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Portraiture as Frame and Portal in La Bruyère

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Abstract

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La Bruyère develops a theory and a practice of portraiture in order to effectuate individual change through the moralist critique of his text, *Les Caractères ou les moeurs de ce siècle*. His hybrid genre melds the traditions of character writing and literary portraiture, and incorporates the mode of visual portraiture in painting. La Bruyère manipulates portrait frames in order to multiply and extend the perspectives onto his subjects. This method of focalizing his readers' attention allows certain portraits to serve as portals opening upon self and society. Although the extreme social cohesiveness during this time, characterized by Jean-Paul Sartre as a *cérémonie de reconnaissance*, precluded the emergence of characters with psychological interiority, La Bruyère extends the boundaries of the aesthetic depiction of an individual. His satirical characters surpass the *clé* readings upon which many of his contemporaries focused, and La Bruyère aims instead at some of the larger structures of his society. Even as his portraits extend the lexical field for portraying a character, they also serve as semiotic distillations of social knowledge. In his portraits we find La Bruyère's absorption in critical issues concerning the aesthetic representational system that governed French society during the apogee of Louis XIV's reign. Foremost is his articulation of a certain temporal malaise – a focus on the punctual that threatens the notion of continuity essential for both the intelligibility of the self as well as for the legitimacy of the monarchy. Yet La Bruyère also bears witness to what we might call the tyranny of reciprocal vision in a society obsessed with appearance. Many of the characters in *Les Caractères* attempt to manipulate the system of signs to effect a change in their social status, thus exploiting the representational system's basis of truth in the mode of plausibility and verisimilitude. La Bruyère issues his own moralist challenge to his readers: *il faut savoir lire*. To read *Les Caractères* as merely symptomatic of late seventeenth-century French society is to fail to appreciate how his text participates in the aesthetic and cultural transformation to the eighteenth century.

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INTRODUCTION

Les Caractères ou les moeurs de ce siècle, the work that earned Jean de La Bruyère a place in the French Academy, falls at a curious moment in history. Published during the apogee of French classical society, one carefully engineered to a large extent by Louis XIV, it also occurs in the middle of a great transformation. This highly complex period, what Michel Foucault calls the "Classical Age," encompasses the rise and fall of absolutism, scientific and philosophical development and the further evolution of a nascent capitalism.[1] Yet other changes, including the emergence of the modern novel, the progressive obsolescence of an aristocratic social and aesthetic system, the growth of a new bourgeois social class and the beginning appearance of more radical notions of differentiation and individuation, prompted Foucault to define this epoch in terms of a specific mode of representation and its relation to a certain form of subjectivity.[2] The epoch was marked on one end by the transition from Montaigne's notion of an embodied self, one that only exists in and through the mediation of its representation to the transcendental subject of Descartes, one based upon rational thought and one that exists only as a spectator to the world -- thus divorced from representation.[3] At the other end of

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[1] Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1970).

[2] While Erica Harth furnished the term "progressive obsolescence," she echoes an idea established by Sartre and Foucault among others. Erica Harth, *Ideology and Culture in Seventeenth Century France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), 18. For an elaboration of the nature of Classical man, see Foucault's *The Order of Things* and its explication in Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, eds., *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (Chicago University of Chicago Press, 1982), 18-43.

[3] See Dalia Judovitz for this transition from self to subject. Dalia Judovitz, *Subjectivity and Representation in Descartes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

the period the human individual, now endowed with an agency, re-emerges as both a subject and an object of representation.

La Bruyère's contribution to this transformation has not been well-understood. At best his text has been largely regarded as an insightful, yet purely descriptive work. La Bruyère was the last artist to attempt to fit a large-scale social critique into a single book. He was also one of the last to work within the strict confines of a representational system dominated by the *être*/*paraître* trope. A major aspect of this framework was the definition of truth (*le vrai*) in the mode of the plausible (*vraisemblable*). This dissertation argues that La Bruyère in fact develops, out of the character and portrait provenances, a practice of portraiture whose primary purpose of moral critique aims beyond superficial satire. La Bruyère should be credited for an originality beyond stylistics. His exploitation of the genre of portraiture casts new light on the degree of aesthetic experimentation allowable in late seventeenth-century France. The classical notion of *mimesis*, contained a tension between representation as mirror and as art. This tension is manifested in Furetière's *Dictionaire Universel*. The entry "portrait" reads:

> -- Representation faite d'une personne telle qu'elle est au naturel. Narcisse voyant son *portrait* dans l'eau, en devint amoureux & se noya. Quand on regarde dans un miroir, on y voit son *portrait*.
> -- se dit aussi de l'ouvrage d'un Peintre, qui par art fait l'image & la representation d'une personne.[4]

This struggle over art as faithful imitation, as the reflecting mirror, or as artifice (the "par art fait l'image" where the stress lies on the artistic fabrication) continued throughout the classical age. Larry Norman insightfully demonstrates how Molière aligns his comedic

[4] Antoine Furetière, *Dictionaire Universel* (A La Haye et a Rotterdam: Chez A. et R. Leers, 1690).

portraits on the side of truth, rather than verisimilitude.[5] Molière's social typology exploited the particular and true detail. La Bruyère works through the tension in a similar fashion, for his portraits were read by his contemporaries as *keys*, as indices of real persons.

Yet La Bruyère manages to change the locus of this aesthetic tension. As Norman explains, visual spectacle and literary representation were considered radically different: "the stage projects a more immediate image of the original, one more dangerously natural because it passes directly through the eyes."[6] La Bruyère's contribution to the aesthetic shift between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is to navigate this essential tension while appropriating the visual register of the portrait. *Les Caractères* can be read visually, in terms of what La Bruyère accomplishes through his system of framing. La Bruyère thus provides another step whereby the text usurps the stage, leading to the eighteenth century when the development of the novelistic character fully begins in France.

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[5] See Larry F. Norman, *The Public Mirror: Molière and the Social Commerce of Depiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).
[6] Ibid., 39-40.

La Bruyère's portraits: "…il faut savoir lire…"[7]

"Tout est dit, et l'on vient trop tard…" Thus begins Jean de La Bruyère's *Les Caractères ou les moeurs de ce siècle*. One must love the understated humor in the fact that he follows this line with a 300-page text. Yet if everything has already been written, then surely everything has already been read. As its point of departure this dissertation takes seriously two phrases of La Bruyère's which answer this enigma: "on pense les choses d'une manière différente…" and "…il faut savoir lire…"[8] The key to both the writing and the reading of *Les Caractères* lies in La Bruyère's practice of portraiture. His portraits are semiotic distillations. They are emblematic figures – abbreviated schemas that enable the encapsulation of certain forms of social knowledge, know-how and experience. Certain portraits crystallize his efforts to creatively employ the aesthetic form of the portrait in order to better explore the relationship of the individual to society. If *Les Caractères* epitomizes the classical era in France, it also problemitizes the fractures in the social fabric. Portraiture for La Bruyère serves as a mode of social knowledge, one which surpasses mere description and which instead aspires to a more active critique of his society. Focusing upon La Bruyère's portraits we find a critique that aims at a certain temporal malaise affecting his society and at the relationship of truth to language in regards the aesthetic strictures of the period, one that ultimately hints at a kind of interiority not readily evident in the characters with a traditional method of reading.

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[7] Jean de La Bruyère, "Les Caractères Ou Les Moeurs De Ce Siècle," in *Moralistes Du Xviie Siècle*, ed. Jean Lafond, Bouquins (Paris: Editions Robert Laffont, 1992), 694. I shall use page numbers to cite quotations from the *Discours sur Théophraste* (the preface to La Bruyère's translation), the text of La Bruyère's translation of Theophrastus, and the *Preface* to his own work. All other citations to the text of *Les Caractères* will be referenced by a Roman numeral according to the Chapter, and an Arabic numeral according to the Number of the fragment (ex. IV, 24).

[8] La Bruyère, 695 and 694.

La Bruyère's *Les Caractères ou les moeurs de ce siècle* can be extraordinarily difficult for the modern reader. Roland Barthes remarked upon this at length in his 1963 seminal article which resurrected La Bruyère from the dusty far margins of the French literary canon.[9] The fragmented nature of the work, contemptuously dismissed by one of his contemporary critics as "a mass of detached pieces," thwarts a search for a consistently developed thread or a larger coherence.[10] Additionally, the tone does not lend itself well to critics searching for an attitude or point of view. La Bruyère's is a dry wit, and however incisive his social observations, his passion is muted, his position as a writer elusive. Complicating the difficulty of his vantage point is the specificity of the world from which La Bruyère writes. As Barthes remarks, the modern reader has difficulty locating this late seventeenth-century French world as it is neither close enough nor distant enough. The social framework that La Bruyère describes seems familiar, but it remains both too insular and too confident of that insularity.

A further problem in reading La Bruyère for us Moderns is that our obsession with singularity does not resonate in seventeenth-century texts. The classical reader reads, partaking in what Jean-Paul Sartre calls a "cérémonie de reconnaissance."[11] Sartre's very discerning pages on the relation between the writers and readers of seventeenth-century French society describe the extreme social cohesiveness which effectively closes society in upon itself. As the strength of the ruling ideology precludes any position outside of society, the individual is defined in purely social terms. This

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[9] Roland Barthes, "La Bruyère," in *Oeuvres Complètes*, ed. Roland Barthes (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1993).
[10] *Mercure Galant*, juin 1693, 259-284; S, III, 103-106. Cited in Georges Mongrédien, *La Bruyère: Recueil Des Textes Et Des Documents Contemporains* (Paris: Editions du Centre Nationale de la Recherche Scientifique, 1979), 67-68.
[11] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Qu'est-Ce Que La Littérature* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1948), 99.

extends to the realm of truth as well, where the question of *vérité* has no meaning insofar as the social order incarnates the only possible extant truth. The issue is rather one of *vraisemblance*.[12]

Barthes' article effectively revealed La Bruyère's text as a site open to diverse interpretation. *Les Caractères* has been read in the context of larger literary and philosophical traditions: Classicism, traditional moralist discourse and Cartesian thought.[13] Some critics have mined the specific influences of other writers from the earlier genre of literary portraiture to the dramatic personae of Molière.[14] Others have focused upon a specific term or theme and followed the notions of *esprit*, *gout* and *la nature humaine* through the text.[15] Still others have analyzed the style for which La Bruyère has always been praised.[16] The multiplicity of approaches testifies to both the richness and the resistance of *Les Caractères*.

Originally, readers seized upon the portraits as the *clés* to the text. From the publication of the first edition of La Bruyère's *Les Caractères* in 1688 until the final edition in 1696 lists of attributions would circulate, and debate would ensue over the identity of the real persons "depicted" in the text.[17] Indeed the same critic who took issue with the style of the text also disliked the content: "un recueil de portraits satiriques, dont

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[12] See Sartre's full discussion of the classical era across pages 88-105.
[13] See of course the large body of work on La Bruyère by Louis Van Delft, but also interesting studies by Jules Brody, Emmanuel Bury and Odette de Mourgues.
[14] For a look back toward Molière, see Robert Garapon, *Les Caracteres De La Bruyère: La Bruyère Au Travail* (Paris: Cdu & Sedes, 1978).
[15] See respectively the work done by Marine Ricord and Michael Moriarty, and for opposing readings considering the status of human nature in La Bruyère, Louis Van Delft and Michael Koppisch.
[16] Voltaire and other eighteenth-century critics (La Harpe and Suard) ensured La Bruyère's continued fame. For a more recent reading, see Marc Escola's two volume work on hermeneutics and rhetoric.
[17] Harth, 123.

la plupart sont faux, et les autres tellement outrés qu'il a été aisé de connaître qu'il a voulu faire réussir son livre à force de dire du mal de son prochain…"[18] The problem of this type of reading for both reader and text, however, is that once the subjects referenced by the portraits had passed, either corporeally or fashionably, the text became far less interesting. One contemporary anticipated this presumed fate of the text, remarking on the occasion of La Bruyère's acceptance into the French Academy: "…il est à craindre que les vôtres ne perdent quelque chose de ce vif et de brillant qu'on y remarque, quand on ne pourra plus les comparer avec ceux sur qui vous les avez tirés."[19]

Portraiture in general has been taken up by disciplinary scholarship. As the production of portraits tended to privilege the visual forms, sculpture and painting, the status of the visual portrait as a recognizable genre completely subsumed any literary equivalent. Thus the portrait as an aesthetic problem unto itself has been addressed primarily from a visual rather than a literary perspective. Traditional art historians have focused upon content, addressing the question of likeness as arising only in the context of identifying the sitter. The most interesting scholars in this group have made an effort to analyze the processes of portrait production, inquiring into its social and cultural conditions. Lorne Campbell's work on Renaissance portraiture asks a series of basic questions: what kinds of portraits were produced during this period, who produced them and for whom, how were they painted, why were they wanted and how were they used?[20] Her work does not touch upon questions of likeness and subjectivity. John Pope-Hennessy's *The Portrait in the Renaissance*, is another more traditional work full of rich

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[18] Mongrédien, 67-68.
[19] F. Charpentier, *Discours prononcé à la réception de La Bruyère,* 1693, cited in Ibid., 59.
[20] Lorne Campbell, *Renaissance Portraits: European Portrait-Painting in the 14th, 15th, and 16th Centuries* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 2.

insights.[21] One of his chapters analyzes the type of portraiture which sought to depict human personality. Yet he stops short of questioning the sense of human subjectivity that lies behind this screen of personality.

Edouard Pommier offers a different approach. His fascinating and well-researched *Théories du portrait* traces theories about portraiture from the Renaissance through the eighteenth century.[22] He argues that one can reduce the history of these theories from Alberti to Diderot to a fundamental question of whether the portrait is an imitation of the real, and thus by definition flawed, or whether it is an inspired creation which departs from the real in order to idealize the subject. Because of his large scope he confines himself to aesthetic theory, yet curiously while he reads literary portraits as expressions of theory, and while he reads the writing of painters, he does not read or analyze paintings themselves. Another type of study is Richard Brilliant's 1991 *Portraiture*.[23] He was the first to theoretically approach the subject, by defining portraiture as a represented likeness endowed with authority. He goes on to argue that behind this authority lies either a form of self-fashioning or a form of self-fabrication. The difficulty with his work lies in his conception of the subject's self as basically psychological. His ideas about "inner character" and intentionality are not historically grounded, thus running the risk of overlooking the social and historical implications of portraiture.

The literary portrait, in part because it does not exist as such a well-defined genre, has not attracted the attention of much recent scholarship. Works that do attempt to trace broader histories tend to focus on Montaigne, then mention Pascal before turning to that

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[21] John Pope-Hennessy, *The Portrait in the Renaissance* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1966).
[22] Edouard Pommier, *Théories Du Portrait: De La Renaissance Aux Lumières* (Paris: Gallimard, 1998).
[23] Richard Brilliant, *Portraiture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991).

other great confessionalist, Rousseau. Michel Beaujour's *Miroirs d'Encre* treats the *autoportrait* in a more theoretical vein, defining it both against the narrative temporality of autobiography and against the literary portrait which he maintains is far more limited in exploratory scope.[24]

Much more useful to the elaboration of this project has been Erica Harth's work. She has focused a chapter in her work *Ideology and Culture* upon the wave of portraits, both visual and verbal, that were published in France during the latter half of the seventeenth century.[25] She contends that verbal portraiture served as a focal point in the ideological battles during the French state's consolidation of power. For her the issue of likeness served as a strategic arena in which noble writers attempted to maintain the myth of aristocratic greatness. The literary portrait depended upon the *clé* device which articulated the social position of the represented individual.

The theory of portraiture that emerges in *Les Caractères* includes both visual and verbal registers. This dissertation makes a concerted effort to attend to the complimentarity of those registers in the portraits found in the text. The best definition of portraiture that I have found, Elisabeth Bronfen's, is worth quoting here:

> The act of portraying, then, conjoins disparate gestures. A portrait is the pictorial copy of a particular human face and body within a specific historical and geographical context, with similitude linking the model and the image. In a transitive sense, however, to portray also means to adorn a surface with a picture or a figure, so that the emphasis is on the artistic medium rather than on the reality of the rendered person. Finally, in the figurative sense, a portrait also entails the act of forming a mental image of something that represents or typifies something else by virtue of resemblance to the depicted figure. Thus, even as the portrait

[24] Michel Beaujour, *Miroirs D'encre* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1980).
[25] Erica Harth, "Of Portraits," in *Ideology and Culture in Seventeenth Century France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983).

> implies a binding relation to a particular referent it also implies its very opposite, namely the artist's freedom from any naturally given context.[26]

La Bruyère's portraits, as faceless as they may be, nonetheless develop the context of the bodies they depict. It is in the *transitive* sense, to use Bronfen's term, that La Bruyère excels. It is through a formal analysis, one that recognizes the framing devices that La Bruyère deploys, that the portraits in *Les Caractères* can be best read.[27] And it is through the portraits that the reader can come closest to recognizing the originality of the text and its author.

Curiously, in Barthes' essay, the portrait reclaimed its place as the center of the text. Despite acknowledging the power of the text as an organizing body of knowledge reflective of late seventeenth-century France, he ends with the notion that the text serves primarily as a written self-portrait, the portrait of a/the writer, La Bruyère. Unlike Barthes, for whom La Bruyère's "portrait/characters" remain but metaphors, Jules Brody considers the portrait as a reflective structure, albeit a passive one whose fragmented nature mirrors the substance of La Bruyère's text: the recognition of a new social order.[28] Yet the portrait in *Les Caractères* is neither metaphorical nor passive. In fact, La Bruyère problemitizes *the practice of portraiture*, as opposed to the static object of the portrait. The *clé* readings, both by La Bruyère's contemporaries and obliquely by Barthes, miss the point. Some of his portraits are points of articulation, carefully structured paradigms that schematize the modes rather than merely the content of social knowledge.

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[26] Elisabeth Bronfen, "Facing Defacement: Degas's Portraits of Women," in *Degas: Portraits*, ed. Felix Baumann and Marianne Karabelnik (London: Merrell Holberton, 1994), 232.
[27] For an excellent tutorial on how to *see* by attending to form, note Meyer Schapiro, *Words, Script, and Pictures : Semiotics of Visual Language*, 1st ed. (New York: George Braziller, 1996).
[28] A secondary source well-worth perusing, Brody's work contains very astute and provocative comments. See Jules Brody, *Du Style a La Pensee: Trois Etudes Sur Les Caracteres De La Bruyère*, French Forum Monographs, vol. 20 (Lexington: French Forum, 1980).

My methodological approach in this dissertation follows what I argue is an implicit stricture of La Bruyère's: "il faut savoir lire." An unusual text deserves an unusual mode of reading. My focus on portraiture eschews one of the main issues in that genre: the question of identity. I argue simply that portraiture in *Les Caractères* is about framing, or as La Bruyère puts it, how: "on pense les choses d'une manière différente.[29] Portraiture then for La Bruyère references the visual only in the sense of perspective, of what we can and cannot see, of what is and is not represented on the canvas/page, of how the manipulation of boundaries contains the power of direction, of correction, of change. The presence of maxims, remarks, anecdotes and other fragments attests to the importance of the frame. The portraits, in order to remain relevant, must be provided with a worldview and values, i.e. a context which renders them socially and artistically meaningful. Their presence also serves formally to highlight those portraits that call upon the interplay of writing and reading to effect moral change.

Chapter One will begin by taking seriously La Bruyère's two prefaces, for in them we find an articulation of his theory of portraiture. Melding genres to invent a new type of moralist discourse, La Bruyère uses key portraits to explore a new method of social critique. The portrait of Narcissus, taken up in the second half of the chapter, betrays a temporal malaise. Translating the motif of visual seduction into the mirroring of time, La Bruyère calls into question not only the temporal consistency of a given individual in his society but also the notion, on a larger scale, of royal continuity.

The broken frame of the Narcissus portrait serves as the point of departure in Chapter Two. La Bruyère spills the content of his Narcissus portrait into other fragments in order to explore a different form of narrative. This suggests that the structure of the

[29] La Bruyère, 695.

text itself should be approached through an attentive reading of differing formal frames. La Bruyère's chapter *De la ville*, which includes both the portraits of Narcissus and the Sannions, thus contains a critique of the manipulation of signs in a society struggling with the tension between being and seeing.[30] La Bruyère's opening chapter, *Des ouvrages de l'esprit*, manifests this conflict as well. Chapter Three more fully explores the parameters of La Bruyère's social critique by analyzing portraits across the text at large.

In a sense, the practice of portraiture is both the method and the subject of the text. La Bruyère created a hybrid genre, and then creatively exploited that genre in an effort to perfect a satiric critique, not just of the manners and behaviors of those he observed, but also one aimed at some of the larger structures of his society: the conception of time, the use of language, the competing modes of textual and visual representation, and the idea of the self. It is the insightful vivacity of his commentary that opens for the modern reader a compelling window onto the society of late seventeenth-century France. This critique, however, remains inseparable from its form, the 'portrait.'

[30] Être/paraître.

CHAPTER ONE

THE PORTRAIT IN THEORY AND PRACTICE

Writing across genres

La Bruyère utilizes four antecedent forms of expression to craft *Les Caractères*. He shares with the moralist writers a subject and an intent. Character writing supplied him with a mode of approaching human experience and the beginning of a descriptive lexicon. From literary portraits he took up a direct focal point: the human individual. Yet it was the painted portrait that supplied La Bruyère with the methodological tool of the frame and the theme of a verbal/visual reciprocity that existed in the uneasy space between representation and real social practice.

The moralist

If we currently consider La Bruyère a *moraliste*, it is because his work springs in part from that genre that aims to contemplate the human condition. Across two prefaces, the *Discours sur Théophraste* (which precedes his translation of Theophrastus) and the *Preface* to his own text (which immediately follows the translation), La Bruyère delineates his rationale for writing, his motivation and reward, and his functional choice of method. His prefaces serve to position the text within a certain tradition of social

critique, while simultaneously and rather covertly, claiming a bold originality. La Bruyère explicitly develops his own radical notion of the moralist project engaging, as I argue later, portraiture.

Calling La Bruyère a *moraliste* is an anachronistic gesture, for the term first appears in a dictionary in the 1690 version of Furetière, after the fifth edition of *Les Caractères* had been published.[31] The Furetière definitions restrain the scope of the activity. The *moraliste* is the author "qui escrit, qui traite de la Morale."[32] *La morale* refers to the "doctrine des moeurs, science qui enseigne à conduire sa vie, ses actions." These definitions make no reference to any preceding authors, and if the entry to *moeurs* does mention Socrates, it is only in the context of "Habitudes naturelles ou acquises, suivant lesquelles les peuples ou les particuliers conduisent les actions de leur vie." Yet the term *moraliste* as used by modern critics can name almost anyone, and the modern term includes a moralizing connotation absent in Furetière. Against this vague tendency Louis Van Delft, in a thoughtful and wide-ranging study, has attempted to provide a defined typology of the classical moralist.[33] The model for what he persuasively argues as constituting a genre reaches back to Antiquity. The essential motivation of the *moraliste* is a "réflexion sur le vécu."[34] He operates on a pre-defined thematic terrain, his subject being aspects of "la conduite de la vie."[35] His function as "guide" or "educator" is clear, as are the various perspectival positions he is permitted to occupy.[36] A moralist manual

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[31] Jean Lafond, "Préface," in *Moralistes Du Xviie Siècle*, ed. Jean Lafond (Paris: Editions Robert Laffont, 1992), i.
[32] Furetière. Entry "moraliste." And below, entries "morale" and "moeurs."
[33] Louis Van Delft, *Le Moraliste Classique: Essai De Définition Et De Typologie* (Genève: Librairie Droz S.A., 1982).
[34] Ibid., 341.
[35] Ibid., 295.
[36] Ibid., 295-8.

does not exist, but the sheer temporal weight of the tradition constrains the one who would claim to write in this vein. All of these parameters are clearly evident in *Les Caractères*, and in both the prefaces and the body of the text La Bruyère explicitly acknowledges his debt and the genealogy of his work.

By constructing his own idiosyncratic text in a fragmented form reminiscent of La Rochefoucauld's *maximes* and Pascal's discrete entries La Bruyère firmly places himself in their esteemed company. The similarity of form, for many of La Bruyère's remarks can be formally read as *maximes*, is a danger that La Bruyère attempts to ward off. He labels his entries *réflexions* or *remarques*, and in his *Discours sur Théophraste* declares that his text should not be read as an imitation of either Pascal or La Rochefoucauld.[37] The explicit invocation of these two authors (he all but names them) requires La Bruyère to distinguish himself. As La Bruyère explains, Pascal's interest concerned the spiritual activity of the *coeur humain*. La Rochefoucauld broached the motivations of human conduct, in particular the specific role of *amour-propre* as the basis for behavior and social relations. Although La Bruyère modestly claims that the difference of his text lies in the simplicity of his observations, the real departure exists in his perspective. La Rochefoucauld and Pascal focused on the interior space reopened after antiquity by Montaigne. La Bruyère studies humans in a context, as social beings. His sphere of interest concerns human manners and behaviors operating within the strictly hierarchical, but changing society in which he lived. He specifically inscribes his definition of his task in his title: *Les Caractères ou les moeurs de ce siècle*, where *moeurs* refers not to an

[37] La Bruyère, 667. Neither label ever caught on. Even the different editions reveal that he waffled between the two terms, and Vauvenargues later termed them *fragments.* See Lafond, XXIX.

ethical or moral code (translated as *la morale*), but rather to the habits and customs of a social individual.

