The Undercover Artist:
Review of Gary Inbinder's *The Flower to the Painter*

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Gary Inbinder, *The Flower to the Painter*
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Cross-dressing, transvestism, and gender-bending are popular and by now well established themes of neo-Victorian fiction, dominating both classic and unfairly neglected texts of the genre.[1] What such novels share is a focus on gender performativity and a critique – often subversion – of unequal power relations, combined with the struggle against sexual discrimination. Recycling these familiar concerns, however, immediately presents a writer with a dilemma, namely how to differentiate his or her work from the field of prior, often well-known fictions on this subject.

As in many of its quasi precursor texts in this vein, Gary Inbinder's *The Flower to the Painter* links its cross-dressing theme with non-heteronormative desire, employing a lesbian protagonist, the orphaned American governess Marcia Brownlow, who assumes the persona of her deceased brother Mark, fallen in the Civil War, to reinvent herself as a painter on the nineteenth-century European art scene. Inbinder's novel, however, dispenses with the overt Gothic or comedic overtones often associated with depictions of such self-fashioning reinventions, which enable characters to pursue forbidden desires or otherwise unrealisable professional ambitions. In this sense, his novel might be compared with Patricia Duncker's realist *James Miranda Barry* (1999), based on an actual historical military surgeon, believed to have been born a woman but living life as a man, so as to attain a medical degree and practice her/his chosen career in various parts of the British Empire. Like Duncker's Barry, Brownlow surrenders her sexual identity for most of the narrative to

safeguard her elective gender identity, on which Mark relies to obtain patronage and establish 'himself' as a respected commercial artist.

The novel begins innocuously enough, though perhaps resorting a little too readily to melodramatic cliché. Governessing for an American family in Italy and unfairly dismissed on account of the *pater familias*' improper attentions, Brunlow flees to her friend Daisy Brewster, residing with a wealthy expatriate aunt, Mrs. Kingsford. While hardly another Jane Eyre, the artistically inclined Marcia and her first person narrative evince occasionally too blatant hints of both Charlotte Brontë's novel and Henry James' scheming expatriate characters and communities – although the Jamesian overtones in particular also constitute part of the novel's appeal. In spite of being enamoured with Daisy – the girls share affectionate embraces and sleep "in each other's arms" (p. 7) – the cynical heroine has few scruples about hamming up her destitution in order to scrounge off her friend: "I saw in Daisy's trusting cornflower eyes the opportunity of a new wardrobe" (p. 3). Initially the mercenary, even predatory narrator is not particularly likeable, just as her ponderous, not to say antiquated self-protestations lack credibility: "though I may seem worldly, it is only thus because misfortune and ill-use have hardened my tender and affectionate nature" (p. 19). Yet Inbinder seems intent on conveying the extent to which Marcia's calculating character is formed by the financial precariousness of her situation and the limited employment opportunities available to impoverished women of good family in the nineteenth century, picking up a common thread of neo-Victorian protest against historical social and gender injustice.

Mrs. Kingsford is less sympathetic than Daisy, quickly seeing through Marcia's assumed character of a "poor orphan […] so grateful for […] sympathy" (p. 7). Kingsford becomes increasingly worried at the likely corruption of her niece to 'unnatural' desires, evidently suspecting that "[y]oung women such as [Marcia] tend to appeal" to other vulnerable women as much as "to men of louche tastes" (p. 11). A cross between a merry widow, Brontë's Mrs. Reed and Dickens' Miss Havisham, Kingsford hatches a scheme to get rid of Marcia, suggesting that, in exchange for an agreed sum, Marcia draws on her former experience of "acting the male roles in school plays" (p. 14) to become the private secretary of Arthur Walcott, a famous American author and art aficionado residing in Florence. Unbeknownst to the narrator until the end of the novel, Kingsford's plan is

intended as a scheme of revenge not only against herself, but also the likely homosexual Walcott, who once toyed with the widow's affections, as Kingsford calculates that his anticipated interest in Marcia and her eventual exposure will publicly humiliate him.

Following Daisy's departure back to America, Marcia's transformation into a gentleman begins. Like Nancy Astley in Sarah Waters' *Tipping the Velvet* (1998), she experiences "a feeling of liberation" in male attire, albeit accompanied by "a sense of immodesty at being so exposed" (pp. 23-24). Arguably, Inbinder imbues his protagonist's transition between gender identities with much greater internal conflict than does Waters in the carnivalesque context of her novel's music hall setting. Yet while laudable, this aspect backfires somewhat, since both the initial and later scenes of Marcia's soul-searching, self-doubt, and at times self-hatred tend to be overwritten, so that their genuineness is inevitably called into question. With overtones of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), Marcia rises in the night to study her reflection in her dressing-table's looking glass, prior to her interview with Walcott: "I detected corruption lurking beneath the epicene mask that stared back at me from the mirror. 'Oh how wicked and obscene,' I whispered" (p. 25). Taking out her brother's photograph, she sobbingly begs his forgiveness "for having drawn you into this filthy trick", before "I set down my sputtering taper, fell to my knees and wept like the damned. *Lasciate ogni speranza, voi ch'entrate*!" (p. 25). Here, the scene comes close to descending into melodramatic farce. Similarly unintentionally comic, though certainly raising a legitimate concern – one that Waters' Nancy, whether performing in the music halls or masquerading as a rent boy on London's streets, seems curiously unbothered by – is the issue of menstruation:

> "We must discuss how you will manage your monthly visitor."
>
> This was serious, and my cheeks flushed with shame. No matter how well I acted the male part, I could not escape the burden of my natural function. Nevertheless, I tried to disguise my embarrassment with a smart reply. "Mrs. Kingsford, my visitor is quite neat, regular and unimposing, and never outstays her welcome." (pp. 27-28)

While this emulates the grittier realism of recent neo-Victorian writing as regards mundane bodily functions found, for instance, in Michel Faber's *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2002), the passage is once again overwrought; so too the later paragraph describing how Marcia buries her "unmentionables" surreptitiously in the grounds of Walcott's palazzo under the pretext of extended morning walks (p. 34). The style and terminology are problematic, exhibiting a prudishness and inhibition at odds with the narrator's often 'shameless' character rejecting social constraints and conventions. As might be expected from the elaborate attention accorded menstruation, it is Marcia's "unmentionables" that betray her masquerade to the only love interest, Lady Agatha (Aggie) Clifford, with whom she actually consummates sexual relations (see p. 249).

Mark's relationship with Walcott swiftly develops from employer/employee to something more akin to friendship, as Walcott works with Mark on 'his' drawings, developing his new protégé's talent. Also, at one of Walcott's dinners, Mark meets the American heiress Betsy Endicott, to whom s/he feels immediately attracted. Their conversations, as does the expatriate context, allow Inbinder to voice what might be termed a pragmatically commonsensical, quintessential 'American', venture capitalist approach to art, not as something pursued for its own sake so as to beautify the world, but viewed foremost as a commercial enterprise that must be worked at (and up) to make it financially viable and a profitable investment (see pp. 37-41; also pp. 193-194). As Mark remarks at one point, applying "the jungle law" of Darwin's and Spencer's "process of natural selection and survival of the fittest" to the art world, "I did not want to starve for any reason, let alone an idealistic abstraction" (p. 58). The protagonist's avowed all-consuming passion to paint and create is thus repeatedly undercut by an eye for the main chance, self-promotion and financial advantage, and how best to inveigle him/herself with individuals that may prove useful for a painterly career rather than aesthetic growth. In a sense, this attention to the consumption as much as the production of art compromises the critical potential of the narrative's gender and aesthetic politics, as repeatedly Inbinder seems inclined to sacrifice genuine thoughtful engagement with these subjects for instant melodramatic effect – which in itself, however, does not serve to 'sell' neo-Victorian fiction.

The narrator's attitude towards homosexuality, both his/her own and others', is likewise portrayed as highly ambivalent, verging on the

intolerant, as when Mark criticises Donatello's statue of David, finding "something deceitful about displaying a naked catamite under the guise of a biblical hero" (p. 43), or suspects a new acquaintance of having "sized [him/her] up as a cream puff" (p. 68). Mark's tutor, the dissolute and hard-up painter Duncan MacDonald, RA, admits that his greatest success, "Vulcan Catching Venus and Mars in Adultery", was no more than "salacious brothel art cloaked in classical respectability" (p. 48), while Marcia later describes herself as having made her dead brother "a pimp in nature's whorehouse" (p. 225). Exhausted from the effort of completing his/her finest painting, a haunting Pre-Raphaelite portrait, Mark experiences a feverish nightmare of being "the drowned girl in Hood's poem, 'The Bridge of Sighs,' fished out of the channel and ogled by a curious crowd" (p. 232). Whether intentionally or otherwise, such images have the recurrent effect of blurring the lines between art and (self-)prostitution, a profession Mrs. Kingsford had previously implied Marcia would be well suited for. Again, the text creates confusion about its intended gender politics, which undermines the would-be liberatory project of Inbinder's neo-Victorian female *Künstlerroman.*

