

Commentaire de texte :

Des défauts qui ne devraient plus exister :

- méthode générale :
 - lecture du paratexte : identification du genre du texte, compréhension de la date (parution)
 - respect des conventions d'écriture : guillemets anglais, utilisation des guillemets / du soulignement
- format de l'introduction :
 - quatre paragraphes séparés (retour à la ligne et retrait en début de paragraphe)
 - tournures correctes en anglais pour présenter la problématique et annoncer le plan
- méthode de l'analyse de texte : Les notions utilisées, pour être de véritables outils d'analyse, doivent être abordées à la fois au niveau du contenu (thématique, narratif, explicite) du texte et au niveau de son écriture (formelle, stylistique, implicite). Il faut chercher tous les sens, toutes les applications, de ces notions dans le texte. Se contenter d'un sens ou d'une application revient à mettre en place une grille de lecture univoque. Dans le meilleur des cas, cette grille sera pertinente et vous permettra de voir des choses justes, mais elle risque de vous empêcher d'en voir d'autres. Dans le pire des cas, cette grille risque, si elle repose sur des termes insuffisamment définis, de conduire à une description ou à une interprétation arbitraire.

Ici, ces notions vous étaient proposées. Il convenait donc de commencer par réfléchir à tout ce qui peut être défini comme de la description aux niveaux thématique et scriptural, c'est-à-dire dans ce que le texte dit et dans ce qu'il fait. Le texte décrit une situation, un lieu, un tableau, des sensations et des idées ; il évoque aussi des descriptions : son sujet est un portrait, autrement dit une description, et il reproduit une description de ce tableau. La question à aborder ne pouvait donc pas être seulement ce que le texte décrit et comment il le décrit, mais ce que le texte dit sur la description, et comment ce qu'il dit sur la description rétro-agit sur lui.

Plus généralement, pour dépasser la paraphrase localisée, il est utile dans le cas de ce texte de chercher les rapports entre le texte et son sujet (en l'occurrence le tableau), et entre le modèle représenté par le tableau et son spectateur.

The relationship between description and imagination

The text addresses the subject matter of description in visual art by performing literary description and narration, presenting description as a death force which kills off imagination, but also exercising the power of writing to redeem description through a narrative which nourishes imagination, and which is nourished by imagination.

The eponymous oval portrait is a pictorial description of a woman which the text presents as an artistic failure disguised as an artistic triumph. The embedded narrative, and the fascination of the narrator in the frame narrative, ostensibly illustrate the accomplishment of a painter who produces an illusionistic description of a living human being. In the mythical *ekphrasis* and in the eye of the narrator, this artistry is perceived as a form of magic or witchcraft which transgresses the limit between life and its representation, between life and man-made objects.

However, the ambivalent relationship of this artistry with love reveals the limits of description: in the embedded narrative which serves as an apologue on painting, the painter's dedication to art can be interpreted either as a metaphor for his love for his wife or, on the contrary, as a deadly obsession which competes with love although he mistakes one for the other. From one point of view, the artist's work may be seen as a sublimated expression of his love for his wife: his love for her unleashes his artistic potential, empowering him to reach the highest artistic heights; his masterpiece and the woman's death are the tragic yet miraculous fruit of their love. From another point of view, the painter is obsessed with art instead of in love with his wife, he sucks the life out of her to produce a perfect picture, that is to say one that is stolen from life.

The image of the portrait painter as a vampire presents descriptive art as engaged in a zero-sum game with life: it metaphorically argues that the artist whose aim is to produce a perfect description of life, that is to say an artist who turns his back on imagination, does not create anything since he does not put anything on the canvas that he has not taken from life. The idea of a zero-sum game is clearly encapsulated by the juxtaposition of the last two sentences: ““This is indeed Life itself!” [...] *She was dead!*”; life cannot be both in the painting and in real life. A descriptive artist kills off his imagination and that of the viewer: the

narrator is shaken by the sight of the picture but this experience does not seem to bring him any epiphany and may not even be entirely pleasant: he describes himself as “confounded, subdued, and appalled”.