Character writing

Yet La Bruyère in large part pre-empted the question of precursor by appending his text to his translation of Theophrastus' *Les Caractères*. Character writing originated in the Aristotelian idea of isolating for analysis positive and negative character traits. It tended to lay more emphasis on the negative (vices rather than virtues), and depending on the author, balanced criticism and moral instruction with entertainment. The strain of character writing that began with Theophrastus had more recent imitators in both Britain and in France. Joseph Hall's *Characters of Virtues and Vices*, was translated by J.L. de Tourval in 1610. Urbain Chevreau also translated Hall in *L'Escole du Sage* (1646) and continued to mine Hall in his later writings.[38] Presented as part frontispiece, part warrant, La Bruyère's translation serves a number of functions. Of course it immediately legitimizes La Bruyère's scholarly authority, as no dilettante would undertake such a work. Its proximity and the titular repetition simulates a kind of master/apprentice agreement. It also situates La Bruyère's work squarely in an ancient tradition, rather than granting his more recent predecessors all of the legitimizing authority. Again however, La Bruyère must address the difference between his work and Theophrastus' text out of which he claims to be writing, and this he does following the passages on Pascal and La Rochefoucauld in the *Discours sur Théophraste.*

[38] For the history of character writing, see Jeffrey S. Rusten's "Introduction" to his recent English translation of Theophrastus. Theophrastus, *Characters*, trans. Jeffrey S. Rusten, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002). See also J. W. Smeed, *The Theophrastan "Character" : The History of a Literary Genre* (New York: Clarendon Press, 1985).

Ostensibly, it seems as though La Bruyère asserts his originality in focusing upon a deeper level of human behavior: "L'on s'est plus appliqué…à tout l'intérieur de l'homme que n'a fait Théophraste…les nouveaux *Caractères*…découvrent le principe…"[39] Van Delft has convincingly argued that one aspect of La Bruyère's originality lies in his full development of the notion of "character."[40] His is a more complicated notion of man, where masks hide that which cannot always be seized, and where the observed details lead no longer to types, but ultimately to individuals, however eccentric. Perhaps because of a kind of "autocensure" or Cartesian prudence that most moralist writers exercised, or perhaps because as Michael Koppisch argues, La Bruyère's beliefs change over the course of nine separate editions of his text, he does not articulate this difference, or development, in his prefaces.[41] Rather, we read it throughout the body of his remarks.

Yet there is another original notion in *Les Caractères* which La Bruyère does raise in the prefaces. This involves the *method* of the moralist. Earlier in the *Discours sur Théophraste* La Bruyère describes three means of moralist discourse. One can provide a detailed analysis of virtues and vices such that the reader may learn to be virtuous by instruction. One can also reduce morals to the movement of the passions, which in effect absolves the author of any further work. The third method, which La Bruyère ascribes to the work of Theophrastus, views moralist principles as essentially constant across the ages, and applies them to the contemporary world by means of "images…familières."[42]

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[39] La Bruyère, 667.
[40] Van Delft, 139-149.
[41] Ibid., 293. For a view of the development of La Bruyère's thought, see Michael Koppisch, *The Dissolution of Character: Changing Perspectives in La Bruyère's Caracteres*, French Forum Monographs, vol. 24 (Lexington: French Forum, 1981).
[42] La Bruyère, 660.

This echoes La Bruyère's very liberal translation of Theophrastus' own short preface, where the aim is not to "peindre les Grecs en général," but to touch upon what is personal and familiar. As La Bruyère has Theophrastus explain, such a text functions by teaching the reader to discern among those with whom he or she associates, whereby "*émulation* les portera à imiter leur sagesse et leurs vertus."[43]

This notion of emulation is articulated here (when describing the third method) fairly simply: "…corrigent les hommes les uns par les autres."[44] Interestingly, La Bruyère returns to this idea in the body of his own text. In what would become a seminal definition for eighteenth-century writers, La Bruyère carefully separates the noble sentiment of emulation from that of the base passion of jealousy.[45] Although it seems at this point in the preface (the discussion of the third method) that La Bruyère is tacitly following the methodological lead of Theophrastus, his own definition of emulation is buried in the chapter entitled *De l'homme*. Instead of exploiting what those in the eighteenth century found as a powerfully original motive for change, La Bruyère stakes claim to another unique and more radical idea.

The hint is found in his very articulation of the three classes of discourse, since La Bruyère discusses the moralist's task from the reverse position. He creates a typology of the three "orders" of readers whom the moralist text will affect. The text reads: "Les uns cherchent des défintions… Les autres…quittent un auteur de tout le reste... Il s'en trouve d'un troisième ordre qui…se plaisent infiniment dans la lecture…"[46] It is an odd gesture

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[43] Ibid., 669. My italics.
[44] La Bruyère, 660.
[45] Ibid., XI-85. For a brief study of the importance of emulation in the 18th Century, see John Iverson, "Introduction to Forum: Emulation in France, 1750-1800," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 36, no. 2 (2003).
[46] La Bruyère, 660.

to name his readers ahead of time, before they have even begun to read. Yet this passage is in effect the third echo of the beginning of the *Discours*. The very first sentence of the *Discours* anticipates a critical response to the text, as no text can appeal to all readers:

> Je n'estime pas que l'homme soit capable de former dans son esprit un projet plus vain et plus chimérique, que de prétendre, en écrivant de quelque art ou de quelque science que ce soit, échapper à toute sorte de critique, et enlever les suffrages de tous ses lecteurs.

The second paragraph of the *Discours* then begins the dissection of that audience:

> …la différence des esprits des hommes, aussi prodigieuse en eux que celle de leurs visages, qui fait goûter aux uns les choses de spéculation et aux autres celles de pratique, qui fait que quelques-uns cherchent dans les livres à exercer leur imagination, quelques autres à former leur jugement, qu'entre ceux qui lisent, ceux-ci aiment à être forcés par la démonstration, et ceux-là veulent entendre délicatement, ou former des raisonnements et des conjectures…[47]

The dividing impulsion continues in the third paragraph where La Bruyère again distinguishes his readers. *Les savants* patently ignore contemporary customs; *les femmes*, and *les gens de la Cour*, have no focus but the present, and even then, only upon what is of current interest. In addition to this gulf is the complete non-recognition between the two worlds of *la Cour* and *la Ville* as described in the fourth paragraph. Michael Moriarty has read this fundamental opposition of worlds as a central problem for La Bruyère, the difficulty being: "finding a place from which to speak and a public to address."[48] Yet La Bruyère's own particular situation implies that this contradiction was at least somewhat already practically resolved. For La Bruyère lived a rather fluid existence. After the 1686 death of the Grand Condé, La Bruyère was elevated from tutor of the grandson to one of his *gentilhommes* with a pension. He occupied both worlds, traveling between Paris and

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[47] Ibid., 659.
[48] Michael Moriarty, *Taste and Ideology in Seventeenth-Century France*, Cambridge Studies in French (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 141.

Versailles, with lodging in both.[49] The relationship between La Bruyère's observation posts and his literary representation was extremely close.[50] However, the more pressing question involves the inaugural gesture of La Bruyère's text. In the first two pages of the *Discours* he displays four different categorical frames: the different types of *esprits*, *savants* vs. *femmes* vs. *gens de la Cour*, *Cour* vs. *Ville*, and the three orders of readers. Why the series of four classifications? Why the repetition?

In a sense, La Bruyère's problem of different types of readers is a false problem, the point actually being to call attention to the relation between the writer and his audience, more specifically, to the nature of the act of reading. The four repetitions begin under the aegis of portraiture. The juxtaposition created by La Bruyère between *esprits* and *visages* (in the block quote above) elicits the traditional purview of the portrait. The portrait artist's task requires the balancing of external details in order to evoke either personal or social qualities. Following this juxtaposition is the revelation of the method that La Bruyère will use throughout his text: repetitive reflections or refractions. The underlying tension of these passages, where La Bruyère reiterates the typology of his audience, thus bears on the relation of portraiture and the act of reading. If portraiture at this point seems to have something to do with repetition, changes in perspective and changes in articulation, then what is reading? La Bruyère's point of departure in *Les Caractères* is to shift from the normal literary trope: reading is analogous not to a conversation between writer and reader, but rather to the interlocutory relation between

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[49] For biographical details, see Patrice Soler, "La Bruyère Dans Tous Ses Éclats," in *Moralistes Du Xviie Siècle*, ed. Jean Lafond (Paris: Editions Robert Laffont, 1992), Garapon, and Edmund Gosse, *Three French Moralists and the Gallantry of France* (London: W. Heinemann, 1918).
[50] Van Delft contends that salon culture was indeed critical for allowing the moralist genre to flourish, in regards the proximate relation of moralist literature in general and *le vécu* (their lived experience). Van Delft, 151-154.

painter and sitter, and the act of reading becomes an ocular process of manipulating frames in order to envision the same object.

Nomenclature

On a formal level, La Bruyère accomplishes the invocation of portraiture by means of another basic difference between his text and that of Theophrastus. La Bruyère gives his characters classical names. By naming, instead of classifying traits like Theophrastus, La Bruyère puts into effect a completely different reading dynamic. Theophrastus uses isolated traits of character to name his short sections, which delineate a particular type of person (i.e. the grouch, the coward), albeit sometimes with details so specific as to perhaps indicate an original model. Yet La Bruyère's use of names is not simply a replacement. It fundamentally changes the way the text is read.

Unlike the use of an abstract, third-person pronoun in Theophrastus' text which aims at a universal, nomination in La Bruyère's *Les Caractères* automatically appeals to a model of recognition and evokes the question of identity. Yet the referential aspect of the names in this text recalls an anecdote related by Montaigne. The Duke of Normandy for simple amusement at a festive occasion grouped all of his nobles by first name – thus all the Guillaumes were placed here…[51] Names are distinguishing labels, but they do not always function properly. Proper names in *Les Caractères* originate in the tension between the character and portrait provenances. If one names a portrait, one attempts to breach the representation-reality gap. If one names a character, one attempts to situate an individual, as an individual and not as a generalized type, in a social construct. La Bruyère's focal point of nomination in this text is broad because he tries to accommodate

[51] Antoine Compagnon, *Nous, Michel De Montaigne* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1980), 53.

both movements. Furthering this dynamic is the fact that the model of recognition was based in the real practice of adopting Greek names. This conceit existed among the *précieux* circle, in the journal *Mercure Galant* and at court. It served both as a mode of social posturing and as a way of recalling and recreating a mythology. Yet the point was to celebrate recognition itself.

The literary portrait

In addition to the moralist tradition and the character genre, and through in part the use of proper names, La Bruyère has also tapped a third form that specifically isolates the individual: the literary portrait.[52] The literary portrait in France grew out of four different sources. The first was the emblem. Italian medals often had a depiction on one side, and an emblematic inscription (either linguistic or visually symbolic) on the other. This oppositional relationship, for the question of which side served as illustration to the other remains open, existed as well between artists. The second source grew out of this opposition. What began as a comparison in Horace's dictum of the Sister Arts had turned into a competition (*paragone*) by the time of Leonardo da Vinci.

In sixteenth-century France, artists had to compete for patronage. Ronsard's evocation of portraiture in *Les Amours* could be read as a crass money-grab: in order to compete, Ronsard has to make the case that the poet produces more representational value than the painter. This of course implies the same opposition found on the emblematic medal. Ronsard's work, like the Petrarchian sonnets which he is in part re-writing, describes a painted portrait – in the same gesture maintaining that image (and the

[52] Good surveys can be found in J.W. Smeed and in Erica Harth's well-researched chapter on portraits in her Marxist work on seventeenth-century culture.

artist's name who produced the lost or forgotten painting) while proclaiming its (poetry's) own power to maintain that image. The third source was the portrait book, which contained both drawn or painted and written portraits on the same page, with image and text mutually engaged. Evolving from the early sixteenth century, portrait books reached their apogee with André Thévet's *Vrais pourtraits et vies des hommes illustres* (1584).

The fourth source remains partially oblique, for Montaigne is not usually cited in terms of portraiture but rather invoked by any discussion of self-representation. Yet Montaigne's work sheds light on the relation of the self to language, and therefore the *Essais* are critical for understanding the very possibility of representing a person in late sixteenth and early seventeenth-century France. The status of portraiture does, however, remain problematic in the *Essais*, since Montaigne depicts a self in passage rather than providing a fixed visual image of the self.

Enormously popular in seventeenth-century France, the literary portrait encompassed two main variants. Portraits as found in traditional historical writing, with emphasis on interior and exterior description, found their way into memorial works penned by those like the Cardinal de Retz and the Duc de Saint-Simon. The 1649 publication of *Le Grand Cyrus* by Mlle de Scudéry inaugurated the seventeenth-century vogue for scarcely-veiled portrait descriptions of fashionable contemporary figures. Antoine Furetière's *Le Roman bourgeois* is but another example. These *romans à clef* fascinated readers in the *Salons* who absorbed themselves in the guessing game of divining the actual persons represented in the texts, with participants creating their own examples for the delight of their friends.

Although first published later, *Les Caractères* still caught the tail end of the vogue of verbal portraiture. La Bruyère's witty denigration of those he observed ensured a certain audience for his work. Indeed he implicitly acknowledges in the *Discours* the seduction of scandal when referring to the *critique* he expects his text will attract. Harth argues that La Bruyère has rendered the *clé* aspect of *Les Caractères* completely "irrelevant" by referring only to "types and conditions" in his portraits.[53] Yet Harth is only partially correct. La Bruyère's portraits may be irrelevant in the sense that, except in a few cases, he did not aim to artistically capture a specific individual. However, his portraits far exceed the aspersion read by his maligned readers, but not for the reasons Harth may believe. For La Bruyère, the literary portrait remains but a source, one which he mines in order to produce his own formal technique of portraiture.

Portraiture in painting

Although Jean Fouquet's portrait of Charles VII is well known, it was not until the ascension of François I to the French throne in 1515 that the tradition of royal court portraiture in France began. This lack of tradition allowed Jean Clouet to explore the genre of portraiture in his depictions of François I in ways prohibited to Italian royal painters. In general, however, the painted portrait in France inherited and modified the iconographic repertoire created by the Renaissance Italians. Elements, subordinate figures, settings and poses all belong to this tradition. Although royal portraiture is beyond the purview of this study, for it involves a set of ideological concerns specifically related to the representation of power, general portraiture contains many of its

[53] Harth, *Ideology and Culture*, 124.

hierarchical strategies, combining realistic likeness with idealizing aspects in order to both evoke the sitter's presence and signal his or her authority or station.

The functions or powers of the portrait were expanded upon in the seventeenth century, and the eighteenth century might be considered the apogee of the genre. Portraiture always implicates identification, but the changing social atmosphere of this period complicates this issue in light of bourgeois claims to noble status and because of the gradual forging of a separate bourgeois identity. This link between the portrait and recognition does not necessarily imply a realist depiction, for idealization also works to identify, though in a register which encompasses both the individual and his social existence in the world. Artists of the period continued to vary the exemplary, moralizing and pedagogical functions of portraiture. To an increasing degree, portraiture also began to acknowledge the abstract life of the sitter and to express the idea of the sitter's self.

Portraiture as an artistic and cultural practice flourished in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Thousands of works were produced and they entered the great intellectual *Salon* conversations. Some painters focused primarily on the portrait while others included it in their repertoire. Despite its overwhelming presence, and indeed it played a vital role in royal iconography for Richelieu and for the propaganda surrounding Louis XIV, portraiture held a lower status theoretically. The Academy-sanctioned hierarchy of genres privileged a form of painting defined by poetic and dramatic terms. Literature essentially subjugated painting during this period, determining both its content and its principles. Thus portraiture, which remains mainly devoid of narrative content, was relegated to second-place status. Yet this did not suppress its growth and variety, and it by no means limits its present interest.

La Bruyère's portrait theory: the *Préface*

The *Discours sur Théophraste* serves not just as an introduction to the translation. It also works in effect to redefine the parameters of a text aiming at social critique in the tradition of other preceding moralist writers. The opening lines of the *Préface* to his own text, however, articulate precisely the claims La Bruyère makes for the function and effect of his portraits. This passage concerns reading and writing, observing and representing, but he begins by alluding to a sort of contract:

> Je rends au public ce qu'il m'a prêté; j'ai emprunté de lui la matière de cet ouvrage: il est juste que, l'ayant achevé avec toute l'attention pour la vérité dont je suis capable, et qu'il mérite de moi, je lui en fasse la restitution. Il peut regarder avec loisir ce portrait que j'ai fait de lui d'après nature, et s'il se connaît quelques-uns des défauts que je touche, s'en corriger. C'est l'unique fin que l'on doit se proposer en écrivant…[54]

The balancing of *prêté*/*emprunté* applies the unusual notion of active social commerce to what is usually considered unidirectional observation. The recuperation of these terms by *restitution* might seem to tame this departure by invoking the conventional idea of *rendre* (meaning to give back), a simple echo of the first verb. Yet a closer look reveals a strange turn. The first entry for the verb *restituer* in the 1694 version of the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française* (to which the *restitution* entry refers) suggests a moral compulsion in this act of giving back: "Rendre ce qui a esté pris ou possedé induëment, injustement."[55] The sentence above reiterates this idea with the oscillating meaning of *juste*, connoting both justice and precision. Barthes argues that the modernity of La

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[54] La Bruyère, 693.

[55] Entry "Restituer," in *Dictionnaire de L'Académie française*, 1st Edition (1694), <http://humanities.uchicago.edu/orgs/ARTFL/> (July, 2006). N.B. All references to this dictionary were mined in the ARTFL database.

Bruyère lies precisely in a notion of moral obligation, what Barthes calls "une certaine responsabilité de l'écriture."[56] For Barthes, *Les Caractères* defines the function of literature, in its confrontation with the world, as such: "[Elle] n'est pas de répondre directement aux questions que le monde pose, mais…d'amener la question au bord de sa réponse, de construire techniquement la signification sans cependant la remplir."[57] The initial opening of La Bruyère's preface answers the question not fully explored by Barthes, which concerns the nature of that "technique." La Bruyère makes explicit both the obligation and the technique related to his redefinition of the practice of portraiture.

It might seem that the mention of *portrait* in the passage remains a merely perfunctory allusion. The term *portrait* does seem to echo its titular analogue *caractère*. Yet from the diversity of meaning in these two terms, La Bruyère creates a marvelous lexical knot. The character tradition is textual, and although the *literary* portrait also has a long history, the term *portrait* immediately conjures a visual image. An interior personal reality is more available in the character, whereas the portrait can only allude to its presence.[58] A character is first an *empreinte* or *marque*; a portrait is the "Image, ressemblance d'une personne."[59] There is also the tacit recognition in Furetière that unlike *caractère*, which exists primarily as an object, the action of portraying subsumes the finished product.[60] Further, beyond the lexical map there exists a broad difference between the general products of the two traditions. The character tradition aims at types,

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[56] Barthes, 1345.
[57] Ibid.
[58] "…se dit encore des qualités invisibles." Entry "Caractère." Furetière. "Pour ce qui distingue une personne des autres à l'esgard des moeurs ou de l'esprit." Entry "Caractère." *Dictionnaire de L'Académie française*.
[59] Entries "Caractère" and "Portrait." *Dictionnaire de L'Académie française*.
[60] The verb "caracteriser" is a subheading of the noun "caractère," while the Portraire/portrait entry reverses the verb/noun relation.

at describing the general, at representing the perennial. The portrait tradition names individuals, observes the specificity of details, and captures a punctual subject. But La Bruyère invokes the proximity of *portrait/caractère*. Thus he manages to incorporate tensions on several levels: between modes of representation (visual vs. textual), between the subject of man as an interior and exterior being, between the rhetorical structures of each (character/metonymy and portrait/metaphor), between different temporalities and between concrete and discursive reality (the portrait as substantive object vs. the character as a form of verbal practice).[61]

The use of the term *portrait* might also seem a crass strategic move, an attempt at legitimizing the text by placing it squarely in the dominant representational system in seventeenth-century France: *ut pictura poesis*. In this aesthetic creed, the doctrine of the "Sister Arts," painting and poetry ostensibly shared equal status, although the theory favored the visual. Painting supplied the "figural idiom" by which poetry evoked graphic images such as portraits.[62] La Bruyère's full use of the painterly lexicon (*achevé*, *regarder*, *portrait*, *d'après nature* and *touche*) in the passage further situates the portrait in the visual tradition. He describes the temporality of artistic reception: "regarder avec loisir." By means of the qualifier *d'après nature*, he explicitly delineates the type of portraits he professes to produce. The vibrant tension of the alternate term *caractère* affects the meaning of even this aesthetic concept, focusing its sphere to the specificity of *human* nature.

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[61] Barthes argues that the character in La Bruyère has a metaphorical structure cloaked in metonymy. Although I will not now discuss this, I should mention that his use of the celebrated portraits of Ménalque and Giton/Phédon remains somewhat facile. Barthes, 1343.

[62] Christopher Braider, *Refiguring the Real: Picture and Modernity in Word and Image, 1400-1700* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 7.

As a moralist his observations will not embellish or idealize – he will instead aim at a naturalist depiction according to the seventeenth- rather than nineteenth-century understanding of the term. The use of the term here references one of the fundamental tenets of the *ut pictura* system: verisimilitude (*vraisemblance*). The closed society in which La Bruyère lived largely conflated truth and verisimilitude, insofar as the social order incarnated the only possible extant truth. The classical referent for this was La Bruyère's contemporary Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux, whose text *L'Art poétique* codified this aesthetic theory: "Le vrai peut quelquefois n'estre pas vraisemblable."[63]

Curiously, La Bruyère does invoke truth here, but it in fact remains slightly out of reach. What he offers is "l'attention pour la vérité," a care that suggests both truth's accessibility and its inaccessibility. For La Bruyère tempers his access by an appeal to a certain realism, a nod to his own faculties, to his capacity as a writer who will do the best he can ("dont je suis capable"), and also by the notion of truth's worth – truth that merits his attention ("qu'il mérite de moi"). His choice of words marks the tenuous standing of truth as a referent whose meaning is not absolute but rather embedded in social and artistic considerations that require the deliberate discernment and technique of the writer. In the very brevity of this formulation, La Bruyère thus hints at the complex nature of *ut pictura* practice at the end of the seventeenth century, and at the deeper significance of the concept of the portrait in *Les Caractères*.[64]

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[63] From ARTFL database: Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux, *L'art poétique* (In Oeuvres Completes, T.2. Paris, les Belles Lettres, 1952.)

[64] While Harth sees a "crisis" in the *ut pictura* system at the end of the seventeenth century, Christopher Braider's remarkably rich study suggests that the entire edifice of the theory and practice of the Sister Arts be reconsidered as a deeper historical problem. See Harth, *Ideology and Culture*, 24. and Braider.

Although in using the term *portrait* La Bruyère takes full advantage of its allusive qualities and its rhetorical use, he also exploits its functional power. La Bruyère uses the word *restitution* only once in his entire book.[65] Its singular presence does serve to signal obligation as noted above, but also another equally important concept, for *restitution* invokes too the idea of *reconstitution*. Again, the entry for *restituer* in the 1694 *Dictionnaire de L'Académie française* is wonderfully instructive, and three of six entries bear citing in full:

> --On dit aussi, Restituer l'honneur, pour dire, Rendre l'honneur, restablir, reparer l'honneur de quelqu'un.
>
> --Les gens de lettres disent, Restituer le passage d'un autheur, pour dire, Restablir un passage qui estoit corrompu, le remettre comme il doit estre. Il a restitué heureusement plusieurs passages de Tacite; de Tite-Live, d'Aristophane, &c. je voudrois bien voir comme il a restitué cet endroit.
>
> --On dit en termes de Palais, Restituer une personne en son entier, pour dire, La remettre dans l'estat où elle estoit auparavant. Il a obtenu des lettres de rescision pour estre restitué en son entier.[66]

The concept of restitution involves no less than the moral, ontological, and legal status of the returned object. The returned object, the *portrait*, exists across boundaries. Painted portraits have, of course, a different functional and ontological status than do other representational modes (text, speech…) and other genres (history, mythological, landscape…). As evinced by its traditional commemorative function, portraiture has always enjoyed a unique relation to the real.[67] La Bruyère's opening statement thus does not pretend to imitate the visual register associated with painting, rather it attempts to appropriate, by means of re-establishment (*restitution* in the mode of *restablir*), the functional power of the portrait image: presence in absence. Christopher Braider has

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[65] Only one of its variants, *restituant*, appears in XII-68.
[66] Entry "Restituer." *Dictionnaire de L'Académie française*.
[67] See the seminal work by Campbell, 193.

described the system of *ut pictura* in practice, where poetry envies the "faculty the classical tradition of ekphrastic rhetoric called *enargeia*, the power of filling the beholder with an overwhelming sensation of dramatic physical presence."[68] This envy translates here in La Bruyère's claim, which is no less than the invocation of portrait painting as a *genre*, separate from the other traditions he has called upon (the literary portrait, character writing, the moralist tradition).

