Reading the Portraits of Queen Elizabeth I

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Elizabeth in her coronation robes, c. 1600, National Portrait Gallery, London.

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The “Rainbow” portrait, c. 1600, courtesy of The Marquess of Salisbury.
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Introduction

This book has two aims: to shed new light on a remarkable series of objects, and to suggest approaches fruitful for the study of all portraits, partaking, as they do, of both history and art.

My approach has developed over several years, as I have discussed Queen Elizabeth's portraits with many audiences: students, colleagues in teaching, museum people, specialists, interested readers, and observers of many persuasions. No audience has failed to be intrigued by these pictures and their implications, and the questions of my listeners have helped to shape the inquiries pursued in this book.

This is not a work of traditional art history, although I believe it will be of value in that field. Instead, it explores the borderlines between disciplines, searching for ideas from several provinces which may help us see these pictures anew.

Such a work cannot be an exhaustive survey of theories current in various fields—cultural anthropology, semiotics, literary theory, social history, the psychology of perception. Rather, it must be selective. And so this work is: one author's personal combination of ideas assembled from current scholarly dialogue, gathering what ever seemed to enlighten the subject at hand.

While I have cast a wide interdisciplinary net, some likely theorists or areas of thought may not be included. My intention is
to suggest, to offer connections, to unsettle standard interpretations. If open spaces remain in the fabric of this book, so much the better. If the reader is stimulated to think of other links, or of roads I have not taken, then this study will have successfully joined the continuing dialogue. I would like my text to be regarded, in the words of Umberto Eco, as an “opera aperta,” an open work.

A book about Queen Elizabeth's portraits becomes, in widening circles, a book about Queen Elizabeth, about her life and policies, and about the culture of the age. Few works of art participate in so many dimensions of a society as do portraits, especially portraits of a ruler. Discussion of these pictures has illuminated my own teaching of literature and interdisciplinary courses, and I believe the portraits have a bearing on the study of history and philosophy as well.

Building upon the extensive work of Roy Strong and Frances Yates in establishing an art-history context for these pictures, I offer my own study as an experiment in linking different fields, in discovering—and inventing—some “unsuspected harmonies” of interpretation.

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The Past Affirmed, the Past Transformed

About one hundred and thirty-five painted portraits of Elizabeth I, survivors of a much greater number, are still to be seen, in England and at points around the world. Some are works of beauty and mystery; others are the hack work of royal public relations under uneasy control. Ranging in date from about 1547 to about 1600, they provide a slice of life—a slice of art and history—running like a rich and curious vein through the record of Elizabethan England.

As a slice of art, the pictures show the favored late Tudor style in its highs and lows: the bright-colored surfaces, emblematic details, and archaic sensibility, giving way at times to the repetitions of mass-produced court imagery. As a slice of history, they document the great events of the reign, diplomatic encounters, and the compact of loyalty between Queen and people.

Viewed by either of these disciplines, the paintings form a steady chronology, a linear sequence which ultimately resolves itself into biography: the life and reign of a Queen. But the variety of the portraits, and their strange beauty, raise questions that spill out of the traditional disciplines.

Seeking more encompassing modes of interpretation, we turn to anthropology, with its concepts of culture, and to literary criticism, considering its inquiries into signs, communication, and
genre. Together these two fields illuminate the contexts of the paintings, and also uncover a surprising array of voices—artist, sitter, and audience—in close proximity to the portraits. In the twentieth century, we overhear these voices and also participate as latter-day readers of the visual texts.

Beginning the pursuit of interpretation, we may adopt with the anthropologist Clifford Geertz a semiotic concept of culture: “Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning.”

The Queen’s portraits are part of that web of significance spun around her, for her, and to some extent, by her, for myriad purposes. Clearly, this is not an orderly, radiating web, with our objects of study at the center, but a three-dimensional one, including linear strands and many complex crossings and layers. Our intellectual enterprise must finally match Geertz’s notion of “thick description,” disturbing the piled-up structures of inference and implication.

Since our subjects are works of art (as well as works of history and politics), we find many profitable insights in Jacques Maquet’s Aesthetic Experience, an anthropologist’s view of the visual arts. Here is the comprehensive context that we seek: culture as a socially constructed reality, composed of all human activities and creations.

In Maquet’s framework, aesthetic objects are present in each of the large horizontal divisions of a culture: social networks of people, configurations of ideas, and the systems of material production. The portraits of Elizabeth I cannot be extricated from any of these levels. They are signs of human interchange, couched in symbol and idea, left to us in the material form of canvas, panel, and miniature.

Another analytical tool serves this discussion, the concept of “aesthetic locus.” No society, says Maquet, in his Introduction to Aesthetic Anthropology, “maintains an equally intense aesthetic interest in all the things made within its borders. There are certain privileged fields where awareness and performance are higher, where expectations and efforts converge. The class or classes of objects that are localized in these areas of heightened aesthetic consciousness constitute the aesthetic locus of a culture.” For the Renaissance at large, and for Elizabethan England, portraiture was such a focal point.

Portraiture—stimulated by humanistic ideals and a passionate sense of dynasty—rushed into the vacuum created by the widespread destruction of religious art under Henry VIII. Increasingly, dynastic pride was showing in a network of family portraits being created in English society. In this emerging tradition of dynastic pictures appeared the first images of Elizabeth.

The process of reading these pictures may also adopt literary models. Jonathan Culler shares with the anthropologists an image of weblike significances: “Literary works are to be considered not as autonomous entities, ‘organic wholes,’ but as intertextual constructs: sequences which have meaning in relation to other texts which they take up, cite, parody, refute, or generally transform. A text can be read only in relation to other texts, and it is made possible by the codes which animate the discursive space of a culture.”

If we construe the Queen’s portraits as texts, many new questions appear. Who is “speaking” these visual texts (not necessarily the artist), and who “listens”? What is the vocabulary, the style, the rhetoric? Is the language private or public? Can we distinguish genres—narrative, drama, poetry? Does a system of signs emerge from the visual forms? And, finally, with a nonlinear text (not a sequence of words), how do we read these portraits of Queen Elizabeth I?

The painting of Elizabeth as a princess, now in Windsor Castle, is the point of departure for this study. Its dating arises from its absence in a royal inventory of 1542 and its appearance in a later one of 1547, where an entry reads: “Item a table with the picture of the ladye Elizabeth her grace with a booke in her hande her gowne like crymnsen clothe of golde with worke.” The two inventories, and a third from the reign of Edward VI, have now been
published, giving a valuable record of the first aesthetic surroundings of this painting.\textsuperscript{9}

The picture is not a court portrait but a family portrait. Elizabeth, here depicted between the ages of nine and fourteen, had no royal authority nor clear sight of any, with her sister, Mary, and her brother, Edward, both preceding her in the succession. The picture belongs to that proliferating web of Tudor imagery which provides such an abundant part of the social record left to us: dynastic portraiture.

The dissolution of the monasteries had begun in 1536, and thereafter religious subjects were no longer acceptable in England. Secular portraits, only one facet of Italian Renaissance art, assumed a far greater prominence in the late-Tudor generations of religious equivocation and eventual Protestant settlement.

The dozen or so surviving picture inventories must suffice to reveal the once-vivid portrait collections of the age. These listings itemize the holdings of Archbishop Parker, the various Leicester houses, and the earl of Northampton, among others. Painters’ names are rarely mentioned. The portraits are prized not as the work of artists but as affirmations of the family line.

Bess of Hardwick’s collection, still hanging virtually unchanged in the splendid Long Gallery of Hardwick Hall, contains some seventy-five pictures of family members and the royal figures which her marriages had brought near to her. Lord Lumley had amassed, by 1590, an astonishing group of more than two hundred portraits, emphasizing his ancestors and celebrated contemporaries. Sets of kings and queens of England were also a vital ingredient in most late-Elizabethan portrait collections.

Within such a milieu, constituting a social fabric more than an aesthetic tradition, the “Princess” portrait of Elizabeth, artist unknown, entered the Royal Collection, where it has remained to this day.\textsuperscript{9}

Knowing the boundary dates of 1542 and 1547, it is tempting to see this portrait as depicting a segment of a life. With that five-year span, the picture seems to record more than a moment, to offer a temporal dimension as well as the photographic instant. During most of those years Elizabeth was deep in her studies under William Grindal, Roger Ascham’s pupil and one of the Cambridge humanists. In 1544 she wrote the first of her many surviving letters, in Italian, to Queen Catherine Parr, who was beneficently overseeing her education. Exercises in Greek, Latin, and French were sharpening her quick intellect and earning the sober praise of her tutors. In 1547, Henry VIII died, and with her destiny uncertain under the reigns of her siblings, Elizabeth left forever the peace of her early schoolroom.

Within the complex interchanges of the culture, this painting is at a point of stasis, neither generated by action nor intended to inspire action. The sitter was not a public figure, and her image was not yet of import beyond her family. All this would change in the later portraits. But here the ties of family affection and loyalty are primary. Perhaps the painting originated in a request like the one acknowledged by Elizabeth about 1550, her brother having asked for her picture: “For the face I grant I might well blush to offer, but the mind I shall never be ashamed to present. But though from the grace of the picture the colours may fade by time, may give by weather, may be spited by chance; yet the other, nor Time with his swift wings shall overtake, nor the misty clouds with their lowering may darken, nor Chance with her slippery foot may overthrow.”\textsuperscript{10}

A schoolgirl excursion into metaphor, yet its linking of face and mind is apt for the Princess portrait as well. In fifteenth-century Milan, Leonardo had declared his belief that portraits should portray “the motions of the mind.”\textsuperscript{11} In this portrait of Elizabeth, the face is entirely serene, with no revelations. But mental activity is signified clearly through her books. The only action in the painting is implied: interrupted in her reading, she holds her place in her book.

Returning to her letter, we interpret: as against the mutability
of paint and colors, the mind’s creations may endure. Later, she was to know the power, however temporary, of the use of material artifacts—the many portraits—in her own public policy.

In reading the portraits of Queen Elizabeth, this one is a kind of primer. Its simple forms are captivating. The youth of the sitter has direct appeal. The portrait signals the eventual elaboration of dress and attributes, the naturalism soon to be transformed, the metaphor soon to spiral into riddles.

But here, all is moderation. Elizabeth’s brocaded dress is rich but not extravagant. The undersleeves are traced with finely observed textures. Her ornaments are few. The refinement of the hands will reappear many times and be noted by firsthand observers. A lifetime of pearls and rich jewels is still ahead of her, with all their implications of loyalty in the exchange of gifts. The crescent of pearls binding her hair only hints, to later beholders, at the moon imagery of Diana and the crescents which will be repeated to the very last of her portraits.

The interior space of the picture is neither perspectival (placing her in an imagined world) nor flat (creating the Byzantine remoteness of some later portraits.) Instead she appears to be in a curtained niche, and so she is: in a niche of the family line.

If the series of Elizabeth’s portraits is a “discursive space,” this one stands at the boundary—in its position as the first, chronologically, and in its straightforward vocabulary. It begins to sketch the cultural space which is yet to become animated with codes. Against the later counterpoint of likeness and metaphor, this picture offers a simple realism: the gentle curves of her dress, the steady gaze, the glowing colors. Not yet Queen Elizabeth, the sitter has only paused in her study.

At a different point in the webs of significance is the “Coronation” portrait, in the manner of Nicholas Hilliard, recently purchased by the National Portrait Gallery from the earls of Warwick. The picture draws us at once into the controversy over images which preceded Elizabeth’s accession and continued thereafter under her watchful eye.

The vigorously Protestant view, the Puritan view, advocated the superiority of nature (God’s creation) over images (man’s artifices), which were works only of seeming virtue and beauty. Henry VIII attempted to classify religious images as “abused” (worshiped) or “unabused” (merely taken as a sign of remembrance), which would have allowed some latitude in the sustenance of religious art. But the distinction proved difficult in practice, and widespread destruction of sacred images continued.\footnote{12}

The Elizabethan Settlement of 1559 avoided the vexing concepts of abused and unabused, and the new queen proceeded with that tolerance which was to distinguish her \textit{via media} in theological matters. The proliferation of her own portraits in the years to follow was no simple substitution for the lost imagery of the Queen of Heaven. But the portraits did increasingly provide, in the temporal sphere, magnets for a nearly religious devotion.\footnote{11}

Reading the Coronation portrait, we may see it as the last in a chain of representations, all reinforcing the idea of culture as an “acted document.”\footnote{14} First came an event in time, the extended ceremony of Elizabeth’s recognition procession on January 14, 1559, the day before her coronation. As she passed through the city of London to Westminster, she paused before five pageants, each enacting a message between Queen and people.

The prevailing themes of these dramatic offerings were peace and justice—peace in the stabilizing of religious turmoil after the “troublesome reign of Queen Mary,” justice in the hoped-for wise governance of the new reign. Surrounded by rich banners and the “noyse of instrumentes,” children addressed Elizabeth on the virtues and vices surrounding the seat of government; farther on, a child representing Truth presented her with the Bible in English.

At every stop, Elizabeth repaid each gift with a pledge appropriate to the offering: “And whereas your request is that I should continue your good Ladie and Queene, be ye assured, that I will be as good unto you as ever Queene was to her people.” Spectacle though it was, the festive event was also a charge given and received; through her gracious responses, Elizabeth was both audience and
participant. The inimitable dramatic instincts of the time transformed an oath of office into a performance involving all Londoners.

The fifth of the pageants gives the image that reappears in the Coronation portrait: a portrayal of Deborah, "the judge and restorer of the house of Israel," richly appareled in Parliament robes, with an open crown and a scepter in her hand.

Next in the chain of representations, and appearing with amazing rapidity, was the little pamphlet describing the pageantry and the Queen’s responses. Two editions were published on or soon after January 23, 1559, the first titled The Quenes Majesties Passage through the Citie of London to Westminster the Day before her Coronacion. Although the author is unknown, as are many artists of the Queen’s portraits, he had apparently been close to the Queen throughout the procession, since he set down many of her remarks. With this pamphlet, the verbal account of the day, touched with fine detail, entered the permanent record. The printed medium further confirmed the compact between Queen and people, and disseminated that compact for memory and for reflection.

Following the printed text, most probably, was a painted portrait, but not the one we are studying. The so-called Coronation portrait was long believed to be contemporary with the coronation itself, and has been dated about 1559. But modern technology has recently intervened and established an entirely new premise for interpreting the portrait. Tree-ring dating has confirmed that the boards making up the panel on which the portrait is painted were used around 1600, and the trees felled shortly before that.

This startling discovery reminds us that this portrait, like all the others, is after all an object of material culture—a created object which has come down to us. A new fact about its matter (the late sixteenth century wood) must radically alter our speculations about its meaning.

The painting also documents material culture on another level, for the Queen’s robes—her mantle and dress—are those still surviving in 1600 and described in her wardrobe list of that year. The detail of verbal description in such lists parallels the fine touches given by Elizabeth’s artists in their renditions of dress: “The Coronation Robes: one Mantle of Clothe of golde [sic] with golde and silver furred with powdered Armony [ermine] with a Mantle lace of silke and golde with buttons and Tassels to the same,” and “one kirtle [dress] of the same tissye, the traine and skirts furred with powdered Armynys the rest lined with Sarceonnet, with a pair of bodies and sleeves to the same.”

Also in the "lineage" of this painting is the "Coronation" miniature painted by Nicholas Hilliard in about 1570, similar in costume and formerly described as a copy of the panel picture. Janet Arnold has compared the garments and regalia in the two paintings, down to the smallest detail of ruff, fur, pleat, and gilded thread. She concludes that neither painting is a copy of the other, but that both were derived from another picture, probably painted soon after 1559 and now missing. Both Hilliard and the later artist, following a custom of the time, may have arranged the robes and jewels in order to paint them from direct observation. The panel thus ends a chain of representations, originating with a historic event followed by a succession of words and images.

The regalia in the panel—scepter, orb, crown, and jeweled collars—are of special interest, and they appear to have been designed as a set. Although the exact pieces cannot now be traced in any known inventory, they may well be linked with the firsthand descriptions of the coronation events. Observers report that three crowns were carried before Elizabeth in the procession at Westminster. One was St. Edward’s crown; one the Imperial crown (over seven pounds in weight, with a purple velvet cap inside); and the third, her personal crown (made especially for her or perhaps altered from an earlier one, possibly even the one worn by Anne Boleyn at her own coronation in 1533). The correspondence of the robes to known items in the inventory suggests that the crown in the painting may also depict one of the actual procession crowns.

