

The Outward Turn: Personality, Blankness, and Allure in American Modernism

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## ABSTRACT

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The history of personality in American literature has surprisingly little to do with the differentiating individuality we now tend to associate with the term. Scholars of nineteenth- and twentieth-century American culture have defined personality either as the morally vacuous successor to the Protestant ideal of character or as the equivalent of mass-media celebrity. In both accounts, personality is deliberately constructed and displayed. However, hiding in American writings of the long modernist period (1880s–1940s) is a conception of personality as the innate capacity, possessed by few, to attract attention and elicit projection. Skeptical of the great American myth of self-making, such writers as Henry James, Theodore Dreiser, Gertrude Stein, Nathanael West, and Langston Hughes invented ways of representing individuals not by stable inner qualities but by their fascinating—and, often, gendered and racialized—blankness. For these writers, this sense of personality was not only an important theme and formal principle of their fiction and non-fiction writing; it was also a professional concern made especially salient by the rise of authorial celebrity. This dissertation both offers an alternative history of personality in American literature and culture and challenges the common critical assumption that modernist writers took the interior life to be their primary site of exploration and representation. Instead, it argues for a reassessment of American modernism as crucially concerned—in its literary texts and in its professional literary culture—with surface, blankness, and opacity, all barriers to seeing inside which nonetheless produce an impression of personal power.

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## INTRODUCTION:

## THE CURIOUS IMPERSONALITY OF PERSONALITY

*'Cause you got—personality*  
*Walk, with personality*  
*Talk, with personality*  
*Smile, with personality*  
*Charm, with personality*  
*Love, with personality*  
*'Cause you got a great big heart*  
*Well over—and over*  
*I'll be a fool for you.*

—Lloyd Price<sup>1</sup>

“If personality is an unbroken series of successful gestures,” says F. Scott Fitzgerald’s Nick Carraway of Jay Gatsby, “then there was something gorgeous about him, some heightened sensitivity to the promises of life.”<sup>2</sup> There is a striking ambiguity in Nick’s definition of personality, one that suggests competing models of selfhood: either Gatsby is consciously acting, presenting himself as something he is not, or he is pure surface and intention is irrelevant. The first possibility is supported by the revelation of Gatsby’s past, with his boyhood fly-leaf “SCHEDULE” serving as an emblem of a disciplined self-invention straight out of Ben Franklin: “Practice elocution, poise and how to attain it,” “Read one improving book or magazine per week,” “Bath every other day” (181, 182). The second possibility is suggested by frequent references to Gatsby’s absolute blankness: the “romantic speculation” he inspires (rumors, gossip, fantasies, longings) renders him powerless to control how his gestures are perceived (48).

Fitzgerald’s emphasis on external signs taken to express the inner self can be situated within a late-nineteenth-century shift in American modes of self-presentation, usually described

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<sup>1</sup> Lloyd Price, “Personality,” 1959.

<sup>2</sup> F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (New York: Scribner, 1992), 6.

as a shift from an ethic of character to one of personality.<sup>3</sup> Whereas the concept of character stressed the Protestant values of an industrializing, entrepreneurial society, the concept of personality expressed the amoral ideals of a corporate, consumer society; and whereas the culture of character was founded on self-denial and sacrifice toward some greater civic or religious ideal, the culture of personality—centered on what Jackson Lears has called a “therapeutic ethos”—promised personal fulfillment through self-expression. Personality was considered to be a possession, one that could (and should) be crafted and displayed in order to impress upon others one’s distinctive individuality within the competitive environment of corporate capitalism. Personal charm was of the utmost importance, exalted by popular psychologists, advertisers, and other advocates of a therapeutic conception of selfhood.

In his influential essay “‘Personality’ and the Making of Twentieth-Century Culture” (1979), Warren Susman argues that this shift from ascetic self-discipline to indulgent self-fulfillment was reflected in the changing content of advice literature, the “hundreds of manuals and guides for self-improvement published between 1900 and 1920.”<sup>4</sup> As Susman demonstrates, these manuals encouraged readers to think of themselves, and to make others think of them, as “somebodies” (277). A “good” personality consisted in being “fascinating, stunning, attractive, magnetic, glowing, masterful, creative, dominant, forceful” (277). We can see the transition from character to personality, for example, in the work of Orison Swett Marden, the author of many

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<sup>3</sup> For the rise of consumer culture and the therapeutic view of the self, see T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880–1920* (New York: Pantheon, 1981); David Riesman, et al., *The Lonely Crowd* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001); John Cawelti, *Apostles of the Self-Made Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965); David Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith After Freud* (New York: Harper, 1966); Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man* (New York: Norton, 1976); Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: Norton, 1979).

<sup>4</sup> Warren Susman, “‘Personality’ and the Making of Twentieth-Century Culture,” in *Culture As History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 277. Susman claims that this shift in advice literature represents a larger shift in cultural values and he gestures toward further examination of literature and film as potential “manifestations of the working out of the basic ideas central to this vision of self” (282). I take him up on this invitation.



motivational books and the founding editor of *Success* magazine. In *Character: The Greatest Thing in the World* (1899), Marden extolled self-reliance and urged readers to strive for the “highest and most harmonious development of one’s powers” to achieve “a complete and consistent whole.”<sup>5</sup> But in his *Masterful Personality* (1921), Marden extolled instead the value of making an impression: if you have the right clothes and enough poise, “you can compel people to like you,” an idea that would find its most influential expression in Dale Carnegie’s 1936 *How to Win Friends and Influence People*.<sup>6</sup> In the new economic and social order, it mattered not whether one was good or bad, but whether one was attractive or unattractive, known or unknown, a somebody or a nobody.

Although this distinction between character and personality has long oriented scholarly discussions of selfhood around the turn of the century, a handful of critics have uncovered a radical democratic strain in the culture of personality.<sup>7</sup> The ideal of democratic personality persists from Walt Whitman’s pleasure in being “affectionately absorbed” by his fellow citizens, to John Dewey’s contention that democracy itself was the idea of an infinite capacity “incorporate” in every man, to the Young American critics’ search for personal fulfillment through democratic participation in the “beloved community.” Instead of a self defined (and

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<sup>5</sup> Susman, “Personality,” 279.

<sup>6</sup> Susman, “Personality,” 279. For a discussion of personal magnetism in the “success formula” of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century America, see the epilogue of Karen Halttunen’s *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830–1870* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982).

<sup>7</sup> In *Walt Whitman and the Culture of American Celebrity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), David Blake examines Whitman’s celebrity as a political identity, the distinction of having been “affectionately absorbed” by one’s fellow citizens (6). In *Beloved Community* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), Casey Blake argues that Randolph Bourne, Van Wyck Brooks, Waldo Frank, and Lewis Mumford’s pursuit of self-realization through “participation in a democratic culture” poses an important challenge to the view that the sole successor to the Victorian character ideal was “a consumer ethos emphasizing therapeutic growth within the structures of a corporate capitalist society” (7, 2). In the wide-ranging *Democratic Personality* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1998), Nancy Ruttenberg theorizes “democratic personality” as a distinctive mode of political and literary subjectivity staged in the symbolic theater of American political expression from the Salem witchcraft crisis through the antebellum era.

confined) by prevailing standards of likability, personality was for community-minded thinkers a vision of limitless human potentiality. In censorious and celebratory accounts of personality alike, the concept expresses the basic changeability of the self, whether that change is understood as a social transformation (from a nobody to a somebody, as Susman tells it), or in more philosophical terms as a process of perpetual becoming.

*The Outward Turn* moves outside this critical configuration, asking what it might mean to read personality not as a quietistic or radical program for changing our selves but as a way of theorizing that which we simply cannot control: our vulnerability to the attractive powers of others. Lurking in American writings throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is a model of innate personal power that is, paradoxically, completely impersonal.<sup>8</sup> My claim is that for several major American writers of the period—including Henry James, Theodore Dreiser, Gertrude Stein, Nathanael West, and Langston Hughes—personality was something strange and dangerous: an innate capacity, possessed by few, to attract attention and exert a hypnotic power over others. Against the notion of personality as consciously cultivated charm, these writers all attempted, with varying degrees of irony, to rescue a deterministic sense of innate capacity in an era awash in rhetoric of self-fashioning. While we might expect Dreiser to embrace this simultaneously mechanistic and mystical vision of the self, I contend that writers often associated with the constructed performativity of modernist selfhood—James, Stein, West, and Hughes—also subscribed to a naturalist understanding of personality as operating autonomously, without our volition.

Personality can thus be understood as both a historically specific model of subjectivity and a literary aesthetics, what I call “the allure of blankness.” In theories of the “social self” developed

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<sup>8</sup> This effacement of agency has been traced to Ralph Waldo Emerson. See Howard Horwitz, *By the Law of Nature: Form and Value in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); Branka Arsić, *On Leaving: A Reading in Emerson* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

by philosophers and sociologists around the turn of the twentieth century, personality referred not to the particular, stable qualities that constitute a unique individual but to a *lack* of qualities and a corresponding capacity for imitation and adaptation. This concept of externalized, socialized selfhood was fundamental to the development in American literature of themes and forms concerned with personal vacuity, rather than substance, and the attractive pull that such blankness exerts. Personality is embodied in the figure of the empty subject, whose aimless presence in and movement through American literature of the period disrupts the notions of progress and perfectibility central to the dominant cultural narratives of individual self-fulfillment and of democratic participation. *The Outward Turn* tracks this elusive subject through an eccentric assortment of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century texts, each of which challenges the notion of self-power on which the culture of self-improvement was premised. As we will see, the aimless figure is often female, and often a professional performer: James's "naturally theatrical" Verena Tarrant, Dreiser's "naturally imitative" Carrie Meeber, and West's "automatic" Faye Greener. These characters would seem to be examples of what Andreas Huyssen has influentially described as the modernist construal of popular culture as a threat of encroaching formlessness, gendered as female.<sup>9</sup> However, formlessness is central to what I see as a modernist literary aesthetics in which individuals lacking any "authentic" identity gain forms exclusively through the projections of others.

In this dissertation, I aim to correct two common assumptions about twentieth-century personality: that it is the morally impoverished successor to character, and that it is an expression of the modernist concern with psychic interiority. The canonical distinction between character and personality has concealed the actual heterogeneity in how people at the century's turn

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<sup>9</sup> Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).

thought about both concepts. For instance, Susman suggests that both “visions of self” are “assumed from the start not to be natural but to be things that can be learned and practiced”; and yet the idea of personality as a natural power or capacity is everywhere, even in the very materials Susman marshals (280). For instance, as Orison Swett Marden was supposedly busy promoting self-building, he was also asserting in *Success* that the “charm of personality is a divine gift” and the coveted quality of magnetism is “born in one.”<sup>10</sup> Although the rhetoric of character has been productively revisited in recent scholarship, the concept of personality as it was articulated in this transitional period is remarkably under-examined and under-theorized.<sup>11</sup> Especially startling is the critical neglect of the darkly deterministic discourse of innate capacities and innate deficiencies that developed alongside the sunny advice industry, a gap I try to fill by exploring the mechanistic underpinnings of what appears in these authors’ work to be willfully performative behavior.

My genealogy of personality spans from about 1880 to about 1940, the period in which the term’s meanings proliferated and often clashed with one another, and I have culled historically nuanced definitions from a wide range of sources. Particularly before psychologists seized on the term around 1920, personality was a wildly unstable concept, often described in euphemistic language that seemed to be vague by necessity rather than by choice. What *is* personality, Americans wondered. And their answers tended toward tautology. “A certain something.” “An indescribable something.” “An indefinable quality.” “A way.” Or just “It,” the innate quality Joseph Roach explores in his book of that name.<sup>12</sup> Even more pressing, and

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<sup>10</sup> *Success*, April 1903, 241; *Success*, July 1903, 430.

<sup>11</sup> James B. Salazar, *Bodies of Reform: The Rhetoric of Character in Gilded Age America* (New York: New York University Press, 2010). The only recent book-length study of early-twentieth-century personality, Juras Uwe’s *Pleasing to the “I”: The Culture of Personality and Its Representations in Theodore Dreiser and F. Scott Fitzgerald* (New York: Peter Lang, 2006), reproduces the standard narrative of self-fashioning.

<sup>12</sup> Joseph Roach, *It* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007).

perplexing, was the matter of why some people possessed this mysterious thing while others did not, why some people seemed bound for distinction without effort on their part. For all the writers studied here, though with widely varying consequences for their writing, personality is inherent. The success that personality promises those who possess it depends not on specific, stable qualities (such as strength or intelligence) but on blank receptivity to others. In turn, any effort to get “inside” personality, to access the “inner” self, is futile, since the naturally capacious individual is constitutionally quality-less. This is the truly surprising thing about personality in this period: it is a power to influence and dominate that is at the same time a powerless passivity.

In order to understand personality’s chimeric status in American literature, its way of arresting our attention even as it is revealed to be a kind of absence, we must look at the writers who were most curious about—even fascinated by—it as a social and aesthetic phenomenon, rather than those (such as Fitzgerald) who provided the most pat formulations. It also requires looking at a variety of genres: the novel, the short story, the literary portrait, and the non-fiction essay. The writers I have chosen to examine in detail may seem to have little in common with each other, but what binds them together is a shared concern with changing forms of individual distinction: not only the rise of celebrity in the age of new media, but also the less technologically mediated phenomenon of personality and its structures of attention and logics of identity. As we will see, James, who is known for his bitter complaints about the encroachments of publicity on the private life of the writer, is an unheralded theorist—and, as I will argue, sly celebrant—of personality, in whose fiction consciousness is (to invoke his brother William) “a kind of external relation.” Dreiser devoted entire essays to the topic of personality, but for all their tonal vehemence they are muddled with the same contradictions that structure his journalism and fiction: personality is at once inborn and acquired through imitation; it is an inexplicable force of

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nature and a commodity for purchase. Stein's artistic project of capturing "the rhythm of personality" in portraits, informed by her early academic study of personality types, was complicated by her interest in promoting herself as an observer. West and Hughes satirized 1920s cults of personal authenticity and, from this same posture of blasé hindsight, described an authenticity residing within those cultural registers (of fakery, frippery, fashion, and charlatanism) that high modernism had deemed especially and powerfully inauthentic.

In grouping these diverse writers under the rubric of modernism, I challenge the standard critical assumption that modernist writers valued psychic interiority and saw the interior life as literature's primary site of exploration and representation. Instead, I argue for a reassessment of modernism as centrally concerned—in its literary texts and in its professional literary culture—with surface, blankness, and flatness, all barriers to seeing inside which nonetheless produce an impression of personal power. We can trace this sense of externality to Emerson, who in "Experience" (1844) asserted that "the world is all outside: it has no inside."<sup>13</sup> Noting that one manifestation of this externality is impenetrability, Sharon Cameron argues that "the person is a surface—nothing that *can* be penetrated, something that does not even register contact—is impervious as a stone would be," an image that brazenly defies the teleological view of modernism as plumbing relentlessly deeper into the inexhaustible richness of consciousness.<sup>14</sup> By showing a range of "modernist" texts to be organized around psychic opacity, I demonstrate that the conception of personality I have been outlining expands our sense of what it means for modernism to be psychological.

In constructing this lineage of literary thinking about personality, I consider how James, Dreiser, Stein, West, and Hughes responded to the popular culture of self-improvement in which

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<sup>13</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Experience," in *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Essays and Lectures*, ed. Joel Porte (New York: Library of America, 1983), 481.

<sup>14</sup> Sharon Cameron, *Impersonality: Seven Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), x.

“the management of interpersonal relations,” as Christopher Lasch remarks, “came to be seen as the essence of self-advancement.”<sup>15</sup> However, lest it appear that there was a monolithic popular understanding of personality, I attempt to account for the astonishingly variable meanings of the term, and attend to productive tensions within the therapeutic culture in which the term gained currency. For instance, motivational writing, with its unsettling combination of strenuous optimism and blithe assurance, presented some stark contradictions. (Personality is “that which belongs to one human being only,” opens one personality manual, followed by a chapter on “qualities necessary to form personality.”)<sup>16</sup> But so did the work of the most influential literary writers of the day. And rather than see these writers as either endorsing or criticizing a popular notion with detached authority, I consider how conditions of the literary profession forced them to take self-reflexive stances toward their own inevitable participation in the culture of personality.

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One treasured claim about personality in the early twentieth century was that it exceeded the capacity of words to define it. This problem of definition was compounded by the proximity, evident then and still present today, between personality and a host of similar terms: character, charisma, charm, fascination, magnetism, genius, and more. In light of personality’s messy emergence and development as a concept, a terminological demarcation is in order. While “personality” once referred to the “quality of being a person and not a thing,” writes Raymond Williams in *Keywords*, since the late eighteenth century it has been used to describe individual identities: one has a “lively,” “strong,” or “weak” personality, or even “no” personality at all.<sup>17</sup> A

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<sup>15</sup> Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*, 58.

<sup>16</sup> Henri Laurent, *Personality: How to Build It*, trans. Richard Duffy (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1916), 11, 27.

<sup>17</sup> Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 232–35.

more specialized meaning developed with the rise of the mass media in the twentieth century: we have “leading personalities,” radio, television, and Internet “Personalities.” Whereas personality is, according to Williams, “something we all once had,” it has now been limited to the “well-known.”

Indeed, personality was at the turn of the twentieth century so inextricable from worldly success that, despite the mystery of its source, it generally lacked the religious significance of “charisma” and the occult resonance of “charm.” The original meaning of charisma can be found in the gospels, where a “charism” is God’s free gift of grace, a “gift or capacity for right action” benefitting the creedal community. In the nineteenth century, Max Weber would extol the power of the charismatic individual to inspire devotion or enthusiasm and thus to subvert modernity’s disenchantment of the world.<sup>18</sup> Charm had since the Middle Ages been associated with magic, specifically the recitation of a verse supposed to possess occult power; since Shakespeare, charm has referred to any quality that exerts a fascinating or attractive influence.<sup>19</sup> Fascination was also linked to magic and spell-binding, though since the seventeenth century it has denoted the ability to attract by delightful qualities.<sup>20</sup> Magnetism, too, once connected to occult influence, was sanitized and scientized to mean simply an attractive power. The disenchantment of the language of enchantment evinces a desire to escape from the menace and promise of succumbing to a mysterious power, of being truly charmed. As Adrian Poole remarks, “One way of defusing the spell of old convictions, beliefs, and superstitions is to seize a key word” and “force it to modernise. You can shrink the dark force of charm by pronouncing it

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<sup>18</sup> “Charisma,” *OED Online*. Ross Posnock, “Under the Sign of Sontag: Philip Rieff and the Uses of Humiliation,” *Raritan* 29, no. 4 (2010): 58.

<sup>19</sup> “Charm,” *OED Online*.

<sup>20</sup> “Fascination,” *OED Online*.



‘charming.’”<sup>21</sup> Indeed, personal attraction is potentially a threat to judgment. A James character remarks of an “original” young woman, “I don’t want to be fascinated—I object to being fascinated!”<sup>22</sup> Teased by a friend, he explains that “to be fascinated is to be mystified” and asserts, “Damn it, I like my liberty—I like my judgment” (1022).

“Genius” has a distinct history, one too complex to recount in detail here. Although the term “genius” had long denoted the special character of a person, place, or abstract social entity, it was within Romanticism that the modern meaning of genius, particularly its association with creativity and inspiration, was developed. As Victoria Olwell explains, this more specialized usage “defined genius as a highly valued mode of creative cognition marked by originality, spontaneity, and instinct.”<sup>23</sup> More than a theory of creativity, genius was a model of subjectivity: it indicated a split consciousness and an attenuated will by figuring creativity as inspiration, “a sudden rushing into the mind of an idea that was totally authentic to its creator and at the same time completely alien to the creator’s conscious mind or sense of self” (Olwell 3). The figure of genius was, on the basis of his or her exceptional ability, granted a distinct individuality while at the same time being viewed as “completely representative,” a particular mind coordinated with universal truth (Olwell 4). James’s Verena Tarrant, the gifted orator of *The Bostonians*, is described as a “natural genius” who has “the great thing you couldn’t learn, a kind of divine afflatus, as the ancients used to say.”<sup>24</sup> Even Verena’s own father asserts that her gift is “thoroughly impersonal” (79). As we will see in James and Dreiser, the possessor of personality, like the possessor of genius,

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<sup>21</sup> Adrian Poole, “Henry James and Charm,” *Essays in Criticism* 61, no. 2 (2011): 120. For an astute discussion of fascination in *The Great Gatsby*, see ch. 2 of Judith Brown, *Glamour in Six Dimensions* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009).

<sup>22</sup> Henry James, *Confidence*, in *Novels, 1871–1880*, ed. William T. Stafford (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1983), 1088.

<sup>23</sup> Victoria Olwell, *The Genius of Democracy: Fictions of Gender and Citizenship in the United States, 1860–1945* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 2011), 3.

<sup>24</sup> Henry James, *The Bostonians*, ed. Charles R. Anderson (New York: Penguin, 1984), 156.

is simultaneously invested with special, unique abilities or capacities and divested of particularity through the projection of representativeness.

And then there is celebrity, the word with which personality is perhaps most often confused, and frequently with good reason. In fact, the usual story of personality (as told by Susman, et al.) sounds a lot like the story of modern celebrity as told by a line of moralistic critics who have decried the emptiness of the performing self in the age of mass media. In *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* (1961), Daniel Boorstin lamented that the “hero,” a man or woman “who has shown greatness in some achievement,” has since the mass proliferation of images been replaced by a new figure of eminence: the celebrity, defined as “a person who is known for his well-knownness.”<sup>25</sup> Leo Lowenthal, in a 1943 study of popular biography, condemned the turn away from heroes of production (politicians, businessmen, professionals, serious artists) to “idols of consumption,” representatives of entertainment and leisure differentiated not by their great deeds but by trivia of personality (hobbies, food preferences, favorite products, etc.).<sup>26</sup> Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer concluded their classic essay “The Culture Industry” (1944) with the assertion that our predetermined, reflexive reactions to mass-produced culture have made it nearly impossible for us to think anything “specific” to ourselves: “personality scarcely signifies anything more than shining white teeth and freedom from body odor and emotions.” Advancing a typology similar to that of Carl Jung’s “introverts” and “extraverts,” David Riesman in *The Lonely Crowd* (1950) explained a post-WWII change in American social character in terms of “inner-directed” and “other-directed” personalities,

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<sup>25</sup> Daniel Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* (1987), 57.

<sup>26</sup> Leo Lowenthal, “Biographies in Popular Magazines,” in *Literature, Popular Culture, and Society* (Palo Alto: Pacific Books, 1961).

arguing that modern life compels the individual to use as his source of identity not tradition or himself but other people, especially those in the mass media.”<sup>27</sup>

Sharon Marcus has remarked that “intellectuals love to hate celebrity culture, viewing it as frivolous at best, pernicious at worst.”<sup>28</sup> Part of what has alarmed critics about the rise of celebrity is the replacement of individual particularity with blank, impersonal allure, which fools us into equating personal details with distinctive, estimable personhood. But while theories of celebrity are useful for approaching personality as an object of public fascination, celebrity and personality are different in several crucial respects. Whereas celebrity is the state of being well known, personality is the capacity (that is, the *potential*) to attract attention. Whereas celebrity is produced through what Richard Dyer calls an “elaborate machinery of image-building” and consumed on a large scale, personality is experienced in the space between individuals, on a smaller, more local scale.<sup>29</sup> And whereas modern celebrity is conveyed primarily through the circulation of images, personality is transacted through physical presence and realized through encounters. In the early twentieth century personal magnetism was often figured through the trope of the enlivened room: “At a social gathering,” wrote Marden in a 1903 *Success* column, “when conversation drags, and interest is at a low ebb, the entrance of some bright woman with a magnetic personality may instantly change the whole situation.”<sup>30</sup> Dreiser would reformulate this idea in physiochemical terms in the 1930s, claiming that each person gives out a

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<sup>27</sup> Riesman, David, *The Lonely Crowd*, 21.

<sup>28</sup> Sharon Marcus, “Salomé!! Sarah Bernhardt, Oscar Wilde, and the Drama of Celebrity,” *PMLA* 126, no. 4 (2011): 1001.

<sup>29</sup> Richard Dyer, *Stars* (London: British Film Institute, 1998), 17.

<sup>30</sup> *Success*, July 1903, 430.

“characteristic personality charge,” and that “the impact of a strange personality on a group of people” must be measured according to each member’s “relative force of personality.”<sup>31</sup>

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*The Outward Turn* explores personality’s relationship to both literary form and cultural formation, situating American modernism within a broader effort to account for changing standards and measures of individual distinction. Although the externalization of the self has been throughout the twentieth century viewed as a symptom of widespread alienation (Riesman, for one, was suspicious of the “bland surface of American sociability” following the trauma of world war), several influential turn-of-century philosophers and sociologists saw outwardness as a function of the necessarily social formation of the self.<sup>32</sup> For these thinkers, the self was not just influenced by society but constituted by it; selfhood itself had a history, a notion that romantic individualism could not accommodate. In 1888, John Dewey argued that “the full significance of personality can be learned by the individual only as it is already presented to him in objective form in society.”<sup>33</sup> In *The Principles of Psychology* (1890), William James asserted that “a man has as many social selves as there are individuals who recognize him and carry an image of him in their mind.”<sup>34</sup> In the work of George Herbert Mead, who was greatly influenced by James, the self begins to develop when individuals interact with others and play roles. According to Mead, it is through such role-taking that we occupy the perspectives of others, our “audience,” and thereby

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<sup>31</sup> Dreiser, “Transmutation of Personality,” in *Notes on Life*, ed. Marguerite Tjader and John J. McAleer. (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1974), 167.

<sup>32</sup> Riesman, quoted in Lasch, *Narcissism*, 64.

<sup>33</sup> John Dewey, “The Ethics of Democracy” (*The Political Writings*, eds. Debra Morris and Ian Shapiro, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1993), 62.

<sup>34</sup> William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, vol. 1 (New York: H. Holt, 1918), 294, emphasis original. In “Person and Personality,” which James wrote for *Johnson’s Universal Encyclopedia* in 1894, James defined personality as individual identity in flux. Following Locke, James specifies that personality is not a principle or a constant identity: “It is not something which, by simply being, gives rise to consequences, but something which is made from moment to moment by a cause which can be assigned.” James, *Essays in Psychology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 317.

become self-conscious; indeed, “a person is a personality because he belongs to a community” and internalizes its institutions.<sup>35</sup> In 1903, Georg Simmel argued that asserting one’s “personality within the dimensions of metropolitan life” required “seizing upon qualitative differentiation” and inspired extravagant forms of self-presentation: “mannerism, caprice, and preciousness” for the sake of “being different, of standing out in a striking manner and thereby attracting attention.”<sup>36</sup>

Personality was so open to definition in a number of cultural fields partly because the term was in common colloquial use for many years before psychology claimed it and codified its meaning. Historians of the character-to-personality shift place it between 1880 and 1920, precisely the period in which psychology was being established as an academic discipline in the United States. Although today we may think of personality as belonging to the domain of psychology, Ian Nicholson explains that “between 1880 and 1920, personality was not regarded as a basic psychological category that warranted special attention,” and the term was used exclusively in the context of bizarre clinical phenomena, such as the “alternating” and “double” personality that William James discussed in *The Principles of Psychology*, or the “dissociation of personality” Morton Prince examined in his 1906 study of that name.<sup>37</sup> In the 1920s and 30s,

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<sup>35</sup> Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1936), 162. For a brief discussion of James and Mead, see Ross Posnock, *The Trial of Curiosity*, 35.

<sup>36</sup> Georg Simmel, “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” in *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, trans. Kurt H. Wolff (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1950), 420.

<sup>37</sup> Nicholson, Ian A. M. *Inventing Personality: Gordon Allport and the Science of Selfhood* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2003), 3. Nicole B. Barenbaum and David G. Winter, “History of Modern Personality Theory and Research,” in *Handbook of Personality: Theory and Research*, ed. Oliver John, Richard W. Robins, and Lawrence Pervin (New York, NY: Guilford Press, 2008), 4. In *Personality: The Crux of Social Intercourse* (Cambridge, MA: Sci-Art Publishers, 1931), A. A. Roback remarks that “it was not until the cases of double and multiple personality began to crop up that a beginning was made to divert the word from the purely philosophical to the psychological, but as yet weirdly psychological, channel” (20). According to Barenbaum and Winter, “The popular press featured dramatic descriptions of cases of psychopathology, such as the [1908] *Ladies’ Home Journal* article entitled ‘How One Girl Lived Four Lives: The Astounding Case of Miss Beauchamp,’ a popularized version of Morton Prince’s famous case of

personality became a central concern of psychological research across many fields (including business, education, and criminology), with increasing institutional support in the form of journals, textbooks, courses, and conferences devoted to the topic.<sup>38</sup> In 1930, Harvard psychologist Gordon Allport observed that theoretical and clinical interest in personality had reached “astonishing proportions.”<sup>39</sup> In 1938, he would declare that “one of the outstanding events of psychology in the present century has been the discovery of personality.”<sup>40</sup>

One reason for the delay in formalizing the study of personality was that, until about 1920, most psychologists used the term interchangeably with “character,” a period of overlap that critics have tended to ignore. A conceptual distinction was established when in 1921 Allport suggested that character, defined as “the personality evaluated according to prevailing standards of conduct,” was not an appropriate psychological topic.<sup>41</sup> Drawing on Susman, Elizabeth Lunbeck argues that whereas character, in Victorian thought, “presumed a degree of respectability, of participation in the wider world of work and politics, to which only a portion of the male population could reasonably aspire,” personality was free of such restriction: not only *could* anyone have a personality but, as psychologists saw it, everyone *did*.

The psychologist A. A. Roback made a further differentiation within the concept of personality itself, between the popular and the psychological meanings of it. In his 1931

*Personality: The Crux of Social Intercourse*, Roback observed that personality, a term previously

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‘dissociated personality.’” “Personality,” in *Handbook of Psychology*, ed. Irving B. Weiner (New York: Wiley Interscience, 2003).

<sup>38</sup> Nicholson, 3–4, 219; Barenbaum and Winter, “History,” 6.

<sup>39</sup> Gordon Allport and Philip Vernon, “The field of personality,” *Psychological Bulletin*, 27, no. 10 (1930): 677.

<sup>40</sup> Allport, “An editorial,” *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 33 (1938): 3–13.

<sup>41</sup> Allport, “Personality and Character,” 443. The overlap between terms is apparent in A. A. Roback’s *Bibliography of Character and Personality* (1927). See also Barenbaum and Winter, “History,” 5; Nicholson, *Inventing Personality*. In “Character and Inhibition” (1925), Roback offered a definition similar to Allport’s: character is “an enduring psycho-physical disposition to inhibit instinctive impulses in accordance with a regulative principle” (118). In his *De la personnalité* (Paris: Au Sans Pareil, 1928), Ramon Fernandez lamented that character is “the tragic conformity of a man to his definition.”

limited to philosophical and religious discourse, had, oddly enough, “caught the fancy of the masses and made its way into the vocabulary of the street” before it was “encased in an applied setting” (21, 20). Blaming the cinema and such writers as Elinor Glyn, popularizer of the catchword “It,” Roback regretted that personality had been “vulgarized to mean nothing but sex appeal” and a superficially pleasing manner, rather than referring to the individuality as a complex totality (21). According to Lunbeck, this popular emphasis on likability was an important “means by which the discipline effected the shift from the necessarily limited psychiatry of the abnormal to a psychiatry of normality,” a psychiatry “applicable to everyone.”<sup>42</sup> Even as purveyors of popular advice encouraged Americans to display their best traits or invent new ones altogether, psychologists were beginning to view the individual as an integrated—or potentially integrated—whole.

This shift from the abnormal to the normal involved a change in the unit of analysis, from the symptom to the “total personality,” and required new methods of apprehending and assessing the individual (Lunbeck 69). Psychometric tests (known as “personality tests”) were introduced as early as 1919 as a way of assessing emotional stability for military and workplace purposes.<sup>43</sup> In 1927, a Columbia psychology professor attempted to “find an objective measure of personality” using a galvanometer.<sup>44</sup> Graduate students were ranked by their professors on the basis of their “magnetic personality” and “nervous temperament,” and galvanometric readings confirmed that the students judged to be most magnetic had in fact shown the greatest resistance to electrodes. In a strange way, these metric approaches were consistent with the philosophical and literary

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<sup>42</sup> Elizabeth Lunbeck, *The Psychiatric Persuasion: Knowledge, Gender, and Power in Modern America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994).

<sup>43</sup> Barenbaum and Winter, “History,” 5. The Woodworth Personal Data Sheet was used by the U.S. Army to screen out recruits who might be susceptible to shellshock.

<sup>44</sup> Edwin G. Fleming, “Personality as Revealed by the Galvanometer,” *The American Journal of Psychology* 38, no. 1 (1927): 128–129.

idea that personality could be realized only through its external effects; as Roback remarked, “we discover personality, just as we become aware of the presence of electricity, by its effects” (23).

We can certainly imagine the appeal of the Columbia experiment to Stein, who studied psychology with William James and completed a year of medical school, and to Dreiser, who read more widely in the sciences than perhaps any other American novelist. In *The Making of Americans*, the massive typology of personality she wrote between 1906 and 1908, Stein describes a number of characters as “nervous” (they have a “nervous being in them,” or experience “nervous feeling,” or are themselves just “nervous”), perhaps picking up on the idea of American nervousness popularized by George Miller Beard starting in the 1870s. When Dreiser was suffering from neurasthenia in 1903, his brother sent him to a sanitarium to be restored to his former manliness, though the author of a 1907 “personality sketch” of Dreiser described him as “the most nervous man I ever met.”<sup>45</sup> So intense was Dreiser’s fascination with the physiochemical basis of human personality that he spent the last decade of his life writing a unfinished collection of philosophical-scientific essays, which he considered titling *The Mechanism Called Man*.

By treating personality as a universal possession, psychologists and psychiatrists conferred on everyone—women as well as men, the maladjusted as well as the well-adjusted—the dignity of having what Raymond Williams has called a “‘freestanding’ and therefore ‘estimable’ existence” that had not formerly been theirs.<sup>46</sup> At the same time, the paradigm of normality made it possible to reframe the cherished ideals of the broader self-help culture—charm, fascination,

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<sup>45</sup> Personality Sketch of Dreiser, *Newspaperdom* (1907). Dreiser recounted his experience at the sanitarium in “Culhane, the Solid Man,” a portrait of the health spa’s owner. The sanitarium as an institution was typical of a society in which professionals advocated personal wellbeing through “the creation of a ‘muscular’ culture of strength and martial valor, a return to traditional ideals of craftsmanship, and a ‘recovery of the primal, irrational forces in the human psyche’” (Lears, *No Place*, 57).

<sup>46</sup> Lunbeck, *Psychiatric Persuasion*, 69–70.



magnetism—as “indicative of psychopathy at its most objectionable.”<sup>47</sup> In 1941, Hervey Cleckley would publish *The Mask of Sanity*, a collection of clinical interviews with incarcerated psychopaths, in which he outlined the characteristics of the psychopathic personality, the most pronounced of which was “superficial charm.”<sup>48</sup> And although psychopathology approached the individual personality in isolation, anthropologist Edward Sapir in his 1934 essay “Personality” described charm as “notoriously dangerous” because it tends to be “not so much personal as cultural data” that receives its “contextual value from the inability of the observer to withhold a strictly personal definition.”<sup>49</sup> Thus, while charm would seem to be a manifestation of a distinctive, robust individuality, it is actually (in Sapir’s definition) a depersonalized display of sociability. The charming psychopath, particularly in his most deviant incarnations, does not violate but exemplifies in exaggerated fashion the values of his culture.

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This brief history shows the tremendous diversity of thought about personality in the period of the concept’s emergence and rise. For most self-help writers, personality signified a pleasing ensemble of qualities that anyone could acquire through practice. For philosophers and sociologists, it was the sense of self we gained from interaction with others, an image of ourselves seen through others’ eyes. For psychiatrists and psychologists, personality was an individual’s unique psychic makeup, innate yet subject to behavioral adjustment. In all of these conceptions, personality is a *social* phenomenon, whether it is constituted by or expressed through an individual’s interactions with others.

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<sup>47</sup> Lunbeck, *Psychiatric Persuasion*, 69.

<sup>48</sup> Hervey M. Cleckley, *The Mask of Sanity: An Attempt to Reinterpret the So-Called Psychopathic Personality* (St. Louis: C. V. Mosby Company, 1941).

<sup>49</sup> Edward Sapir, “Personality,” in *Culture, Language, and Personality: Selected Essays*, ed. David G. Mandelbaum (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1949), 196.

The widespread cultural effort to define the idea of personality was complemented and complicated by the formation of a literary aesthetics of personality predicated on a refusal to define the individual person in isolation. Like the vague vocabulary of special qualities (the “It” without a referent), literary principles and methods of representing personality were often suggestively indirect, aimed at showing the self to be an intersubjective process rather than an insulated entity. We can see the beginnings of this project of externalization in Hawthorne. Writing on *The Blithedale Romance* in 1981, Alfred Kazin reflected on Hawthorne’s “fascination” with personality as a “modern theme,” contending that “*personality* is the inner truth of what *character* tries to impose on the world as truth,” a formulation that recalls Roback’s distinction between the terms (character is “personality evaluated according to prevailing standards of conduct”) and roughly aligns with a Freudian model of the mechanisms of self-control.<sup>50</sup> Kazin defines personality as “intrinsic, fated, ultimately defenseless in obtaining from the ‘world’—other people—what it proposes”; hence the “social necessity” of character. And yet he argues that, in life as in fiction, the “filtering” from character to personality and back again creates an exciting but unsustainable “drama” whose solution consists in “our ‘real’ personality” asserting itself and “refus[ing] all compromise.” After all, personality is “the absolute logic behind our inner life,” the “shadow on us of some original sin.”

In Kazin’s description, personality’s triumph is against its possessor as much as against character: we submit to, without necessarily becoming conscious of, who we really are. But whereas in Hawthorne’s world personality exists in everyone, in American literature after Hawthorne personality gradually takes on two divergent meanings. It becomes more or less synonymous with character as Kazin describes it: “that social necessity,” how we present

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<sup>50</sup> Alfred Kazin, introduction to *The Blithedale Romance*, by Nathaniel Hawthorne (New York: Signet, 1981), xvi.

ourselves to the world—hence Fitzgerald’s “unbroken series of successful gestures.” Or it remains our “inner truth,” with the difference that its triumph enriches rather than degrades or destroys us. Thus in James’s *The Bostonians*, a novel deeply influenced by Hawthorne, and Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie*, one submits to the law of one’s nature, and in both cases that nature is directed outward: Verena’s is “to please every one who came near her,” and the “one stay” of Carrie’s “nature” is “a craving for pleasure.”<sup>51</sup> These “truths” become known to these characters only through their relations with others, who ascribe qualities to and project identities onto them (Verena’s desire to please is noted to be Basil Ransom’s “interpretation” [85]). In fact, the very idea of individual nature in these novels is a bit misleading, then, as individuals are defined by what they *do* and not by what they “are” or what traits they may be said to have.

If much of the diction of personal power had by the nineteenth century been severed from its divine or occult roots, personality underwent the opposite transformation: the growing interest in individual particularity was accompanied by a sense of wonder and terror at the apparently superhuman source of human difference. In a 1920 essay, Dreiser reflected on the problem (as much a problem for the lucky as for the rest) of explaining personality: the individual who possesses it “does not know from whence it comes, why he has it, why he of all people should have it and so many other billions not.”<sup>52</sup> Dreiser’s naturalism, in its obsessive documentation of social reality, might seem to explain the phenomenon of personality as nothing more than a product of urban capitalist modernity. In a world in which people are governed by animal instincts and drives, there is little sense of personality (per the old meaning, the quality of being a person) in the process by which some people rise to success and fame—and the exalted status of being a Personality—while others suffer obscure decline. And yet his fiction preserves

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<sup>51</sup> James, *Bostonians*, 85; Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*, 23.

<sup>52</sup> Theodore Dreiser, “Personality,” *Hey Rub-A-Dub-Dub* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1920), 107.

personality's magical quality by representing it as the means by which characters absorb the world around them and thereby become, as if in the mode of genius, "other" than themselves. It is this doubleness in Dreiser—this unflinching naturalist attention to hard facts and the material circumscription of identity, combined with his romantic vision of limitless self-expansion—that makes him so central to this project (indeed, in Dreiserian fashion, he extends from Chapter Two into Chapter Three). We might even say that, in Dreiser, naturalism plus a little romance equals modernism.

Attending to the transmutation of personality in this period changes the story of how we got from realism to modernism and how we think about modernism itself. Here is one (admittedly rather elementary) way of telling the story. Whereas realism was premised on the existence of the conscious, autonomous subject, naturalism replaced consciousness and autonomy with impersonal forces.<sup>53</sup> And whereas both realism and naturalism aspired to represent the world as it is, modernism sought to represent the world as it appears to the individual mind. By the same token, modernism can be considered a realism of consciousness, an alignment that would exclude naturalism for its curtailment of individual freedom in thought and action. (For instance, one critic has commented that Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* "has no characters to speak of," since Carrie, Drouet, and Hurstwood are so inarticulate that we cannot imagine any agency for them.)<sup>54</sup> Personality disrupts any schematic division among these modes by serving as an

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<sup>53</sup> Realism and naturalism have traditionally been distinguished in three ways: as historically separate movements, with realism prevailing in the 1870s and 80s and naturalism coming to prominence in the 1890s; along class lines, with realism representing middle-class domesticity and naturalism taking up lower-class and urban life; and by their philosophical perspectives, as realism is said to reproduce a liberal, self-determining subject while naturalism is said to inculcate a deterministic notion of individual agency.

<sup>54</sup> James Livingston, *Pragmatism and the Political Economy of Cultural Revolution, 1850-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 139

impersonal agency, one that in its externality undermines interiority as a requirement for self-determination.<sup>55</sup>

Understanding the impersonality of personality requires rethinking the relationship between realism, naturalism, and modernism, a task that is inevitably shadowed by the work of Georg Lukács. In his championing of realism, Lukács charged modernism with repeating naturalism's errors by deploying an essentially descriptive method that could produce only static, and not dynamic, accounts of the subject's relation to the social process.<sup>56</sup> Lukács sees the modernist hero as solitary, "confined within the limits of his own experience" and not developing "through contact with the world; he neither forms nor is formed by it" (397). For Lukács, this is a grave misunderstanding of how "personality" is determined, as "subjective mental states" tell us little about an individual's actual fate (398). "Rather, the development of personality is determined by inherent gifts and qualities; by the factors, external or internal, which further or inhibit their growth," a process that is obscured by the subject's retreat into himself (398). Thus, with modernism's "attenuation of reality" comes a corresponding "dissolution of personality" (400).

For Lukács, both naturalism and modernism fail to create a "hierarchy of significance" in the presentation of character and plot, an arbitrariness that deprives literature of "a sense of *perspective*" (405). Raymond Williams has observed that although naturalism's leading principle, "that all experience must be seen within its environment," was intended as "a radical challenge to all received idealist forms," naturalism "came to be understood as the very thing it had challenged: mere reproduction; or reproduction as a setting, a cover, for the same old idealized

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<sup>55</sup> In this respect personality is related to "compulsion," as discussed by Jennifer Fleissner in her provocative reevaluation of naturalism, *Women, Compulsion, Modernity: The Moment of American Naturalism*. (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2004).

<sup>56</sup> György Lukács, "The Ideology of Modernism," *The Novel: An Anthology of Criticism, 1900–2000*, ed. Dorothy J. Hale (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2006).

or stereotyped stories.”<sup>57</sup> Fredric Jameson has assessed modernism in similar terms: “The most influential formal impulses of canonical modernism have been strategies of inwardness, which set out to reappropriate an alienated universe by transforming it into personal styles and private languages,” an impressionistic aesthetic that eclipsed the “externalizing and mechanical” aesthetic of expressionism.<sup>58</sup> However, as with the naturalist reproduction of idealism, the inward turns of modernism “have seemed in retrospect to reconfirm the very privatization and fragmentation of social life against which they meant to protest” (2). Whereas Lukács complains that modernism presents the individual’s subjectivity “alone in the universe, reflecting only itself,” Jameson suggests that in modernism (at least of the impressionistic variety) consciousness is a direct reflection of the very social and historical conditions from which it has tried to escape (408). For instance, even the phantasmagoria of *Ulysses*, which would seem to dissolve the personality in its external determinations, instead “serves to reconfirm the unity of the psyche” (Jameson 57).

Where these critics use personality to mean the broadly historical concept of a person’s distinctive individuality, I use it in the historically specific, de-individualizing senses I have outlined. And where they see the modernist emphasis on personality, in its dissolution or coherence, as an escape into private experience, I approach it as a means by which the self remains in constant contact with other selves. Mikhail Bakhtin writes of ancient Greek autobiography and its poetics of self-display that “a man was utterly exteriorized but within a human element, in the human medium of his own people.”<sup>59</sup> In the literature studied here, personality is the capacity to externalize oneself: to be receptive, absorptive, even while being

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<sup>57</sup> Raymond Williams, “Cinema and Socialism,” in *The Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists* (London: Verso, 1989), 113–114.

<sup>58</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Fables of Aggression: Wyndham Lewis, the Modernist as Fascist* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1981), 2.

<sup>59</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel: Notes toward a Historical Poetics,” in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 135.

perceived as autonomous, separate, sealed off. This is not merely to say that the self is formed by and forms the world (it obviously is and does, as Williams takes pains to point out), but also that personality realizes itself best through giving itself over to others. Carrie, Dreiser's paragon of vacuity, captivates audiences because her face is "a natural expression of the world's longing" (342). We learn of Hughes's Eugene Lesche, a charismatic performer able to move audiences to their feet, that it is his "very blasé-ness" that "made him appear so fresh."<sup>60</sup> It is in this outward tendency that we can detect an affinity between naturalism and modernism other than that established by Lukács. In both cases, personality is realized neither through submission to all-determining social conditions (which render the subject powerless) nor through retreat into individual subjectivity (which is imagined to be self-contained and inexhaustibly rich), but in the interpersonal experience of fascination, which thrusts subject and object into contact.

Although in much literature of the naturalist-to-modernist period personality appears as an innate capacity, the question of whether that capacity is consciously wielded finds no easy answer. As we will soon discover, personality simultaneously denotes a form of subjectivity (modern, urban, theatrical) and frustrates any effort to get inside that subjectivity, to access the interior life that it presumes. Crucially, this psychic opacity elicits desire and projection by both characters and readers alike. Personality operates synecdochally, often through facial expressions and bodily gestures that draw in the observer and create the illusion of intimacy. *The Great Gatsby*, which appears only in flashes in this study, is a good example of the mystifying transactional experience of being in the presence of personal blankness. Jay Gatsby "had one of those rare smiles with a quality of eternal reassurance in it, that you may come across four or five times in life. It faced, or seemed to face, the whole external world for an instant and then concentrated on

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<sup>60</sup> Langston Hughes, "Rejuvenation Through Joy," in *The Ways of White Folks* (New York: Vintage, 1990), 88.

you with an irresistible prejudice in your favor. It understood you just as far as you wanted to be understood, believed in you as you would like to believe in yourself” (52–53). Gatsby’s smile embodies the seduction of advertising: it is for everyone and just for you, it satisfies your longing to be recognized without being fully known, it forges an unthreatening intimacy of one-sided affirmation. This “eternal reassurance,” achieved in a moment, is possible because the interaction actually *limits* intimacy: the smile penetrates you but “just as far as you wanted.”

This is of course Nick Carraway’s interpretation of Gatsby’s smile, a reading informed by the narrator’s simultaneous admiration and contempt for Gatsby as a blank object of public speculation and fantasy. In other texts, this asymmetry is heightened, and to a certain extent demystified, by narrative irony. In *The Bostonians*, Basil thinks Verena smiles at him because she likes him, but the narrator comments that “he could not have known that this was fatuous, that she smiled at everyone; the first time she saw people she treated them as if she recognized them.” In *The Day of the Locust*, Faye’s smile is “one of her most characteristic gestures and very effective. It seemed to promise all sorts of undefined intimacies, yet it was really as simple and automatic as the word thanks.” Of course, readers have the advantage of being told that these expressions of interest are false, while the characters remain enthralled by the insinuated possibilities. But readers are kept out in another way. It is hard to speak of the “real personality” of Verena or Carrie or Faye or Gatsby, not least because they are fictional beings whose inner life exists only to the extent that it is represented. Personality’s blankness is reproduced in narrative structure, in which there is no grand development, only repetitive action and incremental (if any) change.

While personality would seem to emanate from a discrete subject, possessed of a natural attractive power, for these writers it is above all an interpersonal—and thus social—phenomenon. Williams writes that personality, once (like character) an outward sign indicating a reputation or striking quality, has been “decisively internalized, yet internalized as a possession, and therefore



as something which can be either displayed or interpreted.”<sup>61</sup> But what does it mean to “possess” personality, when the lesson of naturalism is that the self cannot be understood as a single, undivided entity? Walter Benn Michaels asserts that naturalism was “obsessed with manifestations of internal difference” and in its efforts to imagine “the possibility of identity without difference” was “provoked by its own images into ever more powerful imaginations by way of difference”(22). Hysteria is in this respect an exemplary disease, since (as Michaels notes) it is *in* the body without being *of* the body. Personality, in my account, takes this logic to an extreme: it is a signifier of interiority that, like the “inscrutable” eyes of Dreiser’s Frank Cowperwood, “indicate[s] much and reveal[s] nothing”—because there is no inner identity to reveal.<sup>62</sup>

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The writers under discussion were (with the exception of West, who died relatively young) public figures about whose private lives (and personalities, naturally) there has long been a great deal of interest. Any mention of authorial “personality” in relation to modernism will raise the specter of T. S. Eliot, whose theory of poetic “impersonality” has long served as the definitive high-modernist statement on the necessary division between the artist as person and the artist as artist. “Poetry is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality,” Eliot wrote in 1919, and “the progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality.”<sup>63</sup> Maud Ellman traces the modernist doctrine of impersonality to Romanticism, arguing that Eliot as well as Ezra Pound derived their sense of the impersonal from the Romantic notion of the inspired poet as the instrument of forces that transcend his personality. In their

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<sup>61</sup> Williams, *Keywords*, 235.

<sup>62</sup> Theodore Dreiser, *The Financier* (New York: Penguin, 2008), 12.

<sup>63</sup> T. S. Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” in *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed. Frank Kermode (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975), 43, 40.

“crusade against Romantic individualism,” the modernists attacked the Romantic poets for being too “engrossed in making themselves *present* in their verse” to engage with the past, an engagement that Eliot considered the poet’s primary responsibility.<sup>64</sup> However, another reason impersonality became so important to the modernists was that it promised to protect them from biographical criticism. Since the rise of popular psychology in the 1880s, readers had begun to search the text for hints of the author himself or herself. Eliot’s barrier between the “man” and the “poet” was erected in part to prevent critics from making recourse to psychology—rather than tradition itself—to explain poetry.<sup>65</sup> And yet, as one contemporary commentator asserted, “the great secret of personality is the power of expressiveness—of giving oneself, if there is anything to give.”<sup>66</sup> Moreover, as Lionel Trilling remarked, “for all their intention of impersonality,” the modernist masters “figure in our minds exactly as persons, as personalities, of a large, exemplary kind, asking, each one of them, what his own self is and whether or not he is being true to it.”<sup>67</sup>

“Tradition and the Individual Talent,” the essay in which Eliot expressed these views, was published in *The Egoist*, exemplary of that quintessential modernist publication: the little magazine. It was from his position as an editor of avant-garde writing that Eliot could with authority make his solemn call for the extinction of human particularity in surrender to literary tradition. The self-effacement envisioned by Eliot has conventionally been understood as an expression of modernism’s larger concern with aesthetic autonomy and the effort to insulate artists and their work from the mass market via circuits of patronage. However, this view of

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<sup>64</sup> Maud Ellmann, *The Poetics of Impersonality: T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound* (Brighton, Sussex: Harvester Press, 1987), 4.

<sup>65</sup> See Sharon Cameron, *Impersonality: Seven Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); Maud Ellmann, *Poetics of Impersonality* (Brighton, Sussex: Harvester Press, 1987); and Kevin Lamb, *Impersonality and the Modernist Critique of Art* (PhD diss., Cornell University, 2007).

<sup>66</sup> Lady Randolph Churchill, “Personality,” *Harper’s Bazaar*, June 1916, 46.

<sup>67</sup> Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972), 7.

modernism as “a strategy whereby the work of art resists commodification” has been corrected by numerous studies of modernism’s equivocal stance toward, and in some cases eager embrace of, that very commodification, perhaps most visible in the commodification of writers themselves within the growing culture of literary celebrity.<sup>68</sup> Not only was the writer’s name separated from and elevated above his work (we hear the “names” of poets, Eliot complained, but seldom of an actual poem), but at least since the mid-nineteenth century writers who attained a certain level of fame were expected to satisfy curiosity about their private lives by appearing before the public in various forms: photographs, interviews, profiles, even product advertisements.<sup>69</sup>

The writers studied here all contributed to magazines, big and little, high and low, and some of them even worked as editors. Their careers (particularly those of Stein and West) were shaped by the ascendancy of elite literary institutions often identified with modernism, particularly the little magazine and small-press book publishing. And yet, just as scholars have thoroughly demonstrated the imbrication of modernist elitism and popular culture, these writers’ careers were equally determined by their cooperation with, and even exploitation of, the market forces that they allegedly opposed. This is nowhere clearer than in their strategies of authorial self-construction. James, who had cultivated the genteel persona of the aloof aesthete horrified by the intrusive culture of publicity, capitalized on his own waning popularity in the 1890s by

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<sup>68</sup> Lawrence Rainey, *Institutions of Modernism: Literary Elites and Public Culture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), 3. Rainey describes the changing relationship between high art and commercial culture; for example, he shows the transformation of Ezra Pound from an artist whose sense of value came from a small, elite, salon-based culture to an artist whose sense of value came from publicity and market success. In *The Performing Self* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992), Richard Poirier makes a similar argument about Eliot’s franchising of modernism. See also Mark Morrison, *The Public Face of Modernism: Little Magazines, Audiences, and Reception, 1905–1920* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001); Thomas Strychacz, *Modernism, Mass Culture, and Professionalism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Loren Glass, *Authors Inc.: Literary Celebrity in the Modern United States, 1880–1980* (New York: New York University Press, 2004); and Aaron Jaffe, *Modernism and the Culture of Celebrity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

<sup>69</sup> In the absence of human promoters, products themselves were often touted as having “personality”; for example, an ad for Navajo rugs stated that the unique pattern of each article gave it “a certain personality that is not always readily definable, but certainly is readily recognizable” (*Fra Magazine*, 1913).

writing satires of the literary life for the impudent, much-publicized journal *The Yellow Book*. Dreiser's productive stint as a scrappy hack journalist and editor of mainstream women's magazines enabled him to write with booming authority on matters of sex in *The Seven Arts* and other avant-garde periodicals. West co-edited *Contact* with William Carlos Williams during its brief second life in 1932 and included in every issue chapters of *Miss Lonelyhearts*, for which he had copied material from a popular *Brooklyn Eagle* advice column. Both men regarded *Contact* as the successor to *transition*, which had published numerous Stein pieces between 1927 and 1932.<sup>70</sup> And although Stein frequently contributed to little magazines, she longed to see her name in the *Atlantic*, and she crossed the Atlantic to do a lecture tour of America.<sup>71</sup> In his long-running *Chicago Defender* column, Hughes created "Simple," the everyday black man who offered musings on American social and political life.

In addition to being embedded in modernist print culture, all these writers took an interest in biography, not only as an index of the changing value of individual personality but also as a venue for promotion—of their idols, their friends, and themselves. Many writers of the period wrote autobiography (including James, Dreiser, Stein, and Hughes), but it is in the decision to portray other people, as well as the portrayals themselves, that we can see the subtlest negotiations of literary fame. A digression in my research led me to discover the astonishing prevalence of written portraits in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and to attempt to account for literary portraiture as a critically neglected genre (which I explore in Chapter

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<sup>70</sup> Williams had co-edited the magazine with Robert McAlmon during its first run, from 1920–1923/24 (see Morrison, *Public Face*). For the story of its revival and West's involvement as associate editor (along with McAlmon, in the same position), see Jay Martin, *Nathanael West: The Art of His Life* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1970), 143–150; and *Nathanael West: Novels and Other Writings*, ed. Sacvan Bercovitch (New York: Library of America, 1997), 807–808. For a brief discussion of Stein's contributions to *transition*, see Ulla Dydo, *Gertrude Stein: The Language That Rises, 1923–1934* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2003), 69.

<sup>71</sup> Bryce Conrad, "Gertrude Stein in the American Marketplace," *Journal of Modern Literature* 19, no. 2 (1995): 218.

Three). Building on the practices of biography, painting, and sculpture, literary portraiture was part of a larger cultural effort to redefine individual personality and the best methods of representing it. I found that many portraits in this period figured personality as both an expression of a particular psychic constitution and as a distinctive form that is perceptible only to others, hence inaccessible to its possessor. Portraits offered writers a way not only to capture the “rhythm of personality,” as Stein phrased it, but also to assert their authority as special readers of others and as judges of personal worth, of who deserved to be portrayed. Dreiser, for example, organized his portrait collections *Twelve Men* (1919) and *A Gallery of Women* (1929) around his own powers of identification, sympathy, and desire. And Stein engaged in what I call “sequential” and “reciprocal” portraiture: making more than one portrait of the same person, and making a portrait of a person who has made or will make (or even makes at the same time) a portrait of the portraitist. Seeing yourself in others, finding “eternal reassurance” in another’s smile, is literalized in such exchanges.

These writers’ efforts to promote themselves as personalities bring us back to the question of whether personality can be understood (as Susman understands it) as a “method” of conscious self-presentation. Advice manuals from the 1890s through the 1930s certainly tell us so, and in an optimistic tone undeterred by economic and societal crises. But a broader look at the popular discourse of personality reveals the concept’s subtle evolution in this period. In the first half of the twentieth century, at least three magazines used the word in their titles.

*Personality: A Magazine of Good Cheer and Inspiration* (fig. 1) was started around 1910 by Arthur Fischer, an entertainer known for his skill in impersonation who wrote all the magazine’s content. (An ad describes him as “a protean actor” and “also a protean editor, for he says many

things from many points of view.”<sup>72</sup>) The comparatively serious *Personality: A Magazine of Biography* (fig. 2), published from 1927 to 1928, was edited by Ralph Henry Graves, who in 1934 put out a biography of Henry Ford. Graves’s magazine included reverential profiles of American heroes

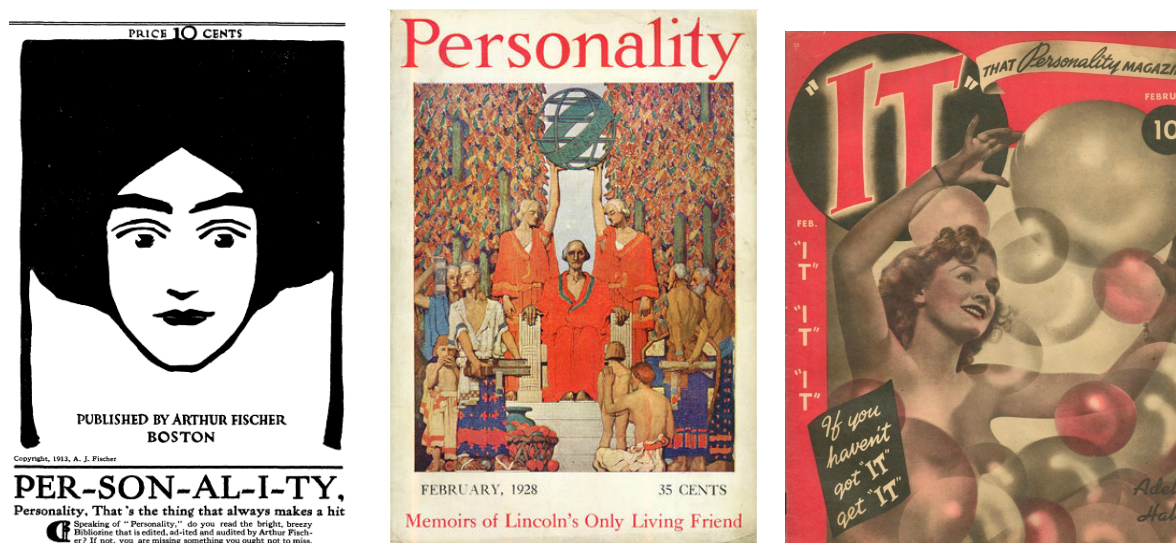


Figure 1. Advertisement for *Personality: A Magazine of Good Cheer* (from *Fra Magazine*, October 1913)  
 Figure 2. *Personality: A Magazine of Biography* (1928)  
 Figure 3. “IT”: *The Personality Magazine* (1941)

but also several sensational installments of Theodore Roosevelt’s diaries, “Never Before Published.” Started in 1940, the glamour magazine “IT”: *That Personality Magazine* (fig. 3) featured starlets along with some real stars and occasionally historical personages, all of whom who possessed “IT” (always capitalized, always in quotations), a quality loosely equated with personality (as the subtitle suggests).

Printing the word “IT” on nearly every page, and never defining it, this magazine was emblematic of a new irony toward the very notion of pinning down what makes certain people stand out, a task the advice industry had approached with blithe assurance. In this magazine, the idea of personality as a present, verifiable quality rather than as an absence (as literature had

<sup>72</sup> *The Fra: A Journal of Affirmation* 7 (July 1911): liii.

shown it to be) was taken to a self-parodic extreme. As a sampling of article titles shows, “IT” was to be found *everywhere*:

Screen “IT”  
 Opera Has “IT”  
 George Sand Had Plenty of “IT”  
 Night Club “IT”  
 “IT” Is International  
 “Legit” Has “IT”<sup>73</sup>

Rare attempts to define “IT” either relied on tautology or deteriorated into cliché and nonsense.