However, by imagining the story of this picture, borrowing from the Gothic and from the Classical stories of Zeuxis and Pygmalion, as a fantastic love triangle between an artist, his muse and his art, and by embedding this imaginary apologetic *ekphrasis* in an entirely unbelievable frame narrative, the text imagines a way to articulate the deadly failure of descriptive art that also transfigures it into its exact opposite: the writer unleashes his imagination to tell the story of an artist who makes the mistake of renouncing imagination through a literary description of the descriptive picture which transforms its artistic failure into an artistic success.

Proposition d'introduction et de plan :

‘What demi-god / Hath come so near creation? Move these eyes? / Or whether, riding on the balls of mine, / Seem they in motion?’, Bassanio asks in Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice* when he discovers ‘fair Portia’s counterfeit’. The fascination produced by illusionistic paintings, especially portraits of human faces, has long interested philosophers and writers since ancient times, as it raises the question of the relation of artistic creation to reality and life.

In ‘The Oval Portrait’, this subject-matter is approached through the narrative of an I-narrator who discovers such a picture in the dramatic context of a castle straight from Gothic fiction. The sight of the picture produces a dramatic effect on the narrator, who approaches the picture both directly through his vision, and as a reader through its story in a catalogue of the castle’s paintings. This embedded narrative is a fantastic mix of the Zeuxis and Pygmalion narratives, according to which the artist made this extraordinary image of life out of real life itself, resulting in the death of the sitter.

By framing an illusionistic picture within a fantastic *ekphrasis* embedded within the Gothic-inspired tale of an I-narrator, the text approaches descriptive representation in art both from the point of view of *poiesis* and that of *esthesis*, offering an apologue in the shape of a metaphor for imitative art, denouncing it as a failure while offering a way to remedy it.

I will first analyse the illusionistic portrait as a source of fascination which, however, ultimately turns out to be an artistic failure. I will then show that the picture reveals a conflict between life and its representation which is also a conflict between sight and mind. I will finally argue that, through an engagement with fiction, the text illustrates the power of imagination to rise above the limitations of descriptive art.

1. Descriptive art: from fascinating accomplishment to artistic failure.

1.1. The fascinating illusion of an artistic triumph.

1.1.1. The illusionistic portrait is presented as endowed with supernatural power (“a mighty marvel”, l. 68): through the fantastic dimension of the story, the text presents the fascinating effect on the viewer of an illusionistic portrait as a feeling of experiencing the supernatural.

The artist is presented as a magician who transforms life into pictures, which happens in both *poiesis* and *esthesis*: the artist breathes life into a lifeless, man-made object, transforming a living woman into a picture (a reversal of the Pygmalion myth), and doing the same thing to the viewer: “I remained, for an hour perhaps, half sitting, half reclining, with my vision riveted upon the portrait” (l. 45); the narrator is somehow immobilised in a highly unstable posture, transformed into a tableau made visible to the reader by hypotyposis. The effect is enhanced by the fact that the narrator is in the same place where the woman sat for the picture. This freezing, death-like transformation of the narrator into an image reveals the ambivalence of his fascination.

1.1.2. By doing this, the artist brings about another magic: the picture seems to overcome death, both for the sitter who has become the picture (“the immortal beauty of the countenance”, l. 39) and for the viewer (“the first flashing of the candles upon the canvas had seemed [...] to startle me at once into waking life”, l. 31, although the narrator is “desperately wounded”, l. 2). The present participle “ripening” (l. 25) suggests the illusion of movement, change.

1.1.3. The corollary on the level of *esthesis* of the transfigurative effect of the painter’s artistry is the I-narrator’s experience of the painting’s aura (Walter Benjamin). However, this results from the paradoxical, simultaneous perception of the artificiality of the picture (the frame, the vignetting) and its lifelikeness.

1.2. A negative epiphany: the absence of a visual epiphany brings about an epiphany on the failure of

descriptive art.

