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Victorian Art Criticism and the Woman Writer

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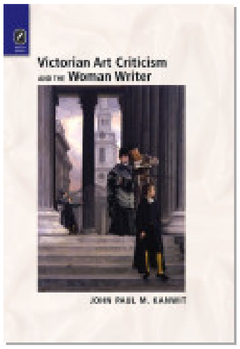

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INTRODUCTION

Victorian Art Criticism and the Woman Writer examines the development of specialized art commentary in a period when art education became a national concern in Britain. The explosion of Victorian visual culture—evident in the rapid expansion of galleries and museums, the technological innovations of which photography is only the most famous, the public debates over household design, and the high profile granted to such developments as the aesthetic movement—provided art critics unprecedented social power. Scholarship to date, however, has often been restricted to a narrow collection of writers on art: John Ruskin, Walter Pater, William Morris, and Oscar Wilde. By including influential but now less well-known critics such as Anna Jameson, Elizabeth Eastlake, and Emilia Dilke, and by focusing on critical debates rather than celebrated figures, *Victorian Art Criticism and the Woman Writer* offers a more penetrating and accurate understanding of this pervasive aspect of Victorian society.

In discussing eighteenth- and nineteenth-century aesthetics, recent scholarship has often stumbled on a reductive binary: writings on art either function in the service of state and social hegemony or allow the individual some interpretive freedom. The most useful of these recent commentaries acknowledge that art criticism can serve both purposes, but such a formulation still ignores much of the material's possibilities. Victorian art criticism *is* both controlling and liberating, but scholarship that merely classifies the genre within this binary fails to capture what is distinctive about the individual responses made by authors and texts to cultural and institutional changes in the British art world. Victorian writers on art display unique voices, literary styles, and approaches to their subject that are simply not accounted for by studies solely intent on classifying their ideological function. Of course, critics had their own thematic preoccupations and rhetorical tactics, but they also situated themselves within their institutional environments in quite distinct fashions. The cumulative effect of these varied responses from the 1840s on was to increase the quality of art commentary, redefine the standards used to evaluate art and its criticism, and elevate the art critic in society. The activities of art critics—their commentary on art, their disagreements with each other, their emergent relations with newly created government bureaucracies—had institutional as well as aesthetic effects that cannot be reduced to schematic evaluation.

The increased social importance granted to the exhibition of art was marked by a proliferation of parliamentary hearings in the early- and mid-Victorian periods. The first such parliamentary body, the Select Committee on the State of Arts and Manufactures (1835–36), hoped to educate a broad public about the arts. The committee's recommendations—especially its injunction to provide written guidance for viewers within museums—marked, I argue, a decisive turn from the eighteenth-century assumption that viewers could appreciate artworks without verbal direction. This claim qualifies much recent scholarship on nineteenth-century aesthetics, which asserts that little changed from the elitist and controlling views of the eighteenth century. According to Terry Eagleton, eighteenth-century aesthetic theorists, facing the destabilizing threat of increased democratization, hoped to replace the external control of an authoritarian state with an internal adherence to shared ideas of beauty.[1] This *sensus communis* was based on the values of the elite, not on common sense. In her more historically specific study, Linda Dowling has shown how Victorian art commentary repeated the authoritarian, aristocratic type of connoisseurship that Eagleton associates with Kantian aesthetics. While Eagleton and Dowling usefully identify this aristocratic strain of connoisseurship, their arguments fail to account for what did change in the Victorian period.

The 1835–36 select committee, in identifying the needs for written guidance and specialized expertise, actually helped fragment the authority that had been concentrated in the male connoisseur. While eighteenth-century painters and writers believed that visual art should be appreciated without any sort of guidance, many nineteenth-century critics advocated verbal mediation. We thus see a shift away from the Kantian assumption of an inherent, generally shared aesthetic faculty to the notion that taste could be taught. Moreover, the connoisseur could, in a kind of circular logic, judge any art based on his own good taste; the select committee desired a professional class of museum directors trained in specific types or periods of art. Art commentators referred to traditional standards of taste throughout the nineteenth century, but they also sought to base their judgments on more scientific criteria and to prompt viewers to interpret artworks on their own. Although the committee and witnesses took for granted that this expertise would be practiced by men, their recommendations facilitated the careers of the women art critics who are a major focus of this book.

