Engineering Failure:
Historiographical Changes in Artist Biography

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Abstract

Engineering Failure: Historiographical Changes in Artistic Biography

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A popular stereotype of artists is the failure who suffers for his art. This thesis aims to locate when, in art history, the concept of the “failure” established itself, how it became such a stereotype, and how it developed into an exemplar for artists to emulate. Édouard Manet (1832-1883) represents a crucial instance of this stereotype because his life, and the failure he experienced during it, are evidence of a shift in the perception of failure. I argue that Manet’s failure is the first in a chain of events which signify a dramatic shift in the public perception of the artist. I conduct my analysis through a historiographical reading of the biographies of failures, tracing the “failure” from its beginnings in the 19th century through to its prominent place in the 20th century in order to reveal the development of a rhetoric of failure in the genre of artist biography that culminates in the career of Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968)’s who employed the trope of the artistic failure to his advantage in his career. This study of failure in the biographies of artists at once sheds new light on previous scholarship on the artists at hand, while also providing a new direction for historiography in art history by presenting failure as the distinguishing characteristic of modernism and progress.
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“I think it deserves to be taken more seriously than most biographies and autobiographies. You know what they are. The published surface of a life. What the Zurich school call the persona – the mask. Now, *Phantasmata* says what it is quite frankly in its title; it is an illusion, a vision. Which is what I am, and because I satisfy the hunger that almost everybody has for marvels, the book is a far truer account of me than ordinary biographies, which do not admit that their intent is to deceive and are woefully lacking in poetry…It is not a police-court record. But as I have already said it is truer to the essence of my life than the dowdy facts could ever be.”

-Robertson Davis

*The Manticore*
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Introduction

The rhetoric of failure has been an important aspect of writing art history and its role has changed significantly in the last century. Failure is now almost a necessary prelude to becoming a successful artist, a condition partly due to artists’ increasing awareness of their position in society through reading criticism. An artist experiencing failure is also explicitly tied to the narrative of modernism in art history,¹ so much so that now, if an artist’s life is meant to be read as radical and innovative, a narrative of failure is used to communicate just that. I will examine how the rhetoric of failure in art historical biography occurred in two specific cases: Édouard Manet’s (1832-1883) critical reception while submitting to the Salon in the 1860’s, and Marcel Duchamp’s (1887-1968) use of failure in the construction of his artistic persona.

I believe that Manet’s experience with the Salon represents a pivotal point in art history in which the public’s perception of failure shifted from shameful to dignified. As such, the art historical writing on the artist from that time - in this case critical and newspaper Salon reviews - warrants further examination. In order to deconstruct and provide a better understanding of this new genre of critical writing, I apply the practice of metahistory, as defined by Hayden White,² Robert F. Berkhofer,³ and Catherine Soussloff,⁴ to the paradigm of artistic biography, in order to specifically examine how

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failure works within that paradigm. I follow this by analyzing how failure works in the
œuvre of Marcel Duchamp to suggest that the artist was himself aware of this function.
Together these two studies, examined through the theoretical lens of metahistory, track
the significant changes in the use of the narrative of failure in artist biography and
demonstrate how the concept moved from a tool of augmentation to the defining
classic of an artist’s life.

Though I focus on Manet and Duchamp, with some reference to the 17th-century
artist Michelangelo Merisi, better known as Caravaggio (1571-1610), there is a myriad
of artists who failed and suffered for their avant-garde bravado in the eyes of art
historians that also fit into this paradigm. Rembrandt van Rijn (1606-1669), William
Blake (1757-1827), Francisco Goya (1746-1828), Théodore Géricault (1791-1824),
Gustave Courbet (1819-1877), and Paul Cézanne (1839-1906) are well-known artists
whose biographies also feature critical and commercial failure as a defining
characteristic of their careers. Romanticism is a particularly important antecedent to
Manet’s biographical construct in terms of the way that the movement determined that
professional failure communicated the avant-garde in art. This is demonstrated in the

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5 Regarding Caravaggio’s place as the 17th-century’s melancholic, see Christopher Allen’ “Caravaggio’s
Complexion: The Humoral Characterization of Artists in the Early Modern Period” in Intellectual History
Review 18 (2008): 61-74. For a historiographical study of Caravaggio’s biography, see Philip Sohm’s
“Caravaggio’s Deaths” in Art Bulletin 84 3 (Sep 2002): 449-468. Additionally, Walter Friedlander’s
Caravaggio Studies (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955) was also a valuable archival resource,
providing transcriptions of many pertinent documents that would have been unobtainable otherwise.
6 For a study on the role of failure in Rembrandt’s biography, see Alison McQueen’s excellent essay
“Reinventing the Biography, Creating the Myth: Rembrandt in Nineteenth-Century France.” Simiolus
see Stephen Eisenman’s “The Failure and Success of Cezanne” in Nineteenth-Century Art: A Critical
T.J. Clark’s Image of the People, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1973) is a thorough analysis of how
Courbet’s failure and counter-culture nature figure into his place in modernity. For studies of Goya’s
career and legacy, see Janis A. Tomlinson’s Goya in the Twilight of Enlightenment (London: Yale
University Press, 1992) and Reva Wolfe’s Goya and the Satirical Print in England and on the Continent,
careers of Goya and Géricault, both of whose early failures became fundamental to them later being depicted as important rungs in the climb towards modernism.\(^7\) Manet, however, is frequently cited as the forerunner of modernism in art history and, as such, his biography, defined by his failure submitting paintings to the Salon in the 1860’s, is critical to any study of the metanarrative of failure.\(^8\)

I have chosen to examine Caravaggio and Manet in the first chapter of this thesis because their lives are prominent examples in art history’s canon of an artist failing to meet the standards of powerful institutional forces, and their failures are significant episodes in the metanarrative of failure. Although the rhetoric of failure became an established trope in the lives of many artists after Manet, I feel that the universality of some of the concepts in this thesis, and the fact that they could be applied to large numbers of artists in the canon, only further proves my point that failure has been pervasive in art history as a tool in constructing the narrative of modernity. Rather than a specific, unique experience, I propose that Manet’s biography is instead just one significant part in a metanarrative that is still unfolding.

In order to properly examine the genre of biography, I apply the combination of literary and historical theory, metahistory - as established by Hayden White - to the discipline in order to deconstruct it and achieve the most complete reading. White’s concept of metahistory, and specifically the book *Metahistory: The Historical*

\(^7\) T.J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 21-22. Here, Clark posits that the political nature of several works, Géricault’s *Raft of the Medusa* being one, was the fundamental aspect of the work which led to later modernist painting.

\(^8\) T.J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers* (London: Thames and Hudson, Ltd., 1984), 12. Modernism is referred to here as “…the art to which Manet gave birth.” Clark, a prominent Modernist in art history, has published several books on 19th-century Paris, all of which were helpful in the researching of this thesis. Clark’s research was a valuable first step towards the ideas that would later become the crux of *Engineering Failure*. 
*Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* from 1973, is fundamental to the study of historiography because it treats history as a narrative, which opens the discipline to different forms of criticism.\(^9\) White uses literary theory to identify recurring narrative tropes in history writing. In doing so, White reduces history to a set of defining characteristics which make it easy to compare the writing of different time periods in order to better contextualize them. I use this to connect the biographies of Manet and Duchamp and understand them as part of the same metanarrative.

Duchamp’s biography is chosen as an object of study for the same reason as Manet’s. The significance of Manet’s failure to the metanarrative lies in the fact that it represented a major turn in the *public*’s opinion towards failure. The importance of Duchamp’s failure lies in the fact that it represents a major turn in the *artist*’s opinion towards failure. An analysis of how failure permeates Duchamp’s major artworks, his persona, and his œuvre in general, suggests that the artist was conscious of the relatively new role that failure played in assigning the label of avant-garde to artists. Duchamp creates a sort of meta-reading of his own work by adding to it a sense of self-awareness, separating his art and biography from those of preceding artists. Through my analysis, I prove that Duchamp, through his use of failure, aligns himself with art history’s past avant-garde failures, thereby acting as his own critic.

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Beginning with Manet, an artist’s exhibition reviews and art criticism gradually replaced their biography. At one time, there was an established tradition of biographies of artists which served as the primary way that the public would learn about the lives of artists and, in doing so, would learn about the nature of artists and the art world.\(^\text{10}\)

These biographies, like Giorgio Vasari’s (1511-1574) *Lives of the Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, published in 1550 and later revised and reissued in 1568, and Giovani Pietro Bellori’s (1613-1696) *The Lives of the Modern Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, published in 1672, are returned to often because they represent an early instance of writers choosing art as their subject and thus represent the earliest and most basic form of art history.\(^\text{11}\) In almost every case, the author of these biographies was also an artist and a member of the newly emergent professional class of art critic, which resulted in the biography being manipulated to serve whatever that particular critic’s objective happened to be.\(^\text{12}\)

For example, Vasari’s *Lives* were intended to create a narrative

\(^{10}\) Soussloff, *The Absolute Artist*, 138. In Soussloff’s words, “The biography of the artist, I argue, has been the dominant cultural, and, therefore, art historical source for the construction of the image of the artist since the beginning of the Early Modern period.” Soussloff uses “Early Modern” to refer to the time period most people associate with the beginning of the Italian Renaissance, c. 1350.


\(^{12}\) Soussloff, *The Absolute Artist*, 37. In the 16th and 17th centuries, when early lives were written, being a critic amounted to being a scholar or connoisseur aligned with a prominent institution. Vasari writing his *Lives* as an exultation of the city of Florence is the earliest and most prominent example of a critic’s biographies serving the author’s particular agenda.
celebrating the triumph of Florence, culminating in the life of Michelangelo (1475-1564).13 The outcome of this system of biography is that artists' lives began to serve a specific purpose in the larger narrative of art history rather than simply being a retelling of that artist's life. When a primary concern of a discipline is to assemble a larger narrative about specific individuals, as it seems to be in art history, the lives of those individuals become the raw matter of that narrative.

Catherine Soussloff states that these early Lives, referring to those published by Vasari and Bellori, were often written with a specific institution in mind; for Vasari, the Academia del Disegno in Florence and, for Bellori, the French Academy in Paris.14 This is relevant to Manet, as his critical reviews were created with the Salon and École des Beaux-Arts in mind. It is also applicable to the career of Marcel Duchamp, whose style of biography and failure was a reaction to the new institution of art history and the discipline's apparent need for new artists to fail before they could be considered avant-garde.15

A key difference between 19th-century Paris, in which Manet lived, and the art centres that preceded it was the rising popularity of the newspaper as a form of literature. Popular media like newspapers and magazines began to be widely circulated in the 19th century and the reviews of art shows contained within them, notably the

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14 Soussloff, The Absolute Artist, 37.
15 Paul Barolsky, "The Fable of Failure in Modern Art." In this article, Barolsky traces the 'failure' as a character type through several modernist artists and novels, including Duchamp and Zola's L'Œuvre, and comes to the conclusion that failure is still intertwined with becoming a modernist master.
media circus that accompanied the Salon every year, gave the public an exposure to art that they had never experienced before.\textsuperscript{16} In Oscar Wilde’s seminal novel \textit{The Picture of Dorian Gray}, published in full in 1891, Basil Hallward, a painter, says of the reception of one of his earlier works “I believe some picture of mine had made a great success at the time, at least had been chattered about in the penny newspapers, which is the nineteenth-century standard of immortality.”\textsuperscript{17} After the Industrial Revolution, public literacy increased considerably and newspapers and magazines were logically the main reading material enjoyed by the public because of their inexpensiveness. Coupled with technological increases that allowed companies to produce more issues more quickly than ever before, the result of the newspaper’s rise in popularity was a greater social consciousness in the general public.\textsuperscript{18} Now able to read about daily events and politics, the average urban residents in 19\textsuperscript{th}-century European metropolitan areas were forming opinions of their own on the various subjects relayed to them through their new news source.\textsuperscript{19}

The popularity of newspapers and the art criticism contained therein were significant factors in the career of Édouard Manet. Two of his submissions to the annual


\textsuperscript{17} Oscar Wilde, \textit{The Picture of Dorian Gray} (Scarborough, Ontario: Signet Classics, 1962): 25.


\textsuperscript{19} Hamilton, \textit{Manet and His Critics}, 16-17. “Dailies and weeklies alike carried long accounts of the Salon during the six weeks it was open. Often these were not so much serious discussions of the artistic merits of the works on exhibition as detailed descriptions of the subject matter of the paintings most likely to attract popular attention.” Regardless of if the reviews are considered “serious” by informed critics, they were certainly seen that way by the public reading them.
Paris Salon, 1863’s *Déjeuner sur l’Herbe* and 1865’s *Olympia*, were criticized to an extreme extent by the Parisian press, who were all partial to a Salon/Académie-centric view of painting. Despite a lack of endorsement from an accepted institution and widespread criticism in the periodical press, it was noted in some reviews that Manet’s career was met with enthusiasm by the general populace.\(^{20}\) This implies that there was a disparity between critic and public opinion. While deemed a failure because his work was poorly received critically and not selling in the art market, he was perceived much differently by the public.\(^{21}\)

His critical failure might be explained by the influence the Salon exerted over the writers who reviewed the annual exhibition in newspapers. By echoing the sentiments of the Salon committee, writers could easily establish a position of critical dominance. Additionally, giving favourable reviews to the paintings endorsed by the Salon’s committee would ensure a large crowd at the exhibition, which would then keep the Salon running further into the future. By doing this, writers were also acting in their own interests. Writing about the Salon was their occupation and gave them intellectual superiority, so it would be in their interest to ensure that the exhibition continued.\(^{22}\)

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\(^{20}\) Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life*, 83. A review of the 1865 Salon by a writer who went by Bonnin from the June 7\(^{th}\) edition of *La France*, translated by Clark: “Some people are delighted, they think it a joke that they want to look at as if they understood; others observe the thing seriously and show their neighbour, here a well-placed tone, and there a hand which is improper, but richly painted…Very probably everyone is right to some extent,” remark on the positive sects of the crowd amidst an otherwise negative review of *Olympia*.

\(^{21}\) Ibid, 80-82. Clark includes a translation of a few letters between Manet and his friend, the noted poet Charles Baudelaire. In the letters, the two commiserate about recent works not being accepted in their fields, the submission of *Jesus Insulted by Soldiers* and *Olympia* for Manet and *Mystery of Marie Roget* for Baudelaire. Manet makes reference a critic who had panned the two in the press, named Villemassant, indicating that though Manet was not popular among critics, there was a smaller community, made up of creative types, who did support him and formed their opinions free of the influence of larger institutions.

\(^{22}\) Hamilton, *Manet and His Critics*, 16-18. Hamilton explains the role that critics played in Paris at this time. In the 19\(^{th}\) century, they were not always the academically trained figure that is associated with the
In his 1954 study *Manet and his Critics*, George Heard Hamilton published contemporary magazine and newspaper reviews of all of Manet’s Salon submissions as well as other critical literature published on the artist later in his life. Since newspapers from the mid-19th century are either out of print, destroyed, lost or obtainable only through specific institutions, Hamilton serves as an invaluable resource for understanding the critical environment surrounding Manet during his most tumultuous period. Since its publication, *Manet and His Critics* has been a touchstone for Manet scholars, being used by T.J. Clark for *The Painting of Modern Life* and Michael Fried for *Manet’s Modernism*, both of which are major modernist studies from the 20th century.

Hamilton states at the beginning of his book that it is “neither a biography of Edouard Manet nor a critical examination of his entire work. It is a study of the kind of criticism published about Manet and his art during his lifetime.” But this statement is only half correct, as these reviews became the story of Manet’s life as an artist. A formal biography of the artist, written by his friend Antonin Proust (1832-1905) was published serially in the *Revue Blanche* in the February, March, and April 1897 issues, and then later reprinted in a single volume, but it soon went out of print. Proust’s biography of Manet creates the version of his life that the average reader is most familiar with. Proust states when Manet was born, but skips over the painter’s early life and begins his

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23 Ibid.
25 Ibid, 1.
26 A transcription of Proust’s biography as well as a translation is found in Fried, *Manet’s Modernism*, 417-437. The reason for the biography going out of print is assumed to be a lack of interest.
narrative when Manet is 20 years, presenting the artist as a thorn in his teacher’s side who rejects classicism in favour of the art of Courbet and Velasquez. The bulk of the text focuses on Manet’s Salon submissions from 1861-1865, highlighting the period as when he felt that Manet came into his own as a painter. Proust passes over the next 15 years of Manet’s life by saying that in that period Manet made a series of works in which he was “in full possession of himself,” but offering little in documentation or analysis. He praises Manet for coming into his own as an artist, yet spends far more time speaking of the times when Manet failed critically.

The way Proust wrote his biography of Manet causes the reader to place more importance on the artist’s critical reception and, as a result, the painter lives on in the public consciousness through the controversy surrounding his 1860’s Salon submissions.27 Though documentation of Manet’s personal life exists, it is inconsequential because the painter’s reviews serve the role normally reserved for a life story. In art history survey texts, Manet is brought up as a victim of the Salon. On exhibition labels, Manet is brought up as a victim of the Salon. In the minds of people who know of Manet, he is a victim of the Salon.

T.J. Clark’s book *The Painting of Modern Life* also focuses the critical world surrounding Manet, with attention paid to *Olympia* and *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* in particular.28 While Hamilton’s work exists as more of documentary exercise, showing

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27 Ibid, 283. Proust’s biography of Manet was later collected in a single volume in 1913, described by Hamilton as “informal, partial, and not always accurate”. Though it has been reprinted as recently as 2011 after being out of print for an extended period of time, the manuscript is described as having “missing or blurred pages, poor pictures, errant marks, etc.”, making it far from an authoritative source on the artist.

28 Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life*. Each painting has a chapter devoted to an analysis of it. Other chapters concern themselves with the cultural environment of late-1800’s Paris.
exactly what was said about Manet’s art at the time of its production, Clark conducts a more thorough analysis of the painter’s reviews, seeking to understand exactly why Manet was written about the way he was. While Clark’s goal is similar to my own, and certainly plays a role in my own approach to Manet, I differ from him in that I seek the effect that Manet’s failure, illustrated through the painter’s reviews, had on the painter’s biography, rather than to understand why Manet failed in the first place. Rather than seeking to understand the painter, I am aiming to understand the writing about him.

