

Cynthia Freeland

Portraits and Persons.

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Cynthia Freeland's *Portraits and Persons* provides a marvelous survey of the philosophical issues that arise in considering the nature of portraiture, from the metaphysics of the iconic relation, to the depictive function of portraits in individuality and expression, to the key question of how portraiture is related to notions of the self.

According to Freeland portraits serve two main purposes: they preserve identity, bringing us closer to loved ones, God, or the departed; and they tell us something about the subject portrayed, not just on the outside, but on the inside as well—not only on the level of material and symbolic culture but on the level of emotions and inner states.

The work is divided into seven chapters, plus an introduction and an epilogue. The intro lays out the preliminaries, arguing for the validity of this consideration of a neglected aspect of the philosophical expression of human nature and individuality: 'portraits might reasonably be thought to represent cumulated cultural wisdom about being human' (1). Freeland shows the historical development of the idea of portraiture as part of her focus on her main theme—the 'perennial philosophical problem of the mind's relation to the body':

The portrait artist is an alchemist who seeks to make inert physical material 'live' and show us a person, an actual individual whose physical embodiment reveals psychological awareness, consciousness, and an inner emotional life. How can artists ever succeed at this mysterious project? What enables the artist to convey 'truths' about a person—and what would constitute such truths? (1)

The first chapter, on animals, seems almost whimsical at first glance, but turns out to contain a surprisingly complex comparative analysis of persons and animals, simultaneously explaining her first definition of portraiture. A portrait must: 1) depict individuality or distinct physical embodiment; 2) convey the expression of inner states, and; 3) show a mutual self-awareness of the portraiture process. Animals (cats in particular, because of their symbolic value) do not fare well on this criterion, though she seems somewhat favorable to some portraits of horses and dogs.

According to Freeland, in Chapter 2 ('Contact'), portraits fulfill four important functions: they provide likeness, psychological characterizations, proofs of presence or 'contact', and manifestations of a person's moral 'essence' or 'air' (this last borrowed from Roland Barthes). She never comes through, however, on her promise for a fuller definition of a portrait (49), unless it lies in her focus on subjectification (205).

The last five chapters focus on the self, and particularly the historical development of the self in connection to the development of portraiture in the early-modern period, though she overlooks John Shearman's important discussion of the portrait and the imaginative conception of the subject's inner life in the Italian Renaissance (*Only Connect: Art and the Spectator in the Italian Renaissance*, 1994). She does focus on the early modern emphasis on self-reflection and self-consciousness, the emerging focus on the nature of mind in its relationship to a newly conceptualized body, and a growing interest in how the individual self is shaped in interactions and relations with others (81). This then involves the author in Chapter 3 ('Individuality') in a discussion of how the bodily self, the reflective self, the moral self, and the relational self of the modern period, all connect to the history of portraiture.

Freeland continues the themes of reflection and relationship in Chapters 4-7. Chapter 4 ('Expression') examines the views put forth by philosophers, painters, anatomists and others about the nature of emotional expression and how it should be captured in art. She looks at both the scientific/philosophical tradition and the artistic tradition, and concludes with an interesting discussion of Bill Viola. Chapter 5 ('Self-Knowledge') looks at self-portraits (the 'Case Studies' Rembrandt, Cezanne, and Kahlo, plus Dürer and Anguissola) as a way of how examining how artists sought to convey aspects of their own inner lives and psychological identity over time; Chapter 6 ('Intimacy') probes the relational aspects of persons by studying artists' portrayals of the people with whom they were most intimate: lovers spouses, parents, children. Chapter 7 ('The Fallen Self') deals with the fragmented and disappearing post-modern self (Peyton, Richter, Warhol, Cindy Sherman, Yasumasa Morimura), as well as the exposed self (Nan Goldin, Tracy Emin) and the scientific self (Mark Quinn, Gary Schneider, Rauschenberg, de la Mora). The self, she concludes, persists, despite reports of its demise.

There is no one theme or argument in the book, as Freeland takes a problems-based approach to the philosophical issues raised by portraiture. Her main assumption seems to be that there is an inner self to be revealed in portraits. This means there is a lot of polemic as she argues for this and weighs all sides of an issue, both artistic and philosophical—which explains the large number of artists, theorists, and critics cited in the text. Does self-portraiture count as autobiography? No, because its seriality undoes any narrative account of the self. Has postmodernism put an end to portraiture and the self? No, because there is always an expression of inner life. How do artists depict the inner states of their subjects? Through contact, expression, and subjectification.