Certainly, the regalia are the signifiers in this picture, and they lead us into one of two approaches to reading the painting: the linguistic model. This approach, geared to cognition, seeks the
visual vocabulary which communicates information. Meanings may be multiple, but they are distinct and can be grasped, with a degree of common consent among viewers.

The aesthetic premise, which offers the second approach, is based on contemplation. Signifiers are not pressed for direct communication. Instead, an aesthetic object is seen as an *opera aperta*, an open work, in Umberto Eco’s term. Deriving information is not the object of this approach.

The “Coronation” panel is a choice subject for both the above means of reading. In the language-oriented model, we are drawn at once to the regalia. The set of three symbolic objects—crown, orb, and scepter—is a semiotic system in itself, complete, known. The three are found together in countless portrayals of royalty. As vocabulary transcending particular languages, they conveyed an unmistakable message to all levels of Western European society for centuries.

Within this painting, the regalia means authority: the crown, the personal vesting of authority in an individual; the orb, the ruler’s hand upon the world or her kingdom; the scepter, justice to be combined with power. The three crowns carried before Elizabeth in the procession suggest multiple meanings: two represented tradition and the orderly succession from the past, and the third was the personal crown, indicating new responsibility and a new reign. The same evocation of past and future is implied in the portrait regalia. A linguistic approach to the painting asks us to consider speaker and audience, and both are tantalizingly unclear for this picture. There is no evidence that Elizabeth evoked or controlled the creation of the painting, virtually “spoke it herself,” as in many of her portraits in mid-career. The dialogue between sitter and painter, such a fruitful interchange in much Renaissance portraiture, is simply not here, and there are no clues.

In the portrait of Elizabeth as a princess, because of the related letter to her brother, we almost hear her addressing the picture to him. The painting is an answer, a family communication.

For the Coronation portrait, the nearest verbal text is the pamphlet describing the procession, where we see the Queen passing before us in a performance, establishing the authority later symbolized in the painting. Only the very late date is still mystifying: painted, spoken, sometime after 1600, for whom was the picture intended? Perhaps it was associated with Elizabeth’s funeral ceremonies in 1603, when it would have confirmed her fame rather than expressed popular hopes for a young new queen, as the missing original may have done.

Read in the aesthetic mode, the contemplative, the picture is equally rewarding. Its design and balance offer sheer pleasure to the eye. Maque: directs our attention to meanings apart from any symbolic codes, apart from the language of content: “From the point of view of the meanings of the visual, the form-subject matter distinction is of no use. There is no subject matter independent of lines and shapes, colors and textures, brightness and darkness. Figurative works are not different from non-figurative works in this respect. Their meanings lie exclusively in their forms.”

This view is deliberately extreme, as it must be if we are to suspend the translation of symbols—to transcend the artistic “words” and experience the poem made of those words. The Coronation portrait is elegantly graceful in its balance. All is in curves, except for the rod-like scepter. The near-blending of the Queen’s face with her ruff, and of her flowing hair with her mantle, makes an organic whole. The garments and the wearer are visually joined. She has put on majesty and embodies it.

We sense a: once that the picture is like an icon or an object of devotion. The absence of volume and of pictorial space recalls Byzantine holy pictures. The effect of the painting emerges with reflective contemplation. The royal figure seems psychologically distant, because it is not within the three-dimensional space we ourselves occupy. Yet the beholder is somehow close to the figure, because it is not full-length (we have been allowed to step nearer) and there is fine detail observable only at close range. We have, in effect, an intimate view of a remote secular saint.

Finally, the question of the motives of portraiture, introduced
here, will recur throughout this study. This issue is not a version of the intentional fallacy in which meaning consists only of the author’s intentions, or even of the sitter’s intentions. Instead, we will construe “motive” much more broadly, as the entire complex of creative forces within a culture—including the pursuit of fame, the civic instinct for order and stability, the dynamism of inevitable change (the aging of the monarch is at the heart of this), and the perpetual dialogue between ruler and people to reconfirm a peaceful and vigorous state.

The two paintings discussed in this chapter depict Elizabeth early in her life, one in a private world, the other in her public role. Yet to come are the pattern portraits, the Queen’s attempts to control her proliferating image, the international scope of her portraits as diplomatic communication. Still other pictures will yield insights into Elizabethan domestic propaganda and that peculiar minuet of affection and dissembling, life at court.

The rhetoric of these two pictures (actually, one painted early and one late) is simple and straightforward. By their presumed dating, they seem to bracket the Queen’s reign. In between is that “discursive space” which will be filled with so many other paintings of Elizabeth. Like the literary texts perused by Culler, these pictures become an intertextual construct, animating and reflecting each other as the sequence diversifies.

The visual language of the two paintings considered in this chapter introduces two lines to be followed throughout the series: the rhetoric of praise and the rhetoric of self-fashioning. The latter grows organically, in a sense autobiographically, from the Princess portrait and its companion text, the letter to Elizabeth’s brother. In “offering her face” and “presenting her mind,” Elizabeth begins the long process which she mastered so well: the deliberate construction of a persona, along with its visual image.

Her later attempts to control quality in her portraits testify to her efforts at visual self-fashioning. The self that emerges from her letters and speeches provides a parallel, in verbal form, to the complex image conveyed in the pictures. We will observe an inter-

nally generated, self-fashioned version of the Queen unfolding in the chapters that follow.

The rhetoric of praise is a contrasting element, the externally generated language in the portraits. To express the continuing courtship between Queen and people, artists gathered a myriad of details from the symbolic vocabulary of the time. Within this rhetoric, the visual codes appear and recur, some at the level of convention, others far more idiosyncratic and riddling.

Out of this discussion of expression and self-expression comes a central query, the question of likeness. With all these portraits to study, will we discover what the Queen actually looked like? Will the combination of flattery, vanity, and convention make an impenetrable veil? A search of contemporary descriptions of Elizabeth will offer a suggestive parallel (although these accounts show a similar mix of flattery and convention), allowing us to read the portraits not just as works of the imagination but as the changing record of a face.

Believing culture to be those “webs of significance” mankind has spun, one must regard the process as unfinished. In any given age the spinning continues. With her political sagacity, Elizabeth clearly understood and manipulated the webs she had inherited from her Tudor forebears. At the same time, with her vigor and influence, she created new webs, with new meanings added to the received culture. Reading the portraits of the Queen will be an exploration of these meanings, expressed in the arts and on the stage of the world.
Public and Private Voices

The whole may be greater than the sum of the parts. How can this be? The logic of the imagination may break into sub-sets the elements of a large and complex group of objects. The process of analysis (which is the separation into parts) ultimately puts our focus on relationships: How are these items alike? What do they share in appearance, purpose, or the dynamics of their creation? This kind of question offers new access to the public and private worlds of Queen Elizabeth’s pictures.

Recent work has added greatly to our knowledge of Renaissance portraits, producing important studies of their historical development, sources, conventions, and iconography. Lines of descent have been uncovered in court portraiture. In particular, Roy Strong’s extensive studies explore Tudor art in both its imagery and its production.¹

This abundant gathering of information now invites new theoretical approaches. One such basis for new perceptions is in the branching and often ironic notions of structuralism.

“In its broadest sense,” believes literary critic Robert Scholes, “structuralism is a way of looking for reality not in individual things but in the relationships among them.” As a methodology, it addresses the fragmentation of knowledge into isolated fields, which proceeded so vigorously in the first half of this century. With an integrative and holistic way of looking at the world, structuralism might discover (or create) a “coherent system that would unite the modern sciences and make the world habitable for man again.”²

This is an appealing view, despite (or because of) its inherent paradox: the world seen as a number of complete, and hence closed, internally coherent structures—yet with the possibility of an infinite number of new ones continuously being added through human perception. Many of its proponents share Scholes’s view that the tendency to replace atomism by structuralism “has not been merely scientific but has affected the arts as well, for it is a general movement of mind—one of those currents of thought that from time to time sweep through a culture and move its most disparate elements in the same direction.”³

In one version, structuralism holds that any element of a situation takes its meaning entirely from its relationships to the other elements in that situation. Thus any item is a part of one or more structures, and interpretation begins with affirming those interconnections. Discovering relationships, the viewer-reader becomes bound to the meanings of the text and participates in creating them.

The origins of structuralism are commonly traced to the writings of Ferdinand de Saussure, the Swiss linguist. In his study of language, Saussure insisted upon two dimensions: the historical development of language as it changes over time (the *diachronic* aspect), and its current existence in all its systems of relationships (the *synchronic* aspect). The former corresponds to the history of any created forms, whether they be literature, art, objects, or institutions. The latter, a horizontal axis through society, links together perceptible structures contemporary in time.⁴

Structuralist debate, in some of its modes, has neared the point of exhaustion. Yet some of its premises are still viable as avenues into disciplines or for the catalysis of unlikely combinations. Structural anthropologists—for example, Claude Lévi-Strauss—establish a broad base, maintaining that social phenomena are best understood by reconstructing the systems to which they belong. A
belief emerges which will return us to the Queen’s portraits: “Structuralism is the search for unsuspected harmonies.”

Observers have described various inter-relationships within the set of Elizabeth's portraits. In the mid-eighteenth century Horace Walpole proposed this criterion for recognizing pictures of the Queen: “A pale Roman nose, a head of hair loaded with crowns and powdered with diamonds, a vast ruff, a vaster fardingale, and a bushel of pearls, are the features by which everybody knows at once the pictures of Queen Elizabeth.”

Two published catalogues of the Queen’s portraits have appeared, each with its own system of organizing the pictures. Freeman O’Donoghue (1894) offered a taxonomy by dress (it is something like a botanical classification). His categories were: “When a Princess; Wearing a small frill-ruff; Wearing a radiating ruff, unbroken; Wearing a radiating ruff, open in front; Wearing a high ruff, open in front; and, In fancy dress.” The groupings were further divided into “crowned” and “not crowned.” He mentions no dates and acknowledges that no chronological order can attach to the ruff styles.

Roy Strong, in 1963, replaced this organization with a series of types, based on more or less officially sanctioned pattern pictures. The types are like small families of paintings, each tied to others by their similar appearance and their derivation from some common model. Strong does list the pattern groups chronologically, although some pictures fall outside the scheme and must be accounted for separately.

These viewers have uncovered patterns, phenomenological or historical, within the body of the portraits. But we may also borrow some notions of structuralism to link paintings beyond themselves, to related creations within the culture. In particular, consider examples of two distinct sub-sets, reading them in terms of intersecting groups to which they belong: the monumental “Armada” portrait, which hangs in Woburn Abbey (one of a pattern-set, public in audience), and a Hilliard miniature (belonging to that distinctly English genre, meant as a private communication).

Turning to the Armada portrait, we may study it within three structures: the Queen’s attempts to control her portraiture; a historic event followed by its network of celebrations; and the Queen’s speeches to her people (which relate to the visual statement as a kind of self-fashioning). There is no doubt we will discover here some “unsuspected harmonies.”

As early as 1563, Elizabeth felt it necessary to regulate the production of her portraits. In that year, a draft proclamation recommended the idea of the pattern pictures, which would be approved before their release to the painters’ workshops. The Queen intended that “some special person that shall be by her allowed shall have first finished a portraicture therof, after which finished, hir Majesty will be content that all other payntors, or grauors ... shall and maye at hir pleasures follow the sayd patron or first portraictur.”

Decades later, in 1596, the Queen’s Privy Council ordered that all the debased portraits causing her “great offense” should be destroyed, and Sir Walter Raleigh reports that many were cast into the fire.

Clearly, the demand for pictures of Elizabeth far outstripped the talent and time available to produce them with consistent high quality. Following her excommunication in 1570, display of the Queen’s portrait was a statement of loyalty not required but freely offered. Already the 1563 document had declared that “all sortes of subiects and people both noble and meane” wished to own and show the Queen’s image.

Among all the surviving portraits of Elizabeth, some are certainly the hasty hack-work she deplored. But a magnificent panel like the Armada portrait belongs to a pattern set that spread her approved image as deliberately as she could manage. Roy Strong’s catalogue lists ten pictures within this set, all alike in using a common “face mask,” or facial design. (One of the paintings is now in Toledo, Ohio.)

The Queen’s efforts to monitor her pictures met with very limited success. She never did achieve a system for steady and careful
production, partly because enthusiasm for her image rose in unmanageable tides in times of danger or triumph, and partly because she was unwilling to provide the firm monetary patronage which could have put her more effectively in control of the artists.

In still another structure, the Armada portrait is a distinct response to a historical event and thus linked with many forms of celebration. It is an occasional portrait—a document of a particular occasion. The locus of the Queen’s authority is here shown to be in an action, not an abstraction of divine right. The event was a victory with many outcomes: the reinforcing of Protestantism, the securing of English borders, the renewed safety of the Queen’s own person.

The Spanish fleet, freighted with Catholic hopes as the “Invincible Armada,” had met the English fleet in July of 1588. Despite heroism on both sides, only about half the Spanish ships survived to return home, delivered from English capture by a sudden squall, yet finally battered by those same winds of the Channel and the northern sea.

News of victory knit all levels of English society in celebration, from the highest style to the commonest of popular culture. Londoners heard a special sermon at Paul’s Cross, where the captured banners were displayed. Psalm-singing, more sermons, and bonfires linked the entire realm with the common theme. Later, the Queen made a special procession to St. Paul’s, reiterating her coronation spectacle with music and the wearing of official finery by each guild and profession.

Ballads were composed, printed, and circulated almost instantly, making legend and heroes out of the great events. Nicholas Hilliard designed a gold commemorative medal with the Queen’s image and the motto: “No richer crown in the whole world: not even dangers affect it.” And the painters created their new pattern pictures (perhaps originated by George Gower, the Serjeant Painter) adding naval details as background to the Queen’s Majesty. The painting we are studying is a proclamation, created in a far-reaching web of celebrations.

The public speeches of Elizabeth form a third structure for the Armada portrait. Fifteen speeches survive which she is known to have delivered, and six others were spoken in her name. In all, her intelligence, her classical training, and her personal energy are amply displayed. These are the verbal self-fashioning of a Queen, describing herself, continually re-defining her base of power in popular support.

Her references to herself as a woman are of particular interest. They seem to parallel the outright displays of female finery so obvious in the portraits and the wardrobe lists. She knew how to make the most of her gender. But in her speeches (with calculated effect), she often uses the supposed weakness of her sex to make her personal courage stand out more sharply. And the much-orchestrated theme of virginity allows for that self-effacing which made her unforgettable in the public mind.

The latter tactic appears beautifully in a parliamentary speech late in her reign. She has fashioned herself into a neat metaphysical conceit: “I have diminished my own revenue that I might add to your security and been content to be a taper of true virgin wax to waste my self and spend my life that I might give light and comfort to those that live under me.”

The defeat of the Spanish Armada gave occasion for the courage-by-contrast motif. In August of 1588, Elizabeth visited her army at Tilbury, where Leicester was in command. Anticipating another possible invasion, she cut a memorable figure on horseback among her troops, giving this exhortation:

“I know I have the body but of a weak and feeble woman; but I have the heart and stomach of a king, and of a king of England too, and think foul scorn that Parma or Spain or any prince of Europe should dare to invade the borders of my realm; to which, rather than any dishonor should grow by me, I myself will take up arms, I myself will be your general, judge, and rewarder of every one of your virtues in the field.”

Elizabeth’s speeches carried statements of policy, or maneuvers for delay. But equally, they were always a conscious projection of
herself. Through the verbal means, she reminded Parliament, the universities, and the people that she was in control. Certain qualities she wished to have portrayed, certain images reinforced. Just so it was with her pattern portraits, the visual element of her public relations.

A close reading of the Armada portrait shows the meeting point of history, propaganda, and art. The great size of the painting—about forty-two by fifty-three inches—denotes a monumental event. The figure of the Queen dominates the picture space, her pale steady face surmounting a jumble of detail.

The two windows in the background give fragments of historical narrative. In one, the English fleet embarks on a strangely golden sea. In the other, a storm swamps other vessels in semidarkness. The device of the windows was commonly used in Italian Renaissance art to show fanciful landscapes (a decorative purpose), or familiar real landscapes (a sense of place, a local signature, as in Tuscan hills behind a ducal portrait or a Biblical scene). But here, the views of the Armada establish the occasion for the picture.

Perspective in the painting is so oddly miscued that the background becomes unimportant. Only the coverings of a chair and table convey a vague sense of richness. A carved mermaid confirms the nautical theme.