This is because understanding the person Édouard Manet is difficult, as no definite version of the artist has ever been presented. We have no collections of Manet’s thoughts or writings, and as a result depend on the versions of him we receive through correspondence with friends, people’s accounts of him from the 19th century, and his critical reviews. Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867), in an 1864 letter to Théophile Thoré, describes Manet as “a very straightforward, unaffected person, as reasonable as he can be but unfortunately touched by romanticism from birth,” but in an 1865 letter to Manet, has to excessively reassure his friend of his worth, saying “I must try to show you what you are worth.” Shortly after the letter to Manet, Baudelaire wrote to Jules Champfleury and described the painter as having a “weak character.”

Even among the accounts written by one of Manet’s closest friends, there is a disparity between the versions of the artist we are presented with. Of course, this is all much different from the character of Manet which the critics described as arrogant and impatient, and still even more different than the self-confident modern master described by Proust. He

29 Hamilton, Manet and His Critics, 62-62 for a transcription of the letter to Thoré, 35 for a transcription of the letter to Manet, and 36 for a transcription of the letter to Champfleury.
30 Ibid, 43,
31 Fried, Manet’s Modernism, 433-435.
seems dissatisfied with the confines of classicism, yet still tries to work within those confines and submits to the Salon every year. He seems to predict the fate of his paintings, yet is still disheartened when they are attacked by critics.\textsuperscript{32} Since there is no definitive source on Manet’s temperament, the painter is a malleable figure in art history, who can be manipulated to serve a variety of different narratives. The fact that Manet cannot be pigeonholed into one specific reading made him the ideal choice as a proto-modernist, because it would be difficult to concretely refute that he is not.

Since Manet seems to have so many different and contrasting character types associated with him, his biography exists in different forms and is distributed throughout an array of written accounts, with each review playing a role in constructing the artist’s image and, as a result, contributing to the creation of his biography. To study the biographies of painters from the 16\textsuperscript{th} or 17\textsuperscript{th} centuries, one simply has to look at the multiple collections of biographies of those artists published. This is not the case with Manet. The integration of critical reviews into the biographical enterprise also permits the consideration of other literary forms focused on his life and art. The famous French novelist Émile Zola (1840-1902) began his career as an art critic in Paris during the 1860’s and became fast friends with Manet.\textsuperscript{33} In 1886, Zola published \textit{L’Œuvre} (The Masterpiece) as part of his sprawling Rougon-Macquart series of novels, which covers

\textsuperscript{32} Clark, \textit{The Painting of Modern Life}, 80-82. In a letter to Baudelaire, Manet says that he thinks the yet-to-be-exhibited \textit{Olympia} will suffer the same fate as \textit{Déjeuner}. Hamilton, \textit{Manet and His Critics}, 34. After \textit{Olympia} has been exhibited, he writes to Baudelaire complaining about the critics’ reactions.

\textsuperscript{33} Fried, \textit{Manet’s Modernism}, 248-250. Fried, a prominent 20\textsuperscript{th}-century modernist, includes a short section on Zola in this book about the author’s rise in the literary world from newspaper critic to novelist. Manet wrote to Zola in Hamilton’s \textit{Manet and His Critics}, 104: “You have given me a first-rate New Year’s present, and your remarkable article pleases me very much. It comes at an opportune time, for I have been considered unworthy to benefit, as so many others, by the advantage of the invitation list, and as I augur nothing good from my judges I shall take good care not to send them any paintings. They would only make a fool of me by accepting one or two, and that would be that.”
multiple generations of a family in 19th-century Paris. The book series is subtitled “Natural and social history of a family under the Second Empire” and is made up of 20 novels, each of which concerns itself with a member of the Rougon-Macquart family tree. Zola also uses the books to explore different parts of Parisian society during the Second Empire. For example, *Germinal*, which is considered the most popular of the series, follows a coalminers strike in Northern France and is thus Zola commenting on labour issues at the time. *L’Œuvre* is the series’ entry on art, failure, and modernity.

The main character of *L’Œuvre* is a painter named Claude Lantier, who is attempting to paint in a new, modern style, but whose effort fails for a variety of reasons. The character of Lantier draws significantly upon Manet’s life, including the *Salon des Réfusés* being a pivotal plot event. The novel was popular and as a result Lantier came to represent the emerging archetype of the avant-garde failure. Since Manet was a principal source of inspiration for Lantier, the lives of the actual and fictional painters became interchangeable and I argue that this fictional account of a failure became a part of Manet’s biography.

This brings to mind the quote included at the beginning of this thesis from Robertson Davies’ novel *The Manticore*. In the passage, one of the novel’s main

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35 Fried, *Manet’s Modernism*, 250. Fried also makes the connection between Manet and Lantier.
36 Barolsky, “The Fable of Failure in Modern Art,” *Virginia Quarterly Review*.
37 Lantier is often interpreted to be Paul Cézanne, as the painter grew up with Zola in Aix-en-Provence. This is also due to people assigning the narrative of the avant-garde failure to Cézanne. For sources that make this connection, see Alexis Philonenko’s “L’Œuvre de Zola” in *Œuvres et Critiques: Revue Internationale d’Étude de la Réception Critique des Œuvres Littéraires de Lanque Française* 29:1 (2004): 89-96 and Margaret Sankey’s “Zola’s L’Œuvre and Cézanne: The Art and Politics of Friendship,” in *Repenser les processes créateurs*, ed. Françoise Grauby and Michelle Royer (Bern Switzerland: Peter Lang, 2001): 97-114.
characters explains that the fictional biography written about his stage persona is, to him, a truer biography because it reflects the way he was perceived by the general public and relatively few people know the actual facts of his life. It is the same with Manet, as the number of people familiar with him as an anti-Salon anti-hero, a reading created through his critical reviews, dwarfs the number of people familiar with his full life story.

An intriguing aspect of Manet’s treatment by the Parisian critics is that it closely resembled the way that Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio was depicted by 17th-century biographers such as Giovanni Baglione (1566-1643) and Gian Pietro Bellori. Caravaggio was considered the ‘failure’ of his time by these writers due to his erratic behaviour, hot-blooded temperament, and naturalistic painting style. Once forgotten for several hundred years, Caravaggio was re-discovered by art historian Roberto Longhi in the early 20th century, exactly when modernism was beginning to become the prevailing painting style and the need to establish a modernist narrative was becoming apparent. He is now considered one of art history’s first modernists due to changes in the use of the rhetoric of failure since the 17th century.

The version of Caravaggio that is presented to readers in the artist’s 17th-century biographies closely resembles the version of Manet present in 1860’s Salon reviews, so much so that it would seem that the similarity was intentional. None of Manet’s reviews

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38 This description is given in the 17th-century biographies of the artists by Giulio Mancini, Baglione, Bellori and Joachim Sandrart. See pages 231-266 of Friedlaender for Mancini, Baglione and Sandrart, and Tommaso Montanari and Hellmut Wohl’s translation of Bellori’s Lives (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).
39 Friedlaender, Caravaggio Studies, vii-viii. Though Caravaggio’s popularity has been widespread over the last century, Longhi’s initial articles and a large exhibition in Milan in 1951 were the catalyst for this. Friedlaender mentions his debt to the scholar in the introduction of Caravaggio Studies.
mention Caravaggio specifically, so Parisian critics did not set out to make Manet a 
*Caravaggio-type*, but did so inadvertently, writing Manet as a Caravaggio-like character 
to strengthen their rhetoric.⁴⁰ I intend to investigate this similarity and what it means to 
art history by using a historiographical approach to the biographies of artists.

In this thesis I equate biography and traditional history writing, called historical 
realism, for the purpose of a more coherent analysis.⁴¹ Biography is a genre of writing 
which straddles the disciplines of literature and history and incorporates the positives 
and negatives of both. Therefore, in order to properly ground a historiographical study of 
biography, a methodology that incorporates both history and literature is necessary.

Northrop Frye was a literary theorist who deconstructed texts down to their most basic 
structural and linguistic elements. He famously did so with the poetry of William Blake in 
the book *Fearful Symmetry*, until each text was simply made up of recurring tropes.⁴² If 
one were to do this with history, and especially artist biography, they could then 
understand changes within the paradigm and make sense of why failure shifted from 
being a tool used to compliment success stories into being *the* defining characteristic of 
the artistic experience.

This practice of deconstructing texts into tropes in history is known as 
metahistory and was introduced in the book *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in*

⁴⁰ Hamilton, *Manet and His Critics*, 38-80. This section of Hamilton’s text contains transcriptions of 
Manet’s critical reviews from 1863-1865.
⁴¹ Berkhofer. *Beyond the Great Story*, 58-60. Berkhofer thoroughly comprehensively defines the term and 
all of the subconscious associations that go along with it here.
1969). The practice he started here was later codified in the widely influential *Anatomy of Criticism: Four 
Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), for which he is most well-known.
Nineteenth-Century Europe by Hayden White. The broad thesis of the book is that all of history is narrative prose falsely claiming to be a representation of the past, and that any historical text can fit into one of four modes, which White calls “emplotments.” In the introduction to Metahistory, White mentions his interest in Frye’s work with tropes and it is obvious that the former used the latter’s writing as a framework for his own text. Whereas Frye examines poetry, White deconstructs major historical texts from the 19th century. Through this analysis, White argues that history consists of several recurring themes, characters, and story arcs, thereby establishing a new formalist structure for reading historical texts.

White proves this thesis by examining 19th-century history and distilling the discipline into four larger narratives, or emplotments, that are perpetually repeated: Romance, Tragedy, Comedy and Satire. Each emplotment has a corresponding historian and philosopher that White feels best represents its characteristics in their writing, those being; Jules Michelet (1742-1818) and Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) representing the Romance; Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1859) and Karl Marx (1818-1883) the Tragedy; Leopold von Ranke (1795-1886) and G.W.F. Hegel (1770-1831) the Comedy; and Jacob Burckhardt (1818-1897) and Benedetto Croce (1866-1952) the Satire. These four historians and philosophers are chosen because, in the opinion of White, they each represent different views to take on a subject, rather than trying to

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44 Ibid, 2.
refute each other. In addition to this, there are a variety of other characteristics that White associates with each emplotment which I have organized into a table (Figure 1.1).

The practice of metahistory is important to history as a discipline, and by extension art history, because self-criticality is one of its central elements, which is generally lacking in history writing.\textsuperscript{46} Robert F. Berkhofer Jr. tackles the problems inherent in traditional history writing in his book \textit{Beyond the Great Story: History as Text and Discourse}.\textsuperscript{47} He asserts that “The very success of history as an enterprise depends upon its practitioners not recognizing the impossible contradiction that lies at the bottom of their endeavor.”\textsuperscript{48} In his opinion, as the knowledge of and use of rhetoric in history writing declined, the understanding of the term also changed from something inherent and useful in prose to a disingenuous and superfluous literary tool. Due to this change, historians now try to conceal their rhetoric to maintain an air of objectivity. Though many history writers will admit to only giving a partial view or telling of a particular story or event, there is still an assumption made by the reader when viewing a text that since it is history, it is fact. This is due to the way that the narrative is presented to the reader, favouring transparency over argumentation or opinion.

The practice of authors assembling various facts in their own, preferred order and then purporting that narrative to be a complete document is given the name “historical realism” by Berkhofer, though it is often also called “normal” or “traditional” history because it has generally been the favoured technique for history writing since

\textsuperscript{46} Berkhofer, \textit{Beyond the Great Story}, 90-94. In this section of the book, Berkhofer outlines how the problems I mention in the text are prevalent in historical realism and why the self-critical and all-encompassing approach used by White in \textit{Metahistory} is necessary to sound historiographical writing.

\textsuperscript{47} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{48} Ibid, 16.
the discipline’s inception. Metahistory on the other hand attempts to take a more encompassing view of history, acknowledging history writing as the creation of a story and placing importance on the study of tropes. Literary theory is the perfect tool to parse history because it distrusts the separation of facts and events and narrative and rhetoric, thus challenging the basic paradigm of historical realism.

For the purpose of my argument, I equate historical realism with biography because they both seek to accomplish the same goal. The paradigm of biography is and has always been an author arranging facts about an individual in order to create a narrative purporting to be that individual’s life. By doing so, the practice of metahistory, meaning the four emplotments introduced by White and his self-reflexive approach, which was expanded upon by Berkhofer, can easily be applied to biography in order to achieve a fuller reading of the genre. The reader is never privy to the writer’s presuppositions and intentions and as a result the text is subconsciously given authenticity. A combination of metahistory and artist biography reveals that each artist’s life can be fit into one or more emplotments and the table presented in figure 1.1 can be extended to include an ‘artist’ column (figure 1.2). In identifying where an artist’s biography fits into the larger metanarratives of art history, it is easy to trace the development of the genre and see how different subjects and stories changed in their

49 Ibid, 58. Berkhofer’s writing and thought are heavily influence by White’s theories and he was an important voice in furthering the ideas first presented in *Metahistory*, while also grounding them in other critical thought in order to make them more relevant to contemporary research. He also taught at the University of California Santa Cruz at the same time as Catherine Soussloff, another important theoretical influence on this thesis.

50 Ibid, 62,
treatment throughout the history of the discipline. In particular, this study focuses on using this framework to trace the ‘failure’.

This is not the first time that a project like this has been undertaken. Hayden White was a major influence on Catherine Soussloff’s book *The Absolute Artist*, which was one of the primary influences for this thesis.\(^{51}\) Soussloff similarly takes a meta-approach to art history, and she cites White’s work as a key influence on the book in its introduction, as she examines the ways that the “artist” figure was constructed in society and places emphasis on artist biography in her study.\(^{52}\) Through her analysis, Soussloff constructs a schematic for a typical artist biography and includes it at the beginning of the book.\(^{53}\) However, Soussloff’s work focuses strictly on the place of the “artist-genius” in history, whereas this project has a narrower focus, aiming to locate the place of the failed artist in biography in order to identify where today’s idea of the artist appeared in history and society and how we created them. I will identify where today’s idea of the “failed artist” arose and then prove how failure, read through different examples of failure in art, has informed changes in artist biography.

Marcel Duchamp marks another significant figure in the metanarrative of failure in artist biography because he authored his own biography and seemed to be aware of historical tropes, using them to his advantage. Caravaggio and Manet were both named as failures by those who recorded their lives, which ultimately led to them being regarded as avant-garde and having a unique vision by art historians after the fact. Duchamp differs because he created his art during a time when art history had already

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\(^{51}\) Soussloff, *The Absolute Artist*.
\(^{52}\) Ibid, 10.
\(^{53}\) Ibid, 2.
been established as a discipline taught at universities; scholars such as Jacob Burckhardt (1818-1897) published major texts which launched art history as a significant pursuit in the academic world, but especially in Germany. This was not the case when Caravaggio and Manet were working and art history signified a completely different thing to the public consciousness.

As with Manet, Duchamp's biography is not a biography in the literal sense, but rather a collection documents that created his identity and acted as a biography. With regards to Duchamp, these documents are all of his works of art, as he distributed a self-created identity, an image of himself to be recognized by his audience, throughout all of his works. There are many ancillary documents, in addition to Duchamp’s œuvre, which are also crucial to understanding and analyzing the artist's persona and biography. Duchamp kept notes on his artistic method which invite the viewer to further contemplate his thought process and subsequently makes them an essential part of many of Duchamp's works. Duchamp later collected his notes and released them in a series of 'boxes', The 1914 Box from 1914 (figure 1.3), The Green Box from 1934 (figure 1.4), and Boîte-en-valise from 1941 (figure 1.5), which further emphasizes the importance Duchamp placed on these notes in reading his work.

The key difference between the Manet and Duchamp is that Manet's life was still the result of others writing about him, while Duchamp created his 'life' through his art, which meant that he had more control over the eventual outcome. This is a core idea of this thesis and will be one of the main ideas discussed in the third chapter, which examines the ways that Duchamp's identity is present in a few of his works. In this way, Duchamp was using White’s satirical emplotment, recognizing the futility of narratives
and slyly commenting on them in his art to create his own Tragedy. The result is a mixing of the two emplotments; a Satirical Tragedy.

Alfred Gell’s writing on the distribution of the artist in their œuvre, contained in his book *Art and Agency*, is vital to this thesis because it provides the framework for the analysis that is used in the third chapter. Gell introduces the ideas of retention and protention, which suggest that there are elements unique to an artist that are more present in some works than others and return throughout the artist’s career. For Gell, this, rather a work itself, is the valuable aspect of an artist’s creations. In Gell’s opinion, each work is at the same time influenced by what they created before it, “retention,” and influencing what came after it, “protention.” The degree to which ideas recur and influence each other is measured by having strong or weak retention or protention and by using this system, Gell has created a way to evaluate an artist’s entire output or œuvre.

Gell chooses to illustrate this concept by examining the œuvre of Marcel Duchamp because he feels that “Duchamp certainly provides by far the most perspicuous instance of an important artist whose total œuvre repays study as a network of protentions and retentions fanning out from particular works”, so much so that he believes Duchamp may have set out to create just such an œuvre. The central claim in the third chapter of this thesis is that Duchamp self-fashioned his biography and

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56 Ibid, 233-234. “Meanwhile, the distinction I have just drawn between ‘preparatory studies’ and ‘finished works’ is not absolute. Because we know the dates of finished works, we are also able to see these finished works as being, simultaneously, ‘preparatory studies’ for later works… Any given work of art, in gross terms, considered in the context of its maker’s œuvre, is likely to be both a ‘preparation’ for later works, and a ‘recapitulation’ of previous works.”
57 Ibid, 243.
deliberately employed a self-reflexive use of failure throughout his œuvre which was essential to that biography. As such, Gell’s model for the distribution of the artist throughout their œuvre is the ideal tool to illustrate Duchamp’s technique regarding the rhetoric of failure.

A study of several key works by Duchamp will be used to illustrate specific instances of failure being used by the artist to his benefit. The most significant of these is 1914’s *1914 Box*, which was mostly a collection of Duchamp’s notes regarding ideas for then-current and future art projects. Through these notes, Duchamp invites the reader into his creative process, but in doing so is also able to direct the way that the reader then reads his work. The process they are presented with is one of a frustrated individual working through the ideas he has for future projects. For example, Duchamp includes several preliminary sketches and notes regarding his well-known work *The Bride Stripped Bare by Bachelors, Even* created between 1915 and 1923. While the legitimacy of the notes is debateable, the effect of them on the reader is certain. Since a source seemingly explaining the meaning of a work was written by the artist, it is impossible to not include the source in a reading of that work.

