

Portraits, Painters, and Women: Balzac's *La Maison du chat-qui-pelote* and James's 'Glasses,'" presents us with the common scenario in which a male painter paints a woman's portrait (or portraits); it thus invites us to explore the way the power to represent another person (and thus construct or produce subjects) relates to gender. I argue that as stories that demonstrate the social function and power of the portrait qua representation and show the painter's artistic production to be inseparable from his interests and desires, they also show how, and under what conditions, the power to represent is gained, kept, or lost. Chapter 5, "Portraits of the Male Body: Kleist's 'Der Findling,' Hardy's 'Barbara of the House of Grebe,' and Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*," presents us with the less common scenario in which a man is the object, rather than subject, of vision and desire. In all three texts, we find a full-body representation of an idealized male that is kept hidden (as opposed to the texts discussed in chapter 4 where we have portraits of women's faces that are exhibited in public). These full-body representations are the sites of conflicting desires and identifications for multiple viewers, male and female. I argue that though we can understand some of these viewers' relation to the image in terms of narcissistic identification and mimetic desire, this paradigm cannot fully account for what takes place in these stories.

The issue of gender is crucial also for chapter 6, "Portraits, Parents, and Children: Storm's 'Aquis submersus' and Sand's 'Le Château de Picordu,'" in which I discuss the way portraits function as means of transmission—of traits but also of authority, knowledge, and the past. I argue that both Storm's story, centered around the relation between father and son, and Sand's fairy tale, dealing with the relation between mother and daughter, question prevalent ideas about the relation between gender and transmission. Storm's story puts into question genealogical transmission and the power of the father while Sand's story de-idealizes the father and represents a successful transmission from mother to daughter.

Nikolai Gogol's "The Portrait," discussed in the final chapter, deals with the relation between portraits and money. I argue that the story has two conflicting strands: in one strand, where representation is understood as a relation between original and copy, money is seen as what destroys art; in the other strand, where representation is understood as a relation of adequation, art is seen as analogous to money.

Finally, in the afterword, I reflect on the relation between "portrait" and "story," between the characters' experience of seeing the portrait and the reader's experience of reading about it.

CHAPTER I

Poe's "Oval Portrait"

As we have seen in the introduction, portrait stories expanded their scope in the nineteenth century to include, besides the viewer and the portrait, the painter and his subject. This means not only that the story of the portrait's production is now added to that of its after-effects but also that the portrait can no longer be considered as purely referential. The attenuation of the portrait's referential status, in turn, means that viewing it cannot be reduced to an identification of its subject. Edgar Allan Poe's short story "The Oval Portrait" (1845; originally published as "Life in Death" in 1842) is a good example of this expansion and complication of the portrait story: it features, besides the oval portrait, the full array of character-positions—a painter, a subject, and a viewer—and in three short pages tells the story of both the portrait's production and its subsequent effect on a viewer. Moreover, the experience of the viewer in Poe's story is dramatically different from the one typical to portrait stories in pre-nineteenth-century texts, whether in the gothic, sentimental, or romance tradition. Indeed, though the story opens with an explicit allusion to the gothic novel, this allusion, I will argue, serves to mark the *difference* of the viewer's experience in the story from the one we find in the gothic novel.¹

The complexity of the story is reduced considerably; however, when critics see the frame narrator (the viewer) as replicating the predicament of the painter in the main narrative, as they often do (going as far as to claim that they are one and the same person).² The result of such a reading is to simplify the frame narrative (dealing with the viewer's experience), depriving it of its most puzzling aspects.

In what follows I will focus on these two points—the differences between "The Oval Portrait" and gothic fiction and the differences between the two parts of the text (the story of the painter and that of the viewer), in order to come to terms with the story's unsettling effect. I will conclude by considering the reasons for critics' tendency to conflate the stories told in the two parts as well as what I see as at stake in resisting this tendency.

