From Self to Shelf

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The Artist Under Construction

Edited by

Sally Bayley and William May

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Figure 1: Arnold Newman, Mondrian in his New York studio,
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PREFACE

FRANCES SPALDING

The title of this book implies movement and process. Identity, which is never stable, is here translated from self to shelf by scholars diverse in their interests and methodology. If anything unites them it is the absence of received pieties concerning individuality and creativity, and, in its place, a deliberate desire to vex the issue of biographical identity. Some of the essays are cross-disciplinary; all generate new meanings and unforeseen, sometimes surprising, connections. Hence the excitement this book offers.

The transformation inherent in the title was first explored in the conference, 'From Self to Shelf', which a group of postgraduate students and lecturers from Balliol College organized in Oxford in the summer of 2005. It was Sally Bayley and William May who took the idea forward, found a publisher and co-ordinated this selection, incorporating papers from the originating event as well as new material. All included in this book are indebted to their entrepreneurship and enthusiasm. They have been ably assisted by Alexandra Harris, one of the contributors, who has shown great persistence in tracking down and obtaining illustrations and Andrew Hay, whose confident and readable introduction encapsulates the rationale behind the book.

Dip into this collection of essays and you will encounter some of the questions and concerns that currently inflect our perception of identity and identities. Certain factors, such as the impact of gender studies, are immediately apparent. Then, too, underlying the context that surrounds and infiltrates these chapters, can be discerned a radical shift of emphasis in the writing of history. It owes much to the far-reaching impact of Pierre Nora's massive collaborative history of French collective memory, *Les Lieux de Mémoire* (1984-1992).[1] In its analysis of sites, be it places, monuments, historical figures, emblems or symbols, this project encouraged many things, not least the treatment of history in terms of multiple voices and the giving of attention to the traces left by actions rather than the actions themselves.

Whether directly or indirectly influenced by this great intellectual project of the Mitterand era, a similar change of focus can be discerned in the writing of biography. Admittedly, the classic enterprise, the monument to an entire life which proceeds from the cradle to the grave, is still in demand. But alongside it

now runs an interest in a tighter focus, in, for instance, that which Alethea Hayter pioneered in *This Sultry Month*—a particular moment in the life of a cluster of individuals. A single event or a particular relationship may now focus the biographical project, for these can accrue fertile readings and symbolic function. In some instances, one particular aspect of a life can become a *lieu de mémoire*, and will embody not just individual history but collective memory. The article, here, on Vera Lynn is a case in point, her famous song, 'We'll Meet Again', resisting closure, as Kate McLoughlin observes.

As a song or work of art moves through time and space its meanings and symbolic value alter. This, too, is another reason why the biographer is increasingly aware of mobility, distrustful of fixed identities and often more interested in searching out unstable contradictions. Then, too, biographers themselves are not static, but subject, like those they write about, to change and alteration. No biography is ever 'definitive', in part because it is seen through the lens of an author, which necessarily belongs to a specific moment in time.

I was made intensely aware of this in the course of my work on a biography of Duncan Grant. Invited to write his life, I havered at first, unable to decide whether or not it was wise to return to material, much of which I had covered ten years before, while writing a life of Vanessa Bell, with whom Grant shared a lasting creative partnership. When finally I began, it was disconcerting to discover, now that I was a decade older, that certain letters revealed interesting matter which previously I had ignored. Writing biography requires many things, not least emotional intelligence as well as scholarly endeavour. Accuracy remains the goal, despite the limitations of language and the many other factors that curtail the enterprise and oblige us to recognize its provisionality.

Another disturbing moment came when I encountered a photograph of Roger Fry many years after I had completed an account of his life. Owing to the generosity of others, I had previously been shown many photographs of him which had left me familiar with his facial expressions, his sartorial style and his general appearance. This particular photograph, however, had an especially sharp focus, to such an extent that it made pronounced the tendons in his neck and even the pores in his skin. With a shock I recognized a reality I had not till then seen, known or imagined. It made me aware of the biographer's presumption. Convinced I knew the shape and texture of this man's life, I suddenly realized that if I were to encounter him in the street disconcerting details, such as the photograph had shown, would leave a pronounced feeling of estranged otherness.

Perhaps it is necessary, therefore, for the subject of biography always to remain a little out of sight. We may study and analyse a person's films, songs, letters or emails, but in order to construct an individual's identity, we need the freedom provided by his or her (at least partial) absence. This may to some

extent explain why biographies of living people frequently disappoint, for a biography does not imitate a life, it creates life. And to do so successfully, there must be a gap, a lack, a feeling that the person in question has just left the room. Only then can the fizzing vitality of the biographical project at its best come into play.

