INTRODUCTION

The Artist as Text

> The entrance of a biographical subject into written discourse is still a momentous occasion, an event that can, among other things, reaffirm cultural eminence, contextualize social action, alter literary opinion, deputize political influence, or instruct economic conduct – and this admissions procedure, which is always in crisis, is constantly (if not often consciously) surveilled in and through biographical recognition.
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> William Epstein, "(Post)Modern Lives: Abducting the Biographical Subject," in W. Epstein, Ed., *Contesting the Subject*, 1991, 222.

The Victorian period is well known for its interest in, and even obsession with, the genre of biography. In a 1996 study of Victorian scientists' biographies, Michael Shortland and Richard Yeo describe biography as "one of the most popular and yet least studied forms of contemporary writing," avidly consumed by readers, while often encapsulating its writers and readers' "moral and epistemological beliefs."[1] Anxiously seeking heroic and moral role models "crowned with achievement" (Shortland/Yeo, 28), Victorians "witnessed a massive efflorescence of writing in the first person singular: the maxim, essay, diary, notebook, the letter, the self-portrait, the autobiography, the memoir, the first-person novel, the lyric"; by 1884, "a critic boasted that England had published more biographies than any other country" (Shortland/Yeo, 22).[2] The genre even framed a range of fictional and historical variations such as the imaginary portraits of Renaissance artists by Walter Pater, John Ruskin's "Two Boyhoods" chapter in *Modern Painters,* the historical narratives of both Thomas Carlyle and Thomas Babington Macaulay, and many Victorian novels presented as "biographies."

The genre was not a simple one. Richard Altick describes English biography as "a rich but unstable compound of history, journalism, eulogy,

inspiration, and materials suitable for the study of the mind," a hybrid genre with many forms: the "compilation," "life and letters," "reminiscences," "memoirs," and ranging from press interviews, to expensive two-volume family biographies, to popular biographical series co-published or reprinted in Europe, the United States, and around the Empire.[3] Victorian biographies intersected with discourses of current events, creativity, aesthetics, psychology, and national and racial beliefs (Altick, 104–11).

During the last quarter of the nineteenth century, artists entered Victorian "biographical recognition," becoming popular subjects of Victorian biographies on a mass scale not experienced before: serialized biographies, for example, sometimes numbered up to fifty artists' biographies in a single series. Epstein argues that biography became "an agent in the great chain of enterprise, another institutional channel through which the modern state can materially produce or reproduce the individual in this world."[4] Victorian artists themselves attested to the importance of reading biographies while growing up. T. S. Cooper "read every book I could get hold of about artists and their work," while Frederic Haydon wrote that his father Benjamin Haydon read "Every life of every great man he could get hold of . . . he fed his sensibilities and excited his own ambition by reading the lives of ambitious men." Frederic Leighton's friend the architect George Aitchison read the *Life of Haydon* to the painter while he worked in his studio.[5] *The Art Journal* advised its readers that the biographical dictionary *Men of the Time* "ought to find a place in every library, and is almost a necessity in every household in these days."[6] One biographer claimed that G. F. Watts's life "possesses also exceptional value for young people," indicating that, despite the early-century suspicions about artists' character, by the century's end, they, too, were moral paradigms equal to writers, statesmen, and scientists.[7] But biographies not only replicated hegemonic identities but they also created identities for social change, as feminists recognized in promoting more biographies of women artists in the press, and especially in *The English Woman's Journal*.[8]

Given that biography has become a dominant genre that continues to shape artists' (and others') public images so profoundly, it seems pertinent to examine a period in which biographies flourished on a modern mass scale and constructed artists as very different from modern notions of the avant-garde. Most late-Victorian biographical subjects were not agonized geniuses, but gentlemen and ladies whose material success and public appeal became representative of English cultural domination and superiority, as well as signs of national unity. The rise of British artists' celebrity was considered evidence that British public taste had improved and that artists were thoroughly socialized, not alienated and suffering in garrets. Victorian

artists were models of success, decorum, proper manliness or femininity, and, ultimately, of Britishness, all intended for public consumption. Yet, this popular biographical literature did not simply reproduce artists as identical to one another or to a transcendental type, nor did it always express unmitigated admiration. Biographically recognized artists were marked by conflicting and fluid identities between 1870 and 1910. And, of course, artists were gendered in very different ways in biographical genres.[9]