Rewriting the Gothic Portrait Story

"The Oval Portrait" starts with an explicit reference to the gothic novel: the chateau in which the wounded narrator of the frame narrative takes refuge is described as "one of those piles of commingled gloom and grandeur which have so long frowned among the Apennines, not less in fact than in the fancy of Mrs. Radcliffe" (*Poetry and Tales* 481). As I have argued in the introduction, in the gothic novel (as in other seventeenth- and eighteenth-century texts featuring a portrait) the portrait is the sign of unresolved past conflicts; often the character who discovers the portrait (or any other mysterious object that refers to past misdeeds) gets involved, as a result of this viewing, in adventures that eventually lead to the uncovering of past wrongs and to their righting. In Poe's story, the frame narrator finds in the castle a portrait that fascinates and appalls him; the story of the portrait's production he reads in a book he finds by his bedside tells of the death of one person (a woman) as a result of the actions of another person (the painter); the narrator himself, as I have mentioned, is severely wounded. However, neither one of these "crimes" gets clarified, punished, or avenged by the viewer; the frame narrator's actions remain limited to gazing at the portrait and reading the story of its production. Whatever wrong occurred in the past is not rectified.

The main narrative, dealing with the painter, describes a double process by which, on the one hand, an empty canvas gradually fills up and becomes a painting and, on the other hand, a living human being is drained of life and becomes a corpse; the tale's conceit is that the former is the

cause of the latter.³ In other words, the painter's story is not that of a metamorphosis, where a woman becomes a work of art.⁴ The narrator's story, therefore, cannot be a symmetrical reversal of such a metamorphosis—that is, of a work of art, a portrait, coming to life. The narrator is explicit on this point when he insists that, drowsy as he was, he had not "mistaken the head [in the portrait] for that of a living person" and, further on, that "the peculiarities of the design, of the *vignetting*, and of the frame must have instantly dispelled such an idea [that the portrait is not a picture but the head of a living person]" (482). The coming to life of a portrait is one of the scenarios we find in gothic fiction, where it leads to the avenging of a crime or the rectifying of a wrong of which the portrait is the sign. That the frame narrative does not—indeed, cannot—stage a coming to life of a portrait marks one of the differences between Poe's story and the gothic novel (and at the same time suggests that the frame is different from the main narrative, rather than being its repetition-through-inversion).

The gothic in Poe's story is primarily a space—a chateau in the Apennines, and even more precisely, a turret room in the chateau. We should note that there is no plausible motivation for the wounded narrator choosing "a remote turret" (481) for his place of rest inside the deserted chateau. Similarly, it is not obvious why, in the main narrative, the painter, who is presented to us only as an artist and a husband, should be painting in a castle, and specifically in a "dark high turret-chamber" (483). Without realistic motivation, "turret" appears as the purely conventional site of the literary tradition of the gothic. But whereas characters in gothic fiction end up leaving the chateau with its scary turrets at the end of their travels, this is not the case with the characters of "The Oval Portrait." The painter, the woman who is the subject of the portrait, the narrator who views it, and the portrait itself all occupy the space of the turret and none of them leaves it: the woman dies in the turret room where the portrait was painted; we are not told what happened to the painter after he finished painting the portrait or to the narrator after he finished reading the story of the portrait so that they, in some sense, remain forever in a turret room.

By leaving the painter and the narrator in the turret room, with the portrait (as well as the corpse of the dead woman, in the case of the painter, and the book, in the case of the narrator), Poe does not allow them the possibility of stepping outside the site of their horrific experience. The absence of an outside is also conveyed through the lack of realistic motivation for the transmission of the story. Since the narrator of the frame narrative is "desperately wounded" (481), it is not at all clear whether or why

he could or would write it. The main narrative ends when the painter completes the portrait and realizes that his wife is dead; a few lines before, we were told that "as the labor [of painting] drew near to its conclusion, there were admitted none into the turret" (483). It is, therefore, not clear who could have witnessed the completion of the portrait and the death of the woman and hence who could have told the painter's story. The origin of the story cannot be the painter himself not only because the story is in the third person but also, indeed primarily, because the story relates what the painter did not—indeed would not—notice. Thus both the main narrative and the frame narrative dispense with providing a realistic motivation for the act of transmission (a feature we find also in other Poe stories, such as "The Pit and the Pendulum" or "Manuscript Found in a Bottle").

The lack of realistic explanation for the story's transmission casts a doubt on the narratives' status as records or re-presentations of past experience; they appear, rather, as coextensive with the experience itself. Lived experience is repeated in the narratives but without the distance or difference (of re-presentation) that would allow one to overcome or "redeem" this experience (to use Leo Bersani's term).⁵ If the gothic is alluded to in order to suggest a horrifying, "appalling" experience, in Poe's story, contrary to what happens in gothic fiction, this experience has no "outside" and cannot, therefore, be either left behind or mastered and overcome.

