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Crossing the Great Divides: Selfridges, Modernity, and the Commodified Authentic

Elizabeth Outka

‘Harsh criticism arrives from a Wakefield man every other day. He cuts our cartoon advertisements from the papers and underlines the letter press, sending a note always with the same wording, “What do you sell? What do you sell? Why don’t you say what you sell in your advertisements?”’

Evening News, “Criticising Mr. Selfridge,” 1909¹

Mr. Selfridge, however, in his gracefully worded advertisements, lays but little stress on the commercial side of his gigantic undertaking. We are to look upon Selfridges rather as a pleasant place for a quiet look round than as a mere store. We are to go there as connoisseurs contemplating a choice collection, not as seekers after bargains. Everything is to be done to make our visit pleasant for us, and should anybody desire to acquire any new possessions on a basis of payment, it is rumoured that even that will not be impossible in this remarkable establishment.

Bystander, “A Week of Shopping,” 1909²

What the public have yet to realize is that business is a science, or at its greatest an art. . . . Sheer commercialism, the desire to make profit and to accumulate money, may determine the organization of a business, but busi-

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ness to-day has passed beyond that mere money-grubbing stage.
Times, Selfridges's Advertisement, "London's Greatest Store," 1909³

The opening of Selfridges Department Store in London in 1909 marked a pivotal moment in British marketing. "London's Greatest Store" perfected the commercial selling of the non-commercial, paradoxically inscribing within its elegantly decorated interior a cultural location outside the marketplace. Visitors on the store's opening day found a luxurious, almost enchanted space, where soft lighting illuminated the vast array of goods from clothes to china to books, where price tags were absent or at least discreet, and where concealed string quartets provided a soothing musical accompaniment for the spectators. In this new commercial environment, the message was that even large-scale stores were free of mass market taint; amid the refined atmosphere the shoppers—or guests, as Selfridges called them—would find an abundance of authentic and exclusive objects, not to be confused with the mass produced goods available elsewhere. This extraordinary atmosphere marked a dramatic realignment of London's commercial energies, representing one of the first mass market campaigns to sell a disdain for the mass market.⁴

Any half-awake twenty-first century cultural critic will be able to list the commercial tricks deployed on Selfridges' opening day: the selling of products as lifestyle, the lure of spectacle and visual intoxication, the fetishizing of the commodity, and so on. Indeed, as the first two contemporary reactions printed above suggest, even in 1909 the non-commercial aesthetic of Selfridges raised cynical eyebrows. "What do you sell?" writes the first indignant commentator. "Why don't you say what you sell in your advertisements?"—his query offering one of the earliest protests against the marketing of image and lifestyle over goods themselves. The more sophisticated irony of the *Bystander* writer reveals his careful understanding of the strategy; he lets his audience know that despite the "gracefully worded advertisements" implying that shoppers would be transformed into "connoisseurs contemplating a choice collection," acquiring new possessions will still be possible in this new establishment. He will not be taken in by the non-commercial appearance, he hints, or by any idea that this is somehow not a shop with profit as its central motive. And trained in skepticism as we are, readers then and now will not be fooled by the claims made by Selfridges in the third quotation; dress it up as you might, business is about profit, about money-grubbing, about accumulation. We won't believe the hype.

This article takes these critiques as a given. Incisive critical commentary on advertising and on marketing abounds, and exploring the false claims and schemes within a commercial culture is an essential and ongoing project.⁵ This critical approach, however, is not the end of the story, for armed only with skepticism, we are blinded to the dramatic commercial revolution offered by Selfridges, one that is intrinsically tied to British modernism. Selfridges embodies and deploys a surprisingly modernist set of tensions between low and high culture, and between the specter of the mass market and an alternative, non-commercial aesthetic. As this article will explore, at the same time that Selfridges' marketing strategies seem to exploit these tensions, they

also anticipate the work of recent modernist critics by dismantling them, deliberately highlighting the commercial production of a realm theoretically independent of the market. In the advertisements, philosophy, and physical space of the store, Selfridges offered an intoxicating promise: be awash in a modern sea of plentiful and accessible goods, yet maintain (or obtain) a sense of authenticity, of originality, of non-commercial purity. Examining such a blending from the perspective of the mass market offers a vital new strategy for assessing a divide that has been intrinsic to modernist studies since its inception: the alleged separation of aesthetic modernism from mass culture. Exploring how a commercial venture not only represented this divide, but in fact offered a way for its customers to negotiate it, in turn allows us to re-assess some of our own critical divisions within modernist studies.

I. Dismantling the Great Divides

In recent years, numerous scholars have fundamentally questioned the separation between modernism and the market, and the critical road map that begins their arguments is now familiar terrain.⁶ Huyssen's well-known formulation of "the great divide," which describes how modernism defined itself against mass culture, and Jameson's oft-quoted assertion that modernist writing relies on a "distinction between high and so-called mass culture" have proven irresistible targets for many contemporary critics.⁷ While visions of modernism as disdainful of popular values and commercial culture still dominate many definitions (especially outside of literary studies), a wealth of new books has now fully challenged and dismantled much of the great divide. Far from being above mass culture, and by extension commerce, advertising, and even the mass market, literary modernists should be viewed, as one critic writes, through "the lens of consumption," and writers from James to Woolf to Joyce have been usefully linked to a range of commercial concerns.⁸ Running alongside and often overlapping these efforts are critical works that reassess the divisions between high and low moderns, both by bringing renewed attention to neglected (read: low) writers, and by skillfully showing how each category overlapped and indeed influenced the other.⁹

Examining Selfridges allows us to continue questioning the great divide but—critically—from a position that begins on the mass culture side. Rather than examining how modernists appropriated the market, we can consider how the market might use modernism, or more precisely, how the market itself embodies the vexed relationship between high and low culture. If we only study how modernists use the market both within and for their works, we ironically reify modernism as the central cultural location of these tensions, and we further risk treating the market as a monolithic entity, rather than as an immensely complicated set of strategies and commercial exchanges, something in fact as variable as modernism itself. Selfridges encapsulates a broad stream of competing concerns, a stream influenced by currents of nostalgia for an authentic, commercial-free past overlapping another stream of desire for an authentically new future, not derived from an outmoded tradition; currents that dream of exclusivity and a select audience flowing into currents that desire a ready accessibility and a wide

314 market. One of the reasons that modernism is so notoriously and wonderfully difficult to define is that it too encompasses all these currents; by exploring how a commercial venture itself negotiates such tensions, we gain critical perspective on modernism as well. It is the movement across the gap—by Selfridges, by modernists, by critics themselves—the ability both to perform the great divide and to dismantle it when needed, the *action* of this, rather than the vantage point on either side, that offers the most vital critical model of both modernism and modernity.