Notes

[1] See Nora's introductory essay, 'Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire',* in *Realms of Memory*, Columbia University Press, 1996. It is also found, in slightly different form, in *Representations*, Issue 26, Spring 1989, pp.7-25.

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The Editors
September 2006

INTRODUCTION

ANDREW HAY

> It was in his own mind that the artist sought his model.
> —Ralph Waldo Emerson, 'Self-Reliance'

> One should either be a work of art, or wear a work of art.
> —Oscar Wilde, *Phrases & Philosophies for the Use of the Young*

> Sociology endeavours to establish the conditions in which the consumers of cultural goods, and their taste for them, are produced, and at the same time to describe the different ways of appropriating such of these objects as are regarded at a particular moment as works of art.
> —Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*

From *Self* to *Shelf*: the journey between these two terms covers a plethora of assumptions about both the artist and art. Self, as a starting point for understanding art, is a loaded yet important word, whether we are trying to discern something about the self of the artist, or about ourselves as a viewing, reading or listening audience. Despite T. S. Eliot's infamous vanquishing of personality from modern poetry,[1] that most ancient of ideas, expressivism,[2] still lingers as a salient feature of our approach to visual art, literature, and music. As a theory, expressivism avers that art is an expression of some internal state—what we might call 'self'. Perhaps the most seminal example of such a theory is to be found in William Wordsworth's definition of poetry in the preface to *Lyrical Ballads* as "a spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling".[3] In contrast, shelf, as a bed partner to self, might connote to some a certain amount of conceptual incongruity: what could an artist or writer's availability on the shelf possibly illuminate about the art work or—depending on one's critical predisposition—the artist? The answer to this question requires an acknowledgement of a major shift in the ways of engaging with art over the last century.

Clinging to the expressive potentialities of art vis-à-vis its creator, as a route of interpretation and as a means of unlocking something confined to a unique art object, obviates the implications of the biggest change in art consumption within the twentieth century; namely, mass production. This type of production poses a

challenge to the idea of a singular art object (a painting, for example) that localizes a unique sense of a creator's expressive intention to be viewed via some gallery wall. Indeed, any attempt to address the current relationship of art to the general public must, by necessity, consider the ways in which the distribution and reception of art works are caught up with wider social and economic matters.[4] Similarly, when millions of reproductions of any one of Picasso's paintings adorn the walls of homes across the globe, what changes take place in the idea of the artistic self? How does it influence the correlation of a reified sense of singular, authentic artistic genius to an art object distributed *en masse* to shops and shelves, for purchase at some agreed monetary price?

The most obvious answer, as Walter Benjamin has argued, is a distancing of the artistic self as a guarantor of origin and authenticity, as a consequence of the reproduction's availability on the shelf as one of many available reproductions.[5] If such a scenario suggests the usurpation of the expressivist potential of art, or the dissimulation of a stable artistic subjectivity with which to buttress our interpretations of the art object, we must also bear in mind that such matters lay beyond a purely formalist appreciation of an art work. When we consider the artist as a relevant context for an understanding of the work, perhaps as a result of the artist's fame as a public figure, are we imposing something more than a mere name?

In contrast to the unknown artist, the fame game seems to comprise a wholly different set of assumptions for art by minimising the space or distance between artist and work; thus, the media can exacerbate a set of relations that might be implicit in the artwork itself. For example, Tracey Emin's career stages the recurrence of an inflated sense of expressionism as a locus for the interpretation of her art. From the titular provocation of *My Bed* and the notorious finger splint interview, to *When I Think About Sex* and the recent *Strangeland*, an alchemy of the personal is constitutive of the art, but when that art is proffered into the world and mediated by the media, it becomes caught in an aporia between audience inscription and artistic denotation. Appreciation of the art might rightly be thought to lie somewhere in between these two spheres, in that awkward space between the personal and public. And yet the tele-visual figure of Emin hovers, as an irrepressible and simultaneously inescapable interpretative context for the work: as Marshall McLuhan put it many years ago "the medium is the message".[6] The artist who is both medium and message chimes with Guy Debord's infamous definition of "spectacle".[7] When the artist works through spectacle it involves a different set of interpretative assumptions in relation to artistic form. Thus, dealing with an artist whose iconic—sometimes histrionic—speakers have all too often been placed within a lyric-confessional expressivist framework, Sally Bayley's 'The Performance Art of Sylvia Plath and Tracey Emin' highlights Plath's use of spectacle for purposes that subvert the

identification of the reader with the poetic speaker. Bayley compares Plath's work to Tracey Emin's conceptual art and commentaries, thus bringing two artists from ostensibly different mediums together to re-think performance itself. With a continuing emphasis on the spectacle of the artist, this time as constructed biographically, Sarah Churchwell explores Janis Joplin and how she fits into constructions of femininity and death in her essay, '"Fuck *Reality*!": Janis Joplin and Performance Anxiety'.