One actress was described as “a brunette of striking beauty, charm, and an inordinate amount of ‘IT’ in all that the term implies,” leaving readers to imagine the implications. Whether readers were to imagine that they, too, could have “IT” was unclear. On the one hand, the magazine told readers, in a cheap double entendre, “If you don’t have ‘IT,’ get ‘IT.’” On the other hand, the magazine asserted that

You cannot buy ‘IT’ any more than you can purchase health. ‘IT’ is not to be acquired in beauty *salons*, or to be had simply for the asking. ‘IT’ is a mental quality, an inherent desire, a feeling of placid, unruffled sense of values, an understanding of the fitness of things, and a willingness to play the game the way the game is played. ‘IT’ must come from within—it must be the result of mental loveliness producing a physical attractiveness rather than just a beautiful body trying to intrigue the opposite sex.<sup>74</sup>

“IT” magazine completes the evolution from the genuine wonder with which personality was regarded at the century’s turn, to the knowing, winking evasiveness with which it was advertised after four decades of tireless popular, professional, and literary discourse on the subject. The exciting notion of a peculiar, singular charm that one could wield, though not always consciously, had weakened through dissemination, until it was so emptied of meaning that “personality” became just another word in a string of superlatives: “Adele Hall is positive personality plus at its

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<sup>73</sup> Table of Contents, “IT”: *That Personality Magazine*, November 1940.

<sup>74</sup> “IT”: *That Personality Magazine*, November 1940, 24–25.

peak!”<sup>75</sup> By this point, the discourse of personality had been replaced by a meta-discourse in which the concept of personality was so poorly defined that it exerted a fascination similar to that of the quality it named—the allure of the allure.

*The Outward Turn* ends in 1941, with Hughes attempting to sell his satirical treatment of 1920s self-help culture to the Hollywood studios. Hughes had played with personality as a metaphor for other things, in particular the allure of racialized otherness, and turned the cultural obsession with personality into a joke about the rise of Hollywood and performers being sold as objects of desire. What is amazing about “*IT*” as an artifact of this moment is that it, too, treats personality as a flexible metaphor: “*IT*” is anything we want it to be.

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<sup>75</sup> “*IT*”: *That Personality Magazine*, February 1941, 5.



## CHAPTER ONE:

## HENRY JAMES'S PERSONAL PROFESSIONS

*You fellows said so much about the bally book that I wanted to see what it was like; so I untied the ribbon, and cut the leaves with the paper knife lying here, and found—and found that there was n't a single line in it, don't you know!*

—Charles Chesnutt<sup>1</sup>

## 1. A “delirious dream”

At the corner of Amsterdam Avenue and 113<sup>th</sup> Street, in Manhattan's Morningside Heights, stands an enormous residential tower that in 1932 replaced the Henry James, an apartment house built at the turn of the twentieth century and advertised to appeal to “refined persons.”<sup>2</sup> When William Dean Howells told James of the building, James wrote back that the news “at once deeply agitated & wildly uplifted” him.<sup>3</sup> It was his “delirious dream” that the event would bring his work to the American public's attention, but he despaired that the venture would inevitably fail and be rebranded with the name of a more popular writer: “best of all as the Edith Wharton!” (368, 369).

When he made this prediction in 1902, James was hardly lacking in fame, and he did much in his lifetime to create the name a canny developer could use as shorthand for sophistication. He was, however, unequivocally disturbed by the rapidly expanding publicity of modern life in the United States and England, and in the 1880s and 1890s he frequently

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Chesnutt, “Baxter's Procrustes,” in *Charles W. Chesnutt: Stories, Novels, and Essays* (New York: Library of America, 2002), 792. The story first appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1904.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Anesko, *Monopolizing the Master: Henry James and the Politics of Modern Literary Scholarship* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012), 8. The apartment house is a great emblem for James's concerns, since it had for much of the nineteenth century been perceived as the troubling of private life by publicity. See Sharon Marcus, *Apartment Stories: City and Home in Nineteenth-Century Paris and London* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999).

<sup>3</sup> Henry James, *Letters, Fictions, Lives: Henry James and William Dean Howells*, ed. Michael Anesko (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 368, emphasis original.

expressed concern about the “insurmountable desire to *know*” as both a general cultural impulse and an institutional feature of professional literary culture.<sup>4</sup> James was horrified by “the invasion, the impudence and shamelessness, of the newspaper and the interviewer, the devouring *publicity* of life, the extinction of all sense between public and private” and persistently troubled by the professional pressure on the author to be not just a creator of literature but also a personality: to grant interviews and sign autographs, to read one’s work in public, even to appear in product advertisements.<sup>5</sup> He did occasionally sit for portraits and late in his career grudgingly agreed to a few interviews, but these were small concessions in comparison to the self-promotional strategies of some of his peers, most notably Mark Twain’s public lectures. James’s “delirious dream” that his name being displayed on a Manhattan apartment house would somehow gain him readers indicates the degree to which he accepted personal publicity only in the service of promoting his work.

James’s principled resistance to demands for his person and his eloquent complaints about the trials of modern authorship earned him a reputation, in his lifetime and in his critical legacy, as a passionate defender of artistic privacy—both of the artist himself and of the creative act. Indeed, the enduring image of James—the aloof aesthete unconcerned with money, devoted to style, and discomfited by vulgar public curiosity about his life—comes partly from the massive project of selective self-presentation he undertook in his last decade: revising and collecting his fiction in the New York Edition, writing pieces of an autobiography, and burning piles of letters

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<sup>4</sup> Richard Salmon remarks that “James discussed Flaubert’s notion of artistic impersonality in his 1893 review of the *Correspondence de Gustave Flaubert*, where he also noted the ironic disjunction between Flaubert’s aesthetic theory and the publication of the letters in which that theory was expounded.” It was in this review that James raised “the whole question of the rights and duties, the decencies and discretions of the insurmountable desire to *know*.” Salmon, *Henry James and the Culture of Publicity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 207.

<sup>5</sup> Henry James, *The Notebooks of Henry James*, ed. F. O. Matthiessen and Kenneth B. Murdock (New York: Oxford University Press, 1947), 82. James wrote this in his notebook in 1887, when he was horrified by an American woman’s newspaper report on the “personal domestic arrangements and secrets” of the people she had been staying with in Venice (82). This episode inspired *The Reverberator* (1888).

in an effort to guide future critics and frustrate future biographers. But in recent decades biographers and scholars have uncovered a more nuanced James. The best works in this critical strain have carefully and shrewdly examined James's views of the culture of publicity and the literary market and have fundamentally changed our perception of James's career choices.<sup>6</sup> This reassessment of James's work in terms of his professional anxieties and ambivalences has especially illuminated some of his most self-conscious work: his diverse body of fiction about the artistic life in the age of publicity. James's many stories about writers and painters have been read as satires not only of the personal violations perpetrated by journalists, critics, and other intrusive figures, but also, in some cases, of artists' willingness to be betrayed and exposed. These artistic compromises are in turn assumed to be James's ironic defense against publicity and his necessary implication in it.

Despite the betrayals, compromises, and failures involved in the artistic life as James portrays it, there seems to be a touch of irony in his contempt for what he called "the dreary duty of being a personality."<sup>7</sup> Indeed, what has been neglected in studies of James's fiction about the artistic life are the ways in which he not only responded critically to the artificial, performative model of personality imposed on artists but also—as I will argue—imagined such staged, theatrical selfhood as a condition for intimacy in the modern age. Whereas critics have taken James's late pronouncements on his relationship to publicity and celebrity and being an artistic

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<sup>6</sup> See Michael Anesko, *"Friction with the Market": Henry James and the Profession of Authorship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); Richard Salmon, *Henry James and the Culture of Publicity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997); and Jonathan Freedman, *Professions of Taste: Henry James, British Aestheticism, and Commodity Culture* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990). In arguing that James was more involved in the literary marketplace—and poorer—than critics have assumed, Anesko not only gives us a portrait of the artist as a canny fashioner of his own career in a quickly changing marketplace of words, but he also suggests that James's behavior in that marketplace demonstrates the changing nature of the literary profession. On the question of "obliging the worshipful," Salmon explores James's deep concern with publicity and its effect on professional authorship. Freedman traces the complex interaction of James and aestheticism in the context of the professionalization of literary and artistic practice.

<sup>7</sup> Henry James, "The Death of the Lion," *The Novels and Tales of Henry James*, New York Edition, vol. 15 (New York: Scribner's, 1909), 130.

personality as the whole story, I demonstrate through readings of his earlier fiction (including several artist stories written in the 1890s and *The Bostonians*) that James's much-discussed "horror" was something of a cover story. In these texts, personality is represented not as a duty but as its opposite: a way of giving one's self over to others, indeed of realizing one's self through the projections and ascriptions of others. This vision of productive publicity changes our view of James's so-called retreat from encroaching market forces, recasting his oppositional rhetoric as an acknowledgement of the fraught pleasures of being circulated within the literary field.

Thus, in "The Death of the Lion" (1894) a young admirer feels "affectionately addressed" as a great author reads from his manuscript; and in *The Bostonians* (1886) a particularly eager member of an inspirational speaker's "exceedingly affected" audience feels that "to *his* starved senses she irresistibly appealed" and that "he was particularly spoken to."<sup>8</sup> It would be easy to dismiss personal attachments formed in such contexts as the illusory projections of the reader or auditor. But James's decision to give us little to no information about the inner experience of the artists themselves in the moment of performance opens the possibility that what the audience perceives as personal plenitude is in fact personal blankness, as well as that the audience's feeling of being exclusively, affectionately addressed is the effect of this specific kind of personality. Far from being merely the constructed persona an artist reluctantly adopts when appearing in public, personality in these Jamesian scenes is a capacity that preexists the public but that can be realized only in the affirming presence of an audience.

My aim in this chapter is to reconstruct and examine a body of writing in which James theorized artistic personality in the age of publicity. This requires a terminological distinction. By "artistic personality" I do not mean the personality of the author as it was or was not considered to shape a work of art. It was not until after James's death that the great modernist credo of

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<sup>8</sup> Henry James, *The Bostonians*, ed. Charles R. Anderson (New York: Penguin, 1984), 59, 87, 85, 265.

poetic impersonality achieved its clearest articulation (by T. S. Eliot, who called for the “continual extinction of personality”), but James himself frequently objected to the assumption that an author’s personality could serve a source of aesthetic unity. “From the personality of the author,” he explained to fellow writer Mary Ward in 1899, a novel “can get nothing but a unity of execution & of tone.”<sup>9</sup> He added, parenthetically, that the author’s personality, “however enchanting, is a thing for the reader only, & not for the author himself...to count in at all” (320). What I intend to trace through James’s writing is not the personality of James himself but his thinking about personality as a historical phenomenon particularly affecting artists and their potentially “enchanted” audiences.

In James’s fiction, personality is an attractive power: the power to interest, to fascinate, to compel, and thereby to produce a feeling of intimacy. As such, personality complicates the distinction between publicity and privacy on which James’s statements about authorship would seem to depend. In the artist stories, and even more so in *The Bostonians*, personality is neither an impersonal public image nor the “real” individual behind the image, both of which imply a certain completeness and detachment. Instead, personality is an intersubjective process, a lack that can be filled only through an audience’s attributions; it is a power that can be realized only through asymmetrical relations with interested observers, however intimate those others may (or may not) be. For artists, the apparent degradation of going public, as well as the apparent dignity of staying private, are thus challenged by the notion of personality as a necessary dependence on the fantasies of others. And for audiences, the experience of being “individually addressed” gains value not for its privacy but for its sheer publicity: the scarce privilege of being the “real” recipient of the attention and affection imagined by many. Personality in James’s fiction thus reconfigures publicity as a mass privacy and privacy as an intimate publicity.

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<sup>9</sup> Henry James, *Henry James: A Life in Letters*, ed. Philip Horne (London: Allen Lane, 1999), 320.

The chapter is organized around three moments in James's career, moving backwards in time in order to plumb the origins of his preoccupation with the personal. The first moment is in the mid-1890s, when at the height of his despair about the "devouring publicity of life" James contributed several satires of the artistic life to a London magazine called *The Yellow Book*. In response to the magazine editors' exploitation of his fame, James used these stories as an occasion to comment on his own participation in the culture of literary celebrity. This episode in James's career reveals his growing acceptance of his inevitable, and possibly pleasurable, complicity in what he perceived as the growing distance between the modern author's name and reputation and his work—a distance that within a few years would lead to the branding of his name on a New York City residential building. The second moment is a bit earlier in the 1890s, when James published "The Private Life," a story about two artists with opposite conditions: one is split between his public and private identities, whereas the other is *only* public, with no private existence at all. This schematic tale serves as a pivot point in James's thinking about personality: the psychic bivalence of the modern artist is made more unsettling by the figure of the purely public individual, whose consciousness cannot be divided because, as one character remarks, he "isn't even whole."<sup>10</sup> The third moment is in the mid-1880s, when James was more broadly, and somewhat less cynically, interested in the American culture of publicity and its human types. In *The Bostonians*, which Philip Fisher has called James's "romance of fame," James first depicted the figure of the "naturally theatrical" individual with what I read as a sense of wonder at the mysterious capacity that made some people famous without effort on their part.<sup>11</sup> The productive blankness of this novel's celebrity persona not only changes how we understand James's later

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<sup>10</sup> Henry James, *The Private Life* (London: James R. Osgood, McIlvaine & Co., 1893), 33.

<sup>11</sup> Philip Fisher, "Appearing and Disappearing in Public: Social Space in Late-Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture," in *Reconstructing American Literary History*, ed. Sacvan Bercovitch (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), 178. James, *Bostonians*, 77.

position on publicity. It also sheds new light on later attempts by Theodore Dreiser and Nathanael West (as explored in Chapters Two and Four, respectively) to use such personal blankness as a structural principle of their fiction about acting.

The works by James discussed here represent different historical periods and different milieus, from the post-Reconstruction New England reform scene to the fin-de-siècle elite London literary crowd, and they illuminate each other in surprising ways. As an exploration of the perils of fame and the possibilities of intimacy within cultural institutions and social arrangements designed to prevent it, *The Bostonians* establishes the conditions of subjectivity that would seem to dispose an individual (as the novel's heroine seems disposed) to “expose [one]self, give [one]self away, turn [one]self inside out” for the “satisfaction” of others (370). The artist stories turn attention to the agents and beneficiaries of such exposure by employing narrators with deeply personal investments in the artists whose private identities they claim to respect or protect. In this arc from James's social realism to his more explicitly psychological investigation into modern spectatorship, my archival discoveries about James's vexed relationship with the aestheticist *The Yellow Book* and his ironic view of his own literary celebrity help to complicate James's critiques of the overly personal professions. It is with a case study of James's *Yellow Book* days that I begin this story of his “delirious dream” that the advertisement of his name might do his work some good.

## 2. Circulations: *The Yellow Book* and Literary Personality

“I hate too much the horrid aspect and company of the whole publication,” wrote James to his brother William on May 28, 1894, a month and a half after his story “The Death of the Lion” appeared in the first issue of *The Yellow Book*. “And yet I am again to be intimately—conspicuously—associated with the second number. It is for gold and to oblige the worshipful

Harland.”<sup>12</sup> James went on to publish two more stories and an essay in the magazine and even recalled fondly his first meeting and continued association with its editors, Henry Harland and Aubrey Beardsley, in the preface to the volume of the New York Edition in which he collected all of his *Yellow Book* stories. In both the letter to William and in the later preface, James appears deeply concerned with his financial security and professional and social standing in the transatlantic literary world at the turn of the twentieth century.

James’s motives—earning money and obliging the worshipful—have been the focus of critics who have tried, over the last thirty or so years, to complicate the image of James as a detached mandarin. Even so, James’s involvement with *The Yellow Book* has been either treated as a flirtation with aestheticism or subsumed into a general argument about his professional desperation during a period of rejection by established magazines.<sup>13</sup> In his erudite *Professions of Taste*, Jonathan Freedman argues that through his cautious engagement with aestheticism James asserted himself as “the true exemplar of the disinterested, artistic novelist” but at the same time established himself as a literary professional who recognized the appeal of disinterestedness to an elite readership, a model that so many modernist artists would follow (178).

But while Freedman and others see James’s publication in *The Yellow Book* merely as part of his general professional transformation in the 1890s, I suggest that his involvement with the magazine reveals his complex stance toward the specific problem of literary personality. Since these critics’ arguments generally proceed from James’s point of view, I take a complementary approach by asking what *The Yellow Book* thought of James. I claim that the editors, Henry

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<sup>12</sup> Henry James, *Henry James: Selected Letters*, ed. Leon Edel (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 277.

<sup>13</sup> Freedman argues that James turned to the elite magazines of 1890s aestheticism in a “reformulation of his sense of his artistic identity” (176–77). Anesko and Jacobson both argue that James, finding himself less welcome at the major periodicals, turned to these aesthetic magazines for a new market.



Harland and Aubrey Beardsley, and the publisher, John Lane, used not James's writing but his personality to promote their magazine. Their request for James's contribution represents a peculiar relation between authors and readers: in the age of publicity an author's name could be separated from his work, and readers could thus feel a relation to an author independent of his writing. The *Yellow Book* editors and publisher evacuated "Henry James" of personal reference, turning his name into a signifier of indifference to popular taste and obsession with formal particularity. James's response to this exploitation of personality was to satirize it in the stories he contributed to the magazine. James decided to contribute to the magazine neither in flirtation nor in desperation but rather, I argue, because he saw an opportunity to write a meta-commentary on the very act of contributing to *The Yellow Book* and on his unhappy participation in the culture of publicity more generally. In his *Yellow Book* stories, James is concerned with the situation of the modern writer facing the demands of the market and "the dreary duty of being a personality," as he writes in "The Death of the Lion" (130). But he is also disturbed by the situation of the modern reader, who is distracted from reading by the spectacle of personality. Since these stories of authors are written from the perspective of friends or admirers of the authors—"special" readers, as I will call them—they show the process by which authorial personality creates for all readers an illusion of the intimacy that is in fact afforded to the privileged few.

In the early 1890s, James began to have trouble publishing his work in the magazines that had previously accepted him. As he became "ever more interested in the projection of complex states of thought and feeling," writes F. O. Matthiessen, he encountered resistance from editors of such magazines as *The New Review*, *Longman's*, *The Atlantic*, *Harper's*, and *Scribner's*, "who found his

stories too long and not ‘exciting’ enough.”<sup>14</sup> Harland came along at just the right time. James would later praise Harland’s “emphasised indifference to the arbitrary limit of length,” an indifference that “struck” James as “the fruit of the finest artistic intelligence.”<sup>15</sup> Harland also offered James a generous rate of pay. As Michael Anesko shows, James’s income from periodicals declined each year in the first half of the 1890s—in 1893 it was approximately \$550, down from approximately \$5,400 in 1888 (190–92).<sup>16</sup> Harland’s offer was too good to refuse.

James was lured by the formal and financial generosity of the new magazine, but he was also drawn by a sense of obligation to Harland, a strange and compelling figure. Born in New York in 1861, Harland tried in his twenties to become a writer but was unable to publish, or even complete, most of his early works. Creating a niche for himself in the market for realist novels, he adopted the pseudonym Sidney Luska, presented himself as Jewish, and published several novels on Jewish themes in the mid-1880s. When a journalist revealed that Harland was not actually Jewish, he fled to London in 1889 to start over. Despite his disgraced exit from the United States, the expatriate quickly fell in with important Americans in London. Edmund Gosse introduced Harland to James in 1890, and William Dean Howells, who liked Harland’s Jewish novels, also recommended him to James, who, always happy to meet talented young men, responded enthusiastically: “I shall be glad to make him mine if he’ll be so—he seems a very clever fellow.”<sup>17</sup> James did make Harland his friend and in the process became increasingly concerned about the young man’s failing health and withering spirit. When asked to back Harland’s magazine, James eagerly stepped up to help his desperately yearning friend. “I want to do

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<sup>14</sup> Henry James, *Notebooks*, xvi.

<sup>15</sup> Henry James, *The Art of the Novel: Critical Prefaces*, ed. R. P. Blackmur (New York: Scribner’s, 1934), 219.

<sup>16</sup> Anesko estimates that James made \$300 (about £60) for his fifteen-thousand-word “The Death of the Lion,” with the *Yellow Book*’s relatively high rate (for an English periodical) of 2¢ a word (192).

<sup>17</sup> Henry James, *Henry James: A Life in Letters*, ed. Philip Horne (London: Allen Lane, 1999), 229.

something very good for the Y.B.," James declared in his notebook just days after the magazine's debut.<sup>18</sup>

While James's reasons for contributing to *The Yellow Book*—formal freedom, money, and social obligation—are clearly stated in his letter and later preface, they do not explain why Harland, Beardsley, and Lane wanted James in the first place. These men showed a rebellious spirit in their conception of *The Yellow Book*: "As the sole editorial staff," announced Harland, "we would feel free and welcome to publish any and all of ourselves that nobody else could be hired to print" (4). Why, if their ambition was to publish unpublishable material by unpublished writers and artists, did they seek out as their first contributor the well-published (if not recently so) Henry James? Even though the *Yellow Book* editors were interested in novelty, they recognized that a familiar name would legitimate their bold experiment.

The experiment was bold in two respects: the magazine's appearance was unconventional, and its contributors were, for the most part, unknown. The editors described the project in a prospectus for the inaugural issue:

The aim . . . of *The Yellow Book* is to depart as far as may be from the bad old traditions of periodical literature, and to provide an Illustrated Magazine which shall be beautiful as a piece of bookmaking, modern and distinguished in its letter-press and its pictures. . . . It will be charming, it will be daring, it will be distinguished. It will be a *book*—a book to be read, and placed upon one's shelves, and read again; a book in form, a book in substance. . . .<sup>19</sup>

Harland, Beardsley, and especially Lane, a collector of antiquarian books and the preeminent maker of fine editions in the 1890s, considered all aspects of the book's appearance—the type of printing, cloth of sufficient durability and the right shade of yellow, the best paper for reproducing art. The first issue was something to behold: the banana-yellow and waxy-black

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<sup>18</sup> Henry James, *Notebooks*, 160.

<sup>19</sup> Aubrey Beardsley and Henry Harland, in Katherine Mix, *A Study in Yellow: The Yellow Book and Its Contributors* (New York: Greenwood, 1969), 77–79.

front cover featured a large illustration by Beardsley of a singing fat woman; the back cover advertised the roster of contributors; and inside, its two-hundred-and-seventy-two thick pages were, anachronistically, left uncut and adorned with catchwords. With such striking visual and tactile qualities, *The Yellow Book* instantly distinguished itself from the literary quarterlies, an august form characterized by the density of words on the page, as well as from the flimsy popular illustrated magazines designed for quick consumption.

The question of who would fill the pages of this beautiful book was more complicated. According to Harland, on January 1, 1894, Beardsley came to his home, where they “declared, each to each, that we thought it quite a pity and a shame that London publishers should feel themselves longer under obligation to refuse any more of our good manuscript.”<sup>20</sup> Resolving then and there to start a magazine, they decided to publish work by themselves and other young writers and artists and made an appointment with Lane for the next day. When Harland met with Beardsley and Lane on January 2, James’s name came up immediately: “At one o’clock precisely the three of us sat down to luncheon. At five minutes after one [Lane] had consented to ‘back’ our publication with Beardsley as art editor and myself as editor. At exactly half-past one we had arranged over the telephone with Mr. Henry James for the publication of our first piece of fiction” (4). Harland’s account may be too crisply precise to be entirely true, but it nonetheless shows how immediately and largely James figured in the incipient magazine. Lane would back the magazine with money, while James would back it with his difficult style and magisterial name and even his face, in a now-iconic portrait by John Singer Sargent, printed in the second issue. Arthur Waugh, a young journalist who lunched with Harland and Lane on January 4 and immediately reported the magazine’s plans to the *American Critic*, saw *The Yellow Book* as putting “the oldest school and the newest side by side,” with a list ranging from the middle-aged Henry

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<sup>20</sup> Henry Harland, interview, *New York Herald*, December 13, 1903, 4.

James and Edmund Gosse, to Arthur Symons and Hubert Crackanthorpe, both in their twenties, and (at Beardsley's suggestion) Max Beerbohm, still an undergraduate at Oxford.<sup>21</sup> It would *not* include Wilde, whom Beardsley banned from the magazine. While the diversity of contributors, and the youth of many, may seem to have been intended to represent the radically “new,” Waugh claims in his memoir that “the table of contents for the first number . . . was an ingenious study in compromise,” and contributing poet Richard Le Gallienne remarks in his memoir that the “shrewd” Lane, architect of this compromise, “sandwiched in such safe and even ‘respectable’ writers as Henry James.”<sup>22</sup>

Harland's affinity for James was largely for his style. As Katherine Mix notes, Harland showed boundless admiration for his fellow expatriate throughout their acquaintance, calling him “mon *maître*” to all of London (169). So when it came to starting an avant-garde magazine, Harland immediately thought of his Master, who was not as “safe,” as Le Gallienne characterized him, but volatile during this period of decreasing demand for his writing and increasing demand for his person. After suffering in early 1894 “a period of terrific sacrifice to the ravenous Moloch of one's endless personal, social relations—one's eternal exposures, accidents, disasters,” James had had enough: “Basta,” he declared in his notebook and began writing “The Coxon Fund,” which Leon Edel describes as “perhaps the first in which James's ‘later manner’ begins to emerge.”<sup>23</sup> Harland's reverence for James deepened as he perceived his Master becoming increasingly indifferent to the market and his style increasingly indirect.

Harland went so far as to declare James, in a 1903 interview, “the very greatest mind that has

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<sup>21</sup> Arthur Waugh, *One Man's Road: Being a Picture of Life in a Passing Generation* (London: Chapman, 1931), 251–52. Aubrey Beardsley, *The Letters of Aubrey Beardsley*, ed. Henry Mass, J. L. Duncan, and W. G. Good (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1970), 61.

<sup>22</sup> Waugh, *One Man's Road*, 253. Richard Le Gallienne, *The Romantic '90s* (London: Putnam, 1951), 133.

<sup>23</sup> Henry James, *Notebooks*, 151–52. Leon Edel, *Henry James: The Middle Years, 1883–1895* (New York: Lippincott, 1962), 373.

ever been devoted to the writing of fiction in any language since the beginning of created literature” and “the absolute master of the most unapproachable style.”<sup>24</sup> *The Yellow Book* not only went on to promote (and, to a lesser extent, practice) a Jamesian style—with Waugh calling in the first issue for “Reticence in Literature” in response to unrestrained realism—but it also took a putatively Jamesian stance against commerce and its vulgarizing effect on literature by refusing to print advertisements other than publishers’ lists.

Despite the auspicious beginning of the magazine and Harland’s inexhaustible admiration, tensions grew between James and *The Yellow Book*. Just a month after the magazine’s successful debut, James wrote his chagrined letter to William, calling the magazine “horrid” and excusing away his association with it. Even though his own contribution, “The Death of the Lion,” was roundly praised on both sides of the Atlantic, James’s letter suggests that he felt shame in having appeared among young aesthetes such as Le Gallienne, Crackanthorpe, Beerbohm, and Beardsley and in being associated with a notoriously homosexual circle. But despite this discomfort, James proved his loyalty to Harland by staying on for the second number and beyond.<sup>25</sup> Quite unexpected, then, is the way Harland treated James in his correspondence with Lane from 1894 to 1897, the three years during which *The Yellow Book* ran.<sup>26</sup> In June 1894,

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<sup>24</sup> Henry Harland, interview, 5. James dismissed this interview as “most unutterable” in a letter to Gosse (*Henry James: A Life in Letters*, 395). For more on James and interviewing, see Matthew Rubery, who argues that “James’s own refusal to speak with the press—he gave only three interviews in his lifetime—is noteworthy for taking place during the very decades in which the British public had become more interested in reading about the lives of authors than at any previous point in history” (62). Rubery, “Wishing to Be Interviewed in *The Reverberator*,” *Henry James Review* 28, no. 1 (2007): 57–72.

<sup>25</sup> John R. Bradley links James’s discomfort with this association at a moment in the 1890s when “homosexuality had arrived in the public consciousness” to a change in his style, which becomes less direct and more allusive, especially in depicting relations between men (311). But while Bradley astutely sees in the letter to William both repulsion from and attraction to the *Yellow Book*’s elite readership and public homosexuality, I see James also grappling in the letter with his own complicity in the magazine’s promotion of his aloof personality. Bradley, “Henry James’s Permanent Adolescence,” *Essays in Criticism* 47, no. 4 (1997): 287–314.

<sup>26</sup> Beckson and Lasner generously make available letters that “reveal not only Harland and Lane’s close cordial relationship but also the tensions that arose between them over payments to *Yellow Book*

Harland answered Lane's request for a budget for the second volume, listing all the contributors and suggesting a payment for each. Here is his estimate for "The Coxon Fund":

16. A story 22,000 words long by Henry James. As Clement Shorter will tell you James's usual price is £10 a thousand, which would make £220 for the story. But *I have calculated that to us he is worth about the same sum per thousand as Le Gallienne*: therefore, if for a short article we pay Le Gallienne £25, for a long story, almost a novel, we cannot offer Henry James less than £75. McClure offered him through me £80 for the American copyright alone. But the McClure negotiation [sic] fell through.<sup>27</sup>

Harland's equation of James with Le Gallienne, a 28-year-old poet who had not yet earned critical acclaim ("Even his name is ungrammatical," protested fellow poet William Ernest Henley), shows either the editor's declining opinion of James, or his confidence in James's loyalty to the magazine, or his belief that James's name could translate into *Yellow Book* sales.<sup>28</sup> By mid-1895 Harland was offering James only £35 for a story of similar length, "The Next Time," despite the fact that the magazine had begun to lose popularity, in part because of the preponderance of minor writers in the fourth and fifth volumes.<sup>29</sup>

There was also the problem of length. The magazine's policy was changing: while it initially flaunted its disregard for money matters by paying by the word, dwindling sales in 1895 forced *The Yellow Book* to put a cap of ten pounds on all contributions, considering words in excess of that amount a gift from the author (Mix 192). James agreed to contribute to the first number after being "regaled with the golden truth that [his] composition might absolutely assume, might

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contributors, the result of Harland's determination to attract leading writers and artists to the periodical" (405). What is significant to me in this correspondence is James's decreasing value to the people producing *The Yellow Book*.

<sup>27</sup> Henry Harland to John Lane, in Karl Beckson, *Henry Harland: His Life and Work* (London: Eighteen Nineties Society, 1978), 412, emphasis added.

<sup>28</sup> Harland, in Mix, *Yellow*, 83.

<sup>29</sup> James, *Henry James: A Life in Letters*, 283.

shamelessly parade in, its own organic form.”<sup>30</sup> But the magazine lost money in its first year, and Harland began to urge important contributors to keep their pieces short or to accept a fixed sum.

Despite his dejection after the failure of *Guy Domville* in January 1895, James chafed at such paltry payment and formal restrictions. As we have seen in the letter to his brother, “gold” was one of his main reasons for staying on at the magazine, and he grew indignant as his rate of payment decreased. “Your cheque for £35.00 reached me this a.m.—better late than never,” he wrote sharply to Lane in August 1895, a month after “The Next Time” was published in the sixth volume.<sup>31</sup> He eventually lost all patience with Lane’s frugality, writing to him in February 1896:

It is impossible for me to contribute another story to *The Yellow Book* at £35. I have only once, for many years, accepted that sum; viz: in the case of the tale [“The Next Time”] published in the Y.B. last July. I did so, much against the grain, because Harland made me an appeal, on your behalf, as I understood him, to do so, for some special reason, for that occasion only. At all events, my customary fee is more than double that amount.<sup>32</sup>

James refused to publish any more fiction in *The Yellow Book* for less than his customary fee, but he did agree to contribute once more. When Lane arranged in January 1897 to have James write an essay for the twelfth volume, Harland seemed to take perverse pleasure in paying his idol mere pocket change to boost the magazine’s reputation: “James will do the article for ten guineas, and have it finished by the end of next week. *You were* clever to arrange it. I think it will do the book vast good.”<sup>33</sup> James chose as his topic, appropriately enough, George Sand’s recently published love letters to Alfred de Musset, a volume that had been arranged by Sand herself. Taking the question of making private matters public as the essay’s opening gambit, James reflected on the author’s personal life as a legitimate object of interest. Sand’s novels, he

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<sup>30</sup> Henry James, *Art of the Novel*, 219.

<sup>31</sup> James, *Henry James: A Life in Letters*, 283.

<sup>32</sup> Henry James, *Henry James: Selected Letters*, ed. Leon Edel (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 294.

<sup>33</sup> Beckson, *Henry Harland*, 67.



confessed, “are rather on our shelves than in our hands,” but he also admitted that reading her letters counted as reading *her* after all: “who shall say that we do not, and with avidity, ‘read’ George Sand?”<sup>34</sup>

The *Yellow Book* editors recognized what such a widely admired writer as James could do for their enterprise: give it credibility and, more important, a refined sensibility. Displaying James’s name and story prominently in the first few issues, the editors used James as a signifier of an uncompromising devotion to art. While most reviewers of the first issue sincerely or dutifully praised “The Death of the Lion,” one reviewer admitted that it was “very hard to read” and astutely observed that it was “valuable for the sake of the name of its author” (Mix 94). James seems to have been aware of this all along. A month after agreeing to write for the magazine, he described in his notebook the “ravenous autograph-hunters, lion-hunters, exploiters of publicity; in whose number one gets the impression that a person knowing and *loving* the thing itself, the work, is simply never to be found.”<sup>35</sup> Given that he had just published his satirical story in the magazine and yet was being asked to contribute again, James was clearly referring to the *Yellow Book* editors, who were unabashedly asking permission to circulate his name. They took this permission to its limits: the seventh issue, to which James did not contribute, featured Lena Milman’s “A Few Notes upon Mr. James,” which is as much a sketch of his personality as a review of his short stories.

What was the effect of this dissociation of an author from that which made him an author—his work? And what became of a reading public when it read *about* authors, rather than reading their work? As we will see, James himself participated in this dissociation, not least by making his work so difficult to read but also by signing it and thus making claims for his status as

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<sup>34</sup> Henry James, “She and He: Recent Documents,” *The Yellow Book* 12 (1897): 16.

<sup>35</sup> Henry James, *Notebooks*, 148.

an author that depend on the value of the signature appended to that work.<sup>36</sup> In protesting Lane's low fee for "The Next Time," he did not argue for the merits of the story itself, for its valuable content or style; instead, he defended his own reputation as a writer in full control of his artistic powers and practical affairs, capable of a professional and personal magnanimity—in this instance, to Harland—that could be revoked at any moment. In the stories he published in *The Yellow Book*, James addressed the problems that literary personality posed to the writing and reading of literature, but he also hinted at the pleasures of acting out the identity—and value—assigned to one by the public.

### 3. Violations and Derogations: James's Stories in *The Yellow Book*

James wrote three stories for *The Yellow Book*: "The Death of the Lion" (April 1894), "The Coxon Fund" (July 1894), and "The Next Time" (July 1895). All of these stories are about the perils of a talented writer or thinker in an age when the author's personality was severed from and privileged over his work. In "The Death of the Lion" and "The Next Time," great writers are brought down by popular demands. The latter story can even be considered a complement to the former, as James planned it to be "a little story that might perhaps be a mate to *The Death of the Lion*" (180). "The Coxon Fund," in contrast, features a complacent philosopher who does not show up for his own lectures and has written only a few mediocre articles. He does "fall" intellectually after gaining the financial support of a young American woman: "The very day he found himself able to publish he wholly ceased to produce" (368). But he has been famously "low" from the beginning, having fathered three illegitimate children in his dissipated youth and lived irresponsibly since then. Since Saltram does not qualify as a great artist ruined by the public, but

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<sup>36</sup> In *Modernism and the Culture of Celebrity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), Aaron Jaffe describes the authorial signature as an "imprimatur," a "distinctive mark and sanctioning impression" that "turns the author into a formal artefact" (20).

as a bad artist made worse by personal support, I do not include “The Coxon Fund” in my analysis.

James had been writing stories of writers and artists for twenty years, several dealing with the issues that would preoccupy him in *The Yellow Book* stories. These stories center largely on the interference of personal lives in artistic production. If “The Lesson of the Master” (1888) gently presents marriage and artistic integrity as mutually exclusive, “The Author of Beltraffio” (1884) and “Greville Fane” (1893) show the absolute debacle that writers’ selfish families can make of their careers, a destruction prompted in “The Author of Beltraffio,” for example, by a wife’s fear that her husband, an aestheticist writer, will corrupt their child.<sup>37</sup> Other tales, like “The Middle Years” (1893), depict the complex relations between artists and admirers. Yet, while the early stories deal with the pain, sacrifice, and regret that writers suffer in their personal and artistic lives, they differ from the *Yellow Book* stories in their direct and sometimes even didactic treatment of the problems of the literary life—the narrators are generally reliable and characters usually learn from their own and others’ mistakes. But in his 1893 fables, James started to reassess the value of the personal, perhaps prompted by the appearance of Harland and other attractive young men eager to call him “Master.” At this time, Edel surmises, James “was beginning to feel that the greatest art is not that which creates a sensation or a success”; instead, “by some strange process of human relation, true art inspired in others an interest, an attachment, a sense of ‘transference.’”<sup>38</sup>

The sense of “transference” in James’s stories of literary friendship and discipleship is at once aesthetic and erotic. John Bradley has claimed that after the failure of *Guy Domville* James

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<sup>37</sup> For a striking discussion of “erotic innocence,” the seductive power of aestheticism, and readerly protection and betrayal in “The Author of Beltraffio,” see Kevin Ohi, “‘The Author of ‘Beltraffio’: The Exquisite Boy and Henry James’s Equivocal Aestheticism,” *ELH* 72, no. 3 (2005): 747–67.

<sup>38</sup> Leon Edel, *Henry James: A Life* (New York: Harper, 1985), 375.

renounced his ambition to gain a large audience and achieved a newly intimate relation with sophisticated readers by writing implicitly homosexual tales of literary bonding and by associating himself, tentatively and tenuously, with an aestheticist crowd.<sup>39</sup> Writing on “James’s Homo-Aesthetics,” Leland Person argues that in these stories James “examines the relation between male authors and their audience,” consistently imagining “enabling and empowering male readers, who enjoy an intimate, closeted relationship with the Master writers whose work they admire.”<sup>40</sup> The *Yellow Book* stories are all written from the perspective of fervent male admirers of the authors—people much like Harland and the other young men who surrounded James at the time. While the narrators might form “homo-aesthetic” bonds with the author-characters, I would argue that they do not “enable” or “empower” their masters to work but instead advertise, to other characters and to readers, their personal intimacy with these literary geniuses. “The Death of the Lion” is narrated by a young reporter who comes to the home of the excellent but long-neglected novelist Neil Paraday to write him up in a newspaper, only to be converted into an intransigent protector of the writer’s privacy. “The Next Time,” which centers on novelist Ralph Limbert, is narrated by a minor literary critic and friend of Limbert who believes so strongly in the writer’s talent that he discourages his friend’s attempt to write for the market, despite the obvious material benefits a little circulation would provide. But for all their love for high art, and their assiduous defense of it, the narrators do not reveal *what* these writers write: the writers’ allegedly brilliant words are never described, much less reproduced on the page, and so their content and style remain a mystery. What the narrators do describe, and describe at length, are the personalities of the writers: how they look (writerly), how they talk

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<sup>39</sup> Bradley, “Henry James’s Permanent Adolescence,” 307–08.

<sup>40</sup> Leland S. Person Jr., “James’s Homo-Aesthetics: Deploying Desire in the Tales of Writers and Artists,” *Henry James Review* 14, no. 2 (1993): 189.

(wittily), how people act in their presence (admiringly), how people receive their writing (indifferently). The narrators are thus participating, ironically, in the very practice they so vocally oppose: the appreciation of a writer's personality or life rather than his writing.

So while these stories seem to be about how people write, about cultural conditions enabling or disabling the production and consumption of literature, they in fact depict myriad relations to literature that do not include reading. The characters most invested in the authors are those who have the least familiarity with or concern for the work itself.<sup>41</sup> Take for example the various abuses of Paraday's manuscript in "The Death of the Lion." The newspaperman Mr. Morrow scoffs at the idea of reading it as a way of getting to know the writer.<sup>42</sup> The ferocious socialite Mrs. Wimbush arranges for the author to read aloud at her country house, Prestidge, without having read this new work, or indeed any of his work, herself. She then lends the author's manuscript, "as if it were the morning paper," to a friend, who gives it to her maid to give to a friend's footman to give to his master, who then leaves the parcel on the train (145). The narrator, who is charged with protecting the author's work, spends his days "hovering about Neil Paraday's room" and keeping a "loose diary of the situation," which he sends to his love interest, a young woman who had come to Paraday's home in search of his autograph (149, 148). In "The Next Time," the people most concerned with Limbert's bid for popularity, and who view it with "much reprobation," are "certain persons who ha[ve] never read a word of him, or assuredly

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<sup>41</sup> James sketched Paraday in his notebook on February 3, 1894, as "the great (the distinguished, the celebrated) artist . . . who is tremulously made up to, *fêted*, written to for his autograph, portrait, etc., and yet with whose work, in this age of advertisement and newspaperism, this age of interviewing, not one of the persons concerned has the smallest acquaintance?" (147–48). James seems to have been casting himself as the author and men such as Harland as the lionizers, for he devised the "subject of the little tale [he had] engaged to write for H. Harland and his *Yellow Book*" in his notebook on January 9, just a few days after being asked to be the first contributor (143).

<sup>42</sup> In "John Delavoy" (1898), James portrayed a market-minded editor who rejects a serious critical essay about the talented author John Delavoy's work in favor of something more vividly biographical.

ha[ve] never spent a shilling on him, and who h[a]ng for hours over the other attractions of the newspaper that announced his abasement.”<sup>43</sup>

The few scenes of reading we *do* see are not so much of reading as of cathexis. Our experiences of the celebrated texts in both stories are mediated by the narrators’ emotional reactions to them. In “The Death of the Lion,” Paraday reads in his garden a sketch of his next work to the narrator, who is stunned by its affective power:

Loose liberal confident, it might have passed for a great gossiping eloquent letter—the overflow into talk of an artist’s amorous plan. The theme I thought singularly rich... I remember rather profanely wondering whether the ultimate production could possibly keep at the pitch. His reading of the fond epistle, at any rate, made me feel as if I were, for the advantage of posterity, in close correspondence with him—were the distinguished person to whom it had been affectionately addressed. It was a high distinction simply to be told such things. The idea he now communicated had all the freshness, the flushed fairness, of the conception untouched and untried: it was Venus rising from the sea and before her the airs had blown upon her. I had never been so throbbingly present at such an unveiling. (106–07)

It is not the content of what is read that makes the narrator feel a “high distinction” but rather the feeling of being “affectionately addressed” by the author. The narrator is indeed in a special position as the sole addressee of the reading, but the intimacy he feels as a result is extended to a much wider audience through his description of that very feeling. How can we not, along with the narrator, be “throbbingly present” at Paraday’s reading, even though we do not hear his words? Even a later scene of solitary reading, in which the narrator reads Paraday’s latest novel from beginning to end in a single day, also takes place in the author’s garden, a space appropriately positioned in between the private home and the wide world.

The ambivalence that we have seen develop in Harland’s treatment of James comes into play in this exchange between an author and his special reader. The scene of birth, in which Paraday “communicate[s]” the “freshness” and “flushed fairness” of the “untouched and untried”

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<sup>43</sup> Henry James, “The Next Time,” *The Novels and Tales of Henry James*, New York Edition, vol. 15 (New York: Scribner’s, 1909), 193.

idea, suggests a fantasy of issuing something without limits, a fantasy evident in James's delight in Harland's permission to let his contribution "shamelessly parade in . . . its own organic form." But as the narrator listens to Paraday read, he is "rather profanely wondering" if the "ultimate production could possibly keep at the pitch," and after the author finishes reading, the narrator asks, "My dear master, how, after all, are you going to do it?" and insists that finishing it will require "perfect conditions" of isolation (107). But as the manuscript from which Paraday reads is eventually taken from the author, passed from person to person, and finally lost, the "conception untouched and untried" never finds an audience apart from the narrator, who betrays Paraday by neglecting to protect him from the people who treat him as a mere attraction. Harland, who constantly called James his "master," fancied himself to be a special reader of that greatly accomplished yet famously unread author. As his editor at *The Yellow Book*, he encouraged James to write "shamelessly," but in using James's name to legitimate a project associated with decadence, he did not create the "perfect conditions" for such abandon.

"The Next Time" features a more conventional scene of reading: the narrator reads, to himself, the manuscript of the novel his friend Limbert is trying to make popular.

During the last weeks, as the opportunity of reading the complete thing drew near, one's suspense was barely endurable, and I shall never forget the July evening on which I put it to rout. Coming home to dinner I found the two volumes on my table, and I sat up with them half the night, dazed, bewildered, rubbing my eyes, wondering at the monstrous joke. *Was* it a monstrous joke, his second manner—was *this* the new line, the desperate bid, the scheme for more general acceptance and the remedy for material failure? Had he made a fool of all his following, or had he most injuriously made a still bigger fool of himself? Obvious?—where the deuce was it obvious? Popular?—how on earth could it be popular? The thing was charming with all his charm and powerful with all his power: it was an unscrupulous, an unsparing, a shameless merciless masterpiece. . . . I was thrilled with the whole impression and with all that came crowding in its train. It was too grand a collapse—it was too hideous a triumph; I exulted almost with tears—I lamented with a strange delight. (194–95)

Despite his effusive praise, the narrator gives us no idea what the "masterpiece" contains; instead, he thinks about its future reception—its "grand collapse," its "hideous triumph." As he reads it,

he imagines it *not* being read, and the excess of emotion makes us feel as special as the narrator. James, who was at this time entering his own “second manner,” here insists that, to be a masterpiece, a work of literature cannot take popularity into account. The less an author addresses himself to a public, the more his readers will be “thrilled,” will “exult” and “lament” in being privy to his virgin productions. At the same time, however, James was aware that the less an author addresses himself to a public, the more his readers—the public—will be fascinated with him. The new stance of James’s second manner (for which he would ultimately become more famous than for his earlier, more accessible one) did not simply make him unpopular—which meant that it also did not rely on his being utterly indifferent to the issue of popularity.

The special reader thus has a unique relation to the author, one that collapses the usual distinctions between the author’s private life and public work. In the first few months of his association with *The Yellow Book*, James resolved to use an ironic point of view to convey the particularities of this relation between special reader and author. In his notebook entry for “The Next Time,” for example, he considers using as his narrator a “deluded vulgarian,” someone who has all the success his author lacks, but he ultimately decides that “the narrator must be fully and richly *conscient*,” that he must use his “real ironic painter” (201). The narrator-critic of the story believes that Limbert’s writing is the only thing truly worth his attention. But by a twist in the plot he is prohibited from writing about his friend’s work, so he ironically does what the worst of critics would do—he takes as his material Limbert’s life.

The difference between these stories lies in the narrators’ motives for taking their relations to the authors too personally. In “The Death of the Lion,” the narrator is so flattered by being “affectionately addressed” that his vanity distracts him from the responsibility he has gained through his “bargain” with Paraday (225). The irony of the narrator’s dogged defense of Paraday’s art, as Richard Salmon notes, is that the narrator has already betrayed his idol in true



journalistic fashion by violating his privacy in the act of narrating the story. The narrator admits as much: he asserts that his “meagre notes are essentially private” but also hints darkly that “the insidious forces that . . . make at present for publicity” may just “overmaster” his “precautions” (103). Through his narrator, James protests against the forces of publicity while at the same time acknowledging that the publication of his own work is inevitably part of the same problem. Moreover, while the publication is overly public, the apparent privacy of obscure style is itself also a bid for public attention and draws attention to the personality it claims to sidestep.

The narrator of “The Next Time,” a story written shortly after the debut of *Guy Domville*, is less concerned with protecting the author’s privacy than he is with redefining success and failure. At the opening of the story, Mrs. Highmore, a best-selling novelist and Limbert’s sister-in-law, tells the narrator of her plans to write a “failure”:

She yearned to be, like Limbert, but of course only once, an exquisite failure. There was something a failure was, a failure in the market, that a success somehow was n’t. . . . A failure now could make—oh with the aid of immense talent of course, for there were failures and failures—such a reputation! (158–59)

“Failure” in this passage is subject to endless modifications and qualifications: it is “exquisite”; in the market it is “something . . . that success somehow [is]n’t”; it can make “such a reputation,” as long as it is not a total failure; and it can refer to either a person (the narrator-critic) or a literary work on the market (Mrs. Highmore’s proposed novel). Only one thing remains stable in this series: failure is measured by the market. “Success” undergoes an even greater shift. The narrator at first declares that a success is “as prosaic as a good dinner: there was nothing more to be said about it than that you had had it”; and while a failure can make a reputation, a success can make “nothing but money” (159). After *The Major Key* sells dismally, however, the narrator and Limbert reevaluate the meaning of success: “Of course when we said success we did n’t mean exactly what Mrs. Highmore for instance meant” but rather that a writer had achieved success “when of

a beautiful subject his expression was complete” (183). But as soon as they have settled on the definition of *artistic* success as the perfection of an innate talent, Limbert’s belief in the sufficiency of innate talent is unsettled by the market. After accepting an editorial position at a “high-class monthly” to support his family, Limbert turns on the narrator’s definition (185):

We’ve sat prating here of “success” . . . hugging the sweet delusion that it lies somewhere in the work itself. . . . One has been going on in short as if the only thing to do were to accept the law of one’s talent, and thinking that if certain consequences did n’t follow it was only because one was n’t logical enough. . . . What *is* “success” anyhow? . . . Success be hanged!—I want to sell. . . . I must cultivate the market. (187–88)

The irony of Limbert’s dismissal of “the law of one’s talent” is that there truly is a law to his talent: he cannot produce anything but beautiful, brilliant literature that, like his first two novels, “passe[s] unperceived” (165). When Limbert is fired from his editorship for refusing to publish a “series of screaming sketches” by Minnie Meadows, he begins, with failing health and no concern for “whether he generally s[ells] or not,” what will be his last novel (200, 216). Although he does not finish *Derogation*, what he has written is, in the narrator’s opinion, “a splendid fragment; it evidently would have been one of his high successes” (216).

The movements of the meanings of “failure” and “success” are thus opposite: failure starts out meaning artistic success and commercial failure, while success starts out meaning commercial success and artistic failure. However, these terms migrate from commerce to art, and the narrator is able to declare Limbert’s commercially failed works “successes” and Mrs. Highmore’s commercially successful works “failures.” This migration illuminates the problem of circulation: the narrator-critic states proudly that he is one of “several persons” who think “highly” of the fact that Limbert does not sell (158). Since the narrator’s praise has proved to be “the love that kill[s],” Limbert asks his friend not to review his attempted “popular” novels, and the narrator obliges him (161). The narrator’s reticence about the content of Limbert’s writing is, in some sense, an enactment of this promise. The irony of keeping this promise, however, is that

the narrator thereby limits the “success” (in both definitions) of Limbert’s work even further, for readers cannot judge his work without ever seeing it. By restricting our access to Limbert’s work and focusing instead on the story of his friend’s “desperate bid” at popularity, the narrator treats very superficially the thing he cares so deeply about and very deeply the thing he claims to detest—that is, he gives less attention to the literature he thinks successful than he does to the trash the public so adores.

This difference between the narrators reflects a change in James’s professional standing, caused not only by the failure of his play but also by his involvement with *The Yellow Book*. Although most reviewers of the first two issues lauded James’s stories, several were dismayed by his association with the *Yellow Book* crowd. A British reviewer, incredulous at James’s and other respectable writers’ participation in the first issue, concluded that “amiability makes strange bed-fellows,” and a year later an American critic commented that “of late . . . Mr. James has been in bad company. . . . He has become one of the *Yellow Book* clique.”<sup>44</sup> While James was initially resentful at having to “be a personality” and embarrassed by his association with the magazine, he soon became more concerned with how an author rises and falls and then rises in value—how an author could fail to sell his work, fail to be read, and yet be deemed a success. By the time he wrote “The Next Time,” James had seen how the replacement of intellectual and personal relations with market relations, and the replacement of artistic value with exchange value, could put an author in the peculiar position of being famous yet unread—and, ultimately, famously unread. Being a literary personality, however unwillingly, predisposed one to this affliction.

#### 4. Terminations and Embarrassments: James’s Stories after *The Yellow Book*

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<sup>44</sup> Mix, *Yellow*, 93, 166.

While the literary work of James's characters may disappear, his stories about them appeared and reappeared in various editions of his short fiction. After being published in *The Yellow Book*, "The Death of the Lion" was collected in *Terminations* (1895) and "The Next Time" was collected in *Embarrassments* (1896). The English and American editions of these story collections are visually austere, covered in pale cloth, lettered in gilt, and embellished with delicate irises. Compared to the flashy *Yellow Book*, *Terminations* and *Embarrassments* were almost conspicuously discreet. By reprinting "The Death of the Lion" and "The Next Time" in books of eminently respectable aspect (and of his *own* company) before he was through with *The Yellow Book*, James presented the stories on starkly different terms. They now appeared as serious critiques of a culture of publicity that would make their point without mocking their own publication in a magazine that rejected the culture of publicity even as it used the names of James and other famous writers to promote itself. The promptness with which he reprinted these stories was part of James's professional strategy: to cater to diverse markets, all the while posing (in this case through his fictional self-representation) as a defender of pure artistic existence and output.<sup>45</sup> The deflationary titles of these collections, which are suggestively similar to Limbert's *Derogation*, make an ironic comment on the anxious status of these books as commodities and even sabotage their own marketability; only a special reader would want to purchase an Embarrassment.

Consistent with this strategy, which Freedman sees as part of James's growing "notion of the artist as professional," James reprinted his satires of a vulgar culture of publicity for the last time in the New York Edition of his novels and stories (177). "The Death of the Lion," "The

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<sup>45</sup> Stuart Culver notes that James's contribution in the mid-1890s to a variety of periodicals indicates "his willingness in these years to experiment with different publishing media" (42). Aside from *The Yellow Book*, he published in its American counterpart, *The Chap-Book*, in the genteel *North American Review*, in the esteemed *Punch*, and in the popular *Collier's Weekly* and *The Illustrated London News* (42). Culver, "Ozymandias and the Master of Ruins: The Design of the New York Edition," in *Henry James's New York Edition: The Construction of Authorship*, ed. David McWhirter (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995), 39–57.

Coxon Fund,” and “The Next Time” were classified as parables of the literary life and reprinted in Volume 15 (1909), along with “The Lesson of the Master” and “The Figure in the Carpet.” In the preface to this volume, James writes that “these pieces have this in common that they deal all with the literary life, gathering their motive, in each case, from some noted adventure, some felt embarrassment, some extreme predicament, of the artist enamoured of perfection, ridden by his idea or paying for his sincerity.”<sup>46</sup> In this characterization of the artist, James identifies with the figure of the aesthete unconcerned with the demands of the market, an attitude that he has “pa[id] for” in declining sales and income in the last few years. He thus registers a protest against the forces of publicity that threaten artistic production. At the same time, his repackaging of the *Yellow Book* stories in an expensive and authoritative format promotes an image of the artist as a unified, awe-inspiring personality, embodied in his stark signature on the cover. The repackaging thus capitalizes on the very problem that the stories expose.

James tells an anecdote in the preface to this volume that illustrates his ambivalence about literary personality. He remembers not a telephone call but a visit from Harland and Beardsley on that afternoon in early 1894:

I make the most of this passage of literary history—I like so, as I find, to recall it. . . . It was of a Sunday afternoon in the spring of that year: a young friend, a Kensington neighbour and an ardent man of letters [Harland], called on me to introduce a young friend of his own [Beardsley] and to bespeak my interest for a periodical about to take birth, in his hands, on the most original “lines” and with the happiest omens. What omen could be happier for instance than that this infant *recueil*, joyously christened even before reaching the cradle, should take the name of *The Yellow Book?*—which so certainly would command for it the liveliest attention. What, further, should one rejoice more to hear than that this venture was, for all its constitutional gaiety, to brave the quarterly form, a thing hitherto of austere, of awful tradition, and was indeed in still other ways to sound the note of a bright young defiance? The project, modestly and a little vaguely but all communicatively set forth, amused me, charmed me, on the spot—or at least the touchingly convinced and inflamed projector did. . . . I was invited, and all urgently, to contribute to the first number. . . .<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Henry James, *Art of the Novel*, 220–21.

<sup>47</sup> Henry James, *Art of the Novel*, 217–19.

Despite James's complaints against lionizers in "The Death of the Lion" and the vulgar public in "The Next Time," and despite his revulsion at the "horrid aspect and company" of *The Yellow Book*, James seems to have enjoyed his status as a nearly mythic figure for a generation of young writers and admirers—so much so that he remembers early January in London as "spring" and even insinuates the "defiant" sexual orientation of the *Yellow Book* circle, or at least of the "inflamed projector" Beardsley. So fond a memory is it that James, who passionately reviled the impudent invasion of privacy that brought the worshipful to knock at the author's door, opens his volume about the dissolution of privacy and the rise of personality with a tenderly personal anecdote.

James's involvement with *The Yellow Book* occasioned some of his most damning statements, fictional and otherwise, about publicity's detriment to art. At the same time, that involvement points to the impossibility—for James and for authors in general—of making a claim against publicity as a published author, or even as a writer. Despite the obscurity of the artistic process as James represents it, what we can see clearly in this episode in James's career is a conundrum affecting all writers who sought to criticize the very condition of their success.

## 5. The Half and the Not Even Whole

Taken together, James's tales of writers constitute his most sustained, forceful critique of the effects of publicity on the literary profession. Through their content as well as the circumstances of their publication, these stories show the extent to which the "dreary duty" of being a personality reduces modern authorship to a kind of coerced popular performance, but they also hint at the freedoms and pleasures provided—to audience and authors alike—by the asymmetrical intimacy that such public exposure entails. As I have discussed, the narrators of

these stories protectively criticize intrusions into the personal and professional lives of celebrated writers about whom they just as readily relate privileged details. The authors, too, show a certain ambivalence: Paraday tries to please those who request his time, and Limbert makes his “desperate bid” for popularity. On the one hand, the narrators violate their own commitments to privacy, but on the other hand the writers’ willingness to indulge the public’s curiosity undermines the need for this protection in the first place. Moreover, these stories express the ambivalence of James himself, not just that of the narrators whose ambivalence he distances himself from rather than identifying with.

James’s fiction about the literary profession serves to reveal the artist’s inevitable vulnerability to and, in some cases, eager participation in the cultural marketplace, and thus to topple the figure of the autonomous genius isolated from prosaic realities. These characters are split between privacy and publicity, whether they occupy these spheres simultaneously or in alternation, but the division is represented as endemic to their profession rather than essential to their individual subjectivity. They may be voluntarily engaged in the potentially public activity of writing, as well as the social life associated with it, but they are portrayed as private individuals who have been *made* (by journalists, acolytes, socialites) into public figures. And even as James plunges his artists into the “devouring publicity of life,” he subtly asserts the inalienable privacy of the artistic act itself, a privacy he would capture a decade later, in his 1908 preface to *The Tragic Muse* (1890), in the image of the artist whose back “turns to us as he bends over his work.”<sup>48</sup> The narrators are excluded from the artists’ self-communion, and despite various attempts to look them “in the face” (as the young woman wants to do to Paraday) in the space of creation, these artists remain safely inaccessible, turned to the side, oblique (figs. 4 and 5).

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<sup>48</sup> Henry James, *Art of the Novel*, 96.

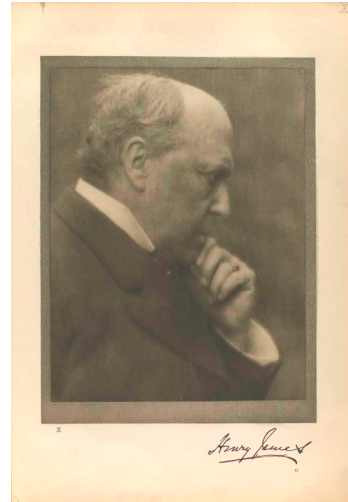
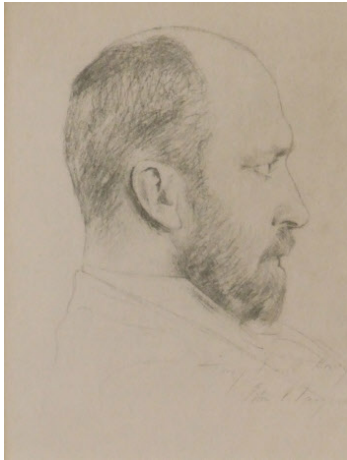


Figure 4. John Singer Sargent, *Henry James* (1885), from the second issue of *The Yellow Book*  
 Figure 5. Alvin Langdon Coburn, “Henry James, Rye, June 12th, 1906”

Before I turn to *The Bostonians* as a counterpoint to the privacy-obsessed artist stories, I would like to look briefly at a story that provides an even more stark, though also more ironic, schematization of private and public. This is James’s 1892 story “The Private Life,” which has generally been read as a whimsical fantasy of the irreconcilability of private and public selves. The story, narrated by a young playwright, centers on the contrast between two well-known figures in the London literary scene: the writer Clare Vawdrey and the socialite Lord Mellifont. The action takes place at a Swiss inn, where a number of high-society Londoners, including the narrator, happen to converge on holiday. The narrator remarks that although Vawdrey, Mellifont, and the actress Blanche Adney are generally in high social demand, the people on holiday all “participate in the same miscellaneous publicity” and all know each other fairly well.<sup>49</sup> Having established his privileged access to these sought-after celebrities, the narrator reveals that the nationally celebrated Vawdrey, “the greatest (in the opinion of many) of our literary glories,”

<sup>49</sup> Henry James, *The Private Life* (London: James R. Osgood, McIlvaine & Co., 1893), 4.



does not exhibit in his dinner conversation any of the genius ascribed to him by the public (4). He is a bourgeois bore:

He used to be called “subjective” in the weekly papers, but in society no distinguished man could have been less so. He never talked about himself; and this was a topic on which, though it would have been tremendously worthy of him, he apparently never even reflected. He had his hours and his habits, his tailor and his hatter, his hygiene and his particular wine, but all these things together never made up an attitude. Yet they constituted the only attitude he ever adopted... He struck me as having neither moods nor sensibilities nor preferences.... I never found him anything but loud and cheerful and copious, and I never heard him utter a paradox or express a shade or play with an idea.... His opinions were sound and second-rate, and of his perceptions it was too mystifying to think. (6–7)

When Vawdrey mentions that is writing a new play but cannot remember any lines from it, the narrator decides to find the manuscript in Vawdrey’s room when he thinks the writer is occupied with Miss Adney on the terrace. But as he fumbles about the room, he suddenly sees a figure seated at a table—“a figure I had at first taken for a travelling-rug thrown over a chair”—and realizes that it is Vawdrey himself, an identity confirmed by the light of a candle whose source is a servant who quickly enters and exits (25).<sup>50</sup> The narrator speaks to Vawdrey but receives no reply, for “his back was half turned to me, and he bent over the table in the attitude of writing” (25). The narrator speaks with Miss Adney about this peculiar encounter and presents the theory that “there are two of them,” two Vawdreys: “One goes out, the other stays at home. One is the genius, the other’s the bourgeois, and it’s only the bourgeois whom we personally know. He talks, he circulates, he’s awfully popular” (31–32).<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> This scene is oddly similar to the scene in Nathanael West’s *The Day of the Locust* of Tod Hackett mistaking Abe Kusich for a pile of laundry.

