



**Jerome Boyd Maunsell.** *Portraits from Life: Modernist Novelists & Autobiography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018, ISBN 9780198789369).

**Sandra Kisters.** *The Lure of the Biographical: On the (Self-)Representation of Modern Artists.* (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2017, ISBN 9789492095251).

**Marleen Rensen**

University of Amsterdam

Ever since the cult of the artist came to prominence in the Romantic period, the lives of famous painters, writers and composers have never ceased to fascinate the public. Their biographies are often mythologized and held up as exceptional life stories, distinguished by extravagance, torment or tragedy. Famous artists like Damien Hirst and Ai Weiwei evoke excitement with the mere mention that they are writing their memoirs.<sup>1</sup> This continuing fascination with the artist behind the work is further illustrated by the recent publications of biographies of Debussy (2018)<sup>2</sup> and Lucebert (2018),<sup>3</sup> as well as by popular biopics, such as *The Happy Prince* (2018), featuring a fictionalized Oscar Wilde.<sup>4</sup> Current research in the humanities is also increasingly focused on the image-making of artists. The emerging field of celebrity studies, for example, takes a critical interest in notions of fame and stardom and pays special attention to the self-fashioning of artists and their public appropriation. The life writing field, which at certain points intersects with celebrity studies, is especially concerned with modes of representing the lives and afterlives of artists.

Two excellent new studies explore innovative approaches to the artist's biography and autobiography. *The Lure of the Biographical. On the (Self-)Representation of Modern Artists* (2017) is written by art historian Sandra Kisters, who is Head of Collection and Research at Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam, the Netherlands. She focuses on visual artists and analyzes their self-images, as well as the way they are represented by others. Since the rise to fame is a central theme in her book, it can be seen as linking the academic fields of celebrity studies and of life writing. Kisters presents three case studies from the late nineteenth and

twentieth centuries: the French sculptor Auguste Rodin, the American painter Georgia O'Keeffe and the Irish/English painter Francis Bacon.

In *Portraits from Life. Modernist Novelists & Autobiography* (2018), literary scholar Jerome Boyd Maunsell examines the autobiographical writings of British and American novelists in the first half of the twentieth century, all related to literary modernism. Each of the seven chapters is devoted to one author, respectively Joseph Conrad, Henry James, Ford Madox Ford, Edith Wharton, H.G. Wells, Gertrude Stein and Wyndham Lewis. In literary biography, he argues, the memoirs and autobiographies of writers have often been treated differently than their fictional work. The writing of self-narratives “tended to be presented as a *fait accompli*, as if these books somehow wrote themselves” (7). Autobiographical writings have only recently received attention as works of art in their own right. As Boyd Maunsell stresses, no matter how truthful or accurate they are, these works are very often the fruit of creative effort over a long period of time, and therefore can offer valuable insights into the process of writing life.

The two studies obviously differ in focus and approach. While Boyd Maunsell offers an analysis of artists' memoirs and autobiographies, informed by biography, Kisters takes a socio-historical approach, combining a wide range of textual and visual sources, such as biographies, photos, films, exhibition catalogues, testaments and the artists' studios and houses. Notwithstanding these differences, both studies encompass a wide range of canonical artists and investigate how their (self-)portraits create a certain image or name for themselves. They discuss similar topics and themes, of which the most important are ethical issues of privacy and censorship, the artist's control over his or her public image and existing links to the life writing texts of fellow artists in past and present.

In her introduction to *The Lure of the Biographical*, Kisters explains that these matters have regained scholarly interest since the recent ‘Return of the Artist’. Since the late 1960s, when Roland Barthes proclaimed the ‘Death of the Author’, many scholars moved away from studying the individual creator of art and instead focused on the artwork itself. In their view, the interpretation of art depended on the recipient, rather than on the intentions or imaginations of its creator. The biographical approach to art, which connected style and subject matter to the life of the artist, was therefore criticized, questioned and considered out of date. Although twenty-first century scholars remain careful to avoid the so-called biographical fallacy, the relevance of the artist's life is now recognized once more in literary scholarship and critical art studies.