Intermittently Mark mourns for "my cast away self", described as having "disappeared down an obscure hole along with [Marcia's] bloodstained linen"; this leads to the eventual realisation that "I had erased her like a cipher, and whatever fame and fortune she would achieve through her art, the credit would go to a man who never was" (pp. 53-54). In one sense Mark is *too* much of a tortured soul and, in another, not quite enough, and it must be said that the trope of masculine appropriation or, more accurately, 'over-writing' of female-authored visual art has been previously explored with greater dramatic and tragic intensity, for instance in Elizabeth Kostova's *The Swan Thieves* (2010). Perhaps unsurprisingly, the female protagonist casts herself in an implicitly male role as Narcissus, originally inspired by her own "natural beauty", having "first encountered my erotic muse in mirrors"; she both identifies with and reaffirms the objectifying male gaze and masculine subjectivity that a novel about a cross-dressing woman painter might be expected to contest: "we artists are like voyeurs who first spy beauty through a keyhole, and later return to ravish her unawares" (p. 67). While vignette encounters between Mark and famed male artists abound (Sargent, Renoir, Whistler, Leighton), there are none with female artists; although a few (Mary Cassatt, Berthe Morisot) are

briefly mentioned, they tend to be denigrated by Mark for "relegating their subject matter to domesticity" and imitating the style of male painters (p. 98). At the Third Impressionists Exhibition, "their pictures remained obscured in the shadows of more well regarded men" (p. 112) and go uncommented upon by Mark and his/her friends. That does rather disregard the extensive work done by twentieth- and twenty-first-century feminist art historians, such as Jan Marsh among others, in 'recovering' women artists and incorporating their work into the canon, analogous to the common neo-Victorian project of voicing the historically marginalised. This inconsistency struck me especially with regards to the Pre-Raphaelites, repeatedly referenced in the novel, not least because some of Mark's most accomplished works – and some of Inbinder's finest descriptions of fictive artworks – are in this vein. Artists like Evelyn de Morgan, Marie Spartali Stillman, or Marianne Stokes, among many others, go curiously unmentioned, though one might have presumed them to provide viable models for Marcia's own artistic ambitions.

The problem of Inbinder's novel, for me, lies in its inability to fully reconcile the two intertwined storylines of lesbian desire and the female/feminist *Künstlerroman*. His attempt to capture Marcia/Mark's frustrated sexual energies, sublimated into art (see pp. 171-173), at times assumes jarring essentialist overtones as when, having promised to paint her lover Aggie's portrait, Marcia grandiloquently proclaims: "My womb will always remain barren, but our love will bear fruit of a kind" (p. 250). As already indicated, Inbinder also ends up recycling stereotypes of Victorian repression, as when the scandalous devil-may-care Aggie suddenly evinces "fear" about being found out in a lesbian affair and scuppering her chance of an advantageous marriage (p. 250). For large parts of the novel, many of the main characters – Arthur, Betsy, even at times Marcia herself – come across as curiously desexed or undersexed; indeed in Marcia's case she proves her own forbidding enforcer.[2] Unlike neo-Victorian fiction's great lovers, driven and consumed by desire, such as John Fowles' Charles Smithson in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) or A.S. Byatt's Randolph Henry Ash and Christabel LaMotte in *Possession: A Romance* (1990), Marcia with her fickle, swiftly transferring infatuations mostly seems to 'play' at love. Accordingly she weeps for the loss of Marcia rather more than for the loss of Daisy or the separation from her other love-interests, or even for being unable to act freely and openly on her lesbian desires.

Her final reunion with Betsy fittingly takes place in the still relatively lawless frontier city of San Francisco, far away from the stifling social constraints of the Old World, once Marcia has re-assumed feminine guise under threat of exposure by Daisy.[3] Yet even this romantic climax proves strangely unsatisfying as regards readers' expectations. Not so much that the novel ends prior to the lovers' consummation, but Marcia again seems to resort to histrionic self-dramatisation: "I had surpassed Bernhardt in La Dame aux Camélias" (p. 271). Having been diagnosed with "incipient consumption" (p. 269), imagining her money running out and ending as a destitute streetwalker, her mercenary side comes to the fore once more: "Betsy was my best hope" (p. 270). When Marcia confesses her prior imposture to Betsy, she delivers a well "rehearsed" speech, pledging that both her art and love were always true (p. 272). The calculated ploy does not fool Betsy who, having already been infatuated with 'Mark', nonetheless seizes the chance to enjoy love while retaining her economic independence and full control of her life in a manner conventional heteronormative marriage would not have enabled her to do. Their romance ends with what is, in effect, a binding but unequal contract, even if described as a "compact": "I pledged my art and love in exchange for Betsy's care and patronage. For my remaining years, this terrace would become my Bridge of Sighs, this fanciful castle my Bargello" – in a sense Marcia herself will become an object of display. There is also, of course, a pun here between 'Bargello' and 'bordello', while "my Bridge of Sighs" recalls Hood's earlier referenced poem, giving the lie to Marcia's claim that "my last work would be my best because it would be all for love" (p. 275).

