

Trinity University

## Digital Commons @ Trinity

---

Modern Languages and Literatures Faculty  
Research

Modern Languages and Literatures Department

---

1992

### Reference and Resemblance in the Seventeenth-Century Literary Portrait

Nina Ekstein

Trinity University, nekstein@trinity.edu

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/mlf\\_faculty](https://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/mlf_faculty)



Part of the [Modern Languages Commons](#)

---

#### Repository Citation

Ekstein, N. (1992). Reference and resemblance in the seventeenth-century literary portrait. *Studi Francesi*, 36(106), 9-20.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Modern Languages and Literatures Department at Digital Commons @ Trinity. It has been accepted for inclusion in Modern Languages and Literatures Faculty Research by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Trinity. For more information, please contact [jcostanz@trinity.edu](mailto:jcostanz@trinity.edu).

## *Reference and Resemblance in the Seventeenth-Century Literary Portrait*

The history of portraiture, in both literature and the graphic arts, reaches back to antiquity. This art was perhaps most highly developed in seventeenth-century France, where the form branched out in numerous directions. In the social sphere, verbal portraiture became the basis of a fashionable salon game. Diplomatic portraits were widely employed in political dealings. The popularity of painted portraits was widespread, and gave rise to such trends as the portrait-miniature and the depiction of individuals as mythological figures. In the domain of literature, the development of portrait forms was especially rich. The use of the portrait in the novel gradually gained ground throughout the century, reaching a peak in Madeleine de Scudéry's *Le Grand Cyrus* (1649-53) and *Clélie* (1654-61). Portrait collections were in vogue as well: 1659 saw the publication of the *Divers Portraits* (associated with M<sup>lle</sup> de Montpensier) and the two competing editions of the *Recueil des Portraits et Eloges*. In the years that followed, the portrait appeared in virtually all of the diverse written forms that the seventeenth century invented<sup>1</sup>. Concurrently, written portraits were a frequent object of parody, satire, and criticism<sup>2</sup>. In the final years of the century, after gradually waning in popularity, the portrait returned in a somewhat different form in La Bruyère's *Caractères*<sup>3</sup>.

I intend to focus in this study on the question of referentiality in the seventeenth-century literary portrait. I want to examine the textual and contextual cues which encourage the reader to assume that there is a referent, an actual person to whom the text refers (as opposed to a fictional character)<sup>4</sup>. It is surprising how pervasive is the assumption of such referentiality, especially when contrasted

(1) The most well-known examples of literary portraiture are found in Bussy-Rabutin's *Histoire amoureuse des Gaules*, Molière's *Misanthrope*, the memoirs of the Cardinal de Retz and Saint-Simon, the letters of M<sup>me</sup> de Sévigné, and Boussuet's funeral orations.

(2) These include Sorel's *Berger extravagant* and *Description de l'isle de la portraiture*, Scarron's self-portrait, Desmarets de Saint-Sorlin's *Visionnaires*, Furetière's *Roman bourgeois*, and Boileau's *Dialogue des heros du roman*.

(3) It is not my intent here to write a history of the portrait. The most thorough discussions of the development of the portrait in seventeenth-

century France are to be found in E. HARTH, *Ideology and Culture in Seventeenth-Century France*, Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 1983; P. GANTER, *Das literarische Porträt in Frankreich im 17. Jahrhundert*, 1939, Nedeln, Lichtenstein, Kraus Reprint Limited, 1967; and especially, J. PLANTIÉ, *La Mode du Portrait littéraire en France dans la société mondaine (1641-1681)*, diss., Université de Paris IV, 1975.

(4) The Larousse *Dictionnaire de linguistique* defines a referent as follows: « On appelle référent ce à quoi renvoie un signe linguistique dans la réalité extra-linguistique telle qu'elle est découpée par l'expérience d'un groupe humain ».

with the broad range of forces (both formal and contextual) that undermine referential connections. But pervasive it is; in fact it is no exaggeration to speak of a virtual « reflex of referentiality ». My discussion will thus center on the tensions between the assumption of referentiality in the written portrait and those forces which oppose the connections between text and reality. As illustrations, I will use primarily the collections of portraits from 1659<sup>5</sup> and the novels of M<sup>lle</sup> de Scudéry, central texts in the development of the literary portrait in seventeenth-century France.

The use of a proper name provides the simplest cue for the referentiality of a portrait. If a portrait is identified as depicting an actual named individual, it is obvious that a referential association is automatic and appropriate. A context may be equally forceful in signaling referentiality. In the situation of the salon game of portraiture, portraits are necessarily referential, whether the object is named or whether the name is omitted, resulting in an enigma<sup>6</sup>. The assumption of referentiality carries over into the collections of 1659, a series of portraits which have their origins in the salon game. A number of these portraits are designated by a pseudonym. Within the social circles of the period, pseudonyms are both extremely common and transparent to those who belong to the group in which the portrait originates. A pseudonym need only be decoded to reveal the real-world referent. In moving from the narrower world of the salon to the broader one of politics, the referential nature of the portrait is even stronger. The real-world, historical status of diplomatic reports, memoirs, letters, and official accounts commissioned by the king dictates and insures that the portraits these texts contain are viewed as clearly referential.

