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Între text și imagine. Portrete din scrierile Reginei Maria

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BETWEEN TEXT AND IMAGE

Portraits in Queen Marie's writings

ÎNTRE TEXT ȘI IMAGINE

Portrete din scrierile Reginei Maria

(Ediție bilingvă)

INSTITUTUL EUROPEAN

2026

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Editor's Note

The present edition brings together a carefully curated selection from the writings of Queen Marie, preserved in the documentary collections of the National Archives of Romania – *Queen Marie's Personal Fund* and the *Royal Household Miscellanea*. The texts, hitherto unpublished, were originally composed in English. Their translation is the work of the editor of this volume, with the sole exception of the portrait of the illustrious composer George Enescu, translated by the writer and diplomat Nicolae Mares.

In both the transcription of the original manuscripts and their subsequent translation, every effort has been made to retain the chromatic subtlety, expressive vitality, and occasional archaism of the Queen's language – elements deliberately employed to lend greater persuasive force or to illuminate a thought, a concept, or a moral exhortation.

We wish to express our profound gratitude to the staff of the Reading Room of the National Archives of Romania for their kind assistance during the consultation of the archival holdings of Queen Marie. Our appreciation also extends to the management of the *European Institute Publishing House* for their generous and enthusiastic support in the publication of this volume.

Introductory study

The Technique of Description
***Portraits* – by Queen Marie**

Introduction

The portrait is a visual representation of a person, created through painting, sculpture, drawing, or photography. Its purpose may vary: documentary, commemorative, psychological, or symbolic (Gombrich, 1950).

Depending on the artist's intention and the period in which it was produced, the portrait may emphasize the subject's social status, emotional expressiveness, or spiritual dimension (Clark, 1956).

The theme of the portrait is addressed both in the visual arts and in literature. In painting and photography – and this applies equally to literature – the artistic approach to portraiture requires us to forget both the author who created it and the model it represents. The figure portrayed lives its own life within the confined and motionless space of a canvas, a photograph, or a book, and yet this life often appears to us far more real, more intense than life itself. This very presence in which the character is situated prevents the portrait from falling into a certain realist flatness.

Portraits play an important, sometimes even central, role in many literary works. It suffices to think of Oscar Wilde or Honoré de Balzac. In these cases, the portraits are fictional, imagined by the authors; however, other literary works refer to real portraits existing outside the world of fiction. This distinction – between imagining a portrait and

beholding one – is essential for understanding the contrast between real and fictional portraits represented in literature.

Thus, the portraits invented in literature can be *visualized* (imagined), but not *seen*; each reader will imagine a different image. This distinction between portraits created by writers and those created by painters is significant for Byatt (2002: 92), and it also explains why novelists are often cautious about film adaptations.

What, in fact, constitutes a real portrait? Primarily, it is a portrait that exists outside the imagined world of stories. How is it transposed into painting, photography, or literature? Certainly, in multiple nuances – and artists continually have the opportunity to demonstrate their skills: the ability to render delicacy, serenity, malice, sadness, as well as other aspects such as exotic attire, and so forth.

In what follows, we propose an exploration of the portrait as represented in *painting*, *photography*, and *literature*, before devoting the entire study to the portrait as it appears in the literary works of Queen Marie.

The Portrait in Painting

At its very beginnings, the portrait belonged to the painter's art. It emerged in antiquity, often intertwined with the dawn of the visual arts themselves. From the splendour of Greece to the solemnity of Rome, and through the lingering echoes of Egyptian civilization, the art of portraiture has been perpetuated, transformed, and renewed across the centuries.

In ancient times, it served chiefly to represent divinities. During the Middle Ages, the elites delighted in seeing themselves portrayed alongside the gods, and for centuries portraiture was devoted primarily to religious purposes. Fidelity to nature was then of lesser concern than the symbolic

dimension of the image – its ability to convey piety, devotion, or sacred meaning.

Already esteemed, portrait painting attained an unprecedented brilliance during the Renaissance. Unlike the medieval period, when the ideal often eclipsed the real, Renaissance artists pursued a heightened realism: the precision of resemblance became a measure of artistic mastery. In Italy especially, portraiture drew inspiration from a tireless quest for truth and evolved in harmony with the development of perspective.

With the advent of the seventeenth century – the age of classical reason – portrait painting lost some of its former prestige, deemed less noble than the grand narratives of history painting. The latter, with its depictions of heroic deeds and solemn ceremonies, was favoured by patrons and academies, while portraiture was confined to a more intimate and personal sphere.

It was not until the nineteenth century that this art rediscovered its vitality, even as it faced a formidable rival: the camera. Once reserved for monarchs and dignitaries, portraiture now embraced humanity in its entirety – men and women of every social condition. Freed from convention, it opened itself to new sensibilities and modern forms of expression.

The twentieth century would confirm what history had already revealed: that portraiture remains one of the essential genres of painting, a mirror through which generations have sought to contemplate the human condition.

Curiously, portrait painting has no single, exclusive technique. Rather, it is a field open to infinite possibilities. Oil or acrylic, canvas or wood, fresco or board – all may serve the artist's intention. Whatever the chosen medium, one criterion remains constant: likeness. The painter strives for the living presence of the model to emerge from pigment and form, for recognition to coincide with revelation.

To capture not only the features but also the essence of a being – to translate temperament, emotion, and inner light into visible form – is perhaps the highest aspiration of the portraitist.