But all eyes are on the Queen. The fashions of the farthingale, wide ruff, and grandly puffed sleeves all make the body seem larger than it is. Black and white (here, silverly white) were Elizabeth's personal colors, much worn by her and by those who wished to compliment her.

A glorious excess holds sway in bows, rosettes, and points of lace. There are enough pearls to satisfy Walpole's test easily, and each is individually rounded by the artist. A handsome crown is well is evidence. Surprisingly, no rings adorn the slender, almost Mannerist hands, but the feather fan is rendered with a fine touch. In place of the symbolic orb, the Queen rests long fingers on a globe of the world.

We are accustomed to looking into the depicted space of a painting to read it as disclosing some inner space—the consciousness of the chief figure or sitter (if a portrait), or some kind of metaphorical space. That does not seem to work here, though it will with some other portraits of the Queen. Because the interior of this picture is not visually plausible, it shuts us out, forcing us to seek contexts beyond. The painting makes its essential references: majesty, naval power, the feminine—then leaves the viewer to follow these networks of meaning wherever they will lead.

Here the Queen is assuming mythic proportions. The image readily departs from its historical moment and takes on a familiarity and weight still felt today, in this widely recognizable picture. As myth made visible, the painting recalls again the insights of Lévi-Strauss, who insisted that “the true constituent units of a myth are not the isolated relations but bundles of such relations, and it is only as bundles that these relations can be put to use and combined so as to produce a meaning.” The structures of many inter-relationships—including ties to other pictures and to verbal texts—surround this painting and locate it within the web of significances.

Some extensions of structuralist thought carry us into a more private world: the genre of miniature paintings. Here we encounter Nicholas Hilliard, the prolific and high-spirited artist “in little,” the best known of the Queen’s painters. Much detail has now been uncovered about his work and life (1547–1619), revealing his generous and adventurous character, his close access to the court, and the admiration extended by his contemporaries. One hundred and seventy-one miniatures survive from his long career; plus seven oil paintings and examples of his work as a goldsmith. Altogether, Hilliard painted the Queen over a period of almost thirty years. The earliest picture may be the charming oval inscribed 1572, “AEtatis Sue 38,” mounted on the back of a playing card, the Queen of Hearts. The latest miniatures, painted close to 1600, discreetly modify the Queen to youthfulness and are rendered with
well-practiced fineness of touch. From the 1580s we have about a
dozens of the nineteen Hilliard miniatures of Elizabeth now surviv-
ing.

These tiny paintings, most ovals of no more than two-and-a-
half inches in height, have a startling degree of preservation. Roy
Strong believes that the oil paintings on wood from Elizabeth's time
have perhaps 60 percent of the original surface left, but the mini-
atures reach us almost intact.15 We sense an intimate contact with
an earlier age—heightened, if Strong's hypothesis is true, by the
fact that the clothes and jewels in the miniatures were always
painted from life, set up to receive the artist's minute attention.16

The portrait miniature, Mary Edmond reminds us, has an
unbroken history in England (and only in England) for over four
hundred years.17 As such, the form came to be "mere English," if
we may borrow the motto favored by Elizabeth for her own solidly
English parentage. And the miniatures invite our study as a genre,
with Hilliard's distinctive work both affirming and re-creating a
pre-existing "kind."

The concept of genre, or kind, is a preoccupation both old and
new in the history of interpretation. Chiefly as a system for de-
scribing written texts, the framework of genres has evolved through
many variations since Aristotle—mirroring, perhaps, the developing
kingdoms of other living things. But contemporary critics have
found a generic view fruitful for visual as well as literary arts. E. H.
Gombrich, pursuing a definition of artistic meaning, agrees with
the literary critic E. D. Hirsch that interpretation proceeds by steps,
and the first step on which all else depends is deciding the genre
of a work.18 The primacy of genre, Gombrich maintains, is the same
in the visual arts as it has traditionally been in literature.

The structuralists' interest in genre need not pose rigid types
in some theoretical cosmos. Instead, we find structuralism shading
into ideas of post-structuralism, observing a dialectic which seems
much closer to a true reading experience: in the words of Roland
Barthes, "I refused the idea of a model transcendent to several texts
(and, thus, all the more so, of a model transcendent to every text)
in order to postulate that each text is in some sort its own model,
that each text, in other words, must be treated in its difference."19
But the transcendent model, the generic paradigm, need not be
completely rejected either: it provides the means for perceiving
distinctiveness, and thus is the source for its own continuing re-
juvenation.

The nearest verbal text to Hilliard's miniatures is his own
_Treatise Concerning the Arte of Limning_, written sometime between
1598 and the Queen's death in 1603. The sole manuscript of the
work has been known and read in the intervening centuries, and
it belonged to both George Vertue and Horace Walpole, eighteenth-
century collectors and scholars. But only in 1912 was the text
published for the first time, with its many revelations about a highly
prized Elizabethan artistic "kind": miniature painting.

For the _Arte of Limning_ may well be read as a delineation of a
genre. Hilliard has touched upon all the elements traditionally in-
cluded in genre study: the author, the intended audience, form,
materials, and technique. He mentions the inheritance of past mod-
els, the process of present creation, and the future continuation of
the "kind" via his instruction (and, though he does not mention
it, his example). In his verbal portrayal, limning is a genre with a
distinct formal history, but also a genre continuously in the making.

Any work by a creative person in a medium other than his or
her known one carries special interest (the writings of an artist,
the drawings of a poet). Hilliard's treatise is a rare compound of
theory, minute practical detail, and implied social history. He is
present in person, reporting his conversations with the Queen. The
personal strand appears and reappears, amidst technical directions
on the grinding of colors or the arrangement of his workplace. The
treatise is miscellaneous, and certainly harks to no particular lit-
erary genre. Its modern editors have noted that the essay seems
unrevised, a work still in process. But the book has numerous
theoretical possibilities for our reading of the Queen's portraits:
this is a statement of an artistic genre.

The generic "model" sketched by Hilliard may be briefly ex-
tracted. On the authors: "I wish it were so that none should meddle with limning but gentlemen alone, for that it is a kind of gentle painting, of less subjection than any other" (p. 63). He agrees with the Romans that if a man uses painting to get his living, he won’t have the patience or leisure to do true and rare work.

And the audience? “[It is] for the service of noble persons very meet, in small volumes, in private manner, for them to have the portraits and pictures of themselves, their peers, or any other foreign persons which are of interest to them” (p. 65). This is an aristocratic genre, in a private mode. The creator, the receiver, and the subject (the sitter) all take part in a communication among peers.

Placing himself within a tradition, he praises Holbein: “But Holbein’s manner of limning I have ever imitated, and hold it for the best.” Albrecht Dürer also influenced the limner, though Hilliard felt Dürer served the carver better than the painter as a precursor (pp. 69, 71).

Principles of form appear throughout Hilliard’s treatise. For one thing, the tiny size is a given. For another, “all painting imitateth nature, or the life” (p. 75), but it may express the sitter’s best graces and countenance (since everyone has a variety of looks.) Thus may the skillful limner create out of likeness itself, a work of art.

There are passages on proportion, line, shadow, and (at length) color. Two of these sections touch on Hilliard’s perceptions of the Queen, his royal mistress and favorite sitter. “Forget not therefore that the principal part of painting or drawing after the life consisteth in the truth of the line; as, one sayeth in a place that he hath seen the picture of Her Majesty in four lines very like” (p. 85). (It was Sir John Harington who praised Hilliard himself for these four telling lines.)

Following is the artist’s well-known discussion with the Queen about “shadowing.” He agreed with her that limnings, which are to be viewed in the hand, require a subtlety, “that to shadow sweetly, as we well call it, and to round well, is a far greater cunning than shadowing hard or dark” (p. 87). But Elizabeth went a step further, “and therefore chose her place to sit in for that purpose in the open alley of a goodly garden, where no tree was near, nor any shadow at all, save that as the heaven is lighter than the earth, so must there be that little shadow that was from the earth.” Here we have that moment so rare in the records of Elizabethan portraiture, a first-hand encounter between painter and sitter, with the Queen controlling an important effect in the portrait.

The technique of the genre is much elaborated in describing the colors—their sources in various minerals, and methods for grinding, mixing, and painting. Then a passage on jewels provides extended metaphor for the colors, their meanings and value. Altogether, we are immersed in the creative and practical imagination of the limner. The book is an informal account of a formal and meticulous art. How does the concept of genre give us new insight into Hilliard’s miniatures of the Queen? Let us first have before our eyes the example we have chosen to study: the portrait miniature known as “Queen Elizabeth Playing the Lute,” now at Berkeley Castle. Erna Auerbach dates the picture between 1574 and 1576, painted when the artist was in his twenties.

The characteristic oval shape, here two inches by one-and-a-quarter inches, encloses a beautifully refined image of Elizabeth, viewed to the waist, with both arms gracefully incorporated into the composition. The architectural setting of the background is rare for a miniature, though its face-framing curves echo the calligraphic inscriptions often used by Hilliard to decorate the upper spaces of his ovals. Here, a throne is discreetly indicated, as is the scrolling of its high back, and the side columns and their capitals, ornamental balls with crowns and decorative touches. The dark shading of the seat back makes a delicious foil for the fair, unshaded face and hair. And the three-dimensional scroll, besides contributing to a sense of depth, creates a cartouche of dramatic emphasis around the Queen’s head. Of all the thrones of Madonnas and royalty found in Renaissance painting, it is hard to recall a more appropriate and elegant treatment, although the scale is tiny.
In front of the Queen’s figure, a horizontal parapet, like a window opening, further encloses her within an imagined space. Her dress is an exquisite composition in itself, with patterns of dark against light picked out in decorative slashes and openwork; delicate frill-ruffs set off throat and wrists. But the marvel of the piece is the lute, the shadowing of its rounded form, the detail of the rose, and the precise movement of each individual finger in the act of playing.

The picture is a microcosm of the features later abundant in the Queen’s portraiture: richness of dress, attention to her hands, which she enjoyed having praised, and the pale, unshaded (later mask-like) face. But the picture is rare (and here arises an interdisciplinary pun) as a genre painting, one which shows an activity of daily life. The moment is especially personal, since the Queen preferred to play her instruments (usually the virginals) privately and objected to being overheard by visitors.

The moment was not repeated in Hilliard’s work, as he settled into the more familiar head-and-shoulders portraits of his later miniatures. Only occasionally does a hand or part of the arms appear. In fact, many limnings from his prime, including some of Elizabeth, show elaborate dress and ruff entirely filling the oval picture space, with the sitter’s face floating in isolation within the finery.

To study the miniature from the vantage point of genre, we must step beyond the premises in Hilliard’s treatise. Traditionally genre implied a context of expectation in the mind of both readers and writers, a shared understanding of some known models which were the basis for each new example. But the current attention being given to reading is breaking apart some old generic notions, which were primarily about pre-existing forms and how authors or artists filled them anew.

Two concepts will fortify our reading of Hilliard’s genre and of this picture in particular: the belief that genres are about communicating rather than classifying, and a notion of the creative, subversive force in departing from a genre.

Alastair Fowler, in his discussion of literary kinds, maintains that genre is “a communication system, for the use of writers in writing, and readers and critics in reading and interpreting.” Working within a genre enables an artist to orient a composition to previous creations, and generic recognition becomes fundamental to the reading process. In this view, the work of art is finally situated mid-way between the creator and the perceiver. In the genre is the communication, and in the communication (however hidden) are the meanings of the piece. The matter is complicated in the case of portrait miniatures, since the sitter may be the giver and so, in a sense, the originating of a private message. Both sitter and artist participate in the eventual message conveyed.

Genre, continues Fowler, is not really about classification. Instead he takes an organic approach to the life, death, and mutability of literary forms. We are speaking more about pigeons than about pigeonholes. A fruitful concept of genre now combines both synchronic and diachronic elements—the synchronic being a taxonomy of forms or species at a given moment, the diachronic the history and development of forms as they evolve. Like the changing concepts in the natural sciences, artistic genre theory has moved from the idea of “fixed species” to a dynamic sense of evolution, including “hybrids,” variants, and many new life-forms.

Elizabethan miniatures, including our subject, were first of all communications. Tokens of private emotions, they were painted to be given, and given to be worn. John Pope-Hennessy believes that the shape of the miniatures changed from round to oval for just this reason, to be accommodated in lockets and jeweled settings for personal adornment. The tiny size assured that the image would be held in the hand, viewed with intimate closeness.

History records the miniatures as messages conveyed and then cherished, to be read and reread. In 1581, at Deptford, the Queen presented the returning Sir Francis Drake with the splendid gift now known as the Drake Pendant—an enamelled and jeweled locket containing her portrait by Hilliard. In his portrait dated about 1591, now at Greenwich, Drake is wearing the pendant, which is today
a small miracle of survival. The Queen’s gift was a ceremonial one, but because it was her image to be worn, the gift was affectionately personal as well.

Elizabeth was very much the receiver as well as the giver of gifts. We may glimpse her own collection of miniatures in a report by Sir James Melville, envoy from Mary Queen of Scots. In 1564, Elizabeth had conducted him and her ministers to her bedchamber; there she opened for him a small cabinet, “wherein were divers little pictures wrapt within paper, and their names written with her own hand upon the papers. Upon the first that she took up was written, ‘My Lord’s picture’”—it was the Earl of Leicester.26

Erna Auerbach notes that one Hilliard miniature of the Queen is still preserved in a small carved and gilt cabinet, with four other limnings, said to have been given by Elizabeth to Penelope, Lady Rich.27 The emotions once conveyed by these tiny images are now long past retrieval. But the Queen’s picture had a message we still may read: both the giver and the receiver affirmed public loyalty and private affection.

The Berkeley Castle miniature, with its activity of music, also confronts us with its departure from its genre. In one modern view, this departure is itself the matter to be read: “What constitutes the Text is, on the contrary (or precisely), its subversive force with regard to old classifications.”28 So maintained Roland Barthes, and he is echoed by Alastair Fowler in a diacritical understanding of genre: “To have any artistic significance, to mean anything distinctive in a literary way, a work must modulate or vary or depart from its generic conventions, and consequently alter them for the future.”29

The miniature of the lute player is like none other of the Queen, or of any other sitter. The picture observes almost all the conventions of the genre: size, oval shape, refinement of dress and facial detail, and the clear steady light favored by Elizabeth. But then there is the lute—suggesting the tribute of one art form to another, activity in place of iconic stasis, and the private life of the Queen.

Although the lute miniature is an early one, and one which did not really alter Hilliard’s approach to the many that came after, its “differentness” does change our reading. Its subject matter sets up a contrast with virtually all the surviving portraits of Elizabeth. In a reading based on relationships, we place this picture within the context, the structure, of all Hilliard’s miniatures of the Queen. The meanings of its “text” are then the meanings inherent in the genre (its language) plus the special word of its differentness. Both language and word are essential to the communicative power of this tiny image.

Structures have aided our interpretation of two portraits—one in a probable pattern-set, the other a charming outlier of the miniature genre. The dramatic contrast between the two is something to note. Actually, the two-inch picture is more animated and more inviting, establishing a rapport with the viewer (even the latter-day viewer for whom it was never intended). It seems to convey sound as well as sense. The Armada portrait, on the other hand, despite the chilled and remote image, has its own paths of access through the Queen’s speeches. The words of the painting are the words of her exhortation: “Rather than any dishonor should grow by me, I myself will take up arms, I myself will be your general, judge, and rewarder of every one of your virtues in the field.”

And herein lies our final observation of the “unsuspected harmonies” found among Elizabeth’s portraits: we hear two voices of the Queen, the public and the private. The large-scale picture, like a proclamation, extends its message through formal rhetoric. Its audience is widespread, thanks to the repeated versions. The miniature, a message to one person or family, is lyrical in feeling and depicts a private moment.

Yet each is a voice, more or less deliberate, in the Queen’s continuous dialogue with her subjects. Whether in the public-contract (her marriage with her people) or in the private bonds of long affection, the portraits affirmed her presence and her faith.
3.

A Web of Fictions

A portrait is a fiction. This brief equation opens two interesting lines of inquiry for reading the Queen’s portraits. The first line treats the element of narrative, the second, of likeness.

Fiction is, among other things, an imagined world, a representation of reality which may relate or imply a tale. It suggests a sequence of activity and response, conveyed through character. We are surprised to find this kind of fiction in portraiture, which usually depicts a single figure or at most adds one or two figures as “foils.” But one of the handsomest portraits of Elizabeth is exactly this: a narrative with its siter as protagonist.