<sup>51</sup> The narrator’s suggestion that Vawdrey is “double” evokes the familiar figure of the double or doppelgänger prevalent in nineteenth-century American literature. Sidney E. Lind has argued that Vawdrey’s “other personality, the creative self, may not even be designated a doppelgänger,” citing Poe’s “William Wilson” as a classic case of the doppelgänger in that Wilson’s double “duplicates” his action, whereas Vawdrey’s two selves comprise “a whole.” Lind, “James’s ‘The Private Life’ and Browning.” *American Literature* 23, no. 3 (1951): 321. Vawdrey’s doubleness also points to the emerging psychological concept of the double personality, which William James had discussed in the “Consciousness of the Self” chapter of *The Principles of Psychology* (1890).

Vawdrey's doubleness is a convenient (if somewhat heavy-handed) metaphor for the internal division experienced by professional writers around the turn of the twentieth century, whose success and distinction depended on their ability to "interest" the public. James's narrator is ambivalent about the legitimacy of this expectation. He dismisses Vawdrey's popularity as a social accident, an unfortunate transmutation of the writer's real artistic talent into an undeserved social renown. Contrary to his initial impression of Vawdrey as "exempt from variations" and "differ[ing] from other people, but never from himself," the narrator realizes that Vawdrey is defined above all by his self-difference, and yet this discovery explains—but does not excuse—Vawdrey's bland social performance (6). Vawdrey may "disappoint every one who looks in him for the genius that created the pages they adore," but the greater disappointment, for the narrator, is finding the genius himself in the dark and silent chamber of creation and receiving no acknowledgement, only the sight of a half-turned back (31). And, as in "The Death of the Lion," the manuscript is just out of reach.

This uncanny scene of doubleness, along with James's description of the story (in his notebook) as a "rank fantasy," have prompted critics to link the story to James's supernatural tales. However, Ross Posnock argues convincingly that the story is not ghostly or even whimsical at all; it is instead "a realistic narrative containing an uncanny episode" designed to distract the reader from what is really at stake: the narrator's tortured relationship to Vawdrey, from whom he, as a fellow artist, seeks recognition.<sup>52</sup> The narrator's "absorb[ing]," "torment[ing]" questions about Vawdrey, whom Posnock identifies (as does James in his notebook and later preface) as James's childhood literary hero Robert Browning, suggests that his interest goes beyond his

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<sup>52</sup> Ross Posnock, *Henry James and the Problem of Robert Browning* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1985), 59. As Posnock notes, Leon Edel included "The Private Life" in his volume of James's ghost stories. In the notes to James's *Notebooks*, F. O. Matthiessen and Kenneth Murdock use James's phrase "rank fantasy" to connect "the method of his fantasy...with that of his ghost stories" (110).

disappointment in the older writer's social performance. Indeed, the narrator's apparent envy at Vawdrey's sexual attractiveness—he assumes Blanche Adney is having an affair with Vawdrey, whereas she is actually trysting with Mellifont—suggests that the narrator's exclusion from the private chamber indicates his artistic and sexual inadequacy, an imbalance between master and apprentice similar to that of "The Lesson of the Master." In turn, the narrator's fantastical theory of Vawdrey's double personality is a defensive response to his experience of non-recognition and compensates, to some degree, for his feelings of inferiority.

However, what critics have overlooked in this story is the narrator's use of "personality" as a way of explaining the blankness of the social self for which he holds such contempt. Even if the narrator's theory is a defensive response, he presents it in a playful manner to Blanche Adney, who takes the idea seriously and offers a counterpoint to Vawdrey's doubleness in the figure of Lord Mellifont, who is overwhelmingly present. According to the narrator, Mellifont "pervade[s]," "colour[s]," and embellish[s]" English life; he contributes to every social occasion a perfectly controlled "vocabulary," a "tone," a "style"—indeed, "he [is] a style" (15). Miss Adney theorizes that "if Clare Vawdrey is double," then Mellifont has the opposite complaint: he isn't even whole" (33). She clarifies that "if there are two of Mr Vawdrey, there isn't so much as one, all told, of Lord Mellifont" (33). If Vawdrey fails to be "himself" (i.e., a genius) in public, Mellifont cannot fail to be himself, or even to be different from himself, because he does not exist apart from other people. The narrator develops his own perfectly balanced answer to Adney's "riddle": Mellifont is "all public and ha[s] no corresponding private life," just as Vawdrey is "all private and ha[s] no corresponding public one" (34–35). In the narrator's first hypothesis about Vawdrey, he distinguishes between the "genius" and the "bourgeois"; however, in order to contrast Vawdrey with Mellifont, he shifts the terms to "private" and "public." But his pithily symmetrical formula is slightly off-kilter: private and public may be mutually exclusive, but they are not equally

perceivable and representable conditions. As Salmon points out, Vawdrey's "doubling of identity" or "splitting of the self" clearly follows the conventions of late-Victorian gothic fantasy; whereas Mellifont's self-division is "literally unrepresentable: the supposition that the interior space of the self is entirely void."<sup>53</sup>

James's notebook entry on "The Private Life" anticipates this problem of representing the non-existence of Mellifont's private experience. In August 1891 he wrote a brief summary of the idea of the story and concluded breathlessly, "Lord Mellefont is the public *performer*—the man whose whole personality goes forth so in representation and aspect and sonority and phraseology and accomplishment and frontage that there is absolutely—but I *see* it: begin it—begin it! Don't talk *about* it only, and around it" (110). In envisioning a character whose personality is so external, existing only "in representation" and other outward features of his person, James takes on a challenge *of* representation. His precipitous phrase "there is absolutely—" halts at the void of Mellifont's interiority: there is nothing there but the writer's giddy imagination of the character who is all surface, and whose portrayal consists of nothing more than his effects on others. Mellifont "comes forth in representation" in two senses: he is all appearance, even when he is physically present; and his existence is possible only through the various media (the newspapers, the gossip, and of course the story itself) that "prefigure" him: they embody him before he actually appears, *so that* he may exist. The story begins with a paradigmatic instance of this prefiguration: Mellifont is missing from the hotel, and it is this conspicuous absence and his wife's worry about it that immediately establish his importance. And the narrator's theorization of Vawdrey's selves provides the conceptual opposition that makes Mellifont's incompleteness apparent.

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<sup>53</sup> Richard Salmon, "Henry James in the Public Sphere," in *A Companion to Henry James*, ed. Greg W. Zacharias (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2008).

“The Private Life” appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly* in April 1892, just two years before James’s first publication in *The Yellow Book*, and in August 1892 he published a volume titled *The Private Life*. Biographers and critics have seen the theme of privacy as a reflection of a split in James’s life that would become more pronounced with his turn to theater.<sup>54</sup> Edel writes that “Henry’s little fantasy” about Browning “was also a fantasy about himself” and reflected his “eagerness” to “seek the worldliness and publicity of the stage.”<sup>55</sup> While the story’s narrator obsesses over the mystery of Vawdrey, James’s later preface suggests that his own interest lay just as much in Mellifont and the “wonder” that the figure of the “perpetual, essential performer” could inspire. Writing the preface allowed James to elaborate on the theories presented in the story, but also to explicitly connect the characters to their real-life models: Robert Browning and Frederick Leighton.<sup>56</sup> The preface is thus a reframing of the story in terms of James’s own participation in the culture of literary personality, and a reflection not only on *being* the object of public attention but also on the temptations and pleasures of seeing others in this way. His prefatory description of Mellifont attests to the exciting mental effects of encountering an exclusively external person:

...that most accomplished of artists and most dazzling of men of the world whose effect on the mind repeatedly invited to appraise him was to beget in it an image of representation and figuration so exclusive of any possible inner self that, so far from there being here a question of an *alter ego*, a double personality, there seemed scarce a question of a real and single one, scarce foothold or margin for any private and domestic *ego* at all. Immense in this case too, for any analytic witness, the solicitation of wonder—which struggled all the while, not less amusingly than in the other example, toward the explanatory secret; a clear view of the perpetual, essential performer, consummate, infallible, impeccable, and with his high shining elegance, his intensity of presence, on these lines, involving to the

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<sup>55</sup> Leon Edel, *Henry James: A Life*, 359.

<sup>56</sup> In his notebook James refers to personages suggested by “F.L.” and “R.B.,” initials half-decoded by James’s direct reference in his prefatory remarks to “Robert Browning” (*Notebooks* 110, *Art of the Novel* 252). Critics generally agree that “F.L.” refers to the English painter Sir Frederic Leighton, but James’s decision to not mention Leighton by name in the preface (or, indeed, anywhere) might suggest a desire to preserve the character’s essential dependence on others’—be they characters or readers—projections.

imagination an absolutely blank reverse or starved residuum, no *other* power of presence whatever. One said it under one's breath, one really yearned to know: was he, such an embodiment of skill and taste and tone and composition, of every public gloss and grace, thinkable even as occasionally single?—since to be truly single is to be able, under stress, to be separate, to be *solus*, to know at need the interlunar swoon of *some* independent consciousness. Yes, *had* our dazzling friend any such alternative, could he so unattestedly exist, and was the withdrawn, the sequestered, the unobserved and unhonoured condition so much as imputable to him? Was n't his potentiality of existence public, in fine, to the last squeeze of the golden orange, and when he passed from our admiring sight into the chamber of mystery what, the next minute, was on the other side of the door? It was irresistible to believe at last that there was at such junctures inveterately nothing... (251–52)

James describes this figure in terms of his effects on the observing mind, which vacillates between appraisal and wonder: the observer feels “repeatedly invited to appraise” him, feels his “wonder” to be “solicited” and his “imagination” “involv[ed]”; he is an “analytic witness” who nonetheless “admir[es]” the man. The problem, in short, is not that the socialite cannot exist in the absence of others, but that it is impossible for the observer to *think* of him existing in such circumstances. James asks not whether solitude is possible for the man, but whether it is “thinkable” or “imputable” to him. Privacy, like personality, is an interpretive and representational question rather than an existential condition.

#### 6. “It isn't *me*” / “It isn't *you*”

It is this idea of an individual who “isn't even whole” that I would like to take up in the rest of this chapter. As I have been arguing, James developed his complex stance toward the culture of publicity *in* and *through* the writing of his stories about writers and artists. That is to say, he wrote satires of the artistic professions and used those satires as occasions for meta-commentary, in the circumstances of their publication and his later critical reflections (in correspondence and in the prefaces), on his own fraught investment in the benefits of an increasingly “personal” literary culture, foremost among them the aura created by his own

refusal to satisfy the curiosity of a prurient public. Although I do not propose taking James's writer-characters as direct stand-ins for James himself, it is clear that his meditations on the changing nature of his own profession allowed him to theorize modern authorship—and specifically authorial personality—under the very conditions of social visibility he experienced. The figure of the author that emerges in his fiction is invariably split between private and public, and the divisions (between social and artistic genius, or between commercial and artistic achievement) that ramify from this primary separation largely reinforce it. At the same time, those conditions of visibility give a new value to the performance of authorial invisibility or illegibility.

And yet James's droll theory of Mellifont's unwholeness points to a different and more complex phenomenology of the modern self, one that, I argue, he develops most fully in his 1886 novel *The Bostonians*, which draws heavily on a naturalist understanding of the determining forces of inheritance and environment in the formation of modern subjectivity. For all his complaints about the tyranny of publicity in the literary profession, and the illusions of intimacy on which that publicity depends, James offers in this novel what I take to be a more forgiving version of the "personality" he elsewhere depicts as artificial and creativity-destroying. In *The Bostonians*, personality is constructed and displayed in an emphatically public world of stages, newspapers, photographs, and advertisements. Given the novel's thematic concern with this culture of display, we might assume that personality would be represented as a consciously created and performed persona made available to others through the mass media. Indeed, the mesmerist healer Selah Tarrant, for whom "human existence...[is] a huge publicity," regrets that through the "medium" of a niche spiritualist newspaper his "personality" has not been able to "attract general attention" (121). However, through the character of Verena Tarrant, the mesmerist's daughter, James unsettles the idea that personality could be so neatly packaged and communicated to others. In

this novel, to have personality is to be, like Mellifont, “not even whole,” radically dependent on the presence and attention of others. And this incompleteness is, I argue, the condition on which intimacy can even be imagined, not only for spectators but also for the possessors of personality themselves. Verena must see herself as existing for others in order to realize the personal power that, in the eyes of those same others, appears to exist apart from them.

*The Bostonians* concerns the struggle between two cousins, the Boston feminist Olive Chancellor and the conservative Southern lawyer Basil Ransom, for possession of the beautiful, charming inspirational speaker Verena Tarrant. Early in the novel, Olive and Basil attend a meeting of feminists, where Verena, who has previously spoken alongside mesmerist father in spiritual lectures, gives a rousing (if somewhat incoherent) speech on the rights of women. Enamored of her charisma, Olive convinces her to join her reform efforts and to act as her mouthpiece; Basil, equally infatuated but lagging slightly in action, ultimately persuades her to leave the public sphere, marry him, and use her “gift” at home. The novel ends with Basil ushering a cloaked, crying Verena out of the sold-out Music Hall where she is scheduled to speak, while the devastated Olive goes on stage to address the restless audience. This final scene crystallizes the division of public and private around which the contest for Verena’s love is organized, and Verena’s concealed tears suggest that this separation has forced Verena to suppress her natural outwardness, a gift of personality inexpressible within the restricted intimacy of the domestic sphere.

This parting hint that privacy might be a privation distinguishes *The Bostonians*, an early work, from the later James stories in which publicity stifles art and privacy offers the only possibility of independent consciousness and creativity. Of course, Verena’s charismatic personality would seem to classify her (along with Mellifont) as a natural performer, in contrast to the artist-characters who adopt social personae under duress. And differences in James’s



treatment of publicity and personality might be understood in terms of these characters' different professional and social identities. But such a division would merely affirm stereotypes of the popular performer as vacuous and the serious artist as possessing an inexhaustibly rich interiority. Instead, I want to suggest that just as the artist stories help us see more clearly the external construction of identity in *The Bostonians*, so does the novel illuminate positive forms of artistry and intimacy within the publicity-saturated culture depicted across this body of writing.

Despite James's great ambitions for the book—he thought it would be “the best thing” he had done yet—*The Bostonians* was a commercial and critical failure, not least because it was his most explicit effort to write in the realist mode of Balzac and Turgenev, whom he had been reading during the years in which he conceived and drafted the novel.<sup>57</sup> (James even called himself “quite the Naturalist” for visiting a prison as research for another realist novel undertaken at the same time, *The Princess Casamassima*.)<sup>58</sup> What contemporary reviewers perceived to be James's neglect of *The Bostonians*'s putative topic—the women's movement—and the romantic quality Philip Fisher has detected in the novel can be attributed to James's distance both from America and from the social reform scene he depicted. After the book began to appear serially, James would defend himself against charges of having cruelly portrayed a respected Boston feminist by claiming to have written “with absolute independence of any model.”<sup>59</sup> But he soon admitted to William that he had mistakenly depicted a “kind of life” that he “had the sense of knowing terribly little about” and a “business” he had “*seen* so little of.”<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> James, *Henry James: A Life in Letters*, 161.

<sup>58</sup> In December 1884, James wrote to a friend regarding *The Princess Casamassima*: “I have been all the morning at Millbank Prison (horrible place) collecting notes for a fiction scene. You see I am quite the Naturalist” (*Henry James: A Life in Letters*, 168).

<sup>59</sup> James, *Henry James: A Life in Letters*, 172.

<sup>60</sup> James, *Henry James: A Life in Letters*, 184.

In spite of his unfamiliarity with American feminism, James was fascinated by the emergence in the United States of a culture of publicity and the ease with which certain people inhabited this new visibility. Critics have tended to read *The Bostonians*'s engagement with modern publicity in two ways. One critical angle has focused on the transformation of the public sphere following the Civil War and Reconstruction, in particular the problem, as Sara Blair puts it, "of identity in a collective life increasingly dominated by the logic of mass media and entertainment."<sup>61</sup> Richard Salmon argues that Basil's effort to possess Verena is intended, in part, to dispel the threatened "feminization" of that public sphere.<sup>62</sup> At the same time—as we will see—James, in targeting feminism, was also addressing its insistence on opening up the private sphere to public debate and even to publicity itself. In a related critical strain, Philip Fisher and Brook Thomas have attended to the process by which Verena can become a "private" individual. Fisher claims that Verena's private self does not preexist her public self but is created by disappearing from it, whereas Thomas counters that the only "space" in which a private self can be constructed is in the act of symbolically (and legally) contracting herself to another individual. If we take Verena to be, in Lydia Ginzburg's evocative terms, an "epochal" or "historically significant" personality in her proclivity for self-display, then her natural outwardness raises the larger question of whether privacy can and should be salvaged.<sup>63</sup> As Fisher writes, *The Bostonians* takes on "not the fashioning of a public form for ordinary personality, but rather the question of the appearance of instinctively public personalities" (179). Whereas the writer-characters of the short fiction have a strained relationship to publicity, the mesmerist Selah Tarrant's "nature" is

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<sup>61</sup> Sara Blair, "Realism, Culture, and the Place of the Literary: Henry James and *The Bostonians*," in *The Cambridge Companion to Henry James*, ed. Jonathan Freedman (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 153–154.

<sup>62</sup> Salmon, *Culture of Publicity*, 26.

<sup>63</sup> Lydia Ginzburg, *On Psychological Prose*, trans. Judson Rosengrant (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991).

“pitched, altogether in the key of public life,” and Verena makes an “intensely personal exhibition” on stage with remarkably little effort (96, 84).

The matter of fashioning and owning a private self is especially urgent for Verena because her “gifts” of presence and speech subject her to the possessive desires of others. As Thomas has remarked, Verena’s capacity to establish intimate relationships with people “results not from a fullness, but an emptiness” within herself, an empty space in within herself and the other party that allows for intimacy.<sup>64</sup> Verena’s emptiness manifests itself in what the narrator describes as “the extraordinary generosity with which she could expose herself, give herself away, turn herself inside out, for the satisfaction of a person who made demands of her” (370). For Fisher, the only way for Verena to “win” that intimacy and humanity is to disappear from public view, through a series of steps toward “full possession of an individual self”: keeping secrets or withholding information from Olive, going for long walks with Basil, and, finally, vanishing from the sold-out theater where she is scheduled to speak, all strategies of “negation” that “invert” the visibility necessary for true celebrity (178–79).

But why *must* Verena become private in order to have a self? In my reading of the novel the nature of Verena’s personality, described variously as her “gift,” her “genius,” her “generosity,” complicates the public/private distinction on which these accounts of her privatization depend.<sup>65</sup> It is not that Verena starts out public and becomes private, or that she becomes private only by contracting herself to another person, but—as I will argue—that her

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<sup>64</sup> Brook Thomas, “The Construction of Privacy in and Around *The Bostonians*,” *American Literature: A Journal of Literary History, Criticism, and Bibliography* 64, no. 4 (1992): 735.

<sup>65</sup> Fisher’s argument about the inversion of public and private in the formation of selves belies any notion of privacy as *prior* to publicity, as the natural state from which individuals move, tragically, into publicity. Thomas says that Verena’s privacy arises from the creation of a space between her and another individual and comments on the irony of her realizing her desire to be “free” by submitting to Basil’s desire to possess her. But Thomas’s focus on contractually created privacy limits our view of the ways in which Verena is, in her relations with less intimate acquaintances, already private in her very publicity.

public existence actually *consists of* others' individual experiences of a private, intimate relation with her. Verena is not *essentially* public or private, as much as Olive and Basil want to understand her as such; she is essentially unwhole and can exist only through the projection of other people's desires, whether or not those people are intimate. Her publicity is experienced as a mass privacy, and her privacy as an intimate publicity—hence Basil's luring Verena into marriage through the promise that the “dining-table” will be her “platform” (379).<sup>66</sup> The audience's feeling of intimacy with the speaker resembles on a larger scale the “Death of the Lion” narrator's feeling of “close correspondence” with Paraday; in both cases, the thrill of that intimacy produces in the audience a sense of power and authority. The competition to be intimate with Verena is, in effect, a competition to say who she is and where she belongs.

What defines Verena's personality is her openness to definition by others. To be sure, characters are generally presented through the perspectives of others: we first see Ransom from Mrs. Luna's perspective, Olive from Ransom's, Verena from Olive's and Ransom's, and these impressions teach us about the characters being perceived and those doing the perceiving. But there is also direct, spoken description of one character *to* another, and Olive and Basil regularly avail of Verena's receptivity to such attention. When Olive befriends Verena after hearing her speak, she announces that she wants to “know” Verena and quickly proceeds to ask for her full commitment to their friendship and the women's movement (102). Clarifying that she has no interest in Verena's vulgar parents, Olive reiterates her passionate desire for and acceptance of Verena: “It's only you [I want]—just as you are,” a sentiment that seems to Verena “indeed very well” (102). Olive is thus able to convince Verena to become her partner in study and social

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<sup>66</sup> In *The Genius of Democracy: Fictions of Gender and Citizenship in the United States, 1860–1945* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), Victoria Olwell claims that “James defines Verena's genius as an ability to create private attachments” among her audience (84). However, Olwell does not address what the audience *does* with those private attachments, which—as I assert—is to claim the authority to defining the object of their interest and desire: Verena herself, rather than the ideas or sentiments she expresses.

reform, to give up her private “life” in order to “move the world” with her gift, to “do something great” (104, 106). This exchange establishes a pattern of Olive eagerly praising Verena “as she is” in order to communicate who she might be and how she might use her capacity to attract attention for the benefit of women as an underrepresented group. This is not to suggest that Olive is disingenuous in her love of Verena, but that her love is predicated on a desire to instrumentalize Verena that she misrecognizes as Verena’s own desire to “use” her “gift” (104).

Similarly, Basil sees Verena as manifesting nothing more than the capacity to be personal. When he first sees her speak, he concludes that her speech is an “intensely personal exhibition” but has “nothing to do” with the “doctrine” being presented (84). The narrator censures Basil by saying that he may not have been “aware of the bearings of his interpretation, which attributed to Miss Tarrant a singular hollowness of character” (85). But this is precisely the point: as an inspirational speaker (and, according to some, a medium), she is not seen to possess ideas resulting from rational thought and moral conviction, but rather to spontaneously express ideas appropriate to the occasion.<sup>67</sup> Basil’s characterization of her speech as nonsensical—“full of school-girl phrases, of patches of remembered eloquence, of childish lapses of logic, or flights of fancy”—and his belief that she does not “mean it,” in fact does not “know what she mean[s]” exempts her from the expectation of self-identity associated with character as a moral concept (84, 85). Moreover, this implied “hollowness” is perfectly consistent with what Basil ultimately wants from Verena: for her to abandon her speaking career and stop being a “inflated little figure” controlled by strings (330). Basil tells her to free herself from this “preposterous puppet” not because it is empty and fake but because it “it isn’t *you*” (330). And yet in describing the real

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<sup>67</sup> Olwell explains that the genius orator was supposed to lift her auditors out of their merely private sensory experience and into a collective body and mind by spontaneously expressing a thought—a “representative” thought—that listeners realized was also their own (*Genius of Democracy*, 69). Verena’s speech is described as “thoroughly impersonal”; cf. Dreiser’s Carrie’s face as “representative of the world’s longing.”

Verena as defined by her desire to “please” others, he reinstates the dependent identity he has just encouraged her to renounce. In contrast to Verena’s earlier pleasure in Olive’s seemingly unconditional admiration of her, here Verena accepts Basil’s “description of herself as something other than what she was trying to be” with pain but also with credulity.

James’s technique of filling out characters through other characters’ direct attribution of qualities (you are this, you are not that) creates a competition to describe, and a triangulation of desire, very different from what we have seen in the artist stories. In the stories, the narrator singles himself out as the most important recipient of the writer’s intimacy, in competition with only the public and the reader, whose access to the writer is mediated in various ways and therefore inferior. The question, in turn, is not so much who the writer is as who has the privilege of telling others who he is. The narrator of “The Next Time” claims the authority to assess his friend’s life and career in what is effectively a eulogy of an author who would otherwise remain obscure. In *The Bostonians*, by contrast, the overt triangulation of the three characters of Verena, Olive, and Basil changes the stakes of this pursuit of intimacy. Olive and Basil vie with each other to define who Verena is or ought to be, but implicit in this competition is the question of whom the essentially unwhole Verena should define herself *in relation to*, to whom she should entrust her self-definition.<sup>68</sup> And to extend my earlier term to the present discussion, we might call Olive and Basil “special readers” of Verena herself.

To be fair, Verena is not the only “hollow” character. As Thomas has pointed out, it is “deficiencies, not a fullness” that cause Olive and Basil to “seek out partnerships” (735). But both Olive and Basil are somewhat insulated from this necessary outwardness: Olive’s money and social position enable her to choose her relations carefully, while Basil’s chivalric behavior and

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<sup>68</sup> To borrow Sam Halliday’s useful terms, what seems to be a matter of “intrapersonal” definition is in fact an “interpersonal” process of ascription. Halliday, “Helen Keller, Henry James, and the Social Relations of Perception,” *Criticism* 48, no. 2 (2006): 175–201.

firm belief in separate spheres permits him to keep Verena at a distance even as he courts her total devotion. For Verena, however, who aspires (at the urging of her mother) to rise socially, recognizing her own emptiness means also accepting her need of an intimate relation that can provide such security. Basil succeeds in winning her love in part because he perceives this emptiness as a splitness and describes to her—and thus fills in—the half of her that has allegedly disappeared through her constant exposure.

Basil argues for her withdrawal from public on the basis of her already existing fullness—a “unique, extraordinary” self capable of being “conceal[ed] and efface[d]” by the performing persona imposed on her. Yet what prompts Verena to recognize this real self is Basil’s “charge of want of reality” (331). Her apparent recognition of the “real” self that Basil describes would seem to point to something existing already “within” her, but instead it reveals a lack she suddenly wants to overcome. What has until this moment been her characteristic blankness becomes a false identity, and in her movement from that capacious undefinedness to being the “free” woman Basil describes, momentarily untethered from the puppet strings, she becomes self-conscious for the first time in the novel. As Basil fixes his eyes on her, Verena immediately enacts the privacy he is proposing by “blush[ing]” and changing the subject: she “had been commended of old by Olive for her serenity ‘while exposed to the gaze of hundreds’; but a change had taken place, and she was now unable to endure the contemplation of an individual” (331). Although Verena abruptly departs, offended by his elaboration on the inferiority of women for “civic uses,” her terse, nearly speechless withdrawal from Basil clarifies that speech itself, not her public oratory, is the field on which their negotiation of power is being conducted (332). This imbalanced exchange foreshadows what Salmon describes as Basil’s final “usurp[ation]” of

Verena's charismatic powers of speech in his "effective and penetrating" words about her "genuine vocation."<sup>69</sup>

It is through this emphasis on the charismatic, relational, vulnerable self that James articulates a different conception of personality: more than just the dreary professional duty of appearing in public, it is a form of subjectivity predicated on the individual's voluntary subjection to others' projections. Verena subjects herself to others in two conflicting ways: by taking the stage at her father's and Olive's encouragement, and by accepting Basil's assessment of her genius and its appropriate uses to such an extent that is forced to abandon the stage altogether. A reconceptualization of personality happens within the novel as well. Basil defends his agenda of privatizing Verena on the grounds that she possesses "the gift of expression," and "there is nothing [he] can do for [her] that will make [her] less expressive" (379). Basil treats her expressiveness as a matter of fact, a gift "indestructible," but this very expressiveness is something that he has ascribed to her, something potentially—and actually—disproven by her occasionally faltering speech or silence (379). Basil's insistence on preserving her autonomy in the act of telling her who she is marks an explicit shift from the expressive model of personality suggested in the scenes of Verena's speeches—in which everyone is "exceedingly affected" by Verena's charismatic performance, despite the claim that an outside power speaks through her—to an ascriptive model of personality enacted in private scenes of other people speaking Verena into existence (87).

## 7. "Incalculable Phenomena": Deracinating Personality

Verena's "want of reality" evokes the American innocence as James describes it in his 1908 preface to *The Reverberator* (1888). Writing of his time in the south of Europe, he remembers

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<sup>69</sup> Salmon, *Culture of Publicity*, 26.



the Americans he met there as “irreducibly destitute of those elements of preparedness” that Europe required (188). However, he qualifies this characterization by adding that the “characteristic blankness” of some of the American girls “underwent what one might call a sea-change”: “Conscious of so few things in the world, these unprecedented creatures...were least of all conscious of deficiencies and dangers; so that, the grace of youth and innocence and freshness aiding, their negatives were converted and became in certain relations lively positives and values.”<sup>70</sup> The “deficiencies” and “dangers” are the world’s, but it is the women’s “negatives”—their unconsciousness of that world—that equips them to engage in social intercourse heedlessly yet with inadvertently beneficial results. The “conversion” of their negatives into positives does not mean that they cease being American, but rather than their Americanness, defined here as a “blankness,” allows them to transform what might be labeled innocence into a less morally charged openness and receptivity.

Although *The Bostonians* is markedly American in both setting and subject, it nonetheless features a fantasy of deracination that evokes the international theme of many of James’s novels. And although Verena differs from other American girls James had recently depicted—the naïve, self-sufficient heroines of *Daisy Miller* (1878), *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), and several short stories—she shares with them a lack of definite origins. James remarked in his notebook in May 1883 that the “self-made girl” was a good subject; and in “Pandora,” written in 1883–1884, he noted the characteristics of this American type: “You knew her by many different signs, but chiefly, infallibly, by the appearance of her parents . . . you always saw that her parents could never have made her.”<sup>71</sup> Before settling on the title *The Bostonians*, James planned to call the book *Verena*, and he seems to have envisioned the recreation of this type in an exclusively American

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<sup>70</sup> Henry James, *Art of the Novel*, 188.

<sup>71</sup> Lee Ann Johnston, “The Psychology of Characterization: James’s Portraits of Verena Tarrant and Olive Chancellor,” *Studies in the Novel* 6, no. 3 (1974): 296–97.

setting where her innocence, unchallenged by European worldliness, could thrive and take new forms.

The discourse of hereditary and environmental determination in *The Bostonians* links the novel to the naturalist project that after the 1880 publication of Zola's theory of *le roman expérimental* took hold of the American literary imagination.<sup>72</sup> James read Zola along with Balzac and Turgenev and reviewed Zola's *Nana* in 1880, shortly before recording his first plans for his own study of what Salmon calls the "histrionic 'character'" and the "surrounding influence of her theatrical milieu."<sup>73</sup> James had already attempted, in his 1874 story "Professor Fargo," a strange, hybrid experiment on the interaction between the forces of heredity and environment. This little satire of American quackery, scarcely acknowledged by critics, is narrated by a traveling salesman who, stuck in a small New England town, attends a show put on by a mesmerist.<sup>74</sup> Performing with Professor Fargo are the eccentric mathematician Colonel Gifford and his computationally talented deaf-mute daughter, who submits to the hypnotic trance the mesmerist

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<sup>72</sup> Salmon explains that "the naturalistic elements of *The Bostonians* may well have been derived from James's reading of Zola's novel, *Nana*, which he reviewed in 1880, the year of its publication. Like James's novel, *Nana* may be read as a study of the histrionic "character" (in this case, that of an actress) and the surrounding influence of her theatrical milieu" (*Culture of Publicity*, 197).

<sup>73</sup> Salmon, *Culture of Publicity*, 197. Terry Castle discusses the links between *The Bostonians* and *Nana* at some length in *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Sexuality and Modern Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

<sup>74</sup> Adeline R. Tintner, "Henry James's 'Professor Fargo' and 'Don Quixote': American Realism Through a Literary Analogy," *American Literary Realism, 1870–1910* 19, no. 3 (1987): 42–51. For discussions of "Professor Fargo" and mesmeric science, see Martha Banta, *Henry James and the Occult: The Great Extension* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1972); Howard Kerr, *Mediums, and Spirit-Rappers, and Roaring Radicals: Spiritualism in American Literature, 1850–1900* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1972). Banta argues that realism redefined the terms of mesmerism and "mental science": the binding power that is presented as partially occult in Hawthorne's *The Blithedale Romance*, and depicted as sexual attraction alone in James's "Professor Fargo," is fully defined in Howells's *The Undiscovered Country* as love, that mutual absorption of human consciousness (90, 96). Banta describes the mesmeric power in "Professor Fargo" as an irrational personal magnetism winning over scientific mind, fraud triumphant over truth, sexual mastery and the corruption of innocence by Yankee shrewdness (103). On the blankness of the mediumistic girl, Kerr notes that James found Howells's medium, Egeria Boynton, without distinct personality (203). And Johnston notes James's reaction to the faulty characterization of Hawthorne's *Blithedale Romance* and Daudet's *L'Évangéliste*, whose female lead he found "terribly, almost grotesquely void" (296).

imposes on her. When the exhibition stops drawing crowds and money, Fargo absconds with the daughter, and Gifford goes mad as a result. Notable as James's only other treatment of mesmerism, this story stages a conflict between the "genius" Gifford's daughter has inherited from him and her susceptibility to the animal "magnetism" with which Fargo corrupts her.<sup>75</sup> The narrator closes the story by expressing his sympathy for the bereaved old man and contempt for the mesmerist's tricks, but his final dismissive mention of Fargo's "new entertainment"—a show presumably featuring the hypnotized girl, who is now "of age"—implies a grudging respect for the charlatan's success at triumphing over the power of paternal affection (253).

*The Bostonians* employs and repurposes several elements from "Professor Fargo": the mesmerist quack, the father-daughter stage couple, the direct passing-on of genius, and the struggle for possession over a gifted girl whose mind (in the earlier instance because of her disability) is imagined as blank. But for all the talk of heredity in the novel, there is widespread doubt that Verena's parents could have made her or that her upbringing limited who she could be. Verena's deracination is imagined in several ways, all of which challenge the general understanding that her personality can be explained by reference to her father's power as a mesmeric healer and his alleged ability to "pass" inspiration into her. From the moment of Verena's appearance in Mrs. Farrinder's home, everyone talks about the nature and origin of her gift. Doctor Prance condescendingly comments that the Tarrantes are all talk: that if Verena is Selah's child, "she would be sure to have some gift—if it was only the gift of the g— well, she didn't mean to say that; but a talent for conversation" (70). Others take a more reverent view, as when the journalist Matthias Pardon speaks to Olive: "They call it inspirational. I don't know what it is—only it's exquisite; so fresh and poetical. She has to have her father to start her up. It

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<sup>75</sup> Henry James, "Professor Fargo," *Galaxy Magazine* 18, no. 1 (1874): 244, 235.

seems to pass into her” (78). Despite Pardon’s “mean opinion” of Selah, Pardon grants him a certain authority as the source of Verena’s inspiration (140).

Even Selah himself remarks on the origin of her power in order to clarify that it cannot be traced solely to him.

[Mr Tarrant] said that these flattering allusions were not so embarrassing as they might be, inasmuch as any success that he and his daughter might have had was so thoroughly impersonal: he insisted on that word. They had just heard her say: ‘It’s not *me*, mother,’ and he and Mrs Tarrant and the girl herself were all equally aware it was not she. It was some power outside—it seemed to flow through her; he couldn’t pretend to say why his daughter should be called, more than anyone else. But it seemed as if she *was* called. When he just calmed her down by laying his hand on her a few moments, it seemed to come. (79–80)

Selah’s repeated assertions of the “impersonality” of his daughter’s talent may be an attempt at gentility, but his self-effacement also sets up and inadvertently affirms other people’s efforts to distance Verena from her parents for overtly classist reasons.<sup>76</sup>

Indeed, the Tarrants’ ways of minimizing their contributions to Verena’s success, and Verena’s own “it’s not *me*,” demonstrate a modesty that both Olive and Basil exploit in their attempts to gain exclusive possession of Verena. For these characters, refusing any biological or hereditary explanation of Verena’s special capacity is necessary to creating a private bond with her, for knowledge of her “trashy” origins would disrupt the illusion of individuality and autonomy underlying a voluntary partnership. While Basil states simply to Verena, “I don’t know where you come from nor how you come to be what you are,” Olive is more searching and mystical in her thinking about the “perpetual enigma” of Verena’s gift (330).

Verena’s genius was a mystery, and it might remain a mystery; it was impossible to see how this charming, blooming, simple creature, all youth and grace and innocence got her extraordinary powers of reflection[...] Olive had to content herself, provisionally, with saying that her precious faculty had come to her just as her beauty and distinction[...] had

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<sup>76</sup> See Susan Mizruchi, *The Power of Historical Knowledge* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), 172.

come; it had dropped straight from heaven, without filtering through her parents, whom Miss Chancellor decidedly did not fancy. (104)

She had explained it, as we explain all exceptional things, by making the part, as the French say, of the miraculous. She had come to consider the girl as a wonder of wonders, to hold that no human origin, however congruous it might superficially appear, would sufficiently account for her; that her springing up between Selah and his wife was an exquisite whim or the creative force, and that in such a case a few shades more or less of the inexplicable didn't matter. It was notorious that great beauties, great geniuses, great characters, take their own times and places for coming into the world, leaving the gaping spectators to make them 'fit in', and holding from far-off ancestors, or even, perhaps, straight from the divine generosity, much more than from their ugly or stupid progenitors. They were incalculable phenomena, anyway, as Selah would have said. (132)

Olive's praise of Verena as "all grace and youth and innocence" anticipates James's phrasing in his *Reverberator* preface when he describes the American girls who overcome their deficiencies "with grace of youth and innocence and freshness aiding." Olive does not reject the idea of "human origin" altogether, but her belief it could not "sufficiently account" for Verena's existence allows her to treat the Tarrants as no more important to explaining her their daughter's gift than "far-off ancestors" or "divine generosity" (132). The fantasy of divinely or spontaneously created personality at once divests Verena of all agency (she is a "wonder" to behold) and credits her, in the absence of any other identifiable source, with her own success. In this way Verena is like the actress Miriam Rooth in *The Tragic Muse*. As Sara Blair remarks, the "blank[ness]" associated with Miriam's "history and performance constitutes, at least in part, a power of transformative self-invention."<sup>77</sup>

However, this trope of the "inexplicable" mystery is marked as a feature of the radical subculture of New England spiritualists and reformers from which Olive is trying to extricate Verena. (In his notebook entry on *The Bostonians*, James sketched Verena as the "daughter of old abolitionists, spiritualists, transcendentalists, etc." and thus placed her in a family tradition

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<sup>77</sup> Sara Blair, *Henry James and the Writing of Race and Nation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 129.

extending beyond her mesmerist father [46].) It is Selah who first refers to a superhuman power imbuing Verena with eloquence, and Olive seems to borrow unwittingly from his spiritualist vocabulary in her own earnest description of her “miraculous” friend (132). In other words, Olive’s disdain for the Tarrants leads her to indulge in the same wide-eyed deferral to the “incalculable” as Selah performs in his insistence on the impersonality of Verena’s ability. This echoing seems to reinstate in idealizing terms the personal nature of Verena’s ability that Selah has shied away from. Moreover, Olive refines the idea of Verena’s “thoroughly impersonal” gift by putting her in a class of great individuals whose greatness is not their own personal achievement but is nonetheless their possession and distinction. If Verena cannot be *explained* by reference to her parents, she can at least be placed in relation to other examples of greatness across history, and thus removed from the vulgar circumstances into which she happened to be born.

This idealization of Verena as an unsolvable mystery suggests that it is actually a desire to know *less* of a person that makes intimacy possible in a culture of publicity. Contrary to what James called the “insurmountable desire to *know*” that threatens the artist’s privacy, in *The Bostonians* we see instead the desire to possess without knowing. The central conflict of the novel—the contest to own Verena—thus arises from a simple fetishism: a shared fantasy in which the object of acquisition is valued for its magically spontaneous appearance, “fresh from the hand of Omnipotence,” and its concomitant distance (133).

## 8. The Work of the Gifted

My discussion of these efforts to define and explain Verena—who she really is, where she comes from—is a circuitous way of getting to a formal question at the core of both the artist stories and *The Bostonians*: Why is the very thing that distinguishes these writers and speakers—

their work—not represented in the stories? Why is the *content* of their work not made available? I asked a version of this question earlier in this chapter, but it takes on a new urgency when the work is not writing but speech. There are two reasons for this, one characterological, the other textual. First, it is Verena’s special ability as a speaker that attracts other people to her. And while it is Verena’s public speaking that moves Olive and Basil to pursue her, private interactions among these characters occur largely through speech as well, as opposed to more or less direct means by which knowledge of others becomes possible in others James novels (e.g., silent observation in *The Portrait of a Lady* and *The Ambassadors*). Second, while Verena’s public speeches would be difficult to reproduce (though perhaps not as difficult as Paraday’s or Limbert’s novels, or Vawdrey’s unfinished play), the ideas expressed in those speeches might be conveyed.

One could argue that in *The Bostonians* verisimilitude justifies this omission, as Verena’s audience does not pay much attention to her words, which Basil and Olive consider to be incidental to her performance.<sup>78</sup> Indeed, Basil considers the content of Verena’s speeches to be imposed on her and deems whatever ideas she expresses at Miss Birdseye’s to be “trash” that she is “neither more nor less willing to say” than “anything else” (85). Olive is more forgiving of the fact that Verena’s words are not her own: “she might have been satisfied that the girl was a mass of fluent catch-words and yet scarcely have liked her the less” (101). Basil pursues Verena in spite of her apparent politics, and Olive decides to collaborate with Verena on the basis on personal charm, rather than her ideas; Olive finds Verena’s preference for “free unions” distasteful but sees the potential for such notions to be unlearned.

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<sup>78</sup> See Mizruchi, *Historical Knowledge*; Salmon, *Culture of Publicity*; and Olwell, *Genius of Democracy*. While Mizruchi and Salmon focus on Basil’s silencing of Verena, Olwell makes a particularly provocative claim about the Olive’s “analytical blankness” forgiving the unspecificity of Verena’s speech: “The main effect of Verena’s genius on Olive is to create a desire that fills the space where politics might be but is not” (85).

It is the narrator who addresses the matter most directly: “The historian who has gathered these documents together does not deem it necessary to give a larger specimen of Verena’s eloquence, especially as Basil Ransom, through whose ears we are listening to it, arrived, at this point, at a definite conclusion” (268–69). Kent Puckett argues that this technique “releases James from the difficult task of writing political speeches” but also “points to James’s chief insight about the political” in this novel: that “not knowing is a fact of composition not only in his novel about politics but also in politics as such.”<sup>79</sup> And if Verena’s confused if eloquent speeches play “a positive role in the organization of political consciousness,” as Puckett suggests, then we can take seriously the idea that Verena’s “work” is indeed being done. Verena succeeds in producing an affective response in her audience; whether she also makes them *think* seems almost irrelevant when she holds them in such unity that she regards them as a “single person,” a “single sentient personality” (86, 265). The fact that auditors of such different political orientations as the reactionary Basil and the radical Olive both value Verena more for her affective power than for her words implies that our getting her speeches through Basil’s perspective may not be an erasure or limitation at all, but the most psychologically realistic representation possible.

For all the discussion of and debate about the origin and nature of Verena’s gift, there is a general consensus on its “effectiveness,” which serves as another justification for the neglect of her ideas. Olive believes that “the most effective way of protesting against the state of bondage of women [is] for an individual member of the sex to become illustrious” (169). And Olive justifies her and Verena’s partnership of minds in terms of political effectiveness: “To Olive it appeared that just this partnership of their two minds—each of them, by itself, lacking an important group of facets—made an organic whole which, for the work in hand, could not fail to be brilliantly

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<sup>79</sup> Kent Puckett, *Bad Form: Social Mistakes and the Nineteenth-Century Novel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 144.



effective” (169). Basil takes a more cynical view, wondering after Verena’s first speech if Mrs. Farrinder will think of her as a “a parrot or a genius,” but acknowledges that in either case she would “be effective, would help the cause” (88). Not only does Basil recognize that effectiveness trumps sincerity and authenticity in political work, but he creates a distinction that is false, and illuminatingly so. Verena is not either a parrot or a genius: her genius is *in* her parrotry, and her effectiveness depends on that emptiness and adaptability. Basil’s quip that he has become a convert to Miss Tarrant rather than to the cause is a dismissal of the content of her speech, but it is also an affirmation of her ability as a performer.

The pragmatic assessment of Verena’s gift as “effective” reinforces its value as “work,” and I would like to propose an understanding of Verena as an artist whose work is to create, for the benefit of her audience, an illusion of substance and fullness where there is none. Olive thinks of Verena as having the “disposition of the artist, the spirit to which all charming forms come easily and naturally” (132). But just as Olive’s explanation of Verena’s gift as “divine” deprives her friend of both and self-making, her view of Verena as artist-like makes her “charming forms” seem effortless. However, Verena herself speaks of her gift as “work.” When Olive asks Verena to leave her parents and come live with her, Verena replies:

“I have my work, you know. That’s the way I must live now.”  
 “Your work?” Olive repeated, not quite understanding.  
 “My gift,” said Verena, smiling.  
 “Oh yes, you must use it. That’s what I mean; you must move the world with it; it’s divine.” (104)

While Verena generally defines herself in response to others’ descriptions of her, here she gently asserts her self-understanding in the face of Olive’s eager (if somewhat inaccurate) appreciation. And when Olive praises her for being more personal and less abstract than other feminist speakers, Verena affirms Olive’s compliment by crediting herself with “a certain amount of imagination,” for “she couldn’t be so effective on the platform if she hadn’t a rich fancy” (106). In

this exchange, Verena defers to Olive while at the same time subtly challenging Olive's assumption that her new friend is in need of a vocation that would dignify her talent. In referring to the inspirational speaking she is already doing as a kind of "work," and in praising her own imaginative faculty, she disrupts in advance the narrative of redemption that Olive soon constructs: the heroic story of elevating a working-class girl out of a world of mercenary charlatanry and into the noble vocation of social reform—the redemption of women on an individual scale.

This brings us back to the question of why Verena "must" become private in a culture of publicity, why the logic of the novel dictates this particular mode of becoming an individual. As critics have noted, Verena gains independence from Olive by keeping secrets from her. Not only does the keeping of secrets involve a different kind of dependence (on the sharer of the secret, in this case Basil), but this focus on her chosen privacy obscures another way in which she moves toward self-possession: by embracing her own commodification in public. Although Verena does measure her own success in Olive's terms, primary among them her usefulness to others, she is also unapologetic about the pleasure she takes in her own growing celebrity. Her embrace of her fame discomfits Olive, who wants her friend to be "illustrious" rather than famous, and Basil, who wants her to withdraw from public life altogether. Verena's enjoyment of her fame thus thwarts both characters' efforts to define and possess her, for even as they see her as an essentially extroverted being—whether her outwardness is meant for a lecture audience or for a husband—they attempt to limit the ways in which she can engage with others, or that others (particularly the masses) can engage with her. (The conflict between these exhibitionist and proprietary impulses anticipates "The Death of the Lion," where they converge in the narrator to spur the publication of his "essentially private notes" on Paraday.)

A striking instance of this ambivalence toward Verena's public representation occurs in the first of the private walks that she and Basil take. Verena has just attended a Boston women's convention (and discovered there that she has "a great use"), and Basil responds to her pride in the impressive company she kept by asking whether she has ever "subjected herself to the process" of being photographed (242). Verena answers "that a photographer had been after her as soon as she got back from Europe, and that she had sat for him, and that there were certain shops in Boston where her portrait could be obtained" (242). The exchange that follows this news reveals a gulf of understanding between them about what it means for her to have achieved such renown. When Basil says "that he should go and buy one of the little pictures as soon as he returned to town," Verena replies that he should "pick out a good one!" (242). Basil takes this a sign of the distance between them: "He had not been altogether without a hope that she would offer to give him one, with her name written beneath, which was a mode of acquisition he would greatly have preferred; but this, evidently, had not occurred to her" (242). Basil accepts the *fact* of Verena's photographic existence but not the way in which it mediates the relationship between them. He does not think of the portraits as false representations of her, as we might expect from his later criticism of her puppetry. Nor does he object absolutely to the idea of purchasing a picture for fear of tainting their relationship with commerce. Instead, he merely regrets that he has not reached a more privileged position as a spectator of her fame. A gifted, signed portrait would be a symbolic affirmation of the intimacy imaginatively experienced by all who behold her but in fact afforded to a select few.

In contrast to the characters who cannot content themselves with this kind of mediated intimacy, the journalist Matthias Pardon emerges as a kind of democratic hero, who for all his newsy faddishness and commercial vulgarity is unselfish in his appreciation of Verena. Pardon, who shows up at all the events but never becomes close to Verena, seems to be nothing more

than a superficial, modern type, the “ingenuous son of his age” for whom “all distinction between the person and the artist had ceased to exist” (139). But in his gross, mercenary way, he actually recognizes the value of Verena’s talent more fully and generously than anyone else. He wants her to succeed, not merely to love him; in this respect Pardon resembles Rosedale in Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth* (1905). Although he unabashedly commodifies her, declaring that “there’s money for someone in that girl,” he sees her as common property: despite his own infatuation with her, he wants to “share the object of his affection with the American people” (87, 140). Even when he proposes to Olive that they manage Verena together, he claims that he is not after money but wants “to make history” (157). A subtle irony of the novel is that Pardon’s crass dream of seeing Verena’s “name in the biggest kind of bills and her portrait in the windows of the stores” turns out to be the most *accurate* prediction about her career (142). At the end of the book, Verena is scheduled to speak at the sold-out Music Hall; as Basil realizes with distress, her portrait is “in half the shop-fronts, her advertisement on all the fences, and the occasion on which she was to reveal herself to the country at large close at hand” (406).

Are we then to understand Verena’s final refusal to appear before the eager audience to be not only a break with Olive but also an ideological rejection of Pardon’s commercial vision? It is true that, as Sara Blair writes, Pardon “emblemizes the rise of commodified selfhood, and of mass cultural institutions for exploiting it, as a norm of American public life.”<sup>80</sup> But this commodification also provides a kind of freedom for Verena, as the portraits and advertisements mediating her relationship to her audience take on a life of their own, rendering irrelevant the questions of who she *really* is and where she *really* belongs: she is “Miss Tarrant” and she is everywhere. The newspapers and advertisers that exploit her also excuse her from the difficult

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<sup>80</sup> Blair, “Realism, Culture, and the Place of the Literary,” 153.

task of self-representation, a task that for a “naturally theatrical” individual may well be impossible (77).

This problem of self-representation is acute in the hours just before the scheduled lecture, when Verena is nowhere to be found. As Basil searches for Verena, contemplating preventing her from going on stage, he paces in front of the Music Hall and sees “Verena immensely advertised” before going inside only to find boys selling portraits of her: “‘Photographs of Miss Tarrant — sketch of her life!’ or ‘Portraits of the Speaker — story of her career!’” (413, 415). He buys a photograph, which he deems “shockingly bad,” and a sketch of her life, before concluding that “Verena [is] not in the least present to him in connexion with this exhibition of enterprise and puffery” and wishing that he “had money to buy up the stock of the vociferous little boys” (415). Basil’s belief that the event is not really Verena’s justifies his desire to take her out of circulation.

Basil ultimately makes a demand for self-identity: he asks that Verena be the “real” Verena he has called forth. In a sense, he holds himself to the same standard in his own professional ambitions, as he gives up his floundering law career in order to write. Encouraged by the acceptance of an article into the *Rational Review*, he tells Verena that he believes “it will attract some attention” and proposes to support her in marriage by publishing more articles (360). As with Verena’s speeches, we do not learn what Basil has written about save that the article “contain[s] a good many of the opinions” he has expressed to Verena, “and a good many more besides” (359–60). Despite Basil’s disapproval of Verena’s public life, he welcomes his own publication as an expression of his masculine, rational nature. However, before the article is accepted, Verena hints at the consequences of publication when she says, “I hope very much you *will* get printed,” to which Basil clarifies, “Get my articles published?” (333). This momentary confusion about who or what is to be printed points to an unexpected similarity between Verena

and Basil: in publishing his work, even in the impersonal *Rational Review*, he is himself inevitably also “printed”—commodified and circulated on paper, just as Verena is on the lecture circuit and in the media. In hoping that “he” will get printed, Verena conflates the person and the work in a way that suggests her own inseparability from her work: that of exposing herself.

As in the artist stories, this conflation of artist and person can be, in a surprising, surreptitious way, advantageous to those it seems to harm. In *The Bostonians*, the publication of the self, on the stage or in writing, is not only a satisfaction in itself but also an opportunity for a kind of ironic displacement. Verena’s “it’s not *me*” is more than just an attribution of her performance to an external force; it is an affirmation of the audience’s desire to know that part of the performer’s self is hidden or absent even while her presence is overwhelmingly felt. As Verena finishes her first speech, the narrator describes her calm, confident movements:

...the young lady finished her harangue, which was not followed by her sinking exhausted into her chair or by any traces of a laboured climax. She only turned away slowly towards her mother, smiling over her shoulder at the whole room, as if it had been a single person, without a flush in her whiteness, or the need of drawing a longer breath. The performance had evidently been very easy to her, and there might have been a kind of impertinence in her air of not having suffered from an exertion which had wrought so powerfully on every one else. (86)

This performance apparently of total and haughty self-control is strikingly effortless, even automatic in comparison to the passion of her speech. She is, in a sense, most fully engaged with her audience at the moment of seductive retreat, and the theatrical gesture of smiling as she turns away evokes the “generosity” with which she presents herself to others. Her transition out of view seems to mark her disappearance from public to private, from stage to family. But it is the impression of a prior privacy—her self-containment and self-possession *during* the performance—that provokes the audience to experience her presence as an imminent deprivation.

Verena’s gesture of turning away also evokes, in an oblique way, the image of the artist James gives us in his preface to *The Tragic Muse*. He concludes that preface with an explanation of

why Nick Dormer, who is torn between the political career expected by his family and his own ambitions as a painter, is not “quite so interesting as he was fondly intended to be.”<sup>81</sup> James asserts the difficulty of representing the artist “in triumph,” for the artist’s triumph “is but the triumph of what he produces, and that is another affair” (96). All we see of the “charm-compeller,” then—and here I return to the line I quoted earlier—is “the back he turns to us as he bends over his work” (96). James insists on the necessary opacity of the artistic act while at the same time giving us an image of the transitional moment between the artist’s engagement with others and his creative solitude. The artist’s gestures of exclusion, his turning away and bending over, draw us in. Verena might be understood as a representational, if not an ideological, solution to the problem of the privacy of creation: her genius is in her parrotry, and so her originality is not at stake; her labor, as we see in the image of her finishing “without a flush in her whiteness, or the need of drawing a longer breath,” appears to be null; and her product is not so much her speech or even her performance as the desirous response she “generously” elicits from her audience.

#### 9. “The better part”?

When *The Bostonians* began its run as a serial in the *Century Magazine* in February 1885, it immediately offended Bostonian sensitivities and caused something of a national scandal. American readers thought they discerned a satirical portrait of Elizabeth Peabody—the educator, editor, and transcendentalist reformer—in the bumbling figure of Miss Birdseye. After receiving an accusatory letter from William, James responded with a mordant self-defense: “I am quite appalled by your note...in which you assault me on the subject of my having painted a ‘portrait

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<sup>81</sup> Henry James, *Art of the Novel*, 96.

from life' of Miss Peabody!"<sup>82</sup> Claiming that he had "no shadow of such an intention" and did not know enough of Miss Peabody to use her as a "starting-point" anyway, he insisted on the autonomy of his imaginative labor: "Miss Birdseye was evolved entirely from my moral consciousness, like every person I have ever drawn" (170). The next day he wrote a postscript in which he again emphasized his creative labor, but also emphasized that the character was, in his opinion, sympathetic: "I never wished or attempted to represent her *at all*, or dreamed of it, & to be accused of doing so is a poor reward for having laboriously bodied forth out of the vague of imagination, & with absolute independence of any model that my own wits did not afford me, a creature who is (as I think) interesting & picturesque" (172–73). Around the same time, he complained to James R. Osgood, who had sold the novel to the *Century* and was to publish the book, that "the charge in regard to this serial's containing 'personalities' is idiotic & baseless: there is not the smallest, faintest portrait in the book" (169).

The accusation leveled at James was that he had unfairly and cruelly used his personal acquaintance with Miss Peabody as material for his satire of the Boston reform scene. This was evidently not the first time James had faced the charge of having written personal portraits. In his letter to William, he mentioned another case: in London, "I am told, on all sides...that my *Author of Beltraffio* is a living & scandalous portrait of J. A. Symonds & his wife, whom I have never seen" (172). This tendency by American and British readers alike to speculate on the historical models for fictional characters irked James, apparently more for the insult to his imagination than because of any fundamental objection to taking inspiration from historical figures. Over the years his ambivalence only grew: although he would later unabashedly name Robert Browning as the basis for Clare Vawdrey, when Vernon Lee allegedly "directed a kind of satire of a flagrant & 'saucy' kind" at him, he dismissed her books as "a tissue of personalities of the hideous roman à

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<sup>82</sup> James, *Henry James: A Life in Letters*, 169.



clef kind.”<sup>83</sup> But in 1885, standing accused of defaming a respected Bostonian he scarcely knew, James found himself suffering from a version of the problem he would represent in his *Yellow Book* stories—the privileging of the author’s life over his work. In this instance, that privileging may have felt like more of a degradation, wherein his life was reduced to mere fodder for his fiction and he was maligned as an instrumentalist.

Following the critical and commercial failure of *The Bostonians*, James diluted his original conception of *The Reverberator* as a further exploration of the modern phenomenon of publicity.<sup>84</sup> As we have seen, James turned his attention in the 1890s toward the literary profession itself, and this narrowing of his broader concern with publicity can be understood as a *personalization* of the subject. In the letter to William in which he admitted his ignorance of the American reform scene, James concluded that he would have written with “a lighter hand” if he had chosen “a subject concerned with people & things of a nature more near to my experience.”<sup>85</sup> This self-admonition presages James’s deepening interest in the personal subject of “the artist deluded, diverted, frustrated or vanquished,” as he describes it in the preface to *The Tragic Muse*.<sup>86</sup> James’s disclaimer that “the better part” of the artist “is locked too much away from us” to be represented, and that we can see only the part he “has to pass for,” encapsulates the irony intrinsic to the project of self-representation he undertook in his artist fiction, as well as in his commercial and critical packaging of that work (97). The “dreary duty” of being personal in his professional life provided James with the occasion to theorize personality as a phenomenological and representational problem of “passing,” an act of self-presentation that involves both self-control and surrender to others’ perceptions. James’s excitement at Howells’s news of “the

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<sup>83</sup> Vineta Colby, *Vernon Lee* (University of Virginia Press, 2003), 196.

<sup>84</sup> Anne Margolis, cited in Salmon, *Culture of Publicity*, 209.

<sup>85</sup> James, *Henry James: A Life in Letters*, 184.

<sup>86</sup> Henry James, *Art of the Novel*, 96.

miraculously-named ‘uptown’ apartment house” is one small example of the fraught pleasure he seems to have felt in such surrender.

## CHAPTER TWO:

## DREISERIAN PERSONALITY AND THE REFORMULATION OF SUCCESS

*Even her weeping was an art.*

—Edith Wharton<sup>1</sup>

1. “In other words, personality”

Working as a magazine journalist around the turn of the twentieth century, Theodore Dreiser first became interested in a concept that would obsess him for the rest of his career: personality. Dreiser’s experience interviewing famous men for *Success* magazine in the 1890s and editing popular women’s magazines in the 1900s exposed him to the increasingly popular idea that anyone could succeed simply by developing and deploying personal charm. As we have seen, Warren Susman has situated the notion of personal magnetism in what is commonly understood as the late-nineteenth-century shift from the austere “culture of character” to an indulgent “culture of personality” organized around self-realization through material consumption and social adjustment.<sup>2</sup> Although Susman’s distinction between character and personality has long oriented scholarly considerations of selfhood under new conditions of consumer capitalism, Dreiser tells a strikingly different story about this cultural change.

In 1920, Dreiser published *Hey Rub-A-Dub-Dub*, a collection of philosophical essays expressing a bleak, mechanistic vision of the universe. In one these essays, “Personality,” Dreiser offers a brief history of American self-making:

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<sup>1</sup> Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth* (New York: Signet, 1980), 77.

<sup>2</sup> Warren I. Susman, “‘Personality’ and the Making of Twentieth-Century Culture,” in *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2003), 271–85.

It is significant of the intellectual development of America, if not of other countries, that we hear less these days of *character*, that something or somewhat which we were all supposed to have, or at least develop for ourselves or make (!) à la Washington, Lincoln, Grant, etc., who in most American schoolbook essays and college addresses were and still are supposed to have *made* their skill, endurance, resourcefulness, etc.; and more of that other thing which we call personality and which for a long time apparently we were not supposed to have, that unexplainable, inescapable something with which we come and in which even here in America we are now beginning to believe. Yes, we are beginning to suspect that there are certain things which some of us cannot do, however much we may wish to or try to. Also that ability in many realms and forms comes without volition on our part, fate and circumstance causing it to blaze for us whether we will or no. After many volumes of another kind of mush, this is at last becoming rather apparent... Men do better once they realize their genuine limitations and cease reaching for the moon. For so very long, here in America at least, we have been fed on something so very different: our inalienable ability to do anything and everything equally well.<sup>3</sup>

Dreiser's narrative bears a superficial resemblance to Susman's, while at the same time containing a fundamental—and, for my reading of Dreiser, consequential—difference from it. The cultural shift is the same: from character to personality. But what Dreiser means by each of these terms is exactly the opposite of what Susman means. Susman sees the ideal of personality, like the ideal of character, as a vision and method of self-realization through the conscious development of particular qualities and habits (274, 276). Dreiser, however, finds the assumption that we can intentionally “develop” character to be ridiculous—as if the famous Americans whose lives we study and admire “*made* their skill, endurance, resourcefulness,” instead of just having been endowed by nature with these gifts (109).

More provocative, however, is Dreiser's claim that personality can be “made” even less than character can be; it is “inherited,” something that “comes without volition on our part” (109). Having dismissed any possibility of self-determination, whether through old-fashioned character building or the “positive thinking” prescribed by recent spiritual advisors, Dreiser offers his own definitions of personality, “that peculiar quality or ability which makes a way for our plans, desires, dreams” (113):

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<sup>3</sup> Theodore Dreiser, “Personality,” in *Hey Rub-A-Dub-Dub* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1920), 109–110.