The use of the term 'icon' within the context of Emin, Plath and Joplin points to the public's desire to affix qualities to the creative artist; a desire that frequently takes the form of a wish to know more than the performer's art. Biographical information, from the mildly inquisitive to the prurient and morbid, has surrounded Joplin, Plath and Emin. Yet, in order for a work to make it to the shelf, wall or stage, there has to be at least the hypothetical expectation that someone will want to browse, purchase or look and listen, irrespective of whether the generative force behind the purchase is an appreciation of the work or the gravitation toward a particular authorial signature or style. The iconic artist, as Patricia Allmer shows in 'Magritte, Art and Art History', is one who must relive his past creations over and against the imperative to create anew. As Allmer deftly illustrates, Magritte's images engage with situating himself both in and out of his own previous works, wider aesthetic traditions, canonicity and, ultimately, life and death itself.

Death, of course, actually pre-empts the fame of some artists. Van Gogh, for example, didn't acquire fame until after his death and, now, is one of the most reproduced—and expensive—artists in history. This also provides an instance of the artist as a chimera hovering somewhere behind the reproduction, vaguely present yet curiously deferred, as artistic identity in the reproductions of famous paintings and images sit with coalescing factors, such as printing, distribution, labour and price, to form a bridge between self and shelf (irrespective of how unstable that bridge might be).[8]

"Under construction" features in the title of this book precisely because the stability of the artist is both a variable factor in the artwork and an on going process outside of it. So it is a matter for debate as to whether, in the context of some artworks, it is the public who constructs the artist, as much as the artist constructs themselves through the work and vice versa. (Van Gogh, Jackson Pollock, Andy Warhol and Tracey Emin spring to mind). In 'Matisse's Armchair and Mondrian's Grocer', Frances Spalding evokes the impulses to anonymity and privacy that propelled the self-construction of the great abstract painter, Piet Mondrian, in relation to his own work, arguing that, far from being a hindrance to writing about the artist, such concealment of the self provides the biographer with real 'literary potential'.

Recognising how protracted the issue of separating artist and work can be when trying to clarify origins, Martin Heidegger, in 'The Origin of the Work of Art' concludes that:

> But by what and whence is the artist what he is? The artist is the origin of the work. The work is the origin of the artist. Neither is without the other. Nevertheless, neither is the sole supporter of the other…[9]

Although artist and artwork are locked together in a symbiotic relationship of inscription and erasure, the public, too, have a role in constructing the artist, particularly when s/he has a high amount of cultural visibility via the shelf, wall, print or screen.

Yet the availability of these mediums through the growth of cinemas, galleries and bookshops throughout the world are, of course, all a relatively recent phenomenon as localized conduits for artistic distribution. While patronage of a prominent poet or artist was a commonplace reason for creation in both the art and poetry of the Renaissance, mass reproduction, printing and distribution points to far more than an overtly financial incentive for artistic creation. Although Dr. Johnson once adroitly suggested that "no man but a blockhead ever wrote except for money",[10] the mass production of art changes the nature of artistic engagement and questions the very possibility of a localized and authentic expression of subjectivity as the bedrock of artistic appreciation. As Walter Benjamin recognizes in his 1936 essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction':

> Mechanical reproduction of art changes the reaction of the masses toward art. The reactionary attitude toward a Picasso painting changes into the progressive reaction toward a Chaplin movie.[11]

The rituals from which art has been 'liberated' through reproduction for the masses to which Benjamin alludes in this passage are the magical and religious. Do Benjamin's incisive prognostications on the nature of art as a sphere of capitalism and the concomitant implications for subjectivity, expression and consumption negate the magical, the religious or the straightforwardly expressive which are still very alive in thinking about art of many different kinds?[12]

Perhaps, since art continues to be made in ever more surprising and innovative ways while being viewed by millions in even more multifarious ways, such questions are tangential to the practice of art. Yet, if attentiveness to the ways in which we view and interpret anything is a valuable part of learning how to think, as well as being instructive about art itself, such questions remain important. For the poet and novelist Stevie Smith, as William May argues in his essay 'An Eye for an I: Constructing the Visual in the work of Stevie Smith',

the viewing process itself becomes yet another strategy for the artist to continually reshape their own work. At this stage, we seem to have arrived at a dichotomy of sorts: expressivism and the spiritual as explanations for the formation of art vs. the minutiae of capitalist production and distribution of art. If we reformulated these different ways of approaching an art work—from the self or from the shelf—in Blakean terms, innocence and experience might be appropriate; the pure and expressive against the world of 'Getting and spending', as Wordsworth so aptly put it.[13]