2. The Commodified Authentic

Central to my discussion of Selfridges is a phenomenon I term the “commodified authentic,” a marketing strategy that enjoyed an unprecedented rise in early twentieth-century Britain, with Selfridges’ opening marking a central moment in its history. This strategy promised to balance the seemingly contradictory desires for an autonomous “authentic” realm separate from popular culture or the mass market, and the desire (or need) to accommodate the growing pleasures and demands of the consumer age. In its broadest form, this strategy involved linking places or objects usually considered outside the mass market—the domestic home, a weathered piece of furniture, an original artwork—to the goods for sale. Critically, the strategy also presented, with no sense of paradox, the market itself as the best way to obtain this desired non-commercial aura, for the market would provide shoppers access to such purified goods. At Selfridges, for example, the goods and the space were presented as exclusive and refined, defined against the mass market and indeed theoretically not even part of the market itself, existing instead in a purified cultural location outside conventional markers of commerce. Many advertisements implied that the goods at Selfridges were one-of-a-kind objects, in direct contrast with the mass-produced goods available at lesser stores. On the other hand, however, Selfridges simultaneously invoked the modern pleasures of the mass market: the goods were available to all, they would be produced in numbers that implied an unimaginable plenty and endless supply, everyone in London was invited, and no one would be turned away. The term “commodified authentic” encapsulates this dual—and even paradoxical—strategy, for Selfridges was not simply selling notions of the authentic, but frankly avowing that this authenticity was commodified, and that this very commodification in turn made the authenticity that much more appealing and available. By embracing the commodified authentic, customers could perform an (alleged) oxymoron; they might be pure and shop as well, for Selfridges offered a complete education in negotiating and even transcending the divide.

I distinguish between two types of the commodified authentic in the discussion that follows: the nostalgic and the aesthetic. Selling a nostalgic version of the authentic meant invoking an originary and unified past before mechanical reproduction and fragmentation: images of old country houses or warm domestic interiors, references to “primitive” cultures, or, to borrow from Benjamin, the aura of an original artwork.¹⁰ On the aesthetic side, the commodified authentic drew from an alternative sense of “authenticity” as original, new, something that was not a copy and not derived from

tradition or previous models: appeals to exclusive new fashions, the one-of-a-kind item, the limited edition. Naturally, the nostalgic and the aesthetic can overlap—appeals to an original model might be both, for example—but the distinction elucidates an important nuance in this neglected phenomenon. What both types share is the evocation of a realm outside of the mass market, and the simultaneous acknowledgement, and even celebration, of the commercial availability of the goods.¹¹

Selling the authentic is certainly a hypocritical move, a trick, an expression of commercial duplicity, and such a move is usually greeted with criticism ranging from simple derision to horror. Recipients of Pottery Barn catalogues as well as critical journals, we are all adept at unmasking the commerce behind the authentic. Simple unmasking, however, misses the complexity of the commodified authentic at the turn of the century, for it in fact represented an enormously powerful fantasy, with egalitarian possibilities, one that offered the mostly middle class customers at Selfridges a chance to participate in both the pleasures of authenticity and the pleasures of abundance and accessibility. Such a combination had important gender implications as well, for Selfridges promised to provide female shoppers a public space of domestic purity, a place where they might remain within a non-commercial sphere and still fully participate in modern commercial exchanges. The vital new ways to transcend class and gender barriers offered by the commodified authentic had far reaching implications not only for the commercial history of the twentieth century (with Laura Ashley or Pottery Barn the logical inheritors), but also for the development of both British culture in general and British modernism in particular.

3. The Genuine Article

Our first destination on the Selfridges' shopping excursion is to the goods themselves and the unique form of commercial erasure Selfridges mastered within its initial flood of advertisements. The marketing campaign to announce the store's opening was unprecedented. The store's founder, Gordon Selfridge, hired thirty-eight of the best illustrators in London, headed by Sir Bernard Partridge from *Punch*, and commissioned them to create over one hundred full-page advertisements for eighteen different newspapers, along with half and quarter page advertisements. He spent an extraordinary 36,000 thousand pounds to promote his new store before opening day, setting a new standard for London retailers.¹² Within this initial campaign, and for several months following, Selfridges worked to distance its goods from the taint of commerce both by evoking a nostalgic aura around the production process and by linking the goods to various markers of high class taste. At the same time, Selfridges deliberately unmasked these efforts, insisting—often in the same advertisements—that the goods were easy to purchase, plentiful, and available to all. By both unsettling and reinscribing distinctions between a low, commercial commerce and a high, non-commercial one, Selfridges offered shoppers a chance to enjoy both the distinction and the pleasure of transcending it.

316 Critical theory stretching back to Marx has acknowledged the role of the glorified commodity in Britain and the cultural values that can swirl around advertised objects. As Marx famously observed, in the nineteenth century, goods had come to exceed their use value, becoming commodities that were “fetishized,” “transcendent,” and even “mystical.”¹³ Thomas Richards has argued that from the time of the Great Exhibition of 1851, commodities were typically set on pedestals, under lights—both literally and figuratively—hiding any sense of production in favor of the final, seemingly ahistorical product. Commodities so represented could sell the ideology of England, from its imperial fantasies to its moral codes.¹⁴ By glorifying commodities and hiding production, sellers could distance a product from a sense of everyday use or from mundane suggestions of actual work; even the sense that such objects were for sale could be obscured. Advertisements, as Jennifer Wicke has pointed out, can form an “aesthetic space” around these objects, which could in turn “put the actual act of commercial exchange under a unique form of erasure” (*AF*, 70; 83). Selfridges was one of the first advertisers in England to exploit fully the “not for sale” aura surrounding the shop goods, and exploit it in a fully realized, mass market, campaign. I will first consider this purified commodity within Selfridges, before turning to the unique union of this message with its opposing twin, the message of ready availability and abundance.