The painting, now in Hampton Court, is known as “The Judgment of Paris,” or “Queen Elizabeth and the Three Goddesses.” Dated 1569, it has been ascribed to the Flemish painter Hans Eworth. Oliver Millar, writing about the present Royal Collection, finds this picture and the portrait of Elizabeth as a princess to be the most beautiful survivors of her own collection (many Tudor pieces now belonging to the Crown having been added by later kings and queens).

The implied narrative is none other than the tale of Paris and the apple of discord. In this revised version, supremacy has been awarded not to Hera, Athena, or Aphrodite, but to Elizabeth. Surpassing them in their own qualities of majesty, prowess, and beauty, she confounds the goddesses and is stationed firmly above them. A number of contemporary literary texts develop the same theme of royal compliment, and the classical story was well known.

The painting includes a studied composition of seven figures. In the foreground is the corner of a Tudor brick palace; in the background, a very early rendering of Windsor Castle. A lively realism invests the scene. As the Queen steps forward (virtually on stage) at the left, two of her ladies attend, their heads bent in animated exchange. In the right half of the panel, the three goddesses show varying degrees of agitation. Hera twists in her flight, Athena raises a hand (in wonder?), and only Aphrodite remains serene, drawn entirely in repose. Winged Eros completes the allegorical tableau, which depicts action, yet is frozen forever in stillness, like the pursuer and pursued in Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn.”

The supple handling of drapery and gesture among the goddesses makes this painting unusual in mid-century Tudor art. At the same time, the Queen and her ladies show off the finely detailed and simple bell-shapes and triangles of Elizabethan costume. Palace arches and steps are accurate in perspective and careful in shadowing. The reading eye builds a sense of accumulated details as it moves back and forth between the two groups in the drama.

Two objects have particular symbolic weight and strategic placement within the design. At the left, Elizabeth holds out the orb (in German, Reichsapfel, the “imperial apple”), and at center stage, Hera’s sandal lies, dropped in her retreat. The contest is over; we have arrived just as the narrative is ending.

Actually, the implied narrative of the picture is twofold. On the one hand, we recall the Judgment of Paris and the prior tale, the apple of discord. Eris, the personification of strife, had attended the marriage of Peleus and Thetis. Throwing an apple in among the goddesses, she challenged the most beautiful to pick it up. Other accounts hold that Hermes then brought Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite to Paris for him to judge their beauty and award the apple. Bribed by the promise of Helen, Paris chose Aphrodite. As
a folk-tale of choice, which has its counterpart in other cultures, the story questions which is best: kingship, courage in conflict, or love? The apple of strife, then the fateful choice, led to the disastrous Trojan War in which deities and mortals alike were embroiled.

On the other hand, the painting relates what Jean Seznec has called "the invasion of England by the gods"—that reintroduction of the ancient deities into the Elizabethan imagination, primarily from Italian manuals of mythology. Now the classical goddesses and the historical Queen appear in some kind of interaction, each with a vigorous presence in the age. By even appearing in the painting, the pagan figures are not entirely vanquished by Elizabeth but show their persistence in poetic texts and decorative art of the time.

Erwin Panofsky provides a variation in interpreting this second "narrative"—the arrival of the pagan gods in the Renaissance. He suggests that during the Middle Ages, classical motifs and classical themes came apart (for example, the figure of Hercules turned into an allegory of salvation), but the Renaissance re-integrated them. The painting we are studying confirms and extends this view: the goddesses are solidly alive, with their original pagan attributes, but here they are also personifications of Elizabeth's qualities, externalized like pageant figures. Her symbolic routing of them does not mean their banishment but rather her supremacy in their traditional qualities.

Once again, let us approach the painting as readers. Reader-oriented schools of criticism offer promising theories in literary study, and provoke our thoughts about visual forms as well. Remember Scholes's semiotic view of all texts as open, incomplete, using semantic and cultural codes and echoing other texts. As interpreters of this complex portrait, the readers will participate in creating meaning, in completing the statement (or a statement) made by the painting. The notion of codes, to be explored in a later chapter, recalls the idea of text as communication: sender and receiver meet at the center of symbolic expression—one encoding and the other interpreting, a meeting of minds.

As for echoing other texts, this Judgment of Paris portrait offers implications radiating in all directions. The modes of inter-relationships are many: Culler has advocated reading works "in relation to other texts which they take up, cite, parody, refute, or generally transform." What other texts are taken up by this painting, and how are they transformed?

To begin with, this portrait dates from fairly early in the Queen's reign. The classical tale illustrated here, revised to honor Elizabeth, found literary expression in the 1580s (Peel's Arreigment of Paris) and 1590s (Richard Barnfield's Cynthia). In the sequence of artistic work, the later texts cite and reflect the earlier, although to a reader today, all exist simultaneously for comparison and interpretation. The Elizabethan writers may well have been aware of this vivid painting, probably displayed in one of the Royal residences. It was they who may have taken up the picture's imagery and theme.

But the painting does follow the 1563 draft proclamation expressing official dismay over the many unseemly portraits of the Queen. This handsome portrayals, rich in legible attributes and skilled in artistry, certainly refutes the earlier hackwork. It transforms the conventional, single portraits into a kind of collective portrait, with an implied narrative animating the characters.

If we search more widely, we find still other kinds of texts in the web of relationships. Returning to our question of the motives of portraiture, we recall Elizabeth's means of showing herself forth, of keeping in the public eye, of continually courting the kingdom which she had "married." The portraits were features in this domestic public relations, and so were the many progresses with their pageant entertainments. All were texts echoing each other.

If culture is an acted document, then the progresses were among the Queen's own statements in that complex document the Elizabethan age. They were written by her actions and inscribed in the memory of her subjects. Today the eye-witness account of her progresses are read as historical texts; the published entertainments are treated as literary texts. The Judgment of Paris painting com-
bines these elements and adds the Queen’s portrait, which (whether of much value as a likeness or not) anchors the picture in still another stream, the visual texts.

Elizabeth’s summer progresses, to her own royal houses and the great houses of her leading subjects, were an extraordinary feature of her reign. The sheer activity generated by this courtly habit matched her own energy as protagonist of it all: enormous retinues traveled; hosts prepared hospitality, often prodigious and at nearly ruinous cost; and towns and universities turned out to exchange affection with the Queen in countless ways, formal and informal, while literary and artistic talent was marshaled for tributes both playful and profoundly serious.

The rich interconnections between Elizabeth’s travels and the texts surrounding them were perceived years ago by the antiquary John Nichols. In his three volume Progresses and Public Processions of Queen Elizabeth (two volumes, 1788; the third, 1807), he collected accounts of the many visits, plus entertainments, orations, songs, and poems; expense accounts, lists of gifts, letters to and from the Queen on arrangements or policy matters that had come up along the way, and much more. By casting his net so widely, Nichols seems to anticipate by two centuries our current fascination with echoing texts, and with the cultural web formed by many kinds of expression.

The pageants associated with Elizabeth’s visits also deserve our attention. These were a steady series of mini-narratives offered to her over forty-five years, from beginning to end of her reign. She was both audience and participant (as her successor James never was) as her temperamental and political instincts led her. The tone of her future involvement was set in a brief episode in her coronation procession: pausing at Little Conduit, she met the figure Time leading his daughter Truth. When Truth offered her the English Bible, she took it, kissing and embracing it in affirmation. Thereafter she favored being an actor, however briefly, in the symbolic dramas set before her.

Often the pageants combined historical figures with emblematic, classical, or mythical ones, as the 1569 portrait does. And it is crucial to remember that the pageantry was counsel as well as compliment. Although the royal virtues were enacted and extolled, the whole matter was also admonition and reminder—prescriptive as well as descriptive in intent. Hence the term “flattery” does not really apply to these courtly tributes. To someone less successful (and self-confident) than Elizabeth they might have seemed a constant, even nagging, scrutiny of her performance as a ruler.

Another feature of the 1569 portrait links it intriguingly to pageant motifs: the characters in the painting are all female (with the exception of the boy Eros). The problem of a female monarch was clear to Elizabeth from the beginning of her reign. Adroitly, she turned to her advantage whatever aspects of her sex she could, from the notion of marrying her kingdom to the much-varied theme of virginity. It served her well to be associated with female deities, female representatives of the qualities of kingship. For although there were few examples of successful queens in nearby history, there was an ample pantheon of women to draw upon in classical mythology and Biblical tradition.

E. C. Wilson surveyed many of these associations several generations ago, noting Elizabeth’s treatment (in literature) as the Old Testament Judith and Deborah, and also as Diana, Cynthia, Gloriana, and Belphoebe, combinations of classical and native mythmaking.

In the painting we are studying, the qualities of Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite come to the fore, linked to the Queen. Since she herself carries off the apple, the Reichstag, the choice motif has become moot. It no longer matters which of the three attributes is best, as Elizabeth embodies them all.

For a nice echo in pageantry, this time literally an acted document, we look at a marriage entertainment attended by the Queen in 1600. A masque portrayed eight Muses in search of the ninth, to dance with them to the music of Apollo. Elizabeth was invited to be the ninth, and—thereby allying herself with history, drama, and all activities inspired by the Muses—she joined in the dance.
appearance on the stage of history, was a most appropriate set for the Queen to join at the end of her reign, for she herself had inspired much in artistic creativity and the statecraft of her age.

Other questions now arise from the reader-oriented modern schools. The Judgment of Paris picture relies on an earlier story for its meaning. How does the work use the audience’s knowledge of the original? How can narrative be implied in a fixed image like a painting? These questions will come into our final discussion, on the mental process of reading a picture like this one.11

Clearly, much depends here on the degree of the viewer’s acquaintance with the Paris story. First, we may adduce Wolfgang Iser’s distinction between contemporary (i.e., sixteenth-century) and later readers of a text. The former he calls “participants,” the latter “observers.”12 Although this idea cuts across our earlier premise, common among modern theorists, that all audiences participate in creating meanings, Iser’s distinction is useful in introducing the question of degree. Contemporary viewers were involved in myriad ways with what they saw. We are more detached, our interpretations cooled by distance.

The viewer’s knowledge of the original story may come to mind in sketchy detail. We may recognize the three figures on the right, by dress and symbolic detail, but not know why they are there. We may spot the orb and translate it (peering closer, ask “Is that an apple?”), but not know how Queen Elizabeth is involved. As usual, there is no problem in recognizing her. Even realizing the Judgment of Paris motif, readers of the picture may not recall the classical story and hence may be unable to imagine a Tudor version of the narrative.

The process of “literary borrowing” has forged links between centuries, and between sister arts, over the years. The retelling of a tale may generate parody, mock heroic, or painful irony in the setting of a different age. In this instance, the story of Paris is cited but left untold. The reader must rebuild the new version, out of the existing fragments and what Wolfgang Iser has called “the blanks in the text.” Iser maintains that the reader “is drawn into the events and must supply what is meant from what is not said. What is said only appears to take on significance as a reference to what is not said; it is the implications and not the statements that give shape and weight to the meaning.” This is, in a phrase, “the interaction between text and reader.”13

The Tudor painting replaces Paris with Elizabeth, but we must rewrite the narrative. She is not making a choice to present the apple. Instead, someone has chosen her. Because the apple has become the orb, we conclude that divine right has chosen and affirmed her to be Queen.

But the figure immediately facing her is another queen. Between the two is one of those blanks in the text, which we are challenged to fill in. Elizabeth appears to be entirely decorous and still; she makes no gesture. But Hera’s gesture crosses the open space. Is she indicating dismay, on behalf of her group? (The picture is sometimes called “The Confounding of the Goddesses.”) Or does she beckon to Elizabeth with the upraised arm, bidding the Queen to join them, establishing a link? The space is also the discontinuity between the fictional figures and the historical; must they always be on one side of the imagination and she on the other?

Anyone knowing the Paris story knows its consequences: ten years of war. The narrative implied in the painting must end differently. The three quarreling goddesses have been bypassed, and the choice has gone to Elizabeth: the consequence may be peace, or stability.

By the sixteenth century, these female powers lived in the arts and not in the heavens, but nevertheless they were still goddesses. Elizabeth lifts the orb surmounted by a cross, an implied religious statement as well.

Although this painting is a fixed image, it evokes the reader’s activity in many ways to recreate its hidden narrative. “A work . . . does not speak, as it were, it only answers,” suggests Jonathan Culler.14 But this remarkable picture, a portrait and more, certainly
“speaks” in its allusion to the Judgment of Paris. In response, the reader poses questions, then both seeks and creates many possible answers.

Clearly, fiction has to do with narrative, with telling tales. But it also has to do with feigning, and with invention. This avenue brings us squarely to the question of likeness. Thrown off the scent by the many routine and primitive portraits, our curiosity becomes even stronger: what did she really look like?

The art of portraiture exists along a continuum, with history/realism at one end and invention/romance at the other. Pictures of the Queen may tend toward the latter pole, but how can a portrait be a portrait at all without a basic kernel of likeness? To explore these matters we turn to what may be the most satisfying image of Elizabeth, the “Darnley” portrait of about 1575.

This painting, purchased in 1925 from the ears of Darnley, at Cobham Hall, has been a favorite for sixty years in the National Portrait Gallery. Roy Strong believes that its facial type, the “mask of majesty” became the pattern for five different series, each with three or four pictures—a little family tree in itself.\(^1\)

We are struck immediately by the naturalism of this portrait, and its beauty. The Queen’s famous wardrobe is richly illustrated. Her unshadowed face is all the more striking in contrast to the patterned gown, the brocade in shades of gold and russet, the fine narrow ruffs at throat and wrists. A lush feather fan echoes the colors and sets off her hands.

Pearls loop across her bodice and also form a delicate tiara. The ruby jewel with pendant pearl at her waist may enclose a miniature (in 1566 the Spanish ambassador noted a portrait of Mary Queen of Scots hanging from Elizabeth’s waist).\(^2\) The bands of gold-colored braid add pattern to pattern and outline the stylish curve of her sleeves. In the shadows, but still a definite presence, is a crown. The colors are thoroughly Titian, and the dark background seems to heighten the glow even after four hundred years.

The surprising thing is the solidity of the figure, the body within the garment. The fit is so believable that Janet Arnold, the assiduous investigator of early clothing design, can sketch a dressmaker’s pattern of these sleeves and analyze how they achieve their shape (by curved seams).\(^3\)

The face, severe though it may be, seems credible also. Dark eyes, slightly crooked nose, distinctive mouth: all are drawn in just a few strokes. Yet Hilliard had found likeness to be in just such simplicity—“the truth of the line.”

It is time to look at first-hand descriptions of Elizabeth, for they do seem to be the written texts most closely allied to the painted portraits. Horace Walpole sought a common denominator (not settling for the “bushel of pearls” test): “... by placing together the verbal descriptions of her person, which those conversant with her, at different periods, have given us, a clearer idea of it may be suggested, than by any other means, and a criterion afforded of the exact degree of resemblance.”\(^4\) This goal proved easier told than reached.

Sir James Melville, minister to England from Mary Queen of Scots, gave this account of Elizabeth at age thirty-one, in 1564: “Queen Elizabeth’s hair was more reddish than yellow, curled in appearance naturally. She desired to know of me, what colour of hair was reputed best; and whether my Queen’s hair or hers was best; and which of them two was fairest [i.e. palest]. I answered, the fairness of them both was not their worst faults. But she was earnest with me to declare which of them I judged fairest. I said, she was the fairest Queen in England, and mine the fairest Queen of Scotland. Yet she appeared earnest. I answered, they were both the fairest ladies in their countries; that her Majesty was whiter, but my Queen was very lovely. She enquired which of them was the highest stature: I said, my Queen. Then, saith she, she is too high; for I myself am neither too high nor too low.”\(^5\)

Later, at an uncertain date, we find Sir Richard Baker confirming that alliance of mind and face noted in the Princess portrait: “She was of stature indifferent tall, slender and straight; fair of complexion; her hair inclining to pale yellow; her fore-head large and fair; her eyes lively and sweet, but short-sighted; her nose
somewhat rising in the midst; the whole compass of her countenance somewhat long, yet of admirable beauty; but the beauty of her mind was far more admirable, which she was particularly happy in expressing, both by speech and writing.”