"The dirty nurse, Experience, in her kind / Hath foul'd me – and I wallowed, then I / washed"[14] remarks Tennyson's Tristram in *Idylls of the King,* flagging worldly 'experience' as something sullying or 'dirty', to be expunged. Experience, of course, need not always be the basis of an expressivist notion of an artistic self; if it was, there would be no place for the transformation of imagination or fantasy that forms the other side of the artistic coin to straightforward mimesis. It was the hermetic Emily Dickinson who recognized that "There is no frigate like a book / To take us Lands away".[15] Freud, too, identified art as a fantasy space to compensate for lack of lived experience—although we might want to avoid the reductive Freudian explanation for the ultimate creative impetus of the artist as neurosis.[16] It was Charles Baudelaire, that most worldly of nineteenth-century poets, who famously situated the genius of the artist in "childhood recovered at will", in a kind of radical innocence.[17] Indeed, Baudelaire's location of artistic genius in the childish, in an ability to express artistically from some unconditioned or untainted imaginative mindset, has much to tell us. If, following Baudelaire, the childish is an innate part of the genius of great artists, it is peculiarly absent from what would be considered an intelligent response to art from the adults who read, view or listen to it. The childish, for some, would be entirely antithetical to a sophisticated or mature appreciation of art. Thus, a gap exists between the Baudelairean idea of artistic expression and our current practices of artistic consumption. Yet some would find the notion that those who enjoy art are consumers extremely distasteful. Is 'appreciating' appropriate: is pleasure or displeasure the most important responsive parameters?[18] Do interpretation and appreciation have the same function as potential terms with which to end the sentence? The individual(s) at the other end of the process from the individual(s) who create the art work; namely, those who view and engage with the art have as many issues of identification in reflecting upon how they choose to view as the artist does in terms of materials and forms with which to represent.

Once the representation is realized, however, it is frequently appended to a name, which can have serious consequences for that individual. Clive James's piece 'Reputation' might be seen as a contemporary recasting of an old story still lingering from Romanticism in its treatment of the tensions between roles

for a writer with a public persona, as well as a secondary identity as a prolific poet. James questions how each role relates to the other within a culture increasingly driven by celebrity at the expense of all else. Similarly, writing in 1814, Lord Byron considered the relationship between his actions and their reception by the wider world thus: "My great comfort is that the temporary celebrity I have wrung from the world has been in the very teeth of all opinions and prejudices. I have flattered no ruling powers; I have never concealed a single thought that tempted me."[19] Byron's suggestive figuration of his social status and its links to his personal motivations has important consequences for the construction of the Romantic artist. His status as a "temporary celebrity" is not a result of fawning; he has deliberately "flattered no ruling powers" nor "concealed" thoughts. In contrast to the patronage system of previous ages, where artists and poets would, by necessity, flatter those powers capable of financially supporting their enterprise, the Romantic artist is charged with the power of vision so he might critically observe society and its operations. As Percy Bysshe Shelley suggests in his 1821 *The Defence of Poetry*, "a poet….beholds intensely the present as it is, and discovers those laws according to which present things ought to be ordered".[20] Consequently, the poet must be attentive to the defects of society; his detachment facilitates insight in relation to how things "ought to be ordered". Indeed, to make such critical observation, the Romantic artist is privileged with powers of observation beyond that of 'common' man; in other words, he—and it is usually a he—is gifted with genius. As Wordsworth suggests in the 1802 Preface to *Lyrical Ballads,* "What is a poet?….He is a man speaking to men: a man, it is true, endued with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be common among mankind".[21]

Yet the observatory powers suggested by both Shelley and Wordsworth are not wholly external; internality, and the exploration of the self signals yet another aesthetic strategy of the Romantic artist that lasted beyond the confines of what is traditionally classed as Romanticism. W. B. Yeats once characterized the imperative of an aging poet as one where "myself must I remake".[22] The artist here is one whom, as a result of his status as 'poet', is continually forced to engage in a process of identification and transformation of the self and, thorough it, of the world; this very idea is explored in our section on 'Romantic Legacies'. In 'Rousseau's Self, Shelley's Self', Geoff Klock artfully traces how Percy Bysshe Shelley's lengthy poem, *The Triumph of Life,* is an instance of a specific genre of Romantic writing that Klock terms the "imaginary biography", a genre where an imagined life/self is utilized for wider thematic purposes; in this case, Shelley's imagining of the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Monika Class sketches a strikingly original approach to understanding

Wordsworth's representation of internality in both the *Lyrical Ballads* and *The Prelude*, suggesting that a sartorial renunciation underwrites Wordsworth's construction of inner self in the first four Books of *The Prelude*. In a continued emphasis on self-stylisation, this time as a legacy of Romanticism, Lynda Bundtzen, in 'The Artist as Übermensch', examines the ever-shifting place of the auteur, Werner Herzog, in his own films, connecting his narration and self-figuration in such films as his recent *Grizzly Man* to a will-to-power over his filmic world and its audience.