Kisters explicitly engages with the debate about taking a biographical approach to art criticism. She argues that “in art historical discourse, the artist as creator has never really been questioned. It was in particular within the field of literary studies, semiotics and post-structuralism that

the author was a topic of debate in the second half of the twentieth century” (62). Nevertheless, the debate has sparked off new directions of research in art history. New Historicism and New Art History, for example, examine the lives and works of individual artists in order to gain insight into the cultural, historical and socio-economic complexities of the art world. Biography remains relevant, Kisters observes, because the art market is largely structured around individual artists when it comes to finance, marketing and musealization. In her own study, she draws attention to the importance of ‘biographical image-making’ in the modern art world. Looking at artists’ self-images and reputations, *The Lure of the Biographical* investigates how and when knowledge of the life of artists is used in the presentation and interpretation of their work.

*Portraits from Life* is concerned with biography in a slightly different way. Boyd Maunsell takes a ‘biographical approach’ to the autobiographies and memoirs of novelists in order to inspect how they deal with the facts; what is foregrounded, what is omitted, what is embellished or revised. The seven authors he discusses — in a series of biographical case studies — can be considered a literary group, centered around Kent, Sussex, London and Paris. Some were dear friends, many were acquaintances, and they all frequented the same artistic circles and read and wrote in the same magazines and journals. Boyd Maunsell aims to lay bare the interrelations between their lives and to create true-to-life portraits. He thus characterizes his book as “an experiment in biography, and in group biography, of its own, rather than a critical study. It aims to tell a story, to craft a narrative; and it owes more to the procedures of biography than of literary criticism, although it is informed by, and sometimes fuses, both” (6).

In comparison with Boyd Maunsell, Kisters devotes considerably more attention to theories of the modern artist. Building upon the work of Pierre Bourdieu, she approaches the artist as a social being who operates in a ‘field of cultural production’, in which critics, biographers, agents and art dealers all have a share in the production of art and in the image-making of the artist. From this perspective, Kisters traces the changing status of the artist in relation to historical developments in the media and the art market. She highlights the importance of the nineteenth century, in which the emerging cult of the creative genius coincided with the commercialization of art and the growing influence of the mass media. Due to the increasing number of art reviews, photos and interviews in newspapers and magazines, artists needed an image more than ever before, in order to engage the interest of the public and to sell their work.

The role of life writing in the process of image-making is discussed extensively in Kisters’ book. Her sources include *The Victorian Artist. Artist’s Lifewritings in Britain, ca. 1870–1910* (2003) by Julie F. Codell, who examines various life writing genres in relation to the image of British

artists in the decades before the First World War. Kisters mainly considers biography and stresses, like Codell, that this is a powerful means to promote an artist. Life writing scholars will find a familiar, but clear and effective overview in her book of the history of the artist's biography. As may be expected, much attention is given to Renaissance critic Giorgio Vasari, whose *Lives of the Artists* established the artist's biography as a distinct genre with a vast array of rhetorical strategies, borrowed from classical sources. Following Vasari's model, biographers structured the lives of their subjects around similar themes and topoi, such as the infant prodigy and the recognition of talent. Mythical images of the modern artist as a solitary or mad genius and bohemian have developed within this tradition since the age of Romanticism. Such 'biographical formulae', articulating an idea of 'the true artist', became stereotypical and self-descriptive. They prevail up to the present day, even if many contemporary biographers and artists are more inclined to debunk myths, or treat them playfully.

One of the strengths of Kisters' study is the way she draws on a wide range of research to develop a comprehensive methodology for analyzing the image-making of modern visual artists. The media presence of artists is one of her central concerns. It is worth noting that the role of the media is addressed as a distinct topic in the recent volume she edited with Rachel Esner, called *The Mediatization of the Artist* (2018). *The Lure of the Biographical* primarily aims to reveal the complex process of image-making, in which the media continuously interact with forms of life writing and with other material forms of representation. In a clear and coherent manner, Kisters classifies the various textual and visual means which are used to construct and communicate a certain (self-)image of an artist. This forms the basis for the analysis of the heterogeneous corpus of sources she uses for the in-depth studies of Rodin, O'Keeffe and Bacon. The careful design of the book, which is rich in illustrations, helps understand how images are of crucial importance to the biographical representations of these modern artists.