Certain details are reinforced also by one Fuller, an observer at Court: “She was of person tall; of hair and complexion fair; well-favoured, but high-nosed; of limbs and feature neat; of a stately and majestic deportment. She had a piercing eye where with she used to touch what metall strangers were made of which came into her presence. . . . She much affected rich and costly apparel; and if ever jewells had just cause to be proud, it was with her wearing them.”

Hair, nose, the favored paleness, the keen eyes—these features are corroborated in the Darnley portrait, as is the general effect of majesty.

In Elizabeth’s sixty-fifth year, in 1598, the German traveler Paul Hentzner recorded a late view of her: “Next came the queen, very majestic, her face oblong, fair, but wrinkled, her eyes small, yet black and pleasant; her nose a little hooked, her lips thin, and her teeth black. She had in her ears two pearls, with very rich drops; she wore false hair, and that red; upon her head she had a small crown. Her bosom was uncovered, as all the English ladies have it till they marry; and she had a necklace of exceeding fine jewels; her hands were small, her fingers long, and her stature neither tall nor low.”

These verbal portraits also may combine realism and idealizing, just as the paintings do. But still we find in them supporting evidence in our quest for likeness in the pictures.

Theories of sixteenth-century state portraiture range along the very continuum that we are observing: from history / realism to invention / romance. Marianna Jenkins has studied in detail the qualities and conventions of European court portraits, and the ideas surrounding them. One problem was that painters felt they must heighten or surpass nature. Merely making a documentary record

left the artist’s talent untapped. Giorgio Vasari certainly advocated likeness, but he believed it could be combined with true artistry: “Now it is a truth, that he who takes portraits should labor, not so much with reference to what is demanded by a perfect figure, as with the determination to make his works resemble those for whom they are intended; but when the portrait, in addition to being a faithful resemblance, is beautiful also, then such works deserve to be called extraordinary, and masters who execute them merit the reputation of excellence.” (The Darnley portrait may meet this very test.)

Some artists, on the other hand, apparently cared little for realism in portraiture. Michelangelo, it is said, was asked why his statues of the dukes of Nemours and Urbino (on the Medici tombs) did not resemble their subjects. In a thousand years, he answered, no one will know what they looked like.

But for the most part, sixteenth-century court portraiture followed a kind of selective idealism, as advocated by Paolo Lomazzo in his *Trattato dell’Arte de la Pittura* (published in Milan, 1584; translated into English by Richard Haydocke and published 1598). Lomazzo counseled painters to pursue likeness, yet also to work from an “idea” in the mind. It follows that the artist may dissimulate and hide natural imperfections, since portraits of the great are intended to inspire people. The resemblance should combine physical likeness with qualities of the sitter’s character and station. In fact, the portraitist might follow the artists of antiquity, whose aim was to personify the subject’s most pronounced traits. For a ruler, this might well be “majesty.”

Lomazzo treats majesty in a section on how to represent various abstract concepts. His discussion is somewhat circular, as he recommends movements and gestures showing honor, nobility, and magnanimity. Although he does not specify the gestures, they should be grave and stately. In its mainstream, court portraiture adopted the standing, full-length figure, perhaps to best show off the desired proportions of different parts of the body. We may
note also that a full-length figure appears to be at a greater distance than a partial, nearer view, and hence is more reserved and imposing.

Hilliard’s * Arte of Limning* (which opens with a reference to Lomazzo) also contains the premise of realism combined with selectivity. “Now know that all painting imitateth nature, or the life,” he writes. But one can choose what details to imitate, so that “not only the party in all likeness for favour and complexion is, or may be very well resembled, but even his best graces and countenance notably expressed; for there is no person but hath variety of looks and countenance, as well ill-becoming as pleasing or delighting.” The artist may select the best features and expression of a sitter. In this would be nothing false.

It is a pity that conventions (or inability) prevented Elizabeth’s portraitists from following Hilliard’s urging to “catch those lovely graces, witty smiling, and those stolen glances which suddenly like lightning pass, and another countenance taketh place.” Subtlety of expression is just what we miss in most pictures of her. Her mercurial moods evidently did pass like lightning, and her expressiveness was often compared to weather. The quickness of her mind and responses would have been a challenge for any artist to capture in a fixed image. But the tiny lute miniature by Hilliard may have caught just the witty smile he spoke of.

Through all of this, we sense that the Renaissance artist is creating an illusion, and knows it. Whether that illusion be a lifelike representation or quite unlike the sitter is another matter. It is an invention either way. Lucy Gent, writing on picture and poetry in sixteenth-century England, notes that lively colors, not closeness of imitation, were most praiseworthy then in painting. In fact shadowing (that subject of discussion between Hilliard and the Queen) was still suspect as a concept—recalling the old contrasts between shadow and substance, in which the former suggested feigning or something false. Toward the end of the century, shadowing, or rounding, began to be accepted, along with perspective, as bringing life to the visual forms. By these lights, a sophisticated viewer would be aware of art as artifice, but also as a rendering of truth.

Like the poets, Elizabethan painters could generate wonder in the transformations of reality to illusion, and they increasingly followed this mode in creating portraits of the Queen. In the latter decades of Elizabeth’s reign, the personification of majesty was played out in its many variations—with illusions of youth and of dreamlike imagery. But always the core of reality was there, the reality of the Queen’s dignity and authority.

It is worth mentioning, as background to the splendid Darnley portrait of about 1575, that Nichols records that the most memorable of the Queen’s progresses, and the longest in duration, was made in that year. That summer she passed from Theobalds (the principal residence of Lord Burghley), through Bedfordshire, to her palace at Grafton, in Northamptonshire, and thence to Kenilworth, where she was royally entertained for nineteen days by the Earl of Leicester. She returned through Staffordshire, Gloucestershire, Oxfordshire, and Berkshire. These travels, and the painting, occurred in the decade just after Elizabeth’s excommunication. Though she was watchful of dangers, she still vigorously courted the loyalty of her subjects.

Reading the Queen’s portraits as fiction works on several different levels. We have seen the element of narrative in a single painting, and we may well ask whether the entire body of portraits forms a biographical narrative. After all, the surviving pictures span a period of at least fifty years. And yes, to the extent that we know their dates, the portraits do take on implications from (and add reflections to) the concurrent events of the reign.

But inquiring about a visual biography, our reading must be much more problematic. The Princess portrait certainly shows credible youth and simplicity. A few late portraits (including the great Ditchley canvas, which we will study below), show signs of the Queen’s aging. But so much is going on within these pictures and around them that we find barely any record of her changing
appearance. The continuing narrative is instead the narrative of the imaginative perceptions of her by her artists.

And finally, there remains the question of likeness, which still eludes us. The spectrum we proposed—from history/realism to invention/romance—is not even a distinct progression, as each portrait has its own combination of historical “truth” and invention. The clothing and jewels may be the one thread of authenticity; some of the famous jewels in the pictures had names and appear in the royal inventories, as do the clothes in the wardrobe lists.

The mixture of resemblance and idealizing was advocated by theorists of the time, including Lomazzo (published very late in England) and Hilliard. As the Queen’s physical beauty declined, the inventiveness of the artists provided other attractions emphasis on rich surroundings, or the outright deception of continuing youth.

But the important thing to remember in admiring this web of fictions about Elizabeth is that history and romance were interplaying from the start. So central was she in the affairs of her kingdom, so strong a figure did she cut in critical events at home and abroad, that each portrait was anchored in history whether it resembled her or not. At the same time, the ceremony of praise continued in various permutations from her coronation day to her death, and the portraits partake of this romance also. The historical Elizabeth and the idealized Elizabeth were absolutely interdependent, each continuously creating the other in a peculiar dialectic. The portraits convey the synthesis, in the mode of art.

4.

Perspective and Pattern

Discursive space and pictorial space: when these coincide in a work of visual art, the discussion of structure takes on new possibilities. Two of the Queen’s portraits offer fields of thought in which one key may unlock a mixture of meanings, illusions, and readings.

Let that key be the art of perspective, with all its implications for the ordering of internal space and the differentiation of viewpoints. The first of the two paintings is the Siena version of the “Sieve portraits,” the one now hanging in the Pinocateca of Siena, Italy. Discovered rolled up in the attic of a Medici palace there in the 1890s, the picture is of uncertain authorship, though probably by a northern hand. It has been dated about 1580–83.

The other painting, which presents a kind of antithesis in its ordering of space, is the familiar “Ermine” portrait at Hatfield House. Dated 1585 on the sword hilt in the picture, the work was traditionally ascribed to Hilliard. But like so many of the Queen’s portraits, this one eludes any certain attribution. Because the artist is unknown, the work is not colored by the biography of its creator. Instead, the Queen’s persona holds sway in a kind of solitude, as though in the absence of the artist.

The Siena portrait is one of the most beautiful and evocative images of Elizabeth. Her garments are simple, in high contrasts of
black and white, with the auburn of her hair recapitulated in the
golden tones of the architecture, jewelry, and even the sieve. Es-
entially, no colors appear except the ruddy gold. All else is the
plain velvety blackness of her unfuriged dress, the white of the
flowing cloak, curving high behind her shoulders, and the finely
pointed lace and ruffs at her wrists and throat. The face and hands
are of the prized whiteness, while the eyes appear intently black.

The figure of the Queen is surrounded by a detailed program
of symbolic forms, which can be summarized only briefly here.
Most important is the circular sieve, linking Elizabeth to the vestal
virgin Tuccia, who had carried water from the Tiber River to her
temple in a sieve as proof of her chastity. The Queen’s right arm
rests against a pillar made of faceted jewels and inset with oval
medallions depicting the tale of Dido and Aeneas. Both the imperial
column and the allusions to the Aeneas story confirm the regal
destiny of Elizabeth, suggesting that she has turned away from
encumbering marriage as Aeneas turned away from Dido’s attrac-
tions.3

Counterpoint to these imperial themes is the globe at the
Queen’s left, with a shining highlight on the British Isles, sur-
rrounded by ships. Three inscriptions in Italian, to be discussed at
length below, are incorporated into the visual web of detail within
the painting, so finely they are nearly hidden.

But perhaps most eye-catching in this portrait is the arcade
stretching into the background of the picture, with its colonnade
and attending figures in the receding space. The flatly decorative
aesthetic of Tudor portraiture is briefly pierced by this excursion
into visual geometry. Unlike the shallow niche of the Princess por-
trait or the historiated open windows of the Armada panel, this
background design genuinely explores space.

We must note that the little exercise in perspective occupies
just a fraction of the picture surface, as though it were an option
the artist chose instead of painting in a window. The area imme-
diately around the Queen’s figure is shadowy and two-dimensional.

The pillar and globe are indeterminate in their depth within the
painting and their distance from her. Characteristically, her form
rises like a pyramid from the two lower corners of the picture,
boldly near, and we cannot make out plausible space around her.
Nor is there a visually clear relationship between the interior, where
she stands, and the apparently outdoor arcade where her gentleman
pensioners walk with their halberds. Yet, limited though it is, the
fragment of articulated perspective affects our whole sense of the
portrait.

Recent studies of linear perspective and its rediscovery in the
Renaissance have laid a groundwork for our reading of the Siena
portrait. The principal assumptions of perspective, as an artistic
convention, are summarized by the critic Claudio Guillen as follows:
(1) painting is a mimetic fiction concerned with visual appearances;
(2) the unified space of a painting depends on the fiction of the
single beholder; (3) the point of view of this beholder belongs to a
single, immobile eye; (4) objects are represented as having the same
sizes and positions relative to one another, as they do when viewed
by the single eye; (5) structures and their interconnections as rep-
resented on a painting’s surface belong to geometrical systems; and
(6) the most important relational structure is distance, with depth
perceived as relational to the viewer.3

To pursue these notions of optical perspective toward their
ramifications in metaphorical perspective, we must consider Samuel Y.
Edgerton’s elegant small study of The Renaissance Rediscovery of Linear
Perspective. He traces the new ways of seeing and representing reality
in the Italian Renaissance through contexts of civic humanism and
the expanding secular world, scientific curiosity, and the ideals of
the ancients. Complex understandings of perspective in later cen-
turies stem from a central literary document of Quattrocento Flo-
rence, the Della pittura of Leon Battista Alberti.

Alberti treated painting as an exercise of the mind, requiring
close observation of nature but also consciousness of an ideal
world—an inner structure of things, ordered by the harmonies and
portraits of Queen Elizabeth I

48 Proportions perceived by mathematics and related sciences. Optics and geometry were at the service of an artist not only for aesthetic purposes but to infuse a divine harmony into his or her work.*

Hence the notion of perspective as conveying both a physical and an intellectual reality—a notion which we will bring to the Siena portrait of Elizabeth—had evolved for about a hundred and fifty years since Alberti’s formulation in 1435 (and since his compatriot Filippo Brunelleschi’s famous demonstration of the vanishing point at the Duomo in Florence, 1425).* Because this painting of the Queen hangs in Italy, its early history unknown, and because it has inscriptions in Italian, its use of perspective seems all the more linked with the Quattrocento theorists.

Regarding the painting as a text, we may profitably turn to Guillen’s discussion of the term (and the idea) of “perspective” in literature. Our visual perception of the Siena portrait and corresponding interpretations constantly shift back and forth into each other, an interaction of the eye and the mind’s eye.

Guillen traces the metaphor of perspective from sixteenth-century Florence through Shakespeare and Cervantes. At first the term indicated falsehood or deceit. Visual illusion was to be distrusted, equated with “seeming” and deception. Eventually, the notion of distance in perspective transferred metaphorically to time, the perception of depth suggesting insight into past or future.

By the seventeenth century, the metaphor of perspective was being used with respect to knowledge and judgment, drawing on the optical basis of a single point of view. Soon came the earliest examples of what is called, “seeing things in perspective” (implications of distance: a detached and dispassionate attitude).

In the twentieth century, the critical term “perspectivism” denotes another shift, this time toward eclecticism, cosmopolitan doubt, intellectual pluralism. In essence, a keen awareness of history (that view backwards—or forwards—toward some vanishing point) keeps alive the possibility of multiple points of view.

A perspectivist aesthetic, Guillen concludes, if such a thing exists, proceeds from the work of art itself, a complex of poten-
tialities which criticism tries to actualize. The creative achievement of each critic “brings us back to the work itself, in a kind of constant voyage between the finite structure and the endless critical perspectives.” The existence of the work is not static or immutable, as critics continue their discoveries of perspectives into it. Optical and cognitive perceptions continually interweave.

All these notions of perspective, transferred into our study from the literary sphere, may have a bearing on our reading of the Siena portrait. Essentially, they remind us that the eye-catching space within the picture is also a discursive space—a space filled with statements and questions. Suppose that we take the various historic meanings of perspective (a diachronic set, in their development over time) and consider them as simultaneously available to us for querying the painting (a synchronic system of related ideas).

The Siena portrait apparently has little to do with the sense of perspective as deceit. Nevertheless, this usage, implying distrust for artificial appearances, is worth our pause, because it was nearly contemporary with the painting. In 1623, only a generation after the probable dating of the portrait, William Drummond of Hawthornden wrote, “All we can set our eyes upon in these intricate mazes of Life is but Alchimie, vain Perspective, and deceiving Shadows, appearing far other ways afar off, than when enjoyed and looked upon at a near Distance.”

Even closer to the probable date of the painting is Hilliard’s Arte of Limning, written sometime around 1600. Drawing on the Italian theorist Lomazzo, Hilliard makes this analysis of truth within deceit: “... for as Lomazzo truly speaketh in the eleventh chapter, Of Optica, ‘you cannot measure any part of your picture by his true superfices [surfaces], because painting perspective and foreshortening of lines, with due shadowing, according to the rule of the eye, worketh by falsehood to express truth in very cunning of line and true observation of shadowing—especially in human shapes, as the figure lieth, boweth, or standeth, and is situated, or is and aptly shall be placed to deceive the eye.

“For perspective, to define it briefly, is an art taken from or
by the effect or judgment of the eye, for a man to express anything in shortened lines and shadows, to deceive both the understanding and the eye. This caused the famous and eloquent Cicero to say, ‘O how many things do painters see in heightening or lightening and shadowing, which we discern not.’

Working by falsehood to express truth, Hilliard concurs, is the nature of perspective. And the use of shortened lines and shadows deceives both the understanding and the eye. Yet insight arises even from the deception, as painters discern more in their work than a common eye can see, playing across surfaces.

The later notion of distance transformed into time is also fruitful, with visual depth suggesting a view into past or future. The portrait contains two avenues of historical detail. The first, in the foreground, is the mythical past occupied by Dido and Aeneas. That classical parallel, along with the sieve linking the Virgin Queen to her vestal forebear, adds the dimension of time to the painting.

