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978-1-107-07575-7 - Women Writing Art History in the Nineteenth Century:

Looking Like a Woman

Hilary Fraser

Excerpt

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Introduction

In 1893, Bernard Berenson wrote from Venice to his friend, the poet Edith Cooper. Berenson was then at the very beginning of his career as a connoisseur and art historian, and he expresses his admiration for the established writer's perceptive appreciation of art: 'There is perhaps no person living whose company before a work of art I covet so much as I do yours', he writes. He finds 'something so profound, & earnest in the effort you make to suck out the soul of a picture that it really makes me feel as if my own powers of appreciation had received a new set of feelers'. In Venice more than anywhere, he declares, he would find her 'sympathy stimulating' to his own ability to respond to the city's art: 'Before the best Bellinis & Carpaccios, the best Tintoretos, & Veroneses you would make me feel as I have felt these days having had the luck to see mirrors throwing a light upon them which revealed in them whole tracts I had not seen before.' The effect of the warm Italian light reflected on the Venetian paintings puts him in mind of Cooper's own power to illuminate and transform his experience of art: 'The mere addition of warmth given by the light was in itself something never to be forgotten when looking again at these pictures. Well, you have in a subtle way, & emotionally, nearly the same effect on a picture, for me, that these mirrors had.'¹ In the previous year Edith Cooper and Katharine Bradley, writing under their authorial signature Michael Field, had published a volume of ekphrastic poetry entitled *Sight and Song*, based on their collaborative response to a series of paintings in British and Continental public galleries. Cooper was an experienced art critic, yet in Berenson's account she is assigned a wholly reflexive role. She figures as a 'mirror' that enables the connoisseur to see more, and more profoundly, what is present in the picture. She is valued for her sympathy and her warmth, qualities that enhance his own emotional encounter with these art works in the same way that the mirrors do. The

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letter nicely exemplifies how a woman's talent as an art critic could be at once acknowledged and complimented, and at the same time regarded as inevitably subsidiary to a man's expertise. It is an attitude expressed more succinctly in a private comment Berenson made to his partner (later wife) Mary Costelloe about another female writer more established than himself, the art historian and critic Vernon Lee: 'Vernon said something *worthy of me* yesterday ... she somehow makes you feel that she is intelligent.'² Anna Jameson did not merit even such equivocal praise from John Ruskin, who confided contemptuously to his father that the popular critic 'has some tact & cleverness, & knows as much of art as the cat'.³

My aim in what follows is to correct the partial and distorted view of the emergent discipline of art history, formulated in the nineteenth century and recapitulated in most modern accounts, that art criticism was a masculine intellectual field in which a handful of women played a merely secondary role. In fact, according to the nineteenth-century French art historian Alexis-François Rio, Jameson had a greater influence on the artistic education of the British public than any of her contemporaries, including Ruskin.⁴

The high value placed on art writing by the Victorians makes the neglect of women's contributions especially egregious. Art criticism had an unprecedentedly important public function in nineteenth-century Britain. Writers such as Ruskin and Walter Pater formulated and disseminated an entirely new concept of the cultural and moral value of looking at art. The capacity to respond critically to paintings, sculpture and architectural forms was enshrined as a crucial dimension of human experience.⁵ So my book will investigate the part female writers played in developing a discourse of art notable for its complexity and cultural power, its increasing professionalism and reach, and its integration with other discourses of modernity. It will ask how women looked at art in the nineteenth century and how they participated in the mainstream writing of art criticism and art's histories. The past few decades have witnessed a growing intellectual preoccupation with vision and visuality, and with the related issue of the gendered gaze. There has been a steady scholarly interest in the art-historical work of writers such as Charles Eastlake, Walter Pater, and Ruskin and Berenson themselves. But relatively little attention has been paid to women's art criticism and history and to what it can tell us about female visual experience, in all its diversity, and about the patterns and strategies of women's cultural engagement in the nineteenth century.⁶ The submerged history of women's relationship to art offers a compelling instance of Deborah Cherry's observation that 'feminine spectators have remained beneath the surface of historical discourse'.⁷