Yet La Bruyère's formulation ultimately transcends mere envy. La Bruyère *defines* portraiture as a practice. If what he returns (*restitution*) belongs to the order of representation, albeit with unequaled force of presence, so does what is borrowed. For the original subject is *matière*. *Matière* (that which La Bruyère borrows) is transformed and returned as *portrait* (that which La Bruyère renders). The *Dictionnaire de L'Académie française* defines *matière* as constitutive matter ("Ce dequoy chaque chose se fait."), as textual subject ("Sujet sur lequel on escrit, on parle."), and as physical matter (Se dit aussi par opposition à l'esprit.).[69] The textual traffic alluded to in the definitions of *restitution* and *matière* characterizes the relation between the orders of the real and the represented. The two terms *matière*/*portrait* have equal valence in La Bruyère's opening, with the transaction between the two involving a simple borrowing and returning as supported by the simple pronoun in the middle: "Je rends au public *ce qu*'il m'a prêté" (my emphasis). La Bruyère radically suggests reading the real (the *public*) a priori as text, as representation. Barthes comments obliquely on this in his essay on La Bruyère. For Barthes, La Bruyère views humanity not as substance but as form. His search for the ideal descriptive trait, which Barthes names *la clôture*, ends with the production of "un

[68] Braider, 9.
[69] Entry "Matière." *Dictionnaire de L'Académie française*.

objet à la fois réel (car il pourrait relever de la sociologie) et poétique (car les écrivains l'ont traité avec prédilection): c'est la *mondanité*…"[70] La Bruyère's opening in his *Préface* could be read as a reprisal of arguments taken up in the 1680's by the logicians of Port-Royal. Louis Marin has convincingly illustrated how the portrait was a locus of contention for issues concerning the theory of signs and the power of visual representation.[71] But for La Bruyère, the context remains social critique. Thus in a passage where the elements work towards blurring the distinction between representation and the real, he pragmatically defines the practice of portraiture in terms of restitution in the mode of reforming his reading public. Which, then, raises the question regarding the nature of *public* as part of La Bruyère's opening equation.

So what is the nature of this public? The number of literate persons in France was extremely limited. Despite La Bruyère's specific inclusion of *le peuple* among those whose opinion should count in questions of taste, "…[le] simple peuple, qu' il n' est pas permis de négliger...," even those middle class theatre audiences in the *parterre* can hardly be counted among those with enough learning to apprehend literary works.[72] In addition to *les Grands*, the elite of the hierarchy whose status was based upon military tradition, the literate class included the lesser nobility (those with smaller fortunes, often provincial) and the *noblesse de robe*, the new class of hereditary administrators.[73] A rising bourgeois class also counted as literate readers, and indeed they are often targeted in *Les Caractères* for their false grandeur. Recent research has unearthed much evidence

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[70] Barthes, 1338.
[71] See Louis Marin, *Philippe De Champaigne Ou La Présence Cachée* (Paris: Hazan, 1995), 85-86.and Louis Marin, *Le Portrait Du Roi* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1981), 15.
[72] La Bruyère, 693. See John Lough, *Writer and Public in France: From the Middle Ages to the Present Day* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978).
[73] Sharon Kettering, *French Society, 1589-1715*, A Social History of Europe (New York: Longman, 2001), 66.

of an extant *sociability*, which we may define as "the voluntary interaction among individuals of different social standing."[74] The most conspicuous evidence for this remains of course Madame de Rambouillet's famous salon, the *cabinet* Dupuy, and other salons which epitomize this social traffic during the first half of the century. By the end of the century, Louis XIV's explicit concentration of power and culture in Versailles had largely eclipsed the salons, and not until the end of his reign did another wave begin by those like Mme de Lambert and Mme de Tencin. The literary scene at the end of the century, including both writers and readers, remained to a remarkable degree centered in Paris and Versailles. Edmund Gosse once described the readers of *Les Caractères* as "the most compact body of general intelligence to be met with at that time in any part of the world."[75]

Scholars have had different ways of describing this peculiarly exclusive society in late seventeenth-century France. Sartre makes the distinction between an author's real and virtual public, the latter existing as an audience capable of understanding progressive literature. In the seventeenth century, as individuals were defined only in social terms, these two publics were identical: no objective "outside" vantage point existed.[76] Peter Brooks remarks that in many ways *Les Caractères* represents the apotheosis of the literature of worldliness in the seventeenth century.[77] He defines this worldliness as "a literature directed to man's self-conscious social existence," where worldliness is "a

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[74] Ibid., 121.
[75] Gosse, 67. More recent scholars have described this society in terms of a web of interdependent social/personal relationships. See Norbert Elias, *The Court Society*, 1st American ed. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983) and Philippe Ariès and Georges Duby, *A History of Private Life*, vol. 3 (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1987).
[76] Sartre, 90-99.
[77] Peter Brooks, *The Novel of Worldliness; Crébillon, Marivaux, Laclos, Stendhal* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 77.

concept at the same time real, moral, psychological, and imaginative: the actual way of life of a milieu, a system of values, a form of personal consciousness and behavior, and a literary subject."[78] There's no question that La Bruyère's work fits Brooks' description. However, both Sartre and Brooks obliquely raise the problem of reform. If there exists no "outside" from which to observe, how can the moralist hope to effect change?

La Bruyère approaches this difficulty in his opening passage with the subtle use of a pronoun: "Je rends au public ce qu'il m'a prêté…" This *il* is repeated as the subject that gazes at its own portrait and that then recognizes itself: "Il peut regarder… ce portrait… et s'il se connaît…" The third-person singular to which La Bruyère refers in this passage connotes to the reader a single, particular subject of a portrait. Yet it in actuality denotes the *public*, that is, the singular entity of society. And once the *il* begins acting on its own, it throws into relief the tension manifested in the subtle ambiguity of the object/subject: *public*. For *public* concurrently denotes two subjects: the public as a singular social entity, and the public as constituted by individuals. Thus the portrait as mirror reflects both the collective *and* the individual subject. Returning back to the ideas embedded in the usage of both *caractère* and *portrait*, La Bruyère thus suggests that reform may occur by approaching both the general (reform the public through re-writing of its image) and the particular (through individual reading practices) at the same time.

Normally one might read this reference to the public as a trope, yet the entire usage structure of pronouns in this passage is strikingly unique. It is almost as if La Bruyère is acknowledging a different kind of subject, one in between the socially-defined character of the seventeenth century and the emerging, consumerist, eighteenth-century subject. Notice the prevalence of self-references in this opening passage. Six in the first

[78] Ibid., 4-5.

sentence, two in the second, and the abrupt switch to the impersonal "*on*" in the third. Curious perhaps? Except in the context of a transaction, a transaction which involves the society of which La Bruyère is an integral part. The outside position for La Bruyère is not "outside" in the way we now consider "outside." It is also not an outside defined by profession – referring to the scholarly and *mondain* cultures to which La Bruyère refers, and which to a certain extent was a specious dichotomy (granted there existed an animosity against the pedant as a social type, but as Sartre noted, "au XVIIe siècle savoir écrire c'est déjà savoir bien écrire").[79]

As in painted portraits, La Bruyère's portraits can only function by means of recognition: "et *s'il* se connaît" (my emphasis). The tradition of character writing, despite the attention to detail found in Theophrastus, tended toward describing general truths. La Bruyère's portraits aim much closer to the human individual. Many critics, mainly art critics, who have considered portraiture view the issue of resemblance and its twin, identity, as crucial elements. Lorne Campbell goes so far as to deny the status of "portrait" to those paintings in which it was clear that a model was used.[80] Yet surely the very evidence he cites refutes his argument: Michelangelo's purposeful negligence of likeness in reference to the future viewer's complete ignorance of any portrait's identity.[81] And this same mechanism exists at any given time, even in the period of the portrait's production. Any depiction of a human individual that includes the conventions typical of portraiture (the framing, above all) retains an immediate aesthetic and ethical power. Recognition, in the context of the *mondain* culture from which La Bruyère writes,

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[79] Sartre, 95.
[80] Campbell, 2.
[81] Ibid., 1.

thus defines the relationship between viewer and portrait, where the viewer approaches the painting's subject as an individual with some plausible semblance to himself.

If the portrait functions by means of recognition, it does so in the context of La Bruyère's enterprise which, as the entire passage highlights, intends to reform: "et s'il se connaît quelques-uns des défauts que je touche, s'en corriger." Interestingly, the mechanism for change is in effect built-in. La Bruyère tacitly acknowledges this in his use of the infinitive *s'en corriger*. It is as if La Bruyère claims for portraiture (in his text) a unique power of re-definition. Any recognition by the object of itself as subject of the portrait sets in motion a process of self-correction (*s'en corriger*). In this manner the passage returns to La Bruyère's taxonomy of moralist discourse:

> Il s'en trouve d'un troisième ordre qui, persuadés que tout doctrine des moeurs doit tendre à les reformer… se plaisent infiniment dans la lecture des livres qui, supposant les principes physiques et moraux rebattus par les anciens et les modernes, se jettent d'abord dans leur application aux moeurs du temps, corrigent les hommes les uns par les autres, par ces images de choses qui leur sont si familières, et dont néanmoins ils ne s'avisaient pas de tirer leur instruction.[82]

Thus La Bruyère, in his own *Préface*, exceeds the process of emulation described here. Theophrastus' work corrects the reader ("dans la lecture") by what turns out to be a conflation of two elements: 1) fellow human beings ("les autres") and 2) images of familiar aspects (*choses*). The assumption is that the reforming process functions by reading the representation, or rather, reading the repetition of images which did not seem to have much value the first time round, in terms of moral correction. The method is framed in doubt: a too overt mention of persuasion and the hopeful *must* ("doit tendre"). In contrast, La Bruyère's formulation aims at what he subtly couches in *l'unique fin*: what should be considered a claim for a "fourth order" of moralist discourse. Recognition

[82] La Bruyère, 660.

implies not a reflection of the other, but rather a mirroring of the subject. Yet La Bruyère phrases this notion very carefully. The hinge is the *if* ("*s'il* se connaît"). For the object in a reflection is always self *and* other. That is, one recognizes some aspects, but not others—thus the familiar and unfamiliar coexist. The core of this process is not *image* but *portrait*.

There thus exists an entirely different level to La Bruyère's critique. He essentially redefines the position of *moraliste*. To the other traditions mined in *Les Caractères*, La Bruyère adds the genre of visual portraiture as the touchstone element. He is attempting to forge an entirely new ethic of change, by stressing a fundamental reciprocity between text and image. The operation of his technique is summed up rather nicely by J.W. Smeed who ascribes to La Bruyère's readers, and by implication to La Bruyère himself, the belief that "that reading ought to be an attentive and even creative activity…"[83] In positing reading itself as an exercise in self-cultivation, La Bruyère reprises the Greek "arts of existence" central to their idea of moral improvement.[84] As I have attempted to demonstrate, this point is evident in La Bruyère's *Préface* where not only does he stress "…il faut savoir lire" but also appends another rule, one that engages reading as a visual process: "ne pas perdre mon titre de vue."[85]

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[83] Smeed, 53.
[84] This is most explicitly discussed in Michel Foucault, "On the Geneology of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress," in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 2: The Use of Pleasure* (New York: Vintage, 1978), 10-32, and in Michel Foucault and others, *Technologies of the Self : A Seminar with Michel Foucault* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988).
[85] La Bruyère, 693.

The portrait of *Narcissus*

> *Narcisse* se lève le matin pour se coucher le soir ; il a ses heures de toilette comme une femme ; il va tous les jours fort régulièrement à la belle messe aux Feuillants ou aux Minimes ; il est homme d'un bon commerce, et l'on compte sur lui au quartier de** pour un tiers ou pour un cinquième à l'hombre ou au reversi ; là il tient le fauteuil quatre heures de suite chez *Aricie*, où il risque chaque soir cinq pistoles d'or. Il lit exactement la *Gazette de Hollande* et le *Mercure galant* ; il a lu Bergerac, des Marets, Lesclache, les Historiettes de Barbin, et quelques recueils de poésies. Il se promène avec des femmes à la Plaine ou au Cours, et il est d'une ponctualité religieuse sur les visites. Il fera demain ce qu'il fait aujourd'hui et ce qu'il fit hier ; et il meurt ainsi après avoir vécu.[86]

Of the few hundred obscure, difficult proper names in *Les Caractères*, *Narcisse* suddenly fixes one's reading attention. Here is a recognizable classical, literary referent. Yet the portrait that follows might seem to disappoint, for La Bruyère evacuates the primary themes of the fable. Beauty, passion, self-recognition and even the subject of reflection are explicitly rendered absent. Of course, the simple gesture of deploying the name *Narcisse* lends an amount of erudite authority to the author, but La Bruyère is never given to such facile usage, and is never so superficial as to use Ovid's fable nor its subsequent genealogy as a "simple quarry for ornamentation."[87] Only upon a closer reading do we find that La Bruyère in fact does invoke the specificity of the events described in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, in support of a twofold philosophical inquiry.

The first path concerns the ontological exploration of one important aspect of late seventeenth-century French society: temporal experience. Peter Brooks has called La Bruyère one of the *moralistes* "who refined and fixed a vocabulary directed to a hard-headed, accurate, penetrating understanding of social man."[88] It is this social being who is

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[86] VII, 12.
[87] This phrase was taken from Kenneth Knoespel's very useful study which views Ovid's text as the basis for subsequent narrative innovation. See Kenneth Jacob Knoespel, *Narcissus and the Invention of Personal History* (New York, N.Y.: Garland Publishers, 1985), x.
[88] Brooks, 6.

the subject of all of La Bruyère's portraits. In this passage, La Bruyère leverages Ovid's famed character in order to critique his own society's changing relation to time. The second path involves the realm of aesthetics. La Bruyère's stylistic experiments do not function as ends. They are instead enmeshed in the task of accounting for human experience, and act as an exploration, development and perfection (opening up) of narrative forms. La Bruyère uses the Ovidian fable in order to focus on the genre itself. He effectively pares portraiture down to its base characteristic: not the subject, but the frame. Thus, despite the seemingly reductive nature of the portrait that follows the name *Narcisse* in the passage, it proves to be a provocative, albeit subtle point of departure for a much larger critical engagement both with its own subject (Narcissus) and medium (the portrait).

Narcissus as topos

The story of Narcissus had been familiar in France since the Middle Ages. From twelfth-century glosses such as those written by Arnulf of Orleans and its presence in the in troubadour poetry, to the *Roman de la Rose* in the thirteenth, from Ronsard (*Le Bocage* and *Les Amours*) to the celebrated works by Caravaggio and Poussin, writers and artists explored with greater and greater latitude the themes and difficulties presented by the story of Narcissus. In the Baroque period, Jean Puget de la Serre's *Les Amours des Déesses…et les Amours de Narcisse* (1627) was perhaps the most extensive engagement with the fable.[89] The fable of Narcissus explores the force of an overwhelming, insane

[89] For the history of Narcissus as a literary tradition, in addition to Knoespel, see also Louise Vinge, *The Narcissus Theme in Western European Literature up to the Early 19th Century* (Lund: Gleerups, 1967) and Laura Rescia, "Le Mythe De Narcisse Dans La Littérature Française

passion, the strength of images, the forms of reflection, the path to self-knowledge and the inevitability of transformation. There are several versions of the story. Conon, Pausanias and Philostratus all produced slightly different variants, yet La Bruyère re-engages the events as recounted in Ovid.[90] For beyond the moral aspect of the story, concerning a new form of madness, Ovid forged a narrative reflective of a concerted aesthetic, historical and rhetorical agenda.[91] It is thus worth recounting here the details of Ovid's fable, in light of the way in which La Bruyère re-writes the story.

Despite our contemporary obsession with Narcissus, due in part to the rich body of psychoanalytic criticism, Ovid in fact combined in his *Metamorphoses* what had been two separate myths, and we must consider then two paradoxes: Echo's love for Narcissus thwarted by her inability to speak and Narcissus' incapacity to satisfy his passion for his own reflection. Ovid's passage begins with the prophecy by the blind Teiresias: the fate of Narcissus, defined in temporal terms as the length of his life, will depend ironically on a lack of self-knowledge. Narcissus is the object of passion for all who see him, yet he remains aloof. Rebuffed by Narcissus, the nymph Echo literally wastes away, devoured by her love for him, becoming bodiless – only her parroting voice remains. Another scorned admirer prays for retribution, and the goddess Nemesis answers with the creation

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Baroque (1580-1630)," in *Recherches Des Jeunes Dix-Septiémistes*, ed. Charles Mazouer, Biblio 17 (Tübingen: Université Michel de Montaigne, 2000).

[90] For a careful consideration of the fable's origins up through its function in Plotinus' text *Sur le Beau*, see Pierre Hadot, "Le Mythe De Narcisse Et Son Interprétation Par Plotin," in *Narcisses*, ed. J.-B. Pontalis (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1976).

[91] In the early part of the fable, Ovid characterizes Narcissus' eventual fate as *genus novitasque furoris*. For a wealth of resources concerning the *Metamorphoses* see the University of Virginia's online site (http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/latin/ovid). All Latin citations from Ovid are from the University of Virginia Latin text version (http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/OviLMet.html) and the English prose citations are from the University of Virginia translation by A. S. Kline (http://etext.virginia.edu/latin/ovid/trans/Ovhome.htm). Further references to either will simply read: UVA.

of a virgin pool of water from which Narcissus bends to drink after hunting. A vision of overwhelming beauty transforms his thirst. Helplessly enamored by this image, he then realizes his error and comes to know himself as both subject and object of his own desire. Thus unable to fulfill his passion, Narcissus too wastes away, losing his beauty, while Echo mimics his vocal remorse. He finally expires, leaving not a corpse but a flower.[92]

At first glance, La Bruyère's passage might seem to have slight resemblance to Ovid's fable. Formally, La Bruyère eschews narrative. Regardless of their ordered appearance, events in this passage remain punctual, not sequential. Having evacuated story, La Bruyère also eliminates drama: there is no conflict. Absent are the sentient themes of beauty and passion. Further, La Bruyère seems to avoid any attempt at provoking pathos. His Narcissus dies, simply, without transformation. Perhaps most strikingly, and this even considering the general lack of figurative imagery in *Les Caractères*, La Bruyère elides the visual metaphors so central to other preceding interpretations of the Ovidian fable.[93]

And yet there remains something strangely reminiscent of Ovid's Narcissus – death after a period of fixation marked by reflection or mirroring. The first line is reflected in the last. The beginning verbs *se lever*/*mourir*, reflect in an exact inverse fashion the ending: *se coucher*/*vivre*. Repetitions both lexical (numerical – *quartier*, *tiers*, *cinquième*, *quatre*, *cinq*, and qualitative – *régulièrement*, *exactement*, *ponctualité religieuse*) and phrasal (sentence after sentence constructed in simple subject-verb form)

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[92] Two other translations were also helpful. Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. A. E. Watts (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1954) and Ovid, *Metamorphoses: A New Verse Translation*, trans. David Raeburn (New York: Penguin, 2004).

[93] One example is found in Ronsard, who evokes the fountain and the flower. Artistic examples include the celebrated works by Caravaggio and Poussin which picture Narcissus languishing by the fountain.

embody the verbal echolalia of Ovid's fable. The very textuality of the language in this portrait testifies to the importance of the passage in light of La Bruyère's dictum "il faut savoir lire."[94] This discursive emphasis on reflection thus alerts the reader to further consider the status of the Narcissus portrait in relation to Ovid's fable.[95]

Why the recourse to this specific classical fable? The strength of the Ovidian fable lies in the paradoxical trap in which Narcissus finds himself. Transfixed by his passion for a vision of himself, he perishes. And at the end of Ovid's fable, Narcissus remains paralyzed, gazing at the Stygian waters. The trap is the same on either side of the river. As Kenneth Knoespel has observed: "Narcissus is without a history because there is no end to his entrapment."[96] This is true even in his transformative, earthly state: a flower which blooms every season. This fixed state, in between life and death, serves La Bruyère's descriptive purpose. The Narcissus fable as reflective trap becomes the starting point for La Bruyère's critique of a certain temporal mode, a new way of living in time experienced by seventeenth-century French society. Yet La Bruyère offers an alternative. Brilliantly harnessing the Ovidian idea of transformation to the reformative ideal of the *moraliste,* La Bruyère breaks the frame of the portrait in order to chart a unique narrative path, one suggestive of a different temporal mode of living.

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[94] La Bruyère, 694.
[95] Reflection also assumes a larger role in the *Roman de la Rose*. See Claire Nouvet's enlightened reading. Claire Nouvet, "An Allegorical Mirror: The Pool of *Narcissus* in Guillaume De Lorris' *Romance of the Rose*," *Romanic Review* 91, no. 4 (2000).
[96] Knoespel, 109.

The temporality of Narcissus

The name *Narcisse*, by virtue of its provenance, immediately signals the presence of a particular malaise. La Bruyère's Narcissus repeats endlessly, day after day, the exact same actions. The textual work of the passage, the discursive reflections and repetitions described above, flows into La Bruyère's thematic development. The initial denigration is not the equation of Narcissus' habits with feminine actions ("il a ses heures de toilette comme une femme"), but the fact that he has these regular *hours* in the first place.[97] As the passage continues, the excess that La Bruyère criticizes (and excess itself is a critical topos throughout the text of *Les Caractères*) is an excess of temporal regularity: "fort régulièrement / chaque soir / d'une ponctualité religieuse." Despite the insistence of the passage on the theme of time – the numbers, the repetition of the word *heures*, the metaphorical hints of waking/living vs. sleeping/dying – no progression exists for Narcissus. Past, present and future exist on the vertical axis of temporality. The *duration* of time in the first sentence ("*Narcisse* se lève le matin pour se coucher le soir…"), the entire day, is absent. Each activity (attending mass, gambling, reading of the latest periodicals and well-known authors, frequenting well-known places) exists as a discrete item, as if on a daily agenda with a time allotment for each, yet without any sort of transition between them. Further, none of these activities have any real import; no relation to any kind of productive work that would lead to the acquisition of merit, another central theme to the text.

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[97] Interestingly, another point of commonality between La Bruyère and Ovid is the stress on the femininity of Narcissus. As Pierre Hadot remarks, such demonstrative behavior in sadness (in his frustration, Narcissus self-inflicts wounds with his fists) would connote femininity in Antiquity. In this passage La Bruyère alludes twice to the feminine, in the form of the word *femme*(*s*). Hadot, 144.

The end of the passage renders more clearly the nature of the critique inherent in the Narcissus portrait: his relation to time. La Bruyère's repeated use of the neutral verb "faire" enforces the banality of all of Narcissus' activities, thus reemphasizing time as a subject in and of itself: "Il fera demain ce qu'il fait aujourd'hui et ce qu'il fit hier ; et il meurt ainsi après avoir vécu." It is the status of the ultimate term *vécu*, however, upon which hinges a proliferation of meaning. The Tiresian proclamation of the first line may be read two different ways. "Waking in order to die" ("se lever pour se coucher") is tantamount to a death sentence, and the endless multilayered mirroring eventually proves fatal: "il meurt…" Yet a stress on the "pour" suggests that life's content or purpose, its duration, is the key concern. The last line echoes this notion. Its brevity and the assonance, the vocalic rhyme of "il meurt *ainsi après avoir* vécu," act to unify the two terms *meurt*/*vécu*. Their textual proximity serves to extend their semiotic relationship beyond the causal, meaning that one will die from living in this manner, to the correlative, suggesting that at issue lies a mode of living. The sentence may be read then as punctual finality or as an introduction to an odd, purgatorial state. The passage as a whole hints then at temporal problems that bear both upon the culture's *representation* of time, as well as its *experience* of time. The next two sections will take up these two interrelated leads.