An important insight that emerges from all three case studies is that artists exert control over their public image in different ways. Rodin, to start with, held up the (self-)image of the solitary and misunderstood genius, thus playing out the non-recognition in the early phase of his career. He also made use of new media to promote his work and capture it in a mysterious atmosphere. On his initiative, some of his sculptures were photographed in moonlight and he would even occasionally pose for photos with a mythic allure. The power of photography is also evident from the case of Georgia O'Keeffe. She tried to correct the image of the *woman* artist that was created by Alfred Stieglitz, her future husband, a well-known photographer and art dealer, who exhibited a series of photos

he had taken of her. The desire to create for herself the counter-image of an independent and professional artist, equal to men, is clear from her autobiographical book *Georgia O'Keeffe* (1976), as well as from her strict control over the publications about her life. The concern for being misinterpreted is equally recognizable in the study of Francis Bacon. Paradoxically, as Kisters points out, he discouraged biographical interpretations of his work, but cultivated the image of himself as “a gambler, drinker and *drifter*” to promote his art. The series of interviews with art critic David Sylvester for the BBC, between 1962 and 1984, seemed spontaneous dialogues, but were in fact scripted and carefully edited conversations, which emphasized that Bacon was led by chance and accident, having no systematic working method.

In all three case studies, the studio is of crucial importance for the mythologized representations of the artist. While the pictures of Rodin confirm the image of a solitary genius by hiding the assistants and fellow artists in his studio, the images of Bacon conceal all indications of order and method and highlight the mess of pots of paint, brushes and sketches. After his death in 1992, the ‘organized chaos’ was continued in the reconstruction of his studio, which was relocated from London to Dublin. The fact that this was not his personal wish but a decision of his heir, illustrates that Bacon did not try to control his afterlife in the same way as O’Keeffe and Rodin did. Rodin consciously built his legacy by donating his oeuvre and personal documentation to the French state and making successful efforts to turn his studios in Meudon and Paris into personal museums. Similarly, O’Keeffe was involved in the conservation of the Abiquiu House, her house and studio, and made arrangements to help realize her wish of a personal museum in Santa Fe. Together the three case studies clearly illustrate that none of these artists held absolute control over their images, certainly not after their deaths.

Although the main emphasis of *Portraits from Life* is on literary artists and their self-representations in writing, this study has interesting parallels with that of Kisters. Boyd Maunsell also gives attention to the ways in which literature and visual arts interact: he describes how James and Stein sat for painted portraits, he discusses Ford’s ‘literary impressionism’ and devotes a full case study to Wyndham Lewis, who was both a novelist and a painter. The cross-over with Kisters resides more fundamentally in his analysis of what artists choose to tell and reveal about themselves and what they leave out. Boyd Maunsell touches on the mythologies of artists and their presence in the media, but he treats (self-)life writing as a form of art, as much as a means of image-making. He does, after all, discuss artists for whom the writing of lives is closely connected to their creative practice as novelists.

In the introduction of his book, Boyd Maunsell offers the genre-definitions needed to reflect on the boundaries between autobiography, memoir and the novel. It seems particularly complicated to distinguish the genres and to deal with categories of 'fiction' and 'truth', since novelists draw on life experiences in their fictional writing, just as in their autobiographical work. Moreover, in the latter they also tend to invent stories and make use of the narrative strategies of novel writing. This applies especially to modernist authors who experiment with forms of writing and stretch or question the boundaries between autobiography and the novel. However, as Boyd Maunsell argues, most of them felt and respected the line between fiction and non-fiction. Following their generic lines as much as possible, he concentrates primarily on their autobiographies and memoirs, only 'occasionally' looking at their autobiographical novels.