Recent books address the need to study popular biographies because of their role in shaping a national collective memory and a people's pantheon.[10] Through this literature, reputations were shaped and retrofit into changing tastes for art and for artistic personae in what Friedrich Nietzsche called a "biographical epidemic," in which popular biography served as a venue for official and mass culture throughout Europe.[11]

Despite the scale of this literature, it has been relatively ignored and rarely examined critically by art historians, although lifewriting genres are a focus of much literary scholarship. Art historians have thoroughly examined Victorian art criticism's lexicon and aesthetic and gendered values, and their application to individual artists. But biographies were at least as popular as criticism and probably more widely read, and in their public images of artists they profoundly shaped the reading public's own national identity, influencing Britons well into the twentieth century. In 1983, Griselda Pollock argued that the monograph often succumbed to infatuations with a mystified creativity as the artist's persona participate in the production of meanings about the artist and about art.[12] As Pierre Bourdieu has demonstrated, art production encompasses more than art works alone; press reviews, art books and periodicals, public exhibitions, catalogues, and biographies produce meanings and beliefs about the nature of creativity, cultural patterns, artistic identities, national culture, and aesthetic worth.[13] Furthermore, nineteenth-century biographies continue to influence our own assessments of Victorian artists. Recent blockbuster exhibitions and publications have focused on the very same artists who were among Victorians' most popular biographical subjects: Edward Burne-Jones, Frederic Leighton, Lawrence Alma-Tadema, and John Everett Millais. This similarity reflects our continued and sometimes uncritical reliance on Victorian biographical literature.[14]

Thus, there are several reasons to study artists' lifewritings in the late-Victorian period: the genre's proliferation and acquisition of cultural authority during this period, the fundamental importance of biography to art history as a discipline, the role of biography in shaping broad cultural meanings and beliefs, and the continuing influence of Victorian biographies on our own current studies. Martha Woodmansee and Mark Osteen, in *The*

New Economic Criticism, argue for the need to examine "the condition of authors or artists as commodities and celebrities," and my study explores this condition, or set of conditions, within the context of biographical writings and their "economies of reading" that shaped these artistic identities and roles. My study of late Victorian artists' biographies examines the typologies they generated, the "economics of canonicity" they shaped, and narrative strategies they deployed.[15] Exploring biographies of late-Victorian artists through the typologies they generated and their biographical genres and narrative strategies, I hope to offer some methods for analyzing and categorizing this massive body of literature. My main focus will be lifewritings of late-Victorian artists, but biographical constructions of their forerunners (Joshua Reynolds, Thomas Gainsborough, J. M. W. Turner, Benjamin Haydon, William Hogarth, and George Morland), whose identifications with national canons solidified in late Victorian art literature, will also be considered as such artistic identities offered templates for biographies of living artists.

My subject is the artist as text, but to treat the artist from this perspective means also treating biographical constructions of "artist" as intertextual, as embodying Victorian social, national, ideological, and ideal identities. Linda Nochlin argues that now "the time is ripe for a return to biography in a new sense, to biography as a history of personal making in the world, within community and society."[16] In a key article on the nature and functions of biography in art history, J. R. R. Christie and Fred Orton similarly argue for the study of art history's reliance on multiple representations of the biographical subject "simultaneously and non-contradictorily" as "an individual in a society, a culture, sub-culture, a country, a mode of production." They propose presenting "historicity through the realization of human agency" in biographical narratives without "over-individualized accounts of artistic creation, and reductive explanations in terms of talent or genius, or incorrigible psychoanalytic interpretations."[17] Given that we live "biographically: we live a way of living, or – more correctly – we live ways of living; we live plural-biographically," they argue that

> . . . What needs to be excavated and written is the nature of the explanatory systems mobilised by these always already institutionalised commentators and the conditions under which they . . . . worked to produce their explanations, their expression claims, their biographies; and why.[18]

My purpose is to carry out this kind of excavation of the explanatory systems of late-Victorian artists' biographical elevation into new roles of social and cultural agency.

