

# The Victorian Artist

Artists' Lifewritings in Britain,  
ca. 1870–1910

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# ONE

## Biographical Functions, Mediations, and Exchanges

Most artists' biographies are pure drivel and claptrap. But I know the business demands it and for some reason clients are incurably curious about the personal lives of artists.

Oleg Stavrowsky, "Cowboy artist," *Southwest Art*, 26 (1996), 87.

### Historical Differences and Overarching Themes

As the opening quote acknowledges, biography serves art consumption, among other things. This chapter will explore several overarching functions of late-Victorian biography that met the demands of "the business" and its "clients." These functions arose out of changes in the nature of the Victorian audience for art after mid-century, and I will briefly survey differences between this period and earlier periods in terms of artists' agency, complaints about commercialism, and relations between artists and their publics. My survey will be brief and schematic; its purpose is to distinguish the Victorian biographical discourse in the latter half of the nineteenth century from earlier attitudes toward artists and to anticipate my later chapters on narratives and biographical genres.

As Iain Pears so thoroughly demonstrates, changes in the importance of art as part of a cultivated life between 1680 and 1768 were instrumental in redefining the nature of the artist and in developing an early version of the modern art market. During this period, when sources of social authority were in flux, taste became a measure of gentility and acceptability, as English society became "open only to a few, but open nonetheless," and an emerging middle class began actively picture buying at the end of the seventeenth century.<sup>1</sup> Despite changes and debates over the meaning and nature of the "gentleman," however, fears over destabilization of the social order (if class

divisions were broached and wealth were made the major criterion of social status) kept the circle of power within limited class boundaries.<sup>2</sup> Painters were considered *arrivistes* during this period and rarely permitted into higher social circles, and then only near the end of the period; Reynolds, Godfrey Kneller, and Arthur Pond were examples of socially accepted artists and collectors (Pears, 1988, 7, 15).<sup>3</sup>

The ideal spectator's taste, or perception of beauty, was deemed the measure of aesthetic value (Pears, 27). Whether art was seen as moral or sensual depended primarily on the highborn spectator whose social position was assumed to be aligned with virtue and whose mediation guaranteed that "the effects of art" would "percolate down the social scale and improve the totality of the nation" (Pears, 23, 37). Yet cultural homogeneity among the oligarchy tended to sharpen cultural divisions between the classes rather than spread homogeneous cultural values to all classes (Pears, 25).<sup>4</sup>

However, an aesthetic trickle-down did appear in the eighteenth century: "If the notion of taste was vague it was nonetheless immensely powerful, absorbed and adopted by artists and public alike" (Pears, 50). During this period the modern art market was also invented, according to Pears, as the volume of trade increased dramatically with the removal of prohibitive duties for foreign works, the resale of these and other works, increasing numbers of works by living artists, and the domination of English over French print production (Pears, 51–5). Modern venues and middlemen such as the auction house, the dealer system, and the professional art agent emerged in response to these increases in the availability and affordability of art (Pears, 57–106). One net effect of these new roles was that collecting art "changed from being an assertion of independence into being one of conformity to the standards of the period," as the "eccentricity" of collecting "became an accepted and widespread activity . . . the pinnacle of a general interest" (Pears, 106).

But the artist's status remained circumscribed, and the audience for art limited, despite the growing acceptability of collecting and the availability of art. Although collecting art was defended as an activity that contributed to "the political, economic and moral health of the entire country," collections were largely inaccessible except to a limited range of visitors whose viewing was mostly for social purposes (Pears, 171–9). Although eighteenth-century artists began to fill their modern market niche as "a by-product of urban development, highly dependent on the existence of substantial surplus resources available for expenditure on objects of luxury or status by a growing number of people," artists' works appeared mostly in small shops and private or restricted public exhibition spaces (Pears, 133). Connoisseurship was the expertise of aristocrats and not of painters who were ironically barred from such expertise because as painters they were

considered unable to be “objective” in judgment (Pears, 182–9). Painting was not yet an acceptable part of a gentleman’s education, and even nascent forms of modern art writing, such as catalogs for private collections, were primarily histories of taste, not of painting, aimed at patrons and collectors, not at artists or the general public (Pears, 202–4). In short, during this period the artist’s position was uncertain, sometimes respected but more often disdained. Ironically, as Pears argues, the public role being defined for art “expanded the public usefulness of artists,” while it simultaneously “diminished the intellectual worth of painting” (Pears, 205).

