. This “argument” hampers the process of portraiture showing the gap between the real model and the artistic formation of her portraiture identity.

The poem has a ring structure, as it ends with the repetitive image of an apple tree from the opening line. Thus, the “portrait” imitates a curl, which is a conceptual style-forming component of Rococo. But in the final line, the image of apple tree petals appears in the context of the disturbing “argument” (“Which shore?/I said petals from an apple tree”) (Williams, “Portrait” 129). As a result, the Rococo-like composition itself becomes the object of a parodic game.

The absence of the heroine’s face in “Portrait of a Lady” is remarkable. We see here another example of a modernist faceless portrait, in which the subject’s face is displaced by her heavily eroticized body. All her metaphorically named charms belong to the lower bodily stratum, which corresponds to the cult of sensual pleasures and refined eroticism of Rococo aesthetics. However, the lack of any imagery associated with the heroine’s face might be read as a reference to Rococo portraiture with its trend of stylizing a natural face, transforming it into a kind of artificial mask (it is not a coincidence that a mask is a frequent attribute of Rococo portraits). In this context, the very process of portraiture is rather about performing and constructing than revealing identity. Interestingly, in “Antoine Watteau” Marcel Proust creates a poetic description of the artist’s pictorial language, describing faces as hidden under uncertain masks (“sous son masque incertain”) and transformed by twilight (“Crépuscule grimant les arbres et les faces”) (81). The underlined artificiality of Rococo portraiture, featuring a human face as ephemeral and mask-like, echoes modernist portraiture with its trend to blur and deform its subject’s face.

In fact, Williams’s “Portrait of a Lady” turns out to be a kind of “anti-portrait.” Through the intertextual appeal to Rococo pictorial imagery, the poet reveals the artificiality of the portraiture process and shows the conditionality of artistic language through the lenses of which the identity is constructed. Ironically, he displays that the portrayed subject is very different from the sitter, who is hampering the process with her annoying questions, revealing a gap between a real person and a constructed portrait image. The poem shows how the portrait of the lady turns into a “portrait of the artist” (Watteau, Fragonard, and Williams, who are involved in the ironic and cross-media dialogue).

IV. Modernist Portraiture and the Concept of Subjectivity

All these examples show that the modernist portrait challenges the Cartesian subject as a crucial product of bourgeois ideology. Promoting new approaches to subjectivity, in modernist portraits painters and writers reconceptualized the notion of an individual as an autonomous, coherent free agent, characterized by unity and distinctiveness. Being the most mimetic art form, that assumes recognition and likeness as basic conditions of its genre definition, the portrait turns out to be the conceptual field where the modernist revolt against realistic resemblance that is claimed to be the true representation of authentic reality becomes most obvious. At the heart of modernist portraiture is a fundamental change in the notion of the subject, who is conceptualized now as fragmented, decentralized, unfixed, and with blurred identity borders. Struggling to free an individual from traditional limiting understanding and focusing on new concepts of selfhood, modernist literary and pictorial portraits reveal that the self is a human-created construction. Defining the goal of modernist portraiture, Pawlikowska quotes a French writer, poet, and visual artist, Antonin Artaud: "Why does an artist distort? Because the model is nothing in itself; only the result, only all the model implies, only everything which, through the mode, can be said to be pulsating, vibrating, anguished or assuaged in life" (25). However, dealing with the unconventionality of a modernist portrait from the point of view of realist aesthetics, we should rather talk about the deformation of realistic portrait vision than "distortion" of the model. We are aware of the innovativeness of modernist portraits, with their non-indexical stance, against the background of realistic portraits.

Featuring subjects as not equal to themselves, a modernist portrait in a certain sense activates the memory of the genre. Archaic portraits appeared in the context of burial rites, serving as ritualistic substitutes for the dead. Their function was not to give a recognizable image of a person, through fixing their individuality, but to guarantee their presence in the eternal cosmic structure. For example, speaking about Egyptian mummy portraits, J. Taylor remarks that "the image of the deceased which these substitutes perpetuated was an idealized one, representing an immortal being endowed with the quality of divinity; it was not intended to recall the appearance of the deceased in life, and hence an authentic likeness was rarely attempted" (9). Egyptian portrait panels had a direct influence on modernist portraits by Matisse and André Derain (Challis, 234). It seems that in the twentieth century, this understanding of portraiture's ontological "increment," revealing the inequality of a portrayed person to himself, encourages the innovative language of the portrait, which seems to be deeply connected with archaic elements of the genre memory.

The generalized nature of archaic portraits should not be regarded as the mere result of artistic "ineptness." It was conditioned by an intention to focus on a superindividual timeless concept of a person's existence. Genetically, the portrait is not determined by the task of creating an illusion of visible reality. The main purpose of the archaic portrait is not to "limit" a person through emphasizing individual features, but to "open," extend a person with the help of portraiture. Apparently, the interest of some modernist artists in the African mask, the influence of which is obvious, for example, in portraits by Picasso, Modigliani, and sculptures by Brancusi, is somehow connected to the genetic memory of the portrait, which goes back to a funeral mask.

