Portraits: Some Phenomenological Remarks

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I.

The aim of this paper is easy to say: my goal is to collect some phenomenological remarks concerning a particular kind of picture — *portraits.* I know that portrait is not a phenomenological concept: on the contrary, it is a classificatory device, whose meaning is quite elusive and depends on many stylistic features which are relatively idiosyncratic and which have their own history. I also know that portraits are pictures which are characteristic of many, but not of all visual cultures and that they vary in their form and nature according to the different cultural and historic traditions they belong to; notwithstanding this, I will try to point out which *reasons*, if any, are responsible for our classifying a picture as a portrait and which requirements have to be met by a picture in order to be regarded as a portrait[1].

I will try to fulfill this task by answering three questions I believe to be crucial in order to understand portraits:

1. Portraits depict individuals. The first question we have to raise is: how is it possible for a picture to refer to an individual entity as such?

2. The second question is: are portraits necessarily representations of real individual entities or is it possible for a portrait to have as its subject imaginary entities such as Don Quixote or Raskolnikoff?

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[1] I don't expect that my descriptions can capture every item that could be wavering labeled as a *portrait*, but I think that they can explain the most basic and relevant usages of this word. It goes without saying that if my sketch of a theory would not be able to capture too many items of what we usually call "portrait", it would be off the mark.

3. Finally, what conditions must be satisfied by the subject of a picture, if this picture has to be regarded as a portrait?

First of all, I will try to face the question concerning the *individual reference* of portraits.

A first statement seems to be obvious: it is usually very easy to see and recognize in a portrait a person we are well acquainted with. I only need to look at the following drawing (see FIGURE 1.) to utter "This is Proust!".

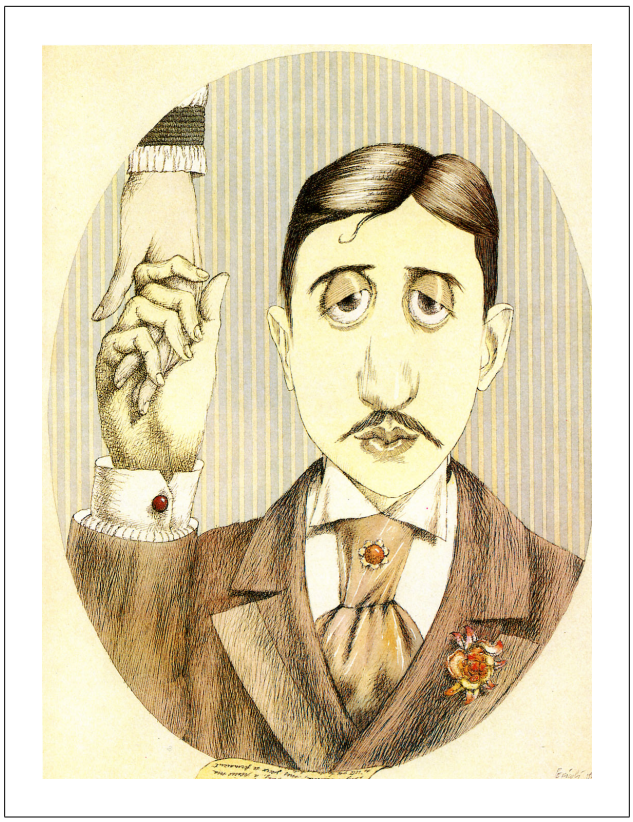

FIGURE 1. Tullio Pericoli, *Marcel Proust*.

Just as I recognize you when I meet you somewhere by chance, with the same ease I see that it is Proust — even if I see him only as an object of representation. On the other hand, the possibility for a picture to pick up just one person cannot rest on its perceptual content: the same picture

could be referred to many similar individuals, like twins or clones. Similarity is not a plausible standard a judgment or a decision can be based on.

Moreover, recognizing someone in a picture is not the same as stating that this picture is a portrait of him. Remember allegorical pictures: a painting by Giorgione has an old woman as its subject (see FIGURE 2.). She holds in her hand a scroll on which it is written: "col tempo": it is a *memento mori* and its allegorical goal is to remember an established rule — young people will grow old just because of the passing of time.

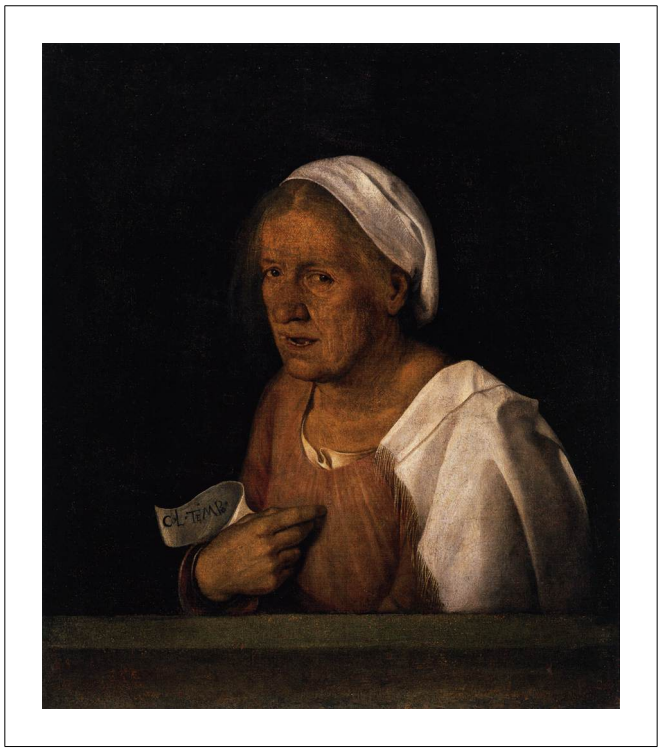

FIGURE 2. Giorgione, *Old Woman*., 1508.