As artisanal forms of painting, such as sign painting, separated from “high” art, artists’ collective activity helped institutionalize their claims to gentlemanly status, but at first this status was weak and without political or cultural authority (Pears, 109, 113–15). The Royal Academy maintained limited social networks for a privileged group of member artists whose professional status existed within the terms of gentlemanly conduct outlined by aristocratic codes. Pears concludes that the main focus of the eighteenth-century art world was decidedly *not* the artist: “the appreciation of the viewer was the central element around which the entire art world revolved . . . it was the observer who was crucial for the development and importance of the arts, not the producer . . . painters consequently remained in the inevitably subservient position of creating works for others to taste” (Pears, 206).

The art discourse of “high” culture was circumscribed by class identity rather than by national identity. Patrons took their role seriously as a symbol of their social status: “one of the main and most important roles of the painter was to be patronized, to fulfill a role that would enable the great, the rich and the educated to demonstrate their concern for, and worth to, their country” (Pears, 156). This role did not put painters on a social or intellectual par with patrons. Steven Copley points out that suspicions over artists’ authority, exemplified by the persistence of “aristocratic terminologies” in journalism, left the artist limited to a position of servitude to a class of “betters.” Aesthetic judgment was the domain of wealthy aristocratic collectors whose “discriminating reception” redeemed any moral purpose assigned to art.<sup>5</sup>

Even Academy President Martin Archer Shee in the early nineteenth century expressed a suspicion of artists’ agency through his attack on commercialism: “The principle of trade, and the principle of the arts, are not only dissimilar but incompatible. Profit is the impelling power of the one – praise, of the other. *Employment* is the *pabulum vitae* of the first – *encouragement*, of the last.”<sup>6</sup> “Encouragement” and “praise,” subservient gifts from appreciative connoisseurs, put the artist at the receiving end of taste, not at the defining end of it. As Morris Eaves (1992) argues, Shee applied the social



order to the art world, fearing that a free market might level social distinctions and threaten the legitimate proprietors of art, the landed upper class.<sup>7</sup>

The lack of a dialog between artists and public, a dialog that later characterized the Victorian art world, exemplifies differences between this period and the Victorian nineteenth century. Direct communication between artist and public did not emerge in the eighteenth century for many reasons, including the general lack of adequate literacy among both artists and the public as well as the limited venues for such communication. There never developed “any form of two-way process through which the opinions of the public could be absorbed. The audience was there to be manipulated and moulded, not to have any influence on the development of painting through their reactions” (Pears, 127). Eighteenth-century spectators remained a small, relatively coherent social group, hardly the Victorian mass public of disparate classes or audiences. A limited, relatively homogeneous audience of connoisseurs and collectors sharing similar cultural views did not need a massive literature of art. But a heterogeneous late-Victorian mass public fed by an equal mass of critics, artists, exhibitions, and writings generated a public reception to which no eighteenth-century artist had had to respond or appeal. The mass public for art that arose after mid-century was the outcome of the expansion of economic resources, social and economic opportunities, and enfranchisement that followed in the wake of such seismic changes as the Reform Bills of 1832, 1867, and 1884; the Education Act of 1870; and the Married Women’s Property Acts of 1870 and 1882,<sup>8</sup> as well as of the creation of public museums and galleries and the proliferation of newspapers and magazines with their multiple niche markets for newly recognized readerships (e.g., regional populations, women, children, and those in emerging professions).

Into the middle of the century, art spectating spread to other parts of the population, affecting aesthetic values and audiences for art.<sup>9</sup> Writings on the decorative arts fed an emerging audience of women consumers for whom amateur manuals on decorative techniques and Wedgwoods were produced.<sup>10</sup> Working-class artisans, too, were encouraged to improve themselves through art’s cultivation of their person and through art’s uses in industrial design; mechanics institutes sprang up for their education and edification. This change informed nineteenth-century writers’ explanations of art’s appeal away from intellectual cultivation to an appeal to the senses, feelings, and the passions, an appeal codified in the concept of sentiment, a prominent term in the Victorian art critical lexicon.<sup>11</sup>