As readers we, of course, can leave the space of the turret/tale, go "outside" it and gain a distance that would allow us to comment on it (rather than relive it) or, alternatively, simply leave it behind and read or do something else. But though this is true empirically, it is also the case that the structure of the story is such as to make our own exit impossible: the frame narrative precedes the main narrative, which is chronologically prior to it and is its necessary precondition; the frame does not "close," and at the end of the main narrative we do not return to the narrator to find out what happened to him after he finished reading the story of the painter and his wife, we should, logically, continue by going back to the frame narrative that tells of the subsequent history of the portrait; we would then read again the story of the painter and his wife, and so on, ad infinitum: we, too, would never leave the turret/tale.

Rewriting the gothic portrait story in "The Oval Portrait" thus amounts to exposing a crime or an act of violence that cannot be avenged, a wrong that cannot be rectified, creating a horrifying experience that cannot be overcome or neutralized in any way.

Painter and Viewer

We have seen that the three characters of the tale share the same predicament, which the reader is also invited to assume. This, however, does not mean that they are interchangeable: While the narrator both sees the portrait and reads the book, the reader only reads the book and the painter only sees the portrait. Since, as we shall see, the portrait and the book where the painter's story is written seem to be mutually exclusive, the frame narrator's position seems to be the most complicated one.

As critics have long noticed, the frame narrative is considerably longer than the main narrative; it is also more complex. The story of the painter, his wife, and the portrait, with all its uncanniness, is relatively easy to understand because it is structured around a series of symmetrical oppositions such as art/life, life/death, seeing/not seeing, looking/withholding of the gaze, man/woman, and so on. Indeed, several critics have commented upon the clichéd nature of the painter's story.⁶ The story of the narrator, on the other hand, though it resembles that of the painter in some respects, involves less clear-cut oppositions: instead of gazing/withholding the gaze, gazing/reading; instead of portrait/woman, portrait/story. In addition, rather than generating its meaning through stark oppositions, the frame narrative emphasizes middles. We have already seen that the narrator occupies a mediating position between painter and reader (since he both sees the portrait and reads the story). Wounded, the narrator also occupies a middle ground between life and death. When he reaches the turret room he creates, through a series of instructions to his valet, a space of light, where gazing and reading will take place, and that lies, again, in a middle ground between the darkness of the outside world (night outdoors, the danger of death) and the darkness of the inside—the bed with its heavy curtains (sleep, danger of delirium): "I bade Pedro to close the heavy shutters of the room—since it was already night—and to throw open far and wide the fringed curtains of black velvet which enveloped the bed itself" (485). In collapsing the narrator's story into that of the painter we risk, therefore, subsuming what is strange and even incomprehensible in what is known and familiar.

Though the painter is described as a complex figure (for example, he is both "passionate" and "austere" [483]), he is a fairly conventional representative of the Romantic artist. Art is his first love; he takes "a fervid and burning pleasure" (483) at the task of painting his wife so that implicitly at least artistic pleasure replaces for him erotic pleasure and artistic creation takes the place of sexual procreation. In producing a portrait that he

considers to be "*Life* itself" (484), he shows himself to be a Promethean figure who dares to compete with God. Though he "h[as] high renown" (483), we don't hear of his exhibiting or selling his art, and though he is "striduous" (483), there is no indication that he has learned his art from a master; he is a genius, a born artist who lives solely for his art. In using his art—his first bride and his wife's "rival" (483)—to paint a portrait of the latter he, like other Romantic artists depicted in fiction (one thinks of stories by E. T. A. Hoffmann, such as "Die Jesuitkirche in G.," or "Der Artushof," for example), tries to resolve the conflict (overcome the opposition) between the real and the ideal. In stating that the portrait is "*Life* itself" (484), the painter claims that he succeeded in transcending the particular, concrete, contingent (and in so doing has gone beyond painting a portrait of an individual), though he also realizes belatedly that this was achieved at the price of the life of the depicted woman.