A central early advertising strategy for Selfridges involved the nostalgic version of the commodified authentic, a strategy that cast a misty glow over the production process and implied that the goods were made not en-masse in factories, but the old fashioned way, in small cottage industries that transferred that purification to product and eventually to the buyer. As one example, consider Figure 1, which shows one of Selfridges’ article advertisements that appeared in the *Times* in the weeks before the store opened.¹⁵ (Fig. 1) By mimicking the paper’s news stories, the layout emphasizes the continuity between the established, and less obviously commercial news of the *Times*, and the new news about Selfridgés. The writer relates here “How Selfridges Gathers Its Goods From All Parts of the World.” On romantic journeys, buyers scour the globe, looking for distinctive, original articles, made at home or in cottage industries. The advertisement decries the mass-produced nature of most goods, made by machines churning out identical finished products. This “painful uniformity,” however, has been addressed by avid Selfridges’ buyers; forever “In Search of the Original,” they seek goods that “strike a distinctive and individual note” (“HSGG”). To this end, the buyers try to find the original makers of articles, going

literally off the high road of commerce to penetrate into little known villages, and sequestered districts where manufactures are still carried on in a simple human way by men and women whose workshop is their home and who themselves are artists in their craft rather than artisans. (“HSGG”)

According to the advertisement, peasants in places such as Japan, Germany, and even Britain are still making goods using time-honored methods; crucially, such goods maintain their aura of distinctiveness even when they have left their surroundings. The Japanese articles obtained by the buyers, for example, are

318 impersonal forces of mechanization, industry, and mass-produced objects. The nostalgic authentic lies not simply in the past, but in the way a connection to a tradition becomes inscribed on to an object. These objects are made in the home, by an individual, who creates an object that “embodies his own personality” in its very distinctiveness. The objects come to stand in metonymically for the authenticity located in the production process and in the peasants themselves, and such objects brought to Selfridges can, the advertisement implies, not only bestow on the store this sense of distinctiveness, but can in turn bestow on the shopper’s home the sense of authenticity originally located in the cottage industry. By simultaneously advancing and erasing production, Selfridges sought to sell the very kind of authenticity that a writer such as E. M. Forster would see as antithetical to London’s commercial district. The buyer could shop in a capitalist market without taint, could return, with carefully selected purchases, to an earlier mythic past located in an imagined pre-industrial world.

Evoking such an idealized production process was certainly nothing new. Selfridges drew on Victorian traditions such as the arts and crafts movements, for William Morris, along with a host of precursors and followers, had imagined a similar production process. Morris, who exposed the actual factory conditions of the “peasants” whom Selfridges mythologized, praised the many virtues of the hand made and carefully crafted goods.¹⁶ What marked Selfridges as a departure, however, was how the store borrowed these “refined” models of commerce, usually by definition separate from the mass market, and deployed them in a structured, mass-market campaign. Such a strategy certainly served an ideological function, hiding the bleak conditions that likely went into producing these goods; as one article heading notes, the Selfridges’ buyers “ransack the world” for the products. The strategy also served an intriguing cultural function, however, promising to address the emerging disdain for mass market production.¹⁷

A close cousin of the nostalgic version of the commodified authentic blended a Morris-like attachment to the hand-crafted item with a high class aesthetic purity. A second example from print advertising, an ad for “famous Teco Ware” (Fig. 2), offers a contrast for the reader between the cluttered, hard-to-read news, and the three refined pottery pieces in the advertisements.¹⁸ “Teco,” says the copy, “is without a doubt the refinement of Art in Pottery.” It cannot be described “by word or picture,” but every piece “is a chaste, dignified, refined, and valuable specimen of Pottery, unique of its kind, and suggestive of the reincarnation of a lost art. Every piece is an embodiment of the genius of a well-known artist, and bears its designer’s name to attest its individual character.” These are works of art in the age of mechanical reproduction, suggesting not copies, but the original objects from which lesser imitations (for sale at lesser stores) might be made. The Selfridges’ shopper can obtain objects that, in effect, pre-date any commercial “contamination.” The goods are surrounded with the language of art, rather than the language of commerce; while this of course remains a commercial strategy familiar to modern readers, it was a new trend for British advertisers.¹⁹

Alongside these efforts to present the goods as one-of-a-kind objects, purified of commercial “contamination,” the print advertising simultaneously evoked a more mass-market narrative: the goods were plentiful, they were readily available, and they were

THE BIRTH OF A NATION
 Mrs. Howard said that after she married the prisoner her father advised her to look him in the face and to be the best of her and not to mind his doings.
 The girl, Mrs. Howard, said she was 20 years of age when she married the prisoner, and that she was the only woman who had ever been married to him.
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It was a remarkable thing that in proportion to the thickness of their skin there they all so over-reacted to the impulse to record their impressions in print.
 The sooner the time they spent in the country, the longer the speeches they made in the House of Commons afterwards about it. The more famous their reputation and the greater the ignorance, as a rule, they showed. (Laughter and "Hear, hear.")

THE IRISH CIVIL SERVICE.
 If he were a person seeking a profession he would be thought that the first thing he would do would be to look his eyes on India, mainly for two reasons. In the first place, because he would be doing something definite, practical, of positive value to any other country or profession he would be only secondarily because India offered a field of responsible activity for a young Englishman who had no money in the world. It was open to any young man of character and ability who went to India from every class he was drawn, to rise to a position in which he could be had admitted to the age of 20.