1.2.1. The reactions elicited by the picture are essentially negative (“confounded, subdued, and appalled”, l. 49). Indeed, they are nearly negated: from the first moment the narrator sees the picture (l. 25) until line 48, he dwells at length on those effects without naming them. Actually, from line 34 until line 47, his first analysis of his response to the picture is conspicuously aporetic: “It could have been neither... nor... Least of all, could it have been...”, the juxtaposition between this analysis and the description of the picture stressing the narrator’s inability to locate the effect of the picture in the picture itself. There is something anticlimactic about the narrator writing that the whole process involving all his faculties has enabled him to pinpoint “the spell of the picture in an absolute life-likeness of expression”.

1.2.2. The portrait, for all its power to fascinate, brings no epiphany: in contrast to Bassanio’s pouring forth in metaphors which express his artistic enjoyment of Portia’s portrait and demonstrate how his experience as a viewer of art unleashes his own artistic production (link from *esthesis* to *poiesis*), the narrator of ‘The Oval Portrait’ ultimately experiences the illusionistic effect of the picture as an optical trick that treats his eyes and nervous system merely as a mechanism, without speaking to his soul.

1.2.3. This negativity on the level of *esthesis* is echoed on the level of *poiesis*: the artist has not created anything, he has merely taken from real life. The death of the sitter in the embedded story prevents it from being read as an optimistic metaphor on the painter’s work.

2. The sight of the picture reveals a conflict between life and its representation, between description and imagination, between sight and mind.

2.1.1. Descriptive art competes with life: the artist who sets himself the aim of producing an illusionistic description renounces the creativity of imagination, engaging in a zero-sum game with life, a vampiric activity which only creates an illusion of life in an artwork by sucking it out of life itself (whereas the magic in Portia’s portrait, which does not take anything away from her, makes Bassanio happy).

2.1.2. The vampirism of the picture does not just act on the woman within the story, it also acts on the narrator on the level of the narrative: just as the picture kills the woman, it enslaves (“subdue[s]”) the narrator and erases his story: the reader will never know where he came from or what happened to him afterwards; his story is pre-empted by that of the picture, for which it becomes a pretext.

2.2.1. Seeing the picture sends the narrator into an epic battle between his senses and his mind, between the exterior world and his inner life: his immediate reaction is to close his eyes “to gain time for thought”; the painting’s perfect description strikes his imagination so forcefully that he feels the need to protect his mind from the danger of being invaded by this exterior power through his eyesight.

2.2.2. The picture is a vision that is so powerful that it paradoxically destroys vision: instead of causing a pleasurable compulsive contemplation (such as Bassanio’s), the picture provokes an immediate rejection of sight, a refuge in blindness. This seems to be a self-defeating prowess for the painter. The idea that this signifies the artist’s failure may be confirmed if the passage is read through the lens of the Stendhal syndrome, which some psychologists interpret not as a sign of the overwhelming power of an artwork, but of its falling short of the viewer’s expectations: a psychotic denial of his disappointment.

2.3. This conflict in the narrator plays out in a conflict between seeing (the picture) with his eyes and reading (its story) with his mind. This conflict begins with the accidental revelation of the picture by a light which was meant for the book, an ambivalent fact: it may mean that the light was meant for the picture from the start, that the book was a guide to the picture, or that the picture steals the narrator’s attention away from the book. The narrator moves from the catalogue to the picture to blindness back to the picture and finally back to the catalogue: a symmetrical, palindromic journey which illustrates: a) the fact that the narrator is torn between seeing and reading, between description and imagination, between the picture and narrative, b) that the book brackets the picture because it is at the beginning and at the end of the journey, c) that blindness, not the sight of the picture, where the eye-narrator can take shelter from the picture, is at the centre of his experience.

This conflict results in the writing of a tale which articulates the failure of descriptive art while celebrating imaginative story-telling.

3. The text celebrates and enacts the power of imaginative story-telling by transforming the artistic failure of descriptive art into a fantastic narrative.

3.1. The multi-tiered frame system enables, and symbolises, a multi-layered approach of the descriptive

picture and its relation to the tale which tells its story: the picture is contained in a frame, just as the text is made of a frame story and an embedded narrative, and the text itself is a frame for the picture; the picture is embedded in a frame which is embedded in an *ekphrasis* which is embedded in a tale (but it also appears directly in the frame narrative).