In his consideration of modernist autobiographies, Boyd Maunsell is following a trend in literary scholarship. A key publication is Max Saunders' book *Self-Impression: Life writing, Autobiografiction, and the Forms of Modern Literature* (2010). Here Saunders investigates modernism's engagement with life writing and treats many of the same novelists but, in contrast to Boyd Maunsell, he is first and foremost concerned with the relations between auto/biography and fiction. Additionally, while Saunders discusses a broad variety of authors in the period from 1870 to the 1930s, Boyd Maunsell studies a specific group of novelists and explores their interrelations. In this respect, his approach bears more resemblance to Mhairi Pooler's book *Writing Life: Early Twentieth-Century Autobiographies of the Artist-Hero* (2015). Pooler presents case studies of Edmund Gosse, Henry James, Siegfried Sassoon and Dorothy Richardson and treats them as a group. She also stresses that their autobiographies are fabrications that reveal less about the *lives* of their authors than about the *modes of representing* their lives. Pooler reaches this conclusion by identifying influences of the German *Künstlerroman* in their 'creative autobiographies' and placing them in a wider literary tradition. Boyd Maunsell's study differs in that its frame is more biographical than literary and puts more particular emphasis on the act of (self-)life writing.

Strikingly, Maunsell shows that these novelists, although actively engaged with biographies and autobiographies, were ambivalent and suspicious about both genres. They all published biographical studies of fellow artists or family members and reflected on the invasion of privacy by reading someone else's personal letters and revealing their intimate details. Moreover, each of them showed concern or resistance to being biographized themselves. Edith Wharton and Henry James, for instance, tried to prevent biographers from finding out all about their lives by destroying private letters. Comparable to Kisters' study of O'Keeffe, Boyd

Maunsell illustrates that Joseph Conrad rather tried to correct an undesirable image through autobiography. *A Personal Record* (1912), in which he explores his Polish roots, seems to be a self-defence against a critic who had accused him of being a writer “without country or language”, suggesting he had no nationality (21).

Resonating again with Kisters’ analyses are the cases in which life writing is used to establish a reputation at the beginning of an artistic career. This is most apparent from the study of American-born writer Gertrude Stein, who suddenly gained name and fame when she published *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933). In the voice of her partner Alice, she describes her life in the literary and artistic circles of Paris where she is surrounded by celebrity artists like Cocteau, Fitzgerald, Hemingway and many others. Stein most particularly links her life to the famous Spanish painter, Picasso. She refers numerous times to his portrait of her, painted in 1906. The mythologized description of her sittings in his chaotic studio in Montmartre correspond closely to Kisters’ observations on the artistic genius in his workplace. Moreover, like the case study of O’Keeffe, which shows that Stieglitz’ photos of the *woman* artist reveal as much about him as his model, Boyd Maunsell makes evident that Stein’s portrait can equally be considered “a self-portrait of Picasso” (148).

It is well known that, at the time, many people felt that Picasso failed to catch a likeness with Stein’s physique, but she herself was happy with the painting: “I was and still am satisfied with my portrait, for me it is I, and it is the only reproduction of me which is always I” (148). Picasso predicted she would eventually resemble the portrait. And she did, as Boyd Maunsell comments: “Stein did come to look like this, until as a historical figure, her image is tied to the portrait” (148). He continues by arguing that the painter had a formative influence on her artistic identity because Stein studied his cubist technique during the sittings and transposed it to her writing. In what she called “portrait-writing”, she experimented with techniques, some similar to the cubist way of presenting multiple perspectives on a subject. Stein expanded on her experimental style in *Everybody’s Autobiography* (1937). In this ‘follow-up’ to the *Autobiography* she presented herself from multiple angles, reflecting on how her book had brought about her rise to fame and how it had impacted her life and sense of self.

Stein’s case is particularly instructive in illustrating the modernist art of self-portraiture which is the focal point of *Portraits from Life*. Two key themes of the book converge here. Firstly, her ‘external self-portrait’ gives an impression of the modernist experiments with the form and content of self-narration. Reacting against the linear, straightforward prose of traditional biography, each of the novelists Boyd Maunsell treats, experimented with new forms to shape their life stories, to cope with changing

memories, shifting perspectives on the self and self-estrangement, be it with chronology and time (Conrad, Wharton), memory (James), contradicting identities (Lewis) or with distinctions between fact and fiction, novel and autobiography (Ford). This experimentation, in various forms, articulates a modernist sense of self, which is incoherent and inconsistent, elusive and multiple, and makes evident an awareness of the fashioning of Self.