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IMPERIAL CANDIDATE—About six hundred cases are being heard from during the year. The 25th, 26th, and 27th of the year are the last days of the year.

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LAW SOCIETY.

CLERK AND ASSISTANT CLERK.
 The Law Society has appointed Mr. J. E. H. Cook to be the Clerk and Mr. J. E. H. Cook to be the Assistant Clerk.

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NAVY EXAMINATION.

The examination for the post of Midshipman in the Royal Navy will be held on the 25th and 26th of the month.

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POLICE COURTS.

Monday, before Mr. Curtis Bennett.
 A man was charged with stealing a watch from a shop. He was found guilty and sentenced to 12 months imprisonment.

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SPECIAL DISPLAY
of the Famous Teco Ware
at SELFRIDGES

TECO is without doubt the refinement of Art in Pottery. It is impossible to describe it by word or picture, and its colour—called Teco Green—is of a shade to be seen in no other ware. Its texture is equally baffling of description—being neither smooth nor rough. Every piece of Teco is a chaste, dignified, refined, and valuable specimen of Pottery, unique of its kind, and suggestive of the reincarnation of a lost art. Every piece is an embodiment of the genius of a well-known artist, and bears its designer's name to attest its individual character.

An interesting display of Teco Ware is now being held in the Pottery Department (Third Floor: Room 10).

patented by all the leading makers is also displayed.

The Tall Vase, low fluted, a fine specimen, 17 1/2 inches high, 50/-
 The Short Vase, low fluted, a fine specimen, 10 inches high, 20/10d.
 The Short Vase, low fluted, a fine specimen, 10 inches high, 20/10d.
 The Short Vase, low fluted, a fine specimen, 10 inches high, 20/10d.

OTHER PIECES
 A tall, slender, and graceful specimen of Teco Ware, 17 1/2 inches high, 50/-
 A tall, slender, and graceful specimen of Teco Ware, 17 1/2 inches high, 50/-

SELFRIDGES
 SELFRIDGE & CO. LTD.
Oxford Street
One Hundred Departments—all connected by Telephone
 (Overhead One)

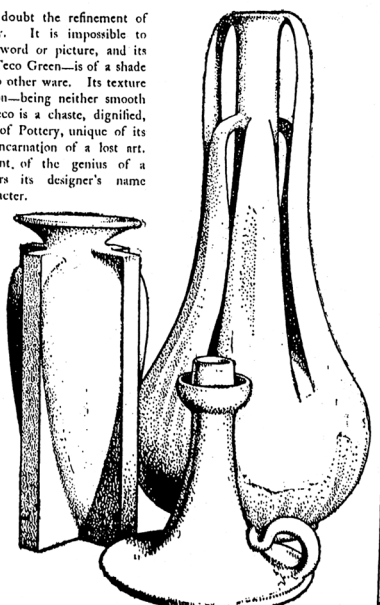


Fig. 2. Selfridges' advertisement, "Special Display of the Famous Teco Ware at Selfridges," Times, May 22, 1909: 4.

sold at prices accessible to most buyers. Within the same article-advertisement that declares the goods at Selfridges were made in cottage industries, the writer declares

Selfridges will sell nearly everything that any man, woman, or child may require or desire from the day of birth and throughout life—clothes, hats, boots, jewellery, stationary, toys, games, musical instruments, sport requisites, cutlery, glass, china, carpets—but not heavy furniture—household equipments, ornaments, embroideries, pictures, engravings, &c. ("HSGG")

320 The store would be a veritable cornucopia of the latest goods. In a similar move, another large advertisement listed Selfridges' many departments, and just a sampling of the goods available in each. The very size of the full-page advertisement suggested the store's vastness, the sheer number of goods that would fit under one roof.²⁰ The tag line that frequently appeared in the early advertisements, "London's lowest prices—always" further served to emphasize ready availability. Shoppers might take pleasure in the goods' uniqueness, but might simultaneously take pleasure in the goods' abundance.

This cheerful paradox between unique and available goods paralleled the simultaneous move to hide the monetary transaction and to acknowledge it. These contradictions may be seen in a long advertisement that presents the script of a short play for the readers. The play takes place in the "Morning-room of Mr. Carew's little house in Mayfair" (Fig. 3).²¹ Mr. and Mrs. Carew have just returned from the Continent to find that their house has been burglarized; along with their possessions have gone all their markers of taste and class. Facing a dinner party that night, the couple is in despair, since their traders are scattered all over town and they could not possibly be reached in time. Turning over a newspaper, Mr. Carew spies an advertisement for Selfridges, and they quickly telephone in an order. Mrs. Carew selects a houseful of goods, all the "best quality," including dresses, china, glasses, a clock, and a variety of fruits and flowers. Mrs. Carew dismisses her husband's concern over prices, telling him that "we're getting the best bargain of our lives." The Selfridges assistant assures her that the vases, for example, are "the same things that one buys in the antiquity shops at fancy prices" and that the candle-shades are "unique."

The play highlights low prices and offers a clear indication that a whole houseful of goods might be bought at a moment's notice for the specific purpose of constructing the illusion of stable taste and class that the Carews will need for their visitors. The act of buying is at once effaced and foregrounded: the goods are unique aesthetic objects purified of the suggestion that they were ever actually purchased, and this aura may be purchased with a simple phone call. Readers are in fact offered a performance of how they might perform the Carews' trick. This Janus-faced approach is notable for how readily it changes direction. The very dexterity that Selfridges allows in presenting the latest old goods, and the genuine reproduction, suggests an irreverent blend of high and low styles; the chance to smooth the gap between different values, and still be free to reinforce this gap, is part of what is so effectively sold.²² Selfridges may offer commerce in a non-commercial guise—but at the same time it happily exposes this guise not simply as a shopkeeper's trick, but as a powerful strategy to possess goods that are both authentic and up-to-date, untainted by commerce, and still readily available.