In the notes included in *The 1914 Box*, Duchamp attempts to subvert traditional art standards, experimented with media and presentation wherever he could, and also infused works with emerging philosophical concepts such as Dada, Futurism and Surrealism. A central conceptual component to each work is failure. The notes from the *Green Box* are reproduced in the book *Salt Seller: The Writings of Marcel Duchamp* by Michel Sanouillet, which is the only sensible way to attain this material as every copy of
this piece is in a museum or private collection. In addition to a translation of Duchamp’s notes, Sanouillet also compiles essays by Duchamp and his contributions to the avant-garde art collective Société Anonyme. The breadth of material included in *Salt Seller*, and the fact that it was the first collection of Duchamp’s writing published, make it an essential source for a study of this nature. Given that Duchamp’s biography is distributed throughout all of his output, *Salt Seller* plays an necessary role in recognizing the breadth of the artist’s biography. It is also through Duchamp’s notes that the viewer can understand the extent to which failure permeates the artist’s œuvre, since the artist describes his many efforts to incorporate ideas into his work and the trouble he has in doing so.

Duchamp’s persona also played a major role in the function of failure in his œuvre, as he would emphasize it in interviews he gave in magazines and newspapers. Pierre Cabanne conducted a series of interviews with the artist, collected in the 1971 book *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*, that are a valuable source of first-hand information from the artist. Cabanne covers Duchamp’s entire career, so through the interview the reader is presented with the artist’s biography, the way that he wants them to read it. The interviewer believes that these conversations with Duchamp, recorded in

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59 Calvin Tompkins, *Duchamp: A Biography* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1996): 225-229. Société Anonyme was an avant-garde art collective/project meant to “advance the serious study of modern art through exhibitions, lectures, publications, and loans to other museums” formed by Duchamp, Katherine Dreier and Man Ray in 1920. The group organized 85 exhibitions of modern over 20 years of existence.

60 Michel Sanouillet and Elmer Peterson, “Preface,” in *Salt Seller*, v. The writers state here that Sanouillet’s initial 1958 edition of *Salt Seller* was the first collection of Duchamp’s writing.

1966, are unique in their candidness, but Duchamp, as he did constantly in his career, is playing a game with him and pretending to have retired while withholding the fact that he had been working on *Étant Donnés* (Figure 1.6) in secret for the previous 20 years.\(^{62}\) The fact that Duchamp purposely misdirects Cabanne for the purpose of *Étant* is evidence that these interviews are Duchamp purposefully manipulating his own biography for the purpose of his art.

Manet and Duchamp both represent the most significant moments of change in the use of failure in artist biography, so both must be examined in order to explain how failure became the essential characteristic of an avant-garde artist. In order to properly place their careers in the proper context, metahistory provides a structure which allows readers to understand the biographies of the two artists as parts of the same larger narrative and grasp the roles they played in contributing to the importance of the rhetoric of failure in artist biography.

\(^{62}\) Ibid, 105-106. "Duchamp: ...It’s fun to do thing by hand. I’m on guard, because there’s the great danger of the “hand,” which comes back, but since I’m not doing works of art, it’s fine. Cabanne: You never want to pick up a brush or a pencil? Duchamp: No, especially not a brush."
Chapter 2: Destination Failure

You see? They have to bludgeon a man into obscurity before they acknowledge his genius.


The career of Édouard Manet was defined by a defiance of the academic standards set by the Académie des Beaux-Arts and is widely regarded in art historical discourse as the heralding of modernism. He has come to represent this pivotal point in art history, serving as the proto-modernist, after his moments of dissensus in 1863 and 1865. In the 19th century, acceptance from the Salon was paramount to the development of a successful artistic career in Paris and his fame is largely predicated on the fate of two paintings submitted to the Salon in each of those years.63 *Déjeuner sur l’Herbe* (Musée d’Orsay, 1863, Paris, Fig. 2.1) and *Olympia* (Musée d’Orsay, 1863, Fig. 2.2) respectively, were taken as a bold resistance toward the institutional tradition that valued classical mimesis and elevated historical subject matter as the true substance of art. As a result, Manet became a symbol of rebellion against a system that had become outdated, and his departure from accepted styles, by all accounts a professional failure, eventually created a cult of personality around the painter. His triumph was complete with the advent of 20th-century formalism that preferred his flat, almost geometric treatment of figures and space to classical mimesis.

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Manet vs. His Critics

In 1865, the year that Manet’s submitted his *Olympia* to the Salon, a photograph was taken of all of the paintings purchased by the state from the exhibition.64 Two of the photos (Fig. 2.3 and 2.4) feature all of the nudes from that acquisition, six in total that, taken together, demonstrate what the Salon judges deemed appropriate in terms of treatment of the figure. Each nude is highly idealized and is used to illustrate a classical theme in order to justify the nudity of the central figure(s). The Salon had a preference for classical themes and painting styles and their selection of nudes from the 1865 exhibition is a clear demonstration of this partiality for classical ideals. Manet’s failure to abide by the Salon’s strict guidelines for painting decorous nudes had an instant affect on the success of his *Olympia*, which was moved to an unfavourable location high up over a door after drawing negative criticism shortly after the exhibition opened.65 The painting was panned, almost unanimously, by Paris’s art critics at the time.66 At the same time, Manet’s almost naturalistic representation of the reclining nude prostitute, and its rejection by critics, won him a significant number of supporters among the Parisian working class and literary community. But the excoriation of his work by the official critics of the Salon system outweighed his popular appeal, so by all traditional measures, in the Paris of 1865, Manet was a critical failure as an artist. In this sense, the *Olympia* proved to be the defining moment of his artistic career.

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64 Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life*, 119. Clark includes black and white photographs of the paintings here, but does not cite the source for the images.
65 The Salon was supported financially by the government of France, which meant that the taste of the selection jury was controlled by the École des Beaux-Arts, which was sponsored by the government. The system of the Salon, the nature of the selection process, and the critical atmosphere that resulted from this is described in detail by Hamilton in *Manet and His Critics*, 9-19.
66 Ibid, 94-98.
It is clear why, on the surface, Manet ‘failed’ as an artist: his work was ill-suited stylistically to his professional environment and he was steadfast in his refusal to conform to their rules. What is perplexing though, is why Manet was embraced for his failure by the public. Manet as the proletariat’s lovable troublemaker is now an essential part of the modernist narrative in art history. Readers are led to believe that without the flat and metropolitan paintings of Manet, 20th-century modernism, which is often presented as the culmination of the art historical narrative and canon, would not have happened. Something about Manet’s failure made it ubiquitous, which gives rise to the following questions: Why did Manet’s critical failure elicit a rallying cry around him rather than public excoriation? Did Manet fail in a particular way that was beneficial to him? If he did so, did he do it consciously? Why did this particular instance of failing in art become such a marquee moment for art history later? What function did the rhetoric of failure serve to the discourse of art history?

These questions can only be addressed in the context of the environment that produced this shift in the reception of failure. The long 19th century in France is a well-documented period of social change, highlighted by three revolutions in just over 50 years that were accompanied by shifts in social and cultural values. It is not just that Manet was a brave new character in the art world, but that there was a brave new world of critical reception that greeted his work.67

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67 Meyer Shapiro, “The Nature of Abstract Art,” Marxist Quarterly, January-March 1937: 83 “As the contexts of bourgeois sociability changed from community, family and church to commercialized or privately improvised forms—the streets, the cafés and resorts—the resulting consciousness of individual freedom involved more and more estrangement from older ties… [the middle class] were spiritually torn by a sense of helpless isolation in an anonymous indifferent mass.”
Much like the discipline of art history, Manet’s critical reception is constantly evolving. It is important to recognize the ever-changing nature of art history, as an understanding of that nature can separate Manet’s canonical identity from the facts of his actual career and from the critical reception of his work by his contemporaries. The goal and style of history is defined by the greater powers of the society in which it is written, meaning that those goals and styles are never the same in different time periods. Manet’s success as the counter-cultural public favourite was chiefly created by the evolving narrative of art history as a discipline and was not a reflection of the artist himself.68 Initial studies of Manet, which were the main way that the public would receive information on the painter, were untranslated from French or out of print until Hamilton collected them in Manet and His Critics in 1954.69 Hamilton’s text, along with Proust’s biography, both place the significance of Manet’s life squarely on the painter’s critical reception. Since sources on Manet focus on his critical reception rather than him as a character, because his character was unclear, readers are left to read his critical reception as his life. This is the opposite of what was the established tradition in artist biography, as Vasari or Bellori, the exemplars of the discipline of artist biography, presented artworks as a direct reflection of the personality and virtues of the artists who created them.

White, Metahistory, 197. Tocqueville describes his era of France, the first half of the 19th century, as existing between two distinct social systems and cultural ideas and there being a tension as a result of that.
68 Hamilton, Manet and His Critics. Clark, The Painting of Modern Life. Manet, Édouard, Manet, Raconté par Lui-Même et Par Ses Amis (Lausanne: Presses D’Héliographia, 1945). Sources from the time indicate that Manet surely had anti-Salon sentiments in mind when making the piece, but certainly not to the extent that they were exaggerated by art history later.
69 Hamilton, Manet and his Critics, 5.
Now Manet’s ‘life’ lives on in new ways: through the reviews written about him in the Parisian press, which consist chiefly of criticism of his submissions to the Salon, and through his correspondence with several French writers, most notably Charles Baudelaire and Émile Zola. Additionally, Manet was drawn upon as the inspiration for the protagonist of Zola’s novel L’Œuvre which, I will argue, was one of the principle contributing factors to the creation of the ‘failed artist’ archetype, as well as Manet being seen as the originator of that archetype.

This reliance on critics and literary representations of Manet is important, because it heralds a significant shift in the paradigm of biography. Initially, biographies of artists were created to eulogize and glorify artists in order to ensure lasting relevance, as evidenced in Vasari’s Lives of the Artists, which epitomized this approach. Later volumes of biographies, such as Gian Pietro Bellori’s Lives, were modeled on the Vasarian formula and also served a similarly important function in contemporary art scholarship. By the 19th century, the focus on the long and persuasive narrative form favoured by Vasari and Bellori had more or less been abandoned. A 17th-century- style biography of Manet would likely have followed the model that Bellori cast when he wrote the life of the painter Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, rooted in street-life and taking a keen interest of the painter’s self-taught impressions of daily life. Manet’s work, like Caravaggio’s, would be criticized as untrained and uneducated when compared to the prevailing academic art of his time.

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72 Vasari, Lives of the Artists, 95-104. A precursor to this mode of biography would be the life of Paolo Uccello written by Vasari. Vasari writes Uccello, who was known for being one of the innovators of one-
Instead, by the middle of the 19th century, public interest in Manet’s life had been distilled to include only those facts considered relevant to his career, namely his submission of *Le Déjeuner sur l'Herbe* and *Olympia* to the Salon and their subsequent reception. This distillation of the artist’s life as essentialized through his career probably explains why Manet’s contemporary biographies have gone out of print but his Salon reviews are still read and discussed.  

*The Death of the “Lives”*

This expiration of the genre of compendia of artist biographies does not just signify a shift in public biographical interest, but one in professional practice as well. Since the Salon was the marquee event of Parisian social life in the 19th century, it drew a significant amount of attention in the media and yearly reviews of the event in newspapers enjoyed high public readership. These annual reviews came to serve the role typically reserved for artists’ biographies, as the public would have no need for the story of an artist’s life when they already received it in yearly doses in the newspaper. As a result of this shift in writing practice, Manet’s ‘life’, in Vasarian terms, became synonymous with the linear timeline of submissions to the Salon starting with 1860’s *Spanish Singer* (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Fig. 2.5.) and ending with point perspective, as being so concerned with mathematical precision that he forewent the “beautiful” aspects of painting, to his own detriment.

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73 T.J. Clark and Michael Fried are the two foremost Modernist scholars of the second half of the 20th century and have both published volumes on Manet, those being Clark’s *The Painting of Modern Life* and Fried’s *Manet’s Modernism*. In each case, the study is based around Manet’s interactions with the Salon. Studies of Manet’s critical reviews were first collected by Adolphe Tabrant in his books *Manet, histoire catalographique* (Paris: Éditions Montaigne, 1931), and *Manet et ses œuvres* (Paris: Gallimard, 1947). Hamilton combined these resources with his own research done at a variety of institutions, which was then the primary resource for the work done by Clark and Fried, today recognized as the most recent major works on Manet’s critical reception in the 1860’s and its effect on modernism.  

74 Hamilton, *Manet and His Critics*, 15-18. Hamilton describes the high public interest in the shows and subsequent demand for criticism, whether it be from newspapers, art periodicals, dailies, or graphic satire.
1882’s *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* (Courtland Gallery, London, Fig. 2.6.) Reviews of Manet’s submissions to the Salon become vital to the study of the artist’s biography because they, rather than any formal biography, represent how Manet was presented to the public.

Soussloff states in *The Absolute Artist* that time is not mimetic in biography, but that events are spaced out as the author sees fit. An event which the author decides is more important to the overall goal of the biography will be written about more, and thus be seen as more important, in the eyes of the reader, than an event the author deems less significant. In the case of Manet, this means that his career has been essentialized into his interactions with the Salon. In any short account of Manet’s career, often the only two works mentioned are *Déjeuner sur l’Herbe* and *Olympia*, which are understood as important because they represent the first instance of an artist successfully defying a greater art institution in the canon. In Hamilton’s *Manet and His Critics*, the only works examined are those which he submitted to the Salon and the author admits “the materials for his spiritual biography consist of a few reminiscences by his friends and a mass of contemporary criticism.” This defiance then became the most frequently mentioned and most-detailed aspect of Manet’s career. Using Soussloff’s logic, this distills Manet’s life into a roughly twenty-year period in which he submitted paintings to the Salon with varying degrees of success. This idea is similar to Alfred Gell’s notion of

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75 Ibid, 4. Manet submitted 38 paintings to the Salon over the course of 21 years.
76 Soussloff, *The Absolute Artist*, 32.
77 E. H. Gombrich, *The Story of Art* (London: Phaidon Press, 1990): 385-388. Gombrich’s book was the most popular text used to teach introductory art history university courses in the 20th Century and represents a simple lineage-based form of the discipline. Though Gombrich includes two lesser known examples of Manet’s art as visual examples, *The Balcony* (1869, The Louvre) and *The Races at Longchamp* (1872), the discussion of the artist focuses on the artist’s experience with the Salon.
the œuvre as an artwork, in which the entire body of the artist's work is considered, rather than just one specific part of it, and the essential element of a work of art is tied to the persona of the artist themselves. In Manet's œuvre, the recurring theme is the artist’s relationship with the Salon, with each piece being defined by its acceptance or rejection and then its critical reception.79

The Salon des Réfusés was spearheaded by the Emperor Louis-Napoleon (1808-1873) after receiving many complaints from the public after the Salon jury rejected more than 4000 paintings in 1863. Though the show now represents a major triumph against ruling art institutions in the battle of modernity, at the time it was a pittance to the denied artists and most were too embarrassed to participate in it.80 Manet’s conflict against the Salon was not the first instance of an artist defying a greater institution, let alone a French artist opposing the Salon in the 19th century. Eugène Delacroix (1798-1863), Théodore Géricault, and Gustave Courbet are well-known examples of artists having their own run-ins with the institution. However, Déjeuner's popularity as part of the Salon des Réfusés nonetheless represents a major victory for an artist against the ruling institution of the Salon, which gave a new importance and significance to being a ‘failure’; if one can fail academically, but still be ascribed a distinct importance in art history’s canon, then failing does not carry the same weight that it formerly did.

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79 Ibid. “Indeed, in quite literal sense we can know this man only by studying his work [in this case meaning paintings submitted to the Salon]”
80 Ibid, 41.
In 1865 there were 87 reviews written about the Salon and of these, 72 mention *Olympia*, with only 13 of those discussing the painting in a critical way.\(^{81}\) It is odd that a painting such as *Olympia* was critically discussed in only 15% of reviews, as it has now come to represent the entire Salon experience. Manet, because of *Déjeuner sur l'Herbe* and its ensuing controversy in 1863,\(^ {82}\) was already established as a troublesome figure by the opening of the 1865 edition of the exhibition, but even though he was critically panned two years prior, the painting was still given the same aesthetic analysis as all of the other submissions.\(^ {83}\) The problem here is that this method of analysis was suited specifically to the classical style favoured by the Salon, so even though critics attempted to approach the paintings with some semblance of impartiality, the field of art criticism in Paris was too heavily influenced by the Salon to escape bias.

It is possible that critics simply did not know how to approach Manet’s art because they saw it as an odd mixture of styles which was equally new and confusing.\(^ {84}\) For example, the idea of Manet’s appropriation of Titian’s (1488-1576) *Venus of Urbino* (Uffizi Gallery, Florence, 1538, Fig. 2.7), which is often used as the primary proof of the artist consciously fighting against the Neoclassical ideals of the Salon, did not arise as an issue of contention until several years after the Salon of 1865 closed.\(^ {85}\) The comparison of Manet’s and Titian’s nudes, which is now an obvious and essential juxtaposition to explain Manet’s proto-modernist tendencies, evidently took a few years to develop, as only one critic out of the 87 who reviewed the Salon made the connection.

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\(^{81}\) Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life*, EN 8, 83.

\(^{82}\) Hamilton, *Manet and His Critics*, 45.

\(^{83}\) Ibid, 50.

\(^{84}\) Ibid, 18.

\(^{85}\) Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life*, 95.
between the two pieces, mentioning it in two reviews under two different pseudonyms.\textsuperscript{86}

In both reviews, Titian’s work was used by the author as a point of comparison in their own analysis, rather than being acknowledged as some sort of source material for the \textit{Olympia}. In contrast, when \textit{Déjeuner sur l’Herbe} was shown at the Salon des Réfusés in 1863, its appropriation of \textit{The Judgment of Paris} by Raphael (1483-1520) (figure 2.8) was noted more quickly and used as a catalyst for discussion.\textsuperscript{87}

This lapse is evidence of the Salon’s dominion over the critical community at the time. The critics were only equipped to judge a painting on the qualities deemed important by the Académie, such as design, softness of line, and religious or classical allegory, so if a work of art did not possess those qualities, then it would be relegated into an artistic category with less esteem. For example, Manet’s \textit{Déjeuner sur l’Herbe} was described as a “sketch” rather than a painting, which slighted the work’s place in the Salon among history paintings.\textsuperscript{88} Readers now understand that what sets Manet apart in the art historical canon is that he often painted a contemporary scene in a classical context, forcing critics to draw comparisons between it and the more conventional history paintings which surrounded it in the show. This meant that his art had an important conceptual aspect, tied to the painting’s interaction with its environment. Through examining Manet’s reviews, it is apparent that the critics’ tendency to view everything through a classical lens led to a limited reading of the

\textsuperscript{86} Ibid, 94. The reason for the author using the pseudonyms is unclear. The critic is not defending Manet, so it does not serve to protect the author from a backlash from his peers. It could have been done to simply publish two separate reviews at the same time and be paid twice for the same work.