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History has frequently been identified as the ‘master’ discourse of the nineteenth century, while vision has been described by Martin Jay as ‘the master sense of the modern era’.⁸ The emergence of the new discipline of art history in Victorian Britain combined both. It became uniquely eloquent of the cultural moment and it cast new light on the gender politics of both visuality and history. Because my book is concerned with the intersection of vision, art and history in writing by women, it focuses some of the most momentous questions about how gender shapes ideology in Victorian cultural history. How could women claim visual agency and make space for themselves as observers under the Victorian gender order? In what ways were the female observer’s relations to institutions, professions and discourses regulated and circumscribed? And how did female art historians, in particular, participate in the epistemic shift identified by Jonathan Crary, who argues that a new kind of observer took shape in the nineteenth century? Crary’s influential study of vision and modernity, *Techniques of the Observer*, speaks of a new understanding of the physiology of human perception, and new interests in the ways in which optical phenomena are mediated by the body. Female art historians and critics provide, as a category, a good example against which to test his theory.⁹ To what extent are their experiences as observers marked by gender in ways that distinguish them from the homogeneous ‘dominant model’ of the modern observer that he proposes? My aim is to re-evaluate the large body of generically diverse art-historical writing by Victorian women that has been written out of literary and art history. My hope is that this will allow the recovery of what Elspeth Probyn calls “submerged” knowledges’, and that in reading these women writers alongside the more mainstream male authors ‘we can begin to trace out what is sayable at any one moment’, to develop a sense of their differences, and hence of our own.¹⁰

My focus, then, is on nineteenth-century women observers and specifically on women who looked at and wrote about art. These women, I suggest, have become invisible to the modern gaze. They have barely crossed the sightline even of second-wave feminist art historians who were so concerned with reconceptualising how we write the past that they had little patience for what they saw as the deficiencies of first-wave critical interventions and the putative collusion of their grandmothers in the establishment of a male canon.¹¹ Yet it is undoubtedly the case that Victorian women wrote about art in ways that anticipate the more systematic approach of twentieth-century feminist scholarship, and which lend themselves to analysis using the tools and concepts of modern gender theory. In the course of my work on the relationship between modern feminist scholarship on the gendered gaze and nineteenth-century art-critical practice, I encountered a

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suggestive genealogy grounded in a particular family history. Laura Mulvey, Professor of Film and Media at Birkbeck, whose work has done so much to expand our thinking about gender and visuality, is the great-granddaughter of the prominent Victorian poet, journalist and art critic Alice Meynell. Although it must be said that Meynell herself had little time for ‘Professors [who] have written of the mental habits of women as though they accumulated generation by generation upon women, and passed over their sons. Professors [who seem to] take it for granted ... that women derive from their mothers and grandmothers, and men from their fathers and grandfathers’,¹² I do find this particular line of descent irresistible. It seems wonderfully apt that Alice Meynell’s pioneering excursions into the realms of visual pleasure should have been renewed three generations on. Laura Mulvey’s groundbreaking article in *Screen*, ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’, is an essay that has generated much debate around the question of the gender of the gaze. Mulvey’s work helps frame the questions we might ask about how people looked in the nineteenth century. Her own focus is on Hollywood film, but her argument about its enshrinement of ‘woman as image, man as bearer of the look’, and about the “‘masculinisation’ of the spectator position’, has been extended into other visual and textual fields.¹³ We might similarly ask to what extent patriarchal ideologies, conventional interpretations of sexual difference and heterosexual desire structured the form and discourse of art history and criticism in the nineteenth century. How can such work help the modern reader approach the work of her own great-grandmother, for example?

Alice Meynell, one of numerous women who looked at and wrote professionally about art and aesthetic matters in the nineteenth century, was married to the writer and journalist Wilfred Meynell and mother of their eight children. She was loved by (among others) the poet Coventry Patmore, who gave her the manuscript of his poem *The Angel in the House*. She came to be regarded as a real-life model for this domestic paragon, despite her actual professional identity as an energetic and high-profile figure in the busy world of Victorian journalism and letters. How did such a woman write about art? Why, having commanded a considerable reputation in her own day, is she now so neglected?