Nietzsche's all-encompassing will entails self-mastery, as much as power over others, and while Nietzsche might have disliked Romanticism, self-knowledge is one of the most salient tenets of Enlightenment thought and the Romantic impulse towards internality. In his notebook, Samuel Taylor Coleridge comments on his artistic enterprise as one predicated on self-discovery—"I seem rather to be seeking a symbolical language for something within me that already and forever exists".[23] Despite the stress on internality, the powers of self-understanding, critical observation and imagination in the conception of the Romantic artist, the ability to bring what Coleridge terms in his *Biographia Literaria* "the whole soul of man into activity",[24] of being a man writing for men, is that the poet becomes—if not a celebrity—then a very public figure, who is himself open to criticism and judgement, as in the brilliantly scathing dedication of Byron's *Don Juan*:

> Bob Southey! You're a poet—Poet-laureate,
> And representative of all the race;
>
> And Coleridge too has lately taken wing,
> But like a hawk encumbered with his hood,
> Explaining metaphysics to the nation.
> I wish he would explain his explanation.[25]

The Romantic artist, like other artists in this book, treads a delicate line between his status as a public figure "representative of all the race" or, as the creator of a public figure—such as Byron's Childe Harold or Delacroix's *La Liberté guidant le people*— and as an objective observer who is, simultaneously, a self-observer promulgating a self to be read, viewed and judged.

Judgement, as Immanuel Kant realized,[26] might be the only common factor in response to art across many different periods and places; indeed, it is the starting point of interpretation. But does art need interpretation or just consumption, can there be one without the other; what do we *do* with art? In the 1960s, Susan Sontag—influenced by Wilde—suggested that one of the most violent responses to art was its interpretation;[27] her "erotics of art", as an alternative to interpretation, was an attempt to place the sensual and instinctual

over the hypertrophied cerebral formulations that fall under the banner of "interpretation".[28] And yet, despite the bad rap that interpretation receives, Sontag's delineation of the distortions that traverse an artwork and its interpretation raise a pertinent secondary question when exploring the chains from world to artist, artist to work and work to world: does the artist merely represent, or actively seek certain kinds of interpretation? Indeed, does such a question even matter, given the theoretical autonomy of the spectator?[29]

Such a theoretical issue can only be clarified through concrete example—I say clarified, rather than resolved. Consider the Royal Academy's infamous *Sensations* exhibition, where the items on display included pornography, a blood filled head and a portrait of the moors murderer, Myra Hindley, made up of children's handprints. Does the blood-filled head shock less than Hindley's portrait because it is less overtly embedded within a horrific real life context? If a viewer knew nothing of Hindley, one would, presumably, lack a sense of outrage. And yet context need not always be necessary to shock. Alison Lapper's recent sculpture, *Alison Lapper Pregnant*, situated in Trafalgar Square, London, was thought shocking by some due to its depiction of a naked pregnant woman with no arms. Indeed, people who questioned the artfulness of the sculpture's composition had to emphatically qualify their objections by stating that it was not the subject matter that perturbed, but the formal/compositional choices the artist made in order to form the representation, rather than the representative subject itself.

In literature (as in art) representation has consistently rocked the boat: Flaubert, Wilde, Joyce and Lawrence were all prosecuted by the state for obscenity. If it was realism that underpinned the representational aims of these writers, for some, it was a realism too far; indeed, too much verisimilitude could cost you your liberty. Of course, you would be hard pressed to find anyone today outraged by Emma Bovary's extramarital dalliances, Wilde's homosexuality, Leopold Bloom's masturbation or Lady Chatterley's liaisons with Mellors in the garden hut. Historicizing artistic response usually illustrates the ephemeral nature of all responses, after all, the Romantics thought it better to read Shakespeare rather than watch his work performed in the theatre.[30]

As an example of our changing reactions to the artist as writer, in the sixteenth century, Sir Philip Sidney asserted that "the poet nothing affirms and therefore never lieth".[31] But a few centuries later, D. H. Lawrence advised readers to "Never trust the teller, trust the tale".[32] By the 1960s, the experimental novels of B.S. Johnson with their random chapter orders and cut-through pages had denounced fiction as lies altogether. If Johnson's tirade against conventional fiction seems to have had little impact on the realism of the contemporary novel, it seems pertinent that the recent resurgence of interest in his work has been down largely to the recent biography by the contemporary