Therefore, both in the salon game and the forms derived from it, and in the historical or semi-historical document, context reinforces an assumption of referentiality. As we have seen in the case of the salon, context also makes it possible for the claim of referentiality to be divorced from the proper name. The fictional name does not mask the true identity.

The habits of understanding the portrait as referential and of reading the real name for the pseudonym constitute ideal preparation for the *roman à clef*. It is the *sine qua non* of the genre that characters in such novels refer to living individuals. Portraits in *romans à clef* are thus a privileged site of extra-literary reference. The transparency of such portraits, of course, can vary considerably, but there is a natural urge on the reader's part to attempt to identify the referent. In fact, there seems to have been a powerful inclination at the time to read all novels as though they were *à clef*, regardless of the author's pronouncements on the subject. Roland Barthes explains the tendency to link characters to real individuals as an aspect of the personalized nature of seventeenth-century society<sup>7</sup>. The assumption of referentiality was certainly applied to Bussy-Rabutin's *Histoire amoureuse des Gaules*: the author was exiled to his château in Burgundy because the portraits in his novel were believed to refer to specific individuals. The boundary between the social world of existents and the more ambiguous literary universe is thus often seamless, and the assumption of referentiality carries over into realm of fiction.

Referentiality in the seventeenth-century literary portrait can not be discus-

(5) M<sup>lle</sup> de Montpensier's *Divers portraits* and the two editions of the *Recueil des portraits et éloges* are combined in E. BARTHELEMY's edition, *La Galerie de Portraits*, Paris, Didier, 1860.

(6) On the portrait as enigma, see HARTH, *op. cit.*, p. 104 and PLANTIÉ, *op. cit.*, pp. 269-70.

(7) *La Bruyère*, in *Essais critiques*, Paris, Seuil, 1964, p. 229.

sed apart from the notion of resemblance. That an adequate resemblance between living person and written portrait is possible is an assumption typical of the seventeenth-century, in which human character was believed to be stable and subject to summarization (e.g., in a catalogue of traits)<sup>8</sup>. Furthermore, in the conceptual framework of Michel Foucault's classical episteme, the medium of the written portrait – language – is perceived to be transparent and appropriate to full and complete representation<sup>9</sup>. Unlike nineteenth-century realism, which focuses on producing the illusion of reality<sup>10</sup>, writing of the seventeenth-century assumes a direct relationship between words and reality. Thus for there to be resemblance, there must logically and necessarily be referentiality to an individual outside of and preceding the portrait.

As a concept, resemblance has strong ties to the notion of *vraisemblance*. While the relationship between portraitee and portrait is believed to be virtually direct during the seventeenth-century, and a series of events is considered *vraisemblable* because they *might*, rather than did, occur, in fact both resemblance and *vraisemblance* rely heavily on the mediation of conventions grounded in the dominant ideology of the period<sup>11</sup>.

Beyond the seventeenth-century conception of the adequacy of language, expectations about narrative form also contribute to the assumption of referentiality in written portraiture. To the extent that a portrait is divorced from the narrative context in which it occurs (or if there is no narrative context), it will seem to refer to a real individual outside the text. This accounts for the general assumption that the portraits in the collections of 1659, whether named or anonymous, refer to someone specific: they have no narrative context whatsoever. At the opposite end of the spectrum are novels such as *L'Astrée*. The brief portraits found therein do not seem to elicit the automatic response of searching for contemporary models; rather the depictions are integrated into or at the service of the narrative. A mixed case is found in the novels of M<sup>lle</sup> de Scudéry: here there is a narrative context, but the connections between the portraits and the narrative action are minimal. The traits described find no source or continuation within the story line, and the portrait consequently seems independent of the context, thus suggesting the existence of an extra-textual referent.

The contemporary understanding of the nature of language and narrative was crucial to the development of an assumption of referentiality. However, extra-literary cues also contributed to producing the effect. One of the most powerful forces linking the written portrait to a real individual is the model of the painted portrait. The strong ties between written and painted portraiture are reflected in the notion of *ut pictura poesis*, the aesthetic dominant in Europe from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries<sup>12</sup>. Furthermore, the vocabulary used to

(8) S. READ BAKER, *La Rochefoucauld and the Art of the Self-Portrait*, « Romanic Review », 65, 1974, p. 17. For a discussion of the portrait's "truth" and accuracy, see H. BOUILLIER, *Portraits et miroirs*, Paris, SEDÉS, 1979, p. 23; HARTH, *op. cit.*, p. 69, and S. DIJKSTRA, *La Grande Mademoiselle and the Written Portrait: Feminine Narcissism, Aristocratic Pride, or Literary Innovation?*, « Pacific Coast Philology », 13, 1978, p. 25.

(9) Foucault discusses language and truth thus: « La vérité trouve sa manifestation et son signe dans la perception évidente et distincte. Il appartient aux mots de la traduire... ». « La vocation profonde du langage classique a toujours été de

faire "tableau": que ce soit comme discours naturel, recueil de la vérité, description des choses, corpus de connaissances exactes, ou dictionnaire encyclopédique. Il n'existe donc que pour être transparent »; *Les Mots et les choses*, Paris, Gallimard, 1966, pp. 70 and 322.