This last allows Freeland to examine the issue of objectification in portraits and to arrive at a typology for personal subjectification that addresses how artists depict persons as subjects, based on an inversion of Nussbaum's types of 'personal objectification':

1. Person P treats Q as an end and not as a means;
2. P endorses Q's autonomy;
3. P treats Q as active and alive;
4. P treats Q as unique and irreplaceable;
5. P respects Q's boundaries;

6. P treats Q as something that cannot be owned;
7. P endorses Q's subjectivity (200).

The various artists examined in this section ('Intimacy') are then assessed in relation to subjectification and objectification. There is more subjectification, for example, in Lucian Freud's depictions of his mother than in his nude models (210). It would be interesting to know how this Kantian subjectivity corresponds to the moral 'air' of portraiture Freeland discusses earlier (116), or her discussion of the 'moral self' in Chapter 3. It turns out that some degree of objectification might be permissible in the case of all portraits, and particularly erotic portraits, in so far as they reflect an interest in the human body that is aesthetic and not sexual: 'Treating a person as a means to an end in this sense—as an object of aesthetic contemplation—is not as problematic as using them as a slave or sexual servant' (241). Still, this inherent objectification (which I suppose applies to any depiction) will always be an obstacle to the aim of portraiture: 'rendering persons in their full and complete subjectivity' (242).

The Kantian themes of our duties of justice and beneficence are obvious (205), though the issue of subjects' consent and participation in images that necessarily objectify in some sense is left unresolved (200-01), as is aesthetic objectification; nor do Freeland's concluding remarks on the paradox of portraiture—how a material object is used to capture or convey a person, who is a subject—offer any suggestions as to how her solution to the paradox—a recognition of our phenomenological subjective objectivity (or should it be our objective subjectivity?)—can illuminate this moral dilemma of agreeing to objectification. Kant did, after all, write only that you cannot treat people as means to an end to which they cannot rationally consent.

Freeland seems to see portraits spatially, which is part of her reason for rejecting the autobiographical in self-portraiture. She rejects any idea of linear narrative in favor of more spatial narratives of the self, but why these spatial narratives cannot be themselves caught up in autobiography she never explains: 'The artist presents himself to the world in a way that is simply *not narrative*' (157, italics in original). But spatial narratives are narratives all the same. Does every autobiography or even every narrative have to be linear? She may be right that a collection of self-portraits isn't an autobiography, but isn't every self-portrait in some sense autobiographical? Does the point about spatial narrativity apply equally to biographical portraits (as discussed, for example, in Richard Wendorf's *The Elements of Life*) or to her discussion of Viola? Where *do* video portraits fit in?

This focus on the spatial self overlooks the way portrait paintings are able to capture a sense of time and expressively represent their subject in time even while displaying a moment of existence, creating an expression of thought and creating insight through appearance. A painted portrait is a slow unfolding of the truth of the sitter in the eyes of the portraitist—which is captured in Warhol's *Screen Tests* and Wilkins' *Kinetic Portraits*. This kind of narrativity is illustrated in an anecdote about Franco Moretti and Carlo Ginzburg at the Metropolitan Museum in New York, recently reported by Perry Anderson:

Coming upon Vermeer's *A Maid Asleep*, depicting a servant-girl drowsing at a table laden with fruit, a wine-glass lying on its side, a painting of Cupid on the wall above, and an empty chair half-swung towards a door half-open, implying the recent departure of a male companion, Moretti—reading the image as a depiction, in Hegel's phrase, of the 'prose of everyday life'—exclaimed: 'That is the beginning of the novel.' In other words, a narrative of ordinary people in a familiar setting—neither epic nor tragedy. Ginzburg then spun round to a portrait by Rembrandt on the opposite wall, of the disfigured painter Gérard de Lairesse, his nose deformed by syphilis, and retorted: 'No, *that* is the beginning of the novel (*London Review of Books*, April 26, 2012).

Portraits involve purposes and adventures, many of them dark, some of them light. Freeland overlooks some of the dark (Bonnard), though there are moments of light (see the bottom of 239). There is a lot in this book, and Freeland's discussion shows a broad depth of knowledge and reading, as well as a familiarity with both the philosophical and artistic traditions. The story of the practice of portraiture is not the main focus, though there are some interesting insights on the interpenetrating duality of self-revealing and masking in portraits and society, as well as some excellent discussions of portraits themselves. This is a boundary-breaking work about human nature, persons, the self, and portraiture. It could have benefited from a bibliography.

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