The second avenue, into the immediate history of Elizabeth’s regime, begins with the identity of a figure in the background arcade. Roy Strong identifies the gentleman walking forward with his young page as Sir Christopher Hatton, Captain of the Guard and a favorite of the Queen. He is known by his cognizance of a white hind on his sleeve. Hatton was deeply interested in the many exploratory sea voyages of the time, and Strong finds his presence in the painting a link to Elizabeth’s imperial destiny and accomplishments. Further, such an identity strengthens the attribution of the painting to Cornelius Ketel, as Hatton had been that artist’s patron.

Even without a sure identification of the background gentlemen, the space opening behind the Queen implies structure, the social structure of the monarch backed by her court. Although typically alone in her portraits, Elizabeth here appears in the potential dynamic of human activity, even though the courtiers are so small and detached from her that they are more like a reference, an allusion, than players in a shared drama.

Guillen concludes his discussion of the metaphor of perspective
Plate 2. The "Armada" portrait, c. 1588

Plate 3. The "Armada" portrait, c. 1588 (detail)
Plate 4. Elizabeth in her coronation robes, c. 1600

Plate 5. Queen Elizabeth playing the lute, by Nicholas Hilliard, c. 1576
Plate 6. "Queen Elizabeth and the Three Goddesses" 
("The Judgment of Paris"), 1569

Plate 7. "Queen Elizabeth and the Three Goddesses" 
("The Judgment of Paris"), 1569 (detail)
Plate 8. The "Durnley" portrait, c. 1575

Plate 9. The "Siena" portrait, c. 1580-83
Plate 10. The "Ermine" portrait, c. 1585

Plate 11. The "Ditchley" portrait, c. 1592
with some intriguing reflections. Though Renaissance perspective "was founded on a common-sense approach to the facts of vision," the idea has become strangely complex under modern eyes.\(^9\) The whole notion of perspective, with its distinct viewpoint, presupposes that people are beholders rather than part of what they experience. Distance, an assumption of perspective, seems to confirm the position of spectator as one who is detached, outside. At the same time, the individual is centrally involved because his or her point of view (in the visual sense) determines what is seen—angles, spaces, rows of columns, lining up according to the one perceiving eye. It is a neat paradox. We have seen that perspective is an account of structure—and it may indicate structure in space or in time. The Siena portrait offers structure to read by another means as well, from the literary premise of echoing texts.

This painting has an unusual richness, in the appearance of three inscriptions. They lie within the visible outlines of the picture as neatly as a sub-text within a text. Because they are in Italian, they have their roots in another national literature and culture, and they also remind us of the spread of the Queen's portraits on the international scene. (A scholar of Renaissance diplomacy believes that Italian was probably the commonest modern language in Europe in the second half of the sixteenth century—more Elizabethans learning it than learned French—and a language widely known in Spain and France also.)\(^11\)

The three inscriptions are as follows: on the column, "Stanco riposo e riposato affanno" ("Weary I rest, and having rested I am still weary"), derived from Petrarch's *Trionfo d'Amore*; on the globe, "Questo vedo e molto" ("I see all this, and much [is lacking]"); and on the sieve, "A terra il ben—mal dimora in sella" (meaning perhaps, "the good [falls] to the ground—the bad stays in the saddle").

The column text gives a familiar Petrarchan contrast, resembling the "freezing fire" characteristic of poetic sequences. Its source suggests a context of frustrated hopes in love, and its position on the imperial column translates the words into the civic sphere, implying the relentless vigilance of the ruler.
The other two inscriptions are even more problematic, but on the principle of echoing texts, we associate the verbal with the visual elements as they are joined in the painting. (This is the same union basic to the highly popular emblem books of the time.) The motto on the sieve indicates sifting, good and bad separated by some means in the hands of the Queen. Irony filters through the cryptic line: good falls while the bad is elevated or remains in power? Or perhaps, the good is of the earth (“down to earth,” in modern phrasing), while the bad is arrogant?

The motto of the globe may be completed by reference to another version of the painting, one of half a dozen depicting the Queen with the round sieve. Only one other contains all three inscriptions, including the version “Tutto vedo e molto mancha.”12 (here, “I see everything, and much is lacking”). Mysterious, like the other two texts, and like them, centering on a contrast or paradox.

Associated with the globe, this inscription may hint at the diplomatic networks set up by Elizabeth for political and security reasons. On a more abstract plane, the text may refer to a kind of manifest destiny, not so much for territory as for influence—roles the Queen had yet to play, which she could in broad outline foresee, as Aeneas knew his own destiny perfectly well.

If the three inscriptions are sub-texts within the painting, the painting is itself a sub-text within the larger culture. It belongs to the subsystem of art (in particular, portraiture), which runs like a thread through political structures, religious constructs, and many other components of a society. Recalling the notion of culture as an acted document, we may read the Siena portrait as a text within that document, a text which is a visible statement but also a hidden statement—its messages conveyed by indirections.

The spatial metaphor which comes to mind here is something like a nested structure: meanings within inscriptions, within a portrait, within (perhaps) a particular diplomatic corridor, within the foreign policy/public relations of a Queen. These ideas recede from us as we look at the painting, giving the effect of linear perspective.

Among the writings of the time, two may be cited as illustrating the Italians’ fascination with Elizabeth, one of the most conspicuous figures on the international scene. A Florentine visitor to her court reported that even in her seventieth year, she walked “straight as a rod” (“com’ una canna”), clad all in white.13

And the indefatigable English traveler Fynes Moryson, visiting Italy in 1594, made this discovery in the palace of the Duke of Florence: “Among other things, I wondered to see there the picture of Elizabeth our famous Queene: but the Duke of Florence much esteemed her picture, for the admiration of her vertues, howsoever the malitious Papists had long endeavoured to obscure her fame, especially in those remote parts, whose slaunders God turned to her greater glory.”14

Certainly images of Elizabeth in sixteenth-century Italy, shown there after her excommunication in 1570, must have been rare. There is no way of knowing whether the portrait seen by Moryson was the one now in Siena, but it may indeed have been.

Strikingly different in its handling of visual space is the so-called Ermine portrait, now at Hatfield House. Erna Auerbach believes it was commissioned by William Cecil, Lord Burghley, whose family built Hatfield House in the early seventeenth century and lives in it to this day. The painting may have been prepared as part of an entertainment for the Queen, who visited Burghley at Theobalds in 1585, the date painted on the sword hilt.15 It had been Burghley who, in 1563, drafted the proclamation to control the quality of Elizabeth’s portraits. (He was also a financial patron of Hilliard in the 1580s, a fact which lends support to the traditional attribution of the picture to Hilliard.)

Because it belonged to her closest minister, and because it has presumably remained through almost all its history in this quintessentially English house, the Ermine portrait is as domestic a piece as the Siena is foreign (at least in its history and associations).
The Ermine painting and its circumstances recall the Queen’s strategic pride in being “mere English.”

But what does the art of perspective, our formal “key” in this discussion, have to do with the portrait at Hatfield House? By rendering an imitation of physical space, a picture may be conveying a metaphor for discursive space—a three-dimensional and perhaps boundless area of mental activity where meanings may emerge and move into combinations or even paradoxes. The Ermine portrait seems to deny space and depth, stopping the eye at the surface of the painting.

In the absence of perspective, pattern becomes the dominant feature of this portrait. Pattern seems almost the antithesis of visual depth as it spreads its orderly webs across the two-dimensional picture plane. Its details occupy the eye, and may become pure decoration or may carry their own meanings. Either way, realistic space and the solidity of the figure are no longer the issue.

The Ermine portrait depicts Elizabeth in the familiar three-quarter length, her form nearly filling the available dimensions of the panel. While the Siena portrait made animated use of space with the background arcade, this one closes off any hint of distance, offering only an opaque window. The window both is and is not an indication of space beyond; the viewer sees nothing through the gray panes, and it is not a source of light within the painting, which is completely without shadow.

The coloring is remarkably like that of the Siena painting: black, white, and gold. This time, the black of the Queen’s gown merges with the background so that her figure nearly disappears. Only on a closer look may the two blacks be distinguished, the velvety gown and the paler black wall. Her sleeves and strangely tiny waist can be made out, and the covered table on which the sword rests. The elements of white contrast elegantly. The center of attention is the pale face, with its sharp black eyes. The wide ruff is a tour de force of detail, in evenly spaced radiating folds. It is even possible to distinguish the diamond-shaped tips of the lace at the bottom of the folds from those nearest the viewer, making a kind of rhythm

of the repeated tiny shapes. The ruffs at the wrists, though more nearly flat in design, are also highly refined.

Picking up the note of white, a little ermine (lacking the familiar tail) appears on the Queen’s left wrist. The ermine represents purity and chastity, since it was said to prefer death to soiling its white fur. The collar of gold is in the form of a crown, associating royalty and virginity; no other crown is visible in the painting.

The animal emblem links Elizabeth to Petrarch’s I Triumf, in particular the “Triumph of Chastity.” In that text, Laura is preceded in her triumphal car by a banner bearing the golden-collared ermine device. Frances Yates believed that the association with Petrarch’s Laura was carried further by the nearly invisible leafy branch in the Queen’s right hand, which may be laurel. Another interpretation might read the branch as olive, for peace, balancing the sword, which suggests both justice and military strength.

Our sense of pattern derives mainly from the Queen’s jewelry. Two items stand out from the total effect: the collar, seen in portraits of Elizabeth’s father, Henry VIII; and the pendant of three rubies known as the Three Brothers, a famous royal jewel which had belonged to the dukes of Burgundy. The predominance of topazes and pearls reinforces the association with virginity. But chiefly, the jewels serve the overall pattern as parts of a decorative whole.

From the complex realm of decorative art and its theory, we may take a few insights for the reading of this painting. All of the Queen’s portraits are ornamental, to a greater or lesser degree, and her famous wardrobe shows many examples of rich detailing. Gombrich, in The Sense of Order, his study of the psychology of decorative art, finds that a tradition of ornamentation exists in every culture, but that theoretical concern with design is a comparatively recent development.

Yet, because such awareness is current in the twentieth century (part of our historical perspective), we observe pattern as a thing-in-itself within the Ermine portrait. Elements proposed by Gombrich will serve our analysis: restlessness and repose, balance and instability. These are terms having entirely to do with the effect
on the viewer, that vital interaction between text and reader which continuously re-creates the work.

A design may be called restless if many signals compete for the viewer's attention. The details may appear to be randomly placed, or no clear arrangement may be legible. In other cases, such as with Gothic tracery, or pavement and carpet patterns, one design seems to emerge, then to dissolve and be replaced by another. We sense repose in a decorative design if it has a strong basic structure, or if we manage to see its repeats and therefore "solve" the design.

The first impression of the Ermine portrait is of a restlessly active pattern. The picture seems scattered randomly with a surface of gold dots and jewels. The effect is like a veil of richness hiding the person of the Queen; only her head and hands emerge with real substance.

But on closer inspection, the pattern of her gown begins to settle down. Both the puffed sleeves and the skirt have the repeated design of golden circlets alternated with a silvery double line motif (resembling cutwork). The lace at her wrists and ruff, although finely detailed, is so orderly that it too signals repose.

Balance and instability have more to do with apparent weight, and with symmetry. The Queen's gold braid with its frogging effect (compare the bodice decoration in the Darnley portrait) makes a strong vertical against the black gown. The garment would apparently be heavy to wear. Further, the ornamental details are symmetrical, except for the ropes of smoky gray pearls, drawn to one side. This evenness contributes to visual balance.

Gombrich also describes an organizing pull which orients patterns toward their center, a "field of force." The notion of the privileged center is common to many activities—whether theater, ceremony, or visual art—the eye moving to the central point, all the more strongly if that middle ground is richly framed. In the Ermine portrait, as in so many of the miniatures, the elaborate ruff focuses attention on the face. Hence the total effect of the picture is a flurry of detail which settles into orderly if broken patterns, all surmounted by the intricately framed face.

Pattern-making may easily flow into the abstract, a mode which seems alien to the Tudor aesthetic as it is usually understood. Yet the concept provides insights here, in the terms suggested by Jack Burnham in his study of structural approaches to art. Modern abstract artists, he believes, feel that their work "recomposes reality in its quintessential form," rather than deviating from reality. 18

The Ermine portrait is the Queen reduced to visual essence, recomposed out of space and into pattern. The essence resembles the synopsis proposed by Horace Walpole: "a pale Roman nose ... a vast ruff ... a bushel of pearls." But further, the painting is abstract in a literary sense, as allegory—for example, Elizabeth read as Petrarch's Laura. It is abstract too in a visual sense, as the idea of monarchy coded into nearly pure decoration.

The trappings of rule and its substance are like mass and energy, continually being transformed into each other. 19 Applying this notion of Clifford Geertz from his analysis of pageantry, we see the energy of Elizabeth's power emerge allegorically even as her substantive figure disappears in the Ermine portrait.

Also indicating subtleties of power, and linking the Siena and Ermine portraits, is the Queen's dress color. Toward the end of her life she habitually wore white; this had been observed by the Italian visitor already quoted. In these two paintings of the 1580s, she appears in black. Historical anthropology has proposed a certain cultural logic in the color of dress within Elizabethan court society, a logic directly interwoven with the Queen's own preferences.

The Canadian anthropologist Grant McCracken observes that the contrast between youth and age among gentlemen at Elizabeth's court was encoded by dress. 20 White or light colors set apart the younger generation, while older figures at court commonly dressed in black. His primary evidence was a hundred and one portraits of English males painted in the Elizabethan period—not, actually, documents of daily life, but records deliberately shaped for posterity by the sitters.

Among the young, white was the color of chivalry, and it implied that the wearer was illuminated by Elizabeth as the sun.
White was worn in compliment to the Queen by subjects who were as moon and stars to her brightness. Also, it echoed the coloring she herself wore, and hence showed allegiance.

Black, in contrast, was appropriate for age, suggesting gravity and constancy. Black was also associated with melancholy, but for court garb the color spoke of seriousness and responsibility. White and black, lightness and weightiness, hot ambitions and sober reflection: these were the markers traditionally setting apart youth and maturity. In the latter years of Elizabeth's reign, as she herself entered the life-stage of wearing black, the two groups polarized into two parties at court.

Elizabeth adroitly handled this color symbolism even as she kept her eye on the restless generation of Raleigh and Essex, for she herself wore both black and white. Portraits like the Siena and the Ermine expressed her authority and stability in black, while her frequent daily garb of white maintained her artifice of youth, as the fair mistress of the poets—not simply a falsehood but an image compounded of vanity, politics, and true loyalties.

Interpreting the semiotic value of dress color leads us once again to perspective—or to perspectives, as points of view. We have seen earlier, in reflecting upon Guillen, that optical perspective places the beholder distinctly outside a picture even though the structure of the picture depends on that one viewing eye. The beholder's vantage point organizes the space within the painting. (This works only when there is more or less orderly depth within a picture. To the extent such depth is missing, the viewer may be stranded outside the image, even disoriented by conflicting signals—the nonsense perspectives of M. C. Escher are an example.)

In interpreting dress color, a twentieth-century viewer may have an observer's understanding while seeking a participant's understanding. Reading cultural codes from a distance, the beholder may peruse writings of the period, or undertake what Geertz has called "a natural history of signs and symbols," investigating signs in their habitat of the society's commonplaces.13

All of this may be an effort to approximate "the period eye," as Michael Baxandall terms the visual sensibility of an age, informed by its culture. To the sixteenth-century eye, the color of royal garments might have conveyed messages which can be retrieved today only by scholarly digging. The colors were part of that rhetoric of praise surrounding the Queen by a common consent.

Equally problematic to a modern student of Elizabeth's portraits is the question of intention. To perceive, however broadly, the intentions of an artistic work is to come at least closer to a participant's understanding of it. Yet the term is fraught with psychological dilemmas only compounded by the elapse of time.

"The account of intention," writes Baxandall, "is not a narrative of what went on in the painter's mind but an analytical construct about his ends and means."22 The possibility of ever knowing authorial intention—or the necessity of knowing it—are points susceptible of endless debate. But Baxandall's terms seem to offer a way beyond the dilemma.