As I have said, it is an allegorical painting, but in the inventory of the Vendramin collection this picture by Giorgione is recorded as a portrait of his mother ("un retrato de la mare de Zorzon").

I don't know if the Vendramin inventory was right classifying this picture as a portrait; however, it is possible that Giorgione painted an allegory

of old age, taking his mother as a model. If this is true, Giorgione, as well as his friends and relatives, could recognize his mother in the picture, but this is not an evidence against its allegorical nature: Giorgione intended to paint an allegory of old age even if he chose his mother as a model in order to give a sensible and *for him* disquieting dress to the flowing of time. It is not a portrait, because it is used — and it was intended to be used — as an allegorical picture. Looking at this picture we are not invited to pick out an individual woman in her mood and character, but a — the old age and the shortness of life. general subject

There are lots of similar examples. In 1912 Umberto Boccioni painted a picture of an old woman (see Figure 3) — it is his mother and it is very likely that she posed as a model for some of his paintings (compare Figure 4). However, as soon as we read the title — *Matter* — we understand that this painting was not intended to be used as a portrait; its subject is not that woman who had Umberto Boccioni as her son, but something else — the conceptual relation between motherhood, matter and generativity.

Figures 3 & 4. Umberto Boccioni, *Matter* & *Mother*, 1912.

There are at least two other answers to our question that, I believe, are wrong and they both try to put themselves in the painter's shoes, instead of discussing pictures from the spectator's point of view

The first answer puts his finger on the author's intention: if you ask me how do I know that what I am drawing is a caricature of Jaroslaw instead of Lech Kaczynski, I will probably answer that this is a caricature of Jaroslaw because I want it to be his caricature and not the caricature of his twin brother. Intention seems to have the last word: it depends on me what the subject of my drawings is, as well as it depends on me what the meaning of what I say is.

I agree that the author's intention is one ingredient in the answer, but I don't think that we can assign to the painter's intention the task to settle the question of picture's reference. First of all — to dwell on the linguistic analogy I have hinted at — the meaning of an utterance is not necessarily identical with the communicative goal of the speaker. Words themselves have a meaning and in uttering them we *commit* ourselves to a set of rules which preexist to any individual speech act.

Take for instance the case of someone speaking in a foreign language: the meaning of his utterances could be different from what he has in mind. Sometimes we must speak carefully and we must take care of any single word: so, when I make a promise, I must respect what I have actually said, even if it is not identical with what I would have said. This is also the case with pictures. A few scholars have maintained that the *Monna Lisa* by Leonardo looks like its author and we could conjecture (as a joke) that Leonardo, painting this canvas, had secretly in his mind the hidden desire to depict himself in women's clothing. Now, it is plainly impossible to know what crossed Leonardo's mind five centuries ago, but, even if we could find that this was Leonardo's secrete thought while painting his Monna Lisa, this would not be a reason to refuse to this picture its usual subject and function: this famous painting is a portrait of a woman because it was used from the beginning, and without troubles, as a portrait of a woman.

It would be difficult to use it as a self-portrait because it has not the stylistic pattern of this kind of painting and because it is not easy, if possible, to recognize Leonardo in that famous painting. Words have conventional meanings: we need to know them, if we want to use them correctly.

On the other hand, conventions are easy to handle: if we both know the conventional meaning of a gesture, you can hardly fail to understand what I mean by shrugging or nodding. Drawings and pictures are different; they do not depict conventionally and must be made *skillfully*. A portrait must enable a recognition and from the fact that I want to draw your face doesn't necessarily follow that it will be possible to see in my drawing your face; willing is not enough. I wanted to draw your portrait, but I didn't succeed in is a meaningful utterance, — an utterance, which implies that the author's intention alone does not settle the question of portraits' reference.

There is another solution I believe to be false. In 1501 Giovanni Bellini painted a portrait of Leonardo Loredan, the contemporary Venetian Doge. We know from many different sources that Leonardo Loredan posed as a model for Bellini and we could argue that, if this picture can be regarded as a portrait and if it has an individual reference, it is just because Leonardo Loredan posed for the painter: according to this argument, the portrait's reference would be the consequence of the real relation between the act of painting and the presence of a model.

As I said, I am not of this opinion. The person a portrait refers to is not the model which once posed for the painter. Many artists have painted their pictures representing religious subjects and many of them have models; nevertheless, it would be odd to say that a painting like the *Madonna di Senigallia* by Piero della Francesca is about a woman we don't know or that there is just one man who is the true (but unknown) referent of many frescoes by Piero, even if those frescoes aim to tell the story of Cosroe, Constantine, Saint John and so on. So, it seems completely irrelevant to know who the woman was Piero used as a model to paint his *Madonna di Senigallia*: looking at this picture, we see a woman with a child and we see them represented in a way — in the way of the *brephocratousa odigitria* — which is codified by an established iconological tradition. This allows us to use this painting as a painting of Mary and the blessing Jesus.

We are now in the position to answer the question we have raised. What turns a picture into a portrait of x is the customary use we make of that picture as an image which is just about x and represents x in a particular way. Individuality of reference depends on using this picture as a picture portraying a person we know. On the other hand, *a given image cannot be used in any way whatsoever*; on the contrary, every picture has

in its perceptual nature the constrain which sets a limit to its possible uses.

In order to be used as a portrait of an individual, a picture has to satisfy a set of different conditions. Similarity seems to be the most important of these conditions: the picture you have painted can be used as your self-portrait if and only if it is possible for all people who have been acquainted with you to recognize your face in the canvas.

However, it would be a mistake to give similarity an excessive weight. Similarity is not the unique, nor it is a necessary condition a portrait has to satisfy.