The physical placement of the goods in the store itself offered a literal performance of the Carew's play and its self-conscious paradox. On the one hand, the store's window displays offered spaces for the transcendent commodity. Far from the cluttered window of the Victorian merchant, who crammed as many goods into the display as possible, Selfridges initiated a new era of window design in Britain. Displays were carefully constructed, often using classical detailing, or displaying a single figure or object in a romantic setting. The objects for sale were set under lights, often literally on pedestals,

THE TIMES, WEDNESDAY, MARCH 31, 1909.


“GERRARD ONE.”

SCENE—Morning-room of Mr. Carew's little house in Mayfair.

TIME—The present day. 10 a.m. Mr. and Mrs. Carew, who have just arrived from the Continent, and are in travelling costume, are regarding each other gloomily from either side of the fireplace. The mantel is bare of adornments, and the room, though prettily furnished, is entirely bare of bibelots.

THE POLICE COURTS.

Eye of Fraud.
The *Manxman* yesterday Mr. Phoenix vs. *Manxman*, Mr. *Manxman*, and Mr. *Manxman* vs. *Manxman*. At 10 a.m. Mr. *Manxman* was charged on a charge of obtaining money from the mortgage of certain estates in Surrey, with intent to defraud. Mr. *Manxman* was charged with misappropriating £1,170 belonging to the *Manxman* Co., of which he was a director, and converting the same as if it were his own property. Mr. *Manxman* pleaded guilty. Mr. *Manxman* was sentenced to imprisonment for 12 months. Mr. *Manxman* was committed to the House of Correction for 12 months.

Mr. W. H. H. vs. Mr. W. H. H.
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Mr. C. (sarcastically).—H-m. Pleading well come! So much for your "respectable elderly couple!" And so much for Lady Mallison's recommendation. Next time, perhaps, you won't be so quick to accept—

Mrs. C.—This is atrocious! I suppose you are trying to put the blame on me. You know perfectly well you told me the man favourably impressed you. You know you said you were glad of a chance to do a good turn to a couple of the deserving poor. How can you bring yourself to declare it's my fault!

Marie, French maid, precipitates herself into the room.

Marie.—Madame! Monsieur! C'est affreux! C'est terrible! Mais c'est terrible! Tout est disparu! Ah, c'est affreux!

Marshall, valet, knocks at the door, and enters.

Marshall.—Very sorry, Sir, I'm afraid they've made a clean sweep of everything. Your Rushing sable coat, an' your extra dress suite, an' all your ties an' linen—

(Forcible ejection from Mr. C.)

Marshall (continuing).—Well, all I can say is, Sir, if you will pardon me, Sir, it's a— well, I mean, Sir, it's a jolly good thing you sent the plate to the Bank and took the jewelry with you.

Mrs. C. becomes Early Victorian, subsides into a chair, and melts into tears.

Mr. C. (hastily to the valet).—All right, Marshall, I'll see you about it afterwards. (To the maid.) Go away. I'll attend to your mistress. Go away. Allez! Departez vous!

Maid and valet leave the room.

Mr. C.—Here, little woman, this won't do. After all, it's nothing very tragic. Hang it! I've made more out of that Copper deal than the whole thing will cost us. That sweet couple have kindly left the pictures, and you've got your jewelry. (Strokes his wife's head.) Gertrude! Gertrude! For heaven's sake, don't faint! I tell you it's all right.

Mrs. C. (tragically).—Oh, it's all very well for you! You don't care if all those people come to-night and find a house that's like a barn! You don't mind if I haven't got a rag to wear—and you know I haven't—the things from Paris won't come for a week. You know we've invited the Spencers, and the Alloways, and the Poiters, and the Heydell-Morgans, and the rest of them. And there's not even an glass and china. We haven't even got a drawing-room clock—not even a drawing-room clock—

(Rings alarming symptoms.)

Mr. C.—Are you there? I'm giving a dinner party to-night, and almost everything here has been stolen. Yes, about a dozen pieces! Oh, I don't know—anywhere from £20 to £40. Yes, satin and lace would do nicely. What is that? You can do that sort of a gown for £25? Well, if you're sure? Well, be certain to have them here by 2 o'clock. Thank you. Will you kindly have me put on to the China Department?

She is transferred to the China and Glass Department.

Mrs. C.—Are you there? I'm giving a dinner party to-night, and almost everything here has been stolen. Yes, about a dozen pieces! Oh, I don't know—anywhere from £20 to £40. Yes, satin and lace would do nicely. What is that? You can do that sort of a gown for £25? Well, if you're sure? Well, be certain to have them here by 2 o'clock. Thank you. Will you kindly have me put on to the China Department?

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Fig. 3. Selfridges' advertisement, "Gerrard One," Times, March 31, 1909: 4.

surrounded by the suggestion of distinction—the single, beautiful object. As a writer for the *Daily Mail* noted, “Each window-frame formed a sort of proscenium for a deep-set scene with a painted background in colours delicately harmonizing with the articles occupying what may be termed the centre of the stage. The windows were not crowded with selling articles. No price tickets were displayed.”²³ The commodity was the star in the spotlight. On the other hand, the store's interior also presented models of abundance. While many of the special displays and showcases within the store continued the idea of the transcendent commodity appearing outside, the sheer number of goods suggested plenty over particularity and exclusivity.²⁴ As one contemporary reviewer commented, on opening day, visitors could find “large quantities of woollens,” “about 1000 washing robes,” “Dress materials too numerous to be mentioned” and thousands of

322 other items, all set, of course, within a refined atmosphere.²⁵ Selfridges built a mutable aura around its commodities, one that might shift at the customers' discretion and that built on the consumers' willing, pleasurable consent to the paradox.

