

Coming 'Face to Face with the People who Shaped Scotland': Portrait Galleries, Creative Writing and the Pedagogical Dynamism of the Portrait Image

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Abstract

Museum education literature has paid surprisingly little attention to the distinctiveness of portrait galleries or portraits as a genre, despite the fact that they provide 'powerful spaces for pedagogy' (Hooper-Greenhill 2020: 24). Taking an ethnographic approach, this article offers a detailed analysis of such pedagogies at work in one creative writing class based at the Scottish National Portrait Gallery. It describes two pedagogical regimes – the institution's and the guide's – and explores how they compete to frame the portraits in different ways. Focusing on two specific portraits, and the creative writing produced in response to them, it argues that while the portrait gallery's implied pedagogy insists on the *subject in the portrait*, the class tutor focuses on the *portrait as object*. Employing Hans Belting's theory of images (2011), the article concludes that there is a distinctive pedagogical dynamism inherent in the portrait genre, which can be mined for different educational purposes.

Keywords: portrait gallery, pedagogy, Belting, ethnography, creative writing.

Introduction

This paper, which focuses on a creative writing class based at the Scottish National Portrait Gallery in Edinburgh, takes its cue from the material turn in museum studies (Edwards 2004; Dudley 2010, 2012; Riggs 2014) in exploring the relationship between portraiture and pedagogy. Sandra Dudley (2010; 2012) has already noted the dominance of constructivist learning theory in both museum pedagogical practices and in the majority of literature on 'museum learning'. In these studies there is an emphasis on the way in which visitors interpret or 'make-meaning' out of their encounters with collections (see, for example Hooper-Greenhill 1994; Hein 1998; Falk and Dierking 2000). Similarly, she argues, museums depend on the 'object-information composite' in order to engage and educate their visitors. Such approaches inhibit, or ignore, the embodied and sensual engagements visitors might have with the objects themselves (Dudley 2010: 9). Drawing on the work of social anthropologists such as Gell (1998) and Strathern (1999), Dudley (2010; 2012) argues for the importance of paying attention to the *materiality* of objects and the phenomenological circumstances of how, where and when visitors encounter them. Of 'object-subject engagements', she writes:

what matters [...] is the way in which things instigate or trigger a particular set of perceptions and response in the human subject – a repeated set of events perpetually open to change, including once something has become a museum object. At the same time, it is not the person's subjective experience and response alone that matters, either. The specific, objective attributes of a particular object also play a part. As a result, neither the object nor subject has the last or only word; rather, it is in their mutual intersection that sensory responses and subsequent ideas are generated (Dudley 2010: 12).

For Dudley, this can occur even if visitors cannot literally touch objects because they can use their imagination to add sensory experiences to them.

In this article, I am interested in exploring the blurring of this 'object-subject' nexus in the case of one kind of object in a particular kind of museum – the painted portrait encountered in a national portrait gallery. The fact that objects and artworks can wield agency, or that they have effects and affects on subjects, is an established (if contested) argument within both the anthropology of art and art history (Mitchell 1996; Gell 1998; Pinney and Thomas 2001; Elkins 2001; Osborne and Tanner 2008; Belting 2011). However, what Mitchell (1996: 72) has called 'the subjectivity of the object, the personhood of things' has an additional – literal – twist when it comes to portraits and their properties. For when we encounter a portrait, we also encounter a person. When encountered in a portrait gallery, that person is usually well-known, someone with whom the viewer may already have a relationship. Finally, in a portrait gallery, that person/portrait is situated within a set of pre-determined relationships to other persons/portraits. The 'object-subject' engagement highlighted by Dudley is complex and nuanced in interesting ways when it comes to portraits.

Hooper-Greenhill (2020: 24) has pointed out that portrait galleries offer 'powerful spaces for pedagogy' and yet museum education literature has paid surprisingly little attention to the distinctiveness of portrait galleries, or of portraits as specific *genres* of artwork. What does it mean to understand and appreciate a person *through* a portrait? What potentials for pedagogy are inherent in this encounter? This article offers a fine-grained ethnographic analysis of such pedagogies at work in one class based at the Scottish National Portrait Gallery in Edinburgh. It describes two pedagogical regimes – the institution's and the guide's – and explores how they compete to frame the portraits in different ways. It argues that, while the portrait gallery's pedagogy insists on the *subject in the portrait*, the class tutor focuses instead on the *portrait as object*; at the same time, the portrait as *both* subject (person depicted) and material object (framed painting on display) exercises its own agency on the class participants who, in turn, create *new portraits* through their creative writing. A description of these processes reveals, I argue, a distinctive pedagogical dynamism inherent in the portrait genre.

The ethnographic material comes from a creative writing class founded on the assumption that objects in the gallery's collections will 'inspire' short pieces of fiction. The imaginative engagement of the participants with the portraits, in other words, *materialize* later on as poems and short stories and I draw on these, as well as field notes and interviews, to help illuminate the nature of their pedagogically mediated encounters with the portraits. My analysis is theoretically informed by Hans Belting's theory of the image, which intersects with notions of the imagination and the imaginary in ways that are fruitful for the case explored here (Belting 2011). In order to introduce the material and themes, I begin with a short ethnographic vignette before going on to outline my methodology and research context in further detail.