It is not the only condition. A first remark leaps before the eye: there are portraits in which similarity, even if present, is not the path leading to recognition. Painters have often tried to support similarity with a multiplicity of clues leading to the intended goal. In order to give a name to the face we see in the canvas we sometimes have to work out a riddle or a rebus. This happens in a wonderful portrait by Lorenzo Lotto, representing a gloomy young man, on the background of brocade curtain with thistle flowers. Hence the name of the young man we can single out even if similarity, if present, is no more within reach: the young gloomy man is Broccardo Malchiostro.

There is however a second remark which is — in my opinion — more relevant to deny the uniqueness of similarity as a condition on which portraits rest. Portraits, like every other image, play a significant role in our life and we use them in very different ways. Now, if the goals we would achieve with an instrument are different in nature, the criteria of its conformity will consequently change. If we need a screw-driver to tighten a screw we will look at the screw's head — if it is slotted or crosshead. On the contrary, if we need the screw-driver as a chisel, we would worry about the strength of the shaft: different goals ask for different conformity criteria of the instrument.

The same conclusion holds for portraits. There are portraits whose function is to support political power or to stress the social or economical status of a man; other portraits strive for a different goal: they are useful because they help to remember someone we lost; on the other hand, in our pictorial tradition there are portraits which seem to fulfill a different task: they have been painted to help visualizing the face of people we never met — of an ancient philosopher like Plato, of an hero like Alexander the

Great, of a poet like Homer. It follows that portraits are instruments we use in different ways and every different function we assign to a portrait requires a difference in its perceptual nature[2].

In a famous painting, Rembrandt presents us a beautiful, though unconventional portrait of Aristoteles. To be used as a portrait, this painting has to be *suitable* to its subject, but there are at least two different basic forms of suitability, which vary according to the different functions we ascribe to it (see Figure 5).

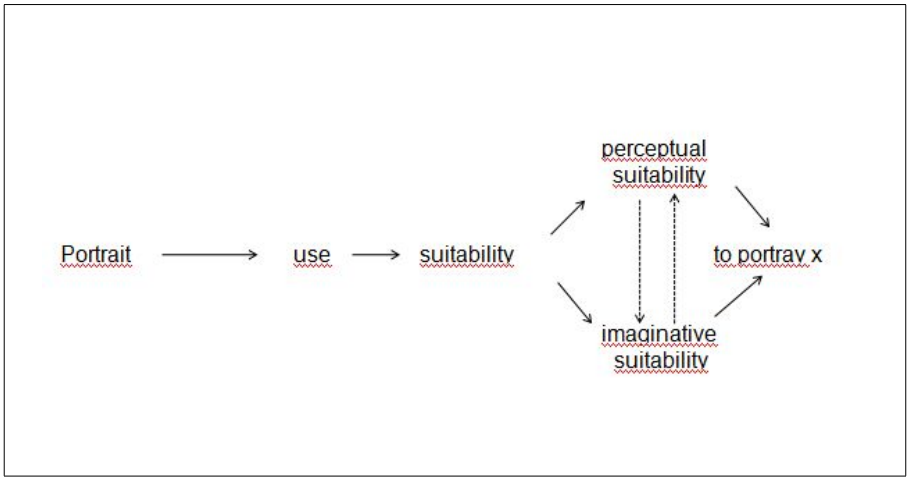

Figure 5.

The *first* criterion is perceptual in nature: the face we see on the canvas has to be similar to the real face of this ancient philosopher — it must look like Aristoteles *if* we want to use Rembrandt's portrait as a mnemonic tool.

The *second* possibility rests on imagination: we could plausibly believe that we have no chance to know what Aristoteles was like. We have never seen his face and therefore it would be odd to look for a portrait of him in order to save the real look of his face from the ruin of time. What we can

[2] In the first half of the XVI century, Paolo Giovio collected hundreds of portraits of ancient distinguished men. His aim was to invite his contemporaries to emulate the deeds of the great men of the past and in order to achieve this goal perceptual similarity was not an essential feature of portraits: imaginative suitability was enough. It is therefore not surprising that Giovio did not refuse the aids of physiognomic in order to suggest a face for the great men of a lost time.

ask a portrait of this ancient philosopher is to *suggest* a face and a sensible stuff to the author of theories and books we have read.

We have different goals and, consequently, different criteria of suitability.

The first basic criterion is *perceptual suitability* — the portrait of Aristoteles is somehow similar to the real Aristoteles and it reminds of him everyone who has been acquainted with him; on the other hand, the second criterion is *imaginative* in nature: according to Rembrandt, this is the face that a man *like* Aristoteles should have had.

It is important to remark that perceptual and imaginative suitability can work together, as it happens in many different kinds of portraits. Recall the celebrative function of portraits. Portraits are intended to celebrate the greatness of a king or the courage of a soldier: a portrait which has to celebrate the bravery of a military commander cannot only be similar to its subject, but it has also to be imaginative pertinent. In a beautiful painting, Antonello da Messina depicts a military commander and even if we don't know anything about this young and contemptuous man it seems undeniable that this portrait is at least imaginatively pertinent to its subject.

To reflect upon the twofold nature of suitability is important also because it allows us to answer our question concerning the possibility to portray fictional entities. In my opinion, there is no reason to deny this possibility and the history of paintings counts innumerable pictures of men like Homer or gods like Zeus, even if we have no evidence to assert that there really was a man who wrote about Odysseus and Achilles or that there really is a god responsible for thunderbolts and storms.

These pictures refer to subjects we know and they are part of a tradition which sets a limit to the free decision of painters: we know a lot of things about Socrates and we have read the few words Plato devoted to his description, — and these very words stay at the beginning of an iconographical tradition which has given a face to this ancient philosopher, according to an imaginative criterion of suitability, somehow supported by the odd and imaginative arguments of physiognomic — this old and venerable clutter of mistakes (see FIGURE 6).[3]

[3] The importance of physiognomical studies in Renaissance's theories of portraiture is

FIGURE 6. Johann Kaspar Lavater, *Physiognomical Studies on Socrrates*, 1789.