Marcia's *Bildungsroman*, then, evinces no real growth in self-knowledge, except in terms of her confidence as an artist, a confidence, however, that never achieves full independence from reliance on the financial goodwill of others. Hence the quasi fairytale ending (poor orphaned 'Jane' makes good after many trials and tribulations) reminded me somewhat more of the bleak finale of Waters' *Affinity* (1999), where Ruth Vigers impresses on Selina Dawes that she, rather than the spirit medium, holds the strings – in the case of Betsy and Marcia, the purse strings – of their relationship. Marcia is not to be rewarded with an openly admitted and fully equal partnership. Yet if the pursuance of their same-sex affair will evidently continue 'undercover', as it were, this is probably also more

realistic for the time than the carnivalesque grand finale of *Tipping the Velvet* with its very public and passionate lesbian kiss.

The Flower to the Painter's mixed messages as regards gender, sexuality, and same-sex desire probably prevent it from furnishing new grist for the mills of feminist neo-Victorian criticism. Yet Inbinder's novel is not, finally, without its attractions. On some level, the reader does want to learn the outcome of Marcia's masquerade, and part of her appeal as a narrator lies exactly in her mercenary cynical nature, which both hams up and undermines her quest for romance – and thus the reader's analogous romantic foray into a bygone age and 'The Cult of Beauty', as the Victoria & Albert Museum entitled its 2011 homage to the Aesthetic Movement. Along the way, the reader may revel in the vicarious pleasures of beautiful places, people, and things, stopping off at a variety of Victorian cultural hot-spots, mostly well protected (apart from the odd encounter with a child prostitute) from the less palatable aspects of nineteenth-century existence. As such, Inbinder's novel is fairly unconventional, even innovative in its approach, treating the reader to the period's "Olympean heights" (p. 267) rather than its foul underbelly. This is arguably refreshing in light of the prevalence of overtly Gothic evocations of the nineteenth century in fiction and film. Yet perhaps the novel's greatest interest lies in its aesthetic context, which inadvertently sketches out the ground for the sort of creative work still waiting to be done – the bio-fictions of numerous nineteenth-century female artists yet to be written and the genuine neo-Victorian female *Künstlerromane* yet to be conceived.[4]

Notes

1. These range from James Buxton's *Pity* (1997), Sarah Waters' *Tipping the Velvet* (1998) and *Affinity* (1999), and Patricia Duncker's *James Miranda Barry* (1999) to Wesley Stace's *Misfortune* (2005). Though none of these novels function as actual intertexts for *The Flower to the Painter*, Inbinder's text will almost certainly call some of them to mind for most neo-Victorian readers/scholars. Implicitly, Inbinder capitalises on the appeal of the cross-dressing theme.
2. Two scenes may serve as examples in point. The first is a London carriage ride with Betsy which, following a brief and unusually explicit lesbian fantasy on Mark/Marcia's part, ends as follows: "I rested my head on [Betsy's] satin

enshrouded lap and felt some assurance that she shared my erotic reverie, but I was even more certain that we would never consummate our desire" (pp. 128-129). The second is another erotic daydream while bathing, in which Marcia imagines herself in a Leighton picture, being ministered to like Venus by her "water nymphs", the "nubile" Aggie, Betsy and Daisy – only to panic at sounds in the hallway, leap from the bath to grab her towel and hysterically punish herself, "rubb[ing] my body raw as if by that action I could eradicate some indelible stain" (p. 162).

3. Mark' is conveniently and romantically killed off on a staged voyage to Algeria, which Marcia, having come clean to Arthur, stresses should drive up the price of 'his' work.
4. Some excellent bio-fictions of nineteenth-century female writers and artists are already available, such as Margaret Forster's *Lady's Maid* (1990) and Laura Fish's *Strange Music* (2008), both in part about Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Elizabeth Maguire's *The Open Door* (2008) about Constance Fenimore Woolson, or H.D.'s *White Rose and the Red* (1948, first published 2009) about Elizabeth (Lizzie) Siddal – as well as a whole range of fictive Charlotte Brontë 'memoirs' and 'diaries' of widely divergent quality. Yet these texts have not attracted the sort of public and critical attention accorded bio-fictions about male writers, most prominently Henry James, and they often focus equally on male artists, in Forster's case, Robert Browning, for instance; in Maguire's case, Henry James; in H.D.'s Rossetti and Morris. The arguably best known neo-Victorian *Künstlerroman*, A.S. Byatt's *Possession*, similarly has its fictive poet Christabel LaMotte share centre stage with the equally fictive, but more successful poet Randolph Henry Ash before she fades into obscurity. Combined with the suicide of LaMotte's female artist companion and the fact that the modern-day protagonist Roland Michell, rather than his female fellow academic Maud Bailey, discovers his poetic calling at the end of the novel, this suggests that *Possession* might be more accurately described as a female anti-*Künstlerroman*.