If intention is a construct, according to this idea, then who has constructed it? The reader beholder of a historical text may construct intention by studying the work and its purposes. In this case, intention is "not a reconstituted historical state of mind, but a relation between the object and its circumstances."23 The artist's "ends and means" include those wider motives of Tudor portraiture touched on earlier: the social and dynastic importance ascribed to portraits, the diplomatic purposes, the replacement of religious images, the gift-giving, the communications expressed both privately and publicly. Each of the Queen's portraits viewed in this study has its own possible "construct of ends and means." The anonymity of so many of the artists does not undermine the discussion of intention, but rather opens it to the wider sphere: the culture at large.

Also part of the ends and means is the genre employed by an artist, for genre is, among other things, a pre-existing set of intentions which the artist may adopt wholesale or modify or subvert. The Elizabethan miniatures were such a genre, and so, in a broader sense, was late Renaissance court portraiture. Therein lies the va-
lidity of Baxandall’s suggestion that the intention of a work may reside not in the painter’s mind but outside, in the categories of the culture.

The Siena and the Ermine portraits, both probably painted in the third decade of the Queen’s rule, date from a high time in her public esteem, both at home and abroad. In 1583, Elizabeth was fifty years old. The triumph over the Armada was ahead of her, but so was the divisiveness of the later rival generations at Court. For the present, her own vigor and achievements easily predominated over the ambitions of the young. Allegiance to her was strongly expressed in the abundance of portraits.

Two Renaissance motifs seem to coexist in the Siena and Ermine paintings. The one draws upon optical perspective to organize internal space and, by implication, to create a “depth of field” relating to historical time. The way the Siena portrait combines texts with visual signs is like a multi-faceted emblem compounded from the emblem books. Perspective suggests too the viewpoints of many beholders—Englishmen and also Italians of the time, and the disciplinary specialists looking today (historians, anthropologists, literary critics, designers). Quattrocento Italy is somewhere in the origins of this painting.

The other portrait, the Ermine, is of a native English tradition, reminiscent of medieval art with its decorative surface. Unconcerned with space, this artist presents almost an abstraction of richness, an abstraction of the Queen’s majesty. Here perspective, in the sense of orderly internal space, is replaced by pattern. This is an image surprisingly modern in feeling, yet one which, in its detachment, serves the purpose underlying so many of the Queen’s portraits—as an icon of power.

5.

Reading the Language of Signs

The idea of reading paintings has suggested many contexts for interpreting the Queen’s portraits. Questions of language, voice, and figure cross back and forth from the verbal to the visual spheres. From the web of meanings, we may attempt to fashion a theory of reading belonging especially to portraiture.

The fabric interwoven thus far has contained many strands, which must now be recalled as essential elements. The earliest images of Elizabeth took meaning from their social and dynastic context. As an “aesthetic locus” within the culture, portraiture was abundant and also operated as a medium for family pride and social continuity. Tudor portraits, existing largely to affirm a lineage and to be displayed, are documents more of history than of art.

But portraits of the young Elizabeth soon had the further weight of religious import, as they replaced the lost medieval art of the Virgin and saints and offered objects for devotion. Political and religious allegiance joined together later, as loyal subjects supported the Queen’s authority against Catholic enemies.

From the beginning, the portraits formed texts and counter-texts related to the written word. Family letters, coronation pageantry, speeches in public crisis, and messages of private affection all appear now to be verbal parallels to the paintings. But more than parallels, they are like branches from common sources, those
motives of portraiture which also yielded texts of the written language.

The sense of intertextuality carried our discussion to the rhetoric of praise, conventional in court portraiture but having a particular accent in pictures of Elizabeth. Because the Queen attempted, however fitfully and unsuccessfully, to regulate the production of her portraits, we must count her as one shaper of these images. The voice of the portrait was often hers, especially since so many of the artists cannot be certainly known. This anonymity clears the field, in a sense, for her own considerable personality to dominate her portraiture, the stage unshared with a Raphael or a Leonardo.

The conventions of genre also have entered our view, for many of the portraits must be read within the expectations of a type. Looking for the departures that throw a genre into sharper relief, we find few, and usually must content ourselves with subtle variations.

Still, genre serves as one of the structures for thinking about the whole body of Elizabeth’s portraiture. Patterns and systems emerge within the array of over a hundred surviving pictures. Other patterns—the cycle of Royal progresses, or the Queen’s self-fashioning in her speeches—incorporate certain portraits into wider circles of the culture.

Still reading texts, we uncover the element of narrative, in which a portrait may contain its own implied tale or serve as illustration for a segment of historical narrative. Sometimes, bits of story lie here and there like sub-texts—the tale of Dido and Aeneas, or the emblem-book vignette of the ermine’s purity.

Inquiring for likeness, which seems a “given” of portraiture, we observe the maneuvering of artists between realism and idealism (what we may term “history” and “romance”) in the depiction of Elizabeth. As the years passed, a historically accurate rendering of the Queen’s person became more and more unwelcome, although the fabulous wardrobe continued as a realistic record of material culture. But the so-called mask of youth slipped over the aging features and, with few exceptions, transformed the royal image into romance.

Finally, these readings of pictorial texts have included the notion of perspective, both optical and metaphorical. Point of view is a kind of captivity, confining the beholder at a single vantage point, but it may also be liberating, as we seek the “period eye” or attempt to reconstruct the figure Elizabeth cut among foreign contemporaries.

Analysis of organized space within the paintings reminds us of the open spaces in texts recognized by literary critics. The one is intended to convince the eye of depth and dimension; the other offers unknowns or the gaps of an “open work,” inviting the reader to interact in creating the text.

Surface pattern, so familiar in the Tudor aesthetic, presents an abstracted richness and majesty, but it may also be filled with semiotic possibilities. These elements of design are the figurative language of the portraits, ranging from the “alliteration” of echoing details to complex and ultimately mysterious conceits.

To pursue several final topics toward a theory of reading portraiture, we must round out the chronology of the Queen’s portraits with two late examples. These pictures will provide cases for study of reading as process, and for insight into sign systems in the visual language.

Each of the two paintings has been associated with a ceremonial, or at least a particular, occasion. The “Ditchley” portrait is dated about 1592, the year of the Queen’s visit to Ditchley in Oxfordshire, the home of her champion Sir Henry Lee. It was Lee who had initiated the tilts held each year on November 17, the Queen’s Accession Day. This pageantry of chivalry, which became a vehicle for devotion to Elizabeth and to Protestantism, carried over some medieval observances into the Renaissance milieu.

The 1592 visit included a two-day entertainment, pastoral and allegorical, acted out in compliment to the Queen. Roy Strong
believes that Lee himself also devised the iconography of this portrait, including the sonnet it contains. At nearly five feet by seven-and-a-half feet in size, it is the largest surviving image of her.

The portrait depicts Elizabeth in a cosmic setting, suspended above the curving surface of the earth. Under her feet is a map of England, with her toes touching Oxfordshire, site of the royal visit. Elements of the Queen’s costume—drum farthingale, winged cloak, tall headdress, and stiffened veil behind the shoulders—all distort the body and extend it in scale.

The effect is monumental: she “doth bestride the narrow world like a Colossus.” Behind the figure, this time, is entirely metaphorical space, suggesting the mixed “weather” of her influence. The sonnet, surviving only in fragments, affirms her light as the sun and her power as the thunder. There are also three Latin mottoes, now so fragmentary as to be out of reach.

Most startling about this painting is its candor in revealing the Queen’s age. The cheeks are sunken and the mouth tight. Although the setting places the monarch beyond the human sphere, the painted face is distinctly realistic. One wonders what she thought of the portrait.

The other late rendering of Elizabeth is the celebrated “Rainbow” portrait. Now at Hatfield House, the picture has evidently always belonged to the Cecil family and may have been painted on the occasion of the Queen’s visit to Robert Cecil in 1602, just a year before her death.

At this visit, another entertainment was enacted for her, this time a contention among a wife, a widow, and a maid before “Astraea’s shrine.” Astraea was the just virgin of Virgil’s Fourth Eclogue, whose return to earth was to bring the golden age—a figure often proposed as compliment to Elizabeth, especially late in her life. Roy Strong conjectures that this painting may have appeared above the altar of “this saint” in the pageantry.

The portrait is technically skilled and rich in coppery hues. Although it was painted when the Queen was close to seventy years old, the face is imperviously young, and the Titian-colored hair falls around her shoulders like a maiden’s. She wears a most elaborate costume, which, even with the accustomed lavishness of her wardrobe, seems to elevate this image into the realm of fantasy. The many details of her garments will be taken up below in a treatment of signs.

The painted motto is “Non sine Sole Iris”—“No rainbow without the sun”—once again associating the Queen with metaphoric weather and the atmosphere of her kingdom. But, strangely, the little arc she holds is not nearly as colorful as her own hair and cloak.

Let us test several processes for the reading of the Queen’s portraits. These processes may be instinctive, or more conscious and articulated. All partake of what Rudolf Arnheim terms “the psychology of the creative eye.”

Arnheim’s basic premise is to decompose the pictorial image into constituent parts: balance, shape, form, growth, space, light, color, movement, tension, expression (thus, points out Jack Burnham, explaining the mechanics of abstraction, which may be an exploration of any one of these visual elements). The process of taking apart a visual image is not really initiated by the viewer but is in a sense already underway within the work of art. “Every visual pattern is dynamic,” Arnheim maintains. “Any line drawn on a sheet of paper, or the simplest form modeled from a piece of clay, is like a rock thrown into a pond. It upsets repose, it mobilizes space. Seeing is the perception of action.” The work of art is already in motion when the beholder reaches it.

The ideas of mobility and action strike an ironic note in connection with these Tudor court images, which on one level appear so static and remote. Yet many of Elizabeth’s portraits have so much internal complexity that inter-actions within the painting do set up the energy of apparent forces. The “creative eye,” recomposing the paintings from their disparate elements, may generate readings full of vitality and unsuspected visual harmonies.
Let us venture a study of the Ditchley portrait, using Arnheim’s categories. We will not exhaust the depth and range of these elements but rather use them as a framework, looking for insights.

Balance, in Arnheim’s understanding, is determined by weight and direction. Parts of the painting’s composition take on weight relative to each other, and may imply directional movement which also affects our sense of balance. The Ditchley figure of Elizabeth suggests weight and stability by several means: the figure is centered on the picture surface; it extends almost to each edge (we must note that the painting has been cut down to the present size); the lower part of her body is visually much heavier than the upper; and she appears in isolation (which carries psychological weight).

In fact, not only is the Queen alone, but the map at her feet renders her superhumanly large, an actor “on the stage of the world.” Behind her, the curving horizon of the earth shows the cosmic scale. Lest we regard the map as just a border design, her feet appear to be resting solidly on it.

Of directional force this painting reveals little. The figure is slightly angled and the arms sway lightly in the same direction that the lightning points. The Queen barely faces to the left, which is the half of the painting showing light and blue sky, as opposed to the darkness of the other half.

Where shape and form are concerned, the Queen’s dress and its relationship to her body occupy our attention. The many folds of the skirt, the puffed sleeves, and the floating outer sleeves are rendered with accurate shadowing, and the pattern is broken up in a plausible way. Yet, as we have seen, the garment entirely disguises the shape of the Queen’s person.

Space and light are intimately related. Shadows create our sense of space around an object, and light is essential to reveal its shape. In the Ditchley portrait, light subtly molds the dress into heavy folds, creating a vertical glow on the skirt panel nearest the viewer. But light in this painting is of more consequence in an emblematic sense, creating the atmospheric effects above the Queen’s head.

Color provides a further harmony, as the dress is not just white but has the silvery pallor of moonlight. With the crescent of pearls in her hair, Elizabeth appears here akin to Cynthia, the moon goddess. Color and light merge as elements in the dominance of the silvery dress.

Arnheim’s final categories—movement, tension, and expression—are, in his scheme, the culmination of all the other perceptions. Color, shape, space, and light together produce the dynamics within a work of art—its movement and tension. Expression goes far beyond the revelation of character in a face, though it includes that too. (Leonardo, we recall, looked for “the motions of the mind” in portraiture.) But beyond this, expression is the highest of perceptual categories. Each artistic work, having its own particular play of forces, expresses a conception of reality.

Other models exist of the process of visual reading. The logic of such reading is reviewed by Erdmann Waniek in his pursuit of a common language for the arts. He cites the notion of Gombrich that both artistic creation and responsive perception are a process of making and matching. The viewer makes hypothetical projections, anticipating, expecting. Then the work of art returns its stimuli, continually reshaping and correcting the initial forays of the “reader.” The process of understanding is a dialogue, a “hermeneutic rhythm” which, we may suggest, is never complete.

Perusing the Ditchley portrait in this way, we first respond to the familiar: the lavish dress and abundance of pearls (Walpole’s test again). But the gaunt face, surprising expectations, conveys age. The stiff frontal pose speaks of conventional portraiture, but the globe underfoot radically alters the scale; the Queen’s bulk may be approaching caricature. The globe has been a familiar accomplishment in her portraiture (recall the Armada portrait, the Siena portrait, the orb in its guise as apple of the kingdom), but here we almost do not recognize this curving earthscape as akin to those conventional props.

The background of the Ditchley portrait is divided in halves—fair and foul weather—in a somewhat mechanical way, similar to the deliberate contrast evoked in the window scenes of the Armada
portrait. But the oddness of this split is modified by the involvement of the sonnet, which speaks of “The prince of light . . . the Sonne . . . Of heaven the glorye . . . and . . . Thunder the Ymage of that power.” The three Latin mottoes would appear to offer keys to the coherence of the painting, but now they contain only two or three complete words. If legible, they might only have deepened the mystery. Here the reader’s process of testing and revising is cut off and must be redirected, for the mottoes will yield nothing.

Another version of the “psychology of the creative eye” is found in transactional models of the reading process. Of the various expressions of this theory, Louise Rosenblatt’s provides a suggestive example. Interactions between reader and text are also at the heart of her method, but the mental pattern differs from that proposed by Arnhem or Gombrich.

Rosenblatt draws upon William James’s idea of the stream of consciousness, that complex and iridescent flow of sensations, percepts, concepts, and feelings. In the play of consciousness over its objects, James found that a “selective attention” prevails. Consciousness consists in selecting some possibilities and suppressing the rest. Accentuation and emphasis are part of every perception.\(^7\)

This selective attention then becomes for Rosenblatt the determinant of either an aesthetic or a nonaesthetic reading of a text. In an aesthetic transaction, the observer’s attention concentrates on the experience of the reading itself. Qualitative or affective overtones may predominate, or the reader may be keenly aware of his or her own reactions. An example might be the sense of intimacy, or even solitude, in viewing one of the Queen’s miniatures, which can be perused by only one person at a time.

A nonaesthetic transaction, on the other hand, focuses on the information to be carried away from the reading. Any reading event may fall on a continuum between these two types. Readings of a work of art (literary, visual, or otherwise) partake of both processes, depending on the selective attention devoted by each observer. An example of nonaesthetic reading might be to approach the Siena portrait seeking clues to the identity of the artist. If we decode the device of the white hind as a reference to Christopher Hatton, this selectivity has yielded a (probable) piece of information which points to another: the attribution to Cornelius Ketel, who had been supported by Hatton.

A nonaesthetic reading of the Ditchley portrait might focus on the Queen’s face. Observing that she appears old, we conclude: a late portrait, a statement of her position and esteem at the end of her reign, the portrait serving as a document. An aesthetic reading would result if the selective attention instead concentrated on the fantasy quality of the picture: the color echoes of silvery white in sky, dress, and map; the sheer impact of how huge the painting is and how monumental the Queen’s size; the pleasure of scanning intricate patterns in her clothing; or even the curiosity about how such a complicated garment could possibly be constructed (or gotten into).

Our study of the inscriptions might begin in a nonaesthetic vein, looking for verbal keys to interpret the painting. But because the texts are just fragments, and bits of conceit at that, they contribute instead to the mysterious effect of the portrait—the lost meanings past recovery—and we are again in the aesthetic mode.

From these processes of reading, we must now turn to systems of signs, another way of access to these complex late images of Elizabeth. The reading process is a fluid activity, with any given model shifting constantly with the beholder’s active awareness. A system of signs, on the other hand, may be at least temporarily fixed—as a hypothesis—because it is a system. If internally consistent, the set of signs stays in place long enough to generate a structure of meanings. The structuralist thinking referred to in previous chapters, with its early ties to linguistics and anthropology, has yielded varying concepts of signs and how they are inter-related. The resulting study of semiotics, or semiology, sweeps under the heading of “communication” any human activity, creation, or choice. Each may be analyzed into the tri-partite scheme described by Roland Barthes (and defined by other theorists in similar terms): signifier, signified, and (the associative total of both) sign.\(^8\)
To speak of the visual arts, our arena in reading the portraits of Queen Elizabeth, a signifier may be a visual detail, or, in these paintings, a word of the written language. For the former example, let us consider the orb held out by Elizabeth in the “Queen and the Goddesses” portrait. If that small, conventional object of royal trapping is the signifier, then its “signified” is complex. As a traditional piece of regalia, the orb indicates authority and kingly power. As the centerpiece in the implied story of the Judgment of Paris, it is the apple given to the fairest.