The Representation of Royal Continuity

Les Caractères is full of temporal references. Patrice Soler touches upon a few of the references in his brief introductory essay to the text.[98] He resumes the arguments that the references to time serve both as an illustration to La Bruyère's view of man as

[98] Soler, 637-658.

automat, and as a reflection of the writer as artisan, as clockmaker. On one level, the Narcissus portrait certainly conforms to this view. The textual work of the passage directs our understanding. The anaphoric use of the *il* in the passage is like the punctual ticking of a timepiece. Thirteen strikes signals time amiss, a thematic reminder in any case, for indeed the sound echoes throughout the text where the *horloge* is a constant presence. A later passage in the text touches upon a generic courtier. The description of his image is like the dissection of a clock. The skin of the body is lifted to reveal the inner workings: "Les roues, les ressorts, les mouvements sont cachés; rien ne paraît d'une montre que son aiguille, qui insensiblement s'avance et achève son tour…"[99] Narcissus acts as this image in movement, physically marking the point of the *aiguille* by changing his activity and location.

La Bruyère's obsession with time and the mechanics of time was of course no accident. The seventeenth century witnessed the advent of new technology: the development of precision instruments with which to measure time. The pendulum clock was invented in 1657 by the Dutch scientist Christiaan Huygens. The next 16 years he spent working in Paris led to the eventual development of the spiral spring and the creation of accurate miniature timepieces. These technological devices produced cultural change: a new attention paid to temporal divisions and to small units of time.

This change was co-opted by the court. Extreme punctuality was perfected at Versailles, where the court ostentatiously represented time. The literary historian Richard Glasser has referred to the set agenda of Louis XIV, with its precise, timed ordering of

[99] VIII, 65.

daily activities as "the majestic stylization of the royal day."[100] In Roland Racevskis' important contribution to the cultural history of seventeenth-century France, he argues that Louis XIV used control of minute units of time to reflect his symbolic control as French sovereign, in service of strengthening his claim to legitimacy.[101] Louis Marin's provocative work on the absolutist knot of power and representation helps to explain how *representations* of time, essentially what Glasser terms "stylization," meant the making explicit of temporal divisions, thus calling attention to time and the king's control over it.[102] As Marin writes concerning the monarch: "*ses* signes *sont* la *réalité* royale."[103]

Yet the aesthetic impact of the stylized agenda exceeded that of symbolic control. For as Glasser writes in a later passage: "The objectification of time also reflected an aesthetic desire to impart a monumental quality to life."[104] By isolating moments in time, one delineates each activity as something worthy of beholding, as if this act would better etch the activity into memory. The temporal aspect of the monumental is *duration*. The command of time engineered by Louis XIV was meant to create the illusion of a larger mantle of royal continuity, linking past and present. It is this aspect of the schedule that would have made it easier to coerce the royal court to conform to the King's rigid hours, as the actions of the courtiers would seem to participate in the same logic, becoming memorable in their own right.

Narcissus, as an inhabitant of *La Ville* (both textual chapter and geographical referent), would seem to be attempting to emulate through his exact schedule the fixed

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[100] Richard Glasser, *Time in French Life and Thought* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1972), 225.
[101] Roland Racevskis, *Time and Ways of Knowing under Louis XIV : Molière, Sévigné, Lafayette* (Cranbury, NJ: Bucknell University Press, 2003).
[102] Marin, *Le Portrait Du Roi*.
[103] Ibid., 12-13.
[104] Glasser, 227.

agenda of the court. Narcissus as *poseur*. So upon one reading, the portrait of Narcissus obviously echoes a common satire found in *Les Caractères*: deploring the parvenu, the rich bourgeois who would dare such imitation. But the text surpasses this facile interpretation. The strength of the passage lies not in the skewering of a parodic buffoon, but rather in that link of the parody itself. The reflexive nature of parody always bears in part upon the object as well. The critique works not by stressing the result – the banality of Narcissus' actions and thus the failed nature of his emulation – but by using those actions to reflect upon Narcissus' flagrant manifestations of temporal divisions. Obliquely then, La Bruyère's critique bears upon the royal representation of time, for Narcissus' actions mirror those at Versailles.

Why does La Bruyère subtly denigrate the valorization of the temporal signs used by the royal court? Georges Poulet, in his eloquent study of time in France, has described the particular situation of the seventeenth century: "But of all the anxieties of the century the most frequent and the most poignant is that born of a sense of the discontinuity of duration."[105] Poulet points to the many authors in seventeenth-century France who seize upon a particular moment that defines their very existence.[106] But La Bruyère's text manifests an awareness that the stress on a "moment" has certain costs. He expresses Poulet's "anxiety" in his critique of a mode of temporality. He describes the temporal scheme valorized at court not as something which appears as historically monumental, but rather as disjointed. Royal time appears as a kind of deadening continuity, as an odd "duration" made up of isolated moments.

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[105] Georges Poulet, *Studies in Human Time* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1956), 16.
[106] Cartesian joy is the moment when knowledge is fulfilled; Cornelian joy is the moment when the will is fulfilled. Ibid., 15.

Even though La Bruyère charges his portraits with a moralist function, he still manifests a certain nostalgia for a type of literary portrait found earlier in the century. His portrait of Æmile (most often identified as La Bruyère's benefactor, the Prince of Condé) is written in the mode of a panegyric, nostalgic of an earlier era. Erica Harth has traced the changing functions of the portrait in seventeenth-century France.[107] At the beginning of the seventeenth century, the portrait functioned mythologically, that is under a Plutarchian system of analogy. The portrait existed as exemplum, linking mythological heroes to present nobility. Later, under Richelieu, the portrait was used to support a genealogical line that differentiated the monarchy from the nobility. In both cases, the portrait was used to imply a long continuity.

The question here for La Bruyère is how to represent the monarchy. Royal continuity was an important concept. In the Quarrel between the Ancients and Moderns, La Bruyère was a partisan of the former. In post-Fronde France, classicism retained a certain nostalgia to which La Bruyère's work with its Greek frontispiece bears witness. Yet interestingly, La Bruyère's concern about royal continuity mirrors his own explicit logical conundrum. As Michael Moriarty explains: "…it is this simultaneous affirmation of unchanging human nature and changing human manners that gives *Les Caractères* much of its ideological character."[108] La Bruyère is quite explicit about his historical worry. His task is to describe not just current society, but civilization as he knew it, a civilization tied to the past.

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[107] Harth, *Ideology and Culture*.
[108] Moriarty, 143.

The *Discours sur Théophraste* extends this notion. In the following well-known passage, the idea of continuity assumes then a still larger mantle, stretching back to the classical age.

> …il y a deux mille ans accomplis que vivait ce peuple d'Athènes dont il fait la peinture, nous admirerons de nous y reconnaître nous-mêmes, nos amis, nos ennemis, ceux avec qui nous vivons, et que cette ressemblance avec des hommes séparés par tant de siècles soit si entière. En effet, les hommes n'ont point changé selon le coeur et selon les passions ; ils sont encore tels qu'ils étaient alors et qu'ils sont marqués dans Théophraste : vains, dissimulés, flatteurs, intéressés, effrontés, importuns, défiants, médisants, querelleux, superstitieux.[109]

The *ressemblance… entière* equates both societies, and the passage on one hand is but a panegyric to La Bruyère's epoch. Yet the negative enumeration (vains, dissimulés, flatteurs, etc…) also emphasizes the imperative of the moralist's work. The *ressemblance* thus cuts two ways. Scarcely having changed over the centuries, La Bruyère's contemporaries retain the same vices as their Greek counterparts. The moralist, this time La Bruyère, must re-write the previous moralist Theophrastus, must re-form a description of *des hommes* in order to force change. Nowhere, perhaps, does La Bruyère so explicitly state his adherence (and in a very personal manner, equating himself with Theophrastus) to the social ideology of the seventeenth century that Jean-Paul Sartre poetically characterized as *pénétrée du mythe de sa pérennité*.[110] La Bruyère writes in his *Préface*, reminding the reader: "ne pas perdre mon titre de vue…que ce sont les caractères ou les moeurs de ce siècle que je décris."[111] He assumes that he has the authority to define, to describe, to write the *moeurs* not, of his society alone, but of the entire century. The absence of a verb in the subtitle allows La Bruyère full ownership of the time period, *ce siècle*, and his subject, *moeurs*. As evident in the 1694 edition of the *Dictionnaire de*

[109] La Bruyère, 666.
[110] Sartre, 99.
[111] La Bruyère, 693.

L'Académie française, one could commonly refer to one's lifespan with the term "siècle."[112] La Bruyère thus inscribes in his subtitle, *Les moeurs de ce siècle*, the idea of an enduring, immutable present. Yet the Narcissus passage does manifest a certain anxiety over the possibility of such a continuity.

Reading as temporal experience

The passage thus critiques not a specific behavior, but something larger: a mode of living. As stated above, the textual unification of the two terms *meurt*/*vécu* suggests that living this kind of life is in fact a *form of death* (deadening). The Narcissus fable involves a blurring of the temporal division between life and death. In order to reinforce this idea, Ovid plays off of the dual associations of the narcissus flower. The plant, popularly called the *fleur funèbre*, was used to decorate tombs, but also functioned as a narcotic (as described by Petrarch).[113] Ovid enhances the aura of *numbness* surrounding Narcissus by describing him in that moment when he gazes into the pool at the image as "a statue carved from Parian marble."[114] La Bruyère takes this same quality of *numbness* as one of his problematics, viewing it within the parameters of the temporal and the aesthetic. If his text has its rare philosophical moments, this would be where La Bruyère would answer the question of how to live with the negative stricture against a stylistically punctual deadening life.

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[112] Siecle. s. m. Cours de cent années. Nous sommes dans le dix-septiesme siecle de l'Eglise.. Siecle. signifie aussi, Un espace de temps indeterminé… Il signifie aussi plus particulierement, Un temps marqué par le regne de quelque grand Prince… Siecle. se prend encore pour Les hommes qui vivent, on qui ont vescu dans le siecle dont on parle…. Siecle. sign. aussi, L'estat de la vie mondaine entant qu'il est opposé à l'estat de la vie religieuse. *Dictionnaire De L'académie Française*.

[113] Hadot, 128-144. The French translation is from Hadot. Later, the plant came to be known as *narcissus poeticus*.

[114] Knoespel uses the term *numbness* when referring to Ovid's Narcissus, 10. For the citation from Ovid's text, see the UVA website above.

At this point I must digress for a moment to consider the identity of Narcissus. In order to confront the status of the subject of La Bruyère's portrait we might begin by hypothesizing: what would a portrait of Narcissus look like? The difficulty is that Narcissus always exists *in narrative*. We cannot isolate him, and all attempts turn him into a type, a character. Psychoanalysis has accomplished this to perhaps the greatest degree with its transformation of a literary character into an "-ism", a pathological condition originating in what Ovid terms *genus novitasque furoris*.[115] Yet La Bruyère adroitly displaces this issue by listing not traits but activities. As discussed, these detailed activities within the Narcissus portrait do connote banality, but they denotatively serve to enlarge the satirical indictment. For all of these activities were shared with others in society. Thus the "portrait" of Narcissus exceeds the particular-to-general movement of many of the other portraits because the *specificity* of Narcissus' actions pertains not to his individual character, but rather to the society at large. La Bruyère transforms the psychological import of the fable, grounding it firmly in his contemporary society. As Louis Van Delft explains:

> …le détail de l'individuel est transitoire comme le sont les individus eux-mêmes", de sort que "l'homme veritable" n'est pas tel individu particulier, mais "l'homme en général, pris dans son essence invariable et sans rien de ce qui la diversie dans les êtres singuliers," constitue la pierre angulaire de la psychologie dans l'Europe de l'âge classique.[116]

Narcissus here does not indicate type so much as the larger society. He textually embodies the duality of the subject (singular and plural) embedded in the notion of *public* as I discussed earlier when commenting upon La Bruyère's prefaces. The temporal

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[115] See the UVA website above.
[116] Van Delft, 139. Van Delft incorporates material from E. Gilson, "La Scolastique et l'esprit classique" in *Les Idées et les lettres*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Vrin, 1955), p. 254, and V.B. Boyce, *Theophrastan Character in England to 1642*, nlle ed. (London: F. Cass, 1967) respectively.

experience here is not personal, but rather general. This odd, seemingly quotidian snapshot functions then with a strict, foreclosed temporal frame.

Existence and duration, as Poulet explains, had long been synonymous, yet in the seventeenth century as the progressive separation of the divine and human spheres continues, human thought disengages from exterior time.[117] Descartes conceives of existence in terms of a single moment of human consciousness. This philosophical idea becomes effectively translated into practical living with the advent of a new technology available in the later seventeenth century. As Roland Racevskis has persuasively argued, because of this: "restricted temporal units framed within microdiachronies of daily experience constituted a new domain of consciousness."[118] If La Bruyère's Narcissus is not conscious, La Bruyère does express this precariousness of discontinuity, where existence is constantly on the cusp of what Poulet terms *nonbeing*…[119] His most fully expressed idea serves to punctuate the chapter entitled *De la mode*:

> Chaque heure en soi comme à notre égard est unique; est-elle écoulée une fois, elle a péri entièrement, les millions de siècles ne la ramèneront pas: les jours, les mois, les années s'enfoncent et se perdent sans retour dans l'abîme des temps; le temps même sera détruit; ce n'est qu'un point dans les espaces immenses de l'éternité, et il sera effacé… La vertu seule, si peu à la mode, va au delà du temps.[120]

Yet the anxiety here does have an outlet: virtue. For La Bruyère this type of existence is a condition subject to improvement.

Poulet argues that the seventeenth century's answer to this problem lay in the exaggerated interest in the idea of continued creation: "Duration is a chaplet of instants.

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[117] Poulet, 14-19.
[118] Racevskis, 19.
[119] Poulet, 19.
[120] XIII, 31.

The creative activity alone permits passage from one bead to another."[121] La Bruyère's creativity here is to re-write the Narcissus fable. In La Bruyère's Narcissus there lies the possibility of a positive transformation. He recasts the myth to put into question the temporal malaise of his society. And his gestural writing, found in the structure of his fragments, incorporates the solution in a formal manner. For as the reader reconstructs the story of Narcissus, through the creative act of stitching together the relevant passages *beyond* the Narcissus fragment proper, she indeed discovers a type of narrative duration not immediately evident in the text of *Les Caractères*.

[121] Poulet, 14.

CHAPTER TWO

NARCISSUS AS PORTAL: *DE LA VILLE*

Narcissus continued…

In an important sense, the Narcissus portrait acts as a kind of portal. In terms of both structure and thematics, reading this passage in particular opens up the entire text. As in Ovid where the Narcissus fable cannot be isolated from its origin, the story of Echo, the reader of *Les Caractères* may not neglect the echoes of the Narcissus portrait. Attending to the basic elements of the Narcissus story in other passages, and then in other portraits, leads the reader not only to encounter the full dimension of La Bruyère's critique of temporality, but also to engage in other aspects of La Bruyère's societal critique including his concern with the problem of substance and appearance and with the status of language as representation. All these are inextricably intertwined with his mode of representing social knowledge: portraiture.

Portrait and frame

Before continuing to follow La Bruyère's rewriting of the Narcissus fable, we should stop to consider the rather obvious though heretofore unaddressed question: Why or how can we read the Narcissus passage as portraiture? First, the fable of Narcissus evokes painting itself. Leon Battista Alberti claimed this long before:

> …I say among my friends that Narcissus who was changed into a flower, according to the poets, was the inventor of painting. Since painting is already the flower of every art, the story of Narcissus is most to the point. What else can you call painting but a similar embracing with art of what is presented on the surface of the water in the fountain?[122]

Then there is the definition of "*portrait*" found in Furetière:

> Representation faite d'une personne telle qu'elle est au naturel. Narcisse voyant son *portrait* dans l'eau, en devint amoureux & se noya. Quand on regarde dans un miroir, on y voit son *portrait*.[123]

Narcissus is *the* primary referent for the portrait in late seventeenth-century France. Yet of course, painting in La Bruyère's passage seems mysteriously absent. In fact, nothing immediately related to image exists – there is no visual description. How then does the passage qualify as a portrait? Take, for example, a general definition of portraiture as a comparison: "the individual person is recognizable in the depicted individualized body, with its unique characteristics, especially of the face."[124] The reader finds no face, the basic physicality upon which most of human identity rests, in La Bruyère's passage. But La Bruyère does not deploy physical descriptors in his portraits. There are only three exceptions. In the case of Ménalque, the rambling physique of the character is mirrored by the textual structure of the passage and by his unique personal style. The two others are the celebrated portrait pairing of Giton and Phédon and the portrait of Ruffin. In all three passages the visual cues serve a function different than that of visual identity. The portraits in *Les Caractères* are marked first by naming, and second by framing. La Bruyère's use of this aspect of portraiture, framing, qualifies certain passages as portraits.

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[122] Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting*, trans. John R. Spencer, Rare Masterpieces of Philosophy and Science (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 63.
[123] Furetière. Entry "Portraire."
[124] Marilyn Strathern, "Pre-Figured Features: A View from the Papua New Guinea Highlands," in *Portraiture: Facing the Subject*, ed. Joanna Woodall (New York: Manchester University Press, 1997), 260.

All portraits function first and foremost as framing devices. Before the elements of the face, skull, and physical attributes are sketched, and before the attributes are considered and added and the background blended, the artist or writer must first decide where to cut the image, where to place the border, how best to use the frame to direct the beholder's attention. Portraiture is based upon *exclusion*. That is, it pares the individual down to an outline. Attributes are rare, perhaps even rarified/reified. What La Bruyère does from the outset is "frame" Narcissus, immediately cutting out details, focusing on the essential theme of temporality. His critique plays against the traditional temporal frame of the portrait. Portraits usually aim at a sort of double temporality: at capturing a "slice of time" or a fixed moment, but also what is enduring about a person, an "essence" that somehow exists in that person during their lifetime.

If the passage is read *not* as portrait but as a *clé*, then the passage becomes *too* specific. The supposed real referent essentially closes any further application of the critique: personal faults are just that, personal. If read as a *remarque*, the passage becomes too general. The persona evoked by the name Narcissus dissipates into the morass of the 200-plus names in the text and the temporal critique loses its edge as it then becomes associated with a generalized theme of time that one can read across *Les Caractères*. Yet this passage provokes a different reading. If one reads *as a frame* the hard white space of the page, the division between the Narcissus passage numbered "12" and the following passage numbered "13," a lingering curiosity remains upon finishing the last line, and one's gaze returns to the opening word *Narcisse* which now stands out in relief: it has a texture. Is this a portrait?

Re-reading the passage it seems as if only actions trace Narcissus. Searching further we find a reading list. It does provide a cultural context grounded in a specific geo-temporal reality: “Il lit exactement la *Gazette de Hollande* et le *Mercure galant* ; il a lu Bergerac, des Marets, Lesclache, les Historiettes de Barbin, et quelques recueils de poésies.” It also attests again to the social consciousness of Narcissus. He has read what his contemporaries have read: from the fashionable *Mercure galant* to the most popular journal of the day, the *Gazette de Hollande*, to more intimate literary works.[125] Further, the list also implicates a *habit* of reading, and as Roger Chartier has demonstrated, this habit was connected to the development of the private sphere:

> Reading influenced privatization in several ways. It contributed to the emergence of a sense of self, as the reader scrutinized his own thoughts and emotions in solitude and secrecy.[126]

Indeed, the list’s inclusion of *unnamed* works (“quelques recueils de poésies”) attests exactly to this kind of private, interior reflection. The list therefore serves as a kind of literary, textual body. Reading the Narcissus passage as a *portrait* we *look* for the individualized person. Finding a body, we then search for a face.

The text satisfies this curiosity in the passage immediately subsequent to Narcissus. It begins: “Voilà un homme, dites-vous, que j’ai vu quelque part: de savoir où, il est difficile; mais son visage m’est familier…”[127] La Bruyère’s humor remains subtle, in the coy allusion to the Narcissus fable where the reflected image is familiar but unrecognized. La Bruyère breaks the frame of his portrait, and places the face, the mirroring image that is the *identifying* characteristic of the Narcissus fable and of the

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[125] N.B. The *Gazette d’Amsterdam* was known in France as the *Gazette de Hollande*.
[126] Roger Chartier, "The Practical Impact of Writing," in *A History of Private Life*, ed. Philippe Ariès and Georges Duby (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1987), 151.
[127] VII, 13.

Narcissus character, in the following passage. A superb stylistic gesture? or strategic? As Wendy Steiner has noted, the particularity of portraits in regards their "real" referents causes a receptive tension:

> The reader or viewer is consequently forced into conflicting modes of perception – the self-reference and enclosure of the aesthetic organization of the work and the outward-turning, centrifugal impulse of the portrait's denotation.[128]

In this case, the tension is manifested formally. A body *and* a face now exist for this portrait, and because the physiognomic details of that face are absent, we continue to search for a face. We find not the visual cues, but instead, in the passage that begins the chapter, the echo of the word itself: *visage*.

Structure

Before, however, following the echolalic trace, we should revisit the question of how to read this text. Where does one begin reading *Les Caractères*? Given the fragmented nature of the text, its mass of remarks and stylistic experimentations, a constant frame of reference can be somewhat elusive. Modern critics have attempted taxonomies to explain the text. As Roland Barthes has so perceptively argued, not only can La Bruyère divide his world into manageable sections, but these sections correspond to different sciences. There are two sociological classes: *De la Cour* (*les grands*) and *De la Ville* (*les bourgeois*); two anthropological classes: *De l'homme* and *Des femmes* (women being a special, rather than a general case, as noted by the plural); a political class: *Du souverain*…; psychological classes: *Du mérite*, *Du coeur* and *Des jugements*;

[128] Wendy Steiner, "The Semiotics of a Genre: Portraiture in Literature and Painting," *Semiotics* 21 (1977): 111.

and two ethnographic classes: *De la mode* and *De quelques usages*.[129] For Barthes, this organizational schema, much like a cosmogony, acts as a summation, essentially enclosing La Bruyère's world in a fashion that would be incomprehensible in the eighteenth century where a similar effort took the *Encyclopédistes* some 33 volumes. Thus his work can claim a kind of totalization of knowledge (abstract) at the same time it provides a kind of "experience initiatique" (practical).[130] Louis Van Delft casts a more subjective eye on what he calls more of a *répartition* than an *organigramme*.[131] Of this *infrastructure*, of the different classes and their corresponding types, he comments: "c'est un appareil lourd et complexe."[132]

Yet these efforts at explication have not necessarily driven their respective readings. The stress on the structure of the text also runs headlong into the issue of the temporal construction of *Les Caractères*. Robert Garapon has meticulously examined and compared the successive nine differing editions of the text. He remarks at one point upon the difficulty of deciphering the "secret architecture" of the text because it appears that La Bruyère incorporated sections of text which he in fact wrote much earlier.[133] This implies that the structure of the text is somehow secondary to the presumed function of the moralist text.

So let us return to the idea of the portrait itself. If the Narcissus portrait can be seen as a portal, with echoes throughout the text, and if we consider that across chapters, certain portraits still retain a certain similarity (*Cimon, Clitandre,* and *Narcisse* for example: all occupy themselves with empty activities), then we might understand the

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[129] Barthes, 1336.
[130] Ibid.
[131] Louis Van Delft, "Clarté Et Cartésianisme De La Bruyère," *French Review* 44 (1970): 283.
[132] Ibid.
[133] Garapon, 39.

infrastructure of *Les Caractères* in a different light: rather as a collection of frames. Imagine the same object being observed by a frame that does not allow an all-encompassing view. In order to fully see the object, one must move the frame around. At each pause, one sees the same image, but a different portion of it. The result is a mode of knowledge in succession: the reader gradually grasps the larger picture. Most books are read in one mode: from start to end. The fragmented nature of *Les Caractères* seems to upset this progression, and most critics pick and choose passages when considering this work. But by following the portraits in *Les Caractères*, we find in fact that there is a kind of general logic that links the chapters in *Les Caractères*.

Each chapter, to a large degree, focuses upon one kernel of an idea, a single thematic, and also includes at least one character embodiment. One portrait usually serves as a focal point for the entire critique, and the portrait itself serves both a satirical function (aiming to fulfill La Bruyère's moralist imperative) and also a meta-function, whereby its very construction serves as a mode of social knowledge. Below is a list, revealing how, for example, the first few chapters may be read *sequentially* when keeping the portrait as the primary frame of reference.

I. *Des ouvrages de l'esprit* -- Ostensibly engaging the position of the writer and the text, the portrait of *Arsène* in this chapter reveals the degree to which the visual and verbal registers complicate the notion of the portrait in the text.

II. *Du mérite personnel* -- As the previous chapter dealt also with quality, La Bruyère is compelled to give a more full account of what quality means when deflected onto social concerns.[134]

[134] I, 21 refers to: "le mérite d'un manuscrit."

III. *Des femmes* -- Nevertheless, *mérite* is a personal quality, and La Bruyère must digress to consider a special case that in fact warrants a different form: a narrative where the only tragedy (however abbreviated) occurs in the text.