The same happened with Homer, Moses, Jesus or Don Quixote: we have read books and we have seen paintings and now we believe to know what their faces should have been like.

Briefly, a portrait is a painting whose subject is not necessarily real. Reality is not an ingredient in portraits, but there is a different condition that must be fulfilled: portraits can refer to fictional entities *if and only if* features and characters of their fictional subjects are stated by a tradition *which preexists the act of painting.* It is possible to draw a portrait

well known and it is clearly stated by Pomponio Gaurico in his *De Sculptura* (1504): `Nunc igitur de Physiognomonica. [...] Ea autem est certa quedam observatio, qua ex iis que corpori insunt signis, animorum etiam qualitates denotamus, Solent enim ut in proverbio est, artificem instrumenta dominum qualis sit domus ostendere, Id autem quoniam antistrofon est, commutacionemque patitur, Erit quidem Sculptori quam maxime necessarium, namque vel ex viventium corporibus effigies imitabimur, Quod a nobis in Calpurnio factum vidistis. vel mortuorum praesentias ex notissimis eorum moribus imaginabimur [...] Vix iam certe verbis explicari posset, quantum Statuario usum praestet Physiognomonia, nec statuariis modo sed et omni generi humano' (Pomponio Gaurico, *De sculptura*,(1504), edited by A. Chastel and R. Klein, Droz, Geneva, 1969, p. 129). On Lavater's remarks on Socrates's face see. J. H. Berland, "Reading Character in the Face: Socrates, Lavater, and Physiognomy", *Word and Image*, 9, 3, 1993, pp. 252-69 and J. C. Lavater *Von der Physiognomik,* 1789.

ofDon Quixote because Don Quixote fictionally exists in a well known book which gives (and gave) a norm to the many painters who have tried to portray him, grounding on their own an iconological tradition which sets the limits his face can vary within.

Finally, I will try to answer the third question I have raised — the question about the existence of *constraints* concerning the nature of what can be portrayed. From the art historian's descriptive point of view, these constraints seem to be effective: there are lots of paintings, depicting recognizable individuals, which are not labeled as portraits and I think that the resistance in applying the concept of portrait to some pictures depicting individuals is more than a tribute to stylistic contingencies and historic conventions. I believe that there are at least two main features which seem to be responsible for our regarding a picture as a portrait:

- It is possible to depict accurately a chair, a bed or a tree and I can see that these are exactly van Gogh's chair and bed or the tree I saw thousands of times in the University courtyard. However, it seems quite odd to regard Van Gogh's room at Arles a portrait of his chair and bed and nobody would call a photo of the University courtyard a *portrait* of that tree. Portraits are boring in their subjects: *they seem to depict only human beings.*

- In the history of western painting, there are individual portraits as well as family-portraits and group-portraits[4], but, even if I can recognize you and (maybe) your friends playing football in the photo you are showing to me, I can hardly refer to this picture as a portrait. Recognizability is not enough: portraits are usually characterized by their depicting still people. *Portraits are boring in the way they depict their subjects*: to be portrayed, people have to stop walking, playing piano, reading books, writing letters, painting pictures and in general they have to put aside, at least for one moment, the

[4] On these different kinds of portraits see F.K. Laarmann, "Riegl and the Family Portrait, or How to Deal with a Genre or Group of Art", in: R. Wood[FB01?]eld (ed.), *Framing Formalism. Riegl's work*, (Critical Voices in Art, Theory and Culture), Amsterdam 2001, 195-218 and the classic work by A. Riegl, *Das holl%oondische Gruppenportr%oot*, Wien 1902.

> activities in which they are involved. The time of portraits is the time of *temporary inaction͡*, of the brief suspension of the pause.

I have suggested two main features of portrays, but we can grasp that they both rest on a common ground if we regard the temporary inaction which characterizes portrayed subjects as an *intentional behavior*. As a matter of fact, temporary inaction is not just a simple fact, but it seems to be the outcome of the subject's decision to step back from cares and opportunities of live and to rise above the pressure of what impinges on him from the world.

It must be said that *usually* temporary inaction is too poor a description: portrayed *persons look as if they have decided to assume a pose͡* and it seems that there is no other reason of their present behavior than the *decision͡* to appear in this attitude in the picture.

Now, if to be portrayed implies an intentional behavior from the side of the depicted subject and if *pose͡* as an intentional behavior whose goal is to appear to an onlooker in a peculiar way, is a condition of many portraits, it seems to be obvious that it is not possible to portray chair, beds and trees. There are no portraits of a chair because it isn't possible to understand the way it appears as the outcome of a decision, as if it were the result of an attitude that this chair has taken in order to take its leave from the world or to look the way it looks.

Objects cannot properly behave — this is obvious; but animals? A cat can be careful, a dog threatening, but it seems quite odd to talk about dogs and cats *posing* or *rising above the pressure͡* of what impinges on them from the world. Portraits of animals sounds odd because of their implying from their subjects behaviors which seem to exceed animals capabilities. It sounds odd, but to stress the uneasiness we feel reasoning about a famous van Gogh's painting as a portrait of his chair is not the same as suggesting a philosophical understanding of the constraints which seems to pertain to the nature of portraits.

II.

In order to give an answer to the question we raised in the previous paragraph, I would dwell first of all on the concept of pose which seems to be

the essential feature of the greatest family of portraits — those paintings which are on the one hand paradigmatic examples of what we labeled as *portraits* and which seem to be, on the other hand, the manifestation of a desire: the depicted subject looks as if she wanted to *stage* her own nature in the painting.