Under the name of “Reichsapfel” the two signifieds join, including the imperial aspect and the meaning borrowed from the classical tale. The sign is then the product of the visible object and its idea-contents. But the sign does not result from simply filling the empty signifier with meanings. This process is itself part of the “science of signs”—and part of the process of reading. We fill the orb with its imperial meaning through known conventions familiar from our past and present culture. We fill it with the mythical meaning by first recognizing the three goddesses and recalling the Paris story, then radically rewriting that story to incorporate Elizabeth. At that point, the signifier has become sign. In the background of our imagination is the linguistic counterpart of the merger, the term “Reichsapfel.”

In other portraits, a word of the written language appears as a sign. In the Rainbow portrait, with its motto “Non sine Sole Iris,” the word “Iris” both denotes and connotes the rainbow. It denotes—or directly refers to—the little arc visible in the Queen’s hand. It connotes—the indirect signified—all the metaphoric colorings of achievement made possible by the Queen’s brightness. Some spectrum of effects is projected across her kingdom by virtue of her strength/light/enlightened rule. Signifier and signified coalesce into sign, once again because of our prior knowledge of cultural structures surrounding the Queen.

Of all the elaborate costumes in the portraits of Elizabeth, the one in the Rainbow portrait most obviously invites readings as a system of signs. Once the outlines of the system are set into place, the details may be transformed from signifiers to signs. If the context is shifted, those same signifiers become different signs.

One reading results from the interpretation by Frances Yates, that Elizabeth is being portrayed as Astraea, the just virgin of Virgil’s eclogue whose return to earth brings the Golden Age. In the semiotics of such a view, an imperial theme prevails. The dominant texts creating the system of meanings are Cesare Ripa’s Iconologia and the emblem books of Henry Peacham and others.

The eyes and ears on the Queen’s cloak may signify Fame, although Strong points out the absence of mouths. In his view, the symbolism of the cloak refers instead to the Queen’s use of her servants as seeing and hearing for her, yielding intelligence and preserving her safety. The serpent device on her sleeve, with a jeweled heart in its mouth and a celestial sphere above its head, denotes wisdom, or prudence, ruling the passions.

The recognizable English flowers on the Queen’s bodice (pansies, cowslips, and honeysuckles) associate her with the Golden Age as if it were spring in her own kingdom. The crescent of pearls in her hair, centered with a dark jewel and a pendant pearl, is almost identical to that in the Ditchley portrait, and it too evokes a classical reference—to Cynthia the moon goddess.

But this proposed system of signs will not stay closed, as it must admit the element of the rainbow from some other tradition, along with the tiny gauntlet on the Queen’s ruff, which suggests medieval chivalry and the Accession Day tilts honoring Elizabeth.

Another system altogether is proposed by René Graziani, constructed not on the Renaissance handbooks of iconography but on the Bible. Believing that Yates’s courtly reading of the portrait would be intelligible only to educated contemporaries knowing the scarce books, he offers a religious reading of Elizabeth as a great Christian sovereign. Now the rainbow and serpent become scriptural symbols, the former indicating a covenant of peace, the latter the Redeemer (in some Old Testament passages). The eyes and ears evoke various texts on the theme of “blessed are those who see and hear.” The gauntlet marks Elizabeth as champion of the Chris-
tian religion. In the most central re-casting, the sun in the motto is no longer Elizabeth herself but Christ.

We must recognize that the verbs used in the above descriptions are full of implications in the study of signs, and that they are here used more freely than exact precision would allow. Evoke suggest, indicate, associate, mark—each of these terms is subtly different in expressing how a signifier becomes a sign (or what the signifier brings to the transaction and what the observer brings).

The Queen understood the language of clothing perfectly well, and used its powers of communication. We have already looked at dress color at court, with its function of expressing allegiance and marking out different groupings by age or status.

Further, Elizabeth wore varying styles for diplomatic reasons, like a parallel language to her use of French, Italian, and Latin in speaking to visitors. Sir James Melville reported that one day Elizabeth wore English fashion, another day French, another day Italian. When she asked him which suited her best, he pleased her by replying, “the Italian,” for its caul and bonnet showed off her golden hair.”

Lest we view the Rainbow portrait entirely as a fantasy image, we must return to the Queen’s wardrobe list of 1600. Here we find dozens of decorative details similar to the eyes, ears, serpent, and flora of the famous portrait. Are these all signifiers? And do, or did, the systems of meaning exist which would enable them to become signs?

Perhaps we can regard the wardrobe itself as a structure (although we have only the verbal description of it). This particular inventory, an incredibly rich and motley array of materials and fashions of the time, contains only a part of Elizabeth’s lifetime collection. For, if we are to believe Melville, “she was also so fond of her cloaths, that she never could part with any of them; and at her death she had in her wardrobe all the different habits, to the number of 3000, which she had ever worn in her life-time.” But elsewhere we read of her giving her garments to her ladies in waiting, sometimes to be cut up to reuse the choice fabrics.

The details in the 1600 list serve as a medium for interpreting the Rainbow portrait. The list records a mantle embroidered all over with pomegranates, roses, honeysuckles, and acorns, and a French gown of lawn covered with fountains, snakes, swords, and other devices. A white cloth-of-silver gown was worked with flies, worms, and snails, while others included spiders, grasshoppers, or butterflies.

Native and exotic plants scattered throughout the wardrobe included pansies, roses, daffodils, gillyflowers, oak leaves, mulberries, “pineapple trees,” and even artichokes. Embroidered in gold, silver, colored silks, or seed pearls were abundant examples of rainbows, clouds, flames, suns, moons, signs (zodiacal) and planets. Sometimes the recorder summarized a menagerie as “sundry beasts, fowl, and fishes.”

These decorations appeared as borders, or as all-over designs. Besides this inventory, at least one other surviving portrait illustrates the pictorial mania—the painting at Hardwick Hall, with its gown adorned with serpents, birds, and sea horses.

In this context, the Rainbow portrait no longer seems so completely an imaginary creation. The tawny, orange, or marigold coloring is common in the wardrobe list also. The Rainbow costume is no more elaborate or strange than many described in the written text.

Within the Queen’s wardrobe, realism and artifice are curiously interwoven. Art imitates nature, for example, in the realistic flowers; then the painters imitate the actual gowns she wore (which are already artifice) in portraits combining mimesis and pure fantasy.

The Rainbow portrait is also part of this complex structure, with its multiple layers of representation and imagination. While its apparent signs may resist inclusion in an orderly internal system, they do seem to partake of the larger set within the entire wardrobe. The decorations there celebrate English flora and fauna, and also show a taste for the exotic creatures. The many images from weather and the heavens recall the metaphors surrounding the Queen in both the Ditchley and the Rainbow portraits.

Looking back at the paintings treated earlier in this book, we
would find them too filled with the internal echoes of signs, forming a set within a given picture or within the Queen’s portraiture as a whole.

It is time to discover or invent that synthesis toward which all this discussion has been tending: a theory of reading belonging especially to portraiture. That theory must treat the elements distinctive to portraiture, as an art form and as a creation of a given culture.

To begin, a portrait is a rendering of a person who lives or has lived. Touching history, touching biography, it bears an identity. It is possible to read a portrait without knowing who the sitter is, or (seeing the identification, for example, in a museum label) knowing nothing whatever about the sitter.

Such readings may stay in the aesthetic mode: enjoyment of the experience of the painting. Or elements of the non-aesthetic—the information-gathering—may enter: a picture of an unknown man may be recognized as certainly by El Greco, or a mitred figure may clearly be a bishop.

David Piper, in his excellent study The English Face, suggests that with Elizabethan portraits, everything depends on knowing who the sitter is. He puts his finger on a certain paradox about these abundant Tudor pictures: “How contradictory the stiff proud portraits seem in contrast with what we know about the imagination and adventure of their time. The pictures seem to portray decadence, a remote race of beings—yet when we hear the names, we sense their stiff faces lighting up as with a candle within.”

He is right about this startling effect of identity, in viewing portraits of such as Drake or Raleigh, Martin Frobisher, or Mary Queen of Scots. And in the portraits of Elizabeth, the contrast between painterly stiffness and the known vigor of the lady is only heightened.

Is it possible to read a portrait when we do not recognize the sitter? There may be some advantages to such an unconditioned view, into which biography does not intrude (as we observed earlier about not knowing the identity of the artist). Our attention is then entirely upon such perceptual components as form, balance, color, and light, as broken out by Arnheim. We will be reading the picture not as a portrait but simply as a visual work of art. But clearly, at least for the fullest composite of readings, we need to know the identity and something about the sitter. The more we know, the more our perusal can yield “thick description.” For this unagain term, we might substitute the “iridescence” of a portrait, more subtly to describe the evanescence of personality and the interplay of history and imagery in such renderings as Elizabeth’s.

Having affirmed the necessity of a sitter, we next inquire about the relationship of sitter to portrait. All portraits must be mimetic to some degree. Twentieth-century versions, with their departures from representation, may confirm minimal points of likeness, then let the rest of the image go to abstraction. Nevertheless, in any period, a portrait somehow hails mutability, by recording a moment and holding it indefinitely while the original reality moves on into old age or other change.

During the reign of Elizabeth, picture and poetry were near allied. Some contemporary terminology used for both will extend our discussion of likeness, and also focus our attention again on the role of the beholder (the reader).

Lucy Gent has pointed out that the English, in the early sixteenth century appreciated lively colors above all else in paintings. (Think of Hilliard’s lengthy section on jewel-like colors and how to mix each one.) The English vocabulary had few words referring to perspective or chiaroscuro, and the Elizabethans were accustomed to paintings without shadows. In fact, the term “shadow” had been suspect, as indicating the contrast between shadow and substance.

The capacity of art for illusion or lifelikeness did not come to be valued until late in the century in England. Ironically, the interest in lifelike qualities of art increased just as the Queen was passing into old age. A direct representation of this most painted sitter would then have been far from politic. One result was the Rainbow portrait, in which garments and figure are palpably realistic, but
the youthful face is what the poets might term an enchanting
deception. The basis for the image is nature, but nature’s world is
brazen; painters and poets alike, in Sir Philip Sidney’s view, may
deliver a golden world.

Two other crucial terms link picture and poetry, and will once
again bring the reader directly into our focus. Discussing the rhet-
oric of praise, O. B. Hardison cites the twin Renaissance concepts
of “mirror” and “idea.” Mirror, much used as a figure in literary
texts and in titles of treatises, suggests a direct reflection, a physical
likeness. A comedy may be a mirror for life, or a portrait the mirror
of a face. Idea, a term with Platonic associations, suggests idealiza-
tion or a mental image. Physical appearance is incidental, as an idea
may be conveyed under many forms or guises. If idea governs por-
traiture, then the picture exists to set forth concepts: majesty, the
centrality of the ruler, or even just the constant presence of the
ruler. Communicating these concepts matters more than the cor-
respondence of the image to a particular face.

Whether mirror or idea, or a combination of the two, por-
traiture is read as the encounter of one individual with another,
the viewer perhaps looking across centuries. The artists are the
intermediaries. They have completed their own encounters (whether
at first hand or not) with the sitters. Ultimately, of course, the
artist’s perception is what the later viewer perceives—the filter,
the code, the language behind which the historical person still
maintains an existence. As a work of art, a painted portrait gives
indirect access to an area of knowledge, and direct experience of
beauty and design.

As the creation of a given culture, a portrait belongs to even
wider webs of significance. Following Geertz, we have understood
culture to be “interworked systems of construable signs,” not so
much a power which causes events, institutions, or process, but
rather a context within which these can intelligibly be described. By
adopting a semiotic approach to culture, we gain admittance to
the conceptual world in which its images have meanings.

The portraits of Queen Elizabeth belong to this cultural context
in an extraordinary way. We must recall that although we have
been reading ten of these pictures with some care, more than a
hundred and thirty still survive, and these are themselves just the
remaining strands in a once-extensive web of communication.

Other parts of this web have enhanced our reading. Parallel to
the portraits were the many literary texts celebrating or depicting
the Queen. E. C. Wilson’s England’s Eliza is like a catalogue of these
verbal/visual renderings of her, similar in some ways to Roy
Strong’s grouping of the painted portraits by type. Wilson’s chap-
ters survey the Queen’s image as Judith in the broadsides, Deborah
in progressions, Eliza in the drama, and Diana, Laura, Cynthia, Glo-
ria, and Belphebe in written texts classical or pastoral.

For self-portrayal, Elizabeth’s own words provide a counterpart
to the paintings. In her letters and speeches, the private and public
writings of a Queen, she shows the qualities of her personality and
also confirms the authority of her rule: mirror and idea. Further,
hers efforts to control her portraiture combine with her written
statements in a structure which may be read as propaganda, or
public relations—or just a vigorous self-determination.

In the next century, Louis XIV ruled France with the assertion
“L’état, c’est moi.” Elizabeth preferred the notion of marriage to her
kingdom, a more complex premise than the simple (and rather
stunning) equation of the French king. Her marriage image was a
typically brilliant stroke, for it capitalized on her feminality while
allowing her to avoid ever choosing a husband. The subservience
she could not accept with an actual husband she turned to purposes
of the public good by affirming that she ruled, in a sense, at her
people’s will.

Among her final public words were these, in the so-called
Golden Speech to her last Parliament, in 1601. They are as familiar
to posterity as some of her most famous portraits, and they re-
confirm that same bond which caused her subjects to demand her
painted image in such numbers: “... And though God hath raised
me high, yet this I account the glory of my crown, that I have
reigned with your loves. ... It is not my desire to live or reign
longer than my life and reign shall be for your good. And though you have had, and may have, many mightier and wiser princes sitting in this seat, yet you never had, nor shall have any that will love you better." It was a marriage that had endured.

With words such as these and the images by her artists, Elizabeth maintained herself—amid foreign enemies, domestic plots, and forty-five passing years—firmly at the center of her culture and of her age. We have explored a promising avenue into the history of that age, with its codes, signs, and voices: reading the portraits of Queen Elizabeth I.

Notes

1. The Past Affirmed, the Past Transformed


3. Ibid., p. 6.


7. Cited in Strong, Portraits of Queen Elizabeth I, p. 54.


15. The Queenes Maiesties Passage through the Citie of London to Westminster the Day before her Coronacion, ed. James M. Osborn (New Haven, 1960).


17. For the wardrobe list of 1600, see *Progresses and Public Processions*, vol. III, p. 502.


19. Ibid., p. 735.

20. This two-part understanding is suggested by Maquet's passage on a semantic theory of art in *Introduction to Aesthetic Anthropology*, pp. 86–92.


2. Public and Private Voices


3. Ibid., p. 7.


8. Strong discusses the pattern process in his *Portraits of Queen Elizabeth I*, pp. 5–12.

9. Ibid., p. 5.

10. Ibid., pp. 72–75.


16. Ibid., p. 85.


22. Auerbach gives further background on this miniature, pp. 66–68, and lists it as #20 (p. 290) in her catalogue of Hilliard’s works.
24. Ibid., p. 37.

3. A Web of Fictions

1. Strong, *Portraits of Queen Elizabeth I*, p. 79.

25. Examples and variations are discussed in ibid., pp. 44–45.
27. Ibid., p. 77.
4. Perspective and Pattern

2. One current interpretation of the painting’s imagery is found in ibid., pp. 103–7.
5. Edgerton’s engrossing account of that event, the science and the art of it, appears in ibid., pp. 124–42.
6. For Guillet’s pursuit of this evolving metaphor, see “On the Concept and Metaphor of Perspective,” pp. 299–345.

5. Reading the Language of Signs

5. Ibid., pp. 374–76.
8. Terence Hawkes discusses Barthes and other contributors to the “sci-


18. The Queen’s valedictory, delivered to about a hundred and fifty members of Parliament at Whitehall, is found in *Public Speaking of Queen Elizabeth*, ed. George P. Rice, Jr., pp. 106–9.

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