\textsuperscript{87} Ibid, 95.

\textsuperscript{88} Hamilton, \textit{Manet and His Critics}, 47. “The Bath, the Majo, the Espada are good sketches, I will grant you. There is a certain verve in the colors...But then what? Is this drawing? Is this painting? Manet thinks himself resolute and powerful. He is only hard.” This is written by Jules Antoine Castagnary, (1830-1888) who wrote popular yearly reviews of the Salon.
paintings, which is the commonly accepted reason for the harsh criticism that *Déjeuner* received. Manet's rejection by the Salon for producing paintings that were themselves explicit critiques of the Salon selection process makes him the perfect victim in the eyes of later art historians seeking to establish a narrative of institutional defiance for the sake of grounding 20th-century modern painting in ‘art history’.

*They’re All Gonna Laugh at You*

In terms of *Olympia*, an explanation for the omission of the Titian comparison is that art critics at the time would have been hesitant to mention Titian and Manet in the same sentence because it would have implied parity in their art. The Salon obviously had an agenda to accept strictly classical works, as evidenced by the photograph of those purchased in 1865, and the primacy of that agenda extended well beyond just the showing and acquisition of paintings. The critics’ livelihood depended on the continuance of the Salon because, if the yearly exhibition ended, then they would have no show to review. If critics excoriated artists whose work was not aligned with the dominant taste of the Salon, they gained good standing with the Salon officials, lending their own arguments more credibility. This is demonstrated by their harsh reviews of Manet, some reproduced below, as opposed to the praise reserved for more traditional painters.\(^89\)

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\(^89\) Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life*, 97, 118-119. A state photographer was hired to document the purchases of the state in 1865, which is reproduced on these pages. Six of the 10 paintings bought feature female nudes in a classical context, implying they made the biggest critical impression. Chapter Two of Clark’s text gives a thorough examination of the various factors that influenced art criticism in the 19th century and does an excellent comparison of how *Olympia* was received versus how more typically classical works were reviewed. Pages 65-80 of Hamilton’s text (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1954) give a thorough summary of the criticism written about Manet in 1865.
The expression of her face is that of a being prematurely aged and vicious; her body, of a putrefying colour, recalls the horror of the morgue.90

- Victor de Jankovitz

The mob, as at the Morgue, crowds around the spicy Olympia and the frightful Ecce Homo by Manet. Art sunk so low doesn’t even deserve reproach. “Do not speak of them; observe and pass on,” Virgil says to Dante while crossing one of the abysses of hell. But Manet’s characters belong rather to Scarron’s hell than to Dante’s.91

-Paul de Saint Victor

This redhead is of a perfect ugliness. Her face is stupid, her skin cadaverous. She does not have a human form; Monsieur Manet has so pulled her out of joint that she could not possibly move her arms or legs.92

-Félix Deriège

After Ribot, must we speak of Manet? No, if it is only to ascertain that this is group of invalids trying to pass themselves off as incurable. A hospital flirtation! Do they think they can impose themselves on us? They will be cured, one after the other, and Manet himself in spite of his excesses will not die impenitent.93

-Léon Lagrange

However, panning an artist like Manet could also serve to increase interest in that specific artist, rather than draw attention to the Salon itself, which is exactly what happened in the case of Olympia and the Salon des Réfusés two years prior. The critics had a fine line to tread and had to perform a balancing act between saying enough and not saying too much, an exercise that did not always work in their favour. In reviewing Manet, the critics are not creating a dialogue or seeking debate, as the overwhelming

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90 Ibid, 96. Clark translates the review, originally published by Jankovitz in Etude sur le Salon de 1865.
91 Hamilton, Manet and His Critics, 71. Paul Bins, Comte de Saint-Victor, from the May 28th edition of Presse, where he was the publication’s art critic. He was also a Salon juror in 1866, 1867 and 1878. Manet’s work was rejected in all of those years.
93 Hamilton, Manet and His Critics, 72. A critic and author who published two books on French art in the 1860’s, Les Vernets in 1863 and Pierre Puget in 1868, here publishing in Correspondent, a monthly general interest magazine.
majority of critics used his pieces as an exercise in subjugation. Given the size of the
exhibition, it makes sense to assume that the majority of paintings submitted would not
be endorsed by critics, but the degree to which reviewers denounced *Olympia* is
extreme. Manet was often referred to as a “one-man movement” in Paris, but it would
be safe to assume that, by panning the artist, critics thought they were just putting down
someone who did not fit into their criteria. In reality, they were giving him the exposure
to the public that ultimately proved to be essential to his position as the first modernist,
both stylistically and biographically, in the greater narrative of art history.

One clue to deciphering why Manet was written about the way that he was is
found in the caption attached to a cartoon by Albert d’Anoux (1820-1882), known
professionally as Bertall, included in the May 27th, 1865 edition of *Le Journal Amusant*
(Fig. 2.9). The cartoonist enlarges the bouquet held by Olympia’s maid so that it
occupies the entire centre of the image and includes some clouds around Olympia’s
feet as an allusion to their odor.94 In the inscription below the image, Manet is described
as “le grande coloriste.” That epithet is interesting, as it echoes the reaction to
Caravaggio by his biographers, who presented him in a similar manner, praising his use
of colour, while criticizing his overt naturalism. An unsigned review from July 1865 reads
“Manet has unusual qualities of originality and character as a draftsman, of subtlety and
pungency as a colorist”, while Joachim Sandrart (1606-1688) describes a *Cupid* by
Caravaggio as being “drawn with correctness, strong color, cleanness.”95 Beyond the
general “Realist” similarities that Manet and Caravaggio shared in their painting style,

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94 Hamilton, *Manet and His Critics*, 70.
the character of Manet that is shown in his reviews is clearly informed by earlier biographies of Caravaggio. Both are depicted as resistant to institutional authority and, while there are no explicit comparisons made by the reviewers between the two, there is a sense that Manet is subconsciously written with Caravaggio in mind.

Manet is often compared to other painters in his reviews, with many noting the unmistakable Spanish influence on his painting style.96 Not once in the reviews of Manet’s Salon submissions is Caravaggio mentioned.97 This is peculiar because Caravaggio’s life was manipulated by writers in a similar manner, though to different ends, and his career was marked by the same dichotomies of critical failure and popular success that Manet’s was. Biographers such as Bellori and Sandrart used Caravaggio as foil to more successful court painters, generally regarding him unfavourably while commending his mastery of colour and light. Every biography of Caravaggio clearly builds upon the previous iteration, with even more embellishment added each time. Rather than using the artist’s life to establish a discourse on painting, Caravaggio’s biographers wrote his life in order to suppress the stylistic ideas and lifestyles associated with the painter. Though the redeeming qualities of the artist are mentioned, they are always described as inferior to those of the greater institution. The biographies

97 The only link I have found between Caravaggio and Manet is Lionello Venturi’s *Four Steps Towards Modern Art: Giorgione, Caravaggio, Manet, Cézanne* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1956). This text consists of transcriptions of four lectures given by the author in the year of publication. I do not find this to be a substantial connection though because the lectures presented are fairly rudimentary in nature and are also given and published well after Manet’s death. They exist in a time when Caravaggio had already been “re-discovered” and framed as a proto-modern painter and do not contribute to the critical image of Manet in the Second Empire.
of Caravaggio and Manet are examples of institutions flexing their power and controlling the direction of criticism and artistic practice rather than establishing a discourse.

Giulio Mancini wrote the first version of Caravaggio’s life in 161798, with the next major iteration coming in 1642, written by the painter’s rival and his nemesis Giovanni Baglione in his collection of biographies The Lives of Painters, Sculptors, Architects, and Engravers, active from 1572-1642.99 Baglione clearly drew from Mancini’s biography, but his view of Caravaggio was deeply coloured by his own experience, leading him to conclude that his rival had “…died as miserably as he lived”100 or as Philip Sohm more accurately put it “died as badly as he painted”101.

Caravaggio’s life is ultimately defined by the version of his biography written by Gian Pietro Bellori in his 1672 collection Lives of the Modern Painters, Sculptors and Architects.102 Bellori’s collection is close to Vasari’s in style, but whereas Vasari used his Lives as a means to glorify the art of Michelangelo and Bellori sought to do so for his colleague Nicolas Poussin. In this context, Caravaggio is used as a foil to Poussin, a “Precursor” who exemplifies the missteps that Poussin was able to avoid in his path to

99 Enggass, Italy and Spain 1600-1750, 5; 75. Caravaggio and Baglione had an intense personal rivalry that came to a head in a libel suit, documented in several court records from the time. See also Walter Friedlaender’s Caravaggio Studies (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955): 272-286, for translated transcripts of the court proceedings.
102 Bell, Art history in the Age of Bellori, 64. It bears mentioning that Bellori was acquainted with Baglione, having written a poem titled “On Painting” which served as the preface for Baglione’s Lives. It is also worth noting that Bellori’s use of the word “modern” is used in literal, “newest” sense of the word and not referring to the meaning eventually ascribed to the word by art history.
becoming the greatest painter of the 17th Century, in the opinion of Bellori. After Caravaggio’s inclusion in 17th-century biographical compendia, such as Bellori’s, he remained largely forgotten until his reputation was revived in the 20th century by the scholar Roberto Longhi. In the interim, his biographies continued to attest to his essential and exemplary ‘failure’ as an artist.

According to Soussloff, the underlying goal in early Lives was a nostalgic need to portray and emphasize exemplarity. Vasari’s Lives chronicled the “best” artists of the Italian Renaissance, but was completed in 1568, well after the High Renaissance is considered to have ended and Mannerism had become the prevailing style. This indicates that Vasari’s biographies were a yearning for the artistic paragons of earlier in the century, precisely because the writer was critical of Mannerism and did not feel that the artists produced the same sort of celebrity figures. Exemplarity is also the underlying, driving force of Bellori’s Lives as well, as Martina Hansmann remarks that Bellori sought to only include artists of exemplary importance. This is evidenced in the length of Bellori’s text, as he wrote only 12 Lives, while Vasari included ten times as many. As previously mentioned, Caravaggio is criticized harshly by Bellori and used as

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103 Friedlaender, Caravaggio Studies, vii-viii.
104 Enggass, Italy and Spain, 1660-1750, 173-174. Here 17th-century art theorist Vincencio Carducho, in his Dialogues on Painting, calls Caravaggio an “evil genius” and the “anti-Michelangelo”. Additionally, in “Caravaggio’s Deaths”, Philip Sohm examines the ways that the biographies, and specifically the deaths, of painters who emulated Caravaggio’s painting style mirrored the biographies of Caravaggio. In all of his biographies, Caravaggio was said to have chased a boat departing for Rome down a beach, dying in the process. Caravaggio’s followers’ deaths were all variations on this theme, indicating that the biographer was clearly trying to fit his followers into the framework used for Caravaggio’s life “Caravaggio’s Deaths”, 8.
105 Soussloff, The Absolute Artist, 40.
a cautionary tale, included to illustrate the wrong path in art, in contrast to the classical style espoused by Poussin and the artists associated with the French and Italian academies. As an example of everything wrong with the art of his time, Caravaggio is the 17th century’s most exemplary failure.

The cautionary tale of Caravaggio may then be read as a prelude to the biographies of Manet written in the 19th century, and also to the reviews of his art that appeared in the popular Parisian press. The literary environment in which Manet lived and worked was not unlike that of Bellori, in that the propelling force behind the art historical writing of the mid to late 19th century was to emphasize tradition and exemplarity. In Soussloff’s opinion, the drive to nostalgic standards of excellence that is present in biography was driven by contemporary anxiety about changing standards in art. For Soussloff, this anxiety is therefore contained in, and integral to, the form itself.\footnote{Soussloff, \textit{The Absolute Artist}, 40.} This same anxiety existed in Manet’s Paris, a period of friction between the standards of the Academy and the rise of a new art that seemed to challenge those standards. The excessive praise of institutionally-favoured art by Parisian critics could easily be attributed to anxiety about the changing of France’s art world at the time, meaning the diminishing power of the Salon in the second half of the 19th century. First the Romantics, and then Courbet, had already been examples of artists seeking to disrupt the pattern of Salon-induced Alexandrianism in Paris during the 19th century, so, using Soussloff’s logic, critics fiercely debasing Manet’s painting is rooted in long-term anxieties about social change. There are always greater political powers that influence history writing, and this is the case with Manet as well, as Hamilton states that the
selection process of the Salon was controlled the government of that time, the Second Empire ruled by Emperor Napoleon III.\textsuperscript{109} With that in mind, supporting Manet critically became a much more controversial stance, because it meant siding with a younger, democratic sentiment, rather than the established monarchist one already in place. By condemning Manet’s art and making an example out of him, critics are supporting the ruling regime.

Just as Bellori used Caravaggio to assert the value of continuity and tradition in the art of the Baroque classicists, Manet was a tool employed by contemporary critics in order to exalt the Salon and the academic system. By cheapening the art of Manet, they provided further proof, at least to themselves, of the superiority of the tastemakers who dominated the exhibition system and who had determined the standards of artistic training in France for the past 100 years. Such an attitude was the result of looking into the past in order to guide the future. Only a few decades after his Salon failures, Manet would be hailed by the Impressionists and later critics as the “father of modernism.”\textsuperscript{110} As such, his qualities came to exemplify the virtues of modernism, setting off a new chain of biographical conventions with respect to the characterization of the ‘modern’ artist; a hero of anti-establishment sentiment, one who works against the grain, rather in

\textsuperscript{109} Hamilton, \textit{Manet and His Critics}, 3. “...the selection of work to be exhibited was more often than not influenced by the prevailing taste and interests of the middle classes which supported the government” and also 10, “During the Second Empire the Salon...came increasingly under the control of the central government through the appointment of additional jurors sympathetic to the artistic ideals of the administration.”

\textsuperscript{110} Ibid, 84. Described by Hamilton here as “the painter whose work continued the realist tradition of Courbet while modifying it so that it became a point of departure for the Impressionists”. And also 269-270, where prominent 19\textsuperscript{th} century art critic Théodore Duret, once a detractor, describes Manet as an “innovator” and of the “modern school”. In Antonin Proust’s \textit{Souvenirs}, he describes Manet as “the leader of the Impressionist School”, a transcription of which is found in Fried’s \textit{Manet’s Modernism}, 417-437.
conformation to tradition, and one whose originality makes them vulnerable to popular criticism.

In reality, the hard facts we have of Manet’s life are at odds with the public image of him created by the critics. The first biography of Manet was written by Antonin Proust, a childhood friend of artist, titled Édouard Manet souvenirs. As with most literature of the period concerning Manet, this was published serially in the newspaper La Revue blanche in 1897. All subsequent biographical sources on Manet draw from Proust’s, with most of the later versions conflate the life story with the image of Manet constructed from Parisian reviews. Both biographical traditions contributed to the image we have of Manet today. On one hand, Manet’s detractors created the image of a radical painter, in personality and technique, whose confrontational style had never been seen before. On the other, Manet’s supporters provided evidence of pro-Manet groups at one time, no matter the size or scope of influence, which allowed him to be invented as the bridge between the old guard and a new, modern France.

Manet was born in 1832 to a distinguished bourgeois family. His mother, Eugénie Fournier, was the daughter of a diplomat with powerful political ties and his father, Auguste Manet, was a Parisian magistrate. After completing his formal education, but failing his law school entrance exams, Manet instead enlisted as a merchant marine rather than taking the traditional Grand Tour, which was going out of style. He sailed

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111 Fried, Manet’s Modernism, 1. Antonin Proust is of no relation to famed early 20th-century author Marcel Proust. He is known mostly for being a journalist and later a politician in late 19th-century France.
112 Ibid, 417-427. Fried includes a transcription of an article in which Proust reflects on his friend as an appendix to Manet’s Modernism.
113 Fried, Manet’s Modernism, 1; Hamilton, Manet and His Critics, 20.
114 Hamilton, Manet and His Critics, 20. Manet pursued this with the hope that it would lead to a naval career afterwards.
on a training ship to Brazil and back and the trip had a profound effect on the artist, as Manet’s early work, such as *The Spanish Singer* (figure 2.5), was heavily influenced by Spanish painting and it is assumed that this trip was the source of that inspiration.\textsuperscript{115}

Upon his return, Manet decided to pursue painting and by virtue of his upper class upbringing, he received the most expensive and formal art instruction available in Paris, learning under Thomas Couture (1815-1879), a successful Salon painter who learned from a pupil of Jacques-Louis David (1748-1825).\textsuperscript{116}

However privileged this path to becoming a painter appears, the seeds of Manet’s discontent with the inequalities of the French class system also took root during this early period. As a child, he excelled only in the classes which interested him, art and history, and did not pay attention to his other courses leading his teachers to label him as having a “caractère difficile.”\textsuperscript{117} Manet’s stubbornness was also echoed in his relationship with Couture, as he consistently refused to develop into a history painter and instead wished to focus on painting things as he saw them, not as other wished to

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\textsuperscript{115} A brief note on the *Spanish Singer*, since it is a significant part of Manet’s œuvre. The painting is often considered Manet’s first success, because it was the first work of his to be accepted to the Salon. At first “skied”, meaning it was hung high up near the ceiling, where it is difficult to see the painting, it was moved down because of public interest, mirroring later trends in Manet’s art. The critical reaction was mixed though, as the painting was reviewed positively by poet Théophile Gautier, a yearly Salon reviewer, who said “there is a great deal of talent in this life-sized figure,” while Hector de Callias, an art critic for *L’Artiste* and *Figaro*, described Manet’s technique as “mortar on top of mortar” and Léon Lagrange, who wrote two volumes on painting in the 1860’s, said that “Manet tramples under foot even the most sacred ties.” As with later in his career, he was endorsed by member of the literary community, in this case a poet, while being condemned by critics. Regardless of the reviews, the *Spanish Singer* won an honourable mention at the Salon of 1961, which brightened Manet’s spirits. For references to the reviews, see Hamilton, *Manet and His Critics*, 24-28.