(10) BARTHES, *L'effet de réel*, « Communications », 11, 1968, rpt. in « Littérature et réalité », Paris, Seuil, 1982, p. 85.

(11) On the notion of *vraisemblance*, see G. GENETTE, *Vraisemblance et motivation*, « Figures II », Paris, Seuil, 1969, pp. 71-99.

(12) HARTH, *The Ideological Value of the Por-*

discuss written portraits comes from the domain of painting (e.g., “pinceau”, “vives couleurs”, “tableau”, “peintre”). The reflex of referentiality is mirrored as well: painted portraits are almost invariably “of someone”: they are not purchased and valued because of their beauty, but because of their purported resemblance to a real individual<sup>13</sup>.

These then are the arguments for and the influences favoring referentiality. So prevalent is the association between written portrait and historical individual during this period that one might say that portraiture is hardly a fictional genre at all. Even when a work is fictional, the very presence of the portrait therein seem to undermine fictionality and to establish firm links between the text and the non-fictional universe.

Within the framework of strong ties between the literary portrait and the world, opposing forces nonetheless act to combat the assumption of a simple correspondance between text and reality. These opposing forces serve to undermine resemblance and therefore to weaken referentiality. A portrait, after all, need not resemble its referent. A portraitist may choose to emphasize artistic elements in the portrait at the expense of resemblance. As Evelyn Copley points out, « description, which is the locus of referentiality, is paradoxically also the locus of lexical or aesthetic ostentation »<sup>14</sup>. In this section, I propose to examine the forces which undermine resemblance and referentiality in the written portrait.

The specific, contextually-determined ends of a given portrait may exceed the limits implied by resemblance, even to the point of sacrificing that resemblance. For example, portraits may purport to judge the object, and thus to sway or edify the reader<sup>15</sup>. Resemblance is secondary in such situations. Examples include portraits in funeral orations as well as caricatures. M<sup>lle</sup> de Scudéry finds fault with the *Divers Portraits* because of the absence of moralizing intent; indeed, a number of her own portraits sacrifice individualization for moral painting<sup>16</sup>. Plantié attributes a hagiographic intent to M<sup>lle</sup> de Montpensier in the case of her depiction of the Countess of Brienne (p. 180). Virtually any portrait can be credited with some specific end that is likely to compromise its objectivity. For example, when a portraitist seeks to edify and emphasizes the moralizing component of the portrait, the reader is less likely to perceive a real person and is more apt to imagine an allegorical fiction.

The desire to flatter the object is the most common extrinsic end that portraitists bring to their work during period. Curiously, despite the deforming nature of flattery, its presence functions to support rather than to undermine referentiality. The basic situation is circular: the decision to use flattery implies that the referent is indeed real, and likely to be part of the portrait's audience. By employing flattery, the portraitist sacrifices some degree of resemblance. Therefore while reference is assumed in those portraits dominated by flattery (as is the case in many of the portraits in the novels of M<sup>lle</sup> de Scudéry and the col-

trait in *Seventeenth-Century France*, in « Esprit créateur », XXI, 2, 1981, p. 15.

(13) It was less than a century earlier, according to John Pope-Hennessy, that a painted portrait had been sold for the first time, not as a record, but as a work of art wherein the identity of the sitter was of no account (Titian's « La Bella », 1536); *The Portrait in the Renaissance*, New York, Bollingen Foundation, 1966, p. 142.

(14) *Description in Realist Discourse: the War Novel*, « Style », 20, 1986, p. 400.

(15) See W. STEINER, *Exact Resemblance to Exact Resemblance. The Literary Portraiture of Gertrude Stein*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1978, p. 7.

(16) R. TINGLE KEATING, *The Literary Portraits in the Novels of M<sup>lle</sup> de Scudéry*, diss., Yale University, 1970, p. 132.

lections of 1659), it is not on the basis of resemblance. Nonetheless, the link between resemblance and referentiality is a strong one; resemblance, after all, is *the* basis for reference at the time<sup>17</sup>. The solution frequently chosen by these authors is to camouflage the deformations occasioned by flattery by pretending that they do not exist, that the portrait indeed resembles its object. This is accomplished most simply by including protestations of sincerity on the part of the portraitist. Such statements, not surprisingly, are most common in those portraits which contain the highest dose of flattery<sup>18</sup>.