If [the average man] wishes to stand out above his fellows he must bring something new, and this he cannot provide by mere wishing or thinking. There is something more than that—inherent capacity, a something which he cannot create for himself, try as he may. He also knows that Nature sends bubbling up from her inexhaustible springs an infinitude of creatures who are of small import, because they have no inherent power wherewith to develop very special characteristics, or better yet individual impulses—in other words, personality. (110)

That which places one being over another and sets differences between man and man is not alone intellect or knowledge...but these plus, other things being equal, the vital energy to apply them or the hypnotic power of attracting attention to them—in other words, personality. (113)

Given Dreiser's wonder at the mysteries of nature, it is no surprise that he would define personality by its indefinability: it is "a something" whose precise origin and operation simply cannot be explained. The reverse structure of these two definitions, wherein personality's effects are described before personality itself is named (and even then, it is preceded by the distancing phrase "in other words"), suggests that it is a phenomenon best understood in terms of its practical, observable consequences.

Dreiser rejects the foundational American belief in our "inalienable ability to do anything and everything equally well" in favor of honest self-assessment and the acceptance of our varying individual abilities (110). Repeatedly using "we" to signal that his view is hardly singular, Dreiser positions himself not as an iconoclast destroying the sacred democratic ideal of self-determination, but as one of many Americans coming to embrace the value, for both the individual and the larger society, of recognizing and working within their natural limits. Indeed, Dreiser's "Personality" was a polemical reformulation of ideas that, as his references to the "talk" of the day indicate, had been circulating in popular discourse for several decades. As Morris Dickstein remarks, nineteenth-century oracles of success "preached the unlimited capacity of the

individual and laid almost a divine sanction on personal effort,” a gospel bound to be challenged when new economic and social realities set in.<sup>4</sup>

Dreiser wrote “Personality” at the midpoint of his career. The myth of self-making had enchanted Dreiser since he moved from rural Indiana to Chicago as a young seeker, and the redefinition of success under new conditions of urbanization and industrialization became one of the major subjects of his fiction. To explain Dreiser’s increasingly deterministic view of social life, critics have thoroughly explored the impact of science, particularly the evolutionary theories of Herbert Spencer and Jacques Loeb, on Dreiser’s thinking about the nature of human existence and the organization of society.<sup>5</sup> (As Walter Benn Michaels remarks, “nothing about Dreiser is better known than his susceptibility to Spencerian ‘physico-chemical’ explanations of human behavior.”)<sup>6</sup> But even as Dreiser’s despair about human impotence under the double burden of heredity and environment deepened, so did his fascination with personality as a natural advantage that seemed to entitle certain individuals to a larger share of the finite power and pleasure available to the human species.

Perpetually uncertain of whether he was one of those people, Dreiser undertook in his fiction and non-fiction writing a massive theorization of modern personality. The results were provocative in Dreiser’s time, and they are even more politically unfashionable today, which might help account for the critical neglect of this keyword in Dreiser’s work and in naturalist writing more generally. Dreiser’s reputation as a chronicler of the impersonal is partly to blame, since it skews our attention toward his pessimistic perspective on human smallness, rather than

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<sup>4</sup> Morris Dickstein, *Dancing in the Dark: A Cultural History of the Great Depression* (New York: Norton, 2009), 221.

<sup>5</sup> See Louis J. Zanine, *Mechanism and Mysticism: The Influence of Science on the Thought and Work of Theodore Dreiser* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993).

<sup>6</sup> Walter Benn Michaels, *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 76.

his sense of wonder at human capacities. “Realize your limitations,” he advised Americans from the pages of *Current Opinion* in 1919 (fig. 6), and such stern statements have contributed to the enduring image of a Dreiser intent on voiding human subjects of agency and will.<sup>7</sup>

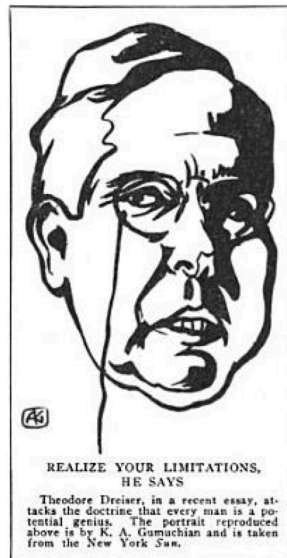


Figure 6. Illustration in a 1919 *Current Opinion* summary of his essay “Personality,” which had appeared recently in *Pearson’s*

However, Dreiser’s conception of personality complicates this image in surprising ways. In “Personality” and his later essay “The Transmutation of Personality,” personality is a determinant of human behavior, but one that enables rather than constrains. As opposed to such inherent faculties as intelligence, personality manifests itself in adaptability, in the capacity to exist in a state of continual becoming. Framed in a discourse of human limitation, Dreiserian personality is a fantasy of human limitlessness that has wide-ranging implications for our understanding of his fiction. We are frequently told that Dreiser’s characters are defined by insatiable desires produced by new conditions of industry and urbanism. Carrie Meeber, for

<sup>7</sup> Just four years before, *Current Opinion* printed an article called “Personality: A Cashable Business Asset” (vol. 58, 1915).

instance, is the perfection of capitalist desire: her “craving for pleasure” is “the one stay of her nature,” and every commodity “touche[s] her with individual desire” (23, 16). The story of Carrie’s social mobility, like that of Frank Cowperwood or Clyde Griffiths, depends on her never being satisfied; the capitalist system knows no cessation, so capitalist subjectivity does not either. But personality, in Dreiser’s conception, is at once outside and inside this historical determination: it is an innate, transhistorical capacity (like the “It” of Joseph Roach’s recent study), yet it conforms with uncanny precision to a turn-of-century ideology that holds blank potential to be the key to success.<sup>8</sup>

In this chapter, I make a two-part argument about the relationship between personality and success in Dreiser’s writing and career. As I have suggested, Dreiser’s belief in individual “nature” is crucial to understanding his increasingly cynical depiction of success over the course of his principal literary work, from *Sister Carrie* to *An American Tragedy*. Although Dreiser’s direct engagement with personality as a catchword of his age has been completely ignored by critics, there is an impressive body of scholarship on the problematic status of personal identity in his novels.<sup>9</sup> Dreiser’s characters do not have core identities; instead, they constitute themselves

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<sup>8</sup> Joseph Roach, *It* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007).

<sup>9</sup> Critics have approached Dreiser’s representation of selfhood in two ways. One critical strain places Dreiser’s portrayal of the modern self in the context of the shift from proprietary to corporate capitalism. See Walter Benn Michaels, *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987); Bruce Robbins, “Can there be loyalty in *The Financier*? Dreiser and upward mobility,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Theodore Dreiser*, ed. Leonard Cassuto and Clare Virginia Eby (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 112–26; James Livingston, *Pragmatism and the Political Economy of Cultural Revolution, 1850–1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994); and Howard Horwitz, *By the Law of Nature: Form and Value in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991). A related critical strain focuses on the specific structures of desire and habits of consumption produced by new material conditions of the city. See Philip Fisher, *Hard Facts: Setting and Form in the American Novel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); Bill Brown, “The Matter of Dreiser’s Modernity,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Theodore Dreiser*, ed. Leonard Cassuto and Clare Virginia Eby (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 83–99; and T. J. Jackson Lears, “Dreiser and the history of American longing,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Theodore Dreiser*, ed. Leonard Cassuto and Clare Virginia Eby (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004). Along with Fisher and Brown, Jackson Lears sees Dreiser’s fiction as putting “longings” at the center of historical change (63).



through imitation of others—their clothes, their mannerisms, their desires. However, this critical consensus on this external formation of the self in Dreiser’s work reduces what I see as significant variation among his novels. Philip Fisher, for example, applies his aphorism “Looking around to see who I am” equally to Carrie Meeber as to Clyde Griffiths. This chapter delineates a development in Dreiser’s representation of this imitative tendency, a development that hinges on his deepening interest in personality and its social consequences. I argue that Dreiser gradually denaturalizes personality, presenting it in *Sister Carrie* and the Cowperwood Trilogy as the manifestation of natural emptiness and aimlessness—Carrie’s face itself is “representative of all desire,” a reservoir of unorganized feeling—and then, in *An American Tragedy*, as the precarious byproduct of a desperate and futile pursuit of success.<sup>10</sup> Personality is initially the means by which the individual is unmoored from conventional morality, only to transform into a symptom of conformity.

My first claim is that Dreiser initially embraced personality as a way of explaining the dissociation of American success from the conventional ethic of character building. I argue that in his early journalism and novels, notably *Sister Carrie* and *The Financier*, Dreiser presents a polemical reformulation whereby success is achieved through vacuity rather than through substance. In his magazine articles about successful men, Dreiser presented his subjects, who were selected as models of accomplishment, as so conventional that they at once invite emulation and, through their bland lack of qualities, defy it. Likewise, Carrie Meeber’s and Frank Cowperwood’s social mobility depends entirely on their endless, protean adaptability, their confidence-inspiring blankness, which is gendered in its manifestation as radiant feeling or inscrutable opacity. As ciphers, these characters exert a centripetal pull on narrative attention

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<sup>10</sup> Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*, ed. Donald Pizer (New York: Norton, 2006), 342.

that reproduces in the very structure of the novels the perception of fullness experienced by those who observe them.

While Clyde Griffiths of *An American Tragedy* would seem to be yet another example of the powerfully empty self, my second claim is that *An American Tragedy* reflects a major change in Dreiser's thinking about personality. Whereas in his journalism and earlier fiction Dreiser represented the triumph of personality in a capitalist society, with Carrie and Cowperwood expanding infinitely outward as they appropriate the world around them, *An American Tragedy* portrays the "failure" of personality in two respects. Clyde does not "have" personality in the same way Carrie or Cowperwood does: Clyde's earnest affectation of charm is itself a faint imitation of the seductive, absorptive blankness of his fictional predecessors; he is afflicted by a "virus of ambition and unrest," in contrast to their energetic, salutary self-advancement.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, Clyde's self-invention is thwarted by the circumscription of his desire for material success through a single romantic choice, rather than the aimless, almost objectless yearnings of Carrie or Cowperwood. In a sense, *An American Tragedy* is an application and extension of Dreiser's argument that personality cannot be willed into existence: you have it or you don't, and faking it will get you only so far. In this chapter, I read *An American Tragedy* not only as a critique of the myth of self-made success, but also as a bold retrospective valorization of the "real"—that is, inherent, involuntary—personality embodied in the hollow, adaptable characters of Dreiser's earlier novels. In short, there are two kinds of personality at work here: the innate, and the put on, and Dreiser uses the latter to affirm the former.

What I am tracing through Dreiser's work are not only his changing definitions of and attitudes toward personality, but also his various ways of responding to larger questions about literature's ability to represent the increasingly "outward" tendency of modern subjectivity.

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<sup>11</sup> Theodore Dreiser, *An American Tragedy* (New York: Signet, 2000), 247.

Dreiser's contemporary Randolph Bourne described Carrie as "sensitive, breathing, scarcely conscious where herself leaves off and the rest of the world begins," and this description points to a formal question at the core of Dreiser's literary project.<sup>12</sup> How can the form of the novel represent a subjectivity that itself refuses the very distinctions—between self and world—that would seem necessary to make it intelligible? One answer lies in a superficial aspect of Dreiser's novels: their length, which formally enacts the idea of personal capacity through an extended and extensive process of characterization. Bourne identified the "hero" of Dreiser's novels as "desire itself"; the characters themselves are barely conscious, defined externally and through a seemingly infinite sequence of encounters. The duration and repetitiveness of this process is captured in the image of Carrie in her rocking chair, and even more powerfully in the serial extension of Cowperwood's relentless movement through the three books that make up the *Trilogy of Desire*.

This sense of limitlessness should prompt us to reconsider two critical commonplaces about the naturalism with which Dreiser is often associated. At least since Georg Lukács's classic essay "Narrate or Describe?" (1936), naturalism has been known for its obsessively descriptive style, its attempt to create totality through the accumulation of details, as well as for its concomitant subordination of character to plot. In its emulation of the diagnostic and descriptive techniques of scientific method, naturalism is deemed to evacuate its human subjects of will. Thus, the typical naturalist plots of triumph and decline sidestep the question of why particular individuals rise or fall, making recourse always to all-determining historical and social conditions such as poverty. Jennifer Fleissner has argued against this triumph-or-decline binary, replacing it with a nonlinear notion of compulsion, which emphasizes the modern subject's static, thwarted

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<sup>12</sup> Bourne, "Theodore Dreiser," in *The Radical Will* (New York: Urizen, 1977), 460.

relationship to history.<sup>13</sup> But another way to circumvent conventional distinctions between determinism and self-determination is to introduce personality as a middle term, one that acknowledges the subject's power while making that power contingent on external realization.

These two features of naturalism—its descriptive completism, paired with its flattening externalization of subjectivity—were addressed indirectly by Dreiser himself. Whereas Bourne saw Dreiser's particular characters as secondary to the driving force of desire, the editor and journalist Frank Harris was more invested in those characters' individuality. In a 1919 interview, Harris confronted Dreiser about his tendency to repeat characters and themes, a tendency Harris considered to be "a sign of poverty, surely."<sup>14</sup> Harris asserted that *Jennie Gerhardt* was "only a better *Sister Carrie*," and that *The Financier* and *The Titan* are two books for one figure of The Millionaire (97). Dreiser "growled" his reply: "I'm going to do another on him...and why not?" (97). When Harris claimed that another Cowperwood book would be "a mere replica or copy," Dreiser dissented: "'I don't agree with you,' he said stoutly; 'it is a development'" (98).

We can take Dreiser's self-defense here as explaining his compositional method in two respects. First, because Dreiser's characters are defined above all by their adaptability, the repetitive structure of his novels reflects the process by which they temporarily, provisionally adopt identities and thus develop. The second principle is something that, put into practice, garnered much criticism in Dreiser's lifetime and since: his habit of basing novels on historical personages and events, including Charles Tyson Yerkes as the model for Frank Cowperwood and, more famously, the Chester Gillette murder case as the material for *An American Tragedy*. This is another version of development insofar as Dreiser did not merely copy the facts but adapted and evolved these figures and stories from their already mediated appearances in

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<sup>13</sup> Jennifer Fleissner, *Women, Compulsion, Modernity: The Moment of American Naturalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2004).

<sup>14</sup> Frank Harris, *Contemporary Portraits: Second Series* (New York: The author, 1919), 97.

newspapers and other sources. “Doing another”—whether another incarnation of a type or another rendering of a typical tale—allowed Dreiser to insist on the plottedness of American life even as he showed those plots to go on and on, stripped of any possibility of redemptive closure.

## 2. Composing Success

In the years just before he wrote *Sister Carrie*, Dreiser worked as a staff writer for *Success*, founded in 1897 by Orison Swett Marden, a leading writer of motivational books. Dreiser was one of the magazine’s most prolific contributors, publishing thirty interviews and one poem between 1898 and 1900; and, after a brief hiatus (during which *Sister Carrie* flopped and his struggle with neurasthenia began), three more essays.<sup>15</sup> His *Success* interviews, which have received only glancing critical attention, are a testament to his cynical interest in the idea—promoted by popular psychologists, advertisers, and other advocates of a therapeutic conception of selfhood—that personality could in fact be made at will.

Dreiser later claimed that he joined the *Success* staff primarily for money (\$100 per interview was an irresistible rate) and dismissed Marden as “partly a dreamer and partly an unconscious charlatan.”<sup>16</sup> But his writing for *Success* tells a more complicated story. Amy Kaplan and Thomas Riggio have considered how Dreiser’s work as a magazine journalist and editor taught him not only to employ the conventions of biography in his novels but also to promote a particular image of himself as an author who wrote for the market while maintaining a critical distance from it.<sup>17</sup> Arguing against the common view of Dreiser’s professional trajectory as being

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<sup>15</sup> *A Theodore Dreiser Encyclopedia*, ed. Keith Newlin (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2003), 354.

<sup>16</sup> Theodore Dreiser, “O. S. Marden and *Success* Magazine,” in *A Selection of Uncollected Prose*, ed. Donald Pizer (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1977), 276.

<sup>17</sup> Amy Kaplan, *The Social Construction of American Realism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988). Thomas P. Riggio, “Dreiser and the Uses of Biography,” in *Cambridge Companion to Theodore Dreiser*, ed. Leonard Cassuto and Clare Virginia Eby (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 30–46. Richard

from “conventional hack to iconoclastic realist, from the mass market to the production of serious art,” Kaplan cites an interview that Dreiser conducted with William Dean Howells for *Success* as an example of the young Dreiser’s suspicion that, while the previous generation of writers might have been able to idealize literature as a form of “community service,” changes in the literary market and the publishing industry forced his own generation—following Howells’s pronouncements on the profession—to recognize the inextricability of their work from commerce (Kaplan 108). Dreiser’s magazine apprenticeship thus “involved not just learning how to write realistically, but learning how to promote himself as an author in the market and sell his product—his construction of reality” (105). As Henry James had presaged, the author had to be a personality to succeed in the new market.

If discreetly branding his own construction of reality was indeed Dreiser’s goal, then *Success* was an odd choice for him, since its formulaic content left little room for subtle commentary on a success-worshipping culture. The explicit aim of the magazine was to provide young men and women with examples of public figures who rose to fame through “the application of industry and will-power.”<sup>18</sup> Thus, the typical article would tell a Horatio Alger-style story of upward mobility: “Dr. Josiah Strong’s Self-Promotion from a Newsboy to an Author,” or “My Rise from the Slums to Manhood.” Readers, in turn, were expected to draw inspiration from and imitate the “methods” of these self-made men (and sometimes women). Proof of the magazine’s social good was advertised in excerpted “letters of appreciation” from a wide range of people—from President Roosevelt to a railroad man, a housewife, a lawyer, and a mountaineer—testifying to the magazine’s positive influence on their and others’ lives.<sup>19</sup>

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Lehan, *Theodore Dreiser: His World and His Novels* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969), 37–40. Yoshinobu Hakutani has also written extensively on Dreiser’s journalism.

<sup>18</sup> Kaplan, *Social Construction*, 125.

<sup>19</sup> *Success*, February 1903, 120.

*Success* ran from 1898 to 1911, precisely the period in which Susman’s tidy narrative locates the character-to-personality shift. (Incidentally, Marden’s self-help writing is one of Susman’s main examples.) Both words appeared frequently in the magazine, and while character was indeed presented as something to be built, personality was an ambiguous term. It was frequently used to instruct readers, particularly women, to act naturally.<sup>20</sup> As a 1903 article on “The Elements of Social Success for a Girl” declared, “A natural manner in an individual means the expression, with dignity, without self-consciousness, and without any desire to produce an effect, of personality.”<sup>21</sup> The accompanying illustration (fig. 7) provides an incongruous example of this “natural manner,” one that highlights the conscious self-presentation involved in the direct “expression” of personality.



Figure 7. An illustration by Fred J. Mulhaupt of “Mrs. Pearl Mary-Teresa Craigie,” in “The Elements of Social Success for a Girl” (*Success*, May 1903, 279)

However, the editor’s column, written by Marden himself, included rhapsodic reflections on “The Power of Personality” and “Personal Magnetism,” described in mysterious terms:

<sup>20</sup> According to Fleissner, the idea that women were in fact natural actors was common in the late nineteenth century (*Women, Compulsion, Modernity*, 174–175). See also Lynn Voskuil, *Acting Naturally: Victorian Theatricality and Authenticity* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2004).

<sup>21</sup> *Success*, May 1903, 279.

There is an indescribable something in certain personalities which is greater than mere physical beauty and more powerful than learning. This charm of personality is a divine gift that often sways the strongest characters, and sometimes even controls the destinies of nations.<sup>22</sup>

There is something in a magnetic personality which cannot be expressed. It is intangible. It eludes biographers and photographers alike. This mysterious something, which we sometimes call individuality, is often more powerful than the ability which can be measured, or the qualities that can be rated. It makes a man powerful and successful far beyond one who, though having more ability, is lacking in this indefinable power.<sup>23</sup>

Despite his definition of personality as a “natural gift,” something “born in one,” Marden fulfills his editorial duty by ending each of these columns in the magazine’s signature prescriptive mode, instructing readers to “cultivate” the generosity and tact they observe in magnetic people. But the repetition in these articles (and elsewhere in self-help literature of the period) of the tropes of the indescribability and inexplicability undermine Marden’s strenuous optimism. In his account, personality is an “indescribable something,” “intangible,” an “indefinable power,” and those who have it cannot explain it any better: “People who possess this rare quality are frequently ignorant of the source of their power. They simply know they have it, but cannot locate or describe it...it is, like poetry, music, or art, a gift of nature, born in one.”<sup>24</sup>

Although Dreiser’s 1919 essay “Personality” would echo Marden’s argument and phrasing, at the time Dreiser wrote for *Success* he was only beginning to theorize this kind of natural power. As Marden’s statements about personality demonstrate, the magazine did not always support its own premise: that success could be achieved through sheer will. While article after article insisted that developing certain qualities and habits—in most cases, thrift, industry, and enterprise—would lead to success, the magazine’s profiles of successful men (and occasionally women) often hinted that those individuals were *naturally* destined for power.

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<sup>22</sup> *Success*, April 1903, 241.

<sup>23</sup> *Success*, July 1903, 430.

<sup>24</sup> *Success*, July 1903, 430.



Whatever their initial disadvantages or lack of advantages, and no matter how hard they worked or how consciously they developed social graces, they were portrayed as predisposed, by an indefinable specialness, to achieve wealth and influence. The biographical narratives spared no detail, but the *logic* of these individuals' success remained obscure, an early example of what Leo Lowenthal described as the shift away from biography's exemplary function.<sup>25</sup>

Before Dreiser had settled on the peculiar pseudo-scientific vocabulary for which he is known (and frequently ridiculed), he documented in his *Success* interviews not merely his subjects' great deeds but the signs of natural power—the traits and behaviors—that might help to explain their outstanding achievement. In some of the resulting profiles, these signs are confoundingly mannered. At the end of a terse 1898 interview with the lawyer Joseph H. Choate, Dreiser notes:

Mr. Choate had talked for ten minutes. His ease of manner, quickness of reply, smoothness of expression, and incisive diction, were fascinating beyond description. As I was about to leave, I inquired if he would object to my making our conversation the subject of an article, to which he smiled his willingness, waiving objection with a slight movement of the hand.<sup>26</sup>

Choate's lawyerly "ease," "quickness," "smoothness," and "incisiveness" seem to express a natural confidence and comfort, but also to signify a superficial manner designed attract attention and inspire confidence. Dreiser's own wordless fascination even seems to anticipate Choate's own silent gestures, in which his preternatural ability to express himself in words gives way to his consenting with a "smile" and "slight movement of the hand," gestures that signal so natural a comfort, and such an economy of self-presentation, that he need not speak.

Likewise, when Dreiser has just arrived, Choate, who is prodding the fire, "voice[s] a resonant good-evening without turning," and "assume[s] a standing attitude before the fire, his

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<sup>25</sup> Leo Lowenthal, "Biographies in Popular Magazines," in *Literature, Popular Culture, and Society* (Palo Alto, CA: Pacific Books, 1961).

<sup>26</sup> Theodore Dreiser, "A Talk with America's Leading Lawyer, Joseph H. Choate," in *Theodore Dreiser's Uncollected Magazine Articles, 1897–1902*, ed. Yoshinobu Hakutani (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2003), 45.

hands behind him” (40). Choate’s actions are strikingly theatrical, calculated to make an impression, but at the same time his natural force seems to exercise itself without his volition; his voice is “resonant,” and he “evoke[s] a blaze” in a moment, almost magically. As if to justify his own fascination with the man, Dreiser ends the article with a distinguished lawyer’s praise of Choate’s presence in the courtroom:

Where other lawyers are solemn and portentous, or wild and unpleasant, he is humorous and human. He assumes no superior air; often he speaks with his hands in his pockets. He strives to stir up no dark passions. While he is always a little bit keener, a little finer and more witty than the man in the box or on the bench, yet he is always a brother man to him. (45)

The positions and movements of Choate’s hands are significant: he puts them behind him to signify his readiness, he moves one slightly to signify his consent, he keep them in his pockets to signify his modesty in the presence of peers and superiors. Despite the emphasis on Choate’s proper self-presentation, the portrait gives us only a glimpse—and Dreiser’s glimpse—of this eminently admirable man. Choate is ultimately defined not by his inner qualities but by the effects of his charming exterior on his earnest, impressionable interviewer.

Dreiser’s privileged position as an observer is even more pronounced in the opening to a 1900 interview with the congressman Thomas Brackett Reed. Claiming that the “true story” of Reed’s career “has never before been told,” Dreiser claims to capture what makes his subject so special: “The Maine statesman has been written *about* fully as much as any other man in public life...and yet his secret personality, the true Thomas Brackett Reed, has escaped.”<sup>27</sup> It is the journalist’s task here to “induce” the subject “to talk of himself”; the subject may indeed reveal himself, but his personality becomes intelligible only through the astute observer’s interpretation and presentation (78). While Choate is startlingly concentrated, talking for only ten minutes and

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<sup>27</sup> Theodore Dreiser, “Thomas Brackett Reed: The Story of a Great Career,” in *Theodore Dreiser’s Uncollected Magazine Articles, 1897–1902*, ed. Yoshinobu Hakutani (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2003), 78.

efficiently controlling and managing the signs that express his interiority, Reed's speech about himself is so profuse that he does not "trouble himself to finish" one story, in anticipation of moving on to the next, and his declaration that the present "age is richer with opportunities than ages before" concludes the article (79).

The interviews are not so much chronicles of social mobility as records of the subjects' effects on Dreiser himself, who, like his fictional characters, is particularly responsive to external stimuli.<sup>28</sup> Despite Choate's and Reed's emphasis on their own hard work, Dreiser implies that they are both naturally magnetic, capable of attracting attention without much effort on their part. While the typical *Success* interview might claim to demystify success, revealing it to be the product of qualities and habits that anyone can develop, Dreiser's interviews seem subtly to do the opposite by suggesting that some people are inherently, and inimitably, forceful.<sup>29</sup> Given the magazine's declared aim of providing "models" of success through "the application of industry and will-power," this implication of natural advantage makes imitation of the model, in effect, impossible.

Dreiser's practice in creating these brief portraits seems to have prepared him to write *Sister Carrie*, a novel similarly concerned with the relationship between one's nature and one's social and economic fate. Although he claimed to have contributed to *Success* only for money, it is likely that his experience constructing success stories shaped his representation—by example and by contrast—of the rapidly changing fortunes of his main characters. The popular forms of the interview and profile tended to fix the individual personality, treating it as a discrete entity to be

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<sup>28</sup> In a strange twist, Marden wrote to Dreiser (July 11, 1900) that "I have a letter from Mr. Reed who is very angry about your interview published in *Success*, which he says he never gave." In Richard Lehan, *Theodore Dreiser: His World and His Novels* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969), 25.

<sup>29</sup> Hakutani notes that the interviews were formulaic, with stock questions, and that Marden commissioned Dreiser to write success stories based on the earlier ethics of Puritanism and individualism (*Uncollected Magazine Articles*, 17–18). See also Lehan, *Theodore Dreiser*, 37–38.

apprehended by readers. In contrast, the form of the novel, particularly the realist or naturalist novel, at once employed and undermined an economy of characterization in which making an impression is the highest value. The novel's ambition to represent the individual *in relation to others* and *over a long temporal duration* gave it greater potential to reveal the process by which an individual comes to appear concentrated, as Carrie ultimately does in the "life-size lithograph" advertising her theatrical performance.

A quarter of a century after Dreiser wrote *Sister Carrie*, Virginia Woolf had learned its lesson and provided in *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) a lucid example of the process of consolidation: as she prepares to greet her party guests, Clarissa Dalloway sees in the mirror the "self" that forms "when some effort, some call on her to be herself, drew the parts together."<sup>30</sup> It is the social exigency of appearing concentrated, of becoming a "radiancy no doubt in some dull lives" that forces her self into a form that, in its very coherence, makes that self not itself. Clarissa's self takes shape, becoming "pointed; dartlike; definite," only as she prepares to play the graceful hostess and fulfill her guests' expectation that she will "be herself" (37). Here, as in Dreiser, the self is pure externality—what you see in the mirror; and we might think of personality as the name for this drawing together of the parts of the self. In Dreiser, personality is not just the distinctive individuality of a person; instead, it is the special capacity of a person to display a distinctive individuality, however "drawn together"—consciously or not—it might be.

#### 4. Imitation as Nature in *Sister Carrie*

Dreiser's journalism was his first experiment with representing personality, and while he certainly employed journalistic conventions in his fiction, he adapted those conventions—in *Sister Carrie* as well as in *An American Tragedy*—in ways that merit attention to the particularity of

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<sup>30</sup> Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* (New York: Harvest Books, 1981), 37.

novelistic form and its ability to represent individuals over long durations of time. While popular forms of depicting personality tended to offer readers only static “glimpses” of their subjects, the novel could produce dynamic images and sustained encounters with individual characters as they interact with other characters and their environments. Instead of adding to the chorus of those who bemoan Dreiserian bulk, then, I want to suggest that his commitment to length is a key source of the novel’s ability to show selfhood in-the-making, allowing his fiction to resist the reification of personality so prevalent in popular media of the period.

In his professional life, Dreiser gained several vantages of the growing culture of personality as a journalist and editor of popular magazines, as well as a serious author who sought to distance himself from the literary market, particularly after the failure of *Sister Carrie*. In arguing that Dreiser undertakes a complicated denaturalization of personality over the course of his work, I will consider Dreiser’s explicit commentary on the culture that holds personality as an ideal, but I will be concerned above all with the formal aesthetics of personality in his novels. Dreiser’s self-assured tone in “Personality,” the fullest articulation of his theory, may imply that he considered himself a chosen one—like the infinitely more elitist T. S. Eliot, who in stating his doctrine of poetic impersonality congratulated himself on being someone who “ha[s] personality and emotions” and therefore “know[s] what it means to want to escape from these things.” But Dreiser was not simply an exponent of personality. *An American Tragedy* is a critique of the popular understanding of personality and its function in the ideology of personal adjustment, but I think his novels do their best critical work by testing the *formal* limits of that ideology’s foundational concepts and values.

Randolph Bourne was a fervent defender of Dreiser in the years in which his critical reputation began to suffer, most dramatically after the 1915 publication of his provocative autobiographical novel *The “Genius.”* To Bourne, Dreiser’s placement of his characters directly *in*

“flowing life” represented a radical assault on the genteel tradition in fiction.<sup>31</sup> In a 1915 review of *The “Genius”* titled “Desire as Hero,” Bourne praises the same inchoate vital force that Dreiser perceives as the source of personality: that force is the “subterranean current of life” struggling against “the organized machinery of existence”; it is “that desire within us that pounds in manifold guise against the iron walls of experience.”<sup>32</sup> Bourne here identifies the elemental force, desire, that gives rise to the “vital energy” and “hypnotic power” that Dreiser ascribes to personality. For Bourne, the “hero” of any Dreiser novel is thus not the titular character but “desire of life” itself; individual consciousness and agency may be absent from Dreiser’s fiction, but not at the expense of movement and the longing and striving that drive it.<sup>33</sup>

In a 1915 review of *Sister Carrie*, which had been reissued in 1907, Bourne makes a distinction between character and personality similar to that which Dreiser makes in “Personality.” He initially asserts that Dreiser’s “psychology of desire is still too new” for an American audience that must find it “shocking that Carrie should not have been redeemed”:

To follow this aimless and alluring soul as she passes from sphere to sphere, in quest of the warmth and light that she craves, and then to leave her still wistful and unrepentant, is to offend our sense of righteousness. If she is not to be redeemed, most of us would prefer that she be degraded. Mr. Dreiser, however, paints her career actually as growth and not demoralization. She emerges enhanced, a richer personality, elemental but genuinely unspotted, rather poetically human.<sup>34</sup>

Bourne remarks that Dreiser’s depiction of Carrie’s development is especially “incredible,” and especially offensive to a decorous public, because he presents the possibility of her choosing

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<sup>31</sup> Bourne, “Theodore Dreiser,” in *The Radical Will* (New York: Urizen, 1977), 460.

<sup>32</sup> Bourne, “Desire as Hero,” in *Critical Essays on Theodore Dreiser*, ed. Donald Pizer (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1981), 243–44.

<sup>33</sup> Bourne, “Desire as Hero,” 246. At the end of this essay, Bourne concedes that Eugene Witla of *The “Genius”* is not a fully realized personality: “I trust that that quotation marks in the title indicate Mr. Dreiser’s realization that he has created only a second-rate personality, that he never, indeed, creates any but second-rate personalities. In the *Genius* he has made, however, a grandiose caricature of the masculine soul. And his real hero, anyway, is not his second-rate personality, but the desire of life. For this, much shall be forgiven him” (246).

<sup>34</sup> Bourne, “Theodore Dreiser,” 460.

Ames, who “suggests a still wider horizon” than Hurstwood does, but then resists “the opportunity slowly to improve her character through this steady and elevating influence” (460). Bourne thus celebrates Dreiser’s fiction primarily for its vision of personal growth as possible only through “perpetual eagerness of life, dominant impulse that pounds away at environment”—engagement with the world through energetic entanglement with and struggle against it, rather than idealistic elevation above it.<sup>35</sup> Bourne insists that what makes Dreiser’s novel so radical is his decision to eschew conventional morality, to which desire and life are themselves indifferent, by having Carrie “emerge” a “richer personality” rather than improve her “character.” This amoral growth flouts Susman’s logic, by which development is achieved through self-mastery and self-containment rather than outward seeking and responsiveness.

But it is this mysterious action of “emergence” that points to the formal problem I stated earlier. If personality is enhanced by immersion in life so deep that the boundaries between self and environment are constantly dissolving—as Bourne says of Carrie, “she is sensitive, breathing, scarcely conscious where herself leaves off and the rest of the world begins” (460)—then how can the form of the novel represent a subjectivity indifferent to the distinctions that would make it intelligible? Carrie is enhanced and becomes “poetically human” through her aimless immersion in the world, not through some progressive development or epiphanic revelation of her real self; unlike in Woolf, there is no moment of pulling one’s self together into coherence. This lack of coherence is a challenge for readers, who cannot take for granted conscious and autonomous characters whose thoughts and actions are (at least potentially) knowable. It is also a challenge for

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<sup>35</sup> In another review, “The Art of Dreiser” (1917), Bourne generalizes this entanglement of self and world to make a comment about American life: “There stirs in Dreiser’s books a new American quality....It is an authentic attempt to make something artistic out of the chaotic materials that lie around us in American life...He expresses an America that is in process of forming. The interest he evokes is part of the eager interest we feel in that growth.” In *Critical Essays on Theodore Dreiser*, ed. Donald Pizer (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1981), 95.

characters, especially those who tend to observe rather than act, and who are the subjects rather than the objects of fascination. Writing on relations between minor characters and protagonists in the realist novel, Alex Woloch describes a “distributional matrix” in which “the discrete representation of any specific individual is intertwined with the narrative’s continual apportioning of attention to different characters who jostle for limited space within the same fictive universe.”<sup>36</sup> This competition among characters for attention within a limited space makes questions about personality—whether it is inherent or cultivated, reserved for a select few or available to all—crucial to how the novel grapples with *how* some individuals command the attention of others.

For a protagonist, Carrie Meeber is surprisingly amorphous. The narrator’s first description of the young woman from rural Wisconsin emphasizes not only her “rudimentary” intelligence and “high” “self-interest” but also her physically graceless self-presentation: “In the intuitive graces she was still crude. She could scarcely toss her head gracefully. Her hands were almost ineffectual. The feet, though small, were set flatly. And yet she was interested in her charms, quick to understand the keener pleasures of life, ambitious to gain in material things” (2). The description of these physical graces as “intuitive” seems to be slightly ironic, since the very gesture of tossing one’s head is pointedly affected. Moreover, the comment that her hands are “ineffectual” and her feet “set flatly” defines her body in terms of its failure to be graceful, rather than—as we might expect from her poor background and her ambition “to gain in material things”—her readiness for labor. However, Carrie’s being “*still* crude” implies that she is merely late in cultivating her graces, not incapable of doing so. And her being “interested in her charms” implies a future in which she will capitalize on her now-inchoate attractiveness, for she is

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<sup>36</sup> Alex Woloch, *The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 13.



“possessed of a figure promising eventual shape” (2). This emphasis on future potentiality establishes that her success rests on the development of her body into a recognizable form, a set of “graces” and a general “shape” that together will create the distinctive individuality she currently lacks.

Carrie’s amorphousness is gendered feminine: the “intuitive graces” she ought to develop are as oxymoronic as the “natural manner” recommended by the *Success* article on “Social Success for a Girl,” yet it is the capacity to act natural(ly) that is in both cases valued. Lacking a coherent form, Carrie constitutes her self through imitation—first of other women and, once she begins her acting career, of dramatic characters. Critics agree that Carrie’s natural imitativeness, her constant reference outside of herself, means that she possesses no stable self but is—in Fisher’s influential argument—constantly “getting” it “moment by moment from the outside.”<sup>37</sup> Carrie exemplifies what historians and sociologists have called the “externalized self,” one that derives its sense of self not from within but from without, that defines itself according to how others perceive it.<sup>38</sup> At the same time, the force of Carrie’s desire erodes the boundary between inside and outside. Walter Benn Michaels argues that the novel’s “economy of desire” makes “an involvement with the world so central to one’s sense of self that the distinction between what one is and what one wants tends to disappear.”<sup>39</sup>

While critics have tended to think about Carrie’s “naturally imitative” behavior as a way for her to gain a sense of self, I want to take her *nature* more seriously a way of understanding her

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<sup>37</sup> Fisher argues that, in Dreiser’s novels, “the question of authenticity never exists”; in *Sister Carrie* and *An American Tragedy*, characters have no stable or authentic selves to which they might be “true” because they “get” their selves “moment by moment from the outside” (*Hard Facts*, 140–41).

<sup>38</sup> See David Riesman, et al., *The Lonely Crowd* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001); Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: Norton, 1979); and Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic Uses of Faith After Freud* (New York: Harper, 1966). All these critics lament the self’s reliance on external sources of identity.

<sup>39</sup> Michaels, *Gold Standard*, 41.

powerful effects on others (75). While many characters' "natures" are described, Carrie's nature is unique in its ability to appropriate the signs that compose the individuality of another character. The most striking example of this usurpation is Carrie's copying of a neighbor girl, who disappears from the novel as soon as Carrie has mimicked the girl's graceful gestures. Rachel Bowlby astutely comments that Carrie's imitation of the girl shows that her "'personality,' her recognition as an individual, is guaranteed only to the extent that it is an exact reflection of others."<sup>40</sup> But the same could be said of these "others": that *their* individuality is guaranteed only to the extent that Carrie takes an interest in them. Carrie's advantage in the competition for narrative attention that Woloch describes is that she is at times more like an author than a character, particularly in her acts of erasure (of the neighbor girl) or replacement (of Drouet with Cowperwood). By the end of the novel, Carrie views her appearance, her "look," as her own property.<sup>41</sup>

The emergence of what Bourne calls this "enhanced," "enriched" Carrie depends not only on her capacity to incorporate what is around her but also on her ability to elicit responses from others. Drouet, the traveling salesman whom she meets on the train to Chicago, recognizes "the indescribable thing that made up for fascination and beauty in her," and decides to pursue her (5). Whenever Carrie assumes some new pose or air, we immediately see what effect this has on an observing character—Drouet, his successor Hurstwood, and eventually her audience in the theater, all of whom perceive her assumed qualities as *naturally* hers, even if we (and they, in some cases) know them to be not *innately* hers.

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<sup>40</sup> Rachel Bowlby, *Just Looking: Consumer Culture in Dreiser, Gissing, and Zola* (New York: Methuen, 1985), 62.

<sup>41</sup> See Walter Benn Michaels, "The Contracted Heart," *New Literary History* 21, no. 3, 495–531. Michaels discusses personality as property, connecting Carrie's "look" to Samuel D. Warren and Louis D. Brandeis's "The Right to Privacy" (1890).

But why are these characters so interested in Carrie, so approving of her affectations?

Because she reflects back to them their own desires. Let us return for a moment to *Success*, where Marden describes the enlivening experience of being in the presence of people who possess the magnetic “power of personality”:

The moment we come into their presence we have a sense of enlargement, of expansion in every direction. They seem to unlock within us possibilities of which we previously had no conception. Our horizon broadens; we feel a new power stirring through all our being; we experience a sense of relief, as if a great weight which long had pressed upon us had been removed... With their presence, impulses and longings come thronging to our minds which never stirred us before... suddenly, the flashlight of a potent personality of this kind has opened a rift in our lives and revealed to us hidden capabilities... we have caught a glimpse of higher ideals; and, for the moment, at least, have been transformed. The old commonplace life, with its absence of purpose and endeavor, has dropped out of sight, and we resolve, with better heart and newer hope, to struggle to make permanently ours the forces and potentialities that have been revealed to us. Even a momentary contact with a character of this kind seems to double our mental and soul powers, as two great dinamos double the current which passes over the wire, and we are loath to leave the magical presence lest we lose our new-born power.<sup>42</sup>

Marden defines personality in terms of its effects on observers; his emphasis on those drawn in by this magnetism, rather than those possessing it, highlights its mirroring effect. The “magical presence” of such individuals, rather than what they do or say, “enlarge[s],” “expand[s],” “unlock[s],” “broaden[s],” and “stir[s]” their observers. Unlike the Henry James characters who feel individually, affectionately “addressed” by the powerful individuals they admire or desire, the observers in Marden’s description derive from these magnetic individuals not a sense of intimacy but a new image of themselves. Mere “contact” with personality actually “transforms” us, revealing our latent “impulses,” longings,” “capabilities,” ideal,” “forces,” “potentialities,” and “powers.” We suddenly see what was already there in us, but we fear that this potentiality may not be innate: we must “struggle” to make it “permanently ours.”

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<sup>42</sup> *Success*, July 1903, 430.

Although Carrie is the character who best fits Marden's description, she is not exempt from this longing for recognition, as her desire to impress Drouet indicates; and it is through their relationship that we see her realizing her capacity to be what others want her to be. A salesman, Drouet quickly establishes the value of an attractive and pleasing appearance, not only by himself dressing and acting in a way "calculated to elicit the admiration of susceptible young women" but also, with Carrie, by "insist[ing] upon her good looks" and, as a "habit," "looking after stylishly dressed or pretty women on the street and remarking upon them" (3, 72). Shortly after Carrie moves in to his apartment, he comments on an attractive neighbor girl, the railroad treasurer's daughter, and Carrie responds by imitating the girl's behavior:

What Drouet said about the girl's grace, as she tripped out evenings accompanied by her mother, caused Carrie to perceive the nature and value of those little modish ways which women adopt when they would presume to be something. She looked in the mirror and pursed up her lips, accompanying it with a little toss of the head, as she had seen the railroad treasurer's daughter do. She caught up her skirts with an easy swing, for had not Drouet remarked that in her and several others, and Carrie was naturally imitative. She began to get the hang of those little things which the pretty woman who has vanity invariably adopts. In short, her knowledge of grace doubled, and with it her appearance changed. She became a girl of considerable taste.

Drouet noticed this. He saw the new bow in her hair and the new way of arranging her locks which she affected one morning.

"You look fine that way, Cad," he said.

"Do I?" she replied, sweetly. It made her try for other effects that selfsame day.  
(75)

In this scene, Carrie acquires through imitation the exact "intuitive graces" she conspicuously lacks the opening of the novel: she learns to move her body loosely, in the style of the "trip" and "swing" of the neighbor girl, and to move and arrange her clothing, hair, and even her face and head in a tightly controlled and coordinated set of gestures—pursing up, tossing, catching up,

adorning and arranging. This behavior is emphatically affected, but it is also so *effective*—like Verena Tarrant’s gift—that its affectedness ceases to matter.<sup>43</sup>

On the one hand, this passage reveals how Carrie gets a self: by adopting “little modish ways” and “little things,” she will not just seem but “*become* a girl of considerable taste.” On the other hand, the simple copying of gestures does not seem sufficient to explain the change in her identity. The narrator generalizes the imitative tendency by saying that “the pretty woman who has vanity invariably adopts” such ways, but Carrie’s tendency to imitate goes beyond adherence to a social code and equips her for a career on the stage. In Carrie’s only faltering as an actress, when she performs without feeling in the first scene of *Under the Gaslight*, Drouet hastens to remind her to “get that toss of [her] head” that she had showed him in a rehearsal at home, and his recognition prompts a spectacular performance (127). This imitation of a gesture that is itself an imitation of someone else’s presumably affected gesture would seem to place Carrie in a mimetic loop, but instead it allows her natural force to exceed what her role prescribes. As she emits “radiating waves of feeling and sincerity,” the crowd takes notice: “There [is] a drawing, too, of attention, a riveting of feeling, heretofore wandering” (129). The shift from Carrie’s performance to its effect on the distracted audience grants her prominence within the scene precisely by showing not her interiority but the impression of a projected interiority on others.

In fact, it is the general shift in the narrative from Carrie’s attention to herself to others’ attention to her, with a corresponding restriction of our access to her thoughts, that shows her increasing dominance over the people she entralls. According to Woloch, a “character’s referential personality—the unique sense and abiding impression that the character leaves us

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<sup>43</sup> It is worth noting that in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* (New York: Scribner, 1992), Myrtle Wilson (like Dreiser’s Carrie) changes dresses and “with the influence of the dress her personality had also undergone a change... Her laughter, her gestures, her assertions became more violently affected moment by moment...” (35).

with—emerges in-and-through, not despite, his textual position and the descriptive configuration that flows out from this position” (12). Carrie’s textual position changes from one in which she struggles to attract attention in the delimited space of Chicago to one in which she, as a famous actress on the New York City stage—a space metaphorically both larger and smaller than Chicago—is structurally guaranteed that attention. The formal consequence of this change in position is that, while Carrie’s outward desire remains constant throughout the novel, our access to her subjectivity decreases precisely as that subjectivity takes shape.

This increasing mediation of our perception of Carrie reveals her effects on others to be more variable than her protean adaptability might lead us to expect. And although her rise to stardom seems to be the inevitable outcome, the question of her “merit” as a performer—first as a chorus girl, then as a Broadway actress—is debated in her personal and professional lives. As Austin Graham has pointed out, Dreiser’s plot “revolves around a single question: who can interpret Carrie correctly?”<sup>44</sup> Whereas Drouet immediately recognizes that “indescribable thing” and Ames praises the natural “expression” in her face, Hurstwood does not understand her “emotional greatness” and various managers decline to hire or promote her (5, 341, 261). Graham further notes that we, as readers, are in on Carrie’s talent: when Carrie, comparing herself to the featured performers, tells herself that “I could do better than that,” the narrator adds that “she was right.”<sup>45</sup>

Within the novel, Ames, as the most educated, articulate character, would seem to be the best judge of Carrie’s “merit” as a cultural icon. However, his declaration that her face is “representative of all desire” brings us back to Drouet’s recognition on the train of the “indescribable thing” in Carrie that became apparent as “more” passes between them “than the

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<sup>44</sup> Austin Graham, *Great American Songbooks: Musical Texts, Modernism, and the Value of Popular Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 169.

<sup>45</sup> Graham, *Songbooks*, 167; Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*, 272.

mere words indicated" (5). While Drouet's sensitivity to this mysterious allure clearly indicates his sexual interest in his new acquaintance, his crude appreciation of her rivals Ames's genteel elevation of Carrie's artistic ability. In both assessments, Carrie's seductive blankness is singled out as her defining quality. Ames dignifies this power by locating it in the "natural look" of her face, the "large, sympathetic eyes and pain-touched mouth" that suit her well for a more serious dramatic role (341). In contrast, on the train Drouet first takes interest in the back of her head, staring at her "mass of hair" and "fidgeting" (2). Both men arouse her desire, but while Drouet promises material things well within her reach, Ames's flattery makes her "long"—in vain, it seems—"to be equal to this feeling written upon her countenance" (341). In the final scene of her "sitting alone" and dreaming of future happiness, even Ames becomes just another vanishing accessory to her advancement: "Ames had pointed out a farther step, but on and on beyond that, if accomplished, would lie others for her" (341).

Carrie's endless desire propels her on, leaving the men she has discarded forgotten or dead. Nodding to Bourne's conclusion that Carrie emerges "rather poetically human," James Livingston asserts that her desire is the means by which she becomes self-conscious:

Carrie's desire is the medium through which her memory is restored, her consciousness is awakened, her personality is constructed—the means by which she begins to look and sound, at the end of the novel, like a character in a novel. Her externalization, her immersion in or absorption by the "worldness" of her world, objectifies her particular subjectivity, that is, it eventually makes her self-conscious. (142)

For Carrie, the serial repetition of her entanglements has the salutary effect of externalizing her as an object of competition and perpetual fascination. For her seemingly infinite succession of admirers, Carrie is (and will, by all indications, continue to be) a seductive, unattainable cipher.

But as readers we have already seen the material objectification of her subjectivity in the figures of two lithographs. The first appears in Chicago. Drouet returns home to get some papers he had forgotten and discovers that Carrie has gone out, though he does not know she is meeting

Hurstwood. Drouet flirts with the chambermaid, to whom he shows a “little lithographed card” he has picked up in his travels (139). On the card is “a picture of a pretty girl holding a striped parasol, the colours of which could be changed by means of a revolving disk in the back, which showed red, yellow, green, and blue through little interstices made in the ground occupied by the umbrella top” (139). This lithograph is an emblem, in miniature, of Carrie’s success: the pretty girl, the glamorous accessory, and the hidden mechanism by which her change of fashion occurs. Carrie’s very first purchase in the novel is of an umbrella, which she buys after her “vanity” troubled at borrowing her sister’s “worn and faded” one (39). Drouet brings out this little card in Carrie’s absence, while Carrie herself has ficklely rotated to the superior Hurstwood, and the “coquettish” chambermaid turns out to be the perfect stand-in (139). “Isn’t that clever?” Drouet asks the woman about the card (139). “Isn’t it?” she responds, in a monosyllabic style echoing the first words Carrie speaks in the novel, which are of course addressed to Drouet: “‘That,’ said a voice in her ear, ‘is one of the prettiest little resorts in Wisconsin.’ ‘Is it?’ she answered nervously” (2). Carrie, in all her charming changeability, is embodied in the little card, which has itself changed hands.

The second lithograph appears in New York. Hurstwood, homeless and aimlessly desperate, shuffles down to Broadway, where a sign is “blazing, in incandescent fire, Carrie’s name,” to which Hurstwood “looked up, and then at a large, gilt-framed posterboard, on which was a fine lithograph of Carrie, life-size” (347). Hurstwood, who has long since lost his formerly “impressive personality,” gazes with slow recognition: “‘That’s you,’ he said at last, addressing her” (235, 348). The snowy street corner is a space, like Drouet’s apartment, from which Carrie is absent—in this case she is safely behind the stage door, and we, like Hurstwood, are forced to regard her from a mediated distance. Hurstwood remembers that “she’s got it,” meaning money, goes to the theater to find her. This sequence recalls the final action of *The Bostonians*, where Basil



Ransom sees Verena Tarrant “immensely advertised” outside the Music-Hall, and displayed in little portraits being sold inside, and resolves to go backstage to prevent her performance (413). The lithograph builds upon the publication of Carrie’s name and photos in the newspapers, signifying the expansion of her public personality to a “life-size”—and, hovering above Hurstwood, *outsize*—scale. More strikingly, this lithograph outdoes the pocket-size card by emitting the incessant radiance, so characteristic of Carrie, that the card’s spinning color wheel could only crudely indicate.

#### 4. Inscrutability in *The Financier*

Carrie’s radiance, reified in the figure of the “blazing” lithograph, is reformulated in *The Financier* as another kind of alluring quality: inscrutability. Of all Dreiser’s protagonists, Frank Cowperwood has the most natural force—so much force, in fact, that many critics have compared him with Nietzsche’s superman.<sup>46</sup> While Dreiser often permits us direct access to Cowperwood’s thoughts and thus makes relatively transparent his motives and decisions, he conveys Cowperwood’s force primarily by showing the effects that he has on others, who perceive an exciting and unsettling distance between his outer appearance and his projected inner life. His eyes and smile are “inscrutable,” a word that at once indicates a hidden depth that his observer could reach only with greater interpretive ability and suggests a self-referential superficiality completely separated from anything that might lie beneath or behind.

Cowperwood’s inscrutability simultaneously concentrates his personality in an inaccessible

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<sup>46</sup> See Donald Pizer, *The Novels of Theodore Dreiser: A Critical Study* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1979), 158–59, 160–200; and many others. In his essay “The American Financier,” Dreiser himself cited the influence of Nietzsche in his understanding of rising individuality in the world of American business: “Nietzsche appeared preaching individuality, greater individuality for everybody who could achieve it, and to a certain extent he was right. Greater individuality than the world has seen will certainly be achieved by some” (*Hey Rub-A-Dub-Dub*, 89).

(except, to a limited degree, to readers) interiority and disperses it across all of his physical features and gestures. At once engulfed and exploded by the signs that express it, his mysterious personality marks the instability of a discrete and intelligible self.

In *The Financier*, as in *Sister Carrie*, Dreiser attributes the force of his protagonist to an inexplicable natural determinism of the kind that Ames espouses in telling Carrie that “nature” has made her face “representative of all desire” (342). In *The Financier*, Dreiser immediately introduces the idea of natural power by distinguishing between his father, who wishes that he had enough of “that curious thing, a magnetic personality—the ability to win the confidence of others,” to fulfill his ambition to make a fortune from the railroads, and young Cowperwood himself, who, “even at ten, was a natural-born leader.”<sup>47</sup> This stark contrast between father and son suggests that nature has, however arbitrarily, given the boy a special power and marked him off for a special purpose. He appears, at first glance, almost self-generating, distinguished from his parents by his nature rather than by the geographical distance between Carrie and her parents, which grows as her success increases. As in *The Bostonians*, heredity is emphasized but insufficient to *explain* anything.

But nature has molded Carrie and Cowperwood differently. Carrie’s initial appearance as a graceless, shapeless, barely even conscious and hardly articulate young woman clearly marks her power as that of adaptable blankness, which indeed becomes her greatest merit as an actress. The change in character from the “vacant” Carrie to the “inscrutable” Cowperwood represents a shift in Dreiser’s thinking about personality.<sup>48</sup> Dreiser introduces a gender distinction: whereas Carrie exhibits a “feminine” outwardness and porosity (akin to Verena Tarrant’s “generosity”), Cowperwood is defined above all by his “masculine” concentrated self-containment. Whereas in

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<sup>47</sup> Theodore Dreiser, *The Financier* (New York: Penguin, 2008), 23

<sup>48</sup> Livingston notes that Dreiser’s favorite adjective for his heroine is “vacant” (*Pragmatism*, 139).

*Sister Carrie* the question is whether Carrie can be interpreted correctly, the question here is whether Cowperwood can be read at all. And whereas Carrie's rise depends on her developing recognizable *forms*—whether as the modish girl of Drouet's affections or the haunting face of Ames's description—Cowperwood's success as a financier depends on his remaining an intriguing mystery, never quite socially legible.

Cowperwood would thus seem to escape the Carrie-like dependence on others for a sense of self. Bruce Robbins has contended that Cowperwood's "magnetism," his ability to "inspire confidence in others," translates into an ability to "receive more loyalty from others than one is obliged to give them."<sup>49</sup> But Cowperwood is defined, and even possessed, by others through that very magnetism and the desire it elicits. In the decade following his return to fiction in 1909, Dreiser took an intense interest in the mechanistic theory of Jacques Loeb, whose ideas would shape Dreiser's unfinished *Notes on Life*, composed from the mid-1930s until his death in 1945. In that book appears "Transmutation of Personality," a fragmentary essay in which Dreiser defines all life as "nothing less than a constant transmutation of personality."<sup>50</sup> Rejecting the persistent notion that "we make our lives and control our temperaments and their compulsions or deeds," which he had already debunked in "Personality," here Dreiser asserts that "each person must give out, not only in the more easily sensed material reactions of sound, speech, appearance, etc., but as a sort of energy wave, his characteristic personality charge" (166, 167). Dreiser concludes that "thus it can be explained why certain people seem to occupy positions of more importance

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<sup>49</sup> See Robbins, "Can there be loyalty in *The Financier*? Dreiser and upward mobility"; Livingston, *Pragmatism and the Political Economy of Cultural Revolution, 1850-1940*; and Horwitz, *By the Law of Nature: Form and Value in Nineteenth-Century America*. These critics have traced changes in the notion of the stable accountable self to the "effacement of agency" that various institutions of early finance capitalism permitted; the individual in Dreiser's novels achieves his or her power by never seeming to have any such power, a logic that Horwitz traces to Emerson.

<sup>50</sup> Theodore Dreiser, "Transmutation of Personality," in *Notes on Life*, ed. Marguerite Tjader and John J. McAleer (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1974), 165. Ellen Moers describes the book as "synthesis of the scientific thought of his day," which he considered calling *Notes on Life, Philosophy, The Mechanism Called Man, The Formulae of Life*, and more (*Two Dreisers*, 243).

and more influence and to attract more attention than any of their overt actions would allow” (167–168). Building upon his earlier claim that personality is “inherent,” Dreiser provides a scientific explanation of the illusive status of human agency he had been exploring in his fiction. “Man has no power to do other than to react to stimuli,” he continues. “So he changes, but not voluntarily” (169).

*The Financier*, written some twenty years before this essay, is an early experiment in creating a character whose “overt actions” do not fully explain his success. At first, Cowperwood’s power seems to emanate from his “sturdy” body. His uncle, the owner of a sugar plantation in Cuba, sees in his nephew’s impressive form the potential for tremendous success: “There was real force in that sturdy young body—no doubt of it. Those large, clear gray eyes were full of intelligence. They indicated much and revealed nothing” (12). Assessing Cowperwood a few years later, the narrator echoes the uncle’s approving equation of inscrutability and potential.

The appearance of Frank Cowperwood at this time was, to say the least, prepossessing and satisfactory. Nature had destined him to be about five feet ten inches tall. His head was large, shapely, notably commercial in aspect, thickly covered with crisp, dark-brown hair and fixed on a pair of square shoulders and a stocky body. Already his eyes had the look that subtle years of thought bring. They were inscrutable. You could tell nothing by his eyes. He walked with a light, confident, springy step. Life had given him no severe shocks nor rude awakenings. (25)

This passage establishes Cowperwood’s individuality while at the same time casting him as a type: his head being “notably commercial in aspect” suggests that he is destined by his appearance to be a businessman. What makes him his particular self is also what makes him not any particular self, just an assemblage of traits with no personal significance. Nowhere is this more obvious than in his eyes. In the uncle’s description, Cowperwood’s eyes take on the synecdochal function of “indicating” the activity of his mind without “revealing” its content, simultaneously inciting and impeding interpretation; his self is reduced to an evocative,

impersonal surface. Here, his eyes falsely embody an inner experience, the “subtle years of thought” he has not yet lived, while revealing “nothing” of the experience that is actually his. The very feature that would seem to express his personality actually acts as a barrier between him and the world.

But if Cowperwood’s eyes initially seem to signify his separability from the world around him, this opacity gradually dissolves under the pressure of his passionate involvement with various women. Cowperwood may be precociously and sturdily formed, but he becomes increasingly permeable as he submits to the overriding force of sexual desire; his natural power, then, is placed in competition with the forces that subject him to others. To an even greater degree than in *Sister Carrie*, the narration is increasingly focalized through the characters Cowperwood attracts most powerfully, his wife Lillian and his mistress Aileen.

For instance, when the recently widowed Lillian finally understands Cowperwood’s intention in coming to see her often, she looks at him anew: “His handsome body, slowly broadening, was nearly full grown. His face, because of its full, clear, big, inscrutable eyes, had an expression which was almost babyish. She could not have guessed the depths it veiled. His cheeks were pink, his hands not large, but sinewy and strong. Her pale, uncertain, lymphatic body extracted a form of dynamic energy from his even at this range” (53). Most of what Lillian notes about Cowperwood has already been noted, especially his “broad[ness]” and his “inscrutable eyes, but through her perspective we see in him a new vulnerability—his “almost babyish” expression, his “pink” cheeks. Whether we are to trust her perception, though, is put in doubt by the narrator’s ironic comment that “she could not have guessed the depths it veiled,” an intellectual limit later reinforced by the description of her “conventional mind” as no better than “a petty piece of machinery” (244). Her parasitic ability to “extract” energy from him without really knowing him resonates with *The Bostonians*, where the contest over Verena Tarrant is

driven by a desire to possess without knowing. Here, however, we are informed that Lillian's mind would be incapable of knowing Cowperwood in any case.

In a world in which intellectual power is inconsequential compared to the ability to “extract” energy from another person, Lillian's mechanical mind might seem to be a virtue. But Dreiser makes clear that Lillian is “not alive in the sense that Aileen Butler [is],” and it is only when the Cowperwood meets someone of equal force that his own “dynamic” personality can be fully realized (244). Aileen is powerfully, chaotically natural: she possesses more “innate force” than any other woman Cowperwood has known, she represents “a fillip to life, a sting to existence,” she seems “so intensely alive,” she is “passionate, vibrant, desireful,” and her “confidence in her charms, her personality, her earthly privileges [is] quite anarchistic” (89, 127, 128, 413, 415). In contrast to the Lillian parasitic “extract[ion],” Aileen's direct, vital engagement with Cowperwood elevates physiochemical sexual attraction into spiritual connection.

In a scene parallel to that of Lillian recognizing her interest in Cowperwood, Aileen finds that Cowperwood has suddenly taken on “a peculiar charm for her”:

It was not his body—great passion is never that, exactly. The flavor of his spirit was what attracted and compelled, like the glow of a flame to a moth. There was a light of romance in his eyes, which, however governed and controlled—was directed and almost all-powerful to her. When he touched her hand at parting, it was as though she had received an electric shock, and she recalled that it was very difficult to look directly into his eyes. Something akin to a destructive force seemed to issue from them at times. Other people, men particularly, found it difficult to face Cowperwood's glazed stare. It was as though there were another pair of eyes behind those they saw, watching through thin, obscuring curtains. You could not tell what he was thinking. (136)

This focalization through Aileen's perspective reveals her receptivity to Cowperwood's power as it manifests in the “electric shock” of his touch and the “destructive force” of his eyes. The reference to other people's fear of the “glazed stare” that obscures “what he [is] thinking” implicitly distinguishes her as someone capable of absorbing his force without *thinking*. Although

Aileen is clearly intelligent, the image of the “glow of a flame to a moth” (one of Dreiser’s hallmark metaphors, applied to the “merry, unthinking” Drouet in *Sister Carrie* and to his own brother in a memoir) creates an asymmetrical relation between her and Cowperwood, whose flame-like power to attract and compel positions him (like the lithographed Carrie) as the self-sustaining object—rather than the potential subject—of fascination.