\textsuperscript{116} Fried, *Manet’s Modernism*, 1. Couture was taught by Antoine-Jean Gros, who in turn was taught by David.

\textsuperscript{117} Hamilton, *Manet and His Critics*, 20.
see them. The emergent theme in Manet’s biography was his tendency to work within established systems in order to disrupt them.

*Manet and L’Œuvre*

One of Manet’s most ardent supporters was the French author Émile Zola, whose literary fame had been won through the naturalist style of his novels. Zola first visited Manet’s studio in February of 1866 at the age of 26 while writing art criticism for *L’Évenement*, a weekly newspaper in Paris. Though it was popular at the time to deride Manet, Zola instead declared himself the first to “…praise Manet without reservations” in an article published in the newspaper that year. Following *Olympia*, Manet had become a victim of the Salon, so Zola’s championing of the artist comes from an earnest fondness for the artist and his work. At a time when Manet was arguably at his lowest professionally, having been ostracized by the Parisian critical community, Zola instead praised Manet as the master of tomorrow.

Following Zola’s initial visit, the two struck up a friendship and began corresponding that year. On January 1st 1867, Zola published a revised version of his *L’Évenement* piece in the journal *Revue du XIXe siècle*, now titling it “A new style in painting: M. Edouard Manet” and intertwined biographical facts about the artist with art criticism. This article was an important early resource on the painter’s life, for example it was the first mention of Manet’s studies under Couture, but more importantly, a large portion of the article covered Manet’s famous problems with the Salon jury. Zola’s

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118 Ibid, 21.
119 Ibid, 83.
120 Ibid, 84.
121 Ibid, 83-85.
account served as the public’s introduction to the narrative of Manet being the victim of the ruthless Salon selection process, since this article was published less than two years after the event.¹²²

Later, however, Zola seemed to present this narrative in a more negative light. In 1886, Zola published the novel *L’Œuvre* (The Masterpiece) in which the main character, Claude Lantier, is a modern painter in Belle Époque Paris. Lantier struggles with the creative process and works in a revolutionary, realist style that is anathema to the established art institutions of the period before he ultimately commits suicide in front of his rejected modern masterpiece. Zola’s character of Claude Lantier is generally considered to be a composite of several French painters; Manet, Paul Cézanne and Claude Monet (1840-1926); all of whom had a relationship with Zola in some way.¹²³ It would be a stretch to attribute the entirety of the character to just Manet, but it would also be a mistake to exclude him entirely. With that in mind, which parts of the fictional Lantier correspond most closely to Manet?

Many authors see Cézanne as the model for Lantier, since Zola had grown up with the painter and they remained friends up until the publication of *L’Œuvre*.¹²⁴ The two wrote to each often throughout their lives and when Zola finished *L’Œuvre* he sent a copy to Cézanne. The painter responded by thanking him for the gift, but their

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¹²² Ibid, 95-102. Zola’s article is the first example of the now-commonplace story of Manet’s life, in which the Salon does not recognize the genius of the artist, specifically the genius of *Déjeuner sur l’Herbe* and *Olympia*. Zola also takes care to note that the audience are equally deserving of blame as the vast majority of them echoed popular critical opinions of the artist and acted as pawns of the Salon in the process. Zola himself had problems similar to Manet’s while submitting his work to the Académie Française, so he no doubt would empathized with the painter due to their shared experiences.

¹²³ Pearson, “Introduction”, vii. Zola grew up with Cézanne in Aix-en-Provence, maintained a life-long friendship based on mutual support with Manet and also carried a correspondence with Monet.

¹²⁴ Ibid.
correspondence then ceased, presumably because Cézanne thought Lantier was a stand-in for himself and he took the grim ending of the book to be an insult. Much of the character’s temperament and personal life seem to be taken directly from Cézanne, namely the way that Lantier sheepishly interacts with his love interest Christine and the childhood in the country spent with his novelist friend Pierre Sandoz, a thinly disguised self-portrait of Zola. But from the events and paintings described in the novel, the character is also undeniably Manet.\textsuperscript{125} Nowhere is this more evident than in the description of Lantier’s “masterpiece,” a feebly disguised description of Manet’s \textit{Déjeuner sur l’Herbe}:

\begin{quote}
It showed the sun pouring into a forest clearing, with a solid background of greenery and a dark path running off to the left and with a bright spot in the far distance. Lying on the grass in the foreground, among the lush vegetation of high summer, was the naked figure of a woman... In the background, two other nude women...making two lovely patches of flesh-colour against the green, while in the foreground, to make the necessary contrast, the artist had seen fit to place a man's figure. He wore a plain black velvet jacket, and was seated on the grass so that nothing could be seen but his back and his left hand upon which he was leaning.\textsuperscript{126}
\end{quote}

While Zola reversed the number of men and women and changed the pose of the male figure in the foreground, his reference to \textit{Déjeuner} is clear. Moreover, when Lantier finally gathers the nerve to finish and submit his painting to the Salon, it is instead rejected and shown in the “Salon des Réfusés” rather than the Salon proper, which, of course, is what happened with \textit{Déjeuner} in reality.\textsuperscript{127} After the \textit{Déjeuner} and \textit{Olympia}, Manet fell into obscurity in the Parisian art world. His next major success did

\textsuperscript{125} Ibid, xii; Ibid, 181. Sandoz describes his intention to write what is clearly the Rougon-Macquart series to Lantier here.
\textsuperscript{126} Émile Zola, \textit{The Masterpiece} (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1993), 29.
\textsuperscript{127} Ibid, 126.
not come until 1882, with the showing of *Un Bar au Folies-Bergère*. In between, of course, was his friendship with Zola, a series of failed submissions to the Salon, and solo exhibitions of varying success. Though the solo exhibitions can be read as somewhat of a personal victory for Manet, as the artist removed himself from the Salon system, he did not receive nearly as much attention as he did from 1863-65 and, as a result, faded from the art community and consequently the public consciousness as well.

*After two decades of relative obscurity, it was Zola’s *L’Œuvre*, through the character of Lantier, along with the successful exhibition of *Un Bar au Folies-Bergère* that reminded the public of Manet. With his wild, curly hair and thick beard, Lantier even evoked Manet physically – evidenced in Henri Fantin-Latour’s *Portrait of Édouard Manet*, (1867, Art Institute of Chicago, Fig. 2.10). However, Zola does not portray the painter as the champion of modernism, but rather as the epitome of artistic failure. Later, when Manet is adopted as the predecessor of modernism, failure is so ingrained in his character that it then became a defining characteristic of the successful modern artist.*

*L’Œuvre* is a work of fiction, but the rise in popularity of the novel as a genre in the 19th century, coupled with the popularity of Zola’s entire Rougon-Macquart series, partially informed later readings of Manet’s life and work. The character of Claude Lantier drew substantially from Manet’s life, as many aspects of the character correspond directly to those of the real person. While *L’Œuvre* is not a biography in the traditional sense, it accomplished the same goals as one in the case of Manet, by
providing readers with a life-story of a figure, which in this case could easily be presumed to be Manet.

In fact, when Monet received his copy of the novel from Zola, he worried that detractors of the burgeoning “new school of painting” would use the novel to exploit and make an example of Manet, meaning that the public obviously understood the character to be a “Manet type”. In this way, L’Œuvre essentially functions as a biography of Manet because it contributed so much to the creation of Manet’s biography in the public consciousness. After the exhibition of Le Déjeuner sur l’Herbe and Olympia and the ensuing notoriety, there was a 17-year gap until Folies-Bergère was shown in 1882, a year before his death. Zola began work on L’Œuvre in 1885, so perhaps the plot of the novel reflects Manet’s life following the height of his notoriety. Of course, Zola befriended Manet in the painter’s period of alienation from public exhibition, perhaps providing him with insight into the character of Lantier.

Manet’s role in the careers of the Impressionists is crucial to our understanding the ways that his biography evolved over time, as it was his endorsement by that group of painters which fueled his critical reconciliation. His influence and place in society only grew after his death, as there was a large memorial exhibition of his work in 1884. At that time, Modernism was beginning to gain traction as the premier painting style in Europe, so by revisiting initial criticisms of Manet, critics were seeking to validate current painting styles, the Impressionists, by grounding them in an example of the

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130 Ibid, 3.
past.\textsuperscript{131} This process of pulling an example out of the past in order to substantiate the present is a common trope in the development of the discipline of art history; artists are continually ‘re-discovered’ after being ‘overlooked’ or critically underrated by previous generations.\textsuperscript{132} New scholarship is generated through this process of rediscovery and validation, and the figure of the avant-garde failure is inevitably used to justify the oversight.

All of this raises several questions about artist biography as a genre, specifically as it applies to Manet: To what degree does the genre of biography shape the way we understand artists and their art? Secondly, if Manet’s biography was influenced by the earlier biography of Caravaggio, how often does such conflation or elision occur within the genre overall? Where is Manet’s place in biography and where is biography’s place in literature? To answer this, I examine Hayden White’s concept of metahistory and metanarratives in order to isolate recurring narrative tropes in history writing, which I feel is the larger context in which biography as a genre exists.

\textsuperscript{131} Fried, \textit{Manet’s Modernism}, 2-3.
\textsuperscript{132} One of the most prominent examples of this is aforementioned case of Caravaggio, which is explained on page 12.
Chapter 3: Moves Toward a Meta-Art History

“Someone once told me, ‘Time is flat circle.’ Everything we’ve ever done or will do, we’re gonna do over and over and over again.”

-Rust Cohle, True Detective (2014)

In order to resolve the issues raised at the end of the second chapter, I conflate biography and history so that each may be subject to the critiques of the other. A biography is essentially the history of person, so I feel that this move is not unwarranted, as biography is a separate discipline than academic history writing, but that does not mean that they do not share many characteristics. In The Absolute Artist, Soussloff explains the notion of biography as a form of history and how that idea has been used in art history.133 A historiography of biography is especially prescient in art history, because the biographies of artists have served as a primary lens of interpretations of artworks since the Italian Renaissance. Biography is assumed to be the history of an individual’s life and is almost always taken to be fact, though this relationship can be just as troubled as that of traditional history and the past, as illustrated in the disingenuous portrait of Manet created by the Parisian press in the 1860’s. In fact, the two genres are so similar that through taking a cross-disciplinary approach when examining the two - applying historiography to biography and literary analysis to history - yields a much stronger reading of both and is essential in

133 Soussloff, The Absolute Artist, 112-124. In this passage, Soussloff explains the historical nature of biography as a genre and traces the myth of the “hero” through art history. The work of Ernst Kris (1900-1957) and Otto Kurz (1908-1975) is of primary importance in this endeavour, as they explored the concept of the myth in biography and that was a significant influence on Soussloff’s text. “Kris and Kurz recognize that the content of the form is filled by a theory of what the artist is and does, rather than being based on a depiction of the personality of an individual at a particular historical moment.”
approaching the biographies of artists, as that genre exists in both fields, history and literature.

Each artist’s biography is written with ulterior personal and political motives by the writer. Thomas Heffernan states that “Texts have their beginnings not in the act of composition, but in a complex series of anticipations.”134 This implies that every author of a biography is writing that biography with a specific intent in mind. Vasari wanted to promote and elevate Florentine art, Bellori wanted to promote and elevate Nicolas Poussin, Zola wanted to illustrate and dramatize the effects of criticism on his friends and peers. Each of these biographers assembled their information and then placed it in an order best suited to the achievement of their specific goals and views. This represents a flawed process. The above examples display overt bias, which has been uncovered through scholarship on each of the texts, but at one time were considered “histories”, with the exception of Zola. There is just as much creation and arranging of a narrative in history as there is in literature.

**Historical Realism and the Problems Therein**

Robert Berkhofer (1931-2012) called traditional history writing “historical realism” because, even if it is not intended by the author, the reader takes the text to be fact. As a textual form, historical realism conveys the illusion of reality by its mode of representation.135 What this means is that history, due to the nature of the discipline,

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134 Thomas J. Heffernan, *Sacred Biography: Saints and Their Biographers in the Middle Ages* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988): 18. Hagiology, the subject of Heffernan’s text, as well as other forms of biography like those of great poets, served as a key precursor for the genre of artistic biography, which is outlined and defined aptly in Soussloff’s *The Absolute Artist* (Minneapolis, 1997).

135 Berkhofer, *Beyond the Great Story* 58. In doing so, Berkhofer believes that historical realism, and most historians, are trying to bridge the gap between history’s form and its subject.
can often be perceived as a fairly impartial retelling of facts due to the nature of the discipline which, if described in its most basic form, is a presentation of events that have already occurred. This retelling is inevitably coloured by the personal or critical bias of the author. The choice to write about a particular event, rather than another, has already affected the account’s degree of impartiality, even if the author gives a completely truthful retelling of that event.

The practice of historical realism is problematic because its success relies on both the authors and readers not recognizing the inherent contradiction in it.\(^{136}\) History purports to be the conveyance of facts, yet the only documentation of those facts is other history writing. Since the apparent aim of historical realists in their writing is to convey a truth of the past or its closest approximation, the primary objective in their writing then becomes transparency, so that they seem as though they are simply the middleman in the relaying of information.\(^{137}\) In order to further illustrate this point, analyzing the semiotic nature of what history writing represents will prove fruitful.

As stated above, history serves as a representation or “sign” of the past. The contradiction in this relationship is that the signified, the “true” past as it existed, is in reality the same as the signifier - history - because history is the only document of the past. In effect, there is no signified, because the thing signified is pointing to itself.\(^{138}\) At the very least, the signified is troubled because of its relationship with the signifier.

\(^{136}\) Ibid, 16.
\(^{137}\) Ibid, 29. Berkhofer explains the “idealized process of normal historical practice” which is analogous with historical realism. In it, the Past becomes evidence, which then becomes fact, which is synthesized with prose to become History. Once it has been read in the present, History and the Past become one and the same.
\(^{138}\) Ibid, 64.
Berkhofer explains this analysis by referring to the goal of historical realism as a “great story”. The goal of historical realism, in the opinion of Berkhofer, is to communicate a large or significant event through the retelling of events, but the only facts that the author has at his disposal are examples of previous history writing. This method of writing is as if the foremost method of writing fiction was to copy and paste excerpts from other novels. Therefore, historical realism is really trying to bridge the gap between its form and its subject.\(^{139}\) Clearly, this method of history writing is in need of reform, though that sentiment is denied wholeheartedly by traditional history writers.\(^{140}\) The discipline, according to Berkhofer’s reading, appears to be happy to rest on its laurels and resist change. Though Berkhofer’s analysis speaks to an incorporation of change into history writing, he is not indicative of the greater discipline. Recent journals on the subject of metahistory, a field in which we can include Berkhofer, all note that the subject is still met with resistance in the field.\(^{141}\)

Art history is, in many ways, an extension of history, so the difficulties that plague one are also present in the other.\(^{142}\) In art history, the reading of a specific work is always coloured by a previous critic or scholar’s interpretation of it. The closest parallel

\(^{139}\) Ibid, 58.
\(^{140}\) Ibid, 16. “The ideas advanced and developed by Michel Foucault in *The Order of Things* and by Hayden White in *Metahistory*” both texts which Berkhofer believes are integral in exposing the contradictions in historical realism “have been pursued mainly in fields other than history.”
\(^{141}\) This sentiment is expressed in Peter Burke’s “Metahistory: before and after,” *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice* 17:4 437-447, Alan Munslow’s “Rethinking Metahistory: The Historical imagination in nineteenth century Europe,” *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice* (September 23 2013) and Gabrille M. Spiegel’s “Above, about and beyond the writing of history: a retrospective view of Hayden White’s Metahistory on the 40th anniversary of its publication,” *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice* 19 August 2013: 492-508, which all consider the contemporary impact of White’s theories.
\(^{142}\) Soussloff, *The Absolute Artist*, 78. In the third chapter of her text, “The Artist in Culture”, Soussloff examines the concept of *Kulturwissenschaft*, a German term which loosely translates to “the science of culture” as an embryonic of art history. The chapter ties together the 19th-century historical practice of Leopold van Ranke and Jacob Burckhardt to the early and notable 20th-century art historian Aby Warburg (1866-1929), thereby creating an academic link between the two disciplines.
to historical realism in art history, what we can call ‘traditional art history’, would be the canon-based, chronological method that was favoured by modernists in the 20th century. This chronological approach extends to exhibiting practice, as many museums and art galleries are still rooted in traditional art history and group artworks by artist, year, and country. Critics such as Rosalind Krauss combined art history with prominent critical theory and philosophy in the 1970’s and 80’s, which forced the discipline to transform its approaches and subject matter. In particular, French philosophers of the mid-20th century, such as Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault, provided new theoretical approaches in literary theory that were applied to reading art objects in new ways. This move was indicative of a greater shift in art history in the late-20th century that was connected to the rise of postmodernist art and scholarship.

However, in the midst of all this, approaches to the study of the artist in the context of biography remained more or less unchanged. As illustrated in the previous chapter, the biographies of Caravaggio and Manet were influenced enormously by the social politics of the art world in their respective eras, which in turn shaped the reception of the two artists. The word “history” has a subtext in the public consciousness which

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143 This method was favoured by modernists because it presented art history as a single linear Eurocentric narrative which would culminate in 20th-century modern art. The prominent advocate of this style of art history was Clement Greenberg, whose views on art, specifically painting, are aptly summed in his seminal essay “Modernist Painting,” which can be found in Art and Interpretation (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 1998). Greenberg’s work inspired a substantial amount of followers whose work mirrored his approach. Two of the most prevalent examples of his followers are the art historians T.J. Clark and Michael Fried, whose work has been cited throughout this thesis.