Resemblance is far more seriously undermined by the medium of the written portrait: language. While seventeenth-century theorists believed language to be wholly transparent (see Foucault's arguments above and in note 9), it will not be long before the adequacy of language is called into question. In *Laocoön*, Lessing deems language inadequate to the description of a person or object because of the basic opposition between time and space: the referent exists in space while the description in language requires a temporally-organized presentation. A painting may capture an object in its simultaneity, but language never can<sup>19</sup>. With this argument, the very project of written description, whether or not it claims an extra-textual referent, is undermined. In fact, it is precisely this argument that underlies the persistent illegitimation of description in literary art<sup>20</sup>. In the famous example of Charité's portrait in *Le Berger extravagant*, Sorel pokes fun at the language used in literary portraiture, underlining its artificial nature and implying its essential inadequacy. By taking metaphors literally Anselme converts Lysis's verbal portrait into a grotesque graphic representation: the woman's mouth is composed of branches of coral, the god of love is painted on her forehead, her eyes are depicted as suns, her breasts as globes, etc. Naturally, if language inadequate for representation of anything but action, all links between written portrait and real individual become highly tenuous. Another vivid demonstration of this problem is offered by Diderot:

Un Espagnol ou un Italien, pressé du désir de posséder un portrait de sa maîtresse, qu'il ne pouvait montrer à aucun peintre, prit le seul parti qui lui restait, d'en faire par écrit la description la plus étendue et la plus exacte; il commença par déterminer la juste proportion de la tête entière; il passa ensuite aux dimensions du front, des yeux, du nez, de la bouche, du menton, du cou; puis il revint sur chacune de ces parties, et il n'épargna rien pour que son esprit gravât dans l'esprit du peintre la véritable image qu'il avait sous les yeux; il n'oublia ni les couleurs, ni les formes, ni rien de ce qui appartient au caractère: plus il compara son discours avec le visage de sa maîtresse, plus il le trouva ressemblant; il crut, surtout, que plus il chargerait sa description de petits détails, moins il laisserait de liberté au peintre; il n'oublia rien de ce qu'il pensa devoir captiver le pinceau. Lorsque sa description lui parut achevée, il en fit cent copies, qu'il envoya à cent peintres, leur enjoignant à chacun d'exécuter exactement sur la toile ce qu'ils liraient sur son papier. Les peintres travaillèrent; et au bout d'un certain temps, notre amant reçut cent portraits, qui tous ressemblent rigoureusement à sa description, et dont aucun ne ressemble à un autre, ni à sa maîtresse<sup>21</sup>.

(17) Pierre Corneille states: « dans la portraiture il n'est pas question si un visage est beau, mais s'il ressemble » (dedicatory letter preceding *Médée*, *Œuvres complètes*, 3 vols., Paris, Gallimard, 1980, I, p. 535). See also note 8.

(18) PLAINTIÉ, *op. cit.*, p. 307.

(19) *Laocoön*, trans. Edward Allen McCormick,

Baltimore and London, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984, p. 78.

(20) M. STERNBERG, *Ordering the Unordered: Time, Space and Descriptive Coherence*, « Yale French Studies », 61, 1981, p. 61.

(21) *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Asezat-Tourneux, 20 vols., Paris, Garnier Frères, 1875-1877, XIV, p. 444.

According to Diderot, the medium of language dooms all possibility of resemblance. The problems of verbal depiction did not go unnoticed by the portraitists of the seventeenth-century. A number of portraits in the 1659 collections contain laments on the difficulties of doing justice to a particular individual in mere words<sup>22</sup>. M<sup>lle</sup> de Scudéry calls attention to the problems of language with the frequent use of expressions such as « je ne sais quoi », “inexplicable” and virtual confessions of linguistic impotence (“inexprimable”)<sup>23</sup>. Attempts at resemblance in portraiture are often accompanied by the avowal of its impossibility.

The presence of the portraitist may also serve to weaken the link between text and object upon which the assumption of referentiality rests. Every portrait has both an object and a portraitist. Like the narrator of narrative fiction, the latter may be more or less intrusive, more less self-effacing, but never absent<sup>24</sup>. As Bouillier has noted, the portrait, whether painted or written, invariably reveals something of the portraitist. For Oscar Wilde, « every portrait painted with feeling is a portrait of the artist, not the sitter »<sup>25</sup>. Clearly, the more the portraitist's presence is felt in a portrait, whether the intervention is direct or indirect, the less likely it is that the reader will connect the object of the portrait to an existing individual in a unmediated, transparent fashion.

Certain configurations of portrait-telling undermine resemblance, and thus referentiality as well. A text may, for example, contain more than one portrait of an individual, each told by a different portraitist<sup>26</sup>. The issues of resemblance and objectivity are immediately raised by the different points view and the resulting differences in the portraits. The portraitist comes to the fore and the object becomes a subjective, unstable entity, a function of the vision of the individual portraitist. Conversely, a portrait may describe more than one object. The most memorable example is La Bruyère's portrait of Giton and Phédon, but others can be found in the collection of 1659. Once again, resemblance is undermined, here because the object is defined in relation to the other(s) presented within the same portrait. The simple correspondence between text and object is complicated by interrelationships within the text. Phédon does not exist independently, but is described purely in opposition to Giton.