Portraits, in their basic form, imply this peculiar kind of mise-en-scène: pose is therefore the essential feature of this *first class* of portraits. We must dwell on this essential feature. We usually speak of pose meaning a kind of intentional behavior which consists in disposing face and body according to a *design* which is exclusively determined by the *awareness of being observed* and by the desire to appear in a particular way — the way we have chosen — to an observer. So, if you want to pose, you must assume the attitude and the posture *you want to be seen in*.

It follows that assuming a pose implies a *suspension* of usual behaviors: someone is posing if he stops doing what he has to do and what the situation requires, in order to *stage* that behavior he assumes to be the most suitable to disclose his own nature.

Pose has therefore a dual nature. On one hand, posing means to be conscious of a *fact*: we just have this body and this face and they both determine the way in which we will appear to everyone will give us a look.

On the other hand, to pose is a *voluntary* behavior, and postures and attitudes are the outcome of a decision: we want to look in a peculiar way and therefore we stage our body and face according to a mood we think pertinent to our nature. Hence the consequence I would like to draw: just because of its dual nature, of its being on one hand expression of the awareness of what we actually are and, on the other, outcome of a decision, pose is a personal narration of the self. Pose is, in this regard, similar (but not identical) to an autobiographical sketch, because both are the outcome of a compromise between two different requirements: what I think of myself and what I have to say if I want to be recognized in my own story and nature. Pose is a narration of the self just because it rests on a similar ground: the compromise between what I am as a perceptual object and what I would like to appear.

From this point of view, we can better understand what requirements must be met by a picture to be regarded as a portrait. A portrait is a picture the depicted person *tells his own identity* with. Portraits imply recogniz-

ability: they depict an individual subject giving us the instruments to pick up his identity. On the other hand, by *posing* this way, the depicted person seems to tell us how we have to disclose his own nature: this is the fact that turns portraits into *first-person narration of the self*. The portrait seems to tell us: "I am just like this, as you see me, and by posing this way I have chosen the path you have to run along if you want to disclose what I believe to be my true nature".

Pose is an essential features of many portraits, but it would be a mistake to believe that the existence of one of those portraits implies as a consequence that someone really posed in front of a painter or a photograph. There are many photographic portraits which are taken instantaneously, giving to the subject no time for posing. Moreover, many Renaissance portraits were painted after the death of their subjects and it goes without saying that in similar cases there is no chance for posing. Moreover, portraits can have fictional entities as subjects: it follows that the existence of a portrait is not an argument to infer the real occurrence of an act of posing.

All these remarks hint at the same misunderstanding, which consists in believing that if there is a portrait, then there was once someone who posed for it. This is simply not true: a portrait in not an *index* of a *real* relation between two objects — the painter and the model — and it isn't possible to argue that if I see a portrait depicting a man in melancholic mood there should be a man who has chosen this attitude to disclose his temperament.

It follows that in order to regard a picture as a portrait we don't need a real man posing in some way. The condition required is weaker: a picture turns into a portrait if it can *represent* a man *as if he were posing*, say, in a melancholic mood, but this is no argument to infer that this man really exists and that he has once really posed in this way.

As we have noticed, in a portrait the depicted person tells about himself what he pretends to be and what he tries to look like, but it would be a mistake to regard a portrait as a *confession* given by the model to the spectator and concerning his own nature and character. This conclusion is untenable because in every portrait, the first-person narration is not about the real person himself, but about this person *as he is represented by the picture*. So, to say that a portrait is a first-person narration is not the

same as regarding the painting as an autobiographical sketch or as a confession: the voice telling the spectator "I am just the man you see!" isn't the model's voice, but it is the voice of the depicted man as such, which exists fictionally as an object of pictorial representation.

We are now in the position to state more exactly the thesis according to which only human beings can be portrayed: if portraits are first-person narration and rest on posing as a complex *social attitude*, it seems to be impossible to have portraits depicting animals. At a deeper glance, however, we realize that the question is more intricate than it looked at a first glance. Portraits do not imply real persons as their subjects, but something which can *appear* to behave as a person. The ego of the portrait's first-person narration is not necessarily a real ego: in order to be portrayed, subjects have to fulfill a weaker condition — they *must look as if they were egos*.

Posing is a kind of behavior which requires for a personal ego: if it sounds odd to regard a picture of an animal as its portrait it is just because is difficult to think of an animal as a personal ego. It is difficult, but it is not impossible. Dogs and cats can be seen on a human background and this is a precondition which somehow allows the spectator to *fancy* in a picture of his dog a portrait of it.[5]

We run into a similar difficulty when we scrutinize pictures depicting dead or dying persons. According to Boethius, Erasmus and Nicole, portraits are ethically reprehensible: they give weight to something — the body — which doesn't deserve great esteem and they are in the end responsible for us so often confusing soul with body and trying to disclose a man's true nature, by gazing his face. On the other hand, Nicole and other Port Royal philosophers were the opinion that funeral masks may be permissible: a death mask can remind of what a face was like, but it cannot succeed in confusing soul and body. *Funeral masks are dumb* and they are dumb because *they cannot lodge a pose*: they are just signs of a material thing among others — the dead face. Nicole's ethical remarks seem there-

[5] There was once in the Sixties a television program about a boy — his name was Rusty — living in a fort in Arizona. He had a dog and thanks to his dog he could succeed in defeating Indians, wolfs, crocodiles and so on. The dog's name was Rin tin tin and in the Rin tin tin's website, you can see photos which portray it in a thoughtful attitude and which seem signed in its own hand.

fore to argue in favor of the link binding together pose and portrait[6].

