

WOMEN WRITING ART HISTORY IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Looking Like a Woman

HILARY FRASER



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WOMEN WRITING ART HISTORY IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

This book sets out to correct received accounts of the emergence of art history as a masculine field. It investigates the importance of female writers from Anna Jameson, Elizabeth Eastlake and George Eliot to Alice Meynell, Vernon Lee and Michael Field 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. Proposing a more flexible and inclusive model of what constitutes art historical writing, including fiction, poetry and travel literature, this book offers a radically revisionist account of the genealogy of a discipline and a profession. It shows how women experienced forms of professional exclusion that, while detrimental to their careers, could be aesthetically formative; how working from the margins of established institutional structures gave women the freedom to be audaciously experimental in their writing about art in ways that resonate with modern readers.

HILARY FRASER is Executive Dean of Arts and Geoffrey Tillotson Professor of Nineteenth-Century Studies at Birkbeck, University of London. Her publications include *Beauty and Belief: Aesthetics and Religion in Victorian Literature* (Cambridge, 1986), *The Victorians and Renaissance Italy* (1992), *Gender and the Victorian Periodical* (with Judith Johnston and Stephanie Green, Cambridge, 2003) and *Minds, Bodies, Machines, 1770–1930* (co-edited with Deirdre Coleman, 2011).

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Nineteenth-century British literature and culture have been rich fields for interdisciplinary studies. Since the turn of the twentieth century, scholars and critics have tracked the intersections and tensions between Victorian literature and the visual arts, politics, social organisation, economic life, technical innovations, scientific thought – in short, culture in its broadest sense. In recent years, theoretical challenges and historiographical shifts have unsettled the assumptions of previous scholarly synthesis and called into question the terms of older debates. Whereas the tendency in much past literary critical interpretation was to use the metaphor of culture as 'background', feminist, Foucauldian, and other analyses have employed more dynamic models that raise questions of power and of circulation. Such developments have reanimated the field. This series aims to accommodate and promote the most interesting work being undertaken on the frontiers of the field of nineteenth-century literary studies: work which intersects fruitfully with other fields of study such as history, or literary theory, or the history of science. Comparative as well as interdisciplinary approaches are welcomed.

A complete list of titles published will be found at the end of the book.

For Nick

Acknowledgements

This is a book that, more than most, owes its existence to the family and friends, colleagues and students who have enabled me to bring it to completion. Nick Burton animated the entire project, and when he died it nearly died with him. It is thanks to the countless kindnesses and unstinting support of all those who have helped me find my way back that *Looking Like a Woman*, which for so long was looking like a defeat, recovered its focus.

My personal debts are many, but there are a few people whose support has been crucial. I wish my children - Matthew, Clair and Adam - hadn't had to experience illness and loss at such a tender age, but it taught them empathy and compassion and, in this as in many happier ways, Nick helped form the wonderful young people they are. For a while it was really only they who made life worth living; they remain constantly sustaining. My parents, Pauline and Douglas Brumwell, and my sister, Sally Clark, were rocks. Nick's family, especially Andrew Wyllie and Pat Wyllie, gave much support. Bridget Thornley, the 'Angel of the North', flew down to look after us all. Friends in Canterbury, in particular Rod Edmond, Mary Evans, Sally Minogue and Karen Shepherdson, must know how grateful I am to them for all their loving care. Old friends did what old friends do, and mine did and do it marvellously. Special thanks to Carlene Adamson, Mary Black, Jesmond Blumenfeld, Daniel Brown, Vic Burrows, Deirdre Coleman, Rob Fraser, Susan Hitch, Steven Holtzman, Clair and George Hughes, Gail Jones, Peter Kenyon, Prue Kerr, Lizzie Maisels, Keith and Jenny Page, Orna Raz, Rob Rockman, Simon Schama, Patrick Vittet-Philippe, Leon Wieseltier, Jan Wright. Their steady faith in me has made it possible to finish this book.