If the painter is an easily recognizable figure, the narrator remains mysterious since we know practically nothing about him except that he is wounded and has a valet named Pedro. And while the painter's story lends itself easily to interpretation, the narrator's story remains puzzling. We can see the difference between the two narratives through the way in which light and the gaze are used in both. In the main narrative, gaze and light are the equivalent of love or attention (just as blood/paint is the equivalent of life). As the painter paints he gradually looks more at the painted face than at the real one until he "turned his eyes from the canvas rarely, even to regard the countenance of his wife" (483). Deprived of his "regard"—his gaze and attention—the woman gradually loses life. In order to live, the woman also needs light. The description of the turret room as "dark" (483) is linked to her experience (since presumably the turret room has enough light, indeed, the right light, for the painter to paint): "She . . . sat meekly for many weeks in the dark turret-chamber where the light dripped upon the pale canvas only from overhead" (483). Following the logic whereby the creation of the portrait is the destruction of the woman, either the light that enables the painter to paint is withheld from her, as is her husband's gaze, so that she dies from the paucity of light, its relative absence (the light drips on the canvas, not on her); or, alternatively, the light can be read as a symbolic equivalent of the painter's transcendently oriented idealism, in which case it actively kills her. In either case, light and the gaze cannot serve both the interests of life (of the woman) and of artistic creation (by the painter).

In the frame narrative, on the other hand, the competition for light/gaze between the woman and the portrait becomes a competition (or dis-

junctive alternative) between the book and the portrait—an alternative whose meaning is less readily available. The narrator alternates between gazing at pictures and reading the book he finds by his bed: "Long—long I read—and devoutly, devotedly I gazed" (481). The analogy between the gaze and light, and the competition for them between book and portrait, become explicit when the narrator shifts the light in order to see the book better and, in so doing, makes the oval portrait visible for the first time, thus diverting his gaze and attention from the book to the portrait. When he moves the candelabrum back, the portrait is shut off from view and then he seeks the book "eagerly" (482). The whole sequence of actions, carefully noted, is not entirely logical: if the narrator moved the candelabrum in order better to read, why, after discovering the portrait, would he need to move the light back in order to read? And for that matter, why, to begin with, does he move the candelabrum rather than the book? The insistence on shifting and reshifting the light (which attracts our attention precisely because it does not make practical sense) may suggest an incompatibility between book and portrait, other than the empirical impossibility of reading and gazing at the same time. The disjunction between portrait and book appears as a difference that cannot be overcome: there cannot be a synthesis between book and portrait that would allow the narrator (or us) to grasp them together.⁷

The painter's reaction to the completed portrait is described as a logical progression: Having put the last brush strokes onto the face in the picture, the painter first stood "entranced before the work which he had wrought." In the next moment, while still gazing at the painting, "he grew tremulous and very pallid, and aghast," and cried "This is indeed *Life* itself." In a third moment, he "turned suddenly to regard his beloved" and found that "*—She was dead!*" (484).

Whereas the painter's reaction is characterized by a logical progression, the reaction of the narrator to the portrait is more complex and not entirely comprehensible. As a shifting of the light/gaze brings the portrait into view, the narrator's first reaction is: "I glanced at the painting hurriedly, and then closed my eyes" (482). He does not understand, at first, why he shut his eyes; with his eyes still closed he tries to figure out the reason for his action and concludes that "It was an impulsive movement to gain time for thought" (482). There is a certain panic at being exposed to viewing without thinking, maybe because such viewing might be a projection of one's imagination, desire, obsession; thought intervenes "to calm and subdue my fancy for a more sober and more certain gaze" (482). After the interval of thought he "look[s] fixedly" at the portrait, gives a

detailed description of its style and its frame, and tries to account for his first reaction to it—that it “had so suddenly and so vehemently moved [him]”—by rejecting three possible causes for the impression it made on him: “the execution of the work,” “the immortal beauty of the countenance,” and that “fancy . . . had mistaken the head for that of a living person” (482). He then remains “for an hour perhaps” both “thinking earnestly upon these points” and gazing “riveted upon the portrait” (482). The result of this “thoughtful vision” is that he finds the solution to the “true secret of [the portrait’s] effect” in its “absolute *life-likeness* of expression” (though as noted above this “expression” apparently comes neither from the painter’s skill nor from the subject’s beauty). At the same time he elaborates on the effect this “absolute *life-likeness* of expression” had on him: “at first startling, [it] finally confounded, subdued, and appalled [him].” Satisfied with his solution to the origin of the “spell,” he moves the light away from the portrait “with deep and reverent awe,” and, with the “cause of [his] deep agitation being thus shut from view,” he starts reading (482–83).