Muriel Spark in the Café – Vignette 1

It was early December and a sharp wind blew through Queen Street, a broad avenue in Edinburgh's eighteenth-century new town where the impressive red, neo-Gothic building of the Scottish National Portrait Gallery stands. Inside, the Christmas tree was already up, extending high into the vestibule, aglow with little white lights. It was hard not to look up as you went in and marvel at the space itself: the tiered arched balconies, stained glass windows, the gold and multi-coloured frescoes of Scottish heroes painted around the walls and four flickering orange lanterns suspended from the ceiling on wrought iron chains. Hushed voices and the echo of distant footfalls on the stone floors contributed to the ecclesiastical atmosphere of the entrance. I was struck by the sharpness of the contrast when I entered the education room. Here, clean modernist lines, glass doors and white furniture greeted me. I found the group I was meeting huddled round the large table with Maggie, the local writer who had guided our tour of portraits a fortnight ago and was waiting to hear the creative writing we had produced. Although we had seen a number of portraits, only two had been written about: *Mary, Queen of Scots, 1542 - 1587* by Unknown Artist, which was the first portrait we had looked at, and *Dame Muriel Spark, 1918-2006, Writer* by Alexander Moffat, which Maggie had taken us to

see at the end of our tour and which hung in the gallery's café.

Graeme had written a short story about the latter but with some difficulty. He told us: 'I was feeling desperate so I dragged my wife to the Portrait Gallery and we sat in the café staring up at the portrait of Muriel Spark'.¹ The story he wrote, called *Out of Position*, was split into two parts, each taking a different narrative perspective. It begins by assuming the subject position of Muriel-in-the-portrait looking out at the visitors in the café. In the story Muriel is complaining about why she has been moved from one wall to another where she no longer has a view out of the window. She observes and haughtily comments on a number of other persons sitting at various tables. The second part takes a third person perspective on a Mr Hamish Munro, a fifty-something, slightly balding bachelor and regular frequenter of the café who has developed an infatuation with 'his Muriel'. She, it turns out, is not averse to his attentions and has begun to experience 'stirrings' when he comes in. Hamish, we realize at the end of the story, has embezzled a small sum of money from his company in order to buy Muriel an opal ring from the gallery gift shop. We all enjoyed listening to Graeme's gently irreverent and humorous story and Maggie gave him some feedback on how to pare down the language and make it more like 'Spark's own writing'. Two other class participants had written spoof Christmas carols which also gently poked fun at Spark, the portrait and her reputation as a 'difficult woman'.



Figure 1: Dame Muriel Spark, 1918-2006, Writer by Alexander Moffat, National Galleries Scotland. Commissioned 1984.

In Graeme's story little attention was paid to the material properties of the portrait itself – a striking panel of blues, blacks and reds. However, he clearly found the phenomenological circumstances of its display difficult to ignore: the sense of Spark staring down sternly at the café patrons is captured in his story, as are the potential intersubjective relations and familiarity engendered by placing *portraits of* Edinburgh celebrities like Spark in the vicinity of *actual* local visitors.² Spark is best known for her novel *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, published in 1961 and set in an Edinburgh girls' school, but her personal reputation is also prominent in the public imagination, particularly for a well-publicized feud with her only son whom she left at the age of five, and disinherited prior to her death.³ Maggie, the guide, had told me:

I think that portrait is really interesting and quite clever actually, because she sort of floats a bit in space in it and she sort of fixes you with her stare. You just think, 'Oh god, please don't ask me anything'... and it kind of annoys me that it's in the café [...]. It's good in one way because she sort of stares down at you [...] but another part of it really annoys me. It's to do with women and being represented in the gallery.⁴

For Maggie, the power of the portrait image is related to its capacity to invoke a sense of intersubjectivity: 'she sort of fixes you with her stare'. At the same time, she objects to how Spark is 'represented' by the gallery: a woman situated in the social and more domestic space of the café. In the rest of this article I draw out the differences between the gallery's implicit pedagogy – enacted through remnants of its original educational purpose, as well as its display and labelling practices⁵ – and Maggie's explicit and deliberate attempts to counter it for the purpose of inspiring creative fiction. First, I provide a more detailed description of the research context and methodology.

Methodology and Research Context

The research presented here took place as part of a seven-year ethnography of a creative writing class based at the National Galleries of Scotland in Edinburgh. My approach is situated within an anthropological tradition of fieldwork which involves an 'in-depth, and long-term study of a social or cultural group' (Green and Bloome 1997: 184). In a recent comprehensive summary of museum ethnographies, Macdonald, Gerbich and von Oswald (2018) have pointed to the scarcity of ethnographic explorations of, and in, museums, noting how the majority take the institution itself as the subject. Rather than 'going behind the scenes' to reveal institutional practices, my ethnographic focus has been on a small group of the public who engage with the artworks towards a particular end. This has provided me with unique insights by enabling long-term research with a stable group of regular gallery visitors. Indeed, the membership of the class, which numbered between fourteen to sixteen people at any given time, fluctuated very little. I joined the group and attended tours, writing sessions and other activities that the group members took part in as an extension to the class itself. It is the *creative writing class*, in other words, that constitutes my ethnographic 'field', rather than the gallery or the institution. My methods of data collection included participant observation and the taking of fieldnotes, as well as semi-structured interviews with class participants, guides, writers and other museum professionals involved with the class. I also collected a number of ethnographic artefacts including postcards of artworks, the creative writing produced, scans of participant and educator notes and/or sketches. The group, and the gallery, were aware from the start that I was a researcher interested in the pedagogical relationships embedded in their engagement with artworks and the production and discussion of the creative writing that emerged. I employ pseudonyms throughout, but I have not anonymized the context of the research which would be easily identifiable through the artworks in its collection.