The same conclusion apparently follows from a series of portraits painted and drawn by Ferdinand Hodler in 1915, during the last days of his lover, Valentine Godé Darel. Looking at these painful and terrifying paintings, the spectator cannot avoid to ask the question that was probably tormenting Hodler himself: the question concerning the moment in which the face he was compulsively painting would have ceased to be her face and would have stopped lodging a possible pose. Now, if we scrutinize chronologically the series of paintings and drawings Hodler has devoted to his dying woman, we realize that it becomes harder and harder to regard these pictures as portraits, because of the growing effort we have to make in order to see in these fading faces a pose and therefore the will to disclose mood and character.

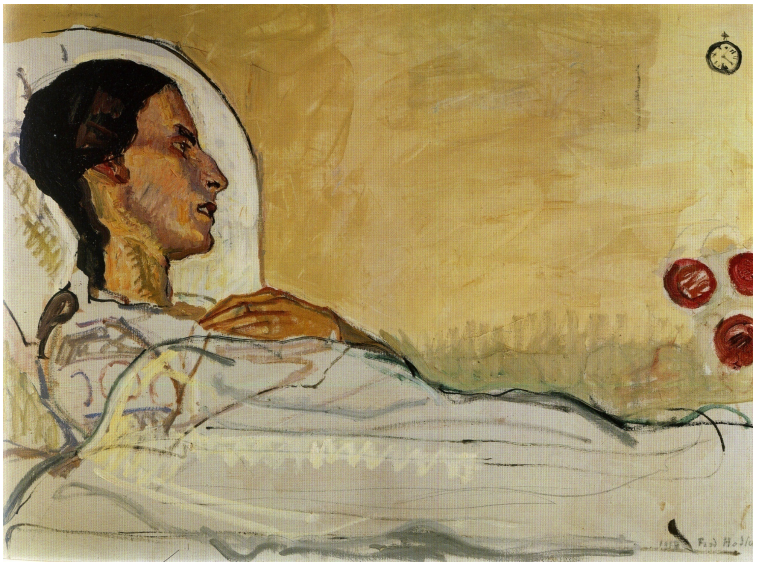

FIGURE 7. Ferdinand Hodler, *Portrait (?) of Valentine*, 1915.

The chronological sequence of these pictures must be briefly explained. In the first paintings we see a sorrow face, whose attitude seems expressly

[6] On this topic see the beautiful book by E. Pommier, *Théories du portrait. De la Renaissance aux lumières*, Paris, Gallimard, 1998.

chosen to let us know what Valentine had in her mind and what she intended to tell of herself: her fear, her seclusion and weariness, her feeling of defeat, and so on.

The first of these paintings is no doubt a portrait (see FIGURE 7): it tells us that particular narration of herself which Valentine has chosen as the best to disclose her present being. As a matter of fact, this portrait has some allegorical hints — the red roses and the clock on the wall — but it is just a shade of meaning which doesn't deserve particular attention.

In the following paintings and drawings, however, there are no more allegorical meanings and it becomes harder, if not impossible, to find person and character in the suffering expression of Valentine's face (see, for example, FIGURE 8). So, looking at the chronological sequence of those pictures, we see at first a fading, but human face, then agony and, finally, in a remoteness which gives up the stylistic form of portrait, the dead body of Valentine. Hodler's sequence of paintings is a dark meditation on death, but they deserve an attentive scrutiny also because they help us defining the meaning and thephilosophical grammar of the concept of portrait.

FIGURE 8. Ferdinand Hodler, *The Dying Valentine Godé Darel*, 1915.

III.

In the preceding paragraphs of this paper, I let myself be guided by a general argument which could be phrased as follows: portraits, in their basic nature, rest on the concept of pose which — as we saw — allows us to answer many important questions concerning both nature and subject of portraits.

I really believe that pose is an essential ingredient in the fundamental and paradigmatic form of portraits; notwithstanding this, it is worth noticing that there are paintings which are usually regarded by art critics as portraits even if they have nothing to do with pose. Look at this wonderful *portrait* by Tiziano (Figure 9): it would be odd to understand this picture as the outcome of Pietro Bembo's decision to look the way he looks.

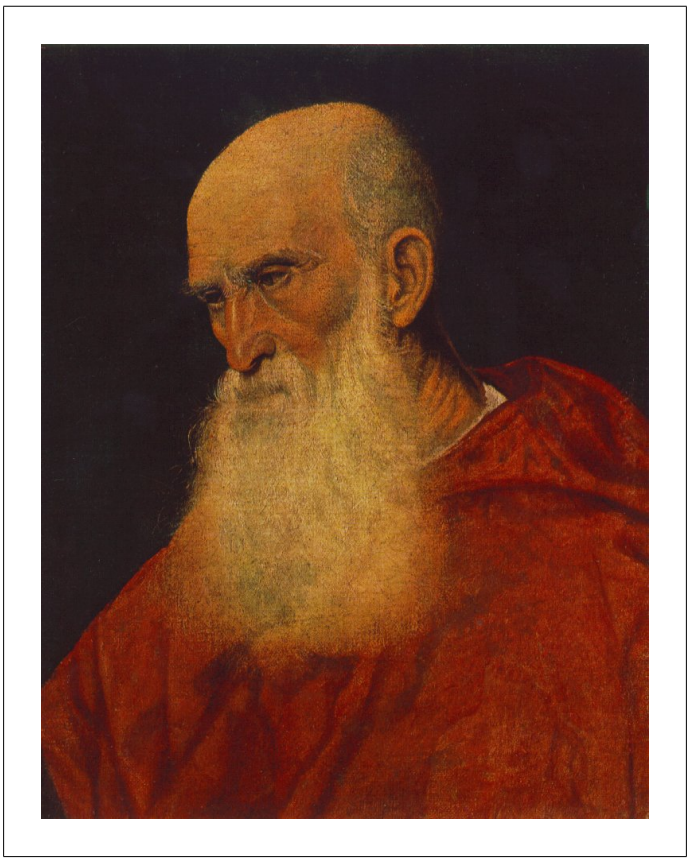

Figure 9. Tiziano, *Pietro Bembo*, 1545-6.