In her introduction to the Centenary Volume of essays and poems by Alice Meynell, published in 1947, Vita Sackville-West describes the difficulty of writing about someone whom one never knew, when ‘a multitude of the personally well-informed exists to ululate in protest’. ‘Like an army of friends and relations invited to view a posthumous painting’, she writes, ‘they fill the artist’s studio with their cries of objection.’¹⁴ Although

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Fig. 1. John Singer Sargent, *Alice Meynell* (1894)

Sackville-West never met her subject, and claims only to be able to put together a ‘composite image’ of her, she nonetheless makes of her a visual object. She invokes an imaginary portrait, one of the visual forms that most engaged Meynell herself (she wrote, for example, with great insight about the work of John Singer Sargent, whose drawing of Meynell was used as a frontispiece for her books (Fig. 1)).¹⁵ Yet this woman who was the subject of several portraits was also an artist in words. ‘She wrote, one might believe, with an etching pen’, says Sackville-West, who quotes from

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a contemporary review that labels her an ‘observer of genius’, like a jeweller with ‘a cylindrical magnifying-glass fixed in one eye’.¹⁶

Meynell’s lyrical essays are full of evocative descriptions of visual phenomena and the process of perception. This woman with, by all accounts, spectacular eyes devoted a whole essay to the subject, called simply ‘Eyes’.¹⁷ They are everywhere in her work. Sometimes they are the passive recipients of nature’s dazzling special effects, as in the essay ‘Rain’, where ‘nature flashes on our meditative eyes’; where ‘[t]here is no need for the impressionist to make haste, nor would haste avail him, for mobile nature doubles upon him, and plays with his delays the exquisite game of visibility’.¹⁸ More often, though, eyes are active players in this visual game. They *make* the world, as in her essay on ‘The Horizon’, which explains: ‘All things follow and wait upon your eyes’, even, it seems the horizon, for ‘[t]o mount a hill is to lift with you something lighter and brighter than yourself or than any meaner burden. You lift the world, you raise the horizon; you give a signal for the distance to stand up’.¹⁹ For Meynell the early landscapes of Jean-Baptiste Corot, conceived ‘at the time when sleep and dreams claimed his eyes’, contain ‘the very light of dreams’.²⁰ Elsewhere, thinking about shadows and clouds, she is intrigued by the way light and darkness are entangled and reversible, and by how painters, such as those of the Newlyn School, represent light in their work.²¹

Meynell’s literary essays are scattered with illustrative references to the visual arts – ‘Solitude’, Millet has painted it; ‘Walls’, the Norwich painters knew the value of them.²² But she also wrote dedicated art-historical pieces and notices of art exhibitions, and was well known as an art critic. She contributed regularly to a range of periodicals, including specialist art journals such as the *Magazine of Art* and the *Art Journal*. An article ‘Art Critics of To-Day’, published in the *Art Journal* in 1892, informs us that ‘a good many ladies are to be found’ at ‘Press Views’, and Mrs Meynell heads the list of ‘regular critics of well-known weekly and daily journals ... who are invariably visible on these and the like occasions’.²³

In this crowded and notably masculine space, the normally invisible female viewer is made into a visual object. Meaghan Clarke identifies Meynell as one of the women who appear in the accompanying illustration showing ‘Press Day at the Royal Academy, 1892’ (Fig. 2): ‘Meynell is in the top centre with her back to the viewer, wearing a hat and veil’.²⁴ A friend recalled her appearance at a Royal Academy private view in the 1890s ‘wearing a flounced skirt of smoke-grey crepe and a simple black hat. She moved among the women there, many of whom wore eccentric and startling costumes, as if she were a being belonging to another, and

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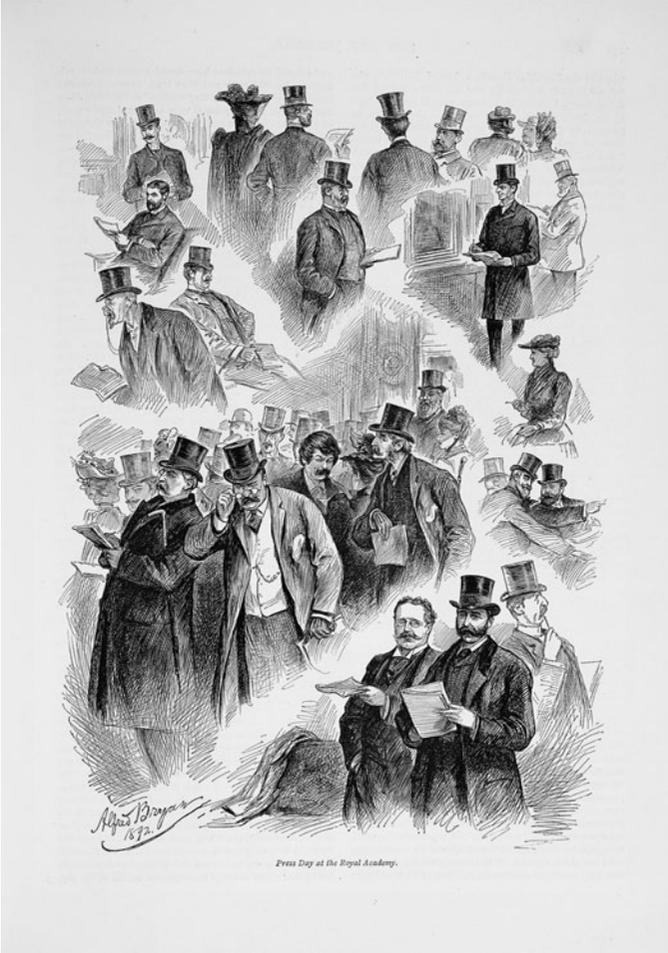