The group, which I call 'Painting Words', worked across several sites and buildings in the city that form part of the Galleries complex. The pedagogical assumption of the class was that artworks in the collection would inspire the participants to produce pieces of creative writing and the structure of the classes reflected this assumption (see Sabeti 2015 for more

on this). Participants would gather one Monday morning for a tour of artworks and then meet again exactly two weeks later to read out and discuss the pieces of writing produced in the intervening period. These sessions were always mediated: the tour would be led by a gallery guide (usually an art historian or artist employed on a freelance basis); the writing session was facilitated by a freelance writer and creative writing teacher. Class members ranged in age from their late fifties to their early eighties and the vast majority came from professional middle class, university-educated backgrounds such as teaching, journalism, insurance work or university administration. Many of them, by the time they undertook the class, had already retired. All of them were white and Scottish and lived either in, or around, the city of Edinburgh; only three of the members were men. I have discussed a number of their encounters using Alfred Gell's (1998) theory of art and agency (see Sabeti 2018), but never dwelt on the portrait as a specific type of encounter. In this article I focus on a particular session which took place in the, then, newly restored and refurbished Scottish National Portrait Gallery in 2013 and in the run up to the Scottish Independence Referendum of 2014. Whilst I draw on fieldnotes I made at the time for some of the ethnographic vignettes, my analysis is also informed by a more recent (2020) interview with the guide who led the sessions discussed. In this case our guide, Maggie, was herself a writer who also went on to lead the ensuing writing session. She shared with me her reflections on the sessions, as well as the preparatory notes she had made for the tour at the time. As was my normal practice, I shared a draft of this paper with all of the participants discussed in it, including Maggie, to ensure all gave full consent, prior to submitting it for review by this publication.

Portraits, Portrait Galleries and Pedagogy

As a 'central invention of European pictorial culture' (Belting 2011: 62), the history of portraiture is widely recognized as a barometer of changing perceptions of what constitutes a 'subject' or person (Woodall 1997; Sousloff 2006; Belting 2011). The modern portrait, in line with dualist understandings of the self, makes a claim to index resemblance, character and identity (Brilliant 1991; Sousloff 2006). It is, writes Belting, 'more than a flat plane', and 'through its activity of the gaze it displays a dualism of interior and exterior', suggesting a way into that person's inner world (Belting 2011: 70). The inherent sociality of the portrait genre is summed up neatly by Strathern: social relations are not just implied within the portrait itself (who the sitter is and why they were important enough to be painted) but in the relations existing around the portrait-as-object. In a portrait, she writes, there is 'a focus on the interactions between portraitist, sitter and viewer – whose recognition of the portrait also constitutes it – [this] creates an intersubjective milieu' (Strathern 2018: 201). The viewer, in other words, is *drawn into the portrait* in a number of ways and the portrait genre is contingent on this 'recognition'; as Belting (2011: 63) puts it, portraits 'demand a response'. Graeme's story acknowledges this power in explicit and comic ways; it also acknowledges the way that hanging Spark's portrait in the café extends the 'intersubjective milieu' of the portrait outwards. This intersubjectivity is a foundational premise of portrait galleries and how they engage, and aim to educate, their visitors more broadly.

The National Portrait Gallery (NPG) in London, founded in 1856 and built on the site of a former workhouse, was the first of its kind and the product of a specifically British nineteenth century.⁶ Hooper-Greenhill (2020) has documented how this early collection was informed by values such as Empire, masculinity, nationalism and a growing sense of middle-class individualism. Its educational role was clear from the start; as the Prime Minister, Palmerston, stated at the time:

There cannot, I feel convinced, be a greater incentive to mental exertion, to noble actions, to good conduct on the part of the living than for them to see before them the features of those who have done things which are worthy of our admiration and whose example we are more induced to imitate when they are brought before us in the visible and tangible shape of portraits (Hansard, 6 June 1856: 1120, cited in Hooper Greenhill 2020: 31).

Encounters with portraits, in other words, were believed to have a powerful potential to influence human thought and behaviour. Not only were portrait galleries instructing us who

to admire and emulate but they were also conceived and designed on a belief about how (pedagogically) this admiration could be achieved. Whilst the collections of modern-day portrait galleries reflect a more diverse and inclusive set of values, in other respects they have changed surprisingly little. The NPG's primary purpose is to 'promote, through the medium of portraits, the appreciation and understanding of the people who have made, and are making, British history and culture'.⁷ Their current refurbishment plan, 'Inspiring People', deliberately plays with a subject/object ambiguity in its title – is it the people in the portraits who are inspiring, or is it those that come to see them who are inspired? Similarly, the Scottish National Portrait Gallery (SNPG) – the context of this study – harks back to the importance of the direct person-to-person encounter, inviting visitors to 'Come face to face with the people who shaped Scotland' in a building that was deliberately designed as both gallery and 'shrine' by its architect, Sir Robert Rowand Anderson.⁸ Indeed, the architecture, design and embellishments of the SNPG, the first purpose-designed portrait gallery in the world, constitute what Ellsworth, in her analysis of learning and place, has called a 'pedagogically charged' environment (Ellsworth 2005: 8). Founded in 1889, the impressive red sandstone building externally displays 28 statues of Scottish notables in niches. Inside, the processional frieze described in the vignette consists of a 'long line of Scottish heroes [...who] tread a grassy field before a shining golden sky' ensuring that visitors look symbolically upwards as they enter (Thomson 2011: 53). Depicted in reverse chronological order, the procession ends with Thomas Carlyle, whose controversial *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* (1841) is associated with the conception and inception of the portrait gallery.⁹

Paul Barlow has argued that, in the Victorian period, portraiture began to be seen as a quasi-religious act, a devotion to the sitter and a miraculous capturing of that person on the canvas (Barlow 1997: 219). For this reason a value was placed on 'authenticity'. Carlyle remarked that it did not matter if the portrait was a great work of art or not, what mattered was that it was:

a representation made by a faithful human creature, of that face and figure, which he saw with his eyes, and which I can never see with mine (Hansard, 4 March 1856: 1779, cited in Barlow 1997: 221).