Vision itself is fleeting: in an instant the eye embraces a multitude of shapes, yet truly apprehends but one. Leonardo da Vinci, ever the philosopher of sight, compared the act of looking to that of reading: one cannot grasp an entire page at a glance. The reader perceives letters, but meaning reveals itself only word by word, line by line – just as the artist must reconstruct, gesture by gesture, the ineffable presence of the soul he portrays.

The Portrait in Photography

The portrait has always been one of the most significant forms of artistic expression, aiming to capture not only the outward appearance but also the character and inner essence of an individual. From the stylized representations of Antiquity to the hyperrealist portraits of the contemporary era, this artistic genre has undergone a remarkable evolution.

With the advent of photography, however, humankind began to see itself as never before. Photogenicity – understood in its original sense as “creation through light” – conferred upon the subject a new and mysterious beauty. Rather than threatening human identity, photography renewed it. In every photograph, we may see ourselves otherwise, differently, even unexpectedly; liberated from the tyranny of the ego, we gain a certain distance and freedom (Raquel Fonseca, 2007: 663–672).

Contemplating a portrait becomes an unforgettable experience when it provokes that unique and unsettling exchange of gazes – of looking and being looked at. It is within this mutual gaze that the questions of identity and mask

arise, of being and appearance, of the visible and the invisible. These tensions define the endless interpretive pursuit of the human face.

From its earliest decades, photography explored the same subgenres of portraiture that are still practiced today: the official portrait, the social portrait, the documentary portrait, the “scientific” portrait, the family portrait – especially wedding and children’s portraits – the self-portrait, the group portrait, the historical portrait, and the fictional or staged portrait. Later developments would only renew this central role of portraiture, which remains one of photography’s most enduring social functions.

To illustrate this, we return to the 1860s, when the *carte-de-visite* portrait became a widespread fashion, lasting well into the early twentieth century. Every city soon had photographic studios where people of nearly all social classes could have their portraits taken. Even the most remote regions were soon reached by photography: beginning in the 1950s, itinerant photographers travelled through rural and distant areas, and with the expansion of colonial routes and transportation networks, portrait photography rapidly spread to every corner of the world.

Gradually, however, portraiture was assigned a new function – as an instrument of social control – first through Bertillon’s descriptive anthropometry, and later through the standardized identity photograph.

When the vogue of the *carte-de-visite* began to decline at the start of the twentieth century, this did not indicate a loss of interest in portraiture as a genre. Rather, due to technological and economic changes, amateur photography – especially within the family – progressively replaced the role of the professional portraitist, except in specific contexts: public portraits (for the press or public relations), ceremonial portraits (baptisms, weddings, commemorations), and official identification photographs, where the

camera – or the photobooth – ultimately replaced the human portraitist.

This shift toward the realm of intimacy was accompanied by a transformation in the portrait’s symbolic function. Its traditional role – to mark the significant moments of social time (baptism, military service, marriage) – was gradually replaced by a more irregular temporal rhythm. Today, amateur portraiture often takes the form of a visual diary, devoid of the artistic pretensions that once defined the genre.

Perhaps because it inherited the place once occupied by painting, photography has also inherited its limitations. The portrait photograph, in striving for objective likeness, has too often lost what painting once revealed: the transfigurative power to reach beyond mere appearance, to disclose that essential interiority which lies beyond the visible surface of the body.

The Portrait in Literature

Literature may be described as the art of the “human sciences”: it is created by one person (the author), addressed to another (the reader), and speaks about a third (the literary character). This means that a person’s individuality – his or her path through life, emotions and aspirations, values and ideals, in short, the measure of a human being – can be found in every literary work. Yet readers are, above all, interested in characters – those singular beings whose traits and destinies they can recognize or identify with.

The literary portrait is one of the most important narrative techniques used by authors to construct and define characters, offering the reader clues about their identity, traits, and function within the work. Far from being a mere exercise in description, the portrait performs a complex role, combining psychological, social, and symbolic dimensions.

Through portraiture, literature assumes its dual vocation: to reflect reality, but also to interpret and reshape it.

Within the immense gallery of portraits that literature has produced, some return insistently – like tutelary shadows – condensing within themselves the traces of vast inner journeys of heart and mind.

Portraiture became fashionable in literature during the seventeenth century, under the influence of the so-called *précieuse* society, acquiring a more complex and structured form in the novels of the nineteenth century. It came to define characters through three fundamental, yet interrelated criteria: physical – facial features, gestures, and bodily posture; psychological or moral – the character’s emotions, temperament, and inner thoughts; social – class, clothing, setting, speech, occupation, associations, and ideology.

Literary portraiture can be analyzed from two complementary angles: direct and indirect.

Direct prosopography presents the character through physical appearance, both to create a visual image and to distinguish him or her from others. It is, in essence, a *portrait painted in words*, through which the writer evokes not only external traits but also moral and psychological nuances. The description of the body is generally accompanied by interpretation – an art of physiognomy that reveals character through form. As in a successful painting, the physical traits in a literary portrait must also illuminate the defining qualities of personality.

Since the face is the part of the body that reveals the self most profoundly, it is often described in meticulous detail. By isolating a personality and situating it within a temporal frame, the author produces a vivid impression that guides the reader toward seeing the character precisely as intended.

In contrast to direct portraiture, which involves the author’s intervention, **indirect** portraiture allows the reader