As Dowling, James Eli Adams, and other scholars have recently recognized, the now-canonical Victorian art critics modeled their careers on the traditional values of the gentlemen. But the gentleman-critic was only one of many figures defined by Victorian writers on the arts. Women art critics demonstrate with particular force the kinds of varied careers that were available as the genre became a more lucrative profession from the 1840s on. Ruskin, Morris, Pater, and Wilde were all from privileged class positions and had the luxury of institutional affiliations not available to women at the time. Ruskin, for example, was blessed with family money, a degree from Oxford, and, eventually, a teaching post there. Money and stable employment protected these men from the need to make a living from their art criticism.

In tracing the critical interventions of women critics alongside canonical and lesser-known male critics, this book attempts a feminist reconsideration of a genre that helped shape the most crucial debates of the Victorian period—including those about taste, class, gender, and the very need for guidance. By taking this approach, however, I do not mean to propose that a single theory unites these diverse writers. My method is empirical, studying the different ways in which these writers consciously established their careers despite the tendency of male writers to define the field as masculine. Moreover, these women were involved in and/or wrote about feminist causes for women—again, with individual views of what greater rights for women might mean. Jameson and Eastlake believed that a woman should be equipped with the means to earn a living, but that her ideal place was in the home; Dilke was more radical in advocating equal careers and political rights for women.

Although scholars have recognized these activities and, less commonly, the important careers fashioned by these writers, they have generally denied the existence of a feminist aesthetic in women's art criticism. This assumption seems related to the misconception that I identify earlier: that Victorian art criticism was an essentially conservative genre, little changed from the class- and gender-based eighteenth-century models. Kate Flint insightfully writes that "it is hard to detect anything like a feminist agenda" in art criticism by women (*Victorians* 193). Yet feminist views are often embedded in the stories that women writers tell about artworks. In an extremely important example of a feminist approach, Dilke emphasizes the unhappiness of female artistic subjects who are under the control of men—a thinly veiled critique of the limited rights afforded to married women in Victorian society. In describing François Clouet's seemingly emotionless portrait of Elisabeth of Austria, she comments as follows on the pitfalls of marriage for young women: "the frank and simple life, the girlish eagerness which breathes in the delicate lines of this portrait, seem instinct with pathetic appeal, when we remember the fate to which the original was already committed. . . . Four years of a miserable marriage" (*The Renaissance of Art in France* 1: 349). It is difficult, notes Kali Israel, not to read Elisabeth's misery as an autobiographical reference to Dilke's unhappy first marriage to Mark Pattison. Dilke's account of Clouet's painting conveys not only personal feeling but, more broadly, the despair that many Victorian women experienced in a society that primarily prized them as wives. Dilke's re-creation of Elisabeth's history in moving words provokes sympathy for the painting's subject and perhaps prompted readers to question Victorian marriage conventions. There is, however, no single feminist aesthetic that applies to all four of these writers. For example, Eastlake does not display in her commentary the kind of emergent feminist perspective that we see in art critical stories by Dilke and Jameson.

As a result of these stories about artworks and the shift toward written mediation of art, this book takes literary studies rather than art history as its focus. Indeed, most Victorian art critics considered their practice to be a branch of literature. For art critics and their audiences, art criticism was an act of imaginative recreation. While recent scholarship on the professionalization of art criticism has attempted to separate a more popular, narrative strand of criticism from a supposedly later mode focused on form, all the writers I examine display what can be called literary preoccupations. Influential women critics were especially likely to combine formal analysis with stories about artworks. As she became a specialist on art in the 1840s, Jameson exhibited both an attention to narrative concerns *and* a mastery of formal features some thirty years before the period commonly associated with the development of a technical vocabulary for art in Britain.