Perhaps the most problematic situation of portrait-telling is the self-portrait. While during the period resemblance was generally considered an attainable goal for the portrait, serious doubts were raised in the case of the self-portrait because of the issue of self-knowledge<sup>27</sup>. Despite the strong potential for deformation,

(22) « Sa bouche a des beautés que je ne puis décrire, ma main ne peut tracer ce que mon œil admire » (Portrait de la Maréchale de Guesbriant, *La Galerie de Portraits*, p. 156); « Mais quelle présomption, quelle témérité d'entreprendre le portrait de Climène! Qui me fournira un pinceau assez délicat? où prendrai-je des couleurs assez vives et assez éclatantes? C'est un ouvrage au-dessus des forces humaines » (Portrait de M<sup>lle</sup> de Bussy, p. 291); « Je sais bien que cette obéissance sera suivie du dépit et du chagrin de n'avoir pu trouver de termes pour exprimer la moindre perfection d'une beauté qui donne tant d'admiration et de ravissement de [sic] tout le monde » (Portrait de Madame la Marquise de la Boulaye, p. 157).

(23) KEATING, *op. cit.*, pp. 175 and 282.

(24) G. PRINCE, *Narratology. The Form and*

*Function of Narrative*, Amsterdam, Mouton, 1982, pp. 8 and 10.

(25) BOUILLIER, *op. cit.*, p. 35; *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, New York, Dell, 1968, p. 13.

(26) There are at least eight such examples in Barthelemy's edition of *La Galerie des Portraits*; M<sup>lle</sup> de Scudéry creates a similar situation with what she calls « portraits partagés », in which an individual is described successively by two portraitists.

(27) Jean Rousset outlines many of the reactions of the time. For François de Sales, « l'homme porte en lui un "labyrinthe" »; according to Malebranche, he is « un fond de ténèbres ». Nicole is more explicit: « on ne connaît jamais avec certitude ce qu'on appelle le fond du cœur »; *Narcisse romancier*, Paris, Corti, 1973, p. 45. La Rochefoucauld changes his stance with time: in

opinions on the validity of the self-portrait were divided and examples of the form were abundant. The numerous self-portraits in the *Galerie des portraits* (44 out of 157) often include commentary on the subject. The Prince de Tarente is in favor of self-portraiture: « Je suis si persuadé que personne ne me connoît si bien que moi-même, quand mon portrait ne paroîtroit ressemblant à tous ceux qui le verront, je ne puis m'empêcher de m'en juger un très-fidèle peintre » (p. 41). M<sup>me</sup> la Marquise de la Grenouillère is representative of the opposite position: « J'avoue que l'on auroit meilleure grâce de laisser faire son portrait par d'autres, que de le faire soi-même, car il est assez difficile ou de ne se point flatter ou d'éviter la fausse modestie » (p. 373; see also pp. 114, 199, 214, 224, and 415). While the self-portrait generates the most serious questions concerning resemblance, description of the self invariably supports referentiality. Because the portraitist and the object are one and the same, it is assumed that the portrait refers to an existing individual. It is this assumption of identity that M<sup>lle</sup> de Montpensier exploits in her pseudo-self-portraits. In this curious form, Montpensier composes a portrait of an individual, but disguises it so that it appears to be a self-portrait written by the object. Reference is not disturbed: the object of the portrait indeed exists, but the relationship of the portraitist to the object is called into question: if the portrait-telling voice is not trustworthy, then what referential validity can the portrait itself possibly have?

The highly conventional nature of portraiture during the period constitutes another force undermining both the resemblance and the referentiality of written portraits. The terms used to describe an individual, when not vague and subject to infinite interpretations (e.g., « je ne sais quoi? », “beau”, etc.), are generally empty clichés, taken from a limited lexical stock. In the early part of the century, such clichés typically involved Petrarchan metaphors (linking cheeks and roses, teeth and pearls, etc.) which conveyed virtually no information about the actual appearance of the individual depicted. By the middle of the century, there is a marked decrease in the frequency of such hackneyed expressions, but a relatively frozen set of descriptive categories and terminology persists, thus limiting the possibilities for resemblance. In the collections of portraits, there are fundamental elements which almost always appear (e.g., nose, mouth, eyes, bearing, humour, speaking and writing abilities, judgment, ambition, piety) and an even more limited number of acceptable options to describe these elements. Everyone's judgment is invariably good and friendship is universally valorized and practiced with great skill. André Bertière describes these portraits as a questionnaire with all the blanks filled in<sup>28</sup>.

The result is a monotonous similarity between portraits that operates in total opposition to referentiality. The concept of the individual is based on uniqueness; thus the possibility for identification of a real person on the basis of a portrait is linked to the portraitist's success at presenting distinguishing characteristics, marks of individuality. In the vast majority of portraits in the collections of 1659 as well as in M<sup>lle</sup> de Scudéry's novels, individuation is minimal and consequently both resemblance and referentiality are compromised<sup>29</sup>. While

his own self-portrait he is optimistic: « Je me suis assez étudié pour me bien connoître » (*Galerie des portraits*, p. 341); later in the *Maximes* he will treat self-knowledge as an impossible delusion (BAKER, *op. cit.*, p. 26).

(28) *Le Cardinal de Retz mémorialiste*, Paris, Klincksieck, 1977, p. 477.