144 Krauss’s method is best reflected in the journal she founded in 1976, October, published quarterly by MIT Press. The journal’s name is a reference to the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia in the October of 1917, hoping to bring about a similarly radical revolution in the methodology of art history.
causes a person to equate it with veracity. The reality is that history is much closer to a documentary, in which a director arranges footage to create their narrative.\textsuperscript{145}

This discussion of the discursive nature of history is used to ground my study of biography. As discussed above, biography is essentially a form of history, so these arguments about the discursiveness of history can also be applied to biography. Given the intrinsic problem in the discipline of history, it vital to approach it with a high degree of criticality and acknowledge the problematic parts of writing history and the documents that already exist. A popular way that this degree of criticality has been achieved by historians over the last half century is by applying literary criticism and analysis to history and approaching history as equal parts fact and plot; conveyance and creation.\textsuperscript{146}

These metahistorical works are not the first to have considered the various problems inherent in historical realism. From the Enlightenment through to the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, philosophers would include a “Philosophy of History” or similarly named chapter in their texts. These philosophies of histories can be understood as the embryonic form of historiography. In Berkhofer’s mind, metahistory renders the philosophy of history irrelevant because the former embraces the whole paradigm of presuppositions that make up the discipline of history and as a result exists completely outside of it.\textsuperscript{147} If history is considered to exist between fact and narrative, which I have established \textit{is} the case, then an approach that exists between those two disciplines is

\textsuperscript{145} White, \textit{Metahistory}, 2.
\textsuperscript{146} Berkhofer, \textit{Beyond the Great Story}, 28. Berkhofer believes that the problems created for professional historians by literary and rhetorical theorists are the most cutting and important.
\textsuperscript{147} Ibid, 65.
necessary to properly analyze history. Metahistory accepts that no particular historical
text is a completely true account, but also accepts and defines the contexts and
readings that are created by writing history, which makes metahistory the strongest
historiographical method.

This is why a metahistorical approach is used to approach biography in this
thesis. Biography is subsumed by history, meaning that it is subject to all of the same
criticisms. What Hayden White said about history still applies; biography is a prose
narrative written with bias, but it is still assumed to be a realistic representation.
Through applying White’s historical criticism to biography, accounts of an individual’s life
can be shown in a more realistic light and be better understood within their historical
context. By using a metahistorical analysis, biography reveals itself to be a similar
construct to historical realism.

For the purpose of this chapter, the terms “historical realism” and “biography” will
be interchangeable, as the latter is included in the former. As such, an unpacking of the
problems inherent in historical realism will also expose problems inherent to the
paradigm of biography. By exposing those problems through a metahistorical approach,
I will examine the underlying contributing factors to artist biography, which will inform my
analysis in the next chapter, of how that discipline and the role of the artist changed in
the 20th century.

**Metahistory**

The concept of the “poetics of history” is a central tenet of the practice of
metahistory, first developed by Hayden White in his 1973 text *Metahistory: The
Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*. The self-reflexive approach taken
by White in this book uses literary theory to parse through the writing of prominent philosophy and history writers of the 19th Century. White concisely states his objective on the second page of *Metahistory*:

I will consider the historical work as what it most manifestly is – that is to say a verbal structure in the form of a narrative prose discourse that purports to be a model, or icon, of past structures in the interest of explaining what they were by representing them.\(^{148}\)

White does this by deconstructing 19th-century history in order to organize it based on content, style and goal.\(^{149}\) In this process, White concludes that this narrative process results in four categories of history writing, which he calls emplotments. The four emplotments; Romance, Tragedy, Comedy, and Satire; each represent a specific type of larger narrative, into which one can fit any historical narrative. Each emplotment is identified on the basis of common characteristics, essentially the tropes used, the prominent ideology represented, and the method of argument, and then paired with the writing of a specific historian and philosopher in order to demonstrate how they represent that specific narrative. For White, Jules Michelet and Friedrich Nietzsche embody the Romance emplotment, Leopold von Ranke and G.W.F. Hegel the Comedy emplotment, Alexis de Tocqueville and Karl Marx the Tragedy emplotment, and Jacob Burckhardt and Benedetto Croce the Satire emplotment.\(^{150}\) Each historian and philosopher are chosen because they characterize different ways to approach a subject, rather than trying to refute the other emplotments. A reasonable metaphor for this would be to compare White’s emplotments to languages, rather than theories; one historian’s

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\(^{149}\) Ibid, 283.
\(^{150}\) Ibid, 39-42.
account is no more objective than another’s any more than German is a truer language than French.\textsuperscript{151}

Each emplotment has further characteristics associated with it, which are mentioned above and outlined by White in the introduction to his \textit{Metahistory}.\textsuperscript{152} Rather than rewrite White’s emplotments, I have organized these traits into a table, illustrated in Figure 1.1. Though the book is written exclusively about 19\textsuperscript{th}-century historical practice, the principles White argues against are present in every era of the discipline, as well as in other contingent disciplines, so it can be easily applied to any other historical period. Ultimately, a narrative’s place in metahistory is most strongly influenced by its outcome and the fate of the story’s protagonist(s). Since there are four emplotments, there are four possible outcomes at the end of a narrative. The protagonist can be victorious and vindicated in the Romance, defeated and vindicated in the Comedy, defeated and unjustified in the Tragedy, or recognize the futility of the process and become indifferent in the Satire. These narrative are delineated in figure 3.1.

These emplotments imply that there are larger narratives in history that are made up of smaller, self-contained narratives. For example, a history of the Tragedy would be constituted of many different tragedies, each representing a small part of the greater history of the emplotment. These larger narratives, which are called ‘metanarratives’ in this thesis, can only be discovered and analyzed through historiography and by adopting a self-reflexive approach, which is the aim of this thesis. Examining the roles of

\textsuperscript{151} Munslow, “Rethinking Metahistory” \textit{Rethinking History}, 4. Munslow considers the impact of \textit{Metahistory} 40 years after its publication. In doing so, he places the book into its own formal system of classification, which situates \textit{Metahistory}, a book fairly removed from the majority of history writing, in the discipline. Munslow also includes reactions and criticisms to the book.

\textsuperscript{152} White, \textit{Metahistory}, 5-42.
biographies in specific metanarratives will illuminate the various roles that each element plays in the other.

The emplotment most relevant to this study is the Tragedy, as artists whose biographies fit into this particular emplotment, like Caravaggio and Manet, were essential to art history’s construction of ‘failure’ within the broader metanarrative of modernism. The Tragedy, defined by White through the writing of Tocqueville and Marx, entails a journey of defeat that results in an undesirable outcome for the protagonist(s), making it the narrative most appropriate to define artists who were written as failures in their own time, like Manet and Caravaggio. This emplotment is characterized by the protagonist’s “fall from grace” at the end of the narrative, as opposed to the more positive outcomes associated with the other three emplotments. ¹⁵³ This defeat communicates to the reader that nothing with respect to the greater metanarrative has changed since the beginning of the story and the only enlightenment gained the reader receives is the recognition of those larger powers by whom the protagonist(s) will always be defeated.

The other emplotments all offer some sort of resolution and message of empowerment, but the Tragedy is bleaker, with the only discovery being the revelation of a greater power structure; one in which the reader/protagonist/public exists in

¹⁵³ White, Metahistory, 9. The Romance, Comedy, and Satire all end with the protagonist(s) having some form of triumph, as they are victorious in their cause in the Romance, gain small victories which legitimate their cause in the Comedy and remove themselves from the conflict in the Satire. Philip Sohm, “Caravaggio’s Deaths,” Art Bulletin 84 3 (Sep 2002): 449-468. Sohm covers similar ground in this article, examining the various ways that biographers wrote Caravaggio’s death, which occurred while the artist was on his way back to Rome. In every case, Caravaggio is shown as a failure in spite of his talent, which was reflected in the fact that he died while literally chasing his salvation down a beach. The biographies of painters who mimicked Caravaggio’s style were written in a similar way. In addition to excellent bibliographic information, Sohm historiographic approach to biography provided a valuable framework for this study.
subordination to the force with which they are at odds in the narrative.\textsuperscript{154} In every case, these powers are the result of a hierarchical structure in which a particular group controls most of the power. In essence the Tragedy is a depiction of the societal struggles of mankind in general.\textsuperscript{155} This is reflected in the historical theories of Alexis de Tocqueville, the Tragic historian, who saw man as a figure trapped between the social order he needs to survive and a “demonic nature” which drives him away from that order.\textsuperscript{156} Similarly, Karl Marx, the Tragic philosopher, envisioned man in conflict with himself; at once gaining control of nature while also alienating himself from his own humanity.\textsuperscript{157} These conflicts are not unlike those in the other emplotments, but what is unique to the Tragedy is that the protagonist cannot balance these various forces and fails. Each figure in a Tragedy is effectively an avatar for anyone who struggles against the perception of a greater force.

The method that White introduced in \textit{Metahistory} has since developed into a sub-discipline of its own that is still prevalent in historiography today.\textsuperscript{158} Within historiography, \textit{Metahistory} is considered to have permanently changed the discipline and any work produced in the genre since has had to wrestle with White’s ideas.\textsuperscript{159} White’s critique of not just history, but also philosophy, gives the approach credence,

\textsuperscript{154} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{155} Ibid, 10. In White’s words, the Tragedy results in a “revelation of the nature of the forces opposing man”.
\textsuperscript{156} Ibid, 193-5. Here White examines this idea of man’s relationship with social as they are presented in Tocqueville’s major works \textit{Democracy in America} and \textit{The Old Regime and the Revolution}.
\textsuperscript{157} Ibid, 286. This is illustrated through Marx’s ideas of the Superstructure and the Base, which are the two parts of the historical process, in his mind.
\textsuperscript{159} Burke, “Metahistory: before and after” \textit{Rethinking Metahistory}: 442. Burke examines the various ways that \textit{Metahistory} was received upon its release. He lists and summarizes a plethora of sources on \textit{Metahistory} and also illustrates the various that the book has been influential outside of history.
but also makes metahistory a useful means of analysis in art history.\textsuperscript{160} This is evidenced by Catherine Soussloff’s employment of White’s method in her historiography of artist biography, \textit{The Absolute Artist}.\textsuperscript{161}

Soussloff aims to locate “the artist” as a figure in society and history by examining it as a sub-category of “the genius”. By identifying the time when the artist-genius emerged, in the Italian Renaissance and courtesy of Vasari, Soussloff then traces the concept through history and identifies key changes in the approach to artist biography. Rather than the genius, I examine the failure as a sub-category of the artist. The failure goes unappreciated and unsuccessful in their own time, but is recognized only in retrospect as being avant-garde. Whereas the genius emerged as a character type in the Italian Renaissance, the failure emerged in late 19\textsuperscript{th}-century France, during the beginnings of modernism. This is not a coincidence. The rise of the failure as a form of genius in the late 19\textsuperscript{th} century can be tied to the life of Édouard Manet and his failure submitting paintings to the Salon in the mid 1860’s. Examining the ways that the details of his life fit into the Tragic emplotment will contextualize the writing about Manet and also situate the failure as a figure in society in opposition to the genius, as defined by Soussloff.

\textit{The Failure’s Place in the Tragedy}

In this analysis, Manet becomes the protagonist in White’s Tragic emplotment, standing in opposition to the influence of the Paris Salon and its selection committee. Though art history now regards Manet as the harbinger of modernism and sees his

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{160} Ibid, 16. \textsuperscript{161} Soussloff, \textit{The Absolute Artist: The Historiography of a Concept} (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1997).}
Olympia as the defining moment of that beginning, that was certainly not the case at the
time.\textsuperscript{162} The painting was received poorly when it was exhibited, and even though
Manet’s literary friends, such as Baudelaire and Zola, voiced their approval when the
critics ridiculed the work, this had little effect on Manet’s reputation among the Salon
elite.\textsuperscript{163} In 1864, Louis Leroy (1812-1885), who was a frequent contributor to the French
illustrated newspaper Le Charivari, published a satirical conversation between Manet,
Charles Baudelaire and Napoleon III, which implied that the French critical community
would prefer that novelists stay out of their business because it was not their place and
they were misinformed.\textsuperscript{164} Since White deals specifically with the 19th century, if one
were to expand the table illustrating White’s four emplotments to include an “Artist”
column, then Manet would surely occupy the slot for the Tragic emplotment there (Fig.
1.2).

A key precursor to Manet in the metanarrative of failure is the proto-Baroque
painter Caravaggio, whose hopes of success were similarly tied to a classicist
institution. In the case of Caravaggio, the institution was less defined, consisting of the
burgeoning royal academies in France and Italy, which came to prominence in the 17th
and 18th Centuries, the Raphael-influenced school of the Carracci cousins and a
general priority given to classicism in Rome. In opposition to the taste for classical
harmony and clear, fluid Raphaelesque palette of the Carracci, Caravaggio painted in a

\textsuperscript{162} Clark, The Painting of Modern Life, 21-22.
\textsuperscript{163} Though Zola met Manet after the controversy in 1866, Baudelaire was an early supporter of the artist,
coming to his defence in the press and defending Manet’s first Salon submission, The Absinthe Drinker
(1859, Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen) and also the Spanish Singer, before waning in his support
in the middle of the 1860’s, Hamilton, Manet and His Critics, 24-35.
\textsuperscript{164} Hamilton, Manet and his Critics, 32-34. “I repeat, Baudelaire, you haven’t the right to be so noisy in
here.”
proto-Realist style which, coupled with his tumultuous personal life, put him out of favour with the major patrons of the time. Gian Pietro Bellori wrote the most well-known version of Caravaggio’s life and was closely associated with institutions in France and Rome which taught Classical painting above all else, so for him to write a damning account of Caravaggio’s life was to subjugate the artist to the ideals that Bellori himself upheld. Just as Manet was used as a cautionary tale by critics in the 19th century, Caravaggio was similarly fable-like in his biography.

Tocqueville’s belief that man is continually at odds with history’s greater forces, in his own words “on the verge between two abysses”, and that those forces are irreconcilable is relevant here. On the one hand, man needs social order to define himself, but, on the other, he has an innate nature which drives himself away from that order. This statement applies to both Caravaggio and Manet. The two artists both gained notoriety for their apparent defiance of authority which benefitted their legacy in the long term, but signalled professional failure in the short term. Later art historians would use their failure as the necessary prelude to the Modernist narrative. Even though something in their nature drove them to distance themselves from the Classical establishment in art, their success was completely controlled by that establishment. For example, Olympia would not have made the impact that it did were it not for the Salon’s rejection of it. The same can be said of Caravaggio’s relationship with his contemporaries and superiors. The artists and the powerful institutions form the parts of an interdependent artistic relationship. While the greater institutions are what define

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165 Bell, Art history in the Age of Bellori, 64. Bellori had previously written the introductions to other art treatises and collections of biographies
166 White, Metahistory, 193.
these two as failures, they also need that definition to claim their place in the counter-
culture.

Viewing history as a closed system like this, in which one party’s wax is the direct
result of another’s wane, or vice-versa, is a characteristic of the Mechanist argument in
history, which corresponds to the Tragic emplotment, according to White.\footnote{White, Metahistory, 195.} The failures
of both Caravaggio and Manet are the direct result of larger art institutions and, when
they are eventually adopted as the forefathers of Modernism in the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, it
comes at the expense of those same Classical institutions. In order for art historians to
portray both of the painters as modernist revolutionaries, they must be plotted against
an opposing institutional force.\footnote{Ibid, 17. A key characteristic of the Mechanist argument is the apprehension of larger laws. Modern art historians use this argument method in order to show Caravaggio and Manet as singular figures who recognize the power dynamics of their time and work against it. By doing so, it makes the figures more empathetic, by having them be underdogs in a fight for their cause.} Other characteristics of the Mechanist argument also
dovetail with the biographies of the two Realist “masters”, such as the idea that all
historical figures are simply playing the part set out for them by the greater powers.\footnote{Ibid.} In
this case, this concerns the role of Manet and Caravaggio serving as the warning to
other artists to not defy the authority of art institutions because that would result in
professional failure. However, at the beginning of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, the perception of
failure in art began to change dramatically.

Tocqueville was also aware of tropes of history writing, which is illustrated in his
most famous work \textit{Democracy in America} (1835). Tocqueville defined only two types of
history writing, the aristocratic and the democratic, both of which are applicable to the
biographies of Caravaggio and Manet. Each of these styles draw their name from the time period that they were written in; the aristocratic, written during an aristocracy such as an Empire or a Monarchy, and the democratic written during a democracy such as a republic. Whereas White takes more a retrospective view and presents his emplotments more as universal ideas which can be easily applied to any era of history, Tocqueville’s embryonic concept of the emplotment corresponds directly to a specific, defined period of history. White’s theory of emplotments draws directly from Tocqueville’s, as the former’s Romantic and Tragic modes correspond to the latter’s aristocratic and democratic modes, respectively.

Examining Tocqueville’s two emplotments and applying them to the eras of Caravaggio and Manet yields valuable information about why the two painters were received the way they were. The earliest writings about Manet, his contemporary Parisian art reviews, were created during an aristocratic time, the Second Empire, during the reign of Louis-Napoleon. In this period, Manet was deemed a failure because

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170 A description of the Tocqueville two modes: Aristocratic history focuses on telling history through certain individuals which it deems important, such as a king or an army leader. As such, the story is greatly coloured by the political beliefs of the presiding power of the time. Their interests, told through a few “great” individuals, are focused upon, while larger more encompassing arcs are left covered. Democratic history on the other hand, seeks to undo all that is achieved by aristocratic history and discover a larger meaning. Since democratic history is made when the country’s power rests, theoretically, with its population, there is greater focus on larger themes which are more relatable to all members of the population, such as the struggles of the lower classes. These larger meanings can correspond to a wide array of cultural forces, depending on the social climate of the time. An obvious example for Tocqueville would be the United States in the late 19th century. They are at once victims of a larger ruling power, in their case residual conflict with the British Empire after the American Revolution, and also all ascribe to a common social and political philosophy, those being the founding principles of the United States as outlined in their Declaration of Independence. Rather than reading history through a specific individual as in aristocratic history, an example would be Louis XIV (1638-1715) or Napoleon (1769-1821) in France, democratic history focuses on the general populace and broad ideas that can be easily applied to them. Tocqueville’s method of classifying history writing illustrates that the time in which a narrative was created influences the way it is written and received, which in turn influences the reading of the narrative later.

171 Ibid, 201.
the Salon determined he was simply a bad painter – his failure was due to his own shortcomings as an artist. At the time, this was the only writing available to the public about Manet, so this determined their impressions not only of his art, but of his life.