British novelist Jonathan Coe. Yet, like the novelist whose work and life it explored, Coe's biography, *Like a Fiery Elephant: the story of B.S. Johnson*, rejects linear narratives and traditional chronology. Its readers must sort through its information like amateur detectives, struggling to piece together the fabric of Johnson's life from the scraps and fragments that remain. In 'Closing the Circle: an interview with Jonathan Coe', Coe explains the rationale behind the structuring of the book, and considers how it illuminates issues of truth, fiction, and literary celebrity in his own writing.

Lawrence and Johnson are just two examples of writers who exemplify an acute attentiveness to the fictionality of utterance codified in the narrators, characters and lines that comprise their works. By keeping distrust in mind, one could chart the emergence of a certain kind of readerly suspicion that spans much twentieth- century responses to literature; to invoke an apt Wordsworthian line: "we murder to dissect".[33] For example, in 'The Culture Industry', Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, preoccupied with the shelf, stress the status of art as a commodity in order to denounce the age-old trap of mystification:

> A change in the character of the art commodity itself is coming about. What is new is not that it is a commodity, but that today it deliberately admits it is one; that art renounces its own autonomy and proudly takes its place among consumption goods constitutes the charm of novelty.[34]

Adorno and Horkheimer seem to anticipate a certain kind of postmodern knowingness in his perception of the emergence of an art that flaunts its commodification—even though any liberating or magical potential for art is lost in 'industry' as a result of a quasi-Marxist phantasmagoria comprised of ideological interpellation, price and want.

In literature, if there was a constructed self contained between the pages on the shelf then, in the spirit of suspicion, we readers had better distrust him (or her). Concurring with D. H. Lawrence's earlier suspicion of "the teller", Wayne C. Booth came to the conclusion that the teller was indeed not to be trusted; there was a mass of "unreliable narrators"[35] in fiction just waiting to be unmasked. And while Gustave Flaubert, in the nineteenth century, had a very lyrical conception of the place of the author in a novel— "the Artist in his work ought to be like God in creation, invisible and all-powerful: everywhere felt but nowhere visible"[36]—twentieth-century readers were not quite so magnanimous. If we readers were fools for trusting the teller, we could kill him off, thanks to Roland Barthes's semiotic dissemination of text as a prelude to the apocalyptic "death of the author".[37]

"God is dead, we're all his murderers"[38] intones the madman of Nietzsche's *The Gay Science*. If, following Barthes, all readers had authorial blood on their hands, it didn't stop authors appearing on television, radio and in print to

confirm or deny the propinquity of their fictional creations to 'real' life.[39] Nor did it impede the distribution of large cash prizes to authors in high profile competitions; it didn't stop authors being targeted by religious militants: after all, it would be hard to kill the text, even if its pages remained flammable, both politically and practically. What this reinforces is the intensity with which the relationship of artist to world and world to artist[40] has been treated. At this point artist has to subsume writer because these issues cannot be confined to the literary. As the essays in this book will demonstrate, cinema, literature, art and music share common concerns from self to shelf.

Despite the nominalism of a great deal of the developments in twentieth-century literary criticism, what the categories of 'self' to 'shelf' and the processes in between maintain is the possibility of a co-existence between expression and transformation in the world. Karl Marx's infamous differentiation of himself from all previous philosophers in the eleventh 'Thesis on Feuerbach'—"the philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways: the point is to change it"[41]—foregrounds the importance of *praxis,* of thoughts to the external world. As Alexandra Harris suggests in "Almost fashionable again": John Sell Cotman in the Twentieth Century', even in a situation of international carnage as bloody as the Second World War, where emblematic sites of English culture were targeted for destruction along with the lives of British citizens, the enthusiasm for the watercolourist John Sell Cotman evidences a turn towards a particular kind of idyllic art. This tells us much about the complex function of art in the world in times of national crisis. In contrast to what might be considered 'high' art, in the form of painting, in 'Vera Lynn and the "We'll Meet Again" Hypothesis', Kate McLoughlin examines how Vera Lynn's song came to be symbolic of a certain kind of national solidarity. Unpacking 'We'll Meet Again', McLoughlin finds a multifaceted lyric that "resists closure", with many temporal and tonal complexities. In a continued emphasis on the lyrical, this time in the connection between poetics and music, Alexandra Coghlan focuses on an artist whose work has also been made to be emblematic of our nation. In her essay 'Othering the Nation', Coghlan traces how Benjamin Britten's settings of W. H. Auden's poems were co-opted as part of a wider nationalistic agenda in the music of the period.