The old man we saw in this painting is not staging at all; on the contrary, he is lost in his own thoughts, in a gloomy meditation which seems to disregard the (eventual) presence of an onlooker. He is *alone* in his meditative stance and we can understand his deep melancholic mood which is able to disclose for us his true nature and character if only if we do not try to read in his face the desire to look the way it looks. In this portrait by Tiziano, Pietro Bembo is not staging a pose, but he is still revealing his own nature: he is just the man we see through his mood and meditative behavior.

I don't believe it is possible to work out a solution to this problem by invoking the old and discredited "exception confirming the rule" argument: there are a lot of portraits which have nothing to do with staging a pose and Pietro Bembo's portrait is expression of a characteristic trend in Italian art and particularly in the portraiture of the Renaissance age[7].

In one of his most intriguing books, Michael Fried has maintained that there are two different ways in which a painting can relate itself to its spectator: *theatricality* and *absorption*[8]. This distinction holds also for portraits. Portraits can be under the aegis of theatricality: the spectator has to understand himself as the addressee of a message whose content is a *first-person narration which disclose nature and character of the depicted subject*. Therefore theatricality is a feature of what we labeled as the basic form of portraits — an essential feature because, as we know, theatricality is part of the very nature of pose.

There are, however, also portraits in *absorption* — portraits which have no hints of communicative intention which is, on the contrary, part of the concept of pose. Pose is a *social* attitude which asks for a spectator: on the other hand, there are portraits which can make use of silent and seclusion as their stylistic signatures. We can call this second class of painting *portraits in absorption*. They do not imply pose as a communicative stance and they are not the outcome of the (apparent) decision of the depicted subject to look the way she looks: looking at Pietro Bembo's portrait we are called to be present to the process of disclosing of his own nature — a process which goes side by side with his taking his leave from everyday oc-

[7] This is the central thesis in Gottfried Böhm's *Bildnis und Individuum. Über den Ursprung der Porträitmalerei in der italienischen Renaissance*,München 1985.

[8] M. Fried, *Absorption and theatricality. Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot*, California University Press, Berkeley — Los Angeles — London 1980

cupations and cares. Portraits in absorption seems therefore to be in their own nature a proof of the *inadequacy* of the arguments I have suggested in the previous paragraphs of this paper.

I don't believe we are compelled to jump to this conclusion, — for two different reasons.

First, portraits are a relative open class of paintings whose items are not necessarily grouped together by their partaking one and the same essential feature, i.e. *pose*. Portraits have different forms, and every effort to reduce them to a single pattern is an oversimplification. On the other hand, to take cognizance of this problem is not the same as denying that portraiture, in its simplest form, rests on pose and is best exemplified by portraits whose subjects are staging a pose. Portraits aim to cast light on the individual nature of their referents and the easiest way to reach this goal is to represent them as staging a pose: in their basic form, portraits are first person narration of the self.

Modifications of this simple and basic pattern are nevertheless possible. Hence the second reason I mentioned. Portraits in absorption do not entail a mise-en-scéne, but there is still something in their nature which reminds us of the concepts of pose and which seems to result from pose as a peculiar behavior: as a matter of fact, portraits in absorption still ask for the *temporary inaction* of their subjects — and temporary inaction has to be understood as an *intentional* behavior, as the outcome of the subject's decision to step back from cares and opportunities of live and to rise above the pressure of what impinges on him from the world. Therefore absorption is still a distinguish mark of humanity and spirituality: portraits must depict their own subjects *as if they were egos*, even if they do not represent those egos as staging a pose.

It is possible to go one step further to highlight the difference we are dwelling upon: if pose is an intentional behavior which aims to a *communicative* goal, it follows that a portrait of the first class is characterized by representing its subject as deeply involved in the *first person* narration of himself. `I am the man you see' — this is what the painting seems to tell to its spectator. On the contrary, portraits in absorption are *dumb*: they silently allow their onlookers to *disclose* nature and character of the depicted subjects. They are dumb, or better: their subjects intentionally refuse to yielding to the solicitations of life and their keeping silent is not

just a sheer fact, but the result of a decision, whose existential meaning has to be emphasized. The step back from opportunities and cares of life, which is so characteristic of the melancholic mood of absorption, seems to relieve the *true nature* of the depicted subject from the burden of life. Relieved from the fleeting emotions of everyday cares, lost in his *own* thoughts, Pietro Bembo — as Tiziano painted him — come into our sight and what we onlookers perceive is nothing less than his nature as it is and it appears to be beyond all the contingencies and opportunities of the moment. Take away the communicative dimension from pose and you have absorption: portraits in absorption, therefore, are *third person* narration of the nature and character of the depicted subject[9].

IV.

I would like to end this paper mentioning very quickly a particular kind of images which are similar to portraits and which seems to stay halfway between theatricality and absorption — I mean *caricatures*.

[9] It is important to dwell on these remarks, in order to understand the imaginative and symbolic meaning usually given to this kind of portraits. Pose is an intentional behavior and — like every communicative act — can be *mendacious*; on the contrary, portraits in absorption are a kind of painting in which the depicted subjects reveal, *unwittingly*, their character and their deep spiritual life. It follows that properly they *cannot be deceitful* because their meaning is a sort of natural meaning. Looking at Pietro Bembo's portrait we see his hidden spiritual life and his melancholic mood in the same way we see measles in an erythematous rash. Painters must be able to spot this ephemeral symptom and the secrete of portraiture rests on the painter's ability to grasp an interesting aspect of a man's face, as soon as it shines through the many fleeting and irrelevant aspects in which it looks. Hence the emphasis that sometimes is placed on the expressive value of portraits, which *seem* to be able to bring to light the true nature of their subjects, the hidden meaning which is impossible to grasp looking at them in their everyday occupations. In one of his sonnets, Petrarca suggests that Simone Martini — in order to portrait Laura as he did — must have seen her face in heaven, as it appears (or it should appear) once it is freed from the burden of life and body: `Ma certo il mio Simon fu in paradiso / onde questa gentil donna si parte, / ivi la vide, et la ritrasse in carte / per far fede qua giú del suo bel viso. / L'opra fu ben di quelle che nel cielo / si ponno imaginar, non qui tra noi, / ove le membra fanno a l'alma velo' (Petrarca, *Canzoniere*, LXXVII). The grandiloquent thesis that portraits can disclose the true nature of men better than direct experience has a long history, which has still its echo in Gadamer's *Wahrheit und Methode*.