In response to the many social, educational, and economic enfranchisements during the nineteenth century, late-Victorian art discourse increasingly included the views and interventions of the *producers* of art. By the

end of the nineteenth century, artists spoke for themselves and controlled a significant portion of the art discourse by publishing theories, lectures, interviews, autobiographies, and photos of themselves, a process continued almost seamlessly across the press and all lifewriting genres. Since commercial success was generally respectable for the Victorian middle class, artists' entrepreneurial ventures bonded them with their merchant and industrial patrons and their mass consumers.<sup>12</sup>

Perhaps these changes can be described as developments away from a republic of taste to a democracy of taste, or an "aesthetic democracy," to use Linda Dowling's phrase.<sup>13</sup> As Copley points out, the civic humanist and the consumerist accounts of painting emerged together in the eighteenth century. John Barrell (1992) argues that these two strands "continued to coexist in uneasy symbiosis."<sup>14</sup> I believe that popular art literature, especially biographies, created a discourse in which the civic and the commercial were at times symbiotic and at times merged, becoming mutually illuminating rather than adversarial. For example, Charles R. Leslie's biography of John Constable (1843, 1845) is filled with examples of Constable's economic maturity and knowledge, his careful negotiations regarding money and commissions, and his responsible paterfamilial behavior. These examples and attitudes distinguished Leslie's biography from other mid-century biographies, but they became commonplace in popular biographies later in the century.<sup>15</sup> Canon elevations of artists in lifewritings were affected by the values of new consumers, including industrialist patrons and the mass public.

The expanding audiences (and markets) for art made a difference of kind, not simply of degree, in the nature of art discourse. No longer a matter of identifying art consumption with the interests and ambitions of a relatively limited and homogeneous class, art writing for a wide audience became taxed with the burden of finding common ground and shared experiences to bind these diverse populations. Some artists and movements, such as the arts-and-crafts movements, scavenged the past for a supposed utopian unity of taste in the Middle Ages or the equally imaginary unity of classes in preindustrial England that still haunts the British heritage industry today. Imaginary origins posited a belief in a prior cultural commonality that simply had to be rebuilt in contemporary times through the elimination of those modern elements, such as capitalistic competition or machines, that contaminated this ideal unity and "caused" divisions and discord.

New audiences were served by new art forms, such as illustrations in books and in the press, new printmaking media, and new types of reproductions that served multiple and often distinct economic populations. The term "culture" was often used to subsume all these forms. By the 1870s

“culture” could be invoked as a unifier, first on a national, then on a global and imperial, scale as popular paintings were sent around the world (William Holman Hunt’s *Light of the World*) and reproductions were produced on a mass scale for global markets (e.g., John Everett Millais’s *Cherry Ripe* or Estella Canziani’s *The Piper of Dreams*).<sup>16</sup> To join the strands of such a wide, anonymous audience with mixed, and even adversarial, interests, art production and consumption became translated into acts of national identity and unity. While the notion of an English or British school of painting appeared well before the end of the nineteenth century, it was addressed to a small audience, often identified with landscape painting, relatively vague, and not always nationalistic.<sup>17</sup> Later in the century consuming became identified with the promotion of British goods, including art, making consumption serious, communal, and nationalistic. As Andrew Hemingway points out, “nationalism was more important as a medium for the expression of middle-class identity than universalist Enlightenment ideals,” and biographies’ appeals included an offer of national identity gained through acts of cultural consumption – whether purchases, appreciation, or spectating.<sup>18</sup>

Even those critics who felt art had a civilizing mission, including critics from different parts of the aesthetic political spectrum, as Claire Wildsmith argues, feared “that art would not be powerful enough to retain its virtue at the hands of its middle-class audience” and so needed protection from commercialism and uneducated tastes, lest artists be driven to satisfy middle-class philistine tastes along with their own social and economic desires provoked by public patronage.<sup>19</sup> Biographical literature bore these anxieties and ideals into the representations of artists. Forms, attitudes, and debates over the nature of biography were conducted within these cultural changes and anxieties, as biography itself moved from a mission of providing moral exemplarity to one of offering psychological insights into creativity that aligned individuals with national character. Thomas Carlyle and others viewed history as the composite of individual lives of great men. The debates over biography focused on how much intimate information to provide, as this often threatened the heroic treatment that justified biographical recognition in the first place. Should biography show the subject, warts and all, and threaten the purpose of presenting the subject as a moral exemplum for new readers in need of socialization? Could anecdotage overcome sensationalism and sustain biography’s higher purpose? The earlier Romantic idol, as Kay Dian Kriz argues, was “a model that viewers cannot hope to emulate, to understand, or to criticize,” and Romantics’ mystified creativity looked inward for its powers. Victorian biographies emphasized artists as “typical” or “normal” Britons, whose inspiration came from