The next major written work associated with Manet, Émile Zola’s *L’Œuvre*, was written during the Third Republic in France, when the country was a democratic republic. Though the character of Claude Lantier, a partial avatar for Manet, was still a failure, he was made out to be a victim of the Salon and of the larger social constructs that defined art, rather than simply failing because of his own shortcomings. This, of course, has much in common with the ideas that White associates with his Tragic emplotment, which identifies a single, unfortunate figure being subjected to forces outside of their control. This creates a new interpretation of White’s metahistorical emplotments. Tocqueville’s idea that a historical period’s system of government dictates its style of history writing has some truth to it, as demonstrated above, but it is debunked by White’s theory of four separate modes which exist more or less concurrently. What it does bring to mind though, is the idea that a particular individual or story can move from one emplotment to another over time and that no piece of writing is ever fixed to one particular interpretation.

This shift in interpretation is created by the reader, rather than the author. When a person reads Bellori’s biography of Caravaggio or a critic lambasting *Olympia* today and sees them as the first parts of a story about the rise of the avant-garde, this is due to a shift, after modernism, in the perception of failure. Failure has become a necessary step towards eventual success, a phenomenon which can be linked to the democratization of criticism. The critical outrage against the paintings of Manet in the
19th century put the world of art criticism into a much more prominent cultural position. With the advent of this new critical organism, artists would have to consider the consequences that criticism could have on their work and vice-versa, making art criticism a necessary part of the artistic process. A large part of this thesis is concerned with showing how the mechanism of success changed for artists over time through analyzing failure. From the Italian Renaissance, which is when artistic success began to be dictated by critical opinion, through to the mid-19th century, essentially only one type of artist, one academically trained and classically inclined, and who fit into White’s Romance emplotment, was permitted to be successful by critics. In the late-19th century, coinciding with the rise of modernity, other types of artists, epitomized by Manet and others who followed him, began to be successful.

After situating Manet’s life placed within the metanarrative of failure, how can we use that metanarrative to determine what the effect of Manet’s failure was on the careers of the artists who followed him? What effect did Manet’s failure have on art history and, more specifically, biography in art history? How does failure figure into the avant-garde? To address these questions, I examine the role that failure played in the biography and work of Marcel Duchamp. Duchamp’s artwork possessed a certain degree of self-awareness, and this self-awareness extended to his thoughtful manipulation of the connection between critical failure and the triumph of the avant-garde.
“He devised a set of clues, which we developed into a game, but there may be no game”

-Robert Pincus-Witten

Since the beginning of modernity, the concept of artistic failure has become integral to the interpretation of an artist's life and informed their work through the mechanism of biography. Manet’s interactions with the Salon selection committee and then his critical reception afterward represent one major episode in the metanarrative of failure, with the next major episode in this metanarrative occurring in the first half of the 20th century with the career of Marcel Duchamp, which I will argue exemplifies another shift regarding failure’s place in the context of art history, precisely because Duchamp recognized the new role that failure had assumed in art history, specifically in artistic biography, and manipulated it in a variety of ways to ensure his own success.

Duchamp incorporated failure into essentially every piece that he created and failure also figured prominently into his construction of his own artistic mythology and biography. In the opening essay to Salt Seller, Michel Sanouillet says that Duchamp was trying to “forge a world for himself which would conform to his personal concepts” and I argue that the main “personal concept” used was failure. The artist had an acute awareness of the dominant critical approaches to art in the popular press, knew how modernist art was generally received by the public, and then used this knowledge

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172 Yves Arman, Marcel Duchamp plays and wins (New York: Galerie Yves Arman, 1984), 142.
to his advantage in his own career. By examining Duchamp’s deliberate use of ‘failure’ as a strategic tool in his own career, this chapter demonstrates the ironic necessity of failure to his critical success, and how this ironic deployment of such failure may be read as the key to his identification, by art historians, as the first postmodernist.

The idea of an artist constructing their own self-image was not a discovery of the 20th century, since as early as the Renaissance artists assumed self-reflective approaches to the cultivation of their identity.174 In his Book of the Courtier, Baldasarrre Castiglione (1478-1529) articulated the notion of sprezzature, a sort of studied carelessness, as a means to ensure a public image that would benefit courtiers, as well as artists, in their profession.175 The idea, among the non-aristocrats at the Italian courts, was to deliberately cultivate a public persona perceived to be capable of consorting with kings and princes. Since artists could count themselves among these courtiers, this self-conscious self-fashioning became part of the successful artist’s creative repertoire. Part of this success depended on fashioning a sociable personality, one conscious of the approbation of powerful patrons. Part of Caravaggio’s failure, while he longed to be a courtier, lay in his inability to ingratiate himself in this deliberate way with courtly society, presumably because of his difficult personality. Manet also failed at this sort of social power brokering and instead consigned himself to the strivings of bohemia. Both distinctly craved the acceptance that their lack of easy sociability denied them. Marcel Duchamp chose to present an image of himself radically different from the artists who had preceded him. Rather than trying to seem genial or extremely committed to his

artistic practice, Duchamp remained silent whenever possible, deflected questions about himself, and was completely indifferent towards the nature and quality of his art, presenting himself as a bumbling failure who seemed unaware of how different he was from everyone else.\textsuperscript{176} In addition to this, after a flurry of production in the first quarter of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, when all of his most notable works were made, Duchamp abruptly retreated from the spotlight of the art world to pursue a career in chess, leading people to believe that he was retiring from making art because he was not successful. Practically a recluse, Duchamp rented an apartment in Manhattan which eventually became notorious for its austerity, as he owned only a bed, a chair and a chess set.\textsuperscript{177}

An essay by Michel Sanouillet in 1958 explores Duchamp’s identity and touches on many of these ideas of failure, withdrawal and removal. The essay predates Duchamp’s death, at which time it was revealed that the artist had been secretly working on a large scale instillation for the last part of his life.\textsuperscript{178} Obviously, Sanouillet was one among the majority of critics who was successfully duped by Duchamp into thinking the artist had given up. In fact, Duchamp is often characterized as an artist who stood alone in terms of the nature of his practice, and whose avant-garde work was never fully appreciated in its own time. Because Duchamp chose to remain silent on his lack of critical success, whether by not exhibiting or by being reticent about the work he did produce, the audience was left to wonder why he was not outraged by his own failure. He did not kill a man and flee town the way Caravaggio did, he did not cut off his

\textsuperscript{176} Duchamp, \textit{Salt Seller}, 4.
\textsuperscript{177} Tompkins, \textit{Duchamp}, 344-345.
\textsuperscript{178} Duchamp, \textit{Salt Seller}, 4.
own ear as Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890) did. Why did Duchamp appear to be content in abandoning art to live in a pitiful apartment playing chess?

The reality of Duchamp’s perceived ‘failure’ is that it was deliberately and carefully orchestrated by the artist himself. By this point in history, the trope of the failed artist whose genius was only recognized after his death has become a powerful narrative. In the case of the French Romantics, Manet, and van Gogh, public and critical failure had become codified as the necessary prelude to recognition. The downfall of the Academy and the Salon, which Manet had helped to precipitate, created an art world with few rules for achieving success. Such rules had been displaced by a narrative of recognition, in which an artist was practically required to fail critically in order to demonstrate their ‘avant-gardeness’, and by extension their cultural significance. This pattern was then subsumed into the narrative of critical success which became modernism. This was a difficult period of transition in terms of artists’ lives, as the idea of being constantly refused success and admiration was diametrically opposed to the former system of fame and recognition. Duchamp, however, theorized an alternative which was present in the exhibition of his seminal 1917 ready-made Fountain (figure 4.1).

The Fountain

As the legend goes, Duchamp’s 1917 appropriation of an industrially-made urinal was met with a significant amount of disapproval when he submitted it for exhibition to The Society of Independent Artists in New York. The work was rejected and kept behind
a curtain for the show’s duration. Duchamp had been a founding member of the Society and submitted the piece under the pseudonym Richard Mutt, evidenced by the “R. Mutt, 1917” signature on the work. He claimed this ruse was necessary in order to not raise issues of bias towards it being accepted by a committee of which he was a member. In retrospect, it seems unlikely that no one would have known that Duchamp was the “creator” of the piece and he himself admits that the other committee members were probably aware of the subterfuge. Nonetheless, after Fountain was rejected, Duchamp’s cause was taken up by the New York Dada magazine The Blind Man, which published a piece saying that the removal of Fountain from the show was unjust, because everyone who submitted a piece was promised the opportunity to exhibit. In the article, the “exhibiting artist” is only referred to as Richard Mutt, the signature affixed to the work, and never as Marcel Duchamp, indicating complicity with the artist’s intentions. This was because, in actuality, Duchamp was a founder and contributor to the magazine. It is obvious that Duchamp himself engineered the failure of

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179 In Louise Norton’s “Buddha of the Bathroom,” The Blind Man 2. http://sdrc.lib.uiowa.edu/dada/blindman/2/index.htm. 6., famously known as the review of The Society of Independent’s show which championed Duchamp’s sculpture while condemning the Society’s selection process, she says “When the jurors of The Society of Independent Artists fairly rushed to remove the bit of sculpture called the Fountain sent in by Richard Mutt, because the object was irrevocably associated in their atavistic minds with a certain natural function of a secretive sort.” Little biographical information is available on Norton, beyond the contributions she and her husband, Allen Norton, made to the literary world in early 20th-century New York. In addition to contributing to The Blind Man, which was a significant contribution to the Dada movement, she also edited the avant-garde poetry magazine Rogue with her husband. This is covered in American Salons: Encounters with European Modernism, 1885-1917 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) by Robert M. Crunden.

180 Cabanne, Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp, 54. This book by Cabanne is a crucial window into the psyche of Duchamp. It consists of a series interviews done with the artist in his home in Neuilly, France roughly two years before his death in 1968. In the words of Cabanne, they are the first time that Duchamp “…has agreed to talk about and explain so profoundly and at such length, his actions, his reactions, his feelings, and the choices he made.” Ibid, 7.

181 Norton, “Buddha of the Bathroom.”
*Fountain*, and that the point of the submission was to make a cause célèbre of the failure of the work to qualify as art.

Only two issues of *The Blind Man* were ever produced and Duchamp admitted in an interview with Pierre Cabanne that “In *The Blind Man* it was above all a matter of justifying the ‘Fountain-Urinal’…”182 These interviews are generally regarded to be the closest that Duchamp ever came to a candid discussion of his career, though, as is usually the case, Duchamp’s veracity remains debateable. Because of the artist’s influence and ideas, the *Blind Man* piece introduces many views that eventually became the rudimentary tenets of postmodernism, most notably the question of what separates art from non-art. If the only criteria for exhibiting with *The Society of Independents* was to pay a required fee, then on what grounds was Duchamp’s piece removed? Louise Norton’s, the author of *The Blind Man*’s editorial, likened the urinal to a painting by saying “How pleasant is its chaste line and color!”183 By submitting a piece that was sure to be rejected from a show at which artists paid for admission, Duchamp was able to circumvent traditional critical failure and create it himself. By failing so obviously and majestically, he paradoxically made failure impossible.

For this to be true, it has to be proven that Duchamp’s audience bought into this failure created by the artist, because without the complicity of his viewers, Duchamp’s effort was for naught. Evidence of Duchamp’s success at being a failure is found in the writing of American art critic Wayne Andersen whose book *Marcel Duchamp: The Failed Messiah* (2011) is extremely critical of Duchamp and presents the artist as a disruption

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182 Ibid, 56.
in the narrative of Modern painting.\textsuperscript{184} While the use of “messiah” in the title seems to characterize Duchamp as an avant-garde martyr, the text posits the opposite. Whereas I try to situate Duchamp’s self-engineered failure as a catalyst of American postmodernism, Andersen instead views him as the anathema of Greenbergian modernism. Andersen’s criticisms of Duchamp stem from the artist not adhering to the traditional themes and media of art and concludes that this prevents Duchamp’s art from possessing any real value. Andersen seems unaware that, by illustrating the various ways that Duchamp failed at being an artist in the terms established by his artistic predecessors, he is actually bringing light to Duchamp’s fundamental philosophy. Andersen persists in seeing Duchamp’s failure as a fault, rather than grasping that it is precisely this failure that defines Duchamp’s success. In fact, Andersen’s analysis perfectly enshrines Duchamp as the protagonist of Hayden White’s Tragic emplotment, a lone figure struggling against the powerful artistic forces of 20\textsuperscript{th} century art criticism.

\textit{Andersen writes: }

Duchamp was not competing with the authority of art history, but denying it. His refusal to accept anything within the common parameters of art assured him that his interests were at the outer edge of the frothing bubble, … A redefinition of art was built around Duchamp, just as a redefined religious practice was built around Luther.\textsuperscript{185}

\textsuperscript{184} Wayne Andersen, \textit{Marcel Duchamp: The Failed Messiah} (Geneva: Éditions Fabriat, 2011): 3-15. Andersen adheres to the theories of Clement Greenberg, seeing the paintings produced by the Post-Impressionists, Cubists, and Abstract-Expressionists as the pinnacle of Modern art. He uses the typical methods of evaluation for Modern painting, such as form and colour, as the measuring stick of Duchamp’s success as an artist. This is, of course, a fruitless effort, given the nature of Duchamp’s art.

\textsuperscript{185} Ibid, 25.
The religious simile at the end of the quote is apt because it speaks to the reverence for the artist that arose in the 20th century. The public consciousness drew a direct parallel between Duchamp and his art, in that his art was subsumed by this cult of personality. The foundations of this connection can be traced to Duchamp’s distribution of his failure throughout his œuvre, making its presence in an artwork a necessary element. The persona of Duchamp took precedence over the art object itself. The ubiquity of Duchamp in art historical discourse makes it easy to overstate this importance; in the canon of art history he is often considered the first postmodernist. Like many artists in popular culture, Duchamp has now been reduced to his one masterpiece, *Fountain*, and the controversy surrounding that work, which is an oversimplification that ignores of the greater ideas at play in Duchamp’s œuvre. Each of Duchamp’s artworks used failure in some way, which made failure an essential part of studying Duchamp’s œuvre.

*Duchamp’s Notes, Sketches, and Œuvre*

Alfred Gell states that after an artist dies, their œuvre becomes the manifestation of their person and they are represented by their works. For Gell, every work that an artist produces represents a piece of space time that possesses that artist’s “artistness”. Duchamp is an interesting example to study through this framework, as his œuvre differs substantially from all artists who preceded him. It is easy to view the career of an Old Master, for example Raphael, as a finite object, beginning with their

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186 Ibid, 7. Again, Andersen intends this as insult, trying to portray the cult of personality surrounding Duchamp as a negative force in the artworld. I find that it aptly sums up the conscious efforts Duchamp made in his artistic process.

earliest work and ending with their last. Each Raphael painting, drawing, sketch, etc., is a dot in the network of the artist’s œuvre, described and illustrated by Gell on pages 233 to 234 (figure 4.2), and the entirety of Raphael’s career is contained in all of his images.

The same cannot be said of Duchamp, as many of his pieces are conceptual in nature and thus are not completely contained in the images that represent them. If one contemplates a complete collection of Duchamp works, they do not grasp the entirety of Duchamp’s œuvre. That can only be achieved by thinking about the thought process and ideas that pertain to each piece. As a result, when seeing a Duchamp piece, we are not thinking about the piece itself and its nature, but rather about the concept that Duchamp ascribed to each one and how they represent the artist’s ideas. In doing this, we are not thinking about an artwork, we are thinking about an artist. As such, we come to realize that Duchamp’s œuvre is not about any specific piece, place or time, but rather about Duchamp himself and thus about the idea of the œuvre in general. This is illustrated by the extent to which Duchamp references his own work in almost all of his art. Sketches and notes constantly reoccur and all of his major pieces make a multitude of references to previous minor pieces. In addition, if one considers the role that failure played in Duchamp’s art and how essential it was to each of his pieces, we can see that Duchamp’s œuvre is also about the various ways that he, and by extension, artists in general, can, will and do fail.

Duchamp currently holds a unique position in this regard because he was so unlike other artists producing in the early 20th century, when traditional use of media

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188 Ibid, 243.
was still entrenched in the visual arts. Given that in the second half of the twentieth century artists began to, apparently, take cues from Duchamp and move away from the usual media of painted canvas and sculpture, when those artists begin to die, it will signal a large shift in the way that œuvres are consumed by their audience. For example, an artist such as Sherri Levine, today recognized as an important figure of postmodernism for her photography practice, which consists of reappropriating old photographs in new contexts, but with minimal to no changes to the original images, will have a œuvre that consists of other people’s photographs. Like Duchamp, Levine’s “true” œuvre will rest in the concepts that she had in mind while producing each artwork and there will be a key metaphysical aspect to it. When the currently aging first generation of postmodern artists die and we begin to examine their œuvres, the logical point of comparison will be the career of Marcel Duchamp because he was the first artist for whom the metaphysical aspect of his work surpassed any material œuvre.

_Fountain_ may be the most well-known example of Duchamp’s work hinging on the idea of failure, but it is not the first. From 1913 until his staged “retirement” in the mid-20th century, Duchamp kept notes on his ideas for potential artworks, as any artist would. Meticulous reproductions of these notes were eventually collected in various forms in a series of mini retrospective boxed collections Duchamp created. The first of these was the _1914 Box_ (Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1914, figure 1.3), followed by _The Green Box_ (Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1934, figure 1.4) and finally the _Boîte-en-valise_ (Museum of Modern Art, 1941, figure 1.5). Each box was reproduced and sold as part of a series by Duchamp, thus making his notes available to the public on a scale that had not been done purposefully by an artist before. These works allow the reader to
investigate the artist’s thought process and to visualize ideas that were never actually realized. Eventually the 1914 Box was remade in book form and retitled Salt Seller, which further disseminated the notes to the public.¹⁸⁹

3 Standard Stoppages

The first idea that Duchamp writes about in his notes is the early work 3 Standard Stoppages (Museum of Modern Art, 1914, figure 4.3). To create this piece, Duchamp dropped a one-meter-long piece of thread from a height of one meter, traced the outline of the thread and then cut that shape from a piece of wood.¹⁹⁰ With the stoppages, Duchamp wanted to create a new standard of measurement, saying they were “… a new shape of the measure of length.”¹⁹¹ In this regard, each stoppage can be seen as a failed meter since each stoppage has the potential to be a typical one-meter straight edge, but fails to achieve that potential. The fact that the stoppages were intended to be used as a standard of measurement also hints that Duchamp may have had a larger mythology in mind, a sort of imagined world, or 4th dimension, in which length could be measured through use of the stoppages. If that were the case, then failure would be integral to that imagined world, as concrete and objective facts, such as measurement, would be determined through the use of a failed object, the stoppages.