(29) Jacques Prévost underscores the problems involved: « ni la sponanéité, ni l'observation personnelle ne peuvent dépasser le niveau de la flatterie, des conventions sociales. Parce qu'elle est mal assurée, la technique se fait pedantesque, ainsi que le vocabulaire qui est moins riche que spécialisé, et moins spécialisé que figé »; *L'Art*



such monotony of presentation poses only minor problems in the 1659 collections (because the presence of the object's name or an easily recognized pseudonym insures referentiality), in the case of M<sup>lle</sup> de Scudéry's novels, the situation both is more extreme and has greater referential consequences. The droning monotony and similarity of her portraits (noted by Keating, p. 12 and *passim*; and Plantié, p. 300) not only minimize resemblance, but operate as an impediment to the referential reading of the portrait, by making virtually impossible the extra-literary identification of the individuals depicted.

One final characteristic of the written portrait which works against referentiality, although in a more abstract fashion, is the divorce of the portrait from both time and space. Typically the portrait specifies neither: the individual described is ageless and exists independent of any particular locale<sup>30</sup>. The object of a portrait has no past, as a rule, but is an amalgam of free-floating qualities seemingly not subject to change. The absence of ties to time and space in the portraits does not facilitate referential identification; rather, it works to cut the portrait off from the real world.

Portraiture, even in those cases where a real-world referent clearly exists, is at least in part drawn in a non-referential direction. Portraits tend to turn the portraitee into an aesthetic object, a thing<sup>31</sup>. The difference in medium between the portrait and its referent, the open-ended structure of description, and the deforming effect of the numerous conventions of seventeenth-century written portraiture, all work against smooth referential identification. Before examining the possibilities for the resolution of the tension between referentiality and non-referentiality, I would like to examine in greater detail the way in which these issues are framed in the portrait collections of 1659 and in M<sup>lle</sup> de Scudéry's *Le Grand Cyrus* and *Clélie*.

The most salient feature of the portraits in the collections of 1659 is that they are universally read as referential. It matters little whether the object is named, given a pseudonym, or entirely anonymous. The existence of a real individual corresponding to the portrait is not in question, but merely the reader's ability to make the identification<sup>32</sup>. Reference is, or rather was, further abetted in M<sup>lle</sup> de Montpensier's *Divers Portraits* by the severe limitation of audience: only 60 copies of this work were printed<sup>33</sup>, and we may safely assume that they were distributed either to the objects and portraitists of the collection, or to individuals who knew them well. Such intimate ties between reader and object facilitate reference while requiring a lesser degree of resemblance.

*du portrait chez Bussy-Rabutin*, « Revue d'Histoire Littéraire de la France », 69, 1969, p. 11.

(30) Faith Beasley notes that the individual textes in M<sup>lle</sup> de Montpensier's *Divers Portraits* contain both the dates and location of their composition (*Rescripting Historical Discourse: Literary Portraits by Women*, « Papers on French Seventeenth-Century Literature », 14, 1987, p. 526). The act of writing, rather than the object of the portrait, is the temporal and spatial referent.

(31) STEINER, *op. cit.*, p. 18; D. M. LUBIN, *Act of Portrayal. Eakins, Sargent, James*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1985, p. 13. Lubin points out that this tendency toward objectification contains within it « the secret desire to still the life of that person ». Portraiture

conceals, but contains, a leaning toward death, fixation, reification (p. 13). This "deathwish" of portraiture is a disturbing and intriguing motive for the seemingly innocent projects of reference and resemblance.

(32) Even those few portraits that are blatantly humorous (nos. 66, 67, 102, 103, 104, 106, and 156) in Barthelemy's edition are generally caricatures of some specific individual and not mere parodies of the genre.

(33) According to Huet; only 30 copies were made according to Segrais (D. MAYER, *Recueils de portraits littéraires attribués à la Grande Mademoiselle*, « Bulletin du bibliophile », 1969-70, p. 138).

While the collections of portraits may at first glance appear to be monolithic compendiums of flattery and literary formulae, in fact they display a tremendous variety of styles, tones, narrative voices, etc. These collections are virtual workshops of the written portrait<sup>34</sup> and their diversity suggests that they may assign different degrees of prominence to the notion of reference. A number of these variations have already been discussed: the absence or presence of the object's name, the conventionalized nature of the categories available for description, and the self-consciousness of the portraitist who openly deliberates the possibilities of resemblance. Distance in the situation of narration provides another means of undermining referential association: if the portraitist does not know the object very well, the distance between describer and described becomes problematically large and the portrait is neither detailed nor specific. In one instance this leads to the generalization of the object: because the portraitist does not know the portraitee, she merely serves as a model of the perfect wife (*Portrait de la duchesse de Créquy*, pp. 465-68). Generalization, of course, runs counter to reference to a real-world individual. In another portrait, the portraitist claims to hardly know the object but to be in love with her because of what another has told him about her (*Portrait de la comtesse de Fiesque*, pp. 91-94). Much of the portrait consists of this second-hand description. Such a narrative situation functions to distance the object and to undermine resemblance, if not referentiality. A modest nun has recourse to a similar technique in her self-portrait: for the physical part of her description, she relates what others have said of her (*Portrait de M<sup>me</sup> de Montatère*, pp. 504-08). Again, resemblance is compromised and referentiality is based principally on the presence of a name.