Engaging readers with stories and formal expertise, critics also defend the complexity of great artworks—a quality that they define in terms of literary practice. They often label such works "poetic" to emphasize the intricacy of their imaginative conceptions. While "poetic" had been used before the nineteenth century to describe imaginative art, the Victorian art critical conception of the word underscores the primacy of verbal over visual art. Judith Johnston notes that for Jameson and Ruskin, the term "reverse[s] the traditional overreading of *ut pictura poesis* from Horace's *Ars Poetica* . . . that poetry should be like painting. Rather, for these two Victorian critics, painting should be like poetry" (161). The critics I examine use this formulation in their own writing: they posit the difficulty of translating visual sights while also suggesting that only through their words is the imaginative potential of art realized—a move that serves to explain the need for their expertise. However, by providing stories as well as didactic information and by equating their practice with poetic thought, they indicate that much remains for the reader to interpret. Again, the sources of authority and the ways in which readers can participate are too numerous in this art critical conception of the literary to fit neatly into a controlling-liberating binary.

Victorian art criticism, then, was discussed throughout the period in some of the same terms used to evaluate literature. Similarly to some other forms of criticism, it was also appreciated as literature itself, and a distinctive style was an additional and important way for a writer to claim authority. Recognizing this, Wilde wrote in his 1890 "The Critic as Artist" that the best criticism "treats the work of art simply as a starting-point for a new creation" (142). Modern assessments of Victorian art criticism have continued to appreciate the genre as literature, but only in considerations of the canonical male art critics. The styles of Pater and Ruskin have received as much attention as those of any other nineteenth-century writers, and Pater has additionally been considered a forerunner of literary modernism. Harold Bloom refers to Pater and his impressionism as the "hinge upon which turns the single gate" (qtd. in Matz 434) between Arnoldian objectivism and modernist literary styles. The contributions of lesser-known writers to art criticism's developing use of literary terms and to its status as literature remain undervalued. Jameson, for instance, conceived of artworks as "poetic" as early as 1826—well before Ruskin, the figure commonly associated with the use of that term in the arts (J. Johnston 160). To take an example even more consequential for the history of literary practice, Vernon Lee was, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary,* the first writer to use the term "impressionism" in the literary sense, defining reality as filtered through individual perceptions rather than the representation of "a thing in itself" ("impressionism"). If, as Bloom suggests, art criticism helped form twentieth-century conceptions of realism, both canonical and noncanonical critics deserve credit for this development.

The feminist lens I employ in examining women's careers and art commentary also informs my readings of Victorian novels by women. While the rich interchange between literature and the visual arts has been well studied, the influences of Victorian art critics on literary representations have received less attention. Women novelists including Charlotte Brontë, Anne Brontë, Elizabeth Gaskell, and George Eliot evidently read Victorian art critics and used their lessons to reconfigure the power relationships represented in key moments of spectatorship in *Villette, The Tenant of Wildfell Hall, North and South,* and *Middlemarch.* These novelists engage contemporary art critical concerns such as household taste, the scholarly attribution of artworks, the instruction of viewers in art galleries, and the professionalization of painting and art criticism. Similarly to art critics, they exhibit a fascination with stories about art even as they acknowledge the increased importance of formal and attributional concerns. But these novelists resist what they saw as the coercive role that some mainstream mid-Victorian art criticism was assuming. While many art critics hoped to improve national taste by directing viewers to buy certain products and appreciate particular artworks—often in ways that reinforced class and gender divisions—the novelists aim to subvert traditional ways of seeing.