The very appearance of Victorian artists as worthy of "biographical recognition" signaled their new importance, which Walter Armstrong

described in his 1905 biography of Reynolds as "the pinnacle on which the world has placed" the artist.[19] Such recognition did all the things listed in Epstein's quote at the beginning of this introduction: "reaffirm cultural eminence, contextualize social action, alter literary opinion, deputize political influence, or instruct economic conduct."[20] Biographical recognition not only reflected successful lives but also contributed to their material success in many cases and to their elevation as national icons of British culture, as it shaped artists' social, economic, and professional behaviors and identities. In 1894, Esther Wood asserted: "To study a temperament like Rossetti's in its relation to the intellectual life of the age, and to ask how such a temperament was in its turn brought to bear upon some of the problems of that life, is to be confronted with much more than a personality or a career; is to deal with a wide and crucial phase in the history of a people."[21] Here Victorian "biographical recognition" raised individual artistic achievement into a "higher" public good and turned artists into exempla of national identity.

This "raising" helped suture artists to their intended public. As Andrew Hemingway points out, art is "a function of social relations then prevailing, an effect of discourse, and a range of complex learnt pleasures."[22] The art public grew in the second half of the century through various social, economic, and legal changes (e.g., three Reform Bills, the Education Act of 1870, the Married Women's Property Acts of 1870 and 1882, increased public access to education and enfranchisement). These new culture consumers were very diverse, and their social relations with each other were loose and disunified compared to the much smaller and more homogeneous art public of earlier periods who shared a common vocabulary, education, and status. As Sarah Burns notes regarding American "modernization," artists' public images and self-representations "were remodeled by new conditions of producing and marketing their work," including "mass culture, spectacle, commercialism, and consumerism."[23] Biographies, like critical reviews, helped inexperienced readers gain access to cultural knowledge in the form of accessible canons for those who desired cultural citizenship in the modern industrial state.

Within this suturing function, late-Victorian biographies are dramatically different from both Romantic and avant-garde models of neglected artists characterized as "introverted, intuitive, inspired, neurotic, impractical, bohemian" (Burns, 1996, 19). Most Victorian artists, identified with the opposite characteristics (extroverted, hard working, normal, pragmatic), were raised into biographical recognition by their success and their *fortune*, not their misfortune. These artists wrote or were written about as insiders for the most part – popular, rich, socially mobile, and respectable – fulfilling many of the ambitions of their readers and spectators. Popular

Victorian artists' lifewritings were predicated on the presentation of a mutually reflecting mirror between public and artist, not on distinguishing the artist radically from the public, as in the case of Van Gogh, for example, whose difference, his alleged "madness," was fundamental to his modernist iconicity.

Yet, lifewritings were sites of culture wars, too, where mid-century didacticism clashed with aestheticism, and Victorian respectability met early modernism head on. Artists' identities, even those of the "founding fathers" of the British School (Joshua Reynolds and William Hogarth), generally considered fixed and reified in their national characteristics, were often quite fluid. Truly problematic identities like those of J. W. M. Turner and George Morland generated overtly contradictory representations. Some artists defied domestication and some authors refused to domesticate or homogenize their subjects, disrupting the comfortable biographical homogenization with disagreements about the link between artists' character and their works, the dangers of the studio, and conflicts over social status and gendered identity of artists as they rose to become representatives of Englishness. Artists in biographies could masquerade in multiple, bricolaged, and contradictory identities to become as consumable as their art works.[24]

Artists' lifewritings became sites of public homage, the reading of which was a way to "tender a tribute."[25] The tremendous popularity of Victorian artists' biographies was part of a larger process of acculturation of middle and working classes initiated by earlier serialized reprints of the English literary classics and authors' biographies. Like literary series, art series were promoted as vehicles for self-education and self-help: "fireside universities," as Richard Altick calls them.[26] They ranged in price from cheap to costly and in size and style from pocketbooks to large limited editions. Frequently texts were reprinted in costlier or cheaper versions and even dispersed transnationally: The French critic Robert de la Sizeranne in his 1898 book *English Contemporary Art* based his assessments of English artists largely on British press biographies and interviews.[27] German and French biographical series (e.g., *Les Grands Artistes*) took their information from popular British biographical series and histories, and vice versa.

Biographical identities were not discrete from other forms of art discourse. The stated intention of some series was to complement the expanding numbers of provincial and London museums, encouraging readers to familiarize themselves with their own national culture. Other art institutions feeding the public desire for acculturation included Mechanics' Institutes, a spectrum of art journals from the populist *Art Journal* and *Magazine of Art* to the elite periodicals of the 1890s, the voluminous trade in cheap prints, and

historical and technical books on art and architecture.[28] Biographies incorporated critics' judgments or shared press pages with exhibition reviews.