However, while Aileen’s interest in Cowperwood may seem to arise from his inscrutable otherness, the attraction that develops *between* them is repeatedly represented as a fantasy of sameness that, surprisingly, shatters the discrete self on which Cowperwood’s identity seems to rest. In the early days of his marriage to Lillian, Cowperwood wants to have a child, for he likes “the idea of self-duplication,” and this desire to see himself in others extends to Aileen (61). When he looks at her “there swe[eps] over him a sense of great vigor there, of beautiful if raw, dynamic energy that to him [is] irresistible” and he “fe[els] that she [is] nearer to his clear, aggressive, unblinking attitude than any one whom he had not yet seen in the form of woman” (128). The mirroring of his magnetic personality in another person would seem to affirm his sense of discreteness by providing an objective image for him to contemplate. But once they have started an affair, he finds that, “for all her crudeness,” she is “a definite force personally” and, with her “mannish impetuosity,” he “really [can] not rule her” (162, 413). He begins to expect that “she would really overcome him mentally, make him subservient to her” and he makes several anxious attempts to erect a barrier between them, lest she, Carrie-like, absorb him completely (413). Aileen’s rawness and crudeness overwhelm him, making it impossible for him to maintain the spectatorial power embodied in the fantastic image of the second pair of eyes behind the visible ones.

Personality in *The Financier* depends on the illusion of self-containment: even as it invites people in, it keeps them at bay, forced to “guess” at the “depths” they assume to be beyond their

reach. The illusion is exposed in moments of bodily contact, such as the “electric shock” that seems to pass from Cowperwood to Aileen, alerting her to possibility that she may exert a similar control over him. That Cowperwood’s incarceration for a financial crime coincides with his personal disintegration at the hands of a woman of “mannish impetuosity” recasts his romantic affair as itself a battle of masculine wills not in full control of their effects. Whatever sentimental attachment Dreiser may have had to the myth of self-making as he chronicled Carrie’s success had, by the time he began the Cowperwood trilogy, been replaced by the bleak mechanistic philosophy he was gradually accepting as the truth of life. And as he would argue in his essays on personality, the only thing that can produce that sought-after “transmutation” of self is involuntary, nothing more—or “nothing less,” as Dreiser would put it—than physiochemical interaction with other beings.

In the subsequent books in the trilogy, Cowperwood is unfaithful to Aileen and eventually becomes estranged from her. As Shelley Fisher Fishkin remarks, Cowperwood is “enslaved by a desire which, like Carrie’s, would always outstrip its attainments.”<sup>51</sup> And yet we can see Aileen as a rare match for what Fishkin describes as the “amoral energy” inhering in the “ever-reaching, overreaching desire of a Cowperwood” (105). Although this energy, a force that “animated and dominated the age” was typically gendered masculine, Aileen is a paradigm of a female desire that not only equals that of her male counterpart but also extends and enlivens that of her comparatively somnambulistic female precursor, Carrie, who is a figure of power but also of powerlessness: “There was nothing bold in her manner. Life had not taught her domination” (101).

## 6. Costumes and Courtrooms in *An American Tragedy*

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<sup>51</sup> Shelley Fisher Fishkin, “From Fact to Fiction: *An American Tragedy*,” in *Theodore Dreiser’s An American Tragedy*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1988), 105.



In *Sister Carrie* and *The Financier*, Dreiser represents personality as an innate capacity, not only to attract attention to one's self but also to open one's self to such force in others. Even as he became increasingly interested in the physiochemical basis of that mysterious "something" innate to some people and not others, Dreiser remained attentive to the theatricality of self-presentation in American society. Despite Dreiser's conviction that that the average man cannot "create" personality, "try as he may," the belief that we are potential "Napoleons all" persisted with surprising tenacity in the popular imagination.<sup>52</sup> And despite Dreiser's career-long attempt to expose the myth of self-made success as an obfuscation of all-powerful natural and social determinants, F. O. Matthiessen noted (in the 1940s) that Cowperwood represented not an alternative to but a fulfillment of the "American success story, no matter how refracted from the official versions Dreiser recorded in his *Success* interviews with financiers."<sup>53</sup> At times in Cowperwood novels, remarked Matthiessen, "a bare Horatio Alger pattern shows oddly through" (133).

But lurking around the grand narrative of hard work and its rewards, as Dreiser discovered, were countless stories of failed attempts to overcome poverty simply by marrying rich. In some cases, the pursuit of a financially advantageous marriage led to murder, and the tragic potential of such stories appealed to Dreiser's pessimism. Since the early 1890s, Dreiser had followed news stories of ambitious young men who murdered their usually pregnant sweethearts for economic and social advancement. After completing *The Titan* (1914), Dreiser began writing a novel called "The Rake," based on the well-known murder case of Roland Molineux; a few years later, he began a novel about the similarly sensational murder case of Clarence Richesen and completed a short story, "Her Boy," about a Philadelphia criminal.

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<sup>52</sup>Theodore Dreiser, "Personality," 109.

<sup>53</sup> F. O. Matthiessen, *Theodore Dreiser* (New York: William Sloane Associates, Inc., 1951), 133.

Dreiser's reliance on newspaper accounts of Chester Gillette's 1906 murder of Grace Brown for the plot of *An American Tragedy* has been thoroughly documented.<sup>54</sup> Although Dreiser adapted the main personages and events from the news reports of the crime and trial, he made a major departure in making the prospect of marriage to a rich girl the primary motivation for Clyde Griffiths's crime. The newspapers had exploited rumors of Gillette's general fickleness and particular interest in a high-society girl to construct a scandalous love triangle, and Dreiser went further by fleshing out this newspaper figment into the compelling figure of Sondra Finchley.

While Dreiser's addition may seem like a further sensationalizing of the news story, the figure of the rich girl was essential to the novel's social commentary. In 1935, Dreiser expanded his New York *Post* coverage of yet another crime of this type into "I Find the Real American Tragedy," an essay in which he attempted to correct a general "misunderstanding" of the social "conditions and circumstances" under which Gillette (and young men like him) had chosen to murder. He argued that Gillette "*was really doing the kind of thing which Americans should and would have said was the wise and moral thing to do*"—that is, to aim for success—"had he not committed a murder."<sup>55</sup> Dreiser called Gillette's aspiration to a higher social state a "pro-social," rather than an "anti-social," dream, since Gillette was in fact following the "organized standards of the society of his day" (11).

*Sister Carrie* and *The Financier* both depict characters whose desire always exceeds their attainments in a structure of speculative futurity enlarged by the novels' open endings. It might be said that *An American Tragedy* features a character whose desire cannot exceed what it has

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<sup>54</sup> See Donald Pizer, "An American Tragedy," in *Theodore Dreiser's An American Tragedy*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1988), 45–67; Shelley Fisher Fishkin, "From Fact to Fiction: An American Tragedy," in *Theodore Dreiser's An American Tragedy*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1988), 103–126; Moers, *Two Dreisers*, 196.

<sup>55</sup> Theodore Dreiser, "'I Find the Real American Tragedy' by Theodore Dreiser," *Resources for American Literary Study* 2 (1972): 10, emphasis original.

attained because its object cannot be “attained” in the bluntly material or sexual sense obtaining in the earlier novels.<sup>56</sup> Shopping, sex, and acting appeal to Carrie because they give her temporary identities: a “fine-stepper” in her new shoes, a pretend “Mrs.” in her cohabitation, “Miss Madenda” on the playbills. Just as there is an obvious fetishism to Carrie’s experience of being “individually touched” by department store goods, Clyde’s perception of Sondra as a symbol of “what it was to want and not to have” seems like an abstracting reduction of her individuality (225). But it is abstract only to the extent that Sondra herself is abstract, defined by the trappings of glamour and the cutesy speech of her social set. Whereas Carrie and Cowperwood free themselves from the conventional morality in which the success myth is inscribed, Clyde’s attempt to free himself from stifling poverty involves submitting to another kind of moral script: that of achieving success at all costs. Despite F. O. Matthiessen’s claim that Dreiser wrote *An American Tragedy* with “objective detachment,” having overcome the “despair” that afflicted him as he wrote *Sister Carrie*, there is a passionate moralism in his pronouncements on human limitations.<sup>57</sup>

The book’s title clues us in to the costs of Clyde’s failure to achieve what he wants, but why does seem so constrained in his attempt? The problem, I will suggest, is personality. In Dreiser’s earlier novels, as in his non-fiction writings on the subject, personality is a mysterious capacity defined in opposition to the popular notion of cultivated charm. Clyde Griffiths does not have that inherent power, though he discovers that he can *appear* as though he did. Trying to get a job as a bellhop at the Green-Davidson Hotel in Kansas City, Clyde learns that “if he wanted to get on he ought to insinuate himself into the good graces of people—do or say something that would make them like him. So now he contrived an eager, ingratiating smile...” (30). This

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<sup>56</sup> Moers has described Clyde as “a static, sterile creature incapable of growth” (*Two Dreisers*, 229).

<sup>57</sup> F. O. Matthiessen, “Of Crime and Punishment,” in *The Stature of Theodore Dreiser*, ed. Alfred Kazin and Charles Shapiro (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1955), 215.

conscious attempt to create the “something” that, in Dreiser’s view, only nature can bestow, is the occasion to formally denaturalize personality by meticulously tracing its construction.

For Dreiser, the project of cultivating personality was doomed to failure, yet he was interested in the aesthetic process of constructing an enchanting persona. So, even as *An American Tragedy* implicitly opposes the cultivation of personality to the natural existence of it, with Clyde’s wheedling earnestness paling in comparison to the Laurentian life-force of Carrie and Cowperwood, the novel nonetheless apports attention to characters according to their ability to convincingly *perform* natural power. In those earlier novels, the characters with the most irrepressible natural force—Carrie, Cowperwood, even Aileen—come out on top, both in their social worlds and in the narrative’s distribution of attention, in spite of the relative difficulty of representing their consciousness. These novels give form to the inexorable triumph of nature by demonstrating that the measure of personal power is its effects on others. *An American Tragedy* follows a different logic, the logic of the dream of upward social mobility that it seeks to test, a logic in which the *appearance* of power makes the lack of natural power irrelevant—or nearly so.

This formal denaturalization of personality begins with the novel’s emphasis on personal appearance. Like Carrie’s, Clyde’s social ambition is consistently figured through his fascination with clothes, bodily poses, and facial expressions. In his first job, at a soda fountain in Kansas City, he studies the girls who are “so well-dressed and smart-looking—the rings, pins, furs, delightful hats, pretty shoes they wore,” and by the power of their male companions in “evening suit, dress shirt, high hat, bow tie, white kid gloves and patent leather shoes” (24). He sees his own future success as requiring the possession of this “costume” and “standard of equipment” (24):

It was plainly necessary—the thing. And once he did attain it—was able to wear such clothes as these—well, then was he not well set upon the path that leads to all the blisses? All the jots of life would then most certainly be spread before him. The friendly smiles!

The secret handclasps, maybe—an arm about the waist of some one or another—a kiss—a promise of marriage—and then, and then! (24)

The style of this passage mimics Clyde's excitement: not only the exuberant dashes and fragmentary images indicating the rapidity of his thoughts, but also the words emphasizing the theatricality of the social performance he is imagining—the “costume,” the “equipment,” and “the thing,” that catchword of the age, so often applied to the mystery of personality. Clyde suddenly understands the power of “the thing” to betoken a seemingly natural entitlement, a lesson reinforced by his ascent in the social hierarchy of the bellhops at the Green-Davidson Hotel through the “contriv[ance]” of an impressive appearance (30). The difference from *Sister Carrie* lies in the vocabulary and the tone, which convey the tawdriness of Clyde's wants and the simple calculations he devises to satisfy them. Moers points to Carrie's “capacity for a miraculous flowering” to Clyde's inability to do anything but *react* to infinitesimal stimuli (229).

In his desire for women, Clyde's awareness of the “artistry” of attraction does not diminish but enhances that attraction's power (137). In an early meeting with Hortense Briggs in Kansas City, her “impersonal” attitude toward him motivates him to “make himself interesting to her” (83):

Clyde was captivated by all this. Her gestures, her poses, moods and attitudes were sensuous and suggestive. She seemed to like to tease, promise, lay herself open to certain charges and conclusions and then to withhold and pretend that there was nothing to all of this—that she was very unconscious of anything save the most reserved thoughts in regard to herself. In the main, Clyde was thrilled and nourished by this mere proximity to her. (83)

Hortense is attractive to Clyde because, in her oscillation between self-exposure and self-concealment, she invites projection; each of her gestures indicates something but ultimately reveals nothing, in an empty echo of the “destructive” opacity of Cowperwood's eyes. She feigns interest in others to the extent that it will secure their interest in her—an example of Marden's aphorism “You can compel people to like you.” Carrie, too, operates in this way, but her

affectations are granted greater legitimacy as the manifestation of her theatrical nature and a sign of her future professional success.

Clyde's experience of Hortense's personality as a "sensuous and suggestive" performance anticipates his infatuation with Sondra for similar reasons. Shortly after Clyde and Sondra's accidental meeting on the street, in which Sondra has become "interested in his personality," she brings him to a society party, where, as a "seeking Aphrodite, eager to prove the destroying power of her charm," she tries to impress Clyde: "She was now keen, first to see if he were present, next to be sure that he gained no hint that she had seen him first, and lastly to act as grandly as possible for her benefit—a Hortensian procedure and type of thought that was exactly the thing best calculated to impress him. He gazed and there she was..." (316, 332). The narration shuttles between perspectives here: we see Sondra's mind at work, machinating to impress Clyde with a display of indifference; but the reference to the "Hortensian" style of this flirtation shifts us back to Clyde, whose social education has taught him to see all behavior as "artistry." The "procedural" description of Sondra's display of charm implies Clyde's recognition of, and pleasure in, being impressed by exactly the behavior that he expected to impress him, even as he complies with Sondra's plan by gazing at her admiringly. Sondra's certainty in making an impression and Clyde's absence of surprise in receiving it require a suspension of disbelief in the obvious performativity of personality, even a *re*-naturalization of what Clyde has learned, through careful study, to deconstruct into its constitutive parts. The spell intensifies rather than diminishes when the mechanisms of theatricality are unveiled.

This procedural model of charm is perhaps the clearest indication that personality in the sense Dreiser uses in his essays and earlier novels is not present in *An American Tragedy*. To be sure, we have seen Carrie acquire "graces" by practicing them in front of a mirror, but we have also seen her acquire a power incommensurate with her mimetic ability. On her way to international

celebrity by the end of the novel, she has become a blank screen onto which her countless admirers can project their fantasies. Whereas in *Sister Carrie* acting in an ordinary sense and in a theatrical sense are fused together, in *An American Tragedy* acting is treated as a social pathology. After Clyde has killed (whether by accident or by intent) the relatively charmless Roberta Alden and is charged with murder, the case draws the attention of the national press and his conviction transforms him into a celebrity, a figure in the newspapers from which he has drawn the idea for the crime in the first place.

Clyde's behavior in court represents a failure to properly negotiate the institutional roles available to him. Most consequentially, he fails to maintain a bodily blankness that would allow the judge, jury, and other observers to project innocence onto him. Previously, his eyes have been a source of mysterious attraction.<sup>58</sup> A Kansas City prostitute tells Clyde, "I like your eyes. You're not like those others fellows" (65). Later, his "eyes fairly radiated" a "desire and intensity" to possess Sondra, who in turn addresses him in letters as (among other things) "Sweetest Black Eyes" (379). However, after Roberta's murder his eyes become his biggest giveaway, rendering him vulnerably legible to various concerned or suspicious observers. Returning to Sondra, he resolves to "be calm" and "appear cool," but she immediately notices something different about him: "You look so pale! Your eyes" (566). Likewise, when Clyde is first addressed by Orville Mason, the district attorney, his "nervous, dark eyes show enormous strain," "full of a deep, tremulous yet evasive terror" (585, 586).

These involuntary expressions of guilt only increase once he is on trial and subject to the jury's scrutiny. We might think back to Cowperwood's inscrutability, which not only attracts women to him but also, when he is charged with misusing municipal funds and goes to court,

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<sup>58</sup> Moers remarks that "the eyes of Clyde involve us in his fate with a sense of discomfort and alarm that nothing in his character can explain" (*Two Dreisers*, 232).

gives him a certain advantage. “Pah!” he thinks, looking around at the judge and jury, and “his inscrutable eyes took them all in and gave no sign” (329). Clyde, in contrast, exposes himself at every step. “I must look very calm,” he thinks as he begins his examination by his lawyer, Jephson (706). “Like I didn’t care so very much, because I didn’t really kill her. That’s right, I didn’t. Yet his skin blue and the lids of his eyes red and puffy and his hands trembling slightly in spite of himself” (706–707). And as Clyde lies about his love for Roberta, “he lick[s] his lips in sheer nervousness” (714). At moments his physical discomfort seems to work in his favor, as when, despite his lawyer Jephson’s having told him exactly what to say, Clyde “hesitate[s] and stumble[s], quite as if he had not been instructed as to all this beforehand,” and thereby gains a certain authenticity (717).

The possibility that Clyde’s performance of innocence will actually succeed, aided by the script provided by Jephson, is remarked upon in parenthetical asides by Mason and other skeptics: “Beautifully done!” “Excellent stage play,” “Well staged!” “Pretty shrewd—pretty shrewd!” (715, 716). Indeed, the tightly structured dialogue between Jephson and Clyde makes this section of the novel read like a play directed by Jephson himself, with occasional ironic stage directions (Clyde acts “as he had been instructed to do”—as if we needed reminding that an actor is playing a part) and reminders of the temporal contingency of the performance, which is soon to be followed by Mason’s own production—reason for Mason to complain that Jephson is “stealing most of [his] thunder” (720). Having risen socially through his blank adaptability, Clyde is now being called upon to *act* in the theatrical space of the courtroom. He has had a rehearsal in the preceding weeks, he has “memorized the answers,” but he is ultimately not up to the task (717). He begins to “twist and swallow in the weak, stigmatic way that was his whenever he was attempting something which was beyond him—any untruth or a feat of skill” (730). We are reminded of the accomplished feat of the traveling vaudeville actor who early in the novel



seduces and impregnates Clyde's younger sister; he is "one of those vain, handsome, animal personalities, all clothes and airs" who has "no morals" but a "compelling magnetism (16). Here, the skill-less Clyde can hardly remember his lines.

Clyde cowers under Mason's cross-examination and, despite the judge's argument that the failure to rescue the victim of a genuine accident is not a crime, is convicted of murder in the first degree. His failure to act effectively is attributed to his self-consciousness about the inevitable publicity that the trial will attract. During his initial testimony, he imagines people reading about him in the newspapers; "he thinks of his mother—Sondra—of all the people throughout the United States—who would read and so know" (719). And when asked directly about Sondra—protected in the proceedings under the name "Miss X"—Clyde fears that "whatever he said would be seized upon" and used in "the newspapers along with her name" (721). This vision of publicity is realized as Clyde is transported to the penitentiary where he will be held until his execution:

...impressive crowds at every station—young and old, men, women and children—all seeking a glimpse of the astonishingly youthful slayer. And girls and women, under the guise of kindly interest, but which, at best, spelled little more than a desire to achieve a facile intimacy with this daring and romantic, if unfortunate figure, throwing him a flower here and there and calling to him gayly and loudly as the train moved out from one station or another: "Hello, Clyde! Hope to see you again soon. Don't stay too long down there." "If you take an appeal, you're sure to be acquitted. We hope so, anyhow." (793)

Clyde has become "someone"; he is in the newspapers. The glamour of publicity is, according to Clyde's testimony, what attracted to him to Sondra in the first place: "everybody paid so much attention to what she did and what she said...and her name and pictures were always in the paper. I used to read about her every day when I didn't see her, and that seemed to keep her before me a lot. She was daring, too" (721). This asymmetrical structure of interest also obtains in the crowds whose desire to see Clyde as he passes by is "little more than a desire to achieve a facile intimacy" (793). Clyde's mediated desire for the "daring" Sondra, adored by the press and

other young men, is another instance of “facile intimacy” insofar as it is abstract: Sondra is a figure for Clyde just as he is for his anonymous spectators. And just as Clyde is forced to refer to his love Sondra as “Miss X,” these strangers take the liberty of calling Clyde “Clyde.”

It is with Clyde’s account of Miss X’s appeal that we can see the extent to which personality has transmuted over the course of Dreiser’s work. Clyde initially seems to be a Carrie-like seeker, a youth of humble origins defined by his craving for pleasure and his eagerness to take on new identities (he, like Carrie, adopts new names several times). He seems, in short, to have personality, the power (as Dreiser defines it) to attract attention. Even Sondra thinks so in their second meeting, when she, “interested in his personality, at once began to look at him” and decides, in turn, to “reveal her devastating charms” (316, 317). This interaction leaves Clyde, more than Sondra, wanting more: “he was animated by a feverish desire to make some use of this brief occasion which might cause her to think favorably on him—perhaps, who knows—lead to some faint desire on her part to contact him again at some time or other” (317). We know that Clyde has been fascinated by other girls, Hortense in particular, but the power ascribed to Sondra is unprecedented. Her appeal is not just sexual but in her ease of manner, the quintessential virtue of old money; Clyde claims that she “seemed to know more than any one else I ever knew,” yet all we hear her say is things like “Sondra so glad Clydie here” and other inanities (721, 464). Jephson, in Clyde’s defense, remarks that he “might have been in love, or hypnotized at that” (721). It turns out that Clyde is not the possessor but the victim of personality as the concept had been trumpeted by the popular therapeutic discourse of the day; the hyperbolic idiom of charm—its “devastating,” “hypnotic” effects—seems to absolve those who fall under its sway.

From this position of barely conscious victimhood, Clyde’s experience of seeing himself objectified in the newspapers and the faces of the eager crowds awakens his self-consciousness.

Although throughout the trial he has wondered what others would think of him, it is not until he arrives in prison and suffers a change of costume that he begins to see himself. The “wavy, black hair he so much admired” is cut off and he is dressed in a “a prison-stripped uniform and hideous cap of the same material, prison underwear and heavy gray felt shoes to quiet the restless prison tread” (794). Although “there [is] no mirror here—or anywhere,” he can “feel” how he looks, and despairs at having been transformed from his respectable appearance of “just an hour before” (794). His memory is short, but we can see a glimmer of understanding, a sense of continuity between his first hunger for the dapper costume (the “standard of equipment”) worn by the young men in the soda fountain and his present position in the standardizing prison system. He sees in cell across from him “a sallow and emaciated and sinister-looking Chinaman in a suit exactly like his own” who looks at him “out of his inscrutable slant eyes” (795). In a rare moment of reflection (in this case, self-reflection through the other), Clyde concludes that the Chinese murderer is “as good as himself” and “with a garb like his own” (795). This is no Carrie reading *Père Goriot* in her comfortable chambers at the Waldorf, suddenly alert to the plight of the poor and how far she has come. What Clyde’s objectification shows him is himself, and he is grateful that “visitors [are] probably not many” (795).

Dreiser’s novel of failure was a tremendous commercial and critical success, though reviewers did complain of his excessive reliance on the Gillette trial coverage and the novel’s length. For instance, H. L. Mencken pronounced it “a shapeless and forbidding monster,” “a vast, sloppy, chaotic thing of 385,000 words—at least 250,000 of them unnecessary,” “dreadful bilge,” and “a colossal botch.”<sup>59</sup> Dreiser’s combination of “leisurely” and “meticulous” description was, in Mencken’s opinion, a violation of “literary tact,” especially in light of the fact that the “Dreiser cult” had been waiting a decade (since *The “Genius”*) for his next novel (798,

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<sup>59</sup> H. L. Mencken, “Dreiser in 840 Pages,” *American Mercury* 7 (1926): 379–81.

797). Four year after the book's publication, Dreiser reflected on the cult of personality in his own terms:

There is a certain magnetism about success or fame or wealth or publicity or personality that tends to draw, often fatally and hopelessly, those who are fascinated by these peculiar attributes. In my own case I would not be able to say exactly what it has been that a fascinated individual has seen in me. But always, or ever since the publication of my second book—and even before—there has been a stream of these followers.<sup>60</sup>

When he says that he “would not be able to say exactly what” his followers have seen in him, we should take him at his word. This passage is typical Dreiser: the vague humility and the vague boastfulness, the piling up of nouns counteracted by the leveling repetition of “or,” the self-revision. But the imprecise, evasive language actually expresses Dreiser's main insight about magnetic personality: it can be understood only in terms of its effects—the observable “stream of followers,” rather than the “peculiar attributes” for which Dreiser claims no credit.

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<sup>60</sup> Dreiser, “This Madness: The Story of Elizabeth,” *Hearst's International-Cosmopolitan* 86, no. 5 (1929): 81.

## CHAPTER THREE:

## PERSONALITY AND SELF-PROMOTION IN THE LITERARY PORTRAITURE OF DREISER AND STEIN

*I remember my mother used to say, It's not hard to do a portrait of a man, but the hardest thing is to do a portrait of a pretty woman—to take it into its parts, to avoid the fixation of “beauty.”*

—William Carlos Williams<sup>1</sup>

## 1. Personal Contacts

Perhaps the closest Theodore Dreiser and Gertrude Stein ever came to each other was in December 1935, when Carl Van Vechten showed portraits of the two writers in the Second International Leica Exhibition of Photography in New York. In a gigantic exhibition of more than 600 photographs, all taken with the Leica camera by more than 100 photographers, Van Vechten showed just a few works, including portraits of Theodore Dreiser and Gertrude Stein. His small contribution caught the attention of major art critic Henry McBride, who in his review of the exhibition hailed Van Vechten as “the Bronzino of this camera period,” calling his work “large, with a boldness in design,” but also “searching.”<sup>2</sup> For McBride, this combination of breadth and penetration ensured the lasting power of Van Vechten’s images as guides to their subjects:

The studies of Gertrude Stein and Theodore Dreiser, Fania Marinof [sic] and Lynn Fontanne are not only vital but packed with fourth-dimensional insinuations. If we go on, in the future, being more psychic than we are at present—I hope we won’t but I dare say we will—then the analyzers of Gertrude Stein and Theodore Dreiser will have all the data they need in these portraits. They won’t require personal contacts. (28)

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<sup>1</sup> William Carlos Williams, “The Day of the Locust,” in *Nathanael West: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Jay Martin (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1971), 139.

<sup>2</sup> Henry McBride, “Photography as an Art: The Leica Exhibition and More Camera Adherents,” *New York Sun*, November 30, 1935, 28. Among Van Vechten’s subjects were Fania Marinoff (Van Vechten’s wife), Lynn Fontanne, as well as—according to an ecstatic letter Van Vechten sent Langston Hughes on the day McBride’s review was published—“Bricktop” (Ada Smith du Congé), Taylor Gordon, Ethel Waters, and Emma Goldman. See Hughes and Van Vechten, *Remember Me to Harlem: The Letters of Langston Hughes and Carl Van Vechten, 1925–1964*, ed. Emily Bernard (New York: Knopf, 2001), 133.

McBride's praise of the photographs for their potential to replace their subjects raises questions about portraiture that concerned Dreiser and Stein themselves. In McBride's account, the representation will replace the original, making "personal contact" unnecessary, and the object of analysis will be the subject's personality as it manifests in physical and psychological "data." And because the photographs are posed, rather than spontaneous, a sense of the presence of the photographer himself will remain in the images, further distancing the viewer from the original subject. At the same time, the photographs' "vitality" suggests that the distinction between original and copy is irrelevant.

Dreiser and Stein both worried about the capacity of writing to do what McBride describes: to portray the intangible attributes of an individual in a recognizable yet unique form, a compelling representation of an actual person that is at the same an expression of the portraitist's singular vision. The two writers were almost exact contemporaries—Dreiser lived from 1871 to 1945, Stein from 1874 to 1946—and both were extremely famous by the time Van Vechten photographed them in 1935. Dreiser had published his best-selling *An American Tragedy* (1925) ten years before, and Stein had just enjoyed a flurry of success that included her best-selling *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933) and her a lecture tour of America. Being photographed by Van Vechten both marked and secured their fame. The photographs (figs. 8 and 9) are interesting for their own sake. Dreiser, crammed in front of a gaudy, vaguely galactic backdrop, gazes far beyond the camera, with one eye squinted and his hair disheveled. Stein sits in front of an American flag (odd, given that she lived in France) and looks frankly at the camera, her dark eyes, closely cropped hair, and elegant clothing giving her an austerity that contrasts with Dreiser's mystical dreaminess. As McBride predicted, these images have contributed to our rather caricatured ideas of the writers, with Dreiser as a lumbering analyst of historical,

biological, and cosmic forces beyond our control, and Stein as an agile and fastidious innovator, dedicated to developing radical artistic forms to make us experience language and the world anew. Displayed together in the Leica show, the antithetical pair must have seemed to stand for competing, rather than complementary, trends in American literature.

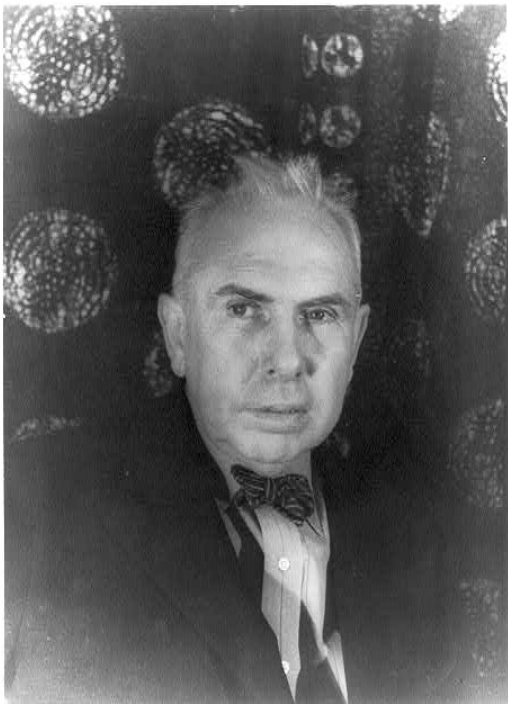


Figure 8. Carl Van Vechten, “Theodore Dreiser” (1934)

Figure 9. Carl Van Vechten, “Gertrude Stein, January 4, 1935” (1935)

To be sure, much of Dreiser’s and Stein’s writing is startlingly different in content and form. But where they intersect in significant ways—to be discussed in this chapter—is that throughout their careers Dreiser and Stein both published many literary portraits, individually and in collections, representing forms of personal distinction ranging from obscure artistic genius to dazzling celebrity in a period when both traditional visual arts and new media promised, or threatened, to capture greatness more vividly. Given their mutual obsession with fame, as well as

their reputations for writing too much and too aimlessly, it is puzzling that their decision to write portraits—a form known for its brevity and clear purpose—at the same moment in American literary history has been overlooked. Indeed, Dreiser and Stein are rarely considered as even remotely connected to each other, except to mark formal and thematic differences between plodding naturalist narrative and experimental modernist prose.<sup>3</sup> As for their respective ventures into portraiture, Dreiser's portraits have received much less attention than his novels, essays, and memoirs in critical accounts of his work and of naturalism more generally. The scanty scholarship on Dreiser's portraits collections *Twelve Men* (1919) and *A Gallery of Women* (1929) that does exist has treated his portraits as transparent autobiographical expressions of his views of art, success, and gender.<sup>4</sup> While Stein's portraiture has been studied far more extensively, the relationship between her portraiture and her fame has been under-examined, and several portraits that she wrote at pivotal moments in her career have received only passing mention.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> As early as 1932, Dorothy Dudley, in her unabashedly personal study *Forgotten Frontiers: Dreiser and the Land of the Free* (New York: Harrison Smith and Robert Haas, 1932), compared Dreiser and Stein on stylistic grounds. Praising Stein for her early work, Dudley asserts that “*Three Lives*, the stories of three servant girls in terms of their hidden minds, initiated a method of writing as new and real as Dreiser’s themes were real and startling” (277). But she faults Stein for falling “under the influence of Picasso” and inventing “a style of writing exotic to letters, which sought to give the color and tone of thought rather than the thought itself” (278). She concludes her assessment by conceding that Stein has “produced some alluring poems” and perhaps “liberated her own soul,” but “she has enslaved the minds of her many disciples in a blind attempt to emulate her, and has helped to stunt the growth of our articulate talent” (278). More recent critics have tended, like Dudley, to align Dreiser with “theme” and Stein with “style,” although rarely with any direct comparison of the two writers.

<sup>4</sup> See Yoshinobu Hakutani, “The Dream of Success in Dreiser’s *A Gallery of Women*,” *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik*, 27, no. 3 (1979): 236–246; Joseph Griffin, “Dreiser’s Later Sketches,” *Dreiser Newsletter* 16, no. 2 (1985): 1–13; Carol A. Nathanson, “Anne Estelle Rice and ‘Ellen Adams Wrynn’: Dreiser’s Perspectives on Art,” *Dreiser Studies* 32, no. 1 (2001): 3–35. There have also been several bibliographical and textual studies of *Twelve Men*.

<sup>5</sup> Wendy Steiner’s excellent *Exact Resemblance to Exact Resemblance: The Literary Portraiture of Gertrude Stein* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1978) is the most thorough study of Stein’s portraits. Also useful are Ulla Haselstein, “Gertrude Stein’s Portraits of Matisse and Picasso,” *New Literary History* 34, no. 4 (2003): 723–43; Ulla Dydo, *A Stein Reader* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1993); Karin Cope, “Painting After Gertrude Stein,” *diacritics* 24, no. 2/3 (2003): 190–203; Michael J. Hoffman, “Gertrude Stein’s ‘Portraits,’” *Twentieth Century Literature* 11, no. 3 (1965): 115–122; and Harriet Chessman, “Steinian Dialogue and the Two-Body Relationship,” in *The Public is Invited to Dance* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1989), esp. 61–71. Many critics have dealt with Stein’s self-promotion, but usually with a



As we will see, both Dreiser and Stein were interested in portraiture not only as a literary form, but also as a broader artistic and social practice that contributed to the formation of artistic canons and the consolidation of cultural power in the modernist period. Writers often portrayed fellow writers, and the resulting portraits attested to relationships between persons implicitly worthy of public attention, both as individuals and for their connection to each other. This emphasis on the relationship between a portrait's subject and its maker had important consequences for Dreiser's and Stein's writing, as both writers used portraiture not to capture an individual's essence, what makes him or her unique, but to represent the effects that an individual's personality has on others. Their portraits may look quite different: Dreiser's are long biographical narratives, while Stein's are concentrated and abstract "word paintings," what she called "complete conceptions" of individuals. But together they reinvigorated and redefined the very idea of the portrait by going beyond physical and psychological description to create a record of the encounter between their subjects and themselves.

Through this emphasis on process and interaction, Dreiser and Stein both showed the extent to which their perceptions were inevitably projections. At the same time, however, they asserted the authority of their perceptions on the basis of their *own* power of personality: they attracted the attention of the very subjects whose mysterious attractive power prompted the portrait in the first place. Examining Dreiser's carefully curated portrait collections in relation to what I call Stein's "sequential" and "reciprocal" portraits, I argue that their representations of

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focus on *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*: James E. Breslin, "Gertrude Stein and the Problems of Autobiography," in *Critical Essays on Gertrude Stein*, ed. Michael J. Hoffman (Boston, MA: G. K. Hall, 1986), 149–159; Helga Lénárt-Cheng, "Autobiography As Advertisement: Why Do Gertrude Stein's Sentences Get Under Our Skin?" *New Literary History* 34, no. 1 (2003): 117–131; Kirk Curnutt, "Inside and Outside: Gertrude Stein on Identity, Celebrity, and Authenticity," *Journal of Modern Literature* 23, no. 2 (1999): 291–308; and Susan M. Schultz, "Gertrude Stein's Self-Advertisement," *Raritan* 12, no. 2 (1992): 71–87. As for the neglected portraits I examine, Richard Kostelanetz briefly mentions "An Instant Answer or A Hundred Prominent Men" in *The Gertrude Stein Reader* (New York: Cooper Square Press, 2002); and Edward Burns includes the unpublished "And too. Van Vechten. A sequel to One" in *The Letters of Gertrude Stein and Carl Van Vechten, 1913–1946* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986).

personality attest to portraiture's power as a means of social consecration and authorial self-promotion. This proximity between Dreiser and Stein not only illuminates a neglected moment in the history of literary portraiture but also attests to a general cultural fascination with the possibility of "natural" distinction in an era awash in rhetoric of self-fashioning.

## 2. The Thirteenth Man: Authorial Presence in *Twelve Men*

Dreiser himself contributed to our sense of the distance between him and Stein. In a 1923 interview, he complained about contemporary novelists being overly preoccupied with "form" and technique at the expense of "substance," naming Stein and her imitators as representing a reduction of, rather than a shift away from, what he and other authors of ambitious social novels had been doing:

Form is another curse under which American writers are suffering. The critics are greatly to blame for this. A man writes a novel and how is it reviewed? "This book is a masterpiece. The hero is described in one sentence." In other words, the critics don't give two straws about the substance of the book, but confine themselves to singing a paean of praise about its style. What happens as a direct result of this? Every young writer who wants to make a mark confines himself to form and lets the substance go. They strive after a quality of description, an alliterative feeling, "Gertrude Stein" stuff that all the world considered a joke when it was born and now scrape to it so sedulously. The effect is the thing, the right word, the short sentence. And they're dishonest about it. They pretend at the same time to tell you a story, a life story. They don't....We have no substance today. We have very little today.<sup>6</sup>

In his contemptuous dismissal of "Gertrude Stein's stuff," Dreiser identifies "substance" as the part of his writing, and of realist and naturalist fiction more generally, that the modernist obsession with form—the "effect," the "right word," the "short sentence"—has impoverished or tacitly repudiated. His grumpy comment anticipates what would soon become a critical

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<sup>6</sup> Theodore Dreiser, *Interviews*, ed. Donald Pizer and Frederic E. Rusch (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 91–92. While this seems to be Dreiser's only mention of Stein, a catalog of his personal library indicates that he owned a copy of her *Three Lives* (1909).

commonplace: the idea that modernist art is more concerned with the process of representation than with the object of representation, or that representation itself is the object of representation.

Accusing Stein and her followers as indulging in narcissistic self-referentiality, Dreiser presents himself as a writer wary of form as an end in itself and staunchly committed to substance—content, and above all *story*. But his work tells a more complicated story. As we have seen in his novels, Dreiser’s conception of personality as an innate capacity, rather than a fixed essence or identity, led him into formal experimentation that he disavowed in his defense of unpretentious storytelling. Dreiser understood the origin and operation of personality as involuntary, for the person who possesses it and the person who feels its effects. In his 1920 essay “Personality,” Dreiser argues that it is not the measurable qualities or acts of great men but our sense of their “inherent capacity”—that is, their potential—that makes us pay attention to them.<sup>7</sup> Personality is “a sense of power resting on a feeling of capability or wisdom and usefulness, and hence a right to be” and is, crucially, “inexplicable to the individual himself” (107). Because personality, in Dreiser’s account, “comes without volition on our part,” it can be understood as an impersonal agency and represented only by an external observer attentive to its constant transmutation (109).<sup>8</sup>

Designating himself as that observer, Dreiser turned to the portrait as a form that represents a real person in a deliberately artful way, pointing to the subject’s existence outside the work yet also offering the portraitist’s impression of the subject as interesting in itself. In his study of visual portraiture, Richard Brilliant describes the portrait’s “oscillation between art object and human subject” as the necessary expression of an “intended relationship between the portrait

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<sup>7</sup> Theodore Dreiser, “Personality,” 110.

<sup>8</sup> On Emerson’s and Dreiser’s commitment to impersonal agency, see Howard Horwitz, “The Standard Oil Trust as Emersonian Hero,” *Raritan* 6, no. 4 (1987): 97–119.

image and the human original.”<sup>9</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer called this intended relationship “occasionality” because the portrait “contains, in its own pictorial content, a deliberate allusion to the original” that is not a product of the viewer’s interpretation but of the portraitist’s “intention” in a specific occasion of creation.<sup>10</sup> While Brilliant and Gadamer concern themselves with visual art, their view of the portrait’s power to refer to a real person in order to call attention to the portraitist’s act of representing that person also pertains to written portraiture in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

In this period, written portraits were ubiquitous, appearing everywhere from popular magazines to self-contained collections, authored by people as different as Henry James and high-society chronicler Charles G. Shaw. Just as popular biography increasingly featured what the sociologist Leo Lowenthal calls “idols of consumption” instead of the great men of politics and industry, the staid genre of literary portraiture also took a conspicuously personal turn.<sup>11</sup> The subjects of written portraits had long been public figures known for their achievements, but in the early twentieth century writers on both sides of the Atlantic began depicting unknown subjects, notable primarily for their personal magnetism. When writers did portray the famous, they often exposed shocking details of their subjects’ private lives. The “new biography” of Lytton Strachey’s ironically titled *Eminent Victorians* (1918) took an irreverent and even malicious approach to its subjects, while Frank Harris’s five-volume *Contemporary Portraits* (1915–1930) shared the secrets of leading contemporary artists, writers (including Dreiser), philosophers, and politicians. In the 1920s, the *New Yorker* ran humorous profiles by Waldo Frank and Janet Flanner of writers and artists. (“Mrs. [Edith] Wharton’s excellencies are never marketed,” wrote Flanner

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<sup>9</sup> Richard Brilliant, *Portraiture* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991), 7.

<sup>10</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Garrett Barden and John Cumming (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), 128.

<sup>11</sup> Leo Lowenthal, “Biographies in Popular Magazines,” *Literature, Popular Culture, and Society* (Palo Alto, CA: Pacific Books, 1961).

in 1929. “Even those who love her most come by accident upon her golden qualities.”<sup>12</sup> A burst of daringly idiosyncratic portrait collections, including Eugene Debs’s *Pastels of Men* (1919) and Paul Rosenfeld’s *Port of New York* (1924) and *Men Seen* (1925), solidified the position of the portraitist as not just a dutiful recorder of important people but also a shrewd and provocative judge of personal and cultural value. The form of the portrait collection was particularly well suited to this purpose, since it allowed the portraitist to assert, whether explicitly or implicitly, his principles of selection and arrangement. For instance, the titles of Henry James’s *Partial Portraits* (1888), and Walter Pater’s *Imaginary Portraits* (1887) announced the artistry involved in a form that had long prided itself on verisimilitude; indeed, Pater’s book, as well as Max Beerbohm’s *Seven Men* (1919), consisted of biographies of fictional characters. In 1936, Ford Madox Ford would publish *Portraits from Life*, which consisted of “memoirs and criticisms” of the leading British and American writers of the day (including James and Dreiser); in his opening ascription, he explains without apology that he is “trying to make you see these people whom I have very much loved—as I want them seen.”<sup>13</sup>

In the context of such changes in biographical writing, Dreiser’s portraiture appears at once traditional and experimental. In *Twelve Men* (1919) and *A Gallery of Women* (1929), instead of prying into famous people’s inner lives or destroying their public images of propriety, Dreiser depicts ordinary people whose primary distinction is having impressed him in some way, always through an irresistible force of personality. Most of the portraits in both collections begin with an

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<sup>12</sup> Janet Flanner, “Dearest Edith,” *The New Yorker*, March 2, 1929, 26–28.

<sup>13</sup> Ford Madox Ford, *Portraits From Life* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1980), vi. The music critic James Gibbons Huneker published several portrait collections between 1902 and 1921, including *Overtones: A Book of Temperaments* (1903), *Iconoclasts: A Book of Dramatists* (1905), *Egoists: A Book of Supermen* (1909), and *Unicorns* (1917), the last of which featured “A Note on Henry James” asserting that his fiction “is for the future” (*Unicorns* 53). While in Paris in the 1920s, Nathanael West did research for a book of popularized short biographies of painters, but he stopped short of writing (Martin, *Nathanael West: The Art of His Life*, 107).

explanation of how Dreiser met the subject and proceed through their years of knowing each other, and many end with the subject's disappearance or death. Although he does tell the story of each subject's life before and after his friendship, he often gives limited information, gathered from unreliable sources such as lovers, friends, mere acquaintances. The distinction of his subjects is thus completely external: the distinction of having attracted notice, having compelled attention, having been chosen. *Twelve Men* and *A Gallery of Women* are thus relatively traditional in their largely narrative form and analysis of biographical information and personal qualities. But by calling attention to the particular personal relationships between the author and his subjects, the same works disrupt the illusion of authorial impartiality on which the portrait traditionally depends for its truth. The portrait collection thus allowed Dreiser to address the formal problem of, on the one hand, how to represent an individual personality as unique and, on the other hand, how to put individual subjects together in a way that effaces individual distinction and emphasizes the contingency of that arrangement, the portraitist's selection and organization of the collection. The self-assertive or self-promotional aspect of *Twelve Men* and *A Gallery of Women* is most obvious in Dreiser's selection of unknown subjects on whom he bestows distinction.

Dreiser's innovation in biographical writing thus centered on an elevation of ordinary people to a position formerly reserved for the famous and, at the same time, an assertion of his own special power to recognize and represent the power of personality, however unknown to the public the subject may be. In a July 1919 review of *Twelve Men*, the biographer and critic Frank Harris likened Dreiser's book to his own "experiment" in biography, admitting that he had the advantage in *Contemporary Portraits* of presenting distinguished men (one of whom was Dreiser himself) about whom everyone was already curious, whereas Dreiser takes "people of no particular interest to the general public and gives portraits of them in their habit as they lived"—a description that, incidentally, makes the *Twelve Men* portrait collection sound quite like a realist

or naturalist novel.<sup>14</sup> According to Harris, Dreiser's book was an "experiment" because he replaces general fame with particular or local fame; it is not being known to all but being known to certain people that matters. Dreiser's privileged intimacy with the subjects in *Twelve Men* is the very premise of the book; the men have made an impression on him and *should* have a similar effect on readers. It is therefore ironic that Dreiser would respond to Harris's portrait series by identifying an "over-self valuation or, at least, self-emphasis" in Harris's treatment of the celebrities of his day and requesting that Harris "reduce [his] vaulting egotism."<sup>15</sup>

In so blatantly privileging his particular interest in his subjects while at the same time presenting them, rather didactically, as worthy of general notice, Dreiser attempted to redefine whose lives matter and even what counts as "mattering." He did so not to elevate the ordinary for its own sake, but as part of his larger effort to replace the stale nineteenth-century concept of character with the more vital concept of personality, a form of individual distinction defined not by static qualities or concrete deeds but by the power to attract and compel others. By emphasizing his subjects' mysterious effects, Dreiser would attempt to capture the experience of being in the presence of those rare people who, famous or not, fascinate others without doing anything conventionally deemed worthy of public attention. Personality thus seemed to replace social standing and measurable achievement as the requirement for portrayal.

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<sup>14</sup> Frank Harris, untitled article, *Pearson's Magazine* (July 1919), in *Theodore Dreiser: The Critical Reception*, ed. Jack Salzman (New York: David Lewis, 1972), 340.

<sup>15</sup> Theodore Dreiser to Frank Harris, 21 January 1921, in *Letters of Theodore Dreiser: A Selection*, vol. 1, ed. by Robert H. Elias (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1959), 294–295. As a postscript, Dreiser added: "Please do not gather from this that I dislike you. You have, in person, great charm" (295). Harris traded on unflattering portraiture, even libel. Lord Alfred Douglas sued Harris for his depiction of his relationship with Oscar Wilde in his *Life and Confessions of Oscar Wilde* (1918); Harris responded by writing a new introduction for the British edition. While Harris was editor of the scandal paper *Modern Society*, he made a proposition to Jo Davidson: "He would write a libelous article about me, and when it was published I could sue the paper, on which he held an option. He could then buy it for a song"; Davidson declined the offer (Davidson, *Between Sittings*, 93–94).

Dreiser's effort to externalize and socialize the self in his portraits, and to treat portraiture as an intersubjective process, had a number of formal consequences in his writing. In *Twelve Men*, Dreiser mystifies personality on the level of the individual portrait. He writes, for example, that his brother Paul "is possessed of so many interesting and peculiar and almost indescribable traits" and, about the former wrestler Culhane, that "there is some iron power in some people which literally compels [attention], whether one will or no."<sup>16</sup> In a more ambivalent portrait of a young writer, Dreiser regrets that the young man knows nothing of "that subtle thing which makes for personality" in writing, "that grateful something which attracts and detains one" (1016). But on the level of the collection, personality becomes more transparent: while Dreiser keeps his distance from his subjects by attributing their individual and collective distinction and success to powers and abilities whose origin and operation he can explain only as "natural," he also implies the importance of his particular admiration in producing that distinction. The power of the portraitist is to confer social consecration.

Consider the portrait of his late brother Paul Dresser, a popular songwriter. The portrait, written in 1909, shows Paul in all his "agile geniality," entertaining New York crowds with his gift for mimicry—how he did the "old Irish washerwoman arguing; a stout, truculent German laying down the law; lean, gloomy, out-at-elbows actors of the Hamlet or classic school complaining of their fate; the stingy skinflint haggling over a dollar" (895–96). Dreiser admires Paul's ability to imitate, but he laments that "it is useless to try to indicate such things in writing, the facial expression, the intonation, the gestures; these are not things of words" (896). To give an idea of who his brother was, Dreiser tells a story of Paul playing a joke on a blind New York street singer who, whenever someone would drop a coin into his cup, would insert a "thank you" between whatever words he was singing. Dreiser describes Paul exchanging a quarter for pennies

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<sup>16</sup> Theodore Dreiser, *Twelve Men* (New York: Library of America, 1987), 897, 963.



and then dropping the coins, one at a time, into the cup, each time eliciting a “thank you” from the singer. The result is comical, as Dreiser makes clear in a transcript of the interaction : “Da-a-ling’ (Clink!—’Thank you!)’ ‘I am—’ (Clink!—’Thank you!)’ ‘growing o-o-o-ld’ (Clink!—’Thank you!)” and so on (896). In this portrait, Paul’s physical presence is sheerly auditory, inferred, his individual personality externalized and given grammatical expression in a repeated parenthetical “clink.” But the singer cannot see who is putting coins in his cup and likely assumes that it is a series of people, impersonality pounding down with each clink; it is unclear if he ever realizes that it has been the same man all along. Dreiser is, quite literally, the only person who can *see* Paul here. Formally, this passage replaces description with an exact, sound-by-sound imitation of Paul’s performance, as a way of illustrating personality without naming abstract personal qualities.

This anecdote is characteristic of Dreiser’s portraiture in its emphasis on the author’s presence, a subject of much critical discussion. Some reviewers praised the subjectivity of the portraits, while others complained about the autobiographical framing. For several reviewers, the book contained as much of its author as of its subjects. “Whether he refers to himself or not,” a reviewer wrote, “we feel his continual presence, for we are watching [his subjects] as they react upon himself.”<sup>17</sup> David Karsner declared that the book “should really have been called ‘Thirteen Men,’ for Dreiser himself is the odd character in each portrayal.”<sup>18</sup> A less forgiving reviewer suggested that the book “might more accurately have been named *Twelve Men and Myself*, or even the other way around,” although he later conceded that the portraits without the author are

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<sup>17</sup> E. F. Edgett, “Theodore Dreiser Dissects Humanity,” *Boston Evening Transcript* (April 30, 1919), in *Theodore Dreiser: The Critical Reception*, ed. Jack Salzman (New York: David Lewis, 1972), 327.

<sup>18</sup> David Karsner, “Theodore Dreiser: A Portrait,” *New York Call*, July 18, 1920, 6–7.

“tiresome, perhaps because they have less of Dreiser in them.”<sup>19</sup> More enthusiastic critics identified an artistic motive and process in Dreiser’s self-insertion, one praising the “Great Impresario” for revealing “wondrous, inscrutable, fascinating life” in “the diversity of twelve marionettes.”<sup>20</sup> David Karsner called Dreiser “a sculptor at work in his studio, modeling his object,” and, in line with the modernist notion of impersonality, concluded that “the object is the thing, after all, and Dreiser steps aside from his finished work with the modesty of the true artist.”<sup>21</sup> Whatever their position on Dreiser’s insertion of himself into the collection, all of the critics agreed that what makes the subjects interesting is not self-evident or self-sufficient but entirely dependent on the author’s artistic representation of them.<sup>22</sup>

*Twelve Men*’s organization also raised the question of authorial presence. It has been suggested that Dreiser divided the book into six examples of success, six of failure, in keeping with the typical naturalist narrative of decline.<sup>23</sup> Although the book does have an occasionally moralistic tone, Dreiser’s praise of the vitality of even those who fail suggests a less pessimistically deterministic progression. In fact, Dreiser is less interested in what the men have or have not done than in what they could potentially do. His hesitancy to judge the men and his wonder at their infinite capacity are central to the book’s critique of the notion of personal identity presupposed by traditional portraiture. In “De Maupassant, Jr.,” a promising young writer from

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<sup>19</sup> Anonymous, *New York Globe* (April 26, 1919), in *Theodore Dreiser: The Critical Reception*, ed. Jack Salzman (New York: David Lewis, 1972), 324.

<sup>20</sup> Burton Rascoe, “Dreiser Gives Us His Best Effort in *Twelve Men*,” *Chicago Tribune* (May 3, 1919), in *Theodore Dreiser: The Critical Reception*, ed. Jack Salzman (New York: David Lewis, 1972), 331.

<sup>21</sup> David Karsner, “Theodore Dreiser’s *Twelve Men*,” *New York Call* (April 27, 1919), in *Theodore Dreiser: The Critical Reception*, ed. Jack Salzman (New York: David Lewis, 1972), 325.

<sup>22</sup> In a 1922 interview, Dreiser observed that *Twelve Men* was apparently the best liked of all his books, for “more copies of it ha[d] been sent to him for his signature than of all the others combined” (*Interviews* 80). He also explained that he had struggled to sell individual portraits: “I hawked them all in every editorial office. Everybody said they were no good until after they came out in book form and critics here and there began to praise them. Then editors wanted me to write more like them” (81).

<sup>23</sup> Keith Newlin, “Twelve Men,” in *A Theodore Dreiser Encyclopedia*, ed. Keith Newlin (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2003), 380–382.

the country is seduced by the glamour of the urban literary scene and ruined by its superficiality. We encounter the man in a single capacity, as a writer, and watch him fail to write, but we sense that his aimless hedonism might entail an expression of personality inconsistent with, even antagonistic to, the gendered social requirement of having a vocation. In “My Brother Paul” and “Peter,” Dreiser makes a stronger argument for capacity. “One felt in him a capacity to do,” Dreiser says of Paul, “an ability to achieve, whether he was doing so at the moment or not, and a supreme willingness to share and radiate his success” (895). Stating plainly that the artist Peter could have done anything, for “the material from which anything may rise was there,” he glorifies his friend’s failure to meet conventional standards of success: “I felt always as though I were in the presence of a great personage...a loose bubbling temperament, wise beyond his years or day, and so truly great that perhaps because of the intensity and immense variety of his interests he would never shine in a world in which the most intensive specialization, and that of a purely commercial character, was the grand rôle” (869, 846–47). Dreiser’s praise of Peter’s vitality may be anti-modern, revealing a fear that “intensity” and “variety” of engagement with life are obsolescent in the age of specialization, but it optimistically implies that the social function of portraiture is to present personality as a way of resisting, rather than adjusting to, the development of a new economic and social order.

### 3. “Being quite like”: Desire and Substitution in *A Gallery of Women*

In comparison to his formulaic *Success* interviews and other popular biography of the day, Dreiser’s *Twelve Men* may have been unconventional in its inclusion of unknown subjects and its reluctance to evaluate them as successes or failures. But even though Dreiser rejects the essentializing concept of vocation in “My Brother Paul,” “Peter,” and “De Maupassant, Junior,” his fraternal relationship to his subjects limits his critique of identity by minimizing, if not entirely

excluding, any element of desire that would destabilize the relationship between observer and observed. *A Gallery of Women*, which Dreiser started planning just after *Twelve Men* came out, presents a different intellectual and affective relationship between the author and his subjects and a much more overtly gendered conception of personality. The book makes a broader critique of essential identity through a varied and cumulative process of mediation in which desire abolishes distinctions between the observing and the observed subject, as well as between the observed subject and the signs that serve to express her interiority.

As a specifically referential yet also obviously artful form, the portrait provided Dreiser with the opportunity to develop an aesthetics of personality that first emerged in his representation of the mimetic self in *Sister Carrie*, explored in Chapter Two. Without an essential self to give her a social identity, Carrie gains recognition only because she is “naturally imitative” and able temporarily to adopt and naturalize any quality or role. Carrie’s affective force exercises itself involuntarily, physiologically, her face becoming “representative of all desire,” the ultimate freedom from essential identity. Dreiser’s understanding of personality as an innate capacity remained constant in his portraiture, but between *Twelve Men* and *A Gallery of Women* his attention shifted from the ideal self toward which personality is perpetually striving, to the *actual* self in action. His portraiture, even though it continued to be narrative and retrospective, thus became a portraiture of the immediate present, for it represented personality not its abstract potential but as it actually existed, moment by moment, in the women he observed. To invoke a term Stein would later use in describing her own portraits, it is “movement,” rather than development, that organizes each of Dreiser’s portraits and the collection as a whole.

Dreiser refused to portray his female subjects instrumentally, as female types or as models of womanhood, but he worried about his sexual desire for the women in his book interfering with truthful representation of them. In a letter to his friend David Karsner, the editor of a socialist

newspaper to which Dreiser contributed frequently during the late 1910s and early 1920s, Dreiser admits the difficulty of writing about real women, referring to “these snowy days” in which women imagine for themselves lives defined not by their relations to men.<sup>24</sup> He makes a “business proposition,” expressing frustration with his current agent and asking if Karsner would attempt to interest editors in his new book. He described the book as “a number of studies of women somewhat after the fashion of *Twelve Men*,” with the particular difficulty that “women are not men, not in any commercial or constructive fray and whatever else is truly dramatic in their lives relates to love, marriage and sex,” yet women today “feel that their lives ought to be more than they are” (102). Following years of being criticized for practicing a “barbaric naturalism” that reduced humans to atavistic animal behavior, and his recent triumph against the puritanical censorship of *The “Genius”* in 1915, Dreiser took on the social issues of the women’s movement with ardor.<sup>25</sup> He emphasized to Karsner that his new “studies” were not fiction, at least not strictly: “You want to remember in discussing this that these are not short stories and they have no short story quality. They are full length portraits, with much that is forthright, especially where morals come into play. At the same time they are not sexy,—just serious with, in most cases sex as a factor. Not always” (102).<sup>26</sup> Referring directly to a real person, the portrait is the genre for the “forthright” and the “serious,” its “full length” giving it an edge on the short story in thoroughness of presentation.

In practice, this forthrightness meant that the book featured a number of women in somewhat marginal social positions, including a morphine addict, a fortune-teller, an Irish

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<sup>24</sup> Theodore Dreiser, letter to David Karsner, August 9, 1922, in *A Picture and a Criticism of Life: New Letters*, vol. 1, ed. Donald Pizer (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 102.

<sup>25</sup> Stuart Sherman was the first critic to utter this often-repeated phrase (see Lingeman, *Theodore Dreiser*, vol. 2, 121).

<sup>26</sup> Dreiser disparages recent short story writers in a 1923 interview, where he remarks that “brevity seems to be the essence of these writers. They use the short-story technique. There doesn’t seem to be a person today who is interested in writing a well-rounded life picture” (*Interviews*, 91).

scrubwoman, and a Missouri farmwife. Other subjects included an actress, a painter, a poet, and a business owner. Dreiser described their personal lives in great detail and often with great sympathy; he shows the women negotiating relationships, choosing or changing or maintaining careers, and expressing ideas about how the world works, and he frequently quotes and paraphrases them at length. “Reina,” a newlywed who has moved to Hollywood to try her luck, has “sheer animal spirits and a crazy kind of imagination and zest for life running wild,” an ebullience that makes her bore quickly of her husband’s “humdrum existence” (26, 32). Although Dreiser comments condescendingly on her speech, which is full of grammatical errors and Hollywood slang (and he “blush[es] to repeat” the such expressions as “the cat’s pajamas”), he does not judge her for her restlessness, for “she was a parasite by nature” and could not help (like Carrie) but dream all day (16, 23). Dreiser takes less seriously another actress, “Ernestine,” who is “disturbingly beautiful and magnetic” and whose personality is so “focal” that when she enters a room all attention goes to her. Although he disapproves of her work, he ironizes his own prejudice by admitting that she is “a personage, not a mere chemical assault upon the hormones of the male,” and he relates her professional and romantic troubles with, as well as her eventual suicide, with respect (533).

But the centrality of desire in *A Gallery of Women* complicates Dreiser’s ambition to represent the women in a “serious” way. While Dreiser’s professional success until this point rested on his fictional portrayal of transgressive women, he appears unsure of what position to take in relation to the subjects portrayed. In a cautious 1928 letter to Kirah Markham, a former lover, Dreiser asked for her opinion on “Sidonie,” a sketch he had written of her that he ultimately did not include in the book. “Personally I feel that no one ever really knows anyone else,” Dreiser mused.

We observe—exteriorly certain deeds & expressions. But what else? You & I lived together nearly three years. During that time we each imagined we sensed certain things in regard to each other. But did we? And if we did not, how are we to do more than paint a seeming portrait from a purely personal view painting—not accurate but as we saw it—or thought I did.<sup>27</sup>

This epistemological assumption about the limits of intersubjective knowledge underlies both *Twelve Men* and *A Gallery of Women*, but here his nervous rhetorical justification reveals a problem specific to writing about women. The women in his book are quite sexual, several of them liberated women who reject monogamy and embrace “varietism.” Or, in the words of a reviewer, the book gives the impression that “Mr. Dreiser believes there is only one kind of woman—the one who is over-troubled with sex.”<sup>28</sup> Taking a dispassionate view of subjects who themselves embody limitless desire would require a self-effacement at odds with the personal premise of the book: what the women have in common is a connection, however distant, to Dreiser himself.