Selfridges' use of the commodified authentic to sell its goods had clear class implications for London shoppers. Selfridges largely appealed to the rapidly rising middle class and contributed to the emergence of the "middlebrow" culture. As Lawrence Rainey has observed, the term middlebrow actually comes into existence at precisely this time, with its first recorded use in 1904 (*IM*, 3). Shoppers were offered all the exclusivity implied by the higher class Bond Street stores, but without the high price tags and snobbish disdain for the middle class customer that was found there, as well as all the spectacle and pleasures of the Oxford Street Emporiums, without the negative associations of cheap goods and frenzied shopping. The commodified authentic in fact united what appeared to be two contradictory models, and made these models available at middle class prices. The Selfridges' shopper might obtain—as the Carews did—a houseful of apparently old stuff, infused with an instant familiarity that intrinsically suggested an erasure of monetary exchange. Such an erasure was usually considered a special purview of high class dwellings, embodied in the country house or the old urban residences, places where the purchases were made so long ago as to purify them of commercial stain. The commodified authentic, however, cheerfully pricked the sacred bubble surrounding such established places, not only exposing them as constructed environments that were commercial in origin, but in the same breath offering this tantalizing high class erasure to the middle class shopper. The authentic was of course manufactured, but with the potentially egalitarian result of making high-class models more universally available. Selfridges captured the understandable longing to possess authentic goods—and the perhaps hypocritical but perhaps honest admission that these must be purchased like anything else. The middle class shoppers at Selfridges could perform different class identities depending on the goods chosen and, as I go on to discuss in the next section, on where they were in the store.

4. Redefining Commerce

Selfridges not only used the commodified authentic to shift radically the image of shop goods, but also to redefine British commerce in general, and the department store in particular. The initial ads repeatedly chastised the English public for thinking of commerce as a tainted endeavor. Commerce was, on the contrary, a dignified and respected profession, and the department store an established institution. Selfridges declared that viewing business as "mere money-grubbing" was an outdated model of commerce, an older evolutionary stage now superseded by a new and improved commercial vision.²⁶ This new vision linked commerce and Selfridges to older, less commercial models. Both the depiction of Selfridges in the advertisements, and the store's actual layout, suggested a readily exchangeable set of lived environments, each with its own form of commercial erasure. Selfridges, at turns, was an established institution, a museum, an art gallery, a self-contained village, a domestic home. The shoppers themselves could

decide which model to embrace; Selfridges thus worked to move commerce from its tainted position as contaminated other into the very heart of British culture. As another advertisement declared, Selfridges was ready to “enter into and take its place in the life of the whole of London, indeed, the United Kingdom, and in its own time of the whole British Empire.”²⁷ Two of Selfridges’ constructed images—the store as village and the store as domestic home—offer especially potent models of the commodified authentic. I will turn to them now.

The print advertising and the store’s policies presented Selfridges as an urban village, a gathering place for people motivated by more than economic ties. Gordon Selfridge himself insisted that the store was a community center, not a shop, declaring, “My object was to make Selfridges a civil center where friends could meet and where buying was only a secondary consideration” (qtd. in *SB*, 254). Selfridge worked to form the staff, store, and customers into a self-sufficient community, announcing at a staff meeting that the goal was “not merely to provide the goods of civilization. It is to *be* civilization” (qtd. in *SB*, 213). As the familiar communities of the countryside—so nostalgically re-imagined by writers such as Forster—were disappearing, Selfridges re-created a community in an urban setting, one that echoed the kind that Forster believed urban commercialism was dismantling. Selfridges almost seemed to be responding to the lament C. F. G. Masterman cite in his popular 1909 work *The Condition of England*:

‘A village which once fed, clothed, policed, and regulated itself cannot now dig its own wells or build its own barns. Still less can it act its own dramas, build its own church, or organize its own work and play.’²⁸

Selfridges in effect took up this call, creating an urban village within London. The staff formed its own community groups, including a popular drama league. Like small villages across England, Selfridges’ employees organized support efforts during the First World War, a group of men formed a “House Corps” and actually drilled on the roof and practiced musketry, and the employees created the “Selfridges Red Cross Detachment” that met wounded soldiers at the train stations. Like a new and improved town elder, the information desk advertised that it could answer any reasonable question on any topic. In 1929, Selfridges even added a traditional country garden on the roof of the store, where the vegetables prepared in the restaurant were grown.²⁹ By gesturing towards older, nostalgic visions of town centers, Selfridges simultaneously redefined the commercial landscape using non-market models and at the same time suggested to its guests that they might literally and figuratively buy into such a model. The customer might visit this idyllic town in the position of feudal lord, gathering the goods desired before retreating home, and yet avoiding any of the guilt or responsibility that might have attached itself to such a position. Alternatively—or simultaneously—the shopper could participate as a valued member of the community, equal to any within the town and invited to share in its bounty, but without the labor such a position might once have required.

324 Selfridges also linked the store to that perennial icon of non-commercial ties, the private home. Visitors, especially women visitors, were instructed to make themselves at home while the staff endeavored “in every way imaginable to create and cherish that comfortable sentiment.”³⁰ Visitors were given small silver keys on opening day, with the wish that they would feel “at home” in Selfridges.³¹ At the top of the store, elaborate and luxurious rooms of rest awaited the guest: Reception rooms, a library, the Silence Room, and the Retiring Room, each with special attendants ready to serve the visitors. Several rooms offered free use of phones and were stocked with paper and writing utensils available at no charge. There were even special rooms for different European guests, decorated in the décor of the visitors’ home country.³² Material transactions disappeared; the rooms were free and open to all, and no tips of any kind were required or allowed. A Luncheon Hall and a Tea Garden provided food “in a dainty, home-like fashion” (“VD”). This domestic model was encouraged not simply among the guests, but among the employees as well. One of the expressions among the staff was “I’m home,” meaning the sales target had been met for the day; bonuses were then given out in what Selfridges called “a little family ceremony” (*SB*, 182–3). Of course, Selfridges did not re-create the home, but offered a vision of a new and improved home, one that had the markers of comforting familiarity, yet improved on the reality. As Gordon Selfridge said, his female customers came to the store “because it’s so much brighter than their homes” (qtd. in *SB*, 107).