natural and empirical sources available to everyone.<sup>20</sup> Elbert Hubbard's *Little Journeys to the Homes of Eminent Artists* (1902) was a culmination of this late-century intention, promising to tame every artist into someone "you and I would be at home with . . . simple and unpretentious" (Leonardo!), or who possessed "bubbling, boyish good cheer" (Corot).<sup>21</sup> Hubbard condemned biographies "written with intent to make a man the demi-god, or to damn him as a rogue who has hoodwinked a world" (Hubbard, 171). He praised biographers for presenting "the man as though he had lived yesterday" (Hubbard, 174).

Here is one leading motivation of late-century biographies: to domesticate the artist into "one of us" and thereby define or at least imply a meaning for "us," the nation of artists, readers, and cultural consumers. To this end artists were often represented as morally pure, devoted to art, manly, and civic minded. Historical veracity conflicted with didactic intentions in debates about the nature of biography, Alexander Nicolson in 1856 attacked biographies of mediocre or unworthy men and considered the biography-reading public driven by "vulgar curiosity." At best, biography "is one of the most instructive and interesting kinds of composition; ill done, it is about the worst . . . gossiping in its character" and written by "Biographical Life Academy" hacks.<sup>22</sup> In 1864, Charles Allston Collins, an artist himself, considered biography "to a great extent a farce . . . a mere milk-and-water panegyric" if it leaves out the blemishes. Collins called for the biographical subject "to be exhibited to us in his idle as well as his industrious mood," and he condemned saccharine religious "memoirs."<sup>23</sup> Biography's redundancy, in Collins's view, was due to the increasing educational opportunities for all, which made once-remarkable achievements commonplace.

Most striking was Collins's prescience that interest in biographies was predicated on artists' material success: "'So-and-so can command 5,000£. for a novel' . . . 'Such-a-one never puts brush to canvas under a couple of thousand'" (Collins, 159). Drawing exclusively on art, drama, and mechanical invention, he characterized his age as obsessed with "a purely pecuniary nature in the dialogues of modern geniuses" such as "whether the sum said to have been paid over to Genius No. 3 for his last picture was inclusive or exclusive of copyright" (Collins, 162).

These debates spilled over into reviews of artists' biographies in the 1860s. One *Athenaeum* reviewer criticized Walter Thornbury's biography of Turner in 1861 for its blatant hero worship and gossip.<sup>24</sup> Another, commenting in 1860 on Martin Shee's biography of his father Sir Martin Shee, mildly chastized its author for his "natural feelings" that led him to dwell on the obvious and banal.<sup>25</sup> A reviewer of Alexander Gilchrist's biography

of Blake in 1863 noted the enormous numbers of artists' lifewritings that piled up waiting for the time "when the Vasari shall arise who will treat the subject as a whole" before attacking the book as stilted and strange. The reviewer highlighted Blake's nastier side, which Gilchrist had defended.<sup>26</sup>

Artists' biographies were based on an amalgam of conflicting criteria including material success, genius or talent, social demeanor, moral exemplarity, and even eccentricity. Aesthetic quality was often assumed, but it was not the dominant theme of these biographies and appeared not to be the *raison d'être* of biography. Aesthetic criteria were left vague and undefined, subordinate to the search for common ground and unifying values. The result was often a jumble of moral, social, and economic justifications for biographical recognition, affecting both the intended readership for, and the critical receptions of, lifewritings.

However, I would argue that Collins's anxiety over the dominance of material success as a measure of biographical recognition was sublimated in later lifewritings, as material success become a sign of both cultural and social capital and of national unity. Ascension through material capital to cultural capital was to become the ultimate justification for artists' biographical recognition, as the concern for the reader's moral edification gave way to later themes of Englishmen, success, public identification with the artist, and the separation of individual creativity from moral character.