Given Dreiser’s concerns about his right to portray the women in his book, it is no surprise that the portraits in *A Gallery of Women* are overtly fictionalized. In *Twelve Men*, Dreiser gained representational authority by specifying his relationships to the subjects—brother, friend, colleague, mentor, and so on—and by proving his fraternal intimacy through extreme mimeticism, representing personality sound by sound, gesture by gesture. In *A Gallery of Women*, Dreiser takes this self-assertion to an extreme by organizing the collection around his own desire, while at the same time insisting that the women have made it into the book on their own innate interest, rather than through their relations to the author. In his portraits of even his most intimate female friends, Dreiser preemptively denies any sexual relationship with the women; in

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<sup>27</sup> Theodore Dreiser to Kirah Markham, 6 November 1928, in *Letters to Women: New Letters*, vol. 2, ed. Donald Pizer (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 208.

<sup>28</sup> Rollo Walter Brown, “Fifteen Women” (*Saturday Review of Literature*, February 8, 1930), in *Theodore Dreiser: The Critical Reception*, ed. Jack Salzman (New York: David Lewis, 1972), 582.

some cases, he has not even known the women directly. In forewords to several portraits, Dreiser declares that he has changed names and facts; even when he does not make a formal disclaimer, he conceals the identities of his subjects by using fake names, often only first names, as titles and attributing biographical information to external sources.

Despite this prevalent, if uneven, fictionalization, Dreiser also insisted on the truth of the work. In the forewords to “Albertine” and “Rella,” Dreiser preempts any charge of falsity by revealing the sources of his material and his modifications to it. The men who told him the stories, a sculptor and a poet, chose to confide in Dreiser in particular because of a shared artistic sensibility.

[The] sculptor...because of his interest in me and my work, seemed to feel that I ought to know. He craved always dramatic realism and sought to inspire it in others. And because of his keen wish that something be done with his story, I do not hesitate—now that he is dead these six years past—to reconstruct from the many details with which he provided me the following portrait of Albertine...As you may well guess, not only the character details, but some of the principal places and illuminating incidents are most thoroughly disguised. None the less, being *quite like*, they make a portrait that is true.<sup>29</sup>

About “Rella,” he makes a more complicated claim to truth:

This story, innately truthful and self-revealing, was outlined to me one evening in Greenwich Village many years ago by an American poet who has since died; and before him by his wife and the girl to whom he referred. Since no names appear, and his quondam fame, as well as name, has dimmed with time, there can be, to me, no conceivable reason why the sketchy transcript I made of it then should not now be enlarged upon according to the mood in which he related it to me. (480)

The book is full of substitutions: Dreiser stands in for the sculptor and the poet, whose accounts of the subjects’ lives are passionately proprietary—one involving a claim to paternity, the other a claim to thwarted but everlasting love—and he replaces their details with his own, “*quite like*” the originals, to create “innately truthful” portraits. It is his distance from his subjects that allows him

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<sup>29</sup> Theodore Dreiser, *A Gallery of Women*, 2 vols. (New York: Horace Liveright, 1929), 360, emphasis original.



to embrace approximation, the next best thing to the thing itself. But it is also the women's lack of essential identity that makes no one representation any more truthful than another. One reviewer saw in the book Dreiser's "groping instinct to know all and forgive all, to apprehend if not to unriddle personality," echoing Randolph Bourne's praise of Carrie as an "aimless and alluring soul" exempt from moral evaluation.<sup>30</sup>

Dreiser literalizes the women's status as aesthetic objects by staging conflicts between the arts and between artists and their products. The forewords implicitly elevate fiction above other arts, including poetry and sculpture, even if the "gallery" of the book's title nods to the visual arts, particularly painting, and several of the women he portrays are themselves artists. He makes a few concessions to other forms of writing by reprinting a poem that "Olive Brand" wrote and sent to him, by listing the enigmatic utterances of the fortune-teller "Giff," and by bookending his portrait of "Rona Murtha," who dropped her typing business for love but eventually returned to it, with images of her newspaper classified ads. In several portraits, Dreiser uses a strategy of synecdochal substitution of the women's work for the women themselves. Ellen, a heartbroken painter, vanishes to London after having some paintings delivered to Dreiser's New York home. Fifteen years later, he is incredulous at her silence: her paintings are "still unclaimed" and "no word—nothing—from Ellen Adams Wrynn" (178). The paintings are, for Dreiser, all that is left of Ellen, but they do not refer to *her*, just as Carrie's facial expression indicates not her interiority but the impression of a projected interiority on her audience. Instead, the work simply replaces the subject associated with it. In *A Gallery of Women*, much more so than in *Twelve Men*, Dreiser concerns himself with the status of literary portraiture, as it relates to other kinds of writing—

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<sup>30</sup> Grant C. Knight, "Fiction" (*Bookman*, November 1929), in *Theodore Dreiser: The Critical Reception*, ed. Jack Salzman (New York: David Lewis, 1972), 563. Randolph Bourne, "Theodore Dreiser," 460.

fictional, documentary, journalistic—and to other media.<sup>31</sup> But even more strikingly, he is anxious not just about not getting something quite right but about the portrait overtaking, or becoming a surrogate for, the original subject.

If Dreiser incorporates these texts to let the women speak for themselves and prove the “truth” of the portraits, there is also something proprietary in his gesture. This is not to say that the act of giving a face or voice to an absent entity—prosopopeia, in Paul De Man’s account of autobiography—produces and effaces (or de-faces) the object that appears to have preceded it. Rather, in the biographical act, Dreiser’s self-effacement through the ceding of narrative control shows a deference to others that actually directs attention back to his special ability to distinguish their interest in the first place. His attention is less evaluative and more appreciative than in *Twelve Men*, yet that very generosity reinstates the author’s recognition and representation as the condition of a subject’s distinction. *A Gallery of Women* thus calls attention not only to the representational process of portraiture, with its various mediations between the subject and her observers, but more strikingly to the process—evoked by the titular “gallery”—of curation. Dreiser is at once the artist exhibiting his impressionistic portraits and the curator of the show, custodian of its contents.

Yet Dreiser’s representational position is itself hardly stable. His insistence on his ability to take a dispassionate view of his female subjects might imply a fantasy of distance and control, but his non-instrumental, “aesthetic” representation of them involves a more complicated model of desire. Leo Bersani, in a response to Walter Benn Michaels’s charge that he “approves” desire as

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<sup>31</sup> Dreiser to Yvette Eastman, 27 October 1939: “Thinking of your new radio skill. Why not take one of my short stories—or character sketches—*Twelve Men*—*Gallery of Women* and show how one would run, radiodized. It might start something.” And, in a postscript, “Have you a copy of Clark’s radio start on *Sister Carrie*?” Ken Clark’s radio script of *Sister Carrie* was never produced. Eastman, *Dearest Wilding: A Memoir, With Love Letters from Theodore Dreiser*, ed. Thomas B. Riggio (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 186–87.

a force of resistance to capitalism, offers a clarification: “Desire transforms its objects into a longing for them, into fantasy objects; in desire, *objects constitute the subject*. The pleasure of desire is not the pleasure of possession or fulfillment but rather the pleasure of the exploded boundary, of the self overloaded or shattered by the internalizing, in desiring fantasy, of its effects on the world.”<sup>32</sup> Dreiser denies any sexual relationship with the women he portrays, but he gladly admits to *desiring* them, no matter what their attitude toward him. The pleasure of portraying them, according to Bersani’s model, is the pleasure of experiencing himself dispersed throughout the collection. Dreiser’s accounts of the women’s effects on him is itself a fantasy of the “effects on the world” that he might achieve through his own act of writing. The “overloaded or shattered” self that emerges from this fantastic relation to his subjects appears most clearly in the very moments when Dreiser distances himself from the objects of his desire—the disclaimers, the forewords, the incorporation of others’ voices, all of which contribute to his image as “mere” author. For it is the act of self-distancing that seems to maintain, but actually explodes, the boundary between the self and the world. Recalling his first encounter with “Albertine,” Dreiser admits, “I could not tell whether she disliked me or whether I was merely failing to make an impression of any kind,” an uncertainty that drives him, as a “prospective historiographer,” to pay attention to his subjects so that they will notice (or will have noticed) him (372, 19).

Shortly after the publication of *A Gallery of Women*, Dreiser began forming a relational account of the human body and mind in which personality, like desire, crosses boundaries between one self and another. In the fragmentary essay “Transmutation of Personality,” he insists that, while some people have stronger personalities than others, an individual personality is not a discrete entity but a dynamic force affected by its interactions with other personalities.

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<sup>32</sup> Leo Bersani, “Rejoinder to Walter Benn Michaels,” *Critical Inquiry* 8, no. 1 (1981): 158, emphasis original.

Noting that personality can be changed by drugs or other external stimuli, Dreiser asserts that “personality must also be influenced by the other personalities with which it comes into contact,” and speculates that “one reason why human nature seems inconsistent to us [is] that we fail to take into account the dynamic and non-static force of personality.”<sup>33</sup> While his chemical explanation of interpersonal relations challenges the notion of atomized individuality, it at the same time mystifies the production of social identity by making recourse to the occult workings of individual personality:

each person must give out, not only in the more easily sensed material reactions of sound, speech, appearance, etc., but as a sort of energy wave, his characteristic personality charge. And thus it can be explained why certain people seem to occupy positions of more importance and more influence and to attract more attention than any of their overt actions would allow. Unconsciously we have known this always—that people had a force outside of what could be explained with reference to ordinary sensation. (168)

For Dreiser, our inability to perceive and explain a force does not diminish its effect on our lives; as he suggests in “Personality,” we are only just beginning to understand how personality, however randomly distributed, has always organized society. Even as he deems this organizing force imperceptible, he implicitly positions himself as someone uniquely capable of tracing the involuntary vectors of attention that lead us to close, or ignore, the gap between measurable achievement and personal distinction. What Dreiser does not quite say is that this exhilarating power depends on desire to constitute the very position from which he carefully observes the power of others to inspire fantasy.

In a gratuitously misogynistic review of *A Gallery of Women*, H. L. Mencken identifies desire as the reason Dreiser is able to represent the women so memorably:

He is at his best in just such character sketches, and he has a special skill at getting under the skins of women. In all of his books, indeed, the matter chiefly dealt with is female

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<sup>33</sup> Theodore Dreiser, “Transmutation of Personality,” in *Notes on Life*, ed. Marguerite Tjader and John J. McAleer (University of Alabama Press, 1974), 167. This essay is a compilation of notes that Dreiser had written on the subject between the mid-1910s and his death in 1945.

vagary, and to its elucidation he has brought an immense curiosity and no little shrewdness. As I have said, men are naturally more interesting, if only because they show a higher variability, but women remain more mysterious, and hence more romantic...They remain figures in the eternal charade, touching always but inscrutable to the last.<sup>34</sup>

Mencken astutely identifies Dreiser's consistent refusal to satisfy the basic expectation of what a portrait will deliver: representational transparency and moral certainty. Instead, the "vagary" of his "mysterious" and "inscrutable" subjects redefines the substance and form of the portrait itself as fundamentally *aimless*.

In light of Dreiser's emphasis on the difficulty of pinning down his subjects in fixed forms, his publisher's approach to marketing the book was surprising. When *A Gallery of Women* came out in late 1929, Liveright launched a major advertising campaign, including a full page in the *New York Times*, followed by daily ads in several papers for a solid month. The Liveright delivery truck, as well as buses, were papered with what Dorothy Dudley remembers as "fifteen Miss Americas, supposedly the novelist's favorites, and above, an ecstatic appeal to read Theodore Dreiser who 'bares the heart and mind of womanhood!'"<sup>35</sup> And Dreiser's ambition to provide "full length" portraits was there realized in a startling static manner.

#### 4. "One and one and one": Personality and Individuality in Stein's Portraits

I have argued that Dreiser developed the figure of the naturally vacant individual whose *lack* of essential qualities compels the attention and elicits the projection of others. Because such power of personality is "inexplicable to the individual himself," both in *why* he (and not someone else) has it and in *how* it exercises itself in daily life, it can be understood only through external

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<sup>34</sup> H. L. Mencken, "Ladies, Mainly Sad," (*American Mercury*, February 1930), in *Theodore Dreiser: The Critical Reception*, ed. Jack Salzman (New York: David Lewis, 1972), 579–80.

<sup>35</sup> Dorothy Dudley, *Forgotten Frontiers: Dreiser and the Land of the Free* (New York: Harrison Smith and Robert Haas, 1932), 469. See also Lingeman, *Theodore Dreiser*, 326–27.

observation and interpretation, which in effect turns the individual into a medium for the expression of other people's desires. This blank receptivity recalls Ames's description of Carrie's face as "representative of all desire," but in *A Gallery of Women* it is only Dreiser's desire that is at stake. Dreiser's attention to his subjects in their moment-to-moment actuality places the locus of selfhood in exteriority, the subject's attributes defined entirely by external perception. Stein expressed a belief throughout her career in the "bottom nature" of an individual, seeming to reinstate a core selfhood that Dreiser had emptied out or shown to be purely relational. But this difference aside, her theory and practice of portraiture merits comparison to Dreiser's because Stein, too, was committed to representing personality always in its external patterns, what she called "the rhythm of anybody's personality."<sup>36</sup> Even more than Dreiser, Stein emphasized the impossibility of conceiving of a person apart from his or her effects on others.

The formal heterogeneity of Stein's portraits makes it difficult to link individual works except in their common attempt to represent "the rhythm of personality." But I propose that two kinds of "occasionality" add a social logic to what is otherwise appears to be only a loose aesthetic connection. The first kind of occasionality involves making more than one portrait of the same person; the second kind entails making a portrait of a person who has made or will make (or even makes at the same time) a portrait of the portraitist. Her practices of what I call "sequential" and "reciprocal" portraiture show the process of representing another person to be intersubjective in both a perceptual and a social sense.

Stein wrote over a hundred portraits between 1908 and her death in 1946. Following the completion of *The Making of Americans*, in which she developed an elaborate typology of personality, Stein began writing or "word paintings" in 1908, taking Toklas, Matisse, and Picasso

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<sup>36</sup> Gertrude Stein, "Portraits and Repetition," *Writings 1932–1946*, ed. Catharine R. Stimpson and Harriet Chessman (New York: Library of America, 1998), 293.

as her first subjects. Despite the formal heterogeneity of her literary experiments, Stein took on remarkably limited range of subjects: herself and her immediate friends.<sup>37</sup> Her most famous portraits are of her most famous friends: Picasso, Matisse, Anderson, Erik Satie, Hemingway, Man Ray, Jean Cocteau, Jane Heap, Van Vechten, Virgil Thomson, Alfred Stieglitz, Francis Picabia, Sherwood Anderson, and others, most of whom in turn made portraits of her in their chosen media. Allegra Stewart writes that Stein's "portraits leave out what everyone else can see," presenting an intensely personal vision that "subjectifies" the world.<sup>38</sup> Ulla Dydo instructs us to enter a Stein portrait "through the words, not through what we know of the subject," for her work "is almost invariably grounded in details of place, time, person, but it is not always possible to see on which facts she relies."<sup>39</sup>

I will argue that the idiosyncrasy of Stein's perception and representation of her subjects, her exclusion of any obvious identifying traits, actually requires that her subjects be recognizable figures for her portraits to be comprehensible to readers at all. Her selection of famous subjects is partly just a reflection of a narrow cultural milieu. "At that time," she writes of Paris in the first decade of the century, "every little crowd lived its own life and knew practically nothing of any other crowd," justifying the insularity of her rarified circle. But it is also a formal and social strategy that directs attention back to her own power to turn the apparently familiar into the unrecognizably strange. By using names as titles, Stein invites readers to identify the represented subject with the person referred to but also with herself, the portraitist who sees in them what no one else could possibly see. It is only because figures such as Picasso and Hemingway already live in readers' minds, sometimes just as names, sometimes with specific shapes and associations, that

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<sup>37</sup> Richard Kostelanetz, introduction to *The Gertrude Stein Reader*, 1st ed. (New York: Cooper Square Press, 2002), xxxiii.

<sup>38</sup> Allegra Stewart, "The Quality of Gertrude Stein's Creativity," in *Modern Critical Views: Gertrude Stein*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1986), 66.

<sup>39</sup> Ulla Dydo, ed., *A Stein Reader* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 260.

Stein's portraits so easily elicit comparison of the representations to the actual subjects and, in turn, reflection on why the author portrays them in such unrecognizable forms—what she sees in them that no one else does. Recognition is the condition for re-cognition of the reified form of the famous personality, or celebrity.

Stein started writing portraits long before the period of her own popular celebrity. Critics tend to divide Stein's work into "real" writing and "audience" writing, with the real writing written without any consideration of audience, and audience writing addressed directly to other people. *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, the first major example of audience writing, prompted a crisis in Stein's relationship to herself, her writing, and others. Stein herself describes this moment in "And Now" (1934), with an emphasis on the effect of audience on her personality:

What happened to me was this. When the success began and it was a success I got completely lost. You know the nursery rhyme, I am I because my little dog knows me. Well you see I did not know myself, I lost my personality. It has always been completely included in myself my personality as any personality naturally is, and here all of a sudden, I was not just I because so many people did know me. It was just the opposite of I am I because my little dog knows me. So many people knowing me I was I no longer and for the first time since I had begun to write I could not write and what was worse I could not worry about not writing and what was also worst I began to think about how my writing would sound to others, how could I make them understand, I who had always lived within myself and my writing.<sup>40</sup>

In claiming that she stopped knowing herself and "lost" her personality, Stein uses startlingly hackneyed language for what she elaborates into a complex problem of living "within" oneself while at the same time knowing oneself through others. In her portraiture, Stein treats personality as something that exists completely within an individual yet constantly expresses its unique rhythm to an attentive and receptive audience; hence her project of discovering the "thing" that moves inside a person and excites the observer. Her portraits represent not the content of the subject's personality but the process of knowing herself through that subject. Here,

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<sup>40</sup> Gertrude Stein, "And Now," *How Writing Is Written*, ed. Robert Bartlett Haas (Los Angeles: Black Sparrow Press, 1974), 63



she treats personality as something intensely private, “completely included in myself,” and other people as a threat to that self-containment, rather than as a potential audience for the expression of what makes her *her*. She loses her personality not because others know her, but because “so many people” know her; she fears not the idea of audience itself but the size of her new audience.

In her portraiture itself and in her statements about it, Stein’s attitude toward audience hovers between provocative engagement and principled indifference. In *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, Stein declares that “she has written portraits of practically everybody she has known.”<sup>41</sup> In “Portraits and Repetition,” she explains, “...I made portraits of every one I know. I said what I knew as they said and heard what they heard and said until I had completely emptied myself of all they were...” (296). Stein’s practice of writing what *she* knows as she observes a subject, instead of analyzing the subject’s consciousness as it manifests itself in words and gestures, depends on her already having a personal knowledge of the subject that allows her to depersonalize the portrait to the point of making it a record of her own perception rather than a direct representation of another person. This is possible, as Stein admits, because she limits the scope of her portraiture to people she knows and, in many cases, to people other people do know or *should* know. Picasso famously said of his portrait of Stein, when someone commented that she did not look like her portrait, that “she will.” Stein’s portraiture also prophetically points to a future moment when whomever she chooses to portray will achieve the fame that she has already generously bestowed through the act of portrayal. It is a contentless gesture of recognition that establishes Stein’s position as an arbiter of social and cultural value, reinforcing a hierarchical relation between observed and observed not just in the actual act of creating a portrait but also in the cultural legacy of the form itself. For portraiture to be a sacrificial process of “emptying” oneself for the sake of someone else requires a reconfiguration of portraitist, subject, and

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<sup>41</sup> Gertrude Stein, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 114.

audience, so that portraiture becomes a means not just of social orientation but also of authorial self-promotion.

Stein's description of "emptying" herself in—or *as*—the process of creation might evoke T. S. Eliot's vision of the modern artist striving for "a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality" in the name of tradition.<sup>42</sup> To be sure, Eliot acknowledged that impersonality is possible only when there is a personality to be extinguished. In "Tradition and the Individual Talent," Eliot asserted that poetry "is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality," adding the qualification (generally ignored by critics) that "of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things" (43). But Stein saw the expression of personality as not only inevitable but potentially beneficial to her work. "Jo Davidson always said one should sell one's personality," Stein writes in *Everybody's Autobiography* (1937), "and I always said only insofar as that personality expressed itself in work. It always did bother me that the American public were more interested in me than in my work. And after all there is no sense in it because if it were not for my work they would not be interested in me so why should they not be more interested in my work than in me."<sup>43</sup> For Stein, the way to ensure that the public pays more attention to the work than the author is not to make the work impersonal but to provide in the work itself the personality the public craves. In fact, the overtly "personal" form of a Stein portrait, as a subjective record of an interaction between two people, complicates notions of artistic and critical impersonality in and about modernist art.

In part because of the prestige of Eliot's doctrine of impersonality, the place of personality in Stein's portraiture has not received any critical attention, despite the concept's centrality in her

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<sup>42</sup> T. S. Eliot, *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed. Frank Kermode (New York: Harvest Books, 1975), 40.

<sup>43</sup> Gertrude Stein, *Everybody's Autobiography* (Cambridge, Mass.: Exact Change, 1993), 51.

accounts of her representation of individuality. In the lecture “Portraits and Repetition”—which she often called “The Conception of Personality And Its Expression In Portraits, Poetry, and *Tender Buttons*”—she explains her motivation for creating portraits: “I had to find out what it was inside any one, and by any one I mean every one I had to find out inside every one what was in them that was intrinsically exciting and I had to find out not by what they said not by what they did not by how much or how little they resembled any other one but I had to find it out by the intensity of movement that there was inside any one of them.”<sup>44</sup> The notion of the “intrinsically exciting,” unlike Dreiser’s notion of the “naturally imitative,” locates the defining characteristic of an individual *inside* the subject. But of course nothing is “exciting” in itself, only to a particular observer; like imitativeness, excitingness is not a static state of being but an outward action or effect. Stein foregrounds this externalization: “Of course I am interested in any one. And in any one I must or else I must betake myself to some entirely different occupation and I do not think I will, I must find out what is moving inside them that makes them, and I must find out how I *by the thing moving excitedly inside me* can make a portrait of them” (298, emphasis added). In this definition, Stein portrays “what is moving inside” the subject, but only “by,” or through, what is “moving excitedly inside” herself. This is not a simple reduction of portraiture to self-portraiture. Instead, this description marks the separation of subject and portraitist—each has an “inside”—while at the same time showing the act of creation to depend on intersubjective excitement. Portraiture involves the mutual construction of subjectivity and identity through the representation of one person’s inside as it “mov[es] excitedly,” or as it animates the movement of something else, in someone else. Dreiser made a related point in “Olive Brand,” where he

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<sup>44</sup> Gertrude Stein, “Portraits and Repetition,” *Writings 1932–1946*, ed. Catharine R. Stimpson and Harriet Chessman (New York: Library of America, 1998), 298. Variant titles for lectures: “Portraits and Repetition” is often titled “The Conception of Personality And Its Expression In Portraits, Poetry, and *Tender Buttons*” or “Insistence and Repetition.” *Letters of Gertrude Stein and Thornton Wilder*, ed. Edward Burns and Ulla E. Dydo, with William Rice (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), 338.

wondered if Olive “maybe did not quite know herself, or that, at most, certain chemic fires burned so high that they obscured all sharp demarcation of mine and thine”—a dissolution of boundaries that made clear the necessity of an observer in determining who she “was” (93).

In “The Gradual Making of the Making of Americans” and “Portraits and Repetition,” Stein refers to the early phrase in her portraiture when, through listening and talking at once, she attempted to capture “the rhythm of each human being” and “the rhythm of anybody’s personality.”<sup>45</sup> While personality here seems to mean simply the combination of qualities that makes any and each individual unique, Stein’s emphasis on the perceptibility of personality—its “rhythm,” the way it sounds and feels to others—suggests a more nuanced definition. In “The Gradual Making of the Making of Americans,” Stein explains the difficulty of representing “the complete conception” of an individual, not as a collection of abstract qualities but as an object of direct, immediate experience over time:

When I was up against the difficulty of putting down the complete conception that I had of an individual, the complete rhythm of personality that I had gradually acquired by listening seeing feeling and experience, I was faced by the trouble that I had acquired all this knowledge gradually but when I had it I had it completely at one time.... [It] was a struggle to make a whole present of something that it had taken a great deal of time to find out... (278)

For Stein, representing the temporality of acquiring knowledge gradually yet not *having* it until a specific moment of recognition precludes the use of narrative, as narrative would reify the “rhythm of personality” rather than represent the process of perceiving it.<sup>46</sup> Rhythm, as a repeated pattern, is perceptible only over time, yet the very process of perceiving it over time

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<sup>45</sup> Gertrude Stein, “The Gradual Making of the Making of Americans,” in *Writings 1932–1946*, ed. Catharine R. Stimpson and Harriet Chessman (New York: Library of America, 1998), 277; Stein, “Portraits and Repetition,” 293.

<sup>46</sup>As Cyrena Pondrom suggests, a synchronic rather than a narrative revelation of character asserts “the contradictory realities which are simultaneously present and which taken together constitute the truth of the individual personality.” Introduction to *Geography and Plays* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993), xxi.

threatens the integrity of the “complete conception” in which it culminates. The function of the portrait is thus to represent the subject as simultaneously actual and complete, in each passing moment and all at once.

The strange temporality of “the rhythm of personality” points to the perennial question of what Stein’s portraits are *of*, what they portray. It has become a critical commonplace that Stein’s portraits are self-referential, pointing not to the actual person portrayed, as indicated by the name in the title, but to the textual composition itself. The best example of this self-referentiality is “Guillaume Apollinaire,” whose first line, “Give known or pin ware,” is a transliteration of his name into a nonsensical yet linguistically recognizable English phrase. The portrait is not of the man named in the title; it is of his name, which is itself immediately divided into its constitutive parts and translated and transformed into something else. The portrait is thus of the name as both a sequence of written symbols and a sequence of sounds that in turn opens various possibilities for written representation. The portrait’s content is not Guillaume Apollinaire the man but “Guillaume Apollinaire” the words; any connection between the actual person whose presence or name occasioned the portrait and the composition itself is arbitrary.<sup>47</sup> The implied equivalence of “Guillaume Apollinaire” and Guillaume Apollinaire invites readers to make this substitution. But such substitution in turn invites us ask why the subject matters in the first place. What distinguishes the subject from other potential subjects—that is, why this person and not someone else? And what distinguishes the subject from the portraitist—why bother writing about someone at all, if the portrait merely records the observer’s thoughts?

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<sup>47</sup> Wendy Steiner, *Exact Resemblance*, 6. Wendy Steiner has argued that the use of names reveals portraiture’s aspiration to what C. S. Peirce calls indexicality, a mode of signification in which a signifier refers directly—like a pointing index finger—to its signified. When a portrait has the same name as its subject, Steiner says, “the name is a homonym, and a motivated one at that. The implication is that the portrait and the subject are equivalent, that the portrait can in a sense be substituted for the subject, be a surrogate for him.” But words and names are *not* indexical of persons, so in Steiner’s account this indexicality is an aspiration.

If we take Stein's explanation of her own portraiture in "Portraits and Repetition" seriously, it is personality—as a marker of individual particularity—that makes the human subjects in her portraits matter. Stein uses a rhetoric of inclusion in the narrative of the development of her portraiture: she aspires in *The Making of Americans* to represent "every individual that could exist" and then begins to "think about portraits of any one" (276, 291). Her repetition of "every," "each," "any one," and "anybody" groups her subjects together into a mass of singularities, of abstract "ones" and concrete "bodies," all inherently worthy of attention. Cyrena Pondrom has argued that Stein's portraiture subordinates "nominal identity to repeated behavior as the marker of character," making the subject's status as "someone" more important than being any particular one.<sup>48</sup> Simply being a person seems to qualify one to be the subject of a portrait. However, at a critical moment in the narrative of the development of her portraiture, Stein recognizes the responsibility of the portraitist to decide who is worth writing about. Unsure whether it is possible to consider a subject in total isolation, she asks whether a subject must be "in relation with any one or with anything in order to be one of whom one can make a portrait" (291). This question, generated by Stein's recurring fantasy of a "thing contained within itself," is not purely aesthetic. To consider if someone is "in relation with" someone or something else is not just to consider that person in physical relation to other elements in the field of perception but also to place that person in a social network or hierarchy. And to ask whether one "can" make a portrait of someone implies not just the practical possibility but the social legitimacy and value of such an act, a doubt implicit in Dreiser's panicked defense of the truth of his portraits of unknown subjects.

Stein's preoccupation with the subjects of her portraits as *particular* persons should give us pause in considering the content of her portraiture to be just words themselves, divorced from

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<sup>48</sup> Pondrom, introduction to Stein's *Geography and Plays*, xvii.

any referent. It should also call our attention to the distinction she assumes in her self-assignment as the “one” who portrays: “I wrote portraits knowing that each one is themselves inside them and something about them perhaps everything about them will tell some one all about that thing about what is themselves inside them and I was then hoping completely hoping that I was that one the one who would tell that thing. Perhaps I was that one” (292). Stein’s breathless aspiration to be the “one” gives distinction to the position of the portraitist, for to “tell” here is not simply to report; it is to tell a story and tell a secret—the story of the secret of what is inside a person.

While Stein acknowledges that “something” or “everything” about a person will “tell” someone else about the “thing” inside that person, she also implies (or invents?) the necessity of “the one who would tell that thing,” despite the power of the thing to represent itself. The ambiguity of “them” in the phrase “what is themselves inside them” in turn casts doubt on what is being represented: is the observer learning what is inside someone else or what is inside herself? As in Stein’s description of the intersubjective stimulation of finding what is “intrinsically exciting” in another person, the source or location of the thing being told is less important than the fact and process of its telling. If we take the “thing” inside a subject to be personality, Stein’s self-positioning as “the one who would tell that thing” accords with Dreiser’s account of personality being explicable only to an external observer.

The questions of whom and what to represent in portraiture converge with particular force in “An Instant Answer or A Hundred Prominent Men” (1922), a portrait that Stein later collected in *Useful Knowledge* (1928) and published in *transition* in 1928.<sup>49</sup> Almost entirely neglected by critics, this unusual portrait goes through “a hundred prominent men” one by one. In the opening lines, Stein muses on the “difference between wandering behind one another or behind each other” in the procession of the great men of history, showing the production of prominence

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<sup>49</sup> *Transition* 13 (Summer 1928): 118–130.







...study the eighty-seventh one carefully and tell me what it is that you notice. I notice that in different positions one sees a different distinction. You mean you always distinguish him. Oh so readily. And when you smile does he smile at all, he smiles very readily when you smile at all. And does he furnish you with agreeable merriment. Very agreeably so. Tell him so it will please him. I do. I will. (490)

Distinction here has a double meaning: it is perceptual discernment and differentiation, the act of noticing the various traits that make this subject different from the others, but it is also social consecration, the act of bestowing prominence. These meanings are inseparable: to distinguish the subject is to notice and consecrate his uniqueness; noticing *is* consecrating; it even elicits a smile from the eighty-seventh man. But while this power of the observer to “distinguish” might seem to be primarily perceptual and social, it is above all compositional; it is the power to give form to personality, to give compositional prominence to a subject. When, at the end of “An Instant Answer or A Hundred Prominent Men,” Stein asks “you” to make her “another one,” she is announcing both her own “prominence,” her right to be in the group, and her, anyone’s, dependence on the observing subject in becoming “one.” This momentary reversal of the positions of observer and observed suggests the impotence of the observed in relation to the equalizing effect of group portraiture: to become “one” is to submit to becoming just “another one.” At the same time, Stein’s desire to become not just another “one” but another *man* suggests that being represented is more empowering than representing. (The critics eager to point out Dreiser’s status as the thirteenth man in *Twelve Men* suspected as much.) Stein’s practices of what I call “sequential” and “reciprocal” portraiture, which come together quite spectacularly in 1923, open the way to such empowerment.

##### 5. Returning the Compliment: Stein’s Reciprocal Portraiture

Even if she bristled at Davidson’s advice to “sell one’s personality,” Stein found a way to do just that in 1923, when her portrait of Davidson, illustrated by portraits that others had done

of her, appeared in *Vanity Fair*. Although Stein was not yet a popular celebrity, she was certainly not lacking in recognition. Artists in various mediums had been making portraits of her for years. Picasso started his famous painting of her in 1905 and, after having failed to finish her face after nearly a hundred sittings, completed the work in her absence in 1906. The placid, mask-like face, strikingly incongruous with her realistically rendered body, is the first of several examples of Stein being represented as an enigmatic persona. A year later, Félix Vallotton followed Picasso's piece with his own painting of Stein, seated and inscrutable. In 1920, Jacques Lipchitz made a bronze bust of her as a modern Buddha. Stein, in turn did a portrait of Lipchitz in 1925, making mutual portraiture the thematic and verbal center of the work. As Dydo has remarked, "Doing a likeness, making a portrait look or sound like the subject, also involves liking the subject and requires looking with receptiveness and tenderness."<sup>52</sup> The portrait ends with a symmetrical sentence that affirms their mutual regard: "When I know him I look at him for him and I look at him for him and I look at him for him when I know him."<sup>53</sup> Alvin Langdon Coburn took a photograph of her in 1913, with Stein dressed in a voluminous black robe and hunched over with her hands on her lap, an iconic pose taken from Picasso's painting and replicated in future portraits.<sup>54</sup> Man Ray, the prolific portraitist of modernism, photographed Stein several times in the 1920s and 1930s. A 1922 portrait shows her seated in front of Picasso's portrait of her, with painting and sitter facing opposite directions, each gazing inscrutably both at and away from the viewer at the same time, and the painted Stein obliquely contemplating the real, foregrounded Stein.

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<sup>52</sup> Dydo, *A Stein Reader*, 491.

<sup>53</sup> Gertrude Stein, "Lipchitz," *A Stein Reader*, ed. Dydo, 492.

<sup>54</sup> In *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, Stein recalls that after Coburn had finished his frontispieces for Henry James's New York Edition, he "had published a book of photographs of prominent men and he wished now to do a companion volume of prominent women" (140). With his gender-based portrait collections, Coburn was somewhat like Dreiser.

This self-conscious portraiture reached a new height in 1923, when Jo Davidson made an almost-life-size sculpture of Stein, and Stein wrote a portrait of him in return. The details of the sitting itself and the publicity that followed attest to a development in Stein's ongoing concern with recognition and reciprocity: a new awareness of the opportunity for self-promotion that portraiture—the *event* of it, not just the artistic product—provided. Stein's "A Portrait of Jo Davidson" appeared in *Vanity Fair* in February 1923. The unsigned article, "An American Revolutionary of Prose Sets Down Her Impressions of an American Sculptor," included three photographic illustrations: Davidson working on his sculpture of Stein, the Lipchitz bust of Stein, and the Picasso *Portrait of Gertrude Stein* (fig. 10).<sup>55</sup> The caption for Man Ray's photograph of Davidson's studio reports that Stein had "returned the compliment" of Davidson's tribute by doing a portrait of him, a phrase that anticipates the idea of portraiture as a system of reciprocal obligation that Stein would express later that year in a private portrait she wrote of Van Vechten. The article's introduction to Stein's portrait ends with what amounts to a promotional blurb from Sherwood Anderson's "appreciation of Mrs. Stein's gift" in the spring 1922 issue of *The Little Review*, marking yet another relationship of mutual admiration that culminated in acts of homage. Anderson had also written the foreword to *Geography and Plays*, published in December 1922. Stein published "Idem the Same. A Valentine to Sherwood Anderson" in the spring 1923 issue of *The Little Review*, thanking him for the support he showed the previous year by attaching his name to her work. "An Instant Answer or A Hundred Prominent Men," written in 1922 but not published until 1928, could be read as a meta-commentary on her own practice (and idealization) of instantly answering favors done by her many prominent male friends.

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<sup>55</sup> Gertrude Stein, "An American Revolutionary of Prose Sets Down Her Impressions of an American Sculptor," *Vanity Fair* 19, no. 6 (February 1923), 48, 90.

## A Portrait of Jo Davidson

*An American Revolutionary of Prose Sets Down Her Impressions of an American Sculptor*

By GERTRUDE STEIN

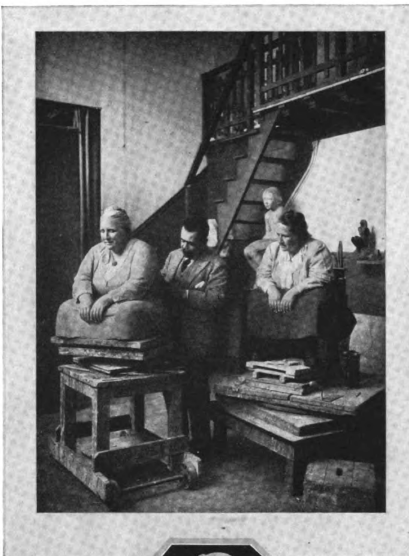
MISS Gertrude Stein, an American now living in Paris, began her literary career by writing realistic fiction in a more or less conventional manner. Several years ago, however, she published a book called *Tender Buttons*, with the sub-title "Food, Objects, Room", a literary experiment which at once brought down upon her an enormous amount of ridicule and indignation. Miss Stein had begun to attempt doing in literature what the new school of French painters—Picasso, Matisse, etc., in whom she had become deeply interested—had successfully accomplished in painting. The theory of this movement in the plastic arts has already been made fairly familiar by the writings of such critics as Mr. Clive Bell. The aim of Picasso and Braque was, by splitting the subject up and distorting it, to express the impression it produced more truly than could be done by a literal representation. Miss Stein's mysterious prose sketches were attempts to do the same thing with language. The things in *Tender Buttons* were supposed to be literary still-lives, with the table, the chair, the vase of flowers, the bowl of apples or whatever, rendered, in their actual effect on the mind by splitting up and distorting them. So, the portrait of Jo Davidson which appears on this page should be regarded as an attempt to do in prose what Picasso's portraits of Buffalo Bill, *L'Homme à la mandoline*, *Femme en Chemise*, etc., etc., did in paint.

Whatever one may think of the soundness of Miss Stein's analogy between the plastic arts and literature, one cannot fail to be impressed by the personal rhythms of her prose and the strange values with which she seems to invest ordinary words. Mr. Sherwood Anderson, in an article in *The Little Review* has written perhaps the best appreciation of Mrs. Stein's gift: "She gives words an oddly new, intimate flavor and at the same time makes familiar words seem almost like strangers. . . . For me the work of Gertrude Stein consists in a rebuilding, an entire new recasting of life, in the city of words. Here is one artist who has been ready to accept ridicule, who has even foregone the privilege of writing the great American novel, uplifting our English speaking stage and wearing the bays of the great poets to go live among the little housekeeping words, the swaggering bullying street-corner words, the honest working, money-saving words and all the other forgotten and neglected citizens of the sacred and half forgotten city."

### Part I

TO be back, to attack back. Attack back. What do you mean by attack back. To be back to be back to attack back.

What do you mean by, what do you mean by to be clean to be a queen to be mean, what do you mean to mean to be a queen to be clean. What do you mean. What do you mean:



Mr. Jo Davidson is here shown (above) completing his statue of Gertrude Stein. Miss Stein returned the compliment by doing of him the portrait on this page



(Left) A bust of Gertrude Stein by Jacques Lipshitz, the young Polish sculptor who produces extraordinary effects by a process of elimination



Portrait of Gertrude Stein by Pablo Picasso. Picasso has brought out in her, much more than the other two artists, the strange and almost mystic turn of mind which produces her extraordinary writings

What do you mean by readdressing a queen. The address the readdress they readdress in between.

This is what is said of a cardinal a red cardinal a singing cardinal, a singing red cardinal singing them a song. When you believe that black is red, do you believe that black is red.

The story of asunder is not thunder the story of the thunder is not asunder. Do tenderly address and run. The story of do tenderly address and run is the story of the son of a son. And how many whites are there.

Not anywhere in there.  
What did you say.  
What did he say.  
What did they say.  
What did they say.  
They didn't say anything.  
And you say.  
To play.  
To play they say.  
Wives of great man.  
Wives of a great many men.  
Wives a great introduction.  
Wives are a great recognition.  
There were more husbands than wives in their lives.  
Two live too him.

This is the story of Jo Davidson.

### Part II

A PART of two.  
When I was in the dark or two, how do you do, how do you not do that. How do you do industrially.

I can reasonably be in him.  
Be in him.  
How do you do industrially.  
I can reasonably be in him.  
Narrative or along.  
I feel no narrative to be or worn.  
You don't wear it the same way.

You do not wear it the same way.  
You do not wear it on the same day.  
You do not wear it the same way.

The same day or guess it to brother it.  
A brother who knows about a brother. Who knows about a brother or a brother.

I now count skies. One sky two skies three skies, four skies five skies, six skies, seven skies, more than eight or nine skies. How many skies are less than nine skies. Nine skies need no tree.

A tree makes me hesitate.  
Can you dismiss it happens, where does it happen.

How does it happen that you can dismiss dismiss this.

How can it happen that you can dismiss.

Dismiss. How can it happen that you have grass in one night. I do favor grass. You mean grass feels your favor. I am in favor of this mass.

Please prepare there.  
I do not ask for installation.  
And now mention Jo Davidson.  
This is the beginning of Part III.

(Continued on page 90)

Figure 10. Gertrude Stein, "A Portrait of Jo Davidson," *Vanity Fair* (1923)

Stein and Davidson achieved a literal simultaneity of recognition when she read his portrait of him as he worked on his portrait of her. In his autobiography *Between Sittings*, Davidson

explains, “To do a head of Gertrude was not enough—there was so much more to her than that. So I did a seated figure of her—a sort of modern Buddha.”<sup>56</sup> He recreates the scene of Stein’s sitting, emphasizing the mutual pleasure of the interaction:

Gertrude’s was a very rich personality. Her wit and laughter were contagious. She loved good food and served it. While I was doing her portrait, she would come around to my studio with a manuscript and read it aloud. The extraordinary part of it was that, as she read, I never felt any sense of mystification. ‘A rose is a rose is a rose,’ took on a different meaning with each inflection. When she read aloud, I got the humor of it. We both laughed, and her laughter was something to hear. There was an eternal quality about her—she somehow symbolized wisdom.

Gertrude did a portrait of me in prose. When she read it aloud, I thought it was wonderful. It was published in *Vanity Fair* with my portrait of her. But when I tried to read it out loud to some friends, or for that matter to myself, it didn’t make very much sense. (175)

Given the placid demeanor of the sculpture itself, it is surprising that it was created in an atmosphere of conviviality and action. Stein did not just sit there, but talked and laughed and read aloud her work, including her own portrait of her portraitist. In Davidson’s account, Stein’s physical presence, specifically her voice, makes her momentarily intelligible at the same time as her “rich personality” and “eternal quality” serve as signs of an unsolvable mystery. It is only when Stein directly addresses her work to him by reading it aloud that he finds it “wonderful”; in her absence, her work, implicitly an extension of her physical being, “d[oes]n’t make very much sense.” This distinction between being addressed and addressing others or oneself echoes Stein’s assertion in “And Now” that one can recognize oneself through others only in an intimate, one-to-one encounter: “I am I because my little dog knows me,” but “I was not just I because so

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<sup>56</sup> Jo Davidson, *Between Sittings* (New York: Dial Press, 1951), 174. In *Between Sittings*, Davidson devotes the short chapter “Gertrude Stein and Dr. Coué” to Stein and self-help guru Émile Coué because he made sculptures of them in the same year, but the two subjects’ status as cult figures of sorts suggest more than just accidental proximity. For example, he mentions the personalities of both subjects: “Gertrude’s was a very rich personality” and “I was intrigued by Dr. Coué’s personality, and the day after the séance I started his bust” (175, 176). A couple of tangential connections to Dreiser: sometime in the 1910s Davidson did a portrait of the portraitist Frank Harris, who in 1919 published a portrait of Dreiser; and Dreiser’s “Culhane, the Solid Man” (*Twelve Men*) is based on a burlier self-help figure than Coué, a wrestler who started a health spa near New York City that Dreiser visited while suffering from neurasthenia in 1903.

many people did know me.” Davidson here implies that meaning and identity are made in a closed interaction between two subjects perceiving each other perceiving each other, leaving no room for an audience.

But the audience is there: Man Ray in the studio itself, readers of *Vanity Fair* peering in from a greater distance. The magazine’s supplementation of Stein’s text with this photograph and the other images tells a complicated story about Stein’s reputation and about modernist portraiture more generally. Through the images, the article calls our attention to Stein as an artist who has been ignored by the public but, from the very beginning of her career, was recognized and appreciated by the right people. Stein’s portraitists are thus the heroes of the story, ahead of the curve in their decision to immortalize a figure who would eventually become emblematic of the avant-garde itself. Or Stein is the ultimate insider, someone who has risen to a position of power by obscure means and who commands respect within an impenetrably exclusive cultural scene. In this very ambiguity, the *Vanity Fair* spread anticipates the logic of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, which portrays a peculiar relation between public and private, a world of studio visits and dinner parties, in which everyone Toklas and Stein meet is already a celebrity or, with their help, bound to be one. Toklas hints at this inevitability by always writing Stein’s full name, “Gertrude Stein,” even before she has become widely known in the world of the book, as if she had always been destined for fame, or, in a stranger formulation consistent with a naturalistic notion of personality, *naturally* famous, even if actually relatively unknown. The autobiography is full of intimate details about the private lives of famous artists and writers, but these details form such witty, pat stories that the book sounds more like a celebrity gossip column than a candid account of their life together. Stein thus reveals the sociology and ontology of fame: there is Gertrude Stein, and then there is “Gertrude Stein,” but the former cannot be fully

recovered once the latter has come into being. As Stein laments in “And Now,” to be known, to become a “personality,” is to lose one’s personality.

Stein’s “A Portrait of Jo Davidson” reflects ambivalently on its own publicity, using “you” to designate an unnamed audience and Davidson her subject. The portrait, divided into three parts, opens with aggressive questioning, asking “To be back, to attack back. Attack back. What do you mean by attack back,” and repeating “what do you mean” through the first part. The skeptical distance between the implicit “I” and the interrogated “you” decreases in the second part in an image of twoness: “A part of two...I can reasonably be in him. Be in him.” Stein points even more explicitly to the reciprocity of portraiture in the third part, with the counterfactual statement that “he,” whom we can assume to be Davidson, “has so often been seated.” As the maker of countless sculptures, Davidson was of course hardly ever seated himself, except figuratively on the occasion of Stein’s portrait. In keeping with Stein’s assertion that she can “be in him,” Davidson here takes a seat as Stein’s subject, an equality reinforced by the final lines of the portrait: “You know and I know, I know and you know, you know and I know, we know and they know, they know and we know, they know and I know, they know and they know you know and you know I know and I know.” The reciprocal structure of the alternating repetition of “you” and “I,” with both subjects presumably knowing the same thing, seems to correct the imbalance of power in the act of representing someone else. But the shift from “you” and “I” to “we” and “they” unifies Stein and Davidson and divides them from the audience, “they,” and the final repetition of “I know and I know” suggests a total absorption of the “you” into the “I,” ending the portrait with cagey self-promotion in the face of a hostile audience.

6. “And so I say so. So and so”: Distinction and Authority in Stein’s Sequential Portraiture



In the fall of 1923, six months after her article appeared in *Vanity Fair*, Stein wrote second portraits of several people—Van Vechten, Picasso, and Toklas, all of whom had been some of her very first subjects. She did this only once. The portraits' titles announce their supplemental status, implying that the first portraits no longer suffice: "Van or Twenty Years After. A Second Portrait of Carl Van Vechten," "If I Told Him. A Completed Portrait of Picasso," "A Book Concluding With As a Wife Has a Cow A Love Story." Between the first and second portraits of each person, a lot had changed: she and Van Vechten had become extremely close friends, she and Picasso had stopped being friends, and she and Toklas had become partners for life. As if an installment in a sequence, each new portrait told the story of a relationship by both reflecting on old impressions of the subject and offering new ones. But the story of her relationship with Van Vechten is complicated by the fact that "Van or Twenty Years After" is actually the third portrait that Stein wrote of him. She wrote the second portrait, "And too. Van Vechten. A sequel to One," only weeks before the third portrait, but Toklas never typed it up and Stein never attempted to publish it.<sup>57</sup> In its inevitable reference to the past, Stein's "sequential" portraiture might seem to be a blip in the development of her writing of the immediate present. But Stein's three portraits of Van Vechten, in their reflection on portraiture as not just an artistic but a social act, attest to Stein's sense of how to gain the recognition she had long sought. As a sequence, the portraits show how Stein's formal strategies of anti-mimeticism and self-promotion work together.

Stein first met Van Vechten in the spring of 1913. Having shared a box with him at the opera *Le Sacre du Printemps* and been impressed by the intricately pleated shirt that he wore, she

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<sup>57</sup> Edward Burns included the unpublished portrait in *The Letters of Gertrude Stein and Carl Van Vechten, 1913–1946*, 2 vols. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), noting that Stein had mentioned the possibility of doing a second portrait of Van Vechten as early as August 1923 and soon after wrote the portrait in a notebook, just after "He and They, Hemingway," her portrait of Hemingway (858).

went home that night and wrote her first portrait of him, “One. Carl Van Vechten.” The portrait has five sections, the first untitled, the following sections titled “ONE,” “ONE,” “TWO,” and “FOUR,” giving the portrait the structure of play in acts.<sup>58</sup> The first section opens with the line “One.,” and each subsequent section repeats its numerical title in the first line: “ONE. One.,” “TWO. Two.,” and so on. This repetitive titling creates continuity between the title and the text of the portrait, making the title just one signifier of the portrayed individual. After being named in the title, Van Vechten appears only synecdochally in the image of his shirt: “the best most silk,” “a touching white shining sash and a touching white green undercoat and a touching white colored orange and a touching piece of elastic” (360). If these abstract flashes of fabric and color all point to their wearer, the word that comes to stand in for Van Vechten, “one,” refers to both a specific individual and *an* individual, any one, every one, depersonalizing the subject and removing it from any incident that would indicate an actual individual. Michael Hoffman observes that in the early portraits “we may still assume a strong relationship between the title of the portrait and the subject of the actual writing,” but it is an overdetermined relationship: Van Vechten is everywhere and nowhere, his person a constant referent and his name merely one linguistic unit among others, his impression on Stein the occasion for the portrait but not its content.<sup>59</sup>

Despite such depersonalizing effects, the portrait serves as a record of a specific encounter between Stein and Van Vechten and, more than her other early portraits, anticipates its own repetition by positioning itself as the first “one” in a diachronic sequence of portraits spanning their friendship. Stein and Van Vechten’s close friendship continued until the end of her life, when she designated him the executor of her literary estate. The bond between Stein and Van

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<sup>58</sup> Gertrude Stein, “One. Carl Van Vechten,” *Writings 1932–1946*, ed. Catharine R. Stimpson and Harriet Chessman (New York: Library of America, 1998), 360–361.

<sup>59</sup> Michael J. Hoffman, “Gertrude Stein’s ‘Portraits,’” *Twentieth Century Literature* 11, no. 3 (1965): 116.

Vechten began when he arranged for the publication of *Tender Buttons* in 1913, and it grew stronger as he interested more and more editors and publishers in her work over the years, an effort that reached a high point with the publication of *The Making of Americans* in 1925. Van Vechten first wrote about Stein early in 1913, when the portrait of Mabel Dodge that she had written two years earlier caused a stir in New York, adding to the buzz created by the sensational appearance of “Matisse” and “Picasso” in *Camera Work* the year before. Dodge had been so delighted by the portrait that she had it published immediately and frequently wrote to Stein expressing her pleasure in the portrait’s reception in Paris, London, and New York. In a rapture of identification with her portrait, she wrote to Stein, “What they see in *it* is what I consider they see in me. No more no less,” and she laughed at those who criticized it knowing “*so little they are saying it of me!*”<sup>60</sup> The glory was not all Dodge’s: “You are just on the even of *bursting!*” she wrote to Stein just before the 1913 Armory show opened. “Everybody wherever I go,” she went on, “is talking of Gertrude Stein.”<sup>61</sup> The *New York Times* sent Van Vechten, then a music critic for the paper, to talk to Dodge about Stein, and he wrote an article on the “cubist of letters.”<sup>62</sup> A few months later, Stein met Van Vechten when he came to Paris with a letter of introduction from Dodge, whose recent promotional effort might have predisposed Stein to choose the young journalist implicated in this publicity to be himself the subject of a portrait. The portrait first appeared as “One (Van Vechten)” in *Geography and Plays* (1922), the first general collection Stein selected for publication.<sup>63</sup> The transformation of Van Vechten’s name into an apposition, rather than a phrase in paratactical relation to the preceding “one,” and the omission of his first name, together suggest that “one” *is* Carl Van Vechten and no one else. The portrait’s modified title

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<sup>60</sup> Mabel Dodge to Gertrude Stein, in James R. Mellow, *Charmed Circle: Gertrude Stein and Company* (New York: Praeger, 1974), 168.

<sup>61</sup> Mellow, *Charmed*, 172.

<sup>62</sup> Mellow, *Charmed*, 198.

<sup>63</sup> Pondrom, introduction to *Geography and Plays*, viii.

and position in the book mark its priority: it is the first in a sequence and, given that Stein included the word “one” in several of her portrait titles (including the next portrait in the book, “One. Harry Phelan Gibb,” also written in 1913), it is the one of the all the ones that matters.

In “Van or Twenty Years After,” Stein provides a pat justification of why she has chosen to represent him again: “And so I say so,” at once a performative utterance and a description of writing that renders any question of mimesis irrelevant.<sup>64</sup> The portrait’s title, “Van or Twenty Years After. A Second Portrait of Carl Van Vechten,” initiates the work’s refusal of a directly representational relationship of the portrait to its subject. The title contains two factual inaccuracies: in 1923, Stein had known Van Vechten for ten, not twenty, years, and it was her third, not second, portrait of him. The friends had corresponded steadily and with great affection since their first meeting, but they had not seen each other since July 1914. Because Stein and Van Vechten’s correspondence reveals the specific occasion for Stein’s second and third portraits of Van Vechten, as well as a messy negotiation of genuine admiration and self-interest on both sides, it bears summary.

In August 1923, Van Vechten wrote to Stein returning the typescript of her play *A List*, which he had not convinced Edmund Wilson to publish, and announcing the success of his own novel *The Blind Bow-Boy*. Stein responded: “Bully for the boy, I am awfully pleased in your success. It’s just the age it should come. I am looking forward to seeing it. I’ll have to do another portrait of you, the twenty years after effect” (858). Van Vechten replied, “Your promise to do another portrait of me ‘twenty years after’ naturally delights me. I like your portraits. I like your work. I like you,” conflating work and author in a way that Stein would have resented in anyone

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<sup>64</sup> Gertrude Stein, “Van or Twenty Years After. A Second Portrait of Carl Van Vechten,” *Writings 1903-1932*, edited by Catharine R. Stimpson and Harriet Chessman (New York: Library of America, 1998), 505.

but an intimate friend (88).<sup>65</sup> Stein's response, in late September, included the second version of the second portrait: "I am glad you like my letter, I am inclosing the second portrait I wonder if you will like it, I think it piles up rather well, if you do like it and Vanity Fair would like to print it, I would be very pleased...I hope you'll like the portrait" (89). In October, Van Vechten sent an affirmation: "The new portrait I liked very much, although as yet it is little but meter and rhythm to me. More will come later. It is a little difficult for me to *ask* Vanity Fair to publish it as it is about *me* but I thought, as occasion offers, I might show it to an editor or two and perhaps one of them might ask me for it. Would you mind if it were published elsewhere than Vanity Fair?" (90). A month later, Stein replied, "About your portrait no I don't want it especially for Vanity Fair in fact I would be very pleased to have some one else use it. I have just read it over, it isn't quite as full as I would like it to be but it does some of it pretty well" (91).

Stein moves rapidly from the declaration of her intention to write the portrait to her request that he find it a publisher. Her reason for writing it is quite transparently Van Vechten's recent success, which she wants to honor through a depiction of him in his moment of glory. At the same time, she directly expresses her desire to reach a larger audience than just him and, in effect, to share in his glory. In this negotiation of private and public recognition, the mixing of Stein's concern for his personal opinion and her desire for publicity makes "liking" not just a matter of friends. Stein makes Van Vechten's approval of the portrait the condition of its publication, but what would *not* liking it even mean? The portrait is "of" him, but it is not an imitation of him whose accuracy he could—or, as someone familiar with her work—would

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<sup>65</sup>Although he had known her for only ten years, Van Vechten must have realized that she was using the term as a literary device; Stein would have been familiar with Alexandre Dumas's novel *Vingt Ans Apres* ("Van" may be a pun on *vingt*); she may also have recalled the chapter "Twenty Years After (1892)" in Adams's *The Education of Henry Adams. Letters of Gertrude Stein and Carl Van Vechten, 1913–1946*, ed. Edward Burns (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 858. Stein's exaggeration of the length of their friendship may have been intended to give the impression of intimacy with an up-and-coming artist.

judge. Van Vechten's response indicates that he knows "how" to read a Stein portrait: "The new portrait I liked very much, although as yet it is little but meter and rhythm to me. More will come later." Unlike Dodge, who identified so completely with her portrait that she equated "it" and "me," Van Vechten treats his portrait as a formal object, just "meter and rhythm," and merely gestures toward a moment when it will mean more, perhaps indicating that only once others have read it will there be "more" to it than just form, a social value accrued through circulation. Stein matches Van Vechten's unconcern for what the portrait "is" with her description of what it "does": "it isn't quite as full as I would like it to be but it does some of it pretty well." What is the "it" that the portrait does pretty well? It does itself: it writes itself and it portrays itself, in an automatic and self-referential style that protects it against any charge of not being adequate to the object it purports to represent.

We are again up against the difficulty of what Stein's portraits are *of*. Just after saying that he likes the portrait without seeing himself in it, Van Vechten acknowledges that it does, in name and in effect, represent him: "It is a little difficult for me to *ask* Vanity Fair to publish it as it is about *me*." Van Vechten did ask *Vanity Fair* to publish it, but the editor declined to do so because he had published Stein's work recently. In the spring of 1924, Van Vechten finally placed the portrait in *The Reviewer*, where the editors were "overjoyed" to have more Stein after the success of "An Indian Boy," which they had reluctantly published earlier that year. Once the portrait appeared in print, Stein and Van Vechten spoke of it again only in the context of *Portraits and Prayers*, a volume Stein began planning in 1923 but which did not come out until 1934.

The second portrait, "And too. Van Vechten. A sequel to One," addresses the issue of recognition by linking it to reciprocal exchange. Stein crossed out a "now" just after "Van Vechten" in the title, indicating a move away from temporal markers that she reinstates in the

“Van or Twenty Years After.” The portrait opens with a sequence of questions about the relationship between the past and the present, ending in the present of “doing”:

Or does he  
 As he was.  
 Or as he was.  
 Or as he does.  
 Does he.  
 He does. (864)

Starting with “or,” Stein seems to present an alternative to something that has already been expressed, but she quickly eliminates any sense of anteriority or continuity by reformulating “was” into “does,” a rhyme that carries us into the present indicative statement “he does.” The action of doing is soon implicated in a situation of portraiture:

Now to follow one  
 One before.  
 Before the other.  
 Now to follow one before the other. [...]  
 And I know what it is.  
 This is what it is.  
 The man next to him half rose to his feet. (864–65)

To follow one is literally to follow her first portrait of Van Vechten, “One,” with a second portrait, whose title announces it as “a sequel to One.” But following also implies subordination: it is to come after in a sequence, or to accompany, admire, serve, like the unnamed “some” who are “certainly following” Picasso in Stein’s first portrait of him. For “one” to be “before the other” is to be prior to the other and, in the act of portraiture, to be physically in front of the other. To follow one portrait of Van Vechten with another portrait is to put him before her perceiving mind, as well as to confront one version of him with another version, embodied in the image of “the man next to him half [rising] to his feet,” an act of both self-assertion and prostration to the other.

Portraiture thus makes the subject, despite being halved and sundered, simultaneous with itself. Stein moves past this imagery of subordination by refusing a linear relation between moments or a hierarchical relation between people: “The same moment and to follow one before the other and in general and at the same moment” and “the man next to him half arose and at the same moment” (865). This simultaneity of moments and of selves implies difference but not hierarchy: having becomes “halving,” and “actually can sunder, as to the same, actually can sunder” (865, 66). But the question of parity arises again when Stein asks what she deserves for this act of integration of one Van Vechten and another Van Vechten into the same moment: “If you be not fair to me what care I how fair you be. When this you see remember me *and share it*” (866, emphasis added). Stein makes the condition of her “fair” portrayal of Van Vechten contingent on his being “fair” to her by publicizing her portrait—an echo of the market meaning of “fair” in *Vanity Fair*. She wants Van Vechten and whoever else reads it to “remember” her but she also wants the portrait itself to be “shared,” to be published and appreciated. The portrait ends with a desire for reciprocity, even a sense of entitlement: “Honor to them to whom honor is due. Due to you and due.” Having honored Van Vechten through this portrait, she now expects recompense, what is “due” to her. “Due” connects to the “doing” of the first few lines, implying that what one “does” produces a “due.” It may also be a pun on “deux,” French for two, pointing to the simple fact that this was her second portrait of Van Vechten, but also suggesting an obligatory reciprocity between friends that he had yet to fulfill.

The third portrait, “Van or Twenty Years After,” also includes a more literal scene of portraiture. Having described unnamed people in situations of sitting and measuring their surroundings, Stein narrows in on a single figure: “So suddenly and at his request. Get up and give it to him at his request. Request to request in request, as request, for a request by request, requested, as requested as they requested, or so have it to be nearly there” (504-5). Although



Stein does not say who “he” is or what he “requests,” the rest of the portrait includes acts of “seating” and “regarding” that clearly evoke the situation of creating a portrait of a specific individual:

Seating regard it as the very regard it as their very nearly regard as their very nearly or as the very regard it as the very settled, seating regard it as the very as their very regard it as their very nearly regard it as the very nice, seating regard as their very nearly regard it as the very nice, known and seated seating regard it, seating and regard it, regard it as the very nearly center left and in the center, regard it as the very left and in the center. And so I say so. So and So. That. For. For that. And for that. So and so and for that. And for that and so and so. And so I say so.

Now to fairly see it have, now to fairly see it have and now to fairly see it have. Have and to have. Now to fairly see it have to and to have. Naturally.