Reference operates in a very different fashion in M<sup>lle</sup> de Scudéry's novels. In *Le Grand Cyrus* and *Clélie*, the portraits are not independent fragments, but rather are embedded in the context of an extended narrative situated in a distant place and time. Each portrait must do double duty, referring to both a fictional character and a contemporary of the author. The double focus is inherently problematic because it involves a compromise of the individuality conventionally implied by the seventeenth-century portrait. M<sup>lle</sup> de Scudéry's technique for dealing with the double referent of her portraits is to divide a character into two parts. The action component of the character is purely fictional, while the physical and moral descriptions refer to a real-world person, generally a participant in the Fronde in the case of *Le Grand Cyrus*, and a member of M<sup>lle</sup> de Scudéry's salon in *Clélie*<sup>35</sup>.

While certainly an ingenious solution to the difficult problem of establishing reference simultaneously to the narrative and to the world outside, the double referent leads to certain difficulties. First, the absence of all reference to real-world events makes the identification of the referent more difficult. Second, M<sup>lle</sup> de Scudéry is hampered by an overriding concern with flattering the real-world objects of her portraits. Not only does her use of flattery hamper identification, but, as Keating points out, it sometimes leads to the implausible situation in which a character described as charming or virtuous later commits villai-

(34) KEATING, *op. cit.*, p. 98.

(35) In earlier *romans à clef*, the identity of characters was generally revealed by actions and events rather than by their characterizations.

*Cyrus* was the first novel in which the actions of the characters and the events in which they play a role indicate nothing about their real-life identity (KEATING, *op. cit.*, p. 81).

nous acts (e.g., Agenor, Athys)<sup>36</sup>. The coherence of the character and, therefore, of the novel suffers.

There is a curious absence of keys identifying the non-fictional referents of the portraits in M<sup>lle</sup> de Scudéry's novels. While no one seems to doubt that most of the portraits refer to real-world individuals, M<sup>lle</sup> de Scudéry neither published nor authorized any keys to her works<sup>37</sup>. The rarer the keys – typical of the *roman à clef* – and the less certain their association with the novel's author, the more difficult becomes the attribution of specific reference.

Furthermore, M<sup>lle</sup> de Scudéry does not consistently maintain a balance between the fictional character and the real-world referent. Some portraits refer primarily to the extra-literary individual. René Godenne notes that of the 44 portraits he has identified in *Clélie*, eleven describe characters who have no role in the novel; their portraits are « une finalité en soi »<sup>38</sup>. The absence of significant ties to the fictional universe increases the likelihood that a given portrait has a real-world referent. Keating and Plantié maintain that the opposite situation occurs as well: certain portraits have only a fictional referent. Both of these critics interpret extreme vagueness of description to mean the absence of a real-world referent. They also suggest that such portraits are in fact “caractères”, types which refer to neither a specific fictional individual nor a real-world one, but rather to a more abstract, ideal person<sup>39</sup>. The question of reference in M<sup>lle</sup> de Scudéry's novels remains muddled, particularly since it is questionable whether the twentieth-century reader, who has no keys and very limited clues to historical identity, can decide which portraits are likely to have a real-world referent and which are not.

One final, brief example of the problematic nature of real-world reference in M<sup>lle</sup> de Scudéry novels: her own self-portrait as Sapho in volume X of *Le Grand Cyrus*. M<sup>lle</sup> de Scudéry devotes seven pages to a portrait in which she exceeds even her own norms for hyperbolic praise: « elle a les yeux si beaux, si vifs, si amoureux, et si pleins d'esprit, qu'on ne peut ny en soustenir l'esclat, ny en détacher ses regards »; « sans que l'on ait presque iamais oüy dire que Sapho ait rien appris, elle sçait pourtant toutes choses »; « de plus, elle est si fidelle dans ses amitez; et elle a l'ame si tendre, et le cœur si passionné, qu'on peut sans doute mettre la supreme felicité, à estre aimé de Sapho »<sup>40</sup>. Because of certain details involving physical characteristics and Sapho's skills, no one has ever raised any doubts that this portrait refers to M<sup>lle</sup> de Scudéry. Real-world reference is thus completely successful. Yet the relationship between this portrait and reality in terms of its objective resemblance is disquieting. Critics seem to avoid the issue by making excuses for the author: « il serait dangereux de trop attribuer de valeur à ce portrait de M<sup>lle</sup> de Scudéry par elle-même; l'outrecuidance, que trop souvent elle y étale, nous ferait douter fâcheusement de l'exactitude des autres portratis »<sup>41</sup>. Indeed, resemblance is hardly M<sup>lle</sup> de Scudéry's

(36) KEATING, *op. cit.*, p. 265.

(37) There exists one key, although not authorized by the author, dated 1657, published by V. COUSIN in *La Société française au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle d'après "Le Grand Cyrus" de M<sup>lle</sup> de Scudéry*, 1858, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1909. Cousin argues that it is the absence of a key and a lack of familiarity with the referents that accounts for the lack of popularity of M<sup>lle</sup> de Scudéry's novels after the seventeenth century (p. 8).