Secondly, Stein's case lays bare the connections and interactions with other artists. All seven novelists portray colleagues in their biographical and autobiographical work and they respond to each other's writings. As Boyd Maunsell argues, all autobiography is 'group biography' in the sense that it involves other people (4). Interestingly, life writing was a collaborative act for some authors, most notably for Ford. Acting as 'Conrad's Boswell', he helped him write *The Mirror of the Sea* (1906), a memoir based on extensive conversations. In other cases, Ford's biographical studies impacted the self-image of an author, like Picasso's portrait of Stein. For example, he "helped Lewis form his persona: in his literary portrayals of Lewis, Ford described him as a conspirator, an exotic European. And Lewis accepted this Fordian mask in *Rude Assignment*" (205). This, and other examples in the book show that the artistic self is a construct, fabricated in relations to others. Citing Virginia Woolf, who can hardly be ignored in a study on modernist literature and life writing, Boyd Maunsell argues that biography "will enlarge its scope by hanging up looking glasses at odd corners". *Portraits from Life* is of great merit for providing a fuller picture of this literary group by showing the mirrors and reflections through which these novelists perceived themselves and looked at others who watched and observed them.

Even if the authors discussed here held differing views of autobiography and vary in form and style, each of them published multiple personal histories, presenting altered versions of themselves. Unlike fiction, which enables writers to create a story exactly as they wish, autobiography is rather a "quest to understand the quirks of fate, and the randomness of destiny" (215). The novelists in *Portraits from Life* seem captivated by the 'lure of the autobiographical', to use a variation on Kisters' title, as they wrote about themselves continually in an effort to come to terms with life while living it. One can wonder if this ceaseless search for self-discovery is a feature of this writers' group especially. As is to be expected from a study that sets out to be more experimental than critical, the historical and theoretical implications of the analyses presented are rather implicit than explicit. It might have been rewarding if Boyd Maunsell had engaged more with recent publications on modernist writers and autobiography, such as the above-mentioned studies of Saunders and Pooler.



Notwithstanding, he lays bare wonderfully the shared engagement with autobiography which characterizes the writing lives of the seven novelists and their self-understanding as modern artists.

*Portraits from Life* and *The Lure of the Biographical* can be read as complementary explorations of the role of life writing in the (self-)representations of modern artists. Boyd Maunsell offers valuable insight into the complexities of the self-representations of modernist novelists by convincingly demonstrating the interconnections between their lives and life-writing practices. In this way, his experiment in group biography makes newly intelligible the ever-intriguing relation between life and art. In addition, Kisters' study offers a useful method and set of tools to study the biographical image-making of visual artists, enabling us to understand the interactions between textual and visual means and to make sense of the medial and material aspects of representation. This method facilitates further research and is, at least partly, relevant for the study of literary artists as well. To be sure, it makes one eager to find out more about the marvelous photos of the novelists in *Portraits from Life* and the cartoons mentioned in the book. Both studies are clear, well-structured, a pleasure to read and highly recommended to scholars and others interested in the representation of modern artists through the variable lens of life writing.

## WORKS CITED

- Boyd Maunsell, Jerome. *Portraits from Life: Modernist Novelists & Autobiography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018.
- Kisters, Sandra. *The Lure of the Biographical: On the (Self-)Representation of Modern Artists*. Amsterdam: Valiz, 2017.

## NOTES

- 1 See for example the news items: 'Damien Hirst to publish tell-all autobiography.' *BBC News*, 8 April 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-26915100>; and Finkel, Jori. 'Ai Weiwei to Publish a Memoir in 2017.' *The New York Times*, 14 October 2015, <https://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/10/14/ai-weiwei-to-publish-a-memoir-in-2017/>.
- 2 Walsh, Stephen. *Debussy: A Painter in Sound*. London: Faber & Faber, 2018.
- 3 Hazeu, Wim. *Lucebert*. Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 2018.
- 4 *The Happy Prince* is written and directed by Rupert Everett, who also plays the lead role of Wilde.