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Elisa Segnini, *Fragments, Genius and Madness: Masks and Mask-Making in the fin-de-siècle Imagination*  
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Elisa Segnini's hot-off-the-press monograph does not aim at filling an insulated gap in scholarship on *fin-de-siècle* culture and literature, but rather at connecting pre-existing dots which ultimately gesture towards a broader picture. The book's *raison d'être* resides in a fascination with a curious happenstance of two seemingly unrelated events in the last decades of the nineteenth century: the rise of the paradigm of regression in the socio-cultural debate on the one hand, and the appearance of masks in sculpture, theatre and literature on the other.

Armed with notions drawn from medical, anthropological, sociological and aesthetic discourses, Segnini sets out to scrutinise several cultural artifacts from a vast and diverse roster of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century authors, in which masks are featured as objects, tropes and even symbolic structures. Segnini is primarily interested in how, in these texts, the presence of masks may nod to manifold instances of regression such as "madness and the return of the repressed, genius as a form of atavism, sexual inversion as symptom of arrested development, and barbarism as a response to cultural exhaustion" (p. 2). The wide-ranging approach of the book, which also engages with recent debates in decadence and early modernist studies, openly challenges the "abrupt separation between authors associated with the 'half-mock interlude of decadence' and those considered exponents of symbolism, and thus part of early modernism" (p. 13).

Segnini's understanding of degeneration is drawn from the work of French psychiatrist Bénédict Morel, who described it as "a pathological deviation from the norm, a state that could be inherited and that was discernible through physical signs" (p. 2). By the same token, the author also engages with the theories of Cesare Lombroso, the Italian anthropologist who, by applying the Darwinian concept of atavism to his own study of criminality, pointed out a correlation between physical signs and mental issues in relation to regression and degeneracy, and further suggested that criminality, madness and genius were all closely related.

Max Nordau's influential *Degeneration* (1892) was indebted to Lombroso's own study of genius. Convinced that the level development of a society was documented by its artistic output, and that European city dwellers were exhausted by overpopulation and increased industrialisation, Nordau scoured the works of symbolists, aesthetes and decadents in search of their "pathological character" (p. 3), which frequently resulted in the blurring and effacement of gender categories through masks and costumes. In light of this, Segnini turns to contemporary psychiatrists such as Richard von Krafft-Ebing and Valentin Magnan, in whose studies on sexuality any deviation from heterosexual genital intercourse was promptly classified as perversion and, as such, a form of "regression on the phylogenetic

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ladder" (*ibidem*). Segnini shows how each of these sexologists stressed the importance that masks and costumes played for subjects suffering from sexual inversion, and how the paradigm of regression persisted even when psychoanalysis connected sexual deviance to childhood experiences, as happened with Sigmund Freud's theories on narcissism.

Masks, as Segnini notes, are crucial in the *fin-de-siècle* imagination because they served as perfect vessels to encapsulate both the excitement about a new age and anxieties about disintegration, thus "functioning at once as anachronistic objects and as icons of modernity" (p. 6). Their disturbing potential was not only sexual and temporal, but also geographical: at that time, many believed that Western culture was caught in an *impasse* and was in dire need of a renewal which might be enhanced through the contact with artifacts from the non-Western world. This explains both decadents and modernists' interest in, and fascination with, masks from North Africa and East Asia that challenged the Western subject and its statute.

Segnini further draws on Freud to argue that, in these texts, masks function as both uncanny and fetishistic objects, disturbing but ever so alluring. By invoking Jacques Lacan's notion of the gaze as a practice conducive to the uncanny, Segnini stresses how the interaction with the mask always entails a confrontation with the Other where "the dichotomy between self and other is challenged by the recognition of Otherness as component of the very self" (p. 12). Since masks are essentially the reproduction of a face, and thus a single part of the whole body, Segnini also frames masks as fragments and links them to the *pars-pro-toto* debate which animated the decadent discourse and characterised its style.

After mapping out the theoretical groundwork, the first chapter proceeds to offer an overview of the discussions around masks in late nineteenth century. Building from Martin Heidegger's distinction between 'objects' and 'things', Segnini relates the multifarious shapes and functions taken by masks across disciplines and cultures. The author highlights how, in their early stages, anthropology, physiognomy and ethnography often overlapped and occasionally interpolated each other's advancements. As a result, the mask emerges as an item which is, in turn, a material artifact, a medical tool and an artistic object, its potentialities put to display in the popular panoptica which attracted mass audience. In relaying the mask's history and functional evolution, Segnini is acutely aware of the double force at work: whereas the death masks of famous men and artists celebrated the features of the 'genius', the same practice was used to reduce the facial characteristics of ill people and prisoners to icons of deviancy.

At the end of the nineteenth century, the mask was no longer a funerary object as in Ancient Egypt and Greece, and neither the theatrical prop of Greek and Japanese theatre. As its function changed, so did its meaning: embedded into the discourses of contemporary art and philosophy, from Picasso to Nietzsche and Schopenhauer, the mask developed its potential for liminality and acquired a newer function as "portrait for the inner self" (p. 30), turning from utilitarian artifact (that is, an object) into a trope for conveying the perplexing paradoxes of modernity (a thing).

Chapter 2 is perhaps the most daring and textually dense of the whole book. Here, Segnini engages with the gothic trope of the portrait as a masterpiece that gradually draws the life out of its subject. Through four transnational and transmedial case studies, the author argues that, as masks substitute paintings, this trope is now infused by a gendered practice, as well as a form of cultural appropriation. Segnini begins by reviewing the works of James Ensor, a Belgian painter enamoured with the folklore and the traditional car-

nival of his Flemish hometown. In one of his paintings, *Self Portrait with Masks* (1899), which also dons the cover of this monograph, the author is surrounded by a masked flock. Though coming from different places and traditions of the world, these masks all bear a striking similarity with the human skulls featured at the top of the painting. Ensor, as Segnini maintains, had begun deconstructing the dichotomy of mask and face, ultimately replacing it with one of masks and skulls. Influenced by the advancements of physiognomy and personal turmoil, carnival masks ultimately highlighted the inner features of the dreadful humanity and the enormity of deformations of the surrounding society (p. 44).