IV. *Du coeur* – La Bruyère makes an interesting move here, as the predominant form in the chapter (remark-maxims) literally surrounds the one portrait in the chapter: *Drance*. The portrait does, however, contextualize the governance of the passions.

V. *De la société et de la conversation* -- Here the text seems to pause, as if needing to collect its own thoughts, before proceeding to critique one central currency of La Bruyère's society: language.

VI. *Des biens de fortune* -- Yet, in taking up language, the text must then approach one main engine of social change: wealth.

The purely sequential reading, however, becomes more forced as the reading progresses. A more fruitful line of inquiry takes La Bruyère at his word concerning his practice of portraiture as explicated in his prefaces. Keeping in mind *il faut savoir lire* and *ne pas perdre mon titre de vue* (meaning that we focus on the *characters*), we can justify reading from one portrait to another.[135]

Jonathan Unglaub, in his fascinating work on the painting of Nicolas Poussin, has described the theoretical justification for a work that upsets traditional temporal integrity:

> The diachronic unity of the plot supersedes the perceptual synchrony of the pictorial field. In the famous discourse on the painting [the *Gerusalemme liberata*] before the Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture in 1667, Poussin's expositors affirmed that the poetic structure of integrating subsidiary

[135] La Bruyère, 694 and 693, respectively.

> episodes to the principle action and its peripeteia, or dramatic reversal, justified the temporal and spatial rupture.[136]

La Bruyère creates such a diachrony in *Les Caractères*, one which works both within chapters and among chapters. La Bruyère's strategic rupture does make for a difficult read. In regards the Narcissus portrait, La Bruyère breaks the frame twice. Not only does the portrait spill over into other passages both subsequent and antecedent, but the critical themes are then also taken up across the text at large.

Narcissus' narrative duration

In the chapter *De la ville*, the frame of the non-visual Narcissus portrait breaks. It opens onto a moment of near-recognition, which in turn itself opens onto a complete tableau of a common Parisian social scene:

> L'on se donne à Paris, sans se parler, comme un rendez-vous public, mais fort exact, tous les soirs au Cours ou aux Tuileries, pour se regarder au visage et se désapprouver les uns les autres… L'on s'attend au passage réciproquement dans une promenade publique; l'on y passe en revue l'un devant l'autre… rien n'échappe aux yeux, tout est curieusement ou malignement observé…[137]

La Bruyère displaces the thematic of the echo to a formal realm in the repetition of the term *visage*, and in fact begins the chapter anachronically. In doing so he evokes the basic theme of the fable: the visual problem where spectatorship and appearance are at issue: "L'on se donne à Paris…pour se regarder au visage…" The first three remarks of the chapter *De la Ville*, while describing seemingly distinct "events" do in fact work to create a tableau – one can read them as a depiction of one scene. The second reads:

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[136] Jonathan Unglaub and Nicolas Poussin, *Poussin and the Poetics of Painting : Pictorial Narrative and the Legacy of Tasso* (Cambridge England ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 5.
[137] VII, 1.

> Tout le monde se connaît cette longue levée qui borne et quie resserre le lit de la Seine, du côté où elle entre à Paris avec la Marne…les hommes s'y baignent au pied pendant les chaleurs de la canicule; on les voit de fort près se jeter dans l'eau; on les en voit sortir; c'est un amusement…[138]

And the third:

> Dans ces lieux d'un concours général…on se joint ensemble pour se rassurer sur le théâtre…c'est là précisement qu'on se parle sans se rien dire, ou plutôt qu'on parle pour les passants…l'on passe et l'on repasse.[139]

In the first passage the temporal mirroring presages the description in the Narcissus portrait: "fort exact, tous les soirs." The "promenade" consists of a mirroring spectatorship. All who participate both see and are seen. The spectral emphasis is heightened by the absence of speech ("sans se parler"). The precision of writing is evident. Besides the overt reference to mirroring with the use of "les uns les autres," "réciproquement," and "l'un devant l'autre," La Bruyère deploys the passive voice. (se donne / se parler / se regarder / se désapprouver / s'attend). The result is a vivid depiction of the kind of temporal fixation that existed in La Bruyère's society. It aims both at those of *la cour*, but also as we see in the following remark which continues the critique with its discursive echo of "*Tout le monde* se connaît" (my emphasis), those of *la ville*. In addition, it also pulls both La Bruyère and his readers into the fraternity of those who "know" about the place ("cette longue levéé) and the societal events which occur there.

What does "fixation" do for Ovid? In a text ostensibly about "metamorphosis," the Narcissus episode stands out as a sudden moment of stasis. Ovid was describing flux and metamorphosis both thematically and narratively (through experimentation with different forms thus upsetting the "epic") in order to comment on history itself, defined in Augustus' terms. Pythagoras' speech at the end shows "a compelling world of flux:" "a

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[138] VII, 2.
[139] VII, 3.

vision of mutability inconsistent with the sense of durability and direction that Augustus was trying to impose on the Roman empire."[140]

The difficulty for La Bruyère is how to reconcile a disconnect between two temporalities: the emerging focus on the instant, the punctual, the isolate discrete unit of time and, the eternal.[141] Although continually redefined since the Renaissance, human time became more independent of divine time, but nonetheless the idea of an enduring human temporality remained. The question for La Bruyère is how to represent both. He chooses the portrait because of all the genres it alone engages both. The court under Louis XIV valorized temporal discontinuity as a spectacle: both as a spectacle on its own terms and as a spectacle of order and efficiency. For La Bruyère the Narcissus portrait is the perfect vehicle for a critique of this temporal mode.

Yet for La Bruyère, such a temporality becomes a problem not for the individual as in Ovid, but for the individual *in society*. He makes this explicit with two references to the social sphere: "rendez-vous public," and "une promenade publique." The modern reader might understand this as a kind of social panopticon, but Sartre astutely describes how this society participated in a "cérémonie de reconnaissance."[142] Due to the ideological framework of seventeenth-century French society, we cannot read a sense of self, of individuated vanity, into La Bruyère's Narcissus portrait.

In the second remark of the chapter, La Bruyère segues from his comments on the temporality inherent in the Narcissus fable as applicable to contemporary French society (using the same passive verbal structure: "se connaît"). Here he evokes the fable by

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[140] Philip R. Hardie, *Ovid's Poetics of Illusion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), Introduction.
[141] Poulet, 13-19.
[142] Sartre, 99.

considering the natural environment. The pool of "silver bright" water which became a fountain in *La Roman de la Rose*, exists here as a temporal and spatial marker: the fluid confluence of the Seine and Marne rivers.[143] The scene metaphorizes the temporal difficulty through the image of the men bathing, literally dipping their toes (a punctual action) in the river (the metaphor for the fluidity of time).[144] La Bruyère further taps the fable with his explicit allusion to the act of throwing oneself in. The third remark continues by commenting upon the function of speech. It recalls Echo's futile attempt to communicate. She can speak, but makes no sense. Transcribed into La Bruyère's context, the passage underlines language as speech act, whereby speech serves a secondary, indirect function. Jean Alter has written about what he calls "a form of semiotic malaise" in seventeenth-century France, the "inability to distinguish between "real things" and signs."[145]

Yet, if this is an issue that La Bruyère himself exhibits even as he takes it up in his text, as Alter believes, it is also evoked in the context of the possibility of transformation. Other writers and artists had seized upon the *moment* of recognition, considering the act of Narcissus looking at his reflection (see the works by Poussin, Caravaggio…). Ronsard uses the moment of metamorphosis, collapsing the plunge into the fountain and the transformation into the flower: "Estre un Narcisse, & elle une fontaine, Pour m'y plonger une nuict à sejour" – it is the *un* Narcisse, the indefinite

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[143] See the UVA website. Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, Bk III:402-436.
[144] For the explication of a similar rhetorical turn in the *Romance de la Rose*, see Claire Nouvet, "A Reversing Mirror: Guillaume De Lorris' *Romance of the Rose*," in *Translatio Studii*, ed. Kevin Brownlee Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski, Mary B. Speer, Lori J. Walters (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), 197.
[145] Jean Alter, "Figures of Social and Semiotic Dissent," in *A New History of French Literature*, ed. Denis Hollier (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 306-7.See also Barbara R. Woshinsky, "Shattered Speech: La Bruyère, de la cour, 81."

article that suggests the metamorphosis.[146] La Bruyère expands his purview to consider the both its duration (the content of the moment) and its status as a temporal "event", one that leads to a transformation. He accomplishes this by displacing Ovid's aesthetic agenda, which involved redefining the "epic" as a literary form.[147] As part of his exhaustive experimentation with writing through and in fragments La Bruyère carefully and very effectively stitches together the basic external elements of the Narcissus fable across the chapter that contains the Narcissus portrait.[148] Thus, through a process of exploring a kind of narrative, La Bruyère explores a kind of discursive temporality, while simultaneously commenting upon the existence of a certain form of temporal living.

There is something there of the moral, about the "aberration of human psychology" found in the Narcissus fable, but it relates *not* to an individuated mental state, but to a type of *social* relation, as an aberrant social condition. La Bruyère transposes Narcissus' problem not onto a contemporary psychological-self, but onto the contemporary social-self. He again attacks this temporal reflection in a later chapter in the portrait of *Euthycrate*. Here, temporal reflection subsumes the extreme logical opposite of continuity, temporal dispersion:

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[146] Leonard Barkan, *The Gods Made Flesh: Metamorphosis and the Pursuit of Paganism* (New Haven: Yale university press, 1986), 221.
[147] David Raeburn, "Introduction," in *Metamorphoses: A New Verse Translation*, Ovid (New York: Penguin, 2004).
[148] For a discussion of the fragment, see Soler. Also see Pascal Quignard, *Une Gêne Technique a L'égard Des Fragments* (Paris: Fata Morgana, 1986).

> Un homme inégale n'est pas un seul homme, ce sont plusieurs : il se multiplie autant de fois qu'il a de nouveaux goûts et de manières différentes ; il est à chaque moment ce qu'il n'était point, et il va être bientôt ce qu'il n'a jamais été : il se succède à lui-même... est-ce *Euthycrate* que vous abordez?" [149]

La Bruyère posits that one can inhabit a non-unified being. Yet the problem remains that this contradicts what we might call the *bienséance de l'être*. The multiplication of being inherent in this passage means a dissolution of the very individual the portrait attempts to capture. And the portrait explicitly recognizes this by asking the question: "est-ce *Euthycrate* que vous abordez?" This portrait critiques not continuity but continual change. Again, as in the portrait of Narcissus, a temporal mirroring exists: "il se succède à lui-même." The result is not unsimilar to the fate of Narcissus. Instead of death, where time stops, *Euthycrate* is banished outside of time: "il est à chaque moment ce qu'il n'était point, et il va être bientôt ce qu'il n'a jamais été."

This kind of dispersed being is echoed spatially in the fragment immediately subsequent to the portrait of Narcissus. This portrait remains without a name, like the fragment about *l'homme inégal*, again because his multiplicity escapes representation:

> Voilà un homme, dites-vous, que j'ai vu quelque part : de savoir où, il est difficile; mais son visage m'est familier… Où pourriez-vous ne l'avoir point vu? où n'est-il point?.. Sa présence est aussi essentielle… C'est son visage que l'on voit... [150]

The passage enumerates the places this man appears, and all the events he attends. This man is temporally and spatially omnipresent. The list includes all arenas of social interaction: the sermon, the ball, the execution, *la chasse publique*… He is "spectateur de profession."

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[149] XI, 6.
[150] VII, 13.

Yet curiously, the passage conflates object and subject. He exists as both spectacle and spectator: he is seen everywhere (by others), and he (himself) has seen everything. The latter part of what is a longer passage emphasizes the importance of his spectating for a society of spectators. All of these events are conveyed to others by this man, he is a visual source, seeing everything they cannot. Visual reflection will once again result in death: "…il a vu, dit-il, tout ce qu'on peut voir, et il n'aura point regret de mourir : quelle perte alors pour toute la ville!" The exclamation here is facetious, but the humor does allusively skewer the excess of seeing and being seen.

This recalls the opening fragment of the chapter, a perfect articulation of the essential narcissistic conundrum, the conflation of the subject and object: the seer and the seen are but one and the same. The endless reflexivity and reciprocity of this "promenade publique" is devoid of all edification. This narcissistic mirroring results only in a summary judgment, as the passage concludes: "…ou l'on respecte les personnnes, ou on les dédaigne." Invariably the judgment is negative: "L'on se donne…pour…se désapprouver." Again, La Bruyère's scrutiny references the temporal aspect. The repetitive continuity of "tous les soirs" has but an ultimately empty result.

The problem for the moralist thus becomes how to correct time, or rather, one's relation to time. Another fragment unpacks the myth of Narcissus, this time explicitly engaging the affective themes: beauty, love, fixation. Here La Bruyère comments on the differing temporalities of love and friendship:

> L'amour naît brusquement, sans autre réflexion, par tempérament ou par faiblesse : un trait de beauté nous fixe, nous détermine. L'amitié au contraire se forme *peu à peu, avec le temps* (my emphasis), par la pratique, par un long commerce.[151]

Directly referring to the myth of Narcissus, La Bruyère comments upon how the instantaneity of the reflection paralyzes the spectator. The "trait de beauté" over-determines the individual, precluding any further development: "un trait…nous fixe." The comparison of love and friendship in this chapter, entitled *Du coeur*, does not neutrally color the two. "Fixe" is not a positive state in this chapter which valorizes friendship. La Bruyère identifies "fixe" as a negative continuity. The chapter overtly champions friendship, beginning with the opening fragment: "Il y a un goût dans la pure amitié où ne peuvent atteindre ceux qui sont nés médiocres."[152] Other fragments echo this same sentiment. Yet the valuation rests on the temporal aspect, as the fourth fragment in the chapter reinforces: "Le temps qui fortifie les amitiés affaiblit l'amour." This "temps" is the "peu à peu", the "temps," the "pratique," ultimately the "commerce," the refined sociability that exists as a high expression of seventeenth-century French society. This passage elevates this kind of time, a continuity of the immediate present.

Formally in the text, La Bruyère inscribes this redefined time, this "peu à peu" by spreading elements of the Narcissus fable throughout the text. If for the most part the portraits remain satirical, what La Bruyère upholds diapositively is the type who participates in a certain kind of sociability. As in Ovid's fable of Narcissus, the story has a moral: Narcissus errs, he at first mistakes the reflected image as himself, and then comes to a moment of realization. La Bruyère criticizes the temporality of a continued moment: the bourgeois are imitating. They try to see the *Grands* in their own reflection.

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[151] IV, 3.
[152] IV, 1.

There is a kind of reversal: La Bruyère as the moralist has as his task to show them that their reflection pales to that of the true *Grands*.

The Sannions

In regards to what Barthes terms one of La Bruyère's two sociological classes, the bourgeois, we might again ask why the chapter entitled *De la ville* contains only 22 entries. Not only is this the shortest of the sixteen chapters in *Les Caractères* (the next shortest being the penultimate *De la chair* with 30 entries), but the bulk of this chapter is contained in five consecutive, longer portraits. Does the object of his sociological study, *la ville*, exist as an entity so circumscribed that a short chapter and five portraits can capture its essence? Perhaps there is in the brevity an implicit acknowledgement that this social class can somehow manage to escape the boundaries of the science which would frame it. Or perhaps this explicitly reveals that the real subject of the text is the primary figure of *la ville*, the wealthy bourgeois as an increasing pervasive force throughout society. From a narrative standpoint, the shorter number of entries serves as a kind of focalizing frame, allowing La Bruyère to explore a different kind of discursive temporality. In effect, it permits him to consider the aesthetic and philosophical ramifications of particular elements of Ovid's fable as they relate to La Bruyère's society.

The portrait of the Sannions begins formally with an echo:

> J'entends dire des Sannions: "Même nom, mêmes armes; la branche aînée, la branche cadette, les cadets de la seconde branche; ceux-là, portent les armes pleines, ceux-ci brisent d'un lambel, et les autres d'une bordure dentelée." Ils ont avec les Bourbons, sur une même couleur, un même métal; ils portent, comme eux, deux et une: ce ne sont pas des fleurs de lis, mais ils s'en consolent… on les voit sur les litres et sur les vitrages, sur la porte de leur château, sur le pilier de leur haute-justice, où ils viennent de faire pendre un homme qui méritait le

> bannissement; elles s'offrent aux yeux de toutes parts, elles sont sur les meubles et sur les serrures, elles sont semées sur les carrosses.[153]

The passage continues in a similar lyrical vein with both lexical and vocalic repetitions. They are themselves spectacle: "…on les voit sur les litres et sur les vitrages, sur la porte de leur château, sur le pilier de leur haute-justice, où ils viennent de faire pendre un homme qui méritait le bannissement; elles s'offrent aux yeux de toutes parts…" La Bruyère even adds the element of hunting to the description.[154]

This reiterative mode, which I relate to the themes found in the Narcissus portal, was remarked upon by Jules Brody, who said of the many portraits that they had in common a certain *air de famille*.[155] But unlike Brody, I believe there is a very deliberate effort by La Bruyère to create a pattern. A portrait becomes for La Bruyère a kind of methodological tool, useful for its fixed object (the portrayed subject), and its fixed, identifiable parameters. La Bruyère expands his tool, and experiments with different modes of description. In his portraits La Bruyère quotes his characters, quotes the remarks of others about them, hypothetically addresses his characters, assumes an omniscient narrator's role in order to provide commentary on them, relates anecdotes about them… He works assiduously at expanding the repertoire of characterization.

The Sannions are emblematic of this class. La Bruyère attaches to them all the signifying markings: their 'over-blazoning,' their 'newness' (not enough history), their motives (they want it said that they spend, despite their aversion to spending), their speech (what they say at parties to encourage notions of their wealth) and their actions (hunting). Brody has closely analyzed in this passage what he calls the "rhetoric of

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[153] VII, 10.
[154] They are not, however, as proficient as Narcissus: "le voilà chasseur s'il tirait bien; il revient de nuit, mouillé et recru, sans avoir tué…"
[155] Brody, 64.

juxtaposition" characteristic of this literary period.[156] The act of judging, then hanging one who should have banished is set against the litany of signs the Sannions use to connote their status. Brody believes that La Bruyère emphasizes the failure of signs, but I would argue that the stress aims equally at their willingness to use these signs. Before the hunt, La Bruyère describes one member of the family by critically using the conditional tense: "he would rather be sleeping" ("qui voudrait dormir"). It is not that they do not succeed, but rather that they do not apply themselves. Thus there is a falsity to their actions, one that comes across in an excess (like in their use of justice). Brody (and to some extent Michael Koppisch) believe that La Bruyère reveals the poverty or emptiness of signs; but I argue that he finds a falsity.

The difference here is thus not that the signs have no meaning, or even an ambiguous meaning, but that signs are *actively* deployed, actively manipulated, and this throws not signs, but signification in a more general sense, into question (i.e. the diff. between nobles, robins…). Because what the text also bears witness to is the very success of the Sannions, a kind of terrifying success when one thinks that their exercise of justice exceeds what is just. La Bruyère's stand on the morality of this excess is quite clear. He comments specifically in the *Discours sur Théophraste* on the future legacy of his society in terms of justice:

> Nous, qui sommes si modernes, seront anciens dans quelques siècles. Alors l'histoire du nôtre fera goûter à la postérité la vénalité des charges, c'est-à-dire le pouvoir de protéger l'innocence, de punir le crime et de faire justice à tout le monde…[157]

Brody may insist on *pauvreté*, but the passage, ending again with the word *juger*, witnesses the power of the Sannions, suggesting that while history may not be so kind

[156] Ibid., 66-7.
[157] La Bruyère, 664.

(the word can be turned against them, as La Bruyère asks what the future will hold for them), they are active and effective agents in the present world.

The complicated nature of this passage, and the multiple readings it proposes, allows me to make the following distinction: Brody's reading suggests that the text upholds an ideology in which the individual must sacrifice to the order of signification, and the problem for La Bruyère is that these sacrifices are in fact manipulations of social signs thus calling into question the entire framework. Yet as my reading shows, the text also bears witness to the real success of the individuals in question. Jean Alter notes that "real power corrupts the social system without disturbing its surface order."[158] The Sannions' manipulation of signs is working, and they function as active agents in the society. Their actions have real consequences, however devoid of morality they may be.

This is where the double project of La Bruyère's text manifests itself – this is indeed the quality that complicates this text and makes it worth tackling: the moral purpose of portraits cannot coincide with the multifarious diversity of man.[159] Regardless of whether he attempts to create a kind of taxonomy, he can never succeed. The portrait following the Sannions and their surfeit of spectators provides a counterpoint. André, the youth who squanders his patrimony, suffers from a lack of spectators. His problem is obscurity. In this portrait the narrator functions solely in an omniscient mode. He begins by appealing to a general type: "Quel est l'égarement de certains particuliers, qui…"[160] But this sentence itself seems to recognize a specific individual mode of action: *égarement*. André as a specifically named character appears halfway through the passage.

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[158] Alter, 307.
[159] In the *Discours sur Théophraste* La Bruyère notes this diversity: "…la différence des esprits des hommes, aussi prodigieuse en eux que celle de leurs visages." La Bruyère, 659.
[160] VII, 11.

He is thus incidental to the larger type, or put differently, he is the anecdote. His excess (*dépense*) fails to raise his stature because there are no witnesses. Narcissus, in the mode of *un bon commerce*, spends his time (social capital) with an exactitude that brings him notice. The Sannions simply buy recognition, and spend it in excess (in an excess of justice).

The object of critique

In order to better understand the possible limits of interiority, of individual selfhood, in *Les Caractères*, we must first return to the object of La Bruyère's critique. Nearly at the end of the first chapter he remarks upon the frame within which the moralist must work: "Un homme né chrétien et Français se trouve contraint dans la satire; les grands sujets lui sont défendus, il les entame quelquefois, et se détourne ensuite…"[161] In his seminal work *Mimesis*, Erich Auerbach takes this proposition at face value. La Bruyère is simply recognizing certain realities in regards his position as a writer:

> He [La Bruyère] could deal with them [great subjects] only in elevated moralizing generalities. Treating their concrete contemporary structure with complete freedom remained inadmissible for both political and aesthetic reasons, and political reasons and aesthetic reasons are interrelated.[162]

Obviously, La Bruyère is writing within and about a society governed by strict parameters, both aesthetic and political. But how else could one read this phrase with out hearing the echo of his previous remark *Tout est dit*...[163] There is humor here, and if we understand *se détourne* as a playful utterance full of false modesty, we can then question

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[161] I, 65.
[162] Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 367.
[163] I, 1.

the limits of his societal critique and arrive at a better understanding of La Bruyère's true objectives.

What are these *grands sujets*? As mentioned previously, La Bruyère positions his text against the two other great *moralistes* of his age: Pascal and La Rochefoucauld. As he explains in the *Discours*:

> L'un [Pascal]…fait servir la métaphysique à la religion, fait connaître l'âme…traite les grands et sérieux motifs pour conduire à la vertu… L'autre [La Rochefoucauld]…observant que l'amour-propre est dans l'homme la cause de tous ses faibles, l'attaque sans relâche…[164]

In contrast, La Bruyère's satirical portraits seem to engage lesser themes. The vast majority aim at those who have in some way *exceeded* societal norms. They have exceeded their position in society, they have betrayed the bienséances, they exist in excess: *André* spends too much; *Gnathon* is a glutton, the collectors of *curiosités* collect for the sake of collecting. Louis Van Delft has commented that many of the portraits "circle around the notion of *éclat* (such as *Théonas* and *Philémon*).[165] The question thus becomes: why the iterations? If one reads this text without fully questioning the aim of La Bruyère's critique, then all the portraits, the entire list of names that populates *Les Caractères*, become nothing more than *clés*, nothing more than an end game of hide and seek.

I would argue that La Bruyère formally elides the *grands sujets* by instead composing what we might call variations on a theme. As the reader tends to focus on the particular, the larger context, the framework within which the characters operate becomes *by necessity*, both political and aesthetic, diaphanous. His method allows him to avoid

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[164] La Bruyère, 667.
[165] Louis Van Delft, "Les Caractères: Du Monde Clos À L'oeuvre Ouverte," in *La Bruyere, Les Caracteres*, ed. Pierre Ronzeaud, Litteratures Classiques (Paris: Klincksieck, 1991), 75.

censure. His transparent objects, the manners and behavior of the portrayed subjects serve his satirical aim. Yet La Bruyère's moralist imperative does engage, on a different level of reading, larger social structures: the modes of temporality, the representational framework, the status of language and the limits of interiority. Subtly and obliquely La Bruyère delineates and defines his own *grands sujets*. The social typology, the portrait iterations, thus serve a different purpose: different frames around these subjects allow La Bruyère and the reader to arrive at a more comprehensive understanding of his society.