### **Naming: Canons, Acculturation, and Keeping Up with Readers**

Les Grands Artistes, collection d'enseignement et de vulgarisation, Placée sous le Haut Patronage de L'administration des Beaux-Arts.

Advertisement for the biographical series, "Les Grands Artistes, Leur Vie – Leur Oeuvre," in its volume on *Hogarth* by François Benoit, 1904.

**D**espite debates over purposes, intentions, and proper portrayal of artists, some shared functions and issues characterize late-century artists' lifewritings, not only in England but also on the Continent. As the previously quoted advertisement from a French series of biographies of great artists noted, popularizing art for a mass public, which in France took a form of government sponsorship of such series, was the primary purpose of biographical series. This required creating canons of both past and present artists and linking them through notions of genius and national identities, a process described by some recent scholars of anthropology and art history as "naming." The importance of a name, which the Victorian artist Frederic Leighton referred to as "the trade-mark that the worker cannot afford to

lose,” was clear to artists, as artists’ signatures stood not only for their identity but also for their work’s authenticity.<sup>27</sup> As Deborah Cherry (2000) points out, “A highly mobile and dynamic borderline shuttling between the corpus of the work and the body of its producer, the signature connected the historical personage, the author name and the opus.”<sup>28</sup>

Philip Hamerton in his 1879 biography of Turner quotes Montaigne’s definition of fame:

There is the name and the thing: the name is a voice which denotes and signifies the thing; the name is no part of the thing, or of the substance; ‘tis a foreign piece joined to the thing, and outside of it.<sup>29</sup>

Hamerton defines the thing as “the mass of his [the artist’s] actual production,” and the voice is “the voice of the talkers and writers about Art” (Hamerton 318). He claims that the “rank of a painter is not determined by his merit but by his fame,” since merit is “a questionable and doubtful thing,” while fame “is an ascertainable thing” revealed by its passing “into all literatures,” even “the shortest and most meagre history of painting” (Hamerton 314). He privileges literature as offering some “objective” assessment of artists distinct from purely aesthetic values inherent in works themselves.

Naming then, does not determine aesthetic value, but assumes it. In most cases the name already has its halo and the naming process is really redundant. But redundancy works to entrench, diffuse, and stabilize meanings for the purposes of generating and naturalizing a canon. As Catherine Soussloff (1997) notes, “Names and naming in the biographies of artists and the discourse of art history become performative of the process of art making itself.”<sup>30</sup>

Naming is one of the pleasures of consumption as well as of production. The anthropologist Mary Douglas identifies naming as a form of consumption:

Each consumption activity has its own field of names. Each field has three dimensions:

- (i) it can be broad or narrow in the geographical range over which its names are known;
- (ii) it can be deep or shallow in the time-depth in which the names can be placed chronologically in relation to one another;
- (iii) it can be rich or poor according to the number and complexity of the criteria for grading the names.

Consumers are always “actively scanning, judging and enjoying” names, some of which “have heavy learning costs. The greater the historical depth,

the more costly it is in time to learn the names. So the fields which afford the greatest number of discriminated names in relation to physical testing, instead of being the most open and democratic, are the most closed and elitist." These fields claim to be "rich" in "spiritual values" or "higher human values."<sup>31</sup>

But Victorian biographical series functioned to democratize costly names, promising to make them widely available in many forms, from large "drawing table" books to miniature books, all with reproductions of "masterpieces" often selected from British and major Continental museums. Anecdotes were mnemonic devices to help the uninitiated remember "costly" names through leveling narratives of humor and intimacy. Naming socialized readers' taste and shaped national cultural identities at the same time.

Eighteenth-century books were generally addressed to collectors, connoisseurs, or the upper classes; late-Victorian biographies were addressed to the general public and to a new reader, the "student." For Victorians, education for the acquisition of cultural capital included autodidacticism or self-help. While cultural acquisition is "naturalized" for those whose families possess large amounts of cultural capital (the "proper" education, travel, and cultural activities), autodidacts gain knowledge with "an insecurity that leads them to stick closely to the hierarchies of cultural legitimacy," as Nicholas Garnham and Raymond Williams (1980) point out.<sup>32</sup> Garnham and Williams note that acquiring cultural capital takes time, so that individuals must feel there is something to gain in acquiring culture, such as social status, national identity, or economic well-being. Lifewritings, often short, small in size, brief in text, with only the "major" works reproduced, became the perfect fit for an autodidactic public desiring an efficient means of acquiring cultural capital in the industrial age.