As naturally, naturally as, as naturally as. As naturally. Now to fairly see it have as naturally. (505)

The elements in this interaction are “it,” they (implied by “their”), and “I,” but their identities and relations are provocatively ambiguous. If we take this to be a scene of representation, the “it” is the subject of the portrait, whether that be an individual or the portrait itself, the “they” is either that same individual subject or a real or imagined audience, and the “I” is the portraitist, who might not be present in the scene at all. As for how these elements relate to each other, the word “regard” reveals the complex interaction between perception and value. As a verb, “to regard” ranges from the concrete act of gazing steadily at someone to the abstract acts of thinking of someone or something in a specified way or having relation to or connection with someone or something—a multiplicity of meanings that, by further evoking the French *regarder* (to look at, to gaze), pushes the boundaries of America and France. As a noun, “regard” is neutral attention to or concern for something, but it is also liking, respect, esteem. In the repetition of the command “regard it,” the addition of the adverbs and adjectives “very,” “very nice,” “very nice, known and seated” suggests that the subject deserves to be regarded, in both the perceptual and the social sense, but the bland neutrality of those same words refuses to specify why or how we are to regard the subject, except as an object in a compositional field: “regard it as the very

nearly center left and in the center,” an obvious reference to the conventional central position of a subject in a visual portrait. The result of the portrait is that, however opaque the process of selection and representation, one can now “fairly see it have” and “fairly see it have and to have,” and “fairly see it have as naturally.” What the subject now has is “it,” either the existing distinction that inspired the portrayal or the distinction of having been portrayed; one sees this “fairly” because it is a beautiful object, and because it is only fair to “see” and to “have” after “regarding” all that time; and this all appears “as naturally” because the distinction of the object of perception has been artfully constructed.

This passage hardly gives a clear account of the process of making a portrait, but it does ask who deserves to be portrayed without answering, but also without dodging, the question. It ends, like many of Stein’s portraits, with an imperial self-assertion: “And so I say so.” Having created a scene of the immediate act of “regarding” in which the past, particularly the first portrait of Van Vechten, all but disappears, Stein then reminds us that even her portraiture of the present is not exempt from the question of the portraitist’s motivation for representing a real person. Stein does not address why Van Vechten is the particular “so and so” she chooses, or what the portrait is “for,” except to make recourse to a notion of “natural” distinction at the end of the portrait challenged by the faint narrative of a sudden “request,” followed by “seating,” “regarding,” and “having,” as well as by the insertion of “as” in the phrase “as naturally” which returns us to portrait’s opening comparative mode, in which things *are* not but are “as if”—as if the same as ten years ago, as if the same as some abstract figure standing in for Van Vechten in his absence. Stein wonders about such equivalence and substitution in the first line, but she seems to tire of the question: “Twenty years after, as much as twenty years after in as much as twenty years after, after twenty years and so on.” But ending the work with “as naturally” suggests that, in her non-mimetic, subjective portraiture, exact fidelity to the original is irrelevant, for one

representation is just as natural or unnatural as any other. The point of representing someone else is simply to do it and “say so.”

## 7. Portraiture and Posterity

While Stein’s “Portrait of Jo Davidson” was the announced reason for the *Vanity Fair* article, Man Ray’s photograph of Stein and Davidson formed the visual center of the spread, pushing the second half of Stein’s text onto a back page in the magazine. The meta-portraiture exemplified by Ray’s photograph continued in a more personal fashion in Stein’s relationship with Van Vechten, who replaced writing with photography as his main occupation in the early 1930s and began to make photographic portraits in 1932. Following Stein’s custom of personalizing stationery with phrases from her own writing, most famously “A rose is a rose is a rose,” Van Vechten started making his own postcards in the 1920s. He wrote to Stein in 1931, regretting that she had not seen his and his wife’s apartment, and making a request for materials that would foster intimacy across the ocean:

You have never known how we are living, but now that I have carried my postcard craze to its legitimate & *personal* conclusion, you will see how we are living & even how *you are* because I now have postcards of [Kristian] Tonny’s & Picasso’s portraits of you & if you can get me a photograph of it, I would have postcards of Jo Davidson’s statue too! I want to have this very much!<sup>66</sup>

Stein sent Van Vechten a photograph of Davidson’s sculpture and asked Davidson to send him some images as well. Van Vechten soon wrote to Stein again, inclosing a postcard he made from a photograph he took of a photograph Davidson had sent him.<sup>67</sup> Van Vechten’s postcard is

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<sup>66</sup> Carl Van Vechten to Gertrude Stein, 22 November 1931, *Letters of Gertrude Stein and Carl Van Vechten, 1913–1946*, ed. Edward Burns (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 248, emphasis original.

<sup>67</sup> The precise sequence of events: Stein sent Van Vechten a photo (possibly by George Lynes) of Davidson’s sculpture; Stein had Davidson send Van Vechten “a copy of the bust”; Van Vechten reported to Stein that Davidson sent him two photos, and he included one of them in his letter (26 April 1932)—a

absurdly meta: a card including a photograph of a photograph of a sculpture of a writer whose own portrait of the sculptor, although not visible in the photograph, was made at the same time as the sculpture. This postcard is indeed what Van Vechten calls the “*personal conclusion*” of his craze, for it carries the original subject of representation through several transformations, from medium to medium, and from place to place, back to herself. If a postcard is often chosen because its content reminds the sender of the recipient, and sent with the aim of reminding the recipient of the sender, Van Vechten pushes the personal basis of such communication to an extreme. He sends the postcard of Davidson’s Stein to Stein to show her, as he puts it, how she “is living”: how her actual image circulates from one context to another and, in the process, how her “image”—her public persona—takes on a life of its own. Pleased by his postcard, Stein sent Van Vechten her own image of the social and artistic construction of “Gertrude Stein”: a postcard featuring a photograph of Francis Picabia and herself holding Picabia’s portrait of her, twenty years after she wrote “Article” (1913), a portrait of Picabia.<sup>68</sup>

Shortly after this exchange of meta-portraits, Stein dedicated *Portraits and Prayers* (1934) to Van Vechten, whose photograph of Stein appeared on the book’s cover, yet another example of reciprocity. Her dedication reads: “TO CARL. Who knows what a portrait is because he makes and is them.” This dedication, whose capitalized title likens it to the volume’s portraits themselves, is perhaps Stein’s clearest statement of the inseparability, indeed the simultaneity, of “making” and “being” in portraiture. To make a portrait is to be a portrait. This is not to say that a portrait is always a self-portrait, or that the dynamic process of perception and

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postcard Van Vechten made from a photograph he took of the photograph Davidson had sent him (*Letters of Stein and Van Vechten*, 255, note 1).

<sup>68</sup> Carl Van Vechten to Gertrude Stein, July 1933, *Letters of Gertrude Stein and Carl Van Vechten*, 270.

After Stein’s death in 1946, Van Vechten mailed thousands of his portraits, including several of Stein, to friends in the form of postcards, usually accompanied by greetings on the back side.

representation can be reified into static being. Instead, the act of making a portrait constitutes the self as much as it does the other being portrayed; this mutual constitution happens quite literally in scene of Stein and Davidson, but it is implicit even in a one-sided portrayal for the simple reason that a portrait is a record of an interaction between two perceiving subjects. The dedication is also a subtle commentary on genre. Saying that Van Vechten “knows what a portrait is *because* he makes and is them,” Stein implies that a portrait cannot be defined outside of a specific act of creation; to know what a portrait “is,” one has to be there, making or being what is being made.

Beyond dedicating the book to Van Vechten, Stein also included “Van or Twenty Years After” in *Portraits and Prayers*. Van Vechten considered his contribution to the book to be enough to sign a friend’s copy of the book himself: “As I did the photograph on the cover and/for the book is dedicated to me, & as it includes a portrait of me, I am taking the liberty of signing it too (tho obscurely).”<sup>69</sup> Van Vechten’s claim to co-authorship, as both maker and subject of portraits in the book, attests to the intersubjective process of portraiture; one cannot make a portrait without also being—or being made into—a subject oneself. Just two months after *Portraits and Prayers* was published, Van Vechten took the photograph titled “Gertrude Stein, January 4, 1935,” which he showed in the Leica exhibition later that year. Sending news of his participation to Stein, Van Vechten wrote that he was submitting several photographs “and Baby Woojums and the Flag is ONE.”<sup>70</sup> The capitalized “ONE” is an obvious allusion to Stein’s first Van Vechten portrait, “One. Carl Van Vechten,” which she often called just “One,” and which began a sequence of three works. It is also a declaration of Stein’s priority among the

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<sup>69</sup> Carl Van Vechten, letter to Ellen Glasgow, 6 February 1935, *Letters of Carl Van Vechten*, ed. Bruce Kellner (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987), 144.

<sup>70</sup> Carl Van Vechten to Gertrude Stein, November 1935, *Letters of Gertrude Stein and Carl Van Vechten*, 455.

photographed subjects, her status as number one. The double meaning of “ONE” neatly encapsulates the formal and qualitative function of the word in Stein’s own work. It is both a neutral marker of individuality, pointing to that one and not another one, and a socially charged differentiation of one individual against and above everyone else. As she puts it in *Everybody’s Autobiography*, “in America everybody is, but some are more than others.”

Van Vechten’s selection of Stein and Dreiser for his first exhibition, at a time when he had become widely known as a promoter of artistic talent, aligned him with Stein’s desire to be “the one” who would “tell” what was inside other people. Dreiser had given Van Vechten his first job as a journalist, commissioning him to write a review for *Broadway Magazine* in 1906.<sup>71</sup> Although their personal and professional relationship over the years hardly compares to the familial bond that Van Vechten formed with Stein (and Toklas), Van Vechten immediately thought of Dreiser when he converted to photography, writing urgently to Dreiser that “it has become very important to me to have you sit for me as soon as you can,” and Dreiser agreed without hesitation.<sup>72</sup> Van Vechten soon took the photograph that he showed in the Leica exhibition, as well as one of Dreiser in a sternly contemplative pose, arms crossed and eyes downcast. In both photographs, he appears to be both a sensitive mystic and the surly iconoclast better known to a public familiar with his assaults on the genteel tradition of American literature. The images thus consolidate established versions of the author while at the same time presenting him in Van Vechten’s singular vision.

Van Vechten was not alone in putting familiar versions of Dreiser under scrutiny and offering fresh visions of the established author. A decade before the Leica exhibition, Waldo

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<sup>71</sup> Corrine E. Blackmer, “Selling Taboo Subjects: The Literary Commerce of Gertrude Stein and Carl Van Vechten,” in *Marketing Modernisms: Self-Promotion, Canonization, Rereading*, ed. Kevin J. H. Dettmar and Stephen Watt (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 225.

<sup>72</sup> Carl Van Vechten to Theodore Dreiser, 18 October 1932, *Letters of Carl Van Vechten*, 128.

Frank published a portrait of Dreiser in *Time-Exposures*, a collection of portraits that he had written for the *New Yorker* the previous year. Writing under the pseudonym Search-Light, Frank opens the portrait with a scene of finding Dreiser in his study:

...Athwart his shoulder on the wall hung portraits of himself by wild and incompetent emulators of the iconoclasts of Paris.

These versions of Theodore Dreiser after Cézanne, Gauguin, Matisse, chimed admirably with the version of him we had formed from the romantic sentiments of our lonely youth....We knew his story....How his nerves had broken down, but not his spirit. How his purse was empty, but not his inspiration.

Between this version of our own, and the garish legends painted on the wall, the factual Dreiser sat, and faintly stirred a twisted mouth in a smile half canny, half naïve. His nervous fingers...played with the accordion he was forever pleating and unpleating with his handkerchief. And he said, perhaps: ‘America is *some* place for a novelist.’ Or, ‘If only my name was Dreiserevski, wouldn’t they just love me!’ Or, ‘What the hell you come here to bother me for? Sit down. Have an orange. Still playing your violoncello?’...It did not matter.<sup>73</sup>

Frank’s use of the first-person plural immediately invites readers to identify with his own “youthful” version of the author, but he then deems this romantic image just as distorted as the “garish” portraits on the walls and turns to the “factual Dreiser” before him to provide an accurate representation. However, instead of supplanting or correcting these “versions” and “legends,” the “factual” figure is just as perplexing as any romantic representation. The convolution of Dreiser’s first action, in which he “stir[s]” an already “twisted” mouth into an inscrutable smile, cautions us against reading for direct expressions of a stable self. The rest of the portrait casts Dreiser a childish eccentric, who “perhaps” said any of a number of things, and who behaves so capriciously yet forcefully that Frank calls him the “Colossus of Children.”

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<sup>73</sup> Waldo Frank, *Time-Exposures* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1926), 159–160. It is worth noting a reverse scenario in the “Brush with Greatness” episode of *The Simpsons* (aired April 11, 1991), in which Mr. Burns commissions Marge Simpson to paint a portrait of him. At his mansion, she catches a glimpse into a closet full of rejecting paintings (as well as bronze busts, bas-reliefs, and modern sculptures) of himself, all by famous artists.

Frank's portrayal owes something to Dreiser's characterization in his novels and portraits. Dreiser is "cultureless, formless, uncontrolled," and yet with "the grace of one who has lived truly, he has the light and the mysterious mark of genius" (163). Like many of his fictional characters, Dreiser is reduced to his mouth and hands: he smiles, fidgets, spews random comments, devours a piece of chocolate cake, with an appetite comparable to that of Frank Cowperwood or Eugene Witla. His repetitive action of "pleating and unpleating" his handkerchief—a habit mentioned in nearly every profile of Dreiser ever written—recalls the aimless movement of Carrie's incessant rocking in her chair. But while Dreiser does appear absorptive—like Carrie, who in Bourne's words "soaks in environment"—he has also dispersed himself into his environment by surrounding himself with portraits of himself, creating a gallery of self-representation that is perhaps a precursor to his gallery of women. What Bersani describes as "the pleasure of the exploded boundary, of the self overloaded or shattered by the internalizing, in desiring fantasy, of its effects on the world," is cast in a different light in the scene of Dreiser rising to assert his "factuality" in an environment of literal self-projection. The self's effects on the world are measured in the concrete presence of the self in the world, not just in a fantasy of such power.

If we consider Frank's portrait to fit into a wide circuit of portraiture in the early twentieth century, then it is possible to bring Dreiser and Stein into unexpected proximity once again, though perhaps less directly than in the Leica exhibition. The scene of Dreiser surrounded by portraits of himself resembles the *Vanity Fair* spread of Stein regarding herself in various mediums. It is striking that Dreiser's portraitists imitate the style of "Cézanne, Gauguin, Matisse" in particular, as Stein had collected and promoted their painting, and had written portraits of Matisse in 1913 and Cézanne in 1923, the years I have identified as crucial to her sense of the mutual recognition involved in portraiture (159). Frank's earnest description of these painters as



“the iconoclasts of Paris” reinforces our sense of their cultural superiority over the “wild and incompetent emulators” in the United States—and, by extension, of Stein’s modernist portraiture over Dreiser’s less easily classified experiments with representing and being represented. But his final contention that the “neolithic Dreiser” is the only living writer “worthy of our homage, worthy to be called our master” challenges the same European modernist superiority; he appears to have introduced the Parisian avant-garde only to praise a “neolithic” American for his boundless vitality (164).

In later portraits by Ford Madox Ford and Jorge Luis Borges, the primitive quality of Dreiser and his writing took on new geographical and historical dimensions. In *Portraits from Life* (1936), a collection of “reminiscences” of famous writers of his day, Ford viciously describes the genteel New Englanders who rejected Dreiser’s early work. While they openly condemned him, they “felt in their bones that Dreiser was not merely a big bad wolf but a mastodon-symptom of an ice-age, an immense, slow-moving convulsion of a continent that when it should have passed would leave neither them nor their houses nor their names, their accents, their syntaxes, their baby-talk nor their world any more observable beneath the indifferent skies that spread from Maine to the meridian and the Occident” (177). In Ford’s apocalyptic vision, Dreiser is truly a force of nature, his elemental enormity threatening destruction far beyond systematic assault on American society and promising change on a massive historical scale.

Borges’s 1938 portrait of Dreiser is one of the “capsule biographies”—like John Dos Passos’s mini-biographies—that he wrote for *El Hogar*, an Argentine women’s magazine similar to the popular magazines that Dreiser himself edited in the 1900s. Borges opens this tiny piece with a mythological metaphor that takes the idea of the absorptive self to an unforgettable extreme:

Dreiser's head is an arduous, monumental head, geological in character, a head of the afflicted Prometheus bound to the Caucasus, and which, across the inexorable centuries, has become ingrained with the Caucasus and now has a fundamental component of rock that is pained by life. Dreiser's work is no different from his tragic face: it is as torpid as the mountains or the deserts, but like them it is important in an elemental and inarticulate way.<sup>74</sup>

In contrast to Ford's amusing hyperbole, Borges's solemn characterization of an "afflicted," "pained" Prometheus, punished for his defiance, makes him a victim of nature before he becomes a force of it. His literal absorption of his environment—the ingrainings of rock in his head—is an involuntary, painful, slow process, but it makes him and his work fundamentally "important." According to his admirers, Dreiser's power lies not in some essential quality but in his inseparability from what surrounds him.

Borges indicates at the end of the portrait that he has read Dreiser's "book on the mystery and wonder and terror of life," the subtitle of *Hey Rub-A-Dub-Dub*. Only two years after the publication of the book in which Dreiser's "Personality" appeared, Borges wrote his own essay, "The Nothingness of Personality" (1922), in which he boldly states that "there is no whole self," only a radically contingent self.<sup>75</sup> He describes his gradual realization that "beyond the episodic, the present, the circumstantial, we [are] nobody," and declares that, as nobodies, "any state of mind, however opportunistic, can entirely fill up our attention, which is much the same as saying that it can form, in its brief and absolute term, our essence" (6). After citing an array of Western and Eastern texts, he ends his anti-essentialist account of the modern self by correlating the Buddhist rejection of consciousness to Schopenhauer's idea that "the self is a point whose immobility is useful for discerning, by contrast, the heavy-laden flight of time," and concluding

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<sup>74</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, "Theodore Dreiser," in *Selected Non-Fictions*, ed. Eliot Weinberger (New York: Viking, 1999), 166.

<sup>75</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, "The Nothingness of Personality," in *Selected Non-Fictions*, ed. Eliot Weinberger (New York: Viking, 1999), 3.

that the self is “a mere logical imperative, without qualities of its own or distinctions from individual to individual” (9). In 1950, Borges published “Personality and the Buddha,” in which he revises his early claim about the universal nothingness of personality to specify that “the very concept of personality” is “appropriate” only to Western culture.<sup>76</sup>

That Stein herself was often represented as a kind of Buddha points to the problematic status of human particularity in that most particular form, the portrait. Following his sudden turn to American transcendentalism in the 1930s, Dreiser addressed the “myth of individuality” (in an essay of that name) in mystical terms, and henceforth made frequent references to the “totality” and the “oneness.”<sup>77</sup> Indeed, it is Stein’s and Dreiser’s conceptions of personality as something that exists *between*, rather than *in*, people that makes their portraits such a rich site for the exploration of individual distinction in a transitional period in American literary history. The fact that Dreiser and Stein themselves were themselves the subjects of countless portraits in and after their lifetimes, all competing to capture the “real” Dreiser or Stein, confirms the lasting cultural significance of the idea of personality as a power measured by its effects on others. McBride’s prediction that Van Vechten’s portraits of Dreiser and Stein would replace their subjects is in fact strangely resonant with the authors’ understanding of the modern self as constituted by, not in control of, its own effects on the world.

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<sup>76</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, “Personality and the Buddha,” in *Selected Non-Fictions*, ed. Eliot Weinberger (New York: Viking, 1999), 350. In 1917, Rabindranath Tagore published *Personality*, a volume of lectures delivered in America (complete with photographs of Tagore on site in California and Colorado, being a personality); in the titular lecture, Tagore asserted the importance of being one with the “Infinite Personality.”

<sup>77</sup> Qtd. in F. O. Matthiessen, *Theodore Dreiser* (New York: William Sloane Associates, Inc., 1951), 239.

## CHAPTER FOUR:

## DOUBLE TAKE, DOUBLE JIVE: ANALOGS OF PASSING IN WEST AND HUGHES

*A voice is personality. It can be as big as a circus and as common as dirt.*

—Willa Cather<sup>1</sup>

## 1. Beyond “litrachoor”? West and Hughes in the 1930s

Between 1932 and 1933 Langston Hughes and Nathanael West both hired Maxim Lieber, a rising New York City literary agent who in the next decade would come to represent the leading leftist writers in America, including Theodore Dreiser. Each writer contracted Lieber for help publishing short stories and novels; Hughes was beginning *The Ways of White Folks*, and West was well into *A Cool Million*. Lieber did his best to find publishers for their fiction (with more success for Hughes than for West), but he saw greater promise in the Hollywood studios, where so many East Coast authors had been finding work in recent years. In 1934, Lieber showed Hughes’s story “Rejuvenation Through Joy” to Paramount Pictures and West’s novel *A Cool Million* to Columbia Pictures. Hughes’s story, a satire of the 1920s cult of primitivism, garnered no interest except as material for a “negro musical” conceived as “either a fantasy or a farce.”<sup>2</sup> Lieber sold Columbia the film rights to West’s novel, a brutal satire of the American myth of success, but the studio could imagine only two possible directions for production: a slapstick burlesque or a musical comedy.<sup>3</sup> The project never moved forward.

<sup>1</sup> Willa Cather, *The Song of the Lark*, ed. Janet Sharistianian (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 301.

<sup>2</sup> Unpublished letter from Ivan Kahn to Langston Hughes, 10 October 1935, in the Papers of Langston Hughes, Box 95, Folder 1775, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

<sup>3</sup> Jay Martin, *Nathanael West: The Art of His Life* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1970), 245. Years later, in 1940, West passed off a more appealing screenplay ostensibly based on *A Cool Million* to Columbia Pictures; West told the co-writer, Boris Ingster, that “no one would read the book to check” whether the story they had written bore any relation to his 1934 novel. The studio bought it for \$10,000 but soon

These experiences of the movie industry were disappointing but not altogether discouraging. West had already worked as a screenwriter in 1933 and would do so again from 1936 until his death in 1940, during which time he would complete his masterful Hollywood novel, *The Day of the Locust*. Hughes would gain entry to the studio system in the late 1930s with various ideas for a comedy starring Paul Robeson, but talks stopped just short of a deal. Despite both writers' eagerness to make a living in Hollywood, their apprenticeships in the New York literary world had not equipped them well to do so. They had started their careers in the modernist system of artistic patronage (in particular, the "small" publishing ventures subsidized by high-minded patrons) in which cachet, rather than money, was the primary measure of success. West in particular had been a fervent proponent of the value of little magazines in American letters. In 1931, West wrote a letter to the editor of the *New York World-Telegram* in response to a recent article attacking *Contempo* (to which both he and Hughes both had contributed) and other "panhandling magazines" for not paying their writers; West defended the magazine's idealism, claiming that only the unpaid writer and "litrachoor"—and not the allegedly pecuniary sponsors—"get anything out of it." In 1932, West joined William Carlos Williams in reviving *Contact*, a quarterly magazine that in addition to publishing daring new writers would also include the somewhat nostalgic feature of a bibliography of little magazines in America.

Going west to Hollywood—a kind of manifest destiny for West, who claimed to have changed his last name from Weinstein to West in response to a friend's oracular pronouncement, "Go west, young man"—was for many "serious" writers of the period an unprecedented opportunity to make money, but the disillusionment many of those same writers experienced

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abandoned the project. *Novels and Other Writings*, ed. Sacvan Bercovitch (New York: Library of America, 1997), 818.

once there has been the focus of censorious narratives of selling out. The problem for writers such as F. Scott Fitzgerald and William Faulkner was not simply that their literary talents were being degraded. Recent scholarship has done much to debunk the myth of Hollywood as the “destroyer of writers,” a “malevolent entity” or “vampire” that fed on the brains of artists.<sup>4</sup> Richard Fine argues that the usual charges of “literary prostitution and studio mistreatment” or the “inability” of writers to “accommodate a new form” do not explain the pervasive unhappiness of these writers (v). Instead, these writers confronted in 1930s Hollywood a new “institutional structure,” one that operated on a different model of professional authorship than the one defining the literary marketplace of New York in the prosperous 1920s (Fine v). At stake was the crucial matter of authorial autonomy, which the anti-establishment ethos of high modernism had sanctified, and which the proliferation of little magazines and other independent publishing venues had enabled. “Authors get a tough break out here,” says a screenwriter character in a Fitzgerald short story.<sup>5</sup> “They don’t want authors. They want writers—like me” (149).

For Hughes and West, moving into a new system of cultural production was an occasion to reflect on the period in which they had chosen their mediums and fashioned themselves as artists: the 1920s. Although they spent their early years in different cultural scenes, with Hughes rising to prominence in Harlem and West among expatriates in Paris and Jewish intellectuals in New York, they took similarly critical attitudes toward the self-deluding pieties of their artistic generations as those crumbling principles now stood in stark relief against the market forces of

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<sup>4</sup> Richard Fine, *West of Eden: Writers in Hollywood 1928–1940* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993), iv–v. Tom Cerasulo, *Authors Out Here: Fitzgerald, West, Parker, and Schulberg in Hollywood* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2010), 1. See also Ian Hamilton, *Writers in Hollywood, 1915–1951* (London: Heinemann, 1990).

<sup>5</sup> F. Scott Fitzgerald, “Mightier Than the Sword,” *The Pat Hobby Stories*, ed. Arnold Gingrich (New York: Scribner, 1962), 149.

the entertainment business. Particularly untenable was the modernist prizing of “authentic culture” and the models of authorship it entailed: the objective, ironic male author, always in control of his means—Stephen Daedalus’s well-pared fingernails come to mind, as does T. S. Eliot’s shred of platinum. These images of heroic detachment belie the modernist artist’s fear, as Andreas Huyssen has influentially described it, of “being devoured by mass culture through cooption, commodification, and the ‘wrong’ kind of success.”<sup>6</sup> Hollywood was perceived as a dream factory where writers, according to an industry *bon mot* related by the anthropologist Hortense Powdermaker, “do not have works, but are workers.”<sup>7</sup> And yet when in the 1930s West and Hughes looked back at the 1920s, they saw pervasive inauthenticity—indeed, all-out fakery—in the avowedly modernist artistic scenes of Paris and New York. That is not to say simply that the boundary between art and mass culture was unclear (it obviously was) but that within circumscribed groups there was a tendency toward performative duplicity.

In their fictional retrospective accounts of the 1920s, West and Hughes both targeted the figure of the charismatic impostor. Around the same time as Hughes was writing “Rejuvenation Through Joy,” a short story about a messianic charlatan who brings the “primitive” healing power of jazz to a wealthy New York audience, West was writing “The Impostor,” a short story about an eccentric man with no technical ability who passes as a talented sculptor among the Parisian art crowd. Both stories feature impostors who dupe elite groups obsessed with originality. Both stories end with twists: the upscale spiritual colony collapses in a violent incident and its leader is revealed to be black; the sculptor takes his antics too far and is revealed to be clinically insane. Beyond these formal correspondences, however, their shared thematic concern

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<sup>6</sup> Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 53.

<sup>7</sup> Hortense Powdermaker, *Hollywood the Dream Factory: An Anthropologist Look at the Movie-Makers* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1951), 150.

with fakery places them at the end of a history of literary thinking about personality that turns from wonder to cynicism. The fantasy of self-invention could be put to ends other than the private personal fulfillment promoted by advice literature; it could also produce the spectacular, mercenary fakery typical of two powerful cultural figures: the movie actor and the cult leader.

By the 1930s, turn-of-century pragmatist psychological theories of the “social self” and the role-taking we constantly engage in had percolated into popular culture, strengthened in the 1920s and 30s by the explosion of Hollywood fan magazines and other celebrity publications featuring a plethora of images of allegedly attainable glamour. In this chapter, I examine how West and Hughes drew on popular entertainment, particularly the newly voguish figures of the movie actor and the cult leader, in order to explore and reframe the deceptive power of modern personality. I argue that by creating morally uncomfortable and aesthetically jarring analogies between various modes of pretending, these writers advanced ideas of blank personal magnetism toward darkly comic and socially incisive ends. West extended “The Impostor,” his farcical sketch of the Parisian expatriate scene and its fads, into *The Day of the Locust*, a study of professional acting within a broader social world where seductive emptiness itself can be voluntarily cultivated and cynically deployed. In his short story “Rejuvenation Through Joy,” Hughes transformed a readymade contemporary historical farce, that of a charismatic quack bringing yoga to the masses, into a searching examination of racial passing. By examining analogies and typologies of fakery in their work, I argue that West and Hughes conceived of imposture not only as a historical phenomenon rife with comic possibilities, but also as a critical posture toward categories of identity and authenticity that had been reinforced by the unwittingly “personal” professional literary culture of 1920s, when some of the greatest proponents of impersonality were regarded by the public as figures of personality in its most refined form.



To be sure, the impostor had been a basic American icon since the colonial period and became a common literary type with Charles Brockden Brown's *Arthur Mervyn* (1799) and Herman Melville's *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* (1857). Although much has been written on the figure of the conscious dissembler in American culture, Lionel Trilling in *Sincerity and Authenticity* remarks that the person who "systematically misrepresents himself" to exploit "the good faith of another" has become "marginal, even alien, to the modern imagination of the moral life."<sup>8</sup> Instead, the deception that "we best understand and most willingly give our attention to is that which a person works upon himself" (16). While Trilling may be right that overt villainy (such as Iago's) tests our own faith as readers, the premise of this chapter is that the "deceptions" practiced by twentieth-century fakes draw us in by confusing the question of who is deceiving whom. West's and Hughes's repurposing of the nineteenth-century figure of the con man redirects our attention from the deceptions themselves to the cultural capital afforded to the most effective affecters.

By the 1930s, when West and Hughes wrote the satires studied here, the turn-of-century fascination with personality as unique, interesting individuality was beginning to give way to suspicion of personality as the object of misdirected worship. "When morals cease to be a matter of tradition and orthodoxy," T. S. Eliot pronounced in a 1933 lecture, "then personality becomes a thing of alarming importance," a sentiment echoed (in less Christian terms) by countless cultural critics fretting over the rise of celebrity.<sup>9</sup> Adding to this cultural anxiety around what Eliot called the "aggrandisement" of individual personality was the sense that contemporary idols

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<sup>8</sup> Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972), 16. There is a large body of scholarship on the figure of the impostor; two notable volumes are: Susan Kuhlmann, *Knave, Fool, Genius: The Confidence Man as He Appears in Nineteenth-Century American Fiction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1973). Gary Lindberg, *The Confidence-Man in American Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982).

<sup>9</sup> T. S. Eliot, *After Strange Gods: A Primer of Modern Heresy* (New York: Faber and Faber, 1934), 54.

were false—not really who they seemed to be, perhaps not even anyone at all. Indeed, the growing association between personality and mass deception in a mediated society would produce the phrase “cult of personality,” first used in the late nineteenth century and applied in the twentieth to authoritarian leaders and movie stars alike.

As we will see in West’s and Hughes’s fiction, personality is the both the instrument of deception and its exculpation. If personality is an impersonal possession, who is to blame for its effects? The cultism depicted in *The Day of the Locust* and “Rejuvenation Through Joy” offers no easy answer, for although the asymmetrical relations we have seen between performers and their audiences in earlier fiction persist in these texts, West’s and Hughes’s fictional audiences respond to this asymmetry with disproportionate desire and violence. In the final scene of *The Day of the Locust*, the lower-middle-class crowd gathering outside Kahn’s Persian Palace to await the arrival of the movie stars is about to turn “demoniac,” for “some little gesture” from their heroes and heroines, “either too pleasing or too offensive,” would set off the “savage and bitter” masses (176, 177). In the final scene of Hughes’s “Rejuvenation,” when the competition among upper-class ladies at the Colony of Joy for the attentions of their Dear Leader is brought to a crisis by an unrelated gunshot, one of the women grabs the gun and points it at the messiah: “How right to shoot the one you love!” she cried. ‘How primitive, how just!’” (97).

Haunting West’s grotesque and Hughes’s farce is the problem of powerlessness that moved Dreiser to his sentimental determinism—which, in Leslie Fiedler’s estimation, amounted to a sob of “Nobody’s fault! Nobody’s fault!”<sup>10</sup> In Dreiser, as in Henry James, personality is a commodity and spectators are speculators. Dreiser’s Drouet, taken with Carrie’s pathos on stage, decides that he “would marry her, by George! She was worth it” (134). Likewise, James’s Matthias Pardon says of Verena Tarrant after hearing her speak, “There’s money for some one

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<sup>10</sup> Leslie Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (New York: Dalkey Archive Press, 1966).

in that girl!” (87). The transactional structure of personality is laid bare, but the characters who invest (libidinally and sometimes financially) in others tend to suffer disappointment with heroic endurance or passive resignation: when Verena absconds with Basil, the devastated Olive Chancellor takes the stage in her stead; when Carrie absconds with Hurstwood, Drouet more or less disappears. In West and Hughes, however, the fans and patrons feel *cheated* (indeed, West’s tentative title was *The Cheated*). What angers these spectators is not the fact that their idols are false (they already knew that) but the discovery that those patently false idols do not maintain the absolute blankness on which spectatorial fantasies depend: the movie star’s “little gesture” says too much. This feeling of being cheated is, in a sense, a commentary on modernism itself: at once an affirmation of modernist artifice and hostility toward the illusion of modernist autonomy.

## 2. “A whole set of personalities”: West’s Generational Stacking

In the mid-1930s, just after publishing *A Cool Million*, Nathanael West planned to write a novel consisting of a series of “double-takes”: people would do exactly the opposite of what their intentions dictated, prompting others to look twice at their behavior. He soon expanded this idea into the more ambitious, cynical treatment of acting that he would undertake in *The Day of the Locust*. Instead of discarding the burlesque premise altogether, West in fact dignified the comic device of the double-take by transforming its premise—things are not what they initially seem—into the central perceptual and affective problem of the novel. Toward the beginning of the book, the main character and narratorial stand-in Tod Hackett spots “what he supposed was a pile of soiled laundry” on the floor of a hotel hallway.<sup>11</sup> When it moves, Tod lights a match, for a moment “thinking it might be a dog wrapped in a blanket,” and then sees that it is “a tiny man,”

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<sup>11</sup> Nathanael West, *The Day of the Locust*, in *Novels and Other Writings*, ed. Sacvan Bercovitch (New York: Library of America, 1997), 245.

a “dwarf rolled up in a woman’s flannel bathrobe (245). Unfazed, Tod tells him he “oughtn’t to sleep there” (245). The scene involves a double-take, with the detail of the lighting of the match as the dramatic means of seeing reality, but what should be a surprising discovery (a pile of textiles is actually a person!) elicits nothing like surprise, only prudent advice. This episode provides the perceptual structure and emotional tone for countless revelations in the novel: Things are not what they seem. Who cares?

By employing the well-established theatrical convention of the double-take but eliminating the element of surprise, West placed *The Day of the Locust* in (though somewhat askew to) popular traditions centered on situational and physical comedy. Most directly, he borrowed from vaudeville, a form of stage entertainment that he had enjoyed all of his life and that had come to interest his peers so much that in 1926 Edmund Wilson named the current generation of writers “The All-Star Literary Vaudeville.” In the 1920s, West and his friend Robert M. Coates often attended burlesque revues, Harlem nightclubs, and the shows of Jimmy Durante (Martin 237). According to West’s biographer Jay Martin, West “frequently spoke of burlesque comedy as classical in form” and of “the connection between burlesque and Greek comedy,” tracing the standard routines to Aristophanes’ *The Birds* and other plays (238). In *The Day of the Locust*, the representative of this kind of comedy is the fading vaudevillian Harry Greener, though other characters put on similarly routinized acts. But at the same time as West nodded to the popular theater, he also portrayed it as a dying tradition of exaggerated acting—indeed, Harry dies halfway through the novel—and satirized the new cinematic conventions that took its place (64). In *Miss Lonelyhearts*, West had introduced “the dead pan,” a blank facial expression “used much by moving-picture comedians” (and perfected in the novel by the newspaper boss Shrike), as a way of ridiculing the emotional impassivity characteristic of the modern age of print and image (64). In *The Day of the Locust*, such ironic detachment seems to be not just a stylized manner (the

deadpan is a “trick”) but the only possible response to a world even more hyperbolically mediated, a world based entirely on simulacrum in which a pile of laundry coming to life inspires not a moment’s surprise (64).

The juxtaposition of these two phases of popular entertainment—overwrought staginess, aloof blankness—provides an historical context and progression for what seems to be an inescapable condition in *The Day of the Locust*: everyone is an actor, everyone is pretending to be someone else. In order to explain West’s cynical yet whimsical depiction of the falsity of American life, critics have characterized his work as a response to mass culture of the 1930s. Jonathan Veitch has traced the influence of surrealism and Dadaism and their techniques of estrangement on West’s exploration of the structures of mediation that constitute the modern subject’s sphere of experience.<sup>12</sup> Rita Barnard has argued that with the rise of what she polemically calls “the culture of abundance” during the Great Depression, West developed a theoretically sophisticated, proto-postmodern alternative to the agitational literary realism practiced by many of his American contemporaries; his ironic plagiarisms of consumerism made him one of its keenest critics.<sup>13</sup> But in their emphasis on West’s difference from his documentary-focused peers, these accounts of West’s career pass over a transitional moment in the early 1930s when he wrote a number of short stories dealing with forms of pretending that he had witnessed in the preceding two decades. In “The Impostor,” the most finished and thematically coherent of the stories, West examined a phenomenon of fakery—expatriate artists feigning craziness in 1920s Paris—that anticipates the modes of being (and pretending to be) that emerge in the later novel. In the progression from “The Impostor,” the antic tale of a single man making a scene in a

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<sup>12</sup> Jonathan Veitch, *American Superrealism: Nathanael West and the Politics of Representation in the 1930s* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997).

<sup>13</sup> Rita Barnard, *The Great Depression and the Culture of Abundance: Kenneth Fearing, Nathanael West, and Mass Culture in the 1930s* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

pretentious scene, to *The Day of the Locust*, a broader examination of acting as a profession and an everyday practice, West traced an attitudinal shift away from precious incredulity at falsity and toward a jaded suspension of disbelief. As we will see, a generational shift was also delineated by Hughes in his light-hearted depictions of racial passing, a counterpoint to graver stories of color crossing written in the 1910s and 20s. For both writers, cultural anxiety about identity was made especially ridiculous by the uncertainty of economic and social life during the Great Depression, and improvising a workable personality seemed to be the only sensible option.

The modes of being in these two works by West range from ironic to authentic imposture. Ironic imposture is knowingly pretending to be something that you are not and that you and others know you are not. In “The Impostor,” the narrator adopts the costume and the manners of a Wall Street conservative and “passes” as such in the Parisian artist scene, where everyone is competing to be original. In *The Day of the Locust*, self-conscious acting is less motivated; the would-be starlet Faye Greener’s gestures are “completely meaningless” (282). Authentic imposture can be defined in two ways: pretending to be what you really are, or really being what you are pretending to be. The distinction depends largely on perspective. The first-person narrator in “The Impostor” thinks that his acquaintance Beano Walsh, a working-class kid who is playing the part of a genius sculptor in Paris, is faking his craziness, but when Beano ends up in an asylum, the narrator doubts his ability to judge the extent of Beano’s imposture. Was he sane and just taking a gimmick too far? Or was he actually insane and passing as stylishly crazy? The narrator’s investment in Beano being a self-controlled actor is clear, but the story mocks this desire to classify and normalize what may be the involuntary expression of a true psychological nature. In the Hollywood of *The Day of the Locust*, where everyone is an actor, many of the characters play themselves, imitate what they actually are. The cowboy Earle Shoop, for instance, occasionally appears in westerns; off screen, he dresses the part and says things like “Lo thar.” He

is already always in character; there is no telling whether he has assumed a permanent role or just *is* the thing he seems to be.

West's reading attested to his interest in imposture of various kinds. He owned a wide range of books involving fakery: Arthur Machen's *The Three Impostors* (1895), a horror novel featuring a scientist and aspiring writer who have taken on the mantle of amateur sleuths and encounter eccentrics telling outlandish tales of imposture that serve as clues toward the resolution of a conspiracy involving a secret pagan society; Max Beerbohm's *The Happy Hypocrite: A Fairy Tale for Tired Men* (1897), the story of a man who wears a mask in order to deceive a beautiful woman into marrying him, and whose face ultimately assumes the shape of the mask (1896); and André Gide's *The Counterfeiters* (1925), a multilayered novel about originals and copies and what differentiates them—in the plot about fake gold coins, in the interpersonal exchanges between the mostly gay or bisexual characters, and in the *mise-en-abîme* story of one character to write a novel of the same name as the book itself. West also owned Ezra Pound's *Personae* (1909), a collection of poems; Beerbohm's *Seven Men* (1919), a collection of biographical sketches of six fictional characters (the author is the seventh man, with whom the others interact); Remy de Gourmont's *The Book of Masks* (1896–1898, translated 1921), a collection of essays on the leading writers of his day and a pioneering study of symbolist aesthetics.<sup>14</sup> West himself did research in Paris for a book of short biographies of painters and thought about doing one of writers as well; he thus imagined the earliest form of *The Day of the Locust* by imagining the crisis each artist faced in his life (Martin 107).

West was himself an impostor. He dropped out of high school and gained admission to Tufts College only by altering his high-school transcript; he then failed out of Tufts and got in to

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<sup>14</sup> All titles taken from “List of books owned by Nathanael West,” in the Jay Martin Collection, Ephemera, Folder 26, Jay Martin Collection, Huntington Library Manuscripts Department.

Brown University by submitting the transcript of a fellow Tufts student with the same name. During his college years, Martin writes, “he would be an outsider exactly to the extent that he could imitate the absurd insider” (48). While at Brown, West created an image evocative of the artistic life that he anticipated leading. He called himself Nathanael von Wallenstein Weinstein (adding his mother’s maiden name preceded by the nobiliary “von,” and thereby revealing his self-perception—akin to Hughes’s—as a fallen aristocrat let down by the republic) and wore almost exclusively Brooks Brothers suits. Despite shirking his coursework, he read deeply in the Greek and Roman classics, religious literature, the French symbolists, Russian realists, and American and British modernists. And despite his ambition to be a writer, he was critical of those who took literature too seriously; he wrote literary hoaxes and published one, “Euripides—A Playwright,” in the college literary magazine. In 1926, shortly before he was to leave for Paris, he changed his name legally to Nathanael West.

West’s efforts to cultivate an image of himself as an artist according to the fads of the day, but always with an ironic distance from them, show his sensitivity to the difference between being an artist and making art. It is perhaps facile to say (as Veitch does about “The Impostor”) that West expressed his insecurity as a beginning writer through his portrayal of struggling artists, but his characters’ artistic ambitions and compromises are telling: the narrator of “The Impostor” is a writer who doesn’t write while in Paris; Miss Lonelyhearts wants to be a newspaper reporter but settles for a job as an advice columnist; Tod Hackett is a Yale-trained painter (an analog, as we will see, to Hughes’s literary “Yale man”) who merely fantasizes about his masterpiece, “The Burning of Los Angeles,” while working as a (hack) set and costume designer in Hollywood. Lemuel Pitkin of *A Cool Million* does not have a steady occupation, but the brothel owner Wu Fong stands in as a mock artist figure, curating a diversity of employees and designing their rooms in the style of their native countries (156).



West's frequent use of artists in his fiction would seem to evoke earlier modernist representations of the artist as hero—Joyce's Stephen Daedalus, Hemingway's Jake Barnes. And yet, as Josephine Herbst asserted in a 1961 critical evaluation of her friend, West never had a strong allegiance to the "earlier group" of modernists. His "sense of detachment," Herbst wrote, "was native to him," merely "re-enforced by the temporal situations in which he found his place."<sup>15</sup> He demonstrated that distance in his first book, *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*, where he created what Martin calls satirical "elephantine close-ups" of the "archetypal figures" through which his artistic contemporaries "were conducting the search for the self" (129). However, one of these figures bears a certain resemblance to the numerous impostors that West would portray in his later fiction: this is the hero envisioned (by Yeats and Pound in particular) as a "streaming sequence of selves" whose identity is at any moment defined by the role he chooses to play, the mask he chooses to assume (Martin 129). West divested this hero of the embarrassingly romantic power to choose his identity and replaced it with various kinds of helpless, hapless internal complexity. In "The Impostor," Beano exposes part of his disease to "hide the rest," an ominous indication of the extent of his affliction.<sup>16</sup> In *The Day of the Locust*, Tod, despite his "almost doltish" appearance, is "really a very complicated young man with a whole set of personalities, one inside the other like a nest of Chinese boxes," who once borrowed "a book of abnormal psychology" from the college library (242, 372). This sense of internal multiplicity would be echoed by Fitzgerald in *The Last Tycoon*, by a film producer's daughter: "Writers aren't people exactly. Or, if they're any good, they're a whole lot of people trying so hard to be one person."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Josephine Herbst, "Nathanael West," in *Nathanael West: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Jay Martin (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1971), 17.

<sup>16</sup> Nathanael West, "The Impostor," in *Novels and Other Writings*, ed. Sacvan Bercovitch (New York: Library of America, 1997), 424.

<sup>17</sup> F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Last Tycoon* (New York, Scribner's, 1969), 19.

### 3. Making the Grade/Faking the Grade in “The Impostor”

Sometime in the early 1930s, a few years after going to Paris for a few months (which he later inflated to two years), West wrote a short story about expatriate artists in Paris. The unnamed narrator, a writer looking back on his days in Montparnasse in the mid-1920s, recalls his acquaintance with the enigmatic Beano Walsh, who was “supposed to be a sculptor” (412). Discovered on a New York coal barge by art scouts and sent to Paris to study, Beano “looked and talked as though he might produce some wonderful stuff” (413). But despite being “cast perfectly” as a sculptor, he produces nothing. Desperate to satisfy his patron, he finally conceives of a project: to write a new anatomy book that will reflect the larger size of modern man and make modern sculpture more accurate. When Beano buys a six-foot-tall corpse from the morgue and shows it off around town, the police send him to jail, but he dodges the charge by acting (or so the narrator thinks) crazy. Beano ends up in an asylum, however, and when the narrator visits him and tries to “give the game away” by calling him a “fake,” the doctor explains that Beano is truly insane: “He’s an insane man who knows he’s insane,” and who has “simulated insanity in order to get by as a sane man” (424). On the train back to Paris, the narrator concludes that the doctor was crazy; but at the moment of telling the story, years later, he decides that the doctor “must have been right because Beano is still in an asylum” (424).

West first called the story “The Fake,” then “L’Affaire Beano,” and, finally, “The Impostor.” While all these titles point to Beano as the fraud, the narrator implicates himself in the general trend of fraudulence done in the service of art. He opens the story with two statements from the same “credo”: “In order to be an artist one has to live like one” and “Artists are all crazy” (411). He immediately dismisses these ideas, but clarifies that “in Paris, in those days, we didn’t know” that they were “nonsense.” And before he introduces Beano at all, he describes his own attempt to “be original” in Montparnasse. He arrived in what he calls the

“second stage” of the craziness fad: at first, the “layman’s definition” was broad enough to make being crazy easy, but soon fellow artists began to judge each other and apply increasingly tough standards: “Long hair and a rapt look wouldn’t get you to first base anymore. Even dirt, sandals, and ‘nightmindedness’ wasn’t enough” (411). By the time the narrator arrives, “all the more obvious roles had been dropped and the less obvious ones were being played by experts” (411). He decides that “instead of buying a strange outfit and trying to cultivate some new idiosyncrasies,” he will take the opposite approach: “‘Craziness’ through the exaggeration of normality was to be my method” (412). He dons the hard collars and pressed suits he had worn as a Wall Street runner and uses “precise, elaborate manners” (412). When he makes his debut at the *Dome*, he is “a big success right from the start”: “beer was spilled at many of the tables,” and he “was invited to all the parties” (412).

So Beano and the narrator are both impostors, but of very different kinds. Beano is an authentic impostor, someone who imitates what he really is: crazy. He seems to be perpetrating a con by accepting Hahn’s financial support and enjoying the social life and cultural cachet it affords him. However, he does not actively misrepresent himself; rather, he finds himself in a scene that thrives on artful deception and acts like himself, exploiting the assumptions of the outsiders who mistakenly equate eccentricity with artistic ability, as well as the illusions of the insiders who claim to know better. The narrator remembers glimpsing what he thought was the real Beano, when for a moment his friend “stepped out of character and talked sense” about his fear that he would not impress Hahn’s scouts. But Beano’s imposture is so comprehensive that he is always in character, even when he’s “out” of it; at any given moment, he is the thing he is pretending to be. Sincerity is irrelevant.

The narrator is, in contrast, an ironic impostor. He considers originality to be a matter of conscious self-presentation, rather than the expression of an individual nature. To make this

point, he engages in a blatant impersonation of someone he is not: a conservative, decorous fop. He treats his time in Paris as a standard phase for a young American artist: “In order to be recognized as artists, we were everything our enemies said we were” (411). He identifies those enemies as “tourists and the folks back home” and, by this stage of the expatriate scene, even his “fellow artists” (411). Despite his contempt for those who impose their definitions on his experience, he does little to disprove the popular credo; instead of writing, he spends most of his time drinking in the *Dome* and “trying to swindle [his] mother out of some money” until he finally moves into Beano’s studio, where he “only hug[s] the stove” (416, 414). He mocks his own desire to conform to the stereotype: “What was I to do? But how was I to make the grade” (411). And he succeeds in the “business of being an artist” not by making art or money but by perfecting the activities and attitudes associated with creativity.

Because the narrator understands the importance of appearances in this business, he feels an immediate affinity with Beano’s extreme persona: “We were attracted to each other immediately because we both realized that the other made him a perfect background. We were the absolute maximum in contrast” (412). However, when he moves into Beano’s studio—in an arrangement similar to the “bargain” between novelist and journalist in Henry James’s “The Death of the Lion”—the narrator’s perception of the sculptor changes, split between his lack of respect for Beano as an artist and his interest in the sculptor succeeding. As the narrator he watches Beano try to work—he draws a few lines, tears up the paper, starts again—and judges Beano’s inability to finish anything “pathetic” (414). When Beano finally comes up with his implausible idea for a new anatomy book, the narrator soon tires of it: “I had my own troubles” (416). It is only when Beano’s craziness becomes a public spectacle during the trial that the narrator reinvests himself in his friend’s success; he takes pleasure in Beano’s bad behavior in the courtroom, which the narrator assumes is put on (he even sees Beano “wink” at one point),

because he knows that it will create instant publicity for Hahn's whole endeavor and guarantee the renewal of the scholarship. As Tom Cerasulo remarks about this story, "the public may not know art, but they know what they like their artists to be like."<sup>18</sup>

The narrator has been duped, but not by Beano. He admits that accepting others' definitions skewed his (and his friends') perception: "Our mistake was that we took his madness for the same kind as our own" (417). And his contempt for those who dare to define the artist is undercut by his rigid expectation that Beano be faking it (411). The narrator's use of "we" to refer in general to artists in Montparnasse becomes exclusionary when he identifies what separates Beano from the mass of unnamed artists: passion.<sup>19</sup> "He had been shouting his 'idea' at us for weeks," the narrator recalls, "and we were sick of it. After all, it is only natural for a man's own poses to interest him more than they do his friends." The narrator's dismissal of Beano's excitement as an uninteresting "pose" is itself a pose: an allergy to sincerity, a suspicion of others' sincerity (and the possibility of there even being a real self capable of sincere expression) that, ironically, prompts a retreat into one's own self. He wants Beano to be the ultimate con man, not just a strange casualty of a fad, in part to affirm his own complementary act. But his fastidiously ironized desire to have a partner and counterpoint in fakery blinds him to the possibility of a different mode of being: being an impostor in a world of imposture, an impostor the extent of whose imposture cannot be determined with any certainty. Beano's project of representing the changing, or changed, size of man is an incisive commentary on this very problem of measuring of individual behavior against shifting norms.

"The Impostor" is a satirical treatment of the insularity and hollowness of 1920s Parisian bohemia, but it is also a nostalgic portrayal of a time when social distinctions—between artists

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<sup>18</sup> Cerasulo, *Authors Out Here*, 36.

<sup>19</sup> "Beano" means "a festive entertainment frequently ending in rowdyism" (*OED Online*).

and their enemies (everyone else), between “crazy” and crazy—allowed people to make meaningful judgments of each other. Caught between critical and commemorative impulses, it is a whimsical farce about the struggle to define an ephemeral scene—who belongs, what matters. As Veitch writes, the story “indicates West’s preoccupation with his own belatedness,” for “by 1926 European modernism had already become something to be copied out of books—a dead corpus” like the corpse Beano carts around (Veitch 24). In this reading, a detail such as West’s setting the story in 1925, when he had not arrived in Paris until the following year, takes on a kind of pathetic, diminutive significance.

But the story is smugly presentist even in its nostalgic longing: the narrator speaks from a position of knowledge, in contrast to the earnest uncertainty of his earlier self, who hid in a hotel room for a week wondering how he could “make the grade” (411). He now eschews that system of evaluation as the product of a modernist mania for originality, though he still imagines a foreclosed future in which Beano “would have made a great actor” (415). Veitch’s argument supports this fantasy: “Beano, as the title suggests, is not so much an artist as a con artist. In place of the six-foot man, he substitutes his own performance” (26). But the idea that Beano is a con artist is the narrator’s romanticization, evidence of his attachment to the contrived eccentricity that is “foisted” on artists by others. The narrator is a different kind of impostor: a satirist who is guilty of the same sentimentality as those he is satirizing, and a modernist whose anti-bourgeois pose has lost its edge.

#### 4. A Parataxis of Fakery in *The Day of the Locust*

In “The Impostor,” the narrator remembers the afternoon when Beano first explained his idea for the anatomy book. The sculptor “put so much passion into his exposition and used so many brilliant gestures that he almost convinced” his friend of the project’s worth. Aside from

noting Beano's ability as an actor, the narrator likens the art world to the film industry: "In those days, if not in these, art critics, like Hollywood directors, insisted on typecasting" (412). *The Day of the Locust* moves us from this bygone Parisian bohemia, which is itself permeated with American commercialism, to the dizzyingly artificial culture of Hollywood. In a novel in which acting is a profession, everyone is an actor, and yet no one is a professionally successful actor, performance is a self-conscious (and often ironically so) act. To be sure, in "The Impostor," all the artists perform their originality and everyone (or everyone at the *Dome*) is in on the joke. Acting itself is a means to other forms of recognition both inside and outside of the artistic world—the narrator stiffens up in order to get invited to the parties, Beano lets loose to get his scholarship renewed. But the narrator's own commentary on the passing trend of feigned craziness, as well as the censure of outsiders—the tourist who screams at the purchased corpse in the cab, the doctor who pronounces Beano insane—make all the imposture seem unthreatening, the antics of leisured expats.

"The Impostor" is the story of a singular case of fakery within a context of artful self-construction that is culturally sanctioned and more or less controlled; it is a pointed satire about the foibles of a particular scene at a particular moment. In turn, *The Day of the Locust* is a deadpan sequel to "The Impostor" in which any pretension to making art has all but disappeared and acting has expanded beyond a specific scene to an entire society. And as the scale of fakery increases, the stakes decrease. The short story mocks the idea that imposture in 1920s Paris was done in the service of art, but the novel recasts such mockery as itself a precious modernist pose. For all the narrator's self-criticism, his half-admiring, half-contemptuous characterization of Beano as an impostor conveys his sense of betrayal at the sculptor's decision to act not in the service of art or some other higher purpose, but as a way of protecting himself. But the final twist in the curious tale of Beano's career, as well as the narrator's incredulity at his friend's trick, seem

almost twee in comparison to the scale of deception and the corresponding emotional vacuity in *The Day of the Locust*. In the novel, there is no circumscription of performance to a scene in either sense of the word: a historically delimited cultural scene in which people of common interest meet or carry on particular activities, or the scene as a formally discrete unit of representation.

Thus, while Beano acts like a crazy person to conceal his actual craziness, in *The Day of the Locust* innumerable characters act like themselves acting like themselves. This added stage of imitation, signaled in part by the prevalence of simile in West's writing, represents a shift in his view of falsity as the condition of modern selfhood. For West, people and things cannot *be* someone or something in particular; they can only *be like* someone or something. The relationality of the self in James or Dreiser or Gertrude Stein is taken to a new extreme in West's novel, where contiguity and analogy are the ruling principles of identity. Faye is "as shiny as a new spoon," Harry's head is "almost all face, like a mask," Homer is "like a poorly made automaton" and neither happy nor unhappy, "just as a plant is neither" (281, 311, 267, 276). A simile (like a metaphor) typically *creates* a relation between things, but in *The Day of the Locust* similes function as observations of what is really there. There is even a penumbral Homeric quality to these descriptions. Unlike Homeric similes, which expand the frame of reference (the comparison of the Greek armies assembling to bees swarming and clustering in the springtime removes us from the war), West's similes contract the material world: Faye is like a spoon just before Homer prepares her lunch, and Homer is like a plant as he sits among plants on his patio. West's similes are more like Homeric epithets: they tell us something about the characters, but mostly they just *are*.

These relations of likeness produce a parataxis of fakery: no background against which a given act of fraud can stand out, only discrete episodes and unmotivated shifts in perspective; several chapters with Homer Simpson break up a story largely focalized through Tod Hackett.



The characters have no orientation, no ability to judge what is real; and their intellectual and affective flatness corresponds to the novel's unpunctuated, cinematic succession of scenes. Even Tod's perspective has a flattening effect. He sees people as "kinds" and "types" and as possible "models" for his two-dimensional painting. And history itself is flattened, synchronic: in the studio lot, history collapses in a single "great din," with the signs of different periods and places all "jumbled together in bobbing disorder" (241); in the city beyond the studios, architectural styles and materials coexist and compete and combine in similarly, diversely grotesque ways.

In this world of simulacrum, acting is both a fully institutionalized profession and a practice of everyday life, done with varying degrees of intention. The novel opens with a scene of Tod, a set and costume designer, watching outside movie extras marching to the set where their battle will take place, and it closes with crowds rioting at a movie premiere (at "Kahn's Persian Palace Theatre"—an Orientalized version of Oscar Hahn's cultural empire in "The Impostor," but also based on actual Hollywood movie theaters like Sid Grauman's Chinese theater). Even beyond the movie business, everyone—from the main characters to the anonymous masses—is a perpetrator or victim of fakery. There are the ubiquitous "masqueraders," who wear clothes that contradict who they are or what they do; and there are those who "had come to California to die" and, having discovered that "they have been cheated and betrayed" by their dream of "leisure" in the "land of sunshine and oranges," stare with hatred at their more comfortable neighbors (242, 380).

In this atmosphere of disappointment and resentment, the traditional sense of imposture—not just acting a part but pretending to be someone else in order to deceive others—takes on a particular charge. At times, imposture seems innocuous. When the screenwriter Claude Estee hosts a party at his house, which is "an exact reproduction" of a famous Mississippian mansion, he greets his guests "by doing the impersonation that went with the

Southern colonial architecture” (252).<sup>20</sup> He even involves his butler in his gimmickry, calling ““Here, you black rascal! A mint julep,”” and “a Chinese servant came running with a Scotch and soda” (252). The notion that things “go” together, that a certain architecture demands a certain personal manner, reduces everything to elements of *style* that can be substituted for one another. This reliance on analogy is particularly relevant to racial identity; here, the introduction of the Chinese servant as a “black rascal” makes his Chineseness significant only in relation to his interpellation as black. Although this is not an instance of racial passing, since everyone present is aware of the impersonation, the scene does bear a structural resemblance—as we will see—to Hughes’s representation of passing as farce.

This kind of provocative, ironic put-on brings into high relief several instances of authentic imposture. The most striking examples are the ethnic families in the orbit of Harry Greener, a washed-up vaudevillian who now peddles silver polish. Harry recalls his days on the stage with a Chinese family known as “The Flying Lings,” “four muscular Orientals” whose comic opening routines are crudely self-stereotyping: spinning plates, juggling fans, hanging by a pigtail (262). The Gingos, another family of four and friends of Harry’s, are “Eskimos who had been brought to Hollywood to make retakes for a picture about polar exploration” and decided to stay there, substituting Jewish delicatessen fare for their native diet (321).<sup>21</sup> While these families play themselves professionally, other characters embody roles with less motivation. Earle Shoop, Faye Greener’s sometimes boyfriend, is a cowboy with a “two-dimensional face” resembling a

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<sup>20</sup> In Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* (New York: Scribner, 1992), Gatsby’s house is described as a “factual imitation” of a French hotel, whereas the books in his library are “real” (9, 50). A guest’s praise of Gatsby’s “realism” marks his aspiration to verisimilitude in the matter of appearing truly, naturally rich (50).

<sup>21</sup> This is the second instance of an add-on to a family of four: the “bedraggled harlequin” Harry Greener and the Lings, and the sexually inviting French maid Marie and the four-person family that employs (and lusts after) her in the pornographic film screened at the beginning of the novel, *Le Predicament de Marie*.

“mechanical drawing” who works occasionally in “horse-operas” and otherwise hangs out in front of saddlery store (299, 298).<sup>22</sup> And every other screen actor in the book (the dwarf Abe Kusich, the ex-silent screen actor and now brother owner Audrey Jenning) is a bit player or out of work; they do not need to win speaking parts because they are already always in character—and, as such, never risk failing to adequately pass as someone else. (The only main character with no direct relationship to the movie business is Homer Simpson, a hotel bookkeeper on sabbatical from his job in Iowa.)

There thus seem to be two primary modes of being available in the novel: the ironic adoption of an obviously false identity (Claude Estee as Southern gentleman), or the effortless enactment of one’s “own” preexisting identity (all of the stock characters who act out what they are). Like passing in Hughes, both of these modes require a flat affect. However, a third option comes to the fore in a scene featuring the one performance in the novel by an actor acting in an official venue: the mode of “really” being what one is pretending to be; or, acting naturally. In this scene, Tod, Faye, and Homer watch a female impersonator, “a young man in a tight even gown of red silk,” sing a lullaby at a nightclub called the Cinderella Bar. This performer has the distinction of being called an “impersonator,” someone who is consciously pretending to be someone else—and who, therefore, *is* someone to begin with. Yet the term “female impersonator” has a fecund ambiguity in its attributive modifier: an impersonator of females, or an impersonator who is female. The performance dramatizes both possibilities.

In a double-reversal similar to the revelation of Beano’s “real” psychological state, the female impersonator turns out to be “really a woman”:

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<sup>22</sup> In his hollowness, Earle Shoop evokes Dreiser’s Clyde Griffiths. Dreiser disapproved of Josef von Sternberg’s film adaptation of *An American Tragedy* because he thought it had insensitively portrayed Clyde as a “drugstore cowboy” (*A Theodore Dreiser Encyclopedia*, 3).