Des ouvrages de l'esprit

The first chapter, *Des ouvrages de l'esprit*, takes up the relationship between author and reader, with the text as the mediating object. La Bruyère's literary criticism – for this chapter is littered with allusions to authors from Horace to Montaigne, from Ronsard to Racine – also incorporates the great quarrel of the age between the Ancients and the Moderns. Early in the chapter he evokes one site of contest: architecture.

> On a dû faire du style ce qu'on a fait de l'architecture. On a entièrement abandonné l'ordre gothique...on a rappelé le dorique, l'ionique et le corinthien: ce qu'on ne voyait plus que dans les ruines de l'ancienne Rome et de la vieille Grèce, devenu moderne, éclate dans nos portiques et dans nos péristyles."[166]

The passage continues, but ignores architecture, turning instead to the quarrel between the Moderns (*auteur moderne*) and the Ancients (the *habiles*) where the arena is textual. La Bruyère uses a lexical field which defines *ouvrage* (the term appears three times in the passage) as text (the terms being *auteur*, "il les *cite*" and "*lire* sa critique"). Of course, classical architecture was nothing if not a three-dimensional picturing of a philosophical ideology, a marbled expression of the classical mind. Yet still: why mention architecture?

[166] I, 15.

The preceding passage helps to explain why La Bruyère invokes it not just to allude to the extent of the quarrel, a philosophical and aesthetic matter which involved all the arts and the transmission of antiquity:

> Tout l'esprit d'un auteur consiste à bien définir et à bien peindre. Moïse, Homère, Platon, Virgile, Horace ne sont au-dessus des autres écrivains que par leurs expressions et par leurs images.[167]

La Bruyère's conflation of writing and painting here, iterated in the next passage by the conflation of writing and architecture, serves also to call attention to the play of two representational modes: the visual and the verbal. Having established in his prefaces the dynamic tension between the character and portrait (as previously discussed above in Chapter One), the reader cannot help but keep in mind a second relationship. There is nothing particularly original in the manner in which La Bruyère broaches the subject of writer and reader. Yet his recasting of the portrait dynamic (painter/sitter) onto the textual relationship (writer/reader) challenges the reader to engage a word/image problem not otherwise evident.

An interesting term explicated by Mary Ann Caws in her provocative work, *The Eye in the Text*, may be of use here.

[167] I, 14.

> By *architexture* I mean in general to refer to the combination of structure and texture visible in a given work and its constructive attachment to other works in an overall building developed in the reader's mind… In sum, this poetics of perception insists upon the immediacy of the eye and upon an *intertexturality* of the visible and the audible and the understandable in their mobile interrelations. Its primary concern is to point to the surface, with its implied tension, and to some connecting threads. This double exposure to the visual and the verbal, by repeated acquaintance or in the rapid flicker of a nervous gaze, is meant to illuminate the play and attractions of text and mind, which a passionate reading informs.[168]

She is not thinking of La Bruyère here, but she ought to be. In many ways, reading *Les Caractères* through the frames of La Bruyère's portraits adheres to her term. In the case of the portrait of *Arsène*, the first longer portrait of the chapter, Caws' *passionate reading* echoes La Bruyère's *il faut savoir lire*.

If we consider the Narcissus portrait as a kind of portal, we would find its first echo in the portrait of *Arsène*. *Arsène* is one of those spectators along the Seine. His being is reinforced only by the presence of other spectators, themselves all participating in that same reciprocal gaze critiqued in the Narcissus passage.

> *Arsène* du plus haut de son esprit contemple les hommes, et dans l'éloignement d'où il les voit, il est comme effrayé de leur petitesse; loué, exalté, et porté jusqu'aux cieux par de certaines gens qui se sont promis de s'admirer réciproquement, il croit, avec quelque mérite qu'il a, posséder tout celui qu'on peut avoir, et qu'il n'aura jamais…il abandonne aux âmes communes le mérite d'une vie suivie et uniforme, et il n'est responsable de ses inconstances qu'à ce cercle d'amis qui les idolâtrent… incapable d'être corrigé par cette peinture, qu'il ne lira point.(I, 24)

Instead of reading this passage metaphorically, our critical portrait lens affords in this case a more literal view. We immediately note the strangeness of his supposed height (*plus haut de son esprit*), his *éloignement*. It is a false height because his contemplation leads only to fear (*effrayé*). He suffers thus from a sort of vertigo. Believing that he is

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[168] Mary Ann Caws, *The Eye in the Text : Essays on Perception, Mannerist to Modern* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1981), 9-11.

looking down and seeing something so very small means, for him, that he is in fact up too high.

Thus contemplation (*contemple*) is a false register for him. His height is supported by the gaze of his *amis* (*loué*/*exalté*/*porté jusqu'aux cieux*). All of this casts self-knowledge into doubt. Not only is *esprit* devalued by the reciprocal gaze, but the notion of merit itself hinges upon a false self-reading. He *believes* (*il croit*), which is the basis of his self-merit, but the portrait devalues his own self-reading. The portrait recuperates the notion of merit in the comment about what he abandons: *une vie suivie et uniforme*. Arsène is a man inconstant, and the culprit of his state is the relationship with his friends, the enclosing primacy of their reciprocal gaze.

La Bruyère raises this thematic throughout *Les Caractères*. The Narcissus portrait, precisely because it reframes the question of reflexivity in the visual domain as a temporal disorder, serves to illuminate the image disorder prevalent throughout many of the portraits.[169] One of La Bruyère's *grands sujets* is this endless repetition of a mirroring gaze, what Jean-Paul Sartre calls the *cérémonie de reconnaissance* characteristic of seventeenth-century France.[170] The insidiousness of this process is explained in a later passage in the chapter *De la cour*. Remarking on the image of one who has just been promoted, La Bruyère writes:

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[169] For an arresting view of how modernity is characterized particularly by its experience of time, see Elissa Marder, *Dead Time: Temporal Disorders in the Wake of Modernity (Baudelaire and Flaubert)* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001).
[170] Sartre, 99.

> …il est si prodigieusement flatté dans toutes les peintures que l'on fait de lui, qu'il paraît difforme près de ses portraits…en est-il entièrement déchu, les machines qui l'avaienet guindé si haut…sont encore toutes dressées pour le faire tomber…[171]

Notable here is the status of the portraits themselves. They seem to constitute a separate, more privileged, reality. In addition, La Bruyère alludes to the entrenchment of the process: it has become a societal mechanism (*les machines*).[172]

The *Arsène* portrait's evocation of inconstancy is echoed later in the portrait of the courtiers, *Cimon* and *Clitandre*. Their profession is to be seen and seen again.[173] They too are completely inconstant: "On ne les a jamais vus assis, jamais fixes et arrêtés…on les voit courir…ils passent et ils repassent…" Their constant movement however, belies the emptiness of their actual function: "ils savent à la cour tout ce que l'on peut y ignorer."

Inconstancy becomes a problem on a meta-level in yet another passage. Working off of Montaigne's *Du repentir* which considers how to engage religious hypocrisy, La Bruyère proposes:

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[171] VIII, 32.

[172] Although it is beyond the purview of this dissertation, the role of the *machine* in *Les Caractères* has been insufficiently appreciated. The production of the character portraits, which increase literally year after year in successive editions, takes on a mechanical tenor when understood in the context of the physicality of the framing process linked to the regulating imperative of the moralist enterprise. The interesting question remains how this machinery corresponds with the kind of reciprocating visual mode of the *machine* characters in the text. For an interesting take on textual machinations in the fourteenth century, see the *horlogerie* as explained in Claire Nouvet, "La Mécanique Du Diffèrement Lyrique : *L'horloge Amoureuse* De Jean Froissart," *Studi Francesi* 30, no. 89 (1986).

[173] VIII, 19.

> Les couleurs sont préparées, et la toile est toute prête; mais comment le fixer, cet homme inquiet, léger, inconstant, qui change de mille et mille figures? Je le peins dévot, et je crois l'avoir attrapé; mais il m'échappe, et déjà il est libertin.[174]

For Louise Horowitz, inconstancy as evident in the passage above, points to the malady of social change during La Bruyère's lifetime:

> …for La Bruyère transience has replaced permanence, and the very act of "fixing" the characters merely long enough to portray them cannot, paradoxically, be accommodated.[175]

She believes La Bruyère's moralist project thus fails. Yet La Bruyère does an able job of "fixing" his characters. His satirical mode was sharp enough to spur a small industry of *clé* texts (revealing the supposed identities of the characters). In addition, "fixation" itself, the reciprocal mode, was an object of La Bruyère's moralist critique.

Chapter Three will further address Horowitz's questioning of La Bruyère's efficacy. His moralist "hope" of effecting change on an individual level hinged upon confronting larger subjects in and through the portraits. The negative satire of the portraits always contains this tension between the general (societal) and the particular (individuating). The portals thus act not only thematically, opening the critique onto societal questions, but also as transformative doorways. The following chapter will further explicate how La Bruyère represents the question of interiority in certain portraits and how he offers the possibility of self-correction.

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[174] On Montaigne, see Philip R. Berk, "*De La Mode*: La Bruyère and the Myth of Order," in *Actes De Davis (1988): Madame De Lafayette, La Bruyere, La Femme Et Le Theatre Au Pouvoir*, ed. Claude Abraham, Biblio 17 (Seattle: Papers on Fr. Seventeenth Cent. Lit.. Paris, 1988), 134. XIII, 19.

[175] Louise K. Horowitz, "La Bruyère's Nausea," in *Actes De Davis (1988): Madame De Lafayette, La Bruyere, La Femme Et Le Theatre Au Pouvoir*, ed. Claude Abraham, Biblio 17 (Seattle: Papers on Fr. Seventeenth Cent. Lit.. Paris, 1988), 105.

CHAPTER THREE

PORTRAITS AND *LES GRANDS SUJETS*

All of the portraits in *Les Caractères* interact in some fashion. The divisions below are thus somewhat specious, yet the attempt is made to organize what is an extremely intricate, interconnected critique of society. Hopefully this dissertation does so in such a way that furthers our reading and our understanding of the text and period in question. Thus, the rubrics below aim at the other two major themes in the text that an examination of the portraits bring to light: truth as it relates to verisimilitude and the trace outline of a nascent interiority.

A history of the self

Writing about the self generally falls into two categories. One approach is to trace its philosophical history. *The Concept of the Self in the French Enlightenment* by Jean Perkins exemplifies the first category.[176] She begins with Scholasticism which focused upon external being and proposed ideas about the immateriality of the soul, and about the self which existed as a marriage between the soul and the body. Montaigne turned inward toward self-exploration, finding a self enmeshed in the world and one which thus constantly changes with the passage of time. Descartes' philosophy bypassed the explicit

[176] Jean Ashmead Perkins, *The Concept of the Self in the French Enlightenment*, Histoire Des Idées Et Critique Littéraire, vol. .94 (Genève: Droz, 1969).

question of man's relation to representation and divided the mind from the body, thus divorcing the subject from any material existence. The Cartesian subject also remains momentary: existence depends upon the continuation of thought. Locke transformed this definition, moving the transcendental, generalized Cartesian subject in the direction of the particular by adding the concept of multiplicity. Locke based personal identity upon the individual's action of self-reflection. He also furthered the concept of the *tabula rasa*, describing man as the receptor of individuated sensations. It was Rousseau and then Kant who ascribed to humans a moral freedom and an agency and who thus brought an end to the Classical Age.[177]

Perkins' strategy, while it has the advantage of a relatively clear and historically grounded path, can trip over the ever-present difference between theory and practice. The answer is, of course, to search through authentic cultural artifacts. The historian Philippe Ariès has explained that the seventeenth century "saw the triumph of individualism in daily life."[178] The changes and the possibilities of change were embraced even by established nobles, whose autobiographical journals Jonathan Dewald has mined with great success, revealing that:

> In these explorations of daily experience the nobles expressed assumptions and fears that had little to do with the confident ideology of dynastic continuity; rather, they used language that emphasized particularity and the problematic relationship of individual to polity.[179]

Yet the portraits in *Les Caractères* suffer from what Ariès calls a "time lag:" reality was ahead of fiction. Vivien Thweatt, considering the status of the self in seventeenth-century

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[177] Foucault speaks of the "Kantian moment" in which the subject, in opposition to the earlier era, "applies to himself his own law, which is the universal law." Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 343.
[178] Ariès and Duby, 7.
[179] Jonathan Dewald, *Aristocratic Experience and the Origins of Modern Culture : France, 1570-1715* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 2.

France, situates both La Rochefoucauld and La Bruyère between "the individuality of the heroic tradition and the reasoned social progress that was to be the aim of the Enlightenment."[180] *Les Caractères*, despite La Bruyère's stylistic experimentations, was written generally within an accepted set of moral and aesthetic guidelines. The *ut pictura* representational system, through the twin constraints of plausibility and decorum (verisimilitude and bienséances), served as the established artistic reference point.[181] It is not that the depiction of individuation was necessarily proscribed, but rather that the constant reference point for the individual was the social networks.[182]

Another approach to the history of the self is to propose a definition and then search for the evidence. In *Sources of the* Self, Charles Taylor attempts to chart a history of the modern identity by tracing the development of inwardness, the sense of ourselves as beings with inner depths and thus as "selves," and of the affirmation of ordinary life which develops from the early modern period.[183] His basic argument turns around the inextricable relationship between selfhood and morality, the latter being the basis for our articulation of our being in the world. He argues that the self exists only within *webs of interlocution*. The self exists as narrative in the sense that an individual's identity is a kind of orientation. Whereas the post-Romantic individual defines himself or herself through various commitments and allegiances, the pre-Romantic individual had recourse to a basic moral frame articulated in universalizing terms. Taylor's stress on narrative and language in his approach to the self places him in what Hubert Dreyfus and Paul

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[180] Vivien Thweatt, *La Rochefoucauld and the Seventeenth-Century Concept of the Self*, Histoire Des Idées Et Critique Littéraire, vol. v. 188 (Genève: Droz, 1980), 41.
[181] Harth, *Ideology and Culture*, 17-32.
[182] Thweatt, 40.
[183] See Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self : The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989).

Rabinow have termed the first category of heideggerian hermeneutics which aims to interpret everyday existence.[184]

In contrast to Taylor, the work of Michel Foucault aims at a more fundamental understanding of how human beings act in the world as both subjects and objects, aiming at "an understanding of social practices as having an intelligibility radically different from that available to the actors."[185] His approach historicizes both the effects of power structures on individuals and the delimiting framework of discourse in which humans articulate their existence. In his later work Foucault explicitly argues that the self is defined in terms of *practices*, a mode he traces back to the Greek *techne tou biou* (a mastery of self), and that the influence of discourse remains but one aspect of these practices, thus opening a space of possibility for individual action.[186] La Bruyère's portraits return to this early ethic, calling for a mode of reading that reinforces a practice of self-fashioning.

Truth: *être*

Égésippe

> Que faire d'*Égésippe* qui demande un emploi? Le mettra-t-on dans les finances, ou dans les troupes? Cela est indifférent, et il faut que ce soit l'intérêt seul qui en décide… "Il est propre à tout," disent ses amis, ce qui signifie toujours… qu'il n'est propre à rien. Ainsi la plupart des hommes occupés d'eux seuls dans leur jeunesse, corrompus…croient faussement dans un âge plus avancé qu'il leur suffit

[184] Dreyfus and Rabinow, eds., xxi-xxii.
[185] Ibid., xxvii.
[186] Foucault, "On the Geneology of Ethics," 348. See also footnote #84 above.

> d'être inutiles ou dans l'indigence…afin que la République soit engagée à les placer.[187]

The first portrait in this chapter, *Du mérite personnel*, poses an interesting case. For we can read it simply as a type. If, however, we read it while considering the portrait/character tension, the movement between the particular and the general, then we arrive at La Bruyère's larger point which goes beyond a kind of comment on what the State needs but instead as a call-to-arms. The ambiguity rests on the operative word *intérêt*. Whose interest is at stake? From the personal *demande* we infer a motivation, an interior desire. Yet, this is immediately recuperated by the impersonal assignation of career (the *le mettra-t-on*). Égésippe is framed by his utterance, his solicitation (*demande*), but the linguistic echo of his friends, whom La Bruyère actually quotes for effect, fixes him, dooming him to a future state of uselessness or indigence (*inutile*/*indigence*). Ironically, La Bruyère shows the linguistic communication as misfiring: what is said by his friends actually means something else entirely.

From the second word of the passage (*faire*) the emphasis is on doing, but the occupation of Égésippe is himself. La Bruyère's target here is self-occupation. But this is not modern introspection, it is more of the Narcissistic mirror, where the obsession with oneself is mediated by the gaze of others through our own selves. He terms this as a kind of corruption (*corrompus*). It remains, however, on a social level.

La Bruyère alludes to a new ethic which requires young men to aspire to a different value of honor. Sharon Kettering, working off of Robert Mandrou, Norbert Elias and Philippe Ariès in her social history of France, has described the great social change

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[187] II, 10.

La Bruyère's society was undergoing in the seventeenth century.[188] Several factors were acting at once. She argues, from Elias, that a new civility sponsored by Louis XIV, helped to transform the French nobility from warriors into courtiers. In addition:

> …changing technology, expanding scale and increasing bureaucratization of armies transformed the nature of military service. Nobles now began to pursue permanent careers in hierarchical, bureaucratized royal armies… new professionalism in careers meant that competence and efficiency were added to their traditional values of ambition, honour and martial glory.[189]

In the following paragraph, quite radical in its call for a society of individuals based on self-distinction and self-worth, La Bruyère aims at the motivating factor of an individual with the exhortation to escape the fatal reciprocity described in the Égésippe portrait: "Se faire valoir par des choses qui ne dépendent point des atures, mais de soi seul…"[190]

Later in the Égésippe passage La Bruyère evokes the metaphor of the State as an architectural structure: where a worthy citizen is "comme une pièce nécessaire à tout son édifice." This raises the question of why the portrait matters in this case. The deliberate and blatant tone of La Bruyère raises the spectre of an empty portrait. In this chapter, which contains only one positive portrait despite its ostensible subject of *mérite* (the portrait of Æmile whose position in reality was so high as to be idealized), the portrait of Égésippe provokes the fear that the portrait frames will be left unfilled. One of portraiture's historical functions was to represent "great men."[191] La Bruyère alludes to the transition from youth to old age when the portrait of a man of merit should be undertaken, but here there will be no figure worthy of being framed.

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[188] Kettering, 65-94.
[189] Ibid., 74-79.
[190] II, 11.
[191] See Pope-Hennessy.

The context for this worry is of course social change. A much later passage in the chapter *Des grands* supports this fear, by contrasting the dissipation of the noble class with the ambitious *citoyens* who are overtaking them:

> Pendant que les grands négligent de rien connaître… [and here La Bruyère lists the ways in which *les grands* are wallowing in ignorance]… des citoyens s'instruisent du dedans et du dehors d'un royaume, étudient le gouvernement, deviennent fins et politiques, savent le fort et le faible de tout un État, songent à se mieux placer, se placent, s'élèvent, deviennent puissants…[192]

A potent wakeup call, this passage echoes in many of the portraits whose satire aims exactly at the negligence and misguided priorities of the subjects portrayed. Interestingly, the term *État* in the above passage corresponds to the term *République* in the Égésippe passage. The movement toward self-work transfers from a concern for the social realm, writ large as in the State. The frame of Æmile collapses these into a single portrait worthy of emulation.

Æmile: the notion of merit

One fundamental societal problem that La Bruyère raises through these portraits is the mode of seeing. There exists a lack of reflection defined as a longer duration look which encompasses self-knowledge. The Narcissus portal opened this subject by revealing a narrative path to self-constancy both in time (with an emphasis on continuity in the present) and in space (where the reflection is no longer punctual and disparate). La Bruyère is writing his own version of visual metaphors in order to allow a better kind of

[192] IX, 24.

epistemological framing. He turns the "tyranny of the regard" on its head by switching the subject and object, and by playing with the tension in the reflecting image.[193]

La Bruyère second chapter, *Du mérite personnel*, takes up the question of what we might call self-identicality, that is the degree to which the external signs of a given person correspond to their social identity. For the term *mérite* also accommodates an inner/outer tension. On the one hand it can mean "ce qui rend digne d'estime, de récompense" (thus referring to a sphere of interaction with another person), and on the other, "qualité rémarquable de l'esprit ou du coeur."[194] The six longer and intriguing portraits of this chapter (a chapter containing a relatively few 44 entries compared to other chapters) tackles this elasticity through the problem of non-self-identicality (and by this I mean the difference or space between one's interior and exterior self). The problem here specifies those characters who have no merit of their own and who borrow from the merit of others.

Yet this chapter contains a rare moment: a positive portrait, one accomplished in the mode of a historical portrait, one of a great man.[195] The portrait of Æmile is a funeral oration for the Prince de Condé. If the grand majority of La Bruyère's portraits can be read as 'negative,' concerning themselves with examples to avoid, they should be read as 'negative' in the diapositive sense: La Bruyère describes negatively in order to reveal virtue. Yet in this portrait, Æmile's super virtue illuminates the more ordinary path toward virtue. The distinction hinges on the opposition of birth versus practices: "Æmile

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[193] See Thweatt's fine discussion of the Cartesian *généreux* and the omnipresence of the *regard* in later seventeenth-century French society. Thweatt, 41-56.
[194] See the entry "Mérite" in Adolphe Hatzfeld, Arsène Darmesteter, and Antoine Thomas, *Dictionnaire Général De La Langue Française Du Commencement Du Xviie Siècle Jusq'à Nos Jours, Précédé D'un Traité De La Formation De La Langue* (Paris: Delagrave, 1890).
[195] Soler, 1161.

était né ce que les plus grands_hommes ne deviennent qu'à force de règles, de méditation et d'exercice."[196] It is interesting that there is a dichotomy between Æmile and *les plus grands hommes*, when Æmile himself belongs to that sub-species called *Les Grands.* Leaving aside the question of the portrait of the philosopher (*règles/ méditation/exercice*) to whom these practices would seem to allude, and which Barthes and others have developed, notice how the passage demonstrates the perfect coincidence in the character of Æmile of what is natural to him (that with which he has been born) and of his actions: "Il n'a eu dans ses premières années, qu'à remplir des talent qui étaient naturels, et qu'à se livrer à son génie. Il a fait, il a agi, avant que de savoir…" Interior reflection remains absent. The remainder of the passage fills out the portrait by alluding to his actions in the military sphere during his life, by referring again to his nature (*une âme du premier ordre*) and by employing a series of qualitative adjectives (*dévoué, sincère, vrai, simple, magninime*) which serve as what in a painted portrait would be called attributes.

This portrait functions much like a painted portrait of an exemplary man – it serves to inspire. Æmile falls, of course, outside the sphere of mere mortals, and the next entry recognizes that *les enfants des Dieux…en sont comme l'exception*.[197] As Patrice Soler has noted, La Bruyère has omitted negative aspects of Condé's life, such as his participation in the Fronde.[198] For mortals, however, the moralism of the passage derives from that first line stressing action: *règles, méditation, exercice*.

In the first of four portraits which contrast dramatically with the exemplary portrait of Æmile, we find Philémon, who demonstrates a complete lack of action, but

[196] II, 32.
[197] II, 33.
[198] Soler, 1161.

also a kind of discontinuity.[199] His portrait begins with a visual metaphor: "L'or éclate…sur les habits de Philémon." La Bruyère describes what one sees when meeting Philémon: his clothing. The portrait proceeds with a list of attributes, as Philémon sports expensive clothes, a masterpiece of a watch, an onyx-handled sword, a diamond ring. La Bruyère's uses satiric commentary during the enunciation of the list, which then culminates in two separate judgments. Derisively dismissing these attributes as *curieuses bagatelles*, and then by remarking how the items have sparked his own *curiosité*, La Bruyère recalls a long series of portraits elsewhere in *Les Caractères* where he takes to task the habit of those collector connoisseurs whose passion is misdirected from things which are *bon et beau* to those which are merely *à la mode*.[200] His second judgment makes a similar point. Asking to see these *choses si précieuses*, La Bruyère makes a reference to *préciosité*, the literary movement well out of fashion by the 1780s.