The fact that the face-to-face encounter between viewer and portrait replaces the face-to-face encounter between artist and sitter suggests an equivalent experience. The viewer can imaginatively 'travel back in time to the moment when the sitter lived', hence erasing in some way the fact of the portrait as a medium, as well as the temporal distance between viewer and sitter (Barlow 1997: 221). In Carlyle's thinking, writes Barlow: 'Encounters with portraits engender the experience of faith' (Barlow 1997: 227). Not only are these portraits compiled and displayed as agents of a national imaginary, then, but we are also being asked to encounter them as persons. The portrait gallery is therefore a distinctive pedagogic space which runs counter to that of conventional art galleries, where value is placed on the artworks and/or artists, rather than the subjects depicted. I now turn back to my ethnographic material and to Belting's theory of the image to explore the complex interplay of this pedagogy with the counter-pedagogy of the class tutor.

Resisting the power of the portrait image – an alternative pedagogy

Contrary to our normal practice, our tour of portraits had started with a discussion over a cup of tea. Maggie had asked the group what, in their opinion, constituted a portrait, and she had read out a number of quotations from writers and filmmakers as provocations. Speaking to me in interview about her decision to do so, she explained:

What I was trying to do was give a wider context to whatever they were going to look at [...] to allow [them] to look at the, sort of, potential depths that you might want to bring to a subject matter [...] to lay the ground a bit [...] before they even saw – because once you see the picture, you're kind of stuck on the picture.¹⁰

To Maggie, it was important that the group's encounter with the portraits (and the portrait

gallery) was mediated through a conceptual framing that enabled some kind of distance on what they were about to see. By 'context' she meant to counter some of the assumptions they might bring to bear on their viewing – the 'image' they already had of the persons depicted and the particular way in which the SNPG presented the portraits to viewers. She had, for example, deliberately chosen several portraits of women for her tour, to counter her belief that the gallery still promoted the outdated 'great men theory' of Thomas Carlyle. As a writer, she told me that her interest was in:

[w]hy the people are here. Why there is a picture of them...so who they were and what it means that somehow their picture, out of all the pictures of all the people that have survived, is there [in the SNPG].¹¹

In insisting on these portraits as objects, she attempted to shift the group's attention away from the 'person' and onto their histories as objects in, and through, time. While the person depicted remains a significant part of this history, Maggie was also wary of the power of the portrait image which, as Richard Brilliant (1991: 24) notes, can 'stimulate[s] cognition with such force that the psychodynamics of perception interfere with the comprehension of the image as something different from the image of the actual person'. In the case of the first portrait she took us to see, it was not just the image in the picture, but Mary, Queen of Scots, in the public imagination, that also had to be contended with.¹² She told me:

If you're going to show and talk about a portrait, like the one of Mary, Queen of Scots... you almost don't have to show a picture. [...] you almost just have to say the words, "Mary, Queen of Scots" and everyone will have an opinion, say what they think, have a sense of the history, the facts. Or the supposed facts etc. etc. [...] For such a famous historical figure you have to sort of bring something else to it as well [...] otherwise people instinctively go with what they know already. They don't necessarily want to know anything that punctures that.¹³

In fact, she had deliberately picked this portrait because it was complex and layered: it was not, for example, painted from life; instead, it was commissioned posthumously by Mary's son James to restore her reputation. Neither was it her favourite portrait of Mary; the 'real' portrait of Mary, she told me, was one of her in her mourning veil further along in the same gallery. However, in a class designed to produce writing, the portrait she chose to show us was the one which she believed could tell the better story. In order to facilitate this, Maggie perceived herself to be working counter to the gallery's pedagogy, counter to the force of the image itself, and counter to preconceived ideas about Mary, Queen of Scots. Hans Belting's theory of the 'image', which I now go on briefly to set out, helps us understand these different forces more clearly.

Hans Belting's *Anthropology of Images*

Making a distinction between an 'image' and a 'work of art', Belting (2011: 2) writes that an image 'often straddles the boundary between physical and mental existence. It may live in the work of art, but the image does not necessarily coincide with the work of art'. Indeed, images depend on vital relationships with two other phenomena he identifies: the *medium* and the *body*. Images need a medium in order to become visible to us; this medium can be either manufactured (such as a canvas) or it could be a living medium, such as the human body (think of masks and tattoos but also of memories and dreams). In either case the medium acts as a 'support, host, and tool' for the image; hence, for Belting, there is no distinction between internal and external images; they are constantly moving in and out of media (Belting 2011: 5). The *body* (which, for Belting, encompasses the mind) is important because, while it can act as a medium, it is also the place where images originate and are received. Images need bodies in order to be created, perceived and animated. The 'picture' (which might also be categorized as a 'work of art') is 'the image with a medium' rendered visible in order to be perceived by a 'body'. Belting goes on to argue that we also think of media as '*different kinds of bodies*'; the canvas, photograph, or cinema screen support the image and replace

an absent body. Because we understand our own living bodies as places which generate and host images, we understand this function of the medium better: '*the medium helps us to see that the image neither equates with living bodies nor with the lifeless object*' (Belting 2011: 11, italics in original). So, for example, a photograph of a loved one is neither the loved one themselves, nor is it just a piece of film or card. Of significance for my argument here is that our ability to recognize this can move along a spectrum. 'Inherent in every medium', writes Belting, 'is its capacity either to catch our attention for its own sake, or just the opposite, to conceal its presence within the picture'. He continues:

The more attention we pay to the medium and its navigating force, the less we concentrate on the image it carries. Conversely, the less we take note of the medium's presence, the more we are captured by the image, until it seems to us that the latter exists by itself. There is then an ambiguity in the relationship between image and medium, arising from the fact that the relationship is ever-changing (Belting 2011:16).