Naming circulates and distributes knowledge, so biographies worked in ways similar to those in which popular reproductions worked, disseminating cultural capital to a broad public. Original works available in public museums could also appear in homes as cheap prints of those same works, which then acquired public affection and familiarity through reproductions in the press and cheap books. The emotionally charged affection Victorians felt toward certain artists (Millais, William Hogarth) and certain art works (Hunt's *Light of the World*, Millais's *Cherry Ripe*, and Canziani's *The Piper of Dreams*) projected onto these artists and their works a new postindustrial aura.

Naming also offered an illusion of continuity with the past – G. F. Watts could be called England's Michelangelo, and Millais, a Victorian Reynolds, an identity Millais cultivated by his "fancy dress" paintings of little girls.

Such applications implied that British artists were direct heirs of the Italian Renaissance, a theme repeated in many biographical series that juxtaposed Italian Old Masters with English Old and New Masters, “proving” that English culture (not French!) dominated Europe in the nineteenth century, as Italian culture had dominated Renaissance Europe. These tags contained their own cultural capital and embodied social relations and ambitions. New Masters could be embedded into a canon that sprang from the past to appear “natural” and *a priori*.

Through repetition, naming “secures” meanings that must be continually policed, asserted, and reassessed. Like art works, artists sometimes exceeded their ascribed meanings. This excess of meaning of “artist” or “artistic personality” was accrued through many representations of artists in both fiction and critical reviews prior to, and simultaneous with, their biographical entrance into recognition. Naming’s effectiveness, then, depended on the ways biographies intersected with readers’ other art experiences and knowledge. A brief look at some biographies’ trajectories offers concrete examples of how naming traversed changing historical receptions, as biographers revised their texts over years and even decades to anticipate and accommodate these changes.

H. C. Marillier’s biographies of D. G. Rossetti displayed a trajectory that appears to be a dumbing down for general readers. In 1899, this biography had 279 pages and ninety plates with a 35-page appendix. In 1901 the text was shortened to 171 pages as part of the Library of English Literature by Bell and Sons, and this version went through several editions.<sup>33</sup> The 1904 version became part of the British Artists series by Bell and cost 7s 6d.<sup>34</sup> The reduced 1 shilling 1906 version in the Miniature Series had only 112 pages and eight illustrations. Originally titled *D. G. Rossetti: An Illustrated Memorial of His Art and Life*, by 1906, Marillier’s truncated text was simply titled *Rossetti*.<sup>35</sup> The “much abridged” 1904 version omitted passages on works of art “of more interest to students and connoisseurs than to general readers,” and “sketches and studies” were also deemed more specialist in interest, although there were still ninety-three illustrations in 1904.<sup>36</sup> Further omissions in 1906 included poems by Rossetti and his friends, details about his relationships with patrons and his prices, analyses of Rossetti’s personality, critical comments, details about his life with Siddal, and Marillier’s critique of Rossetti’s “exaggeration of necks and lips” and other signs of his “growing morbidity of temperament.”<sup>37</sup> The dumbing down and sanitizing for general readers included reducing the 1904 chronological list of 390 works to a short list of 75 works, mostly those in public collections.

While many biographies like Marillier’s *Rossetti* were first intended for specialists and were subsequently watered down for general readers, some



books grew to become more scholarly. Austin Dobson's series of biographies on Hogarth, which he wrote from 1872 to 1907, appeared first as a popular little book in the "Illustrated Biographies of the Great Artists" series published by Sampson Low, Marston, Searle, and Rivington.<sup>38</sup> Reissued and rewritten, it grew to twice its original length in 1891.<sup>39</sup> Between 1879 and 1891, the catalog of prints went from eight to eighty-eight pages; the bibliography, from one to thirty-nine pages; and the catalog of paintings, from two and one-half to twenty-six pages. High-quality reproductions by the firm of Walker and Boutell illustrated the 1891 edition. One memorable change was that the bewigged self-portrait of the 1879 frontispiece gave way to the more relaxed image of Hogarth and his pug that eventually became identified with the Hogarth constructed by the Victorians.<sup>40</sup>