The drive to acculturation that coincided with a growing fixation on the nature of national cultural identity fed Victorian biographical mania. A number of scholars have recently argued that national identity was as much the consequence of cultural practices as of political and social practices and changes. Ernest Gellner argues that nationalism maintains "that similarity of culture" necessary to form crucial social bonds and political identities. Benedict Anderson also describes nationalism, or "nation-ness," as a cultural artifact, that became widely diffused and "modular," transplanted "to a great variety of social terrains" through print media communicating across diverse publics.[29] I would argue here that biographies (along with museums, prints, and the art press) played a major role in aligning cultural production with national interests as lifewritings presented artists as paradigms of often carefully gendered Englishness. International exhibitions also served to bring artists together as national delegates sharing a national purpose and identity.[30] Some artists went further to claim either an international identity, like the polyglot Frederic Leighton, or a universal identity, like G. F. Watts who insisted that he was like a Renaissance artist, not just a painter. Many artists periodically remade their artistic identities by producing works in multiple media and producing identities in multiple forms of art literature (memoirs, Academy lectures, press interviews).

National identity was filtered through emerging cultural canons of art and literature at the very moment when these canons themselves were still under construction. Popular biographies privileged well-known paintings and successful artists as representatives of national culture and character, although they also salvaged the occasional neglected genius.[31] The promotion of art to everyone was part of what Linda Dowling calls an "aesthetic democracy," rooted in Whig liberal belief that every person had the capacity for aesthetic appreciation or a potential for appreciation that could be educated.[32] For these emerging and diverse audiences, biographies' accessible explanations of the meanings of art and of artists' roles helped to socialize them as new cultural consumers.

Victorian artists' biographies were also inflected by aestheticism and an emerging modernism. Elizabeth Prettejohn describes Alma-Tadema's celebrity trajectory across his extensive press coverage from his identification with an "English" resistance to French Impressionism (despite his being originally Dutch) to his later identification with a retrograde style in the posthumous 1913 exhibition, especially in Roger Fry's attack on his work as commercial.[33] Addressing the close ties that Victorians assumed existed between artist and art work, earlier mid-century biographies also had to

negotiate, sanitize, validate, or explain away moral disparities, as the artist's character was often equated with the inherent value of the art work. Some Victorians, like the prominent critic John Ruskin, believed that the best work could only be made by artists of good character. But in late-century writings, art became separated from moral identities and anxieties. A popular artist like the eighteenth-century George Morland who lived a disreputable life nonetheless inspired many late-Victorian biographies, which addressed, excused, or erased any moral disparity between Morland the reprobate and Morland the popular artist whose works had high market values.

Through the sheer accumulation of reiterations, series, and multiples in a variety of sizes and forms, these texts policed and contested artistic identities for a wide readership, as they expressed Victorian anxieties about the very nature of biography itself – should it be heroic and ideal, or reveal the subject, warts and all? The prolixity and popularity of biographies made the genre a culture industry (as it still is today, but with very different intentions and content), as defined by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer: a mass culture subject to the organizational principles and values of industrial capitalism.[34] Some prominent art writers, like William Morris, Ruskin, and Pater, contested this industrialization of culture as driving art production toward the banal and commercial. The modernist Roger Fry condemned "half-educated members of the lower middle-class," a target audience of Victorian biographers, though not the only one for whom they wrote.[35]

Although debates over conflicting criteria of taste, morality, commerce, and aesthetics began to appear in eighteenth-century art literature, there are major differences between late-Victorian art literature and earlier art writings, despite some shared topics. One difference is artists' agency in public art discourses. This agency was a Victorian achievement, as the articulation of aesthetic issues became an activity of the *artist*, the producer of art, who until then had largely been subservient to connoisseurs and collectors. Ann Pullan has demonstrated that after the founding of the British Institution in 1805 by nobility and gentry, arguments were made that the governing classes had a responsibility to control and distribute artists' work, while artists, described as akin to both charity cases and mental patients in need of surveillance, were chided for their ungratefulness to their upper-class keepers.[36] John Gage notes, too, that the British Institution's membership of connoisseurs and collectors in 1805 "decided to do without the advice and the self-help of artists" in organizing exhibitions.[37] The aristocratic governing classes who exhibited their collections to the public were esteemed as philanthropists. The British Institution defined its exhibitions as contributions to national wealth, creating "a School of Art for the Nation at large" to educate public taste, and it largely by-passed artists to do this.[38]