The pedagogical premise of portrait galleries, as we have seen, exploits this ambiguity to ensure a focus on the image (the person). But it is also worth noting that Belting attributes the foundation of his theory to his study of the relationship between the image and death, in particular, funeral images, where it is the *missing body of the dead* in whose place images are installed. This is why images are always '*the presence of an absence*' (Belting 2011: 6); they testify to the absence of that which they make present through inhabiting a medium such as a statue, painting, photograph or computer monitor. Portraits, for example, simultaneously manifest the absence and presence of a person – the sitter. He explains:

Presence and absence are inextricably intertwined in the riddle of the image. The image is present in its medium (otherwise we would not see it), and yet it refers to the absence of that entity of which it is a representation. The "here and now" of images coincides with the medium in which they appear to us (Belting 2011: 19-20).

The close relationship between Belting's notion of the image, the imagination and the concept of the collective 'imaginary' is also pertinent. The 'imaginary', writes Belting (2011: 51), is 'a culture's common stock of images from which images of fiction can be recalled and with which they can then be staged by the imagination of an individual'. In other words, some images are 'public' and these, he argues 'have always controlled personal imagination; and the personal imagination, in turn, either cooperates with them or resists them' (Belting 2011: 15). Whilst Belting acknowledges that these 'public images' will be different depending on temporal and cultural context, we have also seen how they can be mediated through different pedagogical approaches: the gallery 'accepts', even forms and promotes (through commissioning portraits), public images of notable persons, while Maggie resists them. What *did* happen when the group saw this particular portrait of Mary following Maggie's introduction forms the subject of the next vignette.

The Encounter with the Portrait: the 'here and now' of the image – Vignette 2

We climbed two sets of stone steps and entered the Reformation Gallery where we were immediately met by the portrait Maggie had brought us to see. Hung on its own, but in proximity to other portraits related to it historically and genealogically, the picture was a slightly larger than life, full-length portrait of Mary, Queen of Scots, in classic black Elizabethan dress, white lace ruffs at her wrists and neck, and white cap. Even standing back from the portrait itself we had to look up at her. A modest gold crucifix hung from the centre of her dress and a rosary was suspended from another, more elaborate, gold cross from her waist. She was leaning one pale, long-fingered hand on a crimson tablecloth; the other hovered somewhere near her rosary. She stood on a green and red patterned rug, though her feet were not visible below the shadow of her dress; behind her we could see part of a plush olive-green curtain. There was a gold Latin inscription in the top left-hand corner of the portrait.



Figure 2: *Mary, Queen of Scots, 1542-1587* by Unknown Artist, c.1610-15. National Galleries Scotland.

Maggie immediately pointed to the gold plaque at the bottom of the frame which told us that this was the 'Cobham Portrait' and that it was a 'contemporary version of that known as "The Sheffield Portrait" by Pierre Oudry, 1578'. She said, 'There are already several layers here'.

Dorothy: But it's flat. It has no personality for me.

Kirsty: The fabrics in it are absolutely fabulous.

Maggie: It was James I/VI's attempt to rehabilitate his mother and painted between 1610-15.

Joanna: It surprises me that she is represented so much as the Catholic martyr.

Maggie: Yes it does. That tells us a lot about James.

There was a pause while we looked at the painting.

Maggie: Mary, Queen of Scots was famously very tall and beautiful. Do you think she is beautiful here?

Another pause. Without waiting for an answer:

Maggie: What do people think of, and know of, Mary Queen of Scots?

Martha: She really irritates me. She had terrible taste in men.

Graeme (glancing over at Martha): Well, she was in an impossible situation.

Dorothy: I think she wanted the English throne too.

There was a longer pause as we again looked up at the picture.

Ann: So how could an artist possibly put all of that into one portrait?

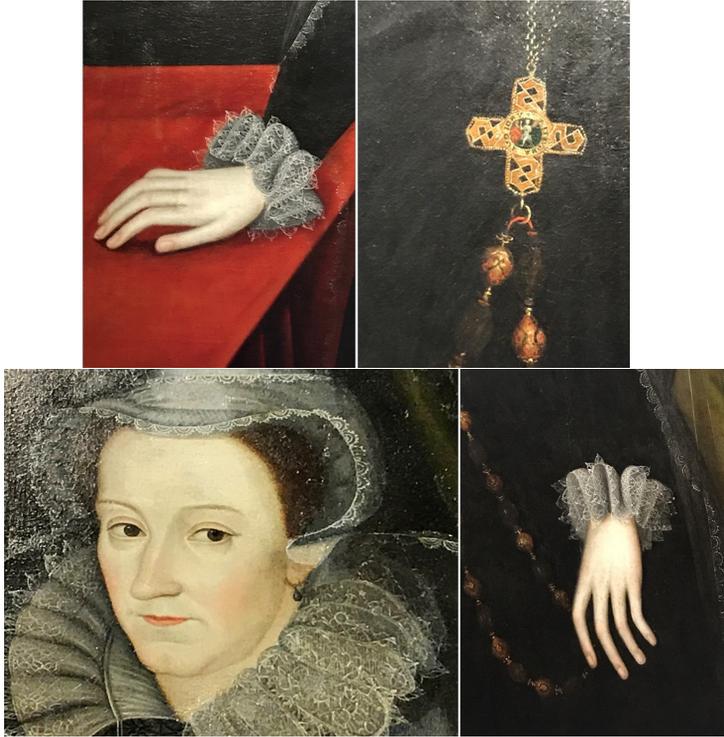
Maggie: Ah! The fact of the portrait does that! It was painted after she died, then we are sitting here – hundreds of years later – discussing it.