(38) « Il ne paraît plus possible de parler d'un

individu sans en broser le portrait en long et en large, qu'il joue ou non un rôle dans l'aventure de Clélie ou dans les Histoires »; *Le Romans de M<sup>lle</sup> de Scudéry*, Geneva, Droz, 1983, p. 235. See also KEATING, *op. cit.*, p. 118.

(39) KEATING, *op. cit.*, p. 121 and PLANTIÉ, *op. cit.*, pp. 392-3.

(40) *Artamène ou Le Grand Cyrus*, 10 vols., Paris, Augustin Courbe, 1656, Geneva, Slatkine Reprints, 1972, pp. 10: 332, 333, and 336.

(41) L. LEVRAULT, *Maximes et portraits*, Pa-

strong suit, and we must wonder about the possibility of accurate reference in the case of portraits which do not resemble their objects and which do not allude to real-world events.

In the years that followed the publication of M<sup>lle</sup> de Scudéry's novels, the portrait became less idealized in its description of individuals, and reference to real-world persons was nearly always assumed. Memoirs, which proliferated in the last third of the century, are a rich source of portraits, all of which claim real-world referents. The relationship between the written portrait and reality was generally assumed to be perfect. As we have seen, however, the portrait is by no means a simple reflection of reality.

The problems of resemblance and referentiality are raised once again near the end of the century, by La Bruyère. While *Les Caractères* contains several kinds of discourse, portraits play a large role therein and are central to the work's popularity<sup>42</sup>. La Bruyère's portraits are significantly unlike those that we have examined thus far. Indeed, the author claims a profoundly different status for them, as he attempts to resolve the problems of referentiality. Using the term "caractère" rather than "portrait", he insists that his descriptions have no specific real-world referents, but rather are composed of features taken from a number of existing individuals (« j'ai pris un trait d'un côté et un trait d'un autre »)<sup>43</sup>. The referential indicators are less numerous: the objects are either anonymous or have Greek pseudonyms, physical description plays only a small role, flattery is absent, and comic elements abound. The portraits, however, do not seem disengaged from the "real" world: the *Caractères* depict the mores and attitudes of the period in social contexts that are clearly referential and specific: « La Cour », « Des Grands », « De la mode », « La Ville », etc. While La Bruyère seems to have arrived at a synthesis between the referential and the purely fictional in his amalgams of the traits of real individuals, in fact the conflict persists. Despite the author's claim that his "caractères" were not portraits of existing individuals, readers clearly sought and believed in the existence of real-world referents. Keys to the identity of his portraits were legion, both at the time and for many years afterward.

The similarities between La Bruyère's "caractères" and the portraits in both the 1659 collections and M<sup>lle</sup> de Scudéry's novels are revealing. With the first La Bruyère shares the fragmentation of the form and the accompanying absence of a narrative context. Like M<sup>lle</sup> de Scudéry, he publicly insists that there are no true keys to the portraits. It is curious that in the case of M<sup>lle</sup> de Scudéry's novels, no one doubted that the portraits had specific real-world referents, but almost no keys remain. In La Bruyère's case, where there is a far more persistent doubt concerning in the relationship between reality and fiction, keys are numerous.

In the final analysis, La Bruyère's combination of reality and fiction does not signal a successful synthesis of the referential and the non-referential in portraiture, but rather indicates the force of the reflex of referentiality at the time. Even when an author such as La Bruyère explicitly denies specific reference, readers insist that it is there. Perhaps an explanation can be formulated in

ris, Paul Mellottée, n.d., pp. 44-45; see also PLANTIÉ, *op. cit.*, p. 79.

(42) M. LEBAILLIF, "Pensées" et "Portraits" dans *l'œuvre de La Bruyère*, « Revue universitaire », 55, 1946, pp. 217-18.

(43) LA BRUYÈRE, *Les Caractères de Théophraste traduits du grec avec les Caractères ou les Mœurs de ce siècle*, ed. Robert Garapon, Paris, Garnier, 1962, p. 498.

terms of *préciosité* and classicism. The *précieus* emphasis is on the particular rather than the general. Portraiture in its very specificity, whether the referent is a living or fictional being, is an essentially *précieus* genre. La Bruyère attempts a classical transformation of the portrait, focusing on the general (the type, the “*caractère*”) rather than on the specific. But the inherent *préciosité* of the genre reasserts itself through the presence of the keys, each positing real-world referents, and totally undermining the supposedly general status of the “*caractère*”.

Whatever the terms of discussion: the classical episteme, the transparency of language, or the *préciosité* of the genre, portraiture in seventeenth-century France is dominated by the assumption of referentiality and the goal of resemblance. A mixture of convention, naming and flattery, and not realism, serve as the vehicle for reference and resemblance. The portrait, despite the fact that it possesses strong links to fiction, despite its inevitable inadequacy as a means of objective resemblance, despite the varied forces operating against any portrait's reference to an existing individual, has become, in the seventeenth century, an essentially non-fictional genre. Wherever it appears, a bridge is established between the text and the real world. Protestations of fictionality are greeted with skepticism. With the rise of realism in the novel, the « reflex of referentiality » will gradually disappear and resemblance will become a literary convention, a sign of literature and not of real-world reference.

NINA EKSTEIN