The British Institution exemplified the artists' exclusion from agency that characterized the pre-Victorian art world. Artists responded by forming professional societies. The Society for Painters in Water Colours (SPWC) founded in 1804 generated a rhetoric of professionalism and commodification in an attempt to raise watercolorists' status to compensate for the Royal Academy's neglect of the medium.[39] Greg Smith's study of this organization's documents reveals the speculative nature of its members' artistic production and their attempts to meet consumer demand with cheap works and ready purchasing opportunities.[40] The society's commercial practices, fueled by some artists' production of massive quantities of drawings, raised concerns over "deskilling" and the over-commodification of art.[41] In these cases, artists' agency appeared infantilized as charity cases (British Institution), or artists were condemned as greedy commodifiers (SPWC). Despite the public activism of Royal Academy Presidents Martin Shee and Joshua Reynolds, eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century writers and collectors were generally uncomfortable with artists' claims of expertise.

Throughout the nineteenth century, artists came to control their public image and to intervene in public art discourse directly and indirectly to address the public on matters of taste, value, technique, theory, and national culture. Increasingly better educated and more literate than the majority of their eighteenth-century antecedents, they became their own agents for the circulation and reproductions of their identities as well as of their works. They nurtured intimate friendships with critics, journalists, and dealers through whom artists indirectly shaped their public images. M. H. Spielmann, editor of the *Magazine of Art* and promoter of popular artists and Academicians, suggested in 1890 that the critic should "watch the artist while his work was in progress and would ascertain his aims more thoroughly, and his artistic code of morality far better, than he could learn them from the artist's exhibited work."[42] Implying a regular, intimate relationship between artist and critic, Spielmann inferred that artists produced themselves, as well as their art, and that the meanings of art grew from a collusion of artists' production and critics' reception. Artists' creative progress revealed in their photographs, sketches, and drawings published in the press demystified creativity and displayed their work ethic to a mass public.[43]

Artists' increasing agency paralleled and contributed to the rising importance of national mass culture. Ernest Gellner defines modern culture as

> no longer merely the adornment, confirmation and legitimization of a social order which was also sustained by harsher and coercive constrictions; culture is now the necessary shared medium, the life-blood or perhaps rather the

> minimal shared atmosphere, within which alone the members of the society can breathe and survive and produce. For a given society, it must be one in which they can *all* breathe and speak and produce; so it must be the *same* culture. Moreover, it must now be a great or high (literate, training-sustained) culture, and it can no longer be a diversified, locality-tied, illiterate little culture or tradition.[44]

The anthropologist Mary Douglas, like Gellner, defines culture as a mutually interdependent set of relationships among its members: "a culture is a system of persons holding one another mutually accountable . . . . From this angle, culture is fraught with the political implications of mutual accountability."[45] Given the transformation of culture into national culture, it is not surprising that artists actively intervened in lifewritings to control their public images and claim a stake in national life. Seen as participating in a shared culture, and even responsible for generating that culture, artists gained high profiles and a great deal of cultural capital through "mutual accountability" in this "shared medium" that interpellated spectators and artists alike.

Victorian artists did not all share the same view of their enterprise, or how it should be represented to the public, or the same motives, whether commercial or "higher" (national or moral or aesthetic). Debates over the role of money in motivating artistic production began before the Victorian period, and several scholars have explored this debate's emergence in the eighteenth century.[46] Writers before the mid-nineteenth century usually condemned commercial motives and attacked artists who openly courted the market. What marked late-Victorian debates on these topics, aside from the mass scale of both Victorian art production and consumption, was artists' open participation in commercial and entrepreneurial ventures. No longer were commercial interests necessarily assumed to be tainted. Entrepreneurship as a character trait could appear distinct from commercialism and both manly and English. Among Victorians, material success was often considered a virtue; earlier in the century debt and poverty, treated as a kind of criminal behavior, were causes for imprisonment or forced labor in workhouses. Biographies heralded high market prices, while they often sought to sublimate market success as a sign of national unity of all classes who loved the same popular paintings and artists. Material success "proved" that artists' labor was capital producing and even exemplified a provident capitalism, as their productive labor now contributed to national wealth and unity and to the balance of trade, as some writers argued.

Artists in their autobiographies freely mentioned their works' market values, while family biographers found ways to alternately reveal and sublimate market measures. Market value as a measure of artistic worth was a dominant