The use of this nostalgic version of the commodified authentic had two important implications for female customers. First, Selfridges united competing versions of the modern woman. As Rita Felski argues in *The Gender of Modernity*, women at the turn of the century were on the one hand associated with a nostalgic vision of a primitive, pre-industrial world separate by definition from the bustling and commercial public sphere. On the other hand, however, a competing vision of women began to emerge in the form of the voracious consumer, caught up in the frenzy of spending.³³ Selfridges, however, deftly combined these images and erased both the contradictions and any negative associations. The careful female shopper at Selfridges could, in effect, remain within the private sphere of the home, surrounded by a domestic atmosphere and home-made products. At the same time, however, she could still shop, not becoming a mad consumer exactly, but a discriminating shopper, selecting goods that would in turn bring her home closer to the Selfridges’ model. The woman shopper could indeed perform the commodified authentic, becoming new and fashionable at the same time that she remained authentic and “non-commercial.”

Second, Selfridges offered female shoppers the chance to experience the home from the male perspective. Women might enjoy the room of Silence, the carefully arranged and decorated interior, the sense of service and security—in short, all the classic images of home—but not have to produce the ideal themselves, at least not while they were in the store. With echoes of the exclusive male clubs in London, with all the comforts of home minus the spouse and children, Selfridges gave women shoppers the chance to sit within the picture of comfort without obligation. As Selfridges understood, misty visions of home derive much of their power from the viewer’s lack of responsibility for

the scene itself; adults may be nostalgic for a childhood home, both men and women may be nostalgic for homes they never had, but the fantasy is to be within the scene, the beneficiary of the maternal, home-like comfort, but not usually to create the comfort oneself. Selfridges allowed women a rare chance to “Feel at Home,” without actually having to maintain the home. The ideal modern woman could enjoy the privileges of the ideal modern man.

Selfridges’ suggestive re-creations of non-commercial environments, and the class and gender mobility such re-creations promised, were literally represented in the store’s interior. A shopper could experience an intriguing geographic hierarchy of monetary associations by simply walking through the store. A shopper might begin in the Bargain Basement, the lowest floor accessible to the public, where an enormous mass of goods were jumbled together and where low prices were the central theme. She could travel upwards to the more exclusive floors, visiting departments where goods were tastefully arranged and price tags available but not obvious. As the efficient lift whisked her to higher floors, she could relax in the elegantly decorated lounging rooms, where she might write a letter, read a book, or simply rest. She might enjoy a home-cooked meal in one of the restaurants or, continuing to the roof, simply sit in an English country garden. The farther up she went in the building, the farther away she moved from actual material transactions, where money was exchanged for specific objects. The shopper could, in effect, choose the environment in which she shopped, and by extension, select the class and even gender associations she wished to perform. Within the store, the identity of both class and gender might be created and maintained within objects and also elided by their ready exchange within a seemingly infinite, expanding market of goods. This sort of mobility was not necessarily liberating but neither was it necessarily a sinister manipulation. Selfridges presented a new commercial landscape for London, one which used the purity implied in nostalgic laments or markers of high class taste—a purity usually invoked to place commercialism in the role of contaminated other—as central to a new definition of commerce.

Selfridges’ use of the commodified authentic not only anticipated the modernist dream of a separate, autonomous aesthetic, but also anticipated recent modernist critiques of this separation. Selfridges fundamentally questioned the organizing binary that divided the authentic from the mass market, or a pure art from a sullied materialism, declaring without embarrassment that its anti-market aesthetic was for sale. It was a true full-service store, offering both the cultural text and the critique exposing it, achieving the cultural equivalent of a vertical monopoly.³⁴ In its development of the commodified authentic, Selfridges offers us an important critical model for approaching modernism’s simultaneous drives to elitism and egalitarianism, one flexible enough to acknowledge the pervasive desire for a cultural location apart from the marketplace, while at the same time acknowledging and even celebrating the commercially constructed nature of such a location.

326 **Acknowledgement**

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Notes

1. *Evening News*, "Criticising Mr. Selfridge," March 16, 1909.
2. *Bystander*, "A Week of Shopping," March 17, 1909.
3. *Times*, Selfridges' advertisement, "London's Greatest Store: Its Ideal and Principles of Business," February 24, 1909.
4. In this article, the term "Selfridges" refers not simply to the store itself, but to the larger phenomenon of Selfridges that encompassed the advertisements, window displays, and store design, as well as the atmosphere created by this larger discourse. I have removed the apostrophe from the store's name to avoid confusion. The owner of the store is always referred to as Gordon Selfridge.
5. Consumer culture and advertising have a vast number of critics, only a few of whom I discuss here in relation to modernism. See, for example, the work of the Frankfurt School, including Max Horkheimer and Theodore W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1994), as well as Roland Barthes' *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), and Stuart Ewen's *Captains of Consciousness: Advertising and the Social Roots of the Consumer Culture* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1977). For older models, see also F. R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1948) and his work with Denys Thompson, *Culture and Environment: The Training of Critical Awareness* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1942); also Queenie D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1932).
6. See, for example, Lawrence Rainey, *Institutions of Modernism: Literary Elites and Public Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), henceforth abbreviated as *IM*, and Thomas Strychacz, *Modernism, Mass Culture, and Professionalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); also, *Marketing Modernisms: Self-Promotion, Canonization, and Rereading*, eds. Kevin J.H. Dettmar and Stephen Watt (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996) and *Modernist Writers and the Marketplace*, eds. Ian Willison, Warwick Gould, and Warren Chernaik (London: Macmillan Press, 1996).
7. Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986). Huyssen goes on to argue that it was the avant-garde that embraced mass culture as constituting its very aesthetics. Fredric Jameson, "The Politics of Theory: Ideological Positions in the Postmodernism Debate," *New German Critique* 33 (1984): 64.
8. Jennifer Wicke, *Advertising Fictions: Literature, Advertisement, and Social Reading* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 122, henceforth abbreviated as *AF*. Lawrence Rainey has recently offered a penetrating assessment of the selling of *Ulysses*, a text marketed specifically as an exclusive, non-commercial venture (*IM*, 42–76). See also Rachel Bowlby, "Walking, Women and Writing: Virginia Woolf as *Flâneuse*," *New Feminist Discourses: Critical Essays on Theories and Texts*, ed. Isobel Armstrong (London: Routledge, 1992), 26–47; Jonathan Freedman, *Professions of Taste: Henry James, British Aestheticism, and Commodity Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990); and Jennifer Wicke, "Coterie Consumption: Bloomsbury, Keynes, and Modernism as Marketing," in Dettmar and Watt, *Marketing Modernisms*, 109–32.
9. See, for example, *High and Low Moderns: Literature and Culture, 1889–1939*, eds. Maria DiBattista and Lucy McDiarmid (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); *Outside Modernism: In Pursuit of the English Novel, 1900–30*, eds. Lynne Hapgood and Nancy L. Paxton (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000); Ann L. Ardis, *Modernism and Cultural Conflict, 1880–1922* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

10. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 217–251.