Duchamp attempts to give very exact circumstances for the creation of the stoppages, but these circumstances cannot be the entirety of their creation if one is to think about it logically. Each of the stoppages, while curved, still has a fairly straight

¹⁸⁹ Duchamp, Salt Seller. The book features photocopies and reproductions of Duchamp’s illustrations, drawings, and schematics accompanied by a transcript of his notes.
¹⁹⁰ Ibid, 22.
¹⁹¹ Duchamp, Salt Seller, 22.
shape. If one dropped a one-metre-long piece of thread from a height of one metre, the shape would not be straight at all, but more likely a pile of thread. Was there a breeze? Did Duchamp repeat the process multiple times until he got a result he was happy with? Did Duchamp even drop the thread at all? It is entirely possible that Duchamp failed in creating his failed metre. What is important though, is not whether or not Duchamp’s story about creating the stoppages actually happened, but that Duchamp is provides the viewer with a narrative regarding the work’s creation and, in doing so, guides our reading of his biography. The creative process is normally an imagined event for the audience, but in this case the artist recounts it for us, which allows us to read a specific narrative behind the work’s creation.

Duchamp’s notes bring to mind another aspect of Gell’s study on the artistic œuvre, that being preparatory sketches and how they relate to finished works within the artist’s career. Gell rightly notes that for many artists, the majority of their œuvre is made up of sketches which were made in anticipation of a larger, “finished” work and, as a result, artists’ œuvres are mostly “non-works” made specifically for private use by the artist to help them plan.192 Sketches are typically seen by the average viewer as occupying a low level on the artistic hierarchy and mostly exist as a by-product of the finished work, which carries all of the historical value. Gell argues against this, saying that studies and sketches “… inform us about the cognitive processes of generation of the finished works produced for public exhibition.”193 In this regard they are important because, for the viewer, they illustrate the earliest instances of the ideas of a genius,

which later became the defining element of a “masterpiece”. As such, sketches and notes occupy a similar role to artist biography, because they both represent information about an individual and explain how that subject achieved something that is perceived by others as significant. Their relevance and importance relies on the human desire to learn about the lives of others, especially the famous, and how their personal information, or their biography, informs what they do.

Since Duchamp abandoned painting after 1912’s *Nude Descending a Staircase No. 2* (1912, Philadelphia Museum of Art, figure 4.4), studies and sketches are correspondingly scarce from all of his boxes. Instead, his notes fill the role that sketches normally would for a traditional artist as, again, his works are primarily conceptual in nature. As a result, readers ascribe the same importance to Duchamp's notes that they do to his artworks: Since we are more interested in why the stoppages look the way they do, rather the way they actually look, we see the notes from the boxes as a type of sketch which inform us of Duchamp’s thought process in creating them. Instead of looking for visual similarities in the studies, we look for similarities in the ideas they convey.

*The Bride*

The piece which occupies the most space in Duchamp's boxes is 1915-23’s *The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even*, often referred to as *The Large Glass* (Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1923, figure 4.5). The piece has several aspects which invite the viewer to read it as they would a history painting, such as its large size, title which suggests a narrative, two-dimensionality and rectangular form - making it akin to
a painting - although it is made of glass. However, when the viewer attempts to discern the events being depicted in the piece, they come up empty.

In the beginning of the *Green Box* Duchamp includes sketches of each individual feature of what he calls a “delay”, as well as a plan for the final product, complete with measurements and also a schematic (figure 4.6) for understanding how each feature functions and interacts with the other parts of the machine.¹⁹⁴ While some of these were assumedly done for legitimate planning purposes, it becomes obvious that in producing the *Green Box*, Duchamp was creating a companion piece to *The Large Glass* that is essential to the reading of the actual work, or even creating the box as part of the work itself.

Duchamp seems to have been acutely aware of the fact that his audience would clamour to try and gain a better understanding of a work as enigmatic as the *Bride*, due to Duchamp’s silence on the meaning and intention of his works, as well as the general human obsession with public figures and the desire to read an artist’s creations through their biography.¹⁹⁵ Though Duchamp’s notes touch on essentially all of his ideas from roughly 1913 to 1923, *The Bride* is the one that returns most frequently. Through elaborate plans and descriptions, Duchamp leads his audience on a wild goose chase to try and nail down the meaning of the piece. Ultimately, it is impossible to discern any type of valuable information from his writing, as it is mostly nonsensical and describes

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¹⁹⁴ Duchamp, *Salt Seller*, 26. This term “delay” is used by Duchamp to refer to art pieces that primarily use glass as their medium.

¹⁹⁵ Amelia Jones, *Postmodernism and the En-Gendering of Marcel Duchamp* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994): xii. Kim Levin in 1977: “In 1915 he arrived in New York… to invent the future of American art… The more he insisted his choices were made for amusement, without sense, without meaning or significance, the more it became necessary to explain him. The more he has been explained, the more inexplicable he becomes.”
imaginary objects not grounded in reality (as evidenced by figure 4.6). By giving his audience a lengthy instruction manual for deciphering the work, we are forced to try and understand it in logical terms, since that is the result we expect to achieve from an instruction manual. In this way, *The Bride* is a failure; the viewer wants to understand how each part works and, by looking to the Duchampian equivalent of studies or sketches to do so, will always fail.

*Nude Descending a Staircase*

Lastly, I would like to return to the beginning of Duchamp’s artistic career and examine the role that failure played in the 1911 painting *Nude Descending a Staircase*, No. 2. The piece represents an interesting point in Duchamp’s œuvre as it is the penultimate example of his painting, with 1918’s *Tu M’* (Yale University Art Gallery, 1918, figure 4.7) being the last. It is the only major work in Duchamp’s œuvre that art historians are comfortable placing in a specific movement, that being cubism. It involves failure in two unusual ways.

The first is that *Nude* was rejected by the *Salon des Indépendents* for their show in 1912 and this was the first significant instance of professional failure in Duchamp’s life. The failure of *Nude* is sometimes considered to be the reason why Duchamp turned towards unconventional and increasingly conceptual work following its rejection which is brought up by Pierre Cabanne in his interviews with Duchamp in the book *Dialogues*

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196 Duchamp created *Tu M’*’s for a friend to put in a specific place in her apartment, so as a result it occupies an odd place in Duchamp’s œuvre, as it is obviously not in line with the other work he was producing at the time and its medium is presumably a result of Duchamp honoring his friend’s request as he openly loathed painting at the time.

197 Jones, *Postmodernism and the En-Gendering of Marcel Duchamp*, xii. Here Willem de Kooning refers to Duchamp as a “one-man movement”, which was a label present in many of the sources on the artist. Curiously, contemporary sources echoed this description when speaking of Manet and Caravaggio as well.
with Marcel Duchamp.\textsuperscript{198} Cabanne draws parallels between Duchamp’s rejection in 1912 and the later rejection of Fountain in 1917, which the artist affirms as connected.\textsuperscript{199} It is then possible, then, that Duchamp’s rejection in 1912 provided the inspiration for his later pieces, specifically enlightening him to the potential uses of failure.

The second way that Nude represents failure involves, once more, a return to Gell who describes the painting as “intentionally comic” and a satirical Cubist painting which draws attention to the shortcomings of the movement.\textsuperscript{200} Cubism attempted to show ‘realistic images’, by trying to capture the 4\textsuperscript{th} dimensional view of an object in a single simultaneous ‘view’ that encompassed not only all aspects of space, but also accounted for time. Accounting for time would invariably lead to the chopped-up-looking, cut and paste style of representation that is present in Nude.\textsuperscript{201} As such, Duchamp does not just draw attention to the visual limitations of Cubism, but is able to illustrate the conceptual cracks in the movement; Cubism had a stranglehold on what was considered avant-garde in the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century, which is evident in their rejection of this painting. In this way, Nude Descending a Staircase is a failure as a Cubist painting and by extension, a failure in the eyes of critics and contemporaries as an avant-garde painting.

Yves Arman (1954-1989), who organized a retrospective of Duchamp’s work at his eponymous gallery in New York, compares The Bride to a chess game as the artist

\textsuperscript{198} Cabanne, Dialogues, 55.
\textsuperscript{199} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{200} Gell, Art and Agency, 244.
\textsuperscript{201} Ibid.
“…arranged all of the elements of the bride on one side, and all the elements of the bachelors on the other…”\textsuperscript{202} with the rest of piece consisting of the two sides interacting with each other. Drawing a correlation between Duchamp’s artistic practice and chess is a common theme in art history, since the artist took a lifelong interest in the game and notably faked his own retirement under the guise of becoming a professional chess player. In many ways, the experience of interacting with a Duchamp piece is not unlike the game of chess.\textsuperscript{203} Duchamp said that he was an avid fan of games and in this one, we play against Duchamp and are seeking to better know and understand his work.\textsuperscript{204} The game will end once we fully understand his intentions, but that has never and will never happen, now that he is dead. There are many quotes in which Duchamp compares the practice of making art to the game of chess and whether or not it illustrates a conscious effort on Duchamp’s part to create chess-like art, it nonetheless occurs enough that it is a valuable way to approach the artist’s career.\textsuperscript{205} As such, interacting with a Duchamp initiates a never-ending cycle of failure for the viewer, apt considering the French name for chess, jeu d’échec; the game of failure.

\textit{Complete Agency}

Duchamp, for better or for worse, is often presented as the father figure of postmodernism, or at least American postmodernism, for a variety of reasons. An easy conclusion to make would be that since postmodernism emerged in 1960’s New York as

\textsuperscript{202} Arman, \textit{Marcel Duchamp plays and wins}, 19.
\textsuperscript{203} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{204} Cabanne, \textit{Dialogues}, 63.
\textsuperscript{205} Arman, \textit{Marcel Duchamp}, 86-87; “…if all the artists are not chess players, all the chess players are artists.” And “It is a mechanical sculpture, with chess one creates beautiful problems and this beauty is made with the hands and the head.”
a left-oriented movement,\textsuperscript{206} thanks in large part to Rosalind Krauss and the emergence of her journal \textit{October}, Duchamp was the most obvious choice, both intellectually and geographically. In this respect Duchamp would have been the poster boy for the movement, as he lived in New York for most of his life and was always one to tend towards the counter-culture. However, further investigation reveals many parallels between Duchamp’s work and persona and the initial tenets of postmodernism. American/Greenbergian modernism is defined by Amelia Jones as being masculine, exclusive and authoritarian.\textsuperscript{207} The art it endorses is made by macho men, as one immediately calls to mind an image of Jackson Pollock (1912-1956) drinking and smoking in his upstate New York shed, producing work that conformed to the formalist creed of Clement Greenberg (1909-1994). Duchamp is the antithesis of these ideas. While a certain machismo is still present in many of his works, such as his last piece \textit{Étant Donné} (Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1966, figures 4.8 and 4.9) in which the viewer gazes voyeuristically at a nude female model, the artist also plays with gender roles in some of his work, such as his adopted, 1920’s flapper identity \textit{Rrose Sélavy} (figure 4.10), in which he dressed in drag.\textsuperscript{208} A man? Yes. Your typical all-American male? No.

Duchamp’s work is open to as many interpretations as there are viewers and, rather than offering one codified and simplified language of interpretation, there is no definitive reading of any of his works. This chapter has primarily examined the rhetoric

\textsuperscript{206}Jones, \textit{Post-Modernism and the En-Gendering of Marcel Duchamp}: xi
\textsuperscript{207}Ibid, xiv.
\textsuperscript{208}Tompkins, \textit{Duchamp: A Biography}, 231-2. “[Duchamp] gave freer rein than most men to the feminine side of his nature” and a quote from Duchamp himself: “Much better than to change religion would be to change sex.”
of failure in his œuvre, while humour and language are but two of the other aspects of his work which are instrumental in understanding his art.\footnote{Salt Seller includes sections on Duchamp’s writing and the importance of language to his art is noted in the book’s introduction. Duchamp was also a member of the French avant-garde writing society Oulipo, who focused on experimental writing techniques. Marcel Duchamp plays and wins includes many contemporaries of the artist commenting on the artist’s propensity for jokes and many humorous quotes from the artist as well.} Gell adeptly summarizes Duchamp’s career by saying “Each Duchamp work invites us to adopt a particular perspective on all Duchamp’s work…”\footnote{Gell, Art and Agency, 250.} and that statement could not be truer or a more perfect way to locate Duchamp’s place in postmodernism.

Duchamp was a necessary example for postmodern scholars because he provided a connection between early 20th-century artists and the radically different types of art that were beginning to surface in the 1960’s. Because Duchamp associated himself with the Dada, Surrealist and Futurist movements, which all happened concurrently, he served as a counterpoint to American modernism. When modernism reached its zenith and its limit fairly quickly by the mid-20th century, art critics and historians were able to use Duchamp as a means to weave a separate thread through history and, in their minds, correct a misrepresentation of the avant-garde. In reality, the defining quality of Duchamp’s work was his awareness of his own place in the art world and how it worked, rather than the modernist awareness of the work itself and how it worked. If one takes into account Hayden White’s metahistory, this act would qualify as Duchamp recognizing his own metanarrative and displacing himself from it. The artist was able to trace the path the Tragedy normally took, recognize how certain events from own career, such as his rejection by the Salon des Indépendents in 1912, related to that metanarrative and appropriately manipulated that history. In this way, Duchamp’s
recognition and use of failure is integral to his creation of the postmodern moment. Through actively involving his own career in his work and playing with the place that he knew he occupied in art history, he was able to have his thought occupy the role normally reserved for a canvas or sculpture in his œuvre. As a result, Duchamp’s art became a visual manifestation of agency and in the process definitively shifted the focus from the artwork to the artist.
Conclusion

The theories about biography that I have raised here are still prevalent and affecting art history today. The way that Édouard Manet’s life was influenced by his critical reception and shaped by popular opinion may be seen today in the way that Leonardo da Vinci’s life and legacy (1452-1519) was altered after the publication of Dan Brown’s novel *The Da Vinci Code* (2003). Leonardo was originally seen as genius artist-inventor by art historians, the first major figure in the High Italian Renaissance, but he is now popularly regarded as a scheming secret society member in the public consciousness due to his depiction in the novel.

I forward here that Marcel Duchamp created a new role for the artist by consciously curating his public persona. By publishing his notes as a sort of companion to his artworks, Duchamp guides the viewer/reader’s interpretation of his artwork, in effect doing their criticism for them, which was a completely new technique in art and biography at the time. In doing so, Duchamp made himself into a true “auteur-complète”, controlling every aspect of his art that he could.211 This facet of his work is one of his distinguishing characteristics as an artist and one of the main reasons he occupies a prominent place in art history’s canon.

In a time where there is almost no divide between a person’s public and private life due to social media, this self-conscious curation of biography by Duchamp is more relevant than ever. It is more common now for a young art enthusiast to search for

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211 The term “auteur” developed out of film theory and refers to one figure representing the entire creative vision behind a work of art. The theory was developed by French film critic François Truffaut in his essay “A certain tendency in French cinema” which appeared in *Cahiers du Cinéma* in 1954.
artist’s Twitter or Facebook page, both of which would assumedly be created and maintained by the artist, than it is to read a critical review of their work. In a manner similar to reading Manet’s biography as a timeline of Salon submissions, they may now read an artist’s life as a timeline of Instagram photos. The fact that artists have to carefully manage the version of themselves they present to their audience is now the norm, rather than a radical technique in self-fashoning.

The way that Duchamp exemplified Gell’s theory of the distribution of the artist is also relevant to today’s artist because the internet represents yet another outlet through which their œuvre is distributed. An artist’s biography is now scattered throughout their presence on the internet as well as within the proliferation of texts on art that are a result of art history’s growth as a discipline. Even a website such as Wikipedia, now a popular resource for those seeking a quick way to obtain rudimentary information on a subject, is itself a collaboration of many different contributors, meaning that there is an almost infinite amount of documents, sources, and authors for any text that exists online.

I would also propose that today in art history, all biographies are on equal ground, due to how much the discipline grew throughout the 20th century. The importance of an artist’s life is now only noted when it pertains to the topic at hand, because art history is so much more multivalent as a discipline than it was at the dawn of the artist biography. For example, in an introductory art history course, the Italian Renaissance painters’ lives are elevated for the sake of presenting a simple and linear narrative to a new audience. Manet’s life was elevated by Parisian critics at the end of the 19th century when it was necessary to tie the Impressionists to a previous artist. In
this thesis, I single out Caravaggio, Manet and Duchamp in order to illustrate the place of failure in art history. The hierarchy that once existed among artists, ranking them in order of a perceived influence on art history’s canon, is no longer of a primary importance to the discipline and this is because of the substantial changes it has undergone in the last 40 years.


### Images Cited

**Chapter 1**

**Figure 1.1.**

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**Figure 1.2**

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Figure 1.3

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Figure 1.4

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Chapter 2

Figure 2.1

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Figure 2.7

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Figure 2.9

Figure 2.10

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Chapter 3

Figure 3.1.

A group or protagonist is pitted against a larger, oppressive force

The protagonist overcomes the oppressive force
The public/reader learn and appreciate the virtues of the protagonist. The protagonist is vindicated.

During the narrative, the protagonist scores several victories against the many more defeats. The protagonist is vindicated in these few victories.

The only knowledge or enlightenment that the public/reader receive through this is the recognition of their subjugation to the greater force.

The protagonist realizes the futility of their conflict and of the greater system in place
This recognition signals the expiration of the former system.

Romance
Comedy
Tragedy
Satire
Chapter 4

Figure 4.1.
Alfred Stieglitz. Photograph of Marcel Duchamp’s *Fountain* in 1917. Silver gelatin print

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Figure 4.2.
Alfred Gell’s Illustration of Protension and Retension

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Figure 4.3.

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Figure 4.4.

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Figure 4.5.

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Figure 4.6.
Marcel Duchamp, plan for the upper half of *The Large Glass*. Included as part of *The Green Box*\(^\text{212}\).

[Image removed due to copyright]

\(^{212}\) Ibid, 20.
Figure 4.7.
Marcel Duchamp, *Tu M*, 1918. Oil on canvas with bottlebrush safety pins and bolt. Yale University Art Gallery.

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Figure 4.8.

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Figure 4.9.
View of the outer viewing door of Étant donnés

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Figure 4.10.

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