Fig. 2. 'Press Day at the Royal Academy', *Art Journal* (1892)

more rarified, sphere.²⁵ This rather distant and ethereal woman was not above making wittily acerbic comments in the margins of the exhibition catalogues. Against *The Judgement* by Burne-Jones, whose work she disliked, she notes: 'So difficult to tell the damned from the blessed'; and at a later exhibition she wrote beside his *The Star of Bethlehem*: 'Angel Trained to carry his feet perpendicularly'.²⁶ Alice Meynell knew all about being a (domestic) Angel, but it didn't prevent her being a dispassionate critic, even in the case of her friend and mentor John Ruskin. A contemporary

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review observes of her book on Ruskin: ‘The warmest praise of the Master is there and yet courteous alarm-bells are rung on every page.’²⁷

She believed, notwithstanding, that while England might not have led the world in the genius of its art, it was, as she wrote, ‘in the literature of art that modern England [is] pre-eminent’.²⁸ Meynell’s own contribution to the literature of art is certainly most distinctive, particularly in the attention it gives to the role of the viewer and the analysis of visual pleasure. In this she resembles her contemporary Vernon Lee, who believed that ‘the life of all art goes on in the mind and heart, not merely of those who make the work, but of those who see and read it’, that ‘*the* work, the real one’, is ‘a certain particular state of feeling, a pattern woven of new perceptions and impressions and of old memories and feelings, which the picture, the statue or poem, awakens, different in each different individual’.²⁹ Like Lee, Meynell creates a space for herself, for herself not least as a woman, to look at art. Writing on Velázquez, whom she accords the title ‘the first Impressionist’, she declares: ‘So little ... are we shut out from the mysteries of a great Impressionist’s impression that Velásquez requires us to be in some degree his colleagues ... he leaves my educated eyes to do a little of the work. He respects my responsibility no less ... than I do his.’³⁰ Meynell identifies in Velázquez’s art qualities that Foucault, writing half a century later, elaborates in his discussion of *Las Meninas* in *The Order of Things*: the painter’s emphasis on the reciprocity of the gaze, and his disruption of the idea that painting is the representation of an objective visual order.³¹ In her introduction to *The Works of John S. Sargent*, Meynell writes eloquently about Sargent’s ‘manner of seeing and of perceiving what he sees’, and of the idiosyncratic ‘look’ of his portrait subjects, such as the great Italian tragedian Eleanora Duse, whose ‘eyes under their sombre lids have ... the most direct look in the world’. But it is her comments on the viewer of his work, on ‘we spectators’, that are most memorable: ‘A certain education’, she writes, ‘makes us able to see well, and that is our art and needs our attention. It is our contribution, and we owe it. Life, light, form and colour in a picture, and indeed in nature, must have our intelligent eyes.’³²

Alice Meynell was evidently a ‘looker’, in all senses of the word. But to what extent might her gaze be seen to be gendered; to what extent did sexuality enter her field of vision? She was undoubtedly aware of gender issues, and was, from a young age, a feminist. She believed that women had equal rights with men to work and vote (she was a leading suffragist). Her essays, both those written under her own name and those published anonymously as part of the radical column ‘The Wares of Autolycus’ in the *Pall Mall Gazette*, are replete with examples of her intolerance of the