11. That conceptions of authenticity have been thoroughly questioned and dismantled does not change the very real power and appeal of these notions in early twentieth-century Britain.

12. For a summary of the early campaign, see Reginald Pound, *Selfridge: A Biography* (London: Heinemann, 1960), henceforth abbreviated as *SB*; T.R. Nevett, *Advertising in Britain: A History* (London: Heinemann, 1982); and Gordon Honeycombe, *Selfridges: Seventy-five Years, The Story of the Store 1909–1984* (London: Park Lane Press, 1984).

13. Karl Marx, *Capital*, rptd. in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: Norton, 1972), 319–29.

14. Thomas Richards, *The Commodity Culture of Victorian England: Advertising and Spectacle, 1851–1914* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 4, 40.

15. *Times*, "London's Greatest Store: How Selfridge's Gathers Its Goods from All Parts of the World," February 26, 1909; henceforth abbreviated as "HSGG."

16. See, for example, Morris' lecture, "How We Live and How We Might Live," given to the Hammersmith Branch of the Socialist Democratic Federation at Kelmscott House, November 30, 1884. In this lecture, Morris goes on to argue that the leisure to make such goods might be obtained by proper use of machinery. Rpt. online on The William Morris Internet Archive, www.marxist.org/archive/morris/index.htm.

17. To maintain consistency, all the Selfridges' advertisements for this article have been drawn from the *Times*. Selfridges used similar strategies in other newspapers, though for the more popular papers such as the *Daily Mail*, it spent relatively more time emphasizing quantity and low pricing. A thorough evaluation of the different marketing strategies for different newspapers lies beyond the scope of this article.

Diane Erika Rappaport offers the only rigorous analysis of Selfridges to date, in her excellent chapter "A New Era of Shopping': An American Department Store in Edwardian England" in *Shopping for Pleasure: Women in the Making of London's West End* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 142–177. She too observes that Selfridges offered "a blend of elite and mass culture" (166), although she inadvertently repeats Reginald Pound's mistaken claim that Selfridges took out no initial advertising in the *Times* (Rappaport, 159; *SB*, 60).

18. *Times*, Selfridges' advertisement, "Special Display of the Famous Teco Ware at Selfridges," May 22, 1909.

19. Selfridges radically shifted advertising in the *Times*. In a period of about four months, after the launch of Selfridges' initial ads that emphasized image and lifestyle over specific objects and prices, stores began to deploy similar strategies and techniques within the paper.

20. *Times*, Selfridges' advertisement, "Selfridges Oxford Street," March 20, 1909.

21. *Times*, Selfridges' advertisement, "'Gerrard One,'" March 31, 1909.

22. We can see here the starting elements of what Raphael Samuel, in his book *Theatres of Memory*, calls "retrochic," the postmodern blending of old styles with the new. Retrochic, relates Samuel,

differs from earlier kinds of period revival in that what it does is parodic. It is irreverent about the past and only half-serious about itself. . . . Retrochic, on this view, involves not obsession with the past but an indifference to it: only when history had ceased to matter can it be treated as a sport. (95)

Retrochic lacks the sentimentality or the high seriousness associated with the Victorians, "is untroubled by the cult of authenticity" and is happy to "blur the distinction between originals and re-makes" (112). While Samuel assigns retrochic to post-World War II society, we can see here at least a glimmer of what Samuel describes. See *Theatres of Memory: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture, Vol. 1* (London: Verso, 1994).

23. *The Daily Mail*, "The Shopping Carnival," March 16, 1909.

24. The window displays at times also emphasized mass availability. For example, one early display offered a vast array of sponges for the viewer, where abundance rather than aesthetics was the central message. See Honeycomb, *Selfridges*, 167.

25. *Bazaar*, "Messrs. Selfridge's Enterprise," March 17, 1909.

26. *Times*, Selfridges' advertisement, "London's Greatest Store: Its Ideal and Principles of Business," February 24, 1909.

27. *Ibid.* Many London newspapers agreed that on opening day, Selfridges did seem more of an institution than a shop: *The Daily Express* wrote that the store appeared as "a national exhibition or museum or gallery of art." *The Westminster Gazette* concurred that the store "resembled nothing so much as an exhibition." *The Daily Express*, "New Era of Shopping," March 16, 1909. *The Westminster Gazette*, "Selfridge's First Day," March 15, 1909.

28. Comments from "a Somerset clergyman," qtd. in C. F. G. Masterman, *The Condition of England*, 1909 (London: Methuen & Co, 1910), 191.

29. See Honeycombe, *Selfridge*, for accounts of the Red Cross Detachment (44) and the country garden (162) and *SB*, 67 for accounts of the information desk.

30. *Times*, Selfridges' advertisement, "Visitors' Day," March 19, 1909; henceforth abbreviated as "VD."

31. See *Daily Chronicle*, "Shopping Palace," March 15, 1909.

32. See, for example, *Daily Mail*, "The New White City," March 22, 1909, and *Daily Graphic*, "A Novel Feature of London's New Emporium," March 16, 1909.

33. See especially Felski's chapters "On Nostalgia: The Prehistoric Woman" (35–60) and "Imagined Pleasures: The Erotics and Aesthetics of Consumption" (51–90) in *The Gender of Modernity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995).