A short pause and then:

Graeme: There is a sinister, slightly Voldemort, quality about her.

We all laughed at this.¹⁴

Maggie pointed to the second, elaborate crucifix and told us that it contained an image from the story of 'Susannah and the Elders' from The Book of Daniel. She related the story of Susannah's victimization and vindication to us and explained how the Latin inscription around it translated to 'Beset on all sides'. We went on to discuss Mary's eyes, which are looking to her left; Maggie described them as 'shifty', Ann chose the word 'wary'. When someone noted the red tablecloth, Maggie told us that Mary was supposed to have worn a red petticoat on her execution day, adding to the controversy around her public image – 'Was she a jezebel, or a wronged woman? It depends on who is viewing it'. Finally, she read out Louise Welsh's short piece of prose about the portrait, which had been written for a BBC radio programme to celebrate the reopening of the gallery. In it, Welsh remembers having a postcard of the portrait pinned on her wall as a child, imagining Mary about to be taken to execution and the shock of realizing that it was in fact painted after she died. The size of the real portrait when she finally saw it surprised her: 'Mary is taller than me', Welsh writes, 'she was a tall woman, before they chopped her head off'. The line that struck us all, however, and which we dwelt on, was 'This is a woman with not a lot of trust left in her'.¹⁵



Figures 3-6: Details from the portrait of Mary, Queen of Scots

We can see how the image of Mary 'straddles the boundary between physical and mental existence' (Belting 2011: 2). The portrait, though not 'authentic' in the Victorian sense as outlined by Barlow, because it is a copy (of a copy, in fact), coincides with our iconic image of Mary in terms of her dress and appearance. Nearly all primary school children in Scotland study her dramatic life story, know that she was a Catholic and that she 'got her head chopped off'. The details (and colours) in this portrait confirm these facts. Despite this, one member of the group, Dorothy, is disappointed by the portrait because it is 'flat' and lacks 'personality'; the physical image in the portrait did not measure up to the image in her imagination perhaps? Others, for example, Kirsty, immediately react to the materiality of objects depicted – the fabrics are 'absolutely fabulous'. On first impression, then, it makes quite different impressions on group members. Joanna's comment is more studied and analytical: she notes the representation of Mary as Catholic martyr and Maggie is keen to reinforce this kind of approach. The quick-fire exchange of statements about Mary in response to Maggie's question, 'What do people think of, and know of, Mary Queen of Scots?' shows them sharing their personal opinions in an almost gossipy fashion; while 'she' and her actions are spoken of in the past tense, the effects on them personally are very present. For Maggie, the 'fact' of the portrait's existence, its survival through time, and its inclusion in the gallery in which they now stand, constitute a story in itself. Again, she is trying to force distance and awareness in Bourdieu's (1980) classic sense of 'distanciation', and yet the pull of the person, and perhaps the material properties of the portrait, are strong. In other words, whatever we know or are told about this portrait, it is difficult not to acknowledge it as the presence (and absence) of another body/person both living and dead. Not only does the portrait capture the living body of its subject in ways that circumvent death but, writes Belting:

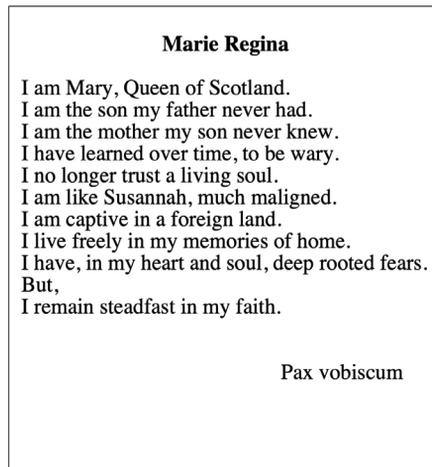
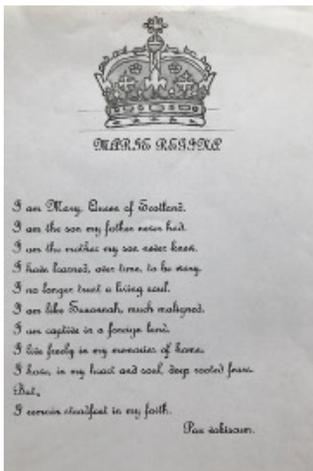
The argument goes further. It is nourished by the analogy between the *body*

and the *medium of the body*. This analogy exists only because a portrait depicts someone who once lived in a body, in the way he is now perceived in the image. That is one reason why the “living expression” one expects to see in the dead painting is so important. The body as a living medium is replaced by an artful and artificial body (the portrait panel) in which a subject is remembered who is worthy of remembrance (if only for emotional reasons) (Belting 2011: 78-9, italics in original).

This life-sized portrait, hung alone and labelled with Mary's dates of birth and death – a common practice in the SNPG – reinscribes our reading of *the panel as the body*. In addition, the ‘living expression’ – the wariness perceived in the slant of her eyes – solicits empathy and identification with the subject. Indeed, subject *positioning* is one important feature of the writing produced as a result of the encounter and I look at these in detail through the vignette that follows.

