

Reid on Ginsburg (2015)

Ginsburg, Michal Peled. *Portrait Stories*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2015. Pp. ix + 213. ISBN: 978-0-8232-6260-1

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It would be hard to identify a time when literature and the visual arts were more closely intertwined than during the nineteenth century. From Honoré de Balzac's *Le Chef d'œuvre inconnu* to Émile Zola's *L'Œuvre* (which led to the infamous break with his friend Paul Cézanne), via Charles Baudelaire's *Salons*, J.-K. Huysmans's art criticism, Édouard Manet's writerly portrait of Zola, and Félix Nadar's photographic portraits of writers, the intersections among artistic domains provided inspiration for many works and have fueled scholarly debate ever since. Michal Peled Ginsburg's *Portrait Stories* makes an original and heuristic contribution to this longstanding conversation. In nuanced readings of works from a broad range of European literary traditions, including some exceptionally well-known texts and others less familiar, she examines "portrait stories"—stories that hinge on the creation and afterlife of paintings of a specific individual—as "varied and differentiated accounts of the ways in which subjectivities are formed in relation to a particular kind of image, whose own production is complicated by intersubjective relations, themselves inflected by social determinants" (3). Her corpus is comprised mainly of short stories and novellas, although it also includes two novels. Ginsburg is interested in how these stories reflect and shift the social and affective landscapes of those represented in the portraits, those who paint them, and those who view them. Exploring these interactions leads her—and her readers—to reflect on the power relations that link readers to and through texts.

Portrait Stories is comprised of seven main chapters, plus an introduction and afterword. The book itself is comparative in approach; Ginsburg not only includes works from American, English, German, French, and Russian traditions, but often establishes conversations among these traditions, in one chapter reading E.T.A. Hoffman alongside Théophile Gautier and Gérard de Nerval, for example, and later Heinrich von Kleist with Thomas Hardy and Oscar Wilde. This makes the book accessible and inviting to specialists in each of these national traditions, revisiting well-known works and encouraging readers to engage with stories they might not otherwise have encountered.

Ginsburg's introduction provides a survey of the history of portraiture and its literary representation; at the same time, it also establishes the theoretical frame that will undergird her readings in the chapters that follow. Of particular interest is her use of Charles Sanders Peirce's opposition between "iconic" and "indexical" presence as a way of revealing the intersubjective play between subject and painter within any portrait. In chapter one, she focuses on Edgar Allan Poe's "Oval Portrait," shifting the reader's attention from the story of the portrait's creation to the enigmatic status of the frame narrator. In chapter two, she contrasts two different portrait stories by Henry James, considering the tension between a portrait as a way of overcoming absence and as a lingering ghostly presence. Chapter three looks at works by Hoffman, Gautier, and Nerval, and examines how each story challenges the artist's subjectivity. Chapter four reads Balzac's *La Maison du chat-qui-pelote* alongside James's "Glasses," focusing on the gendering of the (male) artist/(female) subject relationship, while chapter five reverses this lens to examine stories of portraits of men in works by Kleist, Hardy, and Wilde. Chapter six continues the interrogation of gendered dynamics, juxtaposing stories by Theodor Storm and George Sand to consider how portraits can intervene in the intergenerational transmission of knowledge, power, and self-awareness. The final chapter explores the equation of art and money that emerges from the interstices of Nikolai Gogol's frame-tale "The Portrait." Ginsburg concludes her work with a thoughtful essay that summarizes central points in her preceding analyses, underscoring how portraits are not so much the subject of her book, but a fertile site for—perhaps even a catalyst for—the study of intersubjective relations.

Ginsburg's *Portrait Stories* is a welcome contribution to on-going discussions about the representation of art and artistic creation in nineteenth-century fiction. This is a frame that allows her to trace how portraiture represents the individual, as well as the dynamics that produce a reader's sense of subjectivity within literary texts. She analyzes a broad range of texts from an equally broad array of perspectives and shows exceptional finesse in her close readings. The book may be read as a whole or, for those interested in specific authors or works, in sections. It will be a useful addition to both undergraduate and research libraries.

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