From Philémon's perspective, his goal in collecting and showing off his fineries is magnificence, which one scholar has defined as "the ostentatious display of status and wealth…not a matter of choice but a mandatory expression of the grandeur of their lineage as compelling as professional duties are for us today."[201] Philémon's attempt to define himself in social terms, perfectly conforms to the ideology of *vraisemblance* which governed the seventeenth-century nobility. It would seem then that La Bruyère critiques this very ideology, by suggesting that the form (Philémon's outward appearance) betrays a lack of substance (*toi, qui n'est qu'un fat*). In the first line of the

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[199] II, 27.
[200] XIII, 2.
[201] Kathleen Wine, "Romance and Novel in *La Princesse De Clèves*," in *Approaches to Teaching Lafayette's the Princess of Clèves*, ed. Faith E. Beasley and Katherine Ann Jensen (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1998), 149. And La Bruyère includes the word in his passage: "Mais la broderie et les ornements y ajoutent encore la magnificence."

portrait, he opposes the gold that *éclate* on the clothes of Philémon with the gold that "éclate de même chez les marchands." Thus he refers to a difference between appearance and existence (or origin). In the first edition version of the passage (which appears after the fifth edition insert), La Bruyère even attacks Philémon's motive in adopting the outward signs of nobility: "tu te trompes…si…tu penses que l'on t'estime davantage." La Bruyère seems willing to forgive a notion of self-worth defined in social terms. The one who acts as Philémon, believes himself worthy: *il lit cela dans la contenance et dans les yeux de ceux qui lui parlent*. The problem in Philémon's case is a false reading, which is mirrored by the construction of the portrait. Robert Garapon calls it "dialogic," yet in comparison with other portraits in which an element of interlocution exists, in this portrait the "dialogue" is more rhetorical and serves to emphasize the disconnect between Philémon's real self (alluded to in the phrase *pénétrer jusqu'à toi*) and the self he sees reflected in the attitude and eyes of others.[202] Here again in the portrait of Philémon we find the echo of the Narcissus portrait, although instead of the mechanism of temporal reflection, we read a visual reciprocation which manifests his lack of substance.

There is also a thematic contrast between the two portraits of Æmile and Philémon. Condé's death in 1686 can be read as a watershed for a generation of nobility. For an earlier generation, noble stature depended in large part upon military exploits. For the newer generation, with the increasing professionalization of military service and the importance of one's presence at court, the signs of nobility had begun to change.[203] In terms of La Bruyère's construction of the two portraits, the basic difference exists in the emphasis of action vs. attributes.

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[202] Garapon, 139.
[203] Kettering, 65-79. She describes how the increasing professionalism of the military altered noble values.

A third portrait, that of Mopse follows an entry describing the primacy of actions in regards revealing one's true self: "Il n'y a rien de si délié, de si simple et de si imperceptible, où il n'entre des manières qui nous décèlent."[204] If Philémon lacks a coincidence between his inner and outer portrayal of self, Mopse manifests a double sense of misplacement. He lacks any sense of himself and any sense of others: "sans nulle attention aux autres, ni à soi-même." The portrait describes things Mopse does generally ("il écrit des femmes qu'il connaît de vue") and relates an anecdote. All of his actions point to his fundamental characteristic betrayed by his actions and behavior: "il regarde le monde indifférement, sans embarras, sans pudeur." This portrait then, castigates Mopse for his social failings.

The portrait of Celse mirrors the portrait of Mopse.[205] Although it does refer to several qualities ("d'un rang médiocre" // "il n'est pas savant" // "il a peu de mérite"), La Bruyère implicitly claims that *être savant* can be a means, like *rang*, of attaining *mérite.* Celse is an intermediary who attempts to implicate himself in all the court intrigues, and *les Grands* suffer his presence. Yet like Mopse, the actions of Celse do not coincide with his actual presence. If the actions of Mopse function outside the rules of *bienséance*, the rules governing the propriety of how one should act socially, the actions of Celse function in excess, thus placing him in the same category. Celse acts "plus loin que sa commission," the result being an estrangement between his actions and results. Like Mopse, however, he remains indifferent: "s'il ne l'avait du moins ou rêvé ou imaginé, songerait-il à vous le faire croire?" His is a reality apart.

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[204] II, 37 and 38.
[205] II, 39.

The final portrait of this section, of Ménippe, describes another non-self-identical man. Ménippe is what others are: "Ménippe est l'oiseau paré de divers plumages qui ne sont pas à lui."[206] He is a parrot who flits about imitation: he over-emulates. This absence of self-coincidence goes deeper than exterior plumage, the passage continues and describes Ménippe as an echo: "il ne parle pas, il ne sent pas, il répète des sentiments et des discours." For Michael Moriarty this defines La Bruyère's critical mode which by perverting the relation between *locuteur* and *interlocuteur*, iterates the social dimension of *la parole.*[207] Yet it also bears witness to a complete absence of self.

Compared to the self-possession of Æmile, Ménippe is but a creation of his own vanity. La Bruyère develops this portrait more fully, commenting not just upon Ménippe's actions, but also upon his beliefs, his perception, his thought process. Though the portraits of Philémon, Celse and Mopse give no hint of development, La Bruyère makes reference to the youth of Æmile (in the following passage, however, La Bruyère places him in a different temporal mode) and explains how the vanity of Ménippe has over time transformed him into someone he is not ("l'a fait devenir ce qu'il n'était pas") and who in actuality, he still is not.

Although only in this chapter do we find these kinds of radical contrasts, the same tension haunts the entire text. La Bruyère accomplishes his brand of social critique in four contrary portraits, and we have to notice that this "correction" (*corriger*) occurs iteratively. *Les Caractères* was written and published over the course of six years and eight editions. Very rarely did La Bruyère alter or subtract from his writing: most all of

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[206] II, 40.

[207] Michael Moriarty, "La Parole Dans Les Caracteres," *Cahiers de L'Association Internationale des Etudes Francaises* 44 (1992): 283. Moriarty argues that *la parole* in La Bruyère is connotative. Commenting on 17th-century society as spectacle: "On ne parle pas, semble-t-il, aux autres, ou avec les autres; on parle en vue d'un effet à produire sur eux." (282)

his changes are additive. This points to the very definition of interiority in the late seventeenth century. The action of *corriger* cannot occur in the educational, reflective, transformational mode of Rousseau in the eighteenth century, in the "modern" sense of the term. For La Bruyère this kind of interiority can only be described as a kind of tension between layers, but always in the context of the social.

Giton and Phédon

In chapter VI (*Des biens de la fortune*) La Bruyère takes up the new social currency: money. The very real phenomenon of the rise of a new bourgeois social class, and the corresponding advent of a new consumerism and an ethic of expenditure was unsettling to the established aesthetic order.[208] The portraits of Giton and Phédon have long been celebrated for their stylistic purpose. La Bruyère delineates their personal traits, which seem to function only as metaphors for the terminal opposition: rich vs. poor. Their traits are stereotypical details described in opposite pairs:[209]

Giton	Phédon
teint frais	teint échauffé
visage plein	visage maigre
joues pendantes	corps sec
l'oeil fixe et assuré	les yeux creux

The categories of the description roughly continue to match (note that the passage first describes Giton, then moves on to Phédon):

In the portrait of Giton we find a physical description, a remark about the quality of his conversation, an enumeration of bodily functions and actions. La Bruyère drives

[208] Kettering, Chapter 5.
[209] VI, 83.

the portrait almost entirely with the use of verbs, except for the penultimate phrase where *Il est* is followed by eight adjectives, then "il se croit...Il est riche."

The portrait of Phédon largely mirrors this structure, except for two qualifying remarks, the first about his lack of spatial existence: "Il n'occupe point de lieu, il ne tient point de place," and the second about his lack of bodily existence: he sneezes either alone or without anyone recognizing it. His end: "Il est pauvre."

La Bruyère's literary technique in regards these two portraits is to create a contrast between two generic types using stereotypical detail, foreclosing what we might call portraiture because we go from the name to the general (*riche*/*pauvre*). The signs used in the description point to a class division in which the *homme pauvre* is invisible, somehow outside of normal perception. It is not through his will, but rather an accepted fact. Thus, not only do the final sentences preclude any kind of individuality by annulling the previous list of traits and instead indexing a stereotype, but the contrast serves to define the one class (*homme riche*) by effacing the presence of the other (*homme pauvre*). If the first is a kind of generic portrait, the second is more like a portrait of someone from behind, because there is no possibility of an exchange of gazes: *l'homme pauvre* cannot *inter*-act with his surroundings.

Truth: *paraître*

Chapter V, *De la société et de la conversation*, appears to check the flow of the successive reading model of the text.[210] Indeed the first entry resurrects a term from the

[210] Chapter V contains the portraits of Acis, Arrias, Théodecte, Hermagoras, Troïle and Montaigne.

title: “Un caractère bien fade est celui de n’en avoir aucun.”[211] The word *caractère* is not uncommon in the body of the text, but its placement here at the threshold of a chapter ostensibly about language and society does beg the reader to recall La Bruyère’s second rule from the *Préface*: “ne pas perdre mon titre de vue.”[212] In light of the fact the term *caractère* also signals *empreinte* or *marque*, we can read this chapter as La Bruyère’s attempt to problemitize the representational system of his era, and to examine the relationship of signs as the intermediary between subjects and objects.[213] All of the characters in this chapter’s portraits have a different relationship to language. The chapter progresses, from one warped relationship to another until ending with an idealized relationship of the author himself, La Bruyère, with the language of Montaigne.

Acis, Arrias and Théodecte

The frame of the first portrait is language, literally. People in this society are identified and defined by what they *say*, and the portrait of Acis begins with signs that miss their mark. The portrait begins with the narrator confusedly responding:

> “Que dites-vous? Comment? Je n’y suis pas; vous plairait-il de recommencer? J’y suis encore moins; Je devine enfin: vous voulez, Acis, me dire qu'il fait froid; que ne disiez-vous: "Il fait froid"? Vous voulez m'apprendre qu'il pleut ou qu'il neige; dites: "Il pleut, il neige."… – Mais, répondez-vous, cela est bien uni et bien clair; et d'ailleurs qui ne pourrait pas en dire autant? – Qu'importe, Acis? Est-ce un si grand mal d'être entendu quand on parle, et de parler comme tout le monde?[214]

Acis speaks non-sense; he invents a language and thus cannot affect reality. He attempts to differentiate himself, by speaking in a manner that no one else might imitate, but in

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[211] V, 1.
[212] La Bruyère, 693.
[213] Entry “Caractère.” *Dictionnaire de L'Académie française*.
[214] V, 7.

fact his language does *not* imitate. His problem is that the exaggeration in his speech causes too much distance. He transgresses the rule of verisimilitude through his excessive language.

La Bruyère satirizes the character in the next portrait for a similar reason. Arrias also invents, he manipulates language, he lies: "il aime mieux mentir que de se taire."[215] Again his quest is to set himself apart: "*Arrias* a tout lu, a tout vu, il veut le persuader ainsi; c'est un homme universel, et il se donne pour tel." But unlike Acis, the effort by Arrias betrays a deeper concern. He attempts no less than to situate himself. In the anecdote that La Bruyère relates, Arrias lies both about his knowledge of a certain geographical area, and his source (social connection) for that knowledge. He is caught in his lie, as his companions confront him by revealing that he is actually speaking to the French ambassador from that geographical area. Arrias bends truth, but his effort betrays an anxiety over placing his self, over the question of *where* he exists.

Théodecte is a portrait where the substance of his essence, language, is rendered secondary by his manner of utterance:

> J'entends Théodecte de l'antichambre; il grossit sa voix à mesure qu'il s'approche; le voilà entré: il rit, il crie, il éclate; on bouche ses oreilles, c'est un tonnerre. Il n'est pas moins redoutable par les choses qu'il dit que par le ton dont il parle… Il a si peu d'égard au temps, aux personnes, aux bienséances…[216]

Here the question of truth, usually mediated by language, is based on aural tone. Thus La Bruyère further reveals the debasement of a system where the relationship between signs (language) and their objects can be co-opted solely by the tenor of a voice.

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[215] V, 9.
[216] V, 12.

Hermagoras: a visual echo

La Bruyère readdresses the visual problematic of the Narcissus fable in the portrait of Hermagoras.[217] Here he isolates the action of seeing itself and frames this in a commentary again on temporality. At stake in the passage is the connection between seeing and knowing. Yet upon a first reading the weight of ridicule obscures this issue.

Hermagoras is a withering portrait of a pedant lost in time, utterly oblivious to the present. He knows nothing of current events (political): "il confond les temps, il ignore quand elles ont commencé, quand elles ont fini…" But he knows intimate details of the Assyrian, Babylonian and Egyptian empires: "Il n'a jamais vu Versailles, il ne le verra point : il a presque vu la tour de Babel, il en compte les degrés… Quelle chose lui est cachée de la vénérable antiquité?" In one sense, the portrait of Hermagoras serves instead to showcase the erudition of the author, La Bruyère. For indeed it is the writer himself who knows both the current political situation (by inference the reader assumes he knows the identity of the Hungarian king) and the most minute of historical details (whether Nembrot was left-handed and Sésostris ambidextrous). La Bruyère goes so far as to insert his signature, in the form of the arch "dirai-je" to further the scorn upon Hermagoras.[218] Doing so, however, further reveals the double presence in the portrait: author and subject. It is a striking comparison, and one that La Bruyère evokes early, in the preface to his translation of Theophrastus.[219]

At the end of the Hermagoras passage La Bruyère spends some time describing Hermagoras' obsession with the right- or left-handedness of the Persian king Artaxerxes.

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[217] V, 74.
[218] "Dirai-je qu'il croit Henri IV fils de Henri III?" Henri IV's parents were the King and Queen of Naarre.
[219] "Quelques savants…l'histoire du monde présente leur est insipide." (p. 659).

Echoing the theme and depth of the Narcissus portrait, these lines metaphorize the strange, visual inversing-operation of a reflecting mirror, where left hands appear to be right hands (and *savants* are not actually *savants*). The visual aspect of this is implicitly taken up in the middle of the passage, where La Bruyère quips: "il a presque vu la tour de Babel."[220] Throughout the text, La Bruyère's humor, subtly lodged here in the *presque*, is always understated and always strategic. Even from the beginning of his first chapter where his oft-quoted *Tout est dit* betrays the three hundred odd pages of writing which follow, humor serves as punctuation, as a marker demanding interrogation.[221] In the portrait of Hermagoras, La Bruyère gives the reader an image of a man who has *almost* seen the Tower of Babel, an object which is itself a metaphor for languages, a linguistic image. The "has almost seen" raises the question of vision and language and the interplay between the two so central to this text.

Visually, one cannot "almost see." One either sees or one does not. There exists an inherent ambiguity in the *presque* that suggests the presence of a secondary position of awareness occupied either by a third party (like an author) or the same individual from a vantage point different either by time or space. Yet textually, with its temporal drag (i.e. the delay that gives one both time to consider an event, and a larger perspective on that event), one can *almost see* through the mediation of the writer. The man "almost" sees the image of Babel, however a secondary level of seeing exists. The reader becomes a beholder who does in fact "see," in this case the image of a man attempting to behold. Thus through language, man does manage to "see." In a slightly different sense then, one can "almost" see. It is the operation of the imagination that produces the phantom

[220] V, 74. "…he has almost seen the Tower of Babel" (my translation).
[221] I, 1.

"image." It is, in effect, the standard for "representation." Artistic representation merely makes visually evident what we take for granted when we look around. The interplay between our language skills and our sensory reception creates our reality.

This raises the question of what Hermagoras has not seen. He has not seen Versailles – and in the variant (versions V and VI of *Les Caractères* has: *il n'a jamais vu* Versailles, *oui* Versailles.) La Bruyère stresses this fact not to show that Hermagoras is not in a given social circle, but that in fact he has not seen Versailles for what it really is: the center of the present civilization in which he lives. This returns to the problematic of a functioning temporal existence, for Hermagoras "confond les temps." Yet it also reveals a confusion of registers. Versailles is spectacle, it is visible; but the Tower of Babel is metaphor, it is apprehensible. This suggests that what is in question is not simply a temporal confusion, but also a confusion in how knowledge is acquired. La Bruyère, the second figure in the portrait, **has seen** the tower of Babel. In the following chapter (*Des biens de fortune*) he remarks: "faire fortune… on la reconnaît dans toutes les langues, elle plaît aux étrangers et aux barbares."[222] La Bruyère the author, in opposition to the *savant*, is writing in a temporal mode which allows him to shift his perspective in order to see. Thus he can both apprehend the images of his time, and he can also re-represent them.[223]

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[222] VI, 36.

[223] Another important iteration of this problem is found in the celebrated portrait of Ménalque. Upon truly awakening, with his eyes wide open, he slams his *front* into the *front* of a blind man. It is Ménalque's vision failure that causes his own difficulty of recognizing himself (*se reconnaître*). XI, 7.

Troïle and Montaigne

This chapter contains many portraits, but the theme from the previous chapter, governance (see the portrait of Drance, below), is transferred onto the character of Troïle. He alone in this chapter is successful in mastering language, and in doing so, masters his master:

> Il est l'oracle d'une maison, celui dont on attend, que dis-je? dont on prévient, dont on devine les décisions. Il dit de cet esclave: "Il faut le punir", et on le fouette; et de cet autre: "Il faut l'affranchir", et on l'affranchit. [224]

Troïle is a tool, an advisor to the man who possesses an excess of wealth. He is a model of social power within a very circumscribed area: the house. The details of the portrait all describe how indispensible he has become. The entire household curries favor with him as he is the intermediary to the master. Yet, again if we read the frame, we arrive at a more nuanced critique, one with symbolic repercussions. For Troïle is defined by his position in society:

> Troïle est utile à ceux qui ont trop de bien: il leur ôte l'embarras du superflu; il leur sauve la peine d'amasser de l'argent, de faire des contrats, de fermer des coffres, de porter des clefs sur soi et de craindre un vol domestique. Il les aide dans leurs plaisirs, et il devient capable ensuite de les servir dans leurs passions…

In this rule he is governor of his masters' passions. Indeed he comes close to existing as the symbolic externalization of *reason*. Expressed externally, this reason has real power, and much like the Sannions, his utterances often have brutal consequences (slaves freed or punished, as in the quote above).

In the 30th passage of this chapter La Bruyère explores an authentic, equal relationship to language. He does this by transcribing Montaigne:

> Je n'aime pas un homme que je ne puis aborder le premier, ni saluer avant qu'il me salue, sans m'avilir à ses yeux… Montaigne dirait…Quand il m'est égal, et qu'il

[224] V, 13.

> ne m'est point ennemy, j'anticipe sur son accueil, je le questionne sur sa disposition et santé, je luy fais offre de mes offices sans tant marchander sur le plus ou sur le moins, ne estre, comme disent aucuns, sur le qui vive.[225]

La Bruyère literally rewrites Montaigne by not quoting him, but instead by imagining what Montaigne *would* say ("Montaigne *dirait*"). Ostensibly searching for an equal relationship between self and other, the passage instead reveals a desired for relationship with language. By hinging the artifice on a single term (*dirait*), La Bruyère betrays his own truthful brush, his own effort at *seeming* (*paraître*). La Bruyère repositions his own textual body, attempting an authenticating continuity by assuming the very *plume* of Montaigne.

Ménophile

La Bruyère offers a different take on authenticity vs. seeming in the portrait of Ménophile, found in the chapter *De la cour*. Ménophile is an imposter who assumes a persona:

> Ménophile emprunte ses moeurs d'une profession, et d'une autre son habit; il masque toute l'année, quoique à visage découvert; il paraît à la cour, à la ville, ailleurs, toujours sous un certain nom et sous le même déguisement. On le reconnaît et on sait quel il est à son visage.[226]

His "mask" gives him passport to society and he travels freely between the twin poles of power in late seventeenth-century France: *la cour* and *la ville*. Oddly, however, the passage evokes an ambiguity, for his *masque* covers, but does not disguise his *visage*. The term visage, according to the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française*, refers to what we still understand as the physical ("la partie anterieure de la teste"), but it also

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[225] V, 30.
[226] VIII, 48. N.B. This is a very short portrait, but not entirely rare in *Les Caractères*.

references the physiognomy, i.e. the temperament, countenance or character of a person.[227] This ambiguity is further complicated by the last phrase of the passage, where the term *visage* repeats, and seems to refer to the physical face. The passage reads as if at the end the game is up, the man is discovered: "On le reconnaît…" Yet this seems to occur *before*, or perhaps without, his face being unmasked, thus suggesting that his physical face was *not* the key to his undoing. His final identity is curiously described as a relationship of belonging: "il est à son visage." The entire passage, condensed as it is, reveals the complexity of the relationship between *être* and *paraître*, and the ambiguent congruence between identity and appearance. This distance has been brilliantly explored in the historical work *The Return of Martin Guerre* by Natalie Zemon Davis, but her work explores a sixteenth-century imposter.[228] The social dynamics had changed by the time of Louis XIV, but La Bruyère's passage does manifest an awareness of the overriding importance of appearance in regards the apprehension of the self.[229]

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[227] "On dit, d'Un homme qui a une physionomie funeste, qu'Il a le visage patibulaire." Entry "Visage." Dictionnaire de l'Académie française.

[228] Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983). See also Stephen Jay Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*, Paperback ed. (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

[229] Interestingly, the same division of the term *visage* turns up later in this same chapter in the portrait of the theatrical Théodote. "Théodote avec un habit austère a un visage comique, et d'un homme qui entre sur la scène; sa voix, sa démarche, son geste, son attitude accompagnent son visage…" VIII, 61.

Interiority

Émire

The only true narrative story in *Les Caractères* is found in the third chapter, *Des femmes*. It begins (with the second sentence of the passage) like a fairy tale:

> Il y avait à *Smyrne* une très belle fille qu'on appelait *Émire*, et qui était moins connue dans toute la ville par sa beauté que par la sévérité de ses moeurs, et surtout par l'indifférence qu'elle conservait pour tous les hommes…[230]

A long tragedy, it can be read as a narrative story of René Girard's concept of mimetic desire.[231] Girard postulated that desire springs neither from subject nor object, but rather from the triangular relationship with a third party. Through the object, it is in fact the mediator who is the true object of the subject's desire.[232] Émire is insensible to, even above, love, and instead knows only friendship, above all with Euphrosyne. Only after the latter falls in love does Émire feel jealousy, losing herself completely (*son esprit s'égare*) into madness (*folie*).

Why consider this narrative as a portrait? First, the beginning sentence echoes the Narcissus fable: "Une femme insensible est celle qui n'a pas encore vu celui qu'elle doit aimer." Here we read the primacy of vision as it relates to desire: the lover seeing the beloved. Yet Émire sees without desire, she knows not desire. Her tragedy is that self-

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[230] III, 81.
[231] See René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977).
[232] Curiously, Michael Koppisch, a student of Girard's, ignored this story in favor of La Bruyère's portraits of the collectors of curiosités at the beginning of the chapter entitled *De la mode*. See Koppisch, 40.

knowledge here comes precisely because she is *not* caught in a reciprocal gaze (lover/beloved) from the outset. She learns late but she pays a dear price. Secondly, this portrait, like the portrait of Æmile to some extent, serves an emblematic role. There are only two longer portraits in this chapter, Émire and the earlier portrait of the misogynist, hypocritical Glycère. Émire suggests the limits of portraiture itself when the subject was a woman. Kettering has also written about the life of women in the seventeenth century, about the "difference between prescriptive role and their roles in reality," and how women were thus destined to a life of "concealment and secrecy and dissemblement."[233]

This long, narrative portrait would seem to echo the beginnings of the development of a narrative self in French literature. Indeed, most critics see Mme. de La Fayette's *La Princesse de Clèves* (1678) as the initial salvo in what would become the full development of the novelistic character. But La Bruyère uses a very light brush. Émire's initial attraction to Ctésiphon (the lover) is visual ("Elle le vit avec intérêt") and her desire centers on her wish that he be more intelligent and gallant. Her process of discovering her inner self, of articulating her wishes and her confrontation with her desires in the form of jealousy, then occurs too quickly and without explication.

Drance

Curiously, the long portrait of Émire leads directly into the next, very short fourth chapter, *Du coeur*. Full of short remarks (well over half are under two lines in length, the rest, three to four lines), the chapter promptly picks up the themes unapproached in Émire, comparing love and friendship, their differing temporalities, requirements... The

[233] Kettering, 21.

sole portrait of the chapter, the long passage which contains Drance, is framed formally by the 70 remarks in the chapter which precede it, and the 14 which follow it. It is a curious isolation. Why is there only one portrait in a chapter whose subject would surely command more characterization, or which would have definitive readerly appeal?

If individual interiority is not explicitly at stake here, the portrait of Drance does at least put in relief, by portraying a character who believes he controls his master, how mastery of the social codes reflects upon self-mastery.

> *Drance* veut passer pour gouverner son maître, qui n'en croit rien, non plus que le public; parler sans cesse à un grand que l'on sert, en des lieux et en des temps où il convient le moins, lui parler à l'oreille ou en des termes mystérieux, rire jusqu'à éclater en sa présence, lui couper la parole, se mettre entre lui et ceux qui lui parlent, dédaigner ceux qui viennent faire leur cour…[234]

The social transgressions of Drance reveal that despite his obvious desire for control ("veut passer pour gouverner"), he deceives only himself, as neither his *maître* nor the *public* believes him. Interestingly, all of his social faults involve the misuse of verbal communication. From the quote above we read "parler sans cesse" // "parler à l'oreille" // "rire" // "couper la parole" // "se mettre entre lui et ceux qui lui parlent." The portrait thus clearly links social control to language.