After the Encounter: drafting a new portrait – Vignette 3

Victoria arrived at the session with her usual energy and enthusiastically introduced us to her poem ‘Marie Regina’. Unusually for her (and within the group), she had taken great care over the material presentation of the poem itself. She had chosen ‘French script’ as the typeface and she had also attempted to put a wax seal at the bottom of the piece of writing. She gave the ‘only one that worked’ to Maggie and distributed other versions to the rest of us. There were discussions about the use of certain words, what could be left in and what should perhaps be edited in the text. Victoria then told us that she had deliberately chosen the phrase, ‘Mary Queen of Scotland’, rather than ‘Scots’, as she believed the latter to be an expression appended to her after her death.¹⁶



Figures 7 and 8: Victoria's poem.

Victoria's piece of writing imitates a historical document: the crown, typescript and seal all claiming to be official proof of its provenance. The statements of which it is composed make it seem flat (like the portrait), but also work to establish Mary as a person through her relations to others. There are also references to hidden depths – what is in Mary's mind or heart – suggesting that she is restricted in her ability to express herself fully. In these statements there are clear references to the portrait itself *and* the discussion we had had about it – in particular, the way her eyes revealed that she was ‘wary’ or unable to ‘trust’ anyone. The moment of the portrait's supposed painting, ‘1578’ (even though we knew this to be fictitious), is assumed

as fact. Victoria as writer takes the subject position, aligning the poem as utterance with the portrait (as she experienced it) and with 'Mary, Queen of Scotland'. Her decision to choose this phrase over 'Mary, Queen of Scots', as well as the consistent use of the present tense, extends the identification with the subject to encompass a temporal one. In other words, Victoria imaginatively shifts both subject position and historical time; she revives the person of Mary. Whilst the portrait may not have been 'authentic' in the sense intended by Carlyle, Victoria chooses to read it as such and to reproduce it, or transpose it, into the faux historical document that is the poem. Rather than switch positions with the artist, she switches positions with the sitter. Both the portrait and the poem are statements of a fictitious 'present' moment; both ask the viewer/reader to take them as replacements for the body and person of Mary. In other words, image and imagination appear to overlap in significant ways.

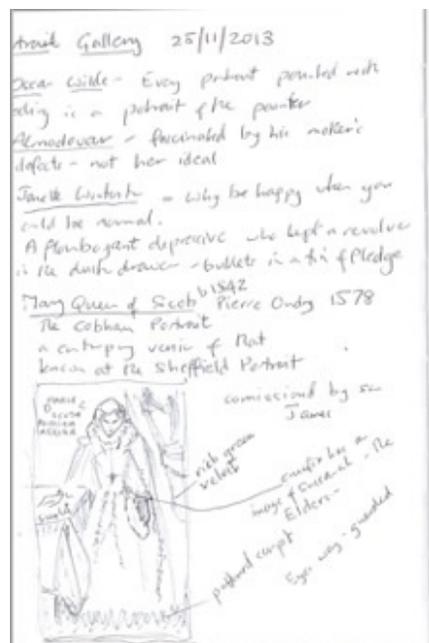
Kirsty's poem about the portrait was written after our writing feedback session. In fact, she sent it to me in 2020 along with photographs of her notebook when, during an email conversation, I told her I had been thinking about the session at the portrait gallery.

Virtual Queen

You float, poor lass,
With sumptuous carpet
Where your feet should be,
One perfect hand braced
On the scarlet table, one
Clenched on your rosary.
Cypher of royalty
Held motionless
Too rare to touch
So far above the rest of us.

Let's hope you turned
Your head to hear
The susurration of a cloak
Sweeping the empty corridor
A careless laugh, a thread of song
The far-off echo of a lute,
And let those guarded eyes unlock
To crowding memories of sun –
Now stranded in the hostile dark
And infinitely far from home.

*Inspired by the Cobham Portrait of Mary,
Queen of Scots.*



Figures 9 and 10: Kirsty's poem, Kirsty's notebook

Kirsty's attention to the details of the portrait itself are worth noting. The fact that Mary appears to 'float' above the carpet; details of her hands – what they look like and what they are doing – find their way into the poem. She is also, as she was when we saw the portrait itself, attentive to the sensory details: the 'sumptuous' carpet, for example. Indeed, she imagines (and desires) further sensory experiences for the 'poor lass' trapped both in captivity and in the portrait. While both poems reveal *awareness* of how Mary is a sign or symbol mobilized for different purposes (what Maggie was trying to draw our attention to), Kirsty explicitly states this by referring to her as a 'Cypher of royalty'. In this sense, and to extend Belting's frame, Mary, Queen of Scots, *becomes a sort of medium herself* – something that carries or hosts other people's images, imaginations, beliefs and desires. Jane Lewis has written about how Mary, Queen of Scots's unstable and multiple 'reputations' resulted in an 'intrinsic incompleteness' to her image and allowed for 'visible fictionality'. Indeed, Kirsty's choice of title, 'Virtual Queen', suggests that Mary is not quite 'there' in the portrait; she is – to echo Lewis, 'intrinsic[ally] incomplete' (Lewis 1998: 8). And yet, whilst recognizing this, Kirsty also

hopes that Mary can hear 'the susurrations' of a cloak, the sound of shared laughter and song; she imagines, in other words, a social and sensual life for her. As Belting says, artefacts that represent a body 'require animation [...] we are called upon to supply to the artefact our own empathy' (Belting 2011: 22).