He had a soft, throbbing voice and his gestures were matronly, tender, and aborted, a series of unconscious caresses. What he was doing was in no sense parody; it was too simple and too restrained. It wasn't even theatrical. This dark young man with his thin, hairless arms and soft, rounded shoulders who rocked an imaginary cradle as he crooned, was really a woman. When he had finished, there was a great deal of applause. The young man shook himself and became an actor again. He tripped on his train, as though he weren't used to it, lifted his skirts to show he was wearing Paris garters, then strode off swinging his shoulders. His imitation of a man was awkward and obscene. (342)

The impersonator's performance is aspirational and transformative; he is, like Cinderella, a fake who turns out to be real. Yet only in a queer reality: he is extremely convincing as a woman, but only *for* a man; his performance is natural and in no way "parody," we are told, yet before he leaves the stage he becomes an "actor again" who, in being "himself," is comically "awkward and obscene"—a momentary self-parody. Veitch astutely comments that, although "West's fiction offers a virtual catalogue of signs manipulated in service to every sort of sham," here "the signifier actually creates, even triumphs over, nature—in effect creating a *second* 'nature'" (117). The first nature, which makes the audience perceive the performer as a "young man," does not disappear; it is the disparity between the two natures that makes it possible for him to be one thing and "really" another.

The impersonator's act depends on the audience's belief in an authentic, grounding self behind or beneath the drag. That the act is stylistically a bit *passé* accentuates its sincerity. Female impersonation, which had been a mainstay of the vaudeville stage since 1900, began to wane in popularity in the 1930s with rising suspicion of homosexuals.<sup>23</sup> Faye makes an oblique reference to the passing of vaudeville and impersonation when she asks Homer if he thinks "fat women are going to be popular next year" (286). "I don't," she adds, "It's just publicity for Mae West," who began her stage career doing various impersonation acts, including male drag and

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<sup>23</sup> See Anthony Slide, *Great Pretenders: A History of Male and Female Impersonation in the Performing Arts* (Lombard, IL: Wallace-Homestead, 1986); F. Michael Moore, *Drag! Male and Female Impersonators on Stage, Screen and Television: An Illustrated World History* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1994).

blackface, and reputedly modeled her signature walk and her entire Diamond Lil character on female impersonators Julian Eltinge and Bert Savoy (286). (Indeed, Mae's vaudeville celebrity may have contributed to Nathanael's decision to assume the same last name.) In 1934, George Davis wrote in *Vanity Fair* that West was "the greatest female impersonator of all time"; when a famous psychic forecasted that a movie star would die and be revealed to have been a man, many speculated that it would be West.<sup>24</sup> In the novel, this flexibility is at once undermined and reinforced by Faye's comment on West's weight, an indirect suggestion that West's female body is a liability in her career as a female impersonator.

The lullaby that the impersonator sings expresses the pathos of being caught between identities and fits into a pattern of songs that transform, or reflect the already transformed state of, their singers.

*"Little man, you're crying,  
I know why you're blue,  
Someone took your kiddycar away;  
Better go to sleep now,  
Little man, you've had a busy day..."* (342)

In this popular 1934 song, the boy has been "playing soldiers" and lost his marbles, but his mother gently instructs him to "put away your gun," for "the war is over for tonight." The military metaphor refers back to the marching cavalry of the opening scene, but the figure of the "little man" with a "kiddycar" points directly to Adore Loomis, a "little boy" who "except for his Buster Brown collar," dresses "like a man, in long trousers, vest and jacket," and who in an earlier scene appears "dragging behind him a small sailboat on wheels" (334). (His surname further associates him with vehicles, as Loomis is an armored-car company that was founded on the West Coast in the early 1920s.) When his mother demands that he sing "Mama Doan Wan' No Peas" for Tod and Homer, he performs in such a way that he "seemed to know what the

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<sup>24</sup> Moore, *Drag*, 189.

words meant, or at least his body and his voice seemed to know” (336). Just as the impersonator’s body (his voice, his rocking torso) expresses his womanliness “unconsciously,” the boy becomes a frustrated adult man—“his buttocks writhed and his voice carried a top-heavy load of sexual pain”—as he sings about a woman neglecting her husband in favor of alcohol. And Adore’s sailboat points further back to Faye’s appearance as a woman-child: “Although she was seventeen, she was dressed like a child of twelve in a white cotton dress with a blue sailor collar” (281). In an attempt to quell her spasmodic father, she sings “Jeepers Creepers,” a sportively romantic jazz standard, and “trucked, jerking her buttocks and shaking her head from side to side,” a childish physical routine in comparison with Adore’s understated performance of sexual torment (283).

The cross-referentiality of the three songs reveals structural and affective affinities among these acts of imposture: a child-like young woman (or woman-like child; she, at seventeen, is on the cusp of adulthood) sings to her father a song addressed to a lover, a man-like child sings to strangers a song about his boozing wife, and a woman-like young man sings to an audience of drunk adults a lullaby for a crying child. But the confusion of roles is also a competition for roles. The impersonator serves as his own foil in the two stages of his act—a natural woman at one moment, an artificial one the next—but Faye, as the main female character, provides a more poignant contrast. For all her nubile charms, Faye’s femininity is impersonal: she is “a tall girl with wide, straight shoulders and long, swordlike legs” and her beauty is “structural like a tree’s, not a quality of her mind or heart” (250, 319). In an inarticulately critical evaluation of the performance, Faye identifies the impersonator as an inferior rival: “I hate fairies,” she tells Tod and Homer. “They’re dirty.” That “Faye,” her name, means “fairy” unsubtly sets up her nasty comment to unwittingly express self-loathing.

But Faye *is* the lesser woman, for even though the impersonator's performance is avowedly fake, an act in the tradition of stagey role-playing, it is the closest thing to an expression of a real self. The impersonator's "unconscious caresses" *mean* something, they reveal his female nature, whereas Faye's gestures have nothing to do with her interiority: they are "so completely meaningless, almost formal, that she seemed a dancer rather than an affected actress"; her "affectations" are "so completely artificial" that Tod finds them "charming"; her smile "seemed to promise all sorts of undefined intimacies, yet it was really as simple and automatic as the word thanks" (282, 292, 355). Even her fantasies are plagiarized; her "swell ideas" for a picture are borrowed from mass culture, recycled versions of Tarzan, South Sea adventures, the Cinderella theme.<sup>25</sup> The ironic use of hackneyed phrases such as "so completely" and "really" in descriptions of her behavior reduplicates the impersonality of her entire being. In this respect, Faye is like Dreiser's Clyde, whose verbal tic "Gee" becomes almost comically sinister when he says to his mother, as she stands before him in the death house, "But you musn't, Ma. Gee, you mustn't cry" (802).

Faye's fakery seems natural, since she has no self to be concealed or revealed. Praising West's depiction of Faye, William Carlos Williams wrote that West "makes of her a moving picture that is close to a work of genius, that cipher. It's what she represents and desires that distinguish her."<sup>26</sup> Although as a "cipher" Faye resembles Henry James's Verena Tarrant and Dreiser's Carrie, Williams's pun on "moving picture" (also a dynamic portrait) implies that Faye's particular blankness is that of the movie screen, rather than the platform or stage of her fictional precursors. To be sure, Faye is stagey at moments: Tod finds that "being with her was

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<sup>25</sup> When Gatsby tells Nick Carraway a false story of his life, Nick says "it was like skimming hastily through a dozen magazines" (71).

<sup>26</sup> William Carlos Williams, "The Day of the Locust," in *Nathanael West: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Jay Martin (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1971), 138.

like being backstage during an amateurish, ridiculous play,” and “the perspiring stagehands” and “wires that held up the tawdry summerhouse with its tangle of paper flowers” suggest that what is natural is not the result or affect of her performance but the means and effort(fulness) by which it is achieved (292). But despite the transparency of her act and her need for external recognition, she is formally self-contained. Her “completeness, her egglike self-sufficiency” makes Tod want to “crush” her (295). “Nothing could hurt her,” Tod later thinks, because she is “like a cork,” “a very pretty cork, gilt with a glittering fragment of mirror set in its top” (375). To Homer, too, she is a reflective surface, “as shiny as a new spoon” (281).

And Faye is nowhere more self-absorbed than in her bedroom, telling Tod her ideas for pictures, at every moment “manufacturing another dream to add to her already thick pack” (294). Faye’s fairytale plot, an incoherent, half-finished tale with Russian counts, dashing sailors, desert islands, deadly serpents, and narrow escapes, shows the extent of her immersion in intersecting mass-produced fantasies. But such daydreaming is also a rare instance of interiority, of self-communion. As Faye moves from one idea to the next, “her excitement narrowed and became deeper and its play internal” (295). Tod reacts with hostility to this inward intensity because it suggests a forbidding autonomy incongruous with her appearance in the movie still he keeps on his mirror: in the photo, “she was supposed to look inviting, but the invitation wasn’t to pleasure... Her invitation wasn’t to pleasure, but to struggle, hard and sharp, closer to murder than to love” (251). Tod’s fantasy of raping Faye is in part a fantasy of destroying her art, the autonomy of total artifice.<sup>27</sup> In contrast, Tod is gentle to Homer, the “automaton” of no artifice; Homer is so completely authentic that there is nothing there. At the same time, Faye finds

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<sup>27</sup> In *Love and Death in the American Novel*, Leslie Fiedler argues that Faye “cannot really be touched, for she is the dream dreamed by all of America, the dream of a love which is death; and in a strange sense she remains as virginal as death is virginal: the immaculate, degraded *anima* of a nation, her realest existence on the screen” (327).



Homer's "generosity" to be "irritating" because it is "bulky," a complementary image of sheer empty presence that angers rather than pacifies (339).

The scene in the Cinderella Bar continues what West had begun in "The Impostor": a dismissal of the very idea of the authentic self, but also a satire of the ironic posture that has made authenticity so dismissible. In both works, the measure of social and professional success is in how well one acts, which results in a competition to act naturally. Whether in the overt competition between the narrator and Beano or among Faye's suitors, or in the tacit rivalry between Faye and the impersonator, adopting a pose of naturalness—even of a kind of natural vacuity—is the best defense against actual sincerity and the vulnerability it entails. Hence the narrator's apathy about Beano's growing passion, or Faye's brusque rejection of the performer her friends have just applauded. Indeed, by pairing these characters—the narrator and Beano, Faye and the impersonator—West periodizes particular forms of fakery. Faye's contempt for the impersonator represents a generational shift away from passing oneself off as something one is expressly not and toward not being anything enough to have to pass.

And yet the apparent discrepancies between Faye's inner life and her outward behavior are what make her fascinating to others. At the opening of the story, she has done very little professional acting, just a bit part here and there (in a "two-reel farce," for example [250]). Although she talks a lot about becoming a movie star, the only remunerative work she does in the novel is prostitution (to pay for her father's funeral—a show of performative sexuality in exchange for the formalities and trappings and ceremonies of death). Even so, Faye and her father Harry consider themselves natural actors.<sup>28</sup> Their current situations call this into question,

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<sup>28</sup> The Greeners invite comparison to Henry James's two father-daughter stage couples: Colonel Gifford and his deaf-mute daughter in "Professor Fargo," and Selah and Verena Tarrant in *The Bostonians*. In all cases, public performance is presented as something not quite *chosen*: intellectual idealism and financial

but their self-mythology is unshakeable. One day Harry enters Homer Simpson's home. In the middle of his sales routine, Harry reflexively rehearses his entire vaudeville repertoire of gags and laughs, but he loses control of his performance. Faye rushes in to help, and while her father recovers from his fit, she offers Homer all the pertinent clichés. "The theatre is in our blood," she says of her actor father and dancer mother, who abandoned them when Faye was a baby. "I'm going to be a star some day," and so on. Homer is largely unresponsive, but the narrator mocks the confused conventionality of her speech: "'We Greeners are all crazy.' She made this last statement as though there were merit in being crazy"—a criticism of Faye's lazy reliance on cliché, but also an allusion to the sentimental values lambasted in "The Impostor" (286). Faye is between generations, the child of stage performers, versed in a few comic routines (such as her "Jeepers Creepers" song and dance), an extra on the big screen but intent on becoming a star.

Faye's in-betweenness, her not being quite one thing or another, manifests itself in all her performative behavior. She is a jumble of signs. In the scene of a cockfight at Homer's house, Faye tells the successful screenwriter Claude Estee about her career plans, and the other men listen in.

None of them really heard her. They were all too busy watching her smile, laugh, shiver, whisper, grow indignant, cross and uncross her legs, stick out her tongue, widen and narrow her eyes, toss her head so that her platinum hair splashed against the red plush of the chair back. The strange thing about her gestures and expressions was that they didn't really illustrate what she was saying. They were almost pure. It was as though her body recognized how foolish her words were and tried to excite her hearers into being uncritical. It worked that night; no one even thought of laughing at her. The only move they made was to narrow their circle about her. (357)

Fitzgerald's provisional definition of personality as a "series of successful gestures" finds parodic fulfillment here. Faye's actions are "pure" because they have no content or meaning, and effective for the same reason. Like Beano's "brilliant gestures," Faye's bodily movements excite

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necessity compel Gifford to take the stage, a belief in his and his daughter's inexplicable "gifts" inspire Tarrant to seek fame, and here heredity is explanation Faye gives for their middling success.

her observers, but whereas Beano made an impassioned and almost convincing “exposition” of his idea, Faye—like a vocation-less Verena Tarrant—has nothing to express or explain. She is performing her ability to perform, to make an arbitrary sequence of signs seem like an expression of who she is: a natural actor. Her dim recognition that her appeal consists of the *signs* of femininity, rather than individual qualities, enables her to be “almost pure” in another sense: she can at once display and disavow her sexuality, a sexuality around which all the male competition in the novel is organized. She is acting like a woman without risking being one.

As I have noted, the prevalence of simile in the novel makes it nearly impossible to *be* anything; everything is described in terms of what it is like. Tod finds it “hard to laugh” but “easy to sigh” at the “the need for beauty and romance” that produced this world of mere likeness (243). But the shrugging indifference that he and other characters show toward the procession of illusions does not escape Tod’s own scrutiny as itself an act, a faddish pose (243). There is a violent undercurrent to that indifference, inchoate in the stares of the bored masses. At Harry’s funeral, Tod sees in the spectators “an expression of vicious, acrid boredom that trembled on the edge of violence” (320–21); Tod later wonders if “he himself didn’t suffer from the ingrained, morbid apathy he liked to draw in others,” if he too is dissatisfied and impatient with spectatorship but helpless to do anything but follow the actors (336).

A sunny counterpoint to this blasé attitude is the enthusiastic devotion of Maybelle Loomis, Homer’s “eager and plump and very American” neighbor (332). She is dutifully training her young son Adore to be an actor and, like Faye, claims to know how the business really works: “It ain’t talent. It’s pull,” she says confidently. “What’s Shirley Temple got that he ain’t got?” (333). But for all her hard-headed, displaced ambition, she is a believer in lifestyle as the way to success. In small talk with Tod and Homer, she mentions her guru as if everyone had a guru.

Her next question surprised them both.

“Who do you follow?”

“What?” said Tod.

“I mean—in the Search for Health, along the Road of Life?”

They both gaped at her.

“I’m a raw-foodist myself,” she said. “Dr. Pierce is our leader. You must have seen his ads—‘Know-All Pierce-All.’”

“Oh, yes,” Tod said, “you’re vegetarians.”

She laughed at his ignorance.

“Far from it. We’re much stricter. Vegetarians eat cooked vegetables. We eat only raw ones. Death comes from eating dead things.”

Neither Tod nor Homer found anything to say. (334)

Maybelle’s assumptions mingle the mundane and the transcendent: she believes that the dietary regulation of the body provides metaphysical protection, that her guru is able to pierce both vegetables and illusions. There is, again, no background of judgment, no circumscription of a marginal fad against normative cultural practices; of course, her question “Who do you follow?” implies that there is no standard way of attaining “Health,” that everyone must make a choice. Eating raw food is just one option in an array of lifestyles advertised to fulfill the deepest spiritual needs. (Unlike Hughes’s “Colony of Joy,” however, raw-foodism does not include entertainment as a means to rejuvenation.) In the face of so many possible positions, the cultist’s defining dogmatism lapses into friendly curiosity: “Have you any children?” “Who do you follow?”

While cultism goes to a violent extreme in the novel’s final scene of the celebrity-obsessed mob, there is a surprising resemblance between the Parisian artist community of “The Impostor” and the various cults appearing in *The Day of the Locust*. When Tod tires of Faye’s rejection, he avoids her for several months and takes “his pad and pencils on a continuous hunt for other models,” a pursuit that recalls Beano’s search for the perfect corpse (337). Tod draws the worshippers at Hollywood churches, all of which combine religious aims with ridiculous forms of bodily control—lifting weights, abstaining from salt, “Brain-Breathing, the Secret of the Aztecs” (337). At one church, Tod watches a man deliver “a crazy jumble of dietary rules, economics and Biblical threats” (337). What interests him is the man’s “messianic rage and the emotional

response of his hearers,” who spring to their feet, “shaking their fists and shouting” (338). This congregation of unhappy people is a dark parody of the cartoonishly droll artists at the *Dome*, who spill their beer at the narrator’s normalcy and barely flinch at Beano’s corpse. Both scenes have a random character to them, but for very different reasons. The artistic crowd welcomes anyone who can “make the grade” of stylized originality. The cultists worship anyone who can create the illusion of a self, who can pass as a coherent being.

Soon after the novel came out in 1939, West’s publisher Bennett Cerf of Random House informed him that it was not selling. West suggested, in desperation, that the book might be given a lift if Cerf could convince *Look* or *Life* to do a photographic study of its actual background. He wrote:

It would be very easy to get photographs of the cultists, the bit players, extras, freaks, houses, etc., of this town. I would be glad to collaborate.... [It] would be very interesting—the different sects, hermits, prophets are easily photographed, the strange architecture, the old sets on a back lot, like the paintings by Dali, the extra girls, beautiful, hard-pressed, sleeping four in a tiny room and dreaming of stardom, brokendown vaudevillians and ancient comics in their special barrooms, where they work over old routines, the racial types, playing Eskimos one week and Hawaiians the next, etc. etc. (Martin 340)

West envisioned a kind of double exposure of the novel, a superimposition of its background on its fictional structure, with each documented type and scene corresponding to and lending naturalist veracity and verisimilitude to what might otherwise seem like hollow characters (Earle’s legs are “so straight” that his pants appear to be “empty”) and outlandish events (298). West used as the basis for his fiction figures whose absurd fraudulence made them readily appropriable for satirical use, and he demonstrated a flexible, humorous imagination of possible cross-media adaptations and uses of his dark vision.

##### 5. Personality and Panacea in “Rejuvenation Through Joy”

In December 1933, Langston Hughes wrote to Carl Van Vechten that he had sent twelve short stories to Knopf for consideration as a book and that he would soon finish several more. He described one unfinished story, “Rejuvenation Through Joy,” as concerning “a group of Park Avenue mystics restoring their souls with a Negro jazz band, bringing the primitive to their country colony.”<sup>29</sup> In the final version of the story, published in *The Ways of White Folks* in 1934, Eugene Lesche, the Westchester colony’s handsome and charismatic leader, prescribes “motion” as a panacea for the enervated modern soul and brings in a Harlem band to provide the “primitive” jazz and demonstrate the elemental bodily rhythms that will restore the colony’s white patrons to mental and physical health. The Dear New Leader, as he comes to be called, enjoys enormous popularity and inspires competition for his attention among his female clients. When the jealous women eventually turn to violence and the colony collapses, the newspapers, which have been recording the antics and excesses of the cult, “laugh about it for weeks.” One tabloid even “claim[s] to have discovered that the great Lesche was a Negro—passing for white!”<sup>30</sup>

We do not learn who or what Lesche “really” is. But through a brief narrative exposition of the events leading to the Colony of Joy’s founding, we learn that when Lesche first discusses the idea with his manager, Sol Blum, they consider what rival colonies might have over theirs. “Nothing,” Sol responds. “You got the personality. With me for a manager, a jazz band for background, and a little showmanship, it could be a riot” (80). Lesche thus takes his place among the blank, deracinated charmers populating American fiction since the late nineteenth century: Verena Tarrant, Carrie Meeber, Frank Cowperwood, and Faye Greener—and, of course Jay

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<sup>29</sup> Langston Hughes, *Remember Me to Harlem: The Letters of Langston Hughes and Carl Van Vechten, 1925–1964* (New York: Knopf, 2001), 114.

<sup>30</sup> Langston Hughes, “Rejuvenation Through Joy,” in *The Ways of White Folks* (New York: Vintage, 1990), 98.

Gatsby. In fact, Hughes's unplaceable narrator decides to tell the "truth" of Lesche's origins in order to dispel fantastic rumors, just as Nick Carraway shares Gatsby's origins "with the idea of exploding those first wild rumors about his antecedents" (76; 107). However, the biographical sketches, which follow similar formulas, are not particularly informative: poor Midwestern boy leaves home on an adventure that ends in another city, meets girl(s) and/or rich Jew, goes away to Europe, comes back with a plan to New York, makes a name as a mysterious entertainer of one kind or another. These stories are insufficient to explain the characters' power, except insofar as they cast the young men as hungry strivers willing to do anything and be anyone to get ahead. Although Lesche has no organic connection to the spiritualism he taps into, his blank adaptability is an updating of the mediumistic Verena, whose readiness "to please everyone who came near here" is here transformed into a Lesche's readiness to sell his personality: "to bring gaiety to a lot of people" is "his avowed intention—for those who could pay for it."<sup>31</sup>

Hughes's decision to place a charming charlatan at the center of the story is also a response to the seductions of the primitivist movement of the previous decade. Although "Rejuvenation Through Joy" has generally been neglected by readers of *The Ways of White Folks*, a few critics have seen it as a bitter satire of the primitivist fad of the Harlem Renaissance: that is, of artistic attempts to access (and sell) a way of being unbounded by the immurements of civilization.<sup>32</sup> In 1920s America, the "vogue of the Negro" was even more voguish than in a Europe captivated by Josephine Baker and *négrophilie*, and black art (as well as Harlem itself and what Zora Neale Hurston had labeled the Niggerati) came to serve as sources of curative

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<sup>31</sup> James, *The Bostonians*, 85; Hughes, *The Ways of White Folks*, 74.

<sup>32</sup> Susan Gubar elaborates on this white search for primal being: Many participants in the Harlem Renaissance "trained their attention on the neurotic motivations of whites and in particular on their dread of nonbeing, their need to turn to African Americans as if toward being itself so as to negate white nothingness with a something destined always to elude." See her *Racechanges: White Skin, Black Face in American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 96.

authentic experience for white tourists. David Chinitz remarks that in an atmosphere of postwar malaise, the African American “became a model of ‘natural’ human behavior to contrast with the falsified, constrained and impotent modes of the ‘civilized.’”<sup>33</sup>

As Chinitz has shown, Hughes’s own engagement with primitivism was complex. From the early 1920s to the mid-1930s, Hughes “struggled to disengage ideas long fused in primitivist discourse” and to “rescue elements of primitivism,” including African-American jazz, that he found meaningful (60–61). Indeed, “Rejuvenation Through Joy” has thus been understood as an example of Hughes’s ambivalent engagement with jazz as both an essential feature of primitivism and an art that could be salvaged from a movement that otherwise constrained black cultural production. According to Chinitz, although primitivism had passed out of fashion by the time Hughes wrote “Rejuvenation Through Joy,” Hughes nevertheless continued to believe that jazz provided access to “a realm of the human psyche that Western civilization ha[d] suppressed” and thus valued it as an art that, despite its dependence on white patronage and fandom in the 1920s, held a uniquely transformative power (69). Another critical strain has taken “Rejuvenation Through Joy” to be a critique of the cultish tendency of modernism more broadly. Sandra Govan argues that the story “mocks and pillories those advocates of modernism who valorized and elevated a ‘cult of primitivism,’ particularly as this socially constructed ‘primitivism’ distorted views of African-American life and culture.”<sup>34</sup>

Hughes’s wry description of the story Van Vechten suggests that both men had, in 1933, gained enough distance from the Harlem Renaissance to recognize primitivism’s absurdities: its

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<sup>33</sup> David Chinitz, “Rejuvenation through Joy: Langston Hughes, Primitivism, and Jazz,” *American Literary History* 9, no. 1 (1997): 61. See also Arnold Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes*, 2 vols. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986–88), 284–85.

<sup>34</sup> Sandra Y. Govan, “The Paradox of Modernism in *The Ways of White Folks*,” in John Edgar Tidwell and Cheryl R. Ragar, eds. *Montage of a Dream: The Art and Life of Langston Hughes* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2007), 156.



commercialization, its support and appropriation by whites. But the story itself complicates any simple account of primitivism by showing it to be part of a broader cultural fantasy of spiritual renewal through a refashioning of the body. “Primitive man never sits in chairs,” Lesche preaches to his rapt audience, rousing them to “sway” their hips (70). “Rejuvenation” is explicitly concerned with music and dance as a means of rejuvenation, but in the background of this story of cult worship is a fascination with the phenomenon of religious imposture. According to Philip Jenkins, during the mid-1920s the culture of “small religions” was “disgraced by a series of scandals involving more or less blatant confidence tricks and sexual misdeeds” that captured the nation’s attention.<sup>35</sup> Thus, even as “Rejuvenation” glances back toward the uses and misuses of blackness and the so-called primitive arts of jazz music and dance, it engages yet more directly with false representations of racial and cultural identity by spiritual authorities—self-help gurus, charismatics, quacks, charlatans—who achieved particular prominence in the period Hughes was writing the story. It was also during these years that Hughes set his sights on Hollywood, the site of fakery and new-age cultism West would document in the final chapters of *The Day of the Locust*.

Given the intersection of race and mysticism in the story, it seems that Hughes’s contemporary Jean (Eugene) Toomer would seem to be the figure to look to as the inspiration for (Eugene) Lesche, as Arnold Rampersad and Chinitz have done. To be sure, Lesche is undeniably based in part on Toomer, a light-skinned “racial chameleon” remarkable for his physical beauty and personal magnetism.<sup>36</sup> After the publication of *Cane* in 1923, Toomer, who had formerly taken pains to identify as black in spite of his ability to pass, distanced himself from the black community: he devoted himself to the Armenian mystic George I. Gurdjieff, married a white

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<sup>35</sup> Philip Jenkins, *Mystics and Messiahs: Cults and New Religions in American History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 129.

<sup>36</sup> David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue* (New York: Knopf, 1981), 66.

woman, and eventually, in Hughes's account, considered himself "no more colored than white" and, finally, decided, "after Paris and Gurdjieff, to be merely American."<sup>37</sup> For these critics, Toomer served as a straightforward model for Lesche, and the racial ambivalence he embodied and enacted as the entire concern of the story. However, as a figure of deliberate and defiant inscrutability, Toomer is more a symbolic distillation of Hughes's conflicted feelings about racial identification and affiliation than a singularly inspiring source for Lesche.

Rampersad identifies another historical figure, the religious charlatan Pierre Bernard, as a possible inspiration for Lesche, but mentions Bernard only in passing. However, the correspondences between Bernard's and Lesche's careers are extensive and striking: Bernard, whose yellow-press name—the Omnipotent Oom—had by the time of Hughes's writing "so thoroughly worked its way into American culture that it had become shorthand for any spiritual charlatan with a taste for the good life," was himself the charismatic leader of an upstate club that featured yoga lessons and jazz shows.<sup>38</sup> Bernard is from Iowa, Lesche goes to school in Indiana; Bernard accompanies a mentor to San Francisco, Lesche follows the circus to Los Angeles; both spend their youths working odd jobs and romancing women, until they move to the East Coast in order to start the serious business of fixing the bodies and souls of all who can pay, and eventually become the trusted spiritual advisors of high-society scions. But while Bernard's career provided Hughes with the outlines for Lesche's rise to fame, it was Bernard's outlandishly exotic persona—despite his unambiguously white appearance, Bernard successfully passed himself off as an Indian guru—that seems to have raised, for Hughes, certain questions about the construction of racial and cultural identity. Like West, Hughes would historicize falsity, treating acting as the condition of the self and ironic detachment as the presiding affect of the age. And just as West's reliance on

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<sup>37</sup> Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea* (New York: Thunder's Mouth, 1986), 242–43.

<sup>38</sup> Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes*, vol. 1, 284. Robert Love, *The Great Oom: The Improbable Birth of Yoga in America* (New York: Viking, 2010), 114.

simile saturates speech with likeness and hollows out the immediate, Hughes's use of analogy creates a similar parataxis: one identity is as good as another.

Especially in light of the parallels between Lesche and Bernard, "Rejuvenation Through Joy" represents a critical moment in Hughes's thinking about various senses of "passing," an issue that preoccupied him throughout the 1930s and 40s. Early in his career, the tenor of both Hughes's poetry and his public persona was one of gravitas; but following his turn to prose with the 1930 novel *Not Without Laughter*, he assumed a more jocular tone. In the years surrounding the publication of "Rejuvenation Through Joy," Hughes wrote several pieces that dealt with themes of passing. The story "Passing," which also appeared in *The Ways of White Folks*, his first story collection, consists of an apologetic, nervously humorous letter from a young man, who is passing for white, to his mother, whom he has recently (with his white girlfriend on his arm) snubbed on the street in Chicago; he now reminds her of the permission she has given him to cross the color line. A later story, "Who's Passing for Who?" (1941) further tweaks the social awkwardness of passing. A group of young black men explain to some confused white tourists what passing is, only to have those "white" people confess that they are in fact black, and then, once everyone is at ease, to make a second announcement: they are actually white.<sup>39</sup> Around the same time, Hughes wrote "Jokes on Our White Folks" (1942) for the *Chicago Defender*, an essay in which he muses on the recent phenomenon of light-skinned black people donating their blood to the Red Cross without mentioning their race. ("By now," he imagines, "white plasma and colored plasma must be hopelessly scrambled together, and it amuses me to wonder how the Red Cross will ever

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<sup>39</sup> Langston Hughes, "Who's Passing for Who?" in *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes: The Short Stories*, ed. Arnold Rampersad and Dolan Hubbard (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002), 163–66.

get it straightened out.”<sup>40</sup>) Hughes observes that whereas passing for employment, education, or “culture” (namely, the ability to attend events in racially segregated venues) “has long been in vogue,” only recently has he heard of “people passing just for fun, just to have a gay and harmless little joke on our white folks” (99).

Hughes’s writing on passing describes an arc that begins with a sensitive examination of the alienating effects that passing has on personal relationships and develops into increasingly humorous treatments of assuming a false identity in order to have fun at others’—often, strangers’—“expense,” as the duped narrator of “Who’s Passing for Who?” puts it.<sup>41</sup> (In the context of “Rejuvenation,” the “expense” becomes financial.) In the 1910s and 20s, the subject of passing had been treated with great seriousness by such authors as James Weldon Johnson, Nella Larsen, and Jessie Redmon Fauset. Their passing novels depicted the act of crossing the color line for the social or economic advantages afforded by whiteness as destructive, even deadly. As Susan Gubar observes, many characters become “‘tragic mulattos,’ suffering a psychological and social splitting that reduces them to self-destructive liminality.”<sup>42</sup> (It should be noted, however, that Fauset’s *Plum Bun* (1928) resists this tragic scenario.) But even in “Passing”—Hughes’s most serious treatment of the theme—the act of passing and its potentially tragic liminality are examined, while earnestly, in an outwardly humorous form. “It is to laugh!” the young man tells his mother about the racist comments his employer makes, suspiciously emphatic about his comfort with his assumed identity.<sup>43</sup> When Hughes’s agent Maxim Lieber read “Passing,” he

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<sup>40</sup> Hughes, “Jokes on Our White Folks,” December 12, 1942, in *Langston Hughes and the Chicago Defender: Essays on Race, Politics, and Culture, 1942–62*, ed. Christopher C. De Santis (University of Illinois Press, 1995), 98.

<sup>41</sup> Hughes, “Who’s Passing for Who?” 66.

<sup>42</sup> Gubar, *Racechanges: White Skin, Black Face in American Culture*, 104. On complicity versus capitulation/surrender, see Gayle Wald, *Crossing the Line: Racial Passing in Twentieth-Century U.S. Literature and Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000).

<sup>43</sup> Langston Hughes, “Passing,” in *The Ways of White Folks*, (New York: Vintage, 1990).

warned Hughes “that editors are frightfully squeamish and will not welcome such pieces” containing an “inter-racial situation.”<sup>44</sup>

By contrast, “Rejuvenation Through Joy” (which comes one story after “Passing” in *The Ways of White Folks*) is thoroughly comical, devoid of any sense of betrayal, and as such is both a reflection on the fraughtness of passing in Harlem Renaissance literature and an anticipation of a more ludic sense of passing as gamesmanship. To be sure, George Schuyler’s *Black No More* (1931) and William Faulkner’s *Light in August* (1932) are contemporaneous novels that involved passing without being about passing per se. But Hughes was unique in his interest in popular self-help culture and his choice of Bernard as a model for Lesche points to this expansion of the author’s conception of passing from a historically specific racial practice to broader notions of performance. Hughes used Bernard’s charlatanry as an opportunity to reframe the debates about identity and responsibility that were central to discourses about racial uplift, creating a less racially restricted definition of passing—namely, passing oneself *off*. “Rejuvenation” provides an acerbic commentary on 1920s primitivism and the particular appropriations and distortions it entailed, but it also opens the issue of passing to encompass spiritualism as a similarly problematic, though markedly more humorous, performance of authenticity.

## 6. Pierre Bernard’s Racial Contortionism

The final line of “Rejuvenation Through Joy” is powerfully resonant with respect to Bernard. The supposedly scandalous revelation that Lesche is “a Negro—passing for white!” might seem to be, in Chinitz’s words, “a fabrication, the caustic last dig from a tabloid sneering

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<sup>44</sup> Unpublished letter from Maxim Lieber to Langston Hughes, 20 October 1933, in the Langston Hughes Papers, Box 102, Folder 1925–1936, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

at high society and its foibles.”<sup>45</sup> But two features of the story suggest that we should take seriously the possibility not only that Lesche has been passing, but also that his racial ambiguity has been part of his appeal all along. First, the gossipy anonymity of the narrative voice contributes to a sense of imminent discovery or exposure: soon enough the scam will fail, and all will be revealed. When the colony attracts some bad press before its official opening, the narrator divulges that the “publicity men who’d started it all, demanded higher wages, so Sol fired them,” but “the thing went rolling of its own accord” (82). Yet there is a coy refusal to share information about the characters save the most spare biographical outlines; even when the narrator gives us the dirt on Lesche, the story is unsatisfying—a clichéd tale of an initially directionless young man who eventually makes it on his good looks and irresistible charms, plus a little help from his friends. This Gatsby-esque background does not explain Lesche’s power as a vaguely foreign guru, whose “very presence” is “nothing America has ever known” (89). But that is precisely the point: his history is a tale of adaptability, the capacity to pass as anything that would make him money. The broad sense of passing that obtains in this story, whether it is the traditional black-for-white kind alluded to at the end, or the Oom-inspired appropriation of racial and cultural attributes, is constantly underscored and mimicked in the story by the tremendous blankness of Lesche. Such blankness is the condition for passing.<sup>46</sup>

Pierre Bernard was born Perry Arnold Baker in Iowa in 1876, but he soon Frenchified his name and eventually became known in the press as the Omnipotent Oom. As a teenager in Nebraska he met Sylvais Hamati, an itinerant tutor of practical Hinduism who trained Bernard

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<sup>45</sup> Chinitz, “Rejuvenation through Joy: Langston Hughes, Primitivism, and Jazz,” 75.

<sup>46</sup> What Samira Kawash says of Johnson’s *Ex-Colored Man* is equally true of Lesche: he “cannot *be* black or white; his appearance as black or white is produced through the imitation of the blackness or whiteness of others,” or in Lesche’s case the performance of familiarity with “Negro jazz.” See her *Dislocating the Color Line: Identity, Hybridity, and Singularity in African-American Narrative* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 147.

in occult practices, including tantric yoga, and launched his career as the leader of various cults and colonies designed to cure the maladies of the rich and famous. After several years of experimenting with suggestive therapy and working as a personal guru to wealthy San Franciscans, Bernard moved to New York City to establish a spiritual group, but soon faced charges (later dropped) by a pair of young women who claimed that he had hypnotized and seduced them. By the 1920s, however, he had restored his reputation and raised enough money to start a religious colony in Westchester County. Life at the club included yoga lessons, baseball and tennis games, and performances by jazz bands and circuses; and the promise of spiritual and physical health attracted distinguished members such as Anne Vanderbilt and her mentally fragile daughters. Bernard appeared frequently in society columns of major newspapers in connection with sexual orgies, unlikely marriages, and the ever-scandalous practice of communal yoga. But to Bernard's benefit, public attention shifted away from his early exploitation of young women and general quackery and toward the eccentricity of the high-society patrons of his new, and extremely successful, venture.

To operate effectively, Bernard had to do two things at once: to claim racial or geographical authenticity, but also to cultivate a sophistication that marked him as civilized in a "white" or "Western" way. Bernard aggressively obscured his own origins, though at various points he said that he had been "born" in India, was "from" India, or had lived and studied there for some time; he thus grounded his claim to authenticity in mystical, ancient autochthony. That Bernard looked white seems not to have mattered, for he created an aura of otherness through controlled self-presentation: speech as elaborately embellished as his gowns and other ritual garments, a marvelously flexible body (fig. 11). In his days in San Francisco, he became so adept at self-hypnotism that he put himself in a death trance and allowed someone to sew his lip to his nose (among other feats with needles) in order to demonstrate the potential of suggestive therapy

for surgical medicine. His ability to contort himself—his body, his consciousness—literalized the notion of self-fashioning that became so central to his success as a guru. Bernard made himself into an object of what Judith Brown calls “primitive glamour,” which “draws from the crossing of attributes” and expresses “a fantasy of the self as the object of desire able to transcend historical and cultural time.”<sup>47</sup>



Figure 11. Pierre Bernard (Bernard Collection, Historical Society of Rockland County)

Hughes seems to have looked to Bernard as an inspiration for his satire for two reasons: first, that his scams were so brazen and outsize that he readily lent himself to farcical appropriation; and second, that he passed in an uncommon direction. Bernard represented the phenomenon that has been termed “reverse passing,” wherein white people passed for other races.<sup>48</sup> Whereas Toomer ended up repudiating a racial identity that he had embraced in his

<sup>47</sup> Judith Brown, *Glamour in Six Dimensions* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009), 126.

<sup>48</sup> Baz Dreisinger, *Near Black: White-to-Black Passing in American Culture* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2008), 2. Dreisinger’s exact term is the “reverse racial pass,” and she cites Philip Brian Harper’s definition: “any instance in which a person legally recognized as white effectively functions



personal life and addressed in his early writing, Bernard gradually arrogated to himself a coloredness (or at times simply a colorfulness) that was not his to begin with. He even left open what, exactly, he was passing as: ethnically Indian, ambiguously Oriental, or just a white master of an Indian tradition. His adoption of the name “Pierre Bernard” soon after meeting Hamati suggests an intention to be *some* kind of foreign, a construct that he grew more invested in as he discovered what such mystery could bring him: fame and women. The fact that federal agents sought to prosecute him in the seduction case under the Mann Act, a piece of legislation that was produced primarily in reaction to racial paranoia about white slavery, reinforced his assumed foreign identity and, in spite of the temporary damage to his reputation, dignified the premise of his enterprise.<sup>49</sup> The *San Francisco Chronicle* described a police raid on the “Mystic Temple of ‘Om,’ a young man who is entered on the police records as Pierre A. Bernard, a native of India,” and reported that “some of his girl pupils said Bernard represented himself as a ‘Swami’ from India”; one of the plaintiffs told the *Los Angeles Times* that he had called himself “a god” who had “condescended to put on the habit of a man” in order to “reveal true religion to the elect of America.”<sup>50</sup> The *Chronicle* soon exposed Bernard as a “faker” whose birthplace was “Chicago, instead of India,” but nonetheless recounted with interest his many “demonstrations of his mysterious power.”<sup>51</sup> At the same time, challenges to Bernard’s cultural patrimony did not thwart his career, but instead gave him opportunity to rebrand himself according to the racially and ethnically inflected religious fashions of the moment.

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as a non-white person in any quarter of the social arena” (Dreisinger 2–3). See also Laura Browder, *Slippery Characters: Ethnic Impersonators and American Identities* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

<sup>49</sup> Love, *The Great Oom: The Improbable Birth of Yoga in America*, 64.

<sup>50</sup> “Women Kept in His ‘Mystic Temple,’” *San Francisco Chronicle*, May 4, 1910; “‘Oom the Omnipotent’ Held in Big Bonds; Court Grills,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 8, 1910.

<sup>51</sup> “Wild Orgies in the Temple of ‘Om,’” *San Francisco Chronicle*, May 5, 1910.

Bernard was a capacious figure, who brought into high relief the contradictions inherent in putting an ancient tradition to a modernist use. Just as Bernard engaged in promiscuous cultural appropriation, Hughes borrowed Oom's religious and financial aspirations for a story that reflects on the very idea of racial and cultural authenticity or ownership. In using Bernard as a source, Hughes went far outside the Harlem Renaissance for material that involved ideas of the primitive, even the magical, but that had little to do with blackness (or, specifically, African-American-ness). Bernard did put on jazz performances at his Nyack colony, but the centrality of jazz in Lesche's spiritual cult was Hughes's invention. Bernard's arts program included other "authentic" traditions such as American folk music and the range of activities at the club reflected variegated and vagarious idiosyncratic taste. And this is precisely the point: "Rejuvenation Through Joy" is a farcical version of the subtle and rending ambiguities of racial identity and cultural affiliation in the Harlem Renaissance that achieves its humorous effect partly through the *unspecificity* of the perpetrator of the scam: the archetypal charismatic quack, of which Oom served as a multifarious example. Hughes took a ridiculous situation, a readymade farce—a white guy from Iowa passing as a guru—and dignified it by turning it into a subtle confrontation with the very notions of racial and cultural fraud.

Hughes only read about Bernard; he did not know him personally, a distance that allowed the author to interpret the man as he wanted. And while Hughes seems to have used Toomer as a physical model for Lesche (which, as Rampersad argues, may have alienated the already evasive Toomer), Hughes clearly drew not just from the "famous religious scam" (as Rampersad puts it) that Bernard perpetrated, but also from two specific aspects of the figure of the Omnipotent Oom: his mysterious origin and his racially coded charisma. The mystery of Oom—where he came from, where he got his power—was largely the product of Bernard's own self-concealment. But it was also a symptom of the public's desire for ongoing "exposure":

different, conflicting versions of his life and his professional activity would compete for veracity, for a stake on the truth, even if only for a moment. The premise of such journalistic exposure was, of course, that Bernard was passing himself off as something he was not and could not sustain forever.

## 7. Showmanship and the Blasé

In a review of *The Ways of White Folks*, Alain Locke wrote: “These fourteen short stories of Negro-white contacts told from the unusual angle of the Negro point of view are challenging to all who would understand the later phases of the race question as it takes on the new complications of contemporary social turmoil and class struggle.”<sup>52</sup> While “Rejuvenation Through Joy” certainly serves as a challenge to any simplistic understanding of race, it does not easily fit Locke’s description of what holds the stories together: the “unusual angle of the Negro point of view.” In “Rejuvenation,” the narrator’s point of view is scrupulously unplaceable, as the voice alternates between factual description and statements of opinion, sometimes within a single sentence: “At \$2.50 a seat (How little for his message!) they listened” (70). Instead of taking the perspective of the passing character (as Johnson had done) or having one character scrutinize the self-presentation of another (Larsen), Hughes employs an omniscient, sardonic narrator to report (and it is merely a tabloid’s “claim”) at the end of the story that Lesche’s true identity has been revealed. And the temporality of this revelation is itself ironic: passing is not the plot’s premise but its final twist; in effect, the disclosure retrospectively illuminates the details that precede it, rather than hang over the plot as it moves along.

The story’s opening sentence is another example of this double pose of objectivity and judgment: “Mr. Eugene Lesche in a morning coat, handsome beyond words, stood on the

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<sup>52</sup> Alain Locke, “Negro Angle,” *Survey Graphic* 23 (1934): 565.

platform of the main ballroom of the big hotel facing Central Park at 59<sup>th</sup> Street, New York” (69). Although it would seem to be the narrator deeming Lesche “handsome beyond words,” soon unattributed utterances crowd in:

“I’ve just heard of it this week. Everybody’s talking about him. Did you hear him before?”  
 “My dear, I shall have heard all six.... He sent me an announcement.”  
 “Oh, why didn’t I...?”  
 “He’s marvelous!”  
 “I simply can’t tell you...” (69–70)

While this exchange occurs between two unnamed ladies, anyone in attendance could speak the same words, could claim or envy a special connection to Lesche. In such moments, the narrator is absent; Lesche’s followers speak for themselves. At other times the narrator intrudes with pointed mockery. About Lesche and his manager the narrator declares, “They really had a lot of nerve” (81). But in a few rare instances, the narrator seems even to be participating in the cult’s activities: “Unfortunately, we did not hear Lesche’s lecture on “Negroes and Joy” (73). The narrator’s combination of good-natured amusement and biting contempt lends the comic events of the story a farcical and satirical charge. Moreover, the narrator’s shifting judgments of the gullible audience and the conniving team behind the production make it difficult to place the voice—whether on the side of the dupes or of the con men, or in one position or another with respect to race.

The paucity of biographical information about Lesche reduplicates this narratorial unlocatability. His unknown origin is part of his appeal: “The women thought surely (to judge from their acclaim) that he had come fullblown right out of heaven to bring them joy” (72). Even so, Lesche’s publicity men fill in the gaps: “The press agents wrote marvelous stories about Lesche; how he had long been in his youth at Del Monte a student of the occult, how he had turned from that to the primitive and, through Africa, had discovered the curative values of Negro jazz” (76). Here, the narrator intrudes to clarify that the “the truth was quite otherwise.”

(76). We learn that Lesche went to school in South Bend, Indiana, joined the circus in Indianapolis, and traveled with it to Los Angeles, where he worked as an art model, a movie extra, and a swim instructor at Blum's "gym for the Hollywood elite" (78). On vacation in Paris, Lesche and Blum formed a plan to start a spiritual colony offering "black rhythms" and producing "happy souls" (80). Lesche wants to provide such "high brow fun" as the successful guru Mogador Bonatz is providing at his colony near Digne, and he asks Blum what Bonatz has that they cannot get. "Nothing," Sol responds. "You got the personality. With me for a manager, a jazz band for background, and a little showmanship, it could be a riot" (80).

Lesche's experience as a performer and his personal and sexual magnetism equip him to be an Oom-style self-help leader, regardless of his ignorance of the spiritual and artistic traditions that he will incorporate into his program. Hughes's confection of Bonatz, a "very great Slav" guru with a Portuguese forename and a German surname practicing his arts in France, is yet another indication of the Hughes's amusement at the artifice of the racial and national unlocatability typical of self-help luminaries. A more subtle instance of name-play is inherent in the possibility that he intended Lesche as a composite figure: T(Oom)er. And Lesche's name is in itself suggestive of compositeness: Eugene comes from Greek word for "well-born," but Lesche derives from the Greek word for "council" or "conversation," or a place for these activities. After first instance of his name, he becomes just the blank site of discourse, the occasion for gossip to fly up and down Park Avenue; even when he gives "counsel" in his afternoon "Private Hour" meetings with individual members, he just listens: "Lesche never advised (he couldn't) but merely received alone in confidence their troubles for contemplation" (93).

The draw of the Colony of Joy is "the very presence" of Lesche, rather than what he has to say, yet even his physical characteristics—evidently his biggest draw—are reported in vague terms (89). The "the black-haired Lesche" is variously "handsome beyond words," "strong and

handsome,” a “big black-haired young man,” “black-haired and handsome beyond words” (78, 69, 70, 71, 72). Once he began working as a swim instructor for rich women at Blum’s gym, he “swam more and drank less,” with the result that “his body was swell, even if licker and women, parties and studio lights had made his face a little hard” (78). The details of his handsomeness—his black hair and his big, swell body—are superficially specific yet opaquely conventional, even euphemistic. Lesche also possesses a mesmerizing voice. He speaks in a “deep, smooth voice, with a slight drawl,” and this “great soft voice” has a hypnotic effect on his audience (69, 87). Lesche’s followers consider him to be singular: “nobody but Lesche” could give them what they had been looking for (91). But Lesche’s capacity to pass—as a guru at all, or as a white guru in particular—depends on the conventionality of his appearance and the geographically neutral quality of his speech. Paradoxically, the confidence that Lesche inspires in his audience is the result not of his particular qualities as a spiritual leader but of his *lack* of qualities, a blankness that allows others to fantasize about who he is. And at the core of that fantasy is the illusion of Lesche’s organic connection to the primal forms of joy that he offers as a panacea.

It is not just his audience’s susceptibility to his charms, but also Lesche’s detached interest in his own performance, that leads to his extraordinary success. Although he comes up with the idea for the colony, he defers to others in practical matters. His relaxed, authentic on-stage persona is manufactured, the product of behind-the-scenes work. A Yale dropout researches and writes all the material for Lesche’s daily talks, and his ex-wife patiently listens to him, “like an actor preparing for a role,” rehearse lectures word by word (83). But Lesche also “improvise[s], add[s] variations of his own, ma[kes] them personal” (81). He is capable of both following a script and ad-libbing spontaneous flourishes. There is a counterintuitive truth about the Oom-type guru Hughes portrays here: behind apparently bizarre idiosyncrasy is a broad adaptability, a willingness to be *whatever*. In Lesche’s case, the affective manifestation of that adaptability is ease:

“The amazing collection of people gathered together in the Colony of Joy astounded even Lesche, whose very blasé-ness was what really made him appear so fresh” (88). The discrepancy between his inner “astonishment” and his outer “blasé-ness” indicates that the art of passing involves the suppression of any emotion that might intimate self-consciousness or otherwise indicate anything other than perfect indifference to one’s assumed identity.

The fact that Lesche both appropriates and leaves himself open to appropriation indicates Hughes’s ironic attitude toward the kind of cultural borrowing that constitutes the Colony’s putative scam. Lesche’s ghost-writing Yale man is a prime example of avid, earnest cultural dabbling: he “hadn’t graduated,” but he “had read Ronald Firbank seriously, adored Louis Armstrong, worshipped Dwight Fisk [*sic*], and had written Lesche’s five hundred personal letters in a seven-lively-arts Gilbert Seldes style” (75).<sup>53</sup> In contrast, Lesche has no such intellectual curiosity. His coolly ironic distance from his elaborately orchestrated celebration of “the primitive” reflects both a necessary suspension of disbelief and a pragmatic submission to being taken for whatever will work, whatever he can get away with. When the Colony attracts seemingly fatal bad press, Sol tears his hair and declares, “We’re ruined!” to which Lesche responds, “Who cares?...We’ll come back to it next year” (95). Any act of passing involves an ironic distance, a careful construction of identity intended to produce a specific perception. In “Rejuvenation,” Hughes both mocks and valorizes such cultural distortion as Lesche’s “primitivism” as a boldly aggressive, but also boldly *un*-self-conscious, kind of passing.

## 8. Afterlives of Passing/Posing

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<sup>53</sup> This reference is a rough indication of the story’s intended historical setting, as Seldes’s book *The Seven Lively Arts* was published in 1924.

The afterlife of “Rejuvenation Through Joy” further demonstrates Hughes’s wry sense of humor around passing. In “Who’s Passing for Who?” a black social worker, known for bringing “some non-descript white person or two” around Harlem, shows up to a bar one night with a white couple from Iowa and introduces them to the narrator (163). Following some confusion about a dark-skinned bar patron abusing a white woman who turns out to be his light-skinned black wife, the narrator and his friends condescendingly explain to the tourists what passing is and even recommend that they read Johnson’s and Larsen’s novels. But just as the group relaxes—laughing and interacting “freely like colored folks do when there are no white folks around”—following the couple’s sudden admission to having been black and passing, the ease is undone by the couple’s parting confession: “We’re white,” announces the woman. “We just thought we’d kid you by passing for colored a little while—just as you said Negroes sometimes pass for white” (166). The men are “dumbfounded”: “Were they really white—passing for colored? Or colored—passing for white?” (166). These lines echo the final revelation of “Rejuvenation Through Joy,” down to the long dash marking the narrator’s incredulity. (They also anticipate the *Day of the Locust* narrator’s deadpan comment that the female impersonator is “really a woman.”) However, whereas the earlier story exclaims its revelation of who Lesche “really” is, here the ambiguity remains, an unanswerable question. Moreover, while in the first case the ambiguity resides in the credibility of the tabloid that purports to have discovered Lesche’s true identity, here it is the result of deliberate—and humorous—deception by seemingly naïve, seemingly white tourists. And the humor of the deception is precisely the point. Hughes described the story to Van Vechten as being “about some Negroes who wanted to jive some white folks but got double jived themselves.”<sup>54</sup> The story nods to the serious history of passing,

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<sup>54</sup> Hughes to Van Vechten, 30 October 1941, *Remember Me to Harlem: The Letters of Langston Hughes and Carl Van Vechten, 1925–1964*, 193.



but it also (along with the white woman, who “laughs” as they speed off in a cab) shows the ludic potential of the moment of scandalous exposure.

This same multivalent humor followed “Rejuvenation Through Joy” in its later incarnations. In the years following its 1934 publication, Hughes tried several times to sell the story to Hollywood studios. (As Chinitz notes, “Rejuvenation Through Joy” has the distinction of being the only Hughes story to have been considered as a Hollywood film.) In 1935, he showed it to Paramount; and in 1941, perhaps prompted by an obscure English professor’s earnest dramatization of it, he sent it to Columbia. Despite serious interest from both studios, no production went forward. In 1943, Hughes began a “Letter to the South” (in his *Chicago Defender* column) by implicating Southern White Folks in his exclusion from the movie business: “You are as much a problem to me as I am to you,” he told his addressees.<sup>55</sup> “I mean personally and figuratively speaking. For one thing, if it were not for you, I, Langston Hughes, might have a nice Hollywood job, like almost every other respectable American writer (who’s white) has at one time or another. But you won’t let Hollywood do anything decent with Negroes in pictures, so Hollywood won’t hire Negro writers—not even to write about Negroes. They are afraid in Hollywood that we won’t write the kinds of scripts you like down South, so they won’t hire us at all” (75).

Nonetheless, the elasticity of “Rejuvenation” is tellingly borne out in Hughes’s ideas of how to adapt the story to other forms just as he had adapted the readymade farce of the Omnipotent Oom. The aforementioned stage play by Texas A&M professor George Darwin Stephens would opt for a burlesque treatment of self-help culture, eliminating the passing

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<sup>55</sup> Hughes, “Letter to the South,” *Chicago Defender*, July 10, 1943, in *Langston Hughes and the Chicago Defender: Essays on Race, Politics, and Culture, 1942–62*, ed. Christopher C. De Santis (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 75. Earlier that year, Hughes had introduced Jesse B. Semple, nicknamed “Simple,” a character who would appear in his columns well into the 1960s.

element altogether and instead relying on overt racial and ethnic stereotypes. And the possibilities for cinematic interpretation were even more promising. Shortly after its publication, a friend wrote to Hughes to express her admiration of *The Ways of White Folks*; according to Hughes, she “was immediately struck by the motion picture possibilities of ‘Rejuvenation Through Joy’” and herself put him in contact with a Hollywood agent who sent the story to Paramount for consideration as a film.<sup>56</sup> Within a year, the story found its way into the hands of comedian Al Jolson, who had famously appeared in blackface in *The Jazz Singer* and more recently applied for the role of “De Lawd” in *The Green Pastures* and Brutus Jones and Porgy on stage.<sup>57</sup> Had Jolson played Lesche, his reputation as a white, Jewish actor practiced in racial performance could have preserved Lesche’s racial ambiguity and raised the spectral question of passing without any visual manipulation. Hughes further toyed with the many senses of “passing” by considering an unambiguously black actor (Paul Robeson was Hughes’s top choice) for the role of Lesche: a prototypically white charlatan who passes himself off as something other than white. Hughes’s willingness to let the story “pass” in several directions, to let characters be flexibly interpreted, is further evidence of his provocative humor as it bore on the process of transforming his fiction into a medium so much less accommodating to visual ambiguity.

Between Paramount’s rejection in 1936 and Hughes’s resubmission of the story to Columbia in 1941, Hughes put aside “Rejuvenation Through Joy” and began work on, among other things, his play *Mulatto*. In the midst of the controversy surrounding that play, Stephens first approached Hughes about adapting “Rejuvenation Through Joy” for the stage. When Stephens showed him a draft, Hughes suggested that the play could be “absurd,” “a fully fledged farce

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<sup>56</sup> Unpublished letter from Langston Hughes to Maxim Lieber, 9 August 1934, in the Langston Hughes Papers, Box 102, Folders 1925–1936, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

<sup>57</sup> Charles Musser, “Why Did Negroes Love Al Jolson and *The Jazz Singer*?: Melodrama, Blackface, and Cosmopolitan Theatrical Culture,” *Film History*, 23 (2011): 218.

even, and still retain its satirical values, too.”<sup>58</sup> To that end, Hughes recommended incorporating the exposition of Lesche’s past more smoothly and adding comical complications to the denouement. For example, “an irate husband might be introduced who comes to the Colony to snatch his wife away.....Or Sol Blum’s wife, a nice fat Jewish hausfrau might take a notion she needs rejuvenation, too---much to the embarrassment of her husband and Lesche---that anybody in the family should take them seriously.” Stephens accepted the latter suggestion, with Mrs. Blum speaking the play’s last lines, and Hughes own acceptance of the unknown Stephens as a potential collaborator was perhaps due to his recognizing the commercial appeal of an adaptation that excluded the final revelation about Lesche: regarding Stephens’s ambition to get the play on Broadway, Hughes wrote that “one point in favor of this play being produced is that it is largely about white people.... With the Negroes as incidental background, it has, I think a better chance of being produced.” In 1940, Hughes extended his support even further, telling Stephens that he deserved a share of the movie rights should his dramatization “be the cause of selling such rights.”<sup>59</sup> He also got Eugene O’Neill to read it.

Although Stephens never sold the script on Broadway or in Hollywood, his interest in “Rejuvenation Through Joy” seems to have prompted Hughes’s later efforts to pitch the story—and other stories—as a movie. In 1941, Hughes began a collaboration with Charles Leonard that led to their proposing to Columbia Pictures possible story lines for a comic movie featuring Paul Robeson. Despite (or because of) the over-the-top comedy of casting Robeson in an adaptation of “Rejuvenation,” more conventionally comic or dramatic plots quickly eclipsed the little satire.

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<sup>58</sup> Unpublished letter from Langston Hughes to George Darwin Stephens, undated (c. 1939), in the Langston Hughes Papers, Box 150, Folder 2794, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

<sup>59</sup> Unpublished letter from Langston Hughes to George Darwin Stephens, 2 January 1940, in the Langston Hughes Papers, Box 150, Folder 2794, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

What Hughes considered the “most entertaining and most ‘commercial’” option was the story of a famous black singer who returns to the South to help a friend, a Pullman porter who has fallen ill, by filling in for him on the train.<sup>60</sup> In a letter to Robeson, Hughes stated that the story would be “based on the old ‘masquerade’ theme”—in short, a different kind of passing story (one animated by the constant risk of passengers’ recognizing the singer’s true identity). But Robeson resisted the Pullman porter idea on the grounds that it relied on racial stereotypes, what his wife described to Hughes as “the same old junk,” and “the old gags.” The Robesons’ assessment of the role reflects the thoughtless equivalence of the stock Pullman porter figure with blackness, yet it is this same marker or stereotype that Hughes’s proposal subtly exploits: a scenario in which someone could not be other than black but nonetheless participates in a deliberate and sustained form of passing.<sup>61</sup> Hughes term “masquerade” again reflects this broad construal of traditional racial passing as part of a more expansive category encompassing various forms of appropriation and gamesmanship. And in casting a glance back to the recent ferment over questions of race and authenticity among the black intelligentsia, Hughes both shifted the stakes of racial passing and expanded his general sense of the term to include other conceptions and practices of passing; and he embraced these other forms in the service of showing the ludic possibility of even the most historically fraught adoption of identity.

By way of conclusion, I cannot resist commenting on a turn of events bizarre enough to have appeared in either writer’s fiction. In 1949, their literary agent Maxim Lieber was himself

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<sup>60</sup> Unpublished letter from Langston Hughes to Paul Robeson, 18 September 1941, in the Langston Hughes Paper, Box 138, Folder 2563, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

<sup>61</sup> Unpublished letter from Eslanda Robeson to Langston Hughes, 6 October 1941, in the Langston Hughes Papers, Box 138, Folder 2562, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University. When the eminent geologist and explorer Clarence King fell in love with a black nursemaid, as recounted in Martha Sandweiss’s book *Passing Strange* (New York: Penguin, 2009), the blue-eyed, fair-skinned King convinced his wife of his blackness in part by maintaining until his death a fictitious identity as a Pullman porter.

revealed to be a complicated impostor: a Communist agent, known in the Party as “Paul.” Lieber’s literary agency may have served as a cover for his espionage, but it was at the same time a real business, one that helped secure or maintain the reputations of major novelists and poets, including Erskine Caldwell, Saul Bellow, John Cheever, Robert M. Coates, Carson McCullers, Bernard Malamud, Thomas Wolfe, and others. According to Jay Martin, Lieber was known “for working extraordinarily hard for his clients and for selling stories even after their authors had lost all hope of a sale,” though this was not the case for West’s “The Impostor.”<sup>62</sup> Lieber has been almost completely forgotten, commemorated briefly in Whittaker Chambers’s *Witness* and in Lieber’s own testimony before the Committee on Un-American Activities. That West and Hughes both signed on with Lieber exactly as they were writing tales of relatively benign duplicity attests to the possibility that even the most trenchant ironists could be duped, but also to the likelihood that, had they known, they would hardly have taken offense.

Indeed, West’s and Hughes’s satires deserve to be read in tandem for their ability to illuminate an insufficiently appreciated area of the discourse of personality in the first half of the twentieth century: the pervasive worry about personality being a false representation of the self, a worry at odds with the growing sense that no one self-representation was more authentic than another. Their fiction, which features modes of public performance in which the presentation of personality is infected with imposture and charlatanism, turns categories of identity and authenticity upside down and inside out; even authenticity itself amounts to a condition of utterly empty selfhood. And although they both looked backwards to diagnose this condition, West’s and Hughes’s ironic treatments of fakery should be distinguished in a crucial respect: posing is about the anxiety of the new, whereas passing is about the anxiety of the past.

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<sup>62</sup> “The Impostor” finally appeared in the *New Yorker* in 1997 and then in the Library of America edition of his work published in the same year.

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