In this context, let us recall the history of the creation of Stein's portrait painted by Picasso in 1906. The writer came to the artist's studio for multiple posing sessions (about eighty in total). However, after all these hours of work, he erased the portrait's face. Later, Picasso painted Stein's face without any sittings, making it look like an Iberian mask. Picasso replied to critics, who noted the dissimilarity between the portrait and the model, that this did not matter because in the future Stein would resemble a portrait. As evident from this anecdote, told by Stein in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, a portrait's mimetic resemblance to a model was perceived by Picasso as an obstacle to portraiture (12).

Rejecting the concept of likeness and interrogating the subject's borders, modernist portraits encourage us to rethink the very notion of this genre. On the one hand, indeed, the portrait as a highly mimetic genre played a significant role in the construction of the idea of individualism, individuality, and individual. On the other hand, it is in the context of this genre that these concepts were challenged. Exploring the broad history of the portrait as a dynamic, cross-media process enables us to see that the development of portraiture is inseparable from reflections on subjectivity and the evolution of sociocultural ideas about selfhood and the manner of its construction.

Huaqiao University, China

Notes

- ¹ For more on Cocteau's faceless portraits see, for example, David Hammerbeck, "Jean Cocteau, Orphee, and the Shock of the Old", 175.
- ² For more on this, see Willard Eugene Bohn, *Apollinaire and the Faceless Man: The Creation and Evolution of a Modern Motif* (1991).
- ³ For more on the rivalry between painting and photography see, for example, Diarmuid Costello, *On Photography: A Philosophical Inquiry*, 13.
- ⁴ For more on the concept of the dehumanization of modern art see José Ortega y Gasset, "The Dehumanization of Art", 1-50.

Works Cited

- Bohn, Willard Eugene. *Apollinaire and the Faceless Man: The Creation and Evolution of a Modern Motif*. Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 1991.
- Bridge, Helen. "Rilke and the Modern Portrait." *Modern Language Review*, Vol. 99, No. 3 (July), 2004, 681-695. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3738995>
- Challis, Debbie. "What's in a Face? Mummy Portrait Panels and Identity in Museum Display." *Histories of Egyptology: Interdisciplinary Measures*. Ed. W. Carruthers. Routledge, 2015, 227-254.
- Costello, Diarmuid. *On Photography: A Philosophical Inquiry*. Routledge, 2018.
- Foucault, Michael. *This is Not a Pipe*, trans. J. Harkness. California UP, 1983.
- Hammerbeck, David. "Jean Cocteau, Orphée, and the Shock of the Old." *Brill's Companion to the Reception of Classics in International Modernism and the Avant-Garde*. Brill, 2016, 160-181.
- Haselstein, Ulla. "Gertrude Stein's Portraits of Matisse and Picasso." *New Literary History*, Vol. 34, No. 4, 2003, 723-743.
- Humm, Maggie. *Modernist Women and Visual Cultures: Virginia Woolf, Vanessa Bell, Photography and Cinema*. Rutgers UP, 2003.
- . "Virginia Woolf's "Portraits" and Photography." *Woolf Studies Annual*, Vol. 8. 2002, 93-106.
- Loy, Mina. *Auto - Facial - Construction*. Sociétaire du Salon d'Automne Paris. Tipografia Giuntina, 1919.
- Ortega y Gasset, José. *The Dehumanization of Art and Other Writings on Art and Culture*. Anchor Books, 1956.
- Pausch, Holger A. "The Face of Modernity." *Modernism*. Vol. 1. Ed. A. Eysteinnsson, V. Liska. John Benjamins, 2007, 347-364.
- Pawlikowska, Kamila. *Anti-Portraits: Poetics of the Face in Modern English, Polish and Russian Literature (1835-1965)*, Brill, 2015.
- Pound, Ezra. "Portrait d'une femme." *Personae: The Shorter Poems of Ezra Pound*. New Directions, 1990, 57-58.
- Proust, Marcel. "Antoine Watteau." *Les Plaisirs et les jours*. Gallimard, 1971, 81.
- Rilke, Rainer Maria. *Letters on Cézanne*. Fromm International, 1985.

- Sitzia, Emilie. *Art in Literature, Literature in Art in 19th Century France*. Cambridge Scholars, 2012.
- Stein, Gertrude. *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, Vintage, 1990.
- . “Matisse.” *Writings, 1903-1932*. Library of America, 1998, 37- 44.
- . “Picasso.” *Writings, 1903-1932*. Library of America, 1998, 45-49.
- . “Portraits and Repetition.” *Writings and Lectures 1909-1945*. Ed. P. Meyerowitz. Penguin, 1971, 99-124.
- Taylor, John H. “Before the Portraits: Burial Practices in Pharaonic Egypt.” *Ancient Faces: Mummy Portraits from Roman Egypt*, British Museum, 1997, 9-13.
- Tobin, Claudia. *Modernism and Still Life: Artists, Writers, Dancers*. Edinburgh UP, 2020.
- Williams, William Carlos. “Portrait in Greys.” *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams. 1909-1939*. Vol. 1, Ed. A. W. Litz, Charles MacGowan. New Directions, 1986, 99.
- . “Portrait of a Lady.” *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams. 1909-1939*. Vol. 1, Ed. A. W. Litz, Charles MacGowan. New Directions, 1986, 129.
- Woolf, Virginia. “Portraits.” *A Haunted House. The Complete Shorter Fiction*. Vintage, 2003, 236-240.
- . *Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown*, The Hogarth Press, 1924.