Later editions and revisions of Dobson's *Hogarth* continued to grow and fit new audiences. His early prefaces printed in the 1907 edition of his biography shared this trajectory with readers. In his preface to the 1898 edition, he described new information added to the memoirs, index, bibliography, and catalogs.<sup>41</sup> But by 1898, biography readers were more critical, more familiar with Hogarth's art, and more sophisticated than they had been in 1879 or even in 1891: "To be complete, to have made no blunders — are not claims which can be lightly put forward, especially in these days of fast-multiplying and often controversial material." By 1898, Hogarth's paintings were available to "an unbiased public." Unlike Hogarth's early biographers, Dobson no longer had to defend Hogarth as a painter as well as a printmaker (Dobson, 1907, ix).

Perhaps the most striking edition was the deluxe 1902 version "included in the sumptuous succession of Art Monographs" published by Heinemann. It measured 15" by 11" with plates in photogravure from original paintings in private and public collections on high-quality paper and contained a preface by Walter Armstrong on Hogarth's technique, clearly meant for connoisseurs, specialists, and students. But by 1907, Dobson feared that Hogarth's reputation as a painter and colorist "may go too far," threatening to obscure his primary importance "as a pictorial moralist and satirist." The 1907 version would "revert to its original plan; and, if possible, make its appeal to the public in a cheaper and more accessible form," returning Hogarth to lay readers (1907, v). But despite removing technical information, catalogs were expanded in 1907.<sup>42</sup> The 1907 biography had seventy-six illustrations (the 1891 version had fifty-eight). Changes reflect Dobson's determination to present Hogarth as a painter; the catalog of paintings in the 1907 appendix precedes the catalog of prints, which until then had been the first of the two appended catalogs.

Dobson's biographies of Hogarth went from populist to scholarly, increasing catalog and bibliography entries, numbers of illustrations, and historical information, and expanding in 1902 to include technical information in a large, sumptuous edition. Then it contracted back to a populist version, but with a twist. No longer the small, miniature biography of 1879, the "popular" 1907 version contained an authoritative bibliography, two catalogs, and more illustrations than its predecessors. These changes reflected and shaped readership; Dobson assumed that lay readers would be more knowledgeable, share specialists' interests, and be able to manage long appendices.

One possible explanation for these different trajectories may be the different audiences and their expectations about living and dead artists. Although Rossetti was dead when Marillier's biographies were circulating (he died in 1882), he was still a Victorian subject with living relatives and friends and did not have the established biographical recognition of the "fathers" of British art about whom biographers had already written for more than a century. Second, works by long-dead artists were more likely to be in museums and galleries, while living or recently dead artists' works were still largely in private collections (especially true for Rossetti who did not exhibit in public for years), making biographies' research and the public's access more difficult. Series had their respective audiences, but almost all catered to their readers' desires to possess artists' names and framable images in "drawing room" books that would display their cultural know-how and their virtual participation in national cultural life.<sup>43</sup>

### Creating Surplus Value

The commercial activities of the Art Union that made prints available to a mass public were both maligned and defended in mid-century. One critic claimed these activities were "independent of the ordinary laws of trade" because art purchases were "not to secure an adequate return for their money, but to obtain the benefits which artistic taste and knowledge are supposed to confer on a community, without involving individuals in any sensible pecuniary loss." The money exchanged was "not for the commodity simply, but for . . . the whole habit and mode of being, on the part both of the artist and the public," and thus the art served as a public good.<sup>44</sup> The dissemination of art to educate public taste overcame any taint of monetary exchanges through this "whole habit and mode of being," its surplus value.