Most notably, aesthetic commentary and education are often used to sensitize key men in these novels. Mr. Thornton's developing perception in matters of household taste, guided by Margaret Hale, helps him understand the complex dynamics between masters and men in *North and South.* In *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall,* Gilbert Markham's astute commentary on Helen Huntingdon's art marks him as a potentially suitable partner for her. Likewise, in *Middlemarch,* Will Ladislaw's growing ability to see art as more than simply pedantic allows him to help Dorothea better understand the art that surrounds her. By contrast, Edward Casaubon's lack of aesthetic enthusiasm conflicts with Dorothea's desire to develop a genuine feeling for art. In all of these more positive examples, women help male figures develop latent aesthetic sensibilities into something personally and sometimes even socially transforming.[2]

My first chapter, "Encouraging Visual Literacy," focuses on the 1835–36 Select Committee on the State of Arts and Manufactures. This committee hoped to improve British national taste through widespread art education. By advocating written guidance and professional expertise, the committee helped professional art critics—including women writers—to take precedence over traditional connoisseurs. While their specific recommendations were slowly and sporadically implemented, they quickly led to a greater acceptance of written guidance by art critics. However, despite this emphasis on teaching a broader public through written instruction, the visual literacy imagined by the committee and by later art critical discourse betrayed considerable anxiety about class mobility, particularly as that mobility was expressed through middle-class consumption of industrial art.

Chapter 2 examines Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* in the context of contemporary debates about household taste. While some prominent Victorian writers hoped to keep them separate, domestic and public life were in fact intimately connected throughout the period. In ways that even recent criticism has only begun to understand, Elizabeth Gaskell uses household details in her novels to effect profound political statements. Class conflicts in *North and South,* I assert, are substantially addressed through the development of perceptive household taste by some middle-class characters. Though Gaskell treats problems of industrialization and the working class in all her novels, and though the link between taste and morality is a central concern elsewhere as well (as it was for many nineteenth-century novelists), *North and South* is the only novel in which Gaskell demonstrates how a master can learn to confront social problems through sensitivity to the domestic.

The third chapter studies Elizabeth Eastlake as an important and neglected example of an early professional woman art critic. While the critic-as-artist was the predominant model in the eighteenth century, specialists in certain areas of the arts became much more commonplace in the Victorian period. Women art critics shaped the profession in some particularly striking ways, especially in their creation of literary styles that could convey serious historical scholarship. In their emphasis on precise attribution, Elizabeth Eastlake and Anna Jameson—already respected literary stylists at the time—helped originate the modern practice of art history. In so doing, these women revise our perspective of when and how art criticism became a professional practice in Britain. While most scholarship dates the movement from the late 1860s—largely as a result of male writers—Jameson and Eastlake began to define the disciplines of both art criticism and art history in the 1840s.

The professional art commentary developed by women prose writers provided an avenue of both intellectual and financial independence. Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848), the focus of chapter 4, addresses this topic in a parallel fashion. Despite recent attention to Helen Huntingdon's painting in *Tenant,* aesthetic commentary in Anne's novels remains underexamined. *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* as well as *Agnes Grey* reveals that Anne shared with Charlotte a vision of ideal external criticism as both educated and rational, criticism that is best exemplified by *Tenant*'s Gilbert Markham. But Anne also suggests, primarily through Helen's diary entries, that the artist is sometimes best served by her own commentary. Against the Victorian stereotype that equated serious criticism with an external male voice, Helen objectively assesses both her own artworks and those of others. Through Helen's selective use of aesthetic commentary, Anne Brontë provides an implicit answer to complaints that she either failed to heed any artistic advice or that she did not understand her own aesthetic choices in *Tenant.*

My fifth chapter studies the Manchester Art Treasures Exhibition of 1857 and the mid-Victorian debates concerning the National Gallery. Seeking to teach the history of art, critics such as Anna Jameson, John Ruskin, Henry Cole, G. F. Waagen, and A. H. Layard tried to manage how visitors walked through existing exhibition spaces and to influence the design of new ones. These critics believed that the proper identification of artworks was integral to an exhibition's educative potential, and so I return here to a central problem examined in previous chapters: attribution. Ignoring the fad for reattribution that this concern provoked, Ruskin hoped viewers would labor to see the truths in a few excellent paintings.

