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Julie F. Codell  

*The Victorian Artist: Artists’ Lifewritings in Britain, ca. 1870–1910*

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Julie Codell’s study of biographies and autobiographies of artists in Victorian Britain offers a significant addition to the understanding of artistic life in late-nineteenth-century Europe. Focusing on the category of “lifewritings,” she examines the intersection of artistic practice and publicity, showing how these texts both reflected the machinations of the art world and shaped popular conceptions about art’s social roles.

Nineteenth-century Britain was obsessed with biography. Narratives of exemplary individuals’ lives were deployed and disseminated across Victorian culture for a variety of political and social ends. This was, after all, the era that produced the daunting sixty-three-volume *Dictionary of National Biography* between 1885 and 1900. Literary history, in particular, has focused on this biographical impulse, but important studies have also emerged from such disciplines as the history of science.[1] Codell’s study expands upon this literature by examining the heretofore overlooked manifestation of this “biographical mania” (7) in artistic culture. In so doing, it contributes an analysis of Victorian Britain to the art-historical literature on the typologies and trajectories of artists’ careers. Beyond the classic studies by Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz, Cynthia and Harrison White, and Rudolf and Margot Wittkower,[2] important contributions to these areas of research have been made in the last two decades by such scholars as Catherine Soussloff, Sarah Burns, Oskar Bätschmann, Robert Jensen, and Howard Singerman.[3] Codell’s book presents a different perspective, however, in examining artists and the art world through the popular books written about them.

The book is organized into individual chapters examining historiographic questions, the issue of typology of life narratives, biographies, autobiographies, family-written biographies, and collective lifewritings’ historical function. Each offers a survey approach, collating themes from a wide range of biographies and autobiographies in order to delineate the topic. Regrettably, the publisher has aridly illustrated these discussions with only a handful of small black-and-white images of the dramatis personae in Codell’s history, and few of these portraits and photographs are directly addressed in the text. Codell’s first chapter argues for the inextricability of Victorian lifewritings from their commercial implications. This becomes a central theme throughout the book, and Codell stresses the ways in which lifewritings compromised between accuracy and efficacy. For instance, in her discussion of the various biographies of George Morland, Codell notes, “Much of what motivated the biography industry was an attempt to grapple with Victorian expectations and disappointments in the gap between ‘pure’ art and ‘impure’ artist” (41). As Codell argues was often the case in the nineteenth century, everything from questionable personal morals to artists’ commercial strategies were managed in biographies that sought to ensure, for posterity, a positive image of the artist and, more generally, an idealized definition of art. Codell examines this tension further in the function of the studio both as the site of artistic production and as surrogate image for the artist herself or himself. Comparing the more conflicted accounts of work in the studio voiced in artists’ correspondence to the public versions of these spaces recounted in biographies, paintings, and press photographs, Codell usefully establishes the Victorian artist biography as neither mere fluff nor true history but rather as a complex intertext requiring interpretation of its production and reception.

Her second chapter charts the typology of artistic identities, and readers from other sub-fields will quickly note correspondences to the familiar taxonomies of artistic identity, some tracing as far back as
Vasari. The stereotypes of the innocent genius, the talent not recognized in his own time, the “clubby bohemian,” and the professional were all deployed in Codell’s objects of study, and she helpfully draws out the specific manifestations of these clichés for her context. In her chapter on autobiographies, Codell further pursues this question of taxonomy, but adds to it a compelling distinction between male and female artists’ writings. She shows that the latter, in particular, relied upon complex self-presentation strategies that both registered and resisted gender norms. She argues that female artists’ autobiographies defended their authors’ public visibility and mobility as professionals.[4]