Although art (in the Wildean view) might seem inimical to such pragmatic notions as nationalism, and while artists certainly "interpreted the world", to use Marx's words, it might be hard to see how they change it. In keeping with a focus on the world as it appears to us, it might even be possible to eschew subjectivity all together and judge art—such as landscape or still life—purely on its success at replicating real scenes or objects. Why should we care about subjectivity, economy or anything other than our reaction to how well the artwork conforms to the conventions of a particular artistic style? But when

perception is the currency of the medium, whether in prose, paint *or* mise-en-scène, mimesis—to put it *very* simply, copying the world—is only one element of a much wider process. As photographic theory has long recognized, the camera does more than 'record'; observation is transformation that calls into question attitudes, preconceptions, ways of seeing and roles. The ever-sceptical Nietzsche recognized as much when he observed in *The Genealogy of Morals* that "all seeing is perspective—and so is all knowing". His self-conception as a philosopher crosses the boundaries of identification and seeing: "We philosophers are never more delighted than when we are taken for artists".[42] In a continued emphasis the possibilities of seeing, Tom Moody's overview of the art of Michael Rodriguez examines his techniques for representing the minutiae of atomic composition, in strikingly unconventional colour schemes. Furthering the examination of different ways of representing the minutiae of things, Andrew Blades looks at the figuration of the body infiltrated by disease, to explore the body itself as a kind of spectacle, in Mark Doty's poetry where anxieties of contagion cross the boundaries between body, word and possibilities of self-articulation.

By clarifying the tensions between permanence and change—to borrow a title from Kenneth Burke—across many different types of artists, artworks and modes of responding to art, we hope to strike a balance between fidelity to what Susan Sontag envisaged when she hypothesized that "the earliest experience of art must have been that it was incantatory, magical",[43] while not abandoning a healthy desire to interrogate what makes the magic and the uses to which it has been subjected. By opening up the *many* spaces in which the categories of self and shelf interpenetrate, *From Self to Shelf* provides a suggestive overview of the complex ways in which film, literature, painting and music traverse the gaps between their creators and the world, without confining the art object in between to a one-dimensional sense of fidelity to some 'message' or to a sense of usage.

Collectively, *From Self to Shelf* grew out of discussions between members of the English literature postgraduate community at Balliol College, Oxford. In conversation we discovered that despite the different nature of our research areas, a common feature was a shared interest in the processes involved in the transition from private individual to name recognition as 'artist': questions abounded. We were curious to see what the common ground would be when literature was placed alongside other disciplines, while also fully expecting to question the limits of disciplinarity itself, remaining open to the exciting discoveries that can be made when exploring ideas across different intellectual fields. Our structure for the book highlights distinct trends that cut across chronological and disciplinary boundaries. The essays in the opening chapter, 'Romantic Legacies' all draw on the Romantic myth of the artist, highlighting the ways in which the late eighteenth-century continues to inform our critical

understanding of the creating self. In the following section, 'Artistic Identities', voice is given back to the artists themselves. Three contemporary figures working in different mediums—painting, poetry, and fiction—present themselves in the process of construction. In 'From Frame to Fame', the essays examine how visual artists, no matter how quietly they live, unwittingly open themselves up to viewing by their audience. The forces of history are at work in chapter four, 'Artist and Nation'. The three essays here all examine how British artists in the fields of music, painting, and poetry had their work enlisted by Second World War rhetoric. Artists may be Conscientious Objectors it seems, but their artistic objects may not. The final section, 'Stage Deaths', explores our continuing fascination with the death of the artist figure. In these essays, death hovers between an inescapable fact, an artistic concern, and yet another constructed performance. However, the journey from the Romantic birth of the artist to the performance of their own death suggests an easy chronology that the subject itself seems to resist.

If the attempt to explicate and answer many of the aforementioned questions between these pages does nothing more than encourage others to do the same, it will have more than served its purpose.

Notes

[1] See T. S. Eliot 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' in *The Sacred Wood* (London: Methuen, 1950), p.47 .

[2] For a discussion of expressivism see part one of M. H. Abram's *The Mirror and the Lamp – romantic theory and the critical tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953).

[3] William Wordsworth, 'Preface to Lyrical Ballads' in *Romanticism – An Anthology*, ed. Duncan Wu (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), p.357.

[4] The pioneering theoretical work on this issue was undertaken by Pierre Bourdieu; see his *The Field of Cultural Production* (Cambridge: Polity, 1993) and *Distinction – A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (London: Routledge, 1984).