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This book is deeply informed, of course, by a lifetime of looking at pictures. Looking at art, looking like a woman, is something I have done for as long as I can remember, often with people I love. Particularly moving and formative gallery experiences include Titian in Venice with my Mother in 1990; Edward Hopper with Matthew; Frida Kahlo with Clair; Whistler's Mother at the Musée d'Orsay (via Mr Bean) with Adam; the Isabella Stuart Gardner Museum with Steven Holtzman, Las Meninas, San Gimignano and, later, Diego Rivera in New York; Anthony Gormley with Russell Celyn Jones and our respective children, Kenwood House (and walks on Hampstead Heath); Eugène Atget and Artemisia Gentileschi in Paris with Martin Sixsmith, Pre-Raphaelites from Port Sunlight to Pegwell Bay. Often looking at art involves tears, and I have wept over art with many a dear friend: over Rodin with Gail Jones, when I had to leave the exhibition because, like George Eliot before the Sistine Madonna, it 'made my heart swell too much for me to remain comfortably'; over Kathe Kollwitz in Berlin with Orna Raz; over Rothko with Chris Leich; over Matisse and Picasso, especially their love of women's breasts, with Trish Crawford, who had lost her own, and has since lost her life, to cancer; over Brancusi with Prue Kerr and Nick.

Memories of looking at art with people now dead are especially precious and enable vividly specific reconnection. I recall my father's good-humoured indulgence whenever I now experience a surfeit of Madonnas; and recollections of a 'Victorian Ladies' expedition to the Millais Exhibition in 2007 with Nicola Bown, Ella Dzelzainis and Sally Ledger encapsulate all that I treasure about working with a group of women who are close friends as well as professional colleagues – something that Sally especially fostered, and I miss her. Looking at art with Nick taught me how to see afresh, and left me with a fund of the dearest memories, especially of our intensely happy summer in Florence researching the female art historians who worked there in the nineteenth century. Nick is gone, but is everywhere present in this book, and I dedicate it to his memory.

Note

My thinking for this book has taken place over a number of years, and I have explored aspects of my project in a number of earlier articles that I wish to acknowledge here: 'Women and the Ends of Art History: Vision and Corporeality in Nineteenth-Century Critical Discourse'.

Victorian Studies 42, 1 (1999): 77-100; 'Regarding the Eighteenth Century: Vernon Lee and Emilia Dilke Construct a Period'. The Victorians and the Eighteenth Century: Reassessing the Tradition, ed. Francis O'Gorman and Katherine Turner. Aldershot: Ashgate (2004), pp. 223-49; 'Interstitial Identities: Vernon Lee and the Spaces In-between'. Marketing the Author: Authorial Personae, Narrative Selves and Self-Fashioning, 1880-1930, ed. Marysa Demoor. Houndmills Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan (2004), pp. 114-33; 'Writing a Female Renaissance: Victorian Women and the Past'. Victorian and Edwardian Perspectives on Renaissance Italy, ed. John E. Law and Lene Østermark-Johansen. Aldershot: Ashgate (2005), pp. 165-84; 'Art History'. Companion to Women's Historical Writing, ed. Mary Spongberg, Barbara Caine and Ann Curthoys. Houndmills Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan (2005), pp. 29-38. 'A Visual Field: Michael Field and the Gaze'. Victorian Literature and Culture 34 (2006): 553-71; 'Through the Looking Glass: Looking like a Woman in the Nineteenth Century'. Strange Sisters: Literature and Aesthetics in the Nineteenth Century, ed. Francesca Orestano and Francesca Frigerio. Oxford, Bern etc.: Peter Lang (2009), pp. 189-209; 'Women Writing Art History: The Art of Fiction'. Yearbook of English Studies 40, 1 and 40, 2 (2010): 61-82.

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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 Tintorettos, & 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.' 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

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

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. 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

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.' Although