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ill-treatment and the patronising of women. She was alert to the injustices, great and small, routinely suffered by women, and she was active in exposing and opposing them. She recognised that literary and artistic canons are shaped by unexamined critical assumptions and gender biases. So she was far from gender blind, particularly in relation to the gaze. In 1885 she turned a journalistic controversy over the propriety of looking at and painting the nude into a feminist polemic. She deplored the exclusion of women from life classes at public art schools, pointing out the irony of an edict which ensured that, '[o]n the grounds ... of conventional propriety, women are deprived of an advantage which could not possibly do them any harm, while men receive with altogether unnecessary abundance, facilities which might conceivably be dangerous'.³³ In the context of women's rights to the life class, she was more than willing to enter into public debate on the question of the 'visual pleasure' that men and women derive from looking at the nude – potentially 'dangerous' for men; 'harmless' for women.

But she was also an Angel, trained – if not to carry her feet perpendicularly – then to maintain a certain upstanding position, schooled to uphold feminine values, such as modesty and discretion. In her own critical writing, she deployed oblique devices and strategies to write about topics such as nudity, focusing on abstract painterly qualities like colour, line or form rather than on the naked body or on her own response as a woman. In her essay 'The Colour of Life', as Talia Schaffer has so deftly argued, she displaces her vision of naked boys swimming in the Serpentine into a disquisition on colour and shape, in which the London gamin 'makes, in his hundreds, a bright and delicate flush between the gray-blue water and the gray-blue sky'.³⁴ It is only through such abstractions that the watching woman and the naked object of her gaze become subtly connected. In a fascinating counter-narrative, what began as a meditation on colour modulates into a powerful statement about female political agency. Now the colour red, with which the essay opens, 'the colour of violence, or of life broken open, edited, and published', is made figurative in the broken body of a woman. Red is made to signify both the 'flush' of a properly modest woman and the violent death by guillotine of Olympe de Gouges, who wrote 'The Declaration of the Rights of Woman': 'The blood where-with she should, according to Robespierre, have blushed to be seen or heard in the tribune, was exposed to the public sight unsheltered by her veins'.³⁵

To what extent did a woman such as Alice Meynell connect the sexual economy and the visual economy? How far did she acknowledge the

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politics of the gaze? In an essay such as ‘The Colour of Life’, whose theme is the viewing of bodies – a woman looking at naked boys, another woman’s body viscerally displayed – the sexed body of the female observer is not explicitly invoked. Questions of gender and sexual difference are seemingly disavowed until the bitter violence of the end, which has the effect of retrospectively colouring the entire piece. It is only ostensibly about ‘The Colour of Life’. Such displacements are characteristic of women’s writing about the body at this time, whether in art-historical discourse or writing about visual experience more generally. They are at once symptomatic of their ideological positioning and discursive circumscription, and, I suggest, an indirect critique of masculine conventions of visual knowing.

Writing such as this raises questions that will inform my thesis about women’s writing about art in the nineteenth century. Was there a specific mode, or spectrum of modes, of looking at art that was specific to women? And, if so, how might we understand the conditions that gave rise to gendered spectatorship? How far, in other words, are aesthetics the product of historically and culturally specific social conditions? One of this book’s most significant findings, for example, is that while women experienced a variety of forms of professional exclusion that were detrimental to their careers, writing from the margins of established institutional structures often had the effect of freeing up their prose styles, liberating their assumptions and encouraging more adventurous tastes. What might be taken as lightweight, conversational or anecdotal may also be read as – in the broadest sense – experimental.

This range of styles in art writing reflects another distinguishing feature of my study: my emphasis on the diversity of genres in which women discussed art. These included reviews for newspapers and magazines; periodical articles; histories; guide books and travel writings; letters and diaries; novels, short stories and poetry. I do not restrict the category of ‘art criticism’ to formal treatises on art history, exhibition catalogues and reviews, artist biographies and more abstract aesthetics. Acknowledging the generic flexibility of women’s writing about art has the effect of recalibrating our definition of what constitutes art history.³⁶ And this means the inclusion of many more women – not only those who are recognised as art critics, such as Anna Jameson, Emilia Francis Dilke and Vernon Lee, but many far less familiar names. In adopting this approach I am following the example of feminist work on nineteenth-century life writing. This elected to include not only formal biography and autobiography but also diaries, letters, novels and so on, and has radically altered the gender profile of the canon. Similarly, the contours of Romanticism changed significantly when critical