This is a very detailed and complicated account of a reaction to a portrait. It seems to have two contradictory threads to it. On the one hand, there is an attempt to master and bind affect. This is done, first, impulsively, by shutting off the source of affect. This impulsive act then becomes in itself a source of anxiety, itself in need of mastering and binding. Thinking or rationalizing is then used first to explain the impulsive act and then to master its source—the portrait. Describing the portrait as an artifact with a specific style, as well as its frame, is one way of mastering the portrait. Finally comes the explanation that satisfies him and brings the viewing to a close. On the other hand, there is the sense that all this control and rationalization ultimately do not result in neutralizing the portrait. The narrator’s thinking and fixed gazing do not eliminate affect, only allow him to spell out more clearly of what this affect consists. Even though he is satisfied with his solution, the portrait still remains a “cause of deep agitation” and needs again to be “shut from view” (482) as it was at the beginning. In trying to control an impulsive first reaction the narrator does not deny the power of the portrait to confound, subdue, appall and agitate him as a portrait.⁸ Since we do not get the narrator’s reaction to what he has read in the book, the story of the painter cannot be seen as solving the riddle of the portrait for the narrator, explaining it or dissolving the horror and agitation it causes.⁹

The Life-likeness Effect

I prefer commencing with the consideration of an effect.

—EDGAR ALLAN POE, “Philosophy of Composition”

The narrator’s final judgment that the effect of the portrait comes from its “absolute *life-likeness* of expression” is much less clear than the painter’s final exclamation: “This is indeed *Life* itself.” The very fact that Poe created a neologism of sorts—“*life-likeness*”—in order to describe the portrait’s expression indicates that he was trying to describe something for which he did not have ready-made terms.

Whatever idea the word “*life-likeness*” was designed to communicate, it does not seem to have been grasped, since most critics substitute, more or less systematically, the clear and relatively common “*life-likeness*” for the alliterative, synthetic “*life-likeness*.”¹⁰ The reason for that is fairly obvious: the word Poe creates introduces into the relatively simple notions of resemblance (likeness, another word for a portrait) and resemblance to life (*life-like*) the heterogeneous term of likelihood or probability. It is the intruding “*li*” of “likelihood” that seems incongruous in this context (and therefore is eliminated by critics) since we normally do not speak of a portrait as “likely,” though we do refer to stories as “likely” (either ironically or not). If “*life-likeness*” suggests the coming together of portrait and story, it does so by keeping their heterogeneity and incomparability intact.

The portrait’s “*life-likeness*” is said to be absolute, which causes a further problem of interpretation since the modifier “absolute” seems to negate the meaning of both “likeness” and “likelihood”: absolute likeness is identity and not resemblance; absolute likelihood is certainty and not probability. This “absolute *life-resemblance-likelihood*” is an “expression” that, as we have seen, cannot be anchored in either the skill of the painter or the beauty of the model and is not the result of taking the portrait to be an actual living person.

What sense can we make of Poe’s “absolute *life-likeness* of expression”? “*Life-likeness*” appears only one other time in Poe’s work, in the story “The Premature Burial.”¹¹ The story lists cases of premature burial, arguing that such occurrences take place frequently. The particular incident to which the expression refers has to do with the application of a galvanic battery to a person who, supposed to be dead, was buried and then disinterred, in order to be dissected. The application of the galvanic battery, we are told, produced “the customary effects” on the body, “except, upon

one or two occasions [when it produced] a more than ordinary degree of life-likeness in the convulsive action" (671)—that is, likeness of being alive. It is worth noting that in the earlier version of "The Oval Portrait," entitled "Life in Death," the narrator is startled "into waking life" by the view of the portrait "as if with the shock of a galvanic battery."¹²

We have seen that unlike the painter who is horrified by having created "Life itself," the narrator is horrified by what he insists is only a picture, by its "expressing" something that is both life-like and likely (or, if we take into account the modifier "absolute," the same as life and certain). The narrator sees something that appears life-like, looks alive—"a young girl just ripening into womanhood" (251; my emphasis) who, the comparison with "The Premature Burial" suggests, is buried alive in the portrait, imprisoned within a frame.¹³ The comparison to "The Premature Burial" (together with the story's earlier version) also suggests that the narrator himself may be in the same predicament of a living corpse, buried prematurely. This may explain his strong reaction to the portrait without imputing to him knowledge or recognition of the portrait's subject. The painter's double reaction when he views his completed work—the painting is "Life itself" and his wife is dead—is replaced by the narrator's reaction—the portrait's spell comes from its "absolute life-likeness," suggesting that both he and the woman in the portrait are buried alive, that is, are both dead and alive. Again, a symmetrical opposition (and the desire to overcome it) is replaced with a middle ground partaking of both terms of the opposition, which, hence, cannot be overcome.