The fascination with the masks of the Flemish carnival is also present in the plays of Fernand Crommelynck, which have often been dubbed as theatrical transpositions of Ensor's paintings. In Crommelynck's work, masks and sculptures reflect the alterity of femininity as well as the otherness of death (p. 54). Though the Belgian dramatist focused on elements of the West, Segnini acknowledges that the same elements that fascinated his Parisian audiences can also be found in Japanese theatre and its masks. In keeping with this, the author reflects on the presence and function of masks in Nō theatre by referring to a play by Kido Okamoto, while also highlighting the influence of Japanophilia in Europe through a review of August Rodin's series of sculptures modelled on the Japanese actress Hanako. From this complex web of references, masks and mask-making emerge as the exemplification of an encounter with the Other in which the Western clashes with the non-Western, men confront themselves with women, and life is contrasted by death.

Chapter 3 shifts the focus to the articulation of modern sexuality in relation to the paradigm of regression via a retracing of Oscar Wilde's *Picture of Dorian Gray* as an intertext in two stories by Max Beerbohm and John Le Gallienne. In both texts, written after Wilde's trials, masks are featured as fetishistic objects tightly related to the protagonist's narcissism. Segnini develops her argument by sifting both authors' lives, highlighting how the two were initially attracted by – and subsequently critical of – Wilde's dandyism. Her detailed readings show how the two authors borrowed and ultimately inverted *Dorian Gray*'s structure and themes, supplanting the original homosocial context with heterosexual romances in which, however, traces and expressions of the non-normative are conveyed through masks and disguises.

Chapter 4 further expands on the regressive quality of fetishism and narcissism by investigating the novels and dramas of Gabriele D'Annunzio. Segnini offers new readings of the famous novel *Il fuoco* (1900), as well as fresh perspectives on lesser-known works such as the plays *La città morta* (1898), *La Gioconda* and *La Gloria* (both 1899). The author invokes the theories of French psychologist Alfred Binet, and even goes so far as to suggest that, in some measure, D'Annunzio's articulation of fetishism seems to prefigure Sigmund Freud's later contribution on the topic. In D'Annunzio's novels and dramas, the author sustains, the uncanny and sexually transgressive nature of the masks "challenge[s] the texts' explicit emphasis on hyper-masculinity" (p. 96). While acknowledging the obvious influence of Nietzsche, Segnini does not fail to notice how all of D'Annunzio's male *Übermenschen*, so convinced of the importance of their artistic and political mission, "suffer from a nervous condition, are effeminate, and display an excessive focus on the self" (p. 118). And this is perfectly in line with the symptoms of degeneration outlined by Lombroso and Nordau.

Combining the intertextual imprint of Chapter 3 and the close-up nature of Chapter 4, Chapter 5 examines the presence of masks in Jean Lorrain's fiction. Segnini takes a closer look at his short story collection *Histoire des masques* (1900) and his novel *Monsieur de*

*Phocas* (1901), suggesting that his work is equally informed by the imagery of E.T.A. Hoffmann, Marcel Schwob and James Ensor, as well as by the contemporary debates on historical decline and non-normative sexual practices. Through the attentive readings of stories in which masks are always at centre stage but in a different fashion at every turn, the author argues for the queerness of Lorrain's masks. Segnini's understanding of queerness consists in a patent resistance to both the politics of signification and the heteronormative societal norms. By constantly widening the gap between signifier and signified, or even refusing to 'signify' anything, Lorrain's unstable and queer masks "challenge notions of 'natural' sexuality and foreground gender and sexuality as individual performances" (p. 140).

Lastly, Chapter 6 attempts to draw a connection between two modernist milestones, Hugo von Hofmannsthal's *Andreas* (1907-1932) and Andrei Bely's *Petersburg* (1916). The two novels do not share much in terms of plot but, as Segnini suggests, they do have some common points in their use of the mask as a symbolic *leitmotif* which gestures towards the period's preoccupation with degeneration. Segnini notices how both novels dilate time through fantasies and dreams that blur the boundaries between facts and imagination, a well-known and established modernist quirk, no doubt, that is here enriched thanks to the respective characters' features. In both *Andreas* and *Petersburg*, in fact, the two protagonists are decadent scions suffering from neurosis and unable to properly relate with the opposite sex. Both figures, as Segnini asserts, experience a dissociation of the self that results in the proliferation of masks and doubles wherein the paradigm of regression finds an echo.

Segnini's aim is undoubtedly ambitious and the result is a sprawling effort, 'comparative' in the truest sense of the word. The author keeps steady command of her arguments while navigating and scrutinising several artifacts from different cultures, though of course each case study shows its own fine tuning. Throughout the chapters there are recurring themes, ideas, and names. One particular item, however, stands out: the *Inconnue de la Seine*, a plaster cast of a young woman drowned in Paris which, according to the legend, was made in 1880s in order to identify the victim at the morgue. Her features are too soft and well preserved to resemble a drowned person, but nonetheless the object became widely popular, and several copies appeared in the home of various artists and writers, as well in their stories, as was the case with Le Gallienne and Lorrain. If Ensor's *Self Portrait*, which dominates the book cover, merely testifies to the existence of a wide variety of masks, the *Inconnue* is the real totemic figure of this study, with her uncanny gaze which seduces, inspires and perplexes at the same time.