One of Codell’s major contributions is her emphasis on the issues relating to women artists and writers. In examining differences between female and male artists’ lifewritings, she adds a new facet to the significant literature on women in the Victorian art world. While much of this literature has focused on the role of women artists and the emergence of a professional and public arena in which they operated, recent studies have begun to emphasize the importance of women’s writing about art.[5] Perhaps the most interesting chapter in the book is Codell’s study of family biographies, in which she examines the complex ways in which wives, in particular, attempted to rewrite or reorient the artistic identity of their husbands for the reading public and for posterity. Her discussions of Georgiana Burne-Jones and Mary Watts show how much these writers sought to align their husbands’ art with priorities that may have been at odds with the more complex histories they wished to sideline. Codell’s analyses are, regrettably, far too brief and summary, and any one of these texts would reward a more extended discussion. She has traded in-depth analyses of these texts for a wider range of examples, but it may have been preferable to dive more deeply into specific cases in order to draw out further-reaching implications. In addition, the focus on women as writers of autobiographies and of family biographies could have been profitably consolidated into one or two chapters, allowing this theme to be more forcefully argued. It is admirable that Codell has integrated this material into an analysis organized by genre instead of theme, so that the contribution of women has not been made supplemental or auxiliary to the art world proper. Nevertheless, one hopes that the historiographic importance of Codell’s findings in this area will not be overlooked.

Codell’s argument culminates in her fifth and final chapter, which examines “collective” biographies in the form of biographical histories of earlier English artists, serialized biographies in journals, and biographical dictionaries. All three of these forms of collective biography had the goal and the effect of writing a larger history of art through the comparative and aggregate compilation of artists’ life narratives. Codell stresses the lasting impact of Vasari’s example and discusses the Victorian republication and augmentation of earlier biographical writings, as with the Victorian re-editions of Horace Walpole’s Anecdotes of Painting in England (1762–80). One major emphasis of such collective biographies, as in Samuel and Richard Redgrave’s A Century of Painters of the English School (1866 and 1890), was nationalistic. Codell’s treatment of the Redgraves’ enterprise is her most extended single analysis, one that illuminates the fuller complexity of the functions of these biographical writings. She returns to a thematic survey approach for her discussions of serialized biographies and biographical dictionaries, but makes clear how much these often shorter texts extended the impact of this mode of artwriting.

Throughout the genre-based approach of Codell’s book, one of her central concerns is the relationship between artists and their public images. Implicit in this is an assumption of ulterior motives on the part of writers, artists, or their heirs, and Codell treats each of their texts as “spin” on facts and agenda. The core issues managed through this spin were commercialism and professionalism, and, unlike the Victorian writers she discusses, Codell relentlessly exposes these motives in particular. No doubt, as a popular genre of writing, the artist biography or autobiography could impact the way an artist’s work was bought and sold. This was, as Codell points out, especially the case in posthumous family biographies, where the finite number of works in an artist’s estate was seen as a financial asset. Such a set of concerns is not isolated to these artists or to Victorian Britain, however, and similar issues have also influenced writing about artists from such disparate categories as the Impressionists, modernists, and the neo-avant-garde. Of the many, one could think of the debates around such artists as Pablo Picasso, Francis Bacon, or Jasper Johns in order to widen this perspective on the
repercussions of writing artists’ biographies. Codell neither makes these extra-contextual connections nor seizes the opportunity to talk about the complexity of the artworks at the foundation of her study. In short, she seems unintentionally to have taken the commercialization of Victorian art not just as a given but as the necessary qualifier that excuses attention to these paintings and sculptures at all. For all her important research into the complexities of publicity, Codell’s book has the unintended effect of subordinating Victorian art to its commercial context, ultimately presenting it only as a product to be marketed.

Similarly, Codell’s research could draw more readers by being less self-effacing about the implications, both historical and methodological, of this study. An attentive reading reveals that Codell’s well-researched analysis is informed by the kind of methodological range that is sometimes spurned in traditional social histories of Victorian art (but clearly not in the study of Victorian literature). Codell’s text is peppered with references to a wider lexicon—from the Marxist to the Lacanian to other variants on the poststructural—yet her invocations of implications outside the Victorian context play secondary and subordinate roles in her thematic survey approach. A more forthright development of these implications could have helped demonstrate to readers the importance of her findings. Codell might have redirected her ambitions from dutiful taxonomies (and the brevity such an approach necessitates) to wider conversations in the discipline of art history. That is to say, her study contains important source material and original observations about the relationship between artistic identity, self-fashioning, commerce, and artistic production, but at present these observations are often buried in the text or are implicit rather than explicit. With fewer examples, her thesis about the importance of lifewritings could have been more thoroughly and unflinchingly argued and more directly connected to those issues that are of sustained interest to the discipline of art history—issues that Codell’s book nevertheless usefully illuminates for readers both inside and outside the field of Victorian art.

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