The theme of premature burial is common enough in Poe's work so that suggesting that this is what the portrait in some sense "expresses" comes as no great surprise. Previous critics have explained the presence of this theme in Poe's work either in terms of a psycho-pathological obsession, or, more recently, as an expression of a more general preoccupation, produced by certain social and cultural concerns.¹⁴ In the context of an analysis of "The Oval Portrait," "buried alive" can be read as a sign of an impossibility or a refusal to transcend the particular, to generalize, to allegorize.¹⁵

As critics pointed out, the painter's story invites being read as an allegory of (a certain kind of) art:¹⁶ art that aspires to transcend the particular. In painting the portrait of his beautiful wife the artist does not engage in mimesis in the sense of copying, slavishly or mechanically imitating, the contingent, particularized real (indeed, as he progressed in his work, the painter "turned his eyes from the canvas rarely, even to regard the countenance of his wife" [483]). Rather, he attempts to capture an essence—

Life itself rather than this or that life, this or that moment in life. In attempting to represent an essence through the painting of his beloved's portrait, the painter marks his effort as a deliberate attempt to overcome art's dependence on the real and contingent (while using a genre defined by its commitment to the particular, real, and contingent).

The frame narrator's reaction to the portrait sidesteps these issues. Unlike the visitors to the turret, who see the portrait's "mighty marvel" in its resemblance to the original (483), the narrator is not struck by the portrait's mimetic accuracy; there is no textual evidence to suggest that he recognizes the portrait's subject. Nor does the narrator express admiration for the portrait as capturing the essence of life, being "Life itself," as the painter put it. The narrator's strong reaction to the portrait, then, is not the result either of the portrait's realism or of its ability to transcend the real but rather of its "life-likeness." As we have seen, the source of the narrator's reaction is not exactly *in* the portrait (the painter's skill, the subject's beauty): in declaring the source of the portrait's spell to be in its "absolute life-likeness," the narrator describes its effect on him, what the portrait "expresses" to this particular viewer.¹⁷

Unlike the story of the painter, the story of the narrator's reaction to the portrait cannot be generalized, or allegorized: it remains the story of one individual's affective response or reaction to a particular portrait. That we know practically nothing about the narrator except that he is a wounded man paradoxically contributes to this particularization (since attributes indicate the belonging of an individual to a category). His being a wounded man is, of course, of the greatest importance since it indicates his similarity to the woman in the portrait, his being, like her, a living dead, buried alive. We can read this as a general statement (there is no life that is not already partaking of death, we are all living dead), but the response of the narrator to the portrait would still remain irreducibly particular since it involves affect rather than knowledge (and affect is anchored in the body, hence in the particular). The overcoming of the particular that the painter seeks (creating "Life itself") and that his story performs (it invites being read as an allegory) thus remains disjunctive in relation to the narrator's unsublatable affective experience of viewing the portrait.

In telling the story of a painter devoted to his art who, in painting a portrait of his wife, shifts his gaze and attention (his "regard") away from her and onto the image he is painting and thus brings about her death, the main narrative explicitly claims what in many other portrait stories involving a painter remains implicit: that the painting of a portrait causes in

some way the annihilation of its subject. In Poe's story this is not attributed to a quasi-magic power of the portrait. Rather, the story suggests that when a portrait is considered superior to its subject, for instance by being "Life itself" rather than but one instance of life, the real subject, rejected as not deserving of attention ("regard"), is symbolically annihilated.

As I have argued in the introduction, the portrait has been often seen as inferior to other art forms because of the particular, singular nature of its subject. A portrait, it was claimed, would not be of much interest to a viewer unless it transcends the particular, is more than a portrait.¹⁸ The narrator's story suggests, however, that the portrait can engage a viewer not because it reveals a general truth or an essence but because it has the power to affect: it can create an effect. The creation of effect has been one of Poe's main goals as a writer (as he himself argued, for example, in his "Philosophy of Composition" or in his review of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales*), and it may be one of the reasons why he is often regarded as not a very serious artist (an artist not to be taken very seriously). Critics' tendency to conflate the narrator's story with that of the painter in a way that subordinates the former to the latter suggests that they prefer the "serious"—that is, generalizable—part of the story (its meaning, its "message") to its affective one. In so doing, critics not only attempt to master and overcome affect (which, as we have seen, the frame narrator also does but without denying the power of affect or obliterating it). They also perform a reading where the production of knowledge or understanding (general) is carried out at the expense of—through the sacrifice of—experience (the particular)—something that the story, in its lack of "outside," lack of distance between experience and narrative, is designed to preclude.¹⁹