The function of the frame is to make the picture identifiable as a simulacrum as opposed to real life (l. 42), and the text plays the same role: it denounces the failure of descriptive art by analysing its effect on the narrator and by telling the story of its making as a tragedy.

3.2. However, it does so through a fantastic metaphor (a topsy-turvy version of the Pygmalion myth) which celebrates its exact opposite: the power of imaginative story-telling, a metaphor of the relationship between *mimesis* and *diegesis*. The narrator's analysis of the painter's artistic failure is articulated as the fantastic story of a tragic love triangle between an artist, his muse and art, where the artist fulfils his love for his wife through performing his art which kills the woman—or where the artist mistakes his obsession with art for love for his wife.

3.3. The narrative wears its artificiality on its sleeve: the narrator explicitly compares the location of the story to that of a novel (and not the most realistic sort, at that): a Gothic novel, and heaps implausibility upon implausibility, even logical impossibility (“desperately wounded”: can he even be alive to write the text?), creating the unbelievable atmosphere of a world entirely manipulated by a puppet master, in particular the light effects and the catalogue placed on the pillow, which ultimately makes the frame narrative just that: a frame for the embedded story.

The visual nature of the picture and the narrator's point of view as a character are transformed into the literary nature of the text and the reader's point of view: the dramatic announcement of the discovery of the “absolute lifelikeness” of the painting hardly makes any sense from the point of view of the I-narrator as a character of the story who sees the picture: it can only be a discovery for the reader who does not see the picture but reads.

Another effect of the artificiality of the narrative is to stimulate the reader's imagination, making the whole text a co-production between the narrative and the reader's imagination (for instance, nothing supernatural is actually mentioned although it is difficult to think of the story as anything but fantastic) in the creation of a narrative which encompasses both the fascination of seductive illusionistic representation and the realisation of its limitations, and redeems it through imaginative storytelling. Thus, while the woman dies in real life as she becomes alive in her portrait, and the narrator almost dies at the beginning of the story to be resuscitated by the vision of the portrait which contains the woman's life, imagination is killed by the purely descriptive picture and is resuscitated by imaginative storytelling.

Version

Des erreurs qui ne devraient plus être commises :

- paragraphes et alinéas non respectés
- utilisation du passé composé pour traduire du récit dans un texte non contemporain
- erreurs de déterminants (adjectifs possessifs)
- « *for* » conjonction de coordination omis ou mal traduit

Il s'agissait du portrait d'une jeune fille qui entrait à peine dans la maturité d'une femme. Je jetai rapidement un regard sur le tableau, puis fermai les yeux. Tout d'abord, la cause de cette action ne se présenta pas même à ma propre conscience. Toutefois, alors que je gardais ainsi les paupières closes, je réfléchis intérieurement à la raison pour laquelle je les avais fermées de la sorte. Il s'agissait d'un mouvement involontaire visant à gagner du temps pour la réflexion, pour m'assurer que ma vue ne m'avait pas trompé, pour calmer et dominer mon imagination au profit d'une contemplation plus lucide et plus assurée. Au bout de quelques instants, je regardai de nouveau la peinture fixement.

Je ne pouvais, ni ne voulais, douter que je voyais alors clairement, / Je ne voulais, ni ne voulais, plus douter que je voyais clairement, car la première lueur que les bougies avaient jetée sur cette toile avait semblé dissiper la stupeur rêveuse qui s'emparait de mes sens, et me ramener d'un coup à la vie éveillée.

Le portrait, je l'ai déjà dit, était celui d'une jeune fille. Il s'agissait simplement d'une tête posée sur des épaules, réalisées, en termes techniques, à la manière d'un buste dégradé, tout à fait dans le style des portraits les plus renommés de Sully. Les bras, la poitrine, et même les pointes des cheveux rayonnants se fondaient imperceptiblement dans l'ombre vague et néanmoins profonde qui formait l'arrière-plan de la composition.