While both poems 'materialize' Mary in different ways, neither is critically distanced in the way Maggie encourages them to be. Mary's reputation is an important force but it is not her national, or even her personal reputation that concerns them; as Lewis (2005: 53) writes, Mary's capacity for inviting 'sympathetic identification' overrides these reputation(s). Extending Belting's theory further, the creative writing produced as a result of the pedagogically mediated encounters with portraits can be seen to testify to the 'presence of an absence': the portrait (the portrait itself is, of course, also the presence of an absence). The texts they produce on paper (the new medium) constitute *another portrait*, which re-embodies the image originally experienced by the body of participants via the medium of the painted portrait. When this creative writing is read, either aloud or to oneself, the image that resides within it is (re) animated by our bodies and made visible in our imagination.

Conclusion

In this article I have focused on the gallery's implicit pedagogy and the explicit creative writing pedagogy of the class tutor. The latter is also an attempt to resist some of the latent historical pedagogies of portrait galleries and a concerted attempt to re-educate the class participants about the meaning of portrait images such as these. In doing so, I do not intend to present the contemporary SNPG's pedagogy as one dimensional. There are numerous ways in which the gallery itself challenges and asks questions of the Carlyle legacy. However, its existence as an institution – as Maggie was keenly aware – is still premised on the selection, commissioning, and display of portraits of individuals or groups who were notable in the making of the Scottish nation. As noted earlier, portrait galleries tell us who to admire, as well as making an assumption about *how* that admiration will occur.

In the examples discussed here, the portraits do not bring about admiration or emulation (though Maggie does suggest Graeme emulate Spark's writing style – see Vignette 1); neither are the figures taken seriously as emblematic of the Scottish nation. We could argue, then, that the pedagogical regime of the institution remains incomplete. But so does that of the class tutor, for in all the cases discussed here, the portraits seem to draw the class participants into an 'intersubjective' experience. That intersubjectivity is nuanced and layered – it consists of what they already know about the person (including their reputations as women in the public imagination) as well as what they are told (on labels and by the guide), and the importance of that moment when they do come 'face to face' with the subject in the portrait (Vignette 2). Maggie, too, is aware of this power and has clearly experienced portraits in this way (that 'real portrait of Mary' she alluded to but did not choose). While the 'authenticity' of the portrait, in Carlyle's sense, does not seem to matter in the cases described here, the mystical feeling of entering the unmediated presence of a person prevails. Even the material properties (or material depictions within) the portrait offer routes to identifying with the image as a feeling subject – the 'recognition', to go back to Strathern's phrase, of another person (Vignette 3). The 'ambiguity' and 'ever-changing relationship' between image and medium that Belting (2011: 16) describes is precisely what enables this to happen. But it is also because the portrait panel depicts a body, that we can identify with it as a *body*.

Interestingly, for the participants discussed, the Carlylean notion of being transported temporally, as well as physically, into the absent person's presence appears to work in the case of Mary, Queen of Scots, but not in that of Muriel Spark. Perhaps it is because Spark is too recent in time, or even too present (Spark is also an Edinburgh writer after all)? Or perhaps it is because she is in the café? Whilst the institution and tutor can stress different aspects of Belting's spectrum of image and medium to suit their pedagogical purposes, so can the creative writers in re-imagining the portrait/person. The incomplete regimes of both institution and tutor show, as Ellsworth has argued, that 'Pedagogy is unable to contain or control where and when its addressee arrives or how it is taken up' (Ellsworth 2005: 55) but

the ethnographic material also demonstrates how the portrait (as well as the contemporary portrait gallery) offers a pedagogical dynamism that is perhaps not present in other genres of art and which can be addressed, at least, to a variety of educational purposes.

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Notes

¹ Fieldnotes, taken by author, 9 December 2013, Edinburgh.

² The Spark portrait is in the company of other local artists and celebrities whose portraits are also hung in the café, for example that of John Byrne.

³ See Stephen Naysmith, 'Death of Muriel Spark's Son Brings Closure to Famous Literary Feud', *The Herald*, 16 August 2016. <https://www.heraldsotland.com/news/14685307.death-muriel-sparks-son-brings-closure-famous-literary-feud/>, accessed 8 November 2021.

⁴ 'Maggie', interview by author, digital recording, 29 September 2020, Edinburgh.

⁵ Please note that I did not interview gallery staff regarding their pedagogical aims and am basing my reading of 'implied pedagogy' on the institutional practices more broadly.

⁶ Indeed, up until very recently, portrait galleries were only to be found in the UK or its former colonies.

⁷ National Portrait Gallery, 'Organisation'. <https://www.npg.org.uk/about/organisation/>, accessed 24 February 2022.

⁸ National Galleries Scotland, 'Scottish National Portrait Gallery'. <https://www.nationalgalleries.org/visit/scottish-national-portrait-gallery>, accessed 24 February 2022.

⁹ Carlyle argued that history was made by the impact of natural born heroes or 'great men'. Though highly influential at the time, his views are now regarded as elitist, misogynist and racist.

¹⁰ 'Maggie', interview, 29 September 2020.

¹¹ 'Maggie', interview, 29 September 2020.

¹² Mary, Queen of Scots, ruled Scotland from 1542 until she was forced to abdicate in favour of her son in 1567. She was held in captivity for over eighteen years and eventually executed for plotting to assassinate Elizabeth I.

¹³ 'Maggie', interview, 29 September 2020.

¹⁴ Fieldnotes, taken by author, 25 November 2013, Edinburgh.

¹⁵ Fieldnotes, 25 November 2013.

¹⁶ Fieldnotes, 9 December 2013.

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