[5] See Walter Benjamin's conception of 'aura' in 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' in *Illuminations* (London: Pimlico, 1999), p.236.

[6] Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media* (London: Routledge, 2001), p.3

[7] "All that once was directly lived has become mere representation". The spectacle represents "a social relationship between people that is mediated by images". Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (New York, Zone Books, 2002), p.12.

[8] For a discussion of absence and presence of the painter as dual forces in the signification of art—particularly the painting of Van Gogh—see Jacques Derrida's *The Truth In Painting* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1987). Derrida opposes the *ductus* (draftsman's signature) and *duction* (production, reproduction and reduction).

[9] Martin Heidegger 'The Origin of the Work of Art' in *Poetry, Language, Thought* (Glasgow: Harper Collins, 1971), p.15.
[10] Cited in Terry Eagleton's *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), p.28.
[11] Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', p.226
[12] See section X of Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990) and compare it to R. G. Collingwood's *The Principles of Art* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1963) and Elaine Scarry's more recent *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).
[13] William Wordsworth, 'The World is Too Much With Us', *The Complete Poems* (London: Everyman, 1998), p.32.
[14] Lord Alfred Tennyson, *Idylls of the King* in *The Poems of Tennyson*, ed. Christopher Ricks (London: Longman, 1969), p.1715 (345-346).
[15] Emily Dickinson,'There is no frigate like a book' no. 1263 in *Emily Dickinson—The Collected Poems*, ed. T.H. Johnson (London: Faber, 1975).
[16] See Sigmund Freud's 1908 essay 'Creative Writers and Day Dreaming' in *Freud: Art and Literature* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980), p.129.
[17]Charles Baudelaire, *Selected Writings on Art and Artists* (London: Pelican, 1972), p.8.
[18] For a discussion of responsiveness to art see Christopher Butler's *Pleasure and the Arts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).
[19] Lord Byron, *Selected Letters and Journals*, ed. Leslie A. Marchand (London: Picador, 1982), p.355.
[20] Percy Bysshe Shelley, 'The Defence of Poetry' in *The Prose Works.* Vol .II (London: Chatto and Windus, 1906), p.5.
[21] Wordsworth, 'Preface to Lyrical Ballads' in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* Vol. II (London: W. W. Norton, 1993), p.147.
[22] W. B. Yeats 'An Acre of Grass' in *W. B. Yeats—The Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p.156.
[23] S.T. Coleridge, *Coleridge's Notebooks—A Selection*, ed. Seamus Perry (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p.95.
[24] S.T. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* (London: J. M. Dent, 1921), p.166.
[25] Lord Byron, *Don Juan* (London: Penguin, 1996), p.41 (1-2 […] 13-16).
[26] See section one of Immanuel Kant *The Critique of Judgement* (Indiana: Hackett, 1987).
[27] Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation* (London: Vintage, 2001).
[28] For a discussion see Christopher Butler's *Pleasure and the Arts,* p.211.
[29] An analogous situation might be the viewer at a play. Of course, the autonomy of the spectator is a debatable matter. The most important theorist on this is Bertolt Brecht in his understanding of the complex nature of dramaturgical crafting, spectacle and identification. See *Brecht on Theatre - the development of an aesthetic*, ed. John Willet (London: Methuen, 1984), p.170.
[30] See the introduction of *The Romantics on Shakespeare*, ed. Jonathan Bate (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1997).

[31] Sir Philip Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), p.32.
[32] D. H. Lawrence, *Selected Critical Writings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p.54.
[33] William Wordsworth, 'The Tables Turned' in *The Complete Poems* (London: Everyman, 1998), p.61.
[34] Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, 'The Culture Industry' in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (London: Verso, 1986), p.123.
[35] Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1987), p.169.
[36] Gustave Flaubert, 1857 letter in *The Letters of Gustave Flaubert* (New York: Belknap, 1982), p.8.
[37] See Roland Barthes 'The Death of the Author' in *Image-Music-Text* (Glasgow: Harper Collins, 1977).
[38] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p.120.
[39] Examples would include Simone de Beauvoir's *Les Mandarins*, Julia Kristeva's *Les Samourais* and Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit*, all of which have been read by some as overt roman-à-clef and combed for biographical correspondences.
[40] For a discussion see M. H. Abrams' *The Mirror and the Lamp,* p.36.
[41] Karl Marx, 'Thesis on Feuerbach' in *A Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: Norton, 1978), p.145.
[42] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p.12. 'Letter to Georg Brandes', 4th May, 1888 in C. Middleton ed. *Selected Letters of Friedrich Nietzsche* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1969), p.290.
[43] Sontag, *Against Interpretation*, p.3.