Again, however, in this portrait as in others, we must look for the frame. In fact, the portrait of Drance is couched in a peculiar ambiguity. The opening line of the passage reads: "Il y a bien autant de paresse que de faiblesse à se laisser gouverner."[235] The passive construction (*se laisser*) bypasses both the agent and object of governance. At this point it is not clear if the supposed master is *un homme* as the previous remarks/maxims would indicate, or if there exists some other governing power. As the

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[234] IV, 71.
[235] IV, 71.

passage continues, for the portrait of Drance occurs some two-thirds into it, it reinforces the commentary about the master and servant.

Yet two phrases recast the ambiguity. The first comes in the paragraph immediately subsequent to the Drance paragraph (still in the same remark, #71) where we read: "Un homme sage… il veut que la raison gouverne seul." The second comes in remark #72: "Toutes les passions sont menteuses." Both of these suggest an alternate reading where the topic has become the governance of the passions. In this reading, Drance's social transgressions betray a lack of inner self-control. He is unable to govern his interior life which in turn causes these kinds of social eruptions.

Le us note however, that later in the text, La Bruyère equally castigates he who *does not have* an interior life. The portrait of Ruffin begins by describing a personality, which is rather rare in *Les Caractères*: "il est sain, il a un visage frais et un oeil vif… il est gai, jovial, familier…"[236] But it soon becomes apparent that his personality is irrelevant. He is too easily consoled after the death of his only son. Thus his personality has nothing to do with any kind of interior life he may lead. His sin: "Il n'a point de passions." This interior emptiness is revealed by the character of his social relations after his son's death: "il n'a ni amis ni ennemis, personne ne l'embarrasse, tout le monde lui convient…" Again, as in the Drance portrait, it is the utterance that signals that something is amiss with Ruffin. The death of his son leads to his statement: "Mon fils est mort, cela fera mourir sa mère."

[236] XI, 123.

De l'homme

The chapter entitled *De l'homme* contains one of *Les Caractères'* most memorable portraits, Ménalque. It begins in a very theatrical fashion, with the air of Harlequin, the comedic figure. He descends a staircase, open and closes his door, and then:

> …il s'aperçoit qu'il est en bonnet de nuit; et venant à mieux s'examiner, il se trouve rasé à moitié, il voit que son épée est mise du côté droit, que ses bas sont rabattus sur ses talons, et que sa chemise est par-dessus ses chausses.[237]

From the very beginning of the portrait, La Bruyère has referenced the trope of spectatorship, but immediately turned it round, so the game is one of self-perception (*il s'aperçoit*). And of course, Ménalque as buffoon finds himself *other* than he would expect (*en bonnet de nuit*, *rasé à moitié*, *chemise par-dessus ses chausses*). Already there exists a gap between *être* and *paraître*. La Bruyère further complicates this idea of mis-self-perception by continuing:

> S'il marche dans les places, il se sent tout d'un coup rudement frapper à l'estomac ou au visage; il ne soupçonne point ce que ce peut être, jusqu'à ce qu'ouvrant les yeux et se réveillant… On l'a vu une fois heurter du front contre celui d'un aveugle, s'embarrasser dans ses jambes, et tomber avec lui chacun de son côté à la renverse. Il lui est arrivé plusieurs fois de se trouver tête pour tête à la rencontre d'un prince et sur son passage, se reconnaître à peine et n'avoir que le loisir de se coller à un mur pour lui faire place.

Thus the equivalent of mis-self-perception is in fact not seeing at all, for as the character of Ménalque moves through time and space (defined socially of course, by using the term *places* as in *place publique*), he has in fact closed his eyes! La Bruyère reinforces this with the entanglement with blindness, with the emphasis on the physical confrontation

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[237] XI, 7.

(face to face) with *un aveugle*.[238] The next immediate encounter again reinforces the thematic of self-mirroring in the context of spectatorship, for Ménalque finds himself not *front à front*, but literally *tête pour tête* with a Prince:

> Il lui est arrivé plusieurs fois de se trouver tête pour tête à la rencontre d'un prince et sur son passage, se reconnaître à peine, et n'avoir que le loisir de se coller à un mur pour lui faire place.

This social meeting again underlines Ménalque's lack of self-awareness, for he can barely recognize himself (*se reconnaître à peine*).

La Bruyère writes the passage as if he is describing discrete events. But the length of the passage and the fact that it is without formal structure (there are no paragraph breaks) make it read like a narrative story. Other readers have taken La Bruyère at his word in his footnote which reads: "Ceci est moins un caractère particulier qu'un recueil de faits de distractions. Ils ne sauraient être en trop grand nombre s'ils sont agréables; car, les goûts étant différents, on a à choisir." Yet should we take him at his word, when there is obviously some sort of thematic structure? Further, the literal *block* of text (the "recueil de faits" runs several pages) could almost be said to resemble a body; it has mass.

After his near collision with the prince, the passage segues into the related theme of misplacement. Again, it occurs in a mirror fashion. First, objects are lost (to him): "Il cherche, il brouille, il crie, il s'échauffe, il appelle ses valets l'un après l'autre: on lui perd tout, on lui égare tout…" Then several lines later, the lost object becomes the subject, Ménalque, who himself becomes lost: "S'il va par la ville, après avoir fait quelque chemin, il se croit égaré.." This physical displacement began with the prince episode, for

[238] The phrase "heurter du front contre celui d'un aveugle" translates as "running his head/face against the head/face of a blind man."

Ménalque was forced to move out of the way. And this points again, to another take on displacement, for a prince made him move. Despite the fact that social class had import in this society, the divisions between *la ville* and *la cour* were becoming increasingly narrow. The prince anecdote visually attests to this by describing how the street passage is so narrow that Ménalque is literally against a wall (*se coller à un mur*).

The passage then moves to displacement: Ménalque first finds his way to a house, makes himself at home and receives a guest, all the while blissfully unaware that it is not in fact his house. The scene then repeats, this time with a lady. The portrait continues. A litany of social transgressions serves to reinforce Ménalque's out-of-place actions. It describes a miscommunication, where he mis-addresses two letters, effectively displacing his missives to the wrong recipients.

Towards the very end of the Ménalque portrait, after several pages of actions (or one may read them as adventures!), La Bruyère attends for the first time to Ménalque's state of mind. The physical displacement exists also as his mental condition:

> Il pense et il parle tout à la fois, mais la chose dont il parle est rarement celle à laquelle il pense; aussi ne parle-t-il guère conséquemment et avec suite: où il dit non, souvent il faut dire oui, et où il dit oui, croyez qu'il veut dire non; il a, en vous répondant si juste, les yeux fort ouverts, mais il ne s'en sert point: il ne regarde ni vous ni personne, ni rien qui soit au monde.

There is a difference between his thought and his speech, and this is caught up with the difference between what he looks at and what he sees: eyes open, yet seeing nothing. This returns to the theme of blindness at the beginning of the passage. In the next few lines, this blindness takes on an existential cant, for he is never with the person he appears to be with, and this causes him to misname: "Jamais aussi il n'est avec ceux avec qui il paraît être: il appelle sérieusement son laquais Monsieur…" The misnaming segues into an encounter with a magistrate, whom Ménalque calls *Mademoiselle*: "Il se trouve

avec un magistrat: cet homme, grave par son caractère, vénérable par son âge et par sa dignité, l'interroge sur un événement." The misnaming here betrays La Bruyère's larger concern: how to read what we see.

Ménalque of course completely mis-recognizes who is in front of him. Yet for the reader of the text, La Bruyère places a visual cue: the term *grave* (a psycho-visual attribute) appears in the text, but the reader influenced by La Bruyère's dictum (*il faut savoir lire*) will catch the *grave*/*gravé* proximity.[239] The engraved character of the magistrate, marked by authenticity, both in experience (*âge*) and in personal character (*dignité*), recalls the portrait of the Sannions. Thus the *who*, the magistrate, becomes a *what*, the invocation of the law. The Sannions were effective agents, in spite of their misappropriation of signs, precisely because of their positions as magistrates.

Placement is at the heart of the Ménalque portrait. A closer look at La Bruyère's footnote reveals a further refinement of this idea. The term distraction (in La Bruyère's disclaimer: "un recueil de faits de distractions") signifies both a mental and a physical condition. From the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française*:

> Distraction. s. f. v. Demembrement d'une partie d'avec son tout… Distraction, signifie aussi, L'inapplication d'une personne aux choses qui la doivent occuper.[240]

Ménalque is indeed self-displaced. It is as if he lacks the etching, the engraved mark of character such that the magistrate possesses. Interestingly, on a formal level, one could read a kind of dismemberment in the iteration of frames that La Bruyère deploys, listing separate anecdotes and events together (the *recueil de faits*) as if to convey a succession of optical frames. His efforts at fixing Ménalque are compounded by Ménalque's

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[239] The reader will thus read "grave par caractère" as "*gravé* par caractère."
[240] Entry "Distraction." *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française*.

constant movement. Not only do the anecdotes take him from place to place, but he also exists in constant gestural movement: “Il cherche, il brouille, il crie, il s'échauffe…” Yet Ménalque also breaks from the body of men, the somewhat idealized version of mankind, that the chapter evokes.

The chapter entitled *De l’homme* takes up the human (masculine) subject. Later passages reveal how portraying man remains elusive, as man himself is elusive. One entry recognizes the influence of both ‘nature’ (“des vices...que nous apportons en naissant”) and ‘nurture’ (“il y en a d’autres que l’on contracte”).[241] Yet curiously the entry does not resolve the issue, observing that one changes over time such that one is unrecognizable to oneself (“l’on a des chagrins et une bile que l’on ne se connaissait point”). It is interesting because it points to an issue not easily explicated: is the self defined in terms of a temporally fixed entity, or is the self a temporal composite, or is there some sort of essence which somehow defies time? In this passage La Bruyère cannot but point to the final reaction, the last self-reflection: “l’on est enfin étonné de se trouver dur et épineux.” This would seem to suggest that we “become” ourselves unconsciously, but that at some given moment we have an epiphany or some self-reflective moment which reveals us to ourselves. A few entries later La Bruyère again acknowledges something that cannot be quantified: “Tout est étranger dans l’humeur, les moeurs et les manières de la plupart des hommes.”[242] The conclusion points to this lack, to a kind of indescribable *homme élusive*: “Ainsi tel homme au fond et en lui-même ne se peut définir...il n’est point précisément ce qu’il est ou ce qu’il paraît être.” But again, there is here only an observance, not an exploration, for the best definition of man had

[241] XI, 15.
[242] XI, 18.

slipped out in an earlier entry (just after Ménalque) as La Bruyère ruminates on mood (humeur):

> ils devraient comprendre qu'il ne leur suffit pas d'être bons, mais qu'ils doivent encore paraître tels, du moins s'ils tendent à être sociables, capables d'union et de commerce, c'est-à-dire à être des hommes.[243]

Here La Bruyère restates the equivalence of being and appearance. The *c'est à dire* reinforces the normative strength of the definition of man in social terms.

In opposition to this description, which does not occur in one particular portrait, is the portrait of Gnathon. He serves an almost emblematic role for both the chapter and the text as a whole. This portrait opens with a bold, declarative proclamation: "Gnathon ne vit que pour soi, et tous les hommes ensemble sont à son égard comme s'ils n'étaient point."[244] This line parrots to a large degree La Rochefoucauld's considerations of *amour-propre*. In La Bruyère's formulation, the passage begins with a fallacy: Gnathon thinks he lives as if in complete isolation; he is not cognizant of the existence of others. The last sentence of the portrait produces an extreme judgment by way of logic. His is an attitude which would lead to the extinction of the human: "[il] ne pleure point la mort des autres, n'appréhende que la sienne, qu'il rachèterait volontiers de l'extinction du genre." The passage highlights not only a world inhabited by others but the extreme social enclosure of that world.

The specific vice that Gnathon represents is gluttony. His main transgressions take place at the table:

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[243] XI, 9.
[244] XI, 121.

> Il ne se sert à table que de ses mains; il manie les viandes, les remanie, démembre, déchire, et en use de manière qu'il faut que les conviés, s'ils veulent manger, mangent ses restes. Il ne leur épargne aucune de ces malpropretés dégoûtantes… Il mange haut et avec grand bruit; il roule les yeux en mangeant…

His breaches of etiquette upset a new code of civility adopted first by the nobility, but which then spread to other sectors of the society.[245] The rules were quite clear. In 1671 Antoine de Courtin published his *New Treatise on Civility as Practiced in France among the Honnêtes Gens*. As Jacques Revel explains, the title reveals both that Louis XIV's court was the sole legitimate model and that the new civility applied to a broader population.

Obviously, Gnathon's "vice" exceeds far beyond the sphere of the gastronomic. The opening and closing lines point to an existential concern (note the first line's *vit*, and the last line's *la mort* / *l'extinction*). Indeed, Gnathon's obsessive behavior implies that his misanthropy betrays an obsession with his own death. Death, in fact, precedes this portrait-passage both as a theme, for old age as a subject is treated in several remarks, and in a portrait. Keeping in mind our reading's point of reference, we note that the framing of Gnathon directly follows the portrait of Phidippe who is already old (déjà vieux).[246] In some ways this portrait acts as an antiportrait, just as in the Giton/Phédon pair. Phidippe is studied in his etiquette: "il s'est fait un art du boire, du manger… les petites règles qu'il s'est prescrites." Curiously, his portrait also is marked by death in the last line ("N'appréhendait-il pas assez de mourir?").

Thus the text seems to condemn both the art of civility and the lack of civility at the same time. But there exists a hint of some personal interiority in the portrait: "Non

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[245] Jacques Revel, "The Uses of Civility," in *A History of Private Life*, ed. Philippe Ariès and Georges Duby (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1987).
[246] XI, 120.

content de remplir…il occupe [deux autres places]… il oublie [que il partage le repas]." The hint of desire, buried by the theatrical and animalistic flourishes (the "eyes rolling"), flashes in that manner described by Caws as *architexture*.[247] In addition, we can understand Gnathon's gluttony as a passion.

These hints recall a curious authorial insertion, found several passages earlier among those on age and the transition to old age. La Bruyère betrays a kind of melancholic wish for something that he cannot truly comprehend:

> Tout notre mal vient de ne pouvoir être seuls : de là le jeu, le luxe, la dissipation, le vin, les femmes, l'ignorance, la médisance, l'envie, l'oubli de soi-même et de Dieu.[248]

La Bruyère's desire is rarely inscribed in the text of *Les Caractères*. Yet the recognition of worth in a sort of solitude, a mode of self-sufficiency, is the only trace of interiority allowed by the representational system governing *Les Caractères*. And it is this trace that serves as an augur to the changes in literature and representational ideology that will occur in the eighteenth century.

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[247] Caws, 9-11.
[248] XI, 99.

CONCLUSION

The overriding purpose of this dissertation is to simultaneously engage both the culture of classical France and the specific aesthetic nature of the text under consideration: *Les Caractères*. Eschewing the methodological approach of a single interpretive frame, the dissertation attempts to comprehend the multiplicity of the work, its various facets and aspects. Works of art are both products of and participants in their respective cultures. As such, analyses of such works are entitled to propose larger claims about the cultural context in which they were produced while exploring the depth of aesthetic originality in both the artist and his or her work. The object is to maintain a "context sensitivity," and to explore the different possible meanings which would make sense for French society during this period.[249]

The singularity of this dissertation resides in its focus upon the portrait in *Les Caractères*. It considers a theory of portraiture developed by La Bruyère across his two prefaces, and then follows La Bruyère's attempt to implement this theory in the body of his text. The portraits in *Les Caractères* are a result of tension between differing genres, the moralist tradition, character writing and the literary portrait, and differing modes of representation: text and image (portrait painting). From this tension La Bruyère creates a unique practice of portraiture, a specific manner of framing his subjects that allows him to formulate a moral critique on a deeper level than the superficial social satire associated

[249] For this term and a call for the end of "interpretive frame fixation" see Charles Bernstein, "What's Art Got to Do with It? The Status of the Subject of the Humanities in an Age of Cultural Studies," in *Beauty and the Critic: Aesthestics in an Age of Cultural Studies*, ed. James Soderholm (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1997).

with those same subjects when considered as *characters*. Close readings of these characters reveal La Bruyère's absorption in critical issues concerning the aesthetic representational system that governed French society during the apogee of Louis XIV's reign. Specifically, La Bruyère articulates a certain temporal malaise he found in all sectors of society. He also bears witness to what we might call the tyranny of reciprocal vision in a society obsessed with appearance. Many of the characters in *Les Caractères* attempt to manipulate the system of signs to effect a change in their social status. In doing so, most of them overextend themselves. Yet La Bruyère always recuperates the constant excess in his text in service of his critique. His text manifests the seventeenth century's obsession with the problematic of substance and appearance, of truth in the mode of plausibility and verisimilitude. All of these issues are vital to our understanding of this period's cultural transformation. Yet they also reveal the complexity of La Bruyère's practice of portraiture, a practice that has not been taken fully into consideration.

This dissertation attempts to show how La Bruyère coalesces visual and textual genres to form a practice of portraiture, and how his interpretation of reality both reflects and participates in the shift from one century to the next. In the context of the waning aesthetic doctrine of the Sister Arts (*ut pictura poesis*) there remains more to be understood about the relationship between painting and poetry as practiced during this epoch. *Les Caractères* is at the confluence of almost all the trends of the seventeenth century, and its focus on portraiture reveals a somewhat overlooked locus of articulation concerning the shift from the seventeenth to the eighteenth century.

W.J.T. Mitchell's emphasis on comparative study provided one starting point for this discussion. Although he is making a different argument, his call to arms in his *Iconology* (1986) still resonates:

> …the key move in the reconstruction of iconology is to resign the hope for a scientific theory and to stage the encounter between the "icon" and "logos" in relation to topics such as the "paragone" of painting and literature and the Sister Arts tradition. This move, in my view, takes iconology well beyond the comparative study of verbal and visual art and into the basic construction of the human subject as a being constituted by both language and imaging.[250]

Indeed the main origin of this dissertation was the interest in studying portraiture over time in order to explore its relation to concepts of self and subjectivity. And as this study of La Bruyère shows, the *cérémonie de reconnaissance* that characterized seventeenth-century France greatly affected individual and social relations.[251] Roland Barthes sketches the difference between the seventeenth-century individual, described as a rare element composed of principles, and the eighteenth-century individual, one of infinite variation.[252] He goes on to explain the totalizing nature of the character in La Bruyère's text and how the insulated nature of French society created a sense of worldliness which transverses the real and the imaginary. This emphasis on portraiture, both literary and artistic, would help us better understand the shift between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the culture of the eighteenth century itself, *and* the specific works themselves.

As opposed to the social constraints of the seventeenth century, eighteenth-century France witnesses the rise of the individual or what Jean Starobinski has called the

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[250] W.J.T. Mitchell, *Iconology. Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 24.
[251] Sartre, 99.
[252] Barthes, 1336-1337.

invention of liberty.[253] In the eighteenth century the possibility of seeing "man" in totality becomes impossible.[254] With the rise of the bourgeoisie and the beginning formation of a new ideology the social margins become visible. It is eighteenth-century society which begins to perceive alterity. This discovery of the Other transforms French society and thus allows a space for some individuation. Sartre has written about the kind of double consciousness of the writer, who negotiates between bourgeois aspirations and a disintegrating aristocratic ideology, and about the representational medium of literature, which no longer merely reflects the social collectivity (as it did in the seventeenth century) but rather critiques and forms ideas.[255] The eighteenth century also begins to ground truth in part upon experimental evidence, thus opening up the exploration of experiential realms and beginning to claim a kind of objectivity.

Yet if *Les Caractères* begins to open up a space of interiority with regards to the self, it also plays a role in the aesthetic history of the self: as a stage in the development of the modern novel. In the seventeenth century, *vraisemblance* is nearly always equivalent to *vérité.* There were of course exceptions. As mentioned earlier, Molière's character portrayals manifest bursts of realistic depiction. And Lafayette's *La Princesse de Clèves* begins to explore a way out of this through the creation of a new self-determined ethic. La Bruyère's contribution is to navigate the truth terrain, inserting incisive observation into an expanded stylistic lexicon, while creating a formal frame to rival the visual form of painting. The portraits in *Les Caractères* are but another step in the full development of the literary character as found in the developing novel, which

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[253] See Jean Starobinski, *The Invention of Liberty, 1700-1789*, Art Ideas History (Geneva: Skira, 1964).
[254] See Barthes, 1337.
[255] Sartre, 110.

gradually assumes a dramatic presence.[256] In addition, La Bruyère's use of the portraits as portals anticipates the evolution of novelistic characters. These future portals, more advanced than those in *Les Caractères*, allow the reader to appreciate the aesthetic value of the text (as the reader follows a given character's development in a given text) while at the same time opening onto larger societal questions which these characters have interiorized.

In the eighteenth century, *vraisemblance* is but a cover – the codes are either played with or uncovered. This change is most readily evident in the change in the definition of the term *caractère*, from the 1694 version of the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française* to the 1762 version.[257] In the 1694 version there is only one entry, with four separate denotations. The first is: "Empreinte, marque. Il se prend particulierement pour les figures dont on se sert dans l'escriture, ou dans l'impression." In the third we find: "Il se prend aussi, Pour ce qui distingue une personne des autres à l'esgard des moeurs ou de l'esprit." Under one heading, the sign (the mark or trace) is proximate to what it signifies (*une personne*). In the 1762 version there are five entries. The denotation of "Empreinte, marque" occurs under a separate heading than that of "…Pour ce qui distingue une personne des autres…" (though the specific language remains much the same). The eighteenth-century term *caractère* thus manifests a distance between the sign and signified. The shift plays out in literary works from implicit role-playing to explicit and manipulated role-playing. In *La Vie de Marianne*, Pierre de Marivaux leverages the

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[256] Writing about….. "the most blatant motive of poetry's appropriation of painting is poetry's envy of a faculty the classical tradition of ekphrastic rhetoric called enargeia, the power of filling the beholder with an overwhelming sensation of dramatic physical presence." Braider, 9.

[257] Entry "Caractère." *Dictionnaire de L'Académie française*. The ARTFL database of dictionary entries very usefully allows one to read the definition of a word in successive works on the same page.

language of the moralists and, as Peter Brooks has so astutely described, the form of the portrait, to detail the emergence of Marianne's social consciousness.[258] While these texts are usually considered neither as "auto-biographical" nor as self-portraits, to read each of them as portraits is to reveal their distinct explorations of self and subjective content and their answer to what it means to be an individual in their specific cultural context.

La Bruyère's *Les Caractères* were produced in a markedly different literary climate than was Denis Diderot's *Le Neveu de Rameau* (1773), but in portrait after portrait, a similar excess is revealed and recuperated. Ménalque's fascinating gestural language is but one example, and he finds his equal in Diderot's Rameau. Rameau is like a compendium of types, composed of all opposite pairs. He surpasses himself and exists in a state of perpetual non-identicality, yet at the same time he is acutely self-conscious of his state-of-being. Some have read this text as a pre-Revolutionary moment in the conscience of French society. I see in this text the last expression of a self attempting to reconcile itself with the idea of change. Compared to the unified and congruent subject found in Rousseau's *Confessions*, the character of Rameau accepts the transforming power of temporality and circumstance.[259] Yet it is less in the figure of Rameau than in the dialogism between the *moi* and the *lui*, Rameau and the Philosopher (both of whom resemble facets of Diderot), that the text explores a novel way of explaining subjectivity in terms of being subject to social forces (discourse, mores, role-playing...) and in terms of retaining a sense of self-consciousness and willfully forming one's own identity.

Across the portraits in *Les Caractères*, La Bruyère explores ways of being, ways of knowing, ways of relating to the world. He carefully works through problems of

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[258] Brooks, 96.
[259] See the discussion of Diderot in Perkins.

portrayal, in part by expanding the repertoire of literary characterization. Yet to read them today remains difficult. La Bruyère anticipates the needed effort when he warns his readers in his *Préface*: *il faut savoir lire*.[260] Yet he himself reveals his own effort undertaken in his quest to understand and frame his society. He attempted to step out of the frame of the *cérémonie* that Sartre describes, and instead tried to bear witness in a different mode. In the chapter entitled *De l'homme*, La Bruyère remarks at one point about what it takes to discern the moral character of children: "une curieuse attention qu'on en pénètre la différence."[261] It is perhaps this *curieuse attention*, a certain wonder and attention to detail, that La Bruyère bequeathed to successive writers and artists, who participate in the long fascination of humans with what it means to be human.

[260] La Bruyère, 694.
[261] XI, 52.

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