Caricatures are an interesting subject and they raise a lot of interesting and difficult questions, which are often neglected by philosophers. At least one of these question is worth to be discussed here: I do believe that caricatures — or at least: a far-reaching family of caricatures — are in some respect similar to portraits and that — like portraits — they meet the two requirements we sketched before. Usually, caricatures have human beings as their subjects and they usually depict them in the temporary inaction of pose. In this respect, caricaturesseems to be similar to the first class of portraits — the one which is under the aegis of *theatricality*. Notwithstanding this, there is an interesting difference. In depicting a portrait of the first class, the painter has to arrange pose and look — i. e. intentionality and factuality — because they both cooperate in determining the way in which the portrayed person seems to disclose his own nature.

Caricatures are different in this respect. Even if these two moments are still present, they seem to straddle: the seriousness of pose and its communicative goal is simply denied by the reality of body, by its looking the way it looks. The first-person narration of the self staged by the pose reveals itself as *deceptive* and it is *unmasked* by the mere presence of body and face, which reveals in its deformity the true nature of the depicted subject. Caricature lets her victim assuming the attitude and the posture she wants to be seen in, but this is just a trick on its own: the voice called to disclose her nature is the *body's* voice, as it is emphatically stressed by the caricature's distortions. Hence, the comical disposition of caricature: we laugh because we are compelled to listen to the *low* voice of body in its denying the *lofty* pretenses of will and consciousness.

I believe that a deeper analysis of caricature would help us in understanding better what is the nature of portraits and what does exactly "pose" mean.Notwithstanding this, instead of deepening these too cursory remarks, I prefer to end my paper by discussing an example.

Look at the caricature by Daumier on the next page (see FIGURE 10): it depicts a French politician — the baron Joseph Podenas — who, according to Daumier, was famous both for his opportunist volte-face and his unending speeches. Daumier depicts him in a very classic and self-satisfied pose, but his dull eyes, his very small and low forehead, which contrasts with his big and shapeless body and his gigantic mouth let us understand what a person he was and how dull were his long speeches.

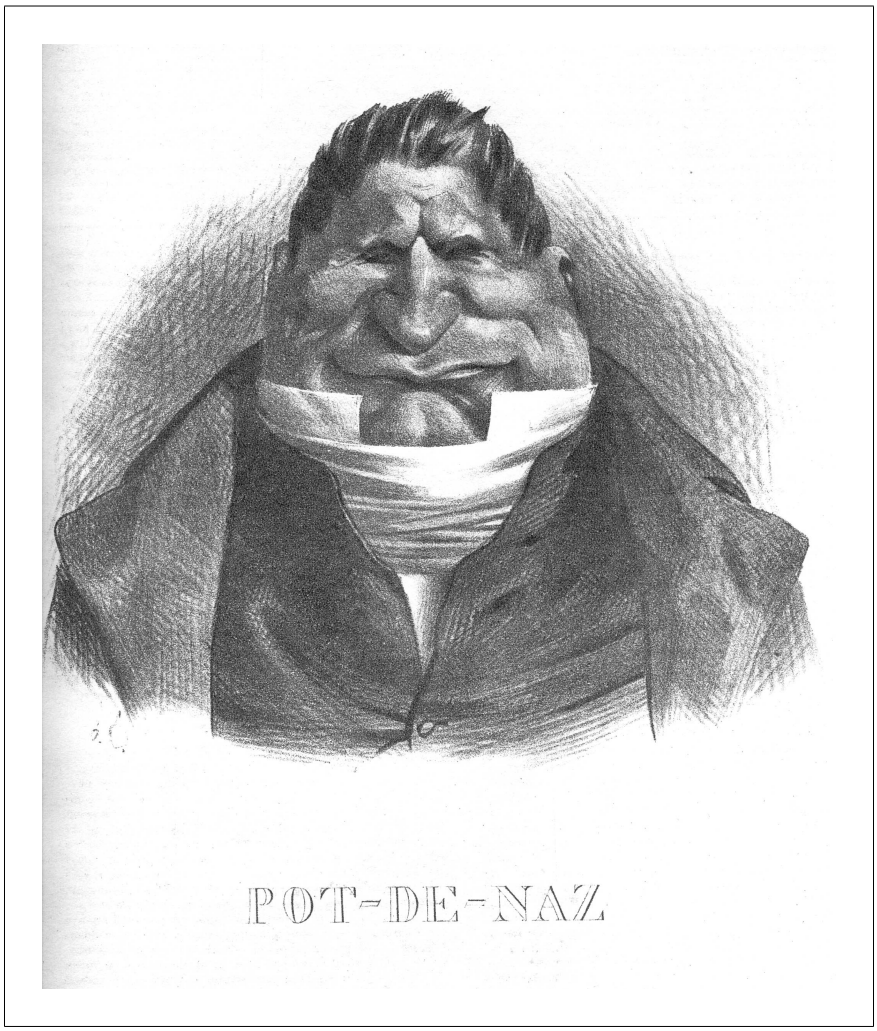

Figure 10. Honoré Daumier, *The Baron Joseph Podenas*, 1833.