Though, as I have argued above, the structure of the story is such that we, readers, remain imprisoned in the turret and, like the characters, cannot step outside the site of a horrifying experience and gain a cognitive distance from it, it is also true, as Hélène Cixous has noted, that the tale's structure entails that we, as readers, would repeatedly forget the narrator as we become absorbed in the painter's story. This forgetting duplicates the painter's own "forgetting" of his wife in favor of her painted image (Cixous 28). Both acts of forgetting have to do with the preference for the general, essential (Life itself, the painter's allegorical tale) over the particular, singular (the woman, the narrator's reaction to the portrait). Thus Poe's story both prefigures and resists the critical response it generates. Put otherwise, it shows us, the readers, the inevitability, but also the price, of "forgetting" the particular text we are reading as (or when) we draw

from it a general meaning, and suggests that not discarding our affective reaction to it in favor of its "message" is a way of countering the urge to generalize. Another way of countering this urge is, of course, committing oneself to a close reading of the text, being attentive and having "regard" for its particularities—to what is different in each text and within each text—rather than sacrificing this difference for some general truth that is, more often than not, already known and familiar.

Poe's story introduces us to some of the issues I will be discussing in the rest of the book. To begin with, the tension between the portrait as a representation of a "mere individual" (hence, debased art form) and the portrait as transcending the particular will be a recurrent issue. As in Poe's story so in many of the others, it will often be mapped onto gender difference. Portrait stories thus provide us with the opportunity of using the undervalued half of the binary opposition particular/universal as means for a critical reflection on how and for what purposes this opposition has been used.

Poe's story also introduces the issue of the painter's power over the sitter or subject—the power to represent. The painter's tale presents this power as absolute: it is the power to create and annihilate life. The lack of any recognizable social setting in the story strips this power of any determinants other than gender difference. Most importantly, the painter who wields this absolute power is presented as a disinterested, "pure," artist-creator who has no worldly concerns, who aspires to transcend the real, and who paints only for the love of art, his first bride. Thus, Poe's story presents the view of art as a separate sphere, outside the world, and hence, presumably, outside power relations, as dependent upon or grounded in a gender differential that gives the male painter complete power over the woman. It can be read as showing how this notion of art founds, justifies, and perpetuates assumptions about male power.²⁰ The frame narrative, on the other hand, presents the narrator-viewer as wounded and his attempt to master the affective charge of the portrait as only partially successful. It suggests that the male gaze is not always and everywhere conscripted to objectify the woman and (or as) her image. The narrator-viewer's possible identification with the image of the woman suggests an alternative view of the male subject and his association with vision, contesting the notion that "the gendered dynamics of looking are reducible to the relations of empowered male subjects and disempowered female ones."²¹ I will return to this question in my discussion of Henry James's story "Glasses" in chapter 4.

Poe's story also addresses the main tension legible in the title of my book: that between portrait and story. By insisting on the disjunction between book and portrait, Poe's story asks us to remember that a story is not a portrait even when it is a portrait story. This issue will be raised in different ways in some of the stories I will be analyzing, and I will discuss it more fully in the afterword.

CHAPTER 2

The Portrait's Two Faces: James's "The Special Type" and "The Tone of Time"

Henry James had a strong and enduring interest in the portrait as a particular kind of representation, and we find in his fiction a large number of texts dealing with portraits and portrait painters. If this fact has not received, on the whole, the attention it deserves, it is, at least in part, because portraits and portrait artists feature prominently primarily in his short fiction, which is still less studied than his novels.¹ But another reason is critics' tendency, when discussing portrait stories, to subsume the portrait within a larger category—such as painting, picture, visual representation, art—rather than to explore the specificity of the portrait as a form of representation.² To some extent James himself is responsible for this approach since the analogy between painting and writing, picture and novel, is frequent in his writings. It is worth noting, however, that though in his critical reflections on the novel, most famously in his essay "The Art of Fiction" (1884), James often uses general terms such as "painting," "picture," and "painter" as terms of comparison for literary production, when it comes to his *fiction* he is, by necessity, more specific and the painters he represents are, more often than not, portrait painters.³ This specificity is by no means marginal or accidental since none of events told