Chapter 6 assays representations of art galleries in two novels, Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* (1853) and George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1874). Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot engage Ruskinian realism and the emphasis on proper attribution—strikingly, while each depicting artworks called "Cleopatra"—but in ways that invite readers to dissent from the opinions of restrictive guides. Most notably, they promote the interpretation of artworks as complicated symbols. Names of artworks are not only important for questions of attribution and authenticity, but are also linked to the identities of characters and to the authors who brought them to life. Perhaps surprisingly, *Villette, Middlemarch,* and the commentary surrounding Victorian art exhibitions reveal a nostalgia for private art galleries, a desire I link to the novelists' desire for privacy in writing under pseudonyms.

"Sensational Sentiments," chapter 7, examines the reception of both literary and visual impressionism by British art critics. Such controversies as those surrounding Pater's *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873) and the *Whistler v. Ruskin* trial (1878) demonstrate an increasing fear among writers that artists and some art critics were pandering to public tastes. Impressionism was viewed as both a contributor to and a potential solution for this problem. Because they often depicted common subjects and purported to represent feelings through what seemed a hasty technique, impressionist painters were seen as encouraging viewers to identify too easily with works of art—a democratization of the arts that was linked to social revolution. Likewise, for Dilke and some other critics, Pater's impressionist *Renaissance* further popularized an already fashionable subject through his emphasis on feeling over historical reality. As a woman art historian, Dilke was particularly careful to differentiate her own precise scholarship from what she characterized as Pater's sentimentalism. At the same time, Dilke and other critics believed that some impressionist works were sufficiently complex and subtle to be labeled as great art. It is this kind of suggestiveness—as opposed to the obvious, easily accessible appeal of some impressionist works—that critics hoped to model in their own writing. Despite their differences from one another, Ruskin, Dilke, Pater, and Lee all claim that art critics cannot completely illuminate the lives or works of even the most famous artists. Instead of lessening the authority of the art critic, this reticence to describe highlights the expertise needed to penetrate great artworks.

In my conclusion, I briefly consider commentaries about art and architectural projects for the World Trade Center site after September 11. Though the United States in the twenty-first century does not have the same fear of revolution as did nineteenth-century Britain, many of these commentaries reveal a familiar urge to order the public through high aesthetic culture. Moreover, while ostensibly democratizing the arts, these critics reject works that seem to pander to public tastes, much like Victorian writers facing the onslaught of impressionism. In another similarity to Victorian debates, some of these recent writers seek to propagandize national values through these buildings, while others decry such obvious symbolism. The commercial nature of many of the new buildings at the World Trade Center site coupled with its memorial function have also led to stark disagreements among critics. While some claim in Ruskinian fashion that good architecture cannot stem from commercial impulses, others celebrate the economic development of the site. Despite the ideological and conflicting nature of these commentaries, they do seek to connect readers with the arts in ways reminiscent of the best Victorian critics.

"The 19th century, afflicted with doubts, made conscientious efforts to educate popular taste," writes John Steegman in *Victorian Taste.* "The 18th century on the other hand, did not discuss whether its taste was good or bad, and 'education' in taste never occurred to it" (4). Steegman's description of this shift, formulated in 1950, is still a productive way of viewing

Victorian art criticism and its relationship to developing art institutions. As a result of this new emphasis on education, both traditional institutions such as the Royal Academy and newly created ones such as the National Gallery were increasingly viewed in terms of their use in improving public taste. Victorian art critics were a logical extension of the national movement to teach visual literacy. Equally important is Steegman's mention of the doubts that surrounded nineteenth-century discussions of taste. While Victorian commentaries on art can seem contradictory to a modern reader, this lack of coherency is better understood as a distinctive feature rather than a flaw of the genre. Unlike eighteenth-century writers who often intellectualized art, Victorian critics endeavored to connect the arts with lived experience. Their opinions thus differed as they confronted new developments and situations (a quality that makes the writings of even a single critic a good register of the period's complex beliefs). By contrast, as Steegman noted in 1950, modern art criticism is closer to the intellectualizing tendency of the eighteenth century, a trend that he hoped would soon reverse itself (6). Twenty-first-century art criticism, however, remains preoccupied with formal features and artistic movements. As I hope to show in the following pages, Victorian art critics provide a strong counterpoint to such limited concerns.