Biographies further encouraged new consumers to buy art. Ernest Rhys's frequently reprinted biography of Leighton contained a list of small

landscape oils sold at Christie's in July 1896, "when the prices realized, from 50 to 100 guineas each for the best, were in excess of those the most sympathetic admirer of Lord Leighton's singular power as a landscape-painter had dared to expect," making this list "worth the space it occupies."<sup>45</sup> Leighton's landscape paintings were precisely the kinds of works that might appeal to new consumers, such as biography readers, being relatively inexpensive compared to Leighton's "masterpieces." Market values were usually sublimated into "higher" values, as biographies helped constitute consumers' "mode of being." These books seamlessly blended economic and cultural values, as artists' names became signs of both material and cultural capital. Walter Bayes, in his 1931 biography of Turner, argued that biographies

build up an immense assumed value for painting. An artist's works are catalogued and his price increases at once. Monographs are written on him and reviews of the monographs. The advances in price are chronicled and, like the serpent feeding on its own tail, the chronicle provokes a further advance . . . a famous work of art is seen magnified through a halo of words, blurred in a mush of tricolour printing . . . . A picturesque personality, a biography rather highly coloured in its episodes, are of great advantage to the artist, or again to be more exact, of advantage posthumously to the owners of the work.<sup>46</sup>

As Pierre Bourdieu points out, art is also produced by

an unprecedented array of institutions for recording, preserving and analysing works (reproductions, catalogues, art journals, museums . . . ) . . . discourse about a work is not a mere accompaniment, . . . but a stage in the production of the work, of its meaning and value.<sup>47</sup>

Biographies were part of this "array." Biographers, like critics, "struggle for the monopoly of legitimate discourse about the work of art, and consequently in the production of the value of the work of art" (Bourdieu, 1993, 36). And like critics, biographers define the relation between the art object and the social formation through codes of meaning, such as costly names that are "hidden references to other artists, past or present." The structure of the artistic field is replicated in every act of production, including naming, one of biography's means of producing and increasing an artist's surplus value (Bourdieu, 1993, 109).

Within this array, biographies had a symbiotic relationship with other art world institutions. Marion Harry Spielmann's biography of Millais in 1898 was "produced in some haste for the use of visitors to the Millais exhibition at the Royal Academy."<sup>48</sup> In his 1903 biography of Gainsborough for George Bell's *British Artists* series, Ronald Gower wrote, "I hope this little book will make Gainsborough's art more familiar to those who may not have had

an opportunity of seeing a collection of his works. I can only advise those who have not studied his paintings in our own National Gallery to do so.”<sup>49</sup> Emilie Barrington requested a copy of George Bell’s biography of Leighton be sent to Leighton House to be “on view among the drawings in the studios.”<sup>50</sup> In tandem with other art institutions, biographies promised to help new audiences feel comfortable in these august spaces by familiarizing them with their own national culture.

S. Cameron, in an essay on the economic role of art critics in the culture industry, argues that critics provide a form of advertisement, create reputations as a form of capital, generate a market for their criticism, as well as for the object of their criticism, and influence “higher order preferences,” or meta-preferences, by validating the consumers’ self-image through concepts of proper taste.<sup>51</sup> Critics shape consumption by repetition and displays of expertise – their knowledge of the artist’s place in the canon or history and applications of specialized aesthetic discourse: “The weight of the canon of received work is a burden on potential consumers. This can be eased by critics but may conflict with their tendency to promote originality” (Cameron, 329). Critics lobby for the right to define “originality” as well as for the authority to situate works in the canon, aligning New with Old Masters. These tasks and roles were precisely the same for biographers who collaborated with artists, art institutions, and the buying public to promote shared values and sustain their own authority.

Surplus value for the artist could be social, as well as aesthetic, or national. As Frances Borzello notes, “cultural philanthropy,” the notion of art offering social models and moral improvement to the poor, was practiced in such venues as East End exhibitions, and many critics argued for art’s diffusion of moral values to the entire public throughout the century.<sup>52</sup> Only rarely did biographies seriously explore a purely aesthetic value. One case was Walter Armstrong’s *Gainsborough and His Place in English Art*. The book’s fifteen-page introduction is all about “the nature of art” for the benefit of “a layman in search of truth.”<sup>53</sup> The biography proper begins in chapter three, and the last chapter returns to a presumably aesthetic assessment, arguing that Gainsborough was “the first and the best of the impressionists,” really an opportunity to capture this movement for the English (Armstrong, 225). But such attention to aesthetic matters was rare.

National identity was the most consistently proclaimed of all surplus value, as it did not invite debate or argument as moral and aesthetic issues often did. Armstrong explicitly binds aesthetic appreciation to national identity. Suffolk, Gainsborough’s birthplace, is treated as a quintessentially English countryside, and his art is English art, characterized by emotion, color, a “national love of moderation,” with best depictions of women and